'Sayyid Qutb was an outstanding personality from amongst the great figures of Islamic thought, from the men of contemporary Islamic Awakening….He possessed the true Imaanic stance, a person of Jihad, struggle, sacrifice, and sincerity to the Ummah. He enriched the Islamic heritage with masterpieces of work from literature and thought.'

Shaykh Ahmed Fareed,
Mawaaqif Imaaniyah

'I say that there is a chapter in this book (Milestones) which is of great benefit, called '*La ilaha illallah minhaj hayah*'……he (Sayyid Qutb) has written some words which I believe are like light from light *ilham* (inspiration)'

Shaykh Nasiruddeen al-Albani,
'al-I'tidal fee Sayyid Qutb'

'Sayyid Qutb is….'the most famous personality of the Muslim world in the second half of the 20th century.'

Robert Irwin,
Is this the man that inspired Bin Laden?

'Sayyid Qutb based his life upon, and what he dedicated his pen for: the D*a'wah* (call) towards *Tawhid* (monotheism) of Allah "in ruling and legislating," rejecting the man-made laws, and confronting those who committed that (legislating and ruling by other than Allah's rule).'

Shaykh Bakr Abu Zaid,
Office of the Presidency of Islamic Research and Legal Verdicts

'Sayyid Qutb (is) among the scholars of the Muslims and among the people of da'wah. Allah has brought benefit by (him) and through (him) He has guided many people.'

Shaykh Ibn Jibreen,
Office of the Presidency of Islamic Research and Legal Verdicts

'Sayyid Qutb (in) his now-celebrated book, *Ma'alim fi'l-tareeq* (Milestones)……..denounces the existing order in Muslim societies as *Jahiliyyahh*, provides guidelines for Muslim activists and describes the steps they must take to establish a society based on divine guidance.'

Zafar Bangash,
Institute of Contemporary Islamic Thought

'….We heard that the death sentence….on Imam Shahid Sayyid Qutb…..had been carried out….Such a great loss. Sayyid Qutb….a man who held fast to his religion, trusting in Allah's victory. Read Milestones to find out why Sayyid (Qutb) was executed.'

Zainab al-Ghazali
Return of the Pharaoh

Appendix III

Article A – 'Interview with the wife of Yusuf Hawwash (executed with Sayyid Qutb)'

We lived together for two years,
and he spent the rest of his life in prisons

Could you give us a brief introduction to the life of your husband Yusuf Hawwaash?

My husband is Muhammad Yusuf Hawwaash (May Allah have mercy upon him). He was born on the 12th of October 1922. He achieved a diploma from Industrial Schools in 1943. He joined the *Ikhwaan* (Muslim Brotherhood), during his studies in the Gharbiyyah province. He married me in 1953 and I had from him two children, Ahmad and Sumayyah. They are both now doctors, and each has four children, both male and female.

How did your marriage start?

One of the brothers recommended me to him as a wife, to help him carry the burden of the *da`wah* (calling to Allah). And he remained for a whole year, whenever he met my brother, saying "We are still on our agreement", but he did not propose because of problems his family was going through. At the end of the year, I told my brother to inform him that this matter was over. Indeed we ended the matter, then another brother came to propose to me, but then he [Yusuf] returned, to reiterate his request anew. So I refused, and my brother advised me to pray *Salaat-ul-Istikhaarah*. When I prayed, I saw myself in the reception of our house in the village, and there was no lighting. Then a bright lamp was hanging in front of me, in the shape of his face, so I agreed and the contract was made. He later told me that when he made *Istikhaarah*, he saw me making wudoo' with him pouring the water for me, and even though it was not much water, I did it well.

Your husband was imprisoned more than once during the beginning of your married life, so how did this situation pass?

He was imprisoned after the *Aqd* [contract], then when he was released, we married and stayed together for one year, then he was imprisoned in 1954 and after the sentence was passed, he gave me the choice of staying with him or divorce. So I reprimanded him harshly, and informed him of something he did not know. That once during our engagement, he was giving a talk in one of the open gatherings, and he fell unconscious, and was taken to hospital. Then we found that one of his kidneys was

severely damaged, because of an old illness he got when he was imprisoned as a student, in a cell filled with cold water in winter. [At that time] the brothers offered me to cancel [the engagement] if I wanted, but I refused not to be with him on this journey because of this situation that Allah Almighty had placed him in during one of his trials.

And when we married in 1953 I bore Sumayyah after ten months of marriage, and after that by 17 days, the security services came to arrest him, and we used to live in the same block as Anwar As-Sadat, who was the head of the Islamic Conference at the time. And because Muhammad's relationship was good with all those around him, the guards of Sadat warned him as he approached the block, i.e. that the security services were inside, so he stayed on the run for a while.

During this time, he came to visit me once, and the guards of Sadat saw him, but did not tell anyone, so he was able to return from where he had come. After this, one of my sisters came, to take me and host me during my husband's absence, but when we came to leave, we found the security services surrounding us, and they wanted to arrest me. So I decided that I would not go with them silently, until I exposed their evil system in front of the people who they had tricked, so I shouted in my highest voice that I would not go with them, whatever they do, and I criticized their actions. So Anwar Sadat came out and asked what was happening, so I replied: '*Demeaning of women and invasion of privacy is happening in this black era of yours.'* So he calmed me down, and told the officer to carry my bags and take me where I wanted. So I said to him: '*I am going to the house of your master and the crown over your head, the respected Murshid (al-Hudaybi) [the head of Ikwaan]'.* Indeed, I remained with the wife of the Murshid and his daughters alone in the house, because all the men in his family were in prison, until my husband appeared, and was tried and sentenced to a total of 55 years.

It is known that the shaheed Yusuf Hawwaash met his Lord in the same trial as the shaheed Sayyid Qutb, so how was their relationship?

Their relationship probably started after their sentencing in 1955, for he had been given 55 years, and the shaheed Sayyid Qutb 15; both were released in 1964. They remained throughout this period together, whether in prison or in hospital, so their relationship developed and strengthened for each other. They complemented each other and would find with the other something he needed - they would complete each other. Muhammad would benefit from and learn, the *Fikr* (thought), culture, *Ilm* (knowledge) and depth of the shaheed Sayyid, while Sayyid would learn about the history of *Ikhwaan*, their organization, *Manhaj* (methodology), and anything related to the *Jamaa`ah* (group) from the shaheed Muhammad, because he had joined before him. And so, they were very attached to each other. Muhammad would say: '*Every chapter and every phrase in the books of Ustaadh Sayyid, I know when it was written, what the occasion was, and the discussion about it when it appeared as it did.'*

And Muhammad saw Yusuf (as) [in a vision], while in Leemaan Turah, and Ustaadh Sayyid was writing on Surat-Yusuf in his book *Adh-Dhilaal* [In the Shade of the Qur'aan], and he [Yusuf (as)] said to him: *"Inform Sayyid that the surah has what he is looking for:* **{Indeed judgement is only for Allah}.**" And thus they remained until after their *shahhadah* (martyrdom), the brothers would say: *"Indeed it from the mercy of Allah over these two men, that He chose them both for martyrdom together, otherwise one would not be able to be patient with splitting from the other.*"

And what of his (last) imprisonment in 1965?

After his release in 1964, I went into hospital for an operation, and after coming out, and being cured by Allah's bounty, he wanted us to spend some time on his father's farm. So I informed him that staying there for a long time was hard on me, especially without a helper to help me with household duties, washing and other things. So he said to me: *'You should make dhikr and seek forgiveness during your work, and you will be rewarded, and have patience and Ihtisaab (looking to your reward in the Hereafter), in being good to your relatives.'* So I agreed, and we travelled. And on one of the days straight after our travel, he informed me that he would pray two *rak`ahs*, (units of prayer) until the food was prepared, and he continuously prayed from nine in the morning to two in the afternoon. Whenever I opened the door, I would find him praying and crying. Until we heard a bang at the door of the house, and found it was the security services. So I opened the door to his room, and informed him that the security services were there and that he should finish his prayer and see them. And he did just that. They tried to take him with them, but he asked them to leave him until he could make ghusl. He then asked me extensively for a *Mushaf* [copy of the Qur'aan], but I did not have except the one which I had written a small message to Ahmad [the son] and was going to give him as a present. So he promised me that it would return to me even if it had to go to Mars and back, so I gave it to him.

Then the oppression of the regime began to increase in harshness. For after I had been transferred from a headmistress to a teacher, then from one province to another, then from normal teaching to special needs, in his first period of imprisonment, the security services started their campaign to imprison me. Until eventually, they achieved what they wanted and I was imprisoned for six months in Al-Qanaatir prison, which I spent in constant *nazeef* [bleeding], until I had an operation to remove my womb after that. And so, I did not attend except the sentencing. When he saw me in my weak state, he informed me that he did not know of my imprisonment, until the dogs had ripped his clothes, and he had sent for clothes from the house, and so Ahmad gave the guard old clothes so that they would not steal the new clothes. And when he saw them, he knew that I was not in the house.

In this painful situation was when my sister bore a daughter, and Ahmad asked me to have for him a sister, and he would nag and cry, so I said: *'Your father has to be here.'*, and when we went to visit his father, he kept crying and pulling him saying: *'Come with me*

father to the house, and mum can have a sister for me. Who is stopping you? Him?' and he pointed to the guard, *'Don't be scared of him, I will hit him, and you come with me.',* until he made me cry and subsequently made the guards cry.

Describe to us the final moments of your farewell. How were they?

The asked us to pay the final visit to him, before the carrying out of the sentence, so I took Ahmad and Sumayyah with me. I prepared for him good food, and we went to see him, but they refused to let me take the food in. They kept taking us into a tent to wait for some time, then taking us to another, until we had been into four tents, and in the end the guards brought him, dragging him in a derogatory manner, and 'threw' him in front of us inside the tent. And Muhammad would say: *'I don't know what to be regretful over? They want me to put forward an apology and regret over what I have done, but what have I done to be regretful over?'*

And when I asked the officer to bring in the food, and he refused, Muhammad said to me: *"Don't tire yourself, and waste the time that we can spend together. If they bring the food in, then they will insist that I eat now, and I am fasting." Ahmad went and sat on his father's lap and kept crying saying: "The boys keep saying to me, you whose father wanted to kill Abdul-Nasser". So the shaheed replied to him: "The scales today are reversed, and they will not be corrected today, indeed:* ***'We Shall set up the Scales of Justice for the Day of Judgment.'***

He advised me to good with the children, and I advised him to good with himself, and the visit ended. On the morning of 29th of August 1966, at [number missing] in the morning, the radio broadcast the news that the sentence had been carried out on the three Martyrs. And I was preparing breakfast at the time, so I kept saying *'Inna lillaahi wa innaa ilayhi raaji`oon*', and seeking forgiveness, with my tears not stopping, while no-one was aware of my situation. The murderers were not content with this, and sent for me, and made me sign acceptance that there would not be a *janaazah* (funeral prayer) for him, and they gave me his things but Ahmad's *Mushaf* (Qur'an) was not amongst them.

This great faithfulness to the shaheed and his da`wah. How did it grow in you and what were its reasons?

He (may Allah have mercy on him), was of kind manners. One of his most important attributes was his generosity. The helper who used to work for him, once complained to me after the *Aqd* (marriage contract), that he did not eat from the food that she would prepare, because his house was always open to the brothers who were students, away from home or in hardship. Whether he was there or not, they would come in and eat, wear whatever of his clothes they wished and sometimes take his money, then he would come back and eat cheese and halaawah from the grocers.

Similarly *Ithaar* [preference of others]. He would not accept at all that there could be a misunderstanding between him and his brothers. Just as he was clean in body and manners. He would make ghusl more than five times a day apart from wudoo'.

Your relationship with the shaheed husband strengthened despite the short time you spent together, so how did you discover these good characteristics in him?

His letters from prison were *Tarbiyah* [educative] lessons in *Aaqeedah* [belief], *Imaan* [faith], *Sabr* [patience], and *Istiqamaah* [steadfastness]. They were a provision for me on this path, and here are some examples:

On *Eed-ul-fitr* he sent a letter saying: '*Eed would come to the sahaabah, and the honourable of them had been martyred, the loved of them had been lost, and they would have been tested in their spouses, parents and children. But all of this would not dampen the happiness of `eed in their souls. In fact this was the real meaning of `eed, effort, work, and sacrifice. So we, with what we are in, are the most rightful of people to celebrate `eed, and the most real in our happiness for what Allah has given us, and for our knowing Him. And to have thankfulness to Allah for it, on this great day. We now taste this deen, and feel it, and we find it in our khalajaat, fresh and soft just like the day it was revealed, alive and beating in our hearts and our blood mixing with it.'*

Just as he was gentle in feelings, he would place his hand on the place of pain, and would nurse it with softness, and gentle medicine. He says in another letter;

"It is hard on me, while I spend these moments with you, to see on you the signs of struggle and the indications of tiredness, and it is as if the journey has been long, and the hardships heavy. And I do not deny the hardships on this path, and I do not claim that I do not feel its difficulty, for indeed I am a weak human. Except that I feel, and I would like you to feel with me, that on either side of this long path, are oases with shade, that passers-by can relax in, if they tire, and in whose shade travellers can rest whenever the toils of travel take their toll. So would you like that we turn to one of these oases, perhaps we may find in it cool and calm? Then we can take from it water and food, which will help us continue our journey, and finish our travel?"

And here is what he wrote in a copy of the Book of Allah Almighty which he gave to me as a present:

"In the Name of Allah the Most Gracious the Most Merciful,

To you. To you my wife.

To you O sister in creed.

To you O partner in Jihad.

To you O calmness of the soul and mother of the child.

To you O flower of the heart. To you this great book, upon whose law Allah brought us together as spouses, through which He gathered us as brothers, and in whose path He made us in the ranks of the believers two soldiers.

To you my beloved this grand book, in appreciation, love and faithfulness from your husband. Lest Allah may bring me back to you, and gather us under His aim.

And peace be upon you, and mercy from Allah, and His blessings, and all praise is due to Allah, Lord of the worlds.

12th Shawwaal 1383

Aside from these soft letters, did you hear anything about his life in prison?

Yes, I heard a lot from his brothers speaking about him. One of the brothers had asked him which season was his favourite, and he replied: *'Autumn, as the falling of the leaves reminds me of the end of one's allotted time.'*

He also saw the Prophet ﷺ more that once, and Yusuf (as) and `Eesaa (as), and he would have true visions. He informed one of his brothers that once in a moment of unconsciousness during his *sujood* [prostration] during the night, that the cells were opened for them to leave and men from the security services was put in them, and this happened after 1967. And he saw himself with a group of the *sahaabah* (companions), giving *bay`ah* (oath of allegiance) to the Prophet ﷺ, and when his turn came, to give *bay`ah*, he said: *"Oh Messenger of Allah, have we changed things after you? Have we replaced things after you?*" So he replied: "*No, but you are trustworthy, trustworthy, trustworthy."*

His brothers say that if he would become very tired in the queues he would say: '*Yes my Lord, how gentle you are.'* And if they spoke about torture in front of him, he would reply: ***(…then leave them in their wasteful discourse and trifling)*** (Al-An`aam:91)

And if they discussed with him the expectations of sentences, he would say: *"Indeed these do not judge, and for Allah is judgment, and Allah does not judge except by the truth and those who they call upon beside him, do not judge by anything. What are we and they while in the qabd [literal: grasp] of Allah like an atom? If Allah sees us as worthy of Martyrdom, He will choose us for it, and if not, then Allah's qadar will pass us and them."*

We spoke about his visions, so what of your visions of him?

After his Martyrdom, I saw myself in the village in which his sister lives, standing behind her house and in front of me, the field extending with no end, as if I was lost. Then a great bird came over the fields, and it was huge in size, then I saw it again, standing on a pole that reached into the sky, and between its feet, my son Ahmad, standing, and pointing me to a path, the end of which I could not see. On it were marching lines of the *Ikhwaan*, so I went to look at the situation, and I saw the moon, extremely huge, and very bright, at the end of this path.

And after his Martyrdom also, his father went to hajj, and when he returned, I called him to come and lighten the sadness of the children because of the leaving of their father, and I called his other children and grandchildren. But I found him completely ignoring my children and taking interest in the others, and I saw the sadness on the face of my daughter Sumayyah, and I was depressed and unhappy all day. So I slept while I was sad for her, then I saw the shaheed Muhammad bend over next to the bed and say: *"Don't be sad, I accept your right."*

You said that Ahmad's Mushaf (Qur'an) has a story so what is it?

When they imprisoned him in 1965, and he took the *mushaf* [Qur'an] with him, I did not find it in the belongings after his Martyrdom. And after twenty years, while we were in Madeenah, in the house of my daughter and her husband, I saw it on the shelves, so I asked my daughter's husband where he got this *mushaf* from so he said that during his being in the *haram*, a woman heard his brothers calling him, so she went to him, and said: *'Are you so and so?'*, do he replied in the affirmative. She said: *'Then wait for me and do not leave until I give you a trust.'* Then she informed him that her husband had given her this *mushaf* that he had taken from the shaheed and told her to take it to his relatives. And that this *mushaf* had been to France, London and Saudi Arabia, until it eventually reached us 20 years later. And I do not expect that Allah Almighty had fulfiled the promise of the shaheed.

If I asked you to send him a letter today, what would you write?

I pray to Allah Almighty that I am still upon the covenant, and have not changed after you, and that you are now in the levels of the S*huhadaa* [Maryrs] and *Sideeqeen* [Truthful], and that Allah Almighty gathers me with you: ***(They and their wives in groves of shade, reclining on thrones)*** (Surah Yaa-Seen:56).

Taken from Ad-Da'wah Issue 109, Muharram 1422 (www.cageprisoners.com)

Appendix IV

Article B - '*al-I'tidaal Fee Sayyid Qutb*' Q&A with Shaykh Al-Albani

The following is an extract from a question and answer session with Shaykh al-Albani. It was recorded on a tape by Abi Lailatal Athari and it is commonly sold under the title, *'al-I'tidaal Fee Sayyid Qutb'*. The date of the recording is *1st of Rabi' al Awwal 1414H* – 9th December 1993.[1]

TRANSCRIPT:

Questioner: (Alleges that Sayyid Qutb pronounced everyone a '*Kafir*' – disbeliever)

Al-Albani: 'We do not know this about him. Rather he has composed words during his stay in prison which are akin to inspiration.

Questioner: Sayyid Qutb claimed that the *Ummah* lives in a state of *Jahiliyyahh* which is worse than the first state of *Jahiliyyahh*. He has also claimed that the *Masajids* are akin to the temples of *Jahiliyyahh* and that Islam does not apply to such societies. I heard this myself, Shaykh.

Al-Albani: Have you been to Egypt?

Questioner: No, I have not.

Al-Albani: He is an Egyptian. He is describing what he has seen in the likes of mosques in Egypt such as Sayyida Zaynab, Sayyid Badawi, etc.

Questioner: Are all mosques in Egypt like that?

Al-Albani: No. I do not say all mosques are like that and neither does Sayyid Qutb. Rather, he is giving a general statement.

Questioner: Did you comment that *'Ma'alim fil-Tareeq'* (Milestones) is about *Tawheed* (monotheism) written in a modern way?

Albani: I say that there is a chapter in this book which is of great benefit, called '*La ilaha illallah minhaj hayah'*. That is what I am saying and as I have said before, Sayyid Qutb is not a scholar but rather he has written some words which I believe are like light from light *ilham* (inspiration)[2] including the chapter 'Way of Life'. A large number of Salafees have not adopted what the

---

[1] *Silsilatul Hudaa wan-Noor (784/1)*.

[2] Ilham - in Arabic means 'inspiration for certain chosen individuals.'

chapter 'Way of Life' discusses. 'Milestones' has many interesting points and discussions.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Some groups have alleged that this recording took place prior to Shaykh al-Albani's discovery of the 'evil' of Sayyid Qutb. There is no evidence to suggest that Shaykh al-Albani retracted these comments and it must also be borne in mind that at the time of this recording it had been nearly 30 years since the Martyrdom of Sayyid Qutb.

Shaykh Albani uses the word *ilham*, which in Arabic means *'inspiration for certain chosen individuals.'* This word is often used by scholars to describe an act or deed which is guided by Allah Almighty. For example scholars uses the same word when describing how the mother of Prophet Musa was inspired to put her infant child into a basket of reeds and floated him on the river Nile to save him from Pharoah's men.

Appendix V

Article C – 'Letter from Shaykh Bakr Abu Zayd to Rabee bin Hadee al-Madkhali'

'The respected brother, sheikh Rabee bin Hadee Al-Madkhali,

Assalamu Alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh…

I draw your attention to **your** request from me to read the book attached: ***"Adwa' Islamiyyah 'Ala 'Aqeedat Sayyid Qutb Wa Fiqrih."*** (Islamic lights on the Aqeedah & Ideas of Sayyid Qutub)… Are there any notes against it? And whether these notes mean that this project should be disregarded and never be narrated again? Or is it considered from which that can be edited and qualified to be printed and distributed to serve as a reward for you in the Day of Judgment, and as a guidance to those whom Allah wills from his servants?

[Answer] Thus I say the following:

1- I looked into the first page where the index of topics are listed, and I found topics against Sayyid Qutb, may Allah have mercy on him, that collects the basics of kufr, atheism, heresy, belief in Wahdat Al-Wujood, the saying that the Quran is created, the saying that it is permissible for other than Allah to legislate, the exaggeration in glorifying the attributes of Allah, not accepting the Mutawatir Ahadeeth, doubts in matters of Aqeedah that one must be certain about it, making takfeer on communities …etc from such topics that makes the believer's hair stand on end.

I felt sorry for the Muslim scholars around the world who did not pay attention to such destructive matters. Then I wondered why with such destructive matters, we find the spread of the books of Qutb on the horizon like the spread of the sun, the common people benefit from them, and even you (Rabee Al-Madkhali) in some of your writings. Therefore, I started comparing the topics with the contents. I found that the contents prove the opposite of other contents; and these topics, in general, are some provocative topics to withdraw the attention of the regular reader to bash Sayyid (Qutb), may Allah have mercy on him. I hate for you, me and all of the Muslims (to fall into) the zones of sin…It is from deception when a person talks about the good in front of whom he hates.

2- I looked, and found that this book (Rabee al-Madkhalee's) lacks: the basis of the scholarly research, the *Manhaj* (methodology) of criticism, the trust of quoting (from others sources), the trust of knowledge, (and) not transgressing on others.

Regarding the etiquette of dialogue, the goodness of the approach, and the strength of introducing the material, then the above have nothing to do with this book by any mean… the proofs are:

First, I saw that you depended in quoting old editions of the books of Sayyid Qutb, like the books: *Fee Thilaal Al-Qur'an, Al'Adalah Al Ejtima'eyyah*, while knowing, as in the margin of page 29 and other (places), that there are some revised editions that came afterwards. It is obligatory according to the basics of criticism and the trust of knowledge to criticize - if it was about the contents of the *last* edition of any book because the changes in it (i.e. the last edition) abrogate the previous ones. This thing, *InshAllah* (God-willing), is not hidden from your basic information, but it is probably a mistake of a student who prepared this information for you who was not aware of that.

It is well known that there are many similar situations for the people of knowledge, for example the book, *Al Rooh*, of Ibn Qayyim, when many scholars looked into it they said: it is probably issued during his early life. This also happened in many cases. The book (of Sayyid Qutb) *Al'Adalah Al Ejtima'yah* was the first (book) that he (Sayyid Qutb) authored about Islamic issues.

Second, the topic in the index of this book: Sayyid Qutb allows other than Allah to legislate, made my hair stand on end. I rushed to this topic before anything else. What I found out is just a single quote from lots of lines in his book, *Al'Adalah AlEjtima'yah*. His sayings do not confirm this provocative topic. Let us suppose that there is a general or vague sentence, why do we turn it into a *takfeeri* (blasphemy) matter against him to destroy what Sayyid Qutb based his life upon and what he dedicated his pen for: the *Da'wah* towards *Tawheed* (monotheism) of Allah Almighty "in ruling and legislating," rejecting the man made laws, and confronting those who committed that (legislating and ruling by other than Allah's rule). Allah Almighty loves justices and fairness in every thing; and I do not see *InshaAllah* except that you are about to go back to justice and fairness.

Third: One of the provocative topics is your topic: Sayyid Qutb believes in Wahdat Al-Wujood. Verily, Sayyid Qutb, may Allah have mercy on him, said something not clear (that might make the reader think that he believes in Wahdat Al-Wujood) using the style (of literature) in commenting on Surat Al-Hadeed, and Surat Al-Ekhlaas, and based upon it the accusation that he believes in Wahdat Al-Wujood was made. You did something good when you quoted his saying in commenting on Surat Al-Baqarah, and his (Sayyid Qutb) clear rejection to the idea of Wahdat Al-Wujood. From these quotes (Sayyid Qutb wrote): "*and from here we find that there is nothing in the true Islamic ideology called the idea of Wahdat Al-Wujood.*" To add, in his (Qutb) book: "*Muqawwimat At-Tasawwur Al-Islami"* there is a clear response to those who belief in Wahdat Al-Wujood. Therefore, we say may Allah forgive Sayyid Qutb for these vague statements that he expanded upon using his literal style; and what is vague does not overcome the clear cut statements from his saying.

Thus, I wish that you rush into deleting this hidden *takfeer* (pronouncement of apostasy) of Sayyid Qutb, and I feel sorry for you.

Fourth, I say clearly to you with all respect, that under these topics: the contrary of what Sayyid Qutb commented on the meaning of *La Ilaha Illah Allah*, to the scholars and the people of language; and that he (Qutb) is not clear about (tawheed) Ar-Ruboobiyah and Al-Uloohiyyah. I say to you, my beloved, that you have destroyed, without making sure, all of what Sayyid (Qutb), may Allah have mercy on him, confirmed from the aspects of Tawheed and what it necessitates and confirms, which occupied the major aspect of the long life of Sayyid Qutb.

All what you (Rabee Al-Madkhali) said is nullified by one word: that the monotheism of Allah in legislation and ruling is from the necessities of the word of Tawheed. Sayyid, May Allah have mercy on him, emphasized on this a lot when he saw the corrupted courage to dismantle the legislations of Allah from courts and other places, and replacing it with man-made laws. Without a doubt, this is a great courage (the courage of changing the rules of Allah) that the Ummah never experienced before 1342 Hijri.

Fifth: from the topics of the index: "Sayyid Qutb confirms the belief that the Quran is created, and that the speech of Allah is just the will"… When I went back to the pages that talk about that, I did not find a single letter where Sayyid Qutub, may Allah have mercy on him, declared this saying: "The Quran is created." How do you easily accuse with these takfeeri matters? The only sentence that I noticed is his (Qutb) saying: *"They cannot author from it—the Muqat'ah letters—a book similar to this book because this book is created by Allah and not by the humans"*… There is no doubt that this sentence is wrong, but does this sentence make us rule that Sayyid Qutb confirms the disbelief saying that the Quran is created?

O Allah I cannot tolerate the burden of this! This reminded me of a similar saying of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdulkhaliq 'Atheemah, may Allah have mercy on him, in his book's introduction: *Studies on the style of the Noble Quran*, that is printed by the Islamic University of Imam Muhammed bin Sa'ud. Do we accuse all people by the saying that the Quran is created? O Allah No. What we mentioned so far is sufficient in talking about the subjective perspectives, and this is the important matter.

Talking about other perspectives:

1- The original copy of this book lies in 161 pages written by hand. These writings are different. I do not know of a single page written by you as usual, unless your handwriting differed from usual, or I missed up something, or you gave the job about Sayyid Qutb to some of the students, and each student wrote what he found under your supervision, or by your dictation. Therefore, I cannot confirm that this book belongs to you except by what you wrote on

it that it is authored by you, and that is enough in considering it to belong to you.

2- Even though there are differences in the handwritings, there is a common trend, This book has the common trend of the disturbing manner, the continuous anger, the same jump on the sentence to generate huge mistakes, rushing into conclusions where there is a possibility to prove otherwise, and depending on the vague sentences and leaving the clear ones, which is a solid rule that do not accept any argument about it….This is considered as betraying (violating) the Manhaj of criticism (named): *Al'Haydah Al'Elmiyah*.

3- Regarding the style of literature, if we were to compare it with the style of Sayyid Qutb, then this style is of descending style. The style of Sayyid (Qutb) is high. If we considered it as your (Rabee's) style, then it is very elementary, and does not suit a student of knowledge who has great degrees. So there should be a balance between the literal taste, the ability of using the language and clearly presenting the matter, and the beauty of presenting; or otherwise the pen should be broken (i.e. otherwise do not bother writing it).

4- The common trend was the trend of anger and frightening which overtook the scientific Manhaj of criticism, thus your response lacked the etiquettes of dialogue.

5- This book from its beginning tells the end has an offensive trend and narrowness in mind and lack of patience in the sentences… why?

6- This book creates a new *hizbiyah* that establishes the trend of making *tahreem* here, and nullifying it there; and to call this a bid'ah and that person a *Mubtadi' (Innovator)* to call this deviancy and that person a deviant… without enough proofs. This also generates *ghuroor* (i.e. deception) of being religious, being proud to the extent that when one of them does that he (thinks that he) gets rid of a huge burden from his back; and that he is saving the Ummah from falling from an edge; that he is considered of a high example of *Wara'* (fearing Allah) and *gheerah* (jealousy) on the rulings of *Shari'ah*. This (Judging) without making sure, is a way of destruction, even if it is considered as a high constructed building, its destiny is destruction and disappearance with the winds.

These are six aspects that this book enjoys, which made it not enjoyable. This is what I see regarding what you requested. I apologize for being late to respond to you, but I used not to read the books of this man (Sayyid Qutb), even though it is popular amongst the people. However, the dangerous remarks that you talked about made me do lots of readings into his books, and I found in his books many good things, a great faith, clear truth, exposing the plans of the enemies of Islam, and some mistakes in the contents and saying some things that I wish he never said. He nullifies lots of these things in other places, and to be perfect is hard. This man was a great writer and a great criticizer, and then he moved towards serving Islam through the great Quran, the noble Sunnah, and the beautiful Seerah. This shaped his attitude regarding the issues of his time. He insisted on his attitude (to continue what he is

doing) for the sake of Allah. He also clarified the issues about his past. It was requested from him to write some words of apology, and he said his faithful and famous word, that *"I will not use the finger which I raise for shahadah (i.e. calling to Tawheed) to write something against Tawheed…"* or a word close to this.

Therefore, the obligation of everyone is to make du'a for him that Allah forgive his sins, to benefit from his knowledge, to clarify his mistakes, and that his mistakes do not make us not benefit from his knowledge, or to abandon his books. Consider, may Allah protect you, his situation like the situation of those of the salaf like Isma'eel Al-Harawi and Al-Jilaani, and how Shaykh-ul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah defended them, even though they fell into many awful mistakes, because the basis of their approach was to defend Islam and the Sunnah. Look to the (book), *"Manazil Alsa'ereen"*, and you will find strange things that cannot be accepted; however, you find Ibn Al-Qayyim, may Allah have mercy on him, making excuses for him and not accusing him, as he clarified it in the book *"Madarij As-Saalikeen"*. I also expanded on this matter in the book "Classifying the people between doubts and certainty," and I put some rules regarding it.

In conclusion, I advise the brother in Allah, not to print this book *"Adwa' Islamiyyah.."*. It is not permissible for this book to be distributed or printed because of what it has of the exaggeration, and the training of the youth of the Ummah to slander the *Ulama*' (scholars), and to put down and disregard their virtues. Forgive me, may Allah bless you, if I was harsh in my sentences, but it is because of what I saw from your exaggeration, because I want the good for you, and because your eagerness to know what I have about him. This is what my pen wrote, and may Allah correct the way of all of us.

Wa assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi Wa barakatahu

(Shaykh) Bakr Abu Zayd

Appendix VI

Article D – 'Fatwah (legal verdict) regarding Sayyid Qutb' by Shaykh Ibn Jibreen

Question: Some youth call Shaykh Sayyid Qutb a heretic and prohibit the reading of his books, and they say a similar statement regarding Imam Hasan al-Banna, as they also say regarding some of the scholars that they are *Khawarij*. Their argument is that [they do this] in order to 'expose the errors [of these men] to the people,' even though [these youth] are until now [only] students [of knowledge]. I hope for a response so that doubt may be removed from us and others, [and] so that this [phenomenon] will not spread.

Response: All praise belongs to Allah alone. To proceed: It is impermissible to [unjustly] call the Muslims heretics or wicked as is evidenced by the statement of the Prophet ﷺ "*Whoever says to his brother 'O enemy of Allah,' and he is not such but that it returns back to him."* While in [another] hadith "*Whoever calls a Muslim an infidel it returns back to one of them*.' While in another hadith: *"A man passed by another while he was doing a sin and he said to him, 'By Allah, Allah will not forgive you.' So [Allah] said: 'Who is he who can pass judgment on my behalf that I will not forgive so and so? I have forgiven him and have nullified your deeds.'*

With this I say, Sayyid Qutb and Imam Hasan al-Banna are among the scholars of the Muslims and among the people of *Da'wa*. Allah has brought benefit by them and through them He has guided many people. They both have efforts [for Islam] which should not be denied. For this reason Shaykh Abdul-Aziz ibn Baz interceded on behalf of Sayyid Qutb when the order for his execution was given. [Ibn Baz] was gentle in his intercession, but President Gamal [Abdel Nasser] did not accept [Ibn Baz's] intercession, may Allah send upon him [i.e. Abdel Nasser] what he deserves. When both men [i.e Imam Hasan al-Banna & Sayyid Qutb] were killed, each was referred to as a *Shaheed* (Martyr), as each was killed unjustly. This is borne witness to by those close [to them] as well as by the general public - as it was widely spread in the papers and books without anyone ever objecting.

Moreover, the scholars have received their books [with acceptance]. No one has attacked them for more than the [last] twenty years. If some [heresy proceeded] from them, then [these mistakes] are similar to an-Nawawi, as-Suyuti, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn 'Atiyah, al-Khatabi, al-Qastalani and the likes of many of them. I have read what… Rabee al-Madkhali has written in his refutation of Sayyid Qutb and I found that he has placed statements where they do not exist. For this reason Shaykh Bakr Abu Zaid, may Allah preserve him, refuted him. Likewise, [al-Madkhali's] unjust attacks of Shaykh 'Abdur-Rahman ['Abdul-Khaaliq] and his [twisting 'Abdur-Rahman 'Abdul-Khaaliq's words] in order to find errors which would make ['Abdur-Rahman 'Abdul-Khaaliq

appear] misguided, even though [al-Madkhali] befriended him for a lengthy period of time and he never found any such errors [in the past].

And the eye of pleasure sees every fault insignificant,

But the eye of hatred always finds fault.

Dictated by
Abdullah ibn Abdur-Rahman ibn Jibreen
26/2/1417 AH

Office of the Presidency of Islamic Research and Legal Verdicts

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol I
Sūrahs 1-2

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Al-Fātiĥah (The Opening) **1**

Overview 2

Al-Baqarah (The Cow) **9**

Prologue *9*
Seeking a Secure Base 11
A Major Breakthrough 13
The Making of a Unique Community 14
The Sūrah's Central Theme 16

1 The Message Spelt Out *21*
Overview 25
The Qualities of True Believers 26
Believing in the Imperceptible 28
A Contrasting Picture 32
The Mark of Hypocrisy 32
The Enemy Within 35
A Divine Challenge 38
The Use of Parables in the Qur'ān 40
God's Covenant with Man 42
Giving Life after Death 43

2 Man in Charge of the Earth *47*
Overview 48
Establishing Man's Authority 50
Man's First Test 52
Points to Consider 53
Man, the Master on Earth 55
The Concept of Sin 57

3 Glimpses of Israelite History *59*
Overview 65
God's Covenant with the Israelites 68
Matching Words with Deeds 70
Two Sources of Strength 71
When Every Soul Stands Alone 72
A Long List of Favours 73
Ingratitude at Its Worst 74
Inviting God's Punishment 75
Unhappy with God's Bounty 77
Boastful Claims by the Jews 78
Where Mockery Is Inadmissible 79
The Episode of the Cow 80
A Murdered Man Brought Back to Life 83

4 Covenants Breached All the Time *85*
Overview 91
Falsification of Scriptures 92
Reply to False Arguments 94

Going Back on Firm Pledges 95
A Long List of Contradictions 98
Claims Falsified by Actions 100
A Strange Enmity to an Angel 103
Casting God's Revelations Away 104
Magic and Psychic Phenomena 106
The Nature of Magic 107

5 Jewish Efforts to Undermine Islam *110*
Efforts to Undermine the New Religion 113
Begrudging God's Grace 115
Claims without Basis 118
Unbelief Is All One 120
Jewish and Christian Arguments 122

6 Universal Faith *126*
Overview 129
Abraham's Covenant 131
Building the Ka`bah 133
A Faith to Pass to Your Children 136
The Argument Is Finally Settled 137

7 Change of Direction *140*
Overview 142
A Middle Community and a Pure Faith 147
Clarification of Issues 151
The Final Say on the Direction of Prayer 154
Abraham's Prayers Are Answered 156
When God Remembers His Servants 158

8 Acquiring Real Strength *161*
Overview 161
The Power of Patience 162
Sacrificing One's Life 164

9 Setting the Record Straight *169*
Overview 173
A Very Significant Ritual 174
Suppressing the Truth 176
Those Using Their Reason 178
Alliances Fall Apart 181
Which Path to Follow 181
Things Forbidden to Eat 183
Suppression of God's Revelations 185
What Constitutes Righteousness 186

10 Social Justice and Fasting *191*
Overview 193
The Law of Just Retribution 194
Life Preservation through Retribution 196
Fasting: Its Nature and Purpose 199
Exemption from Fasting when Travelling 202
Obligatory Fasting 204
A Close Relationship with God 206
Further Rules on Fasting 208
Honesty at All Times 210

11 The Sacred Months, Fighting and Pilgrimage *212*
Overview 215
The Islamic Transformation 216

The New Moon and its Significance 218
The Qur'ān and Scientific Truth 220
The First Order to Fight 223
Jihād: When and Against Whom? 227
The Ethics of War 228
Violation of Sanctities 231
A Symbol of Islamic Unity 234
Perfect Devotion at Every Move 243
The Journey Approaches Its End 246

12 The Nature of Islamic Society *249*
Overview 251
Two Different Types of People 252
The True Meaning of Islam 254
A Caring and Peaceful Society 259
A Question Put to the Israelites 261
A Single Community and Divergent Views 263
When Will God's Help Arrive? 267

13 Worse Than Murder *270*
Overview 271
Balancing Kindness and Personal Preferences 272
What Things We May Love 274
Fighting in the Sacred Months 276
The Ultimate Aim of Islam's Enemies 279
The Qur'ānic Method of Education 280
Dealing with Slavery 281
More Questions by Believers 283
Treatment of Orphans 284

14 The Family: The Foundation of Human Society *286*
Overview 291
Marriage to Unbelievers 295
Purity in Sexual Relations 298
Oaths and Atonements 299
Rules of Divorce 302
Fair and Balanced Divorce Systems 303
Kindly Retention or Amicable Separation 308
Child Care in Broken Homes 311
The Case of Widows 313
Kindness after Divorce 315
A Question of Worship 316
More Rights for Widows and Divorcees 317

15 A Timeless Message *319*
Overview 321
Fleeing from Death 324
Multiplied Loan Repayment 325
A Test of Genuine Faith 326
Keeping Faith with God 328
Different Manifestations of God's Favours 330

16 The Nature of God and Faith *332*
The Unity of the Divine Message 333
The Ranks of God's Messengers 338
Endless Disputes over a Single Truth 340
God's Unique Attributes 342
Freedom of Belief Guaranteed 348

17 Causing Life and Death *354*

Overview 355
An Easily Settled Argument 356
Where Life Originates 358
How God Raises the Dead 360

18 An Islamic Model of Social Security *363*
Overview 366
Ethics of Islamic Charity 368
Charity Coupled with Good Manners 370
Giving Away the Best 373
Charity Benefits the Charitable 376
A Perfectly Integrated System 378

19 The Evil of Usury *380*
Overview 381
The Horrific Image of Usury 387
Divine Admonition Remains Unheeded 389
In Perfect Contrast with Usurers 391
Total War against the Usurers 393
Kind Treatment of Insolvent Debtors 395

20 Safeguards for Financial Transactions *398*
Overview 399
Loan Arrangement and Documentation 400
Where Ultimate Authority Lies 403

21 One Divine Message *405*
Overview 405
One True Faith 407
The Ultimate End 409
Individual Responsibility 411
A Final Prayer 412

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:

ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u

Long:

ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū

Diphthongs:

ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH[1] *1*

Al-Fātiĥah
(The Opening)

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent. (1)	بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿١﴾
Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (2)	ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢﴾
The Compassionate, the Merciful. (3)	ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿٣﴾
Master of the Day of Judgement. (4)	مَٰلِكِ يَوۡمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٤﴾
You alone do we worship and to You alone do we turn for help. (5)	إِيَّاكَ نَعۡبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسۡتَعِينُ ﴿٥﴾
Guide us on the straight path. (6)	ٱهۡدِنَا ٱلصِّرَٰطَ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمَ ﴿٦﴾
The path of those on whom You have bestowed Your favours, not those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray. (7)	صِرَٰطَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنۡعَمۡتَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ غَيۡرِ ٱلۡمَغۡضُوبِ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٧﴾

[1] *Sūrah* is the name of a unit of the Qur'ān. The nearest English word is 'chapter', but since *sūrah*' is used in Arabic to denote only units of the Qur'ān, it has been retained in English. The Qur'ān has 114 *sūrahs* of varying length.

Overview

Every Muslim recites this short *sūrah* of seven verses at least seventeen times a day. An authentic *ĥadīth* of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), says: "A prayer by one who does not read the *Fātiĥah* is invalid."

This short *sūrah* contains a great deal of the central basic ideas of Islam, its beliefs and concepts. It outlines many of its essential perceptions and attitudes. All this makes it clear why it is chosen for frequent recitation and why it is essential for the validity of prayer.

The *sūrah* opens with the phrase:

> *In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.* (Verse 1)

This is recognized by the majority of scholars as a verse of the *sūrah,* in its own right, completing its verses into seven. There is, however, a difference of opinion over whether this is so with respect to all other *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān in which the same words appear as the opening phrase. Some scholars maintain that it is to the *Fātiĥah* that the following Qur'ānic statement refers: *"We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur'ān."* (15: 87)

The very first verses of the Qur'ān revealed to Prophet Muĥammad, which begin with: "*Read in the name of your Lord...*" (96: 1) establish the Islamic etiquette of invoking the name of God at the beginning of every action. This is also in line with the fundamental Islamic principle that God is "*the first and the last, the outward and the inward.*" (57: 3) He is indeed the real being, the origin and the *raison d'être* of all that exists. In His name, therefore, every movement and action is made, and in His name everything begins.

The divine attributes of the Compassionate, *al-Raĥmān,* and the Merciful, *al-Raĥīm,* encompass all aspects and meaning of mercy, and can only be used together with respect to God Almighty. It would be appropriate to use the attribute of *al-Raĥīm* in reference to a human being, but the Islamic faith requires that use of *al-Raĥmān* is exclusive to God. As for the debate over which of the two adjectives denotes the wider meaning of mercy and compassion, it does not concern us here. We can conclude, however, that when combined, they encompass all aspects and dimensions of mercy.

As the invocation of God's name at the beginning of every action constitutes the first fundamental principle of the Muslim faith, the restriction of the use of *al-Raĥmān* and *al-Raĥīm* to God alone constitutes the second principle and defines the relationship between God and man.

Having invoked God's name and acknowledged His infinite mercy, one is directed to praise God and recognize His absolute sovereignty over all beings:

Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (Verse 2)

Praise of God is the first feeling aroused in a believer's heart at the mention of God. For man's own existence is an aspect of God's infinite grace, which engenders gratitude and reverence towards God. The manifestations of God's munificence and generosity to man and other creatures abound everywhere and can be seen at every moment. To praise God at the beginning and at the end of every action is another fundamental principle of the Islamic faith. The Qur'ān says: *"He is God; there is no deity but He. To Him belongs praise in the first and in the last..."* (28: 70)

Nevertheless, God's grace is such that when a believer says, 'praise be to God,' it is recorded for him as a good deed outweighing everything. `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the Prophet's Companion, relates that the Prophet (peace be upon him) told how a man once said, "Lord, I praise You as befits the majesty of Your face and the greatness of Your power." The two angels accompanying that man could not evaluate the remark and referred to God Almighty, who commanded them: "Register it in his record as he said it, and I shall reward him as he deserves when he returns to Me."

The last part of this verse, "*Lord of all the worlds*", expresses the belief in absolute universal Godhead which is at the very core of the Islamic concept of God. God is the sole, absolute and ultimate owner with full independent authority to act in the whole cosmos. He is the overall supreme master who has created the world and continues to watch over it, take care of it, and ensure its stability and well-being. This living and dynamic relationship between the Creator and the created is the perpetual fountain of life for all creation. God has not created the world and abandoned it to its own devices. He continues to be an active living authority over His creation, giving it what it needs for its continued and meaningful life. This applies to all God's creation.

Acknowledging God's absolute Lordship makes all the difference between clarity and confusion with regard to God's absolute oneness. People often combined their acknowledgement of God as the sole creator with belief in multiple deities having authority in their life. It may seem absurd that people should ever hold such a belief, but this was true in the past and is still true today. The Qur'ān speaks of those who claim that they "*only worship them [minor gods] so that they may bring us nearer to God.*" (39: 3) It also mentions that some Jewish and Christian groups who *"have taken their rabbis and priests as gods alongside God."* (9: 31) Polytheism, or the worship of several deities or demigods besides the perceived 'Grand Deity', was widespread when Islam emerged in the 7th century in Arabia.

The affirmation of the absolute sovereignty and active authority of the One God

over all creation was necessary to ensure man's rationality and peace of mind, and to relieve him from the cruel bewilderment of polytheism. Man must be reassured that a vigilant and caring God is in charge of this world and will never abandon or forsake it.

At the advent of Islam, the world was full of erroneous beliefs and philosophies, and of false religions based on superstition, legend and mythology. Very little of it was true or even rational. As far as the concept of God and His relationship with man and the world was concerned, there was plenty of miserable confusion. This in turn led to confusion in man's understanding of the world and of his own position and role within it.

The need for a rational, clear and consistent system of beliefs only becomes apparent when we study those dark periods of human history when there was no such system. We then realize how heavily such great myth and false beliefs weigh on man. There will be more on this when we come to study specific instances in the Qur'ān.

It is in the light of such need that Islam has taken great care to correct man's beliefs and define very clearly the concept and nature of God and His attributes, and the relationship between Creator and creation.

This is embodied in the Islamic concept of God's oneness, the essence and most fundamental principle of Islam. Much care has been devoted to establishing and elucidating the affirmation that God is the One, absolute and transcendent Lord and Master of all that exists. The other aspect of this concept to which Islam has given its greatest attention is the definition of God's attributes, which has been the cause of much confusion, obfuscation and muddled religious and philosophical thinking through the ages.

The intensity, emphasis and detail with which Islam has dealt with the concept of God's oneness, and all subjects related to it, can only be appreciated against the background of the great mass of erroneous beliefs and confused theologies that had accumulated in the course of history. From this perspective, Islam can readily be seen as a profound and timely act of divine mercy bestowed on humanity — mercy that is given with beauty, simplicity, clarity, harmony and full accordance with human nature.

The Compassionate, the Merciful. (Verse 3)

These are two attributes that encompass all meanings and aspects of mercy and compassion, and epitomize mercy as a property of God Almighty. These two attributes define the link between the Lord as Creator and His creation. It is a link

based entirely on love, peace, reassurance and care, and which inspires within man a spontaneous feeling of gratitude and praise towards God.

Unlike Greek mythology or the Old Testament (Genesis, 4: 1112), Islam does not depict God as an enemy who pursues man with relentless vengeance, or plots and schemes against His creation with spite and vindictiveness.

Master of the Day of Judgement. (Verse 4)

This verse states a fundamental Islamic principle that has a most profound influence on human life: belief in the hereafter. The Qur'ān comments on the curious fact that people have often believed in God as Creator but have failed to believe in a Day of Judgement, in a life to come, when reward and punishment are meted out to restore the balance of justice. It is in reference to these that the Qur'ān says: "*If you ask them, 'Who is it that created the heavens and the earth?' they will surely answer, 'God'*" (31: 25) Elsewhere the Qur'ān says of such people: "*They deem it strange that a warner should have come to them from their own midst. Thus, the unbelievers say, A strange thing is this! [Are we to be resurrected] after we have died and become mere dust? Such a return seems far-fetched indeed!*'" (50: 2-3)

Belief in the hereafter is essential because it engages the human soul and mind and concentrates man's attention on a future existence. This in turn helps to rein in man's obsession with the present life, and to transcend his immediate earthly desires. He is no longer anxious to reap all his rewards here and now; he can conquer his selfishness and develop altruistic feelings and interests. Man is able to go through life as a motivated, tolerant, confident and optimistic being.

This central Islamic belief distinguishes clearly between aspiring to gain the moral and intellectual freedom that man needs and deserves, and capitulation to worldly and selfish desires and pleasures. It marks the difference between a well-balanced and conscientious humanity and an egotistic, self-seeking one.

Human life can never be balanced and equitable until people believe that what they earn in this transient life is not the be-all and the end- all. Man needs to have the incentive of a confident belief that another life awaits him, which is worth the struggle and the sacrifices and the effort he may have to make here in this short one. This belief brings a fundamental difference in the feelings, attitudes and behaviour of those who uphold it.

You alone do we worship and to You alone do we turn for help. (Verse 5)

This verse expresses another fundamental principle that follows logically from the preceding ones. It is also a decisive and crucial principle that draws a line between

the freedom man gains in submitting to God and the abuse and debasement implicit in man's servitude to man.

Once man has submitted himself to God and sought help and guidance from Him alone, he has achieved total liberation from the tyranny of all religious, intellectual, moral and political powers.

To the believer in Islam, human power falls into two categories: a rightly-guided power that recognizes God and abides by His directions, and an arrogant, rebellious one that does not admit to God's sovereignty and authority. A Muslim is required to support and endorse the former, no matter how weak or disadvantaged it may be, and to reject and oppose the latter, regardless of its strength or dominance. The Qur'ān says: "*Many a small band, by the grace of God, has vanquished a large one.*" (2: 249) Such victory of the apparently weaker host could only be achieved when it relies on God, the source of all power.

Towards natural forces, a Muslim's attitude is one of curiosity and friendliness rather than fear or hostility. The powers of man and the powers of nature are perceived as by-products of God's own power, and subject to His will. They are, therefore, perfectly complementary and interdependent.

Islam teaches that God has created the physical world and all its forces for man's own use and benefit. Man is specifically taught and directed to study the world around him, discover its potential and utilize all his environment for his own good and the good of his fellow humans. Any harm that man suffers at the hands of nature is a result only of his ignorance or lack of understanding of it and of the laws governing it. The more man learns about nature, the more peaceful and harmonious his relationship with nature and the environment.

Hence the notion of "conquering nature" can readily be seen as cynical and negative. It is alien to Islamic perceptions and betrays a shameless ignorance of the spirit in which the world has been created and the divine wisdom that underlies it.

Being always aware of God's hand and role in shaping and running the world, Muslims have a positive, friendly and constructive outlook on man's relationship with nature. Simply stated, it acknowledges God as the origin and Creator of all these forces, on the basis of the same set of axioms and laws. They are designed to function together, for a common purpose, in harmony, compatibility and mutual support. The forces of nature are essentially subservient to man, who is mentally and physically equipped to discern them, unravel their secrets, comprehend the laws governing them and, subsequently, to harness them to improve the quality of life on earth. The Qur'ān asserts: "*He has all that is on the earth subservient to you.*" (45: 13)

Such an outlook eliminates all traces of fear or isolation and allows, instead, a profound sense of belonging in which man is seen not only as an integral part of the

overall design of the world, but also an essentially effective and influential one. Thus, his world becomes a friendly one. This is best expressed by the Prophet when he once faced Mount Uĥud, the scene of a bitter defeat for Muslims, and said, "How we love this mountain, and how it loves us!" This expresses in a nutshell the affinity the Prophet felt towards nature even in its most rugged forms.

Having established these fundamental principles, the *sūrah* points the way to certain practical means of responding to them, foremost among which is prayer:

> *Guide us on the straight path; the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your favours, not those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray. (Verses 6-7)*

With these words a believer pleads to be shown the Right Way and to be helped along it, which cannot be achieved without God's guidance, care and mercy. To acknowledge that is in itself a recognition of God's sovereignty and dominance over all things and events.

Guidance to the right way of life guarantees man's happiness in this world and in the hereafter. It comes about, in effect, by guiding human nature and man's instincts, desires and inspirations towards the recognition and comprehension of the divine will, so bringing human activity into rhythm with the natural order and the physical world.

The *sūrah* reveals the nature of the "straight path" as being one taken by those whom God has favoured, not the way of those who have earned His displeasure by their deviation from the Truth, nor that of the heedless who have no knowledge of the truth. It is the path of happiness and salvation.

This, then, is *al-Fātiĥah,* the *sūrah* selected for frequent daily recitation, without which Islamic prayers are invalid. Despite its brevity, it contains some of the most fundamental principles of the Islamic faith and certain insights that arise from them.

The Prophet Muĥammad is reliably reported to have quoted God as saying that the fruits of prayer are shared equally between Me and My servant, and My servant will be granted what he asks for. As the worshipper recites [in Prayer]: "*Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds,*" God will say: 'My servant has praised Me.' As he recites: "*The Compassionate, the Merciful,*" God will say: 'My servant has thanked Me.' As he recites: "*Master of the Day of Judgement,*" God will say: "My servant has glorified Me." As he says: "*You alone do we worship, and to You alone do we turn for help,*" God will say: 'This is between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks for.' And, as he says: "*Guide us on the straight path, the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your favours, not those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray,*" God will say: 'This is for My servant, and he will be granted his

wish.'"

This *ĥadīth* explores some of the meanings of *al-Fātiĥah.* The reader will perhaps find it helpful in understanding why God has chosen this *sūrah* for recitation by Muslims at least seventeen times a day, as they stand up for their obligatory prayers, spread over the night and day, and even more frequently, whenever they offer voluntary prayers.

SŪRAH 2

Al-Baqarah
(The Cow)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is one of the earliest to be revealed soon after the migration of the Prophet Muĥammad and his companions from Makkah to Madinah in 622 CE. It is the longest s*ūrah* in the Qur'ān.

From the varied and wide-ranging context of its verses, it is safe to assume that they were not all revealed in sequence. A common feature of the long Madinan *sūrahs* is that their verses were not revealed in consecutive order. Sometimes, passages of one *sūrah* were revealed before the completion of an earlier one. Hence, the convention in deciding the chronological order of the *sūrahs* has been based on the dates of the revelation of the opening passages, and not of the complete *sūrah*. In this instance, we find that Verses 275-280, prohibiting usury, were among the last Qur'ānic revelations, while the opening parts of the *sūrah* were revealed early in the Madinah period.

The composition and arrangement of the verses within each *sūrah* of the Qur'ān is fixed by God and was directly intimated to Prophet Muĥammad. Al-Tirmidhī reports that `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, a close and learned Companion of the Prophet, said that he had asked `Uthmān ibn `Affān, the third Caliph who is universally recognized as having authorized the compilation of the Qur'ānic text as we have it today, why *Sūrah* 8, al-Anfāl, consisting of less than 100 verses, was placed before *Sūrah* 9, al-Tawbah, which comprises over 100 verses, and which, unlike other *sūrahs,* does not contain the usual opening phrase of *"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"*? He further enquired from him why *Sūrah* 8 was grouped with the seven long *sūrahs* [that appear at the beginning of the Qur'ān].

`Uthmān answered, "The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to receive verses or

passages from several *sūrahs* at the same time. He would call the scribes and instruct them to put specific verses at specified places in their respective *sūrahs.* Al-Anfāl was one of the earliest *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah while al-Tawbah was one of the latest, but their subject matter was very similar that I suspected they might be one *sūrah.* The Prophet passed away without clarifying this particular point. Therefore, I placed them one after the other without separation."

This account makes it clear that the arrangement of the verses within every *sūrah* was decided on the Prophet's instructions.

Furthermore, authentic *aĥādīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim mention that the Prophet used to recite the Qur'ān for the Archangel Gabriel every night during the month of Ramaḍān, and that both the Prophet and Gabriel recited the whole Qur'ān for each other. Needless to say, he recited the Qur'ān in the right arrangement of its verses and *sūrahs.*

Anyone who studies the Qur'ān closely, and tastes the unique and rich experience of living within its ambience, will immediately identify the distinct character of every one of its *sūrahs.* Every *sūrah* has an aura and a personality of its own, with unique and well-defined features, and a feel that makes it stand apart from all the rest. Moreover, every *sūrah* revolves around a central theme, or a number of major themes related to one another by a common thread or idea. Every *sūrah* radiates its own atmosphere of meaning and essence, within which its theme, or themes, are discussed using the same well integrated and well coordinated style and approach. It also has its own special rhythm and musical pulse which accord with the meaning and context of its topics and content.

These general outstanding features are common to all *sūrahs,* including the longer ones, such as the present one.

This *sūrah* deals with several issues which revolve in total harmony around closely interrelated twin central lines. On the one hand, the *sūrah* discusses the attitude of the Israelites towards Islam and the burgeoning Muslim community in Madinah. It describes aspects of the hostile reception they gave the new religion and their reaction to the Prophet Muĥammad and the growing community of his followers. It explores the close and unholy alliance that had developed between the Jews and the hypocrites of Madinah, professing belief in Islam, on the one hand, and between the Jews and the Arab idolaters of the rest of Arabia, on the other.

On the other hand, the *sūrah,* having established the Israelites' failure to uphold God's trust and honour their covenant with Him, discusses the vicissitudes faced by the Muslim community during its formative years, and the manner and environment in which it developed, and prepared and mobilized itself for the great task of inheriting the trust of the establishment of God's sovereignty on earth. The *sūrah*

decisively and swiftly strips the Israelites of their association with Abraham, the great proponent of monotheistic belief, and the source of all the honours and privileges that go with it.

This two-fold central theme forms the backbone of the *sūrah's* subject matter as a whole and shadows the growth and progress of Islam and the Muslim community in Madinah during the period from 622 to 632 CE.

To set the contents of this *sūrah* in their appropriate context, it would be pertinent to throw more light on the historic environment and the religious and social setting in which the verses were revealed. Before we do that, however, it is important to point out that, in general terms, what the Muslims had to face in those early days was a miniature of, and a rehearsal for, what has occurred throughout the later history of Islam, albeit with some variations of scope and detail. The setbacks and the achievements, the allies and the opponents have invariably been the same.

This fact highlights the role and status of the Qur'ān as the unchallenged, immutable and incontrovertible authoritative reference for the religious, ethical and legislative principles and systems of Islam. It further affirms the unique property of the Qur'ānic text as being ever fresh and responsive to the inevitable changes that come with the perpetuation and progress of human life.

With these qualities, the Qur'ān remains the eternal guiding light for Muslims, despite the difficulties and hardships they have to suffer or the animosity and hostility they have to face. This, in itself, is an aspect of the inimitability and unsurpassed veracity and beauty of every verse in the Qur'ān.

Seeking a Secure Base

The Prophet Muĥammad's migration from Makkah to Madinah in 622 CE was undertaken after meticulous planning and with appropriate care and attention to detail. Leaving Makkah had become unavoidable in consequence of events: the indigenous Quraysh Arabs of Makkah were pursuing a relentlessly hostile and oppressive campaign against the Prophet personally, and his mission and followers in general. This campaign had intensified following the double personal tragedy of 619 CE in which the Prophet had lost his wife Khadījah, who had been to him a pillar of personal support and strength, and his uncle Abū Ṭālib, his guardian and protector. This tragedy greatly restricted Muĥammad's movement and his followers' activities in and around Makkah.

While the conflict between Muĥammad and his tribal cousins, led by Abū Lahab, `Amr ibn Hishām and Abū Sufyān ibn Ĥarb, reached a stalemate within Makkah, his message was gaining converts and supporters outside it. The majority of provincial

Arabs, however, elected to watch from a distance what they viewed as a purely internal dispute over power within the Quraysh. It would not do for them to become embroiled in supporting the religion of a man whose own tribe had denounced him, especially since that tribe held the custodianship of the sacred Ka`bah and assumed supreme religious authority for the whole of Arabia.

The Prophet had to seek an alternative home for his new faith, and a base where he could be protected, so that he could break the deadlock he had reached in Makkah, and be allowed to pursue his commission unimpeded. This, in my view, was the first and most important reason for leaving Makkah.

Before Madinah, other destinations had been proposed and tried as alternatives to Makkah. In 615, only a few years after Muĥammad's call to prophethood in 610 CE, a number of early Muslims had emigrated to Abyssinia. It would not be correct to say that they had gone there for reasons of personal safety alone. Had this been the case, the emigrants would have included the weakest and least supported elements among the Muslims. These were the ones at the receiving end of a sustained persecution campaign. But the reverse was the case. The emigrants included some of the most powerful of the Prophet's followers and tribesmen. The majority of them were from the tribe of Quraysh, including Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib, and a number of young men who were accustomed to providing protection to the Prophet, such as al-Zubayr ibn al-`Awwām, `Abdur Raĥmān ibn `Awf, Abū Salamah al Makhzūmī, `Uthmān ibn `Affān, to mention but a few. There were women belonging to some of the most prominent families of the Quraysh, such as Umm Ĥabībah, daughter of Abū Sufyān, the Quraysh's unrivalled non-Muslim leader. Such women would never be persecuted in Makkah.

There were, no doubt, other reasons for the Muslims' emigration to Abyssinia. There was the need to shake the religious and social foundations of the Quraysh's most noble and powerful families. There could be no greater insult or threat to the Quraysh dynasties than seeing their proudest and most noble sons and daughters running away for conscientious and religious reasons, leaving their cultural heritage and tribal homeland behind.

Whatever other reasons there might have been for the Muslims' emigration to Abyssinia, the fact remains that the search had started very early on for a safe haven for Islam, or a secure base where it could flourish and spread freely. This is further supported by reports of the Negus of Abyssinia's conversion to Islam, which only the threatened rebellion of his patriarchs prevented him from making public, as some reliable accounts confirm.

Following the death of his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, in 619 CE and as a result of the Quraysh's growing hostility, the Prophet sought help from the Thaqīf tribe who lived

in the town of Ṭā'if, some 90 km east of Makkah. The effort ended in failure because the Thaqīf gave him a most hostile reception. They mocked him and heaped scorn on him. They let loose their louts and their children to chase him and throw stones at him, causing his feet to bleed.

The Prophet's biographers tell us that he took refuge in an orchard belonging to `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah and his brother Shaybah, where he made a most moving and emotional appeal to God, saying, "To You, my Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive. Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a distant person who receives me with hostility? Or an enemy to whom You have given power over me? If You are not displeased with me I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy. I seek refuge in Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put in their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support."

A Major Breakthrough

Not long after that, the Prophet's, and Islam's, fortunes suddenly changed for the better. At a place called `Aqabah near Makkah, the Prophet had two crucial historic meetings in 621 and 622 CE with a group of Arabs from Madinah, during which they pledged their allegiance and support. This was to have a profound and far-reaching effect on the whole future of Islam and the Muslim community.

Towards the end of the Makkan period, the Prophet Muĥammad embarked on a concerted effort of making contact with various influential Arab communities and tribes to introduce Islam to them and seek their following and support.

The Khazraj and the Aws, the two Arab tribes of Madinah, having lived side by side with the Jews, had often heard them boast about "the Prophet who will come soon" and "whose day is at hand", who would lead the Jews to victory over the Arabs. A group of the Khazraj pilgrims met the Prophet who explained to them his message. They immediately realized that he was the very Prophet the Jews were talking about. They were determined to get to him before the Jews did. Having met him and listened to what he had to say, they accepted him and became Muslims. They said to him: "We have left our people in an unprecedented state of mutual hostility. May God make you the cause of their unity." On their return home, they reported what they did to their people who approved their action.

The following year a delegation comprising members of the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj, arrived in Makkah to meet the Prophet. They declared their

acceptance of Islam and their allegiance. He sent them back with one of his senior companions to teach them the Qur'ān and instruct them in their new religion.

At the following annual Pilgrimage, a larger group from both tribes came to Makkah, and offered to make a covenant with the Prophet Muĥammad. This was attended by his then non-Muslim uncle al-'Abbās. The covenant bound them to support Muĥammad and defend him as they would their own families and property. This is known as the second `Aqabah covenant.

`Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah of the Madinah people is reported to have stood up and asked the Prophet to "put forward your Lord's and your own conditions."

Muĥammad replied, "My Lord's condition is that you worship Him alone and take no other gods beside Him. As for myself, my condition is that you give me the protection you would give yourselves and your property."

`Abdullāh asked, "What do we receive in return?"

"Paradise!" the Prophet replied.

They said, "This is a profitable deal on which none will go back."

Thus the Arabs of Madinah committed themselves to Islam and to following Muĥammad and defending him. Islam was to spread rapidly and entrench itself among them. The Muslims of Makkah began to arrive in Madinah in droves, abandoning their belongings and material possessions and taking only their faith. They were warmly welcomed by their fellow Muslims, who offered to share with them everything they had.

Eventually the time came for the Prophet himself to migrate to Madinah. He was accompanied by his close and trusted companion Abū Bakr. At last Muĥammad had found the safe haven he had been looking for all those years, where he and his followers would be free to proclaim the faith and establish their community. The Prophet's arrival in Madinah was to prove a crucial turning point in the history of Islam.

The Making of a Unique Community

The community taking shape in Madinah was a unique and distinguished one, praised repeatedly throughout the Qur'ān. This *sūrah* opens with a concise, generally applicable, definition of true believers. Nevertheless, it refers specifically to those early pioneers of Islam: "*This is the Book; there is no doubt about it, a guidance for the God-fearing. Those who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, observe Prayer and give of what We bestow upon them. Those who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. Those follow their*

Lord's guidance, and they shall surely prosper." (Verses 1-5)

In contrast, we are immediately given a description of the unbelievers, which is again general and universal but applies specifically to those who rejected Islam and opposed it, in and around both Makkah and Madinah: "*For the unbelievers, it is alike whether you forewarn them or not, they will not accept the faith. God has sealed their hearts and ears; their eyes are covered; and a grievous punishment awaits them." (Verses 6-7)*

In Madinah, a third group emerged, the hypocrites, or *al-Munāfiqūn.* This faction had not been noticeable in Makkah; its rise was prompted by the Prophet's arrival and settlement in Madinah, as outlined earlier. That was because in Makkah, Islam had no sovereign political entity or force, and the Muslims remained soft targets for persecution and repression by the rest of the Arabs. Those who accepted Islam had to be brave and sincere, prepared to endure all kinds of hardship and terror.

In Madinah, hitherto known as Yathrib, the picture was very different. Islam was gradually gaining strength and the Muslims were developing into a dominant force. This became even more evident following their decisive victory over the non-Muslim Arabs at Badr, 125 kms south of Madinah, in February of 624 CE. This caused some people, including a number of leading and privileged figures, to feign acceptance of Islam merely to save their position and protect their social and tribal status and interests. Thus they came to be known as the 'hypocrites' in Islamic terminology. One of the most prominent of these was `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl who, prior to the Prophet's arrival in Madinah, was about to be crowned as a king of the city.

At the beginning of the *sūrah,* we find a detailed description of the hypocrites (Verses 8-20) from which it can easily be seen that they included those who had reluctantly embraced Islam and had not totally relinquished their self-pride and arrogance.

We also find a reference to their 'evil companions', which the context of the *sūrah* indicates to be the Jews, who were at the forefront of opposition and hostility to Islam. The *sūrah* devotes a fair amount of space to a series of stinging attacks on the Jews who were ranged against Islam and the Prophet Muĥammad.

The Jews were the first community to confront Islam in Madinah, for several reasons. As a people with an established religious heritage and culture, the Jews enjoyed a privileged and highly esteemed position among the illiterate Arabs of Madinah from both tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. However, the pagan Arabs had not shown any great enthusiasm or inclination to embrace the Jewish religion. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the Jews were better versed in matters of religious wisdom than they were. Moreover, the tense, and at times bloody, rivalry existing between these two tribes provided the Jews with an ideal environment for manipulation and exploitation.

When Islam came to Madinah, those advantages and privileges came under threat. Not only did Islam come to embrace and endorse Jewish Scriptures and beliefs, but it immediately aimed to eliminate the existing a unified and divisions them into harmonious community, unique in the whole history of mankind.

Above all, the Jews had claimed to be God's own chosen people, heirs of earlier prophets, true inheritors and custodians of the divine message, and the people from among whom the new Prophet, foretold in their own scriptures, was most likely to be selected. When an Arab prophet emerged, they expected him to discredit them and restrict the new religion to his own people, the Arabs. But, as Muĥammad went on to introduce his message to the Jews, as recipients of earlier revelations and therefore more likely to respond and give him their support, they became arrogant and self-important and took offence.

They were overwhelmed with envy and jealousy towards Muĥammad on two grounds: first, for being chosen as God's Messenger and, second, for the rapid and growing success he was having in and around Madinah.

But, of course, there was another very important reason for their unease and hostility. They had seen the threat of becoming marginalized and isolated within Madinah itself, where they had held spiritual as well as commercial sway for such a long time. The alternative would be to embrace the new faith and become assimilated into the Muslim community, losing their identity and separate existence for ever. Their options were thus severely restricted.

These factors explain the stance taken by the Jews towards Islam; a stance which has been extensively explored on several occasions in the Qur'ān. In this *sūrah,* we find the Qur'ān appealing to the Israelites, reminding them of the attitudes and conduct of their ancestors towards earlier Prophets, and recalling their stubbornness and intransigence, and their betrayal of God's trust and covenant.

The images and examples cited from the chequered and turbulent Jewish past were familiar in Muĥammad's time, and reflected the true nature of the Jewish psyche and attitude. Those features have accompanied the Jews in every generation and remain typical of their behaviour even today. For this reason, the Qur'ān has adopted a unique and revealing style in addressing all Israelite generations as one and the same, which again makes these accounts relevant for all time: past, present and future. Thus, the Qur'ānic words shall remain a timely and pertinent guide, and a warning, to Muslims in every generation with respect to the identity and potential intrigues of the enemies of their faith.

The Sūrah's Central Theme

A significant part of the *sūrah* is devoted to the foundation and essential preparation of the Muslim community which was to carry God's message to the world, the Israelites having notably failed to undertake that noble task. Indeed, they were now in opposition to its final version, Islam.

Having introduced the three main types of humanity: believers, unbelievers and hypocrites, and having made a clear though implicit reference to the 'evil ones', the *sūrah* addresses mankind as a whole, asking them to worship the One God and fully acknowledge the revelations He has bestowed on His Messenger. It affirms God's favour and wisdom in creating the earth and the heavens, and all that is in them, for the use and benefit of man. (Verses 21-29)

This is followed by an account of the occasion when God appointed man as His vicegerent and representative on earth, outlining the terms and conditions of that auspicious appointment. (Verses 30-39)

The following section of the *sūrah* is devoted entirely to an extensive and wide-ranging debate with the Israelites, dealing critically with various aspects of their religious and historic record. (Verses 40-141)

The discussion focuses on the Israelites' reception of Islam in Madinah. They were the first to actively reject it. They deliberately confused and concealed facts. They adopted a two-faced attitude towards faith and attempted to distort God's words. They cheated, lied and broke faith with the Muslims in the hope of turning them away from their religion. They claimed the exclusive possession of God's trust and a monopoly of righteousness. They became envious of the Muslims and spared no effort to undermine their existence and cause them harm. Last, but not least, they allied themselves with Islam's enemies, the hypocrites and pagan Arabs, and were prepared to conspire with them against the Muslim community.

In consequence, the *sūrah* launches a bitter and fierce attack on the Jews, drawing its justification from their behaviour towards Moses and their reaction to the laws given them by God and the prophets and messengers He sent them. All generations of the Jewish nation are addressed as one group.

The attack ends with an admonition to the Muslims never to hold any hope that the Jews will ever reconcile themselves to accepting or acknowledging Islam. It goes on to lambast the Jewish claim to the monotheistic legacy of Abraham, and to establish Muĥammad and his followers as the true heirs of Abraham's faith who are entitled to inherit his covenant with God. It affirms that the inheritance by Muslims of the guardianship of God's message to man had come as a fulfilment of Abraham's and Ishmael's prayers to God while constructing the Ka`bah, the symbol of surrender and the Sacred House devoted to the worship of the One God.

From then on, the *sūrah* addresses the Muslims, instructing them how to fulfil

their role as guardians and carriers of God's Message to mankind. It offers guidance on the beliefs and concepts that were to distinguish the Muslim faith and way of life for all time to come. (Verses 142-283) This part begins by defining the *qiblah,* the direction to which Muslims should turn when praying. It was to be the sacred site at

Makkah housing the Ka`bah, the House of God built by Abraham and Ishmael, its first keepers and custodians. The *sūrah* tells us that even while the Muslims had been praying towards Jerusalem, the centre of Judaism, Muĥammad was privately yearning for the Ka`bah to become the exclusive direction for the Muslims during Prayer. (Verse 144)

The *sūrah* goes on to outline the principles and systems of Islam in several fields including faith and outlook, rites of worship and religious matters, personal and public behaviour and conduct. It teaches the Muslims that those who give their lives for the cause of God never die; that insecurity, hunger and poverty are not necessarily evil in themselves, but are means to test the believers, to assess their potential and refine and strengthen their capacity to advance God's cause in the world. It reassures Muslims that God is their patron and will always be on their side, while their detractors and opponents will be led astray into a wilderness of darkness by impostors, false mentors and bogus leaders. The *sūrah* outlines aspects of lawful and unlawful food and drink, penal measures, rules governing wills, fasting, war, and pilgrimage. It dwells at length on the regulation and organization of family affairs, including marriage and divorce, and covers rules governing spending, usury, lending and trade.

Although during this extensive discussion the *sūrah* refers, from time to time, to instances and glimpses from Jewish history, the main body of the second part deals basically with the structure and organization of the Muslim community, and the essential features and qualifications it requires to uphold God's message and fulfil its prime role as His trustee and the custodian of His message for all time to come.

The following section of the *sūrah* is almost entirely devoted to the education, formation and building of the Muslim community, which was destined to take up the task of expounding God's message to the rest of humanity. We continue, from time to time, to come across discourses and arguments dealing with those opposed to Islam, especially the Israelites, and their plots and schemes to thwart its progress and stifle the growth of the Muslim community. There are also instructions to the Muslims on how to fight back and what precautions to take in order to avoid their traps.

Nevertheless, the chief concern of this section, and of the rest of the *sūrah,* remains the establishment and codification of the distinguishing qualities and features of the Muslim community. It is a community that has its own laws, confirming and

succeeding those of earlier Divine Revelation, its own *qiblah,* and above all its distinct and original outlook on the world and life as a whole. It is a community that is fully cognizant of its relationship with God and of its leading role in the world, and the responsibilities and obligations stemming from that role. It is a community that is confidently and loyally poised to submit fully to God's will and command, as ordained and articulated in the Qur'ān and the teachings and work of the Prophet Muĥammad, God's peace and blessings be upon him.

We learn that the *qiblah* issue is related to the fact that the Muslim community is a moderate and middle-of-the-road community. By virtue of their message and role in the world, Muslims shall be God's witness to the rest of mankind, while Muĥammad shall be a witness to them. The Qur'ān accords the Muslims a leading status in the world, and calls on them to work hard, persevere and make all the sacrifices that are required of them to earn that status and fulfil their role, putting their trust fully in God's will and wisdom.

We come across some important elaboration of basic Islamic concepts such as *taqwā,* fearing God, and *`amal ṣāliĥ,* good works. This comes in the course of refuting Jewish arguments concerning the change of the *qiblah,* which are based on distortion of the facts and faulty interpretations of Divine instructions.

The *sūrah* then turns to setting out rules and regulations for the religious and practical life of the community. These include penalties for capital offences and rules relating to wills, fasting during the month of Ramadan, going to war during the sacred months and within the surrounds of the Ka`bah, the *Hajj,* or Pilgrimage, drinking and gambling, and family affairs. The common denominator underpinning all these duties and regulations is sound belief and strong faith in God Almighty.

The section contains a discussion on *jihād,* citing an important episode from the history of the Israelites after Moses, during the reign of the Prophet David, which has many essential lessons for the Muslims as heirs of Abraham's religious tradition and the responsibility of world leadership.

The *sūrah* has given us a good idea of the nature of the battle the Qur'ān was fighting and the environment it was fighting in while it was being revealed, and the objectives it was aiming to achieve in raising and building the Muslim community in the 7th century CE. The atmosphere among the Makkan Arabs was one of intrigue, mischief, confusion and falsehood. Human weakness and greed also had to be taken into account.

Above all, the Qur'ān was aiming to establish and articulate upright concepts and sound principles on which the community could be raised, and to chart for it a course for a righteous and dignified leadership of the world.

The enduring qualities of the Qur'ān are vindicated by the fact that the principles,

rules and instructions it propounded fourteen centuries ago remain today, and for all time to come, essential for the regeneration and reconstruction of Muslim society. The battles and the issues and the controversies remain the same. The enemies, and the means and weapons used against the Qur'ān and its followers also remain fundamentally the same. To fight and win today's battles, Muslims will need to follow the Qur'ānic principles and teachings which shaped and guided that pioneering Muslim community of Madinah.

Muslims today need the Qur'ān for a better and a more realistic understanding of the world and their role in it. No other source exists that can provide them with the inspiration, the practical guidance and the complete way of life they need to forge ahead and assume the leadership of the world again.

The closing two verses take us full circle to the opening of the *sūrah,* affirming the Muslim world community's eternal belief in all Prophets and messages sent by God to man, without exception, and in what lies beyond the reach of human perception. They assert the Muslims' total unqualified faith in, and submission to, the One God.

Thus, the ending of the *sūrah* coalesces smoothly with its beginning, as the subject matter is shaped and honed to give a complete and superb example of the Qur'ān's inimitable and powerful style.

1
The Message Spelt Out

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif, lām, mīm. (1)

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ ۛ فِيهِ ۛ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٢﴾

This is the Book; there is no doubt about it, a guidance For the God-fearing. (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Those who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, observe Prayer and give of what We bestow upon them. (3)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ مِن قَبْلِكَ وَبِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

Those who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. (4)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Those follow their Lord's guidance, and they shall surely prosper. (5)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَأَنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

For the unbelievers, it is alike whether you forewarn them or not, they will not accept the faith. (6)

خَتَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ ۖ وَعَلَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرِهِمْ غِشَٰوَةٌ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

God has sealed their hearts and ears; their eyes are covered; and a grievous punishment

awaits them. (7)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَبِٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَمَا هُم بِمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾

There are some who say: 'We believe in God and the Last Day', yet, in truth, they do not believe. (8)

يُخَٰدِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَمَا يَخۡدَعُونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمۡ وَمَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They seek to deceive God and the believers, but they are only deceiving themselves, though they may not realize it. (9)

فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٞ فَزَادَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَرَضٗاۖ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمُۢ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكۡذِبُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

There is sickness in their hearts, and God has aggravated their sickness. Painful suffering awaits them for the lies they keep telling. (10)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ لَا تُفۡسِدُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّمَا نَحۡنُ مُصۡلِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

When it is said to them: 'Do not spread corruption in the land', they say: 'We are but doers of good.' (11)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمۡ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدُونَ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

But, they indeed are the ones who do spread corruption, though they do not realize it. (12)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ ءَامِنُواْ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلنَّاسُ قَالُوٓاْ أَنُؤۡمِنُ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمۡ هُمُ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

When it is said to them, 'Believe as other people have believed', they say, 'Are we to believe as the fools believe?' It is indeed they who are fools, though they do not know it. (13)

وَإِذَا لَقُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ شَيَٰطِينِهِمۡ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا مَعَكُمۡ إِنَّمَا نَحۡنُ مُسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe', but when they are alone with their devilish allies, they say, 'We are with you, we are only mocking.' (14)

ٱللَّهُ يَسۡتَهۡزِئُ بِهِمۡ وَيَمُدُّهُمۡ فِي طُغۡيَٰنِهِمۡ

God will put them to derision and let them continue their transgression, blundering

يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

blindly along. (15)

أُولَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَٰرَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

These are the ones who barter away guidance for error. Their transaction is profitless and they will receive no guidance. (16)

مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِى ٱسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَلَمَّآ أَضَآءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُۥ ذَهَبَ ٱللَّهُ بِنُورِهِمْ وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِى ظُلُمَٰتٍ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

They are like one who sought to kindle a fire, and as it lit up all around him God took away their light and left them in darkness, unable to see anything. (17)

صُمٌّۢ بُكْمٌ عُمْىٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Deaf, dumb and blind, they can never return to the right path. (18)

أَوْ كَصَيِّبٍ مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فِيهِ ظُلُمَٰتٌ وَرَعْدٌ وَبَرْقٌ يَجْعَلُونَ أَصَٰبِعَهُمْ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِم مِّنَ ٱلصَّوَٰعِقِ حَذَرَ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ مُحِيطٌۢ بِٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Or, when there is a storm-cloud, dark, charged with thunder and lightning, they thrust their fingers in their ears at every thunder-clap, for fear of death; but God encompasses the unbelievers. (19)

يَكَادُ ٱلْبَرْقُ يَخْطَفُ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أَضَآءَ لَهُم مَّشَوْا۟ فِيهِ وَإِذَآ أَظْلَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ قَامُوا۟ ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَذَهَبَ بِسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَٰرِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

The lightning all but snatches away their sight; whenever it flashes over them they walk on, but when darkness overtakes them they stand still. Should God will it, He would take away their hearing and their sight, for God has power over all things. (20)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Mankind, worship your Lord who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you may become God-fearing. (21)

ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ فِرَٰشًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَأَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ رِزْقًا لَّكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تَجْعَلُوا۟ لِلَّهِ

He made the earth a couch for you, and the heavens a ceiling. He sent down water from the sky to bring forth fruits for your sustenance. Do not, then, knowingly set up

أَندَادًا وَأَنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٢

equals to God. (22)

وَإِن كُنتُمۡ فِي رَيۡبٖ مِّمَّا نَزَّلۡنَا عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِنَا فَأۡتُواْ بِسُورَةٖ مِّن مِّثۡلِهِۦ وَٱدۡعُواْ شُهَدَآءَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٢٣

If you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce one sūrah comparable to it and call upon all your witnesses, other than God, if what you say is true. (23)

فَإِن لَّمۡ تَفۡعَلُواْ وَلَن تَفۡعَلُواْ فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِي وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلۡحِجَارَةُۖ أُعِدَّتۡ لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٢٤

But if you fail, as you will certainly do, then guard yourselves against the fire, fuelled by men and stones, prepared for the unbelievers. (24)

وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۖ كُلَّمَا رُزِقُواْ مِنۡهَا مِن ثَمَرَةٖ رِّزۡقٗاۙ قَالُواْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِي رُزِقۡنَا مِن قَبۡلُۖ وَأُتُواْ بِهِۦ مُتَشَٰبِهٗاۖ وَلَهُمۡ فِيهَآ أَزۡوَٰجٞ مُّطَهَّرَةٞۖ وَهُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٢٥

To those who believe and do good deeds give the good tidings that they shall reside in gardens through which running waters flow. Whenever they are offered fruits therefrom, they say, 'We have been given the same before', for they shall be provided with what looks similar. They shall also have pure spouses and they shall reside there for ever. (25)

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَسۡتَحۡيِۦٓ أَن يَضۡرِبَ مَثَلٗا مَّا بَعُوضَةٗ فَمَا فَوۡقَهَاۚ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ فَيَعۡلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمۡۖ

God does not disdain to give a parable of a gnat, or a higher creature. Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Lord,

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلٗاۘ يُضِلُّ بِهِۦ كَثِيرٗا وَيَهۡدِي بِهِۦ كَثِيرٗاۚ وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِۦٓ إِلَّا

while the unbelievers ask, 'What could God mean by such a parable?' In this way, God lets many go astray and gives guidance to many others, but none does He leave to

go astray except the evildoers. (26)	ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ٢٦
Who violate God's covenant after having accepted it, and cut asunder what He has ordered to be joined, and spread corruption in the land. They are the losers. (27)	ٱلَّذِينَ يَنقُضُونَ عَهۡدَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مِيثَٰقِهِۦ وَيَقۡطَعُونَ مَآ أَمَرَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦٓ أَن يُوصَلَ وَيُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ٢٧
How can you reject God who has given you life after you were dead? He will cause you to die again then He will bring you back to life. To Him you shall return. (28)	كَيۡفَ تَكۡفُرُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَكُنتُمۡ أَمۡوَٰتٗا فَأَحۡيَٰكُمۡۖ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُحۡيِيكُمۡ ثُمَّ إِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٢٨
It is He who created for you all that is on earth. He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things. (29)	هُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُم مَّا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا ثُمَّ ٱسۡتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَسَوَّىٰهُنَّ سَبۡعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٖۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٞ ٢٩

Overview

This opening passage of the *sūrah* outlines the essential features of the religious groups the Muslim community faced in Madinah, with the exception of the Jews, to whom only a brief, but adequate, reference is made. They are described as the 'satans' or 'evil companions' of the hypocrites; a description that says a great deal about their qualities and the nature of their role. They are dealt with in more detail later on in the *sūrah.*

In delineating the features of these groups, the special characteristics of the Qur'ānic style are clearly displayed. Words are used as an artist uses lines and colours, and through them images slowly begin to take on shape and life.

At the outset, in a few words and sentences, profiles of three types of people merge, each a true representation of a group of human beings such as recurs in every day and age. Indeed, all mankind in all ages and places can be classified into these types. This is a fine example of the eloquence and power of the Qur'ānic style.

In these brief and highly informative sentences and verses, pictures are brought to life with a power and focus that no lengthy or elaborate rendition could ever provide. A few rapid touches combine with the beauties of style and rhythm to supreme effect.

Following this concise and powerful introduction, the *sūrah* addresses all people in the world, calling on them to belong to the first category of mankind. It urges man to believe in the One God, the Creator, Sustainer and Provider, who has no equals or partners. It challenges those sceptics who doubt the truth of the Prophet Muĥammad's message, and of the revelations he received, to come up with a single *sūrah* to compare with the Qur'ān. It complements the challenge with a severe warning of horrible punishment for those who reject God's message, and a promise of everlasting bliss and happiness for those who trust and believe in God and His revelations.

The passage then responds to certain Jews and hypocrites who had questioned the use of parables in the Qur'ān, which they used as an excuse to doubt the truth and validity of Divine revelations altogether. It gives them a stern warning that they are departing from God's path, in contrast to the believers, who are drawn closer to God and strengthened in faith. It denounces their denial of God who gives life and takes it away, the Creator who controls all and whose knowledge of things and events in this vast universe is all-embracing and comprehensive. It is God who has bestowed His grace on mankind by making the earth and all that it contains, to be under their control and for their benefit.

These are the main themes of this opening passage of the *sūrah,* and we shall now go on to look into them in more detail.

The Qualities of True Believers

The *sūrah* opens with three Arabic letters: "*Alif, lām, mīm.*" (Verse 1) This is immediately followed by the statement: "*This is the Book, there is no doubt about it, a guidance for the God-fearing.*'' (Verse 2)

Several *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān begin with a combination of Arabic letters in this way, and interpretations of these abstract openings vary quite widely. The one we tend to favour is that these are meant to emphasize the fact that the Qur'ān is a book composed of the letters of the Arabic language, in the same way as they are used by the Arabs who were the first people addressed by this divine revelation. Nevertheless, it is such an unparalleled and transcendent work that no Arab writer, using the same letters and the same language, could ever match its majesty and power. Rivals are repeatedly challenged to compose a book similar to it, or only ten *sūrahs,* or even a single *sūrah,* of matching quality. No one has ever been able to take

up the challenge.

This is true for all God's creation. Soil, for example, is made up of elements of known properties. The best man has been able to make out of soil is bricks, tiles, vessels and structures of various types and uses, which are in some cases very sophisticated. But using these same elements, God has created life, the one outstanding secret that remains far beyond man's intellectual and creative abilities.

Similarly, the same letters and words that ordinary people, speaking the language of the Qur'ān, use to articulate expressions and convey meanings and concepts, are used by God to produce the Qur'ān as a definitive book stating the final and absolute distinction between truth and falsehood. A comparison between man's work and the work of God is simply not possible; it is a comparison between the image and the reality, between the dead body and the living soul.

"This is the Book; there is no doubt about it." (Verse 2) How can there be any doubt about it when the evidence for its truth and veracity is given in these very letters with which the *sūrah* opens? Evidence is implicit in the total inability of the Arabs to produce anything matching the Qur'ān, despite their proficiency and excellence in the use of their own language which is comprised of the same letters and words.

"This is the Book; there is no doubt about it a guidance for the God- fearing." (Verse 2) The key word in this statement is 'guidance'. It expresses the essence and the nature of the Qur'ān. But guidance for whom? Who are the people who will find that this Book provides them with light, direction and true counsel? They are the God-fearing.

Once a man's heart is filled with the fear of God, he will benefit by the Qur'ān. Fear and consciousness of God is the quality that opens one's mind to the true guidance contained in the Qur'ān and allows it to have its proper effect on one's life. It is the factor that causes one's heart and mind to become sensitive and receptive to God's guidance and enables one to respond to His call and His instruction.

Anyone seeking the benefit and Godly wisdom of the Qur'ān must approach it with an open mind and a pure heart. One must also approach it with perception and sensitivity, and with a determination not to fall by the wayside or be tempted away from God. Then, and only then, will the marvels and treasures of the Qur'ān be opened and revealed, and their light and wisdom will pour into this apprehensive, alert and welcoming heart.

It is reported that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a close companion of the Prophet and his second successor, asked the learned Companion, Ubayy ibn Ka`b, about the true meaning of 'fear of God'.

Ubayy asked `Umar, "Have you ever walked along a thorny road?" "Yes, certainly," `Umar replied.

Ubayy asked again, "How did you manage to get through it?" `Umar replied, "I gathered up my clothes and tried my best to avoid the thorns."

"That is precisely what God-fearing is like," said Ubayy.

Fear of God, then, is to have a sensitive conscience, clear feelings, a continuous concern, vigilance and alacrity, and a yearning for the correct path in life. It is a feeling that is ever alive, a feeling of being aware of life's temptations and pitfalls; and the ambitions and hopes, and the worries and fears that come with it. It is a feeling of being able to discern false hopes and unwarranted fears that one associates with individuals or powers that could neither bring benefit nor cause harm. Above all, the journey of life is full of many other kinds of thorns and nettles one must be aware of and strive to avoid.

Believing in the Imperceptible

The *sūrah* then gives a description of those who are God-fearing. In doing so it presents the early model of believers in Madinah, which was also to be the universal one for all future generations of Muslims: *"Those who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, observe Prayer and give of what We bestow upon them. Those who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and are certain of the Hereafter.''* (Verses 3-4)

The most essential quality of the God-fearing believers is their conscious, active moral unity that enriches their souls with profound belief in the imperceptible, or *ghayb,* dedication to their religious obligations, recognition of all God's messengers, and unshakeable certainty in the hereafter. Such are the ingredients that make the Muslim faith a complete whole and distinguishes believers from unbelievers. Such a thorough outlook is worthy of God's final message to man, which was intended as a focus and a guide for all human endeavour on this earth. Man is called upon to adopt this message and lead a complete and wholesome life, guided by its light which shapes man's feelings, actions, beliefs and ways of living and behaviour.

Looking more closely at each of these qualities, one discovers a number of essential values that are fundamental to human life.

"Who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception." (Verse 3) The limits of human perception do not prevent believers' souls from reaching their Creator, the omnipotent power behind the universe and all existence. Their limited natural senses do not stand in the way of their desire to reach beyond the physical world or their pursuit of the ultimate truths of life.

Belief in the imperceptible is a major threshold in human understanding, and crossing it elevates man above animals and takes him far beyond the physical world

of the senses or all the devices that may extend their function. It raises human consciousness to a level where a wider and fuller world can be perceived. Such a step has far-reaching effects on man's understanding of his own existence and the existence of everything else around him. It provides him with a totally new awareness of the realities of the interacting energies and forces that are at play in this complex world, and of the way he conceives of them. It also affects his behaviour and life on earth in general.

There is a vast difference between the thinking that is trapped within the parochial materialist world of the senses, and that which is based on the awareness of an infinite world of existence and which can, through the soul and the instinctive mind, deeply and intensely feel its energies and the forces governing it. Time and space extend far beyond what can be determined or comprehended within the short span of life. Man will come to recognize the great and ultimate truth that underpins the whole cosmos and sustains all existence, seen as well as unseen. It is the Divine Being that the human eye cannot see, nor the mind perceive.

This belief has the vital role of preserving man's finite mental and intellectual powers and saving them from being wasted, abused or misdirected. These faculties have been bestowed on man to enable him to properly discharge his obligations as God's vicegerent on earth. In the present life, the domain for man's activities of procreation, construction, innovation and excellence is limited. His intellectual power needs to be strengthened and complemented by spiritual power which stems directly from God and is thereby linked to the whole of existence.

Any attempt to comprehend the world from another perspective is futile and foolish, because it resorts to the wrong tools and defies the fundamental truth that the finite cannot fathom the infinite. Man's limited sensory and intellectual capabilities do not enable him to understand the absolute meaning of things.

This inherent human deficiency, however, in no way prevents man from believing in the imperceptible and accepting that it is the prerogative of the Divine. Man should leave these matters to God, the Omniscient, and should turn to Him for meaning, information, understanding and explanation. Recognition of this fact is the greatest prize the human mind can win, and is the first and foremost mark of the God-fearing believer.

The concept of the imperceptible is a decisive factor in distinguishing man from animals. Materialist thinking, ancient as well as modern, has tended to drag man back to an irrational existence, with no room for the spiritual, where everything is determined by sensory means alone. What is peddled as 'progressive thought' is no more than dismal regression. God has protected believers against such an error by describing them as those who believe in the imperceptible. For that alone they should

be deeply grateful.

Those who *"observe prayer,"* revere and worship none but God Almighty. They never debase themselves by worshipping anyone or anything else. They turn to the real and ultimate power in this world, humbling their hearts and souls to Him alone. In this way they link up to the cause and origin of existence; their lives assume real meaning and noble purpose, transcending the crude and trivial pursuits and needs of worldly living. Their ties with God give them power over other creatures and feed their conscience with moral strength and fear of God. Prayer is an essential element in the building of a believer's character and shaping his concepts, feelings and behaviour and in linking them directly with God.

"And give of what We bestow upon them." (Verse 3) This implies the believers' recognition that what they own and possess is a gift and a favour from God. It is not of their own making. Such a belief brings mercy and benevolence towards the weak and the poor, and mutual fellowship and a true spirit of brotherhood and human community among all. The outcome is to eliminate greed and fill people's hearts with compassion and humanity, making life an opportunity for cooperation rather than an arena for conflict and confrontation. The sick, the weak and the young and helpless in society are given security, so that they feel they are living among human beings with compassionate hearts and scrupulous souls, rather than selfish beasts with nothing but claws and teeth.

This kind of benevolent spending comprises the obligatory *zakāt,* as well as the giving of alms, voluntary donations and all other forms of charitable offerings. The latter had been instituted in Islam long before *zakāt,* because they are more general and wide-ranging than *zakāt,* which relates to the obligatory aspect of charitable spending. Fāṭimah bint Qays quotes the Prophet Muĥammad as saying: "There is a rightful claim to people's money, other than *zakāt."* [Related by al-Tirmidhī] This statement by the Prophet clearly establishes the general principle with respect to financial obligations.

"Who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you." (Verse 4) This is a characteristic of the Muslim community, or *ummah,* the rightful heir to, and custodian of, God's message and the legacy of all prophets since the dawn of human life, and the leader of mankind. This characteristic embodies such concepts as the unity of man, the oneness of God, the unity of the divine faith and God's messengers. It purges man's soul of bigotry and petty fanaticism. It reassures us of God's everlasting grace and protection which He has shown by sending successive messengers preaching one and the same faith and offering the same guidance to all mankind. It allows us to feel proud of being the recipients of God's pure and universal guidance, which remains a bright shining star that is never extinguished, even in the darkest days of human history.

"*And are certain of the Hereafter.*" (Verse 4) This characteristic of the God-fearing links the present life with the life to come; the beginning with the end; deed with reward. It provokes in man the feeling that he is no mere useless being, created without a purpose and left to wither away. It comforts him by affirming that full justice is certain to come, and thus inspires man to seek to do good, with total confidence in God's justice and mercy.

Belief in the hereafter is the point of departure between those who conceive only of the confines of the physical world and those who appreciate the limitless expanse of existence; those who believe that worldly life is the be-all and end-all, and those who see it merely as a testing arena where the ultimate reward is earned. This latter group realize that true life is there, beyond the limited confines of this earthly existence.

Each of these interrelated characteristics carries certain values for human life, and they form one harmonious entity.

Fear of God is an inner feeling, a state of mind, a source of human action and behaviour. It binds inner feeling with outer action, and brings man into constant contact with God, in private and in public. This contact extends into the deeper recesses of meaning and consciousness, penetrating barriers of knowledge and feeling, making acceptance of the belief in the unseen a plausible and natural outcome and bringing total peace and tranquillity to man's soul.

Fear of God and belief in what is beyond human perception go hand in hand with acts of worship, in accordance with the manner prescribed by God Almighty in order to link man the servant with God the Lord and Master.

Then comes the giving of part of one's wealth to charity, in acknowledgement of God's favour and as an expression of human fraternity and compassion. This is followed by a broad, all-embracing fellowship with all believers in God, and acceptance of His message and all the Prophets and messengers who preached it. Finally comes an unswerving belief in the hereafter.

These qualities were true of the first Muslim community which emerged in Madinah at the time these verses were revealed. It consisted of the *Muhājirūn,* who had migrated from Makkah, and the *Anşār,* the natives of Madinah who welcomed them. Members of this model community displayed these profound characteristics of faith in their personal and public conduct. Thus they were capable of great achievements, with far-reaching effects on human life and civilization as a whole.

The passage aptly concludes with the comment: "*Those follow their Lord's guidance, and they shall surely prosper:*" (Verse 5) Indeed, they adhered to God's guidance and they were successful. For those who wish to follow in their footsteps, the route remains clearly marked.

A Contrasting Picture

The next human model we are presented with is that of the unbelievers. *"For the unbelievers, it is alike whether you forewarn them or not, they will not accept the faith. God has sealed their hearts and ears; their eyes are covered; and a grievous punishment awaits them."* (Verses 6-7)

The contrast with the previous group is total. While God's Book in itself is a guide for the God-fearing, no warning to the unbelievers has any effect at all. The receptivity of the believer contrasts with the unbeliever's total unreceptivity; here the ties that bind the believer to God and the world around, and link the seen with the unseen and the overt with the covert, are completely absent. Their hearts are firmly shut and their ears can hear nothing. They are utterly incapable of receiving guidance or discovering the truth. Moreover, *"their eyes are covered."* (Verse 7) They are in total darkness, with no light to guide them anywhere. All this is their just reward for ignoring God's warnings.

The verses paint a grim and lifeless picture of these people on their way to *"a grievous punishment"*, which is a fitting and proper reward for obstinacy and disbelief.

The Mark of Hypocrisy

We now move on to the third model. The picture that the verses paint of this type of people is neither as bright and noble as the first nor as dark and base as the second. It is an elusive, evanescent image, constantly changing. These are the hypocrites: *"There are some who say: "We believe in God and the Last Day', yet, in truth, they do not believe. They seek to deceive God and the believers, but they are only deceiving themselves, though they may not realize it. There is sickness in their hearts, and God has aggravated their sickness. Painful suffering awaits them for the lies they keep telling. When it is said to them: "Do not spread corruption in the land', they say: "We are but doers of good.' But, they indeed are the ones who do spread corruption, though they do not realize it. When it is said to them, 'Believe as other people have believed', they say, Are we to believe as the fools believe?' It is indeed they who are fools, though they do not know it. When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe', but when they are alone with their devilish allies, they say, 'We are with you, we are only mocking.' God will put them to derision and let them continue their transgression, blundering blindly along. These are the ones who barter away guidance for error. Their transaction is profitless and they will receive no guidance."* (Verses 8-16)

This was a description of a number of people in Madinah, but the picture can be identified in every human generation. Such people are to be found among the elite of society who lack the moral courage to either openly accept the truth or clearly reject it. They are ever assuming the moral high ground, placing themselves above all

others, deriding their understanding. We should, therefore, take these verses in their absolute sense, as being descriptive of hypocrites in all generations. They indeed address the human soul which is one in all societies.

Typically, the hypocrites claim belief in God and the Last Day when they in fact entertain no such belief. They simply do not possess the resolve to declare their true feelings and convictions.

They delude themselves into thinking that they are so clever and cunning as to be able to deceive the 'naive' believers, but God uncovers the truth about their actions. They are trying to deceive not only believers, but God Himself: "*They seek to deceive God and the believers.*" (Verse 9)

This and similar Qur'ānic verses reveal a great truth and an honour that God has bestowed on believers, for they emphasize the special relationship He has with them. God always takes the believers' side and makes their concern His concern. He protects them and stands against their enemy, and repels any attacks directed at them. This great honour elevates the status of believers among the rest of mankind, and affirms the fact that belief in God is the noblest and most honourable of all concepts in this life. It is the source of boundless reassurance to the believer that God supports his cause, nurtures him and fights on his side. The scheming and intrigue of other mortals is not to be feared.

This statement also carries a stiff warning to those who seek to deceive believers, harm them or scheme against them. It tells them that they will have to confront not only believers, but God Almighty. Waging war against believers means having to fight against God Himself and face His wrath and His retribution.

Both aspects of this fact should be appreciated and carefully considered by believers, so that they may be fully satisfied and reassured of their ultimate success. They need not be perturbed by the scheming and hostility of their detractors or the harm that these people may inflict upon them. Equally, the enemies of the believers should reflect on them, in order to appreciate the true nature and magnitude of the force they are contending with.

Going back to the verse, we find that it mocks their behaviour, pointing out that "*they are only deceiving themselves, though they may not realize it.*" (Verse 9) They are so oblivious of the reality of their position, and so careless, that they deceive no one but themselves. God is aware of their schemes and deception. The believers are under God's protection. The thinking of these foolish hypocrites is so warped that they believe they have triumphed and achieved their goal, whereas in fact they have earned themselves nothing but doom and have condemned themselves to a terrible fate.

But why, we may ask, do these hypocrites resort to such behaviour? The answer

is: *"There is sickness in their hearts."* (Verse 10) There is something wrong with their attitude and their hearts are not pure, which causes them to deviate and incur further displeasure from God, who has *"aggravated their sickness."* (Verse 10)

This type of sickness begins as a minor deviation and grows gradually, according to the established laws of human social and psychological behaviour. Predictably, such behaviour will only lead to one end, as befits those who deceive God and the believers: *"Painful suffering awaits them for the lies they keep telling."* (Verse 10)

Other characteristics of the hypocrites, which were certainly evident in the case of those notorious ones encountered by the early Muslims at Madinah, such as Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, is obstinacy and justification of their corrupting behaviour, together with an arrogant belief that they will escape punishment. *"When it is said to them: Do not spread corruption in the land', they say: "We are but doers of good.' But, they indeed are the ones who do spread corruption, though they do not realize it..."* (Verses 11-12) It is not sufficient for them simply to tell lies and resort to deception. They have to make false claims, adding insult to injury.

People of this type can be found in every generation. They perpetuate evil and corruption but claim to be proponents of reform and proper behaviour. Their standards of responsibility towards society and dedication to the common interest are distorted, and so is their evaluation of good and evil. Lack of faith and sincerity towards God blurs their vision of right and wrong, allowing their actions to be influenced by personal whims and desires. Their criteria of good and evil, right and wrong, are not dictated by the standards laid down by God. Therefore they are strongly and severely reprimanded: *"They indeed are the ones who do spread corruption, though they do not realize it."* (Verse 12)

Hypocrites are also distinguished by their arrogance, their contempt for other people and their pretence to be what they are not. The description continues: *"When it is said to them, 'Believe as other people have believed', they say, Are we to believe as the fools believe?' It is indeed they who are fools, though they do not know it."* (Verse 13)

It is clear that what the hypocrites of Madinah were being called on to demonstrate was sincere, unwavering faith, free of personal desire or caprice. They were being urged to join those who accepted Islam in its totality, submitted themselves completely to God, and opened their hearts and minds to the teachings and instructions of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him).

But it is also clear that they were too proud to accept. They thought of Islam as a religion for the meek and the poor in society, which did not become the lofty elite. This was reflected in their response. They are quoted as saying: *"Are we to believe as the fools believe?"* which is appropriately met by: *"It is indeed they who are fools, though they do not know it."* (Verse 13) Fools are seldom aware of their predicament and are

always willing to delude themselves that they are righteous and proper.

Then comes the last characteristic, which reveals the common ground that the hypocrites of Madinah shared with the grudging Jews. Their lies and deceptions are compounded by treachery and murky scheming against the Muslims: *"When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe', but when they are alone with their devilish allies, they say, 'We are with you, we are only mocking.'"* (Verse 14)

To some people wickedness means strength and scheming is an art; yet the opposite is true. A strong person never feels the need to resort to treachery or intrigue. The hypocrites were too cowardly to come into the open and could only adopt a two-faced attitude. With the Muslims they professed belief in order to protect themselves and have access to the Muslim community and undermine it from within, but with their allies, who were often the Jews, they would say otherwise. Their rapport was matched by their cooperation in wicked schemes.

As soon as this aspect of their conduct is revealed, God delivers the sternest warning of all: *"God will put them to derision and let them continue their transgression, blundering blindly along."* (Verse 15)

What a degrading, humiliating and terrifying end: they are left wandering heedlessly, without guidance or direction, until the hand of God picks them up again, like feeble mice walking unawares into a trap. This is the true irony of their situation, which makes their mockery of the believers appear even more petty and ignoble.

Here again we are faced with the timeless truth mentioned earlier: that God always takes care to defend the believers, reassuring them and thwarting their enemy, who will blunder arrogantly in the dark, deceived by God's temporary clemency and brief remission, towards their inevitable and dreadful fate.

Then comes a final statement to sum up: *"These are the ones who barter away guidance for error. Their transaction is profitless and they will receive no guidance."* (Verse 16) They spurned the opportunity to be rightly guided, and forfeited their right to it. They are left miserable and totally lost on all counts.

The Enemy Within

We note that more space is devoted to the delineation of the character of the third group, the hypocrites, than to either of the preceding ones. This is because each of the first two types is, in a sense, simple and straightforward. The first picture shows people with clear vision and honest purpose, while the second paints those moving aimlessly, devoid of guidance. In the third picture we see those with a devious, restless, complex and sick disposition. Its delineation requires more touches and finer

detail to be clearly and fully defined.

A detailed description of this third group also suggests that the role played by the hypocrites in Madinah in undermining the Muslim community during those formative years was a very serious one, and that they instigated trouble and instability in that community. It is also an indication of how far-reaching a role hypocrites can play in any Muslim community, and that there is a need to expose their activities and maleficent scheming against the Muslims.

Further examples are given to add more clarification and expose the nature of hypocrisy: *"They are like one who sought to kindle a fire, and as it lit up all around him God took away their light and left them in darkness, unable to see anything. Deaf, dumb and blind, they can never return to the right path."* (Verses 17-18)

Unlike the unbelievers, the hypocrites did not turn away from divine guidance in the first instance. They did not block their ears or refuse to listen or understand. They simply elected to turn away from God's guidance, after having considered and understood it. They sought the light and saw it, but they did not benefit from it. It was for this reason that *"God took away their light and left them in darkness, unable to see anything."* (Verse 17) This is a punishment for their deliberate rejection of God's guidance.

Man's senses are meant to enable him to perceive and receive God's Guidance, but the hypocrites wilfully closed off their senses, rendering themselves deaf, dumb and blind. Thus they are no longer able to see the light, nor can they find the right path again. They are lost.

Another description of their wavering and loss of direction tells us that: *"Or, when there is a storm-cloud, dark, charged with thunder and lightning, they thrust their fingers in their ears at every thunder-clap, for fear of death; but God encompasses the unbelievers. The lightning all but snatches away their sight; whenever it flashes over them they walk on, but when darkness overtakes them they stand still. Should God will it, He would take away their hearing and their sight, for God has power over all things."* (Verses 19-20)

It is a fascinating scene, full of life and movement, overshadowed by confusion. It is remarkable for the sense of loss, panic and perplexity it conveys. There is light and sound, dark stormy clouds bringing heavy rain, intermittent spells of light and darkness. People walking in all directions, not knowing where to go, and stopping abruptly in terror as the light disappears, covering their ears against the piercing sound of thunder that could well-nigh kill them.

The interaction between the various dynamic elements of this awesome scene perfectly reflects the confused and perplexed state of mind of the hypocrites, their double-faced way of life and their wavering and equivocating attitude towards others. It is a vivid picture of the psychological condition of those people, eloquently

expressed in the rich inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

Having clearly defined these three types of people, the *sūrah* goes on to address mankind as a whole with an exhortation to seek to be of the pure, constructive and honest type in order to attain happiness and prosperity. *"Mankind, worship your Lord who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you may become God-fearing. He made the earth a couch for you, and the heavens a ceiling. He sent down water from the sky to bring forth fruits for your sustenance. Do not, then, knowingly set up equals to God."* (Verses 21-22)

The call is addressed to all mankind to worship God, the sole Creator of all beings. He alone is the Creator, and He alone must be worshipped. Man's worship of God fulfils a definite purpose, namely, to make man God-fearing. It is through worship that people can attain the honourable status of believing in, and fearing none other than God. Thus, they fulfil their obligations towards the One God, Lord of the living and the dead, past and present, and the sole sustainer and provider of all that is in the heavens and the earth.

"*He made the earth a couch for you.*" (Verse 22) The tone here emphasizes the element of ease in human life. Planet earth has been prepared as a suitable place for living, providing comfortable shelter for man. Long familiarity, however, tends to make people take this ease and comfort for granted and to overlook the meticulous care and balance involved in providing the means to sustain human life on earth. Should only one of the elements necessary for life on this planet fail or run short, life itself would disappear or become impossibly hard.

"*And the heavens a ceiling*", solid and well coordinated. Man's life on earth is strongly linked to the skies and what they provide: heat, light, gravity, stars and planets. The forces that preserve this delicate coherence and harmony between the earth and the rest of the universe are vital to enable and sustain man's life. It is no surprise, therefore, that this should be mentioned within the context of God's power and grace, emphasizing man's duty to worship and submit to Him.

"*He sent down water from the sky to bring forth fruits for your sustenance.*" (Verse 22) This is a recurring theme in the Qur'ān, especially in the context of reminding man of God's power and grace. Water is the essence of all life on earth. God says elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"We have made out of water every living thing."* (21: 30) Causing plants to grow, running into rivers, forming lakes, permeating the soil to form underground reservoirs then springing out or drilled up, water remains the most vital substance for life.

Water as a phenomenon, and its role on this earth, are wonders that no one can deny or overlook. To assert God's power and grace, it is sufficient simply to point them out as an example.

Two fundamental Islamic principles emerge from this passage. The first is God's oneness as the Creator of all beings; the other is the unity of the universe and its internal cohesion, and its fitness for man and for all life. The earth is stretched out for our ease and comfort and the skies support their marvellous systems above us, while water brings forth crops and fruits to sustain mankind. All this is by the grace of God, the sole Creator. Therefore the *sūrah* continues: "*Do not, then, knowingly set up equals to God*" (Verse 22)

Knowing that God has created us and those who came before us, and knowing that He prepared the earth for us to live on and built the skies above us, single-handedly and without a partner or helper, and provided us with water, the essence of life, how can we ever deny Him, set up equals to Him, or worship others as gods beside Him?

The concept of "setting up equals to God" which the Qur'ān frequently and strongly condemns need not necessarily refer to the worship of idols or figurines or statues, normally associated with pagan religious practice and observed by the Arab idolaters. It could very well take other forms, some of which are very subtle indeed. To pin one's hopes on anyone other than God, to fear someone other than Him, to believe that others can bring fortune or cause harm, are all infringements of monotheistic belief and, therefore, forms of idolatry or, to use Islamic terminology, *shirk*.

The Prophet's learned companion, `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, said: "Setting up equals to God is a subtle form of idolatry, or *shirk*. It is more subtle than an ant stealthily walking on a smooth black surface in the thick of darkness. It is when someone swears by something other than the name of God or believes that dogs or ducks keep the thief away. It is when someone says, 'By the will of God and the will of man' or, 'Were it not for God and you...'" It is also reported that a man once came up to the Prophet and said: "Whatever you and God will." The Prophet replied: "Do you take me as an equal to God?"

The early Muslims were extremely sensitive and alert to these subtle forms of idolatry. We today have to reflect on our own attitude towards this matter and determine how true and faithful we are to the pure and fundamental principle of God's oneness.

A Divine Challenge

The Jews of Madinah used to raise doubts about the truth of the Prophet Muĥammad's message, while the hypocrites, like the pagan Arabs of Makkah, were sceptical and called it into question. Therefore we find the Qur'ān challenging them all, as indeed it challenges mankind in general, saying: "*If you are in doubt as to what*

We have revealed to Our servant, then produce one sūrah comparable to it and call upon all your witnesses, other than God, if what you say is true." (Verse 23)

The challenge starts off with emphasizing an important fact by describing the Prophet Muĥammad as God's 'servant'. This description is significant in a number of ways: it is, first, an honour to the Prophet himself and an indication that to be a 'servant' of God is the highest honour a human being can attain. Second, it affirms the essence of servitude to God in the universal human context, calling on all men to submit only to God and renounce all partners that may be associated with Him. The Prophet Muĥammad, who attained the highest position of honour as a recipient of divine revelations, is also honoured by being described as a servant of God.

The challenge is also related to the opening of this *sūrah,* which points out that the Qur'ān was composed of the very same letters the Arabs were familiar with in their language. If they were in any doubt as to its truth or veracity, they were free to produce anything, even one *sūrah,* comparable to it, and they could call any witnesses they wished to testify in their favour. The Prophet's claim had already been supported by God.

This challenge remained open throughout the Prophet's life, and has done so ever since. The Qur'ānic argument stands just as firmly today as it has through the centuries. The Qur'ān remains today the unique work it was on the first day it was revealed, clearly distinguished from anything men can ever produce. Thus, God's words, and His warning, remain true: *"But if you fail, as you will certainly do, then guard yourselves against the fire, fuelled by men and stones, prepared for the unbelievers."* (Verse 24)

It is a remarkable challenge indeed, but what is even more remarkable is the absolute certainty with which it is made. Were any of the unbelieving Arabs able to take up the challenge, they would not have hesitated for a moment. The Qur'ānic assertion of the futility of their task, and the endurance of that assertion, are in themselves manifest and irrefutable proof of its superior nature.

The opportunity remains wide open for anyone or any group to pick up the gauntlet and try their best to match the Qur'ān and refute its claims of divinity and superiority. But this has not happened and, as the Qur'ān clearly states, will never happen. That is the Qur'ān's final word for posterity.

Anyone with any real knowledge or appreciation of literary styles, or expertise in philosophy, psychology, social science, or any other science at all, will not fail to recognize that whatever the Qur'ān has to say in any field of knowledge is something unique, unlike anything human beings would say. Argument over this fact can only arise from blind ignorance or sheer prejudice.

The stern warning to *"guard yourselves against the fire, fuelled by men and stones"*

should, therefore, come as no surprise to those who may fail in their challenge to God but persist, nevertheless, with their rejection of the truth.

The use of the word 'stones' here is intriguing. This fire is prepared for the unbelievers, described earlier in the *sūrah* as those whom "*God has sealed their hearts and ears*" and whose *'eyes are covered."* (Verse 7) They are the ones who have failed to take up God's challenge, and persisted, nevertheless, in their rejection of His message. They are effectively stone-like, although they have a human form. Hence the connection between humans and stones in this verse. The expression amply conveys the horror of the awesome scene in which people and stones are consumed by fire.

In total contrast, we are given the scene of bliss which awaits the believers: "*To those who believe and do good deeds give the good tidings that they shall reside in gardens through which running waters flow. Whenever they are offered fruits therefrom, they say, 'We have been given the same before', for they shall be provided with what looks similar. They shall also have pure spouses and they shall reside there for ever."* (Verse 25)

The interesting aspect of this life of eternal bliss, besides the chaste, pure spouses, is the similar types of fruit offered to the believers, which they somehow feel they were given previously, either in this world or in heaven. This apparent similarity seems to introduce an element of recurring surprise; every time the fruits are found to be different, adding to an atmosphere already filled with pleasure, abundance and enjoyment.

The combination of apparent similarity and difference of essence is a phenomenon clearly discernible in God's creation, indicating, for one thing, that the world we know is much greater than it seems to us. Take man as an example. Overall, people look the same and possess the same limbs and organs, with essentially the same physical, biological and chemical constitution. But how far does this similarity go? How different can people be in their habits and aptitudes? For, despite the striking physical similarity, such differences can be vast indeed.

Variety and diversity in God's creation can be great indeed. There is variety in living species and in human races; there is diversity in shapes and features, *as* well as qualities and characteristics. Yet, this vast, multitudinous, diversified and inexhaustible universe goes back to a basic single cell which is made up of the same constituent parts.

Who, with all these manifest marvels and astounding proofs of God's power and omnipotence, dare reject God and fail to submit to Him alone in total awe and reverence?

The Use of Parables in the Qur'ān

At this point the *sūrah* speaks of the Qur'ānic use of parables: *"God does not disdain to give a parable of a gnat, or a higher creature. Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Lord, while the unbelievers ask, 'What could God mean by such a parable?' In this way, God lets many go astray and gives guidance to many others, but none does He leave to go astray except the evildoers, who violate God's covenant after having accepted it, and cut asunder what He has ordered to be joined, and spread corruption in the land. They are the losers."* (Verses 26-27)

Earlier in the *sūrah,* the hypocrites were shown in derogatory situations. They also realized that the Qur'ān uses parables referring to insignificant creatures. One of these compares unbelievers to spiders: *"Those who take beings other than God for their protectors are like a spider which makes for itself a house. The frailest of all houses is the spider's house. Could they only understand."* (29: 41) Similarly the Qur'ān cites a parable showing the powerlessness of their false deities: *"Mankind/ An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought!"* (22: 73)

This passage suggests that the hypocrites in Madinah, and probably the Jews and the polytheists, were, in their clumsy and confused campaign against Islam, trying to exploit such use of parables to raise doubts about the Qur'ān's divine origins, claiming that God would not speak about such insignificant creatures as spiders and flies. They thus hoped to undermine the authority and authenticity of the Qur'ān.

These verses serve to refute that argument and explain the wisdom underlying the use of such parables, while warning unbelievers against taking up such a line of argument and reassuring believers that they will strengthen their faith.

"God does not disdain to give a parable of a gnat, or a higher creature." (Verse 26) God is the Lord of all creatures, big and small. Every single creature, regardless of shape or size, is a marvel to behold, embodying the greatest secret of life, which is known only to God. Besides, parables are used to explain and illustrate concepts and ideas, and the size or shape of their subjects is irrelevant; in no case should they be slighted or scoffed at. Moreover, God, in His infinite wisdom, makes use of such parables to assess and test people's faith. *"Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Lord..."* (Verse 26)

Since they believe in God, they accept what He sends with the reverence that is due to Him and with respect for His wisdom, which they do not question. The faith He bestowed upon them enlightens believers' hearts, enhances their spirits, opens their minds, brings them closer to God and makes them more sensitive and receptive to what they receive from Him.

"While the unbelievers ask, 'What could God mean by such a parable?'" (Verse 26) Apart

from being an impertinent and inappropriate question, this reveals the unbelievers' ignorance and their exclusion from God's light and guidance. They have no reverence for God and no trust in His revelations.

Accordingly, the answer comes in the form of a swift warning: "*In this way, God lets many go astray and gives guidance to many others, but none does He leave to go astray except the evildoers.*" (Verse 26)

God tests people in various ways and with varying degrees of difficulty and rigour, but the effect is not the same. Ordeals and tribulations can only bring a believer much closer to God and enhance his God-fearing sense and his submission to Him, while they will shake and confound an unbeliever or a hypocrite. It is the same with prosperity and good fortune. A believer will become more conscious of, and thankful to God, while an unbeliever or a hypocrite will grow more arrogant, inconsiderate and irresponsible.

Thus parables are used by God to test people's faith, so that "*In this way, God lets many go astray and gives guidance to many others, but none does He leave to go astray except the evildoers.*" (Verse 26) In consequence of their attitudes and actions, the evildoers are given even more freedom to pursue the route they have chosen for themselves.

God's Covenant with Man

We have not completely departed from the subject of the beginning of the *sūrah:* the presentation of the main types of people found in every human society. So the text turns to speak in more detail of the "evildoers". They are those "*who violate God's covenant after having accepted it, and cut asunder what He has ordered to be joined, and spread corruption in the land. They are the losers.*" (Verse 27)

The text speaks in very general terms, without specifying the 'covenant' or the thing they cut asunder, or the type of 'corruption' they spread. Priority is given to defining the overall profile of this type of people rather than recording any particular incidents or examples. They have lost God's trust, severed all the ties He commanded to be maintained, and they are capable of perpetrating every kind of corruption or evil. These are people condemned to confusion and loss of guidance; their basic human nature has been corrupted and perverted. They are like a prematurely picked fruit that has rotted and withered away. Their minds and outlook on life are totally distorted, so that whatever gives believers guidance and direction only confounds them and sends them further towards ruin and damnation.

Here, we may care to reflect briefly on the destructive effect of the activities of this type of people, as represented by the Jews, the hypocrites and the idolaters, on the

young Muslim community of Madinah; and on subsequent Muslim societies everywhere, although under different guises and names.

Those *"who violate God's covenant after having accepted it"*. (Verse 27) The 'covenant' is in fact several covenants, the fundamental one being man's obligation to acknowledge his Creator and turn to Him in worship and submission. Belief in God is a basic human need that must be fulfilled; but it can be abused and misdirected, so that a person sets up partners or equals to God and turns to them.

There is the covenant made with Adam on behalf of all mankind, establishing man's role on earth and defining his rights and obligations, as we shall discuss presently.

There are numerous covenants and agreements, conveyed through Prophets and Messengers at different stages of human history, with various communities and human groups, committing them to the belief in the One God and implementation in their daily life of His laws and teachings. Evildoers, throughout history, have violated these covenants, and once they renege on their basic and fundamental obligations towards God, there is nothing to deter them from violating laws and norms of every kind, thereby wreaking havoc and destruction on all forms of life.

"And cut asunder what He has ordered to be joined." (Verse 27) Such ties are also numerous, and include family ties between kindred and relations as well as humanitarian ties within the larger human family. First and foremost, God has enjoined the maintenance of man's relationship with God and his fellow believers, which underpins all other ties and relationships. When these ties are broken or dissolved, societies fall apart and chaos and corruption run rampant.

"And [they] spread corruption in the land". (Verse 27) This corruption also takes numerous forms and manifestations, but it stems from one major evil: deviation from God's word and violation of His covenant, severing the ties and relations He has commanded to be maintained. The root of all evil and corruption on earth is deviation from God's laws which He has laid down for the conduct and organization of human life. This is a departure that will surely lead to ruin and destruction.

Human life cannot be built on sound and healthy foundations as long as God's laws, commands and teachings are discarded or ignored or given second place. Once this vital bond between God and man is broken, human and natural destruction becomes inevitable. Therefore, those who advocate such deviation from God's path and perpetrate corruption and ungodliness deserve to be left to stray and to be utterly confounded. Their confusion is caused by the same thing that provides guidance to those who are God-fearing.

Giving Life after Death

The *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, denouncing their disbelief in God who gives life and takes it away, and who provides for all and has full control over the whole universe: "*How can you reject God who has given you life after you were dead? He will cause you to die again then He will bring you back to life. To Him you shall return. It is He who created for you all that is on earth. He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things.*" (Verses 28-29)

Denial or rejection of God after seeing all these manifest signs is certainly despicable and utterly unjustifiable. The Qur'ān here faces mankind directly with facts they cannot deny or question. It refers to their life and the phases of human existence. God brought man out of a state of death and gave him life. This transformation is a fact that cannot be ignored or denied, and can only be explained by acknowledging the creative power of God. Life is not an illusion, but how has it come about? Who has initiated this unique phenomenon we call life, which distinguishes the living from the dead in this world? Life represents an extraordinary dimension that is the complete antithesis of death, but where does it originate?

It is a question that has to be faced and answered in a way that will satisfy man's curiosity and put his heart and mind at rest. It is simply not enough to dismiss it or attribute life to anything other than a creative power that is itself totally different from creation. The immediate answer to this question is that life comes from God. Let those who dispute this come up with another answer.

The verse questions man's denial of, and disbelief in, God "*who has given you life after you were dead*". (Verse 28) How impertinent of man to reject God, the origin and the cause of life. It affirms that God "*will cause you to die again*", a fact that is beyond dispute and of which we are constantly reminded. It adds that "*[He] will bring you back to life*'', which has been, and still is today, a matter for endless argument and debate. Yet, if people would only reflect on how man came to be in the first instance, there would be no reason for bewilderment or rejection of life after death.

"*And to Him you shall return.*" (Verse 28) As it was from Him you have come, to Him you shall return, in total fulfilment of His will and purpose.

Thus, in one short verse, the whole book of life is opened and. closed. The whole story of man's existence on this earth is reviewed. It begins, by the will of God, with a state of death and ends with death, after which God will restore life again, and the ultimate return thereafter shall be to Him from whom life originated. In this brief picture, we can visualize God's awesome power and appreciate its deep impact on our hearts and minds.

This is complemented by another powerful affirmation: "*It is He who created for you all that is on earth. He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 29)

Commentators and scholars have spoken at length about the origin and creation of the heavens and the earth. They have spoken about the order in which various parts of the universe were created. They have delved deep into the possible ways in which God could have 'turned' to heaven and 'fashioned' it. However, they overlook the fact that such dimensions of time and space are meaningless in relation to God. These are linguistic terms used to bring infinite concepts into the sphere of our finite minds. Endless disputes have periodically erupted among Muslim scholars about these and similar terms, over many centuries. These are part of the unfortunate legacy of Greek philosophy and Jewish and Christian theological and scholastic arguments that had crept into Arabic and Islamic thought and theology. Today, we would be better advised to avoid engaging in such futile debates, which can only mar the clarity of faith and destroy the beauty of the Qur'ān.

We should, therefore, look for those facts, ideas and concepts that lie beyond these Qur'ānic expressions and relate to the creation of all that is on the earth for the benefit of man. Let us look into the purpose of human existence and man's great role on this earth, and its value in the sight of God. What value does Islam attach to human beings, and what role does it assign to them in the social system?

"It is He who created for you all that is on earth." (Verse 29) The key words in this sentence are "*for you*". They explicitly assert that God created man for a momentous and important purpose, placing him in charge of the earth's affairs: to own it and to play an effective part in it.

Man is the master of this expansive earthly realm, and his role in its development and well-being is the most crucial of all. Man is the master on earth, and he is the master of the tools that are available to him on it. He cannot become a slave to these tools, as he is perceived to be by modern materialistic thinking. Nor is he subservient to, or dependent on, the changes or developments brought about by technology and their influence on human relations and societies, as materialists today would have us believe. Such thinking belittles man's role, lowers his status in the world, and renders him inferior to machines instead of being their master.

No material value should ever supersede human values, or subjugate or dominate man. Any cause that aims to depreciate man's worth is anti-human, no matter how much material advantage it achieves. Man's dignity and integrity override all material values and ideals, which are of secondary importance.

The grace and honour implied in these verses, of which God reminds mankind, even while He denounces their rejection of Him, are not only reflected in the fact that He has provided them with all that is on earth, but also that He has appointed man its master and set him above everything else on it. This honour is represented by the fact that man has been delegated by God to rule over the earth.

"*He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens.*" (Verse 29) This can only be interpreted in the sense that God has total control over everything, and with Him rests the will and decision of creating and shaping things.§ There is no need to dwell on the precise meaning, shape or dimensions of the 'seven heavens' referred to here. It is sufficient to point out the overall import of the text as outlined above.

"*He has knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 29) He is the Creator of everything and has control over all things. God's omniscience and omnipotence are strong incentives for man to believe in Him, acknowledge His favours and worship Him alone.

This brings us to the end of the first section of the *sūrah,* which has focused mainly on belief in God and on urging mankind to join the ranks of God-fearing believers.

§ Here, the translator uses the expression 'turned to heaven' for the Arabic verb *Istawā.* For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

2
Man in Charge of the Earth

وَإِذ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ إِنِّى جَاعِلٌ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوٓاْ أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَن يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ ٱلدِّمَآءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۖ قَالَ إِنِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.' They said, 'Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?' He said, 'I surely know that of which you have no knowledge.' (30)

وَعَلَّمَ ءَادَمَ ٱلْأَسْمَآءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنۢبِـُٔونِى بِأَسْمَآءِ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

And He taught Adam the names of all things and then turned to the angels and said, 'Tell Me the names of these things, if what you say is true.' (31)

قَالُواْ سُبْحَٰنَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَآ إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٢﴾

They said, 'Limitless are You in Your glory! We only know what You have taught us. Indeed, You alone are All-Knowing, Wise.' (32)

قَالَ يَٰٓـَٔادَمُ أَنۢبِئْهُم بِأَسْمَآئِهِمْ ۖ فَلَمَّآ أَنۢبَأَهُم بِأَسْمَآئِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ إِنِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

He said, 'Adam! Tell them their names.' When he had told them all their names, He said, 'Have I not said to you that I know the secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth, and I know all that you reveal and conceal?' (33)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسْجُدُواْ لِأَدَمَ فَسَجَدُوٓاْ إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَٱسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam', they did so except for Iblīs who refused, swelled in insolence,

and was thus an unbeliever. (34)

وَقُلْنَا يَـٰٓـَٔادَمُ ٱسْكُنْ أَنتَ وَزَوْجُكَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَـٰذِهِ ٱلشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

And We said to Adam, 'Dwell you with your spouse in Paradise and eat freely whatever you wish of its fruit, but do not come near this one tree, lest you would be wrongdoers.' (35)

فَأَزَلَّهُمَا ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ ۖ وَقُلْنَا ٱهْبِطُوا۟ بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ ۖ وَلَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتَـٰعٌ إِلَىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

But Satan lured them away from it [Paradise] and thus caused them to be ousted from where they had been. We said, 'Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.' (36)

فَتَلَقَّىٰٓ ءَادَمُ مِن رَّبِّهِۦ كَلِمَـٰتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

Thereupon Adam received from his Lord certain words, and He accepted his repentance; for He alone is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. (37)

قُلْنَا ٱهْبِطُوا۟ مِنْهَا جَمِيعًا ۖ فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُم مِّنِّى هُدًى فَمَن تَبِعَ هُدَاىَ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

We said, 'You shall all descend from it [Paradise]. Guidance shall reach you from Me. Those who follow My guidance shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve, (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَـٰلِدُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

but those who deny and gainsay Our revelations shall have the fire, wherein they shall abide.' (39)

Overview

Stories and narratives are a familiar part of the Qur'ān, recurring with varying emphasis and detail. The context within which a narrative or story is given normally dictates the main line and content of the story, as well as the style and form in which it is presented. All these factors are chosen to blend in with the spiritual and intellectual background of the text, as well as its artistic aspects. In this way, a story

or narrative serves its intended purpose and produces the desired psychological effect.

Some people are of the view that there is much repetition in the Qur'ān, as some stories are related in more than one *sūrah.* But on deeper reflection, one finds that not a single story or episode is ever related twice in exactly the same way. There are obvious variations of detail, style and format. Every time a story is told, it has something new to say. The criticism of repetitiveness does not stand.

Some have gone so far as to suggest that there is a certain amount of invention or manipulation of detail and events, with a tendency to artistic licence that does not adhere to historical facts. But anyone studying the Qur'ān objectively, with an honest and open mind, will see clearly that the circumstances in which a story is related determine the aspects and amount of detail given in each specific instance. These also usually dictate the style and the way in which it is presented.

The Qur'ān is a book with a message. It lays down a constitution and provides an outline for a complete way of life. Its purpose is not to relate a story or to give an account of historical events for pure intellectual enjoyment. The extent of narrative detail chosen is determined by the message and the context in which it is used, while seeking also to attain and preserve beauty of style and power of expression, without exaggeration or false embellishment. The Qur'ānic style relies purely on faithful representation of the facts with characteristic power and beauty.

Historical accounts of earlier Prophets, as related in the Qur'ān, portray the long procession of the faithful through the ages, and the reaction of mankind to God's messages, generation after generation. They also give us a glimpse of faith in God as experienced and interpreted by that select group of human beings, the messengers, whom God has chosen for the great honour of conveying His message to mankind. For believers, reading these rich and vivid accounts can be heart-warming and reassuring, reaffirming the essence and value of faith and its profound role in human life. They also help define the believer's outlook on life, as established by the belief in God, and distinguish it from other man-made concepts. It is for these reasons that such historical narratives form a significant part of the Qur'ānic text.

Against this background, we now look at the story of Adam, or that part of it that is related in this *sūrah.*

The overall context, we may recall, is a review of human life in general and of the phenomenon of existence as a whole. It talks about planet earth, emphasizing the grace of God, who created everything on it for man's benefit. It then moves on to tell us about Adam's arrival on earth and his appointment as master over it, in full charge of its affairs, subject to certain conditions. It mentions that God has provided him with the tools of knowledge that would qualify and enable him and his

descendants to fulfil their mission. This also serves as an interlude to the account that will follow, relating the assignment of the Israelites to take charge of God's message on earth, their covenant with Him, and their subsequent discharge and replacement by the followers of Islam, the loyal and true keepers of God's covenant.

Thus we find that the account of Adam fits in very well with the whole drift of the *sūrah* and forms a perfect link between the sections that precede and follow it, as we shall now see in more detail.

Establishing Man's Authority

The opening scene is an awesome one. We are in the presence of God Almighty and the Supreme Society of the angels: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.' They said, 'Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?' He said, 'I surely know that of which you have no knowledge.'*" (Verse 30)

God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to hand over the earth's affairs and destiny to man and give him a free hand to use, develop and transform all its energies and resources for the fulfilment of God's will and purpose in creation, and to carry out the pre-eminent mission with which he was charged.

It may be assumed, then, that man has been given the capability to take on that responsibility, and the necessary latent skills and energies to fulfil God's purpose on earth.

It may, therefore, be concluded that a perfect harmony exists between those laws that govern the earth and the universe, and those governing man's powers and abilities. The aim of this harmony is to eliminate and avoid conflict and collision, and to save man's energies from being overwhelmed by the formidable forces of nature.

This clearly indicates that man is held in high regard in God's sight, and occupies a prominent position in the system of the universe, bestowed on him by God Himself. This is neatly encapsulated in the glorious statement: *"I am appointing a vicegerent on earth."* (Verse 30) The impact of this statement becomes even more profound and impressive, as we reflect on man's contribution and achievement on earth and beyond.

"They said: 'Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?'" (Verse 30) The angels' reply suggests that they were aware of man's nature and disposition, either through some past experience on earth or special inspiration or direct information. Thus, they were able to surmise that he would spread corruption and shed blood on earth. Furthermore, by nature, angels can think only of absolute goodness and complete

peace. Hence, they perceive that total dedication to the praise of God should be the sole and ultimate purpose of existence. They were already carrying out this purpose, extolling God's praises and glorifying Him at all times.

The angels were not privy to God's will and His purpose in setting up the earth and creating the various forms of life on it. They were not aware of God's plan to have the earth developed, cultivated and enriched at the hands of man, His vicegerent there. It is true that man would commit corruption and shed blood, but even this apparently evil aspect of his function turns out to be for the best. It is a necessary consequence of perpetual progress and development, and the changes brought about by a ceaseless endeavour in pursuit of better and higher things in this world.

Thus, they are given God's answer which settles the matter: "*He said: "I surely know that of which you have no knowledge.'"* (Verse 30) "*And He taught Adam the names of all things and then turned to the angels and said, 'Tell Me the names of these things, if what you say is true.' They said, 'Limitless of e You in Your glory! We only know what You have taught us. Indeed, You alone are all-knowing, wise.' He said, Adam! Tell them their names.' When he had told them all their names, He said, 'Have I not said to you that I know the secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth, and I know all that you reveal and conceal?'"* (Verses 31-33)

The passage takes us right into the very scene in which we can see the angels in God's presence, and witness how He entrusts man with the task of God's vicegerent on earth. He has given man the great secret of knowledge and cognition, as well as the ability to assign names to persons and objects which serve as symbols denoting whatever they are assigned to, even though they are no more than sounds and words. The ability to know and name objects has had the most profound effect on man's life on earth. We can only imagine what life would have been like without this communication tool to appreciate its value. Indeed, without it, human life and interaction would have been unthinkable, and there would have been no progress beyond a very primitive state. Without such ability, all communication would have necessitated the presence of the subject matter. Thus, if a group want to discuss something related to a tree, a mountain, or a particular person, then that person should be brought before the group, or they should all go to the tree or mountain. Indeed, without the ability to use names and symbols, human life could not function.

The angels have no use for such an ability because it is not required for their role. Therefore, they have not been given it. When God, having bestowed this great honour on Adam, asked the angels to identify certain objects, they could not because they did not possess the ability to use symbols and assign names or titles to things. They admitted their inability and recognized the limits of their knowledge, prompting the comment that followed: "*He said, 'Have I not said to you that I know the*

secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth, and I know all that you reveal and conceal?'" (Verse 33)

Man's First Test

The story continues: *"When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam', they did so."* (Verse 34) This is undoubtedly the highest accolade bestowed upon man. For, despite the fact that he would commit corruption on earth and shed blood, he was elevated above the angels, endowed with the secrets of knowledge, and given a free and independent will to choose his destiny. Man's dual nature, his ability to determine his own course of action, and the trust he carries to pursue God's guidance by his own means are all aspects of the high esteem in which he is held. The angels prostrated themselves before Adam in obedience to God's command, *"except for Iblīs who refused, swelled in insolence, and was thus an unbeliever"* (Verse 34)

Here we see evil manifested in Satan's behaviour as he disobeys God Almighty, vainly refuses to recognize honour where it is due, persists in his error and closes his mind to the truth.

The general drift of the narration suggests that *Iblīs* was not one of the angels; rather, he was with them. For, had he been an angel, he would not have disobeyed God, since the angels' foremost characteristic is that they *"do not disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden."* (66: 6) The fact that the Arabic construction here makes an exception in relation to *Iblīs* does not mean that he is, or was, one of the angles. The exception is justified on the basis that he was with the angles. This is perfectly acceptable in Arabic, which allows the construction "the whole clan arrived but not Aĥmad" without implying that Aĥmad is a member of the clan.

Furthermore, the Qur'ān specifically identifies *Iblīs* as belonging to another type of extra-terrestrial creatures, the *jinn,* who are created out of fire, eliminating the idea that he was, at any time, an angel. (See 15: 27, 18: 50, and 55: 15)

The battle lines are drawn, and the long struggle commences between *Iblīs,* the epitome of evil, and man, God's vicegerent on earth.

This battle is fought within man's own conscience. Its outcome will be in man's favour as long as he exercises his will and remains faithful to his covenant with God. Evil will triumph only if man succumbs to his own desires and alienates himself from his Lord.

> *And We said to Adam, "Dwell you with your spouse in Paradise and eat freely whatever you wish of its fruit, but do not come near this one tree, lest you would be*

wrongdoers." (Verse 35)

They had been allowed access to all the fruits of Paradise with the exception of one tree. That tree may be seen as a symbol of the things forbidden to man on earth, without which there would be no freewill for him to exercise. Man would have been indistinguishable from animals, acting on mere instinct. Without forbidden things, there would be no way of testing man's willpower and resolve in fulfilling his covenant with God. The human will is the deciding factor, and those who do not exercise their will, despite their human form, belong with animals and irrational creatures.

"But Satan lured them away from it [Paradise] and thus caused them to be ousted from where they had been." (Verse 36) So graphic and expressive is the Arabic word, *azallahumā,* used here to express the act of luring away. We almost visualise the scene of Adam and Eve being tempted and manoeuvred so that they slip and fall out of Paradise.

Thus the test is over. Adam forgot his covenant and yielded to temptation, invoking God's inevitable judgement that they should be sent down to earth. *"We said, 'Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while."* (Verse 36) This was the signal for the battle between man and Satan to commence and continue until the end of time.

But Adam, by virtue of his basically good and sound human nature, was awakened to his oversight and was saved by God's boundless mercy, which is always close at hand for the repentant to seek. *"Thereupon Adam received from his Lord certain words, and He accepted his repentance; for He alone is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful."* (Verse 37)

God's final word has been spoken, and His full covenant with Adam and his offspring as His vicegerents on earth has been sealed and brought into effect. This covenant outlines the conditions that bring mankind prosperity and those that lead people to ruin. *"We said, 'You shall all descend from it [Paradise]. Guidance shall reach you from Me. Those who follow My guidance shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve, but those who deny and gainsay Our revelations shall have the fire, wherein they shall abide.'"* (Verses 38-39)

Thus the battlefield was transferred to its proper location, the planet earth, and the battle was to rage on unabated. From that early moment man was taught how to triumph over evil, and what would bring about his defeat and condemnation. It is now for him to choose how to act.

Points to Consider

It is quite clear that when God told the angels that He was appointing a vicegerent on earth, He intended Adam and his descendants to settle there. Hence, the question arises about the purpose behind the forbidden tree and the ordeal that Adam and his wife had to endure. Why was it all necessary to justify Adam's coming to earth, since he was meant to live on it in the first instance?

It seems that all this was part of Adam's training and preparation for the task ahead. The test was necessary in order to awaken his inner powers and latent ability to face up to temptation, so that he could see for himself the consequences of his actions and bear responsibility for them. It was also necessary to let man identify his enemy, and to give him a taste of repentance so that he would feel the need to return to God and seek His help and forgiveness.

The forbidden fruit, Satan's deception, Adam's disregard of his covenant with God, his grave error, subsequent realization and profound sorrow for what he had done, and his pleading for God's forgiveness, encapsulate the ever-recurring cycle of human experience.

God Almighty, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, has seen fit that man should undergo this experience before he came to settle on earth, where he was to be the master. Man was going to face this experience time and again in order to be properly equipped to cope with the rigours of his fight with Satan and the evil he represented.

We may also ask: Where did all that happen? What was this 'paradise' where Adam and his spouse had lived for some time? Who were the angels? Who was *Iblīs?* How did God communicate with them all, and how did they speak to Him?

Knowledge of these and other similar matters found in the Qur'ān is exclusive to God Almighty. God, in His infinite wisdom, knows that such details, and similar information, are of little consequence in the fulfilment of man's mission as God's vicegerent on earth. Just as God has favoured man with the secrets of many physical laws and control over many physical events, He has withheld certain others as they are of no immediate benefit to man.

Thus, despite the vast and amazing knowledge of life and the universe that he has been able to accumulate, man remains completely ignorant of what lies beyond the present moment. None of the tools of knowledge, intuition or technology enable him to gain knowledge of the immediate future in any degree of certainty. No human being can even know if his next breath will be his last. This is a typical example of the kind of knowledge that is withheld from man because it is not needed for the discharge of his duties as God's vicegerent.

Indeed, were man to have access to such knowledge, it could well impede the fulfilment of those duties.

For this reason it would be futile for man to persist in pursuing such knowledge, since he does not have the means to obtain it. All efforts expended in this direction will be fruitless and would simply lead nowhere.

On the other hand, the lack of licence to penetrate the unknown does not give man the right to deny it. Denial is in itself a judgement which must be based on knowledge, but this is out of bounds for the human mind because it is not a prerequisite for man's life and role on earth.

To succumb to myth and superstition is extremely serious and harmful, but it is even more serious to deny the unknown or refuse to take it into account simply because it is beyond the limits of human perception and understanding. Such an attitude reduces man to the level of animals which can only live within the realm of the material world of the senses and are not capable of going to the wider universe beyond.

We ought, therefore, to leave the knowledge of the unknown to God and be satisfied with whatever glimpses He allows us into it that would improve our understanding and the quality of our life and behaviour. With accounts such as that of Adam and Eve, we must reflect on the universal and human truths, concepts, morals and impressions the story conveys and on man's nature and values, and their place within the context of the wider existence. That should prove a far more useful pursuit.

Man, the Master on Earth

With that in mind, we shall now have a close, but brief, look at the concepts, facts and ideas that can be derived from this story.

Foremost among these is the great value Islam assigns to man, his role on earth and his position in the universal system as well as the values by which he will be judged. Equally important is man's commitment to God's covenant which forms the basis upon which man's mission on earth is founded.

The high regard in which man is held in God's universe is manifested in the divine will to declare man a vicegerent on earth and in the symbolic gesture of ordering the angels to prostrate themselves before him, and the subsequent condemnation of *Iblīs* who refused to join them. It is also evident in the care and the kindness with which God has blessed man from the start.

From this emerge a number of fundamental concepts and considerations which are relevant to both intellectual and practical aspects of human life.

The first of these is that man is the master over this earth; everything in it has been created for his benefit and pleasure. This elevates man above all other beings and

forbids his subjugation or humiliation for the sake of material achievement. Man's humanity must be respected and safeguarded; none of his fundamental rights or values should for any reason be violated or abused. Material things are meant to serve man and are made to promote his humanity and enhance his existence. It, therefore, stands to reason that achievements must not come at a price that would undermine fundamental human values, or at the expense of man's dignity or integrity.

Secondly, man's role on earth is of the highest importance. Man, rather than the means of production or distribution, is the force of change on this earth; he influences and alters the course of all life on it. Contrary to the materialistic view, man is the master, not the slave, of the machine.

The Qur'ānic view of man as a vicegerent on earth accords him a distinguished status and a central position in the divine world order. Through a number of vital and complex relationships, man's commission on earth is closely linked to other parts and forces of the physical world such as the stars and planets, the wind and the rain, the sun and the skies. All these phenomena are evidently designed, and are made to interact and converge, to serve the purpose of sustaining life on earth and to assist man in fulfilling the purpose of his existence on it. This view of man is easily distinguished from, and vastly superior to, the feeble and negative role assigned to him by materialistic philosophies.

All such views advocate their own means to promote, develop and preserve human life and values. The erosion of human freedom, dignity and values we see in materialistic societies as a result of the relentless drive towards material prosperity and progress, is but one facet of their godless view of man and his role on earth.

The Islamic view, on the other hand, leads to a deeper appreciation of moral values and ethical behaviour. It teaches man to appreciate highly such virtues as religious belief, righteousness and honesty, which are indeed the terms on which his covenant with God was originally based. These virtues and values supersede and override all material ones. This is not to say that material objectives and considerations are unimportant; indeed, they are vital for the fulfilment of man's commission as God's vicegerent on earth. But they must not be allowed to overshadow or usurp the fundamental higher ones. Unlike materialistic creeds and principles that dismiss spiritual values, Islam aims to always guide man towards a decent and moral life. Production, consumerism and the satisfaction of man's carnal instincts and desires are not all that life is about.

The Islamic view clearly accords to human will a lofty position, as the cornerstone in man's covenant with God. Free-will is also seen as the essence of man's responsibility and accountability. Man can attain a status higher than that of the

angels by remaining, through his own choice and free-will, true to his covenant with God, and by not yielding to his desires or succumbing to temptation. However, he can also debase himself by allowing his desires to get the better of his will, and temptation to overcome faith and common sense, and by neglecting his commitments towards God Almighty.

This way of looking at man and his place in the world accords the human species further honour and esteem, and reminds us constantly of what leads to happiness and fulfilment and what ends in misery and degradation.

We are also constantly reminded through Adam's story of the nature of the battle between belief and denial, truth and falsehood, guidance and error. Man's own soul is part of the battleground, while man himself is the protagonist who may either win or lose.

The Concept of Sin

Finally, we have the Islamic view of sin and repentance. This view is very clear and simple, with no mysteries or complications. Sin and repentance are two very personal acts. Contrary to the Christian doctrine of 'original sin', no sin is ever imposed on a person prior to his or her birth. Nor, as the Church claims, is there 'divine' atonement in which Jesus, whom they allege to be the son of God, was crucified to free humanity of Adam's sin. Adam took full responsibility for his sin, which he personally committed. Having repented, he was simply and easily absolved of it. Any sins committed by Adam's offspring would likewise be totally personal. The gateway to repentance and forgiveness is open to all, without restriction or discrimination.

It is a simple and straightforward concept that puts everyone's mind and heart at rest, and inspires man to do his utmost to succeed and save his soul, and never to despair or give up. Everyone shall be held responsible for what he or she does; none shall carry the burden of another.

These are some of the impressions that the story of Adam, as related in the Qur'ān, evokes. They are rich with meaning and ideas, inspiration and generous advice that can underpin a social system built on virtue and morality. They highlight the significance of such accounts as we find in the Qur'ān, and reinforce the concepts and precepts of the Islamic view and the values on which it is based.

These values originate with God Almighty and are bound to lead to Him in the end. God's covenant with man is based on man receiving God's guidance and abiding by its imperatives and principles. The decisive factor is man's choice either to adhere to and obey God's commands, or to hanker after Satan's deceptive

allurements. There can be no third way. This foremost and fundamental truth is emphasized throughout the Qur'ān, and it is the foundation on which all human concepts and systems are established.

3
Glimpses of Israelite History

يَٰبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَتِيَ ٱلَّتِيٓ أَنۡعَمۡتُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَأَوۡفُواْ بِعَهۡدِيٓ أُوفِ بِعَهۡدِكُمۡ وَإِيَّٰيَ فَٱرۡهَبُونِ

Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I have bestowed on you. Fulfil your covenant with Me and I will fulfil Mine with you; and of Me alone stand in awe. (40)

٤٠ وَءَامِنُواْ بِمَآ أَنزَلۡتُ مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا مَعَكُمۡ وَلَا تَكُونُوٓاْ أَوَّلَ كَافِرِۭ بِهِۦۖ وَلَا تَشۡتَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِي ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلٗا وَإِيَّٰيَ فَٱتَّقُونِ ٤١

Believe in what I have revealed, confirming that which you already have, and be not the first to reject it. Do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price, and fear Me alone. (41)

وَلَا تَلۡبِسُواْ ٱلۡحَقَّ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ وَتَكۡتُمُواْ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَأَنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٤٢

Do not overlay the truth with falsehood, nor knowingly suppress the truth. (42)

وَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَٱرۡكَعُواْ مَعَ ٱلرَّٰكِعِينَ ٤٣

Attend regularly to your prayers, pay your zakāt, and bow down in prayer with those who bow down. (43)

۞ أَتَأۡمُرُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ بِٱلۡبِرِّ وَتَنسَوۡنَ أَنفُسَكُمۡ وَأَنتُمۡ تَتۡلُونَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٤٤

How can you bid others to be righteous and forget yourselves, even when you read the Scriptures? Do you not understand? (44)

وَٱسۡتَعِينُواْ بِٱلصَّبۡرِ وَٱلصَّلَوٰةِۚ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱلۡخَٰشِعِينَ ٤٥

Seek strength in patient perseverance and in prayer, which is indeed a demanding task except for the devout. (45)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُم مُّلَٰقُوا۟ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَٰجِعُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

who know that they shall meet their Lord and to Him they shall ultimately return. (46)

يَٰبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَتِىَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنِّى فَضَّلْتُكُمْ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I bestowed on you, and that I have preferred you over all people. (47)

وَٱتَّقُوا۟ يَوْمًا لَّا تَجْزِى نَفْسٌ عَن نَّفْسٍ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا شَفَٰعَةٌ وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Fear the day when no soul shall avail another in any way, nor shall intercession be accepted from any of them, nor ransom taken from them, and none shall receive help. (48)

وَإِذْ نَجَّيْنَٰكُم مِّنْ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوٓءَ ٱلْعَذَابِ يُذَبِّحُونَ أَبْنَآءَكُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيُونَ نِسَآءَكُمْ ۚ وَفِى ذَٰلِكُم بَلَآءٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

And remember how We delivered you from Pharaoh's people, who afflicted you with cruel suffering, killing your sons and sparing only your women. That was a grievous trial from your Lord. (49)

وَإِذْ فَرَقْنَا بِكُمُ ٱلْبَحْرَ فَأَنجَيْنَٰكُمْ وَأَغْرَقْنَآ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَأَنتُمْ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

We parted the sea for you, led you to safety and drowned Pharaoh's people before your very eyes. (50)

وَإِذْ وَٰعَدْنَا مُوسَىٰٓ أَرْبَعِينَ لَيْلَةً ثُمَّ ٱتَّخَذْتُمُ ٱلْعِجْلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ وَأَنتُمْ ظَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

And [remember, too], when We appointed for Moses forty nights, and in his absence you took to worshipping the calf, and thus became wrongdoers. (51)

ثُمَّ عَفَوْنَا عَنكُم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ ذَٰلِكَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Yet even after that We pardoned you, so that you might be thankful. (52)

We gave Moses the Scriptures and the Standard [by which to distinguish right from wrong], so that you might be rightly guided. (53)

وَإِذۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَى ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡفُرۡقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَهۡتَدُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Moses said to his people, 'You, my people, have wronged yourselves by worshipping the calf. Turn, then, in repentance to your Maker and slay one another. That will be better for you in your Maker's sight.' Thus, He accepted your repentance; for He is the One to accept repentance, the Merciful. (54)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوۡمِهِۦ يَٰقَوۡمِ إِنَّكُمۡ ظَلَمۡتُمۡ أَنفُسَكُم بِٱتِّخَاذِكُمُ ٱلۡعِجۡلَ فَتُوبُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ بَارِئِكُمۡ فَٱقۡتُلُوٓاْ أَنفُسَكُمۡ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ عِندَ بَارِئِكُمۡ فَتَابَ عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥٤﴾

And [remember] when you said, 'Moses, we will not believe in you until we see God in person.' You were then struck by a thunderbolt while you were looking on. (55)

وَإِذۡ قُلۡتُمۡ يَٰمُوسَىٰ لَن نُّؤۡمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّىٰ نَرَى ٱللَّهَ جَهۡرَةٗ فَأَخَذَتۡكُمُ ٱلصَّٰعِقَةُ وَأَنتُمۡ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

But We raised you again after you had been as dead, so that you might be thankful. (56)

ثُمَّ بَعَثۡنَٰكُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ مَوۡتِكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

We caused the clouds to provide shade for you, and sent down for you manna and quails. 'Eat of the good things We have provided for you.' Indeed, to Us they did no harm, but themselves did they wrong. (57)

وَظَلَّلۡنَا عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡغَمَامَ وَأَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡكُمۡ ٱلۡمَنَّ وَٱلسَّلۡوَىٰۖ كُلُواْ مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا رَزَقۡنَٰكُمۡۖ وَمَا ظَلَمُونَا وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

And [remember] when We said, 'Enter this city, eat of its abundant food as you may desire, prostrate yourselves as you enter the gates and say: "Lord, relieve us of our burden." We will then forgive your sins and We will richly reward those who do good.' (58)

وَإِذۡ قُلۡنَا ٱدۡخُلُواْ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةَ فَكُلُواْ مِنۡهَا حَيۡثُ شِئۡتُمۡ رَغَدٗا وَٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡبَابَ سُجَّدٗا وَقُولُواْ حِطَّةٞ نَّغۡفِرۡ لَكُمۡ خَطَٰيَٰكُمۡۚ وَسَنَزِيدُ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore, We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their

transgression. (59)

فَبَدَّلَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ قَوۡلاً غَيۡرَ ٱلَّذِى قِيلَ لَهُمۡ فَأَنزَلۡنَا عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ رِجۡزًا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡسُقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

And [remember] when Moses prayed for water for his people We said to him, 'Strike the rock with your staff.' Twelve springs gushed forth from it. Each tribe knew their drinking place. Eat and drink of what God has provided and do not persistently spread corruption in the land. (60)

۞ وَإِذِ ٱسۡتَسۡقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوۡمِهِۦ فَقُلۡنَا ٱضۡرِب بِّعَصَاكَ ٱلۡحَجَرَۖ فَٱنفَجَرَتۡ مِنۡهُ ٱثۡنَتَا عَشۡرَةَ عَيۡنًاۖ قَدۡ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُنَاسٖ مَّشۡرَبَهُمۡۖ كُلُواْ وَٱشۡرَبُواْ مِن رِّزۡقِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

And [remember] when you said, 'Moses! We can no longer put up with one kind of food. Pray to your Lord, then, to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of green herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions.' He said, 'Would you take a lesser thing in exchange for what is much better? Go down to any land and you shall have what you asked for.' Ignominy and humiliation were stamped upon them and they incurred the wrath of God, because they denied His revelations and slew prophets against all right, and because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression. (61)

وَإِذۡ قُلۡتُمۡ يَٰمُوسَىٰ لَن نَّصۡبِرَ عَلَىٰ طَعَامٖ وَٰحِدٖ فَٱدۡعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُخۡرِجۡ لَنَا مِمَّا تُنۢبِتُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ مِنۢ بَقۡلِهَا وَقِثَّآئِهَا وَفُومِهَا وَعَدَسِهَا وَبَصَلِهَاۖ قَالَ أَتَسۡتَبۡدِلُونَ ٱلَّذِى هُوَ أَدۡنَىٰ بِٱلَّذِى هُوَ خَيۡرٌۚ ٱهۡبِطُواْ مِصۡرٗا فَإِنَّ لَكُم مَّا سَأَلۡتُمۡۗ وَضُرِبَتۡ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلذِّلَّةُ وَٱلۡمَسۡكَنَةُ وَبَآءُو بِغَضَبٖ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۗ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ يَكۡفُرُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَقۡتُلُونَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ بِغَيۡرِ ٱلۡحَقِّۗ ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا عَصَواْ وَّكَانُواْ يَعۡتَدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians and the Sabaeans — anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and does what is right, shall have

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ وَٱلصَّٰبِـِٔينَ مَنۡ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ

وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا فَلَهُمۡ أَجۡرُهُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ وَلَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ٦٢

their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve. (62)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ وَرَفَعۡنَا فَوۡقَكُمُ ٱلطُّورَ خُذُواْ مَآ ءَاتَيۡنَٰكُم بِقُوَّةٖ وَٱذۡكُرُواْ مَا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَّقُونَ ٦٣

We accepted your solemn pledge and raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We have given you, and bear in mind all its contents, so that you may remain God-fearing.' (63)

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيۡتُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَۖ فَلَوۡلَا فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَتُهُۥ لَكُنتُم مِّنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ٦٤

Yet after that you turned away, and but for God's grace and mercy you would have surely been among the losers. (64)

وَلَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱعۡتَدَوۡاْ مِنكُمۡ فِي ٱلسَّبۡتِ فَقُلۡنَا لَهُمۡ كُونُواْ قِرَدَةً خَٰسِـِٔينَ ٦٥

You are well aware of those of you who broke the Sabbath. To them We said, 'Be as despicable apes.' (65)

فَجَعَلۡنَٰهَا نَكَٰلٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهَا وَمَا خَلۡفَهَا وَمَوۡعِظَةٗ لِّلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٦٦

Through that [punishment] We set an example to their own time and for all times to come, and an admonition to the God-fearing. (66)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَأۡمُرُكُمۡ أَن تَذۡبَحُواْ بَقَرَةٗۖ قَالُوٓاْ أَتَتَّخِذُنَا هُزُوٗاۖ قَالَ أَعُوذُ بِٱللَّهِ أَنۡ أَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡجَٰهِلِينَ ٦٧

When Moses said to his people, 'God commands you to sacrifice a cow,' they said, 'Are you mocking at us?' He said, 'God forbid that I should be so ignorant.' (67)

قَالُواْ ٱدۡعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّن لَّنَا مَا هِيَۚ قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٞ لَّا فَارِضٞ وَلَا بِكۡرٌۚ عَوَانُۢ بَيۡنَ ذَٰلِكَۖ فَٱفۡعَلُواْ مَا

They said, 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.' He said, 'He says let her be neither an old cow nor a young heifer, but of an age in between. Do, then, as you are commanded.' (68)

They said, 'Pray on our behalf to your

تُؤۡمَرُونَ ٦٨

قَالُواْ ٱدۡعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّن لَّنَا مَا لَوۡنُهَاۚ قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٌ صَفۡرَآءُ فَاقِعٌ لَّوۡنُهَا تَسُرُّ ٱلنَّٰظِرِينَ ٦٩

Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.' [Moses] replied, 'He says let her be a yellow cow, bright of hue, pleasing to the beholder.' (69)

قَالُواْ ٱدۡعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ يُبَيِّن لَّنَا مَا هِيَ إِنَّ ٱلۡبَقَرَ تَشَٰبَهَ عَلَيۡنَا وَإِنَّآ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَمُهۡتَدُونَ ٧٠

They said, 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike. We shall, God willing, be guided aright.' (70)

قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ يَقُولُ إِنَّهَا بَقَرَةٞ لَّا ذَلُولٞ تُثِيرُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَلَا تَسۡقِي ٱلۡحَرۡثَ مُسَلَّمَةٞ لَّا شِيَةَ فِيهَاۚ قَالُواْ ٱلۡـَٰٔنَ جِئۡتَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ فَذَبَحُوهَا وَمَا كَادُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ٧١

[Moses] answered, 'He says let her be a cow, not broken-in to plough the earth or water the tillage, free of all fault, without markings of any other colour.' Said they, 'Now you have given the right description.' They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone. (71)

وَإِذۡ قَتَلۡتُمۡ نَفۡسٗا فَٱدَّٰرَٰٔتُمۡ فِيهَاۖ وَٱللَّهُ مُخۡرِجٞ مَّا كُنتُمۡ تَكۡتُمُونَ ٧٢

Having slain a human being, you cast the blame on one another for this [murder]. God would definitely reveal what you have concealed. (72)

فَقُلۡنَا ٱضۡرِبُوهُ بِبَعۡضِهَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُحۡيِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ وَيُرِيكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَعۡقِلُونَ ٧٣

We said, 'Strike him with a piece of it. Thus God brings the dead back to life and shows you His signs, so that you may use your reason.' (73)

ثُمَّ قَسَتۡ قُلُوبُكُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَ فَهِيَ كَٱلۡحِجَارَةِ أَوۡ أَشَدُّ قَسۡوَةٗۚ وَإِنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡحِجَارَةِ لَمَا يَتَفَجَّرُ مِنۡهُ ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۚ وَإِنَّ مِنۡهَا لَمَا يَشَّقَّقُ فَيَخۡرُجُ مِنۡهُ ٱلۡمَآءُۚ وَإِنَّ

Yet after all this, your hearts hardened until they were as hard as rocks or even harder; for there are rocks from which rivers gush forth; others split so that water flows through them, and some other rocks fall down for fear of God. Indeed, God is

not unaware of what you do. (74)	مِنۡهَا لَمَا يَهۡبِطُ مِنۡ خَشۡيَةِ ٱللَّهِۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٧٤

Overview

At this point, the *sūrah* begins its address to the Children of Israel, represented by the Jews of Madinah, who posed the stiffest opposition to the Islamic message the moment it arrived there. They launched a relentless campaign of overt and covert resistance as soon as they realized that it had come to stay and to take control of the city and its population. They felt that Islam was bound to deprive them of the moral and economic hegemony they had so far enjoyed. Slowly, Islam began to heal the rifts that had existed between Madinah's two main rival Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, thus ending the disputes that the Jews had been able to exploit. At the same time it provided Madinah with an independent code of conduct, based on the Qur'ān.

The war the Jews began to wage against Islam and Muslims in those early days has raged on to the present day. The form and appearance may have changed, but the nature and means remain the same. This is in spite of the fact that the Jews, who have been widely persecuted throughout their history, have always been welcomed and accommodated by Muslim communities. Indeed, Muslim communities have no history of religious or racial intolerance, discrimination or persecution. They are known to welcome peaceful outsiders who have no intention to undermine Islam or harm its people.

It was thought that the Jews of Madinah would be the first to welcome Islam and embrace the new religion and its advocate, the Prophet Muĥammad. The Qur'ān had already given a general endorsement to the Torah; while the Jews had been bidden by their own Scriptures to await the emergence of a new Messenger, whom their own prophets had described. In fact, they had been boasting about his impending arrival to the pagan Arabs.

This section of the *sūrah* constitutes the opening chapter in a wide- ranging campaign aimed at exposing the scheming and hostile stance of the Jews towards Islam. This counter-attack, however, was launched only after all means of persuasion to get them to accept Islam and join its ranks had been used without success.

The passage opens with a majestic call to the Israelites, reminding them of God's grace and inviting them to fulfil their part of the covenant with God so that He will

fulfil His. It calls on them to be fearful of God and submit to Him, as a prelude to appealing to them to accept the new revelations. It then goes on to condemn them for being among the first to reject it. It censures their deliberate confusion of truth with falsehood and their efforts to obfuscate and conceal the truth contained in their Scriptures. It denounces their attempts to mislead others, particularly those who had recently embraced the new religion, and to foment conflict and strife in the burgeoning Muslim community. It invites them to join the ranks of the believers, observe prayers, and pay their religious dues. Through perseverance and prayer, they seek to overcome their intransigence and arrogance that have prevented them from acknowledging and embracing the new religion. It denounces their two-faced attitude of calling on the Arab idolaters to believe in God while they themselves refuse to accept Islam.

The *sūrah* goes on to recall for the Jews the long list of favours God had bestowed on them all through their long history. In its unique style, the Qur'ān addresses the Jewish contemporaries of Muĥammad as if they were the contemporaries of Moses who lived centuries earlier, and treats them as one and the same community. Indeed, their attitude and behaviour have been remarkably the same through the ages.

The Qur'ān also reminds them of the horrors of Resurrection Day, when every soul has to defend itself, no intercession or ransom shall be accepted, and no one shall save them from God's wrath and punishment.

It recalls in vivid detail their ancestors' confrontation with, and subsequent escape from, Egypt's Pharaoh, and all the favours God blessed them with afterwards. It reminds them of their lack of gratitude, their relapses and frequent deviations, and their insistence on committing the same errors again and again. It stresses their stubbornness, deviousness, lack of resolve, inability to shoulder responsibility, dishonesty and unfaithfulness to their covenants with God and their own Prophets, some of whom they even killed. They defied God and rejected His messages, worshipped the golden calf, made impossible demands on their prophets and violated almost every commandment they received from God.

The Jews, according to the Qur'ān, have done all this while insisting that they are the only rightly-guided nation in the world and the exclusive recipients of God's guidance and blessings, and arguing that their religion is the only true one. However, as we shall see in the following pages, the Qur'ān refutes this claim and declares that all believers in God who adhere to His commands shall receive their deserved reward and shall have nothing to fear or regret.

This campaign to uncover the destructive machinations of the Jews was unavoidable for two main reasons. First, it was essential to demolish their arguments, expose their intrigues and reveal their true intentions towards Islam and

the Muslims. This would make Muslims fully aware of what was being done behind their backs to undermine the foundations of their fledgling community.

Second, it was necessary as a warning to the Muslims themselves to avoid the pitfalls into which earlier recipients of God's message, had fallen. As a result, such communities were stripped of the honour of having custody of the divine message and of the leadership of mankind. A number of specific instructions to this effect, some implicit and some explicit, can be found throughout the present passage.

There is no doubt that the Muslim community in Madinah at the time, and Muslims in subsequent generations, are in need of such warnings and admonitions. Muslims always need to study the Qur'ān very closely in order to discern and understand the divine instructions that will help them fight their habitual enemies, and to find out how to combat their insidious scheming.

Without God's guidance and the light of faith, human beings can never recognize all the perils or fathom the wickedness of their enemies.

We can see very clearly here how, in the unique Qur'ānic style, the story of the Jews dovetails with that of Adam and Eve. This reflects an aspect of the integrity and the complementary nature of the topics with the context in which they are presented.

If we go back a little we find that the *sūrah* had established that God created everything on earth for the benefit of man. It then went on to relate how Adam, father of the human race, was given a covenant as God's vicegerent on earth, how he was honoured by the angels falling prostrate before him, the brief he received from God, how he overlooked it, regretted his error and repented. We have also been told how he was forgiven and provided with divine guidance to ensure his success in this life. We have seen how that experience was in fact the prelude to the continuous conflict that was to take place on earth between the forces of evil and destruction, represented by *Iblīs,* and the forces of goodness and construction, represented by God-fearing man.

This is followed by an account of the history of the Israelites which records their covenant with God and how they violated it, as well as the favours God had bestowed on them and their ingratitude. As a result God withdrew His trust from them, allowing them to live in humiliation. The account warns Muslims against the evil designs of the Israelites and against following their example.

There is a clear link between the assignment of Adam as God's vicegerent on earth and the choice of the Israelites as custodians of God's message. The subject matter and the message flow in total harmony with the style employed.

The Qur'ān is not concerned with the chronology of the history of the Israelites. It is only recalling certain events or actions in as much or as little detail as is

appropriate. Various other episodes of the story of the Israelites are related in other *sūrahs,* revealed earlier in Makkah, but for a different purpose. The aim there was to inspire and reassure that small group of the early Muslims in Makkah, and show them how to cope with their situation and learn from the strong faith and courage of earlier believers.

In the present context, however, the aim is to expose the real intentions and plans of the Jews, to describe their methods, and to warn the Muslim community about their scheming, as well as against repeating their mistakes. The difference between the Makkan and Madinan styles of the Qur'ān, which will become clear later when we study the Makkan *sūrahs,* is reflected in the emphasis and the presentation of the same topics.

On reviewing the passages where the story of the Israelites occurs in the Qur'ān, one finds that the details fit perfectly into the context to reinforce the argument or the point that is being made. It is also the case in this instance, as already explained.

The story of the Israelites is the one most frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān. The special care and attention with which it is told is indicative of God's great wisdom in the way He deals with the Muslim community and how He prepares it to assume the all important task of the leadership of mankind.

God's Covenant with the Israelites

> *Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I have bestowed on you. Fulfil your covenant with Me and I will fulfil Mine with you; and of Me alone stand in awe. Believe in what I have revealed, confirming that which you already have, and be not the first to reject it. Do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price, and fear Me alone. Do not overlay the truth with falsehood, nor knowingly suppress the truth. Attend regularly to your prayers, pay your zakāt, and bow down in prayers with those who bow down. How can you bid others to be righteous and forget yourselves, even when you read the Scriptures? Do you not understand? Seek strength in patient perseverance and in prayer, which is indeed a demanding task except for the devout, who know that they shall meet their Lord and to Him they shall ultimately return.* (Verses 40-46)

Any review of Jewish history would immediately fill one with amazement at the host of favours and blessings God has bestowed on these people. Nor could one fail to be amazed at how persistently they have shown total ingratitude in return. In this opening announcement, God makes a general reference to those special favours before going on to speak about some of them in greater detail. As He does so, God again calls on the Israelites to fulfil their pledges and the commitments they made to Him. If they do, He will bless them with more favour and grace.

What is this covenant? Is it the original one made with Adam: "*Guidance shall reach you from Me. Those who follow My guidance shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve, but those who deny and gainsay Our revelations shall have the fire, wherein they shall abide.*" (Verses 38-39) Or, is it the universal covenant made between God and human nature, which binds man to seek the Lord and worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him? The latter needs no qualification or justification, as man perceives it instinctively and naturally, as long as his basic nature is free of capricious and deviant influences. Or does the verse refer to the covenant made with Abraham, the patriarch of Israel: "*When his Lord tested Abraham with certain commandments and he fulfilled them, He said, 'I have appointed you a leader of mankind.' Abraham asked, And what of my descendants?' God said, 'My covenant does not apply to the wrongdoers.'*" (Verse 124) Is it, on the other hand, the covenant made with the Israelites on Mount Sinai, when the mountain was raised over their heads? They were ordered then to take it up with strength and dedication, as will be later explained.

In fact, all these are essentially one covenant. Their essence is man's total submission to God and adherence to the one true faith He sent to humanity through His messengers, in a long and honourable procession throughout history.

In fulfilment of this covenant, God calls on the Israelites to fear Him alone, and to believe in and accept what He has revealed to His Messenger, Muĥammad, confirming and endorsing their own Scriptures. They are urged not to hasten into rejecting it but to be among the first to believe in it: "*Believe in what I have revealed, confirming that which you already have, and be not the first to reject it.*" (Verse 41)

Islam, as propounded by Prophet Muĥammad, was no more than God's one eternal religion given its final form. It is a continuation of the same message and the complement of the covenant God made with man in the beginning. It embraces past revelations and provides guidance for mankind in future generations. It brings together the Torah of the Old Testament and the Gospel of the New Testament, and adds what is required to lead mankind to further prosperity, unity and progress. Its aim has been to achieve the true brotherhood of man, eliminate racial and ethnic divisions and discrimination, and unite humanity in its submission to God under the covenant with Him.

God warns the Israelites against rejecting His final message in pursuit of temporal gain or narrow interests, such as the privileges and the status enjoyed by the rabbis through their religious function in the community: "*Do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price, and fear Me alone.*" (Verse 41)

Money, wealth and worldly aggrandizement have been the delight of the Jews since their early days. This verse could be referring to the fees and taxes imposed on ordinary Jews by their rabbis and clerics in return for religious services. These people

were known, as stated elsewhere in the Qur'ān, to have had a monopoly on the interpretation of the Scriptures which enabled them to issue biased and tendentious rulings favouring the rich and powerful. To maintain this monopoly, Jewish elders and religious leaders would be inclined to urge their people to reject Islam and refuse to recognize it.

Commenting on this verse, some companions of the Prophet and later scholars have pointed out that when compared to belief in God's revelations and the promised rewards of the hereafter, the world and all its treasures are worthless.

The *sūrah* goes on to censure the Israelites for deliberately confusing truth with falsehood in order to create confusion, doubt and discord among the Muslims. "*Do not overlay the truth with falsehood, nor knowingly suppress the truth.*" (Verse 42)

The Qur'ān abounds with reports of how the Jews of Madinah would seize every opportunity to antagonize its Muslims, create distractions and spread false ideas and malicious rumours among them. They had a notorious reputation, as we shall see, for causing division and making mischief within the Muslim community.

The *sūrah* then invites the Israelites to join the Muslims in their religious practices, and abandon their prejudices and ethnocentric tendencies. "*Attend regularly to your prayers, pay your zakāt, and bow down in prayer with those who bow down.*" (Verse 43)

Matching Words with Deeds

The *sūrah* refutes their pretence, particularly that of their elders and rabbis, of piety and godliness which they claim simply on the basis of having received divine revelations. The fact is that they continued to reject the new revelations which confirm their own. The *sūrah* asks them disapprovingly: "*How can you bid others to be righteous and forget yourselves, even when you read the Scriptures? Do you not understand?*" (Verse 44)

This may well have been directed at the Jews of Madinah on some specific occasions, but it applies to all believers and religious leaders of all groups and generations.

When religious teaching becomes a mere profession, it loses its fervour. Those who take it up begin to say things they do not believe and their actions tend to become divorced from their words. This can lead them to twist facts and compromise ideas and principles to serve their interests and desires. Their rulings, pronouncements and opinions, or *fatwas,* may sound convincing but they are far removed from the spirit and the letter of the religion.

The double standards of those who claim to represent a certain religion or ideology not only harm them personally, but also undermine the ideas and the

religions they are advocating. Thus people would hear fine words, contradicted by foul deeds. Then become confused and the light generated by faith in their hearts becomes dim. Having lost trust in religious preachers, they now lose trust in the religion itself.

When they are not uttered with sincerity and conviction, words lose their impact. A man's beliefs are meaningless unless his actions and behaviour become a practical translation of those beliefs. When a man's conduct reflects his words, no matter how plain and ordinary these words are, people will trust him and take him seriously. His words draw their power and effect from the sincerity and honesty with which they are being uttered, not from the rhetoric or eloquence in which they are delivered. They assume a force of their own.

To match one's actions to one's words is not easy to achieve. It requires cultivation, discipline and constant contact with God. Life's preoccupations are normally distracting, and man is weak unless he remains in touch with God's omnipotent power. The forces of evil and temptation can also overwhelm him sometimes, and a brief moment of carelessness can damage the entire course of his life. But, supported by God's invincible power, man can conquer his desires, overcome his weaknesses and overpower his opponents, powerful as they may be.

Thus the Qur'ān directs the Jews of Madinah and, by implication, all mankind, to seek support and strength through perseverance and prayer. The Jews were being asked to give up the privileged status they enjoyed in Madinah and the material benefits obtained from their religious functions, and to accept the new revelations which they knew to be true. Such great sacrifices require strength, courage and devotion. Hence the directive: "*Seek strength in patient perseverance and in prayer, which is indeed a demanding task except for the devout, who know that they shall meet their Lord and to Him they shall ultimately return.*" (Verses 45-46)

It demands courage, honesty and tenacity, as well as the power of prayer and perseverance.

Two Sources of Strength

Reference to perseverance is quite frequent in the Qur'ān, which presents it as crucial and indispensable in enduring hardship and making momentous decisions. One of the most difficult moments anyone can encounter is having to acknowledge the truth and relinquish power and material privilege as a result.

But what do we understand from the directive to '*seek strength in... prayer*'. Prayer is seen by Islam as a link between man and his Lord and Master, through which the human heart draws strength and fortitude. It generates life and energy in the human

soul. Despite his unique relationship with God and the lofty level of spiritual piety he attained, the Prophet Muĥammad was known to resort to prayer every time he experienced distress or anxiety. Prayer remains an inexhaustible fountain of peace, comfort and spiritual uplift for every believer.

A prerequisite of perseverance, or *şabr,* and fear of God, or *taqwā, is* the absolute and unshakeable belief in man's return to God when his actions will be reckoned and he will be judged. This is also an essential requirement for the establishment of values for this life and the life to come. Once the right criteria to judge these values are set, the world and all its treasures and riches are seen as worth very little when compared to the rewards in the hereafter.

What started as a simple instruction initially directed at the Jews of Madinah turns out to be a permanent and enduring lesson for all mankind.

The following verse is yet another reminder from God to the Israelites of His grace and generosity towards them, and a general admonition to them about the resurrection that is certain to come: *"Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I bestowed on you, and that I have preferred you over all people. Fear the day when no soul shall avail another in any way, nor shall intercession be accepted from any of them, nor ransom taken from them, and none shall receive help."* (Verses 47-48)

The preferred position granted to the Israelites was limited to the time of their mandate as custodians of God's message on earth. As soon as they betrayed their trust, disobeyed their prophets, denied God's favours and abandoned their commitment to God, they incurred His wrath, and were condemned to a life of humiliation, misery and exile.

When Every Soul Stands Alone

The statement was meant to remind them of that glory and privilege in order to encourage them to seize the fresh opportunity presented to them by Islam to rejoin the community of believers and renew their covenant with God. But they are also being warned about *"a day when no soul shall avail another in any way,"* and no individual can save another.

This is one of the most important Islamic principles. Responsibility and accountability are personal and not collective, and are directly related to an individual's will and freedom of choice. They are also based on divine justice.

It is a principle that upholds the dignity and integrity of man and cultivates and strengthens his conscience. It raises his standards of morality and behaviour and enriches his wealth of values with which Islam has honoured him.

The verse further stresses that on that day, no intercession *"shall be accepted..., nor*

ransom taken" from, or on behalf of, anyone. Unless a person has a record of faith and good deeds, nothing can save him or absolve his misdemeanours or intransigence towards God. Furthermore, he shall receive no support of any kind from anyone else.

A Long List of Favours

The *sūrah* proceeds to enumerate the favours God had extended to the Israelites, the most significant of which was their deliverance from the tyranny and persecution of the Pharaoh. It portrays their response to these favours which was marked with lack of appreciation and flagrant violation of God's commandments. *"And remember how We delivered you from Pharaoh's people, who afflicted you with cruel suffering, killing your sons and sparing only your women. That was a grievous trial from your Lord. We parted the sea for you, led you to safety and drowned Pharaoh's people before your very eyes."* (Verses 49-50)

The Qur'ān graphically recalls the ordeals suffered by the Israelites' forefathers, as if the later Jews themselves had undergone those experiences. It stresses the act of deliverance as well as the torment and the persecution that preceded it. It makes the specific point that the whole experience contained an element of trial by God to the Israelites, testing their faith and resolve, and their trust in the Lord. The expression used in this verse in reference to the suffering adds connotations that the suffering was like food given regularly. It highlights one aspect of that suffering, which is the killing of young men and leaving women alone. This was meant to weaken the Jews and exhaust their strength.

The verse seeks to impress upon the listener that when ordained by the will of God, hardship, misfortune and tribulation will not be in vain. Once aware of this fact, one will develop more resilience and moral strength that will enable one to endure pain and overcome it much more easily. The experience will inspire one to draw closer to God and seek His mercy and help, and raise one's capacity to cope with life's difficulties as well as one's credit for reward in the hereafter. Hence the telling comment: *"That was a grievous trial from your Lord."* (Verse 49)

Having recalled the painful part of the episode, the *sūrah* portrays the scene of delivery when God *"parted the sea for you, led you to safety and drowned Pharaoh's people before your very eyes."* (Verse 50)

More detailed accounts of this event, already familiar to the Jews from their own Scriptures, are given in several Makkan *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. Here, in typical Qur'ānic style, we get only a brief reference to it, but in the most vivid terms, addressing the Jews of Madinah as if they were present at the scene, for a heightened effect and greater impact.

Ingratitude at Its Worst

The Jews have left Egypt and, through God's grace and mercy, crossed the Red Sea safely. The *sūrah* picks up the story: "*And [remember, too], when We appointed for Moses forty nights, and in his absence you took to worshipping the calf, and thus became wrongdoers. Yet even after that We pardoned you, so that you might be thankful. We gave Moses the Scriptures and the Standard [by which to distinguish right from wrong], so that you might be rightly guided. Moses said to his people, 'You, my people, have wronged yourselves by worshipping the calf Turn, then, in repentance to your Maker and slay one another. That will be better for you in your Maker's sight.' Thus, He accepted your repentance; for He is the One to accept repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verses 51-54)

The episode of the calf is covered in more detail in verses 87-98 of *Sūrah* 20, revealed earlier in Makkah. It is a well-known chapter of Jewish history. When their Prophet left them for a while, they sank as low as worshipping an inanimate object, in total disregard of the instructions of the Prophet who saved them, by God's grace, from Pharaoh and his army. Their attitude is described in its true colours:

"*You took to worshipping the calf, and thus became wrongdoers.*" (Verse 51) Who could be a worse wrongdoer than one who worships the model of a calf after God had saved him from idolaters?

Nevertheless, God pardoned them and gave their Prophet, Moses, the Torah as a source of guidance for them. However, there was need for a thorough cleansing of ranks. Such a shaky nature could only be steadied by a very stringent atonement: "*Moses said to his people: "You, my people, have wronged yourselves by worshipping the calf Turn, then, in repentance to your Maker and slay one another. That will be better for you in your Maker's sight.*" (Verse 54) Thus, the order was given to kill those who went far astray as a means of cleansing for the whole community.

No doubt it was a heavy responsibility, for killing members of their community was like killing themselves; but it was inescapable in order to preserve the purity and righteousness of the rest of the community. It was a punishment commensurate with the vile transgression perpetrated. Had they counselled one another against transgression, they would not have worshipped the calf. Hence, the punishment to reform their nature.

Once punishment has been meted out, God's mercy descends afresh. "*Thus, He accepted your repentance; for He is the One to accept repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verse 54)

Yet, true to form, their stubbornness and obduracy had the better of the Israelites. They now demanded to see God Himself. The demand was made by the seventy individuals who, as detailed in the earlier Makkan *sūrahs,* had been chosen by Moses to represent his people. They went further than that, making their belief in Moses and his message conditional on their seeing God in person. Obviously, this is

mentioned here for comparison with the attitude of the Prophet Muĥammad's Jewish contemporaries, who were demanding impossible proof to verify the truth of his claim to prophethood.

> *And [remember] when you said, Moses, we will not believe in you until we see God in person. 'You were then struck by a thunderbolt while you were looking on. But We raised you again after you had been as dead, so that you might be thankful. We caused the clouds to provide shade for you, and sent down for you manna and quails. 'Eat of the good things We have provided for you. 'Indeed, to Us they did no harm, but themselves did they wrong.* (Verses 55-57)

Neither the signs and favours nor God's forgiveness and generosity had any effect on the Israelites' obdurate, materialistic and cynical nature. The prolonged and harsh persecution they had endured under the tyranny of the Pharaoh seems to have finally corrupted their souls, so that they would yield only to force. Nothing corrupts souls and natures than writhing under tyranny for a long time. They had acquired the slave characteristics of being submissive when overpowered and subjugated, but vicious and revengeful when not under threat. Over the centuries, this became, and remains today, a defining character of the Jewish people.

While on Mount Sinai, the Israelites had the audacity to demand from Moses that they should see God in person, to which God responded by striking them with a thunderbolt that left them as dead. Nevertheless, God was again merciful towards them and restored them to consciousness, so that they might appreciate His kindness and show gratitude.

God also recalls for them how He had taken care of their forefathers when they were lost in the wilderness, providing them with food and protecting them against the scorching heat of the sun. Historic records indicate that the Israelites, on leaving Egypt, crossed the Red Sea into the Sinai desert. It was hot and without water, which put them in danger of dying of starvation. But, God bestowed His grace on them and provided them with a special type of food, as sweet as honey, which they called manna. God also sent them flocks of quail which they could easily catch and eat. Clouds would gather above them to protect them from the heat of the desert sun. Thus God alleviated their suffering in the wilderness, but, as the verse comments, they showed no appreciation or gratitude. As such, they were the losers: "*Indeed to Us they did no harm, but themselves did they wrong.*" (Verse 57)

Inviting God's Punishment

The *sūrah* reminds the Children of Israel of more of their acts of intransigence and heartless behaviour: "*And [remember] when We said, 'Enter this city, eat of its abundant*

food as you may desire, prostrate yourselves as you enter the gates and say: "Lord, relieve us of our burden." We will then forgive your sins and We will richly reward those who do good.' But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their transgression." (Verses 58-59)

Some reports indicate that the city referred to here is Jerusalem, the holy city which, not long after the Jewish exodus from Egypt, God commanded the Israelites to enter, driving out its inhabitants who were a race of giants. They refused and asked Moses to do that by himself while they waited outside the city. This episode is discussed fully in verses 20-26 of *Sūrah* 5, where, in an attitude of unmatched insolence, they say to Moses: "*Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter."* (5: 22) "*Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight. We shall stay here."* (5: 24)

As punishment they were lost for forty years in the wilderness of the Sinai desert, until a new generation had grown up who, led by the Prophet Joshua, son of Nūn, conquered the city. However, instead of entering Jerusalem, prostrating themselves in humility, and praying God to remove their burden of sin and forgive them, they took a totally different attitude and said different words.

Although these events occurred at a time much later than the one described at the beginning of this section of the *sūrah,* it can be seen clearly that, throughout their history, the Children of Israel displayed the same characteristics of insolence, rebellion, and stubborn deviation.

The Qur'ān was relating to the Jews of Madinah events and episodes of their history well known to them, reminding them of the victory God granted to their forefathers, God's help in bringing them to the holy city of Jerusalem, and their ingratitude and disobedience towards God. "*But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore, We let loose on them a scourge from heaven in requital for their transgression."* (Verse 59)

'Wrongdoers', as used in this verse, could be a reference to a small group among the Israelites or to the whole community, depending on who perpetrated the misdemeanours and rebelled against God and Moses.

In addition to the above, God had also blessed the Israelites while they were in the wilderness by providing them with water. The Qur'ān reminds the Jews of Madinah of this also, and of their forefathers' response to it. "*And [remember] when Moses prayed for water for his people We said to him, Strike the rock with your staff' Twelve springs gushed forth from it. Each tribe knew their drinking place. Eat and drink of what God has provided and do not persistently spread corruption in the land"* (Verse 60)

The Israelites descended from twelve tribes who went back to the twelve sons of Jacob, or Israel, father of the Jews. When they needed water in the desert, they asked Moses to provide it for them, and he turned to God for help. God answered his prayers, and asked Moses to strike a rock with his stick, whereupon twelve springs, one for each tribe, spurted out with enough water for all their needs. They were given all this by God's grace, but they were also warned against spreading corruption: "*Eat and drink of what God has provided for you and do not persistently spread corruption in the land*" (Verse 60)

Unhappy with God's Bounty

Let us recall the scene. The Israelites have fled from persecution and have journeyed into a desert of sand and rocks. The sun beats down all day and the sky will yield no rain. While they endure these desperate and hostile conditions, water springs out of the rocks, honey-tasting manna *falls* from the sky and quails begin to arrive in multitudes.

But despite all this, the people's minds remained closed, their hearts intractable and their attitude rigid. They could not rise to the occasion or appreciate the purpose of their flight from Egypt. God had delivered them from the humiliation and persecution of the Pharaoh in order to restore their honour, dignity and freedom. Needless to say, there was a price to be paid. They were to inherit the holy city of Jerusalem; but they had to capture it first.

The Israelites did not seem to appreciate that honour or to be ready to make the necessary sacrifices. They simply were not up to the commitment and the responsibility that God had entrusted them with. They were not prepared even to sacrifice the most mundane of their daily needs and habits, so that they might undertake the brief but harsh journey across the desert, on their way to glory, freedom and dignity.

The Qur'ān reminds the Jews of Madinah of what their forefathers had asked of Moses and addresses the early Israelites, saying: "*[And remember] when you said, Moses! We can no longer put up with one kind of food. Pray to your Lord, then, to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of green herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions.' He said, 'Would you take a lesser thing in exchange for what is much better? Go down to any land and you shall have what you asked for.' Ignominy and humiliation were stamped upon them and they incurred the wrath of God, because they denied His revelations and slew prophets against all right, and because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression.*" (Verse 61)

It is clear that Moses himself was aghast at their ignoble demands. His response was that what they were asking for was worthless and could be found anywhere. In

its Arabic form, Moses's response could be interpreted in one of two ways. It could mean that their request is so mundane and available everywhere. So wherever they wish to stay, they could find what they asked for. Alternatively, Moses is telling them to go back to Egypt and resume their servile, humble, humdrum life where they can have their cucumber, lentils, garlic and onion. They would not, it seems, be strong enough for the great and noble task God had called on them to undertake.

Contrary to some commentators, I favour this second meaning because it reminds the Israelites of their misery and humiliation in Egypt, as it says: "*Ignominy and humiliation were stamped upon them and they incurred the wrath of God.*" (Verse 61) Historically, this came later as a result of their disbelief in God's revelations, their killing of some of their prophets, and their general disobedience. These developments occurred several generations after Moses, but "*ignominy and humiliation*" are mentioned here because they fit the context of their condescension and insolence. Moses reminded them of the suffering and the distress they had undergone in Egypt and of God's kindness in delivering them from the Pharaoh.

Boastful Claims by the Jews

No other nation in history has shown more intransigence and obstinacy than the Jews. They viciously and mercilessly killed and mutilated a number of prophets and messengers. They have over the centuries displayed the most extreme attitudes towards God, and towards their own religion and people.

Nevertheless, they have always boasted of their virtue and made the implausible claims of being the most rightly-guided nation, the chosen people of God and the only people that shall be saved. Such claims are totally refuted by the Qur'ān which, in this *sūrah,* goes on to stress the most basic and all-embracing principle of the unity of God's religion. It establishes that belief in God is one and the same for all groups and nations, and that it will lead to righteousness and good deeds. God's grace and mercy are not the monopoly or the privilege of any particular racial or ethnic group. They are extended to all believers at all stages of human history, in succession, until the arrival of God's final message, which would unite all believers. "*Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians and the Sabaeans — anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and does what is right, shall have their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 62)

'Those who believe', as used here refers to the Muslims, while "Sabaeans" probably refers to a pre-Islamic religious group among the Arabs who were unhappy with idolatry and sought belief in the one God of Abraham, cutting themselves off from the pagan Arabs. Their name comes from the Arab word *saba',* describing a person who has abandoned the religion of his forefathers. In some commentaries,

they are confused with the followers of Sabaism, who worshipped stars.

The verse affirms that all of those religious communities who believe in God and the Last Day shall obtain their reward with God and may rest assured that they will be saved. The main criterion is religious belief rather than ethnic or national affiliation. With the advent of Islam this comes into sharper focus, because the final version of divine faith has been established.

The *sūrah* continues to recall to the Jews of Madinah incidents from the history of their forefathers. *"We accepted your solemn pledge and raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We have given you, and bear in mind all its contents, so that you may remain God-fearing.' Yet after that you turned away, and but for Gods grace and mercy you would have surely been among the losers."* (Verses 63-64)

Details of the 'pledge' are given later on in this *sūrah* and elsewhere in the Qur'ān. The emphasis here is on recalling the scene, in words that well suit the awesome atmosphere in which the covenant was delivered, and lend particular stress to the solemnity and significance of the occasion. God's covenant with the Israelites was not a matter that could be taken lightly; no half-heartedness, equivocation or wavering. It is the most momentous, gravest enterprise that can be contracted between God and man, and it carries a heavy responsibility indeed. Those chosen to give such a pledge must have total determination and devotion to be able to fulfil its obligations. The Israelites are therefore told: *"Take with firmness and strength what We have given you, and bear in mind all its contents, so that you may remain God fearing."* (Verse 63)

When Prophet Muĥammad was assigned prophethood he said to his wife Khadījah, "There is no longer any time for relaxation", for he had already been told in the Qur'ān: *"We are about to address you with grave and weighty words."* (73: 5)

Having given their pledge, it was essential that the Israelites should understand its implications, appreciate its reality and prepare to meet its demands. What is particularly important is that there should be no short-lived enthusiasm. Such a pledge means, in essence, a whole new way of life for them. As they go about implementing it, it generates new feelings, establishes a new system and observes a new morality. The end result is an attitude based on fearing God, always remembering that He sees us and knows our feelings and motives.

Alas, what a disappointment! The Israelites failed to live up to that responsibility. *"Yet after that you turned away."* (Verse 64) Nevertheless, God did not withhold His grace and mercy from them: *"but for God's grace and mercy you would have surely been among the losers."* (Verse 64)

Where Mockery Is Inadmissible

The *sūrah* moves on to yet another manifestation of their violations of their covenant with God, and their failure to fulfil its requirements. This time it takes the form of weakness in the face of temptation and the prospect of short-term gain. "*You are well aware of those of you who broke the Sabbath. To them We said, Be as despicable apes.' Through that [punishment] We set an example to their own time and for all times to come, and an admonition to the God-fearing.*" (Verses 65-66)

Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have the details of their violation of the Sabbath: "*Ask them about the town which stood by the sea: how its people profaned the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days.*" (7: 163) They had requested that a day should be assigned to them for rest. God set them Saturday as a day when they do not work for a living. He then put them to a clear test when fish would come to the shore in large numbers on the Sabbath but not on other days of the week. Overwhelmed by greed, the Israelites were not able to pass that test. It was not in their nature to let such an opportunity go by for the sake of such a trivial matter as the observance of a certain covenant made with God!

Thus, deviously and flagrantly, they violated the Sabbath by trapping the fish when they came to the shore and waiting until the next day, when the Sabbath was over, to collect them. As a consequence, they were severely reprimanded and rated as no more than *'despicable apes'*, since their mentality and behaviour had sunk to utterly revolting depths.

They had earned their due punishment for breaching the trust God had placed in them, abased their humanity by losing their self discipline and control, and descended to the lowest level of animals who have no free will of their own, but are driven by their needs and desires. It is not imperative that they should be physically changed into apes, as the Arabic text may be taken to mean. They had already sunk into that level by thought and spirit.

This episode was marked in their history as a useful lesson for them and for the generations of believers that would come after them.

The Episode of the Cow

The present passage is rounded off by the story of the cow, told here in full since it is not mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. The story depicts the Israelites as shifty and stubborn people, ever looking for excuses and justification for their failures.

> *When Moses said to his people, 'God commands you to sacrifice a cow, ' they said, Are you mocking at us?' He said, 'God forbid that I should be so ignorant.' They said, 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.'*

> *He said, 'He says let her be neither an old cow nor a young heifer, but of an age in between. Do, then, as you are commanded.' They said, Tray on our behalf to your Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.' [Moses] replied, 'He says let her be a yellow cow, bright of hue, pleasing to the beholder.' They said, Tray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike. We shall, God willing, be guided aright.' [Moses] answered, 'He says let her be a cow, not broken-in to plough the earth or water the tillage, free of all fault, without markings of any other colour.' Said they, 'Now you have given the right description.' They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone. Having slain a human being, you cast the blame on one another for this [murder]. God would definitely reveal what you have concealed. We said, 'Strike him with a piece of it. Thus God brings the dead back to life and shows you His signs, so that you may use your reason.'* (Verses 67-73)

This brief account highlights a number of issues, including the nature and disposition of the Israelite mentality, God's power, life after death, and the nature of life and death. Moreover, we may reflect on the stylistic touches in the way the story is told, which fit it perfectly into the context of the *sūrah.*

The Israelite character comes through very clearly in this story, reflecting lack of faith or trust in God, reluctance to believe their Prophets and hesitation in responding to them, and a tendency to mock and ridicule what they are told, coupled with impertinence.

God's directive, as conveyed to them by Moses was clear and simple: "*sacrifice a cow*". It hardly needed elaboration, nor was it difficult to carry out. Moses, after all, was the man who had led them out of Egypt and, by the grace of God, brought them to safety. He made it clear that he was simply conveying a commandment from God. Not only was their response insolent and brazen, but they also accused Moses of jesting and making fun of them.

Moses was clearly perturbed and made it immediately clear that he entertained no such idea: "*He said: 'God forbid that I should be so ignorant.'*" (Verse 67) His gentle, polite response was sufficient to prompt them to reconsider and act upon God's order. He makes it clear to them that mocking at others is unbecoming of anyone other than a person who does not know recognize God's position.

Up to that point, it was still possible for them to sacrifice any cow to fulfil God's order as given to them by His Messenger, but their devious and hesitant nature got the better of them and they came up with an unnecessary demand: "*They said: 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.'*" (Verse 68)

The way this question is phrased suggests that they still suspected Moses of making fun of them. Their use of the phrase 'your Lord' when addressing Moses also indicates their indifference towards the whole affair which, they inferred, concerned

only Moses and *his* Lord. Moreover, their question regarding the type of cow to be sacrificed is also indicative of their total lack of interest and their tendency to ridicule. Moses had already told them to sacrifice a cow, and any cow would have sufficed.

Moses persisted with his patient approach and tried to steer the dialogue back to a sensible level and away from argument on formality and technicality. He gives them another straight and clear answer: "*He says let her be neither an old cow nor a young heifer, but of an age in between.*" (Verse 68) He follows that with a clear, authoritative advice: "*Do, then, as you are commanded.*" (Verse 68)

That should have been more than adequate for them to choose a cow and carry out the order, discharging their obligation and sparing themselves further complication by narrowing their choices even further. Nevertheless, they insisted on asking more questions: "*They said: 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.'*" (Verse 69) Since they asked, they received an answer: "*[Moses] replied: 'He says let her be a yellow cow, bright of hue, pleasing to the beholder.'*" (Verse 69)

The choices are narrowing and the task of finding the right kind of beast that would meet this now elaborate description has become more difficult than ever. It is no longer simply the first available cow, but it has to be one of middle years, neither very old nor very young, of bright yellow colour, not too fat nor too lean, and, most difficult of all, 'pleasing to the beholder'. This means that the cow must be bright, lively and vigorous; because such are the qualities that people are pleased to see. On the other hand, people dislike to look at a thin, weak or deformed animal.

Yet those Jews were not finished. They continued to make matters difficult for themselves. Once again they ask about the type of cow they should sacrifice, justifying their new request on grounds that they had a problem of choice: "*They said: 'Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike. We shall, God willing, be guided aright.'*" (Verse 70)

There was now no escaping severe complication and restriction of choice, as more and more features were specified: "*[Moses] answered: 'He says let her be a cow, not broken-in to plough the earth or water the tillage, free of all fault, without markings of any other colour.'*" (Verse 71)

It was no longer an ordinary, average cow that could be easily found anywhere, but one with a specific description and an unusual combination of features. Then, just as the matter became unduly complicated and the choice really hard, the people relented: "*Said they: 'Now you have given the right description.' They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.*" (Verse 71)

It was as though Moses had not, up to that point, been telling them the truth, or

they had not been disposed to believe him.

A Murdered Man Brought Back to Life

As soon as they carried out the command, God revealed to them its purpose: "*Having slain a human being, you cast the blame on one another for this [murder]. God would definitely reveal what you have concealed. We said, 'Strike him with a piece of it. Thus God brings the dead back to life and shows you His signs, so that you may use your reason.'*" (Verses 72-73)

This is the second aspect of the story, which highlights God's power, the reality of resurrection and the nature of life and death. The mode changes from narration to direct speech. God has revealed to the Israelites under Moses the wisdom behind asking them to slaughter a cow. A man had been murdered and, with no witnesses available, they were blaming one another for his murder. God wanted to demonstrate to them that He could bring the victim back to life to identify his killer or killers. This was achieved by striking the dead man's body with a piece of the sacrificial cow. The mystery was solved and justice was done.

The question here is why this approach should be necessary when God can restore the dead to life without the need for anything in particular. What possible relationship could there be between the sacrificed cow and the murdered person being restored to life?

The Jews were accustomed to sacrificing cows, but why should a piece of meat restore life to a dead body when it had no life and no ability to give life? The logical answer is that the whole event was symbolic, intended to demonstrate God's power, the workings of which human beings cannot comprehend. We see the effects of God's power around us all the time, but we are not able to grasp its reality or the way it works.

"*Thus God brings the dead back to life...* " – just as effortlessly and readily as they had seen, though they could not understand how it happened.

To the human mind, the contrast between the reality of life and the mystery of death cannot be more bewildering, but to God Almighty the matter poses no problem whatsoever. But, how is that so? This is the greatest mystery that no creature can, or ever will, unravel. It is the secret that only the Supreme Being knows, but whose significance and outcome the human mind is able to appreciate and comprehend, because God "*shows you His signs, so that you may use your reason.*" (Verse 73)

As given in the Qur'ānic superior style, the narrative takes us on a short mystery tour with a story that begins with a command from God to the Israelites to sacrifice a

cow, without at first telling them, or the reader, of the purpose behind it. It was simply a test of faith and obedience.

We are only given the dialogue that takes place between Moses and his people. At no time is the story interrupted to tell us what words were exchanged between God and Moses. We only know that every time the Israelites asked Moses to refer to "his Lord", he did so and came back to them with an answer. We are not told how that communication was conducted or what was said by either God or Moses. This omission is most befitting of God's greatness, who should be revered and not insulted with pointless arguments such as those Jews were making.

The story concludes with an event as astounding for us as it was for the Israelites themselves: a dead man brought back to life simply by striking his corpse with a piece of a dead cow. That is most amazing!

The artistic method employed here combines with the purpose of the narration to a most significant and successful effect in one of the shortest and finest stories told in the Qur'ān.

The final scene in the story should have been awesome enough to inspire faith, submission and fear of God in the hearts of the Children of Israel. But despite all the lessons they might have learnt from earlier encounters related in the *sūrah,* there is a gloomy, disappointing conclusion that comes as a complete surprise: "*Yet after all this, your hearts hardened until they were as hard as rocks or even harder; for there are rocks from which rivers gush forth; others split so that water flows through them, and some other rocks fall down for fear of God. Indeed, God is not unaware of what you do.*" (Verse 74)

Their hearts are compared here to hard rocks, but even more difficult to subdue. The similes given were not altogether unfamiliar to the Israelites, for when they needed water they had seen it gush forth from one solid rock, in twelve springs. They had witnessed how a Mountain crashed down when God revealed His glory there, as told in *Sūrah* 7, Verse 143. Their hearts, however, remained rigid and inflexible, totally devoid of faith and fear of God, harsh, barren and unbending. But they are warned that "*God is not unaware of what you do.*" (Verse 74)

This concludes an episode of the Israelites' rich and chequered history; a history fraught with denials, deviousness, scheming, stubbornness, corruption and flagrant rebellion.

4
Covenants Breached All the Time

۞ أَفَتَطۡمَعُونَ أَن يُؤۡمِنُواْ لَكُمۡ وَقَدۡ كَانَ
فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ يَسۡمَعُونَ كَلَٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ
يُحَرِّفُونَهُۥ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا عَقَلُوهُ وَهُمۡ
يَعۡلَمُونَ ٧٥

Do you hope that they will accept your message when some of them would listen to the word of God then, having understood them, knowingly distort it? (75)

وَإِذَا لَقُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا
خَلَا بَعۡضُهُمۡ إِلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ قَالُوٓاْ أَتُحَدِّثُونَهُم
بِمَا فَتَحَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ لِيُحَآجُّوكُم بِهِۦ
عِندَ رَبِّكُمۡۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٧٦

When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe,' but when they find themselves alone, they say to one another, 'Need you inform them that which God has disclosed to you? They will only use it in argument against you before your Lord? Will you not use your reason?' (76)

أَوَلَا يَعۡلَمُونَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعۡلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ
وَمَا يُعۡلِنُونَ ٧٧

Do they not know that God is well aware of all that they conceal and all that they reveal? (77)

وَمِنۡهُمۡ أُمِّيُّونَ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ إِلَّآ
أَمَانِيَّ وَإِنۡ هُمۡ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ٧٨

There are among them illiterate people who have no real knowledge of the Scriptures, entertaining only wishful beliefs and conjecture. (78)

فَوَيۡلٞ لِّلَّذِينَ يَكۡتُبُونَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ بِأَيۡدِيهِمۡ ثُمَّ
يَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا مِنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ لِيَشۡتَرُواْ بِهِۦ
ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلٗاۖ فَوَيۡلٞ لَّهُم مِّمَّا كَتَبَتۡ
أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَوَيۡلٞ لَّهُم مِّمَّا يَكۡسِبُونَ ٧٩

Woe, then, to those who write down, with their own hands, [something which they claim to be of] the Scriptures, and then say, 'This is from God', in order to get for it a trifling price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they earn. (79)

وَقَالُواْ لَن تَمَسَّنَا ٱلنَّارُ إِلَّآ أَيَّامًا مَّعۡدُودَةٗۚ قُلۡ أَتَّخَذۡتُمۡ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ عَهۡدٗا فَلَن يُخۡلِفَ ٱللَّهُ عَهۡدَهُۥٓۖ أَمۡ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٨٠

They declare, 'The fire will not touch us except for a few days.' Say, 'Have you received such a promise from God — for God never breaks His promise — or do you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?' (80)

بَلَىٰ مَن كَسَبَ سَيِّئَةٗ وَأَحَٰطَتۡ بِهِۦ خَطِيٓـَٔتُهُۥ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٨١

Indeed, those who earn evil and become engulfed by their sin are destined for the fire where they shall abide, (81)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٨٢

but those who believe and do righteous deeds are destined for Paradise where they shall abide. (82)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ لَا تَعۡبُدُونَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ وَبِٱلۡوَٰلِدَيۡنِ إِحۡسَانٗا وَذِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينِ وَقُولُواْ لِلنَّاسِ حُسۡنٗا وَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيۡتُمۡ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا مِّنكُمۡ وَأَنتُم مُّعۡرِضُونَ ٨٣

We made this covenant with the Children of Israel: "Worship none but God; show kindness to parents and kinsfolk and to the orphans and the poor; speak kindly to all people; attend regularly to your prayers and pay the obligatory alms.' But, except for a few, you turned away and paid no heed. (83)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ لَا تَسۡفِكُونَ دِمَآءَكُمۡ وَلَا تُخۡرِجُونَ أَنفُسَكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمۡ ثُمَّ أَقۡرَرۡتُمۡ وَأَنتُمۡ تَشۡهَدُونَ ٨٤

We made a covenant with you that you shall not shed your own blood or drive yourselves out of your own homeland. You acknowledged all that and bore witness to it. (84)

ثُمَّ أَنتُمْ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ تَقْتُلُونَ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَتُخْرِجُونَ فَرِيقًا مِّنكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِهِمْ تَظَٰهَرُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَإِن يَأْتُوكُمْ أُسَٰرَىٰ تُفَٰدُوهُمْ وَهُوَ مُحَرَّمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ إِخْرَاجُهُمْ ۚ أَفَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِبَعْضِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَتَكْفُرُونَ بِبَعْضٍ ۚ فَمَا جَزَآءُ مَن يَفْعَلُ ذَٰلِكَ مِنكُمْ إِلَّا خِزْىٌ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَيَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَشَدِّ ٱلْعَذَابِ ۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Yet there you are, slaying yourselves, and driving some of your own people out of their homes, collaborating against them in sin and injustice. Had they come to you as captives you would have ransomed them. Their expulsion is indeed forbidden to you. Do you, then, believe in some parts of the Scriptures and deny others? Those of you who do this will have nothing for their reward other than ignominy in this life and, on the Day of Resurrection, they shall be committed to a most grievous suffering. For God is not unaware of what you do. (85)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۖ فَلَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Such are the ones who buy the life of this world at the price of the life to come. Their suffering shall not be alleviated, nor shall they receive any succour. (86)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَقَفَّيْنَا مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ بِٱلرُّسُلِ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَا عِيسَى ٱبْنَ مَرْيَمَ ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَأَيَّدْنَٰهُ بِرُوحِ ٱلْقُدُسِ ۗ أَفَكُلَّمَا جَآءَكُمْ رَسُولٌۢ بِمَا لَا تَهْوَىٰٓ أَنفُسُكُمُ ٱسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ فَفَرِيقًا كَذَّبْتُمْ وَفَرِيقًا تَقْتُلُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

We gave Moses the Book and caused a succession of messengers to follow him. To Jesus, son of Mary, We gave clear proofs and supported him with the Holy Spirit. Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you with a message that does not suit your fancies, you glory in your arrogance, charging some (messengers) with lying and slaying others? (87)

وَقَالُوا۟ قُلُوبُنَا غُلْفٌۢ ۚ بَل لَّعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِكُفْرِهِمْ فَقَلِيلًا مَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

They say, 'Our hearts are sealed.' No! God has cursed them for their disbelief. They have but little faith. (88)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡ كِتَٰبٞ مِّنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٞ لِّمَا مَعَهُمۡ وَكَانُواْ مِن قَبۡلُ يَسۡتَفۡتِحُونَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم مَّا عَرَفُواْ كَفَرُواْ بِهِۦۚ فَلَعۡنَةُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٨٩

And now that a Book confirming their own has come to them from God, and they had repeatedly forecast its coming to the unbelievers, they have denied what they know to be the truth. God's curse be upon the unbelievers! (89)

بِئۡسَمَا ٱشۡتَرَوۡاْ بِهِۦٓ أَنفُسَهُمۡ أَن يَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بَغۡيًا أَن يُنَزِّلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦۖ فَبَآءُو بِغَضَبٍ عَلَىٰ غَضَبٖۚ وَلِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابٞ مُّهِينٞ ٩٠

Vile is that for which they have bartered their souls, because they have denied what God has revealed, grudging that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants. Thus they have incurred God's wrath over and over again. Ignominious suffering is in store for the unbelievers. (90)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ ءَامِنُواْ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُواْ نُؤۡمِنُ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡنَا وَيَكۡفُرُونَ بِمَا وَرَآءَهُۥ وَهُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا مَعَهُمۡۗ قُلۡ فَلِمَ تَقۡتُلُونَ أَنۢبِيَآءَ ٱللَّهِ مِن قَبۡلُ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٩١

When it is said to them, 'Believe in what God has revealed,' they say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us.' They deny everything else, although it is the truth, corroborating the revelations they have. Say, 'Why, then, did you in the past kill God's prophets, if you were true believers?' (91)

۞ وَلَقَدۡ جَآءَكُم مُّوسَىٰ بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ ثُمَّ ٱتَّخَذۡتُمُ ٱلۡعِجۡلَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ وَأَنتُمۡ ظَٰلِمُونَ ٩٢

Moses came to you with clear proofs, but in his absence you transgressed, worshipping the calf. (92)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ وَرَفَعۡنَا فَوۡقَكُمُ ٱلطُّورَ خُذُواْ مَآ ءَاتَيۡنَٰكُم بِقُوَّةٖ وَٱسۡمَعُواْۖ

We accepted your solemn pledge, and We raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We

قَالُواْ سَمِعۡنَا وَعَصَيۡنَا وَأُشۡرِبُواْ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلۡعِجۡلَ بِكُفۡرِهِمۡۚ قُلۡ بِئۡسَمَا يَأۡمُرُكُم بِهِۦٓ إِيمَٰنُكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٩٣

have given you and hearken to it.'

They said, 'We hear but we disobey.' For their unbelief they were made to drink the calf into their hearts. Say, 'Vile is that which your faith enjoins upon you, if indeed you are believers.' (93)

قُلۡ إِن كَانَتۡ لَكُمُ ٱلدَّارُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَالِصَةٗ مِّن دُونِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوُاْ ٱلۡمَوۡتَ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٩٤

Say, 'If the ultimate abode with God is yours alone, to the exclusion of all others, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' (94)

وَلَن يَتَمَنَّوۡهُ أَبَدَۢا بِمَا قَدَّمَتۡ أَيۡدِيهِمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمُۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٩٥

But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. (95)

وَلَتَجِدَنَّهُمۡ أَحۡرَصَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ حَيَوٰةٖ وَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُواْۚ يَوَدُّ أَحَدُهُمۡ لَوۡ يُعَمَّرُ أَلۡفَ سَنَةٖ وَمَا هُوَ بِمُزَحۡزِحِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ أَن يُعَمَّرَۗ وَٱللَّهُ بَصِيرُۢ بِمَا يَعۡمَلُونَ ٩٦

Indeed, you shall find that they cling to life more eagerly than any other people, even more than the idolaters. Each one of them would love to live a thousand years, although the grant of a long life could not save him from punishment. God sees all that they do. (96)

قُلۡ مَن كَانَ عَدُوّٗا لِّجِبۡرِيلَ فَإِنَّهُۥ نَزَّلَهُۥ عَلَىٰ قَلۡبِكَ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ وَهُدٗى وَبُشۡرَىٰ لِلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٩٧

Say, 'Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel should know that he revealed it [the Qur'ān] to your heart by God's leave.' It confirms the Scriptures revealed before it, and is a guidance and joyful tidings for the believers. (97)

مَن كَانَ عَدُوّٗا لِّلَّهِ وَمَلَٰٓئِكَتِهِۦ وَرُسُلِهِۦ وَجِبۡرِيلَ وَمِيكَىٰلَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَدُوّٞ لِّلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٩٨

Whoever is an enemy of God, His angels, His messengers, and to Gabriel and Michael will surely find that God is indeed

the enemy of the unbelievers. (98)

وَلَقَدۡ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ءَايَٰتِۭ بَيِّنَٰتٖۖ وَمَا يَكۡفُرُ بِهَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡفَٰسِقُونَ ٩٩

We have sent down to you clear revelations: none will deny them except the evildoers. (99)

أَوَكُلَّمَا عَٰهَدُواْ عَهۡدٗا نَّبَذَهُۥ فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡهُمۚ بَلۡ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٠٠

Is it always to be the case that every time they make a solemn pledge some of them will violate it? The truth is that most of them do not believe. (100)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡ رَسُولٞ مِّنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٞ لِّمَا مَعَهُمۡ نَبَذَ فَرِيقٞ مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ كِتَٰبَ ٱللَّهِ وَرَآءَ ظُهُورِهِمۡ كَأَنَّهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ١٠١

And now that a Messenger from God has come to them, confirming what is already in their possession, some of those who had been given the Scriptures cast God's Book behind their backs as though they know nothing. (101)

وَٱتَّبَعُواْ مَا تَتۡلُواْ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ عَلَىٰ مُلۡكِ سُلَيۡمَٰنَۖ وَمَا كَفَرَ سُلَيۡمَٰنُ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ كَفَرُواْ يُعَلِّمُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ ٱلسِّحۡرَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَى ٱلۡمَلَكَيۡنِ بِبَابِلَ هَٰرُوتَ وَمَٰرُوتَۚ وَمَا يُعَلِّمَانِ مِنۡ أَحَدٍ حَتَّىٰ يَقُولَآ إِنَّمَا نَحۡنُ فِتۡنَةٞ فَلَا تَكۡفُرۡۖ فَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مِنۡهُمَا مَا يُفَرِّقُونَ بِهِۦ بَيۡنَ ٱلۡمَرۡءِ وَزَوۡجِهِۦۚ وَمَا هُم بِضَآرِّينَ بِهِۦ مِنۡ أَحَدٍ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۚ وَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مَا يَضُرُّهُمۡ وَلَا يَنفَعُهُمۡۚ وَلَقَدۡ عَلِمُواْ لَمَنِ ٱشۡتَرَىٰهُ مَا لَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ مِنۡ خَلَٰقٖۚ وَلَبِئۡسَ مَا شَرَوۡاْ بِهِۦٓ أَنفُسَهُمۡۚ لَوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ١٠٢

They follow what the devils relate of Solomon's kingdom. Solomon never disbelieved, but the devils did. They instruct people in witchcraft which was certainly not revealed to the two angels, Hārūt and Mārūt, at Babylon. Yet these two [angels] never taught anyone without first declaring, 'We are but a temptation to evil, so do not renounce your faith.' From these two, people learned what they would use to cause discord between a man and his wife. However, with that knowledge they can harm no one except by God's leave. Indeed, they learn what harms them and brings them no profit. They knew full well that whoever contracted such a deal would have no share in the life to come. Vile indeed is what they had sold their souls for, if they

but knew id (102)	وَلَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱتَّقَوۡاْ لَمَثُوبَةٞ مِّنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ خَيۡرٞۖ لَّوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ١٠٣
Had they embraced the faith and been God-fearing, God's reward would have been far better for them, if they but knew it. (103)	

Overview

The passage we discussed in Chapter 3 ended on a note reminding the Children of Israel of the many favours God had bestowed on them and their continued ingratitude. We witnessed a number of scenes, some drawn in general outline and some elaborate, showing God's favours and the Israelites' ungrateful response. This culminated in the description of their hearts as harder than rocks.

This passage addresses the Muslim community, giving it an outline of the machinations of the Children of Israel, and their devious, wicked scheming. The Muslims are warned that, with such history and nature, the Jews will always try to lead them astray. The length of this address, and the different styles and approaches it employs are indicative of the magnitude of the wicked schemes the Jews of Madinah employed to undermine the Muslim community.

Every now and then, the *sūrah* confronts the Children of Israel, in front of the Muslims, with the pledges they gave to God and how they violated them. They went as far as killing some of their Prophets when those Prophets would not comply with their wishes. It also describes their violation of divine law, their false arguments and distortion of their Scriptures.

The passage highlights their long arguments with the Muslim community, and the false claims they used. It instructs the Prophet on how to expose their claims and refute their arguments, putting forward the truth, clear and simple. One of their claims was that they would not be in hell for more than a small number of days, on account of their special position with God. God instructs His Messenger on how to refute this claim: "*Say: 'Have you received such a promise from God – for God never breaks His promise – or do you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?'*" (Verse 80)

When they were called upon to embrace Islam, "*they would say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us.' They deny everything else, although it is the truth, corroborating the revelations they have.*" (Verse 91) God tells the Prophet to expose as false their claim of believing in what was revealed to them. "*Say, 'Why, then, did you in the past kill God's*

prophets, if you were true believers?' Moses came to you with clear proof, but in his absence you transgressed, worshipping the calf. We accepted your solemn pledge, and We raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We have given you and hearken to it.' They said, 'We hear but we disobey.' For their unbelief they were made to drink the calf into their hearts. Say, 'Vile is that which your faith enjoins upon you, if indeed you are believers.'" (Verses 91-93)

They also alleged that paradise belongs to them alone, in preference to all people. God instructs the Prophet Muĥammad to challenge them to open appeal in which they and the Muslims would meet and pray to God together to destroy the party that is lying: "*Say: 'If the ultimate abode with God is yours alone, to the exclusion of all others, then wish for death, if your claim is true.'"* (Verse 94)

He also states very clearly that they would never wish for death. This proved to be true. When challenged for such a public appeal, they declined, because they realized that their claims were false.

The *sūrah* continues with this confrontation, exposure of the Israelites and instructions to the Muslims. Such a line was certain to weaken and foil the Jewish wicked schemes against the Muslims. All their devious designs were laid bare. Through knowledge of their old history, the Muslim community was able to expose their insidious methods.

Even today, the Muslim community continues to be the target of such Jewish methods. Unfortunately, the Muslim community today does not follow in the footsteps of its forefathers who implemented the Qur'ānic directives. It was only through such implementation that they were able to overcome the wicked schemes of the Jews of Madinah, even though the Muslim community was still in its infancy. Persisting with their wicked designs, the Jews continue to try to turn the Muslims away from the Qur'ān so that they would not derive from it their most effective weapons. As long as the Muslim community turns its back to its source of true power and pure knowledge, they feel safe. Therefore, anyone who tries to divert the Muslim community away from its faith and from the Qur'ān serves, knowingly and willingly or not, the Israeli aims. It is only through its true faith, its law and method of action that the Muslim community derives its true power. When it abandons these, its enemies are assured of their safety and victory.

Falsification of Scriptures

> *Do you hope that they will accept your message when some of them would listen to the word of God then, having understood them, knowingly distort it? When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe,' but when they find themselves alone, they say to one another, Need you inform them that which God has disclosed to you? They will only*

> *use it in argument against you before your Lord? Will you not use your reason?' Do they not know that God is well aware of all that they conceal and all that they reveal?* (Verses 75-77)

Towards the end of the last section, we were told about the rigid and relentless nature of the Israelites. It is a gloomy portrait that casts a bleak shadow of despair and hopelessness; it would seem impossible that any good would come out of them. With that in mind, the *sūrah* questions the grounds for any hope, as entertained by some Muslims, that the Jews would accept Islam.

Such a hope was ill-founded because the Jews seemed to lack the perception and the understanding that would lead them to acknowledge the truth and accept it. Faith and belief in God require a straightforward, refined and receptive nature that is free of deviousness and perversity. It requires a caring, sensitive nature that is truly sincere and fearful of God, that would not distort His words or try to obliterate the truth once it is declared.

The reference here is to the learned and the scholars among Madinah's Jews, the rabbis and religious elders, who were well versed in the Torah but were willing to tamper with it, and who would knowingly misrepresent and misquote it. This they would do out of jealousy and for their own selfish purposes. Since those people were predisposed to distorting their own Scriptures, they would be even more liable to misrepresent and reject what Muĥammad was teaching, and more than ready to oppose Islam and falsify its message.

> *When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe,' but when they find themselves alone, they say to one another, 'Need you inform them that which God has disclosed to you? They will only use it in argument against you before your Lord? Will you not use your reason?'* (Verse 76)

Besides distortion and misrepresentation of the truth, there is also cant and hypocrisy. In fulfilment of prophecies found in their own Scriptures and by virtue of the fact that they had been awaiting the coming of a prophet to lead them to salvation, some Jews would tell the Muslims at times that they too believed in Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Privately, to avoid giving the Muslims any evidence they could use to indict them before God, they would strongly reproach one another for overdoing their pretence of belief. Ludicrous as it may appear, they seemed to believe that as long as they did not divulge their true convictions to the Muslims publicly, they would succeed in concealing them from God and He would thereby not hold it against them. The *sūrah*, therefore, wonders what kind of logic they were using and, before moving to elaborate on their claims, asks in amazement: *"Do they not know that God is well aware of all that they conceal and all that they reveal?"*

(Verse 77)

The *sūrah* continues with its education of the Muslims about the Israelites by saying that they fall into two groups. The first is the ignorant, illiterate masses who have no knowledge or understanding of the Scriptures, who live by superstition and wishful thinking, and who presume that the Jews will gain eternal salvation, on the fallacious grounds of being God's 'Chosen People', whose sins are forgiven and deliverance guaranteed.

The second group is those who exploit this ignorance and distort the Scriptures for material gain and in order to further and safeguard their own ambitions, power and influence: "*There are among them illiterate people who have no real knowledge of the Scriptures, entertaining only wishful belief and conjecture. Woe, then, to those who write down, with their own hands, [something which they claim to be of] the Scriptures, and then say, 'This is from God', in order to get for it a trifling price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they earn.*" (Verses 78-79)

Neither group could be relied on to be truthful to their Scriptures or respond positively to the truth and guidance revealed by God to the Prophet Muĥammad. They are condemned to a deplorable end for distorting God's words, and for exploiting their own people and others for material gain and for the sake of religious and political dominance.

Reply to False Arguments

One of the most notorious claims made by the Israelites which stood in direct conflict with divine justice, and had no basis in logic or religious doctrine, was that they were immune to punishment no matter how much they erred or deviated. Hell fire, they said, would touch them for no more than a few days, if at all; after which they would abide in Paradise for ever.

What basis did they have for such a pompous claim? Nothing but sheer wishful thinking based on ignorance and the cunning lies of their elders. When people stray away and find themselves, over a long period, divorced from the true spirit of their religious belief, they end up with a mere facade, a superficial identity that means little in reality. Such people will continue to cherish the illusion of righteousness and salvation by paying lip service to their religious faith. They imagine that their claims of following the right faith will spare them God's punishment: "*They declare, 'The fire will not touch us except for a few clays.' Say, 'Have you received such a promise from God — for God never breaks His promise — or do you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?'*" (Verse 80)

What a powerful rebuttal! What promise or assurance do they have from God to

substantiate their claims? The truth is that they have no such thing. The question is a rhetorical one, carrying a whiff of sarcasm and reproach.

The next verse gives a definitive statement which represents one of the most fundamental concepts in Islam based on its overall view of man, life and the universe. Reward relates directly to action, both in quantity and quality: *"Indeed, those who earn evil and become engulfed by their sin are destined for the fire where they shall abide, but those who believe and do righteous deeds are destined for Paradise where they shall abide."* (Verses 81-82)

What we have here is a superb artistic portrait of a particular mentality, leading to a clear-cut and decisive ruling. We learn that evil is earned. This goes beyond the mere act of committing a sin. We are presented with a psychological frame of mind: the sinners are deriving a certain degree of pleasure and satisfaction from their sins.

They somehow consider that as gainful and worthwhile behaviour, and so they become totally overcome by it. Had they not believed it to be so, they would have desisted and done their best to avoid such sinful conduct. The Qur'ānic Arabic expression is most graphic, so that the meaning is clear and immediately grasped. These people are totally enthralled with their wrongdoing and misguided behaviour. It practically engulfs them to the extent that their whole life is dominated by it and they live for nothing else.

The image of these sinners as eternal dwellers of hell is contrasted with that of those who "believe and do righteous deeds" and are destined for eternal bliss and endless happiness.

True faith finds genuine expression in good acts; a fact which believers, and Muslims in particular, ought to consider and realize. Belief loses its meaning unless it leads to constructive and worthwhile activity. Those who claim to be Muslims but perpetrate corruption, oppose the implementation of God's law in society, and resist the promotion of Islamic ethics and modes of moral conduct among people are seriously lacking in faith and loyalty to God and Islam. The efforts of such people are fruitless. They shall have no protection whatsoever against God's punishment, which is bound to come, keen as they may be to avoid it.

Going Back on Firm Pledges

The *sūrah* tells the Muslims more about the nature of the Jews and their crooked and devious ways while, at the same time, confronting the Jews themselves with these revelations.

We made this covenant with the Children of Israel: "Worship none but God; show

> *kindness to parents and kinsfolk and to the orphans and the poor; speak kindly to all people; attend regularly to your prayers and pay the obligatory alms.' But, except for a few, you turned away and paid no heed. We made a covenant with you that you shall not shed your own blood or drive yourselves out of your own homeland. You acknowledged all that and bore witness to it. Yet there you are, slaying yourselves, and driving some of your own people out of their homes, collaborating against them in sin and injustice. Had they come to you as captives you would have ransomed them. Their expulsion is indeed forbidden to you. Do you, then, believe in some parts of the Scriptures and deny others? Those of you who do this will have nothing for their reward other than ignominy in this life and, on the Day of Resurrection, they shall be committed to a most grievous suffering. For God is not unaware of what you do.* (Verses 83-85)

Reference has already been made to God's covenant with the Israelites, and here we learn of more details of this covenant.

Right at the outset, we learn that the covenant between God and the Israelites contained the fundamental and absolute tenets of Divine faith that were subsequently confirmed by Islam, which the Jews chose to oppose and deny.

It required that the Israelites submit to, and worship God, other than whom there is no deity. It advocated kindness to parents, relatives, orphans and the poor in society. It urged courtesy towards others, especially in teaching and preaching to them about right and wrong, good and evil. Furthermore, the covenant enjoined upon the Israelites the observance of regular prayer and the giving of alms; all of which are, indeed, the very basic principles and obligations set by Islam.

This leads to two definite conclusions. First, God's religion is one and the same throughout human history; its last version, Islam, confirms and endorses the fundamentals of all preceding ones. Second, there is no doubt about the arrogance and obstinacy of the Jews towards this universal religion of God and their refusal to acknowledge it, despite the fact that it advocated the same principles as their covenant with God.

The *sūrah* then turns to address the Israelites directly, highlighting the inherent contradiction in their attitude. It goes on to point out further contradictions between their present attitude and the terms of their covenant with God: *"We made a covenant with you that you shall not shed your own blood or drive yourselves out of your own homeland. You acknowledged all that and bore witness to it."* (Verse 84)

But what have they done after that? "*Yet there you are, slaying yourselves, and driving some of your own people out of their homes, collaborating against them in sin and injustice. Had they come to you as captives you would have ransomed them. Their expulsion is indeed forbidden to you. Do you, then, believe in some parts of the Scriptures and deny others? Those of you who do this will have nothing for their reward other than ignominy in this life and, on*

the Day of Resurrection, they shall be committed to a most grievous suffering. For God is not unaware of what you do." (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* is referring here to events that had occurred shortly before the advent of Islam. The city of Madinah was inhabited by two major Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, who had no formal religious beliefs of their own and worshipped various deities. They were bitter rivals, constantly at loggerheads. The Jews had settled in three well-defined areas of Madinah and made various agreements with their Arab neighbours from both tribes. The Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā` and al-Nadīr allied themselves with the Khazraj tribe, while the Qurayżah allied itself with the Aws. Whenever war broke out between the two major Arab tribes, the Jewish inhabitants would side with their respective allies, so that Jew killed Jew, in complete violation of their covenant with God. Jews would drive other Jews out of their homes, loot their possessions and take their women. As soon as hostilities ceased, Jews on both sides would hurry to exchange Jewish captives or buy their freedom, in fulfilment of the Torah teachings.

The contradiction underlying this behaviour is exposed and the Jews are strongly reproached: "*Do you, then, believe in some parts of the Scriptures and deny others?"* (Verse 85) This is the very violation of their covenant for which they are given a very stern warning: "*Those of you who do this will have nothing for their reward other than ignominy in this life and, on the Day of Resurrection, they shall be committed to a most grievous suffering. For God is not unaware of what you do."* (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Muslims, and mankind in general:

> "*Such are the ones who buy the life of this world at the price of the life to come. Their suffering shall not be alleviated, nor shall they receive any succour."* (Verse 86)

The motive behind their bartering away the life to come, and its rewards, for temporal gain in this life, in stark violation of their covenant with God, was their eagerness to fulfil the unholy alliances they had forged with the Arab idolaters, in contradiction to the teachings of their Scriptures. Siding with both rival camps at the same time was typical of the Jews of that time, consistent with their age- old policy of holding both ends of the stick and placing two-way bets on events in order to secure some gains and protect certain interests, whichever camp ends up the winner.

Such hypocrisy and cynical manipulation on the part of the Israelites betray a deep-seated mistrust of God Almighty and a lack of faith in His covenant with them. They undermine the very foundations of their belief in God and His powers, and expose their actions as driven wholly by materialistic self-interest, in total disregard for the precepts and teachings of their Scriptures.

A Long List of Contradictions

The *sūrah* then confronts the Israelites with their record of how they treated God's messages and messengers, including their own prophets: *"We gave Moses the Book and caused a succession of messengers to follow him. To Jesus, son of Mary, We gave clear proof and supported him with the Holy Spirit. Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you with a message that does not suit your fancies, you glory in your arrogance, charging some (messengers) with lying and slaying others?"* (Verse 87)

The Israelites' main argument for not accepting Islam was that they were in possession of a great many such teachings that had been given to them by their own prophets. The Qur'ān, however, rejects that claim and exposes the disgraceful manner in which they had received those prophets and their teachings.

We have already been told of their encounter with Moses (peace be upon him), and here we learn of more prophets coming after him and receiving similar treatment, right up to Jesus, the son of Mary. Jesus (peace be upon him) came to them with clear evidence of the truth, including the performance of miracles, and was supported by the Holy Spirit, the Archangel Gabriel. But what was their attitude towards him? Their own Scriptures testify to a sad tale of rejection, denunciation and appalling ingratitude towards all the prophets who were sent to them: *"Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you with a message that does not suit your fancies, you glory in your arrogance, charging some (messengers) with lying and slaying others?"* (Verse 87)

The human tendency to manipulate rules and set double standards in order to achieve selfish ethnocentric, nationalist or sectarian objectives is a well-known phenomenon in society. It usually surfaces in corrupt societies that have lost the basic human sense of justice and fair-play. Laws, principles and standards ought to stem from a neutral, objective and a fair source that is not susceptible to the influence of human desires or prejudices. This agency must transcend human frailty and self-interest.

God relates these accounts of Israelite history as a warning to Muslims to avoid those pitfalls, to preserve their position of leadership on earth and live up to the trust God has placed in them. Thus we find that whenever Muslims have deviated from or abandoned the rule of Islam and persecuted the advocates of true faith, rejecting some and killing others, they have met a fate similar to that of the Israelites. They became weak, divided and humiliated, wallowing in ignominy and misery. This sad state will persist until they respond to the call of God and His messengers, submit to His will, and fulfil their covenant with God with clear resolve and determination.

Having confronted the Israelites with their attitude towards their own Prophets, the *sūrah* tackles their response to the new message, Islam, and its bearer, Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him):

> *They say, 'Our hearts are sealed.' No! God has cursed them for their disbelief They have but little faith. And now that a Book confirming their own has come to them from God, and they had repeatedly forecast its coming to the unbelievers, they have denied what they know to be the truth. God's curse be upon the unbelievers! Vile is that for which they have bartered their souls, because they have denied what God has revealed, grudging that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants. Thus they have incurred God's wrath over and over again. Ignominous suffering is in store for the unbelievers. When it is said to them, Believe in what God has revealed,' they say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us.' They deny everything else, although it is the truth, corroborating the revelations they have. Say, 'Why, then, did you in the past kill God's prophets, if you were true believers?' Moses came to you with clear proofs, but in his absence you transgressed, worshipping the calf. We accepted your solemn pledge, and We raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We have given you and hearken to it.' They said, 'We hear but we disobey.' For their unbelief they were made to drink the calf into their hearts. Say, 'Vile is that which your faith enjoins upon you, if indeed you are believers.'* (Verses 88-93)

The words are fierce: it is as if thunderbolts or balls of fire are being thrown in their faces. The verses completely demolish their arguments and their bogus excuses; their malevolent attitude towards Islam and the Prophet Muĥammad is exposed fully.

"*They say, 'Our hearts are sealed.' No! God has cursed them for their disbelief. They have but little faith.*" (Verse 88) They said that to Muĥammad and his followers to discourage them from presenting the new religion to them, and in order to justify their own refusal to accept Islam. But the real reason, according to the *sūrah,* is that God has rejected them because of their disbelief. This means that the initial step was theirs when they rejected the faith. Therefore, God punished them by His rejection, which means that they cannot benefit by His guidance, which they have already rejected. They have generally shown very little faith anyway, in all periods.

Their transgression was compounded, because they rejected a Prophet, Muĥammad, who had come to confirm the revelations they had already received, whom they were eagerly awaiting and about whom they had been boasting before the pagan Arabs. With him, they used to tell those Arabs, 'our victory would be complete.'

Such irresponsible and devious behaviour can only be met with divine wrath and condemnation: "*God's curse be upon the unbelievers!*" (Verse 89)

The *sūrah* exposes the hidden cause underlying their wicked attitude, stressing their loss and the failure of their pursuit. "*Vile is that for which they have bartered their souls, because they have denied what God has revealed, grudging that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants. Thus they*

have incurred God's wrath over and over again. Ignominous suffering is in store for the unbelievers." (Verse 90)

It is vile indeed that they should barter away their souls for a denial of God's Revelations. The human soul may very well have a price, which can be high or low, but to sell oneself for such a demeaning reward as the denial of faith in God is the lowest a human being can achieve. By adopting this attitude, the Israelites have lost doubly: in this life and in the life to come, where a humiliating punishment is in store for them.

The main reason for all this is their envy of Muĥammad (peace be upon him) for being the Prophet they had been waiting for. They begrudge anyone else receiving the honour of carrying God's message to mankind, which reflects their arrogant, overweening mentality. This is totally unjust on their part, and it earns them God's wrath and punishment.

This typically grudging attitude of the Jews of Madinah betrays a deeply selfish and bigoted mind, which detests that any good or blessings should be given to other people, as if that would reduce their own share of such goodness. It reflects a total lack of sensitivity towards others and a tendency towards self-alienation, which explains the isolation experienced by the Jews throughout history. They have tended to look upon their race as separate from the rest of humanity. Indeed, they have often set themselves up against the rest, harbouring grudges and an insatiable desire for revenge, and exploiting other peoples' misfortunes. It is not surprising, therefore, that they have historically been portrayed as conspiring troublemakers who are prepared to instigate war and bloodshed among nations in order to advance and safeguard their own interests. This hideous tendency is traced back to their grudge *"that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants."* (Verse 90)

Claims Falsified by Actions

The *sūrah* then goes further in exposing their bigotry and deception. It says: *"When it is said to them, 'Believe in what God has revealed,' they say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us.' They deny everything else, although it is the truth, corroborating the revelations they have."* (Verse 91)

This would be the reply of the Jews of Madinah whenever they were called upon to acknowledge Islam and the Qur'ān. They considered what their own Prophets had taught them sufficient and complete, and they rejected all else, including the revelations received by Jesus and Muĥammad, the last of all prophets (peace be upon them all). The Qur'ān takes great exception to this reaction by the Israelites to God's revelations, when these are *"the truth, corroborating the revelations they have."* (Verse

91)

But, why should they bother about the truth when it is not addressed to them alone, and what concern is it to them that revelations sent to other nations should corroborate their own? Their bigotry and narrow-mindedness were so extreme that they had even rejected what their own Prophets had preached, and dared even to kill some of them. "*Say: 'Why, then, did you in the past kill God's prophets, if you were true believers?'*" (Verse 91) How could they substantiate their claims to believe only in what had been revealed to them through their Prophets if they went as far as killing some of these prophets?

Worse still, they rejected the revelations Moses, their most senior Prophet and the saviour of their nation, had conveyed to them. "*Moses came to you with clear proof, but in his absence you transgressed, worshipping the calf:*" (Verse 92) Could their worship of the calf, with Moses still alive, ever be considered a sign of faith? Does it support their argument that they believe in what has been revealed to them?

Nor, indeed, was that the only instance of their transgression and rebellion. Earlier, God had made the covenant with them under Mount Sinai, but soon they were in clear breach of that covenant. "*We accepted your solemn pledge, and We raised Mount Sinai above you, saying, 'Take with firmness and strength what We have given you and hearken to it.' They said, 'We hear but we disobey.' For their unbelief they were made to drink the calf into their hearts.*" (Verse 93)

The mode of expression changes from direct address to that of reporting past events. Thus, it confronts the Israelites with their past attitudes, and informs Muslims and mankind generally of these Jewish attitudes. It then instructs the Prophet Muĥammad to condemn utterly the bizarre faith they claimed to have if it would require them to flagrantly reject the truth: "*Say, 'Vile is that which your faith enjoins upon you, if indeed you are believers.'*" (Verse 93)

Two fascinating expressions immediately draw our attention here. The first is: "*They said: 'We hear but we disobey.'*" Indeed, they did not utter the words, *'but we disobey'*. How is it then that these words are attributed to them? It is simply a question of portraying an attitude as though it is fully expressive. Thus, their actual words said that they had heard the message, but their actions said that they had disobeyed it. This reality was a much more authentic and accurate statement of their attitude than the words they uttered. The *sūrah* here is emphasizing one of the most fundamental Islamic principles: actions lend validity to words. Actions must be in harmony with words in order for the words to have any meaning or value whatsoever.

The second expression is: "*For their unbelief they were made to drink the calf into their hearts.*" The sarcasm and the severity of the image are unmistakable. They were

forcibly made to drink something nasty; but what is it? It is nothing other than the calf, which is shown to be forced into their hearts. It is easy to get carried away by this image so as to almost overlook the real significance of the metaphor used here. It shows their love and adoration for the calf to be so strong that it runs in their veins. Such powerful imagery is but one tool of the inimitable Qur'ānic style.

The Jews have made a great fuss claiming themselves to be 'God's chosen people', alleging that they enjoy an exclusive inherent right to divine guidance. They have further claimed that, unlike other communities, their salvation is guaranteed, both in this life and in the life to come.

By implication, these claims exclude Muĥammad's followers from God's grace in the hereafter. Their aim behind such claims was to undermine the Muslims' trust in their own religion and in the promises made to them by the Prophet and in the Qur'ān. God instructs Prophet Muĥammad to challenge the Jews to join the Muslims in an earnest prayer to God to destroy the party that fabricated lies. He says: "*Say, 'If the ultimate abode with God is yours alone, to the exclusion of all others, then wish for death, if your claim is true.'*" (Verse 94)

This is immediately followed by the assertion that the Jews would not take up such a challenge or pray for death because they were aware that they were the ones who were lying. Hence, they would be afraid that God might answer their prayers. They were well aware that their actions and their record did not qualify them for any grace in the hereafter. Were they to die straightaway, their loss would be complete: their life here would be cut short and they would come to grief in the life hereafter. This, the *sūrah* affirms, would only mean that they would fight tooth and nail to stay alive, putting them on a par with the idolaters: "*But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. Indeed, you shall find that they cling to life more eagerly than any other people, even more than the idolaters. Each one of them would love to live a thousand years, although the grant of a long life could not save him from punishment. God sees all that they do.*" (Verses 95-96)

In these verses, the Qur'ān points to another contemptible characteristic of the Jews: their craven desire to live, no matter at what price and regardless of quality, honour and dignity. This has been borne out by Jewish behaviour during all stages of their history; their heads are raised only when the big stick of the tormentor is put away, but once the stick is wielded before them, their heads are bowed and they acquiesce in fear and servility, scurrying for life, any kind of life.

Each of them would wish to live a thousand years because they do not believe in a future life, after this present one is over. When one accepts that one's days on earth are numbered but supposes that life here does not lead to a future life, this life would then seem very short, no matter how many years it lasts. Therefore, to believe in life

after death is a blessing and a source of inspiration that brings hope, since man naturally entertains hopes that go far beyond his numbered years of life. To discard the hopes of an immortal and happy existence reflects a lack of appreciation for the very meaning of life.

Besides being a belief in God's absolute justice and His most gracious reward, belief in the hereafter is an expression of the value and vigour of life itself, not confined to, or restricted by, the limits of this world. It links man's existence to a life that goes far beyond this one, to reach spheres and realms the edges of which are known only to God Almighty.

A Strange Enmity to an Angel

The *sūrah* goes on to direct Prophet Muĥammad to proclaim more challenging truths: "*Say, 'Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel should know that he revealed it [the Qur'ān] to your heart by God's leave.' It confirms the Scriptures revealed before it, and is a guidance and joyful tidings for the believers. Whoever is an enemy of God, His angels, His messengers, and to Gabriel and Michael will surely find that God is indeed the enemy of the unbelievers.*" (Verses 97-98)

Another astonishing trait of the Israelites is revealed. The spite and envy they feel towards other recipients of God's grace are not only beyond belief, but have now landed them in a serious paradox. Because they knew that the Angel Gabriel conveyed God's revelations to Muĥammad, and in view of the hatred and the grudge they harboured against Muĥammad, they circulated the absurd tale that Gabriel was also an enemy of theirs because he was the Angel of death and destruction. This, they alleged, gave them a valid reason to reject Muĥammad and the revelations he was receiving. Had it been the Angel Michael who had conveyed the revelations, they claimed, they would have accepted it, because he was the angel of rain, fertility and prosperity.

It is a ludicrous argument brought about by blind hatred. They had no reason to be hostile towards Gabriel who, not being human himself, could not take sides for or against them. He was a messenger whom they disliked although he had no personal preference or choice in delivering that message. He only did as he was bid.

We note in this verse the point that the Qur'ān was lodged in Muĥammad's 'heart', a term used frequently in the Qur'ān to indicate a non-physical part of the human personality that receives and understands. It does not refer to the physical human organ known by that name. The heart, according to the Qur'ān, is the centre of human perception.

The Qur'ān was lodged in Muĥammad's heart, confirming "*the Scriptures revealed*

before it, and is a guidance and joyful tidings for the believers". (Verse 97)

The Qur'ān confirms and endorses in general terms all divine revelations received before it. The religion of God, as expounded and preached by all revealed Scriptures, is basically one and the same. All divine revelations have come as guidance to man and as a source of joyful tidings for all believing hearts that are receptive and willing to have faith in God.

There is an aspect of religious experience which is important to emphasize. The effect of divine revelations on the believing heart is uniquely uplifting. The simple recitation of the Qur'ān fills the heart with tranquillity and solace, and opens up new vistas of meaning and knowledge. The study of this revelation can also be very inspiring, uncovering wider horizons of understanding and, therefore, guidance and achievement. Many verses include descriptions of the Qur'ān as '*guidance for the God-fearing*' (2: 2), or '*guidance and grace for people who believe*' (12: 111), or *'a cure... and mercy for all believers.'* (10: 57) These descriptions confirm that its guidance is the fruit of strong faith and trust in, and genuine fear of, God Almighty.

Such qualities were seen to be lacking among the Israelites. They have traditionally undermined the inherent unity of divine religion by discriminating between the prophets and between the angels themselves. The verse, therefore, insists that prophets and angels should be equally respected and revered, and that whoever opposes or is hostile to any of them shall have God's power to contend with. "*Whoever is an enemy of God, His angels, His messengers, and to Gabriel and Michael will surely find that God is indeed the enemy of the unbelievers.*" (Verse 98)

Casting God's Revelations Away

The *sūrah* then turns to reassure Prophet Muĥammad of the truth and validity of the revelations he had received, and to denounce those who reject or oppose his message. It specifically condemns the Israelites for not living up to their promises and commitments, whether made to God or to their own prophets, or to Muĥammad himself. That is manifest in their rejection of the Qur'ān, God's final revelation to man, which endorsed and reinforced the revelations they already had. *"We have sent down to you clear revelations: none will deny them except the evildoers. Is it always to be the case that every time they make a solemn pledge some of them will violate it? The truth is that most of them do not believe. And now that a Messenger from God has come to them, confirming what is already in their possession, some of those who had been given the Scriptures cast God's Book behind their backs as though they know nothing." (Verse*s 99-101)

Here, then, we have the real reason behind the Israelites' rejection of God's revelations; it is their sheer wickedness and the corruption of their souls. Normal, healthy human nature could not but acknowledge and embrace the truth and

principles expounded by divine revelations. The compelling logic in such revelations cannot fail to impress the human heart and mind. The fact that the Jews, or any other people for that matter, have refused to believe divine revelations is not a criticism of the validity or veracity of such revelations, but rather a reflection of those people's perverted and corrupt nature.

The *sūrah* then makes a public condemnation of the Jews, exposing their inconsistency and insincerity and showing them as a fragmented community with no unity or identity of purpose, despite their racial prejudice against others. Their chauvinism, ethnocentricity and their jealousy of any other favoured community did not stop them from being divided among themselves and mistrustful of each other. Whatever treaty or agreement they make with any other people, some of them are bound to break ranks and violate it.

This was evident when they broke the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai, and in their reneging on pledges given to their prophets and patriarchs, as well as in their breach of the treaty they had with the Prophet Muĥammad and the Muslims, when he first arrived to settle in Madinah. That agreement provided for a framework of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Jews, but the Jews were quick to undermine the new faith, lending support to the Prophet's enemies and sowing the seeds of strife and discord within the Muslim community in Madinah.

This is a well-known characteristic of the Israelites. In contrast, the lives of Muslims, as described by the Prophet Muĥammad "are of equal worth. All Muslims stand united against any hostile party. Even the weakest among them speaks on their behalf and honours their commitments." No Muslim would break a promise made by another on behalf of the whole community. Abū `Ubaydah, the commander of a Muslim army, once wrote to the Caliph `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, seeking advice concerning one of his soldiers, a slave, who had given a pledge of security to the citizens of a town in Iraq. The Caliph wrote back, saying, "God has praised the honouring of pledges very highly and you would not be faithful to your commitments unless you honour them. Therefore, you must honour your pledge to these people and leave them in peace." Such is the behaviour of a magnanimous, united and straightforward community — a far cry from that of those perfidious and conniving Jews.

"And now that a Messenger from God has come to them confirming what is already in their possession, some of those who had been given the Scriptures cast God's Book behind their backs as though they know nothing." (Verse 101) This is further evidence that every time the Israelites made a commitment, some of them reneged on it. Their covenant with God stipulated that they would accept, believe and support every messenger He sent, but some of them rejected the Qur'ān revealed by God to Muĥammad, which in fact amounted to rejecting their own Scriptures, since it endorsed and

confirmed those Scriptures.

The verse is loaded with stinging sarcasm, castigating the very recipients of divine revelations for rejecting similar revelations simply because these have been given to someone else.

Had such a stance been adopted by the pagan Arabs, it would perhaps have been understandable. The Jews had the privilege of receiving divine messages and messengers and were presumed well versed in religious guidance and experience. Yet, as the verse very graphically puts it, they cast God's new revelations *"behind their backs"*. They carelessly and recklessly rejected it out of hand. They closed their minds to it and discounted it from their life and thought.

Magic and Psychic Phenomena

Would that be the end of their transgression? Would they, having rejected the revelations sent down to Muĥammad, hold fast to the revelations given to their forefathers and show faith and loyalty to its laws and teachings? Definitely not. They cast God's revelations behind their backs and went in search of myths and superstitions: *"They follow what the devils relate of Solomon's kingdom. Solomon never disbelieved, but the devils did. They instruct people in witchcraft which was certainly not revealed to the two angels, Hārūt and Mārūt, at Babylon. Yet these two [angels] never taught anyone without first declaring, 'We are but a temptation to evil, so do not renounce your faith.' From these two, people learned what they would use to cause discord between a man and his wife. However, with that knowledge they can harm no one except by God's leave. Indeed, they learn what harms them and brings them no profit. They knew full well that whoever contracted such a deal would have no share in the life to come. Vile indeed is what they had sold their souls for, if they but knew it! Had they embraced the faith and been God-fearing, God's reward would have been far better for them, if they but knew it."* (Verses 102-103)

They abandoned Divine revelations which had come to confirm their Scriptures and gave credence to myths and legends from the time of Solomon, which falsely asserted that he practised sorcery and witchcraft and owed all his extraordinary powers to them.

The Qur'ān refutes this allegation completely and talks of sorcery and deliberate rejection of the divine faith, in the same vein. Thus, the Qur'ān treats sorcery as disbelief, and attributes it to devils: *"Solomon never disbelieved, but the devils did. They instruct people in witchcraft."* (Verse 102) It further refutes the allegation that the two angels of Babylon, Hārūt and Mārūt, were sorcerers. It confirms that witchcraft *"was certainly not revealed to the two angels, Hārūt and Mārūt, at Babylon."* (Verse 102) The Qur'ān makes the truth about these two angels clear. They were testing people's

faith, for a purpose that has not been identified. Again associating sorcery, black magic and witchcraft with disbelief in God, the Qur'ān exonerates the two angels, confirming that they had explained the nature of their work to the people and given them fair warning: "*Yet these two [angels] never taught anyone without first declaring, 'We are but a temptation to evil, so do not renounce your faith.'*" (Verse 102) Nevertheless, some people persisted with learning and practising sorcery, thus falling to temptation and causing harm: "*From these two, people learned what they would use to cause discord between a man and his wife.*'' (Verse 102)

At this point, the Qur'ān establishes another fundamental Islamic principle of faith: nothing happens in this world without God's authority. "*However, with that knowledge they can harm no one except by God's leave.*" (Verse 102) Cause and effect are only valid by the will of God. When you put your hand in the fire it is burnt, but the burning itself only occurs with God's leave; for it is He who gave fire the property to incinerate and gave human skin susceptibility to burn. This means that God is also capable at any moment of cancelling this property and rendering fire completely harmless, as was the case with the Prophet Abraham, when his people threw him into a blazing fire and he came out of it unscathed. (21: 69)

The same is true for such practices as sorcery and witchcraft: they can only work with God's will, as must all conventional physical and metaphysical phenomena of cause and effect.

The *sūrah* states clearly that what people learnt of practices that could bring discord between man and wife could only bring them harm: "*Indeed, they learn what harms them and brings them no profit.*" (Verse 102) Since this thing that they learnt is described as disbelief in God, this is reason enough to make it pure evil that can bring no profit whatsoever. "*They knew full well that whoever contracted such a deal would have no share in the life to come.*" When anyone makes such a deal, he realizes that he is assigning away every good share he could have in the life to come. That makes their deal a massive loss indeed: "*Vile indeed is what they had sold their souls for, if they but knew it! Had they embraced the faith and been God fearing, God's reward would have been far better for them, if they but knew it.*" (Verses 102-103)

This condemnation applies to those who took to practising sorcery and witchcraft at Babylon, and to those Israelites who gave credence to tales about Solomon and his kingdom and abandoned God's authentic revelations.

The Nature of Magic

Black magic, sorcery and witchcraft still hold deep fascination for many people today, while many others are taken in by the seemingly extraordinary powers of their practitioners.

It is true that some individuals are seen to possess special powers or abilities not explained by scientific evidence. Science has not been able to go farther than giving a description of some of these phenomena such as telepathy, the supposed communication of thoughts or ideas other than by the known senses; and hypnosis, artificially produced sleep or the sleep-like state in which the subject acts only on external suggestion.

While recognizing these powers and acknowledging their existence and effects, science has not been able to offer any satisfactory explanations as to what they are or how they come about.

This, of course, applies to numerous other psychic phenomena over which scientists are in dispute and which science is still unable to understand, either through lack of scientific evidence or because such phenomena cannot be verified by empirical methods. One such method is premonitory or "prospective" dreams which foretell the future and which Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychoanalysis who was well known for his rejection of spiritual powers, was not able to dismiss or deny. How is it possible that some people are able to sense and identify future events long before they actually occur?

It is presumptuous and native to dismiss these powers of extrasensory perception simply because science has not been able to understand or explain them.

This does not, however, give credence to myths or fairy tales. It is important that we should take an objective and open-minded attitude towards such experiences. While science cannot deny them completely, it should nevertheless continue to probe these phenomena and try to decipher their mystery. We have, therefore, to accept the fact that certain matters in the physical as well as the spiritual world will remain beyond human comprehension and that they must be taken into account when trying to understand life.

One of these matters is black magic, and all other feats and activities related to it, and the possibility of Satanic invasion of the human mind. The evident power possessed by some people to convey suggestions, and to psychologically influence and inspire others, mentally and physically, is quite striking. And, although the Qur'ān speaks of the sorcery performed by Pharaoh's magicians in their challenge to Moses as delusion (20: 66), we cannot dismiss the possibility that this type of trickery could be used to create discord and dissension between friends or husbands and wives. Naturally, people's emotions and feelings are determined by all kinds of influences and causes that are ultimately controlled by the will of God, as discussed earlier.

As to the identity of the two angels referred to here, Hārūt and Mārūt, and their location in Babylon, the story was well known in Jewish religious literature. The Jews

of Madinah did not question the Qur'ānic account of their story. Qur'ānic accounts of this type, however, are often brief and general, since the aim is not to give detailed chronological or historic information, but rather to draw lessons and highlight the morals behind the events.

It is not our intention in this work to pursue the myths and legends woven around the events and personalities we come across in our study of the Qur'ān, not least because of lack of authentic historical information.

Human history is vastly rich in accounts of human endeavour, and the tests and tribulations people of different ages and generations encountered. The personalities and the details of those events that are cited may change in accordance with the circumstances and stage of cultural development of each human group or society, but the messages remain valid and valuable.

From this story we learn of the Israelites' misguided pursuit of myths and their preference for superstition and such-like activities, and we come to know that sorcery, black magic and witchcraft are works of the devil that undermine man's belief in God, negate his good deeds and deprive him of all favour and privilege in the hereafter.

5
Jewish Efforts to Undermine Islam

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَقُولُواْ رَٰعِنَا وَقُولُواْ ٱنظُرۡنَا وَٱسۡمَعُواْۗ وَلِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ١٠٤

Believers, do not say [to the Prophet]: "Listen to us," but say: "Have patience with us," and hearken. Grievous suffering awaits the unbelievers. (104)

مَّا يَوَدُّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَلَا ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ أَن يُنَزَّلَ عَلَيۡكُم مِّنۡ خَيۡرٖ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَخۡتَصُّ بِرَحۡمَتِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلۡفَضۡلِ ٱلۡعَظِيمِ ١٠٥

Neither the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations nor the idolaters would like to see any blessing ever bestowed upon you by your Lord. But God favours with His mercy whom He wills; His grace is infinite. (105)

۞ مَا نَنسَخۡ مِنۡ ءَايَةٍ أَوۡ نُنسِهَا نَأۡتِ بِخَيۡرٖ مِّنۡهَآ أَوۡ مِثۡلِهَآۗ أَلَمۡ تَعۡلَمۡ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٌ ١٠٦

Any revelation We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or similar one. Do you not know that God has power over all things? (106)

أَلَمۡ تَعۡلَمۡ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِيّٖ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ١٠٧

Do you not know that God has sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and that apart from God you have no one to protect you or give you help? (107)

أَمۡ تُرِيدُونَ أَن تَسۡـَٔلُواْ رَسُولَكُمۡ كَمَا سُئِلَ مُوسَىٰ مِن قَبۡلُۗ وَمَن يَتَبَدَّلِ ٱلۡكُفۡرَ بِٱلۡإِيمَٰنِ فَقَدۡ ضَلَّ سَوَآءَ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ١٠٨

Do you wish to ask of the Messenger who has been sent to you the same as was formerly asked of Moses? He who barters faith for unbelief has surely strayed away from the right path. (108)

وَدَّ كَثِيرٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَوْ يَرُدُّونَكُم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ إِيمَٰنِكُمْ كُفَّارًا حَسَدًا مِّنْ عِندِ أَنفُسِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۖ فَٱعْفُوا۟ وَٱصْفَحُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِىَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَمْرِهِۦٓ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٠٩﴾

Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief, now that you have embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them; so forgive and forbear until God makes known His decree. Indeed, God has power over all things. (109)

وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ ۚ وَمَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟ لِأَنفُسِكُم مِّنْ خَيْرٍ تَجِدُوهُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١١٠﴾

Attend regularly to your prayer and pay zakāt (financial duty); for, whatever good you do for your own sake you shall find it with God. God sees all that you do. (110)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَن يَدْخُلَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ إِلَّا مَن كَانَ هُودًا أَوْ نَصَٰرَىٰ ۗ تِلْكَ أَمَانِيُّهُمْ ۗ قُلْ هَاتُوا۟ بُرْهَٰنَكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١١١﴾

They declare, 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.' Such are their wishful fancies. Say, 'Produce your proof, if what you say is true.' (111)

بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُۥ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُۥٓ أَجْرُهُۥ عِندَ رَبِّهِۦ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Indeed, whoever surrender themselves to God, while doing good works, shall have their reward with their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve. (112)

وَقَالَتِ ٱلْيَهُودُ لَيْسَتِ ٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ وَقَالَتِ ٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ لَيْسَتِ ٱلْيَهُودُ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ وَهُمْ يَتْلُونَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ ۚ فَٱللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا۟ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

The Jews say the Christians have no basis for their faith and the Christians say the Jews have no basis for their faith. Yet they both recite the Scriptures. Those devoid of knowledge say likewise, and on the Day of Judgement God shall judge between them on all their disputes. (113)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّن مَّنَعَ مَسَٰجِدَ ٱللَّهِ أَن يُذْكَرَ فِيهَا ٱسْمُهُۥ وَسَعَىٰ فِى خَرَابِهَآ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مَا كَانَ لَهُمْ أَن يَدْخُلُوهَآ إِلَّا خَآئِفِينَ ۚ لَهُمْ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا خِزْىٌ وَلَهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١١٤﴾

Who is more unjust than he who forbids God's name to be mentioned in His places of worship, and seeks to destroy them? Such people have no right to enter them except with fear in their hearts. They shall suffer ignominy in this world and awesome suffering awaits them in the life to come. (114)

وَلِلَّهِ ٱلْمَشْرِقُ وَٱلْمَغْرِبُ ۚ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا۟ فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

To God belong the east and the west: wherever you turn there will be the face of God. Truly, God is limitless in His bounty and He knows all. (115)

وَقَالُوا۟ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَدًا ۗ سُبْحَٰنَهُۥ ۖ بَل لَّهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ كُلٌّ لَّهُۥ قَٰنِتُونَ ﴿١١٦﴾

They say, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' Limitless is He in His glory! His is all that is in the heavens and on earth; all things are obedient to Him. (116)

بَدِيعُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَإِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿١١٧﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He wills something to be, He need only say, 'Be', and it is. (117)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ لَوْلَا يُكَلِّمُنَا ٱللَّهُ أَوْ تَأْتِينَآ ءَايَةٌ ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ ۘ تَشَٰبَهَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ قَدْ بَيَّنَّا ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

Those devoid of knowledge say, 'Why does not God speak to us, nor is a sign shown to us?' The same demands were made by people before them: their hearts are all alike. We have made the signs very clear for those with firm conviction. (118)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَٰكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا ۖ وَلَا تُسْـَٔلُ عَنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿١١٩﴾

We have sent you with the truth; a hearer of glad tidings and a warner. You shall not be questioned about those who are destined for the blazing fire. (119)

وَلَن تَرۡضَىٰ عَنكَ ٱلۡيَهُودُ وَلَا ٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمۡۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ هُوَ ٱلۡهُدَىٰۗ وَلَئِنِ ٱتَّبَعۡتَ أَهۡوَآءَهُم بَعۡدَ ٱلَّذِي جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡعِلۡمِۙ مَا لَكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِيّٖ وَلَا نَصِيرٖ ١٢٠

Never will the Jews nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith. Say, 'God's guidance is the only true guidance.' Should you follow their desires after all the knowledge that has come to you, you would have none to protect you from God, nor to give you help. (120)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يَتۡلُونَهُۥ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِۦٓ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦۗ وَمَن يَكۡفُرۡ بِهِۦ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ١٢١

Those to whom We have given the Book, and who recite it as it ought to be recited, truly believe in it; those who deny it are utter losers. (121)

يَٰبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَتِيَ ٱلَّتِيٓ أَنۡعَمۡتُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَأَنِّي فَضَّلۡتُكُمۡ عَلَى ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٢٢

Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I bestowed on you, and that I have preferred you over all people. (122)

وَٱتَّقُواْ يَوۡمٗا لَّا تَجۡزِي نَفۡسٌ عَن نَّفۡسٖ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يُقۡبَلُ مِنۡهَا عَدۡلٞ وَلَا تَنفَعُهَا شَفَٰعَةٞ وَلَا هُمۡ يُنصَرُونَ ١٢٣

Fear the day when no soul shall avail another in any way, nor shall ransom be accepted from any of them, nor shall intercession be of any benefit, and none shall receive help. (123)

Efforts to Undermine the New Religion

This new passage takes the exposition of Jewish intrigue against Islam and the Muslims a step further, revealing the reasons that lie behind their deep-seated hatred and their treachery and troublemaking. It gives Muslims strong warnings, requiring them to be on their guard in dealing with the hostile and malicious scheming of the Jews. Muslims are pointedly told not to emulate the behaviour of the Jews, or to fall for their trickery and deceit.

It appears that the Jews were making an issue of the modifications and amendments that had to be made to some Islamic rules and requirements during the formative years of Islam. They utilized this to raise doubts in Muslim minds,

questioning the validity and veracity of their religion. Had those rules and ideas originated from God, the Jews argued, they would not have had to be changed or replaced.

This insidious campaign gathered strength when the direction faced by Muslims in prayer, the *qiblah,* was changed from Jerusalem to the Ka`bah in Makkah, sixteen months after the Prophet's arrival in Madinah in 622 CE.

On his arrival in Madinah, the Prophet instructed his followers to turn towards Jerusalem, the sacred city of Judaism, in prayer, which gave the Jews reason to argue that their faith was superior, the one and only true religion. This made the Prophet wish, although he never expressed his feelings in words, that prayers could be made facing the Ka`bah in Makkah. As time went by, this feeling grew even stronger until his unspoken wish was granted, as we shall see later in the *sūrah.*

Since the change of *qiblah* deprived the Israelites of the basis for their argument concerning the merits and status of their faith, they launched a malevolent and surreptitious campaign aimed at discrediting the divine origins of Islam and questioning its veracity. They went for the very foundations of Islam, arguing with the Muslims that if facing Jerusalem during Prayer had not been valid, their worship hitherto would have been in vain; but that if it had been valid, there would be no justification for a change of *qiblah.* They were hitting at the very roots of the Muslims' faith in God's reward and, more seriously, at the wisdom and insight of the Prophet's leadership.

More worrying were the indications that the anti-Islamic campaign instigated by the Jews of Madinah was having some success. Weak- minded Muslims began to question the Prophet demanding 'proof' and 'evidence' for what he taught and preached. Needless to say, such questioning is the opposite of complete trust in the Prophet's leadership and in the source of the Islamic faith. Therefore, the Qur'ān clarifies the principle and the wisdom behind the abrogation, replacement or amendment of some rulings, and warns the Muslims against the real aims of Jewish criticism of the Qur'ān and the Prophet. It tells them clearly that the ultimate aim of the Jews was to turn the clock back, so that the Arabs who believed in Islam would revert to their old pagan days. It was jealousy and malice that drove the Jews to those lengths. They deeply resented, and would not accept, the fact that God had favoured another people with the honour of His final mandate to man and chosen them as the advocates of His last message. The Qur'ān undertook to expose the perfidious and malevolent Jewish accusations and claims, citing examples of earlier conflicts between Jews and Christians in which accusations were exchanged and insults traded.

The *sūrah* then turns to highlight aspects of the *qiblah* issue, pointing out that the Jews were hell-bent on preventing the Muslims from turning towards the Ka`bah in prayer. The Qur'ān condemns this stance, branding it an attempt to prevent the mentioning of God's name in His places of worship and an effort to destroy such places.

As the passage draws to a close it brings the Muslims face to face with the real and underlying motives driving the Jews and Christians in their opposition to Islam. Their chief wish had been to turn the Muslims away from their beliefs and their religion altogether. They were never going to rest or be happy with Muĥammad until he abandoned his faith for theirs; otherwise, it would be war, intrigue and confrontation all the way.

Begrudging God's Grace

> *"Believers, do not say [to the Prophet]: "Listen to us,' but say: "Have patience with us,' and hearken. Grievous suffering awaits the unbelievers. Neither the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations nor the idolaters would like to see any blessing ever bestowed upon you by your Lord. But God favours with His mercy whom He wills; His grace is infinite. Any revelation We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or similar one. Do you not know that God has power over all things? Do you not know that God has sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and that apart from God you have no one to protect you or give you help? Do you wish to ask of the Messenger who has been sent to you the same as was formerly asked of Moses? He who barters faith for unbelief has surely strayed away from the right path. Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief now that you have embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them; so forgive and forbear until God makes known His decree. Indeed, God has power over all things. Attend regularly to your prayer and pay zakāt (financial duty); for, whatever good you do for your own sake you shall find it with God. God sees all that you do.* (Verses 104-110)

The opening verse of this passage addresses the believers, asking them not to emulate the Jews in their play on certain Arabic words when speaking to the Prophet. One such word is *rā`inā,* which means "listen to us", but the sound of which could be subtly varied to convey the offensive meaning of 'an impulsive fool'. They would resort to this cowardly form of abuse because they would not dare insult the Prophet openly. The Muslims were advised to use synonymous words that could not be twisted to give an offensive meaning in their address to the Prophet.

This kind of behaviour not only shows the extent of Jewish resentment and envy towards the Muslims, it also shows the Jews as discourteous and underhand. The Qur'ān mentions these activities to indicate how caring and well disposed God is

towards the Prophet and the Muslims, and how much He is willing to defend and protect them against their detractors.

The *sūrah* goes on to expose further Jewish ill-will and animosity towards the Muslims, so that they may beware of their malign influence and hold fast to what God has entrusted them with: *"Neither the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations nor the idolaters would like to see any blessing ever bestowed upon you by your Lord. But God favours with His mercy whom He wills; His grace is infinite."* (Verse 105) The verse speaks of Jews, Christians and idolaters in the same vein, describing them as unbelievers because they have all denied God's last and final message to man which was revealed to Muĥammad (peace be upon him). They share the same grudges and hatred towards the Muslims for being chosen by God as recipients of His revelation and as trustees and custodians of His religion on earth.

Earlier, we saw other manifestations of this jealousy and the blind hatred underlying it, and how it was extended even to angels such as Gabriel who was no more than a carrier of God's revelations to the Prophet Muĥammad.

In stating that *"God favours with His mercy whom He wills"*, the *sūrah* emphasizes that God's decisions in these matters are not arbitrary. If He chooses to bestow His mercy on Muĥammad and his followers, it is because He knows that they both deserve and are worthy of it. The comment at the end of this verse is: *"His grace is infinite"* (Verse 105).

The greatest of God's bounties is His message, and the advocacy of His faith. Thus, believers should realize in their hearts how favoured they have been. They would be able then to counter the hatred and doubt campaign led always by the Jews to weaken the faith in the hearts of Muslims, with awe and gratitude, coming as it does after they have been alerted to the unbelievers' intrigues and ill-will. All these feelings may be seen as an essential mobilization to counter the Jews' campaign against Islam.

The main reason for this impudent attack, as mentioned earlier, was the abrogation, replacement or amendment of certain Qur'ānic directives and rulings, especially the one regarding the *qiblah.* This last ruling instructed Muslims to face the Ka`bah in Makkah, rather than Jerusalem, in prayer.

Regardless of the immediate occasion, the *sūrah* at this point gives a definitive statement with regard to this important issue: *"Any revelation We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or similar one. Do you not know that God has power over all things?"* (Verse 106)

Partial amendments of rulings in response to changing circumstances during the lifetime of Prophet Muĥammad could only be in the interest of mankind as a whole. As the originator of revelations, God, the Creator, is the final and absolute authority

to decide such amendments. To cancel or replace any directive or principle is His exclusive prerogative. This point is emphasized in the next verse: *"Do you not know that God has sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and that apart from God you have no one to protect you or give you help?"* (Verse 107)

We can clearly detect a hint of warning, and a reminder to Muslims that other than God they can call on no one for support or protection. The likely reason for this is the effect the Jewish campaign had had on some Muslims, whose trust and confidence in the Prophet showed signs of flagging. That is borne out by the following verse: *"Do you wish to ask of the Messenger who has been sent to you the same as was formerly asked of Moses? He who barters faith for unbelief has surely strayed away from the right path."* (Verse 108)

Again there is a clear denunciation of the Jewish habit of questioning their prophets, disobeying them and asking for the impossible, as has been described at length earlier in the *sūrah.*

The verse also warns Muslims not to lose sight of their commitments and obligations towards God, as the Jews had clone before them. Otherwise, they would lose faith in their own religion, as the Jews wish them to do: *"Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief now that you have embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them."* (Verse 109)

That enmity towards Islam which filled, and continues to fill, the hearts of the Jews, has always been the real force that motivates their plotting and scheming. The Qur'ān makes this very clear as it describes the relentless Jewish efforts to shake the foundations of Islam and destroy the Muslim community throughout the world. It therefore calls on Muslims to rise above their opponents' level rather than meet evil with evil. It advises not mere restraint, but forgiveness and forbearance: *"so forgive and forbear until God makes known His decree. Indeed, God has power over all things."* (Verse 109)

Muslims are urged to pursue the faith God has chosen for them and to invest their efforts and energies in the worship of God Almighty: *"Attend regularly to your prayer and pay zakāt (financial duty); for, whatever good you do for your own sake you shall find it with God. God sees all that you do."* (Verse 110)

Thus we can see how the Qur'ān revitalizes the collective Muslim conscience, focuses on the real sources of danger to the community, and mobilizes Muslims' energy and feelings for closer contact with God and more gracious submission to His will and command. Until that will is revealed and God's word takes effect in life, Muslims are urged to exercise prudence and show tolerance and magnanimity towards detractors, envious people and ill-wishers.

Claims without Basis

The *sūrah* then deals with some general claims made by Jews and Christians, to the effect that they are the only righteous people who are assured of being admitted to heaven in the life to come. At the same time they continue to denounce and throw charges at each other. It then goes on to give God's final word on the matter. "*They declare, 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.' Such are their wishful fancies. Say, 'Produce your proof, if what you say is true.' Indeed, whoever surrender themselves to God, while doing good works, shall have their reward with their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve. The Jews say the Christians have no basis for their faith and the Christians say the Jews have no basis for their faith. Yet they both recite the Scriptures. Those devoid of knowledge say likewise, and on the Day of Judgement God shall judge between them on all their disputes.*" (Verses 111-113)

Although, when the Qur'ān was being revealed, there was no strong Christian presence in Madinah, as compared to that of the Jews, the text refers to both groups as well as to the polytheists, dismissing their claims as baseless and challenging them to provide evidence to support their argument. "*They declare: None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.*" This is a dual report of what both groups argued. Otherwise, the Jews used to claim that only they were destined for heaven, and the Christians claimed that for themselves. Both statements are boastful, without supporting evidence. Hence, God instructs the Prophet to challenge their claims: "*Say: 'Produce your proof if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 111)

The *sūrah* then establishes another fundamental Islamic principle: that reward is commensurate with deed, without any preference for one nation, group or individual over another. Faith and submission to God, rather than title, ancestry or name, is the determining factor in this regard, and "*whoever surrender themselves to God, while doing good works, shall have their reward with their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 112)

This complements the earlier principle concerning punishment, when they claimed that the fire of hell would only touch them for a very brief period. They were told: "*Those who earn evil and become engulfed by their sin are destined for the fire, where they shall abide.*" (Verse 81) Thus, the complete Islamic concept of reward and punishment emerges.

Here again we find the most important feature of the Islamic faith: total, unconditional, mental and physical surrender to God. It is, however, a surrender that must be manifested in a practical form, expressed in the verse in the proviso, '*while doing good works,*' because Islam makes a direct functional link between abstract belief and everyday behaviour, between faith and action, inner convictions and outward deeds. In this way, religious faith becomes a complete way of life, and man's

character and actions merge into a single entity — hence the generous reward granted by God Almighty to believers without discrimination or preference of one group over another. Those who willingly and completely surrender themselves to God "*shall have their reward with their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear no shall they grieve.*" (Verse 112)

While the Jews and the Christians were making those inflated and self-righteous claims, they were accusing each other of having no basis for their respective beliefs, which caused the Arabs "*devoid of knowledge*" to refuse both of them and throw the same charge back at them both.

This last phrase clearly refers to the illiterate idolaters of Arabia, who observed with bewilderment the polemical religious arguments and the incessant barrage of accusations and counter-accusations hurled at each other by Jews and Christians. They viewed both religious groups with disdain, not least because of the myths and superstitions that had crept into Jewish and Christian theology, which did not greatly differ from the Arabs' own polytheistic beliefs, such as ascribing offspring to God. Accordingly, neither Judaism nor Christianity had much appeal for the people of Arabia.

The *sūrah* notes those accusations and controversies but leaves the final judgement to God, who "*on the Day of Judgement shall judge between them on all their disputes*". It is to Him that all matters are ultimately referred. This is the fairest and most satisfactory way of dealing with these irrational and futile arguments, which were made by people whose exclusive claim to salvation and guidance has already been refuted.

There follow further denunciations of the Jews' and Christians' attempts to raise doubts in Muslim minds about the veracity of the Prophet's teachings and instructions, especially those concerned with the change of the direction of prayer, or the *qiblah.* These attempts are considered tantamount to obstructing places of worship and keeping people out of them, or even seeking to destroy them. "*Who is more unjust than he who forbids God's name to be mentioned in His places of worship, and seeks to destroy them? Such people have no right to enter them except with fear in their hearts. They shall suffer ignominy in this world and awesome suffering awaits them in the life to come. To God belong the east and the west: wherever you turn there will be the face of God. Truly, God is limitless in His bounty and He knows all.*" (Verses 114-115)

The immediate impression one gets from these two verses is that they relate to the *qiblah* issue and to Jewish efforts to dissuade the Muslims from turning in prayer towards the Ka`bah, in Makkah. Other accounts, however, speak of different circumstances for their revelation.

The verses are phrased in general terms and may therefore be interpreted

generally. The same applies to the consequences of hindering the use of God's places of worship or destroying them. Those who perpetrate such acts deserve to be unceasingly pursued and relentlessly harassed, unless they seek refuge in the sanctuary of places of worship. It was in this spirit that on the day the Muslims conquered Makkah in August 630 CE, the Prophet Muĥammad ordered a general amnesty declaring that anyone who entered the sacred mosque would be safe. Many of the Arab enemies of Islam did exactly that. These were the very people who prevented the Prophet and his followers from entering the sacred mosque in Makkah, making it clear that they would go to war, if necessary, to stop the Muslims from entering. Furthermore, they are now warned of a double punishment: *"They shall suffer ignominy in this world and awesome suffering awaits them in the life to come."* (Verse 114)

However, another interpretation of the statement *"Such people have no right to enter them except with fear in their hearts"* emphasizes the fact that those who hinder or impede the use of places of worship should themselves only enter such places in fear of God and in total submission to Him. That would be the most appropriate way for them to show respect for these places and to acknowledge God's power and glory.

But what makes us favour the view that the two verses were revealed in connection with the *qiblah* issue is the verse that comes immediately after them, stating: *"To God belong the east and the west; wherever you turn there will be the face of God. Truly, God is limitless in His bounty, and He knows all."* (Verse 115) Clearly this verse comes as a response to Jewish lies and false contentions that prayers offered by Muslims facing Jerusalem were worthless and in vain. It is saying that in the final analysis prayer is valid whatever direction a worshipper faces, because God's face will be there. To specify a particular direction is no more than a matter of discipline. It does not mean that God's face is found in one direction rather than another. After all, God does not wish to make things difficult for people, nor would He want to take away their reward or devalue it: *"Truly, God is limitless in His bounty and He knows all."* (Verse 1 15)

Unbelief Is All One

The *sūrah* then discusses certain distorted concepts of Godhead held by Jews and Christians. It highlights the contrast between those and the beliefs held by the pagan Arabs, emphasizing the striking similarities, before it corrects those erroneous concepts and presents the true unitarian belief of Islam. *"They say, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' Limitless is He in His glory! His is all that is in the heavens and on earth; all things are obedient to Him. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He wills something to be, He need only say, Be, and it is. Those devoid of knowledge say, 'Why does not God speak to us, nor is a sign shown to us?' The same demands were made by people*

before them: their hearts are all alike. We have made the signs very clear for those with firm conviction." (Verses 116-118)

Indeed, the totally misguided notion of "God the Father" was not restricted to the Christians who take Jesus to be the son of God; for some Jews also believed that Ezra was a son of God, while the Arab idolaters believed that the angels were God's daughters. The *sūrah* condemns these three groups, all fiercely antagonistic towards Islam in Arabia at the time, without going into details of their beliefs.

It is interesting to note here that those groups compare very closely with the three groups that are opposed to Islam today, as represented by world Zionism, the crusading Churches and international Communism, the last being even more hostile to Islam than the Arab idolaters ever were.

By grouping all three camps together, the Qur'ān equates the absurd Jewish and Christian beliefs with those of idolatry, and it implicitly refutes their claims to exclusive righteousness and salvation by putting forward the correct version of unitarian belief: *"Limitless is He in His Glory. His is all that is in the heavens and on earth; all things are obedient to Him. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He wills something to be, He need only say, 'Be', and it is."* (Verses 116-117)

Here we come to the pure and clear Islamic concept of the nature of God and His relationship with His creation, and how creatures come into being. This is the clearest and noblest understanding of all these facts.

The universe was created directly by God through an act of His free, absolute and omnipotent will, expressed in the simple word "Be". The mere intention of God to create anything would bring it instantaneously into existence in the form chosen for it, without the need for intermediaries of any kind. As to how this actually happens, this remains one of life's most profound mysteries. In fact, the human mind is not equipped to fathom the secret of life. Such understanding is not necessary for the fulfilment of man's role, which is to build human life on earth.

God has given man numerous skills, talents and resources that have enabled him to discover and unravel a great many of the natural laws that govern the world around him. But, much as man has been able to learn about the world and exploit that knowledge for his own progress and advancement, other aspects have been kept away from him, as these have no impact on man's role on earth.

Philosophers and thinkers throughout human existence have attempted to unravel the secrets of creation, and a number of theories of life and the universe have been advanced, including some absurd and ridiculous notions. Man's failure in this area has been due to the fact that human science and philosophy have ventured into a realm of thought for which man does not possess the necessary intellectual and analytical tools. They have merely been groping in the dark, adrift in uncharted

waters.

Some Muslim thinkers and philosophers have also been lured into this controversial and complicated area of human thinking but failed to come up with any satisfactory conclusions. When some of them sought help in Greek philosophy, itself none the wiser, they were thrown into even deeper confusion. This has inevitably and surreptitiously found its way into Islamic thought but only as an alien body.

The Islamic view draws a distinct line between Creator and creation. The Creator is unique and matchless, which leaves no room in Islamic thought for the idea of "the unity of creation" or pantheism. Non- Muslim philosophy relies on this idea to indicate that creation and the Creator are one and the same; that creation is a mere reflection of the Creator and the physical manifestation of its Maker. A Muslim views existence as a unity in a different sense: it is created by one will, follows the same laws of nature, demonstrates absolute harmony and submits humbly to its Lord:

"His is all that is in the heavens and on earth; all things are obedient to Him." (Verse 116) This plain concept eliminates the need for the Creator to have offspring or have them ascribed to Him, since *"He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He wills something to be, He need only say, 'Be', and it is."* (Verse 117) How this divine will operates cannot be known because it is beyond man's capacity to comprehend, and it would be futile for him to try or pretend to know.

Following this brief discussion, the *sūrah* cites another statement it attributes to the idolaters of Arabia, again having a strange resemblance to what the Jews and the Christians were saying: *"Those devoid of knowledge say, 'Why does not God speak to us, nor is a sign shown to us?' The same demands were made by people before them: their hearts are all alike. We have made the signs very clear for those with firm conviction."* (Verse 118)

The pagan Arabs had often challenged the Prophet Muĥammad to come up with some miraculous proof or an extraordinary act to convince them of Islam. The *sūrah* makes the point that Jews and Christians who lived before them had asked the same of their prophets. A case in mind is that when the Israelites asked Moses that they should be allowed to see God in person. All three groups seem to share the same attitudes, concepts and inclinations, and therefore belong together.

God emphasizes that He has *"made the signs very clear for those with firm conviction."* Conviction, or certainty of faith, is a function of the heart and not a reaction to astounding or spectacular demonstrations. With faith, man is capable of appreciating signs and miracles, and understanding their meaning and purpose, and drawing the necessary lessons and reassurance from them.

Jewish and Christian Arguments

Having dismissed the false claims of the Jews, the Christians and the Arab idolaters and revealed the real motives driving them to oppose Islam, the *sūrah* directly addresses the Prophet Muĥammad in order to define his mission and specify his responsibilities. It also exposes the true nature of the dispute between him and the Jews and Christians, who wanted to exact a very high price that Muĥammad neither possessed nor was able to afford. *"We have sent you with the truth; a bearer of glad tidings and a warner. You shall not be questioned about those who are destined for the blazing fire. Never will the Jews nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith. Say, 'Gods guidance is the only true guidance. 'Should you follow their desires after all the knowledge that has come to you, you would have none to protect you from God, nor to give you help. Those to whom We have given the Book, and who recite it as it ought to be recited, truly believe in it; those who deny it are utter losers."* (Verses 119-121)

"We have sent you with the truth..." This opening statement in these verses gives strong reassurance to the Prophet that would help him to dispel any doubts or fears regarding the nature of his mission, and to foil any schemes or threats to undermine it. It is expressed very sharply and succinctly, giving it force and impact.

"A bearer of glad tidings and a warner." Muĥammad's mission was to deliver God's message, giving the good news to those who accept it and warning those who reject it. This is the total sum of his task. He would not be questioned about those who would end up in hell, because they would have met their fate as a result of their own actions.

The Prophet is also told that the Jews and the Christians would continue to oppose and scheme against him. They would never make peace with Islam, nor be satisfied unless Muĥammad abandoned Islam and took up their distorted beliefs and erroneous ideas, referred to earlier. It was not evidence or proof of credentials they were after; nor was it because they doubted his integrity or the truth of the revelations he had received. Nothing would seem to satisfy or convince them apart from an undertaking by Muĥammad that he was ready to relinquish his commission as Messenger of God and adopt their faith.

"Never will the Jews, nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith." This is the bone of contention. What they are after is not evidence or conviction of the truth of Islam. Islam and Muĥammad have been a constant obsession with Jews and Christians throughout history. The faith of Islam has always been at the centre of the crusades and campaigns launched against the Muslim community all over the world. No matter how much the two camps may differ or quarrel between themselves, or how divided each of them may be, when it comes to fighting Islam and Muslims they are in full agreement and as united as they could be.

The conflict between the Judaeo-Christian world on the one side, and the Muslim community on the other, remains in essence one of ideology, although over the years

it has appeared in various guises and has grown more sophisticated and, at times, more insidious. We have seen the original ideological conflict succeeded by economic, political and military confrontation, on the basis that 'religious' or 'ideological' conflicts are outdated and are usually prosecuted by 'fanatics' and backward people. Unfortunately, some naïve and confused Muslims have fallen for this stratagem and persuaded themselves that the religious and ideological aspects of the conflict are no longer relevant.

But in reality world Zionism and Christian Imperialism, as well as world Communism, are conducting the fight against Islam and the Muslim community, first and foremost, on ideological grounds and with the sole aim of destroying this solid rock which, despite their concerted and sustained efforts, they have not been able to remove.

The confrontation is not over control of territory or economic resources, or for military domination. If we believe that, we would play into our enemies' hands and would have no one but ourselves to blame for the consequences.

"*Never will the Jews, nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith.*" (Verse 120) That is the heavy price that would have to be paid. They will accept nothing less.

But God's instructions are very clear: "*Say: 'God's guidance is the only true guidance.'*" (Verse 120) The instruction is definite and emphatic: there is to he no negotiation or bargaining, no compromise or appeasement. The Prophet is warned that his wish to convey the message to those people and his eagerness for them to believe him, or his inclination to befriend them, should not distract him from the difficult but straight path he has taken: "*Should you follow their desires after all the knowledge that has come to you, you would have none to protect you from God, nor to give you help.*" (Verse 120)

It is a stern, uncompromising warning, addressed to none other than Muĥammad, God's Messenger and beloved Prophet. His detractors are motivated by prejudice and narrow-minded self-interest, rather than by lack of proof or knowledge. Those of them who are able to rid themselves of such motives and who properly understand their own Scriptures will believe him. "*Those to whom We have given the Book, and who recite it as it ought to be recited, truly believe in it; those who deny it are utter losers.*" (Verse 121)

Having delivered this decisive warning, the *sūrah* now addresses the Israelites with an amicable and sympathetic appeal, as a fitting end to this extensive debate concerning their history and religious conduct. They are offered a last chance before they are totally discredited and deprived of the privilege and honour of being the trustees and custodians of God's message to mankind.

The appeal opens with similar words as used earlier: "*Children of Israel! Remember My favour which I bestowed on you, and that I have preferred you over all people. Fear the day when no soul shall avail another in any way, nor shall ransom be accepted from any of them, nor shall intercession be of any benefit, and none shall receive help.*" (Verses 122-123)

6
Universal Faith

۞ وَإِذِ ٱبۡتَلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ رَبُّهُۥ بِكَلِمَٰتٖ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّۖ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامٗاۖ قَالَ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِيۖ قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهۡدِي ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٢٤

When his Lord tested Abraham with certain commandments and he fulfilled them, He said, 'I have appointed you a leader of mankind.' Abraham asked, And what of my descendants?' God said, 'My covenant does not apply to the wrongdoers.' (124)

وَإِذۡ جَعَلۡنَا ٱلۡبَيۡتَ مَثَابَةٗ لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمۡنٗاۖ وَٱتَّخِذُواْ مِن مَّقَامِ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ مُصَلّٗىۖ وَعَهِدۡنَآ إِلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ أَن طَهِّرَا بَيۡتِيَ لِلطَّآئِفِينَ وَٱلۡعَٰكِفِينَ وَٱلرُّكَّعِ ٱلسُّجُودِ ١٢٥

We made the House [i.e. the Ka`bah] a resort for mankind and a sanctuary: "Make the place where Abraham stood as a place of prayer.' We assigned to Abraham and Ishmael the task of purifying My House for those who walk around it, those who sojourn there for meditation and those who bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. (125)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمُ رَبِّ ٱجۡعَلۡ هَٰذَا بَلَدًا ءَامِنٗا وَٱرۡزُقۡ أَهۡلَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ مَنۡ ءَامَنَ مِنۡهُم بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۖ قَالَ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَأُمَتِّعُهُۥ قَلِيلٗا ثُمَّ أَضۡطَرُّهُۥٓ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ ٱلنَّارِۖ وَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ١٢٦

Abraham said, 'Lord, make this a land of security and make provisions of fruits for those of its people who believe in God and the Last Day.' God said, And as for he who disbelieves, I shall let him enjoy life for a while and then I shall drive him to suffering through the fire; and what a terrible end!' (126)

وَإِذۡ يَرۡفَعُ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمُ ٱلۡقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ ٱلۡبَيۡتِ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلۡ مِنَّآۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ١٢٧

As Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House, [they prayed]: "Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. (127)

رَبَّنَا وَٱجۡعَلۡنَا مُسۡلِمَيۡنِ لَكَ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِنَآ أُمَّةٗ مُّسۡلِمَةٗ لَّكَ وَأَرِنَا مَنَاسِكَنَا وَتُبۡ عَلَيۡنَآۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٢٨

Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. (128)

رَبَّنَا وَٱبۡعَثۡ فِيهِمۡ رَسُولٗا مِّنۡهُمۡ يَتۡلُواْ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمۡۚ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ١٢٩

Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.' (129)

وَمَن يَرۡغَبُ عَن مِّلَّةِ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ إِلَّا مَن سَفِهَ نَفۡسَهُۥۚ وَلَقَدِ ٱصۡطَفَيۡنَٰهُ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ١٣٠

Who but a foolish person would turn away from the faith of Abraham? We raised him high in this life, and in the life to come he shall be among the righteous. (130)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُۥ رَبُّهُۥٓ أَسۡلِمۡۖ قَالَ أَسۡلَمۡتُ لِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٣١

When his Lord said to him, 'Submit yourself', he said, 'I have submitted myself to the Lord of all the worlds.' (131)

وَوَصَّىٰ بِهَآ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمُ بَنِيهِ وَيَعۡقُوبُ يَٰبَنِيَّ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱصۡطَفَىٰ لَكُمُ ٱلدِّينَ فَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُم مُّسۡلِمُونَ ١٣٢

Abraham enjoined the same on his children, and so did Jacob, saying, 'My children, God has given you the purest faith. Do not let death overtake you before you have submitted yourselves to God.' (132)

أَمۡ كُنتُمۡ شُهَدَآءَ إِذۡ حَضَرَ يَعۡقُوبَ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ إِذۡ قَالَ لِبَنِيهِ مَا تَعۡبُدُونَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِي قَالُواْ نَعۡبُدُ إِلَٰهَكَ وَإِلَٰهَ ءَابَآئِكَ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَ إِلَٰهٗا وَٰحِدٗا وَنَحۡنُ

Were you present when death approached Jacob? He asked his children, 'Whom will you worship when I am gone?' They replied, 'We will worship your God, the God of your forefathers Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, the One God. To Him we submit

ourselves.' (133)

لَهُۥ مُسۡلِمُونَ ١٣٣

That community has passed away. Theirs is what they had earned and yours is what you have earned. You shall not be questioned about what they did. (134)

تِلۡكَ أُمَّةٞ قَدۡ خَلَتۡۖ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتۡ وَلَكُم مَّا كَسَبۡتُمۡۖ وَلَا تُسۡـَٔلُونَ عَمَّا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٣٤

They say, 'Follow the Jewish faith — or, follow the Christian faith — and you shall be rightly guided.' Say, 'No. We follow the faith of Abraham, who was truly devoted to God, and was not of those who associated partners with God.' (135)

وَقَالُواْ كُونُواْ هُودًا أَوۡ نَصَٰرَىٰ تَهۡتَدُواْۗ قُلۡ بَلۡ مِلَّةَ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ حَنِيفٗاۖ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ١٣٥

Say [all of you], 'We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and in what all prophets have been given by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to God we have surrendered ourselves.' (136)

قُولُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡنَا وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ وَٱلۡأَسۡبَاطِ وَمَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَآ أُوتِيَ ٱلنَّبِيُّونَ مِن رَّبِّهِمۡ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيۡنَ أَحَدٖ مِّنۡهُمۡ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ مُسۡلِمُونَ ١٣٦

If they come to believe in the way you believe, they will be rightly guided; but if they turn away, they will be in schism, but God will protect you from them; He hears all and knows all. (137)

فَإِنۡ ءَامَنُواْ بِمِثۡلِ مَآ ءَامَنتُم بِهِۦ فَقَدِ ٱهۡتَدَواْۖ وَّإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ فَإِنَّمَا هُمۡ فِي شِقَاقٖۖ فَسَيَكۡفِيكَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ١٣٧

[This message takes its] hue from God; who can give a better hue than God? Him alone do we worship. (138)

صِبۡغَةَ ٱللَّهِۖ وَمَنۡ أَحۡسَنُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ صِبۡغَةٗۖ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ عَٰبِدُونَ ١٣٨

Say, 'Would you dispute with us about God? He is our Lord and your Lord. To us our deeds shall be credited and to you,

قُلۡ أَتُحَآجُّونَنَا فِي ٱللَّهِ وَهُوَ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمۡ وَلَنَآ أَعۡمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمۡ أَعۡمَٰلُكُمۡ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ

your deeds. To Him alone we are devoted.' (139)	مُخۡلِصُونَ ﴿١٣٩﴾
Do you claim that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes were Jews or Christians? Say, 'Do you know better than God?' Who is more wicked than one who suppresses a testimony he has received from God? God is not unmindful of what you do. (140)	أَمۡ تَقُولُونَ إِنَّ إِبۡرَٰهِـۧمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ وَٱلۡأَسۡبَاطَ كَانُواْ هُودًا أَوۡ نَصَٰرَىٰۗ قُلۡ ءَأَنتُمۡ أَعۡلَمُ أَمِ ٱللَّهُۗ وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّن كَتَمَ شَهَٰدَةً عِندَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٤٠﴾
That community has passed away. Theirs is what they earned and yours is what you have earned You shall not be questioned about what they did. (141)	تِلۡكَ أُمَّةٞ قَدۡ خَلَتۡۖ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتۡ وَلَكُم مَّا كَسَبۡتُمۡۖ وَلَا تُسۡـَٔلُونَ عَمَّا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٤١﴾

Overview

So far in the *sūrah*, the debate with the people of earlier revelations, i.e. the Jews and the Christians, has mainly focused on the historical record of the Israelites and their response to the Prophets who came to lead them, the teachings that these Prophets preached, and the covenants and pledges to which the Israelites committed themselves. This covered a historical span from the era of Moses to the time of Muĥammad (peace be upon them both). The argument so far was in the most part with the Jews, shorter ones with the Christians, with a few references to the idolaters, particularly when they shared certain features with the other two groups.

In this section we are taken farther back in history, to the era of Abraham. The events and amount of detail presented here fall neatly into context with the subject matter of the *sūrah* as a whole. They are also immediately relevant to the long and hard debate that was taking place between the Muslims and the Jews in Madinah when these verses were revealed.

The people of earlier revelations trace their origins back to Abraham by way of his son Isaac (peace be upon them). Understandably, they have always been proud of this relationship, just as they have cherished the promises God made to Abraham to bless him and his seed, and the covenant God made with them. This has led them to

make exclusive claims to righteousness and custodianship of God's message to mankind. It has also misled them into believing that heaven is exclusively theirs, whatever they do.

The Quraysh Arab tribe living in Makkah were also Abraham's descendants through his other son, Ishmael. They were also just as proud of their ancestry as the Jews were of theirs. It gave them the privilege of being the custodians of the sacred shrine of the Ka`bah in Makkah, which had, in turn, given them the religious authority, honour, power and position they enjoyed over the rest of the Arabs.

Towards the end of the last passage we saw how the Qur'ān refuted Jewish and Christian claims to exclusive righteousness and salvation: "*They declare: 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.'*" (Verse 111) Hard did they try to convert Muslims to Judaism or Christianity: "*They say: 'Follow the Jewish faith' – or, 'Follow the Christian faith' – and you shall be rightly guided.'*" (Verse 135) It also condemned those who prevent people from worshipping in God's places of worship — which, as we said, was probably linked to the issue of changing the direction Muslims face in prayer from Jerusalem to the Ka (bah in Makkah — and efforts to exploit that issue to create division and confusion within Muslim ranks.

In this section, and still within the same context of Jewish, Christian and pagan claims, the *sūrah* recounts parts of the history of Abraham and his sons Ishmael and Isaac, and gives a final ruling on the *qiblah* issue. The occasion is also used to establish the truth regarding the religion of Abraham, which was based purely on the belief in God's absolute oneness. Thus it remains at complete variance with the distorted beliefs adopted by those three groups, while its affinity to the message of the Prophet Muĥammad was total. It denounces the monopoly of religious righteousness by any nation or racial group, stressing that religion resides in the believer's heart; it is not inherited through blood or ancestral lineage. Religion belongs to God Almighty, who is not related through blood or ancestry to any human individual or group. Those who believe in His religion and practise it properly shall be its rightful custodians and trustees, at all times, regardless of their race or ethnic origin.

The Qur'ān presents these facts, which form some of the most basic tenets of Islamic belief, in a fine, clear and elegant style. It takes the reader step by step through the long span of history starting at the time God entrusted Abraham with the religious leadership of mankind, upon successfully completing the test to which God put him. It goes up to the early formation of the Muslim community which believes in the message of Muĥammad. Its rise is seen as fulfilment of Abraham's and Ishmael's prayers while they were laying the foundations of the Ka`bah. Thus, it is the Muslim community that is the legitimate heir to God's religion, solely by virtue of their faith in God and by their true and sincere following of Abraham's teachings.

Those who depart from it, choosing to turn away from Abraham's faith in God's absolute oneness, renege on their commitments to God and, as such, cannot be the heirs to the divine faith.

The Qur'ān further establishes that Islam, in the sense of submission to God alone, was the first and the last divine message to mankind. It was the religion of Abraham and of Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Hebrew tribes who came after him, and was handed down to Moses and Jesus until it was eventually inherited by the Muslims. All true and faithful followers of those and other prophets and messengers belong to the same nation and share in all the merits and rewards of following the religion of Islam in its wider, universal version. All those who reject the religion of Abraham or renege on any of their covenants with God forfeit their claim to those privileges and rewards.

Thus we can see how Jewish and Christian claims to an exclusive possession of God's true religion, by virtue of lineage to Abraham, are totally groundless. They lost that right the moment they deviated from the true faith based on total submission to God alone. For the same reason, the idolater Arabs of the Quraysh forfeited their claim to the exclusive custodianship of the Ka`bah. Likewise, the Jewish argument for opposing the designation of the Ka`bah as the *qiblah* for the Muslims falls apart, because the Ka`bah was the original *qiblah* of their forefather Abraham, and therefore it was theirs also.

Following this brief introduction, let us now take a closer look at the account of Abraham, his covenant with God, and its significance in the history of the religion of Islam.

Abraham's Covenant

> *When his Lord tested Abraham with certain commandments and he fulfilled them, He said, I have appointed you a leader of mankind.' Abraham asked, And what of my descendants?' God said, 'My covenant does not apply to the wrongdoers.'* (Verse 124)

The Prophet is here reminded of how God had imparted certain commandments and obligations to Abraham in order to test his faith, loyalty and resolve. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, he is described as *"Abraham, who was faithful to his trust."* (53: 37) This is a recognition by God of Abraham's faithful and complete fulfilment of those obligations, according him a very high rank in God's estimation. Hence, God's promise: *"I have appointed you a leader of mankind"* Thus, Abraham becomes the leader to be followed, the one who shows people the way to all goodness.

Being human, Abraham is immediately prompted to wish for that blessing and privilege to be extended to his offspring. What Abraham expressed was a natural

instinctive human reaction, because man is always eager to multiply and perpetuate his achievements and attainments. By the passing of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next, the human lot is improved and life is preserved. This natural and necessary human process has been a target for criticism and attack, while Islam recognizes its importance, and promotes it through its law of inheritance, so that it serves human society to the full.

The misguided efforts made in some societies to undermine this natural progression in fact try to suppress human nature altogether. Such efforts betray short-sightedness, inhumanity and arbitrary methods in tackling social and moral ills. Unless remedied, these will lead to the fragmentation and destruction of society. However, solutions that run contrary to human nature will inevitably end in failure. What is needed is a solution that rectifies deviation and social ills without contradicting human nature. Such methods can only be adopted and made to work within a framework of divine guidance and faith. They require a profound and enlightened understanding of human nature and the human mind, and an unbiased outlook, free of all grudges and destructive tendencies.

The answer to Abraham's question, "*And what of my descendants?*" reiterates an already stated major principle: that religious leadership and authority are granted purely on merit, in reward for sincere faith and diligent work. They are not inherited through ancestral lineage. God said: "*My covenant does not apply to the wrongdoers.*"

"Wrongdoing" takes various forms: it might be directed at oneself, by associating partners with God, or it might be oppression directed at fellow human beings. The leadership denied to wrongdoers includes all the meanings covered by the Arabic term *imām,* which include prophethood, political authority, and the leading of congregational prayers. Equity and justice make up the foremost qualification for this lofty vocation, and no one who deviates from these qualities deserves any form of leadership, in its widest sense.

This is the clear essence of the covenant made with Abraham. According to it, the Jews, as a result of their repeated wrongdoing, self-indulgence and waywardness, could never have an exclusive monopoly of the leadership of mankind. Similarly, and for the same reasons, some so-called Muslims today would also be barred from that covenant.

Islam gives no credence to ties or relationships not based on faith and sincere action. It places a sharp distinction between one generation and another when the later one deviates from the faith, despite their common ancestry. Indeed, according to Islam, faith can separate father and son, and man and wife. Thus the Arabs who adopted Islam are distinguished from those who did not, just as Jews and Christians who believed in the religion of Abraham, Moses and Jesus are distinguished from

those who deviated from them. Ancestors and offspring only become one family or nation when they are all believers united by the same faith, regardless of colour and geographic or ethnic origins.

Building the Ka`bah

> *We made the House [i.e. the Ka`bah] a resort for mankind and a sanctuary: Make the place where Abraham stood as a place of prayer.' We assigned to Abraham and Ishmael the task of purifying My House for those who walk around it, those who sojourn there for meditation and those who bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer.* (Verse 125)

The Sacred House, the Ka`bah, was defiled by the Arabs of the Quraysh who were supposed to be its trusted caretakers and custodians. They harassed and persecuted the believers and drove them out of Makkah. Yet God wanted this House to be a sanctuary to which people of all races resort. In there people should find peace and security for all.

The Arabs had been directed to establish "*the place where Abraham stood*", which is a reference to the whole area surrounding the Ka`bah, as a place for prayer, which makes its subsequent designation as a *qiblah,* a spot towards which Muslims turn in Prayer, a very natural progression raising no objections from anyone. After all, it had been the very first place to which Muslims, the legitimate heirs of Abraham's monotheistic religion, had turned in their prayer, because it had been dedicated to God and to no one else. Abraham and Ishmael, two pious and sincere servants of God, had been charged with cleansing it and preparing it for pilgrims who would come to it for worship and meditation. They would make no claim to its ownership, nor did they have it in their power to pass such ownership to anyone else. They were mere servants of God Almighty and keepers of His sacred and revered House.

> *Abraham said, 'Lord, make this a land of security and make provisions of fruits for those of its people who believe in God and the Last Day.' God said, 'And as for he who disbelieves, I shall let him enjoy life for a while and then I shall drive him to suffering through the fire; and what a terrible end!'* (Verse 126)

While still pleading for the House to be made a universal place of peace and security for posterity, Abraham has clearly heeded God's earlier admonition, as we now find him making the exception that only the believers should receive God's favour.

The *sūrah* then goes on to paint a lively picture of Abraham and Ishmael embarking on the job of constructing the House of God and preparing it for

worshippers: "*As Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House, [they prayed]: 'Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.'*" (Verses 127-129)

Not only does this vivid account take the reader right into the scene of the action, but it also surrounds him with the mood and feeling of the occasion. It was a labour of love and devotion that those two pious people undertook, dedicated to God Almighty and carried out in expectation and hope that He would accept it and be pleased with it.

We almost hear the tone and music of their prayer, and we feel the atmosphere of heart-felt appeal to God. This is a special characteristic of the Qur'ānic style which brings a scene of an event long gone as though it is taking place here and now, right in front of us. In their prayer we cannot fail to note the sort of humility, devotion and profound faith that are worthy of prophets who understand the importance of true faith in this world. Such characteristics the Qur'ān tries to teach the advocates of faith and instil it in their hearts.

"*'Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all.'*" (Verse 127) Their first aim is that their labour, which is dedicated purely to God, should be accepted by Him. Hence, they offer it with humility, hoping to earn God's pleasure through it, pinning their hopes on the fact that God listens to their prayers and knows their feelings and intentions.

"*Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verse 128) They turn to God seeking His guidance, fully aware that, without His help and support, they are powerless. Their prayer also shows the intrinsic solidarity of the community of believers over successive generations. "*Make of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You.*" This shows not only the fact that faith is the most important aspect in a believer's life, and appreciation of its great blessings, but also the instinctive natural feeling of wishing the best for one's children and descendants. Their main concern was that their offspring should be God-fearing, righteous and obedient to God. So they add a specific request: "*'Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.'*" (Verse 129)

That particular prayer was answered when the Prophet Muĥammad, a direct descendant of Abraham and Ishmael, was given his message several centuries later.

We note that some time may elapse before God answers a particular prayer. As human beings, we tend to be impatient and want our prayers answered immediately, forgetting that it is for God Almighty to choose how and when they should be answered and fulfilled.

This prayer by Abraham and Ishmael carries particular significance for the debate that was going on between the Muslims and the Jews in Madinah at the time. The two Prophets expressly request God to make out of their offspring a nation that would serve God, as the word 'Muslim', (meaning one who submits himself) implies. The prayer makes clear that the Muslim nation, followers of Muĥammad, are the recognized heirs to the legacy of Abraham; that is, the leadership of mankind and the custody of the House of God in Makkah. This, in turn, is an affirmation of the Muslims' right, over the idolater Arabs, to the Ka`bah, as well as of the latter's precedence over Jerusalem as the *qiblah* faced by Muslims in Prayer throughout the world.

Jews and Christians who claim a religious bond with Abraham, and the Quraysh Arabs who claim an ancestral relationship to Ishmael, are informed in clear, simple language that Abraham excluded the wrongdoers among his offspring from his covenant with God, and prayed for guidance and salvation only for the believers among them. Furthermore, when Abraham and Ishmael embarked on building a place dedicated to the worship of God on earth, they asked Him to make a nation from their offspring, the Muslim nation that would submit to God; and to send them a messenger of their own, Muĥammad, to instruct them in the true religion of God. These are the real and legitimate heirs of the legacy of Abraham and Ishmael.

Then comes a brief interjection condemning those who dispute Muĥammad's role as a prophet and messenger and argue about the essence of divine faith: *"Who but a foolish person would turn away from the faith of Abraham? We raised him high in this life, and in the If to come he shall be among the righteous. When his Lord said to him, 'Submit yourself', he said, 'I have submitted myself to the Lord of all the worlds.' Abraham enjoined the same on his children, and so did Jacob, saying, My children, God has given you the purest faith. Do not let death overtake you before you have submitted yourselves to God.'"* (Verses 130-132)

The essence of the religion of Abraham is pure submission to God, or Islam, which only a foolish or obstinate person would abandon or reject. Abraham and Jacob, or Israel as he is otherwise called, were determined to hand it down to their offspring, in perpetuity. This religion had been chosen for them by God Himself, as an act of grace and a boon to them; it was not of their making, and a better choice they would not have. With the coming of Muĥammad and the message of Islam, a fresh opportunity opened up for the Arabs and the Jews of Arabia to fulfil the wishes of their forefathers from whom they were proud to claim descent.

A Faith to Pass to Your Children

At this point we come to witness another awesome scene: Jacob on his deathbed, giving his last words of wisdom and advice to his children, gathered around him: *"Were you present when death approached Jacob? He asked his children, 'Whom will you worship when I am gone?' They replied, 'We will worship your God, the God of your forefathers Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, the One God. To Him we submit ourselves.'"* (Verse 133)

It is indeed a tremendous and solemn occasion. The most important and only issue that concerned Jacob as he drew his last breath was the religion his children were to follow after his death. He was worried about the fate of his legacy and the future of the religion placed in his trust. His children's reply must have been most reassuring and gratifying for him. The chain would not be broken, and the legacy of Abraham was sure to live on for many generations to come.

Jacob asks his children: *"Whom will you worship when I am gone?"* (Verse 133) He thus tells them why he gathered them, and the issue he wanted to be sure of before his death. It is the trust and the heritage of that blessed house. His children reassure Jacob that they would be true to their trust. Thus, the same heritage of Abraham was safe with Jacob's children, who clearly state that they have submitted themselves to God.

The verse opens with a rhetorical question addressed to the Jews: *"Were you present when death approached Jacob?"* (Verse 133) It tells them what went on as witnessed by God Himself. They could not question the truth of what had happened or distort it after God has stated what went on.

In the light of these assertions, a clear distinction is established between that bygone generation and the one that was facing Islam in Madinah: *"That community has passed away. Theirs is what they had earned and yours is what you have earned. You shall not be questioned about what they did."* (Verse 134)

Every generation has its concerns and characteristics, and the record for which it shall be accountable. A corrupt and heedless generation shall bear no relation to a righteous one. The only durable link between generations of nations is that of faith and belief. From the Islamic point of view, a nation's characteristics are preserved and perpetuated through faith rather than race or blood, and generations are viewed as either believers or unbelievers, with every one seen in the light of their actions and record.

According to Islam, a nation is defined by its faith and beliefs, regardless of its constituent ethnic and racial groups, or how widely spread in the world they are. Having a common race or territory does not make a nation. This approach stems

from Islam's universal view of mankind as a single race deriving its unique human qualities from the divine spirit God had breathed into man at the moment of creation, rather than from some acquired physical qualities that are of little concern.

The Argument Is Finally Settled

Against this historical background of God's covenant with Abraham, the building of the Ka`bah and the entitlement to the religious heritage of Abraham, the *sūrah* takes a closer look at some Jewish and Christian arguments and claims. It exposes the weakness in those arguments and the insidious ulterior motives behind them. The passage is rounded off by presenting Islam as man's comprehensive and universal religion, opposed and rejected only by those who are stubborn and ungrateful:

> *They say, 'Follow the Jewish faith — or, follow the Christian faith — and you shall be rightly guided.' Say, 'No. We follow the faith of Abraham, who was truly devoted to God, and was not of those who associated partners with God.' Say [all of you], 'We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and in what all prophets have been given by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to God we have surrendered ourselves. ' If they come to believe in the way you believe, they will be rightly guided; but if they turn away, they will be in schism, but God will protect you from them; He hears all and knows all.'* (Verses 135-137)

The Prophet is instructed here to confront the Jews and the Christians together with the same challenge, and call upon them equally to revert, together with the Muslims, to the original religion of Abraham, the founding father of the faith of Islam on earth. He was the one to make a covenant with God and he was true to his covenant.

Then the Muslims are called upon to acknowledge and declare an overall unity of faith, from that of Abraham right up to that of Jesus and Muĥammad.

The principle of the unity and universality of faith, and the unity of all prophets and messengers all through the ages, is the cornerstone of Islamic faith. It lends legitimacy to the Muslim community's claim to the legacy of Abraham and to the right of trusteeship for God's religion in this world. It is this principle as a fundamental backbone of Islam that gives it its universal characteristic, which brings people together under the same banner, free of all prejudice or discrimination. It makes the Muslim community open to all people in a spirit of genuine love and peace.

This leads to the conclusion that Islam, in its broad, universal sense, is the true

guidance. Its followers shall succeed and prosper while its opponents will never find a firm basis to stand upon. On the contrary, they will live in constant turmoil and confusion.

This testimony from none other than God Almighty will give Muslims reassurance and make them proud of their faith and confident that they will overcome setbacks and tribulations and prevail over their enemies. God is on their side and *"will protect you from them; He hears all and knows all."* (Verse 137)

The duty of believers is to uphold the faith and take pride in it and wear the distinctive mark of the true servants of God which makes them stand out and surpass all others in the world: *"[This message takes its] hue from God; who can give a better hue than God? Him alone do we worship."* (Verse 138) He has given a very distinctive colour to the message He has chosen to be the last to mankind. It serves as a basis on which to establish an all-embracing human unity, free of all prejudices and fanaticism, giving no special status to any race or colour.

We need to reflect a little here about a unique and highly significant aspect of the Qur'ānic mode of expression. The beginning of this verse is a statement made by God: *"This message takes its hue from God; who can give a better hue than God?"* (Verse 138) The rest of the verse is a statement by the believers. The Qur'ān joins both statements without anything to separate or distinguish one from the other. This is a great honour to the believers when their statement is joined to that of God, indicating their very close link with their Lord. Examples of such highly significant type of expression are numerous in the Qur'ān.

The argument is then brought to its climax by posing the ultimate question: "*Say, 'Would you dispute with us about God? He is our Lord and your Lord. To us our deeds shall be credited and to you, your deeds. To Him alone we are devoted.'*" (Verse 139)

There can be no room for doubt about God's oneness and sovereignty over all creation. He is the Lord of all of us, and He shall judge everyone by their own deeds. As Muslims, we devote our life and existence totally to God alone. We seek no other beings with or beside Him; and to us, these are incontrovertible and indisputable facts on which the faith of Islam rests.

In terse and forceful language, the *sūrah* poses other rhetorical questions regarding the faith of earlier prophets, well known to the Jews and the Christians: *"Do you claim that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes were Jews or Christians?"* (Verse 140) These lived long before Moses, and their faith preceded both Christianity and Judaism. God states the truth about their faith: "*Say: 'Do you know better than God?'*" (Verse 140) No answer could be offered to such a rhetorical question. Besides, both Jews and Christians knew very well that these Prophets lived long before their faiths. They further have, in their own Scriptures, clear statements speaking of the Prophet

who would be sent with a message of the pure monotheistic faith of Abraham, but they suppressed that. Hence, the warning that God is fully aware of what they suppress: *"Who is more wicked than one who suppresses a testimony he has received from God? God is not unmindful of what you do."* (Verse 140)

As the *sūrah* makes its final, irrefutable argument, showing the great gulf separating Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and his sons from the Jews who were the Prophet's contemporaries, it repeats the verse with which it concluded its discourse about Abraham and his descendants who submitted themselves to God: *"That community has passed away. Theirs is what they earned and yours is what you have earned. You shall not be questioned about what they did."* (Verse 141) With this powerful statement, all arguments are brought to their decisive conclusion.

7
Change of Direction

۞ سَيَقُولُ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ مِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَا وَلَّىٰهُمۡ عَن قِبۡلَتِهِمُ ٱلَّتِي كَانُواْ عَلَيۡهَاۚ قُل لِّلَّهِ ٱلۡمَشۡرِقُ وَٱلۡمَغۡرِبُۚ يَهۡدِي مَن يَشَآءُ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ١٤٢

The weak-minded among people will say, 'What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have so far observed?' Say, 'To God belong the east and the west. He guides whomever He wills to a straight path.' (142)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلۡنَٰكُمۡ أُمَّةٗ وَسَطٗا لِّتَكُونُواْ شُهَدَآءَ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ ٱلرَّسُولُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ شَهِيدٗاۗ وَمَا جَعَلۡنَا ٱلۡقِبۡلَةَ ٱلَّتِي كُنتَ عَلَيۡهَآ إِلَّا لِنَعۡلَمَ مَن يَتَّبِعُ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِمَّن يَنقَلِبُ عَلَىٰ عَقِبَيۡهِۚ وَإِن كَانَتۡ لَكَبِيرَةً إِلَّا عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ هَدَى ٱللَّهُۗ وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيُضِيعَ إِيمَٰنَكُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِٱلنَّاسِ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ١٤٣

Thus We have mad) you the community [ummah] of the middle way, so that you may stand witness against the rest of mankind, and the Messenger shall be a witness against you. We appointed the direction of prayer which you formerly followed in order that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels. It was indeed a hard test except for those whom God has guided. God would never have let your faith be in vain. God is Compassionate and Merciful to mankind. (143)

قَدۡ نَرَىٰ تَقَلُّبَ وَجۡهِكَ فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِۖ فَلَنُوَلِّيَنَّكَ قِبۡلَةٗ تَرۡضَىٰهَاۚ فَوَلِّ وَجۡهَكَ شَطۡرَ ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۚ وَحَيۡثُ مَا كُنتُمۡ فَوَلُّواْ وُجُوهَكُمۡ شَطۡرَهُۥۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ لَيَعۡلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمۡۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٤٤

We have seen you often turn your face towards heaven. We shall, therefore, make you turn in prayer towards a direction you will be happy with. Turn your face, then, towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces [in prayer] towards it. Those who have been granted revelations in the past know well that it is the truth from their Lord. God is not unaware of what they do. (144)

وَلَئِنۡ أَتَيۡتَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ بِكُلِّ ءَايَةٖ مَّا تَبِعُواْ قِبۡلَتَكَۚ وَمَآ أَنتَ بِتَابِعٖ قِبۡلَتَهُمۡۚ وَمَا بَعۡضُهُم بِتَابِعٖ قِبۡلَةَ بَعۡضٖۚ وَلَئِنِ ٱتَّبَعۡتَ أَهۡوَآءَهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡعِلۡمِ إِنَّكَ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٤٥

Were you to bring every possible sign before those who had been granted revelations, they would not follow your direction of prayer. And neither may you follow their direction of prayer, nor would they even follow one another's direction. If you were to follow their whims and desires after all the knowledge that has been given to you, you would certainly be among the wrongdoers. (145)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يَعۡرِفُونَهُۥ كَمَا يَعۡرِفُونَ أَبۡنَآءَهُمۡۖ وَإِنَّ فَرِيقٗا مِّنۡهُمۡ لَيَكۡتُمُونَ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَهُمۡ يَعۡلَمُونَ ١٤٦

Those to whom We granted revelation know it as well as they know their own children, but some of them knowingly conceal the truth. (146)

ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَۖ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمُمۡتَرِينَ ١٤٧

This is the truth from your Lord; never, then, be among the doubters. (147)

وَلِكُلّٖ وِجۡهَةٌ هُوَ مُوَلِّيهَاۖ فَٱسۡتَبِقُواْ ٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِۚ أَيۡنَ مَا تَكُونُواْ يَأۡتِ بِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ جَمِيعًاۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ١٤٨

Each one has a goal towards which he turns; so vie with one another in good works. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together. God has power over all things. (148)

وَمِنۡ حَيۡثُ خَرَجۡتَ فَوَلِّ وَجۡهَكَ شَطۡرَ ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ١٤٩

From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque. It is indeed the truth from your Lord. God is not unaware of what you do. (149)

وَمِنۡ حَيۡثُ خَرَجۡتَ فَوَلِّ وَجۡهَكَ شَطۡرَ ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۚ وَحَيۡثُ مَا كُنتُمۡ فَوَلُّواْ وُجُوهَكُمۡ شَطۡرَهُۥ

From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you all may be, 'turn your faces towards it,

so that people may have no argument against you, except those who are bent on wrongdoing. Have no fear of them, but fear Me, so that I may perfect My grace on you, and that you may be rightly guided. (150)	لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَيْكُمْ حُجَّةٌ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنْهُمْ فَلَا تَخْشَوْهُمْ وَٱخْشَوْنِى وَلِأُتِمَّ نِعْمَتِى عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٠﴾
Thus We have sent forth to you a Messenger from among yourselves to recite to you Our revelations, purify you, and instruct you in the Book and in wisdom and teach you what you did not know. (151)	كَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولاً مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُواْ عَلَيْكُمْ ءَايَـٰتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ ٱلْكِتَـٰبَ وَٱلْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُواْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٥١﴾
Remember Me, then, and I will remember you; give thanks to Me and never deny Me. (152)	فَٱذْكُرُونِىٓ أَذْكُرْكُمْ وَٱشْكُرُواْ لِى وَلَا تَكْفُرُونِ ﴿١٥٢﴾

Overview

This passage is almost entirely devoted to a discussion of the change of the *qiblah,* or direction faced in prayer, which occurred sixteen or seventeen months after the Prophet's arrival in Madinah in 622 CE, and the controversy that attended it. The Jews of Madinah tried to exploit the *qiblah* issue to create division and confusion among the Muslims. The Qur'ān denounces their allegations, and warns of the damage they might cause to the more vulnerable members of the Muslim community. No reference can be found in the Qur'ān to the exact date of the change of the *qiblah.*

The main facts of the situation make it clear that prayer was made a daily religious duty for Muslims while they were still in Makkah. They faced the Ka`bah when they prayed. No specific order is given in the Qur'ān on this point. When the Muslims emigrated from Makkah to Madinah, the instruction was given to the Prophet that instead of the Ka`bah in Makkah, Muslims should face Jerusalem. The fact that in both cases the instruction had come from the Prophet rather than in Qur'ānic statements in no way diminishes its validity or authority.

This continued to be the practice until the revelation of the instructions in the

present section, which superseded the previous ones. The Prophet, and the Muslims with him, were told to *"Turn your face, then, towards the Sacred Mosque, and wherever you all may be, turn your faces [in prayer] towards it."* (Verse 144)

Jerusalem happened to be the *qiblah* for the Jews and the Christians also, and the fact that the Muslims too had been instructed to use it as theirs gave the Jews of Madinah a ready excuse for refusing to recognize or accept Islam. They saw the fact that the Prophet and his companions faced Jerusalem when they prayed as proof that theirs was the true religion and their *qiblah* was the original and legitimate one. Muĥammad and his followers, they argued, should follow their religion and refrain from trying to convert them to Islam.

This was not easy for the Arab Muslims to accept, since they had always revered the Ka`bah and considered it their most sacred religious symbol. The Jewish arguments made the situation even harder for the Muslims.

The Prophet Muĥammad entertained a wish to turn towards the Ka`bah, and could be seen looking up to heaven anxiously, without uttering a word, trusting to God and His wisdom.

Not long afterwards instructions were revealed that the Muslims should turn towards the Ka`bah. Some Muslims were reportedly in the middle of performing their prayer when they heard the news, and immediately turned to face the Ka`bah.

The Jews resented that decision which deprived them of their argument. They began to question the wisdom of the Muslim leadership and to raise doubts about the validity of the religious basis of Islam. Did the change of *qiblah* from Jerusalem to the Ka`bah mean that the Muslims had been praying towards the wrong *qiblah* all that time? And, if Jerusalem was the right *qiblah,* and it was correct to pray towards it, then it must have been wrong to change to another one. Praying towards the new *qiblah,* the Ka`bah, would, in this case, not be valid. They further argued that such abrogation of earlier orders could not be done by God. Hence, the decision must have been made by Muĥammad himself, proving that he was not receiving any divine revelations.

The gravity of the controversy surrounding this event is clear from the considerable attention given in the Qur'ān to its ramifications and the effect it had on some rank-and-file Muslims. It is also clear in the way the *sūrah* deals with the concept of abrogation. This is discussed in full in Chapters 5 and 6, beginning with Verse 106. More on this later.

The change of the *qiblah* was a central event in the history of Islam with far-reaching long-term consequences. It gave Islam a new focus and identified the Muslim community as an independent nation with a *qiblah* of its own.

The earlier decision to declare Jerusalem rather than the Ka`bah as the *qiblah* was for specific educational reasons, as explained in Verse 143: *"We appointed the direction of prayer [i.e. the* qiblah] *which you formerly followed in order that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels."*

Before Islam, the Arabs revered the Ka`bah and considered it a symbol of their religious and cultural heritage and glory. But in order to test their sincerity in accepting Islam, and ensure that their hearts were totally free of narrow racial or tribal loyalties, God initially instructed the Prophet to command his followers to adopt Jerusalem as the direction they faced in prayer. It was a difficult instruction to carry out, but it was a crucial test of how much they really understood the nature and the spirit of their new religion. It was necessary in order to establish how far some of those early Muslims were still influenced by pre-Islamic racial and tribal traditions.

When the Muslims adopted their new direction, and the Jews had begun to exploit that situation, fresh divine instructions were received to revert to the Ka`bah as the direction to face in prayer. The basis for the new decision was, however, made clear. It stemmed from the fact that the Sacred Mosque at Makkah had, in the first instance, been established by Abraham and Ishmael as a monument to pure unadulterated monotheism. It was part of the heritage of Islam which had come about, as seen earlier in verses 124-141, in answer to Abraham's prayer that a Messenger should be sent to his descendants, the inhabitants of Makkah, with the pure faith based on complete submission to God.

That part of the *sūrah,* giving the background and the circumstances surrounding the construction of the Ka`bah, provided a fitting introduction to the issue of the *qiblah.* Changing the *qiblah* back to the Ka`bah seems the only logical conclusion from that discussion of the dispute between the Muslims on the one hand, and the Jews, Christians and polytheist Arabs on the other, concerning Abraham's covenant with God and the right to his heritage. That covenant bound Abraham and his descendants, from one generation to another, to total submission to God.

The construction of the Sacred Mosque at the Ka`bah was carried out by Abraham and his son Ishmael at God's specific instruction. It is, therefore, part of the heritage passed on to their offspring. Muĥammad, a direct descendant of Abraham and a beneficiary of his covenant with God, and his followers, are rightful and natural heirs to that heritage, of which the Ka`bah is an important part. The decision to declare it a permanent *qiblah* for Islam and the Muslims is the natural one that brings reality, history and feeling together in unison.

The decision could not have come sooner. Jewish hostility towards Islam and Muĥammad, despite the temporary declaration of Jerusalem as a *qiblah,* did not diminish. They could see that their right to Abraham's religious legacy was being

forfeited as the days passed, and the time had come when the Muslims could emerge as independent and rightful claimants to that heritage, and move on to declare its universal and eternal message to the rest of the world.

It had become imperative for the Muslims to forge ahead in that way and to establish their distinct identity as a religious force for advocating the central principle of God's oneness, or *tawhîd.* The symbolism of the Ka`bah as the exclusive and permanent direction in prayer for the Muslim community was most important.

Symbolism, ritual and form in religious practice can be easily misunderstood, if taken in isolation from the ideals and principles of the religious faith itself. Physical expression of feelings and emotions is a natural human tendency, because man has a material as well as a spiritual aspect to his nature. Emotions and feelings are only fulfilled when expressed in a physical or tangible form, through which they are released to one's happiness and satisfaction. This action brings about balance and harmony between the outer and inner aspects of the human soul, and provides a means of fulfilling man's desire to know what lies behind the apparent symbol and the outward physical form.

All Islamic religious rituals are based on this basic natural philosophy. Mere intention expressed privately, or abstract spiritual meditation, is not enough to satisfy the requirements of religious worship. These involve the participation of the senses, coordinated movement of the body, and position, direction, dress, and recitation of set text, as well as abstention at specified times from food and drink. In this way, every movement and bodily action will have a religious significance attached to it, while religious ritual assumes meaning and dignity, thus bringing soul and body into full harmony.

In those religious communities where this innate human craving for symbolism and physical expression and representation of religious devotion is misunderstood or abused, people have gone astray. Idolatry and the worship of inanimate objects such as stones, trees, planets and stars, as well as animals and birds, can be traced to such abuse and misunderstanding. Islam presents a unique, straightforward concept of the nature of God Almighty, who is not anthropomorphic and whose attributes cannot be defined or represented in physical form. Nevertheless, physical means, or symbols, such as the *qiblah,* that point man's senses, heart, soul and body towards God are important. God cannot be restricted by the confines of space, but man needs the dimension of space to direct and concentrate his devotion and feelings towards God. That is how the important need for the *qiblah* arises.

Once that principle was understood, it was necessary for the new direction in prayer, *qiblah,* to be unique and exclusive to Islam, in order to underline Islam's distinction and eminence.

A corollary of this principle says that Muslims are specifically forbidden to emulate or adopt other, non-Muslim, religious and cultural customs. However, it would be wrong to put this down to bigotry or prejudice on the part of Islam, since outward religious and social behaviour is a reflection of the inner beliefs and ideals that motivate and determine behaviour and outlook. These beliefs and ideals are the main factors that distinguish between different nations, outlooks, ethical systems, moral values and ways of life.

Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying, "The Jews and the Christians do not dye their hair. So, adopt a different line." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd] He was also reported to have told a group of his Companions who stood up to greet him, "Do not be like other communities who stand up in reverence to one another." [Related by Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah] He also said, "Do not revere me in the same way the Christians revered Jesus, son of Mary. I am a mere servant of God. So refer to me as God's servant and messenger." [Related by al-Bukhārī]

The Prophet Muĥammad strongly advised against imitating non- Muslims in appearance, dress, manners, etiquette and behaviour. Behind all these outward aspects lie the emotions and convictions that shape man's outlook, character and way of life.

More importantly, the Prophet strongly rules out the adoption of ideas and concepts not emanating from, or reconcilable with, the world order God has commissioned the Muslim community to promote and establish. He warns against defeatism and feelings of inferiority among the Muslims who, being selected to lead mankind, should derive their values and traditions, and the basis of their faith, from the original source of their religion: God Almighty.

The Qur'ān describes the Muslim community variously as the leading community, a consummately upright nation and a paradigm of moderation. This special acclaim is only conferred upon them by virtue of the fact that they draw their philosophy, outlook, traditions and way of life from God's revelations.

It is not out of religious bigotry and intolerance that Islam presents itself to the world as a universal and most complete way of life. Islam sees itself as a unifying force in the world, because it advocates the unity of all mankind under one God-given social, political and economic way of life. It offers equality to all in the eyes of God, and does not recognize or advance the interests of one group at the expense of others.

Today, Muslims are called on once again to understand the significance of having their own exclusive *qiblah.* It is not merely a direction to which they turn in their Prayers, nor is it an empty symbol. It is a feature that distinguishes Islam's whole

outlook on life, its concerns and aims, and its identity.

Muslims today, more than at any other time in their history, need to assert their identity. They need to set themselves apart in the world, which is suffering under the tyranny of false religions, oppressive and arrogant ideologies, flawed political and economic systems and heedless leadership. They have to offer new and effective remedies to save mankind and fulfil God's will, so that the world will acknowledge their community as the central and righteous nation commissioned by God to carry His message to all mankind.

Islam is a complete way of life. Through Islam, Muslims become fit to inherit God's trust and the leadership of mankind, and to stand witness before God for all humanity. But it is only when they adhere faithfully to Islam that they take on their distinctive and unique features and qualities. Without it they lose their way; and their influence and status in the world diminish and evaporate.

We will now look at the passage in more detail.

A Middle Community and a Pure Faith

> *The weak-minded among people will say, 'What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have so far observed?' Say, 'To God belong the east and the west. He guides whomever He wills to a straight path.' Thus We have made you the community [ummah] of the middle way, so that you may stand witness against the rest of mankind, and the Messenger shall be a witness against you. We appointed the direction of prayer which you formerly followed in order that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels. It was indeed a hard test except for those whom God has guided. God would never have let your faith be in vain. God is Compassionate and Merciful to mankind.* (Verses 142-143)

It is clear from the course of the discussion that 'the weak-minded' is a reference to the Jews of Madinah. They were the ones who stirred up the controversy about the change of *qiblah* from Jerusalem to Makkah, and questioned its validity and the wisdom behind it.

Al-Barā' ibn `Āzib reported: "When the Prophet first arrived in Madinah, he stayed at his grandparents [or maybe he said at his maternal uncles] of the *Anşār*.[1] The Prophet used to pray facing Jerusalem for the first sixteen or seventeen months, though he would have preferred to face the Ka`bah. The first prayer he offered

[1] It is well known that the Prophet stayed at the home of Khālid ibn Zayd, better known as Abū Ayyūb al-Anşārī, who belonged to al-Najjār clan, to whom belonged the Prophet's maternal grandmother. According to the Arabian usage, all men of this clan are considered maternal uncles of the Prophet by virtue of his grandfather's marriage to one of its women — Editor's notes.

[facing the Ka`bah] was *`Aşr,* when he was joined by a group of people. One of them later passed by another group praying in a mosque and said to them, 'I bear witness before God that I have just prayed with the Prophet facing the Ka`bah.' They all turned towards it without interrupting their prayer. The Jews were happy while the Prophet faced Jerusalem in prayer, but when he now turned towards the Ka`bah they were dismayed. It was then that this verse was revealed describing the Jews as weak-minded." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Tirmidhī]

The way the Qur'ān deals with this issue clearly indicates the enormity of the effect that the Jewish campaign was then having on some ordinary Muslims. From the first few words one is made aware that a change of the direction to be faced in prayer is going to be announced. The tone is clearly meant to forestall the doubts and questions that were inevitably going to be raised by troublemakers. But the Qur'ān was ready with the appropriate reply to the argument they would put forward.

The Qur'ān goes on to direct the Prophet to the proper course of action in dealing with the questions that would arise and how to put the whole issue in its proper perspective.

"*Say: 'To God belong the east and the west. He guides whomever He wills to a straight path.'*" (Verse 142) Places and directions carry no intrinsic merit in themselves, except inasmuch as God assigns them such merit, and to whatever direction one turns, God will be there. It is God's prerogative to guide whomever He wishes to the right path.

What He designates as the direction to be faced in prayer is the right and proper choice, and His designation of it is for the good of the community.

On such criteria Islam defines the relative merits of places and directions, and specifies the source of those criteria: God Almighty to whom all should turn and submit.

The *sūrah* goes on to outline the central position the Muslim community, or *ummah,* occupies in the world, and the great role it is destined to play in the history and development of mankind. A prerequisite of that status and role is that the Muslim *ummah* should have its own exclusive *qiblah* and distinct identity. It must, first and foremost, owe allegiance to none other than God Almighty, who has commissioned it for that great task.

> "*We have made you the community of the middle way, so that you may stand witness against the rest of mankind, and the Messenger shall be a witness against you.*" (Verse 143)

The Arabic term *wasaṭ,* used in this verse to describe the global Muslim community, is a vivid epithet which evokes a much wider range of meaning than is

given by its literal equivalent of 'middle'. The term is used here in a very broad sense. Thus, the Muslim community, or *ummah,* to use the Qur'ānic term, is a middle-of-the- road community which stands witness against other nations and communities in the sense that it upholds and defends justice and equality for all people. It weighs up their values, standards, traditions, concepts and objectives, judging them as either true or false. It occupies the dual position of being a witness against mankind and an umpire administering justice among them. God's Messenger, Muĥammad, is in turn a witness against the Muslim community in the sense that, as its leader and guardian, he defines its aims, activities and obligations, and charts the direction it should take. His teachings, example and leadership stimulate the community to appreciate its role and position in the world, and live up to their requirements.

The Muslim community occupies the middle ground in its beliefs and outlook on life. It maintains a healthy and equitable balance between the two extremes of spiritual asceticism and materialism. It treats man as a balanced combination of body and soul, and allows him the opportunity and means to satisfy them both in such a way as to uplift the spirit and enhance the quality of human life. Within this framework of balance and moderation, every constructive talent, ability, aptitude, and activity is nourished and encouraged to grow and play its part in society.

The Muslim community is balanced in the sense that it is not rigid or dogmatic. It holds fast to its ideals and traditions, and to the sources of its religion and way of life, while fostering change and progress in all fields. It is an open society that welcomes new ideas and learns from the work and experience of other societies, cultures and civilizations. Its main objective is to seek the truth, wherever that may come from, and to adopt it with courage and confidence.

Balance and moderation are clear in the way Muslim society is run and organized. It is neither a permissive, undisciplined community nor a regimented one run by brute force or rigid rules. It is a society raised on learning, education and rich cultural and social traditions.

Within the Muslim 'middle' community, equitable and fair relationships are cultivated and regulated among all individuals and social groups in the community. Individual rights and liberties are guaranteed and protected in order to encourage innovation, production and growth, in a manner that will serve the common good without infringing upon the rights of the individual, or endangering society as a whole. Individual as well as collective rights and obligations are clearly defined to enable people to serve a society that will care for them and protect their rights and interests.

The Muslim community is also the middle nation geographically, because the part of the world where Islam first emerged, and which continues to represent the heart

of the Muslim world, occupies a central position in the world as a whole. It has been a crucible of cultures and civilizations and a busy crossroads for trade from all corners of the earth. It has been, throughout history, a rich source of vital natural resources and raw materials of many kinds for nations and civilizations all over the world. This position has given the Islamic community a strategic and influential role to play on the world stage.

Islam emerged at a time that can be said to mark the beginning of maturity in human thinking. It brought a religious and social order that appealed to the human mind and rescued man from religions and philosophies founded on mythology, superstition, paganism or nihilistic thinking. It ushered in a new era of enlightenment that brought together genuine divine revelations, authentic philosophical thought and sound practical human experience to chart the proper course for man's progress, happiness and prosperity.

What stops Muslims today from assuming the position and role in the world that God has assigned to them is the fact that they have abandoned the religion God has chosen for them, and adopted social and political philosophies and systems that are inconsistent with it.

World leadership imposes its own demands and responsibilities. For the Muslim community to legitimately earn that position again, it must undergo severe trials and make great sacrifices, prove its loyalty and dedication to God and show total allegiance to its wise leadership.

Having announced that the Ka`bah was to be the permanent, universal direction of prayer for Muslims, the *sūrah* now reveals the purpose behind the previous choice of Jerusalem as a temporary *qiblah.*

"We appointed the direction of prayer which you formerly followed in order that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels." (Verse 143) From these few words one can immediately identify the divine approach in educating the Muslims and preparing them, from that early stage of their development, for the role of custodian of God's message and the leadership of mankind. As part of that transformation, it was essential for that nascent community to be freed of all traces of paganism and ethnocentricity, and to become totally obedient and dedicated to the new religion of Islam. The early Muslims had to realize that their values and standards in life must, from then on, be derived from the divine revelations being regularly communicated to the Prophet Muĥammad.

In pre-Islamic days, certain elements of polytheism and racism had crept into the Arabs' understanding of the faith of Abraham and the status of the Sacred House in Makkah. The Ka`bah had come to be venerated as an exclusively Arab shrine. This was contrary to its intended purpose, since it had been established by Abraham and

his son Ishmael as a symbol of purely monotheistic faith and for the reverence and worship of God alone.

To correct the situation and to test their faith and loyalty to the Prophet Muĥammad, God commanded the Muslims to adopt Jerusalem as the direction they face in prayer. Although it was not clear to the Muslims at the time, the measure was meant to be a temporary one, specifically intended to decide where their allegiance would really lie.

It was a delicate decision, but Islam is a complete and self-sufficient religion. It does not need to be supplemented or augmented by other religious beliefs. It does not accept any lingering traces of un-Islamic ways, serious or trivial. This is indeed the point implied in the Qur'ānic statement: *"We appointed the direction of prayer which you formerly followed in order that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels."* (Verse 143) God certainly knows everything before it happens. However, He wishes that what is kept deep in people's hearts should first appear in action before He holds them accountable for it. His grace means that He does not hold man answerable for his thoughts and feelings; He only holds man accountable for what he does.

It was also a critical decision because God was aware that it was going to be a hard test for some Muslims, still fresh from idolatry. But He was also there to provide help and support for the sincere ones: *"It was indeed a hard test except for those whom God has guided."* (Verse 143) With God's guidance every difficulty becomes easy.

For yet further reassurance, God affirms that the prayers the Muslims had performed facing Jerusalem were valid and the reward for them guaranteed. *"God would never have let your faith be in vain. God is Compassionate and Merciful to mankind."* (Verse 143) God would have never burdened the Muslims with more than He knew they would be able to bear. As long as their intentions were genuine and their determination sincere, God was sure to come to their assistance and lighten the tasks expected of them. If a certain hardship or test is meant to reflect God's wisdom and purpose, passing such a test is indicative of His mercy and compassion.

Thus the Muslims could feel content, confident and free of worry about the past and the future.

Clarification of Issues

Next comes the indication that Muĥammad's unease with respect to the direction of prayer was soon to be over, as God decreed a permanent one which would satisfy his wishes. However, the announcement comes with a stern warning that the Jews would oppose it and try to exploit it to sow division and confusion among the

Muslims.

> *We have seen you often turn your face towards heaven. We shall, therefore, make you turn in prayer towards a direction you will be happy with. Turn your face, then, towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces [in prayer] towards it. Those who have been granted revelations in the past know well that it is the truth from their Lord. God is not unaware of what they do. Were you to bring every possible sign before those who had been granted revelations, they would not follow your direction of prayer. And neither may you follow their direction of prayer, nor would they even follow one another's direction. If you were to follow their whims and desires after all the knowledge that has been given to you, you would certainly be among the wrongdoers. Those to whom We granted revelation know it as well as they know their own children, but some of them knowingly conceal the truth. This is the truth from your Lord; never, then, be among the doubters. Each one has a goal towards which he turns; so vie with one another in good works. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together. God has power over all things. From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque. It is indeed the truth from your Lord. God is not unaware of what you do. From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces towards it, so that people may have no argument against you, except those who are bent on wrongdoing. Have no fear of them, but fear Me, so that I may perfect My grace on you, and that you may be rightly guided."* (Verses 144-150)

We have a graphic description of the Prophet's strong desire that God might direct him to a *qiblah* other than that which the Muslims had hitherto followed, i.e. Jerusalem. The Jews attempted to mislead the Muslims and exploit that situation to their advantage. We can almost feel the restrained desire of the Prophet and his reluctance even to say a prayer that reflected his desire. This is a question on which no one could have a say. It is entirely up to God.

The divine decree, expressed here with compassion and love, comes in line with the Prophet's wish. The new direction of prayer is exactly the one he has been silently hoping for all those months: *"We shall, therefore, make you turn in prayer towards a direction you will be happy with. Turn your face, then, towards the Sacred Mosque."* (Verse 144) What is more, is that it is a permanent and universal one: *"Wherever you all may be, turn your faces [in prayer] towards it."* (Verse 144)

Thus the Ka`bah was reinstated as the original focus and symbol of religious unity for the whole world community of Islam. Muslims all over the world, with all their differences of race and language, would from then on perform their prayers facing the same spot on the globe. In doing so, Muslims would assert, and be reminded of, their human and religious unity, and of their membership of a single world community with a common way of life, a common religious legacy, and a common

role and aim in the world.

The Muslim world community transcends race and language. The principle of God's oneness, the bedrock of Islam, is thus manifested in total subservience to God alone; allegiance to the same leadership, that of Muĥammad; adherence to the same religion, Islam; and adoption of the same direction of prayer. Despite all the superficial differences that may exist between people, they are one and equal in their faith. There is no other means by which a truly universal and equitable human society can be brought forth and successfully organized.

Turning to the people of earlier revelations, the *sūrah* confirms their certain knowledge of the history and religious status of the Sacred Mosque at the Ka`bah. They were well aware that it had been established by Abraham, the founding father of the community that had inherited the creed of God's oneness, and that its designation as the universal and permanent direction of Islamic prayer would be totally in line with the divine universal order.

Nevertheless, the *sūrah* points out, they would raise doubts and endlessly quibble over it. The Muslims should not be unduly concerned at that; God will take care of it, as He is fully aware of what they do.

There would be no point in reasoning with the Jews over the issue of the *qiblah.* Their problem was not lack of evidence or persuasion, but lack of faith and unwillingness to accept the truth. *"Were you to bring every possible sign before those who had been granted revelations, they would not follow your direction of prayer."* (Verse 145)

It was not ignorance or lack of understanding that was responsible for that stubborn attitude, but caprice and vested interests. This would also be the source of subsequent Jewish and Christian animosity towards Islam, which was to emerge in various forms in later centuries.

In response to that bigoted stance, the proper and natural attitude of the Prophet is stated: "*And neither may you follow their direction of prayer*" (Verse 145) This Qur'ānic statement implies, particularly in its Arabic phraseology, a strong sense of finality and permanence. It also conveys to the Muslims a clear instruction never to adopt any direction of prayer, distinctive symbol or a way of life other than what gives it its clear Islamic identity.

The *sūrah* further reveals that neither the bitterly divided Jewish and Christian sects, nor even the majority of the Jews and the Christians, could ever agree on the adoption of one direction of prayer: *"nor would they even follow one another's direction."* (Verse 145)

As the Prophet is made fully aware of the truth in this matter of worship, he is warned against falling in with those people and their desires: *"If you were to follow*

their whims and desires after all the knowledge that has been given to you, you would certainly be among the wrongdoers." (Verse 145)

Having been addressed by his Lord with warmth and compassion, the Prophet is here given a strong warning. A grave matter of principle is involved here. There should be no hesitation in carrying out God's instructions; personal preferences or considerations must not be allowed to influence the Prophet's or the Muslims' response to God's will and command. A Muslim may not abandon the certain knowledge that is given by God to pick up what suits personal whims and desires.

This strong admonition also suggests that there could have been specific cases in which a certain degree of weakness had crept into Muslim minds, in the face of the vicious and insistent propaganda campaign launched by the Jews of Madinah.

The *sūrah* then asserts that the Jews and Christians were absolutely certain that what the Qur'ān has stated with respect to the *qiblah* issue, and other issues for that matter, and what the Prophet has ordered is the truth. However, they suppress the truth they know for their own self-interest: *"Those to whom We granted revelation know it as well as they know their own children, but some of them knowingly conceal the truth."* (Verse 146)

It is a very powerful simile, used among the Arabs to denote absolute certainty. The point here is that the Jews, despite their denials, were as certain of the truth of the revelations that Muĥammad was receiving, including the announcement of the new direction of prayer. Therefore, the Muslims should pay them no attention nor be influenced by their allegations and misleading interpretations.

The Final Say on the Direction of Prayer

Then the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet directly, saying: *"This is the truth from your Lord; never, then, be among the doubters."* (Verse 147) The Prophet never entertained any doubt about the veracity of his message. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, the Prophet is told, *"If you are in any doubt regarding what has been revealed to you, then consult those who have read the Scriptures before your time."* (10:94) On hearing this verse, the Prophet said: "I entertain no doubts, and. I ask no one." But the fact that he is here addressed directly is a clear signal to those around him, and others who would come later, who might be influenced by those who may try to undermine Islam.

It is appropriate for Muslims today to reflect on this statement. Some Muslims display remarkable naivety in relying on the authority of Jewish, Christian and Marxist Orientalists, for the interpretation and understanding of Islamic principles and texts of the Qur'ān and *ĥadīth,* or for the study and analysis of Islamic faith, literature, and history. It is a great pity that Muslim students have to be sent from

Muslim countries to be educated in various Islamic disciplines in European and American universities, where some of them acquire a distorted and confused understanding of Islam and Islamic teachings and principles. We must never forget that the Qur'ān is the eternal book God revealed to the Muslim community, outlining what it should do and what it must refrain from. Unbelievers of any creed are not the ones to teach us our faith.

The *sūrah* gives us clear instructions not to rely on Jewish and Christian advice regarding Islamic principles and practices. It urges Muslims not to deviate from the path charted for them by Islam, and to compete among themselves in their pursuit of constructive and beneficial goals. They will, eventually, return to God, to whom all 'mankind will be gathered: *"Each one has a goal towards which he turns; so vie with one another in good works. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together. God has power over all things."* (Verse 148) Thus God turns the minds of the Muslims away from the falsehood spread by the followers of other religions. They should disregard any schemes or ploys to thwart or undermine their status and role in the world. They should, instead, compete in doing what is good and beneficial.

The instruction to face the Sacred Mosque in Makkah is reiterated in the following verse: "*From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque. It is indeed the truth from your Lord. God is not unaware of what you do."* (Verse 149) The point here has nothing to do with the people of earlier revelations. It is an order to the Prophet to turn towards the Sacred Mosque wherever he offers his prayers, emphasizing that what God reveals to him is the truth. But the verse also implies a warning in the words *"God is not unaware of what you do"*, indicating yet again that there had been some weakness among some Muslims, which called for attention and remedy.

Then comes a third reiteration of the institution of the new direction of prayer, but this new statement has a different purpose, namely to refute the argument made by the Jews and other people that taking Jerusalem as the direction of prayer was a vindication of their claim that their religion was superior to that of Muĥammad. It was also meant to counter the argument of the polytheist Arabs who had exploited the situation to turn their fellow Arabs, who venerated the Ka`bah, away from Islam. *"From wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] towards the Sacred Mosque; and wherever you all may be, turn your faces towards it, so that people may have no argument against you, except those who are bent on wrongdoing. Have no fear of them, but fear Me, so that I may perfect My grace on you, and that you may be rightly guided."* (Verse 150)

This is a general order to the Prophet and the Muslims to turn in prayer towards the Ka`bah, wherever they happen to be. Thus, no one would have any argument against them. Any criticism of this decision is of no consequence, and its detractors,

Jewish and Arab alike, are motivated only by stubborn hatred of Islam. But they need not be feared, because they can no longer pose any threat to Islam or Muslims. The Muslims in Madinah were reminded that God was on their side and would look after them until they were fully developed and transformed into the leading community they were destined to become.

The Muslims of that small community knew very well what God Almighty meant by the reminder: *"so that I may perfect My grace on you, and that you may be rightly guided."* (Verse 150) Only a few years earlier they had been wallowing in tribal ignorance, dogged by futile internecine conflicts, and preoccupied with worldly pursuits. The Arabs before Islam were a heathen, aimless society, plagued by corruption and absurd religious beliefs and practices. They had little or no influence outside their immediate traditional territory, and no ambitions or ideals to strive for.

But Islam changed all that and transformed those erratic and wayward people into an enlightened, mature, outward-looking and powerful community, charged with the momentous and historic role of custodians of God's message to the world, and poised to assume the leadership of mankind.

The Prophet's generation of Muslims could see tangible proof, in their personal as well as communal life, of God's infinite grace and favour. The reminder would raise their morale and boost their confidence and determination to move ahead.

That the instruction to adopt the new direction of prayer is mentioned three times stresses a different purpose each time. It was, first, to grant the Prophet Muĥammad his unspoken wish on this question; second, to assert that it was also the truth declared by God coinciding with the Prophet's wish; and third, to put an end to self-serving criticism and hostility from other groups.

Apart from those reasons, we can detect that there was real cause for concern about weakness and doubt among some Muslims, which called for the instruction to be stressed and reiterated. This suggests that the campaign of false allegations was quite vicious and had gone some way towards creating disruption and confusion within the Muslim community.

Although these statements deal with the immediate issue at the time, the principles and the basic advice that they impart remain relevant and applicable in other similar situations that might arise in the perennial confrontation between the Muslims and their enemies.

Abraham's Prayers Are Answered

The *sūrah* goes on to remind the Muslims of more divine favours reserved for them. By one such special favour God has sent them a Messenger, Muĥammad, in

fulfilment of the prayer made by Abraham, the first custodian of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, the permanent and universal *qiblah* of all Muslims.

> *Thus We have sent forth to you a Messenger from among yourselves to recite to you Our revelations, purify you, and instruct you in the Book and in wisdom and teach you what you did not know. Remember Me, then, and I will remember you; give thanks to Me and never deny Me.* (Verses 151-152)

The same words of Abraham's prayer (Verse 129) are used here, thus establishing a direct and significant link between the two Prophets and their religion. Islam was not, then, invented or born out of expediency, but had its origins firmly rooted in history. The direction of prayer that was being instituted had not been chosen haphazardly or without purpose. It was the answer to Abraham's passionate and sincere prayers.

As a result of this boundless divine grace, the Muslims were sent a messenger, one of their own number, who was to be the last human Messenger from God to mankind, and had their own exclusive direction of prayer designated for them by God, thereby giving them a distinctive character and a privileged status in the world.

Another aspect of God's favour is that, through Muĥammad, He was addressing the Muslims, a humble and insignificant band of believers, with His own words. Who were those people? What did they represent, for God and for mankind? What did they do or have to deserve God's attention and special favour?

"*Thus We have sent forth to you a Messenger from among yourselves to recite to you Our revelations, purify you...*" The fact that Muĥammad had come from that society, and was chosen to receive God's revelations, the Qur'ān, represented God's limitless favour. God's Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was also sent to cleanse the Arabs of the sad misconceptions, corruption and ignorance that went with their idolatrous beliefs and lax way of life. Those whose souls are not purged by submission to God, at whatever time or place they may live, sink into a stinking depth of worldly desires that are unbecoming of man. In such a condition, man sinks lower than animals, controlled as animals are by their desires. The Prophet also purges their society of usury, cheating, looting and illegal earnings; all of which are impurities that contaminate souls, feelings, society and human life altogether. He further purges their lives of injustice, putting in place a superior standard of justice to which their community aspires.

"*... And instructs you in the Book and in wisdom...*" This incorporates what has been mentioned earlier about reciting God's revelations included in His book, and emphasizes its essential subject matter, i.e. wisdom. Wisdom is acquired as the fruit of instruction in this book, i.e. the Qur'ān. It is a quality which ensures that anyone

who has it views matters in their proper perspective and evaluates them correctly.

He has the necessary understanding to appreciate the aims behind God's commandments and teachings.

Before Islam, the Arabs were a heedless and xenophobic people, living in total darkness and moral corruption, given to inhuman practices such as usury, infanticide, slavery, piracy and other forms of crime. Islam had come to purge that vile and destructive way of life and transform the Arabs into a pioneering society that would uphold justice and strive to promote and preserve the humanity of man.

Muĥammad had also been sent to *"instruct you in the Book and in wisdom and teach you what you did not know"*. One of Muĥammad's duties was to teach his followers how to understand and interpret the Qur'ān, and translate it into a practical code for daily life. Through the Qur'ān they acquired the wisdom and the ability to appreciate and understand God's commands, evaluate ideas and concepts, and judge values and objectives.

It was through that slow and painstaking process of education and development that the first group of Muslims was raised out of an almost uncultured tribal desert people. Out of that community, within a phenomenally short time, came a nation with a rich ideology and a dynamic spirit, fit to assume a leading role in the world.

That pioneering generation was raised on the ideas and teachings of the Qur'ān and under the instruction of the Prophet Muĥammad, which was inspired by and derived from the Qur'ān. The Prophet's mosque in Madinah was the focal point of Muslim life and its centre of learning, which produced a unique civilization and a community that has been unrivalled throughout history.

That divine legacy and those teachings, which were responsible for raising the first generation of Islam, remain intact and accessible today. It is vital for Muslims to return to their original source of knowledge and greatness, and to look at the Qur'ān as a guide and an instrument for change, rather than as lyrics to be melodiously chanted for idle pleasure.

When God Remembers His Servants

This passage is concluded with yet another reminder of God's favours to the Muslim community. God calls on Muslims to remember and praise Him, and in return He will remember them: *"Remember Me, then, and I will remember you; give thanks to Me and never deny Me."* (Verse 152)

What honour, what benevolence and compassion! God Almighty, in all His greatness and glory, exchanges these sentiments on an equal level with His humble servants. What grace and generosity!

"*Remember Me, then, and I will remember you*" – it is the greatest privilege any human being can receive from God, whose generosity is limitless and whose benevolence knows no bounds. The Prophet Muĥammad is reported to have quoted God as saying: "Whoever remembers Me privately to himself I will remember him to Myself; and whoever remembers Me in the company of people I will remember him in a better company."

The Prophet also quotes God as saying: "Son of Adam! When you remember Me to yourself, I will remember you to Myself. When you remember Me in the company of others I will remember you in a company of angels. When you draw closer to Me by a handspan, I will draw closer to you by an arm's length; and when you draw closer to Me by an arm's length, I will draw closer to you by a longer distance; and when you walk towards Me, I will run towards you."

No words could possibly describe the effects and scope of this divine grace. Man can only reciprocate such feelings through prayer, meditation and total submission to God Almighty. This will eventually lead him to see and recognize no other power in this world but that of God.

The recognition of God's power and the expression of one's gratitude to Him come in several stages. The least of them is to acknowledge God's grace and blessings and refrain from disobeying Him. The highest stage is that of total dedication of one's thoughts, talents, energies and actions to the service of God.

The words "*give thanks to Me and never deny Me*" also carry a warning that negligence of, ingratitude to, and rebellion against God would lead to denying Him altogether, which is a most hopeless and dismal end.

All the instructions and warnings conveyed in the above passage are extremely pertinent to the issue of the direction of prayer, the focus of Muslims and the distinctive symbol of acknowledging God's oneness. They are also pertinent to the confrontation with the Jews of Madinah, whose ultimate objective was to mislead the Muslims in the hope that they might revert to unbelief. Thus, they would deprive them of God's favours and blessings, the greatest and foremost of which is that of faith.

The Jews were aware that the Arabs without Islam would go back to their aimless tribal existence, with no influence on the rest of the world or role in history. A people without sound principles or creed, or a philosophy of life, would have no reason to assume a position of leadership in the world.

To be remembered by God, Muslims have to remember that Islam is more than a religion concerned only with the spiritual or personal aspects of life. It is a complete way of life with teachings, laws and practices for the organization and development of all human affairs. History tells us that whenever Muslims showed awareness of

God and dedication to His cause, they progressed and achieved prominence, and their standing in the world rose high above all others; but when they neglected Islam and forgot God, they declined and were crushed and left behind.

Yet, the door will always remain open. In His blessed book, the Qur'ān, God calls on Muslims: "*Remember Me, then, and I will remember you; give thanks to Me and never deny Me.*" (Verse 152)

8
Acquiring Real Strength

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱسۡتَعِينُواْ بِٱلصَّبۡرِ وَٱلصَّلَوٰةِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلصَّـٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

Believers, seek strength in patience and prayer. God is with those who are patient. (153)

وَلَا تَقُولُواْ لِمَن يُقۡتَلُ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ أَمۡوَٰتُۢۚ بَلۡ أَحۡيَآءٞ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that. (154)

وَلَنَبۡلُوَنَّكُم بِشَيۡءٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡخَوۡفِ وَٱلۡجُوعِ وَنَقۡصٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡأَمۡوَٰلِ وَٱلۡأَنفُسِ وَٱلثَّمَرَٰتِۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلصَّـٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

We shall certainly try you with a certain measure of fear and hunger, and with diminution of wealth, lives and crops. But give glad tidings to those who remain patient in adversity. (155)

ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَصَـٰبَتۡهُم مُّصِيبَةٞ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّآ إِلَيۡهِ رَٰجِعُونَ ﴿١٥٦﴾

Who, when a calamity befalls them, say, 'To God we belong, and to Him we shall return.' (156)

أُوْلَـٰٓئِكَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ صَلَوَٰتٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِمۡ وَرَحۡمَةٞۖ وَأُوْلَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُهۡتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

On such people, blessings and mercy are bestowed by their Lord; such people will be rightly guided. (157)

Overview

Having established a permanent and universal *qiblah* for Islam, and having outlined the general features of the 'middle' Muslim community, distinguished by

Islam and by its role of guardianship over the rest of mankind, the Qur'ān gives Muslims specific instructions to endure adversity with patience and to observe their prayers. These are the best help they may have in the fulfilment of their great role that requires great sacrifice.

These are the two most essential requisites for the Muslim *ummah* to be able to withstand the hardships and trials that were to come, and to fulfil its universal and historic role in this world. Lives would have to be sacrificed; poverty, death, famine and insecurity would have to be faced with courage and strength, for the *ummah* to establish and defend the Divine world order, make it a reality in human society on this earth, and assert God's unrivalled sovereignty over all its affairs.

In return, the Muslim community shall receive God's blessings, mercy and guidance, making it a most profitable bargain indeed, if only the Muslims would appreciate it.

The Power of Patience

"Believers, seek strength in patience and prayer. God is with those who are patient." (Verse 153) Patience is mentioned frequently in the Qur'ān. God is aware that patience is an essential element in maintaining a steady and balanced pace in the face of the inevitable hardships and adversities of life. It is a prime requirement for the Muslim community in its universal responsibility for establishing God's order on earth.

Patience is required on the personal level for observing one's religious duties, for resisting temptation, misfortune, poverty, oppression and injustice, and for carrying out one's responsibilities towards the establishment of the Islamic way of life in society. Patience and perseverance are required to remain always on the alert, ready to give whatever sacrifice may be needed. When those who are hostile to God's cause seem to wield power, when falsehood seems too strong, when help seems to be endlessly delayed and the destination too far away patience and perseverance are the most important qualities to have. They are also needed to face those who are deviant, erring, harsh and persistent in their opposition to the truth.

When victory seems far away and the going gets really tough, people tend to lose heart and give up. To avoid that state of despair, God links patience with prayer, as an inexhaustible source of strength and energy. The two combine to infuse the heart with boundless confidence and fortitude and to impart to the believer total tranquillity, happiness and inner peace.

When man, weak as he is, faces a task that seems beyond his limited resources, when he faces the powers of evil, when he finds temptations and allurements very

hard to resist, when tyranny and corruption are too powerful, seeking support from God Almighty is the only way forward. As the goals of one's endeavour seem to recede and life becomes shorter and shorter, despair starts to creep into one's heart and mind. As the twilight of one's life approaches and all achievements seem trivial and meaningless, one realizes the value and significance of prayer. It is a spring that never ceases to flow with spiritual strength and tender compassion.

The value and role of prayer lie in its being the direct link between God and man. It is the means by which man, an insignificant mortal, draws strength, reassurance and help from God's infinite power and everlasting mercy. It is the source from which man, a frail creature, replenishes his energy and renews his power and strength to face and resist his own inner temptations and prejudices, as well as the temptations and pressures of the world around him. It is the key to the treasures of God's grace, and the fountain of light which illuminates man's heart with inner peace and tranquillity and leads him through the darkness of doubt and confusion to the certainty of faith and trust in God Almighty. It is an occasion for rest, serenity and peace of mind. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) used to resort to prayer whenever things became difficult to cope with. He used to ask Bilāl, his Companion, to make the call to prayer, saying: "Bring us its comfort."

Worship is the essence of the Islamic way of life, which revolves around its mysteries and hidden qualities. It is a source of sustenance in the long journey of life; it purifies the heart and gives the human spirit its inner powers. It goes hand in hand with responsibility and obligation, because it is the key to our appreciation of our responsibilities and obligations in life and to the satisfaction and benefits we draw from fulfilling them.

When God Almighty commissioned Muĥammad for his great and historic task, He said to him: "*Stand up in prayer at night, all except for a small portion of it; or half the night or a little less, or a little more, and recite the Qur'ān in a calm and distinct manner. We are about to address you with words of surpassing gravity*" (73: 2-5)

Prayer during the night and recitation of the Qur'ān were the essential means of preparing Muĥammad for the stupendous task of conveying God's message to mankind. Prayer opens the human heart to hope and enlightenment, reinvigorates one's relationship with God, mitigates the struggle for life, and provides one with inspiration and confidence.

For the believers in that small fledgling Muslim community, poised to embark on their momentous task, the *sūrah* reinforces that reassurance by saying: *"God is with those who are patient."* God is always there to provide the believers with help and comfort, to lend them His support and replenish their sapping morale and fading

enthusiasm. It is noteworthy that the verse starts by making its address exclusively to the believers, and concludes by reassuring them that patience ensures God's help.

Numerous reports have been handed down that tell us how highly the Prophet himself viewed the qualities of patience and perseverance, and how deeply he had thought about them. Some of them are quite relevant to our discussion.

The Prophet's Companion, Khabbāb ibn al-Aratt, said: "A group of us once appealed to God's Messenger while he was resting in the shade of the Ka`bah. We said, 'Would you please appeal to God to help us? Would you kindly pray for us?' He replied, 'In days gone by, believers like yourselves used to be put in ditches and have their heads sawed in halves, and have their flesh scraped off the bone with iron combs. They withstood all that torture, held on to their faith, and never wavered. I swear that God Almighty will establish this religion so that a man can travel from San 'ā' [in western Yemen] to Ĥadramawt [in eastern Yemen] fearing none but God, and the wolf for his sheep. But you are impatient!" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī]

Another Companion of the Prophet, `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd says: "I can almost see God's Messenger in the same position as an earlier prophet who was beaten by his people until he bled. But even while he was wiping the blood off his face he said: 'Lord, forgive my people, for they do not know the truth.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

The Prophet is also quoted as saying: "A Muslim who mixes with people and puts up with their maltreatment is better than one who neither mixes with people nor suffers their abuse." [Related by al- Tirmidhī]

Sacrificing One's Life

The Qur'ān continues with its spiritual mobilization of the pioneering Muslim community of Madinah, as the latter braces itself for the crucial and momentous task of leading mankind back to God. It outlines the major demands and consequences of its hard and long struggle, or *jihād,* with its attendant sacrifices. It identifies the proper and correct criteria for the evaluation and appraisal of its outcome: *"Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that."* (Verse 154)

The *sūrah* tells the Muslims that, in the fight to uphold God's universal truth, lives will have to be sacrificed. Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God are honourable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul. But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to

live, as God Himself clearly states.

To all intents and purposes, those people may very well appear lifeless, but life and death are not judged by superficial physical means alone. Life is chiefly characterized by activity, growth, and persistence, while death is a state of total loss of function, of complete inertia and lifelessness. But the death of those who are killed for the cause of God gives more impetus to the cause, which continues to thrive on their blood. Their influence on those they leave behind also grows and spreads. Thus, after their death they remain an active force in shaping the life of their community and giving it direction. It is in this sense that such people, having sacrificed their lives for the sake of God, retain their active existence in everyday life. They might, on the other hand, be alive in another level or mode of existence which we here cannot see or conceive of.

According to Islamic tradition, people who are killed "for the cause of God" are not washed or prepared for burial in the conventional way, but buried in the clothes they happen to be wearing, because they are considered clean and pure, and because in reality they are not dead.

Because they are alive, those who die for the cause of God should not be missed or grieved over by their relatives, friends and loved ones. There is no real sense of loss in their death, since they continue to live, enjoying the hospitality of their Lord, relishing His company and boundless rewards.

There are copious reports in the *ĥadīth* literature extolling the spirit of sacrifice and the status of martyrs. Muslim records a *ĥadīth* which says: "The souls of martyrs are carried in the bellies of green birds which fly at leisure in Paradise. They roost on lamps, placed near God's Throne. God casts a glance at them and says, 'What is your wish?' They would reply, 'Lord, what more can we wish for, when You have given us what You have not given any of Your creation.' God would ask them again and again until they realize they have to make a request, and they would say, 'We wish to be returned to live on earth so that we fight for Your cause and be killed a second time.' They say this since they have seen how great God's rewards are to those who attain martyrdom for God's cause. But God says, 'I have already decreed that people would not return to worldly life."

The Prophet's Companion, Anas ibn Mālik, reports that the Prophet said: "No one enters Paradise and wishes to return to worldly life, even if he was given everything on earth, except a martyr. He wishes to return to life and be killed in the cause of God ten times over, for the honour and privilege he receives." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

But who are the living martyrs? They are those killed in God's cause, and in God's cause alone. It is they who lay down their lives in defence of God's universal truth,

rather than in the name of a king, nation or military honour. The sole objective of their struggle and sacrifice is to uphold God's world order and establish it as a social reality. The Qur'ān and the *Ĥadīth* lay strong emphasis on this point, so as to leave no doubt about its meaning.

The Prophet's Companion, Abū Mūsā, reports that the Prophet was asked whether fighting out of bravery, or to support one's own ethnic group, or in pursuit of fame and glory, might be considered as fighting "for the cause of God." He replied: "Only the one who fights to keep God's word supreme fights for God's cause!" [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Another Companion of the Prophet, Abū Hurayrah, reported that a man asked God's Messenger three times about the fate of someone who fights 'in the cause of God,' but is also seeking worldly gain. Every time the Messenger replied: "He would receive no reward!" [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Abū Hurayrah reports that God's Messenger said that God gives a guarantee to anyone who goes to battle for God's cause: "If he has set out for no purpose other than to fight for My cause, totally motivated by faith in Me and to confirm the veracity of My messengers, then I guarantee that he will either enter Paradise or return safely home, enjoying whatever reward or booty he might have gained." The Prophet continues this *Ĥadīth,* saying: "By Him who holds Muĥammad's soul in His hand, any wound he may have sustained in battle will look on the Day of Resurrection in the same way as on the day it happened, with the colour of blood, but with the smell of pure musk. By Him who holds Muĥammad's soul in His hand, were it not for fear of making things too hard for Muslims I would have joined every single expedition going out in God's cause. However, I do not have the means to give them transport, nor do they have such means to follow me. In addition, it is trying for them to stay behind. By Him who holds Muĥammad's soul in His hand, I would love to have fought and been killed for God's cause again and again." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Martyrs, then, are those who set out to fight solely and purely for God's cause, out of faith in Him and an unshakeable belief in His messengers.

The Prophet Muĥammad expressed disapproval when he heard a Persian youth extolling his ancestry in the battlefield. `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Abī `Uqbah reported that his father, a Persian 'ally' of the *Anşār,* relates that he took part with the Prophet in the Battle of Uĥud. "As I struck an unbeliever, I shouted, 'Take it from me; I, a Persian youth!' The Prophet turned to me and said, 'Would it not have been better for you to say, I, the *Anşārī* youth. The nephew and the ally of any group of people belong to them.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

The Prophet disliked the fact that the young man had chosen to express pride in

anything other than being a supporter of God's Messenger and to fight under any banner other than that of the religion of Islam. That is the true meaning of *jihād,* for which men can give up their lives, earn martyrdom and ensure permanent life.

The *sūrah* continues to mobilize the believers for the hard, long struggle ahead and increase their understanding of things to come:

> *We shall certainly try you with a certain measure of fear and hunger, and with diminution of wealth, lives and crops. But give glad tidings to those who remain patient in adversity. Who, when a calamity befalls them, say, 'To God we belong, and to Him we shall return.'* (Verses 155-156)

Trials are part of the process of education. The believers' resolve to fight for the truth, and to bear in the process whatever they may have to face of fear, hardship, poverty, famine, and loss of life, must be rigorously tested. There is a price that believers have to pay in order to uphold their faith, and that price is their own lives. Unless one's faith becomes dearer to one than one's own life, that faith has no chance of survival at the very first serious test. This love and dedication to one's faith must be apparent to others on every occasion for them to appreciate its place and value in the believer's heart. Such sacrifice and perseverance demonstrate the believer's love for his faith, and inspire others to respect it, examine its merits and develop an interest in it. That can open the hearts and minds of many people to Islam.

Tests and trials bring out the best in people, renew their energies, reinforce their resolve, and unleash within them latent powers that they themselves knew nothing of. Moreover, such experiences refine one's perception and sharpen one's mental and emotional vision and judgement.

Underlying all this is the fact that, when subjected to pressure and the severe demands of the struggle, a believer will turn to no one else but God for help and solace, and will seek the support of no other power than God's. This will be done in full acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and total control over everything in this world.

"*Give glad tidings to those who remain patient in adversity'. Who, when a calamity befalls them, say, 'To God we belong, and to Him we shall return.'*" (Verses 155-156) God is the ultimate sovereign and final arbiter. To Him we turn for guidance on every matter. This is the essence of true submission, which comes from full recognition of His control of our destiny and our fate.

Such are the true believers who show patience and endure with fortitude. God's Messenger gives them the happy news of having earned their reward from God, the most bounteous. The blessings they receive are guaranteed by God. Himself: "*On such people, blessings and mercy are bestowed by their Lord; such people will be rightly*

guided." (Verse 157) It is indeed a noble and honourable reward that they will receive. Indeed, they share in the same type of reward the Prophet himself receives. What is more is that they have a testimony by God making it clear that they are rightly guided. This, again, is an honourable status.

In the process of mobilizing the Muslims for their great struggle, or *jihād,* God Almighty makes it clear that the believers' only reward for making the sort of sacrifice involved in struggle in God's cause, which includes loss of life, property, hunger, worry, as well as depletion of numbers and resources, will be God's mercy and blessings.

No material victory, power or wealth whatsoever is promised here — only God's mercy and blessings. There is no promise of victory or having power in their own community. That pioneering Muslim community was being prepared for a role that is more valuable than the very life of its members. Members of that community had to be free of all personal ambitions and selfish desires, and the community's aims and objectives had to be free of all worldly considerations, including victory for Islam through its own efforts.

The Qur'ān teaches the Muslims to seek nothing in return for their obedience, struggle and hard work but God's pleasure, blessings and guidance. That is to be the ultimate goal of their endeavour, and these will be the sweet fruits of their labour. As and when the victory comes, it will not be a victory for them but for the religion and the way of life they represent and are striving to establish in society.

God's mercy and blessings are ample reward for the believers' perseverance and for the sacrifices they make. In fact, they are a better reward than any material or worldly gain they aspire to achieve.

The foregoing passage has given us a glimpse of God's amazing but effective approach in educating the Muslim community and preparing its ranks for upholding His order and carrying it on to the rest of mankind.

9
Setting the Record Straight

۞ إِنَّ ٱلصَّفَا وَٱلْمَرْوَةَ مِن شَعَآئِرِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَمَنْ حَجَّ ٱلْبَيْتَ أَوِ ٱعْتَمَرَ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِ أَن يَطَّوَّفَ بِهِمَا ۚ وَمَن تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَاكِرٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥٨﴾

Ṣafā and Marwah are among the symbols set up by God. Whoever visits the Sacred House for Pilgrimage or `Umrah, would do no wrong to walk to and fro between them. He who does good of his own accord shall find that God is most thankful, All-Knowing. (158)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَكْتُمُونَ مَآ أَنزَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَٱلْهُدَىٰ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا بَيَّنَّٰهُ لِلنَّاسِ فِى ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ۙ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَلْعَنُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَيَلْعَنُهُمُ ٱللَّٰعِنُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Those who conceal the clear proofs and guidance We bestowed from on high, after We have expounded it clearly for mankind in the Book, shall be cursed by God and by others who curse. (159)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ تَابُوا۟ وَأَصْلَحُوا۟ وَبَيَّنُوا۟ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَتُوبُ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَأَنَا ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٦٠﴾

Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, mend their ways and make known the Truth: from these I shall accept their repentance; for I alone accept repentance and I am the Merciful. (160)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَمَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَعْنَةُ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾

Those who reject the faith and die unbelievers shall incur the curse of God, the angels and all mankind. (161)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ لَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿١٦٢﴾

They shall remain under that curse for ever, their torment shall not be alleviated, nor shall they have a respite. (162)

وَإِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ ۖ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٦٣﴾

Your God is the One God: there is no deity but He, the Compassionate, the Merciful. (163)

إِنَّ فِى خَلْقِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَٱلْفُلْكِ ٱلَّتِى تَجْرِى فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنفَعُ ٱلنَّاسَ وَمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مِن مَّآءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ دَآبَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ ٱلرِّيَٰحِ وَٱلسَّحَابِ ٱلْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٦٤﴾

In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the vessels that sail through the sea with what is useful for mankind; in the water God sends down from the sky giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless, causing all manner of living creatures to multiply on it; in the movement of the winds, and the clouds that run their courses between sky and earth: in all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (164)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَتَّخِذُ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَندَادًا يُحِبُّونَهُمْ كَحُبِّ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَشَدُّ حُبًّا لِّلَّهِ ۗ وَلَوْ يَرَى ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓا۟ إِذْ يَرَوْنَ ٱلْعَذَابَ أَنَّ ٱلْقُوَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿١٦٥﴾

Yet there are people who worship beings other than God, giving them a status equal to His, loving them as God alone should be loved; whereas the believers love God more than all else. If the unbelievers could but see, as see they will when they are made to suffer, that all might belongs to God alone, and that He is stern in retribution. (165)

إِذْ تَبَرَّأَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتُّبِعُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوا۟ وَرَأَوُا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ وَتَقَطَّعَتْ بِهِمُ ٱلْأَسْبَابُ ﴿١٦٦﴾

[On that day] those who were followed will disown their followers and they all shall see their punishment, while all their ties are severed. (166)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوا۟ لَوْ أَنَّ لَنَا كَرَّةً فَنَتَبَرَّأَ مِنْهُمْ كَمَا تَبَرَّءُوا۟ مِنَّا ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُرِيهِمُ ٱللَّهُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ حَسَرَٰتٍ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَمَا هُم بِخَٰرِجِينَ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٦٧﴾

The followers will say, 'Would that we had another chance so that we can disown them as they have disowned us!' Thus will God show them their works [in a way which causes them] bitter regrets. They shall never come out of the fire. (167)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ كُلُواْ مِمَّا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ حَلَٰلٗا طَيِّبٗا وَلَا تَتَّبِعُواْ خُطُوَٰتِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمۡ عَدُوّٞ مُّبِينٌ ١٦٨

Mankind, eat of what is lawful and wholesome on earth and do not follow Satan's footsteps: he is indeed an open enemy for you. (168)

إِنَّمَا يَأۡمُرُكُم بِٱلسُّوٓءِ وَٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِ وَأَن تَقُولُواْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ١٦٩

He enjoins you only to commit evil and indecency and to attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge. (169)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّبِعُواْ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُواْ بَلۡ نَتَّبِعُ مَآ أَلۡفَيۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ءَابَآءَنَآۚ أَوَلَوۡ كَانَ ءَابَآؤُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡقِلُونَ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يَهۡتَدُونَ ١٧٠

When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if their forefathers did not use reason at all, and followed no guidance. (170)

وَمَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِي يَنۡعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسۡمَعُ إِلَّا دُعَآءٗ وَنِدَآءٗۚ صُمُّۢ بُكۡمٌ عُمۡيٞ فَهُمۡ لَا يَعۡقِلُونَ ١٧١

The unbelievers are like the one who shouts to that which hears nothing but a call and a cry. Deaf, dumb and blind, they understand nothing. (171)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُلُواْ مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا رَزَقۡنَٰكُمۡ وَٱشۡكُرُواْ لِلَّهِ إِن كُنتُمۡ إِيَّاهُ تَعۡبُدُونَ ١٧٢

Believers, eat of the wholesome things We have provided for you, and give thanks to God, if it is truly Him that you worship. (172)

إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡمَيۡتَةَ وَٱلدَّمَ وَلَحۡمَ ٱلۡخِنزِيرِ وَمَآ أُهِلَّ بِهِۦ لِغَيۡرِ ٱللَّهِۖ فَمَنِ ٱضۡطُرَّ غَيۡرَ بَاغٖ وَلَا عَادٖ فَلَآ إِثۡمَ عَلَيۡهِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٌ ١٧٣

He has only forbidden you carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which a name other than God's has been invoked. But he who is driven by necessity, not intending to transgress nor exceeding his need, incurs no sin. God is much-

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَكۡتُمُونَ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَيَشۡتَرُونَ بِهِۦ ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلًاۙ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ مَا يَأۡكُلُونَ فِي بُطُونِهِمۡ إِلَّا ٱلنَّارَ وَلَا يُكَلِّمُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ وَلَا يُزَكِّيهِمۡ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ١٧٤

Forgiving, Merciful. (173)

Those who suppress any part of the Scriptures God has revealed, and barter it away for a paltry price, eat nothing but fire in their bellies. God will not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them. A grievous suffering awaits them. (174)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشۡتَرَوُاْ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَٱلۡعَذَابَ بِٱلۡمَغۡفِرَةِۚ فَمَآ أَصۡبَرَهُمۡ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ ١٧٥

It is they who barter guidance for error and forgiveness for suffering. How great is their endurance of the Fire! (175)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ نَزَّلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱخۡتَلَفُواْ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَفِي شِقَاقِۭ بَعِيدٖ ١٧٦

That is because God has revealed the Book with the truth. Those who are at variance with the Book are most deeply in the wrong. (176)

۞ لَّيۡسَ ٱلۡبِرَّ أَن تُوَلُّواْ وُجُوهَكُمۡ قِبَلَ ٱلۡمَشۡرِقِ وَٱلۡمَغۡرِبِ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلۡبِرَّ مَنۡ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ وَٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ وَءَاتَى ٱلۡمَالَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِۦ ذَوِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينَ وَٱبۡنَ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَٱلسَّآئِلِينَ وَفِي ٱلرِّقَابِ وَأَقَامَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَى ٱلزَّكَوٰةَۖ وَٱلۡمُوفُونَ بِعَهۡدِهِمۡ إِذَا عَٰهَدُواْۖ وَٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ فِي ٱلۡبَأۡسَآءِ وَٱلضَّرَّآءِ وَحِينَ ٱلۡبَأۡسِۗ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ صَدَقُواْۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُتَّقُونَ ١٧٧

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces towards the east or the west, but truly righteous is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets; and gives his money, much as he may cherish it, to his kinsfolk, orphans, the needy, a stranded wayfarer, beggars, and for the freeing of slaves; who attends to his prayers and pays zakāt; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises once made, and are patient in misfortune and adversity and in time of peril. Such are those who have proved themselves true, and

such are the God-fearing. (177)	

Overview

This new passage aims at correcting certain principles and clarifying some misconceptions concerning the true faith. It also continues the confrontation with the Jews of Madinah, to which we were introduced earlier. They did not cease to try to present falsehood in the guise of truth, and to cause confusion among the Muslims. However, the tone this time is rather general, presenting principles that apply to the Jews of Madinah as well as other opponents of the new faith. It also identifies a number of pitfalls that the Muslims would do well to avoid.

To begin with, we have a reference to the pilgrimage ritual of walking between the two hills of Ṣafā and Marwah, near the Ka`bah, clarifying the confusion surrounding them as a result of pre-Islamic pagan traditions. To some extent, this is related to the institution of the Ka`bah as the universal direction of prayer for Muslims as well as to pilgrimage rituals.

This is followed by a fierce condemnation of Jews and Christians who conceal parts of their Scriptures, while making it clear that repentance and forgiveness remain open to those of them who wish to refrain from such practices. Those who persist will meet with harsh punishment.

Then comes a reaffirmation of the concept of God's oneness, and a reference to the marvels of the natural world that attest to it. Those who reject God's oneness are roundly condemned, while a scene from the Day of Judgement depicts how futile it will be for unbelievers to realize their wrongdoing when it is too late.

Referring to the Jewish arguments about what is lawful and unlawful of food and drink, the passage makes a general call to mankind to enjoy the wholesome and lawful things in life which God has provided for them. An account of things that are forbidden to eat and drink is also given in this section.

The passage resumes the attack on those who suppress or tamper with God's revelations, threatening them with God's wrath and their own humiliation, and a most severe punishment in the life to come.

As the passage is rounded off, we have a statement of the essential principles of faith and good works, highlighting the direct link between faith and action, and

reiterating the fact that it stems from one's heart and emotions. It is no empty gesture or hollow ritual, but a deliberate and constant state of consciousness of God's existence and power.

The passage continues to educate and inform, and to raise the Muslims' understanding of the principles of their religion as well as their awareness of the hostile schemes and campaigns of their enemies to undermine their faith and sow chaos and confusion in their community.

A Very Significant Ritual

> *Ṣafā and Marwah are among the symbols set up by God. Whoever visits the Sacred House for pilgrimage or `Umrah, would do no wrong to walk to and fro between them. He who does good of his own accord shall find that God is most thankful, All-Knowing.* (Verse 158)

Several reports suggest a specific cause for the revelation of this verse; the most logical account, which is also the closest to the way of thinking Islam had cultivated in the minds of the early Muslims, is the following:

Walking between the two small hills known as Ṣafā and Marwah had been part of the pilgrimage rituals practised by the Arabs before Islam. However, two idols, Isāf and Nā'ilah, were erected on top of them, respectively. Hence, some Muslims felt uneasy about this walk because of the two idols that had been there, associating the two hills with polytheism.

Al-Bukhārī relates that, in answer to a question about walking between Ṣafā and Marwah, Anas, a Companion of the Prophet, said: "We used to consider them part of pre-Islamic ignorant tradition. With the advent of Islam, people stopped walking there as part of religious ritual. God then revealed the verse starting: "*Ṣafā and Marwah are among the symbols set up by God.*"

Al-Sha`bī says: "Isāf was placed on Ṣafā and Nā'ilah on the Marwah, and people used to revere these idols. Hence, after Islam they felt uneasy about walking in between the two hills. Hence this verse was revealed."

No specific date can be determined for the revelation of this verse, but it seems more probable that it was revealed later than the verses dealing with the change of the direction of prayer. Although Makkah was hostile territory for the Muslims for many years after their migration to Madinah, it was possible for some of them to visit it for pilgrimage or *`Umrah.* It is most probably such individual Muslim pilgrims who were reluctant to include Ṣafā and Marwah in their rituals.

Their reluctance was the outcome of the long and rigorous process of education

and purification they had undergone under their new faith. They developed a new sense of faith and religious understanding that made them question all the traditions and practices they had inherited from their pre-Islamic life, in case these were not sanctioned by Islam.

Islam shook the hearts of the Arabs who adopted it and penetrated the deepest recesses of their souls. It brought about a complete change in their psyche, perceptions and attitude. They began to view their pre-Islamic past with different eyes, and were inclined to divorce themselves from it completely. They no longer felt any affinity towards it; rather, it became a hateful legacy.

A closer study of that radical change brought about in the life of that generation by Islamic beliefs, principles and arguments would reveal how total and complete was the transformation they had undergone. It was as if the Prophet had shaken those people with an electric shock that reshaped their character and personality in a completely new form.

This is, in fact, the true essence of Islam: total departure from one's previous *jāhiliyyah*[1] convictions and outlook. One develops an acute sensitivity towards all that is un-Islamic, and all one's inherited habits, customs, practices and traditions. Both heart and soul must be given up to the new religion.

Once that stage was reached in the life of that pioneering Muslim society, Islam began to adopt and reform those traditions and practices it considered acceptable and in line with its own principles, objectives and outlook. The Muslims then readopted those traditions and practices as part of Islam, and not because they had inherited them from their forefathers.

The incorporation of Şafā and Marwah in the pilgrimage rituals is a good example of this process. Clarifying the issue, the Qur'ān begins by stating: *"Şafā and Marwah are among the symbols set up by God"* (Verse 158) When a person walks now from one to the other in the prescribed manner, he is fulfilling an Islamic ritual, devoted to God alone. It has been purified and cleansed of all its pagan associations and significance. Muslims can perform the ritual with no fear of doing anything wrong or un-Islamic. *"Whoever visits the Sacred House for pilgrimage or `Umrah, would do no wrong to walk to and fro between them.* " (Verse 158)

This was the case with most rituals of the pilgrimage practised by the Arabs in pre-Islamic days. All aspects pertaining to idolatry were abolished. Now all the pilgrimage rituals have become linked to Islamic principles and restored to the

[1] This is an Islamic term that refers to the beliefs and concepts that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia, but it is often used by Islamic writers to refer to all non-Islamic social practices and traditions. The word is derived from the root *'Jahl'* which means ignorance. Thus, it has come to mean a stare of mind associated with ignorance.

original form practised by Abraham, as will be discussed in detail later in the *sūrah.* As for the *`Umrah,* its rituals are the same as the pilgrimage, except for attendance at Arafat and that it may be performed at all times. In both, walking between the two hills is a duty.

The verse ends with a statement praising voluntary acts of worship in general: "*He who does good of his own accord shall find that God is most thankful, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 158) This statement affirms that God would welcome and appreciate such acts and would reserve generous rewards for their doers. By its very wording, this verse implies that walking between the two hills is a good action which earns reward from God.

The word *shākir,* which means "thankful", used in the Arabic original to describe God's response to voluntary acts, conveys a very friendly impression. It has the added connotation that God Almighty is very pleased with these acts and thanks His servants for doing them. This would surely demand respect and modesty towards God on the part of His human servants. If God describes Himself as thankful to His servant for any good action that servant does, how can we be sufficiently grateful to God in our praise of Him? The connotations of divine compassion and mercy implied here defy description in human language.

Suppressing the Truth

The verses that follow launch a sharp attack on those Jews who, as mentioned earlier, concealed facts that were revealed in their Scriptures, in the wake of the controversy they created over the change of the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to the Ka`bah. This suggests that they continued to exploit the situation, especially after Makkah was also instituted as the place of the pilgrimage for Muslims.

> *Those who conceal the clear proofs and guidance We bestowed from on high, after We have expounded it clearly for mankind in the Book, shall be cursed by God and by others who curse. Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, mend their ways and make known the Truth: from these I shall accept their repentance; for I alone accept repentance and I am the Merciful. Those who reject the faith and die unbelievers shall incur the curse of God, the angels and all mankind. They shall remain under that curse for ever, their torment shall not be alleviated, nor shall they have a respite.* (Verses 159-162)

The Jews and the Christians were already aware, on the basis of their own Scriptures, of the truth of Muĥammad's mission. They had little doubt of his honesty and integrity. Nevertheless, they spared no effort to conceal and suppress what their Scriptures had to say about him. Manipulation of religious text and tampering with

revealed Scriptures have, for a variety of reasons, been encountered on numerous occasions in history. There have always been people with a propensity for evading the truth, or ignoring or suppressing it, or changing it to suit their own aims and ends. Thy knowingly conceal the truth, suppressing all evidence of the veracity of which they are most certain. They even suppress verses in God's book so that the truth they expound is kept away from people. They do all this in order to achieve some worldly gain. In fact, we often encounter examples of such suppression of the truth. Such people shall be cursed by God and man. They shall become pariahs, denied God's mercy and rejected by their fellow men.

Exception is, of course, made of those who come to realize their folly, repent and abandon such practices: "*Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, mend their ways and make known the Truth: from these I shall accept their repentance; for I alone accept repentance and I am the Merciful.*" (Verse 160) The Qur'ān opens the door, as always, for those who repent and make amends, giving them another chance to see the light and make the change within themselves. To prove that the change is genuine, they are required to make up for the past by performing good deeds, being scrupulously honest in their actions, and championing the truth and abiding by it in all they say and do. They must have full confidence in God's mercy and be certain that He will forgive and reward their repentance.

Those who *persist* and refuse to repent, however, shall meet their nemesis in the worst possible way, because they rejected God's hospitality and consciously chose to perpetrate evil and falsehood: "*Those who reject the faith and die unbelievers shall incur the curse of God, the angels and all mankind They shall remain under that curse for ever, their torment shall not be alleviated, nor shall they have a respite.*" (Verses 161-162)

This general curse is considered a just reward for their abhorrent behaviour. They shall live as social outcasts, rejected by everyone and bereft of all dignity and respect. Worst of all, they shall incur the curse of God, which is the most devastating of all humiliations.

Following that, there is a reiteration of the basic aspects of the concept of God's oneness. To illustrate these, the *sūrah* cites a number of natural phenomena in the physical world that testify to God's power and overall sovereignty. It then portrays a scene from the Day of Resurrection, showing the despair and confusion of those who reject God and deny His power and existence.

> *Your God is the One God: there is no deity but He, the Compassionate, the Merciful. In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the vessels that sail through the sea with what is useful for mankind; in the water God sends down from the sky giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless, causing all manner of living creatures to multiply on it; in the movement of the winds, and the*

> *clouds that run their courses between sky and earth: in all this there are signs for people who use their reason. Yet there are people who worship beings other than God, giving them a status equal to His, loving them as God alone should be loved; whereas the believers love God more than all else. If the unbelievers could but see, as see they will when they are made to suffer, that all might belongs to God alone, and that He is stern in retribution. [On that day] those who were followed will disown their followers and they all shall see their punishment, while all their ties are severed. The followers will say, 'Would that we had another chance so that we can disown them as they have disowned us!" Thus will God show them their works [in a way which causes them] bitter regrets. They shall never come out of the fire.* (Verses 163-167)

The oneness of God is the quintessence of faith. On the whole, the debate has never been about God's existence, however differently his entity, attributes or role in the universe might be viewed or defined by different societies and religions. Man's nature has always led him to the belief in God. But in recent human history, a new philosophy has emerged, never known in human thinking before, which totally denies the very notion of God. This intellectual monstrosity has very little chance of becoming universal, because it is self-defeating and is invalidated by the very nature and structure of the universe and our own existence in it.

The passage, therefore, affirms the principle of God's oneness as an essential part of true faith and a solid foundation for man's moral and social systems. The one God is the only deity to be adored and worshipped, and He is also the sole source of man's moral codes and norms, and the origin of all the laws and regulations that govern and control man's social, political and economic life and the life of the whole cosmos: "*Your God is the One God: there is no deity but He, the Compassionate, the Merciful." (*Verse 163) We cannot fail to note how the truth of God's oneness is emphatically stressed here in several ways. Thus, the Lord worshipped and obeyed by all creatures is the only God who legislates for all people making clear for them what moral values to uphold. It is from Him that they receive all their legislation.

This central concept of Islam is re-emphasized time after time in the Qur'ān, particularly in the parts revealed in Makkah. It is brought up here in the context of preparing the Muslim community for its crucial universal leadership role. The Qur'ān hammers home these concepts so as to leave people in no doubt that the principle of God's oneness permeates all aspects of life and all parts of existence.

God's sovereignty over this world and His active control of its affairs stem from His grace attributes. He is "*the Merciful, the Compassionate."*

Those Using Their Reason

> *In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the*

> *vessels that sail through the sea with what is useful for mankind; in the water God sends down from the sky giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless, causing all manner of living creatures to multiply on it; in the movement of the winds, and the clouds that run their courses between sky and earth: in all this there are signs for people who use their reason.* (Verse 164)

This unique Qur'ānic approach in addressing the human mind and heart tends to heighten man's feelings and emotions and make him behold and contemplate the wonders of the Universe. Familiarity may have blunted man's appreciation of these marvels, but the verses invite him to reflect on the world around, as if for the first time, with open eyes and eager senses and a conscious heart. The physical world is full of beautiful mysteries and awe-inspiring events that have captivated many an eye and fascinated many a heart.

The world is a boundless festival of mystery, splendour and beauty. The Heavens, the Earth, the planets, the stars, the galaxies, are all floating along their decreed orbits with incredible harmony, in a vast expanse of limitless space of dizzying dimensions. Man has been fascinated by this vast gallery of wonders long before he was able to get a glimpse, through study and science, of how it works and what lies behind it.

The cycle of day and night and the alternation of light and darkness, dawn and dusk, have sent a million shivers through the hearts and souls of men everywhere. For the believing heart, it is a daily marvel to behold, despite its familiarity; a constant reminder of God's magnificence and glory.

As for "*in the vessels that sail through the sea with what is useful for mankind,*" I admit that I had not fully appreciated the import of this statement until the day I travelled on board a large ship, which seemed like a dot in the ocean. Waves were hitting us from all sides while we were engulfed in an almost surreal world of endless blue. Those who have experienced sea travel know that in the middle of the ocean one is entirely at God's mercy and that it is only with God's will and command that one is brought to the safety of the shore.

The *sūrah* highlights other natural phenomena: "*the water Godsends down from the sky giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless, causing all manner of living creatures to multiply on it; in the movement of the winds, and the clouds that run their courses between sky and earth.*" (Verse 164) All these phenomena deserve our attention, reflection and intelligent study. They are all manifestations of God's awesome power and infinite mercy. Life is the greatest mystery of all. How does it spring out of the earth when water makes it fertile? How does it come about, starting gently at first before manifesting itself with full vigour? By what incredible process is it carried in a seed, an egg or a gene?

It is a question that has to be asked. It is no good brushing it aside or ignoring it, as

some agnostics have tried to do. Some have even gone further and claimed that life can be created by man, without the need for God's intervention! But even in the land where the ruling class prides itself on denying God altogether they have given up and were forced to admit that this is impossible without a Creator to give life. Leading Soviet scientists do now openly admit this as a fact beyond man's ability.[1] In the past Charles Darwin, the first to put forward the theory of evolution, tried hard to evade the question.

As for the wind and the clouds, and all other natural phenomena, it is not sufficient to advance a theory to explain or describe merely how winds blow, or how clouds form, or the process by which they function, or what their effects are. The central question, the real mystery, revolves around the origin of life itself: why has the world been created in the way it has, and by what methods? How did the universe come to exist in its present form which, in order to produce and sustain life, provides the right combination of elements such as wind, cloud, rain and soil, according to thousands upon thousands of perfectly balanced proportions and formulae? If any of these proportions were to change, life would not be possible. The secret lies in the intricate design and clear purpose of existence, and in the unity and compassion of the Creator.

"In all this there are signs for people who use their reason." (Verse 164) Indeed, all man needs to do is to shake off familiarity and apathy and look afresh at the world around with a discerning eye and an enlightened heart. He should study every movement, scrutinize every phenomenon, and probe all secrets and mysteries, and let his ingenuity and imagination be fired so that he can grasp the splendour of the universe and the brilliance of its Maker.

Such refined awareness, such sensitivity, and such appreciation of the beauty, balance and perfection of the universe are derived from true faith. Faith gives the believer a new insight into the world around him and a new understanding of beauty, and turns life into one continuous celebration of the creation and glory of God.

Nevertheless, there are still those who neither look nor understand. That is the reason they go astray and lose direction in life.

> *"Yet there are people who worship beings other than God, giving them a status equal to His, loving them as God alone should be loved."* (Verse 165)

In those days these were idols carved out of stone or wood, or they were stars and planets, or angels and devils. In every age these deities take on different forms and

[1] This was written in the early 1960s. — Editor's note.

sizes. Their common feature is that they are all forms of associating partners with God, whether they are invoked together with God, or treated merely as objects of adoration or on a par with God. In the worst case, they replace God altogether.

But the case is different with true believers: "*whereas the believers love God more than all else.*" (Verse 165) Their love for God supersedes their love for everything else in the world. The use of the term "love" here is both touching and appropriate, because the relationship between God and true believers is one of love and spiritual affection. It is an intimate and private relationship, continuously renewed with an undying adoration.

Alliances Fall Apart

> *If the unbelievers could but see, as see they will when they are made to suffer, that all might belongs to God alone, and that He is stern in retribution. [On that day] those who were followed will disown their followers and they all shall see their punishment, while all their ties are severed. The followers will say, 'Would that we had another chance so that we can disown them as they have disowned us!' Thus will God show them their works [in a way which causes them] bitter regrets. They shall never come out of the fire.* (Verses 165-167)

Were these transgressors to look ahead to the Day of Resurrection, they would realize their folly in worshipping anything or anybody other than God. All power belongs to Him. He has neither equals nor partners. They would also see the hopelessness of their actions and the severity of the punishment awaiting them. The leaders shall disassociate themselves from their followers, and shall be exposed as powerless to help them, or even help themselves. The truth of God's oneness and His absolute power would be clearly manifest. The followers, on the other hand, would wish for a second chance of life in order to denounce and disown those false gods and leaders. The full extent of the fraud and the delusion under which they had been living would be exposed.

It is an awesome scene in which all the hypocrisy and the insincerity and futility of the relationship between the two groups is brought fully into the open. And then come the pain and the torment: "*Thus will God show them their works [in a way which causes them] bitter regrets. They shall never come out of the fire.*" (Verse 167)

Which Path to Follow

This is followed by an invitation to all mankind to enjoy the good things in life and avoid the harmful ones. This is coupled with a warning against following the suggestions of Satan, who will only advise people to do evil and harmful things and

to arrogate to themselves the right to legislate without reference to God. There is also a warning against following others blindly in matters of religion, and a denunciation of the worship of any deity other than God Almighty, neatly linking this passage with the preceding one.

> *Mankind, eat of what is lawful and wholesome on earth and do not follow Satan's footsteps: he is indeed an open enemy for you. He enjoins you only to commit evil and indecency and to attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge. When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed, they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if their forefathers did not use reason at all, and followed no guidance. The unbelievers are like the one who shouts to that which hears nothing but a call and a cry. Deaf, dumb and blind, they understand nothing.* (Verses 168-171)

Having set out the argument for God's oneness and shown Himself as the Creator of all, and exposed the utter failure of those who worship gods other than Him, God Almighty states in these verses that He is also the provider and sustainer of life. Accordingly, He is the ultimate authority to decide what food is lawful and what is unlawful; an aspect of exercising His authority as the only God. The Creator who makes and provides is also the authority who decides what is lawful and what is not. The law, *Sharī`ah,* is thus inextricably intertwined with belief.

The verses give the whole of mankind permission to enjoy the food God has provided on earth, with the exception of what He has forbidden — which will be mentioned later in the *sūrah.* People are also instructed here that they should listen only to God concerning what may or may not be lawful for consumption. They should not listen to Satan's views in these matters, because, as their sworn enemy, he will not give them good advice. He will only mislead them and encourage them to decide what is and is not lawful of their own accord, with no reference to God's guidance, as the Jews used to do, and as the Arab idolaters used to claim.

These instructions show plainly how realistic and practical Islam is, and how genuinely aware of man's nature and needs. The rule is that everything is lawful with the exception of a few things, which are listed in the Qur'ān by name.

God has created the earth and all its products for man's free use, enjoyment and benefit. The exceptions and restrictions are made only to safeguard man's interests, and to ensure that he does not over-consume, or abuse the resources God has provided for him. The most important condition, however, is that man should not refer to anybody other than God for the identification of those items that are not permissible, and for the determination of the limits and the conditions under which the permissible ones should be consumed and used. If they do not, then they will be listening to Satan's promptings, and he is wont to bid people to commit only evil and

indecency.

The *sūrah* derides the argument put forward by the Arab idolaters or the Jews, or both, who insist that they will only follow what their forefathers followed: *"Even if their forefathers did not use reason at all, and followed no guidance."* That is exactly what the Qur'ān condemns. When it comes to defining matters relating to faith, the Qur'ān rejects all authority other than God's, and flatly condemns those who follow blindly inherited traditions and practices.

The next verse gives a humiliating image of those blind followers of earlier generations, depicting them as herds of sheep that can hear the shouting and the sounds made by their shepherds but do not understand what those words actually mean. In fact, as the *sūrah* goes on we realize that they are worse. For while sheep can, at least, see, hear and bleat, while these are heedless and even worse: *"The unbelievers are like the one who shouts to that which hears nothing but a call and a cry. Deaf dumb and blind, they understand nothing."* (Verse 171)

Such people may very well have ears, tongues and eyes of their own, but what good will these do them if not put to proper use? They might as well have none. That is indeed the lowest and the most contemptible state that human beings can reach: when they give up their intelligence and discerning faculties. No one other than God has the authority to ordain or pronounce over matters of religion, law or behaviour.

Things Forbidden to Eat

The *sūrah* then gives believers specific rules on the various types of animal meat that they may eat, denouncing the Jews, who argue over this matter although it has been adequately discussed in their own Scriptures.

> *Believers, eat of the wholesome things We have provided for you, and give thanks to God, if it is truly Him that you worship. He has only forbidden you carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which a name other than God's has been invoked. But he who is driven by necessity, not intending to transgress nor exceeding his need, incurs no sin. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful. Those who suppress any part of the Scriptures God has revealed, and barter it away for a paltry price, eat nothing but fire in their bellies. God will not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them. A grievous suffering awaits them. It is they who barter guidance for error and forgiveness for suffering. How great is their endurance of the Fire! That is because God has revealed the Book with the truth. Those who are at variance with the Book are most deeply in the wrong.* (Verses 172-176)

God addresses believers by their most important quality of having accepted the faith, clearly underlining their special relationship with Him and making it clear that

they should accept only His instructions and guidelines with respect to what is or is not lawful and permissible. They are reminded that He alone provides for them and shows them what is permissible and what is not. Nothing good or wholesome has been forbidden, only what is harmful and corrupt. The purpose behind these few restrictions is not to deprive people or curb their enjoyment of the good things God has made available, and for which they should show gratitude. God directs them to thank Him if they truly worship Him alone. Thus, they are taught that thanksgiving is an act of worship. "*Believers, eat of the wholesome things We have provided for you, and give thanks to God, if it is truly Him that you worship.*" (Verse 172)

Then comes a list of what has been forbidden for the Muslims to eat. It starts with an Arabic word which indicates that the restriction is limited to the given items: "*He has only forbidden you carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which a name other than Gods has been invoked.*" (Verse 173)

Both carrion — dead putrefying flesh — and blood are unhygienic and offensive to human taste. Centuries after this Qur'ānic statement was revealed, modern medical research has shown that both attract harmful germs and carry deadly substances. There could he many more reasons why they were forbidden by Islam, which modern medical science has yet to discover.

The next item is the flesh of swine, about the banning of which some have recently raised doubts. The pig is an unattractive animal with foul habits, and God has forbidden its flesh a very long time ago. Only recently, human knowledge has shown it to be singularly prone to infection with parasitic worms that are a serious health hazard to humans. Some may yet argue that advances in health care and modern cooking methods have reduced or even eliminated this risk. But this has only come to light several centuries after Islam, and there is no guarantee that pig's meat does not carry other risks of which we are yet to become aware. Islamic law has been well ahead of human science by many centuries. It deserves our unqualified trust. It must be considered the final arbiter in what is wholesome and what is not. It is the legislation revealed by the One who is wise and who knows all.

The meat of animals slaughtered in dedication to something or someone other than God is forbidden for Muslims to eat for that very reason. There is nothing physically wrong with the meat, but it is spiritually tainted by the fact that it was sacrificed in reverence of a creature of God. This impairs one's loyalty to, and faith in, God. This makes it akin to material impurity and dirtiness. Of all prohibited things this type is most relevant to faith.

It becomes clear, yet again, how strongly and closely the principle of God's oneness is linked to the source of religious guidance and lawmaking in Islam, God Almighty.

In establishing the above restrictions, however, Islam takes account of the circumstances under which they would apply. Necessities could arise which would entail a measured lifting or relaxation of those restrictions. These are dictated strictly by the need at the time, and on condition that consumption of forbidden meat is not, in any way, permitted for reasons of self-indulgence or in defiance of God's instructions.

"*But he who is driven by necessity, not intending to transgress nor exceeding his need, incurs no sin. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 173) This is a general Islamic principle in all matters of this kind, and can be extended to situations of a similar nature. Any life-threatening situation creates a necessity which would allow a person to eat or drink forbidden things if alternatives cannot be found, within the conditions mentioned above.

Scholars differ in their definition of what constitutes necessity. Are the situations in which necessity exists only those specifically cited by God, or could other, similar circumstances be included? Nor is there any consensus of opinion among scholars on what constitutes relieving the necessity: is it confined to the smallest of measures, or is it a full meal or drink? However, we are happy to confine our discussion here to pointing out the general principles that are of relevance in these matters, without discussing these differences in detail.

Suppression of God's Revelations

The Jews created considerable controversy around the Qur'ānic pronouncements on permissible and forbidden food and drink. Elsewhere, the Qur'ān informs us of other types of meat that had been forbidden to the Jews but which Muslims were allowed to eat: "*To those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all animals that have claws; and We forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails or what is mixed with their bones.*" (6: 146) All these are lawful to Muslims.

The Jews might have disputed this relaxation of the earlier prohibition. They even argued about other forbidden things, although these were forbidden them in their own Scriptures. Their aim, of which they never lost sight, was to create doubts about Qur'ānic commandments and undermine the fact that they were revealed by God. This explains the strong denunciation of those who suppress what they know to he God's revelation. "*Those who suppress any part of the Scriptures God has revealed, and barter it away for a paltry price, eat nothing but fire in their bellies. God will not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them. A grievous suffering awaits them. It is they who barter guidance for error and forgiveness for suffering. How great is their endurance of the Fire! That is because God has revealed the Book with the truth. Those who are at variance with the Book are most deeply in the wrong.*" (Verses 174-176)

The verses may be directed at people of earlier Scriptures, Jews and Christians, but the condemnation applies in the widest possible sense. All those who deliberately and systematically suppress the truth, especially religious truth, or manipulate it for power or worldly gains *of* any kind, stand condemned by God, and are doomed to incur His wrath and a stern punishment in the hereafter. Even if they were to gain this whole world for such suppression, it remains a paltry price when compared with what they lose of God's pleasure and His reward in the life to come.

They *"eat nothing but fire in their bellies."* (Verse 174) Here we have a description that is in perfect harmony with the scene being portrayed. Their gain for suppressing the truth is nothing but fire in their bellies. Indeed they are portrayed eating fire. Yet the description is factual. When they are in hell, the fire makes their clothes and their food. As an additional disgrace and humiliation, they are totally ignored in the life to come. Their isolation is given a very graphic description in the text: *"God will not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He purify them. A grievous suffering awaits them."* (Verse 174)

Another expressive description tells us that they have made an utterly foolish choice by exchanging success for failure and making a losing deal. *"It is they who barter guidance for error and forgiveness for suffering. How great is their endurance of the Fire!"* (Verse 175)

The sarcasm is unmistakable, but it fits the vile actions of concealing the truth that God has revealed for the guidance and benefit of all mankind, and rightly castigates the folly of rejecting guidance and accepting humbug.

The result of deliberately concealing or disputing God's revealed truth is a life of constant turmoil, confusion and conflict with human nature. It is a life of permanent conflict and discord. *"That is because God has revealed the Book with the truth. Those who are at variance with the Book are most deeply in the wrong."* (Verse 176) Such an outcome has been seen time and again in human society, in accordance with God's true warning; history is evidence of its veracity.

What Constitutes Righteousness

This passage concludes with a verse that outlines the principles of true faith together with the rules of proper Islamic conduct:

> *Righteousness is not that you turn your faces towards the east or the west, but truly righteous is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets; and gives his money, much as he may cherish it, to his kinsfolk, orphans, the needy, a stranded wayfarer, beggars, and for the freeing of slaves,' who attends to his prayers and pays zakāt; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises once made,*

> *and are patient in misfortune and adversity and in time of peril. Such are those who have proved themselves true, and such are the God-fearing.* (Verse 177)

The subject of this verse is clearly linked to the issue of the direction of prayer and the controversy surrounding it, as discussed earlier. It now establishes a comprehensive principle that covers this issue and all matters that the Jews of Madinah were wont to dispute. These mostly centred on new religious rituals and forms of worship introduced by Islam and which differed from their own.

The purpose behind the change of the place Muslims face in prayers, and indeed all aspects of worship and ritual, has never been the direction people face, or indeed any outward form. These are not what gives worship its value or meaning, nor what makes people good and righteous. Righteousness is the result of a total feeling, an attitude and a mode of behaviour which shape the individual's conscience and the mind set of the community. It is a discipline whose effects are immediately and constantly apparent in one's life and the life of society as a whole. Without these aspects, facing east or west, or turning one's face to the right and to the left at the end of prayer or the performance of the various movements of prayer would have no effect or significance.

"*Truly righteous is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets...*" Taken as a whole, the verse spells out the total sum of goodness, or righteousness. What, then, gives these beliefs and actions their value and meaning? What is the value of believing in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets?

Belief in God marks a definite turning point in one's life, at which one is freed from servitude and submission to all manner of powers, forces and desires, and submits to God alone. It is a transformation from chaos to order, from aimlessness to purpose, and from fragmentation to unity. It is a focal point around which all mankind stands equal in the eyes of God and which gives the whole of existence direction, balance, and coherence.

Belief in the Last Day is a belief in universal and divine justice. It is a testimony to the fact that human life on earth is not without purpose or value or order, and that good works that seem to go unrewarded shall certainly be rewarded.

Believing in the angels is an essential part of believing in a world that is beyond human perception. It is what distinguishes the way humans perceive the world and understand it from the way animals do. Animals perceive the world through their senses and instincts, while man believes in a world that lies beyond the reach of his perception.[1]

---

[1] This is fully discussed in our commentary on the first few verses of this *sūrah,* pp.28-30

To believe in the Books and the Prophets means to attest, without reservation, to the truth, honesty, and integrity of all the revealed Books and all the Prophets and messengers God commissioned to deliver them at various times of human history. This leads to a belief in the unity of the human race, serving God alone, abiding by one and the same religion and adhering to one universal divine order. This outlook has a profound effect on the personality of the believer, who is seen as custodian of the heritage of God's messengers and divine messages.

The next clement of righteousness is to spend money, dear as it may be, on one's near of kin, orphans, the needy, the stranded traveller, beggars, and for the freeing of slaves. The significance of this commendable act of charity and sacrifice is that it liberates man from stinginess, selfishness, greed and excessive love of wealth, which cripple one's ability to give and help those who are in need. It is a highly spiritual act of altruism when someone of means has the courage and the generosity to give away his dearest and most precious possessions. It is an act of liberation for the human soul when man rises above worldly desires and materialistic instincts. It is an admirable achievement, which Islam commends and values very highly.

It is characteristic of the Islamic approach that it aims, first and foremost, at liberating man from his own internal prejudices, weaknesses and desires before going on to liberate him from the pressures and influences of the society around him. Unless one overcomes one's own egotism, one is not likely to stand up to evil and temptation in the world outside.

Charity is also a social value that strengthens the bonds of love and trust within the family unit, the vital nucleus of society, and preserves the dignity of its members. Charity towards orphans in society achieves social justice and helps to save the young and the weak from homelessness, corruption and abuse. For the needy and the destitute, charity provides the care and security by which their dignity is preserved, their standing in society may be enhanced, and their contribution to society assured. It ensures that not a single person in the community is lost, or left uncared for. For travellers who, for one reason or another, find themselves stranded in foreign lands or in societies where they feel alienated, charity can be a lifeline. It is an emergency measure to alleviate an unexpected hardship, and by which they are made to feel that they belong to the global human family.

Begging is a practice Islam abhors. It is forbidden to those who can earn a minimum of sustenance or have jobs. Charity by those who have the means aims to stop this evil practice.

Charity has played a vital role in Islam's fight against slavery. It provided the means to free those unfortunate enough to have been taken prisoner in wars against Islam. This is done by either buying slaves to set them free, or by giving a slave

money to buy his own freedom, at a price he agrees with his master. Under Islam, slaves became entitled to their freedom as soon as they demanded it, and they were helped to regain their liberty and dignity by allocating them money from charity and *zakāt.* Slaves would then become wage earners, entitled to receive *zakāt.* Every effort would be made to speed up their total freedom.

The verse adds that the regular observance of prayer is another important aspect of righteousness. Prayer is more than a sequence of bodily movements, and there is more to it than facing in a certain direction, east or west. It is more than a simple act of spiritual meditation. Prayer, an act of total submission and dedication to God, epitomizes the entire Islamic outlook on life.

Islam recognizes the human being as a complex entity comprising body, mind and soul, and perceives no contradiction or conflict among their respective roles or needs. It, therefore, sees no need for suppressing the functions or needs of any one of them in order to satisfy any of the others. From this perspective we can clearly see how prayer combines the activity of all three elements in an integrated act of worship dedicated completely to the adoration and glorification of God Almighty. The bodily movements of standing *(qiyām),* bowing (*rukū`*) and prostration *(sujūd),* and the recitation of Qur'ānic verses and other prescribed text and the deliberate reflection required on that, and exclusive devotion to God, coalesce beautifully during prayer in a unique and splendid combination. Maintaining this standard in the performance of prayer is a reminder and a fulfilment of the essence and purpose of Islam as a whole.

Paying the *zakāt* duty is another aspect of righteousness. This is a social tax instituted by God Almighty, the ultimate provider, as a token of the entitlement of the poor to a share in the wealth of the rich. It is clear from the text that *zakāt* is separate from, rather than a substitute for, the charitable spending mentioned earlier. While giving to those causes is voluntary, payment of *zakāt* is a religious duty in its own right, and both are essential factors in attaining righteousness. Unless this was the case, obviously there would be no meaning in giving *zakāt* a separate mention in the same verse.

Keeping one's promises is another aspect of righteousness that the Qur'ān frequently highlights as a feature of true faith and humanity. It is a quality that stems from honesty to God and fulfilment of one's promises to Him. Furthermore, it is an essential requirement for creating an environment of mutual trust and confidence among individuals, societies and nations. History will readily testify to the Muslims' impeccable record in honouring agreements, promises and treaties with allies and enemies alike. Islam has given an unparalleled example of integrity that can never be surpassed.

Steadfastness and perseverance in times of adversity and hardship, and in the face of danger, are necessary qualities for the education and development of strong individuals with solid characters who will stand firm, come what may. Under such conditions the faithful never lose hope or confidence in God, nor will they seek help from any source other than Him.

For the Muslim community, or *ummah,* to fulfil its great role of universal leadership of mankind and its task of instituting justice and equality in the world, it is necessary to collectively acquire these qualities. All should have the resilience to withstand poverty, weakness, loss of friends and allies, shortage of manpower and resources, and the rigours and consequences of war and striving to serve God's cause.

The construction of this part of the verse in the Arabic original indicates that this quality is singled out as especially significant in the context of the verse as a whole. This gives added importance and a higher status in the sight of God to those possessing this quality.[1]

Thus we see how, in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān, a single short verse combines the essentials of faith and personal and financial Islamic obligations and presents them as a complete code under the all-embracing title of *al-birr,* which has been variously interpreted as 'righteousness', 'ultimate goodness' or, indeed, 'faith'. It is essentially a concise and complete statement of the basic philosophy of Islam and the principles of the Islamic code of living that must be evident in any Muslim society.

The verse ends with the words: "*Such are those who have proved themselves true, and such are the God fearing.*" (Verse 177) They will have been sincere in their faith and their commitment to God, and they will have proved themselves capable of translating that faith into a practical way of life. They are also God-fearing because they are conscious of God and of their bond with His power and grace, and they are conscientious in fulfilling their obligations towards Him.

In reflecting on the contents of this verse, one can clearly visualize the great heights to which God is aiming to raise human beings through Islam, His constitution. But as one looks at those who ignore Islam, or those who resist it and suppress or persecute its followers and supporters, and those who simply turn away from it, one cannot help being filled with sorrow.

Yet we must not despair. Our faith and trust in God fill our hearts with hope and confidence that the day is coming when humanity will come around to seeing the profound value, universal beauty and eternal qualities of Islam.

---

[1] See the commentary on Verses 128-130 in this volume, pp.160-167

10
Social Justice and Fasting

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُتِبَ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡقِصَاصُ فِي ٱلۡقَتۡلَى ۖ ٱلۡحُرُّ بِٱلۡحُرِّ وَٱلۡعَبۡدُ بِٱلۡعَبۡدِ وَٱلۡأُنثَىٰ بِٱلۡأُنثَىٰۚ فَمَنۡ عُفِيَ لَهُۥ مِنۡ أَخِيهِ شَيۡءٞ فَٱتِّبَاعُۢ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَأَدَآءٌ إِلَيۡهِ بِإِحۡسَٰنٖۗ ذَٰلِكَ تَخۡفِيفٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَةٞۗ فَمَنِ ٱعۡتَدَىٰ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ فَلَهُۥ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ﴿١٧٨﴾

Believers, just retribution is prescribed for you in cases of killing: a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave, and a female for a female. If something [of his guilt] is remitted to a person by his brother, this shall be pursued with fairness, and restitution to his fellow-man shall be made in a goodly manner. This is an alleviation from your Lord, and an act of His grace. He who transgresses thereafter shall face grievous suffering. (178)

وَلَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡقِصَاصِ حَيَوٰةٞ يَـٰٓأُوْلِي ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

There is life for you, men of understanding, in this law of just retribution, so that you may remain God-fearing. (179)

كُتِبَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَكُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ إِن تَرَكَ خَيۡرًا ٱلۡوَصِيَّةُ لِلۡوَٰلِدَيۡنِ وَٱلۡأَقۡرَبِينَ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِۖ حَقًّا عَلَى ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

It is prescribed for you, when death approaches any of you and he is leaving behind some property, to make bequests in favour of his parents and other near of kin in fairness. This is a duty incumbent on the God- fearing. (180)

فَمَنۢ بَدَّلَهُۥ بَعۡدَمَا سَمِعَهُۥ فَإِنَّمَآ إِثۡمُهُۥ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَدِّلُونَهُۥٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٞ ﴿١٨١﴾

If anyone alters a will after having come to know it, the sin of acting thus shall fall only on those who have altered it. God hears all and knows all. (181)

فَمَنۡ خَافَ مِن مُّوصٍ جَنَفًا أَوۡ إِثۡمٗا فَأَصۡلَحَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ فَلَآ إِثۡمَ عَلَيۡهِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ

If, however, one fears that the testator has committed a mistake or a wrong, and brings about a settlement between the parties concerned, he will incur no sin thereby. God is indeed much- Forgiving,

غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٨٢﴾

Merciful. (182)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُتِبَ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

Believers, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may be God-fearing. (183)

أَيَّامٗا مَّعۡدُودَٰتٖۚ فَمَن كَانَ مِنكُم مَّرِيضًا أَوۡ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٖ فَعِدَّةٞ مِّنۡ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَۚ وَعَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُۥ فِدۡيَةٞ طَعَامُ مِسۡكِينٖۖ فَمَن تَطَوَّعَ خَيۡرٗا فَهُوَ خَيۡرٞ لَّهُۥۚ وَأَن تَصُومُواْ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡۖ إِن كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٤﴾

[Fast] on a certain number of days. But whoever of you is ill, or on a journey, shall fast instead the same number of days later on. Those who find fasting a strain too hard to bear may compensate for it by feeding a needy person. He who does good of his own account does himself good thereby. For to fast is to do good to yourselves, if you only knew it. (184)

شَهۡرُ رَمَضَانَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ فِيهِ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانُ هُدٗى لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَٰتٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَٱلۡفُرۡقَانِۚ فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنكُمُ ٱلشَّهۡرَ فَلۡيَصُمۡهُۖ وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوۡ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٖ فَعِدَّةٞ مِّنۡ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَۗ يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ بِكُمُ ٱلۡيُسۡرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ ٱلۡعُسۡرَ وَلِتُكۡمِلُواْ ٱلۡعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُواْ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَىٰكُمۡ وَلَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿١٨٥﴾

It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'ān was revealed: a guidance for mankind and a self- evident proof of that guidance and a standard to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month shall fast throughout the month; but he who is ill or on a journey shall fast instead the same number of days later on. God desires that you have ease. He does not desire that you be afflicted with hardship. You are, however, required to complete the necessary number of days and to extol and glorify God for having guided you aright and to tender your thanks. (185)

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌۖ أُجِيبُ دَعۡوَةَ ٱلدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِۖ فَلۡيَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لِي وَلۡيُؤۡمِنُواْ بِي لَعَلَّهُمۡ

If My servants ask you about Me, well, I am near; I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls to Me. Let them then respond to Me, and believe in Me, so

that they may follow the right way. (186)

يَرۡشُدُونَ ١٨٦

It is lawful for you to be intimate with your wives during the night preceding the fast. They are as a garment for you, as you are for them. God is aware that you have been deceiving yourselves in this respect, and He has turned to you in His mercy and pardoned you. So, you may now lie with them and seek what God has ordained for you. Eat and drink until you can see the white streak of dawn against the blackness of the night. Then resume the fast till nightfall. Do not lie with your wives when you are in retreat in the mosques. These are the bounds set by God, so do not come near them. Thus God makes clear His revelations to people, that they may remain God-fearing. (187)

أُحِلَّ لَكُمۡ لَيۡلَةَ ٱلصِّيَامِ ٱلرَّفَثُ إِلَىٰ نِسَآئِكُمۡۚ هُنَّ لِبَاسٞ لَّكُمۡ وَأَنتُمۡ لِبَاسٞ لَّهُنَّۗ عَلِمَ ٱللَّهُ أَنَّكُمۡ كُنتُمۡ تَخۡتَانُونَ أَنفُسَكُمۡ فَتَابَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَعَفَا عَنكُمۡۖ فَٱلۡـَٰٔنَ بَٰشِرُوهُنَّ وَٱبۡتَغُواْ مَا كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡۚ وَكُلُواْ وَٱشۡرَبُواْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡخَيۡطُ ٱلۡأَبۡيَضُ مِنَ ٱلۡخَيۡطِ ٱلۡأَسۡوَدِ مِنَ ٱلۡفَجۡرِۖ ثُمَّ أَتِمُّواْ ٱلصِّيَامَ إِلَى ٱلَّيۡلِۚ وَلَا تُبَٰشِرُوهُنَّ وَأَنتُمۡ عَٰكِفُونَ فِي ٱلۡمَسَٰجِدِۗ تِلۡكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ فَلَا تَقۡرَبُوهَاۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَّقُونَ ١٨٧

Do not devour one another's property wrongfully, nor bribe with it the judges in order that you may sinfully, and knowingly, deprive others of any part of what is rightfully theirs. (188)

وَلَا تَأۡكُلُوٓاْ أَمۡوَٰلَكُم بَيۡنَكُم بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ وَتُدۡلُواْ بِهَآ إِلَى ٱلۡحُكَّامِ لِتَأۡكُلُواْ فَرِيقٗا مِّنۡ أَمۡوَٰلِ ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلۡإِثۡمِ وَأَنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ١٨٨

Overview

This passage covers a series of instructions relating to the social organization of the Muslim community during its formative period in Madinah. It also introduces certain aspects of Muslim religious worship. The two parts go hand in hand, and are linked with the notion of maintaining a sense of God-fearing, or *taqwā,* which is emphasized towards the end of each part. It is worth recalling that the same feature of *taqwā* was highlighted at the end of the previous verse (177), which outlined the

fundamental elements of righteousness, incorporating aspects of faith and practical behaviour.

The passage discusses the legal aspects of just retribution *(qişāş)* in cases of killing. It outlines rulings on will and inheritance, and outlines provisions relating to fasting, prayer, retirement to a mosque for a certain period of time *(i`tikāf)*, and rules governing financial claims.

The outline of each of these and other subjects in the passage is concluded with a direct or an indirect reference to *taqwā*.

This consistent and deliberate approach highlights the essential nature of the religion of Islam. It is an integral system, an indivisible whole. Its social systems, legislative codes, and religious rituals emanate from faith and the comprehensive world order it generates. These are all held together by a common goal of submission to, and veneration of God, the Creator and the Provider, who has instituted man as His vicegerent and custodian in this world. This trusteeship is conditional on man's worship of God alone and on receiving all his concepts, systems and laws from Him only.

The passage is a notable example of the cohesion of the various aspects of Islam.

The Law of Just Retribution

> *Believers, just retribution is prescribed for you in cases of killing: a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave, and a female for a female. If something [of his guilt] is remitted to a person by his brother, this shall be pursued with fairness, and restitution to his fellow-man shall be made in a goodly manner. This is an alleviation from your Lord, and an act of His grace. He who transgresses thereafter shall face grievous suffering. There is life for you, men of understanding, in this law of just retribution, so that you may remain God-fearing.* (Verses 178-179)

The passage begins with an address to the believers, highlighting their main quality of having accepted the faith, which means that they receive their laws from God. They are hereby informed that retribution in cases of killing is permitted to them, in accordance with the provisions laid down in these two verses. They are also called upon to reflect on the purpose and wisdom of this legislation, outlined in the second verse. They are reminded of the need to enhance their sense of God-fearing, which acts as a safety valve against any excess or injustice in punishing those accused of killing.

The statement clearly indicates how retribution ought to be exacted: a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave, a woman for a woman. But "*If something [of his guilt] is remitted to a person by his brother, this shall be pursued with fairness, and restitution to his*

fellow-man shall be made in a goodly manner." (Verse 178) This situation would arise when the victim's relatives decide to accept financial compensation instead of insisting on the execution of the killer in retaliation. Once this is agreed, the victim's relatives are also under an obligation to seek a fair and amicable settlement, while the killer's guardian or representative must, on his part, settle readily and honourably. This serves to clear the air and to remove any ill-feelings or grudges that would have inevitably arisen between the two parties. It would also be conducive to a more friendly and pleasant relationship between the living members of both parties.

This provision has been laid down out of God's grace, as a special favour and an act of mercy towards believers: *"This is an alleviation from your Lord, and an act of His grace."* (Verse 178) The concession permitting the settlement of cases of killing by financial compensation paid to the victim's family was not given to the Jews in the Torah. For Islam, it has been set up as an alternative aiming to spare lives when agreement and amicable settlement can be reached.

"He who transgresses thereafter shall face grievous suffering." (Verse 178) It is not merely the punishment in the hereafter that is certain to come; such aggression means that capital punishment becomes due and financial compensation no longer accepted. Reneging on the agreement constitutes a violation of the agreed settlement and could only fuel hatred, animosity and a desire for vengeance from both sides. Therefore, when the victim's closest relatives have accepted blood money, they can no longer seek retaliation by killing the killer.

We can appreciate the profound wisdom of the Islamic approach and its respect for, and understanding of, human nature and motivation. Islam recognizes anger as a very basic human reaction when one's relative is killed, and Islam satisfies this desire by legislating for just retribution in this way. Rigorous justice cools tempers and helps to remove grudges and deter the killer from offending again.

At the same time, however, Islam holds out the prospect of pardon and opens the way for mutual agreement, defining precisely the principles and rules which govern it. Islam advocates that the alternative of pardon should, therefore, come as a voluntary option accepted by both sides out of a genuine desire for reconciliation, rather than having it forced upon them.

Some commentators consider that this ruling was cancelled and superseded by that given in Verse 45 of *Sūrah* 5, which provides for retribution on the basis of "*a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds.*" In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr quotes Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, an early scholar, explaining that the present verse was revealed with reference to fighting that broke out between two Arab clans, shortly before the advent of Islam, leading to widespread bloodshed on both *sides.* Among those killed

were several slaves and women, but the dispute was not settled until much later, after both clans had embraced Islam. Excessive claims were made by both clans, demanding that a free man be killed for a slave and a man for a woman. They could not reach a settlement until this verse was revealed. But this verse has, in turn, been superseded by Verse 45 of *Sūrah* 5 revealed at a later date. The same version is supported in a report by Abū Mālik.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the two verses are dealing with different aspects of the same issue, retribution for killing. Verse 5: 45, stating equal retribution is applicable in cases of premeditated murder of one specific person, or group of persons, by another, in which case conviction entails capital punishment. The verse we are discussing here, however, covers situations of assault by a group such as when a family, clan or community attacks another, as happened between those two Arab clans. As and when such conflicts come to be settled, just retribution would require that a free man be set against a free man, a slave against a slave, and a woman against a woman. How else in such cases, one may ask, can justice be seen to be done?

If this view is correct, then there is no conflict between the two verses, and the rulings of each remain valid without one superseding or replacing the other.

Revealing the profound wisdom underlying this ruling, and its objectives, the verse ends with the words: *"There is life for you, men of understanding, in this law of just retribution, so that you may remain God fearing."* (Verse 179)

Vengeance, or the satisfaction of grudges, is not the prime goal of this legislation. Its objective is to promote and preserve human life. Furthermore, there is an invitation to reflect on the wisdom of this code and an endeavour to raise believers' consciousness and fear of God.

Life Preservation through Retribution

This is achieved by providing strong deterrence, preventing further crimes from being committed. When a person knows for certain that the price he will pay for committing murder is his own life, he is more likely to stop and think before deciding to go ahead. Life is also preserved by giving satisfaction to the victim's relatives in exacting justice on the offender, with the effect that they will neither seek, nor have the right to seek, further revenge on the offender's family. In pre-Islamic Arabia the desire for vengeance knew no limits, leading to protracted wars and conflicts that continued for years on end — the notorious al-Basūs[1] wars lasted, on

[1] Al-Basūs is the name given to a series of tribal conflicts which took place in pre-Islamic Arabia, and continued sporadically over a period of some forty years.

and off, for forty years. There were other family, tribal and clan feuds in which vendettas and bloodshed continued for generations.

The law of just retribution promotes life in a wider and more comprehensive sense. Murder is an aggression on life and a criminal act against humanity as a whole. In preventing a single murder from being committed, the law upholds the inviolability of life as an absolute value. This is a far higher goal than saving the life of an individual or a group of people. It is a goal that enshrines life.

More importantly, the verse urges believers to reflect deeply on this matter and discover the wisdom behind the code, in order *"that you may remain God-fearing".*

This is the real deterrent that can prevent murder being committed in the first instance, and stop vendettas being pursued endlessly. Without this measure of deterrence, no law can be successfully upheld and crime can never he effectively rooted out. Laws and regulations that lack such sensitivity, or do not evoke in people the fear and respect of an authority higher and more powerful than the human one, are inadequate and ineffective.

This explains the remarkably small number of cases in which capital punishment was carried out during the Prophet Muĥammad's era and that of his early successors. In most of those cases, conviction was based on confessions voluntarily made by the offenders themselves. Fear and consciousness of God, *taqwā,* were evident in the public conscience which, together with enlightened and wise legislation, served as a most effective deterrent. Legal codes and regulations were supplemented by religious discipline, education and exhortation to produce a balanced and virtuous society, with clear concepts of responsibility and justice.

The renowned contemporary scholar, Abū al-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī puts it thus:

> If anyone ever succumbed to beastly urges and fell into error, even though unobserved, he would make a confession there of straightaway before the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine Displeasure.[1]

The next piece of legislation introduced in the *sūrah* relates to personal wills: "*It is prescribed for you, when death approaches any of you and he is leaving behind some property, to make bequests in favour of his parents and other near of kin in fairness. This is a duty incumbent on the God-fearing. If anyone alters a will after having come to know it, the sin of acting thus shall fall only on those who have altered it. God hears all and knows all. If however, one fears that the testator has committed a mistake or a wrong, and brings about a settlement between the parties concerned, he will incur no sin thereby. God is indeed much*

[1] Abū al-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World.* Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, Lucknow, 1980, p.56

forgiving, merciful." (Verses 180-182)

Before the revelation of the verses in *Sūrah* 5 specifying the exact share of inheritance due to each heir, it was an incumbent duty on Muslims to make a will in favour of parents and other near of kin. The Arabic term *khayr,* translated here as "property", also means "good" and "goodness", and some commentators interpret it to denote wealth generally.

Scholars differ, however, as to the minimum amount of wealth for which drawing up a will becomes obligatory. The majority view is that this is decided by convention. Assets ranging in value between sixty and a thousand dīnārs have been mentioned, but surely this must differ from one generation to another and from one society to another.

The Qur'ānic verses, 4: 11, 12 and 176, specifying shares for the distribution of inheritance were revealed at a later date than those under discussion here. Those verses make parents legally entitled to specific shares of their departed children's wealth. Hence, no bequest by will may be made to them. The Prophet established the rule that no will may be made in favour of an heir. As for other relatives the present rule holds in general terms, except for relatives who are named as heirs in the relevant verses on inheritance in *Sūrah* 4. All other non-inheriting relatives may be included in a will. This is the view of a number of the Prophet's Companions and their successors, to which we subscribe.

The provision of including non-inheriting relatives in one's will is extremely perceptive because it benefits, in particular, those relatives who are not assigned a share or entitled to any inheritance. Providing for them through a will strengthens family ties and promotes the welfare of the family.

In this way equitable distribution of wealth is guaranteed: heirs are not wronged, and other relatives are not ignored. A will should be made combining moderation, kindness and benevolence. As an additional measure, the Prophet specified that a maximum of one-third, and preferably a quarter, of the inheritance may be bequeathed by will. This ensures that the rights of natural heirs are not unfavourably affected by the will. These legal measures are reinforced, as is the case with all social legislation in Islam, by a positive fear and consciousness of God Almighty.

Anyone having knowledge of the contents of a will who, after the death of the testator, gives himself the right to alter any of its details will be guilty of grave misconduct. The deceased would bear no blame for such unauthorized alteration. *"If anyone alters a will after having come to know it, the sin of acting thus shall fall only on those who have altered it. God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 181) God will be the witness to the deceased's innocence as well as to the guilt of those who tamper with the will, and He will deal with each of them accordingly.

There is, however, one exceptional situation in which an executor may amend the contents of a will. This arises when the executor realizes that the will favours some beneficiaries at the expense of others or that it prejudices one or more of the heirs. *"If, however, one fears that the testator has committed a mistake or a wrong, and brings about a settlement between the parties concerned, he will incur no sin thereby. God is indeed much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 182) Here again, the action is closely linked to how conscientious and God-fearing the people involved are. This quality, as we saw earlier in our discussion of just retribution, is the basis of the Islamic concepts of justice and honesty, and of public responsibility in an Islamic society.

Fasting: Its Nature and Purpose

For the Muslim community, or *ummah,* duty-bound to undertake a campaign of struggle, i.e. *jihad,* as a means of establishing God's universal order, to assume the leadership of mankind, and to stand witness against the rest of mankind, it is only natural that fasting should he made obligatory. Fasting is a means of testing man's determination and will-power, and an important aspect of man's relationship with God. It is a discipline that teaches man how to rise above his physical needs and overcome the pressure of temptation in order to earn God's blessings and reward.

These are essential ingredients for the discipline and training of the believers so that they may carry God's message forward despite the temptations, the obstacles and hardships they are bound to encounter.

Although I am not in favour of justifying religious obligations and practices, especially in matters of worship, on the grounds of their immediate material benefits, which become apparent with experience or through scientific discovery, I would not deny that fasting has several obvious health benefits. But in my view, the whole purpose underlying religious obligations is far greater and more comprehensive than any physical advantages gained from them. The overall aim is to adequately equip man for the fulfilment of his role in this world and for the perfection he is intended to achieve in the life to come.

It is obvious that all religious practices and obligations are ordained by God with full consideration of man's physical needs and capabilities, but we should not justify them solely on the basis of what our knowledge, limited as it is, may discover. The scope of human knowledge remains limited and incapable of comprehending the divine wisdom behind the order and the system God has chosen for the discipline of man and the administration of the universe as a whole.

> *Believers, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may be God-fearing. [Fast] on a certain number of days. But whoever of you is ill, or*

> *on a journey, shall fast instead the same number of days later on. Those who find fasting a strain too hard to bear may compensate for it by feeding a needy person. He who does good of his own account does himself good thereby. For to fast is to do good to yourselves, if you only knew it. It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed: a guidance for mankind and a self-evident proof of that guidance and a standard to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month shall fast throughout the month; but he who is ill or on a journey shall fast instead the same number of days later on. God desires that you have ease. He does not desire that you be afflicted with hardship. You are, however, required to complete the necessary number of days and to extol and glorify God for having guided you aright and to tender your thanks.* (Verses 183-185)

This important announcement begins by addressing believers directly to remind them of who they are and of their status with God. God is aware that for believers to fulfil any religious obligation, regardless of its immediate benefits, they need encouragement and motivation. Hence they are addressed by their essential quality of having faith.

The verse establishes that fasting had been made obligatory for earlier believers, and that the aim behind it is to open their hearts to God and make them more conscious of Him. This, then, is the principal objective of fasting: to be God-fearing, or *taqwā*. Fasting, when observed in obedience to God and in pursuit of His pleasure, instils and revives this quality in the human heart and acts as a safeguard against evil and wrongdoing. True believers know and appreciate the value of being God-fearing in God's sight. Hence, they constantly seek to enhance their sense of it. Fasting is a means to achieve just that.

Fasting is prescribed for a specific number of days. It is not required the whole year round. Nevertheless, those who are ill or travelling are exempt from fasting until they recover or return home.

On the face of it, the type and extent of the illness and the travel to which the exemption applies are left unqualified. Therefore, any kind of illness or travel would exempt one from fasting, provided one makes up for it at some other time, after one has recovered or returned home. This would seem to be the most appropriate interpretation of the Qur'ānic statement, truly reflecting the overriding Islamic objective of mitigating hardship and relieving discomfort. The concession is not conditional on either the severity of the illness or on how arduous the journey is, because in all cases people should not have to undergo any undue strain as a result of fasting.

There could be other considerations, known only to God, for leaving the conditions so general. Fasting during illness or in the course of a journey could result in hardship or adverse effects that human beings cannot foresee or predict. We take

the ruling as it is stated, in the certain belief that there are valid reasons behind it.

Some people may fear that such a view may encourage a more lax attitude that could lead to abuse of such concessions, rendering them an easy excuse for neglecting religious observances and practices. This concern is said to account for the strict terms set by Muslim scholars on the use of these concessions, but it should not, in my view, justify the need to restrict an unqualified Qur'ānic ruling such as the one under discussion.

Islam does not lead people to obedience by force. It guides them through their consciousness of God, which is the ultimate objective in this particular case. Those who use concessions to evade religious obligation merely bring their own faith under suspicion, because their attitude negates the very purpose of the obligation.

Above all, it is important to keep in mind that Islam is a religion laid down by God not by man, and He is best aware of how much tightening or relaxation is prudent in fulfilling its obligations. It must be the case, then, that a concession can under certain circumstances serve a particular purpose far more effectively than would strict adherence to the rule. From this we find that the Prophet Muĥammad instructed Muslims to avail themselves of the concessions and exemptions God has allowed them.

If it so happens that in certain generations people's behaviour tends to become corrupt, reform will not be achieved through a stricter application of religious rules. A better chance of reform would come through enlightenment, education and motivation in order to instil the quality of fearing God in people's hearts.

At times of social decline, a stricter application of religious rules would, indeed, be desirable as a deterrent in matters relating to public or collective behaviour. But the fulfilment of personal religious obligations is largely a matter between God and each individual, with little or no direct influence on the public interest. In public duties — unlike personal religious duties which are based on faith — appearance and form have considerable significance. Once *taqwā,* or the fear of God, takes its roots, one would not resort to concessions except when absolutely necessary, and with a clear conscience. A concession is thus exercised only when one is fully satisfied that it is conducive to achieving a higher degree of obedience to God.

Strictness in the application of the rules relating to acts of worship generally, and the tendency to restrict unqualified exemptions, can be counter-productive. Besides causing hardship and discomfort, they have little effect in dissuading those who want to evade the rules. It is far more appropriate to approach Islam and understand it within the terms and the framework in which it is presented by God, who is wiser and more aware of all the advantages to be gained from fulfilling its obligations.

Exemption from Fasting when Travelling

A number of reported incidents illustrate the Prophet's attitude towards the exemption from fasting in Ramadan while travelling. These give us a glimpse of how the early Muslims received and implemented such rules, long before scholars introduced legal technicalities. These reports reflect a realistic and dynamic approach to Islam which gives it, and life under it, a vigorous and agreeable meaning.

1. Jābir reports that it was in the month of Ramadan that the Prophet left Madinah for Makkah, the year it fell to Islam. He observed the fast until he reached Kurā` al-Ghamīm, and so did those who marched with him. Then he called for a glass of water, raised it for everyone to see, and drank from it. Later he was told that some people continued to fast. He said, "They are disobedient! They are disobedient!" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī]
2. Anas reports: "A group of us were once travelling with the Prophet in Ramadan. Some of us were fasting and some were not. On a hot day, we stopped to rest, with little or no shade available. The one who had maximum shade was a person who had a shirt to cover himself. Some used their hands as a cover from the sun. Those who were fasting collapsed of exhaustion while those who were not pitched the tents and gave water to the animals. Commenting, the Prophet said: "Those who are not fasting have run away with the whole reward today." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Nasā'ī]
3. Jābir reports: "Once on a journey, the Prophet saw a group of people gathered to shade a fellow traveller. When he enquired what was wrong with him, he was told that the man was fasting. The Prophet said, "It is not righteous to fast while on a journey." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī]
4. `Amr ibn Umayyah al-Đamarī reports: "On arriving from a journey, I reported to the Prophet who invited me to stay for lunch. I apologised because I was fasting. The Prophet said, 'Then let me tell you about the traveller: God has exempted him from fasting and half his prayers.'" [Related by al-Nasā'ī]
5. A man from the clan of `Abdullāh ibn Ka`b ibn Mālik, called Anas ibn Mālik, quotes the Prophet as saying, "God has reduced the prayer for the traveller by half and exempted him from fasting. He has also exempted from fasting the nursing mother and the pregnant woman if they fear for their babies" [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al- Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah]
6. `Ā'ishah reports that Ĥamzah ibn `Amr al-Aslamī, who was frequently fasting, once asked the Prophet about fasting while travelling, to which the Prophet replied: "You may fast if you wish, or you may not." [Related by

Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī] Another version of this *ĥadīth* describes the man as 'one who had no difficulty with fasting'.

7. Anas reports: "A group of us were travelling with the Prophet: some were fasting and others were not. No fasting person criticized anyone for not fasting, nor did any criticize others for fasting." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd]
8. Abū al-Dardā' reports: "We travelled with the Prophet one very hot day in Ramadan. We would even cover our heads with our hands because of the intense heat. None of us was fasting except the Prophet and Ibn Rawāĥah." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd]
9. Muĥammad ibn Ka`b reports: "I went in Ramadan to see Anas ibn Mālik as he was about to leave on a journey. When Anas was dressed and had his horse saddled and ready, he requested some food and ate. I asked whether this was the practice of the Prophet. Anas said, 'Yes.'" [Related by al-Tirmidhī]
10. 'Ubayd ibn Jubayr reports: "I was travelling from Fusṭāṭ by boat during Ramaḍān with Abū Başrah al-Ghifārī, a Companion of the Prophet (peace be upon him). As he set off on his journey, Abū Başrah asked for lunch to be brought to him. He said to me, 'Come and join me.' I said, 'We can still see the buildings on the shore,' (meaning they had not gone past the city, the Nile). Abū Başrah said, 'Are you unwilling to follow the Prophet's example, or *Sunnah.*' He then started eating and I joined him." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]
11. Manşūr al-Kalbī reports that Diĥyah ibn Khalīfah, a Companion of the Prophet, was travelling a distance of about five kilometres from a suburb of Damascus during Ramaḍān. Neither did he fast, nor did many of the people with him. Some, however, were reluctant to break the fast. When he returned to his home village, Diĥyah said, "By God, I have today seen something I thought I would never see: people unwilling to follow the example of God's Messenger and his Companions. My Lord, gather me to You!" [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Taken together, these reports support the view that the option of not fasting while on a journey ought to be taken unconditionally to alleviate hardship. This is particularly clear in the last two reports. The incident reported by Abū al-Dardā', which relates that the Prophet and only one of his Companions continued to fast despite the severe heat, should be taken as an exceptional case. In certain religious matters, the Prophet was known to commit himself to a much more rigorous discipline than he would recommend to his Companions. He, for example, ordered that no one should fast two days running without the normal night break. Yet, he did

so on some occasions. When he was asked about that, he said: "I am not like you; my Lord feeds me and gives me to drink." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim] The first report cited above clearly shows that the Prophet broke his fast and described those who continued to fast as 'disobedient'. The incident happened around the time of the conquest of Makkah, which occurred towards the end of the Prophet's life. Hence, this *ĥadīth* is a better pointer to the option preferred by the Prophet.

The common thread in all these incidents is that in issuing any directive, mitigating circumstances are always taken into account. This is so whenever several *aĥadīth* referring to the same subject seem to point in different directions. The Prophet Muĥammad was a leader and a teacher dealing with real situations and giving practical rulings and solutions in each case.

As far as fasting while travelling is concerned, one gets the distinct impression that the ruling is strongly in favour of exemption from fasting without restricting the exemption to cases of hardship. As for the licence to break the fast during illness, apart from the different opinions of scholars, it also seems to be granted unconditionally and without qualification. Implicit in this ruling is the requirement that the missing days must be compensated for at a later date, with no requirement to make the compensatory fasting days consecutive.

The purpose of this detailed discussion and quotations is not to get involved in any legal discussion, but to highlight two important aspects in understanding rulings relevant to matters of personal worship. A paramount objective is to create a healthy attitude, in order to cultivate the worshipper's conscience, improve his performance, and raise the standards of his behaviour in life generally. Another consideration is that Islam must be adopted in its totality and as God has intended. All its instructions, the hard as well as the lenient, must be accepted in equal measure. They should be taken in total confidence in God's mercy and wisdom, always aiming to enhance our God-fearing sense.

Obligatory Fasting

Fasting was made obligatory for Muslims in the second year after the *Hijrah,* i.e. the Prophet's migration from Makkah to Madinah (which was to become the start of the Islamic lunar calendar). Thus, the obligation of fasting was decreed shortly before the ordinance of *jihād,* or striving for God's cause. As a new duty, fasting was at first hard for the Muslims to observe. Those who found it too strenuous were, therefore, given a concession, requiring them instead to feed one needy person for every day of fasting they miss. A general recommendation to feed the needy is then made, either as a voluntary act in itself or by feeding more than the minimum number of needy people in lieu of fasting. "*He who does good of his own account does himself good thereby.*"

(Verse 184) This is followed by the recommendation that, apart from cases of illness or travel, fasting would be more beneficial and preferable despite the hardship or discomfort it might cause: *"For to fast is to do good to yourselves, if you only knew it."* (Verse 184) There is here an obvious element of education and training of will-power to enable Muslims to make the effort to fast. This also highlights the health benefits of fasting, in spite of the strain, all of which are important factors in the Islamic self-education process.

These recommendations were a step towards the withdrawal of the exemption for non-travelling healthy people and making fasting in the month of Ramadan obligatory, as given in verse 185. The concession remained valid for elderly people who find fasting in Ramadan too strenuous and are not expected to be able to fast at a later date.

Imām Mālik reports that Anas ibn Mālik, a Companion of the Prophet Muĥammad, lived to a very advanced age and was not able to keep the fast. He used to compensate by feeding poor people instead. `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, a cousin and learned Companion of the Prophet, was of the opinion that the exemption has not been completely abrogated by the ruling of verse 185; it remains applicable to the elderly who are not able to keep the fast.

Ibn Abī Laylā, a prominent scholar, says that he visited `Aṭā' one day in Ramadan and found him eating." (`Aṭā' told me that, according to Ibn `Abbās, the ruling of verse 185 superseded that of the one before it with respect to healthy non-travelling people, but the elderly were free not to fast if they fed instead one needy person for every day."

Fasting was made more appealing due to the fact that it is observed in Ramadan, the month in which the Qur'ān was revealed. This could be a reference to the fact that it was first revealed during Ramadan, or that most of it was revealed in it. It is a significant distinction since the Qur'ān is the definitive and timeless Book of the Muslim community, its guiding light, the source of its strength and security, from which it has drawn all the enduring qualities and elements that have made it great. Without the gifts that the Qur'ān has given the Muslim community, it would have become forgotten history long ago. As a token of gratitude to God Almighty, Muslims observe the fast in the month of Ramadan during which the Qur'ān was revealed.

> *It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'ān was revealed: a guidance for mankind and a self-evident proof of that guidance and a standard to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month shall fast throughout the month; but he who is ill or on a journey shall fast instead the same number of days later on.* (Verse 185)

This verse establishes fasting in Ramadan as obligatory for all healthy non-travelling Muslims, with no concessions except for the elderly, as pointed out above: *"Whoever of you is present in that month shall fast throughout the month."* It has thus become binding on all Muslims who either see the new moon of the lunar month of Ramadan themselves or learn of it by any other reliable means, to observe the fast in Ramadan. But as this is a general order applicable to all, a reiteration of the concession given in special cases immediately follows: "*But he who is ill or on a journey shall fast instead the same number of days later on."*

The *sūrah* gives the Muslims yet another incentive to keep the fast: "*God desires that you have ease. He does not desire that you be afflicted with hardship."* (Verse 185) This statement encapsulates the fundamental principle on which all Islamic religious duties are founded. They are intended to be easy, not arduous. This indicates a generous and realistic outlook on life as a whole. It instils in the Muslim heart a tolerant, easy and agreeable attitude. Religious and social activities and responsibilities are discharged with ease, confidence and assurance, in the happy knowledge that God's purpose is to enable man to go through life with the minimum of hardship or discomfort.

To complete a whole month, sick people or those who travel in Ramadan and avail themselves of the special concession are required to make up for days missed by fasting an equal number of days at a later date in the year: "*You are, however, required to complete the necessary number of days."* (Verse 185)

Fasting is an occasion to celebrate God's guidance, glory and grace. Hence the requirement "*to extol and glorify God for having guided you aright and to tender your thanks."* (Verse 185) It is a time during which believers can feel and appreciate God's favours and reciprocate with thanks, submission and gratitude. In so doing, Muslims cultivate the precious and vital quality of *taqwā,* or God-fearing; a main objective of fasting.

Thus we can see how evident God's grace is in the imposition of the duty of fasting which, on the face of it, seems hard and demanding. We can clearly see its educational and disciplinary benefits for a nation being prepared for the leadership of mankind, guided by a genuine fear of God, a keen sense of accountability, and a vigorous conscience.

A Close Relationship with God

Interposed among the verses dealing with fasting comes a verse reflecting a profound insight into human nature. It reaches to the deepest recesses of the human psyche, offering solace and ample rewards for keeping the fast in response to God's commands: "*If My servants ask you about Me, well, I am near; I answer the prayer of the*

supplicant when he calls to Me. Let them then respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may follow the right way." (Verse 186)

How kind and compassionate God truly is! Any hardship encountered in keeping the fast fades in comparison with this friendly and gentle reassurance. The choice of words creates an atmosphere of intimacy and accessibility, with God Himself stating a direct contact between Him and His servants. He does not give instructions to His Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad on how to answer believers' questions about Him. He gives the answer Himself: "*I am near."* His closeness is not only to listen but also for immediate response: "*I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls to Me."* (Verse 186)

This verse fills a believer's heart with love, confidence and utter reassurance. In this atmosphere of friendliness and compassion, God, who has no need for anyone, directs believers to respond to Him and believe in Him, in the hope that this will guide them to wisdom and righteousness. *"Let them then respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may follow the right way." (*Verse 186) By earning God's generosity and guidance, believers end up winners on all counts.

Belief in God and response to His commands lead to true guidance. The way of life God has ordained for man is the only one truly worthy of adoption and adherence; all other ideologies lead only to ruin and frustration. When one responds to God's call, one must be confident that God will answer one's prayers (*du`ā'*). However, one should not hasten God's response, for He alone decides the most appropriate time to respond.

Salmān, the Persian, a Companion of the Prophet, quotes the Prophet as saying: "God would not like to see His servant holding out his arms pleading for help and turn him away empty handed." [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah]

`Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit quotes the Prophet as saying: "God shall answer the prayer (*du`ā'*) of any Muslim anywhere on earth, or He will protect him against contrasting harm, as long as he does not ask for something evil or for the break-up of kinship relations." [Related by al-Tirmidhī on ibn Thawbān's authority and by `Abdullāh ibn Imām Aĥmad]

The Prophet is also reported to have said: "Your prayers shall be answered as long as you remain patient. Do not say, 'I have prayed but my prayer has never been answered!'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

He is also reported as saying: "Prayers [*du`ā'*] shall be answered unless one asks for something evil or the break-up of kinship relations, and as long as one does not become impatient." When the Prophet was asked to explain how one becomes impatient, he said: "One says, 'I have prayed many times but I have had no response,' then gives up hope and abandons praying [*du`ā'*] altogether." [Related by

Muslim]

A fasting person has the best chance of his prayers being answered. Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālisī relates on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Umar that the Prophet said: "The prayer a fasting person says at the time when he is about to finish his fast shall be answered." Accordingly, `Abdullāh ibn `Umar, a learned Companion of the Prophet, used to gather his family together when breaking the fast and pray.

Ibn Mājah also relates a *ĥadīth* in which `Abdullāh ibn `Umar quoted the Prophet as saying: "On breaking the fast, the prayer of a fasting person is never turned down." This is supported by a *ĥadīth* in which Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "Prayers by three people shall never be turned down: a just ruler, a fasting person until he breaks the fast, and the oppressed for whose prayer [*du`ā'*] the gates of heaven shall be opened wide and God shall say to him, 'By My power, I shall support you, even though it may be in due course.'" [Related by Imām Aĥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah]

From these reports one can clearly see the close relationship between prayer and fasting.

Further Rules on Fasting

The *sūrah* then resumes its elaboration on the rules of fasting. It points out that, in addition to food and drink, married Muslims are permitted sexual intimacy with their spouses between sunset and dawn. It gives the exact time for the fasting which extends from dawn till sunset. It points out that during any period when people retire to a mosque for worship in Ramadan, i.e. *i`tikāf,* sexual intimacy is not permitted for married people.

> *It is lawful for you to be intimate with your wives during the night preceding the fast. They are as a garment for you, as you are for them. God is aware that you have been deceiving yourselves in this respect, and He has turned to you in His mercy and pardoned you. So, you may now lie with them and seek what God has ordained for you. Eat and drink until you can see the white streak of dawn against the blackness of the night. Then resume the fast till nightfall. Do not lie with your wives when you are in retreat in the mosques. These are the bounds set by God, so do not come near them. Thus God makes clear His revelations to people, that they may remain God- fearing.* (Verse 187)

When fasting was first instituted, once one got to sleep at night, one would not eat, drink or have sexual intercourse with his wife, even if one woke up before dawn. It so happened that some Muslims did not have anything to eat at the time of the evening meal. One person was overtaken by sleep before he could eat anything and

had to fast the following day as well, which made the fast arduous. Likewise, some were inclined to have sexual intercourse and did so. The Prophet became acutely aware of the hardship the Muslims were experiencing. Soon afterwards, God eased the situation by revealing this verse as a token of His mercy and benevolence.

"It is lawful for you to be intimate with your wives during the night preceding the fast." (Verse 187) The Arabic expression translated here as 'to be intimate with one's wife' denotes the preliminaries of sex, or denotes sexual intercourse. In fact, both are intended here and made lawful. However, in setting out this rule, God does not overlook to describe the marital relationship in transparent and compassionate terms: *"They are as a garment for you, as you are for them."* The word used to describe the marital relationship in the Arabic original is *libās*, literally meaning garment. Marriage does indeed cover and protect both spouses. Islam fully takes into account man's natural drives, instincts and desires. It elevates man, treating him as one integral entity. Accordingly, Islam responds to the needs of the flesh, incorporating them into a decent and virtuous context.

The verse reveals the fact that some Muslims were finding it difficult to suppress their natural sexual desires, and some were even breaking the rules: *"God is aware that you have been deceiving yourselves in this respect, and He has turned to you in His mercy and pardoned you."* (Verse 187) The self deception mentioned here refers to suppressed desires, or to the breach of the rules, as happened in some cases. Whichever was the case, the Qur'ān affirms that God understood their weaknesses and forgave them. New rules are laid down: *"You may now lie with them and seek what God has ordained for you."* (Verse 187) It tells the Muslims that they are allowed to enjoy the intimacy of their spouses to satisfy their craving and to seek offspring, both of which are legitimate aspects of the relationship.

Thus, marriage is given a much wider dimension and higher objectives, over and above the mere satisfaction of the carnal sexual desire. It assumes an honourable status that must be cherished, treasured and protected.

These hints that the Qur'ān gives from time to time indicate the credit that should be given to the effort Islam dedicates to raising man's moral and ethical standards within the parameters of his human nature and disposition. This is what makes Islam such a unique, practical and effective way for education and development. It is, after all, God's way.

The verse goes on to define the parts of the day and night allocated for fasting and eating, respectively, which, when taken with reports from the Prophet's own practice, indicate that fasting begins not long before sunrise. However, it seems to me that we, in Egypt, start fasting sometime before it is due, perhaps as a precautionary measure.

Ibn Jarīr relates on the authority of Samurah ibn Jundub who quotes the Prophet as saying: "Do not take much heed of Bilāl's call for dawn Prayer or this whiteness; do not start the fast until dawn breaks fully." Another version quotes the Prophet as saying: "Do not abstain from eating if you hear Bilāl calling for the dawn Prayer, or when you see the elongated dawn light. But begin the fast when the dawn spreads over the horizon." This means the light spreading in the eastern sky a short while before sunrise. It is also important to recall here that Bilāl used to raise the call to prayer early to wake people up, while Ibn Umm Maktūm used to make a second call at a later time to indicate the beginning of the fast. Hence, the Prophet clarifies the point of starting the fast.

The *sūrah* then instructs the Muslims not to lie with their wives when they decide to retreat in the mosques. This is a reference to a special practice known in Arabic as *i`tikāf*. It is an act of devotion involving a stay in the mosque for several days during the last ten days of the month of Ramadan, for prolonged Prayer, recitation of the Qur'ān, reflection and spiritual rejuvenation. Once one decides to observe *i`tikāf* one will only go home when it is necessary. The Prophet was known to observe this practice during the last ten days of the month. To enhance their sense of devotion and enable them to concentrate their hearts and minds on the worship of God during such retreat, or *i`tikāf* Muslims are barred from sexual intercourse with their wives during such period.

The *sūrah* then links these rules and instructions directly with God, emphasizing that: "*These are the bounds set by God, so do not come near them.*" (Verse 187) Although the Qur'ān uses the words *'come near'*, the warning is against the violation of these bounds. But a margin of safety has to be maintained, because man cannot always rely on his moral strength and self-control. It is far better to keep away from evil rather than walk into it, over-confident of resisting, and then failing to do so. Prudence is liable to develop and cultivate that very precious quality of God-fearing, one of the most fundamental goals the Qur'ān is coaching man to attain in his life: "*Thus God makes clear His revelations to people, that they may remain God fearing.*" (Verse 187)

Honesty at All Times

Within this context of fasting and abstention from food and drink, the *sūrah* sounds another warning, this time against usurping other people's possessions. The verse refers specifically to presenting false and fraudulent evidence before a judge or an arbiter in order to obtain a favourable judgement giving one the right to appropriate someone else's property. To reinforce the sense of deterrence, the warning follows immediately after reference to the bounds set by God and the call for more consciousness and fear of Him.

> *Do not devour one another's property wrongfully, nor bribe with it the judges in order that you may sinfully, and knowingly, deprive others of any part of what is rightfully theirs.* (Verse 188)

Commenting on this verse, Ibn Kathīr cites a report by `Alī ibn Abī Ṭalĥah who quotes Ibn `Abbās, a cousin and Companion of the Prophet, as saying that the verse refers to someone owing money to another. Knowing that the creditor has no document to prove the debt, the debtor denies liability altogether. He would then put the matter before a judge, knowing very well that he is in the wrong, taking what is unlawful to him, and has no case whatsoever. He adds that Mujāhid, Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, `Ikrimah, al-Ĥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī, Muqātil ibn Ĥayyān, and `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Zayd ibn Aslam have all warned against contesting a dispute when one knows oneself to be in the wrong. Ibn Kathīr also refers to accounts in al-Bukhārī and Muslim in which Umm Salamah quotes the Prophet as saying: "I am only human. When you come to me for judgement, some of you may have a clearer piece of evidence, and I might be inclined to rule in their favour. If I give someone anything which is not rightly his, it would be as if I have given him a brand of fire; it is up to him to take it or leave it."

Judges decide on *prima facie* evidence, and the onus of honesty is on the litigants. They are left to their own conscience.

Thus we can see how this matter is also closely linked to *taqwā,* or the sense of God-fearing, as was just retribution and fasting before it. These rulings represent parts of a harmonious and divinely-ordained way of life, firmly bound together in a common framework of maintaining the fear of God, or *taqwā.* This makes Islam a potent and well integrated system which cannot be fragmented or disconnected, taking some parts of it and discarding others. That would be a gross transgression and a most vile offence against God Almighty.

11
The Sacred Months, Fighting and Pilgrimage

۞ يَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلْأَهِلَّةِ ۖ قُلْ هِىَ مَوَٰقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَٱلْحَجِّ ۗ وَلَيْسَ ٱلْبِرُّ بِأَن تَأْتُوا۟ ٱلْبُيُوتَ مِن ظُهُورِهَا وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلْبِرَّ مَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰ ۗ وَأْتُوا۟ ٱلْبُيُوتَ مِنْ أَبْوَٰبِهَا ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٨٩﴾

They ask you about the new moons. Say, 'They are signs for people to mark fixed periods of time, and for the pilgrimage.' Righteousness does not mean that you enter houses from the rear, but truly righteous is he who fears God. Enter houses by their doors and fear God, so that you may be successful. (189)

وَقَٰتِلُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِينَ يُقَٰتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُعْتَدِينَ ﴿١٩٠﴾

Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors. (190)

وَٱقْتُلُوهُمْ حَيْثُ ثَقِفْتُمُوهُمْ وَأَخْرِجُوهُم مِّنْ حَيْثُ أَخْرَجُوكُمْ ۚ وَٱلْفِتْنَةُ أَشَدُّ مِنَ ٱلْقَتْلِ ۚ وَلَا تُقَٰتِلُوهُمْ عِندَ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ حَتَّىٰ يُقَٰتِلُوكُمْ فِيهِ ۖ فَإِن قَٰتَلُوكُمْ فَٱقْتُلُوهُمْ ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩١﴾

Slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away; for oppression is even worse than killing. Do not fight them near the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there first. Should they fight you, then kill them. Such is the reward of the unbelievers. (191)

فَإِنِ ٱنتَهَوْا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٩٢﴾

But if they desist, know that God is much-Forgiving, Merciful. (192)

وَقَٰتِلُوهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ لَا تَكُونَ فِتۡنَةٞ وَيَكُونَ ٱلدِّينُ لِلَّهِۖ فَإِنِ ٱنتَهَوۡاْ فَلَا عُدۡوَٰنَ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٩٣

Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone. If they desist, let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers. (193)

ٱلشَّهۡرُ ٱلۡحَرَامُ بِٱلشَّهۡرِ ٱلۡحَرَامِ وَٱلۡحُرُمَٰتُ قِصَاصٞۚ فَمَنِ ٱعۡتَدَىٰ عَلَيۡكُمۡ فَٱعۡتَدُواْ عَلَيۡهِ بِمِثۡلِ مَا ٱعۡتَدَىٰ عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ١٩٤

A sacred month for a sacred month: for just retribution also applies to the violation of sanctity. If anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you. Have fear of God, and be sure that God is with those who are God-fearing. (194)

وَأَنفِقُواْ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا تُلۡقُواْ بِأَيۡدِيكُمۡ إِلَى ٱلتَّهۡلُكَةِۛ وَأَحۡسِنُوٓاْۛ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ١٩٥

Give generously for the cause of God and do not with your own hands throw yourselves to ruin. Persevere in doing good, for God loves those who do good. (195)

وَأَتِمُّواْ ٱلۡحَجَّ وَٱلۡعُمۡرَةَ لِلَّهِۚ فَإِنۡ أُحۡصِرۡتُمۡ فَمَا ٱسۡتَيۡسَرَ مِنَ ٱلۡهَدۡيِۖ وَلَا تَحۡلِقُواْ رُءُوسَكُمۡ حَتَّىٰ يَبۡلُغَ ٱلۡهَدۡيُ مَحِلَّهُۥۚ فَمَن كَانَ مِنكُم مَّرِيضًا أَوۡ بِهِۦٓ أَذٗى مِّن رَّأۡسِهِۦ فَفِدۡيَةٞ مِّن صِيَامٍ أَوۡ صَدَقَةٍ أَوۡ نُسُكٖۚ فَإِذَآ أَمِنتُمۡ فَمَن تَمَتَّعَ بِٱلۡعُمۡرَةِ إِلَى ٱلۡحَجِّ فَمَا ٱسۡتَيۡسَرَ مِنَ ٱلۡهَدۡيِۚ فَمَن لَّمۡ يَجِدۡ فَصِيَامُ ثَلَٰثَةِ أَيَّامٖ فِي ٱلۡحَجِّ وَسَبۡعَةٍ إِذَا رَجَعۡتُمۡۗ تِلۡكَ عَشَرَةٞ كَامِلَةٞۗ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَن لَّمۡ يَكُنۡ أَهۡلُهُۥ حَاضِرِي ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ

Perform to their completion both the pilgrimage and the `Umrah purely for God's sake. If you are prevented from doing so, then make whatever offering you can easily afford. Do not shave your heads until the offerings have reached their appointed destination. If any of you is ill or suffers from an ailment of the head, he shall redeem himself by fasting, or alms, or sacrifice. When you are in safety, then he who takes advantage of performing the `Umrah before the pilgrimage shall make whatever offering he can easily afford; but he who lacks the means shall fast three days during the pilgrimage and seven more days on returning home; that is, ten days in all. All this applies to those whose families are not resident in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque. Fear God, and know well that He is severe in retribution. (196)

شَدِيدُ ٱلۡعِقَابِ ﴿١٩٦﴾

ٱلۡحَجُّ أَشۡهُرٞ مَّعۡلُومَٰتٞۚ فَمَن فَرَضَ فِيهِنَّ ٱلۡحَجَّ فَلَا رَفَثَ وَلَا فُسُوقَ وَلَا جِدَالَ فِي ٱلۡحَجِّۗ وَمَا تَفۡعَلُواْ مِنۡ خَيۡرٖ يَعۡلَمۡهُ ٱللَّهُۗ وَتَزَوَّدُواْ فَإِنَّ خَيۡرَ ٱلزَّادِ ٱلتَّقۡوَىٰۚ وَٱتَّقُونِ يَٰٓأُوْلِي ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِ ﴿١٩٧﴾

The pilgrimage takes place in the months appointed for it. Whoever undertakes the pilgrimage in those months shall, while on pilgrimage, abstain from lewdness, all wicked conduct and wrangling. Whatever good you do God is well aware of it. Provide well for yourselves: the best provision of all is to be God- fearing. Fear Me, then, you who are endowed with insight. (197)

لَيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَبۡتَغُواْ فَضۡلٗا مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۚ فَإِذَآ أَفَضۡتُم مِّنۡ عَرَفَٰتٖ فَٱذۡكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ عِندَ ٱلۡمَشۡعَرِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۖ وَٱذۡكُرُوهُ كَمَا هَدَىٰكُمۡ وَإِن كُنتُم مِّن قَبۡلِهِۦ لَمِنَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿١٩٨﴾

It is no sin for you to seek the bounty of your Lord. When you surge downward from `Arafāt, remember God at al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām. Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error. (198)

ثُمَّ أَفِيضُواْ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ أَفَاضَ ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱسۡتَغۡفِرُواْ ٱللَّهَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿١٩٩﴾

Surge onward from the place where all other pilgrims surge and pray God to forgive you. He is much-Forgiving, ever Merciful. (199)

فَإِذَا قَضَيۡتُم مَّنَاسِكَكُمۡ فَٱذۡكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ كَذِكۡرِكُمۡ ءَابَآءَكُمۡ أَوۡ أَشَدَّ ذِكۡرٗاۗ فَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ رَبَّنَآ ءَاتِنَا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَمَا لَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ مِنۡ خَلَٰقٖ ﴿٢٠٠﴾

When you have fulfilled your sacred duties, remember God as you remember your fathers — nay with a yet keener remembrance. Some people say, 'Our Lord, give us abundance in this world.' They shall have no share in the rewards of the life to come. (200)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَقُولُ رَبَّنَآ ءَاتِنَا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا حَسَنَةٗ وَفِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ حَسَنَةٗ وَقِنَا عَذَابَ

There are others who say, 'Our Lord, grant us what is good in this world and what is good in the life to come and protect

us from the torment of the fire.' (201)	ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٢٠١﴾
These shall have their portion in return for what they have earned; for God is swift in reckoning. (202)	أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُواْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٠٢﴾
Give glory to God during certain appointed days. Those who hasten their departure after two days incur no sin, and those who stay longer incur no sin, provided that they are truly God- fearing. Have fear of God and know well that you shall all be gathered before Him. (203)	۞ وَٱذْكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ فِىٓ أَيَّامٍ مَّعْدُودَٰتٍ ۚ فَمَن تَعَجَّلَ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ فَلَآ إِثْمَ عَلَيْهِ وَمَن تَأَخَّرَ فَلَآ إِثْمَ عَلَيْهِ ۚ لِمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰ ۗ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٠٣﴾

Overview

This new passage resumes the elaboration of religious obligations and practical rules governing behaviour within the Muslim community and its relations with the outside world.

It explains the religious and practical significance of the phases of the moon. It dismisses the pre-Islamic Arab superstitious practice of entering houses through the back door on certain occasions. It outlines the rules governing war and fighting generally, as well as the prohibition of fighting in the four lunar months: Rajab (the seventh), Dhu'l-Qa'dah (the eleventh), Dhu'l-Ĥijjah (the twelfth) and Muharram (the first) and particularly in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. It ends with a comprehensive description of the rituals of the pilgrimage and the *`Umrah* (which may be described as a mini-pilgrimage) as prescribed by Islam, revising, modifying and replacing all the pagan and idolatrous concepts and practices of former times.

In one concise passage, and in a succinctly clear style, the Qur'ān lays down rules and principles relating to faith and belief, the regulation of religious rituals and practices, as well as war and fighting. These are all linked and interlaced with powerful admonitions and comments evocative of God and His power.

On correcting the Arab practice of entering houses through the back door, the *sūrah* points out that form, in itself, is not what really matters but it is one's consciousness and fear of God. It says: *"Righteousness does not mean that you enter houses from the rear; but truly righteous is he who fears God. Enter houses by their doors and fear God, so that you may be successful."* (Verse 189)

In dealing with war, the *sūrah* directs Muslims never to initiate aggression, affirming that *"God does not love aggressors."* (Verse 190) Commenting on fighting during a sacred month, the *sūrah* urges:

"Fear God and be sure that God is with those who are God-fearing." (Verse 194)

The *sūrah* calls on Muslims to spend of their wealth for the cause of God, exhorting them to *"Persevere in doing good, for God loves those who do good."* (Verse 195)

The *sūrah* again emphasizes consciousness and fear of God when dealing with the pilgrimage rituals. *"Fear God, and know well that He is severe in retribution."* (Verse 196) *"Provide well for yourselves: the best provision of all is to be God-fearing. Fear Me, then, you who are endowed with insight."* (Verse 197) *"Have fear of God, and know well that you shall all be gathered before Him."* (Verse 203)

It is quite clear that there is a common thread firmly binding these instructions and rulings together. Matters of faith, ritual and law, the spiritual and the mundane, the religious and the secular, the personal, national and international, are all intertwined and spun together in one comprehensive, universal religious and social system based on rules and laws laid down directly by God.

The Islamic Transformation

Beginning with this passage, we note a salient feature recurring in the rest of the *sūrah.* We find the Muslims addressing the Prophet Muĥammad with specific enquiries relating to a wide range of everyday issues and situations they were encountering in their new way of life. They reveal a genuine desire on the part of the new Muslims to find out what their new religion has to say about these matters. The believers wanted to learn more about how Islam viewed and interpreted the social and physical phenomena they were experiencing in the world around them.

They ask about the moon and the various phases it goes through. Why does it start as a fine crescent which becomes bigger until it develops into a full sphere, and then reverses the cycle until it disappears altogether before it is reborn in the shape of a thin crescent again?

They enquired about what part and how much of their wealth they should give away as charity. They enquired about war, and whether it would be allowed during the sacred months and in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. They asked for Islamic rulings on alcoholic drinks and gambling, which were social habits in pre-Islamic Arabian life.

They enquired regarding menstruation, and whether sexual contact between

spouses was allowed during such periods. They enquired about even more intimate and personal issues concerning matrimonial relations. These questions were sometimes raised by women.

Questions relating to other issues are to be found in several other *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The fact that they were raised is in itself significant in more ways than one.

To begin with, it indicates a high degree of enlightenment and dynamism in the Muslim society, which was already developing a distinct character. A sense of community was rapidly growing. The Muslims were no longer a set of isolated individuals, nor were they any longer separate tribes scattered all over Arabia. They had become a nation with its own identity, systems and relationships, in which every person was keen to assume his or her role and position. This new social, intellectual and emotional awareness was brought about by Islam, and was moulded by the Islamic outlook on life, its system and its pioneering views and concepts.

Second, this inquisitiveness also indicates a keen sense of religious consciousness emerging in the new society. It reflects the depth and strength of the hold the new faith had taken on the hearts and minds of its followers. Having discarded their old assumptions and attitudes, and wrenched themselves away from pre-Islamic customs and traditions, they lost confidence in the old order and began looking to their new religion for education and guidance in all aspects of life.

This state of emotional and intellectual awareness is generated by true faith. The believer is freed from all former beliefs and traditions. He begins to view with scepticism all previously held ideas, and to subject all his actions to fresh scrutiny. The believer becomes readily receptive to the directives of the new faith, and keen to reform his or her life accordingly. Even those former concepts and practices which are approved or adopted by the new order will assume a new context as they are integrated into the new faith.

The new order need not necessarily replace the old one in every detail, but it is important that those details adopted by the new faith should be assimilated and incorporated into it in substance as well as in spirit. This is very well illustrated by the pre-Islamic pilgrimage rituals which Islam transforms into a new set of rules, hardly bearing any resemblance to those formerly practised by the Arabs.

Third, some of the questions the Muslims were raising relate directly to the historical context of that period. The Jews in Madinah and the idolatrous Arabs in Makkah would often voice doubts as to the merits of Islamic teachings and principles. They would seize every opportunity to disparage Islam, exploiting certain occasions or events to wage a campaign of hostility and disinformation. One such occasion involved unwarranted criticism to the effect that a Muslim expedition, led by `Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh, had violated the prohibition of fighting during the sacred

months by attacking a Quraysh caravan.

The Muslims found it necessary to solicit answers and explanations to reassure themselves and to enable them to face the propaganda launched against them by their enemies.

This illustrates that the Qur'ān was keeping abreast of the confrontation between the Muslims and the non-Muslims, and providing the Muslims with guidance and leadership. This was happening in areas of faith and belief as well as in the real world, where the enemies of Islam were incessantly scheming and plotting against its followers.

The situation today is not very different: the same battles continue to rage on. Human nature has not changed, and the enemies of Islam can be found everywhere. But the Qur'ān is also there. Neither man nor the Muslim world community will be safe until the Qur'ān assumes conduct of the battle as it did for the first generation of Muslims. Unless Muslims realize this fact they cannot hope to succeed or prosper.

The least that results from such a realization is that Muslims would approach the Qur'ān with the same understanding and attitude. The Qur'ān would be seen as a dynamic, active force, formulating new concepts, facing up to anti-Islamic ideas, insulating Muslims against ignorance and deviation and helping them avoid the pitfalls. This would be far removed from the present approach many have adopted towards the Qur'ān, viewing it merely as a fine work of literature and going no farther than reciting it rhythmically or chanting its words like a melody on certain occasions.

The Qur'ān was revealed for a totally different purpose. God meant it as a blueprint for a complete way of life, a stimulus, a driving force guiding the Muslim community, charting its course through thick and thin, and helping it overcome and avoid all the difficulties and obstacles it is bound to encounter in this world.

The New Moon and its Significance

> *They ask you about the new moons. Say, 'They are signs for people to mark fixed periods of time, and for the pilgrimage.' Righteousness does not mean that you enter houses from the rear, but truly righteous is he who fears God. Enter houses by their doors and fear God, so that you may be successful.* (Verse 189)

Some reports suggest that the Prophet Muĥammad was asked why the moon goes through its various phases. Others say that he was asked why have the crescent moons been created, which seems to be more consistent with the answer given in the *sūrah: "They are signs for people to mark fixed periods of time, and for the pilgrimage."*

They serve as a means by which people fix and measure the time of important religious events and activities such as travel, pilgrimage, fasting, marriage and divorce, as well as trade transactions and loan periods.

Whatever the original enquiry, the answer had gone beyond mere abstraction and given practical, rather than 'scientific', information relating to the phases of the moon. The Qur'ān, without going into a detailed astronomical discussion, speaks of the function of the moon and its role in people's daily life. The Qur'ān did not embark on an explanation of the moon's position within the solar system or the relative movement of stars, planets and galaxies, although this is implied in the question.

What significance, then, does the answer given in the Qur'ān imply? The principal objective of the Qur'ān was the creation and promotion of a new conception of life in a new social, political and economic order. Indeed, it was working towards the creation of a new human community, with a special role of leadership in the world. It was developing a new model of human society, the like of which had not been known before, to uphold a new way of life that would firmly establish essential universal features and principles which the rest of mankind would look up to and emulate.

A scientific answer would undoubtedly have provided the Prophet's followers with theoretical knowledge about the universe, to add to their meagre understanding of it. Indeed, it is doubtful that the Arabs knew enough about astronomy at that time to be able to make use of further theoretical information, which would have required an understanding of basic principles and phenomena that were beyond all scientific progress achieved in the world up to that time.

The Qur'ān avoided a scientific answer because people were not ready for it, and it would have been of little use for the universal mission the Qur'ān was revealed to fulfil. Its role was far greater than the mere dissemination of detailed knowledge. The Qur'ān was never intended to be a book on astronomy, chemistry or medicine, as some of its admirers and detractors try, each for their own different purposes, to demonstrate.

These attempts betray a lack of understanding of the nature of the Qur'ān, its function and scope. It is mainly concerned with the human soul and the state and direction of the human condition. Its purpose is to establish a broad view of the world in which we exist and its relationship with the Creator, and a general outline of man's position in this world and his relationship with the Creator. On the basis of these broad concepts, the Qur'ān goes on to establish a way of life which enables man to apply all his skills and abilities, not least his intellectual faculties. Once these are properly and correctly developed, they are given full freedom, through

observation, experiment and scientific research, to probe the mysteries of life and the universe and make the appropriate conclusions — which could never, in any case, be said to be final or absolute.

The basic raw material with which the Qur'ān is concerned is man himself: the way he views things around him, his beliefs, emotions and ideas, his behaviour and activity, and the ties and relationships that govern his life. The conduct and development of material science and innovation are left to man's mental and intellectual capabilities and his diligent endeavour to know and understand. It is this knowledge and understanding that are the essential prerequisites for man to fulfil his divinely ordained mission in the world, for which he is naturally fitted and qualified.

The Qur'ān nurtures man's basic nature and protects it against deviation and corruption. It provides man with the moral, social, political and economic foundations and mechanisms that enable him to put his talents and skills to full and proper use. It furnishes him with a broad and comprehensive view of the nature, the inherent harmony, and the delicate balance of the physical world, of which man himself is an important and integral part, and its relationship with the Creator.

The Qur'ān does not cover such topics in great detail, because that is man's task. He is expected to take the initiative to search, discover and use his environment in order to further and fulfil his supreme position in the world.

The attempt to make the Qur'ān what it was never meant to be often seems naïve and counter-productive. The fact that the Qur'ān is not a reference book for medicine or chemistry or astronomy takes nothing away from its power and glory.

The Qur'ān and Scientific Truth

The Qur'ān deals with something much wider and more comprehensive than all those sciences. It is concerned with man himself, the key to uncovering the facts and mysteries of the world around. The human mind is fully equipped to scrutinize and probe into man's surroundings, and to experiment with and apply the theories he formulates and the tools he invents. The Qur'ān concentrates on nurturing man's character, conscience and mind, and laying the sound foundations of the human environment which allows him to make full use of his own hidden potential and that of the world around. Having laid down the groundwork and given man the necessary mental tools and criteria, the Qur'ān leaves man free to seek and search, experiment, achieve and make mistakes, in all areas of life.

There is also a great risk in attempting to seek verification of facts of a scientific nature given occasionally in the Qur'ān through suppositions, theories or so-called 'scientific facts' arrived at through human empirical efforts.

The facts that the Qur'ān mentions are absolute and final truths, while those arrived at through human research are not, no matter how advanced or sophisticated the means or the approach used to arrive at them. The latter are constrained by the conditions of man's own environment, and they are limited by the nature and scope of the tools used. The absolute and final truths of the Qur'ān cannot, therefore, be qualified or authenticated by the inconclusive ones discovered by man.

In addition to 'scientific fact', this applies in the case of 'scientific theory'. This includes theories on the origin of the universe, the creation and evolution of man, and psychological and sociological theories. Even within the realm of human thought, these are not considered to express scientific facts. Indeed, they are no more than suppositions or speculative ideas which, at best, help explain a vast array of physical, biological, psychological or sociological phenomena. As more accurate instruments and more discoveries are made, these theories are constantly amended and developed, or superseded by others that give wider or more accurate explanations or interpretations.

The attempt to verify Qur'ānic facts by the changing findings of human science is fundamentally flawed. It reflects three negative aspects that should not be associated with the Qur'ān.

First, is an inner defeatism that science is somehow superior to the Qur'ān. This leads to an attempt to find scientific evidence to verify and corroborate what the Qur'ān says. But in fact, Qur'ānic statements are definitive, complete and conclusive, while human science remains in a constant state of flux and development. This is due to the constraints of the environment in which human research and experiment are conducted, and the inadequacy of the tools and methods used in those processes.

Second, is a misunderstanding of the true nature and function of the Qur'ān as the absolute definitive truth addressing man in his totality according to his basic nature and within the constraints of the physical world and its laws. Ideally, it aims to achieve perfect harmony between man and the physical world, avoiding a clash between man and nature. Such harmony enables man to unravel, through enquiry, observation, experiment and application, as many of the world's mysteries as he can and use its potential energies and resources to enhance his position and fulfil his role as God's vicegerent on earth.

Third, is the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation, with frequent resort to far-fetched and arbitrary methods, of Qur'ānic statements in a vain attempt to make them agree or coincide with speculative suppositions and tentative theories.

However, this should not prevent us from making full use of what human sciences uncover about man, life and the world, for a better understanding of the Qur'ān. God says: *"We shall show them Our signs across all horizons and within themselves, until they*

clearly see that this [revelation] is the truth." (41: 53) This is a clear call to study closely and absorb what science discovers of God's signs and to use them to expand the meaning and application of the Qur'ānic injunctions, without undermining or demeaning the immutability and integrity of the Qur'ān.

This may be illustrated further by the following examples:

The Qur'ān says: "*And He created all things and ordained them in due proportion."* (25: 2) Scientific observation also has led to the conclusion that there are inherent harmony, very intricate interactions and consonances within the structure of the universe. The earth's shape and distance from both the sun and the moon, its size relative to theirs, its speed and axis of rotation, and countless other factors combine to make life on earth possible and sustainable. None of this may be attributed to chance or coincidence, or can be said to be without purpose.

These observations no doubt are useful in gaining a better understanding of the Qur'ānic statement. This is quite legitimate and should be encouraged. But here are other examples that are neither legitimate nor scientifically correct.

The Qur'ān says: *"We created man from an extraction of clay."* (23: 12) Centuries later, scientists such as Charles Darwin, proposed a theory of evolution which purports that life began in water as a single cell, and that human beings are the result of millions of years of evolution. Now, it would be pointless, indeed wrong, to attempt to show that this is precisely what the Qur'ān says.

To begin with, the theory is not conclusive and, within a century, it underwent several amendments and changes that have made it almost unrecognizable. There were flaws in the original theory, which was conceived at a time when nothing was known of the genes which carry hereditary properties and distinguish one species from another. Several aspects of Darwin's theory have since been disproved, and many others are still a matter of debate.

The Qur'ānic statement is conclusive as it establishes the origin of man without giving any details of the process involved. It does not aim at more than that and carries no other connotations or meaning.

The Qur'ān tells us: *"And the sun runs towards its resting place."* (36: 38) This is a statement of fact concerning the movement of the sun. Science has shown that the sun is indeed moving relative to other stars nearby and is part of a galaxy which itself is moving. Furthermore the speeds at which the sun and the galaxies move are measured. Such observations, relative and inconclusive as they are, do not affect the truth of the Qur'ānic statement, which is final.

The Qur'ān says: "*Are the unbelievers unaware that the heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder?"* (21: *30)* Some have tried to reconcile

this statement with the theory that suggests that the earth was part of the sun and then they were separated. It is futile to try and limit Qur'ānic statements with human scientific theory. This particular theory is not the only one in its field and it is contested by many scientists, while the Qur'ānic statement is complete and conclusive. It merely states a fact without telling us what is meant by 'heavens' or how the fragmentation occurred. No scientific proposition should be used to corroborate Qur'ānic statements, no matter how apparently close or similar the conclusions may be.

Having established these principles, we may now return to the Qur'ānic text: "*Righteousness does not mean that you enter houses from the rear, but truly righteous is he who fears God. Enter houses by their doors and fear God, so that you may be successful.*" (Verse 189)

This part of the verse and the preceding one relating to phases of the moon seem to be connected by the theme of pilgrimage: the new moon as an astronomical time marker for pilgrimage and other events, and the pre-Islamic Arab pilgrimage custom of entering houses from the rear.

Al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate a report by al-Barā', in which he said: "It was the custom of the *Anşār* [i.e. Muslims from Madinah] that on returning from pilgrimage they would approach their houses from the rear. When one of them broke this tradition and entered by the front door, he was severely criticised. It was at this point that the verse was revealed." A similar report is related by Abū Dāwūd.

Whether this custom related to the pilgrimage only, which seems more probable, or to travelling in general, the Arabs had maintained the belief that it was a sign of piety and righteousness to uphold it. However, the Qur'ān refutes that as an empty gesture that could serve no religious purpose. It goes on to establish the proper religious concept of righteousness as consciousness of God and His presence at all times and in all situations, rather than as a routine gesture that had no meaning whatsoever. Therefore it gives the instruction that houses must be approached from the front, and re-emphasizes the importance of God-fearing as the road to success in this life.

The verse, then, focuses our minds and hearts on *taqwā,* God- fearing, as a basic fact of faith, and links it with the attainment of absolute success, both in this life and in the life to come. It repeals a useless, ignorant tradition and directs the believers to appreciate God's grace in providing them with the new moon at the beginning of every month to enable them to determine the time for pilgrimage and other human activities.

The First Order to Fight

This is followed with a statement on fighting in general, and on fighting around the Sacred Mosque in Makkah and during the sacred months in particular. Then follows an urgent call to spend of one's personal wealth for the promotion of God's cause, an activity which is closely related to the fundamental Islamic duty of *jihād,* or struggle for God's cause:

> *Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors. Slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away; for oppression is even worse than killing. Do not fight them near the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there first. Should they fight you, then kill them. Such is the reward of the unbelievers. But if they desist, know that God is much-Forgiving, Merciful. Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone. If they desist, let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers. A sacred month for a sacred month: for just retribution also applies to the violation of sanctity. If anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you. Have fear of God, and be sure that God is with those who are God-fearing. Give generously for the cause of God and do not with your own hands throw yourselves to ruin. Persevere in doing good, for God loves those who do good.* (Verses 190-195)

Some reports indicate that these were the first verses on the subject of fighting to be revealed. They were preceded only by verses 39-41 of *Sūrah* 22: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God.' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques — in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled — would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events.*"

These verses had given the Muslims permission to fight those unbelievers who had oppressed them, and they understood them to be a prelude to the institution *of jihād,* or striving for God's cause, as a religious duty. Further, they realized that because they had been oppressed, they were given permission to fight back and restore justice, after they had been restrained from doing so all the time they were in Makkah. Their instructions then were to "*hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt.*" (4: 77) This restraint had been imposed by God for a purpose He had determined. We may try to discern some of the reasons behind this order.

The first of these reasons is a disciplinary one, aimed at taming the insubordinate

and rebellious nature of the early Arab Muslims. They had to learn to be patient and await instructions, rather than act impulsively and recklessly, as they used to do in pre-Islamic days. For the new Muslim community to fulfil its great universal role, the desire for revenge and heedless reaction had to be brought under control, and left to the discretion of a trusted leadership which gave its decisions careful consideration and was duly obeyed — even though to do so would test the Arabs' impatient and impetuous nature.

Such discipline enabled people such as `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and Ĥamzah ibn Abd al-Muṭṭalib, and other independent and strong personalities among the early Muslims, to show a great deal of patience in the face of the persecution and oppression being inflicted upon their fellow Muslims. They would await Prophet Muĥammad's instructions and the commands of the Supreme Authority which had ordered them to *"hold back your hands [from fighting', and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt."* (4:77) Thus a balance was struck in the consciousness of that pioneering community, between rashness and restraint, impulse and deliberation, passionate reaction and rational compliance.

Another reason for restraining the Muslims from fighting in Makkah was that in Arabian society, rushing to help an oppressed person was highly commendable. Despite their ability to hit back hard, the Muslims showed a large degree of restraint. This was demonstrated during the boycott imposed by the rest of the Quraysh against the Prophet's Hāshimite clan in order to force them to withdraw their support and protection of the Prophet and his followers. When this persecution, which lasted for three years, became unbearable, their re-awakened sense of justice caused some non- Muslim Arabs to break ranks and end the boycott. It seems from a study of the Prophet's history at this time that, in adopting this policy of passive resistance, the Muslim leadership in Makkah was aware of the crucial role played by social and tribal factors.

This is strongly borne out by the fact that the Muslim leadership had no wish to unleash internecine feuds within the Makkan clans. Muslim converts fell victim to moral and physical torture and abuse to force them to renounce their new faith, even at the hands of members of their own families. These were self-appointed tormentors, with no central authority directing their battles against the Muslims. Had the Muslims been allowed to hit back, fighting would have broken out in every Makkan household, and blood would have been shed in every family. That would have made Islam, in the eyes of Arabian society, seem a divisive religion, advocating strife and destruction within Arab clans.

After the *Hijrah,* or emigration to Madinah, however, the Muslims emerged as an independent community, prepared to face up to the Makkan leadership which was actively recruiting fighters and organizing military expeditions against it. The

situation had changed; instead of individual persecutors targetting individual victims, a collective and deliberate campaign was being organized.

To these reasons one may add the fact that the Muslims in Makkah were a dangerously exposed minority. Had they engaged the unbelievers in armed conflict as an organized group, they would have faced total annihilation. God's will was that they should first gather in a safe place before He granted them permission to go into battle.

However, the rules governing fighting were issued gradually, as and when the need arose, and as dictated by the needs of the development of Islam, first within Arabia and later outside it as well.

The present verses contain some of those rules which were relevant to that stage of development of the community, when hostility was just beginning to set in between the Muslim and non-Muslim camps. These rules also represent part of the permanent code that has come to govern war in Islam generally. They have undergone slight modifications, given at a later stage in *Sūrah* 9.

It might well be useful at this point to give a general synopsis of the concept of *jihād* in Islam, which can form the basis for the interpretation and understanding of Qur'ānic statements on fighting and war.

Islam represents the final and complete version of faith, revealed as the basis of a universal and comprehensive human order on earth. The Muslim community was raised to assume the leadership of humanity in accordance with this order, which derives in its entirety from the comprehensive Islamic concept of the purpose of existence as a whole and of human existence in particular. The Muslim community would lead humanity to ultimate success and to all that is good and noble *(khayr),* which no man-made order can provide. It would raise mankind to unprecedented moral and material standards. Conversely, no greater harm could be inflicted upon humanity than to deprive it of seeking to attain those levels of nobility, purity, happiness and perfection God wants it to achieve.

It is, therefore, a basic human right to be addressed with the message of Islam. No authority should deny mankind that right and under no circumstances should any obstacles be allowed to prevent that divine message from being delivered.

Having received the message, people have the right to freely accept the religion of Islam, and be under no pressure from any quarter to dissuade or prevent them from taking it up. Those who choose not to accept Islam are expected not to impede its progress. Indeed, they are required to guarantee Islam's freedom of action and to leave the Muslim community a clear road to fulfil its task, free from any threat of aggression.

Those who adopt the religion of Islam also have the right not to be intimidated or subjected to oppression, in any way whatsoever, so that they abandon their faith. No impediments may be placed to turn people away from Islam. The Muslim community, if subjected to any such aggressive designs, has the right to defend itself by force, in order to protect the community's freedom and security. This would further the establishment of God's order on earth and guarantee humanity the opportunity and the right to receive God's message.

It also results in another obligation that the Muslim community must undertake: to oppose any power that would stand in its way and prevent it from conveying the message freely to the public, or would threaten its followers. The Muslim community must pursue this course of *jihād,* or struggle for God's cause, until all threat of oppression is eliminated and people are free to believe in Islam and practise it. This does not imply any sense of compulsion, but it does mean allowing Islam to prevail in society to the extent that everyone is free to accept it and tell others about it without any fear of persecution or intimidation.

These are the parameters within which the principles of *jihād* have been laid down. These are the real objectives for which it has been instituted. It has no other purpose and serves no other end.

Jihād in Islam is pursued to protect the faith against outside attacks as well as internal strife. Its aim is the preservation of the Islamic way of life, establishing it as a force to be respected and reckoned with in the world. Anyone who willingly wishes to enter the fold of Islam should have no fear of being prevented from doing so and should not have to suffer for making that choice.

This is the true *jihād,* as recognized and endorsed by Islam. Those who take part in it are richly rewarded and rank among the noblest of believers, and those who give their lives in doing so are the true martyrs.

Jihād: When and Against Whom?

The present passage addresses the situation of the Muslim community in Madinah as it was in confrontation with the pagan Arabs of the Quraysh. Those unbelievers had persecuted the Muslims for their religious beliefs, drove them out of their homes and were trying hard to turn them away from their faith. It also lays down the fundamental rules of *jihād* in Islam.

It begins with the precise instruction that Muslims should fight those who had been fighting them and to meet with force any attacks against them by anyone, without committing aggression. *"Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors."* (Verse 190)

The aims of war in Islam are clearly defined right at the outset: "*Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you...*" Fighting should, therefore, be undertaken for the sake of God, and for no other purpose that may be defined by human desires or motivations. War should not be pursued for glory or dominance, nor for material aggrandisement, nor to gain new markets or control raw materials. It should not be pursued to give one class, race or nation of people dominance over another. Fighting in Islam must be undertaken only to promote the aims defined by Islam: to make God's word supreme in the world, to establish His order, and to protect the believers against persecution, coercion, corruption, and all efforts to force them to betray their faith or abandon it. According to Islam, all other types of war are unjust, and those who take part in them should expect no rewards or blessings from God.

Having defined the objective, the verses also define the limits of war: "*... but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors.*" (Verse 190) 'Aggression' implies attacks on non-combatants and peaceful, unarmed civilians who pose no threat to Muslims or to their community as a whole. This includes women, children, the elderly, and those devoted to religious activity, such as priests and monks, of all religious and ideological persuasions. Aggression also entails exceeding the moral and ethical limits set by Islam for fighting a just war. These limits outlaw the atrocities perpetrated in wars outside Islam, past and present. Such atrocities are totally repugnant to Muslims and can never be sanctioned or committed by people who honour and fear God.

The Ethics of War

Here is a selection of these principles and conventions, as laid down by the Prophet Muĥammad and outlined in the instructions of some of his Companions. They clearly reveal the nature of the Islamic approach to a just war, hitherto unknown to human society.

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar reports that when, in one of the battles, the Prophet was told that a woman was found among those killed, he immediately ordered that women and children should not be killed during combat. [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī]

Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "When you fight, avoid striking your opponent in the face." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet sent him with an expedition instructing them to burn two men from the Quraysh he had named, but as they were about to depart the Prophet said: "I have ordered you to burn these two people, but only God may punish with fire. If you capture them, just kill them." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī]

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "True believers are those who strictly observe their moral code when they kill." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

`Abdullāh ibn Yazīd al-Anşarī reports that the Prophet has strictly forbidden looting and the mutilation of dead bodies. [Related by al- Bukhārī]

Ibn Ya`lā reports that on one expedition, the leader, `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Khālid ibn al-Walīd, was brought four enemy fighters. He ordered that they be tied and put to death slowly. When Abū Ayyūb al-Anşārī, a close Companion of the Prophet, heard of this, he said: "I heard the Prophet forbid slow killing. I swear by God that I would not inflict slow death even on a chicken." When `Abd al-Raĥmān heard this he immediately sought to free four slaves in compensation. [Related by Abū Dāwūd] We may add here that freeing a slave is part of the prescribed compensation for accidental killing.

Al-Ĥārith ibn Muslim ibn al-Ĥārith quotes his father as saying that the Prophet sent him with others on an expedition. As they approached their target he hurried his horse and reached the village ahead of the rest of the expedition. He said that the inhabitants gave him a noisy reception and that he told them that if they were to declare their acceptance of Islam they would be spared and their safety would be assured. They followed his advice declaring their acceptance of Islam. Some of his Companions reproached him for what he did, saying that he had deprived them of the spoils of war. But when they returned and the Prophet learnt of what had happened, he commended him for his action and said: "God Almighty has given you such and such reward for every one of them." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Buraydah reports: "Whenever God's Messenger appointed a commander to lead an expedition or an army, he would urge him to fear God and to show kindness towards his fellow Muslims. He would then instruct him as follows: "Proceed to fight in God's name and for His cause. Fight those who deny God. Take the initiative but do not commit any acts of treachery, do not mutilate your victims, and do not kill any children." [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al- Tirmidhī]

Mālik quotes Abū Bakr as saying in his farewell address to one of his armies: "You will come across people who claim to have devoted themselves to the service of God, so leave them to their claim. Do not kill any women, children or elderly people."

Such is the code that governs war in Islam, and such are its objectives, which derive directly from the Qur'ānic statement: "*Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors.*" (Verse 190)

The Muslims were well aware that they would not prevail as a result of their numerical strength or superior armament; they were hopelessly deficient on both counts. The main secret of their victory lay in their faith in, and obedience to, God,

and the support they received from Him. To ignore God's commands and the Prophet's instructions would have deprived them of the only force that could ensure their victory. These principles had to be strictly observed, even with those enemies who had persecuted them and inflicted unspeakable atrocities on them. Even though at one point the Prophet, overcome by rage, had ordered that two Qurayshī men be a, put to death by burning, he immediately retracted that order, because only God punishes with fire.

The *sūrah* goes on to reaffirm the rightness of war against those who had subjected the Muslims to campaigns of terror and persecution, and driven them out of their homeland. The Muslims were urged to confront their enemies and kill them wherever they happen to be, except within the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah unless their enemies were to attack them there first. Those orders would stand unless the unbelievers accepted Islam, in which case it was forbidden to fight them, regardless of any killings or atrocities they might have perpetrated against Muslims earlier.

> *"Slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away; for oppression is even worse than killing. Do not fight them near the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there first. Should they fight you, then kill them. Such is the reward of the unbelievers. But if they desist, know that God is much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 191-192)

Forced religious conversion is the worst violation of a most inviolable human right. It is, therefore, a much more heinous offence than murder, regardless of the form that coercion takes or how it is exerted.

Suppression of religious freedom can be imposed by threats and the direct use of force. But it can also be practised through the imposition of corrupt or totalitarian regimes and oppressive social systems that deprave the masses, drive them away from God's path, and encourage and force them to reject the divine faith and break away from it. The best example to illustrate this is Communism, which banned religious instruction, openly advocated atheism, legislated for prostitution and drinking, promoted vice and discouraged virtue almost to the point of direct compulsion.

The Islamic view of freedom of belief assigns it a great status as a social and human value, and stems from the Islamic view of the ultimate purpose of life and of the whole of human existence: the worship of God in its widest sense which encompasses all constructive human activity. Freedom of belief is man's most precious right in this world, and ought to be cherished and protected. Any infringement of this right, direct or indirect, must be fought even if one has to kill for

it. This is borne out by the significant term used in the Qur'ān, which is *"slay them* [rather than 'fight them'] *wherever you may find them"*. This signifies that, if you have to, you may resort to any means to slay those who infringe upon your right of freedom of belief, while heeding those other Islamic principles mentioned earlier.

Violation of Sanctities

The other restriction is that no fighting was allowed within the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, which God, in response to the Prophet Abraham's prayers, had declared a safe haven and an inviolable house of peace. However, those who desecrate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque and commit aggression against Muslims there must be fought and should not be spared. Their vile actions and their persecution of Muslims, committed as they are within the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque, can only be rewarded with severe punishment.

"But if they desist, know that God is much-Forgiving, Merciful." (Verse 192) To earn God's forgiveness and mercy, they should not simply desist from waging war against the Muslims and trying to force them to abandon their faith. They would be required to renounce their denial of God and their rejection of His Message. The most they can expect in return for refraining from attacking the Muslims and persecuting them would be a truce, but that would not be sufficient to merit God's forgiveness and mercy. The unbelievers are, therefore, invited and encouraged to believe so that they may enjoy God's mercy and forgiveness.

What a commendable gesture! Islam spares its staunchest enemies punishment and retribution, and instead offers them forgiveness and mercy in return for the simple act of joining the ranks of the believers. That would absolve them of all their previous misdemeanours, and cancel out the damage and the atrocities they had wrought against the Muslims.

The aim of war in Islam is to let people be free to uphold Islam and practise it, and never find themselves, by virtue of either direct force or the type of social, political or economic system they live under, compelled to renounce it. The growth and spread of Islam must not be hampered or restricted, and the Muslim community must be allowed the means to defend itself and deter its enemies from taking advantage of it. No one who wishes to adopt Islam should feel threatened. If such threats are made, the Muslim community is collectively obliged to do all it can to eliminate that threat and secure the success of Islam.

"Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone. If they desist, let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers." (Verse 193) These statements were revealed to deal with a specific situation in Arabia, when the pagan Arabs were persecuting an incipient Muslim community and stifling the spread of

Islam. Nevertheless, they remain valid, and *jihad* is incumbent on Muslims until the end of time. Whenever a tyrant or an oppressive power emerges and prevents people from upholding Islam or seeks to prevent them from knowing about it, the Muslim community must rise against it and secure for all the right of freedom to know the truth, listen to it, and have the choice to accept it freely.

It is clear how severely these verses condemn oppression. It is considered a more repugnant evil than murder. This emphasis makes it clear that Islam views this matter most gravely. It establishes another crucial universal principle, heralding a rebirth of mankind, according to which man's value is determined by his faith. Man's life is always outweighed by his religious beliefs.

This principle also identifies the true enemies of humanity in this world. They are those who persecute believers and inflict suffering on a Muslim for no reason other than his being a Muslim. They are those who stand between mankind and God's truth and guidance. It is these that Muslims are obliged to fight and destroy *"until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone."* (Verse 193)

This fundamental Islamic principle remains as valid today as it was when these verses were revealed. Islam remains a target for attack and vilification from various quarters. Muslims everywhere continue to be victims of aggression, oppression and religious intolerance as individuals and groups and, in some cases, as whole communities. All victims of oppression and aggression have the right and duty to defend themselves and seek to destroy their enemies, in fulfilment of this great Islamic principle which marked a rebirth of humanity.

It is only when the aggression or the persecution ceases or is eliminated that fighting must come to an end. *"If they desist, let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers."*[1] (Verse 193)

Having ruled on fighting during the sacred months, the *sūrah* now gives the ruling on fighting in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. *"A sacred month for a sacred month: for just retribution also applies to the violation of sanctity. If anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you. Have fear of God, and be sure that God is with those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 194)

Those who violate the sacred months cannot expect guarantees of peace and immunity from attack during it. God had declared the Sacred Mosque a safe haven and a place of peace, and designated the sacred months a time of truce and security.

[1] This ruling was later amended by verses in the first passage of *Sūrah* 9, which instructed the Muslims to liberate the whole of the Arabian Peninsula from idolatry and paganism. This was a necessary measure to give Islam a solid and secure base in Arabia. Muslims would thus he safe from any rearguard attack as they moved to face the hostile powers of the Byzantines to the north and the Persians to the east.

During these months no blood shall be shed, all sacred places and property shall be immune, and the safety of every living thing is guaranteed. Those who are bent on infringing this peace must not escape unpunished. The Muslims are instructed to retaliate in a measured way and within the limits dictated by the type and extent of the initial aggression. *"If anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you."* (Verse 194)

There should be no excessive retribution. Muslims are here left to their own conscience and their consciousness of God. They realize that their own victory depends on God's help and support, and are therefore reminded that God is on the side of those who fear Him — a supremely effective safeguard.

Jihād requires money as much as it requires men. In those early days of Islam, fighters would provide their own fighting equipment, their own transport and their own food. They received no remuneration for their work, and freely offered their own possessions as well as their lives. This can only happen when the political, social and economic system in society is based on faith. The community would not need to appropriate funds to defend itself against internal or external enemies. Leaders and soldiers volunteer their efforts and their possessions to defend the faith and the community.

However, some of the less well-to-do Muslims who were keen to join the fighting but could not provide their own means of transport would go to the Prophet pleading to be taken to the battlefront. The Qur'ān tells us that when the Prophet did not have the necessary transportation or equipment to give them: *"They turned away with tears in their eyes, sad that they did not have the means to contribute."* (9: 92)

For this reason, we find numerous exhortations in the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* urging financial contribution, whenever necessary, to the war effort. The call to *jihād* is almost always accompanied by a call to contribute materially and financially.

The passage goes as far as describing the reluctance to contribute financially as folly leading to self-destruction. It says: *"Give generously for the cause of God and do not with your own hands throw yourselves to ruin. Persevere in doing good, for God loves those who do good."* (Verse 195) Miserliness and greed are indeed a form of self- destruction for the individual as well as for society as a whole. They result in deprivation and weakness of the whole community, especially one whose affairs are dependant on voluntary, self- motivated contributions.

The Qur'ān goes on to recommend even a higher state of excellence: *"Persevere in doing good, for God loves those who do good"* (Verse 195) The Arabic term used here is *iĥsān,* whose Islamic connotations are difficult to convey in translation. It is the highest level of altruism and self-denial. The Prophet Muĥammad defines it as: "worshipping God as if you see Him with your own eyes; for, though you cannot see

Him, He certainly sees you". [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim] Once this stage of piety is reached, one will become a consummate devotee, utterly obedient to God in everything; and all one's resources, energies and life will be entirely dedicated to God Almighty.

This closing comment is a befitting end for a passage dealing with fighting and giving for God's cause. It urges believers to aspire to the level of *iĥsān,* the highest grade of religious excellence.

A Symbol of Islamic Unity

The *sūrah* then gives an outline of the rituals of the pilgrimage and the *`Umrah* (lesser pilgrimage). This follows quite naturally from the earlier account dealing with lunar changes and phases, and the admissibility of fighting during the sacred months of the year and in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque in Makkah.

> *Perform to their completion both the pilgrimage and the `Umrah purely for God's sake. If you are prevented from doing so, then make whatever offering you can easily afford. Do not shave your heads until the offerings have reached their appointed destination. If any of you is ill or suffers from an ailment of the head, he shall redeem himself by fasting, or alms, or sacrifice. When you are in safety, then he who takes advantage of performing the `Umrah before the pilgrimage shall make whatever offering he can easily afford; but he who lacks the means shall fast three days during the pilgrimage and seven more days on returning home; that is, ten days in all. All this applies to those whose families are not resident in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque. Fear God, and know well that He is severe in retribution. The pilgrimage takes place in the months appointed for it. Whoever undertakes the pilgrimage in those months shall, while on pilgrimage, abstain from lewdness, all wicked conduct and wrangling. Whatever good you do God is well aware of it. Provide well for yourselves: the best provision of all is to be God-fearing. Fear Me, then, you who are endowed with insight. It is no sin for you to seek the bounty of your Lord. When you surge downward from `Arafāt, remember God at al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām. Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error. Surge onward from the place where all other pilgrims surge and pray God to forgive you. He is much forgiving, ever merciful. When you have fulfilled your sacred duties, remember God as you remember your fathers – nay with a yet keener remembrance. Some people say, Our Lord, give us abundance in this world.' They shall have no share in the rewards of the life to come. There are others who say, 'Our Lord, grant us what is good in this world and what is good in the lift to come and protect us from the torment of the fire.' These shall have their portion in return for what they have earned; for God is swift in reckoning. Give glory to God during certain appointed days. Those who hasten their departure after two days incur no sin, and those who stay longer incur no sin, provided that they are truly God-fearing. Have fear of God and know well that you shall all be gathered before Him.* (Verses 196-203)

The exact date of the revelation of these verses is not known, except for one report indicating that verse 196 was revealed at al-Ĥudaybīyah during the sixth year after *Hijrah,* 628 CE. Nor can we be precise as to when the pilgrimage was made obligatory in Islam, whether we take that to have been established by verse 196 of this *sūrah* or verse 97 of *Sūrah* 3 which says: "*Pilgrimage to this House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it.*"

In his book *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Imām Ibn al-Qayyim says that the pilgrimage was instituted during the ninth or tenth year of the Prophet's migration to Madinah. This is based on the fact that the Prophet himself performed the pilgrimage in 10 AH. This, however, is not sufficient evidence to support that view. There could have been other reasons that made the Prophet delay going on pilgrimage until the tenth year, especially when we know that he delegated Abū Bakr to head the pilgrimage during the ninth year.

It is also well established that on his return from the campaign of Tabūk, the Prophet intended to go for pilgrimage. However, he later decided not to do so, because non-Muslim Arabs were still doing the pilgrimage to Makkah and he did not wish to join them, not least because some of them would be going round the Ka`bah naked, as was their custom. At that point *Sūrah* 9, which brought the truce with the polytheist Arabs to an end, was revealed and the Prophet dispatched `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to Makkah to proclaim its provisions to the pilgrims. He charged him with the task of announcing at Mina, when all the pilgrims were gathered, that: "No unbeliever shall enter paradise; no idolater may henceforth perform the pilgrimage; no one may go round the Ka`bah naked. All treaties signed with God's Messenger shall run their course." Accordingly, the Prophet did not go to Makkah for pilgrimage until the Ka`bah was cleared of all symbols and manifestations of idolatry.

One could point out certain texts as evidence indicating that the pilgrimage was instituted in principle much earlier. Indeed some reports suggest that this took place when the Prophet was still in Makkah, before the migration to Madinah. But this would not hold water. Nevertheless, verses 26-37 of *Sūrah* 22 list most of the pilgrimage rituals as they were communicated to the Prophet Abraham. These include:

> *When We assigned to Abraham the site of the [Sacred] House, [We said], Do not associate anything as partner with Me. Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter, so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over*

> *whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor. Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House...Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts. You have benefit in them for a term appointed; and in the end their place of sacrifice is near the Ancient House...The sacrifice of camels We have ordained for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in which there is much good for you. Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up [for sacrifice]; and after they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their meat, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot, as well as the one who is forced to beg. It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful. Never does their meat or their blood reach God; it is your piety that reaches Him. It is to this end that He has made them subservient to your needs, so that you might glorify God for all the guidance with which He has graced you. Give good news to those who do good.*

These verses make specific reference to offering animals for sacrifice, walking around the Ka`bah *(ṭawāf),* the rites of *iĥrām*[1] (consecration), and the invocation of God's name, all of which constitute the basic rites of the pilgrimage. The Muslims were addressed with these words as the heirs of Abraham, indicating that the pilgrimage had been instituted at an early stage as part of the legacy of Abraham. The fact that Muslims, for various practical reasons, had not been able to perform the pilgrimage is beside the point. However, as mentioned earlier in this volume, individual Muslims had been able to perform the pilgrimage since the Ka`bah was re-instituted as the *qiblah* in the second year of the Islamic calendar.

Let us now take a closer look at the verses on pilgrimage in this *sūrah* and the instructive message they convey.

> *Perform to their completion both the pilgrimage and the `Umrah purely for God's sake. If you are prevented from doing so, then make whatever offering you can easily afford. Do not shave your heads until the offerings have reached their appointed destination. If any of you is ill or suffers from an ailment of the head, he shall redeem himself by fasting, or alms, or sacrifice. When you are in safety, then he who takes advantage of performing the `Umrah before the pilgrimage shall make whatever offering he can easily afford; but he who lacks the means shall fast three days during the pilgrimage and seven more days on returning home; that is, ten days in all. All this applies to those whose families are not resident in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque. Fear God, and know well that God is severe in retribution.* (Verse 196)

[1] Iĥrām, or consecration, involves that men discard their normal clothes and wear simple unsewn garments, refraining from shaving or cutting one's hair, covering the head, clipping one's nails, hunting, and sexual contact with one's spouse. This state is assumed at specified locations outside Makkah, each known as *mīqāt,* and for the main part of the pilgrimage and the whole of the *`Umrah.* Women observe the same restrictions but wear their normal clothes.

The first thing to notice about this verse is the precision with which it treats the subject. It is divided into a number of short, well-defined instructions. Any exceptions or provisions relating to each ruling are made immediately before moving on to the next. The passage is rounded off with a strong emphasis on God-fearing.

The first article stresses the fact that once one has decided to perform the pilgrimage or the *`Umrah,* one must do so in full and dedicate one's actions to God: "*Perform to their completion both the pilgrimage and the `Umrah purely for God's sake.*" Some scholars have taken this statement as instituting the pilgrimage as a religious duty, while others have understood it to be a mere instruction that once one begins performing the pilgrimage, one should go on to complete its rites. The latter interpretation seems more accurate, since the *`Umrah* is not universally considered by scholars an obligatory duty. Nevertheless, the order to complete the rites, once begun, applies equally to the pilgrimage and the *`Umrah.* The latter involves the same rites with the exception of attending at `Arafāt, but differs in that it can be performed any time throughout the year.

Exemption from completing the pilgrimage or the *`Umrah* is granted when one is prevented from doing so either by an enemy or, by illness or other exceptional circumstances. This is universally accepted by all schools of thought. The same applies to the case of being prevented from completing the rites. *"If you are prevented from doing so, then make whatever offering you can easily afford."* (Verse 196) If prevented by force, a pilgrim offers a sacrifice within the means at his disposal. He would then be able to terminate his state of consecration, or *iĥrām,* at the point he reached, even though he might not have performed any of the rituals other than going into the state of consecration.

Such a situation arose in the sixth year of the Islamic calendar when the pagan Arabs prevented the Prophet and his Companions from entering Makkah and visiting the Sacred Mosque. The Muslims had camped at al-Ĥudaybiyah, about 25 kilometres west of Makkah, where eventually the famous truce agreement was signed between the Quraysh and the Muslims. It stipulated that the Prophet and his followers would be free to return for *`Umrah* the following year. Some reports indicate that this verse was revealed at that time, and, accordingly, the Prophet ordered his Companions to make their sacrifices at al-Ĥudaybiyah and terminate their state of consecration, or *iĥrām.* Some of them showed reluctance, finding it difficult to release themselves from *iĥrām* before making the offerings at the appropriate place. But once the Prophet took the initiative and offered his sacrifice there, the rest followed suit.

The verse refers to "*whatever offering you can easily afford*" This includes animals such as camels, cows, sheep, or goats. A pilgrim should sacrifice whatever he can easily afford, and several people may share in a single camel or cow. In the *`Umrah* of

al-Ĥudaybiyah, as many as seven people shared in the sacrifice of one camel. On the other hand, one person may choose to offer a sheep or a goat, which would suffice. The exemption serves to mitigate hardship such as that encountered at al-Ĥudaybiyah, or which might arise as a result of illness.

The essential aim of such a religious practice is to revive one's awareness of God and draw closer to Him. If this is disrupted by threats from a hostile quarter, a disabling illness or the like, pilgrims are not deprived of the rewards they would have received had they completed the pilgrimage or the *`Umrah.* They are, therefore, instructed to proceed with making the offerings as if they had completed the intended rituals. This compassionate attitude is well in line with the spirit of Islam and its view of the purpose of worship.

Then follows another rule relating to the performance of pilgrimage and *`Umrah: "Do not shave your heads until the offerings have reached their appointed destination."* (Verse 196)

This, of course, applies under normal peaceful conditions. A pilgrim is not to shave his head, which precedes the termination of the state of consecration, or *iĥrām,* until he has made his offerings at the designated place and time. This is done at Mind on the tenth day of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah, after attendance the previous day at the plain of `Arafāt. Once the offerings are made, a pilgrim may release himself from consecration.

Here we have another exemption: *"If any of you is ill or suffers from an ailment of the head, he shall redeem himself by fasting, or alms, or sacrifice."* (Verse 196) Islam is a practical and humane religion, and if there are grounds of health that would require shaving one's head, one would be permitted to do so while in the state of *iĥrām,* even before the destination for offering the sacrifice is reached or the appropriate rituals are completed. The concession, however, is balanced with a compensation which has been set as a three-day fast from dawn to dusk, the feeding of six needy people, or slaughtering a sheep and giving its meat to the poor.

This is supported by what the Prophet Muĥammad said to Ka`b ibn `Ajrah when the latter was brought to him during the pilgrimage, having suffered a severe infection so that lice were crawling all over his face. The Prophet said: "I would not have thought you could have reached such a dire state. Can you afford a sheep?" Ka`b said he could not. The Prophet said to him: "Fast for three days, or feed six needy people, giving each half a *ṣā`* of food, and shave your head." (One *ṣā`* is an Arabian measure equivalent to four times the fill of a man's hands cupped together.)

The *sūrah* gives another ruling relating to the pilgrimage and the *`Umrah: "When you are in safety, then he who takes advantage of performing the `Umrah before the pilgrimage shall make whatever offering he can easily afford."* (Verse 196) The sacrifice is

required of those who are able to complete the rituals of both duties. Let us look at the matter in more detail.

One form of *tamattu`*, which is referred to in this verse as 'taking advantage of performing both duties of pilgrimage and *`Umrah,* involves the performance of the *`Umrah* separately, prior to performing the pilgrimage. To do this, one sets off for *`Umrah,* goes into *iĥrām* at the appointed location, performs the rites of *`Umrah,* which include *ṭawāf* around the Ka`bah and *sa`ī* between Şafā and Marwah, and shaving one's head or trimming one's hair to release oneself from consecration. One then waits for the time of the pilgrimage to re-enter into *iĥrām,* or consecration, for the pilgrimage. This is valid only if the *`Umrah* is offered within the appointed months of pilgrimage: Shawwāl, Dhu'l-Qa'dah and the first ten days of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah.

Another form of *tamattu`* is when one goes into *iĥrām,* at the appointed location, with the intention of combining both *`Umrah* and pilgrimage. On arrival in Makkah, the *`Umrah* is performed, after which the pilgrim maintains his *iĥrām* until he has performed the rest of the rites of the pilgrimage at the proper time.

In both cases, pilgrims are required to make such offerings as they can afford and are available. Animals such as camels, cows, sheep and goats can be offered for this purpose.

Those who lack the means need to fulfil an alternative requirement. "*He who lacks the means shall fast three days during the pilgrimage and seven more days on returning home; that is, ten days in all.*" (Verse 196) It is recommended that fasting should be undertaken over the three days before attendance at `Arafāt on the ninth day of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah. The other seven days of fasting are undertaken following one's arrival back home, a total of ten days in all, as the Qur'ān clearly points out.

The idea here apparently is to keep the pilgrims' hearts and minds attached to God during the interval between the *`Umrah* and the pilgrimage. The requirement of sacrifice or fasting perhaps aims to maintain the feeling of being closer to God in the period between the *`Umrah* and pilgrimage. Thus, lifting the restrictions of consecration, or *iĥrām,* after performing the *`Umrah* would not lead people away from the highly spiritual atmosphere that the pilgrimage generates.

Since those who live close to the Sacred Mosque are required to perform the pilgrimage only, and not the *`Umrah,* they cannot have the option of *tamattu`*. They have no sacrifice to offer and, consequently, the ruling of fasting ten days instead does not apply to them, either: "*This applies to those whose families are not resident in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque.*" (Verse 196)

At this juncture the *sūrah* draws attention to a vital and fundamental aspect of man's relationship with God. It exhorts: "*Fear God, and know well that He is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 196) The requirement for proper observance of these rulings

would be an ever-present sense of God-fearing, and an appreciation of the awesome power of His retribution. By its very nature, *iĥrām* invokes a high sense of awareness" of God and an eagerness not to incur His displeasure, which must be maintained, with equal vigour and sincerity, during the interval when the pilgrims are relieved from the restrictions of *iĥrām.* Pilgrims are expected to remain vigilant and self-controlled throughout the whole period.

The *sūrah* proceeds to give further details of the pilgrimage rituals. It defines the time of the year in which it is valid and explains further the values to be observed in its performance. Like the preceding passage, it closes with an exhortation to fear God at all times.

> *"The pilgrimage takes place in the months appointed for it. Whoever undertakes the pilgrimage in those months shall, while on pilgrimage, abstain from lewdness, all wicked conduct and wrangling. Whatever good you do God is well aware of it. Provide well for yourselves: the best provision of all is to be God-fearing. Fear Me, then, you who are endowed with insight."* (Verse 197)

The text is clear that pilgrimage may be undertaken only within a specified period of the year, which extends over the months of Shawwāl, Dhu'l-Qa'dah and the first ten days of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah, the last three months in the Islamic lunar year. Accordingly — and this is the view held by the Shāfi`ī school of thought and attributed to the reputable scholars Ibn `Abbās, Jābir, `Aṭā', Ṭāwūs and Mujāhid— *iĥrām* for the purpose of pilgrimage is valid only when undertaken during this specified period, known as the "pilgrimage months". However, Mālik, Abū Ĥanīfah and Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal, as well as Ibrāhīm al-Nakha`ī, al-Thawrī and al-Layth ibn Sa`d, hold that *iĥrām* for pilgrimage is valid all the year round. Nevertheless, they restrict the actual performance of the pilgrimage rituals to the period of the year specified in the *sūrah.* The former view appears to reflect more closely the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

Once a commitment is made to perform the pilgrimage, by entering into the state of *iĥrām* during the pilgrimage months, the would-be pilgrim *"must abstain from lewdness, all wicked conduct and wrangling."* This is a call for total abstinence from all interests, preoccupations and behaviour that are in conflict with, or distract from, the spirit of total devotion and obedience to God which should prevail during pilgrimage. It entails rising above worldly pursuits, total devotion to God alone, and seeking to acquire the necessary humility when conducting oneself at His Sacred Mosque. Donning the unsewn garments of *iĥrām* is the signal that the pilgrim has discarded all that relates to worldly position or possession, including ordinary clothes.

Having pointed out what should be avoided, the *sūrah* conveys the reassurance

that *"Whatever good you do, God is well aware of it."* (Verse 197) This would be the greatest incentive for the believer to perform more good deeds, and to have God witness more of his devotion, which is in itself a source of contentment and recompense.

God then calls on the pilgrims to provide for themselves, physically and spiritually, in preparation for the challenging and demanding experience of pilgrimage.

It has been reported that a group of Yemeni pilgrims set off for pilgrimage without carrying any provisions for the journey, claiming that, since they were intending to visit God's Sacred House, He would surely provide for them. This conflicts directly with Islamic teaching that while one should rely on God and put one's trust in Him, one should also seek the necessary practical means and take all measures to look after oneself. Furthermore, such an attitude smacks of impertinence towards God; the implication that God is obliged to provide is one of condescending arrogance.

Hence the emphatic exhortation: *"Provide well for yourselves: the best provision of all is to be God-fearing. Fear Me, then, you who are endowed with insight."* (Verse 197) The fear of God is a real source of both material and spiritual sustenance. It provides the human mind and body with strength, refinement and physical and moral support. Those with insight and understanding would be the first to appreciate this directive and benefit from divine provision.

The *sūrah* outlines more pilgrimage rules. It explains that it is permitted for pilgrims to engage in trade or employment during the pilgrimage period. It also adds further elaboration of rituals.

> *"It is no sin for you to seek the bounty of your Lord. When you surge downward from `Arafāt, remember God at al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām [the sacred landmark of Muzdalifah]. Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this, you were certainly in error. Surge onwards from the place where all other pilgrims surge and pray God to forgive you. God is much-Forgiving, ever-Merciful"* (Verses 198-199)

Al-Bukhārī reports that Ibn Abbās said that this verse was revealed because people used to feel uneasy about conducting trade during the pilgrimage as they did in pre-Islamic days in such markets as `Ukāż, Mijannah and Dhu'l-Majāz. Abū Dāwūd also quotes Ibn Abbās as saying that the verse was revealed because people used to avoid trading during the pilgrimage season, as they considered it a time for worship and devotion.

Abū Umāmah al-Taymī asked Abdullāh ibn `Umar: "While on pilgrimage we offer transport services for hire. Is our pilgrimage valid?" Ibn `Umar said, "Do you not make *ṭawāf* around the Ka`bah, do good deeds, throw the stones, and shave your

heads?" When Abū Umāmah replied that they did all those things, Ibn `Umar said, "When the Prophet was asked the same question, he gave no answer until the angel Gabriel conveyed to him the verse which states: "*It is no sin for you to seek the bounty of your Lord.*"

Abū Ṣāliĥ, an attendant of `Umar, the second Caliph, is reported to have asked him whether people used to conduct trade during the pilgrimage season. `Umar replied, "Indeed! People had no other way of earning a living!"

This reluctance to conduct trade and business during the pilgrimage season is but one aspect of the new sensitivity and awareness that Islam had brought to people's minds, giving them a new attitude towards their pre-Islamic way of life. Muslims would seek to know the view of Islam, or await instructions, before performing certain actions or adopting certain modes of behaviour, as explained earlier with reference to the ritual of *sa`ī* between the two hills of Ṣafā and Marwah.

Thus, trading and commercial activity, including letting and leasing, are permitted during pilgrimage. In fact, the Qur'ān describes such activities as a means of seeking *"the bounty of your Lord"*. Thus, anyone who seeks to earn some income through trade and business in pilgrimage should feel that he only seeks God's bounty and that whatever he receives is given to him by God. It is not his own efforts that give him his earnings. It is God, the generous giver who gives us all we have. Once this is appreciated by the pilgrim, he will realize that even as he is trading, he is in a state of devotion to God which in no way violates or defiles his observance of the pilgrimage duties. Once this principle is established in believers' hearts and minds, Islam allows them total freedom to pursue their interests, every one of which would in itself be considered a valid act of worship.

It is not by chance, therefore, that a verse dealing with the rituals of pilgrimage should also include instructions on earning through trade and commercial activities.

"When you surge downward from `Arafāt, remember God at al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām. Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error." (Verse 198) Attendance at `Arafāt is the central duty of the pilgrimage. It is authentically reported on the authority of `Abd al-Raĥmān al-Daylamī that the Prophet Muĥammad said: "The pilgrimage is attendance at `Arafāt. [He repeated this three times.] He who arrives at `Arafāt before the break of dawn [on the tenth day of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah] will have fulfilled this duty. The days of Minā are three; those who depart after only two days incur no sin, nor do those who stay longer."

The scheduled time for attendance at `Arafāt begins at noon on the Day of `Arafāt, the ninth day of the Muslim lunar month of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah, and ends at the break of dawn the following morning, the Day of Sacrifice. Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal, however, is of the opinion that the time begins at the break of day, rather than at noon, on the Day

of `Arafāt. This is based on the report by `Urwah al-Ṭā'ī that he had gone up to the Prophet, as he was going to prayer at Muzdalifah, and explained to him that having come from a long way away both he and his camel were on the point of exhaustion, and that he had done his best to stand at every hill he had passed, and wanted to know whether his pilgrimage would still be valid. The Prophet replied: "Anyone who has joined us in the prayer today and stands with us until we move on, having already been present in `Arafāt at any time, night or day, has completed the pilgrimage and fulfilled his obligations."

Perfect Devotion at Every Move

The Prophet laid down this rule and extended the time to the break of dawn on the Day of Sacrifice, the tenth of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah, in order to distinguish Islamic practice from that of the pagan Arabs.

Al-Musawwar ibn Makhramah, a Companion of the Prophet reports that, in his address at `Arafāt, the Prophet began with praising and glorifying God before saying: "This is the grand day of pilgrimage. The polytheists and the idolaters used to leave `Arafāt before the sun had set, when it was still visible over mountain tops looking like men's turbans. But we depart before the sun rises, our practice being distinctly different to theirs."

The established tradition adopted by the Prophet was to depart from `Arafāt after sunset. In an authentic *Ĥadīth* related by Muslim, Jābir ibn `Abdullāh reports that "the Prophet remained at `Arafāt until the sun began to set, the sky reddened and the sun's disc completely disappeared. With Usāmah behind him on the same camel, he was pulling hard on the reins of his she-camel until her head would hit the saddle. He motioned with his right hand, saying, 'Stay calm! Stay calm!' He relaxed his grip on the reins at every hill so that the camel could climb with ease. On arrival at Muzdalifah, he prayed *maghrib* and *`ishā'* with a single *adhān* and two separate *iqāmahs.* He did not separate the two obligatory prayers with any glorification of God. After that he lay down to rest until dawn, when he got up and offered the *fajr* prayer when the light of day began to appear. The prayer was preceded by *adhān* and *iqāmah.* The Prophet then mounted his camel and headed towards al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām. There he faced the *qiblah* and embarked on a lengthy devotional prayers and praise of God until the light of day was bright. He then set off before the sun had risen." This is the practice outlined in the *sūrah* as it says:

> *"When you surge downward from `Arafāt, remember God at al-Mash`ar al-Ĥarām. Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error."* (Verse 198)

The Qur'ān exhorts Muslims to invoke God's name following their departure from `Arafāt. It reminds them that this is part of the guidance God favoured them with, and that their actions are an expression of gratitude for that favour. They are also reminded of the gloom and despair that had marked their way of life prior to Islam: *"Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error."*

Those early Muslims were fully aware of this profound truth. They were only a few years away from the pagan Arab way of life, with its lamentable religious ignorance and its worship of idols, *jinn* and angels, who were also conceived to be daughters of God, while the jinn were thought to be His in-laws. Such foolish superstitions had in turn led to confusion in religious practices. These included the unjustified and unexplained prohibition of the meat of certain animals, or the meat from their backs, and the sacrifice of children to idols, gods or *jinn.*

Pre-Islamic Arab life was plagued with a host of socially unjust and morally corrupt practices. The *sūrah* points specifically to one of them here, class distinction, by commanding: *"Surge onwards from the place where all other pilgrims surge."*

The Arabs' decadence was also shown in the senseless and bloody tribal conflicts which at the time had totally undermined their position in the world. It was further reflected in the near-total confusion of their sexual mores, marriage customs, and family relationships in general. It was apparent in the injustice inflicted upon the weak by the strong, in the total absence of ethical or legal guarantees to restore the balance. Above all, it was manifested in the Arabs' marginal existence and insignificance on the world stage, which had only begun to be redressed with the advent of Islam.

The Qur'ānic words, *"Remember Him who has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error,"* brought all that dark history back to the Muslims' minds, and led them to consider their new life under Islam, to reflect on God's grace in guiding them, and to appreciate its value and role in shaping their existence. This remains true for Muslims of all nations and generations. Without Islam they would fall into utter insignificance.

Islam has been the main force that has transformed Muslims' lives and lifted them from tiny, subservient and confused communities to a great pioneering nation. Muslims appreciate this transformation only when they sincerely and diligently adopt Islam and build their whole way of life on its principles. In fact, all mankind needs Islam's guidance and blessings. This is confirmed, and highly appreciated, by those who come into the fold of Islam after having lived a different life. They find the contrast immeasurable.

As a believer in Islam reflects on the social philosophies and ideologies developed and adopted by various societies throughout human history, he is usually astonished

by their triviality, misery, pettiness and confusion when compared with Islam. In some societies man, to his great disadvantage, seems to have chosen the reckless course of denying his instinctive need for God and His care and guidance. That is precisely what is being emphasized in this *sūrah* when God says: *"Remember that He has given you guidance. Before this you were certainly in error."* (Verse 198)

Returning to the main theme of this passage, one can also describe the pilgrimage as the greatest gathering of Muslims from all over the globe. They are brought together under the single banner of Islam, abandoning all their former racial, cultural and national ties. The unsewn *iĥrām* garments they don when they are in the state of consecration are symbolic in more senses than one. All pilgrims wearing these garments stand on the same level, with no distinctions of tribal or ethnic kinship. Islam is the only unifying factor:

In pre-Islamic days, the Quraysh used to give themselves certain privileges to distinguish them from the rest of the Arabs during the pilgrimage. They arrogantly referred to themselves as *al-hums,* or the pure. One such privilege the Quraysh had granted themselves was that they did not attend at `Arafāt, and so approached Muzdalifah from a different direction to that of other pilgrims. These Qur'ānic instructions eliminated this anomaly and bound the Quraysh to observe the same pilgrimage rituals as the rest of the Muslims, removing all false distinction: "*Surge onwards from the place where all other pilgrims surge and pray God to forgive you. God is much-Forgiving, ever-Merciful.''*

Al-Bukhārī relates a report by `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, in which she said, "The Quraysh and those who followed its lead used to attend at Muzdalifah, and they were known as *al-hums,* while the rest of the Arabs attended at `Arafāt. But God's Messenger was instructed to go to `Arafāt, spend the day there, and then leave it for Muzdalifah, and this is what the verse refers to."

Islam transcends kinship and class distinction, and treats all human beings as belonging to one nation; the sole distinction being their fear of, and obedience to, God Almighty. The pilgrimage ritual of *iĥrām* requires all pilgrims to abandon their usual clothing in order to appear equal, and it would be inconsistent to allow them to boast of their lineage or ancestry.

All prejudices and manifestations of pride and vanity must be discarded during the pilgrimage. Pilgrims are instructed to direct their devotion, praise and pleas to God, to pray for forgiveness for their errors and excesses, large and small. They ought to keep their minds, hearts and souls pure of all thoughts of lewdness, transgression, wicked conduct and wrangling of any kind. Through the pilgrimage, Muslims are educated in the wide fundamental principles of Islam: the equality of man and the rejection of discrimination on the basis of caste, race, language, or any

other differences. Should they deviate or become negligent, they are urged to seek God's guidance and forgiveness.

The Journey Approaches Its End

> *When you have fulfilled your sacred duties, remember God as you remember your fathers – nay with a yet keener remembrance. Some people say, 'Our Lord, give us abundance in this world.' They shall have no share in the rewards of the life to come. There are others who say, 'Our Lord, grant us what is good in this world and what is good in the life to come and protect us from the torment of the fire.' These shall have their portion in return for what they have earned; for God is swift in reckoning.* (Verses 200-202)

Prior to Islam, the Arabs had no mission or message to take them outside the confines of the Arabian Peninsula. They would throng to the famous market places of `Ukāż, Mijannah, and Dhu'l-Majāz, not only to trade and exchange material goods, but also to display their tribal pride, eulogize their ancestors and celebrate their past glories. These were occasions for showing off their poetic and literary prowess. They had no other culturally or nationally significant pursuits to attract their interest or encourage them to mix with or explore other cultures and societies.

With the advent of Islam, however, they acquired a fresh outlook on life, a great responsibility, and a definite purpose. The Qur'ān prompted them in their new direction: *"When you have fulfilled your sacred duties, remember God as you remember your fathers – nay with a yet keener remembrance."* (Verse 200)

The irony of this statement would not have escaped them. It ridicules their infatuation with their forefathers and instructs them to correct their behaviour by devoting their attention completely to God, and with far greater diligence. Just as they are required to abandon their normal dress for the untailored, plain garments of *iĥrām,* they are directed to break free from their racial and ethnic prejudices. It is made clear to them that devotion to God alone, and not to their ancestral glory, will take them to higher attainments in this world.

Man's destiny is determined, and his credentials evaluated, according to how close his way of life is to God. "*Some people say, 'Our Lord, give us abundance in this world.' They shall have no share in the rewards of the life to come. There are others who say, 'Our Lord, grant us what is good in this world and what is good in the life to come and protect us from the torment of the fire. 'These shall have their portion in return for what they have earned; for God is swift in reckoning."* (Verses 200-202)

There are two types of people: those who care only for the here and now and devote their energies to nothing else, and those with a wider vision and more far-

reaching concerns, who are conscious of God and who seek happiness in this life without forfeiting their share of life to come.

Ibn `Abbās reported that this verse was revealed with reference to those Arabs who, on pilgrimage day, would pray for rain, or a good harvest, or a successful breeding season, but ask nothing of the rewards of the hereafter. Of course, its message is timeless and applies much more generally. Such people, who remain preoccupied with this worldly life even as they pray to God, are to be found in all human societies and generations. God, in His infinite wisdom, may well grant them some or all of what they wish for, but their share in the life to come will amount to nothing.

But those who say, *"Our Lord, grant us what is good in this world and in the life to come and protect us from the torment of the fire,"* are assured their full share of happiness and reward. They are polite enough not to specify the type of reward they seek, but will be content with whatever God grants them. His generosity is neither withheld nor delayed. The temperate and reasonable tone of their prayer assures them success and a generous response from God Almighty.

These divine statements clearly point to the direction man ought to take in seeking help and success. By wholeheartedly submitting oneself to God and accepting His judgement without doubt or hesitation, one's good fortune is guaranteed both in this life and in the life to come. Only those who devote all their love and energy to life in this world will forfeit their reward in the Hereafter.

Islam does not require believers to abandon worldly pursuits altogether. Man has a vital role to play on this Earth. But in taking charge of the world's affairs, man must be guided by God in order to see life in its wider dimension. Islam aims to free man from the shackles of material living, and help him rise above its limits and restrictions. Man is encouraged to apply his energies and abilities as the master of the world rather than its slave, and to transcend its trivial ephemera.

The passage on pilgrimage rituals closes with more exhortations to praise God and be conscious of His power: *"Give glory to God during certain appointed days. Those who hasten their departure after two days incur no sin, and those who stay longer incur no sin, provided that they are truly God-fearing. Have fear of God and know well that you shall all be gathered before Him."* (Verse 203)

These special days are widely believed to be the day of `Arafāt (the ninth day of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah), the day of sacrifice (the tenth day), and the following three days. Ibn `Abbās suggests that the 'appointed days' are the eleventh to the thirteenth. `Ikrimah, however, interprets the verse as referring to the glorification of God following the regular daily prayers on the three days following the tenth of Dhu'l-Ĥijjah.

In the *ĥadīth* quoted earlier, `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Mu`ammar al-Daylamī quotes

the Prophet as saying: "The days of Mina are three; those who depart after only two days incur no sin, nor do those who stay longer." Indeed, the days from the ninth to the thirteenth of Dhul-Ĥijjah are all equally suitable for devotional prayers and glorification of God, regardless of whether one includes the first or the last two days. The common prerequisite is that one should *"truly fear God"*.

The passage ends on a significant note, reminding the believers of the Day of Judgement, to which reference is made in some of the verses on pilgrimage, thus arousing in their hearts a healthy fear of God. *"Have fear of God and know well that you shall all be gathered before Him."* (Verse 203)

The preceding verses demonstrate clearly how Islam transformed the pagan Arab customs of the pilgrimage into a rich and meaningful Islamic ritual, ridding it of all idolatrous, sectarian and exclusive practices. It turned it from a narrow Arab tradition into a truly universal one: a typical Islamic form of worship dedicated to the praise and service of God Almighty. This is yet another example of how Islam can overcome and transcend all differences and distinctions that divide mankind.

I2
The Nature of Islamic Society

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يُعۡجِبُكَ قَوۡلُهُۥ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَيُشۡهِدُ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا فِي قَلۡبِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَلَدُّ ٱلۡخِصَامِ ﴿٢٠٤﴾

There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says, and he cites God as witness to what is in his heart, whereas he is the most hostile of adversaries. (204)

وَإِذَا تَوَلَّىٰ سَعَىٰ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ لِيُفۡسِدَ فِيهَا وَيُهۡلِكَ ٱلۡحَرۡثَ وَٱلنَّسۡلَۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلۡفَسَادَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾

Yet, no sooner does he turn his back than he strives to spread corruption in the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption. (205)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُ ٱتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ أَخَذَتۡهُ ٱلۡعِزَّةُ بِٱلۡإِثۡمِۚ فَحَسۡبُهُۥ جَهَنَّمُۚ وَلَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمِهَادُ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

When it is said to him, 'Have fear of God', his false pride drives him into sin. Therefore, hell will be his allotted portion, and how vile a resting place. (206)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَشۡرِي نَفۡسَهُ ٱبۡتِغَآءَ مَرۡضَاتِ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ رَءُوفُۢ بِٱلۡعِبَادِ ﴿٢٠٧﴾

But there is also a kind of man who would willingly sell himself, seeking God's pleasure. God is most Compassionate to His servants. (207)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱدۡخُلُواْ فِي ٱلسِّلۡمِ كَآفَّةٗ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُواْ خُطُوَٰتِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمۡ عَدُوّٞ مُّبِينٞ ﴿٢٠٨﴾

Believers, submit all of you to God and do not follow Satan's footsteps. He is indeed your open foe. (208)

فَإِن زَلَلْتُم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَتْكُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ فَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٠٩﴾

If you should stumble after all evidence of the truth has come to you, then know that God is Almighty, Wise. (209)

هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَأْتِيَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِى ظُلَلٍ مِّنَ ٱلْغَمَامِ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَقُضِىَ ٱلْأَمْرُ ۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ ٱلْأُمُورُ ﴿٢١٠﴾

Are they waiting for God to reveal Himself to them in the shadows of clouds, together with the angels? The case will have been settled then. To God shall all things return. (210)

سَلْ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ كَمْ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُم مِّنْ ءَايَةٍۭ بَيِّنَةٍ ۗ وَمَن يُبَدِّلْ نِعْمَةَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَتْهُ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢١١﴾

Ask the Children of Israel how many a veritable sign We have given them. He who alters the grace of God after it has been bestowed on him [should know that] God is severe in retribution. (211)

زُيِّنَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَيَسْخَرُونَ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ۘ وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوْاْ فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَآءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٢١٢﴾

The life of this world has been made alluring to the unbelievers; hence, they scoff at those who believe; but those that fear God shall be above them in rank on the Day of Resurrection. God grants sustenance to whom He wills beyond all reckoning. (212)

كَانَ ٱلنَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلنَّبِيِّۧنَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ وَأَنزَلَ مَعَهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ ٱلنَّاسِ فِيمَا ٱخْتَلَفُواْ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَا ٱخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ فَهَدَى ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لِمَا ٱخْتَلَفُواْ فِيهِ مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ بِإِذْنِهِۦ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ

All mankind were once one single community. Then God sent forth Prophets to give them good tidings and to warn them, and with them He sent down the Book, setting forth the truth, to judge between people over all on which they differed. Yet none other than those who had been given the Book started, out of injustice to one another, to dispute it after clear evidence of the truth had come to them. God, by His will, guided the believers to the truth concerning which they had differed. God guides whom He will to the straight path. (213)

يَهۡدِي مَن يَشَآءُ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٍ ٢١٣

أَمۡ حَسِبۡتُمۡ أَن تَدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأۡتِكُم مَّثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ خَلَوۡاْ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۖ مَّسَّتۡهُمُ ٱلۡبَأۡسَآءُ وَٱلضَّرَّآءُ وَزُلۡزِلُواْ حَتَّىٰ يَقُولَ ٱلرَّسُولُ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ مَتَىٰ نَصۡرُ ٱللَّهِۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ نَصۡرَ ٱللَّهِ قَرِيبٞ ٢١٤

Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand. (214)

Overview

Within the body of Qur'ānic directives and legislative statements, which cumulatively constitute the all-embracing divine code of living, one often comes across elements of a complete theory of personal and social education and enlightenment, based on a full and deep understanding of human nature in its totality. This theory introduces us to different types of human beings with such lucidity and in such detail that almost bring them to life before our eyes. It would be natural to point to real individuals we know from personal experience and say, "These are the very people the Qur'ān talks about!"

In this passage the Qur'ān presents us with two distinct types of human personalities. One is the ostentatious and smooth-talking but malevolent person, outwardly charming but self-centred and usually concealing evil intentions. If called on to fear God and heed His message such a person will not respond, but will arrogantly persist in his misdeeds and wanton intrigues, mischief-making and oppression.

The other type is the sincere and genuine believer whose life is totally devoted to seeking the pleasure of God Almighty. This type of person is sanguine, benevolent and entirely selfless.

The passage then continues with an earnest call to the believers to submit themselves completely to God, unconditionally and without any doubt or hesitation. Muslims are urged to submit themselves to God, emphasizing the vast reality of the essence of faith in God and the divine code of living based on it. There are further reproofs of the Israelites for their betrayal of God's cause. The passage also highlights the fundamental flaws in the unbelievers' outlook on life and their derision of those who believe in God, stressing that "*those that fear God shall be above them in rank on the*

Day of Resurrection".

This is followed by a brief reference to the differences that have beset mankind, and the criteria human beings ought to use in judging or settling those differences. The role of the Qur'ān, as the ultimate word of God's universal truth, in that regard is then explained. The passage goes on to elaborate the demands of upholding that truth, and the difficulty in delivering the message that God has entrusted to believers. This serves as a warning and an incentive for the Muslims to live up to the demands and standards of their new global mission, fully confident in God's unfailing support.

Thus, even as the Qur'ān deals with religious and legislative aspects of Islamic life, it provides an overall view of the Divine method in guiding, educating and preparing Muslims for the role of custodians of God's universal message.

Two Different Types of People

> *There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says, and he cites God as witness to what is in his heart, whereas he is the most hostile of adversaries. Yet, no sooner does he turn his back than he strives to spread corruption in the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption. When it is said to him, Have fear of God, his false pride drives him into sin. Therefore, hell will be his allotted portion, and how vile a resting place. But there is also a kind of man who would willingly sell himself seeking God's pleasure. God is most Compassionate to His servants.* (Verses 204-207)

This fascinating insight into human nature is in itself sufficient proof that the inimitable style in which it is presented cannot be human. The precision, clarity and depth we find here cannot be matched by any human expression.

The words are like the strokes of a master painter's brush, delivered with outstanding vigour and confidence. No sooner are the strokes laid down than the true personality emerges, distinctive and lifelike. We can easily recognize the type that we may exclaim, "Yes, we know the very person the Qur'ān is talking about!" It is a process no less creative than the physical creation of man.

The passage introduces a person who portrays himself as the epitome of goodness, sincerity, dedication, love, innocence, and undoubted willingness to spread goodness, compassion, happiness, and purity of heart all around him. "*There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says.*" (Verse 204) Such people enchant you with their turn of phrase; their tone of sincerity and claims of integrity and righteousness can easily mislead; and, for good measure, they would cite God as witness to what is in their hearts.

In reality, however, such people are "*the most hostile of adversaries*". Their hearts are filled with malice and hatred, with no room for love, compassion or tolerance. Such two-faced people are capable of the most vicious lies; they are treacherous and totally dishonest. When put to the test, their true personality is revealed: evil, spiteful, and malevolent.

"*Yet, no sooner does he turn his back than he strives to spread corruption in the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption.*" (Verse 205) As they go about their daily work, these people do nothing but spread evil and plunder the material and human resources of society. Their actions are a true and accurate reflection of the grudges they harbour and the evil contained inside them. But God is fully aware of the corruption these hypocrites spread in society and throughout the world, and utterly condemns them.

As we read on, more features of this type of people are revealed: "*When it is said to him, 'Have fear of God,' his false pride drives him into sin. Therefore, hell will be his allotted portion, and how vile a resting place.*" (Verse 206) Intent on pursuing their vile deeds, these people become resistant to advice and reform; if anything, they grow more obstinate and arrogant. They begin to take pride in spreading evil and corruption, with no remorse, sense of guilt or fear of God. The portrait is thus complete. The example is clear, true to life, and instantly recognizable, at any time and in every society.

This snobbery, contention and lack of shame are met with a most swift and appropriate punishment: "*Hell will be his allotted portion, and how vile a resting place.*" (Verse 206) That would be more than sufficient retribution. For hell is the most terrible of all punishments: it is a fire fuelled by men and stones; it consumes everything thrown into it. With unmistakable irony, the verse describes hell as their "*resting place*":

By way of contrast, the *sūrah* presents the other type of human being: "*But there is also a kind of man who would willingly sell himself, seeking God's pleasure. God is most Compassionate to His servants.*" (Verse 207) These people are willing to dedicate their souls and bodies to God Almighty, for nothing in return other than His pleasure. It is a deal they conclude without a moment's hesitation, desiring nothing else but divine blessing and approval.

The Arabic expression used here may be interpreted differently to give the same message. The Arabic term denoting 'sell' is also used to mean 'buy'. Thus such people buy themselves by giving up all the pleasures of this world, dedicating themselves purely to God. They are ready and willing to sacrifice all worldly success and pleasure so that they may be accepted by God and admitted into the divine fold.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr cites several reports suggesting that

this verse was revealed with reference to one of the Prophet's Companions, Şuhayb ibn Sinān, who was of Byzantine origin. He had accepted Islam when the Prophet was still in Makkah, but when the migration to Madinah took place and he wanted to join the Muslims, the Arab unbelievers prevented him from taking his belongings and his money with him. He decided to give it all up in return for the right to leave Makkah.

He was met at the outskirts of Madinah by a group of Muslims, including `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who greeted him with the words: "Well done! You have struck a profitable bargain!"

He returned the compliment, saying, "And may God make your trade always profitable. What might be the cause of your felicitations?"

They gave him the good news that a verse of the Qur'ān, a great honour, was revealed in tribute to his deal with the Arabs of Makkah.

It is also reported that the Prophet Muĥammad had commented, "Şuhayb has struck a profitable deal."

Whether the verse was revealed with reference to this particular incident, or it was simply applicable to it, it certainly covers a range far beyond a single person or event. It portrays a type of person to be found again and again in human societies.

We have two contrasting portraits. One is that of the hypocrite, silver-tongued who is essentially brutal, ill-mannered, contentious, and corrupt. The other is that of the true believer whose whole life is dedicated to the service of God, and who has conquered the temptations of life.

These two living portraits, which reveal some extraordinary aspects of the Qur'ānic style, are for us to study and marvel at. We cannot but stand in awe of God's inimitable power of creation, as we learn how not to be taken in by soft-spoken words or false pretences. We are directed to look deeper into the essence of things, rather than be deceived by outward appearances. The verses also draw our attention to the values and criteria, based on faith in God, which should be used to judge people.

The True Meaning of Islam

Against this background, the *sūrah* addresses the Muslim community, the believers, with a very special and unique instruction:

> *Believers, submit all of you to God and do not follow Satan's footsteps. He is indeed your open foe. If you should stumble after all evidence of the truth has come to you, then know that God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 208-209)

The call is addressed to the true adherents of Islam, whose faith sets them apart and links them directly to God. The invitation entails, first of all, total submission to God Almighty in all matters, simple or grave. Believers must surrender to God their intentions, actions, desires, and their whole destiny, and accept His judgement without hesitation, and with total trust and self-assurance. They will submit in full certainty and confidence that God will lead them to happiness and self-fulfilment, in both this life and the life to come.

The fact that the call was made at that particular stage of the development of the Muslim community suggests that there were Muslims who fell short of the required degree of obedience and submission to God, in their public as well as their private life. This in itself is not unusual, and could explain the need for such a call to be made from time to time, in order to create the required discipline in the community and enable it to function as a coherent, self-assured, and forward-looking body.

Heeding this call takes the Muslim into a realm of peace and security. The world of Islamic faith radiates tranquillity, harmony, reassurance and clarity of vision. A believing Muslim lives in total peace with himself, with his conscience and his mind, with other people and with his whole environment. He lives in peace with all the world and everything in it. He enjoys peace on earth and peace in heaven.

This peace emanates, first and foremost, from a clear, simple and compelling understanding of the essence and nature of the Divine Being. There is but one God, to whom every Muslim believer turns for guidance. Freed from paganism and idolatry, a Muslim believer happily and honestly devotes his loyalty and energy to God alone, to whom there is but one straight path.

He is mighty, omnipotent, supreme. Turning to Him for help and guidance is turning to the ultimate power that controls all existence.

Having thus sought His succour, the believer is totally secure and confident, having no cause or reason to fear anyone or anything else. Submission to the all-powerful and supreme God is a sufficient guarantee of perpetual sustenance, which spares the believer the need to seek livelihood and support anywhere else.

God is also just and wise, unlike pagan and man-made deities. His might and omnipotence are a safeguard against injustice, inequity and bias. To seek His protection is to seek dependable justice, care and security.

He is also merciful and compassionate, generous and benevolent, forgiving and responsive to those who repent and seek His protection. Under God's protection a believer feels total peace, security, understanding and sympathy.

Islam reveals to Muslims that every attribute of God Almighty inspires an overwhelming feeling of added intimacy and renewed tranquillity, bringing about an

unshakeable sense of protection, compassion, self-esteem, stability and peace.

A believer's heart is filled with peace as a result of the clear and robust understanding of the nature of the relationship between God and man, between Creator and creation and between man and the world around him. God has created the world and everything in it according to a sound scheme and for a definite purpose. The creation of man is a deliberate and carefully considered act, and he does not stand alone; all the natural prerequisites for his existence and wellbeing are present in nature and the world around him, and available for his benefit. As God's representative on earth, man is given honour by God and enjoys a privileged position in the divine order of things. In discharging his mission, he receives God's unstinted support and the support of the world around, with which, through submitting to the will of God Almighty, he shares a harmony of bonding. Man is invited to partake in a cosmic festival of divine creation, to reflect on its marvels, to interact and become intimate with everything and every being in this vast, rich and dynamic universe.

The faith that teaches its followers to reflect on the tiniest plants, and promises to reward them for watering them and looking after them and helping them grow and flourish, is a beautiful and noble one. It fills man's heart with peace and releases him to embrace the whole cosmos and everything in it, promoting peace, mercy, love, compassion, and security all around him.

Belief in the hereafter plays a fundamental role in radiating peace throughout a believer's surroundings, and prevents anxiety, resentment and despair. It makes it clear that the final reckoning and the real and just reward are reserved for another time, when full justice shall be guaranteed. One need not regret the good deeds and the sacrifices and the struggles that may go unrewarded in this life, nor should one lose hope that justice will be done when in this brief journey of life one encounters hatred, wrongdoing or oppression. God harbours no grudges against anyone, and His justice shall be done.

Belief in the hereafter saves believers from following the frenetic rat-race of mankind, in which values and sanctity are brazenly trampled upon and violated. This belief gives real promise of abundance, magnanimity and recompense for all victims, and can turn that contentious and selfish race into a peaceful and fair contest, assuaging the frenzied feeling that this transient life is man's only chance to have, hold and enjoy.

The conviction that the ultimate purpose of human existence is to worship and serve God can elevate man's conscience and consciousness, his activity and performance, to wider and more glorious horizons. It purifies and develops his methods and techniques; all his pursuits and activities and his whole vocation as

God's vicegerent on earth become means of worship of, and devotion to, God and the establishment of His order. Man will thus shun treachery, deceit, law breaking, arrogance, oppression, and all such foul and vile behaviour. He will avoid haste and recklessness, shortcuts and aimless wandering; the sincerity of his intentions and his diligence are the best guarantee of success. Man will be free of fear and anxiety throughout his life, because he is aware that at every step he is asserting his own role and serving God Almighty. Every action he takes will bring him closer to God.

A believer's feeling that he is moving according to God's order, in obedience to, and in fulfilment of, His will, and the security, peace and tranquillity such a feeling generates, fill his heart and soul with inner peace. Even during armed combat against his and God's enemies, he continues to feel and enjoy such peace because he is conscious that he is fighting in the cause of God and to establish His order, not for worldly or personal gain, privilege or ambition.

The believer's feeling that he is living in harmony with God's order and the laws of nature, and acting in unison with all other creatures and forces around him, brings a state of peace and tranquillity. His existence is reinforced by the world around him, and together they move in harmony and union, without conflict or contradiction, guided by God's light and devoted to Him.

The obligations prescribed by Islam are in full harmony with human nature and aim to keep that nature on the right path. They are well within man's capabilities and take full account of his aptitudes and disposition. They leave no human talent or ability untapped, enhancing and promoting them, and fulfilling man's physical and spiritual needs. In discharging these obligations, man faces no hardship or distress, but seeks God's pleasure with confidence and peace of mind.

The society which Islam creates existed once in its purest and best form. Islam then continued to give different examples of it in varying degrees of purity, in various parts of the world. It is a society established on the principles of love, compassion, unity, solidarity and care. Whatever its degree of purity, it remains the best and most shining social experiment the world has known.

It is a society brought together by the single bond of religious faith, which is greater than any bond of race, origin, colour or language. Muslims are described in the Qur'ān as the community of 'brothers,' (49: 10) and by the Prophet Muĥammad as 'one body; if any part suffers any pain all other parts share in its complaint, feeling sleepless and feverish.' [Related by Aĥmad and Muslim]

It is a society with a strong code of social morality based on Qur'ānic teachings and exhortations, some of which are outlined in the statements:

When a greeting is offered you, answer it with an even better greeting, or [at least]

with its like. (4:86)

Never turn your face away in disdain to others, and do not walk haughtily on the ground, for God does not like the arrogant and vain glorious. (31:18)

Repel [evil] with something that is better. Thus, a person with whom you had enmity may become as though he has always been close to you and a true friend. (41: 34)

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill- seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers... Do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is Merciful. (49:11-12)

It is a society protected by solid guarantees enshrined in the Qur'ān: "*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action.*" (49: 6) "*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another.*" (49: 12) *'Believers, shun most suspicions, for in some cases suspicion is injustice, and do not spy on one another*" (49: 12) "*Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained their residents' permission and greeted them.*" (24: 27) The Prophet Muĥammad clearly states: "All that belongs to a Muslim is inviolable and forbidden to any other Muslim: his blood, personal honour and property." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

It is a clean and virtuous society, where promiscuity and loose sexual conduct are stringently outlawed, and where lewd and indecent behaviour is given no room to thrive. It is well protected against all forms of over-indulgence, and against unrestricted exploitation and manipulation of people's sensual and sexual desires common in many non-Muslim societies, past and present. The principles of this social morality are derived from a host of Qur'ānic directives, a few of which may be cited below.

Those who delight in spreading immoral slander against the believers shall face grievous punishment in this life and in the life to come. God knows, whereas you do not know. (24: 19)

As for the adulteress and the adulterer: flog each of them with a hundred lashes, and

> *let no compassion for them hold you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let their punishment be witnessed by a group of believers.* (24: 2)
>
> *As for those who accuse chaste women (of adultery] and are unable to produce four witnesses: flog them with eighty lashes. Do not accept their testimony ever after, for they are transgressors.* (24: 4)
>
> *Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity: this will be most conducive to their purity. God is aware of all they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be mindful of their chastity and not to display their charms in public beyond what may decently be apparent thereof Hence, let them draw their head-covering over their bosoms. And let them not display their charms except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are beyond all sexual desire, or children who are yet unaware of women's nakedness. And let them not walk in such a way as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn all of you to God in repentance, so that you may be successful.* (24: 30-31)

The Qur'ān addresses the Prophet's wives, the purest women ever to grace this earth, living in the purest house at the purest place in the purest time, saying: *"Wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other women, provided you maintain your fear of God. Do not be over- soft in your speech, lest any whose heart is diseased should be moved to desire [you], and always speak in a kindly way. Abide quietly in your homes, and do not flaunt your charms as women used to flaunt them in the old days of pagan ignorance. Attend regularly to your prayers, pay zakāt [the purifying alms], and obey God and His Messenger. Women of the Prophet's household, God wishes only to remove from you all that might be loathsome, and to totally purify you."* (33: 32-33)

A Caring and Peaceful Society

In such a society husbands and wives grow to trust each other, and people feel that their families and their honour are safe and respected. All society is free from stress and anxiety. There are no salacious or lurid temptations that might lead people to violate the moral codes and norms of society. It is a tranquil and peaceful society.

A Muslim society gives every able-bodied member the opportunity to work and earn a decent living. The infirm and invalid are cared for and helped to lead a dignified life. It provides for those who seek to marry and start a family. It is a society where the residents of a locality are collectively responsible for the death of any one of them through hunger. Some Muslim jurists would charge them with negligence and require them to pay indemnity for manslaughter to his family.

Under the laws of Islam, all basic rights and freedoms are protected and guaranteed; no one may be condemned on suspicion alone. According to Islamic law, illegal entry into homes or private property, invasion of privacy, homicide, theft, or robbery of any kind are strictly forbidden and are punishable crimes.

A Muslim society is built on mutual consultation and cooperation among its members, on equality and rigorous justice, where everyone feels that their rights are subject only to God's law and not to the fancy or prejudice or interests of any individual or group.

It is, further, the only human society in which people are not subjected to the rule of other people. The whole society, the rulers as well as the ruled, are subordinate to God and His laws, and comply willingly and confidently with His will and order. All stand equal before God, the just Lord of all creation.

These are some aspects of the peace the *sūrah* invites the believers to enter into in submitting themselves completely to God. The significance of such peace can only be appreciated when one considers the extent of confusion and mental stress plaguing non- Muslim societies as well as societies that have cast Islam and its teachings aside. Despite all the material comfort and progress these societies may achieve, their life remains aimless, confused and miserable.

In a highly developed country like Sweden, for example, people enjoy a high per capita income, free health care and sickness benefit, free education and an array of state grants and easy loans for students. Newly married couples receive financial assistance to help them set up homes. Indeed, in Sweden there are numerous other manifestations of true material affluence. But where is it all leading to in a country where the majority have abandoned their faith in God? It is a society with incurable ills, living under the threat of a rapidly declining birth rate, rampant promiscuity, a high divorce rate (one in six marriages ends in divorce!),[1] alcohol and drug addiction, widespread psychological and mental disease and disturbed behaviour, and a rising rate of suicide. The same can be said about the United States or Russia.

Such wretchedness can only be the result of lack of belief in God, without which souls are deprived of happiness, security and peace of mind.

As God calls upon the believers to submit themselves to Him alone, He warns them against following *"Satan's footsteps; he is indeed your open foe."* (Verse 208) There is no third way; it is either God's Guidance or Satan's confusion; either the way of Islam or the way of ignorance and foolishness. A Muslim has to be very clear on this point and permit no doubt or hesitation.

[1] The author wrote this in the early 1960s, when such divorce rate was considered very high. Now it is much higher throughout Europe. Other social ills are also at higher peaks. — Editor's note.

In life there can be no compromises or half measures; the choice is between right and wrong, guidance and confusion, order and chaos, Islam and unbelief, the way of God and the way of Satan. God invites believers to peace and obedience and warns them against following Satan, in an effort to arouse their emotions and inspire their conscience and to make them conscious of Satan's avowed enmity to believers. It is a hostility of which the believing heart is ever aware.

The *sūrah* goes on to point to the consequences of taking that warning lightly, saying: "*If you should stumble after all evidence of the truth has come to you, then know that God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 209)

The reminder carries awesome power. Those who disregard God's advice, challenge His power and question the wisdom of His guidance, expose themselves to condemnation and destruction.

At this point the *sūrah* adopts a different approach to emphasize its previous warnings and speaks in the third person, saying: "*Are they waiting for God to reveal Himself to them in the shadows of clouds, together with the angels? The case will have been settled then. To God shall all things return.*" (Verse 210)

It condemns those who waver and are reluctant to submit and come into the fold of God's peace. It questions their motives and the reasons that hold them back, and asks whether they will remain fixed in their obstinacy until such time as God, flanked by angels, should appear to them in person. In other words, are they waiting for the fearful Day of Judgement to arrive? That day will indeed come, and the *sūrah* moves at once to that momentous day to tell us that everything has been settled. Time has come to a stop. The opportunity to believe and repent has gone for ever. No one could be saved now, as all stand facing their Lord to whom "*shall all things return*".

This is an illustration of the unique and effective style of the Qur'ān, which brings to life the scenes it describes, and makes the reader or listener feel, see and hear what is going on as if it were happening now.

How much longer will they dither when the chance to come into the fold of God's peace is calling, and the final judgement is so close? God's invitation is a promise of peace and happiness both in this life and the life to come.

A Question Put to the Israelites

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet Muĥammad, ordering him to inquire of the Israelites, described earlier in the *sūrah* as dithering and hesitant in their response to God's call: how many signs they chose to disregard and how they abused the privileges God had bestowed upon them and how much they distorted His Message:

"Ask the Children of Israel how many a veritable sign We have given them. He who alters the grace of God after it has been bestowed on him [should know that] God is severe in retribution." (Verse 211)

Referring back to the experience of the Israelites at this juncture is a timely warning to Muslims not to follow their example. Muslims are urged not to hesitate in responding to God's call, or show any reluctance or stubbornness, or insist on miracles as proof of its authenticity. By avoiding these pitfalls, Muslims will be sure to avoid the Israelites' fate. The instruction to *"ask the Children of Israel" is* not meant literally, of course, but purely to introduce the next point: the profusion of evidence presented to them, either at their request or directly given by God, and their persistent refusal to accept and believe in God, or submit themselves to Him.

Having drawn attention to the Israelites' example, the *sūrah* makes a general reference to the 'grace' of faith and peace, and warns: *"He who alters the grace of God after it has been bestowed on him [should know that] God is severe in retribution."* (Verse 211)

Whenever a society turns away from God's grace and denies His favour, it is beset by tension and strife, as manifested all over the world today in the inordinate spread of stress and depression, social and military conflict, alcohol and drug abuse, and the emergence of extreme and bizarre alternatives to religious faith.

The strange trends in fashion, the arts, entertainment and general social behaviour, which appear almost every day in modern society, as well as the changing social norms relating to marriage and the family, to sexual relations and attitudes, are all indications of social alienation, insecurity, discontent and a lack of direction in life. Modern life seems almost like a demented attempt to escape, where individuals and groups tend to break away from the norm and reject everything, but have no idea what they are looking for. That is the outcome of renouncing God's teachings, and ignoring His call to enter the fold of faith.

The *sūrah* then contrasts believers and unbelievers, and the difference in their outlook: *"The life of this world has been made alluring to the unbelievers; hence, they scoff at those who believe; but those that fear God shall be above them in rank on the Day of Resurrection. God grants sustenance to whom He wills beyond all reckoning."* (Verse 212)

This life, with its transient concerns and ephemeral interests and enjoyments, is all that the unbelievers know and aspire to. They are unable to see beyond the here-and-now; they know of no greater values or aspirations other than those of life on this earth. Consequently, their scope is limited, their vision is blurred, and they are deprived of the higher understanding and greater reward experienced by believers.

A believer in God may look with disdain at material and worldly things, but that is not due to a negative or pessimistic view of life. It is because a believer seeks more

from life than mere material or sensual enjoyment. A believer aims to establish God's order in society and lead his community towards a better and more fulfilled way of life.

Believers are altruistic in their approach to life; they have high hopes for humanity, and they care for the progress and well-being of others. They look beyond their selfish egotistic needs and desires and make tremendous personal sacrifices for the sake of their beliefs and ideals. From the point of view of a person who only thinks of this life's concerns and worldly affairs, that might seem strange or even ludicrous. Hence it may evoke scorn and derision from unbelievers.

But what justification could there be for such a reaction? The unbelievers' opinion is erroneous and utterly false. It is the view of unbelief and ignorance. The true measure is that of God who confirms that "*those that fear God shall be above them in rank on the Day of Resurrection*". (Verse 212) Believers should uphold their faith and disregard the mockery and scorn of the unbelievers. They have God's word that they shall occupy a higher position than those unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, and that shall be the real test and the final judgement.

What God has in store for believers is far better and far more favourable. They shall be rewarded in abundance, according to God's wish and wisdom, either here in this life or in the life to come, for "*God grants sustenance to whom He wills beyond all reckoning.*"

God is the gracious giver who gives directly, generously and with no restriction. In His infinite wisdom, He may give to those who do not believe much of the comforts and allurements of this world. What He grants them is not based on any merit they may have. He also gives to the believers whatever He chooses to grant them both in this life and in the life to come. He is the sole benefactor and His choice is right, wise and most durable.

The two types of human being — believers who take their guidance and advice from God, and others for whom this life is the be-all and end-all, can be found in every age and every generation. The former rise above the trivialities of life to fulfil their humanity and become masters of their world and their destiny, while the latter shall ever be attached to, and enslaved by, the prurient and lewd aspects of life.

Believers will always look from their elevated position on unbelievers, no matter how affluent or influential these may be. Unbelievers, who think they are more fortunate and privileged, may well be contemptuous of the faithful, but it is they who deserve pity and commiseration.

A Single Community and Divergent Views

The *sūrah* continues to elaborate on the differences among human beings in their beliefs, outlook, values and standards, concluding with a statement identifying the ultimate judgement and criteria to pronounce on those differences.

> *All mankind were once one single community. Then God sent forth Prophets to give them good tidings and to warn them, and with them He sent down the Book, setting forth the truth, to judge between people over all on which they differed. Yet none other than those who had been given the Book started, out of injustice to one another, to dispute it after clear evidence of the truth had come to them. God, by His will, guided the believers to the truth concerning which they had differed. God guides whom He will to the straight path.* (Verse 213)

That is it in a nutshell! Humanity emerged as a single community, living according to the same code and upholding similar beliefs. This may be taken as reference to the very first nucleus of human beings to live on earth, consisting of Adam, Eve and their offspring, before they multiplied and adopted various beliefs and ways of life. What the Qur'ān asserts here, however, is that mankind shares the same origin and that we are members of the same human family. Such was the will of God, to instil the family principle in human life and establish it as the cornerstone of the human community. Time was when that early group remained close-knit and uniform in its outlook and understanding, but it was later to grow, multiply and scatter in various directions; their way of life evolved in different ways, and so did their mental and cultural abilities and norms. New trends, fresh ideas and advanced social and cultural forms emerged which, as God knew, would be useful and advantageous to human society.

With progress and diversity came differences, disagreements and divisions. New beliefs, traditions and ideologies appeared and were accepted in various degrees by various communities. It was then that God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to send forth Prophets to convey the promise of success and to warn against deviation. With the Prophets, God "*sent down the Book, setting forth the truth, to judge between people over all on which they differed.*" (Verse 213)

Here is a profound truth: it is in the nature of human beings to differ and disagree. Such a propensity is fundamental to the human disposition, and essential for the fulfilment of man's role as God's vicegerent on earth. This task calls for a divergence of functions, aptitudes and talents that are compatible and complementary to one another and come together in harmony, according to God's universal scheme and wisdom. Different needs require different abilities.

Differences of ability and function lead to differences in perception, outlook, interests, approach and method. These differences and variations, however, are harmonized and regulated within the wide, all-embracing framework of the divine

order of faith where abilities, faculties and resources are given the best chance to grow and develop for the good of the individual and the community, as well as for the benefit of humanity at large.

However, it is essential that there should be a proper and valid by which differences and divisions may be judged and evaluated. Such a point of reference is alluded to in the *sūrah* when it says that God: "*sent down the Book, setting forth the truth, to judge between people over all on which they differed*". (Verse 213)

It is worth pausing here to consider the statement that the Book is "*setting forth the truth*". This is an affirmation that the Book, the revelation from God to mankind, has come with the definitive and absolute truth. It is the ultimate, pre-eminent and sole arbiter and judge of all human thought and behaviour. Without this authority society would be at a loss, life would descend into chaos, confusion and strife, and mankind would know no peace or happiness.

This is vital in determining the source of human values, thought and understanding, and for defining the laws that govern human relations. The source is God, and God alone, who has sent down revelations, the Book, to establish the truth and maintain harmony, justice and peace in the world.

The Book is, in essence, one and the same, whose message all Messengers had delivered. Its teachings convey a faith based on belief in one God and the same set of laws and values for all mankind. As time goes on, changes occur according to peoples' needs from generation to generation, and from one stage of development to another, culminating in the ultimate version of God's message represented by the Islamic faith. Under the caring eye of God Almighty and the vibrant and dynamic laws and teachings of divine revelation, Islam took the scope of human experience to new horizons, enabling man to reach new heights of progress and achievement within the all-embracing framework of values provided by the faith.

What the Qur'ān states here is the definitive Islamic view of the origin and development of religion and religious ideology in the world. Briefly stated, this says that every Prophet came with teachings based on the fundamental principle of God's absolute oneness. Inevitably, after some time, deviations and myths crept in, causing people to depart from the original authentic traditions and teachings, thereby precipitating the need for a new Prophet and a new set of teachings to revive and restore the preceding one, taking into account the mental, cultural and material developments and changes society had undergone and the new conditions prevailing. This is a far more estimable theory of the history of religion than others advanced by secular thinkers, and unwittingly adopted by some Muslim students of religion.

The united kinship of religious faith is congruous with the role and function of the

Book God has revealed to mankind at every phase through all the Prophets and messengers, throughout human history.

The fact is that it was necessary for a definite and firm standard to exist as a reference point for all mankind. It was likewise necessary that this standard should come from a source above the human mind and independent from it. It had to come from an impartial source, not encumbered or swayed by human prejudices or shortcomings.

Such a responsibility requires an infinite and comprehensive knowledge of past, present and future events, not restricted by the limitations of time and space. It also requires perfection, total self- sufficiency, and freedom from all the needs, instincts, ambitions, desires and fears that constrain and control human beings. It can then be given only by God who is influenced neither by personal purpose, prejudice or desire, nor by weakness or shortcoming.

Man's role is one of facing change and coping with new circumstances and needs that arise as a result of it, and of adapting to them within the prevailing conditions. The divine criteria act as a reference point and a guide, directing mankind to what is best and most advantageous. Thus life proceeds along proper lines, and people are confident that their fate and destiny are in the hands of an impartial, fair and caring God.

The Book was not revealed in order to eliminate or restrict the differences and variety in human talent, ability or inclination, but it is there as an arbiter and a reference point whenever disputes and controversies arise.

This argument gives rise to another fundamental aspect of the Islamic view of human history. Islam considers the Book revealed by God as a criterion and an arbiter for mankind, a foundation for human life on which it can rise or fall. Society will progress and improve as long as it adheres to the teachings of God's Book, and it will falter and deviate when it neglects them, even if this was the choice of the majority in society. Right and wrong are not to be decided by human individuals or through a ballot box. The Islamic view is that the norms, traditions, systems, and laws people may adopt and accept as a way of life for human society at any particular time in history have no merit or consistency if they are at variance or in contradiction with God's Book. The whole philosophy on which such a way of life is based would be discredited, no matter how durable it might prove in practice.

This argument is important in protecting the foundations of religious thought against human interference. In Muslim society, for example, serious deviations have occurred at certain stages of its history, and such deviation continued to move further away. But it would be a travesty of the truth to argue that these darker chapters are in any way representative of the true image or spirit of Muslim life.

Islam, as a religion and a way of life, will remain unsullied by that inauspicious history, which must be discredited and renounced. For genuine Islamic life to be resumed and a distinctive Muslim society to be rebuilt, deviant practices that might have occurred at certain periods of Muslim history have to be cast aside. Reference should be made again directly to the Book that God has revealed, containing the whole truth as arbiter and guide for all mankind.

The *sūrah* goes on to explain why people allowed their whims and prejudices to cause them to neglect God's Book and turn away from the truth and the guidance it had brought them: *"Yet none other than those who had been given the Book started, out of injustice to one another, to dispute it after clear evidence of the truth had come to them."* (Verse 213) Jealousy, greed, caprice and self-aggrandizement were some of the motives behind the divisions, disagreements and conflict that have beset mankind throughout history.

No two people could disagree over the veracity and authenticity of God's revelations unless one or both of them are adversely motivated. True believers are in full agreement: *"God, by His will, guided the believers to the truth concerning which they had differed. God guides whom He will to the straight path."* (Verse 213)

God guides believers to the true and straight path outlined by His revelations, for their sincerity and devotion and for their genuine desire to seek the truth and live by the truth. God, in His infinite wisdom, bestows such grace and privilege on those who earn it with their passion and enthusiasm for the truth. Those are they who shall be liberated to enjoy peace and happiness and the favour of God Almighty. They are the ones who submit themselves totally to God, and they are the ones who are granted the highest position by God. This is true even though people who are ignorant of God's standards may think them to lead a deprived sort of life in this world. It is true even though they may be derided or scoffed at by foolish unbelievers.

When Will God's Help Arrive?

As it comes to a close, this highly instructive passage addresses the fearful adversity the believers encountered as a result of their disagreement and confrontation with the Arab unbelievers on the one hand, and with the followers of earlier religions, such as the Jews, on the other. The *sūrah* reassures the believers that what they faced was part of the experience and education they needed to qualify for God's reward in paradise. Believers must defend their faith and, in doing so, have to face up to numerous challenges and much hardship. They will experience triumphs as well as setbacks. If they persevere and stand firm and hold on to their beliefs and convictions, they will earn God's succour and trust. They will deserve to be the

custodians of God's message in this world. Their reward will be in paradise in the life to come. It is a fitting reward for their courage in defeating their own selfishness and greed, resisting all manner of temptation, and refusing to surrender their life and destiny to any other power or authority except that of God Almighty.

> *Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand.* (Verse 214)

With these poignant and profound words, and in this direct manner, God addresses the founding community of Islam, drawing their attention to the experiences of their fellow believers before them who were entrusted with the same task of establishing the divine code of living on earth. Nevertheless, the message in these words is timeless. It is directed to all human groups to whom God assigns that honourable task.

It is an awesome experience that drives God's own Messenger and those who have accepted the faith close to despair and makes there cry out with frustration: " *'When will God's help come?' "It* is a picture of great trepidation and unimaginable apprehension that cause a believer's faith to be tested so severely and shaken in such a profound manner. However, with determination and steadfastness, God's help is sure to arrive, for "*Surely, God's help is close at hand."*

God's support that ensures victory is reserved for those who earn it: those who persevere and stand firm to the end in the face of all adversity and misfortune, never wavering but always certain that God's help is on its way. No matter how severe the ordeal may become, true believers will always look to God, and to God alone, for salvation and support. By displaying such faith and trust in God, believers are deservedly rewarded by being admitted into paradise.

The dynamic of social and religious struggle reinforces the human spirit and encourages man to rise above his own ego and so emerge purer and stronger, ready to uphold the faith with greater energy and vigour. Thus, believers become a shining role model even for their most ardent adversaries, some of whom are liable to be impressed and join ranks with the believers, as witnessed throughout human history.

But even if this were not the case, something else much greater and much more admirable happens: advocates of God's order are liberated from subordination to any worldly power or temptation. Life and its comforts become of no real consequence, and man assumes control of his world, which can only mean a triumph for humanity and the human spirit as a whole.

The ingredients of success are faith, hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance. With those, victory is guaranteed and the road to greater, everlasting rewards, to eternal bliss, is direct and clear.

13
Worse Than Murder

يَسْـَٔلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنفِقُونَ ۖ قُلْ مَآ أَنفَقْتُم
مِّنْ خَيْرٍ فَلِلْوَٰلِدَيْنِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبِينَ وَٱلْيَتَـٰمَىٰ
وَٱلْمَسَـٰكِينِ وَٱبْنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۗ وَمَا تَفْعَلُوا۟ مِنْ
خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِهِۦ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١٥﴾

They ask you what they should spend [in charity]. Say, 'Anything good you spend of your wealth should go to parents and the near of kin, to orphans and the needy, and to travellers in need. God is well aware of whatever good you do.' (215)

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهٌ لَّكُمْ ۖ
وَعَسَىٰٓ أَن تَكْرَهُوا۟ شَيْـًٔا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ۖ
وَعَسَىٰٓ أَن تُحِبُّوا۟ شَيْـًٔا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ ۗ
وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢١٦﴾

Fighting is ordained for you, even though it is hateful to you. But it may well be that you hate a thing while it is good for you, and it may well be that you love a thing while it is bad for you. God knows, whereas you do not know. (216)

يَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلشَّهْرِ ٱلْحَرَامِ قِتَالٍ فِيهِ ۖ
قُلْ قِتَالٌ فِيهِ كَبِيرٌ ۖ وَصَدٌّ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ
وَكُفْرٌۢ بِهِۦ وَٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ وَإِخْرَاجُ
أَهْلِهِۦ مِنْهُ أَكْبَرُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱلْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ
مِنَ ٱلْقَتْلِ ۗ وَلَا يَزَالُونَ يُقَـٰتِلُونَكُمْ حَتَّىٰ
يَرُدُّوكُمْ عَن دِينِكُمْ إِنِ ٱسْتَطَـٰعُوا۟ ۚ وَمَن
يَرْتَدِدْ مِنكُمْ عَن دِينِهِۦ فَيَمُتْ وَهُوَ
كَافِرٌ فَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَـٰلُهُمْ فِى
ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ ۖ وَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ
هُمْ فِيهَا خَـٰلِدُونَ ﴿٢١٧﴾

They ask you about fighting in the sacred month. Say, 'Fighting in it is a grave offence, but to turn people away from God's path, to disbelieve in Him and in the Sacred Mosque, and to expel its people from it — [all this] is far more grave in God's sight.' Religious persecution is worse than killing. They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can. But whoever of you renounces his faith and dies an unbeliever, his works shall come to nothing in this world and in the world to come. Such people are destined for hell, wherein they shall abide. (217)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُواْ وَجَٰهَدُواْ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَرۡجُونَ رَحۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٢١٨

Those who have believed and those who have forsaken their homeland and striven hard for God's cause are indeed the ones who may look forward to God's mercy. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful. (218)

۞ يَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلۡخَمۡرِ وَٱلۡمَيۡسِرِۖ قُلۡ فِيهِمَآ إِثۡمٞ كَبِيرٞ وَمَنَٰفِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثۡمُهُمَآ أَكۡبَرُ مِن نَّفۡعِهِمَاۗ وَيَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنفِقُونَ قُلِ ٱلۡعَفۡوَۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٢١٩

They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say, 'In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people, but their evil is far greater than their benefit.' They ask you what they should spend in charity; say, 'Whatever you can spare.' Thus God makes plain His revelations so that you may reflect (219)

فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۗ وَيَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰۖ قُلۡ إِصۡلَاحٞ لَّهُمۡ خَيۡرٞۖ وَإِن تُخَالِطُوهُمۡ فَإِخۡوَٰنُكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُصۡلِحِۚ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَعۡنَتَكُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٢٢٠

upon this life and the life to come. They ask you about orphans; say, 'To improve their conditions is best. If you mix their affairs with yours, remember that they are your brothers. God knows him who spoils things and him who improves. Had God so willed, He would indeed have overburdened you. God is indeed Almighty, Wise.' (220)

Overview

The most notable feature of the next passage is that it deals with specific religious rulings. These come in the form of answers to questions, reflecting a degree of alertness in the Muslim community, and an eagerness to know and understand the requirements and obligations of their new faith. It shows a desire on their part to live up to the demands of Islam in every aspect of everyday life. This is indeed the mark of a true Muslim: to learn Islamic rulings with respect to every detail, no matter how trivial. No action is taken before establishing the position of Islam on it: if sanctioned and approved, it becomes part of a Muslim's way of life; otherwise, it is shunned and

avoided. This sensitivity is second nature to every true Muslim.

Questions were raised as a result of hostile propaganda spread by some Arabian Jews, hypocrites, and unbelievers among the Arabs. Muslims would then put those questions to the Prophet Muĥammad, either to seek clarification or to dispel doubts stirred by that poisonous propaganda. Revelation would often be received by the Prophet giving comprehensive and final answers. This process informs and educates the Muslims about their religion and pre-empts any hostile schemes or designs being contemplated against them.

This illustrates the dynamics of the battles the Qur'ān was fighting to enlighten individual Muslims and to reinforce the Muslim community in combating outside threats.

This passage covers questions relating to charity: what and how much should be given and to whom. There are questions on fighting during the sacred months, drinking and gambling, and the treatment of orphans. We will discuss the reasons that gave rise to these questions as we discuss the relevant verses.

Balancing Kindness and Personal Preferences

> *They ask you what they should spend [in charity]. Say, Anything good you spend of your wealth should go to parents and the near of kin, to orphans and the needy, and to travellers in need. God is well aware of whatever good you do.* (Verse 215)

The subject of charity had already been dealt with in several Qur'ānic passages that preceded the revelation of the present verse. The circumstances that witnessed the birth of Islam made voluntary financial contributions by Muslims absolutely essential in order for the community to emerge and consolidate its position, considering the great difficulties and threat of war it was facing. It was also essential as an expression of solidarity and cohesion within the community, and to eliminate inequality and reinforce loyalty and self-sufficiency. All these are indispensable qualities for building up a true and practical sense of community among the Muslims.

At this point we are told that some Muslims asked *"what they should spend [in charily]."* (Verse 215) The question is about the type of money Muslims may give in charity. The reply speaks of the nature of charitable spending and defines the most important beneficiaries. The phraseology of the answer, "*Say, 'Anything good you spend of your wealth,'*" indicates, first of all, that whatever is given in charity is good for the donor, the recipient and the community as a whole. It is good in itself and it is done for good reasons. It also implies that people should give from the best of what they have and share it with others. As well as benefitting the needy, this would

purify the donor's heart and soul and give charity and altruism real meaning.

However, giving from the best of what one has is not a condition of generosity, as the Qur'ān urges elsewhere that people should give from neither the best nor the worst, but from the average, of what they have. In its inimitable style, the Qur'ān in the present passage is aiming to persuade people to rise to a higher level of excellence and generosity by giving what is closer and dearer to their hearts.

As to whom charity should be directed, the verse explains: "*to parents and the near of kin, to orphans and the needy, and to travellers in need*" The verse gives a list of categories of people brought together through ties of family, kinship, compassion, and an integral strong framework of human social welfare, nurtured and promoted by religious faith.

This relationship was further defined by the Prophet who was reported to have said: "Start by being charitable to yourself. If you have something left, then to your immediate family. When you have something left after having looked after your family, then give to your relatives. If you have more, then to all others." [Related by Muslim]

This example reveals the Islamic highly effective and common sense approach in guiding human individuals. It begins from man's natural aptitudes and inclinations and takes him gradually and gently upwards to where it wants him to be. As he progresses and improves his human condition, he would not find himself over-strained or being forcibly dragged to fulfil his duties, or find that his natural needs and talents are being suppressed or thwarted. While his eyes and aspirations are cast as high as possible, and his heart and soul reach out towards God Almighty, man's feet would be set firmly on the ground.

God knows that human beings tend to be selfish, and so He directs them to see to their own needs before those of others. God allows man to enjoy the good things of life, in moderation, and only when man has looked properly after himself does God direct him to be charitable towards others. The Prophet Muĥammad is quoted as saying: "The most noble charity is that made once one's own needs are fulfilled; the upper (giving) hand is better than the lower (receiving) hand. Start with your dependants." [Related by Muslim] Jābir ibn `Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "A man once offered a lump of gold, the size of an egg, to the Prophet saying that he is giving it for charity and that it was all he had, but the Prophet turned away from him. The man came to the Prophet again from the right, then from the left, then from the back, saying the same thing. Every time the Prophet turned away from him. At last the Prophet took the lump of gold and threw it at him. Had it hit him, he would have been hurt. The Prophet then said, 'A person would come with all he possesses and say he wants to give it away to charity. He then goes to beg from

others. The best charity is that made when one's own needs have been fulfilled." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

God also knows that human beings favour their immediate family and relatives, their parents and children, and so He urges them to give willingly to these relatives, thereby satisfying a natural human tendency, which is both legitimate and sensible, while benefitting a section of the community. For, unless these relatives are helped they would continue to be a burden on the rest of society, and it is far more dignified for them to be cared for by members of their own family. This is bound to bring people closer together and spread love and harmony within immediate and extended families, the vital nucleus of the larger human society.

Beyond that, man is required to show generosity towards a whole range of other human groups such as young orphans and those members of society who are helpless but are too sensitive to ask for help. Another group are those stranded travellers or immigrants, some of whom may be well-off but for reasons beyond their control are unable to have access to their money. The first Muslim community in Madinah had a sizeable section of such people, most of whom were migrants from Makkah who had left all their belongings behind.

All these are members of the Muslim community and Islam urges the well-off to act charitably towards them. It encourages people's natural kindness and good-will to purify the hearts and souls of the donors, who give generously and willingly, and to ensure the welfare of those in need, thereby achieving greater cohesion and solidarity among the community in a smooth, fair and equitable manner.

The verse goes on to link such commendable charity with God Almighty, saying: *"God is well aware of whatever good you do."* (Verse 215) God is aware of the deed as well as of the intention behind it. Thus, it will not go to waste. He has taken note of it and, being just, He will give a suitable reward for it.

This educational approach directs man's heart and soul towards God Almighty with ease and deliberation. It picks man up from wherever he is and takes him to far wider horizons of civility and humanity which he would never reach without God's guidance and grace.

What Things We May Love

The next verse deals with the duty of taking up arms for a legitimate cause: *"Fighting is ordained for you, even though it is hateful to you. But it may well be that you hate a thing while it is good for you, and it may well be that you love a thing while it is bad for you. God knows, whereas you do not know."* (Verse 216)

To take up arms in support of a cause blessed by God is a demanding duty, but is

nevertheless necessary because it serves the good of Muslim individuals and communities as well as that of mankind as a whole. It also underpins what is good and right.

As with all the obligations it prescribes, Islam takes into account the limits of human nature. In the case of war, it does not only acknowledge the efforts and the sacrifices it demands, but also man's instinctive reluctance to prosecute it. Islam does not deny, contradict or suppress human nature, but always seeks an appropriate approach to deal with the issues it proposes. It clearly allows for the fact that certain obligations in this life are demanding, unappealing or even detestable, but at the same time it indicates that there is a greater cause to be served by fulfilling them, which might not be readily obvious to the human mind, finite as it is. It opens up new avenues of hope and achievement. For, no one can tell for certain whether there is not some unforeseen good beyond an impending evil. Only God, the omniscient, knows the future outcome of present actions, and man cannot even pretend to have that privilege.

This comforting thought revives man's hopes and optimism, drawing him closer to God with more self-confidence and reassurance.

By this effective educational approach, Islam nurtures in man a deeper sense of loyalty and readiness to sacrifice and to scale greater heights of excellence and achievement. It allows him to face his responsibilities with courage and enthusiasm, safe in the knowledge that God's blessings and support are not far behind. This motivates him to persevere in the face of adversity, because a pleasant and favourable outcome might be waiting for him. It also restrains man's cravings so that he is not carried away by his pleasures and desires, which could end in pain and sorrow.

It is a remarkably simple, but profound, approach that is in harmony with human nature and honest in addressing it. It is undeniable that man, weak and short-sighted as he is, would reject something which is in fact good for him, or covet something which is in fact evil and harmful. The fact is that God alone has knowledge of everything; people are often ignorant or hampered by prejudice and their own shortcomings.

This opens up a whole new world, hitherto unknown, and brings to light new factors of cause and effect, into which man's fears, hopes and behaviour blend smoothly, under God's benevolent and omniscient presence. By accepting the fact that whatever God ordains is always for the best, man enters a world of total serenity, security and faith. It is the world of peace which God has recommended to the believers even as He calls upon them to take up arms and fight, because real peace is that of the soul and the conscience that on experiences in. the heat of battle.

The implications of this Qur'ānic principle are not limited to fighting, which is only one example of a necessary evil that may ultimately result in something good, but extend to all aspects of a believer's life. The Muslims who left Madinah, on the eve of the Battle of Badr in 624 CE, to intercept the Quraysh trade caravan travelling from Syria to Makkah, were hoping that they would take it over without having to fight. However, God willed it that the caravan would escape and the Muslims find themselves facing the Quraysh army which was intent on subduing them. The outcome was a resounding victory for Islam and the Muslims which was infinitely better than the trade caravan and its valuable commodities. What the Muslims aimed for was much inferior to what God had in store for them. God knows and people do not.

In an episode involving the Prophet Moses, the Qur'ān tells us how, as he embarked on a journey accompanied by his boy servant, the boy unwittingly left their provisions of fish behind and it found its way back into the sea. The narrative goes on, saying: "*And after they had marched on for some distance, Moses said to his servant: 'Bring us our mid-day meal; we are indeed worn out by this our journey' Said [the servant]: Do you recall when we betook ourselves to that rock for rest. There I forgot the fish — and none but Satan made me thus forget to mention it! — and it took its way into the sea. How strange! [Moses] said: "That is [the place] we are seeking!' So they turned back, retracing their footsteps, and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Our mercy and whom We had endowed with knowledge of Our own.*" (18: 62-65) What seemed an oversight by the servant turned out to be a fortunate turn of events that brought Moses into contact with the learned man, which was the very purpose of the journey.

We could all recall instances, from personal experience, in which we dreaded certain situations that had turned out to be of great benefit, as well as others which looked appealing and lucrative but ended in disaster. Often, people bitterly regret missing out on certain things, but as time goes by they realize that God had spared them certain adverse consequences; while others undergo intense suffering that could drive them to the edge of despair, but would eventually bring opportunities of incredible happiness and prosperity.

Man simply cannot pretend to know where his good lies, but God knows for certain, a fact that man must accept and act upon by submitting himself to God alone. This is what the Qur'ān teaches, and this is the approach it adopts to convince people to submit to the will and judgement of God Almighty.

Fighting in the Sacred Months

> *They ask you about fighting in the sacred month. Say, 'Fighting in it is a grave offence, but to turn people away from God's path, to disbelieve in Him and in the*

> *Sacred Mosque, and to expel its people from it — [all this] is far more grave in God's sight.' Religious persecution is worse than killing. They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can. But whoever of you renounces his faith and dies an unbeliever, his works shall come to nothing in this world and in the world to come. Such people are destined for hell, wherein they shall abide.* (Verse 217)

Several reports indicate that these verses were revealed in connection with an expedition of eight Muslims from the *Muhājirūn* [i.e. those who migrated with the Prophet to Madinah], led by `Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh, dispatched by the Prophet Muĥammad prior to the great Battle of Badr, with sealed instructions and ordered not to open them before the company had travelled for two nights. When opened, the instructions read as follows: "When you have read this letter of mine proceed until you reach the Nakhlah valley, between Makkah and Ṭā'if. Once there, monitor the movements of the Quraysh and gather news of their activities. Do not force any of your men to go with you."

On reading those instructions, `Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh, the group commander, said, "To hear is to obey." He informed his Companions, giving them the choice to join him or return to Madinah. They all agreed to go ahead. They took a route through the Ĥijāz, but on the way the camel mounted by Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş and `Utbah ibn Ghazwān went missing and they stayed behind to look for it. The other six went on and, as they reached the valley, a small trade caravan belonging to the Quraysh, passed by. Four people, including `Amr ibn al-Ĥadramī, were travelling with it. The task force attacked it, killing `Amr ibn al-Ĥadramī and apprehending two of the other three men, while the fourth escaped. They did this thinking it was the last day of Jumādā II, whereas in fact it was the first day of Rajab, one of the months recognized as sacred by the Arabs, when no fighting may take place, and whose sanctity was endorsed by Islam.

When the expedition returned to Madinah, the Prophet said to them, "I never ordered you to fight during the sacred month," and refused to accept the caravan or the two prisoners. Members of the expedition were reproached by their fellow Muslims and they were in despair, while the Quraysh accused the Prophet and his followers of violating a sacred month by killing one man, abducting two others, and seizing the caravan. Some Jews in Madinah saw the incident as an omen of impending war between the Muslims and the Quraysh.

The atmosphere became charged with intrigue and propaganda. The Muslims were depicted as self-serving renegades who would not hesitate to violate age-old sanctities. It was at that point that the revelations were received confirming the sanctity of the sacred months and condemning all acts of killing during them, but putting the whole episode involving the expedition in the right perspective.

It was the unbelievers who had declared war against the Muslims, rather than the other way round. They obstructed the spread of Islam, and spared no effort in turning people away from it, resorting to oppression and persecution. They refused to believe in God or respect the Sacred Mosque. Over a period of thirteen long years, they repeatedly violated the sanctity of Makkah by their relentless and violent opposition to Islam and by persecuting Muslim converts whom they had eventually driven out of their homes and families.

These vile and shameless acts the pagan Arabs had perpetrated against Islam and the Muslims were far more grievous violations of the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque and the sacred months. They persecuted people in order to force them to renounce their faith. That is a much more grievous crime. The smoke screen had fallen down, and the pagan Arabs could no longer hide behind a wall of false piety, putting the Muslims on the defensive and accusing them of the very aggressions they themselves had committed.

Islam is a practical and realistic way of life which is not based on rigid idealistic dogma. It takes life as it is and deals with the realities of problems and situations as and when they arise, and provides practical, effective and realistic solutions.

In this instance, the idolater Arabs were the aggressors, who were seen to treat sanctities of religion and tradition with utter contempt.

They stood in active opposition to Islam, using all forms of intimidation and enticement to disconcert the Muslims, break up their ranks, drive them out of their homes and bar them from their land. At the same time, they falsely claimed the higher moral ground, protesting in the name of religion and accusing Muĥammad and his followers of breaching the sanctity of the sacred months.

How should Islam deal with such people? Should it recommend a utopian approach? It could not possibly advise its followers to stand idle while their opponents were using every available means to stifle them. Islam aims to stamp out oppression and evil, and curtail the powers of aggression and injustice, to allow the good and righteous to prevail and prevent religious sanctities being used as a shield for the perpetration of tyranny and corruption.

Islam assiduously respects those who honour religious sanctities, but it would not allow such sanctities to be used as a pretext for the persecution or suppression of the believers, or to deprive them of their legitimate rights. It further affirms that such acts should not go unpunished.

By the same token, Islam forbids backbiting, slander and injustice, for instance, but makes it clear that this does not apply in cases of people who are known for their corruption or bad reputation, or who commit an injustice. To protect such behaviour is liable to be misconstrued as weakness, and could only encourage further

corruption and injustice.

Nevertheless, Islam maintains its own high moral principles and does not recommend resort to the same obscene methods used by its detractors. It simply directs the Muslims to stand up to those who offend against them, and reserves for them the right to appropriately and publicly punish them. It is only when justice is established and wrongdoing is contained that sanctities can be protected and preserved.

Islam is utterly unequivocal on this point. It makes no excuses, nor allows anyone to take advantage of its lenient and tolerant attitude. The Qur'ān, in this instance, provides the Muslim community with the solid ground on which to stand in its fight against evil and corruption. It gives Muslims clear and definite principles to allow them to forge ahead with their mission with certainty, self-assurance and total peace of conscience.

The Ultimate Aim of Islam's Enemies

The verse then goes on to state, in no uncertain terms, how determined the unbelievers are in pursuing their goal of destroying the Muslims' faith, saying: *"They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (Verse 217)

This objective is common to all enemies of Islam everywhere, to whom its very existence and success seem to be a source of deep resentment and consternation. They are profoundly alarmed by Islam's inherent strength and resilience. The clarity of its ideas and the rigour of its principles seem to evoke their displeasure and hostility because Islam represents a bedrock of resistance against falsehood, tyranny and corruption. This morbid attitude towards Islam lies behind most of the hostile and bigoted policies and designs directed against Muslim groups and communities in many parts of the world.

The methods and means of achieving this unholy goal may vary from one case to another, but the aim remains constant: to force Muslims to abandon their faith. This campaign never abates or relaxes. Fresh impetus is added at every stage, and greater resources are deployed whenever deemed necessary.

Hence, the Qur'ān urges caution and persistence, warning of dire consequences if Muslims give in to pressure or relinquish their position. It says: *"But whoever of you renounces his faith and dies an unbeliever, his works shall come to nothing in this world and in the world to come. Such people are destined for hell, wherein they shall abide."* (Verse 217)

The Arabic term, *ĥabiṭat,* used to describe the futility of the works of those who renounce their faith, conjures up an image very familiar to the Arabs. It is what

happens to a camel that grazes in polluted pastures and ends up with an inflated belly, and dies. The impact of this metaphor could not have been lost on them.

It is almost inconceivable for someone who has truly experienced the faith of Islam to renounce it completely, unless that person has been irredeemably corrupted. Renouncing the faith of Islam, no matter how severe a pressure one is subjected to, can only result in total loss, both in this world as well as in the world to come. This is not to say that it is not justifiable under extreme duress, when one could feign desertion of one's faith to save oneself from danger or death, while one continues to believe in one's heart and conscience. Deliberate and conscious apostasy, on the other hand, is a gross and loathsome offence.

The warning given in this verse remains true for the rest of time. Muslims are exhorted never to desert their faith, no matter what difficulties they have to put up with. When they are in difficulty, they should persevere, endure and look to God for help and salvation. No matter what hardships they undergo, Muslims are guaranteed one of two ends: victory or martyrdom.

Above all, there is God's grace and mercy, reserved for those who struggle for His cause. No one with true faith can ever despair of God's mercy: *"Those who have believed and those who have forsaken their homeland and striven hard for God's cause are indeed the ones who may look forward to God's mercy. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 218)

As long as a believer continues to trust in God's grace, he shall never be disappointed. Those early Muslims from Makkah, who had given up everything for their faith, lived up to their belief, strove hard, and received the appropriate rewards. They deservedly won God's forgiveness and mercy, pointing the way to those who would come after them.

The Qur'ānic Method of Education

The *sūrah* goes on to give the Islamic rulings on drinking and gambling, two of the most popular indulgences among the Arabs at the time, who had little else of importance to occupy their minds or their time:

> *They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say, 'In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people, but their evil is far greater than their benefit.* (Verse 219)

Prior to the revelation of this verse, drinking and gambling were tolerated but never condoned. We do not have a single statement in the Qur'ān which may be construed as making them permissible. God, however, carefully charted the way He

wanted the newly born Muslim community to take, marking it step by step, so that it would he able to fulfil the role He has assigned to it. The time had to come when such wasteful pastimes would be condemned and rooted out of the Muslim community whose role in the life and history of mankind demanded the dedication and full conscious participation of everyone in that community. Unlike godless societies, past, present and future, a Muslim community has no room for escapism or excessive diversions. The Qur'ānic approach in banning these practices was measured and deliberate.

This statement was' the first step towards a universal ban on drinking and gambling in Muslim society. While good and evil could often intermingle and be confused with one another, making it impossible in the human world for things to be purely good or purely evil, the main criteria for whether something could be permissible or prohibited is the preponderance of good or evil associated with it. This statement is a good example of the judicious Qur'ānic approach discernible in many Islamic legal and practical rulings and teachings.

We often find that in matters of faith or abstract belief, Islam gives specific and definite pronouncements, but when it comes to matters of tradition or complex social practices, it takes a more pragmatic and measured approach, preparing the ground for smoother adoption and implementation.

On the question of God's oneness, for example, Islam gave its final ruling right at the outset, without any hesitation or room for compromise. That is an essential question of faith. Unless the concept of God's oneness is firmly established in a community, it cannot be truly Islamic.

Drinking and gambling are well-entrenched social habits that require careful treatment. The first step was to raise in people's minds an inner consciousness of their harmful effects, advising that they would be better avoided. The second step came later on, which directed Muslims: *"Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying."* (4: 43)

There are five prayers to be performed at set times every day. The time interval between one prayer and the next is not long enough for a drinking person to regain sobriety. This restricts the opportunity to drink and helps habitual drinkers to give it up altogether.

The third and final step in banning drinking came in the verse which says: *"Believers, intoxicants, games of chance, idolatrous practices and divining arrows are abominations devised by Satan. Therefore, turn away from them, so that you may be successful."* (5: 90)

Dealing with Slavery

At the advent of Islam, slavery was an established social and economic practice known all over the world. Any movement towards the abolition of slavery would require radical social change and far- reaching economic reforms and adjustments, as well as international treaties and conventions to govern the treatment of war prisoners. Islam never condoned slavery. There is not a single statement in the Qur'ān that recommends or approves of slavery or the enslavement of war prisoners. Slavery was a widespread practice with considerable bearing on the world economy. Moreover, it was an international tradition that prisoners of war were made slaves. Hence, there was no alternative but to phase it out gradually and progressively.

Apart from war captives and slave children, Islam opted for eliminating the root causes and drying up the sources of slavery, with an overriding objective to avoid social upheaval, and it strove to provide the basic guarantees of a decent living and dignity for freed slaves.

As for war captives, Islam could not unilaterally forgo imposing slavery on war prisoners since non-Muslim states continued to do so with Muslim prisoners in times of war. Were it to do so, it would have immediately put the Muslims at a disadvantage *vis-a-vis* their enemies. If any Muslim soldiers were taken prisoners, they would be certain to be made slaves, while prisoners taken by Muslims would remain free. On the other hand, were Islam to require that children born in slavery be immediately freed before creating the right social and economic environment that would absorb them as free citizens, they would have been left stranded, thrown into society with no means of living or welfare. They would have had no families to protect them against descending into poverty or moral delinquency.

For these, and other, reasons it would have been premature for Islam to immediately and unilaterally abolish slavery. However, taking the well-entrenched social conditions into account and while not banning the enslavement of war captives, the Qur'ān did not specifically order that they should be held in bondage. Instead, the Qur'ān advises the Muslims: "*when you meet the unbelievers [in war] smite their necks until you overcome them fully, then bind [the captives] firmly. Thereafter, [set them free,] either by an act of grace or against ransom, so that war lays down its burdens.*" (47: 4) This gave the Muslim authorities the choice to deal with war captives according to the prevailing circumstances and the nature of the conflict and the enemy they were facing. War captives could be released, exchanged or, if necessary, held in bondage.

Other ways of enslavement, and they were many, were totally banned. That was sure to minimize the number of slaves in society. Islam began by integrating those slaves as soon as they joined the Muslim community. It gave them the full right to buy their freedom through an agreement a slave would make with his master, who may not refuse him such a deal. Once an agreement of this sort is made, a slave has

the right to work, own property, earn an independent income, and seek employment with other employers, in order to be able to raise the money to secure his freedom. That made it possible for slaves to gradually acquire an independent status in society and enjoy all the basic citizenship rights of the community, and they would become eligible for state welfare aid, which consists mainly of *zakāt* revenue. Furthermore, Islam urged its followers to help slaves financially to secure their freedom and incorporated the freeing of slaves into the legal code as a form of atonement for certain offences including manslaughter, reneging on an oath, and the ancient Arabian practice of a husband banishing his wife and saying that he considers her, for marital purposes, like his mother. With time, slavery was bound to be phased out, whereas a drastic or draconian approach to abolish it would have resulted in unnecessary social turmoil and disintegration.

The subsequent proliferation of slavery in Muslim societies had come about as a result of a gradual decline of the authority of Islam. This is a historical fact for which Islam may not be blamed. Islam cannot be held responsible for its incorrect implementation in certain periods or societies. Islam was, and remains, unchanged, but what had changed was people's understanding of it an the way they translated its principles into social reality, which was often an aberration and a travesty of Islam for which it cannot be held accountable.

Any revival of Islamic life should, therefore, start from the authentic and established sources and principles of Islam and not be a continuation of a certain distorted historical legacy. This is an essential truth, both in abstract as well as practical terms, that cannot be overemphasized. Grossly mistaken conclusions are made regarding the Islamic view of history and on understanding the historic reality of Islam and how it operates in society. The leading culprits in this field are the so-called Orientalists, or Western scholars of Islam, and their students, including some sincere but very naïve Muslim scholars who were misled by them.

More Questions by Believers

The *sūrah* continues, answering other questions and laying down more fundamental Islamic principles. "*They ask you what they should spend in charity; say, 'Whatever you can spare.' Thus God makes plain His revelations so that you may reflect upon this life and the life to come.*" (Verses 219-220)

The answer given to this question the first time round, in verse 215, identified what could be given in charity and to whom, and here it identifies quantities. Anything above one's basic reasonable personal needs should be considered available for donation to others, starting with those eligible among one's nearest of kin, as already pointed out.

The present statement implies that the obligatory *zakāt* is not by itself sufficient as a means of wealth distribution, and this ruling, in my view, has not been overruled by the imposition of *zakāt*. Payment of *zakāt* by those liable to it does not exempt them from making additional donations and contributions to good causes. *Zakāt* is a duty levied by the ruling Muslim authority for allocation to the various causes specified in the Qur'ān (9: 60), beyond which Muslims continue to have an obligation towards God and fellow-Muslims in society. It may not exhaust one's ability to give, or one's desire to gain further blessings and pleasure from God Almighty. The Prophet Muĥammad is quoted in al-Jaşşāş's *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān* as having said: "There is a duty on wealth other than *zakāt."* If this duty is not discharged voluntarily, which is obviously more gracious and laudable, Muslim authorities have the power to collect funds over and above the obligatory *zakāt,* for spending in the public interest, in order to curb wastage or hoarding of wealth.

Muslims are then reminded that: *"God makes plain His revelations so that you may reflect upon this life and the life to come."* (Verses 219-220) It would not suffice to consider only the realities of this life, which represents the more immediate and shorter part of the whole picture of human existence and all the responsibilities and relationships associated with it. That would only give a distorted understanding of the values and the criteria upon which life is built which would bring about the wrong kind of human behaviour.

The distribution and allocation of wealth, in particular, calls for total awarness of accountability in this life and in the life to come. One is always substantially rewarded, spiritually and morally, for what one gives in charity. Further reward comes in the contribution one makes to the welfare and well-being of society. These rewards may not, however, be readily apparent to everyone, which makes the rewards of the hereafter even more of an incentive to give generously and willingly and away from ostentation and pomposity.

Treatment of Orphans

The *sūrah* then raises the question of how orphans ought to be treated. *"They ask you about orphans; say, 'To improve their conditions is best.' If you mix their affairs with yours, remember that they are your brothers. God knows him who spoils things and him who improves. Had God so willed, He would indeed have overburdened you. God is indeed Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 220)

Social welfare is the bedrock of Muslim society which has a responsibility to care for the weaker among its members and protect their interests. Having lost either or both of their parents at a young age, orphan children would come at the top of the list of social groups that deserve care and protection. Some guardians of orphan

children used to incorporate any possessions or wealth those children might have inherited into their own, for trading or other purposes, which did not always work in the children's favour As the Qur'ān denounced such actions, some conscientious people began to feel guilty and went too far the other way in caring for orphans, to the extent that they separated their own food from that of the orphans in their care. This led to subsequent revelations being sent down to moderate the situation and put the whole issue in a proper perspective. Muslims were urged to do what would he in the best interest of the orphan children they were caring for. Being members of the larger family of Islam, orphans should be treated in a spirit of fraternity and brotherhood. God is the judge of people's motives and intentions. He recognizes those who are genuine and, being all-powerful and compassionate, He does not wish to overburden them.

The Qur'ān refers all actions ultimately to God. Faith and life revolve on the central pivot of belief in God. It is notable that Islamic teachings and precepts are based on an inner conscious conviction that acts as a solid guarantee for their success and effectiveness.

14
The Family: The Foundation of Human Society

وَلَا تَنكِحُواْ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكَٰتِ حَتَّىٰ يُؤۡمِنَّۚ وَلَأَمَةٞ مُّؤۡمِنَةٌ خَيۡرٞ مِّن مُّشۡرِكَةٖ وَلَوۡ أَعۡجَبَتۡكُمۡۗ وَلَا تُنكِحُواْ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ حَتَّىٰ يُؤۡمِنُواْۚ وَلَعَبۡدٞ مُّؤۡمِنٌ خَيۡرٞ مِّن مُّشۡرِكٖ وَلَوۡ أَعۡجَبَكُمۡۗ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَدۡعُونَ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَدۡعُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱلۡجَنَّةِ وَٱلۡمَغۡفِرَةِ بِإِذۡنِهِۦۖ وَيُبَيِّنُ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ٢٢١

Do not marry women who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith. Any believing bondwoman is certainly better than an idolatress, even though the latter may well please you. And do not give your women in marriage to men who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith. Any believing bondman is certainly better than an idolater, even though the latter may well please you. These invite to the fire; whereas God invites to paradise and to the achievement of forgiveness by His leave. He makes plain His revelations to mankind so that they may bear them in mind. (221)

وَيَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلۡمَحِيضِۖ قُلۡ هُوَ أَذٗى فَٱعۡتَزِلُواْ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فِي ٱلۡمَحِيضِۖ وَلَا تَقۡرَبُوهُنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَطۡهُرۡنَۖ فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرۡنَ فَأۡتُوهُنَّ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ أَمَرَكُمُ ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلتَّوَّٰبِينَ وَيُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُتَطَهِّرِينَ ٢٢٢

They ask you about menstruation. Say: 'It is an unclean condition; so keep aloof from women during menstruation, and do not draw near to them until they are cleansed. When they have cleansed themselves, you may go in unto them in the proper way, as God has bidden you. God loves those who turn to Him in repentance, and He loves those who keep themselves pure.' (222)

نِسَآؤُكُمْ حَرْثٌ لَّكُمْ فَأْتُواْ حَرْثَكُمْ أَنَّىٰ شِئْتُمْ ۖ وَقَدِّمُواْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّكُم مُّلَٰقُوهُ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢٢٣﴾

Your wives are your tilth; go, then, to your tilth as you may desire, but first provide something for your souls. Fear God and know that you shall meet Him. Give the happy news to the believers. (223)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُواْ ٱللَّهَ عُرْضَةً لِّأَيْمَٰنِكُمْ أَن تَبَرُّواْ وَتَتَّقُواْ وَتُصْلِحُواْ بَيْنَ ٱلنَّاسِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٤﴾

Do not allow your oaths in the name of God to become an obstacle to your being kind and God-fearing, or to promoting peace among people. God hears all and knows all. (224)

لَّا يُؤَاخِذُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِٱللَّغْوِ فِىٓ أَيْمَٰنِكُمْ وَلَٰكِن يُؤَاخِذُكُم بِمَا كَسَبَتْ قُلُوبُكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٥﴾

God shall not take you to task for oaths which you may have uttered without thought, but He will take you to task for what your hearts have conceived in earnest. God is much-Forgiving, Forbearing. (225)

لِّلَّذِينَ يُؤْلُونَ مِن نِّسَآئِهِمْ تَرَبُّصُ أَرْبَعَةِ أَشْهُرٍ ۖ فَإِن فَآءُو فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٦﴾

Those who take an oath that they will not approach their wives shall have four months of grace. If they go back on their oaths, God is much-Forgiving, Merciful; (226)

وَإِنْ عَزَمُواْ ٱلطَّلَٰقَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٧﴾

and if they are resolved on divorce, [let them remember that] God hears all and knows all. (227)

وَٱلْمُطَلَّقَٰتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَٰثَةَ قُرُوٓءٍ ۚ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَن يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ فِىٓ أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِن كُنَّ يُؤْمِنَّ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ ۚ وَبُعُولَتُهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوٓاْ إِصْلَٰحًا ۚ وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ ٱلَّذِى عَلَيْهِنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ

Divorced women shall wait, by themselves, for three monthly courses. It is unlawful for them to conceal what God might have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. During this period, their husbands are entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation. Women shall, in all fairness, enjoy rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have an advantage over them. God is Almighty, Wise. (228)

دَرَجَةٌ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٢٨﴾

ٱلطَّلَٰقُ مَرَّتَانِ ۖ فَإِمۡسَاكُۢ بِمَعۡرُوفٍ أَوۡ تَسۡرِيحُۢ بِإِحۡسَٰنٖ ۗ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمۡ أَن تَأۡخُذُواْ مِمَّآ ءَاتَيۡتُمُوهُنَّ شَيۡـٔٗا إِلَّآ أَن يَخَافَآ أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَإِنۡ خِفۡتُمۡ أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡهِمَا فِيمَا ٱفۡتَدَتۡ بِهِۦ ۗ تِلۡكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ فَلَا تَعۡتَدُوهَا ۚ وَمَن يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٢٢٩﴾

Divorce may be [revoked] twice, whereupon a woman may either be retained in fairness or released with kindness. It is unlawful for you to take back from women anything of what you have given them [as dowry], unless they both [husband and wife] fear that they may not be able to keep within the bounds set by God. If you have cause to fear that they would not be able to keep within the bounds set by God, it shall be no offence for either of them if she gives up whatever she may in order to free herself. These are the bounds set by God; do not, then, transgress them. Those who transgress the bounds set by God are wrongdoers indeed. (229)

فَإِن طَلَّقَهَا فَلَا تَحِلُّ لَهُۥ مِنۢ بَعۡدُ حَتَّىٰ تَنكِحَ زَوۡجًا غَيۡرَهُۥ ۗ فَإِن طَلَّقَهَا فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡهِمَآ أَن يَتَرَاجَعَآ إِن ظَنَّآ أَن يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَتِلۡكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ يُبَيِّنُهَا لِقَوۡمٖ يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٢٣٠﴾

Should he divorce her [a third time], she shall not thereafter be lawful for him to remarry until she has wedded another husband. If the latter then divorces her it shall be no offence for either of the two if they return to one another, if they feel that they will be able to keep within the bounds set by God. Such are the bounds set by God. He makes them plain for people who have knowledge. (230)

وَإِذَا طَلَّقۡتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَبَلَغۡنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَأَمۡسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعۡرُوفٍ أَوۡ سَرِّحُوهُنَّ بِمَعۡرُوفٖ ۚ وَلَا تُمۡسِكُوهُنَّ ضِرَارٗا لِّتَعۡتَدُواْ

When you have divorced women and they have reached the end of their waiting-term, either retain them with fairness or let them go with fairness. Do not retain them out of malice in order to hurt them. He who does so wrongs his own soul.

وَمَن يَفۡعَلۡ ذَٰلِكَ فَقَدۡ ظَلَمَ نَفۡسَهُۥۚ

وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوٓاْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ هُزُوٗاۚ وَٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَمَآ أَنزَلَ عَلَيۡكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةِ يَعِظُكُم بِهِۦۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٞ ٢٣١

وَإِذَا طَلَّقۡتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَبَلَغۡنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَلَا تَعۡضُلُوهُنَّ أَن يَنكِحۡنَ أَزۡوَٰجَهُنَّ إِذَا تَرَٰضَوۡاْ بَيۡنَهُم بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِۗ ذَٰلِكَ يُوعَظُ بِهِۦ مَن كَانَ مِنكُمۡ يُؤۡمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۗ ذَٰلِكُمۡ أَزۡكَىٰ لَكُمۡ وَأَطۡهَرُۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ وَأَنتُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٣٢

۞ وَٱلۡوَٰلِدَٰتُ يُرۡضِعۡنَ أَوۡلَٰدَهُنَّ حَوۡلَيۡنِ كَامِلَيۡنِۖ لِمَنۡ أَرَادَ أَن يُتِمَّ ٱلرَّضَاعَةَۚ وَعَلَى ٱلۡمَوۡلُودِ لَهُۥ رِزۡقُهُنَّ وَكِسۡوَتُهُنَّ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِۚ لَا تُكَلَّفُ نَفۡسٌ إِلَّا وُسۡعَهَاۚ لَا تُضَآرَّ وَٰلِدَةُۢ بِوَلَدِهَا وَلَا مَوۡلُودٞ لَّهُۥ بِوَلَدِهِۦۚ وَعَلَى ٱلۡوَارِثِ مِثۡلُ ذَٰلِكَۗ فَإِنۡ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا عَن تَرَاضٖ مِّنۡهُمَا وَتَشَاوُرٖ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡهِمَاۗ وَإِنۡ أَرَدتُّمۡ أَن تَسۡتَرۡضِعُوٓاْ أَوۡلَٰدَكُمۡ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذَا سَلَّمۡتُم مَّآ ءَاتَيۡتُم

Do not take God's revelations in a frivolous manner. Remember the blessings God has bestowed upon you, and all the revelation and wisdom He has bestowed upon you from on high in order to admonish you. Fear God and know well that He has full knowledge of everything. (231)

And when you have divorced women and they have reached the end of their waiting-term, do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they have agreed with each other in a fair manner. This is an admonition for everyone of you who believes in God and the Last Day. That is more virtuous for you, and purer. God knows, whereas you do not know. (232)

Mothers may breast-feed their children for two whole years; [that is] for those who wish to complete the suckling. The father of the child is responsible to provide in a fair manner for their sustenance and clothing. No human being shall be burdened with more than he is well able to bear. Neither shall a mother be allowed to cause her child to suffer, nor shall a father cause suffering to his child. The same shall apply to the father's heir. If, by mutual consent and after due consultation, the parents choose to wean the child, they will incur no sin thereby. Nor shall it be any offence on your part if you engage wet nurses for your children, provided that you hand over what you agreed to pay, in a fair manner. Fear God, and know that God sees all that you

بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۗ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٣٣﴾

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُتَوَفَّوْنَ مِنكُمْ وَيَذَرُونَ أَزْوَٰجًا يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنفُسِهِنَّ أَرْبَعَةَ أَشْهُرٍ وَعَشْرًا ۖ فَإِذَا بَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا فَعَلْنَ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٣٤﴾

وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا عَرَّضْتُم بِهِۦ مِنْ خِطْبَةِ ٱلنِّسَآءِ أَوْ أَكْنَنتُمْ فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ عَلِمَ ٱللَّهُ أَنَّكُمْ سَتَذْكُرُونَهُنَّ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُوَاعِدُوهُنَّ سِرًّا إِلَّآ أَن تَقُولُواْ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا ۚ وَلَا تَعْزِمُواْ عُقْدَةَ ٱلنِّكَاحِ حَتَّىٰ يَبْلُغَ ٱلْكِتَٰبُ أَجَلَهُۥ ۚ وَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ فَٱحْذَرُوهُ ۚ وَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٣٥﴾

لَّا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِن طَلَّقْتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ مَا لَمْ تَمَسُّوهُنَّ أَوْ تَفْرِضُواْ لَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً ۚ وَمَتِّعُوهُنَّ عَلَى ٱلْمُوسِعِ قَدَرُهُۥ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُقْتِرِ قَدَرُهُۥ مَتَٰعًۢا بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۖ حَقًّا عَلَى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٢٣٦﴾

وَإِن طَلَّقْتُمُوهُنَّ مِن قَبْلِ أَن تَمَسُّوهُنَّ وَقَدْ فَرَضْتُمْ لَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً فَنِصْفُ مَا فَرَضْتُمْ إِلَّآ أَن يَعْفُونَ أَوْ يَعْفُوَاْ ٱلَّذِى

do. (233)

Those of you who die leaving wives behind, their wives shall wait, by themselves, for four months and ten days. When they have reached the end of their waiting-term, you shall incur no sin in whatever they may do with themselves in a lawful manner. God is aware of all that you do. (234)

You will incur no sin if you give a hint of a marriage offer to [widowed] women or keep such an intention to yourselves. God knows that you will entertain such intentions concerning them. Do not, however, plight your troth in secret; but speak only in a decent manner. Furthermore, do not resolve on actually making the marriage tie before the prescribed term [of waiting] has run its course. Know well that God knows what is in your minds, so have fear of Him; and know that God is much-Forgiving, Forbearing. (235)

You will incur no sin if you divorce women before having touched them or settled a dowry for them. Provide for them, the rich according to his means and the straitened according to his means. Such a provision, in an equitable manner, is an obligation binding on the righteous. (236)

If you divorce them before having touched them but after having settled a dowry for them, then give them half of that which you have settled, unless they forgo it or he in whose hand is the marriage tie forgoes it. To forgo what is due to you is closer to being righteous. Do not forget to act

بِيَدِهِۦ عُقْدَةُ ٱلنِّكَاحِ ۚ وَأَن تَعْفُوٓاْ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ وَلَا تَنسَوُاْ ٱلْفَضْلَ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٣٧﴾

benevolently to one another. God sees all that you do. (237)

حَٰفِظُواْ عَلَى ٱلصَّلَوَٰتِ وَٱلصَّلَوٰةِ ٱلْوُسْطَىٰ وَقُومُواْ لِلَّهِ قَٰنِتِينَ ﴿٢٣٨﴾

Attend regularly to your prayers, particularly the middle prayer, and stand up before God in devout obedience. (238)

فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ فَرِجَالًا أَوْ رُكْبَانًا ۖ فَإِذَآ أَمِنتُمْ فَٱذْكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ كَمَا عَلَّمَكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُواْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٣٩﴾

If you are in fear, pray walking or riding. When you are again secure, remember God, since it is He who has taught you what you did not know. (239)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُتَوَفَّوْنَ مِنكُمْ وَيَذَرُونَ أَزْوَٰجًا وَصِيَّةً لِّأَزْوَٰجِهِم مَّتَٰعًا إِلَى ٱلْحَوْلِ غَيْرَ إِخْرَاجٍ ۚ فَإِنْ خَرَجْنَ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِى مَا فَعَلْنَ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِنَّ مِن مَّعْرُوفٍ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٤٠﴾

Those of you who die leaving their wives behind, shall bequeath to their wives provisions for one year without their being obliged to leave [their deceased husbands' homes]. Should they leave home [of their own accord], you shall incur no sin for what they may do with themselves in a lawful manner. God is Almighty, Wise. (240)

وَلِلْمُطَلَّقَٰتِ مَتَٰعٌۢ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۖ حَقًّا عَلَى ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٢٤١﴾

Divorced women shall have a provision according to what is fair. This is an obligation on the God-fearing. (241)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٤٢﴾

Thus God makes clear to you His revelations that you may understand. (242)

Overview

The following section of the *sūrah* deals with the family, the nucleus and the

foundation of Muslim society, to which Islam has extended notable attention and effort, regulating its essential aspects and ensuring its safety and protection against abuse and disintegration. Such attention is reflected in several Qur'ānic *sūrahs* and addresses all necessary elements to ensure the strong foundation of the family in Muslim society.

The Islamic social order is family-based by virtue of its being a divinely-ordained system for human society that takes full account of the essentials of human nature and its basic requirements.

Its ingredients originate with the very essence of life itself, as stated in the Qur'ān when it says: "*Of all things We have created a pair [male and female], so that you may give thought.*" (51: 49) "*Limitless in His glory is He who has created pairs of whatever the earth produces, of your own kind, and of that which they [people] have no knowledge.* " (36: 36)

Human life began with one person, out of whom came a spouse, and then offspring from the pair of them, and so on. The result is this numerous multitude of human beings. The Qur'ān says: "*Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women.*" (4: 1) *@Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.*" (49: *13)*

The Qur'ān also highlights the special inherent attraction between the male and the female of the human species which is vital for setting up and supporting the family unit: "*And of His signs is that He creates for you mates from your own selves, so that you may incline towards them, and He engenders between you love and compassion.*" (30: 21) "*They [your wives] are a garment and you are a garment to them.*" (2: 187) "*Your wives are your tilth; go, then, to your tilth as you may desire, but first provide something for your souls, and fear God and know that you shall meet Him.*" (2: 223) "*And God has made for you in your homes, a place of rest.''* (16: 80)

As ever, Islam strongly emphasizes the harmony and compatibility between the philosophy and the spirit upon which the system of the natural universe is built and that upon which the human social order is based.

The family is the natural environment in which children can be raised and protected, and allowed to grow and develop, mentally and physically. Within the family, they receive love, kindness and care, and gain the values, ideals and behaviour patterns that will accompany them for the rest of their lives, and according to which they will know life, understand it and deal with it.

Humans have the longest childhood period of all species, extending to several years. It is the formative period during which children acquire all the essential skills that will enable them to chart their way through life and find a suitable role in society. It is made longer in order to ensure that adequate training, education and

discipline are imparted to children to prepare them sufficiently for the future, especially in view of man's heavy responsibility in this world. Furthermore, children need to be cared for and brought up by their own parents in a happy and stable environment.

Experience has shown that no other arrangement can adequately compensate for the role of the family as the proper setting for bringing up children. In fact, the alternatives have proved extremely harmful and damaging to both the individual and society. These alternatives, such as the children's homes which emerged in Europe after the Second World War or as a result of social pressures created by the need for mothers to go out to work, have deprived children of the love and care that only mothers can provide within a secure family atmosphere. Thousands of children, brought up in children's homes, grew up to develop numerous chronic and disturbing mental and psychological problems.

What is most amazing is that prevailing misconceptions lead people to consider the fact that women are today forced to seek work a symbol of progress and emancipation. It is in fact this system that is responsible for much of the deprivation and suffering witnessed in many countries. It sacrifices the psychological health of society's most precious resources, young children, for nothing other than an increase in the family's income or giving a young mother an income to live on. It is modern ignorance that refuses to look after young mothers to allow them to rear their children. This is indeed one of the most reprehensible failures of modern society.

Studies have shown that during the first two years of life, a child shows an instinctive need to have the exclusive care and attention of its parents, particularly its mother. After that stage, a child needs to be with its parents in a caring family atmosphere. Both of these needs are impossible to meet under any arrangement other than a stable family, without which children are bound to grow up with all kinds of mental and psychological deficiencies and ailments.

The social system of Islam as a religion of peace and harmony is based on the family, to which it accords proper and adequate attention. As we see in this *sūrah,* numerous Qur'ānic passages have been dedicated to emphasizing the importance of the family and to setting out the principles and foundations upon which it is based.

This section of the *sūrah* puts forward the principles of marriage and the rules governing essential aspects of divorce and its repercussions, desertion of wives by their husbands, alimony, breast- feeding, and the custody of children.

These principles and rules are not given in abstract legalistic language, but within a broader context, as part of God's universal code of living and as a fundamental dimension of the Islamic faith. The *sūrah* emphasizes the strong link between these principles and God's ultimate will and purpose.

One is immediately aware of the weight of the whole matter, and of how meticulously it is being dealt with. Every aspect of it is there to serve a greater objective in the overall scheme of things which is being guided and protected by God Almighty. It is the system He has perfected for implementation in human life. Hence, He gives His reward to those who implement it, and punishes those who discard or abuse it.

The *sūrah* makes a very detailed and rational presentation of these rules and principles, of which there are twelve altogether, intermittently prodding the human conscience to be aware of its responsibility and accountability. These rules cover a very wide area directly related to marriage and divorce, beginning with the prohibition of marriage with unbelievers, followed by the prohibition of sexual intercourse between married couples when the woman is in menstruation. Here we note how even this aspect is elevated from a purely physical attraction to a human function that serves important goals. Then follow rulings on faith, suspension of marital relations, a divorcee's waiting period, repeated divorce and the refund of the dowry, the finalization of divorce, breast-feeding when divorce has taken place, a widow's waiting period, hints of a marriage proposal during such a period, divorce before the consummation of marriage and free gifts to a widow or a divorcee. The final comment on all these rulings is: *"Thus God makes clear to you His revelations that you may understand."* (Verse 242)

We note that in all these, the emphasis is on the worship of God. Thus, the Qur'ān relates man's behaviour in all these situations to worship, which is, from the Islamic point of view, not confined to prayers and rituals. Thus, to further relate prayer to aspects of worship in practical life situations, the *sūrah* mentions, along with these rulings regulating marriage and divorce, a couple of rulings on prayer in times of fear and security. (Verses 238-239)

What is worthy of note is that while all these rulings spread an air of worship on all these affairs, no aspect of practical life, human nature or the needs of human life is overlooked. Islam enacts its laws for a community of human beings, who are neither angels nor flying aliens. As it elevates people to the pure atmosphere of worship through its rulings and directives, it does not ignore their human nature, prejudices, preferences, weaknesses, feelings, reactions and moments of clear thinking and pure feeling. It works on all these, directing them in a congenial atmosphere to a better human status.

Thus we see that Islam allows the suspension of marital relations but restricts it to a maximum of four months. It allows divorce, but regulates it fairly and tries hard to strengthen the foundations of the family in a balanced way that makes of ideal principles a daily practice. It is a smooth approach designed to facilitate things, for both man and woman, in the case when this great institution of the family meets

with failure. God Almighty, who knows His creation better than they know themselves, does not wish the marriage bond to become a prison when the two parties are unsuited to each other. If their natures clash, then it is better for them to part and try again with different spouses. But before reaching this point, it would have made every effort to save the family. Furthermore, it provides every legal and compassionate guarantee to ensure that no harm comes to husband, wife, child or infant.

Compare the principles of the Islamic family system God has enacted for human life, and the balanced and peaceful society it produces, with what prevailed in human life prior to Islam, or what prevails today in non-Islamic societies everywhere, and you are bound to recognize the high standard of peace and dignity God wants for mankind. Women in particular will appreciate the extent of care God takes of them. I am absolutely certain that no woman could understand this manifestly caring approach without feeling the love of God fills her heart.

Marriage to Unbelievers

> *Do not marry women who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith. Any believing bondwoman is certainly better than an idolatress, even though the latter may well please you. And do not give your women in marriage to men who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith. Any believing bondman is certainly better than an idolater, even though the latter may well please you. These invite to the fire; whereas God invites to paradise and to the achievement of forgiveness by His leave. He makes plain His revelations to mankind so that they may bear them in mind.* (Verse 221)

Marriage is the deepest and most enduring bond that can exist between two human beings. It calls for the widest possible range of mutual and intimate responses and, therefore, requires the most firm emotional commitment that can be made. For this to be achieved, a clear common objective must exist between the two parties, and what is better than religious faith to provide such affinity and unity of purpose. This profound influence of religion on human thought has often been ignored or overlooked and some societies have made the mistake of trying to replace religious faith with one social philosophy or another.

During the early days of Islam in Makkah, although the Muslims had succeeded in detaching themselves spiritually and ideologically from the rest of society, it was not possible for them to totally disengage themselves socially. This transformation required time and a measured pace of change. In Madinah, however, where Muslims were to acquire an independent social as well as religious identity, the new social order rapidly began to take shape, with these Qur'ānic verses prohibiting any new

marriage of Muslims and idol worshippers. Existing marriages remained valid, however, until the sixth year of the Islamic calendar when verses 9 and 10 of *Sūrah* 60 were revealed, annulling such marriages once and for all.

From then on, marriages involving Muslims and pagans were prohibited, as such unions were considered devoid of spiritual meaning and non-deserving of God's blessings or consecration, since the parties involved did not share the same beliefs and outlook on life. Having honoured mankind, God does not want marriage to be based on mere physical attraction. It is a bond that is closely related to the divine system for human life.

Hence, we have a clear, definitive injunction: "*Do not marry women who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith.*" (Verse 221) Were the unbelieving woman to embrace the faith, the barrier would be removed and the hearts of the two people concerned would fall into harmony and could be united in marriage as they are united in belief.

"*Any believing bondwoman is certainly better than an idolatress, even though the latter may well please you.*" (Verse 221) Such attraction would normally be physical, rather than spiritual, and therefore superficial. It is the attraction of the soul that really matters, even if the Muslim girl is a slave, because it would be infinitely more enduring and profound.

"*And do not give your women in marriage to men who associate partners with God unless they embrace the true faith. Any believing bondman is certainly better than an idolater, even though the latter may well please you.*" (Verse 221) The same rule applies to Muslim women who wish to marry unbelieving men, and for the same underlying reason: "*These invite to the fire; whereas God invites to paradise and to the achievement of forgiveness by His leave. He makes plain His revelations to mankind so that they may bear them in mind.*" (Verse 221)

Believers and unbelievers move along two different paths: how can they meet together in a unit that is the foundation of life? The unbelievers take the route that leads to the fire, while those who believe in God take the way leading to His forgiveness and to heaven. The gap between the two is an ever-widening one.

The question arises here: do these people really call to the fire? Would anyone knowingly take himself or others towards the fire? What is highlighted here is the outcome, shown to be the advocated objective. Hence, God warns against such advocacy that leads to perdition and makes plain His revelations so that people may bear them in mind. Whoever fails to take heed can blame none other than himself.

It is noteworthy that Muslim men are not prohibited from marrying Christian or Jewish women, despite certain important differences in religious belief and practice. This is because Muslims, Christians and Jews share a fundamental belief in God's

oneness.

As for marrying Christian women who believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, or in Jesus as the Lord, and Jewish women who believe Ezra was the son of God, Muslim jurists take various views. The question is whether such women should be considered idolaters, and therefore outlawed from marriage with Muslims, or whether they are covered by the general Qur'ānic ruling which says: "*Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And the virtuous women from among the believers and the virtuous women from among those who were given revelations before you [are also lawful to you] when you give them their dower.*" (5: 5) The majority of jurists are of the opinion that they are lawful for Muslims to marry, but I am more inclined to support the view that they are not. Al-Bukhārī quotes `Abdullāh ibn `Umar, a scholar Companion of the Prophet Muĥammad, as saying: "To my mind, there could be no greater polytheism for a woman than to believe that Jesus is the Lord."

Muslim women, however, are forbidden from marrying Jewish or Christian men. The two cases are different, meriting different verdicts. Under Islamic law, children are called by their father's names. It is the practice in all societies that, after marriage, a woman joins the household of her husband. If a Muslim man married a Christian or Jewish woman, she would move to the town or country where he lived, and join the rest of his family, and their children would take the father's name and grow up in his religious and cultural environment. The situation would be reversed in the case of a Muslim woman marrying a Jewish or Christian man, where the children would be raised in a non-Muslim culture and most likely grow up to be non-Muslims.

There are, however, other practical considerations that would discourage the marriage of a Muslim man to a Christian or Jewish woman, which is otherwise permissible. Some of these were pointed out by the second Caliph, `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr quotes Ibn Jarīr al- Ṭabarī as saying that despite unanimity over the marriage of Muslim men to Jewish or Christian women, `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was not in favour of it, lest Muslim men should turn away from marrying Muslim women.

He also reports that when Ĥudhayfah married a Jewess, `Umar wrote ordering him to divorce her. Ĥudhayfah wrote back, asking: "Is it because you claim that she is forbidden for me to marry that I should divorce her?" `Umar replied: "No, I do not, but I fear that people may turn away from marrying Muslim women."

More recent experiences provide further evidence that such marriages undermine the faith and Muslim identity of the new generations of Islam, especially in view of the fact that our societies today are only nominally Muslim.

Purity in Sexual Relations

The next point the *sūrah* deals with is a delicate and most private one, but here again marital relations are elevated above the physical contact, even when the discussion is concerned with the most physical aspect of married life, namely, sexual relations:

> *They ask you about menstruation. Say: "It is an unclean condition; so keep aloof from women during menstruation, and do not draw near to them until they are cleansed. When they have cleansed themselves, you may go in unto them in the proper way, as God has bidden you. God loves those who turn to Him in repentance, and He loves those who keep themselves pure.' Your wives are your tilth; go, then, to your tilth as you may desire, but first provide something for your souls. Fear God and know that you shall meet Him. Give the happy news to the believers.* (Verses 222-223)

Within marriage, sex is not an end in itself, but a means to achieving much more profound goals in life, not least of which is reproduction and the continuation of human life. While it may satisfy the physical desire, sex during menstruation is not only unclean and carries health risks for both man and woman, but also fails to serve its fundamental objective. As a matter of fact, sex during menstruation is not very attractive to normal healthy people because it is not conducive to reproduction. Sound human nature tends to avoid it. On the other hand, during cleanliness sex fulfils the natural desire and achieves a natural objective. Therefore, the question raised is given a clear answer of prohibition: *"They ask you about menstruation. Say: 'It is an unclean condition; so keep aloof from women during menstruation, and do not draw near to them until they are cleansed.'"* (Verse 222)

However, that is not the end of the matter. Sexual behaviour outside the menstruation period must conform to certain manners and standards of decency and propriety: *"When they have cleansed themselves, you may go in unto them in the proper way, as God has bidden you."* (Verse 222) Here the *sūrah* points out that sexual intercourse is allowed only at the place where fertilization may take place. The immediate physical pleasure is not the only purpose of sexual intercourse; its higher purpose is the continuity of human life. God points out what He has made lawful, and a Muslim seeks what is lawful. Moreover, God's laws are meant to purify His servants. Hence the statement: *"God loves those who turn to Him in repentance, and He loves those who keep themselves pure."* (Verse 222)

The *sūrah* then defines this aspect of the marital relationship in the most poignant and affectionate terms, saying: *"Your wives are your tilth; go, then, to your tilth as you may desire, but first provide something for your souls. Fear God and know that you shall meet Him. Give the happy news to the believers."* (Verse 223)

There can hardly be a more accurate and eloquent description of the nature and purpose of this aspect of the relationship between husband and wife. It is by no means a complete description of the marital relationship. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we find other similarly befitting and powerful descriptions, such as: "*They [your wives] are a garment and you are a garment to them.*" (2: 187) "*And of His signs is that He creates for you mates from your own selves, so that you may incline towards them, and He engenders between you love and compassion.*" (30: 21)

Each of these statements describes an aspect of this most profound and important of human relationships. The use of the Arabic word *ĥarth,* rendered here as 'tilth', with its connotations of tillage and production, is most fitting, in a context of fertility and procreation. Within this healthy, warm and conducive atmosphere, couples may seek each other's comfort in any manner that will give them the greatest and most fulfilling pleasure.

Sexual fulfilment must, therefore, be sought as part of an overall objective which serves to please God Almighty, and is beneficial to the individuals concerned. They will be further rewarded by God for respecting His teachings and abiding by them.

We have here a good example of the generosity and kindness of Islam. It is a religion that does not deny man any of his natural tendencies or instincts, or pretend to achieve human purity by suppressing or destroying man's basic physical needs. Rather, Islam disciplines, guides and fosters these desires and needs in a manner that reinforces man's humanity and invigorates his consciousness of, and relationship with, God. It seeks to blend physical and sensual tendencies with human and religious emotions, thus bringing together the transient pleasures and the immutable values of human life into one harmonious and congruent system that will render man worthy of being God's vicegerent on earth. Being a system ordained by the Creator Himself, it will never clash with human nature or cause any human misery or unhappiness.

Oaths and Atonements

The *sūrah* then moves on to the subject of renouncing wives on oath and abstaining from sexual contact with them as a form of punishment. By way of introduction, it begins with talking about oaths in general, saying:

> *Do not allow your oaths in the name of God to become an obstacle to your being kind and God-fearing, or to promoting peace among people. God hears all and knows all. God shall not take you to task for oaths which you may have uttered without thought, but He will take you to task for what your hearts have conceived in earnest. God is much-Forgiving, Forbearing. Those who take an oath that they will not approach their wives shall have four months of grace. If they go back on their oaths, God is much-*

Forgiving, Merciful; and if they are resolved on divorce, [let them remember that] God hears all and knows all. (Verses 224-227)

The accepted interpretation of the opening part of this passage is that attributed to `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās who is quoted as saying: "Do not allow the fact that you have made an oath prevent you from doing what is good and righteous; rather, do what is right and atone for your oath." According to Ibn Kathīr, a similar view is attributed to a host of leading scholars.

To support this interpretation, the Prophet's statement, reported by Abū Hurayrah and related by Muslim, is often quoted. The Prophet said: "Whoever made an oath and later realized that it would be better to do something different, let him atone for his oath and do what is better." Al-Bukhārī cites the statement reported by Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet said: "For someone to insist on honouring his oath concerning his relationship with his wife is, in God's sight, far worse than to relent and pay the atonement God has prescribed for going back on an oath."

It may, therefore, be concluded that the main import of the statement is that oaths should not be an excuse for not doing what is best under the circumstances. One should not hesitate to revoke an oath one has taken if it becomes clear that revoking it is better from the Islamic point of view. The promotion of goodness and reconciliation takes precedence over one's commitment to an oath.

A case in point is the vow made by Abū Bakr, the Prophet's leading Companion, that he would never forgive one of his relatives, Misṭaḥ, for taking part in the campaign to slander the Prophet's wife, `Ā'ishah, who was also Abū Bakr's daughter.

On that occasion a passage was revealed, declaring `Ā'ishah's innocence of what was said against her. Then a verse follows in the same *sūrah* calling on believers to always choose the better course of action. This verse may be translated as follows: *"Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and are well-off withhold their generosity from their relatives, or the needy, or those who leave their homes for the cause of God. Let them forgive and forebear. Do you not wish that God should forgive you your sins? God is much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (24: 22) Abū Bakr relented and atoned for his oath, and reinstated his generous help to Misṭaḥ.

God is even more gracious in offering this concession not only for inadvertent vows that need no atonement, but also for vows made *in* earnest and with full intention. The Prophet was reported to have often overlooked off-hand or casual vows made out of habit or in the heat of the moment. Premeditated vows must be revoked and atoned for, if keeping them results in, or leads to, something evil, harmful or inequitable. Some jurists, however, are of the opinion that making a false vow, knowing that it is false, can never be atoned for. Mālik says in his famous book,

al-Muwaṭṭa': "The best I have heard on this subject is that a casual vow is made in total good faith. If it is subsequently proven to be false, it requires no atonement. If a false vow is made deliberately, with the intention of appeasing someone, or for material gain, that is too grave to be atoned for."

The *sūrah* emphasizes that God knows all and hears all, and that He is forgiving and lenient, in order to establish in people's minds the fact that these matters are ultimately referred to God Almighty for judgement, and to urge them to be conscious of Him and seek His pleasure and grace in all such matters.

Having established the general rule with respect to vows, the *sūrah* goes on to deal with the specific vows by husbands to abstain from sexual contact with their wives, either indefinitely or for a specified but long period of time: *"Those who take an oath that they will not approach their wives shall have four months of grace. If they go back on their oaths, God is much forgiving, merciful; and if they are resolved on divorce, [let them remember that] God hears all and knows all.''* (Verses 226-227)

There are times in married life when spouses, for one reason or another, find themselves drawn away from one another. In such cases, some men swear not to sleep with their wives as a form of punishment, which can be humiliating for the wife and psychologically extremely hard on her. It is also a negation of the very essence of marriage and can be detrimental to the well-being and stability of the whole family.

This behaviour was not forbidden outright to begin with because it could be effective with vain, spiteful or quarrelsome women. It could, indeed, act as a safety valve for the relief of certain pressures that build up within a married relationship. Nor was the advantage left completely on the man's side, who could sometimes be at fault, intent on humiliating his wife or coercing her to submit to his terms or demands. He thus tries to deny her the chance to live happily with him, refusing, at the same time, to release her to seek happiness with someone else.

To balance all relevant factors and all practicalities, Islam has limited the duration of such estrangement to four months. This period seems to be the maximum an average normal woman can go before feeling the need for a man's comfort.

`Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second Caliph, was reported to be patrolling the streets of Madinah one night when he heard a woman reciting a few lines of poetry expressing her loneliness and desire for her husband who was away fighting with one of the Muslim armies. She complained of sleeplessness which she attributed to the fact that she had no one to frolic with, affirming that only her fear of God prevented her from seeking pleasure with someone else.

`Umar then enquired from his daughter, Ĥafşah, the Prophet's wife, how long a woman could stand the absence of her husband. She replied: "Six months;" or she

said four months, according to some reports. `Umar then declared that he would never let soldiers stay away from their wives for more than that period.

People's temperament and will-power vary, but four months seem to be a reasonable test period, after which a husband should either resume normal marital relations with his wife or insist on his rejection of her. In this latter case the relationship must be dissolved by divorce and the wife given her freedom, whether by the husband or through the courts. This would enable both parties to start a new life with another spouse, thereby preserving the dignity and integrity of the wife and taking the pressure off the husband. Such a solution would be more just to both people and would safeguard the institution of marriage, which God has ordained for the enhancement and advancement of human life.

Rules of Divorce

Having reached in the previous verse a point when divorce becomes a possibility, the *sūrah* goes on to outline in some detail the rules governing divorce and all matters relating to it, such as the waiting period and maintenance: *"Divorced women shall wait, by themselves, for three monthly courses. It is unlawful for them to conceal what God might have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. During this period, their husbands are entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation. Women shall, in all fairness, enjoy rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have an advantage over them. God is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 228)

The three monthly courses referred to here are variously understood as three menstrual periods, or three periods of cleanliness from menstruation. The idea is that a divorced woman should not seek another marriage within that period.

The original Arabic expression uses a most delicate and sensitive language when advising divorced women to *"wait, by themselves, for three monthly courses."* It conveys a mixed sense of eagerness and apprehension. It suggests that a divorced woman would have a strong desire to start a new marital relationship in order to reassure herself, and show others, that the failure of her marriage was not due to any weaknesses or shortcomings on her part, and that she remained attractive to men and capable of starting her life afresh. Being the one who had initiated the divorce, the husband would naturally have no such feelings.

Furthermore, the Qur'ān appeals to the woman's faith in God and the Last Day, urging her not to conceal the fact if she were pregnant by the divorcing husband. Reminding her of the Last Day, the time for punishment and reward, is especially pertinent here as it is meant to arouse her conscience and make her totally scrupulous over such a grave matter. After all, God knows the truth and there is no point in hiding it from Him.

The waiting period also acts as a period of grace during which the estranged couple can test their feelings and emotions. They may still have feelings for each other, and their mutual compassion might have been overshadowed by a temporary moment of heated emotions, or a misunderstanding, or personal pride. Once tempers are cooled and fury gives way to common sense, the couple might reconsider their situation and decide that it would be more sensible to forget their disagreement and resume their life together.

Divorce is the least preferable solution in God's eyes; it should only be used as a last resort, when all else has failed. Elsewhere, the Qur'ān urges that divorce must be preceded by attempts at reconciliation and that it must not take place during the menstrual period. It is only possible in a period of cleanliness from menstruation during which no sexual intercourse has taken place between the divorcing couples. This gives yet more time for reflection and reconsideration.

When a first divorce between a married couple is initiated, the waiting period acts as a test for their feelings, and if they discover during this time that reconciliation is possible, that option is available to them. As the *sūrah* says: *"their husbands are entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation."* (Verse 228) The condition here is that, in coming back together again, the couple should be seriously seeking reconciliation. The aim should never be to undermine the wife's right to marry someone else or put any pressure on her to resume an unhappy relationship.

"Women shall, in all fairness, enjoy rights similar to those exercised against them..." (Verse 228) The divorced woman is required to wait for a certain period before she can marry someone else, and is obliged to declare whether she is carrying a baby by her divorced husband. The husband is equally required to show good faith if he wishes to take her back, making sure that he intends to cause her no harm. He is further obliged, as we shall see later, to provide maintenance for his divorced wife during the waiting period.

The *sūrah* goes on to say: "*... although men have an advantage over them."* (Verse 228) This advantage, in my view, is in no way absolute but is contingent, within the present context, upon the fact that it is the man who initiates the divorce and would, therefore, have the prerogative to take his wife back, a decision that could not be left to her to take. This advantage, indeed a useful and proper one, is by no means universal, as some have erroneously concluded, but is simply dictated by the nature and the circumstances of the dispute.

The verse then concludes by asserting: *"God is Almighty, Wise."* He lays down rules with force and authority, as well as prudence and compassion.

Fair and Balanced Divorce Systems

The next set of rules relates to the number of times divorce can take place and the wife's full entitlement to her dowry, except in the case when a wife buys herself out of a marriage she feels she could not sustain for fear that she might commit an act of disobedience to God. Under such circumstances, a wife may forgo part of her dowry or make an agreed settlement in order to release herself when her husband is unwilling to divorce her.

The *sūrah* says: "*Divorce may be [revoked] twice, whereupon a woman may either be retained in fairness or released with kindness. It is unlawful for you to take back from women anything of what you have given them [as dowry], unless they both [husband and wife] fear that they may not be able to keep within the bounds set by God. If you have cause to fear that they would not be able to keep within the bounds set by God, it shall be no offence for either of them if she gives up whatever she may in order to free herself These are the bounds set by God; do not, then, transgress them. Those who transgress the bounds set by God are wrongdoers indeed.*" (Verse 229)

Couples are allowed to divorce and revoke their divorce twice before the condition stated in the next verse applies. Under this provision, remarriage with a three-times divorced wife cannot take place except in the case when she legally marries another husband who may subsequently, and in the normal course of events, divorce her. Should this take place normally, without it being pre-arranged, the woman and her first husband may be re-married, if they believe that by now they are able to make their marriage successful.

The background to this ruling is that in pre-Islamic Arabia no limitation was set on the number of times divorce could take place. Men would marry, divorce and remarry the same woman, virtually at will. When a man from Madinah had fallen out with his wife and grew to dislike her intensely, he vowed that he would neither keep her nor let her go; he would divorce her and then take her back just before her waiting period had elapsed. The woman complained to the Prophet Muĥammad, to whom this verse was then revealed.

This is another example of the prudent and propitious method the Qur'ān had adopted in providing the Muslims with the rulings and directions they needed to organize their community. This approach continued throughout the period of the revelation of the Qur'ān until all the main provisions of the Islamic code were fully laid down, enabling succeeding generations of Muslims to live by their guidance and principles.

Limiting the number of times divorce can be revoked prevents its abuse. The first time a man divorces his wife he would be entitled, without the need for any formalities, to take her back anytime during her waiting period. If this period elapses, the divorce would become final and a fresh marriage contract, with a fresh dowry, would have to be entered into. In both cases, the husband is allowed one

additional divorce if matters again go wrong. The third time a divorce takes place, it is final and irrevocable. The only way a three-times divorced couple could resume a married relationship would be if the ex-wife married a different man who subsequently dies or, in the normal course of events, divorces her and she completes her waiting period without the marriage being re-instated.

The first divorce, as we said earlier, would put the whole relationship to the test, the second one would provide a second and final chance to reassess the situation before judging whether it is irreconcilable. If the marriage could be saved, well and good. A third divorce would, however, be evidence of a total breakdown of the relationship, and that the marriage was unworkable.

In any case, divorce should only be a last resort option to remedy a situation which could not otherwise be saved. Once divorce takes place twice, it would only be fair to either maintain the relationship with honour and dignity and resume as happy a life as possible, or to amicably bring it to an end without pain or acrimony. This would be the third divorce, after which both man and woman are free to start afresh with a different spouse. This is an extremely realistic approach, providing practical solutions. It neither denies the problem nor condemns it, nor attempts to re-create human nature to suit it, nor, indeed, does it ignore the problem altogether or try to sweep it under the carpet.

If the marriage proved unsustainable, the woman would be entitled to everything that had come to be hers during the marriage including the dowry. She would not have to reimburse the man for any upkeep or other costs he had incurred, unless it was her decision to end the marriage, for reasons of her own which had convinced her that life with that particular husband was no longer tolerable or would drive her to transgress the limits of decency, with herself or in her relationship with her husband. In this case the woman may ask for a divorce but would be obliged to compensate the man for the break-up of his marriage home, through no fault of his own, by giving him back the dowry he had paid her, or reimbursing him for all or some of the costs he had incurred while keeping her and enabling her to preserve her honour and dignity.

These realistic and scrupulous measures take account of all possible situations and feelings, ensuring that a wife will never have to accept an unhappy marriage under duress, and that a husband does not forgo any of his rights if his marriage breaks up through no fault of his own.

The merits of this approach may be illustrated by an event during the Prophet Muĥammad's lifetime. Mālik reports in *al-Muwaṭṭa'* that one morning, at dawn, the Prophet found Ĥabībah bint Sahl, wife of Thābit ibn Qays, waiting at his door. He asked her what she wanted and she replied: "I can no longer live with Thābit ibn

Qays."

The Prophet sent for her husband and told him what Ĥabībah had said. Ĥabībah then turned to the Prophet and said: "I still have all that he had given me," upon which the Prophet said to Thābit: "Take it back"; which he did and Ĥabībah went back to her people.

The version related by al-Bukhārī mentions that Ĥabībah said to the Prophet: "I take nothing against Thābit's religious or moral behaviour, but as a Muslim I cannot live with him and be ungrateful." The Prophet asked her: "Would you give him back his orchard?" (The orchard being the dowry Thābit had given her.) She agreed and the Prophet said to Thābit: "Take back the orchard and divorce her once."

Another version related by al-Ṭabarī mentions that Abū Jarīr had asked `Ikrimah how the *khul`* had been instituted. He said that Ibn `Abbās used to say that the first case of *khula`* was when `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's sister went to the Prophet and said: "Nothing could ever make me put my head next to his! I lifted my curtain and saw him with a group of men. He was the darkest, shortest and the least handsome of them all." Her husband then said: "But I have given her the best of what I have: my orchard. If she gives it back to me, I shall let her go." She agreed and offered to give him more, if he so wished. The Prophet annulled their marriage.

These incidents show how the Prophet took into consideration the psychological and emotional state of the wife, and settled the matter fairly and forthrightly, in full appreciation of human nature and consideration of family relations and personal feelings.

To put these rulings within their proper religious context, the verse ends with a powerful reminder, saying: *"These are the bounds set by God; do not, then, transgress them. Those who transgress the bounds set by God are wrongdoers indeed."* (Verse 229)

We pause here to reflect on a subtle difference in the use of two Qur'ānic expressions denoting a similar meaning in two different contexts.

Verse 187 of this *sūrah* may be given in translation: *"It is lawful for you to be intimate with your wives during the night preceding the fast. They are as a garment for you, as you are for them. God is aware that you have been deceiving yourselves in this respect, and He has turned to you in His mercy and pardoned you. So, you may now lie with them and seek what God has ordained for you. Eat and drink until you can see the white streak of dawn against the blackness of the night. Then resume the fast till nightfall. Do not lie with your wives when you are in retreat in the mosques. These are the bounds set by God, so do not come near there. Thus God makes clear His revelations to people, that they may remain God fearing. "*

We note here that the verse closes with the words: "*These are the bounds set by God, so do not come near them*", while the present verse uses the expression: "*These are the*

bounds set by God; do not, then, transgress them." While one warns against drawing near to the act of wrongdoing itself, the other warns against transgression.

In the first instance, the warning was against being attracted or tempted by certain desires and it was appropriate to talk of resisting those temptations and keeping away from them. In the second instance, the subject matter involves conflict and acrimonious disputes, and the danger here is of either party overreaching or exceeding their limits, so it is more pertinent to advise restraint and., steering away from transgression.

This is a good example of the remarkably precise diction of the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* continues, giving more rulings relating to divorce: *"Should he divorce her [a third time], she shall not thereafter be lawful for him to remarry until she has wedded another husband. If the latter' then divorces her it shall be no offence for either of the two if they return to one another, if they feel that they will be able to keep within the bounds set by God Such are the bounds set by God He makes them plain for people who have knowledge."* (Verse 230)

If a third divorce takes place in a marriage, it could only be a sign of serious and irreversible deterioration within that relationship. The best solution in this case would be permanent separation, and for each partner to seek happiness with someone else. However, if any or all of the three divorces were pronounced by the man lightly, or out of spite, or in the heat of the moment, here again, a drastic measure must be taken to prevent men abusing their divorce privilege. Such s an unhappy relationship should not be perpetuated, since the man has no appreciation for it, nor is keen to protect it.

The question may here be put, therefore, as to why the woman should have to suffer the consequences of a rash utterance by her husband, thereby jeopardizing her life, peace and security? The answer is that the ruling has to be realistic. Let us look at this more closely and ask: What would be the alternative solution? Should the man be forced to live with a woman in a marriage he has little or no respect for? Should he be told that his repeated divorcing of his wife is not enforceable and that his wife is his responsibility, whether he likes it or not? This, in fact, would be far more humiliating for the wife, and degrading to the marriage itself, neither of which Islam would condone. A more proper censure of the man's behaviour would be to deprive him of the right to his wife and make him in the first and second divorces liable to pay a new dowry, under a new marriage contract, after he had failed to take her back before the passing of the waiting period. The third time a man resorts to divorce, the separation shall be deemed final and the woman has to marry someone else and be legally divorced by him before being able to return to her former husband. The first husband would stand to forfeit the dowry he had paid as well as all the costs he had

incurred during the marriage. He will also, in any case, be liable for alimony payments. This is a practical and workable manner in which to approach this delicate and emotionally-charged situation.

If, after the third divorce, the woman marries someone else and this marriage is then terminated, in the normal course of events, by divorce or by the husband's death, she may be reunited with the first husband as long as "*they feel that they will be able to keep within the bounds set by God.*" (Verse 230) This indicates very clearly that the matter is not left to the couple to decide as they please, but it is regulated by terms and conditions set out by God for a proper social order that conforms to His will. These terms and conditions are fully expounded in the Qur'ān for all who are capable of learning and understanding.

Kindly Retention or Amicable Separation

Having detailed the divorce procedure, the sū*rah* goes on to give directions to divorcing couples, urging them to show kindness, compassion and consideration during the post-divorce period, regardless of how the rift came about:

> *When you have divorced women and they have reached the end of their waiting-term, either retain them with fairness or let them go with fairness. Do not retain them out of malice in order to hurt them. He who does so wrongs his own soul. Do not take God revelations in a frivolous manner. Remember the blessings God h bestowed upon you, and all the revelation and wisdom He ha bestowed upon you from on high in order to admonish you. Fear God and know well that He has full knowledge of everything. And when you have divorced women and they have reached the end o their waiting-term, do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they have agreed with each other in a fair manner. This is an admonition for everyone of you who believes in God and the Last Day. That is more virtuous for you, and purer. God knows, whereas you do not know.* (Verses 231-232)

Married life must be built on a spirit of mutual kindness, fairness and compassion, and this spirit must be evident even if the relationship has to be severed. Malice and ill-will must not be allowed to cloud this relationship. But, this can only be attained if the parties concerned are guided by faith in God and are conscious of their accountability to Him in the hereafter. They ought to acknowledge God's grace and blessings in allowing them to marry and enabling them to seek happiness elsewhere when the marriage fails, and providing both parties with necessary and fair guarantees for compensation and redress. These principles of kindness and fairness must be observed under all circumstances.

In pre-Islamic society, women faced a great deal of oppression and abuse. Female

infanticide was widespread in Arabia, and those who survived would suffer cruelty and degradation throughout their lives. Women were bought and sold like animals; mares and she-camels were sometimes considered more precious! They would suffer when they were married; and they received grossly unfair treatment when divorced. Divorced women were not allowed to remarry without their former husband's permission, nor were they allowed by their families to return to their husbands if they wished to be reconciled. Generally, women were looked down upon in Arabia, as indeed in other societies.

When Islam came, it brought fresh principles and values that recognized women and afforded them a status comparable to that of men. It elevated marriage to a religious duty, preserved women's human dignity, and established for them specific rights when they were married and when they were divorced. These principles and values were a gift from God to both men and women, guaranteeing for them fundamental human, social and legal rights they had neither demanded nor even thought possible.

Thus, as the end of the waiting period approaches, a husband should either take his wife back into the marriage, with no ill-feelings and with a sincere intention to treat her kindly and sympathetically; or allow the waiting period to elapse and the divorce to take effect without causing any harm or injustice to the divorced wife or demanding any compensation from her.

This would ensure that a man would not be able to abuse his prerogative to divorce at the expense of his estranged wife, as with the case of the man from Madinah referred to earlier, and as seems to have been the custom among Arabian men before Islam.

To emphasize this further and purge men's hearts of evil and selfishness, the Qur'ān appeals to the noblest of feelings and to man's sense of shame and honour and fear of God: "*Do not retain them out of malice in order to hurt them. He who does so wrongs his own soul. Do not take God's revelations in a frivolous manner. Remember the blessings God has bestowed upon you, and all the revelation and wisdom He has bestowed upon you from on high in order to admonish you. Fear God and know well that He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 231)

Keeping a wife against her will, or mistreating her, would be akin to harming oneself, because she is a fellow human being, with dignity and feelings. A man would be doing himself injustice, too, by allowing himself to act in defiance of God's guidance and teachings.

When it comes to marital relations and divorce, Islamic teachings are straightforward and clear, aimed at building social life on complete honesty and integrity. Men who abuse divorce, which God has permitted a last resort solution, in

order to malign or ill-treat their estranged wives, are violating God's will and subverting His instructions. Regrettably, such blatant abuse is quite widespread in many Muslim communities today, where men tend to do all they can to evade the proper conduct taught by Islam.

The Qur'ānic words evoke man's sense of integrity and gratitude to God. They remind that first generation of Muslims of the very special grace and favour God bestowed upon them through the revelation of Qur'ānic guidance, which had elevated every aspect of their daily life.

One of the most evident favours God had extended to the Arabs was to transform them from obscure, fragmented, uncouth and backward hordes, with no influence or role to play in the world. They had nothing, whether material or spiritual, to provide for themselves, let alone to offer to humanity. A small minority of them lived in riches, while the overwhelming majority lived in dire poverty. They also suffered mental and spiritual deprivation, with an absurd set of beliefs and a primitive concept of life. Their interests were little more than looting raids, vengeance killings, drinking, gambling and similarly trivial enjoyments.

Islam transformed them into a great, united, mature and pioneering nation with a profound religious faith. Under Islam they could offer to the world a faith that provided a superior concept of existence. That same nation went on to lead the world and influence its development and progress in all fields. They became a power to reckon with, whereas previously they were subordinated by neighbouring empires or an ignored community with little consequence. Islam also gave them power and wealth.

Above all else, Islam gave the Muslim nation peace: peace within the minds of individual Muslims, and peace within the home and within society as a whole. It gave Muslims a greatly enhanced sense of pride, decency and nobility, which in turn gave them cultural maturity and self-confidence that made their civilization stand out in the history of mankind.

Muslims of that generation did not require much persuasion that they were a favoured nation because they were aware of their pre- Islamic past and the vast leap they had taken with Islam. They knew and appreciated fully the value of the Qur'ān and its wisdom for the well-being and stability of their community and, in particular, of family life which formed the cornerstone of their society.

Finally, the Qur'ān touches Muslims' hearts with a warning that they should fear God who *"has full knowledge of everything."* This warning evokes a sense of fear and caution, in addition to the sense of gratitude and integrity already revived, in order to use every means of focusing their attention on the right course of action and behaviour.

The *sūrah* directs Muslims not to stand in the way of an estranged wife, whose waiting period has elapsed, if she wants to remarry her divorced husband and they have come to an amicable and honourable agreement to do so: "*And when you have divorced women and they have reached the end of their waiting-term, do not prevent them from marrying their husbands if they have agreed with each other in a fair manner. This is an admonition for everyone of you who believes in God and the Last Day. That is more virtuous for you, and purer. God knows, whereas you do not know.*" (Verse 232)

Al-Tirmidhī reported that Ma`qil ibn Yasār gave his sister in marriage to a Muslim man who later divorced her and she remained divorced until her waiting period had elapsed. After some time they both felt they would like to marry again and the man went to Ma`qil, asking to marry her. Ma`qil was furious and reprimanded the man for divorcing her in the first place, and swore that he would never marry her if he were to live for ever. Al-Tirmidhī adds that, nevertheless, it was God's will that the couple should have the chance to be reunited. Thus, this verse was revealed. On hearing it, Ma`qil said: "I hear and I obey." He then called the man and said to him: "You have my blessings to marry her."

This highly compassionate divine gesture towards people's feelings and emotions is evidence of God's boundless mercy towards mankind. The verse as a whole aims to mitigate the trauma of divorce and to educate Muslims in organizing their social affairs realistically and with compassion.

The verse closes with more exhortations, calling upon the Muslims to be conscious of their accountability to God and to look beyond the objectives of this transient life. They should realize that in ordaining these rules God, who knows all, wishes to elevate their aspirations and bring their society more happiness and harmony. Thus, every action is linked to God and serves as an act of worship aimed at cleansing the individual and all society from immediate materialistic considerations.

Child Care in Broken Homes

The following ruling concerns the fostering and breast-feeding of infants after divorce. When a marriage breaks up, certain ties, commitments and relationships continue to exist between the divorced couple, foremost among which is the well-being and upbringing of children. The *sūrah* covers all possible eventualities:

> *Mothers may breast-feed their children for two whole years; [that is] for those who wish to complete the suckling. The father of the child is responsible to provide in a fair manner for their sustenance and clothing. No human being shall be burdened with more than he is well able to bear. Neither shall a mother be allowed to cause her child to suffer, nor shall a father cause suffering to his child. The same shall apply to the father's heir. If, by mutual consent and after due consultation, the parents choose to*

> *wean the child, they will incur no sin thereby. Nor shall it be any offence on your part if you engage wet nurses for your children, provided that you hand over what you agreed to pay, in a fair manner. Fear God, and know that God sees all that you do.* (Verse 233)

A divorced mother continues to have a God-given duty towards her infant, no matter how acrimonious the separation from her husband. God's mercy and compassion dictate that under no circumstances should the children be made to suffer, especially during the early years of life when they are still being breast-fed. Modern scientific research has shown that the mother's milk is essential for the first two years of life for the healthy physical and psychological development of the child. Mankind needed to know this important fact and hence God, out of His infinite mercy, revealed it in the Qur'ān more than fourteen centuries ago.

In return, the mother has secured the right that the father must provide for her maintenance with fairness and good-will, as partners in their responsibility towards the infant and within their respective means.

"*No human being shall be burdened with more than he is well able to bear*" (Verse 233) The child should not be used by either parent as a pretext to put pressure on the other, and: "*Neither shall a mother be allowed to cause her child to suffer, nor shall a father cause suffering to his child*" (Verse 233)

Neither parent should resort to emotional blackmail or coercion to extort concessions from the other. Were the child's father to die: "*The same shall apply to the father's heir.*" (Verse 233) The father's heir takes over the responsibility to provide for the suckling mother in a fair manner. This is a case where gains and liabilities are shared within the family: the heir receives his share of inheritance and discharges the liabilities of the deceased. It is essential that this right of the mother, and that of her child, is respected and fulfilled in all situations.

"*If by mutual consent and after due consultation, the parents choose to wean the child, they will incur no sin thereby.*" (Verse 233) If, for health or other reasons, the parents, or the mother and the father's heir, jointly decide that it would be in the child's interest to take him off his mother's milk before he has reached two years of age, they shall have the right to do so, provided they have had sufficient consultation over the matter, and act in the child's interest.

Similarly, if the father chooses to have the baby suckled by someone other than the natural mother, and can show the distinct advantage of such action, he may do so provided that he ensures that the suckling mother receives her wages: "*Nor shall it be any offence on your part if you engage wet nurses for your children, provided that you hand over what you agreed to pay, in a fair manner.*" (Verse 233) This ensures that the wet nurse would take good care of the child.

The verse closes with yet further exhortation to all concerned to fear God and take account of His presence and overall authority. *"Fear God, and know that God sees all that you do."* (Verse 233) This, above all else, is a firm guarantee of proper and fair conduct by all.

The Case of Widows

The *sūrah* then turns to introduce the rules governing widows; their waiting period and whether and when they can entertain new proposals for marriage:

> *Those of you who die leaving wives behind, their wives shall wait, by themselves, for four months and ten days. When they have reached the end of their waiting-term, you shall incur no sin in whatever they may do with themselves in a lawful manner. God is aware of all that you do. You will incur no sin if you give a hint of a marriage offer to [widowed] women or keep such an intention to yourselves. God knows that you will entertain such intentions concerning them. Do not, however, plight your troth in secret; but speak only in a decent manner. Furthermore, do not resolve on actually making the marriage tie before the prescribed term [of waiting] has run its course. Know well that God knows what is in your minds, so have fear of Him; and know that God is much- Forgiving, Forbearing.* (Verses 234-235)

In pre-Islamic Arabia, widows suffered a great deal of injustice at the hands of their own families, their in-laws and society in general. When a husband died, his widow would be confined to a drab part of the home and made to wear her shabbiest clothes and refrain from using any perfume or incense for a whole year. At the end of that period, she would be required to perform a series of degrading and meaningless rituals which included casting animal faeces into the air and riding an ass or a sheep through the town or village. Islam did away with all those worthless customs and alleviated the suffering of widows who, in addition to the grief of losing their husbands, had to endure the humiliation and persecution of their families and were deprived of the opportunity to resume a happy and decent family life.

Islam set a waiting period of four months and ten days, which is slightly longer than that for a divorced wife, unless a woman is pregnant, in which case her waiting period extends until she has delivered. The purpose of the waiting period is to determine whether the woman is pregnant and to avoid hurting the feelings of the family of her deceased husband by leaving his home immediately after his death. During this period, the widow wears modest clothes, and does not wear the sort of make-up that encourages suitors to propose marriage to her. Once the waiting period is over, no one, from either her family or that of her deceased husband, has the right to dictate to her what to do with her life. She is totally free to decide for herself within the established traditions and teachings of Islam. She is free to wear all the

adornments permitted for Muslim women, to receive marriage proposals, and to give her consent to marrying anyone she chooses, unimpeded by any antiquated or unreasonable traditions or customs. She has only God to please and fear. For: *"God is aware of all that you do."*

As for men who wish to marry a widow before the end of her waiting period, the *sūrah* gives a most perceptive ruling, based on the observance of principles of decency and propriety, ethical and social values, and the feelings and sensibilities of all concerned while taking account of the overall needs and interests of the community as a whole: *"You will incur no sin if give a hint of a marriage offer to [widowed] women or keep such an intention to yourselves."* (Verse 235)

During the waiting period, the memory of the deceased husband is still fresh in his widow's mind. She may be overwhelmed by the grief she shares with his family, and anxious to find out whether she is carrying his child. If she already knows that she is pregnant, she is bound to be under stress, and would have to wait until she gives birth before she may marry again. All these considerations make any entertainment of a new marriage rather premature, or even inappropriate and hurtful.

Nevertheless, this should not prevent prospective suitors from expressing an interest in marrying a widow once her waiting period had elapsed, short of directly and officially proposing to her.

Al-Bukhārī relates that Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and learned Companion, is reported to have suggested that statements such as: "I wish to get married," or, "I need to have a woman around me," or "I wish I had a good wife," are appropriate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that God is always aware of any unexpressed feelings or intentions by some men in wishing to marry a certain widow. It casts no aspersions on such feelings, which it implicitly recognizes as natural and normal, but urges that no practical steps be taken, or secretive arrangements agreed, before the waiting period is over. Thus, Islam regulates and tames human natural desires rather than condemning or suppressing them. *"God knows that you will entertain such intentions concerning them. Do not, however, plight your troth in secret; but speak only in a decent manner."* (Verse 235)

Arrangements or agreements of marriage made in secret during the waiting period are seen as contrary to decent social propriety and impertinent towards God, who has designated that period as a positive division in a widow's life.

None of this should prevent a decent contact with the woman, provided the subject of conversation falls within the decent religious and social norms as dictated by Islam. No intention of marriage is expressed directly lest the woman's feelings are hurt at such a delicate time in her predicament, as pointed out earlier.

"*Do not, however, plight your troth in secret; but speak only in a decent manner. Furthermore, do not resolve on actually making the marriage tie before the prescribed term [of waiting] has run its course.*" (Verse 235) Once again we note the delicate touches with which the Qur'ān approaches sensitive subjects. It does not warn against making marriage contracts before the end of the waiting period; it warns against making a commitment, plighting one's troth.

The choice of words at the end of the verse is significant: "*Know well that God knows what is in your minds, so have fear of Him; and know that God is much-Forgiving, Forbearing.*" (Verse 235) These closing words refer the whole matter to God's grace and generosity, appealing directly to Muslims' respect and fear of God Almighty in conducting their personal and social affairs. This fear and respect are, in themselves, the ultimate guarantee of God's forgiveness and tolerance towards those who earnestly and sincerely strive to observe and implement His directives and rulings.

Kindness after Divorce

The *sūrah* then tackles a different, but frequently met, situation, in which a woman is divorced before the consummation of the marriage. It outlines the respective rights and obligations of both spouses.

> *You will incur no sin if you divorce women before having touched them or settled a dowry for them. Provide for them, the rich according to his means and the straitened according to his means. Such a provision, in an equitable manner, is an obligation binding on the righteous. If you divorce them before having touched them but after having settled a dowry for them, then give them half of that which you have settled, unless they forgo it or he in whose hand is the marriage tie forgoes it. To forgo what is due to you is closer to being righteous. Do not forget to act benevolently to one another. God sees all that you do.* (Verses 236-237)

Two situations are outlined here. The first involves a woman who is divorced before her marriage had been consummated or a dowry agreed. In this case, the husband is obliged to recompense her according to his means. Such a gesture would have an immense psychological impact on the woman, who would be devastated at having her marriage dissolved before it has even begun. It would go a long way towards dissipating any bitterness or acrimony left in her heart. The unfulfilled marriage would be understood as an unfortunate mistake rather than a reflection on her suitability or integrity. The aim would be to diffuse the tension and conduct the severance of the relationship amicably, in a spirit of fairness and with no hard feelings. Meanwhile, the size of the gift offered in this case is left to the man's discretion and conscience, within his financial ability: "*the rich according to his means and the straitened according to his means. Such a provision, in an equitable manner, is an*

obligation binding on the righteous." (Verse 236)

The second possibility arises if a dowry has been agreed and settled, in which case half of it must, in principle, be paid unless the wife, or her guardian if she is young, choose, without any pressure, to forgo such a payment. Forgoing such a claim is the attitude of one who has the power of the law on her side but she declines to touch the money of a man with whom she no longer has any relation.

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān goes on to urge more fear of God, tolerance, magnanimity and benevolence on the part of all involved. It exhorts: *"To forgo what is due to you is closer to being righteous. Do not forget to act benevolently to one another. God sees all that you do." (*Verse 237)

A Question of Worship

Having evoked an atmosphere of submission to, and consciousness of, God, the *sūrah* interjects with a short passage on prayer, the main act of worship in Islam, before it deals with other aspects of divorce. The inference here, in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān, is that obedience to God in matters of marriage and divorce is an act of worship no less reverent or commendable than prayer itself. This is in total harmony with the comprehensive Islamic concept of worship *(`ibādah)* which encompasses all human activity and is seen as the central purpose of human existence, expressed in the Qur'ān: *"I have not created the jinns and human beings to any end other than that they may worship Me."* (51: 56)

The *sūrah* says: "*Attend regularly to your prayers, particularly the middle prayer, and stand up before God in devout obedience. If you are in fear, pray walking or riding. When you are again secure, remember God, since it is He who has taught you what you did not know."* (Verses 238-239)

This is a clear instruction to Muslims to attend regularly to the five daily prayers, offering them in the proper manner, in the correct form, and at their appointed times. The middle Prayer is generally taken to refer to *`Aşr,* or mid-afternoon prayer, on the basis of reports that on the day of the Battle of the Moat (627 CE), the Prophet Muĥammad was heard cursing the enemy forces for "causing us to miss the middle prayer of *`Aşr.* May God engulf their hearts and homes in fire." The reason for a specific mention of the *`Aşr* prayer is perhaps because it falls during that part of the afternoon when people take a short rest and may easily miss it.

The *sūrah* also emphasizes total devotion during prayers, because in the early days, Muslims used to, if they felt the need, talk and break away from the prayer to attend to urgent business. When this verse was revealed, it became clear that nothing should distract one from prayer and that worshippers must stand before God in a

state of complete submission and devotion.

The *sūrah* points out that even in times of danger and war, Muslims must not neglect the obligatory prayers. They may perform them in the most convenient way possible under the circumstances. They are permitted to perform the prayer in whatever posture they find themselves in, walking or riding, without having to face the *qiblah,* the direction of the Ka`bah, or follow the prescribed procedure. This is not to be confused with *Şalāt al-khawf* or 'prayer while in a state of fear', referred to in *Sūrah* 4, which relates specifically to the performance of prayer in the battlefield. If fighting actually breaks out, or an enemy attack is imminent, the ruling given in the present *sūrah* will apply.

The great importance God attaches to prayer is very clear. It is seen as a source of inspiration and moral support, and should not be neglected no matter how dangerous or threatening the situation may be. In times of war, it is another weapon a Muslim may use in facing the enemy. It is a supply line from God Almighty at a most crucial moment.

Islam is a religion founded upon the worship of God, in various forms and in all circumstances. Prayer is the foremost manifestation of man's submission to God. Through the worship of God, man attains the highest level of purity, gains divine support and direction, and achieves total peace of mind. Hence, prayer must never be neglected, even if one is in the line of fire.

When safety and security prevail, prayer must be observed in the normal way, as taught to Muslims by God Almighty in the Qur'ān and through the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muĥammad. The *sūrah* stresses this fact: *"When you are again secure, remember God, since it is He who has taught you what you did not know."* (Verse 239) Indeed, human beings would not have known anything if it were not for the fact that God teaches them in every minute of their lives.

More Rights for Widows and Divorcees

This interjection, with its fine spiritual touch, serves *as* a fitting interlude before the remaining rules on the rights of widows and on divorce are given:

> *Those of you who die leaving their wives behind, shall bequeath to their wives provisions for one year without their being obliged to leave [their deceased husbands' homes]. Should they leave home [of their own accord], you shall incur no sin for what they may do with themselves in a lawful manner. God is Almighty, Wise. Divorced women shall have a provision according to what is fair. This is an obligation on the God-fearing. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations that you may understand.* (Verses 240-242)

The first of these three verses establishes the right of a widow to a bequest by her deceased husband, allowing her to stay in his home with a provision for her maintenance. She does not need to leave his home or marry again during that period if that is what she chooses to do. This does not exclude her right to leave the house after four months and ten days, the waiting period, as laid down earlier. While the waiting period is an obligation upon the widow, her staying in her late husband's home for a year is her right. Some jurists are of the opinion that this ruling is overruled by the one given in Verse 234. Such a conclusion is not justified since the two rulings refer to two different matters: one establishes a widow's right while the other states an obligation binding upon her.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that: "*Should they leave home [of their own accord], you shall incur no sin for what they may do with themselves in a lawful manner.*" (Verse 240) The use of the plural 'you' in this context is significant because it indicates a collective communal responsibility for the welfare of widowed women, and a need for all members of the community to respect and observe Islamic rules and norms.

The concluding phrase, "*God is Almighty, Wise,*" draws attention to God's power and wisdom in laying down such rules, with a hint of warning that they should not be taken lightly.

The next verse institutes a divorcee's right to provisions, in general, and links the observance of this to righteousness and God-fearing.

Some scholars are of the view that the right given in this verse was superseded by those outlined earlier, which is again difficult to justify because the 'provisions' referred to here are not the same as maintenance. The context and the spirit of these Qur'ānic passages suggest that such provisions are a right of all divorced women irrespective of whether the marriage was consummated or a dowry agreed and settled. These provisions are designed to mitigate the bitterness and acrimony normally associated with divorce, and to offset some of the sadness and disappointment that follow the separation. The *sūrah* again evokes the couple's fear of God as the best guarantee of fairness and generosity.

The final verse in this section asserts: "*God makes clear to you His revelations that you may understand.*" (Verse 242) God lays down rules clearly, fairly and effectively, inviting people to reflect on their value and purpose and to appreciate God's blessings and mercy, implicit in them. They should not lose sight of the fact that they are aimed to bring about conciliation and accord. They are straightforward, easy and beneficial to put into practice, but rigorous and decisive at the, same time.

There is a great need for mankind to take heed of the divinely- inspired social order of Islam and put it into effect in their daily life, which will surely bring peace, stability and harmony into their hearts and minds, and into their lives as a whole.

15
A Timeless Message

۞ أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ خَرَجُواْ مِن دِيَٰرِهِمۡ وَهُمۡ أُلُوفٌ حَذَرَ ٱلۡمَوۡتِ فَقَالَ لَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مُوتُواْ ثُمَّ أَحۡيَٰهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضۡلٍ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٢٤٣﴾

Are you not aware of those who left their homes in their thousands for fear of death? God said to them: "Die," and later He brought them back to life. Surely, God grants limitless bounty to mankind, but most people are ungrateful. (243)

وَقَٰتِلُواْ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٞ ﴿٢٤٤﴾

Fight for the cause of God and know that God hears all and knows all. (244)

مَّن ذَا ٱلَّذِي يُقۡرِضُ ٱللَّهَ قَرۡضًا حَسَنٗا فَيُضَٰعِفَهُۥ لَهُۥٓ أَضۡعَافٗا كَثِيرَةٗۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَقۡبِضُ وَيَبۡصُۜطُ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ﴿٢٤٥﴾

Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay multiplied many times over? It is God who straitens people's circumstances and it is He who gives abundantly; and to Him you shall all return. (245)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلۡمَلَإِ مِنۢ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مُوسَىٰٓ إِذۡ قَالُواْ لِنَبِيّٖ لَّهُمُ ٱبۡعَثۡ لَنَا مَلِكٗا نُّقَٰتِلۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۖ قَالَ هَلۡ عَسَيۡتُمۡ إِن كُتِبَ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡقِتَالُ أَلَّا تُقَٰتِلُواْۖ قَالُواْ وَمَا لَنَآ أَلَّا نُقَٰتِلَ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَقَدۡ أُخۡرِجۡنَا مِن دِيَٰرِنَا وَأَبۡنَآئِنَاۖ فَلَمَّا كُتِبَ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡقِتَالُ تَوَلَّوۡاْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا مِّنۡهُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمُۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٤٦﴾

Are you not aware of those elders of the Children of Israel, after the time of Moses, when they said to one of their Prophets, 'Appoint for us a king, and we shall fight for the cause of God.' He said, 'Would you, perchance, refuse to fight if fighting is ordained for you?' They said, 'Why should we not fight for the cause of God when we have been driven out of our homes and our children?' Yet, when fighting was ordained for them, they turned back, save for a few of them. God is fully aware of the wrong-doers. (246)

وَقَالَ لَهُمۡ نَبِيُّهُمۡ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدۡ بَعَثَ لَكُمۡ طَالُوتَ مَلِكٗاۚ قَالُوٓاْ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لَهُ ٱلۡمُلۡكُ عَلَيۡنَا وَنَحۡنُ أَحَقُّ بِٱلۡمُلۡكِ مِنۡهُ وَلَمۡ يُؤۡتَ سَعَةٗ مِّنَ ٱلۡمَالِۚ قَالَ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱصۡطَفَىٰهُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَزَادَهُۥ بَسۡطَةٗ فِي ٱلۡعِلۡمِ وَٱلۡجِسۡمِۖ وَٱللَّهُ يُؤۡتِي مُلۡكَهُۥ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٢٤٧

Their Prophet said to them, 'God has appointed Saul [Tālūt] to be your king.' They said, 'How can he have the kingship over us when we are better entitled to it than he is? Besides, he has not been given abundance of wealth.' He said, 'God has chosen him in preference to you, and endowed him abundantly with knowledge and physical stature. God grants His dominion to whom He will. He is Munificent, All-Knowing.' (247)

وَقَالَ لَهُمۡ نَبِيُّهُمۡ إِنَّ ءَايَةَ مُلۡكِهِۦٓ أَن يَأۡتِيَكُمُ ٱلتَّابُوتُ فِيهِ سَكِينَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ وَبَقِيَّةٞ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ ءَالُ مُوسَىٰ وَءَالُ هَٰرُونَ تَحۡمِلُهُ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٢٤٨

Their Prophet also said to them, 'The portent of his kingship is that a casket shall be brought to you, wherein you shall have peace of reassurance from your Lord, and a legacy left behind by the House of Moses and the House of Aaron. It will be borne by angels. That will be a sign for you, if you are true believers.' (248)

فَلَمَّا فَصَلَ طَالُوتُ بِٱلۡجُنُودِ قَالَ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مُبۡتَلِيكُم بِنَهَرٖ فَمَن شَرِبَ مِنۡهُ فَلَيۡسَ مِنِّي وَمَن لَّمۡ يَطۡعَمۡهُ فَإِنَّهُۥ مِنِّيٓ إِلَّا مَنِ ٱغۡتَرَفَ غُرۡفَةَۢ بِيَدِهِۦۚ فَشَرِبُواْ مِنۡهُ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا مِّنۡهُمۡۚ فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَهُۥ هُوَ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ قَالُواْ لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا ٱلۡيَوۡمَ بِجَالُوتَ وَجُنُودِهِۦۚ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُم مُّلَٰقُواْ ٱللَّهِ كَم مِّن فِئَةٖ قَلِيلَةٍ غَلَبَتۡ فِئَةَۢ كَثِيرَةَۢ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ مَعَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ٢٤٩

And when Saul set out with his troops, he said, 'God will now out you to the test by a river. He Who drinks from it will not belong to me, but he who does not taste its water will indeed belong to me, except him who takes a scoop with his hand.' They all drank [their fill] of it, except for a few of them. When he and those who kept faith with him crossed the river, they said, 'No strength have we today to stand up to Goliath and his forces.' But those of them who were certain that they would meet their Lord said, 'How often has a small host triumphed over a large host by God's grace. God is with those who remain patient in adversity.' (249)

وَلَمَّا بَرَزُواْ لِجَالُوتَ وَجُنُودِهِۦ قَالُواْ رَبَّنَآ أَفۡرِغۡ عَلَيۡنَا صَبۡرٗا وَثَبِّتۡ أَقۡدَامَنَا وَٱنصُرۡنَا عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٢٥٠

And when they came face to face with Goliath and his troops, they prayed, 'Our Lord, grant us patience in adversity, make firm our steps, and grant us victory over the unbelievers.' (250)

فَهَزَمُوهُم بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِ وَقَتَلَ دَاوُۥدُ جَالُوتَ وَءَاتَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُلۡكَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَعَلَّمَهُۥ مِمَّا يَشَآءُۗ وَلَوۡلَا دَفۡعُ ٱللَّهِ ٱلنَّاسَ بَعۡضَهُم بِبَعۡضٖ لَّفَسَدَتِ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ذُو فَضۡلٍ عَلَى ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٢٥١

They routed them, by God's will. David slew Goliath, and God bestowed on him the kingdom and wisdom, and taught him whatever He willed. Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted. God is limitless in His bounty to all the worlds. (251)

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتۡلُوهَا عَلَيۡكَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ٢٥٢

These are the revelations of God. We recite them to you in all truth, for you are indeed one of Our messengers. (252)

Overview

We can better appreciate the value of this passage and the experience of past nations and communities it relates when we bear in mind that the Qur'ān is the inspiring book of the Muslim community, its sincere counsellor and guide through life. It was with the Qur'ān that God moulded the first Muslim community to which He assigned the task of implementing the Islamic code of living. After the Prophet's death, the Qur'ān remains the guide which prepares future Muslim generations for their role of leadership of mankind. This is the role God has promised the Muslim community whenever it fulfils its pledges to follow His guidance, giving the Qur'ān supremacy over all man-made laws and methods.

The Qur'ān is not merely fine verses to be recited for enchantment. It is a comprehensive constitution providing education and guidance through life. Hence, it provides examples of the experience of past communities for the benefit of the new generations of Muslims. It lays special emphasis on past experience in the advocacy of faith, highlighting its interaction with people in practical life. Such wealth of experience portrayed in the Qur'ān is of great value in the enlightenment of the

advocates of Islam.

This is the reason why the Qur'ān includes a wealth of highly inspiring historical accounts. The history of the Children of Israel provides the majority of these stories for a variety of reasons which we discussed in Chapter 3. We may add here that the prominence given to the Jewish history is perhaps due to God's prior knowledge that some Muslim generations will be going through situations similar to those experienced by the Israelites. Therefore, He alerts them to the slips that may lie in their way by highlighting the lessons they could learn from such history.

Muslim generations should read the Qur'ān very carefully, treating it as guidance provided today to show us how to deal with our present problems and to chart our future course. Its historical accounts are not provided for inconsequential academic study.

We will not benefit by the Qur'ān unless we read it with the aim of seeking guidance for our present and future life, in the same way as the first Muslim community did. When we approach the Qur'ān in this way, we are certain to find in it what we are looking for, and we shall have something far more remarkable than we can imagine. Its words, expressions and instructions will come alive, giving us all the guidance we need. It will point out to us what to do and what to avoid, what precautions to take, who is our friend and who is our enemy. It will give us a long, elaborate discourse touching on everything that may occur to us. Thus, we will find in the Qur'ān both life and enjoyment. God's words will ring in our ears: "*Believers, respond to the call of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that which will give you life.*" (8: 24)

The present passage gives an account of two episodes in the history of past nations to add to the practical lessons given to the Muslim community, as part of its preparation to face what may lie ahead on its way. The first is outlined briefly, but adequately, without even mentioning the people involved. They are a large group who tried to flee from death, leaving their homes to no avail. God caused them to die and brought them back to life, rendering their efforts to evade death futile, and giving them a new life without any effort on their part. As it shows them this example, the Qur'ān urges the believers to fight and donate for the cause of God who gives and takes away both life and wealth.

The second lesson is derived from an episode in the history of the Israelites after the death of Moses. Having abandoned divine guidance, they suffered the loss of their kingdom, violation of their sacred places and personal humiliation at the hands of their enemies. But then their sense of faith reawakened and they were eager to fight for God's cause. They asked their prophet to appoint for them a king to lead them in such a fight.

The way the Qur'ān portrays this episode is highly inspiring and particularly significant for all Muslim generations, let alone the first Muslim community. The total sum of what had taken place on this occasion is that, despite all the weaknesses shown by the Israelites, leading to one group's desertion after another, the steadfastness of even a small group of believers achieved very great results for the whole community. They were able to turn the tables on their enemies, shaking off their long humiliation by their enemies to achieve victory and establish the kingdom of David and Solomon. That was the beginning of the Israelites' golden age. All this was the result of the new impetus given to faith after it remained long forgotten, and the steadfastness of a small group facing the large army led by Goliath.

A number of significant facts are highlighted here. The first is that public enthusiasm can be dangerously deceptive. Therefore, those in the position of leadership must put it to the test before going into a decisive battle. A group of wise and respected elders of the Israelites requested their prophet to choose for them a king who could lead them in their struggle for God's cause. They wanted to fight those enemies who had ravaged their kingdom and looted their property, including what was left by their prophets, Moses and Aaron, and their household. Trying to gauge their determination, their prophet suggested that, once a battle loomed large, they might not be up to the task. Here their enthusiasm reached its highest point, and they expressed their attitude, feeling that they had every reason to fight: *"Why should we not fight for the cause of God when we have been driven out of our homes and our children?"* (Verse 246) Nevertheless, their enthusiasm was short lived: "*Yet, when fighting was ordained for them, they turned back, save for a few of them.*" (Verse 246) Although the Israelites habitually reneged on their promises, such an attitude remains a human weakness often encountered in communities whose strength of faith remains suspect.

Another aspect of the moral of the story is that when public enthusiasm for action is at a high pitch, the first test of its substance should be the final. The great majority of the Israelites in the present case turned away once their expressed desire to fight was accepted. Only a few of them remained true to the promise they gave to their prophet. These were the soldiers that formed Saul's army after the long arguments about his choice as king and commander, and after they were clearly shown that it was God's choice. Nevertheless, the majority of these soldiers failed the very first test to which Saul put them, when he ordered them not to drink from the river they were about to cross. Even then, the minority that remained did not persevere; they were overawed by the great numbers of the enemy force and declared that they were no match for their opponents. But a very small group kept faith with God and stood firm. It was this small group that tilted the balance. They were granted victory and were worthy of their achievement.

As the story unfolds, we appreciate the importance of a resolute leadership motivated by faith. All fine leadership qualities are shown by Saul: knowledge of human nature, repeated testing of commitment of his soldiers, getting rid of the weak elements, unlimited trust in God's promise to those who remain steadfast in the face of adversity.

Moreover, we clearly see how true believers have their own standards and values, because they look at the present situation in a way that relates it to the greater reality of God's will and His power. The great disparity with the large enemy forces was not lost on the small group of believers who persevered with Saul to the end. The difference, however, was that those believers also recognized that victory is granted by God. Hence, they turned to Him in a sincere prayer: "*Our Lord, grant us patience in adversity, make firm our steps, and grant us victory over the unbelievers.*" (Verse 250)

With such unshakeable faith, and such a proper understanding, they deserved the victory given by the One who is always able to grant victory. We will now look at the passage in more detail.

Fleeing from Death

We need not go into the plethora of interpretations with regard to the identity or the time and place of the people referred to in this verse. Had these details been of any particular importance in understanding the moral and the message of the story, they would most certainly have been given in the Qur'ānic account.

The aim of this verse is simply to establish that life and death are determined by the will of God, and that human beings should fulfil their obligations in life with complete trust in God's will and total reassurance that what befalls them is an integral part of God's order of things.

No precautions could ever prevent death or impede God's will, nor could fear or despair prolong life. Life and death are entirely in God's hands. He dispenses them according to reasons known only to Him, and His grace and mercy are evident in both. "*Surely, God grants limitless bounty to mankind, but most people are ungrateful.*"

Such a mass exodus, with thousands of people fleeing at the same time, whether from a hostile attack or the outbreak of disease, could only occur in a state of total panic. Nevertheless, running away could not save those people from meeting their death, for "*God said to there; 'Die.'*" (Verse 243)

No details are given as to the manner in which God spoke to those or how they met their death, because these bear no relevance to the objective of the story, which is that their despairing desertion of their homes did not change the destiny God had already willed for those panic-stricken people. They needed to persevere, be patient

and freely put their trust in God.

Nor are we given any details of how God brought those people back to life, or on whether this is a reference to a later generation of the same community who did not panic or despair, and who accepted what God had chosen for them. There would be no point in speculating over these matters; nor can we accept the various unsubstantiated accounts of some commentaries. The essential message here is that God gave those people life, and their own efforts could not prevent their death. Life is a gift from God which He bestows on human beings with no effort or reason on their part. They, on the other hand, can do nothing to prevent what God has predestined.

Multiplied Loan Repayment

As the *sūrah* continues, we begin to understand the significance of the story and partly appreciate God's purpose in citing this episode quite early on in the history of the Muslim nation. The next verse says: *"Fight for the cause of God and know that God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 244)

This verse tells the Muslims very clearly that neither their love of life nor their fear of death should stop them from fighting for God's cause. Death and life are determined by God, and those who believe should fight for His cause and under His banner alone. They should be mindful that God is aware of what they do and is there to respond to their needs and appreciate and reward their actions.

To fight for the cause of God, which is the ultimate form of *jihād,* requires devotion and sacrifice. In the Qur'ān, *jihād* is frequently associated with financial contribution, especially in the early days of Islam when fighting was voluntary and fighters were required to finance their own participation in it. There would be eager and capable ones who were prevented from going out with the Muslim army only by their lack of means. The emphasis on financial sacrifice was, therefore, essential, as the *sūrah* strongly states: *"Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay multiplied many times over? It is God who straitens people's circumstances and it is He who gives abundantly; and to Him you shall all return."* (Verse 245)

God bestows life and takes it away, and one may go to battle and survive, if that is God's will. Wealth is not lost when spent in a good cause. It is a form of loan to God whose generous repayment is guaranteed, both in this world and in the life to come.

Poverty and wealth are also due to God's will rather than the outcome of one's financial acumen or frugality or philanthropy. *"It is God who straitens people's circumstances and it is He who gives abundantly; and to Him you shall all return."* (Verse 245) People and all their possessions shall one day return to God, and so death and

poverty no longer pose any threat. Believers shall go ahead and sacrifice their lives, their wealth and all their possessions in the cause of God who has already charted their course and destiny in this world. They shall live their lives to the full, in dignity and freedom, in the service of God Almighty.

This short passage is a fine example of the power of the Qur'ānic language and style. We are immediately taken into a scene of panic and confusion, with thousands of people fleeing in all directions to avoid death and annihilation. Suddenly, they meet the very fate they are trying to escape; no measures or precautions they have taken will avail them. And, just as suddenly and without further explanation, they are brought back to life by the mighty hand of God, who controls everything and whose power is overwhelming. Thus, we realize that life and death are in the hands of God Almighty, as are wealth and fortune, which complement the theme of the passage.

A Test of Genuine Faith

The *sūrah* goes on to cite another episode of the story of the Israelites after the death of Moses, God's messenger to them: "*Are you not aware of those elders of the Children of Israel, after the time of Moses, when they said to one of their Prophets, Appoint for us a king, and we shall fight for the cause of God.' He said, 'Would you, perchance, refuse to fight if fighting is ordained for you?' They said, 'Why should we not fight for the cause of God when we have been driven out of our homes and our children?' Yet, when fighting was ordained for them, they turned back, save for a few of them. God is fully aware of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 246)

The reference here is to a group of the Israelite elders who had asked one of their numerous Prophets, whose identity has not been given as it is not essential in this context, to appoint them a king to lead them into battle "for the cause of God". The narrative suggests a time of religious revival among the Israelites, a .d a strong desire to uphold 'the truth and defend it against the ungodly enemies.

Resolve takes a fighter halfway to victory. He must be certain of the legitimacy of his cause, and the falsehood of that of his enemy, and his objective to uphold the cause of God must also be clear in his mind.

The wise prophet needed reassurance that the elders' enthusiasm for fighting was not mere bravado, and that they were sincere in their resolve and committed to the requirements of fighting for God's cause. He did not wish his efforts to be in vain. Would they flinch or retreat once fighting had been made obligatory for them?

The elders gave reasons of their own for wishing to fight: "*They said, 'Why should we not fight for the cause of God when we have been driven out of our homes and our*

children?'" Their motives were clear: they had been wronged. So was their objective: they wanted to fight for the cause of God, and their determination was not open to question.

Nevertheless, as soon as the time had come for them to face their enemy, "*Yet, when fighting was ordained for them, they turned back, save for a few of them.*" (Verse 246) Here the *sūrah* highlights the propensity of some Israelites to breach agreements, break promises and disobey God. It also points to their tendency to display disunity and to betray their cause. This is not only true of those Israelites, but it is true of many other human communities and groups who lack cultural maturity and a strong and enlightened tradition. Such characteristics need to be taken into account by those who have to lead these communities through difficult times.

The verse concludes with the comment: "*God is fully aware of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 246) This comment deplores the dereliction of responsibility and accuses the large group of betraying themselves, their leader and their cause. No group of people could be so certain of the legitimacy of their cause, and of God's support for their case, and then go on to flagrantly relinquish their obligations. People who are certain of the truth they follow, like those Israelites were, could not just turn away from their responsibilities. If they do, they are certain to have the punishment reserved for wrongdoers.

The *sūrah* points to another disturbing streak in the Israelites' character, cited a number of times in the *sūrah.* The group had asked for a king to be appointed to lead them into battle, claiming to be ready to fight for "the cause of God". But, as soon as he was appointed, they began to question the wisdom of his choice and his eligibility to rule over them. They argued that some of them were better suited for the task because he did not come from a noble background, nor was he wealthy enough to be a king and leader.

Here is how the *sūrah* relates what happened: "*Their Prophet said to them, 'God has appointed Saul [Ṭālūt] to be your king.' They said, 'How can he have the kingship over us when we are better entitled to it than he is? Besides, he has not been given abundance of wealth.' He said, 'God has chosen him in preference to you, and endowed him abundantly with knowledge and physical stature. God grants His dominion to whom He will. He is Munificent, All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 247)

Their Prophet had to explain that the king was chosen by God, which should have been enough reason for his people to accept him, because God is powerful and generous and would only choose what would be in their best interest. Moreover, he was endowed with knowledge and physical strength, providing him with a greater quality of leadership and ability.

This should have been enough to convince them to accept Saul as king over them;

but, it seems, nothing short of a miracle would persuade them. "*Their Prophet also said to them, 'The portent of his kingship is that a casket shall be brought to you, wherein you shall have peace of reassurance from your Lord, and a legacy left behind by the House of Moses and the House of Aaron. It will be borne by angels. That will be a sign for you, if you are true believers.'*" (Verse 248)

In the post-Moses era, the Israelites, during the reign of Joshua, were driven out of the Holy Land and most of their sacred heritage was pillaged and looted. This included a casket that was said to contain many relics of Moses and Aaron. More significantly, it also contained a copy of the tablets given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The reappearance of that casket, carried by angels, would be, their Prophet said, a sign from God and material proof of Saul's kingship. Once they saw it they would be reassured and, if they were true believers, would accept him as their leader.

The narration suggests that the miracle did take place and, completely reassured, the Israelites went on to confront their enemy.

Keeping Faith with God

Despite the lack of narrative details, we can gather that Saul had organized his fighting force of willing men and had gone ahead to do battle, and that as soon as they were on their way, he put their loyalty to the test. "*And when Saul set out with his troops, he said, 'God will now put you to the test by a river. He who drinks from it will not belong to me, but he who does not taste its water will indeed belong to me, except him who takes a scoop with his hand.' They all drank [their fill] of it, except for a few of them.*" (Verse 249)

The leadership qualities of Saul are now coming to light. He was leading an army of a vanquished nation who had experienced defeat many times in its history, and was about to meet a formidable enemy, and had therefore to test the will of his troops. He had to be sure of their ability to overcome their desires and endure hardship and deprivation. Above all, he had to test their loyalty and obedience, and their ability to shoulder responsibility. He put them to the test at the river, having established that they were getting very thirsty, to find out who would obey him and who would not.

"*They all drank [their fill] of it, except for a few of them.*" (Verse 249) He allowed them a single scoop with the hand to quench their thirst, but most of them drank their fill and were left behind because they had failed the test. It was better for the rest of the fighting force as weaklings would have been a liability on the battlefield. Military prowess is not determined by size or numbers, but is measured by the will and moral strength and faith of the troops.

This example shows that good intentions, by themselves, are not sufficient unless they are tested in practice. It also demonstrates the strength of a leader who is not swayed by the fall of most of his troops at the first hurdle, but who forges ahead with the rest of them.

Saul's forces were to encounter more trials of loyalty and strength: *"When he and those who kept faith with him crossed the river, they said, 'No strength have we today to stand up to Goliath and his forces.'"* (Verse 249)

Their numbers had dwindled, and they were aware that they were outnumbered by Goliath's forces. Certainly, they had the advantage of faith in their cause and trust in their leader, but the harsh reality of the situation told them they were the weaker side, and that their faith would be put to the test. Would that invisible force of faith triumph? How strong was their faith in God, and would they be able to harness that force in their favour and prevail?

At that decisive moment, a small group of true believers stood up to express their faith: *"But those of them who were certain that they would meet their Lord said, 'How often has a small host triumphed over a large host by God's grace. God is with those who remain patient in adversity.'"* (Verse 249)

To the believer's mind, that is the way it should be: believers are always numerically less than their enemies, because they need to sacrifice more and work harder to earn God's grace and pleasure. But they triumph because they draw their strength from God Almighty and their faith in Him. The believers are aware that their victory comes from God as a reward for their patience and perseverance.

The *sūrah* goes on to confirm that, despite their material disadvantage, the small, devoted, faithful band of believers prevailed and overran their formidable enemy: *"And when they came face to face with Goliath and his troops, they prayed, 'Our Lord, grant us patience in adversity, make firm our steps, and grant us victory over the unbelievers.' They routed them, by God's will. David slew Goliath, and God bestowed on him the kingdom and wisdom, and taught him whatever He willed."* (Verses 250-251)

Their prayers are deeply sincere and poignant. The Arabic words depict patience as an endless shower poured down upon the believers by God Almighty, filling their hearts with reassurance and tranquillity and providing them with the power and energy to face their superior enemy. They plead for strength to stand firm and to triumph over their adversary. It was clearly a confrontation between truth and falsehood in which God's intervention was indispensable to ensure a decisive victory for His allies.

And so it was: *"They routed them, by God's will."* The emphasis here is on "God's will" in order to reassure the believers, and to establish that what goes on in this world is determined and controlled by this will. Believers are only the means by

which God's will comes to pass. They are His servants, with little power of their own, chosen to perform a certain predestined role in the universal divine scheme. Believers are granted this privileged status through the grace of God and as a result of their sincerity, their determination to serve God and their unstinted devotion to Him.

"*David slew Goliath, and God bestowed on him the kingdom and wisdom, and taught him whatever He willed.*" (Verse 251) At the time of these events, David was a young man and Goliath a powerful king and a fearful commander, but God wished to demonstrate to the Israelites that they should not judge matters at face value, and should look deeper into the reality of things. Their side of the bargain was to keep their pact with God and prepare themselves for battle, leaving the rest to God who knows the essence of all things and how they come about. The outcome would be decided by God, in accordance with His will and wisdom. It was God's will that a youth such as David should slay a powerful giant-of-a-man such as Goliath as proof that physical power by itself is not the decisive factor. The other divine objective, not obvious at the time, was that David was destined to inherit the kingdom of Saul, and that David would be succeeded by his son, Solomon, who reigned over what became the golden era in the whole history of the Israelites, a period of great religious revival which came after their return from the wilderness.

Different Manifestations of God's Favours

David was a king and a Prophet, who excelled in the craft of making iron tools and implements of war, as the Qur'ān tells us elsewhere (21: 80). The purpose behind relating this story is revealed in the closing sentence of the verse: "*Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted. God is limitless in His bounty to all the worlds.*" (Verse 251)

This powerful statement takes us beyond the limited narrative and its personalities and events to reveal the fundamental divine wisdom underlying the constant contention, power struggles and battles among the multitudes of mankind in the tumult of life. It depicts the incessant strife and the spirit of competition and rivalry that drive human beings to their various ends and objectives in this world, according to the overall divine scheme under God's wise hand which leads them all towards progress and higher standards of life.

Were it not for this spirit of struggle and competition, life would be dull and stale. The conflict of interests and the variety of objectives that people seek in this world are the means by which human talent and energy are released and brought into play to reinvigorate and revitalize the human experience for the good of mankind. This dynamic movement produces the true human force of goodness, brings truth to the

fore, enhances man's sense of right and wrong, and firmly establishes justice on earth. It enables true and sincere believers to identify their noble role in life. It provides them with the will and strength to persevere and fulfil that role in total obedience to God's order and tireless pursuit of His pleasure and blessings.

God then intervenes on the side of the believers so that the truth they are upholding will prevail. Human conflict becomes a positive and constructive struggle for the good of mankind and a better life in this world. The fact that the smaller group of believers have placed their trust in God, and are devoted to fulfilling His ultimate will in protecting life and establishing the truth and defending it, enables them to eventually triumph and prevail.

The passage is rounded off with a final verse: "*These are the revelations of God. We recite them to you in all truth, for you are indeed one of Our messengers.*" (Verse 252)

These noble revelations emanate directly from God, itself an august fact that deserves man's understanding and reflection. They convey the truth and outline a complete code for human life, unrivalled and unmatched by any other code or system. Any attempts to substitute God's code, or declare it obsolete, are bogus and futile; God alone should be served and obeyed.

The fact that Muĥammad is a Messenger chosen by God Almighty qualifies him to receive God's revelations and to learn from the experiences of previous generations, and adequately equips him to convey those revelations to the rest of mankind.

16
The Nature of God and Faith

۞ تِلۡكَ ٱلرُّسُلُ فَضَّلۡنَا بَعۡضَهُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖۘ مِّنۡهُم مَّن كَلَّمَ ٱللَّهُۖ وَرَفَعَ بَعۡضَهُمۡ دَرَجَٰتٖۚ وَءَاتَيۡنَا عِيسَى ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ ٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَأَيَّدۡنَٰهُ بِرُوحِ ٱلۡقُدُسِۗ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَا ٱقۡتَتَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا جَآءَتۡهُمُ ٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتُ وَلَٰكِنِ ٱخۡتَلَفُواْ فَمِنۡهُم مَّنۡ ءَامَنَ وَمِنۡهُم مَّن كَفَرَۚ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَا ٱقۡتَتَلُواْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَفۡعَلُ مَا يُرِيدُ ٢٥٣

Those are the Messengers! We have exalted some of them above others. To some God spoke directly, and some He raised in rank. We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. Had God so willed, those who succeeded them would not have fought against one another after the clear proofs had come to them. But they differed with one another: some of them accepted the faith and some rejected it. Yet had God so willed, they would not have fought one another. But God does whatever He wills. (253)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَنفِقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقۡنَٰكُم مِّن قَبۡلِ أَن يَأۡتِيَ يَوۡمٞ لَّا بَيۡعٞ فِيهِ وَلَا خُلَّةٞ وَلَا شَفَٰعَةٞۗ وَٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٢٥٤

Believers, spend [for God's cause] out of that with which We have provided you before there comes a day when there will be no trading, or friendship or intercession. Truly, the unbelievers are the wrongdoers. (254)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلۡحَيُّ ٱلۡقَيُّومُۚ لَا تَأۡخُذُهُۥ سِنَةٞ وَلَا نَوۡمٞۚ لَّهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ مَن ذَا ٱلَّذِي

God: there is no deity but Him, the Ever-Living, the Eternal Master of all. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Who is there that can intercede with

يَشْفَعُ عِندَهُۥٓ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِۦ ۚ
يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ ۖ وَلَا
يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنْ عِلْمِهِۦٓ إِلَّا بِمَا شَآءَ ۚ
وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ ۖ وَلَا
يَـُٔودُهُۥ حِفْظُهُمَا ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَلِىُّ ٱلْعَظِيمُ
٢٥٥

Him, except by His permission?

He knows all that lies open before them and all that lies hidden from them; whereas they cannot attain to anything of His knowledge save as He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary Him. He is the Most High, the Most Great. (255)

لَآ إِكْرَاهَ فِى ٱلدِّينِ ۖ قَد تَّبَيَّنَ ٱلرُّشْدُ مِنَ
ٱلْغَىِّ ۚ فَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱلطَّٰغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنۢ
بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدِ ٱسْتَمْسَكَ بِٱلْعُرْوَةِ ٱلْوُثْقَىٰ لَا
ٱنفِصَامَ لَهَا ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٢٥٦

There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error. He who rejects false deities and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a most firm support that never breaks. God hears all and knows all. (256)

ٱللَّهُ وَلِىُّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ
ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟
أَوْلِيَآؤُهُمُ ٱلطَّٰغُوتُ يُخْرِجُونَهُم مِّنَ
ٱلنُّورِ إِلَى ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ ۗ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ
ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٢٥٧

God is the Patron of the believers. He leads them out of darkness into the light. As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false deities who lead them out of light into darkness. Those are the people destined for the fire, therein to abide. (257)

The Unity of the Divine Message

The first thing we note in this passage is its opening phrase, which carries special significance: "*Those are the Messengers!*" The Qur'ān does not refer to them as, 'these messengers', as we would normally refer to a group of people. Reference to them is started in a rather unusual way to highlight certain strong implications.

"*Those are the Messengers!*" They are a special group of people, with a special nature, but they are at the same time ordinary human beings. Who are they, then? What is the nature of their message? How are they given it? And why are only these people made Messengers? These are questions I have always felt reluctant to try to

answer, because when I consider the significance of a divine message given to man, I experience a host of feelings and identify several meanings which I cannot adequately express in words. Yet put them in words I must, in order to explain the concept involved, however inadequately.

The world we live in has certain basic laws supporting its existence. These are the laws of nature which God has set in operation. They govern everything in the universe. Man discovers certain peripheral aspects of these laws as his knowledge increases. But what he discovers remains naturally within the scope of his faculties of perception and understanding. These are suitable to the role assigned to him during his life duration on earth. His efforts to discover these laws rely on two basic methods: observation and experiment. By nature, both are partial, and their conclusions are by no means absolute. They occasionally lead to the discovery of some aspects of natural laws, but this takes place very infrequently and over long periods of time. Whatever man discovers remains of a temporary and partial nature, neither conclusive nor absolute. That is because the overall law that governs the inter-relationship and harmony between all natural laws will remain hidden from man: it cannot be discovered by human observation, which remains limited, over any period of time. The point here is that the ultimate factor in this respect is not time; rather, it is man's limitations within his constitution and role in life. Since this role is only limited, its restriction is compounded by the fact that the time of life on earth given to the human race is also limited. Hence, all means of discovery at man's disposal in this world, and all the conclusions they arrive at, remain within this restricted area.

Now we can identify the role of the message, and the special nature God has given to His messengers so that they may respond to the central law that governs the whole universe. How they respond remains unknown to us, but we can see the effects of their response. This special nature is able to receive God's revelations, as it has been specially equipped for the task. This means that it receives the same signal as the rest of the universe, because it has a direct link with that central and governing law. How does it receive that signal, and by what faculty of perception? To answer such questions we need to have the same nature which God grants to His chosen messengers, but *"God knows best whom to entrust with His message."* (6: 124) The basis of His choice is a far more serious matter than the greatest secrets of the universe.

All messengers were sent with the essential message of the oneness of God and they fully understood it. That has been possible because the effect of the single law governing the universe on their whole being directed them clearly to its one and only source. It cannot be anything but a single source, because there would otherwise be more than one law, giving more than one effect on them. Their understanding of this truth was made very early in the history of humanity, when knowledge based on

observation and experiment was still in its early days, before many human discoveries concerning the laws of the universe were made and all confirmed this oneness. Every one of God's messengers called on people to worship God alone. That is the truth he received and was commanded to convey to people. Their fulfilment of their mission, which is simply to convey the message, was a natural result of their absolute conviction of its truth, as they have received it from God, the one and only God in the universe who has no equals or partners.

They were strongly committed to this truth and to the fulfilment of their mission. We note their commitment in some of their statements reported in the Qur'ān, or in the way they are described in God's revelations. One such example is evident in what Noah (Nūĥ) says to his people: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has favoured me with grace from Himself to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it? And, my people, I do not seek of you any money for it: my reward rests with none but God. Nor will I drive away those who believe; they will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see a people that are ignorant. Were I to drive them away, my people, who would protect me from God? Will you not reflect?"* (11: *28-30)*

It is similarly evident in the statement of Prophet Ṣāliĥ, quoted in the Qur'ān: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God should I disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only augmenting my ruin."* (11: 63)

We also see it in Abraham's argument with his people: "*Do you argue with me about God, when it is He who has given me guidance? I do not fear those beings you associate with Him, [for no evil can befall me] unless my Lord wills it. My Lord embraces all things within His knowledge. Will you not, then, reflect? And why should I fear anything you worship side by side with Him, when you are not afraid of associating with God partners without His ever giving you any warrant? Which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure, if you happen to know?"* (6: 80-81)

Another example is that we note in the story of Shu`ayb, when he says to his community: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give? I have no desire to do behind your backs that which I ask you not to do. All that I desire is to set things right so far as I am able to do so. My success rests with God. In Him I have put my trust, and to Him I turn repentant."* (11: 88)

We find a similar example in what Jacob says to his sons when they remonstrated with him over his continued sorrow: *"It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of Him what you do not know."* (12: 86)

In all these statements we find that their very nature has been strongly affected by

the single law governing the whole of the universe. They feel that effect deep in their consciences.

Day after day, man was able to discover certain phenomena which pointed rather remotely to the central unifying law in the universe. Scientists were able to discern the unity of formation and the unity of movement throughout this vast universe. It was discovered, within the limited scope of human knowledge, that the atom is the basic unit of the whole universal structure and that the atom is energy. Thus matter and power were combined in this basic unit, the atom. Since matter is formed of a mass of atoms, it becomes energy when nuclear fission takes place. It was further discovered that there is continuous movement within the atom, which consists of electrons orbiting a nucleus in a continuous movement. Thus, as a poet has recently put it, every atom is like a complete solar system, with planets orbiting a sun.

What man has been able to discover, through observation and experiment, of the unity of formation and unity of movement in the universe, pointing to the single governing law, is something that the special nature of God's messengers, endowed with whatever He has given it, has understood at the outset. Their nature receives direct inspiration which enables it to grasp this truth. God's messengers have not gathered indicators and measured them, like what happens in a scientific experiment. They have used their special faculty of perception, which receives directly the messages of the single unifying and governing universal law. They were thus able to conclude that the single law which gives such consistent messages must come from a single source. Their special faculty of perception was thus able to make a far more accurate and comprehensive conclusion, realizing that beyond the single source, combining both will and action in the universe, there must be a single divine entity that controls the universe. Hence, they readily, unhesitatingly and completely believed in God.

I have not written this because modern science claims to have been able to understand one or two phenomena pointing to the unity of the universe. Science has an area of investigation in which it may prove or disprove anything. Whatever 'truth' it concludes remains partial and limited. It simply cannot arrive at a single truth that is final and absolute. Besides, whatever theories science makes are always liable to change, amendment and refutation. Nor have I mentioned the unity of formation and unity of movement so as to endorse the accurate perception by God's messengers of the single unifying law of the universe. My aim is totally different. I simply wish to point out the only reliable source for the formation of the right, comprehensive concept of the truth of existence.

The special nature of God's messengers has been able to identify this source, and its conclusion is correct, whether it is corroborated by science or not. Scientific conclusions remain subject to review and amendment through scientific experiment.

They are neither final nor absolute. Hence, we cannot use scientific conclusions to judge whether God's message is correct or not. Our measure must be true, final and subject to no change or modification. Hence, it is God's message that provides such ultimate measure.

This leads to another truism of vital importance. The special nature of the messengers, which responds directly to the single law governing the universe, is the one which is able to define the direction humanity should take in order to be on the same line with the nature of the universe and its constant laws. It receives its inspiration directly from God, so it cannot make a mistake or deviate. It tells no lies and hides no information. It is not hindered by any factor of time or place from seeing the truth clearly, because it receives that truth directly from God, who is not bound by time or place.

The divine will has determined to send messengers, from time to time, to give mankind a clear vision of the absolute truth, of which they cannot hope to learn a few aspects through observation or experiment for hundreds of centuries to come. They would certainly never attain it in full, through these methods, at any time. Through the divine message human beings can achieve complete harmony between their direction, movement and nature and those of the universe.

This means that there is only one source from which people can receive a true, complete and comprehensive concept of the truth and purpose of existence in general and human existence in particular. It is this concept that can lay the basis for the only proper and true code of living which is in harmony with the universe. It is a code of living that leads to true and genuine peace with their own nature and with the universe around them. That gives them peace with one another that governs their activity, direction and progress. That source is God's messages. Everything else is false and erroneous, because it does not derive from the only true source.

What we need to understand is that all means of knowledge that man uses, other than the divine message, work within their respective limitations. They have been given to man so that he may be able to discover some phenomena and laws of the universe, as he needs these for the fulfilment of his role on earth, and to allow human life to progress and prosper. He may go very far indeed in this respect, but whatever progress he achieves will not get him anywhere near the absolute truth he needs to shape his life in accordance with the constant universal laws and with the overall objective of human existence. This objective is clearly determined by God, but remains unknown to man who is subject to the limitations of time and place.

Only the one who sees the whole road ahead can formulate a plan to follow the road to the ultimate destination. But man cannot see the whole length of the road. Indeed he cannot see what will happen in the next moment. That immediate future is

completely hidden behind a thick curtain that is not drawn aside for anyone to see. How can man, then, plan the way ahead when that way is unknown to him? There are only two options for man: either confusion and error, or acceptance of the code defined by God's messengers, whose nature responds directly to the inspiration they receive from God, the Creator of all.

God's messages came in succession to take humanity by the hand and guide it along to new horizons of guidance and light. People and communities often tried to deviate from the way of God, going this way or that. They closed their ears and their minds to the tender call addressed to them by a messenger of God. They would sink into error until a new call is addressed to them by a new messenger. Each time the same truth is given to them in a new and more advanced form to suit their greater experience. The final message, given when humanity reached its maturity, addresses the human mind with all fundamentals of the whole truth, providing it with broad lines to determine its footsteps with certainty and reassurance. The lines it has painted for the ultimate truth were so clear that humanity would need no further message in future. Man will find in it what he needs over the coming centuries.

Now the choice open to humanity is a simple one. It can conduct its;' life within the framework provided by the divine message which can accommodate its progress and, at the same time, shows it the absolute truth it cannot achieve through any other means. The other option open to humanity is to go the wrong way and to be in utter loss.

The Ranks of God's Messengers

> *Those are the Messengers! We have exalted some of them above others. To some God spoke directly, and some He raised in rank. We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. Had God so willed, those who succeeded them would not have fought against one another after the clear proofs had come to them. But they differed with one another: some of them accepted the faith and some rejected it. Yet had God so willed, they would not have fought one another. But God does whatever He wills.* (Verse 253)

This verse summarizes the essence of the mission of God's messengers, whom it speaks of as a distinct group of human beings. It asserts that God has placed some of the messengers higher than others, pointing out some of the reasons for, and signs of, doing so. It refers to the dissension and disagreement among their followers and successors, which in some cases escalated to fighting, confirming that some of those successors believed while others did not. It points out that the fighting was part of God's scheme in order to establish the truth and defeat evil.

"*Those are the Messengers! We have exalted some of them above others*" (Verse 253) The relative elevation of God's messengers is determined by the environment, the nature and the scope of their respective missions. Some messengers were sent to single tribes, some to larger nations, some to single generations, and some to all nations and all generations. It also relates to the various distinctions they had received or brought to their people.

The verse makes a general reference to all messengers, and mentions two of them: Moses and Jesus, saying: "*... to some God spoke directly, and some He raised in rank. We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit.*" (Verse 253)

When reference is made to a messenger to whom God spoke directly, the immediate conclusion is that the reference is made to Moses. Hence, he is not mentioned by name.

Most Qur'ānic references to Jesus describe him as the "son of Mary", for obvious reasons. When the Qur'ān was being revealed, numerous myths surrounding the birth, sonship, and dual divine- human nature of Jesus had found their way into the culture and folklore of the time. Christian churches and councils of the Byzantine, and the Roman, empires were immersed in endless doctrinal disputes, some of which turned to bloody conflict, over the nature and status of Jesus. The Qur'ān often makes the point of emphasizing the human nature of Jesus, underlining the fact by relating him to his mother, Mary. In the Qur'ān, the 'holy spirit' always refers to the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl), who conveyed God's revelations to human messengers. He would inform them of their commissions and instructions, and act as aide and ally to the messengers in their demanding and arduous task of preaching God's Message. He would, as in the case of Jesus, provide them with reassurances and encouragement.

The 'clear signs' given to Jesus include the revealed Gospel and the miracles he was able to perform, detailed elsewhere in the Qur'ān, as supporting evidence of his claim to be God's Messenger to the obstinate Israelites with whom he had to deal.

Muĥammad is not mentioned here by name because these verses are addressed to him, as is clear from the preceding verse which says: "*These are the revelations of God. We recite them to you in all truth, for you are indeed one of Our messengers.*" (Verse 252)

From whichever angle one looks at the merits of God's messengers, Muĥammad always occupies the highest position by virtue of the universal and all-inclusive nature of his Message as well as its scope.

Islam offers by far the most perfect understanding of the greatest and most fundamental truth in the world: the oneness of God *(tawĥīd).* This oneness epitomizes the unique nature of God and the divine will, which is done at the mere mention of

the word: "be.' That is indeed the cause of all existence. This existence, and all the laws governing it, form an integral whole.

This oneness is manifested in all aspects of existence: in human life which starts from a simple single cell; in the unity of humanity from Adam to the last human being on earth; in the synthesis of the system of beliefs revealed by God to mankind, in the unanimity of the messengers commissioned to champion and preach those beliefs; and in the integrity of the community of believers who uphold God's message. It is reflected in the patterns of human behaviour that constitute worship and are aimed at the pleasure and glorification of God; in the complementarity of life in this world, as a period of activity, and life in the hereafter, as a time for accountability; in the integrity of the divine world order to which all human beings are bound; and in the single source from which all knowledge and wisdom flow.

Muĥammad has shown full and complete response to the great universal truth of God's oneness. He fully absorbed its meaning and significance and was able to interpret its principles in his daily life in full view of all his people.

He was the one Messenger sent with a message addressed to all mankind in his and all future generations. The advent of his mission marked the maturity of the human mind. Hence, it is addressed to the human intellect in a rational, persuasive manner without compulsion or the need for worldly and fantastic miracles.

For these reasons, Muĥammad was the last and final Prophet and his message, Islam, was the last and final message which brought divine revelations to an end. Islam became the greatest unifying Message for all mankind, encompassing the entire gamut of human activity and providing the framework within which the human intellect and potential could be exercised to the full, without need for further divine revelations.

God Almighty, the Creator who knows all, has willed that the final message of Islam, and the entire way of life based upon it, are the most competent to guarantee the growth, development and progress of human life. Anyone who presumes for himself a better knowledge of where the human good might lie, or alleges that Islam is no longer appropriate for the organization of human life, or claims to have a better system than the one God has laid down — anyone making any or all of these assertions is undoubtedly and undeniably an unbeliever who wishes to bring the worst upon himself and the whole of mankind. He stands in open defiance to God Almighty and to humanity, towards whom God has shown great mercy and generosity by presenting it with a universal divine order that preserves and regulates life for all time to come.

Endless Disputes over a Single Truth

Despite the unity of 'those messengers' and the continuity of their messages, their followers quarrelled and fought among themselves. *"But they differed with one another: some of them accepted the faith and some rejected it. Yet had God so willed, they would not have fought one another. But God does whatever He wills."* (Verse 253)

Conflict among human groups, evident throughout history, has not come about in spite of God's will, for nothing in this whole world happens in spite of God's will. Man is created with the dual ability to accept guidance or to reject it, and is given the freedom to go one way or the other. All actions resulting from this human disposition are, therefore, determined and governed by the will of God.

The variance in aptitudes and abilities from one individual human being to another is an essential feature of God's scheme of creation. Despite the unity of human origin, such diversity is necessary to fulfil the requirements of the complex multifarious role man is destined to play as God's representative on earth. God does not wish for human beings to be clones of one another, especially in view of the diversity of functions and roles required for the construction, development and growth of life. It is a complementary, self-fulfilling process, in which every individual is urged to seek his or her route to guidance and faith, fully applying their latent disposition in that direction and benefitting from all the facilities and evidence available throughout the universe, as well as from divine revelations received by God's messengers all through the ages.

Nevertheless, people over the generations "*... differed with one another: some of them accepted the faith and some rejected it."* (Verse 253) Once disagreements among people develop into a dispute over faith and belief in God, use of force becomes inevitable in order that the struggle between good and evil can be settled, and the truth clearly established. There is no room for confusion, ambiguity or obfuscation, nor would it suffice for any group of people to plead their following of, or association with, one messenger or another.

When these verses were revealed, the pagan Arabs of Makkah claimed to be the true followers of the religion of Abraham, while the; Jews of Madinah professed to practise the religion of Moses and the Christians that of Jesus. In fact, all three groups were far removed from the teachings and principles of the faiths they declared themselves to uphold. Some of them could be fairly said to have abandoned their declared faith altogether.

At that time also, the Muslims were already in conflict with the idolatrous Arabs. They were about to be ordered to confront the Jews and Christians. These Qur'ānic statements came to affirm that such conflict among proponents of various religious faiths was part and parcel of God's will and scheme of life.

"Had God so willed, they would not have fought one another. But God does whatever He

wills." (Verse 253) It was God's will, therefore, that good and evil should clash in order to reinforce the principles of true faith, preached and upheld by all messengers. God, in His infinite wisdom, knew that evil would not relent or stand idle, and that for His order to be established, evil had to be confronted and driven back.

God's will is absolute and unconditional, and His power to make things happen is totally unrestricted. He has predetermined that human beings shall vary in their abilities and aptitudes; that they shall be free to decide their own destiny in life; that those who do not follow the right path shall deviate and fall; that evil will strive to prevail; that conflict between good and evil is inevitable; that faithful believers will have to struggle and make sacrifices in order to establish the truth and the integrity of their beliefs; that idle claims to following God's messengers is of no consequence and will not prevent one's faith being questioned and challenged.

These facts which God reasserted through revelations are timeless and universal, and not restricted to the Muslims of Madinah at that time. The use of a single incident to illustrate an absolute principle is a device used frequently in the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* then addresses believers directly, urging them to give part of their wealth, which God has bestowed upon them, for the cause of God, complementing the earlier call to fight for God's cause and reinforcing it. *"Believers, spend [for God's cause] out of that with which We have provided you before there comes a day when there will be no trading, or friendship or intercession. Truly, the unbelievers are the wrongdoers."* (Verse 254)

God addresses the Muslims in a most intimate and touching way, using the title they most love and value: believers. He calls on them to give out of the wealth He has given them, before it is too late, in order to secure the greatest gain and the highest reward. He calls upon them to give for His cause; to uphold and defend His way of life and to subdue and uproot wrongdoing and injustice.

The unbelievers *"are the wrongdoers"* by virtue of their denial of the truth. They wrong themselves by choosing a doomed course in life. They wrong others by misleading and confusing them, depriving them of God's generosity and compassion which brings them peace, security, reassurance and serenity of faith.

People who stand in opposition to God's world order, and employ their energy to persuade others not to believe or to prevent God's laws from taking root in society, are undoubtedly the vilest enemies of mankind. Their efforts must be resisted and frustrated by all means available. Muslims are expected to be at the forefront of this fundamental and highly commendable duty.

God's Unique Attributes

Then follows a verse that summarizes, in powerful and succinct Words, the basic principles of the Islamic faith, citing those attributes of God that most aptly assert the meaning and significance of the basic Islamic principle of *tawĥīd:* the oneness of God. *"God: there is no deity but Him, the Ever-Living, the Eternal Master of all. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Who is there that can intercede with Him, except by His permission? He knows all that lies open before them and all that lies hidden from them; whereas they cannot attain to anything of His knowledge save as He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary Him. He is the Most High, the Most Great."* (Verse 255)

Every one of these attributes reflects a fundamental aspect of the universal Islamic view of the world. Although the subject matter of this verse would normally be expected to fall within the themes of the Qur'ānic parts received by the Prophet in Makkah, we do find that on several occasions, parts received in Madinah also cover these most important aspects of Islam. For the overall Islamic system to be understood and appreciated, the fundamentals have to be established and firmly implanted in the minds of the believers.

In our commentary on *Sūrah al-Fātiĥah,* we pointed out the crucial importance of clearly and fully appreciating the significance of God's attributes. The religious and doctrinal confusion preceding the advent of Islam was almost entirely due to misinterpretation or distortion of God's position and attributes. Not until Islam had presented its clear view were the concept and identity of God distinguished from myth and superstition and from the blurred philosophical polemics that had enshrouded them.

The *sūrah* most clearly and unequivocally states: *"God: there is no deity but Him..."* This statement clearly and definitively distinguishes the Islamic concept of God from that of the Trinity, adopted and advanced by Christian church councils long after Jesus, and from the pagan beliefs of the ancient Egyptians who confused God with the sun and recognized the existence of lesser gods beside Him.'

This clear and uncompromising concept is the foundation of Islamic belief and of the whole Islamic system of life. It defines the object of worship and submission for all, so that man submits to none other than God, who alone should be worshipped, obeyed and revered. It gives rise to the principle that God alone should be the source of law and legislation for human life on this earth. The laws and rules that people may lay down should derive from those that God has laid down. This would in turn imply that values and concepts originate with God and that all ethics, traditions and moral systems must be judged in relation to them.

The verse describes God as *"the Ever-Living, the Eternal Master of all"*. This implies a self-generating, self-sustaining being that is unique and independent of everything else. It is also a being without a beginning or an end, totally outside the dimension of

time which defines the beginning and end of other ephemeral beings. Furthermore, this being, God Almighty, is absolute and cannot be defined in conventional terms applicable to all creation. He is unique in every respect, and nothing can be compared with Him. Thus, all other definitions or representations of God, conjured up by the human mind throughout the ages, are false and inadequate.

"*The Eternal Master of all*", implies that God has power over all things and that He is the supreme and ultimate cause, the *raison d'etre,* of everything, without whom there can be no existence or action.

This is diametrically opposite to the misguided view of Aristotle, the most eminent of Greek philosophers, that God takes no interest in His creation, because He is too great to preoccupy Himself with anything else. Aristotle took this to be a glorification of God, but in effect it means the elimination of God from the daily affairs of the world He created. The Islamic view of God, on the other hand, is a positive one, based on the principle that God is actively and constantly sustaining all existence, and that the existence of everything emanates from His will and design.

The Islamic view of God gives total assurance and relates a Muslim's conscience and being, as well as everything around him, directly to God, the power that controls all existence, according to the divine scheme and order. A believer thus draws all his values, norms and standards from God's order and watches God in all his actions and behaviour.

"*Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him.*" This statement reinforces, in simpler and more graphic terms, the preceding one: that God is the everlasting power sustaining everything in existence. It also distinguishes God from other beings by pointing out that He is not affected by sleep to any degree, in any shape or form.

God's unique being and His total and absolute control over all things, large and small, at all times, are awesome concepts to comprehend. No matter how much the limited human mind may be able to grasp the size and variety of creatures and events of this vast universe, it would not be possible for man to adequately perceive how God exercises His power and control over the world. What we are able to appreciate is bound to fill us with amazement, and also give us endless reassurance of God's presence and protection over us.

"*His is all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth.*" God's claim over the cosmos is total and absolute; unconditional and incontestable. This is another aspect of the principle of God's oneness which confirms that God is supreme, ever-present, eternal, master and owner of all. It completely invalidates the assumption that God has partners in His power or actions.

This concept gives a new definition of ownership as applied to individual human beings. For, since God is the ultimate owner of all that exists, no one else can claim

ownership of anything in this world. People are, therefore, mere custodians of what they possess, which is entrusted to them by God. Accordingly, they are bound by the terms of that custodianship, as set out by God Almighty, the ultimate owner, in the divine code of living revealed to mankind. Any violation of these terms leads to disqualification and censure of the trustee.

Here we can see how Islamic principles are directly translated into law for immediate application in life. When God says: "*His is all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth,*" He is not merely stating a principle of faith, but also laying down a fundamental rule of the order of life He envisages for mankind.

Once the belief is firmly established in our consciousness that everything in this world belongs to God and that what we own is merely on loan for a limited period of time, greed and lust to accumulate wealth and worldly possessions by any means will not be difficult to hold in check. This belief is bound to fill our hearts with contentment, humility, tolerance, and magnanimity. One will face wealth and poverty with equal ease and steadfastness, and if impoverished will not be in the least bitter or grudging.

"Who is there that can intercede with Him, except by His permission?" This statement underlines yet another aspect of the concept of God's oneness, distinguishing clearly the Supreme Being, God, and His subordinate creation. All creatures stand in total humility and submission to the Master, never arrogating to themselves powers or authorities not delegated to them by Him. Above all, they are not to intercede on behalf of anyone without God's permission, and when they are granted such permission, they will act within its limits, as set out by God Almighty. Some will certainly attain a higher degree of approval than others, but none of them will overstep their set limits.

The tone of the statement is plainly one of divine majesty and authority, enhanced by its rhetorical form which seems to question the legitimacy of the proposition that anyone can intercede on behalf of another without God's permission and authority.

In the light of this fact, the vulgar absurdity of certain religious notions of God and godhead, upheld by some communities to whom God has sent messengers, becomes glaringly obvious, often verging on the grotesque and outrageous. Some of these allege that God has partners, sons or others, who share His authority, or associates whose intercession He will not refuse. Others recognize certain human individuals as divine representatives of God who, in some mysterious way, draw their earthly powers from Him directly.

The Islamic concept of God is crystal-clear and unambiguous. It makes a sharp distinction between God, the Master, and all creation, His subordinates, leaving no room whatsoever for any confusion or overlap between the essence or status of the

two. Islam complements this distinction by emphasizing God's merciful, caring, compassionate and munificent attitude towards His creation. All believers can enjoy His grace without the need for distorting their conception of God's omnipresence and omnipotence, or perverting the nature of their relationship with Him.

"He knows all that lies open before them and all that lies hidden from them; whereas they cannot attain to anything of His knowledge save as He wills." (Verse 255) This statement expresses God's omniscience. He has full and total knowledge of the present, the past and the future, which human beings cannot possibly know or perceive. He is ever aware of what human beings know and what they do not, and will not, know. They can learn only what He allows them to learn.

The fact that God knows our present, past and future actions and deeds, and beyond, ought to fill us with dread and awe, for being totally and permanently exposed before God Almighty. It inspires total humility and submission to the one omniscient God. It is also Poignant to reflect on the corollary of this principle, that "... *they cannot attain to anything of His knowledge save as He wills*". Human beings may learn only what God wills them to know and learn which, in an age of such tremendous expansion of scientific 1r knowledge, is a compelling truth to ponder.

God alone possesses full and absolute knowledge of all existence. He is able, in His infinite wisdom, to impart whatever He chooses of His knowledge to mankind, as He has promised: *"We will show them Our signs in all the regions of the earth and in their own souls, until they clearly see that this is the truth."* (41: 53)

This fact is often forgotten, and so is the fact that whatever knowledge God imparts to man, whether relating to the physical or to the metaphysical world, entails a certain degree of responsibility and accountability. Despite this, men often forget that God is the source of the knowledge they have acquired, while others deny the fact altogether.

God has been giving man knowledge ever since the day He appointed man His vicegerent on earth and undertook to guide him and show him the way forward, unfolding before him the secrets of the physical world and all the principles, laws and tools that facilitate human life and progress on earth.

While God has generously enabled man to acquire vast amounts of knowledge and made him privy to many of the world's mysteries, He has withheld many others. These are not required for man to know in order to fulfil his role on earth. These include the secret of life, which continues to elude human knowledge and which man continues to pursue with zeal but little success. The same applies to knowledge of the future, which remains hidden behind an impregnable wall, despite man's persistent efforts to predict and determine the future. Occasionally, however, with God's permission certain individuals are given glimpses of the future, but the curtain

soon falls, leaving that world firmly inaccessible.

All the stores of knowledge that are not necessary for man's role in this world remain locked, and the great leaps man has made have barely reached beyond planet earth, a mere speck in a vast immeasurable universe. Nevertheless, man is beguiled and overwhelmed by the little knowledge he has acquired, which he owes to God's grace and generosity, and has assumed for himself a quasi- divine status, a demigod, denying the very existence of God, the Creator. In recent decades, scientists have begun to show a certain degree of humility in recognizing the inadequacy and shortcomings of human knowledge. There are, however, many fools who continue to think that they know everything there is to know.

"His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary Him. He is the Most High, the Most Great." (Verse 255) Here we have another example of the unique style of the Qur'ān in expressing an abstract idea by means of a visual image, in order to make the meaning clear and accessible. The word *kursī,* meaning 'seat' or 'chair' and translated here as "throne", *i*s usually used to denote realm or sovereignty. The idea here is that God's sovereignty and authority extend over the entire cosmos, and the image makes it clear, easy to grasp and comprehend.

Likewise, the phrase, *"the preservation of both does not weary Him,"* is an expression of God's omnipotence, depicting in simple but powerful terms how easy it is for God to sustain and preserve the heavens and the earth.

Qur'ānic expressions of this kind have provoked a great deal of controversy, largely because commentators ignored the Qur'ānic syntax and leaned heavily on alien and absurd philosophies which distorted much of the clarity and simplicity of the Qur'ān.

I would also add here that I have not come across any authentic statements of the Prophet that explain precisely the meanings of 'seat, chair or throne' as used in the Qur'ān, and I would, therefore, rather not speculate further on their meaning.

The verse ends with two more attributes of God: *"He is the Most High, the Most Great,"* exalting God above all else. The Arabic words make it clear that these attributes are exclusive to God Almighty. No human being, or any other creature, could aspire to these qualities, and those who try shall be humbled and disgraced. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, God says: *"As for the [happy] life to come, We grant it exclusively to those who seek neither to exalt themselves on earth nor yet to spread corruption."* (28: 83) It also castigates Pharaoh for being *"a tyrant and a transgressor"* (44: *31)*

No matter how powerful or great a human being may grow, he can never rise above being a servant of God. Once this fact is firmly established in man's mind, it will enhance his status as subordinate to God and restrain his pride and

transgression. He will truly fear God and appreciate His majesty and power, and will seek to be more humble towards God and less haughty in dealing with his fellow human beings.

Here again, we see how a tenet of faith is immediately translated into a code of conduct in real life.

Freedom of Belief Guaranteed

Having outlined some of the most essential and detailed aspects of faith, and having precisely defined the status of God and the nature of His relationship with the rest of creation, the *sūrah* goes on to describe the proper behaviour of the believers as they adopt this faith and pass it on to others, and assume the leadership of mankind.

> *There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error. He who rejects false deities and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a most firm support that never breaks. God hears all and knows all. God is the Patron of the believers. He leads them out of darkness into the light. As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false deities who lead them out of light into darkness. Those are the ones destined for the fire, therein to abide.* (Verses 256-257)

Islam looks at religious faith as a matter of conviction, once the basic facts are provided and explained. Faith is never a matter of coercion or compulsion. To achieve this conviction, Islam addresses the human being in totality. It addresses the human mind and intellect, human common sense, emotions and feelings, the innermost human nature, and the whole human conscious being. It resorts to no coercive means or physical miracles that confound the mind or that are beyond human ability to rationalize and comprehend.

By the same token, Islam never seeks converts through compulsion or threats or pressure of any kind. It deploys facts, reasoning, explanation and persuasion.

In contrast, we find that Christianity, the last revealed religion before Islam, was imposed by force after Constantine, the Roman Emperor, made Christianity the official religion throughout his empire. He adopted the same brutal means his predecessors had used against Christian minorities. These were not restricted to subjects who did not convert to Christianity, but were also used against Christians who would not accept the official doctrine sanctioned by the emperor.

Islam came to declare and establish the great universal principle that: "*There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct porn error.*" (Verse 256) This reflects the honour God has reserved for man and the high regard in which

man's will, thought and emotions are held, and the freedom he is granted to choose his beliefs, and the responsible position he is afforded to be judge of his own actions. Here lies the essence of human emancipation which 20th-century authoritarian and oppressive ideologies and regimes have denied mankind. Modern man has been deprived of the right to choose and live other than according to what is dictated by the state, using the full force of its colossal machinery, laws and powers. People are today given the choice only to adhere to the secular state system, which does not allow for a belief in God as the Creator and Master of the world, or to face annihilation.

Freedom of belief is the most basic right that identifies man as a human being. To deny anyone this right is to deny him or her humanity. Freedom of belief also implies the freedom to express and propagate one's belief without fear of threat or persecution; otherwise, that freedom is hollow and meaningless.

Islam, undoubtedly the most enlightened view of life and the world, establishing a most sensible human and social system, takes the lead in declaring this most fundamental principle. It teaches its adherents, before anyone else, that they are forbidden to compel others to embrace Islam. This Islamic approach stands in total contrast to that of man-made systems and regimes which, despite all their inherent shortcomings, impose their beliefs and policies by the force of the state and deny their opponents the right to dissent or even live.

The Arabic text, using a generic negative, imparts a negation of the very idea of compulsion. When it comes to matters of belief, not only should these never be imposed by coercion or compulsion, but there cannot even be an option to use such a means of conversion or persuasion.

The *sūrah* reinforces the principle with a gentle, but firm, touch to arouse the human conscience and guide it along the path of enlightenment, saying simply: "*The right way is henceforth distinct from error.*" (Verse 256)

Belief in God is the right path man should seek and follow, and denial of His existence and sovereignty is the path of error that man should avoid and guard against. Belief in God is indeed a blessing. It gives the human mind a clear view of the world around, and gives the heart peace and assurance. It sets for man higher goals and noble concerns and aspirations, and for society as a whole a sound system of values and ideals that improve the quality of life. A moment's reflection is sufficient to verify the truth of this Qur'ānic statement) which could only be rejected by the ignorant and the foolish who would choose cynicism, confusion and insecurity over peace, certainty and high aspirations.

The *sūrah* elaborates the theme further, saying: "*He who rejects false deities and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a most firm support that never breaks.*" (Verse 256)

It is false deities that must be rejected, while faith must be reserved for God, who alone deserves faith and trust.

The Arabic term for 'false deities' is *ṭāghūt,* meaning tyranny, a word denoting anything or anyone that takes hold of the mind or suppresses the truth, or transgresses the laws and limits set by God. It refers to forces and systems that disregard the divine religious, moral, social and legal order and operate in this life on values and principles not sanctioned by God or derived from His guidance and teachings. To resist such forces, in all their manifestations, and to believe in God's oneness is the only certain path to success and salvation.

The *sūrah* presents us, yet again, with another vivid image to express an abstract truth. Faith in God provides the believer with a strong and unshakeable support that guarantees him certain liberation. In its essence, faith is a recognition of the most fundamental truth, the existence of God, upon which all reality stands, and acknowledgement of the laws God has laid down for the world and by which the world exists and operates. Believers who hold to God's Guidance are assured of never drifting away from God's path or losing their way.

"God hears all and knows all." (Verse 256) He hears what is uttered and knows what is in people's innermost souls. Those who believe in God will never be denied justice or be disappointed.

The *sūrah* then goes on to present a vivid and graphic scene depicting the two paths of guidance and error. It indicates how God kindly and gently takes the believers by the hand and leads them out of the darkness, into the light, and how the false deities sponsor the unbelievers and lead them, too, by the hand, but out of the light into the darkness.

It is a fascinating and inspiring scene, full of life and imagination, and far more eloquent and effective than any polemic or rational exposition. One would be hard pressed to find an alternative way of expressing the same ideas without losing spirit, rhythm, and dynamism. The Qur'ānic style is not only very articulate and beautiful, it is also precise as it describes, in the original Arabic syntax, faith and belief in the singular as light, and describes disbelief as darkness, in the plural. This is a succinct, profound and enduring statement.

Faith is light that permeates man's soul and conscience to radiate from within his being and illuminate all things, ideas and values around him. It gives the believer a clear vision and a steady and confident understanding that enable him to identify, discern and choose. It lights his route to God, His laws and teachings, putting man in perfect concord with the world around him. He proceeds through life in total harmony, free of all conflict and at peace with his human nature.

The light of faith and truth is one and unique, leading to the one straight path;

while darkness, in the sense of evil, can take various shapes and forms. There is darkness in caprice and uncontrolled desire; in deviation, conceit and tyranny; and there is darkness in abject acquiescence and servility; as well as in ostentation and hypocrisy, in lechery and greed, and in cynicism and scepticism. All these forms of darkness stem from the evil of abandoning God's guidance and submitting to powers and laws other than His. Leaving the light that radiates from God plunges man into darkness and despondency, and the ultimate end is even worse: *"As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false deities who lead them out of light into darkness. Those are the people destined for the fire, therein to abide."* (Verse 257)

The statement *"There shall be no compulsion in religion,"* raises the question of whether this principle can be reconciled with the obligatory duty of *jihād,* or taking up arms for the defence and protection of the faith, which Islam has openly advocated and the Qur'ān has established in verses such as: *"Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone."* (Verse 193)

Some biased writers have accused Islam of double standards, claiming that it was spread and imposed by the sword while, at the same time, advocating non-coercion and freedom of religion. Others have been rather more insidious and used this argument apparently to defend Islam; but in fact they have undermined the very meaning and significance of *jihād* in Islamic culture and history. Their tempting, but specious, arguments lead to the conclusion that *jihād* is a matter of history and is no longer valid or necessary.[1]

Many Orientalists approach this subject with hostility and a tendency to distort and belittle the dynamic aspects of Islam. They perceive Islam as a threat, and seek to resist and destroy it. In effect, they argue that the Muslim peoples' conflict with Western colonialism was dictated by trade, raw materials and power, rather than by religion, a view which would make *jihād* totally unnecessary.

There is no denying that, throughout its long history, Islam has advocated the use of force, not to impose its doctrines, but to guarantee certain objectives that are necessary for human prosperity.

Islam advocates *jihād* to protect its followers against attacks and threats and to ensure their security and freedom. As indicated in Verse 193 of this *sūrah,* Islam considers religious persecution and any threat to religion more dangerous for the future stability and existence of Islam than actual war. According to this great Islamic principle, the survival and prosperity of the faith take precedence over the preservation of human life itself. Islam justifies the defence and protection of life and possessions by force, and allows even greater justification for the use of force in

[1] A leading exponent of this argument is Sir T.W. Arnold, in his book *The Preaching of Islam,* Sh. Muĥammad Ashraf, Lahore, Reprinted in 1968.

defence of the faith. Muslims have been the target of religious persecution on many occasions and in various parts of the world. In Spain, they, together with non-Catholic Christians, suffered waves of genocide and brutality, wiping them out of that part of Europe altogether. In Jerusalem and its surroundings, Muslims were the target of relentless Crusader campaigns designed to uproot Islam and destroy the Muslims. The Muslims resisted and fought, and prevailed, in the name of Islam sparing their land and people a fate similar to that of the Muslims in Spain. Today, Muslims continue to be the target of religious persecution under a host of Christian, Zionist and secular regimes in many parts of the world. This situation makes *jihād* an incumbent duty on Muslims.

Islam also advocates *jihād* to guarantee the right and freedom of expression and propagation of the faith. Islam has a comprehensive understanding of life. Its highly refined social order dwarfs all systems that have existed before or since. Its global message is addressed to all mankind. In order for individual human beings to make the choice of whether they believe in Islam or not, nothing should stand between them and God's message. They should in any way be prevented from having full and free access to it. Once they are informed, they are free to make their choice under no duress, pressure or coercion of any kind.

Of the many obstacles that stand between Islam and people, foremost are the tyrannical political regimes that oppress and persecute religious believers. Islam takes a clear stand against such regimes, striving to topple them. It urges its followers to try to replace them by tolerant and liberal ones that respect and guarantee religious freedom as well as freedom of expression. This remains an on-going objective of Islam, and the duty of *jihād* continues to be a valid and urgent obligation on Muslims.

Another objective of *jihād is* to establish the Islamic social order and defend it. It is an order that frees man from tyranny, in all its forms, by urging the submission of all to God, the supreme master of all. No single person, class or group has the right to dictate laws or moral standards to other people or control their lives through ideology or legislation. The authority of individuals or institutions can only be valid or legitimate if they are representing or implementing God's law, and have had that duty entrusted to them by the community. Individuals have no authority invested in them to introduce ethical or legal concepts, principles or rules on the basis of their own preferences, because that is the prerogative of God alone.

This is the basic Islamic principle upon which a truly civilized social and ethical order is built, guaranteeing individual freedom for every member of society, including non-Muslims. It protects their privacy and personal dignity and respects their civil and religious rights, regardless of creed or conviction. Under Islamic law, no one is compelled or coerced to convert to the religion of Islam.

Islam has justifiably urged its followers to strive for the establishment of this society and to stand firm against man's domination of his fellow human beings. Hence, the hostility and aggression with which tyrannical and totalitarian regimes have responded to Islam were inevitable. Also inevitable was the determination of Islam to stamp out such regimes and assert its legal, social, ethical, and economic world order. That notwithstanding, Islam undertakes to respect and guarantee the religious and personal freedom of everyone under its jurisdiction, in accordance with its ethical principles and social norms and regulations.

It is to continue the fight against religious tyranny and persecution, and establish the tolerant and magnanimous principles of Islam that *jihād* remains valid and necessary today.

It is clear, therefore, that Islam has not used force to impose its beliefs. Nor was it force, as some would have us believe, that has been responsible for the phenomenal success and spread of Islam. Its main objective has been the establishment of a stable society in which all citizens, including those who follow other religious creeds, may live in peace and security.

Power was essential for the survival and continuity of the Islamic order, and for the peace and security of its followers. *Jihād* has been, and continues to be, a significant and necessary means for the establishment and protection of Muslim society. Islam, by definition, is a comprehensive order for the organization of human life that must take root in the world, and power is needed to sustain and promote its existence. *Jihād* is the sinew of that power, without which it would not survive.

The principle of "*no compulsion in religion,*' should be read in conjunction with another one that states: "*Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster, so that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, but of whom God is well aware.*" (8: 60)

These principles present the correct perspective of Islam from which its followers should view and understand it. Muslims need not be on the defensive nor have to justify Islam's stance, but should be confident and proud of its teachings and its history compared with those of all other cultures and philosophies. Muslims ought not to be taken in by those who claim to defend Islam but, in reality, only seek to undermine it and subvert the right of Muslims to strive to be powerful and to undertake *jihād* to protect their faith and spread its teachings to all mankind.

Those who stand in the way of Islam's progress are the real enemies of humanity who ought to be pursued, and whose efforts should be frustrated. This task falls upon the believers who have the benefit of God's grace and blessings which they are obliged to value and pass on to others.

17
Causing Life and Death

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِى حَآجَّ إِبْرَٰهِـۧمَ فِى رَبِّهِۦٓ أَنْ ءَاتَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُلْكَ إِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِـۧمُ رَبِّىَ ٱلَّذِى يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ قَالَ أَنَا۠ أُحْىِۦ وَأُمِيتُ ۖ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِـۧمُ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَأْتِى بِٱلشَّمْسِ مِنَ ٱلْمَشْرِقِ فَأْتِ بِهَا مِنَ ٱلْمَغْرِبِ فَبُهِتَ ٱلَّذِى كَفَرَ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٥٨﴾

Are you not aware of him who argued with Abraham about his Lord simply because God had given him kingship? Abraham said, 'My Lord gives life and causes death.' 'I, too,' said he, 'give life and cause death.' Abraham said, 'Well, God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west.' Thus the unbeliever was dumb-founded. God does not guide the wrongdoers. (258)

أَوْ كَٱلَّذِى مَرَّ عَلَىٰ قَرْيَةٍ وَهِىَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَىٰ عُرُوشِهَا قَالَ أَنَّىٰ يُحْىِۦ هَٰذِهِ ٱللَّهُ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ۖ فَأَمَاتَهُ ٱللَّهُ مِاْئَةَ عَامٍ ثُمَّ بَعَثَهُۥ ۖ قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتَ ۖ قَالَ لَبِثْتُ يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ۖ قَالَ بَل لَّبِثْتَ مِاْئَةَ عَامٍ فَٱنظُرْ إِلَىٰ طَعَامِكَ وَشَرَابِكَ لَمْ يَتَسَنَّهْ ۖ وَٱنظُرْ إِلَىٰ حِمَارِكَ وَلِنَجْعَلَكَ ءَايَةً لِّلنَّاسِ ۖ وَٱنظُرْ إِلَى ٱلْعِظَامِ كَيْفَ نُنشِزُهَا ثُمَّ نَكْسُوهَا لَحْمًا ۚ فَلَمَّا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُۥ قَالَ أَعْلَمُ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٥٩﴾

Or, [are you not aware] of him who, passing by a township which had fallen into utter ruin, exclaimed: 'How can God bring this town back to life now that it is dead?' Thereupon God caused him to be dead for a hundred years, then brought him back to life, and said, 'How long have you remained thus?' He said, 'I have remained thus a day or part of a day.' God said, 'No. You have remained thus for a hundred years. Just look at your food and drink: none of it has rotted. And look at your ass. We will make you a sign for mankind. Look you at the bones, how We put them up and then clothe them with flesh.' When it had all become clear to him, he said, 'I know now that God has power

over all things.' (259)

When Abraham said, 'My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead,' He replied, 'Have you, then, no faith?' 'Indeed, I have', said Abraham, 'but I only wish to set my heart fully at rest to be fully reassured.' God said, 'Take four birds and draw them close to you, then [having cut them into pieces] place a part of them on each mountain. Then call them back and they will come to you in haste. Know that God is Almighty, Wise.' (260)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِـۧمُ رَبِّ أَرِنِى كَيْفَ تُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ ۖ قَالَ أَوَلَمْ تُؤْمِن ۖ قَالَ بَلَىٰ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَطْمَئِنَّ قَلْبِى ۖ قَالَ فَخُذْ أَرْبَعَةً مِّنَ ٱلطَّيْرِ فَصُرْهُنَّ إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ ٱجْعَلْ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ جَبَلٍ مِّنْهُنَّ جُزْءًا ثُمَّ ٱدْعُهُنَّ يَأْتِينَكَ سَعْيًا ۚ وَٱعْلَمْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٦٠﴾

Overview

This passage, composed of only three verses deals with the subject of life and death, presenting an important aspect of Islamic belief, to complement the principles established in the preceding passage, with an obvious direct relationship to Verse 255, known as the 'Verse of the Throne', or *āyat al-kursī,* which outlines a number of fundamental attributes of God.

These three verses form part of the consistent and relentless drive that the Qur'ān pursues to establish in Muslim minds, hearts and consciousness a true and accurate understanding of the Islamic view of life and the world. This understanding is essential in order to approach life with full knowledge and an enlightened perception, built on confidence and an unshakeable faith.

Actions, modes of behaviour and moral values are not divorced from people's beliefs, but are in fact firmly based upon them. Life cannot be well and securely organized unless it is linked to faith and a comprehensive and cohesive view of the world and the relationship it has with its originator who brought it into existence. This explains the great emphasis in the Qur'ān on the fundamental concepts of Islamic belief. Indeed, the entire part of the Qur'ān revealed to the Prophet Muĥammad over thirteen years in Makkah is devoted to this subject. These concepts continue to receive ample and frequent attention in the parts of the Qur'ān revealed in Madinah, with every new legislation these parts outline and with every directive dealing with any aspect of life affairs.

An Easily Settled Argument

The first verse in this passage relates an argument between the Prophet Abraham and a contemporary king who disputed his belief in God. The *sūrah* does not mention the king's name, because mentioning it will not add to the moral of the story. This argument is related to the Prophet and the Muslim community in a way that invites amazement at this person who disputes the truth of God. We listen as though the argument is taking place now, before our eyes: "*Are you not aware of him who argued with Abraham about his Lord simply because God had given him kingship? Abraham said, My Lord gives life and causes death.' I, too,' said he, give life and cause death.' Abraham said, 'Well, God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west.' Thus the unbeliever was dumbfounded. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 258)

We learn from the text that the king who argued with Abraham did not, in fact, deny God's existence, but he denied that He was the only God or that He had sole sovereignty and control over mankind's affairs. This belief was prevalent among the Arabs during their Dark Ages, or *Jāhiliyyah.* They assigned lesser gods as partners to God and denied that God had any concern with, or authority over, worldly and daily human affairs.

The arrogant, stubborn king denies God for the very reason that he should acknowledge Him, as it was God who had made it possible for him to become king and ruler, in the first place. Power in the hands of those who do not believe or appreciate God's grace and generosity corrupts and leads to tyranny and despotism. Rulers govern by God's authority, and He never empowers them to enslave and oppress their people, or impose their own ideas and laws. Like their subjects, they are servants of God and subject to His authority. Their power is delegated by Him. They have no right to initiate or devise teachings and legislation of their own.

The king's attitude seems to evoke astonishment, as the interrogative form indicates. How could one who is given power and sovereignty by God arrogate to himself the right to question those of God, or claim independent powers of his own?

Abraham challenged the king, saying: "*My Lord gives life and causes death.*" (Verse 258) Life and death are two of the greatest wonders of this world which we witness every day. Thinking about them compels the human mind to seek a non-human cause behind them. There is, therefore, no escaping the conclusion that the supreme omnipotent power of God, and no other, lies behind the secrets of life and death. We remain ignorant of the true essence of life and death, but we perceive their manifestations in the world around us, and we are forced to seek their origin and cause with a power unlike any power known to man, and that is the power of God Almighty.

Abraham's reply, "*My Lord gives life and causes death,*" (Verse 258) cites an attribute

that is unique to God Almighty, with no one else able to claim a share of it for himself. The statement implies, too, that God rules and legislates over all. It is clear that in his reply Abraham, a noble Prophet, was not seeking to establish God's power in the mere acts of originating life and taking it away. Both are prerogatives of God alone.

Abraham's interlocutor saw his sovereign position over his subjects and his ability to kill them or let them live as evidence of his having more than temporal authority over them. His reply, "*I, too, give life and cause death,*" (Verse 258) implies having absolute power and authority over the affairs and destiny of his people, who are obliged to submit to his rule.

Abraham did not wish to pursue the argument about the meaning of originating life and causing death, with someone who twists facts.

He simply took the argument to a different sphere, citing another familiar event and challenging the obdurate king to alter a natural phenomenon, the movement of the sun, to make him realize that godhead could not be assumed merely by having absolute power over a group of people in a small corner on earth. God, by definition, controls all the affairs of the whole universe, and He is the source of legislation for mankind.

Abraham said: "*God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west*" (Verse 258) Another familiar daily occurrence is portrayed as a visible proof of God's existence and power, even for those who are not familiar with the principles of astronomy or laws of physics. This statement comes as a direct challenge to man's basic nature by expressing a fact that cannot be disputed. God's Revelations often address human nature at various stages of human intellectual, cultural and social development to lead man from wherever he is to a higher state of consciousness. "*Thus the unbeliever was dumbfounded.*" (Verse 258)

The challenge was real, clear, and unambiguous, and the stubborn king would have been better advised to give in, but his pride had the better of him and prevented him from submitting to the truth. He could do no more than be astounded and stupefied, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to believe and win God's guidance. "*The unbeliever was dumbfounded. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 258) This encounter, which God cited for His Messenger and his community of followers, remains today an example for obstinacy and ignorance, and a lesson from which they learn how to confront those who deny the truth.

The passage presents two simple but profound truths: one taken from within man's being, that God "*gives life and causes death*", and the other from the natural world around, that "*God causes the sun to rise in the east*", and not in the west. These are familiar occurrences, available for all to see and contemplate, requiring little

knowledge or effort to perceive or understand. Man only needs to allow his inner nature to respond and react to these imposing phenomena, the impact of which cannot be mistaken or escaped, unless one is being deliberately stubborn or bent on rejecting the truth.

God is too kind to demand His recognition by means that may not be available to all people. Belief in God is an indispensable ingredient of man's being, without which human life would lose all sense of direction and order, and man would have no source of values, legislation or moral standards.

This can be said about all other essential aspects of human life. Man seeks food, drink, air and procreation by his natural instincts. He does not need to attain certain levels of intellectual or cultural maturity to acquire the right to satisfy these desires. Were he to need these, man would perish without moving one step forward. Belief in God, is equally essential to human life, and it is easily attained by responding honestly and naturally to the compelling evidence present throughout the universe and within man's own being and existence.

Where Life Originates

Still on the subject of the miraculous nature of life and death, the *sūrah* relates another brief tale: "*Or, [are you not aware) of him who, passing by a township which had fallen into utter ruin, exclaimed: "How can God bring this town back to life now that it is dead?' Thereupon God caused him to be dead for a hundred years, then brought him back to life, and said, 'How long have you remained thus?' He said, 'I have remained thus a day or part of a day.' God said, No. You have remained thus for a hundred years. Just look at your food and drink: none of it has rotted. And look at your ass. We will make you a sign for mankind. Look you at the bones, how We put them up and then clothe them with flesh.' When it had all become clear to him, he said, I know now that God has power over all things.'*" (Verse 259)

Again, the Qur'ān does not give details of the identity of the man or the ruined township because such details add little to the significance and impact of the story. Were these necessary, they would not have been omitted in the Qur'ān. Despite the absence of detail, however, the scene comes to life and stirs the imagination with great clarity and power. It is a scene of death, desolation and destruction; a town in ruins, with walls and columns caved in on their foundations, the effect of which is eloquently expressed in the man's incredulity as he exclaims: "*How can God bring this town back to life now that it is dead?*" (Verse 259)

The man is perfectly aware of God's presence, but the impact of that scene of devastation is so powerful that he wonders in disbelief how life could ever be returned to that rubble. It is a most evocative and moving impression which the

Qur'ān, in its inimitable style, depicts with eloquence and awesome brilliance. *"Thereupon God caused him to be dead for a hundred years, then brought him back to life, and said, 'How long have you remained thus?' He said, I have remained thus a day or part of a day.' God said, No. You have remained thus for a hundred years. Just look at your food and drink, none of it has rotted. And look at your ass. We will make you a sign for mankind. Look you at the bones, how We put them up and then clothe them with flesh.'"* (Verse 259)

The man was not given a rational argument as to how a dead body could be brought to life again, but was himself made to undergo that experience. Such a personal direct approach is often more effective than any logical or visible demonstration. It involves one's senses, emotions and feelings. Its impact is sharp and overwhelming.

While he was dead, the man naturally lost all sense of time and could not tell how long he had been in that state. This is easy to understand, since human beings can misjudge things even when they are in control of their senses. Our material senses are not the only or the most accurate means of perception.

God said: "*No. You have remained thus for a hundred years."* (Verse 259) But the man had no way of telling. His provisions remained in good condition.

"And look at your ass. We will make you a sign for mankind. Look you at the bones, how We put them up and then clothe them with flesh." (Verse 259) Which bones are referred to here: the man's own bones, as some commentators maintain? Had it been so, he would have immediately noticed, and would not have thought that he remained in that state for only a few hours or a day. Therefore, we are inclined to uphold the view that the reference here is to the bones of the ass whose gathering together and covering with flesh, before the man's own eyes, was a compelling sign of God's power. The fact that the man, the ass, and the provisions were affected in different wais under the same physical and environmental conditions is another sign of that absolute, limitless and unrestricted divine power. Thus the man gas made to understand how God could bring that desolate town back to life again.

As to how this miracle was achieved, the answer is: in the same way as every other miracle, including the creation of life itself, which we often tend to overlook, forgetting how totally ignorant we are of its reality. All we know is that life comes from God, in the way He wills it to be.

In his study *The Origin of Species,* Charles Darwin, the eminent British biologist, traces life back to the amoeba, a simple single-celled organism, but goes no further in explaining the origin of life. For most unscientific reasons, relating to the historic conflict between science and the Christian Church in Europe, Darwin's theory does not acknowledge the logical and evident truth that life must originate with a creator. Darwin claims that to explain life's affairs by the notion of the existence of a creator is

to introduce an unnatural element into a purely mechanical situation.

The situation, in fact, is far from being a purely mechanical one. What we need to look for is an explanation for this mystery that stares us in the face. It is indeed evident for all to see.

Darwin himself is compelled by the force of natural common sense to refer the whole phenomenon of life to 'the first cause', without telling us what this cause was. It is the power capable of initiating life in the first instance and, according to Darwin's own controversial thesis, is capable of directing the descendants of the first living cell in the direction Darwin supposed they had taken in the process of natural selection. It is pure evasion, obfuscation and muddle.

Going back to the parable of the man and the ruined city, one wonders what could explain the fact that things can exist in the same place and under the same environmental conditions but be affected differently. It could not be explained in terms of the creation or restoration of life. The explanation lies in the limitless and unrestrained nature of the divine will, which is bound by none of the laws or needs we consider absolute and incontrovertible.

Human beings fall into grave error when they apply human rational or 'scientific' assumptions to God Almighty or His actions, for a number of reasons. How can God or His actions be subjected to laws based on man's limited knowledge and experience, and on his imperfect understanding and interpretation of that experience? Even if we assume that the laws man has discovered are final and conclusive, how can we be certain that they are the ultimate and overriding truth? The absolute divine power of God creates laws but is not restricted by them. It is completely free to decide.

We learn from this passage that in addition to granting life and causing death, God's power and will are absolute. The Qur'ān lays particular emphasis on this fact and seeks to instil it in the hearts of believers in order to refer them directly to God, whom they should seek beyond the visible material world. The man in our present story had come to the right conclusion when he said: "*I know now that God has power over all things.*" (Verse 259)

How God Raises the Dead

Then follows another episode, involving the Prophet Abraham and the phenomena of life and death. "*When Abraham said, My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead,' He replied, 'Have you, then, no faith?' 'Indeed, I have', said Abraham, 'but I only wish to set my heart fully at rest to be fully reassured.' God said, 'Take four birds and draw them close to you, then [having cut them into pieces] place a part of them on each mountain.*

Then call them back and they will come to you in haste. Know that God is Almighty, Wise.''' (Verse 260)

It is the usual tale of curiosity about the great mystery of life and creation. When this curiosity is expressed by a devoted and pious person like the Prophet Abraham, it proves that there are times when even the most favoured and believing of God's servants experience a passionate urge and ambition to discover the secrets of creation.

Here curiosity is not motivated by lack of conviction or the demand for proof to confirm one's faith, but has a different flavour, excited by a spiritual yearning to see and share one of God's most fascinating secrets. This privilege, even for someone like Abraham, has a unique honour and a flavour of its own, different even to that of faith itself. It is a natural and spontaneous desire to know and learn how the divine will operates, not in order to believe or obtain proof, but to experience total peace and gain reassurance.

Abraham's experience and the short dialogue which accompanied it reveal several perceptions of faith which the human heart, if it so desires, can experience and enjoy.

Abraham was seeking the reassurance of seeing God's hand at work and the satisfaction of seeing a hidden mystery unfold before him. God was aware that Abraham was a devout believer and that his inquisitiveness had arisen out of the quest for knowledge. The episode also serves to inform and educate and reveal God's compassion and benevolence towards a faithful and curious servant.

God responds favourably to Abraham's request and exposes him to a direct personal experience to satisfy his curiosity, giving him the following instructions: *"Take four birds and draw them close to you, then [having cut them into pieces] place a part of them on each mountain. Then call them back and they will come to you in haste. Know that God is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 260)

The instructions meant that Abraham should choose four birds and make sure of having them close to him so that he would be able to know every little detail of their appearance so that he could unmistakeably identify them at any time. He would then have to kill them and cut them into pieces before placing different parts of their bodies on the surrounding mountains. He would then call them to come over to him, and their parts will join again, life is breathed into them and they could speedily come to him. All this took place in reality.

Thus Abraham was able to witness the secret of breathing life into the dead unfolding before his own eyes. It is the secret that occurs all the time, but people only see its effects after its process has been completed. It is the greatest mystery of life, which was created in the first instance by God out of nothing, and which renews itself an infinite number of times in every new living thing. Abraham saw with his

own eyes the birds he killed and placed portions of their bodies far apart, returned to life and moving in full vigour.

How could all this take place? It is the one mystery that continues to elude human perception. Even if one was to undergo Abraham's experience and witness the actual act of creation, one would not comprehend its reality or how it is accomplished. It is the prerogative of God Almighty, of whose perfect and absolute knowledge man can acquire nothing, except by His will. It is God's will that this sphere should remain beyond the bounds of human knowledge, possibly because it is beyond man's comprehension and is not required for the fulfilment of man's mission on earth.

Until God allows the curtain to be raised on this issue, man's aspiration to grasp the coveted secret of life shall remain unfulfilled. If, however, he were to persist in his defiance of God's authority and continue to trespass in regions that are the exclusive domain of the Divine, his efforts would for ever be in vain and yield nothing.

18
An Islamic Model of Social Security

مَّثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنۢبَتَتۡ سَبۡعَ سَنَابِلَ فِي كُلِّ سُنۢبُلَةٖ مِّاْئَةُ حَبَّةٖۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُضَٰعِفُ لِمَن يَشَآءُۗ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٦١﴾

The case of those who spend their property for the cause of God is like that of a grain that brings forth seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains. God gives manifold increase to whom He wills. God is Munificent, All- Knowing. (261)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ لَا يُتۡبِعُونَ مَآ أَنفَقُواْ مَنّٗا وَلَآ أَذٗى لَّهُمۡ أَجۡرُهُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ وَلَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ﴿٢٦٢﴾

Those who spend their property for the cause of God and do not follow their spending by vaunting their own generosity, or by hurting others, shall have their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (262)

۞ قَوۡلٞ مَّعۡرُوفٞ وَمَغۡفِرَةٌ خَيۡرٞ مِّن صَدَقَةٖ يَتۡبَعُهَآ أَذٗىۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَنِيٌّ حَلِيمٞ ﴿٢٦٣﴾

A kind word with forgiveness is better than charity followed by injury. God is free of all wants, clement. (263)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تُبۡطِلُواْ صَدَقَٰتِكُم بِٱلۡمَنِّ وَٱلۡأَذَىٰ كَٱلَّذِي يُنفِقُ مَالَهُۥ رِئَآءَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤۡمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۖ فَمَثَلُهُۥ كَمَثَلِ صَفۡوَانٍ عَلَيۡهِ تُرَابٞ فَأَصَابَهُۥ وَابِلٞ فَتَرَكَهُۥ صَلۡدٗاۖ لَّا يَقۡدِرُونَ عَلَىٰ شَيۡءٖ مِّمَّا كَسَبُواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢٦٤﴾

Believers, do not render your charitable deeds worthless by boasting about your benevolence and causing injury to others, as does he who spends his wealth to impress people, while he believes neither in God nor in the Last Day. Such a person is like a smooth rock covered with earth. Then heavy rain falls on it and leaves it hard and bare. Such as these shall gain nothing from their works. God does not guide the unbelievers. (264)

وَمَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمُ ٱبۡتِغَآءَ مَرۡضَاتِ ٱللَّهِ وَتَثۡبِيتٗا مِّنۡ أَنفُسِهِمۡ كَمَثَلِ جَنَّةِۭ بِرَبۡوَةٍ أَصَابَهَا وَابِلٞ فَـَٔاتَتۡ أُكُلَهَا ضِعۡفَيۡنِ فَإِن لَّمۡ يُصِبۡهَا وَابِلٞ فَطَلّٞۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ٢٦٥

But those who give away their money out of a genuine desire to please God, and out of their own inner certainty, are like a garden on a hillside. When heavy rain falls on it, it yields up twice its normal produce. If no heavy rain falls on it, then a light drizzle [will suffice]. God sees all that you do. (265)

أَيَوَدُّ أَحَدُكُمۡ أَن تَكُونَ لَهُۥ جَنَّةٞ مِّن نَّخِيلٖ وَأَعۡنَابٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ لَهُۥ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ وَأَصَابَهُ ٱلۡكِبَرُ وَلَهُۥ ذُرِّيَّةٞ ضُعَفَآءُ فَأَصَابَهَآ إِعۡصَارٞ فِيهِ نَارٞ فَٱحۡتَرَقَتۡۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٢٦٦

Would any of you wish to have a garden of palm-trees and vines, through which running waters flow, bringing forth all kinds of fruits, then to be well advanced in age, with helpless offspring; and then a fiery whirlwind smites it and leaves it all burnt down? Thus God makes plain to you His revelations, so that you may reflect. (266)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَنفِقُواْ مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا كَسَبۡتُمۡ وَمِمَّآ أَخۡرَجۡنَا لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ وَلَا تَيَمَّمُواْ ٱلۡخَبِيثَ مِنۡهُ تُنفِقُونَ وَلَسۡتُم بِـَٔاخِذِيهِ إِلَّآ أَن تُغۡمِضُواْ فِيهِۚ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ٢٦٧

Believers, spend on others out of the good things you have earned, and out of that which We bring forth for you from the earth. Do not choose for your spending the inferior things which you yourselves would not accept without turning your eyes away in disdain. Know that God is free of all want, ever to be praised. (267)

ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ يَعِدُكُمُ ٱلۡفَقۡرَ وَيَأۡمُرُكُم بِٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَعِدُكُم مَّغۡفِرَةٗ مِّنۡهُ وَفَضۡلٗاۗ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٢٦٨

Satan promises you poverty and bids you to commit indecency, whereas God promises you His forgiveness and bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. (268)

يُؤۡتِي ٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَمَن يُؤۡتَ ٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ فَقَدۡ أُوتِيَ خَيۡرٗا كَثِيرٗاۗ وَمَا

He grants wisdom to whom He wills. He who is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good. Yet only those with sound minds would take heed. (269)

يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّآ أُوْلُواْ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٢٦٩﴾

وَمَآ أَنفَقْتُم مِّن نَّفَقَةٍ أَوْ نَذَرْتُم مِّن نَّذْرٍ
فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُهُۥ ۗ وَمَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنْ
أَنصَارٍ ﴿٢٧٠﴾

إِن تُبْدُواْ ٱلصَّدَقَٰتِ فَنِعِمَّا هِىَ ۖ وَإِن
تُخْفُوهَا وَتُؤْتُوهَا ٱلْفُقَرَآءَ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ
لَّكُمْ ۚ وَيُكَفِّرُ عَنكُم مِّن سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمْ ۗ
وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٧١﴾

۞ لَّيْسَ عَلَيْكَ هُدَىٰهُمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
يَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۗ وَمَا تُنفِقُواْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ
فَلِأَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ وَمَا تُنفِقُونَ إِلَّا ٱبْتِغَآءَ
وَجْهِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَمَا تُنفِقُواْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ يُوَفَّ
إِلَيْكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٧٢﴾

لِلْفُقَرَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ أُحْصِرُواْ فِى سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ضَرْبًا فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ يَحْسَبُهُمُ ٱلْجَاهِلُ أَغْنِيَآءَ
مِنَ ٱلتَّعَفُّفِ تَعْرِفُهُم بِسِيمَٰهُمْ لَا
يَسْـَٔلُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ إِلْحَافًا ۗ وَمَا تُنفِقُواْ
مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِهِۦ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٧٣﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمْوَٰلَهُم بِٱلَّيْلِ
وَٱلنَّهَارِ سِرًّا وَعَلَانِيَةً فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ
رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ

Whatever alms you give or vows you make are known to God. The evildoers shall have none to help them. (270)

If you give alms openly, that is well; but if you give them to the needy in private, it is even better for you, and will atone for some of your bad deeds. God is aware of all you do. (271)

It is not for you to make people follow the right guidance. It is God who guides whom He wills. Whatever good you may spend in charity is for your own good. You should only spend out of pure dedication to God. And whatever good you give in charity will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged. (272)

[Alms are] for the needy who, being wholly preoccupied with God's cause, are unable to go about earning their livelihood. The unthinking take them for men of wealth on account of their restrained behaviour. You can recognize them by their special mark: they do not importune people for alms. Whatever good you give is certainly known to God. (273)

Those who give their property by night and by day, in private and in public, shall have their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve. (274)

يَحۡزَنُونَ ٢٧٤

Overview

The last three passages centred mainly on ideological concepts of the Islamic faith, clarifying its aspects and ensuring its firm establishment in people's hearts. These passages constituted an interval in the line followed in this long *sūrah* which prepares the Muslim community to undertake its role of leadership of mankind.

From this point and up to its concluding verses, the *sūrah* is largely devoted to setting out some fundamental features of the socioeconomic system that the Muslim community should adopt. It is a system based on social cooperation and welfare through the established financial obligation of *zakāt* and other unspecified voluntary contributions and donations. We learn in this passage that, in contrast to the system prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia, the Islamic socioeconomic system is fundamentally opposed to usury and encourages fundamentally different financial dealings. Thus, the *sūrah* speaks of a proper method of charity, denounces usury and outlines the Islamic principles of lending and trade which complement the social and economic principles according to which Islamic social life is organized and conducted. All this is spread over three closely interrelated passages.

In the present passage we learn that contributing financially to charitable causes is akin to *jihād,* in the sense that its purpose is to serve the cause of God. *Jihād* is prescribed for Muslims to fulfil their duty of implementing God's message and conveying it to the rest of mankind and protecting its followers against persecution and oppression.

The call to spend of one's money is frequently made in this *sūrah,* and this part of it lays down the basic principle underlying that call. Its social and psychological ethics are presented in terms of both compassion and benefit, so that charity becomes a means of financial and spiritual exaltation and refinement for both donor and recipient. It is an act that spreads the spirit of brotherhood, empathy and cooperation among members of the community and makes them feel and behave as equal members of the same family.

It is important to point out that although the directives given in this section of the *sūrah* are universal and general, one can, nevertheless, detect that they were revealed in response to specific situations faced by the Muslims at the time, though these often

recur. It is clear that a Muslim community may include selfish and parsimonious individuals who need rigorous discipline and convincing arguments and examples to absorb the facts.

Besides the sincere and generous people, there were miserly individuals who would exact a steep price for lending or donating their money. There were those who would give for charity with much difficulty and reluctance or merely for ostentatious reasons, and there were those who would use their money to demonstrate their superiority, and others who would give only what they disdained.

It is important to acknowledge these facts because they help us understand the nature and role of the Qur'ān as a dynamic and active force within the developing Muslim community. It was revealed to deal with actual situations and to lead, inform and educate the Muslims to whom it was addressed.

This is how the Qur'ān should be viewed by Muslims today: a living dynamic agent in society, especially in view of the widening gap between Islam and the reality of their daily life. We seem to view the Qur'ān as an abstract thing that has no historical living reality. We no longer perceive of it as the force that once shaped Islamic life and society, or the source of the daily orders that Muslims used to receive and act upon. Our perception of the Qur'ān has died, or at least has gone into a coma, and its true original image has faded from Muslim minds today. We have grown accustomed to listening to the Qur'ān recited by beautiful voices in melodious ways and to being moved and affected by the experience. Or we have become satisfied by simply reading it for spiritual or emotional stimulation, or to gain some esoteric or mystical comfort — all of which the Qur'ān does, indeed, evoke and provide.

We need to approach the Qur'ān in a way that restores its dynamic role in society and breathes life and consciousness into Muslim minds, and leads Muslim life and moves it forward. Muslims today need to turn back to the Qur'ān for advice, enlightenment and direction, as their predecessors did, and to understand its teachings on all aspects and areas of life. They need to see and learn the historic process through which Islam and the first Muslim community came to be established, to appreciate that process and accept it as part of their own formation and existence, and to recognize their life as an extension of that of their pioneering predecessors.

It is important for Muslims today to identify with the struggle and achievements of the early generations of Islam, and see the Qur'ān as equally and directly addressed to them in their present situation, and that they should let it guide all their plans and activities as a comprehensive code of life and a universal body of law and wisdom.

Reading the Qur'ān in this way helps us to recognize the human natural response to faith and the duties it imposes. We can see such response in reality through the Qur'ānic references to the life of the first Muslim community. Although that community was the first recipient of the Qur'ān and the immediate beneficiary of the Prophet's special care, it had certain weaknesses that needed to be addressed and remedied. Yet such weaknesses did not stop that community from achieving its rank as the best generation in the history of mankind. Thus we can see human communities in their reality, unlike the exaggerated images often given to them. We also learn not to despair as we see ourselves well below the high standards Islam calls on people to seek. It is enough that we are making a sincere effort to improve ourselves and achieve a higher standard. Moreover, we learn an important fact, namely that the urge to work towards perfection must continue all the time, unaffected by people's shortcomings and weaknesses. By nature, people will respond gradually as they are constantly reminded of their virtue, duty and goodness. They will also respond to repeated reminders showing the beauty of goodness and the horrible nature of evil. They need a helping hand whenever they slacken as they travel along the road leading to the sublime goal.

Such an intelligent reading of the Qur'ān will put before our eyes an often overlooked simple fact: it is the same people, the same divine message and the same battle fought throughout history. First and foremost, it is a battle against human weakness and parsimony of the individual, and against evil, falsehood, error and tyranny in human life. The fight must be engaged; there can be no way of averting it. The rulers of the Muslim community must fight this battle in both domains, just like the Qur'ān and the Prophet fought it the first time. It is inevitable that some slips and errors would occur; weakness would surface at some points. But a remedy must be found whenever a weakness appears. It is imperative that people should be guided to God in the same Qur'ānic method. This brings us back to what we said at the beginning: we must consult the Qur'ān before embarking on any course of action. It must be seen to mould our lives like it moulded the life of the first Muslim community.

Ethics of Islamic Charity

The present passage opens with gentle exhortations, touching inner, deep-seated human feelings and senses. It depicts a vigorous; flourishing picture of life, with grains sprouting and growing to yield multitudes of grains and return many times what has been invested. This verdant and lush image, the *sūrah* says, represents a model for those who spend of their own money for the cause of God. *"The case of those who spend their property for the cause of God is like that of a grain that brings forth seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains."* (Verse 261)

By simple arithmetic, a single grain of corn or wheat yields seven hundred grains, but we are presented with a much more inspiring and moving picture that leaves a profound and lasting impression on our minds and consciences. It is a picture of life itself, growing abundantly, and giving many times over.

With that vivid image, the Qur'ān directs the human conscience to giving and to charity. By giving away what one dearly loves to retain, one is in fact earning; and the more one gives, the more one gains, in a perpetual process which, with God's blessing, can continue without any limits or restrictions. *"God gives manifold increase to whom He wills. God is Munificent, All-Knowing."* (Verse 261) God's grace never runs out, nor is it withheld. God is aware of people's thoughts, intentions and feelings, and nothing escapes His knowledge.

The question here is: What kind of spending is made to grow in such a phenomenal way, and is rewarded so generously by God, both in this life and in the life to come?

The spending that is generously rewarded is that motivated by the purest and highest human feelings, and which enhances such feelings. It is not intended to degrade or spite or hurt. It is purely done for the sake of God Almighty: *"Those who spend their property for the cause of God and do not follow their spending by vaunting their own generosity, or by hurting others, shall have their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 262)

To give for the sake of vanity or ostentation is a vulgar and odious act. Those who brag about what they give to charity seek nothing but false prestige or the humiliation of the recipients, or to draw attention to themselves in order to win public praise rather than God's pleasure. Such self-seeking desires are alien to the pure heart of a true believer.

Boasting about one's own generosity is pernicious and hurtful to both giver and recipient. It is offensive to the giver because it inflates his ego and satisfies his sense of superiority as he savours the deference of the recipient of his awards. It also makes him arrogant and draws him further away from God. It is hurtful to the recipient because it draws attention to his need and his humble condition, and may make him jealous and desirous of revenge.

Giving, from the Islamic point of view, is not seen merely as an act of condescension, induced by pity, to hand over to the needy a paltry gift or a piece of bread; but as a means to purify the soul of the giver, revive his humanitarian feelings, reinforce the human bond with his less fortunate fellow human beings, and impress upon him the value of God's grace and favour and his obligation to employ his wealth, dispense of it sensibly and share it gratefully with others, in the service of God's cause. Giving for God's cause also acts as a consolation to the recipient and a

means to strengthen the ties of humanity and fraternity. It also promotes love, cooperation and welfare among members of the community and furthers its cohesion and unity of purpose.

Flaunting one's wealth and philanthropy undermines social unity and fuels jealousy and mistrust that could only tear society apart.

Some modern psychologists have suggested that man's natural reaction to charity is hostility and hatred, at some time in the future. They explain this by saying that charity puts the recipient in a position of inferiority and weakness *vis-a-vis* the giver, a feeling that may ferment within him until it grows into total rejection and latent hostility. The more the giver reminds the recipient of his favour, the more painful it is for the recipient and the more antagonistic he grows.

This may well be the case in non-Muslim societies that have not been shaped or disciplined by Islam. Under Islam, people are taught that wealth belongs to God and He gives of it to those who are well- off. Only those who are ignorant of how wealth is acquired dispute this. Wealth and fortune are given by the grace of God, and man is helpless when it comes to earning them. The creation of a single grain of wheat involves a process in which a combination of energies from the sun and the soil, as well as water and air, come together to play their vital respective roles. This process is totally outside man's realm of control, and it applies to a whole range of similar processes of growth and procreation.

Hence, when those who have give, they do so from the wealth God has given them. Indeed, this act of charity is, in the Islamic sense, a loan given to God which is then returned multiplied manifold, Recipients of charity are there to provide the giver with an opportunity to earn a greater reward from God. The terms which the *sūrah* lays down in this passage emphasize these values, seeking to dissuade givers from flaunting their generosity, and encouraging the needy to abandon any feelings of inferiority or inadequacy. Both are beneficiaries of God's bounty, and both shall receive their respective rewards so long as they observe the ethics and the terms laid down by God.

"They have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve." (Verse 262) Givers should not fear poverty, jealousy or injustice, nor should they regret their actions or have any concern regarding their fate in the hereafter.

Charity Coupled with Good Manners

The next verse reasserts the idea that a charitable act followed by wicked behaviour is worthless: *"A kind word with forgiveness is better than charity followed by injury. God is free of all wants, clement."* (Verse 263)

A pleasant word or a kind-hearted gesture would be far more favourable and likely to spread trust, confidence and love and to calm the hearts and souls. Charity, after all, is not a favour from the giver to the recipient, but an obligation towards God who is: "*free of all wants, clement.*" He neither needs these pitiful donations nor is He anxious to exact punishment on the ungrateful. All people owe their very existence to God Almighty. He overlooks many of their shortcomings, and they ought to learn from Him by showing forgiveness and compassion towards the poor and the needy.

The Qur'ān always reminds people of the attributes of God, which provide the perfect ideal Muslims should try to emulate, as far as they can, in their behaviour, and in their values and aspirations.

When the previous verses have given the believers a keen sense of their role and the need to give freely, for no purpose other than to earn God's pleasure, the *sūrah* advises them not to undermine their charitable deeds with condescension or by hurting other people's feelings. Again, it gives a vivid and lively illustration from nature, *in* which ideas and concepts are reflected in exciting movement and vivid scenery.

> *Believers, do not render your charitable deeds worthless by boasting about your benevolence and causing injury to others, as does he who spends his wealth to impress people, while he believes neither in God nor in the Last Day. Such a person is like a smooth rock covered with earth. Then heavy rain falls on it and leaves it hard and bare. Such as these shall gain nothing from their works. God does not guide the unbelievers. But those who give away their money out of a genuine desire to please God, and out of their own inner certainty, are like a garden on a hillside. When heavy rain falls on it, it yields up twice its normal produce. If no heavy rain falls on it, then a light drizzle [will suffice]. God sees all that you do.* (Verses 264-265)

We are presented here with a complete portrait, which is the composite of two perfectly contrasting scenes. Each is full of detail and contrast, beautifully reflecting ideas and feelings in elegant strokes of colour and imagination.

The first of these two scenes is arid, harsh and barren, but with a superficially attractive exterior; the other welcoming and fertile. The first reflects nothing of the warmth of faith; its harshness is concealed under a thin layer of soil, like the thin layer of hypocrisy that shields the real personality of the unbeliever. As soon as rain falls, the veneer disappears and the barren interior is revealed, and so it is with *"he who spends his wealth to impress people, while he believes neither in God nor in the Last Day. Such a person is like a smooth rock covered with earth. Then heavy rain falls on it and leaves it hard and bare."* (Verse 264)

The other scene depicts the believers who "*give away their money out of a genuine*

desire to please God, and out of their own inner certainty." (Verse 265) Such people's hearts are filled with happiness and reassurance. They are full of confidence in the value and goodness of their actions. These are portrayed like a fertile garden with thick, rich soil, as opposed to the thin layer in the previous scene, set on a hillside. Rain revives and reinvigorates it to yield *"twice its normal produce."* (Verse 265) In fact it does not need heavy rain. Only *"a light drizzle [will suffice]. God sees all that you do."* (Verse 265) That is exactly the effect charity has on the believer. It rejuvenates him and enhances his relationship with God who, in turn, would reward him and make his wealth grow even more, thereby raising the quality of social welfare and the life of the community as a whole.

In the inimitable style of the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* presents a fully integrated and harmonious picture, with exquisite detail and elegant contrast of mood and colour, depicting every feeling and every emotion, and reflecting every idea and meaning with clarity and ease. The verse concludes by stressing that God is aware of the real motives and intentions behind people's actions.

The scene that follows depicts the outcome of flaunting one's charity and generosity, and how He thus causes their effect to be totally and irreversibly wiped out. In vivid and powerful terms, the *sūrah* paints a depressing and violent picture. *"Would any of you wish to have a garden of palm-trees and vines, through which running waters flow, bringing forth all kinds of fruits, then to be well advanced in age, with helpless offspring; and then a fiery whirlwind smites it and leaves it all burnt down? Thus God makes plain to you His revelations, so that you may reflect.''* (Verse 266)

Charity, in essence, is given a tangible picture: it is just like *"a garden of palm-trees and vines, through which running waters flow, bringing forth all kinds of fruits..."* It is fresh, opulent, luxuriant, bountiful and fertile. Thus is charity in its effect on the life of the giver and the recipient alike, and on the life of the community. It is blessed, purifying, ever-growing.

How could anyone, in their right mind, wish for such a wonderful gift to be squandered, blown away or burnt down? And for this to happen at the time when he is most in need of its fruits and good yield to look after his weak, helpless, young children! The boasting and flaunting of one's generosity and the injury caused to the recipient wipe out the benefit of charity, just like a fiery whirlwind burns down a whole beautiful garden.

We can see clearly from this passage how the Qur'ānic style achieves a perfect harmony between expression and meaning, in the individual scene as well as in the overall picture. The great truth behind this presentation is the common origin of human beings and the soil of the earth, and the attributes, strengths and weaknesses that they share.

Giving Away the Best

The *sūrah* goes on to outline the nature of charity, its methods, manners and outcome: "*Believers, spend on others out of the good things you have earned, and out of that which We bring forth for you from the earth. Do not choose for your spending the inferior things which you yourselves would not accept without turning your eyes away in disdain. Know that God is free of all want, ever to be praised.*" (Verse 267)

Following the ethics and principles of charity outlined in the preceding verses, one should give of the best in one's possession, rather than of the less worthy, which one would not accept if offered in trade, unless one could strike a bargain price. God has no need to accept charity out of people's second-rate possessions.

This is a broad principle, valid for all time and all types of property, whether earned, cultivated, extracted or mined, whether known at the time of the Prophet Muĥammad or not. Not a single kind of earnings or capital, acquired at any time, is exempt from the obligation of charity, and *zakāt* accrues on it all, in accordance with the rates and proportions specified by the Prophet for the various types of capital known then. These form the standard by which percentages and proportions are determined for new types of wealth, capital or earnings.

By way of illustration, and to appreciate the realities the Qur'ān was dealing with at the time of its revelation, it would be instructive to recall the circumstances in which this verse was revealed to the Prophet. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī reports on the authority of al-Barā' ibn `Āzib that the verse was revealed with reference to the *Anşār* (the Muslims from Madinah). As the harvest season for dates approached, people would take bunches of dates that had just turned colour but had not fully ripened and tie them to posts in the Prophet's Mosque, for the poor among the *Muhājirūn* (the Muslims from Makkah) to eat. Some, however, would take dates of the worst quality and mix them with good ones and think nothing of it. It was then that God revealed the verse, which said: "*Do not choose for your spending the inferior things which you yourselves would not accept without turning your eyes away in disdain.*"

Similar reports were related by al-Ĥākim and Ibn Abī Ĥātim, all of which go to show that, as well as having assiduous and exemplary members, a Muslim community may also have members who need to be educated and informed of their duties and obligations. The *Anşār's* commendable record of tireless sacrifice and support for the cause of Islam did not preclude them from being criticized and censured when some of them failed to live up to the standards and obligations of Islam.

God, after all, "*is free of all want, ever to be praised*" (Verse 267) People donate for their own good, as their donations are of no benefit to God in any way. So they should give willingly and with a clear conscience. When they do, God will accept

their generosity and reward them for it, although it is He who has bestowed the wealth on them in the first place.

The *sūrah* goes on to reveal to the believers that niggardliness and the tendency to give to charity out of one's inferior possessions are motivated by lack of faith in God and by fear of poverty. Such fear is only entertained by those who have no trust in God and their accountability to Him. It identifies these motives clearly, pointing to their original instigator: "*Satan promises you poverty and bids you to commit indecency, whereas God promises you His forgiveness and bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. He grants wisdom to whom He wills. He who is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good. Yet only those with sound minds would take heed*" (Verses 268-269)

The *sūrah* is telling the believers that Satan insinuates into their minds a fear of poverty in order to arouse their selfishness and greed, and that it is he that entices them to transgress and commit indecencies. This fear was responsible for the practice of burying one's young daughters alive in pre-Islamic Arabia, while greed and excessive lust for wealth led some to gorge themselves on usury — both abhorrent and shameful practices.

In contrast to Satan's destructive exhortations, God promises forgiveness and generosity and provides sustenance and livelihood for everyone, in return for their generosity, because He is beneficent and fully aware of people's innermost thoughts and intentions. Furthermore, "*He grants wisdom to whom He wills. He who is granted wisdom has indeed been granted abundant good.*" (Verse 269) God grants wisdom and common sense to enable people to reason and evaluate their actions and to seek moderation and forethought in their attitudes and behaviour. What a great gift, indeed!

"*Yet only those with sound minds would take heed*" (Verse 269) They are the ones who appreciate and understand and judge matters sensibly. As in all matters, it is up to God's absolute will to determine who deserves to receive the gift of wisdom, but the *sūrah* reassures those who sincerely strive for wisdom and guidance that they shall not be denied these gifts.

"*Satan promises you poverty and bids you to commit indecency, whereas God promises you His forgiveness and bounty.*" (Verse 268) This statement asserts the fundamental truth that, in this life, there are only two clear choices to make: God's way or the way of Satan. Man can either heed God's advice or act on Satan's promises; rejecting one way means following the other. Only one way, the way of God, leads to the truth and all other routes belong to Satan.

This truth is frequently and deliberately emphasized in the Qur'ān in order to leave those who reject God's path with no argument or excuses. The path of truth is one and well defined, and people are free to take it or turn away from it. They will

face the consequences of their choice.

The *sūrah* continues with the theme of charity, emphasizing that God is fully aware of what people give and how they give. He will reward them for both the act of giving and the intention behind it: *"Whatever alms you give or vows you make are known to God. The evildoers shall have none to help them. If you give alms openly, that is well; but if you give them to the needy in private, it is even better for you, and will atone for some of your bad deeds. God is aware of all you do."* (Verses 270-271)

Giving, in this sense, refers to all kinds of alms and charity, voluntary as well as obligatory, for private or public causes. Vows and pledges are made by individuals for personal reasons and must be made for the sake of God and for no other cause. Offerings made by unbelievers to individuals or bogus deities are totally unacceptable and condemned by Islam.

The fact that God is aware of one's intentions and actions is reassuring to the believer, arousing within him feelings of respect and eagerness to shun greed and ostentation, as well as total ease that comes from having fulfilled his obligations of giving for God's sake and of showing gratitude to God for His generosity and beneficence.

Honouring one's obligations is fair, and the opposite is evil and unjust. In this respect, people are two types. There are those who fulfil their obligations towards God, and live enjoying God's blessings. On the other side, those who deny God's generosity and show no gratitude for what He gives them, and withhold it from those in need, are condemned as evildoers who have violated their covenant with God and done wrong to themselves as well as to others, and they *"shall have none to help them"*.

The *sūrah* urges that voluntary charity is best given in private, to ensure that it is free from all traces of flaunting and pretension. However, publicizing the giving of obligatory charity could in fact be beneficial because it would promote the practice and help establish it in society. Hence, both ways are acceptable: *"If you give alms openly, that is well; but if you give them to the needy in private, it is even better for you."* (Verse 271) This statement covers both cases, giving each its appropriate weight, promising atonement from sin for both of them: *"and will atone for some of your bad deeds."* (Verse 271) It also evokes consciousness of God on the one hand, and confidence and reassurance on the other. Furthermore, it confirms that all actions and intentions are known to God, who is aware of all that people do.

We cannot fail to note the elaborate and extensive way in which the ethics of giving for charity are covered in the *sūrah,* from which two important conclusions can be drawn.

First is the fact that Islam recognizes human nature, its propensity to be selfish and

tight-fisted and its constant need for motivation and encouragement. Only in this way can human nature overcome these tendencies and aspire towards the noble and benevolent spheres God wishes man to reach.

Second is the nature of the community the Qur'ān was addressing. The Arabs were particularly known for their hospitality and generous disposition, but these were tarnished by their tendency to flaunt their generosity and by their pursuit of fame, acclaim and recognition. It would not, therefore, have been easy to teach them to give all that up and give of their wealth purely for the sake of God. The task required extensive education and motivation to instruct them in self-denial and dedication to God's cause, in which Islam has achieved unparalleled success.

Charity Benefits the Charitable

At this point the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet personally, setting out a number of essential facts bearing on the formulation of Islamic principles and scope of behaviour: *"It is not for you to make people follow the right guidance. It is God who guides whom He wills. Whatever good you may spend in charity is for your own good. You should only spend out of pure dedication to God. And whatever good you give in charity will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged."* (Verse 272)

Ibn Abī Ĥātim reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās that until this verse was revealed, the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to instruct the Muslims to give in charity only to fellow Muslims, but then he ordered that charity should be extended to all who need it, regardless of their religion.

Guidance is a matter for God alone. Not even the Messenger of God could be held responsible for whether individuals heed the truth or not. God is the Creator, and He alone has power over people's hearts and minds. The mission of God's Messenger is to convey His message, and then it is up to God how He gives guidance to individual human beings, as they deserve to be guided. In taking this crucial issue out of the human domain, an important principle is established that a believer should seek and receive guidance from God alone. It also impresses upon the Messenger a need to show understanding, tolerance and perseverance in the face of any rejection or resistance he meets in conveying God's message to the public. He is to appeal to God to grant them guidance and show them the light.

"It is not for you to make people follow the right guidance. It is God who guides whom He wills." (Verse 272) Prophet Muĥammad is directed to open his heart to people, to show kindness, and to offer all possible help, leaving judgement and reward to God Almighty.

With such tenets and principles, Islam opens the widest possible horizons of

compassion and tolerance. It goes beyond the recognition of religious freedom and rejection of compulsion and coercion. It demands universal human compassion and establishes the right of all needy members of society to help and support, regardless of their religious faith, as long as they do not pose any threat to the community. It further asserts that the rewards of those who give for the sake of God are safely guaranteed. No other religious faith has risen to or achieved such high standards of human or social morality.

The *sūrah* emphasizes that: *"Whatever good you may spend in charity is for your own good. You should only spend out of pure dedication to God. And whatever good you give in charity will be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged."* (Verse 272) Only a believer gives for the sake of God and no other. He does not give to charity in order to gain influence or praise, nor does he exploit his generosity to achieve personal ends or satisfy his ego, nor does he seek the favour or pleasure of people in power or authority. A believer gives to charity in the full knowledge and satisfaction that he will be rewarded by God; and that his life, character, and standing will be enhanced and that, furthermore, God's generosity in the hereafter is guaranteed and will be all the more fulfilling..

The *sūrah* then refers to a specific form of giving, the beneficiary of which is an honest and honourable section of society who are not ashamed of being poor and who are prevented by their dignity and self-esteem from degrading themselves by begging: *"[Alms are] for the needy who, being wholly preoccupied with God's cause, are unable to go about earning their livelihood. The unthinking take them for men of wealth on account of their restrained behaviour. You can recognize them by their special mark: they do not importune people for alms. Whatever good you give is certainly known to God."* (Verse 273)

The description fitted a. group of Makkan Muslims *(Muhājirūn)* who had migrated with the Prophet to Madinah, leaving behind all their belongings and members of their families. They settled in Madinah; some of them, known as *Ahl al-Ṣuffah,* lived in and around the Prophet's Mosque, and devoted their lives completely to the service of the community, volunteering for military missions and expeditions or guarding the Prophet and his household and mosque. These people were not able to work and earn a living, but behaved with dignity and propriety, refusing to beg or ask for charity, so much so that only a few people were aware of their plight.

Nevertheless, the directive has a universal application. In every generation there will be people not able, for various reasons, to earn their livelihood, but who insist on preserving their modesty and personal dignity by not becoming a burden on anyone else. They do their utmost to hide their poverty and distress, and only a few people are able to detect and appreciate their predicament.

Thus, in its unique and inimitable style, the Qur'ān depicts in a few words a full and deeply poignant picture of human dignity and self-respect. The highly expressive syntax brings the features of those people gradually to life, and puts the reader face to face with their human characters.

Those honourable people who hide their want, as eagerly as they would their nakedness, could only be offered assistance privately and in such a way as would not offend their dignity. The verse closes with the appropriate comment that: *"Whatever good you give is certainly known to God."* (Verse 273) He will certainly not let it go unrewarded.

Finally, the next verse gives a concise summary of the whole subject of charity and reiterates, reassuringly, the pledge made to those who give out of sheer humanity and altruism: "*Those who give their property by night and by day, in private and in public, shall have their reward with their Lord. They have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.*" (Verse 274) They will have their reward which includes an increase of what they have in this life, other life blessings, and a reward in the hereafter. But they also have what is more than that, namely earning God's pleasure. Hence they need fear nothing whatsoever in this life or in the life to come.

There is a striking harmony between this closing comment and the earlier detailed statements. It provides a fitting final note for the Islamic ethical code of charity which represents a vital aspect of Islamic community and social life.

A Perfectly Integrated System

Despite the attention given to charity, life under Islam is in no way based or dependent on it. Social and economic life in Islam is based, first and foremost, on the provision of work and a decent means of earning a living for all those who are able to do so. It is also based on the fair and equitable distribution of wealth in the community, with the aim of achieving a proper balance between input and reward. Nevertheless, there will always be times when people fall short for various exceptional reasons, and it is these that need to be dealt with through charity. This comes in two forms: obligatory and voluntary.

Obligatory contributions are levied only by Muslim state authorities that implement Islamic law in its entirety. They form an important source of public revenue for the Islamic state, although it is allocated for a specified purpose which cannot be exceeded.

Giving to charity voluntarily is not limited or restricted. It is up to those who can afford it to make directly to the poor and needy, following the ethics and codes given earlier so that the recipients may preserve their dignity and self-esteem, as the *sūrah*

illustrates very clearly.

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet said: "A needy person is not the one who is satisfied with a date or two, or a mouthful or two; but it is he that refrains from begging," and cited the words of verse 273: "*You can recognize them by their special mark: they do not importune people for alms.*"

Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal reports that a mother asked her son to go and ask the Prophet for some money, as other people were doing. The son went and found the Prophet addressing a crowd of people, saying: "He who refrains from begging, God shall spare him the need to beg, and he who refrains from taking charity will be amply provided for by God. If you beg while you possess the equivalent of five ounces of silver, you will be importuning for alms." The man thought for a moment and remembered that he owned a she-camel and his servant owned a she-camel, each of which was worth far more than five ounces of silver. He went away without asking the Prophet for anything.

Al-Ṭabarānī relates that a man from the Quraysh called al-Ĥārith was in Syria and heard that Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, a Companion of the Prophet, was in need of help, so he sent him three hundred dīnārs. When the money arrived, Abū Dharr was taken aback and asked, "Did this man not find anyone else less fortunate than myself? I heard the Prophet say, If someone begs and he has forty dirhams, he is importuning for alms.' My family has forty dirhams, a sheep and two servants."

Islam has a fully integrated and comprehensive socio-economic system whose rules and ethics work harmoniously together, supporting and reinforcing each other. It was this feature of Islam that enabled it to establish that unique and pioneering society, the like of which the world has yet to see.

19
The Evil of Usury

ٱلَّذِينَ يَأۡكُلُونَ ٱلرِّبَوٰاْ لَا يَقُومُونَ إِلَّا كَمَا يَقُومُ ٱلَّذِي يَتَخَبَّطُهُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ مِنَ ٱلۡمَسِّۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّمَا ٱلۡبَيۡعُ مِثۡلُ ٱلرِّبَوٰاْۗ وَأَحَلَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡبَيۡعَ وَحَرَّمَ ٱلرِّبَوٰاْۚ فَمَن جَآءَهُۥ مَوۡعِظَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ فَٱنتَهَىٰ فَلَهُۥ مَا سَلَفَ وَأَمۡرُهُۥٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِۖ وَمَنۡ عَادَ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٢٧٥

Those who gorge themselves on usury cannot rise up except as he may rise up whom Satan has confounded with his touch. That is because they say, 'Trade is just the same as usury;' whereas God has made trade lawful and usury forbidden. He who receives an admonition from his Lord, and thereupon desists [from usury] may retain his past gains, and it will be for God to judge him. Those who revert to the practice [of usury] are indeed the inmates of the fire, wherein they shall abide. (275)

يَمۡحَقُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّبَوٰاْ وَيُرۡبِي ٱلصَّدَقَٰتِۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ كَفَّارٍ أَثِيمٍ ٢٧٦

God blots out usury and causes charitable offerings. to grow and increase. God does not love confirmed unbelievers who persist in wrongdoing. (276)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَوُاْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ لَهُمۡ أَجۡرُهُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ وَلَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ٢٧٧

Those that have faith and do good deeds, attend regularly to their prayers and pay zakāt, shall have their reward with their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (277)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَذَرُواْ مَا بَقِيَ مِنَ ٱلرِّبَوٰٓاْ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٢٧٨

Believers, fear God and give up what remains outstanding of usury gains, if you are true believers. (278)

فَإِن لَّمْ تَفْعَلُواْ فَأْذَنُواْ بِحَرْبٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ
وَرَسُولِهِۦ ۖ وَإِن تُبْتُمْ فَلَكُمْ رُءُوسُ
أَمْوَٰلِكُمْ لَا تَظْلِمُونَ وَلَا
تُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٧٩﴾

If you do not, then war is declared against you by God and His Messenger. If you repent, however, you shall remain entitled to your principal. Thus, you shall commit no wrong, nor suffer any wrong yourselves. (279)

وَإِن كَانَ ذُو عُسْرَةٍ فَنَظِرَةٌ إِلَىٰ مَيْسَرَةٍ ۚ
وَأَن تَصَدَّقُواْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ
تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٨٠﴾

If [the debtor] is in straitened circumstances, grant him a delay until a time of ease. And if you waive [the debt entirely] as a gift of charity, it will be better for you, if you but knew it. (280)

وَٱتَّقُواْ يَوْمًا تُرْجَعُونَ فِيهِ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ ثُمَّ
تُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا
يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٨١﴾

Fear the day when you shall all return to God; when every soul shall be repaid in full for what it had earned, and none shall be wronged. (281)

Overview

The preceding passage discussed the ethics of charity and its role in society; the present passage deals with the opposite, dark side of the circulation of money, namely, usury, or to use the Islamic term, *ribā.* While charity denotes giving, generosity, purification, growth, cooperation and mutual social welfare, usury signifies stinginess, greed and self-aggrandizement.

Charity is giving of one's wealth without any expectation of recompense or repayment, while usury is the exaction of a charge over and above money owed, which is usually paid for out of the sweat and blood of the borrower, regardless of whether he profits as a result of the loan or not.

It is perhaps significant that the *sūrah* should discuss usury immediately after dealing with a pleasant subject such as charity, in order to highlight the sharp contrast between the two, and their effects on people and society.

No other issue has been condemned and denounced so strongly in the Qur'ān as has usury; nor has any practice come in for stronger warnings, spelling out fearful doom. Infinite is God in His wisdom. For, although it was one of the most pervasive evils during the pre- Islamic Dark Ages, most of its destructive aspects have only

become better known in our modern society. Only today, in the light of widespread human suffering, can we appreciate the reasons behind the Qur'ān's determined onslaught on this evil practice. Today, we are better placed than even the people of pre-Islamic Arabia to understand God's wisdom underlying these principles, and the suitability of Islam for the organization of human society. In today's world, we have all the signs and evidence we need to explain and confirm the words of the Qur'ān. We can see what havoc and what misery a usury-based financial system has brought upon the world, as well as the insidious destruction it has caused to the morals, religion, health and economic strength of modern society. As the Qur'ān says, we are witnessing a divinely-inspired war against all individuals, groups, nations and states that persist in defying God's commands concerning the practice of usury in its various disguises.

The passage discussed in Chapter 18 laid down the basic principles for giving to charity, for the sake of God, as an important part of the Islamic social and economic system God has chosen for the Muslim community. It serves as a model for the rest of mankind to emulate and enjoy. It is presented as an alternative to a wicked and inhumane system based on usury.

We, thus, have two contrasting socio-economic systems: the Islamic system and the usury-based un-Islamic system. They are based on totally different value systems and views of the world. They can never be reconciled, as each leads in a completely opposite direction to the other and aims to achieve different ends.

The economic system Islam advocates, like its overall view of life, is based on the fundamental concept that God is the Creator and the undisputed master of all that exists. God has struck a deal with mankind and delegated to man certain duties and responsibilities on earth. He provided him with the tools, the materials and the means by which he can exercise his authority and freewill. The main proviso of God's covenant with man is that man should live and behave according to God's laws. Only actions, morals, dealings or religious activities conducted according to God's law will be sanctioned and valid. The imposition of such activities by duress is rejected and condemned as injustice. God is the ultimate ruler and arbiter, and temporal human authority is derived from adherence to His law and code of living, to which human beings are bound by their covenant with Him.

Another provision of God's covenant with man stipulates that believers must look after one another's welfare and share the benefits of what God has provided for all of them. This does not mean common ownership in the Marxist sense, but responsible and regulated private ownership. Those who have should share with those who have not and all are equally required to seek work and earn their living according to their ability. No capable member of society should live off someone else or become a burden on the community. To support this system of social welfare, Islam has set up

zakāt as a fixed obligation on the well- off and encouraged voluntary charity without limits.

God has also advised man to seek moderation and avoid lavish spending and extravagant living. This would ensure sensible employment of wealth and a surplus of funds for the payment of *zakāt* and a contribution to charitable causes.

Muslims are required to invest their money and seek the growth and development of their wealth, by scrupulous and legitimate means, without exploiting others or encroaching on their rights. Besides, it is not allowed to try to pervert, in any way, the fair and healthy circulation of capital and wealth in society. The Qur'ān stresses that wealth "*should not be left to circulate only among the rich of you." (59:7)*

God has also enjoined honesty of intention and action and the integrity of ends and means. He has laid down rules and ethics that should be observed in the investment and development of wealth so as not to compromise the conscience or morals of the individual, or undermine the life and welfare of the community. These principles are laid down in accordance with Islam's overall philosophy of life and worldview, and in line with the terms and conditions of God's covenant with man that governs the whole range of human actions and activities in this world.

Thus we can see that usury as an economic instrument conflicts directly with the very basic concepts of Islam, because it is based on the total rejection of God's role and the dismissal of all the principles and aims on which the divine code of living is founded.

A usurious or interest-based system assumes a total divorce between the divine will and human life, leading to the conclusion that man is the absolute master of this world, not bound by any responsibility towards God or any obligation to respect His teachings or commands. It also implies that man is free as to how he accumulates, enjoys and uses wealth, and that in this regard he has no obligation whatsoever towards God or, indeed, any liability to others; it would not matter if thousands or millions of people were to suffer in the process.

Of course man-made laws may occasionally intervene to curb this freedom by setting the rates of usury or banning certain fraudulent and illegal practices, but this is usually dictated by expediency and popular convention rather than by considerations of the principle laid down by a higher divine authority.

A usury-based system is founded on the erroneous concept that the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth, regardless of the means, is the ultimate objective of human life, which explains the resulting reckless and vicious rush for money-making and prodigality.

Such a system brings nothing but misery and suffering upon individuals,

communities, and nations, while it benefits only a few moneylenders. It undermines the moral and psychological fabric of society and creates a detrimental imbalance in the distribution of wealth and economic development, leading, as it is doing at present, to the concentration of power and influence in the hands of a few greedy, unscrupulous, and malevolent individuals and institutions, at national and international level, that reap the highest benefits but have no respect or regard for human values and human effort.

These powerful individuals and institutions not only control the world economy and international wealth, but they also wield enormous influence in several other walks of life with the aim of enhancing their role and position in the world. Since they are unscrupulous and unprincipled and look with disdain on religion and morality, it is to their advantage to undermine religious belief and encourage moral degradation, promiscuity and excessive spending. They manipulate the world economy for their own benefit, manufacturing and fuelling regular economic crises in various parts of the world and diverting economic and industrial production away from the common world interest to areas that will give them the greatest advantage and control of international wealth.

This catastrophic situation has been further exacerbated by the success of these powerful finance centres and groups, through their strong influence in the political, economic, media and entertainment worlds, to create the universal popular myth that usury is a good and natural aspect of the economy, without which there would be no economic prosperity or growth. It has been alleged that an interest- based economy is the one responsible for the tremendous achievements and progress of modern Western civilization, and that those calling for the abolition of usury are unrealistic dreamers and idealists motivated by moralistic and religious considerations that are capable, if given the chance, of corrupting the whole modern economic system. What is more is that those who criticize the interest- based economic system on these grounds are ridiculed by people who are in reality victims of this very system. Another victim of the system of usury is world economy which is forcibly set on the wrong course by international usurers. Thus, it suffers periodic, stage-managed crises to ensure that all its benefits are reaped by such usurers, rather than by humanity as a whole.

Some Western economists have recognized the fact that a usurious system is a threat, from the purely economic point of view. One leading critic of the system, Dr. Schacht, a former Governor of the German Central Bank, in a speech given in 1953 in Damascus, said that with an infinite mathematical operation it would be possible to show that the total sum of all liquid money in the world ends up in the hands of a few usurers, because a usurer-lender gains in every deal while the borrower is equally liable to gain or lose. Logically, therefore, money will ultimately end up with

the one who always gains. The majority of capital today is under the real control of a few thousand people; while landlords, industrialists, farmers and traders who borrow from the banks, as well as workers and ordinary consumers, are no more than labourers working for the benefit of those in possession and control of capital.

That is not all that is wrong with a usury-based economy. The relationship between capitalists on the one hand, and those working in commerce and industry on the other, is based on mistrust, strife and resentment. Moneylenders try to make maximum gains by lending their money, and therefore favour a squeeze on the money supply to cause a rise in the cost of borrowing. This eventually leads td a slowdown in the economy, a rise in unemployment, and a fall in /the purchasing power of the individual. This creates a fall in industrial loans which, in turn, forces the moneylenders to reduce the cost of borrowing, and a new cycle of growth and prosperity begins, only to lead to another recession and more misery for borrowers and consumers. It is this vicious circle of boom and bust that brings about the regular international economic crises.

In such an economy, every consumer pays part of the price of goods to the moneylenders albeit indirectly. Industrialists and traders take the extra cost of borrowing out of consumers' pockets by raising the prices of goods and services, thus spreading the burden over the widest possible area. Government borrowing to finance public projects is also met by ever-rising taxes imposed on the earning sections of the population, spreading the cost again over large numbers of people. This led to the rise of colonialism, and remains the root cause of war and conflict in the world today.

When considering the Islamic attitude to usury, we must bear in mind a number of essential facts.

The teachings and ethics of Islam, as we have seen, are in total conflict with a usurious economy. All the rulings, issued by the official 'clergy' in Muslim countries, and the arguments advanced to show that usury may be accommodated into the Islamic system, are pure humbug aimed at deceiving the public.

The usury system is a curse on all humanity, not only ethically and religiously, but also economically and practically. It is a system that creates unhappiness and restricts the growth of harmony and stability in society, despite its deceptive promise of prosperity.

Moral and practical considerations are inextricably linked. In all his actions, man is governed by the terms of God's covenant; he is here with a mission and a responsibility and will have to account for his actions in the hereafter. An Islamic economic system must be built on moral and ethical principles. Such principles are not a merely desirable addition that can be done without in people's life.

A usury-based economic system is bound to undermine the moral and ethical character of individuals, their feelings and their desire to help each other. It encourages greed, selfishness, lechery and speculation. In the modern world, it has opened the gates for the most sinister and corrupting forms of investment ever known, such as the drug trade, pornography, prostitution, all in pursuit of guaranteed astronomical profits. Borrowed money is not used in the service of humanity but for maximizing profit, regardless of the nature of the trade or the methods by which that profit is realized.

Islam is a comprehensive way of life. Its economic system completely discounts the need for usury and organizes the social life of the community in such a way as to eliminate usury altogether. At the same time it maintains the balance and progress of economic, social and human development in society.

Under Islam, there is no need for the abolition or removal of existing economic and financial institutions, such as banks and commercial companies, which play a vital role in modern economic development. Islam can reform these institutions and enable them to function along the sound and constructive rules and regulations it lays down.

Most importantly, Muslims must realize that it is a conceptual impossibility that God Almighty should prohibit something that is vital for the perpetuation and preservation of human life. By the same token, no practice that is inherently corrupt could ever be essential for the organization and progress of human life. A Muslim who truly believes in God as the creator, preserver and controller of life and the world cannot conceive that God would forbid anything that is vital, or prescribe anything that is vile or obscene. The reasons for widespread belief in usury-based economic and financial systems can be traced to ignorance and the obnoxious propaganda systematically waged by capitalist and money lending lobbies and institutions. These continue to exert their pervasive influence on governments, international political organizations, and private and public media and information establishments.

The claim that the international economic and financial systems cannot exist or function without usury is simply a myth and a monstrous lie sustained by big business and international vested interests. Usury-free economies have existed and performed very successfully. To revive them today requires determination and a concerted, well-considered international effort by at least the Muslim countries of the world, in order to revive some hope of future stability, prosperity, happiness and real peace and justice in our world.

It is beyond the scope of this commentary to discuss in detail the practical methods of implementing the Islamic system. We will only look more closely at how

Islam succeeded in the eradication of that abominable practice of usury.

The Horrific Image of Usury

> *Those who gorge themselves on usury cannot rise up except as he may rise up whom Satan has confounded with his touch. That is because they say, 'Trade is just the same as usury;' whereas God has made trade lawful and usury forbidden. He who receives an admonition from his Lord, and thereupon desists [from usury] may retain his past gains, and it will be for God to judge him. Those who revert to the practice [of usury] are indeed the inmates of the fire, wherein they shall abide. God blots out usury and causes charitable offerings to grow and increase. God does not love confirmed unbelievers who persist in wrongdoing.* (Verses 275-276)

It is a frightening image, far more effective than any threat or admonition. The image of a person possessed by the devil is an evocative and terrifying one, most effective in deterring usurers and in conveying the message to others. It shakes the human conscience and brings home the horrible reality of the effects of usury on individuals as well as society as a whole.

Most commentators have suggested that the *sūrah* refers to rising before God on the Day of Judgement, but I am of the view that this is a metaphor for what actually happens in life on this earth. This interpretation is supported by a later passage warning usurers of an impending war against them by God and His Messenger which, in my view, we can see going on in the world today. The whole world is currently reeling under the dire consequences of a pervasive international usury-based financial system.

However, before we study the Qur'ānic text in detail, let us review the different types of usury, or *ribā,* known at the time of revelation and how the Arabs of the pre-Islamic *jāhiliyyah,* or Dark Ages, viewed the whole practice of usury. There were two main types, known in Arabic as *ribā al-nasī'āh,* increase related to deferment, and *ribā al- faḍl,* increase based on difference in quality.

Ribā al-nasī'ah, according to Qatādah, applies to selling goods on credit for an agreed term. When the term expires, and the buyer finds himself unable to settle, the seller raises the price in lieu of extending the settlement term. According to Mujāhid, if a borrower fails to settle a debt, he agrees to make an additional payment, over the original loan, to the lender in return for an extension of the settlement period. According to Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *ribā al-nasī'ah* was no more than a deferred loan conditional on an implied premium, the deferment being granted in return for the additional payment over the original amount.

In his commentary, Imām al-Rāzī says that *ribā al-nasī'ah* was the more widely

known in the pre-Islamic days. People would advance money for a fixed term in return for an agreed monthly fee, keeping the original amount unchanged. At the end of the fixed term, the borrower would either pay back the original loan in full or be granted an extension with higher monthly payments.

Usāmah ibn Zayd quotes the Prophet as saying: "*Ribā al-nasī'ah* [i.e. increase related to deferment] is the only real form of usury." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Ribā al faḍl [i.e. increase based on difference in quality] applies to premiums on spot transactions involving the exchange of quantities of the same commodity, with something extra: gold for gold, silver for silver, wheat for wheat, and so on. Such transactions are considered usurious because they bring exploitation, a feature common to all types of usury. This fact will be of great importance in our discussion of the contemporary situation.

Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī quotes the Prophet as saying: "Gold for gold, silver for silver, wheat for wheat, barley for barley, dates for dates and salt for salt; may be exchanged, measure for measure, from hand to hand [on the spot] . If either party gives or seeks an increase, both parties are equally guilty of usury." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī also reports that when Bilāl, the Abyssinian Companion of the Prophet, once brought the Prophet some dates of excellent quality, the Prophet immediately asked where he had obtained them. Bilāl said he had received them in exchange for some dates of lower quality that were in his possession, two measures for one. The Prophet was extremely displeased and said: "This is stark usury! It is the very thing! Do not ever do it. If you wish to buy good dates, sell your dates in some other way and then buy the good ones with what you receive." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

That *ribā al-nasī'ah* is usurious is self-explanatory: it involves an increased payment and time extension, the two essential elements of usurious transactions. In *ribā al-faḍl* there have to be real differences in quality of the same commodity which give rise to an increase in the quantity of one over the other. This is clear in Bilāl's transaction, condemned by the Prophet as usurious, since it assigned different values to the two types of dates. Hence the Prophet ordered that one type of dates should be sold for cash, which is then used by the seller to buy the other type, thus removing all suspicion of usury.

The requirement to exchange traded goods simultaneously, "hand to hand", is important in order to avoid any difference in the two quantities due to a lapse in time which could affect their respective values. It also indicates how sensitive the Prophet was to any suspicion of usury, and how sagacious was his approach in uprooting it.

There are those today, overwhelmed by the triumph of Western capitalism, who wish to limit the definition of usury to *ribā al-nasī'ah* only, basing their reasoning on the report by Usāmah and definitions of usury in pre-Islamic Arabia given by some early scholars. Later and new forms of usury that do not precisely fit those definitions are, according to these pundits, allowed by Islam.

This is a symptom of spiritual and intellectual defeatism, because Islamic rules are not decided merely on technicalities but on sound and firm concepts and principles. Islam did not condemn one particular form of usury, but stood against it entirely in theory and practice. It went so far as to forbid *ribā al faḍl* in order to eliminate all semblance of usury from Islamic monetary and economic systems.

This could only mean that all usurious dealings are forbidden, whether similar to those known in pre-Islamic Arabia or it has a new shape. Wherever the essential elements of usury are present in a transaction, it becomes forbidden. Similarly, any transaction tainted by extortion, greed or an element of gambling, or otherwise driven by the evil desire to make a profit by any means, is strictly outlawed.

Divine Admonition Remains Unheeded

"Those who gorge themselves on usury cannot rise up except as he may rise up whom Satan has confounded with his touch." (Verse 275) This is a reference not only to those who take interest or charge a usurious gain, but also to society as a whole.

Jābir ibn `Abdullāh reports that the Prophet has cursed the person who charges usury, the one who pays it, the two witnesses and the one who writes the contract, saying: "They bear the same responsibility. [Related by Muslim, Aĥmad, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī]

These rules apply to private, one-to-one transactions, while the whole community is condemned to the onslaught of God's wrath in societies where usury forms the basis for financial transactions. Such a society lives in turmoil and constant insecurity; and if there were doubts about this fact during the early days of the capitalist system, some four centuries ago, its record since then totally vindicates it.

The world we live in today is full of anxiety, instability and fear. Western leaders, intellectuals and scientists themselves admit to the frightening spread of nervous and psychological diseases in the West, despite its spectacular industrial, scientific and economic success. The other frightening aspect of today's Western-dominated world is the spread of conflict and strife, and the imminent threat of global war and mass destruction.

As a result, a dark cloud of depression and despair hangs over this world of ours which Western civilization, with all its achievements and capabilities and wealth

cannot remove. What, then, is the point of material progress if it does not bring happiness, peace and security to individuals and societies?

It is a fact that no fair-minded person could ever deny: the majority of people in the most affluent and materially advanced countries, such as the United States of America or Sweden, lead the most miserable lives. Anxiety, depression and boredom are eating into people's lives who, despite their affluence and energy, are driven to a culture of fads and mental and sexual perversions, and all kinds of anti-social escapist behaviour that allows them no peace or security

The fundamental cause of this pervasive unhappiness is the spiritual wilderness in which Western societies are living today. For, in spite of the prosperity and material well-being they enjoy, these societies lack the spiritual reassurance and faith that can only come with belief in God and placing our full trust in Him. They no longer have any universal goals or aims to aspire to. They have lost faith in human life and man's mission and role in the world as defined in God's covenant with mankind.

From that fundamental cause springs the curse of usury which undermines the whole economic edifice of society in such a way that the economy inflates but never seems to grow in a healthy and equitable manner or benefit all sections of the community. A usury-based economy is a lopsided one, in which the faceless privileged few prosper to the most obscene extent at the expense of the industrial and commercial resources of the community. Financiers and moneylenders control the flow of money into the market and thereby impose their wishes and interests rather than seek to meet the needs of the people or serve the public interest. Their aim is not to provide regular employment or long-term security of income, leading to happiness and social stability, but to maximize their own profits, even if that means the suffering and deprivation of millions, or the destruction of the security and welfare of the rest of mankind.

Those with vested interests objected to the condemnation and abolition of usury, claiming that "*'Trade is just the same as usury;' whereas God has made trade lawful and usury forbidden.*" (Verse 275) Their argument rested on the false assumption that the objective of both trading and usury was to secure gains, but trading is open to the risk of loss as well as to making profit. It also requires real tangible input from the trader. Usury transactions, on the other hand, are aimed at bringing guaranteed gains for the lender in any case. That is the crucial difference between the two. Any transactions involving a guaranteed return for the lender, under all circumstances, are usurious and, hence, forbidden. There can be no argument on this point. God has permitted trading for many reasons that make it beneficial for human life, and the absence of guaranteed returns is first among them.

However, Islam faced the situation existing at the time with realism, averting any

kind of economic or social upheaval. It declared its new rules effective immediately and turned a new page with respect to what had been going on previously: *"He who receives an admonition from his Lord, and thereupon desists [from usury] may retain his past gains, and it will be for God to judge him."* (Verse 275)

It seems to suggest that exoneration for previous usurious activities would be left to God's grace, thereby providing individuals with a stronger incentive to desist and seek to conduct their trade without usury. Nevertheless, it goes on to warn those who go back to such practices that they "*are indeed the inmates of the fire, wherein they shall abide."* (Verse 275) It affirms with power and authority for the benefit of those who might delude themselves that the hereafter was a long way away, that: *"God blots out usury and causes charitable offerings to grow and increase. God does not love confirmed unbelievers who persist in wrongdoing."* (Verse 276)

God's words have come true. There is evidence that no society has built its economy on usury and seen real prosperity, peace, security or happiness. A society may indeed be outwardly wealthy, productive and affluent, but these are not necessarily the signs of a blessed and fortunate society. Social welfare, integrity and cohesion are only found in societies constructed on altruism, charity, tolerance, compassion and open-handedness, and in which people vie only for the pleasure and grace of God Almighty.

There are, of course, those who refuse to see these facts, because they are either consumed by greed and self-interest or blinded by the falsehood and the propaganda perpetrated by those who have a real vested interest in the promotion and spread of the odious practice of usury and the whole system based on it.

"God does not love confirmed unbelievers who persist in wrongdoing." (Verse 276) This statement clearly indicates that those who persist with usury, after all that has been said about it, are guilty of grave wrongdoing and condemned by God. Evidently, those who legalize what God has forbidden are guilty and damned, even if they assert their belief in Islam with all the power at their disposal.

Islam is not mere words one utters, but a comprehensive way and system of life. To reject a part of it is to reject it all. In this case, there is riot the slightest doubt that usury is totally forbidden. Hence, to legalize it and build the life of society on it is tantamount to unbelief.

In Perfect Contrast with Usurers

In contrast to the preceding example of disbelief and wrongdoing, the *sūrah* presents the case of faith and righteousness, highlighting the essential attributes of the community of believers and the basis of the economic system which disavows

usury and has the firm foundation of the important institution of *zakāt:* "*Those that have faith and do good deeds, attend regularly to their prayers and pay zakāt, shall have their reward with their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 277)

The main element in this verse is that of *zakāt* which denotes giving willingly, expecting nothing from any human being in return. The verse also introduces a feature of the community of believers and one of its important pillars, before it goes on to describe the total reassurance, tranquillity and happiness such a community enjoys.

The institution of *zakāt* represents the foundation of a caring, sympathetic and supportive society, which has no cause to resort to usury in any aspect of its life. The image of *zakāt* has faded somewhat in the minds of those unfortunate generations of Muslims who have had no experience of life under Islam. They have not seen Islamic laws, ethics and principles shaping the daily lives of people, and creating a healthy, virtuous, decent society. They have had no experience of how *zakāt* works in practical terms to bring about economic growth and prosperity as a reward for individual diligence and honest cooperation.

These generations have become accustomed to the odious effects of the materialist usurious system, which promotes greed, unashamed self- interest and social antagonism. They have come to accept that economic and commercial life cannot be run without usury, although under this system, the transfer of wealth is often accompanied by exploitation, while people who have no money have no security in life, and industry and commerce become hostages to the moneylenders.

To contemporary eyes, *zakāt* appears as an outdated form of charity that does not fit into modern economic or financial systems. Yet *zakāt* is paid out by people educated by Islam to implement Islamic laws and regulations, and to establish a system that can hardly be imagined by those who have never experienced it. *Zakāt* is levied by Muslim authorities at the yearly rate of 2.5 per cent on liquid money (or 5-10 per cent on crops, and 20 per cent on mineral resources), as an incumbent duty rather than optional charity. The authorities then distribute the proceeds among those in need in the community as widely as possible, in order for the beneficiaries to meet their basic necessities and alleviate their hardships. Debtors who are insolvent are helped with *zakāt* money to settle their debts, whether these are personal or commercial. Poor people are helped to find appropriate work that makes them self-sufficient.

The form in which such a system operates is of secondary importance: what is important is the spirit in which the system and society come together and function as a whole to bring about genuine care and effective social welfare.

God promises those who conduct themselves according to the ethics and

principles of faith, in submission to the divine will and in a spirit of cooperation, that they *"shall have their reward with their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 277)

On the other hand, God threatens the advocates of usury that theft will live in fear, confusion, and insecurity, and that their society were to disintegrate. History has witnessed the benefits of the Islamic, non_ usury system and its results in human society. It is today witnessing the disastrous and oppressive effects of the usury-based system that forms the core of contemporary civilization. We Muslims only wish we could make others see the force of our argument against the evils of usury, but all we can do is present the facts and hope that people will listen and heed our warnings and advice.

Total War against the Usurers

Having evoked an atmosphere of calm and peace, the *sūrah* makes a final passionate appeal to the true believers to eradicate usury and rid their society of it completely, or face a relentless war waged against them by none other than God Almighty and His Messenger: "*Believers, fear God and give up what remains outstanding of usury gains, if you are true believers. If you do not, then war is declared against you by God and His Messenger. If you repent, however, you shall remain entitled to your principal. Thus, you shall commit no wrong, nor suffer any wrong yourselves."* (Verses 278-279)

This passage makes the rejection of usury a condition of true faith; Muslims shall only become true believers when they fear God and reject any usury money they are owed. No faith could be claimed, even as a mere form of words, without total acceptance of, and submission to, God's will and command. The Qur'ān is very explicit on this point and leaves no room for confusion. There is no chance for anyone wishing to declare their faith and belief in God verbally, only to adopt a way of life that is the antithesis of His laws and teachings. Those who separate religious belief from their daily affairs of life are deluding themselves if they think they are true believers, no matter how much they insist they are, or how regularly they observe religious rituals.

The *sūrah* exonerates Muslims of all previous dealings involving usury, making it clear that there would be no appropriation of property previously gained or acquired through usurious transactions. Islam has laid down an important rule that everything is permissible unless it is specifically declared otherwise, and no rules may be retroactively applied. Everything done previously would be suspended and left to God to judge and assess. Thus Islam ensured that the transition to a usury-free system was smooth and with little, if any, social or economic difficulty. Only very recently has this approach been incorporated into modern laws. Islamic legislation

deals with practical human situations, while always aiming at purifying society and directing and promoting human progress and prosperity.

God also makes it a condition that Muslims, in order to be true believers, should accept this legislation and implement it in their daily life as soon as they become aware of it. The *sūrah* also stresses that fear of God and consciousness of Him are a necessary corollary to following His teachings and implementing His laws. This fear of God is an important safeguard for the enforcement of the laws and regulations, reinforcing the guarantees inherent in them. Thus, Islamic laws have a far better chance of being obeyed and adhered to than man-made laws. The enforcement of the latter is solely contingent upon the force of external authority which is easily evaded and circumvented in the absence of the inner incentives and convictions of a vigilant conscience.

The alternative is far more gloomy. *"If you do not, then war is declared against you by God and His Messenger. If you repent, however, you shall remain entitled to your principal. Thus, you shall commit no wrong, nor suffer any wrong yourselves."* (Verse 279) What a terrifying prospect! How could the frail and powerless humans even contemplate going to war against God and His Messenger; the outcome is a foregone conclusion.

Following the revelation of these verses, the Prophet instructed his governor in Makkah to use force against the wealthy clan of al-Mughīrah if they refused to cease dealing with usury. In his farewell speech in `Arafāt, about three months before his death, the Prophet also declared that all usury originating in pre-Islamic times, and still due at the time, is written off, starting with that of his own uncle al- `Abbās. This crucial step in the transition into a fully-fledged, mature Islamic life came only many years after the start of the Islamic mission, when the ideological and ethical foundations of the society were firmly established.

In that speech, the Prophet said: "Every usury gain accrued according to the un-Islamic practices of *jāhiliyyah* is under my feet, and I start with that of al-`Abbās." He did not, however, order repayment of any gains made during the pre-Islamic era.

Every Muslim ruler is required to combat usury and those who pursue it, even if they declare themselves to be Muslims. The Prophet's successor, Abū Bakr, used force to crush groups of Muslims who, following the Prophet's death, refused to pay the *zakāt* they owed to the Muslim treasury, without renouncing any other precepts or obligations of Islam. A person who refuses to implement God's law, in daily life is certainly not a Muslim.

The war that God and His Messenger are ready to wage against the perpetrators of usury is much wider in concept than the use of armed force by a worldly ruler. It is a warning of a total condemnation of all societies adopting usury as a basis for their social and economic life. It is a war affecting the psychological, economic, and

emotional aspects of life. It is the social strife, acrimony and antagonism brought about by the exploitative usurious system, as well as the regional and international conflict and instability suffered in consequence by all humanity. It is a war instigated, directly or indirectly, by moneylenders and international capitalists who, like sharks, prey on corporations, businesses, industries, commerce, governments and states. Their predatory activities are the root cause of runaway inflation, high taxation, crippling international debts, recession and poverty, all of which are capable of starting wars and fuelling bloodshed and destruction all over the world. The outcome of this vicious circle of misery is economic deprivation, moral degradation, social disintegration and the inevitable collapse of human civilization.

It is a relentless war that spares nothing, and it is currently eating into the very fabric of human society as a result of the domination of the usury-based capitalist system, even though this is registering astronomical levels of industrial production and material consumption. This unprecedented industrial and material success should have ensured man's happiness, progress and well-being, but it has proved suffocating and destructive for all mankind, except for the small section of privileged financiers and capitalists, who are relatively unaffected by this misery and suffering.

Nevertheless, as it once called on that first community, Islam continues to call on every generation of mankind to desist from the evil of usury and adopt clean and wholesome monetary and commercial practices, assuring them that: *"If you repent, however, you shall remain entitled to your principal. Thus, you shall commit no wrong nor suffer any wrong yourselves."* (Verse 279)

The objective of the persistent campaign against usury is to rid human society of this universal evil and take life back to God's pristine way, that humanity may be spared the psychological, moral and social effects of the exploitation and injustice that inevitably set in under a usury-based socio-economic system.

Recovery of the principal capital in commercial dealings cannot be said to be unfair to either lender or borrower. There are countless legitimate ways and means for investment, growth and development of capital, employing one's own entrepreneurial skills or by working in partnership with others, in which all parties proportionately share in the loss and profit of the enterprise. These would include many profitable and equitable forms of business such as trading in shares of companies whose profits are fairly distributed among the shareholders, cooperative banks that invest in commercial and industrial projects and share profits and losses among depositors, rather than give a fixed rate return on deposits — such banks would be entitled to charge appropriate service or management fees.

Kind Treatment of Insolvent Debtors

This passage dealing with lending and borrowing is concluded with advice on how to deal with insolvent debtors. In such cases, the solution would not be to impose further penalties in lieu of deferred payment, but the debtor should be granted a reprieve until he is able to settle his debt, or the lender should be magnanimous enough to write off the debt completely. *"If [the debtor] is in straitened circumstances, grant him a delay until a time of ease. And if you waive [the debt entirely] as a gift of charity, it will be better for you, if you but knew it."* (Verse 280)

The words evoke an atmosphere of tolerance and benevolence. They provide a respite from the harshness and severity of greed and selfishness. They call for clemency and compassion on the part of creditor and borrower, as well as by society as a whole.

These words may not make a great deal of sense to those 'rationalists' who apply purely materialistic criteria. It makes even less sense to moneylenders, individuals as well as faceless institutions, that justify their exploitative and extortionate practices on utterly amoral and inhuman principles and considerations. These Qur'ānic exhortations may never reach their hearts. But, as believing Muslims, we recognize that these are words of truth that are certain to bring about happiness and security for all mankind: *"If [the debtor] is in straitened circumstances, grant him a delay until a time of ease. And if you waive [the debt entirely] as a gift of charity, it will be better for you, if you but knew it."* (Verse 280)

Under Islam, a debtor is never put under duress by either the creditor or the law, but is always given another chance to settle his debt. Furthermore, society at large will not stand idly by when a borrower is suffering genuine hardship because of his indebtedness. God calls on the creditor to willingly waive the debt, and if' he does so it will be good for him and for the debtor, and for the welfare and cohesion of the community as a whole.

The abolition of usury would lose much of its purpose if the creditor were allowed to harass and squeeze the debtor while he was not able to settle the debt. Thus the *sūrah* urges that he should be given time to settle, and advises the creditor to waive the debt, in full or in part. Other Qur'ānic statements (9: 60) specify that insolvent debtors, who borrow money for legitimate purposes and are unable to pay it back, qualify for help from *zakāt* funds to clear their liabilities and alleviate their situation, provided that their debts were incurred for legitimate purposes.

Then, in a highly inspiring comment, the *sūrah* recalls the fearful Day of Judgement when people shall stand defenceless before God to account for their actions. These words cannot fail to move a thoughtful and conscientious person to write off any money he might be owed by some helpless borrower. *"Fear the day when you shall all return to God; when every soul shall be repaid in full for what it had earned, and*

none shall be wronged." (Verse 281)

The day to be feared is awesome indeed. Believers' hearts dread the events of that day when all will be made to stand in front of God to face the reckoning of their deeds. This verse serves as a fitting comment on a passage devoted to the liquidation of past unfair dealings.

This fear is the powerful 'voice within' which Islam kindles in the deepest recesses of people's minds and hearts to act as a potent guiding force in life. Thus Islam proves yet again how vigorous, well-integrated, practical and merciful it is, and demonstrates that its overriding aim and objective is the happiness and well-being of man as an individual, and of human society as a whole.

20
Safeguards for Financial Transactions

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا تَدَايَنتُم بِدَيۡنٍ
إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمّٗى فَٱكۡتُبُوهُۚ وَلۡيَكۡتُب
بَّيۡنَكُمۡ كَاتِبُۢ بِٱلۡعَدۡلِۚ وَلَا يَأۡبَ كَاتِبٌ
أَن يَكۡتُبَ كَمَا عَلَّمَهُ ٱللَّهُۚ فَلۡيَكۡتُبۡ
وَلۡيُمۡلِلِ ٱلَّذِي عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَلۡيَتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّهُۥ
وَلَا يَبۡخَسۡ مِنۡهُ شَيۡـٔٗاۚ فَإِن كَانَ ٱلَّذِي
عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡحَقُّ سَفِيهًا أَوۡ ضَعِيفًا أَوۡ لَا
يَسۡتَطِيعُ أَن يُمِلَّ هُوَ فَلۡيُمۡلِلۡ وَلِيُّهُۥ
بِٱلۡعَدۡلِۚ وَٱسۡتَشۡهِدُواْ شَهِيدَيۡنِ مِن
رِّجَالِكُمۡۖ فَإِن لَّمۡ يَكُونَا رَجُلَيۡنِ فَرَجُلٞ
وَٱمۡرَأَتَانِ مِمَّن تَرۡضَوۡنَ مِنَ ٱلشُّهَدَآءِ أَن
تَضِلَّ إِحۡدَىٰهُمَا فَتُذَكِّرَ إِحۡدَىٰهُمَا
ٱلۡأُخۡرَىٰۚ وَلَا يَأۡبَ ٱلشُّهَدَآءُ إِذَا مَا دُعُواْۚ
وَلَا تَسۡـَٔمُوٓاْ أَن تَكۡتُبُوهُ صَغِيرًا أَوۡ كَبِيرًا
إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلِهِۦۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ أَقۡسَطُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَأَقۡوَمُ
لِلشَّهَٰدَةِ وَأَدۡنَىٰٓ أَلَّا تَرۡتَابُوٓاْۖ إِلَّآ أَن
تَكُونَ تِجَٰرَةً حَاضِرَةٗ تُدِيرُونَهَا
بَيۡنَكُمۡ فَلَيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ جُنَاحٌ أَلَّا
تَكۡتُبُوهَاۗ

Believers, when you contract a debt for a fixed term, put it in writing, and let a scribe write it down for you with fairness. No scribe shall refuse to write as God has taught him. So he shall write. And let the one who incurs the liability [i.e. the debtor] dictate; and [in so doing] let him be conscious of God his Lord and not diminish anything of it. If he who incurs the liability is weak of mind or body, or unable to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate with fairness. Call in two of your men to act as witnesses, but if two men are not available, then a man and two women, whom you consider acceptable as witnesses, so that if either of them should make a mistake, the other will remind her. Witnesses must not refuse when they are called in. Do not be averse to writing down debts, be they small or great, together with the time when they fall due; that is more equitable in the sight of God and lends greater credence to the testimony and is more likely to spare you any doubt. In the case of a commercial deal transacted on the spot, you shall incur no sin by not writing it down.

وَأَشْهِدُوٓاْ إِذَا تَبَايَعْتُمْ ۚ وَلَا يُضَآرَّ كَاتِبٌ وَلَا شَهِيدٌ ۚ وَإِن تَفْعَلُواْ فَإِنَّهُۥ فُسُوقٌۢ بِكُمْ ۗ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ ۖ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٨٢﴾

Have witnesses when you make business deals; but let no harm be suffered by scribe or witness; if you do [harm them], that is sinful on your part. Have fear of God, for it is God who teaches you. God has knowledge of all things. (282)

۞ وَإِن كُنتُمْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ وَلَمْ تَجِدُواْ كَاتِبًا فَرِهَٰنٌ مَّقْبُوضَةٌ ۖ فَإِنْ أَمِنَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا فَلْيُؤَدِّ ٱلَّذِى ٱؤْتُمِنَ أَمَٰنَتَهُۥ وَلْيَتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّهُۥ ۗ وَلَا تَكْتُمُواْ ٱلشَّهَٰدَةَ ۚ وَمَن يَكْتُمْهَا فَإِنَّهُۥٓ ءَاثِمٌ قَلْبُهُۥ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٨٣﴾

If you are on a journey and cannot find a scribe, pledges taken in hand [are sufficient]. If you trust one another, let him who is trusted fulfil his trust, and let him fear God, his Lord. You shall not withhold testimony, for he that withholds testimony is sinful at heart. God has full knowledge of all you do. (283)

لِّلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ وَإِن تُبْدُواْ مَا فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوْ تُخْفُوهُ يُحَاسِبْكُم بِهِ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَيَغْفِرُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٨٤﴾

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Whether you make known what is in your minds or conceal it, God will bring you to account for it. He will then forgive whom He wills and punish whom He wills. God has power over all things. (284)

Overview

Having condemned usury as an unhealthy, inequitable economic practice, the *sūrah* resumes by outlining provisions governing trade, loans, loan securities, and usury-free lending and transactions.

As one reads these verses, one cannot fail to marvel at the superb style of the Qur'ān, which combines precise legal language with eloquence and great literary merit. It achieves that delicate and elusive balance between clarity of meaning and pungency of expression, thereby gently but most effectively enhancing the appeal of the legal provisions to the religious conscience, without prejudicing the moral stance

of the text or the precision of the wording. In the case of commercial contracts, for instance, all potential influences are brought into play with respect to the two parties to the contract, the witnesses and the executors, taking great care to consider all eventualities. Each point is thoroughly dealt with before moving on to the next, thereby avoiding unnecessary repetition, superfluous expressions, or the labouring of any aspect of the topic under discussion.

In these highly legalistic discussions, the Qur'ān maintains the same quality of literary excellence and beauty as in those passages that deal with moral or religious exhortations. Indeed, it is even more so, because precision is of the essence in these cases and one inappropriate word could affect the whole meaning with unfortunate consequences. Yet in its pioneering role in establishing these principles almost ten centuries before civil and commercial laws, as legal experts would willingly admit, the Qur'ān achieves its objective of penetrating the human mind and heart with immense ease and elegance.

Loan Arrangement and Documentation

Let us now take a closer look at the principles that Islam establishes with respect to loans: "*Believers, when you contract a debt for a fixed term, put it in writing, and let a scribe write it down for you with fairness.*" (Verse 282)

The general rule, therefore, is that details of all fixed-term loans must be in writing, for reasons that will become clear later, and that a third party must do the recording in order to ensure total impartiality and fairness. The writer is required to record the agreed terms of the loan faithfully, without interference, bias or prejudice. He is obliged to do his job fully and competently as a duty to God who has blessed him with the ability to write, and for which he will be appropriately rewarded: "*No scribe shall refuse to write as God has taught him. So he shall write.*" (Verse 282)

Having established that the terms of loans should be committed to writing by an independent document writer, the *sūrah* goes on to explain how the writing should be carried out: "*... and let the one who incurs the liability i.e. the debtor] dictate; and [in so doing] let him be conscious of God his Lord and not diminish anything of it. If he who incurs the liability is weak of mind or body, or unable to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate with fairness.*" (Verse 282)

The party incurring the liability, the borrower, is the one to dictate to the writer, acknowledging the amount borrowed and his commitment to the terms and conditions of the loan, as a safeguard against any injustice to him. As the weaker party to the transaction, he would be less liable to alter the terms and conditions. This would reinforce the borrower's commitment to the liability. For, were the creditor to dictate, there would be no guarantee that he might not tamper with the

terms and conditions of the loan to his advantage. Furthermore, the *sūrah* appeals to the borrower's conscience to be scrupulous and faithful in dictating the terms of the loan. It goes on to advise that if the borrower is feeble-minded, under age, or unable to dictate through ignorance or an impediment of speech, or any other reason, his guardian, attorney or trustee, may do so on his behalf, showing the same, if not greater, scrupulous fairness.

The *sūrah* gives detailed instructions concerning the witnessing of the contract: *"Call in two of your men to act as witnesses, but if two men are not available, then a man and two women, whom you consider acceptable as witnesses, so that if either of them should make a mistake, the other will remind her."* (Verse 282)

For the contract to be valid, it must be witnessed by two men or, if these are not readily available, one man and two women, all of whom should be of good standing in the community and deemed *"acceptable as witnesses"* by both parties. The reason for recommending men witnesses in the first instance is that, in a Muslim society, the majority of marketplace attendants are normally men, since women, generally, do not have to seek work to earn a living and their main preoccupation is the family home and the raising of society's new generation. Nevertheless, if two men cannot be found to witness a contract, a man and two women will do. But why two women? Since this is a legal matter, the *sūrah* does not leave the answer to speculation; and explains: "*... so that if either of them should make a mistake, the other will remind her."* (Verse 282)

Such a mistake may occur for a number of reasons, such as lack of experience or knowledge, or failure to understand the subject matter or the ramifications of the contract. A woman's impulsive nature tends to make her impressionable and more easily influenced or swayed. This emotional, sympathetic nature is necessary and, indeed, advantageous for women in their role as mothers. Human nature being indivisible, it would be present whenever women are called upon to witness or judge anything requiring deliberation, reflection and strict impartiality. Having two women rather than one, provides a greater assurance that they will balance each other and provide an objective testimony.

The *sūrah* calls on people not to refuse to act as witnesses if invited to do so, as it did with the writer earlier, saying: *"Witnesses must not refuse when they are called in."* (Verse 282) It is an obligation, rather than a privilege, because it is a means of establishing justice and preserving rights. Witnesses must carry out their duty willingly, honestly and without any condescension or deference towards either of the parties.

The *sūrah* moves on to another, more general, aspect of legal and business transactions: "*Do not be averse to writing down debts, be they small or great, together with*

the time when they fall due; that is more equitable in the sight of God and lends greater credence to the testimony and is more likely to spare you any doubt." (Verse 282)

The text displays a remarkable perception of human nature, as people are often inclined to judge that certain small debt transactions are not worth writing down, but the *sūrah* stresses the fact that recording all debt transactions is seen by God as preferable and more fair. A written contract gives greater force to the testimony of the witnesses, since a written statement carries more weight than one based totally on memory, and it *"is more likely to spare you any doubt"*. Thus, the wisdom underlying these instructions becomes clear and they appear more convincing, practical and reassuring.

In spot trading, executed immediately and frequently, there is no need for writing dawn the details and the mere presence of witnesses will suffice: *"In the case of a commercial deal transacted on the spot, you shall incur no sin by not writing it down. Have witnesses when you make business deals."* (Verse 282)

At face value, the statement seems to allow the concession of not recording spot transactions while making it a condition that witnesses should be present; but, according to some considered opinion, the latter is strongly recommended rather than obligatory.

Nevertheless, the weightier view is that witnesses are necessary for spot trading as well.

The *sūrah* proceeds to specify the rights of contract writers and witnesses, assuring them of the protection they deserve: *"But let no harm be suffered by scribe or witness; if you do [harm them], that is sinful on your part. Have fear of God, for it is God who teaches you. God has knowledge of all things."* (Verse 282)

Scribes and witnesses should come to no harm in the course of fulfilling their obligations towards God, and any wrongdoing they may suffer would be a gross violation of God's law. This is a necessary precaution, for scribes and witnesses often incur the displeasure of one or the other of the contracting parties and must, therefore, be protected and reassured so that they fulfil their obligations fairly, honestly and with absolute objectivity.

Finally the *sūrah,* in keeping with the Qur'ānic way of igniting the inner powers of the human conscience, calls on believers to fear God and reminds them of His grace and favour in giving them knowledge and understanding, so that they may conduct their affairs in accordance with His will and guidance: *"Have fear of God, for it is God who teaches you. God has knowledge of all things."* (Verse 282)

The *sūrah* rounds off the subject of loans by dealing with the special case of borrowing money while on a journey, when scribes may be difficult to find. Under

these circumstances, to facilitate the transaction and ensure repayment of the loan, a verbal agreement is valid and binding provided a tangible article is given, and accepted, as security for the loan: *"If you are on a journey and cannot find a scribe, pledges taken in hand [are sufficient]. If you trust one another, let him who is trusted fulfil his trust, and let him fear God, his Lord."* (Verse 283)

Both creditor and borrower are trustees: the former entrusted with the security and the latter with the money he has borrowed, and they are both called upon to fulfil their trust and fear God, the ultimate master and ruler and judge over all.

We do not subscribe to the view advanced by some jurists that this ruling supersedes the one given in the preceding verse which makes the writing down of loan agreements obligatory. We believe that written documentation is essential except when the two parties are on a journey, in which case security must be provided for the loan and both parties are under an obligation to fulfil their part of the verbal agreement.

With all these principles in mind, the *sūrah* speaks about giving evidence in cases of litigation: *"You shall not withhold testimony, for he that withholds testimony is sinful at heart. God has full knowledge of all you do."* (Verse 283)

Transgression in this instance is attributed to the heart, where man's intention to do or not to do things originates, but the statement contains a veiled threat in stressing that *"God has full knowledge of all you do."* God will certainly recompense people according to His knowledge which uncovers any sinful intention.

Where Ultimate Authority Lies

The *sūrah* goes on to elaborate this point further, arousing deeper fear and consciousness of God, to whom everything belongs and who is aware of every thought, whether concealed or stated. He is sure to bring everyone to account, and He has full control over people's ultimate destiny: *"To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Whether you make known what is in your minds or conceal it, God will bring you to account for it. He will then forgive whom He wills and punish whom He wills. God has power over all things."* (Verse 284)

One of the most distinctive features of the Qur'ānic legislative approach is that it combines purely legalistic directives with emotional and spiritual exhortations. Thus, it links the rules to be implemented in human life to their source, the Creator of all life, within a context rich with fear of, and hope in, God Almighty. Islam moulds individual hearts and souls, as well as society as a whole, to which it addresses its legislation in order to achieve perfect harmony between morality and law, piety and authority. It is a code of life designed and laid down for man by his Creator, which

can never be rivalled by anything that man, with his limited knowledge, perception and life duration, can ever hope to produce or achieve. After all, human beings always differ in their views and perspectives. Why, then, does humanity try to run away from its Creator who knows best what suits His creation in every case, time or situation?

The modern wilderness in which humanity suffers today originated, in Europe with the breakaway from the oppression of the Church and the "God" it claimed to represent, and the shackles it put on human thought. The Church in Europe imposed steep taxes on ordinary people, levied tithes, sold indulgences for sins committed, and imposed very harsh tyranny. As people rose to challenge and discard these inhuman practices, they denounced the Church and rejected its teachings and authority. Regrettably, they did not stop there but went on to reject the "God of the Church" and His authority and to completely turn away from religion itself. That was a crucial development in human history that was to prove the cause of most of the misery and suffering seen in the world ever since.

The question is why should Muslims reject their religious way of life or turn away from it? Unlike the Church in Europe, Islam has been a religion largely associated with tolerance, progress and universal human well-being. The objective Islam has always worked for is to lighten the burden of human suffering and eradicate oppression, cruelty and injustice for all mankind. What reason, then, do we have to banish it from our life, imitating the West, when we have always been free from the problems that the West has had with the Church?

21
One Divine Message

ءَامَنَ ٱلرَّسُولُ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡهِ مِن رَّبِّهِۦ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَۚ كُلٌّ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَمَلَٰٓئِكَتِهِۦ وَكُتُبِهِۦ وَرُسُلِهِۦ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيۡنَ أَحَدٖ مِّن رُّسُلِهِۦۚ وَقَالُواْ سَمِعۡنَا وَأَطَعۡنَاۖ غُفۡرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيۡكَ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ٢٨٥

The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do the believers. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers. And they say, 'We hear and we obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord; to You we shall all return.' (285)

لَا يُكَلِّفُ ٱللَّهُ نَفۡسًا إِلَّا وُسۡعَهَاۚ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتۡ وَعَلَيۡهَا مَا ٱكۡتَسَبَتۡۗ رَبَّنَا لَا تُؤَاخِذۡنَآ إِن نَّسِينَآ أَوۡ أَخۡطَأۡنَاۚ رَبَّنَا وَلَا تَحۡمِلۡ عَلَيۡنَآ إِصۡرٗا كَمَا حَمَلۡتَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِنَاۚ رَبَّنَا وَلَا تُحَمِّلۡنَا مَا لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِۦۖ وَٱعۡفُ عَنَّا وَٱغۡفِرۡ لَنَا وَٱرۡحَمۡنَآۚ أَنتَ مَوۡلَىٰنَا فَٱنصُرۡنَا عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٢٨٦

God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear. In its favour shall be whatever good it does, and against it whatever evil it does. Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden such as that You laid on those before us. Our Lord, do not burden us with what we do not have the strength to bear. Pardon us, and forgive us our sins, and bestow Your mercy on us. You are our Lord Supreme; grant us victory against the unbelievers. (286)

Overview

These two verses make up the final passage of this comprehensive and remarkable *sūrah,* the longest in the Qur'ān. Its subject matter covers a wide range of issues and fundamental Islamic concepts, rules and principles. It outlines the nature and role of the Muslim community in the world, and identifies its enemies and detractors, their

attitudes and the methods they use to undermine and weaken it, and the means the community has to use in order to combat their intrigues and thwart their schemes. The *sūrah* then elaborates on the nature and scope of man's role in the world, as well as his weaknesses and shortcomings.

These closing verses give a concise and appropriate summary of the major themes of the *sūrah,* and form an inspiring conclusion to its grand message.

The *sūrah* opened with the statement: *"This is the Book; there is no doubt about it, a guidance for the God-fearing. Those who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, observe prayer and give of what We bestow upon them. Those who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. Those follow their Lord's guidance, and they shall surely prosper." (Ver*ses 1-5)

Throughout the *sūrah* we have found frequent references to the recognition and endorsement by Islam of all divine messages revealed to earlier prophets and messengers. Now the *sūrah* gives the final summation: *"The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do all the believers. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His Books, and His Messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers."* (Verse 285) The two passages coalesce beautifully as if to form the frame of a single work of art.

The *sūrah* covers quite extensively many of the laws and rules governing all aspects of personal and communal life. It has described at length the excesses and the impertinence of some Israelite communities. Here it concludes with a clear statement regarding the fulfilment, or otherwise, of one's obligations in this life. It stresses that God neither wishes to overburden the believers who uphold the faith; nor to favour them with any concessions or privileges, as some Israelites had claimed for themselves. Nor does He leave them to their own devices. *"God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear. In its favour shall be whatever good it does, and against it whatever evil it does."* (Verse 286)

The *sūrah* has related various episodes of Israelite history, pointing out the grace God accorded them and how some of them had received that grace with insolence and ingratitude, for which they had to pay a heavy price amounting, in certain cases, to their own lives. Here it concludes with a moving and passionate prayer in which believers plead with God Almighty: *"Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden such as that You laid on those before us. Our Lord, do not burden us with what we do not have the strength to bear. Pardon us, and forgive us our sins, and bestow Your mercy on us. You are our Lord Supreme; grant us victory against the unbelievers."* (Verse 286)

The *sūrah* has instituted *jihād* and generous donations for God's cause to combat aggression. It ends with believers seeking God's help and support, saying: *"You are*

our Lord Supreme; grant us victory against the unbelievers." (Verse 286)

These concluding verses are precisely formulated, and every word has its place and significance in the text. Taken as a whole, they reflect the central aspects of faith and define the position of believers, their relationship with God and their perception of His will and purpose in the world, which they accept and willingly submit themselves to Him. The verses are a superb example of the excellence of the Qur'ānic style and approach, which remain fascinating even to those who are well acquainted with the Qur'ān. Let us now look more closely at these two verses.

One True Faith

> *The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do the believers. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers. And they say, 'We hear and we obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord; to You we shall all return.'* (Verse 285)

The Qur'ān refers to that privileged community of believers who are the archetype of faith, and to all succeeding communities modelled on their example. This community is honoured by, and greatly appreciates, being mentioned in the same breath as God's Messenger.

The Messenger's faith springs directly from the revelations he receives from God, the ultimate truth. It is a degree of faith that cannot be described except by one who has experienced it; it remains beyond comprehension for those mortals who have not experienced divine revelation and is, therefore, totally unique and exclusive to God's Messenger himself. That is why it is such an honour for ordinary believers to he mentioned side by side with God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* defines the nature and parameters of this faith. It is *a* comprehensive and universal faith, commensurate with the far- reaching and historic role the Muslim community is destined to inherit and take on in the world. It is a commitment that identifies humanity, throughout its history, as being of only two main groups: the believers who represent the party of God, and the unbelievers who constitute the party of Satan.

"*Each one of them believes in God...*" According to Islam, belief in God is the foundation of a Muslim's understanding of life, and of the code governing his life, morals, economic and all other activities. It means believing in God as the Supreme Being, the Lord of everything and the sole object of reverence and worship. He is the ultimate authority over man's conscience and behaviour in every single aspect of his life.

God has no partners in His Godhead and Lordship over the world. He is the Creator and the active ruler of the whole cosmos, and no other power interferes with His organization and running of the physical world or of life in it. He is the sole provider of life and sustenance for all creation. He is the only and ultimate cause of what befalls the world, without whose will and knowledge nothing, great or small, happens or comes into being in this world.

Nothing and no one but God Almighty should be adored and worshipped, in any sense of the word. God is the supreme authority to be obeyed, and all temporal authority is derived from Him, and from total adherence to His teachings and commands and the laws He lays down. An imperative of faith in God is submission to, and acceptance of, the principles and values He has set out for the moral, social, legal and economic spheres of life. Faith in this sense sets man free from control and manipulation by all other forces, powers and authorities, and from the fetters of obligation or submission to anyone or anything other than God Almighty.

"... and His angels..." This is an important aspect of belief in the unseen, the unknowable which lies beyond human perception or understanding, or, to use the Islamic term *ghayb,* as already discussed at the beginning of the *sūrah.* Man's ability to perceive and accept a world above and beyond the physical world whose existence he can discern and verify sets him above the rest of creation and confers on him his human qualities. This belief puts into proper perspective man's natural curiosity for what lies beyond the material physical world, which he instinctively and clearly perceives to exist. Without this clear perspective and vision, man resorts to myth and superstition, leading to imbalance and instability.

Angels are a fact of *ghayb* that humans cannot perceive by conventional sensory or intellectual means. But man has an instinctive urge to look beyond the world that he can see; and God, in His infinite wisdom, has seen to it that this natural and legitimate human urge is satisfied in order to save man the frustration and suffering he would otherwise inevitably encounter. There is sufficient evidence to show that those individuals and communities who have chosen to defy human nature and reject all notion of a world beyond have fallen victim to utterly farcical and fallacious superstitions that have blurred their vision, undermined their mental well-being, and turned their lives into a series of negative and destructive obsessions.

Like other aspects of *ghayb,* belief in the angels widens man's perception and understanding of the world around him. It is no longer restricted to what he can see and feel, which is only a small part of reality. He feels safer in the company of these faithful creatures, fellow believers in God's oneness, who pray constantly for man's redemption, and in the comforting thought that they are there to help and guide him spiritually. Furthermore, the mere knowledge of this fact is a blessing from God to those who believe in Him and His angels.

"... and His books and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers." According to the Islamic view, belief in God's books and messengers follows logically and naturally from belief in God Himself. To believe in God is to believe in the truth of all that is revealed by Him, and in the honour and integrity of all the messengers He has commissioned, and inn the unity of the source of the messages they have preached. A Muslim has no notion of discrimination between God's messengers. They all preached Islam in various versions, suited to the circumstances of the communities they addressed. Muĥammad, (peace be upon him), was the last and final of those Prophets and messengers who has delivered the final, complete and universal version of Islam, which will remain valid for the rest of time.

The Muslim community, therefore, inherits the legacy of God's religion on earth in its totality, which places a grave responsibility on Muslims. As bearers of God's banner on earth, they are the custodians of the greatest gift to mankind. Their mission is to promote and establish the Islamic order, and to stand up to chauvinistic, oppressive and totalitarian ideologies of all kinds, whenever they are advocated, anywhere in the world.

The Muslim community, or *ummah,* is undoubtedly the legitimate heir to the greatest treasure of guidance, light, confidence and fulfilment, as well as certainty and knowledge, ever made available to mankind. Those deprived of its benefits and blessings might as well be living in darkness and confusion. Their life is inevitably plagued with scepticism, cynicism, unhappiness, spiritual suffering and deprivation.

The history of mankind has seen countless individuals and communities deprived of the sustenance and happiness of faith. The agony and miserable experiences of many a sensitive and troubled heart have been most eloquently and passionately preserved for posterity in poetry, literature and art. There are those, however, who are immune to religious faith and have no desire for knowledge beyond the material world. They go through life with little or no humanity, hardly better than animals. They eat and survive and fend for themselves ruthlessly. They oppress, tyrannize and corrupt others in order to further their own interests and desires. They are despised by God and by their fellow human beings.

Human societies deprived of the grace and blessings of faith in God are miserable despite their affluence, barren despite their wealth, and restive despite their apparent freedom, security and peace. There are, even today, obvious examples of such unfortunate societies, a fact denied only by the arrogant.

The Ultimate End

Those who truly believe in God and His angels, books and messengers, know well that they shall return to their Lord, and so they turn to Him in obedience and

submission, seeking His mercy and forgiveness. "*And they say, 'We hear and we obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord; to You we shall all return.'*" (Verse 285)

This submission is an expression of their faith. They heed and obey every commandment received from God in affirmation of His oneness and in recognition of the validity of His order in every aspect of life. No submission can be sincere without adherence to God's guidance and implementation of His rule in every sphere. Man's faith cannot be complete if he turns his back on God's teachings and seeks moral, social, economic or political guidance elsewhere. Faith is a quality firmly entrenched in man's heart and is only given credence when expressed in actions.

With submission and obedience to the Lord comes a feeling of inadequacy and deficiency in paying one's dues towards God. Thus believers appeal to the merciful God to overlook their failures and shortcomings: "*... Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord...*" (Verse 285)

The appeal for forgiveness follows the assertion of total submission and obedience. It is then followed by certainty in one's fate here in this life and in the life to come. God's word is the final and ultimate truth; everything shall return to Him; He is omnipotent; His will is done and His power unchallenged; His forgiveness, mercy and grace provide the way to escape punishment for sins we commit.

"*To You we shall all return.*" (Verse 285) This statement implies belief in the hereafter, which, from the Islamic point of view, is another essential aspect of faith in God. Islam asserts that God has created man and made him His vicegerent on earth on the basis of a clear covenant encompassing all man's activities on earth. Throughout his earthly existence man is on probation. When his probation is over, he shall be judged and made accountable for his actions. Thus belief in the Day of Judgement and man's accountability for his deeds is a correlative of belief in God. This faith plays a central role in shaping and guiding a believer's conscience and behaviour, and his perception of values and consequences in this life. A believer will live in obedience to God, promoting good and supporting the truth, regardless of whether the result of his endeavour in this world is happiness or suffering, gain or loss, victory or defeat, recompense or deprivation, or even death. The reward he seeks for passing the test of life is in the hereafter. Were the whole world to stand in opposition to him in this pursuit, and were his very life to be threatened, it would not dissuade him. He is dealing directly with God Almighty, fulfilling his obligation towards Him and looking forward to the reward He has in store for him.

This short Qur'ānic verse encapsulates the basic concept of the unity and integrity of the Islamic belief. It is a simple and clear belief in the unity of God, His angels, His books and messengers, with no distinction among those messengers whatsoever,

based on total obedience and submission to God and an unshakeable faith in the Day of Judgement.

Such is Islam, a faith perfectly suited to epitomize the full and final divine message. It reflects the procession of faith which began with the creation of man and continued throughout the generations. It has been expounded and elucidated by messenger after messenger, according to the intellectual and social development of the recipient communities. With the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), the message is brought to full maturity and its complete unity is declared, leaving man with the task of understanding its principles and details, and implementing it in his life.

Islam is a religion that recognizes man as a unique being; neither animal nor inanimate, neither angelic nor Satanic. Islam takes a holistic, rather than a fragmented, view of man. It allows for his weaknesses as well as his strengths, treating him as an integrated being comprising a physical aspect with instincts, impulses and natural drives, and a discerning intellectual power, and a soul with spiritual passions and yearnings. It requires of man only such tasks as he is able to fulfil, maintaining that delicate balance between obligations and abilities, with fairness and without duress, satisfying the needs of body, mind and soul in perfect harmony. The corollary to that concept is man's freedom to choose and bear full responsibility for his choice.

Individual Responsibility

The *sūrah* continues: *"God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear. In its favour shall be whatever good it does, and against it whatever evil it does."* (Verse 286) It is within this framework of divine mercy and justice that a Muslim views, with total confidence and satisfaction, his obligations as God's vicegerent on earth, the challenges he faces in fulfilling those obligations, and the ultimate reward he receives. He is content in the belief that God is fully aware of his abilities and limitations, and will not overburden him or subject him to any duress or coercion. Not only does this fill a believer's heart with contentment and peace of mind, but it also inspires him to discharge his duties to the best of his ability. He is fully aware that any weakness he may experience is not because the task is excessive, but due to his own shortcomings, and this, in turn, motivates him to strengthen his resolve and strive for excellence in his actions.

The second part of the statement emphasizes individual responsibility for action: *"... In its favour shall be whatever good it does, and against it whatever evil it does."* (Verse 286) Every individual is accountable for his own actions. No responsibility can be transferred from one person to another, nor can any person come to the aid of

another in the matter of accountability. Once people appreciate this principle, each and every one of them becomes a positive and active force in society. They become responsible human beings ready to defend God's right over them, unwilling to concede it to anyone else. They will resist submission to temptation, tyranny, transgression and corruption, and submit their whole physical and spiritual being to God Almighty. Those who give in to powers other than God's, except those people subjected to duress or coercion, have only themselves to blame and shall have to face the full consequences of their actions.

On the Day of Judgement, no one shall intercede on behalf of anyone else, and everyone shall stand alone to face God's judgement. This inspires healthy individualism, spurring every member of society to fulfil his or her obligations towards the community, which derive from their obligations towards God. Individuals are obliged to share their wealth, labour and wisdom, and the responsibility to bring about good and fight evil and falsehood, and earn their respective reward individually and directly from God Almighty.

A Final Prayer

As the believers understand and appreciate the significance and implications of these principles, they make their earnest plea to God. The Qur'ān, in its fine and highly expressive style, quotes their moving, passionate prayer. The reader can almost see the multitudes of believers reciting in unison throughout the generations this prayer, evoked by a dual feeling of hope and fear: *"Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden such as that You laid on those before us. Our Lord, do not burden us with what we do not have the strength to bear. Pardon us, and forgive us our sins, and bestow Your mercy on us. You are our Lord Supreme; grant us victory against the unbelievers."* (Verse 286)

It is a prayer that clearly defines the relationship between the believers and their Lord. In its soft tone and poignant rhythm it implies an admission of weakness and helplessness, and a recognition of the need for God's aid, support, forgiveness and grace.

"Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong." (Verse 286) Error and forgetfulness are two defining characteristics of human behaviour. In recognition of this, a Muslim never boasts of his faults, nor deliberately exploits them, nor places himself above God's will, but always seeks God's help and turns to Him in repentance. The answer to this prayer is given by the Prophet who says: "God has pardoned my followers anything they do through a genuine mistake, forgetfulness or by compulsion." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī and others]

"Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden such as that You laid on those before us." (Verse

286) This plea stems from an appreciation of the gravity of the responsibility placed upon the Muslim community as heirs and custodians of God's message to mankind. It also reflects full absorption of the lessons and experiences of earlier nations who had received God's revelations, as related in the Qur'ān. We have seen, for example, earlier in this *sūrah* that the Israelites were castigated and penalized on several occasions, and in various ways, for their stubbornness and intransigence. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, we read that, for similar reasons, they were forbidden certain foods: *"To those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all animals that have claws; and We forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones. Thus did We requite them for their wrongdoing."* (6: 146) On a certain occasion, they were ordered to kill one another in atonement for their worship of the calf, as stated in Verse 54 of this *sūrah.* They were also forbidden to conduct any business or to hunt on the Sabbath.

Hence, believers appeal to God not to burden them in the same way as He imposed on earlier communities. The Prophet Muĥammad was sent with a tolerant and benevolent religion that is fully cognizant of human nature, and is aimed at relieving mankind of all the burdens and encumbrances placed upon them. The Prophet is told by God: *"We shall smooth your way to perfect ease."* (87: 8)

The heaviest, most arduous burden placed on mankind, which Islam came to lift, is man's submission and subjugation to man. This is manifested in one man's capitulation to the will or power of another, or to the power of clan or class. Submission to God alone is true emancipation and represents real freedom from this oppression.

Submission to God entails recognition of Him as the ultimate source of values, standards and laws. It liberates man from the hegemony and oppression of all political, social and religious institutions, and from the power of myth and superstition. It delivers him from the grip of his whims and desires and equips him to resist any ungodly power that seeks to subjugate him or control his life and destiny.

The plea reflects the believers' gratitude for the freedom God has provided, as well as their fear of relapse.

"Our Lord, do not burden us with what we do not have the strength to bear." (Verse 286) This is not an excuse for negligence or a justification for dereliction of duty, but a plea by the weak to the powerful, for consideration and forbearance. Ā conscientious believer does not wish to fail in serving his Lord and Creator, and so he asks for leniency and tolerance. While acknowledging his weakness, a true believer remains vigilant and tries to compensate for his shortcomings by seeking more of God's grace and forgiveness.

"Pardon us, and forgive us our sins, and bestow Your mercy on us." (Verse 286) This is the only true guarantee of success and deliverance. No matter how hard a man strives to live up to his obligations and responsibilities towards God, he will not fulfil them satisfactorily. God shows grace by treating man with mercy and forgiveness. `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, reported that the Prophet had said, "No man shall enter Paradise by virtue of his deeds alone." When asked, "How about you?" he replied, "Not even I, unless God bestows mercy on me." [Related by al-Bukhārī]

The essence of a believer's attitude towards God revolves around an unflinching effort to strive to the best of his ability, tinged with a feeling of deficiency, of not doing enough, and with genuine hope and confidence in God's mercy and benevolence.

The *sūrah* closes with a statement asserting that believers put their full trust in God to come to their help in establishing His order on earth and defending it against its foes. God is the source of their strength and their ultimate triumph.

"You are our Lord Supreme; grant us victory against the unbelievers." (Verse 286) These words encapsulate the essence of the *sūrah* as well as the faith of Islam. They reflect the mind of true believers and define the eternal relationship between them and their Supreme Lord.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol II

Sūrah 3

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **V**

Āl `Imrān **1**

Prologue *1*
The Early Years in Madinah 4
The Battle of Uĥud 9

1 Concepts Outlined *13*
Overview 16
The Cornerstone of the Islamic Faith 18
The Qur'ān and Earlier Revelations 22
Two Types of Revelation 24
A Lesson for the Discerning 27
False and True Comforts 29
Better Than All Comforts 32

2 Concepts Clarified *35*
Overview 38
The Ultimate Witness 40
When Prophets Are Killed 45
What God's Sovereignty Entails 48
An Unwelcome Confrontation 51

3 The Birth and Prophethood of Jesus (pbuh) *56*
Overview 61
God's Chosen Servants 63
A Child Dedicated to Divine Service 64
A Very Strange Birth 67
Preparation for a Special Event 69
A Miraculous Birth 71
Jesus: A Testimony to God's Free Will 73
Jesus Endorsing a Message 75
An Appeal for Help 78
Full Heavenly Reward 80
A Challenge to Stop All Argument 82
When There Is Nothing More to Say 84

4 The Heirs of Abraham's Faith *88*
Overview 93
A Dispute Over Abraham's Faith 96
A Deliberate Attempt to Conceal the Truth 99
A Dirty Tricks Campaign to Confuse Believers 101
A Transaction Ending in Ruin 104
When Men of Religion Become Corrupt 106
A Pledge Binding on All Prophets 109
Deliberate Rejection of the Truth 113

5 One God, One Faith *117*
Overview 121
The Beginning of a Long Debate 123
The First House for Human Worship 125

An Appeal in the Interest of Truth ... 128
A Warning Against Obeying Non-Muslims ... 130
Making Sure One's Way Is Right ... 132
Brotherhood After Hostility ... 135
The Role of the Muslim Community ... 138
Faces Shining with Happiness ... 141
A Quality Essential to the Muslim Community ... 142
The Fate of Deserters ... 145
Different Ways, Different Ends ... 147
The Sort of Friends Unbelievers Make ... 150

6 Lessons for All Muslim Generations ... 154
Overview ... 156
A Brief Account of the Battle of Uḥud ... 159
Old Loyalties Totally Disregarded ... 162
Glimpses of Muslim Dedication ... 165
Treatment of the Battle Events in the Qur'ān ... 168
Preparation for Battle ... 169
A Reminder of Past Victory ... 171
A Comprehensive Outlook ... 175
Usury: The Way to Inevitable Ruin ... 176
A Reward Worth Competing For ... 178
Man: Saint or Sinner ... 180

7 A High Price for Heaven ... 183
Overview ... 185
Unfailing Life Patterns ... 185
A Cycle of Fortune and Misfortune ... 187
A Careful Selection of Martyrs ... 189
Wishful Thinking in Contrast with Reality ... 192
Muḥammad: Man, Prophet and Messenger ... 194
Death and Reward ... 197
Lessons from the History of the Prophets ... 198

8 Forgiveness of a Disastrous Error ... 201
Obedience Bringing Utter Loss ... 203
Striking Fear in Enemies' Hearts ... 205
Victory So Near, Yet So Far ... 208
A Trial for the Faithful ... 210
Diverging Views of Life and Death ... 213

9 The Prophet's Message of Compassion ... 217
Distinctive Marks of the Prophet's Personality ... 218
Consultation: The Essence of Islamic Government ... 220
When God's Help Is Withdrawn ... 223
A Great Favour Done to Believers ... 226
The Purification of a Model Community ... 228
Idolatry and Human Dignity ... 230
Nationalism and Islamic Identity ... 232

10 Priorities Defined ... 235
God's Will and Man's Doing ... 237
The Fruits of Total Dedication to Islam ... 244
Nothing to Fear from Satan's Allies ... 246
How People's Actions Affect God ... 247
Why Disbelievers May Wield Power ... 250
The Lesson in a Nutshell ... 252

11 Main Issues Re-emphasised ... 263
Overview ... 265

Impudence That Cannot Be Equalled 267
A Drink to Be Tasted by All 270
In the Face of abuse and Hardship 272
Seeking Praise for Nothing 274

12 Issues Resolved *277*
Overview 279
Universal Evidence of Creation 280
A Passionate Prayer by True Believers 282
Prayers Answered and Obligation Defined 285
What Reward for a Long, Hard Struggle 287
Summing Up All Obligations 289

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	ʻ	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:		ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u
Long:		ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū
Diphthongs:				ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH 3

Āl `Imrān

(The House of `Imrān)

Prologue

The Qur'ān is the Book of Islam. It is the soul and *raison d'être* of the Islamic mission. It is the backbone and edifice of its existence. It is its guardian and protector; its expression and manifestation; its constitution and way of life. Once all is said and done, the Qur'ān is the fountain, and the reference point, from which Islam and Muslims draw the ways and means of their actions, their systems and approach, and the provisions for their journey in this life.

However, a vast chasm will continue to separate us from the Qur'ān unless we understand deep down in our consciousness that the Qur'ān was addressed to a living community that existed in real life. It dealt with genuine situations in the life of that community and interacted with human life in its true manifestation on this earth. It was the main factor in a tremendous battle within the human soul that took place on a specific part of our planet; a battle that teemed with changes, passions and responses.

This divide between our hearts and the Qur'ān will continue to exist as long as we recite or listen to it as though it were a collection of fanciful religious hymns, totally disassociated from the realities of daily life facing this being we call man, and this community we call Muslims. These verses were revealed to address living souls, actual realities and events, with real meaning. They did indeed guide those souls, realities and events in an effective and vigorous manner, bringing forth a particular tangible situation with particular characteristics in man's life, in general, and in the life of the Muslim community, in particular.

The Qur'ān's distinctive miracle lies in the fact that it was revealed to deal with the actual experience of a particular human community, at a specific and finite time in history. It led that community in a momentous battle that was to change the whole history of mankind. That notwithstanding, the Qur'ān continues to provide us with the competence and the capability to live life today, as though it were being revealed at this very moment to organise the affairs of the Muslim community, and its ongoing struggle against pervasive universal ignorance. It continues to lead Muslims in their struggle with their own souls and conscience and with the same vigour and down-to- earth spirit it displayed so long ago.

In order for us, today, to capture the Qur'ān's penetrating power, appreciate its latent vitality and receive the guidance it conveys to Muslims in every generation, we need to visualise the true nature of the earliest Muslim generation who received the Qur'ān for the first time. We need to perceive the Muslims of that generation as they went about their daily lives, facing up to events and developments in Madinah and the rest of Arabia, dealing with their enemies as well as their allies, and struggling against their own passions and desires. The Qur'ān was being revealed to deal with all that and to follow the progress of the Muslim community in their greatest battle — with their own souls, with those enemies poised to strike in Madinah, Makkah and the surrounding lands, and even beyond.

Indeed, we have to live with that pioneering community of Muslims and picture them in their downright humanity, their actual life and in their human predicaments. We ought to reflect on how the Qur'ān guided that community directly in their daily affairs as well as in their greater global aspirations. We have to see how the Qur'ān led those Muslims by the hand, step by step, as they stumbled and rose, deviated and returned to the true path, weakened and resisted, as they suffered and endured, as they climbed upwards slowly and painfully, striving and persevering, showing all their human characteristics, their weaknesses and capabilities.

In this way, we can feel that we are being addressed by the Qur'ān in exactly the same manner as that earlier Muslim community. We can realise that the humanity whose attributes we see and know and feel within ourselves is also capable of responding to the Qur'ān and benefiting from its guidance along the same true path.

Thus, we will find the Qur'ān actively working in the life of that Muslim community, but also working in our own lives as well. We will feel that as the Qur'ān is here with us today, so will it be with us tomorrow. It is not merely hymns or hollow rituals, far- removed from our changing reality; nor is it some historic record that has passed and been forgotten, having lost its efficacy and dynamic ability to interact with human life.

The Qur'ān is a reality with a perpetual existence akin to that of the cosmos itself;

the cosmos being God's visual "book" while the Qur'ān is God's recited "book". Each book is a testimony and a witness to the Creator, and a force in the world. The universe continues to move and fulfil the functions ordained for it by its Creator: the sun moves in its orbit and performs its role, as do the moon, the earth and all the stars and planets, unhindered by the passing of time or the changes affecting their role in the universe. Similarly, the Qur'ān has fulfilled its role towards humanity, and continues to exist in its original form. Likewise, as far as his true character and original nature are concerned, man has not changed. The Qur'ān is God's message to man. It is immutable because, despite the changes that may have taken place around him and despite the mutual effect between him and those changes, man has not changed or become a different being. The Qur'ān addresses man's basic being and his original nature which have remained the same. It is capable of guiding human life today and in the future because it is destined so to do. That is because it is God's last and final message and because human nature, like that of the physical universe, is constant and dynamic but never changing.

Would it not be laughable if the sun, for instance, were described as old or "reactionary" and hence it should be replaced by a new and more "progressive" star? Similarly, is it not also laughable for man to be considered antiquated and "reactionary" and his replacement by some other more "enlightened" being to rule the world be argued for?

It would also be ludicrous to say the same with regard to the Qur'ān, God's last and final message to mankind.

The *sūrah* under examination here covers a lively period in the history of the Muslims in Madinah, extending from the end of the famous Battle of Badr, in the second year of *Hijrah* (622 CE), to the aftermath of the Battle of Uĥud, a year later. It describes the circumstances and the atmosphere surrounding the events of that period, the impact of the Qur'ān on the life of that community, and how it interacted with the prevailing conditions, across all walks of life.

The force and vitality of the Qur'ānic text brings into sharp focus the images of that period, the life of the community, and the interactions and circumstances in which that life was engulfed. It penetrates deep into the Muslims' consciences, exploring their innermost thoughts, feelings and sensibilities; so much so that the reader feels those events in the same way that members of that community experienced them. If one closes one's eyes, one may begin to see — as I have seen — those Muslims going about their daily lives, hither and thither, with their smiling faces and serenity, but with enemies lurking all around. Those enemies were conspiring, spreading lies and suspicion, harbouring grudges, and rallying their forces for combat with the Muslims, for them to be defeated initially at Uĥud, but later to re-group and inflict heavy losses upon the Muslims. One can picture every

movement and every action that took place on the battlefield, and every inner or outward emotion and reaction that accompanied it. One can see the Qur'ān being revealed to counteract the conspiracy and the intrigue, to refute the lies and the allegations, to strengthen Muslim morale and bolster the Muslim position, to direct Muslim spirit and thoughts, to comment on events and actions and draw appropriate lessons, to establish and clarify concepts, to alert the Muslims to the treachery and deceit of their scheming enemies, and to provide them with an enlightened and judicious lead through the thorns, nettles and traps laid in their path.

Beyond that, the directives and exhortations contained in this *sūrah* remain eternal and universal, not restricted by time, place, or circumstance. The *sūrah* addresses the human soul and the Muslim community — today and in the future — and the whole of mankind, as though it is being revealed at this very moment. It deals with contemporary issues and current situations, because it deals with emotional and spiritual issues, events and feelings as though these were already taken into account within the context of the *sūrah.* Indeed, they would have been taken into account in the overall scheme of God, the omniscient, who has full knowledge of everything.

Thus, it becomes clear that the Qur'ān is the guiding light of Islam everywhere and at all times. It is the life code for every generation of Muslims whoever they may be, and their beacon along the way, century after century. For, it is God's last and final message to mankind in all ages.

The Early Years in Madinah

At the time of the revelation of this *sūrah,* the Muslim community began to settle in their new homeland, Madinah, the city of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and had gone some way into the state of affairs already described in our Introduction to *sūrah 2, al-Baqarah,* or The Cow (Vol. I, pp 9-16).

The Battle of Badr had already taken place, and the Muslims had been blessed with victory over the Quraysh. The circumstances concomitant with achieving that victory suggested a "miracle". This forced notable figures such as `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, a grand personality of the Khazraj tribe of Madinah, to suppress his pride, put aside his hatred for Islam, and contain his spite and envy towards the Prophet Muĥammad in order to assimilate into the Muslim community, albeit hypocritically. His only comment was: "This, Islam, is here to stay." He had come to accept that Islam was firmly established and its progress unstoppable.

This was how the seeds of the phenomenon known as hypocrisy were planted in Madinah, and which began to grow and spread. Before Badr, some people whose relatives had converted to Islam were obliged to pretend not to mind; some of the more prominent of these even pretended to have accepted Islam and joined the

Muslim community while, at the same time, they continued to harbour a grudge and animosity. They were ready to scheme against the Muslims and to seek the weaker points in the structure of the new community in order to undermine Muslim ranks and strength, satisfy their own prejudices and await the appropriate moment to strike their final blow, if possible.

The hypocrites found natural allies among the Jews of Madinah who had a similar or even stronger grudge and prejudices of their own towards Islam and the Prophet. Islam had posed a real and formidable threat to the status of the Jews among the Arabs of Madinah. It deprived them of the one reason they had to cause rancour and division between the two main Arab tribes of Madinah: the Aws and the Khazraj. Under Islam, people of the two tribes became "brothers and sisters", belonging to the same united side.

The Jews of Madinah were stifled and choked at the Muslim victory at Badr. From then on, they would use all their powers of intrigue, deceit and scheming to break Muslim ranks and throw doubt and confusion into Muslim hearts and minds; spreading rumours and allegations against Islam and against the Muslims personally.

Then came that episode with the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā` bringing all that animosity into the open. This they did, despite the agreements and covenants the Prophet Muĥammad had made with the Jews of Madinah following his arrival there in 622 CE.

On the other hand, in the wake of their defeat at Badr, the non- Muslim Arabs were growing increasingly bitter. They could no longer afford to ignore Muhammad's achievements or those of the Madinah camp; nor could they underestimate the threat posed to their trade, their status and their very existence in Arabia. They were, therefore, keen to eliminate that imminent threat before it was beyond their capacity to do so.

As the hatred and power of the enemies of Islam were reaching their peak, the Muslim camp in Madinah was still in its infancy. It was hardly a homogeneous community; there were the elites of the earlier Muslims of Makkah (the *Muhājirūn)* and Madinah (the *Anşār)* as well as individuals who were yet to mature. The community as a whole lacked any practical experience to be able to smooth away the rough edges in its composition and to present a clear image of Islam and the phase it was going through, or to express the sum and substance of its approach and obligations.

The hypocrites, headed by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, commanded a strong position in society. They maintained strong family and tribal ties. The Muslims, on the other hand, were yet to develop the understanding that Islam alone represented their

family and tribal relationships and the only bond that united them. A certain amount of dislocation could still be found within Muslim ranks due to the existence of hypocrite and dishonest elements and their influence on the destiny and future of the whole community, as we will see clearly when we come to review the verses in this *sūrah* relating to the Battle of Uĥud.

The Jews also enjoyed a strong position in Madinah as well as maintaining their economic ties and covenant alliances with its inhabitants. Their hostility was yet to become open, while the Muslims had yet to develop the feeling that their faith was the only covenant binding upon them, the sole symbol of their nationhood, and the basis of their behavioural and contractual dealings. They were yet to appreciate that ties and bonds, which clashed with their faith, would have no efficacy or validity. In this atmosphere, the Jews found openings for meddling, and for sowing doubts and confusion. There were Muslims who would listen to their talk and be influenced by it. There were Muslims even prepared to intervene with the Prophet on their behalf so as to spare them any possible penalty or punishment and to mitigate the harm they might cause the Muslim community. A stark example is that of `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy who spoke harshly to the Prophet in his plea on behalf of the Qaynuqā ' Jews.

The total and decisive victory of the Muslims at Badr, however, was achieved with minimum effort and cost. The small band of Muslims who joined that expedition were scantily equipped for armed conflict. Although they confronted a much larger and well- prepared Quraysh battalion, the latter were overcome swiftly and convincingly.

That victory, coming in the very first confrontation between the army of God and that of the infidels, was part of God's scheme of things, and we may be able to discern some of its underlying purpose today. Perhaps it was designed to reinforce and strengthen the fledgling religion of Islam, or to demonstrate its efficacy in the battlefield so that it could proceed and progress thereafter.

The Muslims, themselves, might have taken their victory for granted and considered that they would prevail at every stage of their ascent. After all, were they not believing Muslims and their enemies unbelievers? Was it not the case, then, that whenever the two camps met in battle, the Muslims would be certain of triumph.

The Divine principles governing victory and defeat are not so simplistic or naïve. There are prerequisites pertaining to mental preparation, organisational readiness, equipment and provisions, discipline and control, as well as mental and physical alertness. This is what God meant to teach them through the setback they suffered at Uĥud, as this *sūrah* portrays in vivid, breathtaking and meaningful terms. It identifies the behaviour of some Muslims as the reason for their defeat and delivers constructive lessons for both individuals and the community as a whole.

As we review the Battle of Uĥud, we can see that its lessons cost the Muslims enormous pain and sacrifice. They lost some of their dearest and most important members, including Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet Muĥammad's uncle. More serious and shocking than that, they saw God's Messenger sustain wounds to his forehead, break one of his teeth, fall into a ditch, and have the rings of his armour embedded in his cheek. Nothing could have been more horrific and distressing for the Muslims to witness.

The events of the Battle of Uĥud are preceded in the *sūrah* by a lengthy section completely devoted to a series of directives and exhortations aimed at an elaborate and crystal-clear statement of Islamic belief. It presents the principle of the oneness of God, or *tawĥīd,* in precise and unambiguous terms; it refutes the lies and suspicions propagated by Jews and Christians in Arabia, whether those emanated from their own deviation and false beliefs or those they aimed to sow in Muslim ranks so as to undermine their faith and break their unity and solidarity.

Several accounts identify verses 1-83 as being revealed in connection with a visit, during the ninth year of the Muslim calendar, to Madinah by a Christian delegation from Najrān in southern Arabia. However, I doubt if these verses were revealed in that year because their context and content indicate that they were received over the earlier part of the Madinah era, during the Muslim community's formative years. It was during that period that the Muslims were exposed to the largest part of Jewish and other intrigues, which affected both the development of their community as well as their individual behaviour.

However, whether we accept those reports or not, it is clear that the verses address Christian claims and allegations, especially those relating to Jesus (peace be upon him) and focus on the principle of oneness of God. The verses clear the Christian faith of the confusion and distortions that had crept into it, and call upon Christians to believe in the one true God identified in their own scriptures which the Qur'ān had come to confirm and endorse.

The section also contains references and reprimands addressed to the Jews. Specifically, it warns the Muslims against intrigues by their non-Muslim neighbours, especially the Jews of Madinah.

This section, delineated in this work as Part I, which represents about half of the *sūrah,* covers aspects of the confrontation between Islam and other religious beliefs existing in the Arabian peninsula at the time. This conflict was not merely theological, but rather represented the theoretical aspects of the wider confrontation between the developing Muslim community and its many antagonists who connived and schemed against it, and who strenuously sought to undermine the Islamic faith itself. The essence of that confrontation between the Muslim nation and its

opponents remains fundamentally the same today: secularism, international Zionism and modern-day Crusaders.

It is also clear from the text of the *sūrah* that the means and the ends of the confrontation remain the same. This confirms that the Qur'ān is the Book of Islam and the guidebook for the Muslim nation, now and in the future, as it was its reference during its formative years so long ago. In today's struggle, only those who are mentally unsound would reject the means that would bring certain victory and refuse to consult the Qur'ān or follow its guidance. Through weak-mindedness, carelessness or malice, those would be deceiving themselves and the Muslim nation, and rendering its enemies a great service.

The discourses and the accounts given in this part of the *sūrah* also expose the attitude of the Jews and Christians, peoples who have deviated from their own true Scriptures, towards the Muslim community and the new faith of Islam. (See, for instance, verses 7, 23, 65, 69-72, 75, 78, 98-9, and 119-20.)

It is clear from the numerous and pointed references that the instruments of war used against the Muslim community were not limited to swords and spears. First and foremost, Islam's enemies targeted the Muslim faith. They deployed deception and intrigue, spread false allegations, plotted and conspired. They aimed to dislodge Islam, the essence that had brought the Muslim community into being. They sought to undermine and destroy the Islamic faith, because they knew, as their counterparts know today, it was the mainstay of the community; the community is only defeated when its spirit of faith is defeated. Their enemies could do the Muslims no harm so long as the Muslims themselves held fast to their faith, depended on it, lived according to its principles, championed its banner, represented its true supporters, and proudly identified with it alone.

From this it is clear that the most evil of enemies are those who divert Muslims away from their faith and belief, and who lead them away from God's path or deceive them regarding the true identity of their enemies and their long-term objectives.

The struggle between the Muslim community and its enemies is, first and foremost, a struggle of faith and belief. Even when the struggle is over land or resources or economic gain or raw materials, winning the war of beliefs and ideas comes first. Long experience has taught Islam's enemies that they cannot prevail over the Muslim community as long as the latter adhere to their faith and religion and commit themselves to its system, remaining constantly vigilant. This is why Islam's enemies and their lackeys expend colossal energy and resources in order to deceive the Muslims and camouflage the real nature of the conflict. In this way they seek to get what they want, to dominate and exploit the Muslims, safe in the knowledge that

no faith or belief can motivate them.

Although its enemies today adopt more sophisticated means of intrigue against the Muslim community and use more advanced methods to sow doubts among its people and weaken their bonds, their fundamental objective remains unchanged: to lead the Muslims astray, away from their faith and their religion.

The Qur'ān, therefore, concentrated first of all on frustrating these noxious efforts. It would strengthen the Muslim community's belief in the truth it advocated; it would refute the lies and suspicions that the Jews and Christians spread about Islam; it would expound unequivocally, the grand concepts it promoted, impressing upon the Muslims the need to see the essence and value of their existence on this earth, and to appreciate their role and the role of the faith they uphold in shaping the history of mankind.

The Qur'ān warned the Muslims against their opponents' intrigue, exposed their clandestine schemes, dirty tricks and sinister aims. It identified this hatred towards Islam and Muslims as the result of the favour conferred by God for the great honour of conveying the message of Islam to the world.

The Qur'ān guides the Muslims by affirming the realities and criteria of power in this world, stressing the inherent weakness of their enemies and their disgrace in the eyes of God. It cites their infidelity and deviation from God's revealed messages and their slaying of their own prophets and messengers. It reassures them that God is on their side; He is One, the unmatched Supreme Ruler of everything, and He alone bestows power or takes it away. He will severely punish the faithless (who, in this context, are the Jews). He will humiliate them, just as He did the polytheist Arabs. (See verses 1-5, 10-13, 19, 26, 28, 68, 83, 85, 1003, 110-12, and 118-20.)

A number of facts arise from the concerted and diverse campaign depicted in these verses: Firstly; the extent to which the Jews of Madinah were prepared to go to subvert Islam and undermine the Muslim community, the depth of their hatred and the wide variety of means and methods they were willing to deploy. Secondly; the great impact the campaign had on individual Muslims, thereby calling for such extensive and detailed Qur'ānic coverage. Thirdly; that, after all these centuries, we still find the same antagonists perpetrating a similar campaign of vilification and demonisation against Islam and the Muslims all over the world. They continue to pose the main threat, and so God Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, has preserved the Qur'ān as a guiding beacon for subsequent Muslim generations to be able to identify their traditional enemies clearly and accurately.

The Battle of Uĥud

The second part of the *sūrah* deals exclusively with the Uĥud campaign, but also carries affirmations relating to the principles of Islam and its outlook, together with commands and exhortations on how to build the Muslim community on those principles. It reviews the facts and events of the campaign, and the feelings and thoughts generated by it, in vivid detail. It describes most accurately the state of the Muslim community at the time and its various constituents, as outlined at the beginning of this Prologue.

The link between this section and the preceding one is quite clear. It also attends to the articulation of the Islamic outlook — immediately and decisively in the heat of battle. It guides and counsels the Muslim community how to uphold their faith and to take on their obligations and responsibilities. It instructs the Muslims in the Divine rules and criteria regarding victory and defeat, complementing the lessons they had learned from their practical experience.

It is hardly possible, in this general Prologue, to do justice to this section of the *sūrah,* but we shall return to it at the appropriate point in the commentary.

The final section of the *sūrah* provides a summary of its main themes. It begins with a revealing reference to the physical world, God's observed book, and its inspiring effect on believing hearts. It continues with a serene and flowing invocation on behalf of those faithful hearts, recited with God's 'observed book' as a fitting backdrop. It says: "*In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for men endowed with insight, who remember God when they stand, sit and lie down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: 'Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory. Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire. Our Lord, him whom You shall commit to the fire, You will have condemned to disgrace. The evildoers shall have none to help them. Our Lord, we have heard the voice of one who calls to faith, [saying], "Believe in your Lord, "and we have believed. Our Lord, forgive us then our sins and efface our bad deeds and let us die with the truly virtuous. Our Lord, grant us what You have promised us through Your Messengers and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, You never fail to fulfil Your promise.'*" (Verses 190-4)

God's response comes next, citing the displacement, struggle and persecution suffered by the believers for the cause of God Almighty:

> *Their Lord answers them: "I will not suffer the work of any worker among you, male or female, to be lost. Each of you is an issue of the other. Therefore, those who emigrate and are driven out of their homes and suffer persecution in My cause, and fight and are slain [for it] — I shall indeed efface their bad deeds and admit them to gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God. With God is the best of rewards."* (Verse 195)

It is clear that these verses directly relate to the events and the aftermath of the Battle of Uĥud.

The *sūrah* then refers to those people who received earlier revelations, and to whom it devotes the whole of its first part. It reassures the Muslims that the revelation they received has not been rejected by all of those earlier communities, as some of them believe its teachings and attest to its veracity. It says: *"There are indeed among the people of earlier revelations some who believe in God and what has been bestowed from on high upon you and in what has been bestowed upon them, humbling themselves before God. They do not barter away God's revelations for a trifling price."* (Verse 199)

The *sūrah* closes with an appeal to believing Muslims to persevere, to forebear, and to hold fast to their faith and to fear God, a call that fits perfectly with the whole ambience of the *sūrah* and its many themes.

No introduction to the *sūrah* would be complete without understanding three broad themes whose constituent elements are dotted throughout it.

Firstly, the clear and precise statements made on the meaning of "religion" and "Islam". Religious faith, as defined and affirmed by God Almighty, is not a haphazard or irrational belief in the existence of God. There is only one form of belief in God and that is an absolute, definite and certain affirmation of the oneness of God, *tawĥīd*. He is a God to whom mankind submit, as do all other creatures in this world. He is the power that controls and oversees the affairs of mankind and of everything in existence. Nothing can exist or function without God Almighty, and none but Him has absolute power and authority over creation. Accordingly, the religion that God would approve of is Islam, which in this context means total and absolute submission to the Divine Being. Islam is to acknowledge God as the only source of guidance in all walks of life, to recognise His revealed Book, the Qur'ān, as the final arbiter and reference and to follow the Messenger to whom it was revealed. The Book, in its essence, is one and the same, and the religion, in its essence, is one and the same. It is Islam, in its realistic and practical meaning as perceived in the human mind and conscience and in man's daily affairs. By adopting this one religion, all believing followers of God's appointed Messengers, in their respective generations, fall into line as long as they believe in the oneness of God and in His absolute authority and submit to Him in all aspects of their life, without exception.

The *sūrah* highlights this theme, expanding upon it, in clear and emphatic terms, on more than thirty occasions. (See, for example, verses 2, 18-20, 23, 31-2, 52, 64, 67, 83, and 85.)

Secondly, the *sūrah* deals with the relationship between Muslims and God. It emphasises their full submission to Him and their total acceptance of, compliance with, and acquiescence in all that He had revealed. References to this theme will be

dealt with in full in their respective places in this *sūrah.* (See verses 7-8, 16-17, 52-3, 110, 113-14, 146-7, 172-3, 191-4, and 199.)

Thirdly, the Muslims are warned against seeking alliances with the unbelievers whose position and strength are shown to be of little consequence. It emphasises that alliances with the unbelievers, who do not adhere to God's Book or comply with the way of life He ordains, negate any presumed belief in God or ties with Him. Reference has already been made to this aspect, but since it is such a prominent feature of the *sūrah,* further amplification is given here. Some quotations which deal with this theme include verses 28-9, 69, 100-3, 111-12, 118, 149-51, and 196.

These three broad themes complement one another perfectly in presenting the Islamic outlook and the true concept of the oneness of God, *tawhîd.* The prerequisites of this concept in human life and in man's consciousness of God Almighty are clearly delineated as also the effect all this has on the Muslims' attitude towards the enemies of God.

When read in their proper place and context in this *sūrah,* these verses provide greater vigour and deeper meaning. They were revealed in the thick of battle; the battle for faith and belief. During both the internal battle raging within Muslim hearts and minds, and the battle taking place in their daily lives. Hence the *sūrah* has come to contain such extraordinary accounts of movement, inspiration and impact.

1
Concepts Outlined

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْحَىُّ ٱلْقَيُّومُ ﴿٢﴾

God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all. (2)

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنزَلَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةَ وَٱلْإِنجِيلَ ﴿٣﴾

He has revealed to you this Book with the truth, confirming what was revealed before it; and He has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel (3)

مِن قَبْلُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَنزَلَ ٱلْفُرْقَانَ ۗ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو ٱنتِقَامٍ ﴿٤﴾

before this as guidance for people. And He has revealed the Criterion (to distinguish the true from the false). Those who disbelieve in God's revelations shall endure grievous suffering. God is Mighty, able to requite. (4)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَيْهِ شَىْءٌ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ ﴿٥﴾

Nothing on earth or in the heavens is hidden from God. (5)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَآءُ ۚ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

It is He Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no deity save Him, the

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنْهُ ءَايَٰتٌ مُّحْكَمَٰتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَٰبِهَٰتٌ ۖ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَٰبَهَ مِنْهُ ٱبْتِغَآءَ ٱلْفِتْنَةِ وَٱبْتِغَآءَ تَأْوِيلِهِۦ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ۗ وَٱلرَّٰسِخُونَ فِى ٱلْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّآ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٧﴾

Almighty, the Wise. (6)

He it is Who has sent down to you the Book, containing verses which are clear and precise — and these are the essence of the Book — and others are allegorical. Those whose hearts have swerved from the truth pursue that part of it which is allegorical, seeking to create dissension and trying to give it an arbitrary meaning. None save God knows its final meaning. Those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it; it is all from our Lord." But only those who are endowed with insight take heed. (7)

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ رَحْمَةً ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْوَهَّابُ ﴿٨﴾

"Our Lord, let not our hearts swerve from the truth after You have guided us; and bestow on us mercy from Yourself. You are indeed the great Giver. (8)

رَبَّنَآ إِنَّكَ جَامِعُ ٱلنَّاسِ لِيَوْمٍ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُخْلِفُ ٱلْمِيعَادَ ﴿٩﴾

"Our Lord, You will indeed gather mankind together to witness the Day of which there is no doubt. Surely, God never fails to keep His promise." (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَن تُغْنِىَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَٰلُهُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَٰدُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمْ وَقُودُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٠﴾

As for those who disbelieve, neither their riches nor their offspring will in the least avail them against God; it is they who shall be the fuel of the fire. (10)

كَدَأْبِ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿١١﴾

Just like the cases of the people of Pharaoh and those before them: they disbelieved Our revelations; therefore, God took them to task for their sins. God's retribution is severe indeed. (11)

قُل لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ سَتُغْلَبُونَ وَتُحْشَرُونَ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ ۚ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمِهَادُ

Say to those who disbelieve: "You shall be overcome and gathered unto hell, an evil resting

place. (12)

﴿١٣﴾

قَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ ءَايَةٌ فِى فِئَتَيْنِ ٱلْتَقَتَا ۖ فِئَةٌ
تُقَـٰتِلُ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَأُخْرَىٰ كَافِرَةٌ
يَرَوْنَهُم مِّثْلَيْهِمْ رَأْىَ ٱلْعَيْنِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ يُؤَيِّدُ
بِنَصْرِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ ۗ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَعِبْرَةً
لِّأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَبْصَـٰرِ ﴿١٣﴾

"You have had a sign in the two armies which met in battle. One was fighting for God's cause, the other an army of unbelievers. They saw with their very eyes that the others were twice their own number. But God strengthens with His succour whom He wills. In this there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see." (13)

زُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ ٱلشَّهَوَٰتِ مِنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ
وَٱلْبَنِينَ وَٱلْقَنَـٰطِيرِ ٱلْمُقَنطَرَةِ مِنَ
ٱلذَّهَبِ وَٱلْفِضَّةِ وَٱلْخَيْلِ ٱلْمُسَوَّمَةِ
وَٱلْأَنْعَـٰمِ وَٱلْحَرْثِ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ مَتَـٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ
ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَٱللَّهُ عِندَهُۥ حُسْنُ ٱلْمَـَٔابِ

Alluring to man is the enjoyment of worldly desires through women and offspring, heaped-up treasures of gold and silver, horses of high mark, cattle and plantations. These are the comforts of this life. With God is the best of all goals. (14)

﴿١٤﴾

۞ قُلْ أَؤُنَبِّئُكُم بِخَيْرٍ مِّن ذَٰلِكُمْ ۚ لِلَّذِينَ
ٱتَّقَوْا۟ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّـٰتٌ تَجْرِى مِن
تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَـٰرُ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا وَأَزْوَٰجٌ
مُّطَهَّرَةٌ وَرِضْوَٰنٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ
بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿١٥﴾

Say: Shall I tell you of better things than these? For the God- fearing there are, with their Lord, gardens through which running waters flow where they shall dwell forever, and wives of perfect chastity, and God's good pleasure. God is mindful of His servants, (15)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَآ إِنَّنَآ ءَامَنَّا فَٱغْفِرْ
لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَقِنَا عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

those who say: "Our Lord, we have indeed accepted the faith. Forgive us our sins and keep us safe from the torments of the fire." (16)

ٱلصَّـٰبِرِينَ وَٱلصَّـٰدِقِينَ وَٱلْقَـٰنِتِينَ
وَٱلْمُنفِقِينَ وَٱلْمُسْتَغْفِرِينَ
بِٱلْأَسْحَارِ ﴿١٧﴾

They are the patient in adversity, the true to their word, the devoted who spend in the cause of God, and those who pray for forgiveness at the time of

dawn. (17)

Overview

Based on the reports that verses 1-83 were revealed in relation to the visit by a Christian delegation from Najrān in Yemen to Madinah and their debates with the Prophet Muĥammad about the Prophet Jesus, one would expect these opening verses to form part of those debates. However, the reports give the date of that visit as being the ninth year of the Muslim calendar which dates from the migration, *Hijrah,* in 622 CE, of the Prophet Muĥammad from Makkah to Madinah. The ninth year of *Hijrah* is also known as "the Year of Delegations" during which a succession of delegations from various parts of Arabia, having seen the power and influence of Islam spread throughout Arabia and beyond, arrived in Madinah to pay homage to the Prophet Muĥammad or to conclude agreements with him or find out more about his mission.

As already pointed out, I feel that the subject matter of these verses and their approach to the subject favour the opinion that they were revealed much earlier in the Madinian period. Accordingly, I am more inclined to conclude that the debates with the people of earlier revelations (i.e. the Jews and Christians), the refutation of their distorted beliefs, the doubts they deliberately spread about the Prophet Muĥammad and the faith of Islam, as well as the subsequent warnings and reassurances addressed to the Muslims, were not directly connected with the Najrān delegation in the ninth year of *Hijrah.* Other and earlier occasions must have inspired the revelation of these verses.

We now continue to take a general look at these verses as Qur'ānic arguments addressed to the people of earlier revelations but not directly linked with that event which came at a much later date.[1]

These verses, as has already been pointed out, present the on-going and fundamental struggle between the Muslim community and its belief, on the one

[1] In his commendable book, *The Life of the Prophet: a version based on the Qur'ānic text,* Muĥammad `Izzat Darwāzah says: "The reports suggest that the (Najrān) delegation arrived in Madinah during the first quarter of the Madinian period (i.e. the first two and a half years)." I am not sure, however, what reports he uses to arrive at this date. All the accounts I have seen give the ninth year as the date and mention the delegation of Najrān as only one of several other delegations (who, as is well-established, arrived during the ninth year of Hijrah, known as "the Year of Delegations"). Indeed, Ibn Kathīr in his commentary, does mention the possibility that the Najrān delegation could have arrived before the campaign of Ĥudaybiyyah (in 6 AH, 628 CE) but he does not give his sources or evidence for such a suggestion. The suggestion that the verses were revealed in connection with the Najrān delegation is, at any rate, concomitant with the likelihood that the delegation arrived before Ĥudaybiyyah; in other words, if one is true, then so is the other. But if we take the numerous reports that give the date of the delegation as the ninth year of *Hijrah,* we have no alternative but to distinguish between the verses and the occasion on which the reports claim they were revealed.

hand, and the people of earlier revelations and their beliefs, on the other. It is a struggle that has never ceased since the advent of Islam, and specifically since its emergence and the establishment of its state in Madinah. The Qur'ān documents this encounter, in which the unbelievers and the Jews of Madinah emerged as close allies, in a brilliant and succinct style.

It would hardly be surprising that certain Christian priests from distant parts in Arabia should, in one way or another, participate in that controversy. Nor is it implausible that some of them, whether in groups or as individuals, would have gone to Madinah to take part in debates on the controversial aspects of the difference between their distorted beliefs and the beliefs of the new faith, based on the concept of God's absolute oneness, especially the identity and nature of the Prophet Jesus (pbuh).

The opening verses of the *sūrah* emphasise the parting of the ways between the principle of God's absolute oneness and that of falsehood and distortion. It delivers a warning to those who reject the Qur'ān and God's revelations it contains. All such people are branded as unbelievers, even though they may profess to be Christian or Jewish. It describes the Muslims' attitude towards their Lord and their reactions to His revelations in a manner that makes the situation crystal clear. This it does by defining in no uncertain terms the true meanings of belief, or *īmān,* and disbelief, or *kufr.* (Verses 2-7, and 18-19)

The passage also carries a warning which contains a clear reference to the Jews, when it says: *"Those who deny God's revelations, and slay the prophets against all right, and slay the people who enjoin equity among people: promise them a painful suffering."* (Verse 21) The Israelites would immediately spring to mind at the mere mention of a prophet being slain.

The same reprimand is repeated in the instruction: *"Let not the believers take unbelievers for their allies in preference to the believers..."* (Verse 28) Most likely this is a reference to the Jews, although it could possibly include the idolaters as well. For, until that time many Muslims maintained various alliances with their non-Muslim blood relatives as well as with Jews in Madinah. The Qur'ān ordered them to desist from such associations, warning them in the severest terms. Regardless of whether those allies were Jews or non-Muslim Arabs, they were all identified as "unbelievers".

It is also obvious that the references in verse 12 are to the Badr campaign and that they are addressed to the Jews of Madinah. Ibn `Abbās reported that having triumphed over the Quraysh at Badr, the Prophet Muĥammad on his return to Madinah called the Jews together and urged them to convert to Islam before they met a similar fate to that of the Quraysh. Their reply was: "Look here, Muĥammad.

Do not let yourself be deceived by the fact that you have done away with a few men from the Quraysh, inexperienced in the skills of battle. Were you to fight us, you would realise that we are the true men, and you would never fight a more courageous people." Ibn `Abbās adds that it was on that occasion that verses 12 and 13 were revealed. (Related by Abū Dāwūd.)

It is also evident that although the instructions addressed to the Prophet Muĥammad in verse 20 are inspired by concurrent events, they are meant to be general and universal, relevant to confrontation with all adversaries who oppose his faith.

God's assertion that: *"If they turn away, then your only duty is to convey your message. God is watching over His servants"* (20), indicates clearly that, up to that point, Muĥammad was not ordered to use force against the people of earlier revelations or to impose taxes on them. All this reinforces what has been stated previously that these verses were revealed at an earlier stage in Madinah.

The overall purport of the passage, as we can see, indicates that they represent a general argument that is not restricted to a particular occasion such as the Najrān delegation's visit to Madinah. Indeed, this could well be one of the events the verses were revealed to cover, but there are frequent other occasions throughout the struggle between Islam and its many adversaries in Arabia, especially the Jews of Madinah.

This opening passage also includes robust expositions of the principles of the Muslim religious outlook, complemented by a powerful elucidation of the nature of Islam and its influences on daily life. Islam is a religion based on belief in the oneness of God, and it therefore demands submission to God and no one else besides Him. Islam means submission and obedience to, and compliance with, the commands and laws of God and the teachings and leadership of His messenger. He that neither submits, obeys nor complies is not a Muslim, and his religious belief will be rejected by God. God accepts no other religion except that of Islam, in the sense of total submission, obedience and compliance. This *sūrah* expresses astonishment at those people of earlier revelations who are called to the Book of God to judge between them, "... *some of them turn away and pay no heed"* (23). Such obstinacy and intransigence towards God's Book are a sign of rejection and infidelity that negates any claims of belief or submission to God.

The second aspect of this part of the *sūrah* revolves entirely around this fundamental truth. Let us now turn to a closer examination of the text.

The Cornerstone of the Islamic Faith

> *Alif. Lām. Mīm. God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all. He has revealed to you this Book with the truth, confirming what was revealed before it; and He has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel before this as guidance for people.* (Verses 1-4)

We choose as the most probable explanation of the three individual letters of the Arabic alphabet, which open the *sūrah,* namely, *Alif; Lām; Mīm,* the same explanation given in our commentary on the opening passage of the preceding *sūrah al-Baqarah.* These letters are mentioned here in order to draw people's attention to the fact that this book, the Qur'ān, is composed of the same type of letters as those available to the Arabs addressed by it. It remains at the same time a miraculous book which they cannot imitate despite the fact that their language is composed of the same letters. This most probable of explanations helps us understand, without difficulty, the need for such references to the nature of the Qur'ān in many *sūrahs* that open with individual letters. In the preceding *sūrah al-Baqarah,* this reference points to the challenge thrown down subsequently in the *sūrah* in these terms: "*If you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce one sūrah comparable to it and call upon all your witnesses, other than God, if you were truthful.*" (2: 23)

In this *sūrah* a different occasion necessitates this reference to the letters of which the Qur'ān is composed. The *sūrah* stresses that this Book is revealed by God, the One and only deity. It is yet composed of letters and words in the same way as earlier revelations acknowledged by their followers, who are primarily addressed by this *sūrah.* There is nothing new in the fact that God has chosen to reveal this Book to His Messenger in this way.

The *sūrah* begins with confronting the People of the Book, a Qur'ānic term used to denote people of earlier Divine revelation, especially the Jews and Christians, who deny the Prophet's message, even though their knowledge of earlier Prophets, messages, and revelations should have made them the first to accept and believe in the new message. That should have been the case if the matter was simply one of evidence and conviction.

The first passage of the *sūrah* confronts these people in clear terms, dismissing all doubts they entertain or deliberately try to raise in people's minds. It points out how these doubts press on the minds of people. It defines the attitude of true believers towards God's message and defines the attitude of doubters and those who go astray. It vividly portrays the believers' attitude towards their Lord and how they seek refuge with Him and appeal to Him. They know all His attributes.

"*God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all.*" This emphatic opening stresses the absolute oneness of God. It identifies itself as the very basic difference between the faith of Muslims and all other religions and ideologies,

whether atheist and polytheist creeds or the religions of those people of the Book, Jews and Christians alike, who have gone astray. It distinguishes the faith of Islam from all other faiths, creeds and ideologies. It is also the basic difference between the way of life of Muslims and that of the followers of all other religions. It is the faith which determines the direction and the system of life in an elaborate and perfect manner.

"*God: there is no deity save Him.*" He has no partner in His most essential attribute of Divinity. "*The Ever-living,*" Who has true, self- sustaining life with absolutely no restrictions. Hence, nothing is similar to Him in this attribute. "*The Eternal Master of all,*" Who gives every life and sustains every existence. No life can exist in this universe without His permission.

This is the central point at issue between the Islamic faith and all other ideologies; between ascribing Divinity only to God and all the multitude of erring beliefs, including idolatry, concepts which were rife at the time in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as Jewish and Christian concepts. The Qur'ān tells us that the Jews used to say that Ezra was the son of God. Something to this effect is included in the fallacies recorded in what the Jews claim to be the Holy Book (Genesis, chapter 6). As for erroneous Christian concepts, the Qur'ān speaks of the Christian belief in the Trinity and their claim that Jesus, son of Mary, was God Himself. They also attribute Divinity to Jesus and his mother, considering them gods. They also consider their priests and monks to have Divine authority. In his book, *The Preaching of Islam,* Thomas Arnold refers to some of these deviant concepts.

A hundred years before, Justinian had succeeded in giving some show of unity to the Roman Empire, but after his death it rapidly fell asunder, and at this time there was an entire want of common national feeling between the provinces and the seat of government. Heraclius had made some partially successful efforts to attach Syria again to the central government, but unfortunately the general methods of re-conciliation which he adopted had served only to increase dissension instead of allaying it. Religious Passions were the only existing substitute for national feeling, and he tried, by propounding an exposition of faith, that was intended to serve as an eirenicon, to stop all further dispute between the contending factions and unite the heretics to the Orthodox Church and to the central government. The Council of Chalcedon (451) had maintained that Christ was "to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, change, diversion or separation; the difference of the natures being in nowise taken away by reason of their union, but rather the properties of each nature being preserved, and concurring into one person and one substance, not as it were divided or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten, God the Word." The council was rejected by the Monophysites, who only allowed one nature in the person of Christ, who was said to

be a composite person, having all attributes divine and human, but the substance bearing these attributes was no longer a duality, but a composite unity. The controversy between the orthodox party and the Monophysites, who flourished particularly in Egypt and Syria and in countries outside the Byzantine empire, had been hotly contested for nearly two centuries, when Heraclius sought to effect a reconciliation by means of the doctrine of Monotheism: while conceding the duality of the natures, it secured unity of the person in the actual life of Christ, by the rejection of two series of activities in this one person; the one Christ and Son of God effectuates that which is human and that which is divine by one divine human agency, *i.e.,* there is only one will in the Incarnate Word.[2]

As for deviation in the beliefs of idolaters, the Qur'ān speaks of their worship of the *jinn,* the angels, the sun, the moon and idols. The least deviant in all their beliefs being the assertion by some of them that they only worshipped these idols in order that they would act as intermediaries endearing them to God.

It confronting such a great heap of erring beliefs and deviant concepts, Islam declares in the clearest and strongest of terms: *"God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all."* As we have said, this declaration identifies the central point at issue in matters of faith. Moreover, it is the departing point for different ways of life and codes of behaviour. When belief in the existence of God, the only God Who is Ever-living, and Who is the Eternal Master from Whom every life and every existence are derived and Who controls every living thing, is firmly established in someone's mind, his way of life must, by necessity, be totally different from that of a person who holds to any of the confused and erring concepts. The latter cannot feel the influence on his life of the Divine Being, the One, who is actually in control of his life. With the concept of the absolute oneness of God, submission to anyone other than Him is inadmissible. There can be no room for deriving any laws or systems, moral values, economic or social systems except from God. He is the only One to Whom we turn for guidance in every matter which concerns this life or in what follows this life. With all other confused beliefs and concepts there is no one to whom we may turn. There are no boundaries distinguishing right from wrong, what is forbidden from what is lawful. All these can be determined only when the source from which they are derived is determined. For it is that source to which we turn for guidance and to which we submit ourselves in total obedience.

Hence, it was necessary to put the issue very clearly right at the outset: "*God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all."* This is, indeed, what gives Islamic life its unique character, one which is not confined to the realm of

[2] T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore, Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1968), p.53.

beliefs only. All aspects of Islamic life are derived from this basic Islamic concept of the total and absolute oneness of God. This concept cannot be truly established in our minds unless its practical influence is felt in our lives, starting with deriving our laws which relate to all fields of life from God alone, and turning to Him for guidance in every sphere of life.

When the central issue is thus resolved by the declaration of the absolute oneness of God and outlining His unique attributes, which no one shares with Him, are outlined, the *sūrah* moves on to speak of the unity of the source from which all religions, Scriptures and Divine messages are revealed. That is to say the source of the revealed code implemented throughout all generations of human life.

The Qur'ān and Earlier Revelations

> *... And He has revealed the Criterion (to distinguish the true from the false). Those who disbelieve in God's revelations shall endure grievous suffering. God is Mighty, able to requite. Nothing on earth or in the heavens is hidden from God. It is He Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 4-6)

These initial verses provide an affirmation of several essential principles in formulating the correct ideological concept, i.e. Islam, and for silencing the people of earlier revelations and others who denied the Prophet's message and its Divine source. It states first the unity of the source which reveals Divine messages to Prophets and Messengers. It is God the only deity, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all Who has revealed this Qur'ān as He has indeed revealed the Torah to Moses and the Gospel to Jesus (pbuh them). There can, therefore, be no confusion between the position of the Divine Being and that of His servants. There is only One God Who reveals messages to His chosen servants. For their part, they are servants who submit themselves to God, despite the fact that they are Prophets sent with messages from Him.

The verses also state the unity of Divine faith, as well as the fact that the Truth included in the Scriptures revealed by God is also one. This Book which has been sent down to Muĥammad has been revealed, *"with the truth, confirming what was revealed before it,"* i.e. the Torah and the Gospel. All these Scriptures have been sent down for a single purpose, that is, to serve *"as guidance for people."* This newly revealed Book is a *"Criterion"* distinguishing the Truth embodied in the revealed Scriptures from all sorts of deviation and confused ideas which have found their way into the Scriptures whether by way of personal prejudices, intellectual trends or political considerations.

These verses also include an implicit insertion that there can be no valid reason for the denial of the new message by the people of earlier revelations. In this way, it follows the same line of earlier messages. It is a book sent down with the truth in the same way as all revealed books and Scriptures are. It too has been revealed to a human messenger. Furthermore, it confirms all Divine Scriptures revealed before it. It clearly sets out the "Truth" which they have stated earlier. Moreover, it has been sent down by the One Who is able to send down His revelations and Who has the right to lay down a code of living for mankind which sets for them their concepts of faith, law, and morality.

Verse 4 also delivers a stern threat to those who deny God's revelations. It reminds them of God's might, His grievous punishment, and His ability to enforce justice. Those who deny God's messages are those who reject this one faith in its absolute nature. The people of earlier revelations who have deviated from the Divine revelations and who deny this new book, a clear criterion distinguishing right from wrong, are the first to be described here as non-believers. They are foremost amongst those to whom God's threat of severe punishment and grievous suffering is directed.

Within the context of this threat an emphatic assertion is given that God knows everything. Nothing at all can be hidden from Him: "*Nothing on earth or in the heavens is hidden from God.*" This assertion of God's absolute knowledge fits well with the statement of the absolute oneness of the Divine Being Who is the Eternal Master of all. This attribute of God is stated right at the outset, in verse 5. It also fits well with the stern threat delivered in the preceding verse. Since nothing on earth or in the heavens may be withheld from God's knowledge and no secrets can be kept from Him, then all intentions and all schemes are known to Him. Hence, nothing can escape His fair judgement and His just punishment.

Having stated this fact of God's absolute knowledge of everything in the universe, the *sūrah* gently but effectively touches upon human nature with a reference to man's origin. It is an origin well hidden from man in the darkness of mothers' wombs and in the realm to which man's knowledge cannot aspire: "*It is He Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise.*"

It is He Who gives you whatever shape He pleases. He also gives you your distinctive characteristics. This He does alone, according to His absolute will, "*as He pleases.*" For He is the only deity in the universe, and He is "*the Almighty*" Who has the power and the ability to shape and fashion His creation, "*the Wise*" Who determines everything according to His wisdom. He has no partner or associate to influence what He creates and fashions.

This statement dispels all the confusion created by the Christians concerning Jesus's birth and origin. It is God Who shaped Jesus (pbuh) as He pleased. There is

no truth whatsoever in the claims that Jesus (pbuh) was the Lord, or was God, or the son of God, or a being with a dual nature: Divine and human. All deviant and confused concepts which are at variance with the Truth of the absolute oneness of God are false and without substance.

Two Types of Revelation

In this brief passage, the *sūrah* uncovers the reality of those who swerve from the truth. These people turn their back on the facts stated with absolute clarity in the Qur'ān, pursuing other Qur'ānic statements which admit more than one explanation in order to use the same as a basis for their fabrications. It also shows the distinctive characteristics of those who truly believe in God and submit to Him, accepting everything they receive from Him without any doubt or argument.

One report suggests that the Christian delegation from Najrān said to the Prophet: "Do you not state that Jesus Christ was the word of God and His spirit?" They wanted to utilise this statement to support their own doctrines that Jesus was not a human being, but the spirit of God. At the same time they paid no heed to those unequivocal verses which emphatically state the absolute oneness of God, categorically rejecting all claims of His having any partner or son. The report says that verse 7 was revealed by way of reply, showing the reality of their attempt to make use of such allegorical statements, while at the same time abandoning other clear and precise statements.

This verse does, however, have more general significance than its relevance to that particular historical case. It shows the attitudes of different people towards this Book which God has revealed to the Prophet, stating the essentials of the correct concept of faith and the basics of the Islamic way of life. It also includes other statements which relate to matters kept beyond the realm of human perception. The human mind cannot fathom these matters beyond what the relevant Qur'ānic statements point out.

As for the basics of faith and Islamic law, these are definitively stated, clearly understood and have well-defined aims. These are the essence of this Qur'ān. Those matters which are stated allegorically, including the origin and birth of Jesus (pbuh) are so given in order that we accept them at face value. We believe in them because they come to us from the source which speaks the truth: their sense and form are difficult to comprehend because, by nature, they are beyond our human, finite means of comprehension.

People's reception of both types of revelation differs according to whether their nature has remained straightforward or has swerved from the truth. Those whose hearts have deviated and erred deliberately overlook the clear and precise essentials

which make up the foundation of the faith, the law and the practical way of life. Instead, they pursue those allegorical verses which can only be accepted on the basis of believing in their source and acknowledging that He is the One Who knows all the truth, while human perception is limited. Acceptance of both types of revelation also depends on human nature remaining pure and straightforward, believing as a matter of course that this whole book is a book of truth, and that it has been sent down with the truth and that no deviation or error can creep into it. Deviants, however, create trouble and dissension by attributing interpretations to those allegorical statements which shake the foundation of the faith, and which bring about confusion as a result of forcing the human mind into a realm which lies way beyond it. *"None save God knows its final meaning."*

"Those who are firmly grounded in knowledge" and who have recognised the nature of human thinking and the area within which the human mind can operate say with confidence and reassurance: *"We believe in it; it is all from our Lord."* Such scholars are reassured because they know that it is all from their Lord; hence it must tell the truth, simply because whatever originates with God is the truth. It is not part of the function or ability of the human mind to look for reasons and arguments to support it. Nor is it within its ability to fathom its nature or the nature of the causes which give rise to it. True knowledge presupposes that the human mind need not try to penetrate what is kept beyond it nor what man has not been given the means to discover or understand.

This is a true description of those firmly grounded in knowledge. Only those who are deluded by the scanty knowledge they have acquired make boastful statements that they have acquired omnipotent knowledge and only they deny the very existence of what they cannot understand. Furthermore, they sometimes impose their own understanding on universal facts, allowing them to exist only in the manner they understand them. Hence, they try to measure God's Word, which is absolute, by their own rational dictates formulated by their own finite minds. Those who are truly learned, however, are much more humble in their attitude, and they readily accept that the human mind cannot fathom the great many facts beyond its capability. They are more faithful to human nature, recognising the truth and accepting it: "*... only those who are endowed with insight take heed."*

It seems that those who have insight need only reflect and take heed in order to recognise the truth and to have it well established in their minds. When this is achieved they repeat their prayers in total devotion, asking God to enable them to hold on to that truth, to not let their hearts swerve from it, and to give them of His Abundant grace. They also remember the undoubted day when all mankind will be gathered together, and they remember the promise which will never fail: "*Our Lord, ... bestow on us mercy from Yourself You are indeed the great Giver. Our Lord, You will*

indeed gather mankind together to witness the Day of which there is no doubt. Surely, God never fails to keep His promise."

This is the sort of attitude those who are firmly grounded in knowledge adopt, and it is the attitude which suits the believers. It emanates from the reassurance that what God says is the truth and that His promise will be fulfilled. It is an attitude influenced by knowledge of God's mercy and His grace, and by fear of what His will may determine. It is an attitude shaped by fear of God and the great sensitivity faith implants in the hearts of believers so that they never forget or overlook these facts at any moment of day or night.

A believer's heart appreciates the value of having guidance after being misguided, the value of clarity after impaired vision, the value of following a straight road after confusion, the value of reassurance after being at a loss, the value of liberation from subjugation to other people, through submission to God alone, the value of having high concerns after being preoccupied with pettiness. It appreciates that God has given him all that through faith. Hence, the believer fears to return to error as much as a person who follows a bright, clear way fears to return to a dark, endless labyrinth, or a person who has enjoyed the cool shade fears to return to the burning sun of the desert. Only a person who has experienced the bitter misery of unbelief can appreciate the sweetness and happiness of faith, and only a person who has tasted the bitterness of deviation and error can enjoy the reassurance of faith.

Hence, the believers address their Lord with this prayer which reflects their sincere devotion: *"Our Lord, let not our hearts swerve from the truth after You have guided us."* They pray for more of God's mercy which has saved them from error, provided them with guidance, and given them what they could not have from any other source: *"... and bestow on us mercy from Yourself You are indeed the great Giver"*

Their faith tells them that they cannot attain anything except through God's mercy and grace. They do not even have control-over their own hearts; for they are in God's hand. Hence, they pray for God's help. `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife reports: "God's messenger (peace be on him) often repeated this prayer: Lord, You are the One Who turns hearts over. Let my heart stick firmly to your faith. I said: Messenger of God, you often repeat this prayer. He said: Every single heart is held in between two of the Merciful's fingers; He will keep it on the right path if He wills, and He will let it swerve from the truth if He wills."

When the believer appreciates that God's will is accomplished in this way, he realises that his only choice is to hold tight to God's guidance, and to pray to God to bestow His mercy on him so that he may keep the great treasure which God has given him.

A Lesson for the Discerning

> *As for those who disbelieve, neither their riches nor their offspring will in the least avail them against God; it is they who shall be the fuel of the fire. Just like the cases of the people of Pharaoh and those before them: they disbelieved Our revelations; therefore, God took them to task for their sins. God's retribution is severe indeed. Say to those who disbelieve: "You shall be overcome and gathered unto hell, an evil resting place. You have had a sign in the two armies which met in battle. One was fighting for God's cause, the other an army of unbelievers. They saw with their very eyes that the others were twice their own number. But God strengthens with His succour whom He wills. In this there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see."* (Verses 10-13)

This passage follows the opening verses of the *sūrah* which outline the attitude of the believers towards God's revelations, whether of the clear and precise type or of the type expressed in allegory. Here we have an explanation of the end which awaits the unbelievers, and the Divine Law which never fails to inflict punishment on them for their sins. A warning is also included to the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations who stand in opposition to Islam. The Prophet is instructed to warn them, and to remind them of what they saw with their own eyes at the Battle of Badr when such a small group of believers achieved a great victory over a much larger force of unbelievers.

The context of this passage is an address to the Israelites warning them of a similar fate to that of the unbelievers who lived before them and who may live after them. It also reminds the Israelites of the doom which befell Pharaoh and his soldiers when God saved the Israelites themselves. That, however, does not give the Israelites any right to special treatment should they revert to disbelief and denial of the truth. There is nothing to prevent them from being branded as unbelievers should they err, and there is nothing to save them from doom either in this life or in the life to come, in the same way as doom befell Pharaoh and his army.

They are also reminded of the fate of the Quraysh army of unbelievers at the Battle of Badr. This drives it home to them that God's law will never fail. Nothing will protect them from being overwhelmed by the same fate as the Quraysh. The cause of that fate was the Quraysh's rejection of the faith. In essence they are being told that no one has a special position with God and no one will have any immunity except through true faith.

"*As for those who disbelieve, neither their riches nor their offspring will in the least avail them against God; it is they who shall be the fuel of the fire.*" (Verse 10) Wealth and children are normally thought of as two sources of protection. Neither, however, will be of any avail on that Day, about the arrival of which there is no doubt, because God never fails to keep His promise. On that Day, they will be "*the fuel of the fire.*" This

metaphor deprives them of all the characteristics which distinguish man. They are grouped together with logs, wood and all manner of fuel.

Indeed, wealth and children cannot be of any avail in this life, even when they are coupled with power and authority: *"Just like the cases of the people of Pharaoh and those before them: they disbelieved Our revelations; therefore, God took them to task for their sins. God's retribution is severe indeed."* (Verse 11) This case has had frequent parallels throughout history. God relates it in detail in this book. It is a case which outlines God's law, which applies to those who reject His revelations as lies. He implements this law as He wills. Hence, no one who rejects God's revelations can have any immunity or safeguard.

This means that those who rejected the faith and dismissed Muĥammad's call and the message contained in the book God has revealed to him with the truth, lay themselves open to the same fate in both this life and the life to come. The Prophet is instructed to warn them against the same fate in both lives. He is further instructed to give them the recent example of what happened to them in Badr, for they may have forgotten the example of Pharaoh and the unbelievers before him and how they were overwhelmed by God's stern retribution. *"Say to those who disbelieve: 'You shall be overcome and gathered unto hell, an evil resting place. You have had a sign in the two armies which met in battle. One was fighting for God's cause, the other an army of unbelievers. They saw with their very eyes that the others were twice their own number. But God strengthens with His succour whom He wills. In this there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see.'"* (Verses 12-13)

The statement, *"they saw with their very eyes that the others were twice their own number,"* admits of two possible interpretations. The pronoun "they", preceding the verb "saw" may be taken to refer to the unbelievers, whilst "the others," in this case, refers to the Muslims. This means that despite their numerical superiority, the unbelievers imagined the much smaller group of Muslims to be "twice their own number". This was by God's own design. He led the unbelievers to perceive the Muslims as a very large force when they were indeed few in number, and this put fear into their hearts.

The same statement could be interpreted in the opposite fashion, which suggests that the Muslims saw the unbelievers as "twice their own number" when in actual fact they were three times as many. Nevertheless, the Muslims were steadfast and achieved victory.

The most important factor here is the attribution of victory to God's aid and His planning. This, in itself, serves as a warning to the unbelievers and has a demoralising effect on them. At the same time, it strengthens the believers and decries their enemies, so much so that the believers have no fear. The particulars of the situation pertaining at Badr required both elements. In other words, the Qur'ān

was working on both aspects.

God's promise to defeat those unbelievers who swerve from the truth and who reject God's constitution is valid for all time. Similarly, God's promise to grant victory to the believers, even though they may be few in number, is also valid for all time. That victory depends, in the last resort, on God's help, which He grants to whomever He wills. This fact also remains true for the present as for the future.

The believers need only to be certain that this is the truth and to be confident that God's promise will be fulfilled. They must do all in their power and then be patient until God's will is done. They must not precipitate events, nor should they despair if victory seems long coming. Everything is done in God's own good time, according to His wisdom which determines the most suitable time for every event.

"*In this there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see.*" There must be eyes to see and hearts to understand and minds to reflect, so that the lesson is fully understood. Otherwise, lessons are given at every moment of the day and night, but few pay heed.

False and True Comforts

The next few verses in the *sūrah* fall within that part of the Qur'ān which is mainly concerned with educating the Muslim community. The first of these verses identifies those subtle, natural incentives which cause people to deviate from the right path, unless they are properly checked. In order to control them, one must always be on the alert, yearn for more sublime horizons and aspire to those comforts which remain with God, for these are indeed far superior to worldly comforts.

Pursuing worldly pleasures and giving priority to personal desires and pleasures will no doubt distract a person's mind and prevent him from reflecting on what fruits one is bound to reap or what lessons one can learn from the facts of life. People are thus drowned in easy, physical pleasures, unable to see what lies beyond of better and superior comforts. They are thus deprived of the enjoyment of looking beyond cheap, physical pleasure, or being preoccupied with the nobler concerns which fit with the great role of man, the creature God has placed in charge of this great dominion, the earth.

Those physical pleasures and worldly comforts and incentives are, nevertheless, naturally infused in man by the Creator to fulfil the essential role of preserving the continuity of life. Hence, Islam does not approve of their suppression. It advocates that they should be regulated, moderated and brought under control. Islam wants man to be able to control these desires, not to be controlled by them. I lam promotes the feeling of the sublime in man and helps him look to what is higher and superior.

Hence, that Qur'ānic statement, which is concerned with the education of the Muslim community, mentions all these comforts and pleasures, but portrays alongside them a variety of physical and spiritual pleasures which are provided in the life to come for those who control their natural desires in this life. These are, in part, the reward awaiting those who maintain their noble human standard, and who do not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by the cheap, physical enjoyments of this world.

In a single verse the *sūrah* groups together the most enjoyable pleasures of this life: women, children, endless wealth, splendid horses, fertile land and cattle. These represent the total sum of worldly pleasures, either by themselves, or because of what they can provide for their owners by way of other pleasures. The verse which follows, however, identifies the pleasures of the hereafter: gardens through which running waters flow, spouses renowned for their chastity, and what is much more: God's good pleasure. These are in store for anyone who looks beyond the pleasures of this world and maintains good relations with God.

> *Alluring to man is the enjoyment of worldly desires through women and offspring, heaped-up treasures of gold and silver, horses of high mark, cattle and plantations. These are the comforts of this life. With God is the best of all goals. Say: Shall I tell you of better things than these? For the God-fearing there are, with their Lord, gardens through which running waters flow where they shall dwell forever, and wives of perfect chastity, and God's good pleasure. God is mindful of His servants, those who say: "Our Lord, we have indeed accepted the faith. Forgive us our sins and keep us safe from the torments of the fire." They are the patient in adversity, the true to their word, the devoted who spend in the cause of God, and those who pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn.* (Verses 14-17)

"Alluring to man is the enjoyment of worldly desires." In the original Arabic text, the verb in this sentence is expressed in the passive voice which indicates that this love is part of man's nature. Hence, this is a statement of fact. Man certainly loves to enjoy these pleasures. There is no need, then, either to deny that love or to denounce and condemn it. It is essential for human life so that it may continue and progress. But there is certainly another side which is also infused in human nature and that is to balance that love and to guard man against total consumption by it to the extent that he loses the great effects of the spiritual element in his constitution. That aspect provides man with the ability to look up to the sublime and to control his desires and fulfil them in a befitting and appropriate measure. He can thus achieve his fulfilment here but, at the same time, elevate human life spiritually and look forward to the life to come where he can enjoy God's good pleasure. This ability can hold worldly desires in check, purify them and keep them within safe limits so that physical pleasures do not overwhelm the human soul and its aspirations. To turn to God and

to fear Him is the way to the achievement of those aspirations.

The verse speaks of those worldly desires as being made alluring to man. There is no suggestion, implicit or explicit, that they are contemptible, or that they should be treated as such. We are only called upon to understand their nature in order to place them in their appropriate place in our lives and not allow them to suppress what is superior to and nobler than them. We are, indeed, called upon to aspire to higher horizons after we have taken what is sufficient and necessary for us of those pleasures.

Islam is distinguished by its realistic approach to human nature and its constant effort to elevate rather than suppress it. Those who talk nowadays of the harmful effects of the "suppression" of natural desires, or about psychological complexes which result from such suppression, agree that the main reason for such problems is the suppression of natural desires, not their control. Suppression stems from the condemnation of natural desires, or looking down on them with contempt. This places the individual under two kinds of pressure which pull in opposite directions. There is first the emotional pressure from within, the result of social traditions or religion, that physical desires are contemptible and should not have existed in the first place. They are portrayed as sinful and evil. There is, on the other hand, the pressure of these desires themselves which cannot be overcome because they are deeply rooted in human nature, having an essential role to play in human life. Indeed, they have not been made part of human nature in vain. As this conflict rages within man, it gives rise to psychological complexes. This is the opinion held by scientists specialised in psychology. Assuming that their theory is correct, we still find that Islam has kept man safe from this conflict between the two parts of his human soul, the temptation to indulge in wanton satisfaction of desire and seek every type of easy pleasure and the aspirations to a nobler existence. It caters for the fulfilment of both, combining continuity with moderation.

It goes without saying that women and children are among the most important and strongest desires of man. Coupled with these in the text listing the desires of this world are *"heaped-up treasures of gold and silver"*. The phrase *"heaped-up treasures"* implies a consuming greed for wealth. If it was merely a love of wealth that is meant here, the Qur'ān would simply have used the term "money", or "gold and silver". *"Heaped-up treasures,"* however, adds a further connotation, that is treasure for its own sake. The implication here being the greed to amass gold and silver, because the mere amassing of wealth is a human desire, regardless of what that wealth may be used for, especially in satisfying other desires.

The Qur'ānic verse then adds, *"horses of high mark."* Even in the material world of machines in which we live, horses remain among those pleasures loved and desired by all people. A stallion combines beauty with vigour, strength, intelligence and a

close relationship with his owner. Even those who do not ride horses warm to the sight of a lively horse as it runs. Cattle and plantations are then mentioned. The two are closely linked together in our minds and in real life. People love the scene of plants growing out of the earth, of life blossoming. When the desire of ownership is coupled with this, then cattle and plantations are certainly craved.

All the desires mentioned in this verse are mere examples of what people strive to have. The ones so identified were particularly appealing to the community which the Qur'ān addressed for the first time, but many of them appeal to all people in all ages. The Qur'ān mentions them before stating their real value so that they are given their proper place in the list of priorities of any believer: *"These are the comforts of this life."* (Verse 14)

Better Than All Comforts

All these cherished desires, and all similar ones, are the comforts of this life. Perhaps we should add here that in the Arabic text, the term "this life", or "*dunyā*", connotes "the lower life". Hence, they are not part of the sublime life or of the higher horizon. They are indeed the easy comforts of the life of this world. What is better than all this, because it is essentially nobler and it helps protect the human soul against being consumed by worldly desires, is that which remains with God. This is available to anyone who wants it, and it more than compensates for the pleasures of this world: *"Say: Shall I tell you of better things than these? For the God-fearing there are, with their Lord, gardens through which running waters flow where they shall dwell forever, and wives of perfect chastity, and Gods good pleasure. God is mindful of His servants."* (Verse 15)

The Prophet is commanded to give the happy news of these comforts of the hereafter to those who are described as "the God- fearing". We note that these comforts are, generally speaking, physical. There is, however, an essential difference between them and the comforts of this world. These are provided only to the God-fearing, who are always conscious of God. This consciousness has a definite moderating influence on both the spirit and the body. It prevents man from being totally consumed by his desires, striving like an animal to fulfil them in any way he can. Hence, when the God-fearing look forward to these physical comforts which they are promised, they do so with a sublimity which remains free of the uncontrolled vigour of animal desire. Even in this life, long before they arrive in their promised abode, close to God, they are elevated by looking forward to these heavenly comforts.

They find in them more than a mere compensation of the worldly desires and pleasures they miss in this world. If the pleasures of this life included fertile

plantations, they have in the hereafter gardens through which running waters flow. Moreover, both they and their gardens live forever, unlike the plantations of this world which people enjoy only for a limited period of time. In contrast to the pleasures of women and children in this life, there are in the hereafter wives of perfect chastity. Their purity makes them far superior to what people desire of women in this life. As for the horses of high mark and the cattle, and the heaped-up treasures of gold and silver, all these are viewed in this life as means to achieve more and greater comforts. In the hereafter, all comforts are freely available to everyone. No special means are required to achieve any ends.

There remains what is far superior to all comforts, namely, *"God's good pleasure."* His pleasure is, to a believer, more precious than this life and the life to come combined. The Arabic term which is used to express this pleasure has endless connotations of love, tenderness, care and compassion.

"God is mindful of His servants." He knows their nature and the motivations and incentives which form part of it. He also knows what suits human nature in the way of directives and instructions. He knows how to deal with it in this life and the life to come.

The passage then describes the relationship of the God-fearing with their Lord, which earns them this blessing of God's good pleasure: *"Those who say: 'Our Lord, we have indeed accepted the faith. Forgive us our sins and keep us safe from the torment of the fire.' They are the patient in adversity, the true to their word, the devoted who spend in the cause of God, and those who pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn."* (Verses 16-17)

Their prayer is indicative of the fact that they are God-fearing. They state first that they are believers, before they appeal to God on the strength of that faith to forgive them their sins and to keep them safe from the Fire.

Every one of their qualities is of great value in human life and in the life of the Muslim community. Their patience in adversity suggests that they endure pain without complaint. They remain steadfast, happy to fulfil the duties of their faith, submitting themselves to God and accepting whatever happens to them as part of God's will and design. Being truthful shows that they hold the truth, which is the mainstay of human life, dear to their hearts. They find lying contemptible, for lying is indicative of a state of weakness which prevents one from telling the truth, in order to realise some benefit or to avoid some harm.

Their devotion is a fulfilment of the duty of the servant towards his Lord. Moreover, it elevates man because he addresses his devotion to the only God in the universe, not to anyone else. Spending in the cause of God liberates man from the captivity of the material world, and from the greed for wealth. It also places the reality of human brotherhood above the desire for personal comfort. It achieves

social security on a mutual basis which is worthy of human life.

To pray at dawn for forgiveness adds to all this connotations of purity and compassion. Indeed, the mere mentioning of dawn reminds us of the lovely feelings of this particular part of the night, shortly before the break of day. At that time, everything is beautiful, pure and still. Man's thoughts are at their purest. The inner motives of uncorrupted human nature are at work. When we add to all this the condition of praying to God for forgiveness, then the atmosphere is one of total purity in both the inner soul of man and the inner soul of the universe. Both are truly submissive to God, the Creator of both man and the universe.

The God-fearing, who are characterised by these essential qualities, will have *"God's good pleasure."* They deserve it, and with it all that is associated with God's compassion and grace. It is certainly superior to any worldly comfort and to any of man's desires.

We note how the Qur'ān deals with the human soul. Its approach begins with man on earth. Gradually but steadily it elevates the human soul to higher horizons until it brings it into the highest society with ease and compassion. It never forgets man's weakness, nor his motives and nature. However, it directs man's abilities and aspirations gently, without the suppression of any motive and without the use of force. It is also mindful that human life should continue and progress. This is the nature of God's method: *"God is mindful of His servants."*

2
Concepts Clarified

شَهِدَ ٱللَّهُ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَأُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمِ قَآئِمًۢا بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۚ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

God Himself bears witness, and so do the angels and men of knowledge, that there is no deity save Him, the Executor of Justice. There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise. (18)

إِنَّ ٱلدِّينَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمُ ۗ وَمَا ٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُو۟تُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٩﴾

The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him. Disagreements spread, through mutual aggression, among those who were given revelations only after knowledge had been granted to them. He who denies God's revelations will find that God is indeed swift in reckoning. (19)

فَإِنْ حَآجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِىَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَنِ ۗ وَقُل لِّلَّذِينَ أُو۟تُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْأُمِّيِّـۧنَ ءَأَسْلَمْتُمْ ۚ فَإِنْ أَسْلَمُوا۟ فَقَدِ ٱهْتَدَوا۟ ۖ وَّإِن تَوَلَّوْا۟ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٢٠﴾

If they argue with you, say: "I have surrendered my whole being to God, and so have all who follow me." Say to those who were given revelations and to unlettered people, "Will you also surrender yourselves (to God)?" If they surrender, they are on the right path. But if they turn away, then your only duty is to convey your message. God is watching over His servants. (20)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَيَقْتُلُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَأْمُرُونَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ مِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ فَبَشِّرْهُم بِعَذَابٍ

Those who deny God's revelations, and slay the Prophets against all right and slay people who enjoin equity among all people: promise them a painful suffering. (21)

أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَٰلُهُمْ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّىٰ فَرِيقٌ مِّنْهُمْ وَهُم مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا۟ لَن تَمَسَّنَا ٱلنَّارُ إِلَّآ أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَٰتٍ ۖ وَغَرَّهُمْ فِى دِينِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا جَمَعْنَٰهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَوُفِّيَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قُلِ ٱللَّهُمَّ مَٰلِكَ ٱلْمُلْكِ تُؤْتِى ٱلْمُلْكَ مَن تَشَآءُ وَتَنزِعُ ٱلْمُلْكَ مِمَّن تَشَآءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَن تَشَآءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَن تَشَآءُ ۖ بِيَدِكَ ٱلْخَيْرُ ۖ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

تُولِجُ ٱلَّيْلَ فِى ٱلنَّهَارِ وَتُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِى ٱلَّيْلِ ۖ وَتُخْرِجُ ٱلْحَىَّ مِنَ ٱلْمَيِّتِ

It is they whose works shall come to nothing in this world and in the life to come; and they shall have none to help them. (22)

Have you considered the case of those who have received a share of revelation? When they are called upon to accept the judgement of God's book in their affairs, some of them turn away and pay no heed. (23)

For they claim: "The fire will most certainly not touch us save for a limited number of days." They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent. (24)

How, then, will it be with them when We shall gather them all together to witness the Day about which there is no doubt, when every soul will be paid in full what it has earned, and they shall not be wronged? (25)

Say: "Lord, Sovereign of all dominion, You grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion away from whom You will. You exalt whom You will and abase whom You will. In Your hand is all that is good. You are able to do all things. (26)

"You cause the night to pass into the day, and You cause the day to pass into the night. You bring forth the living from the dead, and You bring forth the dead from that which is alive. You grant sustenance to whom You will, beyond all reckoning." (27)

وَتُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡمَيِّتَ مِنَ ٱلۡحَيِّ وَتَرۡزُقُ مَن تَشَآءُ بِغَيۡرِ حِسَابٖ ٢٧

Let not the believers take unbelievers for their allies in preference to the believers. He who does this has cut himself off from God, unless it be that you protect yourselves against them in this way. God warns you to beware of Him: for to God you shall all return. (28)

لَّا يَتَّخِذِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ أَوۡلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۖ وَمَن يَفۡعَلۡ ذَٰلِكَ فَلَيۡسَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ فِي شَيۡءٍ إِلَّآ أَن تَتَّقُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ تُقَىٰةٗۗ وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ نَفۡسَهُۥۗ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ٢٨

Say: "Whether you conceal what is in your hearts or bring it into the open, it is known to God. He knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and God has the power to accomplish anything. (29)

قُلۡ إِن تُخۡفُواْ مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمۡ أَوۡ تُبۡدُوهُ يَعۡلَمۡهُ ٱللَّهُۗ وَيَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٢٩

"On the day when every soul will find itself confronted with whatever good it has done and whatever evil it has done, they will wish that there were a long span of time between them and that Day. God warns you to beware of Him; and God is Most Compassionate towards His servants." (30)

يَوۡمَ تَجِدُ كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ مَّا عَمِلَتۡ مِنۡ خَيۡرٖ مُّحۡضَرٗا وَمَا عَمِلَتۡ مِن سُوٓءٖ تَوَدُّ لَوۡ أَنَّ بَيۡنَهَا وَبَيۡنَهُۥٓ أَمَدَۢا بَعِيدٗاۗ وَيُحَذِّرُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ نَفۡسَهُۥۗ وَٱللَّهُ رَءُوفُۢ بِٱلۡعِبَادِ ٣٠

Say: "If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful." (31)

قُلۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ تُحِبُّونَ ٱللَّهَ فَٱتَّبِعُونِي يُحۡبِبۡكُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَيَغۡفِرۡ لَكُمۡ ذُنُوبَكُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٣١

Say: "Obey God and the messenger." If they turn their backs, God does not love the unbelievers. (32)

قُلۡ أَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلرَّسُولَۖ فَإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ

فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Overview

> *God Himself bears witness, and so do the angels and men of knowledge, that there is no deity save Him, the Executor of Justice. There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verse 18)

So far the *sūrah* has concentrated mainly on establishing the basic fact of the oneness of God, the Lord and sustainer of the whole universe, Who controls all its affairs. It has also emphasised the unity of the Divine revelation and message. It has described the attitudes of the true believers, and those whose hearts have swerved from the truth, towards God's revelations and His book. It has also threatened the deviants with a doom similar to that which befell those who denied the truth both in the past and in the present. It has further pointed out the natural motives which prevent people from learning these lessons, showing at the same time how the God-fearing turn to their Lord and seek His refuge.

Beginning with verse 18 and continuing up to verse 32, the *sūrah* now speaks of another fact which logically results from the preceding one. The fact that God is One and has no partners requires practical confirmation in human life and this is clearly stated in this passage of the *sūrah.*

The passage begins with a reiteration of the fact stated in the opening verses of the *sūrah* in order to outline its essential consequences. We have here a testimony from God, as well as a testimony from the angels and the people of knowledge that "*there is no deity save Him.*" Added to this is the Divine attribute which results from the fact that He is the Sustainer of the universe, that is, He maintains justice among people and in the universe at large.

We are required to accept this basic fact of God being the only Lord and Sustainer of the whole universe. Our acceptance is manifested primarily by our submitting ourselves to God alone and referring to Him in all matters. It is further manifested by obeying God, our Eternal Master, and following His messenger and implementing His revelations in our lives.

This is the purport of the Divine Statement: "*The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him.*" (Verse 19) He does not accept any other religion or

creed from anyone. Islam means willing submission, obedience and conscious following of the Prophet. This means that the religion which God accepts from people is not merely a concept formulated in their minds, nor is it the mere acceptance of a fact. It is, indeed, the practical translation of this acceptance and that concept. It takes the form of implementing the Divine method in all our affairs, total obedience to all God's laws, and following the guidance of His messenger in His implementation of the Divine Faith.

The passage then moves on to publicise the attitude of the people of earlier revelations, wondering at them. Despite their claim that they follow God's religion, some of them turn away when they are invited to put their disputes forward to be adjudged according to God's revelations. Their whole claim is thus rendered baseless. God accepts no religion other than Islam, and Islam means true submission to God, obedience to His Prophet and the implementation of His revelations in all spheres of life.

We are then told of the real reason for their turning away, which actually means that they do not believe in the Divine religion. That is, they do not take seriously the concept of reckoning and reward on the Day of Judgement: "*For they claim: 'The fire will most certainly not touch us except for a limited number of days.'*" (Verse 24) In this, they rely on their belief that they are followers of a Divine book: "*They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent.*" (Verse 24) Their whole notion is a false delusion. They are neither followers of a Divine book nor are they believers. They have nothing whatsoever to do with the Divine faith, since they are being invited to put their disputes to the judgement of Divine revelations, but they continue to turn away. In such absolute clarity, God states in the Qur'ān the meaning of religion and the true nature of being religious. He accepts from His servants only one clear view: namely, the true religion is Islam, which means self-surrender. In practice, Islam means to consider God's book as the final arbiter and to accept its judgement. Anyone who does not do this in practice cannot be considered a Muslim, even though he may claim to be so or may claim to follow God's religion. It is God who defines and explains His own religion. His definition and explanation does not take into account the desires or personal concepts of human beings.

Indeed, the one who takes the unbelievers, i.e. those who do not accept the judgement of God's book and revelations, as patrons, "*He who does this has cut himself off from God.*" (Verse 28) There is absolutely no relationship between him and God. This applies to those who patronise and support or seek the patronage or support of the unbelievers who reject the judgement of Divine revelations, even though they may claim to follow God's religion.

The warning against such patronage which destroys faith altogether is further elaborated upon. The Muslim community is also made aware of the true nature of

the forces which operate in the universe. God has absolute control over it; He owns it all, and gives kingship to whom He wills and deprives of it whom He wills. It is He Who gives honour to, or causes to sink in contempt, whom He wills. This is only part of the fact that He controls the whole universe and runs it as He wishes. It is He Who causes the night to overwhelm the day and then causes the day to overpower the night. It is He Who makes life come from death and causes death to end life. He thus maintains justice in human life and in the universe at large. There is no need, then, for the patronage of anyone else, no matter how powerful or wealthy they are.

These repeated, emphatic warnings give us an insight into what was actually taking place within the Muslim community at that time and about which matters needed further clarification. Some Muslims still maintained their family, national and economic relations with the unbelievers in Makkah or with the Jews in Madinah. Hence, the need for this explanation and warning. The repeated warnings also suggest that human nature is normally influenced by the physical power of human beings. Hence, people need to be reminded of the true nature of human power and real power. This needs to be added to the clear explanation of the correct concept of faith and its practical effects in life.

The passage concludes with a decisive statement that Islam means true obedience to God and His Messenger. The way to win God's pleasure is simply to follow His Messenger. God's love cannot be earned by the mere mental acceptance of His existence, nor simply by any verbal acknowledgement of that: "*Say: 'If you love God, follow me. God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' Say: 'Obey God and the messenger.' If they turn their backs, God does not love the unbelievers.*" (Verses 31-2) The issues then are very clear: either obedience and conscious following of the Prophet, which is what God likes, or rejection of the faith, which is what God dislikes. There can be no meeting point between the two.

Let us now look in more detail at the significance of this passage starting with verse 18.

The Ultimate Witness

> *God Himself bears witness, and so do the angels and men of knowledge, that there is no deity save Him, the Executor of Justice. There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verse 18)

We have here a statement of the most essential facet of Islamic ideology, namely the fact of the oneness of God and that He is the Eternal Master of the universe Who maintains and executes justice. It is the same principle with which this *sūrah* opens: "*God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all.*" The ultimate

objective of this *sūrah* is to establish in absolute clarity the true nature of the Islamic faith, and to dispel all doubts about it raised by people of earlier revelations. It seeks to dispel such doubts both from the minds of those unbelievers as also from the minds of those Muslims who may fall under their influence.

A testimony from God that there is no deity other than Him is sufficient for anyone who believes in God. Indeed, such a testimony may be thought sufficient only for a believer in God, for he is not in need of it as such. However, this is not absolutely true. People of earlier revelations believe in God, but at the same time they maintain that He has a son and a partner. The idolaters themselves used to profess that they believed in God. Their deviation and error took the form of ascribing partners and equals and children to God. When both groups of people are told that God Himself bears witness to the fact that there is no deity save Him, then this statement has a marked effect in correcting their beliefs.

The matter, however, is much finer and more profound. God's testimony that there is no deity except Him is given here as a prelude to outlining what it entails. Since He Himself stresses His oneness, He, therefore, does not accept from His servants anything other than pure devotion to Him, which takes the form of Islam or submission to Him. Such submission is not confined to the realm of beliefs and feelings; it must be translated into total obedience to God and a conscious implementation of His law outlined in His revelations. If we view the matter from this angle, we will find many people in all ages claiming to believe in God but at the same time ascribing Divinity to others. This they do when they implement a law which is in conflict with His law, and obey those who do not follow His messenger or His book, and when they derive their values, standards and morals from sources other than Him. All such actions run contrary to their claim that they believe in God. They conflict with God's own testimony that He is the only God in the universe.

The testimony of the angels and the people of knowledge takes the form of their total obedience to God's orders and looking to Him alone for guidance, accepting everything which comes to them from Him without doubt or argument, once they are certain that it has come from Him. This *sūrah* has already referred to the attitude of such people of knowledge: *"Those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: 'We believe in it; it is all from our Lord.'"* This is, then, the testimony of the people of knowledge and the angels: total acceptance, obedience and submission.

The testimony of God, the angels and the men of knowledge to the oneness of God is coupled with their testimony to the fact that He establishes and maintains justice, since justice is an essential quality of Godhead. The Arabic text is phrased in such a way as to leave no doubt that justice, at all times and in all situations, is an attribute of God. This also explains the meaning of God being the Eternal Master of the universe which is stated at the beginning of this *sūrah: "God: there is no deity save Him,*

the Ever-living, the Eternal Master of all." He maintains His authority with justice.

God's control of the universe and His conduct of its affairs and of people's lives is always characterised by justice. Indeed, justice cannot be established in human life, which, in turn, cannot be set on its proper course as the rest of the universe where every single creature fulfils its function in perfect harmony with the rest of creation except through the implementation of the method and the way of life God has chosen for people, as outlined in His revelation. Otherwise, justice cannot be established, harmony cannot be achieved and there can be no interrelation between man and the universe. What takes place, then, is injustice, conflict and total ruin.

Throughout history, justice was established only during those periods when God's method was adhered to. These were the times when human life was set on a perfect and straight course like everything else in the universe. However, human nature being what it is means that human beings tend to waver between obedience and disobedience to God. They move nearer to obedience to God whenever His method is established and His law is implemented. Wherever man-made laws are established, ignorance and shortcomings abound. A direct consequence of this is injustice in one form or another: an individual may do injustice to the community, or the community may be unjust to the individual, or one class tyrannises another, or one nation subjugates another, or one generation treats another with injustice. It is only Divine justice which remains free of any favouritism towards any of these. He is the Lord of all creation Who does not overlook anything on earth or in the heavens.

"There is no deity save Him, the Almighty, the Wise." The same truism of the Oneness of God is repeated again in the same verse, but this time it is coupled with the two attributes of God's might and wisdom. Both power and wisdom are essential for the purpose of maintaining justice. Justice can only be maintained when matters are set in their proper places and with the ability to so set them. God's attributes suggest positive activity. Nothing in the Islamic concept associates God with any negative attribute. This is the proper and true concept of the Divine Being, because it is His own description of Himself. When we believe in God, in the light of His positive attributes, our thoughts remain concentrated on His will and His power. Our faith, then, becomes much more than an academic concept; it provides us with a dynamic motive to act and do what is required of us.

> *The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him. Disagreements spread, through mutual aggression, among those who were given revelations only after knowledge had been granted to them. He who denies God's revelations will find that God is indeed swift in reckoning. If they argue with you, say: "I have surrendered my whole being to God, and so have all who follow me." Say to those who were given revelations and to unlettered people, "Will you also surrender yourselves (to God)?" If they surrender, they are on the right path. But if they turn away, then your only duty*

is to convey your message. God is watching over His servants. (Verses 19-20)

The *sūrah* now moves on to establish the logical result that since there is only one God, then all worship must be addressed to that one God: *"The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him."*

The oneness of the Divine Being requires that all submission must be to Him. There is nothing in people's minds or in their lives which is not subject to God's authority. The oneness of God means that there is only One Being who has the right to set values and standards for people, to require them to submit to Him, obey Him, implement the legislation He has enacted for them in all the affairs of their lives. There is only one faith, namely, pure submission to God alone, which is acceptable to Him.

When we state that the only true faith acceptable to God is self- surrender to Him, we mean true Islam. This is not merely a claim to be stated, a flag to be raised or a detached academic concept to be discussed which does not stir hearts or minds, or even a set of acts of worship such as Prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. This is not the sort of Islam which God describes as the only faith acceptable to Him. True Islam means complete obedience, total submission to God and the implementation of His revelations in human life, as will be stated presently in the same Qur'ānic text.

Islam also means the oneness of the Divine Being who is the Eternal Master of all. People of earlier revelations used to confuse the person of God and the person of Jesus Christ. They also confused God's will and that of Christ's. They disagreed among themselves so violently that they fought and killed one another on numerous occasions. God, therefore, makes the reasons for these disputes clear for both the people of earlier revelations and for the Muslim community: *"Disagreements spread, through mutual aggression, among those who were given revelations only after knowledge had been granted to them."*

Their disputes did not arise out of ignorance of the truth. They had been given certain knowledge of God's oneness and the fact that He is the only Lord in the universe. They were also given the knowledge they needed about human nature and true submission to God. They simply disagreed *"through mutual aggression"* when they abandoned the course of justice embodied in the faith and the law God revealed to them.

Christian historians have shown that political considerations were behind these doctrinal disputes. The same has frequently happened in both Jewish and Christian histories. It was the hatred felt by Egypt, Syria and other regions towards the rulers of Rome which resulted in the rejection of the official Roman doctrine and the adoption of a different one. On certain occasions, the keenness of a Byzantine

Emperor to maintain his rule over certain parts of his empire was the reason behind the invention of compromise doctrines which sought to achieve the required results. Faith to them was a ball game serving political goals. As such, it represented one of the worst forms of injustice. Worse still, it was done knowingly and deliberately.

A timely and appropriately stern warning is then given: "*He who denies God's revelations will find that God is indeed swift in reckoning.*" Disagreement over the truism of the oneness of God is thus considered a denial and rejection of God's revelations. The rejecters are here threatened with swift reckoning in order that people do not persist with their disbelief, denials and disputes.

God then instructs the Prophet to make his attitude towards the people of earlier revelations and the idolaters well known. The real issue is stated in absolute clarity. Their fate is left to God. The Prophet, however, proceeds along his absolutely clear path: "*But if they argue with you, say: I have surrendered my whole being to God, and so have all who follow me.' Say to those who were given revelations and to unlettered people, 'Will you also surrender yourselves (to God)? If they surrender, they are on the right path. But if they turn away, then your only duty is to convey your message. God is watching over His servants.*"

Thereafter, there can be no further clarification. Either God's oneness and authority over the universe is acknowledged with its practical correlative which is pure submission to Him, or futile arguments and excuses are pursued.

God teaches His Messenger a single word which explains his faith and way of life: "*If they argue with you,*" in matters of faith and the oneness of God, "*say: 'I have surrendered my whole being to God.'*" This applies to me and also to "*all who follow me.*" The usage here of the word "*follow*" is very significant. What is required is not a mere acceptance of the Prophet's message, but also its following in practice. Similarly, the phrase "*surrendered my whole being to God*" is highly significant. It is not sufficient for one to just state verbally or accept in one's mind the fact of the oneness of God. One must also surrender one's whole being to God. Practically this means obeying God and following His Messenger. Literally translated, the Arabic phrase says: "I have submitted my face to God." Since one's face is the noblest part of a human being, then its submission indicates willing acceptance and implementation of God's laws.

Such is, then, the faith of Muĥammad, God's Messenger, and such is his way of life. Muslims follow him in their faith and code of living. Let the people of earlier revelations and unlettered people, which is a reference to the idolaters, answer the question which is aimed at identifying each group in such a way as leaves no room for confusion about their stance: "*Say to those who were given revelations and to unlettered people, Will you also surrender yourselves (to God)?*" Both the idolaters and the people of earlier revelations are placed on the same level since they are all called

upon to accept Islam in the sense we have just explained. They are called upon to acknowledge the oneness of God and that He is the only Master of the whole universe. They are also required, when they have made this acknowledgement, to make it a practical reality through the implementation of God's revelations in human life.

"*If they surrender, they are on the right path.*" Right guidance has only one form, namely, Islam in its fullest meaning. There is simply no other form, concept, situation, or code which reflects right guidance. Anything which is in conflict with Islam represents error, ignorance, confusion and rejection of the truth.

"*But if they turn away, then your only duty is to convey your message.*" The Prophet's task is simply to convey his message. When he has done this, his mission is over. This applied before God commanded the Prophet to fight those who rejected Islam until they either accepted its faith and submitted to it, or until they pledged their obedience to its political authority by paying a loyalty tax. No one is compelled to accept the faith.

"*God is watching over His servants.*" He conducts all their affairs as He wishes and according to His knowledge. The ultimate decision is with Him. However, they are made fully aware of the fate that awaits them and all transgressors who, like them, reject the true faith.

When Prophets Are Killed

> *Those who deny God's revelations, and slay the Prophets against all right and slay people who enjoin equity among all people: promise them a painful suffering. It is they whose works shall come to nothing in this world and in the life to come; and they shall have none to help them. Have you considered the case of those who have received a share of revelation? When they are called upon to accept the judgement of God's book in their affairs, some of them turn away and pay no heed. For they claim: "The fire will most certainly not touch us save for a limited number of days." They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent. How, then, will it be with them when We shall gather them all together to witness the Day about which there is no doubt, when every soul will be paid in full what it has earned, and they shall not be wronged?* (Verses 21-5)

The first verse in the above passage, verse 21, warns against a painful suffering. Its timing is not specified. Hence, it is to be expected either in this life or in the life to come. It is coupled with an assurance that all their works shall come to nothing in either life. This is given in a highly vivid mode of expression which draws upon a well-known image of an animal grazing in a poisoned area. It swells up before it dies. Similarly, the actions of such people may appear to gather momentum and to

yield great results. This is no more than the swelling up of a poisoned animal prior to its death. All their actions are thus aborted and they will have no one to help or defend them.

We note that the denial and rejection of God's revelation is coupled in the Qur'ānic statement with the totally unjust killing of the Prophets — for there can be no right respected when a Prophet is killed. Furthermore, the killing of those who enjoin equity in human life, which is a reference to those who advocate the implementation of the code God has laid down for human life, which is based on justice and which alone can maintain absolute justice, suggests that the warning is directed at the Jews, for such are their distinctive qualities in history. This does not mean that the warning is not also directed to Christians who in the past killed many thousands of followers of doctrines which were at variance with that adopted by the Roman Empire, including those who declared that God was One and that Jesus Christ was a human being. This latter group are included among those *"who enjoin equity among all people."* It is also a permanent warning to anyone who may perpetrate such ghastly crimes, and these may live in any and every age.

It is worth remembering that when the expression *"those who deny God's revelations" is* mentioned in the Qur'ān, it does not simply refer to those who may declare themselves to be unbelievers. Instead, anyone who does not acknowledge the oneness of God and that He alone is worthy of worship is included in this group. Such a recognition entails that the authority to legislate and to set values and standards for human life belongs only to God. Anyone who claims or attributes any measure of that authority to anyone other than God is either an idolater or an unbeliever, even though he may claim a thousand times that he believes in God. The verses which follow confirm this view.

"Have you considered the case of those who have received a share ref revelation? When they are called upon to accept the judgement of God's book in their affairs, some of them turn away and pay no heed." This is clearly a rhetorical question, one so delivered as to emphasise the contradiction in the attitudes of those who have received a share of revelation. The reference here is to the Torah in respect of the Jews and the Bible in respect of the Christians. Each one is simply *"a share"* of God's Divine revelation, a portion of all the revelations God has vouchsafed to His messengers, which emphasises the unity of Godhead, and the fact that God alone conducts the affairs of the universe. All such revelations are in essence a single book; part of it was given to the Jews, and another part was given to the Christians while the Muslims received the whole book. This is because the Qur'ān embodies all the bases of faith and confirms all messages God revealed in the past. It is certainly something to wonder at, when those who *"have received a share of revelation"* are called upon to accept the judgement of God's book in their disputes and in all the affairs of their lives, but they

nevertheless do not respond positively. Some of them are left behind. They turn their backs on God's legislation, an action that is in flagrant contradiction to their stated belief in any portion of His book. In other words, it belies their claim that they follow God's revelations: *"Have you considered the case of those who have received a share of revelation? When they are called upon to accept the judgement of God's book in their affairs, some of them turn away and pay no heed."* (Verse 23)

God invites us to wonder at the people of earlier revelations when some of them, not all, refuse to allow God's book to judge in their affairs of both faith and life. What, then, should our attitude be towards those who claim to be Muslims, but who nevertheless banish God's law from their lives, 'While they continue to claim to be Muslim? This is, indeed, an example given by God so that Muslims should know the true nature of faith, generally, and Islam, in particular. They must be careful lest they themselves become subject to God's condemnation for their attitude. If God Himself so denounces the attitude of the people of earlier revelations who did not claim to be Muslims simply because they refused to accept the judgement of God's book in their affairs, what degree of denunciation or condemnation would be suitable for Muslims who adopt a similar attitude? There is no doubt that they would incur God's anger, be totally rejected by God and live in utter misery, deprived of Divine Mercy in any form.

The cause of their contradictory, erroneous attitude is then given: *"For they claim: 'The fire will most certainly not touch us save for a limited number of days.' They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent."*

This, then, is the reason for people turning their backs on the judgement of God's book. It places them in total contradiction with their claim to be believers or followers of Divine revelation. They simply do not take seriously the notion of reckoning on the Day of Judgement. Nor do they consider as serious the administration of Divine justice. The import of their claim is that they will not suffer the fire except for a limited number of days. How is this possible when they deviate from the most fundamental principle of faith which imposes on them the duty to accept the judgement of the Divine book in all matters? How can they make such a claim if they truly believe in God's justice, or even if they feel that they will definitely be raised to God on the Day of Judgement? What they state is simply an invention which they themselves perpetrate, and by which they are then deceived: *"They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent."*

It is indeed a fact that believing seriously in meeting God cannot be combined with such a futile notion in respect to His justice and reward. No man can combine fear of God and punishment on the Day of Judgement with turning his back on God's rulings outlined in His book or the implementation of His law in human life.

These people of earlier revelations stand in the same position as those whom we meet today who claim to be Muslims but who turn their backs when they are called upon to implement God's laws in their lives. Some of them even go further than this and impudently claim that human life has nothing to do with religion. They say that there is no need to impose religion on the practical side of human life, or on economic, social, and indeed family relations. They, nevertheless, continue their claim to be Muslims. Some of them are so naïve that they believe that God's punishment will be limited to purifying them of their sins only and that thereafter they will be admitted into heaven. They ask in absolute naivety: "Are we not Muslims?" It is the same false belief which was maintained by such people of earlier revelations. They show the same conceit and they deceive themselves with the same false beliefs which have no foundation in the religion God has revealed. Both groups are the\ same in their rejection of the very basics of faith and in their isolation from its fundamental practical expression, namely, submission to God and total obedience to His commands in all affairs of life, which they receive through His messengers.

> *How, then, will it be with them when We shall gather them all together to witness the Day about which there is no doubt, when every soul will be paid in full what it has earned, and they shall not be wronged?* (Verse 25)

How? This is a very stern warning which every believer shudders to face since he knows that that Day will inevitably come and that God's justice is certain to be done. That belief is in no way weakened by any false hopes or invented beliefs. This warning applies to all: idolaters and atheists, those who claim to follow earlier revelations and those who claim to be Muslims. They are all alike in the essential fact that they do not submit to God in their lives.

"*How, then, will it be with them when We shall gather them all together to witness the Day about which there is no doubt,*" and when God's justice is done? "*Every soul will be paid in full what it has earned,*" without any injustice or favouritism. "*They shall not be wronged,*" nor shall they receive any favours.

It is a question which remains without answer. Man's heart shakes when it imagines what will happen.

What God's Sovereignty Entails

> *Say: "Lord, Sovereign of all dominion, You grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion away from whom You will. You exalt whom You will and abase whom You will. In Your hand is all that is good. You are able to do all things. You cause the night to pass into the day, and You cause the day to pass into the night. You bring forth the living from the dead, and You bring forth the dead from that which is alive.*

You grant sustenance to whom You will, beyond all reckoning." (Verses 26-7)

These verses take the form of a direct instruction from God to His Messenger and every believer to turn to God, stating the absolute truth of the oneness of God and that He is the only One Who controls human life and the universe at large. This latter quality is simply a demonstration of God's Lordship of the whole universe in which He has no equals or partners.

When we carry out this instruction we note that it takes the form of an address made with all humility. The rhythm of a prayer is very clear in its construction, and its total effect is that of a heartfelt appeal. Its references to the universe as an open book touch gently on our feelings. It groups together God's conduct of human life and His full control of the universe, thus stressing the absolute truth of a single Godhead sustaining all. It also stresses the fact that human life is but one ingredient in the life of the universe. Submission to God alone is acknowledged by the universe, as it is indeed the proper attitude expected of man. Any deviation is a folly which leads to perversion.

"Say: 'Lord, Sovereign of all dominion, You grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion away from whom You will. You exalt whom you will and abase whom You will." This expresses the natural result of the oneness of God. Since there is only a single deity, He is then the only Master, *"the Sovereign of all dominion" Who* has no partners. He gives whatever portion He wishes of His dominion to whomever He wants of His servants. What is given becomes simply like a borrowed article. Its owner retains his absolute right of taking it back whenever he wants. No one, then, has any claim of original dominion giving him the right of absolute power. It is simply a received dominion, subject to the terms and conditions stipulated by the original Sovereign. If the recipient behaves in any way which constitutes a violation of these conditions, his action is invalid. Believers have a duty to stop him from that violation in this life. In the life to come, he will have to account for his violation of the terms stipulated by the original Sovereign.

He is also the One Who exalts whom He wills and abases whom He wills. He needs no one to ratify His judgement. No one grants protection against the will of God, and no one has the power to prevent His will taking its full course. His power is absolute and His control is total.

The authority of God ensures the realisation of all goodness. He exercises it with justice. When He gives dominion to anyone or takes it away from him, He does so with justice. Similarly, it is with justice that He exalts or abases any of His servants. This ensures real goodness, in all situations. It is sufficient that He should will something for it to be realised: *"In Your hand is all that is good. You are able to do all things."*

God's supervision of the affairs of human beings with all that is good resulting from it is simply an aspect of His control and, supervision of life in general and of the universe at large: "*You cause the night to pass into the day, and You cause the day to pass into the night. You bring forth the living from the dead, and You bring forth the dead from that which is alive. You grant sustenance to whom You will, beyond all reckoning.*" In this way verse 27 refers to great universal phenomena and paints them in a manner which overwhelms man's whole being: his heart, feelings and senses. It paints a subtle interwoven movement whereby each of the day and night enter into the other, and whereby the living are brought out of the dead and the dead out of the living. When man gives his full attention to the observation of this movement and listens to the voice of uncorrupted human nature identifying its origin, he is bound to conclude, with all certainty, that it is God Who controls it and makes it possible.

Some commentators explain that what is meant by the night and day passing into each other is that each of them takes part of the other when one of the four seasons succeeds another. Others believe that it refers to each of them creeping into the other with the first shades of darkness every evening and the first rays of light every morning. Whichever explanation we prefer, our hearts can almost visualise God's hand as it works in the universe wrapping one ball in darkness and opening another to daylight, reversing one position into another. We can see the dark lines gradually creeping into the light of day, and we can see the dawn slowly beginning to breathe, with the darkness all around. The night stretches little by little as it gains more and more of the hours of day at the beginning of winter, and the day stretches little by little, gaining on the night, as summer approaches. No man ever claims to control either movement with its fine subtleties. No rational person can ever claim that either movement happens by chance.

The same applies to the cycle of life and death: each creeps into the other very slowly and gradually. Every single minute death creeps into every living thing so as to be side by side with life. Death works into a living being and life builds up. Living cells die and disappear, while new living cells come into existence and begin their work. Those cells which have died come back to life in a different cycle, and what comes into life dies again in yet another cycle. All this happens within every single living thing. The circle, however, becomes wider and the living thing dies. Its cells, however, become minute particles which are incorporated in another formula, then enter the body of another living being and come back to life. It is an ever continuing cycle which goes on throughout the day and night. No man claims to control or do any part of this whole process. No rational person can claim that it comes about by chance.

It is a complete cycle which goes on within the whole universe and within every living thing. It is a fine, subtle and, at the same time, great cycle brought about before

our own eyes and minds by this brief Qur'ānic statement. It is a strong pointer to the One Who is able to create, plan and control. How can human beings, then, try to isolate themselves and their affairs from the Creator Who controls and plans everything? How can they devise for themselves systems which satisfy their own whims when they are only a sector of this universe, regulated by the Wise Who knows all?

How can some of them enslave others? How can some look at others as gods when all of them look to God for their own sustenance: *"You grant sustenance to whom You will, beyond all reckoning."*

This final touch puts our human hearts face to face with the greatest truism of the oneness of God: there is only one deity Who controls, sustains, plans, owns and grants sustenance to all. People must submit only to the Eternal Master of all, the Sovereign of all dominion, Who exalts and abases, gives life and causes death, Who gives His grace to whom He wills and withdraws it from whom He wills. In every situation He ensures justice and brings about what is good.

An Unwelcome Confrontation

> *Let not the believers take unbelievers for their allies in preference to the believers. He who does this has cut himself off from God, unless it be that you protect yourselves against them in this way. God warns you to beware of Him: for to God you shall all return. Say: "Whether you conceal what is in your hearts or bring it into the open, it is known to God. He knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and God has the power to accomplish anything. On the day when every soul will find itself confronted with whatever good it has done and whatever evil it has done, they will wish that there were a long span of time between them and that day. God warns you to beware of Him; and God is Most Compassionate towards His servants. "Say: "If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. "Say: "Obey God and the messenger." If they turn their backs, God does not love the unbelievers.* (Verses 28-32)

In these verses, we have first a statement confirming the denunciation made in the preceding verses of the attitude of those who have been given a share of God's revelations, but who have nevertheless turned their backs and refused to submit their disputes for arbitration according to God's book which lays down God's code for human life. They have rejected the Divine code which regulates the life of the universe as well as human life. The preceding verses were also a prelude to the stern warning included in the current passage against the believers forging an alliance with the unbelievers. Since the unbelievers have no power to control the universe, and since all power belongs to God, He alone is the guardian of the believers and

their allies.

In the preceding passage, the *sūrah* placed much emphasis on the fact that all power belongs to God, Who is in absolute control of the universe and Who alone provides sustenance to all His creation. How, then, can a believer be justified in forming an alliance with the enemies of God? True faith in God cannot be combined with an alliance with, or patronage of the enemies of God, who are themselves called upon to implement God's revelations, but who instead turn their backs in contempt.

Hence, we have this very stern warning in verse 28, making it absolutely clear that a Muslim disowns Islam if he forges a relationship of alliance or patronage with someone who refuses to acknowledge God's revelation as the arbiter in life: *"Let not the believers take unbelievers for their allies in preference to the believers. He who does this has cut himself off from God."* What a decisive statement! He has cut himself off from God. He has no relationship whatsoever with Him: no faith, no tie, no support. He never comes near to God nor has any contact with Him whatsoever.

Concessions are only granted to those who find themselves in a state of fear. Such people may try to protect themselves by pretending to support the unbelievers, but this must be understood to be only a verbal support given for a specific purpose. It cannot be an expression of any firmly established alliance or deeply rooted love. Ibn `Abbās says: "The concession here must not be understood as to seek protection through acting in support of unbelievers; it must be limited only to verbal statements." There is no concession whatsoever for a relationship of love between a believer and an unbeliever. It is implied here and explicitly stated elsewhere in this *sūrah* that an unbeliever is a person who does not accept that God's revelation be implemented in all aspects of life. Nor does this concession permit a believer to aid an unbeliever, in any form or way, pretending that he only seeks to protect himself. God cannot be so deceived.

Since the case here is one of conscience and the control is exercised only through the fear of God, Who knows everything, the warning to the believer against God's punishment[§] is given in a most unfamiliar mode of expression: *"God warns you to beware of Him: for to God you shall all return."*

A further warning is also driven home to man whereby he should be aware that God watches him and knows his every action and intention: *"Say: 'Whether you conceal what is in your hearts or bring it into the open, it is known to God. He knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and God has the power to accomplish anything.'"* (Verse 29) A real threat is implied here, one which arouses man's fear and makes him conscious that he must not make himself liable to God's punishment which is

[§] For further discussion on the *Nafs* attribute, please refer to section 1.4 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

inflicted on the basis of His knowledge and ability, and hence, cannot be avoided or repelled.

The warning and threat are further amplified with an image of the Day of Judgement brought before our eyes. It is indeed a fearful day, when nothing escapes attention. Everyone will find a full and detailed account of all his actions and intentions: "*On the day when every soul will find itself confronted with whatever good it has done and whatever evil it has done, they will wish that there were a long span of time between them and that Day.*" (Verse 30) This is a confrontation which leaves the human heart and mind totally overwhelmed. Every human being is cornered by both his good and evil actions. There is no escape. Hence, he inevitably entertains the wish that the confrontation could be long delayed. The confrontation is, however, actually taking place and this leaves any person totally helpless. It is important to point out that the original Arabic text admits two different interpretations regarding that wish; it may be taken to mean that every soul wishes that the day itself be far removed, and alternatively that everyone wishes that the evil they have done be placed far away from them.

The general warning to people to guard against incurring God's anger is repeated again, but this is coupled with a reminder of God's compassion and mercy. There is still a chance to take heed before it is too late: "*God warns you to beware of Him; and God is Most Compassionate towards His servants.*" (Verse 30) These very warnings and reminders are indicative of His compassion and that He wants only what is good for His servants.

These verses are nothing short of a sustained campaign made in a variety of hues and expressions. It suggests that there was at the time a real danger facing the Muslim community in Madinah and involving relations between individuals in the Muslim camp and their relatives, friends, or clients who belonged to the idolaters in Makkah or the Jews in Madinah. Islam sought to lay down the foundations of the Muslim community on the basis of its supreme tie, i.e. faith. The way of life derived from that faith must be the only one to implement. No hesitation or second thoughts could be tolerated in this regard.

These verses also suggest that man will need to exert sustained efforts in order to rid himself of these pressures and shackles, in order to associate himself only with God, and to be committed only to the Divine way of life.

Islam does not restrain any of its followers from being kind to any non-Muslim who does not stand in opposition to Islam. The forging of alliances, however, is different from kind treatment. An alliance means a commitment of mutual support and loyalty. This cannot be given by any true believer except to believers who share with him his faith in God, adopt the Divine way of life and willingly accept the

rulings embodied in His revelations in all their disputes.

The whole passage ends on a high note stating in absolute clarity the final verdict on the whole issue which is central to the *sūrah.* In just a few words, the essence of faith and submission are stated in such a way which admits of no confusion whatsoever between faith and unfaith: "*Say: 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' Say: 'Obey God and the messenger.' If they turn backs, God does not love the unbelievers.*" (Verses 31-2)

True love of God is not a mere verbal claim or a spiritual passion. The claim and the passion must be confirmed with a conscious following of God's Messenger and implementation of the Divine way of life. To be a true believer is not to repeat certain words or to experience certain feelings or to observe certain rituals. True faith is total obedience to God and His Messenger and a conscious implementation of the constitution conveyed to us through God's Messenger.

Imām Ibn Kathīr comments on the verse which states: "*Say: 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.'*" He says: "This verse gives a verdict in the case of anyone who claims to love God but does not follow the way of life laid down by Prophet Muĥammad. His very claim is an absolute lie unless he follows the Muĥammadan legislation in all his actions and statements. This is endorsed by the authentic tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which states: 'Anyone who does something which is not in conformity with this matter of ours will have it rejected.'"

In his commentary on the final verse, "*Say: 'Obey God and the messenger.' If they turn then backs, God does not love the unbelievers,*" Imām Ibn Kathīr says this verse indicates that to disobey God's Messenger is to reject the faith. God does not love anyone who may be described as an unbeliever, even though he may claim to love God.

In his well-known biography of the Prophet Muĥammad, Imām Ibn al-Qayyim writes: "There are well documented reports of many a person from among the people who follow other religions or idolaters who have admitted that the Prophet was a messenger from God and that whatever he said was the truth, but they nevertheless did not become Muslims by that mere admission. When we consider this fact we are bound to conclude that to be a Muslim is much more than the mere knowledge or even the admission of the truthfulness of the Prophet's message; that knowledge and admission must be combined with conscious obedience of the Prophet and the implementation of his religion in every aspect of life."

This faith of Islam has a distinctive component which is essential for its very existence, namely, obedience to God's law and following His Messenger and referring all disputes to God's book for arbitration. It is a fact which is derived from the faith in the Oneness of God as preached by Islam. It is the faith based on the

oneness of the deity who alone has the right to impose his authority on people and provide them with the legislation to implement and set for them the values and standards to observe. Overall authority in human life and all its aspects belong to God alone in the same way as He alone has the absolute authority in the whole universe. After all, man represents only a small element of the great universe.

As we have seen, in these two opening passages of the *sūrah,* and indeed in its very first verse, this fact is stated in absolutely clear terms: "*God: there is no deity save Him, the Ever-living, the Eternal Master all.*" Anyone who wants to be a Muslim must recognise this fact an accept it. This is the only form of Islam acceptable to God, Who accepts no other faith.

3
The Birth and Prophethood of Jesus (pbuh)

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱصْطَفَىٰٓ ءَادَمَ وَنُوحًا وَءَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَءَالَ عِمْرَٰنَ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

God raised Adam and Noah, and the House of Abraham and the House of `Imrān above all mankind. (33)

ذُرِّيَّةًۢ بَعْضُهَا مِنۢ بَعْضٍ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

They were the offspring of one another. God hears all and knows all. (34)

إِذْ قَالَتِ ٱمْرَأَتُ عِمْرَٰنَ رَبِّ إِنِّى نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِى بَطْنِى مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّىٓ ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٥﴾

`Imrān's wife said: "My Lord, I vow to You that which is in my womb, to be devoted to Your service. Accept it from me. You alone are the One Who hears all and knows all." (35)

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّى وَضَعْتُهَآ أُنثَىٰ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعَتْ وَلَيْسَ ٱلذَّكَرُ كَٱلْأُنثَىٰ ۖ وَإِنِّى سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّىٓ أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ٱلرَّجِيمِ ﴿٣٦﴾

When she had given birth she said: "My Lord, I have given birth to a female." — God well knew to what she would give birth. — "The male is not like the female. I have named her Mary and I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed." (36)

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنۢبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا ۖ كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا ٱلْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِندَهَا رِزْقًا ۖ قَالَ يَٰمَرْيَمُ أَنَّىٰ لَكِ هَٰذَا ۖ قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَآءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

Her Lord graciously accepted her. He made her grow up a goodly child, and placed her in the care of Zachariah. Whenever Zachariah visited her in the sanctuary he found her provided with food. He would say: "Mary, where has this come to you from?" She would answer: "It is from God. God gives sustenance to whom He wills, beyond all reckoning." (37)

هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُۥ ۖ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِى مِن لَّدُنكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ ٱلدُّعَآءِ ﴿٣٨﴾

At that point, Zachariah prayed to his Lord, saying: "Lord, bestow on me, out of Your grace, goodly offspring. Indeed, You hear all prayers." (38)

فَنَادَتْهُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَآئِمٌ يُصَلِّى فِى ٱلْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيَحْيَىٰ مُصَدِّقًۢا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا وَحَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Thereupon, the angels called out to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: "God gives you the happy news of [the birth of] John, who shall confirm the truth of a word from God. He shall be noble, utterly chaste and a Prophet from among the righteous." (39)

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِى غُلَٰمٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِىَ ٱلْكِبَرُ وَٱمْرَأَتِى عَاقِرٌ ۖ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ ٱللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَآءُ ﴿٤٠﴾

[Zachariah] said: "Lord, how can I have a son when old age has already overtaken me and my wife is barren?" He answered: "Thus it is. God does what He wills." (40)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱجْعَل لِّىٓ ءَايَةً ۖ قَالَ ءَايَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ ٱلنَّاسَ ثَلَٰثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْزًا ۗ وَٱذْكُر رَّبَّكَ كَثِيرًا وَسَبِّحْ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ وَٱلْإِبْكَٰرِ ﴿٤١﴾

[Zachariah] said: "Lord, grant me a sign." He replied: "Your sign shall be that for three days you will not speak to people except by gestures. Remember your Lord unceasingly and glorify Him in the early hours of night and day." (41)

وَإِذْ قَالَتِ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَٰمَرْيَمُ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱصْطَفَىٰكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ وَٱصْطَفَىٰكِ عَلَىٰ نِسَآءِ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

The angels said: "Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure, and raised you above all the women of the world. (42)

يَٰمَرْيَمُ ٱقْنُتِى لِرَبِّكِ وَٱسْجُدِى وَٱرْكَعِى مَعَ ٱلرَّٰكِعِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

"Mary, remain truly devout to your Lord, prostrate your elf (to Him) and bow down with those who bow down in worship." (43)

ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيۡكَۚ وَمَا كُنتَ لَدَيۡهِمۡ إِذۡ يُلۡقُونَ أَقۡلَٰمَهُمۡ أَيُّهُمۡ يَكۡفُلُ مَرۡيَمَ وَمَا كُنتَ لَدَيۡهِمۡ إِذۡ يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

This is an account of something which remained beyond the reach of your perception We now reveal to you. You were not present with them when they cast lots as to which of them should have charge of Mary; nor were you present when they contended about it with one another. (44)

إِذۡ قَالَتِ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَٰمَرۡيَمُ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكِ بِكَلِمَةٖ مِّنۡهُ ٱسۡمُهُ ٱلۡمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَ وَجِيهٗا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَمِنَ ٱلۡمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

The angels said: "Mary, God sends you the happy news, through a word from Him, [of a son] whose name is the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary, honoured in this world and in the life to come, and shall be among those who are favoured by God. (45)

وَيُكَلِّمُ ٱلنَّاسَ فِي ٱلۡمَهۡدِ وَكَهۡلٗا وَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

He shall speak to people in his cradle, and as a grown man, and shall be of the righteous." (46)

قَالَتۡ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِي وَلَدٞ وَلَمۡ يَمۡسَسۡنِي بَشَرٞۖ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكِ ٱللَّهُ يَخۡلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُۚ إِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمۡرٗا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٤٧﴾

Said she: "My Lord! How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?" [The angel] answered: "Thus it is. God creates what He wills. When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it 'Be', and it is. (47)

وَيُعَلِّمُهُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةَ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلَ ﴿٤٨﴾

"He will teach him the book and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel, (48)

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ أَنِّي قَدۡ جِئۡتُكُم بِـَٔايَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ أَنِّيٓ أَخۡلُقُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلطِّينِ كَهَيۡـَٔةِ ٱلطَّيۡرِ فَأَنفُخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيۡرَۢا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۖ

and will make him a messenger to the Israelites: 'I have brought you a sign from your Lord. I will fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by God's leave, it shall

become a living bird.

I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's leave. I will announce to you what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Surely, in all this there is a sign for you, if you are truly believers. (49)

وَأُبْرِئُ ٱلْأَكْمَهَ وَٱلْأَبْرَصَ وَأُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ وَمَا تَدَّخِرُونَ فِى بُيُوتِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

'And [I have come] to confirm that which has already been sent down of the Torah and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden you. I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so remain conscious of God and obey me. (50)

وَمُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَىَّ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَلِأُحِلَّ لَكُم بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى حُرِّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۚ وَجِئْتُكُم بِـَٔايَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٥٠﴾

'God is indeed my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him alone. That is the straight path." (51)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ رَبِّى وَرَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۗ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

When Jesus became conscious of their rejection of the faith, he asked: "Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?" The disciples replied: "We are [your] helpers in God's cause. We believe in God. Bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves to Him. (52)

۞ فَلَمَّآ أَحَسَّ عِيسَىٰ مِنْهُمُ ٱلْكُفْرَ قَالَ مَنْ أَنصَارِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالَ ٱلْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنصَارُ ٱللَّهِ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَٱشْهَدْ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

"Our Lord, we believe in what You have bestowed from on high, and we follow the messenger, so write us down among those who bear witness [to the truth]." (53)

رَبَّنَآ ءَامَنَّا بِمَآ أَنزَلْتَ وَٱتَّبَعْنَا ٱلرَّسُولَ فَٱكْتُبْنَا مَعَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

They schemed, and God also schemed. God is the

وَمَكَرُوا۟ وَمَكَرَ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ خَيْرُ ٱلْمَٰكِرِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

إِذْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ يَٰعِيسَىٰٓ إِنِّي مُتَوَفِّيكَ وَرَافِعُكَ إِلَيَّ وَمُطَهِّرُكَ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَجَاعِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوكَ فَوْقَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَأَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ فِيمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

best of schemers. (54)

God said: "Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve, and I shall place those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you shall all return, and I shall judge between you with regard to everything on which you used to differ. (55)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فَأُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا فِي ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْأَخِرَةِ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

"As for those who disbelieve, I shall inflict on them severe suffering in this world and in the life to come; and they shall have none to help them. (56)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَيُوَفِّيهِمْ أُجُورَهُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

But to those who believe and do good works, He will grant their reward in full. God does not love the wrongdoers. (57)

ذَٰلِكَ نَتْلُوهُ عَلَيْكَ مِنَ ٱلْأَيَٰتِ وَٱلذِّكْرِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿٥٨﴾

"This which We recite to you is a revelation and a wise reminder." (58)

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ ءَادَمَ ۖ خَلَقَهُۥ مِن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٥٩﴾

The case of Jesus in the sight of God is the same as the case of Adam. He created him of dust and then said to him: "Be", and he was. (59)

ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلْمُمْتَرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

This is the truth from your Lord: be not, then,

among the doubters. (60)

فَمَنْ حَآجَّكَ فِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ فَقُلْ تَعَالَوْا۟ نَدْعُ أَبْنَآءَنَا وَأَبْنَآءَكُمْ وَنِسَآءَنَا وَنِسَآءَكُمْ وَأَنفُسَنَا وَأَنفُسَكُمْ ثُمَّ نَبْتَهِلْ فَنَجْعَل لَّعْنَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَى ٱلْكَـٰذِبِينَ ﴿٦١﴾

If anyone should dispute with you about this [truth] after all the knowledge you have received, say: "Come. Let us summon our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves; then let us pray humbly and solemnly and invoke God's curse upon the ones who are telling a lie." (61)

إِنَّ هَـٰذَا لَهُوَ ٱلْقَصَصُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۚ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَـٰهٍ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٦٢﴾

This is indeed the truth of the matter. There is no deity save God. Indeed, it is God Who is the Mighty, the Wise. (62)

فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٦٣﴾

And if they turn away, God has full knowledge of those who spread corruption. (63)

قُلْ يَـٰٓأَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ تَعَالَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ كَلِمَةٍ سَوَآءٍۭ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِۦ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا۟ فَقُولُوا۟ ٱشْهَدُوا۟ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

Say: "People of earlier revelations. Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall w ship none but God, that shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God." And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God." (64)

Overview

Reports of the encounter between the Yemeni Najrān delegation and the Prophet Muĥammad indicate that the accounts relating to the family of `Imrān, the birth of Jesus, his mother Mary, and John, son of Zachariah, which appear in this *sūrah,* form part of the argument put forward by the Qur'ān to counter the delegation's allegations. This argument is based on the Qur'ānic view that Jesus was God's "word" given to Mary and created from His "spirit". The reports claim that the

Christians of Yemen raised questions other than those covered in *sūrah* 19, entitled *Maryam.*

This may well be the case, but the accounts fall into the general Qur'ānic pattern of citing historic events and episodes in order to establish certain facts and truths, which are almost always the central theme of the *sūrah* in which they appear. The amount of detail and the approach are often determined by how much the stories are used to emphasise, highlight or evoke those facts and truths. Undeniably, narrative, as a literary tool, is a special way of presenting and conveying facts in graphic and lively terms and has a strong and lasting impact. It depicts ideas and concepts in a tangible and moving manner as they translate into real life situations, and leaves aside the merely abstract presentation of those ideas.

In this instance, we find that the narratives cover the same subjects, facts and concepts that the *sūrah* deals with. In this way, it loses its parochial and limited context and emerges as a fundamental element of the whole discussion, in its own right, conveying essential and eternal aspects of Islamic concepts and beliefs.

The central theme of the *sūrah,* as already pointed out, revolves around the issue of the oneness of God, i.e. *tawĥīd.* The story of Jesus and the other accounts related to it reinforce this concept as they refute and completely exclude the idea of offspring or partners as far as God is concerned. The *sūrah* rejects these notions as false and naïve, and presents the birth and life of Maryam and Jesus in such a manner that leaves no room for doubting his full humanity or that he was one of God's messengers; whatever applies to them applies to him. It explains the supernatural phenomena that accompanied the birth and life of Jesus in simple, clear and reassuring terms. The whole issue is presented as a natural and normal one that should raise no confusion or suspicion. It simply says: "*The case of Jesus in the sight of God is the same as the case of Adam. He created him of dust and then said to him, Be, and he was.*" (Verse 59) Believing hearts find certainty and peace in these words, and wonder how this evident concept could ever have been shrouded in doubt and confusion.

The other issue which is reiterated throughout this *sūrah* is that the true religion is Islam, or total submission and obedience to God Almighty. This issue also emerges from the narratives quite clearly. We find it in Jesus's response to the Israelites when he says: "*... I have come to confirm that which has already been sent down of the Torah and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden you.....*" (Verse 50) This is an affirmation of the nature of God's message and its purpose as being to establish a way of life and implement a system defining what is permissible and what is not, to be adopted and adhered to by believers. This concept of submission and compliance is asserted by the disciples of Jesus where we read: "*And when Jesus become conscious of then rejection of the faith, he asked: 'Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?' The disciples replied, 'We are [your] helpers in God's cause. We believe in God. Bear you witness*

that we have surrendered ourselves to Him. Our Lord, we believe in what You have bestowed from on high, and we follow the messenger, so write us down among those who bear witness.'" (Verses 52-3)

Another theme which is quite evident in this passage is a description of the believers' relationship with their Lord. It presents a host of laudable examples in the person of that select group of God's prophets and messengers in successive generations. This noble example is manifested in the earnest plea by `Imrān's wife to God Almighty regarding the new-born baby girl, in Mary's conversation with Zachariah, in the latter's appeal to his Lord, and in the response of the disciples to God's Messenger, Jesus, and their invocations to God.

Once the narrative is completed, the *sūrah* gives a brief commentary and summary of the facts, referring back to the accounts already cited. It expounds the true nature of Jesus, and the nature of creation, Divine will and pure monotheism, or *tawĥīd.* It recalls how people of earlier revelations were called to believe in the oneness of God and how they were challenged to accept it. The passage, verses 33-64, closes with a comprehensive statement which the Prophet Muĥammad could use to address Jews and Christians everywhere, those who attended the debates as well as those who did not, until the end of time. It says: "*Say, 'People of earlier revelations. Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'"* (Verse 64)

There the debate ends and the purpose of Islam and what order of human life it is proposing become very clear. The meaning of religion and submission to God are defined, and all distorted or falsified versions of religion or submission are rejected. This is the ultimate objective of this section and of the *sūrah* as a whole expressed through some of the most charming, interesting and meaningful of narratives. This is the function of historic accounts and narration in the Qur'ān and these are the premises that govern its style and presentation.

The story of Jesus is covered in *sūrah* 19, *Maryam,* as well as in the present *sūrah.* When we compare the two accounts, we find certain additional, albeit brief details in this *sūrah.* In *sūrah Maryam,* we are given a lengthy account of the birth of Jesus, but not of his mother, while here that part is condensed but more details are given of the message of Jesus and about his disciples. The Qur'ānic commentary here is longer because the issue under debate, that of God's oneness, religion and revelation, is more significant and comprehensive.

God's Chosen Servants

> *God raised Adam and Noah, and the House of Abraham and the House of `Imrān above all mankind. They were the offspring of one another. God hears all and knows all. `Imrān's wife said: My Lord, I vow to You that which is in my womb, to be devoted to Your service. Accept it from me. You alone are the One Who hears all and knows all. "When she had given birth she said: "My Lord, I have given birth to a female." – God well knew to what she would give birth. – "The male is not like the female. I have named her Mary and I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed. "Her Lord graciously accepted her. He made her grow up a goodly child, and placed her in the care of Zachariah. Whenever Zachariah visited her in the sanctuary he found her provided with food. He would say: 'Mary, where has this come to you from?" She would answer: "It is from God. God gives sustenance to whom He wills, beyond all reckoning."* (Verses 33-7)

The narration begins with mentioning God's chosen servants whom He has selected for the task of conveying the one message of the single faith preached from the beginning of creation. They are the leaders of the procession of believers in all its phases and throughout history. We are told that these people form a continuous chain or a lineage. However, this does not necessarily mean a family lineage, even though they have all descended from Adam and Noah. Rather the tie which groups them together is that they have been chosen by God and that they belong to the same faith: *"God raised Adam and Noah, and the House of Abraham and the House of `Imrān above all mankind."* (Verse 33)

This verse mentions two individuals, Adam and Noah, and two families, the House of Abraham and the House of `Imrān. It is, thus, made clear that Adam and Noah have been exalted as individuals, while Abraham and `Imrān were favoured along with their descendants, on that basis which was firmly established in the preceding *sūrah al-Baqarah,* with regard to Abraham's seed. This confirms that the inheritance of prophethood and blessings is not determined by the relationship of blood, but by that of faith: *"When his Lord tested Abraham with certain commandments and he fulfilled them, He said: I have appointed you a leader of mankind.' Abraham asked: And what of my descendants?' God said: 'My covenant does not apply to the wrong doers.'"* (2: 124)

Some reports suggest that `Imrān belonged to the House of Abraham. He is, then, mentioned here by name for a particular purpose which pertains to the stories of Mary and Jesus. We also note that this *sūrah* makes no mention of Moses or Jacob, who also belonged to the House of Abraham because the occasion does not require such a reference to answer the arguments raised about Jesus, son of Mary, or about Abraham.

A Child Dedicated to Divine Service

The opening verse in this section is a declaration: "*God raised Adam and Noah, and the House of Abraham and the House of `Imrān above all mankind.*" This serves as a preparatory announcement and an introduction to the story which immediately follows, giving information about the House of `Imrān. Its events begin to unfold with the birth of Mary.

The vow made by `Imrān's wife reveals to us the fact that she is a woman with a heart full of faith. She looks up to her Lord making an offering of the dearest thing to her, namely, the child she is bearing. She dedicates the child to her Lord, free of all conditions and all partnerships, free of all claims which may be made by anyone other than God. The Arabic term used here to denote that the offering is made absolutely purely to God is derived from the root meaning "freedom" or "liberation". This in itself is very significant. No one is truly free unless he devotes himself totally to God, liberating himself from servitude to anyone, anything, or any value.

When submission to God alone is total, it indicates total freedom. Any other situation is a form of slavery although it may appear in the guise of freedom.

This shows that to believe in God as the only Lord is perfect freedom. No human being is truly free if he recognises any degree of authority which belongs to anyone other than God. When Islam preaches the Oneness of God, it preaches the only true form of human freedom.

The devoted prayer `Imrān's wife addresses to her Lord to accept her offering is an indication of her total submission to God. She appears to us free from all shackles. Her only motivation is to seek God's pleasure and acceptance: "*My Lord, I vow to You that which is in my womb, to be devoted to Your service. Accept it from me. You alone are the One Who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 35)

She is, however, delivered of a daughter, not a son: "*When she had given birth she said: 'My Lord, I have given birth to a female. ' – God well knew to what she would give birth. – 'The male is not like the female, I have named her Mary and I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed.'*" (Verse 36) She was hoping for a male child, because only male children were devoted for service in temples, so that they may free themselves from any preoccupation with anything other than worship and prayer. When she discovered that she had given birth to a daughter, she addressed her Lord in a sorrowful tone: "*My Lord, I have given birth to a female.*" – She realises that God is fully aware of the fact. She, however, makes the offering with what she has, and appears to apologize for not having a male child who might have been better able to fulfil the mission for which the baby was devoted: "*The male is not like the female.*" In this particular consideration, a female cannot fulfil the tasks for which the male is better suited. "*I have named her Mary.*"

This address sounds close, familiar, made by one who feels to be having a private conversation with her Lord, explaining what is on her mind and making her offering gently and directly. This is the type of relationship which God's chosen people have with their Lord: it is a relationship of friendship, closeness and simple address, free of all complications. They feel they are speaking with the One Who is near, loving and certain to respond.

"*I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed.*" These are the final words spoken by the mother as she gives up her offering to her Lord, entrusting her baby to His care and seeking His protection for her and her offspring against Satan. They are words which express the desire of a devoted heart. No mother could wish for her new-born baby anything better than protection by God from Satan.

"*Her Lord graciously accepted her. He made her grow up a goodly child.*" (Verse 37) This acceptance is given in return for the dedication which fills the mother's heart and motivates her to make such a dedicated vow. God's gracious acceptance of Mary also serves as a preparation for her to receive the breathing of God's spirit and His word so that she will be able to give birth to Jesus in a way which is totally unfamiliar to human beings.

God "*placed her in the, care of Zachariah.*" (Verse 37) He made Zachariah, the chief of-tie Jewish temple, the custody of which was entrusted to Aaron's priestly descendants, Mary's guardian.

Mary was a blessed child, enjoying a state of Abundance. God ensured that she would always have an Abundance of everything: *"Whenever Zachariah visited her in the sanctuary he found her provided with food. He would say:' Mary, where has this come to you from?' She would answer: 'It is from God. God gives sustenance to whom He wills, beyond all reckoning.'"* (Verse 37)

We do not wish to indulge in any discussion of the nature of the provisions made available to Mary as others have done. It is sufficient for us to know that she was a blessed child whose blessings benefited others around her. She had more than she needed of everything which may be termed as "provisions". Her guardian, himself a Prophet, wondered at this Abundance and asked her how and where she got it from. A humble servant of God as she was, she would acknowledge God's grace, saying no more than: "*It is from God. God gives sustenance to whom He wills, beyond all reckoning.*"

Her answer is indicative of the relationship between a believer and her Lord. She keeps to herself the secret which exists between Him and her, referring to it with modesty, and without any trace of boastfulness.

This unfamiliar aspect which makes Zachariah wonder serves as a prelude to the forthcoming wonders associated with the birth of John and with the birth of Jesus.

A Very Strange Birth

> *At that point, Zachariah prayed to his Lord, saying: "Lord, bestow on me, out of Your grace, goodly offspring. Indeed, You hear all prayers. "Thereupon, the angels called out to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: "God gives you the happy news of [the birth of] John, who shall confirm the truth of a word from God. He shall be noble, utterly chaste and a Prophet from among the righteous. "[Zechariah] said: "Lord, how can I have a son when old age has already overtaken me and my wife is barren?" He answered: "Thus it is. God does what He wills." [Zachariah] said: "Lord, grant me a sign." He replied: "Your sign shall be that for three days you will not speak to people except by gestures. Remember your Lord unceasingly and glorify Him in the early hours of night and day."* (Verses 38-41)

Zachariah, an old man without progeny, experienced a renewal of that yearning to have a child of his own. This is a natural desire which cannot be suppressed even by those who dedicate themselves to Divine Service and preoccupy themselves with worship. God has made this desire a part of human nature so that life can continue and progress.

Here we witness an event which demonstrates that God's will is absolute, not confined to what is familiar to men. Human beings tend to think that what they know of natural laws are final, inviolable, absolute. Hence, they raise doubts about any event which does not seem to fall within the confines of these laws. If they cannot deny the event altogether because they know it to be an accomplished fact, they start to fabricate legends around it.

Here we find Zachariah, a man overtaken by old age, and his barren wife who had not had children even in her youth. As Zachariah brings up Mary, a goodly child provided with Abundance from God, his deep natural desire to have offspring of his own begins to stir inside him. He turns to his Lord with a passionate prayer to give him out of His grace goodly offspring: *"At that point, Zachariah prayed to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, bestow on me, out of Your Grace' goodly offspring. Indeed, You hear all prayers.'"* (Verse 38) And what does this passionate prayer achieve? God answers his prayer in a way which is not restricted to age or what is familiar to people. It is an answer determined by God's absolute will: *"Thereupon, the angels called out to him as he stood praying with in the sanctuary: 'God gives you the happy news of [the birth of] John, who shall confirm the truth of a word from God. He shall be noble, utterly chaste and a Prophet from among the righteous.'"* (Verse 39)

This is the sincere prayer of a man of pure heart who has placed his hopes in the One Who hears all prayers and Who is able to answer them when He chooses. The angels bid Zachariah rejoice at the news of the birth of a son whose name, John, is known even before he is born. His qualities are also well known: he is to be a man of

nobility and distinction, utterly chaste, able to control his desires and a firm believer who will confirm the word of God. Moreover, he will be a Prophet and a righteous man.

God has answered Zachariah's prayer in such a way that the natural phenomena familiar to man are put aside. People may think these phenomena to be a law which restricts even the will of God. Whatever is familiar to man and thought by him to be an inviolable law is no more than a relative law. is neither final nor absolute. Since man is confined by the limit ions of his age and knowledge, and since our minds can only work within our natural limitations, we cannot appreciate any final law or comprehend any fact which is absolute. Hence, it is more suitable for man not to exceed the boundaries of propriety when he thinks of God. It is far better for man to confine himself to the limitations of his own world when he speaks of what is possible and what is impossible. He must not, in any way, try to set a framework by virtue of his own experience and scanty knowledge in which to restrict God's absolute will.

The way his prayer was answered surprised even Zachariah. After all, Zachariah was a man like us. He wanted to know from his Lord how this could happen when it was something "supernatural" by the standards of human beings. He said: *"Lord, how can I have a son when old age has already overtaken me and my wife is barren?"* He was given an easy, simple answer which puts matters in the right perspective and which need not be surprising to anyone: *"Thus it is. God does what He wills."* (Verse 40)

"Thus it is." The whole thing is familiar and it happens all the time when we take it within the context of God's absolute will and His actions which are always accomplished. But people do not think of this nor do they remember this fact.

"Thus it is," absolutely easy, unrestricted. God does what He wills. What is so strange about Him giving Zachariah a son when Zachariah has been overtaken by old age and his wife is barren? These restrictions apply to men because they are familiar to men. As for God, there is nothing familiar or unfamiliar. Everything happens according to God's will. His will is subject to no restrictions whatsoever.

Zachariah, nevertheless, was so overwhelmed by the news that he prayed to his Lord to give him a sign which would reassure him. He said: *"Lord, grant me a sign."* God directs him at this point to that which gives him the perfect reassurance. He gives him a totally unfamiliar experience. The sign was that Zachariah's tongue was to be tied for three days when he tried to address people, but would remain untied when he addressed his Lord and glorified Him: *"He replied: 'Your sign shall be that for three days you will not speak to people except by gestures. Remember your Lord unceasingly and glorify Him in the early hours of night and day.'"* (Verse 41)

The Qur'ānic account stops here. We know that this is what actually took place.

Zachariah had an experience which was unfamiliar in his own life and in the lives of other beings. His tongue was unable to utter a word of ordinary speech while it uttered the praises and glorification of God. What law controls such a phenomenon? It is the law of God's absolute will. There can be no other explanation of this strange event. Similarly, there is no other explanation of the birth of John when his father had been overtaken by old age and his mother was barren.

Preparation for a Special Event

> *The angels said: 'Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure, and raised you above all the women of the world. Mary, Remain truly devout to your Lord, prostrate yourself [to Him] and bow down with those who bow down in worship. This is an account of something which remained beyond the reach of your perception We now reveal to you. You were not present with them when they cast lots as to which of them should have charge of Mary; nor were you present when they contended about it with one another.* (Verses 42-4)

Within the context of this *sūrah,* the miraculous nature of the of birth of John, born to Zachariah and his wife despite their respective old age and barrenness, comes as a prelude to the account of another event around which legends have been woven, even though it is no more than one in a series of events which prove that God's will is free of all restrictions. At this point, the *sūrah* begins the story of Christ with the preparation of Mary with purification and worship to receive the spiritual light.

"The angels said: Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure, and raised you above all the women of the world. Mary, remain truly devout to your Lord, prostrate yourself Ito Him] and bow down with those who bow down in worship." (Verses 42-3) What a great honour to be bestowed upon her. She is chosen to receive the Divine spirit directly in the same way as Adam, the first human being to be created, received it. She is to be the means through which this miraculous event is shown to humanity. It is an event which has not been repeated in the entire history of mankind. Hence, it is undoubtedly a great moment. She, however, had no knowledge whatsoever of the event up to that point.

The reference here to Mary's purification is highly significant because the Jews did not hesitate to raise suspicions about Mary's purity in connection with the birth of her son. Making use of the fact that such a birth is without parallel humanity, they claimed that there must be something dishonourable behind it. Confound them.

Here we see in full light a remarkable aspect of the greatness of this religion of Islam, one which illustrates its great origin. Muĥammad, who conveyed the message of Islam, faced determined opposition by the people of earlier revelations, including

the Christians, which manifested itself in various forms of denunciation, argument and doubt. Nevertheless, Muĥammad announced what God revealed to him of the great truth of Mary and her exaltation above all the women of the world. He did not mince words about her great honour, even though he was involved in a debate with people who honoured Mary and considered her honour sufficient justification for their refusal to believe in Muĥammad and his message. Can there be any greater honesty and truthfulness? This account shows beyond doubt the source from which this religion of Islam has come and confirms the absolute honesty and integrity of the messenger who conveyed it. He received "the truth" from his Lord about Mary and Jesus and he did not hesitate to declare that truth in that debate. Had he not been a messenger from God who describes Himself as "the truth", he would not have made that declaration at that particular time.

"Mary, remain truly devout to your Lord, prostrate yourself [to Him] and bow down with those who bow down in worship." Total obedience and constant worship. It is a life totally devoted to God which serves as preparation for the forthcoming event.

At this point in the story and before relating the details of these great events, the *sūrah* briefly refers to one of the purposes behind relating such historical accounts. It proves the fact of revelation which informs the Prophet of events which he did not attend and could not have known from any source other than God: *"This is an account of something which remained beyond the reach of your perception We now reveal to you. You were not present with them when they cast lots as to which of them should have charge of Mary; nor were you present when they contended about it with one another."* (Verse 44)

This statement refers to the competition among the custodians of the temple to take guardianship of Mary when her mother brought her as a baby to the temple in fulfilment of her vow to her Lord. This verse, in fact, refers to an event which is not related either in the Old or the New Testaments, although it must have been known to the priests and rabbis. The custodians of the temple had to cast their lots in order to determine who would have charge of Mary. The Qur'ānic verse does not provide many details, perhaps because the matter was well known to those to whom the verse was recited, or because it does not add anything to the fact which is meant to be told to future generations. We understand, however, that those custodians agreed on a formula among themselves, through casting lots, to determine Mary's future guardian, just as we do nowadays when we toss up for one thing or another. Some reports suggest that they cast their pens in the river Jordan. The river swept all the pens away, except that of Zachariah which remained in its place. That could equally have been the agreed formula among them, but no matter what it was, they acknowledged his claim to be Mary's guardian.

All this was of the secrets unknown to the Prophet. He did not attend those events. Moreover, it may have been one of the secrets of the temple not told to

anyone. The Qur'ānic account uses it in the debate with the learned authorities of the people of earlier revelations as a proof of God's revelation to His honest and trustworthy messenger. We have no reports of any reply they might have given to this argument. Had it been debatable, they would have argued it, considering that that was their primary purpose.

A Miraculous Birth

> *The angels said: 'Mary, God sends you the happy news, through a word from Him, [of a son] whose name is the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary, honoured in this world and in the life to come, and shall be among those who are favoured by God. He shall speak to people in his cradle, and as a grown man, and shall be of the righteous." Said she: "My Lord! How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?" [The angel] answered: "Thus it is. God creates what He wills. When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it Be, and it is. He will teach him the book and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel, and will make him a messenger to the Israelites. I have brought you a sign from your Lord. I will fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by God's leave, it shall become a living bird. I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's leave. I will announce to you what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Surely, in all this there as a sign for you, if you are truly believers.* (Verses 45-9)

To the human mind, Jesus's birth remains the greatest of all miracles. According to God's will, which is free of all restrictions, it is nothing out of the ordinary.

We are told that Mary qualified, through purification, devotion and sincere worship, to receive this honour and to be chosen for this great event. Here she is receiving the news for the first time through the angels: "*The angels said: Mary, God sends you the happy news, through a word from Him, [of a son] whose name is the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary, honoured in this world and in the life to come, and shall be among those who are favoured by God.'*" (Verse 45) It is a complete piece of news which tells of the whole affair. She receives the news in a word from God, namely the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary. In the construction of the sentence, the name "the Christ" is a substitute for the term "a word". Yet, he is indeed the "Word". What does this expression actually mean?

This and similar statements are of those matters which lie beyond our human perception. There is no way to determine what they precisely mean. They may be part of what God referred to in His earlier statement in the *sūrah: "He it is Who has sent down to you the Book, containing verses which are clear and precise — and these are the essence of the Book — and others are allegorical. Those whose hearts have swerved from the truth pursue that part of it which is allegorical, seeking to create dissension and trying to give it an arbitrary meaning."* (Verse 7) The matter, however, appears to be much simpler if

our purpose is to understand this fact in such a way which keeps our hearts in direct contact with God and His perfect creation, His limitless ability and unrestricted will. It was God's will that human life should start with the creation of Adam from clay. Whether He has made Adam directly from clay or He made from clay an earlier species which continued to develop until the humankind came into existence has no bearing whatsoever on the nature of the secret which remains known only to God. That is, the secret of life which was given to the first living creature, or given to Adam if he was created directly out of lifeless clay. Both are the same in relation to God's work. Neither should be considered preferable to the other in explaining existence.

Where has this life come from, and how? It is certainly something different from dust and different from all the lifeless materials available in the earth. It is something extra, something different. It is something which brings about certain aspects which can never be found in the dust, clay or in any lifeless material whatsoever. How has this secret come about? The fact that we do not know does not justify our denial of its existence or our indulging in petty arguments as those who believe only in matter do.

They pursue their arguments with a narrow-mindedness which cannot be respected by any man of reason, let alone any scientist. The fact remains that we do not know. All the attempts which we, human beings, have made with our limited means to determine the origin of life, or to initiate life from something which is lifeless, have achieved nothing.

We do not know, but God, Who has given life, knows. He tells us that life is a breathing of His spirit into something. He further tells us that giving it is achieved by a word from Him: *"Be, and it is."* What is this spiritual breathing? How is spirit blown into something lifeless so as to bring it into existence? This is a secret which remains incomprehensible to human reason. We cannot achieve that understanding because it is not part of our business. To know these answers does not benefit man in the discharge of his mission for which God has created him, namely, to be in charge of the earth. He will never need to create life from death. Hence, what is the value to him of knowing the nature of life, or the nature of the breathing of the Divine spirit, or how it has been given to Adam or to the first creature in the chain of living beings?

God tells us that the breathing of His spirit in Adam is what gave Adam his honourable place and distinction, even above the angels. It must be, then, something different from that mere "life" given to worms and germs. This leads us to consider man as a kind of creation with a separate existence. He has a special place in the general order of the universe which is not shared by any other creature. This, however, is not our immediate subject. We have only made this brief reference to it in order to warn the reader against any doubts which may arise as a result of

arguments surrounding the advent of man.

What is important here is that God is telling us about the initiation of life. It does not matter that we remain unable to comprehend the nature of this secret or understand how life is breathed into something lifeless.

It was God's will, after Adam came into existence in that direct way, to establish a certain procedure for the regeneration of human life. This procedure requires that a male and a female come together and that the female egg be fertilised by a male sperm for conception to take place. Neither the egg nor the sperm is lifeless.

People were familiar with this process for countless generations until God chose to make an exception to it in the case of an individual human being. He made his birth similar to the very first beginning, although not exactly the same. In this case, a female on her own receives the Divine spirit which initiates life, and the process is completed.

Was this breathing of the spirit what is described as the word? Or, was the word the line God's will has taken? Or, does the word mean the command "be", which may be taken as it is or may express that God's will has chosen something in particular? Was the word Jesus, or is his existence derived from it? The pursuit of all such questions can only result in creating doubts. The only true conclusion is that God willed to initiate life in a manner which had no parallel. His unrestricted will accomplished such an initiation of life through a breathing of His spirit, the nature of which remains unknown to us while we understand its effects. There is no reason for us to understand its nature because such an understanding does not add to our ability to discharge our mission on earth, since to initiate life is not part of our appointed task. Viewed in this manner, the whole question becomes easy to understand and raises no doubts in our minds.

Jesus: A Testimony to God's Free Will

The angels gave Mary the happy news of a word from God whose name was the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary. That piece of news included his sex, name and lineage which revealed that he descended from his mother. It also included his qualities as well as his position with his Lord: "*Honoured in this world and in the life to come, and shall be among those who are favoured by God.*" As given by the angels, that piece of news refers to a miraculous aspect associated with his birth, "*He shall speak to people in his cradle,*" a glimpse of his future, "*and as a grown man,*" his character and the type of people to whom he belongs: "*and shall be of the righteous.*"

Mary, the pure virgin, whose experience is limited to what is familiar in human life receives that piece of news as any girl would receive it. She appeals to her Lord

trying to understand this highly perplexing secret: *"Said she: My Lord.' How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?"*

The answer she is given reminds her of the simple fact which is often overlooked by human beings, whose experience and knowledge is limited to that with which they are familiar of causes and effects: *"[The angel] answered: 'Thus it is'. God creates what He wills. When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it "Be", and it is.'"* When the whole question is thus referred to this basic fact, all wonder disappears. Man is reassured and even wonders at himself for overlooking this simple and clear fact of God's unrestricted will.

The angel goes on to give Mary more information about the child to whom God has chosen her to give birth in a unique way, and what his position shall be among the Israelites. At this point the news given to Mary is interwoven with Jesus's future as if both were taking place now, in front of our eyes, in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān: *"He will teach him the book and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel."*

The term *"the book"*, as used in the Arabic original, may be understood to mean "to write", or to mean the Torah and the Gospel. If it is the latter, then the fact that they are mentioned immediately afterwards is perfectly acceptable usage in Arabic which provides the details of something already mentioned in general terms. *"Wisdom" is* a certain condition which enables a person to look at things in their right perspective, understand what is right and follow it. To be granted wisdom is to be granted much grace by God. The Torah is the book of Jesus in the same way as the Gospel, for it represents the basis of the religion he preached. The Gospel is a complement renovating the spirit of the Torah and reviving the essence of faith which had been smothered by the Israelites. Many of those who speak about Christianity make the mistake of neglecting the Torah when it is the basis of the religion preached by Jesus and contains the law which should be implemented in a Christian society. The Gospel contains only a few amendments to the Torah. Otherwise, it is a message reviving what has already been established by the Torah. It has a refining effect on human conscience enabling man to be in direct contact with God through the revealed text. It is for this revival and refinement that Jesus strove, and because of them his enemies schemed against him, as will be shown later in this *sūrah.*

> *And will make him a messenger to the Israelites. "I have brought you a sign from your Lord. I will fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by God's leave, it shall become a living bird. I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's leave. I will announce to you what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Surely, in all this there is a sign for you, if you are truly believers."* (Verse 49)

This verse makes it clear that Jesus was given a message to deliver to the Israelites.

He was one of their Prophets. Consequently, the Torah revealed to Moses, containing the law to be implemented in the life of the Israelite community and laying down legislation for various aspects of human life, continued to be upheld by Jesus, although it was complemented by the Gospel which places much emphasis on the spiritual aspect of life and the role of human conscience.

The sign which he was to be granted and of which God informed his mother, Mary, and with which he actually confronted the Israelites was the miracle of breathing into the dead to give it life. He was to bring the dead back to life, to heal the one who was born blind, to heal the leper and to inform people of what they eat or store up of food in their houses, although he could not see it or know of it by his own means.

We also note that the Qur'ānic text emphasises, both at the time when the angel gives that happy news to Mary and when these matters came to take place later on, that each of these miracles shown by Jesus to his people was given to him by God. The Qur'ān quotes him as saying that and mentions the phrase "*by Gods leave*" after every single one of them in order to emphasise that fact most strongly. That phrase could have been left to the end of the statement, but it was used repeatedly in order to leave absolutely no room for confusion.

These miracles in general relate to either the initiation or restoration of life, or to the restoration of sound health which is a branch of life, or to the knowledge of something which lies beyond ordinary human perception.

In essence, they are all particularly relevant to the birth of Jesus and the bringing of him into existence in a fashion which is unparalleled, except in the case of Adam. When people realise that God can enable one of His own creatures to accomplish such miracles, they will be able to understand that He Himself is able to create that creature in a totally unfamiliar fashion. There is, therefore, no need for any of the great legends and unfounded reports which have been woven around the birth of Jesus. It is sufficient for man to remember that God's will remains free of all restrictions. When man does not try to impose what is familiar to him on the work of God, he will have no problem understanding how Jesus was born.

Jesus Endorsing a Message

> *And [I have come] to confirm that which has already been sent down of the Torah and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden you. I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so remain conscious of God and obey me. God is indeed my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him alone. That is the straight path.* (Verses 50-1)

This is the final part of the address made by Jesus to the Israelites. Here, certain basic facts are revealed which concern the nature of Divine religion as outlined in the messages preached by all prophets and messengers. These facts acquire an even greater importance when stated by Jesus himself, considering all the mistaken notions which have been formulated about his birth and his nature. All such mistaken notions are the result of deviation from the basic truth of Divine faith which remains the same with all messengers.

When Jesus says: "*And I have come to confirm that which has already been sent down of the Torah and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden you,*" he highlights the nature of true Christianity.

The Torah, which was revealed to Moses, and which contained the legislation to be implemented in the life of the community, according to the needs of that particular time and the special circumstances of the life of the Israelites, is here endorsed by Jesus. Indeed, his message was a confirmation of the Torah with some modifications, making lawful to the Israelites certain things which had previously been forbidden them. The prohibition of these things was originally a punishment inflicted by God for certain acts of disobedience and deviation they had committed. It was now God's will to grant them His mercy through Jesus and to make lawful to them again what they were forbidden for a time.

This shows that it is in the nature of any religion to include legislation to organise the life of the community, and not to be confined to providing moral standards, or restricted to the realms of feelings and conscience or worship and rituals. Religion is the way of life God lays down for people to implement and a social order which ensures that implementation.

The elements of faith and belief cannot be isolated from worship, morality or general law in any religion which aims at organising human life according to God's constitution. All these elements constitute a complete whole and any dichotomy between them is bound to nullify the effect of religion on the life of people and is contrary to the concept and nature of faith as God defines it.

This is what has happened to Christianity. Owing to certain historical circumstances on the one hand, and to the fact that although it was intended for a certain period, until the last message was revealed, it continued to be upheld after its time, and a split occurred between its legislative aspect on the one hand and its spiritual and moral ones on the other. The deeply rooted and mutual hostility between the Jews and the followers of Jesus caused a separation between the Torah, which contained the legal code, and the Gospel, which placed its strong emphasis on spiritual revival and moral refinement. Moreover, that legal code was intended for a limited period and a particular group of people. It was the will of God that the

permanent and comprehensive legal code for all humanity would be revealed later, at its appointed time.

Whatever the reasons, the net result was that Christianity was reduced to a creed which lacked a legal code. As such, it was unable to regulate the social life of the nations which embraced it. Such a regulation of social life requires an ideological concept with a clear interpretation of the existence of the universe and of human life, as well as the position of man in the universe. It also requires a system of worship, a moral code and, inevitably, a set of legislative rules derived from all these to put the life of the community on a sound basis. This is the proper structure of religion which ensures the establishment of a social system with a clear and sound basis and effective safeguards. When Christianity suffered the dichotomy delineated above, it was no longer able to provide a comprehensive system for human life. Hence, its followers were forced to divorce their moral and spiritual values from their practical values in all aspects of their lives, including their social system. This led to the establishment of social systems in the Christian world on bases other than their only natural one. Hence, they were lame systems.

This was not a simple incident or a trifling matter in human history. It was a far reaching catastrophe, generating all the misery, confusion, perversion and immorality which haunt the present material civilisation in all the countries which still profess to be Christian. The case is practically the same in countries which have discarded Christianity even though they have not introduced great changes in their practical lifestyle.

As preached by Jesus Christ himself, Christianity, like every religion worthy of the name, is the legal code which regulates human life on the basis of a clear ideological concept of faith in God and sound moral values derived from that concept. Without such a wholesome structure there can be no Christianity, and indeed no faith. Without such a structure there can be no social system which satisfies the needs of man, whether spiritual or practical, and which elevates human life so that it comes into direct contact with God.

This essential fact is one of the concepts which we can deduce from Jesus's statement: "*And [I have come] to confirm that which has already been sent down of the Torah and to make lawful to you some of the things which were forbidden you.*" (Verse 50)

When he so addresses people, he relies on the paramount fact of the oneness of God which is stated in the clearest of terms: "*I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so remain conscious of God and obey me. God is indeed my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him alone. That is the straight path.*" (Verses 50-1)

He thus declares the essence of the ideological concept which is basic to the Divine religion in all its forms. The miracles he performed were not of his own doing. As a

human being, he had no power to accomplish them. He was given them by God. His message is based, first and foremost, on the need to fear God and to remain conscious of Him and to obey His Messenger. He also stresses that God is his Lord and the Lord of all people. Jesus himself was not the Lord; he was the Lord's servant. Those who follow him must, therefore, address their worship to the Lord, for He alone is worthy of worship. He concludes with a comprehensive statement of fact: to believe in God alone and worship God alone, and to obey His Messenger and implement the system He laid down — all this is "the straight path". Everything else is deviation and cannot be part of the true faith.

An Appeal for Help

> *When Jesus became conscious of their rejection of the faith, he asked: "Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?" The disciples replied: "We are [your] helpers in God's cause. We believe in God. Bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves to Him. Our Lord, we believe in what You have bestowed from on high, and we follow the messenger, so write us down among those who bear witness [to the truth]."* (Verses 52-3)

Here the *sūrah* moves on directly to a point in time when Jesus became conscious that the Israelites were bent on denying his message and rejecting the faith altogether. He then appeals for helpers to convey God's message and explain the faith acceptable to Him.

There is, then, a wide gap in the line of the story the *sūrah* is telling. There is no mention that Jesus was actually born, and that his mother confronted her people acknowledging that he was her own son, and that he spoke to them straightway, when he was still a new-born baby. There is no mention either that he began to call on his people to abide by the teachings of the Divine faith when he was in his prime.

Nothing is mentioned either of the miracles to which reference was made in the happy news of his birth given to his mother, as mentioned in *sūrah* 19, entitled *"Maryam"*. Such gaps do occur in the stories related in the Qur'ān for the dual purpose of avoiding unnecessary repetition, and for highlighting those episodes which are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* in hand.

Jesus was conscious that the Israelites had hardened their attitude against the faith and its implementation despite all the miracles he had shown them. Such miracles could not be accomplished by any human being. They provided concrete evidence that they were the work of God, accomplished by His will as a confirmation of the truth told by the messenger who demonstrated them. Furthermore, although Jesus was also sent to remove some of the restrictions and reduce some of the obligations

which were imposed on the Israelites, they were hardened against his message. At this point, he made his appeal: *"Who will be my helpers in the cause of God."* Who will help me convey God's message and explain it to people? Who will help me to establish God's method and implement His law?

Every man with a message or ideology must have helpers who support him, believe in his message, defend it and convey it to others and make sure that it remains in its original form when he has passed away. "*The disciples replied: 'We are [your] helpers in God's cause. We believe in God. Bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves to Him.'*" (Verse 52)

We note here that the term they use to describe themselves is "Muslim", which is a reference to Islam in its broad sense, i.e. surrender to God, which is the essence of true faith. They ask Jesus to bear witness to their surrender and their pledging themselves to be God's helpers, which means to help His Messenger and His religion and way of life.

They then turn to God, their Lord, addressing Him directly in this very essential matter: "*Our Lord, we believe in what You have bestowed from on high, and we follow the messenger, so write us down among those who bear witness [to the truth].*" The fact that they address their pledges specifically to God is very significant. A believer makes his covenant directly with his Lord. When the messenger conveys God's message, the messenger has discharged his, task in as far as faith is concerned. The pledge is made between the believer and God and it remains binding on the believer after the messenger has passed away. The disciples' statement also includes a pledge to God to obey His Messenger. This is again significant because it shows that the matter is not simply a question of simple beliefs to be accepted. It is also a commitment to a certain way of life which is received through the messenger. This is a basic factor of this *sūrah* which is repeatedly emphasised in different moods and styles.

The disciples' statement also includes another point which merits special consideration: *"Write us down among those who bear witness."* What testimony? And what witnesses?

A person who surrenders himself to God and believes in the Divine faith is required to make a testimony in favour of this faith which stresses its right to be the religion to follow. It also points out very clearly the countless benefits this religion gives to mankind. No one can make such a testimony unless he makes of himself a practical example of this religion in his lifestyle, manners and morality. People will find, in such a practical example, something superior to everything else, something which confirms the right of this religion to continue to exist and which endorses its superiority to all other systems, regimes and methods known to man.

Again, no one can make such a testimony unless he makes this religion the basis of

his life, and the foundation of his society and the law both he and his community follow. Thus, a new social order is brought about which conducts all its affairs according to this straightforward Divine way of life. When a believer struggles to make such a society a reality and to establish this method as the way of life followed by that society, and when he prefers to die rather than live under any system which does not implement a Divine constitution, he in effect gives his testimony that this religion is more important than life itself, the most valuable possession of the living. It is for this reason that he is called "a witness".

Those disciples prayed to God to write them down among those who bear witness to His religion. That is, they pray that God will guide and help them make of themselves a practical example of this religion. That He will direct them to struggle for the cause of implementing it in human life and in a society which mirrors its way of life, even if they will have to sacrifice their lives in order to be chosen as "witnesses" for this religion.

It is a prayer worthy of careful study by everyone who claims to surrender himself to God. This is indeed the meaning of Islam as understood by the disciples and as understood by true Muslims, who actually surrender themselves to God. Anyone who suppresses his testimony and is reluctant to give it in favour of his religion is a sinner at heart. If he claims to be a Muslim but chooses a lifestyle other than that of Islam, or tries to live according to Islam within his own private life but not in the generality of this social life, or does not strive to establish a Divine method in the life of his society either to evade hardship or to spare his own life at the cost of his faith, then he is one who does not give full testimony to this religion, or, indeed, he gives a testimony against it. In so doing, he makes a testimony which deters others from accepting this faith. Can we contemplate the fate of a person who deters others from accepting the Divine faith through his own claim that he is a believer when actually he is not?

Full Heavenly Reward

> *They schemed, and God also schemed. God is the best of schemers. God said: 'Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve, and I shall place those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you shall all return, and I shall judge between you with regard to everything on which you used to differ. As for those who disbelieve, I shall inflict on them severe suffering in this world and in the life to come; and they shall have none to help them. But to those who believe and do good works, He will grant their reward in full. God does not love the wrongdoers."* (Verses 54-7)

We come now to the end of the account of the relationship between Jesus and the

Israelites. This begins with the verse: "*They schemed, and God also schemed. God is the best of schemers.*" The Jews who did not believe in Jesus, the messenger God sent to them, schemed against him in the most terrible, wicked and relentless of manners. They made all sorts of accusations against him and against his mother, the pure, and her fiancée, Joseph the carpenter, who, according to the Gospels, had not actually married her. They also accused Jesus of lying and taking advantage of people. They reported him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, describing him as an agitator who stirred up the masses and encouraged rioting and rebellion. They further accused him of being an impostor who tried to corrupt the faith of the masses.

They continued with this line of false accusations until Pilate granted them their request of punishing him themselves as they saw fit. Pilate, a pagan ruler, dared not take upon himself the responsibility of punishing a man whom he could not condemn on the basis of any real evidence. These are only a few examples of the endless scheming by the Jews.

"*They schemed, and God also schemed. God is the best of schemers.*" We note here that the Qur'ān uses the same term to describe what the Jews plotted against Jesus and what God plans for them. This, in effect, ridicules their scheming, since it will have to be set against what God schemes. How can their scheming be compared to what God plans? Indeed, how can their power be compared to God's might?

They wanted to crucify and kill Jesus. God, on the other hand, willed to gather him and cause him to ascend to Himself. He further willed to purify and cleanse him from mixing with the unbelievers and remaining with them. Such a purification is necessary since all unbelievers are impure. It was also the will of God to elevate the followers of Jesus above the unbelievers until the Day of Resurrection. What God willed came true, and the scheming of the Jews was of no consequence whatsoever: "*God said: 'Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve, and I shall place those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection.'*" (Verse 55) How Jesus was gathered and how he ascended to God are matters which lie beyond our human perception. They are unknown except to God. To try to pursue these matters is of no use whatsoever in respect of faith or its implementation. Those who pursue them will inevitably end up more confused, struggling with complicated and endless arguments, gaining no certainty or satisfaction whatsoever. For the whole matter is part of God's own knowledge.

It is not difficult, on the other hand, to explain God's statement that He has placed those who follow Jesus above the unbelievers, and that this elevation continues until the Day of Resurrection. Those who follow Jesus are the ones who believe in God's true religion, Islam, or surrender to God. Every Prophet is fully aware of the true nature of this religion. Every messenger preached the same religion and everyone who truly believes in the Divine faith believes in it. These believers are indeed far

superior to the unbelievers, according to God's measure, and they will continue to be so until the Day of Judgement. Moreover, they prove their superiority in our practical life every time they confront the forces of un-faith with the true nature of faith and the reality of following God's messengers. The Divine faith is one, preached by Jesus, son of Mary, as preached by every messenger sent before him and by the messenger sent after him. Those who follow Muĥammad at the same time follow all the messengers sent by God, starting with Adam until the last messenger.

This comprehensive outlook conforms with the theme of the *sūrah* and its presentation. It is also in conformity with the essence of faith.

The destiny of both the believers and the unbelievers is stated in the form of information given by God to Jesus: *"Then to Me you shall all return, and I shall judge between you with regard to everything on which you used to differ. As for those who disbelieve, I shall inflict on them severe suffering in this world and in the life to come; and they shall have none to help them. But to those who believe and do good works, He will grant their reward in full. God does not love the wrongdoers."* (Verses 55-7)

This statement proves the seriousness of reward and punishment, the Divine justice which is absolute and which cannot be influenced by people's wishes or fabrications. The return to God, then, is inevitable. His judgement on all matters of dispute is irrevocable. The punishment He inflicts on the unbelievers in this world and in the life to come shall overwhelm them and they can have none to help them against it. The believers who do good works, on the other hand, will have their reward in full, without favouritism, but with great generosity. *"God does not love the wrongdoers."* Far be it from Him, then, to do anyone any wrong when He Himself does not love the wrongdoers.

All that people of other religions claim in variance with this, particularly when they say that their stay in hell will last only for a few days, and all their deceptive, wishful thinking of God's reward and their flimsy concept of Divine justice are incorrect and without foundation.

A Challenge to Stop All Argument

> *This which We recite to you is a revelation and a wise reminder." The case of Jesus in the sight of God is the same as the case of Adam. He created him of dust and then said to him: "Be" and he was. This is the truth from your Lord: be not, then, among the doubters. If anyone should dispute with you about this [truth] after all the knowledge you have received, say: "Come. Let us summon our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves; then let us pray humbly and solemnly and invoke God's curse upon the ones who are telling a lie.* (Verses 58-61)

At this point in the story of Jesus, which has been beset by controversy, the *sūrah* adds certain comments establishing the basic facts which are deduced from such a narration. The Prophet is instructed on how to answer the people of earlier revelations with a decisiveness which ends all controversy and makes the facts, as stated by Islam, absolutely clear to all. These conclusions begin in this *sūrah* with a statement about the truthfulness of the revelations received by Muĥammad: *"This which We recite to you is a revelation and a wise reminder."* (Verse 58)

These stories and all the Qur'ānic instructions are revelations from God. God recites His revelations to His Messenger. This expresses the honour and compassion God bestows on His Messenger. What honour could be greater than that God Himself recites to His Prophet His own revelation and wise reminder? That it is a wise reminder needs no assertion because it states the great and basic facts which concern man and life in a method and a style that address human nature directly and gently, appealing to it in a friendly way, unknown in any other address.

This is followed by a final comment on Jesus's true nature and on the phenomenon of creation in relation to God's will, which creates everything as it has created Jesus: *"The case of Jesus in the sight of God is the same as the case of Adam. He created him of dust and then said to him: 'Be,' and he was."* (Verse 59) The birth of Jesus is indeed amazing when compared to what is familiar to man. It is, however, far from amazing when it is compared with the creation of Adam, the father of the human race. The people of earlier revelations who debated and argued about Jesus's nature, because of his miraculous birth, and wove around him all sorts of legends and fantasies because he had no father, believed that Adam was created of dust, and that it was the breathing of God's spirit into him which made of him a human being. They did not, however, weave any similar legends around Adam as they did around Jesus. They did not claim that Adam had any Divine nature. Yet, the very element which made Adam a human being is the same one which caused Jesus to be born without a father: God's spirit was breathed into both Adam and Jesus. There was also the Divine command, *"Be"*, to initiate whatever God wanted to initiate and cause to come into existence.

We can, then, appreciate the simplicity of the creation of Jesus, Adam and all creatures. We find ourselves accepting it with ease and clarity. We indeed wonder why the birth of Jesus should lead to all these disputes and arguments when it took place according to God's law which applies to all creation.

We can also appreciate the method of the Qur'ān, the wise reminder, in addressing human nature with simple, realistic and natural logic which makes even the most complicated of matters appear to be so simple.

When we have had this clear statement of the facts, a direct address is made to the

Prophet reassuring him of the truth which he has received and which is recited to him. That truth is impressed on the mind of the Prophet as also the minds of his Companions who were exposed to the doubts raised by the people of earlier revelations and their baseless arguments: *"This is the truth from your Lord: be not, then, among the doubters."* (Verse 60)

The Prophet did not entertain even the slightest of doubts as to the truth of what was revealed to him from his Lord at any moment in his life. The fact that this reassurance is needed, however, gives us an idea of how effective the schemes of the enemies of the Muslim community had been at the time. It also indicates that the Muslim community will always be subject to such schemes, and will always need reassurance of the truth it holds in the face of all deceivers. For these renew their scheming and adopt new methods of deception in every generation.

Now that the whole affair is stated absolutely clearly and the truth has appeared to all, God instructs His noble Messenger to end all arguments and debates about this straightforward affair and invite those who continue to argue to join him in a mutual prayer to God to judge between them, in the form which is explained in the next verse: *"If anyone should dispute with you about this [truth] after all the knowledge you have received, say: 'Come. Let us summon our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves; then let us pray humbly and solemnly and invoke God's curse upon the ones who are telling a lie.'"*

The Prophet did actually call on those who disputed what he said on this matter to present themselves at a meeting to be attended by all people. All those who attended would pray humbly and solemnly to God to curse the party which lied. His opponents, however, feared the results of such a prayer and refused the offer. The truth was then clear for everyone to see. The reports which we have of that particular affair tell us that those deceivers had not accepted Islam because they were keen to maintain their position among their people. The clergy at the time enjoyed a great many privileges, much power, and a luxurious lifestyle. We have to remember that those who try to turn people away from this religion, do not need any proof to accept it. They simply follow their own interests and try to safeguard their own ambitions. Such an attitude is bound to make people turn away from the clear truth which is apparent to all.

When There Is Nothing More to Say

> *This is indeed the truth of the matter. There is no deity save God. Indeed, it is God Who is the Mighty, the Wise. And if they turn away, God has full knowledge of those who spread corruption. Say: 'People of earlier revelations Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we*

> *shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God. "And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God."* (Verses 62-4)

In this short passage, which concludes the story of Jesus as related in this *sūrah,* we have a statement explaining the true nature of revelation and Qur'ānic stories, and the Oneness of God which is the subject matter of all this revelation. There is also a stern warning for those who turn away from this truth in order to spread corruption in the world: "*This is indeed the truth of the matter. There is no deity save God. Indeed, it is God Who is the Mighty, the Wise. And if they turn away, God has full knowledge of those who spread corruption."* (Verses 62-3) Having been stated earlier, these facts are repeated here, after those who disputed the true nature of Jesus with the Prophet have rejected his invitation to them to join him in a humble prayer to God invoking His curse upon those who lie. The only new element in this verse is the description of those who turn away from the truth as people who spread corruption, and the warning that God has full knowledge of what they do.

The corruption which is spread by those who reject the truth of the oneness of God is surely great. Indeed, corruption does not appear on earth except as a result of refusing to acknowledge this most important fact. I do not mean verbal acknowledgement; for such an acknowledgement is of little value. Nor do I mean a negative mental acknowledgement which leaves no practical effects on people's lives. What is meant is a refusal to acknowledge this fact with its far-reaching effects on human life. The first of these stresses that the Lord of all the universe is One, which means in effect that all worship should be addressed to Him alone. He is the One to be obeyed and He is the only source of legislation from whom we receive our values, standards and morality as well as everything that relates to human life. If such an acknowledgement of the oneness of God is refused, then the person concerned is either an idolater or a non-believer, no matter how strong his verbal claim to believe in God is and no matter how strong his assurances are that at heart he is a believer.

This universe, as a whole entity, is not set on its right course unless it is run by one God who determines all its affairs: "*Had there been in them [i.e. the heavens and the earth] any deities other than God, they would surely have been overwhelmed by corruption."* (al-Anbiyā' 21: 22) The most essential characteristics of Godhead, according to man, are: that He be worshipped, and that He lays down legislation and sets standards for people to apply in their lives. He who claims any of these for himself, claims in effect to be a deity alongside God.

Corruption does not spread on earth unless Divinity is thus ascribed to beings other than God. It is only when a human being enslaves others, claiming that he

himself must be obeyed, or that he has the power to legislate and to set values and standards for human society that corruption becomes rife. Such an assertion is a claim of Godhead, even though the claimant may not state it in as many words as Pharaoh did when he cried: *"I am your lord, most high."* (al-Nāzi`āt 79: 24) To acknowledge such an assertion by anyone is to be an idolater or to disbelieve in God. It is indeed the worst type of corruption.

Hence, the warning in this *sūrah* is followed by an address to the people of earlier revelations to come to an equitable agreement stipulating that worship is to be addressed to God alone and that no partners may be associated with Him, and that people do not take one another for lords beside God. If they reject this offer, then there can be no agreement or argument with them: *"Say: 'People of earlier revelations. Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'"* (Verse 64)

It is indeed an equitable agreement proposed by the Prophet. It does not seek to win any favours for the Prophet himself or for the Muslim community. It only aims to establish a clear agreement which applies to all at the same level, so that none is elevated above another, and none enslaves another. It is the fairest of offers which cannot be rejected except by those corrupters who have determined not to abide by the truth. According to this agreement, all will submit to God as His servants. None is His partner. He has chosen them to convey His message to mankind, not to share with Him His Divinity and Lordship.

"If they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'" If they decline to worship God alone without partners and to submit themselves to Him alone, when worship and submission are the two clear aspects which determine people's attitudes towards God, then the Muslims have to declare their own attitude of surrendering themselves to God. The contrast shown here is between the Muslims and those who take one another for lords beside God, and it demonstrates decisively who the true Muslims are.

They are indeed those who worship God alone, submit to Him and do not enslave one another. These are the characteristics which distinguish them from the followers of all other religions. These characteristics single out the Islamic way of life as unique among all the alternatives known to man. When these characteristics apply to a certain community, it is a Muslim community. When these characteristics do not exist in a community it cannot be described as Muslim, even though people may emphatically profess that they are Muslims. Islam is the total liberation of man from enslavement by others. The Islamic system is the only one which makes that liberation a reality.

In all man-made systems, people enslave one another, and take one another for lords beside God. This happens in the most advanced democracies as well as in the worst types of dictatorship. Under all human systems, the authority to legislate and set values and standards is claimed by a group of people, in one form or another, who have the final authority. This group, which requires others to submit to its legislation, are the lords. They are acknowledged by the others as such since they allow them to claim for themselves the essential characteristics of Godhead. When people do acknowledge this authority for such a group, they are in effect worshipping them although they may not bow or prostrate before them.

It is only under Islam that man is free from such subjugation. He is free because he receives his values, standards, morality, systems, laws and legislation from God alone like everyone else who does the same. All people under the Islamic system stand at one level, looking up to one Lord Who is the Master of them all. None claims lordship over others. Submission to God, in this sense, is the Divine faith preached by every messenger God sent to man. When God sent His messengers to preach this faith, their task was to help people free themselves from subjugation to others, so that worship of God alone could be established. They were to help liberate people from the injustice inflicted by human beings so that they could enjoy God's absolute justice. Those who reject the message of the Prophets are not Muslims, no matter how deceptively and persuasively they may try to describe themselves as such. For, *"In the sight of God, the true faith is [man's] self-surrender to Him."* That is indeed the meaning of Islam.

4
The Heirs of Abraham's Faith

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لِمَ تُحَآجُّونَ فِيٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَتِ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةُ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلُ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦٓۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٥

People of earlier revelations! Why do you argue about Abraham when both the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have you no sense? (65)

هَٰٓأَنتُمۡ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ حَٰجَجۡتُمۡ فِيمَا لَكُم بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞ فَلِمَ تُحَآجُّونَ فِيمَا لَيۡسَ لَكُم بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ وَأَنتُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٦٦

You have indeed argued about that of which you have some knowledge; why then do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge at all? God knows, whereas you do not know. (66)

مَا كَانَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمُ يَهُودِيّٗا وَلَا نَصۡرَانِيّٗا وَلَٰكِن كَانَ حَنِيفٗا مُّسۡلِمٗا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ٦٧

Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; but he was wholly devoted to God, having surrendered himself to Him. He was not of those who associate partners with God. (67)

إِنَّ أَوۡلَى ٱلنَّاسِ بِإِبۡرَٰهِيمَ لَلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُ وَهَٰذَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ وَلِيُّ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٦٨

The people who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who are true believers. God is the Guardian of the believers. (68)

وَدَّت طَّآئِفَةٞ مِّنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَوۡ يُضِلُّونَكُمۡ وَمَا يُضِلُّونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمۡ

A party of the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you astray; but they lead astray none but themselves, although they may not perceive it. (69)

وَمَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ٦٩

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لِمَ تَكۡفُرُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَنتُمۡ تَشۡهَدُونَ ٧٠

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لِمَ تَلۡبِسُونَ ٱلۡحَقَّ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ وَتَكۡتُمُونَ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَأَنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٧١

وَقَالَت طَّآئِفَةٞ مِّنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ءَامِنُواْ بِٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَجۡهَ ٱلنَّهَارِ وَٱكۡفُرُوٓاْ ءَاخِرَهُۥ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَرۡجِعُونَ ٧٢

وَلَا تُؤۡمِنُوٓاْ إِلَّا لِمَن تَبِعَ دِينَكُمۡ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱلۡهُدَىٰ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ أَن يُؤۡتَىٰٓ أَحَدٞ مِّثۡلَ مَآ أُوتِيتُمۡ أَوۡ يُحَآجُّوكُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّكُمۡۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱلۡفَضۡلَ بِيَدِ ٱللَّهِ يُؤۡتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُۗ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٧٣

يَخۡتَصُّ بِرَحۡمَتِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُۗ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلۡفَضۡلِ ٱلۡعَظِيمِ ٧٤

۞ وَمِنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ مَنۡ إِن تَأۡمَنۡهُ بِقِنطَارٖ يُؤَدِّهِۦٓ إِلَيۡكَ وَمِنۡهُم مَّنۡ إِن تَأۡمَنۡهُ بِدِينَارٖ لَّا يُؤَدِّهِۦٓ إِلَيۡكَ إِلَّا مَا دُمۡتَ عَلَيۡهِ قَآئِمٗاۗ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ قَالُواْ لَيۡسَ عَلَيۡنَا فِي ٱلۡأُمِّيِّـۧنَ سَبِيلٞ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ

People of earlier revelations! Why do you disbelieve in God's revelations when you yourselves bear witness [to their truth]? (70)

People of earlier revelations! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood, and knowingly conceal the truth? (71)

A party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: "Declare at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith. (72)

"But do not really trust anyone except those who follow your own faith" — Say: "All true guidance is God's guidance — That anyone may be given the like of what you have been given. Or that they should contend against you before your Lord." Say: "Grace is in God's hand: He bestows it on whom He wills. God is Munificent and All-Knowing." (73)

He singles out for His mercy whom He wills. And God's grace is great indeed. (74)

Among the people of earlier revelations there is many a one who, if you trust him with a treasure, will return it to you intact; and there is among them many a one who, if you trust him with a small gold coin, will not return it to you, unless you keep standing over him. For they say: "We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles." Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie. (75)

ٱلۡكَذِبَ وَهُمۡ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٧٥

بَلَىٰ مَنۡ أَوۡفَىٰ بِعَهۡدِهِۦ وَٱتَّقَىٰ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٧٦

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَشۡتَرُونَ بِعَهۡدِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَا خَلَٰقَ لَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَلَا يُكَلِّمُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَلَا يَنظُرُ إِلَيۡهِمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ وَلَا يُزَكِّيهِمۡ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ٧٧

وَإِنَّ مِنۡهُمۡ لَفَرِيقٗا يَلۡوُۥنَ أَلۡسِنَتَهُم بِٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لِتَحۡسَبُوهُ مِنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَيَقُولُونَ هُوَ مِنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡكَذِبَ وَهُمۡ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٧٨

مَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَن يُؤۡتِيَهُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحُكۡمَ وَٱلنُّبُوَّةَ ثُمَّ يَقُولَ لِلنَّاسِ كُونُواْ عِبَادٗا لِّي مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَٰكِن كُونُواْ رَبَّٰنِيِّـۧنَ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تُعَلِّمُونَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَبِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَدۡرُسُونَ ٧٩

وَلَا يَأۡمُرَكُمۡ أَن تَتَّخِذُواْ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ وَٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ أَرۡبَابًا ۗ أَيَأۡمُرُكُم بِٱلۡكُفۡرِ بَعۡدَ إِذۡ أَنتُم

Indeed those who fulfil their pledges and guard themselves against evil [enjoy God's love]; for God loves the righteous. (76)

Those who barter away their covenant with God and their oaths for a trifling gain will have no share in the life to come. God will neither speak to them, nor cast a look on them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them of their sins. Theirs will be a grievous suffering. (77)

There are some among them who twist their tongues when quoting the Scriptures, so that you may think that [what they say] is from the Scriptures, when it is not from the Scriptures. They say: "It is from God", when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie. (78)

It is not conceivable that any human being to whom God had given revelation and wisdom and prophethood would subsequently say to people: "Worship me instead of God." But rather: "Be devoted servants of God, by virtue of spreading the knowledge of the Scriptures and your constant study of them." (79)

Nor would he bid you to take the angels and the Prophets as your gods. Would he bid you to be unbelievers after you have surrendered yourselves to God? (80)

مُّسۡلِمُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَإِذۡ أَخَذَ ٱللَّهُ مِيثَٰقَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ لَمَآ ءَاتَيۡتُكُم مِّن كِتَٰبٍ وَحِكۡمَةٍ ثُمَّ جَآءَكُمۡ رَسُولٞ مُّصَدِّقٞ لِّمَا مَعَكُمۡ لَتُؤۡمِنُنَّ بِهِۦ وَلَتَنصُرُنَّهُۥۚ قَالَ ءَأَقۡرَرۡتُمۡ وَأَخَذۡتُمۡ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكُمۡ إِصۡرِيۖ قَالُوٓاْ أَقۡرَرۡنَاۚ قَالَ فَٱشۡهَدُواْ وَأَنَا۠ مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

God made a covenant with the Prophets: "If, after what I have vouchsafed to you of the Scriptures and wisdom, there comes to you a messenger confirming the truth of what you have in your possession, you shall believe in him and you shall help him. Do you," said He, "affirm this and accept the obligation I lay upon you in these terms?" They answered: "We do affirm it." Said He: "Then bear witness, and I am also a witness with you." (81)

فَمَن تَوَلَّىٰ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Then those who turn away afterwards are indeed transgressors. (82)

أَفَغَيۡرَ دِينِ ٱللَّهِ يَبۡغُونَ وَلَهُۥٓ أَسۡلَمَ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ طَوۡعٗا وَكَرۡهٗا وَإِلَيۡهِ يُرۡجَعُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Do they seek a religion other than God's, when every soul in the heavens and the earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they shall all return? (83)

قُلۡ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡنَا وَمَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ وَٱلۡأَسۡبَاطِ وَمَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَٱلنَّبِيُّونَ مِن رَّبِّهِمۡ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيۡنَ أَحَدٖ مِّنۡهُمۡ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ مُسۡلِمُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

Say: "We believe in God and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Lord to Moses and Jesus and all the prophets. We make no distinction between them. To Him do we surrender ourselves." (84)

وَمَن يَبۡتَغِ غَيۡرَ ٱلۡإِسۡلَٰمِ دِينٗا فَلَن يُقۡبَلَ

He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he will be among the lost. (85)

مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِى ٱلْأَخِرَةِ مِنَ ٱلْخَـٰسِرِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

How shall God guide people who have lapsed into disbelief after having accepted the faith and having borne witness that this messenger is true, and after having received clear evidence of the truth? God does not guide the wrongdoers. (86)

كَيْفَ يَهْدِى ٱللَّهُ قَوْمًا كَفَرُوا۟ بَعْدَ إِيمَـٰنِهِمْ وَشَهِدُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱلرَّسُولَ حَقٌّ وَجَآءَهُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَـٰتُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Of such people the punishment shall be the curse of God, the angels and all men. (87)

أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ جَزَآؤُهُمْ أَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ لَعْنَةَ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Under it they shall abide. Neither their suffering shall be lightened, nor shall they be granted respite. (88)

خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Excepted shall be those who afterwards repent and mend their ways; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (89)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ تَابُوا۟ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ذَٰلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٨٩﴾

But those who return to disbelief after having accepted the faith and then grow more stubborn in their rejection of the faith, their repentance will not be accepted. For they are those who have truly gone astray. (90)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بَعْدَ إِيمَـٰنِهِمْ ثُمَّ ٱزْدَادُوا۟ كُفْرًا لَّن تُقْبَلَ تَوْبَتُهُمْ وَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ﴿٩٠﴾

As for those who disbelieve and die unbelievers, not even the earth full of gold shall be accepted from any one of them, were he to offer it in ransom. They shall have grievous suffering and they shall have none to help them. (91)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَمَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَن يُقْبَلَ مِنْ أَحَدِهِم مِّلْءُ ٱلْأَرْضِ ذَهَبًا وَلَوِ ٱفْتَدَىٰ بِهِۦٓ ۗ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن نَّـٰصِرِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish. God has full knowledge of what you spend. (92)

لَن تَنَالُوا۟ ٱلْبِرَّ حَتَّىٰ تُنفِقُوا۟ مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ ۚ وَمَا تُنفِقُوا۟ مِن شَىْءٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ

بِهِۦ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٩٢﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah,* from verse 65 to verse 92, takes up the same general theme of the controversy surrounding religious beliefs between the people of earlier revelations, i.e. the Jews and Christians, and the Muslims. It explores the relentless and devious efforts lined up against Islam; the scheming, smears, slandering, vilification, lies and devilish intrigues of its opponents. It presents the Qur'ān's argument on behalf of the Muslims and reassures them of the truth of their cause and exposes the deviation and hopelessness of their detractors. It openly and closely probes the habits, ethics, intentions and activities of those enemies in order to make the Muslims fully aware of the threat they pose and to take away the mantle of knowledge and wisdom those enemies had assumed. It moves to dissipate any trust some gullible Muslims may have placed in them. It discourages following their example, and eliminates the dangers of their intrigue by exposing it so that no one may be deceived or misled by it.

This section begins with castigating Jewish and Christian claims of affinity to the Prophet Abraham, who pre-dated both the Torah and the Gospel. Each had professed him to be a follower of their respective religious beliefs. Their arguments are dismissed as totally baseless. Abraham, the *sūrah* asserts, was a devotee to God's true religion based on submission to God, i.e. Islam, and his natural patrons are those who adhere to that same religion. God shall be the Guardian of all true believers. Thus, the assertions of both Jews and Christians are refuted and a continuous line emerges linking all prophets and messengers of God throughout the ages. The *sūrah* states: "*The people who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet, and those who are true believers. God is the Guardian of the believers.*" (Verse 68)

The *sūrah* then goes on to expose the real, undeclared objective of the controversies stirred up by the Jews and Christians regarding Abraham as also other issues. Their aim had always been to mislead and distract the Muslims, and to sow doubts in their hearts about Islam. Here the Qur'ān lashes out against such detractors: "*People of earlier revelations! Why do you disbelieve in God's revelations when you yourselves bear witness [to their truth!? People of earlier revelations! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood, and knowingly conceal the truth?*" (Verses 70-1)

The *sūrah* then reveals aspects and manifestations of that evil intrigue. The culprits

declare adherence to Islam in the morning but reject it before the day is out in order to feed uncertainty and suspicion in the hearts of weaker Muslims who are found among all communities. Surely, there must be a valid reason why Jewish and Christian individuals, whose people had a much longer association with, and experience of, prophets and Divine revelations, rejected Islam. The *sūrah* says: "*A party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: 'Declare at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith."* (Verse 72) How vile and malicious their actions are.

The nature of some Jews and Christians is then further examined, together with their ethical standards and their commitment to agreements and covenants. There is no doubting the honesty and integrity of many of them, but some are not to be trusted or relied on to honour an agreement or respect a pledge. These find religious justification for their greed and deceit, but their religions are not to be blamed for such behaviour. The *sūrah* says: "*Among the people of earlier revelations there is many a one who, if you trust him with a treasure, will return it to you intact; and there is among them many a one who, if you trust him with a small gold coin, will not return it to you, unless you keep standing over him. For they say: 'We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles.' Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie."* (Verse 75)

At this point the *sūrah* outlines an aspect of Islam's ethical outlook, its basis and direct link to fear of God Almighty, saying: "*Indeed those who fulfil their pledges and guard themselves against evil [enjoy God's love]; for God loves the righteous. Those who barter away their covenant with God and their oaths for a trifling gain will have no share in the life to come. God will neither speak to them, nor cast a look on them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them of their sins. Theirs will be a grievous suffering."* (Verses 76-7)

The *sūrah* then gives another instance whereby some Jews and Christians resort to devious behaviour and lies about Islam in order to score short-term gains. It says: "*There are some among them who twist their tongues when quoting the Scriptures, so that you may think that [what they say] is from the Scriptures, when it is not from the Scriptures. They say: 'It is from God', when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie."* (Verse 78)

This is a reference to Christian attempts to show that the Qur'ān supported their belief in the Divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. However, God denounces such notions and refutes the claims that Jesus ever made such assertions. It says: "*It is not conceivable that any human being to whom God has given revelation and wisdom and prophethood would subsequently say to people: 'Worship me instead of God.' But rather: Be devoted servants of God, by virtue of spreading the knowledge of the Scriptures and your constant study of them.' Nor would he bid you to take the angels and the Prophets as your*

gods. Would he bid you to be unbelievers after you have surrendered yourselves to God?" (Verses 79-80)

It then turns to mention the essence of God's covenant with successive messengers whereby they endorse and support one another. It says: *"God made a covenant with the Prophets: 'If after what I have vouchsafed to you of the Scriptures and wisdom, there comes to you a messenger confirming the truth of what you have in your possession, you shall believe in him and you shall help him. Do you,' said He, 'affirm this and accept the obligation I lay upon you in these terms?' They answered: 'We do affirm it.' said He: 'Then bear witness, and I am also a witness with you.'"* (Verse 81) Hence the obligation upon the people of earlier revelations to believe in the last and final Prophet and to champion his cause. Alas, they did not respect God's covenant or the covenants they made with their own prophets.

With that on-going covenant in the background, the *sūrah* asserts that anyone seeking a religion other than Islam, or complete surrender to God, would be breaking away from the whole grand and universal order God has ordained for all creation. It says: *"Do they seek a religion other than God's, when every soul in the heavens and the earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they shall all return?"* (Verse 83) Those who choose not to surrender totally to God or humbly and freely comply with His order of life, appear abnormal and out of place in this majestic world design.

At this point, the *sūrah* turns to direct the Prophet Muĥammad and the Muslims to declare their unshakeable faith in the One God, as set out in what was revealed to all prophets, as the only religious belief sanctioned by God Almighty. It says: *"He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he will be among the lost."* (Verse 85)

Those who reject God's religion, however, have no prospect of either being guided by God or being spared His punishment unless they heed and repent. As for those who leave this world without believing in God, nothing they may have done will save them, even if they were to give the earth's weight in gold.

The *sūrah* goes on to urge the Muslims to give those possessions closest to their hearts to good causes, as an investment with God to be collected in the hereafter. It says: *"You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish. God has full knowledge of what you spend."* (Verse 92)

Thus, in one relatively short passage, this *sūrah* packs an impressive and important host of issues, facts and directives. It covers a mere round in the wider confrontation which the *sūrah* as a whole addresses. It is the confrontation between the Muslim community and its opponents, which has been going on for centuries and which continues to rage on today. It bears the same ends and objectives, despite

the different forms it takes and the variety of means or methods it employs today. It is the same endless controversy.

We now turn to look at the text more closely.

A Dispute Over Abraham's Faith

> *People of earlier revelations! Why do you argue about Abraham when both the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have you no sense? You have indeed argued about that of which you have some knowledge; why then do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge at all? God knows, whereas you do not know. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; but he was wholly devoted to God, having surrendered himself to Him. He was not of those who associate partners with God. The people who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who are true believers. God is the Guardian of the believers.* (Verses 65-8)

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq relates a report attributed to Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin, which says: "A number of Christians from Najrān and a number of Jewish rabbis met at the Prophet's place and disputed among themselves. The rabbis claimed that Abraham was nothing but a Jew, while the Christians maintained that Abraham was a Christian. God then revealed this verse starting with: "*People of earlier revelations! Why do you argue about Abraham...*"

Whether it was true or not that that particular occasion was the time when this verse was revealed, it is apparent that this verse is meant to be an answer to the claims of people who professed to believe in earlier revelations. There seem to have been arguments either with the Prophet (peace be upon him) or arguments among themselves in the presence of the Prophet. The ultimate aim of these claims was to monopolise God's covenant with Abraham which meant that prophethood would remain in Abraham's seed, and to monopolise honour and Divine guidance. More importantly, they sought through these claims to reject the Prophet's statement that he followed the faith of Abraham and that the Muslims were the rightful heirs of the original pure faith. The disputants also hoped to raise doubts concerning this fact in the minds of at least some Muslims.

It is for this reason that God condemns their attitude here so strongly and shows clearly that their arguments are without basis. Abraham lived long before the revelation of the Torah or the Gospel; how could he, then, be a Jew or a Christian? It is a totally illogical claim which collapses at the first glance at history: "*People of earlier revelations! Why do you argue about Abraham when both the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have you no sense?*" (Verse 65)

They are further condemned in the verse that follows. All their arguments are shown to be without foundation. They appear to indulge in an endless dispute without providing supporting evidence, consistency or logic: *"You have indeed argued about that of which you have some knowledge; why then do you argue about that of which you have no knowledge at all? God knows, whereas you do not know."*

They argued about Jesus, and they argued about certain Divine legislation when they were called upon to submit to the rulings included in God's Book. Instead, they turned their backs on it. In these matters, they had some knowledge. They could not, however, claim any basis, even technical, for their arguments about things which took place before the revelation of their Scriptures and the preaching of their religions. They argue, then, for argument's sake. It is a worthless argument which is advanced for vested interests and which follows no logical method. A person who advances such an argument cannot be trusted at all. He is, indeed, not worth listening to.

When the *sūrah* has shown the worthlessness of their argument, it states the truth known to God. He alone knows the truth of that distant period in history and the true nature of the faith He revealed to His servant, Abraham. When God states something, His word is final. No one can say anything which differs with God's statement, unless he wishes to make a worthless, futile argument. *"Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; but he was wholly devoted to God, having surrendered himself to Him. He was not of those who associate partners with God."* (Verse 67) Here, we have a clear statement of what has already been implied, that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, since both the Torah and the Gospel were revealed after his time. It is further stated that Abraham had no interest whatsoever in any creed or doctrine other than complete devotion to God. He was a Muslim in the broad sense of Islam, meaning total surrender to God.

"He was not of those who associate partners with God." This is again implied in the preceding statement that Abraham *"was wholly devoted to God, having surrendered himself to Him."* That it is re-emphasised here is significant because it indicates first that both the Jews and the Christians, who had over the years come to accept deviant beliefs, were in effect associating partners with God. Hence, Abraham could neither be a Jew nor a Christian, but an upright man who surrendered himself to God. It further indicates that Islam and polytheism are two diametrically opposed doctrines. Islam means the absolute oneness of God with everything that this oneness entails. Hence, it can have no common ground with any form of polytheism. Moreover, it shows that the claim of the Quraysh idolaters that they followed Abraham's religion since they were the custodians of the Ka`bah, the House he built for worship in Makkah, is also false. Abraham believed in God alone and surrendered himself to Him, while those people of the Quraysh were idolaters: *"He was not of those who*

associate partners with God."

In view of the truth stated in the Qur'ān about Abraham, neither the Jews, nor the Christians, nor indeed the idolaters could lay any claim to his heritage or to his religion since they had all moved far away from his faith. It is faith which is, indeed, the paramount relation which groups people together, according to Islam. If that relationship which unites the people of faith is lacking, no other tie of blood, lineage, race or land is of any value. In the Islamic view, man achieves his humanity through his spirit, the blow which has made out of him a man. Hence, faith, which is the most essential quality of his spirit, forms the basis which unites human beings together. It is only animals that are grouped together on the basis of land, species, food, pasture, boundaries and fences. Patronage between individuals, communities and generations can only be based on faith. It is faith which unites one believer with another, one Muslim community with another, and one generation of believers who surrender themselves to God and all other generations, bypassing the limitations of time and place, blood and lineage, race and nationality. They are all united by their belief in God Who is the Guardian of all the believers: "*The people who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who are true believers. God is the Guardian of the believers.*" (Verse 68)

Those who followed Abraham when he was alive and implemented his method and abided by his teachings had the best claim to him. The same applies to this Prophet who shared with Abraham the quality of surrendering himself to God, according to the testimony of God Himself, the best of all witnesses. Then come those who believe in this Prophet and, thereby, follow Abraham's method and practice.

"*God is the Guardian of the believers.*" They are His party, sheltered by His cover, devoting their loyalty totally to Him, to the exclusion of everyone else. They are one family and one nation, the unity of which transcends all barriers of time, place, country, nationality, race and lineage.

This is the noblest form of social unity which alone is worthy of man. Moreover, it is the only method to establish a community free of all artificial restrictions. The only bond which brings people together in this form is a voluntary one. Every individual can release himself of it by his own choice. That bond is a faith which he personally chooses.

On the other hand, a person cannot change his race if his society is based on race. Neither can he change his community or colour, nor can he easily change his language or caste if any of these is the basis upon which his society is set up. Such barriers will always be divisive, keeping people apart, unless they take up the bond of ideology and faith as their uniting bond. Such a bond relies on personal conviction. Every individual can consciously choose it and join the community on its

basis without having to change his race, colour, language or caste. This is, indeed, an honour given to man because it makes its uniting bond based on the noblest of his qualities.

The choice before humanity is either to live as Islam wishes: human beings united by what nourishes their spirits and refines their feelings, or to live like cattle, confined within the boundaries of race, colour and place. We have to remember here that all these are similar to the distinctive marks given to cattle so that they remain identifiable.

A Deliberate Attempt to Conceal the Truth

> *A party of the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you astray; but they lead astray none but themselves, although they may not perceive it. People of earlier revelations! Why do you disbelieve in God's revelations when you yourselves bear witness [to their truth]? People of earlier revelations! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood, and knowingly conceal the truth? A party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: "Declare at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith. But do not really trust anyone except those who follow your own faith" – Say: All true guidance is God's guidance – That anyone may be given the like of what you have been given. Or that they should contend against you before your Lord" Say: "Grace is in God's hand: He bestows it on whom He wills. God is Munificent and All- Knowing. "He singles out for His mercy whom He wills. And God's grace is great indeed.* (Verses 69-74)

In this passage, the Muslim community is told of the intentions of the people of earlier revelations behind every argument they may raise. The Qur'ān confronts those people with what they actually plot and scheme in close proximity to the Muslim community. Their masks are torn from them and their reality is made apparent to all.

The grudge which the people of earlier revelations bear to the Muslim community relates to the faith of that community. They hate that the Muslims should have Divine guidance. They hate to see them holding to their own faith with firmness and reassurance. They, therefore, mobilise all their efforts to cause the Muslims to go astray: "*A party of the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you astray.*" It is, then, an inner desire which lies behind all their plotting, scheming, arguments and concealment of the truth. There is no doubt that such a desire, motivated by prejudice and grudge, is deviant. An evil desire cannot be based on any right guidance. Hence, the moment they entertain a desire to turn the Muslims away from their faith, they cause themselves to go astray. It is only a person who finds himself

lost in a labyrinth of deviation that loves to lead astray those who are following a straight path: *"But they lead astray none but themselves, although they may not perceive it."* (Verse 69)

The Muslims will come to no harm from what their enemies may scheme against them as long as they maintain and implement their faith. God guarantees them that the scheming and plotting of their enemies will be counter-productive as long as the Muslims hold on to their faith.

The people of earlier revelations are then made to face the reality of their untenable situation: *"People of earlier revelations! Why do you disbelieve in God's revelations when you yourselves bear witness [to their truth!? People of earlier revelations! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood, and knowingly conceal the truth?"* (Verses 70-1)

Those people who had received earlier revelations were at that time, and still are, able to recognise the truth clearly embodied in this religion. This applies to those who know the references contained in their own Scriptures about this religion. Some of them were candid about what they read, so much so that a number of them embraced Islam on this basis. It also applies to those who are not so aware of these references but who are nonetheless able to recognise the clear truth of Islam which is sufficient to persuade them to accept it. Both groups, however, continue to reject the truth of Islam, not because of any lack of evidence and proof, but because of personal prejudices and vested interests. The Qur'ān addresses them as "people of earlier revelations", because it is this very quality which should have prompted them to hearken to God's new revelations and follow His new Book.

They are addressed again in order to unmask their efforts at confounding truth with falsehood, deliberately and knowingly. This is an action which merits uncompromising censure.

This attitude of the people of earlier revelations so condemned by God is the one which they have adopted since the time of the Prophet until the present day. The Jews began by adopting it at the very first moment, and they were followed later by the Christian Crusaders.

Over the centuries, they have unfortunately been able to plant in Islamic heritage that which has nothing to do with this religion of Islam and which cannot be discovered without Herculean efforts. They have managed to confound truth with falsehood in much of our heritage, with the exception, however, of this Book which God has undertaken to preserve intact for the rest of time. Praise be to God for His limitless grace.

They have distorted much of Islamic history and its events as well as the images of its best men of action. They have also put their alien plants in the field of the *ĥadīth* until God has enabled the great scholars of *ĥadīth* to verify and sift out the true from

the false, as much as is humanly possible. Their distortions have also crept into commentaries on the Qur'ān to the extent that it has become very difficult for a student of the Qur'ān to find his clear way to a correct understanding. They have also implanted their own men, hundreds if not thousands, to distort our Islamic heritage. Some of these are with us even today in the shape of Orientalists and their disciples who occupy positions of intellectual leadership in the countries whose peoples claim to be Muslim. They have also implanted in our societies scores of people who are given the status of heroes when they have actually been carefully brought up by Zionism and Christian fanaticism in order to serve the enemies of Islam in a way which cannot be achieved by any open enemy.

Such evil schemes continue to be pursued with no sign of weakening. The only way to guard against them and to be spared their damaging effects is to hold tight to God's Book which He Himself has undertaken to preserve, and to refer to it for guidance and for plotting our strategy in this ever-continuing battle. A reference is then made to some of the attempts undertaken by a party of the people of earlier revelations to cause internal confusion within the Muslim community and to turn them away from Divine guidance: *"A party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: 'Declare, at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith.'"* (Verse 72)

As we have said, this is an act of wicked deception. When such people pretend to accept Islam, then reject it, their action is bound to perplex those who do not have strong faith, and those who have not fully appreciated the truth of Islam and its nature. This was true in an even greater measure in the case of the illiterate Arabs, at the time of the Prophet, who took it for granted that the people of earlier revelations were more aware than themselves of the nature of religions and revelation. When they saw such people accepting Islam one day and rejecting it the next day, they thought that their subsequent action was the result of their coming to realise that there was something wrong with that religion. This caused them considerable consternation and they were uncertain what attitude to adopt.

This trick continues to be employed even today, in a variety of ways suitable to each particular situation and adapted to the mentality of people in every generation.

A Dirty Tricks Campaign to Confuse Believers

The enemies of Islam have realised that to employ this trick in a simple form is no longer possible. They, therefore, resort to a wide range of methods of concealment which are no more than variations on the old theme.

These forces rely today on a large army of disciples all over the Muslim world.

Among these are professors, lecturers, thinkers and scholars, as well as writers, poets, artists and journalists who all have Muslim names because they come from Muslim families. Some of them indeed are included in the ranks of Islamic "scholars".

This army of disciples is mobilised for the achievement of the ultimate goal of shaking the foundations of faith within the Muslim community. It employs all methods of scientific research, literary works, art and information. All these complement one another in the onslaught on Islamic faith and Islamic law. They belittle the role of Islamic faith, interpret it in their own way, and overburden it with what is alien to it. They never tire of branding Islam as "reactionary" and calling on people to break away from it. They try hard to keep Islam away from human life either because they fear the effect of human life on Islam or because they fear the effect of Islam on human life. They work hard to invent concepts, ideals, values and standards which are in direct conflict with those of the Islamic faith, painting the former in the most appealing of pictures while distorting the latter so that they appear in the most grotesque of forms. Moreover, they try to facilitate the breaking loose of carnal desires, seeking to erode the moral basis upon which clean faith is founded. What is more, they distort history in the same way as they distort Scriptures.

To compound their evil, they claim to be Muslims. They, after all, have Muslim names. With these names they declare to be believers at the beginning of the day. With their evil designs they deny the faith at the end of the day. In both their actions, they play the same role as the people of earlier revelations. All that has changed is the framework.

The people of earlier revelations used to encourage one another to pretend to be Muslims one day and to reject Islam the next, so that the Muslims would go back on their faith. They also counselled each other to keep this secret between themselves, not to reveal it to anyone except the followers of their own religion: *"But do not really trust anyone except those who follow your own faith."* (Verse 73) Their secret was closely guarded against the Muslims. The same applies today to the servants of Zionism and Christian fanaticism. They are all working together for a definite objective, that is, the total destruction of the Islamic faith. They may not have sat together to sign a contract or to draw up a plot defining their respective roles, but they, nevertheless, have the sort of understanding which normally exists between stooges who work for the same goal defined by their common master. They trust each other and compare notes. They, or some of them at least, subsequently adopt false pretences. Everything around them is placed in their service and those who are aware of the nature of this faith all over the world are suffering persecution and imprisonment. *"But do not really trust anyone except those who follow your own faith."*

At this point, God directs the Prophet to declare that true guidance is that provided by God, and that unless people accept and abide by it they will never find real guidance by any other method or way of life: *"Say: 'All true guidance is God's guidance.'"* This statement is given in answer to their encouragement to one another to *"declare at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith."* This serves as a warning to the Muslims and helps them to foil the evil goal of their enemies. Since there is no true guidance except that provided by God, then those schemers only want the believers to sink back into deviation and total disbelief. It should be mentioned here that this instruction to the Prophet to declare that true guidance is that provided by God, is given even before the statements of people of earlier revelations are quoted in full. The *sūrah* then goes on quoting them: *"That anyone may be given the like of what you have been given. Or that they should contend against you before your Lord"* (Verse 73) These are the reasons they give for stating earlier: *"Do not really trust anyone except those who follow your own faith."* This betrays their grudge, envy and hatred of the idea that God should give prophethood and revelation to anyone other than them. It also betrays their fear that should the Muslims come to know the truth they themselves know, despite their denials, they will take it as an argument against them before God. They say this as if God does not take against them anything other than verbal statements. The fact is that such thoughts cannot be entertained by anyone who has a sound concept of God and His attributes, or who has a correct knowledge of the true nature of Divine messages and prophethood, or the duties required by faith.

God directs His Messenger to teach them and the Muslim community the nature of God's grace when He wills to favour any nation with a messenger and a message: *"Say: 'Grace is in God's hand: He bestows it on whom He wills. God is Munificent and All-Knowing.' He singles out for His mercy whom He wills. And God's grace is great indeed."* (Verses 73-4)

He has willed to give His message and revelation to a nation other than that which received His earlier revelations. He has chosen to do so after they violated their covenant with Him, breached the pledges of their father, Abraham, knowingly confounded the truth with falsehood, betrayed the trust He has placed in them, abandoned the rulings of their Book and the laws of their religion and showed their unwillingness to refer their disputes to God's revelations for arbitration. What this meant in practice was that human life was no longer following God's constitution and its leadership was no longer in the hands of believers. Hence, He has given the leadership to the Muslim nation in which He placed His trust as an act of infinite honour and grace from Him: *"God is Munificent and All-Knowing. He singles out for His mercy whom He wills."* This He does on the basis of His knowledge of where His mercy should be placed and on the basis that when He bestows His grace, there is no

limit to what He gives. "*God's grace is great indeed.*" There is no grace greater than His guidance provided to any nation in the shape of a Book, or His limitless bounty given in the shape of a message, or His great mercy bestowed in the form of a messenger.

When the Muslims listen to this they realise what great favour God has given them when He has chosen them to carry His message, and they will hold tight to it, defend it with all the power available to them, and try to foil the schemes of their enemies. We see here an aspect of how the Qur'ān was educating the first Muslim community. It remains the Qur'ānic method of educating the Muslim community in every generation.

A Transaction Ending in Ruin

> *Among the people of earlier revelations there is many a one who, if you trust him with a treasure, will return it to you intact; and there is among them many a one who, if you trust him with a small gold coin, will not return it to you, unless you keep standing over him. For they say: "We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles." Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie. Indeed those who fulfil their pledges and guard themselves against evil [enjoy God's love]; for God loves the righteous. Those who barter away their covenant with God and their oaths for a trifling gain will have no share in the life to come. God will neither speak to them, nor cast a look on them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them of their sins. Theirs will be a grievous suffering.* (Verses 75-7)

In these verses, the Qur'ān describes the people of earlier revelations as they are, identifying the points of weakness in their characters. It also states the correct values of the Islamic faith. It begins by describing two types of people and their behaviour in commercial and social transactions. We note here that the Qur'ān maintains a high standard of fairness, stating the facts and denying no one his due credit, despite the fact that those people of earlier revelations were in conflict with the Muslim community. It seems that the same is true of those people in all generations. Nevertheless, their hostility towards, their plotting and scheming against and their attempts to undermine Islam and the Muslims, are not cause for the Qur'ān to deny the good ones among them their due credit. Here we note the Qur'ānic statement that among the people of earlier revelations, there are trustworthy individuals who will not usurp anyone his right, even under the greatest of temptations: "*Among the people of earlier revelations there is many a one who, if you trust him with a treasure, will return it to you intact.*" (Verse 75)

Others among them, however, are too greedy and have no respect for the rights of others. They do not return something which rightfully belongs to another person, no

matter how small, unless they are faced with continuous and insistent demands. They try to justify this contemptible habit by knowingly and deliberately telling lies about God: "*And there is among them many a one who, if you trust him with a small gold coin, will not return it to you, unless you keep standing over him. For they say: 'We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles.' Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie.*" (Verse 75)

This particular characteristic is typical of the Jews. It is they who make this statement and have, in moral and social dealings, double standards. When there is a transaction between one Jew and another, they are honest and trustworthy. When they deal with non-Jews, cheating, false pretences, deception and swindling become admissible practices which stir no conscience and cause no twinge of remorse. We note here that the Qur'ān quotes them as saying, "*We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles.*" The Arabic term used in the Qur'ānic text for the word "Gentiles" means "the illiterate or unlettered people". This was a reference to the Arabs, since the Arabs at that time were largely an illiterate nation. In fact, that was the term they employed to denote all non-Jews.

What is worse, they allege that they are instructed to do so by their God and their religion. However, they know this to be false. They know that God does not approve of any falsehood or any evil manner. He does not allow any community of people to usurp the property of others by fraud and deceit, or to betray their trust or indeed to deal with them unfairly. The Jews, however, have made their hatred to the rest of mankind an essential characteristic of theirs, and indeed part of their religion: "*They deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie.*"

At this point, the Qur'ān states its universal rule of morality, in essence its universal moral standard. Moreover, it relates this to the basic requirement of being conscious of God and fearing Him: "*Indeed those who fulfil their pledges and guard themselves against evil [enjoy God's love]; for God loves the righteous. Those who barter away their covenant with God and their oaths for a trifling gain will have no share in the life to come. God will neither speak to them, nor cast a look on them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them of their sins. Theirs will be a grievous suffering.*" (Verses 76-7)

What we have here is a single rule applicable to all. Anyone who observes this rule by fulfilling his pledges and guarding himself against evil will earn himself God's love and honour. Anyone who takes a paltry price in exchange for his covenant with God and his oaths — needless to say, any worldly gain or, indeed, this whole world is nothing but a paltry price and a trifling gain — will have no share whatsoever in the life to come. He will be rejected by God and he will not be purified by Him. The only wages he gains himself are simply a grievous suffering.

We note here that the fulfilment of one's pledges relates to fear of God. Hence, there can be no double standards, one for friends and another for enemies. Pledges

are not viewed from the point of view of self-interest. Their fulfilment is a matter which relates to dealing with God: the identity of the other party to whom a pledge is given is of little significance.

This explains the general Islamic theory of morality which is applicable to the fulfilment of pledges and to other moral considerations. We deal in the first place with God, and we are, therefore, keen to please Him and to avoid His anger. Hence, our moral incentive is not our self-interest. Nor is it the tradition of the community, nor its particular circumstance. A community may go astray and it may have false standards. It is important, therefore, to have a constant standard which is applicable to both the community and the individual. In addition, this standard must derive its strength from a higher source which is universally valued as taking priority over what people may decide for themselves or what their changing circumstances may require of them. In other words, values and standards must be derived from God. We must try to determine what moral practices and values are acceptable to Him and implement these in the hope that we earn His pleasure and remain righteous. It is in this way that Islam nurtures man's aspiration to a more sublime horizon.

Those who betray their trust and do not honour their pledges are indeed people who *"barter away their covenant with God and their oaths for a trifling gain."* In matters of pledges and trust the relationship is between man and God in the first place although the pledges are made to other people. For this reason, people who do not honour their agreements have no share with God in the life to come. The betrayal of their trust and pledges is perpetrated for only a trifling gain, for something which is available in this life. Therefore, as punishment for their disavowal of His covenant, and their pledge to convey His message to other people, God does not care for them.

Here, the Qur'ān employs its familiar method of drawing an image in order to express a certain attitude. God's neglect of such people and the fact that He withdraws His care from them are described in terms of His not speaking to them, looking at them or cleansing them. These are all familiar symptoms of neglect. The Qur'ān chooses to make use of them in order to draw a vivid image of what happens on the Day of Judgement. In this way, the verses have a much more profound effect on man than a mere statement of fact.

When Men of Religion Become Corrupt

> *There are some among them who twist their tongues when quoting the Scriptures, so that you may think that [what they say] is from the Scriptures, when it is not from the Scriptures. They say: 'It is from God", when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie. It is not conceivable that any human being to whom God had given revelation and wisdom and prophethood would*

> *subsequently say to people: "Worship me instead of God." But rather: 'Be devoted servants of God, by virtue of spreading the knowledge of the Scriptures and your constant study of them." Nor would he bid you to take the angels and the Prophets as your gods. Would he bid you to be unbelievers after you have surrendered yourselves to God?* (Verses 78-80)

These verses speak of a certain type of people of earlier revelations, namely, the deceivers who make use of God's revelations in order to lead other people astray. They twist their tongues when they read or quote it, and interpret its statements so that they may be made to agree with certain prejudices. In return for all this, they receive a paltry price, a trifling worldly gain. One example of such distortion and deliberate misinterpretation relates to their invented beliefs about Jesus, son of Mary, in order to make people's beliefs agree with the prejudices of the Church and political rulers.

When religious men are corrupt they allow themselves to be used as a tool for the falsification of facts. In this manner, they take advantage of their guise as men of religion. The example employed by the Qur'ān in relation to the people of earlier revelations is well known to us today. They impose on the verses and statements of their own revelations arbitrary interpretations and conclusions, claiming that these represent the precise meaning intended and that, as such, they constitute God's message. In actual fact, however, their conclusions are in sharp conflict with the very essence of Divine faith. They are able to achieve this contortion because the majority of people cannot differentiate between the true essence of faith and the true meaning of these statements on the one hand, and the fabricated conclusions they arbitrarily impose on these same statements on the other.

We are today well aware of such people who are wrongly described as religious. Indeed, they are religious professionals who look upon religion as a profession and who use it in order to satisfy all sorts of prejudice. They do not hesitate to make use of any religious text when it seems to them that by so doing they serve their own material interests. It does not concern them that their arbitrary interpretations of God's revelations contradict the basic principles of faith. They try hard to detect even the slightest hint of linguistic ambiguity in a Qur'ānic verse so that they can endorse any desire, tendency or prejudice which serves their immediate interests: *"They say: It is from God', when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie."* (Verse 78)

This sort of corruption is not exclusive to the people of earlier revelations. It is evident in every nation where religious faith has been greatly devalued as a result of the relentless pursuit of trifling worldly gains. It gains currency in any nation where people are so dishonest that they do not hesitate to deliberately and knowingly tell a lie about God and distort His words in order to win favours and satisfy their own

perverted desires. Here God warns the Muslim community against falling into this slippery way; a path on which the Children of Israel fell and which led them to be deprived of what they had been entrusted with, namely the leadership of mankind.

Taken together, these verses suggest that this element of the Children of Israel deliberately misquoted God's revelations which express their intent in a figurative way and instead attributed arbitrary interpretations to them. In so doing, they deluded the masses into believing that the conclusions they stated were taken from the Divine Book. They, who subsequently became the Christians we know today, indeed say that *"It is from God"*, when God has said nothing of the sort. Their aim was to prove the Divine nature of Jesus and to attribute the same to the "Holy Spirit". They alleged that there are three elements, namely, the father, the son and the Holy Spirit, constituting the trinity which is God. Limitless is God in His glory, far be it for Him to be as they falsely describe.

They also attributed certain statements to Jesus confirming their allegations. God here refutes their false interpretations. He states that it is not possible for a prophet whom God has honoured with prophethood and chosen for such a great task to order people to make him or the angels as gods. *"It is not conceivable that any human being to whom God had given revelations and wisdom and prophethood would subsequently say to people: 'Worship me instead of God.' But rather: Be devoted servants of God, by virtue of spreading the knowledge of the Scriptures and your constant study of them.' Nor would he bid you to take the angels and the Prophets as your gods. Would he bid you to be unbelievers after you have surrendered yourselves to God?"* (Verses 79-80)

A prophet knows that he is a servant of God, and that God alone is the only Lord to whom people should address their worship. It is not conceivable for a prophet to claim for himself the quality of Godhead which requires people to surrender themselves to him. Hence, no prophet would ever say to people: *"Worship me instead of God."* What he will always say to them is: *"Be devoted servants of God."* Declare your allegiance to God as servants who surrender themselves to Him. Address your worship to Him alone and adopt only the way of life He has approved for you so that you can be totally devoted to Him. You can achieve this devotion by virtue of your knowledge of the Scriptures and your constant study of what God has revealed. The more you understand your Scriptures, the clearer this task becomes to you.

No prophet would ever instruct people to take the angels or the prophets as lords or gods. For no prophet would ever instruct people to be unbelievers after they have surrendered themselves to God and acknowledged His Divinity. Prophets come to provide guidance for men, not to lead them astray. They set the example for people to be good believers and surrender themselves to God. It is far removed from them to encourage people to be unbelievers.

The impossibility of what these people of earlier revelations attribute to Jesus is thus made apparent. Equally apparent is their deliberate lie when they allege that this is from God. At the same time, all what these people allege in order to create doubts and suspicions within the Muslim community are shown to be baseless once the Qur'ān has revealed the true nature of these lies and the people who spread them.

Today there are still people who purport to be Muslims and who claim to be well read in Islam but who do the same thing as those people of earlier revelations. These Qur'ānic verses, then, are equally applicable to them. For they try to distort Qur'ānic statements and impose arbitrary interpretations on them in order to create all sorts of idols to be worshipped instead of God. They make use of every connivance in order to make their allegations plausible: *"They say: 'It is from God', when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie."*

A Pledge Binding on All Prophets

> *God made a covenant with the Prophets: "If after what I have vouchsafed to you of the Scriptures and wisdom, there comes to you a messenger confirming the truth of what you have in your possession, you shall believe in him and you shall help him. Do you," said He, "affirm this and accept the obligation I lay upon you in these terms?" They answered: "We do affirm it." Said He: 'Then bear witness, and I am also a witness with you." Then those who turn away afterwards are indeed transgressors. Do they seek a religion other than God's, when every soul in the heavens and the earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they shall all return?* (Verses 81-3)

This passage explains the link between all the messengers and messages. It is based on the covenant made with God which judges as a transgressor anyone who declines to follow the last of the Divine messages. It shows that such a person would be guilty of violating his covenant with God and of disobeying the law which applies to the whole universe. God, limitless He is in His glory, has made a binding and solemn covenant with every prophet He sent. He Himself witnessed this covenant as did His prophets. The covenant states that if a prophet is followed by a messenger who confirms his own message, he is required to declare his belief in this messenger, give him his support and follow his religion, no matter what he himself has been given of Scriptures and wisdom. God has made this binding agreement with every prophet and messenger He has sent.

The Qur'ānic presentation overlooks the time intervals which separated God's messengers, but instead groups them all in one scene with God, in His majesty, addressing them all at the same time. He asks whether they acknowledge this

covenant and accept the obligation it places on them: "*Do you affirm this and accept the obligation I lay upon you in these terms?' They answered: 'We do affirm it.'*" (Verse 81) God, the Sublime, witnesses this covenant and asks them to witness it as well: "*He said: 'Then bear witness, and I am also a witness with you.'*" (Verse 81)

As we replay this majestic scene in our minds, we are overawed with the image of all messengers assembled in the presence of God.

United in their submission to the sublime directive, they uphold the single truth, which God has willed should serve as the foundation of human life and remain pure of deviation, contradiction and conflict. God selects one of His servants to establish this truth on earth, before he passes it over to his successor, to whom he pledges his support, as the latter takes over the task of conveying God's message. No prophet has any personal interest in this matter, nor does he seek any personal glory. He is simply a servant of God, chosen by Him to convey His message. It is God Who determines how this message is carried forward from one generation to another, and it is He Who controls the movement of its followers as He pleases.

With this covenant, Divine religion is assured of being free from any narrow prejudice, be it the prejudice of the messenger to himself or to his people, or the prejudice of his followers to their own faith, interests, or to their own people. This single faith remains, in this way, pure, as God wishes it to be.

In light of this fact, how do those among the people of earlier revelations justify their attitude, when their religions call upon them to believe in the last messenger and to help and support him? How do these people who reject the last messenger appear, when their own messengers have made such a solemn and binding covenant with their Lord in a grand, awesome scene? They appear, indeed, to be transgressors. They have moved away from the teachings of their own Prophets, violated God's covenant and rebelled against this system which applies to the whole universe and which surrenders to its Creator. "*Then those who turn away afterwards are indeed transgressors. Do they seek a religion other than God's, when every soul in the heavens and earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they shall all return?*" (Verses 82-3)

No one refuses to follow the last of the Prophets but a transgressor, and no one rejects God's faith but a deviant who stands alone in rebellion against the whole universe, which submits to God.

God's faith is one. All messengers preached the same faith and pledged their covenants to dedicate themselves to it. The covenant God has made with every messenger is the same. Hence, to believe in the new faith, to follow its messenger, and to help implement it so that it attains supremacy over all other creeds and methods is indeed to honour this covenant. Anyone who rejects Islam, therefore,

rejects God's faith as a whole, and violates his covenant with God.

Islam, or submission to God, is the constitution and religion which applies to everything in this universe. It becomes a reality when the way of life God has chosen for mankind is implemented to the exclusion of every other way. This is indeed a universal version of Islam and submission. It has a profound effect on our feelings and conscience. It speaks of an omnipotent rule which subjects all beings to the same constitution and the same destiny.

"To Him they shall all return." There is no way out, for the end is the return to God, the Almighty, Who has created all and controls all.

If man's aim is to be happy, to enjoy peace of mind and to have a good system for his life, then he must inevitably return to God's constitution and implement it in his life both as an individual and in the life of his community. This ensures that man's life is in perfect harmony with the system followed by the universe and devised by the Creator. Only when man achieves harmony between his own system, encompassing his feelings, motives, relations and practices and the system of the universe is he able to work in cooperation, rather than in conflict, with the great powers in the universe. If he finds himself in conflict with these powers, his world is left in tatters and he cannot fulfil the mission assigned to him by God. Conversely, when he achieves harmony with the laws of nature which operate in the universe and to which all living things are subject, he is able to fathom their secrets and to make use of them in a way which ensures his own happiness and peace of mind. He is then spared all worry, fear and conflict. When we say that man can make use of these powers, we mean that in the case of fire, for example, he will not burn himself by it, but will use it for cooking, heating, and lighting.

In its essence, human nature is in harmony with the laws governing the universe. Human nature submits to its Lord like the nature of every living thing. When man forces his own life out of the system laid down by God, he finds himself in conflict not only with the universe, but also with his own nature. This results in misery and worry. He suffers a great deal just as erring humanity now suffers, despite all its scientific achievements and all the facilities provided for man by this materialistic civilisation.

Man suffers a great deal because he finds himself in a terrible void. His soul is devoid of the truth which it desperately needs, the truth of faith. His life is devoid of the Divine method which achieves harmony of movement between man and the universe in which he lives. When man leaves the cool shade provided by God's way of life, he finds himself in the blazing heat of the desert.

Having left the straightforward path, man suffers a worrying type of corruption. This is indeed the reason for all the misery, worry and confusion suffered by

humanity, and for all its hunger, thirst and deprivation. Man tries to escape from all this by resorting to drugs and drink, fast cars and aimless adventures, inventing a new craze every day, but to no avail. Material affluence, high levels of productivity, an easy life and a great deal of spare time do not help reduce his misery and worry. Indeed, the more he has of these, the greater his worry and confusion. This emptiness continues to chase man like a fearful ghost. Man tries to run away, but he can only run into an endless void.

The first impression formed by anyone who visits rich countries is that their peoples are trying to escape. They want to escape even from their own souls. The thin veil of affluence and sensuous enjoyment which is carried too far is soon lifted to reveal all sorts of psychiatric complaints, crime, deviation, perversion, worry, madness, alcohol and drug addiction. There is nothing worthy of respect in such a material life.

The people of these countries cannot determine the true purpose of their lives. They grope in the dark for that divine system which alone will ensure harmony of movement between themselves and the universe around them, and between their system and that of the universe. They cannot enjoy peace of mind because they do not know God, to Whom they shall all return.

Since the Muslim nation — and by this we mean the truly Muslim nation, not that which lives in any particular geographical area or in any particular period of history — is the one which is aware of the true nature of the covenant between God and His messengers, it knows fully the truth of the single faith God has given man through the line of noble prophets and messengers. God instructs the Prophet to declare this truth in absolutely clear terms. He orders him to declare that his nation believes in all past messages, respects and honours all past messengers, and is fully aware of the true nature of the Divine faith which is the only faith acceptable to God: "*Say: 'We believe in God and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Lord to Moses and Jesus and all the prophets. We make no distinction between them. To Him do we surrender ourselves.' He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he will be among the lost.*" (Verses 84-5)

This is the reality of Islam: it encompasses all past messages, maintains loyalty to all past messengers. It shows that the Divine faith is one, and returns all religions to their common source. It implies believing in all these messages as a whole, as they have all been given by God.

It is important to note here that the first of these two verses states first the belief in God and what has been revealed to the Muslims, i.e. the Qur'ān, and what has been revealed to all previous messengers. Its concluding comment on this encompassing

belief is: *"To Him do we surrender ourselves."* This acknowledgement of submission to God is very significant. It comes after it has been explained that Islam means total surrender, submission and obedience as well as the implementation of a certain system and a well-defined law. This is absolutely clear in the preceding verse: *"Do they seek a religion other than Gods, when every soul in the heavens and the earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they shall all return?"* It is clear that, in relation to all beings, "Islam" means surrender and submission, as well as obedience to the law and implementation of the system. It is for this that God deliberately explains the meaning of Islam and its true nature on every occasion, so that no one can mistake it for a word said verbally, or an acceptance made mentally, without it leaving its practical effects on life in the form of submission to God's law and the implementation of that law in real life: *"He who seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he will be among the lost."*

Deliberate Rejection of the Truth

> *How shall God guide people who have lapsed into disbelief after having accepted the faith and having borne witness that this messenger is true, and after having received clear evidence of the truth? God does not guide the wrongdoers. Of such people the punishment shall be the curse of God, the angels and all men. Under it they shall abide. Neither their suffering shall be lightened, nor shall they be granted respite. Excepted shall be those who afterwards repent and mend their ways; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. But those who return to disbelief after having accepted the faith and then grow more stubborn in their rejection of the faith, their repentance will not be accepted. For they are those who have truly gone astray. As for those who disbelieve and die unbelievers, not even the earth full of gold shall be accepted from any one of them, were he to offer it in ransom. They shall have grievous suffering and they shall have none to help them. You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish. God has full knowledge of what you spend.* (Verses 86-92)

The preceding verses leave no doubt whatsoever about the true meaning of Islam. In the light of these verses, it is impossible to arbitrarily interpret Qur'ānic statements in order to give Islam a definition other than that given by God. Islam, the religion of the whole universe, means submission to the system God has laid down for life.

Islam can never be confined to a verbal declaration of believing in the oneness of God and Muĥammad's message. Such a declaration must be followed by its practical correlative. This means, in the context of bearing witness that there is no deity save God; to actually believe that God alone is the only Lord of the universe to Whom worship should be addressed and Whose pleasure is to be sought. In the case of bearing witness that Muĥammad is God's Messenger, it means to implement in full

the way of life he has explained to us as given him by his Lord, and to apply the laws he has given us and to refer all disputes to the Qur'ān, the Book he has conveyed to us.

As we have said, Islam can never be confined to a mere mental acceptance of the truth of divinity and revelation, devoid of its practical effect. Nor can Islam be limited to a set of worship practices, contemplations, or moral and spiritual education, unless these are followed by their practical correlative represented by a way of life derived from God. Worship, contemplation and moral education have no practical value in people's lives unless they are incorporated into a social system which moulds human life in its own clean fashion, in accordance with God's will.

Such is Islam as God wants it. No value can be attached to Islam in the version devised by people's desires, or coloured by the wishes and prejudices of the enemies of Islam and their stooges everywhere.

Those who do not accept Islam in the form God wants it to take, after having learnt its true nature will definitely be the losers in the hereafter. They will receive no guidance from God and will not be exempt from His punishment: "*How shall God guide people who have lapsed into disbelief after having accepted the faith and having borne witness that this messenger is true, and after having received clear evidence of the truth? God does not guide the wrongdoers. Of such people the punishment shall be the curse of God, the angels and all men: under it they shall abide. Neither their suffering shall be lightened, nor shall they be granted respite.*" (Verses 86-8)

It is a sustained campaign which strikes terror in every heart with even the smallest measure of faith, and which views the question of the hereafter with the minimum degree of seriousness. The punishment detailed here is fair for anyone who has been given the chance to save himself, but who deliberately and stubbornly turns away from the path of salvation.

Islam, nevertheless, leaves the door open for repentance. Any erring person who wants to turn back to the right way needs only to knock on the door. Indeed, he does not even need to knock.

There is no one and nothing to prevent him entering. He only needs to turn to the way which ensures his security, and to do good in order to show that his repentance is sincere and truthful:

"*Excepted shall be those who afterwards repent and mend their ways; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 89) However, those who do not repent, who refuse to turn back, who insist on remaining unbelievers and continue in their erring ways until the chance given them is withdrawn, until the test is over, and the time for punishment and reward arrives, cannot be saved. No repentance will be accepted from them. It will not be of any benefit to them that they may have spent the whole

earth's weight of gold in what they thought to be good causes. Since their spending was not made for God's sake and not dedicated to Him alone, it has no value with Him. Nor will they be able to save themselves from the punishment of the hereafter even if they were to offer the earth's full weight of gold. Their chance is over and the doors are closed: *"But those who return to disbelief after having accepted the faith and then grow more stubborn in their rejection of the faith, their repentance will not be accepted. For they are those who have truly gone astray. As for those who disbelieve and die unbelievers, not even the earth full of gold shall be accepted from any one of them, were he to offer it in ransom. They shall have grievous suffering and they shall have none to help them."* (Verses 90-1) The discussion is thus concluded in a fearful and decisive manner, leaving no doubt in anyone's heart.

Since spending for causes other than that of God is mentioned as well as the offering of a ransom when none may be accepted, God explains the sort of spending which earns His pleasure: *"You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish. God has full knowledge of what you spend."* (Verse 92) The Muslims at the time understood this Divine directive perfectly well. They were keen to achieve that standard of true piety, which means the culmination of everything that is good, by offering what they cherished most dearly. They came forward with such offerings in the hope of receiving a much greater reward in the hereafter.

Imām Ahmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik: "Abū Ṭalĥah was one of the richest people among the Anşār in Madinah. His property, which he cherished most dearly, was a plot of land called Ĥā'. It was opposite to the Prophet's mosque. The Prophet used to go there and drink of its fine spring. Anas says that when God revealed the Qur'ānic verse: *"You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish,'* Abū Ṭalĥah said: 'Messenger of God, God says: "You will never attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you dearly cherish." My property, which I cherish most dearly, is this piece of land. I am offering it as a charity dedicated for God's sake. I do this in the hope that I will be rewarded for it by God. You, Messenger of God, may dispense with it in any way you please.' The Prophet said: 'Good. Good. That is an investment with high return. I have heard what you said. I think the best course is for you to divide it among your relatives.' Abū Ṭalĥah said: 'I will do that, Messenger of God.' He divided it among his relatives and cousins." (Related by Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

Al-Bukhārī and Muslim also relate that `Umar said: "Messenger of God, I have never acquired any property which is more valuable than my share in Khaybar. How do you advise me to dispense with it?" The Prophet said: "Make the land a permanent endowment and its produce free for all."

Many of them have followed this line in fulfilment of God's instruction, Who has outlined for us the way to true piety when He has guided us to Islam. In this way, we

attain our freedom from being enslaved by wealth and self-aggrandisement. We can aspire to attain a more sublime level, free of all shackles, undeterred by any impediments.

5
One God, One Faith

۞ كُلُّ ٱلطَّعَامِ كَانَ حِلاًّ لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ إِلَّا مَا حَرَّمَ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ مِن قَبْلِ أَن تُنَزَّلَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةُ ۗ قُلْ فَأْتُوا۟ بِٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ فَٱتْلُوهَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

All food was lawful to the Children of Israel except what Israel forbade himself, in the days before the Torah was bestowed from on high. Say: "Bring the Torah and recite it, if what you say is true." (93)

فَمَنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلْكَذِبَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

Those who fabricate lies about God after this are indeed wrongdoers. (94)

قُلْ صَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ ۗ فَٱتَّبِعُوا۟ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾

Say: "God speaks the truth. Follow, then, the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false and was not one of those who associate partners with God." (95)

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِى بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩٦﴾

The first House [of worship] ever set up for mankind was indeed the one at Bakkah: rich in blessing; and a source of guidance to all the worlds, (96)

فِيهِ ءَايَٰتٌۢ بَيِّنَٰتٌ مَّقَامُ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ۖ وَمَن دَخَلَهُۥ كَانَ ءَامِنًا ۗ وَلِلَّهِ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ حِجُّ ٱلْبَيْتِ مَنِ ٱسْتَطَاعَ إِلَيْهِ سَبِيلًا ۚ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَنِىٌّ عَنِ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩٧﴾

full of clear messages. It is the place whereon Abraham once stood; and whoever enters it finds inner peace. Pilgrimage to this House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it. As for those who disbelieve, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds. (97)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لِمَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱللَّهُ شَهِيدٌ عَلَىٰ مَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

Say: "People of earlier revelations, why do you disbelieve in God's revelations, when God Himself is witness to all that you do?" (98)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لِمَ تَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ مَنْ ءَامَنَ تَبْغُونَهَا عِوَجًا وَأَنتُمْ شُهَدَآءُ ۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why do you try to turn those who have come to believe away from the path of God, seeking to make it appear crooked, when you yourselves bear witness [to its being straight]? God is not unaware of what you do." (99)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن تُطِيعُوا۟ فَرِيقًا مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ يَرُدُّوكُم بَعْدَ إِيمَٰنِكُمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

Believers! If you pay heed to some of those who have been given revelations, they will cause you to renounce the truth after you have accepted the faith. (100)

وَكَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ وَأَنتُمْ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ وَفِيكُمْ رَسُولُهُۥ ۗ وَمَن يَعْتَصِم بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدْ هُدِىَ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿١٠١﴾

But how can you sink into disbelief when God's revelations are being recited to you and His messenger is in your midst? He who holds fast to God has already been guided along a straight path. (101)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ حَقَّ تُقَاتِهِۦ وَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُم مُّسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Believers! Fear God as you rightly should, and do not allow death to overtake you before you have surrendered yourselves truly to Him. (102)

وَٱعْتَصِمُوا۟ بِحَبْلِ ٱللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا۟ ۚ وَٱذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنتُمْ أَعْدَآءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُم بِنِعْمَتِهِۦٓ إِخْوَٰنًا وَكُنتُمْ عَلَىٰ شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ فَأَنقَذَكُم مِّنْهَا ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

Hold fast, all of you together, to the bond with God and do not be disunited. And remember the blessings God has bestowed on you: how, when you were enemies [to one another] He united your hearts and, by His grace, you have become brothers; and how, when you were on the brink of an abyss of fire, He saved you from it. Thus God makes clear His revelations to you, so that you may be rightly guided. (103)

وَلْتَكُن مِّنكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى ٱلْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ ٱلْمُنكَرِ ۚ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Let there become of you a nation that invites to all that is good, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong. Such are they who shall prosper. (104)

وَلَا تَكُونُواْ كَٱلَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُواْ وَٱخۡتَلَفُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتُۚ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ١٠٥

Do not follow the example of those who became divided and fell into conflict with one another after clear proof had come to them. For these there will be grievous suffering, (105)

يَوۡمَ تَبۡيَضُّ وُجُوهٞ وَتَسۡوَدُّ وُجُوهٞۚ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡوَدَّتۡ وُجُوهُهُمۡ أَكَفَرۡتُم بَعۡدَ إِيمَٰنِكُمۡ فَذُوقُواْ ٱلۡعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَكۡفُرُونَ ١٠٦

on the day when some faces will shine with happiness and some faces will be blackened. Those whose faces are blackened [shall be told]: "Did you disbelieve after having embraced the faith? Taste, then, this suffering for having sunk into disbelief." (106)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ٱبۡيَضَّتۡ وُجُوهُهُمۡ فَفِي رَحۡمَةِ ٱللَّهِ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ١٠٧

Those with shining faces shall be in God's grace; they abide there for ever. (107)

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتۡلُوهَا عَلَيۡكَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلۡمٗا لِّلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٠٨

These are revelations of God. We recite them to you in truth. God wills no injustice to His creatures. (108)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ١٠٩

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; to Him shall all things return. (109)

تَأۡمُرُونَ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَتَنۡهَوۡنَ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَتُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِۗ وَلَوۡ ءَامَنَ أَهۡلُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَكَانَ خَيۡرٗا لَّهُمۚ مِّنۡهُمُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ وَأَكۡثَرُهُمُ ٱلۡفَٰسِقُونَ ١١٠

You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God. Had the people of earlier revelations believed, it would have been for their own good. Few of them are believers, while most of them are evildoers. (110)

لَن يَضُرُّوكُمۡ إِلَّآ أَذٗىۖ وَإِن يُقَٰتِلُوكُمۡ يُوَلُّوكُمُ ٱلۡأَدۡبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ١١١

They cannot harm you beyond causing you some trifling hurt; and if they fight against you they will turn their backs upon you in flight. Then they will receive no help. (111)

ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلذِّلَّةُ أَيْنَ مَا ثُقِفُوٓاْ إِلَّا بِحَبْلٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَحَبْلٍ مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَبَآءُو بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْمَسْكَنَةُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُواْ يَكْفُرُونَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ ٱلْأَنۢبِيَآءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا عَصَواْ وَّكَانُواْ يَعْتَدُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Ignominy shall be pitched over them wherever they may be, save when they have a bond with God and a bond with men. They have incurred the wrath of God and humiliation shall overshadow them. That is because they persisted in denying God's revelations and killing the Prophets against all right. That is because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression. (112)

۞ لَيْسُواْ سَوَآءً ۗ مِّنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ أُمَّةٌ قَآئِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ ءَايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ءَانَآءَ ٱلَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

They are not all alike. Of the people of earlier revelations there are some upright people who recite the revelations of God in the depth of the night, and prostrate themselves in worship. (113)

يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ ٱلْمُنكَرِ وَيُسَـٰرِعُونَ فِى ٱلْخَيْرَٰتِ ۖ وَأُوْلَـٰٓئِكَ مِنَ ٱلصَّـٰلِحِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

They believe in God and the Last Day and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong and vie with one another in doing good works. These belong to the righteous. (114)

وَمَا يَفْعَلُواْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلَن يُكْفَرُوهُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١١٥﴾

Whatever good they do, they shall never be denied its reward. God knows those who fear Him. (115)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَن تُغْنِىَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَٰلُهُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَـٰدُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ وَأُوْلَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَـٰلِدُونَ ﴿١١٦﴾

As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children will avail them in any way against God. It is they who are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (116)

مَثَلُ مَا يُنفِقُونَ فِي هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا كَمَثَلِ رِيحٍ فِيهَا صِرٌّ أَصَابَتْ حَرْثَ قَوْمٍ ظَلَمُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمْ فَأَهْلَكَتْهُ ۚ وَمَا ظَلَمَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَلَٰكِنْ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١١٧﴾

Whatever they spend in this present life is like a biting, icy wind which smites the tilth of people who have wronged themselves, laying it to waste. It is not God Who does them wrong; they wrong themselves. (117)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّخِذُواْ بِطَانَةً مِّن دُونِكُمْ لَا يَأْلُونَكُمْ خَبَالاً وَدُّواْ مَا عَنِتُّمْ قَدْ بَدَتِ ٱلْبَغْضَآءُ مِنْ أَفْوَٰهِهِمْ وَمَا تُخْفِي صُدُورُهُمْ أَكْبَرُ ۚ قَدْ بَيَّنَّا لَكُمُ ٱلْأَيَٰتِ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

Believers, do not take for your intimate friends men other than your own folk. They will spare no effort to corrupt you. They love to see you in distress. Their hatred has already become apparent by [what they say with] their mouths, but what their hearts conceal is even much worse. We have made revelations plain to you, if you will only use your reason. (118)

هَٰٓأَنتُمْ أُوْلَآءِ تُحِبُّونَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِبُّونَكُمْ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ كُلِّهِۦ وَإِذَا لَقُوكُمْ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْاْ عَضُّواْ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْأَنَامِلَ مِنَ ٱلْغَيْظِ ۚ قُلْ مُوتُواْ بِغَيْظِكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١١٩﴾

See for yourselves how it is you who love them and they do not love you. You believe in all revelations. When they meet you they say: "We, too, are believers." But when they find themselves alone, they bite their fingertips with rage against you. Say: "Perish in your rage. God is fully aware of what is in the hearts [of people]." (119)

إِن تَمْسَسْكُمْ حَسَنَةٌ تَسُؤْهُمْ وَإِن تُصِبْكُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَفْرَحُواْ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تَصْبِرُواْ وَتَتَّقُواْ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْـًٔا ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ مُحِيطٌ ﴿١٢٠﴾

When good fortune comes your way, it grieves them; and if evil befalls you, they rejoice. If you persevere and fear God, their machinations cannot harm you in any way. God encompasses all that they do. (120)

Overview

In this passage, verses 93 to 120, we witness the culmination of the debate with the people of earlier revelations. Although the concepts outlined here do not form part of

the debate with the Najrān Christian delegation, they share a common theme and, thereby, complement and resonate with that debate. The passage addresses the Jews in particular, countering their intrigues and scheming against the Muslims of Madinah, and leads to a complete and total break between the two camps. Further on, it directs its attention fully to the Muslim community, pointing out their true identity, their way of life and their obligations, in a similar manner adopted by the Qur'ān in the previous *sūrah, al-Baqarah,* or The Cow. (Volume 1, pp. 99 ff)

This section opens by the affirmation that the Israelites were permitted to eat all types of food with the exception of what Israel (Jacob) had chosen to forbid himself and his people from eating before the Torah was revealed to Moses. This statement appears to come in reply to objections raised by the Israelites against the Qur'ān for making permissible certain foods that have been forbidden to them. The reality is, of course, that these were forbidden only to the Israelites as punishment for their transgressions.

It responds to their objection to the change of the direction faced by Muslims during prayer, the *qiblah* – a subject fully covered in *sūrah al-Baqarah* – pointing out that the Ka`bah is the House built by Abraham as the first place of worship ever established for mankind on earth. Since they claim to be descendants of Abraham, their attitude seems all the more objectionable!

It goes on to condemn the people of earlier revelations for their denial of God's revelations, for turning people away from God's path, their refusal to comply with His commands, and for their propensity to deviation as a dominant feature of life when they are well aware of the truth.

It turns to address the people of earlier revelations as a whole, as it warns the Muslims not to comply with their false beliefs. That was all the more urgent as the Qur'ān was being revealed to them and God's Messenger, Muĥammad, was teaching them and calling upon them to fear God and hold fast to Islam until they die and meet their Lord. It reminds them of God's grace which had kept their hearts close together and united them under the singular banner of Islam when they were besieged with schisms and strife. Islam took them back from the brink and prepared them to be the nation that would uphold all that is good and prevent all that is indecent and harmful, as part of their obligation to establish God's order on earth. They are warned not to succumb to the machinations of the people of earlier revelations or to allow themselves to be divided as those people were. That would only bring them frustration and destruction both in this life and in the life to come. Some reports indicate that this warning refers to certain hostilities instigated by the Jews between the two Arab tribes of Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj.

Then God Almighty informs the Muslims regarding their rightful place in this

world and the reality of their role in human society. He says: "*You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God.*" (Verse 110) He draws the attention of the Muslims to the profundity and uniqueness of their role and the true nature of their society.

This is further reinforced by demeaning their detractors who will never undermine their beliefs or completely prevail over them. Having to face such foes is part of the trials and tribulations of their mission. Victory shall be theirs so long as they hold fast to their way of life. Their enemies are condemned to disgrace and subjugation, and have earned God's wrath for their sins and transgressions, and for slaying their prophets without justification. The *sūrah* makes a certain exception concerning those particular Jews and Christians who acknowledge the truth and profess true faith. They adopt the same way of life as the Muslims, advocating what is right and opposing evil and working for all that is proper and decent. As for those who reject Islam, the *sūrah* asserts that they shall receive the just rewards of their infidelity, and neither their wealth nor their offspring shall spare them a miserable end.

The passage closes with a warning to the Muslims not to take allies from among those who wish them evil and who are full of hatred towards them. It points out that the loathing they conceal within their hearts is far more intense. They rejoice when misfortune strikes the Muslims, but are offended when they are blessed with a happy prospect. God, the Omniscient, promises to afford the believers protection against the intrigue of their opponents, as long as they show patience in adversity and fear God.

This extended and rich exhortation reflects the trials and tribulations the Muslims of Madinah suffered as a result of the betrayal and duplicity of their Jewish neighbours. It is an indication of the insidious confusion and disruption they caused inside the Muslim camp. It also confirms the Muslims' need for strong and firm instruction in order to be able to distinguish themselves, to set themselves apart and take a firm and resolute stand, severing all the ties that bound them to the dark days of Ignorance.

These profound instructions endure the test of time and continue to be valid for all Muslim generations who are required to be aware of Islam's traditional age-old enemies. Their methods and practices may change, but they remain ever the same.

The Beginning of a Long Debate

> *All food was lawful to the Children of Israel except what Israel forbade himself in the days before the Torah was bestowed from on high. Say: "Bring the Torah and recite it, if what you say is true." Those who fabricate lies about God after this are indeed*

wrongdoers. (Verses 93-4)

The Jews used every trick and argument to try to raise suspicion concerning the truthfulness of the Prophet and his message. Their only chance to stop the tide of Islam was to create doubts in the minds of the Muslims and to spread confusion within the Muslim community. When the Qur'ān stated that it endorsed what was in the Torah, the Jews seized the opportunity to proceed with their campaign. They asked: "How is it possible in this case that the Qur'ān makes lawful certain types of food which have been forbidden to the Children of Israel?" Reports suggest that they specifically mentioned camel flesh and milk which were forbidden to the Jews. There are, however, other types of food forbidden in Judaism which God has made lawful to the Muslims.

The Qur'ān refers the Jews back to the historical fact which they chose to overlook because that served their purpose in creating doubts about the Qur'ān. The fact is that all types of food were lawful to the Children of Israel, with the exception of what Israel forbade himself long before the revelation of the Torah. Reports suggest that during a serious illness, Israel, or Jacob, pledged to God that if He were to restore his health for him, he would voluntarily abstain from eating camel flesh and drinking camel milk, his favourite food and drink. God accepted his pledge. It became a tradition with the Children of Israel to follow in their father's footsteps and to forbid themselves what he had forbidden himself. Moreover, God forbade the Israelites certain types of food in punishment for certain sins they had committed. God refers to these types of forbidden food in verse 146 of *sūrah* 6, *Al-An 'am,* or Cattle: "*And to those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all beasts that have claws; and we forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, excepting that which is in their backs or entrails or that which is within the bone. Thus did We punish them for their evil doing; for, We are indeed true to Our word.*" Prior to this prohibition, all these types of food were lawful to the Israelites.

God refers them to this historical fact in order to explain that these types of food were originally lawful. They were forbidden them because of certain special circumstances relevant to them alone. If these types of food are made lawful to the Muslims, this only represents a return to the original status. Hence, it should raise no objection from anyone. Nor can it be used to raise doubts about the Qur'ān and the final Divine law it lays down.

The Qur'ān poses a challenge to the Jews to refer back to the Torah, to bring it forward and read it. They were certain to find in it an explanation that the prohibition was imposed on them alone. It is not a prohibition common to all people: "*Say: 'Bring the Torah and recite it, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 93)

This is followed by a threat to anyone who fabricates lies about God. Such a

person is a wrongdoer who is unfair both to himself and to other people. He is, indeed, unfair to truth itself. The punishment of a wrongdoer is well known. It is sufficient, therefore, that they are described as wrongdoers to determine the type of punishment which awaits them. They certainly fabricate lies about God, and they certainly will return to Him.

The Jews also sought constantly to exploit the question of changing the direction of Muslim prayer which meant that the Muslims faced the Ka`bah in prayer instead of turning towards Jerusalem. The Prophet and his Companions faced Jerusalem in their prayer for 16 or 17 months after the Prophet's emigration to Madinah. This topic has been discussed at length in the preceding *sūrah.* That discussion explained that to choose the Ka`bah as the *qiblah* (or direction in prayer) is to opt for the most natural and preferable alternative. When Jerusalem was chosen for a certain period, this was done for a specific reason explained by God. The Jews, nevertheless, continued to exploit this issue, trying to raise doubts and confusion and covering truth with falsehood, in the same way as the enemies of Islam do today. God, however, foils their schemes with a new explanation: "*Say: 'God speaks the truth. Follow, then, the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false and was not one of those who associate partners with God.' The first House [of worship! ever set up for mankind was indeed the one at Bakkah: rich in blessing; and a source of guidance to all the worlds, full of clear messages. It is the place whereon Abraham once stood; and whoever enters it finds inner peace. Pilgrimage to this House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it. As for those who disbelieve, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds.*" (Verses 95-7)

The first sentence here, "*Say.: 'God speaks the truth,'*" refers to what has been stated previously. The Ka`bah was built by Abraham and Ishmael so that it may be a place of refuge and security for all people and to serve as a *qiblah* or focal point and a praying place for all those who believe in Abraham's faith. Hence, the command to follow Abraham's creed which is based on the belief in the absolute oneness of God, associating no partners with Him in any form or shape: "*'Follow, then, the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false and was not one of those who associate partners with God.'*" The Jews claimed that they were the descendants of Abraham. Here, the Qur'ān tells them the true nature of Abraham's faith, namely, the belief in the absolute Oneness of God. This is emphasised twice in succession: the first states that Abraham turned away from all that is false, and the second asserts that he was not one of those who associate partners with God. How can they, then, go as far as to ascribe partners to God?

The First House for Human Worship

> *Say: "God speaks the truth. Follow, then, the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false and was not one of those who associate partners with God. "The first House [of worship] ever set up for mankind was indeed the one at Bakkah: rich in blessing, and a source of guidance to all the worlds, full of clear messages.* (Verses 95-6)

This verse explains that to face the Ka`bah is the proper choice. The Ka`bah is the first House ever set up for the exclusive purpose of worship. God commanded Abraham to build it and to consecrate it for worshippers who either walk round it, spend periods of time worshipping in it and who bow and prostrate themselves there in total submission to God. God has blessed this House and made it like a beacon for mankind where they find guidance showing them the true faith acceptable to God, which is indeed the creed of Abraham himself. There are indeed clear signs in the Ka`bah which show that it is the place where Abraham stood in his worship. Some scholars suggest that the Arabic term, Maqām Ibrāhīm, which is used in this verse and rendered in our translation as "the spot where Abraham stood", refers to the ancient stone on which Abraham stood when he built the Ka`bah. It used to be stuck to the wall of the Ka`bah, but the second Caliph, `Umar, moved it back so that people doing the *ṭawāf (i.e.* walking round the Ka`bah) did not disturb those who prayed behind it. We are commanded by God to make that spot a place where we pray: *"Establish the spot where Abraham stood as a place of worship." (Al-Baqarah* 2: 125)

One of the virtues of this House is highlighted here, namely, the sense of security it imparts to anyone who goes there. It is a refuge for anyone who is overtaken by fear, where he can find peace and security. In this particular aspect, this place is absolutely unique. It shares this quality with no other place on earth. It has remained so ever since it was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Even in the dark ages of Ignorance in Arabia, when the Arabs deviated far away from Abraham's faith and no longer believed in the oneness of God, the sanctity of this House continued to be observed. Al-Ĥasan al-Baṣrī and other renowned scholars explain that in that period of Ignorance, a man might commit a murder and go into the sanctuary of the House, having put a piece of wool around his neck. He might be met there by the son of the man he murdered but he would not be disturbed there until he had left the House.

This is part of the honour and blessings God has given to this House of His, even when people around it lived in total ignorance. He reminds the Arabs of this great favour He has done them: *'Are they not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are snatched away all around them?"* (Al-`Ankabūt 29: 67) Its sanctity is even extended to animals. Hunting is forbidden in its vicinity and no animals are scared out of their abodes in order to be captured. It is also forbidden to cut down the trees in its vicinity. An authentic *Ĥadīth,* related by Al-Bukhārī and Muslim on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, mentions that the Prophet (peace be upon him), said on the

day when Makkah was liberated by the Muslims: "God has made this city a sacred one ever since the day He created the heavens and the earth. It remains, therefore, inviolable by virtue of the sanctity imparted to it by God till the Day of Resurrection. Fighting in this city was never made lawful to anyone before me. It has only been made lawful to me for an hour of one day. It continues to be sanctified by God's order till the Day of Resurrection. Its plants may not be cut, its game may not be scared. No one may pick up something dropped by other people unless he recognizes its owner, etc."

This is, then, the House God has chosen to be the *qiblah,* or direction of Prayer, for Muslims. It is God's House which He has made so rich in blessings. It is the first House ever set up for men to worship in. Moreover, it is the House of Abraham, containing clear signs that it was Abraham himself who built it. Islam, or submission to God, is the creed of Abraham. Hence, the House he built is the one which deserves to serve as the direction of Prayer for Muslims. Moreover, it represents security and peace on earth. Since it is the focal point of Islam, it represents guidance for mankind.

The *sūrah* moves on to state that God has imposed a duty on mankind to make pilgrimage to this House once they are able to do so. Otherwise, they let themselves fall into disbelief which causes God no harm: *"Pilgrimage to this House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it. As for those who disbelieve, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds."*

One thing which attracts our attention when we read this verse is the fact that the duty of pilgrimage is made in absolutely general terms: *"... a duty owed to God by all people."* This suggests, first of all, that the duty of pilgrimage is also required of the Jews who disputed the validity of the Muslims turning to the Ka`bah in their Prayer. Their argument fails completely when it is realised that they themselves are required to make the pilgrimage to this House, since it is the House built by their father, Abraham, and the first one ever to be set up for worship by mankind. In this light, the Jews appear to be the deviant and disobedient ones. We may also infer from the way this verse is phrased that all mankind are required to accept this faith, fulfil its duties, offer its worship, and make the journey of pilgrimage to the House to which the believers in God turn. Unless they do this, their stand is one of disbelief, no matter how strongly they may profess to be believers. God stands in no need of anything or anyone. He does not need people's belief in Him, nor does He benefit by their pilgrimage. The benefit and prosperity are theirs when they accept the faith and offer the worship.

Pilgrimage is a personal obligation on every individual once in a lifetime, and it becomes due when the conditions of ability are fulfilled, including physical health, ability to travel and safe passage. There is, however, a difference of opinion among scholars with regard to the time when this duty was imposed. Relying on the report

that the present passage was revealed in the ninth year of the Prophet's settlement in Madinah, which is generally known in history books as "the year of delegations", some scholars believe that pilgrimage was made an obligatory duty in that same year. They support their argument with the fact that the Prophet himself went on his pilgrimage after that date. When we discussed the question of changing the direction of the *qiblah,* in our commentary on the preceding *sūrah,* we made the point that the timing of the Prophet's pilgrimage could not be taken as an argument in support of the view that the pilgrimage was made obligatory at a late stage in the Prophet's life. Several considerations might have contributed to that delay. One of these may have been the fact that the idolaters used to do the walking round the Ka`bah *(ṭawāf)* completely in the nude, and they continued to do so after the liberation of Makkah. The Prophet did not like to join them in their *ṭawāf.* The *sūrah* entitled "Repentance", or "*Al-Tawbah*", was revealed in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar, and idolaters were banned from *ṭawāf* in the Ka`bah altogether. The Prophet offered his pilgrimage in the following year. Hence, the duty of offering the pilgrimage may have been legislated earlier, and this verse may have been revealed in the early part of the Prophet's settlement in Madinah, probably around the time of the Battle of Uĥud which took place in the third year of the Islamic calendar.

Nonetheless, this statement imposes the obligation of pilgrimage, in the terms of a right which God demands from all people who are able to make the journey.

Pilgrimage is the Muslims' annual general assembly which is held at the House from which their message was given to them for the first time, and which witnessed the birth of the pure faith of Abraham, their first father, and which was the first House God has set up on earth for His own worship. Pilgrimage is, therefore, an assembly of great significance. Its historical associations centre round the noble concept of faith, which highlights the link between man and his Creator. Faith means man's spiritual response to God, a fact of great significance considering that only by the breathing of God's spirit has man acquired his humanity. It is a worthy concept to form the basis for human unity. Hence, it is appropriate that people should assemble every year at the Sacred Place which witnessed the birth of this call to mankind to unite on pure faith.

An Appeal in the Interest of Truth

Having provided this clarification, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to address the people of earlier revelations denouncing their attitude towards the truth of the Islamic message. They know this truth full well, yet they try to turn people away from it. They disbelieve in God's revelations although they bear witness to them and they are certain that these revelations are true: "*Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why*

do you disbelieve in God's revelations, when God Himself is witness to all that you do?' Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why do you try to turn those who have come to believe away from the path of God, seeking to make it appear crooked, when you yourselves bear witness [to its being straight'? God is not unaware of what you do.'" (Verses 98-9)

Similar denunciations are made in this *sūrah* as in many others. It is a highly effective denunciation because it does not mince words about the matter in question. The attitude of the people of earlier revelations is truthfully described, and they are shown in their true colours, even though they try to appear as people who have faith when they are in reality unbelievers. They disbelieve in the Qur'ān, which is revealed by God. Anyone who disbelieves in any part of God's book disbelieves in the whole of that book. Were they true believers in the part of God's book which has been revealed to them, they would have believed in every messenger sent by God after their own messenger. The essence of Divine faith is the same. Anyone who knows it knows for certain that whatever is preached by subsequent messengers is also true. He is bound to accept the prophets' call to surrender himself to God in the way they teach. This fact should shake those people and make them fear the consequences of insisting on their erring ways.

Those in the Muslim community who are deceived by the fact that those people adhere to a Divine book can no longer be so deceived. As they listen to God's words declaring the truth about those people, branding them as total unbelievers, all their doubts are bound to disappear. God issues them with warnings which strike fear in their hearts: *"God Himself is witness to all that you do ... God is not unaware of what you do."* It is a fearful warning because it makes man feel that God watches him and sees exactly what he does, which is, in reality, nothing but disbelief, deception and corruption. Moreover, God makes it clear that they are aware of the truth which they deny and away from which they try to turn people: *"... You yourselves bear witness [to its being straight']."* It is absolutely clear, then, that they were aware of the truth which they rejected. They knowingly tried to turn people away from what they realised to be a straight path. What wickedness! Anyone who adopts such a practice is not worthy of trust, but rather of contempt and denunciation.

We need to reflect on God's description of those people in the following terms: *"... Why do you try to turn those who have come to believe away from the path of God, seeking to make it appear crooked?"* (Verse 99) This is a statement of great significance. God's path is straight, and every other way is crooked. When people are turned away from God's path and believers are forcibly barred from following God's constitution, nothing remains straight. Our standards become faulty and nothing remains on earth except crookedness which can never be set straight.

Corruption, thus, gains the upper hand. Human nature becomes corrupt as it deviates from the straight path, and life becomes corrupt as it follows a crooked line.

All this corruption is the result of turning people away from the path of God. Such corruption manifests itself in different ways: erroneous concepts, deviant conscience, crooked morality, wicked behaviour, unfair transactions and injustice in all relations within human society. Either people follow the path of God which is straight and which leads to everything that is good, or they deviate from it in any direction, and this inevitably leads to crookedness, evil and corruption. In man's life, there is no third alternative.

A Warning Against Obeying Non-Muslims

> *Believers! If you pay heed to some of those who have been given revelations, they will cause you to renounce the truth after you have accepted the faith. But how can you sink into disbelief when God's revelations are being recited to you and His messenger is in your midst? He who holds fast to God has already been guided along a straight path.* (Verses 100-1)

Having answered all the arguments advanced by Christians and Jews against the message of Islam, the *sūrah* now makes this direct address to the Muslim community, which begins with a stern warning against paying heed to false claims made by followers of other religions, and outlines the essential characteristics of the Muslim community, its methods, beliefs and way of life.

The Muslim community implements a Divine system which makes it unique among all nations of the world. It owes its very existence to this system which, in turn, assigns to it a role which cannot be played by any other community. It has to establish this Divine system in practice so that it appears to all eyes as real and practical. Statements and clauses are thus translated into actions. They define moral standards, generate certain feelings and establish certain relations.

The Muslim community, however, cannot go along its proper way, realise the purpose of its existence and make the theory a reality unless it receives its instruction from God alone. Only through this can the Muslim community assume the leadership of mankind. This precludes them any possibility of following or paying heed to any human being. The choice before the Muslim community is either to follow this course dictated by its faith, or to sink into utter disbelief.

The Qur'ān emphasises this fact on several occasions. It tries to mould the feelings, thoughts and morality of the Muslim community on the basis of this principle at every possible opportunity. On this particular occasion, by answering the arguments of the people of earlier revelations and forestalling their schemes against the Muslim community in Madinah, this principle is re-emphasised. The fact that it is stated again here, within the context of a particular set of circumstances, does not detract

from its permanent validity. It applies to all generations of the Muslim community because it is the basis of its very existence.

If the Muslim community is brought into existence in order to assume the leadership of mankind, how is it possible for that community to receive instructions from the very ignorance which it aims to eradicate? If the Muslim community is to abandon its role of leadership, what purpose has its existence? Its leadership is to provide correct concepts and beliefs for human life, generating perfect moral standards and a perfect social set-up. In such a healthy situation, the human intellect makes its constructive contribution as it tries to learn the secrets of the universe and manipulate its potentials. The leadership which permits and controls all that potential, using it for the benefit of mankind, not to threaten human life with destruction, nor to devote it to satisfy carnal desires, belongs to faith only. It is given to the Muslim community which seeks God's guidance and does not allow itself to be dictated to by anyone of God's servants.

These verses include a warning to the Muslim community against following other people. These are followed later by an explanation of how the Muslim community can create and maintain a proper set-up. The first warning is against following people of earlier revelations, the Christians and Jews, for they will inevitably lead the Muslim community back into disbelief: *"Believers! If you pay heed to some of those who have been given revelations, they will cause you to renounce the truth after you have accepted the faith."* (Verse 100) In the first place, to follow the people of earlier revelations and to copy their methods and systems indicate an inner defeat and suggest that the Muslim community has abandoned its leadership role. It also suggests the existence of doubts in the minds of the Muslims about the adequacy of the Divine system to organise and elevate human life. These very doubts are the beginnings of creeping disbelief, even though in these earlier stages one may not sense the approaching danger.

The people of earlier revelations, on the other hand, are keen to turn the Muslim community away from its faith, which represents both its line of defence and its driving force. The enemies of Islam are well aware of this, as they have always been. Hence, they spare no effort and resort to all manner of schemes and designs so as to divert the Muslim community from its proper way. When they realise that they cannot win an open war against the faith of Islam, they resort to evil. When they feel they cannot launch a war against it by themselves, they recruit hypocrites who pretend to be Muslims so that they work against Islam from within, advocating different systems and pledging their loyalty to different leaderships.

Were the people of earlier revelations to find some Muslims responsive to their arguments, they would lose no time in channelling that responsiveness to their paramount goal of leading those Muslims, and the Muslim community as a whole, to

total disbelief and renunciation of the truth. Hence, the sternness of the Divine warning: *"Believers! If you pay heed to some of those who have been given revelations, they will cause you to renounce the truth after you have accepted the faith."* (Verse 100)

At the time of the Prophet, no prospect was more daunting to any Muslim than to find himself sinking into disbelief after he had accepted the faith. That meant throwing himself back into the fire of hell after he had saved himself and opened his way to heaven. This applies to every true Muslim across generations. Hence, a warning in such terms is sufficient to alert his conscience and keep it wide awake. The *sūrah,* therefore, continues the warning with a reminder to the Muslim community of God's grace. How fearful is that prospect, of finding those who have accepted the faith allowing themselves to be led back into disbelief, when God's revelations continue to be recited to them, and God's Messenger remains in their midst. All the incentives to accept the faith are there, and the call to God continues to be made, and the parting of the ways of belief and disbelief is made absolutely clear: *"But how can you sink into disbelief when God's revelations are being recited to you and His messenger is in your midst?"* (Verse 101)

It is indeed a great calamity that a believer should sink into disbelief in circumstances which are conducive to strengthen his faith. If God's Messenger has completed his term in this life, God's revelations remain with us, and the guidance of His Messenger continues to show us the way. Today, we are addressed by the Qur'ān as the first generation of Muslims were addressed by it. The way to follow that guidance is clear and the banner of the truth continues to fly high: *"He who holds fast to God has already been guided along a straight path."* (Verse 101) The only guarantee against slipping into renunciation of the truth is to hold fast to God. He is the eternal Master of all. He never dies.

Making Sure One's Way Is Right

The Prophet used to adopt a very strict attitude with his Companions in matters of faith and with regard to their way of life. At the same time, he allowed them to use their discretion in practical matters which rely on experience and knowledge. Examples of these include military strategy, agriculture and all purely scientific matters which belong to a domain that has no bearing on faith, social system or the relationships which regulate man's life. The way of life adopted by an individual or a certain society has nothing to do with pure or applied science.

The religion of Islam, which has been revealed to conduct human life according to a certain Divine method, makes its directive clear to man to seek knowledge and to benefit by every material discovery or scientific advance, provided that this is made within the context of implementing Islam's own method of life.

Imām Ahmad relates, on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn Thābit, that `Umar came to the Prophet one day and said: "Messenger of God! I have asked a Jewish friend of mine from the tribe of Quraiżah to write me the basic teachings of the Torah. Shall I read them to you? The Prophet's face changed colour when `Umar said that." `Abdullāh ibn Thābit turned to `Umar and said: "Do you not see the expression on God's messenger's face?" `Umar said immediately: "I believe in God as my only Lord, accept Islam as my faith and Muĥammad as God's messenger." The Prophet's face regained its normal colour and he said: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, if Moses comes back to you tomorrow and you follow him and leave me you will go astray. You are my share of nations and I am your share of Prophets."

A *ĥadīth* reported by Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "Do not ask the people of the earlier revelations about anything, for they will not guide you aright when they have gone astray. You will have one of the two alternatives: either you will accept a falsehood, or you will reject a truth. Had Moses been living among you, the only course lawful to him would be to follow me." The Prophet is also quoted as saying: "Had Moses and Jesus been alive, they would have had to follow me."

This is the position of the people of earlier revelations. The Prophet makes our position abundantly clear when it comes to following their guidance in matters of faith, ideological concepts, law or way of life. However, Islam imposes no restriction whatsoever on its followers when it comes to benefiting by the advances of any group of people in any branch of science. We have only to relate these advances to our own approach to everything in the universe, knowing that God has enabled man to make use of everything on earth so as to achieve a higher and more secure standard of living. We should also be grateful to God for enabling us to make such discoveries and for facilitating our use of the resources and potentials He has placed in the universe. We express our gratitude to Him by worshipping Him alone and by making the right use of our advances.

When it comes to asking the followers of other religions about concepts of faith, the purpose of human life, its method, laws and regulations, its moral values and codes, we find the Prophet's face changing colour at the slightest indication of such. God gives the Muslim community a stern warning against being led by others in any such matter. The ultimate result of that is nothing but the total rejection of faith.

In the light of this directive from God and the guidance of His Messenger, where do we, who claim to be Muslims, stand today? I see us taking Orientalists and their disciples as our teachers when we study the Qur'ān and the *ĥadīth* of the Prophet. I also see us formulating our concepts of life and existence on the basis of what we learn from these Orientalists, as well as from Greek, Roman, European and American philosophers. We borrow our regulations and laws from these suspect sources. I also find us borrowing our manners, code of conduct, and morality from the stinking

immorality into which the modern material civilisation has fallen. Yet we still claim to be Muslims! Such a claim is worse than open disbelief. For when we take such a stance, when our state of affairs is such, we testify to the failure of Islam. Such a testimony is not made even by non-Muslims.

Islam is a method with unique, distinctive characteristics in relation to its ideological philosophy, its laws regulating all spheres of life, and its moral code which governs all political, economic and social relations. It is a method designed to lead humanity as a whole. Hence, it is necessary that a certain community should implement this method in order to assume the leadership of mankind. As we stated earlier, it is contrary to the very nature of leadership that this community should receive directives from any source other than its own method of life.

It is for the good of mankind that this method was revealed by God. It is also for the good of mankind that the advocates of Islam call for the implementation of this method, now and in the future. Indeed, the urgency for its implementation today is that much greater, considering the terrible suffering of mankind under all other systems. There is simply no saviour except this Divine method which must retain all its distinctive characteristics in order for it to play its proper role and save mankind anew.

Man has made great advances in utilising the resources and potentials of the universe. His achievements in medicine and industry are miraculous when compared with his past. Fresh discoveries and triumphs still await us. But what is the effect of all this on human life? Has it given man happiness, security and peace? The answer is in the negative. What humanity has found instead is misery, worry, fear, neurological and psychiatric disease, in addition to widespread perversion and crime. Moreover, it has made no progress whatsoever in the formulation of a sound concept dealing with the purpose of human existence. When this is compared with the Islamic concept, this civilisation appears to shrink into insignificance. It seems no more than a curse which belittles man's own concept of himself and his position in the universe. It degrades him and limits his aspirations. The result is a heart consumed by a void and a soul writhing under the burden of confusion.

The simple reason is that humanity cannot find God because miserable circumstances have caused its course to deviate away from Him. Had scientific research followed the Divine method, it would have made every achievement accomplished by man a step drawing humanity nearer to God. Instead, it causes humanity to move further away from Him. Man is, therefore, deprived of the light which would have revealed for him the true purpose of his existence and which would have enabled him to work for that purpose equipped with the scientific progress God has enabled him to achieve. Furthermore, man is deprived of the method which would have established harmony between him and the universe. He

is also deprived of the system which would have established a perfect equilibrium between individual and community, man's potentials and resources, rights and duties, as well as the interests and concerns of this world and the life to come.

Certain groups of people even strive to deprive man of God's method and guidance. It is they who describe man's aspiration to implement this method as "reaction". They dismiss it as a mere nostalgia for the historical past. Whether this be the result of their ignorance or their ill-will, they actually deprive humanity of the right to aspire to the only method which can lead it to perfect peace and happiness, as well as to progress and development. We, who believe in this method, know perfectly well what we call for. We see the misery of mankind and we see as well, over the horizon, the real possibility for mankind's salvation. We are also aware that unless the leadership of mankind is given over to this method, then man will sink into even further deprivation.

The first step to salvation is that this method should remain pure. Its advocates must not listen to any directive given to them by the ignorance which has spread all around them. This ensures the purity of the system until God wills it to reassume the leadership of mankind. God is too kind to man to let him fall prey to his enemies who advocate ignorant ways. This is the lesson God delivered to the first Muslim community in His revelation and which the Prophet was keen to drive home to his followers by his sound teaching.

Brotherhood After Hostility

God warns the Muslim community that it cannot hope to implement the Islamic way of life or fulfil the great trust God has placed in it, unless it acquires the two basic qualities of faith and brotherhood. It must have a faith which keeps the fear of God ever present in its mind. It must also make brotherhood in Islam a reality. Only through this brotherhood can the Muslim community acquire its strength and be able to play its most important role in human life and history, namely, the role of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. In other words, it promotes every good thing in human life and purges it from every evil.

> *Believers! Fear God as you rightly should, and do not allow death to overtake you before you have surrendered yourselves truly to Him. Hold fast, all of you together, to the bond with God and do not be disunited. And remember the blessings God has bestowed on you: how, when you were enemies (to one another] He united your hearts and, by His grace, you have become brothers; and how, when you were on the brink of an abyss of fire, He saved you from it. Thus God makes clear His revelations to you, so that you may be rightly guided.* (Verses 102-3)

Faith and brotherhood are the two pillars upon which the structure of the Muslim community is built. If either of them collapses, the very existence of the Muslim community is undermined, and its great role comes to nothing. The first pillar is that of having faith and fear of God. It is only through such fear that man can fulfil his duties towards God because it makes him always alert. He does not lose sight of his duty for a moment of day or night.

"*Believers! Fear God as you rightly should.*" This command is given in general terms so as to heighten its effect. It thus makes the believer keen to achieve this goal of fearing God as He should rightly be feared, according to man's understanding and ability. This is a road which attracts man more and more as he walks further and further. The nearer he draws to God through fearing Him, the higher the goal he sets for himself. He will continuously strive to achieve a greater position, so as to make his heart always alert, never asleep.

"*Do not allow death to overtake you before you have surrendered yourselves truly to Him.*" The timing of death is beyond the reach of our knowledge. No man can be certain when death will overtake him. Hence, if anyone wants to die a Muslim, in the full sense of the word, he must surrender himself to God, right here and now. He must also abide by the requirements of this surrender at all times. The fact that Islam is mentioned after the command to have fear of God points to its wider implications: total surrender and submission to God, complete obedience and implementation of His method, and making His book the final arbiter in all affairs. This is the meaning which pervades the whole *sūrah.*

This is the first pillar upon which the structure of the Muslim community is built. Without it, no human grouping can be described as Islamic. No Divine method of life can come into operation in any community without it. In its absence, there are only ignorant methods and ignorant leadership.

The other pillar is the bond of brotherhood, based on the love of God and implementation of His method: "*Hold fast, all of you together, to the bond with God and do not be disunited. And remember the blessings God has bestowed on you: how, when you were enemies [to one another] He united your hearts and, by His grace, you have become brothers.*" (Verse 103) It is a brotherhood which has its roots in the fear of God and in surrendering to Him. In other words, it is derived from the first pillar. Its cornerstone is to hold fast to the bond with God, that is, the fulfilment of His commands and the implementation of His law. It cannot have any other basis, concept, goal or bond.

"*Hold fast, all of you together, to the bond with God and do not be disunited.*" This brotherhood which holds fast to a strong bond with God is a blessing with which God has favoured the first Muslim community. It is a blessing which God always grants to those of His servants whom He loves. He reminds the first Muslim

community here of this blessing, recalling how enmity was rife among them in their pre- Islamic days. No enmity was fiercer than that which existed between the Aws and the Khazraj, the two Arab tribes in Yathrib, the city which came to be called Madinah. Alongside them lived the Jews who were always trying to perpetuate this hostility in order to weaken both tribes and destroy all ties between them. It was in such an atmosphere of hatred that the Jews worked and flourished. God, however, united the hearts of both Arab tribes with the tie of Islam. It is only through Islam that such mutually hostile hearts could be united. It was only through the bond of God, to which all can hold fast, that they could become, by God's grace, brothers. Historical grudges, vengeance killings, personal ambitions and racial ties are reduced to nothing when compared with the bond of brotherhood which unites all under the banner of God, the Almighty: "*And remember the blessings God has bestowed on you: how, when you were enemies [to one another] He united your hearts and, by His grace, you have become brothers.*" (Verse 103)

He also reminds them of His grace in the form of saving them from the fire after they were about to fall in it. He saved them when He guided them to hold fast to His bond, the first pillar, and when He united their hearts so that they became brothers, the second pillar: "*When you were on the brink of an abyss of fire, He saved you from it.*" (Verse 103) We note here that the Qur'ān refers to man's heart, which is the centre of his feelings and bonds. It does not say: "*He united you.*" Rather, it refers to man's own deeply-seated feelings: "*He united your hearts.*" Men's hearts are thus described as a solid group, united by God on the basis of His covenant. We also have here a vivid description of the Muslims' earlier situation which touches their hearts: "*... You were on the brink of an abyss of fire.*" At the very moment when their fall into the abyss is expected, those hearts feel God's hand as it reaches out and saves them. They feel God's bond stretched out to them in order to protect them. We find them saved after exposure to a great danger. It is a very vivid, heart-touching scene which is raised before our eyes despite the lapse of many centuries.

In their biographies of the Prophet, Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq and others, report that this verse was revealed on the occasion of a Jewish leader from Madinah passing by a group of Muslims from both the Aws and the Khazraj. When he looked at them a sudden awareness overtook him. He realized that their past hostility had been replaced by genuine love and brotherhood. He was determined to spoil this healthy atmosphere. He sent a man with instructions to sit with those people and remind them of their past hostilities, and the fierce battles that had taken place between them, particularly the Battle of Bu`āth, in which both tribes suffered heavy casualties. The man was successful in his mission and soon tempers were boiling among that group. In their anger, some of the tribesmen repeated their old slogans. Someone called for his sword. Others repeated the same call. Someone even suggested that they should meet for battle the following day outside Madinah. When the Prophet

received intelligence of what was taking place between them, he went hurriedly to them and tried hard to cool their tempers. He said to them: "Do you resort to your ignorant ways when I am living in your midst?" He recited to them the Qur'ānic verse: *"And remember the blessings God has bestowed on you: how, when you were enemies [to one another] He united your hearts and, by His grace, you have become brothers; and how, when you were on the brink of an abyss of fire, He saved you from it."* (Verse 103) They soon regained their senses and regretted what had happened. Peace prevailed anew among them and they hugged each other in genuine brotherly love. They had been rightly guided when God's revelation was made clear to them. Hence, the concluding comment in that Qur'ānic verse is an apt description of their case: *"Thus God makes clear His revelations to you, so that you may be rightly guided."*

This is just one example of Jewish efforts to sever the bond which unites those who love God and follow the Divine method and make of them a model community, providing leadership for the rest of mankind. Every time a true Muslim community comes into existence, holding fast to the bond of God and implementing His constitution, the Jews start their scheming to create division among them. When that group of early Muslims heeded what they were bid by people of earlier revelations, they were about to sink back into disbelief, about to do battle with each other. Their bond with God which unites them in a genuine brotherhood was about to be severed.

This verse has much wider significance than just this particular incident. Taken with what precedes and follows it, the verse suggests that the Jews in Madinah were engaged in a continuous effort to create division and disunity among the Muslims. Hence, the repeated Qur'ānic warnings to the Muslims not to pay heed to the people of earlier revelations and to make sure that they would not fall victim to their scheming. We detect here a feeling that the Muslim community was undergoing great troubles as a result of the plots of the Jews in Madinah. Those same tactics have been employed all the time against Muslims everywhere in the world.

The Role of the Muslim Community

The task of the Muslim community is to implement the Divine method in human society, and to help truth to triumph over falsehood, goodness over evil. This task is stated in the following verse: *"Let there become of you a nation that invites to all that is good, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong. Such are they who shall prosper."* (Verse 104)

It is imperative for this community to come into existence so as to invite all to that which is good, and to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. The Qur'ānic statement imparts that this must be done through a real authority which can invite,

enjoin and forbid. Anyone may be able to invite to what is good, but no one can enjoin and forbid unless he is equipped with real authority.

This is the proper Islamic view of the matter. It is essential that there should be an authority to undertake the task of advocating what is good and removing what is evil. The units which constitute this authority must combine together, hold fast to their bond with God, and translate their brotherhood into a reality. The prerequisites enabling this authority to implement the Divine method in life are faith and brotherhood. The Divine method cannot be put into practice without "inviting" others to every good so that people realise the true nature of this Divine method. It also requires an active authority to "enjoin" what is right and "forbid" what is wrong. Such an authority must be obeyed. God says: *"We have sent every messenger in order to be obeyed with God's leave."* (*Al-Nisā'* 4:64) Hence, God's method is not merely preaching and verbal explanation. This is only one part of it. The other part is an active and sustained effort to promote every right thing in human life and to reduce to a minimum every wrong. In this way, the traditions of the good Muslim community will be protected against the whims of anyone who has the power to impose his own interests on the community. It also protects these traditions against all abuse or subservience to personal desire or interest.

The task of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is not an easy one, especially when we consider that it inevitably conflicts with people's desires, interests and pride. There are in this world of ours tyrants who impose their authority by force, people who are interested only in carnal desires and who do not wish to be elevated to a nobler standard. There are also the lazy who hate to be asked to be serious, the unfair who hate justice, the deviant who do not for a moment contemplate a straightforward attitude, as well as those who think wrong of every right thing and consider every wrong thing to be right. No nation, let alone humanity as a whole, can prosper unless goodness prevails, right is upheld and wrong is thrown out. Hence, the need for an authority to promote goodness and right and to combat evil. What is more, this authority must be obeyed.

This leads us back to the point where we started: a community must be built on the two essential qualities of faith and brotherhood. It is only such a community that can undertake this difficult task, equipped with the power of faith and the seriousness it derives from fearing God as well as the strength of love and brotherhood. It is only through the fulfilment of this role that this community can prosper. Hence, God describes those who fulfil it as prosperous: *"Such are they who shall prosper."* (Verse 104)

The existence of such a community is essential for the Divine method itself. It is indeed the environment in which it can breathe and become a practical reality. It is a good, healthy environment where people co-operate to promote goodness. In such a

community, right is synonymous with goodness, virtue and justice, whereas wrong means evil, vice and injustice. To do good in such a community is easier than to do evil, virtue is simpler than vice, right stronger than wrong, justice more common and beneficial than injustice. A person who wants to do good will find help while the one who wants to do evil will meet resistance. It is this fact that gives this community its greatest value. It provides an environment where goodness and right can prosper without the need for any great effort, because everything in this environment lends them support. Wrong and evil can only grow with difficulty because of the all-round resistance which neglects it.

The concept Islam formulates of life, actions, events, values and people is essentially different from all other concepts. Hence, a special environment, which is totally different from that state of ignorance which prevails in unreligious communities, is needed to enable this unique concept, with all its unique values, to flourish. This environment must be conditioned by the Islamic concept of human life and must serve it so that it may live, breathe freely and grow in it, without encountering any internal hindrances to its development. Should it encounter any obstacles, then the essential qualities of the Muslim community, to advocate all that is good and to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, are certain to remove them. Should an oppressive force attempt to turn people away from God, then it will inevitably encounter those who are prepared to defend and protect the Divine method of life.

This environment is embodied in the Muslim community which is built on the twin pillars of faith and brotherhood. Its faith in God brings conformity to its concept of life, events, actions, values and people and gives it a single standard with which to evaluate everything in life. It conducts all its affairs according to the same Divine law and pledges all its loyalty to the leadership which takes upon itself the task of implementing God's method in human life. The brotherhood of faith provides this community with bonds of love and mutual care. These ties ensure the absence of selfishness in the community and help its members care for one another without pressure or ill feeling.

The first Muslim community in Madinah was built on these two pillars: faith in God based on knowing Him and recognising His attributes, fearing Him and being constantly aware of what pleases Him; and genuine, flowing love, true friendship and mutual care. The first Muslim community achieved all this in practice, an ideal normally considered closer to dreams than reality. The brotherhood established between the *Muhājirīn* (Muslims who emigrated from Makkah) and the *Anşār* (the Muslims of Madinah) is a real story approximating absolute idealism. It is an event borrowed from the heavens, but which took place on this earth. It is on the basis of such strong faith and real brotherhood that God's method of life can be implemented

in every generation.

Faces Shining with Happiness

A fresh warning to the Muslim community against falling out with one another is added here. The example of those people of earlier revelations who were entrusted with the implementation of God's method but who allowed division and conflict to creep into their ranks is given. Therefore, God deprived them of the leadership position and instead assigned that role to the Muslim community, which fosters its bond of brotherhood. Moreover, those who are not true to their task will be sternly punished on the day when faces will either shine or be blackened: *"Do not follow the example of those who became divided and fell into conflict with one another after clear proof had come to them. For these there will be grievous suffering, on the day when some faces will shine with happiness and some faces will be blackened. Those whose faces are blackened [shall be told]: Did you disbelieve after having embraced the faith? Taste, then, this suffering for having sunk into disbelief' Those with shining faces shall be in God's grace; they abide there for even"* (Verses 105-7)

A vivid scene, full of life, is drawn here in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān. The scene is one of horror, but the horror is not described in words or adjectives. It is represented in living human beings, in their faces and looks. We see bright, shining faces, full of joy and happiness, and others gloomy, dusty and blackened. Yet those people are still not left alone to suffer their fate. They have to put up with scourging comments: "'*Did you disbelieve after having embraced the faith? Taste, then, this suffering for having sunk into disbelief.*'"

The happy fortunes of the other group is also vividly described: "*Those with shining faces shall be in God's grace; they abide there for ever.*" This description adds life, movement and dialogue to the scene, again in the Qur'ān's inimitable style.

The scene helps the Muslim community fully appreciate the Qur'ānic warning against division and conflict. The grace God has bestowed on it through faith and unity is also fully appreciated. The Muslim community sees with its own eyes the end of those people of earlier revelations whom it has been warned not to obey. If it follows them, it will share their doom and suffering on the day when faces will either shine or be blackened.

When the destiny of each of the two groups has been clearly stated, a comment is added which is in harmony with the broad lines of the *sūrah.* It reasserts the truth of the Prophet's message and revelation, the fact that reckoning and reward on the Day of Judgement are to be taken seriously, the fact that Divine justice in this world and in the hereafter is absolute, and the fact that all that is in heaven and on earth belong to God and to Him they shall all return: "*These are revelations of God. We recite them to*

you in truth. God wills no injustice to His creatures. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; to Him shall all things return." (Verses 108-9)

All these facts, all these scenes and destinies so described are revelations given by God to His servants. They are recited to His messenger in truth. They embody the truth in the principles and values they establish. They tell only the truth about the destinies of other nations. They are revealed in truth by the One Who is able to reveal them and Who alone has the right to determine values, rewards and destinies. God does not inflict any injustice on anyone of His creatures. He is the fairest of all arbiters. He controls the heavens and the earth, and to Him belong all that is in heaven and on earth, and to Him shall they all return. By making reward fit with action God only wants to establish right, administer justice and ensure that all matters are conducted seriously as befits His majesty. Absurd is the claim of the people of earlier revelations that they will only be scourged by the fire for only a few days.

A Quality Essential to the Muslim Community

> *You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God. Had the people of earlier revelations believed, it would have been for their own good. Few of them are believers, while most of them are evildoers.* (Verse 110)

This verse describes the Muslim nation so that it becomes aware of its position, value and true nature. The first part of the verse imposes a very heavy duty on the Muslim community, while at the same time honouring and elevating it to a position which cannot be given to any other community: *"You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God."*

We note first that the reference to the Muslim community as one which *"has been raised" is* made in the passive voice. This suggests that a highly skilful hand has neatly moulded this community and brought it forth from behind the eternal curtain which covers things known only to God. The expression adopted here indicates a subtle and gentle movement which brings forth onto the stage of existence a whole nation which has a unique role to play and a special position to occupy.

"You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind." The Muslim nation should understand this in order to know its position and its true nature. It should know that it has been raised specially for the purpose of assuming the leadership of mankind, since it is the best nation. God wants the leadership in this planet of ours to be assumed by the forces of goodness, not the forces of evil. It follows that it should

never be in the recipient position, taking what other nations have to offer. It must be the one to offer to others whatever it has of sound ideology, philosophy, morality and knowledge, and of course its perfect system. This is the duty of the Muslim nation, imposed on it by its unique position and the purpose of its very existence. It is a duty on the Muslim nation to assume the leadership of mankind at all times. By assuming it, it also takes upon itself certain responsibilities. Leadership cannot be given to any nation which claims it, unless it proves that it is the worthy leader. By its ideology and social system, the Muslim community is worthy of this position. What remains for it is to prove that in scientific advancement and in the fulfilment of man's task of building the earth, it is also an able leader. It is clear then that the system which brings this nation into existence demands much from it and gives it the incentive to excel in every field, if only it would follow this system and appreciate its requirements and duties.

The first requirement is that the Muslim nation should work hard at protecting human life from evil. It must have the power to enable it to enjoin the doing of all that is right and forbid the doing of all that is wrong. It is, after all, the best nation ever raised for mankind. This position is not given to the Muslim community as the result of any favouritism, coincidence or random selection. Far be it from God to do that. Positions and duties are not given by God to different nations on the basis of any favouritism, as the people of earlier revelations were wont to believe, describing themselves as "*God's children and beloved people.*" (*Al-Mā'idah* 5:18) The criterion which makes a certain community worthy of the position of leadership is its active work for the preservation of human life from evil and the promotion of what is right, in addition to its implementation of the faith which defines what is right and what is wrong: "*You enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong.*" (Verse 110)

The position of leadership is thus earned through the active fulfilment of its tasks, heavy as they are, and through following the way defined for it, thorny as it may be. In practical terms, it means standing up against evil, promoting every good and protecting society against all elements of corruption. All these are extremely hard tasks, but they are nevertheless necessary if a good human society is to be established and protected. There is no other way to bring about the type of society which God loves.

Belief in God is also necessary so that the community has a correct standard of values and a correct definition of what is right and what is wrong. What is socially agreed by a community is not enough. For it may happen that corruption becomes so widespread that standards are no longer correct or appropriate. Hence, reference must be made to a permanent concept of good and evil, virtue and vice, right and wrong. This concept should have as its basis something other than the social norms of any particular generation.

Belief in God provides all this, since it ensures a correct concept of the universe and the relationship between the Creator and His creation. It provides the correct concept of man, the purpose of his existence and his true position in the universe. It is from this general concept that moral values and principles should be derived. The desire to earn God's pleasure and to avoid His displeasure motivates people to work for the implementation of these principles. They, in turn, are safeguarded by fear of God and by the authority of His law.

Belief in God is necessary for those who invite to all that is good, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, to proceed along their appointed course and bear all its difficulties and hardships. They have to face the tyranny of evil at its fiercest, the pressures of worldly desires at their strongest, as also complacency, weakness and narrow ambition. To do this, they have to be equipped with faith. It is their only weapon. Their support comes from God. Any other aid is exhaustible, any other weapon can be overpowered and any other support is liable to collapse.

Earlier in the *sūrah,* the Muslim community is described by God as having the necessary qualities to implement His Divine method. That community, however, does not come into existence by its own volition, but only when it possesses the essential qualities which distinguish it from the rest of mankind. It either invites to all that is good, enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong, in addition to believing in God; in this case it gives credence to its existence as a Muslim nation. Or, alternatively, it does not do any of this. In this case it is deemed not to have come into existence, and it loses its Islamic identity.

The Qur'ān stresses this in numerous places, each of which will be discussed in its appropriate context. The *Sunnah* also includes a number of such directives and commands by the Prophet, some of which may be quoted here:

Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī reports that he heard the Prophet saying: "Let any of you who sees something wrong put it right with his own hand. If he is unable to do so, let him change it by the word of his mouth. If he cannot do even that, then let him do it within himself. This is the weakest form of faith." (Related by Muslim.)

Abū Dāwūd and Al-Tirmidhī relate on the authority of Ibn Mas`ūd that the Prophet said: "When the children of Israel began to commit sins frequently, their scholars tried to dissuade them, but they persisted. Their scholars, nevertheless, continued to attend their social gatherings, and to eat and drink with them. God left them to stray and sealed their hearts. He also cursed them in the words of David, Solomon and Jesus, son of Mary." The Prophet was saying this as he reclined, but at this point he sat up and said: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, you must make them turn back to what is right."

Al-Tirmidhī relates on the authority of Ĥudhayfah that the Prophet said: "By Him

who holds my soul in His hand, you will enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, or else, God will visit you with a punishment of His own. You will, then, pray to Him and He will not answer you."

God's Messenger says: "When a sin is committed on earth, a person who witnesses it and denounces it is the same as one who has not seen it, and the one who has been absent and approves of it is considered like one who has taken part in it." (Related by Abū Dāwūd.)

Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī quotes the Prophet as saying: "One of the highest forms of jihad is to confront a despotic ruler with the word of truth." (Related by Abū Dāwūd and Al-Tirmidhī.)

Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "The best of all martyrs is Ĥamzah and a man who stands up to a despotic ruler, enjoins him to do what is right and forbids him what is wrong, and is, therefore, killed by that ruler."

The Prophet stresses this quality of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong in many other *hadīths,* all of which establish beyond any shadow of doubt that it is a prerequisite for the Muslim community. The *Sunnah* contains a wealth of directives which provide the best education for the Muslim community. Unfortunately, however, we tend not to give the *Sunnah* its true value.

The Fate of Deserters

> *They cannot harm you beyond causing you some trifling hurt; and if they fight against you, they will turn their backs upon you in flight. Then they will receive no help. Ignominy shall be pitched over them wherever they may be, save when they have a bond with God and a bond with men. They have incurred the wrath of God and humiliation shall overshadow them. That is because they persisted in denying God's revelations and killing the Prophets against all right. That is because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression.* (Verses 111-12)

Its unique qualities make the Muslim community the best nation ever to be raised for mankind. Having outlined these qualities of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong and believing in God, the verse goes on to explain that to have faith is better for people: "*Had the people of earlier revelations believed, it would have been for their own good. Few of them are believers, while most of them are evildoers.*" (Verse 110)

This serves as an encouragement to the people of earlier revelations to accept the faith of Islam, because such acceptance works for their own good in this life and in the life to come. By accepting the faith they overcome their division over ideological concepts, which has robbed them of any chance to establish their own distinctive

character. Their concepts cannot serve as the basis for a social system. Hence, their social systems have no firm foundation. This is indeed true of any social system which is not based on an ideology that provides an overall view of existence, of the purpose of human existence, as well as man's position in the universe. To believe in God works for their own good in the life to come, since it is the only means to spare them the fate of the unbelievers.

The same verse describes their attitude, giving the good ones among them due credit: "*Few of them are believers, while most of them are evildoers.*" A number of the people of earlier revelations accepted Islam at the time of the Prophet and became good Muslims. Among them were `Abdullāh ibn Sallām, Asad ibn `Ubayd, Tha`labah ibn Shu`bah and Ka`b ibn Mālik. This verse makes a general reference to them whilst a more detailed reference is given later. Most of them, however, chose the evil way of not fulfilling the covenant God made with all prophets, which stated that every one of them would believe in and support the prophet God sent after him.

They also chose evil when they refused to submit to His will that the last of His messengers would not be from among the Israelites. They rejected this messenger and declined to submit to God's law embodied in His last message, which He has made applicable to all mankind.

Since some of the Muslims at that time retained various links with the Jews in Madinah, and since the Jews still possessed military and economic power which some Muslims felt to be considerable, the Qur'ān deliberately sets out to belittle those evildoers. The Qur'ān shows their true weakness which results from their disbelief, their repeated crimes and disobedience, their division, and the consequent ignominy and humiliation imposed on them by God. It also states God's guarantee to the believers that they will be victorious over these enemies, provided that they themselves hold fast to their faith and believe in God.

> *They cannot harm you beyond causing you some trifling hurt: and if they fight against you they will turn their backs upon you in flight. Then they will receive no help.* (Verse 111)

The harm they may inflict will never be enough to trouble the Islamic message. It will never affect the basic structure of the Muslim community or wipe it out. The most they can inflict on the Muslims is the sort of trifling hurt which is bound to happen in any open conflict. It is nothing more than a superficial pain which disappears with time. When they fight against the Muslims, defeat is their ultimate outcome. They can never be triumphant over the believers. Moreover, they will have no help against, nor protection from the believers. The reason is that ignominy has been imposed on them as their fate. They are humiliated everywhere in the world.

The only protection they have is that which they receive when they seek refuge with God and with the Muslims.

When they choose to come under the protection of the Muslims, their lives and their property become immune, except under the normal working of the law, and they enjoy peace and security. Since that time, the Jews have never enjoyed true security except when they have enjoyed the protection of the Muslims. Yet they themselves have shown their utmost hostility to the Muslims. *"They have incurred the wrath of God,"* as if they have returned from their journey burdened with this wrath. *"And humiliation shall overshadow them,"* remaining forever in their hearts and feelings.

All this took place after this verse was sent down. Whenever a battle flared up between the Muslims and people of earlier revelations, victory was always achieved by the Muslims, provided that they held fast to their faith and implemented God's law in their lives. Their enemies always suffered ignominy and humiliation except when they were able to establish a bond with the Muslims or when the Muslims abandoned their religion.

The Qur'ān states the reason for the fate so imposed on the Jews. It is a general reason, the effect of which may be applicable to every nation, no matter how strongly it professes to be religious. The simple reason is their disobedience and transgression: *"That is because they persisted in denying God's revelations and killing the prophets against all right. That is because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression."* (Verse 112)

Denying God's revelation, whether it is an attitude adopted outright or a refusal to implement it practically, the killing of prophets without any justification and the killing of people who enjoin fairness and justice (as mentioned in another verse of the *sūrah),* as well as disobedience and transgression, are all reasons for incurring God's wrath and bringing about defeat, ignominy and humiliation upon oneself. These reasons are still present today among the lost offspring of the Muslims who call themselves, without justification, Muslims. They present these very qualifications to their Lord and they get their fair reward: they receive all that God has imposed on the Jews of defeat, ignominy and humiliation. Some of them may well ask: why do we suffer defeat when we are Muslims? Let those who pose such a question first reflect on what the true nature of Islam is, and who are the true Muslims?

Different Ways, Different Ends

> *They are not all alike. Of the people of earlier revelations there are some upright people who recite the revelations of God in the depth of the night, and prostrate themselves in worship. They believe in God and the Last Day and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong and vie with one another in doing good works. These belong*

> *to the righteous. Whatever good they do, they shall never be denied its reward. God knows those who fear Him. As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children will avail them in any way against God. It is they who are destined for the fire, where they will abide. Whatever they spend in this present life is like a biting, icy wind which smites the tilth of people who have wronged themselves, laying it to waste. It is not 'God Who does them wrong; they wrong themselves.* (Verses 113-17)

Here the *sūrah* reassures the good minority among the people of earlier revelations who take faith seriously. They are again singled out for praise. The passage begins with a statement that the people of earlier revelations are not all alike. Some of them are true believers. Their attitude to faith and to God is described as that of true believers. This merits them the same reward which God gives to His righteous servants.

It is a bright picture of the true believers among the people who received Divine revelations in the past. Their faith is genuine, profound, and complete. They have made their stand clear. They have joined the ranks of those who surrender themselves to God and defend this faith with all the power they possess. They believe in God and the Last Day. Moreover, they fulfil the duties required of them by their faith and give practical effect to the characteristics of the community which they have joined, the best community ever raised for mankind. They desire every good thing. They enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong. They have set themselves a goal and they compete with one another for its achievement. That goal is to do good works. Hence, they merit this testimony that is given from on high stating that they belong to the righteous. They also have the promise, which never fails, that they will not be denied their reward. The verse adds that God, Who is aware of all things and all people, knows that they belong to that special group of people who genuinely fear Him.

This picture is raised in front of the eyes of those who wish to have a similar testimony and a similar promise. They have only to follow the same line and adopt the same attitude. They will then find its light spreading over the limitless horizon of their lives.

On the other side stand the unbelievers who will not benefit by their possessions or by their children. Nothing they may spend in this life for what they may consider to be a good cause will be of any avail to them. No reward is given them for it in the hereafter because it has not originated from the straight, constant line of goodness. Every good thing must have its foundation in belief in God which combines a clear concept, a well-defined goal, and a straight uninterrupted line. If it does not, it is reduced to a passing whim or an impulsive desire. It has no clear basis and it is not related to an overall way of life.

> *As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children will avail them in any way against God. It is they who are destined for the fire, where they will abide. Whatever they spend in this present life is like a biting, icy wind which smites the tilth of people who have wronged themselves, laying it to waste. It is not God Who does them wrong; they wrong themselves.* (Verses 116-17)

This is a moving, vivid scene, full of life, and drawn in the fine Qur'ānic style. Their riches and their children will never protect them against God. They cannot be offered in ransom so that they escape punishment. They are destined for the fire of hell which will become their permanent abode. Whatever they spend of their money, even on causes which they believe to be good, is wasted. Nothing which does not have its foundation in faith can be good. The Qur'ān does not express the ideas it wants to convey in the same way as we would. Instead, it paints a scene full of life.

When we look up, we find a field ready to yield its crops. It is described as a tilth. But suddenly the wind blows. It is a biting, icy wind. Its strong bite devastates all the tilth. The Arabic word used here sounds like a missile thrown with violence. Its onomatopoeia adds to its meaning. In a single moment, all the crops of that field are destroyed, laid to waste.

It is only a moment which changes everything. All this devastation happens before one can even draw one's breath. Nothing is left. This is the Qur'ānic way of describing what the unbelievers spend on what may seem to be good causes and what they count as their blessings of riches and children. All will be laid to waste giving them no enjoyment and no reward. *"It is not God Who does them wrong; they wrong themselves."* It is they who have abandoned the way of life which groups together every single aspect of goodness and righteousness and makes of them a straight, consistent line with a recognised motive and a clear goal. Goodness does not stem from a momentary thought, a vague desire or a sudden impulse.

It is they who have chosen to be in error and to break loose from the protection offered by their bond with God. If all their actions are wasted, including what they may spend on seemingly good causes, and if their tilth is devastated and they can benefit nothing by wealth or children, this is not an injustice inflicted on them by God. It is they who are unjust to themselves by virtue of the choice they have made.

What we have here, then, is a clear statement that no reward is given for any donation to any cause and no value is attached to any work unless it is clearly linked to the way of life based on faith, and unless it is motivated by faith. It is God Who makes this statement. It cannot be contradicted, then, by any man. No one may argue with this statement except those who argue against God's revelation.

We have examined a long passage of this *sūrah,* starting with verse 93, which aims at explaining the nature of deviation in the behaviour of the people of earlier

revelations. It lays bare their twisted arguments and exposes the evil designs they forge in order to undermine the Muslim community. It also issues directives to the Muslim community to discharge its duties paying no heed to the transgressors and their deviant arguments. At the end of this passage, a warning is issued to the Muslim community against establishing an intimate relationship with its natural enemies, the unbelievers, revealing its secrets to them and trusting them with its interests. This warning is presented in the form of a detailed picture which may be seen in every age and in every community. Today, those who claim to be Muslims and to be the people of the Qur'ān have overlooked this Qur'ānic picture. This has rebounded on them; hence the evil and humiliation they suffer today.

The Sort of Friends Unbelievers Make

> *Believers, do not take for your intimate friends men other than your own folk. They will spare no effort to corrupt you. They love to see you in distress. Their hatred has already become apparent by [what they say with] their mouths, but what their hearts conceal is even much worse. We have made revelations plain to you, if you will only use your reason. See for yourselves how it is you who love them and they do not love you. You believe in all revelations. When they meet you they say: "We, too, are believers." But when they find themselves alone, they bite their fingertips with rage against you. Say: 'Perish in your rage. God is fully aware of what is in the hearts [of people]." When good fortune comes your way, it grieves them; and if evil befalls you, they rejoice. If you persevere and fear God, their machinations cannot harm you in any way. God encompasses all that they do.* (Verses 118-20)

The picture so drawn in these three verses vividly delineates, with full details, people's innermost thoughts. It records inner feelings and apparent reactions. It captures every little movement. It is a picture of a certain type of person who can be seen in every age, in every society, professing friendship with the Muslims when the Muslims are strong and victorious. Their claims, however, are belied by their every thought, every feeling and every organ. Muslims may be deceived by them, placing their trust in them when they wish nothing but trouble and confusion for the Muslims and spare no effort to inflict hardships on them. They most determinedly seek to undermine the Muslims, whenever they have a chance to do so, at any moment of day or night.

This remarkable picture drawn by the Qur'ān applies, in the first place, to those followers of earlier religions who lived close to the Muslim community in Madinah. It depicts their strong hatred of Islam and the Muslims, as well as their treachery and evil schemes against the new Muslim community. Nonetheless, some Muslims continued to think well of these enemies of God. Such Muslims were very friendly towards them and even passed them information which should have been treated as

secret, belonging only to the Muslim community. They developed close friendships and intimacy with them, which meant that they grossly underestimated the consequences of their friendly gestures. The Qur'ān, therefore, issues this warning so as to open the eyes of the Muslim community to the reality of the matter and to make it aware of the machinations of its natural enemies. This warning is not limited to any particular period of history. It applies at all times. It deals with a situation which may exist at any time, as it does indeed in our present time.

The Muslims though remain heedless of their Lord's directive not to develop any intimate friendship with anyone other than their own people. All other people are inferior to the Muslims in their way of life, methods and nature. God tells the Muslims not to make any such people their advisors and confidants. Yet the Muslims do not heed this directive. They continue to refer to such people in every matter and situation and look up to them for guidance in every system, method and philosophy.

The Muslims, even nowadays, maintain their friendship with people who reject God and His Messenger. They pay little heed to God's words which apply to them in the same way as they applied to the first Muslim community: *"They love to see you in distress. Their hatred has already become apparent by [what they say with] their mouths, but what their hearts conceal is even much worse."* (Verse 118)

God also says to the Muslims: *"See for yourselves how it is you who love them and they do not love you. You believe in all revelations. When they meet you they say: 'We, too, are believers.' But when they find themselves alone, they bite their fingertips with rage against you."* (Verse 119) God also points out to the Muslim community the true feelings of such people: *"When good fortune comes your way, it grieves them; and if evil befalls you, they rejoice."* (Verse 120)

Time after time we go through bitter experiences but none of these seem to wake us up. Time after time we discover the unbelievers' evil intentions, cleverly masked, but we do not seem to learn our lesson. Yet they make many slips of the tongue which reveal their deep hatred of Islam. This which cannot be dispelled by any measure of friendliness shown to them by the Muslims or by the tolerance Muslims are taught by their faith. But we nevertheless open our hearts to them and treat them as close friends throughout life. Our courtesy, or indeed our spiritual defeat, reaches such proportions that we even avoid mentioning our faith in front of them. We refrain from taking Islam for our way of life and we distort our own history so as to avoid any mention of past conflicts between our forefathers and those enemies who work for our ruin. It is only to be expected then that we receive the punishment of those who disobey God. It is only natural that we find ourselves weak, defenceless and humiliated, suffering the distress which they love to see us in, and weakened by the corruption they spare no effort to spread among us.

God's revelations teach us, as they taught the first Muslim community, how to forestall the plots of the unbelievers, repel the harm they try to cause us and avoid the evil intentions they harbour against us and which they betray by what they say: *"If you persevere and fear God, their machinations cannot harm you in any way. God encompasses all that they do."* (Verse 120) The message is clear. We have to equip ourselves with perseverance and resolve and stand up to their might if they are powerful, and to their machinations and designs if they try to deceive us and sow division in our ranks. It is such perseverance and resolve which will set us on the road to success. The other requirement is to fear God alone and to watch Him alone. It is through this fear of God that our hearts will establish our bond with Him, seeking no other bond and making no ties with anyone except on the basis of God's Divine method. When a heart establishes its bond with God, it will look down upon every power other than His.

This, then, is the way: perseverance and fear of God, coupled with steadfastness and maintenance of the bond with God. Throughout their history, the Muslims have always been able to raise their heads high, achieve victory, repel the machinations of their enemies and achieve supremacy only when they fostered their bond with God alone and implemented His method in their lives. Conversely when the Muslims revive their bonds with their natural enemies who try in public and in private to suppress their faith, and when the Muslims listen to their advice and take friends, assistants and advisors from among them, then they always bring upon themselves defeat and subjugation. The unbelievers gain the upper hand and the Muslims are left humiliated, feeling regret when regret is of no use. History testifies to the fact that God's words remain always true and His law is always operative. Anyone who overlooks God's law, will be made to experience only humiliation and defeat.

Thus this passage ends, bringing the first section of the *sūrah* to its conclusion. The lesson has been driven home. We stand at the point which separates the Muslims from their enemies; a separation which is total, complete and final.

As we bring our own commentary on this passage to an end, we should note that Islam meets all this hostility with tolerance. It simply commands the Muslims not to take such people as their intimate friends. It does not, however, encourage a policy of measure for measure with the unbelievers. It does not require them to return the unbelievers' hate, grudges and evil schemes with similar feelings and attitudes. It seeks only to provide protection for the Muslim community. It simply warns the Muslims of the danger presented by other people.

A Muslim treats all people with the tolerance characteristic of Islam. He is motivated by his love to do good to all mankind. He tries to foil the evil schemes of others against him, but he does not scheme against anyone. He does not harbour grudges although he takes care not to fall victim to other people's grudges. Only

when a Muslim faces aggression which aims to turn him away from his faith and from following and implementing the method of life God has laid down, is he required to fight back and break down all barriers which prevent people from following Divine guidance and implementing the Divine law. His fight is a struggle for the cause of God. It is not a fight in pursuit of revenge. He fights because he loves what is good for mankind, not because he nurses a grudge against those who have caused him harm. He struggles in order to remove the barriers which prevent the goodness of Islam from reaching mankind, not to win power and dominion over others. His aim is to implement the perfect system under which all mankind enjoy justice and peace. He is not after raising any national banner or building any empire.

Many a statement in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* confirm this fact. Furthermore, the history of the first Muslim community proves this.

This method of life is absolutely good. Only the enemies of mankind try to turn them away from it. It is those enemies who must be chased and kicked out of every position of leadership they occupy. This is the duty God imposes on the Muslim community. It once fulfilled it as it should be fulfilled. It is called upon to fulfil it all the time. Struggle under this banner and for the cause of God will continue until the Day of Judgement.

6
Lessons for All Muslim Generations

وَإِذْ غَدَوْتَ مِنْ أَهْلِكَ تُبَوِّئُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ مَقَـٰعِدَ لِلْقِتَالِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢١﴾

Remember when you set out from your home at an early hour to assign the believers to their battle posts. God hears all and knows all. (121)

إِذْ هَمَّت طَّآئِفَتَانِ مِنكُمْ أَن تَفْشَلَا وَٱللَّهُ وَلِيُّهُمَا ۗ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Two of your groups were about to lose heart, but God was their protector. In God shall the believers trust. (122)

وَلَقَدْ نَصَرَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِبَدْرٍ وَأَنتُمْ أَذِلَّةٌ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

God gave you victory at Badr when you were utterly weak. Therefore fear God, that you may have cause to be grateful. (123)

إِذْ تَقُولُ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَلَن يَكْفِيَكُمْ أَن يُمِدَّكُمْ رَبُّكُم بِثَلَـٰثَةِ ءَالَـٰفٍ مِّنَ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةِ مُنزَلِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

You said to the believers: "Is it not enough for you [to know] that your Lord should send down three thousand angels to support you? (124)

بَلَىٰٓ ۚ إِن تَصْبِرُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ وَيَأْتُوكُم مِّن فَوْرِهِمْ هَـٰذَا يُمْدِدْكُمْ رَبُّكُم بِخَمْسَةِ ءَالَـٰفٍ مِّنَ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةِ مُسَوِّمِينَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

"Indeed, He will, if you are patient in adversity and fear God, and if they [the non-believers] suddenly attack you, your Lord will supply you with five thousand angels swooping down." (125)

وَمَا جَعَلَهُ ٱللَّهُ إِلَّا بُشْرَىٰ لَكُمْ وَلِتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُكُم بِهِۦ ۗ وَمَا ٱلنَّصْرُ إِلَّا مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿١٢٦﴾

God made this only as a happy news for you, so that your hearts might take comfort from it. Victory comes only from God, the Mighty, the Wise. (126)

لِيَقْطَعَ طَرَفًا مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَوْ يَكْبِتَهُمْ فَيَنقَلِبُواْ خَآئِبِينَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

It is in order to destroy some of the non-believers, and so abase others that they lose and withdraw. (127)

لَيْسَ لَكَ مِنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ شَيْءٌ أَوْ يَتُوبَ عَلَيْهِمْ أَوْ يُعَذِّبَهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ ظَٰلِمُونَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

You have no say in the matter. [It is for Him] to accept their repentance or punish them. They are wrongdoers. (128)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَغْفِرُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢٩﴾

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; He forgives whom He wills and punishes whom He wills. God is Forgiving and Merciful. (129)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَأْكُلُواْ ٱلرِّبَوٰٓاْ أَضْعَٰفًا مُّضَٰعَفَةً ۖ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

Believers, do not gorge yourselves on usury, doubling [your money] again and again. Have fear of God, so that you may prosper. (130)

وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٣١﴾

Guard yourselves against the fire which has been prepared for the unbelievers; (131)

وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلرَّسُولَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

and obey God and the messenger, that you may be graced with mercy. (132)

۞ وَسَارِعُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

Hasten, all of you, to the achievement of your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the God-fearing, (133)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ فِى ٱلسَّرَّآءِ وَٱلضَّرَّآءِ وَٱلْكَٰظِمِينَ ٱلْغَيْظَ وَٱلْعَافِينَ عَنِ ٱلنَّاسِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and restrain their anger, and forgive their fellow men. God loves the benevolent. (134)

Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins — for who but God can forgive sins? — and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done. (135)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا۟ فَٰحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ فَٱسْتَغْفَرُوا۟ لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَن يَغْفِرُ ٱلذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ وَلَمْ يُصِرُّوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلُوا۟ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣٥﴾

These shall have the reward of forgiveness by their Lord, and gardens underneath which rivers flow, where they shall abide. Excellent is the reward for those who labour [well]. (136)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ جَزَآؤُهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَجَنَّٰتٌ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ وَنِعْمَ أَجْرُ ٱلْعَٰمِلِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

Overview

From the battlefield of words and ideas and concepts the *sūrah* turns now to that of armed combat: the Battle of Uĥud.

Uĥud was not, however, solely an armed confrontation; it was rather a struggle within the Muslim conscience. Its scope encompassed the whole gamut of human behaviour, feelings, emotions, aspirations, instincts and limitations. The Qur'ān was there to coach the human soul in the most caring and gentle way, and in a manner that is more comprehensive and effective than any forceful confrontation.

First came the victory, and then the setback. The sweeter and greater triumph, however, was still to come. It was the triumph of enlightenment and of a clarity of understanding the facts as the Qur'ān lays them down. A triumph of having those facts established as convictions. Muslim hearts were put to the test and purified, their ranks were set apart and the whole community proceeded with clearer concepts, more definite values, and stronger feelings than before. Furthermore, the hypocrites were largely set apart. In what ensued, the characteristics of hypocrisy and sincerity, as manifested in feelings, words, behaviour and actions, became much clearer, as did the obligations of faith and the responsibilities attendant on it. The battle clearly defined the preparations required of the Muslims in knowledge, devotion, organisation, compliance and total dependence on God Almighty, every step of the way. Everything was and is up to Him alone, in times of victory as in times of defeat, in life as in death.

The unexpected defeat suffered by the Muslim community in battle, however, was immeasurably less crucial than the Qur'ānic guidelines and recommendations that followed it. The Muslims, at that time, were in desperate need of such guidance; they needed it a thousand times more than they needed a military victory or the spoils of war. The benefits of that result were even more important and enduring for later Muslim generations. In short, there was a supreme Divine purpose behind the defeat suffered by the Muslims. As far as we can ascertain from its outward natural causes, what happened conforms to the normal pattern of things. The Muslims had, in essence, the great privilege of learning from their experience, of gaining more enlightenment and maturity, and of cleansing their ranks and reorganising and coordinating their plans. The whole experience has proved immensely valuable for later Muslim generations as well.

As soon as the battle on the ground was over, the Qur'ān moved to a wider arena, the human soul and the whole life of the Muslim community. It goes on to mould the community according to God's will, knowledge and purpose. What God designed for the Muslim community was achieved and it was all for their good, despite the hardships, the travails and the trials and tribulations they experienced.

When discussing the aftermath of the Battle of Uĥud, the Qur'ān combines in a remarkable way its review of the events, portrayal of the scenes of conflict, with its pointed commentary and specific directives. These emanate from the events themselves, and they advance specific exhortations and prescriptions for purifying souls, clarifying concepts and freeing hearts and minds from the negative and dark effects of desire, greed, hatred, guilt, negligence, and coveted aspirations.

What is even more interesting is how, while reviewing a military confrontation, the *sūrah* goes on to discuss the evils of usury and the merits of consultation and collective decision-making, or *shūrā,* despite the fact that at Uĥud it led to a disappointing outcome. Furthermore, the *sūrah* deals in a vigorous and thorough style with a wide range of human behaviour.

This richness, vitality and comprehensiveness come as no surprise to those who are aware of the Divine method. In the dynamics of Islam, an armed confrontation is not merely a clash of artillery, cavalrymen and fighters, nor does it involve pure military planning alone. Rather, such a confrontation cannot be isolated from the greater struggle that takes place inside human consciousness and in the social organisation of the Muslim community. The physical battle is closely linked to the purity and dedication of the human conscience and its freedom from the shackles that darken its vision or prevent it from turning to God Almighty. Likewise, it is firmly linked to the foundations and structure on which the life of the Muslim community is organised, in accordance with God's straight and sound order. The

Divine way of life is built on mutual consultation in all aspects of life, not only in matters of state and governance. It is based on a system of cooperation rather than usury, and the two can never be part of the same structure.

The Qur'ān was addressing a Muslim community in the wake of a battle which, as we have already pointed out, went far beyond a simple armed expedition. It was a battle of wider extent and implication, for individuals as well as for life as a whole. This is the reason for raising in this context subjects such as the condemnation of usury, giving charitably at times of prosperity and need, obedience to God as a condition for His mercy and generosity, the restraint of anger, kindness and the purification from sin through appealing to God for forgiveness, and repentance as a condition for gaining God's pleasure and goodwill. The *sūrah* also talks of God's mercy as reflected in the benevolence of the Prophet Muĥammad and his kindness towards others. Towards the end of the review, the *sūrah* establishes the principle of mutual consultation, or *shūrā,* as necessary even at the most difficult of times; it stresses honesty and sacrifice and warns against parsimony.

These aspects were all ingredients for raising and preparing the Muslim community for the bigger and wider battle which included armed combat but which was not restricted to it. It remains the battle for the greater prize: overcoming the powers of self-interest, desire, greed and hatred, and establishing values and healthy foundations for the total life of the community.

The object here is to highlight the integrity and the unity of the Islamic faith in dealing with the human individual and all aspects of his behaviour and activity. These should revolve around one fundamental principle: worship of, and submission to, God with sensibility and full consciousness. The *sūrah* draws one's attention to the consistency of God's method in dealing with the totality of the human being in every situation, and to the coherent and final outcome of human activity, and to the influence of every move and every action on that outcome.

The all-ranging advice given here is not altogether removed from the context of the battle. People do not triumph in war until they prevail in emotional, moral and organisational struggles. Those who retreated at Uĥud were misled by Satan as a result of some misdemeanour. We are reminded that those earlier communities whose prophets led them to victory in battles of faith only triumphed because they started their march with seeking God's forgiveness and support and by cleansing their hearts of all wrongdoing. To abandon usury and adopt an equitable financial system is an essential preparation for victory. An equitable society is more likely to prevail than an exploitative one. Suppression of one's anger and forgiving others are essential for victory, because self-control, solidarity and kindness are highly potent forces in a tolerant society.

Another fundamental tenet in this context is recognition of God's will and the attribution of all eventualities to His wish and command, a concept which this *sūrah* defines clearly and decisively. In the meantime, it confirms God's way of basing the effect of people's behaviour on the nature of their activities, whether right or wrong, compliant or rebellious. People are no more than an image of God's will and an instrument of His command which He puts to whatever purpose He chooses.

Last, but not least, the *sūrah* impresses upon the Muslims the fact that victory is not a matter for them to decide. It is up to God's will which is translated through their struggle, for which they will be rewarded. The material fruits of victory are not theirs to reap, nor is victory granted to them for their own special gratification. It is brought about for the sake of higher objectives decided by God Almighty. The same applies to defeat, which is brought about in fulfilment of God's will, pursuant to the performance of the Muslim community and whether they discharged their obligations or not. Defeat comes about to achieve certain purposes, predetermined by God and known only to Him, to test people and purify their ranks, establish facts, values and standards, and in order to reveal God's laws for all to see.

Military, political or economic predominance has no value or weight, according to Islam, unless it is based on the Divine way which requires the exercise of proper control of personal desires and greed and the upholding of the way of life chosen by God for mankind. Victory must be totally for God and His way, and every human effort must be made for the sake of God and His cause. Otherwise, it is a triumph of one godless group over another godless group, with no benefit for mankind or for human life. Real advantage is gained only when the truth, the indivisible truth, of God's way prevails. There is no other truth in this world. But for this truth to prevail it must conquer the human soul and the daily system of human life. This can only be achieved when human beings conquer their own self-interest, desires, greed and prejudice, when they break free from the chains of materialism and seek God's pleasure and put their trust fully in His hand. It happens when people do their utmost to comply with God's command in every aspect of their lives. Only then can a military, economic or political victory be considered a real one, in God's sight; otherwise it is a godless victory that carries no weight or value whatsoever.

Thus, we are able to appreciate the approach of the *sūrah* in its appraisal of the Battle of Uĥud and why it takes the wider view of the human struggle, of which the battlefield represents only one aspect.

A Brief Account of the Battle of Uĥud

Before we go into the Qur'ānic review of the Battle of Uĥud, it is fitting to give a brief account of the events of that battle, as recorded in the biographies of the

Prophet, in order to gain a better understanding of the Qur'ānic appraisal of the battle and of God's approach in educating and nurturing the Muslim community through the Qur'ān.

The Muslims scored a total victory against the non-Muslim Arabs at Badr in the second year of the Islamic calendar, 623 CE. That victory had the makings of a miracle about it. The Quraysh lost its most eminent personalities and its leadership fell to Abū Sufyān, who spared no effort in launching a revenge campaign. The trade caravan carrying a substantial portion of the Quraysh's wealth, which had precipitated the Badr confrontation in the first instance, escaped the fighting and it was that wealth which the Arabs of the Quraysh used to finance the planned retaliation.

Abū Sufyān was able to recruit around three thousand fighters from among the Quraysh and their allies, the Aĥābīsh (Abyssinians), who were accompanied by some of their women so as to deter them from running away. The army left for Madinah in the ninth month, Shawwāl, of the third year of the Muslim calendar, and camped near Mount Uĥud on the outskirts of Madinah.

The Prophet Muĥammad consulted with his people over whether they should meet them outside the city or stay put inside. According to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, in his biography of the Prophet, Muĥammad's own view was to remain in the city and fortify their defences around it; if the Arabs decided to enter, the Muslims could engage them in the streets and the women could give support from the rooftops. He was supported by `Abdullah ibn Ubayy [the chief of the hypocrites], but a large number, mainly young men who did not attend Badr, insisted that they should go and meet the enemy outside Madinah. As this view seemed to prevail, the Prophet stood up and went to `Ā'ishah's room, donned his fighting attire, and emerged again ready to move. By that time the people had changed their mind and decided that they should not force the Prophet to leave the city. Some of them said: "Messenger of God, if you prefer you can stay in Madinah." His reply was: "It does not befit a prophet to take off his fighting attire once he has put it on until God decides the duel between him and his enemies." That was the first lesson the Muslims were to learn: once a collective decision has been arrived at by public consultation, there is no way to go but forward. There is no room for dithering, re-consultation and indecision. Things must be allowed to take their natural course and God will decide the outcome.

Shortly prior to this, the Prophet saw in a dream that his sword was cracked, and saw cows being slaughtered, and that he had put his hand inside a strong shield. He interpreted the crack as someone from his household being hit, the cows as some of his Companions being killed and the shield as the city of Madinah. He was, therefore, aware of the outcome of the confrontation, but decided, nevertheless, to

comply with the consensus arrived at with his Companions. He was also educating his followers through practical experience. Above all, he was submitting to God's will which in his heart he felt happy and contented to do.

The Prophet left the city with a thousand Muslims, leaving Ibn Umm Maktūm in charge of leading the prayer during his absence. When they were half-way between Madinah and Uĥud, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, and around one-third of the Muslim contingent withdrew from the expedition, protesting that the Prophet had not respected his views, and that he listened to the boys, so to speak. `Abdullāh ibn `Amr ibn Ĥarām, the father of Jābir ibn `Abdullāh, went after the retreating company, cursing, scolding, and urging them to rejoin the Muslim fighters. He called to them: "Come and fight for the cause of God or lend support." They replied: "If we knew that you would fight we would not have retreated." Eventually he gave up on them, cursed them and rejoined the Muslim army.

Some of the Anşār, i.e. Muslims from Madinah, asked if they could seek the support of their Jewish allies, but the Prophet refused: the Jews had no part in the confrontation between Islam and the idolaters. When one puts one's trust in God and dedicates one's heart and soul to Him, victory will be granted. The Prophet asked his Companions whether anyone of them could lead them closer to the Quraysh and this some of the Anşār did until the party came down the slope of the Valley of Uĥud with the mountain to their backs. The Prophet asked his Companions not to start the fighting until he had given the order.

The following morning, the Prophet marshalled around 700 men for battle, including 50 cavalrymen and 50 archers under the command of `Abdullāh ibn Jubayr. The Prophet ordered Ibn Jubayr and his men to hold their positions behind the main army and not to leave them no matter what happened, even if "you see birds picking up troops" one by one. He ordered them to repel the Quraysh attackers with their arrows so that they could not attack the Muslims from the rear.

The Prophet put on two layers of body armour and handed the standard over to Mus`ab ibn `Umayr. He placed Al-Zubayr ibn al-`Awwām on one flank and Al-Mundhir ibn `Amr on the other. He surveyed the younger recruits and ordered those he thought were under age to go back. These included `Abdullah ibn `Amr, Usāmah ibn Zaid, Usayd ibn Żahīr, al-Barā' ibn `Āzib, Zaid ibn Arqam, Zaid ibn Thābit, `Urābah ibn Aws, and `Amr ibn Ĥizām. Those he allowed to remain with the troops included Samurah ibn Jundub and Rāfi' ibn Khudayj who were both 15 years of age.

The Quraysh similarly mustered their troops, numbering around 3,000, and including 200 horsemen, with Khālid ibn al-Walīd in charge of the right flank and `Ikrimah ibn Abī Jahl commanding the left one.

The Prophet gave his sword to Abū Dujānah Sammāk ibn Kharshah, a brave

fighter who showed real enthusiasm for battle.

Old Loyalties Totally Disregarded

The first man to come forward from the Quraysh was Abū. `Āmir, known as "the Monk", but whom the Prophet nick-named "the Transgressor". He was a leader of the Aws tribe before Islam but he refused to accept Islam and declared open hostility towards the Prophet. He had left Madinah to join the Quraysh in Makkah with the aim of rallying them against the Muslims. He enticed the Makkans to go to war against the Muslims, promising them the support of his tribe, the Aws, whom he said would follow him as soon as they saw him. He was the first man to step into the fighting arena, introduced himself and called over to his people among the Prophet's army to come over to his side. He was rejected and cursed. Declaring that "some evil" had befallen his people, he went on to fight the Muslims with fanatical zeal.

Abū Dujānah, Ṭalĥah ibn `Ubayd Allah, Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, al-Nađīr ibn Anas, Sa`d ibn al-Rabī`, to mention but a few, showed tremendous courage when the combat started.

In the early part of the day, the Muslims prevailed and 70 of the most valiant of the Quraysh fell. The bulk of the Arab troops were scattered and ran back to where the women were camped. The women lifted their dresses and themselves took flight.

As the Muslim archers saw the non-believers withdrawing, they abandoned their assigned positions which the Prophet had ordered them never to leave. They were shouting: "The booty. The booty." Their commander ordered them back, recalling the Prophet's instructions, but they took no notice. They went after the loot leaving the Uĥud positions undefended.

At that precise point, Khālid ibn al-Walīd led the Makkan cavalry in a pincer movement to occupy the Mount abandoned by the archers, so as to attack the Muslims from the rear. When the fleeing Quraysh men saw Khālid and his troops occupying the high ground, they rallied to join them.

The tables were turned. The Muslims went on the defensive and chaos broke out all over the battlefield. The surprise attack from the Quraysh had thrown the Muslims into disarray; they lost control and panicked. Many Muslims were killed in what ensued and the Makkans were even able to get very close to the Prophet himself who was being defended by a handful of followers. Although they fought back bravely, all were killed. As for the Prophet, he sustained a wound to his face, and a broken lower incisor. His helmet was shattered. A volley of stones was hurled at him by the Makkans, causing him to fall on his side into a camouflaged ditch which Abū `Āmir "the Transgressor" had dug to entrap the Muslims. Two metal

rings from his visor pierced his cheek.

Amid this confusion, someone shouted: "Muĥammad has been killed." Whatever morale the Muslims had left was shattered and they were put to flight. Overcome with despair and exhaustion, they were routed and soundly defeated.

As people moved back, some stayed behind, among them Anas ibn al-Naḍr. He saw `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, among other Muslims from both Makkah and Madinah, looking dejected and despondent. He enquired why they were sitting there. When they replied that it was because Muĥammad had been killed, he said: "What is your life worth after him, then? Get up and die for what he died for." He turned towards the enemy camp and as he passed by Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, he said: "Sa`d, how wonderful is the scent of Paradise. I can smell it behind Mount Uĥud." He fought until he was killed, with some seventy wounds to his body. Only his sister was able to identify him, only by a mark on his finger.

The Prophet, however, was able to make his way back to the Muslims and the first person to recognise him from behind his visor was Ka`b ibn Mālik who shouted at the top of his voice: "Muslims. Hear the good news. Here is the Messenger of God." The Prophet gestured to him with his hand not to say any more, and the Muslims, Abū Bakr, `Umar and Al-Ĥārith ibn al-Ṣimmah among them, flocked to him. He led them towards and up the mountain pass. Then they were seen by Ubayy ibn Khalaf on a horse called al-`Awd which he used to feed in Makkah, saying: "I shall ride this horse to kill Muĥammad." When the Prophet heard this he said, "It is I who will kill him, by God's will." As Ubayy charged towards the Prophet aiming to fulfil his intention, the Prophet took a lance from al-Ĥārith and threw it at Ubayy hitting him in the collar bone, whereupon he fell down like a bull. The Prophet was sure the man would never recover, as he had said, and he did indeed die on the way back to Makkah.

Soon thereafter, Abū Sufyān, the Makkan chief, called from the top of the mountain: "Is Muĥammad among you?" Muĥammad told his Companions not to answer him, and he called again: "Is Ibn Abī Quĥāfah (Abū Bakr) among you?" No one answered. He called a third time: "Is `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb among you?" Having received no answer, he turned to his own people and said: "You need no longer worry about these men." However, `Umar could not restrain himself and called back: "You enemy of God, all the men you mentioned are still alive, and may God give you more bad news." Abū Sufyān said: "There has been mutilation among your dead. I neither ordered it nor did it cause me any anger." This was a reference to what his wife, Hind, had done to the body of Ĥamzah, the Prophet's uncle, after her slave, Waĥshī, had killed him. She cut open his abdomen, pulled out his liver, chewed it and then threw it from her mouth.

Abū Sufyān then called upon the Makkan deity, saying: "Rise and prevail, Hubal." The Prophet urged his people to answer him, but they did not know what to say, and he said: "Say, 'God is higher and more exalted."' Abū Sufyān retorted: "We have al-`Uzzā and you do not." The Prophet said: "Say to him, Allah is our Lord, and you have none." Abū Sufyān said: "Today avenges the day of Badr, and victory in war goes by turns." `Umar answered him, saying: "We are not equal. Our dead go to Paradise, but your dead go to Hell."

When the fighting subsided and the Makkans had departed, the Muslims were nonetheless concerned that their enemies would head for Madinah, take their women and children and loot their possessions. The Prophet, therefore, ordered `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to follow them to see which direction they followed and what their intention was. He said if they dismounted the horses and rode the camels, they would be going to Makkah; otherwise they would be going to Madinah. "By God in whose hand is my life," the Prophet said, "if they go to Madinah I will go after them and fight them inside it." `Alī, however, reported that he had seen them dismount their horses and ride their camels instead. They were moving in the direction of Makkah.

Somewhere along the way disagreement broke out among the Makkans. Some of them argued that they had achieved very little at Uĥud. The Muslim high command remained intact and they could easily regroup. Such contenders urged their people to go back to Madinah to annihilate the Muslims. This news soon reached the Prophet and he called his people to prepare to confront the enemy again, adding: "Only those who fought [on the preceding day] should join us." `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy offered to join the expedition but the Prophet declined his offer. Many Muslims willingly and dutifully prepared themselves to go out to fight again, despite their wounds and their apprehensions. Jābir ibn `Abdullāh requested the Prophet to make an exception in his case and allow him to join the army. He said: "Messenger of God, I love to be with you in every battle, but my father asked me to look after his daughters on the day of Uĥud, and I ask you to let me join you this time." The Prophet granted him permission and led the Muslims out in pursuit of the idolaters of the Quraysh. They went as far as Ĥamrā' al-Asad, about 15 kilometres from Madinah.

A man by the name Ma`bad ibn Abī Ma`bad al-Khuzā`ī, came to see the Prophet who asked him to catch up with Abū Sufyān's army and dissuade them from launching any attack on the Muslims. Ma`bad caught up with Abū Sufyān at al-Rawĥā. Unaware that Ma`bad had converted to Islam, Abū Sufyān asked him: "What news have you?" Ma`bad replied: "Muĥammad has come out with his Companions to pursue you with an army the like of which has not been seen before. Many of them regretted staying behind the first time round." Abū Sufyān said: "So what do you think?" Ma`bad replied: "If you were to order your troops to march now, I would imagine that by the time you have started to move, you will be seeing their horses."

Abū Sufyān said: "By God, we are determined to attack them and wipe them out." Ma`bad answered: "But I advise you against it." At that point Abū Sufyān led his people back towards Makkah.

Abū Sufyān also met with some non-Muslims heading for Madinah and he offered to load their camels with raisins when they returned to Makkah, if they would: "Tell Muĥammad from me that we are set to attack and wipe him and his Companions out." When the Muslims heard the message, they said: "God is all-sufficient for us. He is the best protector." Their resolve still strong, they waited for three more days and once they were certain that the unbelievers were well on their way to Makkah, they returned to Madinah.

Glimpses of Muslim Dedication

This summary by no means covers all aspects of the battle or details all the significant events of that day. As a complement, therefore, let us review some of the more remarkable incidents of that memorable episode.

At the climax of the fighting, following the Muslim archers' desertion of their positions, the encirclement by the idolaters, the cry that "Muĥammad had been killed", and the outbreak of mayhem among the Muslims, `Amr ibn Qamī'ah was one of the unbelievers who managed to get close to the Prophet. In that bewildering state of confusion, a lady called Nusaibah bint Ka`b al-Māziniyyah, also known as Umm `Imārah, was staunchly covering the Prophet. She hit `Amr ibn Qamī'ah several times with her sword, but he was well-protected by his two shields. In return, he hit Nusaibah on her shoulder with his sword, seriously wounding her.

Abū. Dujānah was also shielding the Prophet. Despite the volley of arrows that were hitting his back, he never wavered, all the while leaning over the Prophet.

At one point 'Ṭalĥah ibn 'Ubaid Allah rushed towards the Prophet and was the only one defending him. He took that position until he fell. Ibn Ĥibbān reports that `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, related that her father, Abū Bakr said: "When the Prophet was left on his own at Uĥud, I was the first to go to him. I found a man defending him and said, 'Let it be Ṭalĥah; let it be Ṭalĥah. 'Soon Abū `Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrāĥ came flying like a bird towards me and we both rushed towards the Prophet to find Ṭalĥah having fallen wounded. The Prophet asked us to take care of him. The Prophet was hit by an arrow and two rings of his visor had found their way into his cheek. I went to pull one of them out when Abū `Ubaydah pleaded with me to let him pull it out. He grabbed the ring with his teeth and began to ease it out, taking care not to hurt the Prophet. He was able to pull it out, but his own front tooth came out. Then I went to pull the other ring out of the Prophet's cheek, but Abū `Ubaydah again pleaded with me to allow him to do it. He pulled it out carefully

with his teeth and another of his front teeth fell out. The Prophet all the while urged us to go and help "Ṭalĥah who had been hit in more than ten places."

`Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was cleaning the Prophet's wound with water and Fāṭimah, his wife and one of the Prophet's daughters, was helping him. When she saw the blood oozing out of the wound, she burnt straw and put it on the wound to ensure that the bleeding stopped.

Mālik, father of Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī, was sucking the blood out of the Prophet's wound to clean it. The Prophet urged him to spit it out, but he refused. The Prophet used to point to Mālik and say: "Whoever wants to look at a man from Paradise, let him look at this man."

Muslim reports that, at Uĥud, the Prophet was left alone with seven of his Companions from the Anşār and two from the Quraysh. When his attackers increased their pressure on him, he called: "Who would defend me and go to Paradise?" One by one, the Anşārī men came forward, fought the unbelievers but were themselves killed. Looking at them, the Prophet said: "We have not been fair to our Companions." Then Ṭalĥah fought hard to drive the enemy away from the Prophet, and Abū Dujānah shielded him as we have already mentioned. The Prophet was so exhausted that he was not even able to climb a rock on the mountain until Ṭalĥah squatted to allow him to step over his back. When it was time for Prayer, he led the Muslims in Prayer sitting down.

On that momentous day also, Hanżalah al-Anşārī, nick-named al-Ghasīl, attacked Abū. Sufyān and managed to get a firm grip on him, Shaddād ibn al-Aswad, however, dashed forward and killed Hanżalah. Now when the Muslims were called to go out and fight earlier that day, Hanżalah was still in his wife's arms. He got up immediately without taking the obligatory bath. This means that he was in the state of ceremonial impurity, which required that he should take a bath or a shower. When he was killed the Prophet told his Companions that the angels were washing him. He asked them to find out from his wife why the angels should be doing this, and she explained to them what had happened.

Zaid ibn Thābit related that, at Uĥud, the Prophet dispatched him to seek Sa`d ibn al-Rabī`. He found him in the throes of death, with seventy wounds on his body. He said to him: "Sa`d, the Messenger of God sends his greetings and is enquiring after you." He replied: "Give God's Messenger my greetings and tell him that I can smell the scent of Paradise. Tell my people, the Anşār, that they shall have no excuse with God if the Prophet comes to any harm and any of them is still alive." With these words his soul departed.

A Makkan Muslim passed by one from Madinah bleeding profusely. He said to him: "Do you know that Muĥammad has been killed?" The man replied: "If he has,

then he has fulfilled his mission, and you should fight for your religion."

`Abdullāh ibn `Amr ibn Ĥarām said that, before Uĥud, he saw in a dream Mubashshir ibn `Abd al-Mundhir saying to him: "You will be visiting us within a few days." `Abdullāh asked him where he was, and he replied: "In Paradise, where we do as we like." `Abdullāh then asked: "But were you not killed at Badr?" Mubashshir replied: "Indeed, but I was brought back to life." When `Abdullāh related his dream to the Prophet, he said to him: 'Abū Jābir, it is martyrdom."

Khaythamah, whose son was martyred at Badr, said that he had been eager to go to Badr but had missed it because his son won the draw of lots and went with the Muslim army, fighting at Badr until he fell a martyr. He said that in a dream he had had the previous night he had seen his son, looking extremely handsome, strolling around the trees and rivers of Paradise saying: "Join our company in Paradise. I have found what my Lord promised me to be true." He intimated to the Prophet his burning desire to join his son, even though he was old and frail. He asked the Prophet to pray to God to grant him martyrdom and the company of Said in Paradise. The Prophet prayed for him and he died a martyr at Uĥud.

`Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh was heard that day, praying: "God, I beg of You to let me meet the enemies tomorrow, and let them kill me, cut open my abdomen and cut off my nose and ears, so that when You ask me the reason, I can say, 'For Your sake."'

`Amr ibn al-Jamūĥ was the father of four sons who used to go on military expeditions with the Prophet. Despite his bad limp, he wanted to join the fighting at Uĥud. His sons told him that God had granted him exemption. Hence, he did not have to go. He went to the Prophet to protest: "My sons are preventing me from going out to fight with you. By God, I pray to God that I am martyred and that, with this very limp, I would walk in Paradise." The Prophet told him that God had exempted him from fighting on account of his lameness, but he then turned to his sons and said: "Why should you not let him go out to fight? God may indeed grant him martyrdom." He fought at Uĥud and died a martyr.

In the heat of battle, Ĥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān saw some Muslim fighters going to attack his father, not knowing who he was, and thinking him to be one of the unbelievers. He called out to them that the man was his father but they did not understand what he was saying and they killed him. Ĥudhayfah asked for forgiveness for those Muslims. The Prophet offered to pay his ransom but Ĥudhayfah declined, saying that he would give it as a gift to the Muslims. In this way, the Prophet would think even more highly of Ĥudhayfah from then on.

Describing the fall of Ĥamzah, the Prophet's uncle, at Uĥud, Waĥshī, a slave belonging to Jubayr ibn Mut`im, related that Jubayr offered him his freedom if he were to kill Ĥamzah. Being an Ethiopian, he was skilled in throwing the spear and,

he said, he rarely missed. When the fighting started he went round looking for Ĥamzah until he saw him lashing out with his sword "like an angry camel", nothing barring his way. Waĥshī stalked him, hiding behind trees and rocks, so as to get as near to him as possible. Suddenly, he saw someone else aiming to strike Ĥamzah, but Ĥamzah raised his sword and struck a mighty blow, cutting his head off. Waĥshī said he raised his spear, took aim and hit Ĥamzah in the belly until it came out in between his legs. He staggered towards Waĥshī but collapsed before he could get to him. Waĥshī said that he left him to die before he went to retrieve his spear and return to camp where he sat down, "because he was the only one I wanted to kill, and I only killed him to be set free".

Hind, daughter of `Utbah and wife of Abū. Sufyān, then went and opened Ĥamzah's abdomen, pulled out his liver and began to chew it. When she could not swallow it she spat it out.

When the fighting subsided and the Prophet saw Ĥamzah's body, he stood next to him and, deeply overcome with grief, said: "I shall suffer no greater loss than this one. I have never been so angry as I am at this moment." Then he asked whether Hind had eaten any of Ĥamzah's liver and was told that she had not, and so he said: "God would not take any part of Ĥamzah's body to Hell."

The Prophet ordered that the martyrs of Uĥud be buried where they fell, rather than be taken back to the cemetery in Madinah. Some people had already removed their dead, but when they heard the announcement they took them back to Uĥud and buried them there. The Prophet supervised the burials, with two and three bodies interred in the same grave. He would enquire which of the dead had been more versed in the Qur'ān and he gave that person precedence. `Abdullāh ibn `Amr ibn Ĥarām and `Amr ibn al-Jamūĥ were buried together as they were known to have been very close friends. The Prophet said: "Bury them together; they loved each other when they were alive."

Treatment of the Battle Events in the Qur'ān

These are some glimpses from the battlefield of a confrontation that oscillated between victory and defeat, separated only by a passing disobedience or a fleeting neglect of duty. Uĥud witnessed the highest of the high and the lowest of the low, and saw unique examples of bravery and courage as well as of hypocrisy and defeatism.

The overall picture reflects a lack of cohesion and inconsistency among the Muslims and a state of confusion and haziness in some of their minds. As was God's will, the situation led to a bitter outcome and heavy sacrifices for the Muslims. The most serious of these was the wounding of the Prophet himself, which must have

been extremely painful and distressing for his companions. Thus they paid a heavy price, but they learnt a most profound lesson. God wanted to test their hearts and cleanse their ranks. He also wished to prepare their community for the greater mission of leading humankind and establishing His order on earth in its most perfect but realistic form.

Let us now see how the Qur'ān, in its unique style, tackled the situation. The Qur'ānic text does not relate the events of battle in sequence, but traces what goes on inside the hearts and minds of the participants. Events and incidents are used as material for clarification and guidance.

The aim is not to give a chronological account of what took place, but rather to identify and discern lessons, morals and values that lie beyond the events for the purpose of education and enlightenment. The Qur'ān perceives the emotions and apprehensions that outline the prevailing mood and it introduces the basic Divine laws and principles that relate to it. The events, therefore, become a basis or pivotal points for a wealth of feelings, features, conclusions and inferences around which the whole discourse revolves. The Qur'ān explores the intricacies of the human conscience and human life. This pattern is repeated again and again, eventually providing a full account of events. The narration, in fact, is no more than a vehicle, or a means, to focus the arguments and to understand clearly the effect of those events upon the human conscience. In this way, one finds no difficulty in appreciating what happened, nor experiences any confusion as to its causes or objectives.

It is also clear that the Qur'ānic discussion of the events of the day is much more comprehensive and effective than any simple account of what took place. The discussion has a formidable impact on our hearts and minds, and it is more satisfying to our human needs of learning and understanding and our sense of curiosity. It is also more valuable for the Muslim community, when it comes to facing similar situations, because it presents facts, principles and values that endure beyond the transient events themselves. It carries solid benefits that transcend considerations of time and space.

This eternal wealth of ideals and standards the Qur'ān offers to every heart that is open to faith, anywhere and at all times. Let us now look at the Qur'ānic text in more detail.

Preparation for Battle

> *Remember when you set out from your home at an early hour to assign the believers to their battle posts. God hears all and knows all. Two of your groups were about to lose heart, but God was their protector. In God shall the believers trust.* (Verses 121-2)

This is the opening scene, recalled in all its reality and vigour whilst still fresh and clear in the minds of those being so addressed. The *sūrah,* however, brings into focus other factors that were not visible at the time. First, God's presence and knowledge of all that was going on. The Qur'ān always impresses this fact upon the Muslims so as to reinforce in their hearts a clearer and deeper faith and understanding. It is the major and most fundamental facet of the Islamic system and no one can claim a full understanding of this religion without it being firmly established in both their conscience and their mind.

"Remember when you set out from your home at an early hour to assign the believers to their battle posts. God hears all and knows all." (Verse 121) This is a reference to the Prophet setting out from `Ā'ishah's home, having donned his battle dress, consulted with his Companions and all of them having arrived at the consensus that the Muslims should go and meet the enemy outside Madinah. The Prophet went on to organise the Muslim troops, including the archers, assigning them duties and positions around the battlefield. But the *sūrah* also introduces a new fact: "God hears all and knows all." What a momentous event. God Almighty was witnessing the proceedings. How awesome! God was witnessing the consultation and was aware of what was going on inside the hearts and minds of all those present.

The other dimension, however, is that some Muslim hearts vacillated. This was a result of the treachery perpetrated by the leader of the hypocrites, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl. Enraged by the Prophet's acceptance of the views of his Companions, in preference to his own view, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy broke away with one-third of the Muslim fighting force, refusing to join the expedition. Having said, as the *sūrah puts* it: *"If we know for sure that there will be fighting we will come with you,"* (Verse 167) `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had demonstrated that his heart did not fully accept Islam and that his self-importance was in control of him. Islam demands total dedication and does not tolerate sharing a man's heart with other beliefs.

Two of your groups were about to lose heart, but God was their protector. In God shall the believers trust." (Verse 122) According to authentic reports, the two groups were the tribes of Ĥārithah and Salamah, who were influenced by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's stance. They wavered, struggled with doubt, but, as the *sūrah* affirms, God came to their rescue and gave them heart to stay and fight.

`Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb reported that he heard Jābir ibn `Abdullāh say that this verse referred to his people, adding: "But I am not disconcerted about that because God says, 'God was their protector."' (Related by Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

God reveals here some of people's inner thoughts and feelings, which only they and He know. It is He who steers them away from those negative feelings and gives them the courage to go ahead and fight. The Qur'ān recalls the scene, revives the

emotions, and reassures the Muslims that God heard and knew all that had taken place, that He was with them all the way. It demonstrates to them that God is looking after them and helping them in their moments of weakness, so that they learn from where to seek help and support the next time they face a similar situation. It directs them to the only certain way: *'In God shall the believers trust.* "*In* God alone, and in no one else, should the believers put their trust, for, they shall have no other resort.

Hence, in the very first two verses of this section, two major tenets of Islam are established: "*God hears all and knows all,*" and "*In God shall the believers trust.*" They are presented at the correct moment and in the right context, blending perfectly together in rhythm and in nuance, at the very moment when hearts are receptive and ready to learn and understand. Here, then, we also have a good example of the way the Qur'ān deals with events while they are still live, fresh and relevant. Here, we can also see the difference between the Qur'ānic method of relating and interpreting events and other methods that do not aim to touch the human heart or direct, educate and guide human beings.

A Reminder of Past Victory

The *sūrah* takes up the discussion of the battle in which, though they were close to victory, the Muslims did not prevail. It begins with a reference to the hypocrite `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and his followers, who put their own selfish interests ahead of the interests of the faith. It alludes to the two Muslim groups who almost lost heart and withdrew, and concludes with the archers' desertion of their positions, driven by greed in pursuit of booty. The exemplary conduct of some Muslims on the battlefield did not spare the Muslim camp the final and dismal outcome. This was the result of flaws in their ranks and confusion in their thinking.

Before the *sūrah* goes on to analyse and review the events of Uĥud, however, the Muslims are reminded of their victory at the Battle of Badr. This provides them with the opportunity to compare the two situations and to reflect on the root causes and results of both victory and defeat, as also on their own weaknesses and strengths. They have to realise that victory and defeat are the result of Divine providence, brought about for a specific, predetermined purpose. They have to believe that, after all, everything is in God's hands in all circumstances. The *sūrah* says in this respect:

> *God gave you victory at Badr when you were utterly weak. Therefore fear God, that you may have cause to be grateful. You said to the believers: "Is it not enough for you [to know] that your Lord should send down three thousand angels to support you? Indeed, He will, if you are patient in adversity and fear God, and if they [the non-believers] suddenly attack you, your Lord will supply you with five thousand angels*

> *swooping down. "God made this only as a happy news for you, so that your hearts might take comfort from it. Victory comes only from God, the Mighty, the Wise. It is in order to destroy some of the non-believers, and so abase others that they lose and withdraw. You have no say in the matter. [It is for Him] to accept their repentance or punish them. They are wrongdoers. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; He forgives whom He wills and punishes whom He wills. God is Forgiving and Merciful.* (Verses 123-9)

The victory the Muslims scored at Badr had a hint of miracle about it. There were certainly no conventional reasons behind it, especially when one considers that the two sides were not equally balanced. There were around one thousand men on the side of the idolaters assembled to rescue Abū. Sufyān and his caravan. They were well equipped and strongly motivated by the wish to save their wealth and defend their pride. The Muslims, on the other hand, numbered little over three hundred men who had left Madinah in pursuit of the caravan and with no intention or preparation for fighting. Furthermore, they were very poorly equipped. Back in Madinah, there were still many who had not converted to Islam, some powerful "hypocrites", and Jews awaiting the right moment to strike at the Muslims. The Muslims themselves represented a small island in a vast sea of hostility throughout Arabia. Most of them were new immigrants from Makkah, people who had hardly had time to settle down in their new environment.

The *sūrah* reminds the Muslims of all these facts and explains to them the real reason for their triumph at Badr. *"God gave you victory at Badr when you were utterly weak. Therefore fear God, that you may be grateful."* (Verse 123)

It was God Who brought them victory, and for a purpose shortly to be revealed. They had no other helper or patron, and it is He Whom they should fear and consider. He has the power and authority to grant them victory or leave them to be vanquished. Perhaps if they were to fear God they might learn to thank Him properly and appreciate the favour He bestows on them.

> *After this opening stroke, the sūrah goes on to recall some scenes from Badr itself. "You said to the believers: 'Is it not enough for you [to know] that your Lord should send down three thousand angels to support you? Indeed, He will, if are patient in adversity and fear God, and if they [the non-believers] suddenly attack you, your Lord will supply you with five thousand angels swooping down.'"* (Verses 124-5)

These were the comforting words the Prophet conveyed to the Muslims when they embarked on their expedition to intercept the caravan, not knowing they would be confronting a formidable fighting force. He conveyed to them the good news of God's support to reassure their hearts and give them strength. He also told them the condition on which that support would be given: that they should persevere and rise

to the challenge of the enemy, and fear God and be mindful of Him at all times.

> *Indeed, He will, if you are patient in adversity and fear God, and if they [the non-believers] suddenly attack you, your Lord will supply you with five thousand angels swooping down.* (Verse 125)

Then God imparts the fact that everything happens as a result of His will and wisdom. God is the power behind all events. The angels were dispatched to assist the Muslims and lend them moral as well as material support. Victory is determined by God Almighty and results from His will without intervention from anyone or any other cause or means. "*God made this only as a happy news for you, so that your hearts might take comfort from it. Victory comes only from God, the Mighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 126)

The Qur'ān makes this point very strongly so as not to leave any doubt whatsoever in the minds of the Muslims. All things happen by God's absolute, unrestricted, effective and direct will. Causes and reasons cease to have any effect and become mere tools in the hands of God Who employs and operates them according to His will and command. The Qur'ān emphasises this concept in such a forceful way as to maintain that direct link between the believer and His Lord and to make the believer's heart always conscious of God's limitless, unhampered will.

With these repeated directives and exhortations, the Qur'ān emphasises this important fact in a wonderfully gentle, yet profound and enlightened manner.

The believers were made aware that God alone is the cause of everything. They realised that they were obliged to strive by all means to live up to their commitments. They understood the message and complied with the Divine instructions and thus achieved the most effective balance between the two. This was only achieved over a period of time and after numerous experiences and events, and with constant direction and education, as we see in this *sūrah.*

In this passage, the Qur'ān recalls the scenes at Badr as the Prophet promises the Muslims that God will support them with the angels if they would only fear Him, show patience and live up to the conditions of battle when they meet the idolaters. He then identifies the real power behind that action as God to Whose will everything is subjected and with Whose leave victory is achieved. He is the "Mighty" with the power to achieve victory, and He is the "Wise" Whose will decides that victory.

Then the *sūrah* explains the purpose behind that victory, pointing out that the way God deals with the unbelievers is of no concern to any human being: "*It is in order to destroy some of the non-believers, and so abase others that they lose and withdraw. You have no say in the matter. [It is for Him] to accept their repentance or punish them. They are wrongdoers.*" (Verses 127-8)

Victory is granted by God for a particular purpose. Neither the Prophet nor the Muslim fighters had any say in that purpose or any personal interest in it. Furthermore, they had no part in achieving it, but were the instruments of the Divine will. They are neither the causes behind, nor the makers of victory; they have no claim to it nor can they exploit it. It is the will of God achieved through His servants, with His support for a particular purpose He has predetermined.

"It is in order to destroy some of the non-believers, or so abase others that they lose and withdraw. You have no say in the matter. [It is for Him] to accept their repentance or punish them. They are wrongdoers." God will punish the idolaters by granting the believers victory over them, or by making them fall captive in Muslim hands, or by letting them die without having the privilege of becoming believers. This would be the punishment for their disbelief, their hostility towards the Muslim community, their perpetration of corruption, and their opposition to Islam and its way of life.

That, in any case, is God's judgement, and no one can influence it, not even the Prophet Muĥammad himself. It is His sole, unshared prerogative, as the one God of all creation.

Thus the Muslims, as individuals, have no influence over this victory, its causes or results. They are, therefore, free of all the feelings of arrogance and self-delusion usually associated with military victories. They truly feel that they had no hand in their victory and that it was all up to God's Divine will and power.

The Qur'ān assigns the destiny of all people, believers or unbelievers, to God's will. The fate and future of Islam, and those who accept or reject it are determined by God. The Prophet and his followers can only fulfil their obligations and leave the outcome to God. They will receive their just reward, for their loyalty and the efforts they make in support of God's cause.

But there was another reason for stating the principle: *"You have no say in the matter."* The *sūrah* tells us that some people were wondering: *"Have we any say in the matter?' ...Had we had any say in the matter, we should not have been slaughtered here.'"* (Verse 154) The object is to make it clear to the Muslims that they had nothing to do with bringing about victory or defeat. All they are required to do is obey, comply and act accordingly. The result is entirely up to God and no body else, not even the Prophet Muĥammad. It is of supreme importance that this concept is firmly and clearly established in Muslim hearts and minds.

This reminder of what happened at Badr, and the accompanying admonition, are complemented with a more universal and fundamental truth: the destiny of the whole cosmos is in the hands of God, He forgives and punishes people as He wills. *"To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; He forgives whom He wills and punishes whom He wills. God is Forgiving and Merciful."* (Verse 129)

His will and power are absolute and stem from His absolute possession and control of everything. By virtue of this universal ownership, God has the total and complete right to do as He pleases with people's lives and destinies. There is no injustice or partiality in the way He allots forgiveness and punishment. He decides with care and compassion, equitably and wisely because *"God is Forgiving and Merciful."*

The doors are wide open to God's servants to win His forgiveness and mercy. They should place their trust and confidence in Him, put their destiny in His hands, fulfil their commitments and obligations, and leave everything else to His judgement and His absolute will and power that lie behind every cause and every result.

A Comprehensive Outlook

Before the *sūrah* moves on to refer specifically to the Battle of Uĥud, we have a short passage of seven verses which speak about usury and its transactions, obeying God and His Messenger, spending money in God's cause at times of prosperity and adversity, the Islamic co-operative system as opposed to the evil usurious system, controlling one's anger, forgiving other people's mistakes, praying to God for forgiveness and turning to Him in repentance when a mistake is committed.

These directives are given immediately before the discussion of the military confrontation by way of implicit reference to a basic characteristic of the Islamic faith. Islam is a single and comprehensive system which caters for every aspect of human life and makes every human activity revolve around one essential value, namely, submission to God as represented by worshipping Him alone and dedicating everything in human life to Him. In every sphere of human life, we must first make sure of what God bids us and willingly do His bidding. The fact that these instructions are so grouped together in the *sūrah* is a clear reference to the fact that all aspects of human activity are mutually interdependent, and their interdependence has a considerable effect on the total sum of human activity.

The Islamic system deals with man as a whole entity. It organises the whole life of the Muslim community in a totally comprehensive way which it considers preferable to anything piecemeal. It is in this light that we should view this combination of preparation for a military engagement on the one hand, and the purification of souls and hearts, controlling desires and spreading love and friendliness within the community, on the other. All these aspects have mutual effects on one another. When we discuss them in detail, taking each directive individually we are bound to recognise their essential role in the life of the Muslim community and their bearing on the power and the potentials of that community on the battlefield as in all spheres of life.

Usury: The Way to Inevitable Ruin

> *Believers, do not gorge yourselves on usury, doubling (your money] again and again. Have fear of God, so that you may prosper. Guard yourselves against the Fire which has been prepared for the unbelievers; and obey God and the messenger, that you may be graced with mercy.* (Verses 130-2)

We have discussed the subject of usury in detail in our commentary on verses 275-81 of *sūrah* 2, entitled *al-Baqarah,* or The Cow. Here we will only briefly comment on the subject of multiplication of the principal sum of a loan. Some people in our modern times want to manipulate this verse in order to make lawful what God has forbidden. They say that the prohibition is limited only to excessive usury which leads to the multiplication of the principal amount of money time after time. They further claim that rates of interest of 4, 5, 7 or 9 per cent and similar rates do not lead to any such multiplication. Hence, they argue, they are not included in the prohibition of usury.

Let us begin by stating clearly that the reference to multiples is simply a description of something that was happening in life. It is not a condition for the prohibition to operate. The Qur'ānic statement in *sūrah* 2, The Cow, makes a clear prohibition of all usury. It addresses the believers and bids them "*give up what remains outstanding of usury.*" (2: 278) It applies to all that exceeds the principal amount, without qualification.

Now that we have established this principle, we have a word to say about its description. It is in fact not a description of the usurious transactions which took place in the Arabian peninsula at a particular point in history. It is a description of the horrid system of usury per *se,* regardless of the rate of interest. When a financial system is based on usury it makes the financial cycle revolve around it. We have to remember that usurious transactions are neither single, isolated transactions nor simple ones. They are both repetitive and compounded. When we add the element of time to these two aspects we find that they inevitably lead to the multiplication of the principal amount time after time.

By its very nature, the usury system leads to such multiplication. The description here is not, therefore, limited to transactions known in Arabia at the time of the revelation of this verse. It is characteristic of this system at all times.

This system inevitably leads to the corruption of the moral and psychological life of society inasmuch as it corrupts its financial and political life. It has, therefore, a definite and clear influence on the community and all its members.

As Islam began to mould the Muslim community, it was keen to ensure a pure psychological and moral life for it, as well as a sound and healthy financial and political basis. The effect of these elements on the battles fought by the Muslim community is well known. Hence, the inclusion of the prohibition of usury within the Qur'ānic commentary on the Battle of Uĥud is readily understood in the context of this complete system. This prohibition is also coupled with an order to fear God in the hope of achieving prosperity, and to guard against hell, the fire prepared for the unbelievers. This is again a most fitting comment. No one who fears God and fears the fire prepared for the unbelievers will gorge himself on usury. No one who believes in God and removes himself from the ranks of unbelievers will ever think of making profit through usury. To believe in God is not simply a word we utter; it is a conscientious following of a system which God has devised in order to be a practical translation of our faith. Believing in God is simply the introduction for this implementation and for shaping the life of the community according to Islamic directives and commands.

It is impossible in any case for faith and usury to exist side by side. Wherever usury is adopted as a system the faith of Islam, as a whole, does not exist. There can only be the fire which has been prepared for the unbelievers. Any argument against this is simply futile. The fact that these verses combine the express prohibition of usury with calling on the believers to fear God and guard against the Fire is not a mere coincidence. It is made in order to establish this fact clearly in the minds of Muslims. It is also made in the hope of achieving prosperity through abandoning usury and maintaining fear of God. For prosperity is the natural outcome of fearing God and implementing the Divine method in human life. We have already discussed the catastrophic effects of usury on human society. We have only to remind ourselves of these catastrophic effects in order to recognise the meaning of prosperity in this context, and the fact that it is made conditional on abandoning this hateful system.

The final comment here is given in these words: "... *Obey God and the messenger, that you may be graced with mercy*" This is a general command to obey God and His Messenger which makes mercy conditional on this obedience. As it is given, however, in the form of a comment on the prohibition of usury, it acquires a special significance: God and His Messenger cannot be obeyed in any society which adopts a system of usury. No one who accepts usury in any shape or form is obedient to God and His Messenger. This comment, then, serves as further emphasis to the prohibition.

Moreover, this order is particularly relevant to the events of the battle in which the commands of the Prophet were disobeyed. It re-emphasises this obedience as the means to achieve prosperity and benefit by God's mercy.

A Reward Worth Competing For

> *Hasten, all of you, to the achievement of your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the God-fearing, who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and restrain their anger, and forgive their fellow men. God loves the benevolent.* (Verses 133-4)

The prohibition of usury is stated more comprehensively and in greater detail in the preceding *sūrah al-Baqarah,* or The Cow. In our discussion of those verses in Volume I, we noted that when the *sūrah* states the prohibition of usury, it also speaks highly of voluntary charity since the two represent opposite approaches to social relations within the economic system.

They are the most prominent characteristics of two diametrically opposed systems: the one based on usury the other on the cooperative system. Here again we find that the prohibition of usury is followed by an emphasis on the virtue of voluntary spending at times of prosperity and hardship alike.

These verses make a definitive prohibition of all usury, warn the believers against the Fire which is prepared for the unbelievers and call on them to always fear God in the hope of being granted His mercy and of achieving prosperity. This is immediately followed with an order to hasten to the achievement of God's forgiveness and admission into paradise, which is described as being as vast as the heavens and the earth. We are told that this paradise has been *prepared for the God fearing. "*

The first quality given here of this class of people is that they *"spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship."* They are, then, a class of people which is totally different from those who gorge themselves on usury and multiply their money by no effort of their own. Their other qualities are also defined: *"Hasten, all of you, to the achievement of your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the God fearing, who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and restrain their anger, and forgive their fellow men. God loves the benevolent. Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins — for who but God can forgive sins?"* (Verses 133-5)

The style adopted here describes the fulfilment of these duties in a physical movement representing a race towards a certain goal and for a set prize. The prize is forgiveness by God and admission to heaven. It is there to be won, and the believers are invited to make their race and vie with one another in order to win. The prize is set for those who fear God. These have certain qualities which are outlined in the next two verses: they spend their money at all times for the sole reason of earning God's pleasure. They are, then, consistent in their attitude. They follow the way

which pleases God, unchanged either by prosperity or adversity. When money comes to them in plenty, they are not preoccupied with luxurious living. When they suffer hardship and adversity, their sorrow does not become their major preoccupation. They are conscious of their duty at all times and in all situations. They are free from miserliness and greed. They watch God and fear Him. Man loves money and he is always reluctant to part with his money. Nothing makes him spend his money voluntarily in all situations except a motive far stronger than that of possession and self-interest. That motive is the fear of God. It is a pleasant, profound feeling which works on man's soul so that it becomes free, unfettered by greed and personal desire.

The emphasis laid on this characteristic has particular relevance to the Battle of Uĥud. Reference to spending in the *sūrah* is made several times and in the same way as the repeated condemnation of those who refuse to come forward with their money for the cause of God.

They *"restrain their anger, and forgive their fellow men."* Fearing God also works in this respect, providing similar motives and leaving similar effects. Anger is a human reaction which is normally combined with or followed by a fit of temper. It is both natural and essential to man. However, it can only be overcome through that higher perception made possible by the positive effects of fearing God and the spiritual strength which man achieves through looking up to horizons which are far superior and more sublime than man's own needs and interests.

Restraining anger is only the first stage; it is not sufficient on its own. A person may restrain his anger but harbour a grudge. His outward fury becomes a deeply-seated, inward rancour. Needless to say, anger and fury are preferable to harbouring grudges and rancour. The Qur'ānic verse emphasises that the God-fearing do not allow their anger to become a grudge. They forgive others and do not harbour any ill feelings. When anger is deliberately restrained it becomes a burden, a fire which burns internally sending its smoke over man's conscience in order to blur his vision. Forgiveness, however, ensures a release from that burden. It gives peace of heart and conscience, as well as an easy movement in a more sublime world.

"God loves the benevolent." Those who spend their money at times of prosperity and hardship are benevolent. Similarly, those who do not hesitate to forgive others after having been angered by them are also benevolent. The Qur'ānic verse tells us that God loves all who are benevolent. Use of the term "love" here is significant. Its pleasant, friendly, bright and compassionate shades are in perfect harmony with the pleasant and honourable atmosphere of help and forgiveness.

Because God loves the benevolent and the good turns they do, those who love God also love to be benevolent. They have the best of all motives. The final comment

is, then, not only an inspiring description, it is a statement of fact.

The community which enjoys God's love and, in turn, loves God and in which forgiveness replaces anger and rancour is a strong, brotherly and closely-knit community. We see here how this directive is clearly relevant to both the military battle and to the battle of life.

Man: Saint or Sinner

> *Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins — for who but God can forgive sins? — and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done. These shall have the reward of forgiveness by their Lord, and gardens underneath which rivers flow, where they shall abide. Excellent is the reward for those who labour [well].* (Verses 135-6)

Another quality of the God-fearing is highlighted here. They are those who seek forgiveness whenever they slip into sin and make sure of not knowingly disobeying God's orders. How compassionate this religion is. Before He calls on people to be compassionate to one another, God, limitless is He in His glory, shows them one aspect of His own compassion of which they themselves are the recipients, so that they may learn.

In Islamic terminology, the God-fearing are among the elite of believers. God's compassion and mercy, however, include among them those who remember God after committing a gross indecency or who wrong themselves and pray to Him for forgiveness of their sins. The term "gross indecency" includes the most ghastly of all sins. This religion of ours, however, is so tolerant that it neither considers those who sink to its depth as outcasts, nor deprives them of God's mercy. They are not even given the bottom rank among the believers. Rather, they are elevated to the rank of the elite, the God-fearing, on one condition only. That condition is that they should remember God and pray to Him to forgive their sins, that they should not persist with their wrongdoing, knowing that it is sinful, and that they should not unashamedly boast about the sins they have committed. In other words, they should remain within the framework of servitude to God and ultimate submission to Him. By doing so, they remain entitled to His forgiveness, mercy and bounty.

Islam recognises man's weakness. Man may always succumb to his physical desires which may bring him down to the depths of gross indecency. His lust, ambitions or temptations may cause him to lose-- control and drive him to disobedience of God. Recognising this weakness in man, Islam does not adopt harsh punishments, rejecting a sinner altogether and depriving him of God's mercy when he wrongs himself by committing a gross indecency. In the Islamic view there is

something important to add to his credit which is the fact that the light of faith has not been put out altogether in his soul. His heart is not totally hardened, his relationship with God is still alive and he knows that he is merely a servant who slips and makes mistakes, and that he has a Lord who forgives. This weak, sinful creature, then, remains essentially good. He clings to his bond with God and lie does not sever it. He may, then, slip as many times as his weakness imposes on him. Eventually, he will get there, as long as he holds to his bond with God and keeps the light of faith within him. He must always remember God, pray to Him for forgiveness and acknowledge his submission to Him and refrain from boasting about his sins.

Never does Islam slam the door in the face of a weak sinner leaving him lost in the wilderness. Never does it let him feel permanently rejected, afraid to turn back. On the contrary, it holds for him the prospect of forgiveness. It shows him the way and holds his trembling hand, steadying him and giving him the light he needs to return to his secure refuge. It only requires one thing of him, namely, that his heart and soul are not so hardened so as to make him forget God. As long as he remembers God and keeps alive in his conscience the voice of guidance and maintains in his heart the yearning for God's grace, then light will shine again in his soul and the seed of faith will burst forth with a new plant.

When your misbehaving son who has run away knows that nothing awaits him at home except flogging, he will never return. But if he knows that there is also a tender hand which will pat his shoulder when he apologises for his misdeeds and which excuses him when he asks for pardon, he will certainly come back.

Islam knows that side by side with man's weaknesses and carnal desires there exist strength and sublime aspirations. For this reason, Islam is sympathetic to man in his moment of weakness, places him back on his way to a higher horizon, as long as he remembers God and does not knowingly persist with his wrongdoing. The Prophet says: "He who prays for forgiveness does not persist with his sin, even if he commits it 70 times a day." (Related by Abū Dāwūd and Al-Tirmidhī.) In doing so, Islam does not advocate complacency, nor does it praise the one who frequently slips or who describes sinful actions as beautiful, as those who call themselves "realists" do. It simply overlooks such errors in order to awaken both hope and a sense of shame within man. Forgiveness by God, the only One to forgive sins, does not lead to complacency; it fills the sinner with shame. Only those who persist and pay no heed remain outcasts. Thus, Islam combines its call to man to aspire to a higher horizon with its mercy and compassion, knowing man's weakness and capability. It ensures that the door of hope is always open in front of man as it motivates him to exert his utmost in his aspiration towards the sublime.

What is the reward of those God-fearing people? "*These shall have the reward of forgiveness by their Lord, and gardens underneath which rivers flow, where they shall abide.*

Excellent is the reward for those who labour [well]." (Verse 136)

When people pray for forgiveness of their sins, and spend their money in times of prosperity and hardship, and when they control their anger and forgive others, they do not take a negative attitude. Indeed, they are good workers.

"*Excellent is the reward for those who labour well.*" That reward is forgiveness and Paradise. The work of those people has two aspects: an internal one in their own souls and an external one in practical life. Both are fruitful.

All these characteristics of the God-fearing are relevant to the battle which the *sūrah* discusses. In the same way as the Islamic financial system based on cooperation has its effects on the life of the Muslim community and its bearing on the military battle, so these personal and communal qualities have their bearing on that to which we referred earlier. When individuals triumph over their love of money, their anger and their sin and return to God in repentance praying for His forgiveness and pleasure they only do what is necessary to triumph over their enemies on the battlefield. Their enemies only have that status because they represent niggardliness, caprice, sin and boastfulness. They do not submit themselves or their desires or their lifestyle to God and the Divine Law. It is because of this that enmity rises, battles flare up and strenuous efforts, i.e. *jihād,* are made. There is no other reason for a Muslim to stand in opposition to anyone or to fight him. He only fights for God's sake.

The link is, then, very close between these directives and the commentary on the military battle as well as certain aspects of that battle, such as the disobedience of some Muslims of an express order given by the Prophet, and which stemmed from their keenness to share in the spoils of war. Other pertinent elements include the blind attempt at self-assertion which led to the desertion by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and others. Similarly the weakness of some made them forget that they must leave matters to God and caused them to ask: "*Have we any say in the matter?*" while others said: "*Had we had any say in the matter, we should not have been slaughtered here.*" (Verse 154)

7
A High Price for Heaven

قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ سُنَنٌ فَسِيرُواْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٣٧﴾

Many patterns have passed away before you. Go about the earth and see what was the fate of those who described the truth as lies. (137)

هَـٰذَا بَيَانٌ لِّلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَمَوْعِظَةٌ لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

This is a plain exposition for mankind, as well as a guidance and an admonition for the God-fearing. (138)

وَلَا تَهِنُواْ وَلَا تَحْزَنُواْ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْأَعْلَوْنَ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٩﴾

Do not be faint of heart, and do not grieve; for you shall gain the upper hand if you are truly believers. (139)

إِن يَمْسَسْكُمْ قَرْحٌ فَقَدْ مَسَّ ٱلْقَوْمَ قَرْحٌ مِّثْلُهُۥ ۚ وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَيَّامُ نُدَاوِلُهَا بَيْنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَيَتَّخِذَ مِنكُمْ شُهَدَآءَ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾

If misfortune befalls you, a similar misfortune has befallen other people as well. Such days [of fortune and misfortune], We deal out in turn among men. God wants to mark out those who truly believe and choose from among you such as [with their lives] bear witness to the truth. God does not love the wrongdoers. (140)

وَلِيُمَحِّصَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَيَمْحَقَ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٤١﴾

And God wants to test and prove the believers, and to blot out the unbelievers. (141)

أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَن تَدْخُلُواْ ٱلْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ جَـٰهَدُواْ مِنكُمْ وَيَعْلَمَ ٱلصَّـٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٤٢﴾

Do you reckon that you can enter paradise unless God has identified those among you who strive hard [in His cause], and who are patient in adversity. (142)

وَلَقَدۡ كُنتُمۡ تَمَنَّوۡنَ ٱلۡمَوۡتَ مِن قَبۡلِ أَن تَلۡقَوۡهُ فَقَدۡ رَأَيۡتُمُوهُ وَأَنتُمۡ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿١٤٣﴾

Surely, you used to wish for death before you came face to face with it. Now you have seen it with your own eyes. (143)

وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٞ قَدۡ خَلَتۡ مِن قَبۡلِهِ ٱلرُّسُلُۚ أَفَإِيْن مَّاتَ أَوۡ قُتِلَ ٱنقَلَبۡتُمۡ عَلَىٰٓ أَعۡقَٰبِكُمۡۚ وَمَن يَنقَلِبۡ عَلَىٰ عَقِبَيۡهِ فَلَن يَضُرَّ ٱللَّهَ شَيۡـٔٗاۗ وَسَيَجۡزِي ٱللَّهُ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ﴿١٤٤﴾

Muḥammad is only a messenger: all messengers have passed away before him. If, then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels? He that turns about on his heels will not harm God in any way. God will reward those who are grateful [to Him]. (144)

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفۡسٍ أَن تَمُوتَ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِ كِتَٰبٗا مُّؤَجَّلٗاۗ وَمَن يُرِدۡ ثَوَابَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا نُؤۡتِهِۦ مِنۡهَا وَمَن يُرِدۡ ثَوَابَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ نُؤۡتِهِۦ مِنۡهَاۚ وَسَنَجۡزِي ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ﴿١٤٥﴾

No one can die except by God's leave, at a term appointed. He who desires the reward of this world, We shall give him thereof; and to him who desires the reward of the life to come, We shall give thereof. We shall reward those who are grateful to Us. (145)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن نَّبِيّٖ قَٰتَلَ مَعَهُۥ رِبِّيُّونَ كَثِيرٞ فَمَا وَهَنُواْ لِمَآ أَصَابَهُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا ضَعُفُواْ وَمَا ٱسۡتَكَانُواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُحِبُّ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

Many a Prophet has fought with many devout men alongside him. They never lost heart on account of what they had to suffer in God's cause, and neither did they weaken nor succumb. God loves those who are patient in adversity. (146)

وَمَا كَانَ قَوۡلَهُمۡ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُواْ رَبَّنَا ٱغۡفِرۡ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَإِسۡرَافَنَا فِيٓ أَمۡرِنَا وَثَبِّتۡ أَقۡدَامَنَا وَٱنصُرۡنَا عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٤٧﴾

All that they said was this "Our Lord forgive us our sins and our excesses in our affairs. Make firm our steps, and give us victory over the unbelievers." (147)

فَـَٔاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ثَوَابَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَحُسۡنَ ثَوَابِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿١٤٨﴾

God has granted them the reward of this life and the best reward of the life to come. God loves those who do their duty well. (148)

Overview

This passage comments on the early events of the Battle of Uĥud up to the point at which the victory which was well within the grasp of the Muslim army turned into defeat. As the Qur'ān comments on these events, it seeks to establish certain rules and principles. The events themselves are only a means employed by the Qur'ān to drive the truth home to the Muslims. These comments begin with a reference to an ever-recurring pattern which engulfs those who reject God's message and describe it as a lie. The Muslims are told here that the Quraysh victory in this particular battle is a one-off incident delivering a particular lesson. They are called upon to demonstrate their steadfastness and to feel their superiority through faith. If they have suffered, the idolaters have also suffered in the same battle. What happened to the Muslims is useful in certain ways as it helps distinguish those who are firm in their faith and select from among them martyrs who are ready to sacrifice their lives for their faith. Moreover, the Muslims are brought face to face with death, after they had wished for it. Their promises and wishes are thus put to the test. All this helps the Muslim community acquire the necessary equipment to face its enemies and to bring about the desired result of wiping out unbelievers. In both defeat and victory, the overall goal is served.

In the Battle of Uĥud, the Muslims suffered a misfortune: they were defeated and many of them were killed. Physically and mentally, they endured affliction. Seventy of the Prophet's Companions were killed. The Prophet himself was wounded as were those who defended him. All this shook the believers; they had not expected such a blow after their spectacular victory at Badr. They wondered: "How could this happen to us? How can this turn of events come about when we are Muslims?"

The Qur'ān reminds them here that there are patterns which will eventually come to pass. Muslims are not a special type of men. The laws of nature which apply to human life will continue to operate. Nothing comes about out of the blue. If they examine the laws of nature and understand what rules affect them, they will be able to learn the lessons of all events. They will realise that God's law never fails. Nothing happens in vain. They will also be able to carve out their future way in the light of what has happened in the past. They will not stand idle, relying on the fact that they are Muslims, and expect to have victory without doing what is necessary to achieve it. Foremost among these is obedience to God and to His Messenger.

Unfailing Life Patterns

> *Many patterns have passed away before you. Go about the earth and see what was the fate of those who described the truth as lies. This is a plain exposition for mankind, as*

well as a guidance and an admonition for the God-fearing. (Verses 137-8)

The patterns to which the *sūrah* refers here, and to which it draws the attention of the believers, concern the fate of those who, throughout history, denied God's message and described it as a lie, and the fact that days of fortune and misfortune alternate between people and communities. The patterns identified also test people in order to know whether they are truly believers, and patient in adversity. Another pattern of importance is the fact that victory is always granted to those who are steadfast, while the unbelievers are blotted out. As these corresponding parts are outlined, much encouragement is given to the believers to persevere and remain steadfast. They are consoled for their misfortune, which has not befallen them alone. A similar one has befallen their enemies. They should remember that they have a superior faith and aim to those of their enemies and that they enjoy Divine guidance and have a perfect constitution.

Moreover, ultimate victory will be theirs, while their opponents will be vanquished: *"Many patterns have passed away before you. Go about the earth and see what was the fate of those who described the truth as lies."* (Verse 137) The Qur'ān relates the present to the past in order to point to the future. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān had nothing in their lives, neither experience nor knowledge, prior to Islam, to enable them to have such a wide view of life and its events. Islam indeed gave them a new life and made out of them a nation to lead mankind.

The tribal system in their community could never have enabled them to appreciate the relationship between the life of the people of Arabia, or indeed human life in general, and the laws of nature which govern everything in life. The new concept, Islam, represented a great departure which could not have developed out of their tribal society or their life conditions. It was given to them by their new faith. They were elevated to this standard within a quarter of a century, while their contemporaries could not manage to reach this level for many centuries to come. They could not for many generations recognise that the laws of nature never fail. When they did, however, they overlooked the fact that God's will is free and absolute, and that to Him all matters are referred. This nation of Islam was able to recognise all this and to understand it. That enabled it to appreciate the balance between God's free will and the constant laws of nature. Thus, they conducted their lives on the basis of working within the laws of nature, reassured that God can accomplish what He wills at any time He chooses.

"Many patterns have passed away before you." These have taken place according to rules and systems which are established by God's free will to govern life. What happened at other times will also happen in your own time, according to God's will.

What was applicable to other people is applicable to you as well. "*Go about the earth*", because the earth is a single unity and a stage on which human life is played out. Life is an open book for people of intellect to contemplate. "*Go about the earth and see what was the fate of those who described the truth as lies.*" Their fate is evidenced by what they have left behind and by what we know of their history. The Qur'ān mentions some of these in different places. In some cases, it identifies people, places and times. In other instances, it makes general references which establish a general rule: what happened to those who rejected the truth and described it as a lie in past generations will happen to those who reject the truth today and tomorrow. This reassures the Muslim community in respect to what will ultimately happen, and, on the other hand, it serves as a warning against being too complacent with such people. There were important reasons for providing such reassurance and warning, as we will see in this long passage.

Having established the fact that these rules will continue to operate, the *sūrah* emphasises the need to follow Divine guidance and to learn the lessons of the past: "*This is a plain exposition for mankind, as well as a guidance and an admonition for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 138) The Qur'ān makes an exposition of the truth to all mankind. It elevates people to a height which they could never attain without its guidance. But the God-fearing are the only ones who appreciate its guidance and admonition. A word of truth is not appreciated except by a believing heart which is particularly receptive to guidance. A word of plain admonition can only benefit a heart which fears God. The ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, or between following guidance and going astray is rarely lacking among people. By nature, the truth is self-evident. What people lack is the desire to follow the truth and the ability to prefer its implementation, because these are initiated only by faith and cannot be preserved except with the fear of God. This explains the need for the repeated emphasis in the Qur'ān on the fact that the truth it tells and the guidance, light and admonition it provides are meant only for the believers and the God-fearing. It is these qualities which enable man to make use of this guidance and benefit by its light, regardless of the difficulties one may face. This is indeed the heart of the matter. There are many people who know the truth but who, nevertheless, remain immersed in falsehood either because they yield to temptation and desire or because they fear to share in the hardship which the followers of the truth may have to endure.

A Cycle of Fortune and Misfortune

> *Do not be faint of heart, and do not grieve; for you shall gain the upper hand if you are truly believers. If misfortune befalls you, a similar misfortune has befallen other people as well. Such days [of fortune and misfortune], We deal out in turn among men. God*

> *wants to mark out those who truly believe and choose from among you such as [with their lives] bear witness to the truth. God does not love the wrongdoers.* (Verses 139-40)

Believers must not lose heart, nor should they allow grief to overtake them because of what may happen. They will gain the upper hand, because they have a superior faith. Believers prostrate themselves only to God, while others prostrate before one, or more, of His creatures. This *sūrah* makes it plain to the believers that they are indeed superior and far more exalted than other people. It tells them: You have a superior way of life, because you follow a method established by God while the methods followed by other groups have been devised by His creatures. Moreover, your role is superior, because you have been selected for a position of trust, to convey God's guidance to all mankind. Other people are unaware of this guidance, and have gone astray. Your place on earth is superior, because God has promised you to inherit the earth, while they will sink into oblivion. If you are truly believers, then you are superior. Therefore, you have to demonstrate the strength of your faith by not losing heart and you must not grieve. The rules determined by God make it possible that you may score a victory or suffer a defeat, but the ultimate end after enduring the test and striving hard for God's cause, will be in your favour.

"*If misfortune befalls you, a similar misfortune has befallen other people as well.*" The misfortune which is said to have befallen the Muslims and the fact that a similar one befell those who rejected the truth may be a reference to the Battle of Badr, in which the idolaters suffered a heavy defeat. On the other hand, it may be a reference to the Battle of Uĥud, in which the Muslims were initially close to victory, but were then defeated. What the Muslims suffered was fair reward for their disagreement and disobedience. Moreover, it represents an aspect of how the rules of nature established by God never fail. The disagreement among the rearguard of the Muslim army was the result of their greed. In any campaign of *jihād,* God grants victory to those who strive for His cause, looking for nothing of the petty gains of this world. Another rule of nature which is seen in full operation is the dealing out of fortune and misfortune among people according to their actions and intentions. In this way, true believers are distinguished from hypocrites. Mistakes are identified and the way ahead becomes very clear.

"*If misfortune befalls you, a similar misfortune has befallen other people as well. Such days [of fortune and misfortune] We deal out in turn among men. God wants to mark out those who truly believe.*" (Verse 140) When hardship is followed by prosperity and the latter is followed by another hardship, people's true characters emerge. They reveal how clear their vision is, how much they panic and how patient in adversity they can be, as well as how great their trust in God is and how submissive to His will they are. Thus true believers are distinguished from those who are hypocrites. Their true

hearts are apparent to all. The Muslim camp is strengthened by the fact that those who do not truly belong to it are identified and excluded.

God knows all secrets and He is aware of those who are true believers and those who are not. But the alternation of days of fortune and misfortune does not merely reveal secrets; it also translates faith into action and compels hypocrisy to express itself in practical measures. Hence, it is action that merits reward. God does not hold people to account for what He knows of their position, but He counts their actions for or against them. The cycle of hardship and prosperity is an accurate criterion. Prosperity is as good a test as hardship. Some people may withstand hardship but become complacent when they are tested with ease and prosperity. A true believer is one who remains steadfast in adversity and is not lured away by prosperity. He knows that whatever befalls him of good or evil happens only with God's permission.

In the process of moulding the first Muslim community and preparing it for the role of leadership of mankind, God has tested it with hardship after prosperity, and with a bitter defeat after a spectacular victory. Both have happened according to the laws of nature which never fail. That is because God wants the Muslim community to learn what brings it victory and what causes it defeat. Thus, it becomes more obedient to God and reliant on Him. It becomes better aware of the true nature of its Islamic constitution and way of life and what their implementation requires of it.

A Careful Selection of Martyrs

> *God wants to mark out those who truly believe and choose from among you such as [with their lives] bear witness to the truth. God does not love the wrongdoers. And God wants to test and prove the believers, and to blot out the unbelievers.* (Verses 140-1)

The *sūrah* goes on to reveal to the Muslim community certain aspects of Divine wisdom behind which the events of the Battle of Uĥud took place, and why defeat was suffered by the Muslims after their spectacular victory at Badr. The principle of testing the believers and proving their mettle is strongly emphasised. At the same time God states that He wants to choose from among the believers people who *"with their lives bear witness to the truth."* The Arabic original states that God wants to choose from among the believers "martyrs". It should be remembered that in Arabic the word *"shahīd"* which denotes "martyr" also means "witness".[3]

The way this point is expressed in the Qur'ān is particularly remarkable: *"God*

[3] For rendering the meaning of the Qur'ānic text in English, I have borrowed Muĥammad Asad's translation, which combines both meanings.

wants ... to choose from among you such as [with their lives] bear witness to the truth." God, then, takes martyrs from among those who strive for His cause. Therefore, it is neither a tragedy nor a loss that anyone is chosen to be a martyr. Indeed, it is a matter of honour because the choice is made by God and those martyrs are given, by God, a special position near Him. Moreover, they are selected to bear witness to the truth of God's message to mankind. They give their testimony in a way which cannot be contested by anyone. That testimony is to struggle to establish the truth of the Divine Message in life until they die. They testify that what they have received from God is the truth in which they have believed and to which they have dedicated themselves, and that human life will not be set right unless this truth is implemented. They are so certain of this that they spare no effort in fighting falsehood and establishing the truth, moulding society on the basis of its tenets. Their testimony is their struggle until death. The truthfulness of that testimony is irrefutable.

Every Muslim declares that he "bears witness that there is no deity save God and that Muĥammad is His messenger." However, he is not considered a witness unless he gives credence to his declaration that there is only one God in the universe. This means that he accepts no legislation other than that which comes from God. The most essential characteristic of Godhead is to legislate and the most essential characteristic of worship is to accept and implement God's legislation. This declaration also means that a believer does not receive God's legislation except through Muĥammad (pbuh), since he is God's Messenger. Every person who makes this declaration is required to strive hard in order to make sure that God alone is acknowledged as the only God by all mankind. The practical effect of this is to make the constitution God devised for human life, and which was conveyed to us by Muĥammad (pbuh), the established constitution throughout the world. If the attainment of that goal means that a Muslim should die, he is then a martyr, or a witness, chosen by God to make this testimony and to win this noble position.

This is the proper understanding of the remarkable Qur'ānic statement: *"God wants to ... choose from among you such as [with their lives) bear witness to the truth."* It is also the meaning of the declaration that there is no deity save God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger. It is vastly different from the narrow meaning associated with it in the minds of many people today.

"God does not love the wrongdoers." Wrongdoing or injustice, as often mentioned in the Qur'ān, is synonymous with disbelief and polytheism, since the association of partners with God is the worst form of wrongdoing. In the Qur'ān we read: *"To ascribe partners with God is indeed to do a great wrong." (Luqmān,* 31: 13) Al- Bukhārī and Muslim relate a *ĥadīth* on the authority of Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd in which he states that he asked God's Messenger: "Which is the greatest sin of all?" He answered: "To claim a partner to God when He has created you."

The *sūrah* has already referred to the established pattern which determines the fate of those who describe the truth as lies. Now it states that God does not love the wrongdoers. This is indeed another way of making clear the fate that awaits those who reject the truth and who are not loved by God. The statement that God does not love such people generates in the believers' hearts a feeling of hatred for wrongdoing and wrongdoers. It is also highly appropriate for it to be mentioned here in the context of striving hard for God's cause. A believer undertakes such a struggle to combat everyone and everything that God hates. It is in such a combat that martyrs sacrifice themselves and make their testimony after they have been chosen for the task by none other than God Himself.

The *sūrah* goes on to explain the lessons to be drawn from the events of battle and how these help in educating the Muslim community, purging it from foreign elements and preparing it for its nobler role. In this way it becomes a means which God uses to wipe out unbelievers and a manifestation of His ability to crush those who reject the truth and describe it as lies: "*And God wants to test and prove the believers, and to blot out the unbelievers.*" Proving the quality of people is a harder task than drawing a distinction between them. This is something that is accomplished through working on people's hearts and souls. Its aim is to bring into the open the secret elements of which men's characters are made, in order to throw out any foreign elements. Thus, characters become purged and clear, and accept the truth without hesitation. They suffer no ambiguity or confusion.

It is often the case that man is not fully aware of himself and by what or how his character is influenced. He might not be aware of his strengths and weaknesses, of what has sunk into him and become very difficult to bring out. This process of testing and proving, which God operates through dealing out days of fortune and days of misfortune to people, enables the believers to better know themselves.

A man may think himself dedicated and free of meanness or love of material luxuries. When he is exposed to a practical test, however, and when he faces up to actual events, he may discover that he still has certain traces remaining which make it exceedingly difficult for him to withstand the sort of pressures to which he is exposed. It is far better that he becomes aware of these weaknesses in order to try again to mould his character in such a way which enables him to take in his stride any pressures the advocates of Islam may have to face and to fulfil the duties Islam imposes on its followers.

God Himself supervised the first Muslim community which He had chosen to lead mankind. He wanted them to fulfil a certain purpose on earth. Therefore, He put them to the test at Uĥud so that they could prove themselves and rise to a level which made it possible for them to accomplish what God intended for them.

"And God wants to ... blot out the unbelievers." This is again an established pattern in human life. When the voice of truth is heard loud and purged of all foreign elements, God enables it to blot out falsehood and its advocates.

Wishful Thinking in Contrast with Reality

> *Do you reckon that you can enter paradise unless God has identified those among you who strive hard [in His cause], and who are patient in adversity. Surely, you used to wish for death before you came face to face with it. Now you have seen it with your own eyes.* (Verses 142-3)

These verses start with a rhetorical question, the purpose of which is to correct the concepts formed by Muslims on the patterns established by God for the advocacy of His faith: how victory is achieved and defeat suffered; the importance of action and what reward it merits, etc. The Qur'ān makes it clear that/ the road to heaven is attended by many difficulties and undesirable things. The best equipment for a believer is patience in adversity. This is totally different from hollow wishes and claims which any test may prove to be futile. *"Do you reckon that you can enter paradise unless God has identified those among you who strive hard [in His cause] and who are patient in adversity?"* (Verse 142)

The rhetoric mode is employed in this question so as to make it clear that the whole concept is wrong. It is certainly a mistake for any man to think that it is sufficient for him to only say that he has accepted Islam and be ready to die for it in order to fulfil the duties which are required of him as one of the believers. It is important to remember here that the fulfilment of such duties earns that person the greatest prize of all, namely, admission to heaven. What is needed for the fulfilment of such duties is to go through a practical test of *jihād,* to face up to difficulties and to be patient in adversity.

The phraseology of the Qur'ānic text is particularly significant: *"...unless God has identified those among you who strive hard [in His cause], and who are patient in adversity."* It is not sufficient that believers should strive hard in God's cause. They have to demonstrate their patience and fulfil the continuous and varied tasks imposed on them by their faith. Fighting on the battlefield may be one of the lightest of these tasks which demand patience and prove the strength of faith. There is, in addition, the never-ending, uphill task of maintaining the standards of behaviour commensurate with faith, developing a set of values which are not only based on the principles of faith but are also reflected in one's feelings and attitudes. There is also the need for perseverance which helps people overcome their weaknesses, whether these be within themselves or in others with whom they deal in the course of daily

life. Patience and perseverance have to be demonstrated in a variety of situations, especially when to give up appears to be far more appealing.

Examples of this include when falsehood appears to be victorious, and stronger than the truth; when the way ahead appears to be too long, too hard and full of difficulties; when a moment of relaxation appears to be all that one can care for after a long period of hard struggle. Fighting on the battlefield is no more than one aspect of striving for God's cause, which is the only way to heaven. Certainly, heaven is not won by wishful thinking or by paying lip-service to the requirements of faith. *"Surely, you used to wish for death before you came face to face with it. Now you have seen it with your own eyes."* (Verse 143) Once more, they are put face to face with death, which they already faced on the battlefield. Since they used to wish for death, they should weigh their words against the facts they have seen with their own eyes. They are thus taught how words must reflect practical reality. In this way, they learn the value of words, wishes and pledges. What attains them heaven is the credence they give to their words and the fulfilment of their pledges. In practice, that necessitates hard striving and patience in adversity. When they demonstrate all that in practical life, all their hopes are fulfilled.

There is no doubt that God was able, from the very first moment, to grant His Prophet victory and to establish His message in practical life, without any effort made by the believers. He was indeed able to send down His angels to fight alongside the believers, or without them, and to destroy the idolaters just as He destroyed the peoples of `Ād, Thamūd and those to whom the Prophet Lot was sent. But the question is not one of victory. The crux of the matter is the education and preparation of the Muslim community to assume the role of the leadership of mankind, after having overcome all its weaknesses and desires, and having corrected any deviation resulting from such weaknesses. To exercise mature and responsible leadership, the Muslim community should have leaders who go through stringent preparation. Among the most important qualities needed are serious morality, unshaken support for the truth, patience in adversity, awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in human nature, ability to identify the causes of temptation and deviation and how they can be successfully countered. Other prerequisites include passing the test of prosperity as well as that of hardship and the even more difficult test of hardship after prosperity.

It is through this sort of education that God prepares the Muslim community for the great and highly difficult role of leadership He has assigned to it. It is His will that man, whom He has placed in charge of building life on earth, assumes this role. The process of educating and preparing the Muslim community may take a variety of ways and means as well as incidents and events. Sometimes, the Muslim community is elated by a decisive victory and is required to control its feelings. No

trace of arrogance should be apparent in its attitude. On the contrary, it must always show its humility and gratitude to God. At other times, the Muslim community may experience great hardship and defeat. In this case, it must turn to God acknowledging its weakness if it deviates from the method and way of life God has assigned to it. It must remain acutely aware of its intrinsic strength and how to tap it. When the Muslim community suffers a bitter defeat, it must continue to feel itself superior to the forces of falsehood, because it takes its stand in support of the absolute truth. It tries hard to identify its weaknesses in order to remedy its position in preparation for the next round. In either case, of victory or defeat, the Muslim community tries to enhance its strength, realising that the rules of nature set by God will continue to operate and will never fail.

All this was part of what the first Muslim community learnt from the Battle of Uĥud. The Qur'ān presents the same in the clearest of terms before the Muslim community. The lesson, however, continues to apply to every Muslim community in every generation.

Muĥammad: Man, Prophet and Messenger

> *Muĥammad is only a messenger: all messengers have passed away before him. If then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels? He that turns about on his heels will not harm God in any way. God will reward those who are grateful [to Him].* (Verse 144)

This verse refers to a particular incident which took place during the Battle of Uĥud. The Prophet had stationed a detachment of soldiers on top of the mountain behind the Muslim army. They were the rearguard, equipped with bows and arrows to repel any attack launched against the Muslim army from behind. When the battle appeared to be all over, most of them left their positions, against the express orders of the Prophet. A battalion of the enemy forces were thus able to go round the mountain and attack the Muslims from the rear. The Prophet himself was injured: his front teeth were broken, and his face was bleeding.

The situation became chaotic and the Muslim army was in disarray. At this moment, someone cried out: "Muĥammad is killed!" Such a great shock was this to the Muslims, that many of them turned round to return to Madinah. They went up into the mountain, shattered, defeated, in despair. However, the Prophet himself, with a small group of his Companions, stood firm. He called to his Companions as they began to retreat. When they heard him, they began to rally. God helped them regain their moral strength and allowed them to be overtaken by a momentary slumber so as to give them strength, security and reassurance, as will be explained

later.

This sequence of events is used in the Qur'ān to drive home to the Muslims certain fundamental principles about life and death and the history of Divine faith: *"Muĥammad is only a messenger: all messengers have passed away before him. If then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels?"* Muĥammad (pbuh) is simply a messenger, having been preceded by all other messengers. He will die as other messengers have died before him. This is an elementary fact. How is it then that the Muslims show themselves to be oblivious of this fact when it stared them in the face during the battle?

Muĥammad (pbuh) is a messenger of God, entrusted with the task of conveying His message. God is Eternal and His word never dies. Believers should never turn on their heels if the messenger who has come to convey God's word to them dies or is killed. This is also an elementary fact which the Muslims, in their great confusion, overlooked.

Human beings die and perish, while the faith survives. The way of life God has designed for mankind has its own entity; it is independent of those who convey it to people, be they messengers or believers. Every Muslim loves God's Messenger (pbuh). His Companions loved him as no one had ever been loved before. They were ready to sacrifice their lives in order to spare him the slightest pain. One of his Companions, Abū Dujānah, stood as a shield to protect the Prophet, was hit by numerous arrows in the back and yet he never stirred. Only nine of his Companions were close to him when he was targeted by a determined attack by the unbelievers, and those nine defended him most courageously, until they were all killed. Many others in every generation and in all places continue to love him with all their hearts. Every Muslim who loves Muĥammad (pbuh) in such a way is required to distinguish between the Prophet as a person, and the faith he has conveyed to mankind and left intact for all people to accept and implement. It derives its continuity from God, Who never dies.

The message is much older than its advocates: *"Muĥammad is only a messenger: all messengers have passed away before him."* They all preached the same message, the roots of which go back to the beginning of history. It starts with the beginning of human life, providing mankind with guidance and peace from the very first day of its existence.

The message is also greater than its advocates and lasts longer. Many of its advocates have come and gone, while it continues to serve as guidance to succeeding generations. Its followers maintain their link with God Almighty, its originator, Who has sent messengers to convey it to mankind. He is Everlasting and believers address their prayers to Him. None of them may turn about on their heels or turn their back

on God's guidance. This explains the stern warning implicit in this verse: *"If then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels? He that turns about on his heels will not harm God in any way. God will reward those who are grateful [to Him]."* (Verse 144)

The vivid description of turning back is here to be noted: *"Will you turn about on your heels?"* The physical movement depicted here brings alive the meaning of abandoning faith as if we see it with our own eyes. The verse does not refer to the physical turning away as a result of defeat in battle. It is more concerned with the psychological turning about when a voice cried out that Muĥammad was killed. Some Muslims felt that there was no point in continuing the fight against the idolaters, since the death of Muĥammad (pbuh) signalled the end of this faith and the end of combat against idolatry. This psychological effect is delineated in terms of turning about on one's heels, which was a movement that actually took place during the battle. It is this very attitude which Al-Nađīr ibn Anas, a Companion of the Prophet, warned his fellow Muslims against when he saw that many of them had lain down their arms. His retort to their excuse that Muĥammad was dead, was: "What use is life to you after he has died? Get up and die for the cause God's Messenger (pbuh) has sacrificed his life for."

"He that turns about on his heels will not harm God in any way." It is indeed he who is the loser. He who deviates from the path of faith harms himself and causes God no harm. God is in no need of mankind or their worship. It is out of His grace that He has given His servants this constitution for their own good and happiness. Everyone who turns his back on it suffers from confusion and misery. Everything is thus set on the wrong footing. Life itself becomes deviant. People suffer the evil consequences of turning away from the only constitution which provides harmony in life and which achieves harmony between man, his nature and the universe around him.

"God will reward those who are grateful to Him." They know the great bounty God has given His servants by establishing for them this code of living. They show their gratitude to Him by following this code and praising Him. They reap the benefits of this way of life and achieve total happiness. This is good reward for their gratitude. But they also have an increase of happiness with the reward they receive from God in the hereafter. That is a much greater reward and, unlike everything enjoyed in this world, it is everlasting.

"God will reward those who are grateful to Him." Those who appreciate God's bounty and show their gratitude to Him by following His guidance and by glorifying Him find happiness in their lives. Thus are they rewarded for their gratitude, and they will receive an even better reward in the life to come.

Apparently God wanted to wean the Companions of the Prophet from their over-enthusiastic attachment to him in person while he was alive among them. Their

attachment should be, in the first place, with Islam itself. Their covenants should be made with God directly and they should be made to feel that they are responsible to Him directly. Thus they would feel that their responsibilities continue after the death of the Prophet. Perhaps God also wanted to prepare the Muslim community for the inevitable shock which they were bound to receive when the Prophet died. He certainly knew that his death would be a stunning blow to them. Hence, if they were made to feel that their direct relationship was with Him and His message then they would be able to overcome their shock.

When the Prophet actually died his Companions were stunned, so much so that `Umar drew his sword and threatened anyone who claimed that Muĥammad was dead. Only Abū Bakr, the best example of a true believer in God, was able to take the event in its proper perspective. He read out this verse to the Muslims and it was enough to make them realise that it was only a natural event. With this they were able to turn to God. The Qur'ān in this verse touches on man's fear of death. It dispels that fear by stating the ever-correct principle of life and death and also of what comes after life.

Death and Reward

> *No one can die except by God's leave, at a term appointed. He who desires the reward of this world, We shall give him thereof and to him who desires the reward of the life to come, We shall give thereof. We shall reward those who are grateful to Us.* (Verse 145)

Every human soul, then, lives up to its appointed time. No one dies before his time. Neither fear, nor the desire to live longer can postpone anyone's appointed time. Courage and adventure, on the other hand, will not shorten one's life. As this idea sinks into the minds of the believers they simply do not think of death as they go about fulfilling their responsibilities and carrying out their religious duties. This is the reason why people, throughout the ages, have seen that those who believe in God are not encumbered by their desire to prolong their time on earth or by their fear of what lies ahead. They simply rely on God as they carry out their duties with patience and reassurance.

Since everybody dies at his or her appointed time then everyone should think of the life to come and should work hard in order to achieve the greater happiness of that life: "*He who desires the reward of this world, We shall give him thereof and to him who desires the reward of the life to come, We shall give thereof*" (Verse 145)

The gulf between the two types of life is as wide as the gulf between the concerns of those who desire the reward of either one or the other. The length of one's life on

this earth is not affected by the choice one makes. So, he who makes this life his ultimate goal and seeks only its rewards leads a life which is not greatly different from the life of animals, before he dies at the appointed time. On the other hand, he who looks up to the wider horizon leads the life of a true human being whom God has ennobled, to whom He has assigned the mission of building a happy human life on earth. Such a person also dies at his appointed time.

"We shall reward those who are grateful to Us." Those who appreciate how God has ennobled man and lift themselves above the standard of animals and show their gratitude to God will certainly be richly rewarded by Him.

This is how the Qur'ān views the essence of life and death, and the end of human beings as they choose for themselves and determine their preoccupations which can be either petty like those of worms or great like those of man. In this way, the Qur'ān turns our attention from fear of death and worry about duties because we have no say with regard to our life and death. It thus enables us to concentrate on what is of much better use, namely, the life to come. Whichever choice he makes, he will receive from God the reward most appropriate for that choice.

Lessons from the History of the Prophets

God then gives the Muslims an example drawn from the history of fellow believers. The procession of faith, composed of believers, dates back to the very beginning of time. There were people who were true to their word, firm believers who fought alongside the prophets sent to them and they never weakened in times of adversity. As they stared death in the face, they demonstrated their awareness of their true position when they fought in God's cause and lived in accordance with the teachings of their faith. They said no more than a prayer to God to forgive them. They enlarged their slips in behaviour and attitude, so as to describe them as "excesses". They also prayed to God to make their steps firm and to grant them victory. This earned for them the reward of this life and that of the life to come, because they combined the right attitude in battle and the right attitude in their prayers. Thus, they have provided an example which God cites here for the Muslims.

> *Many a Prophet has fought with many devout men alongside him. They never lost heart on account of what they had to suffer in God's cause, and neither did they weaken nor succumb. God loves those who are patient in adversity. All that they said was this: "Our Lord! Forgive us our sins and our excesses in our affairs. Make firm our steps, and give us victory over the unbelievers." God has granted them the reward of this life and the best reward of the life to come. God loves those who do their duty well.* (Verses 146-8)

The Battle of Uĥud was the first major defeat suffered by the Muslims. They had earlier been granted victory at Badr when their forces were far inferior to those of their enemy. Thus, they may have felt that victory in every encounter was part of the laws of nature. The shock dealt them at Uĥud was a hard and disturbing trial. This may be the reason for the long Qur'ānic comments on this particular battle. The Muslims are encouraged at one point, and their notions are corrected at another; at times, certain principles are clearly stated, and at others, examples are cited to provide proper education for them and to correct any misconceptions they may have. They had to be well prepared for their long and arduous struggle in discharging the duties imposed on them as advocates of God's message.

The example which the *sūrah* gives here is a general one, which neither mentions any prophet by name nor specifies a particular nation or people. The outcome of this is that the Muslims feel themselves to belong to the advocates of true faith throughout history. They learn the proper manners which believers should adopt. Trials are shown to them as something to be naturally expected by the advocates of any message and any faith. Ties are established between them and the followers of earlier prophets so that they appreciate that believers in any generation are closely related to their predecessors in faith. They learn that the cause of faith is one which has been present throughout history and that they are only one battalion in a great army of the faithful: *"Many a Prophet has fought with many devout men alongside him. They never lost heart on account of what they had to suffer in God's cause, and neither did they weaken nor succumb."* (Verse 146) There were many prophets who mobilised large groups of fighters who withstood all manner of hardship and suffering. They never yielded or gave up their fight. Such determination is characteristic of believers who know that they have to fight for their faith. *"God loves those who are patient in adversity."* They persevere and show no weakness. Their determination remains strong. When these are described as being loved by God, the expression has its particular effect on the present generation of believers. It helps heal their wounds and it is accepted as ample and generous compensation It for every hardship.

The description so far shows only what is apparent of the attitude of those believers in situations of difficulty and trial. Now the *sūrah* goes on to describe their inner feelings. It shows them as observing all standards of propriety when they address God. The testing times, the difficulties and the dangers do not make the believers oblivious of their need to turn to God. As they do, their first request is not victory, as would have been expected, but forgiveness for their errors and excesses. Prayer for increased strength and victory over the enemy comes second: *"All that they said was this: 'Our Lord! Forgive us our sins and our excesses in our affairs. Make firm our steps, and give us victory over the unbelievers.'"* (Verse 147) They do not pray for any great bounty or reward. They have not implored God to give them the reward of either this life or the life to come. Their humility when they turn to God and address

Him is too great to allow them to do this, and despite the fact that they are fighting for His cause. They pray only that He will grant them forgiveness of their sins, make firm their steps, and grant them victory over the unbelievers.

It is very important to realise here that they do not pray for victory for themselves, but rather for the defeat their opponents and the frustration of the unbelievers. This is the sort of good manners which befit believers when they address God, the Almighty.

To these very people who have asked nothing for themselves, God has given everything, out of His grace. He has given them all that is desired and coveted by those who seek the riches of this world. He has also given them everything that those who prefer the reward of the life to come yearn for: *"God has granted them the reward of this life and the best reward of the life to come."* (Verse 148) He further acknowledges that they have done well. Their good manners are combined with a very effective way of fulfilling their duty of *jihād,* exerting every effort for the cause of God. He, therefore, declares that He loves them. His love is greater than all reward and superior to all bounty: *"God loves those who do their duty well."* (Verse 148)

Within the comments given in the *sūrah* on the Battle of Uĥud, this passage establishes a number of principles which are central to the Islamic concept. It plays an important role in educating the Muslim community and provides a good example which must be understood by every generation of Muslims.

8
Forgiveness of a Disastrous Error

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِن تُطِيعُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يَرُدُّوكُمۡ عَلَىٰٓ أَعۡقَٰبِكُمۡ فَتَنقَلِبُواْ خَٰسِرِينَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

Believers, if you obey those who have rejected the faith, they will cause you to turn back on your heels, and you will be the losers. (149)

بَلِ ٱللَّهُ مَوۡلَىٰكُمۡۖ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلنَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

Indeed, God alone is your Lord Supreme and He is the best of all who bring succour. (150)

سَنُلۡقِي فِي قُلُوبِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ ٱلرُّعۡبَ بِمَآ أَشۡرَكُواْ بِٱللَّهِ مَا لَمۡ يُنَزِّلۡ بِهِۦ سُلۡطَٰنٗاۖ وَمَأۡوَىٰهُمُ ٱلنَّارُۚ وَبِئۡسَ مَثۡوَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾

We shall strike terror in the hearts of unbelievers because they associate partners with God — [something] for which He has never granted any warrant. Their abode is the fire, and evil indeed is the dwelling place of the wrongdoers. (151)

وَلَقَدۡ صَدَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَعۡدَهُۥٓ إِذۡ تَحُسُّونَهُم بِإِذۡنِهِۦۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فَشِلۡتُمۡ وَتَنَٰزَعۡتُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَمۡرِ وَعَصَيۡتُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ مَآ أَرَىٰكُم مَّا تُحِبُّونَۚ مِنكُم مَّن يُرِيدُ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَمِنكُم مَّن يُرِيدُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةَۚ ثُمَّ صَرَفَكُمۡ عَنۡهُمۡ لِيَبۡتَلِيَكُمۡۖ وَلَقَدۡ عَفَا عَنكُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو فَضۡلٍ عَلَى ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

God fulfilled to you His promise when, by His leave, you were about to destroy them. But then you lost heart and disagreed with one another concerning [the Prophet's command] and disobeyed after God had brought you within view of that for which you were longing. Some of you cared only for this world and some cared for the life to come. Then He turned you away from them so that He may put you to a test. But now He has forgiven you, for God is gracious to the

believers. (152)

۞ إِذْ تُصْعِدُونَ وَلَا تَلْوُۥنَ عَلَىٰٓ أَحَدٍ وَٱلرَّسُولُ يَدْعُوكُمْ فِىٓ أُخْرَىٰكُمْ فَأَثَٰبَكُمْ غَمًّۢا بِغَمٍّ لِّكَيْلَا تَحْزَنُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا مَآ أَصَٰبَكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

[Remember] when you ran away, up into the mountain, paying no heed to anyone, while the Messenger was at your rear calling out to you. Therefore, He rewarded you with sorrow after sorrow so that you may not grieve over what has escaped you, nor over what had befallen you. God is aware of all that you do. (153)

ثُمَّ أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكُم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ ٱلْغَمِّ أَمَنَةً نُّعَاسًا يَغْشَىٰ طَآئِفَةً مِّنكُمْ ۖ وَطَآئِفَةٌ قَدْ أَهَمَّتْهُمْ أَنفُسُهُمْ يَظُنُّونَ بِٱللَّهِ غَيْرَ ٱلْحَقِّ ظَنَّ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ ۖ يَقُولُونَ هَل لَّنَا مِنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ مِن شَىْءٍ ۗ قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْأَمْرَ كُلَّهُۥ لِلَّهِ ۗ يُخْفُونَ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِم مَّا لَا يُبْدُونَ لَكَ ۖ يَقُولُونَ لَوْ كَانَ لَنَا مِنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ شَىْءٌ مَّا قُتِلْنَا هَٰهُنَا ۗ قُل لَّوْ كُنتُمْ فِى بُيُوتِكُمْ لَبَرَزَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقَتْلُ إِلَىٰ مَضَاجِعِهِمْ ۖ وَلِيَبْتَلِىَ ٱللَّهُ مَا فِى صُدُورِكُمْ وَلِيُمَحِّصَ مَا فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١٥٤﴾

Then, after sorrow, He let peace fall upon you, in the shape of a slumber which overtook some of you, while others, who cared mainly for themselves, entertained wrong thoughts about God — thoughts of pagan ignorance. They ask: "Have we any say in the matter?" Say: "All power of decision rests with God." They conceal in their minds what they do not disclose to you. They say: "Had we had any say in the matter, we should not have been slaughtered here." Say: "Had you stayed in your homes, those of you who were destined to be killed would have gone to their deathbeds." For it was God's will to put to a test all that you entertain in you minds and to render pure what you may have in your hearts, God is fully aware of what is in people's bosoms. (154)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا۟ مِنكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْتَقَى ٱلْجَمْعَانِ إِنَّمَا ٱسْتَزَلَّهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ بِبَعْضِ مَا كَسَبُوا۟ ۖ وَلَقَدْ عَفَا ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ

As for those of you who turned away on the day when the two hosts met in battle, Satan caused them to slip only in consequence of something that they themselves had done. But now God has pardoned them. Indeed, God is Much-forgiving,

Forbearing. (155)	غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥٥﴾
Believers, be not like those who disbelieve and say of their brethren, when they travel on earth or go forth to war, "Had they stayed with us they would not have died, nor would they have been killed," so that God places a source of despair in their hearts. It is God alone Who grants life and causes death. God sees all that you do. (156)	يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَكُونُواْ كَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَقَالُواْ لِإِخۡوَٰنِهِمۡ إِذَا ضَرَبُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَوۡ كَانُواْ غُزًّى لَّوۡ كَانُواْ عِندَنَا مَا مَاتُواْ وَمَا قُتِلُواْ لِيَجۡعَلَ ٱللَّهُ ذَٰلِكَ حَسۡرَةً فِي قُلُوبِهِمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُحۡيِۦ وَيُمِيتُۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ ﴿١٥٦﴾
If you should be slain or die in God's cause, surely forgiveness by God and His grace are better than all the riches they amass. (157)	وَلَئِن قُتِلۡتُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ أَوۡ مُتُّمۡ لَمَغۡفِرَةٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرَحۡمَةٌ خَيۡرٞ مِّمَّا يَجۡمَعُونَ ﴿١٥٧﴾
If you should die or be slain, it is to God that you shall be gathered. (158)	وَلَئِن مُّتُّمۡ أَوۡ قُتِلۡتُمۡ لَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُحۡشَرُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

Obedience Bringing Utter Loss

> *Believers, if you obey those who have rejected the faith, they will cause you to turn back on your heels, and you will be the losers. Indeed, God alone is your Lord Supreme and He is the best of all who bring succour.* (Verses 149-50)

Another passage within the context of the Qur'ān's review of the Battle of Uĥud and its events now begins. The comments it includes aim at correcting the concepts of the believers, enhancing their awareness of their situation, warning them of pitfalls which lie in their way and what the enemy may scheme against them.

The defeat of the Muslims at Uĥud provided the unbelievers, the hypocrites and the Jews in Madinah with a suitable climate to spread their hostile propaganda. Madinah was not yet a wholly Muslim city. The Muslims there were largely a foreign element, to which the spectacular victory at Badr imparted an awe-inspiring stature. When they were defeated at Uĥud, attitudes were markedly changed. The enemies of

Islam found in that defeat a chance to declare their hostility and spread their poisonous rumours. They were quick to exploit the tragedy which had affected every Muslim family and to try to create confusion in the minds of Muslims.

At the outset of the Qur'ānic report of the actual events of the battle, God Himself emphatically warns the believers against obeying those who have rejected the faith. We hear Him (limitless is He in His glory) promising the believers victory over their enemy coupled with striking a feeling of fear in the hearts of these enemies, and reminding them of the victory He has granted them in the first round of their war, in fulfilment of His earlier promise. They, however, had squandered that victory when they weakened, and disobeyed the express orders of God's Messenger. Now He portrays the opposite scenes of the battle when He gives reassurance to the believers after their defeat, leaving the hypocrites to their own worry and confusion. He reveals to them a part of His purpose in letting events move in the direction they did, explaining the true nature of the timing of people's deaths. He warns them at the end against the erroneous notions promoted by the unbelievers in relation to death and martyrdom. He reminds them that all people, whether they die in the normal course of events or in battle, will eventually be resurrected and return to God.

When we examine these verses carefully, we realise that they describe a vast array of scenes and emphasise at the same time a number of principles which are fundamental to Islamic philosophy, human life and universal law. The whole battle is depicted in quick, lively and penetrating sketches. They accurately describe the atmosphere, events and circumstances of the battle, along with all the feelings and attitudes displayed by the believers at that time. There is no doubt that it is beyond human expression to include all these scenes and all these principles in such a short passage and a small number of sentences, vivid as they may be. This is a point which can be better understood by those familiar with different styles and methods of expression.

> *Believers, if you obey those who have rejected the faith, they will cause you to turn back on your heels, and you will be the losers. Indeed, God alone is your Lord Supreme and He is the best of all who bring succour.* (Verses 149-50)

The unbelievers, the hypocrites and the Jews in Madinah seized the opportunity created by the defeat of the Muslims to warn them against following Muĥammad. They painted to them in dark colours the gloomy prospects of going to war and fighting the idolaters of the Quraysh and its allies. In the aftermath of defeat, the social climate provides easy opportunities to spread confusion and to weaken the trust of soldiers in their leaders. By the same token the idea of establishing a peaceful accord with the victors was painted in tempting colours. Personal grief was being exploited as part of the wicked design aiming to destroy the Muslim community and

Islam altogether.

Hence, God warns the believers against giving heed to those who have rejected the faith, because that obedience will inevitably result in utter loss. Nothing good can come from it. It represents a complete about-turn from a state of disbelief. A believer either continues to fight those who cling to falsehood and reject faith, or turns on his heels — God forbid — thus becoming an unbeliever. It is not possible for a believer to take an in-between attitude, trying to maintain neutrality while at the same time hanging on to his faith. He may harbour some such thoughts in the wake of defeat and under the influence of calamity. He may even imagine that he can withdraw from battle against a mightier power, and establish peace with that enemy, and, at the same time, retain his faith. This, however, is a great delusion. In the whole question of faith, a person who does not move forward can only go backwards. If one does not fight disbelief, evil, falsehood and tyranny, one must beat retreat and turn back on one's heels to embrace all this evil. A person whose faith does not stop him from obeying unbelievers and having trust in them sacrifices, in fact, his very faith for their sake. He is spiritually defeated when he befriends the enemies of his faith and follows their directives. As he starts with defeat, he cannot escape from it at the end. He is bound to revert to rejection of the faith, although he may not imagine that such would be his end. A believer is satisfied with his faith and leadership to such an extent that he has no need to consult the enemies of his faith. If he listens to them once, he actually begins the process of turning back on his heels. This is an elementary and honest truism to which God draws the attentions of the believers: *"Believers, if you obey those who have rejected the faith they will cause you to turn back on your heels, and you will be the losers."*

What loss is greater than turning back on one's heels, after one has attained to faith? What benefits may be gained after loss of faith has taken place?

If the tendency to obey the unbelievers is motivated by hopes of protection and succour, this is also a great delusion. The Qur'ān does not discuss this delusion, but reminds the believers of where true help, protection and succour come from: *"Indeed God alone is your Lord Supreme and He is the best of all who bring succour."* It is to Him that the believers pray for support and victory. He who has God for his supporter has no need whatsoever for any of His creation. If he has the support of God, what use to him is the support of any creature?

Striking Fear in Enemies' Hearts

The *sūrah* now provides the believers with more reassurance, giving them the happy news of God's plan to strike terror into the hearts of their enemies because they associate partners with Him, against all His express orders. Indeed, God has

given those alleged partners no power of any sort. Moreover, in the hereafter, the wrongdoers will receive further punishment: *"We shall strike terror in the hearts of unbelievers because they associate partners with God – something for which He has never granted any warrant. Their abode is the fire, and evil indeed is the dwelling place of the wrongdoers."* (Verse 151)

A promise from God, the Almighty, to strike terror into the hearts of the unbelievers is sufficient guarantee to bring the battle to a decisive victory for the believers who support Him, against His enemies. It is a promise which holds true in every confrontation between belief and disbelief. Every time the unbelievers come face to face with the believers, fear overcomes them, because God strikes that feeling into their hearts. What is important for this feeling to surface is that the believers themselves truly feel their faith. They must genuinely submit themselves to God alone, and have total confidence in God's help and entertain no shred of doubt that victory will be given to God's soldiers and that God will accomplish His will and that the unbelievers can never frustrate what God wants to accomplish. Sometimes, appearances may suggest the contrary, but the believers have to trust in God's promise because it will always come true, regardless of what people may see with their own eyes or judge with their own minds. The unbelievers will feel terror in their hearts, because they do not rely on any firm support. They have no power of their own, and they do not enjoy the support of any other powerful source. They have attributed to God partners who have no authority or power of their own, because God has never bestowed any warrant on them.

The expression *"something for which He has never granted any warrant,"* is particularly significant. It is frequently used in the Qur'ān, sometimes to describe the partners associated with God, and at other times to describe false beliefs. It points to a basic and fundamental principle. An idea, a principle, a person or an organisation can live, survive and be effective only according to what it enjoys of real force. Such force is always commensurate with its share of the truth. This means that it is only powerful in direct proportion to its concordance with the basic principle which constitutes the foundation of the universe and with the laws God has set in operation in the universe. It is only when such harmony is achieved that God gives it effective force, which enables it to work. Otherwise, it remains shaky, false, powerless, though it may appear at times tempting and mighty.

The idolaters ascribe divinity to deities other than God. The very concept of polytheism is based on giving certain fundamental qualities to beings other than God. One of the most important of these qualities and attributes is the right to issue legislation which may affect any aspect of human life, and the right to establish values which people should implement in their community and observe in their behaviour. Also, the right to establish one's 'own power over others and to make

other people submit to such legislation and implement such values is another aspect of practical polytheism. Offering actual worship to beings other than God is another of its aspects, which means, as we have already said, ascribing Godhead qualities to beings other than God.

How much harmony do these deities have with the truth upon which the universe has been founded? God, Who has no partners, has created the universe so that it points to its single Creator. All creation must submit to Him alone, without partners, and must receive from Him alone their laws and values and must offer worship sincerely and genuinely to Him alone. Whatever is in conflict with the general and comprehensive meaning of the concept of the oneness of God, is false and contrary to the truth inherent in the universe. Hence, it is weak, shaky, devoid of any power and authority and cannot have any genuine effect on the course of life, because it is devoid of all the elements of life and has no right to live.

As those idolaters associate with God partners for whom He has never granted any authority, they have no firm support to rely upon. They will always be weak and they will experience terror whenever they come face to face with the believers, who rely on the mighty truth.

This promise always comes true in any confrontation between truth and falsehood. Many a time, falsehood has every type of armament when it confronts the truth, which may have little or no weaponry. Nevertheless, falsehood mobilises its forces, and feels a shiver go through its constitution. It shudders at every movement and at every shout. If the truth makes a sudden attack, confusion will spread within the ranks of falsehood, even though it may have great numerical superiority. All this takes place in fulfilment of God's true promise: *"We shall strike terror in the hearts of the unbelievers because they associate partners with God [something] for which He has never granted any warrant."* All this takes place in this life. As for the hereafter, a dismal and sorrowful destiny awaits the wrongdoers: *"Their abode is the fire, and evil indeed is the dwelling place of the wrongdoers."*

At this point, the *sūrah* takes the believers back to the fulfilment of God's promise at the Battle of Uĥud in particular. Initially, the Muslims enjoyed a clear advantage which could have led to certain victory. Unbelievers lay dead left, right, and centre, until the bulk of their army turned on their heels, leaving much of their equipment and armament as spoils of war. Their banner was on the ground, and there was none to lift it until a woman managed to raise it for them. Yet at that point, the Muslims' clear victory turned into defeat because their rearguard had weakened before the temptation of sharing in the spoils. They disputed among themselves and then violated the express orders of God's Messenger, their Prophet and leader. Now the *sūrah* moves on to describe the scenes and events of the battle itself.

Victory So Near, Yet So Far

> *God fulfilled to you His promise when, by His leave, you were about to destroy them. But then you lost heart and disagreed with one another concerning [the Prophet's command] and disobeyed after God had brought you within view of that for which you were longing. Some of you cared only for this world and some cared for the life to come. Then He turned you away from them so that He may put you to the test. But now He has forgiven you, for God is gracious to the believers. [Remember] when you ran away, up into the mountain, paying no heed to anyone, while the Messenger was at your rear calling out to you. Therefore, He rewarded you with sorrow after sorrow so that you may not grieve over what has escaped you, nor over what had befallen you. God is aware of all that you do.* (Verses 152-3)

The *sūrah* paints a full picture of the battlefield and the succession of victory and defeat. Every movement, every impression, every facial expression and every fleeting thought is recorded. The Qur'ānic description is like a film reel which shows every movement in vivid and sharp detail. This particularly applies to the image of people fleeing from the battlefield and charging up the mountain in panic, as the Prophet called out to them. Coupled with this is a picture of the thoughts, impressions and reactions people entertained. On top of it all, we have a number of directives and statements which are characteristic of the Qur'ānic style and its remarkable method of educating believers.

"*God fulfilled to you His promise, when, by His leave, you were about to destroy them.*" This was at the beginning of the battle, when the Muslims began to steadily put an end to all resistance shown by the idolaters, and to destroy their forces. At that time, they were not distracted by the loot which loomed large. The Prophet had said to them: "*You will be victorious as long as you remain steadfast.*" God has fulfilled that promise which He gave them through His Prophet.

"*But then you lost heart and disagreed with one another concerning [the Prophet's command] and disobeyed after God had brought you within view of that for which you were longing. Some of you cared only for this world and some cared for the life to come.*" (Verse 152) This is a description of what took place among the archers. A group of them felt the temptation too strongly. They wanted their share of the booty. They argued with those who maintained that they must obey the Messenger's command literally. Their argument led to disobedience when they saw the clear indications of the victory they longed to achieve. Thus, they were split into two groups: one caring only for worldly gains, and the other looking only for God's reward in the hereafter. Discord was sown and the believers were no longer one force, working for one goal. Dedication, which is absolutely necessary in every battle fought for the sake of faith, was tainted with greed. What is important to remember is that a battle fought for the sake of faith is unique in that it is fought both on the battlefield and in people's hearts. Victory in

the former is dependent on victory in the latter. It is a battle fought for the sake of God. Therefore, God gives victory in it to those who are totally dedicated to Him.

Since they have raised the banner of God, He does not grant them victory until He has tested them and ascertained their dedication, so that there can be no false pretences. Sometimes, those who clearly raise the banner of falsehood in battle are given victory, for a purpose known to God alone. But it has to be understood that those who raise the banner of faith without demonstrating complete dedication are never granted victory by God until they have proven that they have passed the test. This is the message the Qur'ān wants to state clearly to the Muslim community, using this particular battle as their reference point. He wanted the first Muslim community to learn this as it suffered bitter defeat as a result of a confused and shaky attitude.

"*Some of you cared only for this world and some cared for the life to come.*" Here the Qur'ān sheds light on what is deep in people's hearts. The Muslims themselves did not know that they entertained such thoughts. `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, the Prophet's Companion said: "I never thought that any of the Companions of the Prophet would care for worldly gains, until God revealed in the Qur'ān describing our situation in Uĥud: "*Some of you cared only for this world and some cared for the life to come.*" Their hearts are thus laid open before them so that they can determine the causes of their defeat.

At the same time, the Qur'ān partly reveals to the Muslims God's purpose behind letting them suffer all this pain, and behind allowing events to develop in that particular fashion: "*Then He turned you away from them so that He may put you to a test.*" God's predestination remains operative. When people weakened, disputed and disobeyed, God turned their power away from the idolaters and let the archers abandon their positions and the fighters desert the battlefield. All this took place as a result of their own actions, but it was all predestined by God in order to test the believers with hardship, fear, defeat and loss of life. Such a trial was bound to reveal what was in their innermost hearts and to distinguish true believers from those who only pretended to be so. There is no contradiction whatsoever between allowing events to happen as a direct result of their causes and them being predetermined. The law of cause and effect remains operative but every cause is also well determined.

"*But now He has forgiven you,*" what you have shown of weakness, dispute and disobedience as well as your running away from battle. That forgiveness is an aspect of His grace which overlooks human weakness when it is not the result of ill-will or deliberate disobedience. He has forgiven you because your errors and weakness remain within the framework of faith and submission to God. They do not come in defiance of God's orders.

"*God is gracious to the believers.*" Part of His grace is to forgive them, as long as they follow the method He has laid down for them and they submit to His will, without claiming any of the essential qualities of Godhead for themselves. At the same time, they must not derive any of their laws, values or standards from any source other than Him. Thus, when they slipped, that error came only from weakness. When they were exposed to this trial and proved themselves, they are forgiven.

The *sūrah* then describes the scene of defeat in powerful imagery: "*[Remember] when you ran away, up into the mountain, giving no heed to anyone, while the Messenger was at your rear calling out to you.*" (Verse 153) This description encapsulates their shame for what they had done and the causes which led them to do it, namely, loss of heart, dispute and disobedience. Their physical and mental attitudes are also brought alive in just a few words: they quickly ran away, climbing up into the mountain, confused, afraid, perplexed, paying heed to no one. The Prophet called on them to reassure them that he was still alive after someone had cried out otherwise. The end result is that God rewarded them for the sorrow they suffered when they fled, with a sorrow to fill their own hearts for having abandoned their beloved Prophet and letting him endure his wounds, when he remained steadfast while they turned on their heels. There is no doubt that this experience was very painful. To them, what was most difficult to bear was the sorrow and pain which the Prophet himself had endured, because it was a direct result of their actions. They were bitterly ashamed. Their sorrow is useful in the sense that it was bound to make any loss they themselves suffered seem to be of no significance, and every hardship they will be called upon to bear very easy: "*Therefore, He rewarded you with sorrow after sorrow so that you may not grieve over what has escaped you, nor over what had befallen you.*" God, Who knows everything, is certainly aware of every motive behind every action: "*God is aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 153)

A Trial for the Faithful

> *Then, after sorrow, He let peace fall upon you, in the shape of a slumber which overtook some of you, while others, who cared mainly for themselves, entertained wrong thoughts about God – thoughts of pagan ignorance. They ask: 'Have we any say in the matter?" Say: 'All power of decision rests with God. "They conceal in their minds what they do not disclose to you. They say: "Had we had any say in the matter, we should not have been slaughtered here." Say: "Had you stayed in your homes, those of you who were destined to be killed would have gone to their deathbeds." For it was God's will to put to a test all that you entertain in your minds and to render pure what you may have in your hearts, God is fully aware of what is in people's bosoms.* (Verse 154)

All the chaos, confusion and panic which the defeat spread among the Muslim

soldiers was followed by a remarkable sense of peace and security among the believers who came back and rallied to the Prophet's side. They were overtaken by a gentle slumber which gave them personal reassurance. This exceptional phenomenon is described in fine and gentle words: *"Then, after sorrow, He let peace fall upon you in the shape of a slumber which overtook some of you.''*

There is no doubt that this was a remarkable phenomenon, a manifestation of God's grace when it is bestowed upon His servants. When slumber overtakes people who are tired, exhausted and panicking, even for a brief moment, it brings about remarkable results. It gives them reassurance and comfort in a way which we cannot fathom and it makes of them different people altogether. I say this because I have experienced it in a situation of extreme distress. I felt God's grace in a way which no human language can describe.

Abū Ṭalĥah reports: "I lifted my head on the day of Uĥud to look around me. Everyone of them was hanging down his head because of his drowsiness." In another version, also reported by Abū. Ṭalĥah: "We were overtaken by slumber in our position on the day of Uĥud. My sword kept falling from my hand and I would pick it up before it fell again and I picked it up a second time."

Of the others, the group with shaky faith, their main preoccupation was their own interest. These had not purged their minds from ignorant concepts and they had not submitted themselves totally to God. They did not experience the certitude that what had befallen them was a test which did not represent an abandonment by God of His servants, leaving them alone to face the might of His eminence. Nor was it a verdict that he had passed to allow the non-Muslims and their evil to have final victory: *"While others, who cared mainly for themselves, entertained wrong thoughts about God – thoughts of pagan ignorance. They ask: Have we any say in the matter?' "*

Islam teaches its followers, among other things, that they have no say whatsoever over themselves. They belong to God. When they go out on a campaign of *jihad* for His cause, they dedicate themselves to God and fight for Him, having no personal ambition whatsoever. What He has predestined for them is bound to happen and they accept it with satisfaction and total submission.

Those who care only for themselves, to the extent that they are totally preoccupied with their own interest and well-being, do not feel the true nature of faith deep at heart. The Qur'ān describes them as worried, lost and confused. They think that they have been pushed into the battle without having any say in it. Rather, they were put to a severe test and had to pay a very heavy price. They did not truly know God, and they entertained such thoughts about Him that they had carried with them from the days of their pagan, ignorant past. These false notions included the idea that they were pushed into the battle only in order to be killed, and that God did not intervene

to save them from their enemies. Hence they ask: *"Have we any say in the matter?" This* statement implies objection to the battle plan. Perhaps they were of the view that the Muslims should have stayed in Madinah and never gone out to fight. Although they did not desert with Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and his followers, they, nevertheless, did not have the reassurance of true believers.

Before this long verse continues with its accounts of their worries and thoughts, it states the proper view with regard to what they questioned. It answers them with: *"Say: 'All power of decision rests with God.'"* Neither they, nor anyone else, has any say in the matter. Prior to this, God said to the Prophet: *"You have no say in the matter."* Islam and the fighting for its establishment and the implementation of its way of life on earth, or guiding people's hearts to accept it, are matters which belong totally to God. Human beings have nothing to do with them, except to fulfil their duties and to leave their destiny in God's hands.

The Qur'ān also reveals what they tried to conceal in their hearts: *"They conceal in their minds what they do not disclose to you."* They entertain all sorts of thoughts which imply objection and protest. Indeed their question: *"Have we any say in the matter?"* implies a protest that they have been pushed into a catastrophe which was not of their own making and that they were the victims of unsound leadership. Had they been conducting the battle, they would not have so suffered. *"They say: 'Had we had any say in the matter, we should not have been slaughtered here.'"*

This is the type of thought which those who have not dedicated themselves to their faith feel when they face defeat in battle. When they find out that the price they had to pay is much greater than they had imagined and that the effort is more painful than they had expected. When they look deep into their hearts, they do not have a clear vision and they imagine that the action taken by their leadership was responsible for their defeat, which could have been averted had they had any power of decision. With such a confused view, they cannot see that it is God Who determines events and they cannot understand God's purpose in exposing them to such a test. To them, the whole matter is nothing but utter loss.

At this point, the Qur'ān states the correct concept of life and death, and the purpose behind testing the believers: *"Say: 'Had you stayed in your homes, those of you who were destined to be killed would have gone to their deathbeds.' For it was God's will to put to the test all that you entertain in your minds and to render pure what you may have in your hearts. God is fully aware of what is in people's bosoms."* Had you stayed at home without responding to the battle cry, had you taken your own decisions concerning the battle, those of you who were destined to be killed would certainly have met their death, because death only takes place at the appointed time.

There is a bed to which every person must retire. At the appointed moment, the

person concerned walks to his or her deathbed without the need for force or direction from anyone.

The remarkable Arabic expression used here speaks, literally, of "beds". The graves in which people rest, and at which all endeavours end, is only a bed to which they come with a subtle motive which they cannot fathom. That motive overtakes them and determines their fate. It is far better and more comfortable for them to submit totally to it, because it is God's predestination. He has a purpose behind it: *"It was God's will to put to the test all that you entertain in your minds and to render pure what you may have in your hearts."*

There is nothing like a trial to reveal what is in people's minds and to purge the falsehood that is in their hearts. God wants the hearts of the believers to be purged so that they entertain no false notions. All their concerns will be clear, with no trace of confusion, *"God is fully aware of what is in people's bosoms."* That which is in a person's bosom is a secret which is never allowed to see the light. However, God knows everything that people may conceal in their hearts and He wants to reveal it to all who harbour them. They themselves may not know those secrets until they are shaken by events and laid bare for them to see.

Diverging Views of Life and Death

> *As for those of you who turned away on the day when the two hosts met in battle, Satan caused them to slip only in consequence of something that they themselves had done. But now God has pardoned them. Indeed, God is Much forgiving, Forbearing. Believers, be not like those who disbelieve and say of their brethren, when they travel on earth or go forth to war, "Had they stayed with us they would not have died, nor would they have been killed, "so that God places a source of despair in their hearts. It is God alone Who grants life and causes death. God sees all that you do. If you should be slain or die in God's cause, surely forgiveness by God and His grace are better than all the riches they amass. If you should die or be slain, it is to God that you shall be gathered.* (Verses 155-8)

God was certainly aware of what was in the hearts of those who turned away in defeat during the Battle of Uĥud. They weakened in consequence of a sin they had committed. This caused them to be shaken. Satan was able to manoeuvre them into making such a slip: *"As for those of you who turned away on the day when the two hosts met in battle, Satan caused them to slip only in consequence of something that they themselves had done."* (Verse 155) This may be a reference to the archers who could not resist the temptation of the loot being left behind by the retreating unbelievers. They also entertained the thought that God's Messenger might not give them a share of the spoils of war. That was the sin they committed, in consequence of which Satan made

them slip. This verse, however, describes man after having committed a sin: his confidence weakens and his tie with God loosens. He loses balance and allows himself to fall prey to all sorts of negative thoughts. Thus, Satan whispers in his ear and leads him from one error to another, after he himself has left his safe refuge of content and reassured faith.

Earlier, the *sūrah* mentioned the case of those believers who fought with prophets in earlier times. The first thing they did before fighting was to pray for forgiveness of their sins, because that prayer brings them back to God and strengthens their ties with Him, removing any doubts and barring the way to Satan's influence over them. Satan always finds his way through man's moving away from God's care and protection.

God tells them that He bestows His grace on them and pardons them and does not allow Satan to take them far away. He reminds them of His attributes and that He is much forgiving, forbearing. He does not excommunicate sinners, nor does He visit them with swift punishment if He knows that deep at heart they look up to Him and want to maintain their bonds with Him.

The *sūrah* follows this with a statement of God's determination of life and death. It exposes the false concepts of the unbelievers and warns them against entertaining the same thoughts. It then speaks of values which encourage the believers to be ready and willing to make any sacrifices required of them.

The fact that these verses are included at this point in the *sūrah's* account of the events of the battle, makes it clear that the hypocrites who withdrew from the Muslim army before the battle and the idolaters living in Madinah who continued to maintain ties and relations with the Muslims were the ones who expressed sorrow at the loss of Muslim martyrs at Uĥud. Furthermore, they tried to make use of their deaths, in order to whip up feelings of despair among their families and to exaggerate the sense of loss which they maintained was the direct result of their going forth to fight. There is no doubt that speaking in these terms when the sense of loss among the Muslims was still acute was bound to increase confusion among the Muslims. Hence, the Qur'ān dispels all confusion and provides the right criteria and the correct concepts and values.

The unbelievers said of those who were killed in the Battle of Uĥud: "*Had they stayed with us they would not have died, nor would they have been killed.*" (Verse 156) Their statement, however, shows the great gulf between the concepts of those who have faith and those deprived of it and the laws governing human life, whether pleasant or unpleasant. A believer is aware of these laws and God's will, and he accepts it with reassurance because he knows that he will only get what God has determined for him, and that what happens to him was bound to happen and what

he may have missed, he could never have achieved anyway. Therefore, he neither panics in a calamity, nor is he overwhelmed with joy when good fortunes smiles on him. He does not regret not having done so and so in order to avoid something or to ensure another. Any alternatives should be considered before taking action. Once action is taken, after full consideration, and according to one's best knowledge and within the framework of what God sanctions, the believer accepts any results with satisfaction and reassurance. In other words, whatever happens must take place according to God's will. There was no way it could have been avoided, although it was he himself who provided its causes. There is a perfect equilibrium between action and acceptance of the results, between positiveness and reliance on God. A person who does not have this type of straightforward faith in God will always remain worried and hesitant, and will always say: "If only ...", "Had it not been for...", "I wish that ..." and "How sorrowful it is that..."

As God cultivates the Muslim community and points to the lessons they must learn from the Battle of Uĥud and what the Muslims suffered in it, He warns the believers against doing the same thing as the unbelievers. Their sorrow borders on despair every time a relative of theirs dies at work away from home or fighting for God's cause: "*Believers, be not like those who disbelieve and say of their brethren, when they travel on earth or go forth to war, 'Had they stayed with us, they would not have died, nor would they have been killed.'*" They say this because they have a false concept of what takes place in the universe and of the power behind it. They only see superficial circumstances and reasons because they have removed themselves from God.

"*So that God places a source of despair in their hearts.*" They see their brethren travelling abroad in order to earn their living and they die, and they see them going forth to war and they are killed. They feel that in both cases, it was their setting out that had brought about their death or caused them to be killed. They experience a profound sense of sorrow that they did not prevent them from setting forth. They did not appreciate the real reason, namely, that the life span of those who die was over, their deathbeds beckoned them, and that everyone dies by God's will. Had they realised this, they would not have felt such immense sorrow. They would have accepted what God has determined. "*It is God alone Who grants life and causes death.*" He grants life and takes it back at the time He has appointed, whether people are at their homes, with their families, or working to earn their living, or fighting for their faith. He rewards people according to what He knows of them: "*God sees all that you do.*"

Death, whether natural or in battle, does not represent the end. Life on earth is not the best thing God bestows on people. There are other values and nobler considerations: "*If you should be slain or die in God's cause surely forgiveness by God and His grace are better than all the riches they amass. If you shall die or be slain, it is to God that*

you shall be gathered." (Verse 157)

Viewed in this light, natural death or being killed fighting for God's cause, is better than life and superior to all the riches, position and authority people work for. It is superior because it ensures God's forgiveness and grace, and it is to attain these two objectives that God directs the believers. They are not supposed to work for personal glory or for material values. They are to seek what God has in store for them and to work to ensure that God bestows His grace on them.

They will all be gathered to God, whether they die in their beds at home or fending for themselves away from it, or fighting on the battlefield. That is the destiny of all people. Their death comes at the appointed time and they are gathered to God on the Day of Resurrection. They either receive God's grace or suffer His punishment. The most stupid of all is the one who deliberately chooses a miserable destiny when he knows that he will inevitably die at the appointed time.

Thus, the true concept of life and death and God's predestination becomes clear. People are reassured whatever may happen.

9
The Prophet's Message of Compassion

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ لِنتَ لَهُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ كُنتَ
فَظًّا غَلِيظَ ٱلْقَلْبِ لَٱنفَضُّوا۟ مِنْ حَوْلِكَ ۖ
فَٱعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِى
ٱلْأَمْرِ ۖ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ
ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

It is by God's grace that you deal gently with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would surely have broken away from you. Therefore, pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven and consult with them in the conduct of public affairs. When you have resolved about a course of action, put your trust in God. God loves those who put their trust in Him. (159)

إِن يَنصُرْكُمُ ٱللَّهُ فَلَا غَالِبَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِن
يَخْذُلْكُمْ فَمَن ذَا ٱلَّذِى يَنصُرُكُم مِّنۢ
بَعْدِهِۦ ۗ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ
﴿١٦٠﴾

If God helps you, none can overcome you; but if He should forsake you, then who is it that can help you besides Him? It is in God that the believers should put their trust. (160)

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِىٍّ أَن يَغُلَّ ۚ وَمَن يَغْلُلْ يَأْتِ
بِمَا غَلَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ ۚ ثُمَّ تُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ
نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿١٦١﴾

It does not behove a Prophet to act dishonestly, for he who acts dishonestly shall be faced with his dishonesty on the Day of Resurrection. Everyone will then be paid in full what he has earned, and none shall be wronged. (161)

أَفَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَ رِضْوَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ كَمَنۢ بَآءَ بِسَخَطٍ
مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَمَأْوَىٰهُ جَهَنَّمُ ۚ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٦٢﴾

Can he who strives after God's pleasure be compared to one who has incurred God's wrath and whose abode is hell? How evil such a goal is. (162)

هُمْ دَرَجَـٰتٌ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بَصِيرٌۢ بِمَا

They have different standings in God's sight. God sees all that they do. (163)

يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٦٣

لَقَدۡ مَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَى ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ إِذۡ بَعَثَ فِيهِمۡ رَسُولاً مِّنۡ أَنفُسِهِمۡ يَتۡلُواْ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُزَكِّيهِمۡ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَإِن كَانُواْ مِن قَبۡلُ لَفِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٍ ١٦٤

Indeed, God bestowed a favour on the believers when He sent them a messenger from among themselves, to recite to them His revelations, and to purify them, and teach them the book and wisdom, whereas before that they were surely in plain error. (164)

Distinctive Marks of the Prophet's Personality

> *It is by God's grace that you deal gently with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would surely have broken away from you. Therefore, pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven and consult with them in the conduct of public affairs. When you have resolved about a course of action, put your trust in God. God loves those who put their trust in Him.* (Verse 159)

In the course of the *sūrah's* commentary on the Battle of Uĥud and the attitudes of the Muslim community and other groups towards the way events developed both prior to and during that battle, a few verses are included about the noble personality of Muĥammad, God's Messenger (pbuh) and the importance of his status as a Prophet to the life of the Muslim community. This demonstrates much of the grace God has bestowed on the Muslim community. While the Prophet's personality is the known theme of the following verses, certain lines also explain the Islamic method in organising the Muslim community, the basis of this organisation, as well as some basic elements of Islamic philosophy and its importance to human life generally.

We can appreciate the great aspect of Divine grace represented by the high moral standards of the Prophet and his fine manners. He had an easy, gentle, lenient and compassionate nature, which attracted people and established real bonds among them. We also find in this short passage the basic principle governing the life of the Muslim community, namely, consultative government. We have here a clear order to implement this principle of consultation. It is worthy of note that this order is given at a time when consultation appears to have led to bitter consequences. Coupled with the principle of consultative government is that of firm resolution, of implementing, without hesitation, whatever has been decided after consultation. To these two principles is added the most important value of placing our trust in God. There is a distinct conceptual, practical and organisational complementarity provided by these three principles. Moreover, the essence of God's will and predestination is explained

here. All matters start with Him and return to Him. His will is supreme in conducting events and determining results. The passage also warns against treachery and greed, and distinguishes between those who follow what pleases God and those who incur His wrath. This provides a criterion with which to evaluate gains and losses. The passage concludes by emphasising the great bounty God has bestowed on this nation in the form of the message conveyed by the Prophet. Compared to this bounty, everything else appears so small and all suffering can easily be tolerated.

"It is by God's grace that you deal gently with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would surely have broken away from you. Therefore, pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven and consult with them in the conduct of public affairs. When you have resolved about a course of action, put your trust in God. God loves those who put their trust in Him." At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet who must have felt uneasy towards his people. Initially they had been enthusiastic to meet their enemy outside Madinah. Shortly afterwards confusion crept into their ranks and one-third of the army withdrew, before the battle had even commenced. Later, they disobeyed his express order and yielded to the temptation of the loot. They weakened when they heard the rumour of his death. Defeated at heart, they turned on their heels, leaving him with a handful of his Companions and the net result was that he was wounded. He remained steadfast at their rear, calling them to persevere, while they paid no heed to anyone. The Divine address provides consolation to the Prophet and tells the Muslims of God's limitless grace, manifested in Him sending the Prophet to them. It reminds them of the fact that God has shown them great mercy in giving the Prophet a compassionate nature which makes people's hearts turn towards him.

The purpose of this address is to enhance the Prophet's compassion so that he overcomes what disappointment he may feel at their actions. For their part, they will realise how important it is to them that the Prophet is so compassionate. The Divine address tells the Prophet to pardon his Companions and to pray to God to forgive them. He is also called upon to take counsel with them on how important matters should be conducted, in the same way as he consulted them. The consequences of Uĥud must not be allowed to suspend or override the principle of consultative government which is fundamental to Islamic life.

"It is by God's grace that you deal gently with them. Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would surely have broken away from you." God's grace was indeed shown to the Prophet and his Companions. It is demonstrated by the fact that the Prophet himself had a compassionate nature which prompted him to take a lenient and gentle attitude towards them. Had he been hard of heart, he would not have won their hearts, nor would they have gathered around him.

People always need compassion, care, a cheerful face and patient forbearance which is not exhausted by other people's ignorance and weakness. People need

someone with a large heart who gives them all he can but asks nothing of them, who shares with them their worries without burdening them with his own. They need someone who will always be caring, sympathetic, loving, content and forbearing. God's Messenger had all these characteristics and these were the distinctive aspects of his life among his Companions. He was never angry with anyone; nor was he ever impatient because of their weaknesses. Never did he take for himself anything of the enjoyments of this world; on the contrary, he gave them all that he possessed with a smile and a cheerful heart. His forbearance, compassion, care and sympathy were extended to all. Everyone who came into contact with the Prophet was full of love for him because of what he generously gave of his love.

All this was by God's grace, which He extended to the Prophet and his followers. God reminds them of this grace at this particular moment so as to build on it something which is essential to the life of the Muslim community: *"Therefore, pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven and consult with them in the conduct of public affairs."*

Consultation: The Essence of Islamic Government

We have here a distinctive order: *"Consult with them on the conduct of public affairs."* This principle, which is basic to the Islamic system of government, is established here, even when Muĥammad himself, God's Messenger, is the one who conducts public affairs. This is, then, a definitive statement which leaves the Muslim community in no doubt that consultation is central to Islamic government. Without it, no system is truly Islamic. What form this consultation takes and how the principle is implemented are matters which can be adapted to the prevailing conditions of any particular Islamic society. Any forms and mechanisms which ensure that consultation is really, not superficially, practised are acceptable to Islam.

The decisive order, *"consult with them on the conduct of public affairs"* is issued by God to the Prophet at a time when consultation appears to have produced bitter results. Appearances suggested that it was due to consultation that disunity crept in among the Muslims during the events leading to the Battle of Uĥud. By way of a reminder, one group wanted the Muslims to stay in Madinah, where they could easily repel any enemy attacks. Another group wanted to fight the unbelievers outside the city. The resulting disunity was clearly apparent when `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl withdrew with no less than one-third of the army, when the enemy was knocking at the gates of Madinah. Moreover, the plan adopted for the defence of Madinah did not appear to be the most sound from a military point of view. It was at variance with what had been learnt from past experience. The Muslims did, however adopt the opposite strategy in the following battle, staying in Madinah and digging a moat around it. Thus, they showed that they had benefited by the lessons of Uĥud.

The Prophet himself was not unaware of the serious consequences which would result from moving out. As a prophet, whose dreams always came true, he had seen in a dream that one of his own household would be killed, and that a number of his Companions would fall in battle. He also said that the dream indicated that Madinah was akin to an impregnable fortress. Under the circumstances, he was entitled to overturn the decision made on the basis of consultation. However, he preferred to go ahead with that decision because the practical establishment of the fundamental principle of consultation, and allowing the Muslim community to learn hard lessons through its implementation, was more important than avoiding temporary setbacks.

It would have been understandable if the Prophet, as the leader, had abrogated the whole principle of consultation after the battle, in view of the division and defeat it had caused. Islam was, however, cultivating a whole nation and preparing it to assume its natural role of the leadership of mankind. God knew that the best method to achieve that purpose was for the community to be educated through consultation and to be trained to take responsibility for its decisions. It was expected to err, and indeed to make serious mistakes, in order to learn how to correct its errors and to face up to their consequences. How else could it be trained to make the right decision? Losses can be borne if the net result makes the whole nation understand its responsibilities and able to shoulder them. Avoiding errors does not benefit a community, if it means that the community continues to enjoy supervision and protection. True, it could avoid material losses, but it would lose its personality and its ability to face up to all events. It would be in the same position as a child who is not trained to walk so that it may be spared the falls involved in that training, or to save the price of a pair of shoes.

It was necessary for Islam to allow the Muslim community to achieve maturity so as to prepare it for its role of leadership. There was no alternative but to allow it to practise its role, without patronage or protection, during the Prophet's lifetime and under his guidance. It may be suggested that the presence of wise leadership makes consultation superfluous and should dispense with the practical training of the Muslim community. Wise leadership should have been allowed to make its own decisions on serious matters. Such an assumption is totally false. Had it been true, the very presence of Muĥammad (pbuh), equipped with Divine revelation, would have been sufficient to deprive the Muslim community at that time of its right to consultation, especially in the light of its bitter consequences at Uĥud. Neither the presence of God's Messenger, equipped as he was with Divine revelation, nor the events and complications that took place were enough to suspend the right of the community to be consulted. God, limitless is He in His Glory, knew that consultation must be practised in the most serious of matters, regardless of the consequences, losses and sacrifices. All these were but a small price for the attainment of maturity

by the Muslim community, its training in the conduct of its affairs, to bear its responsibilities and accept the consequences of its decision. Hence the Divine commandment at this particular point in the life of the young Muslim community: *"Therefore, pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven and consult with them in the conduct of public affairs."* Thus, the principle is established, despite the risks that may attend its implementation. The flimsy argument which is often raised in favour of abrogating this principle of consultation is rejected outright. The maturity of the nation cannot be achieved without putting this principle into effect. For the community to achieve its maturity is far more important and far more valuable than any loss that may be incurred in the process.

The true picture of the Islamic system does not appear complete unless we examine the rest of the verse, to discover that consultation is never allowed to lead to hesitation and delay. Nor does it replace the need to rely ultimately on God: *"When you have resolved upon a course of action, put your trust in God. God loves those who put their trust in Him."*

The role of consultation is to examine all views and select a particular course of action. When the process reaches this stage, consultation must give way to implementation with resolve and decisiveness, placing trust in God. Thus, God's will determines the outcome as He pleases.

The Prophet not only gave the Muslim community the lesson of consultation, he also gave it a second lesson as he willingly and seriously implemented the decision made and placed his trust in God. He gave his order to the Muslims to get ready to march and prepared himself to do so by putting on his body armour, even though he was aware of what awaited them all in terms of suffering and sacrifice. As will be recalled, there were those who feared that in all this they might have imposed on the Prophet a course of action of which he did not approve. Therefore, they put the matter back to him and assured him of their obedience whatever he decided. Nevertheless, even with this second opportunity, the Prophet did not reverse his decision. He wanted to teach them the whole lesson of consultation and resolve, combined with complete reliance on God and submission to His will. He wanted them to realise that there was a specific time for consultation, but once a decision was taken there could be no room for hesitation and starting the process anew. That could only perpetuate the state of indecision.

"God loves those who put their trust in Him." This is a distinctive quality of the believers. Reliance on God, putting our trust in Him and submitting to His will constitute the final line which maintains the proper balance in Islamic philosophy and Islamic life. Ultimate authority belongs to God and He does what He chooses.

This was one of the great lessons which the Battle of Uĥud taught the Muslim

community. It remains a lesson to be learnt by every new generation of Muslims.

When God's Help Is Withdrawn

In order to explain what placing one's trust in God means, the *sūrah* clearly states that the power which determines victory or defeat is God's. It is from Him that support should be sought and through His help defeat is avoided. Once the believers have made their preparations and mobilised all the forces they can muster, they turn to God for help, rely fully on Him and recognise that they have no say in determining the consequences. It is God's will that determines the outcome: *"If God helps you, none can overcome you; but if He should forsake you, then who is it that can help you beside Him? It is in God that the believers should place their trust."* (Verse 160)

The Islamic concept of life demonstrates the perfect balance between asserting that God's will is absolute in shaping all events and that it comes into operation through man's own actions. The Divine law of nature establishes a cause and effect relationship in all matters, but causes do not initiate effects. The operative force is that of God, Who determines effects on the basis of causes according to His will. He then requires man to work hard, fulfil his duties, and meet his obligations. It is in relation to how far man discharges his responsibility that God determines the results. This means that results and consequences will always be dependent on God's will, for it is He alone who brings them into being whenever and however He wills. An equilibrium is thus established between the basic concept of a Muslim and his actions. He works as hard as he can and knows that the results of his actions depend on God's will. To him, there is no inevitability in the cause and effect relationship, because he does not claim that anything which God does is inevitable.

In the particular case of a military battle and its two possible results, victory or defeat, the *sūrah* refers Muslims to God's will and reminds them of His might. If God helps them, then they cannot be overcome by any force, and if His help is not forthcoming, then they will not be able to find anyone to bring them victory. This is the absolute truth: there is no ability, power or will other than those of God, Who determines all events. This basic truth, however, does not exempt Muslims from following God's method, obeying His directives and fulfilling their obligations, exerting all efforts and relying, after all that, on God alone: *"It is in God that the believers should put their trust."* (Verse 160) Thus, a Muslim does not seek anything from any source other than God. He has a direct relationship with the operative power in the universe, which means that he is in no need of help or protection from any other source. He relies totally on God to bring about events and results according to His wisdom. As for him, he accepts what God determines with total reassurance. This is a perfect bliss which no human being can experience except

through Islam.

The *sūrah* refers again to the moral qualities associated with the Prophet, in order to stress the importance of honesty and to forbid deceit and cheating. It reminds people that they will have to account for their deeds and that everyone will be given his fair reward: *"It does not behove a prophet to act dishonestly, for he who acts dishonestly shall be faced with his dishonesty on the Day of Resurrection. Everyone will then be paid in full what he has earned, and none shall be wronged."* (Verse 161)

One of the reasons which tempted the archers in the Battle of Uĥud to abandon their positions on top of the hill, was that they feared that the Prophet might not give them a share of the spoils of war. Some of the hypocrites had earlier suggested that a portion of the spoils of war the Muslims collected at Badr had disappeared. They were so impudent as to even mention the Prophet by name in this connection. Here, the *sūrah* delivers a general statement which makes it clear that no prophet could ever act dishonestly. No prophet would take money, or a portion of the spoils for himself or his family, or give one section of the army more of the spoils than another, or commit any deceitful action whatsoever: *"It does not behove a prophet to act dishonestly."* This is inconceivable. Dishonesty is against the very nature of prophethood; it is repugnant to all prophets. The use of the negative here does not mean that it is not lawful for a prophet to act dishonestly, but to make it plain that it is both inconceivable and impossible that a prophet would ever do so. A prophet is by nature honest, just and well-contented. Hence, to be dishonest is to act against his own nature. It is perhaps useful to add that according to the reading of Imām Al-Ĥasan al-Başrī of this verse, the passive voice is used here, which means that it is totally unlawful that a prophet should be deceived, or that his followers allow themselves to hide something from him. This interpretation fits perfectly with the rest of the verse. Those who are dishonest and try to take something which belongs to the public treasury, or keep for themselves what booty they may be able to lay their hands upon, are issued with this fearful warning: *"He who acts dishonestly shall be faced with his dishonesty on the Day of Resurrection. Everyone will then be paid in full what he has earned, and none shall be wronged."*

Imām Ahmad relates that God's Messenger appointed a man called Ibn al-Lutaibah, from the tribe of Azd, to collect *zakāt.* When he had completed his mission, he came back and said: "This belongs to you, and this has been given to me as a gift." God's Messenger said from the pulpit: "How is it that a person whom we send to complete a certain assignment says: 'This belongs to you and this I have been given as a gift?' Let him stay in his parents' home and find out whether any gift will be given to him? By Him Who holds Muĥammad's soul in His hand, anyone of you who does this will come on the Day of Resurrection carrying that thing on his shoulders, even though it may be a camel, a cow or a lamb making its particular

noise." The Prophet then lifted his hands until his armpits were visible and said: "My Lord, have I conveyed Your message?" He repeated this three times. (Related by Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

Abū Umayyah reports: God's Messenger mentioned dishonesty as he was addressing us. He described how serious it was, and said: "Let me not see anyone of you on the Day of Resurrection carrying on his shoulder a camel making noise, and say: 'Messenger of God, help me.' I will then say to him: 'I have no power to help you against God's judgement. I have conveyed to you God's orders.' Let me not see any one of you come on the Day of Resurrection carrying a snorting horse on his shoulders, appealing to me: "Messenger of God, help me.' I will say to him: 'I cannot help you against God's judgement. I have conveyed to you His orders.' Let me not see anyone of you on the Day of Resurrection carrying a dumb load of gold and silver on his shoulders and appealing to me: 'Messenger of God help me.' I will say to him: 'I cannot help you against God's judgement. I have conveyed to you His orders." (Related by Al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Ahmad.)

The Prophet is reported to have said: "Anyone who does an assignment for us and conceals even a needle, or anything bigger, acts dishonestly. He will be faced with his dishonesty on the Day of Judgement." A black man from the *Anṣār* (whose name is, according to Mujāhid, Sa`d ibn `Ubādah) said: "Messenger of God, accept from me what you have assigned to me." The Prophet said: "What do you mean?" He said: "I have heard what you have just said." The Prophet said: "And I repeat it entirely: Whoever does an assignment for us, let him bring it all, big or small. Let him take what he is given and leave alone what he is not given." (Related by Muslim, Ahmad and Abū Dāwūd.)

This Qur'ānic verse, in conjunction with the Prophet's *hadīths,* has worked wonders in the moulding of the Muslim community, and made it unique in the value it attaches to honesty and the repugnance with which it views deceit and cheating. An ordinary Muslim may, in war, lay his hand on something valuable when no one is watching him. If he does, he should take it to his commander, entertaining no thought of keeping it for himself, so that he does not expose himself to what this Qur'ānic verse says, and so that he does not meet the Prophet on the Day of Resurrection in such a shameful condition. To a Muslim, the hereafter is a reality. He cannot see himself coming face to face with the Prophet and standing in front of God, as the Prophet has described. Hence, he knows that this will not happen. This is the secret of his scrupulous nature. The hereafter is to him part of the reality he lives, not a remote promise or threat. He entertains no doubt that everyone will be rewarded for what he does, and that everyone will be paid in full what they earn.

In his comprehensive book on history, Al-Ṭabarī reports that when the Muslims conquered Al-Madā'in and collected the spoils of war, a man came with something

to give to the one in charge of those spoils. He and his assistants said: "We have never seen anyone like this man. None of our people can be compared to him." They asked him: "Have you taken any part of it for yourself?" The man answered: "By God, had it not been for my fear of God, I would not have given it to you." They asked him his name, but he said: "I am not telling you or anyone else my name in order to be praised. I praise God and I am content with His reward." When he left, they sent one of them to follow him until he arrived in his camp. He enquired about him and they learnt that he was called `Āmir ibn `Abd Qais.

After the Battle of Qādisiyyah, the spoils of war were sent to `Umar in Madinah. Included in them was the crown of the Persian Emperor and his throne. They were priceless. `Umar looked at them happily and said: "Soldiers who tender this to their ruler are certainly honest."

This is how Islam moulded the Muslim community. When we hear such stories, we may think them legends. But the fact is that there is no legend in all this; it was the plain reality.

A Great Favour Done to Believers

Within the framework of keenness to have a share in the spoils of war, which was the direct cause of the defeat at Uĥud, and dishonesty in general, the *sūrah* underlines the proper values, on which a believer's attention must be focused: "*Can he who strives after God's pleasure be compared to one who has incurred God's wrath and whose abode is hell? How evil such a goal is.*" (Verse 162)

There is no doubt that God's pleasure is the prize to be coveted, and the winning of which determines whether one's efforts are profitable or end in utter loss. The gulf is great between the one who pursues God's pleasure until he wins it and the one who ends up incurring God's displeasure, which leads him to hell. The two have greatly different standings with God: "*They have different standings in God's sight.*" (Verse 163) Each actually earns his position, which means that there is no favouritism and none is wronged: "*God sees all that they do.*" (Verse 163)

This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a reference back to the personality of God's Messenger, his message, and the fact that it represents a great favour bestowed by God on the believers: "*Indeed, God bestowed a favour on the believers when He sent them a messenger from among themselves, to recite to them His revelations, and to purify them, and teach them the book and wisdom, whereas before that they were surely in plain error.*" (Verse 164)

This reference to the Prophet's role in bringing the Muslim community into existence, and in moulding, educating and leading it out of a state of error to become

a nation endowed with knowledge, wisdom and purity is clearly emphasised. It is typical of the Qur'ānic method of moulding the Muslim community that this reference is made in the context of defeat, pain, and loss suffered at Uĥud. All worldly gains, indeed all the riches of the world, and all the suffering and sacrifices that the Muslims may be called upon to endure seem very petty compared with the great favour God has done to mankind when He sent them His Messenger.

The practical effects of this favour, which can be seen in the life of the Muslim community, are then mentioned: "*... to recite to them His revelations, and to purify them, and to teach them the book and wisdom, whereas before that they were surely in plain error.*" These effects represent a total transformation of the Muslim community. God is preparing this community to play a great role in the leadership of mankind, and this requires that a messenger be sent to them. A nation with such a mission should not be preoccupied with petty gains that it can make in a battle and should not be reluctant to make sacrifices. Great goals cannot be achieved without sacrifice.

"*Indeed, God bestowed a favour on the believers when He sent them a messenger from among themselves.*" The fact that God Almighty cared to send a messenger to a particular species of His creation, is a favour which can only be motivated by His limitless grace. It is a favour that cannot be returned in any way by the recipients. Who are those human beings whom God has chosen for such grace, so as to be the recipients of His revelations? Indeed, God bestows His grace on His creation even when they have not earned that grace, and can never return it.

The favour is made even greater by the fact that this messenger is "*from among themselves.*" We should reflect that the Qur'ānic text did not say "a messenger from them." For him to be *"from among themselves"* is especially significant, because it identifies that the relationship between the believers and the messenger is one of human souls, not a relationship between an individual and a race. The question is not merely that the Prophet was one of them, it is far more significant than that. With faith, they establish their unique relationship with the Prophet and a great position of favour with God. That means that it is a double favour; sending the messenger, and establishing the relationship which exists between believers and the Prophet.

The first and greatest of the effects of this favour on the lives of the believers is referred to in the statement describing the Prophet's role: *"To recite to them His revelations."* When we remember that God Himself addresses man with His own words, to speak to him about His majesty, and to explain His attributes, and the nature and qualities of Godhead, we may begin to appreciate how great God's favour is. Let man reflect that God tells him about himself, an insignificant creature. He speaks to him about his life, feelings, actions and abilities in order to tell him what brings about a truly happy life and what sets him on the way to achieving the greatest of human goals, namely, admission to Paradise, which is far greater than the

heavens and the earth. Such a favour can come only from God's grace, which is infinite indeed.

God the Almighty has no need for mankind, or indeed for any creature. Man, on the other hand, is poor and powerless. He needs God. But it is God Who bestows on man His favours and grace, and calls on him to adopt what brings about a total transformation in his life. Nothing that man can do is sufficient to thank God for His grace.

The Purification of a Model Community

The role of the Messenger is also "*to purify them*". This purification touches their hearts, affects their homes, honour and worship, and characterises their lives, community and social systems. He purges them of all traces of polytheism, idol worship, and superstition and all that is associated with these, of rituals, habits and traditions which are unworthy of man. Human life is thus purged of all traces of ignorance and its effects on values, principles and social traditions.

Every type of ignorant community, including the Arabs at that time, entertained its own evil aspects. These evils were highlighted by Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib, a cousin of the Prophet, when he addressed Negus, the ruler of Abyssinia. A number of Muslims had sought refuge in Abyssinia, but the Quraysh sent a delegation which requested its ruler to extradite them. He called in the Muslim refugees to put their case. Their spokesman, Ja`far, made his statement in the following terms:

"We have been ignorant people who worshipped idols, ate carrion, committed all gross indecencies, severed relations with our kinsfolk, were unkind to our neighbours, and the strong among us usurped the rights of the weak. We continued in this state of affairs until God sent us a Messenger from among ourselves, who was known to us in respect of his good family position, and truthfulness, honesty and integrity. He called upon us to worship God alone, associate no partners with Him, to abandon what we and our forefathers used to worship alongside Him of stones and statues. He has commanded us to be truthful in what we say, honest, kind to our relatives and neighbours, and to refrain from sin and from killing one another. He has forbidden us every aspect of indecency, perjury, devouring what belongs to orphans, and accusing chaste women of committing adultery. He has bidden us to worship God alone, associate no partners with Him, attend to our Prayers, spend in charity [*zakāt*], and fast."

Another aspect of the evil customs that prevailed in ignorant Arabia is described by `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, as she gives this account of relations between the sexes. This report is given in Al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīh,* the most authentic collection of the Prophet's *hadīths:* "There were four types of relations between men and women in

the days of ignorance. One of these was the same as the marital relationships of today: a man may make a proposal of marriage to another man's daughter or some other girl in his charge. He pays her a dower and marries her. A second type was that a man said to his wife after she finishes her menstrual period: 'Go to so and so ... [he names a certain man] and get pregnant by him.' He himself stops having intercourse with her until she is manifestly pregnant by the man he named. When she becomes heavy with the child, her husband may have intercourse with her if he so desires. He resorts to this method because of his desire to have a son of superior blood. A third form is that a number of men, less than ten, shared the same woman, every one of them having intercourse with her. If she got pregnant and gave birth to a child, she sent to them asking them to come over to her a few days after delivery. None of them could absent himself from that meeting. She would say to them: 'You are aware of what has passed between us. Now that I have given birth to a child, this child is the son of ....' She chose whoever she fancied to be the father. He could not disown that child. The fourth type was that of prostitution. Any number of men may associate with a woman who would not refuse anyone who came to her. Prostitutes used to put some sort of a flag on their doors, to indicate that they welcomed any man. If such a prostitute gave birth to a child, they collected some money for her and they called in a physiognomist to determine the father of that child. The child was then named after that man who did not decline to claim it."

This contemptible, derogatory state of affairs needs no comment. It is sufficient to imagine a man sending his wife to another man to get pregnant by him, in the same way as he sends his female camel or horse or other animal for good breeding. It is sufficient to imagine a number of men, less than ten, having intercourse with the same woman and then allowing her to choose one of them to be the father of her child. As for prostitution, it is the same everywhere. In this particular case, however, the child born to a prostitute is named after a particular adulterer. He finds no disgrace in this and does not disclaim the child. Had it not been for Islam and its purifying principles, the Arabs would have continued to live in such squalor.

All this, however, is only one aspect of the contempt which was preserved for women in the pre-Islamic days of ignorance. In his valuable work, *Islam and the World,* Abu'l-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī says:

> The lot of women was extremely lamentable in pre-Islamic Arabia. The right of inheritance was denied to them. Widowed and divorced women were not permitted to remarry. It was a common practice for the eldest son to take as wives his father's widows, inherited as property with the rest of the estate. Discrimination was made against them even in matters of food, men reserving certain dishes for themselves. Daughters were buried alive at birth. Pride and poverty had introduced the abominable crime of female infanticide

> among all the Arabian tribes. Haitham ibn `Adī tells us that one out of every ten men was guilty of it. Kind-hearted tribal chiefs often bought infant girls to save their lives. Sa`sa`a says that before the dawn of Islam he had rescued as many as 300 girls from that terrible fate by paying compensatory money to their fathers. Sometimes a young girl who had escaped being killed at birth or during childhood, due to her father being away from home or some other reason, would be treacherously taken to a lonely spot by her father and done to death. Several incidents of this nature were narrated from their past lives by the companions of the Prophet after they had embraced Islam.[4]

These accounts give us a glimpse of the evils from which Islam saved the Arabs and purified them.

Idolatry and Human Dignity

All systems based on ignorance of God have their evils and debased practices. Perhaps the most prominent among these in pre-Islamic Arabia was idol-worship as described by Nadwī:

> The belief in an overruling Providence had grown very feeble among them (the Arabs of pre-Islamic days). It was confined to a select few, while the religion of the great mass of them was gross idolatry. The idols that had originally been introduced to serve as devotional media had become elevated to the status of divinity. Homage was still paid to one transcendent God, but only verbally; in their hearts a host of deities were enthroned, whose goodwill they sought to propitiate, and displeasure avert.
>
> Each tribe, city, and locality had its own god. Al-Kalbī has stated that every household in Makkah had its own idol. When a Makkan started on a journey, his last act at home would be to invoke the blessings of the family deity, and the first thing he did on his return was to pay reverence to it.
>
> People used to vie with one another in collecting idols and constructing temples for them. Those who could afford neither planted a slab of stone in front of the Ka`bah and performed the ritual of circumambulation around it. Such stones were called *ansāb*. In the words of Abū Rijā' al-`Uṭāridī, as reported in the *Ṣaĥīh* of Al-Bukhārī, "We worshipped stones. When we found a better stone than the one we had, we took it up and threw away the old one. Where no stones were available, we made a mound of sand, milked a goat

[4] Abu'l-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World,* Lucknow, 1973, pp. 30-1. (The author has referred to Shaykh Nadwī's *Mādhā Khasira al-`Ālam bi Inĥiṭāt al-Muslimīn,* while the work cited by us is an abridged English translation of the above — Translators).

> over it and worshipped it." When a traveller halted at a place, he used to collect four stones, worshipped the most beautiful of them and used the other three to rest his pots on for cooking.
>
> Angels, stars, jinns (spirits) and all the rest of the objects of veneration found in polytheistic faiths were adored as divine beings by the Arabs. The angels, they believed, were daughters of God, whom they besought to intercede with Him on their behalf, while jinns were regarded as partners of the Almighty in the practical control of the world.
>
> Al-Kalbī says that Band Malīĥ, a branch of the tribe of Khuzā`ah, worshipped the jinns; and Sā'id reports that the tribe of Ĥimyar worshipped the sun; the tribe of Kinānah adored the moon; the tribe of Tamīm worshipped al-Dabarān; the Lakhm and the Judhām, Ṭā'ī, Banū Qais and Banū Asad worshipped Jupiter, Canopus, the Dog Star and Mercury, respectively.[5]

A quick look at this crude, primitive form of polytheism is sufficient to give a good idea of the sort of feelings, principles and practices it generated. We can also appreciate the great transformation Islam managed to bring about in the lives of the Arabs. It purified their thoughts and their lives of those evils which gave rise to the sort of social and moral ills which prevailed in their society and in which they took pride. Drinking, gambling and tribal vengeance were their highest preoccupations. Countless poems boastfully described their indulgence in such practices. Shaikh Nadwī says in *Islam and the World:*

> War, in some respects, was a necessity for them, but more than that, it was a fun.... A most trivial incident could touch off a bitter inter-tribal war. The war, for instance, between the descendants of Wā'il, Bakr and Taghlīb dragged on for full forty years. There were innumerable casualties in this war. An Arab chief, Muhalhil, has depicted the consequences of this war thus: "Both the tribes have been exterminated; mothers have become childless; children have become orphans; the flow of tears does not cease; the dead are not buried."[6]
>
> The same can be said of the war known as Dāĥis and Al-Ghabrā'. What caused this war to flare up was that Dāĥis, a horse belonging to Qais ibn Zuhair, was leading in a race arranged between the horses of Qais and Ĥudhayfah ibn Badr, with bets placed on which horse will be the winner. A tribesman of Asad, on instructions from Ĥudhayfah, hit the face of the leading horse and this allowed other horses to catch up and pass him by. A killing followed and vengeance was sought. Both tribes tried to revenge the

[5] *Ibid.,* pp. 29-30.
[6] *Ibid.,* pp. 31-2.

killing of their murdered children. Many were taken captive. Tribes were displaced and thousands were killed.

All this was evidence of the fact that their lives had no worthy preoccupation. They used up their energy in such trivialities. They never thought of what sort of role they should play in improving human life. They had no faith to purify them from such social evils. Without faith, people can easily sink to such debasement.

Ignorance remains the same. Every form of ignorance has its own manifestations of debasement, regardless of where and when it exists. When people live without a Divine faith or code to regulate their lives, they sink into some form of ignorance. We can easily draw parallels between the ignorance prevalent in our modern world and that which prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia, or with other contemporary forms elsewhere in the world. It was only through Islam that Arabia was saved from and purified of that ignorance.

Humanity lives today in a great quagmire of vice. We have only to look at the media, the cinema, the fashion industry, beauty competitions, dancing places, public houses, and the widespread use of pornography in literature and art. Combined with the fact that its economic system is based on usury, which entails a materialism that motivates people's greed and the desire to become rich, even if they have to resort to cheating, embezzlement and other immoral methods. The moral and social fabric of society is also undermined. Doubt and cynicism have affected every individual, family, system and community. It is sufficient to cast a quick glance at all this to realise that the ignorance which prevails in our own world is leading humanity to an awful doom.

Man's humanity is wearing thin as people continue to seek animal pleasures. Indeed, animals have a standard of life which is cleaner and purer. They are governed by a serious law of nature which is applicable to them. They do not become debased as man does when he breaks loose, away from faith and its discipline, resorting to ignorance, from which God has saved him by His grace. God reminds His servants of this favour in the verse which states: *"God bestowed a favour on the believers when He sent them a messenger from among themselves to recite to them His revelations, and to purify them, and to teach them the book and wisdom..."*

Nationalism and Islamic Identity

"And to teach them the book and wisdom." Those addressed by this verse were illiterate in every sense of the word. Not only did they not read and write, but their illiteracy was intellectual as well. According to international standards of knowledge, they lagged behind in every field. Their preoccupations were not of the sort which

encouraged or increased knowledge. When they received this message, they experienced a great transformation which made them pass it on to the rest of the world. It endowed them with great wisdom. They became the standard-bearers of an intellectual and social philosophy which was destined to save humanity from the depths of ignorance into which it had sunk. The same doctrine is about to play its role again, God willing, to save humanity anew from its contemporary ignorance, an ignorance which shares with past forms the same moral and social characteristics, as it sets the same goals and objectives for human life, despite the great material advances of science and industry and the affluence such advances have brought about.

"Whereas before that they were surely in plain error." They were certainly in error with regard to concepts and beliefs, goals and objectives, habits and practices, systems and standards, as well as moral and social values. The Arabs, addressed for the first time by this verse, undoubtedly remembered what their lives were like and fully appreciated the total transformation brought about by Islam. They recognised that without Islam they would never have attained the high standards to which Islam elevated them. Such a transformation is totally unique in human history. They recognised that it was through Islam that they moved directly from the tribal stage, with all its petty concerns and narrow-mindedness, to become not merely a nation in the fullest sense of the word, but a nation to lead humanity and to set for it its ideals and systems.

They recognised that only through Islam had they acquired their national, cultural, and intellectual character. Most importantly, Islam gave them their human character, which elevated them to a position of honour through God's grace. They established their whole life on the basis of this honour and, subsequently, imparted it to the world, and taught it how to respect man and give him the position of honour God has granted him. In this they were the leaders. There was no one ahead of them, not in Arabia, not anywhere. The reference to consultative government which we discussed earlier brings out one aspect of this Divine system.

They also realised that only through Islam had they a message to present to mankind. It involved a doctrine and a system by which to mould human life. All these are basic essentials for the existence of a nation which wants to play an important role on life's stage.

The Islamic faith, its concepts of life and existence, its laws and regulation of human life, and its practical code which ensures man's happiness, were the credentials which the Arabs presented to the world and by which they earned the respect and leadership of mankind. Neither at present nor in future will they ever have any other credentials. They have no message other than Islam to give them a position in the world. The choice they have to face is either to be the standard-bearers

of the message of Islam, through which they earn recognition and honour, or to abandon it and go back to their earlier position when no one recognised them. The Arabs should ask themselves what they can give to humanity when they abandon the message of Islam.

Do they offer any great achievements in literature and art? Many nations are far ahead of them in these fields, which are of secondary importance. Nations of the world will not wait for any Arab genius to make his contribution, because the need for such a contribution is not felt by anyone. Can they offer any great industrial advance to win the respect of the world and to compete in international markets? Many a nation has taken the lead over the Arabs in this respect as well. Or can they offer any social, economic, or organisational philosophy of their own? Such philosophies, with varying practical effects, are abundant in our world. What can the Arabs, then, give to mankind in order to win a leading position which commands respect and demonstrates their excellence? They can offer nothing except their great message and unique system. This is the great favour which God has bestowed on them and favoured them with as its standard-bearers. It is the message with which God saved mankind from ignorance. Today, mankind desperately needs this message to save itself from the abyss of misery and worry into which it is sinking.

This message is the identity card of the Arabs, which they presented to the world in the past, and thereby commanded its respect. They can present it anew in order to save themselves and save the world. Every great nation has a message, and the greatness of the nation is commensurate to the greatness of its message and system. The Arabs have this great message in their custody. They are its standard-bearers, while other nations are their partners in it. What devil turns them away from their great role and their infinite wealth? It is their duty to chase the devil and resist his temptation and render his actions hopeless and futile.

10
Priorities Defined

أَوَلَمَّآ أَصَـٰبَتْكُم مُّصِيبَةٌ قَدْ أَصَبْتُم مِّثْلَيْهَا
قُلْتُمْ أَنَّىٰ هَـٰذَا ۖ قُلْ هُوَ مِنْ عِندِ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۗ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٦٥﴾

Why, when a calamity befell you, after you had inflicted twice as much [on your enemy], did you exclaim, "How has this come about?" Say: "It has come from your own selves. Surely, God has the power over all things." (165)

وَمَآ أَصَـٰبَكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْتَقَى ٱلْجَمْعَانِ فَبِإِذْنِ
ٱللَّهِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

That which befell you, on the day when the two hosts met in battle, happened by God's leave, so that He may mark out the true believers. (166)

وَلِيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا۟ ۚ وَقِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا۟
قَـٰتِلُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ أَوِ ٱدْفَعُوا۟ ۖ قَالُوا۟ لَوْ
نَعْلَمُ قِتَالًا لَّٱتَّبَعْنَـٰكُمْ ۗ هُمْ لِلْكُفْرِ
يَوْمَئِذٍ أَقْرَبُ مِنْهُمْ لِلْإِيمَـٰنِ ۚ يَقُولُونَ
بِأَفْوَٰهِهِم مَّا لَيْسَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَا يَكْتُمُونَ ﴿١٦٧﴾

And [He might] mark out the hypocrites. When these were told, "Come, fight in God's cause", or "Defend yourselves", they answered, "Had we known there would be a fight, we would certainly have followed you." On that day they were nearer unbelief than faith, uttering with their mouths something different to what was in their hearts, but God knew full well all that they tried to conceal. (167)

ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ لِإِخْوَٰنِهِمْ وَقَعَدُوا۟ لَوْ
أَطَاعُونَا مَا قُتِلُوا۟ ۗ قُلْ فَٱدْرَءُوا۟ عَنْ
أَنفُسِكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَ إِن كُنتُمْ صَـٰدِقِينَ
﴿١٦٨﴾

Such were they who, having themselves stayed behind, said of their brothers: "If only they had listened to us, they would not have been slain." Say to them: "Ward off death from yourselves, then, if what you say be true." (168)

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ

Do not think of those who are slain in God's cause as dead. They are alive, and well provided for by their Lord. (169)

أَمْوَٰتًاۚ بَلْ أَحْيَآءٌ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

Happy they are with what God has granted them. They rejoice that those [of their brethren] who have been left behind and have not yet joined them have nothing to fear, nor have they [cause] to grieve. (170)

فَرِحِينَ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا۟ بِهِم مِّنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

They rejoice in the happy news of God's blessing and bounty, and in the fact that God will not suffer the reward of the believers to be lost. (171)

۞ يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِنِعْمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَفَضْلٍ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٧١﴾

Those who responded to the call of God and the Messenger after misfortune had befallen them: a great reward awaits those of them who continued to do good and feared God. (172)

ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَجَابُوا۟ لِلَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَآ أَصَابَهُمُ ٱلْقَرْحُۚ لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ وَٱتَّقَوْا۟ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧٢﴾

When other people warned them: "A big force has gathered against you, so fear them", that only strengthened their faith and they answered: "God is enough for us; He is the best Guardian." (173)

ٱلَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّ ٱلنَّاسَ قَدْ جَمَعُوا۟ لَكُمْ فَٱخْشَوْهُمْ فَزَادَهُمْ إِيمَٰنًا وَقَالُوا۟ حَسْبُنَا ٱللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ ٱلْوَكِيلُ ﴿١٧٣﴾

So they earned God's grace and bounty, suffering no harm. For they had striven to please God, Whose bounty is limitless. (174)

فَٱنقَلَبُوا۟ بِنِعْمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَفَضْلٍ لَّمْ يَمْسَسْهُمْ سُوٓءٌ وَٱتَّبَعُوا۟ رِضْوَٰنَ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو فَضْلٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٧٤﴾

It is but Satan who prompts people to fear his allies: so, have no fear of them, but fear Me if you are truly believers. (175)

إِنَّمَا ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ يُخَوِّفُ أَوْلِيَآءَهُۥ فَلَا تَخَافُوهُمْ وَخَافُونِ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٧٥﴾

Be not grieved by those who hasten on to disbelief. They cannot harm God in any way. It is God's will not to assign to them any share in the [blessings of the] life to come. A great suffering

وَلَا يَحْزُنكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُسَٰرِعُونَ فِى ٱلْكُفْرِۚ إِنَّهُمْ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔاۗ يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ أَلَّا يَجْعَلَ لَهُمْ حَظًّا فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِۖ وَلَهُمْ

عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧٦﴾

awaits them. (176)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلْكُفْرَ بِٱلْإِيمَـٰنِ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٧٧﴾

Indeed, those who have bought disbelief at the price of faith cannot harm God in any way. A grievous suffering awaits them. (177)

وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَا نُمْلِى لَهُمْ خَيْرٌ لِّأَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّمَا نُمْلِى لَهُمْ لِيَزْدَادُوٓا۟ إِثْمًا ۚ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿١٧٨﴾

Let not those who disbelieve imagine that Our giving them rein bodes well for their own souls. We only give them rein so that they may grow in sinfulness. A humiliating suffering awaits them. (178)

مَّا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَذَرَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَنتُمْ عَلَيْهِ حَتَّىٰ يَمِيزَ ٱلْخَبِيثَ مِنَ ٱلطَّيِّبِ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيُطْلِعَكُمْ عَلَى ٱلْغَيْبِ وَلَـٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَجْتَبِى مِن رُّسُلِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ ۖ فَـَٔامِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ ۚ وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ فَلَكُمْ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧٩﴾

It is not God's purpose to leave the believers in your present state except to set apart the bad from the good. And it is not God's purpose to reveal to you what is kept beyond the reach of human perception. But God favours from among His messengers whomever He wills. Believe, therefore, in God and His messengers. If you believe and are God-fearing, you shall have a great reward. (179)

God's Will and Man's Doing

The *sūrah* speaks of the Muslims' surprise at the turn of events, which betrayed their naïve concept of life. Soon, however, experience told them to look at the realities of life and how the laws of nature work. They realised that anyone who does not conform to nature and its laws should expect no preferential treatment. People must adapt themselves to the seriousness inherent in the nature of the universe, life and fate. The *sūrah* brings them back to reality as it explains to them that what has befallen them is the result of their own doing. But this is not all. Behind cause and effect lies God's predestination, and beyond the laws of nature lies God's free will.

The purpose of what happened is explained to them so that they learn how God directs events in the believers' favour to serve the cause which they advocate. It was an experience which made them better equipped to face what was bound to come, to put them through a serious test in order to sift their ranks and to mark out the hypocrites who were able to betray them. The whole affair, then, was part of the

accomplishment of God's will. They were thus able to view the event in its totality, equipped with this Qur'ānic explanation: *"Why, when a calamity befell you, after you had inflicted twice as much [on your enemy], did you exclaim, 'How has this come about?' Say: 'It has come from your own selves. Surely, God has the power over all things.' That which befell you, on the day when the two hosts met in battle, happened by God's leave, so that He may mark out the true believers."* (Verses 165-6)

God has committed Himself to grant victory to those who support His cause and fight to defend His faith. He, however, has made the granting of victory conditional upon certain things: that the whole concept of faith be deeply entrenched in their hearts, that the practical implications of faith manifest themselves in their organisation and behaviour and that they equip themselves with all the means necessary to achieve victory and exert their maximum effort. This is the law of nature which God has set in operation and which favours no one. When the believers fall short of meeting any of these conditions, they have to accept the consequences. The fact that they are Muslims and believers does not mean that the laws of nature should be suspended or abrogated for their sake. They are Muslims because they submit themselves to God and conduct their lives according to the laws of nature God has set in operation. This means, in practice, that they achieve harmony between their nature as human beings and the laws of nature.

That they are Muslims is a fact which does not remain inconsequential. They submit themselves to God, raise His banner and determine to obey Him and conduct their lives according to His constitution. All that will eventually turn their errors and shortcomings to good effect after they bear any sacrifice or pain attendant on them. Their mistakes become lessons and experiences which have their good effect. They make their faith pure and their submission clearer. Their ranks are purged of those whose faith is suspect. They are better equipped to achieve the ultimate victory. Thus, God's mercy and care are not withheld from the Muslims.

Indeed, they provide them with what they need to continue along their way, despite all the hardships they may have to face.

It is with such clarity and seriousness that the questioning and surprise of a Muslim community are answered. Both the immediate cause, the actions of the Muslim community, and the ultimate purpose, God's design, are explained. The hypocrites, on the other hand, are shown the fact that death is inevitable and cannot be avoided by staying at home at the time of battle: *"Why, when a calamity befell you after you had inflicted twice as much [on your enemy], did you exclaim: 'How has this come about?'"*

At Uĥud, the Muslims suffered a serious setback, losing 70 martyrs in addition to all the pain they experienced on that difficult day. They found the setback hard to swallow, considering that they were the believers who were fighting in defence of

God's cause. Yet those very Muslims had, prior to this setback, inflicted twice as many losses on their enemy. In the Battle of Badr, they inflicted similar damage on the idolaters when they killed 70 brave warriors of the Quraysh. They achieved a similar feat at Uĥud, when they were following the express orders of the Prophet. But then they weakened before the temptation of the loot and entertained thoughts which must never be entertained by believers.

God reminds them of all this as He answers their questioning surprise. He attributes what happened to them to its immediate cause: *"It has come from your own selves."* It is you who have weakened and entered into dispute. It is you who have failed to fulfil the conditions set by God and His Messenger, and it is you who have succumbed to greed. It is you who have disobeyed God's Messenger and failed to implement his battle plan. What has happened to you, to your surprise, has come from your own souls, because the laws of nature set into operation by God have to apply to you. The laws of nature apply to all human beings, believers and unbelievers alike. Such laws are not suspended for a believer's sake. His faith is not complete unless he conducts his life according to God's laws.

"Surely, God has the power over all things." It is part of His overall power that His law should remain in operation and that matters must continue according to His will. The laws He has devised for the universe and for human life must continue as they have been set.

Nevertheless, God's will in this whole affair was accomplished for a definite purpose of His own. We must not forget that God's will lies beyond everything that takes place and every movement and action in the whole universe: *"That which befell you, on the day when the two hosts met in battle, happened by God's leave."* It has not taken place by mere coincidence or for idle play. Every movement and every action takes place according to a definite plan, with its causes and effects well reckoned. They indeed take place according to the laws of nature which must remain in operation, but in their total sum they accomplish God's purpose and complete the total design of the universe as God created it.

The Islamic view with regard to this whole issue is both comprehensive and well balanced and is not matched by any other view human beings have ever entertained.

Human life exists according to a consistent constitution and unavoidable rules, and beyond these lies God's active and free will. Yet all these are also subject to His wisdom which determines every thing that takes place. Thus the constitution governs all, and the rules apply to everything, including man. By his choice of action and what he determines, initiates and does, man makes himself subject to these rules which are bound to affect him. All this, however, takes place in accordance with God's will and fulfils His purpose. On the other hand, man's own will, thought,

action and movement are part of the constitution and the rules God has set in the universe. He accomplishes with them what He wills. There is no conflict between these and the rules of nature God has set in operation. Such a conflict exists only in the minds of people who put God's will and action against those of man, weighing the one against the other.

That way of thinking is contrary to the Islamic outlook. According to Islam, man is neither equal nor an enemy to God. Indeed when God granted man his constitution, intellect, will, freedom of choice and action, He placed nothing of this in conflict with His own will or laws. Nor did He allow these to serve a purpose other than His overall purpose in the whole universe. He only made it part of His will that man should reflect and decide, take action and produce an effect, be liable to God's rules and laws and bear the full consequences of all that. These consequences may bring him pleasure or pain, comfort or trouble, happiness or misery. But behind all that stands God's free will that encompasses everything in perfect coherence.

What happened in the Battle of Uĥud provides a good example of what we have just said about the way Islam views all matters.

God has explained to the Muslims His rules and conditions which bring them victory or cause defeat. They paid no heed to those rules and, consequently, suffered pain, hardship and defeat. But the matter did not stop there. Their disobedience and their pain contributed to the fulfilment of God's purpose of testing their community so as to mark out the true believers, give them a clear outlook and help them overcome their weakness, and also identify the hypocrites.

All this will ultimately be of benefit to the Muslim community, despite the pain and suffering. It all works in accordance with God's rules and laws. That gives believers who submit themselves to God and follow the way of living He has laid down an assurance that His help and care are forthcoming. By the same token, their errors are ultimately turned to their benefit, because the suffering such errors cause them becomes a means for proving their metal and educating them.

On such solid grounds the believers stand comfortably. They are reassured, free of worry and confusion as they face God's will and interact with His laws. They feel that God determines what He wills concerning them and others. They are merely one of the tools God employs to fulfil His purpose. Whatever they do, right or wrong, and all that results from it remain in full harmony with God's will and fulfils His purpose. It will all benefit them in their life: "*That which befell you, on the day when the two hosts met in battle, happened by God's leave, so that He may mark out the true believers. And (He might] mark out the hypocrites. When these were told, 'Come, fight in God's cause', or 'Defend yourselves', they answered, 'Had we known there would be a fight, we would certainly have followed you.' On that day they were nearer unbelief than faith, uttering with their mouths something different to what was in their hearts, but God knew full well all that*

they tried to conceal." (Verses 166-7)

This verse refers to the attitude of `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl and those who joined him. They are described here as "the hypocrites". Their true feelings became clear for all to see. They were marked out by their true attitude: "*On that day they were nearer unbelief than faith."* They lied when they protested that they only went back because they felt there would be no fight between the Muslims and the unbelievers. That was in no way their real reason. The fact is that they were "*uttering with their mouths something different to what was in their hearts."* Their hearts were infested with hypocrisy which meant that they placed their own considerations above those of faith.

This is indeed true, because what `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was thinking about that day was the fact that the Prophet did not follow his counsel, and that the arrival of the Prophet and his Companions in Madinah deprived him of the position of overall leader his people were preparing for him. Instead, the leadership belonged to faith and the messenger preaching it. These facts were indeed behind the desertion of `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and his followers when the unbelievers were at the gates of Madinah. That is indeed the reason for their refusal to listen to `Abdullāh ibn `Amr ibn Ĥarām when he said to them: "*'Come, fight in God's cause', or 'Defend yourselves:"* They said they did not think a fight would take place anyway. But the truth about them is made clear by God Himself: "*God knew full well all that they tried to conceal.''*

The *sūrah* continues to uncover the true nature of their attitude which aimed to spread a state of confusion and perplexity in the Muslim ranks: "*Such were they who, having themselves stayed behind, said of their brothers: If only they had listened to us, they would not have been slain.'"* (Verse 168) They did not merely stay behind when the battle was imminent, with all the confusion and turmoil that resulted from their desertion. What made things worse was that `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was still thought to be an honourable man. His hypocrisy was not yet known. God had not until that point identified him as a hypocrite, which would have much detracted from his standing among his people. They continued to raise doubt, sow discord and nurture feelings of regret, particularly among the families of those who died in battle. "*Such were they who, having themselves stayed behind, said of their brothers: If only they had listened to us, they would not have been slain."*

In this way they tried to show their own desertion as both wise and beneficial, while obeying the Prophet was shown to be disadvantageous and causing harm. Furthermore, they undermined the clear Islamic concept of God's will, which makes it inevitable that every person dies at his or her appointed time, according to God's will. Hence, the Qur'ānic statement answers them with an irrefutable argument that makes clear all the issues involved: "*Say to them: 'Ward off death from yourselves, then, if what you say be true.'"* (Verse 168) Death affects everyone: the fighter in the battlefield

as well as the deserter, the brave man and the coward. It can neither be prevented by taking precautions, nor delayed by cowardice or the evasion of risk. It is this fact that the Qur'ān puts to them plainly and clearly, thereby foiling all their wicked plotting, reassuring the Muslims and giving them all the comfort faith provides.

A very interesting point in the Qur'ānic review of the events of the battle is that `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's desertion, which occurred before the battle had even started, is commented on only at this point. Bringing it up so late in the discussion illustrates an important feature of the Qur'ānic method of educating the Muslim community. It starts with establishing the main rules which formulate the Islamic outlook, illustrating the proper feelings nurtured in a Muslim heart and explaining the criteria by which Islamic values come into play. When the Qur'ān has done that, it makes this reference to "the hypocrites", showing their action and how they subsequently behaved. By this time, we are well prepared to evaluate their action and understand how far removed it is from proper Islamic values. This is the right sequence and progress: to establish the right values and standards first, then to evaluate actions and behaviour according to them in order to arrive at the right conclusions.

There may be another purpose for delaying the reference to the desertion, namely, and that is to show that the deserters, particularly their chief, are viewed with contempt. He is not mentioned by name, so that he may sink into insignificance as "one of the hypocrites". In the scales of faith, he and his action are not worth more than this humiliating reference.

The *sūrah* then tackles another highly important matter with far- reaching effects. That is the fact that martyrs killed in the defence of God's cause are not dead; they continue to live and they receive what they need from their Lord. They continue to interact with the Muslim community and the events affecting it after they have departed. Such interaction is the most important aspect of continued life. Thus the life of the Uĥud martyrs is strongly linked to the events that followed their martyrdom before the *sūrah* describes the attitude of the true believers. These were the ones who responded to God and His Messenger after they had suffered the calamity of defeat. They immediately chased the Quraysh army so as to prevent any possible attempt by that army to attack Madinah. They paid little heed to other people's warnings that the Quraysh were marshalling large forces to attack them. They placed their trust in God and thus gave practical credence to their declaration of belief in Him: *"Do not think of those who are slain in God's cause as dead. They are alive, and well provided for by their Lord. Happy they are with what God has granted them. They rejoice that those [of their brethren] who have been left behind and have not yet joined them have nothing to fear, nor have they [cause] to grieve. They rejoice in the happy news of God's blessing and bounty, and in the fact that God will not suffer the reward of the believers to be lost."* (Verses 169-71)

Having reassured the believers and established the true facts concerning death and the Divine will, the *sūrah* adds to the reassurance of the believers by describing the fate of the martyrs who are killed while defending God's cause. Indeed that is the true meaning of a martyr, for there is no martyrdom except that achieved through defending God's cause, and dying in the process. These martyrs are indeed alive, having all of the essential qualities of life. They "receive" their needs from their Lord, are happy with the grace God bestows on them, rejoice at the happy news of what is to befall their brethren whom they had left behind, and they witness the events of the Muslim community. Such are the qualities of the living. Why should we, then, be distressed at their departure, when they are indeed interacting with those who are alive? But they have much more than this interaction. They have all that God bestows on them of His grace. Why do believers, then, create untrue separations between a living martyr and his people whom he has left behind, between this world and the world beyond, when there should be no such separation in their thoughts as in both worlds they deal with God.

To clarify this fact is of central importance in the formulation of one's overall understanding. Indeed it initiates a Muslim's perception of the universe, what takes place in it, as well as life in its various stages. Death is not the end of all life, as other people believe. Indeed it does not even represent a barrier between what comes before it and what comes after it.

"Do not think of those who are slain in God's cause as dead. They are alive, and well provided for by their Lord." This verse gives an order not to think of people killed while serving God's cause as dead, even though they have departed from this world and are no longer seen by the living. It gives also an assurance that they are very much alive, with their Lord. The verse then gives a list of the aspects of life they have. The first of these is that they are *"well provided for."*

In this life, we do not know what type of life martyrs have, except for whatever the Prophet has told us in authentic *ĥadīths.* Nevertheless, this true statement by God, Who knows all, is sufficient as a basis for us to fundamentally change our views of life and death, what separates them and what joins them together. It is enough to tell us that things need not be as they appear. Hence when we formulate our conceptions of absolute facts on the basis of their apparent features, we will not be able to arrive at a perfect understanding of such facts. It is infinitely better for us to wait for the right explanation of these facts from the One Who knows them all, God the Almighty.

Here the *sūrah* tells us about people from among us who are slain, depicting a life which is familiar to us in its visible aspects. However, because they are slain *"in God's cause"*, and because they have purged their thoughts and feelings of everything else while their souls look up to God and are sacrificed for His sake, God tells us that they

are alive, not dead. He forbids us to think of them as dead, assuring us that they are with Him, well provided for, and that they receive His bounty in the same way as the living. He then tells us about other qualities of their life. Thus we learn that they are happy *"with what God has granted them."* They are certainly pleased with what is given to them by God, because they know that it is part of His grace. Hence it is, for them, an evidence of the fact that He is well pleased with them.

Moreover, they think about their brethren whom they have left behind, rejoicing at their prospects, because they know that God is pleased with those who strive to serve His cause: *"They rejoice that those [of their brethren] who have been left behind and have not yet joined them have nothing to fear, nor have they [cause] to grieve. They rejoice in the happy news of God's blessing and bounty, and in the fact that God will not suffer the reward of the believers to be lost."* That is a complete picture showing them as continuing to be concerned with their brethren, feeling happy with what they have and reassured about the prospects of their brethren. What qualities of life do they, then, miss? How are they separated from those who are left behind? Why should their departure be an occasion of sadness and grief when it is one of happiness and pleasure?

These verses provide a complete transformation of the reality of death, when it comes about in the course of dedication to God's cause, and the feelings associated with it among the fighters themselves and those who are left behind. The outlook on life gives it a far wider expanse than the present fleeting one. Indeed this wider outlook strengthened the believers in all generations. It steadied their footsteps as they sought martyrdom for God's cause. Hence, the history of Islam portrays countless examples of the type of believers ready to sacrifice their lives for their faith. Some of these examples have been given at the beginning of our commentary on the events of the Battle of Uĥud.

The Fruits of Total Dedication to Islam

Now the *sūrah* moves on to tell us about the "believers" who are concerned with the martyrs and rejoice at what is held in store for them by their Lord: *"Those who responded to the call of God and the Messenger after misfortune had befallen them: a great reward awaits those of them who continued to do good and feared God."* (Verse 172)

The Prophet called upon those who had fought in the Battle of Uĥud to turn out for battle duty with him the following day. They were wounded and exhausted; they had barely escaped death. They were still living the horrors of the battle and the humiliation of defeat. They had lost some of their finest and dearest, were weaker because of their wounds, and also less in number.

Nevertheless the Prophet called them up, and called them in person. He did not

allow any new recruits to join this second expedition, which might, some would say, have reinforced the Muslim fighting force. They responded to the Prophet's call, which was, in essence, a call by God, as the verse makes absolutely clear. Their response was immediate, positive and favourable, despite their misfortune and wounds.

The fact that God's Messenger singled out those who had actually fought at Uĥud for this new call is particularly significant. Perhaps the Prophet did not wish the feelings of defeat and misfortune to be the last that remained with the Muslims after the battle. He called on them to chase the Quraysh in order to drive home to them that all that had happened was merely a test and an experience which was not the end of the matter. They remained strong while their victorious enemies were weak. It was an experience which was certain to be followed by victory once they had shaken off their weakness and failure, and responded to the call issued to them by God and His messenger.

As a corollary, the Prophet may have decided that the Quraysh should not leave the battlefield overjoyed and boastful at their victory. He, therefore, followed the Quraysh so as to make it clear to them that they had not caused any permanent damage to the Muslims; there still remained enough of them to chase off the Quraysh army. Those objectives were fulfilled, according to historical reports.

The Prophet might have also wished to make clear to the Muslims and to all mankind the birth of a faith that meant everything to its adherents. They had absolutely no aim or objective in their lives other than to serve the cause of their faith. They lived for it and they looked to nothing beyond it. They spared nothing of themselves. They offered all as a sacrifice for their faith. This was a new phenomenon the like of which had never been seen before. It was necessary that all mankind realised this after the believers themselves had realised it. Nothing could reflect the birth of this faith better than the marching of those who responded to God's call after misfortune had befallen them. Their march was both spectacular and awesome. It clearly reflected the fact that they relied totally on God. They did not care for people's scaremongering about the size of the Quraysh host as told by the messengers sent by Abū Sufyān, the chief of the Quraysh.

Similarly, the hypocrites depicted the Quraysh as extremely mighty. Those believers, however, cared nothing for all this: "*Those who responded to the call of God and the Messenger after misfortune had befallen them: a great reward awaits those of them who continued to do good and feared God. When other people warned them: A big force has gathered against you, so fear them', that only strengthened their faith and they answered: 'God is enough for us; He is the best Guardian.'*" (Verses 172-3) In this way, the Muslim community declared in the clearest of terms the birth of this faith. The wisdom behind the Prophet's plan is now clearly apparent to us.

Nothing to Fear from Satan's Allies

The pain and the grief suffered by the Muslims at Uĥud has been recorded by the Prophet's biographers. Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq reports the following:

One of the Prophet's Companions from the *Anşār* clan of `Abd al-Ashĥal who fought in Uĥud reports: "My brother and I were at Uĥud with God's messenger. Both of us came back wounded. When we heard the Prophet's call to us to come out and chase the enemy, I said to my brother, or perhaps he said to me: 'Can we miss an expedition led by God's messenger? By God, we have no animal to ride and both of us are wounded and can hardly move.' Nevertheless, we went out with the Prophet. My wounds were less serious than those of my brother. When he could no longer go on, I would carry him for some distance, until we reached the same destination as the rest of the Muslim soldiers."

The second report mentions that the Battle of Uĥud took place on Saturday, the middle day of the month of Shawwāl. On the following day, Sunday the 16th of Shawwāl, the call of the Prophet was made to people to go out and chase the enemy. The message was also made clear: only those who had attended the battle the day before were to come out. However, one of the Prophet's Companions called Jābir ibn `Abdullāh ibn `Amr, sought special permission to join the army. He said: "Messenger of God, my father ordered me to stay behind to look after my seven sisters, saying: 'My son, it does not behove you or me to leave these women without a man to look after them. Moreover, I am not one to allow you to have the privilege of fighting alongside God's Messenger and deny myself that privilege. Therefore, you stay behind and look after your sisters.' I did as he asked." The Prophet gave Jābir special permission to join him.

Such fine examples confirm the birth of this great faith in those hearts who recognise no one other than God as a guardian and whose faith is strengthened at time of hardship. When they are told that people are gathering forces against them, their answer is: *"God is enough for us; He is the best Guardian."* The practical outcome is the fulfilment of God's promise to those who rely on Him and dedicate themselves to His cause: *"... so they earned God's grace and bounty, suffering no harm. For they had striven to please God."* (Verse 174) They were saved, suffering no harm, but enjoying God's pleasure. That is indeed a manifestation of *"God's grace and bounty."* This statement emphasises the primary cause of what God may bestow. It all comes through God's grace and out of His bounty, with which He favours whomever He pleases. It is true that their attitude was uniquely splendid, but nevertheless, it is through God's grace that all bounty is bestowed.

God's bounty is certainly limitless. God records their attitude in His immortal

book, with His own words echoed throughout the universe. As we contemplate this attitude and the picture so drawn, we feel that the whole community went through a fundamental change overnight. It had matured and become much more certain of its stand. Its vision was no longer blurred. No more hesitation or reluctance as those witnessed the day before. It had now acquired a seriousness which had not been experienced before. Yet the time span between these two greatly differing attitudes is only one night. The hard experience produced its results and shook the very souls of the believers. Indeed, God's bounty through this difficult test is greater than anything else.

Finally, the passage concludes with explaining the reason behind fear. It is Satan who tries to depict his allies as a source of might. The believers must be on their guard never to entertain any fear of Satan or his allies. They must fear God alone, the Almighty Who overpowers all forces: *"It is but Satan who prompts people to fear his allies: so, have no fear of them, but fear Me if you are truly believers."* (Verse 175)

It serves Satan's purpose to show his allies as powerful and mighty, able to inflict harm on, and cause benefit to others. By doing so, he has the chance to spread evil and corruption on earth. People will surrender to his allies and allow them to do whatever they want. No one will contemplate standing up to them or foiling their evil purpose. When evil appears to be too powerful and people are paralysed by fear, then Satan's allies can accomplish what he wants of them. Thus, right appears to be wrong and wrong is shown to be right. Evil and corruption become widespread while truth and justice are suppressed. The evildoers make deities of themselves to perpetuate the suppression of goodness and to protect evil. When no one is able to stand up to them, evil becomes triumphant while the truth is overshadowed and forgotten. Satan is a deceptive sorcerer who hides behind his allies while at the same time causing people to fear his allies. But God exposes him as he truly is, without cover. The believers are made aware of Satan's scheming. Thus, they can be on their guard and they have no fear of him or his allies.

Both Satan and his allies are too weak to be feared by any believer who relies on his Lord and has His support. The only power to be feared is the one which truly can cause harm and benefit. That is God's power, feared by those who believe in God. By fearing God alone they are the most powerful of all people. No other force can stand up to them. Hence, God instructs the believers in these words: *"It is but Satan who prompts people to fear his allies: so, have no fear of them, but fear Me if you are truly believers."*

How People's Actions Affect God

Be not grieved by those who hasten on to disbelief They cannot harm God in any way.

> *It is God's will not to assign to them any share in the [blessings of the] life to come. A great suffering awaits them.* (Verse 176)

This verse addresses the Prophet in words which are meant to console him and lighten his grief when he sees people hastening to disbelief and vying with one another to embrace it, as if they were competing for a coveted prize. He is told that all such actions will harm God in no way. The question is one of temptation for them which they cannot resist. God is fully aware of what they think and do, which qualifies them to be deprived of all blessings in the hereafter. He, therefore, has left them to follow their disbelief wherever it leads them. The point is that guidance has been provided for them but they preferred disbelief and, in consequence, they were left alone to follow the way of their choosing. Indeed, they have been given plenty of time and comfort, but they have not been wise enough to understand that it will all end in their undoing. God's purpose behind all events, including the tests endured by the believers and the indulgence allowed disbelievers is then explained. Good will be distinguished from evil. People's thoughts and beliefs are known only to God, but He wanted this to be known to people in such a way that they could easily comprehend it.

This conclusion is the most suitable after the Qur'ān's detailed comments on the events of a battle in which the Muslims suffered a heavy defeat and the idolaters achieved a spectacular victory. For there will always be doubts and silent complaints whenever a battle between truth and falsehood ends up with a setback for the truth and a triumph for falsehood. Why does this happen, Lord? Why do the advocates of the truth suffer while the followers of falsehood triumph? Why is the truth not victorious in every battle it fights against falsehood? Should not the truth always achieve victory? Why is falsehood allowed to gather such strength when it only shakes people and raises doubts in their hearts?

This is indeed what happened at Uĥud when, surprised at what befell them, the Muslims exclaimed: *"How has this come about?"* (Verse 165)

At the conclusion of this long passage, the final answer is given to reassure people and remove all doubts. God's purpose and His law are explained for that particular occasion and for all time. What we are told here is that when falsehood is victorious in any confrontation with the truth then that is not the end of the matter.

Falsehood may appear to be all-conquering, but it is only temporary. No one should think that falsehood is invincible or that it can reduce the truth to a permanently weak position from which it will never recover. Nor does the apparent weakness of the truth in any particular period of time mean that God has abandoned it or that He would allow evil and falsehood to put the truth out of existence.

All this is part of a clearly defined purpose. God allows evil to go the length of its way, committing the most ghastly of crimes and sins so that it merits the worst of suffering. He also tests the truth and its advocates in order to distinguish those who remain truly steadfast and increases their reward. It all, then, ends up in a net gain for the truth and net loss for evil. Each has a double portion of what it earns.

> *Be not grieved by those who hasten on to disbelief. They cannot harm God in any way. It is God's will not to assign to them any share in the [blessings of the] life to come. A great suffering awaits them."* (Verse 176)

This is a consolation for the Prophet so that he does not grieve when he sees people driving headlong into disbelief. This portrays an actual state of affairs in which we see some people exert every effort as they go along the path of evil, disbelief and disobedience of God. They drive along as if they are chased by a fearsome enemy or as if they are promised a splendid prize.

The Prophet used to grieve when he saw such people condemning themselves to a fateful doom, driving towards hell, and he could do nothing to save them because they were determined not to listen to him. He also grieved at what befell the Muslims and his message at the hands of those hardened disbelievers. Masses of people were awaiting the final result of the battle between Islam and the Quraysh in order to choose the camp to join. When the Quraysh eventually embraced Islam, people flocked in large numbers to the religion of God. All these were considerations that affected the Prophet. Hence, the consolation from God: *"Be not grieved by those who hasten on to disbelief They cannot harm God in any way."*

There is absolutely no doubt that such people could not cause God any harm. This is the truth which needs no explanation. But God wants to make it clear that the cause of faith is His own cause. The battle against the disbelievers is, therefore, God's own battle. The ultimate result of this cause and its battle is not the responsibility of the Prophet and, consequently, it is not the responsibility of the believers. For those who hasten on to disbelief are fighting God and they are much too weak to harm Him in any way. They can in no way harm His faith or its advocates no matter how hardened they may be in their disbelief and no matter how much harm they may cause the believers.

The question still arises: why does God allow them to achieve a victory against the believers when they are His own immediate enemies? The answer being that He has prepared something much more humiliating for them: *"It is God's will not to assign to them any share in the [blessings of the] life to come."* They utilise all the share assigned to them and they shoulder their whole burden, meriting God's punishment in full. It is towards this end that they drive headlong: "*A great suffering awaits them."* Why does

God then wish them to have such a miserable end? They have earned it by choosing it themselves.

Why Disbelievers May Wield Power

> *Indeed, those who have bought disbelief at the price of faith cannot harm God in any way. A grievous suffering awaits them. Let not those who disbelieve imagine that Our giving them rein bodes well for their own souls. We only give them rein so that they may grow in sinfulness. A humiliating suffering awaits them. It is not God's purpose to leave the believers in your present state except to set apart the bad from the good. And it is not God's purpose to reveal to you what is kept beyond the reach of human perception. But God favours from among His messengers whomever He wills. Believe, therefore, in God and His messengers. If you believe and are God fearing, you shall have a great reward.* (Verses 177-9)

To believe in God and to follow the path of faith was available to them. The proofs and pointers which guide human beings to faith are everywhere in the universe, planted deep into human nature. The harmony and complementarity which manifest themselves in clear and unique ways, and the direct, positive response of human nature to such remarkable evidence represent a clear invitation to man to have faith. He feels that only God could have created and organised the universe. Moreover, God has sent messengers to convey to mankind His message and to call on them to believe in Him. The message meets the needs of human nature and provides a complete and harmonious way of life.

Knowing that faith is so readily available to them, they nevertheless bartered it away for disbelief. In doing so, they deserve to be abandoned by God so that they can drive headlong into disbelief, exhausting all their share of God's grace, leaving no reward for themselves in the hereafter. Immersed so totally in error and having nothing of the truth, they are too weak to cause God any harm whatsoever. Error has no justice and falsehood has no strength. Its advocates cannot harm those who respond to God's call, even though they may have forces with which they can inflict temporary harm on the believers.

"*A grievous suffering awaits them.*" The suffering they will have to endure is incomparably more painful than what they can inflict on believers in this life. "*Let not those who disbelieve imagine that Our giving them rein bodes well for their own souls. We only give them rein so that they may grow in sinfulness. A humiliating suffering awaits them.*"

At this point the *sūrah* tackles the doubts entertained by some people and their silent remonstrations as they see the enemies of the truth and of God go about unpunished, demonstrating their power and enjoying their strength, position and

wealth. What they seem to possess hardens their attitude and tempts people to side with them. Those whose faith remains weak may entertain evil thoughts so as to believe that God has acquiesced to falsehood, accepted evil and tyranny and given their advocates rein. Far be it for God to do so. They may also think that God takes a neutral position in the battle between truth and falsehood, allowing falsehood to smash the truth. They may even think that a certain brand of falsehood is right; otherwise, how is it allowed to grow and triumph? Or they may go as far as to think that it is the natural order of things in this life for falsehood to triumph over the truth. As for the transgressors who serve evil, wreak injustice and spread corruption, they continue with their erring ways and drive headlong into unbelief, imagining that they wield absolute power and that there is no force to stand up to them. All this is plainly wrong. It is an erroneous concept of how God conducts matters. God warns the disbelievers against entertaining such thoughts. If He does not visit them with immediate punishment for their disbelief and, instead, allows them a chance to enjoy themselves in this life, they should know that it is all a test which lures them away so that their attitudes harden and their errors become plainly apparent: "*Let not those who disbelieve imagine that Our giving them rein bodes well for their own souls. We only give them rein so that they may grow in sinfulness.*"

Had they deserved to be helped out of their distractions with an awakening test, God would have put them to such a trial. But He does not wish them well after they have bought disbelief at the price of faith. They no longer deserve to be awakened. Instead, "*a humiliating suffering awaits them.*" Such humiliation is the exact opposite of their present position of power, prestige and affluence.

This makes it clear to us that a test in this life is a type of God's bounty which is granted to those for whom God stores up a happier future. When it comes as the result of actions made by good servants of God who strive hard in advocating His cause, it is done for a definite purpose which may not be immediately apparent. It remains part of God's grace, shown to His servants. This is sufficient to reassure the believers and to drive home some basic principles about the Islamic concept of life.

It was part of God's grace to the believers that He distinguishes them from the hypocrites who infiltrated their ranks and who had no love for Islam. He put the believers to this hard test at Uĥud as a result of certain actions of their own making, in order to set the bad apart from the good.

"*It is not God's purpose to leave the believers in your present state except to set apart the bad from the good. And it is not God's purpose to reveal to you what is kept beyond the reach of human perception. But God favours from among His messengers whomever He wills. Believe, therefore, in God and His messengers. If you believe and are God-fearing, you shall have a great reward.*" This is a clear Qur'ānic statement which leaves us in no doubt that it is not part of God's design or method to allow the ranks of the believers to

remain loose, giving a chance to the hypocrites to join them under false pretences when they have no real faith. God has moulded this nation of Islam in order that it plays a great role in this world, implements the supreme code of living designed by God Himself. Such a great role requires dedication, purity and unity. To fulfil it the Muslims must not allow any infiltration into their ranks. For this task to be accomplished it requires, in short, that the actors be as great as the role assigned to them in this life and worthy of the position God has prepared for them in the life to come. This means that a severe test must be endured so that only the strong in faith remain within the ranks and those who are weak are moved aside. In practice, it meant that the great shake-up at Uĥud was necessary so that the believers did not remain as they were before the battle.

Nor is it God's purpose to allow human beings to know what He has chosen to remain hidden from them. They are not, by nature, ready or able to receive such a revelation because their constitution has been especially designed to fulfil a certain task in this life which does not require such knowledge. The human constitution would collapse if such a revelation was made, because it has not been made to receive of it except a portion which allows the soul to know its Creator. The least that would happen to man when he knows his eventual destiny is that he remains idle and does nothing in fulfilment of his task on earth, namely, to build human life. Alternatively, he may be worried about his destiny and this may exhaust his strength. How then does God set the bad apart from the good? How does He purge the Muslim ranks from all hypocrisy and mould the Muslim community in the proper shape to fulfil its role? The answer is given in the Qur'ānic statement: *"But God favours from among His messengers whomever He wills."* It is through His message, and through accepting it and believing in it and through the striving of the messengers and the testing of their followers that God's purpose is accomplished. This again stresses the importance of the test which distinguishes people. We now know a part of God's purpose as it manifests itself in the events of life.

Having explained this fundamental fact, an address is made to the believers to demonstrate within their world the practical effects of their faith. If they do, then a great reward awaits them: *"Believe, therefore, in God and His messengers. If you believe and are God-fearing, you shall have a great reward."* This directive, coupled with the promise of a great reward, is the best conclusion for the comments given in this *sūrah* on the Battle of Uĥud.

The Lesson in a Nutshell

The Qur'ān's analysis of the events of the Battle of Uĥud and their ramifications determine that further exploration of the facts be set forward. Only the most

important and far-reaching of these facts, however, will now be pointed out.

1. The first principle relates to the nature of the Islamic system, the way of life God has chosen for mankind, and the way it works in real life. This is a basic aspect which many people overlook or fail to understand. There are those who think that since Islam is a Divine system, it ought to work in real life in a miraculous or supernatural way, with no regard for human nature, man's natural abilities or the real world in which man lives.

   However, when these people see that Islam does not work in this manner, and that it only operates within the constraints of human power and the material limits of man's existence, and that it interacts with that power and that existence, they are hit by a sudden sense of disappointment. They are surprised that Islam is affected by man's capacity and environment, and that these realities do actually influence, sometimes negatively, people's response to Islam. Their faith in the efficacy and practicality of religious faith thus becomes dented, and some may even lose all faith in religion as such.

   Such misunderstandings stem from one fundamental misconception about the nature of Islam and its practical operation in human life. Islam is implemented by human efforts, within the limits of human power. It begins from where man is at a particular moment. It proceeds from his material existence and takes him all the way to the end. It goes as far as man's endeavour and capacity can take him, always mindful of his limitations and capabilities.

   Islam's main characteristic, however, is that it never for one moment neglects human nature and the realities of man's physical existence, all the while allowing him to reach new heights of progress and achievement. This is unparalleled in any man-made system. It happened in the past and can always happen again if a serious attempt is made to revive Islam.

   The mistake lies in misunderstanding or ignoring the nature of this religion, and in looking for supernatural miracles that distort human nature or are totally divorced from man's propensities, aptitudes, capabilities, and from his real physical existence. Is not Islam a Divine way of life? Is it not the religion chosen by the most Omnipotent power in the whole universe? Why, then, does it only operate within the bounds of human power? Why does it require human effort to succeed? Why does it, and its followers, not prevail every time? Why is it sometimes overtaken by habits, desires and material realities? Why should its opponents, who are in the wrong, prevail over its followers, who are in the right? These, as we can see, are all misleading questions that arise from a failure to understand the most basic and simplest fact about the

nature of Islam and the way it works in real life.

God is, of course, capable, through Islam or otherwise, of modifying human nature, and He was able to create man with a different nature. But, He chose to create man as we know him; He chose to grant him a will and the ability to respond; He chose to make guidance dependent on effort and perception. He further ordained that human nature remains a constant and active force for all time. He intended that His way of life shall only be realised in real life through human effort and within man's power, and He planned that man's achievements correspond to the effort he makes within the constraints of real life.

No one can question God's wisdom in this whole process, because no one has the Divine qualities or knowledge to comprehend the overall system of creation or how it works. No one but God can fathom the underlying nature of every creature in this world or the purpose behind creating them in this particular way.

In this context, neither a sincere believer in God nor a hardened atheist could question God's judgement in this regard. A believer is too polite with God, whom he knows within his heart and through His attributes, to ask such an impertinent question, and he knows well that the human mind is not equipped to explore such areas of knowledge. The unbeliever would not ask simply because he does not believe in the existence of God; were he to believe, he would realise that it is a matter for God Almighty alone.

Not one of God's creation has the right to question why He created human nature as we know it? Why did He decide that human nature should be a constant and active force for all time? Why did He decide that the implementation of the Divine system could only be achieved through human effort and within the power frame of the human being?

Nevertheless, every human being has the right to understand this fact and to see how it works in real life — the right to interpret human history according to it so as to appreciate it on the one hand, and to change it on the other.

The Divine system of Islam, as taught by the Prophet Muĥammad, cannot be implemented in real life by the mere fact that it is revealed by God. Nor is it established by merely conveying it or explaining it to people. Nor is it forced on human society like any natural law governing the movement of the galaxies or the stars. The only way to set up the Islamic system is for a group of human beings to fully adopt and uphold its principles, and dedicate their life, energy and aspirations to sustain it. To persuade others of it and build their lives according to its teachings. For that group to endeavour to conquer

weakness, prejudice, desire, and ignorance within themselves and within the hearts of others. To face up to those motivated by weakness, desire and ignorance in their opposition to God's system and to stem the progress of such unbelievers. For this group to go forward in their implementation of God's system, starting from where people are, and never ignoring the requirements of their real situation. This group will, at times, prevail over its own weakness as well as over others and similarly it will fail at others. Its success and failure will depend on the effort it makes and the practical means it employs, and on how successful it is in choosing the right means. But, first and foremost, success depends on its dedication to its cause and on how truly it represents its values and principles in its own behaviour, how close it is to God and how much confidence and trust it places in Him.

This is the reality of Islam and its methods. This is its true action plan and its means to achieve it. This is what God wishes to impart to the Muslim community as He takes them through the Battle of Uĥud and analyses its events.

When that community fell short in representing the true character of Islam in their conduct during the battle and failed, at certain points, to take proper measures to secure victory, when they overlooked the simple but fundamental truth and assumed that victory was guaranteed simply by virtue of their being Muslims, God left them to suffer the hurting pains of defeat. The Qur'ān draws their attention to this basic fact: *"Why, when a calamity befell you, after you had inflicted twice as much [on your enemy], did you exclaim, 'How has this come about?' Say: It has come from your own selves. Surely God has the power over all things.'"* (Verse 165)

The Qur'ān, however, does not leave the argument there but goes on to unveil God's purpose behind the causes and the outcome of the events. It reveals the advantages God intended by the test the Muslims had undergone.

Allowing God's system to take its course in life through human endeavour and under human influence is beneficial. It is healthy and good for human life and it polishes and refines human nature and revives it. A man's faith is only fully consummated when he is tested through direct dealings with people, teaching them, arguing with them and struggling to win them over by all means.

One has to undergo trials and tribulations and experience patience and perseverance in the face of all adversities, and learn how to tolerate defeat and how to cope with victory, which can be much harder, until one's heart is cleansed and true believers are set apart so that their community proceeds

along the true path of success, trusting in God alone.

A man's faith is not complete until he experiences the hardships of expounding that faith to others, because in that process, he develops his own faith. New horizons are opened up for him that would not otherwise have opened; new facts about people and life are revealed that would not otherwise have been revealed. His feelings and outlook, his habits and practices, and his emotions and responses reach levels that would not otherwise have been attainable.

Likewise, a community has to undergo the harsh experiences of struggle until every member realises the extent of his or her own power and objectives. In this way the community understands the value and role of its constituent parts, how strong each member is and how solidly united the whole structure is.

This is what God wanted to teach the Muslim community at Uĥud and through the Qur'ānic discussion of its events. The verses come together to impress upon the Muslims the reasons for their defeat as well as the care and protection God afforded them. They emphasise the rationale behind God's will and purpose in all the events and developments that took place, and stress the underlying principle that God's natural and social laws apply equally to all human societies and individuals.

Ultimately, it is God's will and purpose that are the moving force behind all causes, events and developments. This comprehensive Islamic perspective thus underpins those momentous events and their interpretation.

2. The second principle that emerges from the Qur'ānic comments on the Muslim defeat at Uĥud shows that human nature is not perfect. It does, however, have the propensity to develop and grow to the highest standards of perfection that it is capable of reaching in this world.

   In that community of Muĥammad's Companions, we have a section of humanity representing the quintessential part of the nation that God describes as "*the best nation ever brought forth for mankind.*" They were the ideal human social model ever to grace the earth. But when we look at that community, what do we see? We see a group of human beings who have their weaknesses and shortcomings. The Qur'ān tells us that among them were individuals who fell for Satan's enticement, some who degenerated into dissension and disobedience, and some who were weak and faint-hearted. There were also those who ran away and cared for nothing but their own safety and self-interest.

   But all were believing Muslims. However, they were at the early stages of

Islam's existence, still going through their formative years. Nevertheless, they took their faith most seriously. They submitted all their affairs to God, willingly, and they accepted His religion and way of life. Hence, God did not ostracise them, but rather exonerated them and showed them mercy. He instructed His Messenger to pardon them, pray for their forgiveness and consult them on various matters, despite their unbecoming conduct and the disastrous outcome of his efforts to consult them.

Indeed, God allowed them to see for themselves the results of their own actions. He took them through that gruelling experience, but never banished them or threw them out of the Muslim community. He did not say to them: "You are not fit for this mission due to the weaknesses and shortcomings you have displayed." He acknowledged their faults and inadequacies and presented them with the opportunity to learn through experience by pointing out to them the various lessons and admonitions implicit in that experience. All this is done with a thoughtful, tolerant and caring demeanour, like that of an adult towards a child. He exposed their weakness not in order to humiliate, shame or discredit them, nor in order to overburden their souls, but rather in order to guide and inspire them. To give them greater self-confidence and self-esteem, and to teach them never to despair of reaching their goals as long as they remain loyal to God and hold fast to their strong ties with Him.

They did, in the end, prevail. The sound elements among them, who were few and far between at the beginning of the confrontation, had multiplied. The following day, they all went out with the Prophet to fight for a second time, without any apprehension, hesitation or fear of the threats people made against them. The Qur'ān spoke well of them and applauded their stance.

As the community matured, they were treated more rigorously and held answerable for their actions in a much stricter manner. This becomes quite clear if one considers the Qur'ān's treatment of the aftermath of the Tabūk expedition, in *sūrah* 9, *al-Tawbah,* or Repentance. There, a small group of Muslims who did not join the campaign are severely reprimanded. There is a remarkably different tone in the Qur'ānic approach to, and its reproach of, the Muslims at Uĥud and those at Tabūk, although they were fundamentally the same people. At Tabūk the Muslims were more mature and, therefore, more responsible. Nevertheless, they were human, with the same weaknesses, failings and imperfections. Yet they never ceased to repent and seek God's support and forgiveness.

Islam preserves and nurtures human nature. It does not change it or overburden it even when it is stretched to its limits of achievement and

innovation.

This fact is of great value. It gives lasting hope to mankind so that they may strive more and achieve more under Islam's unique way of life. Those early Muslims began their journey to the top from very humble beginnings. Those frail first steps were taken by a small group of Arabs whose life was, as we have seen, backward in every respect. Their example gives all humanity reason for optimism to achieve greater and further progress, no matter how low it has fallen. They did not represent an isolated case, or a miracle that can never be repeated. Their experience was a product of the Divine way of life which is accomplished through human effort and power, by human beings who are capable of achieving greater and greater things.

The Divine system starts with any society from whatever material situation it is at and takes it forwards and upwards, just as it did with that naïve and ignorant group of Arabs. Within a very short span of time, less than 25 years, that group achieved unparalleled heights of progress and civilisation.

One important requirement, however, must be fulfilled: people must fully submit to God's system; they must believe and comply with its laws and teachings; it must be the foundation of their life, the slogan of their movement, and the beacon in their journey on the long and arduous route ahead.

3. The third fact to come out of the Uĥud episode and the Qur'ān's analysis of it is the close relationship, in Islam's outlook, between the mentality of the Muslim community and the battle it fights against its enemies in every arena. The relationship between the community's beliefs, perceptions, ethics, behaviour and political, economic and social organisation, on the one hand, and its victory or defeat on the battlefield, on the other. These are crucially important factors in determining what befalls a nation and in whether or not it prevails.

   The Divine way of life operates within the huge area of human psyche and human society. It is an intricate and multi-faceted arena. Plans may falter or fail when the relationship and the coordination among its constituent parts are upset or disrupted. It is after all a system which looks at life in its totality, rather than in fragments. It deals with all aspects of man and life, affecting both in a single integrated way that causes no dichotomy or fragmentation.

   This is clearly illustrated in the connection the Qur'ān makes between defeat and succumbing to Satan's suggestions, as in the case of *"those of you who turned away on the day when the two hosts met in battle, Satan caused them to slip only in consequence of something that they themselves had done."* (Verse 155)

Conversely, the earlier believers who fought steadfastly by their prophets' side, provided a role-model for the Muslims to emulate. They began their fighting with prayers and pleas for God's forgiveness (Verses 146-8).

When the Qur'ān addresses the believers in verses 133-5, it directs them first to cleanse their hearts of sin and to seek God's forgiveness before it urges them to stand firm and fight valiantly and bravely in the battlefield. Earlier, in verse 112, it affirms that the reasons for the humiliation and defeat of the people of earlier revelations lay in their transgressions and wickedness.

There are numerous references to wrongdoing and misconduct throughout the Qur'ān's review of the Battle of Uĥud, while the *sūrah* as a whole is filled with allusions to fear of God. This thread links the *sūrah's* diverse themes. There is also the call to abandon usury and to obey God and His messenger. To behave with goodwill and benevolence towards others, and to control anger, all of which are qualities that purify the individual and cleanse society. The whole *sūrah* appears as one integrated effort to emphasise this major objective.

4. A fourth feature of the Islamic method of educating its followers is that it takes them through practical experiences in order to cultivate in them certain feelings, emotions and responses before giving them its judgement and interpretation of those events and experiences, as given in its review of the Battle of Uĥud. In its analysis of the events, the Qur'ān touches every possible nerve in human emotions and behaviour, correcting wrong impressions, giving reassurance and confirming certain facts. It leaves no relevant thought, sensibility or concern without highlighting it or making a direct reference to it. It unravels all aspects of human nature and human response in order to cleanse, purify, correct, clarify and refine the subjects' feelings, impressions, concepts and values. Its aim is to establish the true, sound principles of the Islamic outlook for a better and more stable life. This approach enables the Qur'ān to use every event and every experience by the Muslim community as a means for enlightenment, education and a broader understanding of things.

   Furthermore, the Qur'ān's review of the Battle of Uĥud is meticulous, incisive and comprehensive. Every scene, every move and every emotion is precisely recorded and analysed. Every corner of human feeling and behaviour is penetrated and explored; nothing is overlooked. There is precision in the analysis of the causes and the outcome of the events; there is depth in discussing the various factors involved in propelling the action; there is vitality in the descriptions and rhythms. Feelings are intertwined with imagery in a profound and dynamic way. One cannot remain impassive or detached from the scenes so described; instead one is filled with energy,

enthusiasm and inspiration.

5. Another highly important principle which emerges from the Battle of Uĥud is the realistic nature of the Divine way of life. For the Divine system to be established, it has to be actually implemented in society. It is not a mere collection of abstract principles or vague exhortations. It is a practical, tangible and realistic way of life. The best way to illustrate this fact is the Divine view of *shūrā,* or collective public consultation.

   The Prophet would have been quite within his rights to spare the Muslim community the travails of their experience with consultative government; they were still a young society surrounded by enemies, both from within and from without. He could have planned and conducted the confrontation according to his own judgement, supported by the premonitions in his dream. He did not have to consult his Companions or to comply with the outcome of that consultation. Indeed, even his Companions realised that they might have forced him into a course of action he did not wish to take.

   Nevertheless, the Prophet went ahead and accepted the consensus of his people. This he did, so that they would face the consequences of their judgement and learn how to take responsibility. In the Prophet's view, and according to the Islamic approach he was establishing, compliance with a collective decision takes precedence over the need to avoid losses on the battlefield or to avert the pains of the bitter experience of *shūrā.* To do that would be to deny the Muslims the benefit of their experience and deprive them of the lessons and the maturity they would gain from that experience.

   The Divine instruction to pursue consultation and to comply with its outcome were received by Muĥammad after the battle as confirmation of the principle itself. This was the most effective and profound way of establishing the principle and of elaborating on the tenets of the Divine way of life.

   Islam does not defer establishing a principle until the community is ready to implement it. The community needs to practise in order to learn and be prepared. To deny people the benefits of their experience of fundamental principles, such as consultative government, is more detrimental to the development of that society than any outcome that might emerge from that experience. Mistakes, no matter how great or serious, are no justification for the invalidation, withdrawal or suspension of a particular tenet or principle. This would only stunt the growth and development of the community, emasculate its expertise and threaten its whole existence.

   This is the meaning conveyed by the Qur'ānic statement: "*Therefore pardon them and pray for them to be forgiven, and consult them in the conduct of public*

affairs." (Verse 159)

The practicalities of this approach can also be seen very clearly in the Prophet's behaviour. He refused to take the matter for consultation a second time indicating that it would be a sign of indecisiveness to do so. It would totally undermine the very process itself. In this respect he made that historic declaration that "no prophet should lay down his battle dress until God decides the issue". Then came the Qur'ānic instruction: *"When you have resolved about a course of action, put your trust in God."* (Verse 159) Thus, the action and the instruction come together in perfect harmony.

6. Finally, we learn from the Qur'ānic review of Uĥud that God's way of life is constant and consistent in its values and standards. People may misunderstand the Divine way of life or misinterpret its principles, teachings and concepts, but none of this should in any way demean or devalue that system itself.

   If people misunderstand the Divine system, they are told that they have gone wrong and if they deviate from its principles and teachings, they are depicted as mistaken or misguided. Islam does not overlook such mistakes or deviations, no matter how highly regarded the culprits are, and it does not change its nature in order to accommodate or legitimise such errors or deviations.

   What we learn from this is that exonerating the individual does not justify distorting or mutilating the system. It is far more advantageous for the universal Muslim community to keep the values and principles of their way of life pure and intact and to identify and isolate those who misconstrue or misinterpret them, no matter who they are. Their mistakes and misconceptions should never be justified or lent any legitimacy by changing or modifying the values and standards of the system itself. Such course of action is far more damaging to Islam than criticising or censuring certain Muslim leaders or prominent figures. The system is greater and more lasting than any individual. The true history of Islam is not everything that Muslims have done or achieved in their life, but it is everything they have done and accomplished in total agreement with Islam and its firmly-established values and principles. The deviations and mistakes should not be attributed to Islam or associated with it, but should be credited to the individuals or societies that were responsible for them. The "history of Islam" and the "history of the Muslims" are not one and the same thing, even those who are, to all intents and purposes, Muslim. The "history of Islam" is represented by eras when Islam was truly and rightly put into practice, when its concepts and beliefs, its code of morality, and its way of life for society as a whole were truly

implemented. Islam is the firm centre around which the nation's life revolves within a well - defined structure. Once people stray away from that framework or abandon the central tenets of Islam, they cease to have anything to do with Islam. In this way, Islam should not be held accountable for their behaviour nor should it be interpreted in the light of their actions. Indeed, what justification is there to continue to associate such individuals or groups with Islam, if they break away from its central beliefs and principles and refuse to comply with them in their daily lives. Muslims are only Muslims if they adopt Islam as their way of life, and not because they bear Muslim names or because they claim to be Muslim.

God intended to convey these lessons to the Muslim community by exposing their mistakes and noting their weaknesses and shortcomings. Having done that, He then absolves them and relieves them of all guilt, albeit after having taken them through a harsh and gruelling experience.

11
Main Issues Re-emphasised

وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَبْخَلُونَ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ هُوَ خَيْرًا لَّهُم ۖ بَلْ هُوَ شَرٌّ لَّهُمْ ۖ سَيُطَوَّقُونَ مَا بَخِلُوا۟ بِهِۦ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ وَلِلَّهِ مِيرَٰثُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٨٠﴾

Let not those who niggardly cling to all that God has bestowed on them of His bounty think that this is good for them. Indeed, it is bad for them. That to which they niggardly cling will hang around their necks on the Day of Resurrection. To God belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth, and God is well aware of all that you do. (180)

لَّقَدْ سَمِعَ ٱللَّهُ قَوْلَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ فَقِيرٌ وَنَحْنُ أَغْنِيَآءُ ۘ سَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَالُوا۟ وَقَتْلَهُمُ ٱلْأَنۢبِيَآءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَنَقُولُ ذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابَ ٱلْحَرِيقِ ﴿١٨١﴾

God has certainly heard the words of those who said: "God is poor, and we are rich." We shall record what they have said, and also their slaying of prophets against all right and We shall say: "Taste now the torment of burning. (181)

ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلَّٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿١٨٢﴾

"This is on account of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the slightest injustice to His servants." (182)

ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَهِدَ إِلَيْنَآ أَلَّا نُؤْمِنَ لِرَسُولٍ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَنَا بِقُرْبَانٍ تَأْكُلُهُ ٱلنَّارُ ۗ قُلْ قَدْ جَآءَكُمْ رُسُلٌ مِّن قَبْلِى بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَبِٱلَّذِى قُلْتُمْ فَلِمَ قَتَلْتُمُوهُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

They declare: "God has charged us not to believe in any messenger unless he brings us an offering which the fire consumes." Say: "Messengers came to you before me with clear evidence of the truth, and with that which you describe. Why, then, did you slay them, if what you say is true?" (183)

فَإِن كَذَّبُوكَ فَقَدۡ كُذِّبَ رُسُلٞ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ جَآءُو بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَٱلزُّبُرِ وَٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُنِيرِ ١٨٤

Then, if they charge you with falsehood, before your time other messengers were also charged with falsehood when they came with clear evidence of the truth, and books of Divine wisdom and with the light-giving revelation. (184)

كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ ذَآئِقَةُ ٱلۡمَوۡتِۗ وَإِنَّمَا تُوَفَّوۡنَ أُجُورَكُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۖ فَمَن زُحۡزِحَ عَنِ ٱلنَّارِ وَأُدۡخِلَ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ فَقَدۡ فَازَۗ وَمَا ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَآ إِلَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلۡغُرُورِ ١٨٥

Every soul shall taste death, and you shall be paid on the Day of Resurrection only that which you have earned. He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph. The life of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment. (185)

۞ لَتُبۡلَوُنَّ فِيٓ أَمۡوَٰلِكُمۡ وَأَنفُسِكُمۡ وَلَتَسۡمَعُنَّ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ وَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُوٓاْ أَذٗى كَثِيرٗاۚ وَإِن تَصۡبِرُواْ وَتَتَّقُواْ فَإِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ عَزۡمِ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ١٨٦

You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and you shall hear much hurting abuse from those who were given revelations before you and from those who set up partners with God. But if you persevere and continue to fear God — that is indeed a matter requiring strong resolve. (186)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذَ ٱللَّهُ مِيثَٰقَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ لَتُبَيِّنُنَّهُۥ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَكۡتُمُونَهُۥ فَنَبَذُوهُ وَرَآءَ ظُهُورِهِمۡ وَٱشۡتَرَوۡاْ بِهِۦ ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلٗاۖ فَبِئۡسَ مَا يَشۡتَرُونَ ١٨٧

God has made a covenant with those who were granted revelations (when He bade them): "Make it known to mankind and do not conceal it." But they cast it behind their backs and bartered it away for a trifling price. Evil is that which they have taken in exchange for it. (187)

لَا تَحۡسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَفۡرَحُونَ بِمَآ أَتَواْ وَّيُحِبُّونَ أَن يُحۡمَدُواْ بِمَا لَمۡ يَفۡعَلُواْ فَلَا تَحۡسَبَنَّهُم بِمَفَازَةٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡعَذَابِۖ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ١٨٨

Do not think that those who exult in their deeds and love to be praised for what they have not done — do not think that they will escape punishment. A grievous suffering awaits them.

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٨٩﴾	(188)
	To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; and He has power over all things. (189)

Overview

The *sūrah* has now completed its coverage of the events at Uĥud, but the struggle between the Muslim community and their opponents around Madinah, the Jews in particular, was not over. The debates, the arguments, the intrigues, the rumours, the destructive propaganda, and the controversies raged on unabated. It is this unending struggle that has occupied most of the *sūrah.*

The Prophet Muĥammad had by that time, in the wake of the Battle of Badr, banished the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā from Madinah, in response to their seditious and subversive activities. They had reneged on agreements he made with them upon his arrival in Madinah and his establishment of a Muslim state incorporating the Arab tribes of Aws and Khazraj. The Jewish tribes of al-Nađīr and Qurayżah and the smaller Jewish communities in Khaybar and other parts of Arabia continued to work together, forging alliances with pockets of "hypocrites" inside Madinah and with the idolaters in Makkah and around Madinah, hatching plots to subvert and destroy the young Muslim state.

Earlier in the *sūrah,* the Jews are warned against a fate similar to that of the non-Muslim Arabs, if they underestimated the Muslims' ability to retaliate. We read: "*Say to those who disbelieve: 'You shall be overcome and gathered unto Hell, an evil resting place. You have had a sign in the two armies which met in battle. One was fighting for God's cause, the other an army of unbelievers. They saw with their very eyes that the others were twice their own number. But God strengthens with His succour whom He wills. In this there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see."* (Verses 12-13)

When the Prophet conveyed this warning to the Jews of Madinah, in the wake of the Badr campaign, they reacted with insolence and contempt. On one occasion, a group of the Qaynuqā` Jews said to the Prophet: "Muĥammad. Do not let yourself be deluded that you were able to kill a few naïve men from Quraysh who were so inexperienced in combat. By God, if you were to fight us, you would know that *we* are the real men, the like of whom you have never encountered." They went on to perpetrate more sedition and subversion, many aspects of which are given in this *sūrah,* culminating in the revocation of their agreement with Muĥammad.

Consequently, the Prophet lay siege to the Qaynuqā` forts until they yielded to his demands, and, thereafter, he banished them to a place called Adhra`āt. The two other Jewish tribes, Qurayżah and al-Nađīr, remained in Madinah, apparently faithful to their pact, but in practice heavily engaged in clandestine activities of disinformation, rumour and intrigue. Thus, the Qur'ān records for posterity Certain characteristics and patterns of behaviour that have, in many societies, come to be associated with some Jewish communities throughout history.

This section of the *sūrah* reviews some Jewish activities and claims that reflect an attitude of impertinence and disrespect, not only towards the Muslims, but towards God Almighty Himself. Not only did some of the Jews refuse to honour their financial commitments to the state, but had the impudence to say: *"God is poor, we are rich"*. (Verse 181)

We can also see in this section the weak arguments advanced by the Jews of Madinah against Islam and the contrived manner in which they contradict even their own known history. They disobeyed God and broke their covenant with Him; they concealed God's revelation from other people or disregarded it altogether; they slew prophets who had come to them with clear proof from God, which they rejected.

The Qur'ān's exposure of all this shameful misbehaviour was necessary so as to explain their attitude towards the Muslims and to counteract their unholy alliance with the pagan Arabs. It was also necessary for the enlightened education and development of the Muslim community. It made them aware of their surroundings and the environment they were living and working in; they knew the obstacles and pitfalls on their path and the pain and sacrifices awaiting them. Jewish hostility towards the Muslims in Madinah was much more serious and dangerous than that of the Arabs in Makkah, and could represent the largest threat in their history.

Hence, the constant flood of directives and guidelines addressing the Muslims throughout this discussion. The *sūrah* draws their attention to values that are enduring and fundamental as well as to those that are ephemeral and short-lived. It stresses that life is finite and short; all beings eventually die and in the Hereafter there are rewards, and there are gains and losses. We read: *"He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into Paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph. The life of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment."* (Verse 185) They are told that they will be tested regarding their lives and their wealth; they will meet with hostility and harassment from the unbelievers and the people of earlier revelations which they can only resist with perseverance, with fear of God, and in steadfast compliance of His order which will also save them from the fire.

These Divine directives continue to be as valid and as relevant for Muslims today as in the future. They are addressed to every Muslim community intending to revive

and uphold Islam. God will open their eyes to the hurdles and difficulties awaiting them, as well as the suffering and sacrifices they have to endure. Ultimately, their hearts and minds should aspire to rewards God has in store for them; suffering, death, and tribulation are all quite bearable. God calls to Muslims everywhere, as He did with that first generation, that: *"Every soul shall taste death, and you shall be paid on the Day of Resurrection only that which you have earned. He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph. The life of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment. You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and you shall hear much hurting abuse from those who were given revelations before you, and from those who set up partners with God. But if you persevere and continue to fear God — that is indeed a matter requiring strong resolve."* (Verse 185-6)

Today, the Qur'ān, as the book of this timeless Muslim community, remains its comprehensive constitution, its beacon and trusted guide, just as its enemies and its mission remain the same.

Impudence That Cannot Be Equalled

> *Let not those who niggardly cling to all that God has bestowed on them of His bounty think that this is good for them. Indeed, it is bad for them. That to which they niggardly cling will hang around their necks on the Day of Resurrection. To God belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth, and God is well aware of all that you do. God has certainly heard the words of those who said: "God is poor, and we are rich." We shall record what they have said, and also their slaying of prophets against all right, and We shall say: "Taste now the torment of burning. This is on account of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the slightest injustice to His servants."* (Verses 180-2)

We do not have any highly authentic report as to whom the reference is directly made in the first verse of this passage; that is, those who are warned against being miserly and the result of their miserliness on the Day of Judgement. The fact that it occurs at this particular point in the *sūrah* adds relevance to the following verses which speak of the Jews. It is they, confound them, who said, "*God is poor and we are rich."* It is also they who claimed that God specifically charged them not to believe in any messenger unless he brought them a burnt offering.

It appears that the whole passage has been revealed when the Jews were called upon to honour their financial commitments under their treaty wits the Prophet. They were also called upon to believe in the Prophet as God's Messenger and to give freely for God's cause.

The stern warning made in these verses and the exposition of the excuses given by the Jews as a justification for their refusal to believe in Muĥammad (pbuh) are

revealed as a strong reply to their impudence towards God, their Lord. This is coupled with support given to the Prophet in the face of their rejection of his message. He is reminded of what the messengers before him had to face in the way of hostile reception by their peoples. These included Israelite prophets who were killed after having brought to their people clear evidence of the truthfulness of their prophethood as well as miracles. All this is well known in the history of the Children of Israel.

> *Let not those who niggardly cling to all that God has bestowed on them of His bounty think that this is good for them. Indeed, it is bad for them. That to which they niggardly cling will hang round their necks on the Day of Resurrection. To God belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth, and God is well aware of all that you do.* (Verse 180)

This verse applies to the Jews who refuse to honour their commitments just as much as it applies to any people who refuse to come forward to support God's message with that which God has bestowed on them of His bounty. They may think that their niggardliness serves their interests by protecting their wealth, keeping it in their hands, rather than spend it for a good purpose.

The Qur'ānic statement warns them against entertaining such false delusions, making it clear that what they hoard up will be lit up as fire and hung around their necks on the Day of Judgement. It is a fearful warning, made all the more so as it reveals that they niggardly cling only to that which "*God has bestowed on them of His bounty.* "They are not hoarding something they have gained of their own accord. They have come to this life penniless, with nothing they could call their own, not even their skins. It is God Who has bestowed on them of His grace and bounty. Yet, when He asks them to be charitable with what He has given them, they do not remember God's grace. Instead, they remain tight-fisted, thinking that when they hoard up their possessions, they do what is good for them, while in fact they do themselves nothing but evil. Moreover, they are bound to go away, leaving it all behind. It is God who inherits all: "*To God belongs the heritage of the heavens and the earth.*" They only hoard it up for a brief period, before it all returns to God. Nothing of it remains for them except what they spend for God's sake, in the hope of earning His pleasure. It is that which He rewards them for and ensures their safety on the Day of Judgement.

This is followed by a condemnation of the Jews who thought themselves in no need of God or His reward, or even to the multiples He promises to those who spend their money for His cause. It is this which He is pleased to call a loan given to those who spend their money to serve His cause. The Jews, however, impudently say: How come that God asks us to give Him a loan of our money, and multiplies it for us over

and over again, when He Himself forbids usury and the multiplication of the principal loan? This is no more than their impudent playing with words, their unashamed rudeness towards God: *"God has certainly heard the words of those who said: 'God is poor, and we are rich. ' We shall record what they have said, and also their slaying of prophets against all right and We shall say: 'Taste now the torment of burning. This is on account of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the slightest injustice to His servants.'"*

Confusion in Jewish concepts of the true nature of God is very common in their distortion of their Scriptures. As they utter their impudent mouthful, they are clearly warned: *"We shall record what they have said,"* so that we may take them to account for it. It will neither be forgotten nor overlooked. It will be there, side by side with the record of their past misdeeds, which were perpetrated by their successive generations. They collectively share the blame for it, since they share in their practices of disobedience and sin.

"*And also their slaying of prophets against all right.*" The history of the Children of Israel records a terrible chain of killing one prophet after another, culminating in their attempt on the life of Jesus Christ, (pbuh). They even claim that they killed him, so boasting about their ghastly crime.

And We shall say: 'Taste now the torment of burning.'" The use of the term *"burning"* is deliberate. It adds to the horror of their torment. It makes the whole scene of suffering come to life, terrible, painful, unabating. It is a punishment for a hideous crime, namely, killing prophets without any justification whatsoever, and for a terrible sin, when they said *"God is poor and we are rich."*

"This is on account of what your own hands have wrought." It is a fitting recompense, fair and correct. *"Never does God do the slightest injustice to His servants."* The word *"servants"* highlights their position in relation to God. They are no more than servants to Him. This makes their crime even more ghastly and their impudence even more horrid. We need only remember that it is servants of God who boast against all standards of politeness: *"God is poor, and we are rich."* In addition to their very rude attitude towards God, those Jews claimed that they would not believe in Muĥammad because God had charged them not to believe in any messenger until he brought them an offering and a miracle in the form of fire coming from the sky to consume it. Since Muĥammad did not offer such a miracle, they would remain true to their covenant with God, or so they claimed.

At this point, the Qur'ān confronts them with their own history. In the past, they killed those very prophets who came to them with the very miracles they asked of them and also gave them clear evidence of the truth.

> *They declare: "God has charged us not to believe in any messenger unless he brings us an offering which the fire consumes." Say: "Messengers came to you before me with clear evidence of the truth, and with that which you describe. Why, then, did you slay them, if what you say is true?" Then, if they charge you with falsehood, before your time other messengers were also charged with falsehood when they came with clear evidence of the truth, and books of Divine wisdom and with the light-giving revelation.* (Verses 183-4)

By so confronting them, the Qur'ān exposes their lies, deviousness and their persistence with disbelief. Also exposed are their boastful claims and the fabrications they make against God.

Thereafter, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet with tenderness and reassurance, encouraging him to take lightly whatever they do by way of opposition to him. After all, it is the same as they did against his noble brother messengers throughout history: "*Then, if they charge you with falsehood, before your time other messengers were also charged with falsehood when they came with clear evidence of the truth, and books of Divine wisdom and with the light-giving revelation.*" (Verse 184)

Muĥammad was not the first messenger to be confronted with the charge of falsehood. Many earlier messengers, especially those sent to the Children of Israel, were similarly confronted, despite what they had shown of clear evidence and miracles, as well as scrolls containing Divine commandments, described in this verse as books of Divine wisdom, and with the light-giving revelation, such as the Torah and the Gospel. It is, then, the same story with all messengers and Divine messages. It is the same way they all follow, a way of hardship and sacrifice. It is the only way.

A Drink to Be Tasted by All

Here the *sūrah* addresses the Muslim community, explaining the values it should hold dear, and for which it should make sacrifices. It also speaks of the hardships and the suffering which it is bound to encounter on the way and encourages the Muslims to remain steadfast, show strong resolve and to always maintain fear of God:

> *Every soul shall taste death, and you shall be paid on the Day of Resurrection only that which you have earned. He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph. The lift of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment. You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and you shall hear much hurting abuse from those who were given revelations before you and from those who set up partners with God. But if you persevere and continue to fear God — that is indeed a matter requiring strong resolve."* (Verses 185-6)

The fact that this life on earth is limited to a certain date, which will inevitably come must be well established in believers' hearts. Good people as well as bad people will certainly die. Those who fight a campaign of *jihād* and those who slacken, those who feel pride in their faith and those who are humbled by others, the brave who accept no injustice and the cowards who will do anything to remain alive, those who have great aspirations and the ones who seek only cheap enjoyment, will all die. No one will be spared: *"Every soul shall taste death."* It is a cup from which every living thing will have to drink. There is no distinction whatsoever between one soul and another when it comes to drinking this cup. What distinction there is concerns a different value: the ultimate result. *"You shall be paid on the Day of Resurrection only that which you have earned. He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph."* It is with regard to this value that the distinction will be made. It is this destiny which will separate one group of souls from another. The value is one worth striving for and one to be taken very seriously: *"He who shall be drawn away from the Fire and brought into paradise shall indeed have gained a triumph."* (Verse 185)

The Arabic phrase rendered in translation as *"shall be drawn away"* is much more expressive than its English equivalent. This is because its very sound adds to its meaning and connotation. It gives the listener the sense that the Fire has strong gravity, that it pulls towards it anyone who draws near or enters its orbit. Such a person, then, needs support from someone else who draws him slowly and gradually away from its overpowering gravity. He who can be forced out of its orbit and become free of its pull will enter paradise, and he will have gained a great triumph.

It is a very vivid image, its lines delineated in sharp relief. We see movement, an overpowering force and a strong resistance. The fire beckons those who yield to the overpowering temptation of sin. Is it not true that a human being needs to be gradually drawn away from temptation? This is indeed how he is drawn away from the Fire. Despite the hard work and alertness this requires, man will always be in deficit with regard to the good work he needs to do. His only hope is for God to bestow on him His grace. That is what is being "drawn away" from the fire really means. It is only through God's grace that man is spared the punishment of hell.

"The life of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment." There is enjoyment in this life, it is true. But it is not real enjoyment; it is deceptive indeed; an enjoyment which leads to illusions. As for the real enjoyment which gives lasting happiness and ecstasy, this can only be found in the life to come. It is the triumph gained when one is brought into Paradise. When this fact is well established in the believer's heart, when he is no longer so keen to stay alive, since every soul shall taste death anyway, and when he has recognised the illusory nature of the enjoyment of this life, God tells the believers of the trials which they shall have to endure in their possessions and

persons. By then, they are well prepared for the sacrifice.

In the Face of abuse and Hardship

> *You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and you shall hear much hurting abuse from those who were given revelations before you and from those who set up partners with God. But if you persevere and continue to fear God — that is indeed a matter requiring strong resolve.* (Verse 186)

In this verse, God tells the believers in no uncertain terms that they will have to undergo tests and trials which will affect them and their possessions. They have to persevere and remain steadfast in order to prove themselves worthy of God's trust and His great reward. It is the natural way of things when it comes to the establishment of any faith in real life that its advocates should stand a hard test. There is no escaping the fact that they will have to demonstrate their patience in adversity, their determined resistance and strong resolve as also their readiness to sacrifice whatever is required of their possessions and their persons. This is the only way to heaven which cannot be attained without sacrifice and hardship. Hell, on the other hand, is surrounded by easy pleasures and temptations. Moreover, there is no other way to mould the community which will become the standard-bearer of Islam and discharge its duties. This community must receive thorough education and cultivation in order to heighten its potentials and strengths. The only way is the practical discharge of the duties imposed by their faith and by their gaining a true and practical knowledge of life and people as they are. The trials are needed so that only the strongest in faith continue to advocate the Islamic call. It is only such people that are worthy of its advocacy since only they are fully equipped to be so entrusted. Moreover, it is through trial and perseverance that faith becomes dearer to the faithful. The more they have to endure of hardship and the more sacrifice they have to give for their faith the more valuable it becomes to them. They do not turn their backs on it afterwards, not in any circumstances.

Trials strengthen those who are tried. It is resistance which sharpens potentials and consolidates them. A new faith requires that these potentials be heightened so that it can establish its roots deep in the most fertile soil of human nature.

It is also through trials that the advocates of a faith come to know themselves as they are. They will look at themselves as they struggle and fight for their faith. They become more aware of human nature in reality and its latent potentials, and they know the true nature of societies and communities. They observe the struggle between their own principles on the one hand and desires and temptations on the other. They become aware of how Satan works on man leading him astray and

causing him to err.

Moreover, it is through the trials endured by the advocates of a certain faith that its opponents come to realise that there is much good in, it; its followers have stuck by it despite all the hardships they have endured for its sake. It is then that those opponents may themselves accept that faith *en masse.*

This is in the nature of faith and ideology: to withstand such trials while maintaining fear of God, so that repelling aggression by others does not turn into counter-aggression, and despair is not allowed to becloud one's vision as one goes through the hardships. But this is far from easy: *"That is indeed a matter requiring strong resolve."*

The Muslim community in Madinah was thus made aware of what awaits it of sacrifice, agony, abuse and trial in possessions and persons. These were to be inflicted by its enemies, whether these followed earlier religions or were idolaters. Despite all this, the Muslim community was determined to go along its way, without reluctance or hesitation. Members of that Muslim community in Madinah were certain that every soul will taste death, and that rewards are paid on the Day of Resurrection. They knew that true triumph is that of being drawn away from the fire and of being brought into paradise. To them, the life of this world was nothing but an illusory enjoyment. It is on such hard rocks that the Muslim community in Madinah stood and along that straight and correct way it made its strides. The same hard rocks and the same straight way are available to its advocates in every generation. The enemies of this faith remain the same. Generations follow generations and still they plot to undermine it. The Qur'ān, however, remains the same, well preserved by God.

The methods of trial may differ from time to time, but the principle remains the same: "*You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and you shall hear much hurting abuse from those who were given revelations before you and from those who set up partners with God."* (Verse 186)

The *sūrah* gives many examples of the schemes adopted by people of earlier religions and the idolaters and their propaganda which aimed to cast doubt and confusion on the very fundamentals of Islam and on its followers and their leadership. These examples are always renewed and new methods and forms added to them as new means of communication become available. They are all directed against Islam and its principles of faith as well as against the Muslim community and its leadership. Hence, the same principle which God explains to the first Muslim community as He points out its way and the nature of its enemy remains always applicable.

This Qur'ānic directive remains valid for the Muslim community every time it

takes upon itself to implement God's method in practical life. It reassures the Muslims that God's promise will come true. All that it has to endure of trials, abuse, false accusation and hardship becomes very pleasant, since it is no more than a confirmation that the community is going along the way God intends. It is fully certain that perseverance and maintaining its fear of God are all the equipment it needs. All enemy schemes are of little effect. Trials and abuse are of no consequence.

Seeking Praise for Nothing

The *sūrah* continues to expose the peoples of earlier revelations who have contravened their covenant with God. God took a pledge from them that when He revealed to them the Scriptures that they would always make them known to people. They, however, did not honour their pledges and concealed what had been entrusted to them of God's revelations:

> *God has made a covenant with those who were granted revelations (when He bade them): 'Make it known to mankind and do not conceal it." But they cast it behind their backs and bartered it away for a trifling price. Evil is that which they have taken in exchange for it. Do not think that those who exult in their deeds and love to be praised for what they have not done – do not think that they will escape punishment. A grievous suffering awaits them. To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; and He has power over all things.* (Verses 187-9)

The *sūrah* relates many examples of what the people of earlier religions, particularly the Jews, were keen to do or say. Most serious among these was their concealment of the truth and their attempt to confuse that truth with falsehood. They aimed to create doubt and uncertainty in the basic concept of religion as well as in the truthfulness of the message of Islam. They tried hard to conceal the fact that Islam shared with past religions their basic principles to the extent that Islam endorsed them and they confirmed it. The Torah was in their hands telling them that the message of Muĥammad was true and that it originated from the same source.

In spite of their covenant with God to make their revelations known to mankind and never to conceal them, they have deliberately gone against their pledges. The expression given here to their attitude clearly shows their negligence and contravention of their own pledges. It is expressed in the form of an unseemly gesture: "*they cast it behind their backs.*" It also reveals that they committed this dishonourable act for no more than a trivial gain: "*and bartered it away for a trifling price.*"

Whatever the price, it was nothing more than a small gain by worldly standards. It could only have served the personal interests of the rabbis or the national interest of

the Israelites. All this is nothing but a trifling price, even if it did amount to the ownership of all the earth for the rest of time. How trifling this price is for a covenant made with God. How little all this is in comparison with what is stored with God: *"Evil is that which they have taken in exchange for it."*

A *ĥadīth* related by Al-Bukhārī on the authority of Ibn `Abbās states that the Prophet asked some Jews of Madinah about something. They concealed it and deliberately gave him an incorrect answer. They gave him the impression that they were right, and that they deserved to be praised for it. In fact, they rejoiced at their concealment of what he asked them about. According to this *ĥadīth,* this was the occasion for the revelation of the following verse: *'Do not think that those who exult in their deeds and love to be praised for what they have not done — do not think that they will escape punishment. A grievous suffering awaits them."* (Verse 188)

Another *ĥadīth,* also related by Al-Bukhārī, on the authority of Abū Said al-Khudrī, states that a group of hypocrites at the time of the Prophet used to stay behind when the Prophet embarked on a campaign of *Jihād.* They were very pleased for sparing themselves the trouble of accompanying the Prophet. When he returned to Madinah they gave him all sorts of excuses, swearing that what they said was true, and seeking to be praised for things they had not done. Hence, the revelation of this verse.

It is not always apparent that a certain Qur'ānic verse has been revealed on a particular occasion or to answer a specific question. It frequently happens that a certain verse is quoted to comment on a certain event because it fits the purpose; hence, some people may say that such and such verse was revealed on such and such occasion. It may also be that the verse itself includes fitting comments on a particular event, and again the same suggestion about its revelation is made. In this particular respect we are unable to say which of the two reports is more accurate. If it was the first, the *sūrah* speaks of the people of earlier revelations and their concealment of what God had entrusted to them of His revelations when He accepted their pledge that they would make them known to people. In spite of this, they concealed and lied about it persistently to such an extent that they sought praise for their fabrications.

If the second report is true, the *sūrah* includes references to the hypocrites to which this verse may be attached. It describes a type of people who may be found in every community as they were to be found at the time of the Prophet. They are those who do not have the courage of their convictions, who cannot stand in defence of what they profess to believe in. They are not prepared to fulfil the duties imposed by faith and instead they stay behind, taking no share in the struggle for faith. If those who fight and struggle for their faith suffer a defeat, these hypocrites raise their heads and boast about their wisdom and realism. If the fighters come back victorious, the hypocrites waste no time in pretending to have given them their full support,

claiming that they contributed to their victory. In this way they seek praise for something which they have not done.

This is a type of people who thrive on cowardice and false pretences. Their image is drawn in a couple of touches in the Qur'ān, but the impact is very clear.

God assures His Messenger that such people cannot escape punishment. They cannot spare themselves the grievous suffering which awaits them and they may have no support in trying to evade it: *"Do not think that they will escape punishment. A grievous suffering awaits them."* (Verse 188) They are threatened with suffering, and the threat comes from God, to Whom the heavens and the earth belong, and Who is able to do all things. How, then, can they escape it? *"To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; and He has power over all things."* (Verse 189)

12
Issues Resolved

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿١٩٠﴾

In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for men endowed with insight, (190)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ ٱللَّهَ قِيَٰمًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَٰذَا بَٰطِلًا سُبْحَٰنَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٩١﴾

who remember God when they stand, sit and lie down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: "Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory. Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire. (191)

رَبَّنَآ إِنَّكَ مَن تُدْخِلِ ٱلنَّارَ فَقَدْ أَخْزَيْتَهُۥ ۖ وَمَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنْ أَنصَارٍ ﴿١٩٢﴾

"Our Lord, him whom You shall commit to the fire, You will have condemned to disgrace. The evildoers shall have none to help them. (192)

رَّبَّنَآ إِنَّنَا سَمِعْنَا مُنَادِيًا يُنَادِى لِلْإِيمَٰنِ أَنْ ءَامِنُوا۟ بِرَبِّكُمْ فَـَٔامَنَّا ۚ رَبَّنَا فَٱغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَكَفِّرْ عَنَّا سَيِّـَٔاتِنَا وَتَوَفَّنَا مَعَ ٱلْأَبْرَارِ ﴿١٩٣﴾

"Our Lord, we have heard the voice of one who calls to faith, [saying], 'Believe in your Lord,' and we have believed. Our Lord, forgive us, then, our sins and efface our bad deeds and let us die with the truly virtuous. (193)

رَبَّنَا وَءَاتِنَا مَا وَعَدتَّنَا عَلَىٰ رُسُلِكَ وَلَا تُخْزِنَا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ إِنَّكَ لَا تُخْلِفُ ٱلْمِيعَادَ ﴿١٩٤﴾

"Our Lord, grant us what You have promised us through Your messengers, and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, You never fail to fulfil Your promise." (194)

فَٱسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَآ أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَـٰمِلٍ مِّنكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ ۖ بَعْضُكُم مِّنۢ بَعْضٍ ۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا۟ وَأُخْرِجُوا۟ مِن دِيَـٰرِهِمْ وَأُوذُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِى وَقَـٰتَلُوا۟ وَقُتِلُوا۟ لَأُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ وَلَأُدْخِلَنَّهُمْ جَنَّـٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَـٰرُ ثَوَابًا مِّنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عِندَهُۥ حُسْنُ ٱلثَّوَابِ ﴿١٩٥﴾

Their Lord answers them: "I will not suffer the work of any worker among you, male or female, to be lost. Each of you is an issue of the other. Therefore, those who emigrate and are driven out of their homes and suffer persecution in My cause, and fight and are slain [for it] — I shall indeed efface their bad deeds and admit them to gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God. With God is the best of rewards." (195)

لَا يَغُرَّنَّكَ تَقَلُّبُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْبِلَـٰدِ ﴿١٩٦﴾

Let not the disbelievers' prosperity in the land deceive you. (196)

مَتَـٰعٌ قَلِيلٌ ثُمَّ مَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۚ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمِهَادُ ﴿١٩٧﴾

It is but a brief enjoyment. Then, Hell shall be their abode. What an evil abode. (197)

لَـٰكِنِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوْا۟ رَبَّهُمْ لَهُمْ جَنَّـٰتٌ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَـٰرُ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا نُزُلًا مِّنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ لِّلْأَبْرَارِ ﴿١٩٨﴾

As for those who fear their Lord, theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, in which they shall abide, a gift of welcome from God. That which is with God is best for the truly virtuous. (198)

وَإِنَّ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ لَمَن يُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِمْ خَـٰشِعِينَ لِلَّهِ لَا يَشْتَرُونَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا ۗ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٩٩﴾

There are indeed among the people of earlier revelations some who believe in God and in what has been bestowed from on high upon you and in what has been bestowed upon them, humbling themselves before God. They do not barter away God's revelations for a trifling price. They shall have their reward with their Lord. Swift is God's reckoning. (199)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱصْبِرُوا۟ وَصَابِرُوا۟ وَرَابِطُوا۟ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

Believers, be patient in adversity, and let your patience never be exhausted; be ever ready and fear God so that you may prosper. (200)

Overview

This is the closing passage of a *sūrah* rich in subject matter and imagery. It defines and establishes the fundamentals of the Islamic outlook and, through the debate with the people of earlier revelations and later on with the "hypocrites" of Madinah and the Arab unbelievers, removes all the confusion and misinterpretation all those groups tried to create. It expounds the Divine order of life, its human and financial obligations, and teaches the Muslims how to honour those obligations and how to deal with the hardships and ordeals encountered in so doing. It shows the Muslims how to dedicate themselves and their possessions to fulfilling those enormous obligations.

These concluding strains resonate perfectly with the theme and the style of the *sūrah* as a whole in content as well as context and presentation. This section presents a most profound concept: that the entire physical world is an open "book" which in itself conveys the signs and evidence of faith. It points to the hand that runs it with care and prudence, and reveals that beyond this life there is another where accountability and reward will be decided. These signs, however, are only perceived and appreciated by people *"who understand"*; those who do not go through life with their eyes and minds closed to the overwhelming marvels of this "open book".

This represents one of the most fundamental concepts of the Islamic outlook on the physical world, and the very close and harmonic relationship that exists between it and man's basic and pristine nature. This concept asserts that the physical world, in itself, is living and tangible proof of the existence of its Creator, on the one hand, as well as a manifestation of the system that underpins its existence, and the purpose, the principle and the meaning that define that existence, on the other. This concept is of the utmost importance in defining man's attitude towards the physical world and its Lord, God Almighty, and is, therefore, a central pillar of the Islamic outlook on all existence.

Then follows God's obliging response to "*those who understand,"* who turned to Him in earnest and penitent supplication while reflecting on His open book of the universe and all the signs it displays and the thoughts it evokes and inspires. This response is accompanied by a recommendation to work hard, to strive, sacrifice and

persevere in fulfilling the obligations of the faith they have earned from contemplating the wonders of God's open book. The *sūrah* again underplays the effect and influence of the opponents of Islam, no matter how much material power they may possess in this world. It highlights the everlasting values of the rewards in the Hereafter to which true believers ought to aspire and hope to receive.

Further to the lengthy discussion on the people of earlier revelations and their stance towards the Muslims, the *sūrah* talks here of the believing ones among them and their just rewards.

Preserving the same context of piety, it describes them as devout people who are too polite and modest with God to demean His revelation, like some of their co-religionists, referred to earlier in the *sūrah.*

The closing verse encapsulates God's advice to the Muslims and represents what is required of them, and the obligations whose fulfilment will guarantee them success and accomplishment. "*Believers, be patient in adversity, and let your patience never be exhausted, be ever ready and fear God so that you may prosper.*" (Verse 200) It is an ending that fits beautifully with the central theme of the *sūrah* and all the other subjects it deals with.

Universal Evidence of Creation

> *In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for men endowed with insight, who remember God when they stand, sit and lie down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: "Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory. Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire. Our Lord, him whom You shall commit to the fire, You will have condemned to disgrace. The evildoers shall have none to help them. Our Lord, we have heard the voice of one who calls to faith, [saying], 'Believe in your Lord,' and we have believed. Our Lord, forgive us, then, our sins and efface our bad deeds and let us die with the truly virtuous. Our Lord, grant us what You have promised us through Your messengers, and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, You never fail to fulfil Your promise.* (Verses 190-4)

What are these signs contained in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night? What is the message understood by men of wisdom when they reflect on these phenomena, as they remember God in all situations, when they stand up, sit and lie down? Furthermore, what is the relationship between their reflection on these signs and their remembrance of God in all situations? How does their reflection lead them to engage in their supplication which expresses their humility and fear of God: "*Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory. Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire.*"

What we find here is a vivid image of the sound and proper reception of the messages transmitted by the physical universe to a healthy mind. Proper response is made to these messages which are open to all throughout the universe, both during the day and during the night.

Telling signs appear in every new page of this open book. They awaken uncorrupted human nature to appreciate the truth which is well established both in this book of the universe and in the perfect design of its structure. They create a strong desire to respond to the Creator Who has established this truth in His creation, and couples loving Him with a feeling of fear of Him. People endowed with understanding open their minds to receive the messages God has placed in the universe. They allow no barriers to prevent them from appreciating these messages. Their hearts turn to God when they stand, sit or lie down. Hence, their faculties of understanding are sharpened and they are able to appreciate the message God has placed in the universe, its purpose and its basic nature. Thus, the laws of the universe transmit their inspiration to men's hearts.

We have only to rid ourselves of the shackles of familiarity and to open our eyes and minds to these scenes of the creation of the heavens and earth and the succession of day and night and look at them afresh, as if for the first time, so that we may be overwhelmed with awe and stand in utter wonder and amazement. When we do this, we are bound to feel that behind all this harmony and perfection there must be an organising hand, an elaborate thinking and a law that never fails. We are bound to conclude that nothing of this is deceptive, borne by coincidence or happening in vain.

Our wonder at this beautiful, awe-inspiring scene of the universe is not diminished in any way by our knowledge that the day and the night are two phenomena which result from the earth constantly revolving around the sun, or by our knowledge that the harmony apparent in the creation of the heavens and the earth relies on the law of gravity or some such force. These are mere theories which may be true and equally may be wrong. Be that as it may, they in no way diminish our appreciation of these phenomena and the precise, perfect laws which regulate and preserve them. Regardless of what human scientists may call these laws, they continue to serve as evidence of the truth and of God's power which is manifest in *"the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the succession of night and day."*

This Qur'ānic passage describes in great detail the different psychological stages which result from approaching the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night as men endowed with understanding. At the same time, this description points out the proper approach to universal phenomena, how to respond to the universe and its nature and how to appreciate its messages and inspiration. It makes the open book of the universe a book of knowledge for the

believer who maintains his relationship with God and with what God creates.

It combines man's remembrance and worship of God in all situations, when he, "stands, sits and lies down" with his reflection on the creation of the heavens and the earth and on the succession of day and night. Thus, reflection becomes intertwined with worship and an aspect of remembering God. This combination presents us with two highly important facts, namely, that reflection on God's creation is an act of worship, and the signs that God has placed in the universe do not impart their true messages except to people who always remember God and worship Him.

A Passionate Prayer by True Believers

The first fact is that reflection on God's creation and contemplation of the open book of the universe and the great wonders which God has placed in the universe constitute a definite act of worship and an essential part of remembering God. Had natural sciences which study various aspects, laws and phenomena of the universe in order to unravel their secrets and potential, been directed to remembrance of the Creator of this universe and to appreciate and acknowledge His majesty and grace, they would instantaneously have become part of worship and prayer to the Creator. Human life would have benefited a great deal by these sciences and would have turned towards God. The materialistic trend, however, severs all links between the universe and its Creator, and severs the relationship which should have always existed between natural sciences and the eternal truth of the Divine Being. Scientific research, God's great gift to man, thus becomes a curse which makes human life a continuous succession of misery, worry and spiritual emptiness which weigh very heavily on man.

The second fact is that the signs that God has placed throughout the universe do not impart their inspiring messages except to hearts and minds refined by worship and the remembrance of God. Those who remember God in all situations, when they stand, sit and lie down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth and on the succession of day and night are indeed the very people whose hearts and minds are ready to appreciate the messages imparted by these universal phenomena. They are the ones who reach beyond these messages to the Divine method which ensures salvation, goodness and prosperity. On the other hand, those who confine themselves to the study of certain aspects and appearances, and discover the secrets of some universal laws, without any attempt to know the Divine method of life inevitably destroy life and destroy themselves with the secrets they discover. They cannot escape the misery and worry which characterise their lives and they inevitably end up incurring God's wrath and deserving His punishment.

These two facts are mutually complementary, and they are presented here in this

way for men of understanding at the precise moment of their reflection on universal phenomena. It is a moment which represents clarity of heart and soul, an open mind ready to receive a message and an attitude of being prepared to give the right response and abide by the implications of the truth.

It is a moment of worship, which means that it is a moment of establishing a relationship and receiving a message. It is no wonder, then, that the mere reflection on the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night is enough to reveal the truth about them and the fact that nothing of this has been created in vain. The immediate result of this attitude is embodied in these words: "*'Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory.'*" This is immediately followed by a psychological response to the inspiration of the universe: "*Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire. Our Lord, him whom You shall commit to the fire, You will have condemned to disgrace. The evildoers shall have none to help them.''*

What is the nature of the emotional relationship between recognising the truth behind the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night and the fear of being thrown into hell? Recognition of this truth means to those endowed with understanding and insight that it is all made according to an elaborate plan and for a definite purpose, and that truth and justice will be maintained beyond man's life on this planet. This inevitably means that whatever people do will be taken into account and that rewards will be administered. This leads to the conclusion that there is another life where the truth will be established and where justice will be done.

This line of argument is both obvious and natural. Its conclusion is quickly formulated in the minds of those people of understanding. Hence, the picture of the fire is immediately visualised in their minds and the foremost thought which accompanies their recognition of the truth is to pray to God to guard them against the fire. This shows a remarkable understanding of how thoughts and feelings are aroused in the minds and the hearts of people endowed with understanding. They express their feelings in their long supplication, apprehensive, urgent, melodious, finely rhythmic: "*Our Lord, him whom You shall commit to the fire, You will have condemned to disgrace. The evildoers shall have none to help them.*" This suggests that, first and foremost, they fear the disgrace which will inevitably befall those who are thrown into hell. They shiver with shame when they realise what sort of disgrace befalls such people. They stand ashamed in front of God, and they feel this shame to be more painful than the scourge of the fire. It also expresses their knowledge that there is no one to help them against God: "*The evildoers shall have none to help them.''*

We move on with this humble prayer: "*Our Lord, we have heard the voice of one who calls to faith, [saying]: 'Believe in your Lord', and we have believed. Our Lord, forgive us, then, our sins and efface our bad deeds and let us die with the truly virtuous.*" These hearts

are open. They only need to receive the message in order to respond to it. Their sensitivity is enhanced. The first thing impressed on their minds is the fact that they commit sins and may be guilty of disobedience. Hence, they turn to their Lord, praying for His forgiveness and for their bad deeds to be effaced. They also pray to be grouped with the righteous when they die.

The message of these verses fits in with the message of the rest of the *sūrah.* The believers pray to God to forgive them their sins so that they can win their continuous battle against desire and temptation. Achieving victory in this battle is akin to victory in a military battle against the enemies of God and the enemies of faith. Thus the *sūrah* is a whole unit, each part complementing the other, and delivering a complete and harmonious message.

The last part of this prayer expresses hope, reliance on God and deriving strength from the believers' unshakable trust that He always fulfils His promises: "*Our Lord, grant us what You have promised us through Your messengers, and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, You never fail to fulfil Your promise.*" They pray for the fulfilment of God's promise conveyed to them by His messengers, expressing their absolute confidence that God never fails in His promise, and their hope to be spared disgrace on the Day of Resurrection. This last expression of apprehension relates to that at the beginning of their prayer. It demonstrates their great sensitivity to this disgrace and the fact that they always remember it and mention it both at the beginning and at the end of their prayer. How sensitive and pious are these hearts and how strong their sense of shame in front of God. Taken as a whole, this prayer represents a genuine and profound response to the message which the universe and its signs and phenomena give to men whose hearts remain open and uncorrupted.

A brief word should be added here about the artistic excellence reflected in the rhyming of these verses. It is a rhythm which does not repeat the same tempo, but rather a rhythm of harmony. Most of the 200 verses of this *sūrah* maintain a rhythm which is normally associated with statement of fact. The rhythm is briefly changed in only two instances, the first occurs early in the *sūrah* and the second applies to these verses. In both instances, the verses concerned include a prayer to God. We note that the changes are made for artistic beauty, whereby the rhythm adopted gives the verses a melodious effect which suits the atmosphere of prayer.

Moreover, reflection on the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of day and night is particularly suitable to a long, deliberate prayer which admits elongation and musical overtone. Thus, the scene itself is maintained for a longer period so as to prolong its message and effect on people's minds and imagination.

Prayers Answered and Obligation Defined

> *Their Lord answers them: 'I will not suffer the work of any worker among you, male or female, to be lost. Each of you is an issue of the other. Therefore, those who emigrate and are driven out of their homes and suffer persecution in My cause, and fight and are slain [for it] – I shall indeed efface their bad deeds and admit them to gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God. With God is the best of rewards. Let not the disbelievers' prosperity in the land deceive you. It is but a brief enjoyment. Then, Hell shall be their abode. What an evil abode.* (Verses 195-7)

In this passage we have God's answer to the prayer repeated at length by the believers who have come to accept the faith after their reflection on the scene of the universe. They recognise that God has not created all this in vain. They understand the message imparted by these scenes and make the appropriate response and pray to God to spare them the disgrace of being committed to hell in the Hereafter. God's answer is a detailed one, harmonious with the artistic characteristics of the Qur'ānic style which takes into account the psychological requirements of every situation. Let us consider this answer and what it tells us about the nature of the Divine method and how Islam sets about refining the characters of its followers. Those people, described in an earlier verse as *"endowed with insight"* have reflected on the creation of the heavens and the earth and on the succession of night and day and have appreciated the message of the book of the universe, responding to the truth as it is clearly explained in it. They have addressed their Lord with a long, heart-felt prayer which reflects their apprehension. Here they receive the response of their merciful Lord. Their prayers are answered as their attention is drawn to the constituent elements of the way of life God wants them to adopt and to its obligations: *"Their Lord answers them: I will not suffer the work of any worker among you, male or female, to be lost. Each of you is an issue of the other.'"* Here they are told that reflection, contemplation, apprehension and passionate prayer are not enough, nor is it enough to turn to God for forgiveness and for bad deeds to be effaced and salvation to be granted. These goals require positive action of a particular type that is motivated by understanding the lessons learnt through reflection on the creation of the universe.

Islam considers this an act of worship, in the same way as it considers reflection, contemplation and remembrance of God, a prayer for forgiveness and a fear of God and a hope in His bounty. Indeed, Islam views action as the practical result of such worship. It is accepted from all, male and female alike, without any discrimination on the basis of sex. All people are equal as human beings, since each one of them issues from another, and they are all judged equally.

The work required is then outlined. We can see here the obligations imposed by Islamic faith with regard to personal and financial sacrifices. We can also appreciate

the nature of the Islamic method of life and in what sort of society it is to be implemented. We are made to understand further the way to establish such a society and the barriers and difficulties which work against its establishment. The need is urgent to remove such obstacles and to prepare the soil for the seed of Islam to grow and be firm, no matter how great the sacrifices: *"Therefore, those who emigrate and are driven out of their homes and suffer persecution in My cause, and fight and are slain [for it] – I shall indeed efface their bad deeds and admit them to gardens through which running waters flow, as a reward from God. With God is the best of rewards."*

This was the status of those who engaged in this prayer and who were the first generation to be addressed by the Qur'ān. They emigrated from Makkah and were driven out of their homes there because of their faith. They were persecuted for no other reason than serving God's cause. They had to fight and were killed in battle. The same applies to the advocates of this faith in every land and in every generation. Whenever the faith of Islam begins to establish itself in any environment of ignorance, in a hostile land, which could be any land, and among hostile people, any people, it then faces a bad reception because it stands up to people's illegitimate ambitions and greed. Its followers are persecuted and chased away, especially when its advocates are still few in number. This blessed plant, however, will grow in spite of persecution and hostility. It will then acquire the ability to resist persecution and defend itself against aggression. This inevitably leads to fighting in which some of its followers are killed. In return for these great efforts, bad deeds are effaced, sins are forgiven and reward, great reward, is granted.

Only in this way does the Divine system of life come to establish itself. It is a system whose implementation God has ordained must be through human effort. Effort exerted by true believers who struggle and work hard for God's cause, seeking God's pleasure.

This is the nature of this system, its constituent elements and obligations. We have also seen the course which it follows in educating its followers and refining their characters, giving them directives which ensure that they move from the stage of reflection on God's creation to the stage of positive action and are thus able to implement the system God wants man to implement.

Following this, a glance is cast on the temptation which is represented by the luxuries and comforts available in this life to the unbelievers, the disobedient and those who are hostile to the Divine faith. This only aims at making known the true weight and value of such luxuries and comforts so that they do not dazzle the eyes of their beneficiaries or the believers who suffer all the persecution of being driven out from their homes, and who have to fight and sacrifice their lives: *"Let not the disbelievers' prosperity in the land deceive you. It is but a brief enjoyment. Then, Hell shall be their abode. What an evil abode."*

Their prosperity is an aspect of affluence, wealth, position and power. It is bound to leave something in the hearts of believers as they suffer hardship, poverty, and persecution and as they have to fight in battle. All these are hardships which are very difficult to bear. Yet, the followers of falsehood enjoy themselves and are prosperous. The masses, on the other hand, are bound to feel something when they see the advocates of the truth enduring the suffering while the followers of falsehood are spared and enjoying all they want. The evildoers themselves look at the situation and become hardened in their false beliefs, erroneous ways, evil deeds and corruption.

At this point, we have this gentle touch which sets things aright: "*Let not the disbelievers' prosperity in the land deceive you. It is but a brief enjoyment. Then, Hell shall be their abode. What an evil abode.*" Their enjoyment is brief. It will soon disappear. As for their final and permanent abode, it is nothing other than Hell. It is indeed an evil abode.

What Reward for a Long, Hard Struggle

In contrast to that brief enjoyment and fleeting prosperity there are for the believers eternity and blessings from God:

> *As for those who fear their Lord, theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, in which they shall abide, a gift of welcome from God. That which is with God is best for the truly virtuous. There are indeed among the people of earlier revelations some who believe in God and in what has been bestowed from on high upon you and in what has been bestowed upon them, humbling themselves before God. They do not barter away God's revelations for a trifling price. They shall have their reward with their Lord. Swift is God's reckoning.* (Verses 198-9)

Any comparison shall remove the slightest doubt that what is with God is infinitely better for truly righteous and virtuous people. No one will entertain any thought that what the God-fearing finally receive is much superior than what the disbelievers enjoy. Hence, anyone endowed with insight will unhesitatingly choose for himself the share chosen by the people who have been described earlier as being *'endowed with understanding."*

At this point, when the context is one of cultivating the believers' characters and establishing the essential values according to the Islamic concept of life, God does not promise the believers victory, or that they should triumph over their enemies, or that they should be established in any land. He indeed does not promise them anything in this life. He does not include in His promise here anything of what He promises them elsewhere in the Qur'ān or of what He has undertaken to provide for the believers as they engage in battle against His enemies.

Here, He promises them only one thing, namely, "*that which is with God.*" For this is the basic aspect of this message, and the starting point of this faith. God wants the believers to totally disown every aim, purpose or aspiration, including their desire to see their faith triumph and the enemies of God defeated. God wants the believers to free themselves even from this desire. He wants them to leave this matter altogether to Him so that they are free from all ambitions, including those which are not personal. What is required of them is that they be ready to give and sacrifice, to fulfil their duty and perform their obligations. There is nothing for them of the comforts and enjoyments of this life. Moreover, there is no promise of victory, fulfilment of aims or gaining of power. All that is promised is in the Hereafter.

But then victory takes place and the believers are established in the land. This, however, is not part of the deal. There is nothing in the contract which stipulates any returns in this life. All that it speaks of is fulfilment of the deal made when Islam was persecuted in Makkah. The terms were very clear. God did not give the Muslims victory and the reins of power to assume the role of leadership of mankind until they had rid themselves totally of all ambitions which relate to this life and fulfilled their obligations with total dedication.

Muĥammad ibn Ka`b al-Qurażī and others relate that when people from the two tribes of Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, pledged their loyalty to the Prophet and asked him to emigrate to Madinah, `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah said to the Prophet: "Stipulate whatever conditions you wish to make for your Lord and for yourself." The Prophet said: "For my Lord, I stipulate that you shall worship Him alone and associate no partners with Him. For myself, I make the condition that you shall protect me as you protect yourselves and your property." They asked: "What shall we get if we fulfil our pledge?" The Prophet answered: "Paradise." They said: "It is a profitable deal. We accept no going back and we will never go back on it ourselves."

The Prophet's answer must be noted here. All he said was: "Paradise." He promised nothing more. He did not say to them that they will have victory, power, unity of the Arabian tribes, leadership, wealth, prosperity or anything else. It is true that God gave them all that and allowed them to enjoy it, but that was extra, and certainly not part of the deal.

Their attitude is also worth noting. They viewed it as a deal between a buyer and a seller. Once struck, no more bargaining could be done.

This is how God cultivated and disciplined the community in whose hands it was His will to place the control of the earth, and to whom He assigned the leadership of mankind and custody of the great faith. But He only assigned it that role after it had freed itself totally of all desires and ambitions, including those which related to its message, and the system to be implemented. Custody of this faith, the greatest

treasure, could not come about until this community demonstrated that it did not care about itself and until it surrendered itself totally to God.

Just before the *sūrah* ends, a fresh reference is made to the people of earlier revelations which states that some of them have similar beliefs to those of the Muslims. These are considered to have joined the ranks of the Muslims and adopted their ways. Hence, they also deserve the same reward:

> *There are indeed among the people of earlier revelations some who believe in God and in what has been bestowed from on high upon you and in what has been bestowed upon them, humbling themselves before God. They do not barter away God's revelations for a trifling price. They shall have their reward with their Lord. Swift is God's reckoning.* (Verse 199)

This reference is made in order to bring to a conclusion the long account, given in the *sūrah,* of the people of earlier revelations. The *sūrah* has referred to many groups among them and to many of their attitudes. Now that the *sūrah* is speaking about true faith and how people should accept it, and portraying a scene of supplication to God and His answering of believers' prayers, it states that some of the people of earlier revelations have also followed the same path to its final end. They have believed in all God's revelations and have not sought to isolate God's messengers from Him, nor have they discriminated against any of His messengers. They believe in what was revealed to them in former times, and in what has been revealed to the Muslims. This is the distinctive characteristic of a faith which looks at all believers with loving tenderness and visualises the whole procession of the faithful as leading directly to God. It looks at the Divine system as a complete whole. The one characteristic of those believers among the people of earlier revelations which is highlighted here is humility before God and the refusal to barter away God's revelations for a trifling price. They are thus set apart from the ranks of the people of the Scriptures whose main characteristic is one of boastfulness and of being totally unashamed before God. Moreover, they fabricate lies and seek cheap worldly pleasures.

To those believers among the people of earlier revelations God promises the same reward as He gives to Muslim believers. God does not delay the reward of those who deal with Him. Far be it for Him to do so. "*Swift is God's reckoning.*"

Summing Up All Obligations

> *Believers, be patient in adversity, and let your patience never be exhausted; be ever ready and fear God so that you may prosper.* (Verse 200)

The closing verse in this long *sūrah* is an address to the believers which sums up the obligations imposed on them by the constitution God has chosen for them. It is an address from on high to the believers. It calls them by their very quality which establishes their bond with the source of that address and places on them their obligations and qualifies them for the fulfilment of those obligations. It is the quality which gives them honour in this world and makes them honoured in heaven. They are called upon to show patience in adversity and to continue to do so in all situations, to be always ready for sacrifice and to maintain their fear of God.

The *sūrah* speaks repeatedly about patience in adversity and fear of God. The two qualities are mentioned on occasions separately and on others together. The *sūrah* also repeatedly calls on the believers to endure whatever hardship they have to face, to struggle and to foil the schemes of their enemies and never to listen to the defeatists or to those who sow the seeds of discord. That the concluding verse of the *sūrah* calls on the believer to be patient in adversity and to always persevere demonstrates that these are the essential ingredients of those who want to follow the path of Divine faith. It is a long and hard way, full of impediments, persecution, trials and tribulations. To follow it they must be patient.

They have to resist their own desires, ambitions, weaknesses and impetuosity. They have to persevere in the face of peoples' desires, weaknesses, ignorance, lack of understanding, perversions, selfishness, conceit, and their impatience for quick results. They have to endure the falsehood and tyranny, the power of evil and the conceit of every boastful arrogant.

They have to be patient in spite of any of their own weaknesses and in spite of the whisperings of Satan at such times when they are totally unhappy. They must persevere in spite of the fact that this can give rise to anger, exasperation, occasional lack of trust in goodness, lack of confidence in human nature, disappointment, frustration and total despair. In addition, they must also be patient and restrain themselves at the moment of victory, show humility and gratitude when adversity is replaced by prosperity, suppress every motive for revenge or for exceeding the limits of justice. They must maintain their relationship with God and submit to His will in times of happiness and in times of hardship. They surrender themselves to Him with trust and reassurance.

Words cannot express the true significance of this struggle. Only a person who has experienced such hardships can understand the full significance of such perseverance. The believers themselves knew well what this address from on high meant. They knew what sort of patience and perseverance God wanted them to show.

This verse then calls on the believers to rise to a higher standard. It is expressed in

Arabic in a form of the verb "to be patient" which signifies a highly enhanced effect. This means that the believers must face up to all enemies who try hard to exhaust their patience. The believers are called upon not to allow their patience to fail them despite the prolonged struggle. They must remain more patient and stronger than their enemies, be they the inner enemies in their own souls or the external ones who are the evildoers. The case is thus described as a contest between them and their enemies, and the believers are called upon to meet patience with stronger fortitude, effort with even greater effort, determination with strong resilience. When they have shown that they are stronger and more patient than their enemies, the outcome will undoubtedly be in their favour. If falsehood can be determined and is patient as it goes along its own way, then the truth must be more determined and resilient and must show greater patience as it goes along its own way.

To be ready, in Islamic terminology, is to stay in places where battles are expected, and in positions which are liable to attack from the enemy. The Muslim community never used to leave its eyes closed or to allow sleep to overtake it. Right from the moment when it was called upon to take up the message of Islam and to convey it to mankind, its enemies have never been allowed to rest.

Nor will they ever allow the Muslim community to rest in peace, anywhere or at any time. Hence, it cannot overlook the need to be ever-ready to fight and sacrifice until the end of time.

This message presents to people a practical system which exercises control over their consciences, money, property and way of living. It is a system which is upright, just and good. Evil, however, does not like to see such a system being implemented. Falsehood does not like honesty, justice or goodness. Tyranny does not submit to justice, equality and dignity. Hence, this message will always find enemies who uphold evil, falsehood and tyranny. Those who exploit others and are engaged in self- aggrandisement do not wish to relinquish their privileges. The despots who tyrannise people do not like to stop their oppression. The corrupt who indulge in every vice do not like to mend their ways. They all wage a campaign of extermination against the message of Islam. The believers must face up to all these enemies, and must equip themselves with patience and perseverance which can never be exhausted. They must always be on the alert for any aggression launched against them so that the Muslim community can never be taken unawares by its natural enemies who can be found everywhere and in all times.

This is the nature of this message and this is the path it follows. It does not intend any aggression, but it certainly wants to establish its correct method and perfect system on earth. It will always find those who hate its method and system, and who try to prevent its establishment with force, wickedness and propaganda. The advocates of Islam have no choice but to accept the challenge and to fight the battle

no matter how much it costs. They must always be on their guard.

Fearing God must accompany all this, because it is a watchful guard over man's conscience. It keeps it alert and strong and restrains it from launching any aggression or indulging in any deviation. No one appreciates the need for this watchfulness except the one who suffers the difficulties of this path, the one who has to contend with contradictory feelings and reactions pulling him in opposite directions in every situation and at every moment.

This final verse sums up the message of the whole *sūrah.* It puts in a nutshell all the obligations Islam imposes on its followers. There is no wonder then that God attaches to it the outcome of a long struggle and makes prosperity in the Hereafter dependent on it: *"So that you may prosper."* God always tells the truth.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol III

Sūrah 4

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **VI**

Al-Nisā' **1**

Prologue *1*

1 Fair Inheritance for All *14*
Overview 17
Mankind Begins with a Single Person 18
When Orphans Come of Age 22
Conditions for Marrying an Orphan Girl 24
Reasons for Permitting Polygamy 26
Relationships with Slave Women 31
Handing Property Over to Orphans 34
Inheritance: A Fair System of Social Security 36
Protecting the Weak and Vulnerable 38
Islamic Inheritance Ensures Justice for All 40
Inheritance of Parents and Children 42
Inheritance of Husbands, Wives, Brothers and Sisters 46
When God's Laws Are Obeyed 48

2 Perfect Social Morality *52*
Overview 55
First Step Towards Eradicating Immorality 56
A Perfectly Moral Society 59
The Surest Way to Human Destruction 60
Essence of True Repentance 62
A New Way to Treat Women 63
Marriage Conditions to Be Always Respected 66
Women Whom We Are Forbidden to Marry 68
The Crime of Advocating Free Sex 74
Legitimate Relationships 76
Dowry as a Condition of Marriage 78
Marriage with a Slave Woman 81
When Temptation is Hard to Resist 84
What God Desires for Human Beings 87
Man's Burden Made Light 89

3 Fairness in All Deals *93*
Overview 94
Which Transactions Are Lawful 95
Conditions for Forgiveness 97
Honour for Both Men and Women 100
Differences between the Sexes 102
Inheritance for Relatives Only 106
Regulation of Family Affairs 108
The Partner in Charge 110
In Recognition of Women's Virtues 112
When Family Life Is Endangered 114
Last Resort to Save Troubled Marriages 117

4 Unfailing Kindness *119*
Overview 120

Kindness All Around ... 121
Unfavourable Contrast ... 124
An Unhappy Final Wish ... 126
One Step Towards Forbidding Drinking ... 127
Gradual Eradication of Evil Social Habits ... 129
Islamic Worship Made Easy ... 132
Purpose of Islamic Legislation ... 134

5 Battle Resumed ... *138*
Overview ... 140
Error Multiplied ... 143
Distortion of God's Words ... 144
A Warning Not to Be Ignored ... 146
Fabricating Lies against God ... 150
Taking Pride in False Beliefs ... 152
The Nature of Envy ... 155
Two Contrasting Destinies ... 156

6 Sincerity and True Faith ... *158*
Overview ... 160
Trust and Justice ... 163
An Accurate Standard for the Human Mind ... 165
Claims Belied by Action ... 168
Prophets Must Be Obeyed ... 171
A Law Made Easy ... 173
The Reward of Obedience ... 176

7 Fighting for a Noble Purpose ... *178*
Overview ... 181
Taking Proper Precautions ... 185
An Eye for Gain ... 186
A Good Price for Life ... 189
Taking up the Cause of the Oppressed ... 190
Satan's Feeble Cunning ... 191
Wrong Feeling, Wrong Timing ... 192
A Very Strange Question ... 194
Possible Reasons for Restraint ... 196
What Does Death Signify? ... 199
A Highly Prejudiced Attitude ... 200
The Limits of the Prophet's Role ... 203
Contemplating the Qur'ān ... 203
A Pointer to the Author of the Qur'ān ... 205
The Role of Human Understanding ... 206
Proper Method of Deduction ... 208
The Limits of Responsibility ... 209
Different Deeds with Different Results ... 210

8 Organising External Relations ... *213*
Overview ... 215
Guiding Principles ... 216
Dealing with Hypocrites ... 217
Qualifications for Alliance with Believers ... 220
Peace with Power ... 222
Indemnity for Accidental Killing ... 225
Punishment for Deliberate Killing ... 227

9 Fighting for the Oppressed ... *230*
Overview ... 232
What Elevates People in Rank ... 234
The Philosophy of Jihād ... 236

Misguided or Oppressed? 238
What Value for Leaving Home 241
Prayer Even on the Battlefield 243
Prayer in War and Peace 245

10 Justice for All *249*
Overview 250
A Firm Stand in Support of Justice 254
Responsibility for Action Taken by Individuals 256
Special Grace for the Prophet 257

11 Beliefs That Degrade Mankind *259*
Overview 261
Useless Secret Talking 262
A Sin That Cannot Be Forgiven 263
Legends and Superstitions 265
Action and Reward 268
Requital of Believers' Bad Deeds 269
Dominion of the Universe 270

12 Watching God in All Dealings *272*
Overview 273
The Rights of Orphan Girls 274
Traditional Injustice Removed 276
Equity That Cannot Be Maintained 278
Family Rules Related to Universal Law 281

13 The Reality of Hypocrisy *284*
Overview 286
Justice in All Situations 289
A Call to Believers to Believe 292
Vacillation Between Belief and Disbelief 293
True Submission, True Freedom 295
Ridiculing God's Words 296
Characteristics of the Hypocrites 297
A Promise That Will Never Fail 298
Whom Do They Deceive? 300
Repentance Opens the Way 301
What Need for Punishment 303

14 One Religion for All Mankind *305*
Overview 309
No Foul Language 309
Deny One Part, Deny All 311
The Hard-Hearted Nature of the Israelites 313
The Truth About the Crucifixion 316
Actions Meriting Punishment 318
The Purpose of Sending Messengers 321
The Human Mind and Divine Messages 324
Making God's Argument 326
Grace of the Highest Type 329
The Supreme Witness 331

15 The Truth About Jesus *335*
Overview 336
Truth and Falsehood in People's Beliefs 338
The Breathing of God's Spirit 339
Was Jesus Too Proud? 341
The Ultimate Truth About Jesus 343
A Glorious Light to Remove All Doubt 345

Final Words on Inheritance 348

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 4

Al-Nisā'

(Women)

Prologue

This, the second longest *sūrah* in the Qur'ān was revealed in Madinah, following shortly after *Sūrah* 60, The Examined Woman, or *Al-Mumtaĥanah.* Some reports say that this latter *sūrah* was partly revealed at the time of the expedition that ended in Makkah's fall to Islam in year 8 of the Islamic calendar, while the other parts were revealed earlier, in year 6, at the time of the expedition ending in the peace treaty of Al-Ĥudaybiyyah.

As stated in Volume I, when we discussed the opening of *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, the chronological order of revelation of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* cannot be totally ascertained. The longer *sūrahs* were not revealed in *toto,* on the same occasion. Rather, several *sūrahs* continued to be revealed concurrently over the same period of time. When a verse or a passage was revealed, the Prophet was ordered to place it at its position in a particular *sūrah.* This means that the same *sūrah* remained unfinished for a period of time, sometimes only briefly but on other occasions this gap could extend over several years. For example, some of the verses of *Sūrah* 2, the longest in the Qur'ān, were among the first to be revealed in Madinah whilst others were among the last parts of the Qur'ān to be so delivered.

The same applies to this *sūrah.* Certain parts were revealed after *Sūrah* 60 in years 6 and 8, but many of its verses were revealed early in the Madinah period. It is felt that the revelation of this *sūrah* covered a period starting after the Battle of Uĥud in year 3, stretching over to year 8 when the early part of *Sūrah* 60 was revealed.

We mention by way of example the verse in this *sūrah* which includes a ruling

concerning women found guilty of fornication: "*As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them.*" (Verse 15) It is certain that this verse was revealed earlier than the one in *Sūrah* 24, entitled Light, or *al-Nūr,* which gives a definitive ruling on the punishment for fornication: "*As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion with them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a group of the believers witness their punishment.*" (24: 2) This verse was revealed after the incident known as "The False Story" in year 5. When it was revealed the Prophet said: "Take this from me. God has opened a way for them..." The way to which he refers is the one prescribed in this latter verse. This *sūrah* includes several examples which give some indication of the chronology of their revelation, as we explained in the opening remarks of our commentary on *Sūrah* 2 (Volume I, p. 9).

The *sūrah* also reflects some of the efforts Islam exerted in bringing into being and protecting the first Muslim community and Islamic society. We see an example of the influence of the Qur'ān on that newly born society which derived its basic and distinctive characteristics from the Qur'ān and the Islamic code of living. Here we have clear evidence of how Islam deals with man and how human nature reacts to it. We see how Islam takes man by the hand from the lowest of depths, guiding his footsteps up to a higher horizon, steering him along so that he is able to resist temptation, desire, fear and worry, helping him to bear the difficulties he may encounter and to resist whatever his enemies might scheme against him.

Just as in the earlier two Volumes, which discussed *Sūrahs* 2 and 3 respectively, the Qur'ān here faces all the circumstances prevailing at the time of the birth of the Muslim community in Madinah. It outlines the code of living which lays down the foundation of the Muslim community. It explains the basic principles of the Islamic faith, the values and standards it lays down, and the duties that need to be fulfilled in order to discharge this trust. At the same time, it describes the nature of the forces hostile to the Divine constitution and the community implementing it, warning the Muslim community against these enemies and their schemes. It also exposes the falsehood of their beliefs and their wicked devices.

However, every *sūrah* of the Qur'ān contains its own unique characteristics and distinctive features, as well as a specific idea which permeates all the themes it discusses. This uniqueness essentially means that the themes of every *sūrah* should gather together coherently around its central topic in a special system designed to enhance its distinctive features, just like those of a unique living being which remains the only one of its kind.

We almost feel that this *sūrah* is alive, that its well defined objective is pursued

diligently and, thereby, successfully attained. It achieves this by words, verses and passages. We almost have the same sympathy with this *sūrah* as we would have towards a unique living being moving towards his or her clear objectives, making his or her own moves and experiencing the full gamut of feelings and emotions.

The *sūrah* moves with clear determination to erase all aspects of that ignorant society from which Islam saved the Muslim community. Removing whatever vestiges of that society remained, fashioning the distinctive features of Islamic society and bringing its unique personality into sharp relief. It urges the Muslim community to defend its unique character, outlining its foundation and illustrating the dangers to which it is exposed and from what quarters. It lays down legislation to regulate all this from within its clearly defined line of action.

At the same time, we see the lingering aspects of that ignorant society struggling against the new system, values and standards, trying to overshadow the bright features of the new Islamic society. We actually witness the battle fought by the Qur'ān here, which is by no means less fierce or intransigent than any other physical battle against hostile forces.

When we look carefully at the residue the Muslim society carried over from the old ignorant society, we are surprised at how deeply rooted it was; so much so that its eradication continued over the years taken to reveal this *sūrah.* Indeed this *sūrah* deals with certain aspects of that residue, while several other *sūrahs* deal with other aspects. What is surprising is that such traces of past ignorance continued to be firmly rooted until such a late stage in the life of the Muslim community in Madinah. We are amazed, however, at the great divide that Islam managed to bring about between the two societies. It picked up this community of new believers from the depths of paganism and moved it upwards to a height that humanity could never achieve in its long history except when so steered by the unique code of life Islam puts in place. What is more, this was all done gently, patiently and with a steady and firm step.

Whoever looks carefully at this phenomenon in the history of mankind is bound to recognise some aspects of God's wisdom in choosing the unlettered people of Arabia to be entrusted with such a profound message. They actually represented the very depths of ignorance; ideologically, intellectually, morally, socially, economically and politically. That made them the best model against which to demonstrate the effects of the Islamic system and code of living. They, then, provided the portrait depicting how the great miracle, which no other system can work out, is accomplished. The line of its action is thus seen in practice, as it leads the community, stage by stage, from the lowest depths to the highest zenith. Thus humanity, across all subsequent ages, has been able to see the full workings of the system and how it can help any community, regardless of its position, elevate itself to the same heights those

unlettered Arabs were able to achieve.

The Islamic constitution has well-established principles and constituent elements, because it deals with man, who has a constant, unchangeable make-up. Nothing of the changes and developments that human life may experience will change human nature and make-up. Nothing will make man a different species. These are merely superficial changes, like waves in the sea: they do not change the nature of its water, or even its undercurrents that are subject to certain constant and natural factors.

Thus, all these unchanging Qur'ānic statements deal with an unchanging human nature. Since both are devised by the same Maker, they are able to deal with the changing circumstances of human life and its developing stages with a flexibility that still enables man to retain his essential elements. Man has deliberately been endowed with all the necessary skills to deal with the constant flux that different life situations bring about. Hence the Divine constitution for human life has been given the same degree of flexibility, because it has been made suitable for human life to the end of time.

Thus the Islamic system, represented by the Qur'ānic and *ĥadīth* texts, is able to take human individuals and human communities by the hand, from whatever level they may be at, leading them upwards towards the highest zenith. It never forces them backwards, nor does it allow them to descend by even one step. Nor does it ever tire of any community or feel itself unable to take it up the ascending path to the highest level. The primitive, backward community of the Arabs during their days of ignorance was no different to the civilised, industrial societies pertaining in Europe and America in these present days of unenlightenment: both find in the Divine constitution and in the Qur'ān their rightful places. Both will he taken by the hand, from their respective positions, along the rising path until they reach the top. It was Islam that took Arabian society to that very pinnacle in those earlier days of human history and it is Islam that can achieve the same today, as also across the myriad of societies that make up our global system.

When we speak of an ignorant society, we are not referring to conditions that might have prevailed during a particular period of history. Ignorant is every society in which human beings are subjugated by others. This is the case under all existing systems on earth today. In all these contemporary societies, people look to other human beings for the formulation of their concepts, principles, values, standards, legislation and traditions. This, then, is the essence of an ignorant society, where human beings submit themselves to their fellow human beings.

Islam is the only system of living where people are free from subjugation by other people, because they receive all their concepts, principles, values, standards, legislation and traditions from God. Thus, it is only to God that they bow, only God's

law that they obey, and to God alone that they submit. In this way they are free of all subjugation, because, unlike all other people, they surrender themselves only to God. This is the parting of ways between Islam and ignorance, in all its shapes and forms. Such delineation is clearly and precisely demonstrated in this *sūrah.*

It is well known that every order, prohibition or directive in the Qur'ān was issued in response to a practical situation pertaining in the ignorant society at the time and which aimed either to originate something new or to abolish something in existence, without prejudice to the overall rule that makes "general application supersede special circumstances". It should be remembered that Qur'ānic texts are meant to be implemented throughout all generations and all communities. Here we see the miracle of the Islamic approach. These texts, which dealt with particular situations, are so designed to assist any human society, no matter what its stage of development may be, to rise up along the path to the pinnacle reached by the first Muslim community. Thus when we read the Qur'ān, we can discern in its orders, prohibitions and directives the features and aspects of ignorant society, and we can also see the new features and aspects Islam wants to initiate and establish in the new community it is building.

So what do we find in this *sūrah* of the features of that ignorant society which remained extant in the first Muslim community after it was picked tip by Islam? What new features do we see Islam trying to establish in this new society?

We see addressed the rights of orphans, particularly girls, plundered by the very relatives and guardians who were supposed to look after them; what property of theirs was good and valuable being substituted with foul and less valuable things. The good of their inheritance being quickly consumed lest these orphans come of age and demand what was rightfully theirs. Young and rich orphaned girls were detained at home until they could be married to their guardians, not because the latter loved them, but rather because they wanted their money. Alternatively, they might be forced to marry their guardians' sons so as to achieve the same end.

We see a society in which the young and vulnerable, as also women, were wronged and not given their rightful share of any inheritance. Strong-bodied men who were able to fight in war got away with the largest share of any inheritance, whilst the weak and vulnerable were left with only a meagre portion. Yet it was for such miserly shares that young orphan girls and widowed women were detained so that they would be married to either the guardians themselves or to whom the latter so chose. The reason for that was simply to ensure that their property would not fall into the hands of strangers.

Society at that time gave women an ignoble position, ill-treating them throughout their lives. In addition to the practices to which we have referred in cases of

inheritance, women themselves were treated as part of the estate. When a husband died, his nearest of kin would throw his robe over the widow, this as a mark of retaining her for himself. Furthermore, he could marry her without paying her any dowry, or he could give her in marriage to someone else, but in this latter case he would receive her dowry for himself. In other instances, if a man no longer wanted his wife then he seemed at liberty to ill-treat her. He could leave her in suspense, neither married nor divorced, until she bought her freedom from him with her own money.

In such a society the foundations of the family were shaken because of the low status attributed to women. Additionally, confusion was created by the rules governing adoption and alliance, for these often conflicted with ties of kinship. Furthermore, chaos marked much of the relations between the two sexes as also family relations. All this was the result of the various illegitimate relationships common in society at that time.

Furthermore, usurious financial transactions led to the plundering of property, the usurpation of rights and the violation of trust. Attacks on property and people were widespread, justice was limited to the strong, charitable donations were given only for the sake of reputation and personal pride, with only a small proportion of such donations given to the poor and needy.

These represent only some of the features pertaining in that ignorant society which this *sūrah* deals with. Other features are depicted in other *sūrahs,* as well as in the history books of both Arabia and its neighbouring nations.[1]

It was not, however, a society without some redeeming virtues. Indeed, it had virtues which made it both suitable and ready to receive the ultimate Divine message. But these were virtues that Islam saved and directed in a constructive way. Had it not been for Islam, these virtues would have remained overshadowed by greater vices, lost and working individually to little effect. The Arab nation could never have contributed anything of value to human progress except for the Islamic way of life which erased the ugly features of ignorance and replaced them with the brightness of Islam. It saved and used to good purpose those good qualities the Arabs possessed, which, as in other contemporary societies, were lost and highly unproductive. All such virtues were destined to disappear because they were not saved by any Divine message.

In this *sūrah* we also see some of the features which Islam aims to consolidate in the practical life of the Muslim community, after purging it of its traces of ignorance and after establishing a proper order so as to ensure their protection. We see first of all a statement of the true nature of Lordship and the fact that God is the only Lord in

[1] A fuller discussion has been given in our commentary on verse 164 of *Sūrah* 3, Vol. II pp. 225-30.

the universe; this being a reaffirmation of the single origin of all mankind. This makes the family the basis of all human society and ensures that the maintenance of family relationships has a strong effect on human conscience. The family is thus the mainstay of the Islamic society's structure. The weak and vulnerable in that society are protected through the concept of mutual care within the family, and society itself is protected from indecent conduct, oppression and strife. The family, Islamic society and indeed human society as a whole are all organised on the basis of the Oneness of the Lord and the unity of humanity. (See verse 1.) We will consider this important fact in full when we comment on this first verse in the *sūrah.*

We also find practical legislation which builds firmly upon the system of mutual care within society on the basis of the family. With regard to the protection of orphans, the *sūrah* couples inspiring directives with strong warnings and definitive legal provisions. (See verses 2, 6, 9 and 10.) The protection of young orphan girls and oppressed widows, ensuring their rights of inheritance and earnings, and their right of self-determination, as well as saving them from the oppression and unfair traditions of ignorant society are dealt with in many verses of the *sūrah.* (See, for example, verses 3, 4, 7, 19-21 and 127.)

The establishment of the family on a firm basis coupled with the requirements of human nature, its protection against temporary influences in family and social life are discussed in verses 22-4, 34-5 and 128-30.

Inheritance within the family based on familial organisation and mutual care between family relatives, organising relations between parties to bonds of alliance, as well as the abrogation of adoption are all legislated for in several verses. (See, for example, verses 7, 11-12, 176 and also 33.)

Legislation is also provided to protect society from immorality and to facilitate marriage and the preservation of chastity. (See, for example, verses 15-16 and 25-6.)

Organising relations between individuals in the Muslim community so that they are based on mutual care, compassion, honest counsel, justice and benevolence is the subject dealt with by many verses. (See verses 5, 8, 29-30, 32, 36-8, 59, 85-6, 92-3, 135 and 148-9.)

Another similarly important objective with equally far-reaching effects on the life of Islamic society is the definition of faith. This whereby the conditions and boundaries of Islam are delineated, and which, in turn, relates to all laws and regulations that govern the life of the individual and society with such definitions of faith and religion.

Religion is the system God has laid down for human life and the system to govern its activities. It is God who has the sole right to lay down that system. To believe in religion is to obey the leadership which God has specified as having the right to such

obedience and to give guidance. Just as it has its own faith and outlook, Islamic society also has its own leadership represented by God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and what he has conveyed to us of God's message outlining Divine law. That message remains in force even after the Prophet passed away. Submission by society to this leadership is what makes that society Islamic. Without such submission, that society is not Muslim. Submission means referring disputes to God and His Messenger for arbitration, leaving all matters to God and accepting whatever rulings the Prophet makes without hesitation.

The *sūrah* clarifies this concept and principle in such a decisive way that no room is left for argument, loophole or confusion. This comes out in numerous verses, some of which are of a general nature, like verses 1, 27 and 48, while others are more specific. Examples of the latter include verses 59-61, 64, 65, 80 and 115. From all these verses we see that Islam is not mere feelings, conceptions, slogans or worship rituals. It is also a complete system of government, a leadership to obey, and a regime following a definite code.

The *sūrah* indeed contains numerous directives based on this essential principle:

1. As with rituals of worship, all social regulations are based on the basic principle defining religion and faith. They are not merely regulations for society, they are, in effect, part of believing in the oneness of God, acknowledging Him as the only God and Lord of the universe, and a readiness to receive orders and directives from the leadership He has assigned. Thus, we see that all the legislation to which we have referred have their foundation in this concept, which is re-emphasised in the comments at the end of each relevant verse. The opening verse, for example, affirms the single origin of all mankind, calling on people to nurture their ties with their kin. It serves as an introduction for all the regulations which follow in the *sūrah.* It starts with calling on people to fear their Lord who created them all from a single soul, and concludes with further emphasis on fearing God who is ever watchful. Similarly, the verses which stress the duty of taking proper care of orphans conclude with a reminder that God will hold people to account. Dividing any inheritance according to the defined shares is shown to be something that God Himself enjoins. Fearing God is an ever- present element in all legislation regulating the family and its affairs. Thus all legislation is derived from God and all matters should be referred to Him alone.
2. Another result of that essential principle is that the loyalty of the believers remains, in totality, to their own leadership and to their faithful community. They do not enter into a patronage relationship with anyone who does not

believe in their faith, follow their system, or who does not show loyalty to their leadership. It does not matter what sort of ties they may have with that particular person: to befriend such a person is bound to lead to hypocrisy or idolatry, which, in itself, means abandoning the Muslim community as a whole. (See verses 115-16, 139 and 144-6.)

3. It is imperative, as a result, that Muslims should abandon any land where Islam is not the ruling system and where Islamic leadership does not rule. This so that they may join the Muslim community where it is established and holds sway in the world. This so that they will be able to live under Islamic leadership and not under the banner of disbelief. If they do not do so, they may be guilty of hypocrisy or disbelief, which means abandoning the Muslim camp. (See verses 88-9 and 97-100.)
4. Muslims should fight to save their oppressed Muslim brethren who cannot emigrate from the land of war. In this way, the latter will be able to join the Muslim community in its land and will not be subject to persecution that aims to turn them away from their faith. They will not have to suffer life under a system other than Islam, and will he able, instead, to enjoy life in a pure Islamic society. This is the right of every Muslim. To deny it is to deprive people of the best of God's favours in this world. (See verse 75.)

The *sūrah* follows this with a campaign encouraging Muslims to undertake a struggle for God's cause, i.e. *jihād,* laying down, if necessary, their wealth and lives. It denounces those who sit idle or try to dissuade others from joining such a struggle. This occupies much of the *sūrah* which itself is characterised by a faster rhythm. A full discussion of this campaign will be dealt with later but what we can say now is that glimpses of this campaign may be seen in verses 71-6, 84, 95-6 and 105.

Within this campaign to encourage people to struggle for God's cause come rules to regulate international relations between the land of Islam and other nations and groups. We see for example comments and directives on how to deal with those hypocrites who visited Madinah for trade and other purposes, maintaining links with its people, but who, when they left, turned their allegiance to the enemy camp. (See verses 89-91 and 94.)

Within the context of *jihād* certain rules are outlined on how to offer prayers in a state of fear and insecurity. We note how the believers are repeatedly urged to take care and make precautions against any surprise attack. This is outlined in verses 101-3. These verses show the important position of prayer in Islamic life. Within this context elaborate details are given on how to offer prayer when the enemy is close by and war is imminent. We see clearly the integrity of the Islamic system which deals with human life in all its manifestations, looking after the individual and the

community at all times.

Associated with the orders concerning jihād is a strong denunciation of the hypocrites and their alliance with the Jews of Madinah who schemed in every possible way against Islam and the Muslim community. The hypocrites are also denounced for the tricks and ploys they resorted to in the hope of diluting Islamic values. This is very clear in the verses dealing with *jihād* to which we have already referred. In addition reference in this connection may be made to verses 81-3 and 137-45.

In this and other sections of the *sūrah* we encounter references to the war against Islam and the Muslim community and leadership, launched by the followers of earlier religions, particularly the Jews, and their hypocrite allies in Madinah and the pagan Arabs of Makkah and surrounding areas. This is the same war which was discussed in the previous two *sūrahs,* The Cow and The House of `Imrān, as contained in Volumes I and II of this work. Here again we see how the Islamic system leads the Muslim community showing it how to deal with hostile forces, exposing the nature of its enemies, warning it against their schemes and the nature of the fight it is engaged in.

One aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān is that these very verses which were revealed to deal with a particular battle continue to describe the ever-renewing battle waged everywhere and across all generations against Islam and the Muslim community. The enemies are the same, pursuing the same objectives despite changing shapes and appearances, immediate causes and methods. Those enemies continue to pursue their aims to weaken the faith of the Muslim community, by sowing discord within its ranks and raising doubts with regard to the integrity of the Muslim leadership. They hope ultimately that they will be able to gain control of the Muslim community, its land, resources, and property, just like the Jews of Madinah exploited the two Arab tribes which lived there, the Aws and the Khazraj, before they embraced Islam and benefited by the unity and strength which Islam gave them.

The *sūrah* examines, in detail, the discussion started in the previous two *sūrahs* about the successive plots hatched by the Jews against the Muslim community in Madinah. In all these, they collaborated with the hypocrites living in Madinah itself as also the idolaters in Makkah. (See verses 44-55, 150-1 and 153-61.) The Qur'ān exposes, denounces and refutes the Jews' wicked plots. We note that the Jews are described here as non-believers and enemies, giving us an idea of just how hard such plots were for the Muslim community to endure. It was necessary that God in His glory took it upon Himself to refute the allegations of the Jews, expose their wicked motives, aims and objectives. It should be noted that the Israelites, in their long history, never accepted Divine guidance except for short bursts, but were soon wont

to wickedly murder their prophets. In their grudge and envy against the Prophet Muĥammad for being chosen to carry God's final message to mankind, and against the Muslim community for being united under God's guidance, the Jews have continued their hostility towards Islam ever since it arrived in Madinah. Every Muslim community and every Islamic revival has had to cope with their hostility.

The first aim of the Jews in Madinah was to raise doubts as to the truth of the message and prophethood of Muĥammad (peace be upon him). They realised that once this was done, it would be much easier to divert the Muslims away from their faith and their faithful leadership. This would inevitably lead to the fragmentation of the community. They knew that when the Muslims are united by their faith, under their own leadership, they are very hard to overcome. Hence the Jews always try first to weaken their unity and sow discord between them; this being certain to lead their leadership to become motivated only by personal desires and prejudices. That would ensure their loss of strength.

Hence, the *sūrah* explains the simple truth of Muĥammad's message, which was by no means a unique or strange development. The Israelites themselves knew much about Divine messages to mankind. Muĥammad's message was merely one in a chain of messages through which God puts the argument for faith in Him clearly in front of human beings, before He holds them accountable. God bestowed His revelations on Muĥammad just like He did with earlier messengers. He granted Muĥammad prophethood and wisdom in the same way as He granted these to the Israelite prophets. There is nothing to wonder about, then, in God choosing one of His servants to be the bearer of His last message and to give him the leadership over mankind. All excuses advanced by the Jews are false. Indeed they resorted to the same wicked devices with their greatest messenger, Moses (peace be upon him), and with other prophets, but particularly so with Jesus (peace be upon him). Hence, Muslims must pay no attention to what they claim. Many verses in the *sūrah* explain this, but particular reference may be made to verses 163-6, 153-7 and 54-5.

The *sūrah* also explains some of the most essential elements in the basic concepts of the Islamic faith, purging it of all ambiguity. Refuting all the false allegations the Jews circulated against Jesus (peace be upon him) and his pure, virgin mother, the *sūrah* also outlines the excesses introduced into Christian beliefs. It re-asserts the concepts of the oneness of God and man's servitude to God. It also clarifies the concept of fate and the relationship between God and His servants, the nature of life, its duration, death and its relation to fate, what sins God may forgive, the truth of repentance and the rules governing action and reward. (See verses 17-18, 26-8, 31, 40, 77-9, 123-4, 147, 150-2 and 171-3.)

The *sūrah* also includes a number of the moral principles basic to Islamic society, some of which have already been mentioned. It must be said here that the moral

aspect is not only profound and central to the Islamic concept of human life but also to the type of society Islam builds. Hardly any aspect of life is found without an integral element of morality. We will only refer to some basic points of this highly important aspect in the life of the Muslim community.

Since Islamic society is based on the guiding principle of ascribing Divinity to God alone, it is free of any form of submission to His creatures. Indeed, it is the only society on earth where all attributes of Godhead are ascribed firmly and absolutely to God alone. None of these is associated with any of His creatures. It is from such freedom of submission to others that all virtues and moral principles originate. For all these are directed to the overall goal of seeking God's pleasure, and their basic objective is to acquire the moral standards acceptable to God. Hence, they are free of all egotism and hypocrisy and of currying favour with any creature. That is the essence of Islamic morality.

We are then given some of the components behind Islam's moral concept. We see that Islamic society is based on honesty, fairness, and the prohibition of all illegitimate gains. It ensures that private talks and collaborations are aimed at what is good and beneficial, refraining from foul and abusive language except in the case of the oppressed. In this way, it promotes kindly intercession, friendly greetings, outlaws all indecency and sexual relations outside the marriage bond, prohibits arrogant behaviour, pride, miserliness, envy and the harbouring of grudges. It promotes mutual co-operation, counselling, forbearance, forgiveness, mutual help, and obedience to the Islamic leadership, etc. We will discuss all of these in detail when commenting on the relevant verses. However, we will only refer here to a single and remarkable incident which demonstrates the sublime heights which mankind can only attain under Islam, and in a community conducting its life according to its precepts.

Whilst the Jews of Madinah were scheming endlessly against Islam, the Prophet and the Muslim community as a whole, the Qur'ān was moulding that community with great care, raising its standards of morality and giving it the proper motivation to always aspire to ideals that cannot be compromised. Then an incident occurred involving a Jewish individual.

God commanded the Muslim community to maintain absolute honesty and complete justice between all people, regardless of their race, belief, ethnic origin or nationality. (Verses 58 and 135.) Then a whole passage, running into eleven verses, was revealed to acquit a Jewish person from an unfair accusation levelled against him by a group of Muslims who had not yet fully understood these principles and the need to implement them in practice. They were still influenced by practices of the old, pre-Islamic days. Hence, loyalty to clan and blood relations induced them to divert the blame for a certain offence from one of their number to the Jew. The

incident involved the theft of some body armour. A number of Muslims testified in front of the Prophet against the Jew. The Prophet was about to issue a sentence against the Jew, which would have implemented the prescribed punishment for theft. That would have meant punishment of an innocent person, while the real culprit would have escaped.

This passage was revealed containing as it does a clear reproach of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and a strong reprimand for a group of the people of Madinah who had given refuge and support to the Prophet. And what was the cause of all this blame and censure? The only purpose was to do justice to one Jew who belonged to a group that was very hostile to the Prophet and his message, engaging in unceasing, wicked scheming against all the Muslims. The passage issues very stern warnings to anyone who commits a sin or an offence and then wilfully puts the blame on another innocent person. Thus, the passage represents a clear ascendance towards the sublime. The passage to read in this connection runs from verse 105 to verse 116.

What can we say except that it is only the unique method of the Qur'ān and Islam that can pick up a human community from the depths of ignorance and darkness and take it by the hand along an inclining path until it attains sublimity. All this within a short period of time.

1
Fair Inheritance for All

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم
مِّن نَّفۡسٖ وَٰحِدَةٖ وَخَلَقَ مِنۡهَا زَوۡجَهَا وَبَثَّ
مِنۡهُمَا رِجَالٗا كَثِيرٗا وَنِسَآءٗۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ
ٱلَّذِى تَسَآءَلُونَ بِهِۦ وَٱلۡأَرۡحَامَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
كَانَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ رَقِيبٗا ١

Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women. Fear God, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your ties of kinship. Indeed, God is ever watching over you. (1)

وَءَاتُواْ ٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰٓ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡۖ وَلَا تَتَبَدَّلُواْ
ٱلۡخَبِيثَ بِٱلطَّيِّبِۖ وَلَا تَأۡكُلُوٓاْ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ إِلَىٰٓ
أَمۡوَٰلِكُمۡۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ حُوبٗا كَبِيرٗا ٢

Give the orphans their property. Do not substitute bad things of your own for their good things, and do not absorb their wealth into your own wealth. That is surely a great crime. (2)

وَإِنۡ خِفۡتُمۡ أَلَّا تُقۡسِطُواْ فِي ٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ
فَٱنكِحُواْ مَا طَابَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ مَثۡنَىٰ
وَثُلَٰثَ وَرُبَٰعَۖ فَإِنۡ خِفۡتُمۡ أَلَّا تَعۡدِلُواْ
فَوَٰحِدَةً أَوۡ مَا مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُكُمۡۚ ذَٰلِكَ
أَدۡنَىٰٓ أَلَّا تَعُولُواْ ٣

If you fear that you may not deal fairly by the orphans, you may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That makes it more likely that you will not do injustice. (3)

وَءَاتُواْ ٱلنِّسَآءَ صَدُقَٰتِهِنَّ نِحۡلَةٗۚ فَإِن طِبۡنَ
لَكُمۡ عَن شَيۡءٖ مِّنۡهُ نَفۡسٗا فَكُلُوهُ هَنِيٓـٔٗا
مَّرِيٓـٔٗا ٤

Give women their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own accord, choose to give up to you a part of it, then you may take it

with pleasure. (4)

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا۟ ٱلسُّفَهَآءَ أَمْوَٰلَكُمُ ٱلَّتِى جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ قِيَـٰمًا وَٱرْزُقُوهُمْ فِيهَا وَٱكْسُوهُمْ وَقُولُوا۟ لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا ﴿٥﴾

Do not give to the feeble-minded your wealth which God has assigned to you in trust. Make provisions for them and clothe them out of it and speak to them in a kindly way. (5)

وَٱبْتَلُوا۟ ٱلْيَتَـٰمَىٰ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغُوا۟ ٱلنِّكَاحَ فَإِنْ ءَانَسْتُم مِّنْهُمْ رُشْدًا فَٱدْفَعُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِمْ أَمْوَٰلَهُمْ ۖ وَلَا تَأْكُلُوهَآ إِسْرَافًا وَبِدَارًا أَن يَكْبَرُوا۟ ۚ وَمَن كَانَ غَنِيًّا فَلْيَسْتَعْفِفْ ۖ وَمَن كَانَ فَقِيرًا فَلْيَأْكُلْ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ فَإِذَا دَفَعْتُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ أَمْوَٰلَهُمْ فَأَشْهِدُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ حَسِيبًا ﴿٦﴾

Test the orphans [in your charge] until they reach a marriageable age; then, if you find them of sound judgement, hand over to them their property, and do not consume it by wasteful and hasty spending before they come of age. Let him who is rich abstain generously [from his ward's property], but he who is poor may partake of it in a fair manner. When you hand over to them their property, let there be witnesses on their behalf. God is sufficient as a reckoner. (6)

لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ ٱلْوَٰلِدَانِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَآءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ ٱلْوَٰلِدَانِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ ۚ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا ﴿٧﴾

Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind; whether it be little or much. It is an apportioned share. (7)

وَإِذَا حَضَرَ ٱلْقِسْمَةَ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ وَٱلْيَتَـٰمَىٰ وَٱلْمَسَـٰكِينُ فَٱرْزُقُوهُم مِّنْهُ وَقُولُوا۟ لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا ﴿٨﴾

When other kinsfolk, orphans and needy persons are present at the distribution of inheritance, give them something out of it, and speak to them in a kindly way. (8)

وَلْيَخْشَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَوْ تَرَكُوا۟ مِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّةً ضِعَـٰفًا خَافُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ فَلْيَتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَلْيَقُولُوا۟ قَوْلًا سَدِيدًا ﴿٩﴾

Let those who, if they themselves had to leave behind weak offspring, would feel fear on their account, be afraid (to wrong the orphans in their charge), let them fear God

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَأۡكُلُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَ ٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ ظُلۡمًا إِنَّمَا يَأۡكُلُونَ فِي بُطُونِهِمۡ نَارٗاۖ وَسَيَصۡلَوۡنَ سَعِيرٗا ١٠

يُوصِيكُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِيٓ أَوۡلَٰدِكُمۡۖ لِلذَّكَرِ مِثۡلُ حَظِّ ٱلۡأُنثَيَيۡنِۚ فَإِن كُنَّ نِسَآءٗ فَوۡقَ ٱثۡنَتَيۡنِ فَلَهُنَّ ثُلُثَا مَا تَرَكَۖ وَإِن كَانَتۡ وَٰحِدَةٗ فَلَهَا ٱلنِّصۡفُۚ وَلِأَبَوَيۡهِ لِكُلِّ وَٰحِدٖ مِّنۡهُمَا ٱلسُّدُسُ مِمَّا تَرَكَ إِن كَانَ لَهُۥ وَلَدٞۚ فَإِن لَّمۡ يَكُن لَّهُۥ وَلَدٞ وَوَرِثَهُۥٓ أَبَوَاهُ فَلِأُمِّهِ ٱلثُّلُثُۚ فَإِن كَانَ لَهُۥٓ إِخۡوَةٞ فَلِأُمِّهِ ٱلسُّدُسُۚ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ وَصِيَّةٖ يُوصِي بِهَآ أَوۡ دَيۡنٍۗ ءَابَآؤُكُمۡ وَأَبۡنَآؤُكُمۡ لَا تَدۡرُونَ أَيُّهُمۡ أَقۡرَبُ لَكُمۡ نَفۡعٗاۚ فَرِيضَةٗ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمٗا ١١

۞ وَلَكُمۡ نِصۡفُ مَا تَرَكَ أَزۡوَٰجُكُمۡ إِن لَّمۡ يَكُن لَّهُنَّ وَلَدٞۚ فَإِن كَانَ لَهُنَّ وَلَدٞ فَلَكُمُ ٱلرُّبُعُ مِمَّا تَرَكۡنَۚ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ وَصِيَّةٖ يُوصِينَ بِهَآ أَوۡ دَيۡنٖۚ وَلَهُنَّ ٱلرُّبُعُ مِمَّا تَرَكۡتُمۡ إِن لَّمۡ يَكُن لَّكُمۡ وَلَدٞۚ فَإِن كَانَ لَكُمۡ وَلَدٞ فَلَهُنَّ ٱلثُّمُنُ مِمَّا تَرَكۡتُمۚ مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ وَصِيَّةٖ تُوصُونَ بِهَآ أَوۡ دَيۡنٖۗ

and speak in a just manner. (9)

Those who devour the property of orphans unjustly, only swallow fire into their bellies. They will be made to endure a blazing fire. (10)

God has this to enjoin on you with regard to your children: The male shall have a share equal to that of two females. If there are more than two women, they shall have two-thirds of what [their parents] leave behind; and if there is only one, she shall have one- half of it. As for the parents [of the deceased], each of them shall have one-sixth of what he leaves behind, in the event of his having a child; but if he leaves no children, and his parents be his heirs, then his mother shall have one-third; and if he has brothers and sisters, his mother shall have one-sixth after (deducting) any bequest he may have made, or any outstanding debt. With regard to your parents and your children, you do not know which of them is of more benefit to you. This is, therefore, an ordinance from God. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (11)

You shall inherit one-half of what your wives leave behind, provided that they have left no child; but if they have left a child, then you shall have one-quarter of what they leave behind, after [deducting] any bequest they may have made or any outstanding debt. And they (i.e. your widows) shall inherit one-quarter of what you leave behind, provided that you have left no child; but if you have left a child, then they shall have one-eighth of what you

وَإِن كَانَ رَجُلٌ يُورَثُ كَلَٰلَةً أَوِ ٱمْرَأَةٌ وَلَهُۥٓ أَخٌ أَوْ أُخْتٌ فَلِكُلِّ وَٰحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا ٱلسُّدُسُ ۚ فَإِن كَانُوٓا۟ أَكْثَرَ مِن ذَٰلِكَ فَهُمْ شُرَكَآءُ فِى ٱلثُّلُثِ ۚ مِنۢ بَعْدِ وَصِيَّةٍ يُوصَىٰ بِهَآ أَوْ دَيْنٍ غَيْرَ مُضَآرٍّ ۚ وَصِيَّةً مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

leave behind, after [deducting] any bequest you may have made or any outstanding debt.

If a man or a woman has no heir in the direct line, but has a brother or a sister, then each of them shall inherit one-sixth; but if there be more, then they shall share in one-third, after [deducting] any bequest which may have been made or any outstanding debt, neither of which having been intended to harm [the heirs]. This is a commandment from God; and God is All-Knowing, Gracious. (12)

تِلْكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٣﴾

These are the bounds set by God. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger, him will He admit into gardens through which running waters flow, there to dwell forever. That is the supreme triumph. (13)

وَمَن يَعْصِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَيَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَهُۥ يُدْخِلْهُ نَارًا خَٰلِدًا فِيهَا وَلَهُۥ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿١٤﴾

But whoever disobeys God and His Messenger, and transgresses His bounds, him will He commit to the fire, there to abide forever; and shameful torment awaits him. (14)

Overview

This first passage of this *sūrah* begins with a verse which reminds people that they all have one Lord and a single Creator, that they descend from the same origin and belong to one family. It defines the unit of humanity as the individual and makes the family the unit of society. It emphasises the importance of fearing God and fostering ties of kinship in order to build on this basis all the obligations of mutual care and support, as well as compassion within the family and within humanity as a single

whole. All the legislation and regulations included in this *sūrah* take into account the twin obligations of fearing God and of fostering ties of kinship.

In this opening passage of the *sūrah,* the duties and legal provisions concerning orphans are outlined, thus providing protection for those who are normally weak within both the family and society. These provisions define the way in which orphans and their property should be looked after. They also regulate how inheritance takes place within the family and the various shares of different relatives according to a whole range of situations. All this relates to the fundamental principle stated in this opening verse, reminders of which are given at the beginning, middle or end of other verses. The emphasis being on the relationship between these regulations and legal provisions and the One who enacts them, the Supreme Lord Who alone has the right to legislate.

Mankind Begins with a Single Person

> *Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women. Fear God, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your ties of kinship. Indeed, God is ever watching over you.* (Verse 1)

This address is made to mankind, in their basic human quality, so that they may all turn to their Lord who has created them "*from a single soul*". He further created from this single soul its mate, "*and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women.*" (Verse 1)

These simple and basic facts are very profound, having much weight in human considerations. Had people been truly mindful of these facts, it would have brought about great changes in their lives, helping them to move from their state of ignorance to a state of intelligence, whereby they would be able to receive proper guidance and accept the true faith. They would, thus, have been able to build a true civilisation worthy of man, the creature who acknowledges God as his Lord and Creator.

These facts open up a very wide scope for us to reflect upon. Firstly, they remind us of our origins, and of the fact that we belong to our Creator who has established us on this earth. People are often oblivious to this fact, forget everything and, consequently, cannot establish anything in their lives on a sound basis.

Man came into this world after a period of time when the world existed without him. Who, then, brought him into this world? He has not come into it by his own will. Prior to his arrival he had no definite existence, and no will with which to decide whether to enter this world or not. Man's arrival in this world is, thus, the result of a will other than his own. It is this will which decided to create man, and

which chose and defined his way for him. It has given him his existence with all its special characteristics, his talents and potentials. It has given him the ability to deal with the universe into which he has been brought without any prior preparation except that given him by this same will. Needless to say, that will is omnipotent in the sense that it is able to do whatever it may wish and determine. If people would only remember this fact they would be able to recognise the true path from the very outset.

This will, which has brought man into this world, outlined for him his way of life and gave him the ability to deal with the universe. It is the only will which can influence human life in any way it wishes, knows everything about man and can best manage his affairs. It is the only will which has the right to define for man his source of life, promulgate laws and regulations for human life, and lay down values and standards for man to observe. To this will alone people must refer whenever they differ over anything. When they do this, they refer to the one constitution which God wants mankind to implement.

Secondly, these facts suggest that all humanity, which has issued from a single will, share together in a single kinship and have the same origin and lineage: "*Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women.*" (Verse 1)

Had people been mindful of this fact, they would have paid little or no attention to all the differences that came into their lives at a later time. Differences which led to discrimination between the descendants of a single soul and to the severance of ties of a single universal kinship. All these differences are purely circumstantial and should never have been allowed to take precedence over the tie of kinship and its claim to be fostered, the tie of belonging to one soul which deserves to be maintained, and the tie of belonging to the one Lord who must be feared.

Had this fact been truly appreciated, it would have ensured that no racial discrimination could ever take place in human society. We know how much mankind has suffered from racial discrimination and continues to suffer even today, in a latter day ignorance that seeks to consolidate its own existence through discrimination between people on the basis of their colour or race. It upholds the ties of race and nationality and totally ignores the ties of a single humanity and a single Godhead.

Had this fact been well established, there would have never been the sort of caste system which we find in pagan India, or the sort of class war which leads to much bloodshed in Communist countries. In modern ignorance, this class war is considered to be a doctrinal basis that legitimises the supremacy of one class and the destruction of all others. It chooses to be totally oblivious to the fact that all human

beings have issued from a single soul, and that they all have the same Lord to whom they should all refer.

The third fact stated in this opening verse is that from a single soul God "*created its mate*". Had mankind appreciated this fact, they would have spared themselves all those grievous mistakes under which they have long suffered. They would not have coined such absurdities about women, branding them as the source of impurity and the origin of evil. The truth is that in her nature and temperament, the woman is created from the first human soul in order to be its mate and, thereafter, for numerous men and women to issue forth from them both. There is no difference between man and woman, then, in their nature or origin. The only difference is in their abilities and the roles they have to play. Mankind has groped blindly in this maze of absurd beliefs for a very long time. Women were deprived of their human status, all human characteristics together with all the rights to which their humanity entitles them for no other reason than an absurd, groundless belief that temporarily took hold of man's mind. When mankind recognised its gross mistake and set about correcting it, we find that the other extreme was adopted, one whereby women were left without any check or control. They had forgotten that man and woman are two mutually complementary human beings. They are not identical individuals, but a pair, each part of which complements the other. The Divine constitution brings mankind back to this elementary fact after it has strayed far from it.

This opening verse also suggests that the family is the cornerstone of human life. God's will has determined that this new creation on earth begins with one family. He created first a single soul, before creating from it its mate. Together, they formed a family and a married couple. "*And from the two of them He spread abroad so many men and women.*" Had He so wished, God could from the very outset have created many men and women, and paired them in couples to form different families. This could have been accomplished without any relationship between them except that they all derive their existence from the will of God, the single deity in the universe. He — limitless is He in His glory — has willed, for a definite purpose of His own, to complement man's tie with his Lord, which is the one from which all ties and relationships are derived, with the tie of kinship. He, therefore, formed the first family from a male and female who came from one soul and shared a single nature. From this first family He spread a multitude of men and women who all share in their tie with their Lord and in their family tie upon which human life is built. It is for this reason that the Islamic system takes so much care of the family and tries to strengthen its ties. It protects the family structure against all influences that may weaken it. Most prominent of these is deviation from human nature which leads to neglecting the abilities and potentials of both man and woman and the essential harmony that makes of these abilities and potentials a complete and coherent whole.

Emphasis is laid in this and other *sūrahs* on the numerous aspects of the care the Islamic system takes of the family. Indeed, the family cannot establish its solid foundation when women are treated with the cruelty and degradation they receive in every ignorant society. For this reason, Islam tries hard to remove that cruelty and elevate women to a position of dignity.

Finally, we are called upon to look at that great variety in people's characteristics and abilities, after they have all spread out of a single soul and a single family. No two individuals are exactly the same although as many generations as we can imagine have come and gone and despite the creation of a great many individuals in every generation. There is a great variety in shapes and features; in habits, temperaments, manners and feelings; as well as in abilities, concerns and functions. A glance at this great variety exhibited by mankind demonstrates God's creative ability which is without parallel and which designs its creation on the basis of its knowledge and wisdom. It is enough to cast our minds and eyes around that remarkable living parade of humanity, looking at that ever-renewing multitude of forms which could not have been made except by God. Indeed, no one has dared to attribute his or her creation to anyone other than God. It is only an absolute, limitless will that can achieve such an endless variety from a single source and origin.

To reflect on the creation of people in this way is enough to give a pleasant feeling to our hearts. It strengthens our faith and enhances our sense of fearing God. This is no trifling gain.

At the end of this opening verse, which stimulates all these thoughts, man is given a reminder to fear God in whose name people appeal to one another, and to be mindful of their ties of kinship which makes of them all a single entity: "*Fear God, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your ties of kinship.*" (Verse 1) It is in the name of God that you make pledges and covenants with one another, and in His name you ask one another to fulfil your duties and obligations, and with His name you swear to one another in order to confirm what you are saying. Hence, you must fear Him in your approach to whatever exists between you of relationships, contacts and transactions.

When we speak of fearing God and of being mindful of our duties towards Him, we speak of something we know well because it is frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān. This verse uses the same verb in reference to ties of kinship, as if it says that we must "fear" our ties of kinship. This is a remarkable expression which imparts certain connotations that one can hardly find words to explain. "Fear" your ties of kinship. Enhance your feelings so that you may appreciate the relationships they create and the obligations they constitute. You can then take care never to do any injustice to your kinsfolk and never to treat them badly. Be mindful lest you cause harm to your kinsfolk or offend them. Value your ties of kinship as you value your

treasures.

The verse concludes with the statement: *"Indeed God is ever watching over you."* (Verse 1) That is enough to give us a feeling of awe when we remember that God, the Creator who knows those whom He has created and who allows no action or feeling to escape His knowledge is the One who is ever watching over us.

When Orphans Come of Age

This powerful opening to the *sūrah* is followed with an outline of the foundation upon which the Islamic social system is built: mutual co-operation within the family and the community, care for the weak and vulnerable, protection and honour for women, looking after the property of the community, and the distribution of inheritance among heirs according to a system which ensures justice to individuals and prosperity to the community.

Guardians of orphans are commanded here to hand over to them all their property when they have attained the age associated with sound judgement. Moreover, they are commanded not to marry under-age orphan girls who are in their charge in the hope of absorbing their wealth. As for the weak-minded who, it is feared, will squander their wealth once it is given to them, they should not be handed their property, because it, in fact, belongs to the community which has an interest in it. Hence, it should not he given up to anyone who may use it improperly. Men are also ordered to maintain justice and fairness in their treatment of women generally.

> *Give the orphans their property. Do not substitute bad things of your own for their good things, and do not absorb their wealth into your own wealth. That is surely a great crime.* (Verse 2) *If you fear that you may not deal fairly by the orphans, you may many of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That makes it more likely that you will not do injustice.* (Verse 3) *Give women their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own accord, choose to give up to you a part of it, then you may take it with pleasure.* (Verse 4) *Do not give to the feeble-minded your wealth which God has assigned to you in trust. Make provisions for them and clothe them out of it and speak to them in a kindly way.* (Verse 5) *Test the orphans [in your charge] until they reach a marriageable age; then, if you find them of sound judgement, hand over to them their property, and do not consume it by wasteful and hasty spending before they come of age. Let him who is rich abstain generously [from his wards property] but he who is poor may partake of it in a fair manner. When you hand over to them their property, let there be witnesses on their behalf. God is sufficient as a reckoner.* (Verse 6)

These emphatic orders give us an impression of what was common practice in the

days of ignorance in pre-Islamic Arabia where the rights of the weak in general, and orphans and women in particular, were either usurped or denied them altogether. Some of these practices continued to exist in the Muslim community, which was originally carved out of the ignorant Arabian society, until the Qur'ān began to eradicate them altogether. At the same time, the Qur'ān gave the Muslim community new concepts, aspirations, traditions and a whole new face with distinctive features. *"Give the orphans their property. Do not substitute bad things of your own for their good things, and do not absorb their wealth into your own wealth. That is surely a great crime."* (Verse 2)

The Muslims are ordered here to give to the orphans what belongs to them of property that is under their control. They must not exchange any good part of it for something inferior of their own, such as taking their good land, cattle, shares or cash — for even cash may differ a great deal in value — or any other property in which value differences occur. They must not absorb the wealth of the orphans, in whole or in part, by joining it to their own property. Any such action is a great sin which God here warns the Muslim community against.

All these practices were known in the first society to be addressed by this verse. Their mention suggests that at least some of the addressees practised some of these ways, inherited as they were from the days of ignorance. In every ignorant society such practices are committed. We even see examples of these in our present-day ignorance, in our cities, towns and villages. Orphans' property is often absorbed or squandered by their guardians in spite of all the legal precautions and safeguards and in spite of the official institutions which are specifically set up to protect the interests and the property of minors. This is a problem wherein legislation and official control cannot seem to make any great headway. Success depends on one element, namely, fear of God. It is this fear that watches over our minds and consciences, and this, in turn, gives to legislation its value and proper effect. This is exactly what happened after this verse was revealed. Guardians began to act with much greater caution, so much so that they separated the property of any orphan in their charge from their own property. Moreover, they even separated the orphans' food from their own; this to guard against any possibility of committing what God warned them of as a great crime.

Life on earth cannot be set right merely by legal provisions and regulations, unless they are backed by an inner motive to implement them. This can only be provided by a fear of God. This fear of God does not come strongly into action, in relation to regulations and legal provisions, except when these are enacted by the One who knows what is in people's minds and watches over their consciences. When this occurs, anyone who contemplates violating the law is bound to feel that he is disobeying God and contradicting His will. He also knows that God is aware of his

intentions and actions. Once he remembers this, he trembles and is overwhelmed by fear. He remembers that he must abide by God's law.

God knows very well His servants, their nature and their psychology, since it is He who created them. For this reason, He has made the law and the code of living His own in order to impart to them of His own authority. Thus, they acquire respect that they cannot otherwise have. God is aware that no law is ever obeyed well unless it comes from the One who is genuinely feared, because people know that He is aware of all intentions and feelings. People may obey the law enacted by their fellow human beings when it is backed by force and authority and when there is some form of supervision to ensure the implementation of that law. That supervision, however, cannot monitor what is in people's minds. People will inevitably try to break the law whenever they have a chance or whenever the supervising authority cannot detect their violation. They will always feel unduly checked, and they will always try to break loose whenever a chance to do so presents itself to them.

Conditions for Marrying an Orphan Girl

`Urwah ibn al-Zubair, a scholar from the generation following that of the Prophet's Companions, relates that he once asked `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, about this verse which states: *"But if you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That makes it more likely that you will not do injustice."* (Verse 3) She said: "Nephew, this refers to an orphan girl being brought up by her guardian and she is his partner in his property. He is attracted to her because of her property and beauty, and he wishes to marry her without being fair to her in her dower and without giving her what someone else would have given. People are therefore not allowed, on the basis of this verse, to marry those orphans unless they treat them fairly and give them the maximum dower girls in their station would have had. They are further ordered to marry other women instead."

`Urwah also relates on the authority of `Ā'ishah that the Prophet's Companions sought his ruling on the whole question after this verse was revealed. By way of answer and assistance, another verse of this *sūrah* was revealed: *"They ask you for rulings concerning women. Say, God [Himself] gives you His rulings concerning them, as well as what is conveyed to you through this Book about orphan women whom you deny what has been assigned to them, and you are disinclined to marry them; ..."* (Verse 127) `Ā'ishah further says: "God's statement in this other verse, *i.e. 'and whom you are disinclined to marry'*, refers to their reluctance to marry orphan girls when they are neither wealthy nor beautiful. They are, therefore, told that they must not marry those orphan girls to whom they are attracted because of their wealth and beauty unless they are fair to

them. This is due to the fact that they do not consider marrying them when they lack wealth and beauty." (Related by al-Bukhārī.)

This *ĥadīth,* as related by `Ā'ishah, describes some of the practices and traditions of ignorant, pre-Islamic Arabia that continued to be practised in the Muslim community, that is until the Qur'ān had its say about them. The Qur'ān is here forbidding such practices and removing them from the Muslim community, with such wise directives that place the onus for their appropriate observation on people's consciences. The Qur'ānic verse starts with: "*If you fear that you may not deal fairly by the orphans.*" (Verse 3) It is, then, a question of taking precautions and making sure to be on the safe side, fearing God's punishment, when a guardian suspects that he is not extending fair treatment to an orphan girl in his care. The verse is general and does not speak of any particular area where fairness is essential. What it requires is that orphans must be treated fairly, in every sense of the word and in all situations, whether relating to dowry or to any other aspect. If a guardian seeks to marry an orphan girl for her money, then he is motivated by his desire to absorb her property, and not by any affection he has for her or by any feeling that her personality makes her a suitable wife for him. Unfairness also arises when a guardian marries an orphan girl regardless of the wide differences in age between them. This makes a happily married life rather untenable, and does not give due consideration to the girl's feelings in the matter. Indeed, she may be unable to express her feelings, either out of shyness or because she fears that if she disobeys her guardian, he will squander her wealth. Many other situations and circumstances may make it difficult to maintain fairness. The Qur'ān, therefore, appoints one's conscience as well as fear of God as the watch guards. The opening verse of this *sūrah,* which sets the scene for all these legal provisions and directives, is concluded with the reminder: "*God is ever watching over you.*''

When guardians are unsure about their ability to maintain fairness with orphan girls in their charge, they should turn elsewhere for marriage. In this way they remove all suspicions of dealing unfairly with their ward: "*If you fear that you may not deal fairly by the orphans, you may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess. That makes it more likely that you will not do injustice.*" (Verse 3)

It is necessary to explain this concession with regard to polygamy. Essentially, the reservation stipulates that if one fears that one cannot maintain fairness between one's wives, then only one wife should be married, or one should confine oneself to those whom one's right hand possesses. It is indeed useful to explain this concession because in these modern times of ours, people are often boastful of their acquired knowledge. They claim for themselves an insight into man's life, nature and interests

which surpasses that of their Lord who has created them. They make their judgement on different matters according to their desires and on the basis of their ignorance and blindness. In doing so, they behave as if new circumstances and needs have become more pressing today than when they were taken into consideration by God when He enacted His legislation for mankind. Such a claim combines ignorance and blindness with impudence and bad manners and adds them all to total disbelief. Such boastful statements are repeated again and again, with no one caring to prevent such ignorance. They represent a very rude affront to God, His law and constitution, without fear of any reproach or punishment. Indeed, those who repeat such affronts receive their wages from those who take it upon themselves to try to undermine Islam.

We need to approach this question of the qualified permission of polygamy in Islam with ease, clarity and decisiveness. We will set clearly all the real and practical circumstances that are relevant to it.

Al-Bukhārī relates that when Ghailān ibn Salamah al-Thaqafī embraced Islam he had ten wives. The Prophet said to him: "Choose four of them." Abū Dāwūd quotes `Umairah al-Asadī as saying: "I had eight wives when I accepted Islam. I told the Prophet (peace be upon him) of this fact, and he said to me: `Choose four of them.'" Al-Shāfi`ī relates that Nawfal ibn Mu`āwiyah al-Dailamī said: "When I became a Muslim I had five women. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) said to me: 'Choose four of them, any four you like, and divorce the other one.'"

When Islam was first revealed, men very often had ten or more wives and this without any limits or restrictions. Islam then made it clear that there is a limit which a Muslim cannot exceed, this being four wives. Furthermore, it imposed a qualification, namely, the ability to maintain fair treatment among all wives. Otherwise, a man must limit himself to one wife, or to bondwomen. Islam, therefore, set restrictions that were not formerly present. It has not left the matter for men to do as they please. It has made polygamy conditional upon fair treatment. Otherwise, the concession is withdrawn.

The question then arises as to why has Islam allowed this concession.

Reasons for Permitting Polygamy

Islam is a practical and positive system for human life, which is consistent with human nature and with man's constitution, needs, requirements and changing circumstances in all areas and all generations. It is a system which deals with man as he is, and in the situation it finds him in, elevating him to heights he can never otherwise achieve, without in any way denouncing his natural desires or suppressing his nature or overlooking his practical needs. Moreover, Islam

approaches man gently. It does not resort to violent or arbitrary pushing to force him to move in the direction it wants.

Islam does not raise the spectre of hollow idealism, or dreamy theorisation that clashes with man's nature and the needs of his practical life. It is a system that cares about man's morality and the purity of society. It does not allow a situation to exist if this is likely to lead to the weakening of moral values and the corruption of society. It works for the creation of a social order that promotes moral values and the purity of society with minimum effort on the parts of both the individual and society.

We have to keep all these essential qualities of the Islamic system in view when we look at the question of polygamy. We see firstly that there have always been many practical cases, in different societies, in the past and in the present, where the number of women of marriageable age exceed the number of men who may get married. It has never been known in history that such an imbalance which can affect certain societies has ever exceeded the ratio of four to one. It is always within that limit. How do we deal with this imbalance which happens from time to time in different ratios and societies and which cannot be overlooked? Do we simply shrug our shoulders and do nothing? Do we leave it without treatment until it settles down according to whatever circumstances may come to prevail?

Shrugging our shoulders does not solve any problem. Leaving society to deal with such a situation at random is something no serious man who respects the human race would contemplate. Action must be taken and a system must be devised. Here we find ourselves facing three alternatives:

1. Each man who is fit to get married marries one woman of marriageable age. Therefore, one woman or more, according to the ratio of imbalance, will inevitably remain outside marriage, going through her life without ever knowing a man.
2. Every man who can marry gets married to one woman in a healthy, legitimate relationship. He, then, has an affair or a short-term relationship with one or more of the women who do not have legitimate male partners. In this way, these women associate with men in an illegitimate and hypocritical way.
3. Men who are able to get married, or some of them, actually marry more than one wife. In this way, the second woman associates with a man as an honourable wife, in broad daylight, not as a mistress or as an occasional partner in an illegitimate relationship practised under the cover of darkness.

The first alternative clashes with human nature and places a great burden on the woman who is made to go through life without ever having a man with whom to share her life. This fact cannot be ignored even on the basis of idealistic claims that

argue when a woman works and earns her own living she does not need a man. The need goes much deeper than such superficiality. Neither a job nor a high income can replace a woman's natural need to live normally with a man, to satisfy her physical urges as well as her emotional and spiritual needs, and to have a companion with whom to share her life. A man works and earns his living, yet this too is not enough for him. Therefore, he seeks a partner and a companion. Men and women are alike in this regard, because they descend from a single soul.

The second alternative is in sharp conflict with Islam, the religion of purity, and with Islamic society which is based on serious morality and with woman's human dignity in mind. Those who do not care when immorality spreads in society are the very people who boast that they know better than God and impudently criticise God's law because there is no one to stop them. Indeed, they find every encouragement and help from those who are keen to undermine the Islamic faith.

It is the third alternative that Islam adopts as a qualified concession to a situation that cannot be dealt with by simply shrugging our shoulders or by espousing hollow idealism. Such a choice is in keeping with Islam's seriousness and practicality in dealing with man as he is, taking full account of his changing circumstances. It is this approach which fits perfectly with the importance Islam attaches to decency, purity and morality as it tries to elevate man to its great height in an easy, gentle and practical way.

From another point of view, we see in all human societies, ancient and modern, past, present and future, another real problem that cannot be overlooked or brushed aside. The period of a man's fertility extends to the age of 70, sometimes even beyond. In the case of women, fertility ends at around the age of 50. This means that there are on average 20 years of fertility in a man's life with no corresponding fertility in a woman. There is no doubt that one of the purposes of joining the two different sexes in marriage is to promote life through procreation and to build the earth through increases in population. It does not fit with this natural situation to prevent humanity from making use of man's longer period of fertility. What fits with this practical situation is that legislation that is applicable to all societies in all ages should provide this concession, not as an obligation, but as an option to benefit human life in general. This balancing between human nature as it is and the purpose of legislation is always evident in Divine law, while it is generally absent in man-made laws. Left to himself, man cannot take into account all details, he cannot look at a situation from all angles, and cannot provide for all eventualities.

One aspect that relates directly to the second fact is a man's need at times to satisfy his natural desire while his wife does not care about it, either because of her age or because of illness. Both man and wife, however, are keen to preserve their married life and do not entertain the idea of separation or divorce. So how do we deal with

such cases? Do we simply shrug our shoulders and leave the man and his wife to bang their heads against the wall? Or do we resort to hollow idealism and flowery words which have no practical effect? Once again, the shrugging of shoulders solves nothing and hollow idealism has no relevance to serious considerations affecting human life. Here again, we find ourselves faced with three alternatives:

1. We forbid the man from seeking satisfaction of his natural desires by the force of law. We say to him: "Shame on you. What you are thinking of is unbecoming and does not take account of the rights and dignity of the woman who is married to you.
2. We allow the man to have illegitimate relationships with other women.
3. We allow the man to marry again, as the situation requires, without having to divorce his first wife.

The first alternative is in sharp conflict with human nature, and weighs very heavily on man mentally. If we were to impose it by force of law, its immediate result would be to leave the man resenting, if not hating, his married life because of the pressures it imposes on him. Islam, which views the family home as a place of rest and peace and views the married couple as intimate companions, does not approve of this alternative.

The second alternative clashes with Islam's moral concept as also its method of elevating human life and establishing it on foundations of perfect purity. Only a life of such purity is worthy of God's honoured creature, man.

The third alternative is the only one which satisfies the needs of human nature and which fits in with the Islamic moral code. It allows the first wife to continue to enjoy married life, satisfies the desire of both man and wife to remain together as intimate companions, and helps to elevate man with ease and practicality.

A situation akin to this occurs when a woman cannot have children while the man cherishes his natural desire to do so. He is then faced with one of two alternatives. He either divorces his wife to marry another who can give him children, or he keeps his first wife, maintaining his loyalty to her, and marries another. Some men, and even women, will pedantically argue that the first alternative is better. Ninety-nine women out of every hundred will undoubtedly curse anyone who advises a husband to take a course of action that destroys their family life without any practical return. It is extremely unlikely that a woman known to be unable to bear children will find another husband. On the other hand, many a childless woman will be happy to help look after young children born to her husband by his second wife. Inevitably, such children bring joy and happiness to the family home and this rubs off on the first wife even though there will inevitably be a residue of sadness that the children are

not her own.

In contemplating practical life, leaving aside both pedantic arguments and absurdity in trying to solve serious problems, we are bound to appreciate the Divine wisdom that allows this concession. Naturally, it is qualified with the need to maintain fairness: "*You may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one.*" (Verse 3) Furthermore, this concession not only protects society from deviation into immorality but also protects the wife from being treated unjustly and safeguards her dignity. Moreover, it maintains justice, which helps tolerate a bitter pill.

No one who knows the spirit of Islam will say that polygamy is desired for its own sake, or for no natural or social need. It has not been permitted so as to satisfy carnal desire nor so as to enable a man to move from one wife to another in the same way as an unscrupulous person moves from one mistress to another. Polygamy is necessary so as to counter situations of emergency. Furthermore, it is a well-qualified solution to a problem.

If a certain generation abuses this concession and men utilise it to make married life nothing more than a means to satisfy their carnal desires, creating the notorious harem, the blame should not be put on Islam's doorstep. Such people do not represent Islam. Indeed, they have sunk so low because they have deviated far away from Islam and have not appreciated its requirements of purity and cleanliness. They do not live in a society where Islam is practised and its law is observed. Their society is not one where an Islamic authority rules according to the Islamic constitution and which implements the laws and directives of Islam observing its moral traditions.

The chaos of the harem and the transformation of married life into a home for carnal desires can only flourish in a hostile society that has broken loose from the laws and constitution of Islam. If we want to reform the situation, we have only to call people to re-adopt Islam and seriously implement its laws and constitution. In this way, we return them to purity, cleanliness and moderation. If we want reform, let us make people return to the implementation of Islam, not only in this particular detail, but in all aspects of life. Islam is a complete system that yields its fruit only when it is implemented in full.

The fairness that needs to be maintained is fairness in treatment, financial support and all practical aspects of married life. Love and feelings are not included in this condition of fairness simply because these are not controlled by man's will. It is in relation to this aspect that God rules out the possibility of maintaining justice between one's wives in a later verse in this *sūrah* which states: "*In no way can you maintain equity between your wives, even though you may be keen to do so. Do not, then, be totally partial towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her, as it were, in a state of*

suspense." (Verse 129) Some people quote this verse in support of their argument that Islam does not permit polygamy. What we have to remember is that God's law does not permit something in one verse and then forbid it in another, like one who takes away with his right hand what he has given with his left. The fairness required in the earlier verse is that which relates to treatment, financial support and other practical aspects of married life. It is when one feels unable to maintain this type of fairness that one must not marry more than one wife. What this means is that nothing should be withheld from one wife when it is allowed to another. This is what the Prophet, the noblest and fairest man ever to have walked on this earth, used to maintain at the time when everyone around him, including his own wives, were fully aware that he loved `Ā'ishah most, and felt for her what he did not feel for any of his other wives. Hearts and emotions are not subject to our control. They are governed only by God's will. The Prophet, who knew his religion well and knew his heart well, used to say: "My Lord, this is my fair allocation in what I control. Do not blame me for that which You control and I do not."

To recap, Islam has not started polygamy but rather restricted it. It does not order its followers to be polygamous, but it allows them a qualified concession to marry more than one wife so as to solve some problems in human life and to satisfy the needs of human nature. Here, we have mentioned some of these needs and problems that are currently recognisable. However, there may be other purposes which will become apparent over the course of time, as happens with regard to every legislation or directive included in the Divine constitution. People in any period of history may not fully appreciate its wisdom and benefits. Nonetheless, wisdom and benefit are presumed to exist in every piece of Divine Legislation, whether they are known or unknown to man.

Relationships with Slave Women

So far we have given due importance to the condition attached by the Qur'ān to the concession to marry more than one wife, namely, fair treatment. When a man fears that he may not be able to abide by that condition, the Qur'ānic verse stipulates certain options that are open to him: *"If you fear that you will not be able to maintain fairness between them, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess."* (Verse 3) This means that where fairness cannot be maintained, marriage should be confined to just one wife. The other alternative touched upon by the phrase *"those whom your right hands possess" refers* to women who are slaves. The statement is expressed in general terms, without specifying formal marriage. We have already spoken about the general question of slavery when we discussed the relevant verses in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, or *Al-Baqarah.* It is pertinent to add here some brief remarks in

connection with the present verse.

When a slave woman is married, she regains her human dignity. Such a marriage qualifies her and any offspring by her master for freedom, even if he does not actually set her free when he marries her. On the day when she gives birth, she is elevated to the status of "the child's mother". Her master no longer has any right to sell her, and she is free on his death. Her child is free from birth.

Similar conditions apply if her master joins her to himself without marriage. When she gives birth, she gains the status of "the child's mother" and she cannot be sold. On her master's death, she regains her freedom. So does her child by him, if he acknowledges his parenthood as was the general practice.

Both marriage and cohabitation enable a slave woman to gain her freedom. We know that Islam has provided many such methods for slaves to regain their freedom. Still, some of us may feel uneasy about the notion of cohabiting with a slave woman. We should, however, remember here that slavery was an answer to an emergency situation; a position imposed on captives, on the basis of equal treatment, after a legitimate war declared by a Muslim ruler who implements God's law. The same emergency allowed cohabitation with slave women by their masters. When free Muslim women were taken captive, the treatment they received was infinitely worse.

It is also important not to forget that captive women also have desires that must be taken into account by any practical system that caters for man, his natural needs and life situation. Slave women's desires, then, could be satisfied either through marriage or through cohabitation with their masters. The only other alternative would have meant the spread of immorality and unrestrained sexual chaos whether via prostitution or other illegitimate relationships, as was the case in pre-Islamic days.

During certain generations the number of slave-girls rose very sharply through purchase, kidnapping and the like. Large numbers of them were gathered in palaces where they took part in orgies and other disgusting practices of which we have learnt from both true and exaggerated reports. Nothing of this can be either approved of or encouraged by Islam. It cannot be attributed to the Islamic system or added to its history.

The proper Islamic history is that which comes into existence according to Islamic principles, laws and legal provisions. When something which contravenes Islamic laws and principles takes place in a society that claims to be Islamic, it cannot be attributed to Islam. How could it be when it is in conflict with essential Islamic principles?

Islam has its own independent existence that is separate from that which takes place among Muslims in any generation. What we have to remember is that Muslims have not invented Islam. It is Islam that has brought Muslims into existence. Islam is

the origin and Muslims are only its product. What defines the true Islamic system and true Islamic concepts is not what Muslims do or understand, unless this is in full conformity with Islam in its pure form. In other words, Islam is independent from people's practices and understanding. As for people, their behaviour should be evaluated according to Islamic principles in order to determine how far they are truly Islamic or not.

The situation differs in other systems, which are based on human concepts and on creeds and laws that they formulate for themselves. Here, creed and law change in accordance with how attitude is formulated and applied in society. The Islamic system has not been devised by people. It has been laid down for mankind by their Lord who has created them and who provides them with their sustenance. People can choose to implement this system and conduct their affairs according to its principles, and it is this that makes their society part of practical Islam. Alternatively, they can deviate or turn away from it altogether, which means that their social set-up does not belong to Islam. Indeed, it is a deviation from it.

We have to take this fully into account when we consider Islamic history. It is on the basis of this principle that the Islamic theory of history is founded. It differs with all other historical theories that consider what takes place within the community to be the practical interpretation of the doctrine or the creed it adopts. Such theories trace the "evolution" of the doctrine or the creed in the practices of the community which upholds it and in the changing concepts of the theory itself in the intellectual output of that community. To apply this view to Islam in order to define the true Islamic concept is very hazardous since it clashes with the very nature of Islam which is unlike any other creed or system.

The final comment in this verse refers to the purpose behind all these legal provisions. They all aim at maintaining fairness and avoiding injustice: *"That makes it more likely that you will not do injustice."* (Verse 3) All that — including avoiding marrying orphan girls for fear of dealing unjustly by them, marrying other women, including the concession of polygamy on the one hand and limiting oneself to one wife on the other when unfairness if feared, and the legislation concerning slave women — *"makes it more likely that you will not do injustice."* Indeed, each one of these provisions helps to prevent injustice.

The achievement of justice is, then, the overriding motive of this system and the aim of its every detail. It is most important that justice should be observed in the family home, since the family is the basic unit of the whole social structure, and the starting point for community life. It is in the family home that the young are brought up in their formative years. If justice, affection and peace are lacking in the family home, they cannot be realised in society at large.

This opening passage of the *sūrah* now resumes its outline of legal provisions relevant to women, who are indeed the subject matter of much of this *sūrah,* which derives its title from them: *"Give women their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own accord, choose to give up to you a part of it, then you may take it with pleasure."* (Verse 4)

This verse gives every woman a clear and personal right to her marriage portion or dowry. It tells us something of the practices of a society of *ignorance* that undermined this right in a variety of ways. One such method was that a woman's guardian would receive this dowry and use it as his own, as if he had made a sale of a commodity he owned and received a fair price for it. Another such form, the mutual marriage, meant that a woman's guardian would give her in marriage to someone in return for the other giving him in marriage a woman under his own guardianship. Here, one woman is exchanged for another in a deal between the two guardians with the interests of both women totally ignored. It is a deal akin to that of exchanging one animal for another. Islam totally forbids this form of marriage. It considers marriage a unity between two souls on the basis of free choice. The dowry belongs to the woman and she should receive it herself, not her guardian. It requires that the dowry be specified so that the woman can claim it as her own and it should be treated as an obligation that must be fulfilled. Islam further requires the husband to pay it willingly to his wife in the same manner as he gives her an absolutely free gift. If subsequently the woman decides, of her own free choice, to give up part or all of her dowry to her husband, she is free to do so without any sort of pressure whatsoever. In this case, the husband is free to accept what his wife willingly gives him. Relations between the married couple must be based on free choice, on the absence of pressure, and on mutual care and affection. Such a basis leaves no room for reluctance or embarrassment.

Thus, Islam has removed altogether what was inherited from the days of ignorance concerning women and their dowries. It has preserved her right to exercise her authority over her money and has preserved her dignity and position. At the same time, it not only established the marital relationship on strict legal formalities but also left enough room for care and affection to play their role in this shared life and to impart to it their own colour.

Handing Property Over to Orphans

Having finished with this aspect of the discussion of marriage with orphan girls and other women, the *sūrah* again picks up the subject of orphans' inheritance. It provides detailed legislation concerning the handing over of their monies to them, having briefly referred to this in the second verse.

Although this property belongs to orphans, it remains, in essence, the property of

the community given by God so that the community may make its best use of it. It is the community, therefore, which is the primary owner of property in general. Individuals, including orphans and those who have left them this property upon their death, are in charge of it so that they may invest and benefit by it and provide benefit to the community at large. They may undertake this task as long as they are able to prove sound judgement. Individual ownership, with all its rights and restrictions, is based on this principle. Orphans who have property, but who are feeble minded and unable to look after their property wisely, are not given control over it. Although their rights of ownership remain intact and cannot be taken away from them, they are not allowed to administer their property. It belongs, as we have said, to the community. Hence, someone who is able to administer it from the ranks of the community is given charge of it, taking into consideration his degree of kinship to the orphan. Thus, the principle of mutual care within the family, which is the basis of general care within the greater family of the society, is fulfilled. The feeble-minded, however, enjoy the rights of adequate maintenance and clothing out of their property, as well as the right to be treated kindly: *"Do not give to the feeble-minded your wealth which God has assigned to you in trust. Make provisions for them and clothe them out of it, and speak to them in a kindly way."* (Verse 5)

Feeble-mindedness and sound judgement can be easily detected after a person has attained puberty. Such matters are easily recognised, and they do not require any specific definition. The community can always recognise a person of sound judgement as also one with a feeble mind. The community evaluates the behaviour of all. The test, therefore, to make sure that the orphan has reached the age of puberty, which is referred to in the Qur'ānic text by the term "marriage", is the function that can be fulfilled only after the attainment of puberty. *"Test the orphans [in your charge] until they reach a marriageable age; then, if you find them of sound judgement, hand over to them their property, and do not consume it by wasteful and hasty spending before they come of age. Let him who is rich abstain generously [from his ward's property], but he who is poor may partake of it in a fair manner. When you hand over to them their property, let there be witnesses on their behalf. God is sufficient as a reckoner."* (Verse 6)

We note in this verse the precise nature of the procedure that culminates with the handing over to orphans of their property when they have come of age. The emphasis here is on the need to hand over such property without any delay, once it has been established that an orphan is of sound judgement. It is right that he should receive his property in full. Again, there is strong emphasis on the need to preserve the property of the orphan when he is still a minor. There must be no attempt to consume an orphan's property by wasteful and hasty spending, before the orphan reaches the age when the handing over should take place. Moreover, a guardian who is well off must abstain from taking any part of the proceeds or the principal of an orphan's property in return for administering it. If he is poor, he is allowed to

partake of it within the minimum limits. When the handing over is to be effected, witnesses should be present. The verse concludes with a reminder that God witnesses everything and He takes everything into account: *"God is sufficient as a reckoner"*

Such emphasis and detailed legislation coupled with a variety of warnings and reminders give us the feeling that an orphan's property was frequently absorbed into the property of their guardians during this period of Arabian history. To change such entrenched habits required detailed legislation and emphasis that could leave no room for trickery and deception of any sort.

The Divine method of Islam worked consistently for the eradication of all aspects of ignorance from people's minds and from society at large. This it did while it was establishing all the various aspects of Islam. Its aim was to replace ignorant social characteristics with Islamic ones. A new society was being moulded with its distinctive characteristics, traditions, laws and values. Its paramount aspect was fear of God and the recognition that He watches over people's actions. This is the ultimate guarantee that legislation will be obeyed. No legislation can be guaranteed to work in this life without such fear and recognition: *"God is sufficient as a reckoner."*

Inheritance: A Fair System of Social Security

> *Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind; whether it be little or much. It is an apportioned share.* (Verse 7)

In the days of *jāhiliyyah,* or ignorance, in pre-Islamic Arabia, no share of inheritance was given to females, and little, if any, was given to young boys. The reason being that neither group could fight against any aggressor. God's law, on the other hand, made inheritance due to all kinsfolk, according to their degree of kinship and their shares, which will be detailed later. It is the view of Islam that members of the same family should help and look after one another. Everyone is required to look after his relatives when they are in need, and to share their liability in paying compensation in cases of causing death to or inflicting injury or bodily harm on others. Hence, it is only right that relatives should inherit each other, when they leave behind some property, according to their respective kinship. This gives practical effect to the rule that: "gain is commensurate with liability". Islam is a complete and perfectly coherent system. This is reflected most clearly in the distribution of rights and obligations.

This is the general rule of inheritance. Some people may question the concept of inheritance, but this only betrays their rudeness towards God, their ignorance of

human nature and the requirements of practical life.

It is enough to understand the principles which form the Islamic social system to put an end to such futile arguments. The basic characteristic of this system is mutual care. In order to give mutual care a sound basis, Islam builds its structure on a solid foundation of natural human inclinations that have a basic role to fulfil in human life.

Family ties are genuine and natural. They have not been invented by any generation of humanity, nor indeed by the cumulative wisdom of all generations. These ties have a profound effect on human life, its preservation and betterment. No argument against the seriousness of these ties and their effect is worth any consideration. In view of this, Islam makes mutual care within the family the cornerstone of its system of social care and security. Inheritance is one aspect of that. It is also an essential element of the Islamic economic system.

Should this provision fall short of looking after all cases which need help, the next step, which is care within the local community, will complement it. If this also falls short, then the Islamic state will look after all those who need care after the family and the local community have fulfilled their duties. In this way, the burden is not thrown totally on the shoulders of the state. The reason being that care within the family or the local community is bound to create feelings of compassion which, in turn, promote co-operation in a most natural way. Moreover, these feelings of compassion constitute a net gain for humanity which cannot be dismissed by any person who has the interests of humanity at heart. Furthermore, family care in particular is bound to leave certain effects that are in harmony with human nature. When a person realises that the effort he exerts to improve his situation will also benefit his relatives, especially his offspring, he will have the motive to double his efforts. His increased productivity benefits the community indirectly. Islam does not create barriers between the individual and the community. Whatever an individual owns belongs to the community as a whole when it needs it.

This last rule is enough to make invalid all superficial objections to inheritance, which argue that inheritance gives money to people who have not worked or made an effort for it. The fact is that an heir is an extension of the person from whom he inherits. From another point of view, an heir is the very person to look after his relatives, should he be well off and they be in need. Moreover, all property belongs to the community when it needs it, on the basis of the rules of Islamic social security.

Furthermore, the relationship between testator and heir, especially offspring, is not confined to money and property alone. Relatives, both immediate and extended, also pass on their good and bad tendencies, susceptibility to certain illnesses, physical features, intelligence or the lack of it, and so on. All these inherited aspects stay with those who receive them throughout their lives. They cannot get rid of them,

no matter how hard they try. It is only fair, then, that they should also inherit property when they cannot avoid, even with the help of the state and all its power, inheriting illness, evil tendencies and stupidity.

For all these practical and natural aspects of human life, and for many other social interests, God has laid down the general rule of inheritance: "*Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind; whether it be little or much. It is an apportioned share.*" (Verse 7) This is the general principle by which Islam gave women, fourteen centuries ago, the same rights as men to have a share of inheritance and by which it has preserved the rights of youngsters who were treated unfairly during the days of ignorance. Ignorant society looked at individuals according to their value in war and productivity. Islam, which is a Divine code of living, looks first at the human value of man. This is his intrinsic value of which he cannot be deprived. His duties and obligations within the family and the community take a secondary position.

Under the Islamic system of inheritance, some relatives take precedence over others. This means that certain relatives do not inherit anything because those who are nearer of kin to the deceased take precedence over them. Hence, the *sūrah* states that if such relatives attend the division of inheritance, they may have an unspecified share by way of compensation; so that they do not feel deprived when they see the division which otherwise may have given them a share. This helps to promote family ties, bringing relatives closer together. The same verse also states that orphans and needy people also have a similar claim: "*When other kinsfolk, orphans and needy persons are present at the distribution of inheritance, give them something out of it, and speak to them in a kindly way.*" (Verse 8)

Different opinions have been reported as being expressed by early Muslim scholars regarding this verse. One opinion states that it was abrogated by those verses which detail the inheritance shares. Another considers that this verse has definitive import. Some say that its message is obligatory while others consider it as only recommended, if the heirs agree to implement it. We do not, however, find any evidence to support the view that it was abrogated. We feel that it provides a definitive ruling which must be implemented in those cases we have already mentioned. Our view is based on the fact that the verse is expressed in general terms, and that Islam promotes mutual care within society. This is different from the specified shares of inheritance which are outlined later in the *sūrah.*

Protecting the Weak and Vulnerable

Before defining the respective shares of inheritance which are due, the *sūrah* gives another warning against absorbing orphans' property. The way the warning is

delivered cannot fail to have a strong effect on people's hearts. It does this by stimulating feelings of love, of compassion for one's own children, of parental fear for them when they are young and weak, and similarly of fear of God who watches over all our actions. It also arouses fear for one's safety in the life to come. The fear of burning in the fire is portrayed here in a very vivid and powerful scene: *"Let those who, if they themselves had to leave behind weak offspring, would feel fear on their account, be afraid (to wrong the orphans in their charge), let them fear God and speak in a just manner. Those who devour the property of orphans unjustly, only swallow fire into their bellies. They will be made to endure a blazing fire." (*Verses 9-10)

The first verse touches on parental heartstrings, describing typical parental fear for what may happen to their offspring. They are made to imagine their children, weak, defenceless, left alone with no one to protect or have mercy on them. If they think of their own children in this position, they are bound to sympathise with orphans in their own charge. They cannot know whether their own children would be placed in the care of others, in the same way as they are in charge of orphans. It is further impressed on them that they should fear God in their dealings with those in their charge. This so that God will provide their own children with people who fear Him in the way they deal with such orphans and that they be compassionate and take good care of them. They are also told to speak justly to orphans.

Verse 10 portrays a fearful scene with people swallowing fire into their bellies, and suffering the torment of Hell in the life to come.

Property that belongs to orphans is fire, and guardians devour that fire in the same way as they eat their food. Their ultimate abode is also a blazing fire. It is a blazing fire both inside and out. The way the scene is portrayed shows the fire to be very real, as if its heat is being felt and as if it is seen to burn bellies and skins.

Such Qur'ānic statements are especially effective. They impart their powerful message to Muslims as also eradicate all traces of *ignorance* from their hearts. They replace such elements with a caution and fear of God. Thus, people are apprehensive lest they misplace any part of an orphan's wealth. They look at this wealth as though it is the fire that God describes in such very powerful verses. Hence they do not want to touch an orphan's property in any way. Such indeed was the attitude of the Prophet's Companions when they heard these verses.

It is authentically reported, on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, that when the verse which begins with "*those who devour the property of orphans unjustly, only swallow fire into their bellies*" was revealed, each one of the Prophet's Companions who had an orphan in his charge separated the property of that orphan from his own. They even separated their food and drink. If any part of an orphan's food was left over, it was kept for him until he ate it or it became unsuitable to eat. This inevitably caused great

difficulties. When these difficulties were pointed out to the Prophet, God revealed the verse that states: *"They ask you about orphans. Say: to improve their conditions is best. If you mix their affairs with yours, remember they are your brothers [in Islam]. God knows him who spoils things and him who improves. Had God so willed, He would indeed have overburdened you. Indeed, God is indeed Almighty, Wise."* (2: 220) After this verse was revealed, they mixed their food and drink together.

In this way, the Qur'ān elevates people's consciences to a sublime horizon, purifying them in the process of all traces of *ignorance* and its practices.

Islamic Inheritance Ensures Justice for All

> *God has this to enjoin on you with regard to your children: The male shall have a share equal to that of two females. If there are more than two women, they shall have two-thirds of what [their parents] leave behind; and if there is only one, she shall have one-half of it. As for the parents [of the deceased], each of them shall have one sixth of what he leaves behind, in the event of his having a child; but if he leaves no children, and his parents be his heirs, then his mother shall have one-third; and if he has brothers and sisters, his mother shall have one-sixth after (deducting) any bequest he may have made, or any outstanding debt. With regard to your parents and your children, you do not know which of them is of more benefit to you. This is, therefore, an ordinance from God. God is All-Knowing, Wise.* (Verse 11)

At this point, the *sūrah* explains the Islamic system of inheritance. It starts with an order, made in the form of a strong recommendation, made by God to parents, to maintain justice among their children. This order shows that God, limitless is He in His glory, is kinder, fairer and more merciful than parents are to their own children. It also shows that the whole system of inheritance has been laid down by God, who has given His verdict on every issue concerning parents and children, or that may come up among relatives. People have no choice but to receive their orders from Him and to implement His rulings. This is the proper concept of religion which the *sūrah, in* its entirety, seeks to explain in the clearest of terms.

The opening statement also lays down the general principle which pervades the whole system of Islamic inheritance: *"God has this to enjoin on you with regard to your children: The male shall have a share equal to that of two females."* (Verse 11) Details are then provided and shares assigned in the light of the aforementioned general principle. All these details are given in two verses; the first is devoted to inheritance by offspring and by parents from their children, while the second lists the inheritance of husbands and wives, and situations when the deceased has no surviving children or parents. A few other rules of inheritance are also explained in the last verse of this *sūrah.*

These three verses provide the foundation of the Islamic system of inheritance, which constitutes a branch of Islamic jurisprudence known as that of "decreed shares". Further elaboration is stated clearly in a number of *aĥādīth* or has been deduced by scholars on the basis of the principles provided in these verses. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to discuss such elaborate details, for they are more the concern of specialised works on Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, we will limit ourselves here to an explanation of these verses and we will comment on the principles they provide within the perfect Islamic constitution.

"God has this to enjoin on you with regard to your children: The male shall have a share equal to that of two females." (Verse 11) This beginning to the system of inheritance points to the Originator of these rules and the basis upon which they are founded. It also stresses the fact that God is more merciful to mankind than parents are towards their children. When He assigns shares for them, He gives them better than what parents would normally give to their own children. Both notions are interrelated and mutually complementary. It is God who enjoins and decrees, and it is He who divides inheritance among people in the same way as He enjoins and commands in every respect and distributes everything that people receive in their lives. It is from God that regulations, legal provisions and laws originate, and from Him people learn how to conduct the most personal of their affairs, mainly the distribution of their estates among their children. This is the meaning of religion. People will not have a religion of any sort if they do not receive their instruction, on how to conduct all their life affairs, from God alone. They do not submit themselves totally to God if they receive instructions on any matter, great or small, from any other source. That would be to deny God's authority, and to drop back into *ignorance,* the state which Islam worked hard to uproot from human life altogether.

Moreover, what God enjoins and decrees concerning people's lives, including that which relates to the most private of their affairs, i.e. the sharing out of their wealth among their children, takes much better care of people, and is much more beneficial to them than what they may choose for themselves and their children. People, therefore, cannot say, "we will choose for ourselves," or "we know better what serves our interests best." Such statements are not only false, but they combine rudeness with insolence and make a claim of having better knowledge than God. Such a claim can only be made by one who is completely ignorant.

Al-`Awfī relates a statement on the authority of Ibn `Abbās in relation to the Qur'ānic statement: *"God has this to enjoin on you with regard to your children: The male shall have a share equal to that of two females."* (Verse 11) He says: "When the verses that include the decreed shares were revealed, giving details of what God has ordered of shares to be given to male and female offspring and to parents, some people were not happy with them. They said: 'A woman will be given one-quarter or one-eighth of

the whole estate, and a daughter may be given half of it, and a young boy receives a share when none of these can fight in battle or protect possessions. Keep quiet about this whole subject so that God's messenger (peace be upon him) may forget it, or we may talk to him and he may change these rules.' They spoke to him and said: `Messenger of God, a girl is supposed to receive of her father's estate when she neither rides a horse nor fights the enemy. A boy may receive the whole estate when he is of little value (in war).' It was their tradition in the days of *ignorance* not to give any share of inheritance except for those who fight and then they would give according to seniority of age." (Related by Ibn Abī Ĥātim and Ibn Jarīr.)

This was the logic of Arabian *ignorance,* which made some people uneasy about what God decreed, and His fair distribution of inheritance. Today's misguided logic which makes some people uneasy about the same subject may differ greatly or only a little from that same Arabian *ignorance.* This logic may pose the question: "How do we give wealth to children who have not worked for it and who have made no effort to earn it?" The two kinds of logic are the same. Neither of them appreciates the wisdom behind God's distribution, and neither shows the minimum degree of politeness that a person should maintain in an approach to God's legislation. Both combine ignorance with impudence.

"*The male shall have a share equal to that of two females.*" (Verse 11) When a person leaves behind no heirs other than his own offspring, male and female, they take the whole of his estate, on the basis of one share for a girl and two shares for a boy.

There is no question here of favouring one sex over another. It is all a matter of maintaining balance and justice between the responsibilities of a male and those of a female within the family. In the Islamic social system, the husband is required to support his wife. He is further required to support all his children in all situations, whether he remains married to his wife or he divorces her. A woman, on the other hand, may be required to look after herself, or she may be looked after by a man both before and after her marriage. Under no circumstances is she required to maintain her husband or her children. This means that a man shoulders at least double the burden of a woman within the family and in the Islamic social system. This is how justice is maintained in this wise distribution which achieves perfect balance between rights and duties, claims and liabilities. All objections to this system of distribution betray ignorance on the one hand and impudence with God on the other. They serve no purpose other than to shake the foundations of the whole system, of family and society, to no avail whatsoever.

Inheritance of Parents and Children

The division begins with the shares of offspring when they inherit from their

parents: *"If there are more than two women, they shall have two-thirds of what [their parents] leave behind; and if there is only one, she shall have one-half of it."* If the deceased has no male issue, but has two or more daughters, his daughters share equally two-thirds of his estate. If he leaves behind only one daughter, she inherits half of his estate. The remainder goes to his nearest of kin on his father's side, i.e. to his father, grandfather or brother, or to his half-brother on his father's side or to his paternal uncle or the children of his grandfather.

The Qur'ānic verse states: *"If there are more than two women, they shall have two-thirds of what [their parents] leave behind."* This statement apportions two-thirds if the deceased leaves behind more than two daughters. The same portion of two-thirds is given when the deceased has only two daughters on the basis of the *Sunnah* as well as the analogy with the share given to two sisters in the final verse of this *sūrah.* As for the *Sunnah, A*bū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate, on the authority of Jābir, that the widow of Sa`d ibn al-Rabī` came to the Prophet, saying: "Messenger of God, these are the two daughters of Sa`d whose father fell a martyr in the Battle of Uĥud in which he fought with you. Their uncle has taken their money and left them nothing. They cannot hope to get married unless they have money." The Prophet said: "God will give His judgement in this case." Then the verse that outlines shares of inheritance was revealed. The Prophet sent a message to their uncle, saying: "Give Sa`d's two daughters two-thirds and their mother one-eighth and you take the remainder." This, then, is the Prophet's judgement which gives two-thirds to two daughters. It shows that when the deceased leaves two or more daughters but no sons behind, his daughters share two-thirds of his property.

Another basis for this portion is the final verse in the *sūrah* which states the shares of two sisters: *"If there are two sisters, they shall both together have two-thirds of whatever he has left."* (Verse 176) It is only reasonable that two daughters have a stronger claim than two sisters to two-thirds of the deceased's inheritance. Moreover, in the case explained in the last verse of this *sūrah,* if there is only one sister, she inherits the same share as that given in the present verse to one daughter.

Having completed the offspring's shares, the verse goes on to explain the shares given to parents who survive any of their children, whether the deceased has children or not: *"As for the parents [of the deceased], each of them shall have one-sixth of what he leaves behind, in the event of his having a child; but if he leaves no children, and his parents be his heirs, then his mother shall have one-third; and if he has brothers and sisters, his mother shall have one-sixth."* (Verse 11)

There are, then, different cases and different ways of sharing a parent's bequest according to every particular situation. The first is when the deceased leaves behind children of his own in addition to his parents. Here, each of his parents inherits one-sixth and the remainder goes to his son, or to his son and daughter or daughters, on

the basis of a son having a share equal to that of two daughters. If the deceased has only one daughter, she inherits one-half of her father's estate, while each of his parents takes one-sixth and the father takes the last one-sixth on the basis of his being the nearest of kin to the deceased. In other words, the father has one portion as an ordained share and another portion for being the nearest of kin, taking what remains after those who are given appointed shares have taken theirs. If the deceased has two or more daughters, they take two-thirds and each of his parents one-sixth.

The second situation occurs when the deceased has neither children, brothers, sisters nor spouse. His parents, then, are his only heirs. In this case, his mother inherits one-third as her appointed share, and the remainder goes to his father as his nearest of kin. The father's share in this case is double that of the mother. If the deceased leaves a spouse in addition to his parents, the husband takes one-half in the case of the deceased being a woman, and the wife takes one-quarter if the deceased is a man. The mother takes one-third (and here there is a difference among scholars as to whether the mother's share is one-third of the whole estate or one-third of what is left after the deceased's wife or husband have taken their shares) and the father takes what is left after the mother has taken her share, provided that the father's share is not less than the mother's.

The third situation occurs when the deceased is survived by his parents and brothers, whether they are full or half brothers on either the father's or mother's side. They do not inherit any share themselves because their father takes precedence over them and he is the nearest of kin to the deceased after his own son. Brothers, however, reduce the mother's share by half, from one-third to one-sixth. The father takes the remainder if the deceased has no surviving spouse. If the deceased has only one brother as well as his parents, he does not reduce the mother's share. She receives one-third in the same way as if the deceased had neither children nor brothers.

All these shares, however, are only apportioned after execution of the deceased's will and payment of any outstanding debts: "*after (deducting) any bequest he may have made, or any outstanding debt*". (Verse 11) Ibn Kathīr, the famous Qur'ānic commentator, states: `All scholars, past and contemporary, are unanimous that the deduction of outstanding debts takes precedence over bequests by will." This is only reasonable because debt is a rightful claim of others. Hence, it must be deducted from the estate of the person who incurred the debt, since he has left enough money to do so. Such payment gives the lender his right and absolves the debtor of his debt. Islam has taken special care to impress on its followers the need to repay all debts. This ensures that people's lives can benefit from people's clear consciences and transactions can be made on the basis of trust and reassurance. It is for this reason that a debt is not written-off by reason of the borrower's death. It remains

outstanding. Abū Qatādah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports that a man asked the Prophet whether all his past mistakes and sins are written-off if he dies a martyr in the service of God's cause. The Prophet answered: "Yes. If you are killed fighting willingly, volunteering for God's cause, pushing forward, not withdrawing backward." The Prophet then asked him to repeat the question, which he did. The Prophet then said: "Yes, with the exception of your debts. Gabriel, the Angel, has told me that." (Related by Muslim, Mālik, and others.)

Abū Qatādah also reports that the body of a dead person was brought to the Mosque so that the Prophet may lead the Prayer for the deceased, i.e. *Janāzah* Prayer, for him. The Prophet said to his Companions: "You pray for your friend because he has an outstanding debt." I said: "I take over that debt, Messenger of God." The Prophet asked: "For full settlement?" I answered in the affirmative and the Prophet led the prayer for the deceased.

The will takes precedence over the apportioned shares of inheritance because it represents the deceased's desire. In fact, provision for making a will is made so that care can be taken of certain cases where some relatives supersede others preventing them from having a share of the inheritance. Those who are thus "screened", to use the Islamic term, may be poor and in need of help. Making a will in their favour is one way of helping them. There are other cases where the interests of the family are served through cementing relations between the heirs of the deceased and relatives who are not entitled to any share of the inheritance. Bequeathing some money to them by will is certain to remove all causes of envy, grudge and conflict before they can even take root. We have to remember here that no heir may be given by will anything over his apportioned share and that there is a ceiling for what any person may so bequeath. That ceiling is one-third of the whole estate. Limiting the will in this way guarantees against any prejudice to the rights of all heirs.

The verse concludes with a comment that makes three clear points: *"With regard to your parents and your children, you do not know which of them is of more benefit to you. This is, therefore, an ordinance from God. God is All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 11) The first seeks to help people accept these apportioned shares willingly. Some may be motivated by their parental instinct to favour their own children over their parents if division of their estate is left entirely to them. This is understandable because there is a natural weakness in favour of one's own children. Some people may be able to overcome this weakness if they have a particularly sensitive moral feeling towards their parents. Others vacillate between their natural weaknesses and their morality. It may happen that the social environment and traditions impose certain considerations similar to those that were voiced by some people when this inheritance legislation was first revealed. We have mentioned some of these earlier in the text. God, therefore, wants to give all people the reassurance generated by submission to His will and to His

legislation by reminding them that His knowledge is perfect and absolute, while people do not know who of their relatives is of more benefit to them and which method of sharing out inheritance may best serve their interests: *"With regard to your parents and your children, you do not know which of them is of more benefit to you."* (Verse 11)

The second point states the principles on which the whole system is based. It is not a question of favouring one person over another or serving a narrow interest. It is all a question of faith and Divine law: *"This is, therefore, an ordinance from God."* (Verse 11) It is He who has created parents and children and who has given them all their provisions and properties. It is God who makes the law and decrees the sharing out and promulgates legal provisions. People cannot legislate for themselves or impose their own dictates. After all, they do not know where their interests lie.

"*God is All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 11) This is the final point which impresses on all people that what God legislates for mankind is not merely something that they cannot contravene; it is also made to serve their interests on the basis of God's perfect knowledge and complete wisdom. People, on the other hand, have only scanty knowledge and follow their caprice.

These comments are made before the legislation of inheritance is completed so that the whole matter is put in its proper perspective of faith. A faith that defines religion as submission to God's law and as acceptance of His rulings.

Inheritance of Husbands, Wives, Brothers and Sisters

The *sūrah* goes on to define other apportioned shares: "*You shall inherit one-half of what your wives leave behind, provided that they have left no child; but if they have left a child, then you shall have one- quarter of what they leave behind, after [deducting] any bequest they may have made or any outstanding debt. And they (i.e. your widows) shall inherit one-quarter of what you leave behind, provided that you have left no child; but if you have left a child, then they shall have one- eighth of what you leave behind, after [deducting] any bequest you may have made or any outstanding debt.*" (Verse 12)

These statements are clear and elaborate. A husband inherits half of his deceased wife's property if she leaves behind neither a son nor a daughter. If she has one or more sons or daughters, her husband inherits one-quarter of her property. The children of her sons, i.e. her grandchildren, reduce the husband's share from one-half to one-quarter in the same way as her own children. The same applies to her children from an earlier marriage who also reduce her husband's share to one- quarter. Her property is divided among her heirs after settling any outstanding debts or executing her will, as mentioned earlier.

A wife inherits one-quarter of the property left by her husband, if he dies without any progeny. If he has a child, a son or a daughter or even more, by her or by any other wife, or even grandchildren of his own, then their presence reduces her share to one-eighth. Again, settlement of debts and the execution of the will take precedence over any sharing out of the property.

The share given to a wife remains the same whether the deceased leaves behind one wife or two, three or four wives. All of them share equally in that portion of one-quarter or one-eighth, as the case may be.

The final rule in this second verse outlining the system of inheritance concerns a person who leaves no direct heirs: *"If a man or a woman has no heir in the direct line, but has a brother or a sister, then each of them shall inherit one-sixth; but if there be more, then they shall share in one- third, after [deducting] any bequest which may have been made or any outstanding debt, neither of which having been intended to harm [the heirs]. This is a commandment from God; and God is All-Knowing, Gracious."* (Verse 12) This is the case of a person having heirs whose relationship to him is weaker than that of either parents or children. Abū Bakr was asked to define the Arabic term *kalālah* that is used in the Qur'ān to refer to such a person. He said: "I can give only my own view. Hit is correct, then I am right only by God's grace. If it is mistaken, the mistake is mine and caused by Satan. God and His Messenger are not party to it. *Kalālah* is a person who has no children and no parents." When `Umar took over, he said in this respect: "I would be ashamed to contradict Abū Bakr in an opinion of his." In fact, the most eminent scholars among the Prophet's Companions and those of the next generations as well as the founders of all four major schools of thought and the overwhelming majority of scholars in successive generations, subscribe to this definition.

"If a man or a woman has no heir in the direct line, but has a brother or a sister, then each of them shall inherit one-sixth; but if there be more, then they shall share in one-third." (Verse 12) What is meant in this verse by the deceased having a brother or a sister is that either of them is only a half-brother or half-sister on his mother's side. If they are a full brother or full sister, or if they are a half-brother or half-sister on his father's side, they inherit according to the last verse in this *sūrah,* which gives them a portion in which a male takes twice as much as a female. The portion mentioned here of one-sixth for either of them, male or female, applies only to half-brothers and sisters on the side of the deceased's mother. They have an apportioned share that is specified in the Qur'ān. They do not inherit on the basis of being the nearest of kin. Had that been the case, they would have taken all the deceased's estate, or what is left of it, after those who have apportioned shares took theirs.

"But if there be more, then they shall share in one-third." (Verse 12) This applies regardless of their number or their sex. The weightier opinion is that they equally share their total portion of one-third, although some scholars maintain that the

division of the portion assigned must be on the basis of a male taking twice as much as a female. Equal division seems to be weightier in this case, because it is in line with the principle stated in the same verse, giving the male an equal share of the female: "*Each of them shall have one-sixth.*" (Verse 12)

This means that half-brothers and sisters on the mother's side are different from other heirs on three counts:

1. The shares of males and females are equal among them.
2. They have no claim to any part of the inheritance unless the deceased has neither parents nor offspring. If his father, grandfather, child or grandchild survives him, they inherit nothing.
3. Their total share, regardless of their number, has a maximum of one-third of the estate.

"*After [deducting) any bequest which may have been made or any outstanding debt, neither of which having been intended to harm [the heirs].*" (Verse 12) This is a warning against making a will for the specific purpose of harming any of one's heirs. Thus, Islam ensures that a will is made to serve justice and the family's interests. It is worth mentioning again here that settling debts takes precedence over executing the will and both the debt and the will take precedence over any sharing out of the inheritance among heirs.

This second verse concludes with a comment that is similar to the first verse: "*This is a commandment from God; and God is All-Knowing, Gracious.*" (Verse 12) Thus the import of this comment is emphasised that much more strongly. These apportioned shares are given as "a *commandment from God*". They are not the result of any caprice, nor are they swayed by desire. They emanate from perfect knowledge. Hence, they must be obeyed because they are made by the One to whom the right to legislate and apportion belongs totally. They must be accepted because they come from the only Source with absolute and perfect knowledge.

When God's Laws Are Obeyed

> *These are the bounds set by God. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger, him will He admit into gardens through which running waters flow, there to dwell forever. That is the supreme triumph. But whoever disobeys God and His Messenger, and transgresses His bounds, him will He commit to the fire, there to abide forever; and shameful torment awaits him.* (Verses 13-14)

These two verses serve as further emphasis to the basic rule of Islam that makes it

absolutely clear that the authority to legislate belongs to God alone. Any contravention of this rule constitutes disobedience to God and rejection of Islam altogether. This is re-emphasised in these two verses which describe the shares specified for the distribution of the estate of a deceased person among his or her heirs as bounds set by God. These verses serve as a clear definition of relations within the family and social and economic relations in the society at large. The rulings they give on how the estate of the deceased is to be shared out are final. When they are properly respected and God and His Messenger are obeyed in these legal provisions, the reward is great: it is nothing less than Paradise, forever, which is indeed a supreme triumph. When they are contravened by disobedience to God and His Messenger, the result is an everlasting fire and a shameful torment.

But why is such a great and final destiny dependent on obedience or disobedience in a legal provision that tackles an aspect of secondary importance like the provision of inheritance? This provision speaks only of small details and its reward may appear to be out of proportion with its nature.

Several verses in the *sūrah* clarify this matter and put it into proper perspective. These verses explain the meaning of religion, true faith and the limits of Islam. We will attempt, however, to give a brief clarification of this issue considering that the two verses we are discussing today, which come as a comment on the legislation of inheritance, are of vital importance.

The central question posed by Islam, and indeed by all Divine faith ever since God sent His first messenger to mankind, is: to whom does Godhead on earth belong? and to whom belongs the Lordship of mankind? The answer to both parts of this question makes all the difference not only with regard to faith but to human life altogether.

If the answer is that both Godhead and Lordship in the universe belong to God alone, without associating any partners with Him, then that is the essence of true faith and proper submission to God. That is the religion of Islam. If, on the other hand, the answer is that they belong to God's partners, with or without Him, then that is idolatry, or total rejection of faith.

When Godhead and Lordship in the universe belong to God alone, all creatures must submit to Him and obey all His commandments. This means that they must follow the system and the constitution He has chosen for them. He alone can make that choice and He alone can legislate for people, giving them the values, standards, and the social systems to establish and maintain. No one else, whether an individual or a group, can share that authority with Him except on the basis of His law and constitution. That authority is the total sum and the practical result of Godhead and Lordship. When it is given to someone else, then submission and obedience are

offered to beings other than God. The practical effect of that is the implementation of regulations, laws, values, and standards established by human beings without any reference to God's Book and authority. In such a situation, there can be no proper faith and no Islam. There can only be transgression and a total denial of the faith.

This is the true essence of the whole matter. In this light, transgression of the bounds set by God is the same whether it relates to one aspect of God's laws or to the whole of Islamic law. In both cases, the transgression represents a rebellion against faith. What makes all the difference is the basic rule that shapes human societies. That rule seeks a clear and definite answer to the question of whether Godhead and Lordship are given to God alone, or they are being usurped by people. In this context, verbal claims of adherence to Islam count for little unless they are given their proper practical effect.

This is the essential fact stressed in this comment which makes a link between the sharing out of inheritance, obedience to God and His Messenger and the ultimate reward of Paradise, the reward to be enjoyed forever. This principle is the subject matter of many verses in this *sūrah,* which throw ample light on it, in order to make it totally clear, and absolutely indisputable. Everyone who claims to be a Muslim must understand that basic fact so that he can determine whether he is truly a Muslim who lives his faith.

We still have to add a concluding word about the Islamic system of inheritance. It is a fair system that satisfies the needs of human nature and those of family life. This becomes most obviously apparent when we compare it with any system, old or new, known to man anywhere in the world.

This system takes fully into account the concept of mutual care and security within the family. It apportions shares according to the duty of each member of the family. When heirs of the first degree, such as parents and children, have taken their defined shares, the strongest claim to a portion of the deceased's inheritance belongs to his nearest relatives on his father's side. It is those relatives who are also required to take care of him and to contribute to the satisfaction of his liabilities in any emergency. When we consider this aspect, the system appears to be both balanced and perfect.

This system takes into account the fact that all mankind originated from a single soul. Hence, it does not deprive a woman or a child of their shares simply because of their sex or minority. It does not favour one sex over another, except in relation to their respective duties within the concept of mutual care within the family.

It also takes into account all aspects of human nature. It is for this reason that children are given priority in inheritance over all other relatives. The new generation represents human survival and continuation of the family. Hence it is more

deserving of care. The Islamic system, however, does not deprive parents or grandparents or other relations of their shares. Each has his or her portion.

Moreover, the Islamic system of inheritance is most suitable to human nature. It satisfies the natural desire of every human being to maintain his relations with his offspring in the sense that his children represent the continuity of his existence. It reassures a man who has exerted his efforts to save a portion of his earnings that his own children will not be deprived of the fruits of his efforts. They inherit him when he dies.

This motivates him to double his efforts which, in turn, benefits society as a whole, without prejudice to the concept of mutual social care and security on which Islam lays strong emphasis.

Finally, the Islamic system of inheritance ensures that wealth accumulated by every generation is divided and redistributed. This ensures that vast wealth does not remain in a few hands, as happens in systems that give all inheritance to the eldest son or appoint very few heirs. From this point of view, it is an effective tool for economic reorganisation within the community for it rids it of excesses without any direct intervention by the authorities. Such intervention is normally received with natural distaste. This continuing process of division and redistribution takes place without ill-feeling because it understands human motives and satisfies them. That is the basic difference between Divine and man-made legislation.

2
Perfect Social Morality

وَٱلَّٰتِى يَأۡتِينَ ٱلۡفَٰحِشَةَ مِن نِّسَآئِكُمۡ فَٱسۡتَشۡهِدُواْ عَلَيۡهِنَّ أَرۡبَعَةً مِّنكُمۡۖ فَإِن شَهِدُواْ فَأَمۡسِكُوهُنَّ فِى ٱلۡبُيُوتِ حَتَّىٰ يَتَوَفَّىٰهُنَّ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ أَوۡ يَجۡعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُنَّ سَبِيلاً ﴿١٥﴾

As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them. (15)

وَٱلَّذَانِ يَأۡتِيَٰنِهَا مِنكُمۡ فَـَٔاذُوهُمَاۖ فَإِن تَابَا وَأَصۡلَحَا فَأَعۡرِضُواْ عَنۡهُمَآۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ تَوَّابًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

And the two from among you who are guilty of the same, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, then leave them alone. God is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. (16)

إِنَّمَا ٱلتَّوۡبَةُ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ لِلَّذِينَ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٱلسُّوٓءَ بِجَهَٰلَةٍ ثُمَّ يَتُوبُونَ مِن قَرِيبٖ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَتُوبُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِمۡۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

God will indeed accept the repentance of only those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent shortly afterwards. It is they to whom God turns in His mercy. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (17)

وَلَيۡسَتِ ٱلتَّوۡبَةُ لِلَّذِينَ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَهُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ قَالَ إِنِّى تُبۡتُ ٱلۡـَٰٔنَ وَلَا ٱلَّذِينَ يَمُوتُونَ وَهُمۡ كُفَّارٌۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَعۡتَدۡنَا لَهُمۡ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٨﴾

Repentance shall not be accepted from those who indulge in their evil deeds and, when death comes to any of them, he says: "I now repent"; nor from those who die as non-believers. For those We have prepared grievous suffering. (18)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمۡ أَن تَرِثُواْ ٱلنِّسَآءَ كَرۡهٗاۖ وَلَا تَعۡضُلُوهُنَّ لِتَذۡهَبُواْ بِبَعۡضِ مَآ ءَاتَيۡتُمُوهُنَّ إِلَّآ أَن يَأۡتِينَ بِفَٰحِشَةٖ مُّبَيِّنَةٖۚ وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِۚ فَإِن كَرِهۡتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَىٰٓ أَن تَكۡرَهُواْ شَيۡـٔٗا وَيَجۡعَلَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيۡرٗا كَثِيرٗا ١٩

Believers, it is unlawful for you to inherit women against their will, or to bar them from remarrying so that you may make off with part of what you have given them, except when they are guilty of a flagrant indecency. Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good. (19)

وَإِنۡ أَرَدتُّمُ ٱسۡتِبۡدَالَ زَوۡجٖ مَّكَانَ زَوۡجٖ وَءَاتَيۡتُمۡ إِحۡدَىٰهُنَّ قِنطَارٗا فَلَا تَأۡخُذُواْ مِنۡهُ شَيۡـًٔاۚ أَتَأۡخُذُونَهُۥ بُهۡتَٰنٗا وَإِثۡمٗا مُّبِينٗا ٢٠

If you wish to take one wife in place of another and you have given the first one a large sum of money, do not take away anything of it. Would you take it away though that constitutes a gross injustice and a manifest sin? (20)

وَكَيۡفَ تَأۡخُذُونَهُۥ وَقَدۡ أَفۡضَىٰ بَعۡضُكُمۡ إِلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ وَأَخَذۡنَ مِنكُم مِّيثَٰقًا غَلِيظٗا ٢١

How can you take it away when each of you has been privy with the other, and they have received from you a most solemn pledge? (21)

وَلَا تَنكِحُواْ مَا نَكَحَ ءَابَآؤُكُم مِّنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ إِلَّا مَا قَدۡ سَلَفَۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ فَٰحِشَةٗ وَمَقۡتٗا وَسَآءَ سَبِيلًا ٢٢

Do not marry women whom your fathers have previously married, unless it be a thing of the past. Surely, that is an indecent, abominable and evil practice. (22)

حُرِّمَتۡ عَلَيۡكُمۡ أُمَّهَٰتُكُمۡ وَبَنَاتُكُمۡ وَأَخَوَٰتُكُمۡ وَعَمَّٰتُكُمۡ وَخَٰلَٰتُكُمۡ وَبَنَاتُ ٱلۡأَخِ وَبَنَاتُ ٱلۡأُخۡتِ وَأُمَّهَٰتُكُمُ ٱلَّٰتِيٓ أَرۡضَعۡنَكُمۡ وَأَخَوَٰتُكُم مِّنَ ٱلرَّضَٰعَةِ وَأُمَّهَٰتُ نِسَآئِكُمۡ

Forbidden to you [in marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your aunts paternal and maternal, your brother's daughters and your sister's daughters, your mothers who have given

وَرَبَٰٓئِبُكُمُ ٱلَّٰتِي فِي حُجُورِكُم مِّن نِّسَآئِكُمُ ٱلَّٰتِي دَخَلْتُم بِهِنَّ فَإِن لَّمْ تَكُونُواْ دَخَلْتُم بِهِنَّ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَحَلَٰٓئِلُ أَبْنَآئِكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِنْ أَصْلَٰبِكُمْ وَأَن تَجْمَعُواْ بَيْنَ ٱلْأُخْتَيْنِ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ سَلَفَ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿٢٣﴾

suck to you, your suckling sisters, the mothers of your wives,

your stepdaughters — who are your foster children — born to your wives with whom you have consummated your marriage; but if you have not consummated your marriage with them, you will incur no sin [by marrying their daughters], and the wives of your own begotten sons; and [you are forbidden] to have two sisters as your wives at one and the same time, unless it be a thing of the past. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (23)

۞ وَٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتُ مِنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُكُمْ ۖ كِتَٰبَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ ۚ وَأُحِلَّ لَكُم مَّا وَرَآءَ ذَٰلِكُمْ أَن تَبْتَغُواْ بِأَمْوَٰلِكُم مُّحْصِنِينَ غَيْرَ مُسَٰفِحِينَ ۚ فَمَا ٱسْتَمْتَعْتُم بِهِۦ مِنْهُنَّ فَـَٔاتُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً ۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا تَرَٰضَيْتُم بِهِۦ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱلْفَرِيضَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٢٤﴾

And [forbidden to you are] all married women, other than those whom your right hands possess. This is God's ordinance, binding upon you. Lawful to you are all women other than these, provided that, offering them of your own possessions, you seek to take them in wedlock, not in fornication. To those with whom you seek to enjoy marriage, you shall give the dowers due to them; but you will incur no sin if you agree among yourselves on any voluntary arrangement even after what has been stipulated by way of duty. God is indeed All- Knowing, Wise. (24)

وَمَن لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ مِنكُمْ طَوْلاً أَن يَنكِحَ ٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ فَمِن مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُكُم مِّن فَتَيَٰتِكُمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِإِيمَٰنِكُم ۚ بَعْضُكُم مِّنۢ بَعْضٍ ۚ فَٱنكِحُوهُنَّ بِإِذْنِ أَهْلِهِنَّ وَءَاتُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ مُحْصَنَٰتٍ غَيْرَ

Any of you who, owing to circumstances, is not in a position to marry a free believing woman may marry a believing maiden from among those whom your right hands possess. God knows all about your faith: you belong to one another. Marry them, then, with their people's consent and give them their dowers in an equitable manner, as chaste women who give themselves in

honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as women who have secret love companions.	مُسَٰفِحَٰتٍ وَلَا مُتَّخِذَٰتِ أَخْدَانٍ ۚ
If after their marriage, they are guilty of gross immoral conduct, they shall be liable to half the penalty to which free women are liable. This provision applies to those of you who fear to stumble into sin. Yet it is better for you to be patient. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (25)	فَإِذَآ أُحْصِنَّ فَإِنْ أَتَيْنَ بِفَٰحِشَةٍ فَعَلَيْهِنَّ نِصْفُ مَا عَلَى ٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتِ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَنْ خَشِىَ ٱلْعَنَتَ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَأَن تَصْبِرُوا۟ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٥﴾
God wants to make all this clear to you and to guide you in the [righteous] ways of life of those who have preceded you, and to turn to you in His mercy. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (26)	يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ سُنَنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَيَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٦﴾
And God wants to turn to you in His mercy, while those who follow their lusts want you to go very far astray. (27)	وَٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَن يَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَيُرِيدُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ ٱلشَّهَوَٰتِ أَن تَمِيلُوا۟ مَيْلًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٧﴾
God wants to lighten your burdens; for man has been created weak. (28)	يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ أَن يُخَفِّفَ عَنكُمْ ۚ وَخُلِقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ ضَعِيفًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Overview

The first passage of this *sūrah* dealt with the organisation of Muslim society and the eradication of all traces of pagan beliefs from its system by providing guarantees to orphans and protecting their wealth within their families and within the community. It has also dealt with the system of inheritance. All these guarantees work within the Islamic system outlined by God, the Lord of all people. He has created them all of a single soul, and He has established human society with the family as its basic unit, making mutual care its guiding principle. Moreover, all their affairs must be regulated within the bounds set by God on the basis of His perfect knowledge and infinite wisdom. They receive their reward or suffer their

punishment according to whether they obey or disobey Him in all this.

In this second passage, the *sūrah* continues with its purpose of organising Muslim society, aiming at purifying it of all gross indecency. It provides for the isolation of those who commit such indecency, men and women, while at the same time opening the door for those of them who want to repent, purify themselves and lead a clean and chaste life. It also rescues women from what they used to suffer of humiliation and injustice under *ignorant* systems, so that the family could establish its firm and sound basis. That was the only way to build the society on firm foundations and within a clean atmosphere. It concludes with giving a list of the women whom a man is forbidden to marry under Islamic law. This constitutes a part of the organisation of family life.

First Step Towards Eradicating Immorality

> *As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them.* (Verse 15) *And the two from among you who are guilty of the same, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, then leave them alone. God is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful.* (Verse 16)

Islam defines here its method, which aims at the cleansing and purification of society. In the first instance, it chooses to isolate those women who commit adultery from the rest of the community, once their guilt is proven. It also chooses to inflict physical punishment on those men who are sexually perverted, without specifying the type of punishment or its nature. At a later stage, Islam chose to mete out the same punishment to such men and women, which is flogging as explained in *Sūrah* 24, The Light, or *Al-Nūr,* and stoning to death as explained by the *Sunnah.* The ultimate aim of either punishment is to protect society and to guard its honour and morality.

In every situation and with every punishment, Islamic legislation provides guarantees which make it extremely difficult for injustice to take place and which make it almost impossible for punishment to be inflicted on the basis of suspicion or mistaken identity. This was especially important given that the punishment legislated could leave such a serious effect on people's lives: "*As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them.*" (Verse 15)

Great care is being taken here. Firstly, the women on whom this punishment may

be inflicted are defined as follows, *"As for those of your women"*, meaning Muslim women only. Furthermore, the men who are called in to testify to the occurrence of the offence are specified as follows, *"Call upon four from among you"*, meaning that they must also be Muslims. It is, then, a punishment for a certain kind of woman once the offence is proven by the testimony of certain men.

Islam does not allow non-Muslim men to testify against Muslim women, when they commit indecency. The four male witnesses must belong to the Islamic faith and the Muslim community, submit to its legislation, accept its leadership, care for its welfare and know what takes place within it. When it comes to the honour of a Muslim woman, the testimony of a non-Muslim is unacceptable, because we cannot be certain of his honesty and integrity. He has no interest in safeguarding the cleanliness and chastity of the community and he is not particularly interested in maintaining justice in that community. These safeguards have remained in effect even after the ruling in such cases was changed and the punishment for adultery was more clearly defined as flogging or stoning.

"If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses." (Verse 15) Thus they do not mix with or contaminate the Muslim society, nor are they allowed to marry or undertake any activity. This punishment continues *"until death takes* them" while they are confined in their houses, *"or God opens another way for them"*. This means that they themselves may change, or that their punishment may be changed. It also means that God may decide to do whatever He will with them. All this suggests that this is not a final ruling, but an interim verdict that takes into account certain circumstances in society. A different verdict which would be more permanent was, then, to be expected. This took place when the verdict and the punishment were changed to those outlined in *Sūrah* 24 and in the *Sunnah.* The strict guarantees which are provided here for the establishment of guilt have, however, remained the same.

Imām Aĥmad relates on the authority of `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit that the Prophet used to be visibly affected every time revelations were bestowed on him from on high. His face changed and he looked ill at ease. One day, after he received revelations and he regained his colour, he said: "Learn this from me. God has opened another way for them, both in the case of a married man and a married woman and that of an unmarried man with an unmarried woman. For the married, one hundred lashes and stoning, and for the unmarried one hundred lashes and exile for a year." This *ĥadīth* is also related by Imām Muslim and others but using different wording: "Learn this from me; learn this from me. God has opened another way for them: For an unmarried man with an unmarried woman, one hundred lashes and exile for a year; and for a married man with a married woman, one hundred lashes and stoning." The practice of the Prophet confirms this in the case of Mā`iz and the Ghāmidī woman. It is stated in the authentic compilation of *ĥadīth* by Muslim that

the Prophet stoned them to death, and did not inflict on them the lesser punishment of flogging. The same occurred when the case of two Jewish adulterers was put to him for judgement. His verdict was stoning to death and not flogging. The Prophet's practice, then, shows that this is the final and permanent verdict.

The next verse also prescribes an interim measure: "*And the two from among you who are guilty of the same, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, then leave them alone. God is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verse 16) It seems clear that the reference in the expression to "*the two from among you who are guilty*" of gross immoral conduct refers to two homosexual men. A number of scholars say that the punishment meant in the words *`punish them both" is* in the form of verbal rebuke and beating them with shoes.

"*If they repent and mend their ways, then leave them alone.*" Repentance and mending one's ways indicate a fundamental change in character, method, action and behaviour. With this change, punishment should stop and the community should cease to inflict any harm on repenting homosexuals. In this context, leaving them alone means to cease punishing them.

This is followed by a profound concluding remark: "*God is the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verse 16) It is He who has ordered punishment, and it is He who orders that it must stop when the offender repents and mends his ways. People have no say in either the infliction of punishment or in its suspension. They only implement God's laws and directives. He accepts repentance and turns in mercy to reformed offenders.

Another fine touch contained within this comment directs people to make mercy and compassion the basis of their dealings with one another. God accepts repentance and His grace is limitless. People, then, should be more tolerant of one another, overlook past mistakes and offences when they are followed by true repentance. This is not complacency in disguise. There is no mercy to hardened sinners. This is compassion extended only to repenters who want to reform themselves. They are accepted within the community. No one reminds or reproaches them again of their past offences, since they have mended their ways. The community is required to help them start a new, clean and pure life. It is also required to forget their past offences so that no ill-feeling is aroused which may tempt the repenting sinners to go back to their erring ways. Such a return will inevitably ensure their ruin in this life and in the life to come. Moreover, they will harbour grudges against the society as a whole.

This punishment, however, was later amended. In this respect, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "If you see anyone doing what the people of Lot used to do, kill both partners."

A Perfectly Moral Society

These rulings show very clearly that Islam was intent, from its very early days, to eradicate immorality from Muslim society. It did not wait until it established its state in Madinah before it promulgated laws to be implemented by the ruling authority. Instead, the prohibition of adultery was stated in *Sūrah 17,* The Night Journey, or *Al-Isrā',* which was revealed in Makkah: *"Do not come near to adultery: for it is an abomination and an evil way."* (17: 32) Again, in *Sūrah* 23, The Believers, or *Al-Mu'minūn,* successful believers are described as people *"who are mindful of their chastity, [not seeking to satisfy their desires] except with their wives".* (23: 4-5) The same description is repeated in *Sūrah* 70, The Ascending Stairways, or *Al-Ma`ārij.*

All these *sūrahs* were revealed in Makkah when Islam enjoyed neither a state nor authority. Hence, no specific punishments were given for this offence, although its prohibition was established in Makkah. Only when a state that exercised power was established in Madinah, were punishments defined. Verbal directives and instructions were no longer sufficient to put an end to such crimes and protect society. Islam is a practical religion that appreciates that the power of the state is needed for the implementation of laws. According to Islam, religion is the system by which to regulate people's practical life. It is not mere feelings and abstract values.

From the outset of the Islamic faith being accepted by some people in Makkah, it started to purify them. When Islam established its state in Madinah, which was backed by an authority able to implement a well defined legal code and able to shape the Islamic way of life in a practical form, it began to take practical steps to safeguard society against immoral conduct, adding to its directives the force of proper punishment. As we have already said, Islam is not merely general principles and abstract values. It adds to these a real authority to implement the principles in practice. Its structure cannot stand on one leg.

This applies to all Divine religions, even though some people wrongly claim that there were Divine religions that did not enjoin any law, system or governing authority. Every religion is a way of life, which is practical and down to earth. People submit themselves to God alone and receive their concept of faith, moral values, and practical legislation from Him only. Such legislation must be implemented by a government that can enforce such rules and punish those who violate them, and also protect society from any encroachment by the evils of *ignorance.* Thus, all submission is dedicated to God alone. This means that there are no deities, in any shape or form, who have the authority to legislate and establish values, standards, laws or regulations. The right to do all this belongs to God alone. Any creature that claims such a right is, in effect, claiming Godhead for himself. No religion revealed by God allows any man to be god or suffers him to make such a claim and put it into effect.

Hence, no Divine religion would limit itself to mere beliefs without supporting them by a law and a governing authority.

In Madinah, then, Islam started to make its real presence felt by purifying the society through legislation which was put into practice. It defined punishment for offences, as we have seen in the rulings included in this *sūrah.* Some of these were later amended to take their final forms as determined by God.

The Surest Way to Human Destruction

It should not come as a surprise to us that Islam takes a very serious view of immorality and works hard for its total eradication. The most important feature *of Jāhili* (ignorant) societies throughout all ages, as we see today across the globe, is permissiveness and the shedding of all moral and legal inhibitions. Thus, promiscuity becomes an aspect of personal freedom that is only opposed by intolerant prudes. People living in ignorant societies may agree to forgo, willingly or unwillingly, all their human freedom but not their "animal" freedom. They will also rise up in arms against anyone who opposes promiscuity and tries to regulate their moral standards.

In *ignorant* societies, all systems collaborate to destroy moral barriers, weaken natural controls within man, give an innocent appearance to permissiveness and allow excessive promiscuity to run without checks or controls. This inevitably leads to the weakening of family and social controls, to the ridicule of natural, healthy feelings which are disgusted by permissiveness, and to the glorification of both physical and emotional nudity and all its methods of expression.

Islam tries to purify human feelings and societies from all these characteristics of promiscuous *ignorance.* You have only to read the poetry of Imru'l-Qais, the renowned poet of pre-Islamic Arabia, to find close similarities with the poetry of ancient Greece and that of the Roman Empire. You will also find close similarities with the arts and literature of contemporary *Jāhiliyyah* (or state of ignorance), Arabian and non-Arabian. Moreover, if we examine social traditions, the status of women and permissiveness in all *Jāhiliyyah* societies, ancient and contemporary, we are bound to conclude that they all start from the same concept and adopt similar slogans.

Such permissiveness always leads to the destruction of civilisation and the collapse of the nation in which it spreads. This is exactly what happened to the ancient Greek, Roman and Persian civilisations. It is also happening today to European and American civilisations, which have started their decline despite all the appearances of great advances in the industrial field. This is something that has been worrying men of wisdom in the West, although they feel that they are too weak to be able to check this destructive trend. The total destruction of society and civilisation is

the inevitable end, yet the people of *Jāhiliyyah,* in all ages and societies, push forward towards permissiveness at full speed. Indeed, they are willing to sacrifice all their freedoms, and live the life of slaves, provided that they have the freedom to enjoy their animal indulgences.

This is indeed neither indulgence nor freedom. It is total enslavement to carnal desires, which makes man sink far below the standards of animals. Animals follow the dictates of their nature in this connection. They have special seasons when they become sexually active. Moreover, their sexual function is strictly linked to the purpose of procreation. A female does not accept the male except in her season of fertility. The male, on the other hand, does not make any advance towards the female except when she is ready. But God has left man to his own reason and made faith the power to control that reason. If he breaks loose from faith, he will find himself weak, subjected to much pressure. He cannot check and control his desire. It is impossible, therefore, to provide any real social checks and to make society truly clean except through faith. Yet faith needs to be backed by an organised authority to punish those who violate the bounds set by God. In this way, faith saves man from the depths of animal desire and elevates him to a position of honour among the rest of His creation.

Humanity today lives a life that gives faith a very secondary position. It does not have the benefit of a ruling body that derives its authority from faith. Hence, wise individuals in Western societies call in vain for the establishment of checks and controls. They may well save themselves the trouble because no one responds to mere words that are not backed by an executive authority and deterrent punishments. The church and the clergy also make their contribution against promiscuity, but it all goes in vain. No one responds to a lost faith lacking the authority to undertake the implementation of its laws and directives. Thus, mankind moves headlong towards the abyss without any hope of salvation.

That this civilisation will ultimately be destroyed is absolutely certain, as is evident by all past human experience. This is true despite the apparent strength of this civilisation and its great foundation. Man is indeed the greatest of all these foundations. When man is destroyed, civilisation cannot remain in existence, supported only by factories and newly-implemented robotic production.

If we fully appreciated how profound this truth is, we would be able to recognise the greatness of Islam. For it has legislated its severe punishment for promiscuity and gross indecency in order to protect man from his own destruction. This is the only way for human life to be established on proper human foundations. We would also recognise the extent of the crime committed by those systems which collaborate to destroy the foundation of human life through the glorification of promiscuity and permissiveness, giving them such appealing names as "art", "freedom" and

"progress". Every means that contributes to the destruction of man is a crime and it must be called as such. Moreover, it must be countered with sound advice as well as stern punishment. This is what Islam does because it is a religion with a perfect system.

Essence of True Repentance

> *God will indeed accept the repentance of only those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent shortly afterwards. It is they to whom God turns in His mercy. God is All-Knowing, Wise. Repentance shall not be accepted from those who indulge in their evil deeds and, when death comes to any of them, he says: "I now repent"; nor from those who die as non-believers. For those We have prepared grievous suffering.* (Verses 17-18)

While Islam prescribes punishment, it does not slam the door in the face of sinners, should they want to return to society after having realised their guilt. Indeed, Islam encourages them and opens the way for them to repent and purify themselves. The encouragement is so emphatic that God makes acceptance of repentance, once it is genuine and sincere, a duty which He in His glory imposes on Himself by His Own free will. In this, His grace is more than anyone can expect.

We have spoken about repentance and its acceptance in the past, when we commented on the verse which describes the true believers as those who *"when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins"*. (3: 135) All that we have stated on that occasion is relevant here. Repentance is mentioned here, however, for a different purpose, and by which it seeks to explain its true essence.

True repentance which God, out of His Grace, has bound Himself to accept is the one which is deeply felt by the repenter and which indicates that he or she has undergone a total transformation. It means that past mistakes are sincerely regretted, and that regret has prompted a total change of attitude when the person concerned still enjoys good health, and still aspires to a brighter future. Such repentance is normally accompanied by a genuine desire for self-purification and a resolve to follow a different way of life.

"God will indeed accept the repentance of only those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent shortly afterwards. It is they to whom God turns in His mercy. God is All-Knowing, Wise." (Verse 17) What is meant by *"those who do evil out of ignorance"* is anyone who commits sin. Scholars are almost unanimous that "ignorance", as it is used here, means deviation from Divine guidance, whether for a long or short period, as long as it does not continue until one is in the throes of death. Repenting *"shortly afterwards"*

refers to repentance in good time, before death overtakes one and one's life is felt to have reached its end. Such repentance reveals genuine regret and strong resolve to mend one's ways. It indicates that one's conscience is back at work. Hence, it is to those people that *"God turns in His mercy."* For *"God is All-Knowing, Wise."* Any action of His is based on His knowledge and wisdom and gives His servants the chance to return to the ranks of those who are good. He never chases them out when they have a genuine desire to seek refuge with Him and receive His mercy. We have to remember that God — limitless is He in His glory — has no need for His servants or their repentance. When they repent, they benefit only themselves. It is their lives and the life of the community in which they live that improve and become happy. Hence, the way is open for them to return to the true path at any time.

> *Repentance shall not be accepted from those who indulge in their evil deeds and, when death comes to any of them, he says: "I now repent"; nor from those who die as non-believers. For those We have prepared grievous suffering.* (Verse 18)

This sort of repentance is that of one who is cornered. During his lifetime, he indulged in sin up to his ears. Now that death is overtaking him, he can no longer commit any more sins, for he has no time to do so. Hence, God rejects such repentance because it does not improve one's heart or reform one's style of life. Nor does it indicate any change in one's erring ways. Genuine repentance is accepted because it is the door that is open for erring people to return to the camp of the good, thus regaining themselves from error. In fact, humanity regains them after they have been among those who have been lost to evil and Satan. They will be able, if they remain alive for sometime after their repentance, to do well. If, on the other hand, they are overtaken by death shortly afterwards, they have at least declared their triumph over error.

"Nor from those who die as non-believers." (Verse 18) Those have severed all that could enable them to turn to God in sincere repentance and gain His forgiveness. *"For those We have prepared grievous suffering."* (Verse 18) It is waiting for them, ready to engulf them as just punishment.

The Divine constitution then prescribes severe punishments but it keeps the door open at all times for repentance. This gives it a unique balance, helping it to influence human life as no other constitution, ancient or modern, can ever do.

A New Way to Treat Women

The next theme in this passage is women. Women were treated very badly in pre-Islamic Arabia, as they were treated badly in all surrounding *ignorant* societies. Nowhere in that area were human rights extended to women. Indeed, women were

given a position much inferior to that of men so much so that they were more akin to inanimate objects. They were, at the same time, used for entertainment and pleasure, treated as sexual objects in order to satisfy carnal desires. Moreover, women were used as subject matter for pornographic arts and literature. Islam came to purify women of all that filth, giving them back their natural position in order to play their role in the family and in human society. The position Islam gives to women is that which accords with the general principle stated at the outset of this *sūrah: "Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women."* (Verse 1) Islam also sought to raise the standard of feelings in marital relationships from the low animal level to their highest human level. It adds to them overtones of mutual respect, affection and care, and places them on a much more solid foundation so that they can withstand shocks and outbursts of temper.

> *Believers, it is unlawful for you to inherit women against their will, or to bar them from remarrying so that you may make off with part of what you have given them, except when they are guilty of a flagrant indecency. Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good.* (Verse 19)

This verse outlaws inheriting women altogether. Before Islam rescued the Arabs from the depths of ignorance into which they had sunk, some Arab clans used to consider that the relatives of a deceased man had an overriding claim to his widow. They inherited her like they inherited his animals and property. Anyone of them could marry her if he so wanted. On the other hand, they could marry her to someone else and take her dowry for themselves. In other words, she was no more than an animal that could be sold at will. On the other hand, they could bar her from marrying anyone, leaving her at home until she bought her freedom from them.

Another tradition practised in Arabia, was one whereby if a woman became a widow, a relative of her deceased husband could throw his garment over her. This gesture was sufficient to assert his claim over her. It signified that she was now his, in the same way as if he had looted something. If she was pretty, he might marry her. If she was ugly, he might confine her to his house until she died when he would inherit her, or else, she would buy her freedom by giving him money. If, on the other hand, she was quick to flee from her husband's home, reaching her own family's home before he could throw his garment over her, she was safe and free.

Some Arabs used to divorce women and stipulate that they could not marry anyone without the consent of their former husbands. The only way for a woman in such a position to regain her freedom was to refund her former husband part or all of the dowry she received from him when they were first married.

In other Arabian tribes, a widow was kept without marriage until a young boy became old enough to marry her. If one of them had an orphan girl under his charge, he would bar her from marriage until his young son grew up, when he would marry her, taking all her money.

There were many other similar practices that conflicted with the honourable view with which Islam looked at women, stating that both man and woman were two parts of a single soul. These practices degraded both women and men alike. For it transformed the relationship between the two sexes into a mercenary one.

It is from that low position that Islam raised the relationship between man and woman to such a high, honourable level befitting the dignity of man, whom God has honoured and placed higher than all His creatures. It is indeed the Islamic concept of man and human life that made the elevation of relations between men and women possible.

Islam outlawed any possibility of a woman being treated as part of a deceased man's inheritance, like an animal or inanimate object. It also forbade the imposition of shackles and constraints on women that caused them harm, except in the case of their being manifestly guilty of gross immoral conduct. That, however, applied before the later punishment for adultery was prescribed. Moreover, Islam makes women free to choose their husbands. That freedom is enjoyed by every woman, virgin, widow or divorced. Moreover, kind treatment, which is expressed in the Qur'ān as "*consorting with them in a goodly manner,*" is a duty which applies to all, even when a man dislikes his wife. In this context, Islam raises the hope of what may come in the future, which is known only to God. This serves as a restraining factor, which makes man hesitate before severing a marital relationship in response to his initial feelings. It may be true that he is averse to his wife but it is also equally true that there is a great deal of good by which he may benefit if he restrains his feelings and continues to live with his wife: "*Believers, it is unlawful for you to inherit women against their will, or to bar them from remarrying so that you may make off with part of what you have given them, except when they are guilty of a flagrant indecency. Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good.*" (Verse 19) The last part of this verse helps people to turn to God in hope. It restrains feelings of hatred until man has thought coolly about his situation. Thus, marital relationships are no longer like straw blown with the wind. Rather, they derive their strength from the permanent and strongest of all relationships, namely, the relationship between a believer and his Lord.

This Qur'ānic statement is indicative of the Islamic view of family relationships. Islam views the family's home as a place of peace, where every member of the family feels secure. The marital relationship from the Islamic standpoint, is a relationship

based on affection and compassion. It must, therefore, come into existence on the basis of free choice, so that it spreads an atmosphere into which mutual feelings of love, sympathy and compassion can prosper. Bearing this in mind, it is most befitting that Islam should say to husbands that even if they should dislike their wives, it may well be that the very wives they dislike are of much good to them. The marriage bond is something to be treasured, not to be severed in response to a passing whim. Marriage is a human institution of great importance. It must be viewed seriously. Its continued existence must not be subject to outbursts of temper or sudden changes of superficial sentiment.

A good, practical example of the seriousness with which Islam views marriage is provided by `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second Caliph, who was once approached by a man expressing his resolve to divorce his wife, simply because "he did not like her". `Umar said to him: "Are families built only on love? Where would you, then, place loyalty and mutual care?"

Compared with this, what some people say about "love", when they actually refer to momentary whims and changeable feelings, sounds cheap and stupid. The worst part of it is that such love is glorified to the extent that its absence is considered to be enough justification for divorce. They even advocate what is worse than that, namely, infidelity. Such people justify adultery simply because a woman does not love her husband, or a man does not love his wife. Such petty-minded people have no consideration beyond momentary physical attraction. Their thoughts cannot turn to such ideals as loyalty, mutual care, fulfilment of one's duty and responsibility towards one's family. Moreover, their petty ideas keep them away from faith. They cannot appreciate what God says to his believing servants: *"Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good."* (Verse 19)

It is only faith that elevates people and their concerns. It puts human life on a level far above wealth and carnal desires.

Marriage Conditions to Be Always Respected

> *If you wish to take one wife in place of another and you have given the first one a large sum of money, do not take away anything of it. Would you take it away though that constitutes a gross injustice and a manifest sin? How can you take it away when each of you has been privy with the other, and they have received from you a most solemn pledge? Do not marry women whom your fathers have previously married, unless it be a thing of the past. Surely, that is an indecent, abominable and evil practice. (Verses 20- 22)*

When such human ideals are put into practice, and it is found, nevertheless, that life in the family home has become intolerable and that it may be better for both the man and his wife to separate, then a divorced woman takes all her dowry and whatever she has inherited. The husband cannot take away any part of it, plentiful as it may be. To take away any part of it is evidently sinful: *"If you wish to take one wife in place of another and you have given the first one a large sum of money, do not take away anything of it. Would you take it away though that constitutes a gross injustice and a manifest sin?"* (Verse 20)

This is followed by a fine touch inspired by the close intimacy which exists in family life: *"How can you take it away when each of you has been privy with the other, and they have received from you a most solemn pledge?"* (Verse 21) The Arabic expression used here and which we have rendered as *"being privy with the other" has* much wider and finer connotations. It is by no means limited to physical intimacy. It does not merely mean that a couple have given themselves to one another. It includes feelings, responses and the sharing of secrets, problems and concerns. When we reflect on this verse, numerous images of married life come to mind, depicting what happens between a man and his wife at every moment of the night and day. Past memories are recalled. They have been privy with one another in their expressions of love, in their happy moments, in what they had shared of hopes and problems, in their aspirations for a happier present and a brighter future, in their shared thoughts about their children.

Compared with all these associations and memories which are recalled by the expression *"when each of you has been privy with the other,"* the importance of physical love seems too small. Hence, the divorcing husband would be too shy to ask for a refund of part of the dowry he gave to his wife.

Another factor is introduced by the last part of this verse: *"And they have received from you it most solemn pledge"* (Verse 21) That pledge is the pledge of marriage. Marriage which is given in the name of God and according to the method He has made lawful. It is a very solemn pledge that must be respected and cherished by every believer. Hence, the Qur'ān calls on believers to respect it.

The next verse forbids, most emphatically, a man's marriage with a woman whom his father had married before him. Such a practice was allowed in pre-Islamic Arabia. Moreover, it was one reason for barring women from marriage. If a man died, leaving behind a young son, the family could bar the young boy's stepmother from marriage until he, himself, was old enough to marry her. Alternatively, if the son was old enough to marry, he could inherit his stepmother. Islam forbids all this most emphatically: *"Do not marry women whom your fathers have previously married, unless it be a thing of the past. Surely, that is an indecent, abominable and evil practice."* (Verse 22)

Three easily identifiable considerations lie behind this prohibition. We, as human beings do not pretend to know every reason for Divine legislation. Nor do we make it a condition of obeying God's legislation that we should know the wisdom behind it. It is sufficient that God has decreed something for us to obey and implement it. We are certain that it serves our interests and that Divine wisdom is behind it.

The first consideration is that a father's wife is in the same position as a mother. Secondly, when a son marries a former wife of his father, he subconsciously feels himself to be his equal. Many people come to hate the former husbands of their wives. If a son is allowed to marry his father's former wife, he may come to hate his father instead of loving him. Thirdly, there must never be any suspicion of inheriting one's father's wife, in the same way as it was practised in pre-Islamic days. As we have already said, such inheritance is an insult to the humanity of both man and woman. They have been created from a single soul, and their dignity and honour are the same.

For these reasons, and others as well, such action is considered to be very hateful. It is described as indecent, abominable, i.e. generating hatred, and evil. Exemption is only made in the case of marriages contracted before Islam. These have been left for God's decision.

Women Whom We Are Forbidden to Marry

> *Forbidden to you [in marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your aunts paternal and maternal, your brothers' daughters and your sisters' daughters, your mothers who have given suck to you, your suckling sisters, the mothers of your wives, your stepdaughters – who are your foster children – born to your wives with whom you have consummated your marriage; but if you have not consummated your marriage with them, you will incur no sin [by marrying their daughters], and the wives of your own begotten sons; and [you are forbidden] to have two sisters as your wives at one and the same time, unless it be a thing of the past. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.* (Verse 23)

Now the *sūrah* mentions in detail the classes of women whom we may not marry. This is one of the measures designed to organise the family and society as a whole.

All societies, primitive and sophisticated, ban marriage with certain women. Different nations have different reasons for such prohibitions and different classes of women whom a man cannot marry. Primitive societies normally have a wide area of prohibition, while civilised societies narrow that area considerably.

In Islam, women who are unlawful for marriage are mentioned in three verses: this one, the verse preceding it and the one following it. The prohibition in some

cases is total and permanent, while in others it is temporary. There are three reasons behind prohibition of marriage with certain women, namely, lineage, suckling and relation through a previous marriage. Islam did, however, abrogate all other restrictions known in other human societies, such as those based on differences of race, colour and nationality, and those based on social class and position within the same race and the same nation.

Those whom a man is forbidden to marry because of lineage are divided into four groups:

Firstly, his parents and grandparents. A man is forbidden to marry his mother, his grandmothers, paternal or maternal, no matter how high their degree is. All these come under the statement: "*Forbidden to you [in marriage] are your mothers.*"

Secondly, his own issue of any degree. A man is forbidden to marry his daughter or the daughters of his children, of whichever degree they may be. This is included under "*your daughters.*"

Thirdly, the issue of his parents of any degree. A man is forbidden to marry his sister or the daughters of his own brothers and sisters, and the daughters of his nephews and nieces. All these are included under "*your sisters... your brothers' daughters and your sisters' daughters.*"

Fourthly, the immediate issue of his grandparents. A man is forbidden to marry his paternal or maternal aunt, his father's aunt or the aunt of his maternal or paternal grandfather, his mother's aunt or the aunt of his paternal or maternal grandmother. All these come under "*your aunts, paternal and maternal.*" Those who issue indirectly from grandparents, i.e. cousins, whether on the father's side or the mother's side, are permissible marriage partners.

Women forbidden in marriage through other marital relationships fall into five categories:

1. The parents of one's wife, regardless of their degree. It is forbidden for a man to marry the mother of his wife or her grandmothers, maternal or paternal, no matter how high their degree is. This prohibition comes into effect once his marriage contract to his wife is made, whether the marriage is later consummated or not. This prohibition comes under the reference to "*the mothers of your wives.*"
2. The issue of one's wife, regardless of their degree. A man is forbidden to marry the daughter of his wife, or the daughters of her sons or daughters, of any degree whatsoever. This prohibition, however, does not come into effect unless his marriage to his wife is consummated: "*your stepdaughters – who are your foster children – born to your wives with whom you have consummated your*

marriage; but if you have not consummated your marriage with them, you will incur no sin [by marrying their daughters]." (Verse 23)

3. The former wives of one's father or grandfathers of either side. A man is thus forbidden to marry his stepmother or the former wife of any of his grandfathers, of whichever degree they may be, whether on his father's side or his mother's side. This prohibition is stated in the verse preceding our present passage, which states: "*Do not marry women whom your fathers have previously married, unless it be a thing of the past.*" (Verse 22) In pre-Islamic days, the ignorant Arabians permitted such marriages.
4. Wives of one's own children, or their children. Thus, a man is forbidden to marry the wife of his own begotten son, or the wife of his grandson or great grandson, of any degree. This prohibition comes under the reference to "*the wives of your own begotten sons.*" This prohibition abrogates the tradition of pre-Islamic Arabian society, which forbade marriage with the former wife of one's adopted son. This prohibition is hereby restricted to the wife of one's own son. Furthermore, adoption was stopped by Islam, which demands that all children be called after their own fathers.
5. The sisters of one's wife. The prohibition in this case is conditional on the wife being alive and the man remaining married to her. In other words, it is forbidden to marry two sisters at one and the same time: "*[You are forbidden] to have two sisters as your wives at one and the same time, unless it be a thing of the past.*" (Verse 23) Again, this sort of marriage was permitted in pre-Islamic Arabia.

The third cause of marriage prohibition is suckling. This includes all those categories one is forbidden to marry through lineage and marital relationships. Hence, the women that men are forbidden to marry through suckling include nine groups:

1. One's suckling mother and her mother and grandmothers, of any grade. This comes under "*your mothers who have given suck to you*".
2. Daughters through suckling and their daughters and granddaughters, regardless of their grade. (A man's daughter through suckling is a girl who was breast-fed by his wife when she was married to him.)
3. Sisters through suckling and their daughters and granddaughters of any grade. This prohibition comes under "*your suckling sisters*"
4. Paternal and maternal aunts through suckling. (A maternal suckling aunt is the sister of one's suckling mother and a paternal aunt through suckling is the sister of that suckling mother's husband.)

5. One's wife's suckling mother, i.e. the woman who breast-fed one's wife when she was a child. The same applies to the mother and grandmothers of that woman, of any degree. Here, the same conditions as in prohibition through lineage apply, which means that the prohibition comes into effect the moment the marriage contract is made.
6. One's wife's suckling daughter, i.e. a girl who was breast-fed by one's wife before she was married to him, and her granddaughters of any degree. This prohibition, however, does not come into effect until one's marriage with one's wife has been consummated.
7. The former wife of one's father or grandfather, of any degree, through suckling. One's father through suckling is the man who is married to one's suckling mother. In other words, it is not only forbidden for a person who was breast-fed in his childhood by a woman other than his mother to marry that woman who is his suckling mother, it is also forbidden for him to marry any woman who his suckling father married.
8. The wife of one's son or grandson, of whatever degree, through suckling.
9. To be married at one and the same time to one woman and her sister, or paternal or maternal aunt through suckling or indeed any other woman whose relationship to her through suckling is equivalent to a prohibiting relationship through lineage.

The prohibition of the first and third of these groups is mentioned specifically in this Qur'ānic verse. The prohibition of all the other groups is based on the *ĥadīth* in which the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Forbidden through suckling are all women whose relationships are equivalent to the blood relationships causing marriage prohibition." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

These are the women who are specified as unlawful for us to marry. The Qur'ānic text does not mention any reason, general or specific for this prohibition. This means that whatever the reasons given by scholars or other people are based on personal judgement and opinion. There may be a reason that is common to all these groups of women. There may, on the other hand, be reasons that particularly relate to any one of them. Other reasons may apply to some groups, but not to all of them. It may be said, for example, that marriage between close relatives produces weaker children, especially when it is repeated one generation after another. Hereditary weaknesses may be more pronounced in children of such marriages. Marriage of unrelated partners provides the chance to combine their stronger qualities, which, in turn, give strength to children and grandchildren.

It may also be said that in the case of mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces and

their counterparts through suckling, and mothers- in-law and daughters-in-law, Islam wants a man's relationship with them to be one of care and respect. It should not be subject to what may take place in any marriage of differences leading to divorce, with all its bitterness. These should not be allowed to replace the feelings of love and care that one naturally has towards such close relatives.

It may further be said that Islam wants to preserve the paternal or brotherly and sisterly feelings with some of these groups, such as in the case of stepdaughters, one's wife's sisters, one's mother-in-law and stepmother. A mother who feels that her daughter may take her husband away from her cannot maintain intact her motherly feelings towards her own daughter. The same applies to sisters. Similarly, it is an unhealthy situation when a father feels that his own son may marry his wife. Again, when a son feels that his father who has died or who has divorced his wife is a hostile opponent, simply because the father was the former husband of the son's wife, the situation becomes terrible indeed. The same applies to any marital relationship with one's daughter-in-law. We have to remember that between every father and his son there is a tender and loving relationship that must be protected against anything which may adversely affect it.

We may add here that marriage is a cause for widening the circle of one's family, taking it beyond the narrow relationship of lineage. This precludes any need for marriage between those who are already related. Hence, such marriages are forbidden, except in the case of distant relatives.

Whatever the reason for the prohibition, we recognise that there must be a good cause and a benefit behind whatever God has chosen for us. Whether or not we know the wisdom behind any legislation should not affect in any way our acceptance of it. We must always be ready to implement it. True faith does not establish its roots unless we accept God's law and implement it without any hesitation.

Having explained this legislation in detail, we have to conclude with a few general remarks about the subject of forbidden marriages. Marriage with all these groups of women was forbidden in pre-Islamic Arabia, with the exception of two: former wives of parents or grandparents, and marriage with two sisters at the same time. These were permitted, albeit with reluctance. When Islam forbids these marriages, it does not endorse a prevalent tradition in Arabia. It initiates its own prohibition, based on its own authority. Hence, the prohibiting statement: *"Forbidden to you [in marriage] are your mothers..."* (Verse 23)

This is not a matter of technicalities or formalities. It is a matter of principle which pervades the Islamic faith and all its legislation. For the central issue in Islam is that Godhead belongs solely to God. Hence, permission and prohibition is the jurisdiction of God alone, because they are the most essential qualities of Godhead. He alone can

make certain things lawful to mankind and can forbid them others. No one else can claim this authority or issue any legislation of this type, because that would be synonymous with claiming Godhead for himself.

When a non-Islamic society issues legislation permitting certain things and forbidding others, this legislation is invalid in part and in whole, and cannot be given validity in any way because its existence is not recognised. When Islam considers the legislation of any non-Islamic society, it initially rules that all this legislation is invalid and nonexistent, simply because it is issued by someone or some institution which has no authority to issue it. Islam goes on to initiate its own legislation. If in the process Islam permits something other societies also permit, or forbids what they forbid, its action is not an endorsement of what those societies have legislated. How could it endorse what it considers invalid?

This principle applies to everything in human life. No one other than God can issue any legislation, which permits or forbids anything, whether it relates to marriage, food, drink, appearance, action, contracts, transactions, values, traditions or any situation whatsoever. The authority for all this must derive from God, and any legislation issued must be based on God's law.

This is how Islam has initiated its laws, established its systems and set its traditions in operation. In all this, it has operated its own authority. The Qur'ān emphasises this principle in all manner of ways, arguing with non-believers about everything that they have forbidden or permitted. Many a verse asks a rhetorical question, such as: "*Say: who has forbidden the ornaments and the good provisions God has provided for his servants?*" (7: 32) Many make emphatic statements concerning what is lawful and what is not, as in the case of the following two examples: "*Say: Come and I will read to you what your Lord has forbidden you.*" (6: 151) "*Say: 'I do not find in what has been revealed to me anything forbidden for anyone to eat, unless it be carrion, blood or pig meat...*" (6: 145) Verses like these abound in the Qur'ān.

All these rhetorical questions aim at one and the same thing. They seek to emphasise the basic principle that the authority to give permissions and make prohibitions belongs to God alone. This is a right which cannot be claimed by human beings, whether an individual, a class, a nation or indeed mankind as a whole. The only way for them to enjoy such a right is to have permission from God and to exercise that right according to God's law. To permit and forbid is to legislate, which is synonymous with faith. The one who permits and forbids is the one who establishes the faith and the one to whom people submit. If it is God who does that, then people submit to God and they follow His faith. If it is someone else, then people submit to that person to the exclusion of God's faith.

When the matter is put in this light, we understand it as a question of the essence

and qualities of Godhead. It is a question of faith and its limits and boundaries. Let Muslims throughout the world consider their position with regard to Islamic faith, if they truly want to be Muslims.

The Crime of Advocating Free Sex

> *And (forbidden to you are) all married women, other than those whom your right hands possess. This is God's ordinance, binding upon you. Lawful to you are all women other than these, provided that, offering them of your own possessions, you seek to take them in wedlock not in fornication.* (Verse 24)

The first sentence in this verse makes it clear that married women are, as a result of their marriage, not lawful for other women to marry. This means that polyandry is forbidden in Islam. This is in line with the basic rule in Islamic society that makes the family its constituent unit. It must be protected against any confusion in relationships that may result from "sexual communism" or promiscuity.

The family, which comes into existence through a marriage made in public to unite one woman with one man in order to ensure the preservation of chastity, is the perfect system which fits in with human nature and meets the real needs of man. It is a system that serves the objectives of human life, which transcend man's sexual needs, and helps achieve the goals of human society. It also ensures peace of mind for the individual, the family and the community.

Everyone knows that the human child needs a much longer period of upbringing than the progeny of any animal. Moreover, the education a child needs in order to comprehend the requirements of civilised human life takes a similarly long period.

In animals, the sexual desire has no further objectives than intercourse and procreation. In man, however, it has a much finer objective which establishes a permanent link between the male and the female in order to provide an environment suitable for bringing up children who are able to protect themselves and satisfy their needs. It also serves the more important purpose of educating the child and helping him to gain experience and acquire a good standard of knowledge. Thus, the child will be able to contribute to the life of his community and discharge his responsibility in advancing human civilisation.

Sexual desire, then, is not the paramount element in the life of the two human sexes. It is a means implanted in their nature so that their companionship lasts well beyond their sexual contact. It is not their inclination to each other that determines how long they remain together. It is their sense of duty towards their helpless offspring and towards their human society. It is society that assigns to parents the responsibility of taking good care of their offspring until such children are able to

play their own part in the achievement of the goals of human existence.

All these considerations make the family the only proper platform for companionship between the two sexes. It also makes the system which assigns one woman to one man the only proper system which ensures the continuity of this companionship. Duty becomes the paramount consideration in the establishment and continuation of the family as well as in solving any problem it may encounter and, in extreme cases, at the time of its dissolution. Any attempt to devalue family ties or weaken the family's foundation on duty or to substitute it for temporary passion and burning desire is wicked and criminal, not only because it helps spread promiscuity in human society but also because it destroys human society and pulls down its foundations.

When we remember this, we can appreciate the magnitude of the crime perpetrated by writers and the media who make it their task to weaken family ties and devalue marriage. They depict the same in a very bad light so as to glorify those built on burning, carnal desires and temporary passions. What a bad service they perform when they speak highly of these relationships while at the same time they ridicule marriage.

We can also appreciate the great wisdom of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb when he said to a man who came to him expressing his desire to divorce his wife on the grounds that he no longer loved her: "Think properly, man! Are families built only on love? What room is then left for loyalty and mutual care?" `Umar based his argument on the Qur'ānic directive to God's best servants: *"Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good."* (Verse 19) This directive helps a Muslim to place duty before personal desire. He, therefore, tries hard to solve his problems with his wife amicably. He does not sever the family relationship unless all attempts to achieve proper reconciliation have failed. This attitude gives priority to the care that needs to be taken of the young who should be spared the shocks of changing passions.

Compared with this noble view of marriage, the arguments of those who glorify all relationships except the one which gives priority to duty and which takes care of the primary task of bringing up future generations appear decidedly absurd. Yet we find immoral writers and wicked media encouraging every wife who experiences some coolness towards her husband to rush for a boyfriend. They describe her relationship with that boyfriend as "sacred", whilst at the same time describing her relationship with her husband as one whereby she is "selling her body".

In making His legislation clear, God says: *"Forbidden to you are all married women."* This is what God says which is clearly opposite to what those immoral writers say. It is *"God who says the truth, and it is He who guides to the right path."* (33: 4)

Organised efforts are being made in order to establish social values and standards and to create foundations for human relationships that are at variance with those established by God. They seek to determine a line for people and for human life altogether different from that determined by God. Those who are behind such efforts imagine that what they will ultimately achieve is the destruction of the foundations of Islamic society in Muslim countries. They believe that when the ideology and moral standards of these societies are destroyed, there will no longer be any barriers to prevent them from achieving their old ambitions in these countries. The catastrophe which they are perpetrating goes far beyond this. Their efforts will lead to the destruction of the foundation of all human societies in their endeavour to ruin the basis of human nature. They remove the very elements that enable man to discharge his task of building a civilised existence worthy of him. They deprive him of raising well-balanced and properly equipped children in a happy family atmosphere, who will take over the task of serving the interests of mankind. These considerations are totally different from the sort of sex and procreation practised by animals.

The curse of self-destruction will affect all mankind, as the present generation undermines the prospects of future generations through indulgence in carnal desires. God's judgement will come to pass against those who rebel against His decrees and directives and the nature He has given to man. All mankind will suffer as a result, unless they are rescued by a community of believers that establishes God's system on earth and shows it clearly to others so that they too may adopt it. This is the only way to rescue them from the calamity that they themselves perpetrate while imagining that they are simply destroying Muslim societies. It is painful to see that these evil designs are also served by writers and the media in Muslim countries.

Legitimate Relationships

"*[Forbidden to you are] all married women, other than those whom your right hands possess.*" This exception is made in the case of women who fell captive to Muslims in their *jihād* campaigns. These might, prior to their captivity, have had husbands in their countries which remained at war with the Muslim society. Thus, the physical distance separating them severed their relationships with their unbelieving husbands. As they had no husbands in the land of Islam, they were in the same position as unmarried women. It was sufficient to ascertain that they were not pregnant by observing a waiting period consisting of one menstruation cycle. Thereafter, it was legitimate for them to marry, if they became Muslims. Alternatively, it was legitimate for a person to whom such a captive woman belonged to have sex with her as "one whom his right hand possessed". This applied whether the woman became a Muslim or not.

We have already explained in detail the attitude of Islam towards slavery (Volume I, pp. 262-4). Further explanation will be given in the commentary on *Sūrah* 47, entitled Muĥammad. It is sufficient for our purpose here to explain that in the matter of imposing slavery on war captives, Islam adopted the rule of equal treatment with its enemies. Islam has always been superior to its enemies in its kind treatment of slaves as human beings. This was inevitable because the enslavement of war captives was an international institution that could not be unilaterally abolished by Islam. Otherwise, Muslim captives would have been enslaved while unbelievers who fell captive to Muslims would remain free. This would have tilted the balance in favour of un-Islamic societies. They would no longer have had an incentive to attack the Muslim state, knowing that their captives would never be enslaved.

Therefore, it was inevitable that there would be unbelieving women falling captive to the Muslim society. But what to do with them? Their natural needs would not be totally satisfied with food and drink. There was another aspect which needed satisfying, and had this not been facilitated, promiscuity would have endangered the whole society. Muslims could not marry them as long as they remained unbelievers. There was only one way out. That was to make an unbelieving captive woman lawful for her master only after making sure that she was not pregnant and after her relationship with her former unbelieving husband was totally and physically severed.

The verse goes on to explain which women are lawful to marry. Before it does so, however, it identifies the source of this legislation, namely God. Only God has the authority to forbid something and legitimise another and to issue legislation in all matters whatsoever: *"This is God's ordinance, binding upon you."* (Verse 24) It is, then, a directive from God, not a question of desire, tradition, or local institutions. People must observe what He legislates for them and abide by it. In turn, they are accountable for its implementation.

We have already pointed out that most of the women whom we are forbidden to marry according to the Qur'ān were also forbidden in the Arabian society in pre-Islamic days. The only ones that were not so forbidden were former wives of parents and marriage to two or more sisters at the same time. The Qur'ān does not simply endorse a practice followed in pre-Islamic days. Rather, we are told that this prohibition is a binding ordinance issued by God. This is a point which merits careful consideration as it relates to the essence of Islamic faith. Moreover, its effects are highly important to us in our practical lives.

Islam considers God's commandment and permission as the only basis for legislation. The authority to legislate belongs to Him in the final resort. Whatever is not based on this principle is essentially invalid and cannot subsequently be legitimised. Hence, whatever prevails in ignorant society, which includes every

human situation not based on the only true principle that acknowledges the authority to legislate solely to God, is invalid. This applies to concepts, values, standards, traditions, rules, regulations and laws. When Islam rules, it deals with life as a whole. It begins by abrogating all values, traditions and laws of *ignorance* in order to establish its own system. If, in the process, it approves a tradition that had prevailed in former, ignorant days, it does not accept it with its original foundation. It establishes it anew and gives it its own authority with God's permission. Thus, the practice of pre-Islamic days no longer exists, while a new practice is established in its stead under God's authority.

Similarly, when Islamic jurisprudence refers to "tradition" in certain matters, it imparts to tradition a new authority based on God's permission. Hence, tradition acquires in these particular questions the validity of Islamic law. It is no longer a case of society giving a tradition its authority. That authority is now imparted by God, the only Legislator who has approved of it as a source of judgement in certain cases.

This is a basic principle to which reference is made by the Qur'ānic statement: *"This is God's ordinance, binding upon you."* It is further endorsed by other Qur'ānic statements. Every time an aspect of legislation is mentioned in the Qur'ān, reference is made to the source that gives it its essential validity. When the Qur'ān refers to the laws, traditions and concepts of non-Islamic societies, it very frequently follows that reference with a clear statement that these "have not been given any authority by God." It thus emphasises their invalidity.

This principle is different from the other basic Islamic principle which states that all things and matters are initially permissible, unless they are made unlawful by a clear statement. The initial permissibility is granted by God. It enjoys God's authority. What we are speaking about here concerns that which ignorant societies legislate for themselves. All of which is initially and essentially invalid. It only becomes valid when God's law endorses any part of it, granting it proper legitimacy.

Dowry as a Condition of Marriage

Now that the *sūrah* has defined the women with whom a Muslim may not be married, linking such prohibition of marriages to God's decrees and ordinances, it goes on to define the area within which people may satisfy their natural desire through marriage. It sets out the way God approves of for the companionship between the two sexes, which leads to the establishment of families. In this way, the meeting between the two sexes provides enjoyment with purity. "*Lawful to you are all women other than these, provided that, offering them of your own possessions, you seek to take them in wedlock not in fornication. To those with whom you seek to enjoy marriage, you shall give the dowers due to them; but you will incur no sin if you agree among yourselves on*

any voluntary arrangement even after what has been stipulated by way of duty. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise." (Verse 24)

This Qur'ānic verse states that marriage with any woman other than those listed as forbidden is legitimate. Anyone who wishes to have such a marriage may spend of his money, by way of dowry, not to buy enjoyment outside the marriage bond. Hence, the verse states: "*Provided that, offering them of your own possessions, you seek to take them in wedlock not in fornication.*" This condition is stated perfectly clearly even before the sentence is finished. Moreover, the condition is stated first in a positive form, "*you seek to take them in wedlock,*" which is immediately followed by the negative form, "*not in fornication.*" Thus no ambiguity whatsoever overshadows this legislation. It describes without any equivocation the nature of the type of relationship Islam approves of, namely marriage, and the nature of the relationship it outlaws, that being promiscuity in any form. Promiscuous relationships, whether as fornication or prostitution, were practised and approved of in pre-Islamic Arabian society. This is clear in the following report given by `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife:

> There were four types of man-woman relationship in ignorant days. The first is the same as marriage today: A man makes his proposal to another man to marry a girl in his charge or his daughter, pays her dower and gets married to her.
>
> The second type is that in which a man says to his wife after she has finished her menstruation period: "Contact this person [he names a certain man] and get pregnant by him." Her husband then keeps away from her and does not sleep with her until her pregnancy by the other man becomes manifest. When it is clear that she is pregnant, her husband may take her to bed if he wants. The reason behind this is that the husband wants to have a child of better blood. This relationship is known as having a child through another man.
>
> A third form of relationship was that a number of men, less than 10, may share one woman, with each of them having intercourse with her. If she became pregnant, then a few nights after she gives birth, she calls them all for a meeting. None of them can absent himself. When they meet, she says to them: "You know what has passed between me and you. I have given birth to a child. I want you to know that it is the child of ..." She names any one of them and he becomes the father of the child. He cannot decline to acknowledge his parenthood.
>
> The fourth form was that of many men frequenting the lodging of a certain woman who does not refuse anyone. These were prostitutes and they used to put a flag on their doors. Anyone who wanted them was welcome. When any such prostitute was pregnant, they collected money for her after she gave

> birth and called in an expert in physiognomy to trace resemblance of features and so determine the parenthood of that child. He would claim it without objection, and the child would be called after him. (Related by al-Bukhārī.)

The third and fourth types come under the umbrella of fornication, which is forbidden, whether in a private relationship or in a case of prostitution. The first type is that of honest wedlock which is encouraged. The second is something that we find ourselves at a loss in trying to furnish it with an appropriate name.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the type of relationship God approves of: it is one of honesty, chastity and mutual care. It is wedlock, for both man and woman, which protects their chastity in a clean and straightforward manner. It is also a protection of the home, the family and of children. It provides the strong foundation for the healthy institution we call the family.

Any other form is rejected. It is worth noting that the Arabic term the Qur'ān uses to describe such a relationship is derived from a root which denotes pouring water over low ground. Therefore, it connotes the wasting by both man and woman of the fluid which brings life and which God has created in order to preserve our species and bring about progress through the participation of both man and woman in the upbringing and protection of children. It is wasted over a momentary pleasure. In other words, it is poured over low ground. It does not protect them against impurity, nor does it protect their children against waste.

In two short phrases, the Qur'ān delineates two images of two types of life. Furthermore, it achieves its purpose of promoting the acceptable and of degrading the unacceptable, while stating at the same time the true nature of each type. In this and other features of word economy, the Qur'ānic style is unique.

Having stated the condition that money should be spent for marriage, an explanation of how this is to be conducted follows: "*To those with whom you seek to enjoy marriage, you shall give the dowers due to them.*" (Verse 24) The dowry, then, is something a woman may claim by right for what she gives her husband. A man who wants to fulfil his desire with a woman whom he can wed must seek her through marriage for the purpose of preserving his own and her own chastity. He must also pay her dowry as a stipulated duty. It is not something he gives her by way of charity. Nor can he inherit her without having to pay her dowry, as used to happen in ignorant, pre-Islamic days. Nor is it possible for him to enter into a trade-in relationship like that which once happened and still happens in ignorant societies. That is, an exchange deal between two men, whereby each gave the other a woman in his charge to be his wife. Thus, the two girls or women were traded like animals or inanimate objects.

Having established this right of dowry, which is owed to the woman, the possibility is left open for the married couple to agree between them any arrangement which is suitable to their circumstances, according to their own wishes and feelings towards each other: *"But you will incur no sin if you agree among yourselves on any voluntary arrangement even after what has been stipulated by way of duty. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 24) This means that the wife can forgo part or all of her dowry after it has been clearly stipulated. Her dowry belongs to her by right and she is free to do with it what she likes, without interference from anyone. Hence, it is permissible for her to forgo any part of it. Equally, it is permissible for her husband to give her more than her stipulated dowry. Such an increase is his own prerogative. To make any such arrangement is open to them without restriction.

The concluding comment in this verse relates these legal provisions to their source, who has true knowledge and perfect wisdom: *"God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise."* It is on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that He has decreed these legal provisions. When a Muslim realises from what source he has received laws which affect every aspect of his life, especially his private relationship with his wife, he is reassured that such laws can only be the right ones, since they derive from God's wisdom and knowledge.

Marriage with a Slave Woman

When a Muslim finds himself in circumstances that make it practically impossible to marry a free woman who is likely to be more mindful of her chastity, he may use the concession to marry a slave woman so as to resist the temptation of sin.

> *Any of you who, owing to circumstances, is not in a position to marry a free believing woman may marry a believing maiden from among those whom your right hands possess. God knows all about your faith: you belong to one another. Marry them, then, with their people's consent and give them their dowers in an equitable manner, as chaste women who give themselves in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as women who have secret love companions. If after their marriage, they are guilty of gross immoral conduct, they shall be liable to half the penalty to which free women are liable. This provision applies to those of you who fear to stumble into sin. Yet it is better for you to be patient. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.* (Verse 25)

The religion of Islam deals with man within the limitations of his nature, abilities and practical life. It takes him by the hand, elevating him from the depths of *ignorance* to the sublime horizon of Islamic life. At the same time, it provides him with all that he needs. What takes place in an ignorant society is not inevitable. *Ignorant* standards are low and Islam wants to elevate humanity to a higher standard. Islam is aware that, by his nature, man is capable of reaching a high standard. It is

true that man may sink in the mud of ignorance, but it is equally true that man is able to reach to the sublime. It is God alone who knows human nature fully, because He has created mankind and is aware of what thoughts work themselves into the human mind: "*How could it be that He who has created all should not know all? He is indeed unfathomable in His wisdom, All-Aware.*" (67: 14)

In the early Muslim society, slaves were a by-product of war. Their position needed to be sorted out by setting them free either for no return, or in a mutual exchange of prisoners, or for compensation, according to the different circumstances that prevailed between the Muslim community and its enemies. Islam handled that situation by granting permission to masters only to have sexual intercourse with slave women whom they owned. This arrangement took care of the natural needs of those women as was explained in our commentary on the preceding verse. Such a relationship could either be a marital one, if they were believers, or an extra-marital one provided that it was determined that they were not pregnant. A waiting period lasting until they had had one menstruation period was observed. No men other than their masters were allowed to have intercourse with them except through marriage. They were not permitted to sell themselves for money, nor were their masters allowed to make them prostitutes.

This verse regulates the methods and circumstances which permitted their marriage: "*Any of you who, owing to circumstances, is not in a position to marry a free believing woman may marry a believing maiden from among those whom your right hands possess*". (Verse 25) Islam prefers for its followers to marry free women if they are able to do so. Freedom imparts dignity to a woman, which enables her to protect her chastity and safeguard her husband's honour.

A free woman has a family and a reputation to protect. She is too proud to allow herself to sink into the depths of promiscuity. A slave woman does not have the same considerations. Even when she is married, traces from her bondage days remain with her. Hence, she does not have the same attitude towards chastity and personal dignity as a free woman. She does not have a family reputation to worry about. Moreover, her children were treated as a class lower than the children of free women.

All these considerations were present in the society to which this verse was first addressed. It is natural, in view of all this, that Islam should prefer marriage with free women. Marriage with a bondswoman was treated as a concession given to those who were of limited means and who found it difficult to stay away from sin. In such cases, when temptation is too strong and financial resources are not available, Islam does not deprive its followers of a chance to have a proper relationship through marriage with slave women.

This is followed by an explanation of the only acceptable method for the relationship between free men and non-free women. It is the same form of marriage as with free women. The first condition is that the women in question must be believers: "*Any of you who, owing to circumstances, is not in a position to marry a free believing woman may marry a believing maiden from among those whom your right hands possess.*" (Verse 25) The second condition is that they must be given their dowries, which is a right owing to them, and not to their masters.

No one else has a claim to any part of that dowry: "*Marry them, then, with their people's consent and give them their dowers in an equitable manner.*" (Verse 25)

The third condition is that they should be paid their dues in the form of a dowry, and the enjoyment must be through marriage, not through fornication with one person or prostitution with many: "*as chaste women who give themselves in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as women who have secret love companions*".

Arabian society at that time was familiar with all these sorts of sexual relationships with free women, as explained in the report quoted above from `Ā'ishah. Prostitution among slave women was also commonplace. A number of notables would send out their slave women to earn money for them in this abominable way. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites in Madinah and the chief of his tribe prior to Islam, had four slave women whom he set to prostitution, taking their ill-gotten gains. Islam came to rescue and purify the Arabs, as all humanity, from such stinking filth.

We see clearly that Islam allowed only one sort of companionship between free men and those "maidens", namely, marriage in which one woman is united with one man to form a family. There is no question of allowing the free satisfaction of desire without restraints. What men have to pay is a dowry, which they owe as a duty. It is not a payment given to a prostitute for a temporary acquaintance. Thus does Islam purify the man-woman relationship, even among slaves, of all the dirt of *ignorance,* into the depth of which humanity sinks every time it ignores Islam, including during our present times.

Before we turn to the next statement in this Qur'ānic verse, we need to reflect a little on the way the Qur'ān expresses the relationship which exists between free people and slaves in Islamic society and how Islam views this situation when it occurs in real life. The Qur'ānic verse does not use a term like slave or bondswoman. Rather, it refers to them all as "maidens". The expression runs as follows: "*Any of you ... may marry a believing maiden from among those whom your right hands possess.*" (Verse 25)

Moreover, no racial discrimination is entertained between free and unfree people, as was practised in all societies at that time, and which divided mankind into

different classes. On the contrary, the Qur'ān reminds us all that we have the same origin and establishes our relationship on the ties of humanity and faith which we all share: *"God knows all about your faith: you belong to one another."* It does not describe the people who "own" a slave woman as her "masters", but instead refers to them as her "people" or family: *"Marry them, then, with their people's consent."* The dowry such a slave woman receives is not given to her master; she has full claim to it. This means that the dowry is not included in the rule that all earnings by a slave belong to the master. The dowry is not classified as "earning"; it is a right that accrues to the woman as a result of her becoming lawful to a certain man: *"And give them their dowers in an equitable manner."* Furthermore, they are not looked down upon as women who sell themselves. Indeed, the reverse is true: they are *"chaste women who give themselves in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as women who have secret love companions"*. (Verse 25)

All these considerations give an honourable view of the humanity of those girls, even when they are in the situation of slavery brought about by temporary circumstances. This situation does not affect the fact that they are human beings who must be treated with respect. When we compare this honourable outlook with the view which prevailed all over the world and which deprived slaves of every claim to being human like their masters, and denied them all rights to which they were entitled by virtue of being human, we can appreciate the great gulf between the two. Islam places the dignity and honour of man on a totally different level, and takes care of it in all circumstances, regardless of any temporary situation that may affect any group of people such as their slavery.

When we compare how Islam legislated for this emergency situation with what victorious armies in modern times do with the women of countries defeated in war, we appreciate just how large the gap is. We all know how soldiers "entertain" themselves. Enough has been heard of the filth in which victorious armies indulge themselves everywhere, leaving behind them a terrible legacy from which societies suffer for many years.

When Temptation is Hard to Resist

Islam provides for a reduced punishment for slave women who commit adultery after marriage. In this way, it takes into account the situation in which such a woman finds herself, understanding that this makes her more liable to sin and less able than a free woman to resist temptation. By its very nature, slavery reduces a woman's dignity or family reputation. These are the two elements that make a free woman more able to protect her chastity. It also takes into consideration the social and economic differences between a free woman and a slave girl. All these considerations

make a slave woman more complacent with regard to her honour and make it easier for her to yield to the temptation of money or position by her seducer. It is for this reason that the penalty for a slave woman who commits adultery after marriage is only half that of a free woman: *"If after their marriage, they are guilty of gross immoral conduct, they shall be liable to half the penalty to which* free *women are liable."* (Verse 25)

It goes without saying that this represents the measurable penalty that can be halved, i.e. flogging. It does not apply to the penalty of stoning which cannot be divided. Hence, if a married believing slave commits adultery, she is given half the punishment of an unmarried free woman. If the slave who commits fornication is unmarried, her penalty is subject to different views among scholars. Some are of the opinion that it is the same, i.e. half the penalty of an unmarried free woman, and that the Imām or ruler administers it. Others are of the view that it is a reduced punishment, administered by her master. These views are argued in books of jurisprudence. We have no intention of delving into these details here. It is sufficient for our purposes to state that Islam takes into consideration all situations while at the same time helping people to maintain their purity and chastity.

This is an example of how Islam maintains a balanced view, taking into consideration all relevant factors. Knowing all that may be of influence in a slave's life, it does not legislate the same penalty for her as that for a free woman. On the other hand, it does not give undue weight to her circumstances, so as to exempt her altogether from punishment. It strikes the perfect balance.

On the other hand, Islam does not exploit the low position of slaves so as to increase their punishment, in the same way as all man-made laws used to do. Those laws treat people of high position leniently, while administering cruel punishments to those of lower positions. In the celebrated law of the Roman Empire, punishment was increased for all lowly classes. It stated: "A person who seduces a virtuous widow or a virgin shall be punished by the confiscation of half his wealth if he belongs to a noble family, and by flogging and exile if he comes from a low class." According to the Indian code known by the name of *Manū Shāstra,* a Brahman who commits a crime punishable by death may not be punished by the governor in any other way than by having his head shaved. Anyone else shall be executed. If an untouchable tries to hit a Brahman with his hand or with a stick, he shall have his hand chopped off. The Jews used to let a noble man who steals go without punishment, while the prescribed punishment was administered to ordinary thieves. (This is according to a *ĥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.)

Islam on the other hand, sets the record straight. A criminal will always be punished, but only after taking all extenuating circumstances into account. Thus, for adultery committed by a slave woman after marriage, the prescribed punishment is half that administered to a free unmarried woman. Allowing her to go unpunished

means that her own will is non-existent. To say that is wrong. At the same time, Islam does not overlook her situation.

Some societies today, such as those in America and South Africa, practise a repugnant system of racial discrimination. Crimes which are overlooked when committed by an "honourable" white man are never forgiven when committed by a coloured person.[2] The same logic of *Jāhiliyyah,* or state of ignorance prevails wherever and whenever Divine faith is ignored. Islam implements its own philosophy in all places and throughout all generations.

The verse concludes with a statement which indicates clearly that to marry a slave woman is a concession given to a person who fears that he may yield to temptation and who finds it too hard to resist. A person who can remain patient, without afflicting himself, is better advised to do so, in view of what we have already outlined in connection with marriage with a slave girl: *"This provision applies to those of you who fear to stumble into sin. Yet it is better for you to be patient."* (Verse 25)

God neither wants to afflict His servants nor let them fall victim to temptation. It is true that the faith He has chosen for them inspires them to try to reach the sublime, but it wants them to do so within the limitations of their human nature and their own potentials, as well as their real needs. Hence, it gives them a code of living which is easy to follow. It takes notice of their nature, acknowledges their needs and appreciates their motives. What it will never do, however, is to cheer those who have sunk low. It neither glorifies their surrender, nor exempts them from their responsibility to try to resist temptation.

In this instance, Islam encourages its followers to remain patient until they are able to marry free women who can maintain their chastity after marriage. They are the ones who can establish happy families, give birth to a new noble generation, take good care of young children and remain faithful to their husbands. When that represents affliction and the temptation is too great to resist, a concession is given, coupled with an attempt to raise the standard of slave women through the honour given them. They are our "maidens" and we are their "people". All of us belong to one another, united in the tie of faith. God knows best who is of strong faith. They receive their dowries by way of right. Association with them may only be through marriage. They are liable to punishment if they err, albeit a reduced one in the circumstances: *"God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* This is a concluding comment on having to marry a slave woman and on the reduction of punishment in the case of erring slave girls. It is a suitable comment in both cases. God's forgiveness and mercy are needed in all situations and after every error.

[2] It should be remembered that the author wrote this in the early 1960s — Translator's note.

What God Desires for Human Beings

> *God wants to make all this clear to you and to guide you in the [righteous] ways of life of those who have preceded you, and to turn to you in His mercy. God is All-Knowing, Wise. And God wants to turn to you in His mercy, while those who follow their lusts want you to go very far astray. God wants to lighten your burdens; for man has been created weak. (Verses 26- 28)*

These verses provide a perfect and comprehensive comment on the detailed legislation provided by Islam for the family. It is through this legislation that Islamic society is elevated psychologically, morally and socially to a very high, clean and healthy summit. The comment given in these verses reveals to the Muslim community the truth of what God wants for it by His prescription of these laws and regulations. At the same time, the aims of those who follow their lusts are also revealed.

God treats His servants with grace and reveals to them what lies behind His legislation, explaining to them the benefits they will reap as a result of implementing it. It is a gesture of honour, which God does to His servants by speaking thus to them: "*God wants to make all this clear to you.*" He wants you to understand His wisdom and reflect on it with open eyes and minds. There is nothing enigmatic about His legislation. It is not made arbitrarily. Good servants of God as they *Oil* are, Muslims deserve to have this wisdom explained to them. This is an honour, which is appreciated only by those who understand the true nature of Godhead and what it means to be a servant of God.

"*God wants to make all this clear to you and to guide you in the [righteous] ways of lift of those who have preceded you.*" (Verse 26) This method of life is the one that God has decreed for all believers. Its principles, aims and objectives are the same. It is designed for believers in all generations. It is in this sense that they constitute a single nation. Hence, the Qur'ān groups together those who have received true guidance in all generations and localities. This statement helps every Muslim to recognise his roots, the nation to which he belongs and the method he is required to follow. He is one of the faithful who are joined together despite differences of time, place, race and nationality by the bond of faith and a distinctive way of life to which they all subscribe.

"*And to turn to you in His mercy.*" God, then, makes things clear and guides His servants in the traditions of those who have preceded them as a gesture of mercy that He extends to them. He takes them by the hand so that they can turn to Him in repentance. Thus, He facilitates their way for them and helps them proceed along that easy path.

"*God is All-Knowing, Wise.*" These directives and legal provisions are, then, derived from His knowledge and wisdom. He knows people's hearts and souls, and knows what is suitable for them. He has exercised His wisdom in defining their constitution for them and shown them how to implement it.

"*And God wants to turn to you in His mercy, while those who follow their lusts want you to go very far astray.*" (Verse 27) This short verse reveals the truth of what God wants for people when He established the method of life that He wants them to follow and the truth of what those who follow their lusts, straying far away from God's constitution, want for them. There is only one way of life that combines seriousness with commitment. All other methods merely follow passions and lusts, and constitute deviation and transgression.

What does God, then, want for people when He makes things clear for them and enacts His legislation for them? He simply wants to turn to them in His mercy. He wants to guide them so that they can avoid slips. He wants to help them elevate themselves to the high standards they are worthy of.

And what do those who follow their lusts and tempt people with methods and creeds that God has not sanctioned want for them? They indeed want them to go far astray from the straight path, the clear method and the route to elevation.

What about this particular area which the preceding passage regulates, namely, family relations, purity of society, and the only healthy and acceptable way through which men and women may be joined together, to the exclusion of all other methods? In this particular area, what does God want for people and what do those who follow their lusts want?

What God wants has been explained by the preceding verses which add purity and ease to a perfect system which assures the Muslim community of beneficial results. Those who follow their lusts want to shed all inhibitions so that desires are let loose, unrestricted by any religious, moral or social values. They want uninhibited promiscuity with all that it leads to of instability, spiritual disorder, family chaos and total disregard of honour. They want human beings to be like animals, so that males can have their females with nothing to check them. All this corruption and destruction is preached in the name of freedom. It is simply a false name given to lust and caprice.

It is against this evil that God warns the believers when He tells them that those who follow their lusts want them to go very far astray. Indeed, they spare no effort to achieve their purpose of forcing the Muslim community to sink back into the immorality of *ignorance,* after they have elevated themselves far above it through following the Islamic way of life. It is towards the same end that certain writers and institutions try hard to push our community when they concentrate their aims at

removing all social barriers which stand in the way of total promiscuity. This is a dreadful end from which there can be no protection except through the implementation of the Divine way of life by those who truly believe in God.

Man's Burden Made Light

The final word in this comment touches on man's weakness and the mercy God shows him by giving him a perfect law which lightens his burden and which removes all causes of harm and affliction from him:

"God wants to lighten your burdens; for man has been created weak." (Verse 28)

Within the area addressed by the preceding verses and regulated by the directives and legal provisions they contain, the Divine wish to lighten man's burden is clearly apparent. Natural desires are recognised and given a proper, healthy and fruitful method of satisfaction. God neither charges His servants with an unreasonable suppression of these desires, nor does He allow them to run loose after their pleasure without checks and controls. More generally, God's wish to make things easy for man appears very clearly in the constitution He has laid down for human life which takes into consideration man's nature, ability and real needs. It taps all man's constructive energy, protecting it against wasteful use.

Many people assume that adherence to the Divine method, especially in connection with the relationships between men and women, constitutes a heavy burden. They further claim that shedding all inhibitions to satisfy desires freely ensures ease and comfort. This is utter delusion. Seeking only one's own pleasure in every pursuit and removing the element of duty altogether, confining the objective of human sexual relations to that of its equivalent in the animal world, and removing all moral checks and social duties which influence relations between men and women may appear to give man ease and comfort. In reality, however, they weigh heavily upon man and increase his burden. Their consequences on society, and indeed on every individual, are harmful, wasteful, and destructive. A glance at the situation which prevails in societies that have emancipated themselves and shed the constraints of religion, morality and modesty is enough to make hearts shudder.

Uncontrolled sexual relationships were the major factor that led to the collapse of ancient civilisations, including those of Athens, Rome, and Persia. The same factor is now working for the destruction of Western civilisation. Those effects have appeared first in France and they can be clearly seen now in America, Sweden, England and other Western civilised countries. France is foremost because she took the lead in shedding moral inhibitions. She succumbed in every war she fought since 1870. All

indications are that France is moving fast towards total collapse.

> In the first place, the French people's sexual indulgence has gradually resulted in the loss of their physical strength. Ever-present emotional situations have broken down their power of resistance. Craze for sexual pleasures has left them with little or no forbearance, and the prevalence of venereal diseases has affected their national health fatally. Ever since the beginning of the 20th century, after every couple of years or so, the French military authorities have had to lower standards of physical fitness for new entrants, because young men coming up to the previous standards have day by day become rarer. This measure — with the accuracy of a thermometer — precisely indicates how fast has the French nation been losing its physical strength.[3] Venereal diseases are a major cause of its decline. During the first two years of World War I, the number of French soldiers who had to be hospitalised on account of syphilis was estimated at 75,000. In a garrison town of average importance, 242 soldiers were found suffering from this disease simultaneously. Imagine for a while the predicament in which the French nation was involved. On the one hand, it was facing a life and death situation and stood badly in need of the sincerest effort by every single soldier for its survival: each franc was precious, each second of time and each ounce of energy valuable, and all possible resources were called for in national defence. And on the other, thousands of young men lay useless for months together on account of sexual dissipation, and were thus becoming instrumental in squandering national wealth and resources on treatment at such a critical time.
>
> According to Dr. Leredde, a French specialist, about 30,000 deaths are caused every year in France by syphilis and its immediate or ultimate results, which is the second biggest cause of death after tuberculosis. And syphilis is not the only venereal disease.[4]

The population of France has shown a serious downward tendency. Free sex and easy abortion have left little room for starting a family, and shouldering the responsibility for illegitimate children born after a brief temporary relationship. Hence, the number of marriages decreases, fewer children are born and France moves fast into the abyss.

Hardly 7 or 8 per thousand in France enter wedlock annually. This low percentage clearly indicates that there are big chunks of French population that are unmarried.

---

[3] The same is taking place in the United States where six out of every seven men at conscription age are found to be unfit for military service. God's laws never fail.

[4] A.A. Mawdūdī, *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam,* Lahore, pp.51-2.

Among the few married ones there are even fewer who live chaste or marry with a view to living a morally clean life. Apart from this, they have all sorts of motives while entering matrimony, one common motive being to legitimise the child born or conceived before marriage. Paul Bureau writes that it has almost become a custom among the French working classes that a woman, before marriage, must have the assurance of her would-be husband to recognise a child who is not his. In 1917, a woman stated before a Civil Tribunal of the Seine:

> By these present I declare to my husband that in our union I have only the object of legitimising the children born of our `free' union, ... and not that of resuming our life together. I leave him on the day of our marriage at 5.30 p.m., in order to escape from conjugal duties which I have no intention of fulfilling. I give him by these present a deed of separation, to serve towards what is necessary in order to obtain a divorce.

The Principal of a great college in Paris told Paul Bureau:

> At the present time, many young men see in marriage nothing but the means of securing a mistress at home... For ten or twelve years they have roved a little in all directions, tasting various forms of licentiousness in various degrees. A day comes when they tire of this restless and irregular life; they take a lawful wife, convinced that with her will be combined the advantages of safety and tranquillity with those of licentiousness modified indeed but still sufficient and refined, to suit a less exacting appetite.[5]

These are the reasons for the decline of France and her defeat in every recent war. These have been the seed of France's eclipse and will be the reason for her further gradual decline. It may appear that God's law works very slowly but it never fails.[6]

---

[5] Ibid., pp.53-4. [Mawdūdī says in his book that most of his information on the French situation is drawn from *Towards Moral Bankruptcy,* by Paul Bureau, a distinguished French sociologist, London, 1955.1

[6] It should be remembered that the author wrote this around 1961. The situation has now deteriorated much further and the appearance of AIDS and the threat that it poses to humanity at large confirms every word the author has said. The French government has recognised how serious the situation has become for France. In the late 1980s, the French government offered a new incentive for families to have more children. A family with three children is paid a large third-child allowance for three years after the birth of the third child. This child benefit is meant to allow the mother to stay at home while she brings up her children. This is further proof of the seriousness of the population situation in France, as explained by the author.
The author goes on to give further examples about the spread of promiscuity and how it affects Sweden, the United States and Britain. The story appears the same everywhere with the same effects and the same decline. However, much of what the author has to say is quoted from unspecified sources. As these are not available to us, it is felt that the French case should be sufficient by way of illustrating the author's idea — Translator's note.

All this is part of what humanity, in our present day state of ignorance, has to bear as a result of its following the dictates of those who insist on following carnal desires and who adamantly refuse to follow the way of life God has chosen for mankind. That is a way of life characterised by its easy implementation, reducing the human burden, protecting human society against immorality, leading man along a safe and secure course, that ensures purity, cleanliness and repentance of any slip into sin. *"God wants to lighten your burdens; for man has been created weak."* (Verse 28)

3
Fairness in All Deals

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَأۡكُلُوٓاْ أَمۡوَٰلَكُم بَيۡنَكُم بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ إِلَّآ أَن تَكُونَ تِجَٰرَةً عَن تَرَاضٖ مِّنكُمۡۚ وَلَا تَقۡتُلُوٓاْ أَنفُسَكُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُمۡ رَحِيمٗا ﴿٢٩﴾

Believers, do not devour each other's wealth illegally, unless it be through trade which you conduct by mutual consent. Do not kill yourselves, for God is merciful to you. (29)

وَمَن يَفۡعَلۡ ذَٰلِكَ عُدۡوَٰنٗا وَظُلۡمٗا فَسَوۡفَ نُصۡلِيهِ نَارٗاۚ وَكَانَ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ﴿٣٠﴾

Whoever does this with malicious intent and by way of willful wrongdoing, We shall make to suffer the Fire. That is very easy for God. (30)

إِن تَجۡتَنِبُواْ كَبَآئِرَ مَا تُنۡهَوۡنَ عَنۡهُ نُكَفِّرۡ عَنكُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمۡ وَنُدۡخِلۡكُم مُّدۡخَلٗا كَرِيمٗا ﴿٣١﴾

If you avoid the most serious of what you are Forbidden, We will erase your bad deeds, and shall cause you to enter an abode of glory. (3 1)

وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوۡاْ مَا فَضَّلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦ بَعۡضَكُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖۚ لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٞ مِّمَّا ٱكۡتَسَبُواْۖ وَلِلنِّسَآءِ نَصِيبٞ مِّمَّا ٱكۡتَسَبۡنَۚ وَسۡـَٔلُواْ ٱللَّهَ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٗا ﴿٣٢﴾

Do not covet the bounties God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others. Men shall have a benefit of what they earn and women shall have a benefit of what they earn. Therefore, ask God to give you out of His bounty. God is a witness of everything. (32)

وَلِكُلٍّ جَعَلْنَا مَوَٰلِيَ مِمَّا تَرَكَ ٱلْوَٰلِدَانِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبُونَ ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ عَقَدَتْ أَيْمَٰنُكُمْ فَـَٔاتُوهُمْ نَصِيبَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدًا ﴿٣٣﴾

To everyone have We appointed heirs to property left by parents and relatives. As for those with whom you have made covenants give them their share. God is indeed witness to all things. (33)

ٱلرِّجَالُ قَوَّٰمُونَ عَلَى ٱلنِّسَآءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ ٱللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ وَبِمَآ أَنفَقُوا۟ مِنْ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ ۚ فَٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتُ قَٰنِتَٰتٌ حَٰفِظَٰتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَٱلَّٰتِى تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَٱهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِى ٱلْمَضَاجِعِ وَٱضْرِبُوهُنَّ ۖ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا۟ عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيًّا كَبِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

Men shall take full care of women with the bounties with which God has favoured some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth. The righteous women are devout, guarding the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded. As for those women from whom you have reason to fear rebellion, admonish them [first]; then leave them alone in bed; then beat them. Then, if they pay you heed, do not seek any pretext to harm them. God is indeed Most High, Great. (34)

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ شِقَاقَ بَيْنِهِمَا فَٱبْعَثُوا۟ حَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهِۦ وَحَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهَآ إِن يُرِيدَآ إِصْلَٰحًا يُوَفِّقِ ٱللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمَآ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا خَبِيرًا ﴿٣٥﴾

If you have reason to fear that a breach may occur between a (married) couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people. If they both want to set things aright, God will bring about their reconciliation. God is indeed All-Knowing, Aware of all things. (35)

Overview

This passage aims at the organisation of a certain aspect of financial dealings in Islamic society, in order that such dealings be conducted with purity and good-will. It goes on to establish the rights of earning and ownership to women on an equal footing with men, according to their respective dues. It legislates for pledges or contracts of allegiance, which were observed in pre-Islamic days as well as in the

early years of Islam. The aim here is to liquidate this system and make blood relations the only claimants to inheritance.

The passage is yet another lesson aiming at the refinement of Islamic character. At the same time it lays down new legal provisions. The two purposes go hand in hand, complementing each other. What God legislates for Islamic society refines the Islamic character and organises all practical aspects of life. Legal provisions are intertwined with instructions which cultivate consciences and create a genuine feeling that the seriousness of Islamic law takes every care of the interests of the community. This ensures that they are properly implemented. Moreover, both the legal provisions and moral instructions enhance awareness that this system is well-balanced and complete. It provides solutions to problems encountered in practical life, while enhancing at the same time the role of human conscience.

Which Transactions Are Lawful

> *Believers, do not devour each other's wealth illegally, unless it be through trade which you conduct by mutual consent. Do not kill yourselves, for God is merciful to you.* (Verse 29)

This passage begins with a prohibition against illegally devouring other people's money, explaining that it is only through trade that people may gain money from one another. Illegal gains are described as killing oneself and as utter loss. This is coupled with a warning against incurring punishment in the hereafter as well as a comforting touch in the form of a promise of forgiveness and assured help. The passage also emphasises that people must not covet what others may have. They should instead ask God to give them what they wish, for He is the One who gives in abundance. These directives come side by side with the establishment of the rights of earning and ownership to both man and woman. At this point, the Qur'ān stresses that God is aware of all things. Instructions given with regard to contracts of allegiance stressing the duty to fulfil these contracts and pledges are followed with a statement that God witnesses everything. Both statements of God's knowledge leave very strong impressions on us. They come, after all, from God, who is well aware of man's constitution and what influences his attitude.

The passage begins with an address to believers prohibiting all forms of illegal gain and profit. This suggests that what follows aims at the eradication of traces of past, *ignorant* life from Islamic society. When Muslims are addressed by God as believers, the address serves as a reminder of what faith entails.

What we have here is a prohibition on devouring one another's wealth illegally. This includes all forms of financial transactions that God has not sanctioned or has

forbidden, such as cheating, bribery, gambling, monopoly, hoarding of essential goods and all forbidden forms of trade, particularly usury. We are not certain whether this verse was revealed before or after usury, in all its forms, was outlawed. If it preceded that, then it serves as a preliminary prohibition for usury as the worst form of devouring other people's wealth illegally. Alternatively, if this verse was revealed after the prohibition of usury, then it includes usury as an illegal form of financial transaction.

An exception is made of commercial transactions whereby the buyer and seller enter into these willingly: *"Believers, do not devour each other's wealth illegally, unless it be through trade which you conduct by mutual consent."* (Verse 29) Linguistically speaking, this is a special way of making an exception. It means that if a commercial transaction is conducted by mutual consent, then it is not included in the prohibition. The way that this is expressed in the Qur'ān suggests that there is an element of confusion that combines it with other dealings, described as the illegal devouring of other people's money. We can understand this better if we remind ourselves of the Qur'ānic verses which prohibit usury in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow. We commented on these verses at length in Volume I, pp. 355-71. These verses quote usurers objecting to the prohibition of all usury, claiming that *"trade is just the same as usury"*. (2: 275) God replies to them in the same verse, explaining: *"but God has made trade lawful and usury forbidden"*. In defence of their accursed system, usurers were guilty of deliberate misrepresentation by claiming that trade which results in a profit produces an increase of the trader's money in the same way as usury, which also increases the usurer's money. Hence their claim that it was wrong to outlaw usury while making trade lawful.

The fact is that a great gulf separates ordinary trade transactions and usurious dealings. There is also a great difference between the benefits trade generates to people and the destructive effects brought about by usury.

Trade is a useful medium that brings commodities to consumers. Thus, it is a marketing service providing the motivation to improve goods and commodities and to make them available to the consumer. It is a service to both producer and consumer, which results in a profit gained by the trader. Skill and effort are essential for the gain to be made. A trader runs the risk of loss as also the prospect of profit.

None of these benefits can be attributed to usury. Usury places a heavy burden on industry, in the shape of interest, which is added to the cost of commodities. It also burdens the trader and consumer with the payment of interest paid by producers. As occurred when the capitalist system managed to gather strength, the usury system imposes a certain direction on industry and investment which does not take into account the interests of industry itself or of the consumers. The first priority is given to an increase in profits so that interest on loans can be paid. No objection is raised

even when priority is given to the production of luxury goods, even though the majority of people cannot meet their basic needs. No objection is heard even when large investments are devoted to projects aiming at the illegal satisfaction of lust. The destructive effects of all this on society are not even considered. Additionally, there is the element of ever-continuing profit given to capital, which runs no risk of loss and does not rely on skill or effort which are necessary for trade. The indictment of the usurious system has many more elements, all of which demand the death sentence for this system. Islam issued this sentence long ago.

It is this type of confusion between usury and trade which necessitated this clarification to be made in the form of an exception, stated in the Qur'ānic verse as: "*Believers, do not devour each other's wealth illegally, unless it be through trade which you conduct by mutual consent.*" (Verse 29)

The verse ends with a startling comment: "*Do not kill yourselves, for God is merciful to you.*" (Verse 29) This is how the Qur'ān comments on devouring one another's money illegally. It suggests that such practices have a highly destructive effect on society. It is indeed a crime, which amounts to murder. God forbids the believers to practise it because He is so merciful to them.

It is indeed the crime of suicide. Every time the practices of devouring other people's money illegally, such as usury, cheating, gambling, monopoly, hoarding, embezzlement, bribery, theft, and the selling of un-sellable things such as honour, honesty, and moral and religious values, spread within a community, then that community is sentenced to inevitable self-destruction. Such practices have always been rampant in ignorant societies, old and modern alike. God wants to spare the believers this type of self-destruction and lighten their load. He aims to save them from their weaknesses, for these are bound to destroy them whenever they follow the dictates of lust in preference to His directives.

Conditions for Forgiveness

> *Whoever does this with malicious intent and by way of willful wrongdoing, We shall make to suffer the Fire. That is very easy for God.* (Verse 30) *If you avoid the most serious of what you are forbidden, We will erase your bad deeds, and shall cause you to enter an abode of glory.* (Verse 31)

This first of these two verses warns those who unjustly and illegally devour each other's money that they will suffer the punishment of the hereafter after having destroyed themselves in this life. This applies to them all, since responsibility in such matters is a collective one. Any community which allows such injustice to spread is doomed in this life as well as in the life to come: "*Whoever does this with malicious*

intent and by way of willful wrongdoing, We shall make to suffer the Fire. That is very easy for God." (Verse 30)

As Islam makes its legislation known to people, it appoints everyone a watchful guard to ensure its implementation. It also makes the whole community watchful over one another, since the whole community shares in the responsibility to implement these legal provisions and the destruction which attends upon its failure to do so. Such destruction is bound to engulf the whole community. The punishment in the hereafter for allowing injustice to spread will apply to everyone in the community. That is certainly easy for God since nothing stands in His way. His law never fails when the conditions for its operation exist.

God, however, promises the believers to bestow His mercy on them and to forgive them their sins if they avoid cardinal sins. He, thus, takes into account their weaknesses and reassures them of their destiny once they refrain from the gravest of sins: *"If you avoid the most serious of what you are forbidden, We will erase your bad deeds, and shall cause you to enter an abode of glory."* (Verse 31)

This religion of ours is indeed very tolerant and its method easy to implement. These qualities go hand in hand with its appeal to man's sense of nobility, purity, cleanliness and willingness to obey God. Its commandments, as well as its legal provisions and punishments, work for the same aim of refining people's characters and the establishment of a pure and healthy society. It does not ignore human weakness and does not charge man with what is beyond his ability. It is not unaware of the complexity of factors working on man's mind and does not ignore human nature and motivation. It strikes the right balance between duty and ability, motives and restraints, ideals and necessities, orders and prohibitions, forgiveness of sin and fearful punishment for it.

This religion of Islam is satisfied that a person turns to God with sincerity and does his best to obey Him and win His pleasure. He will then find God's mercy and compassion, which overlook weakness, forgive slips, accept repentance and receive warmly those who turn back after having gone astray.

What signifies that a certain person does his best to seek God's pleasure is that he avoids the cardinal sins God has forbidden. Such sins, all of them well known, cannot be committed unwittingly or through lack of knowledge. Their commitment by anyone signifies that they have not made the required effort to resist temptation. Nevertheless, when a person who has committed such cardinal sins turns to God in genuine and sincere repentance, God, Who is committed to showing mercy to His servants, accepts his repentance. It is He who describes the God- fearing as those who *"when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God forgives sins? – and do not knowingly*

persist in doing the wrong they may have done." (3: 135)

What we have here, however, is an assurance that God straightaway forgives the offences and effaces the errors of those of His servants who avoid cardinal sin. God here gives this promise and happy news to the believers.

Now, what constitutes these cardinal sins? Several *aĥādīth* speak of certain types of cardinal sin. We do not, however, have a full list of them all in any one *ĥadīth.* Each mentions some, which suggests that these *aĥādīth* addressed certain situations, mentioning the cardinal sins relevant to each situation. It is not difficult for a Muslim to identify these cardinal sins, although they may differ in number and gravity according to situations and generations.

It is useful to mention here a story demonstrating how Islam refined the sensitivity of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a man well known for his great piety and an ever-present consciousness of the need to avoid all sin. Islam gave `Umar a well-balanced insight that helped him show the moderation required of a leader when he shouldered the responsibility of running the affairs of the Muslim state. The story, reported by al-Ĥasan, mentions that some Egyptians spoke with `Abdullāh ibn `Amr, a Companion of the Prophet and the son of the governor of Egypt at the time of `Umar. In essence, they said: "We have observed that there are certain things mentioned in God's Book that are not enforced, although He has ordered these to be implemented. We thought that we should speak to the Caliph about them." Hence they, accompanied by `Abdullāh ibn `Amr, went to Madīnah. `Umar met with Abdullāh ibn `Amr and enquired as to the purpose of his journey. When `Abdullāh answered him, `Umar asked whether he had obtained the permission of his father. The reporter of the story does not actually say what `Abdullāh's answer was but that nonetheless `Abdullāh explained why he had come and that this pertained to the Eygptians' queries. `Umar, therefore, asked him to call them all to a meeting with him.

When they met, `Umar spoke to the first man and put to him the following question: "I ask you by God and by what you owe to Islam, have you read the whole of the Qur'ān?" He answered in the affirmative. `Umar asked whether he had implemented God's Book fully in his own life. He replied that he had not. The reporter comments that had the man answered in the affirmative, `Umar would have challenged him on this. `Umar continued his questioning and asked whether the man had implemented Islam fully with regard to what he saw or what he spoke or what he did. He asked everyone of the group the same questions. 'When he had finished, he said: "Are you asking `Umar to force people to implement God's Book? Our Lord knows that we will be committing errors." He than read this verse: *"If you avoid the most serious of what you are forbidden, We will erase your bad deeds."* (Verse 31) He then asked those Egyptians whether the people in Madinah were aware of the purpose of

their visit. When they answered in the negative, he said that had they known, he would have used their visit for admonition.

We observe from this story how `Umar, who was exemplary in his piety and fear of God, showed his refined sense and realism: "Our Lord knows that we will be committing errors." Indeed, we cannot be otherwise. What matters, however, is the willingness and determination to do one's duty, and to try one's level best to do it well. Thus, serious effort is balanced with moderation.

Honour for Both Men and Women

> *Do not covet the bounties God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others. Men shall have a benefit of what they earn and women shall have a benefit of what they earn. Therefore, ask God to give you out of His bounty. God is a witness of everything.* (Verse 32)

This verse, together with the one that follows, continue the discussion of the ties and transactions which exist between men and women. They also speak of the covenants of loyalty and their relevance to the system of inheritance that this *sūrah* discusses earlier.

First, we have a general prohibition against coveting the gifts God has favoured some believers with. This is a general statement that applies to all sorts of favours and privileges, which may include functions, positions, abilities, talents, wealth and other luxuries. A believer should appeal to God and pray to Him to grant him of His grace. He should not waste time feeling sorry for himself nor with all that such an attitude generates of harbouring grudges and greed, of feeling angry, deprived, or unjustly treated. Such feelings may give rise to thinking ill of God and His fair distribution. To harbour such a feeling is disastrous because it substitutes worry and misery for content and self confidence. Entertaining such evil thoughts wastes one's energy. To turn to God directly and to pray to Him for His grace is to turn to the source of all grace; it can never be exhausted and does not repel anyone. Moreover, it is in God that all hopes are placed and to Him alone that one should turn as one goes about, seeking one's share of God's grace.

As has already been said, this is a general directive. The fact that it comes at this point in the *sūrah,* as well as in a number of reports which speak of the occasion when it was revealed, may indicate that this verse refers specifically to a certain type of favour, namely, the difference in shares of inheritance between men and women. This is an extremely important aspect of the relationship between the two sexes which needs to be established on the solid foundation of mutual acceptance and complementarity, so that contentment prevails in the family and the Muslim society

at large. Despite the importance of this aspect, it does not limit the generality of the statement. Authoritative commentaries on the Qur'ān speak of both aspects, giving reports in support of both:

Umm Salamah, a wife of the Prophet, once said to him: "Messenger of God, men fight when we do not, and we receive half a share of inheritance." God subsequently revealed: *"Do not covet the bounties God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others."*

Another report also quotes Umm Salamah as saying to the Prophet: "Messenger of God, we do not fight so that we may be martyrs, and we do not have an equal share of inheritance". This verse was then revealed. Later, God revealed the verse in which He says: "*I will not suffer the work of any worker among you, male or female, to be lost."* (3: 195)

Al-Suddī, an early commentator on the Qur'ān, mentions that some men said: "We want to have twice the reward of women, in the same way as we have two shares of inheritance." Some women said: "We want to have a reward similar to that of martyrs. We cannot fight. Had we been required to fight, we would have done so." God turned down all that and said to them: "Pray for My grace." A similar view is attributed to another commentator, named Qatādah.

Other commentators stress the generality of the verse. Ibn `Abbās is quoted as saying: "No one should say: I wish I had as much money or as many children as this or that person. God has prohibited all that. He should pray to God to grant him of His grace." Similar views have been expressed by Al-Ĥasan, Muĥammad ibn Sīrīn, `Aṭā' and others.

The first three reports suggest the presence of un-Islamic concepts in the relationship between men and women. There is also an air of competition between men and women. This is probably the result of the new freedoms and rights given by Islam to women, in accordance with its overall concept which honours the human race and treats both sexes with fairness. Islam, however, wants its complete system to be implemented, as a whole, not for the benefit of men at the expense of women, nor for the benefit of women at the expense of men. It wants its system to be implemented for the benefit of humanity as a whole, and for the benefit of Muslim society as it establishes the values of propriety, morality, goodness and absolute justice.

In its distribution of the functions and shares of inheritance between men and women, Islam observes human nature, which has made man different from woman and given each of them his or her distinctive characteristics. This is to enable them to discharge their respective duties, not for their own benefit but for the benefit of human life, which can only achieve proper fulfilment and its ultimate objectives

through the multiplicity of characteristics, functions and duties between the two different sexes. Because the characteristics and functions of man and woman are different, their positions and shares vary. The ultimate beneficiary is that great institution which we call human life.

When we consider the Islamic system as a whole and then consider that particular aspect which organises relationships between the two parts of the single soul from which both men and women have been created, we find no room for such ancient arguments of the type mentioned in the reports quoted above. Nor can we find any room for modern arguments advanced by shallow-minded people of both sexes.

It is useless and futile to try to depict matters as if a raging battle is going on between the two sexes in which points and victories are scored. The attempt by some serious writers to discredit women and to attribute all sorts of vices to them is equally futile, whether it is made in the name of Islam or under the guise of scholarly analysis. There is no question of a battle whatsoever. There are simply differences of characteristics and potentials. Differences in the proper distribution of tasks and specialities which achieves both complementarity and absolute justice, as can only be expected from the Divine method.

There may be a battle of this sort in ignorant societies which initiate their own systems according to their will and which serve their immediate interests, or, more probably, to serve the interests of certain classes, families or individuals. Such societies may deprive women of certain rights due to their defective understanding of man as a whole and the function of each of the two sexes. On the other hand, they may deprive women of some of their rights for economic reasons, such as giving a woman a lesser wage than a man who does the same job, or giving her a smaller share of inheritance or depriving her of the right to manage her own property.

There can be no room whatsoever for such a battle under Islam. There is no point in competing for worldly benefits or for an attack on either man or woman in order to undermine their positions and magnify their weaknesses. Given an Islamic outlook, no one can imagine that men and women, who are different in their characteristics and physical constitutions, should not have different tasks, duties and positions. To imagine that is to betray a total misunderstanding of the Islamic system and the nature of both sexes and their respective functions.

Differences between the Sexes

Let us now consider the question of *jihād* and martyrdom, and women's share in all that. This was a question of concern to God- fearing women in the noble first generation of Muslims, which was distinguished by its dedication to the hereafter as it looked after its daily affairs. We will also consider the question of inheritance and

the shares assigned by Islam to men and women. This question not only preoccupied some men and women in the past but continues to be raised even today.

God has not imposed the duty to fight on women. Nor has He forbidden them to fight when there is need for their participation in *jihād* alongside men. In Islamic wars a number of individual women took an active part in the fighting, thus not confining themselves to support duties alone. Their numbers, however, were very few, taking part only when needed. This was by no means the normal practice. It was the exception, not the rule, because God, in His wisdom, has not made fighting obligatory for women.

Women have not been required to fight in war because they give birth to men who do the fighting. By her physical and psychological constitution, a woman is made to give birth to men and to bring them up so that they can face life and participate in *jihād when* necessary. In this particular domain, her ability and usefulness is greater than that of man. Every single cell in her body is made physically and psychologically suitable for this purpose. This is not merely a question of physical constitution. It applies to every single cell, from the moment of conception and the decision made by the Creator, praised be He, which determines the sex of that pregnancy. Physical, organic, and psychological factors take secondary importance. She is also more useful when one considers long-term national interests.

When men fall dead in war, leaving behind women, the nation is left with productive members who give birth to children in order to compensate for the decrease in their numbers. The same cannot be the case if war were to claim the lives of women and men in equal numbers, or were it to claim the lives of more women than men. Under Islam, a single man using all the concessions and abilities available to him can make four women produce children in order to fill the vacuum left after the slaughter that takes place in war. A thousand men cannot make a single woman produce more children than one man can in order to redress the balance that takes place in society after war. This is only one aspect of the Divine wisdom behind relieving women of the duty of fighting. Other aspects relate to social morality and the nature of society, as well as the need to preserve the essential qualities of both sexes. This is a subject which deserves fuller treatment. As for reward, both men and women are reassured by God. It is sufficient for every human being to do well in fulfilling the tasks assigned to him or her in order to achieve a good position with God.

As for inheritance, it may appear at first glance that the general rule which assigns "to the male a share equal to that of two females" favours man. This superficial view, however, will soon disappear to be replaced by a comprehensive treatment of the respective positions of man and woman and their mutually complementary duties. A basic rule in the Islamic system states that "gain is commensurate with duty". The

man pays a dowry to the woman when he marries her, while she pays him no dowry whatsoever. He supports her and their children while she is exempt from such a duty, even when she has money of her own. The least that can happen to a man who is negligent of this duty is that he be imprisoned. A man is required to pay the ransom and compensation for accidental death and injuries caused to others by members of his family, while a woman is exempt from all this.

Moreover, a man is required to support the insolvent and those who are unable to earn their living in his family, according to their degree of kinship, while the woman is exempt from the duty of mutual family support. When divorce or separation takes place, the man pays his divorced or estranged wife compensation for breast-feeding his child and for her custody in the same way as he pays her own maintenance. As we see, then, the Islamic system is a comprehensive one, which distributes inheritance according to the distribution of liabilities. Since the man bears more liabilities than the woman, his share of inheritance is greater.

This system also takes into consideration human nature and man's ability to earn his family's livelihood and to provide the woman with security and comfort so that she can discharge her responsibilities in bringing up the new generation. No monetary value can be placed on this responsibility of hers. Her contribution to the general welfare of society is far superior to any product or service that anyone can render. We can, then, discern the elements of perfect balance in the Islamic system, laid down by the One whose knowledge and wisdom are absolute.

Let us consider here the right of individual ownership given by Islam to women: *"Men shall have a benefit of what they earn and women shall have a benefit of what they earn."* (Verse 32) This right was denied to women by the ignorant society of Arabia as well as by other ignorant societies of the past. Very rarely were women's right to own acknowledged. Indeed, even when it was acknowledged, ways and means were found to deprive her of that right. The woman herself was considered an object, the ownership of which could be transferred by inheritance, in the same way as other possessions.

Modern ignorant societies, which claim to have given women rights and afforded them respect unequalled under any other system, still try to deny women their right to inheritance. Some of these societies give the whole estate to the eldest male heir. Others make it necessary for a woman who wants to make any financial transaction to obtain the prior consent of her guardian, and they even make it necessary for a woman to have her husband endorse any financial deal she makes with her own property before it can go through. This remains the case even after the revolutions made by women to achieve their emancipation. Such actions have, indeed, led to undermining the position of women in both the family and society as also weakened public morality.

Islam has given the right of individual ownership to women of its own accord. Women did not have to launch a revolution, form women's societies or enter parliament in order to claim such a right. Islam's motives are found in its overall view of humanity. It considers that both parts of the single soul, from which men and women issue forth, are honourable. Moreover, it makes the family the basic unit of its social system. Hence, the atmosphere in the family must be one of love and mutual care. The rights of every individual in the family are safeguarded. It is for this reason that Islam gives both men and women equal rights of earning and ownership.

Before we finish our commentary on this verse, we would like to give the following quotation from Dr `Abd al-Wāĥid Wafī who explains in his book, *Human Rights,* the status of women in Islam as compared to their status in the West.

> Islam gives both man and woman an equal status in Front of the law and in all civil rights. This equality applies to married and unmarried women alike. Under Islam, marriage is different from what is practised in most Western countries. A Muslim woman does not lose her name, civil status, and eligibility to make contracts or right of ownership when she gets married. After her marriage, she retains the surname of her own family and continues to enjoy all her rights as before, including the undertaking of any responsibility and entering into any contract, to sell, buy, pledge, make a gift or a will, etc. She also continues to enjoy her right of independent ownership. Under Islam, a married woman is accorded all her civil rights and she may have her own wealth independently from that of her husband, who may not take any part of her money, small or large. God says in the Qur'ān: *"If you wish to take one wife in place of another and you have given the first one a large sum of money, do not take away anything of it. Would you take it away though that constitutes a gross injustice and a manifest sin?* (Verse 20) *How can you take it away when each of you has been privy with the other, and they have received from you a most solemn pledge?"* (Verses 20-1) He also says: *"It is not lawful for you to take back anything of what you have given them as dowry."* (2: 229) If a husband is forbidden to take anything of what he had originally given to his wife when he married her, then it is even more unlawful for him to take any part of her own property, unless she gives it to him willingly and freely. On this particular point, God states: *"Give women their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own accord, choose to give up to you a part of it, then you may take it with pleasure."* (Verse 4) Nor is it lawful for a husband to dispose of any part of his wife's property unless she permits him to do so or gives him a power of attorney to make a contract on her behalf. When she gives him such a power of attorney, she retains the right to cancel it and to give a similar power of

attorney to someone else.

Even the most civilised of contemporary democracies do not aspire to this standard of equality between men and women. Until very recently, indeed until today, the status of women in France was not much better than that of civil bondage. The law deprives her of the authority to act in many a civil matter. Article 217 of French Civil Law states that "even when a marriage stipulates that the properties of husband and wife are to remain separate, a married woman may not dispose of anything by way of gift, assignment, mortgage or pledge, and may not come into the ownership of anything in return for some or no consideration, unless her husband is party to the contract or gives his consent to it in writing.

Despite the numerous amendments that have been introduced to this Article, much of its import still overshadows the status of women under French law. Western laws emphasise this bondage imposed on women by endorsing the tradition that a woman loses her own family name at the moment when she gets married. She is no longer called after her father. She adopts her husband's family name instead. This is simply a token of the loss of her legal status which is merged with that of her husband's.

Strangely enough, many of our own women try to imitate Western women even in this unjust system. They accept for themselves this low status when they adopt their husbands' family names, instead of retaining the names of their own families as is the case under the Islamic system. Ironically speaking, this blind imitation is practised by the very women who pose as defenders of the rights of women and advocates of equality between them and men. They are unaware that by their action, they trample over their most important right which has been given to them by Islam to elevate them to the status of equality with men."[7]

Inheritance for Relatives Only

The *sūrah* then regulates those covenants of loyalty that existed before the provisions contained within the system of inheritance were revealed to limit the right of inheritance to close relatives only. Pledges of loyalty used to give shares of inheritance to others as well.

To everyone have We appointed heirs to property left by parents and relatives. As for

[7] The original book from which this quotation is taken was not available to the translator for more accurate documentation. The quotation is taken from the Arabic version of Dr Wafi's hook which was written in the early 1950s or earlier.

> *those with whom you have made covenants give them their share. God is indeed witness to all things.* (Verse 33)

Having stated that both men and women have the benefit of what they earn, and having already outlined the shares of inheritance of both males and females, the *sūrah* now mentions that God has appointed to everyone heirs from among his kinsfolk who will inherit what has come into his possession of the property of his parents and relatives. Through the inheritance system, then, money circulates from one generation to another. Heirs inherit their shares and add to them what they earn before they themselves leave that to their own close relatives. Thus, wealth is not monopolised by a single generation, family or individual. It is continuously circulated and inherited by one generation after another with different shares being given to different heirs, according to the situation.

This is followed by a reference to covenants which Islam initially approved of. These covenants or pledges of loyalty sometimes allowed wealth to be inherited by non-relatives. There were several types of such covenants in the early period of Islam. There was firstly the covenant of loyalty that came with freeing a slave. When a slave is freed, he becomes a member of his master's household, as it were. If he commits a crime which requires the payment of blood money, his former master pays this on his behalf, in the same way as he does when such a crime is committed by one of his close relatives. He also inherits him when he dies, leaving no immediate relatives behind.

The second type of covenant was one of pure loyalty. This allowed a non-Arab who had no heirs of his own to make a covenant with an Arab. It accorded him the status of a member of the Arab's household, whereby the latter would be willing to pay penalties on his behalf such as blood money, and who would inherit him upon his death.

The third type was that which the Prophet established between the Muhājirīn (his Companions who emigrated with him to Madinah) and the Anṣār (his Companions from among the inhabitants of Madinah). This allowed an Anṣārī to be inherited by one of the Muhājirīn alongside the Anṣārī's own relatives, as if he was one of them, or to their exclusion, if they were unbelievers.

The fourth type of covenant was a straightforward pledge of loyalty stipulating that each of the two parties could inherit the other.

Islam abolished all these covenants, especially the third and fourth types. It stipulated that inheritance is the right of relatives only. It did not, however, abolish those covenants that were already in force. It continued to observe them but it made it clear that no new ones might be made. God states: *"As for those with whom you have*

made covenants give them their share." (Verse 33) He emphasises this by reminding us that He Himself is a witness to the covenant and to how it is observed: "*God is indeed witness to all things."* (Verse 33) The Prophet (peace be upon him) says: "No alliance may be made in Islam. Any covenant of alliance made prior to Islam has only been given added force under Islam." (Related by Aĥmad and Muslim.)

As it began to liquidate these covenants, Islam followed its normal method concerning financial affairs. Its solutions had no retroactive effect. Usury, for example, was abolished from the very moment its prohibition was revealed. What had been gained in the past was left alone. Although usury contracts were not made lawful, Islam did not order the recipients of usury to return what they had gained. In this instant, past covenants were observed, provided that they led to no new contract. One reason for this is that Islam did not wish to disrupt any practical situations that resulted from such covenants, as these may affect family and social relations. Hence, existing covenants were observed but no new ones were made.

This attitude reveals how Islam wants things to be easy. Moreover, the Islamic method in dealing with social affairs is profound, comprehensive, wise and far reaching. As it announced its abrogations and endorsements, Islam was moulding the Muslim society, purifying it of all traces of *ignorance.*

Regulation of Family Affairs

The last topic in this passage concerns the regulation of the family and the allocation of duties and responsibilities within it. The *sūrah* also outlines the measures to be taken in order to protect this social institution against the effects of quarrels and disputes so as to eliminate, as far as possible, any negative effects that could destroy it.

> *Men shall take full care of women with the bounties with which God has favoured some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth. The righteous women are devout, guarding the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded.* (Verse 34)

Before we comment on these verses and outline their psychological and social objectives we need to speak briefly about the Islamic view of the institution of the family and its method of building, protecting and promoting it. However, we cannot speak about this in full detail because to do so would require a whole volume.

God, who has created mankind, is the One who has made duality part of man's nature, as it is indeed ingrained in all creation: "*And of everything We have created pairs, so that you may bear in mind [that God alone is One].*" (51: 49) He then willed to

make the human pair two halves of the same soul: *"Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate."* (Verse 1) Part of His purpose behind the meeting between the two halves of the same soul is that it should lead to peaceful existence and be a comfort to body and soul. It is also a means to protect purity and chastity and provides a secure, clean way for human reproduction and the continuity and promotion of human life, under the watchful care of parents. Different verses in the Qur'ān stress these facts: *"Among His signs is that He creates for you mates from among yourselves, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and compassion between you."* (30: 21) *"They are as a garment to you as you are to them."* (2: 187) *"Your wives are your tilth; go, then, to your filth as you may desire, but prepare well for yourselves and fear God."* (2: 223) *"Believers, ward off from yourselves and your families that fire [of the hereafter] whose fuel is human beings and stones."* (66: 6) *"As for the believers whose offspring will have followed them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not let aught of their deeds go to waste."* (52: 21)

Because the two mates are two halves of the same soul, they stand in the same position in God's sight. Since God has given mankind a position of honour, He has honoured women, assigning to them the same reward for their good deeds, the same rights of ownership and inheritance, and the same rights of independence, as we have already explained.

Similarly, as regards the great responsibility of the family, which results from the meeting of the two halves of the same soul, God has taken care to detail a complete set of elaborate measures which regulate all aspects of the family institution and all its affairs. This *sūrah* outlines some of these measures, whilst other measures have been discussed in Volume I, *Sūrah* 2. Other *sūrahs,* particularly 24, 33, 65 and 66 include further measures. Together, these measures provide a complete and perfect system for the family. Their comprehensive outlook and attention to detail reflect the great importance Islam attaches to this crucial institution.

We hope that the reader may recall what we have said in earlier volumes about the length of the childhood period and the need of the human child for a caring and supporting environment until he is able to earn his living. What is even more important is that the child should receive the type of care which enables him or her to fulfil their social function in order to contribute to the betterment of human society, so as to leave it in a better state than they receive it. All this is particularly significant in explaining the importance of the family and the great care Islam takes to ensure its protection.

With this in mind, the next verse makes it clear that the man is in charge of the family institution, as God has given him the necessary qualities and training to undertake this task and assigned to him the duty of meeting the family's living expenses. It also outlines man's additional task to protect the family against collapse

as a result of fleeting whims, delineating the way to deal with these, should they occur. It also explains other "external" measures to which recourse may be made when all "internal" efforts have failed, and a total breakdown threatens not only the spouses but also the young ones who are more vulnerable. We will now look at these measures in some detail.

The Partner in Charge

> *Men shall take full care of women with the bounties with which God has favoured some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth.* (Verse 34)

We have already said that the family is the first institution in human life in the sense that its influence is felt at every stage of human life. Moreover, it derives its importance from the fact that it is within the family that man, the most noble of all creatures according to the Islamic concept of life, is brought up. The running and administration of much inferior institutions, such as those engaged in financial, industrial and commercial affairs is normally assigned to those who are most qualified for the job by their education, training and natural abilities. It is only logical that the same rule be applied to the family, the institution that looks after the upbringing of the noblest creature in the universe, namely, man.

The Divine code of living takes human nature into consideration, as well as the natural abilities given to both man and woman to enable them to discharge the duties assigned to each of them. It maintains justice in the distribution of duties, giving to each of them only the type of duties to which they are suited.

Needless to say, both man and woman are the creation of God, who does not wish to do injustice to anyone He has created. Indeed, He gives each of His creatures the abilities and talents that befit the duties assigned to them.

God has created human beings as males and females, following the "dual" rule which is central to the system of creation. He has given the woman the great tasks of childbearing, breast-feeding and looking after her children. These are not tasks which can be fulfilled without careful preparation, physically, psychologically, and mentally. It is only just, therefore, that the other part, i.e. the man, should be assigned the task of providing the essential needs and the protection required for the woman to fulfil her highly important duties. She could not be given all those tasks and still be required to work in order to earn her living. It is only fair as well that the man be given the physical, mental and psychological qualities which enable him to fulfil his duties in the same way as the woman is given the abilities to fulfil hers. All this is clearly seen in real human life, because God maintains absolute justice among all.

Among the qualities the woman has been given are tenderness, quick reaction, and an instinctive response to the needs of children, without the need for much deliberation and reflection. The essential human need of even a single individual are not left to be deliberated upon at leisure. Response to them is made instinctively, so that they may be met more or less involuntarily. There is no external compulsion in this. It is an impulsive reaction, which the woman mostly enjoys despite the fact that it requires sacrifice from her. This is part of God's work, which is always perfect.

These are not superficial qualities. Indeed, they are implanted in the woman's physical, mental and psychological constitution. Some leading scientists believe that they are present in each cell in the woman's constitution, because they are rooted in the first cell that multiplies to form the foetus and the child.

On the other hand, among the qualities a man is given are toughness, slow reaction and response, as well as proper thought and reflection before action. All his functions, from the early days of being a hunter- gatherer, to fighting for the protection of his wife and children, to earning his living in any way, require some deliberation and consideration before taking a decision and implementing it. These qualities are also deeply rooted in man's constitution.

Man's qualities make him more able and better equipped to take charge of the family. Similarly, his duty to support his family, as part of that general distribution of functions, makes him more suited to overall authority. That is because earning his family's living is part of being in charge. Moreover, looking after the finances of the family is closer to his family duties.

In highlighting these two elements, the Qur'ān states that in Islamic society men are required to look after women. It is an assignment of duties on the basis of natural abilities and the fair distribution of responsibilities. Each party is assigned the duties most suited to its nature.

The man has the proper natural abilities to take charge of the family affairs, a role essential for the proper progress of human life. It is a simple fact that one party is properly equipped for this role and assigned the duty to play it while the other is not. Hence, it is totally unfair that the latter party should be required, in any situation, to take up these responsibilities in addition to its own. If women are given the necessary practical and scientific training to fulfil these duties, then their ability to play the other role, i.e. that of motherhood, is undermined.

These very serious questions should not be left to human beings to determine at will. When they have been left to human beings to decide, in both past and modern societies, the very existence of mankind was threatened and essential human qualities which distinguish man from other creatures were in danger of extinction.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that the rules of human nature force

themselves on man, even when people deny them altogether. One aspect of this is the decline in the quality of human life and the serious danger to which it is exposed whenever this rule, which gives man the task and the authority to look after the family, has been violated. Such violation leads to confusion within the family, and is bound to have serious repercussions.

Moreover, women prefer for the man to assume authority and responsibility for the family. Many women worry, feel dissatisfied and unhappy, when they live with men who relinquish their role for any reason. Even women who try to challenge the man's role readily admit to this.

Another example of the social repercussions brought about by this unnatural family situation is one whereby children suffer from instability. This happens when the father does not play his role, either because of his weak character which allows the mother to overshadow or control him, or because of his early death or in one-parent families. This, in turn, can lead to mental perversion and behavioural deviation.

These are only a few examples through which human nature indicates its presence and the need to organise human life according to its laws.

To elaborate more on the role of the man as the one in charge of the family and its justification is beyond the scope of this commentary. What we need to state here, however, is that it does not by any means lead to the negation of the woman's character and role in the family home and in society at large. Nor does it mean the cancellation of her civil status. It simply defines her role within the family and how it is run. This is necessary, because the family is a very important institution, and one which must be protected and maintained. In any institution, the observance of certain values does not mean the abrogation of the character or the rights of the partners or the workers. Islam defines the role of the man and what his being in charge means, as well as his duties as the one who takes care of his family, protects it and earns its living.

In Recognition of Women's Virtues

> *Men shall take full care of women with the bounties with which God has favoured some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth. The righteous women are devout, guarding the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded.* (Verse 34)

The verse moves on to explain the qualities of righteous women, their behaviour and duties within the family. "*The righteous women are devout, guarding the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded*" (Verse 34) It is, then, in the nature of the

righteous, believing woman and part of her essential characteristics to be devoted and obedient. Devotion means willing obedience, motivated by love, not the sort of obedience enforced against one's will. Hence, the Qur'ān uses the term "devout", or *qānitāt* to stress its pleasant psychological connotations, which fit perfectly with the sort of affectionate and compassionate relationship which exists between man and woman, the two parts of the single soul from which all mankind descend. Islam stresses that this relationship is essential in the family home where young ones are reared.

It is also part of the nature and essential characteristics of a devoted, believing woman to guard the sanctity of her relationship with her husband. This she maintains in his presence as well as in his absence. She does not reveal what belongs only to him, as one half of the single soul which combines both of them, even inasmuch as a passing look, let alone a full dishonourable relationship. What is forbidden to reveal is decided neither by him nor by her. It is determined by God. It is "*the intimacy which God has ordained to be guarded*". *It* is not a matter of pleasing a husband or allowing what he does not mind to be revealed or what society requires to be exposed, should the husband or society deviate from the Divine code of living. There is only one rule to determine the limits of what must be guarded. She has to guard that "*which God has ordained to be guarded*".

We note that the Qur'ān does not put this in the imperative form. It places much stronger emphasis on it by saying that this guardianship is part of the nature of righteous women and one of their essential characteristics. This statement exposes the flimsiness of the excuses advanced by some mentally defeated Muslims advocating ways and methods that are certain to lead to the collapse of the family only because these are practised in other communities. What must be guarded, willingly and obediently, is that which God has ordered to be guarded.

The ones who are not righteous are described here as rebellious. Their rebellion is given a physical description derived from standing on a high position to declare their mutiny. Islam does not wait for such a rebellion to take place, nor for the roles to become so confused that the family institution splits into two camps. When the situation reaches that point, it is almost impossible to sort out. The treatment must be administered before the rebellion gathers momentum. Once rebellion establishes its roots, the family home is deprived of the peace and affection necessary for the upbringing of children. The whole setup collapses and the young become the victims divided between the two parents or brought up in an atmosphere which makes the family home a fertile place for psychological, mental and physical disorders to multiply and a suitable place for perversion to establish itself.

It is, then, a very serious matter. Gradual treatment must be administered when the early signs of rebellion become apparent. In order to preserve the family and

protect it from destruction, the one who is placed in charge is allowed to take some disciplinary steps that are often effective. He does not take them as retaliatory measures or to humiliate or torture his partner, but to achieve reconciliation and preserve the family in the very early stages of dispute.

When Family Life Is Endangered

> *As for those women from whom you have reason to fear rebellion, admonish them [first]; then leave them alone in bed; then beat them. Then, if they pay you heed, do not seek any pretext to harm them. God is indeed Most High, Great.* (Verse 34)

Before we consider these measures and how they progress from one stage to another, we need to remember what we have already said about the honour God gives to both men and women, giving women their rights for which they are qualified by being human. We should also remember that a Muslim woman retains her independent civil status. The fact that the man is placed in charge of the family does not deprive the woman of her right to choose her partner and to administer her personal and financial affairs. This, as also the great importance Islam attaches to the family, helps us to understand clearly why these disciplinary measures have been allowed and the nature of their application.

They are indeed pre-emptive measures aimed at achieving an early reconciliation when rebellion is feared. There is no question of trying to aggravate the situation or increase hatred. There is no battle between the man and the woman. These measures are not aimed at knocking the woman on the head when she begins to rebel and confining her again to her prison cell. No such thoughts are ever condoned by Islam. They might have crept into the traditions of certain societies at certain stages. Such measures, however, are an indication that mankind, not merely one sex, have sunk to a very low depth. In Islam the situation is widely different in form, substance and aim.

"*As for those women from whom you have reason to fear rebellion, admonish them first.*" (Verse 34) Admonition, then, is the first stage. It is a responsibility of the one who is in charge of the family to admonish against untoward tendencies. Such admonition is required in a variety of situations: "*Believers, ward off from yourselves and your families that fire [of the hereafter] whose fuel is human beings and stones.*" (66: 6) In this particular instance, admonition has a definite aim, which is to treat the symptoms of rebellion before it develops and takes root.

In some cases, admonition may not bring about the desired results. This is possibly because of strongly held views, uncontrolled reactions, too much consciousness of one's beauty, wealth, family position or the like. Any of these

reasons may make a wife forget that she is a partner in an institution, not an adversary in a contest. At this stage the second measure is employed, which is in effect a gesture of dignity, stressing that everything in which a certain woman takes pride, such as beauty or wealth, to stress her superiority does not count for much with him: "*Then leave them alone in bed.*" (Verse 34)

It is in bed that a woman's temptation is most effective. A rebellious, self-conscious woman exercises her true power. When a man is able to overcome this temptation, he deprives the woman of her most effective weapon. In the majority of cases, a woman becomes more ready to give way when the man demonstrates a good measure of will-power in the most difficult of situations. There are, however, certain rules that apply as to how this measure is taken. It is confined to the room where the couple is alone. It should not be taken in front of the children, this so that they are not adversely affected by it. Nor can it be exercised in front of strangers, because it becomes very humiliating for the woman who may, consequently, be hardened in her rebellion. This is a measure which aims at dealing with rebellion, and does not aim to humiliate the wife or to bring about a bad influence on the children.

Nevertheless, this measure may not be effective in certain cases. Are we, then, to leave the family institution to collapse? There is another measure, admittedly more severe, but it may protect the family: "*Then beat them.*" (Verse 34)

When we remember the aim behind all these measures, we realise that this beating is not a form of torture motivated by seeking revenge or humiliating an opponent. Nor is it aimed at forcing the wife to accept life under all unsatisfactory conditions. It is rather a disciplinary measure akin to the punishment a father or a teacher may impose on wayward children. Needless to say, there is no question of any of these measures being resorted to in the case of a healthy relationship between a man and his wife. They are preventive measures taken in an unhealthy situation in order to protect the family against collapse.

When neither admonition nor banishment from one's bed is effective, the situation may need a different type of remedy. Practical and psychological indications suggest that in certain situations this measure may be the appropriate one to remedy a certain perversion and to bring about satisfaction. Even when such a pathological perversion exists, a woman may not sufficiently feel the man's strength for her to accept his authority within the family, at least not unless he overcomes her physically. This is by no means applicable to all women. What we are saying is that such women do exist and that Islam considers this measure a last resort used necessarily to safeguard the family. We have to remember here that these measures are stipulated by the Creator, who knows His creation. No counter argument is valid against what the One who knows all and is aware of all things says. Indeed to stand against what God legislates may lead to a rejection of the faith altogether. What we

have to understand is that God has laid down these measures within a context that describes, in absolute clarity, their nature and aim and the intention behind them. Hence, mistaken concepts developing in periods of ignorance cannot be ascribed to Islam. In such periods, a man may become a jailer and a woman a slave under the pretext of following religious teachings. It may also happen that the man and the woman may exchange roles or that both of them are transformed into a third sex which is midway between man and woman claiming that this is the result of a new understanding of religious teachings. All such situations are not difficult to distinguish from the true sense and proper guidance of Islam.

These disciplinary measures have been approved of in order to deal with early signs of rebellion and before attitudes are hardened. At the same time, they are accompanied by stern warnings against misuse.

The practical example given by the Prophet in his treatment of his own family and his verbal teachings and directives serve as a restraint against going to excess in either direction. The Prophet answers Mu`āwiyah ibn Ĥaydah, who asked him what rights a wife may claim against her husband, by saying: "To provide her with food when you eat, and with clothes when you dress. You are not allowed to slap her on her face, insult her or banish her from your bed anywhere except at home." (Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.)

The Prophet is reported to have given this general directive: "Do not beat up the women servants of God." `Umar later went to the Prophet and said that many women had become rebellious. The Prophet then allowed that they be beaten. Many women then came to the Prophet with complaints against their husbands. The Prophet addressed his Companions saying: "Many women have called at Muĥammad's home complaining against their husbands. Certainly these men are not the best among you." (Related by Abū Dāwūd, al- Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.)

The Prophet portrays this horrid picture of a man who beats up his wife: "Do not beat your wife like you beat your camel, for you will he flogging her early in the day and taking her to bed at night." He also says: "The best among you are those who are best to their family, and I am the best of you to my family." (Related by al-Tirmidhī and al- Ṭabarānī.)

Taken in their proper context, these reports and directives give us a good idea of the conflict that existed in the early days of Islam between old habits inherited from the days of ignorance and Islamic directives. The same sort of conflict also took place in all other spheres before the new Islamic order managed finally to impress its values on human conscience.

God has, however, defined a limit when such measures must stop. Once the objective is reached with any one of these measures, then recourse to them is over:

"Then, if they pay you heed, do not seek any pretext to harm them. God is indeed Most High, Great." (Verse 34)

The aim is, thus, stated clearly: it is obedience based on positive response, not forced obedience. This latter type of obedience is not suited to the establishment of a healthy family. Moreover, the Qur'ānic verse states clearly that to continue to resort to any of these measures after the goal of obedience is achieved takes the husband beyond his allowed limits: *"Do not seek any pretext to harm them."* (Verse 34) This prohibition is followed by a reminder of the greatness of God so that people submit to His directives and repress any feeling of might or arrogance which they may entertain. This fits with the Qur'ānic method of combining temptation with warning: *"God is indeed Most High, Great."*

Last Resort to Save Troubled Marriages

All the measures so discussed apply in a situation where rebellion has not yet taken place. These measures are meant to deal with its early signs. When rebellion is brought out into the open, these measures are useless. At that stage there is a war between two hostile parties, each of them going out to smash the other. Similarly, these measures should not be used if it is felt that they will be ineffective or even counterproductive. In all such situations, Islam recommends a different process of saving this great institution, the family, from collapse: *"If you have reason to fear that a breach may occur between a (married) couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people. If they both want to set things aright, God will bring about their reconciliation. God is indeed All-Knowing, Aware of all things."* (Verse 35)

The Islamic method, then, does not favour an early split when signs of rebellion and hostility begin to appear. Nor does it approve that this institution be left to collapse over the heads of its other members who may be caught in a situation over which they have no control. This institution is very dear to Islam because it supplies the society with its new members whom it needs for its continued development and progress. Islam recommends that this last measure be resorted to when a breach is feared, not after it takes place. An arbiter from each of the two families of the husband and the wife meet in a friendly atmosphere, away from the influences which have caused the relationship between the husband and the wife to be strained and free from all the complications which overshadow the constructive elements in the life of the family. These arbiters must be keen to protect the reputation of both families. They care for the welfare of the children. Neither of them may entertain thoughts of forcing a submission by the other party. They must try to achieve what is best for the husband, the wife and their children.

They must also keep the family secrets because they belong to the two

immediately concerned families. Neither of them has an interest in publicising these secrets. Indeed, it is in their interest to keep them secret, unknown to other people.

The arbiters meet in order to try to achieve reconciliation. If the man and his wife truly desire such a reconciliation, but are only prevented from doing so by strong feelings of anger, then a serious effort by the arbiters will he successful, with God's help: *"If they both want to set things aright, God will bring about their reconciliation."* (Verse 35) Their own desire to bring about reconciliation is endorsed by God, who responds favourably to their serious wish. This is the relationship between people's efforts and God's will. It is indeed by God's will that events take place in people's lives. People, however, are free to try and exert efforts. The end result is decided by God on the basis of His knowledge of people's inner secrets and His awareness of what is best for them: *"God is indeed All-Knowing, Aware of all things."* (Verse 35)

Having studied this passage, we have now a good idea of the seriousness with which Islam views the relationship between man and woman and the institution of the family and the social ties that are established through the family. We can see how Islam has taken care to organise this highly important aspect of human life in order to elevate mankind to the high standard achievable only by the implementation of Divine guidance. That is indeed the only true and right guidance.

4
Unfailing Kindness

۞ وَٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَلَا تُشۡرِكُواْ بِهِۦ شَيۡـٔٗاۖ وَبِٱلۡوَٰلِدَيۡنِ إِحۡسَٰنٗا وَبِذِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱلۡجَارِ ذِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡجَارِ ٱلۡجُنُبِ وَٱلصَّاحِبِ بِٱلۡجَنۢبِ وَٱبۡنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَمَا مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُكُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَن كَانَ مُخۡتَالٗا فَخُورًا ٣٦

Worship God alone and do not associate with Him any partners. Be kind to your parents and near of kin, to orphans, the needy, the neighbour who is related to you and the neighbour who is a stranger, the friend by your side, the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; (36)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَبۡخَلُونَ وَيَأۡمُرُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ بِٱلۡبُخۡلِ وَيَكۡتُمُونَ مَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦۗ وَأَعۡتَدۡنَا لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابٗا مُّهِينٗا ٣٧

[nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly, and conceal whatever God has bestowed on them of His bounty. We have prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers. (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمۡوَٰلَهُمۡ رِئَآءَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَلَا بِٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۗ وَمَن يَكُنِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ لَهُۥ قَرِينٗا فَسَآءَ قَرِينٗا ٣٨

And [God does not love] those who spend their wealth for the sake of ostentation, and do not believe in God and the Last Day. He who chooses Satan for a companion, an evil companion has he. (38)

وَمَاذَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ لَوۡ ءَامَنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَأَنفَقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِمۡ عَلِيمًا ٣٩

What would they have to fear if they would only believe in God and the Last Day, and spend (for His sake) out of that with which He has provided them. Indeed God has full knowledge of them. (39)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَظۡلِمُ مِثۡقَالَ ذَرَّةٖۖ وَإِن تَكُ حَسَنَةٗ يُضَٰعِفۡهَا وَيُؤۡتِ مِن لَّدُنۡهُ أَجۡرًا عَظِيمٗا ٤٠

Indeed God does not wrong anyone by as much as an atom's weight. And if there be a good deed, He will multiply it, and will bestow a great reward out of His grace. (40)

فَكَيۡفَ إِذَا جِئۡنَا مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةِۭ بِشَهِيدٖ وَجِئۡنَا بِكَ عَلَىٰ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ شَهِيدٗا ٤١

How will it be [on Judgement Day] when We shall bring a witness from every community, and call you as a witness against these people? (41)

يَوۡمَئِذٖ يَوَدُّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَعَصَوُاْ ٱلرَّسُولَ لَوۡ تُسَوَّىٰ بِهِمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَلَا يَكۡتُمُونَ ٱللَّهَ حَدِيثٗا ٤٢

Those who disbelieved and disobeyed God's Messenger will on that Day wish that the earth may swallow them. They shall be able to conceal nothing from God. (42)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَقۡرَبُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَنتُمۡ سُكَٰرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَعۡلَمُواْ مَا تَقُولُونَ وَلَا جُنُبًا إِلَّا عَابِرِي سَبِيلٍ حَتَّىٰ تَغۡتَسِلُواْۚ وَإِن كُنتُم مَّرۡضَىٰٓ أَوۡ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ أَوۡ جَآءَ أَحَدٞ مِّنكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡغَآئِطِ أَوۡ لَٰمَسۡتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَلَمۡ تَجِدُواْ مَآءٗ فَتَيَمَّمُواْ صَعِيدٗا طَيِّبٗا فَٱمۡسَحُواْ بِوُجُوهِكُمۡ وَأَيۡدِيكُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُوًّا غَفُورًا ٤٣

Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying; nor when you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, except if you are on your way, until you have bathed. But if you are ill, or travelling, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have cohabited with a woman and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God is indeed Most Lenient, Much-Forgiving. (43)

Overview

A number of factors link the opening of this passage and the central theme of the *sūrah* on the one hand, and the main topics discussed in the last passage on the other. This passage starts with fresh effort to regulate the life of the Muslim community, purging it of the remaining traces of the state of ignorance that prevailed in pre-Islamic days and giving more prominence to the main features of the new Islamic life. It adds a clear warning against the scheming of the people of former religions,

particularly the Jews in Madinah. Evil is ingrained in their characters. It is the mark of all their dealings with the new Muslim community in Madinah. They exert strenuous efforts to disrupt its growth and progress, particularly in morality, in mutual co-operation and in solidarity which are the basic source of its strength.

The new passage reiterates the basic rule that is the central foundation of the new Muslim community. That is the belief in the absolute oneness of God. Indeed, the very life of the Muslim community and its code of living emanate from this basic belief.

Prior to this passage, the *sūrah* addressed several topics, including the family system and the social organisation of the Muslim community. The last passage dealt with the family, its structure, the methods for its protection and the ties which consolidate its structure. This new passage deals with social ties inside the Muslim community that go beyond the family, but which remain related to it. The link between these issues is provided by the reference to parents and to relationships that go beyond parenthood. Indeed, the perception of these ties takes place as a result of the caring and loving relationships within the family. Such care and love soon begin to transcend strict family relatives, so as to care for others. Without the love and kindness that prevail within the family, people would not be able to show much care for others with whom they have no family ties.

As the new passage includes directives to take good care of the immediate family and the large, human family, and to establish values and standards in this regard for the kind and generous on the one hand and the miserly on the other, it begins with the basic concept which gives rise to all values and standards. This is the concept of the oneness of God that is the basis of the Islamic way of life in its totality. The Islamic system relates every action, effort and feeling to the basic principle of submission to God and of worshipping Him. This is the ultimate objective of every human activity in the life of every Muslim.

As the passage speaks of submission and worship being due to God alone, the second part of the passage outlines some of the rulings concerning purity and prayer. It also takes the first step towards the prohibition of intoxicating drinks: when this *sūrah* was revealed, alcohol had not as yet been prohibited. This first step should be seen as a part of the ever-active method of educating the new Muslim society. Furthermore, this step is closely related to worship, prayer and belief in God's oneness. This is sufficient to show how all parts of the *sūrah* are inter-related, serving its central theme.

Kindness All Around

> *Worship God alone and do not associate with Him any partners. Be kind to your parents and near of kin, to orphans, the needy, the neighbour who is related to you and the neighbour who is a stranger, the friend by your side, the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful.* (Verse 36)

The passage starts with a clear commandment to worship God alone and a clear prohibition against associating partners with Him. We note that this verse begins with a conjunction which links it with the preceding orders that relate to the family and its affairs. This serves to stress the total unity that pervades all aspects of Islamic faith. Islam is not merely a number of beliefs that our minds accept, nor is it a host of rituals and acts of worship, nor a worldly system divorced from faith and worship. It is a way of life that combines all these aspects and unites them together on the basis of believing in the Oneness of God and deriving all systems and legislation from Him alone. There can be no split between accepting God's unity and implementing His legislation.

This is followed by an order to extend kind treatment to certain groups of one's immediate family and of the human family at large. Miserliness, conceit, boastfulness and suppression of God's favours, of whichever type, are denounced. This is coupled with a warning against following Satan, together with raising the prospect of punishment in the hereafter and all that attends on it of public humiliation. Again, all this is linked to the belief in God's oneness and to acknowledging that He is the only source of legislation.

In the Islamic system, all directives, laws, and legislation are derived from faith and are based on the basic concept of God's oneness. Hence, they are interlinked, mutually complementary and perfectly coherent. As a result, it is very difficult to isolate one part of Islamic legislation from the rest. The study of any one part without reference to its essential origin is unscholarly. The implementation of some parts of these laws to the exclusion of others falls short of implementing Islam and does not yield the full benefits to humanity which are sure to result from the actualisation of the Islamic system.

Under Islam, all concepts of human and universal relationships upon which all social, economic, political and moral systems are founded, and which affect all aspects of human relations are derived from believing in God. It is these concepts which give shape to human conscience and which characterise the basic set-up of human society. They make ordinary human dealings acts of worship because they are conducted in accordance with the Divine system, and they make worship the basis of all dealings because it refines conscience and improves behaviour. Thus, the whole of human life becomes a single solid unit, guided by the Divine system and seeks its ultimate fulfilment, both in this world and in the world to come, with God,

the only source of legislation.

"Worship God alone and do not associate with Him any partners." (Verse 36) The first commandment is to worship God, which is followed by a prohibition of worshipping anyone other than Him. This is a total and absolute prohibition of all sorts of worship which man has practised in all ages and communities. False gods, be they animate or inanimate objects, angels or devils, have been ascribed as partners to God in one way or another. No claim of this sort is ever allowed in Islam. It is absolutely forbidden for all time.

This is followed by a commandment to extend kindness to parents in particular and relatives in general. Most Divine orders in this particular area tend to emphasise the need to be kind to one's parents, although they do not overlook the other area of requiring parents to be kind to children. God is more merciful and compassionate to children than their own parents. But it is children who need to be directed more strongly to look after the older generation who stand in need of kindness. In most cases, the younger generation direct their feelings, sympathies and concerns to the generation which will follow them, not the preceding one, simply because in life people tend to look forward without turning back. Hence, these directives from the All-Merciful, the Compassionate, who does not neglect a parent or a child. It is He who has taught His servants how to be kind and compassionate to one another.

We also note in this verse, as in many others, that Divine directives begin by emphasising the need to be kind to one's relatives before widening their concern to include all those who need to be looked after in society or in humanity at large. This fits in perfectly with human nature. Compassion towards others begins at home, in one's own immediate family. A person who has not himself been a recipient of compassion in his childhood, within his family, hardly ever feels compassionate towards others. Moreover, man tends to look more favourably towards his relations, extending his kindness to them. There is no harm in this, as long as such compassion is continually enhanced and extended to a wider area so as to benefit more people.

Moreover, this directive to be kind to parents, relatives and other people fits in most coherently with the Islamic view of social organisation. It ensures that social security begins within the family before it is carried further to include the whole community. It does not entrust it to government machinery except when the smaller, more directly involved machinery of the family becomes incapable of meeting the challenge. Normally, smaller local units are more able to ensure that mutual social security is given at the right time, and with an ease and compassion that make the whole social set-up worthy of man.

In this particular verse, the directive begins by emphasising the need to be kind to parents, before widening the area to include kinsfolk, and then at a later stage,

extending this to orphans and the needy. These are given precedence over one's neighbours because their need may be more pressing and they must be looked after more immediately. Kindness is then urged towards a neighbour who may be a relation, and so to any other neighbour. Both take precedence over friends, because a neighbour always remains next to us. We meet our friends intermittently. Commentators on the Qur'ān have defined this type of friend as the one with whom we meet socially and whom we may choose as a travelling companion. The next type of person who deserves our kindness is a stranded wayfarer. This is followed by slaves who suffer the hardships of bondage, but with whom we have human ties common to all mankind.

This commandment to extend our kindness to all these groups is followed by a comment which denounces conceit and arrogance, miserliness, suppression of God's favours, boastfulness and showing off. All these are attributed to one basic cause, namely, lack of faith in God and the Day of Judgement.

Unfavourable Contrast

The verse which commanded all types of kindness ends with a comment denouncing such shameful qualities as arrogance, boastfulness, miserliness, concealment of God's bounty and deliberately giving foul impressions: *"God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly, and conceal whatever God has bestowed on them of His bounty. We have prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers. And [God does not love] those who spend their wealth for the sake of ostentation, and do not believe in God and the Last Day. He who chooses Satan for a companion, an evil companion has he."* (Verses 36-38)

Here again we note an especially important characteristic of the Islamic way of life which relates to all aspects of behaviour, and from which all feelings and all social relationships to faith are derived. When a person worships God alone and derives his values and principles from Him only, he will definitely extend his kindness to people, seeking to please God and hoping to receive reward in the hereafter. His kindness is characterised by a humble and gentle attitude which demonstrates his genuine belief that he only spends what God has granted him. He does not create his wealth. A person who denies God and the Day of Judgement is often arrogant and boastful. He is also a niggardly creature who encourages others to be niggardly. He tries to conceal the favours that God has bestowed on him, which is the opposite attitude of one who demonstrates his gratitude to God by extending his kindness to others. He may, on the other hand, spend some of what he has been given by God in order to publicise his generosity and to seek praise from others. Essentially, however, he does not believe in any other reward than people's adoration.

Here, then, the two opposite types of morality generated by faith and unfaith are clearly demonstrated. Motivation to do good and behave in a goodly manner is essentially the belief in God and the Day of Judgement and the eagerness to earn God's pleasure which ensures reward in the hereafter. It is indeed a sublime motivation, one which is not based in social tradition and which does not expect to be rewarded by other people. When faith is absent and a person does not believe in the Day of Judgement, the Day when he will receive reward for his actions, worldly values predominate. These do not remain constant even during the span of a single generation, let alone for all time and all places. When these constitute the basic motivation, values change in the same way as people change their likes and dislikes. We then have a breeding ground for all the bad qualities thus far mentioned, whether boastfulness, arrogance, niggardliness or hypocrisy.

The Qur'ānic statement says that God "does not love" such people. What we have to understand is that love and hate are not responses applicable to God. What is meant here is the result that is associated with such feelings in people's lives[§]: *"We have prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers."* (Verse 37) Humiliation is the proper response to arrogance and boastfulness. The Qur'ānic verse is couched in such a way as to arouse contempt of such people and disgust at their attitude, especially via the statement that Satan is their intimate friend: *"He who chooses Satan for a companion, an evil companion has he."* (Verse 38)

Some reports suggest that these verses refer to a group of Jews who lived in Madinah. These qualities certainly apply to Jews as well as to hypocrites. Both types were present in the Muslim society at the time. The reference to their concealment of the favours God has bestowed on them may also mean their concealment of the truth that is recorded in their Scriptures about Islam and the Prophet Muĥammad. The verse, however, is expressed as a general statement within the context of charity and kind treatment. It is better, therefore, that we understand it in this context.

This is followed by the rhetorical question: *"What would they have to fear if they would only believe in God and the Last Day, and spend (for His sake) out of that with which He has provided them. Indeed God has full knowledge of them. Indeed God does not wrong anyone by as much as an atom's weight. And if there be a good deed, He will multiply it, and will bestow a great reward out of His Grace."* (Verses 39-40)

Indeed, what do they have to fear from believing in God and the Last Day and spending of the provisions given to them by God. Since God knows their motives and what they have in their hearts and since He does not deny anyone his due reward for even the slightest of actions, then they cannot fear that their good actions

[§] For further discussion on the *Maĥabbah'* attribute, please refer to section 1.7 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

will go unnoticed or that their reward will not be forthcoming. Indeed, they will have an increase and a multiplication for their good deeds.

Even in the narrow sense of material loss and gain, faith gives better returns in all eventualities. Why should they, then, fear to believe in God and the Last Day and to spend of God's provisions? After all, they do not spend of something that they themselves have created. God provides it all for them. He, nevertheless, multiplies to them their reward and gives them an unlimited increase of His provisions. It is the sort of investment that is only rejected by an ignorant loser.

An Unhappy Final Wish

These orders, prohibitions and encouragements are concluded with a scene of the Day of Judgement in which we see feelings and attitudes fully animated before our eyes. All are portrayed in the Qur'ān's uniquely vivid style: "*How will it be [on Judgement Day] when We shall bring a witness from every community, and call you as a witness against these people? Those who disbelieved and disobeyed God's Messenger will on that Day wish that the earth may swallow them. They shall be able to conceal nothing from God.*" (Verses 41-42)

This scene is depicted immediately after the preparations that began by the statement that God does not deny anyone an atom's weight of what is due to him or her. His scales maintain absolute justice. Furthermore, He multiplies good actions and gives them a great reward. This equates with mercy and compassion to those who deserve them. These are the ones who combine faith with action. As for the others, who have neither faith nor good actions, their state will be different. The question asked here is what will their state be when God brings a witness from every nation, i.e. the Prophet sent specifically to it, and, hence, when the Prophet Muĥammad will be a witness against the Arabs?

The scene is very vivid indeed, portrayed against a panoramic background in which every nation is present with its witness. We almost see those unbelievers: boastful, hypocritical, arrogant and niggardly people who conceal God's favours. We see them there when God's Messenger is asked to testify against them. We see them in the presence of the Creator whom they denied, the Provider whose favours they have concealed, on the Last Day in which they did not believe, and facing the Messenger whom they disobeyed. The Qur'ān asks: How then? It is certainly utter humiliation. Their shame is too great to bear. They regret what they have done and they acknowledge it since denial is of no value.

The Qur'ān does not describe all this as an apparent attitude. It portrays a mental attitude which gives us all these impressions so that we see the effect of humiliation, shame and regret: "*Those who disbelieved and disobeyed God's Messenger will on that Day*

wish that the earth may swallow them. They shall be able to conceal nothing from God." (Verse 42) It is through this fine expression and imagery that we sense all these ideas and recognise the unbelievers' feelings as they experience them. This approach is what makes the Qur'ānic style absolutely unique.

One Step Towards Forbidding Drinking

As we have seen, this passage started with the commands to worship God alone, associating no partners with Him. Prayer is the closest of all rituals to the central concept of worship. The following verse outlines some of the rulings connected with prayer and the purification which is required for its validity: *"Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying; nor when you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, except if are on your way, until you have bathed. But if you are ill, or travelling, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have cohabited with a woman and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God is indeed Most Lenient, Much-Forgiving."* (Verse 43)

This verse represents one aspect of the Qur'ānic method for cultivating the Muslim community, enhancing its moral sense and refining its values. We should remember here that Islam picked up the Muslim community from the depths of ignorance, when drinking was a well-established social institution, as it is in almost all ignorant societies, ancient and modern. Drinking was a common habit in Roman, Byzantine and Persian societies, when they were at the zenith of their civilisation. It is also characteristic of contemporary European and American societies which are at the same stage. Similarly, it is very common in backward African societies.

In Sweden, which is considered one of the most civilised of contemporary societies, it used to be the case during the first half of the 19th century that every family brewed its own wine and other alcohol. On average, an individual consumed 20 litres.[1] The Swedish Government recognised the seriousness of this state of affairs, and that it led to major alcohol addiction. It, therefore, monopolised the production of intoxicants, thereby limiting individual consumption, and also restricted drinking in public places. More recently these restrictions have been relaxed.[2] Drinking was then allowed in restaurants, provided that wine was taken with a meal. Later, drinking was allowed in a limited number of public places until midnight. Thereafter, people could only drink beer and similar beverages with a lower alcohol content. Nevertheless, the number of alcoholics among teenagers is growing steadily.

[1] The author does not mention a time context for this consumption. Presumably it is "per year" — Translator's note.

[2] This was written more than 40 years ago.

In America, the Government once tried to abolish drinking altogether, and promulgated a law to this effect in 1919, which was ridiculed as the "dry" law. It remained in force for 14 years until the American government found itself compelled to abolish it in 1933. All methods of enhancing public awareness of the harmful effects of drinking were utilised, including publications, the radio, cinema and public lectures. It is estimated that altogether the American administrations spent over 60 million dollars in campaigning against drink; a very large sum indeed by the standards of that period. Millions of pages were written against drinking in the form of books, pamphlets and the like. Moreover, at least 250 million dollars were spent on enforcing the law during those 14 years. Three hundred people were executed and more than half a million were imprisoned and fines exceeding 16 million dollars were imposed. The Government also confiscated properties worth more than 400 million dollars. In spite of all this, the pressure was too great for the American administrations and they were finally forced to cancel their prohibition laws.[1]

Islam, on the other hand, was able to successfully eradicate this well- entrenched habit, deploying only a few verses of the Qur'ān to do so. This is a striking example of the difference between Divine and human methods in dealing with man and in treating social ills. Pre-Islamic poetry is full of descriptions by Arab poets which show that drinking was a firmly rooted social habit in Arabia. Moreover, certain events took place in the early days of Islam, involving personalities from among the best renowned of the Prophet's Companions, such as `Umar, `Alī, Ĥamzah and `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf. These again indicate how deeply entrenched the drinking of intoxicants was in Arabian society. It is sufficient for our purposes here to give only a few examples.

`Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab begins his report of how he became a Muslim by saying: "I used to drink heavily in my pre-Islamic days. I once decided to go to a particular public house to drink... "`Umar continued to drink when he became a Muslim until the revelation of the Qur'ānic verse stating: "*They ask you about drinking and gambling. Say: `In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people, but their evil far exceeds their benefit.'*" (2: 219) When `Umar heard this Qur'ānic verse he said: "My Lord, give us a clear, categorical statement on wines."

He continued to drink and uttered the same prayer when the Qur'ānic verse, which is the subject of this commentary was revealed. When the express prohibition stated in *Sūrah* 5, entitled The Repast, or *Al-Mā'idah* was given, `Umar declared his submission and stopped drinking.

There are two reports involving `Alī, `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf [both from the Muhājirīn] and Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh [from the Anşār] which give the reasons behind the

[1] A. Mawdudi, *Tangīhāt,* Lahore, 1998, pp. 37-8 (Urdu edition)

revelation of the present Qur'ānic verse. The first report quotes Sa`d as saying: "Four verses were revealed on my account. A man from the Anşār invited a number of the Muhājirīn and a number of the Anşār to a meal. We all ate and drank heavily. Some of us began boasting about our tribes. One man took the chin bone of a camel and pierced it into Sa`d's nose. Since then, Sa`d has had a pierced nose. This was prior to the prohibition of intoxicants. Shortly afterwards, the verse saying, *`Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk"'* (Verse 43), was revealed.

The other report is attributed to `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib who is quoted as saying: "`Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf invited us to a meal and gave us a great deal to drink. We were under the influence of drink when it was time for prayer. One person was asked to lead us in prayer and he recited the *sūrah* entitled The Unbelievers, or *al-Kāfirūn,* changing its text so as to mean: `Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, but we do worship what you worship.' (This is the opposite of its meaning.) God then revealed this verse: *"Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying.'"* (Verse 43)

We do not need any more examples or stories to tell us how common the habit of drinking was in ignorant Arabian society. Both drinking and gambling were well-established social habits. How did the Islamic method deal with these phenomena? How did it combat this evil which makes it impossible to establish a good healthy society? We have to remember that social traditions and economic interests are involved in the promotion of such phenomena.

As we have already said, the Divine method dealt with these evils by simply using a few verses of the Qur'ān. Its approach was easy and gradual. It managed to win the battle without any need to fight, shed blood or sacrifice. The only thing that was shed was the wine itself. All barrels and other containers were spilt. Indeed, some of the Prophet's Companions were in the process of drinking when they heard of the prohibition and they spat out what was in their mouths.

Gradual Eradication of Evil Social Habits

When Islam did not have a state or the authority to rule in Makkah, there was only the authority of the Qur'ān. This was simply a moral authority. Therefore, only an indication of the forthcoming attitude towards drinking was given, which we may understand when we contemplate the verse which occurs in *Sūrah* 16, entitled The Bee, or *Al-Nahl: "From the fruits of date palm and vines you derive intoxicants as well as wholesome sustenance."* (16: 67) Thus, intoxicants were placed as opposites to the wholesome sustenance made of the fruits of palm and vineyard trees. This suggests that intoxicants were something different from the sustenance described as "wholesome". All in all, this was merely a fine touch influencing an Islamic

conscience that was still in its infancy. Drinking, however, was far more than an individual's habit. It was a social tradition with far-reaching economic effects. This fine touch was not calculated to end this tradition.

In Madinah, however, Islam established a state which wielded proper authority. Nevertheless, intoxicants were not forbidden by the authority of the state and the force of law. The Islamic approach relied on the Qur'ān, working its gentle, steady and firm way, to make use of the Divine insight into man and his social realities.

The Islamic approach is gentle, gradual. It benefits from God's absolute knowledge of man, what is suitable for him and his social environment. The first statement in this approach was a verse revealed in *Sūrah* 2, entitled The Cow, or *Al-Baqarah.* This was given by way of an answer to questions which indicate that people with a fine Islamic conscience had begun to feel uneasy about drinking and gambling: *"They ask you about drinking and gambling. Say: 'In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people, but their evil far exceeds their benefit.'"* (2: 219) This was the first loud knock on the door that was bound to have its effect on an Islamic conscience. The criterion which makes something lawful, discouraged or forbidden is whether its harm or evil is greater than its benefit. In this verse we have a clear statement that the case is such with regard to intoxicants and gambling. Their evil is far greater than their benefit. The question, however, went deeper than that. We find `Umar, who was, perhaps, endowed with the finest Islamic sense, uttering this prayer: "My Lord, give us a clear, categorical statement on wines." This shows how well entrenched the habit of drinking was in Arabian society.

Incidents like the ones quoted above took place. Hence, the verse we are now discussing was revealed to tell the believers: *"Do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying."* (Verse 43) Here we find the wise, gentle approach in action, the verse representing the middle stage between showing drink as repugnant because its harm is greater than its benefit and a state of total prohibition where drink is seen as an impurity of Satan's work. The purpose of this middle stage being to break the habit of drinking by prohibiting it near prayer times, which span the whole day. Some prayers are too close to each other to allow anyone who is given to alcohol time to take one or two drinks and regain enough sobriety to be fully aware of what he is saying. Besides, there were special times for drinking, either early in the day or in the evening. Plus there were prayers that must be offered both in between these times and following them. Hence, a person with an Islamic sense was sure to weigh up the enjoyment he derives from drinking against neglecting his duty of prayer. At this stage, a good Muslim would not abandon his prayers for anything. Nevertheless, `Umar repeated his prayer: "My Lord, give us a clear, categorical statement on wines."

Time passed and events took place, and the moment arrived when the gradual

approach would give its final verdict. Two verses in the next *sūrah,* The Repast, or *Al-Mā'idah,* were revealed to state: *"Believers: intoxicants, gambling, idolatrous practices and the divining of the future are but a loathsome evil of Satan's doing. Keep away from them so that you may prosper. By means of intoxicants and gambling Satan seeks only to sow the seeds of enmity and hatred among you, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist?"* (5: 90-1) All Muslims stopped drinking. Once the commandment was given, all wine containers were emptied and broken throughout Madinah. Indeed, those who were in the process of drinking did not swallow what was in their mouths when they were informed of the prohibition. It was, thus, a great triumph for the Qur'ān and its approach.

How did it all happen? How was this miracle, unparalleled in human history, achieved? It was all made possible because the Islamic approach works on man in a unique way. Essentially, it employs God's authority and a Muslim's keenness to please Him. To a Muslim, God oversees him at all times. Hence, he cannot lose sight of his top priority of trying to please God. Moreover, Islam gives its followers greater concerns to spend their time on, and these replace that time which was wasted on drinking and any pleasure derived from it. Any sense of loss, which weighs heavily on people in un-Islamic societies, is replaced with a pleasant feeling of fulfilment in the light of Islam, its freedom, and its sense of openness which unites this life with the life to come.

More importantly, Islam gives man the sense of fulfilment generated by faith. To a Muslim, this life becomes pleasant, happy, forward looking, enlightened with a sense of intimacy with God. Intoxicants, which work on the imagination and generate false feelings of happiness and also cause a real headache, no longer present any temptation for a Muslim. Like gambling and other such fun, drinking is a craze, which is not really different from any other craze, such as sporting events, speed races, cinema, fashion and bull fighting. These are simply a manifestation of a spiritual emptiness reflected in the absence of faith and a lack of high concern consuming one's energy. They are, in themselves, evidence of the bankruptcy of modern civilisation that finds itself unable to fulfil natural needs and to tap the natural resources of man in a clean, healthy way. It is such emptiness and bankruptcy that leads people to fill the vacuum they feel in their lives with wine and gambling. What is more, these social diseases are not only the cause of perversion but also of mental and nervous disorders.[1]

That miracle, which remains unique in the history of man, was not the result of mere words. It was the result of a complete approach defined by those words and formulated by the Lord of mankind, not by ordinary human beings. This is what distinguishes this approach from all man-made approaches, which, generally

[1] The original text is somewhat abridged here — Translator's note.

speaking, achieve very little.

The question is not how a certain idea or rule is stated. Philosophers, intellectuals, poets and rulers write extensively and formulate rules and maxims. Any philosopher or man of letters may write fine words which may appear to constitute a complete approach or a doctrine. However, such a doctrine has but little effect on people's minds and consciences because it has no authority behind it. It is the source of the statement that gives it authority. How can the words of a human being acquire an authority similar to that which is intrinsic in the system given to us by God? When the answer is clear in people's minds, they will stop formulating for themselves systems and rules which are different from those given to us by God, the Lord of mankind. Only He knows what is suitable for man and only His wisdom and ability are limitless. Yet people's conceit still prevents them from recognising these facts.

> *But if you are ill, or travelling, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have cohabited with a woman and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God is indeed Most Lenient, Much- Forgiving.* (Verse 43)

Islamic Worship Made Easy

Let us now look at this verse in detail: *"Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying; nor when you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, except if you are on your way, until you have bathed"* (Verse 43) This stage of prohibiting intoxicants forbids the believers from even trying to pray when they are drunk, until they know fully what they are saying. Furthermore, this verse forbids believers from praying when they are in a state of ceremonial impurity, *or janābah,* before they have removed it by washing themselves, except in situations when they are "on their way".

Different interpretations have been given to the expression translated here as, "on your way". Similarly, different views are expressed with regard to the meaning of "attempting to pray" which may be rendered in a strictly literal translation as "do not come near to prayer", which this verse forbids. Some scholars say that a person who is in a state of ceremonial impurity, i.e. after sexual intercourse or seminal discharge, must not enter a mosque or stay in it until he has taken a bath. An exception is made in the case of he who wants only to pass through the mosque without staying. A number of the Prophet's Companions had their houses surrounding the Prophet's mosque, with their doors opening onto it. They had to go through the mosque when they wanted to go out or when they came back home. A concession, then, is given to those people to pass through the mosque when they are in a state of ceremonial impurity, provided that they do not stay in the mosque or

pray until they have had a bath.

Other scholars suggest that what is meant by the prohibition is the prayer itself. Muslims are not allowed to pray when they are in a state of ceremonial impurity without washing themselves first, unless they are travelling. In this case, a traveller is allowed to go to the mosque and pray, without having had a bath first, provided that he has had dry ablution, i.e. *tayammum,* which, in this case, replaces both lesser ablution, i.e. *wudū'* and full ablution, i.e. *ghusl.*

The first view seems to be the weightier one, because travelling is mentioned later on in the same verse. To say that the expression "on your way" means "travelling" would make the same rule be unnecessarily repeated twice in the same verse: "*But if you are ill, or travelling, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have cohabited with a woman and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God is indeed Most Lenient, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 43) This part of the Qur'ānic verse mentions a traveller who finds himself in a state of ceremonial impurity and who needs to take a bath, or who answers the call of nature and thus needs to perform simple ablution in order to pray. The traveller is given, in this case, the same concession as a person who is ill and who needs to perform either simple or full ablution. The same applies to one who has come from the toilet, which is an expression indicating what people do there.

Different views have also been expressed concerning the meaning of *lāmastum-un-nisā',* which we have translated as meaning "cohabitation with a woman", while some scholars interpret is as "touching a woman". Some scholars believe that it refers to sexual intercourse, which makes it necessary for both partners to have a full bath. Another view explains touching women in any simple body contact. According to some schools of thought, such contact requires simple ablution, i.e. *wuđū'.* Other schools of thought do not make such a requirement. The case is discussed in great detail in books of *Fiqh. We* sum up these different views as follows: (1) touching a woman in any situation or any place requires ablution; (2) a touch requires ablution if the man who touches her is normally excited by such a touch and if she is one to excite a man when touched; (3) a touch requires ablution only if that particular touch stirs some feeling within the man, as he himself determines in every case; (4) a touch does not require ablution in every situation, not, for example, when it involves embracing or kissing one's wife.

Each of these views is supported by evidence from actions or statements attributed to the Prophet. Such differences are common in matters of detail. We are more inclined to the view that states "if you have touched women" signifies an action requiring full ablution, i.e. a bath, which is cohabitation. In opting for this view, we bypass all differences of opinion with regard to simple ablution or *wuđū*

In all the cases mentioned in this verse, whether they require full ablution or a simple one before one prays, *tayammum* or dry ablution is considered adequate compensation when water is not available, or when it is available but harmful to use. This is what is meant by the statement *"then have recourse to pure dust"*. (Verse 43) We are thus instructed to find a place where we can have pure dust, whether it is soil, stone, a wall, or indeed dust which settles on the body of a horse or a donkey or on a bed or a piece of furniture. If we strike such a surface with our hands and dust appears, then it is a suitable place at which to have dry ablution. The way to do this is to strike that dusty surface once with both hands, and to shake the dust off before passing one's hands over one's face and over one's hands up to the elbows. Some scholars require two strikes, then passing our hands over our faces after the first strike. We then follow the second strike by passing each of our palms over our opposite hand up to each elbow. There is no need to speak about such differences of opinion in detail here. What we know is that this religion of ours is made easy and the whole idea of dry ablution is symbolic of the ease with which God wants us to follow His instructions.

"God is indeed Most Lenient, Much-Forgiving." (Verse 43) This comment at the end of the verse stresses how God makes things easier for us. He knows that we are weak and assures us that He sympathises with our weaknesses, that He treats us with leniency and forgives us our failings.

Purpose of Islamic Legislation

Before we conclude our discussion of the present passage we need to reflect a little on certain points, and to try to understand the wisdom behind *tayammum,* or dry ablution.

Sometimes people who try to explain what lies behind certain Islamic legislation or aspects of Islamic worship, put their points of view very forcefully, implying that they have understood everything there is to understand. This is not the proper way to explain Qur'ānic statements and Islamic legislation, except where the reasons for such legislation are expressly stated in the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah.* It is always preferable to state our point of view adding that it is all that we have been able to understand of the wisdom behind a certain piece of legislation. The possibility cannot be excluded that there may be other reasons behind it which we have not been able to determine. In this way, we assign our human mind to its proper position, *vis-a-vis* Qur'ānic statements and Divine legislation.

What motivates me to say this is that some of us, who may have the best of intentions, try to present such statements and legislation to people within the context of a definite purpose which they may determine according to human knowledge or

scientific analysis. This is fine provided that it is put in the right perspective to which I have just alluded in the preceding paragraph. It has often been said that the purpose of having ablution before prayer is to maintain cleanliness. It may be true that cleanliness is intended through ablution, but to emphasise that it is the only reason why ablution is required before prayer is to follow an approach which is neither correct nor safe. Indeed, there came a time when some people suggested that there was no longer any need for this "primitive" method of cleanliness when we live in a clean environment, with people taking care of their daily cleanliness. If ablution had been legislated for this purpose, then it would no longer be necessary before prayer. Indeed, there is no longer any need for prayer itself.

People have often tried to identify the wisdom behind prayer. At times it has been described in terms of a series of exercises which benefit the whole body, and at other times as providing a good training to maintain discipline, in timing, movement and lining up in congregation. Some people have also suggested that it provides a direct relationship with God with what it contains of recitation and supplication. All these may be intended in prayer, but to stress that any of them, or indeed all of them put together are the only reasons behind the requirement of prayer, is to depart from the correct and safe approach.

There were times when some people suggested that we no longer need the physical exercise which prayers provide, since physical exercise has become much more sophisticated. Other people suggested that the army provides a better place and a better system to give everyone the sense of discipline so needed. Another group suggested that there was no need to impose this particular form of prayer, since the relationship with God could be better maintained with a more direct, personal and private communion with Him, which need not be encumbered with physical movement.

In short, if we try to determine the wisdom behind every aspect of worship or piece of legislation, according to a rational analysis or in line with what contemporary science may reveal, stressing always that this is the only reason for it, we move away from the proper method of understanding religious statements and Divine legislation. We, thus, open the way to sophistry and futile argument. In addition, we leave ourselves open to mistakes, especially when our analysis is based on what contemporary science and research reveal, when it is always changing or amending what it used to consider a proven fact.

With respect to the subject we are discussing, namely, *tayammum* or dry ablution, it seems to me that ablution of both types, simple and full, was not ordered simply for the maintenance of cleanliness. Otherwise, the alternative for either type does not serve the same purpose. There must be some other purpose which is served by simple ablution [*wuḍū'*], full ablution [*ghusl*] as well as by dry ablution [*tayammum*].

We do not wish to make the same mistake and categorically affirm that our view provides the complete answer. We wish merely to say that perhaps ablution has been ordered as an intermediate step taking us away from our daily preoccupation in order to prepare us psychologically for prayer, which is a great meeting with God. Taken in this light, *tayammum* appears to serve the same purpose as simple or full ablution. Having said that, we realise that God's knowledge is absolute. He knows our inner selves as we do not know them. It behoves us well to learn how to think or speak of God the Almighty and how to view His commandments.

We should also reflect a little on the place of prayer in Islam. We realise that it is so important to attend to prayers, despite any reasons or circumstances which may prevent us from praying. Islam gives us every facility to offer our prayers on time, removing all obstacles that may lie in our way. This is particularly apparent in replacing dry ablution for either or both types of ablution when water is not available or when it is harmful to use, or when the quantity of water available is needed for drinking and other essentials, as well as when we are travelling. Later on in this *sūrah,* we will speak of how prayers are offered in the battlefield, when soldiers fear a treacherous attack by the enemy. All these aspects emphasise how Islam views prayer as a most essential duty, which should not be neglected for any reason. This is again reflected when one is ill and cannot stand up or sit down. Such a person can pray seated, reclining, or lying down. They can even pray by signalling the normal movements with their eyes only, if they cannot move any part of their body.

Prayer is a communion between the Lord and His servants, which He does not like them to sever, because He knows how important it is for them. God does not need the worship of any of His servants. Indeed, their worship benefits them. They feel that prayer helps them discharge their duties, gives them self satisfaction, reassurance and a feeling of happiness as they realise that they have a relationship with God which is suitable for them and which they can maintain. Needless to say, God knows human nature best and He knows what suits it.

Perhaps we should reflect a little on how certain points are expressed in this Qur'ānic verse. Note for example the expression: *"or if one of you has come from the toilet"*. The Qur'ānic verse does not say when you do this or that; it simply speaks of coming back from a certain place in order to refer to what a person does there. Moreover, it does not attribute that action to the addressees by saying when you come back from the toilet, but it speaks of "one of you" coming back. This is a fine touch, which provides us with an example of how to speak about such situations.

Similarly, the expression "or if you have touched women" refers to the physical relationship between man and woman. It is more in keeping with the Islamic standards of propriety to use such an expression. Touching a woman may be a preliminary step to, or an expression of, the action itself. In either case, we have an

example of how such matters should be referred to in conversation when propriety is observed.

Again, pure dust is described as "good" dust, suggesting that what is pure is good and what is impure is evil. Again, the expression is most effective, a fine touch. Praise be to the Lord, our Creator who knows our human nature best.

5
Battle Resumed

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ نَصِيبٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ يَشۡتَرُونَ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَن تَضِلُّواْ ٱلسَّبِيلَ ٤٤

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now barter it away for error, and want you too to lose your way. (44)

وَٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِأَعۡدَآئِكُمۡۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَلِيّٗا وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ نَصِيرٗا ٤٥

But God knows best who are your enemies. God is sufficient for you as a patron, and God is sufficient to give succour. (45)

مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ يُحَرِّفُونَ ٱلۡكَلِمَ عَن مَّوَاضِعِهِۦ وَيَقُولُونَ سَمِعۡنَا وَعَصَيۡنَا وَٱسۡمَعۡ غَيۡرَ مُسۡمَعٖ وَرَٰعِنَا لَيَّۢا بِأَلۡسِنَتِهِمۡ وَطَعۡنٗا فِي ٱلدِّينِۚ وَلَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ قَالُواْ سَمِعۡنَا وَأَطَعۡنَا وَٱسۡمَعۡ وَٱنظُرۡنَا لَكَانَ خَيۡرٗا لَّهُمۡ وَأَقۡوَمَ وَلَٰكِن لَّعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِكُفۡرِهِمۡ فَلَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ٤٦

Among those of the Jewish faith there are some who take (revealed) words out of their context and say: "We have heard, but we disobey" and, "Hear; may you be bereft of hearing," and, "Hearken to us." Thus they distort the phrases with their tongues and imply that the true faith is false. Had they but said: "We have heard and we pay heed," and "Hear us and have patience with us," it would have been for their own good and more proper. God has rejected them for their disbelief. It is only a few of them that believe. (46)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ ءَامِنُواْ بِمَا نَزَّلۡنَا مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا مَعَكُم مِّن قَبۡلِ أَن نَّطۡمِسَ وُجُوهٗا فَنَرُدَّهَا عَلَىٰٓ أَدۡبَارِهَآ أَوۡ نَلۡعَنَهُمۡ كَمَا لَعَنَّآ أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلسَّبۡتِۚ وَكَانَ أَمۡرُ ٱللَّهِ مَفۡعُولًا ٤٧

O you who have been given revelations! Believe in what We have bestowed from on high confirming that which you already have, lest We obliterate faces and turn them backward, or We reject them as We rejected the Sabbath-breakers: for God's will is always done. (47)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَغۡفِرُ أَن يُشۡرَكَ بِهِۦ وَيَغۡفِرُ مَا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَن يَشَآءُۚ وَمَن يُشۡرِكۡ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰٓ إِثۡمًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٤٨﴾

God will never forgive that partners are associated with Him. He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God indeed contrived an awesome sin. (48)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُزَكُّونَ أَنفُسَهُمۚ بَلِ ٱللَّهُ يُزَكِّي مَن يَشَآءُ وَلَا يُظۡلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا ﴿٤٩﴾

Are you aware of those who consider themselves pure? It is indeed God who causes whom He wills to grow in purity. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. (49)

ٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ يَفۡتَرُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡكَذِبَۖ وَكَفَىٰ بِهِۦٓ إِثۡمٗا مُّبِينًا ﴿٥٠﴾

Behold how they fabricate lies against God. This is enough as an obvious sin [for anyone]. (50)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ نَصِيبٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡجِبۡتِ وَٱلطَّٰغُوتِ وَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ أَهۡدَىٰ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ سَبِيلًا ﴿٥١﴾

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. (51)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۖ وَمَن يَلۡعَنِ ٱللَّهُ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُۥ نَصِيرًا ﴿٥٢﴾

These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. (52)

أَمۡ لَهُمۡ نَصِيبٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡمُلۡكِ فَإِذٗا لَّا يُؤۡتُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ نَقِيرًا ﴿٥٣﴾

Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone. (53)

أَمۡ يَحۡسُدُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ عَلَىٰ مَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦۖ فَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَآ ءَالَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُم مُّلۡكًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥٤﴾

Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. (54)

فَمِنْهُم مَّنْ ءَامَنَ بِهِۦ وَمِنْهُم مَّن صَدَّ عَنْهُۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِجَهَنَّمَ سَعِيرًا ﴿٥٥﴾

Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him. Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell. (55)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا سَوْفَ نُصْلِيهِمْ نَارًا كُلَّمَا نَضِجَتْ جُلُودُهُم بَدَّلْنَـٰهُمْ جُلُودًا غَيْرَهَا لِيَذُوقُوا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٥٦﴾

Those who disbelieve in Our revelations We shall, in time, cause them to endure fire: every time their skins are burnt off, We shall replace them with new skins, so that they may taste suffering [in full]. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. (56)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ سَنُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّـٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَـٰرُ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۖ لَّهُمْ فِيهَآ أَزْوَٰجٌ مُّطَهَّرَةٌ ۖ وَنُدْخِلُهُمْ ظِلًّا ظَلِيلًا ﴿٥٧﴾

but those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall admit into gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide beyond the count of time. There they shall have pure spouses, and We shall admit them into a cool, dense shade. (57)

Overview

The passages of this *sūrah* which we have discussed so far dealt exclusively with the organisation of Islamic society, speaking about marriage, taking care of orphans, inheritance and other relevant matters. Beginning with this passage the *sūrah* turns to a different subject, providing guidance to the Muslim community on how to face its enemies. We have already spoken about this fight when we commented on the two preceding *Sūrahs,* 2, The Cow, or *Al-Baqarah,* and 3, The House of `Imrān, or Āl *`Imrān.*

The *sūrah* now changes emphasis so as to speak mainly about the external battle the Muslim community had and has to fight against surrounding, hostile communities. The battle, however, does not begin at this particular point. All that has passed in the *sūrah* of social, economic, and family legislation, and all the moral values which have been established and the traces of *ignorance* eradicated so that the Muslim community acquires its distinctive Islamic features are all relevant to the external battle against that community's enemies. Whether these enemies be in Madinah in particular or in Arabia generally, all was given in preparation for this battle. This legislation and these values represent a sustained campaign to lay down the foundations of the new society on the basis of Islam so that it may be able to face

up to its enemies and overcome them.

As we have seen in the preceding two *sūrahs,* priority is given to the building of the internal structure of the Muslim community, its faith, concepts, moral values, laws and systems. The Muslim community is also given a full briefing on the nature of its enemies, their methods, designs, and schemes. The believers are sent into the battle with reassurance, open eyes, and a strong will, as well as full knowledge of the nature of both the battle ahead and their enemies. All these features are true of this *sūrah* as well.

Throughout, the Qur'ān directs the battle on all fronts. In feelings and consciousness, the Qur'ān establishes a new faith based on a new concept of God, the Lord, the Creator, and on a new concept of existence. It provides new values and standards, purifies human nature of all traces of ignorance, eradicates these traces from society, and substitutes them with distinctive Islamic features. When it has done that, the Qur'ān provides guidance to the Muslim community on how to engage its internal and external enemies, be they Jews, hypocrites or idolaters. There need be no anxiety about the outcome of the battle since the Muslim community has undertaken all preparations to meet and overcome its enemies. It is fully confident of the strength of its inner structure, faith, morality and social system.

The essential superiority of the Muslim community to all surrounding ignorant communities, including that of the Jews in Madinah itself, was spiritual, moral and social. It never was a military, economic or material superiority. Indeed, it was always the enemies of Islam who outnumbered the Muslims, who were better equipped, and who enjoyed greater material resources, whether in the Arabian peninsula itself or beyond. The superiority of the Muslim community was simply in what Islam had given it through its unique system.

Enjoying this particular type of superiority, which naturally gave the Muslim community a far more competent leadership, Islam was able to crush ignorance, first in Arabia and then in the two superpowers represented by the Empires of Byzantium and Persia. It was then able to carry its message well beyond these territories, having sometimes to rely on military power while at other times, relying exclusively on the Qur'ān.

Without such great superiority, the miracle, which has no parallel in history, not even in the remarkable conquests of the Tartars in ancient history and the Nazi armies in recent days, could not have been accomplished. Islamic conquests were not military ones. They represented a conquest of faith, culture and civilisation. Without having any recourse to compulsion, the people of the conquered lands, or should we say, liberated ones, adopted the faith, language and traditions of Islam. That makes Islamic conquest unique in history.

It was a complete human victory representing a new birth of humanity. It ushered in the birth of a new man who was totally unknown on earth. It imparted its colour and character to the areas where Muslims lived. The Islamic tide was, thus, able to obliterate all traces of former civilisations which had survived for long centuries in certain areas, such as the Pharaonic in Egypt, the Assyrian and Babylonian in Iraq and the Phoenician in Syria. It could only do so because it stretches its roots far deeper in human nature and deals with man as a whole, uniquely moulding human life.

The adoption of the Islamic language such that it became the native language of these countries is a remarkable phenomenon, one that has not been adequately studied. In my view, it is more remarkable than the adoption of the Islamic faith by the local population. Language is so deeply rooted in man's constitution and so thoroughly intertwined with social life that it is impossible for it to change completely except through a perfect miracle. The Arabic language, itself, is not responsible for this, for Arabic had been spoken for centuries. Nor could it perform any miracle of this sort prior to the advent of Islam. It is for this reason that I have called it the "Islamic language". The new strength Arabic acquired to enable it to accomplish this miracle was certainly derived from Islam.

All talents available in the areas liberated through Islamic conquest began to express themselves in the new language of the new faith, i.e. the Islamic language. In every field of specialisation, these talents have made a remarkable and original contribution. It has never suffered from the constraints familiar when a talented person gives expression to that talent in a language other than his mother tongue. What this means is that the Islamic language has become the mother tongue of all these talents. The essential point is that this language gave those people a cultural fund so close to human nature that they could identify themselves with it more than with their old cultures and old languages.

This cultural fund was nothing less than the new faith and the spiritual, moral and social structure the Islamic way of life established; all within a very short period. It was a great structure, which fitted in perfectly with human nature and which imparted an irresistible force to the language of Islam, in the same way as it imparted an irresistible power to Islamic armies.

This is the only explanation that can be given to that remarkable phenomenon which is unique in history. This is a subject that merits discussion at greater length. What has been said, however, should be sufficient within the context of this commentary.

The present passage begins a portion of the *sūrah* giving numerous directives to the Muslim community on how to conduct its fight against those enemy camps who

continuously schemed against the newly-established Muslim community in Madinah. At first, our attentions are drawn to the attitude of the Jews and what steps they took against the new faith and the community advocating it. This is followed by a passage explaining the role of the Muslim community, the nature of its constitution, and the requirement of accepting the faith upon which its whole existence is built. This is then followed by a passage calling on this community to defend its constitution and very existence, warning it against the scheming of hypocrites who had crept into its ranks. The same passage also explains the nature of life and death, which are determined by God. All this is part of the education the Muslim community receives in order to prepare it to fulfil its role and succeed against its enemies.

More about the hypocrites is given in the passage that follows. Here, a warning is given to the Muslim community against defending the actions or taking a different attitude towards the hypocrites. Then follows an explanation of the measures the Muslim community should take in order to regulate its relations with other states and communities. In effect, this lays down the foundation of the Islamic law of international relations.

Another passage provides an example of the unique Islamic standard, explaining how a single Jew should be treated by the Islamic society. A whole passage deals with idolatry, showing how weak the foundations of pagan society in Arabia were. In the midst of all these directives for the battle ahead, we have brief references to the internal organisation of Islamic society. These are closely associated with the earlier passages in the *sūrah* devoted to the organisation of the Muslim family. Then follows a passage denouncing hypocrisy and the hypocrites, relegating them to the lowest grade in Hell.

Taken together, these brief references reveal to us the multi-sided nature of the battle a Muslim community has to face, internally and externally. It also shows that the internal and the external battles in the life of the first Muslim community grew, of their very nature, side by side and were mutually interdependent. The same applies to the challenge every Muslim community has to face at all times.

Error Multiplied

> *Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now barter it away for error, and want you too to lose your way. But God knows best who are your enemies. God is sufficient for you as a patron, and God is sufficient to give succour. Among those of the Jewish faith there are some who take (revealed) words out of their context and say: "We have heard, but we disobey" and, "Hear; may you be bereft of hearing," and, "Hearken to us." Thus they distort the phrases with*

> *their tongues and imply that the true faith is false. Had they but said: "We have heard and we pay heed," and "Hear us and have patience with us, " it would have been for their own good and more proper. God has rejected them for their disbelief. It is only a few of them that believe.* (Verses 44-46)

This is the first in a long series of statements which wonder at the attitude taken by the Jews. It is addressed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and to everyone who witnesses this singular stance. Since they have been given a portion of the Scriptures, namely the Torah, which was conveyed to them by God's Messenger, Moses, it should have given them guidance, steering them away from their erroneous ways. They claim this portion and what it entails of Divine guidance, but they, nevertheless, barter it away for error. Use of the phrase, "barter it away for", or more literally, "purchase" is very significant, because it implies an action taken after deliberation. They have guidance that they ignore and, hence, they prefer to he in error. The deal does not come as a result of ignorance or by mistake, but it is knowingly concluded. This is highly singular. Hence, the Qur'ān wonders at their attitude.

They do not, however, stop at that. They want that the Muslims who follow Divine guidance go astray, and they employ all means and devices to achieve that end. They try to obscure every source of guidance so that no one can follow the right way. In both respects, a warning is given to the Muslims against the Jews' schemes. The Muslims cherished the fact that they had received guidance from God, were proud of following that guidance, and, hence, were naturally hostile to anyone who sought to force them back into past *ignorance.* They were aware of both outlooks but now loved Islam and hated *ignorance.* It is not surprising, therefore, that they took a strong view against anyone who tried to lead them away from guidance into error. God certainly knew their feelings and addressed them in this way, revealing to them the Jews' intentions and designs. The Qur'ān, then, expressly brands the Jews as enemies of the Muslims and reassures the Muslim community that it will receive help from its Patron who is none other than God: *"But God knows best who are your enemies. God is sufficient for you as a patron, and God is sufficient to give succour."* (Verse 45)

Distortion of God's Words

At first, the wondering question is phrased in a way which means the people of the Scriptures in general. It is understood that those who were directly meant by this were the Jews of Madinah. Now the Qur'ān specifies the Jews and describes their rude behaviour towards the Prophet in the early years of his settlement in Madinah, before they were finally subdued: *"Among those of the Jewish faith there are some who*

take (revealed) words out of their context and say: 'We have heard, but we disobey' and, 'Hear; may you be bereft of hearing,' and, 'Hearken to us.' Thus they distort the phrases with their tongues and imply that the true faith is false." (Verse 46)

They have been so impudent and rude that they even distort revealed statements. Most probably, this is a reference to their different interpretation of statements given in the Torah from how they were actually intended. They did this in order to deny every reference to the final, Divine message and to remove every piece of legislation endorsed by the Qur'ān, God's final revelation. Obviously, when the same legislation is given in both Scriptures, this is evidence of their common source, and, consequently, it is evidence emphasising the truthfulness of Muĥammad's message. Distortion of religious statements so that they may be brought in line with people's desires is a phenomenon common to any group of clergy who lose their way and who look at their religious knowledge as a profession in the service of the powerful, and who try at the same time to appease those elements of the masses wishing to release themselves from the discipline of religion. Perhaps the Jews excel all other people in this respect, although we have seen in our time some Muslims who take their religious knowledge as a profession. Indeed, some of these can compete favourably with the Jews.

Their rudeness towards the Prophet went so far that they said to him bluntly: "We hear what you say, Muĥammad! But we disobey it. We are not prepared to believe in you or follow you." Again, this is an indication that these verses were revealed in the early period in Madinah. At that time, the Jews might have been so rude and offensive in their attitude to the Prophet. This is coupled with their bad manners and sly methods. They expressed themselves in a superficially polite way to the Prophet. Ostensibly, they said: "Hear, and no one may order you to hear, (this is a polite manner of speech), and be considerate to us," taking account of our status. It is as though they wanted to say that since they had Divine revelations, they need not be called upon to embrace Islam in the same way as the idolaters were called on to believe in it. But they did not say these words in a straightforward manner. They twisted their words to distort their meaning, implying: "*Hear; may you be bereft of hearing.*" The other phrase mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse, "*Have patience with us*", they distorted so as to describe the Prophet as rash. Thus they combined impudence with slyness and distortion of God's revelations. This is typical of the Israelite nature.

The text then outlines that attitude which is worthy of people given Divine revelations. It assures them that they may still be rightly guided and generously rewarded if they would but only believe. But then their true nature is revealed: "*Had they but said: 'We have heard and we pay heed,' and Hear us and have patience with us,' it would have been for their own good and more proper. God has rejected them for their disbelief. It is only a few of them that believe.*" (Verse 46)

Their problem is that they do not face up to the truth frankly and objectively. Had they done so and spoken in a straightforward manner, meaning what they said, it would have been far better for them and more appropriate for their situation. The truth of the matter is that because of their disbelief, they are rejected, outcast. Only a few of them ever accept the true faith.

God always says the truth. In the long history of Islam, only a very small number of Jews believed in it. These were people whom God rewarded their hard work in pursuit of what pleases Him by guiding them to the true faith. Otherwise, the overwhelming majority of Jews continued to be hostile to Islam and the Muslims for more than fourteen centuries. Their hostility started with Islam establishing its base so close to them in Madinah. Not once did they stop their multifarious scheming against Islam, and with a determination that never weakened. No one has ever worked against Islam during any period of its history, including the Crusades and all forms of colonialism, without having had some help and encouragement from the Jews.

A Warning Not to Be Ignored

These two verses represent a call made to the people of the Scriptures, particularly the Jews, to believe in the Book, which has been sent down confirming what is already in their hands. This is coupled with a warning against their being misshaped and cursed, which can only be expected if they continue in their obstinate rejection of the new Divine faith and in their scheming against it. They are branded as deviant from the faith in the absolute oneness of God, which is also the essence of their faith. God never forgives associating partners with Him. At the same time, the broad scope of God's forgiveness is outlined. Thus, the enormity of associating other deities with God is delineated in sharp relief.

> *0 you who have been given revelations! Believe in what We have bestowed from on high confirming that which you already have, lest We obliterate faces and turn them backward, or We reject them as We rejected the Sabbath-breakers: for God's will is always done. God will never forgive that partners are associated with Him. He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God indeed contrived an awesome sin.* (Verses 47-48)

They are addressed by the quality which should have made them the first to respond favourably to Islam: *"O you who have been given revelations! Believe in what We have bestowed from on high confirming that which you already have."* (Verse 47) Since they had received revelations, it was no strange thing to them that Divine guidance should be given. The One who has given them those Scriptures is now calling upon

them to believe in a message which confirms their own. If this were sufficient to provide a clear proof or strong argument to accept the faith, the Jews should have been the first to embrace it. But they had their own interests, ambitions, grudges and hatreds. Moreover, they themselves were deviant. They are described in the Torah as a "stiff-necked people". Hence, they rejected the faith and they deserved the stern warning: "*Believe... lest We obliterate faces and turn them backwards, or We reject them as We rejected the Sabbath-breakers: for God's will is always done.*" (Verse 47)

The obliteration of faces means the effacing of their distinctive human features. Turning them backward means causing them to walk backwards. This threat could be intended literally, which means that they could lose their human appearance and proper judgement. It could mean something similar to the curse put on the Sabbath breakers, who devised a subtle method to catch fish on the day of the Sabbath, despite its strict prohibition. They were actually transformed into monkeys and pigs. On the other hand, the warning could mean to obliterate the distinctive elements of proper insight and true guidance in their minds causing them to sink back into disbelief, i.e. to the state they were in before the Scriptures were given to them. To disbelieve after having been given guidance is, indeed, to have faces obliterated and to retreat backwards. Whichever meaning is intended, this response to the Jews' obstinate and wicked nature is very stern. One of the few who heeded this warning was a man who had previously earned the title "Ka`b al-Ahbār". He embraced Islam. According to a report related by Abū Ĥātim on the authority of Abū Idrīs (Aidhullāh al-Khaulānī, Ka`b's teacher, Abū Muslim al-Khalīlī used to take Ka`b to task for his slow response to God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He once sent him to the Prophet to make sure that he was the Prophet to which reference is made in the Jewish sacred books. Ka`b says: "I rode to Madinah where I heard someone reciting from the Qur'ān the verse which says*: "O you who have been given revelations! Believe in what We have bestowed from on high confirming that which you already have, lest We obliterate faces and turn them backwards."* I went straight and had a bath, feeling my face with my hands, fearing that it would be obliterated. I then embraced Islam."[12]

The warning is followed by a comment stressing its seriousness. This is done in such a way as to take the Jewish nature into account: "*God's will is always done.*"

Next comes a comment delivering another warning in respect of the Hereafter. This new warning excludes any possibility of forgiveness to anyone who associates partners with God. At the same time, Divine mercy is shown to be greater than all other sins: "*God will never forgive that partners are associated with Him. He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God indeed contrived an*

[12] It should be mentioned here that there is another report which suggests that Ka`b embraced Islam much later, during the reign of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. This report, which may be more accurate, also makes his adoption of Islam the result of listening to this verse.

awesome sin." (Verse 48) This verse is stated in a context that implies an express accusation against the Jews for associating partners with God. Hence, they are called upon to return to the pure faith in His Oneness.

Nothing is mentioned here about what they said or did to brand them as polytheists. Details of that are given elsewhere. The Qur'ān reports that they claimed that *"Ezra is the son of God".* (9: 30) Such a statement was made in the same vein as that of the Christians who claimed that *"the Christ is the son of God".* (9: 30) Any statement of this type constitutes an act of associating partners with God. The Qur'ān also reports that both Christians and Jews *"have taken their rabbis and priests as lords alongside God'.* (9: 31) It has to be said that neither group used to worship rabbis or priests. They simply acknowledged their right to legislate for them, and to make certain things lawful and to forbid others. The authority to do that belongs exclusively to God. It is one of the most essential elements of Godhead. Hence, the Qur'ān classifies them among the polytheists. This is particularly significant in light of the Islamic concept as to who constitutes a Muslim and who a believer. This point will be elaborated upon further in the commentary on the rest of this *sūrah.*

At any rate, the Jews of Arabia at the time when Islam was revealed had had their faith adulterated with polytheistic elements. Hence, they are expressly warned here that God may forgive, as He pleases, anyone whatever sin he may have committed, other than associating partners with Him. No forgiveness is granted to any person who ends his life believing in other gods alongside God, without having repented for holding such an erroneous belief.

When a person associates partners with God, he actually severs all his relations with the Lord and Creator. Hence, there is no hope that he may be forgiven if this state of a total break of relations is maintained until his death. Anyone who maintains such an attitude until death, ignoring all the pointers to God's oneness — in the form of clear proofs throughout the universe, and in the guidance given by prophets and messengers — is devoid of all goodness. Such a persistent denial of God's oneness is proof of total, incurable corruption of human nature, sending it to a lowly depth from which it cannot rise. Such a person has already prepared himself for the life of Hell.

Apart from this extremely grave sin and this flagrant injustice, God forgives all sins, great or small. All these sins, including cardinal ones, may be forgiven, according to God's will, whether one repents or not as some reports tell, as long as the person who commits them believes in God, hopes to be forgiven, believes that God is able to forgive him and that God's forgiveness is greater than his sins. This shows that God's mercy is without limit, inexhaustible, and may be granted to all and sundry. God's forgiveness is open to all. We need only to seek it.

This principle is supported by numerous *aĥādīth* and reports about the Prophet. Let us consider the following examples.

> Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim quote Abū Dharr, a Companion of the Prophet, as saying: "I went out one night only to find God's Messenger walking alone, having none for company. I thought that he did not wish anyone to walk with him. I, therefore, walked in the shade, away from the light thrown by the moon. Seeing me on turning round, he asked: 'Who is it?' I said: 'It is Abū Dharr, may God take my life to protect yours.' He said: 'Come forward, Abū Dharr.' I walked with him for some time and he said to me: 'Those who are given plenty are the ones who will have only very little on the Day of Judgement, except for one who has been given wealth by God and he gave in charity on his right and left, in front of him and behind him, and used it for what is beneficial.' We then walked for some time, before he said to me: 'Sit down here.' He made me sit in a low spot with plenty of stones. He said: 'Sit down here until I come back to you.' He walked in the rocky, open area until I could see him no more. He stayed a long time. I then heard him talking as he came back. He said: 'Even if he commits adultery and theft.' When he arrived, I could no longer resist the temptation. I, therefore, said to him: 'Prophet, may God take my life to protect yours! To whom were you talking in the rocky open space? I thought I heard someone answering you.' He said: 'That was Gabriel, the Angel, who met me over there. He said: "Give to your followers the happy news that anyone who dies without associating any partners with God, shall be admitted to Heaven." I said: 'Gabriel, even if he commits theft and adultery?' He answered: 'Yes'. I said: 'Even if he steals and commits adultery?' He answered: 'Yes, indeed. And even if he drinks intoxicants.'"
>
> Jābir ibn `Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet quotes him as saying: "Any soul who dies associating no partners with God may benefit by His forgiveness. God may punish him if He pleases and may forgive him if He pleases. "*God will never forgive that partners are associated with Him. He may forgive any lesser sin to whomever He wills."* (Related by Ibn Abī Ĥātim.)
>
> `Abdullāh ibn `Umar, a learned Companion of the Prophet says: "We, the Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him) used to be in no doubt that forgiveness could not be extended to a murderer, or one who robs an orphan of his money or one who knowingly accuses a chaste woman of adultery, or one who is guilty of perjury. The verse was then revealed which states: *`God will never forgive that partners be associated with Him. He may forgive any lesser sin to whomever He wills.'* The Prophet's Companions then stopped making such statements." (Related by Ibn Abī Ĥātim.)

> Ibn `Abbās quotes the Prophet as saying: "God says: He who knows that I am able to forgive sins shall he forgiven by Me and I do not care what offences he may have committed, as long as he has not associated any partners with Me." (Related by al-Ṭabarānī.)

This last *Ĥadīth* is particularly significant. What is important is to have a proper awareness of God's true nature. Such an awareness gives rise to a genuine desire to do good as well as feelings of hope, fear and being ashamed of one's faults. If an offence is committed, such feelings help one mend one's ways and bring one nearer to forgiveness.

Fabricating Lies against God

As the Qur'ān directs the battle of the Muslim community against the Jews in Madinah, it wonders at those who claim that they are God's chosen people. They further claim to be pure, yet they continue to distort God's words and take an impudent attitude towards God and His Messenger, and believe in false deities. They, thus, assert false claims against God as they allege that they are close to Him regardless of the magnitude of their bad deeds. "*Are you aware of those who consider themselves pure? It is indeed God who causes whom He wills to grow in purity. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Behold how they fabricate lies against God. This is enough as an obvious sin [for anyone].*" (Verses 49-50)

That the Jews are God's chosen people is an age-old claim asserted by them. God has indeed chosen them to be the bearers of His message to the rest of mankind, giving them at the time a distinguished position above all other nations. He destroyed Pharaoh and his people for their sake and allowed them to take over the sacred land. They, however, deviated from the path God has chosen for them and spread much corruption in the land, perpetrating every evil. Their rabbis made lawful for them what God had forbidden and forbade them what God had made lawful. The people followed them making no objection to their effective claim to Godhead, which they were stating by virtue of their making such legislation. The rabbis changed God's law in order to appease the people in power and to satisfy the desires of the masses. When they followed their rabbis, the people effectively considered them as lords, alongside God.

They also devoured usury, and weakened their relationship with God's faith and the Scriptures He revealed to them. Despite all this and much more, they continued to claim that they were God's children and beloved ones. They also claimed that they would not be touched by the fire of Hell except for a few days. They further claimed that none follows proper guidance and none may be well received by God except the Jews. They, thus, depicted the whole question as one of affinity to God and

favouritism by Him. Far be it from God to do that! There is no blood relation or affinity between God and any of His creation. The only relationship He may have with them is that established by adopting the true faith, doing what is good and maintaining the system He approves of. Anyone who deviates from this incurs God's displeasure. God is particularly displeased with people to whom He gives true guidance and who deliberately turn away from it.

The case of the Jews is the same as those who nowadays claim to be Muslims, of those who think that they belong to the nation of the followers of Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and believe that God will undoubtedly give them victory to liberate their land from the Jews. This, while they totally abandon the code of living God has given to them in the shape of religion. They banish it totally from their lives, giving God's revelation no say in their legal, economic, and social systems, and denying it the right to set for them their moral values and traditions. They have nothing of Islam but their Muslim names and the fact that they have been born in a land which was once inhabited by Muslims who implemented Divine guidance and who followed the Islamic way of life. God invites His Messenger to wonder at those Jews who continuously claimed to be pure. The situation of contemporary Muslims is an even worse spectacle to wonder at.

It is not up to human beings to consider themselves pure and to testify to their own goodness and closeness to God. It is God who causes anyone He wills to grow in purity. He knows all hearts and intentions. He will never wrong anyone in any way, provided that they leave it up to Him to purify whom He wills while they themselves move to do what is required of them, not merely to supplicate. If they do such works quietly, maintaining humility and without any boastfulness, they will never be wronged by God. He does not forget anything they do. *"Are you aware of those who consider themselves pure? It is indeed God who causes whom He wills to grow in purity. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth."* (Verse 49)

God testifies that when the Jews claim purity for themselves and assert that God is pleased with them, they are actually fabricating lies against Him. He denounces what they do in no ambiguous terms: *"Behold how they fabricate lies against God. This is enough as an obvious sin [for anyone]."* (Verse 50)

When we claim to be Muslims simply because we have Muslim names and live in a land which was inhabited by Muslims, while at the same time we do not implement Islam in any aspect of our lives, we actually give a testimony against Islam. When we claim that God has chosen us because we are the nation of Muĥammad (peace be upon him) while at the same time we abandon Muĥammad's faith and the system he has given us to implement in our lives, we are actually in the same position which God warns us against.

The faith given to us by God provides us with a complete way of life. To obey God is to implement this way of life. To draw closer to God can only be achieved through obeying Him. Let us now reflect on our position towards God and His faith. Let us then consider any similarity or dissimilarity between our situation and that of those Jews whom God denounces as fabricating lies against Him when they claim purity for themselves. The same rule applies to both communities, and the situations are particularly similar. No one may claim to have any blood or marriage relationship with God, and no one may claim to be given special favours by Him.

Taking Pride in False Beliefs

The *sūrah* continues to draw people's attention to the singular attitude of those who claim to be pure, while they believe in falsehood and in arbitrary deviation away from Divine guidance. At the same time, they testify that the pagan Arabs were better guided than those who believed in God, His message, and the Divine constitution. This is followed by an outright denunciation of these people and their attitude. They are shown as envious and stingy. The true reason for their opposition to Islam which marks their deviation from the faith of Abraham, in belonging to which they took pride, is given together with a clear warning to them that persistence in such an attitude will inevitably lead to Hell.

> *Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone. Do they, perchance, envy other people fir what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him. Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell.* (Verses 51-55)

Those who were given a portion of the Scriptures should have been the first to believe in God's new revelations and to reject the idolatry advocated by those who received no guidance from God. They are always expected to put God's revelations into practice and to implement them in their lives. They must not follow arrogant, arbitrary deviation, which includes every rule or law that cannot be supported by Divine faith. The Jews, who used to claim purity for themselves and boast that they were God's beloved people, followed falsehood, nevertheless, and were guilty of associating partners with God when they allowed their priests and rabbis to enact for them legislation which could not be sanctioned by Him. Laws which are in conflict

with Divine faith are described here as arrogant, as arbitrary deviations because they involve the usurpation by man of one of the most essential elements of Godhead, namely legislative authority. Moreover, it signifies rebellion against Divine law, which ensures that man abides by the rule of right and justice. Those who believe in such falsehood and follow such arbitrary and arrogant deviation are either unbelievers or idolaters. Hence, the Qur'ān wonders at them having been given a part of the Scriptures for they knowingly deviate from it.

Furthermore, they sided with the pagan idolaters against the believers who were given revelations by God: "*And they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers.*" (Verse 51)

Ibn Isĥāq reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and Companion: "Those who worked to forge the alliance between the confederate Arab tribes of Quraysh and Ghatafān and the Jewish tribe of Quraiżah were Ĥuyay ibn Akhṭab, Sallām ibn al-Ĥaqīq Abū Rāfi`, al-Rabī` ibn al-Ĥaqīq, Abū `Āmir, Waĥwāĥ ibn `Amir, and Ĥawdah ibn Qays. The last three were of the Jewish tribe of Wā'il, while the rest belonged to the Jewish tribe of al-Nađīr. When they went to the Quraysh, the latter thought: `These are the Jewish rabbis who have knowledge of the Old Testament. Let us ask them which religion is better, ours or that of Muĥammad.' When they asked them they said: `Your religion is better than his, and you are better guided than his followers."' God then revealed the following verses:

> *Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone. Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him. Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell.* (Verses 51-55)

This is in effect a declaration that they have been rejected by God and that they will have no support in this life or in the Hereafter, because they had gone to the idolaters seeking their support. They told them what they knew to be untrue in order to win their support. They achieved their purpose and the Arabian tribes came out with them for the Battle of the Moat. The Prophet and his Companions dug the Moat around Madinah, and God took care of their enemies: "*God repelled the unbelievers and caused them to go back frustrated, having achieved nothing. God has spared the believers the need to fight, for God is Mighty, Powerful.*" (33: 25)

It is singular that the Jews should say that idolatry was better than the faith of Muĥammad and his Companions, and to claim that the idolaters were better guided than those who had believed in the Divine Book and in God's Messenger. Nevertheless, it is a consistent attitude displayed by the Jews, who have always opposed the truth and supported the followers of falsehood against them. They have their own insatiable ambition and ever-burning grudges. Those who follow the truth will never support them to achieve these ambitions or avenge these grudges. They can only be supported by those who follow falsehood. For this reason, they have to compromise with the latter and to testify in their favour.

This is a permanent state of affairs which makes it logical for them to describe the unbelievers as better guided than those who believe in God's oneness. They repeat the same statement today and will repeat it in the future. They manipulate all the media under their control in order to distort the image of every successful Islamic movement anywhere in the world. They rush to aid the people of falsehood in destroying any Islamic movement, exactly as they helped the pagans of the Quraysh. Here too they sought their support to distort the image of the first Islamic movement and to destroy it. Their cunning and the circumstances which prevail nowadays, however, sometimes make them refrain from openly praising the people of falsehood. They continue, however, to distort the image of the truth and undermine its followers in order to facilitate their destruction by their enemies.

They realise that their open praise of their secret allies may create suspicion concerning the latter's motives, who try to crush Islamic movements throughout the world. Devious as they are, they take at times an ostensibly hostile attitude towards their own allies, who are engaged in a fight against the truth and its people. They may appear to be engaged in a war against their allies, but it is only a war of words, the aim of which is to dispel any doubt that may be raised about those who are, in reality, their best allies. But they never stop working hard to distort the image of Islam and its followers. Their grudges and hostilities towards Islam and towards any attempt to bring about any Islamic revival is too great to be kept secret, even for deceiving their enemies.

It is the same nature and the same tactics employed for the same aim. It is for this that God curses them and ensures that they shall have no one to support them. He who is not supported by God has no support whatsoever, even though all the people of the world may be on his side: *"These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him."* (Verse 52)

We may be overawed when we say that all Western countries are supporting the Israelis. This may prompt us to ask: What about God's promise that He has rejected them and, as such, that they will have no support? True support comes from God, not from people and states, even though they may have hydrogen bombs and

missiles to deliver them. It is God alone who has mastery over His servants, including those who own hydrogen bombs and missiles. God supports those who support Him. He helps those who truly believe in Him, and follow His method closely, implementing it willingly, feeling happy, reassured.

With these words, God is addressing a community which believes in Him, and who follow His constitution. He belittles the importance of the Jews and their supporters and promises the Muslims that they will succeed in their battle against them. God has fulfilled His promises, which apply only to those who truly believe in Him. It is accomplished only by genuine and true believers. Let us, then, not be frightened by the support given by the atheists, polytheists and crusaders to the Jews. For these have only supported them against Islam. This is not the real support. At the same time, we must not be deceived by the present state of affairs. God's promise to the Muslims will undoubtedly come true, when they are truly Muslims. Let Muslims try once only to be true Muslims, and let them see for themselves whether the Jews will continue to have any supporters, or whether they will benefit in any way by such support.

The Nature of Envy

The next two verses denounce their opposition to the Prophet and Muslims generally, begrudging them God's favours of revelations, victory and strength. They envy them what God has granted them of His grace. They have not given them anything of their own. They view as undeserved, any favour God grants to anyone other than themselves, although He has bestowed on them and their predecessors much of His grace. His bounty has not taught them to be generous, and has not rid them of their envy. "*Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill] the groove of a date-stone. Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion.*" (Verses 53-54)

This is an amazing attitude. They cannot tolerate that God grants any of His servants any favour. Are they His partners? Glorified be He to take any partners. Do they have any share in His wealth and property, from which He bestows His gifts? Had they any such share, they would have not given anyone a trifle. The Arabic expression used here for "a trifle" is a term which signifies a little mark which may be seen at the back of a date-stone or its groove. The Israelites are too selfish even to give that to people, had they any share in God's wealth. We praise God that they do not have any share, otherwise all mankind would have perished.

Or is it envy? They envied the Prophet and the Muslims the great bounty God

gave them when He revealed to them the religion that brought about their rebirth. Thus He gave them their distinctive character, as well as confidence, reassurance, light, purity, and strength. It is certainly their envy, along with their realisation that they had missed out on achieving their ambitions to impose their moral and economic authority on the Arabs, a nation that was divided before it had any religion worthy of the name.

But why should the Jews envy anyone on whom God bestows favours when they themselves had enjoyed much of such favour ever since the time of Abraham. God granted Abraham's household Scriptures and prophethood as well as a kingdom. It was the Israelites who did not appreciate God's favours, nor did they fulfil their obligations. Some of them were truly unbelievers. Nevertheless, people who have enjoyed all this grace should never begrudge anyone anything God may grant them. *"We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him."* (Verses 54-55)

It is perhaps the worst type of envy that one who enjoys much of God's favours should envy others what they have been granted by Him. When a person who is totally deprived of favours envies others, his envy is a terrible vice. For one who enjoys much, envy is a mark of genuine evil. Hence, the warning against an evil doom: "*Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell."* (Verse 55)

Two Contrasting Destinies

At this point, the *sūrah,* which speaks of adherence to faith or lack of it among Abraham's descendants, states the general rule of reward which applies to believers and unbelievers alike, in all religions and at all times. Here it is stated in the form of a scene from the Day of Judgement: *"Those who disbelieve in Our revelations We shall, in time, cause them to endure fire: every time their skins are burnt off, We shall replace them with new skins, so that they may taste suffering [in full]. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. But those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall admit into gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide beyond the count of time. There they shall have pure spouses, and We shall admit them into a cool, dense shade."* (Verses 56-57)

"Every time their skins are burnt off, We shall replace them with new skins, so that they may taste suffering [in full]." It is a never- ending scene, placed before our own eyes, and repeated time after time. Our minds concentrate on it and we would not stare away. It is a fearful scene and what is fearful may attract and hold people's eyes. When the scene is portrayed, its continuous repetition is expressed in two words: "*Every time*". It is depicted as extremely fearful in half a sentence: "*Every time their skins are burnt out..."* It is amazing, supernatural. This effect is brought out in the

second half of the same sentence: *"We shall replace them with new skins".* Then the effects of fear are emphasised and perpetuated in the second part of the subjective sentence. It is a fitting recompense for disbelief, when all the reasons for believing in God have been provided. "*So that they may taste suffering din full]."*God is certainly able to punish them in this way, wise to choose it for them: "*God is indeed Almighty, Wise."*

In opposition to this ever-burning fire, with ever-burning skins, we have a full picture of the perfect reward granted to those who believe in God and translate this belief into action. These are placed in "*gardens through which running waters flow".* It is a reward given them forever, to emphasise the elements of settlement and continuity: *"Where they shall abide beyond the count of time."* In addition, they have what re-emphasises all these elements and what imparts a feeling of total happiness in eternal bliss: "*There they shall have pure spouses." We* also find a cool shade to add an air of ease and freshness to the scene of perfect bliss: *"We shall admit them into a cool, dense shade."* (Verse 57)

Thus we have the perfect contrast of reward and punishment, provided by contrasting scenes and images. This is typical of the Qur'ānic method in its portrayal of highly effective and powerful scenes from the Day of Judgement.

6
Sincerity and True Faith

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَأۡمُرُكُمۡ أَن تُؤَدُّواْ ٱلۡأَمَٰنَٰتِ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمۡتُم بَيۡنَ ٱلنَّاسِ أَن تَحۡكُمُواْ بِٱلۡعَدۡلِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ نِعِمَّا يَعِظُكُم بِهِۦٓۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ سَمِيعَۢا بَصِيرٗا ٥٨

God commands you to deliver whatever you have been entrusted with to their rightful owners, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Most excellent is what God exhorts you to do. God hears all and sees all. (58)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱلرَّسُولَ وَأُوْلِي ٱلۡأَمۡرِ مِنكُمۡۖ فَإِن تَنَٰزَعۡتُمۡ فِي شَيۡءٖ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولِ إِن كُنتُمۡ تُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيۡرٞ وَأَحۡسَنُ تَأۡوِيلًا ٥٩

Believers, obey God and obey the Messenger and those from among you who have been entrusted with authority. If you are in dispute over anything, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best [for you], and most suitable for final determination. (59)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَزۡعُمُونَ أَنَّهُمۡ ءَامَنُواْ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ مِن قَبۡلِكَ يُرِيدُونَ أَن يَتَحَاكَمُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱلطَّٰغُوتِ وَقَدۡ أُمِرُوٓاْ أَن يَكۡفُرُواْ بِهِۦ وَيُرِيدُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ أَن يُضِلَّهُمۡ ضَلَٰلَۢا بَعِيدٗا ٦٠

Are you not aware of those who claim that they believe in what has been bestowed from on high upon you, as well as in what was bestowed from on high before you? They seek the judgement of false gods, although they are bidden to deny them. But Satan wants to lead them far astray. (60)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ تَعَالَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ وَإِلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ رَأَيۡتَ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ يَصُدُّونَ عَنكَ صُدُودٗا ٦١

When it is said to them, "Come to that which God has bestowed from on high, and to the Messenger," you see the hypocrites turn away from you with aversion. (61)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَآ أَصَـٰبَتْهُم مُّصِيبَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ جَآءُوكَ يَحْلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ إِنْ أَرَدْنَآ إِلَّآ إِحْسَـٰنًا وَتَوْفِيقًا ﴿٦٢﴾

But how will it be when calamity befalls them [on the Day of Judgement] because of what their hands have done in this world? They would then come to you, swearing by God, "Our aim was but to do good, and to bring about harmony." (62)

أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُ ٱللَّهُ مَا فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَعْرِضْ عَنْهُمْ وَعِظْهُمْ وَقُل لَّهُمْ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ قَوْلًۢا بَلِيغًا ﴿٦٣﴾

As for them — God knows all that is in their hearts. So leave them alone, and admonish them, and speak to them a word to reach their very souls. (63)

وَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا لِيُطَاعَ بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذ ظَّلَمُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ جَآءُوكَ فَٱسْتَغْفَرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَٱسْتَغْفَرَ لَهُمُ ٱلرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿٦٤﴾

We have sent every messenger so that he should be obeyed by God's leave. If, when they have wronged themselves, they would but come to you and pray to God to forgive them, and the Messenger prayed for their forgiveness, they would surely find that God is the One who accepts repentance, Merciful. (64)

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا۟ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا۟ تَسْلِيمًا ﴿٦٥﴾

But no, by your Lord! They do not really believe unless they make you judge in all disputes between them, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decisions and give themselves up in total submission. (65)

وَلَوْ أَنَّا كَتَبْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ أَنِ ٱقْتُلُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُمْ أَوِ ٱخْرُجُوا۟ مِن دِيَـٰرِكُم مَّا فَعَلُوهُ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ مِّنْهُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ فَعَلُوا۟ مَا يُوعَظُونَ بِهِۦ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ تَثْبِيتًا ﴿٦٦﴾

Yet if We were to order them, "Lay down your lives," or, "Forsake your homelands," only a very few of them would do it; but if they would do what they are admonished to do, it would indeed be for their own good and apt to strengthen them greatly [in faith]. (66)

وَإِذًا لَّـَٔاتَيْنَـٰهُم مِّن لَّدُنَّآ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٦٧﴾

And We should indeed grant them, out of Our grace, a mighty reward, (67)

وَلَهَدَيْنَـٰهُمْ صِرَٰطًا مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٦٨﴾

and indeed guide them along a straight path. (68)

وَلَهَدَيْنَٰهُمْ صِرَٰطًا مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٦٨﴾

وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلرَّسُولَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مِّنَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ وَٱلصِّدِّيقِينَ وَٱلشُّهَدَآءِ وَٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ۚ وَحَسُنَ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ رَفِيقًا ﴿٦٩﴾

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَضْلُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ عَلِيمًا ﴿٧٠﴾

All who obey God and the Messenger shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets, and those who never deviate from the truth, and the martyrs and the righteous ones. How goodly a company are these! (69)

Such is God's bounty, and sufficient it is that God knows all. (70)

Overview

This passage tackles a very serious issue in the life of the Muslim community. It speaks about the conditions that must obtain for faith to exist and the boundaries that must be observed, i.e. the system laid down for the Muslim community to implement.

It is important to realise that the Qur'ān actually brings the Muslim community into existence and nurtures it to ensure its proper growth: *"You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind." (3:*110) Indeed, what the Qur'ān achieved with the first Muslim community was man's re-birth. This was no mere step along the way, a stage in development, or even a leap forward. It was rather a definitive re-birth of the Arabs, and of mankind generally.

To appreciate this we need first to look at pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and other aspects of the Arabs' literary heritage, which delineate their outlook on life, existence, the universe, man, morality and behaviour, as well as the main features of their social life, their feelings, concepts and culture. In short, all that reflects the Arab personality. We should then look at all this in the light of the Qur'ān, as also consider the realities of Arab society both before and after Islam. This will confirm, in the most vivid and clear way, that the Qur'ān initiated a new community. It is God who, to use the Qur'ānic term, "raised" this community. That, in itself, was a unique case. To our knowledge, it was the only time in history that a complete community, with clearly distinctive characteristics, came into existence through the pages of a book. But no wonder, for it is God's Book, containing His own words.

Anyone who disputes this should tell us where this community was before God initiated it with His revealed Book. We certainly know that it was living in the Arabian peninsula, but what position did it occupy in the ranking of human civilisation? Where could it be placed at humanity's dining table? What contribution did it make in human history?

This community was nurtured by the religion of Islam and moulded by its perfect way of life. Thereafter, it mapped its way, assuming the leadership of mankind, on the basis of the Divine Book. Its whole life has borne its mark. It has never had any other quality to give it such a position of leadership among mankind. History bears witness to all this. What is more is that God fulfilled His promise to the Arabs as He says to them: *"We have bestowed on you from on high a Book that contains all that you ought to bear in mind. Will you not use your reason?"* (21: 10)

It is by reason of the Qur'ān that the Arabs acquired a position on the world stage and had a role to play in human history. It is the Qur'ān which has given them their status and civilisation. Yet some people, devoid of intelligence, make it their mission in life to reject God's favours showered on the Arabs. They dismiss as irrelevant God's favour, which brought His final message to mankind through the Arabs, and in their language. Through this, He gave them an honourable position, a history and a true civilisation. Nevertheless, these people want to take off the garment God has given them to wear and to tear down the banner under which they achieved all their glory.

As the Qur'ān started to nurture the Muslim community, making prominent its Islamic features and erasing the marks of ignorance in its lifestyle and character, re-organising its whole society, leading its battle against the forces of ignorance that worked hard to preserve its old ways and practices, it began by giving the Muslim community a totally new concept and outlook. It laid down the basic conditions of faith and its limiting boundaries. It linked all this to its distinctive system which gives it the characteristics that made it "the best community that has ever been raised for mankind," assigning to it its role of leading mankind to the Divine path and way of life.

This passage defines the source from which the Muslim community derives its way of life, how it receives it, the method of understanding what it learns, the ultimate arbiter in controversial matters where a clear verdict is needed, and the authority to obey and how it derives its mandate. Such definitions clearly set out the conditions of faith and the boundaries of Islam.

This is the central issue which this passage makes absolutely clear. When we study it, we wonder how anyone who claims to be a Muslim could argue about it. Here, the Muslim community reads that God's messengers were sent to mankind so that they

may be obeyed, by God's leave, not merely to convey God's message or to advocate the Divine way of lift "We *have sent every messenger so that he should be obeyed by God's leave."* (Verse 64) The Muslim community is also told that people will not be true believers unless they refer all their disputes to God's method and constitution. During the Prophet's time, this meant accepting the Prophet's rulings in all situations. After him, this means that reference must be made to the Qur'ān and to the Prophet's *sunnah.* What is more, it is not enough that they should refer to him in order to be accepted as believers; they must accept his rulings without hesitation. (Verse 65)

The *sūrah* also tells the members of the Muslim community that those who want to refer their disputes to false gods, i.e. to a law other than God's law, will not have their claims to be believers accepted. Their claim is false, belied by their reference to false gods. (Verse 60) The Muslim community is told that their refusal to refer all disputes to God's revelations and His Messenger is a clear mark of hypocrisy. (Verse 61)

The *sūrah* also makes it clear to the Muslim community that its faith defines for it a Divine way of life and a constitution which, together, stipulate that it must obey God by implementing the Qur'ān, obey His Messenger by following his *sunnah,* and obey those believers who have been given power. It is also made aware that the ultimate arbiter in matters of controversy and in any question on which we have no definitive ruling is God and His Messenger, i.e. God's law and the Prophet's practice. Thus the Divine method continues to have the final say in whatever question, problem or dispute may arise at any time, now and in the future. This is the basic rule of the Muslim community without which it cannot be a community of true believers in Islam.

We must not forget what we have explained in our commentary on verse 48, which says: "*God will never forgive that partners are associated with Him. He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.''* We mentioned there that the Jews were described as idolaters because they took their rabbis for gods. They did not worship them as such. The fact that they accepted and obeyed what those rabbis legislated, under their own claimed authority and with no basis of Divine law, classed the Jews as associating partners with God. Thus, they were guilty of that offence which God does not forgive. He forgives every other sin, including cardinal ones, such as adultery, theft and drinking intoxicants. Thus, the whole issue rests on believing in God's absolute oneness, and that, as such, all sovereignty belongs to Him alone. Sovereignty is, after all, the central quality of Godhead. Within these limits, a person remains a Muslim and a believer. He may hope to have all his sins, including cardinal ones, forgiven. Once these limits are breached, the person who breaches them, in effect, associates partners with God, and this is something God does not forgive. Such is the basic

condition of faith.

This is the great issue which is discussed fully in this passage and to which we now turn in detail.

Trust and Justice

> *God commands you to deliver whatever you have been entrusted with to their rightful owners, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Most excellent is what God exhorts you to do. God hears all and sees all.* (Verse 58)

These are the main obligations placed on the Muslim community and these sum up its moral code: namely, fulfilment of trust and maintaining justice. The basic and most important trust is that which God has implanted in human nature. This is the one which the heavens, the earth and the mountains refused to accept, but which man undertook. It is that of willingly and deliberately recognising Divine guidance and believing in God. This is the trust that God has given to human beings alone in their very nature. Other creatures have been given faith without the need for any effort on their part. Thus, they recognise their Lord and worship Him without having to make any choice or exerting any special effort. It is man alone who has been given this task to fulfil on the basis of his guiding nature, knowledge, reasoning, will and effort. He will always receive God's help in that: *"As for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead to Us; for, indeed, God is with those who do good."* (29: 69)

This is, then, the first trust man has to fulfil. It is that which gives rise to all other trusts which God commands people to fulfil. An important one among these being to give testimony in favour of Islam. This takes the form firstly of striving hard within oneself so that one's life, feelings, actions and behaviour become a practical translation of faith. Thus, when people praise a believer's behaviour, values and manners and moral standards, they realise that it is only because he believes in Islam that he is able to attain such high standards.

Another way of giving testimony in favour of Islam is the realisation of just how much more profound and superior Islam is to other human beliefs. With this knowledge, a believer begins to call on people to believe in Islam, explaining its values and principles. It is not sufficient then for a believer to keep his faith to himself. He must fulfil his task of making it known, calling upon others to accept it. That is part of his trust and as such he should discharge it.

Testimony is further given by taking steps to help implement Islam as a code of living for the Muslim community, and in human life in general. To do this, believers should make use of every means available to them both as individuals and as

members of that community. Such a practical implementation is the most important trust, second only to accepting the faith itself. No individual and no group are exempt from this trust. The Prophet says: "*Jihād*" continues until the Day of Resurrection." Jihād in this sense is a fulfilment of a specific trust.

Another trust which is implied in the above is that of dealing with people and delivering to them whatever they have entrusted to us. That includes honesty in daily transactions, giving honest counsel to rulers and ruled, taking good care of young children, protecting the interests of the community and defending it against hostile forces and observing all duties and obligations outlined by the Divine code. All these are trusts that must be fulfilled.

The order to maintain justice is stated in the most general terms so as to make it obligatory between all people. It does not mean that justice should be confined to Muslims only, or to dealings between them and the followers of earlier Divine religions alone. Justice is due to every individual human being. The requirement to maintain justice only takes into account the fact that people are human beings, and that that alone qualifies them for just treatment. Hence, justice should be extended to all: believers and non-believers, friends and enemies, white and coloured, Arabs and non-Arabs, etc. The Muslim community, whenever it exercises power, is responsible for maintaining justice between them all. In fact, humanity has never experienced such justice except under Islamic rule, when Muslims were the leaders of mankind. Once Muslims lost that leadership, humanity has been unable to experience any similar justice that applies to all people, simply because they are human beings. Such administration of pure and complete justice is the cornerstone of Islamic government, and delivering trusts to their rightful owners is the basic characteristic of life under Islam.

The verse makes it clear that orders both to be true to one's trust and to maintain justice between people are part of God's admonition. Good and greatly beneficial indeed is whatever God directs and admonishes us to do. Besides, this is not a mere admonition; it is an order. God only describes it as admonition because that makes it easier to fulfil. Hearts and consciences accept admonition more readily, because its implementation appears to be more of a voluntary nature.

The final comment in the verse attaches the whole matter to fear of God and hope for His reward: "*God hears all and sees all.*" *There* is perfect harmony between the duties God imposes on Muslims and the requirements to fulfil trust and maintain justice on the one hand and God's seeing and hearing everything on the other. God is certain to hear and see all matters related to the fulfilment of trust. Justice, on the other hand, requires good attention, sharp vision and proper evaluation and judgement, as well as taking into account all the relevant factors and circumstances so as to evaluate them properly. Moreover, the order to do both comes from the One

who hears and sees all things.

Then we ask: What is the standard by which to define, measure and administer the fulfilment of trust and the maintaining of justice, in all spheres and aspects of life? Is this something to be left to people's traditions and personal judgement? Reason has its position and value as a means of acquiring knowledge and recognising guidance; that is true. However, when we speak of reason as a human quality, we refer to the reason of individuals and groups in a particular set-up, influenced as it may be by a host of factors. There is nothing we may call "human reason" as an absolute concept. Every individual or group has a reason and a mind of his or its own, at a particular place and time. But all these are subject to various influences, pulling them in all manner of directions.

An Accurate Standard for the Human Mind

It is imperative that a proper standard should be available for all these minds to refer to in order to establish right and wrong in their evaluation and judgement of different issues. The human mind is the one tool available to man in order to determine the accuracy and fairness of his judgements, for this standard does not bend in order to please or appease anyone. The standards people produce for themselves cannot be placed on the same level, because these may be faulty or defective, leading to an imbalance that affects all values. The only way to avoid such imbalance is to refer to the ever-accurate standard God has established for human life in order to maintain honesty and justice, and to establish all proper values and rulings in all spheres of human activity: "*Believers, obey God and obey the Messenger and those from among you who have been entrusted with authority. If you are in dispute over anything, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best [for you], and most suitable for final determination.*" (Verse 59)

In this short statement, God explains the conditions for being a believer and the boundaries of Islam. At the same time, He outlines the underlying rule of the constitution of the Muslim community, the basis of all judgement and the source of all authority. All these begin and end with receiving guidance from God alone, and, where there is no clear statement, to refer to Him in any detail that may arise in human life over which people may differ.

Sovereignty belongs to God alone in all human life and all its affairs, large and small. God has enacted a constitution and a law which He has embodied in His revealed Book, the Qur'ān, and sent His Messenger to explain it to people. God's Messenger "*does not speak out of his own desire: that [which he conveys to you] is but a [Divine] inspiration which he receives.*" (53: 3-4) Hence, the Prophet's *sunnah* is part of God's law.

To obey God is obligatory. One of the essential elements of Godhead is that God enacts the law; implementation of this is, thus, obligatory. Believers are required to obey God, to start with, and to obey His Messenger, since it is God that has sent him with His message. Thus, obedience to the Prophet is part of obeying God Himself. Moreover, the Prophet's *sunnah* and his judgement are part of the Divine law that must be implemented. Whether a person is a believer or not is conditional on such obedience and implementation. As the Qur'ān specifies: *"If you are in dispute over anything, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day."* (Verse 59)

The verse that gives the order to obey God and His Messenger also orders that those *"entrusted with authority"* must also be obeyed. However, these are clearly defined as the ones *"from among you,"* i.e. from among the believers who meet the condition of faith and keep within the boundaries of Islam. This requires them to obey God and His Messenger, accept sovereignty as belonging to God alone and implement only His guidance. The text, as it is phrased, makes obedience to both God and the Messenger a basic, unquestionable duty. Obedience to people entrusted with authority comes as a corollary of such obedience to God and His Messenger. Obeying them applies to that which is known of God's law, that which is not covered by a statement of prohibition and that which is not subject to prohibition when referred to God's law. The *sunnah* makes the extent of such obedience to those people who are "entrusted with authority" very clear: The Prophet says: "Obedience applies in what is reasonably equitable." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.) Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim also relate: "A Muslim is required to listen and obey, when he likes or dislikes, unless he is ordered to commit what is forbidden. Should he be so ordered, then he must neither listen nor obey." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.) In an authentic *ĥadīth* related by Muslim, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "When you are ruled by a slave who implements God's Book, listen to him and obey."

Thus Islam makes every individual in a position of trust with regard to God's law and the Prophet's *sunnah.* That trust covers his own faith, body, soul and destiny in this life and in the life to come. No individual, man or woman, is a sheep in the flock, one in the crowd, obeying orders from here or there. The law and constitution are abundantly clear, and the limits of obedience are also clear. The law and the *sunnah* to be obeyed are the same, thus giving rise to neither division nor confusion.

- Such obedience to people entrusted with authority applies when we have definitive statements in the Qur'ān or the *ĥadīth.* Where no such definitive statement exists, and when we have something new arising as a result of new circumstances, and over which people may have differences of understanding and viewpoints — such matters have not been left hanging in the air, without the possibility of deducing rulings and judgements. In a short statement, the whole basis and

operation of arriving at such rulings through scholarly discretion is laid down: *"If you are in dispute over anything, refer it-to God and the Messenger."* (Verse 59)

What this means is that in such matters where a ruling is needed, these should be referred to whatever implicitly applies to them of Qur'ānic and *ĥadīth* statements. If no such text is applicable, then they should be referred to the general principles of God's law and constitution. These are by no means fluid, confusing or ambiguous, as some people may suggest. Indeed, this religion of ours lays down clear, basic principles covering all aspects of human life, together providing a clear boundary which cannot be breached without any living Islamic conscience recognising the breach.

"If you truly believe in God and the Last Day." (Verse 59) Thus, obeying God and His Messenger, as well as those believers entrusted with authority and trying hard to ensure the implementation of God's law, and referring what is in dispute to God and the Messenger, are all a condition and result of believing in God and the Day of Judgement. Faith does not come into existence unless this condition is fulfilled and its result comes into effect.

Following the previous admonition to fulfil trust and maintain justice, the verse, having explained the issue in such a conditional way, now reiterates it in the form of an admonition that makes it genuinely desired: *"This is the best [for you], and most suitable for final determination."* (Verse 59) It is, indeed, best for you in this life and in the life to come, and it works to your own good in the final resolve in both lives. Great as it is that following this method ensures God's pleasure and earns His reward in the life to come, it is not the only result. Additionally, it ensures the best results for both the individual and the community in this present life.

By following this constitution man reaps the whole benefit of a code of living devised by the Almighty, the Wise whose knowledge is perfect and absolute; a code free of human ignorance, desire and weakness. It is a code of living that favours no individual, class, nation, race or generation over another, because God is the Lord of all mankind who does not entertain any prejudice or favouritism for anyone.

This code of living has numerous advantages, among which is the fact that its author is the Maker of man who knows his nature and its real needs, his inner feelings and preferences, and how he responds and reforms. God does not need to go through trials and errors in order to learn what suits mankind. Far be it from Him to have any such need. When we follow this code of living, we spare ourselves the heavy price of following alternative methods that are bound to be defective, invented as they are by people who lack solid evidence. It is sufficient for human beings to exert their inventive talents in the material world, for this offers them very wide scope. On the other hand, human intellect will have much to do in trying to

implement God's constitution, recognising the areas that allow for analogy and discretion.

Another advantage is that its author is the Creator of the universe in which man lives. Thus, He produces for man a system that remains in perfect harmony with the laws that operate in the universe. This gives man an awareness that he is not in conflict with these laws. He only needs to understand and benefit by them. The Divine constitution will guide his footsteps and provide him with protection as he does so.

A further advantage is that this Divine constitution treats man with respect and honour, allowing him scope for discretion on the basis of scholarship that understands the texts and refers what is new to such texts and the principles they lay down. Hence, following Divine guidance will always be *"the best [for you], and most suitable for final determination."* (Verse 59)

Claims Belied by Action

Now the *sūrah* refers to those who claim to be believers but who deliberately violate the central condition of faith, trying to refer their disputes to false gods for arbitration, when they have been commanded to reject such false gods. The *sūrah* wonders at their attitude and warns them against Satan's attempts to lead them far astray. It describes their reaction when they show their aversion to being called upon to adhere to what God has revealed and to follow His Messenger. The *sūrah* considers this an act of hypocrisy, and denounces their reference to false gods as a rejection of faith. When their wicked plans end up in misery they try to justify themselves, but their justification is shown to be hollow and false. Nevertheless, God directs His Messenger (peace be upon him) to give them good counsel and to admonish them. The paragraph concludes with a clear statement of God's purpose in sending Messengers, which shows that they must be obeyed.

> *Are you not aware of those who claim that they believe in what has been bestowed from on high upon you, as well as in what was bestowed from on high before you? They seek the judgement of false gods, although they are bidden to deny them. But Satan wants to lead them far astray. When it is said to them, "Come to that which God has bestowed from on high, and to the Messenger," you see the hypocrites turn away from you with aversion. But how will it be when calamity befalls them [on the Day of Judgement! because of what their hands have done in this world? They would then come to you, swearing by God, "Our aim was but to do good, and to bring about harmony." As for them — God knows all that is in their hearts. So leave them alone, and admonish them, and speak to them a word to reach their very souls. We have sent every messenger so that he should be obeyed by God's leave. If when they have wronged themselves, they would but come to you and pray to God to forgive them, and*

> *the Messenger prayed for their forgiveness, they would surely find that God is the One who accepts repentance, Merciful. But no, by your Lord. They do not really believe unless they make you judge in all disputes between them, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decisions and give themselves up in total submission.* (Verses 60-65)

This description suggests that all this was in the early stages, after Islam first settled in Madinah. At the time, the hypocrites mustered a substantial force and the Jews, who co-operated with the hypocrites, commanded real strength. Those who did not wish to refer their disputes to God's law, preferring to refer them to false gods instead, might have been a group of hypocrites, as they are clearly described in the second verse in this paragraph. Alternatively, they might have been Jews who, when they needed arbitration in their dealings with the people of Madinah, were invited to refer them to God's Book, i.e. the Torah, in some cases, or to God's Messenger in others. They declined and preferred to refer them to the local traditions that prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia. After consideration, we feel that the first view is more accurate, especially in light of their claims "*that they believe in what has been bestowed from on high upon you, as well as in what was bestowed from on high before you.*" (Verse 60) The Jews did not claim to have accepted Islam or to have believed in what was revealed to the Prophet. It was the hypocrites who made such claims in the early period of Islam, i.e. before their power was severely curtailed with the victories achieved against the Jews of Quraiżah and Khaybar. This subsequently led to the steady weakening of the hypocrites' power in Madinah.

Whatever the case, our understanding of these verses is that they make absolutely clear the conditions for faith just as they define the meaning of Islam. We see in them a clear declaration that any one who wishes to refer to false gods is a non-believer, because God has ordained that people should disbelieve in such false gods. We also read in them an oath, by God, that such people will not attain to faith and will not be included among the believers until they refer their disputes to the Prophet for arbitration, accept his judgement and put it into force. This must be an obedience inspired by contented acceptance of his rulings.

"*Are you not aware of those who claim that they believe in what has been bestowed from on high upon you, as well as in what was bestowed from on high before you? They seek the judgement of false gods, although they are bidden to deny them. But Satan wants to lead them far astray.*" (Verse 60) Have you seen this most amazing situation? Here are a group of people who profess to believe, but immediately negate their own assertions. They claim to believe in what has been revealed to Muĥammad and in earlier revelations as well, but they will not refer their disputes for arbitration on the basis of such revelations. Instead, they want to refer them to a different system, seeking different rulings based on nothing that is contained in God's revelations. That means that they

refer them to "false gods", which claim for themselves an essential attribute of Godhead, and, hence, they apply no clear and accurate criteria.

Moreover, they do not do so out of ignorance or doubt. They know for certain that they are forbidden to refer to such false gods, as the verse makes clear: "*They seek the judgement of false gods, although they are bidden to deny them.*" (Verse 60) Hence, their claims to believe in God's revelations cannot be true. The fact is that Satan tries to steer them far away from God's guidance, so that they cannot return to it at any time: "*But Satan wants to lead them far astray.*" (Verse 60) This is, then, the cause behind their reference to false gods and the reason for their violation of the essentials of faith. It is all stated clearly for them so that they may take heed and mend their ways. It is also made clear to the Muslim community so that it realises who inspires and supports such people.

The *sūrah* continues to illustrate their reaction when they are called upon to refer co what they profess to believe of Divine revelations given to Muĥammad and earlier prophets: *"When it is said to them, 'Come to that which God has bestowed from on high, and to the Messenger,' you see the hypocrites turn away from you with aversion."* (Verse 61)

It is a certainty that hypocrisy will out. It will inevitably contradict obvious natural logic. Otherwise it would not be hypocrisy. An obvious and natural result of belief is that a person should refer for arbitration to what and whom he believes in. Hence, when a person professes to believe in God and what He has revealed, and in the Prophet and the revelations he has received, then he is called upon to refer any dispute to them. When he declines and turns away, he contradicts obvious natural logic and reveals his hypocrisy. He belies his own claims of believing in God, His revelations and Messenger.

The *sūrah* then portrays one specific aspect of hypocrisy in their behaviour. That is when they encounter misfortune or calamity as a result of their refusal to refer matters to God's revelations and to His Messenger, or their reference to false gods. They are certain to come up with excuses, but these are only the excuses of hypocrisy: "*But how will it be when calamity befalls them [on the Day of Judgement! because of what their hands have done in this world? They would then come to you, swearing by God, 'Our aim was but to do good, and to bring about harmony.'*" (Verse 62)

Such a calamity could have occurred at the time, as a result of their reality being exposed. This would have seen them outcast and boycotted by the Muslim community. That community would not have tolerated having in its midst people asserting to believe in God, the Messenger and revelation, yet who turn away from the same when they are invited to have their disputes adjudged by God's Messenger. Such an attitude would only be accepted in a society where faith does not exist: a society whose share of faith is nothing more than the claims asserted by such people

and whose share of Islam is no more than names and allegations.

Another calamity may also befall them, in the form of any injustice they suffer as a result of putting their disputes to a system other than that ordained by God to ensure full justice to all. Thus, their efforts to ensure fair treatment end up in miserable failure. Or they may suffer a calamity as a test to which they are put by God, so that they may once again reflect upon and accept His guidance. 'Whatever the cause of the calamity, the *sūrah* wonders at their attitude when it occurs. They realise that they have to make their excuses to the Prophet: *"They would then come to you, swearing by God, `Our aim was but to do good, and to bring about harmony.'"* (Verse 62)

This is a sorrowful state of affairs. They return, aware of the enormity of their action, unable to face the Prophet with the true nature of their motives, yet ready with their false oaths that their action, which may have been arbitration according to pre-Islamic traditions, only aimed at achieving harmony in society and serving its interests. These are the claims of all people who refuse to refer to Divine law and its way of life. They assert that they only want to avoid problems and difficulties and to achieve harmony between different groups and beliefs. Such are the arguments of the hypocrites and those who falsely assert to be believers.

Limitless in His glory, God exposes their reality, and tells His Messenger that He knows the reality of what they harbour in their hearts. He, nevertheless, directs him to be gentle with them and to admonish them so that they may stop their double dealings: *"As for them – God knows all that is in their hearts. So leave them alone, and admonish them, and speak to them a word to reach their very souls."* (Verse 63) There is no doubt that God knows their real beliefs, motives and intentions, and how false their excuses are. Yet the policy He tells His Messenger to follow is to overlook their real attitude and to continue to treat them gently, so trying to teach and admonish them.

Here the verse uses a remarkable expression: *"Speak to them a word to reach their very souls."* (Verse 63) A literal translation would render the sentence: "Tell them, in their very souls, something highly effective." This portrays a very powerful action, showing the words as being directed to their very hearts and souls.

Yet in spite of their unacceptable action and their turning away from God's revelations, they are invited to turn back in repentance and to seek a comfortable and stable life, enjoying the care of God and His Messenger. The door is always open for repentance. It is certainly not too late for turning back to God, seeking His forgiveness. When the Prophet himself requests God to forgive them, they are certain to be forgiven, by God's leave.

Prophets Must Be Obeyed

A basic fact needs to be asserted here. God has sent His Messengers in order that they should be obeyed, by His leave. They may not be disobeyed. Their role is not merely that of guides and preachers: *"We have sent every messenger so that he should be obeyed by God's leave. If when they have wronged themselves, they would but come to you and pray to God to forgive them, and the Messenger prayed for their forgiveness, they would surely find that God is the One who accepts repentance, Merciful."* (Verse 64) This is a very important fact. God's Messenger is not merely a day preacher who speaks fine words to which no one need pay any heed, as claimed by those who try to distort the role of faith and prophets.

Religion is a code for practical life, with all its systems, situations, values, morality, and worship. This requires that God's message should enjoy proper enforcement authority, commanding obedience. In fact, God has sent His messengers so that they be obeyed, by His leave and within His law, so that the Divine way of life is properly implemented. Thus, obedience of God's messenger is part of obeying God. He certainly has not sent a messenger so that he has only a moral effect on people and gets them to offer worship rituals. That would be an erroneous understanding of religion, which does not fit with the purpose of God sending His messengers. His purpose in so sending them is to establish a proper code in practical life. A world where a messenger has only to speak to people, urging them to mend their ways, and who then leaves them to throw his admonition behind their backs, is far from respectable.

This explains the true image of Islam in history: a message to be conveyed, a regime, an authority, and a system of government to implement the Islamic law and constitution after the Prophet has passed away. This ensures continuous obedience of the Prophet, generation after generation, and fulfils God's purpose behind sending His messengers. There is no other set-up which may be given the name Islam, or which represents the Islamic faith. The essential characteristic of any true Islamic set-up, regardless of the actual form or system it adopts, is complete acceptance of the Divine way of life, referring all matters to God's law, obeying God's Messenger in all that he has conveyed to us of God's message, and acknowledging that Godhead belongs completely to God alone. This makes all sovereignty, with its essential corollary of legislative authority, belong to God. An important result of this is not to refer to false gods in any matter, serious or trivial. Reference must always be to God and His Messenger in any situation that may come up as a result of life development.

The *sūrah* then opens up a way back for those who "wrong themselves" by deviating from God's way. This is the same chance as offered to the hypocrites of Madinah at the time of the Prophet: *"If when they have wronged themselves, they would but come to you and pray to God to forgive them, and the Messenger prayed for their forgiveness, they would surely find that God is the One who accepts repentance, Merciful."*

(Verse 64) When repentance is genuine, God will definitely accept it. He is always merciful to those who return to Him. It is He who describes Himself as such and promises those who turn to Him in repentance, seeking His forgiveness, that He will accept their repentance and turn to them in mercy. Those who were the first to he addressed by this statement had the chance of requesting the Prophet to pray for their forgiveness. This chance is no longer there, but God's door remains open at all times, and His promise will always come true. No one need have any hesitation, once his repentance is sincere.

We then have a categorical and decisive statement, with God declaring an oath by His majestic self, that no one can be a true believer until he accepts the Prophet's rulings over all his life affairs and submits to them willingly, without any hesitation: "*But no, by your Lord! They do not really believe unless they make you judge in all disputes between them, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decisions and give themselves up in total submission.*" (Verse 65) Again, we have here a reiteration of the conditions of faith and the boundaries of Islam. With such a statement from God, no one can argue about it in any way. Yet, in an attempt that cannot command any degree of respect, some people allege that this applies to a particular period of time, and to a certain group of people. By doing so, they betray their total lack of understanding of Islam and their complete failure to grasp the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

What this verse states is a fundamental Islamic principle, expressed in the form of a confirmed oath, without any qualification. This cannot be construed as meaning that the Prophet, in person, should judge in all disputes between believers at all times. His judgement, as referred to here, means a judgement based on his faith and implementation of the Divine law. Otherwise, God's law and the Prophet's *sunnah* would have no place in the life of the community after the Prophet had passed away. Such was the standpoint of the most hardened apostates at the time of Abū Bakr, who fought them hard. In fact, he fought them for something much less serious, namely their refusal to obey Islam with respect to its obligation of *zakāt* payment and the Prophet's ruling on how it is paid after his death.

If it is sufficient as a proof of accepting Islam that people should refer their disputes to God's law and His Messenger's rulings. However, such referral is not sufficient as proof of having faith, unless it is accompanied by complete satisfaction and total and reassured submission. Such is the meaning of being a Muslim and having faith [i.e. *īmān].* Let everyone consider how far it is true in his or her own situation before making any claims under this heading.

A Law Made Easy

Next, the *sūrah* confirms that the code of living people are called upon to implement is easy to apply and that the law to judge in their disputes is compassionate, returning verdicts full of mercy. It does not impose on them anything that is too hard or requiring great sacrifices. God knows how weak man is, and He turns to him with mercy. He knows that if people have very tough duties, only a few will fulfil such duties. He does not wish to overburden them, or that they should fall into sin. Hence, He has not imposed on them what is too hard or what causes many of them to fall short of obeying Him. Thus, when people respond to God's admonition and fulfil the easy tasks imposed on them, they receive great benefits both in the life of this world and in the life to come. God is certain to help them by facilitating their guidance, as He helps everyone who tries his best to follow His guidance: *"Yet if We were to order them, Lay down your lives,' or, 'Forsake your homelands,' only a very few of them would do it; but if they would do what they are admonished to do, it would indeed be for their own good and apt to strengthen them greatly [in faith]. And We should indeed grant them, out of Our grace, a mighty reward, and indeed guide them along a straight path."* (Verses 66-68)

This religion of Islam is easy for anyone with an uncorrupted nature to follow. It does not require any superior will-power, available only to a few. The Islamic message is not meant for such a minority; it is a faith for all mankind. People differ in their abilities to fulfil obligations. The religion of Islam ensures that they are all able to fulfil their obligations and refrain from what is forbidden.

Killing oneself and forsaking one's homeland are two types of hardship to undergo. Were they made binding tasks, they would only be fulfilled by the smallest minority. They have not been imposed, because it is not an objective of Islam to impose such stringent obligations that are too difficult for most people to fulfil, or that most people turn away from. The objective is that all people should be able to fulfil them, so that all those with uncorrupted natures should e able to join the ranks of the faithful. In this way, the Muslim community will include people of different abilities and talents, which helps Islam to progress and refine itself.

Ibn Jurayj relates on the authority Abū Isĥāq al-Subay`ī: "When the verse stating *'if We were to order them, "Lay down your lives"'* was revealed, one of us said, 'Had we been ordered, we would have done it; but we praise God for having spared us.' The Prophet was informed and he commented, 'Some of my followers have firmer faith than great mountains .

Ibn Abī Ĥātim relates on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr: "When the verse stating *'if We were to order them, "Lay down your lives"'* was revealed, the Prophet said, 'Had it been required, Ibn Umm `Abd would have been one of them." Another report on the authority of Shurayĥ ibn Ubayd says: "When the Prophet recited the verse stating *'if We were to order them, "Lay down your lives"'* he pointed to `Abdullāh

ibn Rawāĥah and said, `Had God ordered this, that man would have been among the few who responded.'"

God's Messenger's knowledge of his followers was both intimate and profound. He knew the qualities of each one of them more than they knew themselves. The history of his blessed life reveals numerous examples of the Prophet's intimate knowledge of each one of his Companions, as well as his knowledge of the people and tribes who were fighting him. His was the knowledge of the leader, aware of the minute details of all around him. This aspect of the Messenger's intimate knowledge has not as yet been studied fully. This, however, does not form part of our discussion here.

The Prophet, then, was aware that there were among his followers those who would have fulfilled the toughest of tasks, had these been required of them. However, he also knew that Divine religion is not meant for such elite among humanity. God knows the nature of the human being He has created and the limitations of his ability. Hence, He has not imposed on people, in the religion which He has revealed for all mankind, anything except what is easy for all people to accomplish, provided that they have honesty in their beliefs, a determined desire to obey God, and a nature uncorrupted by wicked influences.

To understand this is exceedingly important when we face evil calls advocating immoral behaviour under the pretext that it is part of human nature. Such philosophies claim that such are the limits of human nature, and they describe religion as an idealistic notion that cannot be implemented in real life. They allege that against every person who can fulfil religious obligations, there are one hundred who cannot.

This claim is both false and deceptive, and it betrays ignorance. It is a claim by people who neither understand man, nor have his Creator's knowledge about him. It is God, his Creator, who imposes on him religious duties, and He knows that these are within the ability of an ordinary human being, because religion is not made for the privileged few. It merely requires the sort of resolve an ordinary human being has, good intention and taking the first step to start along the Islamic way. This is sufficient to ensure the fulfilment of God's promise: *"But if they would do what they are admonished to do, it would indeed be for their own good and apt to strengthen them greatly [in faith]. And We should indeed grant them, out of Our grace, a mighty reward, and indeed guide them along a straight path."* (Verses 66-68)

Once a start is made, God's help is certain to come to ensure that steady progress is made. This is followed by great reward and guidance along the right path. God always tells the truth. He will never deceive His servants or leave His promises to them unfulfilled. *"Whose word could be truer than God's?"* (Verse 87)

When we speak of the easy nature of this religion of Islam, we are not referring to the concessions and exemptions it gives. Nor do we mean to gather all such concessions and make of them a guiding principle in life. This religion includes both hard duties and concessions. The first are essential, because they are what is required in the first place. The concessions are given to cater for emergencies and special situations. Presenting Islam as a collection of such concessions, some of its well-intentioned advocates say to other people: "Look how easy to follow this religion is!" On the other hand, some of those who are keen to appease the rulers or the masses try to find loopholes to satisfy their desires, making such loopholes the essence of Islam.

This religion of Islam is not a set of concessions or loopholes. It is a complete whole that includes matters requiring strong resolve as well as concessions. It is made easy for people, so that, once he has made his resolve, an ordinary person can follow it and attain his personal perfection, within the limitations of his human nature. This is analogous to a garden in which grapes, plums, pears, berries, figs and cucumber become ripe, but have different tastes. Once each of them becomes ripe, no one says it is not ripe simply because its taste is of a different kind from the rest. In the garden of Islam all sorts of fruits are grown and ripen, giving different tastes, but each attains its perfect stage. Thus, we say that Islam is God's plant, grown in God's field, under God's care.

The Reward of Obedience

At the end of this passage, *the sūrah* once again tries to arouse people's feelings, raising before them the prospect of the most noble companionship in the life to come: "*All who obey God and the Messenger shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets, and those who never deviate from the truth, and the martyrs and the righteous ones. How goodly a company are these! Such is God's bounty, and sufficient it is that God knows all.*" (Verses 69-70) It is a prospect to tempt every heart, even with the slightest degree of goodness and the faintest hope of attaining a good position in the life to come, with noble companions, enjoying God's endless favours. To be in the company of such a group can only come about by God's grace. No human being, devout as he or she may be, can ever hope to attain such a grade merely by their devotion. They attain it only through God's abounding grace.

It is fitting here that we should reflect on how the Prophet's Companions yearned for his company in the life to come as well. Some of them could not even contemplate parting with him, when he was still alive among them. When this verse was revealed, their hearts were filled with hope.

Al-Ṭabarī relates on the authority of Sa`īd ibn Jubayr that a man from the Anṣār

looked depressed when he came to the Prophet. The Prophet asked him the cause of his sorrow. He said: "It is something that I have been thinking of." When the Prophet asked him about it, the man said: "We come to see you in the morning and in the evening, look at you and sit with you. Tomorrow, you will be raised to be in the company of other prophets in Heaven,

b and we cannot attain to you." The Prophet gave him no reply. Then this verse was revealed, stating: "*All who obey God and the Messenger shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets...*" The Prophet sent someone to the man to give him this happy news.

A different version of this report is given by Abū Bakr ibn Mardawaih on `Ā'ishah's authority: "A man said to the Prophet, 'Messenger of God, you are dearer to me than myself, my family and my children. I may be at home when I mention you, and I cannot wait to come and see you. When I remember my death and your death, I realise that when you are admitted to heaven, your position will be high among the rest of the prophets. Should I be admitted to heaven, I fear that I may not see you." The Prophet did not answer him until this verse was revealed: "*All who obey God and the Messenger shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets, and those who never deviate from the truth, and the martyrs and the righteous ones. How goodly a company are these!*" (Verse 69)

Rabī`ah ibn Ka`b al-Aslamī reports: "I used to stay some nights at the Prophet's home. One night I brought him water for his ablution and purification. He said to me, 'Tell me your request.' I said, 'Messenger of God, I seek to be your companion in heaven.' He said, 'Say something else.' I said, 'That is my request.' He said, `Then help me to triumph over yourself by frequent prayer and prostration." (Related by Muslim.)

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of several of the Prophet's Companions that God's Messenger was asked about a person who loves a certain company, but whose actions leave him unable to catch up with them. He said: "A person is grouped [in the hereafter] with those whom he loves." Anas reports, "Muslims were never happier than when they heard this *ĥadīth.*"

Those Companions of the Prophet were genuinely concerned about the life to come and with whom they would be there, because they had experienced the Prophet's company in this life. This is, indeed, a matter of concern to everyone who truly loves God's Messenger. The last *ĥadīth* spreads its light over us, providing hope and reassurance.

7
Fighting for a Noble Purpose

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ خُذُواْ حِذۡرَكُمۡ فَٱنفِرُواْ ثُبَاتٍ أَوِ ٱنفِرُواْ جَمِيعٗا ﴿٧١﴾

Believers, be fully prepared against danger, and go to war either in small groups or all together. (71)

وَإِنَّ مِنكُمۡ لَمَن لَّيُبَطِّئَنَّ فَإِنۡ أَصَـٰبَتۡكُم مُّصِيبَةٞ قَالَ قَدۡ أَنۡعَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيَّ إِذۡ لَمۡ أَكُن مَّعَهُمۡ شَهِيدٗا ﴿٧٢﴾

There are indeed among you such as would lag behind, and then, if a calamity befalls you, say, "God has bestowed His favours upon me in that I was not present with them!" (72)

وَلَئِنۡ أَصَـٰبَكُمۡ فَضۡلٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ لَيَقُولَنَّ كَأَن لَّمۡ تَكُۢنۢ بَيۡنَكُمۡ وَبَيۡنَهُۥ مَوَدَّةٞ يَـٰلَيۡتَنِي كُنتُ مَعَهُمۡ فَأَفُوزَ فَوۡزًا عَظِيمٗا ﴿٧٣﴾

But if good fortune comes to you from God, he is sure to say —just as if there had never been any question of love between you and him — "Oh, would that I had been with them; I would surely have had a [share in a] mighty triumph." (73)

۞ فَلۡيُقَـٰتِلۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَشۡرُونَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۚ وَمَن يُقَـٰتِلۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَيُقۡتَلۡ أَوۡ يَغۡلِبۡ فَسَوۡفَ نُؤۡتِيهِ أَجۡرًا عَظِيمٗا ﴿٧٤﴾

Let them fight in God's cause — all who are willing to barter the life of this world for the life to come. To him who fights in God's cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant a rich reward. (74)

وَمَا لَكُمۡ لَا تُقَـٰتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡمُسۡتَضۡعَفِينَ مِنَ ٱلرِّجَالِ وَٱلنِّسَآءِ وَٱلۡوِلۡدَٰنِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَآ أَخۡرِجۡنَا مِنۡ هَـٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِ ٱلظَّالِمِ أَهۡلُهَا وَٱجۡعَل لَّنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ وَلِيّٗا وَٱجۡعَل لَّنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ نَصِيرًا ﴿٧٥﴾

And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, "Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ يُقَـٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يُقَـٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱلطَّـٰغُوتِ فَقَـٰتِلُوٓاْ أَوْلِيَآءَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنِ ۖ إِنَّ كَيْدَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنِ كَانَ ضَعِيفًا ﴿٧٦﴾

that will help us." (75)

Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan. (76)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ قِيلَ لَهُمْ كُفُّوٓاْ أَيْدِيَكُمْ وَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ فَلَمَّا كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقِتَالُ إِذَا فَرِيقٌ مِّنْهُمْ يَخْشَوْنَ ٱلنَّاسَ كَخَشْيَةِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْ أَشَدَّ خَشْيَةً ۚ وَقَالُواْ رَبَّنَا لِمَ كَتَبْتَ عَلَيْنَا ٱلْقِتَالَ لَوْلَآ أَخَّرْتَنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ ۗ قُلْ مَتَـٰعُ ٱلدُّنْيَا قَلِيلٌ وَٱلْـَٔاخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ لِّمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰ وَلَا تُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا ﴿٧٧﴾

Are you not aware of those who have been told, "Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt [i.e. the purifying dues]"? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God — or in even greater awe — and said, "Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!" Say, "Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. (77)

أَيْنَمَا تَكُونُواْ يُدْرِككُّمُ ٱلْمَوْتُ وَلَوْ كُنتُمْ فِى بُرُوجٍ مُّشَيَّدَةٍ ۗ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ حَسَنَةٌ يَقُولُواْ هَـٰذِهِۦ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَقُولُواْ هَـٰذِهِۦ مِنْ عِندِكَ ۚ قُلْ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَمَالِ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلْقَوْمِ لَا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ حَدِيثًا ﴿٧٨﴾

Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high." Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, "This is from God," whereas when evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you!" Say, "All is from God." What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told? (78)

مَّآ أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَمَآ أَصَابَكَ مِن سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِن نَّفْسِكَ ۚ وَأَرْسَلْنَـٰكَ لِلنَّاسِ رَسُولًا ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٧٩﴾

Whatever good happens to you is from God; and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself. We have sent you as a Messenger to all mankind. Enough is God for a

witness. (79)

مَّن يُطِعِ ٱلرَّسُولَ فَقَدۡ أَطَاعَ ٱللَّهَۖ وَمَن تَوَلَّىٰ فَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ حَفِيظٗا ٨٠

He who obeys the Messenger obeys God thereby. As for those who turn away—We have not sent you to be their keeper. (80)

وَيَقُولُونَ طَاعَةٞۖ فَإِذَا بَرَزُواْ مِنۡ عِندِكَ بَيَّتَ طَآئِفَةٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ غَيۡرَ ٱلَّذِي تَقُولُۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَكۡتُبُ مَا يُبَيِّتُونَۖ فَأَعۡرِضۡ عَنۡهُمۡ وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَى ٱللَّهِۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلٗا ٨١

And they say, "We do obey you," but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate. All the while God records what they thus devise in secret. Leave them, then, alone, and place your trust in God. Sufficient is God for a guardian. (81)

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَۚ وَلَوۡ كَانَ مِنۡ عِندِ غَيۡرِ ٱللَّهِ لَوَجَدُواْ فِيهِ ٱخۡتِلَٰفٗا كَثِيرٗا ٨٢

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction! (82)

وَإِذَا جَآءَهُمۡ أَمۡرٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡأَمۡنِ أَوِ ٱلۡخَوۡفِ أَذَاعُواْ بِهِۦۖ وَلَوۡ رَدُّوهُ إِلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ وَإِلَىٰٓ أُوْلِي ٱلۡأَمۡرِ مِنۡهُمۡ لَعَلِمَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسۡتَنۢبِطُونَهُۥ مِنۡهُمۡۗ وَلَوۡلَا فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَتُهُۥ لَٱتَّبَعۡتُمُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ٨٣

If any matter pertaining to peace or war comes to their knowledge, they make it known to all and sundry; whereas, if they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it. Were it not for God's bounty to you, and His grace, all but a few of you would certainly have followed Satan. (83)

فَقَٰتِلۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ لَا تُكَلَّفُ إِلَّا نَفۡسَكَۚ وَحَرِّضِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۖ عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَكُفَّ بَأۡسَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْۚ وَٱللَّهُ أَشَدُّ بَأۡسٗا وَأَشَدُّ تَنكِيلٗا ٨٤

Fight, then, in God's cause, since you are responsible only for your own self, and encourage the believers. God may well curb the might of the unbelievers; for God is the strongest in might, and in the ability to deter. (84)

مَّن يَشۡفَعۡ شَفَٰعَةً حَسَنَةٗ يَكُن لَّهُۥ نَصِيبٞ مِّنۡهَاۖ وَمَن يَشۡفَعۡ شَفَٰعَةٗ سَيِّئَةٗ يَكُن لَّهُۥ كِفۡلٞ مِّنۡهَاۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ مُّقِيتًا

Whoever rallies to a good cause shall have a share in its [benefit], and whoever rallies to an evil cause shall have a share in its

[burden]. God watches over everything. (85)

When a greeting is offered you, answer it with an even better greeting, or [at least] with its like. God keeps count of all things. (86)

وَإِذَا حُيِّيتُم بِتَحِيَّةٍ فَحَيُّواْ بِأَحۡسَنَ مِنۡهَآ أَوۡ رُدُّوهَآۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٍ حَسِيبًا

Overview

Most probably, the verses in this passage were revealed early in the Madinah period, possibly after the Battle of Uĥud (626 AD) and before the Battle of the Moat (627 AD). The picture of the Muslim community that emerges from these verses gives that impression. It suggests the existence of a multiplicity of groups within the Muslim community; groups that were yet to mature, or unwilling to embrace the faith of Islam, and who resorted to duplicity and hypocrisy. It implies that the Muslim community was still in need of an extensive effort of education and induction into Islam. A community that required additional motivation and encouragement in order to take on the enormous task placed on its shoulders and meet its requirements, with respect to the concepts of the faith on the one hand and the confrontation with hostile forces on the other.

This in no way detracts from the fact that there were in that community many individuals whose faith, knowledge and understanding had scaled unparalleled heights of excellence and distinction. We are referring here to the Muslim community as a whole. In its condition at the time, it was a melting pot of different, non-homogeneous elements and, as these verses appear to indicate, in need of greater integration and harmonisation.

A closer look at the main features of these instructions takes us into the often-forgotten environment of the Muslim community in its human mode. Once we see this, we can perceive that community's strengths and weaknesses. We can see how the Qur'ān conducts the battle against human weakness and fights the effects of religious ignorance and other hostile forces on society, all at the same time. We can observe the Qur'ānic process of education as it transforms receptive individuals in the real world. Furthermore, we witness part of the continuous effort it dedicated to this purpose until it was able to pick up that group of human beings, with varying calibre and qualities, from the depths of ignorance to such heights of excellence, integration and homogeneity, all within the limits of human nature. All this was witnessed during the latter part of the Prophet Muĥammad's life.

This treatment is extremely valuable, for it helps us to understand the workings of human nature, its propensity to weakness and its predisposition for strength, as seen in the model Muslim community which was educated and raised by the Prophet himself according to the teachings and guidelines of the Qur'ān. It also helps us understand the Qur'ānic approach to education and teaching. We can see how the Qur'ān, gently and caringly, guides people in the real world, and how it arranges and brings into line the ranks of a society made up, as it was, of various qualities and aptitudes.

We can also benefit from this treatment by comparing our condition, and the conditions of other human societies, to the human realities of that select group of people. Our awareness of their weaknesses gives us hope against despairing or abandoning our own endeavours to reform and develop. This social model, with all its merits and virtues, should not live as a mere fleeting vision in our thoughts or as an example that is impossible for us to emulate in our efforts to rise from the depths of ignorance and regression to the heights of enlightenment and progress. Instead, it represents, for us today, a valuable repertoire and benefit. One which we gain from living under the shade of the Qur'ān.

From this passage, we may conclude that the first Muslim community encompassed several groups. There were those who sought excuses for not going out to fight, and who urged others to do likewise. These gloated when the Muslims suffered setbacks but whinged and complained when they triumphed and were themselves excluded from the booty. In other words, these were they who traded the rewards of the life to come for gains in this life.

Then, there were some from among those who had immigrated from Makkah, i.e. the Muhājirīn, who were eager to fight when they were not obliged to do so in Makkah, but who once in Madinah and required to fight, became apprehensive and stricken with apathy. They wished that God would grant them a period of grace and delay any need for them to fight.

Others would acknowledge God's favour when things went well, but blame the Prophet for any misfortune. Their attitude was not taken on the basis of strong faith in God but was rather an attempt to undermine and vilify the Prophet's leadership. There were also those who showed deference to the Prophet whilst in his presence but who, once they had departed, conspired with others against him. Rumour mongers were also found seeking to sow confusion and discord. Then, there were the sceptics who doubted that Qur'ānic commands and directives originated from God, and who thought instead that some of them were Muĥammad's own ideas and thoughts.

Lastly, there were those who defended some of the hypocrites, as we shall see in

due course, and whose actions split the community into two camps. Their behaviour indicated deficient harmony and consistency in faith as also in their understanding of the role of leadership and their relationship with it.

All these types can be brought together into a single group of hypocrites, or we can classify them into two groups: the hypocrites and those of weak faith. The latter group consists of those who had not fully developed their new Islamic character, even though some of them belonged to those who had immigrated from Makkah. However, the existence of these groups within the Muslim community, as it faced hostility from the Jews inside Madinah, the Arab idolaters of Makkah and other enemies lurking all over Arabia, was bound to create cracks in its structure, requiring a prolonged process of education and intensive application.

In the present passage, we learn of aspects of that process and application. We read of the careful, profound and patient treatment of all the ills that may affect individuals as well as the community as a whole. This is manifested in the perseverance of the supreme leader and benefactor of that community, the Prophet Muĥammad, who was teaching and moulding that community according to the guidance of the Qur'ān.

We find precautionary instructions urging the Muslims to go out to fight in groups and squadrons, rather than as single individuals, in view of the risks and the hostile environment surrounding them. They were susceptible to ambush by the hypocrites living in their midst, and their allies among the Jews and other enemy collaborators.

Those who were dithering are portrayed in a dismal light, exposing their broken spirits, their craving for short-term gains, and their shifting loyalties. We find astonishment at those who in Makkah were outspoken in their advocacy of confrontation but who were overcome with anxiety and apprehension the moment they were instructed to take up arms against their enemies after they had settled in Madinah.

We find God's pledge of a generous reward to those who fight for His cause: "*To him who fights in God's cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 74)

The passage also portrays the integrity, magnificence and nobility of the aims and objectives of the cause the Muslims are urged to fight for: "*Fight [for] the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, 'Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us.'*" (Verse 75)

The *sūrah* also emphasises the morality and sound objective for which the believers are fighting, as well as the fallacy and weakness of the unbelievers' cause:

"Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan." (Verse 76)

We see how the Qur'ān deals with and corrects false beliefs that lead to corrupt thoughts and unhealthy behaviour. At times, it asserts the truth about this life and the life to come: *"Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God- fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth."* (Verse 77) At others, it stresses the inevitability of death and the way it is brought about, no matter how much one may guard against it or evade having to fight for God's cause: *"Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high."* (Verse 78) It also asserts the reality of God's will and of man's actions: *"Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, 'This is from God,' whereas when evil befalls them, they say, 'This is from you!' Say, All is from God.' What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told? Whatever good happens to you is from God; and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself."* (Verses 78-9)

We witness how the Qur'ān stresses the true nature of the relationship between God Almighty and His Messenger as we are told that obeying God's Messenger is part of obeying God Himself. It confirms that the whole of the Qur'ān originates with God and that it calls on people to reflect on its unity and integrity, both demonstrating its single origin:

> *He who obeys the Messenger obeys God thereby.* (Verse 80)
>
> *Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction!* (Verse 82)

Having exposed the rumour-mongers, the Qur'ān goes on to advise the Muslims of the safest and proper way for them to act within the collective conventions of the community. It says: *"...If they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it."* (Verse 83) It warns these elements against pursuing that route, as it reminds them of God's favour and grace in guiding them to Islam, saying: *"Were it not for God's bounty to you, and His grace, all but few of you would certainly have followed Satan."* (Verse 83)

One appreciates fully the disruption such phenomena could create within a Muslim community in need of such persistent and varied effort. We hear God Almighty instructing His Messenger to prosecute the *jihād,* even if he were the only one left in the field, and to press upon the believers to do likewise. The Messenger

shall be accountable only for his own actions, while God Almighty will take personal command of the battle: *"Fight, then, in God's cause, since you are responsible only for your own self and encourage the believers. God may well curb the might of the unbelievers; for God is the strongest in might, and in the ability to deter."* (Verse 84) This approach is clearly inspiring and motivating, raising people's hopes of victory and their confidence in God's power and authority.

Just as the Qur'ān was revealed from on high, so it led the Muslims in battle, regardless of which front they had to fight on. Perhaps the most important battle was that against their own selves; against their doubts, fears, misconceptions and the legacy of their pre-Islamic ignorance, as well as their intrinsic human weakness, none of which could be the result of hypocrisy or deviation. It, the Qur'ān, was gently steering them towards a position of power and full internal harmonisation, itself, a much farther and longer lasting goal. No matter how many really powerful members a community has, it is never safe if it has pockets of weakness within its ranks. With diversity of calibre, a community requires harmony and consistency, as it faces up to the mighty challenges awaiting it.

Let us now consider the text in detail.

Taking Proper Precautions

> *Believers, be fully prepared against danger, and go to war either in small groups or all together. There are indeed among you such as would lag behind, and then, if a calamity befalls you, say, "God has bestowed His favours upon me in that I was not present with them!" But if good fortune comes to you from God, he is sure to say – just as if there had never been any question of love between you and him – "Oh, would that I had been with them; I would surely have had a [share in a] mighty triumph."* (Verses 71-73)

This piece of advice is given to the believers by the "high command", God Almighty, who sets out the plan and points the way for believers to go. One is always amazed at how often the Qur'ān actually outlines for the Muslims, albeit in a general form, the blueprint, or order of battle, for the task they are about to undertake. Elsewhere, we find the Qur'ān offering the Muslims a general plan, saying: *"Believers, fight those unbelievers who are near to you and let them find you adamant."* (9: 123) Here it gives advice on the "tactics" to be employed: *"...Be fully prepared against danger, and go to war either in small groups or all together... "* In *Sūrah* 10, The Spoils of War, there are many instances of this kind (verses 57 ff.).

Thus, the Qur'ān not only teaches the Muslims the rules of worship and religious rites, or moral and ethical principles, as the pathetic view of religion suggests, but it

also deals with their life as a whole, covering all the developments and ramifications of life in the real world. On this basis, Islam rightfully demands full hegemony over human life. It accepts from Muslims, individuals as well as societies, nothing less than total submission and compliance with its way of life and teachings. It specifically rejects the idea that Muslims should, individually or collectively, seek several sources for organising their life: one for their personal life — religious, ethical and moral aspects as well as rituals of worship — based on God's revelations, and another for economic, social, political and international matters taken from different sources or based purely on human thought. The duty of such thought is nothing more than to derive and deduce from the Qur'ān detailed rules and principles applicable to life's practical and ever-changing situations and developments, as outlined in the last passage of this *sūrah.* Otherwise, all claims of true belief in Islam are meaningless. Those who adopt such double standards have not fully absorbed the faith and spirit of Islam or appreciated its fundamental principles. The first among these is the belief that "there is no deity except God". This is the basis that lays down the principles that God is the only and the ultimate ruling and legislating authority in the world.

Here, one sees the Qur'ān outlining part of the battle plan for the Muslims, appropriate for the prevailing situation when they were surrounded not only by countless external threats but also by the hypocrites and their Jewish allies inside Madinah. It first cautions them: "*Believers, be fully prepared against danger.*" You should be on the alert, watch all your enemies, especially those within your ranks who discourage you. These will presently be identified.

"*And go to war either in small groups or all together...*" The advice here is either to fight in small contingents or as a full fighting force, as the battle dictates. Solo fighters are easily targeted and taken by an enemy that is widely deployed, especially within the Muslim community itself, as was the case with the hypocrites and the Jews of Madinah.

An Eye for Gain

> *There are indeed among you such as would lag behind, and then, if a calamity befalls you, say, "God has bestowed His favours upon me in that I was not present with them!" But if good fortune comes to you from God, he is sure to say — just as if there had never been any question of love between you and him — "Oh, would that I had been with them; I would surely have had a [share in a] mighty triumph."* (Verses 72-73)

The Muslims are advised to mobilise themselves into either small parties or as a fully-fledged fighting force, and not to allow any of their numbers to dither or lag

behind, as often happened in practice. They must be vigilant, not only with respect to their external enemy, but also towards those among them who stayed behind and who discouraged others from joining this *jihād.*

The Arabic term chosen here to denote the laggards' position is particularly potent and appropriate. It is a word that gives the impression of slowness, as if one stumbles when it is pronounced. Its sound gives a strong hint of the meaning it conveys. That, itself, is characteristic of the Qur'ān's powerful and stylistic prose.

The emphatic structure of the sentence also suggests that these foot draggers, and they were only a handful, were persistent and ardent in their pursuit. This indicates the serious effect their actions had had on the community. Hence, the Qur'ān focuses its attention on them and their intentions outlining, in its own uniquely graphic style, their abhorrent characteristics. Their character, intentions, and all their exploits and claims are exposed for all to see, as if being scrutinised under a microscope, revealing their secrets, aims and motives.

They are shown then, during the Prophet's time, as they are shown today to be hypocritical, weak, two-faced and small-minded. They perceive nothing other than their own immediate self-interests, nor do they ever look farther than their own limited and personal interests. They wish that life should revolve around a single focal point: themselves, which they never overlook.

They dither and prevaricate, but never speak in the open, trying, as it were, to play a balancing game. Their concept of gain and loss has more in common with that of the hypocrites and the small-minded.

They stay behind so that when Muslim fighters suffer a setback, which sometimes occurs, they rejoice and consider the fact that they were able to run away from the battlefield and dodge the test of faith. This is, then, their valuable prize. "*If calamity befalls you, [he would] say, `God has bestowed His favours upon me in that I was not present with them!'*" (Verse 72)

As they assess their position, they consider their evading the battle to be a blessing, and they feel no shame in attributing their decision to God whose commands they have neglected. Evading the obligation to fight, in such circumstances, can never be by the grace of God. This is never gained by disobeying Him, even if the eventual outcome is positive.

It can only be considered a prize by those who do not deal directly with God and who do not appreciate why God has created them. Such people do not translate their submission to God into practical obedience or into striving to serve His cause and to establish His order in human life. It is a prize in the eyes of those who do not aspire to higher levels than what is known to them on this earth; those who do not appreciate that sacrifice and striving for the establishment of God's order is a

privilege and an honour God bestows upon a select few. He, thus, elevates them in this life and liberates them from the shackles of their own weaknesses and the limitations of their world. He raises their sights to a higher life in which they are in, not under, control. Thus, God Almighty helps them to qualify for an abode closer to Him, one which is preserved for martyrs.

All human beings die, but martyrs who give their lives in God's cause are called upon to testify for God's faith. This is a great privilege bestowed by the grace of God.

If the situation is reversed and the Muslims, who are happy to fight and accept everything God gives them, are blessed with victory and the spoils of war, those who have stayed behind regret their action.

They look at it, from their narrow, worldly perspective, as a refusal to join a winning battle, according to their narrow and short-term understanding of victory and success. "*But if good fortune comes to you from God, he is sure to say – just as if there had never been any question of love between you and him – 'Oh, would that I had been with them; I would surely have had a [share in a] mighty triumph."* (Verse 73)

They describe their wish for trivial loot as a "*mighty triumph*". Believers do not look with disdain at victory or reward; indeed they are urged to implore God specifically for them. Nor do believers wish for a hard test. On the contrary, they are encouraged to pray to God to save them from it. But a believer's overall view of such matters is different from that of a hypocrite's as depicted in these verses.

As already explained, believers do not wish for hardship. On the contrary, they appeal to be spared such hardship. But when called upon to fight for God's cause, they respond without hesitation, appealing to God to grant them either victory or martyrdom. Either eventuality is a Divine blessing and a great triumph. If granted martyrdom, a believer accepts God's choice and rejoices in that privilege, and if granted victory and spoils of war, he thanks God for His blessings and rejoices in the victory granted by God, not merely for his being spared.

This is the level to which God wishes to raise the Muslims when He cites to them the example of indecisive elements living in their midst aiming only to save themselves, so that they, the Muslims, may beware. From the warning and the motivation provided to the Muslim community, a human model of true Muslims emerges. This model is ever recurring in all communities and all generations. This model is painted in a true to life image, using only a few words. Furthermore, this model is seen in all stages of human history.

Therefore, the enduring moral that Muslims have to contemplate is that the existence of such half-hearted people in the community should not lead to despair but should rather make the community more vigilant. With more guidance, education and enlightenment, the community should seek to remedy the deficiency,

overcome the weakness and harmonise and integrate its progress and temper.

A Good Price for Life

The *sūrah* moves on, trying to shake these laggards and stimulate in them an ambition to gain the better and longer lasting rewards of the hereafter. It spurs them on to trade-in this life for the life to come, promising them God's grace and blessings in both worlds and a final outcome of either victory or martyrdom. *"Let them fight in God's cause – all who are willing to barter the life of this world for the life to come. To him who fights in God's cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant a rich reward."* (Verse 74)

Islam recognises no legitimate fighting other than what is taken in support of God's cause. It does not accept fighting merely for material gain, dominance or glory, whether personal or national. Islam does not advocate fighting for the occupation of land or the domination of other communities. It does not approve of fighting which aims at the acquisition or control of industrial raw materials, or consumer markets or for capital and investment.

Islam does not promote fighting for the glory of a particular individual, dynasty, class, state, nation or race. The only fighting it approves of is that undertaken for God's cause, to establish His order and way of life in the world, and to ensure that humanity gains from its benefits, blessings and universal justice. Beyond that, everyone is free to choose one's beliefs, according to one's convictions, under the universal, humane and Divine system Islam advocates.

When a Muslim, fighting for such a purpose, is killed, he is a martyr and will be rewarded accordingly by God. If he fought for any other objective, he would not be considered a "martyr" and no reward will be stored for him with God. His reward, instead, will come from whatever other benefactor he chose to fight for. To call such people "martyrs" is false and constitutes an affront to God Almighty.

The verse is very specific that those seeking the hereafter in preference to material and immediate reward, should fight in the cause of God, and only then will they receive God's grace, whether they are killed or achieve victory. *"To him who fights in God's cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant a rich reward."*

Thus, the Qur'ān uplifts the souls and characters of Muslims and fills them with hope in God's grace, whatever the outcome. It alleviates fear of death and temptation for booty, because life and booty mean nothing in comparison with God's grace. It seeks to dissuade Muslims from going for the losing transaction of trading-in the rewards of the life to come for those of the present life. Such a deal incurs inevitable loss, regardless of their victory or defeat on the battlefield. No comparison can be

made between these two types of reward.

Taking up the Cause of the Oppressed

Having portrayed the position of wavering Muslims, the *sūrah* goes on to address the whole Muslim community. It appeals to Muslims who are presumably sensitive to the cause of weaker men, women and children who suffered at the hands of the Makkan unbelievers. Had such weaker elements been able to migrate to Madinah, the land of Islam, they would have enjoyed protection and safety. These victims were seeking salvation and praying to God to rescue them from the clutches of oppression and aggression. The *sūrah* emphasises the nobility, honour and dignity of the purpose for which Muslims are called upon to fight without hesitation or vacillation. "*And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, 'Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us.'*" (Verse 75)

The *sūrah* enquires: How can believers hesitate to fight for God's cause and rescue helpless men, women and children whose poignant conditions stir believer's enthusiasm, dignity and emotion? These were hapless people, suffering the worst type of persecution because of their beliefs and religious convictions. Religious persecution is far more terrible than making away with material or personal possessions, because it strikes at the essence of human life to which all material considerations are secondary.

The image of vulnerable and heart-broken women and children is heart-rending, and so is that of the defenceless elderly who are unable to defend their beliefs. These images alone are powerful enough to spur believers into action, and so the Qur'ān, profoundly and effectively, denounces the inclination to ignore such calls for help.

It is appropriate here to comment on the concept of homeland and nationality in Islam. The land "*whose people are oppressors*" which, in this context, would be considered hostile and from which Muslims are obliged to rescue their oppressed fellow-Muslims, was Makkah, the land of the Muhājirīn (those who had immigrated to Madinah). The urgency of the call to go and fight the unbelievers is addressed to these Makkan immigrants who had settled in Madinah.

The fact that Makkah was their original homeland did not make any difference, since it was not ruled by the laws of Islam and since the Muslims therein were being persecuted for their beliefs and religious convictions. On the contrary, it had become a "land of hostility" which they should not defend but should, in fact, attack in order to rescue their fellow-Muslims. Muslims fight to defend the faith. The homeland they fight for is where the laws of Islam are upheld, and the land they protect is the "land

of Islam" which adopts Islam as its way of life. All other concepts of nationality or citizenship are alien to Islam and emanate from ignorant, non-Islamic beliefs.

Satan's Feeble Cunning

Then follows another psychological touch to inspire enthusiasm and vigour, and to define the values and objectives for which each side is fighting. *"Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan."* (Verse 76)

In one stroke, people are set apart, lines are drawn and objectives are clearly identified, as mankind are divided into two distinct and separate camps. *"Those who believe fight in the cause of God..."* and *"... those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil."* (Verse 76)

Believers fight in order to uphold God's order and establish His laws and justice "among people" in the name of God Almighty, rather than under any other banner. They acknowledge and attest that God alone is the Lord and, therefore, He is the Ruler.

Unbelievers, however, fight in the cause of evil, advocating various ideologies and legal systems, other than that of God Almighty. They uphold various values and standards that are different from those laid down by God. In this contest, the believers stand supported and protected by God. The unbelievers, with their various beliefs, ideologies, values, and methods, rely on Satan's protection and support. Collectively, they are his followers and supporters.

God instructs the believers to confront Satan's supporters and not be afraid of their power or cunning: *"Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan."* (Verse 76)

Thus, Muslims stand on solid ground with their backs well protected. They are confident that they are fighting God's battle, from which they expect no personal, national, racial or ethnic gain or favour. It is a fight that is purely dedicated to God and His way of life. They are also convinced that they are facing enemies who are in the wrong and who are fighting to replace truth with falsehood. Enemies who are seeking to impose non-Islamic laws and systems — and all human systems are non-Islamic — instead of those of God Almighty. They advocate human injustice — and all human dominance is unjust — in place of God's justice which they are instructed to establish in society.

Muslims go into battle with the confidence that God is supporting them and that their enemies are feeble because they are supported by Satan, and Satan's powers are weak. Thus, the outcome of the battle becomes clear in the believer's mind. Its

conclusion is settled before it even starts. If, subsequently, a believer is martyred, he is happy with the outcome, or if he triumphs and lives to see victory with his own eyes, he is likewise assured of a great reward.

Such understanding of the reality of the situation, in both cases of victory or defeat, has been the source of many miraculous experiences on the battlefield both by the first Muslim generation and throughout Islam's history. There is no need to cite any specific incidents here, for they are noted and well documented elsewhere. Nonetheless, such understanding was in part responsible for the Muslim successes over their enemies, already referred to in this volume, brought about by upholding the Divine order. The establishment of this concept represents some of the effort the Qur'ān devotes to the education and enlightenment of the early Muslims as it guides them through their confrontations with their more powerful enemies. Those possessed material and arms superiority but were weak and backward in their understanding and concepts, and so were overcome.

This task, as we can see, was not easy and was certainly not achieved by mere words. It was a persistent, relentless effort aimed at defeating selfishness and love of life, regardless of the price. Furthermore, it aimed at correcting people's misconceptions of gain and loss.

Wrong Feeling, Wrong Timing

The *sūrah* continues to express surprise at the actions of some Muslims. There were people, said to be over-zealous Makkans, who, while facing persecution in Makkah, asked to be allowed to fight the unbelievers. For reasons known only to God Almighty, some of which we will discuss shortly, they had not been permitted to take up arms against their tormentors. However, when fighting was made obligatory, following the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah, and once God had decided it was advantageous for Muslims and for all mankind, some of those very Muslims, as the Qur'ān says, "*stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!'*" (Verse 77) There were those who attributed fortunate events to God and adverse ones to Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Others expressed obedience to the Prophet in his presence but agreed among themselves to something different once they left his company, and yet others who spread whatever rumours they heard regarding war and peace.

The Qur'ān vividly portrays the state of mind of all these groups. It corrects for them, as well as for others after them, the errors of their understanding of the realities of life and death, fate and destiny, good and evil, benefit and harm, gain and loss, standards and values. It elaborates all these basic facts in a clear and effective

manner.

> *Are you not aware of those who have been told, "Hold back your hands [from fighting', and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt [i.e. the purifying dues]'"? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, "Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!" Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God- fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high. "Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, "This is from God," whereas when evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you!" Say, "All is from God." What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told? Whatever good happens to you is from God; and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself We have sent you as a Messenger to all mankind. Enough is God for a witness. He who obeys the Messenger obeys God thereby. As for those who turn away – We have not sent you to be their keeper. And they say, "We do obey you," but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate. All the while God records what they thus devise in secret. Leave them, then, alone, and place your trust in God. Sufficient is God for a guardian. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction! If any matter pertaining to peace or war comes to their knowledge, they make it known to all and sundry; whereas, if they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it. Were it not for God's bounty to you, and His grace, all but a few of you would certainly have followed Satan.* (Verses 77-83)

These groups, described in the four sections above, may already have been referred to in earlier verses, beginning with verse 72. This would mean that they refer to that group of hypocrites who said and did whatever is described here. Initially, we were more inclined to go along with this interpretation because the hypocrites' qualities are unmistakable in what these verses describe, and because such action and behaviour is closer to their nature and reputation. However, the first of these sections, dealing with "*those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt [i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them... "*, suggests that it refers to a group of Makkan Muslims whose faith was somewhat lacking. Although this is a quality of hypocrisy, they are not themselves hypocrites. Each of the other three passages describes a particular group of hypocrites who had infected the Muslim community at the time. Taken together, the passages describe the hypocrites in general, categorising their actions and behaviour.

The reason for the interpretation I am putting forward is that some Muslims, from

among those who had migrated from Makkah, were over-zealous at times in their desire to confront the unbelievers when they were still in Makkah. Yet at that time, permission to fight was withheld. They were told: "*Hold back your hands [from fighting', and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt.*"

We may take into consideration here the suggestion made to the Prophet by the seventy-two Muslims who were party to the second `Aqabah Covenant (622 AD) to wipe out "the people of Minā", and his reply: "We have not yet been ordered to fight." But even when we do this, we cannot include this group of early Muslims from Madinah who were party to the `Aqabah Covenant among the hypocrites discussed here. Nor can we include them among the faint-hearted, described in the first section. For, not the slightest hint of hypocrisy or weakness was ever known about that select group of Muslims.

The most likely explanation is, therefore, that this group of verses refers to some Makkan Muslims who, once safely settled in Madinah, lost heart and their appetite to fight. The other attributes do not relate to them but rather to the hypocrites *per se.* It is inconceivable that any of those immigrants, i.e. the Muhājirīn, would say or do what the verses here talk about, such as attributing evil to the Prophet or declaring their obedience while resolving not to obey. Perhaps the most that they were guilty of was talking publicly of sensitive matters relating to war and security. This was a result of their lack of discipline rather than duplicity or plain hypocrisy.

The fact is that we are unable to offer a definitive analysis of these verses. None of the information relating to their interpretation is specific, including that in the first section which is said to refer to some Makkan Muslims or to a group of hypocrites.

It is more prudent, therefore, to exonerate the Makkan Muslims from any unwillingness to fight, from acting against the best interests of their fellow-Muslims, as also from attributing evil events to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and harbouring thoughts of disobedience to him. Moreover, anyone who follows the thread of the Qur'ānic text will find it exceedingly difficult to break its flow, particularly when he is well familiar with the Qur'ānic mode of expression.

A Very Strange Question

> *Are you not aware of those who have been told, "Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt [i.e. the purifying dues]"? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, "Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!" Say, "Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God- fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high."* (Verses 77-78)

God Almighty expresses surprise at those Muslims who, while still in Makkah facing persecution and abuse and were restrained from fighting, for reasons known to God Almighty, were enthusiastically vying for confrontation. Yet when the appropriate time, appointed by God, and the right circumstances arrived, and fighting was duly prescribed, some of them were so alarmed and terrified to the point of fearing the enemy they were ordered to fight. Heart-broken, shocked and terrified, all they could say was: *"Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight?..."* A strange question to come from a believer, but an indication of the confusion regarding the obligations required by Islam and regarding its role in life. The enquiry is followed by a pathetic and plaintive wish: *"If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!"* They would rather have had more time before taking up such a heavy and terrifying burden.

The most zealous and reckless of people can also be the most frightened and most easily overpowered when the situation becomes critical. This may, in fact, be the rule rather than the exception, because over-enthusiasm, recklessness and fanatic fervour are often motivated by a lack of judgement of the task ahead, rather than courage, patience or determination. Inspired by impetuosity and a lack of stamina some people are forced to move and seek action and victory in any way and by any means, regardless of the cost. However, once such people come face to face with the task in hand, it looks greater than they had anticipated and more demanding than they had thought. Thus, they become the first to lose heart, to panic and crumple. It is only those who are persevering and restrained, who patiently prepare for battle and who fully appreciate the weight of the task ahead, that endure, remain steadfast and prepare properly for the mission. Reckless zealots may take such people to be weak and sneer at their deliberation and consideration. The battle, however, will decide which of the two groups is the stronger and the more far-sighted.

Most probably, the *sūrah* is referring to that group of Muslims whose dignity did not allow them to tolerate harassment and humiliation in Makkah and who, thus, requested that the Prophet grant them permission to fight. The Prophet, in such matters, was complying with God's instructions of restraint, patience, careful preparation and education, awaiting the right moment. But once they were safely settled in Madinah and securely living out of harm's way, they no longer saw any justification or, at least, no great urgency to fight the enemy.

> *When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, "Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!"* (Verse 77)

These people may have been sincere believers, as seen from their plaintive appeals. No wonder that underdeveloped faith, confusion and a lack of clear understanding of Islam's true mission in the world, should result in such a wavering attitude. Islam's mission is more than the mere preservation of individuals, nations

or countries. It is, first and foremost, the firm establishment of God's order and just system all over the world. It is the institution of a supreme authority that allows no impediments to the spread of God's faith and which refuses to deprive people from receiving God's call wherever they may be. It ensures that no one is persecuted in their livelihood or freedom of action, or indeed in any other way, as a result of the religious belief they have freely chosen. Safety and security at Madinah, even if one accepts these were fully guaranteed, did not, however, mean the Muslims' mission was fulfilled and that *jihād* was no longer required.

It is not surprising that weak faith should produce such an attitude. Weak faith prevents a person from viewing matters objectively, listening only to God's commands, considering them both cause and effect, reason and result, providing the ultimate authority, whether one understands their purpose or not. Nor is it surprising that blurred understanding should result in a stance that the Qur'ān firmly rejects. It is only a clear understanding of Islam that enables a believer to identify Islam's mission in the world and his own role as God's instrument to be used for whatever purpose He may think fit.

It is impossible to say why the Muslims in Makkah were not permitted the use of force to prevent or resist persecution and oppression, even though many of them could not be considered weak or powerless. In fact, some were quite able to defend themselves, despite their small number.

Nor is it possible to be completely certain why the Muslims were instructed to observe their prayers and to give alms and be patient, rather than resort to force, even though some of them were subjected to unbearable forms of persecution. Indeed, some died under torture while others could only escape torture by retracting their faith, either in pretence or in the face of force.

Possible Reasons for Restraint

It would be presumptuous to state what the exact reasons behind God's enforced order to the Muslims to restrain themselves and not resort to armed conflict might have been. If we were to offer certain reasons and say that these were real ones, there being no other purpose, then we would be placing ourselves in an untenable position in relation to God. Analysis or conjecture may help reveal the real reasons or it may not, but believers must refrain from such guesswork regarding any instructions or rulings the reasons or justifications for which have not been expressly given. God knows they are for the good of mankind. No matter how much speculation the human mind may make regarding the reasons behind certain Divine rulings or the way in which they ought to be implemented or exercised, it all remains speculative. No matter how confident, incisive or knowledgeable one is, one can never state with certainty what the Divine reason or wisdom might be. This deference to God Almighty is imperative. It is an essential element in differentiating between the reality and the nature of knowledge that is God-given and that which is the result of human analysis or understanding.

It is from this perspective of reverence that one considers the reasons and the wisdom behind the fact that *jihād* had to wait until the Muslims were settled in Madinah before it was made obligatory. The views advanced here are mere suggestions. The full and real reasons are known only to God who has chosen not to give us a clear statement in this respect.

The following are some personal views which may be right or wrong, open to discussion and revision, and are intended only as reflections on God's rulings as provided and assisted by events and developments.

i. One reason could be that the Makkan period was one of training, educating and preparing a particular group of people under certain conditions. One of the aims of such a programme is to discipline the Arab mind to persevere and endure personal and collective hardship as a means to transcend personal egos. One's own self and immediate community should no longer be the focus and prime movers in one's life. People needed to be taught restraint and self-control and how not to react with immediate rage and anger, as was their nature. They needed to learn to behave as members of an organised society with a central leadership to be consulted and obeyed in all matters, regardless of how different that was from their customs and traditions. This was the cornerstone in remodelling the Arab character to establish a civilised, orderly, non-tribal Muslim society that recognises a governing leadership.

ii. Another possible reason is that peaceful action was more effective in that particular Arab society of the Quraysh, which attached much importance to self-image and honour. The use of force in such a situation could only harden attitudes and result in fresh bloody grudges, reminiscent of the famous inter-Arab feuds of Dāĥis and al-Ghabrā', and of al-Basūs which raged for many years, wiping out complete tribes. Such a new conflict would always be associated in the Arab memory with Islam as the cause of vengeance and bloodshed rather than Islam as a universal Divine mission. The basic essence of Islam would, in that case, be forever obscured and obliterated.

iii. There was also the need to avoid a bloodbath within every Arab household in Makkah since there was no organised authority perpetrating the persecution of Muslim converts. The harassment was unsystematic, following no specific order. Every household dealt with their converts as they saw fit. Prescription of armed confrontation in such circumstances would mean battles and massacres in every home for which Islam would be blamed. In fact, the Quraysh propaganda, spread during the pilgrimage and trading seasons, was already blaming Islam for family splits, feuds and divisions among the Arabs even before the use of force was eventually permitted.

iv. Another reason for the delay in prescribing *jihād* by force of arms could be God's prior knowledge that many of the tormentors and perpetrators of maltreatment against the Muslims would, one day soon, themselves be converts and ardent defenders, indeed leaders, of Islam. Was not `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb

one such person?

v. Another reason could be that Arab tribal chivalry was known to provoke sympathy with the weak and the oppressed when they persevere in the face of adversity, especially if some of these hailed from the noble sections of society. This is borne out in several incidents including that whereby Ibn al-Dughunnah tried to persuade Abū Bakr, a noble man, not to leave Makkah and offered him protection, seeing it as a shame on all the Arabs that he should have to emigrate. Another incident was the repeal of the boycott on Hāshim, Muĥammad's clan, and the ending of their siege in the Hāshimite quarters in Makkah, after an extended period of starvation and hardship. In other ancient civilisations, persecution might have led to the adulation of the oppressor and further humiliation for the oppressed, but not in Arab society.

vi. It could have been due to the small number of Muslims at the time and their confinement in Makkah when Islam had not spread widely in Arabia, and the neutral stand that other Arab tribes would take in an internal conflict within Makkah. Confrontation could very well lead to the annihilation of the small band of Muslim converts, even, if they were to kill twice as many as their own number, and the infidels would thus prevail. In this case, the religion of Islam, which was meant to be a universal way of life and a practical and realistic system, would no longer exist.

vii. In the meantime, there was no great urgency to ignore all these factors and prescribe resistance and the use of force because the main objective of Islam at that time had been achieved. It was the very existence of Islam as represented by the person of the Prophet Muĥammad and the protection he enjoyed from the Hāshim clan. His antagonists would be hit hard. The existing tribal system encouraged other tribes, who might contemplate attacking Muĥammad, to avoid a clash with the Hāshim clan. Thus, Muĥammad, personally, was able, under the protection of the Hāshim clan, to speak and spread his ideas and beliefs openly. He did not have to hide them and no one dared prevent him from talking to people at the Ka`bah or al-Safā or at their public meetings and gatherings. No one would dare stop him speak, or kidnap, incarcerate or eliminate him. Nor could any one restrict or dictate what he could or could not say in public. His opponents asked him to desist from attacking and defaming their gods, but he refused; they appealed to him not to criticise or condemn the religion of their forefathers and again he refused. He rejected the various compromises they offered him. All in all, the foundations and existence of Islam, as represented by the Prophet himself and his active advocacy of Islam, in various ways and places, were taking full root under the protection of the Hāshim clan. These positive factors which were generally conducive to the spread of the call of Islam, could not be readily ignored, and they provided the environment in which there was no immediate urgency for all-out confrontation.

Taken together, the above facts represent, in the present author's view, some of the reasons why God instructed the Muslims in Makkah to refrain from the use of force and instead to concentrate on establishing prayer and paying *zakāt* as a way of perfecting their education, enlightenment and preparation. This also provided the Muslims with the opportunity to benefit from all the resources available in that environment while awaiting the Divine instruction to fight when the right moment presented itself. Furthermore, it enabled them to extricate themselves from any hint of seeking personal profit in going for all-out confrontation; this so that the whole matter would be devoted to God and His noble cause. Meanwhile, Islam had become "a reality" and it was being preserved and protected.

Be that as it may, there were restless Muslims in Makkah urging for a fight, awaiting the moment they were given the go-ahead.

What Does Death Signify?

> *When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God or in even greater awe – and said, "Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!"* (Verse 77)

The mere existence of this group created disruption and discord within the Muslim community as some became fearful and dismayed at the prospect of having to fight their enemy, while others remained calm and confident. The latter received the imposition, of jihād duty with poise, serenity, determination and even enthusiasm. Their enthusiasm was well placed because it was necessary for the proper execution of their obligation. It was not mere recklessness that evaporated immediately on coming face to face with danger.

The Qur'ān deals with these phenomena in its own inimitable style: "*Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the lift to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you small be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high.'*" (Verses 77-78)

They fear death and love life, pathetically pressing their desire that God should give them more time and allow them more of this world's enjoyments. Hence, the Qur'ān goes to the root of the problem, revealing the true understanding of life and death: "*Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world....*"

All worldly enjoyments, and the world as a whole, are ephemeral, let alone a period of days, weeks, months or years. What good is there, in granting a short while longer in life if all the pleasures of human life throughout the world and throughout all ages are worthless? What can these people hope to achieve in such a short time when, in reality all life in this world is short?

"Whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing." (Verse 77) This life is not the be-all and end-all. It is merely a stage of existence beyond which there is a life hereafter full of boundless and endless delights that are *"best for all who are God-fearing"* The reference here to consciousness and fear of God is quite appropriate because it is God, not men, who should be respected and feared. Those whose hearts are filled with fear of God shall have no fear of anyone else; no one can harm them if God wishes them no harm.

"None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth." (Verse 77) There shall be no injustice, prejudice or unfair treatment. Whatever is lost in this life shall be generously compensated for in the final account in the life to come with full justice and appreciation.

Nevertheless, some people wish for longer life, even though they believe in the life to come and look forward to its precious rewards. This is more so during the early days of one's commitment to Islam, as was the case for those Muslims.

At this point, a final touch gives the true understanding of the nature of life, death, destiny and fate, and relates all this to the obligation to fight. *"Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high."* Death is inevitable, and certain to come at its appointed moment. It is not affected by war or peace, or the security of one's position, nor is its timing affected by whether Muslims are ordered to fight or not. The two events are separate and unrelated. Death is only dependent on its appointed time as determined by God Almighty. Any wish to defer *jihād,* as also fear of other people have no significance in this regard. With this, the Qur'ān takes care of all the suspicions that may linger on in our minds regarding this matter, and removes all the fear that results from misunderstanding this basic concept.

This does not mean that people should not take precautions, as best as they can. God has already urged the Muslims to beware of their enemies, and elsewhere in this *sūrah,* He advised specific precautions while praying in the battlefield, and instructed the Muslims to equip and prepare themselves for fighting. But this is quite unrelated to the predetermination and timing of death. Taking precautions and preparing adequately for battle is an order to be executed and has its own obvious and hidden purposes as determined by God's will. Likewise, formulating a proper concept of death and the fact that it occurs at its appointed time, regardless of whatever steps one may take to prevent it, is also an instruction that must be obeyed. It has its own clear and implicit purposes. All this is characteristic of the Islamic system which is moderate and well balanced. It takes all factors into account, ensuring harmony between them all. This is true Islam and this is how it educates and enlightens its followers, individually and collectively.

A Highly Prejudiced Attitude

At this point, attention turns to another of the many different groups making up

the Muslim community, without any obvious break in the flow of the text or in the arguments.

> *Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, "This is from God," whereas when evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you!" Say, All is from God. "What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told? Whatever good happens to you is from God; and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself. We have sent you as a Messenger to all mankind. Enough is God for a witness. He who obeys the Messenger obeys God thereby. As for those who turn away — We have not sent you to be their keeper.* (Verses 78-80)

The attitude of these people can be understood in a number of different ways:

1. They considered the Prophet himself an evil portent who brought them hardship and misfortune. Whenever they suffered a drought or a bad harvest or were defeated in battle, they would attribute the causes to the Prophet. But they attributed good fortunes to God.
2. They deliberately set out to vilify the Prophet in order to criticise his leadership and undermine, in particular, his instructions to the Muslims to go and fight. Instead of admitting to their weakness and lack of courage, they took a perverse approach by pretending to credit God with their fortunes and blaming their difficulties and setbacks on the Prophet and his instructions. Needless to say, all the fortune and the hardship they mean are of the immediate, short-term type.
3. They entertained a real misconception of what happens to them and to other people in this life, and how this relates to the will of God. This makes for a further lack of understanding of the nature and status of the Prophet's commands and the nature of his relationship with God.

The third explanation, if correct, may apply to that group of Makkan immigrants whose misunderstanding of the reality of death and fate had led them to fear other people as much as they feared God, or even more. It prompted them to cry out: "*Our Lord! Why have You ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!*" (Verse 77) Nevertheless, it may be more accurate to say that the reference here is to another group which satisfies all three criteria.

The issue being discussed here represents part of a larger one, referred to in the history of polemics and philosophy worldwide under the heading: "Fate and Predestination" or "Predetermination and Free Will". It is mentioned in the context of correcting certain misconceptions, in a straightforward, unambiguous and clear way. Let us look at it as presented in the Qur'ān.

> *Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, "This is from God," whereas when evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you!" Say, "All is from God."*

> *What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told?* (Verse 78)

God Almighty is the original and sole cause of world events affecting the universe and humankind, and He is the cause of people's actions. People have the power to intend and try but actions only take place with the will of God Almighty. Hence, to ascribe the instigation of fortune or misfortune, or their occurrence, to the Prophet, who is human after all, is erroneous and a sign of complete ignorance.

Humans may wish and seek, by all the means God has put at their disposal, to bring about goodness and good fortune, but the achievement of such wishes only takes place by God's will. In reality, there is no other will capable of making things and events happen or bringing things about in the world. Thus, goodness and good fortune are acts of Divine will, brought about through human means and inclinations.

The same applies to evil or misfortune. It is God's will and power that make them happen. The Qur'ānic statement affirms that God is the ultimate origin of all that happens.

The next statement affirms another truth, quite independent of the previous one, viewed from a completely different perspective: *"Whatever good happens to you is from God; and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself."* (Verse 79)

God has ordained a system and laid down a way of life, indicating the means of good and the means of evil. He has shown people the good, encouraging them to take it up, and warned against evil. When man adheres to this system, seeking the good and avoiding evil, God will help and guide him. God says: *"Those who exert themselves for Our cause We will guide to Our ways."* (29: 69) In this process man is given a real reward, regardless of whether people see this as gain or loss. It is a reward from God who has laid down the rules, concepts and laws of good and evil. When man refuses to adhere to God's guidance and does not seek the good or keep away from evil, misfortune is inflicted upon him, in this life or in the life to come, or both, and he only has himself to blame for not heeding God's guidance.

It is quite clear that this is yet another interpretation, one quite different from the preceding one. However, this does not affect the original assertion that good and evil only happen by God's will and power, as He is the origin and creator of all things, regardless of the human contribution or role in what actually takes place.[13]

[13] Regarding the issue of Predestination and Free Will, which these verses bring to our attention, and the extent to which the human will may affect events, and the reconciliation of man's accountability with an overriding Divine will which creates and determines man's actions, etc., the Qur'ānic view is as follows: Everything happens by God's will and predestination. Man wills and acts and is accountable for his will and his actions. The Qur'ān is the word of God and can never be self-contradictory, and there must, therefore, be a certain logical relationship between the two positions. Man's will and actions must extend over a certain area wide enough to make him accountable and deserving of reward, without bringing him into conflict with the Divine will and predestination. But how is this possible? The answer is that there is no answer, because the human mind is not sufficiently

The Limits of the Prophet's Role

The *sūrah* goes on to explain the nature of the Prophet's mission and its limitations. It also accounts for his actions and attitude towards people, and their's to him. Ultimately, it refers the whole matter to God Almighty. It says: *"We have sent you as a Messenger to all mankind. Enough is God for a witness.* (Verse 79) *He who obeys the Messenger obeys God thereby. As for those who turn away – We have not sent you to be their keeper."* (Verse 80)

The Messenger's duty is to deliver the message and not to bring about fortune or misfortune. That is a matter for God to decide and He is witness, and a sufficient witness at that, to the fact that He sent the Messenger to carry out that mission.

Those who obey the Messenger obey God; there is no distinction, in this context, between God and His Messenger or between what God says and what the Messenger says. Those who reject the Messenger and walk away from him will be referred to God for punishment. The Messenger is not commissioned to compel people to believe or accept the faith, or to prevent them from committing errors or disobedience. To do so is not part of his brief nor is it within his power.

Thus, the Qur'ān corrects the Muslims' concept, affirming that everything happens by God's will and predestination. All good and evil, viewed by whatever means, originate with God, because nothing happens, occurs or is created by anyone else but God. All the good that comes people's way originates with God because it is a consequence of His order and guidance, and the evil that befalls them is due to their own departure from God's guidance.

The Messenger's sole status is that of Messenger. He neither creates nor initiates things and events. He does not vie with God for a share of Godhead, His sovereignty or His essential attribute of creating and causing things and events. He delivers what God reveals to Him, which makes obeying him tantamount to obeying God. In reality, there is no way of obeying God other than by obeying His Messenger who has delivered his message fully and clearly. He is not obliged to cause infidels to follow God's guidance or to protect them against deviation.

Thus, facts are stated simply, clearly and unequivocally to articulate the concepts and reassure the mind. This process of teaching and enlightening the Muslim community was part of the necessary preparation for the great role it was required to play.

Contemplating the Qur'ān

---

capable of comprehending how God Almighty operates.

The *sūrah* goes on to portray, in brief statements, the state of another group of Muslims, or it may be a group of hypocrites, highlighting with such repugnance new aspects of their behaviour. This is also given as part of the process of educating and guiding the rest of the Muslims.

> *And they say, "We do obey you," but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate. All the while God records what they thus devise in secret. Leave them, then, alone, and place your trust in God. Sufficient is God for a guardian. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction!* (Verses 81-82)

These people would sit with God's Messenger, listen to him as he recited the Qur'ān and respond in his presence by saying: *"We do obey you."* They would say this without any hesitation, qualification or objection. But no sooner had they left the Messenger than some of them would change their position, conspire to act differently and seek to extricate themselves from all obligations.

It is also possible that the Qur'ān is describing the state of the Muslim community as a whole, with the exception of a particular group that follows a different line. This would mean that the Muslims, as a whole, would respond to the Messenger by affirming their obedience but a certain group would change their stance immediately upon leaving his company. The picture is one of evident dislocation within Muslim ranks. Those people actually joined the Muslim ranks, and their behaviour was bound to harm the whole Muslim community at a time when it was fighting hard on several fronts.

God reassures the Prophet and his sincere followers that He is monitoring the treacherous elements. This certainly boosts the Muslims' confidence and puts their minds at rest that no harm shall reach them. The assertion is also a threat to the schemers that they will not succeed nor will they escape punishment. *"God records what they thus devise in secret."* (Verse 81)

God's advice to the Prophet in dealing with the hypocrites was to take them at face value, rather than judge them by their intentions, and to ignore and overlook their behaviour. Eventually, the approach wore them out, debilitated their effect and dissipated their influence. The plan, therefore, was to: *"Leave them, then, alone...."* (Verse 81) But also to lean on God and trust Him: "*... and place your trust in God. Sufficient is God for a guardian."* (Verse 81) Indeed, God is sufficient for a guardian and protector. Whoever is under His guardianship is fully protected and shielded against any scheming or conspiracy.

It seems as though the renegades doubted the source of the Prophet's instructions,

and believed that he was the Qur'ān's author. Once such suspicion is entertained even for one moment, the instructions lose their authority altogether. The credibility of the Messenger depends completely on the firm and total belief that God is the origin of what he delivers, and that he does not act out of personal whim or desire. Hence, the strongly repeated emphasis of this fact.

At this point, the Qur'ān offers them a proposition that indicates God's highest possible regard for man, his intelligence and insight, bestowed upon him by God Himself. It invites them to judge the Qur'ān by their own intelligence and intellectual appreciation. It points out the proper approach to adopt and identifies the key aspect by which they can judge the Qur'ān. When they do this, they will have ample, irrefutable evidence that the Qur'ān originates with God Almighty: *"Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction!"* (Verse 82)

This invitation to reflect on the Qur'ān and consider it carefully is particularly significant. Full and absolute harmony and integrity is an unmistakeable feature of the Qur'ān. It is a feature that allows different people and generations to benefit by the Qur'ān according to, and within, their respective aptitudes, education, experience and piety.

This verse addresses all people and all generations, everyone of whom is capable of appreciating as much of the harmony and congruity of the Qur'ān as their ability, education, experience and piety allow. The first generation of Muslims were being addressed with ideas they understood and were able to verify within their own existing intellectual environment.

A Pointer to the Author of the Qur'ān

The harmony and consistency of the Qur'ān are clear methods of expression and literary style. In human expression and language one comes across various levels of excellence, power, lucidity and brilliance, as well as constant fluctuation in mood. This is clearly apparent when we examine the works of any literary personality, thinker, artist, politician or military commander, etc. Variation and inconsistency are inherent features of human expression and behaviour.

The opposite is true of the Qur'ānic literary style. It is harmonious and consistent. The surpassing excellence of the language of the Qur'ān maintains the same scope and level of perfection throughout without any of the fluctuations or alterations known in human language. The Qur'ān carries the stamp of its origin, reflects the fact that it comes from God and points to the Creator who is not affected by changes and conditions.

Perfect consistency and harmony are also manifested in the message of the Qur'ān and the system it outlines. It is a message of education and enlightenment for human souls and societies. It is a system of organisation and discipline for individual and collective human activity in all walks of life throughout history. It is a message for the guidance of human understanding itself and for the harnessing of all human faculties for the enhancement of that understanding. It is a system for co-ordinating and harmonising human beings of all societies, generations and phases and the world in which they exist; between man's life here and in the hereafter. It also regulates the countless ramifications and consequences of that relationship in the life of every individual and the life of mankind as a whole.

The difference between Divine and human proficiency is evident enough with respect to linguistic and artistic expression; it is even more evident in relation to thought, regulation and law-making. Human theories and doctrines remain typically human, influenced by partial vision and transient conditions as well as a lack of understanding of the inherent contradictions that may exist. This is bound to lead, sooner or later, to conflict within the various elements of any theory or doctrine. It could also cause damage to certain aspects of the human personality which had been ignored. Numerous deficiencies and paradoxes emerge as a result of limited human understanding and ignorance of what the future holds, in addition to man's inadequate comprehension of the present. The Qur'ānic approach is totally different, being comprehensive and perfect, with firm, solid and universal foundations and criteria that allow perpetual motion and progress.

Examination of these aspects may not be available to everyone or to every generation, and it is certain that people will appreciate them at varying levels of understanding, each generation making its contribution in one or more fields of knowledge or experience. However, beyond all these human differences, a universally agreed repertoire of understanding and knowledge accumulates. The essence of such knowledge accumulation is that the language of the Qur'ān is not the product of any human being. Human literary excellence is one thing and the Qur'ān is a totally different thing. It is a perfectly made piece of consistent, coherent and homogeneous composition, even though people may differ greatly in their understanding of the extent of such harmony.

In these verses God refers that sceptic group, and everyone else besides, to the results of their own reflection. Indeed He invites all people in all generations to judge the Qur'ān, on the basis of their common understanding. This is sufficient to reaffirm the fact that the Qur'ān can only be from God. It could not have originated from anyone else.

The Role of Human Understanding

It may be useful at this point to reflect very briefly on the role of human comprehension with respect to this particular point, and with respect to religion as a whole. The honour God has granted to human beings in this context ought not to tempt man to become arrogant or exceed safe boundaries. If he does, then he will go too far astray.

These Qur'ānic exhortations, and their scope, are so often misunderstood. Some Muslim intellectuals, past and present, go so far as to grant the human mind the privilege of the final word in the interpretation of religious rules and principles, elevating man's judgement to that of God Almighty, or giving man an overriding authority over God's legislation.

The truth is rather different. The human intellect is a great faculty, so highly respected by God Almighty that He made it the means by which man recognises Islam as being a God-given religion. Certain phenomena arc easy to comprehend and they are, by themselves, sufficient evidence that Islam originates with God Almighty. Once man understands this profound truth, the same rationale leads him to accept Islam in its totality, regardless of whether or not he is able to identify or recognise the hidden purpose of its individual rules. Since it originates from God, it has a definite purpose. Furthermore, the human mind does not stand rival to God. It is certainly not qualified to judge God's wisdom, because its capacity for comprehension remains limited. It cannot look at any question from all angles, neither for a single moment nor for the rest of time.

On the other hand, God's legislation proceeds from an all- encompassing view and no judgement on it, or on any of its established rulings, should be entrusted to the human intellect. The most that the human mind can aspire to achieve is to comprehend the Divine message and how it applies to different situations. It cannot determine its purpose and the wisdom behind it. That a Divine rule serves the interests of the community is an undoubted fact, because it emanates from God. It is when no revealed text is available, with respect to new issues, that the human mind may exercise judgement. We have already pointed out that reference must initially he made to God and His Messenger. In addition to trying to understand the text, this is the other area for the application of human powers of deduction and reasoning, or *ijtihād.* The human intellect is not to be used to determine the purpose of Divine statements and rulings but its greatest arena, which is a vast arena indeed, is the understanding of the laws of nature and life and the pursuit of excellence in the material world.

We must give the human intellect the credit and reverence God has granted it, within its sphere of excellence, and not more than that. When we exaggerate its importance, we are liable to lose direction and proceed without guidance.

Proper Method of Deduction

The *sūrah* now portrays another group, or perhaps it only describes another practice by a particular group of Muslims. "*If any matter pertaining to peace or war comes to their knowledge, they make it known to all and sundry; whereas, if they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it. Were it not for God's bounty to you, and His grace, all but a few of you would certainly have followed Satan.*" (Verse 83)

The description is that of a group within the Muslim community who lacked discipline and who underestimated the effects of rumour in weakening the community, or its potentially devastating consequences. This group were not in tune with what was happening and did not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. They did not understand how a casual word or a slip of the tongue could lead to unimaginable and unavoidable repercussions for individuals and the whole society. Perhaps because they did not feel complete loyalty to the Muslim community and were, therefore, not concerned about the effects on it of the spread of malicious rumours at times of both war and peace.

The danger can be devastating in both cases. The dissemination of news of peace in a community ready and preparing for war will spread a degree of relaxation, despite orders to be on the alert, because vigilance due to a threat is stronger than that due to obeying orders. Such moderation of watchfulness can be fatal. Similarly, spreading fear of war in a peaceful self-assured community can disrupt and unsettle it, forcing it to take measures that might be unnecessary and could also be fatal.

These are the features of a community that has not fully completed its organisation, or has not demonstrated full loyalty to its leadership, or both. Indeed both qualities were evident in the Muslim community at the time, consisting as it did of groups of various levels of conviction, understanding, and allegiance. It is this disharmony that the Qur'ān deals with here.

The Qur'ān identifies for the Muslim community the correct path to follow: "*If they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it.*" (Verse 83) Had those Muslims referred the disruptive rumours to the Messenger, when he was still among them, or to those in authority, the competent and qualified among them would have deduced the facts and determined whether its circulation would benefit the Muslim community or be detrimental to its interests.

Decent and disciplined Muslim soldiers, working under a faithful and trusted leadership, are obliged to report any news or intelligence to their competent superiors rather than pass them around among colleagues or other unconcerned parties. A true Muslim leadership is one that is capable of arriving at the truth in all

matters, and of assessing the benefit of making certain information public, even if it is verified, or withholding it.

Thus the Qur'ān was teaching the Muslims. It was instilling them with faith in, and loyalty to, their trusted Muslim leadership. It encapsulates the essence of military discipline in one brief statement. The beginning of the verse depicts an unfavourable image of the soldier who spreads rumours and hearsay without any attempt at verification or reference to the leadership. The verse then gives the correct advice to follow in such a situation, before directing people's hearts to God, reminding them of His grace, urging them to show appreciation of Him, and warning them against following Satan who is awaiting the first opportunity to divert their hearts away from God. *"Were it not for God's bounty to you, and His grace, all but a few of you would certainly lb have followed Satan."* (Verse 83)

A single verse carries such a tremendous charge, covering all aspects of the question, and touching the deepest recesses of the human conscience. At the same time, it continues teaching and directing. This is proof that the Qur'ān originates with God; otherwise people would find enormous contradictions in it.

The Limits of Responsibility

At this point, having relentlessly exposed the faults existing within the Muslim community that are liable to affect its ability to fight and conduct its affairs, the *sūrah* reaches a crescendo in urging the Muslims to fight. While addressing God's Messenger with the order to fight, there is a personal recommendation not to be dissuaded by any dithering, hesitation, disruption or obstacles on the way, even if he had to fight alone, as he would only be accountable for his own actions and obligations. At the same time, it urges the Muslims to fight, giving them reassurance and a prospect of victory as God, who is stronger and swifter in punishment, will take charge of the battle. *"Fight, then, in God's cause, since you are responsible only for your own self and encourage the believers. God may well curb the might of the unbelievers; for God is the strongest in might, and in the ability to deter"* (Verse 84)

This verse, together with the preceding ones, reveal many characteristics of the Muslim community at the time of revelation, as well as numerous features of human beings at all times.

I. It exposes the inconsistency within the Muslim community and the deep effect on it of dithering, disruption and demoralisation; so much so that the Prophet (peace be upon him) is urged to take up arms and fight alone if necessary, fulfilling his personal obligations and continuing to motivate the believers to join him in the *jihād* whether they responded or not. Although

it was unlikely that they would all refuse to join, putting it in this way indicates how critical it is to emphasise these instructions and to incite the Muslims to respond. Beyond that, the statement also asserts the fundamental Islamic truth that every soul is accountable only for its own deeds.

II. It highlights the fears and hardships associated with fighting the non-Muslims at that time. Indeed, the utmost prospect of hope given to the Muslims is God's guarantee to deter the enemy and keep them at bay, the Muslim forces being a mere manifestation of His power. The passage clearly suggests that the non-Muslims were a formidable force and that fear was prevalent among the Muslims. This would be a reference to the intervening period between the Battles of Uĥud and the Moat, being the most critical period for the Muslims of Madinah. At that time the Muslim community had to contend with the hypocrites, the intrigues of the Jews and the zeal of the idolaters to fight them. Furthermore, the Muslims had yet to perfect their understanding of the basic principles and concepts of Islam.

III. It also brings to light man's urgent need for strong and close links with God Almighty, his need for His reassurance and support, and confidence in His power and authority. At times of great danger other powers are of no avail. These are facts the Divine approach deploys because, being man's creator, God knows best how to educate, mobilise and encourage human nature, and He knows well how human beings respond.

Different Deeds with Different Results

In the context of God's Messenger's exhortation to the believers to fight, towards the end of the passage, and the reference to those who discourage and dampen the spirit to fight, at its beginning, the *sūrah* states a general rule regarding intercession. The statement implies instruction, advice and co-operation. *"Whoever rallies to a good cause shall have a share in its [benefit], and whoever rallies to an evil cause shall have a share in its [burden]. God watches over everything."* (Verse 85)

Whoever participates in mobilising and encouraging and supporting others to fight for the cause of God will receive his due share of the reward for the fighting and its consequences. But those who promote demoralisation and discouragement will bear responsibility for the outcome of their exhortations. The Arabic term *kill* chosen in this context suggests liability for the consequences as well as the actions themselves.

This is a universal principle, which applies to intercession for good or for evil. The

Qur'ān often establishes a general principle through the discussion of a particular issue or event, linking the two together and referring the whole question to God Almighty. He is the source of everything and the source of all power, as the Arabic word used in commenting on the verse indicates: *"God watches over everything."* (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* then gives instructions that a greeting should be answered with a similar or better one. Public courtesy, when practised with politeness and civility, is a means for a smooth and harmonious social life. This closely relates, in social behaviour, to the principle of intercession referred to earlier: *"When a greeting is offered you, answer it with an even better greeting, or [at least] with its like. God keeps count of all things."* (Verse 86)

Islam introduced a special form of greeting which distinguishes Muslim societies and gives a distinct flavour to its daily routine behaviour. It makes Muslims stand out among all other human societies.

Islam has chosen the following forms of greeting: *"assalāmu `alaikum"* (peace be on you) or *"assalāmu `alaikum wa rahmatullāh"* (peace and God's mercy be on you) or *"assalāmu `alaikum wa rahmatullāh wa barakātuh"* (peace and God's mercy and blessings be on you). The more gracious reply would be to repeat the same phrase with the addition of the supplementary words to the first and second forms, the third one being a complete greeting, as follows: *"wa `alaikum assalāmu wa rahmatullāh"* (and peace and God's mercy be on you too) or *"wa `alaikum assalāmu wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh"* (and peace and God's mercy and blessings be on you too). According to the reported practice of the Prophet, the third form is answered by repeating the same phrase in full.

Let us look more closely at the subtle touches implicit in this verse. There is, firstly, the distinct identity which Islam emphatically seeks to confer on Muslim society to preserve its unique features and traditions, just as it has its own individual laws and systems. These aspects were discussed in detail when dealing with the change of the *qiblah,* or direction of prayer. (See Volume I, pp. 112 to 121)

And, secondly, there is the unremitting endeavour to strengthen the ties of amity and friendship among Muslims. The greeting of peace and the better response are one of the best means to achieve that close and solid relationship. God's Messenger was once asked: "What is the best thing one can do?" His reply was: "Give out food, greet with peace those you know and those you do not know." (Related by al-Bukhārī.) This manner of greeting is highly recommended in Muslim societies, and the present verse makes the reply, as outlined above, a religious obligation. The value of such social tradition becomes clear from its real effect in cleansing people's hearts and bringing people closer together and reinforcing the ties among them. This

is clear to all who study closely the effects of this tradition and its amazing consequences in society.

Thirdly, the verse introduces a touch of tranquillity and serenity to a discussion of fighting. It may be intended to point out Islam's fundamental foundation: peace. Islam is the religion of peace. It recommends fighting only in order to establish peace on earth. It advocates peace in its widest and most comprehensive sense; peace emanating from the compliance of human nature with the Divine order of God Almighty.

8
Organising External Relations

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ لَيَجۡمَعَنَّكُمۡ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ لَا رَيۡبَ فِيهِ ۗ وَمَنۡ أَصۡدَقُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ حَدِيثٗا ﴿٨٧﴾

God, save whom there is no deity, will surely gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, which is sure to come, no doubt. Whose word could be truer than God's? (87)

فَمَا لَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ فِئَتَيۡنِ وَٱللَّهُ أَرۡكَسَهُم بِمَا كَسَبُواْ ۚ أَتُرِيدُونَ أَن تَهۡدُواْ مَنۡ أَضَلَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَمَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُۥ سَبِيلٗا ﴿٨٨﴾

How could you be divided into two groups concerning the hypocrites, when God Himself has cast them off because of their guilt? Do you seek to guide those whom God has let go astray? For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way. (88)

وَدُّواْ لَوۡ تَكۡفُرُونَ كَمَا كَفَرُواْ فَتَكُونُونَ سَوَآءٗ ۖ فَلَا تَتَّخِذُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءَ حَتَّىٰ يُهَاجِرُواْ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ فَخُذُوهُمۡ وَٱقۡتُلُوهُمۡ حَيۡثُ وَجَدتُّمُوهُمۡ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّخِذُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ وَلِيّٗا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٨٩﴾

They would love to see you disbelieve as they themselves disbelieve, so that you may be all alike. Do not, therefore, take them for your allies, until they migrate for God's cause. If they turn against you, then seize them and kill them wherever you may find them. Do not take any of them for your ally or supporter. (89)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ يَصِلُونَ إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِۭ بَيۡنَكُمۡ وَبَيۡنَهُم مِّيثَٰقٌ أَوۡ جَآءُوكُمۡ حَصِرَتۡ صُدُورُهُمۡ أَن يُقَٰتِلُوكُمۡ أَوۡ يُقَٰتِلُواْ قَوۡمَهُمۡ ۚ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَسَلَّطَهُمۡ عَلَيۡكُمۡ فَلَقَٰتَلُوكُمۡ ۚ فَإِنِ ٱعۡتَزَلُوكُمۡ فَلَمۡ يُقَٰتِلُوكُمۡ وَأَلۡقَوۡاْ إِلَيۡكُمُ ٱلسَّلَمَ فَمَا جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ سَبِيلٗا

Except in the case of those of them who have ties with people to whom you yourselves are bound by a covenant, or those who come to you because their hearts shrink from the thought of fighting you or fighting their own people. Had God so willed, He would have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. Therefore, if they leave you alone, and do not make war on you, and offer you peace, God has given you no way against them.

(90)

You will find others who would like to be safe from you as well as to be safe from their own people. Whenever they are called back to sedition they plunge headlong into it. If they do not leave you alone, and do not offer you peace and do not stay their hands, seize them and kill them wherever you come upon them. Over these We have given you a clear authority. (91)

Never should a believer kill another believer, unless it be by mistake. He who kills a believer by mistake must free a believing soul from bondage and pay an indemnity to his family, unless they forego it by way of charity. If the victim belonged to a people who are at war with you, while he himself was a believer, then let his killer free a believing soul from bondage. If he (the victim) belonged to a people with whom you are bound by a covenant, then the penalty is an indemnity to be paid to his family and the freeing of a believing soul from bondage. He who cannot afford the wherewithal must fast for two consecutive months. This is the atonement ordained by God. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (92)

He who deliberately kills a believer his punishment is hell, therein to abide permanently. God will be angry with him, and will reject him, and will prepare for

﴿٩٠﴾

سَتَجِدُونَ ءَاخَرِينَ يُرِيدُونَ أَن يَأۡمَنُوكُمۡ وَيَأۡمَنُواْ قَوۡمَهُمۡ كُلَّ مَا رُدُّوٓاْ إِلَى ٱلۡفِتۡنَةِ أُرۡكِسُواْ فِيهَاۚ فَإِن لَّمۡ يَعۡتَزِلُوكُمۡ وَيُلۡقُوٓاْ إِلَيۡكُمُ ٱلسَّلَمَ وَيَكُفُّوٓاْ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡ فَخُذُوهُمۡ وَٱقۡتُلُوهُمۡ حَيۡثُ ثَقِفۡتُمُوهُمۡۚ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكُمۡ جَعَلۡنَا لَكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ سُلۡطَٰنٗا مُّبِينٗا ﴿٩١﴾

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤۡمِنٍ أَن يَقۡتُلَ مُؤۡمِنًا إِلَّا خَطَـٔٗاۚ وَمَن قَتَلَ مُؤۡمِنًا خَطَـٔٗا فَتَحۡرِيرُ رَقَبَةٖ مُّؤۡمِنَةٖ وَدِيَةٞ مُّسَلَّمَةٌ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن يَصَّدَّقُواْۚ فَإِن كَانَ مِن قَوۡمٍ عَدُوّٖ لَّكُمۡ وَهُوَ مُؤۡمِنٞ فَتَحۡرِيرُ رَقَبَةٖ مُّؤۡمِنَةٖۖ وَإِن كَانَ مِن قَوۡمِۭ بَيۡنَكُمۡ وَبَيۡنَهُم مِّيثَٰقٞ فَدِيَةٞ مُّسَلَّمَةٌ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهِۦ وَتَحۡرِيرُ رَقَبَةٖ مُّؤۡمِنَةٖۖ فَمَن لَّمۡ يَجِدۡ فَصِيَامُ شَهۡرَيۡنِ مُتَتَابِعَيۡنِ تَوۡبَةٗ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمٗا ﴿٩٢﴾

وَمَن يَقۡتُلۡ مُؤۡمِنٗا مُّتَعَمِّدٗا فَجَزَآؤُهُۥ جَهَنَّمُ خَٰلِدٗا فِيهَا وَغَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِ

him a dreadful suffering (93)	وَلَعَنَهُۥ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُۥ عَذَابًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٩٣﴾
Believers, when you go on an expedition to serve the cause of God, use your discernment and do not — out of a desire for the fleeting gains of this worldly life — say to one who offers you the greeting of peace: "You are not a believer": for with God are abundant gains. Thus have you been in days gone by. But God has bestowed on you His grace. Therefore, use your discernment. Indeed God is always aware of what you do. (94)	يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا ضَرَبْتُمْ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَتَبَيَّنُواْ وَلَا تَقُولُواْ لِمَنْ أَلْقَىٰٓ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلسَّلَٰمَ لَسْتَ مُؤْمِنًا تَبْتَغُونَ عَرَضَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا فَعِندَ ٱللَّهِ مَغَانِمُ كَثِيرَةٌ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كُنتُم مِّن قَبْلُ فَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓاْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿٩٤﴾

Overview

This new passage begins with an emphatic reiteration of the central principle of Islamic faith, declaring God's oneness. It goes on to formulate on this basis a number of provisions to organise relations between the Muslim community and other groupings. The passage includes a denunciation of the division of Muslims into two groups with different views with regard to the treatment of hypocrites. It seems that this relates to a particular group of hypocrites who did not live in Madinah. These provisions, as well as the denunciation, are based on the same central principle of Islam which is stated most clearly whenever a piece of legislation or a practical directive is mentioned in the Qur'ān. It should be stated that these provisions constitute only a part of the rules which Islam was the first to enunciate in human history for the regulation of international relations. For the first time ever, these relations have a basis other than brute force.

Despite its international law and all the international organisations that have come into existence on the basis of such law, Europe began moving in this direction only in the seventeenth century (the eleventh century of the Islamic calendar). Generally speaking, this law remains theoretical, and international organisations are, on the whole, devices to conceal the ambitions of the great powers. In no way can they be described as aiming to ensure that justice is done. They have come into existence as a result of disputes between forces of equal strength.[14] Whenever this balance is heavily tilted one way or the other, international laws become of little value and

[14] The author wrote this during the late 1950s.

international organisations have no teeth.

Islam, the Divine code for human life, established the bases for international dealings in the seventh century (the first of the Islamic calendar), initiating them without pressure produced by any dispute. It formulated these bases for use by the Islamic society as it established its relations with other camps and forces. The Islamic aim being to raise the banner of justice high, even with hostile camps unable to commit themselves to the same principles. Indeed, Islam took the initiative to formulate these bases for the first time ever. We find them in different *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān, each of them explained within its proper context. Together, they constitute a complete code for international dealings. They provide an authoritative rule for every case which may take place between Islamic society and other camps, whatever attitude they may take towards Islam, be it one of open warfare, peaceful co-existence, alliance or neutrality. They also deal with other parties who may have some association with a camp that is hostile to, at peace with, in alliance with, or neutral to Islamic society. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss these principles and provisions in detail. They should be the subject of a full dissertation written by someone specialising in international law. Here, we will only look at what is contained in this passage of this *sūrah.* These speak of dealings with the following groups and cases:

1. The hypocrites who lived away from Madinah;
2. Those who were associated with a community that had a covenant with the Muslims;
3. Neutral people who had an aversion to warfare against the Muslims or against their own people, while they continued to follow their own religion;
4. Those who wished to play games with faith, pretending to be Muslims whenever they visited Madinah, but who declared their disbelief when they returned to Makkah;

Cases of accidental and deliberate killing among the Muslims in different situations and those belonging to different groups.

Clear and express provisions are given for all these cases. As we have already said, these provisions constitute a part of the principles governing international relations.

Guiding Principles

To start with, this passage begins with the basic principle central to the foundation of Islamic society. "*God, save whom there is no deity, will surely gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, which is sure to come, no doubt. Whose word could be truer than*

God's?" (Verse 87) In the cultivation of hearts and the education of people, as well as in establishing a Muslim community and giving it a distinctive shape and law, Islam begins with the basic principle of declaring the oneness of God and that He is the only deity in the universe. The same holds true whether the legislation to be enacted is an internal one for the Muslim community or whether it relates to international dealings. Hence, the passage which includes a host of provisions for external relations opens with the same central principle. It is from believing in the hereafter and the gathering by God of all His creatures, so that they may account for what they have done with the chances He has offered them in this life, that the Islamic system begins its work to cultivate hearts and educate people.

The aim is to provide Muslims with a keen sense of commitment to Islamic laws and directives and their operation in human life. Every little thing is part of the test set for every individual. Everyone will be held to account for all his deeds, large or small. This is the surest guarantee for the proper enforcement of all laws. It is a guarantee that is well rooted in the depths of the human soul. It gives it an ever sensitive conscience that remains alert when every external watch guard goes into deep slumber. This is God's Word and His promise: *"Whose word could be truer than God's?"* (Verse 87)

These words touch our hearts gently and are indicative of the method followed by the Qur'ān in educating the Muslim community. It also makes a clear statement of the central principle of the Islamic faith.

Dealing with Hypocrites

The next verse criticises the Muslim community's hesitation to adopt a firm attitude towards the hypocrites. The Muslim community was apparently in two minds, leading to some controversy with regard to its relationship with a group of hypocrites from outside Madinah. The criticism makes it clear that Islam only accepts a firm attitude in such matters. It allows for no hesitation in the Muslim community's approach to such a problem. Such hesitation means accepting the pretence they offer. This can only be done if it is based on a clearly defined plan of action.

> *How could you be divided into two groups concerning the hypocrites, when God Himself has cast them off because of their guilt? Do you seek to guide those whom God has let go astray? For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way.* (Verse 88)

We have two reports to indicate which group of hypocrites is meant in this Qur'ānic verse. The first, related by Imām Aĥmad, quotes Zayd ibn Thābit, a Companion of the Prophet, who says that the Prophet (peace be upon him) went out

to Uĥud [with an army]. Some of those who went with him, however, decided to go back. His Companions were divided on how to deal with these retractors. One group said that they must be killed. Another group objected, saying that they were believers. Then this Qur'ānic verse was revealed raising the question that the Muslims should adopt a unified attitude. The Prophet said: "This city is Ṭaibah [another name for Madinah meaning that it is a good and virtuous city]. It throws away evil as a smelter throws away foreign elements in iron." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

The other report quotes Ibn `Abbās as saying that this Qur'ānic verse speaks about certain people who indicated that they were Muslims while, at the same time, they supported the unbelievers. Once, when they went on a mission away from Makkah, they said that they were safe, should they encounter the Prophet's Companions. When the latter were told of their departure from Makkah, some of them suggested that they should "mount an expedition to meet those cowards and kill them, because they supported your enemies". Another group of believers said: "How can you kill people who have made the same declaration of faith which you have made? Is it because they have not migrated to Madinah that their killing and the confiscation of their property can be sanctioned?" Both groups maintained their attitudes, and the Prophet expressed no disapproval of either. Hence, why this Qur'ānic verse was revealed.

Although the first report appears to be more authentic from the point of view of its chain of transmitters and its inclusion in the most authentic collections of *aĥādīth,* the events mentioned in the second report appear to be more correct, considering historical events. We know for certain that no directive to fight against the hypocrites in Madinah was given to the Muslims. The Prophet never fought against them and never ordered their killing. Instead, there was a totally different plan for dealing with them, one which tolerated them until they were naturally cast away. Their support was weakened with the expulsion of the Jews, who used to encourage them. The Jews were forced out of Madinah before they were eventually evacuated from the whole of Arabia.

It may be said that the directive to take them prisoner and to kill them is made conditional on their migration to Madinah which is provided for in the following verse. It is, then, a warning issued to them to desist from their practices. They might have heeded this warning and the Prophet, therefore, would have had no reason to carry out this order. The condition, however, that this threat applies until "they have migrated", makes it absolutely clear that they were not of the people of Madinah. Their migration to Madinah was, in fact, required, because this whole episode took place before the conquest of Makkah. During that period migration meant to move out of the land of unfaith into the land of faith, i.e. Madinah, to join the Muslim

community and implement Islamic law. Otherwise, the identity of those who did not migrate while claiming to be Muslims was questionable. Later in the *sūrah* we have a strong denunciation of the attitude of those few Muslims who remained in Makkah despite their ability to migrate to Madinah, even though they were citizens of Makkah. All this serves to support the second report, describing those hypocrites as a group of the people of Makkah or its surrounding area who claimed to be Muslims while at the same time supporting the Muslims' enemies.

This strong denunciation of the believers' hesitant attitude towards those people is expressed in a rhetorical question: *"How could you be divided into two groups concerning the hypocrites, when God Himself has cast them off because of their guilt? Do you seek to guide those whom God has let go astray?"* (Verse 88) This question emphasises that it is dangerous for the Muslim community to hesitate when faced with hypocrisy, because it points to a lack of clarity with respect to the true nature of this religion. One group of believers could not imagine how the hypocrites could be killed when they had made verbal statements claiming to be Muslims. Yet those very people were aware that they did not belong to the Muslim community. This is clear in their statement: "We need fear nothing from Muĥammad's companions." This is also made clear by the other group of believers who stated that those hypocrites "support your enemies". The fact is that regardless of any verbal claim to belong to Islam, their practical support of the Muslims' enemies proves their hypocrisy beyond any doubt. Hence, there is no room for tolerance or overlooking such an attitude. Tolerance here is a weakness threatening the Muslim community. Hence, it is strongly denounced in the Qur'ān.

The same is not the case with the hypocrites of Madinah. The believers there were clear about their hypocrisy. There was, however, a well-known plan to tolerate them and accept their claims for the time being. The difference in the two cases is that in the one referred to in this verse, some Muslims advocated tolerance towards people living away from Madinah simply because they claimed verbally to be Muslims while at the same time practically supported the enemies of Islam. Hence, God's view of those people is stated clearly: *"When God Himself has cast them off because of their guilt."* (Verse 88) When God adopts a certain attitude there is no way a Muslim can adopt a different one. God has cast them off because of their wickedness and bad intentions.

This is followed by another reproach: *"Do you seek to guide those whom God has let go astray?"* (Verse 88) This probably suggests that the group of Muslims who advocated tolerance might have suggested that if the Muslims were to give those people a chance they might eventually overcome their reluctance in accepting Islam. God tells the believers that since these people merited His punishment, theirs was a hopeless case.

God allows to go astray only those who choose to do so. This means that when people actually do go astray, God allows them to go further away from the right path. He lets them continue their erring ways, moving further and further away from Divine guidance. It is they who have chosen error in preference to Divine guidance and they have done this consciously after being fully aware of the course of action acceptable to God.

Qualifications for Alliance with Believers

> *They would love to see you disbelieve as they themselves disbelieve, so that you may be all alike. Do not, therefore, take them for your allies, until they migrate for God's cause. If they turn against you, then seize them and kill them wherever you my find them. Do not take any of them for your ally or supporter.* (Verse 89)

This verse moves another step closer to exposing the attitude and intentions of the hypocrites. It is not only that they have chosen error in preference to Divine guidance and that their deeds and bad intentions have merited that God lets them go further astray, but they have deliberately tried to divert the believers off their right course into error: "*They would love to see you disbelieve as they themselves disbelieve, so that you my be all alike.*"

Despite the fact that they repeat the same statements as the Muslims, and they have made the same declaration of believing in the oneness of God and in the messages of Muĥammad (peace be upon him), their practical support to the enemies of Islam belie their verbal statements. Nevertheless, they are not satisfied with that. One who consciously rejects the true faith does not feel happy when faith continues to make its presence felt on earth and attracts believers. He feels that he must work hard, utilising all his devices, to turn the Muslims back to disbelief so that they are in the same position as he. This is an initial definition of the hypocrite's real attitude. It leaves no room for a "wet" concept of faith. It makes absolutely clear that faith requires that action be consistent with verbal statements. Words have no significance if actions belie them.

The wording of the Qur'ānic verse sends a strong shudder into the believers' hearts. It tells them that those hypocrites "*would love to see you disbelieve as they themselves disbelieve, so that you may be all alike*". (Verse 89) They have only recently tasted the sweetness of faith after experiencing for long the bitter taste of unbelief. The great transformation which took place in their feelings, concepts and their society as a whole, as they moved from ignorance into Islam, was very real to them. It only required a light touch to arouse their hostility to anyone who wished them to revert to that low depth of ignorance from which Islam saved them and which

elevated them to its sublime heights. Making use of this state of mind, the Qur'ān issues its order to them at the moment when they are most alert to the danger posed by those hypocrites: *"Do not, therefore, take them for your allies, until they migrate for God's cause. If they turn against you, then seize them and kill them wherever you my find them. Do not take any of them for your ally or supporter."* (Verse 89)

The clear prohibition against taking allies from among them suggests that old family and tribal ties, and probably economic interests, had left their mark in the minds of the Muslims in Madinah. The Qur'ān deals with these traces and states clearly to the Muslim community the basis of the ties it establishes with others and the principles upon which its concepts are founded. The Muslims are being taught that a united community or a nation is founded neither on family, blood relationship or tribal ties, nor on the basis of living together in one city or one geographical area, nor on the basis of commercial or economic interests. It is only founded on an ideology and the social system such an ideology produces.

In practical terms, this means that there could be no alliance forged between Muslims living in the land of Islam and other people living in the land of war. At that time, the land of war was Makkah, the place of origin of those early Muslims who migrated to Madinah. What this Qur'ānic verse tells us is that there may never have been any alliance with those who claimed to be Muslims until they migrated to Madinah to join the Muslim society there; that is, until they took the practical step bringing them into the Muslim community. Only in this way, was their migration manifestly genuine, motivated by their faith, undertaken in service of God's cause, for the purpose of building the Muslim society which implements Islam. There could be no other purpose for their migration.

This is stated with a clarity and precision which leaves no room for any sort of ambiguity. If they comply with this requirement, moving into the land of Islam to live under the Islamic regime based on the Islamic faith and implementing Islamic law, leaving behind their families, interests and homes in the land of war, then they are part of the Muslim community and members of the Islamic society. Their refusal to migrate renders their verbal claims devoid of any substance: *"If they turn against you, then seize them and kill them wherever you may find them. Do not take any of them for your ally or supporter"* (Verse 89) It is this ruling which makes us more inclined to say that those hypocrites did not live in Madinah. A different policy was implemented with the hypocrites of Madinah themselves.

Islam is very tolerant with the followers of other faiths and ideologies. It does not force itself on anyone. Non-Muslims who live in a Muslim state under an Islamic regime may openly state their beliefs, which may be in conflict with the Islamic faith, provided that they do not try to win Muslims over to their faith and that they do not insult Islam. The Qur'ān denounces hurling abuse on Islam, as was done by the

followers of earlier religions, in very clear terms. It leaves no doubt that Islam does not allow those who live under its regime to criticise its principles in abusive terms or to distort its facts. Some people in our modern times would like us to believe that they are allowed this. This is totally untrue. It is sufficient that Islam does not force itself on people and that it protects the lives and properties of those who belong to other religions and who live in an Islamic society. Islam further affords to them the same benefits of Islamic life, without any discrimination between them and Muslims, and allows them to implement the rules of their faith in all matters which have no bearing on the general system as it applies to all citizens.

Islam extends this attitude of tolerance to those who openly adopt a different faith, but it does not extend it to those who make a claim to be Muslims but whose actions belie that claim. Its tolerance cannot accommodate those who declare that they believe in God's oneness, who testify that there is no deity except God, and who, at the same time, acknowledge to someone else any attribute which belongs solely to God, such as sovereignty and the authority to legislate. It describes as idolaters those of the people of earlier Scriptures who take their priests and rabbis as well as Jesus, son of Mary, as lords besides God. It is true that they did not worship those priests and rabbis, but they certainly followed their lead when they enacted for them legislation that makes certain things permissible and prohibits others.

Nor does Islam tolerate that some hypocrites should he described as believers, simply because they have made the verbal declaration that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is His Messenger, but, at the same time, remained in the land of unfaith, giving their support to the Muslims' enemies. Tolerance in these circumstances is, in fact, complacency. Islam is tolerant but not complacent. It is a serious concept working within a serious system. Seriousness admits tolerance but has no room for complacency.

These directives given to the first Muslim community are, indeed, indicative of the nature of Islam and reveal a great deal to all Muslim generations.

Peace with Power

Having thus given a clear verdict against those who side with the unbelievers despite their claims to be Muslims, the *sūrah* states an exception in the case of those who seek refuge with people who have a covenant or a treaty with the Muslim community. The attitude determined for such a community now also applies to them: "*Except in the case of those of them who have ties with people to whom you yourselves are bound by a covenant.*" (Verse 90)

We see here that Islam prefers peace whenever there is room for peace which does not impede its work of freely conveying its message to people and allowing them

free choice. Nothing and no one should be in a position to use force against the effort to convey Islam to people. The security of the Muslims should be guaranteed. They must not be exposed to any danger of sedition or to threats to the Islamic message which may cause its efforts to be hampered. For this reason, those who seek refuge and live with any group of people who are bound by a treaty or a covenant with the Muslims enjoy the same treatment as the people with whom they live. The same state of peace applies to them. This is clear evidence of the peaceful nature of Islam.

Exception from imprisonment and execution is also made in the case of those individuals or tribes or communities who take a neutral position, those who do not join the fighting which takes place between their people and the Muslims. Their hearts shrink from thoughts of either fighting with their people against the Muslims or fighting with the Muslims against their own kin. These people stand aside, unwilling to enter into any hostilities: "*Or those who come to you because their hearts shrink from the thought of fighting you or fighting their own people.*" (Verse 90)

Again this ruling is evidence of the Islamic desire to avoid fighting others whenever they refrain from fighting the Muslims, choosing neutrality between them and their enemies. Those who did not fight on either side were present in Arabia and, indeed, within the Quraysh itself. Islam did not pressurise them to take sides for or against it. It was sufficient that they did not oppose Islam. At the same time, there was hope that they would eventually take the side of Islam, once the circumstances which caused their reluctance were removed. This was what actually happened in many cases.

God makes this line towards those neutrals beneficial to the Muslims when He reminds them of the other possibility that could have occurred. Those people could have sided with the hostile unbelievers and fought against the Muslims. The fact that they did not was far more preferable. "*Had God so willed, He would have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. Therefore, if they leave you alone, and do not make war on you, and offer you peace, God has given you no way against them.*" (Verse 90)

We note here the fine touch delivered by the Qur'ān which restrains those Muslims who were full of enthusiasm and who may not have liked these peoples' neutrality. It is a reminder of God's grace. He has restrained these people from taking a hostile attitude that could have increased the Muslims' burden. The Muslims are instructed to accept whatever goodness is offered them and to avoid all evil that God has caused to stay away from them. This is, then, to be the attitude of the Muslim community, as long as it does not involve any relaxation of Islamic principles or complacency in matters of faith or humiliation to the Muslims through a sell out to their enemies. A cheap peace is unacceptable. The aim is not to avoid fighting at any price. The aim is to achieve a peace that does not encroach on any right of the

Muslims, whether these rights are due to people or to Islam as a message and philosophy.

It is only right and proper that all impediments should be removed from the way of conveying the message of Islam to mankind. The point is that everyone who receives this message should feel free to accept it without being exposed to any harm, and this should apply everywhere in the world. It is also needed so that Islam acquires sufficient strength to deter anyone from taking a hostile attitude or inflicting harm of any sort on those who believe in it. Beyond that, peace is preferable and *jihād* continues.

There is another group of people to whom Islam extends no tolerance, because it is an evil group of hypocrites with whom Islam has no covenant or treaty. Hence, it is free to take the appropriate stance against them: "*You will find others who would like to be safe from you as well as to be safe from their own people. Whenever they are called back to sedition they plunge headlong into it. If they do not leave you alone, and do not offer you peace and do not stay their hands, seize them and kill them wherever you come upon them. Over these We have given you a clear authority.*" (Verse 91)

A report by Mujāhid suggests that this statement concerned a certain group of people from Makkah who came to the Prophet to declare that they were Muslims without actually being so. They then returned to Makkah where they reverted to idol worship. Their purpose was that they should feel safe and secure in both camps. Hence, Islam ruled that they be killed unless they stopped their erring ways. The verdict in this case is stated clearly: "*If they do not leave you alone, and do not offer you peace and do not stay their hands, seize them and kill them wherever you come upon them. Over these we have given you a clear authority*" (Verse 91)

We note here the clear balance in the Islamic attitude. It is serious and decisive but, at the same time, tolerant and forbearing. Each situation is faced with the most suitable of attitudes. When we consider both features, we realise that they provide every Muslim with a balanced attitude which becomes an essential feature of the Islamic system as a whole. When some people move towards extremism, adopting an uncompromising, violent attitude, then they do not represent Islam. On the other hand, Islam is not represented by those who take an apologetic attitude towards *jihād,* trying to defend Islam, which, in their view, stands indicted of violent extremism. They emphasise that Islam prefers peace in all situations and its permanent attitude is one of forbearance and forgiveness and that *jihād* is only allowed in the defence of Muslim land or the Muslim community. Thus, they narrow it down. *Jihād* is, indeed, a means of defending the Islamic message and its right to be conveyed freely to everyone, everywhere in the world. It is also the means to ensure that every individual, anywhere in the world is free to accept Islam. It guarantees the supremacy of a virtuous system, which extends security to all people, whether they

accept Islam or not. As we have already said, neither the narrow extremist view, nor the complacent apologetic view is correct. Again, these provisions of Islamic international law convey a clear message to mankind.

Indemnity for Accidental Killing

All the foregoing applies to relations between the Muslim community and other camps. The *sūrah* now moves on to speak of internal relations among Muslims, no matter how distant their countries are. It is clear that there can be no fighting or killing among Muslims except by way of punishment for certain crimes. The point is that there can be no situation superseding the relationship of faith that exists between Muslims. Hence, no Muslim may ever kill another Muslim, knowing that this strong tie of faith exists between them. Such killing may only happen by mistake. Since this is a possibility, it requires certain legal provisions. As for deliberate killing, it is a crime much too ghastly to be erased by any atonement. It is something that transgresses all boundaries of Islam.

> *Never should a believer kill another believer, unless it be by mistake. He who kills a believer by mistake must free a believing soul from bondage and pay an indemnity to his family, unless they forego it by way of charity. If the victim belonged to a people who are at war with you, while he himself was a believer, then let his killer free a believing soul from bondage. If he (the victim) belonged to a people with whom you are bound by a covenant, then the penalty is an indemnity to be paid to his family and the freeing of a believing soul ,from bondage. He who cannot afford the wherewithal must fast for two consecutive months. This is the atonement ordained by God. God is All-Knowing, Wise.* (Verse 92)

The *sūrah* provides legal provisions for four cases of killing, three of which may happen by mistake among Muslims in the same community or in different communities. The fourth is that of deliberate murder which, the Qur'ān insists, should never happen in the first place. Nothing should bring the relationship between two Muslims so low for a murder of this sort to take place. The relationship between two Muslims is too strong, deeply rooted, precious and dearly cherished for such a serious breach to be contemplated. Hence, the *sūrah* begins by legislating for accidental killing.

"*Never should a believer kill another believer, unless it be by mistake.*" (Verse 92) This is the only possibility which is acceptable to the Islamic sense and which is possible in reality. For a Muslim to live side by side with another Muslim is a truly great blessing. It is inconceivable that a Muslim takes a deliberate step, after contemplation, to remove this great blessing from his life by committing such a horrendous crime. Muslims belong to a very dear race. The one who knows the value

of a Muslim is only another Muslim. Hence, killing him makes no sense. This is something well known to the people immediately concerned with it. They recognise it within themselves and in their feelings. It is God who has given it to them through their faith and their ties with God's Messenger. These ties are further elevated to bring them together, united by their bonds with God Himself who has established their remarkable unity.

When accidental killing takes place, there can be one of three cases for which legal provisions are made. The first is that when the victim belongs to a Muslim family living in the land of Islam. In this case, a slave who is a believer must be set free and an indemnity must be paid to the victim's family. Setting a slave free is a compensation made to the Muslim community by the revival of another Muslim soul. This is, indeed, how freeing a slave is viewed in Islam. As for the indemnity, it is paid in order to pacify those immediately affected by the killing. It compensates them for a part of their loss. At the same time, the Qur'ān hints that the victim's family may forego this indemnity, if they so desire, because such an attitude promotes feelings of forgiveness within the Muslim community: "*He who kills a believer by mistake must free a believing soul from bondage and pay an indemnity to his family, unless they forego it by way of charity.*" (Verse 92)

The second case is that whereby the victim is, himself, a believer while his own people are at war with the Muslim community. In this case, a slave who is a believer must be freed to compensate for the believer who has been killed. No indemnity is payable to his people who are at war with Islam, because that would strengthen them in their fight against the Muslims. Here, there is no attempt to pacify the family of the victim or to win favour or to establish friendly relations with them. They are hostile to Islam and they fight against the Muslims.

The third case is one whereby the victim belongs to a people who have a treaty or a covenant with the Muslims. The Qur'ānic statement does not specify that the victim must be a believer in this case. This has led some commentators on the Qur'ān and other scholars to consider the statement a general one, applying to all people who have a covenant or a treaty with the Muslims, even if they are not believers. The fact that they have such a covenant makes them entitled to the same protection as Muslims.

It appears to us, however, that the whole verse deals with the killing of believers. The opening sentence in this Qur'ānic verse states: "*Never should a believer kill another believer, unless it be by mistake.*" This is followed by detailing the various cases in which the victim is a believer. The fact that in the second case there is a clear and specific reference to the victim being a believer, "*If the victim belonged to a people who are at war with you, while he himself was a believer*", has special significance. It is made in order to dispel any confusion about his identity because his people are at war with

the Muslims. The victim, himself, must be a believer, although his people are not. This understanding of the third case being applicable to victims of accidental death who are Muslims is supported by the fact that the penalty includes the freeing of a believing slave. Again this is compensation for the loss of one believer by freeing another from bondage. Otherwise, the freeing of any slave, believer or not, would have been adequate.

A number of reports speak of the Prophet paying indemnity to the families of victims of accidental death who belonged to tribes bound by covenants or treaties with the Muslims. These reports do not speak of the freeing of the same number of slave believers. This suggests that in this case the only penalty is the indemnity. This ruling is based on what the Prophet did, not on this verse. All three cases identified in this verse share a common factor: the victim is a believer, although his family may not be believers living in the Muslim community or belong to a hostile camp at war with the Muslims, or to a people at peace with Islam having a covenant with the believers. This is what appears to us to be a more accurate understanding of this verse.

Punishment for Deliberate Killing

All the foregoing applies to accidental killing. A deliberate murder of a believer is a crime too horrendous to be committed by anyone who has any trace of faith in his heart. It cannot be compensated for by any indemnity or by setting slaves free. The punishment in this case is exacted by God Himself: *"He who deliberately kills a believer, his punishment is hell, therein to abide permanently. God will be angry with him, and will reject him, and will prepare for him a dreadful suffering."* (Verse 93)

It is a crime of murder wherein the victim is not merely the human being who is killed without any justification whatsoever. It also kills the noble and dearly cherished tie established by God between one Muslim and another. It is a crime against the very idea of believing in God. For this reason, it is often associated with denying faith altogether. Some scholars of high standing including Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin, are of the opinion that no repentance of such a crime is acceptable. Other scholars who disagree, rely for their argument on the Qur'ānic verse which states: *"God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever he wills."* (Verse 116) These latter scholars say that a deliberate murderer of a Muslim may still hope for God's Forgiveness. They explain the statement that such a killer shall abide permanently in hell as signifying that hell will be his abode for a very long time.

The Prophet's Companions who graduated in the first Islamic school used to meet others who, prior to Islam, killed their fathers, sons or brothers and some of them

experienced bitter feelings as a result, but they never contemplated revenge killings. This is because they had all embraced Islam, and no thoughts of revenge were entertained by the relatives of the victims, even when their sorrow was most painful.

Indeed, they never thought of depriving them of any right given to them by Islam. To guard against accidental killing, and to ensure the purity of those whose hearts fight for God's cause so that they may be totally dedicated to the service of Islam, God instructs the Muslims not to fight with anyone or to kill them until they are sure of his identity. They must accept his statement if he claims to be a Muslim, since there can be no evidence to the contrary. *"Believers, when you go on an expedition to serve the cause of God, use your discernment and do not – out of a desire for the fleeting gains of this worldly life – say to one who offers you the greeting of peace: 'You are not a believer': for with God are abundant gains. Thus have you been in days gone by. But God has bestowed on you His grace. Therefore, use your discernment. Indeed God is always aware of what you do."* (Verse 94)

There are a number of reports that speak of the circumstances in which this verse was revealed. They may be summed up in such a way that suggests that a Muslim expedition once came across a man with his sheep. He greeted them with the Islamic greeting, *Assalāmu `alaikum,* to indicate that he was a Muslim. Some of them considered that this was merely words he spoke to save his life. Therefore, they killed him. This Qur'ānic verse was then revealed to indicate that such an action is forbidden. Believers must not entertain any thoughts which betray that they are after making any worldly gains or which show that they make hasty judgements. Both are unacceptable to Islam. When Muslims go out on a campaign of *jihād* for God's cause, then the gains that they may make must never come into their reckoning. Such gains are never a motive for *jihād.* Similarly, a hasty judgement may lead to the shedding of a Muslim's blood with whom the most cherished tie should exist. God reminds the believers of their recent days of *ignorance* which were characterised by hasty judgements and the coveting of worldly gains. He reminds them of His grace when He purified their hearts, elevated their ideals and placed their objectives on a sublime level.

They no longer stage war for any material gain as they used to do in the past. They are governed by His legislation, which provides a complete system for them to implement. Their judgements must not be based on rash decisions, characteristic of their days of *ignorance.*

The same statement may also be understood as implying a reference to the fact that they, themselves, used to conceal from their people the fact that they were Muslims. This is because they were too weak. They only revealed this when they felt secure in the company of other Muslims. The man who was thus killed might have concealed the truth of his being a Muslim from his own people. When he met the

Muslims, he offered them the greeting of peace characteristic of Muslims, to indicate that he, himself, was a Muslim: *"Thus have you been in days gone by. But God has bestowed on you His grace. Therefore, use your discernment. Indeed God is always aware of what you do."* (Verse 94)

We note how the Qur'ān touches the believers' most sensitive feelings in order to remind them of God's grace and to make them more conscious of their obligations. It is through this sensitivity and consciousness that Islam achieves full commitment by its followers to its legal system, after having explained its laws most clearly. It is this clarity and purity that characterises external relations between Islam and other communities, as explained in this passage.

9
Fighting for the Oppressed

لَّا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْقَـٰعِدُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ غَيْرُ أُو۟لِى ٱلضَّرَرِ وَٱلْمُجَـٰهِدُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ فَضَّلَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُجَـٰهِدِينَ بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ عَلَى ٱلْقَـٰعِدِينَ دَرَجَةً ۚ وَكُلًّا وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَفَضَّلَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُجَـٰهِدِينَ عَلَى ٱلْقَـٰعِدِينَ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٩٥﴾

Those of the believers who remain passive, other than the disabled, are not equal to those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above the ones who remain passive. To each God has promised the ultimate good, yet God has preferred those who strive hard over those who remain passive with a mighty reward: (95)

دَرَجَـٰتٍ مِّنْهُ وَمَغْفِرَةً وَرَحْمَةً ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿٩٦﴾

degrees of honour, forgiveness of sins and His grace. God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (96)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَوَفَّىٰهُمُ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةُ ظَالِمِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا۟ فِيمَ كُنتُمْ ۖ قَالُوا۟ كُنَّا مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ قَالُوٓا۟ أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضُ ٱللَّهِ وَٰسِعَةً فَتُهَاجِرُوا۟ فِيهَا ۚ فَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ مَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَسَآءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴿٩٧﴾

To those whom the angels gather in death while they are still wronging themselves, the angels will say: "What were you doing?" They will answer: "We were oppressed on earth." (The angels) will say: "Was not God's earth so spacious that you might have migrated to settle elsewhere?" Such will have their abode in Hell, a certainly evil end. (97)

إِلَّا ٱلْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ مِنَ ٱلرِّجَالِ وَٱلنِّسَآءِ وَٱلْوِلْدَٰنِ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ حِيلَةً وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ سَبِيلًا ﴿٩٨﴾

Excepted are the men, women, and children who, being truly helpless, can devise nothing and can find no way. (98)

فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَعۡفُوَ عَنۡهُمۡۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَفُوًّا غَفُورٗا ٩٩

These God may well pardon, then, for God is indeed most Lenient, Much-Forgiving. (99)

۞ وَمَن يُهَاجِرۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ يَجِدۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُرَٰغَمٗا كَثِيرٗا وَسَعَةٗۚ وَمَن يَخۡرُجۡ مِنۢ بَيۡتِهِۦ مُهَاجِرًا إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ ثُمَّ يُدۡرِكۡهُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ فَقَدۡ وَقَعَ أَجۡرُهُۥ عَلَى ٱللَّهِۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ١٠٠

Anyone who migrates for God's cause will find on earth many places for refuge and great abundance. He who leaves his home, fleeing from evil unto God and His Messenger, and is then overtaken by death, his reward is reserved for him with God. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (100)

وَإِذَا ضَرَبۡتُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَلَيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَقۡصُرُواْ مِنَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ إِنۡ خِفۡتُمۡ أَن يَفۡتِنَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ كَانُواْ لَكُمۡ عَدُوّٗا مُّبِينٗا ١٠١

When you go forth on earth, you will incur no sin by shortening your prayers, if you have reason to fear that the unbelievers may cause you affliction. Truly, the unbelievers are your sworn enemies. (101)

وَإِذَا كُنتَ فِيهِمۡ فَأَقَمۡتَ لَهُمُ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ فَلۡتَقُمۡ طَآئِفَةٞ مِّنۡهُم مَّعَكَ وَلۡيَأۡخُذُوٓاْ أَسۡلِحَتَهُمۡ فَإِذَا سَجَدُواْ فَلۡيَكُونُواْ مِن وَرَآئِكُمۡ وَلۡتَأۡتِ طَآئِفَةٌ أُخۡرَىٰ لَمۡ يُصَلُّواْ فَلۡيُصَلُّواْ مَعَكَ وَلۡيَأۡخُذُواْ حِذۡرَهُمۡ وَأَسۡلِحَتَهُمۡۗ وَدَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَوۡ تَغۡفُلُونَ عَنۡ أَسۡلِحَتِكُمۡ وَأَمۡتِعَتِكُمۡ فَيَمِيلُونَ عَلَيۡكُم مَّيۡلَةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِن كَانَ بِكُمۡ أَذٗى مِّن مَّطَرٍ أَوۡ كُنتُم مَّرۡضَىٰٓ أَن تَضَعُوٓاْ أَسۡلِحَتَكُمۡۖ وَخُذُواْ حِذۡرَكُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَعَدَّ لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابٗا مُّهِينٗا ١٠٢

When you are with the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let one group of them stand up with you, holding on to their weapons. Then, after they have prostrated themselves, let them be behind you, while the other group, who have not yet prayed, shall come forward and pray with you, and let these be on their guard, holding on to their weapons. The unbelievers would love to see you oblivious of your weapons and your equipment, so that they might swoop on you with one assault. But it is no offence for you to lay down your arms [while you pray] if you are bothered by heavy rain, or suffering from illness; but you must always be on your guard. God has prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers.

فَإِذَا قَضَيۡتُمُ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ فَٱذۡكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ قِيَٰمٗا وَقُعُودٗا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِكُمۡۚ فَإِذَا ٱطۡمَأۡنَنتُمۡ فَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَۚ إِنَّ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ كَانَتۡ عَلَى ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ كِتَٰبٗا مَّوۡقُوتٗا ﴿١٠٣﴾

(102)

And when you have performed your prayers, remember God standing, sitting, and lying down. When you are again secure, observe your prayers [fully]. Indeed, prayer is a time- related duty, binding on all believers. (103)

وَلَا تَهِنُواْ فِي ٱبۡتِغَآءِ ٱلۡقَوۡمِۖ إِن تَكُونُواْ تَأۡلَمُونَ فَإِنَّهُمۡ يَأۡلَمُونَ كَمَا تَأۡلَمُونَۖ وَتَرۡجُونَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَرۡجُونَۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمٗا ﴿١٠٤﴾

Do not be faint of heart when you seek out the [enemy] host. If you happen to suffer pain, they also suffer pain as you do; while you hope to receive from God what they can never hope for. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (104)

Overview

This passage is closely connected to the two passages that precede it. Indeed, it complements them. Had it not been for our concern to highlight international relations as outlined by Islam, we would have joined all three passages together. The subject matter here is migration to the land of Islam. Those who had accepted Islam, but who still remained in their homes in the land of war are strongly urged to join the Muslim community in Madinah which was striving hard for God's cause, sacrificing their lives and possessions. They are clearly required here to abandon their relatively more comfortable positions in Makkah, where they lived with their families and clans. These were perhaps the ones who are described in these verses as "*remaining passive*". For, there was no Muslim "remaining passive" in Madinah, other than the hypocrites whose situation was discussed in a totally different tone in the preceding passage.

This first point is followed by a stern warning to those who stay in the land of unfaith. This they do despite their ability to join the Muslim community where they can add to the strength of the believers. Nonetheless, they remain safe in their homes until their souls are gathered by the angels, still in a condition of "*wronging themselves*". Their abode is hell which is described as an evil destination.

Following this, we have a guarantee from God to anyone who migrates to serve

His cause. The guarantee is effected from the moment he leaves home, having no purpose other than joining the camp of believers. The guarantee deals with all the fears entertained by anyone who undertakes such a risky and costly adventure. It is clear that the *sūrah* follows the same thread of *jihād,* or striving for God's cause and migration by believers to join the ranks of those who are engaged in such striving. It also legislates for relations between the Muslim community and others who remain outside its land, including Muslims who have chosen not to migrate.

The passage also discusses prayer in a state of fear whether in the battlefield or on the way to the land of the believers. To speak about prayer at these critical times shows how seriously Islam views prayers. This creates a psychological state which enables believers to face the real dangers posed by their enemies who are always on the alert, trying to seize upon any lapse of concentration on the part of the Muslims. The passage ends with a strong, highly effective remark, encouraging the believers to continue to strive for God's cause despite what they may face in the way of hardship. This is coupled with a clear description of the believers' mentality and that of their enemies: "*Do not be faint of heart when you seek out the [enemy] host. If you happen to suffer pain, they also suffer pain as you do; while you hope to receive from God what they can never hope for. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 104)

It is a description showing two different ways and approaches that have no meeting point. To pursue the path of faith means to strive tirelessly, and to think little of any difficulty and hardship. Believers should not forget that those in the other camp also suffer pain and encounter difficulties, but what believers hope to receive from God is incomparable to what the others receive.

In the various points it discusses and the way it deals with different aspects, this passage gives us a picture of what the Muslim community experienced as it faced the practical problems associated with its formation as a separate and independent community. It describes for us the elements of human weakness, the remaining influences of the dark, recent past and other aspects of human nature and their bearing on the new Muslim community as it undertook to fulfil its duties. It also shows how such pain and hardship are coupled with aspirations and eagerness to fulfil those duties. It is the wise, Divine approach that encourages such aspirations and urges such eagerness, working always to refine human nature and prepare it for its great task.

All this comes out clearly in the description of the situation, the encouragement given to the believers and in dealing with natural fears and real pain suffered by the Muslim community. But it is also seen very clearly in the emphasis it lays on ensuring appropriate preparation and equipment for battle, particularly by prayer, as well as hard work and full alertness. A suitable mentality for the forthcoming struggle is further consolidated by the trust the migrants place in God, His reward

for those who strive hard, and support for those who leave home to fight for His cause. This is strengthened even further by knowledge of the humiliating suffering He has prepared for the unbelievers.

This passage also provides a very good example of how the Qur'ān deals with human nature in both situations of strength and weakness, and with the human community in both its stages of initial formation and maturity. We see how it pulls all the strings together at the same time and in the same verse. Of particular significance in this respect is how the Qur'ān fills the Muslim community with feelings of superiority over its enemies. But at the same time, it encourages the Muslim community to be always on the alert, ready to face any threats and dangers. Furthermore, it alerts it to its shortcomings and weaknesses, strongly urging it to eliminate all these.

It is a remarkable method, complete and perfectly suited to human nature. It is also extraordinary in the number of strings it pulls together in order to get a holistic response and a fine overall tune. Indeed, it was the superiority of the Qur'ānic method of educating the Muslim community and the superior social organisation it establishes that has ensured the Muslim community's remarkable distinction over other communities. This clear superiority gave the emerging Muslim community, despite its adverse circumstances and occasional weaknesses, the ability to overwhelm other communities. It was not merely a military victory. It was the triumph of a young, vigorous civilisation over one that had grown old. It was the ultimate victory of a new method and way of life. It heralded the beginning of a new era, a new human being, and a new human community.

What Elevates People in Rank

> *Those of the believers who remain passive, other than the disabled, are not equal to those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above the ones who remain passive. To each God has promised the ultimate good, yet God has preferred those who strive hard over those who remain passive with a mighty reward: degrees of honour, forgiveness of sins and His grace. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.* (Verses 95-6)

This statement addresses a special case within the Muslim community wherein some elements had demonstrated their reluctance to meet the obligations required in striving for God's cause, requiring sacrifice of both possessions and lives. This may be a reference to those who preferred to stay at home and not migrate to Madinah, so that they could hold on to their property and possessions. The unbelievers did not allow anyone who migrated to Madinah to take any part of their wealth. They had to

abandon all their possessions. Others may have preferred to stay at home to spare themselves the hardship and risks of migration. Rarely did the unbelievers allow the Muslims to migrate. In the majority of cases, they imprisoned and ill-treated them, or, more accurately, they intensified their ill-treatment when they suspected that they intended to leave. We are more inclined to this view with regard to what is meant by the reference to those believers who "*remain passive*". It may also refer to some people within the Muslim community who did not readily show their willingness to sacrifice their possessions and their lives for God's cause. This obviously excludes the hypocrites who were mentioned in the preceding passage and who tried to dissuade the Muslims from striving for God's cause. The description could mean both groups of people in both lands who were not ready to make the necessary sacrifices.

Although this verse addresses a special case, it is phrased in the form of a general principle that is not restricted to a particular time or a particular community. What we have in this verse, then, is a principle, describing how God views the believers at any time or place. A distinction is clearly made between true believers and those who remain passive, reluctant to sacrifice themselves or their possessions for God's cause despite having no disability to prevent them from joining in the *jihād* and making the necessary sacrifices. These are certainly unlike those who come forward and strive hard with all they have.

The principle is stated in the most general of terms: "*Those of the believers who remain passive, other than the disabled, are not equal to those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives.*" (Verse 95) This is followed by a clarification which leaves no room whatsoever for ambiguity: "*God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above the ones who remain passive.*" (Verse 95)

The Prophet gives us a feeling of what this distinction in rank actually means. Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate, on the authority of Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī, that God's Messenger (peace be upon him) said: "There are one hundred ranks in heaven which God has prepared for those who strive hard for His cause. The distance between each two ranks is equal to the distance between the earth and the heavens." `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a Companion of the Prophet, quotes him as saying: "He who throws an arrow [to serve God's cause] will be recompensed for it with the advancement of one rank." One man asked him what he meant by a rank? He answered: "It is certainly unlike a step in your mother's home. Between each two ranks is a hundred years."

Now that we, in our modern times, know something of the distances which separate planets in the universe, and understand that it takes hundreds of light years for the rays of light to travel from one star to one planet, we are perhaps better able to imagine the distances to which the Prophet alludes. The Prophet's Companions who heard him making these statements believed him without question. We

obviously believe in the truthfulness of his words in addition to our being in a better position now to understand what these distances mean.

Having stated that there is a distinction among the believers between those who remain passive and those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives, this Qur'ānic verse states that God has promised a great reward for both: *"To each God has promised the ultimate good."* (Verse 95) The very fact of believing in God has its value which must not be underestimated. Nevertheless, the believers have their ranks according to their willingness to fulfil the duties of faith, especially in respect of sacrifice of self and property. It is this last statement which tells us that those who remain passive are not the hypocrites. They are a group of good believers who have taken their positions alongside the other Muslims but have been complacent with regard to this particular duty. They are urged here to overcome their complacency, since they are genuine believers.

This is followed by a restatement of the original principle which is here reaffirmed and expanded by way of encouragement to seek the great reward which is promised to those who strive hard: *"Yet God has preferred those who strive hard over those who remain passive with a mighty reward: degrees of honour, forgiveness of sins and His grace. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 95-6)

The Philosophy of Jihād

Those who strive hard for God's cause are certain, by God's promise, to achieve real glory, while those who remain passive cannot aspire to anything similar. Moreover, the prospect of great reward, the forgiveness of sins by God and abundant mercy is raised high. All this points to two important facts.

The first is that these verses were dealing with real cases within the Muslim community. This should make us better aware of human nature. An individual or a community may achieve a high standard of faith, but remain, nevertheless in need of constant care to deal with any weakness or complacency which may hamper the fulfilment of duties, especially those of striving hard to serve God's cause with complete dedication, sacrificing life and wealth. That such feelings of weakness, complacency or failure to come forward with dedicated service should overtake a person or a community need not cause us to lose hope of their positive response later on or make us look down on them. As long as sincerity and serious willingness to remain with the Muslim community and to deal positively with God remain, we must not give up on them. Yet we cannot just accept that such weakness, complacency and failure are part of human nature without doing anything about it. We still have to motivate that nature to seek the sublime and to reach for the highest standard. Such motivation can take all possible ways and forms as we see in the

Qur'ānic method that, itself, reflects Divine wisdom.

The other fact is the value which Islam assigns to striving hard to serve God's cause and what that may involve of sacrificing wealth and life. God gives it such a high value because He is fully aware of what such a dedicated service means in practical terms and He knows human nature and the nature of the forces which are always hostile to Islam.

Jihād, or striving hard in God's cause, was not something accidental to the particular period which witnessed the advent of Islam. It is a permanent need, inherent in the nature of the Islamic faith. Some people, influenced by the existing situation when great empires ruled the world, have mistakenly expressed the view that the early Muslims thought that it was essential for them to be truly powerful, in a military sense. Such views betray, to say the least, a total failure to understand the true nature of Islam.

Had *jihād* been an accidental development, necessitated by temporary circumstances, it would not have merited such a lengthy exposition in a large number of *sūrahs* and passages in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* and it would not have been treated in such an emphatic style. The Prophet would not have made such a comprehensive statement, addressed to every Muslim in every period of history, as long as human life on earth continues. "He who does not take part or at least contemplates taking part in a campaign of *jihād* until the end of his life meets his death holding to a branch of hypocrisy."

It is true that the Prophet turned back certain individuals who wanted to join *jihād* campaigns because of their particular family situation. It is authentically reported, for example, that a man sought the Prophet's permission to go on *jihād.* The Prophet asked him whether his parents were alive. When the man answered in the affirmative, the Prophet said to him: "Go and strive hard in their service." This, however, was an individual case that does not contradict the general rule. For one man to be withdrawn from an army does not weaken that army. The Prophet was always aware of the circumstances of his Companions. He might have known enough of the particular family circumstances of that man to warrant giving him this directive.

The assumption must never be made that jihād was only incidental to a particular situation in a particular place, and that that situation no longer exists. It is not that Islam loves to draw its sword and chop off people's heads with it. The hard facts of life compel Islam to have its sword drawn and to be always ready and careful. God knows that those who hold the reigns of power are hostile to Islam and that they will always try to resist it, because it points to a way and a method different from theirs. This does not apply to a particular period of past history. It applies to the situation

today and tomorrow, in all places and throughout all generations.

God also knows that evil is arrogant and can never be fair. It cannot allow the seeds of goodness to grow. It does not matter which peaceful tactics the advocates of goodness adopt, the very fact that goodness begins to grow represents a threat to evil. The very existence of the truth endangers falsehood. Evil will always tend to be aggressive and to defend its existence by attempting to smother the truth, never hesitating to use brute force. This is part of nature, not something incidental to a particular situation.

Hence, *jihād,* in every form, is essential. It must start in people's hearts and emerge into the real world. This points the way to the inevitable confrontation between armed evil and armed goodness. The forces of falsehood, in their great numbers and heavy armament, must be countered with the properly equipped forces of goodness. Otherwise it would be a suicidal situation or one that is lacking seriousness. Either attitude is unbecoming of believers. Proper preparation for a serious confrontation requires sacrificing possessions and lives, as God required the believers to do, purchasing all these from them in return for admitting them into heaven. He either gives them victory or martyrdom. It is all within His prerogative and He makes His decision on the basis of His wisdom. As for them, He has promised them one of the two best achievements. All people die when the time comes, but only those who fight for God's cause can be martyrs.

There are a number of basic principles upon which the foundation of the Islamic faith, its practical method and line of action are built. These have nothing to do with changing circumstances. They must not be overlooked or underestimated by believers in any situation. One of these principles is *jihād,* or striving hard for God's cause and under His banner. It is the one that earns martyrdom for the one who falls in combat. They are the only martyrs honoured by God.

Misguided or Oppressed?

The *sūrah* then examines the case of those who remain passive, staying in the land of unfaith instead of migrating to the land of Islam. Their motives for so staying behind are to look after their property and interests, or an inherent weakness which makes them unwilling to undertake the arduous task of migration. Had they been willing to sacrifice, they would have been able to migrate, but they stay put until the angels are instructed to gather them in death. They are portrayed here in a derogatory way, which should have been enough to motivate any one of them to flee from the land of evil to join the ranks of the believers.

To those whom the angels gather in death while they are still wronging themselves,

> *the angels will say: "What were you doing?" They will answer: "We were oppressed on earth." (The angels) will say: "Was not God's earth so spacious that you might have migrated to settle elsewhere?" Such will have their abode in Hell, a certainly evil end. Excepted are the men, women, and children who, being truly helpless, can devise nothing and can find no way. These God may well pardon, then, for God is indeed most Lenient, Much-Forgiving.* (Verses 97-99)

These verses are speaking of a real situation that existed in Makkah and elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula after the Prophet's migration and the establishment of the Islamic state. There were still some Muslims who stayed behind, unwilling to sacrifice their property and interests because the unbelievers did not allow those who migrated to take any possessions with them. Some of them might have feared the consequences of migration, because the unbelievers were ever watchful, trying to turn hack any Muslim who sought to leave for Madinah. Some, however, were too weak to migrate. Among them were the elderly, women, and children who could not find a way of escape.

Unable to seize the Prophet and his Companions when they migrated to Madinah and unable to prevent the establishment of the Muslim state, the unbelievers turned the screw on those Muslims who stayed behind, especially when the new Muslim state began to intercept the Quraysh's trade caravans. When the Muslims were able to score their resounding victory at Badr, the unbelievers in Makkah escalated their torture of those Muslims who were left behind, trying to force them to return to idol worship. Some of them succumbed to the pressure, feeling compelled to at least pretend that they were no longer Muslims and taking part with the unbelievers in their idolatrous practices. This facade of having rejected Islam was permitted them when they had no state to which they could migrate. However, after the establishment of that state, such pretence was no longer acceptable and especially when the means to migrate were available. Migration enabled them to declare that they were Muslims and to live according to the principles of faith.

These verses were revealed to address that particular case. They describe the people unwilling to migrate for one of the above reasons as *"wronging themselves"*. They have indeed done themselves a great wrong by depriving themselves of the opportunity to live in the land of Islam where they could enjoy a clean, healthy, blessed life, free from all pressures. Instead, they chose to live in weakness and to suffer persecution. Moreover, these verses warn them that their abode will be Hell, and describe it as *"a certainly evil end"*. This suggests that this particular statement refers to those who actually turned back from Islam in Makkah.

In the inimitable fashion of the Qur'ān, this whole situation is portrayed very vividly: *"To those whom the angels gather in death while they are still wronging themselves, the angels will say: 'What were you doing?' They will answer: `We were oppressed on earth.'*

(The angels) will say: `Was not God's earth so spacious that you might have migrated to settle elsewhere?'" (Verse 97)

The Qur'ān is dealing here with human beings in whom it attempts to arouse the elements of goodness, courage, and dignity, and to eradicate the elements of weakness, miserliness and humility. It, therefore, gives us this portrait delineating a true situation. It makes use, however, of that true situation to treat human weaknesses. The scene of approaching death is one that sends a shiver into a man's heart. Portraying the angels in the way in which the Qur'ān does makes it more vivid, and heightens our fear. Those people have wronged themselves, and the angels have arrived to gather them in that condition. This, again, makes one's heart shudder. It is sufficient for anyone to imagine himself with the angels terminating his life while he is wronging himself. He has no other chance to redeem himself.

The angels, however, do not keep quiet as they cause these people to die. They review their past history and find a great deal wanting therein. Therefore, they ask them what they were preoccupied with during their days and nights. Their preoccupation has, after all, meant their utter loss. At the moment of death, they provide a humiliating reply, thinking this sufficient justification for their cowardice: *"We were oppressed on earth." We* were humiliated by the people in power and we were unable to do anything about our situation.

Despite all the self-degradation inherent in this reply, which leads us to despise the person who takes such an attitude at the point of death, after having refused to migrate throughout his lifetime, the angels confront these people with the reality of their situation. They reproach them for not having tried when the chance was there: *"Was not God's earth so spacious that you might have migrated to settle elsewhere?"* It was not helplessness that forced them to accept humility and oppression in preference to migrating to the land of Islam. There was something else, namely, their unwillingness to sacrifice their property and possessions and interests in the land of evil. Holding on to these, they remain in their homes when God's earth is so spacious as to make migration possible if only they are willing to make the necessary sacrifice. This highly effective scene concludes with a fearful end: *"Such will have their abode in Hell, a certainly evil end."* (Verse 97)

An exception is then made for those who did not have any real chance of leaving the land of evil where they were persecuted and deprived of the easy and happy life in the land of Islam. These include the elderly, women, and children who are truly helpless. To these, the prospect of God's forgiveness and mercy is raised because their reasons are valid: *"Excepted are the men, women, and children who, being truly helpless, can devise nothing and can find no way. These God may well pardon, then, for God is indeed most Lenient, Much-Forgiving."* (Verses 98-99)

This ruling remains valid until the end of time. It transcends the case of those Muslims who are subjected to pressure and persecution aimed at turning them away from their faith, and yet who stay where they are in order to look after their possessions and interests or to be with their relatives and friends or because of their unwillingness to undertake the hardships of migration. Once there is a place on earth, any place, where Islam rules and where one can feel secure declaring one's faith and fulfilling one's religious duties, then one must migrate in order to live under the banner of Islam and enjoy the sublime standard of life Islam affords.

What Value for Leaving Home

The *sūrah* continues its task of treating those aspects of human nature that continue to raise apprehensions of the difficulties and hardships of migration. It depicts those who prefer to suffer persecution in their homeland, which may end in their turning away from Islam, in a scene which evokes feelings of contempt and fear. The next verse tries to counter that reluctance by giving reassurance to anyone who sets out from his homeland only to serve God's cause, whether he arrives at his destination or dies on the way. God guarantees the reward to such a migrant from the moment he leaves home and promises him that he will find many places of refuge and abundance. "*Anyone who migrates for God's cause will find on earth many places for refuge and great abundance. He who leaves his home, fleeing from evil unto God and His Messenger, and is then overtaken by death, his reward is reserved for him with God. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 100)

We see in this verse how the Qur'ān, in its realistic approach to human problems, addresses the normal apprehensions of someone embarking on migration in the sort of circumstances which prevailed at that time. The same or similar apprehensions may beset anyone who embarks on such a journey at any time. It addresses us with remarkable clarity and lucidity. Nothing that the migrant fears is concealed. No danger, including that of death, is dismissed out of hand. Reassurance is provided through other facts and through a guarantee from God Himself.

Migration must be "for God's cause". This is the only type of migration which earns a reward. It is not a journey for financial gain or for evading problems, or for indulging in carnal pleasures or for any other worldly concern. When the purpose of migration is definitely serving God's cause, the person who undertakes it will inevitably find many places of refuge and great abundance. He does not feel that his whole world has shrunk into a small, tight place. Nor is he helpless, unable to earn his living: "*Anyone who migrates for God's cause will find on earth many places for refuge and great abundance.*" (Verse 100)

It is part of human weakness to think that the chances of a comfortable life are

restricted to a particular land or work within certain circumstances, to the extent that abandonment of these means the end of life. It is such a false concept of life, earning one's living and escaping danger that leads people to tolerate humility and even yield to the pressure to turn away from their faith. All that inevitably leads to the evil end preserved for those who are gathered in death by the angels while they are still *"wronging themselves"*. God states here His promise to anyone who migrates for no reason other than serving His cause. He will find refuge and abundance and he will enjoy God's care and support wherever he goes.

Yet, the time appointed for the end of one's life may arrive during that very journey. As has already been explained, death has nothing to do with its apparent causes. It only comes at its appointed time, whether the person stays in his homeland or leaves. No one can bring forward or put back that appointed time. Nevertheless, human beings form their concepts, influenced, as they are, by apparent circumstances. This is taken into consideration by the Qur'ānic method of addressing human problems. The reward of migration is, therefore, guaranteed from the moment one leaves one's home having no aim other than serving God's cause: *"He who leaves his home, fleeing from evil unto God and His Messenger, and is then overtaken by death, his reward is reserved for him with God."* (Verse 100) This is a reference to the full reward which is preserved for migration, arrival in the land of Islam, and living there with the Muslim community. Anything guaranteed by God is certain to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, along with this guarantee, we have an increase in the form of a reference to God's forgiveness and mercy: *"God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."*

It is decidedly a profitable deal. The one who embarks on migration for God's cause is shown to receive his full reward from the moment he leaves. Death comes at its appointed time, whether one leaves home or not. Indeed, had the person concerned stayed at home he would have still died at that particular time, but he would have missed out on this highly profitable deed. Now, he has no reward, no forgiveness and no mercy. The angels will gather him in death while he is still wronging himself. The difference between the two situations is as great as the difference between the two ends.

The verses we have already looked at in this passage point to several important principles which we may sum up in the following words. The first is that Islam views the attitude of those who remain passive and unwilling to join the ranks of those who are engaged in *jihād* as highly repugnant. This applies to everyone except the ones who are exempted by God either because of their physical disability or a helplessness which makes them unable to devise any way of escape.

Secondly, the duty of *jihād* is central to the Islamic faith and to the Islamic system. Indeed, the Shī`ah include it as one of the pillars upon which the structure of Islam is founded. They support this view with Qur'ānic and *ĥadīth* statements as well as

practical considerations which give their argument a considerable measure of validity. Against this, we have the *ĥadīth* which states that the "structure of Islam is built on five pillars". However, the great emphasis placed on the duty of *jihād* and its central importance to Islamic life everywhere and at all times, makes the need for it an intrinsic one. It is not related to any circumstantial considerations.

Thirdly, we note that human beings are the same at all times. They may hesitate before any danger or scaling any great impediment. This applies even in the best of societies and the best of times. This should not, however, make us lose hope of people who may show such a reluctance. We should, indeed, encourage them and use both elements of warning and reassurance at the same time, in the same way as the Qur'ān does.

Finally, we note how the Qur'ān faced up to the problems of real life and gave directions to the Muslim community on how to engage in battle, on all fronts. Needless to say, the most important front is that of human nature. This should give us an insight into how to understand the Qur'ān and how to refer to it when we face problems in our efforts to call people to accept Islam and implement it.

Prayer Even on the Battlefield

> *When you go forth on earth, you will incur no sin by shortening your prayers, if you have reason to fear that the unbelievers may cause you affliction. Truly, the unbelievers are your sworn enemies. When you are with the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let one group of them stand up with you, holding on to their weapons. Then, after they have prostrated themselves, let them be behind you, while the other group, who have not yet prayed, shall come forward and pray with you, and let these be on their guard, holding on to their weapons. The unbelievers would love to see you oblivious of your weapons and your equipment, so that they might swoop on you with one assault. But it is no offence for you to lay down your arms [while you pray] if you are bothered by heavy rain, or suffering from illness; but you must always be on your guard. God has prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers.* (Verses 101-102)

At this particular juncture, the *sūrah* speaks of the concession God gives to those who migrate or go forth on earth, either on *jihād* or on business, should they fear being taken prisoner by the unbelievers or fear being subjected to hardship and pressure to turn away from their faith. The concession is to reduce prayer. This is different from shortening prayers, which is a concession given to any traveller, whether he has anything to fear from the unbelievers or not. The concession to which the passage refers is a special type. *"When you go forth on earth, you will incur no sin by shortening your prayers, if you have reason to fear that the unbelievers may cause you*

affliction. Truly, the unbelievers are your sworn enemies." (Verse 101)

A person who goes forth on earth always needs badly to maintain a proper relationship with his Lord. Such a relationship helps him to accomplish what he sets out to do, and complements his preparations and precautions. Prayer is the closest contact a man has with God and it is the weapon with which Muslims are invited to equip themselves when they encounter hardships and difficulties. Whenever they have something to fear or a difficult task to accomplish, God tells them: *"Seek strength in perseverance and in prayer."* (2: 45)

It is, therefore, mentioned here at the appropriate time, when it is most needed. Anyone experiencing fear or migrating to a new homeland is in the greatest need of refuge with God. Nevertheless, prayer in its ordinary form, including its normal movements of bowing and prostration, may deprive a traveller on the road of a chance to escape ambush. On the other hand, it may attract the attention of his enemies and they may be able to identify him or to take him unawares while he is bowing or prostrating. Hence, such travellers are granted the concession to reduce prayer when they have reason to be afraid.

We are more inclined to this understanding of this verse explained by Imām al-Jaşşāş. He is of the opinion that the concession given here does not mean a reduction of the number of *rak`ahs,* so as to allow such a traveller to pray two *rak`ahs* instead of four. This type of concession is given to all travellers, whether they have such fears or not. Indeed, such a shortening is preferred for a traveller, so as to follow the example of the Prophet, who shortened his prayers every time he travelled. The weightier opinion is that a traveller may not offer his prayer complete when he travels.

Hence, this new concession in situations of fear means a reduction in the form of prayer so as to pray, for example, in the standing position only, without adding any movement such as bowing, prostration or sitting in the middle or at the end of prayer. Such a traveller may offer his prayers while standing, or mounting his horse or camel, or travelling in a vehicle. He only needs to signal with his eyes indicating other movements. In this way, he does not neglect his contact with God. Nor does he neglect his most important weapon in the battle. He is on his guard against his enemies: *"Truly, the unbelievers are your sworn enemies."* (Verse 101)

In connection with this reference to prayer as offered by travellers who go forth on earth while fearing what the unbelievers may do to them, the form of prayer is outlined as offered by those who are on the battlefield. A number of psychological and educational touches are added to this particular piece of legislation. *"When you are with the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let one group of them stand up with you, holding on to their weapons. Then, after they have prostrated themselves, let them be*

behind you, while the other group, who have not yet prayed, shall come forward and pray with you, and let these be on their guard, holding on to their weapons. The unbelievers would love to see you oblivious of your weapons and your equipment, so that they might swoop on you with one assault. But it is no offence for you to lay down your arms (while you pray] if you are bothered by heavy rain, or suffering from illness; but you must always be on your guard. God has prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers." (Verse 102)

Anyone who tries to fathom the secrets of the Divine method of education represented by the Qur'ān will be amazed at the great number of psychological touches which penetrate deep into the human soul. Here we have an example of prayer on the battlefield. The Qur'ānic verse which we are looking at does not merely aim to explain the rulings concerning prayer in a state of fear. What we have here is part of the Qur'ānic efforts to educate the Muslim community in order to help both the individual and the community mature and fulfil their responsibilities.

The first thing which draws our attention is the determination to maintain prayer even on the battlefield. Yet, this is only natural from the point of view of faith. Since prayer is the main weapon in the battle, its use must be regulated in a way suitable to a military battle. Those men whose education was accomplished through the Qur'ān and in accordance with the Divine method used to face their enemies with the one weapon which gives them superiority over all others. They were superior because they believed in One deity whom they knew very well and whom they were certain would be with them in battle. Another factor in their superiority is their belief in a most noble cause. Moreover, their concept of the universe, life and the purpose of human existence, as well as their social system were elements which added to their superiority. Prayer symbolised all this and reminded them of it. Hence, it worked as a weapon; indeed the most effective weapon in the battle.

The next point to attract attention in this verse is the total spiritual mobilisation against the enemy as well as the warning to the believers to maintain total awareness of their enemy and what moves it may take. The enemies maintain a round-the-clock watch hoping for a moment of relaxation when the believers may lose sight of their weapons and equipment, so that they might swoop on them with one assault. These warnings are coupled with reassurance and encouragement to the believers. They are told that they are only facing an enemy who are certain to be humbled: "*God has prepared humiliating suffering for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 102) Establishing such a balance between warning and confidence, and an emphasis on the need to be extra careful and giving reassurance is characteristic of the Divine method of educating believers and the Muslim community as a whole. In this way, it prepares them to face their wicked enemies.

Prayer in War and Peace

There are various views held by different scholars as to how pray$_{er}$ should be conducted in a state of fear, as at the time of fighting. However, they are all based on this text. We will limit ourselves to the general outline, without going into the various forms suggested.

> *When you are with the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let one group of them stand up with you, holding on to their weapons. Then, after they have prostrated themselves, let them be behind you, while the other group, who have not yet prayed, shall come forward and pray with you, and let these be on their guard, holding on to their weapons.* (Verse 102)

The verse suggests that when the Prophet leads the believers in prayer in battle, a section of them join him in the first *rak`ah,* while the other section stand behind them, weapons in hand, to protect them. When the first group complete the first *rak`ah,* they step back to take over the guard duty, while the other group who were guarding them step forward to join the Prophet in praying one *rak`ah* as well. When the imām finishes his two *rak`ahs,* he concludes his prayers. Then the first group complete their prayer with a second *rak`ah,* guarded by the second group. When they have finished, the second group completes their second *rak`ah,* while they are guarded by the first group. In this way, both groups have joined the Prophet in prayer, and the same applies to those who succeed him as heads of state or with the commanders of the Muslim armies.

Great emphasis is placed on the fact that Muslims need always to be on their guard: *"Let these be on their guard, holding on to their weapons. The unbelievers would love to see you oblivious of your weapons and your equipment, so that they might swoop on you with one assault."* (Verse 102) This statement speaks of a wish always entertained by the unbelievers. This has been confirmed across the centuries. It is for this reason that God takes care to explain it to the first Muslim generation as He defines their general plan of the battle. He even occasionally lays down their operational plan, as we have seen in the detailed instructions outlining how the Muslims should offer their prayers when they are in a state of fear.

The extra care required to be taken by the believers, and their total psychological mobilisation need not over afflict the believers. They implement it as best they can: *"But it is no offence for you to lay down your arms [while you pray] if you are bothered by heavy rain, or suffering from illness; but you must always be on your guard."* (Verse 102) In such cases, taking up one's arms may incur extra bother.

It may be sufficient only to be on one's guard, praying for God's help and the eventual victory: *"But you must always be on your guard. God has prepared humiliating*

suffering for the unbelievers." (Verse 102) It may be that through the continuous vigil and care taken by the believers that God brings about the humiliation and suffering which the unbelievers are certain to endure. Thus the believers may be the means through which God's will is done. This, in itself, gives them more reassurance and confidence that victory is to be theirs.

"And when you have performed your prayers, remember God standing, sitting, and lying down. When you are again secure, observe your prayers [fully]. Indeed, prayer is a time-related duty, binding on all believers." (Verse 103) This is a directive aimed at maintaining a relationship with God through prayer and in all situations. Such a relationship is the most effective weapon with which the believers equip themselves. When security replaces fear again, *"observe your prayers [fully]"*. This means that prayers are then to be offered complete, without any reduction. It is a duty which must be offered at particular times. When the reasons for reducing it are removed, prayers must be offered in full.

It is on the basis of the Qur'ānic statement, *"Indeed, prayer is a time-related duty,"* that the scholars of the Żāhirī school of thought advocate their view that no prayer may be offered when its time has lapsed. A certain prayer is valid only at the time appointed for it. Once it is over, there can be no way for that prayer to be offered. Other scholars disagree and maintain that prayers may be offered in compensation after their time has lapsed, i.e. *Qaḍā'*. All of them, however, encourage attending to prayer early in the time range allowed for them. We prefer not to discuss such matters of detail here.

This passage concludes with an encouragement to the believers to continue with their *jihād,* despite the sacrifices they are called upon to offer. An inspiring touch is added which penetrates into the believers' hearts, explaining that the ends of the believers and unbelievers are widely different: *"Do not be faint of heart when you seek out the [enemy] host. If you happen to suffer pain, they also suffer pain as you do; while you hope to receive from God what they can never hope for. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 104)

These are simple words which draw the distinctive lines and reveal the great gulf that separates the two parties. The believers endure pain in the battlefield, but they are not alone in that. Their enemies also suffer pain and hardship. But their states are different. The believers seek God's pleasure and await His reward. The unbelievers suffer complete loss. They have nothing to expect from God either in this life or in the life to come. If the unbelievers remain steadfast in battle, the believers have all the more reason to do so. They can endure the pain more willingly and with determined perseverance. They need never stop pursuing the enemy until they have achieved complete victory. Thus, they can ensure that they live in a world where all submission is offered to God alone.

In every campaign of struggle, faith plays this great role. There are moments where the hardship and the pain are overpowering. It is then that a man needs to tap an additional source of strength. It is from faith that he can easily derive such strength.

This directive is given to the believers when they are engaged in an open battle, when the two sides are at parity, both have their weapons drawn, and both face the prospect of physical pain. It may happen that the believers have to engage in a battle in which their enemies enjoy superiority. This rule, however, holds true in all situations. Evil never enjoys security even when it triumphs. It suffers pain brought about by its internal conflict and by its clash with the very nature of things. The only way open to believers is to remain steadfast and not allow themselves to weaken. They must realise that their enemies also suffer pain, which may be of a different nature. Moreover, "*you hope to receive from God what they can never hope for.*" (Verse 104) To remember this provides real consolation.

"*God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 104) He knows what and how human beings feel, and He prescribes for the believers what helps them to overcome their pain and suffering.

10
Justice for All

إِنَّآ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ لِتَحۡكُمَ بَيۡنَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِمَآ أَرَىٰكَ ٱللَّهُۚ وَلَا تَكُن لِّلۡخَآئِنِينَ خَصِيمٗا ١٠٥

We have bestowed this book on you from on high, setting forth the truth, so that you may judge between people in accordance with what God has taught you. Hence, do not contend with those who betray their trust. (105)

وَٱسۡتَغۡفِرِ ٱللَّهَۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ١٠٦

Seek God's forgiveness, for God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (106)

وَلَا تُجَٰدِلۡ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخۡتَانُونَ أَنفُسَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَن كَانَ خَوَّانًا أَثِيمٗا ١٠٧

And do not argue on behalf of those who are false to their own selves. Indeed God does not love those who betray their trust and persist in sinful action. (107)

يَسۡتَخۡفُونَ مِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَا يَسۡتَخۡفُونَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ وَهُوَ مَعَهُمۡ إِذۡ يُبَيِّتُونَ مَا لَا يَرۡضَىٰ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡلِۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا يَعۡمَلُونَ مُحِيطًا ١٠٨

They conceal their doings from men, but they cannot conceal them from God; for He is present with them when, in the darkness of the night, they agree all manner of sayings which displease Him. God certainly encompasses [with His knowledge] whatever they do. (108)

هَٰٓأَنتُمۡ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ جَٰدَلۡتُمۡ عَنۡهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا فَمَن يُجَٰدِلُ ٱللَّهَ عَنۡهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ أَم مَّن يَكُونُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَكِيلٗا ١٠٩

You may well argue on their behalf in the life of this world, but who is there to argue on their behalf with God on the Day of Resurrection, or who will be their advocate? (109)

وَمَن يَعۡمَلۡ سُوٓءًا أَوۡ يَظۡلِمۡ نَفۡسَهُۥ ثُمَّ

He who does evil or wrongs his own soul, and then prays to God to forgive him, shall find God Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (110)

يَسْتَغْفِرِ ٱللَّهَ يَجِدِ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١١٠﴾

For he who commits a sin, does so to his own hurt. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (111)

وَمَن يَكْسِبْ إِثْمًا فَإِنَّمَا يَكْسِبُهُۥ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١١١﴾

But he who commits a fault or a sin and then throws the blame therefore on an innocent person, burdens himself with both falsehood and a flagrant sin. (112)

وَمَن يَكْسِبْ خَطِيٓـَٔةً أَوْ إِثْمًا ثُمَّ يَرْمِ بِهِۦ بَرِيٓـًٔا فَقَدِ ٱحْتَمَلَ بُهْتَٰنًا وَإِثْمًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١١٢﴾

But for God's grace to you and His mercy, some of them would indeed endeavour to lead you astray. Yet none but themselves do they lead astray. Nor can they harm you in any way. It is God who has bestowed this book on you from on high and given you wisdom, and has taught you what you did not know. God's favour on you is great indeed. (113)

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ وَرَحْمَتُهُۥ لَهَمَّت طَّآئِفَةٌ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُضِلُّوكَ ۖ وَمَا يُضِلُّونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمْ ۖ وَمَا يَضُرُّونَكَ مِن شَىْءٍ ۚ وَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَكَ مَا لَمْ تَكُن تَعْلَمُ ۚ وَكَانَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ عَظِيمًا ﴿١١٣﴾

Overview

This passage tells of a story which is unparalleled in the history of mankind. It is a story that proves, on its own, that the Qur'ān and this religion of Islam must, by necessity, originate with God. Human beings, no matter how sublime or idealistic they may be and how high the standard of purity and morality they may achieve, cannot on their own raise themselves to the standard drawn in these verses without being inspired by God Himself. The standard is as high as a line drawn over the horizon which people can only attain under Islam. They will never be able to achieve it except through the implementation of Islam.

It has to be remembered that the Jews in Madinah aimed all their vicious attacks against Islam and the Muslim community. This *sūrah* and the preceding two *sūrahs* give an account of only some of these attacks and their effect on the Muslim rank and file. They spread false rumours, fed the idolators' hatred of the Muslim community, encouraged the hypocrites and assisted their efforts to undermine the Muslims' unity, thereby confusing people. They even attacked the Prophet's leadership,

spreading doubts about his revelations and the message of Islam, trying to sow discord within the Muslim society. Their aim has always been to weaken it internally while at the same time encouraging its external enemies. All this took place at a time when Islam was still new, a young shoot forcing itself out in the midst of persistent weeds remaining from the old days of *ignorance.* Moreover, bonds of kinship and common interests uniting some Muslims with some of the idolaters, hypocrites and Jews were still strong. All this represented a real danger threatening the cohesion and unity of the new Muslim community.

At that highly critical juncture in the life of the new Muslim community in Madinah, this whole passage was revealed from on high giving instructions to God's Messenger and the Muslim community to ensure that justice was done to a Jewish person who was wrongly accused of theft. The passage also condemns the actions of a particular household among the Anṣār, who were at the time the main supporters and defenders of the Prophet's message and faith.

What standard of purity, justice and morality is this? Indeed, what words could justly describe this standard? For a certainty, whatever we say by way of comment or explanation is dwarfed by the sublime standards Islam sets and which human beings cannot attain on their own. Only when they give and work hard under the leadership of the Islamic code can they aspire to such heights.

Various reports mention the details of the story leading to the revelation of this passage. A group of the Anṣār, including Qatādah ibn al-Nu`mān and his uncle Rifā`ah, joined the Prophet on one of his military expeditions. A shield belonging to Rifā`ah was stolen and suspicions were raised about a man from the Anṣārī clan of Ubayriq. The shield owner reported this to the Prophet, saying that Ṭu`mah ibn Ubayriq had stolen his shield. [One report suggests that the man who stole it was Bashīr ibn Ubayriq, a hypocrite writing poetry denouncing the Prophet's Companions, but who always attributed his poetry to some bedouins.]

When the real thief realised what was happening, he took the shield and put it in the home of a Jew called Zayd ibn al-Samīn. He then informed some people of his clan of what he had done, confirming that if a search was mounted, the shield would be found in the Jew's home. They immediately went to the Prophet and said, "Messenger of God, our kinsman is innocent, and we have ascertained that the one who stole the shield is a person called —. We request you to declare our kinsman's innocence in public and to defend him. Unless God protects him by your kindness, he will be ruined." When the Prophet realised that the stolen article was found in the Jewish man's home, he declared Ibn Ubayriq's innocence in public, showing his sympathy for him.

Prior to the discovery of the shield in the Jew's home, Ibn Ubayriq's people said to

the Prophet: "Qatādah ibn al-Nu`mān and his uncle have made one of our families, which is known for strong faith and piety, a target for their accusation of thieving, without producing any evidence or proof to support their accusation." Qatādah mentions that he subsequently spoke to the Prophet. The Prophet told him: "How could you target your accusation of theft against a family of strong faith and piety, without producing any evidence in support of your accusation?" Qatādah reports that he went back feeling he would rather have lost a large portion of his property than spoken to the Prophet on this issue. His uncle Rifā`ah came over to learn of the Prophet's reaction, and when he was told, his only comment was: "I seek only God's help." It was shortly afterwards that this passage was revealed from on high to the Prophet.

When revelation had made the issues clear, the stolen armour was brought to the Prophet, and he returned it to Rifā`ah. Qatādah reports: "When I brought the armour to my uncle, who was an old man who had lost his eyesight, or much of it, in pre-Islamic days and whose firmness of belief in Islam was suspect, he said: `I am donating this armour for God's cause.' I then realised that my uncle's faith was strong and genuine."

Bashīr ibn Ubayriq then left Madinah to join the unbelievers. It is with reference to him that the following verses in this passage were revealed: *"But as for him who, after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, puts himself in contention with God's Messenger and follows a path other than that of the believers – him shall We leave to that which he himself has chosen, and shall cause him to endure hell. How evil a journey's end. For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray."* (Verses 115-16)

The question was not merely the acquittal of an innocent man who was the victim of a plot by a small group of people who wanted him to pay for a crime he did not commit. Although the acquittal of an innocent person is very serious indeed by God's standards, the question here was far larger. It simply aimed at establishing a standard that cannot be tilted to accommodate desire, or support for one's kin and crony. It is a standard that is not swayed by feelings of love or hatred, regardless of the circumstances.

The immediate objective was to purify the newly-emerging Muslim community, to treat the elements of human weakness that affected it and to eradicate narrow ties of affiliation in all their forms and guises, even though some of these may be based on religion itself. Ensuring complete justice between all people was paramount. The new community, unparalleled in human history, must be based on a clean and firm foundation, unaffected by personal or communal desires or interests and unswayed by prejudice or favouritism.

Had human or worldly standards or considerations been the deciding factor in the Islamic code and its method of implementation, there would have been several reasons to overlook the whole event. A cover- up would have been concocted and the reality of the matter would not have been exposed in such a way as to approach a scandal. The first and clearest reason was that the accused himself was a Jew belonging to a Jewish community which was engaged in a tooth and nail fight against Islam, using every piece of armament at its disposal. The Muslims of that period were suffering much from the Jews wicked designs. [God has willed that the Muslims should suffer of from the Jews at all times!] Those Jews in Madinah were not restrained by considerations of right or justice. They applied no moral standard in their dealings with the Muslim community.

Another reason stems from the fact that the issue directly concerned a group of the Anşār, the Muslims of Madinah who provided the Prophet and his Makkan Companions with refuge, support and protection. Such an incident could have easily caused much disunity and hatred among their different groups. To direct accusations at a Jew would have averted any likelihood of division among them.

A third reason for approving a cover-up was that it would have avoided giving the Jews in Madinah more armament with which to attack the Anşār. Exposure would allow the Jews to denounce the Anşār as stealing from one another and then falsely and knowingly accusing the Jews of committing their own crimes. The Jews were certain not to allow such an opportunity to pass them by.

But the real issue was far greater than all such considerations, which Islam views as trivial. The real issue was that of educating the newly- emerging Muslim community so that it could fulfil its duties of leading mankind in building a proper human life. The Muslim community could not undertake such tasks until it had adopted a unique system and method of implementation that surpassed everything that humanity had ever known, and until this system was firmly established in its practical life. Furthermore, the new Muslim community needed to be seriously tested so as to purge itself of all evil, weakness and ignorant practices. Its standard of justice needed to be unblemished by any worldly consideration so that it implemented justice between people regardless of any consideration of immediate interest or prejudice.

God, in His wisdom, deliberately chose this particular incident at that particular time, involving as it did a Jew belonging to a community continuously scheming against the Muslims and aiming to undermine the religion of Islam. Furthermore, it was a very critical time for the Muslims in Madinah, for they were facing hostility on all fronts, and in all these the Jews were involved. Nevertheless, God chose this particular incident and time to make His commands clear to the Muslims and to teach them whatever He wanted them to learn. No room was left for considerations

of diplomacy, politics or appeasement. No recourse was made to any device to hide any embarrassing or unpleasant facts.

The apparent interests of the Muslim community and its immediate circumstances were deliberately left out of consideration.

The matter was very serious indeed, allowing no room for pretence or deception. Its concerns were the Divine system and its basics, the Muslim community being prepared to advocate and implement this system, and justice among all people raised to the high standard that humanity never attained without God's revelations and support.

When one looks from such a sublime height at the rest of humanity throughout all ages, one finds all communities suffering. Between that height of Islamic justice and sinking human standards one also sees hard rocks scattered everywhere; cunning, deviousness, politics, skilful manipulation of facts, government, national and community interests, etc. When we examine these rocks and look carefully underneath them, we find only filth. When we look again, we see the Muslim community alone moving upwards, leaving those lowly depths and trying to reach sublimity. Such examples abound in human history, guided only by the unique system of Islam. As for that which people call, "justice", as practised in other communities, past and present, it is better not to remove the lid from it, in order not to let its foul smell disturb the clean and pure atmosphere of Islamic justice.

A Firm Stand in Support of Justice

> *We have bestowed this book on you from on high, setting forth the truth, so that you may judge between people in accordance with what God has taught you. Hence, do not contend with those who betray their trust. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. And do not argue on behalf of those who are false to their own selves. Indeed God does not love those who betray their trust and persist in sinful action. They conceal their doings from men, but they cannot conceal them from God; for He is present with them when, in the darkness of the night, they agree all manner of sayings which displease Him. God certainly encompasses [with His knowledge] whatever they do. You may well argue on their behalf in the life of this world, but who is there to argue on their behalf with God on the Day of Resurrection, or who will be their advocate?* (Verses 105-109)

The style here is very firm, smacking of anger in support of the truth. Real concern for justice is felt throughout the passage. The first aspect of this is the reminder to God's Messenger of the fact that God's book was, in truth, bestowed on him from on high so that he may arbitrate between people in accordance with what God imparted to him of true knowledge. This reminder is followed by an order requiring him never

to defend those who betray their trust. He must not contend for them or argue on their behalf. He is further directed to seek God's forgiveness for such arguments in their defence: *"We have bestowed this book on you from on high, setting forth the truth, so that you may judge between people in accordance with what God has taught you. Hence, do not contend with those who betray their trust. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 105-6)

This command is then repeated once more. Those who are untrue to their trust on whose behalf the Prophet spoke out are further described as false even to themselves. The logic behind this order is the fact that God does not love people who engage in sinful practices and who betray their trust. *"And do not argue on behalf of those who are false to their own selves. Indeed God does not love those who betray their trust and persist in sinful action."* (Verse 107)

To all appearances, these people betrayed others, but in truth they have been false to themselves when they betrayed their community and the system and principles that make it unique among human communities. They also betrayed the trust given to the whole community, of which they themselves are a part. They betrayed themselves in another way, when they exposed themselves to sin and for which they incur severe punishment. Indeed, they incur God's displeasure and render themselves liable to His punishment. This is indeed a case of being false to oneself. A third aspect is that they stained themselves when they conspired against someone, for their conspiracy involved telling lies and playing false.

"Indeed God does not love those who betray their trust and persist in sinful action." (Verse 107) This is indeed a punishment far greater than any other punishment. It also gives a further impression whereby those whom God does not love cannot be defended by anyone. No one can take up their case when God dislikes them for their sin and treachery.

This is followed by a description of their unsavoury behaviour: *"They conceal their doings from men, but they cannot conceal them from God; for He is present with them when, in the darkness of the night, they agree all manner of sayings which displease Him."* (Verse 108) This is a contemptible situation that earns them nothing but scorn and derision. It is contemptible because of all that it shows of weakness and deviousness, particularly when they meet in the darkness of the night to devise their wicked plans. They do this in order to conceal their objectives and to hide it from people. Yet people cause them neither harm nor benefit. The One who is able to harm and benefit them, i.e. God, is with them, fully aware of what they scheme and what they try to conceal. He knows their intentions which lie behind the falsehood they devise. Thus, they incur His displeasure. What situation could be more contemptible than this?

"God certainly encompasses [with His knowledge] whatever they do." (Verse 108) This applies equally to everything in the universe. How can they, then, conceal whatever

they wish to hide when God is with them, aware of all that they do? In fact, He is watching over them and they are subject to His will and power.

The passage goes on to include a censure of all who tried to defend those who were untrue to their trust: *"You may well argue on their behalf in the life of this world, but who is there to argue on their behalf with God on the Day of Resurrection, or who will be their advocate?"* (Verse 109) There will certainly be no one to speak out for them on the Day of Judgement. What is the use, then, of taking up their case in life of this world when such defence will change nothing of what happens on that future day?

Responsibility for Action Taken by Individuals

Having stated its angry case against individuals who betray their trust, coupled with its strong censure of those who argue on their behalf, the *sūrah* states the general principles applicable to this deed, its effects, reckoning and reward, as well as the overall principle of just reward. It is with absolute justice that God deals with all His servants. He requires them to try their best to implement the same rule in their dealings and transactions. They should endeavour as hard as they can to adopt these standards of perfect justice: *"He who does evil or wrongs his own soul, and then prays to God to forgive him, shall find God Much-Forgiving, Merciful. For he who commits a sin, does so to his own hurt. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. But he who commits a fault or a sin and then throws the blame therefore on an innocent person, burdens himself with both falsehood and a flagrant sin."* (Verses 110-112)

These three verses lay down the general principles that God applies in the treatment of His servants. People are well able to implement these in dealing with one another and with God. If they do, they spare themselves much harm.

The first verse leaves the door for repentance wide open for anyone who seeks God's forgiveness and acceptance. *"He who does evil or wrongs his own soul, and then prays to God to forgive him, shall find God Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 110) God is there, ready to forgive and bestow His abundant grace on anyone who turns to Him in repentance. Anyone who does evil wrongs himself and others. He may wrong only himself if his sinful action affects only his own person. In any case, God, the Merciful, the Beneficent, receives those who seek His forgiveness at all times, and extends to them His forgiveness and mercy. There is simply no condition, no intercession and no barrier between them and Him. Whenever they turn to Him in repentance, He turns to them in acceptance and bestows on them His grace.

The second verse establishes personal responsibility as the basis of the Islamic principle of requital for actions. This principle arouses in every heart a sense of reassurance mixed with a sense of fear. The fear is a result of what one may do and earn, and the reassurance is based on the fact that no one will bear responsibility for

anyone else's actions. *"For he who commits a sin, does so to his own hurt. God is indeed All- Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 111)

There is no inherited sin in Islam, such as that which the Church speaks about. No atonement is needed except that done by every individual for his or her own actions. Hence why everyone should be cautious lest they fall into sin. But at the same time, everyone is certain not to answer for others. This is the right balance established by a unique concept, based on absolute Divine justice which human beings are required to strive to emulate.

The third verse speaks of the crime of one who commits something sinful and who tries to put the blame for it on someone else. This is the situation that applies to the case in hand: *"But he who commits a fault or a sin and then throws the blame therefore on an innocent person, burdens himself with both falsehood and a flagrant sin."* (Verse 112) The falsehood is that of knowingly accusing an innocent person and the sin is trying to put the blame for it at someone else's door. Both crimes now become his own burden.

These three rules describe the standard of justice the Qur'ān wants to lay down. It is a standard which holds every individual accountable for his or her own actions. It does not allow any offender to escape, only because he is able to put the blame for it on others. At the same time, it opens the door wide for repentance and forgiveness. It gives those who repent an open appointment with God at every moment. They do not need to knock on the door; they can enter at any time to find only mercy and forgiveness.

Special Grace for the Prophet

Finally, God tells His Messenger of the favour He gave him when He protected him from deception by the conspirators. He, thus, exposed their plot by which they tried to conceal matters so that people would not know what they had plotted. Yet they do not hide themselves from God Who is aware of all their plotting. God also reminds His Messenger of His favours by which He gave him revelations and wisdom, as well as knowledge of what he did not know. This is a favour to all mankind represented by the noblest and most honourable one in God's sight: *"But for God's grace to you and His mercy, some of them would indeed endeavour to lead you astray. Yet none but themselves do they lead astray. Nor can they harm you in any way. It is God who has bestowed this book on you from on high and given you wisdom, and has taught you what you did not know. God's favour on you is great indeed."* (Verse 113)

This was but one of the numerous and diverse attempts which the enemies of Muĥammad, God's noble Messenger, tried in order to divert him away from the path of truth and justice. Each time, however, God bestowed on him grace in abundance,

leaving the schemers to rue their actions and sink into error. The history of the Prophet Muĥammad, (peace be upon him), is full of such attempts, the failure of his enemies and his own success when God guided him every time to the right way. In this verse, God reminds him of His grace and favours, reassuring him at the same time that such people will not harm him in the least. That in itself is an act of Divine grace.

Just as this particular favour is mentioned, with all its aspects of revealing the truth to the Prophet, so the greatest favour of all is also identified. That is, the favour of choosing him to be God's Messenger: *"It is God who has bestowed this book on you from on high and given you wisdom, and has taught you what you did not know. God's favour on you is great indeed."* (Verse 113)

It is a favour God has granted to all mankind, heralding a re-birth of man so that he may have a new upbringing similar to that he enjoyed when God's spirit was first breathed into him. It is the favour that picked humanity up from the depths of *ignorance,* helping it rise to the highest zenith attainable by man through the Divine constitution and the system it lays down for human life. It is a favour that cannot be truly appreciated except by one who knows what it means to live under ignorant systems, past or present, and under Islam, or one who has experienced both.

It is because God's Messenger was the first to realise this favour and the noblest and wisest person ever to experience it, that the reminder is given to him personally: *"It is God who ... has taught you what you did not know. God's favour on you is great indeed."* (Verse 113)

11
Beliefs That Degrade Mankind

۞ لَّا خَيۡرَ فِي كَثِيرٖ مِّن نَّجۡوَىٰهُمۡ إِلَّا مَنۡ أَمَرَ بِصَدَقَةٍ أَوۡ مَعۡرُوفٍ أَوۡ إِصۡلَٰحِۭ بَيۡنَ ٱلنَّاسِۚ وَمَن يَفۡعَلۡ ذَٰلِكَ ٱبۡتِغَآءَ مَرۡضَاتِ ٱللَّهِ فَسَوۡفَ نُؤۡتِيهِ أَجۡرًا عَظِيمٗا ﴿١١٤﴾

No good comes out of much of their secret talks; except for one who enjoins charity, or justice, or setting things right between people. To him who does this out of a longing for God's goodly acceptance We shall in time grant a rich reward. (114)

وَمَن يُشَاقِقِ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُ ٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَيَتَّبِعۡ غَيۡرَ سَبِيلِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ نُوَلِّهِۦ مَا تَوَلَّىٰ وَنُصۡلِهِۦ جَهَنَّمَۖ وَسَآءَتۡ مَصِيرًا ﴿١١٥﴾

But as for him who, after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, puts himself in contention with God's Messenger and follows a path other than that of the believers — him shall We leave to that which he himself has chosen, and shall cause him to endure hell. How evil a journey's end. (115)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَغۡفِرُ أَن يُشۡرَكَ بِهِۦ وَيَغۡفِرُ مَا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَن يَشَآءُۚ وَمَن يُشۡرِكۡ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدۡ ضَلَّ ضَلَٰلَۢا بَعِيدًا ﴿١١٦﴾

For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray. (116)

إِن يَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ إِنَٰثٗا وَإِن يَدۡعُونَ إِلَّا شَيۡطَٰنٗا مَّرِيدٗا ﴿١١٧﴾

In His stead, they invoke only lifeless symbols — thus invoking none but a rebellious Satan, (117)

لَّعَنَهُ ٱللَّهُۘ وَقَالَ لَأَتَّخِذَنَّ مِنۡ عِبَادِكَ نَصِيبٗا مَّفۡرُوضٗا ﴿١١٨﴾

whom God has rejected, for he had said: "Of Your servants I shall indeed take my due share, (118)

وَلَأُضِلَّنَّهُمْ وَلَأُمَنِّيَنَّهُمْ وَلَآمُرَنَّهُمْ فَلَيُبَتِّكُنَّ ءَاذَانَ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ وَلَآمُرَنَّهُمْ فَلَيُغَيِّرُنَّ خَلْقَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّخِذِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنَ وَلِيًّا مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ فَقَدْ خَسِرَ خُسْرَانًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١١٩﴾

and shall certainly lead them astray, and fill them with vain desires; and I shall command them — and they will slit the ears of cattle [in idolatrous sacrifice]; and I shall command them — and they will corrupt God's creation." But all who take Satan rather than God for their master do incur a manifest loss. (119)

يَعِدُهُمْ وَيُمَنِّيهِمْ ۖ وَمَا يَعِدُهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا ﴿١٢٠﴾

He [i.e. Satan] holds out promises to them, and fills them with vain desires, but whatever Satan promises is meant only to deceive them. (120)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَلَا يَجِدُونَ عَنْهَا مَحِيصًا ﴿١٢١﴾

Such as these shall have Hell as their dwelling place. They shall find no way to escape from it. (121)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ سَنُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۖ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقًّا ۚ وَمَنْ أَصْدَقُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ قِيلًا ﴿١٢٢﴾

Yet those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall bring into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time. This is, in truth, God's promise. Whose word could be truer than God's? (122)

لَّيْسَ بِأَمَانِيِّكُمْ وَلَآ أَمَانِىِّ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ۗ مَن يَعْمَلْ سُوٓءًا يُجْزَ بِهِۦ وَلَا يَجِدْ لَهُۥ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿١٢٣﴾

It may not accord with your wishful thinking, nor with the wishful thinking of the people of earlier revelations. He who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him support. (123)

وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا ﴿١٢٤﴾

But anyone, be it man or woman, who does good deeds and is a believer, shall enter paradise and shall not suffer the least injustice. (124)

Who could be of better faith than he who surrenders himself completely to God, does what is good, and follows the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false? For God has taken Abraham for a friend. (125)

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and indeed God encompasses everything. (126)

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِّمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُۥ لِلَّهِ
وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَٱتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۗ
وَٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ خَلِيلًا ﴿١٢٥﴾

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ
وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ مُّحِيطًا ﴿١٢٦﴾

Overview

This passage is closely linked to the previous one. Indeed, some of its verses comment on the events that followed the incident where an innocent Jew was accused of a crime he did not commit. One of the events in question is the apostasy of Bashīr ibn Ubayriq and his reversion to old, ignorant beliefs to which reference is made in this passage. The passage also talks about the concepts and beliefs of *Jāhiliyyah,* or ignorant society, clearly linking these to Satan. The passage makes it absolutely clear that the sin that will never be forgiven is that of associating any partner with God. He may forgive anything else, as He pleases.

The passage also refers to talks people have in secret and their plotting against each other, making it clear that much of this secret talk brings no good; a clear example being the falsely accused Jew. It outlines the types of secret talks which are acceptable to God. These include the urging of one another, in private, to do good, to donate to charity, and to bring about reconciliation between people, etc. It also outlines the reward for each type of talk as administered by God.

The passage finally states the absolutely fair rules of requital by God for human actions. This is not subject to anyone's desire or preference. Indeed, it has nothing to do with the desires of either the Muslim community or the followers of other Divine religions. Requital is based on God's absolute justice and on the truth which yields to no one's desire. Had truth been subject to people's desires, the heavens and earth would have been set along the road to utter corruption.

As we see, the whole passage is closely linked, in subject matter and treatment, to the preceding one. On the other hand, it formulates a part of the judicious method of education that prepares the Muslim community for its guiding role, so that it may assume the leadership of humanity by virtue of its superior education and

organisation. The passage deals with some aspects of human weakness and some of the remaining practices of the old ignorant community. Thus, the Qur'ān helps make the Muslim community ready to fulfil its task in the confrontation with opposing camps. This is the ultimate objective of this *sūrah* in all its themes, and of the Qur'ān as a whole.

Useless Secret Talking

> *No good comes out of much of their secret talks; except for one who enjoins charity, or justice, or setting things right between people. To him who does this out of a longing for God's goodly acceptance We shall in time grant a rich reward.* (Verse 114)

The order to refrain from secret talks is repeated more than once in the Qur'ān. Here, it is a group of people who meet away from the rest of the Muslim community and leadership in order to decide on a certain matter in secret. The Islamic method of education and organisation in the Muslim community was such that any person could put his question or problem to the Prophet, either in private if the matter was personal, or in public, if it was of common interest. The aim was that no "pockets" should be formed within the Muslim community and that no groups be isolated by concepts, interests, ideas or aims different from the rest of the Muslim community. No group within the Muslim community should decide on any matter under the cover of darkness, and then either confront the community with it as a *fait accompli,* or conceal it. Whatever such a group may do, it cannot conceal its action from God who remains present in all situations. The prohibition of secret talks in this case is only one of several Qur'ānic references objecting to such clandestine dealings, away from the rest of the Muslim community.

It was in the mosque that the Muslim community usually met to offer worship and to conduct its life affairs. The whole community was an open one, dealing with all its problems publicly, unless these pertained to military engagements with the enemy, or were of a highly personal and private nature. Hence, this open society remained clean, maintaining a pure atmosphere. None but conspiring enemies, harbouring ill intentions or trying to subvert Islam's guiding principles, isolated themselves in such a community. Furthermore, these were most likely to be hypocrites. Hence, secret talks by small groups have been linked in most cases to hypocrisy and the hypocrites.

This fact is very useful to us. A Muslim community must be free of such actions. Individuals in the Muslim community should refer to their leadership with whatever thoughts they may have or what occurs to them of ideas or problems.

The *sūrah* excludes types of secret talks that do not exactly belong to this category,

but which may take the same form: "*Except for one who enjoins charity, or justice, or setting things right between people.*" (Verse 114) This means that one good person meets another and says, "Let us give something in charity to this or that person, for I have come to know from private sources that he is in need." Or he may urge him to do something good to maintain fairness between people, or invite him to work with him in order to bring reconciliation between two Muslims who are involved in a dispute. Such good people may collaborate to fulfil any of these objectives and they may decide in private on their line of action. This sort of thing is neither plotting nor conspiracy. Hence, the Qur'ān uses the word "enjoin" to describe it, even though its apparent form is the same as clandestine talking, as it involves one good person speaking to others in private, urging them to collaborate in some good action.

It is important, however, that the overriding motive is to earn God's pleasure: "*To him who does this out of a longing for God's goodly acceptance We shall in time grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 114) There must he no element of holding favour against someone, or favouring a particular person with charity, or mending relations between favoured individuals. A person who enjoins such actions must not do so in pursuit of earning a good reputation for himself as one who loves charity and works hard to mend relations between people. Indeed, there must be no element of motive behind such good actions other than seeking God's pleasure. This is the determining factor which makes one good action easy to please God and earn a rich reward from Him, and one that incurs God's displeasure and is recorded by Him as a bad deed. The latter action may have the same appearance or form, but the difference is that it is undertaken for the wrong motives.

A Sin That Cannot Be Forgiven

> *But as for him who, after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, puts himself in contention with God's Messenger and follows a path other than that of the believers – him shall We leave to that which he himself has chosen, and shall cause him to endure hell. How evil a journey's end. For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray.* (Verses 115-16)

It is reported that the reason behind the revelation of these verses was that Bashīr ibn Ubayriq, who had joined the Muslim ranks, reverted to disbelief "*after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him.*" Thus, he followed a different path to that of the believers. But the statement is general and applicable to every case in which a person puts himself in contention with God's Messenger. To be opposed to the Prophet is to disbelieve in God and His message.

The Arabic expression used in the original text of the Qur'ān and rendered here as

being "in contention" with the Prophet means, in its linguistic sense, taking a stand opposite to that taken by another. Hence to put oneself *"in contention with God's Messenger"* is to choose a life other than that followed by the Prophet. God's Messenger has come forward preaching a message that comprises a whole system for life, including faith and worship as well as a legal code legislating for all practical aspects of daily life. The faith and the legal code together constitute the body of this whole system. Should one part of it be adopted and the other neglected, then the whole body, and indeed the whole system, are in ruin. A person brings himself in contention with God's Messenger when he denies his system in total, or believes in parts of it and denies other parts, implementing the former and ignoring the latter.

It is an aspect of God's grace bestowed on mankind that they will not be doomed to suffer the punishment of hell until He has sent them a Messenger who explains to them His guidance but which they reject and choose falsehood instead. This shows the great extent of God's grace bestowed on man, a weak creature. When man, having ascertained the truth of God's guidance and the system He has revealed, still refuses to obey God's Messenger and implement the Divine system, then he is in contention with God's Messenger. Thus, does God condemn him to error, leaving him to follow the path he has chosen and allowing him to join the nonbelievers whose path he preferred. This is what condemning him to the punishment mentioned in the same verse actually means: *"But as for him who, after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, puts himself in contention with God's Messenger and follows a path other than that of the believers – him shall We leave to that which he himself has chosen, and shall cause him to endure hell. How evil a journey's end."* (Verse 115)

The *sūrah* explains that this depressing end is inevitable because God's forgiveness may include every sin except that partners should be associated with Him. When any person continues to associate partners with God until he or she dies, then forgiveness will not be granted: *"For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray."* (Verse 116)

As we have explained when commenting on a similar verse earlier, associating partners with God may take the form of open polytheism on the lines of old Arabian and other pagan beliefs. It may also take the form of denying that certain aspects of Godhead belong to God alone and claiming that these also belong to some human beings. A case in point is mentioned in the Qur'ān whereby the Jews and Christians treated their rabbis and priests as gods in association with God. They certainly did not offer any worship rituals to these, but they acknowledged their right to legislate for them. When the priests and rabbis enacted such legislation, forbidding certain things and making others lawful, and they accepted such legislation, they truly became idolaters. This is because they assigned to their priests and rabbis the most

important of God's attributes. Thus, God says of them that they have violated the orders to believe in God's oneness: "They have been ordered to take for worship none other than a single God." This means that they should address their worship to God alone and receive their laws only from Him.

Associating partners with God is the one sin that cannot be forgiven, if continued until a person dies. Forgiveness is open to all other sins, when God so wills. The reason for portraying the sin of associating partners with God as so great as to permit no forgiveness is that the perpetrator of such a sin goes beyond the boundaries of all goodness. His nature is corrupted beyond redemption: *"He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray." (Verses* 116) If only one thread of upright nature remains in sound condition, it will pull a person round to accepting the oneness of his Lord, even one hour before his death. But when he continues to associate partners with God until his last throes, then he has condemned himself to an awful doom: *"We ... shall cause him to endure hell. How evil a journey's end."* (Verse 115)

Legends and Superstitions

The *sūrah* now describes some of the superstitions of Arabian ignorance and the legends that the Arabs spread about God taking to Himself daughters, i.e. the angels, and the Arabs' worship of Satan, the angels and their idols. It describes some of their rituals, such as slitting the ears of some cattle as offerings to their deities, as well as their corrupting of God's creation, and their belief in other deities beside God. All this is contrary to the upright nature God has placed in man:

> *In His stead, they invoke only lifeless symbols — thus invoking none but a rebellious Satan, whom God has rejected, for he had said: "Of Your servants I shall indeed take my due share, and shall certainly lead them astray, and fill them with vain desires; and I shall command them — and they will slit the ears of cattle [in idolatrous sacrifice]; and I shall command them — and they will corrupt God's creation. But all who take Satan rather than God for their master do incur a manifest loss. He [i.e. Satan] holds out promises to them, and fills them with vain desires, but whatever Satan promises is meant only to deceive them."* (Verses 117-20)

In their days of ignorance, the Arabs alleged that the angels were God's daughters. They made statues representing these angels and gave them feminine names, such as Al-Lāt, Al-`Uzza, Manāt, etc. Then, they worshipped these statues or idols, allegedly representing God's daughters, in order to be closer to God. This was the case at least in the beginning, but then they forgot the original legend and worshipped the statues themselves. Indeed some of them worshipped the very stone from which the statues were made. Some of them also worshipped Satan himself. Al-Kalbī mentions that the

clan of Mulaiĥ, which belonged to the Khuzā`ah tribe, worshipped the *jinn.*

The statement here is of wider implication. The fact that they associated partners with God means that they actually invoked Satan and derived their beliefs from him. It is the same Satan who figures in the story of their original father, Adam, and whom God rejected for his disobedience and for his hostility to mankind. When he was so accursed, Satan nurtured an unabating hatred towards mankind which motivated him to seek permission to lead astray any human who does not seek refuge with God.

> *In His stead, they invoke only lifeless symbols — thus invoking none but a rebellious Satan, whom God has rejected, for he had said: "Of Your servants I shall indeed take my due share, and shall certainly lead them astray, and fill them with vain desires; and I shall command them — and they will slit the ears of cattle [in idolatrous sacrifice]; and I shall command them — and they will corrupt God's creation.* (Verses 117-19)

They invoke their old enemy, Satan, and receive from him all that leads them into manifest error. He has already declared his intention to divert a section of mankind away from Divine guidance, holding for them the prospect of satisfying their vain desires, whether it be some fleeting pleasure, false happiness, or of escaping ultimate punishment. He has also declared that he will persuade them to commit evil actions and perform stupid and legendary rituals, such as the slitting of the ears of cattle so that they become forbidden to ride or eat, although God has not prohibited them. He will also persuade them to change or corrupt God's creation by cutting off or altering some parts of the body of humans or animals, such as castrating slaves or tattooing a person and similarly altering God's creation. All this God has strictly forbidden.

When a human being feels that Satan, his old enemy, is actually the one who advocates such pagan rituals and practices, he is bound to feel that he must be cautious lest he should be tricked by his enemy. Islam makes the battle between man and Satan the main battle, and directs all the resources of a believer into combating Satan and the evil he spreads on earth. Thus, a believer joins God's party and fights under God's banner against Satan and his cronies. This is an ever-raging battle; it will never end. This because Satan will not stop waging it. A believer, on the other hand, will not ignore or withdraw from it. He knows that the choices available to him are either to join God's party or Satan's lot. There is no middle ground to hold. In this battle Satan is represented by all the vain desires he arouses, and by his followers who include all non-believers and all advocates of evil. A Muslim fights Satan himself and his followers in a long battle which lasts as long as life itself continues.

Whoever takes God for his patron will achieve success, and whoever takes Satan for his patron will end up in ruin: *"But all who take Satan rather than God for their*

master do incur a manifest loss." (Verse 119) The Qur'ān describes what Satan does with those who do his bidding in pursuing their vain desires: *"He [i.e. Satan] holds out promises to them, and fills them with vain desires, but whatever Satan promises is meant only to deceive them."* (Verse 120)

This is an example of raising the prospect of fulfilling desires which divert human nature away from faith into disbelief and associating partners with God. Had it not been for this temptation, human nature would have remained pure and responded to the guidance of faith. It is Satan's temptation which adorns the had deeds of a human being so that he sees them as fair. He promises man much gain and complete happiness when he follows the path of disobeying God. Thus, man joins him along that road. Satan then promises man that he will escape punishment in the hereafter, but this leads only to man's inevitable ruin: *"but whatever Satan promises is meant only to deceive them."* (Verse 120)

When the whole scene is portrayed in this form, with the old enemy setting the traps and tempting his victims, only those who are unwilling to see continue to remain oblivious to what is being plotted for them. They do not even try to see the destination to which they are being driven, and into what precipice they are being pushed.

This most touching of descriptions puts people on the alert, paints the battle in its true colours, and then follows the comment which shows the end result of those who succumb to Satan's temptation. They are the ones with whom he accomplishes his declared evil intentions. It also shows the end of those who escape from his wicked schemes because they truly believe in God. True believers are immune from Satan's wicked designs because, when he sought permission to try to seduce mankind, he received no permission to come near true believers. As they hold tight to God's guidance, Satan is shown to be very weak by comparison: *"He [i.e. Satan] holds out promises to them, and fills them with vain desires, but whatever Satan promises is meant only to deceive them. Such as these shall have Hell as their dwelling place. They shall find no way to escape from it. Yet those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall bring into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time. This is, in truth, God's promise. Whose word could be truer than Gods?"* (Verses 120-2)

The two far apart destinations, then, are hell as an inevitable dwelling place for those who patronise Satan and paradise, for ever, for those who are true believers. That is God's promise, and *"whose word could be truer than God's?"* (Verse 122)

The absolute truth of God's word is shown in marked contrast to all of Satan's deceptions and false temptations. The gulf is great indeed between one who believes in God's promise and one who is deluded by Satan.

Action and Reward

The *sūrah* follows this discussion with a statement of the basic Islamic rule that governs action and reward. What determines the type of requital a person receives is not wishful thinking. There is a basic principle, a rule to apply to all and a law that favours no one. The law applies equally to all communities. No one has any special relation of kinship with God. Hence, no one may claim special favour so as to have the rule violated or the law suspended for his own sake. Everyone will be requited according to his deeds, whether good or evil.

> *It may not accord with your wishful thinking, nor with the wishful thinking of the people of earlier revelations. He who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him support. But anyone, be it man or woman, who does good deeds and is a believer, shall enter paradise and shall not suffer the least injustice. Who could be of better faith than he who surrenders himself completely to God, does what is good, and follows the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false? For God has taken Abraham for a friend.* (Verses 123-5)

Both the Jews and Christians claimed to be God's children and beloved ones. Both also claimed: *"The fire will not touch us except for a few days."* (2: 80) And the Jews continue to assert that they are "God's chosen people." It may have occurred to some Muslims that they are truly the "best community ever raised for mankind", and that God is certain to forgive them whatever misdeeds they may have perpetrated, simply because they are Muslims.

These verses put the question right for all three communities. The only determining factor is a person's own deeds. All are, thus, referred to the same standard and criterion: complete submission to God alone, doing what is good, and following Abraham's creed. Indeed, the best faith is Islam, which is Abraham's creed based on total submission and self-surrender to God. The best deeds are those which aim for perfection, defined by the Prophet as "to worship God as though you were seeing Him, and to know that if you cannot see Him, He certainly sees you". Doing good, as the Prophet states, is required in all actions, even when we slaughter an animal for food. In such instances, we are required to place the animal comfortably and to sharpen our blades so that the animal does not suffer much at the point of death.

The Qur'ānic statement ensures equality between the two parts of the single soul

from whom all mankind originate with regard to action and requital. It also makes acceptance of people's deeds conditional on their believing in God. *"But anyone, be it man or woman, who does good deeds and is a believer, shall enter paradise and shall not suffer the least injustice."* (Verse 124) This statement is a clearly extends the same treatment to men and women. Furthermore, faith is the prerequisite for accepting anyone's deeds. Indeed, no action is of any value in God's measure unless it is based on, and motivated by faith. This is both natural and logical. It is belief in God that gives a good deed a proper r concept and a clear purpose. It also makes such a good deed a natural and consistent line of action. It is no longer a response to a personal desire or a momentary impulse.

This clear statement is at variance with what Shaikh Muĥammad `Abdu (may God bless his soul) stated in his commentary on the verse: *"Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it then."* (99: 7) He considers this statement to be applicable to Muslims and non- Muslims alike. The fact is that other clear statements make this totally incorrect. The same applies to what Shaikh al-Marāghī (may God bless his soul) also states. We have referred to this in the last volume of this work.

Requital of Believers' Bad Deeds

"He who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him support." (Verse 123) This statement was tough on the Muslims, for in it they recognised their weaknesses and the fact that no matter how good a person is and how much good works he does, he will inevitably do some evil. They knew what it means in reality to be human. Hence, they knew themselves. They did not try to delude themselves or hide their own tendencies. Nor did they ignore or conceal the weakness they sometimes felt within themselves. Hence, they were very apprehensive when they were told that they would be requited for every bad deed they committed. They shuddered as though they were facing the results here and now. This was their distinctive characteristic: to feel the hereafter as though it were here now, and not merely as something that will eventually, without doubt, come. To them, it was close, not distant. Hence, their anguish at this most serious of warnings.

Imām Aĥmad relates: "I am told that Abū Bakr said to God's Messenger: How is anyone to prosper now that this verse has been revealed: *'It may not accord with your wishful thinking, nor with the wishful thinking of the people of earlier revelations. He who does evil shall be requited for it.'* We will be requited for every bad deed we commit. The Prophet said: `May God forgive you, Abū Bakr! Do you not fall ill? Do you not get tired? Do you not feel distress? Do you not experience hardship?' Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative, and then the Prophet said: All that is part of your requital.'" (This *ĥadīth* is also related by al-Ĥākim.)

Another *ĥadīth* reports Abū Bakr as saying: "I was with the Prophet when a verse was revealed stating: *'He who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him support.'* The Prophet said to me, 'Shall I teach you a verse that has been revealed to me.' I requested him to teach it to me. I had never experienced terrible pain in my back until I had reflected on it. The Prophet said, 'What is wrong with you, Abū Bakr?' I said: 'Who of us has not done bad deeds? Are we to be requited for every bad deed we perpetrate?' God's Messenger said: As for you, Abū Bakr, and your friends, the believers, you will be requited for all that in the life of this world, so that you will have no sin recorded against you when you meet God. As for the others, their deeds will be put together so that they will be requited for such deeds on the Day of Judgement." (Related by al-Tirmidhī.)

`Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, reports: "I said, `Messenger of God, I know the hardest verse in the Qur'ān.' When he asked me to name it, I said, *'He who does evil shall be requited for it.'* He replied: `That refers to what a believer suffers in this world, even every adverse experience.'" (Related by al-Ṭabarī.)

Abū Hurayrah states: "When the verse, '*He who does evil shall be requited for it,'* was revealed, the Muslims felt it too hard. God's Messenger said to them: `Take it easy and do your best. Whatever happens to a Muslim counts as requital, even a thorn pricking his skin or an adverse experience. — (Related by Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

At any rate, this was one part of the process of developing a proper and accurate concept of the rule of action and reward in Islam. It was of paramount importance in making such a concept perfectly accurate and in helping to set believers' practices on the right way. The verse shook them because they took all matters related to their faith very seriously. They realised that whatever God promises will come true, both in this life and in the life to come.

Dominion of the Universe

The passage concludes with a comment on the whole question of action and reward, as well as the earlier question of faith and disbelief. This comment makes it clear that all the heavens and earth belong to God, who encompasses all that is in life and beyond it: *"To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and indeed God encompasses everything."* (Verse 126)

When the oneness of the Godhead is mentioned in the Qur'ān, it is often coupled with a mention that all dominion, power and authority also belong to God alone. Islamic monotheism does not only relate to God's being only. It is a positive monotheism which applies to action that influences the whole universe and to real

and active authority in the universe as well.

When a person realises that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and earth, and that He encompasses everything, so that nothing escapes His knowledge or lies beyond His power, he has a strong motivation to acknowledge Him as the only God in the universe. This means that all worship is addressed to Him alone and His pleasure is sought through the implementation of His constitution and by obeying His orders. This is the logical conclusion, for everything belongs to Him, subject to His power and under His watchful eye.

Some philosophies acknowledge that God is one without partners, yet some of them negate His will, or His knowledge, or His power, or His dominion, etc. Such hollow ideas, calling themselves "philosophies", abound. However, any such creed is negative, having no effect on people's lives, or their moral values and practices, or their feelings and perceptions. It is all hollow, going no further than the words they use to express themselves.

In the Islamic doctrine, however, God is the overall King to whom all the heavens and earth belong. With His knowledge and power, He encompasses everything. Such a doctrine ensures that human conscience is set on the right track. Hence, people's practices are set right and human life itself prospers as it follows the right method.

12
Watching God in All Dealings

وَيَسْتَفْتُونَكَ فِي ٱلنِّسَآءِ ۖ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يُفْتِيكُمْ فِيهِنَّ وَمَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي ٱلْكِتَٰبِ فِي يَتَٰمَى ٱلنِّسَآءِ ٱلَّٰتِي لَا تُؤْتُونَهُنَّ مَا كُتِبَ لَهُنَّ وَتَرْغَبُونَ أَن تَنكِحُوهُنَّ وَٱلْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ مِنَ ٱلْوِلْدَٰنِ وَأَن تَقُومُوا۟ لِلْيَتَٰمَىٰ بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۚ وَمَا تَفْعَلُوا۟ مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِهِۦ عَلِيمًا ﴿١٢٧﴾

They ask you for rulings concerning women. Say, God [Himself] gives you His rulings concerning them, as well as what is conveyed to you through this Book about orphan women whom you deny what has been assigned to them, and you are disinclined to marry them; and concerning helpless children, and about your duty to treat orphans with fairness. Whatever good you may do, God knows it fully. (127)

وَإِنِ ٱمْرَأَةٌ خَافَتْ مِنۢ بَعْلِهَا نُشُوزًا أَوْ إِعْرَاضًا فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَآ أَن يُصْلِحَا بَيْنَهُمَا صُلْحًا ۚ وَٱلصُّلْحُ خَيْرٌ ۗ وَأُحْضِرَتِ ٱلْأَنفُسُ ٱلشُّحَّ ۚ وَإِن تُحْسِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١٢٨﴾

If a woman has reason to fear ill-treatment or desertion by her husband, it shall not be wrong for the two of them if they should try to set things peacefully to rights between them; for peace is best. Avarice is ever-present in human souls. If you act with kindness and are God-fearing, surely God is aware of all that you do. (128)

وَلَن تَسْتَطِيعُوٓا۟ أَن تَعْدِلُوا۟ بَيْنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتُمْ ۖ فَلَا تَمِيلُوا۟ كُلَّ ٱلْمَيْلِ فَتَذَرُوهَا كَٱلْمُعَلَّقَةِ ۚ وَإِن تُصْلِحُوا۟

In no way can you maintain equity between your wives, even though you may be keen to do so. Do not, then, be totally partial towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her, as it were, in a state of suspense. If you put things to rights and are God-fearing, God is indeed Much-

Forgiving, Merciful. (129)

وَتَتَّقُواْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٢٩﴾

But if the two separate, God shall provide for each of them out of His abundance: God is indeed Munificent, Wise. (130)

وَإِن يَتَفَرَّقَا يُغْنِ ٱللَّهُ كُلًّا مِّن سَعَتِهِۦ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٣٠﴾

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. We have indeed enjoined those who were granted revelations before your time, as well as yourselves, to always be God- fearing. If you disbelieve, know that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is Self-Sufficient, Praiseworthy. (131)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ وَلَقَدْ وَصَّيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ أَنِ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ ۚ وَإِن تَكْفُرُواْ فَإِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَنِيًّا حَمِيدًا ﴿١٣١﴾

And to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is your All-Sufficient Guardian. (132)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿١٣٢﴾

If He so wills, He can take you, mankind, and replace you by others. This He surely has the power to do. (133)

إِن يَشَأْ يُذْهِبْكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَيَأْتِ بِـَٔاخَرِينَ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ قَدِيرًا ﴿١٣٣﴾

If anyone desires the rewards of this world, let him remember that with God are the rewards of this world and those of the life to come. God is indeed All- Hearing, All-Seeing. (134)

مَّن كَانَ يُرِيدُ ثَوَابَ ٱلدُّنْيَا فَعِندَ ٱللَّهِ ثَوَابُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ سَمِيعًۢا بَصِيرًا ﴿١٣٤﴾

Overview

This passage complements what the early parts of this *sūrah* have set out to do. It aims to eradicate all traces of past ignorant days, still manifesting themselves in ideas and practices, especially concerning women, their place in society and the treatment

of other vulnerable groups such as orphans and children. The whole Muslim community needed to be purged of such traces in order to allow the family to be established on the basis that man and woman are two parts of a single soul and they both must be given their due and honourable positions. Their interests are to be looked after and family ties need to be strengthened. Any dispute that breaks out within the family should be settled early, before it develops and leads to a severing of ties and the destruction of homes. It is to be remembered that in such cases, the first to suffer are young children who are still in their formative years. The Muslim community, on the other hand must be established along the lines of looking after its vulnerable groups, so that they are not oppressed by those who wield power.

The present passage deals with certain aspects of family relationships, providing a linkage between them and the system that governs the universe. This imparts to us a feeling that the question of the status of women, the role of the family and care for the helpless and vulnerable in society are very serious matters. This is indeed the case. We have already spoken at length, when commenting on the early parts of this *sūrah,* on the way Islam views the family and its efforts to eradicate *ignorance* from the Muslim community in order to elevate its psychological, social, and moral standards. We should remind ourselves that only through such elevation did the Muslim community gain superiority over all other societies which do not believe in Islam and which do not conduct themselves according to its unique system.

The Rights of Orphan Girls

> *They ask you for rulings concerning women. Say, God [Himself] gives you His rulings concerning them, as well as what is conveyed to you through this Book about orphan women whom you deny what has been assigned to them, and you are disinclined to marry them; and concerning helpless children, and about your duty to treat orphans with fairness. Whatever good you may do, God knows it fully.* (Verse 127)

The verses with which the *sūrah* opens and which outline a number of regulations about women raised many questions in the Muslims' minds about different aspects of the position of women. Those in the newly-established Muslim community formulated questions which required rulings on different matters. This indicated a genuine desire on their part to know every ruling of their faith in all matters of life. The move they have made from *ignorance* to Islam had a far-reaching effect on their hearts. They felt that they needed to question everything they did in their pre-Islamic days, fearing that it might have been outlawed or modified by Islam. They wanted to be sure of the Islamic view on all matters. It is true that certain traces of *ignorance* lingered with them, but what was much more significant was their genuine desire to

make sure that their lifestyle was in conformity with Islam. Hence their questionings and their requests for explanations and rulings.

This was not merely an intellectual exercise, aiming only to learn a little more about this religion. They wanted to know in order to practise what they learned. The first generation of Muslims realised that they were born anew when they adopted this faith. Moreover, they considered the great change which took place in their lives as priceless. Hence, they feared to continue with any practices and habits that might be in conflict with Islam. Their anxiety and their resolve to follow whatever rulings Islam gave earned them a great favour indeed. God Himself took care of them and took it upon Himself to answer their queries.

"They ask you for rulings concerning women. Say, God [Himself' gives you His rulings concerning them." (Verse 127) They put their questions to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) but God, limitless is He in His glory, extends to them His favours and tells the Prophet to say to them: God will answer your questions about women and concerning the other matters mentioned in this verse. This is a gesture of great care and honour bestowed on the Muslim community, as God addresses them Himself, giving them the answers to their questions and explaining what they need in their new style of life. The ruling given here portrays a situation that existed in pre-Islamic Arabian society and which lingered on. It gives the required directive to elevate the Muslim community and to purge it of all traces of ignorance: *"Say, God [Himself] gives you His ruling concerning them, as well as what is conveyed to you through this Book about orphan women whom you deny what has been assigned to them, and you are disinclined to marry them; and concerning helpless children, and about your duty to treat orphans with fairness."* (Verse 127)

`Abdullāh ibn `Abbās is reported to have made the following comment on this verse: "In ignorant days, a man may have an orphan girl in his charge and he throws his dress over her. When he does that, no one is allowed to marry her. If she is pretty and he likes her, he marries her and takes all her wealth. If she is ugly, he prevents her from marrying until she dies, when he inherits her wealth. God has forbidden all that." Ibn `Abbās also explains that the phrase *"and concerning helpless children,"* refers to the fact that in pre-Islamic days, the Arabs used not to give any share of inheritance to their children or to their women. This is what is meant by the statement: *"Whom you deny what has been assigned to them."* Again, God has forbidden this. He has assigned to each his or her share, saying that a male inherits a share which is equivalent to the shares of two females. This applies to both young and grown up alike.

Sa`īd ibn Jubayr explains that the statement *"and about your duty to treat orphans with fairness"* refers to cases when an orphan girl is pretty. Her guardian may say: I am marrying her and taking her for myself. If she is not pretty and has no wealth, he

allows her to marry someone else after depriving her of whatever little she may have.

`Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, explains that this verse refers to a situation when a man is in charge of an orphan girl and he is also her heir. She may enter into some partnership with him. He may not want to marry her himself, as she may not be pretty. At the same time, he does not want her to marry anyone else, lest her husband become his partner. Her guardian, then, prevents her from marrying anyone. This verse was revealed to prohibit this practice. (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

`Ā'ishah is also reported to have said: "People began to ask God's Messenger (peace be upon him) for rulings concerning women after the early verses of this *sūrah* were revealed. God then sent down this verse, telling the Prophet: *"They ask you for rulings concerning women. Say, God Himself you His rulings concerning them, as well as what is conveyed to you through this Book..."* (Verse 127) As for what God refers to as being conveyed through this book, it is simply the verse which occurs at the beginning of the *sūrah* and states: "*If you fear that you may not deal fairly by the orphans, you may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four."* (Verse 3) Another statement attributed to `Ā'ishah suggests that God's statement about the disinclination to marry such orphans refers to the lack of desire on the part of a guardian to marry an orphan girl in his charge when she is plain and has little money of her own. This is, then, an order prohibiting Muslims to marry those orphans whom they desire only for their wealth or beauty, unless such a marriage is conducted with fairness and justice.

Traditional Injustice Removed

It is clear from these statements, as well as the Qur'ānic text itself, that orphan girls had a very raw deal in pre-Islamic Arabia. Such a girl suffered from the greed and injustice of her guardian. His greed prompted him to devour her wealth. If he decided to marry her, he would not give her a fair dowry. On the other hand, if her guardian did not marry her on account of her being plain, she still suffered injustice, because he would not allow her to marry someone else, so that her husband could not share with him her wealth.

The same sort of treatment was extended to children. Women and children were deprived of their shares of inheritance because they were powerless or they were classified as non-fighters. The tribal attitude at the time gave every right to those who were able to fight, and left nothing for the powerless who could not take part in the battle.

It is these ignoble traditions which Islam set out to change, replacing them with noble and humane traditions. This was not merely a great reform of Arabian society.

It was indeed a new birth which gave the Arabs a new character, different from their pre-Islamic one.

What is important to note is that this new birth was not preceded by any steps or developments preparing the way for it. Nor did it begin with a sudden economic or material change in the life of that Arabian society. The move from assigning rights of inheritance and possession on the basis of ability to fight to giving them on a purely humane basis was not the result of any newly-discovered ability on their part. Nor were children, orphan girls, and women given their rights of inheritance and ownership as the fruit of any new period of stability which reduced the importance of fighters. Indeed, fighters enjoyed even greater importance in the new regime. What had changed was that Islam came into being, and with it, there was a new birth of humanity, accomplished through a book and a new code of living. Thus, a new society was born in the same land and under the same conditions, without any revolutionary raising slogans of increasing national production or material wealth. There was only a revolution in concepts which led to this rebirth of humanity.

It is true that the new Qur'ānic system had to fight hard to erase the elements of ignorance within people and their social habits and traditions, and to replace these with new Islamic elements. It was also true that *ignorance* continued to resist such a change, leaving lingering traces in society and making their repeated reappearance in individual cases, or expressing itself in a variety of ways. What is important to state here is that the new system, revealed from on high, and the concept it formulated in the minds of its followers, resisted the pressures of the material world and brought about a total change in society. This change had far-reaching effects: it overhauled concepts, traditions and the whole social set-up. Neither the material conditions nor their inner "counter" elements, nor any change in the means of production nor any other Marxist hallucinations had any say in such a change. There was only one new element in the life of that nation. It was something sent down from on high. Hearts responded to it because it addressed their nature. The secret of this rebirth in man led to a total change in the whole life of society. It was the natural, positive interaction between human nature and the new system formulated by God.

Hard as the struggle might have been between the new and the old systems, and painful as the labour and the sacrifices might have been, the remarkable outcome was accomplished because the Divine message and the new faith were the prime movers. Moreover, the benefits of this achievement were not confined to Muslim society; they were extended to all humanity.

Therefore, it is only natural that this Qur'ānic statement, which gives the rulings of God regarding questions put to the Prophet concerning women, the rights of orphan girls, and helpless children, should conclude with further emphasis on the relationship between these rights and directives on the one hand, and the source of

this whole system on the other: "*Whatever good you may do, God knows it fully.*" (Verse 127) Nothing good you do goes in vain. A believer addresses every action he takes to God. It is God's power that gives these directives their ability to influence people's thoughts and lifestyles.

It is not so important how directives and systems derive their influence and effectiveness in shaping human life. The gulf between directives and systems received from God, the Almighty, and ones formulated by fellow human beings is great indeed, even if we assume that both sets are equally good and equally valid. Needless to say, such an assumption is totally unrealistic. It is sufficient for any person to be aware of the source of a certain directive to assign to it its due significance. The importance of a Word said by God, the Most High, is different from that of a word said by a human being.

Equity That Cannot Be Maintained

The *sūrah* then moves a step further with family legislation as part of the general organisation of the society Islam wants to establish. It is a society based on the code God has bestowed from on high, not on changing worldly factors, which are often materialistic in nature and which often are to do with the production of goods and material riches.

> *If a woman has reason to fear ill-treatment or desertion by her husband, it shall not be wrong for the two of them if they should try to set things peacefully to rights between them; for peace is best. Avarice is ever-present in human souls. If you act with kindness and are God-fearing, surely God is aware of all that you do. In no way can you maintain equity between your wives, even though you may be keen to do so. Do not, then, be totally partial towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her, as it were, in a state of suspense. If you put things to rights and are God-fearing, God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.* (Verses 128-129)

Earlier in this *sūrah,* Islamic legislation dealt with the state of rebellion or abuse when caused by a wife. It outlined the procedures that should be taken in order to preserve the structure of the family. At this juncture, we now have regulations dealing with abuse or desertion by the husband, which threatens the security and dignity of the woman as well as the security of the whole family. Feelings and inclinations might change. Islam is a system for life which deals with every detail and caters for every eventuality within the framework of its principles, values and the structure of the society it establishes.

If a woman fears being abandoned, which may be a step leading to divorce, the one legitimate thing God dislikes most, or if she fears being left in such a way that

gives her neither the status of a wife nor the freedom of a divorcee, then a remedy could take the form of her foregoing some of her rights, financial or otherwise. She may, for example, choose to forego part or all of her maintenance which her husband owes to her as a duty. If he has another wife whom she feels he prefers, while she herself may no longer have her feminine appeal, she may forego her right to have her husband stay with her on alternate nights. If she foregoes any such right, that decision must be made by her on the basis of absolutely free choice. Thus, she makes such a decision only if she feels that it is a better option for her: "*If a woman has reason to fear ill-treatment or desertion by her husband, it shall not be wrong for the two of them if they should try to set things peacefully to rights between them.*" (Verse 128) By way of comment, a general statement follows to the effect that peace is better than quarrels, disputes or divorce: "*For peace is best.*" This should help substitute kindness for hard feelings, and strengthen the desire to maintain family relationships.

In dealing with the human soul, Islam takes man as a whole, and utilises all the means it has at its disposal to elevate it to the most sublime level it is equipped to achieve by its very nature. At the same time, it neither ignores this nature nor tries to force on it anything of which it is not capable. It does not set a target for people and tell them: this is what you have to achieve, whether it is in your power or not. On the other hand, it does not condone weakness or praise human nature when it sinks to a lower depth, under the pretext that it is part of reality. Nor does it tie it to the sublime by its neck and leave it swinging in the air, tinder the pretext of elevating human nature. Islam is a middle road responding to human nature. It can be described as ideal practicality or practical idealism. It recognises that man is a singular creature who can put his feet firmly on the ground and, at the same time, allow his spirit to look up to heaven.

In giving this ruling, Islam is dealing with man with all his characteristics, but where one in particular is singled out: "*Avarice is ever present in human souls.*" It is there all the time with all its aspects, material and spiritual. There may exist within the family certain causes which enhance the husband's avarice with regard to his wife. If she foregoes part of her deferred dowry or other financial rights, she may satisfy his greed and preserve her marriage. Similarly, if she foregoes her right to have him stay with her on alternate nights, if he has another wife, she may satisfy his emotional avarice and save her marriage. But all this can only come about by her free choice, according to what she deems to serve her interests best. There is no imposition here on her, rather a dispensation which gives her the freedom to decide in a matter which concerns her.

Islam does not stop here with this particular form of avarice, considering that it represents all aspects of the human soul and its nature. Instead, it proceeds to touch on other feelings and motives: "*If you act with kindness and are God-fearing, surely God*

is aware of all that you do." (Verse 128) Kindness and consciousness of God are, after all, the most important motives. A person who acts on their basis will lose nothing. God is aware of all our motives and actions. To arouse feelings of kindness and consciousness of God and to address man in the name of God, who is aware of everything we do, is a very effective way of influencing behaviour. Indeed, it is the sort of appeal which ensures the best results.

Another example of the ideal practicality or the practical idealism of Islam is provided in the next verse: *"In no way can you maintain equity between your wives, even though you may be keen to do so. Do not, then, be totally partial towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her, as it were, in a state of suspense. If you put things to rights and are God-fearing, God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 129)

God, who has created man, knows that he has feelings which he cannot control. Therefore, He has given man a way to direct these feelings, not to suppress or smother them. One such inclination is to be partial to one wife over and above other wives. Such partiality is beyond a man's control. He cannot easily suppress it. Islam does not hold man to account for something which is beyond his control. It does not make such partiality a sin incurring punishment. Otherwise, man would be torn apart choosing between alternatives with which he cannot cope. Islam takes a realistic view and tells people frankly that they cannot maintain equity between their wives, keen as they may be to do so, because the matter is beyond their control. There are, however, certain matters that are within their ability such as fairness in treatment, distribution of time, financial support and other marital obligations. Such fairness goes so far as to include the occasional smile and word of kindness. This they are required to do in order to regulate their partiality not to smother it.

"Do not, then, be totally partial towards one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her, as it were, in a state of suspense." (Verse 129) This partiality in outward treatment is what is forbidden because it deprives one wife of her rights and places her in a situation where she is neither a wife nor a divorcee. The prohibition is coupled with an effective appeal to believing hearts and a reassurance of overlooking what lies beyond man's control: *"If you put things to rights and are God-fearing, God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 129) Because Islam deals with the human soul with its unique temperament, which is the product of mixing a handful of clay with the breathing of God's spirit, and with its ideal practicality or practical idealism, the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) was the complete example of humanity when it attains its utmost perfection. That perfection is achieved when all characteristics and abilities within man are allowed to develop in a balanced and mutually complementary way within the limitations of human nature. As the Prophet of Islam extended his fair treatment to his wives and distributed his time equally between them, he did not deny that in love and affection he was more inclined towards some

of them than others. He recognised that that was beyond his control. He used to say: "My Lord, this is how I divide between them what I can control. Do not blame me for that which You control and I do not."

But what happens when the marital relationship is so strained that it cannot be maintained? It may happen that both man and wife lose everything needed for a settled, happy family life. In such a situation, separation is better. Islam does not hold marital partners with ropes, chains and fetters. It maintains family life with affection, compassion, or else with a sense of duty and forbearance. If none of these elements can reconcile estranged hearts, Islam does not condemn them to a prison of hate, nor does it try to cover up a real and total breakdown of the marital relationship with a pretence of reconciliation that is only skin deep.

"But if the two separate, God shall provide for each of them out of His abundance: God is indeed Munificent, Wise." (Verse 130) This is a promise by God that He will give to each of the separating couple out of His own abundance what will be sufficient for them. He provides for all His servants and grants them of His grace what is suitable for every situation, according to His wisdom and knowledge.

When we study the Islamic system as it deals with feelings, motives and prejudices and as it provides solutions for practical situations, we are amazed at people turning away from such a simple, uncomplicated method devised especially for human life. It leads people from their lowly position, along the road to great heights, always giving them what is suitable for their nature and capabilities. It does not impose on them any course leading to a higher level of sublimity, unless this has roots within their own nature. What is more, Islam attains a standard which cannot be achieved through any other system, and, all the while, it maintains its ideal practicality or practical idealism.

Family Rules Related to Universal Law

We have to understand that these rules which are applicable to marriage and family life are only a part of an overall system which regulates human life as a whole. This system is, in turn, part of the law God has laid down for the whole universe to follow. It, therefore, fits well with the nature of the universe as well as with the nature of man who lives in the universe. This profound fact is central to the overall system. Therefore, rules which provided for the regulation of family life are followed by statements which relate them to the universal system, as well as God's power over, and His ownership of, everything in it. We also have a statement that God has given the same directive to all mankind in all the messages He has sent them, and a reminder of rewards in this life and in the life to come. Indeed, these are the bases upon which the whole system is founded: truth, justice, and fearing God.

> *But if the two separate, God shall provide for each of them out of His abundance: God is indeed Munificent, Wise. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. We have indeed enjoined those who were granted revelations before your time, as well as yourselves, to always be God-fearing. If you disbelieve, know that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is Self-Sufficient, Praiseworthy. And to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is your All- Sufficient Guardian. If He so wills, He can take you, mankind, and replace you by others. This He surely has the power to do. If anyone desires the rewards of this world, let him remember that with God are the rewards of this world and those of the life to come. God is indeed All-Hearing, All-Seeing. (Verses -130-134)*

Often rules and injunctions given in the Qur'ān are followed by a statement that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. The two are essentially interrelated: he who owns something has all power and authority over it. He alone has the right to establish the system he wants and to impose it on those who are under his dominion. Since God is the only owner, it follows that He alone has the authority to legislate to people. Of all Divine instructions, the one which is highlighted here and which has been given to all those who received messages from God is that which tells people to always fear God: "*To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. We have indeed enjoined those who were granted revelations before your time, as well as yourselves, to always be God fearing.*" (Verse 131)

The One who has real power is the one to be feared. Fearing Him ensures purity of motives and a keenness to implement His constitution and system with all its details.

The unbelievers are shown their insignificance in the universe which belongs to God. In His esteem, they count for little. He is able to replace them with others: "*If you disbelieve, know that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is Self-Sufficient, Praiseworthy. And to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is your All-Sufficient Guardian.*" (Verses 131-2) As God enjoins them to be God-fearing, He makes it clear that their refusal to turn their back on His admonition will not affect Him in the least. Their disbelief will not decrease His kingdom in any way, for: "*To God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth... If He so wills, He can take you, mankind, and replace you by others. This He surely has the power to do.*" (Verses 132-3) Moreover, He is able to substitute them for some other people or creature. He only enjoins them to fear Him for their own sake and for their own interest.

Islam states very clearly that man has a special position of honour with God, which elevates him over everything in the universe. Equally, Islam states that man sinks to abject depths when he disbelieves, transgresses, tyrannises and tries to usurp God's power. These are two opposite situations.

These comments are concluded with a reminder to those who are keen on having

a share of the riches of this life that God's grace is far greater and more bounteous than that. He can give rewards in this life and in the life to come. Those who limit their hopes and ambitions to this world only, can look far beyond to a greater reward in the hereafter which may he given in addition to what God grants them in this life: *"If anyone desires the rewards of this world, let him remember that with God are the rewards of this world and those of the life to come. God is indeed All-Hearing, All-Seeing."* (Verse 134)

It is indeed stupid and highly unbecoming of man to confine himself and his ambitions to this life only when he is able to seek and look forward to God's grace in both this life and the life to come. Enjoyment of both is guaranteed by implementing the well-integrated Islamic way of life which combines practicality with idealism. He is indeed capable of achieving the glory of human life, with his feet on the ground and his spirit in heaven. He moves about and conducts his affairs according to the rules which govern the earth while, at the same time, looking up to the sublime.

As these comments relate detailed Islamic legislations to God's law governing the whole of life, they also point to the great importance Islam assigns to the family. Otherwise, God would not have related family matters to these great issues and would not have emphasised the need to fear Him in all religions. God is able to replace erring people with others who follow His system and implement His law. This is a frightful prospect for human beings. Its statement here is indicative of the seriousness God attaches to the family and its importance in the code He has laid down for human life.

13
The Reality of Hypocrisy

۞ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُونُواْ قَوَّٰمِينَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ شُهَدَآءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ ٱلْوَٰلِدَيْنِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَٱللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ۖ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُواْ ٱلْهَوَىٰٓ أَن تَعْدِلُواْ ۚ وَإِن تَلْوُۥٓاْ أَوْ تُعْرِضُواْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١٣٥﴾

Believers! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kin. Whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over [the claims of] either of them. Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice. If you distort [the truth] or decline to do justice, then [know that] God is indeed aware of all that you do. (135)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ ءَامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَٱلْكِتَـٰبِ ٱلَّذِى نَزَّلَ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَٱلْكِتَـٰبِ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ مِن قَبْلُ ۚ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱللَّهِ وَمَلَـٰٓئِكَتِهِۦ وَكُتُبِهِۦ وَرُسُلِهِۦ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَـٰلًۢا بَعِيدًا ﴿١٣٦﴾

Believers! Do believe in God and His Messenger, and in the Book which He has bestowed from on high upon His Messenger, and in the Book which He sent down in earlier times. Anyone who denies God, His angels, His revealed books, His messengers, and the Last Day has indeed gone far astray. (136)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ثُمَّ كَفَرُواْ ثُمَّ ءَامَنُواْ ثُمَّ كَفَرُواْ ثُمَّ ٱزْدَادُواْ كُفْرًا لَّمْ يَكُنِ ٱللَّهُ لِيَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ وَلَا لِيَهْدِيَهُمْ سَبِيلًۢا ﴿١٣٧﴾

Those who come to believe, then reject faith, and again come to believe, and again reject the faith, and thereafter grow hardened in their disbelief, God will not forgive them, nor will He guide them in anyway. (137)

بَشِّرِ ٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ بِأَنَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٣٨﴾

Happily announce to the hypocrites that grievous suffering awaits them. (138)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ أَوْلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۚ أَيَبْتَغُونَ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ ٱلْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا ﴿١٣٩﴾

They are those who take unbelievers for their allies in preference to believers. Is it honour they seek among them? Indeed all honour belongs to God. (139)

وَقَدْ نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِى ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ أَنْ إِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ ءَايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ يُكْفَرُ بِهَا وَيُسْتَهْزَأُ بِهَا فَلَا تَقْعُدُوا۟ مَعَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يَخُوضُوا۟ فِى حَدِيثٍ غَيْرِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّكُمْ إِذًا مِّثْلُهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ جَامِعُ ٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ وَٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ فِى جَهَنَّمَ جَمِيعًا ﴿١٤٠﴾

Already has He enjoined upon you in this Book that whenever you hear people deny the truth of God's revelations and mock at them, you shall avoid their company until they talk on some other theme; or else, you will indeed become like them. Indeed, God will gather both the hypocrites and the unbelievers together in hell. (140)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَرَبَّصُونَ بِكُمْ فَإِن كَانَ لَكُمْ فَتْحٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ قَالُوٓا۟ أَلَمْ نَكُن مَّعَكُمْ وَإِن كَانَ لِلْكَـٰفِرِينَ نَصِيبٌ قَالُوٓا۟ أَلَمْ نَسْتَحْوِذْ عَلَيْكُمْ وَنَمْنَعْكُم مِّنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۚ فَٱللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ ۗ وَلَن يَجْعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لِلْكَـٰفِرِينَ عَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٤١﴾

[Hypocrites are] those who wait and watch what happens to you: if triumph comes to you from God, they say: "Were we not on your side?" But if the unbelievers gain a success, they say [to them]: "Have we not earned your affection by defending you against those believers?" It is God who will judge between you all on the Day of Resurrection. Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers. (141)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ يُخَـٰدِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَهُوَ خَـٰدِعُهُمْ وَإِذَا قَامُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ قَامُوا۟ كُسَالَىٰ يُرَآءُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ وَلَا يَذْكُرُونَ

The hypocrites seek to deceive God, the while it is He who causes them to be deceived [by themselves]. When they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen by people, remembering God but seldom,

ٱللَّهَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٤٢﴾

(142)

مُّذَبۡذَبِينَ بَيۡنَ ذَٰلِكَ لَآ إِلَىٰ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَلَآ إِلَىٰ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِۚ وَمَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُۥ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٤٣﴾

wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor to those. For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way. (143)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّخِذُواْ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ أَوۡلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۚ أَتُرِيدُونَ أَن تَجۡعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ سُلۡطَٰنٗا مُّبِينًا ﴿١٤٤﴾

Believers! Do not take the unbelievers for your allies in preference to the believers. Do you want to place before God a manifest proof against yourselves? (144)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ فِي ٱلدَّرۡكِ ٱلۡأَسۡفَلِ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِ وَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُمۡ نَصِيرًا ﴿١٤٥﴾

The hypocrites will be in the lowest depth of the fire, and you will find none who can give them support. (145)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ تَابُواْ وَأَصۡلَحُواْ وَٱعۡتَصَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَأَخۡلَصُواْ دِينَهُمۡ لِلَّهِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ مَعَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۖ وَسَوۡفَ يُؤۡتِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ أَجۡرًا عَظِيمٗا ﴿١٤٦﴾

Excepted shall be those who repent, live righteously, hold fast to God, and are more sincere in their faith in God. These shall be with the believers. God will in time grant a splendid reward for the believers. (146)

مَّا يَفۡعَلُ ٱللَّهُ بِعَذَابِكُمۡ إِن شَكَرۡتُمۡ وَءَامَنتُمۡۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ شَاكِرًا عَلِيمًا ﴿١٤٧﴾

What can God gain by your punishment, if you are grateful and you believe? God is always responsive to gratitude, All-Knowing. (147)

Overview

This passage provides another module in the process of the Muslim community's education to achieve the status God has assigned to it. He, Himself, describes it as "the best community ever raised for mankind." At the same time, it is part of the consistent line of action aiming to educate the human soul and cure it of all deviation

and error. It is a line determined by God, the Creator of the human soul who knows its complexity, nature, desires, aspirations, ability and potential.

This module outlines the basic education process which applies to all generations, and which aims to elevate people from whatever standard they may be at to the heights Islam wants mankind to achieve. At the same time, it gives us a picture of the prevailing situation of the first Muslim community addressed by the Qur'ān. It gives a true image of that community with all its human aspects, including its strengths and weaknesses, traces of their past days of *ignorance* and their instinctive feelings. It shows the Islamic method of treating and strengthening the human soul, and encouraging it to stick to the truth of Islam, with all that involves of hard work and sacrifice.

The passage begins with an address to the Muslim community to fulfil the duties its role implies. This means to uphold absolute justice, attaining an ideal standard never before achieved in history except through this Muslim community. It is a standard of justice which requires the community to deal directly with God, disregarding every emotion, prejudice or interest, including what is often called community or national interests. Its only aim is to maintain the God- fearing path which leads to earning His pleasure. It is the sort of justice of which the *sūrah* had already given an example of in the case of the wrongly accused Jew related in Chapter 10.

As God makes it clear that the believers are to maintain justice in this particular fashion, He knows the hard efforts required to achieve it. People have to overcome their natural weaknesses, their own selfishness, feelings towards relatives, the weak, the strong, the poor, the rich, parents and close relatives, and overcome their own friendships and hostilities. He certainly knows the difficulties involved, as human beings attempt to scale great heights, starting from a fine and slippery surface, and having no equipment other than their bond with God.

Another appeal to them is a renewed call to believe in all the constituent parts of complete faith, which means to believe in God, His angels, revealed books, messengers and the Day of Judgement. Each one of these constituents makes its own contribution to the complete faith and the Islamic concept of life. It is a concept superior to all concepts humanity has ever known and leads to all aspects of moral, social and organisational superiority as achieved by the first Muslim community. The seeds of such superiority are always there for any community of believers to achieve. It only needs to fulfil the requirements of the Islamic concept of life. Once it has done this, it will benefit from God's promise stated in this passage: "*Never will God allow the unbelievers a way (to win a complete triumph] over the believers.*" (Verse 141)

The passage then launches a strong campaign against the hypocrites, using a

variety of tools. The hypocrites are those who continued with their hypocrisy as well as those who declared their unbelief after claiming to have accepted Islam. It describes the nature of hypocrisy, painting the ugly sights of what was perpetrated within the Muslim community. They would warmly welcome the believers when they were victorious, but when victory went the way of the unbelievers, the hypocrites would try to impress on them that they themselves, [i.e. the hypocrites], had ensured that victory. They approached prayer very reluctantly, putting on a show of piety. They vacillated from one side to another, and their vacillation was indicative of their shiftiness.

Included within this campaign are a number of directives and cautions addressed to the believers, which indicates the extent of the damage the hypocrites caused. From these we can understand how large a force the hypocrites represented and how far they could penetrate into the Muslim community and affect its overall situation. We should remember that this campaign had to take into consideration the realities of the Muslim community's situation at the time as also the need to take it by the hand and isolate it from the hypocrites. Hence, the believers are directed to avoid the hypocrites' social gatherings where the latter often ridiculed God's revelations stating that they did not believe in them. The believers were not commanded to impose a direct and complete boycott of the hypocrites. This indicates that there was a strong front of hypocrites able to move within the Muslim community in a way that rendered such a boycott either impractical or impossible.

Also included in this campaign are a number of cautions addressed to the believers, explaining the symptoms and preludes of hypocrisy so that they may avoid these. Most important among these are befriending the unbelievers, seeking their support and hoping to achieve honour through them. The *sūrah* makes it clear to the believers that all honour belongs to God, and that He will not allow the unbelievers to achieve a complete victory over the believers, as long as they fulfil their commitments. The passage also paints a horrid picture of the hypocrites both in this life and in the life to come, making it clear that they occupy the lowest position in hell.

All these directives and cautions are indicative of the Islamic method of treating people and situations. It does so within the prevailing circumstances and the abilities of the community, hoping to eventually replace it with a totally new situation. They also give us a glimpse of the Muslim community's situation and its attitude towards the unbelievers and the hypocrites who were in close collaboration against Islam.

From all this we gather a clear idea of the nature of the battle which the Muslim community had to fight under the guidance of the Qur'ān, and the methods the Qur'ān uses to provide such guidance for its followers. This is a continuing battle between faith and unfaith in all generations. The personalities and the methods of the

enemy may change, but their nature and standpoint never do.

All this explains the truth of the book, the Qur'ān, and its role in leading the Muslim community. This does not apply only to the past, for the Qur'ān was not revealed for one generation in preference to another. It is a revelation that provides guidance to the Muslim community in all ages and generations.

At the end of this passage we have a remarkable statement asserting that God has nothing to gain by tormenting His creatures. He does not require anything from them apart from to believe and be grateful. In no way does He need their faith or gratitude, but when they do demonstrate this, they stand to benefit a great deal and to improve their overall lives and conditions. Moreover, they will be prepared for the life to come, with the pure happiness they will experience there. However, should they reject the faith and sink into error, they only prepare themselves for punishment in hell, where the hypocrites are to be found in its lowest depths.

Justice in All Situations

> *Believers! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kin. Whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over [the claims of] either of them. Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice. If you distort [the truth] or decline to do justice, then [know that] God is indeed aware of all that you do.* (Verse 135)

This is an address to the believers, using their new and unique status which ensures a true rebirth of their community. Indeed, they have enjoyed a rebirth of souls, principles, concepts and goals. They have been given a new trust and assigned a new task which places them as mankind's leaders and requires them to maintain justice among all people. Hence, addressing them by the very fact of their being believers is of special importance. It is because they are believers that they are being prepared to fulfil the duties commensurate with this greatest of trusts.

Here we see the wise Qur'ānic method of educating the Muslim community in full operation, preparing the addressees for their difficult duties: "*Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kin. Whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over [the claims of] either of them.*" (Verse 135) The trust they have been assigned is to maintain justice, in its absolute sense, in every situation. It is the sort of fairness which prevents aggression and oppression anywhere on earth. It guarantees justice between people, giving everyone, Muslim or non-Muslim, their rights. In their entitlement to justice, all people, believers and unbelievers, are equal in God's sight, as we have seen in the incident involving the Jewish man in Madinah. Similarly, relative and stranger, friend and foe, poor and rich are treated with

absolute equality.

"*Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God.*" (Verse 135) This is something to be done, dealing directly with God and for His sake. It is not for the sake of anyone else for or against whom a testimony is given. Nor is it to serve the interests of any individual, group or community. It is not something that takes into account the circumstances of any particular case. It is a testimony given for God's sake, free of any desire, prejudice, interest or consideration.

"*Even though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kin.*" (Verse 135) At this point, the Qur'ānic method of education tries to place a person firstly in opposition to himself and secondly against his feelings towards his parents and kin. This is a very difficult task, much more difficult than stating it verbally or understanding its significance theoretically. To put this into practice is totally different from having a mental picture of what it involves. It is only the person who tries to do it practically that can understand its difficulty. Nevertheless, the Qur'ānic method prepares the hearts of believers for this hard task, because it must be put into effect: the rule must be stated and human individuals must abide by it.

The Qur'ān also puts a person in opposition to his natural and social feelings. This when the person against whom one testifies is poor, claims our sympathy and help in his testimony or when his social background inherited from earlier days encourages witnesses to speak against him. The same applies in reverse. When a person involved is rich, social considerations or his own arrogance or other behaviour may encourage a testimony for or against him. All such feelings have their pull when encountered in reality. The Qur'ān wants us to face all such feelings as it prepares us to stand against ourselves or our own parents and relatives.

"*Whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over [the claims of] either of them.*" (Verse 135) It is a hard task, just as we have said, time and again. When Islam pushed the believers to scale those heights, it produced in reality a miraculous situation, one which can never be fulfilled except under this magnificent Divine system.

"*Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice.*" (Verse 135) Desires are of different types, some of which have already been mentioned. Love of oneself, one's immediate family and other relatives is one type of desire, as is sympathy with a poor person when giving testimony or arbitrating. Being courteous or hostile to a rich person is another type of desire. In a situation of being a witness or making judgement, taking sides with one's clan, tribe, community, nation or motherland is one desire, as is taking sides against one's enemies, even though they are enemies to our faith. Desires have many other forms and God prohibits that we be influenced by any one of them in such a way that we deviate from truth and justice.

The verse concludes with a clear warning against twisting the truth in one's testimony: "*If you distort [the truth] or decline to do justice, then [know that] God is indeed aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 135) It is sufficient for a believer to remember that God

sees what he does to realise the seriousness of this warning and to tremble at what it means. We must not forget that this is addressed to people who really do believe.

`Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah was sent by the Prophet to Khaybar to estimate the produce of its land. The Prophet had concluded arrangements with its people by which they would continue to cultivate the land there in return for half its produce. The other half belonged to the Muslims in Madinah. The Jews in Khaybar tried to bribe Ibn Rawāĥah in order that he should give them a favourable estimate. He said to them: "I have come to you from the person whom I love most. On the other hand, I dislike you more than I dislike your equivalent number of monkeys and pigs. Yet my love of him and hatred of you will not cause me to be unfair to you." They said: "It is on the basis of such fairness that the heavens and earth are set to prosper."

He was a man who had completed his education in the Prophet's school and under his own supervision, following that unique Divine curriculum. He was simply a human being who went through that hardest of experiences completing it successfully. He achieved, like many others, the miracle that is possible only through that sort of education.

Centuries then passed by after that special period in human history. Libraries are now the home of numerous books on all aspects of the law. Life is full of judicial systems, legal procedures and technicalities. Much has been said about justice, and many volumes speak about lengthy legal procedures. Theories, administrative authorities and systems of different types are available to regulate all this. But the proper experience of real justice, seeing it in practice and achieving its highest level has only been possible under the Islamic approach and practical system. It was seen first during that special period when it was at its zenith. It was then fulfilled by successive generations in the land where Islam was implemented, by hearts committed to this faith and through individuals and communities living under Islam and according to its teachings.

This fact must be truly appreciated by those who admire modern legal processes and procedures and sophisticated legal systems. They often think that all this is more conducive to achieving justice than under the simple system of that unique period witnessed many centuries ago. They feel that today's procedures are tighter and better controlled than that distant simple form. But all this is a myth entertained by those who are often deceived by magnitude and form. They do not realise the truth that it was only the Divine system that achieved that highest grade of fairness, despite the simplicity of its system and procedure. It is the only system that can today achieve the same high standard, taking into consideration all that has been introduced of new systems and procedures.

We do not mean that we need to dismantle modern legal systems. What we should know is that it is not the system that creates justice, but the spirit behind the system, whatever form and shape it may take and regardless of the time and place where it is applied.

A Call to Believers to Believe

"*Believers! Do believe in God and His Messenger, and in the Book which He has bestowed from on high upon His Messenger, and in the Book which He sent down in earlier times. Anyone who denies God, His angels, His revealed books, His messengers, and the Last Day has indeed gone far astray.*" (Verse 136) This is the second address made in this passage to the believers, outlining their roles and duties, and in their capacity which distinguishes them from all those around them. It also provides a link for them with the source from which they derive strength and receive help in fulfilling their tasks.

"*Believers! Do believe in God and His Messenger, and in the Book which He has bestowed from on high upon His Messenger, and in the Book which He sent down in earlier times.*" (Verse 136) This is an outline of the details in which the believers must believe. Thus, it formulates the basic Islamic concept of faith. It requires first a belief in God and His Messenger. It provides a bond between the believers and their Lord who created them and sent them someone to guide them to Him. This being the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). It also includes belief in his message and accepting all that he conveys to us as part of the Divine message.

This concept of faith also requires belief in the Book God has bestowed on his Messenger. This clearly shows the Muslims the system of life God has chosen for them, all the details of which are contained in this book. It also requires its full implementation, since it comes from the same source and follows the same lines. It is not possible to classify some of it as more deserving of acceptance or implementation. It is all one.

Similarly, there is a requirement to believe in the Book that was revealed earlier, since all revelations come from the same source, who is God Himself. They also have the same basis, namely, submission to God only, attributing Godhead and all its attributes to Him alone, acknowledging His system as the only one to be obeyed and implemented in human life. This unanimity of all books is the natural result of the fact that all these books were, in their original, undistorted form, revealed by God. The Divine approach and method are the same. What He wants for mankind has always been the same. All other systems lead to error while the Divine system will always lead to God's pleasure.

Belief in the whole "Book", in the sense that all Divine revelations are in essence one Book, is a special characteristic applicable only to the Muslim nation. The concept Islam outlines of God as the only Lord, His one system, approach and method are the only ones that fit with the truth of Godhead. They are also consistent with the fact that all humanity is the same, the fact that truth is one and that whatever is at variance with truth is deviant and erroneous.

Having made clear the command to believe, the Qur'ānic verse warns those who do not believe in all the components of faith. It outlines these again to make them clear before mentioning any punishment for disbelief. "*Anyone who denies God, His angels, His revealed books, His messengers, and the Last Day has indeed gone far astray.*" (Verse 136) The first order in this verse mentions the need to believe in God, His

books and messengers, but does not mention belief in the angels. It is well known that God's books mention the angels and the Day of Judgement. Hence, when a person believes in these books, he or she is bound to believe in the angels and in the Day of Judgement. But the second order mentions this explicitly because it is an order spelling out punishment for failure to comply. Hence, a clear statement of all components is perfectly in order.

The expression of going far astray very often indicates a situation where a person is so grossly in error that there is little or no hope that he will ever be guided again. To believe in God is something deeply inherent in human nature. It moves us naturally to achieve it. Hence, a person who disbelieves in God, and in consequence disbelieves in His angels, books, messengers and in the Day of Judgement, is one whose nature has been so corrupted that all hope of a return to Divine guidance is practically lost.

Vacillation Between Belief and Disbelief

After this double address to the believers, the *sūrah* begins its hard campaign against hypocrisy and the hypocrites, starting with a description of a certain condition pertaining to them at the time. It describes the attitude of some of them, which is nearest the attitude of disbelievers: "*Those who come to believe, then reject faith, and again come to believe, and again reject the faith, and thereafter grow hardened in their disbelief God will not forgive them, nor will He guide them in any way*" (Verse 137)

When belief in God is preceded by disbelief, this earlier state is erased by the latter one and the person concerned is forgiven whatever he did prior to his acceptance of faith. It is understandable though that one who has never seen the light can sink further into the darkness. But to disbelieve after having known faith and accepted it, and to do it time and time again, is the most cardinal of sins. It cannot be justified or forgiven on any account. Disbelief is a thick curtain. When it is dropped, nature establishes its links with the Creator. The lost one is returned to the party, the plant is watered anew and the soul experiences a sweet taste that it never forgets; that is, the sweetness of faith. Hence, those who revert to disbelief, time and again, after having experienced faith are in deliberate defiance of their nature. By choice, they prefer to go deep into error. Hence, it is only fair that God should never forgive them or provide them with any guidance. It is they who, having known the way and travelled along it, decided to be misguided, choosing darkness after having seen the light.

Unless a person is dedicated in his following of God's guidance, he will never be free of the pressures of worldly situations, values, needs, interests and greed, or be unencumbered by aspirations and temptations. Nor will he feel the honour, dignity and exaltation experienced by a heart full of faith when he stands in opposition to

worldly values, powers and authority or confronts unfriendly people, events and situations.

This is where the seed of hypocrisy begins to germinate. In essence, hypocrisy signifies weakness to hold on to the truth when confronting falsehood. Such a weakness is a result of fear and temptation, other than fearing God and hoping for His reward. It is the result of holding on to what may be established in isolation from the Divine system of life.

Here we see a clear relationship between talking about faith and giving a truthful testimony for God's sake on the one hand and talking about hypocrisy on the other. This is added to the overall occasion provided by the central theme of the *sūrah,* which is the education of the Muslim community on the basis of the Islamic system, removing the remaining traces of *ignorance,* mobilising the believers against their human weaknesses, and leading the community in its battle against the unbelievers and the hypocrites. In this general objective, the line of the *sūrah is* evident and consistent from start to finish.

After the image given in this verse of a group of hypocrites declaring their belief then going back on it, only to declare again that they believe before denying the faith once more and then growing harder in their disbelief, the rest of the passage is devoted to a discussion of hypocrisy and the hypocrites. It is here that the campaign against hypocrisy starts, utilising different ways and means worthy of careful examination and study. This will show us how this Divine system works in practice, producing its effects on people and their hearts.

> *Happily announce to the hypocrites that grievous suffering awaits them. They are those who take unbelievers for their allies in preference to believers. Is it honour they seek among them? Indeed all honour belongs to God. Already has He enjoined upon you in this Book that whenever you hear people deny the truth of God's revelations and mock at them, you shall avoid their company until they talk on some other theme; or else, you will indeed become like them. Indeed, God will gather both the hypocrites and the unbelievers together in hell. [Hypocrites are] those who wait and watch what happens to you: if triumph comes to you from God, they say: "Were we not on your side?" But if the unbelievers gain a success, they say [to them]: `Have we not earned your affection by defending you against those believers?" It is God who will judge between you all on the Day of Resurrection. Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers. The hypocrites seek to deceive God, the while it is He who causes them to be deceived [by themselves]. When they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen by people, remembering God but seldom, wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor to those. For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way.* (Verses 138-43)

True Submission, True Freedom

The campaign begins with clear derision, which appears by using a phrase indicating a happy announcement instead of a warning, and in considering grievous suffering something to welcome like a very happy piece of news. The reasons that bring about such grievous suffering are then outlined. These are their close friendship with the non-believers in preference to the believers, their foul thinking of God and their misguided concept of the source of honour: "*Happily announce to the hypocrites that grievous suffering awaits them. They are those who take unbelievers for their allies in preference to believers. Is it honour they seek among them? Indeed all honour belongs to God.*" (Verses 138-139)

The unbelievers mentioned here are, most probably, the Jews whom the hypocrites had befriended, and together they plotted all types of evil schemes against the believers. God Almighty asks disapprovingly why they take unbelievers for their allies when they profess to be believers? Why do they place themselves in such an untenable situation? Do they seek to receive honour and power from the unbelievers? All honour is the property of God alone. No one will get any of it unless he seeks it from Him and aspires to His protection.

Thus, the first point exposes the nature of the hypocrites and their first characteristic, which is their alliance with the unbelievers in preference to the believers. It also shows their lack of understanding of the balance of power. The unbelievers have no honour or might to impart to others as the hypocrites believe. It declares that all honour belongs to God, and it is to be sought from Him alone.

People should understand that they have only one source of support. When they seek this, they will find honour and protection. They will be able to feel their dignity and freedom. Otherwise, they will be enslaved by other values, traditions, people and fears. There will be none to protect them from such subjugation. On the other hand, submission to God alone imparts a true feeling of dignity and honour which frees them from all the humiliation which is attendant on submission to any other source or power. The choice is open for us all to make.

No one seeks honour from someone other than God and remains a believer. No one turns to God's enemies for support, strength and glory if he truly believes in God. Some people in our midst who claim to be Muslim and have Muslim names seek support from God's worst sworn enemies on earth. They should reflect on what the Qur'ān says, if they truly want to be Muslims. Otherwise, they should know that God does not stand in need of anyone.

A correlative of seeking honour from the unbelievers and making alliances with them in preference to the believers is that feeling of affinity to earlier generations who lived as unbelievers, holding this tie of ancestry as being of ongoing importance

to the present Muslim generation. This we see today when people ignorantly boast about the honour they feel as descendants of the Pharaohs, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Babylonians and the pagan tribes of Arabia. Imām Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal reports that the Prophet says: "Whoever claims descent of nine unbelieving forefathers, seeking honour and pride, will be the tenth with them in hell." What we should know is that, from the Islamic point of view, the bond that blends a community is faith. The nation comprises all believers in God, from the beginning of history, in all places and across all generations. Nation, in Islam, consists of neither a succession of generations nor the inhabitants of a geographical area in a particular generation.

Ridiculing God's Words

The first degree of hypocrisy is when a believer sits with other people and keeps quiet when he hears God's revelations being denied and ridiculed. He may call that tolerance, or cunning, or broad-mindedness, or acceptance of freedom of thought, or whatever! In fact it is nothing but defeatism working within him. At first he may delude himself, ashamed to acknowledge his humiliating weakness.

Standing up to defend God's faith and revelation is the mark of true faith. When the willingness to do that weakens, everything else collapses and gets swept away. That anger for God's sake is deliberately suppressed at first, but then it weakens and dies away. A person who hears his faith being ridiculed by others has the choice to either stand up in defence of his faith or leave that place altogether. To sit down, turn a blind eye and keep quiet is the first stage of defeat. This is, indeed, the bridge of hypocrisy which carries a person from faith to disbelief.

Some Muslims in Madinah attended the gatherings of influential hypocrites. The Qur'ān alerts those believers to the fact that attending such gatherings and keeping quiet therein is the first sign of defeatism. The Qur'ān wanted to spare the Muslims that stage, but the prevailing circumstances did not allow that they should be ordered to boycott all these gatherings immediately. Hence, they were ordered to boycott them when they heard God's revelations being denied and ridiculed. Otherwise, to sit there would be hypocrisy with its horrible outcome: *"Already has He enjoined upon you in this Book that whenever you hear people deny the truth of God's revelations and mock at them, you shall avoid their company until they talk on some other theme; or else, you will indeed become like them. Indeed, God will gather both the hypocrites and the unbelievers together in hell."* (Verse 140)

This verse refers to an earlier revelation in the Qur'ān itself. The reference is to a verse in *Sūrah* 6, entitled Cattle, which may be rendered in translation as follows: *"Whenever you meet people who indulge in [blasphemous] talk about Our revelations, turn*

your back upon them until they begin to talk of other things."[15] (6: 68)

The threat here is enough to make a believer tremble with dread: "*or else, you will indeed become like them*". (Verse 140) The prospect held out as the result of such friendship with those who ridicule God's revelations is so fearful that it does not allow for any further hesitation: "*Indeed, God will gather both the hypocrites and the unbelievers together in hell."* (Verse 140)

The prohibition is limited to attending gatherings where God's revelations are denied and ridiculed. It does not go further than that so as to impose a total ban on all relations with the hypocrites. This is indicative of the nature of the period when it was revealed and the stage at which the Muslim community was at the time. This could be repeated in later generations and in other environments. It also indicates that it is part of the nature of the Islamic system to move gradually, taking account of the remaining ties, existing feelings and prevailing circumstances, while moving steadily to its ultimate objective of a complete change of situation.

Characteristics of the Hypocrites

The *sūrah* moves on to describe the distinctive features of the hypocrites, painting a revolting image of them as they take one appearance when they meet the Muslims and change it completely when they are with the non-believers. They try to hold the stick from the middle, shifting ground like stealthy snakes and horrid worms: *"[Hypocrites are] those who wait and watch what happens to you: if triumph comes to you from God, they say: "Were we not on your side?" But if the unbelievers gain a success, they say [to them]: "Have we not earned your affection by defending you against those believers?" It is God who will judge between you all on the Day of Resurrection. Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers."* (Verse 141)

The image drawn here is very ugly, showing first the hatred the hypocrites harbour towards the Muslim community and the fact that they are always on the look out for an opportunity when they can harm the Muslims. At the same time, they pretend to be very friendly towards the Muslims, particularly when they are victorious. They even come up with the rhetorical question, *"Were we not on your side?"* What they mean is that they were with them in the battle. Indeed, they sometimes went out with the Muslim army, trying to weaken the resolve of the fighters and create discord in their ranks. Or they may mean to say simply that they were giving them mental support and providing them with much needed backing in the rear.

[15] Although this verse occurs in a later *sūrah* in the Qur'ān, it was revealed earlier. *Sūrah* 6 was revealed in Makkah, several years before the revelation of *Sūrah* 4, which is the subject matter of this volume. We will tackle *Sūrah* 6 in Volume V, God willing.

"But if the unbelievers gain a success, they say [to them]: `Have we not earned your affection by defending you against those believers?" (Verse 141) Saying so, they mean that they gave the non-believers active support, ensuring that their back was well protected, trying at the same time to weaken the Muslim front. Thus, do they shift their ground like snakes. In their heart there is poison, and on their tongues there is hypocrisy. Yet they are weak, portraying a sickening image that fills any true believer with disgust. Such a portrait indicates one of the ways the Qur'ān uses to educate believers.

The policy the Prophet followed with regard to the hypocrites, as directed by God, was to overlook their actions and turn away from them, while warning the believers as to their designs. This was a first stage towards the overall goal of liquidating that hateful front. However, in line with this policy, the Qur'ān leaves judgement in their case to the hereafter when they will be completely exposed and receive their fair punishment: *"It is God who will judge between you all on the Day of Resurrection."* (Verse 141) On that day there will be no room for evil scheming or conspiracy. Nor will there be a chance of concealing what people truly feel.

The believers are then reassured by a definite promise from God that all such stealthy scheming and all conspiratorial activities in collaboration with the non-believers will in no way change the balance of power. God will not allow the non-believers to overpower the believers: *"Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers."* (Verse 141)

As regards the meaning of this statement a report suggests that it applies to the Day of Resurrection when God will judge between the Muslims and the hypocrites. At that point, the non-believers have no means of scoring a triumph against the believers. Another report suggests that the statement applies in this life, whereby God will never give the unbelievers a chance to eradicate the believers, although they may at times score a victory against the Muslims in some battles.

A Promise That Will Never Fail

It is perhaps more accurate to read the statement as applicable to both this life and the life to come, because it includes nothing to limit its application one way or the other. As for the life to come, the question does not need any new emphasis. However, in this life, appearances may indicate that this is not the case. But these are deceptive appearances which need to be carefully examined. The statement provides a definite promise and a clear, permanent ruling: whenever the truth of faith is firmly established in believers' hearts so as to become their way of life, system of government, and when it manifests itself in their dedication to God's cause in all respects, and when they address their worship to God in all matters, large and small,

then God will not allow the unbelievers to score a triumph over them. This is a fact that has never been breached on any occasion in Islamic history.

Absolutely confident of the truth of God's promise, I state that the believers were never defeated in any engagement in their long history, and will never be defeated in the future, unless there is a flaw in their faith. This could be in thought or action. Part of true faith is to take careful precautions and to ensure proper preparedness to strive as hard as need be for God's cause and under His banner, with complete dedication. Temporary defeat will occur only in proportion to the flaw in the believers' faith. Victory will be sure to return when true faith returns.

If we take the example of the Battle of Uĥud, we find a gaping flaw manifesting itself in disobedience of the Prophet's orders and in yielding to the temptation of loot. In the Battle of Ĥunayn, the flaw was manifest in the Muslims' being proud of their numbers, feeling their own strength and forgetting the true source of power. If we study every occasion in Muslim history when victory was slow in coming, we will find a flaw in each case, which may or may not be readily identifiable. As for God's promise, it comes true at all times.

It is true that the believers may be subjected to a trial, but a trial has a definite purpose, which is to make them sure of true faith and to perfect it in their hearts so as to allow it to be reflected in their actions. This is what happened in Uĥud as related in *Sūrah* 3 (see Volume II, pp. 152-260). When the truth of faith has been tested and perfected, victory is certain to come; for God's promise never fails.

However, when I refer to defeat, I have in mind something much wider than the result of a battle. I am speaking of spiritual defeat and weakened resolve. Defeat in a military engagement should not be viewed as a complete defeat unless it leads to despair and inactivity. If, on the other hand, it awakens people, rekindles their resolve, helps them identify their likely slips and gives them a true vision of the nature of their faith and the battle they are fighting, then such a defeat should be viewed as the prelude to victory, even though it may be slow in coming.

"Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers." (Verse 141) When the Qur'ān makes this very clear, it emphasises that the believing spirit will always triumph and the ideology of faith will dominate. The Qur'ān calls upon the Muslims to perfect the truth of faith in their minds, giving it full practical effect in their lives. They must not rely totally on names and labels, because victory is never achieved by names hoisted high, but by the facts they represent. All that we need to ensure victory at any time or place is to ensure that faith is pure and complete in our hearts, and that it is put to practical effect in our lives. It is part of true faith to be prepared with every available means of strength and to seek our honour only through God.

This definite promise from God is in full agreement with the true nature of both faith and disbelief. Faith creates a strong bond with the absolute power in the universe, which will never weaken or disappear. Disbelief, on the other hand, means a break with that power and remaining isolated from it. It is not possible for a limited, isolated and exhaustible power to triumph over one that has a strong bond with the source of power throughout the universe.

However, we should make a clear distinction between the truth of faith and its appearances. The truth of faith is a real power as constant as all universal laws. It influences the human soul and all its actions and activities. It is a great, powerful truth, one which is certain to overcome the truth of disbelief whenever the two are in confrontation. But when faith is no more than an appearance, then the truth of disbelief will overcome it, if it is honest to its nature and works within its domain. The truth of anything is stronger than the appearance of anything else, even though the first is that of disbelief and the second is an appearance of faith.

The basic rule of the battle to overcome falsehood is to establish the truth. When the truth comes into being, with all its constituent elements and all its force, the result of the battle between it and falsehood is a foregone conclusion. Falsehood may appear to be awesome, extremely powerful, but all this is deceptive. *"We hurl the truth over falsehood, and it crushes the latter. Soon it withers away."* (21: 18) *"Never will God allow the unbelievers a way [to win a complete triumph] over the believers."* (Verse 141)

Whom Do They Deceive?

The *sūrah* moves on to paint another ugly picture of the hypocrites, adding further facts that show their designs to be hollow. It reiterates God's warnings to them: *"The hypocrites seek to deceive God, the while it is He who causes them to be deceived [by themselves]. When they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen by people, remembering God but seldom, wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor to those. For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way."* (Verses 142-143)

These verses again touch believing hearts, which will undoubtedly feel disgust with people who try to deceive God. A believer knows that God, limitless is He in His glory, cannot be deceived. How could that be possible when He knows the innermost secrets of people's hearts and what is even more deeply concealed. Believers realise that a person who tries to deceive God must have within him a great measure of evil, ignorance and naivety. Hence, they are disgusted with such people and look upon them with contempt.

The *sūrah* states that while they try to deceive God, it is indeed He who causes them to be deceived. He simply allows them to travel along their erring way, without alerting them by a calamity that opens their eyes. He leaves them to go along until

they fall into the abyss towards which they aim. Calamities and trials can often be an act of mercy, as they deter people from going further into error, or they alert them to what they have overlooked. Favours and affluence may also be a temptation for those who have been hardened in sin. As a result, they are left without any shock to wake them up to the realities of which they have become oblivious to. They continue in their sinning ways until they reach their most evil destination.

The *sūrah* continues to give images of the hypocrites which add to the believers' contempt: *"When they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen by people, remembering God but seldom."* (Verse 142) They are in no way eager to meet God as believers are, standing up in prayer, feeling close to God and deriving strength from Him. The hypocrites only rise to pray in order to be seen by people. Hence, they are very reluctant as they stand up. To them, prayer is a very hard job. It is not a means for God's remembrance. Indeed, they remember God only rarely. They remember people and try to be seen by them. All this adds up to a horrid picture in the eyes of the believers, increasing their feelings of disgust and contempt. This inevitably widens the gulf between them and the hypocrites, weakening personal and business ties between them. This forms an important stage in the Islamic system of educating the Muslim community, leading to a complete separation between the believers and the hypocrites.

Further lines are added to this ugly picture of the hypocrites, now shown to be *"wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor to those. For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way."* (Verse 143) A wavering, vacillating position without trying to commit oneself to either the camp of the believers or that of the unbelievers excites nothing among the believers but contempt. It suggests that the position of the hypocrites is inherently weak. It is their weakness that makes them unable to take a solid position, openly declaring themselves to belong to this side or that. They are too weak to declare a commitment on the basis of conviction. As a result of this shakiness they deserve not to be helped by God's guidance. Hence, no one is able to provide them with guidance showing them a straight way: *"For him whom God lets go astray you can never find any way."* (Verse 143)

Repentance Opens the Way

At this point when contempt of the hypocrites is at its strongest and believers' feelings of the hypocrites' weakness is at its highest, the believers are warned against taking the same way as the hypocrites. As we have explained, the way the hypocrites follow is that of taking the unbelievers for their allies in preference to the believers. They are warned against God's punishment, and shown the destiny of the hypocrites in the hereafter, which is both fearful and humiliating.

> *Believers! Do not take the unbelievers for your allies in preference to the believers. Do you want to place before God a manifest proof against yourselves? The hypocrites will be in the lowest depth of the fire, and you will find none who can give them support. Excepted shall be those who repent, live righteously, hold fast to God, and are more sincere in their faith in God. These shall be with the believers. God will in time grant a splendid reward for the believers.* (Verses 144-146)

The *sūrah* again addresses the believers by the quality that distinguishes them from all other people and distinguishes their system, method and practices. This is the quality of faith, which makes them responsive, obeying God's orders. As believers, they are warned against following the ways of the hypocrites and against taking the unbelievers for allies. There must have been need in the Muslim community at the time for such an address. Relations were still maintained between some of the Muslims and the Jews in Madinah, or between some Muslims and their pagan relatives in Makkah, even though these may be no more than feelings of affinity. We say that this was the case among some Muslims, because there were others who severed all their relations with the unbelievers, including their parents and children. These followed God's instructions, making faith the only tie of social or family relations.

Those in the Muslim community who still maintained relations with unbelievers in Makkah or Madinah were the ones who needed this reminder that this could be the way to hypocrisy. This lesson is even more effective after the hypocrites have been depicted in their ugly, disgusting guise. Thus, the reminder serves as a warning against exposing themselves to God's punishment: *"Do you want to place before God a manifest proof against yourselves?"* (Verse 144) A believer's heart does not fear anything more than God's displeasure and His punishment. Hence, the warning is put in the form of a question, which is sufficient to have a telling effect on those who believe in God.

Then comes another loud knock to alert the believers' hearts. It is not aimed at them directly, but by implication. It comes in the form of a statement showing the hypocrites fearful and humiliating destiny: *"The hypocrites will be in the lowest depth of the fire, and you will find none who can give them support."* (Verse 145) They are indeed in the lowest depth, which befits their condition in this life, pulling them to the earth, making them stick to it, unable to elevate themselves in any way. That is the gravity of desire, temptation, caution, weakness and faint-heartedness. It is that which pulls them down until they reach a level where they take unbelievers for their allies while at the same time they try to win favour with the believers. That is how they justify their humiliating attitude: *"wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor to those"*. (Verse 143)

In life on earth, these people actually prepared themselves for their humiliating

destiny *"in the lowest depth of the fire";* where they could have no helpers or supporters. In this world, they befriended the unbelievers. How can the unbelievers give them support in the Hereafter?

Having painted this fearful scene, the *sūrah* opens for them the door to safety; that is the door of repentance which is open to anyone who wishes to ensure personal safety: *"Excepted shall be those who repent, live righteously, hold fast to God, and are more sincere in their faith in God. These shall be with the believers. God will in time grant a splendid reward for the believers."* (Verse 146) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān the exception is outlined for those *"who repent and live righteously."* Repentance and righteous living include, by necessity, seeking refuge with God and being sincere in one's faith in God. But these two qualities are specified in this instance because the reference here is to people who wavered, vacillated, resorted to hypocrisy and allied themselves with God's enemies. Hence, it is more fitting to add here, in the context of repentance and righteous living, a specific mention of dedication to God, seeking only His refuge and purging oneself of all wavering and vacillation. This demonstration by the repentant shows more strength and dedication.

That is how they are able then to elevate themselves to the ranks of the believers who seek honour with Him alone, feeling their elevation through faith, and, by the power of faith, rising high above earthly considerations. The reward reserved for the believers and those who join them is well known: *"God will in time grant a splendid reward for the believers."* (Verse 146)

With such varied touches the reality of the hypocrites in Islamic society and their weaknesses are exposed. The believers are warned against following this course of action, which will lead to the same fate. The door to repentance is open so that anyone who wishes to save himself is able to do so.

What Need for Punishment

Finally, we have a remarkable, inspiring and profoundly effective touch. It comes after mentioning terrible punishment and great, splendid reward, in order to make people realise that God has no need to punish anyone. All glory be to Him. He has no axe to grind and He bears no one any grudge. Nor does He need to demonstrate His power and authority in this way. He has no self- interest in inflicting torment on human beings. It is only in pagan legends that we encounter such claims: It is people themselves who receive all benefit when they believe and show their gratitude to God. Hence, they are shown the good prospects that encourage them to believe and be grateful. For God knows the inner thoughts of everyone and He always responds to good action: *"What can God gain by your punishment, if you are grateful and you believe? God is always responsive to gratitude, All-Knowing."* (Verse 147)

Yes, indeed! What would God do with people's punishment should they believe and be grateful? Punishment is only a requital for disbelief and ingratitude. It is also a threat so that people may take heed, accept the faith and demonstrate their gratitude. There is no desire here for inflicting punishment or torment, or for demonstrating power and authority. Far be it from God to entertain any such desire or feeling. It is merely a situation where people should seek protection through faith and gratitude, and then they will receive forgiveness and reward. Beyond that, God is ever responsive, well aware of what His servants feel.

God's response to gratitude has a profound effect on our hearts. It is well known that when God is thankful, then He is pleased with His servant, and His pleasure is given effect through a rich reward. But to say that God, in His glory, is grateful to His servants is profoundly inspiring. If God, the Creator, the Initiator who bestows endless favours and blessings on His creation — if He is grateful for His servants' faith, righteousness and gratitude when He needs nothing of all that, what should be their own attitude? If God Himself is thankful and grateful, what should His servants whom He has created and on whom He bestowed great favours do in return? This is a touch full of inspiration. When we hear it, our hearts tremble with shyness and response.

14
One Religion for All Mankind

۞ لَّا يُحِبُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْجَهْرَ بِٱلسُّوٓءِ مِنَ ٱلْقَوْلِ إِلَّا مَن ظُلِمَ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ سَمِيعًا عَلِيمًا ﴿١٤٨﴾

God does not love evil to be spoken openly unless it be by someone who has been truly wronged. God hears all and knows all. (148)

إِن تُبْدُوا۟ خَيْرًا أَوْ تُخْفُوهُ أَوْ تَعْفُوا۟ عَن سُوٓءٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُوًّا قَدِيرًا ﴿١٤٩﴾

Whether you do good openly or in private, or pardon others for evil (done against you), God indeed absolves sin and He is Powerful. (149)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَن يُفَرِّقُوا۟ بَيْنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ وَيَقُولُونَ نُؤْمِنُ بِبَعْضٍ وَنَكْفُرُ بِبَعْضٍ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَن يَتَّخِذُوا۟ بَيْنَ ذَٰلِكَ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٥٠﴾

Those who deny God and His messengers, and want to make a distinction between [belief in] God and [belief in] His messengers, and say: "We believe in some but we deny others", and want to pursue a path in- between (150)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ حَقًّا ۚ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابًا مُّهِينًا ﴿١٥١﴾

those, in truth, are unbelievers. We have prepared for unbelievers humiliating suffering. (151)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ وَلَمْ يُفَرِّقُوا۟ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِّنْهُمْ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ سَوْفَ يُؤْتِيهِمْ أُجُورَهُمْ ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٥٢﴾

As for those who believe in God and His messengers and make no distinction between any of them — to them He will give their reward. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (152)

يَسْـَٔلُكَ أَهْلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ أَن تُنَزِّلَ عَلَيْهِمْ كِتَٰبًا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ ۚ فَقَدْ سَأَلُوا۟ مُوسَىٰٓ أَكْبَرَ مِن ذَٰلِكَ فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَرِنَا ٱللَّهَ جَهْرَةً فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ ٱلصَّٰعِقَةُ بِظُلْمِهِمْ ۚ ثُمَّ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ ٱلْعِجْلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ فَعَفَوْنَا عَن ذَٰلِكَ ۚ وَءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ سُلْطَٰنًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١٥٣﴾

The people of earlier revelations ask you to have a book sent down to them from heaven. They asked Moses for something even greater than that, when they said: "Make us see God with our own eyes". The thunderbolt smote them for this their wrongdoing. After that, they took to worshipping the calf, even after clear evidence of the truth had come to them. Yet We pardoned them that, and We gave Moses clear authority. (153)

وَرَفَعْنَا فَوْقَهُمُ ٱلطُّورَ بِمِيثَٰقِهِمْ وَقُلْنَا لَهُمُ ٱدْخُلُوا۟ ٱلْبَابَ سُجَّدًا وَقُلْنَا لَهُمْ لَا تَعْدُوا۟ فِى ٱلسَّبْتِ وَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُم مِّيثَٰقًا غَلِيظًا ﴿١٥٤﴾

We raised Mount Sinai high above them in witness of their solemn pledge. And We said to them: "Enter the gate, prostrating yourselves"; and We also told them: "Do not break the Sabbath-law"; and We received from them a most solemn pledge. (154)

فَبِمَا نَقْضِهِم مِّيثَٰقَهُمْ وَكُفْرِهِم بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَقَتْلِهِمُ ٱلْأَنۢبِيَآءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَقَوْلِهِمْ قُلُوبُنَا غُلْفٌ ۚ بَلْ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهَا بِكُفْرِهِمْ فَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥٥﴾

And so, [We punished them] for the breaking of their pledge, their disbelief in God's revelations, their killing of prophets against all right, and for their boast, "Our hearts are closed." Indeed God sealed their hearts on account of their disbelief. As a result they have no faith except for a few of them. (155)

وَبِكُفْرِهِمْ وَقَوْلِهِمْ عَلَىٰ مَرْيَمَ بُهْتَٰنًا عَظِيمًا ﴿١٥٦﴾

And for their disbelief and the monstrous calumny they utter against Mary, (156)

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا ٱلْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ٱبْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَبُوهُ وَلَٰكِن شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱخْتَلَفُوا۟ فِيهِ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ ۚ مَا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا ٱتِّبَاعَ ٱلظَّنِّ ۚ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًۢا ﴿١٥٧﴾

and their boast: "We have killed the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, God's Messenger." They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so. Those who hold conflicting views about him are indeed confused, having no real knowledge about it, and following mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they did not kill him.

بَل رَّفَعَهُ ٱللَّهُ إِلَيۡهِۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ١٥٨

(157)

No! God raised him up to Himself. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. (158)

وَإِن مِّنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِلَّا لَيُؤۡمِنَنَّ بِهِۦ قَبۡلَ مَوۡتِهِۦۖ وَيَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ يَكُونُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ شَهِيدًا ١٥٩

There is not one of the people of earlier revelations but will, at the moment of his death, believe in him, and on the Day of Resurrection he will bear witness to the truth against them. (159)

فَبِظُلۡمٖ مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ حَرَّمۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ طَيِّبَٰتٍ أُحِلَّتۡ لَهُمۡ وَبِصَدِّهِمۡ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ كَثِيرًا ١٦٠

So, then, for the wrongdoing of the Jews did We forbid them some of the good things of life which had been formerly allowed to them; and, indeed for their turning away often from God's path, (160)

وَأَخۡذِهِمُ ٱلرِّبَوٰاْ وَقَدۡ نُهُواْ عَنۡهُ وَأَكۡلِهِمۡ أَمۡوَٰلَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِۚ وَأَعۡتَدۡنَا لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ مِنۡهُمۡ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ١٦١

and for their taking usury although it had been forbidden to them, and their wrongful devouring of other people's property. We have prepared for the unbelievers among them grievous suffering. (161)

لَّٰكِنِ ٱلرَّٰسِخُونَ فِي ٱلۡعِلۡمِ مِنۡهُمۡ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ مِن قَبۡلِكَۚ وَٱلۡمُقِيمِينَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَۚ وَٱلۡمُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ سَنُؤۡتِيهِمۡ أَجۡرًا عَظِيمًا ١٦٢

Yet those of them who are versed in knowledge, and the believers, do believe in what is bestowed upon you from on high and that which was bestowed from on high before you. These are the ones who attend to their prayers and spend in charity, and who believe in God and the Last Day. To these We shall give a great reward. (162)

۞ إِنَّآ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ كَمَآ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ نُوحٖ وَٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦۚ وَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ وَٱلۡأَسۡبَاطِ وَعِيسَىٰ وَأَيُّوبَ وَيُونُسَ وَهَٰرُونَ وَسُلَيۡمَٰنَۚ وَءَاتَيۡنَا دَاوُۥدَ زَبُورٗا

We have sent revelations to you just as We did send revelations to Noah and the prophets after him; as We sent revelations to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and as We vouchsafed to

David a Book of Divine wisdom, (163)

and as [We inspired other] messengers whom We have mentioned to you previously, as well as other messengers whom We have not mentioned to you. And God has spoken His word directly to Moses. (164)

[These] were messengers sent to bring good news and to give warning, so that people may have no argument against God once these messengers (had come). God is Almighty, Wise. (165)

However it be, God [Himself] bears witness to the truth of what He has bestowed from on high to you: with His knowledge He bestowed it from on high; and the angels also bear witness to that; although God is sufficient as a witness. (166)

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the way of God have indeed gone far astray. (167)

Those who disbelieve and persist in wrongdoing will find that God will never forgive them, nor will He guide them onto any road, (168)

except the road to hell, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time. That is indeed easy for God. (169)

Mankind, the messenger has now come to you with the truth from your Lord. Believe, then, for it is better for you. But if you disbelieve, know that to God belongs all

١٦٣

وَرُسُلًا قَدْ قَصَصْنَٰهُمْ عَلَيْكَ مِن قَبْلُ
وَرُسُلًا لَّمْ نَقْصُصْهُمْ عَلَيْكَ ۚ وَكَلَّمَ ٱللَّهُ
مُوسَىٰ تَكْلِيمًا ١٦٤

رُّسُلًا مُّبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ
لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ حُجَّةٌۢ بَعْدَ ٱلرُّسُلِ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ١٦٥

لَّٰكِنِ ٱللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ إِلَيْكَ ۖ أَنزَلَهُۥ
بِعِلْمِهِۦ ۖ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَشْهَدُونَ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ
شَهِيدًا ١٦٦

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ
قَدْ ضَلُّوا۟ ضَلَٰلًۢا بَعِيدًا ١٦٧

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَظَلَمُوا۟ لَمْ يَكُنِ ٱللَّهُ
لِيَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ وَلَا لِيَهْدِيَهُمْ طَرِيقًا ١٦٨

إِلَّا طَرِيقَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۚ وَكَانَ
ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ١٦٩

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ قَدْ جَآءَكُمُ ٱلرَّسُولُ بِٱلْحَقِّ
مِن رَّبِّكُمْ فَـَٔامِنُوا۟ خَيْرًا لَّكُمْ ۚ وَإِن تَكْفُرُوا۟
فَإِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ

that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (170)	ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٧٠﴾

Overview

As the Qur'ān was being revealed, it undertook the process of establishing a new nation out of a great many scattered groups each steeped in their little corners of ignorance. After Islam remoulded their characters, the Muslims were led by the hand to a much higher human standard. They were then assigned their great role as the leaders of mankind. In this way, Islam set a completely new moral standard for its followers, one based on a clear conscience and a pure social set-up.

Once the new Muslim community had attained this standard, its superiority over the rest of mankind in personal and social morality was equal to its superiority in ideological concepts. The Muslim community was then able to accomplish, by God's will, what He had determined for it, and to assume its role as custodian of the Divine system. It, thus, became a guide for mankind bringing them out of darkness into light, and providing them with an honest and caring leadership.

Superiority of moral standards makes a nation naturally fit for the role of leadership. It provides the right foundation enabling that nation to achieve a higher standard of civilisation and scientific advancement and to formulate a better economic and political system. Superiority in these matters comes as a natural result of superior beliefs and moral values. This is part of God's natural law which applies to individuals and communities alike.

No Foul Language

Part of this conscience purification process on individual and social levels is represented by the two opening verses in the present passage: "*God does not love evil to be spoken openly unless it be by someone who has been truly wronged. God hears all and knows all. Whether you do good openly or in private, or pardon others for evil (done against you), God indeed absolves sin and He is Powerful.*" (Verses 148-149)

By virtue of its sensitivity, society needs to establish a proper standard of social morality. A word said unwittingly and a rumour intended against only one person may have highly detrimental effects on society as a whole, its traditions, and values. Unless checked by conscience and by the quality common to believers, namely, fear of God, it is very easy to use evil language, which inevitably leaves profoundly harmful effects on society. It often destroys mutual confidence among people, giving a general impression that evil has become commonplace. It also encourages those

with evil tendencies to bring them out into the open. Since they are not the first to start evil, it already being widespread, they need not worry about any reaction. Moreover, familiarity removes the initial shock effect of evil. People tend not to express their disgust at hearing evil words, or indeed, seeing evil acts, when these become widespread. No one will try to change an evil when it becomes commonplace.

Additionally, those who are accused of evil and around whom false rumours are spread actually suffer injustice. This is a direct result of the evil language being used. Innocent people are grouped together with those who are guilty, accusations fly around, psychological and social considerations, which restrain people from using foul language and prevent evil action, become ineffective.

The fact is that the use of evil words starts in the form of individual accusations, but it leads to social corruption and moral chaos. No individual or group of people are given their due credit and people have no confidence in each other, when baseless accusations circulate and scruples are totally disregarded. For these reasons, God does not like the Muslim community to allow evil words to become common parlance. The only exemption in this regard is given to the one who suffers injustice. He is allowed to repel this with a foul word with which he describes the person who has wronged him, within the context of what he has suffered: *"God does not love evil to be spoken openly unless it be by someone who has been truly wronged."* (Verse 148)

In this case, speaking ill of someone, including using language which may be libellous, is no more than an attempt to remove the injustice and retaliation against some wrong that has been done to a particular person. It is no more than a denunciation of injustice and the wrongdoer, which allows the community to punish the latter and restore justice. This works as a deterrent against this sort of action so that it is not repeated either by the same person or others. It should be pointed out here, that those evil words which are allowed to be spoken openly originate with a particular person, who has been wronged, for a particular reason, and are levelled at one person in particular, the wrongdoer. The end purpose justifies the exemption given in this verse, namely, to restore justice to a person who has been wronged. To be sure, Islam does not allow libel in any form. It protects people's reputation and integrity as long as they do not wrong others. If they do so, however, they relinquish their rights of protection.

By enabling this exemption, Islam maintains a balance between its two desires, to maintain a high standard of justice which admits no breach and a standard of morality which allows no violation of personal or social propriety. Commenting on the prohibition and the exemption, the Qur'ān states: *"God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 148) The conclusion relates the whole matter to God's law, after it has been given at the outset within the context of what God loves and what He dislikes: *"God does not love evil to be spoken openly."* The comment at the end of the verse emphasises that judgement of motive and intention, as well as the truth of the words uttered and the accusation so expressed is made by God who hears whatever is said and knows what is in people's hearts.

The *sūrah* does not stop at giving an order not to speak evil openly; it encourages the positive aspect of doing good generally and pardoning others for any error. It reminds people that God Himself is Much- Forgiving, Most Lenient, when He is able to punish offenders. This reminder also serves as an incentive to believers to follow, within the limits of their ability, God's example in dealing with people: *"Whether you do good openly or in private, or pardon others for evil (done against you), God indeed absolves sin and He is Powerful."* (Verse 149)

Here, Islam takes its followers, individuals and communities, up through another stage of their educational process, all the while refining their characters. In the first stage, it spoke to them about God's dislike of evil being spoken openly. It provided a concession to someone subjected to injustice to speak against the person who had wronged him, this so as to remove that wrong. In this second stage, it raises them all to the level of doing good. As for the individual who has been wronged, he is encouraged to freely pardon and forgive, even though he is legitimately able to retaliate in order to remove the injustice.

Needless to say, such forgiveness is higher and more becoming of believers than retaliation. All this helps the spread of good in the Muslim community if it is done openly. If it is done in secret, it helps keep hearts and souls pure. Good is beneficial when done in public or in private. When forgiveness becomes commonplace, little room is left for evil words said in public. The only condition is that forgiveness be granted even when one feels able to retaliate. We forgive because we like to be forgiven by God who, though, able to punish us, pardons us: *"God indeed absolves sin and He is Powerful."* (Verse 149)

Deny One Part, Deny All

The *sūrah* then moves on to speak about those people who received revelations from God prior to the advent of Islam. It then speaks about the Jews in particular and, at a later stage, about the Christians. It is well known that the Jews speak openly in evil terms about Mary and Jesus. They have no basis whatsoever for what they say against them. It is all their own fabrication. Their evil accusations are mentioned in this passage which links it to the two preceding verses in which God orders believers not to speak evil openly. The whole passage is part of the campaign conducted by the Qur'ān against the enemies of the Muslim community in Madinah. Similar parts of this campaign were given in this *sūrah* and the two preceding it. We will now discuss this campaign as it unfolds in this *sūrah.*

> *Those who deny God and His messengers, and want to make a distinction between [belief in] God and [belief in] His messengers, and say: "We believe in some but we deny others", and want to pursue a path in-between those, in truth, are unbelievers. We have prepared for unbelievers humiliating suffering. As for those who believe in God and His messengers and make no distinction between any of them – to them He*

will give their reward. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verses 150-152)

The Jews claimed that they believed in their prophets, but they denied the messages of Jesus and Muĥammad (peace be upon them). The Christians, on the other hand, believed in earlier prophets but stopped at Jesus, though they gave him a Divine nature. They, however, also denied the message of Muĥammad (peace be upon him). The Qur'ān denounces both groups, and explains that the proper and comprehensive concept of faith is based on believing in God and His Messenger, making no distinction between God on the one hand and His messengers on the other, or between the messengers themselves. Embracing such a wide view, Islam is then the only religion acceptable to God, because it emphasises the oneness of God and its practical effects on people's lives and beliefs.

Believing in the absolute unity of God necessitates that we believe that the religion His messengers preached to mankind is also a single faith, and that His messengers who have been entrusted with conveying it to mankind belong to one group. Any denial of the unity of messengers or that the message itself is a single message, is a denial of the oneness of God and a misconception of what His oneness means. The religion and the code God has given to mankind come from the same source and share the same basis and essence. For this reason, those who wish to make a distinction between God and His messengers so that they profess to believe in God and deny His messengers and those who want to make a distinction between some messengers and others, believing in the former and denying the latter, are described as ones "*who deny God and His messengers*". The two distinctions they want to draw represent a denial of them all.

Faith is one complete whole that cannot be divided into parts. To believe in God means to accept that He is One, which, by necessity, means that the religion and the constitution which He has devised to serve as a basis on which all human life is built is also a single religion. It implies that the messengers who have preached this religion in accordance with God's will and His revelations are also a single unity. Attitudes to them all must be the same. Only through absolute disbelief can this unity be dismantled, although people may claim that they believe in some messengers and deny others. The only reward for them is that God has prepared humiliating suffering for them all: "*Those, in truth, are unbelievers. We have prepared for unbelievers humiliating suffering.*" (Verse 151)

Muslims, on the other hand, are those whose ideological concepts require them to believe in God and all His messengers without any distinction. All messengers are highly respected by them, and all Divine faiths are true, unless distortion has crept into them. In this case, they are no longer Divine, in spite of the fact that parts of them may be still maintained in their original forms. Faith is a single unity derived

from the fact that there is only one God. It is He who has devised for human beings a single faith and a single system and He who has sent His messengers to explain them to people. To a Muslim, the procession of believers is ever-continuing, led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muĥammad and all the other messengers, (peace be upon them all). Their own affiliation to this procession is very genuine indeed, since they are the custodians of this great task and the heirs to an ever- continuing blessing. There can be no distinction, no isolation and no splitting asunder. True faith is a complete whole. They alone have inherited the religion of the truth, beyond which lie only falsehood and error. This is the definition of the religion of Islam, which is the only faith acceptable to God. Such are the Muslims who deserve to be rewarded by God for their deeds, and deserve to be forgiven for what they may have omitted: "*To them, He will give their reward. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 152)

Islam takes such a strict view on the question of the unity of faith in God and His messengers because it is the proper foundation on which a believer builds his concept of his Lord, and the well regulated universe where no clash or conflict takes place. It is the faith worthy of a man who recognises the same law of creation throughout the universe and which groups the believers together in one rank opposed to all groups of unbelievers. That rank, however, does not admit those who have distorted faiths, though they may have Divine origins. It admits only those who advocate the proper, pure, undistorted faith.

On this basis, Islam is the only true faith and the Muslims are "the best community ever raised for mankind". This description, however, applies only to those Muslims who have a proper and pure faith which they implement. It does not apply to everyone born into a Muslim family or to anyone who just pays lip-service to Islam.

In this light, those who try to draw a distinction between God and His messengers, or between some messengers and others appear to stand far away from the rank of believers. They seem to try to break the unity brought about by God and seem to deny the concept of Oneness upon which belief in God is founded.

The Hard-Hearted Nature of the Israelites

Having established this basic principle of Islamic faith with regard to the truth of faith and unfaith, God's messengers and their messages, the *sūrah* now refers to the attitudes adopted by the Jews on a number of occasions and how they openly spoke evil. It denounces their attitude towards the Prophet and his message, particularly their pigheaded demands asking him to provide them with signs and evidence proving his message. It compares this attitude to the one they adopted towards their own messenger, Moses (peace be upon him), and to their attitude towards Jesus

(peace be upon him) and his mother, Mary. Their stance reveals that the Jews have always had the same nature over many generations. The Qur'ān speaks of the Jewish generation which opposed the Prophet and that which opposed Jesus and the one which opposed Moses in the past as one group, in this way emphasising the fact that they all shared the same nature.

> *The people of earlier revelations ask you to have a book sent down to them from heaven. They asked Moses for something even greater than that, when they said: `Make us see God with our own eyes." The thunderbolt smote them for this their wrongdoing. After that, they took to worshipping the calf even after clear evidence of the truth had come to them. Yet We pardoned them that, and We gave Moses clear authority. We raised Mount Sinai high above them in witness of their solemn pledge. And We said to them: `Enter the gate, prostrating yourselves"; and We also told them: `Do not break the Sabbath-law"; and We received from them a most solemn pledge.* (Verses 153-154)

The Jews living in the Arabian Peninsula took an openly hostile and rigid attitude towards Islam and the Prophet. They continuously schemed against Islam to try to bring about its downfall. Their attitude and scheming have been described in detail in the Qur'ān. We have also discussed certain aspects of it in Volumes I and II as also earlier in this volume. Now we have an explanation of other aspects of this attitude.

Adopting an overbearing manner, they demanded of the Prophet that he should bring them a written book sent down from heaven which they could touch with their own hands: *"The people of earlier revelations ask you to have a book sent down to them from heaven."* (Verse 153)

God gives the answer on behalf of His Messenger, relating to him and to the Muslim community a chapter of Jewish history with their own Prophet, leader, and saviour, Moses, in whom they claimed to believe while denying the messages of Jesus and Muĥammad (peace be upon them all). This arrogance, then is not new. It was not characteristic only of that generation of Jews. Ever since the time of Moses, they have demonstrated their insensitivity, which has restricted their understanding to the material world only, and their stubbornness which has shown that they do not yield to the truth except under pressure. They have always been treacherous, breaking their covenants not only with people but also with their Lord. They are rude and impudent: they do not verify what is being said. Nor do they refrain from using evil words. They are always greedy, trying to lay their hands on other people's property though they may have no rightful claim to it. They turn their backs on God and the reward He has in store for believers.

What we have here, then, is a campaign revealing the true nature of the Jews and their attitudes. The fact that it tackles in such a powerful way so many different

aspects shows us just what the situation in Madinah at the time of the Prophet really was like. The same sort of wicked scheming is still going on against Islam and the Muslims to this day.

"The people of earlier revelations ask you to have a book sent down to them from heaven." You need not worry about this rigidity in which there is nothing new: *"They asked Moses for something even greater than that, when they said: Make us see God with our own eyes.'"*

The clear evidence and clear signs God has given them through Moses, their Prophet, were not enough to touch their hearts and open their minds or to lead them to belief and submission. They wanted to see God directly, with their own eyes. This was a demand characterised by rudeness which could not have come from a person who knows or feels what faith means. Therefore, *"the thunderbolt smote them for their wrongdoing"*. (Verse 153) God, however, pardoned them, this in answer to the prayers of Moses who appealed to God to forgive them. This is explained in another *sūrah: "When violent trembling seized them, he (Moses) prayed: My Lord, had You so willed, You would have destroyed them before this, and me with them. Will You destroy us for what the weak-minded among us have done? All this is but a trial from You, whereby You allow to go astray whom You will and guide aright whom You will. You are Our Master: grant us then, forgiveness and have mercy on us. You are the best of all forgivers."* (7: 155)

"After that, they took to worshipping the calf even after clear evidence of the truth had come to them." The reference here is to the golden calf, made for them by the Sāmirī using the jewellery taken by trickery from Egyptian women as they left Egypt. They immediately took to worshipping that calf when Moses was called away from them, staying at a place appointed to him by His Lord where He gave him the tablets containing guidance for his people.

"Yet We pardoned them that." But the Jews are always the same. They succumb by force only. *"And We gave Moses clear authority."* (Verse 153) That authority is most probably the laws contained in the tablets. A law given by God provides direct authority from Him. God does not sanction any law other than that. It has no real effect on people's hearts. Consequently, people do not show proper respect to laws and regulations that they themselves issue or promulgate. These are only heeded when people fear being caught when they break them. God's laws, on the other hand, enjoy genuine respect and people observe them willingly.

> *We raised Mount Sinai high above them in witness of their solemn pledge. And We said to them: `Enter the gate, prostrating yourselves"; and We also told them: "Do not break the Sabbath-law"; and We received Pam them a most solemn pledge.* (Verse 154)

Because their hearts had not been truly influenced by faith, the Jews refused to submit to what was written on the tablets. Hence, they were brought into submission by the sort of physical force suited to their insensitive nature. They beheld the mountain raised above their heads, threatening to fall down any moment and destroy them all unless they surrendered and pledged to observe the covenant God made with them and to carry out their duties as explained on these tablets. Only then, when they were forced into submission did they give their pledges to fulfil the binding, most emphatic covenant. The covenant is described here in terms fitting the horrific image of a mountain raised over their heads and within their hardened hearts. Describing the covenant thus also provides an image of its power and effect.

The covenant stipulated that they should prostrate themselves when they entered the gate of Jerusalem, and that they should observe the Sabbath law, after having requested that the Sabbath be their day of rest and enjoyment. But what happened thereafter? Once their feelings of fear and of being overpowered had weakened, they began to disassociate themselves from their pledges. They denied God's revelations and killed their prophets without having any cause to do so. Moreover, they boasted arrogantly, saying that their hearts were closed to all words of admonition. Furthermore, they did all the things God relates to His Messenger and to the Muslims in the Qur'ān: *"And so, [We punished them] for the breaking of their pledge, their disbelief in God's revelations, their killing of prophets against all right, and for their boast, "Our hearts are closed." Indeed God sealed their hearts on account of their disbelief. As a result they have no faith except for a few of them."* (Verse 155)

At this point the account of their highly objectionable behaviour is interrupted. They would say: "*Our hearts are closed*", either to make the Prophet despair of a favourable response from them or to deride the fact that they, themselves, were being called upon to believe in Islam. An answer is given straight away to silence them: *"Indeed God sealed their hearts on account of their disbelief As a result they have no faith, except for a few of them."* (Verse 155) Their hearts were not sealed by nature. It is their disbelief and their rejection of God's messages which caused them to be stamped over and sealed by God. Thus, they are hard-hearted, misguided, incapable of appreciating what faith means. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of them remained unbelievers. Only a few kept their hearts open, maintained an objective judgement and pursued the truth wherever it led them. God has guided these people aright and they accepted the faith. But these were very few indeed. Among them were `Abdullāh ibn Sallām, Tha`labah ibn Sa`yah, Asad ibn Sa`yah and Asad ibn `Ubaydillāh.

The Truth About the Crucifixion

Having answered this boastful claim, the *sūrah* resumes outlining the causes behind their being forbidden certain things which they were previously permitted and the preparation of an even more humiliating punishment for them in the hereafter: "*And for their disbelief and the monstrous calumny they utter against Mary, and their boast: 'We have killed the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, God's Messenger.'*" (Verses 156-57)

The fact of their being unbelievers is referred to every time one of their evil actions is mentioned. This has already been stated in conjunction with their killing of prophets against all right. Needless to say, no prophet could ever be killed rightly. It is merely a statement of fact that the killing of prophets is described as absolutely wrongful and unjust. Again, they are described as unbelievers in conjunction with the monstrous falsehood that they circulated against Mary. Essentially, they accused Mary, the pure, of adultery with Joseph the Carpenter. Accursed are they. They then boasted that they killed the Messiah and crucified him. They coupled this with derision at his statement that he was God's Messenger.

At this point, the account is interrupted again in order to answer this claim by the Jews and to establish the truth concerning Jesus: "*They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so. Those who hold conflicting views about him are indeed confused, having no real knowledge about it, and following mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they did not kill him. No! God raised him up to Himself. God is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verses 157-158)

As regards whether Jesus was killed or crucified, the Jews and the Christians make false claims which have no basis other than in their own suspicions. The Jews claim to have killed him, ridiculing his assertion that he was God's Messenger. The Christians, on the other hand, claim that he was crucified and buried. But they also claim that he was raised three days later. As for history, it states nothing about Christ's birth or his end, almost as if nothing happened. When they make their statements, neither the Jews nor the Christians are certain of their truthfulness. Events moved fast, and conflicting reports were made and muddled up. The real truth could not be discovered, except through Divine guidance.

The four Gospels which relate the story of the arrest, crucifixion, death, burial, and rise of Jesus Christ were all written after a lengthy lapse of time which also witnessed the persecution of Christianity and the Christians. In such an atmosphere of secrecy, fear and persecution, it is exceedingly difficult to be certain of the truthfulness of the reports that circulated. Many other Gospels were written during this period, but these four were chosen towards the end of the second century and were given official status for reasons that are not entirely above suspicion.

One of the many Gospels written in this period was that of Barnabas which gives

an account of the story and crucifixion of Jesus that is at variance with the four recognised Gospels. It states: "When the soldiers, and Judas with them drew near to the place where Jesus was, he heard a large number of people coming close. In fear, he retreated to the home where all eleven disciples were asleep. When the Lord saw His servant in danger, He ordered Gabriel, Michael, Rafael and Oriel, His messengers, to take Jesus away from this world. The pure angels came down and carried Jesus through the window facing south and placed him in the third heaven in the company of angels who glorified the Lord forever. Judas entered violently the room from which Jesus was raised. All the disciples were still asleep. At that moment, God the Almighty accomplished a miraculous thing. Judas's face and voice changed so that he looked like Jesus. We all thought that he was Jesus indeed. As for him, after he awakened us, he began to search for the teacher. We were surprised and said: You are our master and teacher. Have you forgotten us?"

A scholar sifting his material carefully cannot find any confirmed account of this remarkable event that took place in the depths of the night, before the break of dawn. Hence, no report can be given more credence than another. "*Those who hold conflicting views about him are indeed confused, having no real knowledge about it, and following mere conjecture.*" (Verse 157) The Qur'ān, on the other hand, gives its clear account: "*They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so.*" (Verse 157) ... "*For, of a certainty, they did not kill him. No! God raised him up to Himself. God is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verses 157-158) The Qur'ān does not give any details concerning how Jesus was raised or whether it took place in body and soul together in this state of life, or in soul after death. Nor does it tell us when and where his death took place, if at all. What we know for certain is that they neither killed nor crucified him. Instead, another victim was made to appear similar to him.

This is the only statement of fact the Qur'ān makes, apart from what it mentions elsewhere quoting God's address to Jesus: "*Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me.*" (3: 55) In neither statement do we have any details about how Jesus was gathered or the nature of this gathering. For our part, we do not like to change the method we have followed so far when considering statements and legends which we have no way of proving or disproving.

Actions Meriting Punishment

The Qur'ānic text has still more to say about Christ, the position of the people of earlier revelations towards him and what they believed about him: "*There is not one of the people of earlier revelations but will, at the moment of his death, believe in him, and on the Day of Resurrection he will bear witness to the truth against them.*" (Verse 159)

Early Muslim scholars interpret this verse in different ways, according to the

referent, in their view, of the pronoun in the phrase "*his death*". Some maintain that every single person of the people of earlier revelations will inevitably believe in Jesus before his, i.e. Jesus's death, considering that he will be back on earth before the Day of Resurrection. Other scholars maintain that every single one of the people of earlier revelations will, before his own death, believe in Jesus. This means that when this person is in the throes of death, he will be made to see the truth, when his own knowledge will no longer avail him. We are more inclined to take this second view. It means that the Jews who have denied Jesus and continued to deny his status, claiming to have killed and crucified him, will have this experience which tells them that Jesus was truly a messenger from God and that his message was the truth. They will then believe in Jesus but it will be too late for their belief to be of any benefit to them. On the Day of Resurrection, Jesus will be a witness against them.

Having established the truth about the alleged crucifixion, the *sūrah* resumes its account of the evil deeds perpetrated by the Jews, the punishment they have endured in this life and that which they will endure in the life to come: "*So, then, for their wrongdoing of the Jews did We forbid them some of the good things of life which had been formerly allowed to them; and, indeed for their turning away often from God's path, and for their taking usury although it had been forbidden to them, and their wrongful devouring of other people's property. We have prepared for the unbelievers among them grievous suffering.*" (Verse 160-161)

This statement adds to the list of evil deeds perpetrated by the Jews some very serious ones which were not mentioned earlier. This includes wrongdoing, turning away from God's path, which they do all the time, and their accepting usury, not because of lack of knowledge, for they have been forbidden all forms of usury, but because they pay no heed to the instruction. The list also includes the fact that they devour other people's property wrongfully, through usury and other methods. For all these wrong deeds and the others mentioned earlier, many of the good things of this world, which they have been permitted to enjoy, have subsequently been forbidden them. God has also prepared grievous suffering for those who disbelieve.

Thus, the nature of the Jews and their history is revealed. Their thinly disguised excuses for not responding favourably to the Prophet are laid bare. If they were stubborn with the Prophet, they had been stiff and stubborn with their own Prophet, leader and saviour. It is so easy for them to violate God's laws and to speak ill of prophets and righteous people and indeed to kill them and boast about their crimes. By bringing all this into the open, the Qur'ān renders futile all their schemes and plotting against the Muslims. The Muslim community learns about the nature of the Jews, their methods and their opposition to the truth whether its advocates are people from among them or from other nations. In all generations and with their friends and enemies alike, they oppose the truth and its followers just as they oppose

Divine guidance and its advocates. Their hearts are hardened and they do not submit to the power of the truth unless the sword is held over their heads.

It was not only for the benefit of the first Muslim community in Madinah that the nature of this type of people was exposed. The Qur'ān is the book of the Muslim community, serving as its source of guidance for the rest of time. When this nation refers to the Qur'ān for advice and guidance about its enemies, it will certainly provide that. It has given the Muslim community the advice and guidance it needs concerning the Jews. Therefore, the Muslim community was able to bring them to submission. But when the Muslims abandoned the Qur'ān, they had to submit to the Jews. We have seen them gather together only to be defeated by a small force of Jews, simply because they neglected their book of guidance, the Qur'ān, preferring to follow different doctrines and creeds. They will continue to submit to the Jews and suffer from their scheming until they turn back to the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah,* however, does not neglect to give credit to those few Jews who believe and submit to the truth. It includes these among believers, states that they will be well rewarded, and testifies to their being well versed in knowledge. It states that it is their profound knowledge that led them to believe in the Divine faith as a whole, including what was revealed to the Prophet and what was revealed before him: "*Yet those of them who are versed in knowledge, and the believers, do believe in what is bestowed upon you from on high and that which was bestowed from on high before you. These are the ones who attend to their prayers and spend in charity, and who believe in God and the Last Day. To these We shall give a great reward.*" (Verse 162)

Firm knowledge and enlightened belief lead people to accepting faith in its entirety. They also lead to the acknowledgement that Divine faith, revealed by God, the only deity in the Universe, is essentially a single faith.

This firm and proper knowledge is described as a way leading to the truth, just the same as a belief which opens hearts to light is a most appropriate description of the relationship between knowledge and faith. Superficial knowledge and arrogant denial of the truth are the two factors that prevent a human being from learning the truth. This is true of all generations. Those who acquire profound knowledge and become well versed in it find themselves face to face with signs and phenomena all over the universe leading them to faith. Or, at least, they have in front of them many a question about the universe which can only be answered through believing that there is a single Deity who has created the universe and conducts all its affairs and who has a consistent will which has established a single and constant law for the universe. Similarly, those who genuinely aspire to receive guidance, i.e. believers, will undoubtedly have it.

On the other hand, those who receive scant knowledge, yet think themselves to be

great scholars, are the ones whose lack of information prevents them from identifying the signs and indicators which lead to faith. These do not see any question marks that can only be answered through faith. They are in the same position as those whose hearts do not aspire to receive guidance. Therefore, neither of these types of people feel the need for reassurance generated by faith. Some of them equate being religious with ignorant fanaticism, making distinctions between the Divine religions which have been revealed by the same Deity through a long procession of noble messengers (peace be upon them all).

Commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse refers in the first place to those Jews whom we have named above and who responded to the Prophet's call and accepted Islam. It applies, however, to every one of them who accepts the guidance represented by this religion of Islam, whether motivated by profound knowledge or enlightened faith. The *sūrah* includes these with the believers who are identified here as those who "*attend to their prayers and spend in charity and who believe in God and the Last Day*". These are qualities which distinguish true Muslims. All such people have their reward in store for them with God: "*To these We shall give a great reward.*"

Finally, we should perhaps mention that the description of those believers as those "*who attend to their prayers*" is stated, from the linguistic point of view, in the objective case while all others are subjective in their case marking. According to the rules of Arabic grammar, it should normally have been stated in the subjective case, like the rest. However, the change denotes stronger emphasis as it signifies those "who particularly attend to their prayers". This mode of expression is not uncommon in Arabic.

The Purpose of Sending Messengers

The *sūrah* continues its confrontation with the people of earlier revelations, particularly the Jews in this instance, condemning their attitude, particularly their rejection of the Prophet Muĥammad's message and their false claim that God did not send him as a Messenger. It refers to the distinction they tried to draw between messengers and their arrogant demands for proof of this message in the form of a book sent to him, Muĥammad, from heaven. This *sūrah* states clearly that revelation to a messenger is not something new or strange. Indeed, it is the normal practice with all messengers since the time of Noah to that of Muĥammad. All of them have been sent as messengers bringing happy news and delivering strong warnings. This is an aspect of Divine mercy bestowed by God on His servants that they may have no argument to justify their disbelief. They have been amply warned before the Day of Judgement. All these messengers were sent for the same aim, and to convey the same

message. Hence, to try to distinguish between them is an attitude smacking of arrogance and conceit. If people deny this fact, God bears witness to it, together with the angels. God is sufficient for a witness.

> *We have sent revelations to you just as We did send revelations to Noah and the prophets after him; as We sent revelations to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and as We vouchsafed to David a book of Divine wisdom; and as [We inspired other] messengers whom We have mentioned to you previously, as well as other messengers whom We have not mentioned to you. And God has spoken His word directly to Moses. [These] were messengers sent to bring good news and to give warning, so that people may have no argument against God once these messengers (had come). God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 163-165)

It is then the same procession moving forward throughout human history, conveying a single message, bringing the same guidance to warn and to give a piece of happy news. It includes a group of chosen men like Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David, Moses, as well as others whom God spoke about to His Messenger in the Qur'ān and still others about whom He told the Prophet nothing. It is a procession which includes people from various nations and various countries, living at different times. Nothing gives any of them distinction over others. No consideration of race, nation, place, or time divides them. They all give the same guiding light, to warn and motivate, and they all try to lead human beings towards the light. This applies to those of them who were sent to a particular tribe, community, nation, city, country, or the one who was sent to all mankind, namely, Muĥammad, the last of all messengers.

Every one of them received revelations from God. None of them invented anything of his own accord. If Moses was spoken to directly by God, this was simply one aspect of revelation and none of us knows how it happened. The Qur'ān, which is the only authentic source we have on such matters, has not given us any details. The only thing we know is that God gave this revelation in words. How and in what manner or in what sense or power Moses used to receive it we do not know. All that is part of the knowledge God has kept to Himself. If the Qur'ān does not speak to us about it, then any interpretation is simply guesswork lacking foundation.[§]

It is Divine mercy and justice which has required that these messengers tell mankind about what God has prepared in the way of happiness and bliss for those who respond to Him and obey Him. It is their task also to warn mankind against the suffering in hell God has prepared for those who disobey. All this has a definite

[§] For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

purpose: *"So that people may have no argument against God once these messengers had come."* (Verse 165)

To God belongs the overriding argument against all creation. God has given man intelligence of the type that enables him to understand every sign that points towards faith. Nevertheless, Divine mercy is demonstrated in the fact that messengers have been sent by God to remind people and show them the way. The role of these messengers is to try to liberate human intelligence from the fetters of desire, which conceal the signs and indicators leading to faith. God is Almighty, which means that He is able to punish people for what they perpetrate. He is also *"Wise"*. He deals with every matter wisely. Both His might and wisdom have their role in what He decides and does.

A multitude of subtle and profound impressions are left in our minds as we read the statement: *"So that people may have no argument against God once these messengers had come."* (Verse 165) We will briefly discuss only three of these impressions so as to keep within the framework we have set for ourselves in this commentary.

There is firstly the question of the value of human intellect and its role in believing in God. Man's life on earth, its substance, form, direction and action, is based on this question of faith, as is man's destiny in the hereafter, which is even more serious and everlasting.

God certainly knows man, his potentials and his limits. Had He known that the intellect He granted man is sufficient for him to distinguish guidance and to identify his overall interest in this life and the life to come, He would have left him to his intellect. This would mean, then, that man would rely entirely on his intellect to search for and interpret all signs and indicators that draw him closer to faith. This also means that man would be left to draw up a constitution and a way of life which keep him away from error, relying solely on his intellect. Had this been true, God would not have sent messengers to people throughout history, nor would He have assigned them the role of conveying His Divine message. Indeed, the opposite is true: had there been no messenger sent by God with His guidance, He would have allowed people a powerful argument against Himself: *"So that people may have no argument against God once these messengers had come."* (Verse 165)

God knows that the intellect He has given man is inadequate as a tool to achieve guidance by itself, without being assisted, directed and disciplined by a Divine message. It is also inadequate to draw a course for human life that ensures that man achieves his best interest and saves himself from doom in this life and in the life to come. Knowing all this, God's wisdom and mercy have dictated that He sends messengers to mankind and He does not hold people to account until His message has been conveyed to them: *"We would not have punished any community before We have*

sent a messenger [to them]." (17:15) Considering this Qur'ānic statement, this seems to be readily apparent, or at least an essential requirement.

This leads to the question: What is the role of human intellect in the question of believing in God and determining man's way of life?

In short, it is to receive the message and to understand what the messenger conveys to it. The role of the messenger is to explain his message and to rescue human nature from what blurs its vision and to alert the human intellect to everything within man and in the universe which points in the direction of faith. The messenger also draws for man the method of receiving Divine guidance and how to deal with it. He also shows man the basis on which practical life is conducted according to the Divine method, in order to enable man to achieve what is best for him in this life and what is best in the life to come.

The Human Mind and Divine Messages

It should be clear in our minds that it is not for the human intellect to pass judgement on the principles laid down by religion. Nor can we judge through normal human reasoning the validity or otherwise of religious orders and prohibitions, or indeed decide whether to accept or reject them, after having ascertained their meaning and that they have been proclaimed by God. Had it been up to the human intellect to reject Divine legislation, because it disapproves of them or does not wish to respond to them, no punishment would have been incurred for rejecting the Divine faith after it was explained. Man is, indeed, required to accept religious teachings once he gets to know them through a proper source and has correctly understood their import.

When we say that this message of Islam addresses the human mind, we mean that it awakens our minds and directs us to use a proper method of evaluation. It certainly does not mean that it is up to our minds to judge whether the message of Islam is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. Once we have an authentic statement, it provides the judgement to be obeyed and enforced, whether it sounds immediately acceptable or totally strange. We use our minds to understand the import of a particular statement, in accordance with linguistic rules and idiomatic usage. Once the import of a particular statement is ascertained, it remains valid and enforceable because it is a statement given by God. We cannot consider the human intellect a deity to evaluate and judge what has been given to us by God.

A great deal of confusion may occur here. Some people try to give the human intellect the role of a deity, giving it the power to judge the validity or otherwise of authentic religious instructions. Others try to minimise its importance and the role it plays in accepting the faith and following guidance. Neither attitude is correct. It is

the middle attitude, which we have already explained, that is the proper and correct one. What it means practically is that man cannot put religious teachings against premises of his own, which he might have already developed on the basis of human logic, observations or experience. The proper attitude is that he should develop and establish his premises on the basis of correct and authentic religious statements. These are certainly more correct than his own premises and rely on a more accurate system than his own.

It is perfectly acceptable that one intellectual understanding of a religious statement may be opposed by another. Once a statement admits more than one interpretation according to the principles and methodology approved by Islam, then no authority or individual can restrict people or compel them to follow a single interpretation or force on them one way of implementation. Again this is part of the meaning of our statement that the message of Islam addresses human intellect.

It is true that Islam is the religion of reason. This means that it does not use any supernatural power in order to make our minds submit to it. It explains its principles, judgements and teachings in a way that addresses our minds. It calls on us to contemplate and reflect on every aspect of creation within ourselves and in the universe at large. Such contemplation will undoubtedly point the way in the direction of accepting the faith. Thus, it attempts to free the human mind from the pressures of familiarity, continuity, laziness, as well as from desires that distract minds and distort human nature. Its address to the human mind means that man is not compelled to believe in what he cannot understand. It assigns to us the task of understanding the statements which express religious teachings. Once we have understood these, we have the choice of submission to them — and in this case we are believers — or denying them and becoming unbelievers. We cannot pass a judgement of validity or invalidity on separate religious statements. Nor do we have the right to accept or reject them. We cannot select and choose. Otherwise, we will be believing in part of the Divine message whilst denying other parts. Those who do this are described in the Qur'ān as unbelievers, and have been warned against grievous punishment. When God states something about the universe, man, creation, or religious teachings, His commandments must be obeyed and implemented by everyone who is aware of them and understands their import.

God, glorified be He, says: "*God is He who has created seven heavens and a similar number of the earth.*" (65: 12) "*Are the unbelievers unaware that the heavens and the earth were [once) one single entity and We split them apart? — and that We made out of water every living thing?*" (21: 30) "*God has created all animals out of water*" (24: 45) "*He has created man out of sounding clay, like pottery, whereas the jinn He has created out of smokeless fire.*" (55: 14-15) He also states many other things about the nature of the universe, life and creation. All that He has stated is the truth, no doubt. It is not up to

the human intellect to say, after having understood these texts, that their import does not agree with human knowledge or experience. That knowledge and experience is liable to err, while God's statements are always true.

Similarly, God makes in the Qur'ān statements such as: *"Those who do not judge according to what God has bestowed from on high are indeed unbelievers."*(5: 44) *"Believers, fear God and give up what remains outstanding of usury gains, if you are true believers. If you do not, then war is declared against you by God and His messenger. If you repent, however, you shall remain entitled to your principal. Thus, you shall commit no wrong, nor suffer any wrong yourselves."* (2: 278-9) *"And stay in your homes and do not flaunt your charms as women used to do in the old days of pagan ignorance."* (33: 33) *"Let [Muslim women] draw their head-coverings over their bosoms. And let them not display their charms."* (24: 31) He also delivers many other statements and teachings which have a direct bearing on people's way of life. These statements are correct and valid. It is not up to the human intellect to say that something which is in conflict with Divine teachings is more valid or serves people's interests better. Intellectual judgement is liable to error and can be influenced by desire. What God has determined can only be right.

As we see, the same rule applies to what God has stated in matters of faith and concepts, and to His statement with regard to the way of life which must be implemented. Once a statement is authentic, definitive and not restricted to a particular time, then it must be implemented. We cannot say: we accept the ideological part and what relates to worship, but times have changed and we choose our own system. Had it been God's wish to make a particular ruling or legislation limited to a particular time, He would have made that clear. We can use our human intellect and discretion in applying a particular statement to a certain case. This is different from accepting or rejecting a piece of legislation in principle.

The foregoing does not limit the role of the human mind or belittle its importance. It has wide scope open to it in determining how religious statements apply to new situations. It also has wide scope in trying to understand the nature of the universe, its potentials and the forces working within it as well as the nature of different creatures, and to make use of what God has given us in this universe. It can play a great role in improving the quality of life and developing it according to the Divine system, not by merely following the dictates of desire which throw the mind off the right course.

Making God's Argument

We need to consider from another angle the statement, *"so that people may have no argument against God once these messengers had come".* (Verse 165)

It is indeed a great responsibility which has been assigned to God's messengers,

(peace be upon them all) and those who believe in their messages towards humanity. For the destiny of mankind, in both this life and the life to come, depends primarily on the messengers and their followers. If they convey this message to people, as they are required to do, people may achieve reward and happiness in both this world and the next. Otherwise, they live in misery and deserve punishment.

When we describe this as a great responsibility, we are only making a statement of fact. Indeed God's messengers have shown themselves to be keenly aware of the great importance of their task. God has pointed out to them the true nature of their responsibility. He made it clear to His last Messenger that the message he has been assigned is a weighty one, which he needed to prepare himself for: *"O you enwrapped one, keep awake [in prayer] at night, all but a small part of one half of it, or make it a little less than that, or add to it; and recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly, with your mind attuned to its meaning. We shall bestow on you a weighty message."* (73: 1-5) *"It is We who have bestowed from on high this Qur'ān on you, step by step, truly a bestowal from on high. Await, then, in all patience your Lord's judgement and pay no heed to any of them who is a wilful sinner or an ingrate; and bear in mind your Lord's name at morning and evening and during some of the night, and prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night."* (76: 23-6) It is this meaning which God makes clear to the Prophet and He commands him to make certain statements which show that he truly understands the message he has been given and its great importance: "*Say; indeed no one could ever protect me from God, nor could I ever find a place to hide from Him, if I should fail to convey [to the world what has come to me] from God and His messages... He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and to none does He disclose what He has chosen to keep to Himself of His unfathomable knowledge, unless it be to a messenger whom He has been pleased to elect... so as to make manifest that it is indeed only their Lord's messages that these [messengers] deliver."* (72: 22-8)

The question then is that of mankind's life, happiness and reward, indeed of existence itself. Either man accepts the Divine message when it is conveyed to him and implements it to achieve happiness in this life and in the life to come, or he rejects it and brings misery upon himself in both worlds. Alternatively, if no message has been conveyed to him, he has an argument to make against God. In this case, the responsibility for the misery he endures in this life lies fairly and squarely on those who have been assigned the task of conveying God's message but who have failed to do so.

As for God's messengers, (peace be upon them all), they have indeed been faithful to their trust and conveyed their message. They have discharged their responsibility and gone to their Lord. They have not only conveyed the message by word of mouth, but they have also provided a practical example to be followed, and have striven hard, day and night, to remove all impediments of every shape and form: suspicions

raised, temptations offered and tyrannical forces turning people away from faith. This is what Muĥammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the last of all Prophets did. Since his was the final and complete message, he did not merely speak of removing impediments, but he actually removed them with action so that *"there is no more oppression and that submission is made to God".* (2: 193)

The same hard task continues to be assigned to those who believe in his message. Generations come and go and the Divine message must be conveyed to all by the Prophet's followers. They will not fulfil their heavy responsibility, make God's argument against people, and save them from misery in this life and suffering in the hereafter, unless they actually convey God's message, on the same lines followed by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). People are the same throughout all generations and the message is the same. There are, however, diversions, which lead us astray, tempting desires and doubts; and there are tyrannical forces which try to turn us away from faith, either by deception or by brute force. The same situation then, the same impediments and the same people!

The task must be fulfilled and the message conveyed by word of mouth and practical action testifying to the effects brought about by the implementation of the message. Moreover, impediments must be removed. Otherwise, the message is not properly conveyed. There is simply no way this task can be left undone, otherwise the responsibility for mankind's continued error, their misery in this life and their having an argument to make in front of God on the Day of Reckoning must be faced. This is indeed a fearsome responsibility, sending a shudder through the entire body of anyone who realises that he must face it. No one can take it lightly.

A person who claims to be a Muslim must either convey the message of Islam in the way mentioned above, or he cannot save himself in either this or the next life. When he says that he is a Muslim and stops short of conveying God's message as the Prophet did, he is actually testifying against Islam in which he claims to believe. He is indeed required to make a testimony for Islam so that the following Qur'ānic verse applies to him: "*Thus We have made you the community of the middle way, so that you may stand witness against the rest of mankind and the Messenger shall be a witness against you.*" (2: 143)

The testimony a Muslim has to make for Islam begins with himself, his home, family and his immediate society, as he endeavours to make them a living example of Islamic life. The second step in this testimony is his advocacy of Islamic life, as he calls on all mankind to implement Islam in their personal, social, economic and political life. The final step is his striving hard, i.e. *jihād,* for the removal of impediments which cause people to live in error and which turn them away from faith, regardless of what these impediments are. If he sacrifices his life for this cause, he is then a martyr, or, to use the Arabic term, *shahīd,* having made his testimony and

sought to please His Lord. The term *shahīd* can only apply to this type of person.

Grace of the Highest Type

Before we conclude our comments on this verse, we need to reflect a little with our heads bowed in acknowledgement of God's greatness, His knowledge of man, His fairness to him, as well as the care, mercy and grace He extends to him, despite his excessive ingratitude.

Let us first reflect for a moment on God's thorough and perfect knowledge of man, his capabilities and potentials, as well as his inherent susceptibility to follow guidance or to go astray. It is on the basis of His knowledge of man that God has not left him to what his mind, the great gift He has given him, may dictate, even though it makes numerous and clear indicators which point out the way to faith. God knows that this great tool He has placed at man's disposal may be influenced by man's desires and that the indicators He has placed all over the horizon and within man himself may be screened from man, deliberately or through ignorance. Therefore, He does not hold man's intellect responsible for following right guidance or for turning away from it until He has made it clear to him through His messengers. Moreover, even after such a clear message has been given, the task of devising a way of life is not assigned to man. What he is assigned is the implementation of the way of life laid down by God. Beyond that, God has given man a vast dominion to do with it whatever he likes, changing it as he pleases, and analysing it the way he wishes.

We should also reflect a little on the Divine justice which provides people with an argument against God, had He not sent them messengers to raise before them happy prospects and also to warn them against the pitfalls in their way. These messengers are sent in addition to all the indicators in the universe and within man, testifying to God's oneness, His great creation, profound knowledge and infinite ability. Added to this is also the strong inclination of human nature to believe in God and to submit to Him. We should also remember in this respect the harmony between the indicators in the universe and the natural inclination and ability of man's mind to collate information and arrive at conclusions. God, however, is fully aware of the weaknesses that may affect all these factors, clouding their work, bluring people's vision and causing them to arrive at the wrong findings. Therefore, the pointers of the universe, human nature and intellect are not judged by God as sufficient on their own, unless He sends messengers to make sure that these instruments are not influenced by any foreign element as also to control their work according to the right standard shown in the Divine message. It is only when this is accomplished that the universe, human nature, and intellect will give the right and proper judgement. At this point in time, it becomes obligatory for people to submit to God and to obey

Him. Their argument for not doing so is rendered futile and they, then, deserve punishment.

We must also reflect a little on the great care God takes of man and the grace He bestows on him, knowing, as He does, what weaknesses and shortcomings he may have. Nevertheless, He puts him in charge of the earth, which is, to man, a great kingdom, although it is no more than a little particle within God's great dominion.

God's care, grace and mercy take man even further. Despite all the indicators and the work of God's messengers, man continues to reject the faith, stubbornly following erring ways. Yet God does not withhold from him His grace and favour. Nor does He deprive him of the guidance He has made available through His messengers. Indeed, He does not inflict punishment on him either in this world or in the hereafter until His messengers have conveyed His messages and man continues in rejecting them until his death.

Man very often boasts to himself that he can do without his Lord, His care, mercy, guidance, religion and messengers. He claims that he has all he needs for proper guidance, making use of his intellect, when God, his Creator, knows that this is not sufficient for him, unless it is set on the proper course pointed out by Him. This brings to mind the example of a little child just beginning to walk. He feels a little strength in his legs and lets go of his mother's supporting hand. He immediately stumbles and falls. The child in this example, however, is wiser and more responsive to nature. He is naturally inclined to make use of his latent skill, develop his ability, train his muscles and become totally independent. By contrast, the man who lets go of God's supporting hand has no natural inclination to steer away from Divine guidance. The best that he can do for himself is to follow Divine guidance, which ensures that all his powers are used properly and directed wisely. If he turns away from Divine guidance and trusts to his own devices, his powers will be certain to malfunction.

Erroneous, indeed, is every claim which suggests that great minds are not in need of God's message to make great achievements. The fact is that the Divine message provides the human mind with the proper method of reflection and deduction to arrive at proper conclusions. If it errs, its error is similar to that of a clock set right, but later influenced by atmospheric and other factors affecting its movement. It is not like the error of a clock that was never properly set, but left to work at random, giving the right time only by pure coincidence. The difference between the two is great indeed.

Using his intellect and guided by the Divine message, man can make great achievements to which he cannot aspire otherwise. This is evidenced by the fact that throughout human history, no great mind has managed to devise the ideological

concept, the personal discipline, the code of living or the social system which ordinary intellects were able to devise when guided by the Divine message.

Plato and Aristotle were endowed with great minds. It is even said that Aristotle had the greatest mind in human history. When we consider his concept of the Divine being as he devised it independently from God's guidance, we realise how greatly inferior it is to the concept of an ordinary Muslim who follows the Divine message.

In ancient Egypt, Akhenaton advocated monotheism. He might have been influenced by the messages of the Prophets Abraham and Joseph, but even then, there are gaps and legends in his faith making the monotheistic concept of an ordinary Muslim infinitely superior to Akhenaton's monotheistic religion.

In moral standards, we find in the early periods of Islam ordinary people, educated and disciplined by God's Messenger, achieving heights to which even the greatest of people cannot aspire, when they are not guided by a Divine message. As for principles, systems and legislation, Islam achieves a degree of balance and harmony which is absolutely unique. The sort of harmony and ease of life which are characteristic of Islamic society are never to be found in any other society, prior to Islam or after it.

It is not the standard of material civilisation which we should judge. This is something that increases with scientific advancement. The quality of life at any particular time is judged by the balance and harmony achieved between all its aspects and systems. That balance is the source of happiness which brings out all human potentials and gives them a chance to work in harmony, without any excesses. As we have already said, humanity has never known a perfect system such as that of Islam. Imbalance is characteristic of every non-Islamic system, although it may have its bright aspects. It is always the trend that certain aspects of human life may be promoted at the expense of others. With such an imbalance, humanity continues to suffer. Its only saviour is the perfect, balanced and harmonious system of Islam.

The Supreme Witness

What we have said so far is sufficient to explain the clear feelings generated by the Qur'ānic statement: *"[These] were messengers sent to bring good news and to give warning, so that people may have no argument against God once these messengers (had come). God is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 165) We will now proceed with our commentary on the rest of this passage.

People however may deny that message for different reasons. People who have received earlier revelations from God through earlier prophets may deny the final

message given to Muĥammad (peace be upon him), although it follows the same pattern of sending messengers to bring happy news to God's servants and to warn them against disbelief. Those who received earlier revelations believe in the messengers who were sent before Muĥammad: the Jews acknowledged all messengers who came before Jesus (peace be upon him) and the Christians acknowledged all these as well as Jesus, to whom they attribute a Divine nature, as will be explained later. Addressing the Prophet, God consoles him for facing such rejection: "*However it be, God [Himself] bears witness to the truth of what He has bestowed from on high to you: with His knowledge He bestowed it from on high; and the angels also bear witness to that; although God is sufficient as a witness.*" (Verse 166)

This testimony by God and the angels, some of whom were entrusted with carrying the message to Muĥammad (peace be upon him), reduces to nothing all that may be said by those claiming to follow earlier revelations. What significance have they when God Himself gives His testimony and the angels do likewise? Surely God's testimony is enough on its own. Coming when it did, this testimony provided consolation to the Prophet for the stern opposition by the Jews to his message and their scheming against it. It also provided assurance to the early Muslims in Madinah who faced determined assaults from the Jews, the magnitude of which is evidenced by the campaign launched in the Qur'ān to repel it.

This testimony is followed by a stern and fearsome warning to those who deny the message of Islam. "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the way of God have indeed gone far astray. Those who disbelieve and persist in wrongdoing will find that God will never forgive them, nor will He guide them onto any road, except the road to hell, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time. That is indeed easy for God.*" (Verses 167-169)

The description of the unbelievers contained in this warning, though general in its import, applies primarily to the Jews and describes their attitude towards Islam and the Muslims, and indeed towards the truth generally. It applies equally to those of them who lived in the early days of Islam in Madinah and those who lived at the time of Moses himself, as well as to succeeding generations of Jews up to the present day, with the exception of a small number who opened their hearts to Divine guidance and followed it.

Those Jews, as well as any group of people to whom the description of disbelieving and debarring others from the way of God applies, have indeed gone far astray. They have turned away from God's guidance and strayed from the proper way of life which ensures man's happiness. They have erred in their concepts and beliefs, behaviour and social system, and in every aspect of this life generally. This means that their concept regarding the life to come is also erroneous.

Immense in error as they are, there is little hope that they can recognise Divine

guidance and follow it. For they *"have indeed gone far astray"*.

They are again described as unbelievers, but this time they are also described as wrongdoers. To disbelieve is indeed to act wrongfully and to do injustice to the truth, to self and to mankind. Sometimes the Qur'ān describes disbelief as injustice or wrongdoing, as in God's statement: *"To associate partners with God is to commit grave injustice."* (31: 31) He also says: *"They who do not judge in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high are indeed wrongdoers."* (5: 45) In the preceding verse, He describes them as unbelievers. (This will be discussed in detail in Volume IV, God willing.)

As for those Jews, they did not commit only the injustice of associating partners with God but they also persisted in wrongdoing by debarring people from the way of God. In other words, they were up to their ears in disbelief and wrongdoing.

Hence, their just punishment is determined by God: *"Those who disbelieve and persist in wrongdoing will find that God will never forgive them, nor will He guide them onto any road, except the road to hell, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time."* (Verses 168-169) It is unfair that God should forgive such people after they have gone far astray and deprived themselves of every chance of forgiveness. It is also unfair that He should guide them to any road other than that leading to hell, because they have turned away from every road of guidance and sealed off every route leading anywhere other than the one leading to hell. They have gone far along that road, deserving to stay in hell for ever, without any hope of being saved again.

"That is indeed easy for God", for He has the upper hand over every one of His servants. Moreover, He has no special relationship with anyone of His creation to make it difficult for Him to exact such a just punishment. Nor can their punishment be made less easy by any power or force possessed by His servants. The Jews and the Christians used to say that they were God's own children and His beloved ones. They also said: *"The fire will not touch us except for a small number of days."* (2: 80) They also claimed to be God's chosen people. The Qur'ān denies all this and puts them back in their place among God's other servants. They have the same prospects as anyone else: they receive reward if they do well, and they are punished if they do badly, do not repent or pray for forgiveness. All this is easy for God.

This is followed by a universal call to all mankind, to tell them that God's Messenger has come to them with the truth from their Lord. He who believes in him does well. Those who deny him should know that God has no need for any of them and He can overpower them all. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. He is aware of everything, and He runs all affairs according to His knowledge and wisdom:

> *Mankind, the Messenger has now come to you with the truth from your Lord. Believe, then, for it is better for you. But if you disbelieve, know that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.* (Verse 170)

This call to all mankind to believe in the last message was preceded by a recital of all the false claims made by people to whom revelations were given at earlier times. This together with the unmasking of the true nature of the Jews and their evil deeds throughout their history. Their inherent obstinacy, even in their attitude towards Moses, their Prophet, leader and saviour, is also exposed. The call is also preceded by an explanation of the nature of this last message and its purpose, both of which require that God sends messengers and sends Muĥammad to all mankind. Having sent a number of messengers with messages to their own nations, it is only logical that this process should culminate with a final, universal message to all mankind "*so that people may have no argument against God, once the messengers had come*". Had this final message not been addressed to all mankind, later generations would have had an argument against God. But the final and universal message of Muĥammad (peace be upon him) has stopped any such argument. To deny that a message should come after the Jewish prophets, including or excluding Jesus (peace be upon him), is contrary to God's justice which ensures that no punishment can be exacted without having first sent a message. As it happened, there was no universal message prior to Islam. Such a universal message was, therefore, inevitable, to ensure God's justice and mercy to mankind. This proves God's description of His Messenger: *"We have only sent you as mercy to mankind."* (21: 107) He is, indeed, a manifestation of God's mercy in this life and in the life to come, as appears clearly from this Qur'anic statement.

15
The Truth About Jesus

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا تَغۡلُواْ فِي دِينِكُمۡ وَلَا تَقُولُواْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلۡحَقَّۚ إِنَّمَا ٱلۡمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَ رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُۥٓ أَلۡقَىٰهَآ إِلَىٰ مَرۡيَمَ وَرُوحٞ مِّنۡهُۖ فَـَٔامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦۖ وَلَا تَقُولُواْ ثَلَٰثَةٌۚ ٱنتَهُواْ خَيۡرٗا لَّكُمۡۚ إِنَّمَا ٱللَّهُ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۖ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥٓ أَن يَكُونَ لَهُۥ وَلَدٞۘ لَّهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلٗا ١٧١

People of earlier revelations! Do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs, and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Christ Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger from God and His Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not say, "[God is] a trinity!" Desist, for that will be better for you. God is only One God. Infinite He is in His Glory! [To imagine] that He may have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Sufficient is God as a guardian. (171)

لَّن يَسۡتَنكِفَ ٱلۡمَسِيحُ أَن يَكُونَ عَبۡدٗا لِّلَّهِ وَلَا ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ ٱلۡمُقَرَّبُونَۚ وَمَن يَسۡتَنكِفۡ عَنۡ عِبَادَتِهِۦ وَيَسۡتَكۡبِرۡ فَسَيَحۡشُرُهُمۡ إِلَيۡهِ جَمِيعٗا ١٧٢

Never did the Christ feel too proud to be God's servant, nor do the angels who are near to Him. Those who feel too proud to worship Him and glory in their arrogance will He gather all together before Himself; (172)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَيُوَفِّيهِمۡ أُجُورَهُمۡ وَيَزِيدُهُم مِّن فَضۡلِهِۦۖ وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَنكَفُواْ وَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ فَيُعَذِّبُهُمۡ عَذَابًا أَلِيمٗا وَلَا يَجِدُونَ لَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيّٗا وَلَا نَصِيرٗا ١٧٣

then, to those who believe and do good deeds, He will grant their reward in full, and will give them yet more out of His bounty; while those who feel too proud and glory in their arrogance He will cause to suffer a grievous punishment. They shall find none to protect them from God and none to bring them any help. (173)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ قَدۡ جَآءَكُم بُرۡهَٰنٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ وَأَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكُمۡ نُورٗا مُّبِينٗا ١٧٤

Mankind, a clear proof has now come to you from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a glorious light. (174)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱعۡتَصَمُواْ بِهِۦ فَسَيُدۡخِلُهُمۡ فِي رَحۡمَةٖ مِّنۡهُ وَفَضۡلٖ وَيَهۡدِيهِمۡ إِلَيۡهِ صِرَٰطٗا مُّسۡتَقِيمٗا ١٧٥

Those who believe in God and hold fast to Him, will He surely admit to His mercy and grace, and will guide them to Himself along a straight path. (175)

يَسۡتَفۡتُونَكَ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يُفۡتِيكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡكَلَٰلَةِۚ إِنِ ٱمۡرُؤٌاْ هَلَكَ لَيۡسَ لَهُۥ وَلَدٞ وَلَهُۥٓ أُخۡتٞ فَلَهَا نِصۡفُ مَا تَرَكَۚ وَهُوَ يَرِثُهَآ إِن لَّمۡ يَكُن لَّهَا وَلَدٞۚ فَإِن كَانَتَا ٱثۡنَتَيۡنِ فَلَهُمَا ٱلثُّلُثَانِ مِمَّا تَرَكَۚ وَإِن كَانُوٓاْ إِخۡوَةٗ رِّجَالٗا وَنِسَآءٗ فَلِلذَّكَرِ مِثۡلُ حَظِّ ٱلۡأُنثَيَيۡنِۗ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ أَن تَضِلُّواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمُۢ ١٧٦

They will ask you for a verdict. Say, God Himself gives you His ruling concerning [inheritance from] a person who leaves no heir in the direct line. If a man dies childless and has a sister, she shall inherit one-half of what he has left, just as he shall inherit all her [property] if she dies childless. But if there are two sisters, they shall both together have two-thirds of whatever he has left; and if there are brothers and sisters, then the male shall have the equal of two females' share. God makes all this clear to you, lest you go astray; and God knows everything. (176)

Overview

This last passage of this second longest *sūrah* in the Qur'ān is a confrontation with the Christians just as the preceding one was a confrontation with the Jews. Both had received revelations from God through their prophets in earlier times. They are, therefore, addressed in the Qur'ān as "people of the Book", or *"people of earlier revelations"* in our preferred rendering of the relevant Arabic terms. In the preceding passage, the *sūrah* did justice to Jesus, son of Mary, and his pure mother against the fabrications of the Jews. It also stated the view of the true faith concerning the alleged crucifixion and also did justice to the truth itself against the Jews, their schemes and stubborn opposition. In this passage, the *sūrah* also states the view of the true faith and does justice to Jesus, son of Mary, against the excesses of the Christians themselves. It also shows the fallacy of pagan legends that have crept into

Christianity from all nations and creeds with whom Christianity has come into close contact. These include Greek and Roman legends as well as Egyptian and Indian mythology.

Having found the faith of the people of earlier revelations full of distortions and rife with alien mythology, the Qur'ān has taken it upon itself to put this faith back into its original, true form. It also states the truth concerning the faith of the pagan Arabs which combined some remaining traces of the original faith of Abraham, (peace be upon him) covered by a great heap of legends and ignorant absurdities.

Indeed, Islam aims to state the true concept of Godhead to all mankind. It eliminates every distortion, excess, and complacency in human thinking. It puts right among other philosophies mistaken notions about the concept of God's oneness in the philosophy of Aristotle in Athens before the Christian era, Plotinus in Alexandria after Christianity, as well as all intervening and subsequent philosophies and concepts. All these grope in the dark, guided only by the flickering ray of the human mind which cannot be properly guided without a message from God.

The main issue discussed in this passage is that of the trinity, including the legend of whose son Jesus was. It goes on to state the true concept of God's oneness.

At the time when Islam was revealed, the Christian faith, including all denominations, was based on the concept of one god in three elements or manifestations: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is considered the son. Beyond that there are great differences among Christian sects with regard to Jesus Christ and whether he has a dual nature: Divine and human, or a single Divine nature; whether he has a single will despite his dual nature; whether time does not apply to him in the same way as it does not apply to the Father; and whether or not he was created. There are numerous concepts which vary much and which have led to persecution by one sect or another.

If we closely follow the history of the Christian faith, we are bound to come to the conclusion that the concept of trinity and that of Jesus being the son of God, (limitless is God in His glory) were unknown to the early Christians. Also unknown to them was the concept of Mary's Divine nature and her being included in the various concepts of trinity. These concepts were introduced into Christianity much later, at different times, when pagans embraced Christianity without altogether abandoning their pagan and polytheistic concepts. It is perhaps more likely that the concept of trinity was imported from ancient Egyptian religions, such as the concept of the trinity of Osiris, Isis and Horus, as well as the many other trinities in ancient Egyptian religions.

Unitarian Christians continued to resist every type of persecution which they suffered at the hands of Roman emperors and the various synods which followed the

line dictated by the state until the sixth century, suffering in the process untold torture.

The concept of trinity continues to represent an intellectual shock to Christian intelligentsia. The Church tries to make it acceptable to them by all means possible, including references to something unknown, the secrets of which will not be given to man until the day when everything in the heavens and on the earth is laid bare. Potter, the author of a treatise entitled "Fundamentals and Details" who is considered one of the main commentators on the Christian faith, states in his comments on the concept of trinity, "We have understood this as best as our minds can do. We however, hope to understand it more clearly in the future, when everything in the heavens and on earth is laid bare."

It is not our intention to give a historical account of the method and stages by which this concept has crept into Christianity. We will confine ourselves to the study of the Qur'ānic verses in this *sūrah* which aim at correcting this concept, alien as it is to true monotheism.

Truth and Falsehood in People's Beliefs

> *People of earlier revelations! Do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs, and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Christ Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger from God and His Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not say, "[God is] a trinity!" Desist, for that will be better for you. God is only One God. Infinite He is in His Glory! [To imagine] that He may have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Sufficient is God as a guardian.* (Verse 171)

This verse describes the claim that God has a son as overstepping the bounds of truth. It is nothing short of the type of excess which enabled the people who had received earlier revelations to make false claims about God and allege that He had a son. Far removed is such an idea from Him. They also allege that God is a trinity.

The concepts of fatherhood and trinity have gone through different stages with Christians, according to how advanced or backward the intellectual status of different generations may have been. The thought of God having a son sounds repugnant to human nature. The higher one's education, the more absurd that idea appears to him. The Christians were compelled, therefore, to try to make their claims more plausible by saying that the Son was not born as human beings are. It was merely a relationship of love between the father and the son. They have also tried to explain away the concept of trinity by saying that the three elements are "attributes" of the Divine Being who may have three different states. Hard as they may try, they

remain unable to give a rational explanation of these paradoxical concepts. Hence, they give them a mysterious outlook and claim that their reality will not completely appear until the secrets of the heavens and the earth are revealed.

Infinite is God in His glory. He neither has nor needs any partner. Nor is anyone similar to Him in any way. The very fact that He is the Creator means that He is different from all creatures. It stands to reason that the Creator should be different from His creation, the owner different from his property. It is to this fact that this Qur'ānic verse refers: *"God is only One God. Infinite He is in His Glory! [To imagine] that He may have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Sufficient is God as a guardian."* (Verse 171)

That the birth of Jesus (peace be upon him) without a father seems miraculous and preternatural to human beings is only because it is totally different from what is familiar. We must remember that what is familiar to us is certainly not all that is in the universe. Nor are the natural laws we know the only laws in the universe. We must remember that God creates natural laws and sets them into operation according to His will, which is unrestricted, free, absolute.

As regards Jesus Christ, God says the following, and what He says is always true: *"The Christ Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger from God and His Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him."* (Verse 171) He is, then, definitely and undoubtedly "a messenger from God". He is the same as the rest of God's messengers, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Muĥammad, and the other most honourable servants of God whom He selected to convey His message to mankind at various points in time.

"And His Word which He gave to Mary" Perhaps the best explanation of this phrase is that God created Jesus through a direct command which is described in various places in the Qur'ān and which means that when God wants to create something He only says to it "Be", and there it is. He casts this Word to Mary to create Jesus in her womb, without going through the process which is familiar to us humans and which involves a woman's egg being fertilised by a man's sperm. That is how human beings are created, apart from Adam. God's command can create everything and anything from nothing. No wonder that it can create Jesus in Mary's womb with the breathing of His spirit to which reference is made in the following part of the verse. *"And a soul from Him."*

The Breathing of God's Spirit

Formerly, God breathed of His spirit into the clay from which Adam was made, and thus Adam became a man. God says in the Qur'ān: *"When your Lord said to the angels: I am creating a human being from clay. When I have fashioned him and breathed into*

him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration." (38: 71-2) In the context of the creation of Jesus and referring to Jesus's mother, He also says: *"As for the one who guarded her chastity, We breathed into her of Our spirit."* (21: 91) The matter is, then, not without precedent. The spirit to which reference is made in all these statements is the same. None of the people who received revelations before Islam and who believed in Adam's creation and that God breathed into him of His spirit claim that Adam was a god, or one of the elements which constitute the Divine Being, as some people allege regarding Jesus. The two cases are similar: both have spirit breathed into them and both were created in the same fashion. Indeed, Adam was created without either a father or a mother, while Jesus was created having a mother. God also states: *"The case of Jesus in the sight of God is the same as the case of Adam. He created him of dust, and then said to him: 'Be', and he was,* (3: 59)

We see how clear and simple the whole issue is. We, therefore, wonder how personal prejudices and lingering traces of polytheism have added all this complexity to the simple issue of the creation of Jesus in the minds of one generation after another. The Creator who gave Adam, who had no parents, a human life which is different from that of all other creatures by breathing into him of His own spirit is the One who has given the same human life to Jesus who had no father. This simple, straightforward explanation is far more logical and easier to understand than those endless legends which speak of Jesus's Divine nature simply because he was born with no father. These legends, however, do not stop there. They also speak of the Divinity of the three elements of the trinity. Far exalted is God above all that.

"So believe in God and His messengers and do not say, '(God is] a trinity!' Desist, for that will be better for you." (Verse 171) Having given this simple and straightforward explanation, the *sūrah* makes this timely call to all mankind to believe in God and His messengers, including Jesus, who was only a messenger of God, and including Muĥammad, the last of God's messengers. To do so means to desist from making any false claim or advancing any legend or superstition.

"God is only One God." (Verse 171) This is a fact to which the consistency of natural laws, the unity of creation and its single method testify. It is also endorsed by human intellect, for the whole matter is easily appreciated by our minds which cannot imagine a creator looking the same as his creation and cannot conceive how three can merge into one, nor how one can be three.

"Infinite He is in His Glory! [To imagine] that He may have a son! To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth." (Verse 171) To have a son is only an extension of the existence of someone who dies. It is a sort of survival through offspring. God the Eternal has no need to continue His existence in the shape of mortals. Whatever exists in the heavens and on earth belongs to Him. It is sufficient for all mankind to be God's servants. He takes care of them all and there is no need

to claim or imagine that He may have a closer relationship with them by having a son from among their number. The relationship between Him and them is one of protection and guardianship: "*Sufficient is God as a guardian.*" (Verse 171)

We see that the Qur'ān does not stop at explaining the truth in perfect clarity with regard to beliefs. It goes further to reassure people that God looks after them and will see to it that they have their needs and interests served. With such reassurance, they are able to surrender themselves to Him.

Was Jesus Too Proud?

The *sūrah* goes on to establish the most important issue of the true faith. It states one direct result of the concept of God's oneness, namely, that all creatures are His servants. This means in effect that there is one Godhead to whom everything in the universe, every living creature is a servant. At this juncture, the Qur'ān shows the fallacy of Christian concepts as well as every concept which considers angels to be the children of God or His partners.

> *Never did the Christ feel too proud to be God's servant, nor do the angels who are near to Him. Those who feel too proud to worship Him and glory in their arrogance will He gather all together before Himself, then, to those who believe and do good deeds, He will grant their reward in full, and will give them yet more out of His bounty; while those who feel too proud and glory in their arrogance He will cause to suffer a grievous punishment. They shall find none to protect them from God and none to bring them any help.* (Verses 172-173)

Islam has taken much care to state God's oneness in the clearest of terms so that no trace of partnership with God or similarity to Him in any shape or form may be entertained. It has also taken care to explain that there is absolutely nothing which has any similarity with God — limitless is He in His glory. Nothing has any element, attribute or quality in common with God. Islam also takes care to explain that the true relationship between God and all things, including living creatures, is one between the Creator who is the Lord of the universe and His servants, a description which applies to everything in the universe. When we study the Qur'ān carefully we will not fail to notice the great care it takes to state these facts, or indeed this single fact in all its aspects, so that no trace of ambiguity or suspicion is left.

Islam makes it clear that this is the truth which all God's messengers have stated in the clearest of terms. It includes it in the Qur'ānic account of every messenger and his approach to his people. This is the central principle of all Divine messages from the time of Noah, to the time of Muĥammad, the last of all prophets. Every single one of them has declared very clearly: "*My people, worship God alone, for you have no deity*

other than Him." (11: 61)

It is indeed singular that followers of Divine religions which emphasise this fact most strongly have distorted it and alleged that God may have sons and daughters or may be united with one or more of His creatures in one form or another. In this way, they borrow concepts from pagan religions.

There is, then, an all-pervasive rule that applies to everything in the universe. God is the only deity and all creatures are His servants. People's faith and concepts, and indeed their whole lives, will not be set right unless this basic principle is made absolutely clear, untarnished, pure. To achieve that clarity, people must realise that God is their Lord and they are His servants. He is the Creator and they are creatures; He is the Owner and they belong to Him. In relation to Him they are all the same.

No one is His son and no one has a position of favour with Him except through something that is available to all. They only need to have the will to achieve this position and then they can easily have it through being God-fearing and doing good works.

Their roles, relationships, and indeed their lives generally will not be set on the right footing until the notion has been firmly settled in their minds that they are all servants of one Lord, which means that they are all in the same position towards Him. The means to draw closer to Him is available to everyone, because all human beings are equal and they stand in the same rank towards God. All claims to act as an intermediary between people and God are false. Equally false is every privilege claimed by any individual, group, family or clan. This is, indeed, essential to give credence to the principle that all mankind are equal and their social systems must he established on the basis of this equality.

We are not talking, then, of a mere question of faith considered intellectually before it is finally settled on this firm basis. It is a question of a complete system of life that defines social ties and establishes a complete code for human relationships. It heralds a new birth for man at the hands of Islam, which liberates man from being enslaved by other creatures so as to be a servant of only the Lord of all Creatures. At no time in the history of Islam was there a clerical order that subjugated people under the pretext that it represents God's son who imparts to it a considerable measure of authority. Nor has Islam ever known any form of theocratic government claiming a Divine right alleged to be delegated to it by God.

The Divine right was enjoyed by the Church and popes on the one hand and, on the other, by emperors who claimed for themselves a similar right. Both rights were exercised under the name of the son until the Crusaders launched their campaigns to conquer the land of Islam. On their way back, they carried with them the seeds of rebellion against this Divine right. This has led to the revolts of Martin Luther,

Calvin, and others, which are given the general title of a Reform Movement. They were all influenced by Islam and its clear concept which denies to all human beings any holy position and denies the delegation of Divine authority to man or woman in any way, shape or form. According to Islam, there is only the general relationship which applies to all creatures alike, namely, that Godhead belongs to God alone and everyone else is His servant.

The Ultimate Truth About Jesus

Now the *sūrah* makes a final and decisive statement concerning the claims about the Divine nature of Jesus Christ, his alleged sonship and the divinity claimed for the Holy Spirit. It provides a final and decisive word about every legend claiming that God has any son whatsoever, or that anyone other than God has any element of divinity in any shape or form. This the Qur'ān does by stating that Jesus, son of Mary, is only God's servant who will not disdain to acknowledge his position as such. Similarly, the angels who are favoured with being near to God are also His servants and they will not disdain to be so named. It also states that all creatures shall be gathered together before God and that those who disdain to be described as His servants will have grievous suffering awaiting them. As for those who acknowledge their servitude to God, these shall have great reward.

> *Never did the Christ feel too proud to be God's servant, nor do the angels who are near to Him. Those who feel too proud to worship Him and glory in their arrogance will He gather all together before Himself, then, to those who believe and do good deeds, He will grant their reward in full, and will give them yet more out of His bounty; while those who feel too proud and glory in their arrogance He will cause to suffer a grievous punishment. They shall find none to protect them from God and none to bring them any help.* (Verses 172-173)

Jesus, son of Mary, will never be too proud to accept his position as God's servant. Being God's Prophet and Messenger, Jesus (peace be upon him) was the best one to recognise the true nature of Divinity and that of servitude and that the two cannot be combined. He knew very well that he was only God's creature and that God's creatures cannot be like God or part of Him. He also knew that it is not merely that servitude to God is the only established fact, but also that it does not lower his position in any way. Indeed, no one rejects such servitude to God except an unbeliever who does not recognise the grace involved in the very process of being created. It is also the rank God assigns to His messengers, when they occupy their highest positions. The same applies to favoured angels, including Gabriel, the Holy Spirit. As has already been said, this is a rank that applies to Jesus as well as to all prophets. It is certainly strange that a section of Jesus's followers do not accept for

him what he himself accepts and knows full well.

"Those who feel too proud to worship Him and glory in their arrogance will He gather all together before Himself, then, to those who believe and do good deeds, He will grant their reward in full, and will give them yet more out of His bounty." (Verses 172-173) Their pride will not stop them being gathered by God who has the total authority of Godhead over His servants. His power over them is the same as His power over those who acknowledge their servitude and surrender themselves to Him. Those are likely to do good works, because this is the natural result of such knowledge and submission. These will be granted their reward in full and will be given an increase in addition to that.

On the other side, "*those who feel too proud and glory in their arrogance He will cause to suffer a grievous punishment. They shall find none to protect them from God and none to bring them any help.*" (Verse 173) God — limitless is He in His glory — does not want His servants to acknowledge their servitude and to serve Him alone because He needs their service or their worship. Nor does that acknowledgement and submission increase His kingdom in any way. He only wants them to realise the true nature of Divinity and servitude in order to have clear concepts, feelings and systems. Human life with all its systems and concepts cannot be established on a sound basis without this knowledge, acknowledgement and submission.

God wants this principle, with all the aspects we mentioned earlier, to be well established in people's minds and lives, so that they free themselves from the worship of creatures and worship God alone. They will then know who has the final authority in the universe, submit to Him alone and implement His law and system which governs their existence anyway. He wants them to realise that all His creatures are His servants, so that they can face up to anyone other than Him, and prostrate themselves to Him alone. They then stand proud, confident in front of tyrants and despots, while at the same time bowing and prostrating themselves to Him, glorifying Him alone. He wants them to know that winning favour with Him does not come through family relations, but through good works. They will then do well and build the earth in order to win favour with God. Moreover, when they appreciate the true nature of Divinity and servitude, they will rise to defend God's authority on earth when others try to usurp it for themselves, either in His name or otherwise. They will accept nothing of this, but will defer to His authority alone, and their life will become nobler and more honourable when it is conducted on this basis.

When this great principle is fully appreciated, when people's hearts and minds look up to God alone, seeking His pleasure and watching Him before every step or action and establishing their systems on the basis of His guidance, it will add to human life a great credit of goodness, dignity, freedom, justice and honesty. This is the sort of elevation which life on earth experiences as a result of people's submission

to God alone. As for God's reward to those who acknowledge His Divinity and Lordship and exert themselves in doing good, this is certain to come when they meet Him. Whatever He gives them is an aspect of His grace that He bestows on whom He wills.

It is in this light that we should look on the issue of faith as it is explained clearly and lucidly by Islam. We should remember that this is the true basis of all Divine messages and it is the same principle that was central to all Divine messages before they were distorted by those who claimed to be their followers. As we have already said, it represents a new birth of man guaranteeing him dignity, justice, and liberation from all sorts of servitude to creatures, so that he remains free to serve God alone. That servitude is reflected in his worship as well as in his system of life.

Those who disdain to acknowledge their servitude to God are indeed humiliated by other forms of servitude that know no end. They submit to their desires and succumb to superstition and to human beings as well. They recognise that those are human like them, but they nevertheless bow their heads to them and accept their authority over their lives, systems, laws, values and standards. Both groups of people, the ones who are worshipped and the ones who worship them are alike in God's view. The one group humiliate themselves so as to serve the other in this life, but in the life to come, *"He will cause [them] to suffer a grievous punishment. They shall find none to protect them from God and none to bring them any help."* (Verse 173)

This is the greatest issue of faith, which is presented in the above passage so as to provide the final judgement on the distortion perpetrated by Christians at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān. It continues to be the final word against all distortions that may be perpetrated at any future time.

A Glorious Light to Remove All Doubt

As the *sūrah* moves to its conclusion, it makes a general call to all mankind, similar to the one that followed the confrontation with the Jews earlier in the *sūrah.* It tells people that this final message brings its own proof from God and that it is a glorious light which removes all doubt. Those who accept its guidance will receive God's mercy and His grace. They will find themselves guided by this light along a straight path.

> *Mankind, a clear proof has now come to you from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a glorious light. Those who believe in God and hold fast to Him, will He surely admit to His mercy and grace, and will guide them to Himself along a straight path.* (Verses 174-175)

Again, the Qur'ān brings its own proof to mankind from their Lord: "*Mankind, a clear proof has now come to you from your Lord.*" (Verse 174) The Divine mark is apparent in the Qur'ān which distinguishes it from what human beings say or write in both construction and message. This is so clear that it is sometimes acknowledged, quite remarkably, by people who do not understand Arabic at all.

We were once travelling by sea across the Atlantic towards our destination, New York. We, six passengers from different Arab countries and most of the crew who came from Nubia in the remote south of Egypt, organised Friday Prayer. It was left to me to deliver the sermon, in which I included several verses from the Qur'ān. All the passengers on board gathered around us to watch.

After we finished Prayer, many passengers came to express to us their admiration for our worship. One of them was a Yugoslav lady fleeing the tyranny of Communism, hoping to settle in the United States. There were tears in her eyes and her voice was trembling as she said in broken English: "I cannot hide my great admiration of your remarkable Prayer. However, this is not what I want to say. I do not understand a single word of your language but I feel that it has an exceptional rhythm which I have not come across in any other language. There were certain paragraphs in the sermon which were even more remarkable and had a greater effect on me."

It was clear that she was referring to the Qur'ānic verses that I had included in the speech, because these have their own special rhythm. I do not say that this applies to everyone who does not speak Arabic, but it is certainly very significant.

As for those who know this language and understand its style and can appreciate its finer expressions and methods of construction, theirs was a special case when they were presented with the Qur'ān by Muĥammad, God's Messenger, (peace be upon him). We know the famous story of al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, Abū Sufyān and Abū Jahl, three of the fiercest opponents of Islam, when they sought to listen to the Qur'ān secretly under the cover of darkness. They came only to listen to the Qur'ān, when the Quraysh tribe had decided not to listen to anything the Prophet said. Nevertheless, these Quraysh leaders came out individually, none knowing anything about what the other two were doing, and none realising that he had companions doing the same thing as he. They sat there, outside the place where the Prophet and his few followers were reading the Qur'ān, to listen to it. At dawn, they went back, hoping to arrive home before anyone could see them. But they met on the road and each then blamed the others. They pledged to one another that they would never do it again. However, all three did the same thing for three consecutive nights, before they made a solemn pledge never to repeat their deed. This is only one among many similar stories. People who appreciate fine style can understand the unique nature of the Qur'ān and its captivating effect on people and the clear proof it provides of the

truthfulness of its message.

We cannot speak in detail here on the subject matter of the Qur'ān, the concept of life it presents, its approach to human life and the system it lays down. In each of these, we have a clear proof of its origin and that it can never be the word of man. It carries the mark of its author, God, the Glorious.

The Qur'ān also provides light: *"And We have sent down to you a glorious light."* (Verse 174) It is a light which lays bare the very nature of things, and defines the parting of the ways of truth and falsehood within man himself and in human life altogether. When it is properly appreciated, this light gives man the ability to see himself and everything around him clearly, without anything covering its nature or presenting itself in a false light or position. Everything then becomes clear and simple so that man wonders how he could not see it so clearly and simply before he was able to benefit by the light of the Qur'ān.

When man allows his soul to be guided by the Qur'ān and receives from it its values and standards, he feels that he has acquired a new element, one which allows him to see all matters with perfect ease and clarity. Many things that used to worry him now fall into place, all appearing as part of a general system, which is simple, natural and clear.

We can dwell at great length on this expression: *"and We have sent down to you a glorious light"*. But whatever we say, we will never be able to describe its message in our own words and we cannot impart its significance to anyone who has not experienced it. Such concepts can only be appreciated by personal experience.

"Those who believe in God and hold fast to Him, will He surely admit to His mercy and grace, and will guide them to Himself along a straight path." (Verse 175) Holding fast to God is an essential quality of faith, when it is properly understood and held. When man appreciates the true nature of God and the fact that all creation are His servants, he realises that his own choice is to hold fast to God alone who has all power over all things. He admits to His mercy and grace those who hold fast to Him. These aspects are shown them in this life as they benefit by the reassurance of faith and spare themselves all the worry experienced by those who have no faith. Moreover, it provides the basis upon which the life of the community and its system is established, clean, free, honest and dignified. Everyone knows his proper place. He is a servant of God and a person of great honour in relation to everyone else. This is something unique to the system of faith as provided by Islam, the system that frees people from service to other creatures, and which makes them submit to God alone. It ensures their absolute equality as it gives all sovereignty to God alone.

The believers, then, enjoy God's mercy and grace in this life as well as in the life to come. He *"will guide them to Himself along a straight path."* The phrase, *"to Himself"*,

adds an exceptional measure of vividness to this expression, as it portrays the believers being guided by God along the path which is straight and which leads them to Him, step by step. Anyone who consciously believes in God and confidently holds fast to Him will appreciate this expression for he feels himself being guided at every moment in his life and before every step. He or she realises that they are drawing closer to God along a straight path. But this cannot be properly appreciated except by those who experience it.

Final Words on Inheritance

> *They will ask you for a verdict. Say, God Himself gives you His ruling concerning [inheritance from] a person who leaves no heir in the direct line. If a man dies childless and has a sister, she shall inherit one-half of what he has left, just as he shall inherit all her [property] if she dies childless. But if there are two sisters, they shall both together have two-thirds of whatever he has left; and if there are brothers and sisters, then the male shall have the equal of two females' share. God makes all this clear to you, lest you go astray; and God knows everything.* (Verse 176)

Thus, this *sūrah* is concluded with a verse that relates to the family system and to social security which is provided within the family. This brings the *sūrah's* conclusion in line with its beginning, when many of the rules of this social system were first explained. Here in conclusion, we have rules governing the inheritance of a person who is described as *kalālah.* This term, defined by Abū Bakr and all scholars, describes someone who has no parents and no children. In other words, he leaves no heir in the direct line of inheritance.

Some of the rules which relate to the estate of such a person were given very early in the *sūrah* defining the way his estate is distributed when he has no heirs on his father's side but is inherited by heirs on his mother's side. In this verse, the rest of the rules governing this form of inheritance are provided. If the deceased who has no heir in the direct line has a sister, whether by both of his parents or by his father only, she inherits half of what her brother leaves behind. In the case of her death, leaving behind no children and no parents, her brother takes all her property after the other heirs who have apportioned shares have taken their shares. If it happens that the deceased person has two sisters by both his parents or by his father only, they share together two-thirds of his property. If he has more brothers and sisters, then the general rule which gives a male twice the share of a female applies in the distribution of his estate. Brothers and sisters by both parents exclude brothers and sisters on the father's side only when both types happen to survive the deceased person.

This verse, providing for the legislation of inheritance, is concluded with a comment that refers all matters to God alone and relates the regulation of duties and

rights, financial or otherwise, to God's law. *"God makes all this clear to you lest you go astray; and God knows everything."*

"Everything" means all things, whether they relate to inheritance or to any other subject, within family relations or community relations. God provides legislations and laws and people have the choice of either following them in all matters or falling into error. The choice is simple: what mankind is offered is either to follow clear guidance or to go astray. God tells the truth, and He says: "What lies beyond the truth except error?"

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

SAYYID QUṬB

Vol IV
Sūrah 5

Content

Content ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Al-Mā'idah **1**

Prologue *1*

1 Contracts and Their Fulfilment *9*
Overview 12
Implementing Divine Decrees 14
Other Restrictions 16
Justice for Friend and Foe 18
Prohibited Meat 20
Perfection at its Best 22
Grace Abounding 23
Blessings in Full Measure 25
The Choice Religion 27
Nothing Wholesome is Forbidden 27
Good Relations with Other Religions 29
Getting Ready for Prayer 31
Too Valuable an Obligation 32
Justice Even When Dealing with Enemies 34
A Gulf Too Wide 35
A Promise That Never Fails 38

2 Broken Pledges *40*
Overview 43
The Terms of Covenants Made with God 45
Hardened Hearts 47
The Origins of Enmity Among the Christians 49
A Messenger with an Unlikely Background 51
The Nature of God's Final Message 52
False Claims Leading to Disbelief 54
The True Verdict 57
Wishful Thinking That Comes to Nothing 57
An Appeal Mixed with Worry 59
A Typically Cowardly Attitude 62

3 The First Murder *65*
Overview 67
A Murder is Committed 70
A Lesson Provided by a Raven 73
The Killing of All Humanity 74
The Just Punishment for Rebellion 75
Differing Views on Implementation 76
Man's Actions Determine His Future 78
A Severe Punishment for Theft 80
A Punishment to Fit the Crime 84

4 The Right Basis for Judgement *87*
Overview 90
The Superiority of Islamic Legislation 93
Playing Games with Divine Judgement 95
A Baffling Attitude Towards God's Judgement 98

Light and Guidance Shine from the Torah 100
An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth 103
Guidance and Light Given in the Gospel 106
A Book to Supersede All Scriptures 108
The Temptation to Abandon God's Law 111

5 Delineation of an Essential Relationship *114*
Overview 117
Alliances That Cannot Survive 119
Distinctive Values of the Muslim Community 122
The Best Insurance for the Future 124
When Hypocrisy is Laid Bare 127
The Qualities of God's Beloved People 130
To Love God and Be Loved by Him 133
The Party Assured of Triumph 135
When Faith and Prayers Are Mocked 137
Finding Fault with Dedicated Believers 139
Those in the Worst Position of All 143
The Exposure of a Horrid Nature 144
A Confirmed Attitude of Unbelief 145
Advance Results of Implementing Divine Law 148
Development and Faith Go Hand in Hand 150
Worship Gives a New Face to Human Life 154

6 Who Follows Divine Faith? *156*
Overview 159
A Vital Proclamation to Deliver God's Message 159
When the Truth is Advocated by the Few 162
The Truth Versus People's Fancies 165
Misconceptions Leading to Disbelief 167
Mary, the Saintly Woman and Her Son 170
When Wrongdoing is Condoned 172
A Change That Must Be Total 175
An Essential Requirement of Faith 178

7 Relations with Other Faiths *181*
Overview 182
Who Hates the Believers Most? 182
An Attitude Bringing Rich Rewards 186
On Recognising the Truth of Islam 187
A Positive Response to God's Revelations 191

8 Detailed Legislation for Believers *194*
Overview 198
Prohibiting What is Lawful 199
Atonement for Breaking an Oath 201
A Categorical Prohibition of Intoxicants 204
Obedience: A Main Characteristic of Muslim Society 207
Why Intoxicants Are So Repugnant 209
Self-Surrender and Obedience 210
Consecration and Game Killing 212
The Purpose of the Trial 214
The Reason for Prohibition 217
Foul and Wholesome 220
Politeness in Dealing with the Prophet 222
Choosing the Hard Way 224
A Practical Approach to Knowledge 225
Freedom for the Human Mind 228
Superstitious Practices 229

Contradiction in Terms....231
Individual Responsibility....232
Witnesses at the Time of Death....234

9 About Jesus and the Repast....*238*
Overview....240
When All Messengers Are Gathered Together....241
A Hard Confrontation....242
Favours Granted to Jesus's Followers....244
The Miraculous Repast....246
Did Jesus Claim Divinity?....247
The Final Note....250

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 5

Al-Mā'idah

(The Repast)

Prologue

The Qur'ān was bestowed from on high to Muĥammad, God's Messenger, so that he might, by means of it, establish a state, bring a community into being, organise a society, cultivate minds and consciences and set moral values. The Qur'ān was also to set the bonds that would operate within the Muslim community, as also define the international relations the Muslim state might have. All these were to be firmly joined together, so that all their parts would form one coherent whole, stemming from a single source and referring to a single authority. This is, in fact, the nature of religion, as defined by God and practised by Muslims in the days when they were indeed truly Muslims.

Hence, we find in this *sūrah,* as we found in the three long ones preceding it, a whole host of topics interlinked by the main goal the Qur'ān was revealed to achieve, namely, social organisation on the basis of a well-defined concept formulated by faith. Such a concept looks up to God for all its laws, values, standards and code of living and maintains that all Godhead, Lordship and authority belong to God alone.

We also find in this *sūrah* a clear effort to formulate concepts of belief, pure, purged of all traces of idolatrous superstition, and distortion perpetrated by followers of earlier Divine religions. Moreover, the Muslim community is made fully aware of its true nature, its role, the course it must follow and the difficulties that it involves. It is also alerted to the wicked designs of its enemies who are certainly hostile to its faith. The *sūrah* also includes rulings concerning some of its worship rituals, specifically those which aim to give the Muslim individual and the Muslim community spiritual purification, consolidating their relations with their Lord. Other legislation included in the *sūrah* aims to regulate relations within the Muslim community, as well as inter-community relations. Furthermore, the *sūrah* includes

legislation permitting or prohibiting certain types of food, drink, marriages and other practices. All these form a complete unit, in a single *sūrah,* confirming the true meaning of religion, as God intended it and as understood by Muslims who are true to their faith.

In this *sūrah,* as well as in the two preceding *sūrahs,* this idea is not given implicitly but is rather stated explicitly and emphatically. Furthermore, the *sūrah* makes clear that all these together form the religion of Islam, that accepting it all means faith, and that putting it all into practice is the meaning of submission to God or Islam. It further states that those who do not judge according to God's revelations are unbelievers, wrongdoers and transgressors. Indeed, by refusing to judge in accordance with God's revelations, they prefer the judgement of ignorance, and this is something that a Muslim believer simply cannot do.

This fundamental principle is given prominence in the *sūrah* together with the pure concept of faith on which it is based. It is pertinent to show here how the two are intertwined.

As it emphasises that making God's revelation the basis of all judgements is the true meaning of Islam, and that what God has pronounced as lawful or unlawful is the true meaning of religion, the Qur'ān relies on the fact that God is the only deity in the universe and has no partner to share in His Divinity; God the only Creator has no partner in His creation; the only Owner has no partner in His dominion. Hence, it is both logical and inevitable that nothing should be decided except on the basis of His law and by His permission. The One who creates all and owns all has all authority to determine the constitution to be followed by His creatures in His dominion. He is the One to legislate and to be obeyed whatever He may rule. Whoever disputes this is guilty of disobedience, rebellion and disbelief. It is He who defines the true concept of faith as well as the proper code of living. Those who believe in Him embrace the faith He has revealed and implement the system He has outlined. The two go hand in hand. They worship Him through offering the worship rituals and through implementing the code He has legislated, drawing no distinction between a ritual and a legal provision. Both come from God, who alone holds all sovereignty and all authority. This is the essence of the belief in Him as the only God, who has all dominion and who knows all that takes place anywhere in the heavens and the earth. Hence, implementing God's law is at the core of every prophet's religion. Indeed, it is Divine religion which cannot take any other form.

Thus, statements come thick and fast in the *sūrah* emphasising God's oneness and repudiating all forms of polytheism, trinity and association of partners with God or equals to Him. Such statements also establish the characteristics of Godhead and servitude to God in absolute clarity. (See verses 15-17 and 72-3)

Because God is the only Lord, Creator and Sovereign, then He is the only one who legislates and defines what is lawful and what is forbidden. He is the one to be obeyed in what He legislates in the same way as He is the one to whom people should address their worship. He has concluded a covenant with His servants to this effect. Hence, He requires believers in Islam to fulfil their covenant, and warns them against the consequences of breaching it as did the Israelites before them. (Verses 1-2, 7-8, 12-14)

The *sūrah* includes a host of legislative rulings on a wide variety of subjects, such as which animals are lawful to eat when slaughtered or hunted; what is permissible or restricted during the period of consecration, or *iĥrām,* in pilgrimage and in the Sacred Mosque at the Ka`bah; what is permissible or forbidden in marriage; purification for worship and prayer; judgement and the administration of justice; mandatory punishment for theft and rebellion against a lawful Islamic government; wines and intoxicants, gambling, idols and divining arrows; atonement for breached oaths and hunting when in the state of consecration; making a will; cattle marked out by superstition and set aside from man's use; and penal provisions in the Torah that have been incorporated in Islamic law. Thus, we see how legal provisions throughout the *sūrah* are presented hand in hand with teachings concerning worship, this without any separating format between them.

Side by side with such rulings and legal provisions, varied as they are, we are commanded to obey God and observe what He has legislated and ordered. We are also commanded not to make any verdict of permissibility or prohibition which is not sanctioned by God. We also have a statement that Islam is the faith God has laid down for the community that submit to Him in all its affairs. It is the faith He has perfected in order to make His grace bestowed on the Muslim community complete. (Verses 2, 87, 92 and 3)

The *sūrah* does not express in general terms the commandment of absolute obedience with respect to prohibition and permissibility. Rather, it makes an absolutely clear statement requiring people to make all judgements based on what God Himself has revealed. To place such judgement on any other basis is tantamount to disbelief, wrongdoing and transgression. The *sūrah* includes many decisive statements in this respect. (Verses 41-50)

Thus the whole issue is made abundantly clear: there is one God who is the Creator and the Owner of all. Hence, there is one judge, legislator and master commanding all authority. This, by necessity, means that there is only one legal code and one approach. The result of all this is that there can be either obedience and judgement in accordance with God's law, which is the prerequisite of faith, or there can be disobedience, rebellion and judgement on some other basis, which is the mark of disbelief, wrongdoing and transgression. This is the essence of the Divine religion,

the following of which is the subject matter of God's covenant with mankind. It is the same religion preached by all God's messengers to all believing communities and the community of Muĥammad's followers.

It is, then, imperative that Divine religion means that all judgement should be in accordance with what God has revealed from on high, paying no regard to any other consideration. It is only on the basis of such reality that God's authority and sovereignty are seen to operate fully and the declaration of "there is no deity other than God" takes practical effect.

The mutual association between Divine religion and making God's revelation the basis of all judgement is not merely due to the fact that God's revelation is infinitely better than all the laws and regulations human beings may devise and enact. This is only one, though not the main, reason for it. The main reason is found in the fact that judgement in accordance with God's revelation is the practical meaning of attributing all Godhead to God alone and denying all others any attribute of Godhead. This is the meaning of Islam, both linguistically, i.e. submission, and religiously, i.e. self-surrender to God alone.

It is not sufficient, therefore, that human beings should adopt legislation similar to Divine law, or indeed that they should adopt Divine law itself but label it as their own, without attributing it to Him and implementing it in acknowledgement of His sovereignty. What is important here is that people must not claim for themselves any authority or sovereignty except in the form of implementing God's law and establishing His authority on earth.

It is on this principle that the judgement made in the *sūrah* is based: "*Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers ... wrongdoers ... transgressors*". (Verses 44, 45 and 47) This is because those people who have taken for their judgement a basis other than what God has revealed are in effect rejecting God's position as the only God in the universe. They express their rejection through their actions and practices, even though they may not declare it verbally. Actions truly speak louder than words. Hence, the Qur'ān describes them as unbelievers, wrongdoers and as iniquitous. These are apt descriptions for their rejection of Godhead as they refuse to acknowledge God's absolute sovereignty, and claim for themselves the most essential quality of Godhead, namely enacting legislation for people which is at variance with God's law. This concept is repeatedly emphasised in several clear statements made in this *sūrah*.

Another main theme running throughout the *sūrah* is the outline which is given of the nature of the Muslim community, its true role in human life on earth, its attitude towards its enemies, and at the same time an expose of those enemies, their deviant beliefs as also what they scheme against Islam. As it did in the previous three *sūrahs*,

here again we see the Qur'ān leading the Muslim community in battle against hostile forces.

The book that has been revealed to this community is the final message God sends to mankind. It confirms previous messages in the essence of faith and the main concepts they outline. However, since it is God's final message, it is the final and governing text. It provides the ultimate version of the Divine law God wants mankind to implement for the whole duration of human life on earth. Whatever it endorses of past law remains part of God's law, and whatever it abrogates loses this status, even though it is stated in one or the other of God's revealed books. *"This day I have perfected your religion for you and bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you."* (Verse 3) *"And to you We have revealed the Book, setting forth the truth, confirming the Scriptures which had already been revealed before it and superseding them."* (Verse 48)

The role assigned to the Muslim community, then, is that of a trusteeship over mankind: it must ensure justice for all, unaffected by feelings of friendship or hostility, or by what difficulties others place in its way. To endure difficulties and hardships is part and parcel of the discharge of its trust, as is the dismissal of other people's deviation, caprice and desire. The Muslim community must always endeavour not to allow even the slightest deviation from its course or its legal code to curry favour with, or win the support of anyone. It must always seek to win God's pleasure and implement His law. (Verses 2, 8, and 48-9)

A consequence of the fact that the Muslim community is the heir to all Divine messages, the recipient of God's final message to mankind and the trustee over mankind on the basis of the last religion is that it must never have a patronage relationship with those who reject this religion or those who mock its duties and acts of worship. Its patrons are only God, His Messenger, and true believers. The bond that makes this community is not its race, geographical location or national heritage; its only bond is that of faith, the Divine code and final message. (Verses 3, 51, 55, 57-8 and 105)

The enemies of the Muslim community are those who reject Divine guidance and take a hostile attitude towards the system revealed by God. They remain unwilling to see the truth or to moderate their long-standing attitude of hardened hostility to it. The Muslim community must always be able to identify them on the basis of their past attitude towards God's messengers and their recent one towards Islam, its Messenger and followers. (Verses 12-14, 20-6, 32, 41-3, 59-64, 68, 70-1, and 78-82)

This sustained attack that exposes the enemies of the Muslim community, with particular emphasis on the hostility of the Jews and idolaters and some references to the hypocrites and Christians, lead us to another theme the *sūrah* highlights. This

theme portrays an attitude that was very much alive in the Muslim community of Madinah at the time when the Qur'ān was revealed. It also deals with the attitude of the Muslim community throughout its history towards hostile forces, which remain the same at all times.

It is, then, pertinent to ask: at what stage in the history of the Muslim community in Madinah was this *sūrah* revealed? A number of reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed after Sūrah *48, Al-Fatĥ,* or The Conquest. It is well known that Sūrah *48* was revealed shortly after the Prophet concluded the Peace Treaty of al-Ĥudaibiyah in Year 6 after his migration to Madinah. Some of these reports also suggest that the whole *sūrah*, with the exception of verse 3, was revealed on one occasion. Verse 3, according to these reports, was revealed later, during the Prophet's pilgrimage in Year 10.

However, a careful review of this *sūrah*'*s* themes and the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime tends to refute this report. Indeed, one of the events that took place shortly before the Battle of Badr conclusively proves that the verses that speak about the attitude of the Israelites towards entering the Holy Land with Moses were known to the Muslims before that Battle which took place in Year 2 AH. Indeed, one report suggests that Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, and another report says that al-Miqdād ibn `Amr, quoted one of these verses, as one or the other said to the Prophet: "We will not say to you what the Israelites said to Moses, 'Go forth, you and your Lord, and fight. We will stay here'. Rather we say: 'Go forth, you and your Lord, and fight; we will indeed fight with you.'"

Furthermore, in reviewing the themes of the *sūrah* it is clear that when the verses speaking about the Jews were revealed, they still commanded a position of strength and influence in Madinah, and this could have had a bearing on the Muslim community. Hence, the need for this campaign to expose their reality and to render their scheming ineffective. It is well known that the position and influence of the Jews in Madinah was at a very low ebb after the siege and punishment of the Jewish tribe of Qurayżah that followed the Battle of the Moat. By the end of that siege, the three main Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā`, al-Nađīr and Qurayżah had been evacuated from Madinah. All this took place before the signing of the Treaty at al-Ĥudaibiyah with the Arab idolaters. Hence, once that Treaty came into effect, there was no need to give the Jews such importance whereby a whole *sūrah* was devoted to them. Moreover, the time of peaceful coexistence with the Jews was over, and could not be reinstated after they had violated their pledges time after time. Hence, some verses in the *sūrah* must have been revealed before their evacuation. Examples of these are verses 13 and 42.

All this tends to indicate that the opening of the *sūrah* and one or two passages of it were most probably revealed after *Sūrah* 48, while several of its passages were

revealed much earlier. Moreover, verse 3 which includes the statement, "*This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you*", was revealed much later. In fact, this statement was the last of all Qur'ānic revelations, according to the most accurate reports. This means that the *sūrah* could not have been revealed all at once, as one report suggests.

We need to re-emphasise here what we said in the Prologues to *Sūrahs* 2, 3 and 4. As it was being revealed, the Qur'ān was providing leadership for the Muslim community in its battle against its enemies who rejected and opposed its faith, including the Jews, the idolaters and hypocrites. At the same time and using the same approach, it was formulating a proper concept of faith for the believers and giving the Muslim community directives and legislation for its internal organisation. This was all done by means of the same integrated approach.

The most basic and important aspect of building this structure was to purge the monotheistic faith of all confusion, while making it clear that religion means a system for life. It was also intended to illustrate that making God's revelations the basis of all judgement and to be guided in all matters of life by God's message is the true meaning of faith, and that this is Islam in practice. In fact, without all this, the concept of God's oneness will not materialise. As we have already said, the real meaning of God's oneness is to attribute all Godhead, with its essential qualities to God alone. Sovereignty and legislation are among these qualities, just like offering worship rituals. Hence, they must all be attributed and addressed to God alone. This *sūrah* emphasises this point most strongly.

As is clear from this quick preview, the themes discussed in this *sūrah* are closely related to those discussed in the previous three *sūrahs*. However, each *sūrah* has its own distinctive character, approach and style. Each is distinguished by the focus it maintains, the aspects it highlights and the effects it seeks to achieve. This gives each *sūrah* its own quintessential and distinctive style.

The style that distinguishes this *sūrah* is its decisiveness whether in provisions it outlines, which must naturally be free of the legal ambiguity, or in the principles and directives it lays down. These may be given in different styles in other *sūrahs*. However, in the present *sūrah* they are given in full detail and in a distinctively decisive phraseology.

A word should be added about God's statement in the third verse of the *sūrah:* "*This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you*." This statement implies the oneness of the source from which the Muslim community receives its code of living, social system and the law that governs its relations and ties with others for all time. It

also implies the completeness of this religion with all its details of belief, worship and legal code. None of these may be changed or amended. This religion is now completed and finalised. To amend any part of it is tantamount to rejecting it altogether, because it implies a contradiction of what God has stated about its perfection. To deny or contradict that is to deny the faith altogether. To turn away from it and to adopt a different system or legal code need not be described by us; it has been fully described by God in this *sūrah.* Hence, it needs no further elaboration from us.

This verse states most decisively that Islam is a religion and a legal code for all time; that this version which God has approved as a religion for Muslims is the final one. It is the faith and the religion for that time and all time. There need not be a new religion for every period of time. What we have is a final message, completed and perfected by God who has approved it as a faith for all mankind. Whoever wants to change, amend, alter, replace, or develop any part of it is better advised to seek for himself a faith other than Islam: "*He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he will be among the lost.*" (3: 85)

This Divine constitution that includes a concept of belief, worship rituals and a legal code is meant to govern all human life. It allows life to develop and progress without any need to breach any part of the constitution or its detailed provisions. It is meant to be like this, because it is God's final message to mankind.

This constitution has all the necessary elements that facilitate life's development without breaching any of its fundamental or detailed principles. It also means that the constitution has made the necessary provisions for such life development. We must remember that as God devised this constitution, with all its details, He was fully aware of future developments in life and of the emerging needs and requirements of mankind. Hence, when God declares that He has perfected this faith and approved it as a religion for mankind, He has made it able to meet all such requirements. Whoever thinks otherwise does not give God His due respect and status.

Now we will begin looking at the text of the *sūrah* in detail.

1
Contracts and Their Fulfilment

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَوۡفُواْ بِٱلۡعُقُودِۚ أُحِلَّتۡ لَكُم بَهِيمَةُ ٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ إِلَّا مَا يُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡكُمۡ غَيۡرَ مُحِلِّي ٱلصَّيۡدِ وَأَنتُمۡ حُرُمٌۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَحۡكُمُ مَا يُرِيدُ ١

Believers, be true to your contracts. Lawful to you is the [flesh of the] beasts of cattle, other than that which is announced to you herein. But you are not allowed to hunt while you are in the state of consecration. God decrees what He will. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تُحِلُّواْ شَعَٰٓئِرَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا ٱلشَّهۡرَ ٱلۡحَرَامَ وَلَا ٱلۡهَدۡيَ وَلَا ٱلۡقَلَٰٓئِدَ وَلَآ ءَآمِّينَ ٱلۡبَيۡتَ ٱلۡحَرَامَ يَبۡتَغُونَ فَضۡلٗا مِّن رَّبِّهِمۡ وَرِضۡوَٰنٗاۚ وَإِذَا حَلَلۡتُمۡ فَٱصۡطَادُواْۚ وَلَا يَجۡرِمَنَّكُمۡ شَنَـَٔانُ قَوۡمٍ أَن صَدُّوكُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِ أَن تَعۡتَدُواْۘ وَتَعَاوَنُواْ عَلَى ٱلۡبِرِّ وَٱلتَّقۡوَىٰۖ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُواْ عَلَى ٱلۡإِثۡمِ وَٱلۡعُدۡوَٰنِۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلۡعِقَابِ ٢

Believers, do not offend against the symbols set up by God, or against the sacred month, or the offerings or the garlands, or against those who repair to the Sacred House, seeking God's grace and pleasure. Only when you are clear of the Sacred Precincts and released from the state of consecration may you hunt. Do not let your hatred of people who would debar you from the Sacred Mosque lead you into aggression; but rather help one another in furthering righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in furthering evil and aggression. Have fear of God, for God is severe in retribution. (2)

حُرِّمَتۡ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡمَيۡتَةُ وَٱلدَّمُ وَلَحۡمُ ٱلۡخِنزِيرِ وَمَآ أُهِلَّ لِغَيۡرِ ٱللَّهِ بِهِۦ

Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of swine; and that over which any name other than God's has been invoked;

وَٱلْمُنْخَنِقَةُ وَٱلْمَوْقُوذَةُ وَٱلْمُتَرَدِّيَةُ
وَٱلنَّطِيحَةُ وَمَآ أَكَلَ ٱلسَّبُعُ إِلَّا مَا ذَكَّيْتُمْ
وَمَا ذُبِحَ عَلَى ٱلنُّصُبِ وَأَن تَسْتَقْسِمُوا۟
بِٱلْأَزْلَٰمِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ فِسْقٌ ۗ ٱلْيَوْمَ يَئِسَ ٱلَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا۟ مِن دِينِكُمْ فَلَا تَخْشَوْهُمْ وَٱخْشَوْنِ ۚ
ٱلْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتْمَمْتُ
عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِى وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمَ
دِينًا ۚ فَمَنِ ٱضْطُرَّ فِى مَخْمَصَةٍ غَيْرَ
مُتَجَانِفٍ لِّإِثْمٍ ۙ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ
﴿٣﴾

and the animal that has been strangled, or beaten to death, or killed by a fall, or gored to death, or savaged by a beast of prey, except that which you may have slaughtered when it is still alive; and [forbidden to you are] animals that have been slaughtered on idolatrous altars. And [forbidden also] is the division [of meat] by raffling with arrows; for all this is sinful. Today, the unbelievers have lost all hope of your religion. Have no fear of them, then, but fear Me alone. This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you. He who is forced by hunger [to eat of what is forbidden], with no inclination to commit sin, [will find] God Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (3)

يَسْـَٔلُونَكَ مَاذَآ أُحِلَّ لَهُمْ ۖ قُلْ أُحِلَّ لَكُمُ
ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتُ ۙ وَمَا عَلَّمْتُم مِّنَ ٱلْجَوَارِحِ
مُكَلِّبِينَ تُعَلِّمُونَهُنَّ مِمَّا عَلَّمَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَكُلُوا۟
مِمَّآ أَمْسَكْنَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَٱذْكُرُوا۟ ٱسْمَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ ۖ
وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٤﴾

They ask you what is lawful to them. Say: Lawful to you are all good things of life. As for those hunting animals which you train by imparting to them something of the knowledge God has imparted to you, you may eat of what they catch for you. But mention God's name over it and have fear of God; indeed, God is swift in reckoning. (4)

ٱلْيَوْمَ أُحِلَّ لَكُمُ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتُ ۖ وَطَعَامُ ٱلَّذِينَ
أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ حِلٌّ لَّكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ حِلٌّ
لَّهُمْ ۖ وَٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتُ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ
وَٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتُ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن
قَبْلِكُمْ إِذَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ مُحْصِنِينَ
غَيْرَ مُسَٰفِحِينَ وَلَا مُتَّخِذِىٓ أَخْدَانٍ ۗ
وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَقَدْ حَبِطَ عَمَلُهُۥ
وَهُوَ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And the virtuous women from among the believers and the virtuous women from among those who were given revelations before you (are also lawful to you) when you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as mistresses. Anyone who rejects the faith (will find that) all his works will be in vain. In the life to come he shall be among the losers. (5)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى

Believers, when you are about to pray, wash your faces, and your hands and arms

ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ فَٱغۡسِلُواْ وُجُوهَكُمۡ وَأَيۡدِيَكُمۡ إِلَى
ٱلۡمَرَافِقِ وَٱمۡسَحُواْ بِرُءُوسِكُمۡ
وَأَرۡجُلَكُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡكَعۡبَيۡنِۚ وَإِن كُنتُمۡ
جُنُبٗا فَٱطَّهَّرُواْۚ وَإِن كُنتُم مَّرۡضَىٰٓ أَوۡ عَلَىٰ
سَفَرٍ أَوۡ جَآءَ أَحَدٞ مِّنكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡغَآئِطِ أَوۡ
لَٰمَسۡتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَلَمۡ تَجِدُواْ مَآءٗ فَتَيَمَّمُواْ
صَعِيدٗا طَيِّبٗا فَٱمۡسَحُواْ بِوُجُوهِكُمۡ
وَأَيۡدِيكُم مِّنۡهُۚ مَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ لِيَجۡعَلَ
عَلَيۡكُم مِّنۡ حَرَجٖ وَلَٰكِن يُرِيدُ
لِيُطَهِّرَكُمۡ وَلِيُتِمَّ نِعۡمَتَهُۥ عَلَيۡكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ
تَشۡكُرُونَ ٦

وَٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَةَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَمِيثَٰقَهُ
ٱلَّذِي وَاثَقَكُم بِهِۦٓ إِذۡ قُلۡتُمۡ سَمِعۡنَا
وَأَطَعۡنَاۖ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ
ٱلصُّدُورِ ٧

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُونُواْ قَوَّٰمِينَ
لِلَّهِ شُهَدَآءَ بِٱلۡقِسۡطِۖ وَلَا يَجۡرِمَنَّكُمۡ
شَنَـَٔانُ قَوۡمٍ عَلَىٰٓ أَلَّا تَعۡدِلُواْۚ ٱعۡدِلُواْ هُوَ
أَقۡرَبُ لِلتَّقۡوَىٰۖ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
خَبِيرُۢ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٨

وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُم مَّغۡفِرَةٞ وَأَجۡرٌ عَظِيمٞ ٩

up to the elbows, and pass your wet hands lightly over your heads, and wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, purify yourselves. But if you are ill, or on a journey, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have been in intimate contact with women and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but He wants to purify you, and to bestow on you the full measure of His blessings, so that you may be grateful. (6)

Remember always the blessings God has bestowed on you and the covenant with which He has bound you when you said: "We have heard and we obey." Hence, remain God-fearing. Surely God has full knowledge of the secrets of people's hearts. (7)

Believers, be steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity. Never allow your hatred of any people to lead you away from justice. Be just, this is closer to righteousness. And remain God- fearing. Surely, God is aware of all that you do. (8)

God has promised those who believe and do good works that they shall have forgiveness of sins and a rich reward. (9)

As for those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations — they are the ones destined for

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَكَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ١٠

Hell. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذۡ هَمَّ قَوۡمٌ أَن يَبۡسُطُوٓاْ إِلَيۡكُمۡ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡ فَكَفَّ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡ عَنكُمۡۖ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلۡيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ١١

Believers, remember the blessings God has bestowed on you, when certain people designed to stretch against you their hands, but He stayed their hands from you. Remain, then, God-fearing. In God let the believers place their trust. (11)

Overview

There must be controls and constraints in life. These may apply to man's inner life, to what he does in his own affairs, and to his life with other human beings, whether related to him or not, members of his extended family, clan or tribe, community or nation, friends or enemies. These controls and constraints may also govern man's relations with other creatures, whether God has made these subservient to man or not, and to inanimate objects which man finds in the world at large. Furthermore, there must be controls and constraints to govern man's life and his relationship with his Lord, which is the essence of all life.

Islam sets up these controls in human life, defines them with clarity and accuracy, and imparts to them an authority derived from God, ensuring that they remain well respected, observed and obeyed. They are not subject to changing tendencies or temporary interests which may be given prominence by an individual, a group, a nation or a generation. Indeed, these controls and restraints, set up and defined by God, themselves represent the overall "interest", since they have God's authority. Man's interest lies clearly in observing them even though an individual, a community, a nation or a whole generation may feel otherwise, for it is God who knows best, while human beings have, at best, a defective knowledge. What God decides is better than what they may decide for themselves. Indeed, if people were to maintain the lowest degree of politeness in their relationship with God, they would question their own definition of their interest if it were seen to be in conflict with God's definition. True politeness requires that man should have no definition of his interest other than that given by God, which he should accept and obey willingly, always assured and content that it will work for his benefit.

These controls and constraints are what is termed by God here as "contracts". He

commands those who believe in Him to remain true to these contracts.

This *sūrah* opens with a clear order to fulfil these contracts before it proceeds to explain what is lawful and what is unlawful of slaughtered animals, types of food and drink, and also of family relations. It also explains a large number of legal provisions and rules of worship, as well as the true nature of faith, submission to God and the nature of Godhead. The *sūrah* also clarifies the type of relations which exist between the nation of Islam and other nations and beliefs. It explains the obligations of the community of believers in remaining true to their faith, bearing witness in all fairness, maintaining a position of leadership among mankind by virtue of their revealed Book. Theirs is the Book that supersedes all earlier revelations, establishing the rule of God as He has revealed it. They must always be on their guard lest they overlook some of what God may have revealed. They must also ensure that their personal feelings of love or hostility are not allowed to influence the way they administer full justice.

That the *sūrah* follows this pattern after giving a clear opening gives the term "contracts" a much wider sense than what immediately springs to mind. It is evident that "contracts" in this particular context means all the controls God has set up for human life, the most important of which is the contract of believing in God, acknowledging His overall Lordship and submitting to His will. This is the basic contract from which all the other contracts and controls in life are derived.

This contract of believing in God, with all that it entails of total submission and absolute obedience to Him, is the contract God made with Adam (peace be upon him) when He placed him in charge of the earth according to an agreement stating, as we are told in the Qur'ān: *"We said: You shall all descend from it [Paradise]. Guidance shall reach you from Me. Those who follow My guidance shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who deny and gainsay Our revelations shall have the fire, wherein they shall abide."* (2: 38-9) It is, then, an authority given to man on the condition that he follows God's guidance as revealed in His Books which He has vouchsafed to His messengers. Otherwise, the very contract which places man in charge of the earth is violated.

Such a violation essentially makes every action that contravenes God's orders invalid and irremediable. Everyone who believes in God and wants to fulfil his contract with Him is obliged to repel this evil and refuse to deal with it in principle. Otherwise, he is not true to his contract.

The same contract or covenant was made again with all mankind when they were still within the loins of their parents. This is again stated in the Qur'ān: *"Your Lord has brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam and called on them to bear witness about themselves, Am I not your Lord?' – to which they answered: 'Yes, we do bear witness to this.' (Of this We remind you) lest you say on the Day of Resurrection, 'We were*

indeed unaware of this'; or lest you say, Indeed, it was but our forefathers who, in times gone by, began to associate partners with God; and we were but their late offspring: will You, then, destroy us for the doings of falsehood inventors?" (7: *172-3)*

This is another contract made with every individual. God states that He has made this contract with every one of the children of Adam when they were within the loins of their parents. It is not for us to ask how this happened. God knows His creation best and He knows how to address them in every stage of their lives in a way that makes His address understood and their pledge binding. When He says that He has made a contract with them that they will always acknowledge His Lordship, then it must be so. If they do not fulfil this contract, they stand accused of being untrue to their obligations.

God also made a covenant with the Children of Israel, as is mentioned later in this *sūrah,* when He raised the mountain high above their heads as if to give them cover. They thought that it would fall on their heads. We will also learn from this *sūrah* how they were in breach of their covenant and how they were made to suffer the consequences, just as all those who break their covenants with God eventually suffer.

Those who believed in the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) also made a covenant with God, pledging themselves to: "obey the Prophet fully in times of ease and times of hardship, and in preference to our own comfort and interest. We also pledge not to dispute with rulers their authority". Some of them later made certain special contracts supplementing this general one. The second agreement of `Aqabah which facilitated the way for the Prophet to migrate to Madinah was a contract made between the Prophet and the spokesmen' of the Anşār. In al-Ĥudaibiyah, the pact made under the tree came into force, and was later known as the "pact that pleased God".

It is on the basis of the contract to believe in God and to submit to Him that all contracts and covenants are made, whether they relate to all commandments and orders included in the Divine law, or to transactions with other people, or to relations with other creatures and inanimate objects in the universe. These are all contracts believers are required to fulfil. Their essential condition of believing in God makes these contracts binding on them and makes their fulfilment a basic duty. Hence the opening address: "*Believers, be true to your contracts.*" (Verse 1)

Implementing Divine Decrees

Once the address is made to all believers to honour their contracts, some of these are stated in detail: "*Lawful to you is the [flesh of the] beasts of cattle, other than that which is announced to you herein. But you are not allowed to hunt while you are in the state of consecration. God decrees what He will. Believers, do not offend against the symbols set up by*

God, or against the sacred month, or the offerings or the garlands, or against those who repair to the Sacred House, seeking God's grace and pleasure. Only when you are clear of the Sacred Precincts and released from the state of consecration may you hunt. Do not let your hatred of people who would debar you from the Sacred Mosque lead you into aggression; but rather help one another in furthering righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in furthering evil and aggression. Have fear of God, for God is severe in retribution. Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of swine; and that over which any name other than God's has been invoked; and the animal that has been strangled, or beaten to death, or killed by a fall, or gored to death, or savaged by a beast of prey, except that which you may have slaughtered when it is still alive; and [forbidden to you are] animals that have been slaughtered on idolatrous altars. And [forbidden also] is the division [of meat] by raffling with arrows; for all this is sinful. Today, the unbelievers have lost all hope of your religion. Have no fear of them, then, but fear Me alone. This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you. He who is forced by hunger [to eat of what is forbidden], with no inclination to commit sin, [will find] God Much-Forgiving, Merciful." (Verses 1-3)

Whatever is stated here, either prohibiting or making lawful certain slaughtered animals, or certain species, or restricting places and times, is part of the "contract" believers must fulfil. It is part of the contract of faith that those who are party to it, i.e. the believers, must receive their instructions regarding what is lawful and what is unlawful only from God. In this respect, they recognise no authority other than His. Hence, they are addressed as believers at the outset of this detailed explanation of what they may and may not have.

"*Lawful to you is the [flesh of the] beasts of cattle, other than that which is announced to you herein.*" Only because of this permission by God, not through any other authority, is it lawful and permissible for you to eat the flesh of whatever is included under the term "beasts of cattle", whether slaughtered or hunted, with the exception of the prohibitions that follow. Such prohibitions can either be temporary, restricted to certain places, or are total and applicable at all times and places. The beasts of cattle include camels, cows and sheep. Added to these are undomesticated animals like zebra, deer, bull and buffalo.

Thereafter, all other exceptions are detailed. The first pertains to hunting when believers are in the state of consecration: "*But you are not allowed to hunt while you are in the state of consecration. God decrees what He will.*" (Verse 1) The prohibition here applies to the whole process of hunting. When one enters into the state of consecration as one starts pilgrimage or *`umrah,* one turns to God with one's whole being, turning one's back to familiar life practices which are a source of entertainment and pleasure. One turns one's face, and one's whole being, to the Sacred House which God has endowed with a feeling of security that applies to all those in it. Hence, it is necessary that when we are there, we do not stretch our hands

to kill any living thing. Thus, one experiences during this time a necessary feeling of the bonds between all living things created by God, the giver of life. All creatures are, thus, safe from human aggression. The necessities of life, for which game and hunting have been allowed for food purposes, are thus reduced in order to impart to man a sense of elevation above what is familiar and lawful to him in ordinary days.

Before proceeding to add more details of what is excepted from the initial ruling of general permission, this contract is linked to the overall contract of faith. The believers are also reminded of the source of that covenant: *"God decrees what He will."* (Verse 1) His will is absolute and He gives His commandments as He wishes. No one may have a say in what He decrees and no one can abrogate or overrule His judgement. What He outlines in this *sūrah* is His verdict on what is lawful and what is forbidden to us.

The address is again made to the believers to emphasise that they are not allowed to violate what God has restricted: "*Believers, do not offend against the symbols set up by God, or against the sacred month, or the offerings or the garlands, or against those who repair to the Sacred House, seeking God's grace and pleasure. Only when you are clear of the Sacred Precincts and released from the state of consecration may you hunt."* (Verse 2) The first thing that springs to mind regarding the meaning of "*the symbols set up by God*" is that it is a reference to the rites of pilgrimage and *`umrah* and the restrictions that apply to everyone who enters into the state of consecration when he starts his pilgrimage or *`umrah* and which remain in force until the main part of the pilgrimage is over and when animals intended for sacrifice are slaughtered. During the state of consecration, a pilgrim does not offend against these restrictions, because such an offence represents a desecration of the sanctity imparted to them by God. The *sūrah* describes these rites as being set up by God in order to emphasise their sanctity and to warn against their desecration.

Other Restrictions

The term "*the sacred month*" *as* it occurs in this Qur'ānic verse refers to the four months of sanctity in the lunar calendar which are: Rajab, Dhu'l-Qa`dah, Dhu'l-Hijjah and al-Muharram. God has forbidden fighting in these four months, which used to be given special sanctity by Arabian tribes prior to Islam. However, they manipulated them as they wished, delaying certain months according to a ruling given by certain monks or a decree issued by the chiefs of powerful tribes. When Islam was revealed, their sanctity was endorsed by God's legislation. This sanctity is based on a Divine order made when God created the heavens and the earth, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 9, Repentance: "*The number of months, in God's sight, is twelve months [laid down] in God's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth. Of*

these four are sacred." (9: 36) The Qur'ān also states that delaying the sacred months and manipulating them is an indication of compounded disbelief. Thus, the correct order has been re-established according to God's decree. These months remain sacred unless aggression is waged during them against the Muslims, when they are permitted to repel such aggression, without giving the aggressor a chance to escape, making use of the sanctity of these months which they do not recognise. The Islamic view of fighting in these months is mentioned in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow. (*In the Shade of the Qur'ān,* Vol. I, pp. 216-19)

The offerings mentioned in the *sūrah* refer to sacrificial animals which pilgrims slaughter during pilgrimage as part of its rites. This may be a camel, a cow or a sheep. To offend against these is to slaughter them for any reason other than the one for which they have been consecrated. Nor may they be slaughtered until the day of sacrifice during pilgrimage or after the end of *`umrah.* The major part of any sacrificial animal is distributed to the poor of the Ĥaram area. Those who offer such a sacrifice are encouraged to partake of it.

The term "the garlands" mentioned in the *sūrah* refers to cattle which are adorned with garlands to denote that they have been pledged for sacrifice. They are then left alone to graze as they wish until the day when the pledge falls due for their sacrifice. Included among these are cattle intended for sacrifice during pilgrimage and which are given a special sign to indicate the purpose for which they have been pledged. Once such cattle are adorned with garlands, they are no longer available for ordinary slaughter. They are slaughtered only for the purpose for which they have been pledged. It is also said that the garlands refer to a special type of band or necklace worn by those who want to be safe from an enemy or a person who wants to kill them for revenge or for any other purpose. They take some leaves or branches from the trees of the Ĥaram area to make bands and wear them. They then move freely, fearing no aggression from anyone. Scholars who advance this view say that the immunity given to such people was later abrogated when the verse was revealed which states: "*The idolaters are impure; let them not come near the Sacred Mosque after this year*" (9: 28) And by the verse which states: "*Take them and kill them wherever you find them.*" (4: 91) The first view which says that the garlands denote the cattle intended for sacrifice is the weightier one, especially since they are mentioned after the offerings normally sacrificed during pilgrimage.

Similarly, God has given special sanctity to those who flock to the Sacred House, seeking a share of God's bounty and grace and aiming to please Him. They come to the House to do some legitimate business and to seek God's pleasure, whether at the time of pilgrimage or at other times. When they come to God's Sacred House, they are given security.

Having explained all these restrictions, this verse makes it clear that once the

period of consecration is over, hunting becomes lawful again, provided that it takes place outside the Ĥaram area:. *"Only when you are clear of the Sacred Precincts and released from the state of consecration may you hunt."* (Verse 2) This is an area of security which God establishes in His Sacred Mosque, as He has indeed established a time of security during the Sacred Months. People, animals, birds and trees in this area are immune from human aggression. This makes it an area of absolute peace, in response to the prayer of Abraham, the noble father of this nation. This period of peace is extended to the whole planet for four complete months every year, under the guardianship of Islam. People who enjoy the sweetness of this real sense of security will be keen to maintain it according to its provisions and to fulfil their covenants with God. They will try to extend it so that it encompasses human life throughout the year and the whole world over.

Justice for Friend and Foe

With the emphasis placed here on sanctity and security, God calls on those who believe in Him to fulfil their contracts with Him and to rise to the level which enables them to assume the leadership of mankind that has been assigned to them. To fulfil this role they must not allow themselves to be influenced by personal feelings, emotions or temporary circumstances. God calls on them not to transgress even against those who debarred them from entering the Sacred Mosque when they sought to visit it in the year known as "the year of aI-Ĥudaibiyyah" and earlier. The actions of those people left deep scars in the Muslims' hearts, which were bound to arouse emotions of hatred. But all this notwithstanding, the actions of the Muslim community must not be guided by such feelings. Its duty fits its great role: *"Do not let your hatred of people who would debar you from the Sacred Mosque lead you into aggression; but rather help one another in furthering righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in furthering evil and aggression. Have fear of God, for God is severe in retribution."* (Verse 2)

This is the ultimate standard of self-control and compassion. But it is this very ultimate standard that must be attained by the community entrusted by its Lord with the task of being the guide and guardian of humanity. Here it is called upon to attain a sublime horizon. This is part of the responsibility of leadership. It means that believers must overlook what happens to them personally and what they may have to endure of harm caused by others, in order to give to mankind a great model of righteous behaviour that can be achieved only by following Islam. In this way, they give a positive testimony for Islam which is certain to make it appealing to the rest of mankind.

The task outlined here is a great one, but as it is put in this *sūrah* it does not

represent a great burden that will weigh heavily on man. There is a recognition that a human being may be angry and may harbour feelings of hatred. But human beings are not entitled, as a result of fury or hatred, to transgress and be unjust to others. Moreover, cooperation within the ranks of the community of believers must further righteousness and piety, not evil or aggression. The believers are commanded to have fear of God and are reminded that His punishment may be very severe. Such a reminder, together with the commandment to fear God, helps the Muslim community to control its hatred and to rise above the desire to exact revenge, because it is a community always seeking God's pleasure. How Islam works on people is best illustrated by the spectacular results it achieved in moulding the Arabs such that this noble behaviour became characteristic of them and, hence, they abided by its requirements. Prior to Islam they were far removed from such lofty standards. Their unchallenged motto was: "Support your brother, whether he is the victim or the perpetrator of injustice." Tribal loyalty was of paramount importance. To cooperate in furthering evil and aggression was more natural to them than cooperation in furthering piety and righteousness. They forged alliances, but their purpose was more to support evil than to support right. Rare were the pacts made in pre- Islamic days which supported what was and is right. This was only natural in an environment where traditions, customs and morals were not derived from God's constitution. Perhaps the best expression of this principle was the motto we have just quoted. A pre-Islamic poet has also put it in a nutshell when he says: "I am only a man of the tribe of Ghuzayyah: I go with my tribe, whether it follows the right way or the wrong one."

Then the Islamic constitution was revealed to establish new values and to remould people's way of thinking. Islam tells the believers: *"Do not let your hatred of people who would debar you from the Sacred Mosque lead you into aggression; but rather help one another in furthering righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in furthering evil and aggression. Have fear of God, for God is severe in retribution."* (Verse 2) Thus, a new bond linking hearts to God was established. Values and morals were given a new Divine standard. The Arabs, and mankind as a whole, were led out of blind fanaticism and the control of personal and tribal feelings in determining who is a friend and who is a foe. Man was reborn in the Arabian Peninsula. The new man derives his moral standards from God. This heralded the rebirth of man throughout the world. Prior to this, there was nothing in Arabia but blind loyalties which say: "Support your brother, whether he is the victim or the perpetrator of injustice." The same blind loyalties were known throughout the world.

It is a great divide that separates a community governed by such blind loyalty and fanaticism and a community governed by a constitution stating*: "Do not let your hatred of people who would debar you from the Sacred Mosque lead you into aggression; but rather help one another in furthering righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in*

furthering evil and aggression. Have fear of God, for God is severe in retribution." (Verse 2) That great divide was removed by the only force that could remove it, namely, Islam.

Prohibited Meat

The *sūrah* now begins to give the details of the exceptions made in the first verse of cattle that are lawful to eat: "*Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of swine; and that over which any name other than God's has been invoked; and the animal that has been strangled, or beaten to death, or killed by a fall, or gored to death, or savaged by a beast of prey, except that which you may have slaughtered when it is still alive; and [forbidden to you are] animals that have been slaughtered on idolatrous altars. And [forbidden also] is the division [of meat] by raffling with arrows; for all this is sinful. Today, the unbelievers have lost all hope of your religion. Have no fear of them, then, but fear Me alone. This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you. He who is forced by hunger [to eat of what is forbidden], with no inclination to commit sin, [will find] God Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 3)

The first three types: carrion, blood and the flesh of swine are mentioned as forbidden in verse 173 of *Sūrah* 2, The Cow. We commented on this prohibition in our discussion of this verse: Vol. I, pp. 182-4. Whether human knowledge will eventually be able to determine the reasons for this prohibition or not, Divine knowledge has made it clear that these types of food are unwholesome. This is all that we need to know, because God only forbids what is evil and what harms human life in one way or another, whether such harm is known to man or not. Human knowledge remains limited. It does not know everything that causes harm and all that is useful.

Animals on which a name other than that of God has been invoked are forbidden to eat because such a practice is essentially contrary to faith, which is based on the fact that Godhead belongs to God alone. The first thing that follows from this acknowledgement is that the purpose behind every intention and action must be the pursuit of God's pleasure and that every step is made in His name, which is invoked before every action. Therefore, when the name of anyone other than God is invoked at the slaughtering of an animal, and indeed when no name is mentioned at such slaughter, the flesh of that animal is forbidden to eat because such an action is basically contrary to faith. It is in this moral respect that it is unwholesome and, therefore, added to what is physically unwholesome such as carrion, blood and pork.

Animals strangled in one way or another, or beaten or gored to death, or killed by a fall, or savaged by a beast of prey, are all types of carrion. Unless these are caught when still alive and slaughtered in the proper Islamic manner, they are forbidden

meat. These details are given here in order to remove any suspicion that these may have a separate ruling. Scholars have spoken in detail on these and given different rulings with regard to "slaughter", and when an animal is deemed to have been slaughtered. Some scholars consider that if an animal has suffered an injury inevitably leading to its death, it cannot be made lawful even when it is slaughtered before it dies. Other scholars consider that such a slaughter, when the animal is still alive, is appropriate, regardless of the type of injury. These details may be referred to in books of Islamic jurisprudence, or *Fiqh.*

Before Islam, there were idols in the Ka`bah where the unbelievers used to slaughter their animals. They also used to throw some of the blood of their slaughtered animals on these idols. Animals slaughtered on such idolatrous altars, wherever they may be, are forbidden because of the place of their slaughter, even though the name of God may have been mentioned at the time of slaughter. The action itself is idolatrous.

Of the types of meat that are made forbidden in this verse there remains the one concerned with the divining of arrows. These arrows were used in pre-Islamic Arabia in order to decide whether to undertake a certain action or not. Different reports suggest that either three or seven arrows were used, with each indicating a different action. The same arrows were also used in gambling, and to divide the meat of the camel offered for gambling. Every one of the gamblers had an arrow. The arrows were mixed and one is drawn. The person whose name was given to that arrow would take the amount of meat apportioned to it. God has forbidden resorting to arrows for dividing anything and using these arrows for any division because it is just a type of gambling, and all gambling is strictly forbidden. He has also prohibited eating the meat divided in this manner.

"*He who is forced by hunger [to eat of what is forbidden], with no inclination to commit sin, [will find] God Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" A person who is so hungry that he fears for his life may eat of any of these forbidden types, as long as he does not intend to do what is forbidden and commit a sin. Scholars have given different rulings on how much one is allowed to eat: is it only what is sufficient for someone to stay alive, or is one allowed to eat one's fill? Alternatively, can people in this predicament save something for other meals if they fear that they may not find food that is permissible? We need not go into these details here. It is sufficient for our purpose to understand that this religion of ours always allows for what is easy, and always gives situations of necessity the sort of rulings ensuring that no affliction is caused to its followers. In the end, matters are left to clear intention and to being conscious of what God requires of us. A person who is driven by an extreme situation to eat of these forbidden types, having no intention to commit a sin, will suffer no punishment. Instead, they will find that God is certainly Much- Forgiving, Merciful.

Perfection at its Best

So far we have discussed the details of forbidden food as detailed in this verse. The verse, however, also includes other statements that require proper discussion.

> *Today, the unbelievers have lost all hope of your religion. Have no fear of them, then, but fear Me alone. This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you.* (Verse 3)

This statement, which comes in the middle of a detailed account of which meat is forbidden to eat, was the last statement of the Qur'ān to be revealed. It declares the completion of the message of Islam and that its blessings have been brought to their full. `Umar, the Prophet's Companion endowed with a keen insight, felt that the Prophet's remaining days on earth were numbered. He had discharged all his duties and conveyed his message. He was certain to be called to his appointment with God. `Umar's eyes were tearful as he felt the approach of that departure.

These great words come within a verse which has as its subject matter the prohibition of certain types of animal food, and within a *sūrah* which has the detailed purposes we have already mentioned. What we understand from this is that Divine law is a single and complete whole that cannot be split into separate parts. Its provisions may tackle the concept of faith, or acts of worship, or permissions and prohibitions, or social regulations and international relations, but they are all of equal value. In their totality they constitute the religion God describes in this verse as having been perfected by Him. Moreover, it is the blessing of which He has bestowed a full measure on the believers. They represent the code of living God has chosen to be implemented by His servants. To reject any part of this code is to reject it all, and to reject the Divine faith altogether.

We have previously stated that to reject any part of this code, which God has been pleased to vouchsafe to the community of believers, and to substitute for it something made by man has only one clear meaning, namely, that Godhead is denied to God and its attributes are given to human beings. This is a rebellion against God's authority on earth and a claim of Godhead, since its main quality, i.e. the authority to legislate, is given to someone other than God. This means a rejection of Islam altogether.

"*Today, the unbelievers have lost all hope of your religion.*" (Verse 3) They have reached a point of despair and realised that they cannot distort or detract from this religion or invalidate it when God has made it perfect and guaranteed to preserve it. They may defeat the Muslims in battle or ain mastery over them for a period of time,

but they can never vanquish this religion. It is the only religion that has been preserved against all factors of corruption and distortion. Its enemies have tried very hard to distort and to scheme against it, and its people were at times totally ignorant of its truth. But God never allows the earth to be without a group of true believers who recognise the truth of this faith and who dedicate themselves to its advocacy. Islam remains with them fully understood and preserved until they hand it over to the next generation of true believers. God's promise that the unbelievers' despair of vanquishing this religion will always come true.

The believers are then addressed, *"Have no fear of them, then, but fear Me alone."* (Verse 3) The unbelievers can never detract from the essence of this religion. Nor can they gain the upper hand against its advocates, unless these deviate from it and no longer give, through their action and behaviour, a practical translation of its method of living. In other words, they abandon the duties it assigns to them and neglect to fulfil its provisions in their way of life.

This Divine directive given to the Muslim community in Madinah does not apply only to their generation. It is addressed to the believers at all times and in all places. It is a directive to the believers who willingly accept the religion God has chosen for them, in its totality, and implement it as a constitution covering all aspects of life. It is these who are the true believers.

"This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you." (Verse 3) The day on which God revealed this verse during the Prophet's pilgrimage of farewell was the day when this religion attained its perfection and no room was left for any further improvement. The greatest Divine blessings were bestowed on the believers in full measure by giving them this all-embracing and comprehensive code. Islam as a faith and religion was chosen for them by God. Therefore, anyone who finds it unacceptable as a way of life actually rejects what God has determined to be the proper faith.

Grace Abounding

This is a highly inspiring statement. We may contemplate it for a long while without exhausting the essential facts and profound directives it contains or the duties and obligations it assigns.

The first thought that flashes in our minds dwells on the perfection of this religion. What does a believer see when he looks at the procession of faith that started ever since the early days of human life, led by God's messengers, the first of whom was Adam (peace be upon him), down to Muĥammad, the last of all Prophets conveying God's final message to mankind? He sees a noble procession enlightened by Divine

guidance and bringing light to mankind. He also sees clear landmarks defining the way. But he realises that every one of God's Messengers was sent to his own community and every message was meant for a certain period of time, with the exception of the last Messenger and the last message. Each message was addressed to a particular community living in a particular environment. Hence, each was adapted to certain conditions. It is true that all of them called for submission to God alone, because that is the essence of the Divine faith. They all required that Divine instructions be faithfully followed, in an attitude of complete obedience to God alone, because this is the essence of Islam in its broader meaning of surrender to God. But each one of them had its own code suitable to the prevailing conditions of its community at the particular time in which it was revealed.

When it was God's will to conclude His messages to human beings, He sent the last Prophet with a message to mankind, not to a particular community or a particular period. This message addresses the very nature of man which remains the same in all periods and across all communities: "*This is the natural disposition which God has instilled into man. No change shall be made in God's creation. This is the ever true faith.* " (30: 30) This message contains a law addressing all aspects of human life and lays down basic principles and guidelines for those aspects which change according to the time and the environment, as well as detailed regulations for those that remain constant throughout all periods and communities. With such general principles and detailed regulations, this law regulates human life from the time of the revelation of this message to the end of human life. All directives, laws and controls required to help human life to develop and prosper are given within this framework.

When all this has been established, God tells the believers: "*This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you*." (Verse 3) Thus, the faith and the law have been brought to perfection, since the combination of both constitutes religion. No believer may then imagine that religion, in this sense, requires any addition or complement to improve on it, or needs some modification or adaptation to suit local conditions. No one who entertains such thoughts is a true believer; for a believer accepts what God says and is satisfied with His choice. The law of the particular time in which the Qur'ān was revealed applies to all time because, according to God's own statement, it is the law of the religion revealed to mankind to be implemented by all communities for the rest of time. The detailed regulations and laws will remain the same, while the basic principles constitute the framework within which human life develops and progresses. When the framework is broken, man abandons faith altogether.

This religion, including this particular legal code, has been chosen for man by God, man's Creator who knows His creation well. Anyone who says that yesterday's

law cannot be implemented today claims to know man's needs better than God. Secondly, a believer is bound to reflect on the fact that God has bestowed the full measure of His blessings on believers when He perfected their religion for them. This blessing represents not only a rebirth of man, but also the fulfilment and purpose of his existence. Man led a life of insignificance prior to knowing his Lord and Creator, the universe and his position and role in it. All these are defined for him by Islam, the religion his Lord has chosen for him. Before man's liberation from submission to other creatures to attain the state of submission to God alone, and before the attainment of true equality in human life through a law devised by God and supported by His authority, man could only lead a life next to non-existence.

Indeed, his new knowledge of these great facts as established by this religion of Islam was the herald of man's new birth. Without this knowledge man could be no more than an animal or, at best, a prospective human being still in the process of formation and moulding. Only through acquiring this knowledge does man attain his most perfect position which is far removed from all man-made concepts that might have prevailed during different periods of human history.

Blessings in Full Measure

Islam gives man a concept of faith which requires him to believe in God, His angels, revelations, messengers and the Day of Judgement. As he formulates this concept, he leaves the realm of animals which comprehend nothing beyond the extent of their senses to an area which extends well beyond the realm of human perception. Thus, man can comprehend the physical and the metaphysical, the perceptible and the imperceptible. As man acknowledges God's oneness, he is liberated from submission to any authority other than that of God. He feels that he cannot be enslaved by any power other than that of God. He is equal to, if not nobler than, any other creature. It is to God alone that man addresses his worship, from God alone he receives his laws, systems and constitution, on God alone he relies, and Him alone he fears. Through the Divine way of life, laid down by Islam, all human power is dedicated to achieve goodness and to improve life. Thus, he is elevated above the standard of animals, or the fulfilment of desires.

Only a person who has known the true nature of the life of darkness, or *jāhiliyyah,* (which is the Islamic term for any system not based on Divine revelations) and its oppressive concepts and chaos can appreciate the fact that only through the implementation of Islam does man enjoy the full measure of God's blessings. A person who has experienced a life of error, loss and chaos following hollow concepts can fully appreciate the blessing of faith. When one reflects on the suffering that results from tyranny, confusion and total lack of balance in all sorts of systems

human beings devise for themselves, one can state with absolute conviction that life with faith and with the implementation of the Islamic system is the greatest blessing we may enjoy in this world.

The Arabs who were first addressed by the Qur'ān were quick to appreciate its significance, because it told them of their own experience. In matters of faith, they were at the lowest depth of ignorance, believing in idols and considering angels, jinn, stars and forefathers as deities equal to the Supreme Lord. With Islam, they came to know what it meant to believe in the One God who has power over all things, who sees all and knows all, and who is at the same time fair, compassionate and merciful. He is close to everyone and answers everyone. There is no intermediary between Him and any one of His servants. In this way all of us have been liberated from all forms of tyranny, whether that of chiefs, priests or superstition.

The Arab social make-up established a distinction between different classes and allowed everyone with power to tyrannise others. Indeed, to all Arabian chiefs, regardless of their relevant positions in the strict tribal hierarchy, oppression was synonymous with dignity and high position. An Arabian poet described the weakness of someone he was castigating in these terms: "His tribe are never unfaithful to their trust and never try to take the smallest of articles unfairly". `Amr ibn Hind was an Arab chief when he imposed his rule that he would only talk to people from behind a screen. He further considered it impudent for tribal chiefs to refuse that their mothers serve in his palace. Al-Nu`mān ibn al-Mundhir, another Arabian king, was so dictatorial in his rule that he chose a day for pleasure when he gave his bounty to all and sundry, and chose a day for displeasure when he killed everyone he met that day from morning till evening. Examples of such class tyranny in Arabia abound.

In the days prior to Islam, infant girls were buried alive in Arabia; women suffered much injustice; drinking, gambling and indecent sexual practices were common. Abuse of women, revenge killings, assault, stealing, and looting were characteristics of Arabian life; but these went hand in hand with disunity and weakness before any external enemy. Arabian tribes were quick to fight one another, but when the Abyssinians launched an attack with the aim of destroying the Ka`bah, all tribes took a defeatist attitude.

It is from such depths of iniquity that Islam rescued the Arabs, moulding them into a nation, one capable of assuming the leadership of all mankind. It was the same generation of Arabs which lived in the depths of ignorance and darkness, before it experienced life at the top as envisaged by Islam. Hence, they were quick to fully appreciate the significance of the Qur'ānic statement: *"This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you."* (Verse 3)

The Choice Religion

Finally, a believer is bound to reflect on the fact that it was God who chose Islam as a faith for him. This then is a manifestation of God's care and love for this nation. It is He Himself who has laid down its code of living for it.

These words place a heavy burden on the shoulders of this nation whereby it must prove itself equal to this great Divine care. No! I pray God for forgiveness. Nothing that this nation in all its generations can give will match the care God has taken of it. People can only do their utmost in acknowledging God's grace and praising Him for it. In this way, they show that they are aware of their duty and try to fulfil it as best they can, seeking God's forgiveness at the same time for any slips or failures.

The fact that God Himself has chosen this religion for the Muslim nation requires Muslims to appreciate the value of this choice and to exert every effort to implement God's choice in their lives. How foolish and miserable it would be of anyone to ignore, or indeed reject, what God has chosen for him and to try to establish for himself a way of life different from that laid down by God. Such an attitude is nothing short of a ghastly and punishable crime. Its perpetrator cannot escape scot-free when he rejects God's choice. God may leave those who have never known Islam to do what they like for a period of time. As for those who have known Islam and rejected or abandoned it, choosing for themselves other methods of life, these will deservedly suffer the results of their choice.

Nothing Wholesome is Forbidden

> *They ask you what is lawful to them. Say: Lawful to you are all good things of life. As for those hunting animals which you train by imparting to them something of the knowledge God has imparted to you, you may eat of what they catch for you. But mention God's name over it and have fear of God; indeed, God is swift in reckoning. Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And the virtuous women from among the believers and the virtuous women from among those who were given revelations before you (are also lawful to you) when you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as mistresses. Anyone who rejects the faith (will find that) all his works will be in vain. In the life to come he shall be among the losers.* (Verses 4-5)

This question from the believers about what is lawful describes the frame of mind the chosen community adopted by virtue of the honour of being addressed by God Himself. It gives us an impression of the sort of reluctance they had in approaching

anything that was practised in pre-Islamic days lest it be unacceptable to Islam. They felt that they needed to ask about everything to make sure that it fitted with their new way of life.

When we look into the history of that period we cannot fail to recognise the profound change Islam brought about in the Arabian mentality. Islam shook the Arabs into eradicating all traces of ignorance that might have been left behind. It gave the Muslims, whom it had picked up from the depths of darkness to elevate into light and a high level of humanity, a feeling that they were reborn and that they were living a completely new life. It imparted to them a profound sense of the great divide between their present and their past. They recognised the great bounty God had bestowed on them and, therefore, they were keen to adapt their lives to the new Divine method, the benefits of which they were able to discern in their own lives. They were conscious of God's grace and keen not to violate His orders. The net result of all this was their constant reluctance to continue with their old practices, unless they made sure that they were acceptable to Islam.

It is in this context that we should read their question to the Prophet (peace be upon him) about lawful food, after they had heard the verses which outlined what was forbidden to them: "*They ask you what is lawful to them.*" The answer was especially significant: "*Say: Lawful to you are all good things of life.*" This imparts to them the true feeling that they have not been forbidden anything good or wholesome. Indeed, all the good things of life have been made lawful to them. Only bad or evil things are forbidden. Needless to say, everything that God forbids mankind is either something physically repugnant to uncorrupted human nature, such as carrion, blood and the flesh of swine, or something a believer's heart finds nauseating, such as the flesh of animals on which the name of someone other than God has been invoked, or what has been slaughtered over idolatrous altars, or something that has been divided with the help of arrows, which is a type of gambling.

To the good things mentioned here in general, a special type is also added to emphasise that which is good. These are animals caught by beasts and birds of prey which have been trained for that very purpose, such as a hawk or a falcon, and hunting dogs and lions which have been trained to overpower game animals: "*As for those hunting animals which you train by imparting to them something of the knowledge God has imparted to you, you may eat of what they catch for you. But mention God's name over it and have fear of God; indeed, God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 4)

The condition which makes what is caught by such trained hunting animals lawful to eat is that they should leave their prey for their master. That is, the hunting beast or bird must not eat of the animal it has killed, except when the master has gone away. If they eat of their prey at the time of the catch, they have not been

properly trained. They are simply killing other animals for themselves not for their masters. As such, the master may not eat of the game they kill, even if most of it is left, and even if they bring the prey back alive to him. Once they have eaten of it, it cannot be made lawful, not even by proper methods of slaughter.

God reminds the believers of this aspect of His grace, which, is manifested in their ability to train their beasts and birds of prey. It is He who has made these hunting animals subservient to them and given them the knowledge to train them. This is a fine touch, typical of the Qur'ānic method of cultivating believers' minds. The Qur'ān makes use of every occasion and opportunity to impress on people's hearts the fundamental truth that everything we have has been given to us by God. God has created us, given us all the knowledge we have and made everything on earth subservient to us. It is He whom we should thank for whatever we achieve, every gain we make and ability we develop. Thus, in every moment of his life, a believer is fully aware that everything within himself and around him is God's gift to him. He does not allow himself to overlook, even for the briefest moment, the fact that he is indebted to God for everything he may enjoy, all that he possesses, every action he makes. This is what makes him a properly devout person.

God teaches the believers to mention His name over all game animals caught for them by their beasts and birds of prey. This should be done when the hunting animal or bird is set free. Since it may kill its prey with its claws or teeth, this killing is considered as the slaughter of the animal. As God's name is mentioned at the time of slaughter, it is also mentioned when the beast or bird of prey is set on its hunting spree.

The believers are finally reminded to continue to fear God and that His reckoning is very swift. Hence, they should always be on their guard. The question of permissibility or prohibition is thus closely related to the more important feeling of being conscious of God and of fearing Him. It is the pivot round which every intention and every action in the life of a believer turns. Thus, it transforms human life into a relationship with God, a recognition of His greatness and a consciousness of His presence and power in all situations, whether we are alone or with others: *"and have fear of God; indeed, God is swift in reckoning."* (Verse 4)

Good Relations with Other Religions

The *sūrah* goes on to outline more types of food made permissible for believers, and adds to that what is permissible in marriage. "*Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And the virtuous women from among the believers and the virtuous women from among those who were given revelations before you (are also lawful to*

you) when you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as mistresses." (Verse 5)

Again the variety of permissible pleasures are initially described as good: *"Today all the good things of life have been made lawful to you."* This emphasises the meaning we have already stressed, explaining that only evil things have been forbidden to Muslims. Within the framework of making good things lawful, we witness a genuine manifestation of Islamic tolerance when it comes to dealing with non-Muslim communities living side by side with Muslims in the land of Islam, or perhaps having a relationship based on a peace treaty or one of simple loyalty.

Islam does not merely extend religious freedom to these communities allowing them to live a life of isolation from the rest of society. It creates a social set-up based on partnership and mutual friendship. Their food is lawful to Muslims and the food of Muslims is also lawful to them, so that visits and hospitality can be exchanged. The whole society will thus enjoy an air of tolerance and friendship. Moreover, chaste, virtuous women from among these communities who had previously received revelations from God are lawful for Muslims to marry. Indeed, these women are mentioned side by side with chaste, virtuous Muslim women. Only the followers of Islam show such a degree of tolerance and friendliness towards other communities. A Christian Catholic may feel very reluctant at marrying a Christian Orthodox or Protestant woman, despite the fact that all these belong to Christianity. Only those who are not strictly religious may enter such a marriage.

This is clear evidence that Islam provides the only system which allows for the establishment of a world community where Muslims do not live in isolation from the followers of other revealed religions and where barriers are not erected between the followers of different religions which exist side by side in Muslim lands. This also applies to social relations. As for loyalty and patronage, these are covered by different rules which will be outlined later in this *sūrah.*

The same conditions apply to lawful marriages with either virtuous Muslim women or virtuous women of the followers of other Divine religions: *"When you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as mistresses."* (Verse 5) This means that a dower must be paid for a serious, lawful marriage by which a man provides his wife with a home, security and protection. The money paid must never be used for an illegitimate relationship that makes a woman available to any man as a prostitute or only to one man as a mistress. Both types were known in pre-Islamic Arabia and recognised by Arabian society prior to its purification by Islam.

These rulings are followed by a comment which carries an added emphasis together with a strong warning against their violation: *"Anyone who rejects the faith*

[will find that] all his works will be in vain. In the life to come he shall be among the losers." (Verse 5) All these regulations are related to faith. To implement them as they are is faith, or at least is evidence of faith. A person who abandons them rejects the faith altogether. Hence, all his actions will be to no avail. Indeed, whatever good he may do will be rejected by God. This state of affairs, i.e. the rejection of the actions of one who denies the faith, is described in the Qur'ān in terms of what may happen to an animal which grazes in a poisonous area. Its belly is greatly swollen and it dies. This is a perfect description of what is rejected of man's actions. It swells, but it comes to nothing. In the life to come, such a person suffers a loss that comes on top of his vain actions.

It is to be noted that this stern warning comes by way of comment on rulings outlining what is permissible and what is forbidden in matters of food and marriage. This is indicative of the fact that all details of this religion of Islam are closely interwoven in one whole. Nothing that is in conflict with its principles and regulations, whether relevant to fundamentals or matters of detail, is at all acceptable.

Getting Ready for Prayer

This discourse about good food and good, virtuous women is followed by a reference to prayer and regulations governing purification in preparation for prayer. *"Believers, when you are about to pray, wash your faces, and your hands and arms up to the elbows, and pass your wet hands lightly over your heads, and wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, purify yourselves. But if you are ill, or on a journey, or if one of you has come from the toilet, or if you have been in intimate contact with women and can find no water, then have recourse to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your faces and your hands. God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but He wants to purify you, and to bestow on you the full measure of His blessings, so that you may be grateful."* (Verse 6)

It is not by mere coincidence that regulations on purification are mentioned together with regulations on hunting, consecration and dealing with those who turned the Muslims away from the Sacred Mosque. Nor is it unrelated to the general context of this *sūrah.* Indeed, it comes at the right place to serve a definite purpose. Firstly, this is a reference to another aspect of the good things of life: a pure enjoyment of the spirit which is mentioned together with good food and virtuous women. In prayer, a believer finds enjoyment that surpasses that of all material luxuries. It is the enjoyment of a meeting with God in an atmosphere of purity and total devotion. When the pleasures of food and marriage have been outlined, reference is made to a higher level of enjoyment, namely, purification and prayer. Together, both types of enjoyment are necessary for man.

Secondly, the regulations governing purification and prayer are the same as other regulations outlined in the *sūrah,* whether relating to food and marriage, permissible and forbidden hunting, or to human relations in times of peace and war: all these regulations are devotional. In their totality, they constitute the religion acceptable to God. In Islam, there is no difference between what is termed as "rulings on worship" and "rulings governing human transactions". This division has been established by scholars to serve the requirements of classification. It is not essential to the Divine way of life or to Islamic law. The Divine way of life comprises both aspects which together form the religion and the law God has laid down for people to follow. Neither category has any precedence over the other. Indeed, neither can be properly fulfilled without the other. Islam cannot be properly implemented in the life of the Muslim community unless both sets of rulings are strictly followed.

All these regulations are "contracts" which the believers are ordered by God to fulfil. All of them are devotional in the sense that a Muslim fulfils them in order to earn God's pleasure. They are all manifestations of a Muslim's submission to God. We cannot separate worship from transactions except in scholarly classification. Both types indicate aspects of worship, duties and contracts made with God. To violate any of them is to violate the basic contract of believing in God. It is to this fundamental fact that the Qur'ānic ordering of the regulations outlined in this *sūrah* refers.

Too Valuable an Obligation

"Believers, when you are about to pray..." Prayer is a meeting with God. Anyone who is about to offer a prayer stands up in front of God Himself, makes his supplication to Him, and addresses Him in a highly intimate manner. Therefore, it is important to prepare for it properly. In this respect, it is necessary to undergo a physical purification to help with the spiritual preparation. Perhaps this is the reason, as we understand it — though God alone knows the truth — for the requirement of ablution, the essential parts of which are detailed in this Qur'ānic verse: to wash one's face, hands and arms to the elbows, to wipe one's head lightly with one's wet hand and to wash one's feet up to the ankles. These requirements are the subject of very minor differences among scholars, perhaps the most important of which is whether they should be done in the order they are mentioned in this verse or done without following any particular order. This type of ablution is required for a minor invalidation of purity, such as going to the toilet or releasing wind. A shower or a bath in which one washes all one's body is required to remove a state of ceremonial impurity which happens as a result of ejaculation whether through a wet dream or when awake, sexual intercourse and also women's menstruation.

Having outlined the requirements of ablution in both ordinary and total situations, the Qur'ānic verse speaks of dry ablution which may replace either type. This is a concession of which Muslims may avail themselves in the following situations: when water is not available; when a person is ill and needs to have an ordinary ablution, i.e. *wuđū',* or when he is required to have a grand ablution, i.e. *ghusl,* but where water may be harmful to him; and when a person is travelling and needs to perform either type of ablution.

The *sūrah* refers to the reasons requiring ordinary ablution by the phrase: *'or if one of you has come from the toilet',* which indicates answering a call of nature in any way. As for what requires total ablution, washing one's whole body, the *sūrah* uses a gentle expression indicating sexual contact: "*Or if you have been in intimate contact with women.*" In any of these situations, a person who cannot find or use water may not offer his prayer until he has performed dry ablution. He should select a clean surface, on the earth itself or anything associated with it, even if it is the saddle of his horse or mule, or a wall. He must make sure that the surface is free from impurity. He strikes it with both hands, shakes it and wipes it over his face, and then wipes it over his hands up to the elbows. Some scholars say that one strike is sufficient to wipe over the face and both hands, while others say two strikes are required, one to wipe the face and the other to wipe the hands. There are other differences among scholars about what is meant by "*or if you have been in intimate contact with women*". Is it any touch or contact? Or is it sexual intercourse? Or is it any touch associated with sexual thoughts? Similarly, scholars speak about whether any illness allows dry ablution, or whether it is only an illness that makes the use of water harmful. Moreover, it is perhaps more correct to say that if water is too cold or if the person fears that using the water may cause him harm, then dry ablution is permissible.

The verse concludes with this comment: "*God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but He wants to purify you, and to bestow on you the full measure of His blessings, so that you may be grateful.*" (Verse 6)

As we have already said, purification is an essential requirement before a meeting with God. In both ordinary and total ablution, i.e. washing certain parts of one's body or the whole of one's body, the requirement of purification is met physically and spiritually. In dry ablution, only the spiritual part is fulfilled. It is considered sufficient when water is not available or can be harmful. God does not want to afflict people or to overburden them or cause them any difficulty in meeting their religious duties. He simply wants them to be blessed with the grace of purification and to make them feel His grace so that they show their gratitude to Him. When they do, He increases and even multiplies His grace. This clearly illustrates how the easy Islamic code of living combines a gentle and practical approach with Divine blessings.

This Qur'ānic verse states clearly the Divine purpose behind the requirements of ablution, ordinary and total: *"He (God) wants to purify you, and to bestow on you the full measure of His blessings, so that you may be grateful."* When we reflect on this statement, we are bound to see the thread of unity and complementarity Islam establishes between worship and other legislation. Washing some parts of our bodies as we do in ablution, *wuḍū',* or having a full bath, *ghusl,* as we do in total ablution, are not merely meant for physical cleanliness. Otherwise, some pedantic people these days might claim that we have no need for the rituals of the primitive Arabs, since our standards of civilization mean that we take a bath regularly and keep our bodies clean. The fact is that this is a double- fronted exercise to unite the cleanliness of the body with the purification of the soul in the same act of worship a believer addresses to his Lord. The spiritual side is certainly stronger because when it is not possible or inadvisable to use water, dry ablution, which fulfils only this stronger aspect, is deemed sufficient. Moreover, this religion of Islam is a complete way of life which addresses all situations in all societies and stages with a unified and consistent system. In this way, its purpose is realised in all situations in one way or another. Let us then make sure that we fully understand the purpose of Islam before passing a judgement that may not be based on sound knowledge or Divine guidance. We must also maintain an attitude of propriety when we speak about God and His legislation.

Talking about dry ablution as a substitute for ablution with water leads us to consider the fact that Islam is especially keen that obligatory prayer be regularly attended to, in other words without fail. This provision added to similar ones relating to offering prayer in times of fear, or in the case of illness, when it can be offered in seated or reclining positions, shows that every impediment preventing anyone from offering prayers is removed. Islam takes extra care that prayer is offered at its defined times. Indeed, Islam relies heavily on this particular aspect of worship to achieve its educational and reform purposes, so as to mould human nature in a satisfactory shape. As prayer is a meeting with God, a believer feels that when he stands in front of God, this contact is so profoundly important to him that he would not wish to lose it even in the most critical of situations. No difficulty should prevent a Muslim from this meeting with his Lord. He derives from it reassurance, happiness and a contented heart. To him, this is a treasure too valuable to lose.

Justice Even When Dealing with Enemies

So far, the *sūrah* has outlined a number of instructions concerning the types of food believers are permitted to eat, purification and other matters. By way of commenting on these instructions, the *sūrah* reminds the believers of the blessings God has bestowed on them when they have accepted the faith and the covenant He has made with them that they will listen and obey. It is indeed this covenant that

admits them into the fold of Islam. The next verses remind them to have fear of God and that He is aware of all thoughts people may entertain.

> *Remember always the blessings God has bestowed on you and the covenant with which He has bound you when you said: "We have heard and we obey." Hence, remain God-fearing. Surely God has full knowledge of the secrets of people's hearts. Believers, be steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity. Never allow your hatred of any people to lead you away from justice. Be just, this is closer to righteousness. And remain God-fearing. Surely, God is aware of all that you do.* (Verses 7-8)

The first generation to be addressed by the Qur'ān were fully aware of the extent of God's blessings bestowed on them by His revealing this religion. They felt the change within themselves, in their lives, community, and in the position they occupied among mankind. A simple reference to this blessing was always sufficient to turn their attentions to a great, undeniable fact of life. Similarly, a reference to the covenant with which God bound them to listen and to obey aroused in them feelings of dignity, since they were the other party in a contract made with God, the Almighty. To a believer who contemplates such a relationship, this is something great indeed. Hence, it is sufficient to remind them of their duty to remain God-fearing. They were ever conscious of God: *"Hence, remain God-fearing. Surely God has full knowledge of the secrets of people's hearts."* (Verse 7)

The Qur'ān often uses the highly expressive and evocative statement that God has full knowledge of people's innermost thoughts, or the secrets of their hearts. In Arabic, this expression combines accuracy with inspiring beauty. It speaks of something that is always present in the heart. This is a reference to secret feelings and thoughts. Deep as a person may bury these secrets, they are known fully to God.

A Gulf Too Wide

Part of the covenant with which God has bound the Muslim community requires it to deal with other people on the basis of absolute justice, which is never affected by feelings of love or hatred, or by feelings, interests, or relations of any kind. It is justice based on the duty of remaining steadfast in devotion to God alone. No influences are ever allowed to tilt the balance of justice, especially when believers are mindful that God watches over them and knows what lies at the bottom of their hearts. They fully understand this address: *"Believers, be steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity. Never allow your hatred of any people to lead you away from justice. Be just, this is closer to righteousness. And remain God-fearing. Surely, God is aware of all that you do."* (Verse 8)

Earlier in this *sūrah,* God forbade the believers to allow their hatred of those who prevented them from entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah to turn into an act of aggression against them. This is indeed a tough standard of self-restraint and tolerance to which they were elevated by the Divine system. Now they are ordered that hatred must never lead them away from justice. This is an even higher standard which is much more difficult to attain. The first was a stage requiring them not to launch aggression. Here, they are required to maintain justice despite their feelings of hatred and hostility. The first stage stopped at a passive attitude requiring self-restraint. The second is a proactive attitude ensuring justice to people who are hostile to the believers and detested by them.

This Divine system, which brings out the best in man, realises that this is a very difficult objective. Hence, it gives a helping introduction: "*Believers, be steadfast in your devotion to God...*" The instructions are also concluded with a comment that helps in achieving the objective: "*Remain God-fearing. Surely, God is fully aware of all that you do.*"

No human being can attain this standard unless he deals in such a matter directly with God. This is the result that comes about when people are steadfast in their devotion to God, addressing their feelings purely to Him, fearing none but Him, and realising that He knows their innermost thoughts. No earthly consideration can lift human beings to such a high standard and keep them there. It is a standard achievable only through absolute dedication to God. Similarly, no faith or system on earth guarantees absolute justice to detested enemies in the same way as this religion does. This is because Islam addresses those who believe in it, making it clear to them that even when they have to administer justice to their enemies, they are dealing with God and they must rid themselves of any other consideration. With these basic elements in it, Islam has maintained its role as the last universal religion for humanity. Its system guarantees to all mankind, whether they believe in it or not, that they will have justice. For absolute justice is a duty incumbent on all Muslims and they fulfil this duty to God, no matter what hatred is shown to them by other people.

Difficult and hard as this duty is, it is binding on the Muslim community because of its leading role amongst mankind. The role of leadership was fulfilled by this community and all its conditions were met when the believers in this faith implemented it. To them, these instructions were not mere recommendations or ideals, but a reality they should practise in their daily lives. The history of mankind has never before, nor indeed ever since, witnessed any such standard being put into practice, becoming a reality, except during the shining periods in history when Islam was implemented as a way of life. History gives us numerous cases and examples which testify that these duties and commandments outlined by God were

transformed into a practical system, fully implemented in the daily life of the Muslim community. They were not mere ideals to which homage was paid. Nor were they individual examples. They left their mark on life practices to the extent that people felt that that was the only way to live.

When we look from that high summit on human life in all periods of darkness, everywhere on earth, including the type of darkness we see in modern times, we realise how great is the gulf between a system devised by God to be implemented in human life and man-made systems. The gap between the effects on people's lives of these manmade systems on the one hand and the Divine system on the other is too wide to bridge.

People may advocate certain principles, but such advocacy is one thing and practising these principles in reality is another. Indeed, it is often the case that people do not put into effect the principles they call on others to adopt. It is not merely that people should be told to implement certain principles, but more importantly where this call comes from and what kind of authority it has over consciences and feelings. Another hugely instrumental factor is people's knowledge of the ultimate arbiter on the net result of the efforts they put into practising these principles. The true value of the call made by religion on people to implement its principles comes from the sway religion exercises over people. But when a call is only made by a certain person, we have to ask what support such a call has, and what authority it has over people's minds, and what reward it can promise those who work hard to implement these principles? Thousands of people may call for justice, purity, liberation, self-denial, tolerance, love, sacrifice and so on. Their call, however, motivates no one because it lacks the proper support. It is not the call itself that is most important, but rather the power behind the call.

People may listen to others advocating certain ideals, but what is the practical outcome of all this? The fact is that they know by nature that the advocacy comes from people like them, who share with them the same degree of ignorance and weakness and who have similar prejudices of their own. At the end of the day, such advocacy has only a minimum effect on their lives.

Religious directives, on the other hand, are complemented by practical steps which aim to shape life in a certain fashion. If religion were to be confined to directives and rituals, then the directives would remain unimplemented, as we see today everywhere. A complete way of life on the basis of religion is necessary to allow its directives to be put into practice in life situations where directives and practices complement one another. This is the Islamic view of religion which makes it a complete system regulating all aspects of life.

When this concept of religion was put into practice by the Muslim community,

that community occupied the top position in human society. It will do the same today, reducing this latter day ignorance to the same lowly level as it did the Arabian ignorance of the past. Conversely, when religion was reduced to mere directives given on a pulpit, and rituals practised in mosques, and when it no longer regulated the system of life, it lost its very existence in human life.

A Promise That Never Fails

Moreover, there must be a reward given by God to the believers, who deal with Him alone. This reward is needed to give encouragement to people to fulfil their obligations and to discharge their trust. The end of those who disbelieve and deny God's revelations must be different from that of those who believe and do well: "*God has promised those who believe and do good works that they shall have forgiveness of sins and a rich reward. As for those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations – they are the ones destined for Hell.*" (Verses 9-10)

This is a reward to compensate good believers for what they miss of the luxuries and riches of this life when they fulfil their trust. It is a reward that reduces to insignificance all the hardship faced by the believers as they face up to human obstinacy and determined denial of the truth. It is only fair that Divine justice will not deliver to the good and the bad the same treatment.

Believers need to look up to this Divine system of justice and reward, so that they are able to overcome all temptations and impediments when they deal with God. Certain people only need to feel that God is pleased with them to appreciate its value, as well as the value of discharging their trust. But the Divine system deals with all people and with human nature itself. God knows that by nature man needs this promise of forgiveness and rich reward and needs to know the end of the disbelievers and their punishment. This reassures the believers and enables them to face up to the schemes of the evil ones, especially since they are commanded to deal justly with those whom they hate because of all the hardship they may have suffered at their hands.

The *sūrah* continues to cultivate this spirit of justice and tolerance among the Muslim community, and to weaken feelings of hostility, prejudice and revenge. It reminds Muslims of God's grace which manifested itself in restraining the hands of the unbelievers when they intended to make a determined assault against the Muslims: "*Believers, remember the blessings God has bestowed on you, when certain people designed to stretch against you their hands, but He stayed their hands from you. Remain, then, God-fearing. In God let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 11)

Reports give different explanations as to whom this verse refers to. It is perhaps more correct to say that it refers to a group of unbelievers who tried to attack the

Prophet and the Muslims during the days which led to the peace agreement at al-Ĥudaibiyah, but God foiled their design and enabled the Muslims to take them captive instead. The event itself is not as important as the lessons learnt from it. The Qur'ān draws on these lessons to reduce the Muslims' hatred of these people, so that they would feel reassured as they reflected on the fact that God Himself takes care of them and protects them. In such an atmosphere, self-restraint, tolerance and the administration of justice become so much easier. Muslims would be ashamed of themselves if they were not to fulfil their covenant with God, especially when it is He who protects them from their enemies.

Perhaps we should say here very briefly that the idea of God's protection of the believers from aggression by their enemies is expressed in an image of hands being stretched to launch an aggression and then being stayed by a higher power. This charges the expression to its highest, as if the image of the events is placed in front of those who listen to the Qur'ānic verse and as if they witness these events right here and now. The Qur'ān employs this most expressive way in order to get its message to people in the clearest possible way.

2
Broken Pledges

۞ وَلَقَدۡ أَخَذَ ٱللَّهُ مِيثَٰقَ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ
وَبَعَثۡنَا مِنۡهُمُ ٱثۡنَيۡ عَشَرَ نَقِيبٗاۖ وَقَالَ ٱللَّهُ
إِنِّي مَعَكُمۡۖ لَئِنۡ أَقَمۡتُمُ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَيۡتُمُ
ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَءَامَنتُم بِرُسُلِي وَعَزَّرۡتُمُوهُمۡ
وَأَقۡرَضۡتُمُ ٱللَّهَ قَرۡضًا حَسَنٗا لَّأُكَفِّرَنَّ
عَنكُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمۡ وَلَأُدۡخِلَنَّكُمۡ جَنَّٰتٖ
تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۚ فَمَن كَفَرَ
بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ مِنكُمۡ فَقَدۡ ضَلَّ سَوَآءَ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ١٢

Indeed, God made a covenant with the Children of Israel and We appointed among them twelve captains. God said: I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path. (12)

فَبِمَا نَقۡضِهِم مِّيثَٰقَهُمۡ لَعَنَّٰهُمۡ وَجَعَلۡنَا
قُلُوبَهُمۡ قَٰسِيَةٗۖ يُحَرِّفُونَ ٱلۡكَلِمَ عَن
مَّوَاضِعِهِۦ وَنَسُواْ حَظّٗا مِّمَّا ذُكِّرُواْ بِهِۦۚ
وَلَا تَزَالُ تَطَّلِعُ عَلَىٰ خَآئِنَةٖ مِّنۡهُمۡ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا
مِّنۡهُمۡۖ فَٱعۡفُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَٱصۡفَحۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ١٣

Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover, they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind. From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery. But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do

good. (13)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا نَصَٰرَىٰٓ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَهُمۡ فَنَسُواْ حَظّٗا مِّمَّا ذُكِّرُواْ بِهِۦ فَأَغۡرَيۡنَا بَيۡنَهُمُ ٱلۡعَدَٰوَةَ وَٱلۡبَغۡضَآءَ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۚ وَسَوۡفَ يُنَبِّئُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَصۡنَعُونَ ١٤

Likewise, from those who said, "We are Christians," We have they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done. (14)

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ قَدۡ جَآءَكُمۡ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمۡ كَثِيرٗا مِّمَّا كُنتُمۡ تُخۡفُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَيَعۡفُواْ عَن كَثِيرٖۚ قَدۡ جَآءَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ نُورٞ وَكِتَٰبٞ مُّبِينٞ ١٥

People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much. There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book (15)

يَهۡدِي بِهِ ٱللَّهُ مَنِ ٱتَّبَعَ رِضۡوَٰنَهُۥ سُبُلَ ٱلسَّلَٰمِ وَيُخۡرِجُهُم مِّنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ بِإِذۡنِهِۦ وَيَهۡدِيهِمۡ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ١٦

Through which God guides those who seek His good pleasure to the paths of peace. By His grace, He leads them out of darkness into light and guides them to a straight way. (16)

لَّقَدۡ كَفَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡمَسِيحُ ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَۚ قُلۡ فَمَن يَمۡلِكُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيۡـًٔا إِنۡ أَرَادَ أَن يُهۡلِكَ ٱلۡمَسِيحَ ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ وَأُمَّهُۥ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗاۗ وَلِلَّهِ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَاۚ يَخۡلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ١٧

Unbelievers indeed are they who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth? To God belongs the kingdom of

the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things. (17)

وَقَالَتِ ٱلۡيَهُودُ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ نَحۡنُ أَبۡنَٰٓؤُاْ ٱللَّهِ
وَأَحِبَّٰٓؤُهُۥۚ قُلۡ فَلِمَ يُعَذِّبُكُم بِذُنُوبِكُمۖ
بَلۡ أَنتُم بَشَرٞ مِّمَّنۡ خَلَقَۚ يَغۡفِرُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ
وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَلِلَّهِ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَاۖ وَإِلَيۡهِ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ١٨

Both the Jews and the Christians say: "We are God's children and His loved ones." Say: Why then does He punish you for your sins? You are only human beings of His creation. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will. To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and to Him all shall return. (18)

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ قَدۡ جَآءَكُمۡ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ
لَكُمۡ عَلَىٰ فَتۡرَةٖ مِّنَ ٱلرُّسُلِ أَن تَقُولُواْ مَا
جَآءَنَا مِنۢ بَشِيرٖ وَلَا نَذِيرٖۖ فَقَدۡ جَآءَكُم
بَشِيرٞ وَنَذِيرٞۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ١٩

People of earlier revelations! Now after an interval during which no messengers have appeared, Our Messenger has come to you to make things plain to you, lest you say: "No one has come to give us good news or to warn us." Now there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner. God has power over all things. (19)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوۡمِهِۦ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱذۡكُرُواْ
نِعۡمَةَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذۡ جَعَلَ فِيكُمۡ أَنۢبِيَآءَ
وَجَعَلَكُم مُّلُوكٗا وَءَاتَىٰكُم مَّا لَمۡ يُؤۡتِ
أَحَدٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٢٠

And so Moses said to his people: "My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. (20)

يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ ٱلۡمُقَدَّسَةَ ٱلَّتِي
كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ وَلَا تَرۡتَدُّواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَدۡبَارِكُمۡ
فَتَنقَلِبُواْ خَٰسِرِينَ ٢١

My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost." (21)

قَالُواْ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّ فِيهَا قَوۡمٗا جَبَّارِينَ وَإِنَّا
لَن نَّدۡخُلَهَا حَتَّىٰ يَخۡرُجُواْ مِنۡهَا فَإِن
يَخۡرُجُواْ مِنۡهَا فَإِنَّا دَٰخِلُونَ ٢٢

"Moses", they answered, "mighty people

dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter". (22)

قَالَ رَجُلَانِ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ أَنۡعَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِمَا ٱدۡخُلُواْ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡبَابَ فَإِذَا دَخَلۡتُمُوهُ فَإِنَّكُمۡ غَٰلِبُونَ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَتَوَكَّلُوٓاْ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Thereupon two men who were God-fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: "Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers." (23)

قَالُواْ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّا لَن نَّدۡخُلَهَآ أَبَدٗا مَّا دَامُواْ فِيهَا ۖ فَٱذۡهَبۡ أَنتَ وَرَبُّكَ فَقَٰتِلَآ إِنَّا هَٰهُنَا قَٰعِدُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They said, "Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." (24)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي لَآ أَمۡلِكُ إِلَّا نَفۡسِي وَأَخِي ۖ فَٱفۡرُقۡ بَيۡنَنَا وَبَيۡنَ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

"Lord", he said, "I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrong-doing folk." (25)

قَالَ فَإِنَّهَا مُحَرَّمَةٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ أَرۡبَعِينَ سَنَةٗ ۚ يَتِيهُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ ۚ فَلَا تَأۡسَ عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

He replied, "This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for forty years, during which they will wander aimlessly on earth. Do not grieve for these wrongdoing folk." (26)

Overview

In the first passage of this *sūrah,* God reminds the Muslims of their covenant with Him and directs them to always remember the blessings He has bestowed on them when He accepted their covenant and bound them to it. The reminder serves as further encouragement to them to fulfil their pledges and to beware of breaking God's covenant. This new passage outlines the attitudes different groups of those formerly given Divine revelations had taken towards their covenants with God. The passage explains what punishment befell earlier communities as a result of their

violation of their covenants. This serves as a reminder to the Muslim community, pointing out that God's law never fails and admits no favouritism. It also reveals the true nature of the people of earlier revelations and their attitude towards Islam. It, thus, enables the Muslims to see through them and to counter their wicked designs against Islam which they treacherously work out under the guise of following the teachings of their religions. In truth, they had turned their backs on their faith and violated their pledges to God.

This passage firstly discusses the covenant God made with the followers of Moses, when He saved them from subjugation in Egypt and their subsequent violations of this covenant. As a result, they were cursed and rejected by God. They were also denied His blessings and guidance. It also refers to the covenant God made with those who claimed to be Christians. As a result of their following a course contrary to their covenant with God, the seeds of enmity were sewn among them. Hostility among their different sects will continue until the Day of Judgement. The passage also refers to the attitude of the Jews when they cowardly refused to enter the Holy Land, although God had promised them that they would have it for themselves. They said to Moses: *"Go forth, then you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (Verse 24)

This exposition of these pledges and covenants, and the attitudes of those who were previously given revelations, also reveals the distortion that had crept into the Jewish and Christian faiths. Included in their covenants was a condition that they would continue to believe in God's oneness and fully submit to Him. By so doing, they would fulfil their part of the bargain and earn all the blessings God had bestowed on them and the guarantees of victory He had given them. They refused all this and, consequently, incurred the scourge of God's curse and ended up in disunity, suffering persecution by others.

This passage also calls on them anew to follow the Divine guidance embodied in the final message from God, conveyed by Muĥammad, His last Messenger. It refutes their argument that it had been a very long time since the last of their prophets had died and, hence, they had subsequently forgotten everything. A new Messenger who warns and gives happy news has now been sent to all mankind. Their argument is thus refuted by undeniable evidence.

Through this new call to them, the unity of the Divine faith becomes clearly apparent. God accepts the same covenant from all His servants, which binds them to believe in Him alone, and to believe in, and support, His messengers, making no distinction between them. It calls upon them to attend regularly to their prayers, to regularly pay charity and so financially support God's cause. These are the terms of the covenant with God laying down the essentials of the true faith, defining proper worship and outlining the main features of a social system that is suitable to man and

acceptable to God.

The Terms of Covenants Made with God

> *Indeed, God made a covenant with the Children of Israel and We appointed among them twelve captains. God said: I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path. Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover, they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind. From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery. But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do good. Likewise, from those who said, "We are Christians, "We have accepted a firm covenant, but they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done.* (Verses 12-14)

The covenant God had accepted from the Children of Israel stated a specific condition and stipulated certain penalties in case of default. After explaining the circumstances leading to the confirmation of this covenant, the *sūrah* mentions its terms, conditions and penalties. It was a covenant made with the twelve captains of the Israelites, representing all twelve tribes descending from Jacob, or Israel. Each tribe descended from one of Jacob's sons. The terms of the covenant are outlined as follows: *"God said: 'I shall be with you. If you attend to your prayers, practise regular charity, believe in My messengers and support them and offer up to God a generous loan, I shall forgive you your sins and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow. But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path."* (Verse 12)

When God says to any group of people, *"I shall be with you"*, He gives them a great promise. He who has God on his side suffers no opposition. Whoever and whatever stands against him is of no consequence. Moreover, whoever is with God will not go astray. To be with God is sufficient to ensure the right guidance and the proper support. Anyone who is sure to be on God's side will never suffer worry or misery. He is reassured and blessed with unfailing happiness. He need not ask for anything better than what he already has.

But God does not give this blessing of being with them as a special favour or a

personal gift. This comes only after its conditions are fulfilled. It is, indeed, a contract that outlines conditions and specifies penalties. The first condition is to attend to prayer. This is more than merely offering prayers. It means that prayers should become a manifestation of a true relationship between man and his Lord. This makes prayer an educative element which purifies man's behaviour and dissuades him from committing any blatant sin or gross indecency.

Second is charitable payment, in recognition of God's favour for having given us what we have and by way of acknowledgement of the fact that whatever we may own actually belongs to God. The payment of *zakāt,* or charity, is a manifestation of our obedience to God with regard to how to dispense with the money He has given us and specified the conditions of our ownership of it. Moreover, a perfect system of social security can thus be implemented in a society established on faith. Thus, the social economy becomes free of the shackles which result from the concentration of national wealth in the hands of a small minority. This leads to a situation where the overwhelming majority of the population is unable to buy its needs while a small minority enjoys all the wealth. This leads to all sorts of social corruption which can he prevented by the *zakāt* system which ensures the proper distribution of wealth.

The next condition is to believe in God's Messengers making no distinction between them. Every single one of them was sent by God to preach the same message. Therefore, to deny any single one of them is to deny them all and to disbelieve in God, who had sent them all. Moreover, believing in them must not be a mere mental exercise. To truly believe in them is to be actively involved in supporting them in order to ensure that they succeed in their mission. Believing in the Divine faith requires that a believer is always ready to do what is necessary and within his power to support his faith and to see it well established in human life. The Divine faith is not confined merely to a set of beliefs or acts of worship. It is a practical system which organises human life in a certain fashion. Hence, it requires the support of all its followers to establish and protect it. Otherwise, a believer does not fulfil his covenant with God.

In addition to *zakāt,* giving generously to support God's cause is mentioned as a loan given to God. It should be pointed out here that it is God who owns what we have, but He gracefully describes what we pay to further His cause as a loan given to Him.

These were the conditions of the covenant God accepted from the Children of Israel. The reward for the fulfilment of these conditions was to forgive them their sins. Human beings will always err, no matter how keen they are to do what is right. Therefore, the forgiveness of sins is a great reward and a manifestation of God's endless grace. The reward also includes admission into Heaven which is described in the Qur'ān as *"gardens through which running waters flow."* (Verse 12) This is again a

reward which God bestows on human beings out of His grace. No man can earn this reward through his own actions. God, however, has promised this reward to those who do their utmost to fulfil their pledges to Him.

The penalty for failing to honour one's pledges is specified at the end of this verse: *"But any of you who, after this, rejects the faith will indeed have strayed from the right path."* (Verse 12) Hence, he can have no guidance and no way of return. The pledge had already been made, the guidance already provided, the way shown and the penalty specified. Nothing can be of any benefit any more.

Such was the covenant God accepted from the captains of the Children of Israel on behalf of their communities. They all accepted it, which made it a covenant applicable to every single individual among them, and one with the whole nation they constituted. How, then, did the Israelites subsequently fare?

Hardened Hearts

They have indeed broken their covenant with God; they killed their prophets for no legitimate reason, and they plotted to kill and crucify Jesus (peace be upon him) the last of their Prophets. They also distorted their revealed Scriptures, i.e. the Torah, and abandoned its laws. They adopted a hostile attitude towards the last of all Prophets, Muĥammad (peace be upon him). They schemed against him and betrayed him and adopted an uncompromising attitude of hostility towards his message, not hesitating to violate the treaty they signed with him. As a result, God denied them His guidance and rejected them. Their hearts were caused to harden so that they could no longer be the recipients of Divine guidance: *"Then for having broken their covenant, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden. They now distort the meaning of [revealed] words, taking them out of their context. Moreover, they have forgotten much of what they have been told to bear in mind."* (Verse 13)

Indeed, God tells the truth. These were the distinctive features of the Israelites; a curse clearly apparent in their faces and deeply entrenched in their evil character, a hardness that left no room for a compassionate smile, and actions that took no heed of human feelings. They may appear gentle when they have something to fear or an interest to further, or when they try to sow the seeds of discord among people, but their hardness will nevertheless surface revealing how, deep at heart, they are cruel, devoid of mercy. Such was their essential nature that they distorted revealed words, took it all out of context. They distorted their revealed Book and presented it in a light different from that given to Moses (peace be upon him). They did this in more ways than one. They added to their Book much of what served their devious goals and gave them religious justification for pursuing their wicked ends, which they falsely attributed to God. They also interpreted such original statements as remained

in their Book according to their prejudices, this to fit them to their wicked designs. Furthermore, they deliberately abandoned or forgot the tenets of their faith and left them unimplemented in their society because such implementation would have required them to adhere to a clean and pure method, one acceptable to God.

"From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery." (Verse 13) This is an address to the Prophet (peace be upon him), describing the attitude of the Jews towards the Muslim community in Madinah. They never hesitated to try to betray God's Messenger (peace be upon him). Their treacherous attempts came fast and furious, one after the other. Indeed, that was their standard practice during the years when they were with the Prophet in Madinah, then in the whole of Arabia. It has continued to be their practice whenever they live within a Muslim community, despite the fact that the Muslim community has been the only one to provide them with safe refuge, allow them a life free of persecution and extend to them kindly treatment and a prosperous life. Nonetheless, they have continued to show the same attitude they adopted towards the Prophet; characteristics more suited to stealthy snakes and cunning foxes. If they are unable to level a direct low to destroy the Muslims, they resort to tricks and wicked designs instead. They scheme with every enemy of the Muslims until they find a chance to hit them hard, without mercy or compassion, paying no heed to any covenant or treaty. This is true of the great majority of them, as God described them in His Book and as He has told us of their nature which they acquired as a consequence of their breaking their covenant with God early on in their history.

The Qur'ānic description of the situation of the Jews in Madinah and their attitude towards God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is very interesting: *"From all but a few of them you will always experience treachery."* (Verse 13) Treacherous actions, intentions, words and looks are all grouped together in an Arabic expression stating the adjective and deleting the noun it qualifies. For "treachery" in the English translation we read "treacherous" in the Arabic original, which is a mode of expression suggesting a situation so rampant that it is perpetrated by every single one of them. This is part of their nature. It is also the essence of their attitude towards the Prophet and the Muslim community.

The Qur'ān is the teacher and the guide of the Muslim nation, and it marks the road the Muslims are required to follow throughout history. The Qur'ān tells the Muslims about their enemies and their historical attitude towards God's guidance. Had this nation of believers referred to the Qur'ān and listened to its directives and implemented its instructions, their enemies would never have been able to win the upper hand in any fight against Islam. But when the Muslims broke their covenants with their Lord and abandoned the Qur'ān, they suffered the setbacks and calamities known to everyone. It is true that they continue to be enchanted with musical

recitations of the Qur'ān and may use these as charms, but this is not the purpose for which the Qur'ān was revealed. Indeed, when the Qur'ān is not implemented in the lives of the Muslim community, it is effectively abandoned by it, regardless of how much lip service is paid to it.

God tells the Muslim community what happened to the Children of Israel and how they were cursed, rejected and suffered hardened hearts as a result of breaking their covenants with God. Thus, the Muslim community is warned against breaking its own covenant with Him lest it should suffer the same fate. It is because Muslims have disregarded this warning and followed a way different from that of Islam that God has taken away from them the role of humanity's leadership, leaving them at its tail end. They will continue to be in this losing position until they return to their Lord, adhere to their covenant, and fulfil their pledges. Then and only then will God fulfil His promise to them, give them power and return them to the leadership of humanity. God's promise never fails.

At the time when this Qur'ānic verse was revealed, God instructed His Messenger in these terms: *"But pardon them, and forbear. God loves those who do good."* (Verse 13) To pardon their evil act is to do good, and to forgive their treachery is to do good. But a time came when forgiveness and pardon could no longer be extended. God subsequently instructed the Prophet to evacuate them from Madinah and later from the Arabian Peninsula altogether. These instructions were carried out.

The Origins of Enmity Among the Christians

God also relates to His Messenger (peace be upon him) and to the Muslim community that He accepted a covenant from those who described themselves as Christians, but they, too, were unfaithful to their covenant and suffered the consequences: *"Likewise, from those who said, 'We are Christians', We have accepted a firm covenant, but they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind. Therefore, We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred to last until the Day of Resurrection. God will make clear to them what they have done."* (Verse 14)

This verse begins with a particularly significant description: *"Likewise, from those who said: 'We are Christians', We have accepted a firm covenant."* This mode of expression tells us that they simply professed to be Christians without giving practical credence to their claims. The essence of their covenant was to believe in God's oneness. Yet it was in regard to this very issue that deviation crept into the history of Christianity. It is this central clause in their covenant which became the forgotten part of what they had enjoined. When it was forgotten, every deviation became possible and enmity broke out between the numberless sects and churches of Christianity, old and new, as we will shortly but briefly explain. God tells us that their enmity and hatred will

continue until the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, they will suffer the punishment of the Hereafter, at the time when they will be shown a clear image of what they have done in this life.

Old and modern history has witnessed much conflict, hostility and enmity between those who claim to be Christians. All this gives factual endorsement to what God tells us in His truthful Book. Their wars against each other have caused much more bloodshed than the wars they fought against non-Christians throughout history. They have fought each other because of conflicts over principles of faith, disputes over religious supremacy and quarrels over political, economic and social issues. Many generations have passed but their hostility and their wars have not subsided. They will continue to flare up until the Day of Judgement as stated by the One who always says the truth. This is all a natural result of their violation of their pledges to God and their negligence of what He commanded them to do. As we have already said, the first item in their covenant is to believe in God's oneness and it is this first item that they abandoned shortly after Jesus Christ had been raised by God. Perhaps this is not the proper place to discuss the reasons for this deviation in detail.

Now that the attitude taken by the Jews and Christians towards their covenants with God has been made clear, the *sūrah* addresses both communities announcing the message of the last of all prophets and that it is addressed to them as well as to the Arabs and to all mankind. They are required to follow God's last Messenger, and this requirement is part of the firm covenant they made with God. They are told that this last Messenger has come to make public much of what they have concealed of God's revelations which were entrusted to their care, and concerning which they were unfaithful to their trust. They are also told that this last

Messenger will also forgive them much of what they have concealed, because it is no longer needed in the new message. It points out some of the deviant beliefs which the last Messenger would rectify, such as the claim by the Christians that Jesus Christ, son of Mary, was God Himself, and the assertion by both Christians and Jews that they were God's sons and beloved ones. This address is concluded with a clear statement that they would have no argument to press after the revelation of this final and clear message. Nor could they claim that a long time had lapsed after the revelation of their messages, and that this had caused them to forget and become confused.

> *People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much. There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book, through which God guides those who seek His good pleasure to the paths of peace. By His grace, He leads them out of darkness into light and guides them to a straight way.* (Verses 15-16)

A Messenger with an Unlikely Background

Those people who received revelations in the past found it rather hard to accept that a Prophet who did not belong to them should call on them to submit themselves to God. This Prophet belonged to a nation of illiterate people whom they used to despise, on account of their being unlettered while they themselves had Divine Scriptures. God wanted to bestow a great honour on those unlettered people and, therefore, He chose from among them the individual who was to become the last of all Prophets. He also gave them His final message, addressed to all mankind. He taught those unlettered people to become the ones with the highest standard of knowledge on earth. This transformation made them the ones with the highest beliefs, the most consistent and sound way of life, the most complete system and legal code, the soundest social set-up and the most sublime standard of morality. All this was part of the grace God bestowed on them when He chose Islam to be their faith. Those unlettered people could not have aspired to be the guides for humanity without this grace they received from God. Indeed, they never had and will never have anything to offer humanity except for what their faith gives them.

In this Divine address to the people of earlier Scriptures, it is made clear that they are called upon to accept Islam, believe in Muĥammad and support him, as this has been part of their covenant which God accepted from them. They are clearly told that God Himself is a witness that this Prophet who could not read and write was His Messenger to them as well as to the Arabs and to all mankind. There is no denying the fact that his message was given to him by God, and no claim can be admitted that his message was addressed to the Arabs only; it is, indeed, addressed also to the people of earlier revelations: *"People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to you to make clear to you much of what you have been concealing of the Scriptures, and to forgive you much."* (Verse 15) He has sent a Messenger to you, and his role is to open things up to you so that you see them in their reality. You can thus see how he brings out into the open what you have conspired to suppress of the basic truth of the revelations given to you.

This applies to both the Christians and Jews. The Christians suppressed the very basic and fundamental principle of faith, namely, the concept of God's oneness, and the Jews suppressed many Divine legislations such as the punishment of adulterers with stoning and the total prohibition of usury. Both the Christians and the Jews also suppressed the news of the future mission of the unlettered Prophet, *"whom they find mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel in their hands."* (7: 157) He (peace be upon him) pardons them for much of what they had distorted or suppressed as it is not included in his revelations. God has abrogated many of the rulings of earlier Scriptures and Divine codes as these had fulfilled their purpose in the particular community to which the message had been revealed. They had no longer any role to

play in human society. Now the final, comprehensive and everlasting message has been revealed and become well-established as a demonstration of the perfection of the grace God has bestowed on man, when He chose self-surrender, or Islam, as the basis of the faith acceptable to Him. No abrogation or modification can be introduced into this message.

The Nature of God's Final Message

The nature of what the last Messenger has been given, the role it is destined to play in human life and its practical effect are then explained: *"There has come to you from God a light and a clear Book."* (Verse 15) Perhaps nothing expresses the nature of the Qur'ān and the Divine message of Islam more accurately and comprehensively than stating that it is "a light". In his heart of hearts, in everything in his life, in his evaluation of things, events and people, a believer realises as soon as he accepts the truth of faith that he has a light that makes everything clear to him. Everything brightens up in front of him. No longer is he confused about anything; no longer does he suffer any hesitation before taking a serious decision; no longer is he travelling an unmarked road and no longer is he uncertain of his direction. His ultimate goal is clear. His way towards it is straight and he is certain of his footsteps. Two qualities describe the message which was given to the noble Messenger: "*a light and a clear book*"

It has been God's pleasure to choose self-surrender, or Islam, as a religion for mankind. Anyone who follows what God has been pleased to choose for him and accepts it with pleasure will be guided by God "*to the paths of peace*". How true and accurate this description is. What this faith imparts to life as a whole is peace, in the broadest sense of the term. It is peace within the individual, the community and the whole world. It is peace with one's conscience, with one's mind and body. It is peace within the home and family, society and the community and with humanity at large. It is peace with life, the universe and with the Creator, God. Mankind never knew or experienced this sort of peace except through following this faith and implementing its laws and systems.

It is a true fact that through this religion of Islam God guides anyone who seeks His pleasure by following it "*to the paths of peace" in* all the aforementioned aspects of life. No one can appreciate how profound a blessing this is except a person who has experienced what life is like along the paths of war in ignorant societies, old and modern, or one who has experienced the turmoil of worry and restlessness generated within man's conscience by deviant faiths, or erroneous laws and systems. Those who were the first to be addressed by these Qur'ānic revelations realised, as a result of their past experience in ignorant societies, the true meaning of this peace which

brought happiness into their personal lives.

We badly need to understand this basic truth. We see ignorance all around us playing havoc with man's life, as it continues to cause wars to flare up within human conscience and human society, generation after generation. No one needs to understand this true wisdom more than us since we have lived in this state of peace for a period of our history, only to leave it for a life of war that crushes our spirits, morality, behaviour and society. We put up with being choked by the tightening grip of darkness and endure the unabating war it wages against us, all when Islam and the peace it imparts to mankind is well within our reach. We only need to accept for ourselves what God has chosen for us to enjoy this blessed peace. What a raw deal we accept for ourselves when we barter good for evil, truth for error and peace for war.

We can save mankind from the tribulations of ignorance and the war it wages on man in all its shapes and forms. But we cannot do so until we save ourselves by turning back to what God has chosen for us and seek His pleasure by following it in order to be included among those whom God guides along the paths of peace and *"leads them out of darkness into light"* (Verse 16), by His grace. Everything that results from abandoning Islam adds to the state of darkness. There is the darkness of superstition and ill-conceived beliefs, the darkness of unrestrained desire and caprice, the darkness of worry and confusion, the darkness of confused values and mistaken judgements and standards. Light on the other hand, is the sort of clarity and brightness which lightens up man's conscience, his mind and his whole life.

He *"guides them to a straight way."* (Verse 16) It is in line with human nature and with the universe as well as the laws which govern the existence of both man and the universe. It leads straight to God and allows no confusion of issues or blurring of facts or errors of direction.

It is God, the Creator of man, human nature, the universe and its laws, who has devised this system for man and chosen this religion for the believers. It is only natural, therefore, that this system should show them the straight way, for no other system can map it out for them. God always tells the truth. He is in no need of anyone. It is neither of any benefit to Him that people follow His guidance, nor of any consequence to Him that they should sink into error. It is only because He is most gracious that He has given them this faith, which maps out for them the straight way. To claim that Jesus Christ is God is a blatant blasphemy. To say that the Jews and the Christians are God's beloved sons is a false fabrication. Such claims are pressed by people of earlier revelations who have suppressed the clear essence of the concept of God's oneness. The last Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon 'him), was sent to put it back in its clearest form, so that those who have strayed away from it may turn back.

False Claims Leading to Disbelief

> *Unbelievers indeed are they who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth? To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things.* (Verse 17)

The message Jesus (peace be upon him) conveyed as given to him by his Lord was the message of God's absolute oneness which has been given to every messenger. Total submission to God alone as the only God and the Lord of the universe was the attitude adopted by every messenger. This clear faith, however, later became distorted after pagans adopted Christianity, retaining some traces of their old pagan beliefs which they were keen to introduce into the faith based on God's oneness. As time passed, these deviant beliefs became an integral part of the whole faith.

These deviant beliefs were not introduced all at the same time. Ecclesiastical councils introduced them at different intervals until they eventually produced this singularly confusing mixture of legends and concepts that defies even those of its advocates who try to give a logical interpretation of it.

The basic concept of God's oneness was preached after Jesus (peace be upon him) by his disciples and their followers. The Gospel of Barnabas, one of many written at the time, speaks of Jesus Christ as a Messenger of God. Internal differences then broke out, with some maintaining that the Christ was not different from other messengers sent by God. Others acknowledged that he was a messenger but they claimed that he had a special relationship with God, while a third group said that he was the son of God because he was created without a father. Nevertheless, he was one of God's creation. A different group claimed that he was God's son, and that he was not created; he shared with the Father the quality of being eternal.

To settle their differences, a great synod met in 325 AD, attended by 48,000 patriarchs and bishops who were described by Ibn al-Baṭrīq, a historian of Christianity, as follows:

> They differed greatly in views and faiths. Some of them maintained that both the Christ and his mother were gods, while others, Sabilius and his followers, viewed the relationship between the Christ and the Father as a brand of fire separated from a torch, which continued to burn unaffected by this split. A third group, Ilyan and those who followed his lead, claimed that Mary did not bear Jesus for nine months, as mothers bear their children. He only passed through her belly as water runs through gutters. The Word went

> through her ear and came out instantly through the passage where a child is born. Another group claimed that the Christ was a human being created from the Divine with an essence similar to that of any one of us. The beginning of the son started with Mary, and he was chosen to maintain the human essence. Divine grace was bestowed on him with love and Divine will. It is for this reason that he was called the son of God. They maintained that God is an eternal, single essence and single hypostasis who had three names. They did not believe in the Word or in the Holy Spirit. This was the view advocated by Paul Shamshati, the patriarch of Antioch and his followers who were called the Bulikanians. Yet another group believed in a trinity consisting of three deities: good, evil and a middle one in between. This view was advanced by Markiun whom they claimed to be Jesus's Chief Disciple, denying Peter. A further group maintained that Jesus Christ had a Divine nature. This was the belief advocated by St. Paul and 318 bishops who followed him.[1]

The Roman Emperor Constantine, who embraced Christianity without understanding anything of it chose this last view and supported its advocates, giving them a chance to suppress all other beliefs and views, especially those who maintained that the Divine nature belonged only to the father and that Jesus, the Christ, was a human being.

The author of the *History of the Coptic Nation* has this to say about this decision: "The holy community and the apostolic church excommunicated everyone who claimed that there was a time when the son of God did not exist, or that he did not exist before he was born, or that he was born of nothing or that he was made of a substance or an essence other than that of God, the Father. It also excommunicated everyone who said that Jesus Christ was created, or that he was liable to change or that his shadow differed in shape."

By taking these decisions, the ecclesiastical council did not manage to win over the Unitarian followers of Aries who managed to gain power in Constantinople, Antioch, Babylon, Alexandria and Egypt.

A new disagreement erupted over the nature of the Holy Spirit, with some people maintaining that Jesus was Divine, while others rejected this. The first Synod of Constantinople met in 381 to settle these differences. The same historian of Christianity tells us of the decisions of this council as reported by the Bishop of Alexandria: "The Patriarch of Alexandria, Thimothius said: 'To us the Holy Spirit does not have a meaning other than the spirit of God, and the spirit of God has no

[1] Shaikh Muĥammad Abū Zahrah, *Muĥāđarāt fī al-Nasrānīyah,* or "Lectures on Christianity", Cairo. All that we summarise concerning these ecclesiastical councils are based on this book and its sources.

meaning other than His life. Therefore, if we were to say that the Holy Spirit was created, then we are saying that the spirit of God is created, and if we were to say that the spirit of God is created, then we are saying that His life is a creation. If we were to say that His life is a creation, then we allege that He is not the Living. If we were to allege that He is not the Living, then we disbelieve in Him. Whoever disbelieves in Him is to be cursed."

Hence, the Divinity of the Holy Spirit was established in this ecclesiastical council as the Divinity of the Christ, Jesus, was established in the earlier council. Thus the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit was finally established.

Yet another dispute broke out on the issue of the combination of the Divine and the human natures in the Christ. Nestor, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was of the view that there was a hypostasis and a nature. The hypostasis of Divinity was derived from the Father, while the humanity came through Mary. Therefore, Mary was the mother of man in Jesus, not the mother of God. Of the Christ who mixed with people and addressed them, he said, as quoted by the historian of Christianity: "This man who says he is the Christ is united with the son through love. It is said that he is God and the son of God, not in actuality but through grace."

He also says: "Nestor has maintained that our Lord, Jesus Christ, was not God himself, but a man full of blessings and grace, or he was inspired by God. He was infallible and committed no sin."

His view was rejected by the Bishop of Rome, the Patriarch of Alexandria and the Bishops of Antioch. They agreed to hold a fourth summit, the Afsis Council. Held in 431, this Council concluded that "Mary the Virgin was the mother of God and that Jesus was a true God and a man at the same time, with two natures united in the hypostasis." The Council cursed Nestor.

The Church of Alexandria came out with yet another view which was discussed by the second synod, which concluded that "The Christ had one nature combining both Divinity and humanity."

This view was not universally accepted. Disagreement was rife and another ecclesiastical council met at Khalqidonia in 451 and determined that "The Christ had two natures, not one. Divinity was a nature sacred and different from Humanity. Both met in the Christ." Thus, the second synod of Afsis was totally rejected.

The Egyptians declared that they did not recognise this decision. A bloody conflict erupted between the Egyptian Copts, the Monophysites and the Melkites of Syria whose views became the official ones of the Empire.

This note is sufficient to describe the great variety of deviant concepts about the Divinity of Jesus Christ and the enmity and hatred to which it led between various

sects. These divisions and hatred continue even today.

The True Verdict

The final message gives the ultimate ruling on this whole issue, with the final Messenger declaring to the people who received revelations in former times the true nature of the Divine faith: "*Unbelievers indeed are they who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary.'*" (Verse 17) "*Unbelievers indeed are those who claim that God is one of a Trinity.*" (Verse 73) An effort is made here to persuade them to listen to the voice of reason, upright nature and fact: "*Say: Who could have prevailed with God in any way had it been His will to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth?*" (Verse 17) This represents an absolute and undeniable distinction between God, His nature, will and dominion on the one hand and the nature of Jesus (peace be upon him); his mother and all beings on the other. The difference is clear and total. God is single; nothing is like Him; His will is absolute; His authority is total; no one can do anything to reverse His will should He desire to destroy the Christ, son of Mary, his mother and everyone on earth. He, the most glorious owns and creates everything, while all else are created: "*To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He wills and God has power over all things.*" (Verse 17)

The Islamic faith thus appears to all in its true light: simple, clear, straightforward. Its clarity is even more enhanced in comparison to all erroneous concepts, legends and pagan beliefs which have crept into the faith of a section of those who were given earlier revelations. The first distinctive feature of the Islamic faith becomes prominent as it states without any trace of ambiguity the true nature of Godhead, as well as servitude and submission to God. It separates the two positions most decisively.

Wishful Thinking That Comes to Nothing

The *sūrah* then mentions another claim pressed by the Jews and Christians: "*Both the Jews and the Christians say: 'We are God's children and His loved ones.'*" (Verse 18) They allege that some sort of parenthood belongs to God. If this fatherhood is not a physical one, then it is spiritual. Whatever it is, it throws an element of doubt on the concept of God's oneness and detracts from the decisive separation between the position of God and that of His servants. The fact is that this separation is necessary for the clarity of faith and the proper order of human life. It is essential so that all worship is addressed to God by all His creation. They, thus, have a single legislative authority which sets for them their values, standards, laws and systems, with no confusion of authority resulting from a jumble of qualities and positions. It is not

merely a question of deviant beliefs, but a question of their consequences that are bound to corrupt life as a whole.

As a logical consequence of their claim that they are the children of God and His loved ones, the Jews and Christians claimed that He would not punish them for their sins, and that they would not be in Hell for more than a few days, if at all. This means in plain terms that God's justice is not administered properly and that He favours a section of His servants by allowing them to spread corruption on earth without punishing them as He punishes others who would do the same. Can we imagine the sort of corrupt life that may result from such a concept?

At this point, Islam rejects most decisively such deviant beliefs and their practical consequences which corrupt life. It stresses the fact that God's justice is absolute: "*Say: Why then does He punish you for your sins? You are only human beings of His creation. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will.*" (Verse 18) Their claims of being God's children are, thus, stated to be false. They are no more than other human beings. Forgiveness or punishment is determined by the same rule, based on God's will which has established certain reasons for forgiveness and different ones for punishment. Neither is determined by any special relationship with God.

We then have a reiteration of the fact that everything belongs to God and returns to Him: "*To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and to Him all shall return.*" (Verse 18) It goes without saying that the owner is different from what is owned. Limitless as He is in His glory, His will is absolute and to Him will all return.

A renewed address is then made to the people given earlier revelations in order to allow them no excuse whatsoever. They are made to visualise most clearly their eventual destiny: "*People of earlier revelations! Now after an interval during which no messengers have appeared, Our Messenger has come to you to make things plain to you, lest you say: 'No one has come to give us good news or to warn us.' Now there has come to you a bearer of good news and a warner. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 19)

With such decisive clarity, all issues are made plain. No longer can the people of earlier revelations claim that the unlettered Messenger has not been sent to them. God tells them: "*People of earlier revelations, Our Messenger has come to make things plain to you.*" (Verse 19) No longer can they profess that they have not been warned or given good news for a long period which might have allowed forgetfulness or deviation to creep in. Now someone to warn them and to give them happy news has come to them.

They are reminded that nothing can resist God's power; nothing can defy Him. He can send a Messenger from among the unlettered nation and He can punish the people given revelations earlier for what they may earn: "*God has power over all*

things." (Verse 19)

Thus, this round of confrontation with peoples of earlier revelations comes to an end. It has exposed their deviant beliefs which they introduced in the true faith preached by their messengers. It states most clearly the only faith which God accepts from believers and pronounces as false all their excuses which they reiterate in justification of their negative attitude to the unlettered Prophet, Muĥammad (peace be upon him). It calls on them to follow the Divine guidance on the one hand and weakens the effects of their scheming against the Muslim community on the other. Moreover, the way the Muslim community and all those who seek guidance must follow is clearly marked out.

An Appeal Mixed with Worry

At this point in the *sūrah,* the attitude of the Children of Israel towards God's Messenger sent to them, Moses (peace be upon him), is given. Moses was their saviour who led them out of Egypt towards the holy land God had assigned to them. The *sūrah* also exposes their attitude to the covenant they made with their Lord and how they violated it and were punished for that violation.

> *And so Moses said to his people: `My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost.'" "Moses," they answered, `mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter." Thereupon two men who were God-fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: "Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers." They said, "Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." "Lord, "he said, `I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrongdoing folk." He replied, "This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for forty years, during which they will wonder aimlessly on earth. Do not grieve for these wrongdoing folk."* (Verses 20-26)

This is only one episode in the story of the Children of Israel which is related in the Qur'ān in extensive detail to serve several purposes. One purpose relates to the fact that the Children of Israel were the first to confront the Islamic message with wicked designs, plots and open warfare both in Madinah and the whole of Arabia. Their hostile attitude could be traced back to the very early days of the Islamic

message. It was they who encouraged and nurtured hypocrisy and the hypocrites in Madinah, providing them with the means to scheme against Islam and the Muslims. They also incited the pagan Arabs to fight the Muslim community and gave them their active support. It was they who started the war of false rumours against the Muslim community raising among them doubts and suspicions about the Muslim leadership and circulating distortions of the Islamic faith before they confronted the Muslim community in open warfare. It was necessary, therefore, to expose them to the Muslim community so that it knew its enemies: their nature, history, methods and means as well as the nature of the battle it had to fight against them.

Another purpose can be seen in the fact that the Israelites were the followers of a Divine faith revealed before the final faith of Islam. They had a long history before Islam, during which distortions crept into their faith and they repeatedly violated their agreement and covenant with God. The practical consequences of these violations and deviations were seen in their lives, their moral values and their traditions. As the Muslim nation is the heir to all Divine messages and the custodian of the monotheistic Divine faith as a whole, it is necessary that it be made fully aware of the history of the Israelites with all its ups and downs. This gave the Muslim community an accurate knowledge of the way it should follow, what slips lay ahead of it and the consequences of such slips, as these are reflected in the history and morality of the Jews. This enabled the Muslim community to add the experience of the Jews to the total sum of its own experience and to benefit by it in future. It could, thus, avoid the slips and deal effectively with deviation right at the start before it had a chance to develop.

Yet another purpose relates to the fact that over their long history the experience of the Jews was highly varied. God is aware that with the passage of time, people may change, and certain generations may deviate from the right path. As the Muslim nation will continue until the end of life, it is bound to go through certain periods which are not dissimilar to what the Jews have gone through. God has, therefore, chosen to make available to the leaders of the Muslim community and its reformers in different generations, clear examples of what could befall nations so that they may be able to diagnose the disease of their particular generation and administer the proper cure. It is a fact of life that those who deviate after having known the truth are the most resistant to calls and appeals to follow right guidance. Those without any prior knowledge of the truth are more responsive because they find something new which appeals to them and helps them shake off- the burden of ignorance. They are most impressed by the first call that makes its appeal to them. Winning over those with an earlier experience requires a much more strenuous effort and a great deal of perseverance on the part of advocates of the Divine faith.

There are other purposes for relating the story of the Jews in such detail, but it is

sufficient to make only these brief references here and go back to our commentary.

> *And so Moses said to his people: 'My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost."* (Verses 20-21)

Moses' words give us the impression that he may have been worried lest his people disobey. He had tried them before on several occasions. He had led them out of Egypt, liberated them from subjugation with God's help, who parted the sea for them and caused Pharaoh and his soldiers to drown. Nevertheless, when they came by a community engaged in pagan worship, they said to him: "*Moses, set up a deity for us as these people have deities."* (7: 138) On another occasion, he had hardly left them for his appointment with his Lord when the Samaritan used the jewellery stolen from Egyptian women to make them an effigy of the calf which made a lowing sound. They started to worship the calf and claimed that it was the god Moses went to meet.

Another experience which Moses remembered well was when God made springs of water gush out for them in the desert and sent down to them manna and quail, a very wholesome food to eat. Nonetheless, they wanted to have the types of food they were familiar with in Egypt, the land where they were humiliated. They asked Moses to pray to God to bring forth for them herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions. They would not sacrifice their familiar food for a life of dignity, liberation and the pursuit of a noble goal. He also tested them when he conveyed to them God's order to slaughter a cow but they kept postponing the implementation of this order. When they finally slaughtered it, they did so most reluctantly. When he returned from his appointment with his Lord carrying the tablets which outlined the covenant they should make with God, they refused to make that covenant and fulfil their pledges to their Lord. Despite what God had bestowed on them and the forgiveness of their sins which He granted them, they did not give their pledges until they saw with their own eyes the mountain raised over their heads, and felt that it was about to fall on top of them.

Moses had tested them on several occasions and now they were close to the holy land, their destination. God had promised them they would be the rulers in this land and that He would raise up among them prophets so that they remained in God's care. Moses, however, was worried lest they should disobey. He, therefore, coupled this, his last appeal with a reminder of the happiest memories, best incentives and strongest warnings:

> *And so Moses said to his people: 'My people, remember the favours which God has bestowed upon you when He raised up prophets among you, made you kings and granted you what He has not granted to any other community. My people, enter the holy land which God has assigned to you. Do not turn your back, for then you will be lost."* (Verses 20-21)

God's promise never fails. He promises here to raise up prophets among them and to make them kings. The fulfilment of this promise brought them what God granted to no other nation until that period in time. The holy land, which they were approaching, was assigned to them by God's promise, which meant that they were certain to have it. They had already known from experience that God always fulfils His promises. Now, they were called upon to meet the conditions for yet another of His promises. To turn back was sure to bring them to ruin. But the Israelites never changed: their instinctive cowardice, argumentativeness and willingness to breach pledges was sure to surface. "*'Moses' they answered, 'mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter."* (Verse 22)

A Typically Cowardly Attitude

The Israelite nature appears here unmasked, without cosmetics. They were facing danger and, therefore, all attempts to put on a brave face were abandoned. Not even God's promise to them to make this land theirs was sufficient to motivate them. They wanted an easier prize, without having to pay any price. It should come to them from heaven just as manna and quails were sent down for them to eat. "*Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter*" (Verse 22)

Victory, however, does not come in this manner as the Jews wanted when they were devoid of faith: "*Thereupon two men who were God- fearing and on whom God had bestowed His grace said: 'Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious. In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers.'*" (Verse 23) The value of having faith and of being God-fearing appears very clearly. These were two men who feared God, and being God-fearing made them totally fearless when they confronted mighty people. They had all the courage needed to dispel the imaginary danger. They made this testimony, highlighting the importance of faith and the time of trial and difficulty. They wanted to show what it meant to fear God alone at times when people fear each other. God does not combine the two feelings of fear in any one man's heart: fearing Him and fearing human beings. A person who fears God fears no one else.

"Go in upon them through the gate. As soon as you enter it, you shall be victorious." (Verse 23) This is a basic rule in how to fight the enemy. The Jews are advised here to launch an offensive which takes them right through into the other people's homes. Once they are in, the others will be demoralised while their own morale will be high indeed. Those attacked will suffer a total loss of confidence and the attackers will win.

"In God you should place your trust, if you are true believers." (Verse 23) A believer relies on no one other than God. This is the distinctive mark and the correlative of faith. But who were these two men addressing them with these true words? They were after all addressing the Israelites. True to their nature, the Children of Israel said: *"Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (Verse 24)

Cowardly people are increasingly impudent. They start to kick around like donkeys but they never step forward. Often, cowardice and impudence go hand in hand. A cowardly person is reminded of his duty, but his strength fails him. His neglect of his duty embarrasses him and he abuses this duty as well as the message which imposes on him what he does not want.

"Go forth, then, you and your Lord and fight, both of you. We shall stay here." (Verse 24) A perfect example of rudeness from weak people who realise that rudeness costs nothing but words. Fulfilment of their duty, on the other hand, requires them to fight in a real war. *"Go forth, then, you and your Lord, both of you."* He is, then, not their Lord if his lordship means that they will have to fight. *"We shall stay here."* We neither desire a kingdom, nor sovereignty, nor even the promised holy land, if it means that we will have to fight these mighty people.

This is now the end for Moses (peace be upon him) after the strenuous efforts he exerted with the Children of Israel and after bearing all impudence and deviation. The result was simply to turn back, to turn away from the holy land when they stood at its doors. This was a clear violation of the covenant they had made with God. But the covenant applied to Moses also. What should he do now? Whose help should he seek?

"Lord", he said, I am master of none but myself and my brother. Do, then, draw a dividing line between us and these wrongdoing folk." (Verse 25) This is a prayer uttered in pain. It is an appeal to God and one of total submission to Him. It also expresses total determination and a total break with those who disobeyed.

Moses was aware that God knew that he could not account for anyone other than himself and his brother. His are the feelings of weakness experienced by a person who has suffered a major letdown, the faith of a Prophet who spoke to God directly, the determination of an unshakable believer. He could not put his complaint to

anyone other than God, to whom he prays to draw a dividing line between him and the evil-doers. Nothing could provide a link with them after they had abandoned their covenant with God. No relationship of family, ancestry, history or previous effort was of any significance. Their only relationship could be one of faith and the pledges they had given to God. As they breached them, then all relations had been severed. As for him, he was determined to fulfil his own promises to God, while they continued to do wrong.

This is the attitude of humble politeness shown by a Prophet and this is the action plan of a firm believer. The tie which could bring believers together was the tie of faith. Nationality, ancestry, race, language, history and all other ties known to mankind are of no significance when the tie of faith is severed.

God answered His Prophet's prayer and pronounced His judgement of the wrongdoers: "*This land shall, then, be forbidden to them for forty years, during which they will wander aimlessly on earth. Do not grieve for these wrongdoing folk.*" (Verse 26) As they approached the holy land which God had promised them, He abandoned them to their aimless wandering. He forbade them the land He had assigned to them. The weightier view suggests that the land was forbidden to that particular generation of them, until a new generation came of age, aware of the lessons and strengthened by their upbringing in the desert. The first generation had long been used to subjugation and tyranny in Egypt. As such, it could not shoulder the tough responsibility. Tyranny and humiliation corrupt the nature of individuals as well as communities.

The *sūrah* stops at this point in their history to allow believers to reflect on the lessons learned. The Muslims also learned this tough lesson God relates to them. When they came face to face with difficulty and they were few in number confronting a mightier force of unbelievers in Badr, they said to their Prophet, Muĥammad (peace be upon him): "We will not say to you, Messenger of God, what the Israelites said to their Prophet, '*Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here.*' But we will say to you: Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight; we will fight alongside you."

We see how the Qur'ānic method produces results in educating the Muslim community through relating stories from past generations of believers. We can also see what purpose is served by relating the history of the Children of Israel.

3
The First Murder

۞ وَٱتۡلُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ نَبَأَ ٱبۡنَيۡ ءَادَمَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ إِذۡ قَرَّبَا قُرۡبَانٗا فَتُقُبِّلَ مِنۡ أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمۡ يُتَقَبَّلۡ مِنَ ٱلۡأٓخَرِۖ قَالَ لَأَقۡتُلَنَّكَۖ قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٢٧

Relate to them in all truth the story of the two sons of Adam: how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them while it was not accepted from the other. [The latter] said: "I will surely kill you." [The other] replied: "God accepts only from those who are God-fearing. (27)

لَئِنۢ بَسَطتَ إِلَيَّ يَدَكَ لِتَقۡتُلَنِي مَآ أَنَا۠ بِبَاسِطٖ يَدِيَ إِلَيۡكَ لِأَقۡتُلَكَۖ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٢٨

Even if you lay your hand on me to kill me, I shall not lay my hand on you to kill you; for I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds. (28)

إِنِّيٓ أُرِيدُ أَن تَبُوٓأَ بِإِثۡمِي وَإِثۡمِكَ فَتَكُونَ مِنۡ أَصۡحَٰبِ ٱلنَّارِۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَٰٓؤُاْ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٢٩

I would rather you should add your sin against me to your other sins, and thus you will be destined for the Fire; since that is the just retribution of wrongdoers." (29)

فَطَوَّعَتۡ لَهُۥ نَفۡسُهُۥ قَتۡلَ أَخِيهِ فَقَتَلَهُۥ فَأَصۡبَحَ مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ٣٠

His evil soul drove him to kill his brother; and he murdered him, and thus he became one of the lost. (30)

فَبَعَثَ ٱللَّهُ غُرَابٗا يَبۡحَثُ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ لِيُرِيَهُۥ كَيۡفَ يُوَٰرِي سَوۡءَةَ أَخِيهِۚ قَالَ يَٰوَيۡلَتَىٰٓ أَعَجَزۡتُ أَنۡ أَكُونَ مِثۡلَ هَٰذَا ٱلۡغُرَابِ فَأُوَٰرِيَ سَوۡءَةَ أَخِيۖ فَأَصۡبَحَ مِنَ ٱلنَّٰدِمِينَ ٣١

God then sent forth a raven which scratched the earth, to show him how he might conceal the nakedness of his brother's body. He cried out: "Woe to me! Am I then too weak to do what this raven has done, and to conceal the nakedness of my brother's body?" He was then overwhelmed by remorse. (31)

مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَٰلِكَ كَتَبْنَا عَلَىٰ بَنِيٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ أَنَّهُۥ مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًۢا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ ٱلنَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَآ أَحْيَا ٱلنَّاسَ جَمِيعًا ۚ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُنَا بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ثُمَّ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُم بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ لَمُسْرِفُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Because of this did We ordain to the Children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being, for anything other than in punishment of murder or for spreading corruption on earth, it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; and that if anyone saves a human life, it shall be as though he had saved all mankind. Our messengers brought them clear evidence of the truth, but despite all this, many of them continue to commit all manner of excesses on earth. (32)

إِنَّمَا جَزَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحَارِبُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَيَسْعَوْنَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا أَن يُقَتَّلُوٓا۟ أَوْ يُصَلَّبُوٓا۟ أَوْ تُقَطَّعَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُم مِّنْ خِلَٰفٍ أَوْ يُنفَوْا۟ مِنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لَهُمْ خِزْىٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

It is but a just punishment of those who make war on God and His Messenger, and endeavour to spread corruption on earth, that they should be put to death, or be crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides or that they should be banished from the land. Such is their disgrace in this world, and more grievous suffering awaits them in the life to come; (33)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ تَابُوا۟ مِن قَبْلِ أَن تَقْدِرُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ فَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Except those who repent before you overpower them. For you must know that God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (34)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَٱبْتَغُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِ ٱلْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَٰهِدُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Believers, fear God and seek the means to come closer to Him, and strive hard in His cause, so that you may be successful. (35)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَوۡ أَنَّ لَهُم مَّا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا وَمِثۡلَهُۥ مَعَهُۥ لِيَفۡتَدُواْ بِهِۦ مِنۡ عَذَابِ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مَا تُقُبِّلَ مِنۡهُمۡۖ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ٣٦

If those who disbelieve had all that is on earth and as much besides to offer as ransom from the suffering of the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them. Theirs shall be a painful suffering. (36)

يُرِيدُونَ أَن يَخۡرُجُواْ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِ وَمَا هُم بِخَٰرِجِينَ مِنۡهَاۖ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ مُّقِيمٞ ٣٧

They will wish to come out of the Fire, but they shall not come out of it. Theirs shall be a long- lasting suffering. (37)

وَٱلسَّارِقُ وَٱلسَّارِقَةُ فَٱقۡطَعُوٓاْ أَيۡدِيَهُمَا جَزَآءَۢ بِمَا كَسَبَا نَكَٰلٗا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٣٨

As for the man or the woman who is guilty of stealing, cut off their hands in requital for what they have wrought, as an exemplary punishment ordained by God. God is Almighty, Wise. (38)

فَمَن تَابَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ظُلۡمِهِۦ وَأَصۡلَحَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَتُوبُ عَلَيۡهِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٌ ٣٩

But whoever repents after having thus done wrong, and makes amends, shall have his repentance accepted by God. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (39)

أَلَمۡ تَعۡلَمۡ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ يُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَغۡفِرُ لِمَن يَشَآءُۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٤٠

Do you not know that to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He wills and forgives whom He wills. God has power over all things. (40)

Overview

This passage begins to outline some fundamental legislation concerning human life. Some of these are concerned with life protection in a Muslim community that applies Divine law. Others relate to the protection of the system against any rebellion that may seek to undermine the authority administering Divine law in such a society. All in all, these measures aim to provide proper protection for the Muslim community, as well as wealth and private property in a social set-up based on Divine

guidance and ruled by Divine law.

The legislation covering these important aspects of social life take up this whole passage, after an introduction relating the story of Adam's two sons. This story exposes the nature of crime and its motives, and reveals its ugly face, showing the need to stand up to crime and to stamp it out of the life of Islamic society altogether. It stresses the need to punish the criminal and to counter the motives for crime.

The story appears to be firmly welded to the rulings and legislation that are subsequently detailed in this *sūrah.* A reflective reader is bound to feel that the story is given at the right place to fulfil an important function, and present a profound argument that penetrates the reader's consciousness. It thus puts hearts and minds in the right frame to receive the severe penalties Islam legislates for crimes committed against human life, public order, and personal property. These must be put into effect in an Islamic society which implements Divine law.

Islamic society runs all its life affairs, relations and commitments on the basis of the Divine constitution, implementing God's law. Thus, it guarantees for every individual, and for the community as a whole, all elements of justice, stability, reassurance and needful provisions. It protects both the individual and the community against all factors of provocation, oppression, injustice and poverty. Hence, in such a just, balanced society that guarantees mutual solidarity, aggression against personal life, public order, or individual property becomes a horrid crime, without any "extenuating" circumstances. When all factors encouraging a law-abiding life have been provided and motives for crime removed from the life of both individual and society, then a stringent attitude to crime and criminals is totally justified. Nevertheless, Islam ensures for the criminal all that guarantees proper investigation, interrogation and fair judgement, explaining any doubt in his favour, and opening the door to repentance which pardons some crimes in this life and ensures forgiveness of all crimes in the life to come.

We see examples of all this in the present passage and the legislation it puts in place. But before we start our discussion of such legislation we need to say a brief, general word about the environment and social set-up in which such legislation is implemented and the conditions that give its provisions the necessary force.

The legal provisions included in this passage, whether relating to aggression against life, public order or private property have the same status as the rest of Islamic law, prescribing mandatory or discretionary punishments. They are all applicable in Islamic society, in the "land of Islam". In order to understand this, we need to remember that, from the Islamic point of view, the whole world is divided into two parts. The first is the land of Islam, or the land of peace. This includes any area where Islamic law is implemented, whether its population are all Muslims, or

they include non-Muslims living under Islamic rule, or they are all non-Muslims but living under an Islamic government implementing Islamic law.[2] It also includes any area which has been occupied by non-Muslims, but its local population, who may all be Muslims or having non-Muslims among them, are able to implement Islamic law in their own life and judge their disputes accordingly. The main criterion in considering an area as a "land of Islam" is whether Islamic law is implemented in it or not.

The second is 'hostile land' which includes any area where Islamic legal provisions and Islamic law in general are not implemented, regardless of what population it may have. Thus, even if its population, or the majority of them describe themselves as Muslims, or followers of other Divine religions, or non-believers, any area that does not implement Islamic law is considered a hostile land to Muslims, both individuals and community[3].

Islamic society is that which is established in the land of Islam, as defined above. It is such a society which implements Islamic law that deserves to have the full protection of life, property and public order. In such a society it is only appropriate that the punishments outlined by Islamic law should be inflicted on those whose actions threaten its peace and security. It is a noble, free and just society, which ensures work and sufficient provisions for everyone whether they are able or unable to work. It is a society where motives for goodness are plenty and those encouraging evil are few. It is only right that such a society should impose on every one of its subjects the duty of protecting this splendid state of affairs, respecting other people's rights to live in peace and security. It is natural that it should preserve the security of the "land of Islam" in which everyone lives peacefully, with all his rights and privileges guaranteed. Whoever violates the law of such a peaceful society is an evil aggressor who deserves severe punishment, allowing him, however, all the guarantees that ensure fair trial and which interpret doubt in his favour.

The people of a hostile land, as defined above, have no right to enjoy the guarantees provided by Islamic legal provisions and the deterrent they represent. This is because such a land neither implements nor recognises Islamic law. To Muslims who live in the land of Islam, such land is not a land of peace unless it enters into suitable treaties and agreements with the land of Islam. Moreover, Islamic law provides the same guarantees and rights to hostile individuals who come from hostile lands when they enter the land of Islam under a pledge of safety. This applies for the duration of that pledge, and within the area ruled by a Muslim ruler,

[2] A non-Muslim is not bound by the entirety of Islamic law. Rather, a non-Muslim is bound to observe such Islamic laws as are not in conflict with his own faith.

[3] This definition, made by scholars and nor used in the Qur'ān or *ĥadīth,* was introduced at a time when the overwhelming majority of Muslims lived under the Islamic state. It has recently been called into question by a number of scholars. — Translator's note.

implementing Islamic law.

Having made this explanation, we may now discuss this passage in detail.

A Murder is Committed

> *Relate to them in all truth the story of the two sons of Adam: how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them while it was not accepted from the other. [The latter] said: 'I will surely kill you." [The other] replied: "God accepts only from those who are God-fearing. Even if lay your hand on me to kill me, I shall not lay my hand on you to kill you; for I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds. I would rather you should add your sin against me to your other sins, and thus you will be destined for the Fire; since that is the just retribution of wrongdoers." His evil soul drove him to kill his brother; and he murdered him, and thus he became one of the lost. God then sent forth a raven which scratched the earth, to show him how he might conceal the nakedness of his brother's body. He cried out: "Woe to me! Am I then too weak to do what this raven has done, and to conceal the nakedness of my brother's body?" He was then overwhelmed by remorse.* (Verses 27-31)

This story gives us a clear example of the nature of evil and totally unjustified aggression. It also gives us an example showing the nature of goodness and a peaceful attitude towards everyone. The two examples are set in clear contrast. The result is a sordid crime, which makes us feel the need for a legal code to impose just retribution and to stop aggressors even before they commit their crimes. If they, nevertheless, do commit crimes, they are certain to receive a punishment commensurate to their crimes. The legal code will thus be able to protect those who are good and ensure their right to live. It is indeed such people that should feel secure and safe under the protection of the law that deters crime and administers justice.

The Qur'ān does not specify the time or place of the story it relates. Nor does it mention the names of its main characters. Although reports mention the names of Cain and Abel as the two sons involved in the story, and although these reports mention some details about the conflict between them over two of their sisters, we prefer to confine our comments to the story as it is related in the Qur'ān, without adding any details. All reports mentioning details have an element of doubt, in the sense that they are given by people who follow earlier religions. The story is mentioned in the 'Old Testament with details of names, place and time, as given in these reports. The single *ĥadīth* which refers to the story and has been verified as authentic does not give any details. It is a *ĥadīth* in which `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "For every soul that is killed unjustly, a share of

responsibility is borne by the first son of Adam, who was the first to commit murder." All that we can say about this story is that it took place during humanity's childhood stage. It was the first cold-blooded murder. The perpetrator did not know that dead people should be buried.

Leaving the story in the general terms in which it is given in the Qur'ān ensures that the purpose of relating it is fulfilled and its lessons are understood. Providing more details does not add anything to these basic purposes. Hence, our preference to discuss it as it is given.

> *Relate to them in all truth the story of the two sons of Adam: how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them while it was not accepted from the other. [The latter] said: "I will surely kill you." [The other] replied: "God accepts only from those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 27)

Having related to his followers an account of certain events in the history of the Children of Israel with their Prophet, Moses, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is told by God to relate the story of two people representing two types of human being. The account should be given in all honesty, because it tells of the truth deeply entrenched in human nature. It also emphasises the need for a deterrent legal code to ensure justice.

Adam's two sons were in a situation that gives no rise to any thought of aggression in a good person's mind. The situation is one of obedience to God and offering a sacrifice to draw closer to God: *"How each offered a sacrifice and it was accepted from one of them while it was not accepted from the other."* (Verse 27) We note that the passive mode is used here to indicate that the acceptance or rejection of the offered sacrifice is done by a higher power in a metaphysical way. This mode of expression suggests to us two points: the first is that we should not try to determine how exactly the offering was accepted. We need not discuss reports mentioned in books of commentary on the Qur'ān because these reports are most probably derived from Old Testament fables.

The second point suggests that the one whose offering was accepted had not committed any crime that might cause anyone else to be angry with him to any extent, let alone that that person should plot a murder. He had no say in the acceptance of this offering. The nature of the One who accepted the offering was beyond the perception of either of the two brothers. Hence, thoughts of anger or murder should have been far removed from the minds of both brothers. They were in a situation that is close to worship, since it involves offering a sacrifice for God's sake.

"[The latter] said: I will surely kill you.'" (Verse 27) This is a statement of confirmed

intention which is met by our disapproval because it is totally unjustified. Indeed, it could only be the result of blind envy which is alien to a good heart. Thus, from the very first moment, we take an attitude of total disapproval of aggression. The *sūrah,* however, greatly enhances the ghastliness of this act of aggression by showing the peaceful, good-natured attitude of the other brother: *"[The other] replied: 'God accepts only from those who are God-fearing.'"* (Verse 27)

This is a simple statement which puts matters in their proper perspective. It indicates that the person saying this is a believer who understands the reason for the acceptance of sacrifices offered to God. Also implied in this statement is a gentle advice to the aggressor to fear God, because this is the way through which he could gain acceptance. It is all done very gently so that his brother might remain responsive and unirritated. Adopting a completely peaceful attitude, the good believer of the two brothers tries further to pacify his brother and quieten him: *"Even if you lay your hand on me to kill me, I shall not lay my hand on you to kill you; for I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 28)

What we have here is a case of a peaceful man making clear that his attitude is based on fearing God and implementing His commandments. This attitude fills us with enthusiastic support for the victim of aggression, as we admire his calmness, reassurance and the fact that he fears God alone. His gentle words should have been sufficient to quench his brother's rage and reduce his anger. A good response would have been sufficient to re-establish the feelings of brotherhood and the reassurance of faith. To achieve this desirable result, however, the good-natured brother adds a word of warning: *"I would rather you should add your sin against me to your other sins, and thus you will be destined for the Fire; since that is the just retribution of wrongdoers."* (Verse 29)

We may paraphrase this statement by the God-fearing brother as follows: If you were to stretch your hand to me to kill me, it is not in my nature to do the same thing to you. The thought of murder does not occur to me in the first place, not because I cannot do it, but because I fear God, the Lord of all creation. I will leave you to bear the sin of murdering me so as to add it to your other sins which have caused your offering not to be accepted by God. Thus, you end up with a double burden of sin and a double punishment. This is a just reward for a heinous crime.

He, thus, depicted to his brother how loathsome to him was the very thought of committing murder. He did so in the hope that he would help his erring brother to resist all evil thoughts towards him, especially when he, himself, was of a peaceful disposition. He explained to him that the sinful burden of a murder was too heavy and that he would do well to avoid it in order not to end up with a double punishment. The only way to rid himself of it was through fearing God. In his persuasion, he went as far as any man could go. But the example of an evil man

cannot be properly depicted until we know what sort of response he made to such persuasion: *"His evil soul drove him to kill his brother; and he murdered him, and thus he became one of the lost."* (Verse 30)

A Lesson Provided by a Raven

After all this admonition and persuasion, in a perfectly peaceful and gentle approach, the evil soul prevailed and the crime was committed. His evil soul was able to override every hindrance and made him less resistant to the thought of killing. Thus, he killed his own brother, only to be doomed: *"Thus he became one of the lost."* (Verse 30) He lost all as he brought himself into ruin, and lost his brother who should have been his friend and support. He also lost his world, since a murderer can never be happy in life. Most certainly, he lost his future life as he added his new sin to his earlier ones.

The ghastliness of his crime was made to appear to him in its most physical shape. The dead corpse of his brother started to rot and its nakedness became intolerable. Murderer as he was, he was soon made to realise his powerlessness, as he did not know how to conceal the nakedness of his brother's corpse. He was weaker than a raven among birds: *"God then sent forth a raven which scratched the earth, to show him how he might conceal the nakedness of his brother's body. He cried out: 'Woe to me! Am I then too weak to do what this raven has done, and to conceal the nakedness of my brother's body?' He was then overwhelmed by remorse."* (Verse 31)

Some reports suggest that there were two ravens and one of them killed the other. Other reports suggest that the raven found a dead raven or brought the dead one with him and started to scratch the earth and buried the dead one. The murderer expressed his feelings in the way reported in the Qur'ān and liked what he saw the raven do. It is clear that the murderer had never seen a dead man being buried. Otherwise, he would automatically have buried his brother. This may have been because the murdered brother was the first of Adam's children to die on earth, or maybe because the killer was still young and had never seen a burial before. Either case is probable. It also appears that his remorse was not one of repentance: otherwise, God would have accepted it from him. It was the sort of remorse which comes with the realisation that one's action is futile and leads to nothing but trouble.

It may be that the burial of the dead raven is something that ravens do, as some people suggest. It may also be a supernatural action God wanted to show to the killer at that particular time. To us, both cases are the same. The Creator who gives every species of His creation its nature and habits can accomplish whatever He wills through anyone of His creatures. His power is similarly indicated by either course.

The Killing of All Humanity

The *sūrah* then makes use of the profundity of relating this story by enhancing a positive response to the legislation enacted to deal with such a crime. The legislation achieves the dual purpose of weakening the motive to commit a murder and establishing the just punishment for such a crime whenever it takes place: "*Because of this did We ordain to the Children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being, for anything other than in punishment of murder or for spreading corruption on earth, it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; and that if anyone saves a human life, it shall be as though he had saved all mankind. Our messengers brought them clear evidence of the truth, but despite all this, many of them continue to commit all manner of excesses on earth.*" (Verse 32)

This type of person exists and aggression is committed against peaceful and good-natured people who harbour neither grudges nor ill-feelings towards others. A reminder and a warning may achieve nothing with those who have an evil nature. Adopting a peaceful attitude may not be sufficient to prevent aggression. For all this, the ghastly crime of killing one person is considered so grave and so sordid that it is equated with the crime of killing all mankind. On the other hand, efforts to prevent killing and to spare the life of one person are considered a great action, equal to saving all mankind. The law given to the Children of Israel included this principle which equates the life of any human being with every life. The right to live is applicable to all. Hence, killing one person is an aggression against the right to live in which all people stand equal. Similarly, preventing murder and sparing the life of one person, either through defending the would-be victim or inflicting the death penalty on the killer in order to prevent the murder of another, is to save the basic right of life applicable to all.

It should be clarified here that this rule applies to people in the land of Islam, whether Muslim or not, as long as they are living under the rule and protection of the Islamic authority. As for those who are in a land hostile to Islam, neither their lives nor their properties are protected unless they have concluded a peace treaty with the land of Islam. This legislative rule should be well remembered. We should also remember that the land of Islam is that in which the rule of Islam prevails and Islamic law is implemented. The hostile land is that which does not implement Islamic law.

God has decreed this principle for the Children of Israel, because at that time, they were the recipients of Divine revelation and, as such, they represented the land of Islam as long as they implemented the law of the Torah in its fullness, without any distortion. But the Children of Israel exceeded their limits after God's messengers came to them with clear proof of the truth. Ever since the time of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) many of them continue to commit excesses of all sorts. The Qur'ān records against them these excesses as well as the fact that they

have no argument to justify their errors: "*Our [i.e. God's] messengers brought them clear evidence of the truth, but despite all this, many of them continue to commit all manner of excesses on earth.*" (Verse 32) What excess is greater than distorting or ignoring God's law?

This explained, we need to point out that God has made the perpetration of corruption on earth similar to murder: the perpetrator is put to death because he has forfeited his right to live. The security of the Muslim community in the land of Islam and maintaining law and order within the system which gives the Muslim community the sense of peace and security are essential in the same way as the safety of individuals, if not more. Indeed, the safety of individuals cannot be guaranteed unless the security of the community is achieved. There is also the added reason of protecting this distinguished type of community and providing for it all guarantees of stability and continuity so that its people may carry on with their promotion of a better standard of human life. It is perhaps appropriate to mention here that this community provides to all mankind the guarantees necessary for the promotion of life, helps everything good to flourish and repels all evil. Its prime purpose is prevention, but it also administers the proper remedy for what could not be prevented. It removes every cause tempting human beings to lean towards evil and aggression. When it has done all this, anyone who threatens the security of this community is an evil element and should be removed unless he returns to his senses.

The Just Punishment for Rebellion

The *sūrah* lays down the punishment for the crime that such wicked elements commit. This is known in the Islamic legal code as the punishment for waging war against Islam: "*It is but a just punishment of those who make war on God and His Messenger, and endeavour to spread corruption on earth, that they should be put to death, or be crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides or that they should be banished from the land. Such is their disgrace in this world, and more grievous suffering awaits them in the life to come; except those who repent before you overpower them. For you must know that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verses 33-34)

The crime to which this legislative statement refers involves rebellion against a Muslim ruler who implements the laws of Islam. The rebels gather in a group renouncing the ruler's authority. They cause fear among the Muslim community living in the Muslim land and they commit aggression against their lives and property. Some scholars also make it a condition that this should take place away from the areas where the ruler's authority is enforced. Others suggest that the very fact that such rebels begin to gather and use force in aggression against the people of the land of Islam, makes this legal provision applicable to them wherever they are.

This is probably more practical, because Islam adopts a pragmatic approach.

Such rebels do not merely fight the ruler or the community, but they make war on God and His Messenger, since they fight God's law, wage an assault against the community implementing it and threaten the land where the law is implemented. By doing so, they also spread corruption on earth. There is no worse corruption than the attempt to prevent the implementation of Divine law and to spread fear in a land where Divine law is applied.

It is true that such rebels make war on God and His Messenger, although they surely do not fight God with their swords, and they do not fight His Messenger who has passed away. But by fighting the Muslim ruler and the Muslim community, they actually make war on God as they obstruct His law and prevent its implementation. Phrased in this way, the Qur'ānic statement also signifies that the ruler who is entitled to enforce these punishments against those who rebel against him is the ruler who actually implements God's law in the land of Islam. Without such qualities, no ruler may implement these provisions or enforce these punishments.

We wish to make this statement very clear, because some of those who are happy to be subservient to rulers in all generations try to use this verse for the wrong reasons. They find it easy to encourage the enforcement of such punishments by rulers who neither implement God's law nor promote the establishment of the land of Islam in their countries, even though they may profess to be Muslims. Moreover, they want these punishments to be enforced against people who are not making war against God and His Messenger, but who fight a tyrannical power, disobedient to God and His Messenger. It must be understood that no authority has the backing of God's law in its suppression of its enemies unless it implements God's law. Why should an authority seek endorsement of its actions by God's law anyway, when it rejects its implementation, thus claiming for itself certain qualities of Godhead?

Let us consider a situation where an armed group rebels against the authority of a Muslim ruler who is implementing Islamic law and threatens the lives and properties of Muslims living in the land of Islam. The punishment for those who join such a group is death, or crucifixion, (although some scholars say that they should be crucified after they are put to death, in order to frighten others) or to cut off their right hands and left feet.

Differing Views on Implementation

Scholars have widely different views on whether a Muslim ruler may choose any of these punishments or whether each punishment is implemented in a particular case. According to the Ĥanafī, Shāfi`ī and Ĥanbalī schools of Islam law, these punishments are ordered according to the crime committed. A rebel who kills

without taking any property is put to death, while another who has taken property without killing has his limbs cut off. A person who has committed both crimes is put to death and crucified. A rebel who helps spread fear but has neither killed anyone nor taken any property, is banished.

According to Imām Mālik, a rebel who has killed must be killed. The Muslim ruler does not have a choice to enforce the lesser punishments of cutting off his limbs or banishing him. The only choice he has is either to put him to death by a method chosen by the state or to crucify him. If he has taken the property of Muslims but without killing anyone, he cannot be banished. The choices open to the ruler are to kill or crucify him or to cut off his limbs. If he has helped to spread fear, the ruler has all four choices and he may use his discretion. If the culprit is one of the organisers of rebellion, then cutting off his limbs may not be an adequate enough punishment. He should be either killed or crucified. If he is one who helps the rebellion with his physical strength, then cutting off his limbs is the appropriate punishment. If he is of neither type, then the lesser punishment of sending him into exile should be implemented.

We are more inclined to support Imām Mālik's views, especially the latter part which makes the punishment enforceable even in the case of mere rebellion and of spreading fear. This gives a Muslim ruler the right to take pre-emptive action to forestall any rebellion. Those who threaten the security of the Muslim community in the land of Islam, thus, face a stern punishment because the Muslim community is the first to deserve to live in peace and security.

Scholars also differ in their understanding of what is meant by banishing the rebels and whether they should be removed from the land where they committed their crime or from the land where they have their freedom. In the latter sense, they are imprisoned. Or is it that they should be banished from the whole earth, which means that they should be put to death? Our preference is that they should be banished from the land where they committed their crime to a place where they feel lonely and weak. This makes their punishment of the same nature as their crime, which involves spreading fear.

"Such is their disgrace in this world, and more grievous suffering awaits them in the life to come." (Verse 33). This means that their punishment in this life does not waive the punishment of the Hereafter, as it is the case in certain other crimes. This emphasises the gravity of crime and doubles its punishment. The reason being that the Muslim community should live in peace and security in the land of Islam and that the Muslim ruler who implements Islamic rules should be obeyed. Such a social set up and such a just and perfect system deserves to be protected against any design to undermine it.

If the rebels come to realise their mistake and turn to God in repentance when they still have their strength, then their punishment is waived and the Muslim ruler has no way of punishing them. God will forgive them eventually: "*Except those who repent before you overpower them. For you must know that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 34)

The wisdom behind discounting the crime and waiving punishment in this case is clear. For one thing, it is an appreciation of their repentance where they still have their power. It is taken as evidence of their good intentions. For another, they are encouraged to repent so that the Muslim nation is spared the need to fight them.

Islam deals with human nature in its entirety. God, who has chosen this religion for us, is the Creator of human nature. He knows what suits man and what does not suit him. "*How could it be that He who has created all should not know all? Indeed, He alone is unfathomable (in His wisdom), all aware.*" (67: 14)

Man's Actions Determine His Future

An important feature of the Divine method of moulding human society is that it does not rely solely on legislative action. It certainly arms itself with legal provisions in order to deter those who only fear the force of the law. Indeed, it relies primarily on educative action which smoothes over the rough edges of people's characters. It provides guidance to the human spirit as it establishes a society that helps the seeds of goodness to grow and gives harmful weeds no fertile soil. The previous verses spoke of very stern punishments for serious crimes. However, once the punishments are outlined, so as to ensure their deterrent effect, the *sūrah* addresses people's consciences and spirits, aiming to strengthen faith and consciousness of one's obligations towards God. It urges people to seek proper ways of moving nearer to what pleases God and to strive hard in His cause, so that they may be successful. This is coupled with a warning against disbelief and a vivid description of what awaits disbelievers in the Hereafter.

> *Believers, fear God and seek the means to come closer to Him, and strive hard in His cause, so that you may be successful. If those who disbelieve had all that is on earth and as much besides to offer as ransom from the suffering of the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them. Theirs shall be a painful suffering. They will wish to come out of the Fire, but they shall not come out of it. Theirs shall be a long-lasting suffering.* (Verses 35-37)

The Islamic approach makes use of all aspects of human character. It addresses the innermost soul of man and touches on his inner motives as it motivates man to obey

God and deters him from disobedience. The prime aim is to keep human nature upright and to prevent it from deviation. Punishment is only one of many methods to be used. It is not the only method, nor is it treated as an aim to be pursued.

This part of the *sūrah* starts with the story of Adam's two sons, which is particularly inspiring. It is followed by an outline of stern punishments calling on people to fear God and to remain conscious of their obligations towards Him: *"Believers, fear God."* It is God alone who should be feared because this is the type of fear which fits in with man's position of honour. To fear the sword and punishment is characteristic of those whose aspirations remain very low. To fear God is much more honourable. In the final resort, it is fear of God and consciousness of Him that work on man's conscience both in public and in private. They are the motives that deter man from committing evil when no other human being sees him and when he is certain that he cannot be brought before the law in this life. Important and necessary as the law is, it cannot replace fear of God, because what escapes the hand of the law is far greater than the number of cases that are brought to justice. No human soul and no society can remain good if it relies only on the law without adding to it the fear of a higher, Divine authority that works on human conscience.

"And seek the means to come closer to Him." (Verse 35) Fear God and seek the proper approaches which bring you nearer to Him. Try always to be in contact with Him. `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet, is reported to have said that seeking the means to come to God means to feel in need of Him. When human beings realise that they are in need of God's help and when they pray to Him to answer their needs, they stand in the right position of a servant of God towards his Lord. As such, they are in the best position to bring them success in this life and in the life to come. Both interpretations are correct as they mean that human conscience remains alive and helps man to prosper: *"Believers, fear God and seek the means to come closer to Him, and strive hard in His cause, so that you may be successful."* (Verse 35)

On the other side, the *sūrah* portrays a scene of the unbelievers who neither fear God nor seek the means to come to Him. As such, they will never prosper. It is a very vivid description, because the *sūrah* does not only give a statement outlining a position, but depicts a full scene with movement and interaction. This is, indeed, the Qur'ānic method used in portraying scenes of the Day of Judgement. The Qur'ān uses it for most purposes: *"If those who disbelieve had all that is on earth and as much besides to offer as ransom from the suffering of the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them. Theirs shall be a painful suffering. They will wish to come out of the Fire, but they shall not come out of it. Theirs shall be a long-lasting suffering."* (Verses 36-37)

By the longest stretch of imagination, the most that the disbelievers can have is all that is available on the face of the earth. But the *sūrah* goes far beyond that and

supposes that they have all that the earth contains twice over, and portrays them trying to pay all that as ransom to spare themselves the suffering of the Day of Resurrection. It also portrays them as they try to get out of the Fire of Hell, but they are unable to do so. They continue to endure their painful, lasting suffering. This is a very vivid scene with actions following one another in quick succession. There they are at first, having everything that is on earth and as much besides. They offer it all to escape punishment. Then we see them disappointed when all their appeals are turned down. They are then forced into the Fire, trying to get out, but having no means of escape. The curtain then falls and they are left to dwell there permanently.

A Severe Punishment for Theft

This is followed by a legislation outlining the punishment for theft: "*As for the man or the woman who is guilty of stealing, cut off their hands in requital for what they have wrought, as an exemplary punishment ordained by God. God is Almighty, Wise. But whoever repents after having thus done wrong, and makes amends, shall have his repentance accepted by God. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Do you not know that to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He wills and forgives whom He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verses 38-40)

Muslim society provides for all inhabitants of the land of Islam, whatever faith they may have, enough to keep any thought of stealing far from any healthy mind. It guarantees good living, proper education and a system of fair distribution. At the same time, it makes private ownership the result of only legitimate means, and assigns to it a beneficial social role. Why, then, should any good person entertain any thought of stealing? When Muslim society has provided all this, it is only fair that it should prescribe a very stern punishment for theft, which represents an aggression on private ownership and the security of the community. This strong approach, however, is qualified by the fact that the enforcement of punishment is blocked when there is doubt as to the crime or its perpetrator. It provides all rights to the accused to prove his innocence so that no one is punished unless proven guilty beyond doubt.

What is left for us to say is that the Islamic system is a fully integrated one. We cannot properly understand the wisdom behind particular point of detail in its legislation unless we understand the nature of this system, its basic principles and its guarantees. Moreover, details of the Islamic system should not be implemented in isolation of the rest of the system. We cannot simply take one legal provision or one principle of Islam and try to implement it in a non-Muslim social set-up. Such an attempt is useless. Such partial implementation of Islamic law cannot be considered an implementation of Islam, because Islam cannot be implemented piecemeal. Islam has a complete system which affects all aspects of life when implemented. This

applies to the legislation regarding theft as well as to all provisions of Islamic law.

To start with, Islam asserts that every individual in the Muslim community and in the land of Islam has the right to live and to have all the safeguards necessary to protect his or her life. Every individual is entitled to have enough to eat and drink, proper clothing and a home providing him with adequate shelter, where he can rest in comfort. The Muslim community represented by the Muslim government must provide every individual with all these essentials, firstly through his own work as long as he is able to work. The community is responsible to teach him how to work and to provide him with the means and the tools to do his work. If he remains unemployed, either because jobs or their tools are unavailable or because he is unable to work, either partially or totally, temporarily or permanently, then he has a claim against the Muslim community. The same applies if his earnings are not sufficient to meet his needs.

This claim gives an individual the right to still have his or her needs satisfied in different ways. There is firstly a maintenance allowance, which could be imposed on those members of his own household who can afford it. Secondly, his maintenance can be imposed on certain people in his locality. Thirdly, he is entitled to be supported by the state, since such a person, man or woman, child or adult, qualifies as a beneficiary of *zakāt.* If *zakāt* funds are insufficient to provide adequate support to all people in need, then the Muslim state, which implements the whole of Islamic law in the land of Islam, can impose an additional tax on those who are well off in order to satisfy the needs of the underprivileged. The condition to be observed in such a situation is that what is so imposed must remain reasonable, fair and adequate. It must not constitute an injustice to those who make their earnings through legitimate means.

Islam is also strict in its view on legitimate earnings. Private ownership can come only through what is permissible. Hence, such ownership does not create a grudge motivating those who are deprived to lay their hands on the property of others, particularly since the system ensures fair distribution and does not neglect anyone's needs.

Moreover, Islam works on people's consciences and strengthens their moral sense. It directs their thinking towards earning through work not through theft. If work is unavailable or insufficient, the community helps them meet their needs. Thus, Islam gives them their right with honour.

Under such a system, why should anyone steal? Theft cannot be committed to satisfy a legitimate need. Its purpose is to get rich without working for it. Wealth cannot be sought through depriving the Muslim community in the land of Islam from the security to which it is legitimately entitled. Those who have earned their

money in a fair and legitimate way are entitled to enjoy their earnings in peace.

Similarly, every individual in such a community is entitled to earn money fairly and legitimately. No usury, cheating, monopoly or wrongful exploitation of labour is allowed. Moreover, whoever has money must pay his *zakāt* liability and pay his share of what the community may need. When all this has been fulfilled, it is only right that everyone should have security for their property. If someone steals after having all his needs satisfied, knowing that theft is forbidden and having no reasonable need to lay his hands on the property of others, he commits a crime for which he has no justification. Hence, no mercy should be shown to him once he is proven guilty.

However, when there is doubt as to the circumstances of the crime, then the general Islamic principle of blocking punishment in cases of doubt comes into operation. Hence, when the Muslim state was stricken by famine, `Umar, the second Caliph, suspended the enforcement of the punishment for theft. He did the same in one particular case, which has been documented. The servants of the son of Ĥāṭib ibn Abī Balta`ah stole a camel which belonged to a man of the tribe of Muzaynah. When they were proven guilty, `Umar ordered- their hands to be cut off. However, on learning that their master kept them hungry, `Umar stopped the punishment from being enforced. He further punished their master, imposing on him a fine equivalent to the price of two camels. It is within this context that we should understand the punishments imposed by Islam as part of its comprehensive system providing guarantees for all, not for a particular class at the expense of another. It is a system which relies on protection before it imposes punishment. It only punishes wrongdoers who commit totally unjustified crimes.

Having explained this general rule about the Islamic system, let us discuss the particular punishment of theft. Theft is to take surreptitiously the property of others which is kept in a private place. What is taken, therefore, must be a property of a certain value. The minimum limit which, if taken surreptitiously, constitutes theft is agreed by scholars to be equivalent to one quarter of one dīnār, which is approximately equal to 25 Egyptian piastres in our present currency.[4] Moreover, what is stolen must be kept in a private place and the thief must take it out of this place. This means that a person who steals property which is given to him for safe custody is not punished by cutting off his hand. Nor does this punishment apply to a servant who is allowed to enter the home of his owner, because what he steals is not kept in a place which is restricted from him. Nor is the punishment enforced against

[4] The author wrote this commentary in the early 1960s. Twenty-five piastres then were worth at least 100 times their value at present. Such an estimate should, therefore, be taken as giving a general idea and is not meant to be an exact price. It tells us that there is a minimum limit for theft, below which the punishment is not enforced —Translator's note.

someone who has borrowed a certain property and who then denies having borrowed it, nor in the case of someone who steals fruits or crops until they have been put in a barn or a store. Similarly, the punishment is not enforced in the case of stealing property if it is found lying outside the place where it is normally placed for safekeeping. Moreover, the stolen property must belong entirely to someone else. Therefore, if one partner steals something which belongs to a partnership his hand is not cut off because he has a share in what he has stolen. Nor is a thief punished by cutting his hands off if he has stolen something from the state treasury because he has a partial claim to it. In all such cases, the thief is given a lesser punishment such as flogging, imprisonment or verbal reproach, as the judge may think fit, according to the circumstances of the case.

When a thief is punished, his hand is cut off up to the wrist. If he commits theft again, then his left foot is cut off up to the ankle. In case of a third or fourth theft, scholars have different views as to what is cut off.

Where any doubt exists, enforcement of the punishment is blocked. If it is suspected that the person concerned stole food to eat when he was hungry, or to meet a particular need, or if it is suspected that he had a share in the stolen property, then these are reasons which prevent his hands from being cut off. If the theft is proven through personal confession without there being witnesses to give evidence, then withdrawal of the confession is sufficient to prevent enforcement of the punishment. Similarly, if the witnesses recant, punishment is not enforced.

Leading scholars have different views on what constitutes doubt. Imām Abū Ĥanīfah blocks enforcement of the punishment if what is stolen is considered common property in the first place, even though it has been subsequently placed within private ownership. This applies to stealing water from someone's private place or stealing game animals after they have been hunted. Abū Ĥanīfah's view is that since such matters are in the first place co n property, there is doubt as to their remaining so after being kept in a private place. Mālik, al-Shāfi`ī and Ahmad, the founders of the other three schools of Islamic law, are of the view that the punishment of cutting off a thief's hand is enforceable in these cases. Abū Ĥanīfah also blocks enforcement of this punishment in the case of stealing something which may become rotten after a short period of time, as in the case of stealing raw meat or other types of food. The other three schools of law as well as Abū Yūsuf, the second highest ranking scholar of the Ĥanafī school, disagree.

To discuss the different views of scholars in detail is beyond the scope of this commentary. They can be easily referred to in books of *Filth.* We have cited these examples to demonstrate how lenient Islam is and how keen it is not to enforce punishment in any case of doubt. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) clearly said: "Block the enforcement of prescribed punishments in any case of doubt." Whilst

`Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said: "To suspend punishment as a result of doubt is much more preferable to me than to enforce it despite doubt."

A Punishment to Fit the Crime

Having explained the reasons for imposing such a stern punishment for theft in the land where Islamic law is implemented, providing all guarantees of justice and fair distribution as well as the means of protection for all, we need to say a word about the suitability of this punishment to the crime of theft in a Muslim community.

When someone thinks of stealing, he actually thinks of increasing what he owns at the expense of someone else. He feels that what he earns legitimately is too little for him and, therefore, he wishes to add to it in an illegitimate way. The fruits of his own labour do not satisfy his greed and he wants to appear to be wealthy or to get himself in a position where he does not need to work or where he is assured of a comfortable life in future. In short, the motive for stealing is to increase one's income or one's wealth. Islam counters this motive by prescribing the punishment of cutting off the thief's hand or leg, since such a punishment will markedly decrease the thief's ability to work and reduce his income and wealth. When a thief is punished according to Islam, his ability to show off is greatly curtailed and his need to work hard is much greater. Moreover, his worry about his future is infinitely greater.

We see, then, that by prescribing the punishment of cutting off a thief's hand, Islamic law counters the psychological motives of theft with even stronger psychological factors which resist the temptation to steal. If a person, nevertheless, yields to temptation and is guilty of stealing, the severity of the punishment will have lasting effects on him, which will also prevent him from repeating the offence.

This is the basis for the Islamic punishment of theft. It is indeed the best basis for punishing this crime, ever since the creation of mankind.

Most legal codes punish theft with imprisonment, a punishment that has failed miserably in combating crime in general and theft in particular. This failure is due to the fact that imprisonment does not strengthen any psychological influence on a thief to turn him away from stealing. It does not prevent him from work and earning except for the duration of his time of imprisonment, when he has no need to earn since his basic needs are met. When he is discharged, he can go back to his work. Indeed, he has every chance to increase his wealth by both legitimate and illegitimate means. He can easily pretend to be a man of honour and integrity to secure the help of others. If eventually, he achieves his goal, well and good; or that is what he thinks. If not, his loss is minimal.

On the other hand, if a person guilty of stealing has his hand cut off, his

punishment drastically reduces his ability to work and earn. This means in practical terms that his chances of increasing his income are almost lost, while a drastic reduction in income is most probable. He will not be able to win people's confidence as his own hand tells of his past crime. The unmistakable result, then, is that a thief will definitely end up in a loss situation if he is punished, while he is more likely to profit if he receives a prison sentence. It is in human nature that people do not hesitate to do what is likely to bring them profit and to refrain from something which makes loss a certainty.

I wonder at those who claim that the Islamic punishment of cutting off the hand of a thief is not suitable to our present society, in view of the great advancement achieved by mankind. Do progress and advancement mean that we should encourage and reward a thief and allow people to live in fear? Or do they mean that we should work hard so that thieves and drop-outs get away with the fruits of our labour? Or do they mean that we ignore the findings of science and human nature as well as the results of human experience and the conclusions of logical thinking in favour of an argument which is supported by new evidence, simply because it receives much propaganda?

If effectiveness in reducing crime is the criterion which makes a certain punishment fitting to an age of progress and advancement, then imprisonment should be abolished as a punishment for theft and replaced by cutting off thieves' hands. This is because the latter is supported by undeniable psychological evidence, human nature and experience as well as logic. While imprisonment as a punishment is supported by none of these.

The basis of this Islamic punishment is a thorough study of human nature and human thinking. It is then, suitable for both the individual and community because it reduces crime and increases security. As such, it is the best and fairest punishment.

Despite all this, some people object to the Islamic punishment for theft, because they find it cruel. Indeed, this is their only argument. But it is indeed a hollow argument, because no punishment is effective if it is felt not to be serious. Indeed, a punishment must be stern if it is to be a true punishment.[5]

God, who is the Most Compassionate of all those who exercise mercy, says as He makes the punishment for theft so severe: "*Cut off their hands in requital for what they have wrought, as an exemplary punishment ordained by God.*" (Verse 38) It is, then, a stern punishment meant to be a deterrent. To deter someone from committing a crime is an act of mercy to that person, because he is prevented from becoming a criminal. It is also an act of grace to the whole community, because it ensures peace and security. No one may claim to be more merciful to people than God who created them except

[5] `Abd al-Qādir `Awdah, *al-Tashrī`al Jinā'ī al-Islāmī,* Vol. I., pp. 652-4 (Arabic).

one with a blind mind and a dull soul. Practical evidence shows that this punishment was not enforced except in a handful of cases during a period approaching a whole century at the beginning of Islam. This is because Islamic society, with its own system and severe punishments and the safeguards it puts in place, did not witness any more crimes.

God then opens the door for anyone who wishes to repent and mend his ways, adding to that a demonstration of positive intent through good action: "*But whoever repents after having thus done wrong, and makes amends, shall have his repentance accepted by God. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 39)

Wrongdoing is an active step that produces evil results. Hence, it is not sufficient that a wrongdoer should stop his evil action. He should move further and do some goodly work that produces good results. But the case is more profound in Islamic thinking. A human soul must always be active. If it stops its evil and corrupting work, without moving on to produce something good, it continues to lack fulfilment. This may bring about a setback returning it to evil. When it moves on to active goodness, it is more secure against a return to erring ways. This is, then, the method Islam follows in its work to produce a goodly society. It is a Divine method, meant by God, the Creator of all who knows what suits all, to produce the desired results.

Finally the *sūrah* states the overall principle of punishment in this life and in the Hereafter. God, the Creator and Owner of the universe, can will anything and determine the fate of every creature. It is He who enacts legislation for people to implement in their lives, and it is He who rewards them for their actions both in this life and in the life to come: "*Do you not know that to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He wills and forgives whom He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 40) It is then a single authority of dominion which issues legislation in this life and administers reward and retribution in the life to come. There is no division or multiplicity of authority. Indeed, human life can only be set right when the authority to legislate and to reward is united in both this life and the life to come.

4
The Right Basis for Judgement

۞ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلرَّسُولُ لَا يَحۡزُنكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُسَٰرِعُونَ فِي ٱلۡكُفۡرِ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِأَفۡوَٰهِهِمۡ وَلَمۡ تُؤۡمِن قُلُوبُهُمۡۛ وَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْۛ سَمَّٰعُونَ لِلۡكَذِبِ سَمَّٰعُونَ لِقَوۡمٍ ءَاخَرِينَ لَمۡ يَأۡتُوكَۖ يُحَرِّفُونَ ٱلۡكَلِمَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَوَاضِعِهِۦۖ يَقُولُونَ إِنۡ أُوتِيتُمۡ هَٰذَا فَخُذُوهُ وَإِن لَّمۡ تُؤۡتَوۡهُ فَٱحۡذَرُواْۚ وَمَن يُرِدِ ٱللَّهُ فِتۡنَتَهُۥ فَلَن تَمۡلِكَ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيۡـٔٗاۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَمۡ يُرِدِ ٱللَّهُ أَن يُطَهِّرَ قُلُوبَهُمۡۚ لَهُمۡ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا خِزۡيٞۖ وَلَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ﴿٤١﴾

Messenger, be not grieved by those who plunge headlong into unbelief; such as those who say with their mouths, "We believe", while their hearts do not believe. Among the Jews are some who eagerly listen to falsehood, eagerly listen to other people who have not come to you. They tamper with words out of their context, and say, "If such-and-such [a precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard." If God wants to put anyone to test, you shall not be able to avail him anything against God. Such are the ones whose hearts God is not willing to purify. They will have disgrace in this world, and awesome suffering in the life to come. (41)

سَمَّٰعُونَ لِلۡكَذِبِ أَكَّٰلُونَ لِلسُّحۡتِۚ فَإِن جَآءُوكَ فَٱحۡكُم بَيۡنَهُمۡ أَوۡ أَعۡرِضۡ عَنۡهُمۡۖ وَإِن تُعۡرِضۡ عَنۡهُمۡ فَلَن يَضُرُّوكَ شَيۡـٔٗاۖ وَإِنۡ حَكَمۡتَ فَٱحۡكُم بَيۡنَهُم بِٱلۡقِسۡطِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُقۡسِطِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

They eagerly listen to falsehood and greedily devour what is unlawful. Hence, if they come to you (for judgement), you may either judge between them or decline to interfere. If you decline, they cannot harm you in any way. But if you do judge, then judge between them with fairness. God loves those who deal justly. (42)

وَكَيۡفَ يُحَكِّمُونَكَ وَعِندَهُمُ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةُ فِيهَا حُكۡمُ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّوۡنَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَۚ وَمَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ بِٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

But how is it that they ask you for judgement when they have the Torah which contains God's judgement, and they still turn away? For certain, they are not true believers. (43)

إِنَّآ أَنزَلۡنَا ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةَ فِيهَا هُدٗى وَنُورٞۚ يَحۡكُمُ بِهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّونَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسۡلَمُواْ لِلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلرَّبَّٰنِيُّونَ وَٱلۡأَحۡبَارُ بِمَا ٱسۡتُحۡفِظُواْ مِن كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ وَكَانُواْ عَلَيۡهِ شُهَدَآءَۚ فَلَا تَخۡشَوُاْ ٱلنَّاسَ وَٱخۡشَوۡنِ وَلَا تَشۡتَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِي ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلٗاۚ وَمَن لَّمۡ يَحۡكُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light. By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses. So, have no fear of men but fear Me; and do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers. (44)

وَكَتَبۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ فِيهَآ أَنَّ ٱلنَّفۡسَ بِٱلنَّفۡسِ وَٱلۡعَيۡنَ بِٱلۡعَيۡنِ وَٱلۡأَنفَ بِٱلۡأَنفِ وَٱلۡأُذُنَ بِٱلۡأُذُنِ وَٱلسِّنَّ بِٱلسِّنِّ وَٱلۡجُرُوحَ قِصَاصٞۚ فَمَن تَصَدَّقَ بِهِۦ فَهُوَ كَفَّارَةٞ لَّهُۥۚ وَمَن لَّمۡ يَحۡكُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds. But for him who forgoes it out of charity, it will atone for some of his sins. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed wrongdoers. (45)

وَقَفَّيۡنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِعِيسَى ٱبۡنِ مَرۡيَمَ مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةِ وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُ ٱلۡإِنجِيلَ فِيهِ هُدٗى وَنُورٞ وَمُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةِ وَهُدٗى وَمَوۡعِظَةٗ لِّلۡمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow in the footsteps of those (earlier prophets), confirming what had already been revealed before him in the Torah; and We gave him the Gospel, containing guidance and light, confirming what had already been revealed before it in the Torah and giving guidance and admonition to the God-fearing. (46)

وَلْيَحْكُمْ أَهْلُ ٱلْإِنجِيلِ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَحْكُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed therein. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed transgressors. (47)

وَأَنزَلْنَآ إِلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَمُهَيْمِنًا عَلَيْهِ ۖ فَٱحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ لِكُلٍّ جَعَلْنَا مِنكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِى مَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۖ فَٱسْتَبِقُوا۟ ٱلْخَيْرَٰتِ ۚ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

And to you We have revealed the Book, setting forth the truth, confirming the Scriptures which had already been revealed before it and superseding them. Judge, then, between them in accordance with what God has revealed and do not follow their vain desires, forsaking thereby the truth that has come to you. To every one of you We have given a code of law and a way of life. Had God so willed, He could have made you all one community; but (it is His wish) to test you by means of that which He has bestowed on you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works. To God you shall all return. He will then make you understand all that over which you now differ. (48)

وَأَنِ ٱحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ وَٱحْذَرْهُمْ أَن يَفْتِنُوكَ عَنۢ بَعْضِ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۖ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا۟ فَٱعْلَمْ أَنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ أَن يُصِيبَهُم بِبَعْضِ ذُنُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Hence, judge between them in accordance with what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires and beware of them lest they tempt you away from any part of what God has revealed to you. If they turn away, then know that it is God's will to afflict them for some of their sins. Indeed, a great many people are transgressors. (49)

أَفَحُكْمَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ يَبْغُونَ ۚ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ حُكْمًا لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Do they desire to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance? But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law-giver than God? (50)

Overview

This ten-verse passage discusses the most important issue of the Islamic€ faith and its codes of living and justice. The same issue was discussed in the two preceding *sūrahs,* the House of `Imrān and Women, but in this *sūrah* it involves a more direct and emphatic discussion. The subject is that of government, law and the administration of justice in matters of dispute. This is, indeed, a part of a more comprehensive issue, namely, faith and God's oneness. The whole matter can be summed up in the answer to this question: Are judgement and litigation to be conducted in accordance with covenants made with God, pursuant to His law? The task of implementing this law has been accepted by the followers of all Divine faiths. Moreover, is it a duty God has assigned to His messengers and those who succeed them in positions of authority? Or, will all that be subject to changing views and interests that are not based on a firm and constant foundation? In other words, do Godhead, lordship and authority in human life on earth belong to God, or do they belong, even partially, to any one of His creatures exercising the power to enact laws that are not endorsed by God?

God (limitless is He in His glory) says that He alone is the Godhead and He has no partners. His laws, enacted for His servants, mankind, and which they have pledged to Him to implement, must be the ones to enforce in this world. All disputes must be adjudicated by prophets and rulers on the basis of these laws.

God (glorified be He) says that no argument or concession can be admitted with regard to this principle nor can any deviation, however small, be condoned. Nor can anything approved in a particular generation or by a particular community be accepted if it is in conflict with what God has decreed.

God (limitless is He in His glory) says that this whole issue is one of faith or unfaith, Islam or non-Islam, Divine law or human prejudice. No compromise or reconciliation can be worked out between these two sets of values. Those who judge on the basis of the law God has revealed, enforcing all parts of it and substituting nothing else for it, are the believers. By contrast, those who do not make the law God has revealed the basis of their judgement are unbelievers, wrongdoers and transgressors. Rulers can either implement God's law in total and, thus, they remain within the area of faith, or they may enforce some other law. In this latter case, all three descriptions of unbelief, wrongdoing and transgression apply to them. If people accept God's rule and judgement, administered by rulers and judges, then they are believers. Otherwise, they are not. There is no middle way between the two, nor can any justification or claim of serving legitimate interests be admitted. God, the Lord of mankind, knows what serves people's interests and He has enacted His laws for that very purpose. No law or system of government is superior to His. No servant

of God may reject God's law or claim to have better knowledge than God with regard to what serves people's interests. If he makes such a claim, by word or deed, then he pronounces himself an unbeliever.

This highly important and fundamental issue is discussed in this passage in definitive statements. In addition, the passage describes the attitude of the Jews in Madinah and their cooperation with hypocrites in scheming against the Muslim community. God's Messenger is given advice on how to counter such scheming by the Jews, which began with the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah.

In this passage, the *sūrah* states first that all religions revealed by God agree that His law must be implemented and should govern all human life. It is the acceptance of this condition that makes all the difference between faith and unfaith, Islam and other doctrines, Divine law and human caprice. This is clearly stated in the Torah revealed by God to provide guidance and light for mankind. "*By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses. They have the Torah which contains God's judgement. We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds.*" (Verses 43-45)

It is also endorsed by the Gospel God revealed to Jesus, son of Mary, which contains "*guidance and light, confirming what had already been revealed before it in the Torah and giving guidance and admonition to the God-fearing.*" (Verse 46) "*Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed therein.*" (Verses 46-47)

It is further endorsed by the Qur'ān which God revealed to Muĥammad, His last Messenger, "*setting forth the truth, confirming the Scriptures which had already been revealed before it and superseding them.*" (Verse 48) Muĥammad is instructed by God to "*judge between them in accordance with what God has revealed and do not follow their vain desires, forsaking thereby the truth that has come to you.*" (Verse 48)

The ultimate verdict is thus pronounced: "*Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed wrongdoers. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed transgressors. Do they desire to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance? But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law-giver than God?*" (Verses 44-50) In this way, the borders of faith and conditions of submission to God are clearly defined for both rulers and ruled. The criterion for rulers is to judge in accordance with what God has revealed, and for people to accept such a judgement and not to prefer anything else to it.

Stated in these terms, the issue is very serious indeed. Let us, therefore, try to identify the reasons for taking matters so seriously either in this particular passage or in the Qur'ān as a whole.

The first consideration is the fact that this whole matter is one of Godhead, Lordship and authority over mankind. These belong to God alone, who has no partners. Hence, it is a question of faith and submission to God or rejection and unfaith. This basic fact is explained throughout the Qur'ān.

God is the Creator of both the universe and man. He has made everything in the heavens and on earth subservient to man. Moreover, He is the only Creator. No one else creates anything in the universe. God is also the owner of the universe. To Him belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and all that is in between. No one else owns anything in the universe. God is also the provider, and no one can provide anything for himself or for others. As He is the Creator, the owner and the provider, God has all authority over the universe and man. He, indeed, has the absolute power to do whatever He wishes.

To be a believer is to acknowledge that all these attributes belong solely and purely to God alone. To believe in Islam is to submit to the practical implications of these attributes. This is submission to God's law, which means, first and foremost, to acknowledge His Godhead, Lordship and authority. Refusal of God's law or the adoption of a different law in any small detail of human life is in effect a rejection of God's Godhead, Lordship and authority. Submission and rejection can be made by word of mouth or by deed. Hence, the whole issue is, as we have already explained, one of faith or unfaith, Islam or ignorance. Hence, the unequivocal statements made in this passage of the *sūrah*: "*Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers ... wrongdoers ... transgressors.*" (Verses 44, 45 and 47)

The other consideration in this whole issue is the fact that God's law is inevitably and absolutely better for mankind than any manmade law. It is to this fact that the final verse in this passage refers: "*But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law giver than God?*" (Verse 50)

This total acknowledgement of the preferability of God's law in all stages and generations is also a part of the whole issue of faith or unfaith. No person can claim that the law enacted by a human being is better or equal to God's law at any stage of human life and claim at the same time that he is a believer or that he belongs to Muslims. By making such a claim, he is indeed claiming that he has better knowledge and superior wisdom than God in understanding mankind and conducting their affairs. Or he claims that certain conditions and needs have come up in human life and God (limitless is He in His glory) was unaware of them when He enacted His law, or was aware of them but did not provide for them in His law. Such

a claim cannot be reconciled with that of faith and submission to God, no matter how insistently it is made.

The Superiority of Islamic Legislation

The wisdom and purpose behind Divine legislation may not appear in full to mankind in any particular generation. Furthermore, it is very difficult to give a full discussion of what we ourselves see of this wisdom. Therefore, we will only give brief hints.

God's law represents a complete way of life, which regulates and directs all aspects of human life in whatever stage and shape it finds them. This way of life relies on an infallible and true knowledge of man and his needs, and of the universe in which man lives and the laws that control the universe and human existence. As such, it does not ignore any matter of importance to human life. It does not allow or give rise to any destructive conflict between the different types of human activity or between such activity and natural laws. The reverse is true: it establishes proper balance and fine harmony. These can never result from any man-made system, since man's knowledge is confined to what is within human knowledge at a particular time. Any system which man devises must reflect human ignorance and lead to some conflict between different aspects of human activity. This will inevitably lead to violent shake-ups.

The Islamic system sets absolute justice as its goal. For one thing, it is God alone who knows how and by what means absolute justice can be established. For another, God is the Lord of all and He can establish justice between all. The system He lays down and the law He promulgates are free of prejudice, imbalance, extremism or ignorance. This cannot be said of any system or law which man devises, since man is influenced by his own prejudices, caprice and desire, and his vision is hampered by his imperfect knowledge. This applies to all human laws, whether they are enacted by an individual, a class, a nation or a generation. In no situation can man be free of his prejudices and desires and in none can he have perfect knowledge or a comprehensive, profound and perfect insight, not even in a single case for which a law is required.

Moreover, the Islamic system is in perfect harmony with the laws which govern the universe, because it is devised by the Creator of both the universe and man. When the Creator legislates for man, He treats him as an agent in this universe who has control over certain elements made subservient to him by the will of His Lord, on condition that he follows His guidance and learns the nature of these elements and the laws regulating them. This produces harmony between man and the universe in which he lives. The law which regulates human life acquires, then, a universal aspect

to enable man to deal with all living things and objects in the whole universe on the basis of this law. Let us not forget in this context that man cannot break away from this universe. It is inevitable that he will have to deal with it on the basis of a proper and sound system.

Furthermore, the Islamic system is the only one which liberates man from subjugation by others. In all other systems, some people are subservient to others, and some look up to others. Only under the Islamic system do all people share the same position of being servants of God alone.

As we have explained, the most fundamental aspect of Godhead is legislation. When someone enacts legislation for a human community, he claims for himself the position of Godhead. People in that community become his servants instead of being God's servants. By giving the authority to legislate to God alone, Islam declares the liberation of mankind, or indeed, the rebirth of man. For man does not come into real existence unless he is liberated from subservience to another man and unless all human beings stand on an equal footing in front of the Lord of mankind.

This question which is fully discussed in the present passage is the top and most important question of faith. It is the question of Godhood and servitude, justice, freedom, equality and proper existence.

The state of darkness, as used in an Islamic context, does not refer to a particular period of history. Rather, it refers to a particular condition, which may be present in any period of time. In essence, it signifies making law and legislation subject to human desires, not to the Divine system. It is immaterial whether these desires are those of an individual, a class, a nation or a generation. They remain human desires.

An individual may enact laws for a certain community and the result is that the community lives in darkness because his desire or his opinion becomes the law. A class may legislate for the rest of the community and the result is darkness enshrouding its whole life because the interests of that class become law, or let us say, the opinion of the parliamentary majority become law. The representatives of all classes and all sectors in the nation may legislate for themselves, and the result is the same darkness engulfing the whole of life, because the desires of human beings and their imperfect knowledge become law, since people cannot be without prejudices and cannot acquire perfect knowledge. Or it may be the people's view that is the law. And a group of nations may legislate for mankind, but the result is still the same, because the national goals of those nations, or indeed the views of the international community become law. In each one of these situations, the difference is only in words.

But when the Creator of individuals, communities, nations and generations, legislates for all, the result is a Divine law which does not favour an individual, a

community, a nation or a generation at the expense of others. God is the Lord of all and He treats them all equally. He knows the nature and the interests of all and He makes His law serve all their interests and meet all their needs in absolute justice. When anyone other than God legislates for mankind, people become subservient, be that person an individual, a class, a nation or the international community. But when God legislates for mankind, they are all free and equal. They bow in front of no one whatsoever and they submit to God alone. This explains how serious this question of legislation in human life and in the life of the universe is. "*Should the truth be subservient to their desires, the heavens and the earth and all those who are in them will become corrupted.*" (23: 71) A judgement according to laws other than that revealed by God means evil, corruption and turning away from faith, as the Qur'ān itself says.

Playing Games with Divine Judgement

> *Messenger, be not grieved by those who plunge headlong into unbelief such as those who say with their mouths, "We believe", while their hearts do not believe. Among the Jews are some who eagerly listen to falsehood, eagerly listen to other people who have not come to you. They tamper with words out of their context, and say, "If such-and-such [a precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard." If God wants to put anyone to test, you shall not be able to avail him anything against God. Such are the ones whose hearts God is not willing to purify. They will have disgrace in this world, and awesome suffering in the life to come. They eagerly listen to falsehood and greedily devour what is unlawful. Hence, if they come to you (for judgement), you may either judge between them or decline to interfere. If you decline, they cannot harm you in any way. But if you do judge, then judge between them with fairness. God loves those who deal justly. But how is it that they ask you for judgement when they have the Torah which contains God's judgement, and they still turn away? For certain, they are not true believers.* (Verses 41-43)

It is apparently clear that these verses were revealed in the early years after the Prophet's settlement in Madinah where the Jews were part of its community. This means that they were revealed sometime before the attack on Madinah by the confederate tribes, and before severe punishment was inflicted on the Jewish tribe of Qurayżah, or even much earlier. Most probably they were revealed when the two Jewish tribes of al-Nađīr and Qaynuqā` were still in Madinah. The first of these two tribes were evacuated from Madinah after the Battle of Uĥud in the third year of the Islamic calendar and the Qaynuqā were evacuated even before that. In that early period, the Jews concocted many of their tricks and manoeuvres, and the hypocrites received much support from them. Both groups plunged headlong into disbelief, even though the hypocrites might have claimed by word of mouth that they were

believers. Their actions grieved the Prophet and caused him much distress.

God (limitless is He in His glory) consoles His Messenger (peace be upon him) and comforts him. He exposes to the Muslim community the truth about those who plunge headlong into disbelief, as did some of the Jews and the hypocrites. He directs His Messenger to the line of action he should adopt with them when they come to him for arbitration, after explaining to the Prophet what plots they have concocted before coming to him: *"Messenger, be not grieved by those who plunge headlong into unbelief such as those who say with their mouths, `We believe', while their hearts do not believe. Among the Jews are some who eagerly listen to falsehood, eagerly listen to other people who have not come to you. They tamper with words out of their context, and say, If such-and-such (a precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard."* (Verse 41)

Some reports suggest that these verses speak of a group of Jews who committed certain sins including adultery and theft, which carry specific punishments outlined in the Torah. The Jews, however, at least in the first place, had established different punishments, because they did not want to enforce the provisions of the Torah on those of them who were in power. They later wanted to waive these punishments of the Torah in all cases. They replaced them with other punishments, as has been done by those who claim to be Muslims these days. When some of them committed these sins at the time of the Prophet, they thought to seek his judgement. If he judged according to the lesser punishments, which they had legislated, they would enforce them and justify their action to God by saying that they had enforced the verdict of His Messenger. If he judged that they should be punished according to the Torah, they would refuse his judgement. They, thus, sent some of their people to seek his ruling. This, then, explains their statement, *"If such-and-such la precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard."* (Verse 41)

They had indeed gone that far in playing games with God's law and in being dishonest in their dealings with God and His Messenger (peace be upon him). This is a stage which can be reached by any people who, having received Divine revelation, have long ignored their duties. In such a situation hearts are hardened and the light of faith is stifled. Evasion of the laws and duties of their faith becomes the goal for which means are sought and rulings and justifications are found. Does this not apply 1 today to those who claim to be Muslims and who *"say with their mouths, 'We believe', while their hearts do not believe."* (Verse 41) Do they not seek rulings to evade their religious duties, rather than carry them out? Do they not occasionally try to pay lip service to religion so that it may approve and endorse their desires? If religion insists on the word of the truth and the ruling of justice, they have no need for it: They say: *"If such-and-such (a precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard."* (Verse 41) The two situations are identical. Perhaps God has given us

such an account of the history of the Children of Israel, so that future generations may be forewarned of the slips that lie along their way.

God (glorified be He) says to His Messenger with regard to those who rush into disbelief and those conspirators who engage in such schemes that he should not be grieved by such people's actions. They seek to create confusion and they will fall victim to it, while he [i.e. God's Messenger] himself has no say in the matter and cannot help them through their test when they have brought confusion upon themselves: *"If God wants to put anyone to test, you shall not be able to avail him anything against God."* (Verse 41) Such people have sunk their hearts into impurity, so God is unwilling to purify them: *"Such are the ones whose hearts God is not willing to purify."* (Verse 41) He will cause them to suffer ignominy in this life and grievous suffering in the Hereafter: *"They will have disgrace in this world, and awesome suffering in the life to come."* (Verse 41) He tells the Prophet not to worry about them, and not to be grieved by their disbelief. Their fate is sealed.

The *sūrah* goes on to give us further details of their situation and how far they have sunk into moral corruption, prior to giving guidance to the Prophet on how to deal with them: *"They eagerly listen to falsehood and greedily devour what is unlawful. Hence, if they come to you (for judgement), you may either judge between them or decline to interfere. If you decline, they cannot harm you in any way. But if do judge, then judge between them with fairness. God loves those who deal justly."* (Verse 42)

Their listening to falsehood is repeated again, to suggest that this has become an established habit of theirs. They are pleased to listen to falsehood, and they are annoyed when they hear the voice of truth. This applies to all deviant hearts, corrupt souls and communities. To them, falsehood carries much appeal and the truth appears too hard. In these miserable days, falsehood sells like hot cakes, while the word of truth has no buyers.

Those people do not only listen to falsehood, but they greedily devour what is unlawful, prominent among which are usury, bribes and the price of false rulings and false testimony. Again, this evil quality spreads in all communities that deviate from God's law. The term the Qur'ān uses here for "unlawful" also connotes lack of blessings. Indeed, blessings are the first thing to be obliterated in deviant communities, as we see with our own eyes nowadays.

God has given the Prophet the choice whether to judge between them or to turn away from them, if they ask him for judgement. If he chooses not to pay any attention to them, they can harm him in no way. But if he chooses to judge between them then his must be a fair judgement, unaffected by their prejudices or their rushing into disbelief or by their plots and schemes: *"God loves those who deal justly."* (Verse 42)

God's Messenger (peace be upon him), Muslim rulers and judges deal directly with God in such matters and exert their efforts to establish justice in order to serve God because God loves those who deal justly. If people commit injustice or perjury or deviate from the truth, justice continues to carry its superior status. Fair judgement is not passed in order to please people but to please God. This is, indeed, the most effective guarantee provided by Islamic law everywhere and in all times.

A Baffling Attitude Towards God's Judgement

The fact that the Prophet was given this choice with regard to those Jews who came to him for judgement further supports our view that this was in the early period after the Prophet's settlement in Madinah. Later on, judgement according to Islamic law was compulsory, because the land of Islam does not enforce any law other than that of God. All people living there must refer their disputes to this law. This, however, does not contradict the Islamic rule which applies to people of earlier revelations living side by side with the Muslim community in the land of Islam. This principle makes only such laws as are endorsed by their faith or that relate to the general social order applicable to them. Permissible to them is what their religions permit them, such as owning and eating pork, the possession and drinking of intoxicants, but without their selling these Muslims. But they are forbidden all usurious transactions because these are also forbidden in their religions. The punishments prescribed for adultery and theft are applicable to them, because they are stated in their Scriptures. Also enforceable are the punishments prescribed for rebellion against the legitimate authority, and for spreading corruption in the land. Such enforcement is necessary to guarantee the safety and security of the land of Islam and all its inhabitants, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Such punishments cannot be waived in respect of anyone of those living in the land of Islam.

During that period in which the Prophet had the choice whether to judge between them or to ignore them, they used to come with some of their disputes to God's Messenger (peace be upon him). An example of this is reported by `Abdullāh ibn `Umar: "Some Jews came to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and told him that a Jewish man and a Jewish woman committed adultery. The Prophet asked them: 'What does the Torah say about stoning adulterers?' They said: 'We publicise their crime and punish them by flogging.' `Abdullāh ibn Sallām (a Jewish rabbi who had embraced Islam) said, 'This is a lie. The Torah prescribes stoning.' They brought the Torah and opened it up. One of them put his hand over the verse that mentioned stoning and read the preceding and the following verses. `Abdullāh ibn Sallām told him to lift his hand off. When he did, the relevant verse on the death punishment by stoning was there. They said, 'He (meaning `Abdullāh ibn Sallām) has told the truth. It specifies death by stoning.'

The Prophet gave his orders for the two adulterers to be stoned to death. I saw the man bending over the woman to shelter her from the stones." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

Another example is given in a *Ĥadīth* related by Imām Ahmad on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's learned cousin, who says: "These verses were revealed in connection with two groups of Jews, one of which had triumphed over the others in pre-Islamic days. They later worked out a reconciliation agreement which stated that every victim of the defeated tribe killed by the victorious one would be compensated with blood money equal to fifty measures of agricultural produce, while every victim of the victorious tribe killed by the defeated one would have one hundred measures of agricultural produce as blood money. They operated this system until the Prophet (peace be upon him) migrated to Madinah. It so happened then that the defeated tribe killed a man of the victorious one. The latter sent them a message to prepare the full amount of blood money agreed, which was one hundred measures of agricultural produce. The defeated tribe said: 'How is it that two tribes belonging to the same faith, having the same ancestry and living in the same land, have two tariffs of blood money with one tariff being double the other? We had agreed to this measure of injustice you had imposed on us because we feared you. Now that Muĥammad has arrived in Madinah, we will not give you that.' War was about to flare up between the two tribes, before they agreed to refer the matter to God's Messenger for arbitration. The victorious tribe then reflected on this matter. Some of them said: 'Muĥammad will never give you twice the blood money you are prepared to give them. They indeed have told the truth when they said that they agreed to this as a matter of injustice imposed by us on them. Let us, then, sound out Muĥammad, to determine whether he will give us a favourable judgement. If so, we will refer the matter to him. If not, we will have been forewarned.' They sent to the Prophet some of their hypocrite friends to sound him out. God informed His Messenger of the whole affair and revealed to him the passage starting with "*Messenger, be not grieved by those who plunge headlong into unbelief such as those who say with their mouths, 'We believe', while their hearts do not believe. Among the Jews are some who eagerly listen to falsehood, eagerly listen to other people who have not come to you. They tamper with words out of their context, and say, If such-and-such la precept] is given you, accept it; but if you are not given it, then be on your guard'*" (Verse 41) (Related by Abū Dāwūd) Another version of this report names the victorious tribe as the al-Nađīr and the defeated one as the Qurayżah. This again supports our view that these verses were revealed in the early days of the Madinah period before these Jewish tribes were evacuated.

Indeed, the attitude of the Jews in such matters has always been consistent. Hence, the Qur'ān asks this rhetorical question: "*But how is it that they ask you for judgement when they have the Torah which contains God's judgement, and they still turn away?*"

(Verse 43)

It is indeed a very grave and serious matter. They refer something to God's Messenger for arbitration and he judges between them on the basis of God's law. Moreover, they also have the Torah which contains God's judgement. Both judgements are identical, because the Qur'ān has endorsed Divine judgements contained in the Torah. But t nevertheless, turn their backs on God's judgement, either in their dissatisfaction or by not enforcing it. This rhetorical question is followed by an Islamic rule in such matters: "*For certain, they are not true believers.*" (Verse 43)

It is certainly not possible that a true believer will not submit to God's law or would not accept its rulings. Those who claim to themselves or to others that they believe and still refuse to implement God's law in their lives or who are not satisfied when it is enforced on them do indeed make false claims. Their attitude is described in this definitive statement: "*For certain, they are not true believers.*" It is not simply a question of rulers not implementing God's law, but also a question of ordinary people not being satisfied with God's law and judgement. Such dissatisfaction takes them out of the ranks of believers, no matter how emphatically they claim to believe.

This Qur'ānic statement confirms a similar one in the preceding *sūrah*, "Women", which states: "*But no, by your Lord! They do not really believe unless they make you judge in all disputes between them, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of your decisions and give themselves up in total submission.*" (4: 65) Both statements speak about the ruled, not the rulers. Both classify as unbelievers those who do not accept God's judgement as outlined by His Messenger and turn away from it.

As we have already said, the point at issue is that of acknowledging God's authority as the only God and His Lordship of mankind and the universe. To accept God's law and to be satisfied by its rules and judgements is the practical demonstration of accepting Him as the Supreme Godhead and the Lord of the universe. Rejecting the law and being dissatisfied with its judgement is a practical demonstration of disbelieving in God as such.

Light and Guidance Shine from the Torah

Such is God's verdict in relation to ordinary people who refuse to accept judgement in accordance with God's law. These have been described as unbelievers. Beginning with this verse, the *sūrah* speaks of rulers who do not judge in accordance with God's revelations. As we are soon to realise such judgements are endorsed by all religions revealed by God. The first reference is to the Torah: "*Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light. By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis:*

[they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses. So, have no fear of men but fear Me; and do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers. We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds. But for him who forgoes it out of charity, it will atone for some of his sins. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed wrongdoers." (Verses 44-45)

Every religion revealed by God has been meant as a way of life. It has been so devised as to assume the leadership of human life and to organise, direct and protect it. No religion has been revealed by God only to be a set of personal, moral values or a set of rituals that are offered in a temple or a mosque. Necessary as both are for human life, and vital as they are in refining human conscience, they are not sufficient on their own to reorganise, direct and protect human life. They must provide the basis for a complete way of life and a code of law which are implemented and enforced. Any offence against them must be accounted for and punished, if necessary.

Human life cannot be properly organised unless it derives its faith, rituals, way of life and code of law from a single source which can exercise authority over consciences and behaviour alike. It must be able to administer reward and punishment according to its law in this life, and reward people in accordance with its own system of reckoning in the life to come.

Multiplicity of authority and source will only bring about results that are highly undesirable. If God's authority over consciences and rituals is recognised, but not over the law of the land, when reward in the Hereafter is according to God's law, but in this life it is subject to a different authority, then man is torn between two authorities moving in opposite directions. This leads to the total corruption of human life, as clearly and repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'ān: *"Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, they both would have fallen into ruin."* (21: 22) *"If the truth were to follow their caprice, the heavens and the earth and all those who live in them would have fallen into ruin."* (23: 71) *"We have set you on a way by which he purpose [of faith] may be fulfilled. Follow it, then, and do not follow the vain desires of those who are devoid of knowledge."* (45: 18)

For this reason every religion revealed by God has been designed to serve as a way of life. Whether directed to a single village, or to a particular nation, or for all generations of humanity, every religion brought, in addition to a faith setting out the proper concept of life and a set of worship rituals providing a strong link with God, a code of law to regulate human practices. Certain elements or aspects form the basis of every Divine religion. Human life cannot be set on a proper footing unless it

follows Divine faith.

Numerous references in the Qur'ān show that early religions, some of which might have been addressed to small communities, contained all three mutually complementary aspects in a fashion suitable to that particular community's stage of development. At this point, such complementarity in the three major religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is outlined, starting with the Torah: "*Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light.*" (Verse 44) As revealed by God, the Torah was the Book providing guidance for the Children of Israel, lighting up the way they should follow in life in order to lead them to God's pleasure. It contained the essence of monotheistic faith, and a variety of worship rituals, as well as a code of law: "*By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses.*" (Verse 44)

God revealed the Torah to provide guidance and light not only for hearts and consciences with the faith and rituals it outlined, but also to provide guidance and light generated by the code of law which regulated practical life and protected it in accordance with God's system. The Prophets who had submitted themselves totally to God in absolute and complete dedication and who made no claim whatsoever to any attribute of Divinity, used to judge among the Jews on its basis. It was the law given to that particular community. So did the divines and rabbis, i.e. the Jewish scholars and judges, because they had been assigned the task of making sure that God's law was implemented and they were required to be witnesses to its truth. They would fulfil this task through organizing their own lives in accordance with the directives and laws of the Torah and through implementing its laws within their communities.

Before finishing its reference to the Torah, the Qur'ān addresses the Muslim community with regard to judgements in accordance with revelations in general and the opposition people may show to such judgements. It also outlines the duty of everyone entrusted with the implementation of God's law and the punishment incurred by neglecting this duty: "*So, have no fear of men but fear Me; and do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers.*" (Verse 44)

God knows that enforcing His revealed law will be met with opposition in every period of time and in every community. Some people will not easily submit to it. Those who have power, tyrants and despots, and those who claim authority by right of inheritance will put up stiff resistance to it, because they realise that its enforcement will deprive them of the mask of Godhead they wear and acknowledge Godhead as totally belonging to God alone. This is done through depriving them of

their claimed authority to legislate and to judge in accordance with their legislation. Resistance will also be put up by those whose material interests can only be served through exploitation and injustice. God's just law will never endorse their unjust interests. Similarly, there will always be opposition to the implementation of God's law by those who pursue their vain desires and wanton caprice. A Divine religion will always require them to purify themselves from such evil, and will eventually punish indulgence in them. Further opposition will be put up by other quarters who dislike to see goodness, righteousness and justice flourish.

As God knows that opposition to His law will come from all these quarters, and that those to whose care His message is entrusted must face up to this opposition and make all the necessary sacrifices for its sake, He addresses them in these words: *"Have no fear of men but fear Me."* (Verse 44) No fear of tyrants, exploiters or deluded masses should deter them from implementing God's law. It is God alone that they should fear, because fearing Him dispels all other fear.

An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth

God also knows that some of those who are charged with the safekeeping and implementation of God's law may find worldly temptations too strong to resist. As they realise that people with power or money and those who seek all types of pleasure oppose God's legislation, they may flatter them in order to gain something of the riches and pleasures of this world. Professional clerics in all generations have yielded to such temptation, as did some Jewish rabbis. God addresses all those, saying to them: *"Do not barter away My revelations for a paltry price."* (Verse 44) That is the price they may get in return for their silence or for their distortion of God's revelations or for issuing doubtful rulings. Indeed, every price offered is paltry, even if it includes all that is in this world. How could it be described otherwise when it is no more than a position, a salary, a title and a petty interest for which faith is bartered away and Hell is purchased?

Nothing is more wicked than treachery by a person who is in a position of trust and nothing is more vile than the distortion of facts by a witness. Those who are given the title "religious men" do commit such treachery and distortion. They remain idle when they are called upon to work for the implementation of God's revelation and they lift words out of their context in order to please those in power at the expense of God's revelation.

In a most decisive and definitive statement, God tells us: *"Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers."* (Verse 44) The generality of this statement makes it absolutely unrestricted to time or place. The ruling is definitive and applicable to everyone who does not judge according to God's

revelations, regardless of where and in which period he lives.

The reason is the one we have already explained. A person whose judgement is at variance with God's revelations denies that Godhead belongs to God alone. A basic quality of Godhead is the authority to legislate as also His sovereignty. Whoever observes something other than God's revelations in his judgement not only rejects a particular aspect of Godhead but also claims for himself certain qualities of Godhead. If that is not unbelief, I wonder what is. For what use is a verbal claim of being a believer or submitting to God, when action denies such a claim?

Any argument about this definitive and decisive ruling is no more than an attempt to avoid facing the reality. To try to give this ruling a different interpretation is simply an attempt to lift words out of their context. Such arguments change nothing of God's clear and definitive judgement.

Having explained this basic rule in all Divine faiths, the *sūrah* gives some examples of the law contained in the Torah which God revealed so that on its basis, prophets, divines, and rabbis might judge among the Jews: *"We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds."* (Verse 45)

These provisions outlined in the Torah have been retained as an integral part of Islamic law, since it is meant to be the law of all mankind, till the end of time. It is true that these provisions may not be implemented except in the land of Islam, but this is only for practical reasons. Islamic authority cannot implement these provisions beyond the borders of the land of Islam. Whenever and wherever Muslim rulers can implement these laws, they are required to do so, since Islamic law is a code for all mankind in all generations. One provision has been added to them under Islam. This is the one to which reference is made in the following Qur'ānic statement: *"But for him who foregoes it out of charity, it will atone for some of his sins."* (Verse 45) This was not included in the law of the Torah. Retaliation was inevitable. No one could waive it or forego it. Hence, atonement of sins could not be achieved through such a charitable gesture.

A word on the concept of retaliation in punishment for injuries will not go amiss. The basic principle which is established through this concept is that of the equality of human beings and their equality before the law. No law other than Divine law acknowledges such an equality so as to make the punishment equal to the crime and to remove all considerations of class, position, lineage and race. This principle is amplified by its comprehensive application: "*A lie for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth or a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds."* (Verse 45) There is no distinction between one class and another, rulers and ruled. All are equal before God's law, since they all descend from one single soul created by God.

This great principle established by God's law is the true and complete declaration of the birth of man when all human beings are considered equal, subject to the same law which rules on the basis of absolute equality. It is the first declaration of its kind. Human laws lagged behind for tens of centuries before they began to rise to its level, but even then, their aspirations have remained partial and theoretical. As for their practical application, human laws continue to lag behind.

The Jews, in whose Scripture, the Torah, this great principle was established, deviated from it in their relations with other people. They used to say: *"We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles."* (3: 75) They also deviated from it in their own internal relations, as we have already explained when two Jewish tribes in Madinah, the Qurayżah and the al-Nađīr established a system of blood money which gave the victorious twice as much as it gave the defeated. The Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) brought them back to the implementation of God's law based on equality. He put them all on the same level.

Apart from its being a declaration of the birth of man, retaliation on the basis of equality is a most effective deterrent which makes anyone who contemplates killing another or causing him bodily harm think twice before putting his thoughts into action. He knows that regardless of his position, family connections, class or race, he will be executed for killing and he will suffer the same bodily harm as he causes.

If he cuts off a hand or a leg of another person, he will have his own hand or leg cut off; and if he destroys an eye, an ear, a nose or a tooth, he will be similarly impaired. But if he were only to face a period of imprisonment, long as it may be, for such actions, then he is unlikely to be deterred for long. His own physical agony or handicap is so very different from a period of imprisonment.

Moreover, retaliation on the basis of equality is the sort of punishment which appeals to human nature. It quenches the desire for revenge which may be fuelled by blind fury and it pacifies hearts and heals wounds. Some people may accept blood money while others insist on retaliation.

Under Islam, Divine legislation takes full account of human nature, just as it did in the Torah. Having ensured the satisfactory punishment of retaliation, Islam appeals to the benevolent element in human nature to encourage charitable forbearance: *"But for him who foregoes it out of charity, it will atone for some of his sins."* (Verse 45) It is up to the killed victim's next of kin or to the injured person himself in all cases of wounds and injuries to be charitable and forego retaliation. It is up to either person, out of his own free choice, to forego his right to retaliation and to accept blood money in place of it, or to forego both. If he does, God will forgive him some or all of his sins. It should be added, however, that even if such a person foregoes retaliation for blood money, the Muslim ruler may enforce a lesser punishment, as he deems fit,

on the killer.

Guidance and Light Given in the Gospel

Such encouragement to show benevolence to forgive in the hope of being forgiven one's own sins by God may appeal to many a person to whom blood money or retaliation may be poor compensation for past losses. A next of kin may reflect on what benefit he may draw from having the killer executed, or what blood money would be for him. Neither will bring back the person who has been slain. It is true, however, that these punishments are the maximum that can be enforced in order to establish justice and to safeguard the community. But there remain certain feelings which cannot heal unless they look to God for compensation.

Imām Ahmad relates that "a man from the Quraysh broke the tooth of a man from the Anşār. The latter complained to Mu`āwiyah, (the overall ruler of the Islamic state). Mu`āwiyah said that he would satisfy him, (i.e. he was offering financial compensation). The Anşārī man insisted on retaliation. Mu`āwiyah said: 'You may have your retaliation. Abū al-Dardā', one of the Prophet's Companions who was present said, `I heard God's Messenger [peace be upon him] say: Any Muslim who suffers a physical injury and forgoes retaliation out of charity will be raised by God to a higher rank or will have some of his sins atoned.' The Anşārī man said, `I forgive him.'"

This is a typical case of readiness to forgive in the hope of receiving reward from God. Financial compensation had no similar appeal to the injured man. This gives us an idea of how effective God's law is, since it is based on a perfect knowledge of human nature, what motivates and satisfies people, as well as the type of legislation that gives people a feeling of peace and security.

Having explained this part of the law of the Torah, which has been incorporated into Qur'ānic law, the *sūrah* gives a general rule: "*those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 45) This is again a general rule worded in a most general mode. The description used here for those who refuse to judge in line with God's revelations is that they are wrongdoers. This, however, does not mean that this is a different case from the preceding one in which the same people are described as unbelievers. It is only an additional description of anyone who does not judge on the basis of God's revelations. He is first a disbeliever, since he does not acknowledge God's covenant and that He is the only one who has the authority to legislate. Since such a person claims such an authority for himself, he actually claims a property of Godhead. Such a claim makes him an unbeliever. Moreover, he does wrong when he forces people to accept a law different from that laid down by their Lord, which ensures a better life for them. He also wrongs himself

by putting himself in a position that incurs the punishment meted out to unbelievers. He wrongs his community by exposing its life to corruption.

The fact that both qualities apply to "*those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed*" is necessitated by the fact that the subject in both sentences use the same wording. Hence, both parts in the two statements are applicable.

The *sūrah* goes on to emphasise that this ruling remained in force in the period that followed the revelation of the Torah: "*We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow in the footsteps of those (earlier prophets), confirming what had already been revealed before him in the Torah; and We gave him the Gospel, containing guidance and light, confirming what had already been revealed before it in the Torah and giving guidance and admonition to the God-fearing. Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed therein. Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed transgressors.*" (Verses 46-47)

God gave Jesus, son of Mary, the Gospel so that it may serve as a way of life and a code of law. The Gospel did not present new legislation, but rather introduced a few modifications into the law of the Torah. It, thus, confirmed this earlier law by endorsing it with a few modifications. In the Gospel, God gave guidance, light and admonition, but only "to the God-fearing". It is the God-fearing who open their hearts to God's revealed Books and who find in them guidance, light and admonition. Hardened hearts, on the other hand, miss the meaning of the words and the essence of the directives. They neither appreciate the value of its words, benefit by the guidance and light provided, nor do they gain any new knowledge. The light is there, but it needs an open heart to benefit from it; guidance is available, but it only benefits a searching soul; and admonition is given but it is only picked up by a keen intellect.

As we have already said God has provided in the Gospel guidance, light and admonition to the God-fearing. He made it a way of life and a code of law for its people. It is not, however, a universal message for all mankind. This is the case of the Gospel, the Torah and all books and messages revealed before the final message of the Qur'ān. Whatever provisions of legislation in the Gospel or in the Torah agree with those of the Qur'ān form part of the Qur'ānic law, as explained in connection with the case of retaliation.

The followers of the Gospel were, then, required to apply the legal code of the Torah, which was confirmed and endorsed by the Gospel: "*Let then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed therein.*" (Verse 47) The universal rule is to judge in accordance with God's revelations, to the exclusion of all other laws. Neither the Christians nor the Jews can have a sound basis unless they implement the Torah and the Gospel. That, however, is what applied prior to Islam. After the revelation of Islam, they must also implement all that was revealed by their

Lord, because all of it forms a single law to which they must subscribe. "*Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed transgressors.*" (Verse 47)

This is again a very general statement which means that the quality of transgressing is added to the two earlier qualities of unbelief and wrongdoing, which were used to describe those who do not judge in accordance with God's revelations. The new description does not refer to any new case or any new group who are separate from those described in the first two verses. All three qualities are applicable to all those who reject God's revealed law, in all generations and in all nations.

They disbelieve when they reject God's law, and thereby reject that Godhead belongs solely to God. They are indeed wrongdoers when they impose on people a law other than that of God and help spread corruption in the land. They transgress when they deviate from the way of life chosen by God. All three descriptions apply to the same person in equal manner and he confirms them all through his actions.

A Book to Supersede All Scriptures

Having spoken about earlier Divine messages and laws, the *surah* now speaks of the final message which embodies Islam in its final a complete form. It is the religion revealed for all mankind, giving a law which supersedes all preceding laws and forms the final arbiter in all affairs and disputes. It outlines a way of life which regulates all aspects of all human activities and gives a basis for the formulation of a concept of faith, a social system and a code for personal and social behaviour. None of this is given as an academic exercise. It must be implemented in full. Nothing of it may be substituted by something else. People either accept this and be true Muslims, or refuse it and follow ignorance and vain desires. No one may justify any deviation by claiming that he is uniting people by being flexible in matters of religion. Had God so willed, He would have made all mankind a single community. What tie He wants of us is to implement His law and let people decide on how they want to conduct their lives.

> *And to you We have revealed the Book, setting forth the truth, confirming the Scriptures which had already been revealed before it and superseding them. Judge, then, between them in accordance with what God has revealed and do not follow their vain desires, forsaking thereby the truth that has come to you. To every one of you We have given a code of law and a way of life. Had God so willed, He could have made you all one community; but (it is His wish) to test you by means of that which He has bestowed on you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works. To God you shall all return. He will then make you understand all that over which you now differ.*

> *Hence, judge between them in accordance with what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires and beware of them lest they tempt you away from any part of what God has revealed to you. If they turn away, then know that it is God's will to afflict them for some of their sins. Indeed, a great many people are transgressors.) Do they desire to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance? But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law-giver than God?* (Verses 48-50)

This is a definitive statement, expressed in the clearest of terms. It takes extreme care to forestall any temptation to abandon even a small part of this law, regardless of the circumstances. When one reflects on this, one is bound to wonder how a person who claims to be a Muslim can abandon God's law in its totality, justifying his action by force of circumstance. How can he find it in himself to continue to claim that he is a Muslim after so doing? How can people call themselves Muslims when they have refused to acknowledge God's Godhead, turned their backs on God's law and denied its suitability for all situations!

"*And to you, We have revealed the Book, setting forth the truth.*" (Verse 48) Since it is revealed by God, the only One who has the authority to enact laws, then it certainly sets forth the truth. Everything that it contains of matters of faith, law, directives and stories are true.

Hence, it is the Book of the truth. Moreover, it confirms "*the Scriptures which had already been revealed before it and superseding them.*" (Verse 48) It, thus, provides the final version of the Divine faith. It is the final arbiter not only in this regard, but also with regard to the way of life mankind should follow, the legislation that should be implemented and the system that should be established. No modification is admissible. Any disagreement over any of these matters, whether between followers of Divine religions or between Muslims themselves, must be referred to this Book. No opinion advanced by any human being has any value unless it is supported by this final authority.

As this is an undeniable fact, it must have its practical implementation: "*Judge, then, between them in accordance with what God has revealed and do not follow their vain desires, forsaking thereby the truth that has come to you.*" (Verse 48) This command is addressed in the first instance to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) with respect to those of the followers of earlier religions who came to him for arbitration. But its import is not confined to this particular aspect. It is a general order, applicable till the end of time since there will never be a new messenger or a new message to modify anything in this final version of God's message to mankind.

This religion has been made complete, and through it God has perfected the grace He has bestowed on Muslims. Moreover, God has been pleased to choose this religion as a way of life for all mankind. As we have repeatedly said, no modification

or amendment is possible or admissible. When God chose it for human life, He knew its inherent suitability. As God makes it the final arbiter, He knows that it benefits all mankind and that it can be implemented in all generations till the Day of Judgement. Anyone who seeks to modify it, let alone abandon it altogether, takes himself out of the fold of Islam altogether, even though he reiterates a thousand times his claim to be a Muslim.

Twice in this short passage God warns the Prophet (peace be upon him) against yielding to the desires of those who come to him for arbitration trying to tempt him away from any part of his revelations. At times, the thought may occur to some people that under certain circumstances, a certain provision of God's law may be modified or set aside. One such motivation could be the desire to establish a measure of unity among all sects and faiths living in the same country. Some people, however, may advocate a conciliatory attitude in matters which may not appear to be so fundamental.

Some reports suggest that the Jews in Madinah made an offer to the Prophet (peace be upon him) that they would follow him, if he agreed to waive certain provisions of the law including that of stoning adulterers. These reports suggest that the warning contained in these verses relate to that particular offer. It is perfectly clear, however, that the order given here has general application. The followers of this Divine faith may face similar temptations and similar offers. God chooses to give His final word in such matters and to leave no room for a compromise. He tells His Messenger that had He so willed, He would have made all mankind a single community. But He has chosen to give each community a code of law and a way of life in order to test them according to what He has given them. Each community will follow its own way but they will all return to God when He will hold them accountable for their actions and the method they had chosen to implement. He will tell them the truth over which they differ. As such, no compromise can be pursued in order to unite those who differ in method and way of life. Such a unification is out of the question: "*To every one of you We have given a code of law and a way of life. Had God so willed, He could have made you all one community; but (it is His wish) to test you by means of that which He has bestowed on you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works. To God you shall all return. He will then make you understand all that over which you now differ*" (Verse 48)

As we clearly see, God has left no loophole. Even when a compromise may promise good results, such as national unity, it is inadmissible. God's law is too precious for any part of it to be sacrificed in return for something which God knows will never happen. People have been created with varying susceptibilities and different methods and ways. God has created them so for a particular purpose of His. He has offered them His guidance and called on them to vie with one another in

doing good works. When they return to Him, He rewards them according to their deeds.

The Temptation to Abandon God's Law

It is a false notion to try to unite people at the expense of God's law. Moreover, the attempt is bound to fail. The price asked is too high, since any modification of God's law will lead to corruption on earth, injustice and the subservience of some people to others. This is, indeed, a great evil. If no compromise of God's law is admissible for pursuing the noble purpose of uniting people, how can it be justified for something which is more petty. Some of those who claim to be Muslims argue that God's law should not be implemented so that we do not lose the tourist trade! Absurdity knows no limit!

> *Hence, judge between them in accordance with what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires and beware of them lest they tempt you away from any part of what God has revealed to you. If they turn away, then know that it is God's will to afflict them for some of their sins. Indeed, a great many people are transgressors.* (Verse 49) *Do they desire to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance? But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law giver than God?* (Verse 50)

Again, this principle is stated with greater clarity. In the first statement, the Prophet is instructed in these words: *"Judge, then, between them in accordance with what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires, forsaking thereby the truth that has come to you."* (Verse 48) This statement may be construed as meaning abandoning God's law in total and following their vain desires in preference to it. In the second part, the Prophet is warned against compromising even a portion of what has been revealed to him: *"Judge between them in accordance with what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires and beware of them lest they tempt you away from any part of what God has revealed to you."* (Verse 49) The warning here is more precise, stricter and stronger. It also states the matter in its true nature. It is a temptation which must be resisted. The choice is either to implement God's law in full, or to follow vain desires.

At that time, they had the choice whether to refer their disputes to God's law, a choice which was later abrogated in the land of Islam. God's law has to be implemented except in those areas where the followers of other religions have specific provisions. These they are allowed to implement. As this was the case, the Prophet is told not to worry about them if they do not like his commitment to every detail of God's law or if they turn away from Islam: *"If they turn away, then know that it is God's will to afflict them for some of their sins. Indeed, a great many people are transgressors."* (Verse 49) Do not worry about them if they turn away. Do not let their

attitude weaken your resolve to implement God's law in full. It is they who will suffer as a result of their turning away because God will then afflict them with their sins. Neither the Prophet, nor the Muslim community, nor indeed God's law will come to any harm as a result of their turning away. Moreover, it is in human nature that many people will transgress. The Prophet is told that he has no say in this state of affairs. Nor is it the fault of God's law. It is they who will not follow the right path.

Having made it absolutely clear to all believers that nothing of the provisions of God's law will be compromised for any purpose and under any circumstances, the *sūrah* then contrasts the choices available. It is either God's law or man-made law, based on inadequate knowledge and vain desire. There can be no meeting ground between the two. *"Do they desire to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance? But for those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law giver than God?"* (Verse 50)

This statement defines the meaning of *jāhiliyyah,* rendered here as "pagan ignorance", as the term is used in the *Qur'ān. Jāhiliyyah* means that people are ruled by people, because this signifies that they submit to one another. They refuse to submit to God alone and reject His Godhead, acknowledging instead that some human beings have qualities of Godhead and hence they submit to their authority. As such, the term pagan ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* does not refer to a particular period of time, but to a certain situation which may come into existence at any time. Whenever it exists, it must be described as *jāhiliyyah* which is in contrast to Islam.

In all ages and places, people may implement God's law, yielding no part of it for any reason, submitting to it willingly. As such, they follow the religion chosen for them by God. Alternatively, they may acknowledge and implement a man-made law in any shape or form. As such they follow ignorance. In this latter situation, they submit to the one who gives them the law and they cannot be described as following God's religion. Anyone who does not wish to be ruled by God's law actually desires to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance. It is at this point that the two ways part and people are left to their choices.

The final sentence is a rhetorical question which decries their pursuit of the law of *jāhiliyyah* and emphasises the superiority of God's law: *"For those who are firm in their faith, who can be a better law-giver than God?"* (Verse 50) Indeed, who can be? Who can claim that he can give people a better law than that of God? What argument can be given to prove this hollow claim? Can anyone say that he knows mankind's nature better than their Creator? Can he say that he is more compassionate and sympathetic to mankind than God? Can he say that he knows their interests better than the God of mankind? Or can he say that when God promulgated the final version of His law and sent His last Messenger to all mankind, giving him the final and complete version of the Divine message, He might have been unaware of future circumstances and needs and as a result did not take them into account in His legislation?

What can anyone say in justification of setting God's law aside and substituting for it a law of *jāhiliyyah,* placing in the process his own desires, or those of a particular community or generation, above God's law? What can he say if, in spite of this, he still claims to be a Muslim? What is his justification: circumstances, events, people's unwillingness, or fear of the enemy? Were all these not known to God when He commanded Muslims to implement His law and follow His way of life and never be tempted away from any part of His revelations? Or does he justify his attitude by claiming that God's law does not cater for new needs and new situations? Were these needs and situations not known to God when He made this very stern warning? A non-Muslim may say anything he wants, but what can those who claim to be Muslims say of any of this and imagine that they continue to be within the fold of Islam? As we have said: this is the point where the ways part. It is either Islam or *jāhiliyyah,* faith or unfaith, the rule of God or the rule of pagan ignorance. Those who choose not to judge in accordance with what God has revealed are unbelievers, wrongdoers and transgressors. People who do not accept God's law are not believers.

This question must be absolutely clear in every Muslim's mind. Unless it be so, a Muslim will not be able to differentiate between truth and falsehood and will not be able to take one step in the right direction. If it is still not that clear to some people, it cannot remain so in the minds of those who want to claim for themselves the most honourable title of being Muslim.

5
Delineation of an Essential Relationship

۞ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّخِذُواْ ٱلۡيَهُودَ وَٱلنَّصَـٰرَىٰٓ أَوۡلِيَآءَۘ بَعۡضُهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءُ بَعۡضٖۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُم مِّنكُمۡ فَإِنَّهُۥ مِنۡهُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ٥١

Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers. (51)

فَتَرَى ٱلَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٞ يُسَـٰرِعُونَ فِيهِمۡ يَقُولُونَ نَخۡشَىٰٓ أَن تُصِيبَنَا دَآئِرَةٞۚ فَعَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَأۡتِيَ بِٱلۡفَتۡحِ أَوۡ أَمۡرٖ مِّنۡ عِندِهِۦ فَيُصۡبِحُواْ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَسَرُّواْ فِيٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡ نَـٰدِمِينَ ٥٢

Yet you see those who are sick at heart rush to their defence, saying, "We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us." God may well bring about victory (for believers) or some other event of His own making, and those (waverers) will terribly regret the thought they had secretly harboured within themselves. (52)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَهَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ أَقۡسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ جَهۡدَ أَيۡمَـٰنِهِمۡ إِنَّهُمۡ لَمَعَكُمۡۚ حَبِطَتۡ أَعۡمَـٰلُهُمۡ فَأَصۡبَحُواْ خَـٰسِرِينَ ٥٣

The believers will say: "Are these the self-same people who swore by God their most solemn oaths that they were with you?" All their works are in vain and they will lose all. (53)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَن يَرۡتَدَّ مِنكُمۡ عَن دِينِهِۦ فَسَوۡفَ يَأۡتِي ٱللَّهُ بِقَوۡمٖ يُحِبُّهُمۡ وَيُحِبُّونَهُۥٓ أَذِلَّةٍ عَلَى ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٍ عَلَى ٱلۡكَـٰفِرِينَ يُجَـٰهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوۡمَةَ لَآئِمٖۚ ذَٰلِكَ فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ

Believers, if you renounce your faith, God will bring forth (in your stead) people whom He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers, proud towards the unbelievers. They will strive hard for God's cause and will not fear to be censured by any critic. Such is God's favour which He grants to whom He wills. God encompasses all and knows all. (54)

يُؤۡتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُمۡ رَٰكِعُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ فَإِنَّ حِزۡبَ ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّخِذُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُواْ دِينَكُمۡ هُزُوٗا وَلَعِبٗا مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ وَٱلۡكُفَّارَ أَوۡلِيَآءَۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَإِذَا نَادَيۡتُمۡ إِلَى ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ ٱتَّخَذُوهَا هُزُوٗا وَلَعِبٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ قَوۡمٞ لَّا يَعۡقِلُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

قُلۡ يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ هَلۡ تَنقِمُونَ مِنَّآ إِلَّآ أَنۡ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡنَا وَمَآ أُنزِلَ مِن قَبۡلُ وَأَنَّ أَكۡثَرَكُمۡ فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

قُلۡ هَلۡ أُنَبِّئُكُم بِشَرّٖ مِّن ذَٰلِكَ مَثُوبَةً عِندَ ٱللَّهِۚ مَن لَّعَنَهُ ٱللَّهُ وَغَضِبَ عَلَيۡهِ وَجَعَلَ مِنۡهُمُ ٱلۡقِرَدَةَ وَٱلۡخَنَازِيرَ وَعَبَدَ ٱلطَّٰغُوتَۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ شَرّٞ مَّكَانٗا وَأَضَلُّ عَن سَوَآءِ

Your patron is only God, and His Messenger and those who believe — those who attend to their prayers, pay their zakāt (i.e. purifying alms) and bow down in worship. (55)

Those who ally themselves with God and His Messenger and the believers (will find that) the party of God will be victorious. (56)

Believers, do not take for your friends those among the people of earlier revelations who mock at your faith and make a jest of it or those who are unbelievers. Fear God, if you are truly believers. (57)

For, when you call to prayer, they mock at it and make a jest of it. They do this because they are people who do not use their reason. (58)

Say: People of earlier revelations! Do you find fault with us for any reason other than that we believe in God [alone], and in that which has been revealed to us as well as that which has been revealed previously, while most of you are transgressors? (59)

Say: Shall I tell you who, in God's sight, deserves an even worse retribution than these? They whom God has rejected and who have incurred His anger, and whom He has turned into apes and pigs, and who worship false gods. These are yet worse in station and they have gone farther astray from the right path. (60)

ٱلسَّبِيلِ ﴿٦٠﴾

وَإِذَا جَآءُوكُمْ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَقَد دَّخَلُواْ بِٱلْكُفْرِ وَهُمْ قَدْ خَرَجُواْ بِهِۦ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

وَتَرَىٰ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ يُسَٰرِعُونَ فِى ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَأَكْلِهِمُ ٱلسُّحْتَ ۚ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

لَوْلَا يَنْهَىٰهُمُ ٱلرَّبَّٰنِيُّونَ وَٱلْأَحْبَارُ عَن قَوْلِهِمُ ٱلْإِثْمَ وَأَكْلِهِمُ ٱلسُّحْتَ ۚ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُواْ يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

وَقَالَتِ ٱلْيَهُودُ يَدُ ٱللَّهِ مَغْلُولَةٌ ۚ غُلَّتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَلُعِنُواْ بِمَا قَالُواْ ۘ بَلْ يَدَاهُ مَبْسُوطَتَانِ يُنفِقُ كَيْفَ يَشَآءُ ۚ وَلَيَزِيدَنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُم مَّآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ طُغْيَٰنًا وَكُفْرًا ۚ وَأَلْقَيْنَا بَيْنَهُمُ ٱلْعَدَٰوَةَ وَٱلْبَغْضَآءَ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ كُلَّمَآ أَوْقَدُواْ نَارًا لِّلْحَرْبِ أَطْفَأَهَا ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَيَسْعَوْنَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱتَّقَوْاْ

When they come to you, they say: "We believe", whereas, in fact, they come unbelievers and depart unbelievers. God is fully aware of all that they would conceal. (61)

You see many of them rushing into sin and transgression and in devouring the fruits of unlawful gain. Evil indeed is that which they do. (62)

Why do not their divines and their rabbis forbid them to make sinful assertions and to devour the fruits of unlawful gain? Evil indeed is that which they contrive. (63)

The Jews say: "God's hand is shackled!" It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills. But that which has been revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and unbelief. We have cast enmity and hatred among them, [to last] until the Day of Resurrection. Every time they light a fire for war, God puts it out. They labour hard to spread corruption on earth; and God does not love those who spread corruption. (64)

If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God-fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. (65)

لَكَفَّرۡنَا عَنۡهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمۡ وَلَأَدۡخَلۡنَٰهُمۡ جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ٦٥

If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath. Some of them do pursue a right course, but many of them are of evil conduct. (66)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ أَقَامُواْ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةَ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡهِم مِّن رَّبِّهِمۡ لَأَكَلُواْ مِن فَوۡقِهِمۡ وَمِن تَحۡتِ أَرۡجُلِهِمۡۚ مِّنۡهُمۡ أُمَّةٞ مُّقۡتَصِدَةٞۖ وَكَثِيرٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ سَآءَ مَا يَعۡمَلُونَ ٦٦

Overview

This passage confirms that not all the verses of this *sūrah* were revealed after *Sūrah* 48, The Conquest, or *al-Fatĥ,* which was revealed after the peace agreement signed at al-Ĥudaibiyah between the Muslims and the unbelievers of the Quraysh in the sixth year of the Islamic calendar. Indeed, several passages in this *sūrah* were, most probably, revealed well before that, perhaps before the evacuation from Madinah of the Jewish tribe of the Qurayżah in the fourth year, if not even earlier, i.e. before the evacuation of the al-Nađīr and Qaynuqā` Jews. A number of verses in this *sūrah* refer to events and situations that took place within the Muslim community in Madinah as also the circumstances and attitudes adopted by the Jews and hypocrites. These could not have taken place after the power of the Jews was finally broken with the evacuation of the Qurayżah.

We have, for example, a clear warning against taking the Jews and the Christians as allies. The warning states that whoever establishes an alliance with them actually belongs to them. There is another reference to the fact that those who were sick at heart maintained an alliance with them protesting that they feared a change of fortune. The Muslims are warned against maintaining an alliance with those who mock their faith. There is a clear reference to the fact that the Madinah Jews did mock the Muslims' prayer, making a jest of it. None of this could have happened unless the Jews enjoyed a degree of power and influence in Madinah. Otherwise, there would have been no call for such a clear warning and a threat. Nor would there be any need for exposing the true nature of the Jews, condemning them and denouncing their scheming in such a manner which uses a variety of styles and expressions.

Some reports suggest that certain verses in this passage directly relate to specific events. Some referring to the confrontation with the Jewish Qaynuqā` tribe which

followed the Battle of Badr. At that time, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was keen to demonstrate his special relationship with the Jews, and declared, "I am a man who fears a change of fortune, and, therefore, I will not disown my alliances." Even without these reports, an objective study of these statements in relation to the events that took place in Madinah at the time of the Prophet is sufficient to support our view concerning its time of revelation.

Verses in this passage provide a few glimpses of the Qur'ānic method in educating the Muslim community and preparing it to assume the role God assigned to it. They also explain some of the constituent elements in this method as well as a few principles Islam likes to see established in the minds of individual Muslims as well as in the Muslim community. These elements and principles are constant and apply to all generations, since they influence the very making of the Muslim individual and the Muslim community.

The cornerstone of the Qur'ānic method of moulding a true Muslim is to instil in him that his allegiance must be given, pure and total, to his Lord, God's Messenger, his faith, and the Islamic community. This is coupled with the need to instil in one's consciousness the complete distinction between the Islamic camp and any camp that does not raise God's banner, follow God's Messenger or belong to God's party. The Muslim is also to be made to feel that he is chosen by God to be a means of accomplishing His will in human life and history. Such a choice, with all its attending duties, is a demonstration of God's limitless bounty which He bestows on whom He wills. To be in alliance with a community other than that of the Muslims is to turn away from God's faith and reject His choice and bounty. This message is clearly given in several places in the forthcoming passage, such as verses 51 and 54-6.

The Qur'ān also cultivates a Muslim's understanding of the true nature of his enemies and the war they wage against him. It is a battle of faith since faith is the permanent issue between a Muslim and all his enemies. They take a hostile attitude towards him primarily on account of his faith and because they have deviated from Divine faith. Hence, they hate everyone who follows it with diligence and a clear conscience: *"Say: People of earlier revelations! Do you find fault with us for any reason other than that we believe in God [alone], and in that which has been revealed to us as well as that which has been revealed previously, while most of you are transgressors?"* (Verse 59) This is, indeed, the crux of the matter.

This method and its essential directives are of great importance. To be totally dedicated to God and His Messenger, to faith and the Muslim community and to know the true nature of the battle and the enemies are conditions of vital importance in the fulfilment of the conditions of true faith. They are also a prerequisite in the moulding of a true Muslim and the organisation of the Muslim community. Those who claim to be advocates of this faith do not truly believe in it and are not able to

accomplish anything of value on earth unless they come to feel that they are a community apart. They are different from all other communities and camps except for those who raise the same Islamic banner, dedicate their total allegiance to God and His Messenger and have a leadership who shares their belief in God and His Messenger. They will also have to know the true nature of their enemies and their motives, and the nature of the battle they have to fight against them. They also need to know that all their enemies are in actual alliance against them and that they patronise one another in fighting the Muslim community and the Islamic faith.

In this passage, we are not only told of the true motives of the Muslim community's enemies. Instead, the very nature of those enemies and the extent of their transgression are also exposed so that every Muslim is aware of whom he fights and is reassured as to the justice and the inevitability of this fight. Verses 51, 57, 58, 61 and 64 describe these enemies very clearly, highlighting their main characteristics. Those who take such an attitude towards the Muslim community, mock at its faith and prayer and make a jest of them, must be repelled by every Muslim.

This passage also defines the outcome of this battle and points out the value of faith in the destiny of communities in this life as well as in the life to come: "*Those who ally themselves with God and His Messenger and the believers (will find that) the party of God will be victorious.* (Verse 56) "*If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God-fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath.*" (Verses 65-6)

The passage also tells us of the qualities that must be present in a Muslim whom God chooses to be an advocate of His faith, bestowing on him by such choice a favour that is great indeed: "*Believers, if you renounce your faith, God will bring forth (in your stead) people whom He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers, proud towards the unbelievers. They will strive hard for God's cause and will not fear to be censured by any critic. Such is God's favour which He grants to whom He wills. God encompasses all and knows all.*" (Verse 54)

All these statements represent aspects of the Qur'ānic method of moulding the Muslim individual and the Muslim community. It is a method that lays down the best of foundations.

Alliances That Cannot Survive

> *Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers. Yet you see those who are sick at heart rush*

> *to their defence, saying, "We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us." God may well bring about victory (for believers) or some other event of His own making, and those (waverers) will terribly regret the thought they had secretly harboured within themselves. The believers will say: 'Are these the self-same people who swore by God their most solemn oaths that they were with you?" All their works are in vain and they will lose all.* (Verses 51-3)

It is most important to begin by defining the meaning of the alliance the believers are forbidden by God to maintain with the Jews and Christians. It is to establish a relationship of mutual support so as to forge one block with them. It has nothing to do with following their faith. It is extremely unlikely that we find among Muslims anyone who may be inclined to follow the Jewish or Christian faith. It is rather the type of alliance involving mutual help that was unclear to some Muslims who initially thought it permissible. It was a fact of life that there were mutual ties and interests between the Arabs in Madinah and groups of Jews. These developed into alliances between the two prior to Islam and continued in the early days after most Arabs in Madinah adopted Islam. Later, God ordered the Muslims not to enter into such alliances with the Jews of Madinah.

The term "alliance", or its Arabic equivalent *walā',* is well known and has a precise meaning in Islamic terminology. It occurs in the context of the relationship that the Muslims in Madinah were required to have with Muslims who did not migrate to the land of Islam. God says in the Qur'ān: "*You have no alliance with them until they have emigrated."* (8: 72) It is obvious that what is meant here is not support in faith, because every Muslim is a supporter in faith to every other Muslim in all situations. The reference here is to the sort of alliance and patronage that requires mutual cooperation and military assistance. This latter relationship does not exist between Muslims in the land of Islam and those who do not join them in their land. It is this very sort of relationship which these verses block between believers and Jews and Christians in any situation, although it used to exist between them and the Jews in the early days of Islam in Madinah.

Islam insists that its followers maintain an attitude of maximum tolerance towards the people of earlier revelations. To take them as allies and patrons, however, is a different matter altogether. The two may be confused by those who have not formulated a clear concept of the essence of the Islamic faith and its role as a practical and methodical movement aiming to establish a particular order in life according to the unique Islamic concept. As such, Islam clashes with other concepts and situations as it conflicts with people's desires, and hence their deviation and transgression. Thus, it inevitably finds itself engaged in a necessary struggle to establish the new situation.

Those who are thus confused lack a clear vision of the true nature of this faith and a proper understanding of the nature of the battle and the attitude adopted by the people of other religions concerning it. They overlook the clear Qur'ānic directives relating to it. In their minds, the emphasis Islam places on extending a tolerant attitude towards the people of earlier revelations and the need to treat them with kindness in the Muslim community in which they live, enjoying all their rights, is, thus, confused with the alliance that is owed by every Muslim to God, His Messenger and the Muslim community. They forget what the Qur'ān asserts of the people of earlier revelations, of their being allied one with another in fighting the Muslim community. This is their constant attitude. They are hostile to the Muslims because of their faith. They will not be happy with a Muslim unless he abandons his religion and follows theirs. Hence, they persist with their fight with Islam and the Muslim community. Hostility may be clear in what they may say, but what their hearts conceal is much worse.

A Muslim is required to show tolerance in dealing with the people of earlier revelations, but he is forbidden to have a relationship of alliance or patronage with them. His path to establish his religion and implement his unique system cannot join with theirs. No matter how kind he is to them, they will never be happy to implement his faith and establish his system. Nor will it stop them from entering other alliances to scheme against and fight the Muslims. It is too naïve to think that we and they can ever join forces to support religion in general against unbelievers and atheists. For whenever the fight is against Muslims, they join forces with the unbelievers and atheists.

The naïve among us tend to overlook this truth when we think that we can establish an alliance with the people of earlier revelations, i.e. the Christians and Jews, in order to check the advance of materialism and atheism, since we are all people of faith. We forget the teachings of the Qur'ān and the lessons of history. Those very people of earlier revelations used to say to the pagan Arabs that they were "*better guided than the believers*". (4: 51) It is they who stirred the unbelievers and mobilised them into launching a determined attack against the Muslim community in Madinah. Those people of earlier revelations were the ones who launched the Crusades against the land of Islam, which extended over a period of 200 years. It is they who organised the Spanish Inquisition. In recent history, they turned the Muslim Arabs of Palestine out of their land in order to give it to the Jews. In doing so, they were in alliance with atheism and materialism. The same people of earlier revelations persecuted the Muslims in Abyssinia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Algeria. They further collaborated with atheism, materialism and polytheism in the persecution of Muslims in Yugoslavia, China, Turkistan, India and in many other places.

Nevertheless, totally oblivious to such definitive Qur'ānic statements, some of us

may entertain thoughts that we can establish a relationship of alliance or patronage with these people of earlier revelations in order to repel the attacks of atheist materialism on religion. Such people do not read the Qur'ān. If they do, they confuse Islam's attitude of tolerance with the forging of an alliance with such people. It is against this that Islam warns the Muslims. Such people do not actually live Islam as the only faith acceptable to God or as an active movement seeking to establish a new order on earth. This new order will inevitably stand up to the hostility of today's people of earlier revelations, just as it repelled it in the past. This positive attitude cannot change since it is the only natural one. We, therefore, leave such people in their confusion to reflect on this clear Qur'ānic directive: "*Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 51)

Distinctive Values of the Muslim Community

In the first instance, this verse is an address to the Muslim community in Madinah. It is at the same time directed to every Muslim community which comes into existence in any part of the world at any point in time. Its message is meant for every group that may be described as "believers". The particular occasion which necessitated this address was the need for the Muslims in Madinah to have a clearer view of the ties of allegiance which would mould them into a distinct community, totally separate from the people of earlier revelations, especially the Jews. There were ties of alliance, financial dealings, neighbourliness, friendship, etc. All this was natural in the light of the historical, economical, and social conditions which prevailed in Madinah prior to the advent of Islam. This situation, however, allowed the Jews to engage in their scheming against Islam and its followers, as exposed in many Qur'ānic statements, some of which we discussed in the three earlier volumes of this work. The present passage though provides an opportunity to discuss other aspects of this scenario.

As Muslims engage in a fight to establish their new system as a living reality, the Qur'ān provides them with the necessary concept to create, in their subconscious, a sense of distinction between them and all those who do not belong to their community. This distinction does not preclude tolerance and kind treatment; for these come naturally to a Muslim. It only precludes a relationship of alliance, of the sort a Muslim owes only to God, His Messenger and the community of believers. All Muslims, in all generations, have this awareness and feel this distinction: "*Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another.*" (Verse 51)

The fact that they are allies of one another has nothing to do with any particular period of time because it is rooted in the nature of things. They have never been allies with the Muslim community in any land or in any period of history. One generation succeeded another, confirming the truth of this accurate statement. Ever since their collaboration in fighting the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and the Muslim community in Madinah, they have maintained their own alliance in all parts of the world at all times. Never was there any exception to this rule. Never did this planet witness anything other than that stated in the Qur'ān as a universal fact. In the original Arabic text the mode of expression selected is the one which is normally used to state permanent facts.

As this is a permanent fact, its consequences are clearly stated. Since the Jews and the Christians are allies of one another, they can only be patronised by someone of their own kind. If someone from the Islamic camp establishes an alliance with them, he actually removes himself from the Muslim camp, abandons the basic quality of Islam and joins the other camp. For this is the natural and practical result: *"Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them."* (Verse 51) He, thus, wrongs himself and wrongs the Divine faith of the Muslim community. Because of his wrongdoing, God puts him in the same group with the Jews and Christians to whom he has pledged his support and made himself an ally. God neither guides him to the truth nor returns him to the Muslim ranks: *"God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers."* (Verse 51)

This statement represents a very stern warning to the Muslim community in Madinah. Stern it certainly is, but not exaggerated. It simply describes the reality as it is. It is not possible for a Muslim to ally himself with the Jews and Christians and still retain his faith as someone who truly submits himself to God. He simply cannot keep his membership of the Muslim community which acknowledges alliances only with God and His Messenger, and with those who believe.

It is not possible for a Muslim to adopt a "wet" attitude towards the concept of complete distinction between himself and the Muslim community on the one side, and those who follow a system or raise a banner other than that of Islam on the other. If a Muslim does so then he is no longer able to make any contribution or be of any value to the overall Islamic movement, whose first and most essential goal is the establishment of a unique system based on a truly unique concept.

A Muslim believes, with an absolute certainty which admits no hesitation or wavering, that since the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) has conveyed his message to mankind, his faith is the only one acceptable to God. He believes that the system God required him to adopt as the basis of life is a unique system and cannot be replaced or substituted by another. It is the only one that can realise the full potential of human life. The only way for a Muslim to earn God's forgiveness and

acceptance is to exert his maximum effort in establishing both the ideological and social aspects of this system, changing no part of it, however small, and mixing it with no other system, be it religious, social or legal. The only exception is made in the case of what God has chosen to retain of earlier legislation and revelation, incorporating them as He did into the Islamic system.

When a Muslim believes in all this with absolute certainty, he actually has the right motivation to work for the establishment of the system God has chosen for human life, knowing what that involves of hard struggle and pain that often goes beyond what man can normally bear. He also knows that he has to encounter difficult impediments, determined resistance and unending plots. Otherwise, what need is there to go to such trouble if ignorant systems, whether polytheistic, atheistic or based on deviant doctrines, can be made suitable substitutes? Why do we need to trouble ourselves in establishing the Islamic system if the differences between it and the systems of people of earlier revelations or other people are minor, cosmetic or easily ironed out? , Those who try to advocate a less decisive distinction in the name of tolerance and establishing a meeting ground between the followers of Divine faiths are actually mistaken in their concept of faith and their concept of tolerance. The true faith acceptable to God is the final version of His message to mankind. Tolerance remains in the field of personal relations and has nothing to do with ideological concepts or with the social system. These people try to weaken a Muslim's conviction that God does not accept any faith other than that of Islam, which is based on total submission to God alone. They also try to weaken his belief that it is his responsibility to establish the Divine system of Islam and to accept no substitute or amendment to it, however minor. Such a firm conviction is established in a Muslim's mind by Qur'ānic statements such as these: *"The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him."* (3: 19) *"He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him."* (3: 85) *"Beware of them lest they tempt you away from any part of what God has revealed to you."* (Verse 49) *"Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them."* (Verse 51) It is the Qur'ān which has the final say. A Muslim should pay no heed to the attempts of those who try to weaken his resolve or water down his firm beliefs.

The Best Insurance for the Future

The Qur'ān describes the conditions which prevailed in Madinah, and against which it warns the Muslims: *"Yet you see those who are sick at heart rush to their defence, saying, We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us."* (Verse 52)

A report by `Aṭiyyah ibn Sa 'd mentions that `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit, a leading

figure of the Anşār from the tribe of the Khazraj, came to the Prophet and said: "Messenger of God. I have a large number of Jewish allies and I disown all alliances with the Jews seeking only the patronage of God and His Messenger." `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy (the chief hypocrite in Madinah) said: "I am a man who fears changes of fortune. I do not disown my alliances." God's Messenger [peace be upon him] said to `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy: "Abū al-Ĥubāb, the alliance with the Jews which you seem to value more highly than `Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit is left up to you, but not up to him." He said, "I accept." In this respect, then, God revealed the Qur'ānic verse: *"Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies."* (V*erse 51)*

Another report by al-Zuhrī mentions that after the Battle of Badr in which the Muslims achieved a resounding victory, the Muslims said to their Jewish allies: "You had better embrace Islam before God punishes you with a defeat like the one that befell the idolaters in Badr." A Jew called Mālik ibn al-Şayf said: "Do not be deluded by the fact that you could defeat a group of the Quraysh who have no knowledge of warfare. If we resolve to collaborate against you, you will have no power to stand up to us." `Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit said: "Messenger of God, my Jewish allies have been numerous, well-armed, and very mighty. Nevertheless, I disown all alliances with the Jews to pledge allegiance only to God and His Messenger." `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy said: "But I do not disown my alliance with the Jews. I am a man who needs them." God's Messenger, [peace be upon him] said to him: "Abū al-Ĥubāb, your Jewish alliance which you value much more highly than `Ubadāh ibn al-Şāmit is given to you as a privilege, but not to him." He said: "I accept."

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq reports: The first Jewish tribe to violate their treaty with God's Messenger were the Banū Qaynuqā`. It is reported that God's Messenger lay siege to them until they submitted themselves to his rule. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy went to him then and said: "Muĥammad, be kind to my allies." The Prophet did not answer him immediately, so he said again: "Muĥammad, be kind to my allies." The Prophet turned away from him, and so he put his hand inside the Prophet's body armour, but the Prophet told him to let go. The Prophet was angry and it appeared in his face. He said to `Abdullāh: "What are you doing? Let me go!" `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy said: "By God I will not let you go until you are kind to my allies." There are four hundred unarmoured and three hundred with armour, and they have protected me from all people and you want to get them all in one morning? I am a man who fears changes of fortunes." The Prophet said to him: "They are yours."

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq also reports: When the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā` fought against God's Messenger, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy took their case and defended them. On the other hand, `Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit, who had the same alliance with them as that of `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, went to the Prophet and disowned them. He said: "Messenger of God, I release myself from their alliance and pledge allegiance only to

God, His Messenger and the believers. I have no need for an alliance with unbelievers." It is concerning him and `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy that verses 51-6 of *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, were revealed.

Imām Ahmad reports on the authority of Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young Companion of the Prophet: "I went with God's Messenger [peace be upon him] to visit `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, who was ill. The Prophet said to him (during the conversation): "I used to counsel you against loving the Jews." `Abdullāh said: "As`ad ibn Zurārah [one of the earliest people from Madinah to embrace Islam] used to hate them and he died."

Taken together, these reports give us a clear idea of the situation in the Muslim community of Madinah, the relations inherited from pre-Islamic days and the concepts that were totally clarified about the sort of ties which may and may not exist between the Muslim community and the Jews. It is noteworthy that all these reports speak of the Jews and none of them mention the Christians. Nevertheless, the Qur'ānic verse speaks of both Jews and Christians because it seeks to establish a permanent concept about the ties and situations which could prevail between the Muslim community and other communities, whether they followed earlier revelations or were non-believers, as will be mentioned later in this passage.

The Qur'ān also refers later in this *sūrah* to the differences between the attitudes of the Jews and Christians towards the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet: *"You will find that of all people, the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate partners with God, and the closest friends are those who say: We are Christians."* (Verse 82) Nevertheless, despite the differentiation, the Qur'ān equates the Jews and the Christians at this point and equates both groups with the non-believers in a later verse with regard to the question of alliance and patronage. This is due to the fact that this question relates to a permanent principle which states that a Muslim may not have an alliance except with another Muslim. The only patrons for the Muslim are God, His Messenger and the Muslim community. Beyond these, all sects and groups are the same, although they may adopt different attitudes towards the Muslims in different situations.

When God laid down this uncompromising and decisive principle for the Muslim community, He confirmed it on the basis of His own knowledge which encompassed all time, not only that particular period during the lifetime of His Messenger and its special circumstances. Later events of history have revealed that the hostility of the Christians to this religion and to the Muslim community in most parts of the world has not been less than the hostility of the Jews. If we single out the attitude of the Arab Christians and the Christians of Egypt in extending a warm welcome to Islam, we find that, ever since it came into contact with Islam, the wider Christian area in the West has always harboured grudges and hatred and waged a determined war against it. These cannot be described as different from what the Jews harbour against

Islam and the war they have waged against it throughout history. Even Abyssinia, whose ruler had received well the Muslims who emigrated to his land at the time of the Prophet, is now as hostile to Islam and Muslims as the Jews.

Since God knew all this in advance, He laid down this general principle, regardless of the particular circumstances pertaining at the time of the Qur'ānic revelations or any other particular circumstances which may exist at any time in history.

Islam and those who claim to be its followers, highly questionable as their claim may be, continue to be at the receiving end of an unabating war launched against them and their faith by Jews and Christians all over the globe. This is the practical confirmation of what God says: *"They are allies of one another."* (Verse 51) Any Muslim who respects his intelligence, should pay heed to His Lord's advice, or indeed His clear command, implementing His final decision to establish a complete distinction between those who are in alliance with God and His Messenger and those who raise a different banner.

Islam requires every Muslim to establish his ties with all people on the basis of faith. To a Muslim, alliance or hostility can only be in relation to faith. Hence, alliance and patronage cannot exist between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, since they cannot be allies in faith. Not even against atheism can such an alliance be forged, as imagined by some of us who either do not read the Qur'ān or who are too naïve in outlook. How can a Muslim and a non-Muslim be allies when there is no common ground between them?

When Hypocrisy is Laid Bare

Some of those who do not read the Qur'ān properly and do not know the true nature of Islam, and some who are deceived may think that all religions are the same while all denial of faith is the same. They imagine that all those who "respect religion" can stand together in one camp against atheism because atheism opposes all religions and stands against the very idea of being religious. This is, however, unacceptable to Islamic thinking. Nor does it sound right to a person who appreciates Islam as it should be appreciated: as an ideology giving rise to a movement seeking to implement the Islamic system.

In Islamic thinking and to a true Muslim's understanding, matters are clear and simple. Submission to God is the essence of faith. Islam, which means submission, does not recognise any religion which is not based on submission to God, because God says this in the Qur'ān: *"The only true faith acceptable to God is [man's] self-surrender to Him."* (3: 19) He also says: *"He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him."* (3: 85) After the Prophet's message was

delivered there is no longer any religion acceptable to God except this religion of Islam in the form preached by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). What used to be accepted from Christians before the Prophet Muĥammad's mission is no longer acceptable, in the same way as what used to be accepted from the Jews before Jesus was no longer acceptable after he was given his message.

The fact that there have lived, after the mission of the Prophet Muĥammad, Jewish and Christian people does not mean that God will accept from them what they do or recognise what they follow as a Divine religion. That was the case before God's last Messenger was sent. Now that he has conveyed his message, there is no longer any acceptable faith other than Islam. The Qur'ān makes a statement of this fact which admits no other interpretation.

Islam does not force anyone to abandon his faith in order to embrace Islam because the Islamic principle is clear: *"There shall be no compulsion in religion."* (2: 256) This, however, does not mean that Islam acknowledges that they have a faith of their own, in the Islamic sense of the word. Hence, there can be no "religious front", as it were, which Islam may join in opposition to atheism. From the Islamic point of view, there is a religious faith, which is Islam, and a non-religion which includes everything other than Islam. "Non-religion" may take many forms including a faith of Divine origin, if distortion has crept into it, or a pagan faith, or an absolute denial of faith altogether. These doctrines may have their disagreements, but they are all in conflict with Islam and there can be no alliance between them and Islam.

As has already been explained, every Muslim is required to deal fairly and kindly with the people of earlier revelations, unless they persecute him on account of his religion. He is permitted to marry from among their chaste women although scholars have different views on whether a Muslim is permitted to marry a Christian who believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ, or claims that he was son of God, or one who believes in the Trinity. Even when we accept the permissibility of marrying a Christian woman, fair treatment and inter-marriages do not mean that a relationship of alliance and patronage may be forged. Such concessions cannot be construed as acknowledgement that, after the message of the Prophet Muĥammad, the religions of the people of earlier revelations remain acceptable to God. They are not. Nor can Islam be lined up in one front with other religions in opposition to atheism. Islam was revealed in order to correct the beliefs of the people of earlier revelations in the same way as it corrects the beliefs of pagans and idolaters. It calls on them all to accept Islam because it is alone the faith of self-surrender which is acceptable to God. When the Jews claimed that they were not called upon to accept Islam, and felt that it was beneath them to be so called, the Qur'ān confronted them with a clear statement to the effect that if they turned away from Islam, they would be considered unbelievers.

Every Muslim is required to call on the people of earlier revelations, atheists and pagans to submit themselves to God. He is not allowed to compel any of them to accept Islam, because faith cannot be accepted through compulsion. Compulsion is not only forbidden; it is futile. Such a requirement is only logical. If a Muslim were to acknowledge that the beliefs of the people of the Scriptures remained acceptable to God after the mission of the Prophet Muĥammad, he would only be contradicting himself if he were to call on them to believe in Islam. Such a call can have only one basis, namely, that he does not recognise their faith as acceptable to God. Therefore, he calls them to the proper faith. Once this premise is accepted, it follows that a Muslim cannot be consistent if he joins those who do not submit themselves to God in an alliance which aims to establish the faith based on the principle of self-submission.

From the Islamic point of view, this is a question of faith and one of strategy. Perhaps the faith aspect is clear by now and it can be made clearer by reference to Qur'ānic statements which leave us in no doubt that it is not possible to establish an alliance between Muslims and people of the Scriptures. The strategy aspect is also clear. Every effort made by a believer must have as its aim the establishment of the Islamic, way of life as outlined in the message of Islam preached by the Prophet Muĥammad. This is a complete system that encompasses all human activities. How, then, can a Muslim cooperate in such an effort with one who does not believe in Islam as a faith, a way of life and a legal system? Such a person directs his efforts towards objectives which are, to say the least, inconsistent with those of Islam, if they are not directly opposed to them. Islam does not recognise any objective or effort which is not based on faith, although it may appear to serve a good purpose: "*As for unbelievers, their works are like burnt ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day.*" (14: 18)

Islam requires a Muslim to dedicate all his efforts to the cause of Islam. Only a person who does not understand the nature of Islam and its method can imagine that any human activity, however secondary, may be separated from Islam or that there are aspects of life which lie outside the Islamic way of life. Such ignorance of the nature of Islam may cause people to imagine that a true Muslim may cooperate with those who are hostile to Islam or those who will not accept anything from a Muslim unless he abandons his faith, as God states of the Jews and Christians in His revealed Book. Such cooperation is impossible from both a faith and strategy point of view.

`Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, who was one of those described in the Qur'ān as having "disease in their hearts", justified his support of the Jews and his determination to maintain his alliance with them by saying that he feared changes of fortune. His argument was indicative of his lack of faith. It is God's patronage and support that should be sought. To seek the support of others is both futile and erroneous.

`Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's argument is the same as that of everyone like him; hypocrite, sick at heart, ignorant of the true nature of faith. At the other end we find `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit who disclaimed all alliance with the Jews once he realised their true feelings. The two positions are at variance, since they rely on diametrically opposed concepts and feelings. The same difference exists at all times between a faithful heart and one which is devoid of faith.

The Qur'ān threatens those who seek the support of the enemies of their religion, the hypocrites, by bringing about victory for the believers or by revealing the truth about the hypocrites: *"God may well bring about victory (for believers) or some other event of His own making, and those (waverers) will terribly regret the thought they had secretly harboured within themselves."* (Verse 52) At this point of victory, whether it is here a reference to the conquest of Makkah, or to passing judgement over unclear issues, or to the accomplishment of God's will, those who have disease in their hearts will experience terrible regret over their past attitudes. The believers will wonder at the state of affairs which befalls the hypocrites: *"The believers will say: Are these the selfsame people who swore by God their most solemn oaths that they were with you?' All their works are in vain and they will lose all."* (Verse 53)

God brought about victory in the past, and true intentions were laid bare, efforts came to nothing and certain groups of people turned out to be the losers. We have here the same promise from God that victory will be brought about every time we hold fast to our ties with God and we dedicate ourselves to Him alone. To do this, we have to understand the Divine way of life and make it the basis of our life. We have to fight our battle in accordance with God's guidance and seek alliance with no one but God, His Messenger and other believers.

The Qualities of God's Beloved People

This passage now completes its first address to the believers, requiring them not to seek an alliance with the Jews and Christians and warning them against such relationships because they may lead them to an unintentional renunciation of the faith of Islam. The second address made in this passage goes on to add a new warning to anyone who renounces his faith, either through making such an alliance or otherwise. Such a person has no position with God, even though he cannot get away from God, and he cannot cause harm to His faith. This faith has its own supporters who are well known to God. If the present group turn away from God's faith, He will bring forth others who will take their place. The *sūrah* describes the main features of this selected group of supporters in pleasant and reassuring terms. It points out the only way to which a Muslim directs his allegiance and it concludes with stating the inevitable outcome of the battle between God's party and other

parties.

> *Believers, if you renounce your faith, God will bring forth (in your stead) people whom He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers, proud towards the unbelievers. They will strive hard for God's cause and will not fear to be censured by any critic. Such is God's favour which He grants to whom He wills. God encompasses all and knows all. Your patron is only God, and His Messenger and those who believe – those who attend to their prayers, pay their zakāt (i.e. purifying alms) and bow down in worship. Those who ally themselves with God and His Messenger and the believers (will find that) the party of God will be victorious.* (Verses 54-6)

This warning, coming in this fashion at this particular point to those who turn away from faith, is taken to refer, in the first instance, to an equation which places on one side the maintenance of an alliance with the Jews and Christians, and, on the other, turning away from Islam altogether. This is highlighted by what has been said earlier of classifying anyone who seeks to be in alliance with them as one of them, having broken away from the Muslim community: "*Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them.*" (Verse 51) In this light, this second address serves to emphasise the first one. This is further supported by another address which follows later in this *sūrah.* This third address forbids alliances with the people of earlier revelations and unbelievers, classifying them all in one group. This means that seeking an alliance with the Christians and Jews is the same as seeking it with unbelievers. Where Islam provides for extending different treatment to the people of earlier revelations from that extended to unbelievers does not relate to having an alliance with them. Rather, it concerns different matters altogether.

> *Believers, if renounce your faith, God will bring forth (instead) people whom He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers, proud towards the unbelievers. They will strive hard for God's cause and will not fear to be censured by any critic. Such is God's favour which He grants to whom He wills. God encompasses all and knows all.* (Verse 54)

God has chosen the community of believers to be the tool of His will to establish the Divine faith on earth, enforce His rule in human life, and to implement His law in people's affairs and disputes. Thus, they will mould human life on the basis of propriety, goodness and progress. The fact that He has chosen the Muslim community for this purpose is a manifestation of His grace. Whoever rejects this grace and deprives himself of this blessing does so at his own peril. God is in no need of him or anyone else. God chooses from among His servants those whom He knows to deserve this limitless grace.

The chosen people are here given a clear profile, described amidst a bright, evocative picture: *"God will bring forth people whom He loves and who love Him."* (Verse 54) Mutual love is the relationship between them and their Lord. It is a love that gives an air of compassion, which is pleasant, gentle, bright, and friendly. It provides the basis of their relationship with their compassionate Lord.

No one can appreciate the value of God's love to any one of his servants except a person who knows God with all His attributes as He has described Himself and one who feels the effect of these attributes within himself. No one can appreciate the value of this bounty except one who truly knows God, the Giver who has created this vast universe and created man. Man, small creature as he is, sums up the creation of the whole universe. To appreciate the value of God's love requires that one recognises God's greatness, ability and oneness as the only Lord of the universe. How great is the difference between God and man to whom He grants His love. It is He — limitless is He in His glory — who has made man, while He remains Majestic, Eternal, the First and the Last, the Lord of the Universe.

For a servant of God to love his Lord is also a great bounty bestowed on that servant himself. This is something that can be appreciated by those who have experienced it. If God's love to any of His servants is something great and a clear manifestation of endless grace, then, for God to guide one of His servants to love Him and appreciate that unparalleled kind of love is also something great and a clear manifestation of His endless grace.

God's love to any of His servants remains beyond description. At the same time, a human being's love of His Lord is something that is very rarely described adequately except, perhaps, in the occasional touch of excellence manifested in a true lover's description. In this respect, a very small number from among a great multitude of Sufis have demonstrated their truthfulness and have been able to excel in describing their love of God. A few lines of poetry by Rābī`ah al-`Adawiyah give us a sense of her appreciation of this unique type of love. Addressing her Lord, she says:

> How tenderly I wish to feel that You are sweet when life is bitter!
>
> How dearly I wish to feel that You are pleased when everyone else is angry.
>
> When the relationship between You and me is sound, I do not care if my relationship with all the worlds is left in ruin.
>
> If You truly grant me Your love, everything else is of no consequence. All those who are on earth are nothing but dust.

God's love, Majestic as He is in His glory, for one of His servants and the love of God, who bestows all grace, by one of His servants spread in this wide universe puts its mark on every living creature and on every object. It imparts an air of love to the

whole universe and to human existence. This does not refer to something that occurs once only or to a passing moment. It speaks of an essential truth a*n*d *a b*asic Islamic concept: "*God will certainly bestow love on those who believe and do righteous deeds.*" (19: 96) "*My Lord is Merciful, Loving.*" (11: 90) "*He is the Forgiving, the Loving.*" (85: 14) "*When My servants ask you about Me, well, I am near; I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls to Me.*'' (2: 186) "*True believers love God more than all else.*" (2: 165) "*Say: If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins.*" (3: 31) Many other verses speak in the same vein.

It is a great wonder that people may read all this and claim that Islamic philosophy is stringent and violent. They claim that it visualises the relationship between God and man as one of compulsion, punishment, suffering and neglect. They compare it with the philosophy that makes of Jesus Christ a son of God and a manifestation of Him. Thus, they establish an arbitrary link of duality between God and human beings.

The clarity of Islamic philosophy, as it separates between the nature of Godhead and that of servitude, detracts in no way from the pleasant relationship that exists between God and His servants. This is a relationship based on compassion, justice, love and purity. It is a complete concept which includes all the needs of human existence in man's relationship with the Lord of all the worlds.

To Love God and Be Loved by Him

The description of the chosen community of believers is remarkable: "*Whom He loves and who love Him.*" (Verse 54) This mutual love is indeed remarkable, generating as it does a feeling of strength the believer needs to fulfil his difficult task. He feels that it is a great honour to have been chosen for this task through which he earns his position of favour, close to God, the Beneficent, the Almighty.

The *sūrah* gives further details of this community which is dedicated to the service of God's cause: "*Humble towards the believers.*" (Verse 54) This humility means that they are affable, gentle, and tolerant. When they deal with other believers, they do not adopt a difficult attitude or show any stubbornness. They are approachable, responsive, friendly. To adopt such an attitude towards believers does not mean any self-humiliation. Indeed, it is an aspect of brotherhood which removes barriers and formalities. One does not feel that one has anything to withhold from one's fellow brothers. It is self-consciousness that makes someone difficult and unamenable. On the other hand, when he feels himself belonging to the group of believers, he has nothing to withhold or begrudge. What can he retain for himself when they have all been united by faith, loving God and being loved by Him, and feeling this sublime love spreading over them?

"*Proud towards the unbelievers.*" (Verse 54) When they have to deal with unbelievers, they show their dignity and high status. This is the attitude to adopt in such a situation. There is no trace of arrogance or conceit. It is being proud of the faith they have chosen and being honoured to fight unbelievers under the banner of faith. It is their unshakable trust in what they have, which is goodness itself, and their knowledge that their role is to make others submit to this goodness. It is not a personal submission by one group of people to another. It is rather a matter of complete trust that the Divine faith, God's party, will eventually triumph over all creeds based on personal prejudice and also over ignorance. It is they who will eventually triumph though they may be defeated in certain battles along the way.

"*They will strive hard for God's cause and will not fear to be censured by any critic.*" (Verse 54) To strive hard in order to establish the Divine system and implement it in human life so as to achieve all that is good for mankind is a distinctive characteristic of the community of believers chosen by God to accomplish His will on earth. They strive hard for God's cause not to serve their own interests, nor the interests of their people, country or race, but rather to establish God's authority through the implementation of His law and to achieve all that is good for mankind. Personally, they gain nothing for themselves from such hard striving. It is all for God's sake.

They strive in this way, fearing no criticism. Why should they worry about being blamed by people when they have been guaranteed that the Lord of all people loves them? Why should they bother about people's values and traditions when they follow God's own method and call on people to adopt the Divine way of life? It is the person who derives his values and judgement from others' views and who seeks their support that fears to be blamed by them. The one who defers to God's values and standards and tries to make them govern people's values and inclinations, and who derives his power from God's power, cares nothing for what people may say or do, regardless of their position, importance or standard of advancement and civilisation.

We pay so much attention to what people may say, do, or accept, and to their values and standards, because we overlook the standard to which we should refer in evaluating matters. That standard is God's law and system. It is only God's law that is right and everything that is contrary to it is wrong, even though it may be accepted by millions and millions of people and endorsed by successive generations and centuries. The merit of any situation, tradition, or value does not derive from the fact that it exists or that millions of people believe in it or implement it in their lives. Such reasoning is unacceptable to Islam. No situation, custom or tradition has any value unless it is sanctioned by the system revealed by God.

It is for these reasons that the community of believers strives hard for God's cause without fearing to be criticised or censured by anyone. This is the mark of the chosen

believers. Moreover, that those believers are chosen by God, that there is mutual love between Him and them, that they have their own distinctive characteristic and the reassurance they have to conduct their affairs on the basis of Divine guidance are all favours bestowed on them by God: "*Such is God's favour which He grants to whom He wills. God encompasses all and knows all.*" (Verse 54) He gives in abundance and He chooses the ones to whom He grants His favours on the basis of perfect knowledge. His grace is abundant, limitless.

God defines for the believers the only group with whom they may have a relationship of patronage and the ones to patronise: "*Your patron is only God and His Messenger and those who believe – those who attend to their prayers, pay their zakāt (i.e. purifying alms), and bow down in worship.*" (Verse 55) The definition is made here in away which leaves no way for liberal interpretation or confusion. Matters have to be so clearly defined because the central issue here is that of faith and its implementation through a movement. Hence, submission to God must be complete, trust in Him must be absolute, and self-surrender is the only religion. The question is, then, one of a complete distinction between the Muslim camp and all other camps which do not adopt submission to God as a faith and Islamic law as a way of life. The Islamic movement must be serious in its organisation so that it admits no allegiance except to its own leadership. Thus, loyalty and support can exist only between members of the community of believers, because such loyalty and support are based on faith.

The Party Assured of Triumph

Islam is not a mere title, slogan or verbal claim nor is it a hereditary relationship or a description of people who live in a certain area. The *sūrah* mentions here some essential characteristics of believers: "*Those who attend to their prayers, pay their* zakāt *and bow down in worship.*" (Verse 55)

The first characteristic is that of attending to prayers, not merely offering them. This means paying full attention to them so that prayers produce their effects as explained by God when He says: "*Prayer restrains man from loathsome deeds and from all that is bad.*" (29: 45) Those who pray but are not prevented by their prayer from such indulgence have not attended to it properly.

Another characteristic is that they pay *zakāt,* which means that they fulfil their financial obligation willingly, without hesitation and in obedience to God. *Zakāt* is not a simple tax; it is an act of worship which may be described as financial worship. This is indicative of the Islamic system which achieves several objectives through the same duty. This distinguishes it from man-made systems which may achieve one goal and remain short of achieving the rest.

It is not possible for social welfare to be achieved through the mere imposition of civil taxes, or that financial contributions be levied from the rich for the benefit of the poor in the name of the state or the people or any other worldly authority. In such a pattern, only one goal is achieved, namely, the payment of money to the needy.

Zakāt, on the other hand, has a specific significance which is indicated by its very name, which means "purifying alms". First and foremost, *zakāt* is purification and growth. It purifies man's conscience because it is an act of worship and it is paid willingly with a feeling of love towards those who need it, because as a worship its payer expects to be well rewarded for it in the life to come and hopes that his wealth in this life will increase through the implementation of the blessed economic system of Islam. There is also a healthy feeling generated by it among the poor who receive it because they feel that it is part of God's grace that He has determined its payment to them by the rich. They entertain no grudge against the rich. (It is useful to remind ourselves here that under the Islamic system, the rich earn their money through legitimate means and do not usurp the right of anyone as they earn their income.) Needless to say, *zakāt* also achieves the objective of financial taxes in a healthy and satisfactory atmosphere characterised by purity and growth.

The payment of *zakāt* is a characteristic of the believers confirming that they implement God's law in their lives. Its very payment is an acknowledgement that God has the authority over all their affairs. This is exactly what is meant by Islam, which is based on total submission to God.

"*And bow down in worship.*" (Verse 55) The way this phrase is expressed in the Arabic original indicates that bowing down in worship is their normal and essential condition. The Qur'ānic verse has already stated that they attend to their prayer, but this second description is even more comprehensive because it makes it appear as if worship is the most prominent characteristic by which they are known. In such contexts, Qur'ānic expressions are very powerful indeed.

In return for having complete trust in Him, and seeking only His support and maintaining a tie of patronage with Him only and, in consequence, with His Messenger and the believers, and in return for a complete split between them and all other camps that do not submit to Him, God promises the believers victory: "*Those who ally themselves with God and His Messenger and the believers (will find that) the party of God will be victorious.*" (Verse 56)

This promise of victory comes only after the basic principle has been outlined. It is to be in alliance only with God, His Messenger and the believers. This follows a clear warning against having an alliance with the Jews or Christians since it is tantamount to leaving the Muslim camp and belonging to the Jews and Christians. In other words, it is a complete rejection of faith.

What we have here is a consistant Qur'ānic point. God wants people to be Muslims because Islam is good, not because they will triumph or gain power in this world. These are fruits which come only at their appropriate time, and only as a means to accomplish God's will, manifested in the practical implementation of His faith. They are never offered as a temptation to encourage people to accept Islam. Moreover, when Muslims triumph, they gain nothing out of their victory for themselves. They are simply the means through which God accomplishes His will. He grants them victory not as something they add to their personal credit, but to the advantage of their faith. As such, they earn the reward for having striven hard to achieve this victory and enjoy the results of the implementation of the Divine faith. Similarly, God may promise Muslims victory in order to strengthen them and free them from the shackles of the present, which may be overwhelming at times. When they are assured that the ultimate result will be in their favour, they are more determined to overcome the present impediment. In other words, they entertain hopes that God will fulfil His promise to the Muslim nation through their own efforts.

The fact that this statement occurs here tells us something about the Muslim community's situation at that time and its need for such reassurance by reiterating the rule that God's party will eventually triumph. This again confirms our view with regard to the timing of the revelation of this passage.

This rule, however, remains true regardless of time or place. We realise that it is one of God's laws which never fail. If the community of believers experiences some reversals and loses some battles, the constant rule, which will always remain true, is that God's party will remain victorious. Such a clear promise by God is more true than what may appear to be the case at any particular juncture. To maintain a relationship of patronage with God, His Messenger and the believers is the only way to eventually ensure the fulfilment of God's promise.

When Faith and Prayers Are Mocked

The approach utilised in this *sūrah* adopts several ways to impress on the believers the prohibition of taking as allies those who follow a faith different to their own, be they followers of earlier revelations or unbelievers associating partners with God. The aim of using such different methods is to make this rule of faith well established in their minds and consciences. This, in turn, indicates how important this rule is in the overall Islamic concept and the methods adopted by the Islamic movement.

In the first address, as we have seen, a straightforward prohibition has been emphasised, coupled with a warning that God may well bring about victory for the believers or bring about some other event of His own making, and thus the reality

which the hypocrites try hard to cover up will be laid bare. In the second address, a warning is given against the renunciation of faith through the establishment of an alliance with the enemies of God, His Messenger and the believers. This is coupled with raising the far better prospect of belonging to the selected group who love God and are loved by Him, with the additional promise of victory to God's party.

Now this passage adds a third address to the believers, appealing to them to defend their faith, worship and prayers which are mocked at and made a jest of by their enemies. Alliances with the people of earlier revelations or with unbelievers is forbidden in the same way. This prohibition is made directly relevant to fearing God. Belonging to the community of believers is made conditional on compliance with it. The actions of the unbelievers and the people of earlier revelations are shown in their true light and they are described as having no reason: "*Believers, do not take for your friends those among the people of earlier revelations who mock at your faith and make a jest of it or those who are unbelievers. Fear God, if you are truly believers. For, when you call to prayer, they mock at it and make a jest of it. They do this because they are people who do not use their reason.*" (Verses 57-8)

This is the sort of action which is bound to infuriate any believer who feels that he himself is treated in total disrespect, when an insult is directed against his faith and worship, and when his position as he stands to offer his worship is ridiculed. How, then, can any alliance or patronage be forged between the believers and anyone who shares in such a disgraceful action, simply because his mind is impaired? No man of sound mind would ever ridicule the Divine faith or the worship of believers, because a sound mind recognises the pointers to faith in everything around it. It is only when the mind is impaired or when it deviates from the truth that such pointers are not recognised? This because such a person's attitude towards the whole universe around him is unsound. Everything in existence gives the same message that it has a Creator who deserves to be worshipped and glorified. A sound mind appreciates the beauty of worshipping the Creator of the universe. Hence, it does not make fun of something so beautiful and dignified.

Such mockery and ridicule used to be the work of unbelievers. In particular, it used to be the action of the Jews when the Qur'ān was being revealed to God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), so that he would convey it to the Muslim community. We have no mention in the history of the period of any single incidence of this type by the Christians. However, God is stating for the Muslim community a basic principle of faith, as well as the Islamic concept and way of life. God has always been aware of what will take place in all future generations and the attitudes of other people towards Muslims.

We have seen that the enemies of this faith and the Muslim community, in all generations, from among those who claim to be Christians, have been much greater

in number than the Jews and unbelievers who have fought against Islam. All those groups have taken a hostile attitude against Islam, schemed and fought an unabating war against it ever since the Muslim community clashed with the Byzantine Empire at the time of Abū Bakr and `Umar, the first two Caliphs. This continued right down to the Crusades and then to the "Oriental Question" which witnessed the grouping of Christian powers throughout the world in an alliance aimed at destroying the Muslim state altogether. This was followed by imperialism, which embodied the spirit of the Crusades. Such spirit continued to indicate itself in slips of the tongue made by imperialist leaders. Missionary work was initiated to further prepare the ground for imperialism and to give it support. This was followed by an unabating war against the pioneers of Islamic revival the world over. In all such campaigns and efforts, Jews, Christians and unbelievers of all sorts have taken part and joined forces.

The Qur'ān has been revealed so that it remains the constitution of the Muslim community until the Day of Judgement. It gives this community its methodological concept of faith, and lays down for it its social order and its method of operation. Hence, it teaches the Muslim community that it must never share patronage with anyone other than God, His Messenger and the believers. Alliances with Jews, Christians or unbelievers are forbidden outright, and their prohibition is repeatedly emphasised.

This religion of ours impresses on its followers the need for tolerance and that they must extend kind treatment to the people of earlier revelations, particularly those among them who claim to be Christians. It forbids them, however, to have a relationship of alliance and patronage with them. Tolerance and kind treatment is a question of behaviour and good manners.

Alliances, on the other hand, are a matter of faith and organisational groupings. Patronage and alliance mean mutual support between two camps and groups. This cannot take place between Muslims and the people of earlier revelations or with unbelievers, because to a Muslim such support is only a support for the cause of faith and for striving to establish its methods and system in practical life. How can such help and support operate between Muslims and non-Muslims over such a matter? This question is clear cut and allows no wavering. Indeed, God does not accept any attitude over this issue other than that of complete seriousness, which is the only attitude a Muslim may have towards his religion.

Finding Fault with Dedicated Believers

When all these addresses to the believers have been completed, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to put a direct question to the people of the Scriptures: What fault do they find with the Muslim community? Do they take anything against it other than

the fact that Muslims believe in God and in His past revelations, as well as His revelations to the Prophet of Islam? In other words, the only fault they find with the Muslims is that the Muslims are believers, while they, i.e. the people of earlier revelations, are mostly transgressors. It is a confrontation that is embarrassing and decisive at the same time, because it points out the true cause of hostility.

> *Say: People of earlier revelations! Do you find fault with us for any reason other than that we believe in God [alone], and in that which has been revealed to us as well as that which has been revealed previously, while most of you are transgressors? Say: Shall I tell you who, in God's sight, deserves an even worse retribution than these? They whom God has rejected and who have incurred His anger, and whom He has turned into apes and pigs, and who worship false gods. These are yet worse in station and they have gone farther astray from the right path.* (Verses 59-60)

God directs His Messenger to put this question to the people of earlier revelations in order to emphasise the actual fact about their motives which shape their attitude towards the Muslim community and its faith. It is at the same time a question which rebukes them for their attitudes and their motives. Moreover, it seeks to enlighten the Muslims so that the idea of binding themselves in an alliance with such people becomes repugnant to them.

The people of earlier revelations never found fault with the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet, and they do not find fault today with the advocates of Islamic revivalism, except for the fact that Muslims in all ages believe in God and what He has revealed to them in the Qur'ān as well as what the Qur'ān endorses of the revelations sent down to earlier Prophets. They are hostile to Muslims simply because they are Muslims; that is to say, because Muslims do not follow Judaism or Christianity. The other reason is that they themselves are transgressors who have deviated from what God has revealed to them. The most damning proof of their transgression and deviation is the fact that they do not believe in the final message which endorses what God has revealed to them, except that which they have invented or distorted. Moreover, they do not believe in the final Messenger who has come to confirm earlier messages and honour all previous Messengers.

God states this fact absolutely clearly when He says to His Messenger in another *sūrah: "The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you unless you follow their faith."* (2: 120) In this *sūrah,* God tells him that it is time to confront the people of earlier revelations with the truth which shapes their motives and provides the logic behind their attitude: *"Say: People of earlier revelations! Do you find fault with us for any reason other than that we believe in God [alone], and in that which has been revealed to us as well as that which has been revealed previously, while most of you are transgressors?"* (Verse 59)

This fact is stated by God in several places. Nevertheless, it is this act which many among the people of earlier revelations and among those who call themselves Muslims try to dilute or present in a confused way. By so doing, they seek to justify what they term as the cooperation of "religious" people against materialism and atheism.

The people of earlier revelations wish to dilute this fact and to cover it up altogether, because they want to cheat the people of the Islamic world, or, more correctly, the world which claims to be Islamic. They try to distort the penetrative vision Islam gives to its followers as they implement its system. Equipped with such a sound vision and profound awareness, Muslims were able to tower over the imperialism of the Crusaders. Having failed in their direct campaigns, and in their open missionary warfare, those Crusaders felt that the only option left to them was that of deception. They have tried, therefore, to promote among latter day Muslims that the whole episode of religious warfare is over and that it belongs to the dark ages. Now that the world has become more "enlightened" and more "advanced", it is unacceptable for people to be involved in religious conflict. Hence, conflicts of today are over wealth, resources, markets, and investments. Therefore, Muslims, or more correctly their heirs, must remove all thoughts of religion and religious conflict from their minds.

When the people of earlier revelations who colonise Muslim countries are reassured that Muslims have been so hypnotised and that the whole question has been confused in their minds, then they are reassured that they will not have to face the Muslims' fury when their faith is assaulted. They realise from their history that they can never stand up to such fury when it is so motivated. Now that the senses of the Muslims have been benumbed, the people of earlier revelations not only win the war over religion, but they also win with it the materialistic war, enjoying their loot in the shape of investments and resources.

We also find within the Muslim world, agents for the people of earlier revelations repeating the same words. These people claim that the Crusades were not truly crusades and they describe the Muslims who fought against the Crusaders under the banner of faith as "nationalists", not Muslims.

There is a third group who are deluded. They listen to the descendants of the Crusaders of the imperialist West making a call to them: let us meet together to defend religion against the schemes of the "atheists". Naïve and well intentioned, this deluded group respond favourably, oblivious of the fact that these very descendants of the Crusaders have always joined forces with the atheists whenever the confrontation was with Muslims. They have not changed in any way. They are not concerned about fighting atheist materialism as much as they are concerned about fighting Islam. They realise that atheist materialism is a temporary

phenomenon, but Islam is, to them, the eternal enemy. This deceptive call aims only to undermine the Islamic revival and to make use of those deluded people to fight the atheists, the political enemies of imperialism. Both are the same, hostile to Islam and Muslims. In this war, a Muslim's only reliable weapon is the penetrating vision imparted to him by the Divine system.

Those who allow themselves to be deceived and think that the people of earlier revelations are serious about joining forces with Muslims in fighting atheism are oblivious to what history has shown throughout 14 centuries, which have seen no exception to this rule. They are also oblivious to what their Lord has told them most clearly and most emphatically on this particular point. When these people read or write, they quote only those Qur'ānic verses and pronouncements of the Prophet which order the Muslims to treat the people of earlier revelations with kindness and to show them maximum tolerance. They, however, prefer to overlook the clear and decisive warnings against entering into a relationship of patronage and alliance with them. They also ignore the penetrating statement about their motives. They shut their minds to the unequivocal instructions relating to the organisation and practical movement of Islam prohibiting the establishment of such alliances with non-Muslims. To a Muslim such an alliance can only be concerned with the establishment of the Islamic system in practical life. There is simply no common ground between Muslims and the people of earlier revelations with regard to Islam, despite the fact that these religions enjoyed the same origins as Islam before they were distorted. After all the people of earlier revelations do not find fault with Muslims except for that they believe in their faith. They are not satisfied unless Muslims abandon their faith, as the Lord of mankind clearly states.

Such deluded people treat the Qur'ān in an ambivalent way, taking only those parts of it which endorse their naive call, assuming that it is innocent, and abandon what is in conflict with it. As for us, we prefer to listen to God's words in this whole question. His word is clear, unequivocal, decisive.

God, however, gives another reason for their grudge against the Muslims, namely, that the majority of the people of earlier revelations are indeed transgressors. Transgression motivates the transgressor to try to find fault with those who are keen to follow Divine instructions and not to violate God's orders. This is a psychological and practical rule confirmed by this remarkable Qur'ānic verse. Indeed, those who transgress cannot stand those who follow Divine guidance, because their very presence presents them with the ugly sight of their own deviation and transgression. Hence, they begrudge them their obedience of God's orders and try hard to make them follow their own deviation, or to smash them if they prove to be difficult to control.

This is a constant rule, which is not limited to the attitude of the people of earlier

revelations towards the first Muslim community in Madinah. Indeed, it describes their attitude in general towards the Muslims as a whole, and includes the attitude of every deviant transgressor towards every group of believers who seriously observe Divine orders. It tells us the cause of the unabating war launched against the good, the honest and the obedient in any society where the evil, the transgressor, and the deviant have the upper hand. Such a war is only natural in view of this rule, stated in this remarkable verse.

God, limitless He is in His glory, knows that goodness and right will always be viewed with hostility by wickedness and evil, and that obedience to Him will always provoke the anger of transgressors. He also knows that goodness, right and obedience will need to defend themselves and fight the war launched against them by wickedness, evil and transgression. It is an inevitable battle, which right must fight and goodness cannot avoid because wickedness and evil will inevitably try to eliminate them. If the advocates of right, goodness and obedience to God imagine that they can steer away from this war, or that wickedness, evil or transgression can be persuaded to leave them alone to observe some sort of peace or truce between them, then they are infinitely naïve. The people of goodness and right must be prepared for fighting the inevitable battle, or else they will be vanquished.

Those in the Worst Position of All

The *sūrah* then refers to some events pertaining to the history of the people of earlier revelations, their past attitude towards their Lord and the painful punishment awaiting them: *"Say: 'Shall I tell you who, in God's sight, deserves an even worse retribution than these? They whom God has rejected and who have incurred His anger, and whom He has turned into apes and pigs, and who worship false gods. These are yet worse in station and they have gone farther astray from the right path."* (Verse 60)

Here we are face to face with the Jews and their history. It is they whom God has rejected and who have incurred His anger, and whom He has turned into apes and pigs for worshipping false gods. The first three points to which reference is made here are mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Their worship of false gods needs to be explained here because it has particular significance in the context of this *sūrah.*

The expression "false gods" refers in the Qur'ānic context to every authority that is not derived from God's own authority, every system of government that does not have God's law as its basis, and to every aggression exceeding the boundaries of what is right. The worst type of aggression which the Arabic term *ṭāghūt,* rendered here as "false gods", relates is that made against God's authority, and His Godhead. The people of earlier revelations did not worship rabbis and monks, but they followed their rule in preference to that of God's. Therefore, God describes them as

their worshippers and terms them polytheists. It is to this fine point that reference is made here. They worshipped false gods in the sense that they obeyed tyrannical authorities in so far as they exceeded their rightful limits. They worshipped them not in the sense of bowing and prostrating themselves before them, but by simply obeying and following them. This is, indeed, a type of worship which removes its perpetrator from the ranks of God's worshippers who follow His faith.

God directs His Messenger to confront the people of earlier revelations with this history and the punishment they have incurred, as if they are one generation, since they all share the same deviant nature. The Prophet is directed to tell them that the result of such an attitude is much worse: *"Say: Shall I tell you who, in God's sight, deserves an even worse retribution than these?"* (Verse 60) This means that they incur something much worse than those people of earlier revelations who preceded them. Incomparable indeed is God's anger and His retribution. Here, we have His verdict that those people of earlier revelations have turned away from the right path: *"They whom God has rejected and who have incurred His anger, and whom He has turned into apes and pigs, and who worship false gods. These are yet worse in station and they have gone farther astray from the right path."* (Verse 60)

The Exposure of a Horrid Nature

The *sūrah* continues to warn the Muslims against fraternising with them, by exposing their qualities and features, after having referred briefly to their history and punishment. Their schemes are exposed in order that the Muslims be warned against them. The Jews feature prominently here because the *sūrah* speaks of actual events, most of which were perpetrated by them:

> *When they come to you, they say: "We believe," whereas, in fact, they come unbelievers and depart unbelievers. God is fully aware of all that they would conceal. You see many of them rushing into sin and transgression and in devouring the fruits of unlawful gain. Evil indeed is that which they do. Why do not their divines and their rabbis forbid them to make sinful assertions and to devour the fruits of unlawful gain? Evil indeed is that which they contrive. The Jews say: "God's hand is shackled!" It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills. But that which has been revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and unbelief. We have cast enmity and hatred among them, [to last] until the Day of Resurrection. Every time they light a fire for war, God puts it out. They labour hard to spread corruption on earth; and God does not love those who spread corruption.* (Verses 61-4)

With these words, the *sūrah* draws moving pictures and living scenes in front of our eyes. Despite the passage of centuries, the reader of these verses visualises the Jewish people to whom the Qur'ān most probably refers. Although the context applies to the Jews, it is possible, however, that it also refers to some of the hypocrites in Madinah. Those hypocrites would go to the Muslims claiming to be believers. Nevertheless, they held on to their disbelief in all situations, whether coming or going, yet all the while their tongues stated something altogether different.

It was most probably the Jews who were trying to create confusion among the Muslim community, as they said to one another: let us believe in this Qur'ān at the beginning of the day and disbelieve in it at the end of the day, so that those who now believe in it may return to their old unbelief. In other words, they hoped that the confusion and doubt they raised would cause the Muslims to abandon their faith.

"God is fully aware of all that they would conceal." (Verse 61) God makes this statement of truth in order to reassure the believers that their Lord will look after them and will not abandon them to the schemes of their enemies. He is fully aware of their scheming. Hence, He warns its perpetrators, calling on them to abandon their nefarious ways.

A Confirmed Attitude of Unbelief

The *sūrah* moves on to draw a vivid picture of what these people do, as if we see their movements and actions through the words. *"You see many of them rushing into sin and transgression and in devouring the fruits of unlawful gain. Evil indeed is that which they do."* (Verse 62) They are depicted as if they are racing at full speed towards sin and aggression, devouring all that is unlawful. Although this picture is drawn here to denounce those people and to show how ugly they appear, it depicts a certain condition of individuals and communities when they become infested with corruption, lose their values, and give in to evil. When we look at communities that have so degenerated, it appears to us as if all these people race towards evil, plunge into sin and aggression. The strong and the weak among them are alike in such actions. In corrupt societies, sin and aggression are not the monopoly of the powerful. Even the weak move with the tide of sin. It is true that they cannot assault the strong, but some of them can assault others and violate what God has sanctified. In corrupt societies, what God has restricted has become subject to violation, because neither the ruler nor the ruled are ready to honour God's action. When a society becomes corrupt, sin and aggression feature high among its characteristics.

Such was the Jewish community in those days, and such was their devouring of what was unlawful. Indeed, devouring what is forbidden is characteristic of the Jews

at all times. "*Evil indeed is that which they do.*" (Verse 62)

The *sūrah* points out another characteristic of corrupt societies, as it denounces the silence adopted by divines and rabbis, supposedly those scholars who guard the implementation of Divine law. Instead, they remain silent when they see their people plunging into sin and aggression and devouring what is unlawful, when they should be condemning such practices: "*Why do not their divines and their rabbis forbid them to make sinful assertions and to devour the fruits of unlawful gain? Evil indeed is that which they contrive.*" (Verse 63) This is, indeed, a feature of societies that are on the verge of collapse, after becoming corrupt. As described in the Qur'ān, the Children of Israel used not to counsel each other against committing evil.

A main feature of a good, virtuous and strong society is the high esteem given to enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. Such a society is rich with people who undertake this task and with ones who are ready to listen to them. Its traditions are such that those who deviate from their path do not turn their back on this quality or abuse those who speak out, encouraging what is right and forbidding what is wrong. Hence, God's description of the Muslim community: "*You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong and you believe in God.*" (3: 110) He describes the Children of Israel as people who "*would never restrain one another from wrongdoing.*" (Verse 79) This is the criterion by which the two communities are separated.

The divines and rabbis, however, do not speak out against sin, aggression or devouring what is forbidden. Nor do they fulfil the covenant by which God's revelations were entrusted to them. Hence, they are strongly denounced. This denunciation serves as a warning to the people of every religion. For a society to be good depends on the fulfilment by its divines and scholars of their duties to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. As we have said on more than one occasion in this commentary, this requires the presence of an "authority" which commands and forbids. This is different from advocacy, which is mainly concerned with explaining the message and conveying it to people, for it requires power and authority. Therefore, those who enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong should be equipped with the power that makes their task effective, and not confined to verbal statements.

As an example of their most ghastly and sinful assertions, the Qur'ān tells us of the following statement made by the Jews: "*The Jews say: 'God's hand is shackled!' It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills.*" (Verse 64) Such a statement is the outcome of the Jews' wrong concept of God, limitless is He in His glory. The Qur'ān has given us many examples of the results of this wrong concept. When they were told to give money in charity they said: God is poor and we are rich.

Here they say that God's hand is shackled in order to justify their miserliness. They claim that God does not give people enough, and that He gives them very little. How, then, could they be required to give money in charity?

They are too insensitive and too hard-hearted to use the straightforward description of the meaning they had in mind, namely, miserliness. False as that is, they went further choosing an even more aggressive and blasphemous expression. They claimed that God's hand is shackled!

The answer to them asserts that they are the ones to be described in such terms, and furthermore that they are cursed and deprived of God's mercy: "*It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say.*" (Verse 64) This is indeed an apt description, for they are the most stingy and miserly people on earth. Then, God is described by His most appropriate attribute, whereby He bestows His limitless bounty on His servants: "*Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills.*" (Verse 64) His inexhaustible bounty is apparent to everyone. It gives irrefutable proof of His limitless grace, giving testimony to His outstretched hands. It speaks in every language, but the Jews do not hear it, because they are preoccupied with gathering as much gain as they can, using obscene language even when they speak of God Himself.[§]

God tells His Messenger (peace be upon him) about what those people will do and what will happen to them because of the grudge they harbour against him. He further describes the hostility they show the Prophet because God has chosen him to be His Messenger and because his message exposes their attitude, both past and present: "*But that which has been revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and unbelief*" (Verse 64) Having refused to accept the faith, it was inevitable that they should go to the other extreme and remain entrenched in their arrogance and disbelief. Hence, God's Messenger will bring mercy to believers and Divine punishment to unbelievers.

God then tells His Messenger of the inevitability of His will to cause enmity and hatred among them, and to render their schemes futile even when they are at their strongest. Hence, their war against the Muslim community will end in defeat: "*We have cast enmity and hatred among them, [to last] until the Day of Resurrection. Every time they light a fire for war, God puts it out.*" (Verse 64)

Jewish groups continue to be hostile to one another, even though world Jewry may appear to be united at this period of time and capable of launching wars against Muslim countries and winning them. We must not, however, look at only a short period of time or cast only a partial view. Over 13 centuries, indeed since pre- Islamic

[§] For further discussion on the *Yad* attribute, please refer to section 1.6 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

days, the Jews have been hostile to one another, humiliated, and dispersed all over the globe. They will inevitably share the same fate, despite all the support they are receiving. The key to the whole matter is the existence of a true Islamic community, to whom God fulfils His promise. Where do we find today such a community which receives God's promise and becomes the means by which God accomplishes His purpose?

When the Muslim nation returns to Islam, truly believes in it and conducts its whole life in accordance with Islamic law and constitution, God's warning to His most evil creatures will come true. The Jews know this and they use all their power and wicked scheming against the advocates of Islamic revival throughout the world. They level at them, through their puppets and stooges, brutal blows in total disregard of all laws and values. God, will, however, accomplish His will. His promise will certainly come true: *"We have cast enmity and hatred among them, [to last] until the Day of Resurrection. Every time they light a fire for war, God puts it out."* (Verse 64)

The evil and corruption which the Jews represent will inevitably be smashed by God's will. For God does not like corruption to spread on earth. What God does not like will certainly be removed and uprooted by some of His servants, whom He entrusts with this task: *"They labour hard to spread corruption on earth; and God does not love those who spread corruption."* (Verse 64)

Advance Results of Implementing Divine Law

The passage is concluded with a statement of a basic rule that people's implementation of faith in their lives ensures the achievement of goodness and prosperity in the life of believers in this world as well as the next. Faith provides a single code of living which looks after the material and the spiritual aspects of life. This rule is stated in connection with the discussion of the deviation of the people of earlier revelations from proper Divine faith, to their devouring unlawful gains, and their distortion of God's words in order to achieve immediate gain. Had they followed the Divine faith, they would have benefited in this world as well as in the world to come.

> *If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God- fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath. Some of them do pursue a right course, but many of them are of evil conduct.* (Verses 65-6)

This is a major concept in Islamic philosophy. Hence, the two verses that state this reflect a great truth of human life. In view of the great confusion which engulfs the human mind, human standards and situations, and the numerous doctrines that compete to influence man's thinking, the need to explain this concept properly and lucidly has never been greater.

God says to the people of earlier revelations — and His words apply to every community that has received Divine revelations — that if they would believe and be God-fearing, He would forgive them their sins and admit them into gardens of bliss. This is the reward of the Hereafter. Had they implemented in their lives God's law embodied in the Torah and the Gospel and what He had revealed to them, without distortion, they would have enjoyed a good life as well as one of prosperity and affluence. But they neither believe nor implement God's law and are not God-fearing. Apart from a small group of them, who have pursued a right course in their long history, the majority of them are of evil conduct.

These two verses then tell us that to believe and to be God-fearing, to implement God's law in human life ensures more than the reward of the Hereafter, which is certainly the better and longer-lasting reward. To take such a course also ensures a healthy type of life and a good reward in this present world in the shape of prosperity and affluence. This is described in a tangible form, bringing the meaning of affluence before our eyes: "*They would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath.*" (Verse 66) This shows that ensuring a good reward in the Hereafter does not have a special way, separate or independent from that which ensures a good, prosperous life in this world. It is the same way, giving the best results in both this life and the life to come. If it is abandoned, then life in this world becomes corrupt and the life to come is lost. This single way is that of faith, being God-fearing and implementing Divine law.

This approach is not merely a spiritual one, concerned only with beliefs. It is also a code for practical human life, the implementation of which, together with a strong faith and fear of God, ensure a good, prosperous and affluent life. All people will enjoy this abundance and its fair distribution. The code of living that is formulated by faith does not make religion a substitute for this world. Nor does it make happiness in the Hereafter a substitute for happiness in this life. Nor does it set one way for heaven and one for earth. It is sad that this principle has been clouded in people's minds and thoughts.

In most people's minds and in their practical lives, the way leading to Heaven is different from that which brings about the benefits of this life. Ordinary people, and indeed the general human outlook, visualise no meeting place between the two. Hence, people tend to choose this world and abandon the Hereafter, or choose the road that ensures a good life in the Hereafter and, in consequence, abandon

everything to do with this world. This is because everything in people's lives at this point in time tends to support this view.

It is true that all situations in this ignorant way of life, which is totally removed from God and the code He has revealed for human life, tend to widen the gulf between working for the benefits of this world and working for those of the Hereafter. It is inevitable that those who wish to achieve prominence in their communities and good worldly gains sacrifice their moral values and religious teachings as also their clean behaviour which religion encourages. It is also inevitable that those who wish to achieve a good life in the Hereafter steer away from the main current of this life and its dirty and corrupt situations.

But is this truly inevitable? Is there no meeting ground between the road to doing well in this life and the road to Heaven? No, there is nothing inevitable in this. The conflict between this life and the life to come, or between the material and spiritual is not the ultimate, unchangeable truth. Indeed, it is not part of the nature of this life at all. It is an accidental situation which is the consequence of temporary deviation. It is inherent in the nature of human life that the roads to prosperity in this life and to success in the next should meet and be united. This means that good productivity, affluence and hard work in this world, will be the very things which ensure prosperity in this life and reward in the Hereafter. Similarly, faith, fearing God, and good actions are the means to build human life on earth and guarantee God's reward in the Hereafter. This is what is inherent in the nature of human life but it does not demonstrate itself in reality unless human beings conduct their lives on the basis of the code God has chosen for mankind. This code makes work and action a part of worship. It also makes the building of a human civilisation on the basis of the Divine method man's duty. It is this which ensures prosperity and abundance for all human beings.

Development and Faith Go Hand in Hand

According to Islamic concepts, man's role on earth is to be in charge of it, by God's will and permission and according to the conditions God has set. Hence, productive work and ensuring prosperity through the utilisation of all potentials and resources on earth, as well as universal resources, is the proper way for fulfilling man's duty. Such fulfilment, on the basis of the Divine code, is a demonstration of obedience to God, to be rewarded in the Hereafter. At the same time, it ensures enjoyment of all the riches of this world, or the enjoyment of abundance *from above and from beneath'*; as the Qur'ān puts it in its inimitable style.

According to Islamic principles, a man who does not tap the resources of the earth and the universe is a disobedient servant of God; he does not work for the purpose

for which he has been created. This purpose is defined in God's statement to the angels: *"I am appointing a vicegerent on earth."* (2: 30) We should also mention here God's statement, as He addresses mankind: *"He has made all that is in heaven and on earth subservient to you, as a bounty from Him."* (45: 13) Such a man wastes God's bounty, which has been gifted to mankind. As such, he is an absolute loser both in this life and in the life to come.

As such, the Islamic way of life combines, in absolute coherence, work for this world and work for the Hereafter. Hence, man does not need to waste his life on earth in order to win a better life in the world to come, nor does he waste the latter in order to fulfil the former. Reaping the best of the two is by no way contradictory.

This applies to mankind in general and to Muslim communities, wherever they exist on earth, and as long as they want to implement the Divine method. As for individuals, matters are not different. According to Islam, the goals of the individual and the community are not in conflict. The Islamic method makes it incumbent on the individual to use all his physical and mental abilities in his work to ensure maximum productivity and to make his purpose in all that the earning of God's pleasure. Hence, he neither commits injustice, cheating or betrayal, nor does he allow himself to take unlawful gain or to retain something he owns when it is needed by his brother in the community.

Islam fully recognises, however, the right of the individual to own what his work produces and the right of the community to have a share of what its individuals own, in accordance with what God has legislated. The Islamic method also considers an individual's work within these limits and according to these considerations, a sort of worship for which he is rewarded with blessings in this life and with Heaven in the Hereafter. An individual's link with his Lord is enhanced with obligatory worship. This requires man to remind himself of his link with His Lord five times every day through prayers and for 30 days every year during fasting, and on a special occasion which is obligatory at least once in his lifetime, namely, pilgrimage, and in every season or year when he pays his *zakāt.*

This explains to us the importance of obligatory Islamic worship. Such worship, in all its different aspects, serves as a renewal of man's pledge to God to implement the way of life He has chosen for man. Islamic worship is, at the same time, a set of actions drawing man closer to God as he resorts to fulfil all his obligations under this complete system for life. Through them, man feels afresh that God helps him fulfil his obligations and overcome his desires, as also people's opposition and their deviant practices which stand in his way.

These obligatory acts of worship are not separate from ordinary matters such as work, productivity, fair distribution, government, justice, and striving to implement

the Divine method to establish God's authority in human life (i.e. *jihād).* To have faith, to be God-fearing, and to discharge obligatory worship are all one part of the system which enables man to fulfil the other part. In this way, to be a believer, to be God-fearing, and to work for the establishment of the Divine law in human life, means to achieve abundance just as God promises in these two verses. In Islamic philosophy, and the Islamic systems based on it, the world to come is not offered as a substitute for this life, nor is the latter to be preferred to the former. Both can be achieved in the same effort. The two cannot co-exist in human life, however, unless man follows only the Divine way of life without introducing into it amendments that are borrowed from man-made situations or formulated according to man's own thoughts.

Islamic principles and the Islamic way of life do not offer belief, worship and a high standard of piety and morality as a substitute for work, productivity, and development in man's material world. It is not a method which promises people a latter-day paradise and shows them the way to it, while leaving them to make their own way towards a worldly paradise, as some naïve people tend to think. Work, productivity and development represent, according to Islamic principles, man's way to fulfil his task as vicegerent on earth. Faith, worship and fearing God represent, on the other hand, the constraints, motives and incentives to implement the Divine way of life. The two together lead to the achievement of paradise in this life and in the life to come. The same way leads to both and there is no schism between the spiritual and the material sides of human life, as it is the case in all non-Islamic situations we see today.

This depressing split between what relates to this world and what relates to the Hereafter, between spiritual worship and material creativity, between success in this life and success in the life to come is not inevitable. It is simply a depressing tax man has imposed on himself as he abandoned God's constitution in order to adopt a variety of constitutions that are in conflict with what God has chosen for man. It is a tax people pay with their blood and their whole constitution.

What they pay for it in the life to come is much worse. In this world, it manifests itself in worry, misery and confusion because they lack the reassurance and peacefulness of faith. This is the result of abandoning their religion as a whole, alleging that such an abandonment is the only way to increase their productivity, knowledge and experience and to achieve individual and communal success. The net outcome of this state of affairs is that they put themselves in conflict with their own nature and try to suppress their natural hunger to have a faith that brings self-fulfilment into their lives. No social, philosophical or artistic doctrine can satisfy such hunger, because it is a hunger to know the Divine Being.

People's worry, misery and confusion cannot be dispelled if they try to maintain

their faith in God and at the same time be part of the international community which adopts a system, concepts, methods of work and standards of success that are in conflict with faith and with the moral standards and practices acceptable to faith. Humanity will continue to suffer this misery if it adopts materialistic creeds, be they atheistic or ones that try to retain religion as a faith, provided it has nothing to do with practical life. The enemies of man try to depict a deceptive picture showing that religion is a matter between man and God while human life belongs to man alone. They claim that religion is faith, feeling, worship and morals while life is a system, legal code, work, and productivity.

Humanity has to pay this hefty tax of worry, misery, confusion, and emptiness because it cannot see the benefit of implementing God's method. It is a method that does not separate this life from the life to come, but rather combines them both. It does not see affluence in this world to be contradictory with success in the second world, rather it sees them both as mutually complementary.

We must not be deluded by false appearances when we see that nations which do not believe or implement the Divine method are enjoying abundance and affluence. It is all a temporary prosperity which lasts until the natural laws have produced their effects, allowing the consequences of the miserable split between material excellence and spiritual fulfilment to appear in full. We see some of these consequences surface in a variety of ways.

We see first mal-distribution within these nations, which allows hatred, grudges, misery and fear of the unexpected to take root. This is, indeed, an ominous state of affairs, despite prosperity. We also see suppression and fear dominant in those nations which have tried to ensure at least a partially fair distribution. To achieve this, they have resorted to destruction, suppression, and terror in order to enforce their measures of redistribution. In this terrible state of affairs, man is always in fear, never reassured.

We also see the weakening of moral values which leads, sooner or later, to the destruction of material prosperity. Work, productivity and fair distribution need to be guaranteed by high moral standards. Manmade laws cannot on their own provide such guarantees, as human experience has shown throughout the world.

We also see all types of worry spreading throughout the world, particularly in the most affluent of societies. This inevitably makes people less intelligent and reduces their tolerance. It then leads to lowering standards of work and productivity and eventually helps destroy material prosperity. Very clear indications of this impending development can easily be recognised at the present time.

We see the fear, which engulfs all humanity, of the total ruin which threatens the whole world at any moment, as risks of all-out war continue to be in the air. Such

fear places great strain on people's minds, whether they realise it or not. It leads to a whole range of nervous disorders. Is it not significant that death through heart failure, mental disease and suicide are at their highest rate in affluent societies?

The clearest example today is the French. But their case is only an example of the ultimate effect of a continuous split between the material and spiritual aspects of human existence, a split between this life and the life to come, religion and human life. Or, to put it another way, by treating the method given by God as the one to ensure success in the Hereafter while success in this life comes through the following of a different, man-made method.

Worship Gives a New Face to Human Life

Before we conclude our comment on this very important truth, we would like to emphasise that it is most important to achieve harmony between faith, piety and implementation of the Divine method in practical life on the one hand and work, productivity and the fulfilment of man's mission on earth on the other. It is this harmony which ensures the fulfilment of God's promise to the people of earlier revelations, and indeed to all communities, that they will have abundance from above and from beneath, and that they will be forgiven their sins and admitted into gardens of bliss in the Hereafter. Thus, they have paradise on earth and paradise in Heaven. We must not forget, however, that the fundamental principle and the mainstay of the whole system is faith, piety and the implementation of the Divine way of life. This indeed implies hard work, better productivity and development. Moreover, when man maintains a constant link with God, all aspects of life will bring about better enjoyment, to enhance man's values and correct his standards. This is the starting point from which everything else follows.

We should also mention that faith, piety, worship and the establishment of God's law in human life yield all their fruits in human life and give their benefits to man himself. God is in no need of anyone. It is true that Islam lays strong emphasis on these fundamental principles and makes them the basis of all actions and activities. Any action which is not based on them is rejected. The reason for this is not that God gains anything from people's worship and piety; He does not. But He knows that their life and their affairs cannot be established on the right footing unless His method is followed. It is in this light that we should read the sacred *ĥadīth* in which the Prophet relates God's own words:

> My servants, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and have made it forbidden among you, so do not oppress one another. My servants, all of you are astray except for those I have guided, so seek guidance from Me and I shall guide you. My servants, all of you are hungry except for those I have

> fed, so seek food from Me and I shall feed you. My servants, all of you are naked, except for those I have clothed, so seek clothing from Me and I shall clothe you. My servants, you sin by night and by day and I forgive all sins, so seek forgiveness from Me and I shall forgive you. My servants, you will never be able to harm Me and you will never be able to bring Me benefit. My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to be as pious as the most pious heart of any one of you, that would not increase My kingdom in any thing. My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to be as wicked as the most wicked heart of any one of you, that would not decrease My kingdom in anything. My servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the *jinn* of you to rise up in one place and make a request of Me, and were I to give everyone what he requested, that would not decrease what I have, anymore than a needle decreases the sea if put into it. My servants, it is but your deeds that I reckon up for you and then recompense you for. So let him who finds good praise God and let him who finds other than that blame no one but himself. (Related by Muslim.)

It is on this basis that we should understand the purpose of having a strong faith, being pious and devoted and working for the implementation of the code of living God has revealed. All these qualities work in our favour, in this life and in the life to come. They are essential for the welfare of humanity.

Needless to say, this condition made by God to the people of earlier revelations is not exclusive to them. It is even more applicable to those who have been favoured with the revelation of the Qur'ān; those who claim to be Muslims. It is these whose faith requires them to believe in what has been revealed to them and what has been revealed earlier and to implement all that has been sent down to them, as well as those parts of the laws of earlier nations which God has retained in their faith. After all, theirs is the only religion that is acceptable to God. All religions have been incorporated into it. Hence, they are the ones to have God's pledge with all its terms and conditions. It goes without saying that they should accept what God has given them and enjoy what He has promised them of forgiveness of their sins and admission into Heaven, and having abundance from above and from beneath. This is much more preferable to hunger, disease, fear and poverty which they suffer throughout the Muslim world, or more accurately, throughout the world which was Islamic. God's pledge with its conditions is still operative. The way to enjoy its benefits is still there, if only we would follow it.

6
Who Follows Divine Faith?

۞ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلرَّسُولُ بَلِّغۡ مَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَ مِن رَّبِّكَۖ وَإِن لَّمۡ تَفۡعَلۡ فَمَا بَلَّغۡتَ رِسَالَتَهُۥۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡصِمُكَ مِنَ ٱلنَّاسِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٦٧

Messenger, proclaim what has been revealed to you by your Lord. For, unless you do it fully, you will not have delivered His message. God will protect you from all men. God does not guide those who reject faith. (67)

قُلۡ يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَسۡتُمۡ عَلَىٰ شَيۡءٍ حَتَّىٰ تُقِيمُواْ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةَ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكُم مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۗ وَلَيَزِيدَنَّ كَثِيرٗا مِّنۡهُم مَّآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ طُغۡيَٰنٗا وَكُفۡرٗاۖ فَلَا تَأۡسَ عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٦٨

Say: People of earlier revelations! You have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief. But do not grieve for unbelieving folk. (68)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلصَّٰبِـُٔونَ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ مَنۡ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا فَلَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ٦٩

Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians — anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. (69)

لَقَدۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِيثَٰقَ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ وَأَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡهِمۡ رُسُلٗاۖ كُلَّمَا جَآءَهُمۡ رَسُولُۢ بِمَا لَا تَهۡوَىٰٓ أَنفُسُهُمۡ فَرِيقٗا كَذَّبُواْ وَفَرِيقٗا يَقۡتُلُونَ ٧٠

„...Surely, We accepted a solemn pledge from the Children of Israel, and We sent to them messengers. But every time a messenger came to them with something that was not to their liking, [they rebelled:] some they denounced as liars and some they

put to death. (70)

وَحَسِبُوٓاْ أَلَّا تَكُونَ فِتۡنَةٞ فَعَمُواْ وَصَمُّواْ ثُمَّ تَابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ثُمَّ عَمُواْ وَصَمُّواْ كَثِيرٞ مِّنۡهُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ بَصِيرُۢ بِمَا يَعۡمَلُونَ ٧١

They reckoned no harm would come to them, so they were wilfully blind and deaf [to the truth]. Thereafter, God accepted their repentance: still many of them acted blind and deaf. But God sees all that they do. (71)

لَقَدۡ كَفَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡمَسِيحُ ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَۖ وَقَالَ ٱلۡمَسِيحُ يَٰبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبَّكُمۡۖ إِنَّهُۥ مَن يُشۡرِكۡ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدۡ حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ وَمَأۡوَىٰهُ ٱلنَّارُۖ وَمَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنۡ أَنصَارٖ ٧٢

Unbelievers indeed are those who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." The Christ himself said: Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners with God, God shall forbid him entrance into Paradise and his abode will be the Fire. Wrongdoers will have no helpers. (72)

لَّقَدۡ كَفَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَٰثَةٖۘ وَمَا مِنۡ إِلَٰهٍ إِلَّآ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۚ وَإِن لَّمۡ يَنتَهُواْ عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ٧٣

Unbelievers indeed are those who say: "God is the third of a trinity." Of certain, there is no god save the One God. Unless they desist from so saying, grievous suffering will surely befall those of them who are unbelievers. (73)

أَفَلَا يَتُوبُونَ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَيَسۡتَغۡفِرُونَهُۥۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٧٤

Will they not, then, turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (74)

مَّا ٱلۡمَسِيحُ ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَ إِلَّا رَسُولٞ قَدۡ خَلَتۡ مِن قَبۡلِهِ ٱلرُّسُلُۖ وَأُمُّهُۥ صِدِّيقَةٞۖ كَانَا يَأۡكُلَانِ ٱلطَّعَامَۗ ٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ نُبَيِّنُ لَهُمُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ ثُمَّ ٱنظُرۡ أَنَّىٰ يُؤۡفَكُونَ ٧٥

The Christ, son of Mary, was but a Messenger: other messengers have passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman. They both ate food [like other human beings]. Behold how clear We make [Our] revelations to them and behold

قُلۡ أَتَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَمۡلِكُ لَكُمۡ ضَرّٗا وَلَا نَفۡعٗاۚ وَٱللَّهُ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٧٦

how perverted they are. (75)

Say: Would you worship in place of God anything that has no power to harm or to benefit you? It is God alone who hears all and knows all. (76)

قُلۡ يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا تَغۡلُواْ فِي دِينِكُمۡ غَيۡرَ ٱلۡحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوٓاْ أَهۡوَآءَ قَوۡمٖ قَدۡ ضَلُّواْ مِن قَبۡلُ وَأَضَلُّواْ كَثِيرٗا وَضَلُّواْ عَن سَوَآءِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ٧٧

Say: People of earlier revelations! Do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religious beliefs, and do not follow the vain desires of those who have gone astray in the past, and have led many others astray and are still straying from the right path. (77)

لُعِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۢ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ عَلَىٰ لِسَانِ دَاوُۥدَ وَعِيسَى ٱبۡنِ مَرۡيَمَۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا عَصَواْ وَّكَانُواْ يَعۡتَدُونَ ٧٨

Those of the Children of Israel who disbelieved were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression. (78)

كَانُواْ لَا يَتَنَاهَوۡنَ عَن مُّنكَرٖ فَعَلُوهُۚ لَبِئۡسَ مَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ٧٩

They would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. Vile indeed were the things they did. (79)

تَرَىٰ كَثِيرٗا مِّنۡهُمۡ يَتَوَلَّوۡنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْۚ لَبِئۡسَ مَا قَدَّمَتۡ لَهُمۡ أَنفُسُهُمۡ أَن سَخِطَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَفِي ٱلۡعَذَابِ هُمۡ خَٰلِدُونَ ٨٠

Now you can see many of them allying themselves with unbelievers. So evil is that which their souls make them do. They have incurred God's wrath and in suffering they shall abide. (80)

وَلَوۡ كَانُواْ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلنَّبِيِّ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡهِ مَا ٱتَّخَذُوهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءَ وَلَٰكِنَّ كَثِيرٗا مِّنۡهُمۡ فَٰسِقُونَ ٨١

Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to

them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers. (81)

Overview

These verses begin a passage which further exposes the reality of the people of earlier Scriptures, particularly the Jews and Christians. It highlights their deviant beliefs and evil deeds and establishes the basis of the relationship that may exist between them and the Prophet and the Muslim community, outlining the duties of the Prophet and the Muslims in dealing with them. The passage also states a number of basic principles of faith and of the actions the Muslim community should take against deviant beliefs.

God addresses the Prophet giving him the task of conveying everything that has been revealed to him by His Lord, keeping nothing for himself and delaying nothing for any particular reason or circumstance. If he does not act on His instructions, even though he may be motivated by the desire to avoid conflict, he would not be delivering His message. Part of what the Prophet has been commanded to convey, was to tell the people of earlier revelations that they had nothing to stand on unless they implemented the Torah, the Gospel, and what had been revealed to them by their Lord. He was to make this statement in the clearest and most decisive of terms.

Moreover, the Prophet was also to declare that by going back on their covenant with God and by killing prophets, the Jews had rejected the faith and become unbelievers. The Christians did likewise, by claiming that Jesus Christ, son of Mary, was God Himself, and by stating that God was one of a trinity. The Prophet was also to declare that Jesus, (peace be upon him), warned the Children of Israel against associating partners with God. Moreover, God has denied access to Heaven to all those who ascribe partners to Him. He was further to declare that the Children of Israel have been cursed by both David and Jesus, because of their transgression.

The passage ends with an expose of the people of earlier revelations' attitude when they supported the idolaters against the Muslims. It declares that this came about as a result of their lack of belief in God and the Prophet. They are called upon to believe in what has been revealed to Muĥammad, (peace be upon him). Otherwise, they will be unbelievers. We will now look at the verses in this passage in detail.

A Vital Proclamation to Deliver God's Message

> *Messenger, proclaim what has been revealed to you by your Lord. For, unless you do it fully, you will not have delivered His message. God will protect you from all men. God does not guide those who reject faith. Say: People of earlier revelations! You have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief. But do not grieve for unbelieving folk. Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians – anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.* (Verses 67-9)

The Prophet is given clear instructions to convey all that has been revealed to him by His Lord, allowing no room for any reservations as he declares the truth. Otherwise, he would not be fulfilling his duty as a Messenger entrusted with conveying God's message. It is God who will protect him against all mankind. Whoever enjoys God's protection has nothing to fear from other humans, powerless as they are.

In matters of faith, the word of truth must always be clear and decisive, and must be stated in full. Let anyone who opposes it say what he may, and let its enemies do what they can; the true word of faith will never make concessions for people's desires. It must be stated clearly so that it penetrates into people's hearts with power. It is a fact of life that when the word of truth is stated clearly, it is immediately well received by people willing to accept the faith. When it is surrounded with equivocation, it cannot win those reluctant hearts which are the very target of the advocates of faith. Hence, clarity is essential in faith advocacy.

"*God does not guide those who reject faith.*" (Verse 67) If so, let the word of truth be clear, decisive, and final. The truth is accepted by a heart which is open, responsive. It is not accepted as a result of patting the shoulders of those who do not possess such qualities.

A powerful and decisive approach to the statement of truth does not have to be harsh or overbearing. God has commanded His Messenger (peace be upon him) to call all mankind to the path of his Lord using wisdom and goodly exhortation and advice. There is no contradiction between Qur'ānic directives. Wisdom, goodly advice and exhortation are not contrary to clarity and decisiveness in stating the truth. The method of conveying something, however, is different from what is being conveyed. The requirement here is not to resort to equivocation in stating the full truth about faith and not to seek a middle way with people who do not accept it. There can be no compromise when it comes to the essence of faith.

Right from the very early days of his Islamic call, the Prophet employed wisdom and kindly advice in conveying his message, but he made it clear that there could be

no compromise in faith. He was commanded to say: "*Unbelievers, I shall not worship what you worship.*" (109: 1-2) He never suggested to anyone that he was simply after minor amendments to their beliefs. Instead, he told them that their beliefs were totally false and that his faith was the whole truth. He proclaimed the truth in its fullness, using a kindly and gentle approach.

In this *sūrah,* his duty is stated clearly: "*Messenger, proclaim what has been revealed to you by your Lord. For, unless you do it fully, you will not have delivered His message. God will protect you from all men. God does not guide those who reject faith.*" (Verse 67)

It appears from the general context that what is meant here is that the Prophet would confront the people of the Scriptures with what they truly were. He would, thus, be telling them that they had no faith and indeed had nothing to stand on until they implemented the Torah and the Gospel and what had been revealed to them by their Lord. As such, their claims that they followed Scriptures and that they had a faith were false. "*Say: People of earlier revelations! You have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord.*" (Verse 68)

At that time, when the Prophet was ordered to have such a confrontation with them, they used to recite their holy books and they claimed to be Jews or Christians and that they were believers. The orders given to the Prophet recognise nothing of these claims. Faith is not a word or a verbal statement or books that are recited or chanted, nor is it a quality that is passed on from parents to children. Faith is a way of life including personal beliefs, formal worship, and another important type of worship which is fulfilled through conducting all aspects of human life in accordance with faith. Since the people of the Scriptures did not establish their faith on such firm foundations, God's Messenger was ordered to confront them with the fact that they had no faith and that they had nothing to stand on.

The first practical result of implementing the Torah, the Gospel and what was revealed to the people of earlier revelations was the acceptance of the faith conveyed by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). God had made a covenant with them to believe in every messenger He sends, and to give that messenger all their support. Their books, the Torah and the Gospel, included references and descriptions of the Prophet Muĥammad, as God, the most truthful of speakers, states. Hence, they would not be implementing the Torah and the Gospel and what was revealed to them by their Lord, (whether this phrase means the Qur'ān as some commentators say, or other Scriptures such as the Psalms, revealed to David), unless they followed the new faith which endorsed all that they had and superseded it. Unless the Prophet confronted them with these facts, he would not have conveyed the message entrusted to him by his Lord.

God was certainly aware that to confront them with this decisive truth would make many of them grow in their arrogance and disbelief. That, however, did not prevent the Prophet from making such a confrontation, feeling no sorrow at their increased arrogance and deviation. It was Divine wisdom that he should proclaim the word of the truth, and allow it to produce its effect on people's hearts. This would provide anyone who follows right guidance with the truth. *"That which is revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief. But do not grieve for unbelieving folk."* (Verse 68)

By giving these instructions to the first advocate of the Divine faith, God delineated the method of advocacy and explained His purpose behind choosing this method. God also comforts His Messenger so that he does not grieve over what happens to those who reject the truth and grow even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief. They deserve their miserable end because their hearts cannot tolerate the word of truth. Hence, it is better to confront them with it in order to help their reality surface.

When the Truth is Advocated by the Few

These two verses with which the passage opens bring us back to the question of the possibility of forging an alliance or a relationship of patronage between Muslims and those who received revelations from God. We need to look afresh at this question in the light of the task assigned to God's Messenger of delivering His message in full and the expected result of his endeavours. This is expected to mean that many of them will grow even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief.

We find first of all that God Himself states that the people of earlier revelations have nothing to stand on until they have implemented the Torah and the Gospel and all that was revealed to them by their Lord. In other words, they have nothing to stand on until they have adopted the final religion as a logical consequence of their implementation of their Scriptures. This is made absolutely clear by calling on them, in several places in the Qur'ān, to believe in God and the Prophet. Hence, in their present status, they cannot be described as followers of a Divine faith and they do not have a religion acceptable to God. God knows that confronting them with this fact will cause many of them to be even more stubborn in their arrogance and in their disbelief. Nevertheless, God has commanded His Messenger to confront them with this fact in the frankest of manners, feeling no regrets as a result of what it may cause.

If we are to consider God's word in this matter to be final, as it clearly is, then there is no way that we can consider the people of earlier revelations as people of faith with whom Muslims can have a relationship of mutual support against atheists

and atheism, as advocated by deluded people and those who delude them. It is not open for a Muslim to change what God has stated: *"It is not open for a believer, man or woman, once God and His Messenger have made judgement on a certain matter, to have any choice in that matter."* (33: 36) God's word remains valid for all time, unchanged by circumstances. Nor are we permitted to modify our attitude in order to prevent the likely outcome of confronting them with this fact, which is bound to make them even more aggressive against us. It is not open to us to try to gain favour with them by acknowledging that they have a faith which is acceptable to us. Nor can we support them in defending their faith against atheism in the same way as we defend our own faith, the only one acceptable to God, against atheism.

God's instructions do not mark out such a route for us to fallow. Indeed, He neither accepts from us such a recognition of the beliefs of the people of earlier revelations, nor does He forgive us such an alliance or the concept on which it relies. When we choose for ourselves something other than He has chosen for us, we are in effect recognising deviant concepts as a Divine faith, akin to our own. But it is God who says that the people of earlier revelations have nothing to stand on until they observe the Torah, the Gospel and that which has been revealed to them by their Lord. It is sufficient for us to look at their situation to realise that they do nothing of the sort.

Those who claim to be Muslims but do not put into practice what their Lord has revealed to them are in the same position as those people of earlier revelations: they have nothing to stand on. Any person who wants to be a true Muslim must implement God's message in his life, and must follow this through with a clear address to those who do not follow suit, telling them that they have nothing to stand on until they have implemented their faith. Their claims to be religious are refuted by the One who has sent down the religion. Total clarity in this matter is imperative. It is also the duty of a Muslim who has implemented God's message in this life to call on such people to embrace Islam anew. To claim to be a Muslim merely by word of mouth or by belonging to a Muslim family signifies little. It does not give the claimant any endorsement to his assertion that he follows the Divine faith.

When either group have accepted faith and implemented it in their lives, a Muslim may forge out a relationship of patronage and support with them to defend faith against atheists and atheism. Without such a condition, all other attempts are futile.

Faith is not merely a banner or a slogan or something we inherit from our parents. It is a fact instilled in people's consciences and has practical implementation in life. It is a belief held deeply in a person's heart, combined with acts of worship, and a code of living. Divine faith must have all these elements. People do not follow Divine religion unless all these aspects are equally present in their hearts and minds 4s well as in their lives generally. Any other situation is an exercise in self-delusion which no

true Muslim attempts. A Muslim must always make this fact plain and establish his relationship wit people on its basis. He should not worry over the consequences because it is God who protects and it is God who denies true guidance to unbelievers.

An advocate of faith would not have conveyed what God has revealed and would not have made God's argument plain to mankind unless he explained to them the nature of faith in full, describing to them their own situation as it is, in all frankness, without hesitation. Indeed, he may do them a disservice, if he does not tell them that they have nothing to stand on and that all their beliefs and practices are false. He must tell them that he is calling on them to accept something totally different from what they have, and that they have to make a total departure from their concepts, systems and values. It is right that people should know from an advocate of faith where they stand in relation to the truth he is calling on them to accept, "*so that he who would perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and that he who would live might live in clear evidence of the truth.* " (8: 42)

When an advocate of faith minces his words and does not make the essential difference that separates the falsehood people follow and the truth to which he is calling them absolutely clear, he actually deceives them and causes them harm. Such equivocation does not tell people exactly what they are called upon to accept or what they are required to do. Moreover, such an advocate does not fulfil his duty of conveying what God requires of him.

Gentility in calling on people to come to God is confined to the approach an advocate of the truth employs, but not to the truth he is conveying to them. The approach may be modified according to circumstances, employing wisdom and kindly admonition, provided that the truth is stated completely and in full clarity.

Some of us may consider that the people of earlier revelations have the largest following and the greatest material power. Similarly, those who follow pagan faiths in various parts of the world number hundreds of millions, and have their say in international affairs. Some are also bound to see that the advocates of materialistic, atheist creeds command numerical strength and destructive power. On the other hand, they see that those who describe themselves as Muslims have nothing to boast of, simply because they do not implement the Book God has revealed to them. They may, thus, be overawed, feel unable to put a decisive word of truth to mankind's straying majority. They may think it useless to tell all those groups that they have nothing to stand on as also explain to them the' religion of the truth.

But this is not the proper approach. *Jāhiliyyah,* or the state of ignorance of the truth, remains the same even though it may be widespread throughout the whole world. It does not matter what people follow. They continue to be in error, unless they follow

the true faith. The duty of an advocate of the truth remains the same, and cannot be changed simply because those who have gone astray are too numerous or because falsehood appears too strong. Falsehood remains without foundation. The call to the truth should be resumed in the same fashion as it started: it must declare to all mankind that they have nothing to stand on. It must be clear to us that we now face a situation similar to that faced by God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), when God addressed him with these words: "*Messenger, proclaim what has been revealed to you by your Lord. For, unless you do it fully, you will not have delivered His message. God will protect you from all men. God does not guide those who reject faith. Say: People of earlier revelations! You have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord.*" (Verses 67-8)

The Truth Versus People's Fancies

This first part of the present passage concludes with a clear statement of the faith which God accepts from people, regardless of what they were called before the message of the last Prophet. It was the faith which united people of all creeds and doctrines in ancient history. "*Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians – anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 69)

The passage names four groups: "those who believe" refers to Muslims, and the Jews are the followers of the Prophet Moses. The term Sabians refers, most probably, to those who abandoned the worship of idols before the Prophet Muĥammad's message, worshiping God alone, following no particular creed. There were a handful of Arabs among them. The Christians are those who followed the Prophet Jesus Christ (peace be upon him).

This verse states that whatever their creed was, those who believe in God and the Last Day and do what is right — and it is implicitly understood here and explicitly elsewhere in the Qur'ān that they have done that in accordance with the final Prophet's message — will attain salvation: "*shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 69) They need not worry about what they used to do or under what title they were classified. The most important title is the last one.

What we have been describing is implicitly understood from this Qur'ānic verse. It comes under that part of our faith which is essentially known to all people. It is a primary concept of this faith that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is the last of all prophets and a Messenger of God sent to all mankind. All people, regardless of their religion, creed, belief, race, and nationality, are called upon to believe in his message as he preached it in essence and detail. Anyone who does not believe in him as a Messenger and does not believe in the totality and the details of

his message remains in error. God does not accept from him the religion he followed prior to the revelation of Islam. Nor is he included among those described by God as people who *"shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 69)

It is this primary concept of faith which a Muslim may not compromise on under the great pressure of the *jāhiliyyah* or darkness in which humanity lives today. Indeed, a Muslim cannot overlook this concept when he establishes his relations with other people of different creeds and religions. He cannot try to reduce the pressure of ignorance by coming to terms with the followers of other creeds or doctrines, giving them the privilege of having "a faith" acceptable to God and constituting grounds for mutual support.

It is God alone who is the patron of believers: *"Those who ally themselves with God and His Messenger and the believers (will find that) the party of God will be victorious."* (Verse 56) This is certainly true even though appearances may give a different impression. Moreover, those who believe in God and the Last Day and do what is right, on the basis of the religion of Islam, which is the religion acceptable to God, shall have nothing to fear and shall not grieve.

They need have no fear of the forces of evil and darkness and they need have no fear of their own goodly, believing souls. Grief will remain unknown to them.

Following this, the *sūrah* gives us an account of a part of the history of the Children of Israel, the Jews, which shows that they have nothing to stand on and that the message of Islam must be conveyed to them so that they have a chance to believe in the Divine faith. On the other hand, this history shows the Muslims that the nature of the Jews has not changed. Hence, the importance of the Jews will be reduced in their minds and they will not condone any alliance or patronage when they have such an attitude to the truth and to faith: *"Surely, We accepted a solemn pledge from the Children of Israel, and We sent to them messengers. But every time a messenger came to them with something that was not to their liking, [they rebelled:] some they denounced as liars and some they put to death. They reckoned no harm would come to them, so they were wilfully blind and deaf [to the truth]. Thereafter, God accepted their repentance: still many of them acted blind and deaf. But God sees all that they do."* (Verses 70-1)

This is a fact of ancient history. Their attitude to the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) was neither the first nor the last. They have become immersed in sin and disobedience and they have repeatedly violated their covenant with God, taking their own caprice and fancies as their deity instead of obeying God, following Divine faith and the guidance of God's Messengers. Indeed, sin and aggression against the advocates of the truth has become part of their nature: *"Surely, We accepted a solemn pledge from the Children of Israel, and We sent to them messengers. But every time a messenger came to them with something that was not to their liking, [they rebelled:] some they denounced as liars and some they put to death."* (Verse 70) Indeed, the history of the

Jews and their attitude towards their prophets is full of denunciation and rejection, as well as murder and aggression. It is, indeed, a history of following vain desire instead of Divine guidance.

Perhaps this is the reason for giving the Muslim community a long and detailed history of the Israelites. God's purpose is to warn the Muslim nation against following in the footsteps of the Israelites. In this way those who have good insight and who maintain their bond with God remain aware of these slips and follow the example of the Jewish prophets when they encounter similar experiences to theirs. This is bound to happen since some generations of Muslims will inevitably end up in the same situation as the Jews when the latter strayed away from Divine guidance and their hearts hardened. Such generations of Muslims will do likewise: follow the dictates of desire, reject guidance, treat some of the advocates of truth as liars and kill others.

The Jews committed all these sins, thinking that God would not put them to trial and that He would not punish them. They chose to overlook the laws set in operation by God, thinking all the time that they are "God's chosen people."

"*They reckoned no harm would come to them, so they were wilfully blind and deaf [to the truth].*" (Verse 71) God stamped their sight and hearing so that whatever they saw or heard was of no benefit to them. "*Thereafter, God accepted their repentance,*" and He granted them His mercy, but they did not desist, nor did they benefit by their experience. "*Still many of them acted blind and deaf. But God sees all that they do.*" (Verse 71) He will give them, the reward they deserve according to what He sees of their actions and what He knows of their intentions. They will never he allowed to escape punishment.

It is sufficient for the believers to know this old history of the Jews and their present situation to make their believing hearts disown any alliance with them, in the same way as did `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit. Only hypocrites like `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl could bring themselves to remain their allies.

Misconceptions Leading to Disbelief

Such was the situation with regard to the Jews among the people of earlier revelations. The situation with regard to Christians is explained in the *sūrah* in a most decisive manner which clearly fits with its general tone and with the question under discussion.

Early in the *sūrah,* those who claim that the Christ, son of Mary, was God are described as unbelievers. At this point, this description is re-emphasised with regard to those who claim that God is a third of a trinity or allege that Jesus Christ, son of

Mary, was God Himself. The *sūrah* combines this with a testimony by Jesus (peace be upon him) that they are unbelievers. He warns them against ascribing Divinity to anyone other than God Almighty. He acknowledges very clearly that God is his Lord and their Lord. This is concluded by a warning by God Himself against continuing with their unbelief represented by their own statements which cannot be uttered by people who believe in God and in the right faith.

> *Unbelievers indeed are those who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." The Christ himself said: Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners with God, God shall forbid him entrance into Paradise and his abode will be the Fire. Wrongdoers will have no helpers. Unbelievers indeed are those who say: "God is the third of a trinity." Of certain, there is no god save the One God. Unless they desist from so saying, grievous suffering will surely befall those of them who are unbelievers. Will they not, then, turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. The Christ, son of Mary, was but a Messenger: other messengers have passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman. They both ate food [like other human beings]. Behold how clear We make [Our] revelations to them and behold how perverted they are. Say: Would you worship in place of God anything that has no power to harm or to benefit you? It is God alone who hears all and knows all. Say: People of earlier revelations! Do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religious beliefs, and do not follow the vain desires of those who have gone astray in the past, and have led many others astray and are still straying from the right path.* (Verses 72-7)

We have already given a brief explanation of how and when these deviant assertions crept into the Christian faith, which was preached by Jesus (peace be upon him), a Messenger of God. Like his brothers, God's Messengers, he preached the principle of God's oneness in its purity, unadulterated by even the slightest shred of idolatry or polytheism. All Divine messages had the common goal of establishing the principle of God's oneness, calling on mankind to believe in it, and reject all pagan beliefs. We will mention ere briefly the conclusions which those synods endorsed, advocating the concept of trinity and that of the divinity of Jesus Chris and their subsequent disagreements.

> Nawfal ibn Ni`matullāh ibn Girgīs of Nazareth says: the Christian faith on which all churches agree and which represents the basis of the constitution agreed by the synod is to believe in the One God: a single father, the Almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth and what is seen and what is unseen, and to believe in a single lord, Jesus, the only son born to the father prior to all times and created of God's light. He is a true god originating from a true god, born but not created, equal to the father in essence and from

> whom everything derives its existence. It is for the sake of us human beings and for the atonement of our sins he descended from heaven. He took shape from the Holy Spirit, and took form from the Virgin Mary, and was crucified on our behalf at the time of Pilate, and suffered and was buried and then rose from the dead on the third day according to what is written in the books. He then rose to heaven and sat to the right of the Lord. He will come down again with glory to make the living and the dead submit. His kingdom will be everlasting. The Christian faith also requires believing in the Holy Spirit, the lord who gives life and who comes from the father. Together with the son he submits to Him and glorifies Him. He speaks to prophets.

In *Muĥāđarāt fī al-Naşrāniyah,* Muĥammad Abū Zahrah quotes a historian of Christian Faith who mentions that the nature of God comprises three equal consecutive elements: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. To the Father, all creation belongs through the Son; the Son has the atonement; and the Holy Spirit gives purification.

Because of the difficulty of formulating a clear concept which combines the three elements in one and reconciling God's oneness with the trinity, Christian theologians have always tried to evade rational discussion of this paradoxical question. The theologian Potter writes in a paper entitled "Principles and Details": "We have understood this as far as our reason can cope with it. We hope to understand it more clearly in future when everything in the heavens and on earth will be revealed to us. As for the present, the measure of our understanding is sufficient."

God, limitless is He in His glory, says that all these assertions are false and represent unbelief. As we have seen, they include the claim that the Christ has a Divine nature, and they claim that God is the third of a trinity. God has the final say on all questions. He always says the truth and He guides to the right path.

"*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: "God is the Christ, son of Mary." The Christ himself said: Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners with God, God shall forbid him entrance into Paradise and his abode will be the Fire. Wrongdoers will have no helpers.*" (Verse 72) *We* see how Jesus Christ himself (peace be upon him) has warned them, but they paid no heed. After he departed from them, they followed the deviant path he warned them against, because it is certain to forbid them entrance into Paradise and make them suffer in the fire of Hell. They forgot what Christ told them: "*Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord.*" He declared to them that he and they stood in the same position of servitude to God, the One God who has no partners.

The Qur'ān makes a final judgement on all their blasphemous claims: "*Unbelievers are those indeed who say: 'God is the third of a trinity.'*" (Verse 73) It states the truth

which constitutes the basis of every faith preached by every one of God's Messengers: *"Of certain, there is no god save the One God."* (Verse 73) It threatens them with the punishment prepared for those who make such blasphemous assertions and believe in them: *"Unless they desist from so saying, grievous suffering will surely befall those of them who are unbelievers."* (Verse 73) The unbelievers are the ones who continue to make such assertions which God has ruled to be a clear denial of faith.

These stern warnings are followed by encouragement and persuasion: *"Will they not, then, turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 74) The door to repentance and forgiveness is, thus, left open. God's forgiveness and mercy are certain to be forthcoming, if sought before it is too late.

Mary, the Saintly Woman and Her Son

The *sūrah* then puts them face to face with this clear fact in the hope that they will reason properly and bring themselves to understand things as they are. This is coupled with amazement that even after this exposition, they continue to reject the facts: *"The Christ, son of Mary, was but a Messenger: other messengers have passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman. They both ate food [like other human beings]. Behold how clear We make [Our] revelations to them and behold how perverted they are."* (Verse 75)

The verse describes both mother and son as people who ate ordinary food. This was a simple fact in the lives of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) and his saintly mother. Eating food is a characteristic of living creatures which proves the humanity of Christ and his mother. Food is normally eaten to satisfy an undeniable physical need. Whoever needs to eat food in order to live cannot be a deity. God's life needs no food to support it because He lives and remains alive by Himself. He does not need to have any created thing like food to enter or leave his body. Limitless is He in His glory.

This logic is so clear and powerful that no one can deny the fact it states. It is followed, therefore, by a condemnation of the Christians' attitude in so far as they refuse to accept it: *"Behold how clear We make Our revelations to them and behold how perverted they are."* (Verse 75)

This ordinary human life which Christ lived has troubled those who wanted to make him a deity in spite of his teachings to the contrary. They went to a great deal of trouble and argument about Christ's nature and whether it was Divine or human, as we have already briefly explained.

Speaking from a different angle, but using the same clear logic, the *sūrah* wonders at their objectionable stance: *"Say: Would you worship in place of God anything that has*

no power to harm or to benefit you? It is God alone who hears all and knows all." (Verse 76)

It should be noted that the Qur'ānic verse deliberately uses the word "anything" rather than "anyone" in order to group together all creatures that have been worshipped, including those who have reason. The Qur'ān here refers to the fact that they are creatures and, as such, they are far removed in nature from Divinity. Thus, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and Mary are included under "anything" because, by nature, they are some of God's creation. The expression contains its own powerful connotations implying that it is totally illogical for anything or anyone to be worshipped when they can neither harm nor benefit anyone.

"It is God alone who hears all and knows all." (Verse 76) As such, it is God who can cause harm and bring benefit. It is He who hears the supplication of His servants, accepts their worship and knows what they entertain in their minds and what intentions they have behind their supplication and worship. Other beings cannot answer prayers or supplication since they cannot hear or know everything.

This part is concluded with a general appeal the Prophet is required to make to the people of earlier revelations: *"Say: People of earlier revelations! Do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religious beliefs, and do not follow the vain desires of those who have gone astray in the past, and have led many others astray and are still straying from the right path."* (Verse 77) All these deviant beliefs have originated with trying to give Jesus (peace be upon him) a supreme position of honour, which caused them to `overstep the bounds of truth.

The vain desires of Roman rulers brought about idolatrous beliefs into Christianity and the clerical synods' same desires gave rise to all those allegations which have distorted the Christian faith. It should be remembered that Jesus Christ delivered his message in all honesty as a Messenger of God. He said: *"Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners with God, God shall forbid him entrance into Paradise and his abode will be the Fire. Wrongdoers will have no helpers."* (Verse 72) This last address is a final attempt to save the people of earlier revelations and to help them rid themselves of deviation, conflict and vain desire.

Before concluding our commentary on this section, we should refer briefly to three main facts. The first relates to the painstaking effort Islam makes in order to establish the correct concept of faith on the clear basis of God's absolute oneness, and to eradicate all the traces of polytheistic beliefs that distorted earlier religions. The true nature of Godhead is stated clearly and all Divine attributes are associated with God alone. No human being or other creature has any share in these attributes. Islam's great effort in this respect indicates that the correct concept of faith is of vital importance in imparting consistency and happiness to human life. It also indicates that Islam considers faith the basis for all human activities and relations.

The second fact is that the Qur'ān declares unequivocally that those who claim that the Christ, son of Mary, is God, or those who claim that God is the third of a trinity are unbelievers. Now that God has given His verdict, it is not open to any Muslim to consider such people as following a Divine faith. While Islam does not compel anyone to abandon his beliefs in order to embrace Islam, it does not approve of considering non-Islamic beliefs as a religion acceptable to God. It declares here that such beliefs will never be accepted by God, since they are, in their totality, a rejection of the Divine faith.

The third fact is a logical consequence of the preceding ones. It tells us that there can be no alliance or patronage with any of the people of earlier revelations who entertain such beliefs and a Muslim who believes in God's oneness as stated clearly by Islam. Every Muslim believes that Islam is the final form of the religion of submission to God, preached by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and that this is the only religion God accepts from mankind.

As such, any thought of mutual support between the followers of religions against atheism appears to be nonsensical. When beliefs differ so radically, there can be no meeting ground between them. From the Islamic point of view, everything in life is based essentially on faith.

When Wrongdoing is Condoned

These verses make a definitive statement of the Jewish Prophets' attitude towards the unbelievers from among the Children of Israel. It is represented by the attitude of the Prophets David and Jesus (peace be upon them). Both of them cursed the unbelievers among the Children of Israel and their prayers were answered because of the aggression of those unbelievers, the spread of immorality among them, their turning a blind eye to the spread of evil among themselves, and their patronising of other unbelievers. The outcome of all this was that they incurred God's displeasure and were cursed. Their punishment will be everlasting.

> *Those of the Children of Israel who disbelieved were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression. They would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. Vile indeed were the things they did. Now you can see many of them allying themselves with unbelievers. So evil is that which their souls make them do. They have incurred God's wrath and in suffering they shall abide. Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers.* (Verses 78-81)

When we remember that it was Jesus and David who cursed the Children of Israel, we realise that theirs is a long history of unbelief, disobedience and rejection of the truth. Prophets who were sent to guide and save them were the ones who eventually condemned them so that they might not be guided to the truth. God answered their prayers and destined the Israelites to a perpetual curse.

The unbelievers among the Children of Israel were the ones who distorted their revealed Scriptures and refused to abide by the rulings of the Divine Code, as we are told in several Qur'ānic *sūrahs.* They violated their covenant with God in which they pledged themselves to support and follow every messenger He sent: *"That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression."* (Verse 78)

Jewish history is full of examples of such rebellion and aggression. These were not mere individual actions in the Jewish community. Indeed, they were so frequent they became characteristic of the whole community, and even those who did not perpetrate such crimes either turned a blind eye to them or did not speak out against them: *"They would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. Vile indeed were the things they did."* (Verse 79)

Rebellion and transgression can occur in any community by those who are corrupt and deviant. The world is never free from evil and communities will always contain people who transgress. But a good community, by nature, does not allow evil and transgression to become commonplace. When wrongdoing becomes more difficult than doing good in a community, and when deterrent punishments are prescribed and the whole community stands against evil and enforces such punishments, then evil shrinks and the motivation to commit it weakens. This gives the community stronger ties so that it is more closely knit together. Corruption becomes confined to a few individuals or groups who are rejected by the rest of the community and, hence, they hold no sway over it.

As the Qur'ān depicts this phenomenon of Israelite society, condemning it and showing it in a bad light, it wants for the Muslim community a solid structure which repels every aspect of rebellion and transgression. It wants the Muslim community to solidly defend the truth and to be sensitive to any aggression against it. It wants those who advocate the implementation of faith to discharge their responsibility by standing firm against evil, corruption, tyranny and transgression. The Muslims should pay no heed to anyone who blames them for their attitude. They maintain their opposition to evil whether it is practised by powerful rulers, influential men of wealth, evil people with physical power or the masses swayed by vain desires. God's system remains the true system and those who deviate from it are all alike, be they people of high or low position. Islam strongly emphasises the need to fulfil God's trust, and threatens a common punishment to the whole community if it allows evil to spread within it. The responsibility is shared by every individual and by the

community as a whole.

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "When the Children of Israel began to commit sin, their scholars counselled them to desist, but they continued in their erring ways. Their scholars, nevertheless, continued to mix socially with them, and to eat and drink with them. God caused one group of them to stand against another and they were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary." *"That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression."* (Verse 78) The Prophet was reclining when he said this and at this point he sat up and said: "No! By Him who holds my soul in His hand, you must push them to follow the truth." (Related by Ahmad.)

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd quotes the following statement by the Prophet :

> The first defect which occurred in the community of the Israelites was that a man would see another and say to him: "Fear God and abandon what you have been doing because it is not permissible for you." However, he meets him the following day but still the man persists in his erring ways, but this does not prevent the other from eating and mixing socially with him. When they did this, God caused division and conflict to occur among them.
>
> The Prophet then read the Qur'ānic verses: "*Those of the Children of Israel who disbelieved were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression. They would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. Vile indeed were the things they did. Now you can see many of them allying themselves with unbelievers. So evil is that which their souls make them do. They have incurred Gods wrath and in suffering they shall abide. Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers."* (Verses 78-81)
>
> The Prophet then said: "No! By God, you shall enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, stand up to those who are unjust and force them to follow the truth." '(Related by Abū Dāwūd.)

The matter is not then one of mere words which enjoin good actions and speak against bad ones. It cannot stop at this. It must hammer the point home, boycott the evildoer and check evil, corruption, and transgression, with force if need be. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "He of you who sees an evil action being committed should change it with his own hands. If he cannot, then with his tongue. If he still cannot, then with his heart. This last one is the weakest degree of faith." (Related by Muslim.)

Ahmad relates a ĥadīth which quotes the Prophet as saying: "God does not punish the whole community for the actions of a section of it, until the community sees evil committed within its ranks and does not speak out against it when its people are able

to do so. If the case reaches that stage, God punishes the whole community and the evildoers as well."

The Prophet is also quoted as saying: "The best type of *jihād* is to say a word of truth in front of a despotic ruler." (Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.)

There are plenty of Qur'ānic verses and *aĥādīth* which confirm this concept. It is necessary to establish a sense of common responsibility within the community so that none of its members turn a blind eye when they see evil being committed. No one just sits idle knowing that society is becoming corrupt and justifies their inaction by trying to avoid what may happen. Within the Muslim community, everyone is responsible for protecting and maintaining the bonds established by God.

All this requires the formulation of a proper concept of faith and knowledge of what believing entails. It also requires that we know the Divine system we are called upon to implement and that it encompasses all aspects of life. We further need to take our faith seriously and work hard to establish the Divine system in the life of our community. It is only a Muslim community which conducts its affairs on the basis of the Divine system and implements God's law that allows a Muslim individual to put into proper practice the principle of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. This principle no longer remains the action of an individual which has little impact, as is the case in all *jāhiliyyah* societies we see today. These societies have established social traditions of their own which condemn interference in other people's business and consider transgression and disobedience as personal matters. They further allow injustice and tyranny to suppress all opinions and voices and punish very severely everyone who declares the word of truth in the presence of a tyrant.

All efforts and sacrifices should be directed first of all to the establishment of a good and noble society which implements God's system. Efforts must not be wasted in attempting marginal improvements, which are largely individual in outlook, through enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.

A Change That Must Be Total

Partial reforms are not sufficient when the whole of society has gone wrong and ignorance has prevailed. When society has adopted a law other than that of God, efforts must strike at the roots and *jihād* campaigns must have the clear aim to establish God's authority in society. When this is accomplished, there is a solid basis for the fulfilment of the all-important principle which is characteristic of the Muslim community: to enjoin what is right and to forbid what is wrong.

All this requires having strong faith and knowing the true nature of faith and the

scope of its work in peoples' lives. It is through such understanding that advocates of the truth come to rely totally on God, confident in His support, hoping to receive reward from Him only. They do not look to have reward or appreciation from a society that has gone astray or to receive support from those people who choose to live in darkness.

All Qur'ānic statements and *aĥādīth* that speak of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" actually refer to the duty of a Muslim individual in a Muslim community which acknowledges God's authority and enforces His law. Such a society may at times fall under dictatorship or witness the spread of some sinful practices. Hence, the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: "The best type of *jihād* is to say a word of truth in front of a despotic ruler." The Prophet uses the term *"Imām"* to refer to the ruler because, in the Islamic system, the ruler is the first *Imām.* No ruler can be described as *Imām* unless he acknowledges God's authority and his own duty to enforce God's law. A ruler who implements any other law is described in the Qur'ān differently: *"Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers."* (Verse 44) In ignorant societies which refuse to enforce God's law, the most important wrong which gives rise to all other wrongs is the rejection of God's Divinity through rejecting His law. It is to the changing of this basic wrong that the efforts of the Muslim community should be directed before tackling secondary wrongs. It is useless for good people to try to resist or forbid such small wrongs when they, by nature, emanate from the first wrong of attempting to usurp God's Divinity and which reject His authority by ignoring His law.

It is perhaps pertinent to ask here the following question: according to what measure do we describe people's actions as wrong and tell them to refrain from doing them? You may, for example, declare that a particular action is wrong and then find ten people rising up against you from different quarters to tell you that it is not wrong. They claim that it might have been considered wrong in previous generations, but with progress and development, things have to be looked at in a different light. It is important, therefore, to have a proper standard and sound values by which to judge matters and identify what is right and what is wrong. From where though can we derive such values and how do we establish such a standard? If we were to rely on the ever- changing judgement of people and societies, or their traditions and prejudices, we would end up in a maze where there are no sign posts or road markings. Nevertheless, it is so important to establish such a standard and that this standard should remain constant, unaffected by people's prejudices. The standard we require, then, is that which God lays down.

Now let us consider a situation where society does not recognise God's authority in the first place and does not implement His law. Or let us consider a situation where society ridicules and persecutes those who advocate the implementation of

God's law. Would it not be a waste of our time and energy to try to correct certain details or side issues over which opinions, values and standards differ so widely? It is extremely important to reach an initial agreement on a basis, standard and authority to which we refer for arbitration over conflicting views.

We must begin with enjoining the most important "right" of all, namely, the acknowledgement of God's authority and the adoption of the way of life He has laid down. It is equally important to forbid the most serious of wrongs which amounts to a rejection of God's Divinity through the rejection of His way of life. When the foundation is established, the structure can be built. Let us, then, concentrate all our efforts on one front so that we can establish that foundation. It is sad to see good, well meaning people spending all their energy in a concerted attempt to correct certain details when the basic criterion for the establishment of an Islamic community is non-existent.

What use is it to try to persuade people not to accept or take earnings that are unlawful, in a society where the whole community is based on usury? In such a society, all money is unlawful and no one can make sure that what he earns is lawful, because the whole social and economic system is in conflict with God's law.

What use is it to try to persuade people not to be promiscuous in a society which does not consider adultery an offence except in cases of rape? Even in such cases, it does not enforce the punishment prescribed by God, because it rejects God's law and, consequently, rejects God as the Creator, Ruler and Legislator? It is futile to tell people not to drink when the law of the country permits drinking and punishes only those who go out in the street totally drunk. Even then, it administers a punishment other than that defined by God's law, which it does not recognise.

You may try to tell people not to abuse religion, but what good does that achieve in a society which does not recognise God's authority and in which God is not worshipped properly. Other deities are recognised and a different law and set of values, standards and systems are implemented. In such a situation, the whole society, including the person whose faith is abused, submits to those who enact laws and set values and standards for it.

We ask once again, what use is it to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong in these situations? What benefit do we gain when we tell people to refrain from doing these grave sins, let alone small ones, when the most cardinal sin of all, i.e. the rejection of God and His law, is not forbidden? The matter is far greater and wider than the questions which consume the efforts and energies of well meaning people. Details, however important, including cardinal sins, should take a secondary position at this stage. Unless God's authority to legislate is recognised and acted upon, all efforts directed to detail are wasted.

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), says: "Anyone of you who sees something wrong being done should change it with his hand. If he cannot, then with a word of mouth and if he still cannot, then in his heart. This last one is the weakest degree of faith." Muslims may face a situation where they cannot change wrong physically with their own hands and cannot change it by speaking out against it. So what is left to them is the weakest degree of faith, which means that they should change it in their hearts. This is something that no one can prevent them from doing, if they are truly Muslims.

It should be explained that this is not a negative attitude to wrong, as may be thought. The fact that the Prophet describes it as "changing" what is wrong suggests that it is a positive action. To object to what is wrong, even in one's thoughts, means maintaining a positive attitude towards that wrong. It suggests that the person concerned rejects that wrong and tries to eradicate it and replace it with what is right at the first opportunity. A Muslim is required to maintain at least the weakest degree of faith which is to object to wrong in private. To submit to wrong, on the other hand, simply because it can exert enormous pressure, is to abandon even the weakest degree of faith. In such a situation, the same curse that has been incurred by the Children of Israel applies.

> *Those of the Children of Israel who disbelieved were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and persisted in their transgression. They would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. Vile indeed were the things they did.* (Verses 78-9)

An Essential Requirement of Faith

The real reason for this attitude of the Jews, despite their having received revelations from God, is that they do not really believe in God and His Messenger. They have not embraced God's final message. Hence, they are unbelievers. Had they believed, they would not have allied themselves to unbelievers: "*Now you can see many of them allying themselves with unbelievers. So evil is that which their souls make them do. They have incurred God's wrath and in suffering they shall abide. Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers.*" (Verses 80-1)

This statement which describes the position of the Jews at the time of God's Messenger (peace be upon him) also applies today, tomorrow and at all times. It is also true of all the peoples of earlier revelations in most parts of the world today. Hence, it is our duty to carefully study the Qur'ān and learn the lessons it has for every Muslim community throughout all generations.

It was the Jews who allied themselves to the unbelievers and incited them to attack the Muslims. God says of them in the Qur'ān: *"They say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers."* (4: 51) This was most clearly apparent in the Battle of the Moat, but it was also clear both before and after it, up to our present time. Israel could not have come into existence in Palestine except through the Jews allying themselves to present-day unbelievers and atheists.

As for the other people of earlier revelations, they ally themselves with materialist atheism whenever they have to deal with Muslims. They even cooperate with people of pagan and idolatrous religions when they have to fight Muslims, even though those Muslims do not represent Islam in any way, except through being descendants of past Muslim generations. All this goes to show how deeply rooted is the grudge against this faith and those who belong to it, though their claims of belonging to it may be false. God indeed tells the truth. He says: *"Now you can see many of them allying themselves with unbelievers. So evil is that which their souls make them do. They have incurred God's wrath and in suffering they shall abide."* (Verse 80) This is the net result of what they have done for themselves. Evil indeed is such an outcome. Bitter indeed are the fruits they reap from allying themselves with unbelievers.

Who of us reads or listens to God's description of those people and still takes decisions that cannot be sanctioned by God, concerning alliances and mutual support between the followers of this religion and its enemies who are allied with unbelievers? What motive could there be for those people to seek an alliance with unbelievers, unless it is lack of faith in God and His Messenger: *"Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers."* (Verse 81) This is indeed the reason: they do not believe in God and the Prophet, and the majority of them are evildoers. They share the same feelings and directions with unbelievers. Hence, they prefer to be allied with them rather than with those who believe in God and His Messenger.

This Qur'ānic comment highlights three important facts. Firstly, that all the people of the Scriptures, with the exception of a few who believe in Muĥammad, God's Messenger (peace be upon him), do not believe in God because they do not believe in His last Messenger. The Qur'ān does not describe them as people who do not believe in the Prophet only, but describes them as non-believers in God as well: *"Had they truly believed in God and the Prophet and all that which was revealed to them, they would not have taken them for allies, but many of them are evildoers."* (Verse 81) This is a clear statement from God which does not admit any ambiguity or differing interpretation. No matter how strongly they claim that they believe in God, they are unbelievers, particularly when we take into consideration their deviant concepts of God as these have been outlined in this and other *sūrahs*.

Secondly, all the people of earlier revelations are required to embrace the Divine faith, as they have been called upon to do so by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). If they respond, then they are believers and they follow a Divine faith. If they reject this call, God's description of them remains true.

Thirdly, there can be no bond of alliance or mutual support between them and Muslims in any matter, because all matters are, according to Islam subject to faith.

It is important, however, to point out that Islam instruct its followers to be kind to the people of earlier revelations and to extend to them benevolent treatment and to protect their lives, honour, and property when they are in the land of Islam. Muslims are also required to let them follow their religions, whatever they are, but to call on them gently to follow Islam and to argue with them over this in a reasonable manner. It is also the duty of Muslims to fulfil their covenants with them as long as they remain true to such covenants. They may not at any time be subjected to any form of compulsion in matters of faith.

Such is Islam: clear, straightforward, kind, tolerant.

God always tells the truth and He guides to the path that is straightest.

7
Relations with Other Faiths

لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ ٱلنَّاسِ عَدَٰوَةً لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱلْيَهُودَ وَٱلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُواْ ۖ وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُم مَّوَدَّةً لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا نَصَٰرَىٰ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ مِنْهُمْ قِسِّيسِينَ وَرُهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, "We are Christians." This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. (82)

وَإِذَا سَمِعُواْ مَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ تَرَىٰٓ أَعْيُنَهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ ٱلدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُواْ مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ ۖ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَآ ءَامَنَّا فَٱكْتُبْنَا مَعَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: "Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. (83)

وَمَا لَنَا لَا نُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَمَا جَآءَنَا مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ وَنَطْمَعُ أَن يُدْخِلَنَا رَبُّنَا مَعَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

"How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?" (84)

فَأَثَٰبَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا قَالُواْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good; (85)

While those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the blazing fire. (86)	وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَكَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ٨٦

Overview

This short passage complements the discussion which has already taken place in this *sūrah* about the attitudes of the Jews, the Christians and those who associate partners with God towards His Messenger (peace be upon him) and the Muslim community. It includes statements explaining the deviation that has crept into the faiths of the Jews and Christians, the ill intentions and wickedness of the Jews towards their prophets and towards God's Messenger, and their support of the unbelievers against him. The discussion in this *sūrah* gives the final judgement on the Jews and Christians, describing them in terms of unbelief or "unfaith" because they have abandoned what their own Scriptures state and denied what God's Messenger has conveyed to them. This *sūrah* also confirms that the Jews and the Christians have nothing to stand on unless they implement the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord. Addressing the Prophet (peace be upon him), the *sūrah* requires him to convey what has been revealed to him by his Lord to all people: idolaters, Jews and Christians alike. All of them follow nothing of the Divine faith and all of them are called upon to believe in Islam. The *sūrah* also requires the Muslim community to be allied only with God, His Messenger and the believers and to seek no alliance with the Jews and the Christians because they are allies of one another. The Jews also ally themselves to unbelievers, and for this they have been cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary.

This short passage explains the attitude of all these groups towards the Prophet and the Muslim community. They also state the different rewards awaiting them in the Hereafter.

Who Hates the Believers Most?

The Muslim community used to receive Qur'ānic revelations in order to determine, according to the directives of the Qur'ān, its plan of action, and to adopt according to these directives the proper attitudes towards all people. The Qur'ān is the Book which gives the Muslim community the guidance it needs and determines the course of action it should take. When the Muslim community implemented this method, it was able to overcome others and not be beaten by them. This is because it

fought its enemies under direct Divine leadership, by virtue of the fact that the Prophet, its leader, followed Divine guidance and implemented Divine instructions.

The Divine directives included in the Qur'ān continue to be operative. The advocates of Islam today and tomorrow will do well if they listen to these directives and statements as if they are addressed to them now in order to determine on their basis their attitudes towards all groups of people and towards different beliefs and creeds, situations and systems, values and standards.

"*You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God.*" (Verse 82) The way this statement is phrased makes it addressed either to the Prophet or to all believers because it states something that can be recognised by everyone. Arabic style admits both possibilities. In either case, it provides the same meaning. What is noteworthy about the phrasing of this statement is the fact that the Jews are mentioned ahead of the idolaters in being most hostile to the believers, and that their hostility is open and easily recognised by anyone who cares to pay attention.

It is true that in Arabic usage, the conjunction "and" simply denotes a combination without adding any ordering of those which are combined. By mentioning the Jews first in this instance, when it would be thought they would be less than the idolaters in their hostility to the believers as they have revealed Scriptures of their own, makes the ordering particularly significant. Because of the way it is phrased, the statement directs attention to the fact that their Scriptures have not changed the Jews and that they are just the same as the unbelievers in their ardent hostility towards the believers. This is the least that can be said, although it is also possible that the statement means that in their hostility to believers, the Jews took the lead, their animosity greater than that of the idolaters.

When we look at the history of Islam ever since its very early days until the present moment, we have no doubt that the hostility of the Jews to the believers has always been more fierce, determined and longer lasting than the hostility of the idolaters and unbelievers. From the very first moment the Muslim state was established in Madinah, the Jews adopted a hostile attitude towards it. They schemed against the Muslim community from the outset of its very existence. Qur'ānic references to this hostility and scheming are sufficient to give a good idea of the unabating war the Jews have waged against Islam and its Messenger (peace be upon him), and the Muslim community throughout history. Indeed, this war has not abated for a single moment throughout fourteen centuries. It continues to rage throughout the world even today.

When the Prophet settled in Madinah, he concluded a treaty of peaceful coexistence with the Jews and called on them to believe in Islam, which confirmed

the Torah that had been revealed to them before. They, however, did not fulfil their obligations under this treaty in the same way as they reneged on every pledge they made to their Lord or to their prophets. For this reason, God says to the Prophet about them: *"We have sent down to you clear revelations: none will deny them except the evildoers. Is it always to be the case that every time they make a solemn pledge some of them renege on it? The truth is that most of them do not believe. And now that a Messenger from God has come to them confirming what is already in their possession, some of those who had been given the Scriptures cast the Book of God behind their backs as though they know nothing about it." (*2: *99-101)*

They harboured hostility towards Islam and the Muslims from the very first day when God united the two Arab tribes, al-Aws and al-Khazraj, under Islam, thus leaving no room for the Jews to play one group off against the other. They increased their hostility from the day the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) assumed leadership of the Muslim community denying the Jews any chance to impose their views. They have since then utilised all available weapons and all ways and means that their scheming ingenuity could identify to undermine Islam. In this they relied on their experience as slaves in Babylon and Egypt and their subservience to the Roman Empire. Although Islam was hospitable to them after their humiliation, they returned its favours with the most wicked scheming.

They incited all the forces of pagan Arabia against Islam, and they worked hard to forge an alliance with all previously hostile tribes to launch an offensive against the Muslim community. They even claimed that the Arab idolaters were a better guided people than the believers.

When Islam was able to overcome them with the force of the truth, they tried to scheme against it by incorporating fabrications into their books. The only book which remained pure was and is the Qur'ān, God's book which He has guaranteed to preserve intact. They also schemed against Islam by trying to sow discord within Muslim ranks and by creating trouble in which they managed to manipulate newcomers to Islam and those who had not acquired proper insight into Islamic principles or values. Their scheming also entailed inciting Islam's adversaries everywhere to come out in a joint effort against it.

In recent history, they have been the ones to lead the war against Islam throughout the world. It is they who utilised Christian and idolatrous forces in an all-out effort against Islam. It is they who create heroes who have Muslim names but try to suppress Islam with all their might. God tells the truth when He says: "*You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God."* (Verse 82)

An alliance of forces hostile to Islam was forged in order to launch a pincer attack against the newly-born Muslim state in Madinah. In an attempt to exterminate Islam

altogether, this grouping consisted of the Jewish tribe of Qurayżah as well as other Jews, the major Arab tribe of the Quraysh in Madinah and other major tribes in the rest of Arabia. The person who took it upon himself to bring about this alliance and who worked hard for its realisation was a Jew.

Thirty years later, a group of Jews started a mass uprising bringing together the remnants of hostile groups, and spreading all sorts of rumours. They succeeded in stirring up trouble to such an extent that it led to the assassination of `Uthmān the third Caliph to rule the Muslim state after the Prophet. The Muslim world has often faced problems as a result of Jewish conspiracies ever since the early days of Islam.

The person who then took the lead in fabricating statements and attributing them to God's Messenger (peace be upon him), and fabricating reports about Islamic history and leading Muslim personalities was also a Jew.

In more recent history, it was a Jew who stirred nationalistic feelings and gave prominence to them in the last Islamic Caliphate. He was the schemer behind the rebellions and *coups d'etat* which began by replacing Islamic law with a "constitution" during the reign of Sultan `Abd al-Ĥamīd prior to the abolition of Islamic rule altogether at the hands of the nationalist hero, 'Ataturk'.

The Jews have been the prime movers in the war declared on all fronts against the advocates of Islamic revival throughout the world. Moreover, the atheistic, materialistic doctrine in our world was advanced by a Jew, and the permissive doctrine which is sometimes called, "the sexual revolution", was advocated by a Jew. Indeed, most evil theories which try to destroy all values and all that is sacred to mankind are advocated by Jews.

The war that the Jews have launched against Islam has been much longer lasting and wider in spectrum than that launched against it by pagans and unbelievers both in old and modern times, although the latter has also been extremely ferocious. The fight with the Arabian idolaters in the early days of Islam did not last more than 20 years. Of similar duration was the battle against the Persian Empire. In modern times, we see that the war launched against Islam by paganism in India is and has been manifestly ferocious, but it does not equal the ferocity of the Zionist war against Islam. [Incidentally, Marxism is only an offshoot of Zionism in this respect.] The only battle against Islam which is comparable to that of the Jews in respect of its duration and scope was that of the Crusades, to which we will presently refer.

We remind ourselves of this history in order to appreciate God's purpose in mentioning the Jews ahead of the idolaters in the ranking of those who are hostile to Islam: "*You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God.*" (Verse 82) Theirs is a wicked nature which is full of hatred for Islam, its Prophet and its followers. Hence, God warns His

Messenger and the believers against its designs. This wicked and most vile nature could only be defeated in past history by Islam and its followers when they truly followed Islamic principles. Our modern world will not be saved from this wicked nature except by Islam, and only when its people implement Islam completely in their lives.

An Attitude Bringing Rich Rewards

"And you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, `We are Christians.' This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance." (Verse 82) This verse and the four verses that follow it describe a certain condition and make a judgement concerning it. The description applies to a group of the followers of Jesus (peace be upon him) who describe themselves as Christians, and it states that these are the nearest of all people in their affection to the believers.

Although these verses leave us in no doubt that they describe a particular case to which the whole statement applies, many are those who are mistaken in their understanding of it. Their mistake causes a serious error in determining the Muslims' attitude towards other camps. Hence, it is important to carefully study these verses and understand the particular case to which they apply.

That particular case applied to a certain group of Christians. They were closest in their affection to the believers, *"because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance"*. (Verse 82) Among them were people who were fully aware of the true Christian faith, and were prepared to acknowledge the truth whenever they realised it.

The Qur'ān clarifies the fact that this description does not apply to all those who claim to be Christians. It provides more details of the attitude of this particular group: *"When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: `Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?"* (Verses 83-4)

This is a very vivid description of this group. They are so deeply touched when they listen to the Qur'ān that tears spring to their eyes in recognition of the truth they hear. In the first instance, they cannot express this recognition in any way better than allowing their eyes to overflow with tears. No words are adequate to describe their feelings. Such a response, indicative of profound effect, is a well-known human reaction.

Tearful eyes, however, are not enough. They do not wish to adopt a negative attitude to the truth they have recognised as a result of listening to the Qur'ān and its evident authoritativeness. They take a clear, positive attitude which accepts this truth, believes in it and submits to its authority. They declare their acceptance in a profound and frank manner, saying: *"Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?"* (Verses 83-4)

Firstly, they declare to their Lord that they believe in this truth they have recognised and pray to Him in His glory to include them among those who bear witness to this truth and with the community that seeks to implement it. That is the community of Muslims, which gives credence to its belief in this truth both by verbal declaration and by action to establish it in human life. Those new witnesses thus join the Muslim community that submits to the truth and they pray to God to witness their belief. Furthermore, they cannot accept that any obstacle should impede them from believing in God or submitting to the truth as they listen to it. After all, they hope that as a result of their acceptance of the faith, their Lord will be pleased with them, assign to them a higher rank and include them among the righteous: *"How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?"* (Verse 84)

This is, then, a definitive attitude towards the truth God has revealed to His Messenger. It is an attitude of careful listening, unbiased consideration, appropriate recognition, profound influence and unhesitating acceptance. The climax is to declare their total submission and their joining with the Muslim community, coupled with a prayer to God to include them among those who bear witness to the truth. This places on them a duty that their testimony should come in the form of action and struggle to implement the faith in human life, and a recognition that they can no longer adopt any way other than that of believing in God and the truth that He has revealed to His Messenger. It is this which causes them to hope that eventually they will win God's acceptance and His pleasure.

On Recognising the Truth of Islam

Having described their frank, positive attitude towards the truth revealed to God's Messenger and their declaration of their acceptance of Islam and their willingness to bear witness to it by sacrificing their wealth and lives for its cause, praying all the time that God may accept them as witnesses and admit them among the righteous, the *sūrah* describes their destiny: *"And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good."* (Verse 85)

God knows that what they have said is true and that they mean it seriously. They are determined to follow the path of faith and to bear witness to the truthfulness of the new religion they have adopted. He knows that they consider that bearing such testimony with all that it requires of personal and financial sacrifice is a favour which God grants to those of His servants who He chooses. He also knows that they realise that they have no way to follow other than the one they have chosen, hoping that their Lord will include them among the righteous. As God knows all this about them, He accepts their statement and grants them Heaven as a reward, describing them as people who do good and granting them the reward He keeps in reserve for such people: "*And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good."* (Verse 85) Doing good is the highest grade of faith and submission to God. This group of people have earned God's own acknowledgement that they do good.

The *sūrah* has given us a very clear description of this group of people who are "*nearest in affection to the believers*", giving prominence to the fact that they are far from arrogant and that they respond to the truth once they recognise it. Moreover, they are honest, serious and willing to fulfil the requirements of faith. But the *sūrah* does not stop at that in identifying this group. It goes on to distinguish them from the rest of those who say, *"We are Christians"*. This latter group listen to the truth, but they deny it, turn away from it and have no interest in bearing witness to its truthfulness. Indeed, they claim it to be false: *"While those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the blazing fire."* (Verse 86)

There is no doubt that the description, "*those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations*", refers here to those who claim to be Christians, yet listen to the truth and refuse to respond to it. The Qur'ān describes them as unbelievers as long as they adopt this attitude. The description applies to the Jews and Christians who are joined with the idolaters in being unbelievers as long as they continue to deny that what God revealed to His Messenger as the truth, and as long as they continue to refuse to accept Islam which is the only religion acceptable to God. Statements to this effect are found in the Qur'ān: "*Those who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations and the idolaters could have never departed [from their erring ways] until there had come to them the Clear Proof... Those who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations and the idolaters shall be in the fire of hell, wherein they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures." (98:* 1 and 6) "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary.'"* (Verse 72) "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity.'"* (Verse 73) "*Those of the Children of Israel who disbelieved were cursed by David and Jesus, son of Mary."* (Verse 78)

It is, then, a description repeatedly used in the Qur'ān and a judgement endorsed on several occasions. It is used here to distinguish between two groups of those who

describe themselves as Christians as they adopt opposing attitudes towards believers. It also distinguishes the destiny of one group to that of the other. The first group will dwell in Heaven forever, since this is the reward of those who do good, while the other will end up in Hell.

In conclusion, we say that not all those who describe themselves as Christians are included among those who are *"nearest in affection to the believers"*. Anyone who suggests otherwise simply tries to make his judgement on the basis of only one part of the Qur'ānic statement, paying little attention to the rest. God's judgement applies only to a particular group of Christians of whom God has given us a full description, leaving no room for ambiguity or confusion.

But who are the Christians about whom this statement is made? We have several reports which identify them. The first one is given by al-Qurṭubī, a renowned scholar, who includes the following in his well- known commentary on the Qur'ān:

> This verse refers to Negus, the ruler of Abyssinia, and his people. When a group of Muslims arrived in their land after the first emigration, as reported in detail in biographies of the Prophet, to save themselves from persecution by the unbelievers in Makkah.
>
> The emigrants were a good number of people. God's Messenger later migrated to Madinah and the unbelievers were unable to capture him. Subsequently, war broke out between the two camps and the unbelievers were unable to harm the Prophet. When the Battle of Badr took place and God caused many of the stalwarts among the unbelievers to be killed in that Battle, the unbelievers of the Quraysh thought that they could pursue their revenge against the Muslim emigrants in Abyssinia. Some of them suggested that they should send two wise men to Negus with rich presents to request him to extradite the Muslims who had taken refuge in his land. If he responded favourably to this request, they would kill those Muslims in revenge for those unbelievers killed at the Battle of Badr.
>
> The Quraysh sent `Amr ibn al-`Āş and `Abdullāh ibn Abī Rabī`ah with rich gifts. When God's Messenger heard of this, he sent `Amr ibn Umayyah al-Damrī who carried a letter from the Prophet to Negus. When Negus read the Prophet's letter, he called in Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib and his fellow immigrants. He also called in his priests and monks. He asked Ja`far to recite a passage from the Qur'ān and Ja`far recited *Sūrah* 19, entitled Mary. When they listened to it, their eyes were full with tears. It is to those people that reference is made by God in the following verses: *"You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in*

> *affection to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians.' This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: 'Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth.'"* (Verses 82-3) (This report is mentioned in a *ĥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd.]

A different report is given by al-Bayhaqī on the authority of Ibn Isĥāq:

> Twenty people or so of Abyssinian Christians came to meet the Prophet (peace be upon him) when he was still in Makkah. They found him in the Mosque and they talked to him and asked him questions. Several groups of people from the Quraysh were sitting in their usual places around the Ka`bah. When the Abyssinians had put all their questions to the Prophet, he called on them to believe in his message. He recited to them passages of the Qur'ān. When they listened to them, their eyes were tearful. They responded positively and declared that they believed in him as God's Messenger. They recognised him as the Prophet described in their Scriptures. When they left the Prophet, Abū Jahl, [the most hostile opponent of Islam in Makkah], and a number of Quraysh men stopped them and said, 'What a gullible group of people you are! Your people back home have sent you to gather information about this man. But you have not been long with him when you disowned your own faith and declared your belief in what he said to you. We have never seen a more feeble-minded group than you.' They replied, 'We leave you in peace, as we do not wish to have a slanging match with you. We are responsible for our deeds and you for yours. We will let no chance to do ourselves good slip away without making use of it.' It is also said that this group of Christians came from Najrān in Southern Arabia. It is reported that other verses of the Qur'ān commending their attitude were also revealed including the following verses: "*Those to whom We have vouchsafed revelations in the past believe in it [i.e. the Qur'ān]; and when it is read out to them, they say, 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we surrendered ourselves to Him. These shall receive a twofold reward for having been patient in adversity, and having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We provided for them, and whenever they heard frivolous talk, having turned away from it and said: We are responsible for our deeds and you for yours. Peace be to you. We do not seek out ignorant people.'"* (28: 52-5)

A third report suggests that Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's cousin, and his fellow immigrants in Abyssinia, came back to join the Prophet accompanied by 70 men wearing woolen clothes. Sixty-two of them were from Abyssinia and the other

eight from Syria. The latter group included a monk called Baĥīrā and the other seven were Idrīs, Ashraf, Abrahah, Thumāmah, Qutham, Durayd and Ayman. The Prophet recited to them the full text of *Sūrah* 36. When they listened to the Qur'ān, their eyes were full of tears and they declared that they believed in its truth. They said, `This is very similar to the revelations given to Jesus Christ.' It is in reference to them that the following verses were revealed: "*You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians.' This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: `Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?*" (Verses 82-4) This delegation was sent by the Abyssinian ruler, Negus, and they were the ones who dedicated themselves to worship in isolated places, such as caves.

Sa`īd ibn Jubayr says that God also revealed other verses of the Qur'ān, such as verses 52-5 of *Sūrah* 28, quoted above, about this group of people. Muqātil and al-Kalbī report that they were 40 Christians from Najrān and 32 from Abyssinia together with 68 from Syria. Qatādah says that these verses were revealed in reference to a group of Christians who followed the authentic Christian revelations. When God sent the Prophet Muĥammad with His last message, they believed in him and God praised them for this.

A Positive Response to God's Revelations

What we have stated in respect of the meaning of these verses, as suggested by the general sequence of the *sūrah* and confirmed by these reports, fits in well with other statements in this *sūrah* and in the Qur'ān as a whole concerning the attitudes of Jews and Christians in general towards the Islamic faith and its followers. Moreover, it fits in with the history of the Muslim community throughout the fourteen centuries of its history.

The *sūrah* maintains the same trend, atmosphere and objectives throughout. Moreover, God's revelations do not contradict each other:

"*Had it issued from any but God, they would surely have found in it many an inner contradiction!*" (4: 82) In this same *sūrah* various statements have been given which confirm the import of this text which is the subject of our discussion. Of these we may quote: "*Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not*

bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers." (Verse 51) *"Say: People of earlier revelations! You have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief. But do not grieve for unbelieving folk."* (Verse 68)

Similarly in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, we read: *"The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you [Muĥammad] unless you follow their faith. Say, 'God's guidance is the only true guidance.' And if after all the knowledge you have received you yield to their desires, there shall be none to help you or protect you from God."* (2: 120)

The events of history have confirmed God's warnings to the Muslim community against the designs of both the Jews and Christians. History has recorded the wicked opposition of the Jews to Islam right from its first day in Madinah. Their scheming against Islam has continued since then to the present moment, and they continue to be its leaders, nursing their wicked grudges and always resorting to treacherous schemes to undermine Islam. History has also recorded that the crusading Christians have taken a hostile attitude to Islam ever since the Battle of al-Yarmūk between the Muslim army and the forces of the Byzantine Empire. It must be mentioned here that there were exceptional cases such as those described in the verses we have been discussing, when some Christians responded to the call of Islam and embraced it. There were also other groups of Christians who preferred to live under Islamic justice in order to save themselves from the oppression of their co-religionists. The general Christian trend towards Islam, however, is epitomised by the Crusades which have continued in different shades from the day of the Battle of al-Yarmūk up to the present day, although they may occasionally seek to take a low profile.

The Crusades, which lasted for two centuries, epitomise the Christian grudge against Islam. Their attitude is also reflected by the war of extermination launched against Islam and Muslims in the Andalus, in the colonisation of Muslim areas in Africa and throughout the world, as well as in missionary campaigns throughout the Muslim world.

Despite their mutual hatred of each other, Zionism and the Christian world continue to maintain their alliance against Islam. In their campaign against it, they have given practical proof to what God, who knows all, has said about them: *"They are allies of one another."* (Verse 51) They continued their campaigns until they were able to break up the state of the last Caliphate and they went on to erode all aspects of Islam, one after the other. They managed to undermine the Islamic system of government, and they are trying now to undermine the ties generated by Islamic prayer, as the Prophet himself has forewarned.

Moreover, today, they adopt the attitude of the Jews, lending support to paganism against Islam, wherever the two are in confrontation. They do this through direct aid

or through the international organisations which they control. The attitude of Christian powers to the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir is proof positive of all this.

In addition, they continue to patronise and lend support to regimes which undertake to crush the Islamic revivalist movement everywhere. They try to impart a heroic character to these regimes in order to enable them to crush Islam. This is a brief summary of what the history of fourteen centuries of Islam tell us about the attitude of the Jews and Christians towards Islam. Both are in the same camp, hostile to Islam, always trying to undermine it. It is extremely important that the advocates of Islam who fight for it today and in the future should realise this, so that they are not deceived by reconciliatory calls which take up the first part of the Qur'ānic statement and abandon its end, without picking up the thread of the whole *sūrah* or the evidence provided by other Qur'ānic statements, or without benefiting from historical events that confirm all this. Such movements use the preamble of the Qur'ānic text in order to calm the Muslims' legitimate feelings towards those who are hostile to them and scheme against them. All these forces mobilise their efforts in order to level a final, devastating blow at the roots of the Islamic faith.

These forces fear nothing as much as they fear enlightened minds among the believers, even though they may be small in number. Those who try to suppress this awareness are the worst enemies of Islam. Some of them may be deluded victims but the harm they cause is in no way less than the harm which the worst enemies of Islam try to inflict. Indeed, it may be even more harmful.

This Qur'ān guides to the way that is straightest. It is highly consistent, showing no contradiction whatsoever. Therefore, we must try to understand its message with open minds.

8
Detailed Legislation for Believers

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تُحَرِّمُواْ طَيِّبَٰتِ مَآ أَحَلَّ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ وَلَا تَعۡتَدُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُعۡتَدِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Believers, do not forbid yourselves the good things God has made lawful to you. Do not transgress; God does not love the transgressors. (87)

وَكُلُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ حَلَٰلٗا طَيِّبٗاۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنتُم بِهِۦ مُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Eat of what God has provided for you of lawful and wholesome things, and have fear of God in whom you believe. (88)

لَا يُؤَاخِذُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِٱللَّغۡوِ فِيٓ أَيۡمَٰنِكُمۡ وَلَٰكِن يُؤَاخِذُكُم بِمَا عَقَّدتُّمُ ٱلۡأَيۡمَٰنَۖ فَكَفَّٰرَتُهُۥٓ إِطۡعَامُ عَشَرَةِ مَسَٰكِينَ مِنۡ أَوۡسَطِ مَا تُطۡعِمُونَ أَهۡلِيكُمۡ أَوۡ كِسۡوَتُهُمۡ أَوۡ تَحۡرِيرُ رَقَبَةٖۖ فَمَن لَّمۡ يَجِدۡ فَصِيَامُ ثَلَٰثَةِ أَيَّامٖۚ ذَٰلِكَ كَفَّٰرَةُ أَيۡمَٰنِكُمۡ إِذَا حَلَفۡتُمۡۚ وَٱحۡفَظُوٓاْ أَيۡمَٰنَكُمۡۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

.ea God will not take you to task for those of your oaths which you may utter without thought, but He will take you to task for oaths which you have sworn in earnest. The breaking of an oath must be atoned for by the feeding of ten needy persons with more or less the same food as you normally give to your own families, or by clothing them, or by the freeing of one slave. He who cannot afford any of these shall fast three days instead. This shall be the atonement for your oaths when you have sworn [and broken them]. But be mindful of your oaths. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations, so that you may give thanks. (89)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِنَّمَا ٱلۡخَمۡرُ وَٱلۡمَيۡسِرُ وَٱلۡأَنصَابُ وَٱلۡأَزۡلَٰمُ رِجۡسٞ مِّنۡ عَمَلِ

Believers, intoxicants, games of chance, idolatrous practices and divining arrows are abominations devised by Satan. Therefore, turn away from them so that you may be successful. (90)

ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ فَٱجۡتَنِبُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُفۡلِحُونَ ﴿٩٠﴾

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ أَن يُوقِعَ بَيۡنَكُمُ ٱلۡعَدَٰوَةَ وَٱلۡبَغۡضَآءَ فِي ٱلۡخَمۡرِ وَٱلۡمَيۡسِرِ وَيَصُدَّكُمۡ عَن ذِكۡرِ ٱللَّهِ وَعَنِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِۖ فَهَلۡ أَنتُم مُّنتَهُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱلرَّسُولَ وَٱحۡذَرُواْۚ فَإِن تَوَلَّيۡتُمۡ فَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّمَا عَلَىٰ رَسُولِنَا ٱلۡبَلَٰغُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ﴿٩٢﴾

لَيۡسَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جُنَاحٞ فِيمَا طَعِمُوٓاْ إِذَا مَا ٱتَّقَواْ وَّءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ ثُمَّ ٱتَّقَواْ وَّءَامَنُواْ ثُمَّ ٱتَّقَواْ وَّأَحۡسَنُواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَيَبۡلُوَنَّكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِشَيۡءٖ مِّنَ ٱلصَّيۡدِ تَنَالُهُۥٓ أَيۡدِيكُمۡ وَرِمَاحُكُمۡ لِيَعۡلَمَ ٱللَّهُ مَن يَخَافُهُۥ بِٱلۡغَيۡبِۚ فَمَنِ ٱعۡتَدَىٰ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ فَلَهُۥ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ﴿٩٤﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَقۡتُلُواْ ٱلصَّيۡدَ وَأَنتُمۡ حُرُمٞۚ وَمَن قَتَلَهُۥ مِنكُم مُّتَعَمِّدٗا فَجَزَآءٞ مِّثۡلُ مَا قَتَلَ مِنَ ٱلنَّعَمِ يَحۡكُمُ بِهِۦ ذَوَا عَدۡلٖ مِّنكُمۡ هَدۡيَۢا بَٰلِغَ ٱلۡكَعۡبَةِ أَوۡ كَفَّٰرَةٞ طَعَامُ مَسَٰكِينَ أَوۡ عَدۡلُ ذَٰلِكَ

Satan seeks only to stir up enmity and hatred among you by means of intoxicants and games of chance, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist? (91)

Obey God, and obey the Messenger, and be ever on your guard. But if you turn away, then know that Our Messenger's only duty is a clear delivery of the message [entrusted to him]. (92)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have no blame attached to them for any food they may have eaten, so long as they fear God and truly believe and do righteous deeds, and continue to fear God and believe, and remain God-fearing and persevere in doing good. God loves those who do good. (93)

Believers, God will certainly try you by means of game which may come within the reach of your hands or your spears, so that God may mark out those who truly fear Him in their hearts. Whoever transgresses after all this will have grievous suffering. (94)

Believers, kill no game while you are on pilgrimage. Whoever of you kills game by design shall make amends in cattle equivalent to what he has killed, adjudged by two persons of probity among you, to be brought as an offering to the Ka`bah; or else he may atone for his sin by feeding needy persons, or by its equivalent in fasting, so that he may taste the evil consequences of his deeds.

صِيَامًا لِّيَذُوقَ وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِۦ ۗ عَفَا ٱللَّهُ عَمَّا سَلَفَ ۚ وَمَنْ عَادَ فَيَنتَقِمُ ٱللَّهُ مِنْهُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو ٱنتِقَامٍ ﴿٩٥﴾

God has forgiven what is past; but whoever repeats his offence, God will inflict His retribution on him. God is Almighty, Lord of retribution. (95)

أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ صَيْدُ ٱلْبَحْرِ وَطَعَامُهُۥ مَتَٰعًا لَّكُمْ وَلِلسَّيَّارَةِ ۖ وَحُرِّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ صَيْدُ ٱلْبَرِّ مَا دُمْتُمْ حُرُمًا ۗ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِىٓ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

Lawful to you is all water-game, and whatever food the sea brings forth, as a provision for you and for travellers. However, you are forbidden land-game as long as you are in the state of consecration or iḥrām]. Be conscious of God, to whom you shall all be gathered. (96)

۞ جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْكَعْبَةَ ٱلْبَيْتَ ٱلْحَرَامَ قِيَٰمًا لِّلنَّاسِ وَٱلشَّهْرَ ٱلْحَرَامَ وَٱلْهَدْىَ وَٱلْقَلَٰٓئِدَ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِتَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٩٧﴾

God has made the Ka`bah, the Inviolable House of Worship, a symbol for all mankind; and so too the sacred month and the garlanded sacrificial offerings. This, so that you may know that God is aware of all that is in the heavens and the earth, and that God has full knowledge of everything. (97)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٩٨﴾

Know that God is severe in retribution and that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (98)

مَّا عَلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ إِلَّا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

The Messenger's duty is but to deliver the message [entrusted to him]. God knows all that you reveal, and all that you conceal. (99)

قُل لَّا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْخَبِيثُ وَٱلطَّيِّبُ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكَ كَثْرَةُ ٱلْخَبِيثِ ۚ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ يَٰٓأُو۟لِى

Say: Evil and good are not equal, even though the abundance of evil may be pleasing to you. Have fear of God, you who are endowed with understanding, so that you may triumph. (100)

ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُفۡلِحُونَ ١٠٠

Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship. If you should ask about them while the Qur'ān is being revealed, they shall be made plain to you. God will forgive you these; for God is Much-Forgiving, Forbearing. (101)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَسۡـَٔلُواْ عَنۡ أَشۡيَآءَ إِن تُبۡدَ لَكُمۡ تَسُؤۡكُمۡ وَإِن تَسۡـَٔلُواْ عَنۡهَا حِينَ يُنَزَّلُ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانُ تُبۡدَ لَكُمۡ عَفَا ٱللَّهُ عَنۡهَاۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ حَلِيمٞ ١٠١

People before your time inquired about them, and on that account they came to deny the truth. (102)

قَدۡ سَأَلَهَا قَوۡمٞ مِّن قَبۡلِكُمۡ ثُمَّ أَصۡبَحُواْ بِهَا كَٰفِرِينَ ١٠٢

It was not God who instituted [superstitions like those of] a slit- ear she camel, or a she-camel let loose for free pasture, or idol sacrifices for twin-births in animals, or stallion-camels freed from work. It is unbelievers who attribute their own lying inventions to God. Most of them never use their reason. (103)

مَا جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَحِيرَةٖ وَلَا سَآئِبَةٖ وَلَا وَصِيلَةٖ وَلَا حَامٖۙ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡكَذِبَۖ وَأَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡقِلُونَ ١٠٣

When they are told, "Come to that which God has revealed and to the Messenger," they reply, "Sufficient for us are the ways we found our fathers following." Why, even though their fathers knew nothing and were devoid of all guidance? (104)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ تَعَالَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ وَإِلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ قَالُواْ حَسۡبُنَا مَا وَجَدۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ءَابَآءَنَآۚ أَوَلَوۡ كَانَ ءَابَآؤُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يَهۡتَدُونَ ١٠٤

Believers, it is but for your own souls that you are accountable. Those who go astray can do you no harm if you [yourselves] are on the right path. To God you all must return. He will then make you understand all that you were doing [in life]. (105)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ عَلَيۡكُمۡ أَنفُسَكُمۡۖ لَا يَضُرُّكُم مَّن ضَلَّ إِذَا ٱهۡتَدَيۡتُمۡۚ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ جَمِيعٗا فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ

تَعۡمَلُونَ ١٠٥

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ شَهَٰدَةُ بَيۡنِكُمۡ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَكُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ حِينَ ٱلۡوَصِيَّةِ ٱثۡنَانِ ذَوَا عَدۡلٖ مِّنكُمۡ أَوۡ ءَاخَرَانِ مِنۡ غَيۡرِكُمۡ إِنۡ أَنتُمۡ ضَرَبۡتُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَأَصَٰبَتۡكُم مُّصِيبَةُ ٱلۡمَوۡتِۚ تَحۡبِسُونَهُمَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ فَيُقۡسِمَانِ بِٱللَّهِ إِنِ ٱرۡتَبۡتُمۡ لَا نَشۡتَرِي بِهِۦ ثَمَنٗا وَلَوۡ كَانَ ذَا قُرۡبَىٰ وَلَا نَكۡتُمُ شَهَٰدَةَ ٱللَّهِ إِنَّآ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلۡأٓثِمِينَ ١٠٦

فَإِنۡ عُثِرَ عَلَىٰٓ أَنَّهُمَا ٱسۡتَحَقَّآ إِثۡمٗا فَـَٔاخَرَانِ يَقُومَانِ مَقَامَهُمَا مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَحَقَّ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡأَوۡلَيَٰنِ فَيُقۡسِمَانِ بِٱللَّهِ لَشَهَٰدَتُنَآ أَحَقُّ مِن شَهَٰدَتِهِمَا وَمَا ٱعۡتَدَيۡنَآ إِنَّآ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٠٧

ذَٰلِكَ أَدۡنَىٰٓ أَن يَأۡتُواْ بِٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ عَلَىٰ وَجۡهِهَآ أَوۡ يَخَافُوٓاْ أَن تُرَدَّ أَيۡمَٰنُۢ بَعۡدَ أَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡۗ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱسۡمَعُواْۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ١٠٨

Believers, let there be witnesses to what you do when death approaches you and you are about to make bequests: two persons of probity from among your own people, or two others from outside, if the pangs of death come to you when you are travelling through the land. Detain them both after prayer, and if you have any doubt in mind, let them swear by God, "We shall not sell this [our word] for any price, even though it were for a near kinsman; and neither shall we conceal anything of what we have witnessed before God; for then we should be among the sinful." (106)

But if afterwards it should come to light that the two [witnesses] have been guilty of [this very] sin, then two others should replace them from among those immediately concerned. Both shall swear by God, "Our testimony is indeed truer than that of these two. We have not transgressed the bounds of what is right; for then we should be among the evil-doers." (107)

Thus it will be more likely that people will offer testimony in accordance with the truth; or else they will fear that the oaths of others may be taken after their oaths. Have fear of God and hearken [to Him]. God does not guide those who are iniquitous. (108)

Overview

This long passage makes it clear that the authority to legislate belongs only to God who alone determines what is permissible and what is forbidden. Once this basic rule is established, it becomes applicable in all matters, regardless of their degree of importance. Anyone who claims the authority to legislate, by word or deed, is actually claiming Godhead, which belongs only to God Himself. In other words, he does not simply transgress the bounds of what is permitted, he also assaults God's authority. If any legislation is enacted on the basis of social traditions or people's views, then, in practical terms, these are preferred to what God revealed to His Messenger. As such, it constitutes a departure from faith altogether.

This passage provides a long list of legislation in different areas. Every piece begins with an address to those who believe. It is a reminder to them of their essential quality, which implies unqualified `acknowledgement of God's supremacy, sovereignty and authority to legislate. As such, it is an address which re-emphasises the basic quality of faith. This is coupled with a commandment to obey God and His Messenger and to beware of turning one's back on God's legislation. A warning against God's punishment is added, only to be followed with the prospect of earning His forgiveness and mercy. The believers are then told that they have their own way to follow. They are to pay no heed to anyone who does not submit to God's authority.

Then, a clear distinction is drawn between the believers who acknowledge that the authority to legislate belongs to God alone on the one hand and on the other those who follow a different line, claiming for themselves the right to legislate: "*Believers, it is but for your own souls that you are accountable. Those who go astray can do you no harm if you [yourselves] are on the right path. To God you all must return. He will then make you understand all that you were doing [in life].*" (Verse 105)

This makes the believers a community on their own, with its independent course of action, code and legal source. When the Muslim community outlines its own course of action and declares its determination to follow it, it knows that other people's disagreement and error will not cause it any harm. All will eventually return to God.

Such is the central theme of this long passage. We will look at its detailed points as we proceed with our commentary.

Prohibiting What is Lawful

The first address in this passage to the believers reminds them that they may not exercise any of God's attributes, since these belong totally to God. As such, they may not forbid themselves any of the wholesome and good things that God has made lawful to them. It is not open to them to make a demonstration of self-imposed

prohibition, refusing to eat of such good food God has given them. They must remember that it is God who has provided them with such lawful and wholesome sustenance. It is only He who may designate things as permissible or forbidden: *"Believers, do not forbid yourselves the good things God has made lawful to you. Do not transgress; God does not love the transgressors. Eat of what God has provided for you of lawful and wholesome things, and have fear of God in whom you believe."* (Verses 87-8)

The whole question of legislation is closely linked to that of Godhead. It is God alone who has the sole authority to regulate for people's lives. His authority is derived from the fact that it is He who has created human beings and provided them with food and sustenance. Hence, to Him alone belongs the right to make permissible to them whatever He pleases of His own provisions and to declare any part of such provisions forbidden to them. Human beings themselves acknowledge this logic. Whoever owns something enjoys the right to dispose of it in any way he pleases. Anyone who violates this basic principle is undoubtedly a transgressor. It is only to be expected that believers do not make an assault on God in whom they believe. It is inconceivable that a believer could ever assault God's authority.

These two short verses state this principle in absolute clarity. No one may argue against this principle unless he is a transgressor, and God does not love transgressors. This is a general question which establishes a general principle relating to the significance of Godhead and what rights God has against His servants. It also relates to the effect of believing in God with regard to the behaviour and practices of believers. We have a number of reports which suggest that these two verses and the one which follows them (relating to oaths and the various atonements for breaking them) were revealed by way of comment on a particular incident that took place during the Prophet Muĥammad's lifetime. While knowledge of the circumstances of revelation of a particular verse can throw light on its meaning and significance, we have to remember that in general, Qur'ānic statements have a universal application. They do not relate to particular incidents only, unless there is a specific case with which they deal.

One report by Ibn Jarīr mentions that the Prophet (peace be upon him) one day sat to speak with his Companions, reminding them of their duties and the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. He did little more than to warn them of the punishment of the Hereafter and then left. Some of his Companions then said to each other: "We must do something of substance. The Christians forbid themselves certain things and we should do likewise." Some of them declared that they would abstain from eating meat or eating any part of the leg of certain animals. While others declared that they would not eat during the day and some said they forbade themselves marriage. When the Prophet was told of this, he spoke to them again and said: "How is it that some people have forbidden themselves marriage, or food or sleep? As for me, I

sleep and worship at night, and I fast on some days and abstain from fasting on others, and I marry women. Whoever chooses a path other than mine does not belong to me." It is in connection with this incident that this Qur'ānic verse was revealed: *"Believers, do not forbid yourselves the good things God has made lawful to you. Do not transgress; God does not love the transgressors. Eat of what God has provided for you of lawful and wholesome things, and have fear of God in whom you believe."* (Verses 87-8)

Another report confirming the one just quoted is given by Anas, one of the Prophet's Companions, and is related by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim: "Three people came to the home of God's Messenger (peace be upon him), enquiring of his wives about his worship. When they were told of it, they felt that it was less than expected. Then one of them said: "How can we compare ourselves to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) when God has already forgiven him any sin that he might have committed and any which he may commit in future." Hence, one of them declared: "I shall spend all night, every night, in prayer." The second said: "As for me, I shall fast every day of my life." The third one said: "I shall stay away from women and will never get married." The Prophet went to them and said: "Are you the ones who said so and so. You should know that I am the one who fears God most among you. Nevertheless, I fast on some days and abstain from fasting on others; I pray, but I also go to sleep; and I do get married. Whoever abandons my path does not belong to me."

Al-Tirmidhī relates on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās that a man came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and said: "If I eat meat, I want to be with women and I am motivated by desire. Therefore, I have forbidden myself eating meat." God revealed the Qūr'ānic verse: *"Believers, do not forbid yourselves the good things God has made lawful to you..."* (Verse 87)

Atonement for Breaking an Oath

The verse that follows, which refers to oaths and their atonement, appears to have been revealed in order to deal with such cases when people make an oath in order to solemnise their abstention from something permissible, as was done by those Companions of the Prophet. The Qur'ān also makes it clear that it is not up to human beings to declare things forbidden or permissible. That authority belongs to God, in whom those Companions of the Prophet believed. This Qur'ānic verse also deals with all vows of abstention from doing something good or vows to undertake something evil. Whenever it is clear to a person who has made an oath that breaking it is better and more conducive to earning God's pleasure, he should break it and atone for it in one of the methods defined by this Qur'ānic verse.

`Abdullāh ibn `Abbās says that it was revealed in connection with those people

who forbade themselves wholesome types of food and clothes as well as appropriate marriages. They had vowed to abide by these restrictions. When the commandment, *"Believers, do not forbid yourselves the good things God has made lawful to you,"* was revealed, they asked: "What shall we do with our oaths?" This verse giving the necessary verdict was then revealed. It makes clear that God does not take people to task for oaths which they may utter without thought, or those which they may pronounce "off the cuff," as it were, without consciously deciding to make an oath. At the same time, Muslims are urged not to devalue their oaths by uttering too many of them without thought. An oath by God is a very serious statement. Hence, it must not be uttered without thought.

An oath made solemnly and deliberately requires an atonement if it is to be broken. The atonement is given in detail in this Qur'ānic verse: *"The breaking of an oath must be atoned for by the feeding of ten needy persons with more or less the same food as you normally give to your own families, or by clothing them, or by the freeing of one slave. He who cannot afford any of these shall fast three days instead. This shall be the atonement for your oaths when you have sworn [and broken them]. But be mindful of your oaths."* (Verse 89) The Arabic term which is used to describe the type of food which should be offered to the ten needy persons means literally either "the average" or "the best" food a person gives to his own family. However, we can combine both aspects of the meaning because the average is normally preferred in Islam. It also applies to clothing the ten needy persons which means giving them some of the average type of clothes one gives to one's family.

An alternative is to free a person from slavery, but it is not specified here whether that slave should be a believer. Hence, scholars have different views concerning this point, but we will not discuss the details of these views. *"He who cannot afford any of these shall fast three days instead."* (Verse 89) It is only when a person is unable to meet the requirements of any of the above types of atonement that he may atone for his broken oath by fasting. Again, scholars have varying views with regard to whether these three days must be consecutive or not. Our own approach in this commentary is not to discuss such varying views or to evaluate them. Anyone who wishes to study them may do so by referring to books of fiqh which discuss them in detail. All views of scholars are in agreement on the essential purpose of the atonement, namely, attaching proper value to the breached contract and giving proper respect to oaths which are pledges or forms of contracts which God has ordered to be honoured. Hence, if anyone of us makes an oath and finds out subsequently that it is better, from the Islamic point of view, to do otherwise, he both breaks his oath and atones for it. The same applies if he makes an oath which he has no authority to make, such as an oath of prohibition or permissibility of a particular thing. In this case, he breaks the oath and atones for it.

Let us now talk about the subject matter of these verses. As for the particular circumstances, God makes it plain that what He has made lawful is wholesome and what He has forbidden is foul. Hence, it is not for people to choose something different from what God has chosen for them, for two basic reasons: firstly, the authority to forbid or make lawful belongs to God alone. Any violation of that is a transgression which displeases God and contradicts faith. Secondly, God makes lawful only what is good and wholesome. Therefore, people may not forbid themselves such wholesome things that are beneficial to them and to life in general. A human being's knowledge of life and of himself cannot be matched with God's knowledge who combines perfect wisdom with absolute knowledge. Since God has made these things lawful, then they must be good and wholesome. God's knowledge is perfect, based on absolute certainty. Hence we say: had God known that these matters were foul or evil, He would have spared His servants their consequences. Had He known that abstention from them would be better, He would not have made them lawful.

This religion has been revealed so that it brings about goodness in human life and achieves perfect balance and complete harmony between all aspects of human life. It does not overlook any natural human need, nor does it suppress any constructive human activity within appropriate limits. Hence, Islam denounces monastic aestheticism because it amounts to a suppression of nature and an impediment to the development of life. Similarly, Islam speaks out against the forbidding of wholesome lawful things, because these help the development of life. It must be remembered that God has created this life so that it may flourish and develop in accordance with the constitution He has laid down for it. Monastic aestheticism and the forbidding of wholesome things come into direct conflict with God's method for human life because they bring life to a stop at a certain point under the pretext of seeking something more sublime. It should be stated here that attaining the sublime is feasible within the system God has laid down and made easy through its compatibility with human nature.

The fact that this verse was revealed to deal with particular circumstances does not restrict its general applicability because it relates to the question of Godhead and legislation. This is not confined to the statement of which types of food, drink and marriage are lawful and which are forbidden. It applies to the authority to legislate in all matters of life.

We try to emphasise this message as much as we can, because the fact that Islam has not been allowed to regulate human life for a long while has enabled the tendency in people to give Qur'ānic statements a restricted applicability. Thus, many people think that terms like "permissible" and "forbidden" apply only to the slaughtering of animals, to the types of food, drink and clothing a Muslim may have,

and to how marriages should be conducted. Many people tend to refer to Islam only within this area. Other general and more substantive matters are considered in light of theories, constitutions and laws which have nothing to do with Islam. A community's social set-up, political system and international relations are only some examples of serious matters that are determined without reference to Islam.

Islam is a constitution which regulates all of human life. A person who accepts Islam in full and follows all its commandments is a believer, while a person who follows some other method, even though this may be in a single question or issue, is one who rejects faith and transgresses against God's authority. As such, he is not a believer, although he may profess to respect faith and claims to be a Muslim. When he follows a law other than that of God, he falsifies all his claims and takes himself out of the realm of faith altogether.

It is to this central issue that these Qur'ānic verses refer. It puts the question of believing in God above all other considerations. As such, it gives it the seriousness which it should always enjoy.

A Categorical Prohibition of Intoxicants

It is within the context of legislation, permissibility and prohibition, as well as the moulding of the Muslim community in Madinah, purging it from all remaining traces of past tradition of the dark days, that a clear and decisive verdict is given on intoxicating drinks and gambling, coupled with practices of associating partners with God.

> *Believers, intoxicants, games of chance, idolatrous practices and divining arrows are abominations devised by Satan. Therefore, turn away from them so that you may be successful. Satan seeks only to stir up enmity and hatred among you by means of intoxicants and games of chance, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist?* (Verses 90-1)

Drinking, gambling, idols and divining arrows were important aspects of pre-Islamic Arabia. They were closely related in both practice and tradition. The Arabs used to drink to the point of extravagance. They considered that drinking afforded people distinction. They often mention drinking in their poetry as a practice to be proud of or to praise others with. In social gatherings, drinking was coupled with the slaughter of animals which were immediately cooked to provide food to those who took part in these drinking bouts, those who served wine and those who frequented such gatherings. The animals were slaughtered at the feet of idols which were sprayed with the blood of their sacrifice. In such social events, the act of divining

arrows was practised in order to determine the sharing out of the sacrificial meat. Everyone's share was determined by his arrow, with the highest arrow giving the largest share, and the lowest giving no share whatsoever, even though it might have been the arrow of the person who provided the animal for slaughter. This gives us an idea of how traditions were intertwined with ignorant ideological concepts.

Islam did not address such traditions at the start, because they are based on mistaken beliefs. To try to reform them at the surface level before establishing the right foundation of faith was bound to be a wasted effort, and this a Divine system would not even consider. Islam begins its reform with the paramount question for every human being, namely, faith. It uproots the very basic ideological concepts of ignorance in order to put in place the Islamic concept, which is in complete harmony with human nature. It explains to people how grossly mistaken their concepts of God are and guides them to recognise their true Lord and Creator. Once they know Him, they begin to listen with great attention in order to find out what pleases and displeases their Lord. Prior to this they are not even ready to listen or obey an order or commandment. They are not prepared to abandon their ignorant practices no matter how often they are advised against them. The key to human nature is that of faith. Unless the right key is used, nothing of morality or social reform will take root in human nature. Thus, it remains closed, unenlightened, and unfathomable.

The Islamic method of reform did not start with correcting the deviations and abominations of the dark ages, or *Jāhiliyyah.* It addressed the question of faith, beginning with the declaration that there is no deity save God. It took around 13 years to establish this concept of God's oneness, with all that it entails, in the hearts of the early Muslims. In this period, the only aim was its establishment, so that people could know their Lord and submit themselves to His authority. When faith was clearly established in their hearts and they recognised that they could have no choice other than what has been chosen for them by God, then the next phase of outlining their duties, including worship, began. This was combined with the process of eradicating the social, economic, moral and behavioural traces of ignorance. It began in effect at the moment when God's order could be obeyed without hesitation because people realised that God could only order them to do what is good for them.

In other words, commandments were issued after submission had become clear, when every Muslim realised that he had no say other than the say of God. Shaikh Abu'l Ĥasan `Alī al-Nadwī describes this stage succinctly and clearly in his invaluable book *Islam and the World,* under the subtitle "Highest Pinnacle of Development":

> Once the Gordian knot of unbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them (meaning the early Muslims). Once the Prophet

> had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject the Wrong and accept the Right. They had entered into the new faith heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed. They unhesitatingly confessed before the Prophet such crimes as were not known to anyone but themselves. If they committed any crime, they voluntarily submitted themselves for punishment. Many of them actually had wine cups in their hands when the Qur'ānic injunction against the use of intoxicants was revealed, but the Word of God came between them and the cups. They threw away the cups at once and broke their wine barrels so that the drains of Madinah literally overflowed with their detestable contents.[6]

Yet, the prohibition of intoxicants and games of chance did not come as a surprise. Before this categorical prohibition, some steps were taken to loosen the hold of such social traditions which were closely intertwined with personal habits as well as with economic aspects. Indeed, this was the third or fourth step Islam took to solve the problem of intoxicant drinks.

The first step was no more than firing a shot in the right direction, when God (limitless is He in His Glory) says in *Sūrah* 16, The Bee, revealed in Makkah: "*And from the fruit of date palms and vines you derive intoxicants as well as wholesome food.*" (16: 67) This was the first indication to Muslims whereby intoxicants were placed in opposition to wholesome sustenance.

The second step addressed the Muslims' religious conscience through legislative logic, with the verse revealed in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow: "*They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people; but their evil far exceeds their benefit.*" (2: 219) The import here is clear: since the evil of a particular practice is far greater than its benefit, then it is better to abandon it altogether. Hardly anything is totally devoid of benefit, but its permissibility or prohibition depends on how far its evil outweighs its benefit.

The third step broke the habit of drinking and put it on a collision course with attendance to obligatory prayer. Here we have the verse revealed in *Sūrah* 4, Women: "*Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying.*" (4: 43) Since Muslims offer five obligatory prayers every day, with a close time range between them, which is not sufficient to get drunk in and then regain sobriety, this instruction practically restricted the times available for drinking. This, in effect, abolished the habits of midmorning and mid-afternoon drinking, which were part of the traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia. Moreover, it militated against

[6] Abu'l Ĥasan `Ali Nadwī, *Islam and the World.* Tr. M.A. Kidwai, Lucknow, Academy of Islamic Research, 1980, pp. 53-4

addiction, which is closely related to the amount of time available for drinking. In this way, it became practically impossible for a Muslim to attend to his prayers on time, and to drink at his usual times.

The fourth and final stage was this categorical prohibition which came after people had become fully ready to accept it. It needed only a clear order and the Muslims were sure to obey it without hesitation.

Obedience: A Main Characteristic of Muslim Society

It seems that the first of these verses, i.e. the one in *Sūrah* 16, caused `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who described himself prior to embracing Islam as a man of drink, some worry and he wished for a clear-cut ruling on drinking. That verse makes a distinction between what people use dates and grapes for, as it describes them as "*intoxicants and wholesome food.*" (16: 67)

`Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb [may God be pleased with him] reports that he said: "My Lord, give us a clear-cut ruling on drinking." The verse in *Sūrah* 2 was then revealed, stating: "*They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both there is great evil although they have some benefits for people; but their evil far exceeds their benefit.*" (2: 219) `Umar was called in and the verse was recited to him. He said: "My Lord, give us a clear-cut ruling on drinking." The verse in *Sūrah* 4 was then revealed: "*Believers, do not attempt to pray when you are drunk, [but wait] until you know what you are saying.*" (4: 43) `Umar was called in and the verse was recited to him. He once again said: "My Lord, give us a clear-cut ruling on drinking." The verse in this *sūrah,* The Repast, was then revealed, stating: "*Satan seeks only to stir up enmity and hatred among you by means of intoxicants and games of chance, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist?*" (Verse 91) `Umar was called in once more and the verse was recited to him. He said: "We do desist, my Lord! We do desist." (Related by al-Nasā'ī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, and Ibn Mājah.)

When these two verses which make intoxicants absolutely forbidden were revealed in the third year of the Islamic calendar, shortly after the Battle of Uĥud, the matter did not require more than sending someone around the places where people gathered in Madinah to announce: "All intoxicants are forbidden." Everyone who had a glass of wine in his hand broke it and everyone who was in the actual process of drinking threw out what was in his mouth. Barrels and bottles of wine and other intoxicants were broken. The whole matter was over as if the people had never before drunk intoxicants.

Let us now look at the way the Qur'ānic statement is phrased, because it tells us much about the Qur'ānic method of cultivating people's minds and reforming their behaviour. It begins with the address so familiar in this part of the *sūrah:* "*Believers.*"

This address awakens the hearts of believers on the one hand and reminds them, on the other, of the basic requirement of faith, namely, obedience and submission.

This is followed by a decisive statement on the nature of those practices which admit no counter argument: *"Intoxicants, games of chance, idolatrous practices and divining arrows are abominations devised by Satan."* (Verse 90) These are, then, foul practices and cannot be included among good and wholesome things which God has permitted. Moreover, they have been devised by Satan, man's old enemy. It is sufficient for a believer to know that something is devised by Satan to make it totally repugnant to him.

At this point, the prohibition is issued, but is combined with the prospect of attaining success, which itself has its profound effect on the human mind: *"Therefore, turn away from them so that you may be successful."* (Verse 90) The Qur'ānic verses go on to further expose Satan's scheme behind the devising of these abominations: *"Satan seeks only to stir up enmity and hatred among you by meaner of intoxicants and games of chance, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer."* (Verse 91) Satan's aim and the purpose of his scheming are thus exposed before every Muslim. Satan seeks nothing except the stirring up of enmity and hatred among believers so as to turn them away from their worship. What a wicked scheme!

Satan's aims can easily be recognised in our practical life after we have accepted them as true, since God has stated them so. It does not take anyone with an open mind long to recognise how Satan actually stirs up enmity and hatred, utilising for this purpose intoxicants and gambling. Intoxicants weaken one's consciousness and self-control, heighten tempers and stir up whims and impulses. Gambling and all games of chance leave people with a sense of loss and grudges. It is natural that a losing gambler nurses a strong grudge against the winner who takes away his money from under his nose and leaves him empty handed. It is only natural that such matters stir up enmity and hatred, regardless of the impression of happiness they initially give off.

The fact that intoxicants and gambling do turn people away from their remembrance of God and from prayer is too clear to require elaboration. Drinking makes people forget and gambling makes them oblivious to everything else. Indeed, games of chance keep gamblers in a state of intoxication which is not dissimilar to that produced by drink. The world of a gambler is akin to that of a drunk: tables, glasses and a strike of fortune or misfortune.

As this clear reference to Satan's aim in devising these abominations produces its effect and awakens the hearts of those who believe, the question is then put which admits only the sort of answer `Umar gave when he heard it for the first time: *"Will you not, then, desist?"* His immediate response was: "We do desist, my Lord! We do

desist."

The *sūrah* goes on to put the whole matter in its proper perspective: *"Obey God, and obey the Messenger, and be ever on your guard. But if you turn away, then know that Our Messenger's only duty is a clear delivery of the message [entrusted to him]."* (Verse 92)

This is the basic rule to which all matters are referred: obedience to God and His Messenger, i.e. submission which leaves no room except for absolute obedience and total compliance. There is also an implicit warning in this statement: *"If you turn away, then know that Our Messenger's only duty is a clear delivery of the message [entrusted to him]."* (Verse 92) He has certainly conveyed God's message with absolute clarity. Anyone who disobeys bears full responsibility for his disobedience. This warning, implicitly as it is expressed, is indeed very strong. The believers are made aware that should they slip into disobedience they only harm themselves. God's Messenger has fulfilled his trust and conveyed his message. Hence, he is no longer responsible for them. Nor will he shield them from punishment, since they have disobeyed him. Their faith is in the hands of God, who is able to punish those who disobey. Thus does the Qur'ānic method open up our hearts and penetrate our depths.

Why Intoxicants Are So Repugnant

It is useful to explain here the nature of intoxicants which are meant in this prohibition. Abū Dāwūd relates this *ĥadīth* on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās: "Everything that is brewed is wine, and every intoxicant is forbidden." `Umar addressed the Muslims, standing on the Prophet's pulpit, with a group of the Prophet's Companions in attendance. He said: "When the Qur'ānic verse was revealed prohibiting drinks, intoxicants were derived from five types of produce: grapes, palm dates, honey, wheat and barley. Wine refers to everything that blurs the mind." These statements clearly indicate that intoxicants include every brewed drink which causes intoxication. It is not restricted to a particular type. Whatever intoxicates is forbidden.

The lack of consciousness, whichever intoxicant produces it, is diametrically opposed to the state of alertness which Islam requires of every Muslim so that he consciously feels his link with God at every moment, making sure that all his thoughts and actions are of the sort that please God. By being so alert and conscious, the Muslim plays a positive role in the proper development of life and in protecting it against weakness and corruption. He further protects himself, his property and honour and he helps to protect the Muslim community and its system and law against all types of aggression. A Muslim is not abandoned so that he cares only for himself or his enjoyments. On the contrary, at every moment he has duties to fulfil which require that he be always alert. These include duties towards his Lord,

himself, his family and the Muslim community of which he is a member and towards humanity at large. Even when he enjoys the wholesome pleasures Islam permits, he must retain his full consciousness so that he is not enslaved by any type of pleasure or desire. He is in control of all his desires and he fulfils them as one who is totally in control. Drunkenness is the opposite state.

Moreover, seeking such unconsciousness is simply an attempt to escape from the reality of life at a particular moment in time and a preference for the sort of visions which accompany drunkenness. Islam disapproves of all this because it wants people to see the realities as they are, to look them in the face and to conduct their lives on the basis of reality, not imagination. It is through facing reality that man proves his will-power. To escape to the realm of imagination is to prove one's weakness and lack of will. Islam wants its people to have a strong will, unfettered by habit or addiction. From the Islamic point of view, this is enough reason to forbid intoxicants and all drugs. All these are abominations devised by Satan and their effect is only the corruption of human life.

Scholars have different views with regard to whether intoxicants are impure in themselves like other physical impurities, or whether the prohibition applies only to drinking them. The majority of scholars are of the first view, while the second view is that of Rabī`ah, al-Layth ibn Sa`d, al-Muznī of the Shāfi`ī school and a number of later scholars of Baghdad. Perhaps this reference to scholarly views on this point is adequate for our purposes.

Self-Surrender and Obedience

When these verses were revealed totally prohibiting all intoxicants, and describing them as an abomination devised by Satan, two groups of people raised a query in the same wording but for totally different reasons. A few of the Prophet's Companions who were very scrupulous said: "What about our Companions who died when intoxicants were still lawful to drink?" Some of them said: "What about those killed in the Battle of Uĥud, with intoxicants in their bellies?" i.e. before they were forbidden to drink. Another group who were keen to seize every chance to sow the seeds of doubt among the Muslim community said similar things. Their aim was to try to weaken the Muslims' trust in the reasoning behind Islamic legislation. They also wanted to convey the feeling that those who died before the prohibition of intoxicants were totally lost, since they died with this abomination in their bodies. Hence, the purpose behind the following verse: "*Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have no blame attached to them for any food they may have eaten, so long as they fear God and truly believe and do righteous deeds, and continue to fear God and believe, and remain God-fearing and persevere in doing good. God loves those who do good*" (Verse 93)

This verse states that what has not been forbidden is lawful and that prohibition begins with its statement, not at any moment prior to this. There can be no retrospective prohibition and punishment, whether in this life or in the life to come, cannot be inflicted without a clear statement of ruling. Those who died before the prohibition of intoxicants had nothing to fear, because they did not drink any forbidden thing and did not commit any act of disobedience. They feared God and did righteous deeds, knowing that He was totally aware of their intentions and actions. Such a person neither disobeyed nor drank something forbidden.

We have no intention of taking part in the controversy raised by the Mu`tazilah group concerning the ruling that intoxicants are abominations. What we will say, however, is that they raised the question about whether this is a result of its prohibition or because of the inherent quality of intoxicants. They also posed the question about whether what is forbidden is so ruled because of its inherent qualities, or because this quality is attached to it as a result of its prohibition. In my view all this controversy is futile and alien to the Islamic approach. When God forbids something, He knows why He forbids it, whether He states that reason or not. Whether the prohibition is based on the quality of what is prohibited, or on something that relates to the individual partaking of it personally, or to the interests of the whole community, it is God who knows the whole truth. Obeying His orders is an undeniable duty of every Muslim. Any subsequent controversy addresses no real need. Realism is an essential aspect of the Divine method. No one can say: "If prohibition is the result of an inherent quality in the thing prohibited, how can it be permitted in the period leading up to its prohibition?" God must have had a good reason for leaving it permissible for a while. After all, this is always determined by God alone. This is, indeed, an essential quality of Godhead. Whether man considers something to be good or bad is not the determining factor because man can consider something to be the determining reason for prohibition when in actual fact it is not. The appropriate attitude is to accept God's legislation and to carry it out whether we know the reasons behind them or not. God knows everything and we know little.

The implementation of God's law must be based in the first instance on submission to Him. This is, indeed, the very meaning of Islam. When man has shown his obedience, he can use his mind to identify, as much as he is able to, God's purpose behind His commandment or prohibition, whether this purpose is stated by God or not, understood by human intellect or not. It must be remembered, however, that God, not man, is the final arbiter on whether something should be included in His law. When God has issued His decree, all arguments must stop. His decree must be implemented. If a decision is left to human intellect, people become the final arbiter on God's legislation. How then can this fit in with God's position as the ultimate authority, or with man's submission to Him?

Let us now consider the phraseology of this verse: "*Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have no blame attached to them for any food they may have eaten, so long as they fear God and truly believe and do righteous deeds, and continue to fear God and believe, and remain God-fearing and persevere in doing good. God loves those who do good.*" (Verse 93)

I admit that I have not found anything stated by commentators on the Qur'ān to be totally satisfactory in explaining the way this Qur'ānic verse is phrased, and why fear of God is mentioned once in combination with both faith and righteous deeds, and repeated once more in combination with faith and on a third occasion combined with doing good. Nor do I consider now as satisfactory my own comments on this repetition which are included in the first edition of this book. The best that I have read, although it too remains somewhat unsatisfactory to me, is that written by al-Ṭabarī: "The first reference to fearing God equates this fearing of God to total acceptance of His commandment, submission to it and an acting upon it. The second reference equates it with an unshakeable acceptance of faith while the third mention represents a God-fearing person as always being ready to do good work voluntarily."

I will quote here what I have written on this particular point in the first, shorter edition of this work: "This is a method of confirmation by way of following a general statement with a detailed one. The first reference is a general, comprehensive one which includes God-fearing, strong faith and righteous deeds. The aspect of God-fearing is then repeated once in combination with faith and another with doing good, righteous deeds, in order to emphasise this sense and to highlight the important rule that actions are judged by the inner feelings that accompany them. God-fearing is the best expression of a fine sensitivity towards God's commandments and a constant relationship with Him that combines belief in Him with acceptance of His orders. Righteous deeds are the practical translation of inner faith. It is interaction between deeds and beliefs that is the criterion for judgement. Appearances provide no such criterion. It is this basic rule which requires repetition and emphatic statements."

At this moment in time I do not find my own words satisfactory, but I cannot come up with anything better. I seek God's help.

Consecration and Game Killing

The *sūrah* continues to elaborate on further prohibitions, speaking about game when one is in the state of consecration, or *iĥrām,* and what compensates for its killing. It further speaks of the purpose of the sanctity of the House of Worship in Makkah, the sacred months, dedicated and garlanded cattle which must not be touched as the *sūrah* makes clear in its opening verses. This part concludes with the

establishment of a clear standard of values for Muslim individuals and Muslim society. According to this standard, a small amount of good is far more valuable than evil, plentiful as it may be.

> *Believers, God will certainly try you by means of game which may come within the reach of your hands or your spears, so that God may mark out those who truly fear Him in their hearts. Whoever transgresses after all this will have grievous suffering. Believers, kill no game while you are on pilgrimage. Whoever of you kills game by design shall make amends in cattle equivalent to what he has killed, adjudged by two persons of probity among you, to be brought as an offering to the Ka' bah; or else he may atone for his sin by feeding needy persons, or by its equivalent in fasting, so that he may taste the evil consequences of his deeds. God has forgiven what is past; but whoever repeats his offence, God will inflict His retribution on him. God is Almighty, Lord of retribution. Lawful to you is all water game, and whatever food the sea brings forth, as a provision for you and for travellers. However, you are forbidden land game as long as you are in the state of consecration [or iĥrām]. Be conscious of God, to whom you shall all be gathered. God has made the Ka`bah, the Inviolable House of Worship, a symbol for all mankind; and so too the sacred month and the garlanded sacrificial offerings. This, so that you may know that God is aware of all that is in the heavens and the earth, and that God has full knowledge of everything. Know that God is severe in retribution and that God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful. The Messenger's duty is but to deliver the message [entrusted to him]. God knows all that you reveal, and all that you conceal.* (Verses 94-99)

At the beginning of this *sūrah,* God says: "*Believers, do not offend against the symbols set up by God, or against the sacred month, or the offerings or the garlands, or against those who repair to the Sacred House, seeking God's grace and pleasure. Only when you are released from the state of consecration may you hunt.*" (Verse 2) However, this early prohibition of killing game during consecration, or the violation of God's rites, the sacred months, garlanded sacrificial animals, or intercepting those who are on their way to the Sacred House did not specify any punishment to be inflicted on perpetrators in this life. They only incurred a sin. Now a punishment is outlined in the form of an atonement which is sufficient to make the offender taste the evil of what he has perpetrated. The verses declare that past offences have been forgiven, but anyone who commits fresh violations is threatened with God's vengeance.

Like all the other sections of this long passage, this part opens with an address to the believers. They are then told that they are about to be set a test concerning game that has been prohibited to them while they are in the state of consecration, or *iĥrām: "Believers, God will certainly try you by means of game which may come within the reach of your hands or your spears, so that God may mark out those who truly fear Him in their*

hearts. Whoever transgresses after all this will have grievous suffering." (Verse 94)

It is a very easy game that is brought within their vicinity. They could easily grab it with their hands, or with their spears. Some reports suggest that such game would come as close as the doors of their tents or homes. This, then, was a trial of temptation. Similar in nature to that which the Children of Israel were asked to endure in former times, but in which they failed. They had pleaded with their Prophet, Moses (peace be upon him), to appoint a day when they would not have to attend to any aspect of their daily affairs. Rather, they would rest and spend the whole day in worship. Thus, the Sabbath was established for them. They were then tempted with water game, whereby fish of all types came right to the sea shore on the day of the Sabbath. On other days, it went far into the water in the normal behaviour of fish. The Children of Israel, however, could not resist the temptation, could not keep their covenant with God. In the end, they resorted to playing tricks holding the fish in enclosures without actually taking them out of the water. They only captured the fish from those enclosures on the following morning, when the Sabbath was over. Indeed, God instructs the Prophet Muĥammad to question them about this, confronting them with their trickery: *"Ask them about the town which stood facing the sea: how its people broke the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them, breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days. Thus did We try them because of their disobedience."* (7: 163)

It is this same trial which the Muslim community came through successfully, while the Jews did not. This is the proof of God's description of the Muslim community: *"You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God. Had the people of earlier revelations believed, it would have been for their own good. Few of them are believers, while most of them are evildoers."* (3: 110)

In fact the Muslim community has passed the test on numerous occasions whereas the Jews did not pass any similar tests. Hence, God deprived them of their leadership role and assigned it to the Muslim community, giving it more power to establish its entity on earth than He has given to any other community. The fact remains that the code of living laid down by God was never implemented in a practical system regulating the whole of human life until it was put into practice by the Muslim community. But that was when that community was truly Islamic, when it knew and accepted that Islam means that the Divine religion and its laws must be implemented in human life. It also realised that it was placed in a position of trust, undertaking the fulfilment of that great task and providing leadership for mankind in implementing the Divine law.

The Purpose of the Trial

The trial of providing easy game at the time when it was prohibited to kill during the period of consecration, or *iĥrām,* was one of the numerous tests that the Muslim community successfully passed. The care God took of this Muslim community and its education is reflected in such tests. In this particular incident, God tells the believers of the purpose beyond His test: *"So that God may mark out those who truly fear Him in their hearts."* (Verse 94) Being truly God-fearing, or fearing Him in one's heart, is the solid basis on which faith is established in a person's conscience. It mould's one's behaviour and it is the essence of putting man's vicegerency on earth into practice.

Human beings do not see God, but they feel His presence in their hearts when they truly believe in Him. To them, He is beyond the reach of all their faculties of perception, but their hearts know and fear Him. The certainty of this great truth in a firm, unshakeable belief in God, and achieving, without seeing Him or feeling His presence with our senses, a strength of belief equal, if not superior, to that based on one's senses is something great indeed. A believer declares that "there is no deity other than God" without having seen Him. To have such belief is indicative of a huge step forward towards a superior level of humanity that taps man's natural faculties and makes the best use of all his natural abilities. This represents a great departure away from the realm of animal existence that cannot look up to anything beyond its immediate perception. On the other hand, when man bars his soul from looking up to what lies beyond the reach of his faculties of perception and confines his feelings to the material world surrounding him, he shuts down his superior faculties and lingers permanently in his material and sensual world.

Hence, God makes this quality of fearing Him in our hearts the crucial point of this test, making it clear to the believers so that they are able to use all their powers to achieve it. God certainly knows, initially, who fears Him in his heart, but He does not hold people to account on the basis of His initial knowledge. They are accountable only for what they actually do, which God also knows on the basis of its taking place.

"Whoever transgresses after all this will have grievous suffering." (Verse 94) Man is thus told of the trial to which he is being put. He is informed of its purpose and warned against yielding to temptation. All means of success have been given to him. Hence, should he transgress after all this, it is only fair that he should be made to endure grievous suffering. This is his own choice.

Details of the atonement for violation are then given. This starts with a firm prohibition and ends with a second warning: *"Believers, kill no game while you are on pilgrimage. Whoever of you kills game by design shall make amends in cattle equivalent to what he has killed, adjudged by two persons of probity among you, to be brought as an offering to the Ka`bah; or else he may atone for his sin by feeding needy persons, or by its equivalent in fasting, so that he may taste the evil consequences of his deeds. God has forgiven*

what is past; but whoever repeats his offence, God will inflict His retribution on him. God is Almighty, Lord of retribution." (Verse 95)

The prohibition applies to killing game deliberately when a person is in the state of consecration, or *iĥrām.* If a game animal is killed by accident, the person in consecration neither incurs a sin nor has to give any compensation. For deliberate killing, the compensation is an offering of cattle or other animals equivalent to the game he has killed. Thus, if a person in consecration kills a deer, the compensation may be an offering of a sheep or a goat; for a camel, a cow or an ox is appropriate; for an ostrich or a giraffe or a similarly large animal, a camel may be offered; for a rabbit or a cat the offering may be a rabbit. What has no equivalent among animals however, an offering of its cash value is acceptable in compensation.

The compensation is adjudged by two Muslim men of probity. Should they rule that a particular type of animal be slaughtered, that animal is set loose until it reaches the Ka (bah where it is slaughtered and given to the poor to eat. If such an animal is not available, the arbiters may rule that the compensation be given in the form of food given to the poor, provided that its quantity is equivalent to the value of either the animal to be slaughtered or the game animal killed. If the offender who has to make this compensation cannot afford this, he should fast a number of days to be decided as fair compensation. To do so, the value of the animal is first estimated, then the number of poor people that could be fed by this amount is determined. He fasts one day for every poor person. As for how much money is sufficient to feed one poor person, this is a matter on which scholars have differed. However, it cannot be a fixed sum, as it differs according to place, time and conditions.

The verse states the purpose of this compensation: *"So that he may taste the evil consequences of his deeds."* (Verse 95) The requirement of compensation implies punishment. The offence is a breach of a strict prohibition. Hence, it cannot be left unpunished. However, God makes it clear that He has forgiven offences of the past, but He threatens those who do not desist from committing such violations with severe punishment: *"God has forgiven what is past; but whoever repeats his offence, God will inflict His retribution on him. God is Almighty, Lord of retribution."* (Verse 95) Thus, if the killer of game wants to boast of his hunting ability by killing game animals which God wants to enjoy security in the vicinity where all are secure, he should know that it is God who is almighty and who exacts retribution.

All this applies to hunting on land. Fishing, on the other hand, is permissible in all situations: *"Lawful to you is all water game, and whatever food the sea brings forth, as a provision for you and for travellers."* (Verse 96) This means that all types of water animals are permissible to catch and use for food whether a person is in the state of consecration or not. With this mention of the permissibility of water-game and food from the sea, the verse restates the prohibition of killing game on land during

consecration: "*However you are forbidden land-game as long as you are in the state of consecration [or iĥrām].*" (Verse 96)

All scholars are unanimous that killing animal game is forbidden for any person in consecration. However, scholars have differing views as to the permissibility of eating game, should the animal be killed by another person who is not in consecration. Moreover, scholars disagree as to the referent of the term "game" as used in this verse: does it apply only to animals that are normally pursued as game; or does the prohibition apply to all animals, including those which are not normally considered game and are not referred to as game.

These rules of permissibility and prohibition are concluded with a statement that appeals to the believers' sense of fearing God and reminds us of the Day of Judgement and the reckoning We will then have to face: "*Be conscious of God, to whom you shall all be gathered.*" (Verse 96)

The Reason for Prohibition

It is perhaps pertinent to ask here about the purpose behind these prohibition rules. Well, God wishes to provide a security zone for mankind, where they seek refuge from life's worries. This zone is represented by the Ka`bah, the Inviolable House of Worship, and the sacred months. They offer a haven of peace in the midst of the raging battle between those in combat through life, regardless of their race and ethnic origin. Their desires, ambitions and needs continue to fuel their struggle, but this security zone beckons to them so that it may substitute reassurance for their worries, love for conflict, brotherhood and security for hostility and fear. What is more is that such concepts are not confined to the realm of theories and ideals; people are given practical training in real life to grab such feelings and maintain them. Thus, they are seen as a reality, not mere words and visions that have no bearing on real life.

> *God has made the Ka`bah, the Inviolable House of Worship, a symbol for all mankind; and so too the sacred month and the garlanded sacrificial offerings. This, so that you may know that God is aware of all that is in the heavens and the earth, and that God has full knowledge of everything. Know that God is severe in retribution and that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. The Messenger's duty is but to deliver the message [entrusted to him]. God knows all that you reveal, and all that you conceal.* (Verses 97-9)

God has made the sanctity of the Ka`bah applicable to man, animals, birds, insects and all creatures. They all feel secure there. In the period of consecration, the

prohibitions apply even before someone reaches the Ka 'bah. God has also prohibited all fighting and killing in the four sacred months of Dhu'l-Qa`dah, Dhu'l-Hijjah, Muharram and Rajab. Even in pre-Islamic days, God made the Arabs highly respectful of the sanctity of those sacred months. Thus, they would not frighten anyone or seek any vengeance during those times. A man would meet the killer of his father, son, or brother and would not take any action against him. Thus, those four months became a season for travel and seeking one's livelihood. God's purpose has been that the Ka`bah should be a place of peace and security, where people are not troubled by fear and anxiety. Similarly, He made those four months a time- zone of security. He then extended the cover of peace and security beyond geographical and time zones so that it included sacrificial animals let loose during the pilgrimage and *`umrah.* None could intercept such animals until they reached the Ka`bah. The same security being extended to any person or animal wearing a garland taken from the trees of the Ĥaram area; this by way of declaring the protection granted by the Ka`bah.

These sanctities were put in place at the time when the Ka`bah was built by the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael. It was then that God made the Ka`bah a haven for people and a sanctuary. In fact, He reminds the idolatrous Arabs of His favour in placing them close to the House which provides security and sanctuary while people all around them live in fear. Yet still they do not give thanks or express real gratitude. They do not address their worship to God alone even in the House that was built as a symbol for God's oneness. They further said to God's Messenger who called on them to attribute all Godhead to God alone: *"If we were to follow the guidance you bring us, we will be snatched away from our land."* God reports their claim and confronts them with the security and peace they enjoy in the vicinity of the Ka`bah, the Sacred Mosque God has sanctified: *"They say: If we were to follow the message to which you invite us, we would be snatched away from our land.' Why – have We not established for them a secure sanctuary, to which are brought the fruits of all good things, as provision from Ourself? But most of them are ignorant."* (28: 57)

An authentic *ĥadīth* related by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim quotes the Prophet as saying on the day Makkah fell to Islam: "This city is a forbidden city: its trees may not be cut, nor its plants sheared; its game may not be deliberately scared, and whatever is dropped by people may not be picked up except for identification." Of all living things, only five may be killed in the vicinity of the Ka`bah or by a person in consecration. These are: a raven, kite, scorpion, mouse and a biting dog. Al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate, on the authority of `Ā'ishah, that "the Prophet ordered the killing of five harmful creatures in the Ĥaram and outside it: ravens, kites, scorpions, mice and biting dogs." Snakes were also added in an authentic *ĥadīth* related by Muslim on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Umar.

Madinah was similarly declared a place of sanctity. 'Alī quotes the Prophet as saying: "Madinah is a sanctuary between `Īr and Thawr." A *ĥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim on the authority of `Abbād ibn Tamīm states that the Prophet said: "Abraham has consecrated Makkah and prayed for it. I am consecrating Madinah just like Abraham consecrated Makkah."

Furthermore, it is not merely a time and place security zone for humans and animals alone. It is also a security zone for the human conscience, that vast arena of the human soul attendant with all its struggles and strains. It is like a volcano that sends its smoke, fire and lava to burn the land and mar the clarity of time, harming man and animal alike. The Ka`bah and its environs provides the perfect sanctuary in the midst of all this conflict. This sanctuary extends its peace and security so as to make a person in consecration unwilling to chase an animal or a bird, which would otherwise be lawful for them to slay. However, here they are in a sanctuary, in a place of security for animals and humans alike. The whole place is a stage for training the human soul so that it is purged of all its shady traces and so that it is able to attain a standard of clarity and sublimity that enables it to deal with the Supreme Society of Heaven.

Man, terrified, worried and engaged in endless strife as he is, is always in dire need of such a security zone which God has provided in the Islamic faith and outlined its boundaries in the Qur'ān.

"*This, so that you may know that God is aware of all that is in the heavens and the earth, and that God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 97) This may sound a rather strange comment at this particular juncture, but it is perfectly understandable. God has laid down this faith and established this sanctuary so that people may know that He knows everything that is in the heavens and the earth and that He is fully aware of all things. Thus, they know that God is fully cognizant of human nature, as well as people's aspirations, needs and spiritual longings. He enacts legislation in order to satisfy natures, meet needs, fulfil aspirations and answer longings. When people feel in their hearts how God's compassion is evident in His law and appreciate the harmony between their nature and God's law, they realise that God is fully aware of all that is in the heavens and the earth and that His perfect knowledge encompasses everything.

It is most remarkable how this religion of Islam meets all the needs and aspirations of human nature. It has been moulded in a way that perfectly fits human nature. When a person's heart is responsive to the Islamic faith, it finds in it beauty, serenity, comfort and an ease of standards unknown except to those who have experienced them.

The discussion of the permissible and the prohibited, both in consecration and at

other times, is brought to its conclusion with a clear warning against incurring punishment, while at the same time offering the prospect of forgiveness and mercy: *"Know that God is severe in retribution and that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 98) The warning is coupled with pointing out that responsibility lies clearly with the one who breaches sanctities and does not regret or repent: *"The Messenger's duty is but to deliver the message [entrusted to him]. God knows all that you reveal, and all that you conceal."* (Verse 99)

Foul and Wholesome

At the concluding part of this passage God provides us with a standard so that we may give correct judgement of all things. In these scales, only what is good and wholesome is weighty, while that which is foul and evil carries no weight. This prevents a Muslim from being deceived when he finds that the foul is plentiful and the evil too numerous. *"Say: Evil and good are not equal, even though the abundance of evil may be pleasing to you. Have fear of God, you who are endowed with understanding, so that you may triumph."* (Verse 100)

Evil and good are mentioned here within the context of elaborating which food and game are permissible and which are forbidden. What is forbidden is evil, while everything that is permissible is good. Certainly the good and the evil cannot be equal, even though the evil may come in such plenty that it attracts and tempts people. That which is good provides enjoyment that is not followed by foul consequences, such as regret, waste, pain or disease. The pleasure gained out of evil things cannot be matched even by a modicum of the good things in life. What is more is that with the good things, man enjoys safety in this life and in the life to come. When the human mind is free of the shackles of desire as a result of its being God-fearing and when it has attained a keen watchfulness, it will inevitably prefer good to evil. This is bound to end in success and triumph, both in this world and in the Hereafter: *"Have fear of God, you who are endowed with understanding, so that you may triumph."* (Verse 100)

This verse especially suits the present occasion, but it has a much wider implication. It looks to a broad horizon, encompassing life in its totality.

God, who has raised this community as the best model for mankind, wants it to undertake the great trust of establishing His system and constitution on earth, so that it maintains it in practical life as no previous community ever did. Hence, this community has been in need of long and sustained training that purges it from all traces of past ignorance and takes it by the hand from the low ebb of material life along the incline of an Islamic life. The training then continues to purify the concepts, habits, practices and feelings of the Muslim community, strengthening its will and

determination to advocate only the truth. What is more is that it takes place amidst all the adversity it has to face and the responsibility it has to shoulder in so doing. The final stage is that the Muslim community has to shape and mould its whole life in accordance with Islamic values. This places the Muslim community truly on God's side. It gives it the fairest form of humanity, upholding a standard that will never equate evil with good, even though the evil is plentiful and replete with temptation. The ability to distinguish evil from good and to give each its proper value as shown in God's system makes evil very light in God's scale and good very much heavier, even though it may be much smaller in quantity. When the Muslim community attains such a standard, it becomes worthy of shouldering God's trust, providing leadership for humanity, weighing things up according to God's scales, choosing what is good for mankind, and refusing to be tempted by an abundance of evil.

Another situation in which this standard is found to be most suitable is that when falsehood puts on airs and graces so that people think it mighty, plentiful and powerful. But a believer looks at such rising falsehood with a firm gaze, remains unaffected by its apparent might, and chooses, in preference to it, the truth which displays no apparent strength and commands no ready forces. He prefers it only because it is the truth, plain and simple, carrying no weight or authority other than its being true in God's measure.

God subjected the first Muslim community to the Qur'ānic system of education, under the supervision of His Messenger (peace be upon him), until it attained the standard which He had determined to be necessary for its role as trustee of the Divine faith. This standard does not merely apply to conscience and inner belief, but also to practices and life affairs. It looks at all desires, attractions, aspirations, and conflicting interests with which human life abounds, whether these belong to individuals or the community as a whole and then evaluates them by God's standard. This makes it worthy of shouldering the heavy responsibility of trusteeship over human life as a whole.

In His education of the Muslim community, God used all sorts of directives, influences, tests, trials and legislation, placing them all in one bunch to fulfil a single role, namely, the preparation of this community for its role as guardian of God's faith on earth. This preparation required equipping it with the right concepts, formulating the right reactions and responses, adopting the proper morality, legal code and system, and following the right practices, etc. When that preparation was completed, God achieved with that community whatever He willed. God certainly is able to accomplish His purpose at all times. Thus, the earth witnessed a sublime model of the Divine faith in practice. Humanity can always emulate that model, provided it realises that it has to struggle hard for that purpose. When it is determined to go ahead with such a struggle, God will give it His help and support.

Politeness in Dealing with the Prophet

The *sūrah* moves on to draw the attention of the early Muslims to the standard of politeness they must adopt with the Prophet. They are told not to ask him about matters on which he remains silent, particularly such matters which, should they be tackled, may cause hardship or embarrassment to the person raising the question, or may impose on him heavy tasks or restrictions that God, out of His mercy, has chosen not to impose on the Muslims.

> *Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship. If you should ask about them while the Qur'ān is being revealed, they shall be made plain to you. God will forgive you these; for God is Much-Forgiving, Forbearing. People before your time inquired about them, and on that account they came to deny the truth.* (Verses 101-102)

Some people used to put numerous questions to the Prophet (peace be upon him) asking him about matters on which no order or prohibition had been given. Some were always asking about the details of matters that the Qur'ān gave in general terms, to make them easier for people. Some asked about matters which need not be exposed, because exposure would cause a problem either to the person putting the question or to others. It is reported, for example, that when the verse establishing the duty of pilgrimage was revealed, a man asked the Prophet whether pilgrimage was a duty every year. The Prophet disliked the question because the Qur'ānic verse left the matter Unspecified: "*Pilgrimage to this House is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it.*" (3: 97) To offer the pilgrimage once is sufficient for this duty to be fulfilled. To ask whether it is a duty required every year is to give the text a much harder interpretation and one which God has not imposed.

A *Ĥadīth* attributed to `Alī, without quoting the Prophet, says: "When the verse stating that 'pilgrimage is a duty owed to God by all people who are able to undertake it,' was revealed, some people asked the Prophet: `Is it every year?' He did not answer. They repeated the question and he said: 'No.' Had I said, 'yes,' it would have become an obligation." Then God revealed the verse stating: "*Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship.*" (Verse 101) (Related by al-Tirmidhī and al-Dāraquṭnī)

Al-Dāraquṭnī relates a similar *Ĥadīth* on the authority of Abū Hurayrah who says: "The Prophet said: 'Mankind, Pilgrimage has been made a duty of yours.' A man stood up and asked, 'Is it every year, Messenger of God?' The Prophet did not answer him, so the man repeated the question. The Prophet asked who the man was putting the question. When he was told his name, he said: 'By Him who holds my soul in His hand, had I said, "Yes", it would have become binding. Had it been made

binding, you would not be able to fulfil it, and if you were not able to fulfil it, you would be guilty of disbelief." Then God revealed the verse stating: *"Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship."* (Verse 101)

According to al-Ṭabarī, on one occasion people asked the Prophet a great many questions. In reference to that occasion Muslim relates in his *Sahīh* on the authority of Anas that "the Prophet said: 'By God I will answer any question you put to me, as long as I am in this position.' A man stood up and asked: 'Which will be my place of entry?' The Prophet said, 'The Fire.' `Abdullāh ibn Ĥudhāfah asked: 'Who is my father, Messenger of God?' The Prophet said to him, `Your father is Ĥudhāfah.' His mother said to him: 'I have never heard of a more undutiful son. How could you be sure that your mother might not have done something which women prior to Islam did? You would have, then, exposed her in front of all people.' He said: 'Had he said that I belonged to a black slave, I would have affiliated myself to him."' It should be added here that the second man mentioned in this *ĥadīth,* `Abdullāh ibn Ĥudhāfah, was among the early Muslims in Makkah. He went to Abyssinia with the second group of emigrants and took part in the Battle of Badr. He was known for his sense of humour.

Another report by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Abū Hurayrah states: "The Prophet came out angry, with his face red, and sat on the pulpit. A man rose and asked him: 'Where will I be?' He said, `In the Fire.' Another man asked him: `Who is my father?' The Prophet said: `Your father is Ĥudhāfah.' `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb stood up and said: 'We acknowledge God as our Lord, Islam as our faith, and Muĥammad (peace be upon him) as God's Prophet, and the Qur'ān as our constitution. Messenger of God, we only recently abandoned idolatry, and God knows best who were our fathers.' The Prophet's anger cooled down. "Then the verse was revealed stating: *"Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship."* (Verse 101)

Mujāhid quotes Ibn `Abbās as saying that this verse was revealed in answer to people who asked about certain superstitious practices involving animals. He quotes another scholar, Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, as citing in support the verse that follows, stating: *"It was not God who instituted [superstitions like those of] a slit-ear she camel, or a she-camel let loose for free pasture, or idol sacrifices for twin-births in animals, or stallion- camels freed from work."* (Verse 103)

All these reports and similar ones give us a clear picture of the type of questions which believers have been ordered not to ask.

The Qur'ān was revealed from on high not merely to establish a faith or outline a legal code, but also to educate a community and establish a society. It also aims to reform the attitudes of individuals and to set for them a logical and moral system of

its own. Here the

Qur'ān is teaching Muslims how and when to put their questions, demarcating the boundaries of investigation and the system through which to acquire knowledge. Since God is the source of the Islamic code and the One who reveals what is unknown, it is only good manners that His servants should leave it to His wisdom whether to provide details of the legal provisions or to state them in general terms only, and whether to inform them of what is unknown to them or keep it hidden away from them. It behoves them well to stop at the limits determined by God whose knowledge encompasses all things. It is not in their interest to set for themselves stricter limits, through the pursuit of different possibilities. It is wrong that they should try to seek to know things that lie beyond the reach of their powers of perception when God has determined not to reveal these to them. Their attempts are bound to be fruitless, for God knows well the limits of human power and potential. He gives them the law that suits them, revealing only that measure of knowledge with which they are able to cope.

Choosing the Hard Way

God has kept certain matters unknown to man, or He might have expressed certain matters in general terms. It does not harm people to leave such matters in the form God has left them. To question these at the time of the Prophet might have provided them with distressing answers, or might have overburdened both them and future generations. Hence, God tells the believers not to ask about certain matters which if revealed might be harmful. He also warns them that should they ask about these during the Prophet's lifetime, when the Qur'ān was being revealed, for then they would have their answers, but these would impose on them obligations that God did not originally make binding: "*Believers, do not ask about matters which, if made known to you, may cause you hardship. If you should ask about them while the Qur'ān is being revealed, they shall be made plain to you. God will forgive you these; for God is Much-Forgiving, Forbearing.*" (Verse 101) The verse carries a clear instruction not to inquire about matters which God has left out or stated without details in order to keep duties lighter, as in the case of pilgrimage.

God then gives the example of former communities that were given revelations. Some of them made things harder for themselves by numerous questions about rulings and duties. When, as a result, God made new obligations binding on them, they failed to perform these, thus rejecting them. Had they left matters as God stated them originally, they would have been able to benefit by the easier tasks God wanted to assign to them. They would not have had to cope with their failure to fulfil their responsibilities.

We have seen how the Jews asked too many questions when they were ordered to slaughter a cow (Volume I, pp. 63-67). They were not given any conditions initially, and as such, slaughtering any cow would have been good enough. However, they asked for a description, and then details of that description. With every question, the choice before them was narrowed down and the task became harder. Had they refrained from putting these questions, the matter would have remained much easier. The same was the case when they asked for the Sabbath. When it was granted to them, at their request, they could not cope with its obligations. They followed the same pattern time and time again, until God forbade them many things either for educational purposes or as a punishment.

An authentic *ĥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whatever I leave out, do not pursue it with me. Communities before you were ruined as a result of asking too many questions and disputing with their prophets." In another authentic *ĥadīth* the Prophet states: "God has imposed certain obligations; so do not neglect them. He set certain boundaries; so do not transgress them. Furthermore, He has forbidden certain things; so do not violate these. And He has left out certain matters as an act of grace, forgetting none of them; so do not ask about these."

In his authentic collection of *aĥādīth* Muslim relates that the Prophet said: "Among all Muslims, the worst offender against the Muslim community is one who asks about something which has not been forbidden them, and as a result of his question, it has been made forbidden."

A Practical Approach to Knowledge

Perhaps these *aĥādīth* we have quoted, together with statements in the Qur'ān, delineate the Islamic system of pursuing knowledge. The first point to make clear is that, from the Islamic point of view, knowledge is sought to face a real need and to satisfy that need. Human powers and faculties are too precious to expend in pursuing detailed matters of what Islam calls *ghayb,* a term which refers to what lies beyond the reach of human perception. That is because such knowledge is not sought to meet any real or practical need in human life. It is sufficient for the human mind to believe in that *ghayb* as described by the One who has described it. When the human mind goes beyond that belief in order to investigate its nature and details, it will not attain any true results, because it is simply not equipped with the necessary faculties to achieve that knowledge. God has given us all that we need to know about it. Any further pursuit is a waste of effort; it is no more than trying to walk in the desert without a guide. It is bound to end in total loss.

As for Islamic rulings, these are sought when needed, to face practical situations as and when these take place. This is the proper Islamic approach.

Throughout the Makkan period of Islamic revelations, not a single administrative ruling was outlined, although orders were given to do certain things and to refrain from others. Detailed rulings, such as mandatory and discretionary punishments, atonements and the like were only revealed after the establishment of the Islamic state in Madinah, because that state was able to carry out these details and put them into practice.

The first generation of Muslims was fully abreast of this approach. Hence, they would not give a judgement on any question unless it had taken place. Even then, they would only give a judgement within the context of the question, and without trying to apply texts to assumed events that had not taken place. They wanted to maintain seriousness in both questions and rulings. Al-Dārimī, a leading scholar *of Hadīth,* reports that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb used to rebuke anyone who asked about things that had not taken place. He also mentions that Zaid ibn Thābit, a learned scholar among the Prophet's Companions, used to say when a question was put to him: "Has this taken place yet?" If he was told that it had, he would give an answer on the basis of his knowledge. If he was told that it had not taken place, he would say: "Leave it, then, until it takes place."

Another report by al-Dārimī mentions that `Ammār ibn Yāsir, a Companion of the Prophet, was asked about a particular matter. He said: "Has it taken place?" They answered, "No." He said: "Do not trouble us with it, then. Should it take place, we will look into it for you."

Al-Dārimī also mentions a report by Ibn `Abbas, stating: "I have never seen a community better than the Prophet's Companions. They asked him only about 13 matters, the answers for them all are given in the Qur'ān. Among these are, *They ask you about fighting in the sacred month...'* (2: 217), and, *They ask you about menstruation...'* (2: 222), and the like. They only asked about what would benefit them."

Imām Mālik says: "I have lived in this city, [meaning Madinah], and the only knowledge available to its people is the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah.* Should something unusual take place, the Governor would call in all scholars available. Whatever view they approved, he would implement. But you ask too many questions, a habit the Prophet disapproved of."

Al-Qurṭubī, a commentator on the Qur'ān, says in his explanation of this verse [i.e. Verse 101] that the Prophet says: "God has forbidden you to be undutiful to your mothers, burying your daughters alive, stinginess and greed. He also dislikes three qualities: idle speech, asking too many questions and wasting money." Many scholars are of the view that "asking too many questions" refers to asking many hypothetical questions about Islamic rulings on theoretical and imaginary matters and trying to deduce unnecessary rulings for them. The early Muslims disliked this

exercise, considering it to be a pursuit leading to nothing beneficial. They would say that should something take place, a scholar would be guided to its ruling.

This shows the Islamic system to be serious and practical. It provides practical rulings deduced from the principles of Divine law for practical problems in life. In its approach to these problems, it studies each one according to its circumstances and conditions in order to give for it a ruling that covers all its aspects and applies to it fully. To ask for rulings on hypothetical questions is neither useful nor necessary. Since a matter has not taken place, it is impossible to measure it properly. To issue a ruling for it is not suitable, because it cannot cover its aspects which remain unknown. In fact, both question and answer in this case imply a loose attitude to Islamic law and are in breach of the proper Islamic approach.

The same applies to questions asking for Islamic rulings in countries which do not implement Islamic law, and to the answers given to such questions. Divine law is asked for rulings only when these are meant for implementation. Therefore, when both the one who asks the question and the one who answers it are aware that they live in a country where God's authority over human life is denied, then what is the purpose of the whole process of seeking an Islamic ruling? Such a country does not recognise that Godhead means submission to God, His law and authority in this life. So, in such a situation, the two parties to the process of deducing an Islamic ruling on a particular question are involved in degrading Islamic law, whether they are aware of the fact or not.

We may say the same concerning purely theoretical studies of details of Islamic law concerning aspects that remain unimplemented. Such studies are no more than an idle pursuit, aiming to give a false impression that Islamic law occupies a place in the land where it is studied in academic institutes, although it remains unimplemented in the courts. Anyone who is party to giving such a false impression may be guilty of sinful action.

This religion of Islam is serious indeed. It has been revealed so that it governs human life. Its aim is to help people so that they submit to God alone and to deprive those who usurp God's authority of what they claim to be theirs so that all authority is given to God's law. It must be remembered that Islamic law is devised to govern all aspects of human life. It issues its rulings to deal with practical questions and real needs. Hence, it gives a ruling only for questions that actually take place and only when they do take place. Its rulings take into account all the aspects and circumstances of every problem. This religion of Islam has not been revealed so that it becomes a mere slogan, or that its law becomes a subject for academic, theoretical study that has no bearing on practical life. It does not indulge in solving hypotheses and providing hypothetical answers to them.

That is the practical meaning of the seriousness of Islam. Any Islamic scholar who wishes to follow its system, with such seriousness, should work hard for the implementation of Islamic law in practical life. Otherwise, he should at least refrain from issuing theoretical rulings that have no place in reality.

Freedom for the Human Mind

We have already mentioned a report in which Mujāhid quotes Ibn `Abbās and Sa`īd ibn Jubayr's comments on the immediate reason for revealing the verse instructing the believers not to put questions concerning certain matters which would cause them difficulty or distress should they be stated in detail. The same report mentions that their questions included things and practices known in pre-Islamic days.

We have not been able to determine which particular things and practices were referred to, but the fact that the *sūrah* mentions the dedication of certain types of cattle immediately after the instruction not to ask unnecessary questions of detail suggests that the two are somehow linked. This is all that we need to say before discussing the verse that refers to such idolatrous practices.

> *It was not God who instituted [superstitions like those of] a slit-ear she camel, or a she-camel let loose for free pasture, or idol sacrifices for twin-births in animals, or stallion-camels freed from work. It is unbelievers who attribute their own lying inventions to God. Most of them never use their reason. When they are told, "Come to that which God has revealed and to the Messenger, "they reply, "Sufficient for us are the ways we found our fathers following." Why, even though their fathers knew nothing and were devoid of all guidance?* (Verses 103-104)

The human mind finds itself at a crossroads: it either maintains its proper nature with which God has equipped it or takes a different route. Should it take this way, it will recognise its one Lord, God, the Lord of the universe. It will submit to Him and accept His legislation, rejecting all other types of lordship. This means that it will reject any law other than God's. In this case, the human mind will find contact with its Lord to be so easy and worshipping Him to be so simple and clear. Alternatively, the human mind could lose its way in the maze of ignorance, facing darkness in every way and a myth at every junction. Tyrannical deities demand all sorts of worship rituals and sacrifices, which, in time, increase and multiply. An idolater will then forget their origins, but continue to offer them by force of habit. He will writhe under the demands of worshipping a multitude of deities, which will deprive him of all dignity that God has bestowed on man.

Islam declares that the authority to which all people must submit is the One God. In doing so, it liberates people from bondage to one another, restores man's dignity and frees the human mind from the fetters of rituals offered to multiple deities. Hence, Islam fights to eradicate idolatry in all its shapes and forms, pursuing it wherever it settles or manifests itself: deep in the human conscience, in worship rituals, in social practices, or in government and political systems.

At this point, the *sūrah* pays attention to one aspect of idolatry in pre-Islamic, pagan Arabia. It brings it into focus so as to refute all legends surrounding it. It states the basic principles of rational thinking, as well as the principles of law and faith at the same time: "*It was not God who instituted [superstitions like those of] a slit-ear she-camel, or a she-camel let loose for free pasture, or idol sacrifices for twin-births in animals, or stallion-camels freed from work. It is unbelievers who attribute their own lying inventions to God. Most of them never use their reason.*" (Verse 103)

Superstitious Practices

There were certain types of cattle people consecrated for their deities on conditions based in their inherited myths and which people accepted blindly. What were these? Who made the regulations concerning them? We have widely differing reports explaining each type of cattle. We will mention only a couple of these definitions to give an idea of such practices.

Al-Zuhrī quotes Sa`īd ibn al-Musayyib who says that the *baĥīrah,* or "a slit-ear she-camel" was one whose milk was dedicated for deities. [Needless to say, the milk was taken and used by the custodians of the temples.] The second type, *sā'ibah,* was a she-camel dedicated to deities and let loose to graze wherever it wanted. The third type, *waşīlah,* was a she-camel that gave birth to two she-camels consecutively. This they would sacrifice for their deities. The fourth type, *hāmī,* was a male camel kept for breeding. When he had ensured conception for a set number of she-camels, they said that his back had warmed and he was freed and let loose.

Linguists have similar definitions. The first type, *baĥīrah,* is a she- camel whose ear has been widely slit. When a she-camel has given birth five times, producing in the fifth a male camel, the Arabs would slit its ear as a mark of consecration, prohibiting anyone from riding or slaughtering it for food. It would never be turned away from pasture or water. Even when a man suffering from fatigue saw it, he would not ride it. The second type, *sā'ibah,* was a she-camel let loose. When a person wanted to make an offering as a gesture of gratitude after his recovery from illness or return from a long journey or the like, he would say, "My she-camel is free." It would, thus, be consecrated in the same fashion as the first type.

According to a number of linguists, the third type of cattle, *waşīlah,* referred to a

female sheep being a twin of a male sheep. The female would, then, be spared slaughter. Others say that when a sheep gives birth to a female, they took it. Should it give birth to a male, they would slaughter it as an offering to their deities. Now if she gave birth to twins: a male and a female, they would say that the female had spared its brother and they would not slaughter the male as an offering. The fourth type, *hāmī,* was a male camel when it fathered no less than ten different pregnancies. They would say that his back had warmed. Thus, he would not be used to carry anything, and he would be let free to drink and graze wherever he wanted.

Other reports give similar or different definitions but they are all of the same nature based in the same superstitious beliefs. It is clear that these are no more than idolatrous myths. When myth and personal desire are the ultimate arbiter, there can be no logic or proper limits. Rituals will soon diverge, with omissions and additions made at will. This took place in pre-Islamic Arabia and it can happen anywhere, at any time, once human conscience deviates from absolute, straight and clear monotheism. Appearances may differ, but the essence of ignorance remains, allowing guidance to be derived from any source other than God Almighty.

When we speak of the state of ignorance we are not referring to a certain period of time. We mean a state that may take different shapes at any time. There can only be belief in one God, with total submission to Him, acknowledging His total authority, addressing all actions, emotions, thoughts and intentions to Him and deriving all values, standards, concepts and laws from Him and setting all systems and situations on His guidance. Or else, there will be a state of ignorance, in cane form or another, characterised by submission to other people or different creatures, without limits or controls. The point here is that the human mind cannot, on its own, be the source of proper control, unless it is controlled by true faith. We see at all times that the human mind is easily influenced by desires. It loses its power of resistance when it is subjected to different pressures, unless it refers to a well-defined standard of control.

Today, 14 centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān, we observe that whenever the bond that links the human mind to the One God becomes loose, the human mind finds itself lost in an endless labyrinth. It then submits to different deities and loses its freedom, dignity and strength. I personally have seen in the Egyptian countryside numerous forms of myth, in which certain types of animals are consecrated for alleged saints and shrines, in the same way as they were consecrated for false deities in olden times.

At the core of such rituals in any state of ignorance we find the basic question that sets the starting point: Who is the ultimate judge in human life? Is it God alone, as He has stated? Or are there other judges, as people may decide for themselves, setting their own values, standards, systems, laws and rituals? In other words: To whom does Godhead belong? To God alone, or to some of His creatures, whoever they may

be?

Contradiction in Terms

As the Qur'ān deals with these aspects, it states first of all that God has not initiated those practices of consecrating cattle. Who, then, has set those practices for the unbelievers? *"It was not God who instituted [superstitions like those of] a slit-ear she-camel, or a she-camel let loose for free pasture, or idol sacrifices for twin-births in animals, or stallion-camels freed from work."* (Verse 103) Those who follow any code or doctrine other than the one God has laid down are unbelievers, making false claims against God. They may enact their own laws and claim that these are God's law. Or they may claim for themselves the right to promulgate their own laws, allowing no room for God's law in their system, but at the same time, they claim that they do not disobey God. All this is no more than fabricating lies against God. *"It is unbelievers who attribute their own lying inventions to God. Most of them never use their reason."* (Verse 103)

The pagan Arabs used to believe that they were following the faith of Abraham, as revealed to him by God. They did not deny God altogether. Indeed they acknowledged Him, His power and control over the universe. Nevertheless, they enacted their own laws and legislation, claiming that these were all part of God's law. As such they were unbelievers. The same description applies to all people in any state of ignorance, when they make their own laws, whether they claim them to be part of God's law or not.

God's law is that which He has stated in His book, and which was outlined by His Messenger. It is neither vague nor ambiguous. It does not admit, as ignorant people claim everywhere, that anyone may invent something and claim it to be part of God's law. Hence, God brands those who make such claims as unbelievers, and then describes them as devoid of reason. Had they used their reason, they would not have fabricated lies and attributed them to God. Had they had any logic, they would not have imagined that their lies could be accepted.

The irony of what they say and do is made even clearer: *"When they are told, 'Come to that which God has revealed and to the Messenger,' they reply, Sufficient for us are the ways we found our fathers following.' Why, even though their fathers knew nothing and were devoid of all guidance?"* (Verse 104)

Divine law is well-defined in God's revelations, and clarified by the *Sunnah.* This is the point at which Islam takes its course, which is totally different from that of unbelief. When people are called to implement what God has revealed and His Messenger has explained, they either respond positively and in this case they are Muslims, or they reject the call, and in this case they are unbelievers. There is no

other choice. Some Arabs, however, used to respond to such a call by saying that they were satisfied with what they had inherited from their fathers. Thus, they followed laws enacted by human beings in preference to those enacted by the Lord of all human beings. They turned a deaf ear to the appeal to free themselves from submission to other people. By choice, they made their reason and conscience subservient to their forefathers.

In response to such an attitude the Qur'ān makes this reproachful comment: *"Why, even though their fathers knew nothing and were devoid of all guidance?"* (Verse 104) This denunciation of their following their forefathers, even though they were devoid of all knowledge, does not mean that had their forefathers had a wealth of knowledge, they would be right to follow them in abandoning what God has revealed. The *verse* merely makes a statement of fact, describing their situation and that of their predecessors. Yet surely no one would take up his own laws or those of his father, when he has access to God's law and the *Sunnah* of God's Messenger unless he is totally devoid of all knowledge and all guidance. Let such a person claim what he may about his knowledge and enlightenment. God's statement expresses the truth, which is further confirmed by reality. Only an ignorant, deviant unbeliever prefers human law to God's law.

Individual Responsibility

When the situation of the unbelievers was explained, the *sūrah* makes a statement showing the believers as a separate group, distinguished by the duties and obligations they have to fulfil. It defines for them what attitude they should take to other people. It tells them that they may look forward to no reward other than that of God. They should aspire to no reward in this life. *"Believers, it is but for your own souls that you are accountable. Those who go astray can do you no harm if you [yourselves] are on the right path. To God you all must return. He will then make you understand all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 105)

It is a case of a complete break between them and those who are hostile to their cause. Moreover, they should have a relationship of mutual support among themselves, since they form one community: *"Believers, it is but for your own souls that you are accountable. Those who go astray can do you no harm if you [yourselves] are on the right path."* (Verse 105)

What this verse says to the believers is that they should take care of themselves, purifying their souls and committing themselves wholly to their community, paying no attention to what others may say or do, even though they may go far astray. As believers, they are a separate unit, independent of all others. In this unit, they take care of one another, in complete mutual solidarity. Other than this, they have no

need for any bonds or ties of loyalty with anyone.

This single verse establishes some highly important principles with regard to the Muslim community and its relations with other communities. The Muslim community constitutes God's party, while those who are opposed to it belong to Satan's party. Hence, no ties of loyalty or solidarity may exist between the two, as they do not have any ideology in common, nor do they share in any goal, responsibility, means of action or result and reward.

The Muslim community must demonstrate total solidarity within its ranks, where all its members exchange good and sincere counsel, following Divine guidance. This makes them a community apart. When this becomes a reality, the Muslim community need not worry if everyone else goes astray, since it is committed to following God's guidance.

This, however, does not mean that the Muslim community should abandon its task of calling on all people to follow Divine guidance, represented in its own faith, law and system. Once the Muslim community has established its system in its land, its continuing duty is to call on all mankind, urging them to follow the guidance God has provided for their happiness. It should also discharge its trust, ensuring justice among all people, and steering them away from error.

The fact that the Muslim community is accountable only for itself and that it suffers no harm as the result of anyone going astray as long as it follows God's guidance does not mean that it is not accountable if it fails to enjoin what is good and forbids what is wrong. This is certainly a task that it must fulfil within its own ranks first, and then throughout the whole earth. The first thing in "what is right" is submission to God, or Islam, and implementing His law, while the first thing in "what is wrong" is to sink into a state of ignorance and usurp God's authority, abandoning His law. Any judgement of ignorance is a judgement of tyranny, which is defined as an authority at variance with God's authority. The Muslim community is in a position of trust over its own affairs in the first instance, then over the affairs of all humanity.

The purpose in defining the limits of responsibility in this verse is not to say, as some people of old understood and some today understand, that a believer is not required individually, to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong when he or she has ascertained that they follow the right guidance. Nor does it mean that, once the Muslim community has set itself on its course following Divine guidance while others remain astray, it is not required, collectively, to establish God's law in the land. This verse of the Qur'ān does not absolve Muslim individuals or the Muslim community of their ongoing responsibility to combat evil and error and to resist tyranny. The worst form of tyranny is to usurp God's authority and Godhead and to

force people to be subservient to any law other than His own. In fact no following of guidance whether by individuals or the community is sufficient while such evil exists.

Al-Nasā'ī, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah all report that Abū Bakr once said after praising God and glorifying Him: "People often read this verse, *`Believers, it is but for your own souls that you are accountable,"* but they misunderstand it. I have heard God's Messenger (peace be upon him) say: When people see evil and take no action to alter it, they render themselves exposed to God's punishment that encompasses them all." Thus, the first Caliph corrected what some of his contemporaries imagined the verse to mean. Today, we are in much greater need for this correction, because changing an evil situation has become much harder. Hence, it is all too easy for the weak to interpret the verse in a way that exempts them from putting up any struggle against evil.

For certain, this religion cannot establish its roots without effort and struggle. It needs followers who spare no effort to guide people to it in order to liberate them from subservience to other people so that they may submit to God alone. Such followers will do their utmost to establish the right concept of Godhead and to repel those who usurp God's authority so that God's law is seen to be implemented in human life. Such efforts are peaceful when the misguided ones are individuals in need of direction. However, force will be needed when there is a tyrannical power turning people away from God's guidance, and standing in the way of establishing the Islamic faith and implementing God's law. It is only then that the believers will have fulfilled their responsibility and those who persist in error are punished by God: *"To God you all must return. He will then make you understand all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 105)

Witnesses at the Time of Death

The passage is concluded with an outline of the rulings applicable to witnesses to a will, when the testator is away from home and from his society. These are the final rulings given in this *sūrah* on certain transactions in Islamic society. They provide guarantees to ensure that people receive what is rightly theirs.

> *Believers, let there be witnesses to what you do when death approaches you and you are about to make bequests: two persons of probity from among your own people, or two others from outside, if the pangs of death come to you when you are travelling through the land. Detain them both after prayer, and if you have any doubt in mind, let them swear by God, "We shall not sell this [our word] for any price, even though it were for a near kinsman; and neither shall we conceal anything of what we have*

> *witnessed before God; for then we should be among the sinful." But if afterwards it should come to light that the two [witnesses] have been guilty of [this very] sin, then two others should replace them from among those immediately concerned. Both shall swear by God, "Our testimony is indeed truer than that of these two. We have not transgressed the bounds of what is right; for then we should be among the evil-doers. "Thus it will be more likely that people will offer testimony in accordance with the truth; or else they will fear that the oaths of others may be taken after their oaths. Have fear of God and hearken to Him. God does not guide those who are iniquitous.* (Verses 106-108)

The process outlined in these three verses indicates that a person who feels the end to be near and wants to make bequests assigning any money he has to his relatives should call in two Muslim witnesses of probity and give them what property he has so that they may give it to his relatives who are not present. This applies when the person concerned is in his hometown. If he is travelling and does not find two Muslim witnesses to entrust his property to, then it is permissible to have two non-Muslim witnesses.

Should the Muslim community, or the family of the deceased, doubt the honesty of what the witnesses hand over, or they have reason to suspect that the witnesses have been unfaithful to their trust, then the following procedure applies. The witnesses are brought forward after having offered prayers, according to their faith, and they are asked to testify by God that they would not swear to make any gain for themselves or for anyone else, even a close relative, and that they would not conceal anything entrusted to them. Should they do so, they acknowledge that they would be guilty of committing a sin. Thus, their testimony is approved.

However, if it later appears that the witnesses have been guilty of a breach of trust, giving false testimony under oath, another procedure takes place. The two closest heirs of the deceased who have suffered as a result of the false testimony come forward and swear that their own testimony is truer than that of the two witnesses, and that by stating this fact, they are guilty of no iniquity. Should this take place, then the statement of the first two witnesses is considered null and void, while the statement of the second two witnesses is upheld.

The Qur'ānic verses state that these procedures ensure that witnesses remain true in their testimony, fearing that the first witnesses are rejected. Hence, they try hard to be true to their trust. "*Thus it will be more likely that people will offer testimony in accordance with the truth; or else they will fear that the oaths of others may be taken after their oaths.*" (Verse 108) These verses are concluded with a reminder to all people to remain God-fearing, and to watch God and obey His commandments. They are further reminded that God will not give His guidance to anyone who turns away

from His path. "*Have fear of God and hearken [to Him]. God does not guide those who are iniquitous.*" (Verse 108)

Al-Qurṭubī, a leading commentator on the Qur'ān, relates the occasion that led to the revelation of these three verses:

> I do not know of any disagreement among scholars that these three verses were revealed in connection with Tamīm al-Dārī and `Adī ibn Baddā`. Al-Bukhārī, al-Dāraquṭnī and others quote this report by Ibn `Abbās: Tamīm al-Dārī and `Adī ibn Baddā` used to go frequently to Makkah. Once a young man from the Sahm clan went with them and he died in a place where there was no Muslim. Just before his death, he put them in charge of his property, which they delivered to his family, but they retained a silver article with a gold covering. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) asked them by God whether they had withheld or concealed anything. Later on, that silver article was found in Makkah. People there said that they bought it from `Adī and Tamīm. Two men who were heirs of the man from Sahm stated under oath that the article belonged to their relative and that their testimony was truer than that of the two witnesses. They also confirmed that they had not transgressed. [The Prophet] then took the silver article [to give to the deceased man's relatives]. It was in relation to those people that these verses were revealed... [The text quoted here is the one related by al-Dāraquṭnī.]

It is clear that the nature of the society in which these rulings were laid down has a bearing on the procedures outlined. The calling of witnesses and entrusting things to their care, the taking of an oath in public after offering prayers to enhance one's religious consciousness, the fear of being found out, should one be tempted to lie or to act dishonestly, are all measures which suggest their effectiveness in a particular type of society. Modern societies may have different methods and measures of proof, such as documentation, registration, and bank deposits, etc.

The question then which can be posed here is: has this text lost its operational validity in today's society? The fact is that we may often be misguided by the circumstances that prevail in a particular society. We may think that some recommended measures may have lost their validity or effectiveness, or that they have become unnecessary, or that they were more suited to past communities. Such thoughts may be the result of developments that have taken place in society.

When we are so misguided, we simply forget that this religion of Islam is meant for all mankind, in all places and for all generations. We also forget that a huge number of people today still live in semi- primitive or underdeveloped conditions. Such communities are in need of legal provisions and procedures to suit their needs in all their forms and stages of development. They find in this religion of Islam what

suits their needs in all situations. When they move up along the ladder of development and progress, they will still find in it what satisfies their needs in the same way. They also find that its legal provisions satisfy their present needs and the needs of their development. This is one miracle of this religion and its law. It is a proof that it is laid down by God who knows all.

We may also be misguided when we forget that individuals today living in societies that have attained a high standard of development may find themselves in some emergency situation when they could rely on the simplicity and comprehensiveness of Islamic law. We must not forget that the tools employed by the Islamic faith have been devised so that they are effective in all environments, applicable to all cases, in bedouin and urban communities, in the desert and the jungle, as well as in the town and city. It is a faith for mankind in all ages and societies. Again, this is one of its great miracles.

We are even more grossly misguided when we think that we, human beings, know what suits us better than God, our Creator. But we are often reminded by the realities that we should be more humble in our approach. We should better remember before we face the shock of His reality. We should know what manners we should adopt when we refer to God. We should behave like the obedient servants of God, the Master of all.

9
About Jesus and the Repast

۞ يَوۡمَ يَجۡمَعُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرُّسُلَ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَآ أُجِبۡتُمۡۖ قَالُواْ لَا عِلۡمَ لَنَآۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ عَلَّٰمُ ٱلۡغُيُوبِ ١٠٩

On the day when God will gather all [His] messengers and ask them, "What response did you receive?" they will answer, "We have no knowledge. Indeed, it is You alone who has full knowledge of all that lies beyond the reach of human perception." (109)

إِذۡ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ يَٰعِيسَى ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ ٱذۡكُرۡ نِعۡمَتِي عَلَيۡكَ وَعَلَىٰ وَٰلِدَتِكَ إِذۡ أَيَّدتُّكَ بِرُوحِ ٱلۡقُدُسِ تُكَلِّمُ ٱلنَّاسَ فِي ٱلۡمَهۡدِ وَكَهۡلٗاۖ وَإِذۡ عَلَّمۡتُكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةَ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلَۖ وَإِذۡ تَخۡلُقُ مِنَ ٱلطِّينِ كَهَيۡـَٔةِ ٱلطَّيۡرِ بِإِذۡنِي فَتَنفُخُ فِيهَا فَتَكُونُ طَيۡرَۢا بِإِذۡنِيۖ وَتُبۡرِئُ ٱلۡأَكۡمَهَ وَٱلۡأَبۡرَصَ بِإِذۡنِيۖ وَإِذۡ تُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ بِإِذۡنِي وَإِذۡ كَفَفۡتُ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ عَنكَ إِذۡ جِئۡتَهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ فَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ١١٠

God will say: "Jesus, son of Mary! Remember the blessings which I bestowed on you and your mother: how I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit, so that you could speak to people in your cradle, and as a grown man; how I instructed you in the Book and in wisdom, in the Torah and in the Gospel; how, by My leave, you fashioned from clay the figure of a bird and breathed into it so that, by My leave, it became a living bird; how, by My leave, you healed the blind man and the leper, and by My leave, restored the dead to life; how I prevented the Children of Israel from harming you when you came to them with all evidence of the truth: when those of them who disbelieved declared: `This is plain sorcery.' (110)

وَإِذۡ أَوۡحَيۡتُ إِلَى ٱلۡحَوَارِيِّـۧنَ أَنۡ ءَامِنُواْ بِي وَبِرَسُولِي قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَٱشۡهَدۡ بِأَنَّنَا

And when I inspired the disciples to have faith in Me and in My Messenger; they said: "We believe; and bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves [to God]." (111)

مُسۡلِمُونَ ١١١

إِذۡ قَالَ ٱلۡحَوَارِيُّونَ يَٰعِيسَى ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ هَلۡ يَسۡتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَن يُنَزِّلَ عَلَيۡنَا مَآئِدَةً مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِۖ قَالَ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ١١٢

قَالُواْ نُرِيدُ أَن نَّأۡكُلَ مِنۡهَا وَتَطۡمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُنَا وَنَعۡلَمَ أَن قَدۡ صَدَقۡتَنَا وَنَكُونَ عَلَيۡهَا مِنَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ١١٣

قَالَ عِيسَى ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَ ٱللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَآ أَنزِلۡ عَلَيۡنَا مَآئِدَةً مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ تَكُونُ لَنَا عِيدٗا لِّأَوَّلِنَا وَءَاخِرِنَا وَءَايَةٗ مِّنكَۖ وَٱرۡزُقۡنَا وَأَنتَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ١١٤

قَالَ ٱللَّهُ إِنِّي مُنَزِّلُهَا عَلَيۡكُمۡۖ فَمَن يَكۡفُرۡ بَعۡدُ مِنكُمۡ فَإِنِّيٓ أُعَذِّبُهُۥ عَذَابٗا لَّآ أُعَذِّبُهُۥٓ أَحَدٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١١٥

وَإِذۡ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ يَٰعِيسَى ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ ءَأَنتَ قُلۡتَ لِلنَّاسِ ٱتَّخِذُونِي وَأُمِّيَ إِلَٰهَيۡنِ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ قَالَ سُبۡحَٰنَكَ مَا يَكُونُ لِيٓ أَنۡ أَقُولَ مَا لَيۡسَ لِي بِحَقٍّۚ إِن كُنتُ قُلۡتُهُۥ فَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتَهُۥۚ تَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي نَفۡسِي وَلَآ أَعۡلَمُ مَا

The disciples said: "Jesus, son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a repast from heaven?" He answered: "Fear God, if you are truly believers." (112)

Said they: "We desire to eat of it, so that our hearts are reassured and that we know that you have spoken the truth to us, and that we may be witness of it." (113)

"God, our Lord," said Jesus, son of Mary, "send down upon us a repast from heaven: it shall be an ever-recurring feast for us — for the first and the last of us — and a sign from You. And provide us our sustenance, for You are the best provider." (114)

God replied: "I am sending it down to you. But whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall inflict on him suffering the like of which I have not inflicted on anyone in the world." (115)

And God will say: "Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to people, `Worship me and my mother as deities beside God?"' [Jesus] answered: "Limitless are You in Your glory! I could never have claimed what I have no right to [say]! Had I said this, You would certainly have known it. You know all that is within myself, whereas I do not know what is in Yourself. Most certainly, it is You alone who fully knows all that lies beyond the reach of human

perception. (116)

Nothing did I tell them beyond what You bade me [to say]: `Worship God, who is my Lord and your Lord.' I was witness to what they did as long as I lived in their midst. Then when You took me to Yourself, You have been watching over them. You are indeed a witness to all things. (117)

If You punish them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are indeed Almighty, Wise." (118)

God will say: "This is the day when their truthfulness shall benefit all who have been truthful. Theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God is well-pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with Him. That is the supreme triumph." (119)

To God belongs all sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all they contain. He has the power over all things. (120)

فِى نَفْسِكَ ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ عَلَّٰمُ ٱلْغُيُوبِ ﴿١١٦﴾

مَا قُلْتُ لَهُمْ إِلَّا مَآ أَمَرْتَنِى بِهِۦٓ أَنِ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ رَبِّى وَرَبَّكُمْ ۚ وَكُنتُ عَلَيْهِمْ شَهِيدًا مَّا دُمْتُ فِيهِمْ ۖ فَلَمَّا تَوَفَّيْتَنِى كُنتَ أَنتَ ٱلرَّقِيبَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَأَنتَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿١١٧﴾

إِن تُعَذِّبْهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ عِبَادُكَ ۖ وَإِن تَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ فَإِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١١٨﴾

قَالَ ٱللَّهُ هَٰذَا يَوْمُ يَنفَعُ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ صِدْقُهُمْ ۚ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتٌ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۚ رَّضِىَ ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿١١٩﴾

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا فِيهِنَّ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٢٠﴾

Overview

This whole passage serves as a complement to the efforts undertaken in this *sūrah* to keep faith pure and to purge it from all the errors and deviations Christians have introduced. They forced their faith away from its Divine origins and fundamental principles when they diverted it from belief in the absolute oneness of God. That was the belief preached by Jesus (peace be upon him) and by every former messenger of God. They introduced into it certain aspects of disbelief which had nothing to do with Divine faith.

As such, this passage aims to establish the truth about Godhead and servitude to

God, as these are conceived by Islam. This truth is presented through a great scene portrayed here in which Jesus states in front of all God's messengers and all humanity that he never said to his people anything of what they have alleged that both he and his mother were deities. He declares that he could have never said any such blasphemy.

The *sūrah* presents this truth in a vivid scene taken from the Day of Judgement in the same way as the Qur'ān presents various scenes of that great day. In all such presentations, the picture is portrayed in such an inspiring, vivid and effective way that we almost see it before our very *eyes.* We are moved by each such scene as though it were taking place here and now. We see what is taking place, hear what is being said and feel every reaction and response. So, what does this scene at the end of this *sūrah* present?

When All Messengers Are Gathered Together

> *On the day when God will gather all [His] messengers and ask them, "What response did you receive?" they will answer, "We have no knowledge. Indeed, it is You alone who has full knowledge of all that lies beyond the reach of human perception.* (Verse 109)

Those messengers were sent at different times to their respective people, each going his own way to his city or village, and belonging to different races and nations, all preaching the same message to their communities. Then, the last of them, Muĥammad, is given a single message addressed to all people of all races in all generations. Those messengers are gathered together by the One who sent them individually, and as they come together they bring with them the different responses they received. Now, in this scene, those messengers, representing humanity throughout its life span on earth, come together and stand before God, the Lord of all mankind on an awesome day.

The scene is full of life: "*On the day when God will gather all [His] messengers and ask them: `What response did you receive?"* (Verse 109) Today, everything is brought together, and messengers account for their messages. The results are declared before all humanity.

"What response did you receive?" Messengers are human. They know what they see and feel with their senses, but they have no knowledge of what lies beyond. They had called on their peoples to follow Divine guidance. Some responded positively while others turned away. A messenger does not know the full truth about a person responding positively, even though he may know the truth of the one turning away. He can only tell by appearances; it is God who knows the full truth and what is

concealed. Those messengers are now in the presence of God and, among all human beings, they know God best, fear Him most and are too modest to speak out, in His presence, on the basis of their limited knowledge when He knows all.

This is an awesome interrogation, on the day when all creatures are gathered, the Supreme Company is present and all humanity is looking on. This is a confrontation, when all humanity is put face to face with the Messengers, and especially the unbelievers who are now arrayed before those Messengers to whom they used to lie. Then the declaration is made that those noble messengers simply preached the Divine faith, and that they are now in His presence stating what happened to their messages and giving an account of the reaction of their communities which denied them. Those messengers declare that true knowledge belongs to God alone. Whatever they knew should not, in all modesty and humility, be stated by them to God whose knowledge is perfect, absolute. *"They will answer: 'We have no knowledge. Indeed, it is You alone who has full knowledge of all that lies beyond the reach of human perception.'"* (Verse 109)

Those messengers who were sent before the time of Jesus were believed by some people and denied by others. Their account is thus completed with this general answer that they give, leaving all knowledge to God and putting the whole matter into His hands. Hence, the *sūrah* adds nothing here about them. The address is made to Jesus alone, who was a total wonder to his people. It was Jesus who was surrounded with mystery and around whom all sorts of myth and superstition have circulated. A great deal of confusion has been made about his qualities, nature, birth and end.

A Hard Confrontation

The account given in this *sūrah* addresses Jesus, son of Mary, in front of all those who attributed to him Divine status, worshipped him and weaved around him and his mother all sorts of exaggerated stories. The address reminds him of the grace God bestowed on him and on his mother, enumerating the miracles God gave him to help people to believe in his message. Yet some people denied his message most violently, while others were dazzled with the miracles he was given. On account of such miracles they elevated him to the status of a deity, when all miracles are given by God, who created him, gave him a message and supported him.

> *God will say: 'Jesus, son of Mary! Remember the blessings which I bestowed on you and your mother: how I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit, so that you could speak to people in your cradle, and as a grown man; how I instructed you in the Book and in wisdom, in the Torah and in the Gospel; how, by My leave, you fashioned from*

> *clay the figure of a bird and breathed into it so that, by My leave, it became a living bird; how, by My leave, you healed the blind man and the leper, and, by My leave, restored the dead to life; how I prevented the Children of Israel from harming you when you came to them with all evidence of the truth: when those of them who disbelieved declared: 'This is plain sorcery.' And when I inspired the disciples to have faith in Me and in My Messenger; they said: 'We believe; and bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves [to God].''* (Verses 110-111)

Here we have a full account of the various aspects of grace bestowed by God on Jesus and his mother, Mary. To start with, he was supported by the Holy Spirit in his infancy. Then, he was talking to people long before children normally start to talk, absolving his mother of all suspicion raised around her on account of his miraculous birth that had no parallel in history. He also talked to them later when as a grown man he was again supported by the Holy Spirit, Gabriel. He was also given knowledge of the Book and wisdom. He was born without knowledge of reading and writing, but God gave him that knowledge, as He imparted to him wisdom in order to deal with different situations in the best way. God also taught him the Torah which had been given to the Children of Israel and the Gospel which God gave him to confirm the Torah.

Furthermore, God gave Jesus several miraculous things that no human being could accomplish without God's support. Thus, he could fashion a bird shape of clay and breathe into it, and all at once it became a living bird. How did this happen? We do not know, because we still do not know how God creates life. Moreover, he adds quality to life: he cures a person born blind, by God's leave, when medicine does not know how to give eyesight to such a person. God, who gives human beings their faculty of seeing, is able to open a blind person's eyes to see the light. Jesus also cured the leper without using any medicine. Medication is merely a tool for accomplishing God's will of curing a patient, but the One who has willed to cure the patient is able to change the tools by which He accomplishes His purpose, or to achieve it without any tool. Again Jesus is able to restore life to the dead, by God's leave. The One who initiates life is able to restore it at any tune.

God further reminds Jesus of His favours when He extended His protection to him against the Israelites who, when he produced all these miracles, denied him claiming that they were plain sorcery. On the one hand they did not wish to deny the miracles, witnessed by thousands of people, and yet they were too stubborn to submit to the message they imparted. God protected him and they were unable to kill or crucify him, as they were keen to do. God simply gathered him and elevated him to Himself. Another reminder to Jesus speaks of how God inspired the disciples to believe in Him and His Messenger, Jesus, and they do so, appealing to him to bear witness to their acceptance of the faith and total self-surrender to God. "*And when I inspired the*

disciples to have faith in Me and in My Messenger; they said: 'We believe; and bear you witness that we have surrendered ourselves [to God].'" (Verse 111)

All these were favours God, out of His grace, gave to Jesus to serve as clear proof of his status and message. Many of his followers, however, used them erroneously, deviating from the truth and fabricating falsehood. Here Jesus is reminded of all these in the presence of the Supreme Company and in front of all mankind, including those people who exaggerated his status and attributed to him what was not his. When these favours are held in front of him, those who gave him a status far beyond his own humanity will see and hear, and, in consequence, they will be humiliated in the full sight of all humanity.

Favours Granted to Jesus's Followers

In addition to the favours bestowed on Jesus and his mother, the *sūrah* relates some of the favours God granted to his followers, and the miracles with which God supported him, as seen by his disciples.

> *The disciples said: "Jesus, son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a repast from heaven?" He answered: "Fear God, if you are truly believers." Said they: "We desire to eat of it, so that our hearts are reassured and that we know that you have spoken the truth to us, and that we may be witness of it." "God, our Lord," said Jesus, son of Mary, "send down upon us a repast from heaven: it shall be an ever- recurring feast for us — for the first and the last of us — and a sign from You. And provide us our sustenance, for You are the best provider" God replied: 'I am sending it down to you. But whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall inflict on him suffering the like of which I have not inflicted on anyone in the world."* (Verses 112-115)

This dialogue reveals to us something about Jesus's people, and the elite among them, i.e. his disciples. What we find is that they differed greatly from our own Prophet's Companions. Those were the disciples inspired by God to believe in Him and His Messenger, Jesus, son of Mary. They did so and called on Jesus to witness the fact of their faith. Yet even after all the miracles they saw Jesus performing, they still requested another miracle so as to reassure themselves about his truthfulness and to bear witness about it to those who would succeed them.

Muĥammad's Companions, on the other hand, never asked him for a single miracle after they had accepted the faith and submitted themselves to God. Their hearts were full of faith, once they had experienced the happiness and joy of it. They believed God's Messenger and asked him for no more proof of the truth of his message. They testified to his truthfulness with no miracle shown to them other than

the Qur'ān.

Such is the wide gulf between Jesus's disciples and Muĥammad's Companions (peace be upon them both). Theirs are two widely different levels; yet both have submitted to God, and both are accepted by Him, if He so pleases. But their levels remain wide apart.

The story of the Repast, as told in the Qur'ān, is not mentioned in Christian Scriptures. It is not reported in the Gospels written long after Jesus. Thus, they cannot be taken as a reliable statement of the truth revealed by God Almighty. These Gospels are only reports by saints of the story of Jesus. They are not the text of the Gospel, or the *Injīl* that God revealed to Jesus.

However, these books include a different report on the Repast. In 15: 32 of Matthew, the following report is given: "Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.' The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?' Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.' Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowd. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children." Similar reports are given in other Gospels.

Some scholars of the generation following the Prophet's Companions, i.e. *Tābi`īn,* like Mujāhid and al-Ĥasan, believe that the Repast was not sent down. They say that when the disciples were afraid at hearing God's statement, *"I am sending it down to you. But whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall inflict on him suffering the like of which I have not inflicted on anyone in the world."* (Verse 115), they no longer asked for it to be granted.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr quotes several statements by scholars. He quotes Mujāhid as saying: "This was merely a parable given by God, but nothing was sent down." Another quotation by Mujāhid says: "They were offered a table full of food, but they refused it when they were told that they would be severely punished should they disbelieve. They did not want to have anything to do with it." Al-Ĥasan also expresses the view that it was not sent down. He is reported to have said: "When the disciples were told, '*Whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall inflict on him suffering the like of which I have not inflicted on anyone in the world,*' they said, 'We have no need for it.' Thus, it was not sent down."

The majority of early scholars, however, agree that it was sent down, because God

said: "*I am sending it down to you.*" God's promise always comes true. We, therefore, take only what the Qur'ān has stated concerning the Repast.

Thus, God reminds Jesus, son of Mary, of His favours when he stands in front of his people on the Day of Judgement, with all creatures looking on: "*The disciples said: Jesus, son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a repast from heaven?'*" (Verse 112) The disciples, the closest to Jesus of all his followers, were aware that he was a human being, born to Mary. They address him according to his status, which they knew very well. They knew that he was neither a son of God nor a deity, but a servant of God. They also knew that it was his Lord who accomplished all those miraculous events through him. He himself could not do any of them by his own initiative. Hence, when they requested a further miracle, they did not ask him to accomplish it himself, because they were aware that he could not do so. Their question was: "*Jesus, son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a repast from heaven?*" (Verse 112)

Interpretations vary as to the nature of their question. How is it that they would use such a form of question when they had already declared their belief in God and asked Jesus to witness their submission to Him? One interpretation of their question is that it did not seek to know God's ability, but rather whether He would give them the repast. Another view considers the question to mean, "would your Lord respond to you if you were to request Him to send down a repast?" Other interpretations are also given.

The Miraculous Repast

Be that as it may, Jesus warned them against asking for miracles, because believers do not ask for them: "*He answered: 'Fear God, if you are truly believers.'*" (Verse 112) But Jesus's disciples repeated their request stating their reasons for requesting it and what they hoped to achieve, should it be granted. "*Said they: 'We desire to eat of it, so that our hearts are reassured and that we know that you have spoken the truth to us, and that we may be witness of it.'*" (Verse 113)

What they wanted was that they should eat of such food which no human being on earth could ever taste. They would have heart-felt reassurance as they would see the miracle being enacted in front of their eyes. They would know then that Jesus had told them only the truth. This would make of them witnesses to the truth of this miracle so that none of their people could ever deny it. All these reasons confirm that the level of those disciples was well below that of Muĥammad's Companions, who were of a totally different mould.

At this point Jesus addressed his appeal to his Lord: "*God, our Lord," said Jesus, son of Mary, "send down upon us a repast from heaven: it shall be an ever-recurring feast for us — for the first and the last of us — and a sign from You. And provide us our sustenance, for*

You are the best provider." (Verse 114)

We note in Jesus's supplication how he makes his address with all the humility of a servant whose Lord has honoured him. He first makes it clear that he recognises Him, saying, "*God, our Lord!" Then* he states his appeal, requesting Him to give them a repast that would bring them joy and goodness, so as to be like a festival for everyone of them. He acknowledges that it would all be provided by God, the best of all providers. Jesus is thus shown to recognise his own status as a servant of God and to recognise God's status as Lord of all the worlds. This is shown in front of all mankind, particularly his people on that great and eventful day.

God answers the prayer of his good servant, Jesus son of Mary, but with the seriousness that befits His majesty. They asked for a miracle, and He will give them the miracle they requested, on condition that He will severely punish anyone who continues to disbelieve after the miracle is granted. Indeed that punishment will surpass in severity any other punishment inflicted on any other of God's servants. *"God replied: I am sending it down to you. But whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall inflict on him suffering the like of which I have not inflicted on anyone in the world.'"* (Verse 115)

This seriousness is important, so that requests for miracles are not made as idle talk. Moreover, those who ask for proof and continue to disbelieve after they have been given what they have asked for must not go unpunished. It has been God's law, applicable to all past communities, that those who continued to deny the messages preached by God's messengers after the miracles were given them were annihilated. In this instance, however, the statement may mean that they would be punished here in this life, or in the life to come.

Did Jesus Claim Divinity?

The *sūrah* does not follow the account of the Repast after stating God's warning. It moves on to deal with the central issue of Godhead and Lordship, which permeates the whole passage. We go back now to that great scene which continues to be held up for all onlookers. We listen now to a straightforward questioning about the Divinity claimed for Jesus and his mother. The person now interrogated is none other than Jesus, facing those who worshipped him. They listen to him as he, surprised and amazed, disclaims before his Lord all knowledge of such a grievous sin they attach to him. He is, indeed, innocent and it is all fabrication:

> *And God will say: Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to people, 'Worship me and my mother as deities beside God?" [Jesus] answered: "Limitless are You in Your glory! I could never have claimed what I have no right to [say]! Had I said this, You would*

> *certainly have known it. You know all that is within myself whereas I do not know what is in Yourself. Most certainly, it is You alone who fully knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Nothing did I tell them beyond what You bade me [to say]: `Worship God, who is my Lord and your Lord.' I was witness to what they did as long as I lived in their midst. Then when You took me to Yourself, You have been watching over them. You are indeed a witness to all things. If You punish them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are indeed Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 116-118)

Limitless is God in His glory! He knows very well what Jesus said to people. But this worrying interrogation on that fearful day is intended for people other than the one to whom it is addressed. Putting it in this form adds to our abhorrence of the attitude of those who attributed Divinity to Jesus, God's noble and great servant. For anyone of God's servants to claim to be God, knowing that he is no more than a servant of God, is indeed a horrible offence that no normal human being could perpetrate. Is it conceivable, then, that one of God's messengers who were granted the strongest resolve should perpetrate it? Or is it even conceivable that this perpetrator should be Jesus son of Mary, when God gave him all those favours before and after he was chosen to bear His message? How does he feel when questioned about this claim of Godhead, when he is a good servant of God?

Hence, his answer is tinged with awe and fear. He starts by glorifying God and follows this immediately with an absolute denial of any such thoughts or of any such claims: "*[Jesus] answered: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! I could never have claimed what I have no right to [say]'!"* (Verse 116) In his own defence, he seeks God as witness to his innocence of such claims. He owns to his humble position of being only a servant to God who has all attributes of the Godhead. "*Had I said this, You would certainly have known it. You know all that is within myself whereas I do not know what is in Yourself. Most certainly, it is You alone who fully knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception."* (Verse 116)

Now, after having made this long praise of God, he is able to state what he did and did not say, declaring that he said nothing to his community other than calling on them to worship God alone, and stating that, like them, he is no more than God's servant. "*Nothing did I tell them beyond what You bade me [to say]: `Worship God, who is my Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 117)

He then disclaims any responsibility for what they did after the end of his time on earth. Taken at face value, the Qur'ānic text means that God gathered Jesus then elevated him to Himself. Some reports indicate that he is alive with God. In my view, there can be no contradiction between the two situations; for God may have determined that Jesus had completed his term of life on earth, and He may have

taken him so that he be alive with Him. Martyrs die and finish their lives on earth, but they are alive with God. We do not know what form their life with God takes, nor do we know what form of life Jesus has; but he says here to his Lord that he does not know what they did or said after he was gathered from life on earth: "*I was witness to what they did as long as I lived in their midst. Then when You took me to Yourself, You have been watching over them. You are indeed a witness to all things.*" (Verse 117)

He concludes with leaving the fate of his people absolutely to God, stating at the same time that they are His servants and at His disposal. God is able to forgive them or to punish them. Whether He decides on one course or the other, that decision is based on His wisdom, which operates in the same measure whichever fate He determines for them. "*If You punish them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 118) This is all that Jesus, a model servant of God, says in this awesome position.

But where are those who invented such grave falsehood about Jesus in this whole scene? The *sūrah* does not mention them once. They may be feeling their ignominy and wish not to show themselves. We, therefore, leave them where the *sūrah* has left them. We will only look now at the final part in that remarkable scene:

"*God will say: 'This is the day when their truthfulness shall benefit all who have been truthful. Theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them, and they are well pleased with Him. That is the supreme triumph.'*" (Verse 119) The appropriate comment on the falsehood fabricated by liars against the noble Prophet Jesus, concerning the most serious issue of all, i.e. the issue of Godhead, is to state that truth will be of great benefit to its upholders on that awesome day. "*This is the day when their truthfulness shall benefit all who have been truthful.*"

This is God's word at the end of that interrogation beheld by all creatures. It is the final and decisive word. It is coupled with the reward that befits truthfulness and those who are truthful: "*Theirs shall be gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them, and they are well pleased with Him.*" (Verse 119) Each of these phrases represents a grade above the previous one: the gardens with running waters, the everlasting abode there, the fact that God is pleased with them, and their pleasure with what they receive from Him. Hence the description, "*That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 119)

We have looked at this scene as it is portrayed in the unique style of the Qur'ān and we have paid attention to the final word. We say that we have seen and paid attention because the Qur'ānic method of portraying scenes and images does not leave it as merely a promise to be fulfilled or sentences and phrases to be read or heard. The Qur'ān makes of it something to excite feelings and something to behold as if it were taking place now. However, if it is, as far as we human beings are

concerned, a future event to be witnessed on the Day of Judgement, it is, for God's perfect knowledge, a present reality. Time and the screen of the future apply to us, not to God.

The Final Note

At the end of this passage and in contrast to the greatest falsehood ever perpetrated by the followers of any messenger, i.e. the falsehood of Christ's Divine nature, which he himself denounces and leaves all decision about which to God alone, a statement of truth is made. It provides the final note in the *sūrah,* declaring that dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that they contain belongs to God, the Lord of the universe who has full control over all things. Nothing limits His power: *"To God belongs all sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all they contain. He has the power over all things."* (Verse 120)

This is the finale that suits the great question around which that terrible fallacy has been woven. It is an ending that fits that majestic scene where God is seen to be the One who has all knowledge, Godhead and all power. To Him alone all messengers turn, putting all matters in His hands. Indeed, to Him Jesus son of Mary assigns judgement in his own and his people's affair. He is Almighty, Wise, the Sovereign over the heavens, the earth and all they contain. It is a fitting conclusion to the *sūrah* which discusses the meaning of religion, showing it to be the implementation of only God's law, receiving guidance from Him alone and judging only on the basis of His revelations. Since He is the Sovereign, He is the One to judge, for final judgement belongs to whomever has sovereignty: *"Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are indeed unbelievers."* (Verse 44)

It is all one and the same issue: Godhead, the Oneness of God, and judgement on the basis of His guidance.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

SAYYID QUṬB

Vol V
Sūrah 6

Content

Content ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Al-An`ām **1**

Prologue *1*
A Call for Freedom? 3
A Call for Social Justice? 4
Why Not Moral Reform? 5
Results in Abundance 7
The Faith or Its Detailed Systems 8
A Practical System 9
The Qur'ānic Treatment of the Faith Issue 12
An Error to Be Avoided 13
A Divine Method 14
A Sample of Makkan Revelations 16
To Truly Know God 18
Permissible or Forbidden 19
The Sūrah's Revelation 20
The Main Theme 23
Unique Subject Treatment 25

1 The Origin of Life *28*
A Framework Is Set 28
When Evil Schemes Seem to Triumph 31

2 Stubborn Rejection *36*
Overview 37
Social Attitudes and the Decline of Nations 38
Stubborn Rejection of Evident Facts 41
A World of Creation Beyond Human Senses 43
Angels: Their Life and Role 45
When God's Message is Met with Derision 54

3 A Commitment to Mercy *53*
Overview 57
A Commitment Made by God 58
An Outline of Divine Mercy 61
When All Gather for Judgement 64
God's Oneness: The Fundamental Question 66
A Testimony to Settle All Issues 69
A Perfectly Clear Attitude 71

4 Preference to Remain Blind *75*
Overview 77
Wilful Denial of Known Facts 78
A Contention Contrary to Reality 80
Truth and Fables 86
A Wish Availing Nothing 86
Contrasting Concepts and Values 87
The Only Faith Worthy of Man 90
What the Unbelievers Actually Reject 92

5 The Dead Cannot Hear *95*
Overview 96

Honest No Doubt ... 97
Knowing the Truth ... 98
Making False Accusations ... 100
Who Gives a Favourable Response? ... 102
Who Needs Miraculous Evidence? ... 105
A System Bearing No Comparison ... 107
The Islamic Doctrine's Starting Point ... 110

6 To Avert Sudden Punishment ... *114*
Overview ... 115
The Only Hope ... 116
Trials Serve as Reminders ... 119
Important Points for Reflection ... 124

7 Accountability and Grace ... *127*
Overview ... 128
A Call for Proper Reflection ... 129
Which Path the Prophet Follows ... 132
A Warning Loud and Clear ... 134
The Most Deserving of God's Grace ... 137
To Bridge a Wide Gulf ... 140
Tearing Off the Masks of Evildoing ... 143

8 The Extent of God's Knowledge ... *146*
Overview ... 148
A Law Not to Be Violated ... 148
Knowledge Unlimited ... 152
Beyond Our Perception ... 154
Scientific and Imperceptible ... 157
The Imperceptible and the Nature of Islamic Faith ... 161
When All Efforts Are of No Avail ... 164
The Only Saviour ... 166
Diverse Ways to Expound Revelations ... 167

9 Point of Separation ... *170*
Overview ... 171
Consistent Attitude ... 171
When Support is in Short Supply ... 173

10 Sovereign of All the Worlds ... *177*
Overview ... 178
Bewilderment After Guidance ... 178
Guidance Followed by Complete Submission ... 180

11 Guidance for All Nations ... *185*
Overview ... 188
An Instinctive Rejection of Idolatry ... 190
Nature's Way to the Truth ... 192
A Stronger Claim to Security ... 194
The Bearers of Divine Guidance ... 197
Acknowledgement of God's Glory ... 199
Endorsement of Earlier Revelations ... 202

12 The Miracle of Creation ... *208*
Overview ... 211
The Early Signs of Life ... 213
Perfectionism at Its Best ... 217
The Ever-Renewable Miracle of Creation ... 222
A Clear Concept of the Creator ... 224
The Choice to Remain Blind ... 229
Well-Defined Attitudes ... 231

Basic Facts on Faith and God's Power 234

13 On Permissibility and Prohibition *237*
Overview 240
Enemies of the Prophets 241
The Limits of Evil Power 243
A Revelation to Explain All Issues 245
All Erring Ways to be Abandoned 248
Eating Meat with God's Permission 250
Incomparable Situations 254
Who May be Entrusted with a Divine Message? 257
Choosing Divine Guidance 259

14 Judgement According to Deeds *263*
Overview 264
The Power of the Wicked 265
Emphasis on Practical Details 270
Why the Method of Slaughter is Important 271

15 Intertwining Laws and Concepts *273*
Overview 277
Temptation on the Way to Ruin 283
False Absurdity or Absurd Falsehood? 286
The Absolute Losers 288
The Originator of All Creation 291
Prohibitions by the Most Gracious 294
The Ultimate Argument in Defence of Falsehood 297
A Very Clear Course to Follow 299
Detailed Commandments for Human Life 301
Forbidden to People of Sound Mind 304
Maintaining the Path Leading to God 306

16 The Law of Divine Retribution *310*
Overview 312
A Book to Bring Mercy to Mankind 315
Further Warnings 317
Only One of a Kind 318
A Heart-Felt Appeal 319
A Final Word 322

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 6

Al-An`ām

(Cattle)

Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the part of the Qur'ān revealed to the Prophet when he was in Makkah. Although this part of the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) over a period of thirteen years, it deals with only one question. The nature of this question did not change, although the manner of its presentation varied according to the style of the Qur'ān. We, therefore, see this question being constantly presented in a new light, just as if it were being raised for the first time. What is this primary and most fundamental question of this new religion? Essentially, it is the question of faith with its two main aspects, Godhead and His servants, and the relationship between them. It is addressed to every human being in that particular capacity, i.e. as a human being. In this respect, an Arab at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, or in any other subsequent generation, and a non-Arab of any generation, are equal.

This is the ever-present question with which man must deal; it is the question of man's existence in the universe, his ultimate goal, and his relationship with the universe and other creatures. More importantly, it is the question which deals with the relationship between man and the Creator of the universe and all creation. We say that this question does not change, because it relates to man's very being.

The part of the Qur'ān revealed in Makkah explains to man the secret of his existence and the secret of the universe surrounding him. It tells him who he is, where he has come from, for what purpose and where he will go in the end. Who brings him from non-existence into being, who takes him away and to what destiny? It also informs man about the nature of the things he can touch and see and the things which he can sense and conceive without being able to see. It answers his questions concerning the Originator of this universe, which is full of mysteries: Who controls it and who brings about changes? Similarly, this part of the Qur'ān tells man

how to relate to the Creator, to the physical world, and to other human beings.

This great question is the pivot around which human existence turns. It will continue to occupy this position for the rest of time. The full thirteen years of the Makkan period were devoted to explaining and expounding this fundamental question. Indeed, all other questions concerning human life may be said to stem from it.

The Qur'ān made this question its only subject without moving on to discuss any subsidiary topics concerning human life. This continued to be the case until God had decided that the fundamental issue of faith had been fully explained and correctly understood by the community chosen by Him to establish the Islamic faith in a practical human environment.

The advocates of the divine faith who work for the establishment of Islam in real life should carefully consider this most significant fact. They should reflect on the reasons for devoting thirteen full years to the expounding of the central issue of faith, without discussing any of the details of the Islamic system or the legislation to be implemented in an Islamic society.

In His infinite wisdom, God willed that the issue of faith and belief should be the one addressed by His message right from its very first day. He also willed that His Messenger (peace be upon him) should start his first advocacy steps by calling on people to believe that there is no deity other than God. He was also to devote all efforts to explaining to people who their true Lord is, so that they may submit themselves to Him alone.

From the viewpoint of man's limited understanding, this does not appear an easy way to reach the hearts of the Arabs at that time. The Arabs knew their language well and clearly understood the meaning of the term, *ilāh,* i.e. deity, and the phrase, *lā ilāh illā Allāh,* i.e. there is no deity other than God. They realized that Godhead signified sovereignty, and that when sovereignty was recognized to belong to God alone, this meant that all authority exercised by priests, tribal chiefs, and rulers would revert to God. Thus, only God's authority would prevail in people's hearts and consciences, in matters of both religious observance and practical life, such as business, the distribution of wealth and the dispensation of justice; in short, the authority over man's body and soul.

The Arabs at the time of the Prophet knew very well that the declaration that 'there is no deity other than God' was a challenge to the worldly authority that usurped the first and foremost attribute of God, namely, sovereignty. It was a rebellion against all situations established on the basis of such usurpation, a rebellion against any authority that ruled on the basis of a man-made law not sanctioned by God Almighty. The Arabs, who knew their language well, were well aware what the

message based on `there is no deity other than God' meant in relation to their traditions and the powers they exercised. Hence their hostility towards this message, and hence their war against it, determined as they were to nip it in the bud.

So why did the Islamic call begin in this manner? What was the divine wisdom behind allowing it to be faced with such brazen hostility?

A Call for Freedom?

When the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was given his message, the most fertile and wealthiest parts of the Arab lands were not in Arab hands. Syria, in the north, was under the control of the Byzantines who appointed puppet Arab rulers to conduct its affairs. Similarly, in the south, Yemen was under the tutelage of the Persian Empire who appointed local Arab governors. The only independent Arab parts were the Ĥijāz and Najd, barren deserts with a few oases dotted about here and there.

Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was distinguished in his community for his honesty and truthfulness, and for his mature judgement. The leaders of the Quraysh, the major Arab tribe, had earlier made him the arbiter in a dispute that threatened to cause a major war, and were very pleased with his judgement. Moreover, he belonged to the leading family in the top Quraysh clan, the Hashimites. Hence, it would have been easy for him to launch an Arab nationalist movement aimed at uniting the Arabian tribes that had been weakened by long periods of feuding and disputation. He could then have directed them towards the goal of liberating their lands from the colonial rule of the Byzantines to the north and the Persians to the south. He could then have been in a position to establish a strong and united Arab state throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

It could be argued that had the Prophet (peace be upon him) directed his call in this way, all the Arabs would most probably have responded positively to him. In turn, this would have spared him thirteen years of tortuous opposition by those who wielded power in Arabia.

It may also be argued that when Arabia had thus responded to the Prophet's call and recognized his leadership, and when he had led the Arabs to such national glory, he could have used all his power and standing to convince the Arabs to accept the message entrusted to him by his Lord. He could then have preached the faith based on God's oneness. He would have made the Arabs surrender themselves to God after they had submitted to his authority.

But God who knows all did not, in His wisdom, direct his Messenger to follow this route. Instead, He directed him to declare that "there is no deity other than

God", and to bear with his few Companions all the ensuing persecution.

Again why did this happen? It was not God's purpose to subject His Messenger and the believers to oppression. But God knew that replacing Byzantine or Persian tyranny with Arab tyranny was not the right way. For all tyranny is the same. The earth belongs to God and must submit purely to God. This cannot be achieved unless the banner of `no deity other than God' is unfurled across the earth. Man is servant to God alone, and this cannot be maintained except when the banner of `no deity other than God' is raised high. And this must be done in the way an Arab who knows his language well understands: all sovereignty belongs to God alone; there is no law other than God's law; all authority belongs to God. The only grouping of people which Islam proclaims is based on faith, in which Arabs, Byzantines, Persians and people of all races and colours are equal, flying God's banner.

And this is the way.

A Call for Social Justice?

At the time when the Prophet received the message God entrusted to him, Arabian society was in a very bad way with regard to the distribution of wealth and social justice. A handful of people monopolized all wealth and commerce. Moreover, they were able to multiply their resources through usurious transactions. The great majority of people, on the other hand, were poor and hungry. Besides, the wealthy ones also enjoyed a position of honour and distinction, while the majority were deprived of all that.

It would have been easy for Muĥammad (peace be upon him) to start a social movement, declaring war against the aristocracy, and calling for social justice through the redistribution of wealth. Had he done so, Arab society would have been split into two: the great majority would have supported him against the tyranny of wealth and nobility. This would have been better than the opposition he faced from the whole of society when he declared that `there is no deity other than God'. For when he did so, only a few noble souls were able to rise to the sublimity of his call.

It may be said that had Muĥammad (peace be upon him) followed this route, gaining the support of the majority and defeating the minority opposing him, he could have utilized his power to establish the faith based on God's oneness which God had entrusted to him. He would, thus, have been able to make people submit to their Lord after they had submitted to his authority.

But God, in His infinite wisdom, did not direct His Messenger to follow this path. God knows that this is not the way. He knows that social justice can only be achieved fully through a comprehensive ideological concept that submits all affairs to God.

With such a concept people would willingly accept whatever God rules in respect of fair distribution and mutual social solidarity. Thus, both the giver and the recipient realize that they are implementing a divine system and hope to be well rewarded for their obedience both in this life and in the life to come. Thus, such a society would be free of both greed and grudges. Things are not put into effect by strong-handed measures that strike terror into people's hearts. People do not feel desolate, and their spirits are not broken, as is the case under systems based on principles other than that of God's oneness.

Why Not Moral Reform?

The standards of morality that prevailed in Arabia at the time when the Prophet was given his message were at a very low ebb, even though some natural virtues of uncorrupted Bedouin life were still retained.

Oppression was the rule of the day. This is especially clear in the poetry of the time, such as that of Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā who writes: "Whoever does not defend his property with arms will find it plundered, and whoever does not oppress others will himself be oppressed." A motto that was commonly held in pre-Islamic Arabia was: "Help your brother, whether he inflicts or suffers injustice."

Drinking and gambling were recognized social traditions. Indeed, people took pride in such habits. All Arab poetry of the pre-Islamic days of ignorance reflects this very clearly. An example may be taken from a poem by Ṭarfah ibn al-`Abd:

> Had it not been for three practices a young man enjoys, I would not have cared when I meet my death.
>
> One of these is that I beat those who counsel moderation to a drink of wine which is so potent that it bubbles when it is mixed with water.
>
> Drinking, the pursuit of pleasure and spending whatever I lay my hands on have been my life.
>
> And because of that my whole clan has abandoned me, like a camel with a terrible itch.

Promiscuity in various forms was common practice in society. `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, describes in an authentic *Ĥadīth:*

> Four types of matrimonial relationship were common in the days of *jāhiliyyah.*[1] The first of these was the one we have today: a man makes a

[1] *Jāhiliyyah* is the term often used in the Islamic context to refer to the situation that prevailed in Arabia before the advent of Islam. It is derived from a root that signifies `ignorance'. Thus, when

> proposal to marry another man's daughter or his ward, pays her dowry, and marries her. A second type was that a man would tell his wife, after she had finished a menstrual period, to call on a particular man and become pregnant by him. The husband in this case would stay away from his wife not touch her until she was clearly pregnant. He would then have intercourse with her if he so wished. The husband resorted to this in order to have a son of better traits. This relationship was known as *istibđā'*. Another type of relationship was that a number of men, less than 10, would have one woman and each would have sexual intercourse with her. Should she become pregnant and give birth to a child, she would send for them after a few nights to come over. None of them would be able to stay away. When they gathered at her place, she would say to them, "You know what has been going on between us, and now I have a child". She would point to one of them and say, "It is your child". She named whomever she wanted, and the child would be named as that person's child, and he could not deny this. A fourth type of relationship was that many men would associate with the one woman, who would not refuse anyone. Such women were prostitutes. They used to place a flag on their doors as a sign of what they did. Whoever wanted a prostitute was free to go to her. Should any prostitute get pregnant and give birth, they would go to her and call in an expert in recognizing resemblances. He would ascribe the child's paternity to one of them, and the child would be considered his. He would not refuse this. (Related by al-Bukhārī in the *Ṣaĥīh,* Book of Marriage.)

It was certainly possible for Muĥammad, (peace be upon him) to have started a movement for moral reform, aiming at purging society of immorality, helping people to purify their lives, and establishing higher moral values and standards. Like every moral reformer, he would have found a good response from people naturally inclined against moral degeneration. They would have supported such a move from the outset.

But God, in His wisdom and perfect knowledge, did not direct His Messenger to follow this route, because God knew that this was not the right way. God knows that morality must be based on a faith that establishes standards and defines values, making clear which authority sanctions these and what reward and punishment such authority can administer to those who observe these and those who violate them.

---

we speak of the days of *jāhiliyyah,* we mean the days of ignorance. But the term does not simply signify a period of time, rather it refers to a state or condition where people are unaware of the true nature of God and their relationship with Him. In this perspective, the term refers to any human situation that does not place belief in God's oneness as its prime concept, and which should be reflected in people's behaviour, literature, morality as well as their social, economic and political systems. — Editor's note.

Unless such a faith is well established, all values and moral standards remain unstable, without accountability, control, authority or reward.

Results in Abundance

When, after strenuous efforts, the faith was established in people's hearts and the authority behind it was properly acknowledged; when people recognized their Lord and worshipped Him alone; when people were free of the pressures of other authorities and the pressures of their own desires; when the concept of `no deity other than God' was imprinted on people's hearts, God accomplished with it, and with those who believed in it, all that people might have suggested in the way of reform.

The land was now free of Byzantium and Persia, but their colonial rule had not been replaced by an Arab power. Instead God's authority took their place. The land was now free of all tyranny.

Society was freed of all social injustice, because the Islamic system was established to administer God's justice, according to the principles approved by God Himself. The banner of social justice was raised in God's name, but it was called the banner of Islam, on which was written, `there is no deity other than God'.

People's morals were elevated; hearts and souls were purified; and the medium of control was people's own consciences. Hence, the mandatory and discretionary punishments prescribed by God were not needed, except in very few cases. People were eager to earn God's reward. They were ashamed to be seen by Him violating His orders, feared to incur His punishment. Such feelings took the place of any police administration and the various punishments it could impose.

In its social order, morality and life in general, humanity was raised to a summit it had never achieved before. It was not to attain that summit again except under Islam.

All this happened because those who established Islam, in its state, government system, laws and regulations, had already established it in their consciences and lives in the form of faith, morality, worship and behaviour. For their efforts in establishing this religion, they were promised only one thing which included nothing of victory and power, not even for Islam through their efforts. The promise they received had nothing to do with the life of this world. They were promised Paradise. That is their reward for all their hard striving, withstanding hard trials, unwavering advocacy of Islam, confronting the forces of *jāhiliyyah* with the message of `no deity other than God', hateful as it certainly is to those in power at all times and places.

God put those people to trial and they proved themselves to be steadfast, caring little for any personal gain. They showed themselves not to be looking for reward in

this world, no matter how valuable it may be, not even victory for Islam through their own efforts. They were devoid of pride of lineage, tribe, ethnic origin, nationality or country. When they proved all this, God knew that they could fulfil the greatest trust, should it be assigned to them. They would be true to the faith which assigns all sovereignty to God alone, including authority over hearts and consciences, behaviour and worship, body and soul, and all situations. They would fulfil the trust granted to them when they were given power to implement God's law and establish total justice. They would not use such power to serve their own interests or those of their clan, community, nation or race. They would use that power only to serve the divine faith and the divine law, because they knew that only God gave them that power.

This blessed system would not have been established to such a high standard, had the work of Islamic advocacy raised any banner other than that of `no deity other than God'. It could not have prospered without taking this way, rough and difficult as it may appear at first glance, easy and blessed in reality. Had the Islamic message started its initial stages as a nationalist movement, or one of social or moral reform, or had it raised another banner alongside that of `there is no deity other than God', its system would not have remained pure for the sake of God alone.

The Faith or Its Detailed Systems

We now have a clear idea of the reasons behind the fact that the parts of the Qur'ān revealed in Makkah concentrated on imprinting the fundamental principle of 'there is no deity other than God' on people's hearts and minds, even though it appeared difficult in comparison to other ways.

Moreover, it was important that the advocates of Islam should seriously reflect on the fact that these Makkan parts of the Qur'ān concentrated on the issue of faith, without discussing the details of the system to be based on it or the laws governing transactions under this system.

It is the nature of the Islamic faith that has necessitated this approach. Islam in its entirety is based on the belief in God's oneness: all its systems and laws branch out of this essential principle. A high, great tree, with thick and wide branches, must establish its roots deep into the earth and spread them over a wide area, in proportion to its size. Similarly, the Islamic system extends into all aspects of life, dealing with all human affairs, large and small. It regulates human life, not only in this present world but also in the life to come, and not merely in our dealings with the world we see around us, but with the one beyond, which we sense but cannot see. Its legal provisions do not cover only material transactions, but deal also with what is kept deep at heart, as well as intentions and ideas. Thus, we see that it

represents a huge institution with great and far-reaching dimensions.

This aspect of the nature of Islam defines the way it is to be founded and organized. It makes it clear that the proper establishment of the faith on solid foundations and its thorough interaction with all aspects of the human soul are a necessary prerequisite for the proper progress of the faith. It is also a guarantee of a proper relationship between the stem and branches of the tree and its roots.

When belief in `there is no deity other than God' penetrates into the deep recesses of people's hearts, the system based on it is simultaneously well established. It is clear that it is the only system acceptable to those who believe in this faith. They will submit to this system even before its details and regulations are presented to them. Such submission is the corollary of accepting the faith. It is in the spirit of such submission that the early Muslims received Islamic laws and regulations. They expressed their satisfaction, objecting to no rule or regulation, showing no hesitation to implement them as soon as they were issued. Thus, the practices of drinking, usury and gambling, as well as other habits of the pre-Islamic days of ignorance, were abolished. Indeed, they were eradicated with no more than a few verses of the Qur'ān, or a few statements by the Prophet (peace be upon him). Compare this with the efforts of secular governments. They try hard to achieve only a small measure of such success, devoting all their legal authorities, laws and law-enforcement machinery, media and public awareness schemes to it. Yet the maximum they achieve is to detect violations done on the surface, while society continues to be plagued with illegal practices.[2]

A Practical System

Another aspect of the nature of this religion is reflected by the method of action it adopts: this religion of Islam is both practical and serious, aiming to regulate and control everyday affairs. It looks at practical matters and determines whether to approve, modify or change them altogether. Therefore, its legislation applies only to existing conditions in a community that recognizes God's sovereignty in the first place.

Islam is not a theory dealing with assumptions. It is a way of life dealing with existing situations. Hence, it must be established in a Muslim community which believes that `there is no deity other than God', and acknowledges that sovereignty belongs to God alone. It denies the authority of anyone else and refuses legitimacy of any situation that is not based on this fundamental principle.

[2] For details of how the prohibition of intoxicants was implemented in Islamic society see *In the Shade of the Qur'ān,* Vol. IV, pp. 172-77. Refer also to Abu'l Hasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World,* for a discussion of how the USA has miserably failed to do so — Author's note.

Only when such a community comes into existence, and it begins to face its own practical problems does this religion begin to establish its systems and formulate its laws. These will be implemented by people who in principle have already submitted themselves to them and rejected all other systems and laws. It is also necessary that those who believe in the Islamic faith should have sufficient power over themselves and in their society to enable them to implement Islamic systems and laws. Only in this way can the Islamic system be respected and Islamic law appear serious. Moreover, the Muslim community will then have practical issues that need to be addressed by the enactment of laws and regulations.

The Muslims in Makkah did not have power to organize their life or the life of their community. Nor did they have an autonomous community with its own problems that needed to be addressed according to God's law. Hence, laws and regulations were not given to them in God's revelations. The revelations only gave them a faith and a code of morality derived from faith after it had established itself firmly in people's hearts and souls. But when the Muslims established their state in Madinah, one which exercised power, the laws were given to them and the system to establish them was outlined. Thus Islam began to face the practical needs of the Muslim community, because the Muslim state guaranteed respect and implementation of the law.

God Almighty did not wish to send down the details of the system and the laws and regulations when they were still in Makkah, so that they would have them in place, to be implemented as soon as they established their state in Madinah. This would have gone against the nature of the Islamic faith. Islam is far more practical and serious than this. It does not provide hypothetical solutions to hypothetical problems. It looks at the prevailing conditions and circumstances, determines what needs sorting out and interacts with it in its own unique way.

People today may suggest that Islam should provide models for a political system and legal codes and regulations, even though we do not have a single society determined to implement God's law to the exclusion of all other laws and having the wherewithal to carry this through. But these people do not understand the nature of this religion or how it operates in life as God wants it to operate. They want Islam to change its nature, mode of operation and history so that it follows the same pattern as man-made theories and methods. They try to force Islam out of its way in order to satisfy temporary desires which are the product of a defeatist mentality. They want Islam to mould itself in the form of hypotheses and abstractions, dealing with unreal assumptions. But God wants this religion to have its own character: a faith to fill people's hearts and rule over their consciences, making sure that people submit to no one other than Him, and that they derive their laws from no other source than Him. When a community that adopts this faith comes into being and enjoys practical

control in society, they will have the laws and regulations that cater for their practical needs.

It must be clear to the advocates of Islam that when they call for Islamic revival, they are actually calling on people to adopt the Islamic faith, even though they may claim to be Muslims and have birth certificates to support this claim. People should be made to understand that Islam means, in the first place, to believe fully and completely that `there is no deity other than God'. The practical import of this belief is to acknowledge that sovereignty and authority over all human affairs belongs to God alone, and a rejection of those who claim such authority for themselves. In this way the belief in God's oneness is firmly established in their hearts and manifested in their worship and daily practices.

This question must be the basis for Islamic advocacy today, just like it was when Islam was first revealed. Thirteen years of Qur'ānic revelations in Makkah were devoted to this question.

When a group of people embrace Islam in this, its true sense, they become the community well suited to implement Islam in practical life. This is because this community has already decided to conduct its life on the Islamic basis, submitting to no authority other than God's. And when such a community is actually in place, it begins to look at the fundamental concepts of the Islamic system and to use these concepts for the enactment of laws and regulations that meet its practical needs.

Some undoubtedly sincere people who do not fully understand the nature of the Islamic faith and its method of operation are in a hurry. They imagine that presenting fundamental Islamic principles, and even detailed Islamic legislation, to people will facilitate the task of Islamic advocacy and win a favourable outcome for Islam. But this is a myth born out of their haste and impatience. It is the same type of myth as that which might have been suggested to the Prophet to start his message under a nationalist, social or moral banner, so as to give Islam an easier path.

It is essential that people's hearts be totally devoted to God alone, declaring total submission to Him and accepting, in principle, only His law, even before they are told anything of the details of that law. Their driving point must be their desire to be free of any power other than that of God's. Their acceptance of Islam must not be motivated by belief that its system is superior to other systems in such and such details.

There is no doubt that God's law is intrinsically good, because it is formulated by God. Man-made laws will never be as good as God's law. But this is not the basic point in Islamic advocacy. Such advocacy must be based on the fact that accepting God's law, to the exclusion of all other laws, is Islam itself. Indeed, Islam can have no other practical meaning. Whoever wants to adopt Islam has made his choice and

resolved this issue. He or she will not need to be further persuaded by the beauty and superiority of the Islamic system. All this is taken for granted.

The Qur'ānic Treatment of the Faith Issue

We need to discuss how the Qur'ān addressed the issue of faith during the thirteen years of the Makkan period. Certainly it did not present it in the form of a theory or a theological study. Nor was it presented in the form of a scholastic discourse of the type which was later to be known as *`ilm al-kalām,* which dealt mainly with the concept of God's oneness.

None of this! The Qur'ān simply addresses human nature, utilizing all the signs, indicators and pointers within man's own soul and in the universe at large. Thus it liberates human nature from all the pressures that have beclouded its receptive faculties and opens up windows to the world. Thus is human nature able to make the right and proper response. The *sūrah* we are discussing in this volume provides a perfect example of this unique method.

More specifically, the Qur'ān launched a practical campaign against the pressures disrupting the proper functioning of human nature. The field of battle was living human souls. Success could not have been achieved without a direct confrontation which aimed to rend the curtains that had fallen on people's hearts and minds and to remove the walls and psychological blocks that stood between man and the truth. Nor was intellectual argumentation, based on verbal logic, which was the hallmark of the scholastic theology of later times, appropriate for the purpose. The Qur'ān confronted a whole human environment, with all its conditions and circumstances, and addressed the whole human entity within this environment. Similarly, a purely `theological' address was unsuitable. Although Islam is a faith, it also incorporates a code to be implemented in practical life. It does not confine itself to the narrow spheres of theological discourse.

As the Qur'ān worked to establish the faith in the hearts and consciences of the Muslim community, it also fought a hard and determined battle against the surrounding *jāhiliyyah* and against the remaining traces of *jāhiliyyah* in the new community's conscience, morals and practices. Thus, the structure of the Islamic faith was raised under these circumstances, but not in the form of a theory or intellectual discourse, but in a practical and organized social set-up represented by the Muslim community itself. The growth of the Muslim community in its understanding of its faith, and its implementation in practice, as well as its awareness and training to confront *jāhiliyyah,* mirrored the growth of the ideological structure and gave it practical manifestation. Here we see the true Islamic method that reflects its nature and spirit.

The advocates of Islam need to fully understand this dynamic method of operation so that they can realize that the stage of building the faith, which took such a long time in Makkah, was not separate from the stage of practical organization in which the Muslim community came into existence. It was not a stage of having a theory to learn and study. It was a single stage to lay the foundations of the faith, the community and its practical structure all at the same time. The same applies every time the Islamic structure is raised again.

The stage of building the faith should be long, moving gradually and steadily. No theoretical study of the faith is needed, but rather a single stage that aims to translate Islamic beliefs into practical reality, reforming people's consciences, building a community that reflects the growth of faith, and forming a dynamic movement that challenges *jāhiliyyah.* This last challenge is fought out in people's hearts and lives, so that Islam is seen to be a living faith growing steadily as the fight rages on.

An Error to Be Avoided

From the Islamic point of view, it is a great error, indeed a serious danger, that the faith should simply evolve into an abstract theory for academic study.

It is not because the Qur'ān was being revealed for the first time that it took thirteen years to build its faith. Had He so willed, God could have revealed the Qur'ān in full at the beginning and allowed the new Muslims a lengthy period to study it, until they had fully grasped the `Islamic theory'.

In His infinite wisdom, however, God wanted something different. He wanted to put in place a unique method of operation that laid the foundation of the faith, the community and the movement all at the same time. He wanted the community and the movement to be founded on faith, and He wanted the faith to grow with the dynamic progress of the community. He wanted the practical life of that community to be a mirror of the faith. God, limitless is He in His glory, knew that the refinement of souls and the building of communities could not be achieved overnight. Hence, it was necessary that raising the structure of the faith should take the same length of time as the building of the community and the refinement of believers' souls. Thus, when faith had taken its full shape, the community reflected its maturity in practice.

This is the nature of this religion as defined in the light of the Qur'ānic revelations in Makkah. We need to understand its nature and not try to change it under the influence of an impatient, defeatist mentality, brought under pressure from man-made theories and doctrines. It is with this particular nature and with its particular qualities that Islam was able to bring the first Muslim community into existence. Similarly, it can mould the same type of community, using the same nature and qualities, whenever it needs to come into being, by God's will.

We should be aware of the error and danger involved in trying to narrow down the dynamic Islamic faith into a `theory' for intellectual discussion, trying to show its superiority over man-made theories. The Islamic faith must take shape in living souls, be an active organization and a movement striving against the surrounding *jāhiliyyah.* Viewed in this light, the Islamic faith takes up a much larger space in people's hearts and lives, and exercises a much more profound influence on their minds, than any theory. Indeed, it produces all the benefits of a theory but does not remain confined to it.

The Islamic concept of Godhead, the universe, man and life is not only perfect and comprehensive, but also positive and practical. By nature, it dislikes being reduced to a merely intellectual concept, as this is contrary to its nature. It needs to be personified in human beings, in an active organization and in a practical situation so that it comes into its full shape, theoretically and practically, at the same time. Every theoretical progress that moves ahead of, and is not reflected in, practical progress is both erroneous and hazardous when viewed from the Islamic perspective.

God says in the Qur'ān: *"We have divided the Qur'ān into parts so that you may recite to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step."* (17: 106) This shows that the revelation of the Qur'ān one small part at a time is intended, just like its recitation with deliberation, so that its structure is raised as God wants it to be: a faith represented in a dynamic society, and not a mere theory.

A Divine Method

The advocates of Islam must be well aware that just as this religion is a divine revelation, its method of operation, which is harmonious with its nature, is also God-given. It is not possible to separate the truth of Islam and its method of action. They must also realize that just like Islam wants to change people's beliefs and practices, it also wants to change their intellectual and operational methods which formulate concepts of belief and bring about social change. Islam aims to build a faith at the same time as it builds a community and a nation. It also initiates its own independent mode of thinking, in the same way as it initiates its own concepts and way of life. All are parts of a complete whole.

Now that we know what method of action Islam adopts, we should also know that this method is permanent: it is not applicable to just a certain stage, environment or the special circumstances that pertained when the first Muslim community came into existence. It is a method of action which is indispensable for Islamic revival. Islam has never confined its objective to changing people's beliefs and conditions; it also aims to change their outlook and way of thinking. As a method of action, Islam is divine and fundamentally different from all human methods. We cannot achieve the

type of life this divine religion wants to establish unless we adopt its divinely-ordained method, intended by God to reform human thought and practice.

When we try to give Islam the guise of a theory to be studied, we move away from the divine method of operation and thinking. We subject Islam to human modes of thinking, as though the divine method is inferior and as though we want to elevate it to that superior standard! This is extremely dangerous.

The function of the divine method is to give us, the advocates of Islam, a new way of thinking to dissociate ourselves from jāhiliyyah. If we were to impose on Islam a way of thinking alien to its nature, popular as it may be, we nullify its function in human life and deprive ourselves of a great opportunity to be free of the pressure of the ignorant ways of thinking which prevail in our world. Such ways of thinking will continue to have their influence on our minds and lives. Again, this is extremely dangerous.

In Islam, the way of thinking and the methods of operation are no less important than the conceptual beliefs or the practical system. In fact, these are inseparable. Important as we may think it to present Islamic beliefs and systems in a refined, expounding form, we must not forget that such presentation will not bring Islam into being as a practical reality or a dynamic movement. We must not lose sight of the fact that the only people to benefit from such a presentation are those who are already working within an Islamic movement. The maximum benefit these people will have is to interact with it at the level they have already reached while working for Islam.

To recap, Islamic belief concepts must materialize in a practical movement which, in turn, should be a true representation of its beliefs. This is the natural Islamic method of operation, which is superior, more effective and far better suited to human nature than trying to formulate theories in an intellectual manner before people are engaged in a dynamic movement of Islamic advocacy which aims to put Islam into practice.

If this is true for the fundamental concepts of belief, it is even more so in respect of the system on which the Islamic concept is founded, and its legal details.

The *jāhiliyyah* surrounding us puts some sincere advocates of Islam under pressure to hasten the Islamic system. It even tries to confound them by asking: "What are the details of the system which you are advocating? What research, details and projects have you prepared to put it into effect?" In all this, the *jāhiliyyah* tries to force the advocates of Islam off their proper course. It wants them to move beyond the stage of building the ideological structure so as to change the nature of the divine method whereby the theory takes shape through the dynamic movement, and the system develops through practice, and where detailed laws are enacted to meet practical needs and solve real problems.

It is the duty of the advocates of Islam to expose these tactics and refuse to have a system and a method of operation imposed on their religion. They must insist on adopting the method of operation Islam has chosen for itself, because it is one of the main factors of its strength. It is also the source of their strength. Hence, those who are devoid of faith must not be allowed to play tricks on them and divert their attention from their true path.

From the Islamic point of view, the method of operation emanates from the truth of Islam, and the two are inseparable. No alien method can raise the structure of Islam. Western methods may be suitable for their own man-made systems, but they are totally unsuitable for the divine system we believe in. To operate the Islamic method is just as necessary as adherence to the faith itself and the system it puts in place. This is not confined to the first Muslim community, or first Islamic movement, as some people suggest. It applies to every Islamic movement which aims at Islamic revival.

This is my final word on this subject. I hope that by expounding the nature of the Qur'ānic method of operation, as outlined in the Makkan parts of the Qur'ān, I have done my duty. I hope that the advocates of Islam may now be clear about their method, trust that it is the best and the one that leads to success. I hope that they realize that through it they will be triumphant. *"Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright."* (17: 9)

A Sample of Makkan Revelations

This *sūrah,* the first Makkan *sūrah* we discuss in this work, provides a complete sample of the parts of the Qur'ān revealed in Makkah. We have outlined above the nature, characteristics and method of these parts. We see all these in this *sūrah,* its main theme, the way it is approached and how it is presented. At the same time, the *sūrah* has, like every individual *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, its distinctive character which no attentive reader can fail to recognize. Indeed, every *sūrah* has its own character, features, central idea, and method of presenting its main theme. Not only so, but each *sūrah* uses its own inspiration, images, subtleties of meaning, and general ambience. These are all featured in its presentation of its subject matter. Moreover, each *sūrah* uses its own special expressions that may be repeated at intervals, even when it tackles one theme or several related themes. It is not the theme that delineates the character of a *sūrah,* but its special and distinctive features.

Nevertheless, this *sūrah* tackles its subject matter in a unique way. At every turn, in every situation or scene, it brings out in sharp relief all the awesome splendour of what is being portrayed, keeping us spellbound, breathless as we follow its scenes and hear its changing, powerful rhythm. This is certainly true! I feel it in my heart as

I follow the flow of the *sūrah,* its scenes and beats. I think that no reader or listener of any degree of intelligence could fail to appreciate something of its awesome splendour.

The whole *sūrah* presents the truth of Godhead as it is reflected in life and the universe, human soul and conscience, the secrets of the world around us and the secrets of the world beyond the reach of our faculties of perception. It also presents it in the scenes of the creation of the universe, life and human creation, as well as in the destruction of past communities to allow new ones to take their place. It further presents the truth of Godhead in scenes of human nature as it faces the universe, different events, turns of fortune, blessings and trials, and in scenes of divine power over all aspects of human life, be they apparent or hidden, present or future. It finally presents the same truth in scenes of the Day of Resurrection, as creatures are brought before their Lord.

From start to finish, the *sūrah* discusses the theme of faith, in all its features and aspects. It takes the human soul, in its totality, by the hand, and roams over the whole universe, looking at inspirations of faith, observing light and darkness, the sun, the moon, the stars, cultivated gardens and ones growing wild, the rain that falls on them and the waters running through them. In this great round, the *sūrah* also shows the human soul the doom suffered by past generations and their remains. It floats with it through the darkness of land and sea, the secrets of the world beyond and those of the human soul itself. It looks at how the living comes out of the dead and the dead out of the living, the seed planted in the darkness of the soil and the sperm planted in the darkness of the uterus. Then, suddenly, the earth is full *of jinn* and humans, birds, beasts, generations of living things past and present, and angels watching over the living at night and during the day.

It is a huge panorama that overwhelms our souls and sensations. But it is presented with fine, creative touches which bring the scenes and meanings before us, full of life. Thus, we see every familiar scene and experience every familiar feeling as though we experience them for the first time, unseen and unfelt by anyone before us.

In its quick flow of imagery, inspirations, rhythms, and shades, it resembles a fast, wide river, its waves constantly breaking. As one wave reaches its breaking place, the next one follows very closely behind, almost reaching out to the one that has just gone by. The flow remains continuous, unending.

In each of these flowing and closely successive waves, the same rich splendour is there to see. And in all the scenes portrayed, we have superb harmony. Thus, we are absolutely enchanted by it all. The *sūrah* addresses man's heart and mind from every angle and in every possible way.

We say at the outset that with our own human description and style, we cannot

make any headway in presenting the rhythm and beat of the *sūrah.* Instead, we must leave the *sūrah* itself, with its own beat, to address human hearts. What we are doing here is simply to try to provide a bridge between the Qur'ān and those who, by their own life conditions, are isolated from life in the atmosphere generated by the Qur'ān.

Such life does not mean simply to read the Qur'ān frequently and to study its different disciplines. What we mean is that one should live in conditions, movements, struggles and concerns similar to those which witnessed the revelation of the Qur'ān. This means that a person should confront the *jāhiliyyah* that has spread all over the earth, dedicating all his thoughts, feelings and actions to the revival of Islam in his own soul and life as well as in the souls and life of mankind.

Such is the atmosphere generated by the Qur'ān. When we live in this atmosphere, we are able to appreciate the Qur'ān fully, because it is in such an atmosphere that it was revealed and worked. Those who do not experience this atmosphere remain isolated from the Qur'ān, no matter how keenly they study it and how deeply they delve into its academic disciplines.

Our attempt to provide a bridge between the sincere among such people and the Qur'ān will not achieve any results unless they cross that bridge and come over to live in the atmosphere of the Qur'ān by deed and practice. Only then will they begin to experience this blessing with which God favours His servants.

To Truly Know God

This *sūrah* tackles the main issue of faith, Godhead and servitude. Its approach is to make known to people who their true Lord is, answering questions like: Who is He? What is the origin of this existence? What are the secrets beyond it? Who are these creatures? Who brings them into being; and who gives them their provisions and controls their affairs? Who turns their hearts and sights? Who controls the sequence of their days and nights? Who initiates them; and then re-initiates them? For what purpose has He created them? What term has He appointed for them? To what destiny does He deliver them? And then, as regards this life springing up here and there: who initiates it in such a lifeless environment? What about the pouring rain, the opening buds, the tightly piled grain, the piercing star, the breaking dawn, the darkness of the night as it covers all, and the cosmos beyond: who controls all this? What secrets do they hide and what news do they bring? Then again, all these generations that come and go, prosper and perish: who gives them power on earth and who takes it away and leaves them to perish? Why are they placed in control of the world, and why are they left to be ruined? And what remains beyond death of reckoning and reward?

The *sūrah takes* our hearts and minds over such endless horizons and into such

depths. There is no attempt to provide a theory of faith, or start a theological argument. The *sūrah* simply aims to make known to people who their true Lord is, so that they may submit themselves to Him alone, surrendering their consciences, souls, efforts, traditions, worship and all their lives to the Almighty, the only deity in the universe.

The whole drift of the *sūrah,* from start to finish, follows this direction: God is the Creator, the provider, the owner, the almighty who knows all that is concealed. He turns hearts and sights as He turns nights into days. As such, God should be the one who rules over human life to the exclusion of all others. No one else can legislate or judge, permitting certain things and prohibiting others. Such authority belongs to God and may not be exercised by anyone else. For none other than God can create, provide, give life, cause death, cause benefit or harm, give or deprive, or exercise any control over oneself or others in this life or in the life to come. The *sūrah* provides numerous proofs in the scenes and situations it discusses with its unique style, bringing in a multitude of effects and inspirations of every sort and type.

The great issue the *sūrah* addresses is that of Godhead and submission in the heavens and on earth, and in its broadest spectrum. However, the immediate occasion that brings up this issue and emphasizes the need for its implementation is that of food and animal slaughter. The *jāhiliyyah* society exercised the authority to make certain things lawful and others forbidden, and established certain rituals concerning offerings, agricultural produce and offspring. It is these details that are discussed towards the end of the *sūrah.* (See verses 118-21 and 136-40.)

Permissible or Forbidden

A host of statements and influences are brought together as the *sūrah* confronts the unbelievers with this issue of animal slaughter and offerings, as an example of a question requiring legislation. It links this issue to the main theme of faith, Godhead and submission, making it one of belief or disbelief, submission to God or rejection of Him.

This impresses on our minds an essential element in the nature of Islam: that is, that every single detail in human life is subject to God's absolute authority embodied in His law. To reject God's authority over a matter of detail represents rebellion against His sovereignty and a rejection of Islam altogether.

Providing such a host of influences is indicative of the importance Islam attaches to purging all aspects of human life of any trace of authority exercised by human beings over any matter, no matter how trivial it may be. All matters of human life must be related to the fundamental Islamic concept of God's absolute sovereignty and authority, acknowledging His Godhead on earth as it is acknowledged in the

universe.

The *sūrah* comments on the *jāhiliyyah* rituals concerning animal and agricultural produce and the offerings made of these. Some of its comments are direct, showing the absurdity and contradiction in these rituals, while other comments seek to link the exercise by human beings of the authority to prohibit and make permissible with the major issue of faith. They make it clear that to follow God's directives in these matters is to follow His straight path. Whoever turns away from this path abandons the Islamic faith altogether. (Verses 141-53)

We see in these verses that this detailed matter of permissibility and prohibition in connection with animal slaughter and offspring, animal and agricultural offerings, as used to be practised in *jāhiliyyah,* is linked to much greater issues. These include guidance or error, following God's law or Satan's footsteps, God's grace or punishment, testifying to God's oneness or making other people equal to Him, etc. The same expressions used when discussing the overall issue of faith are also used here. Additionally, the *sūrah* introduces at this particular point a host of inspirations and influences such as the scene of creation and life in cultivated and wild-growing gardens, the picture of date trees, olives and pomegranates with their myriad colours and fruits, the scene of testimony and that of the painful punishment of unbelievers. These are the same scenes portrayed earlier in the *sūrah* when it discusses the main issue of faith, in its totality. All this carries an unmistakable pointer to the nature of the Islamic faith and its outlook in the matter of sovereignty and legislation on matters of great or little importance.

As we are explaining the *sūrah's* thematic approach in tackling the total issue of faith, we might have gone ahead of the *sūrah* to speak about a matter of detail under the issue of legislation and sovereignty.

We do not say that this matter of detail has required all this host of statements and inspirations, or necessitated the splendid exposition of the truth of Godhead in its broader area. What we rather say is that this matter of detail has been linked in the *sūrah* to all these. This linkage shows the nature of this religion of Islam and how it looks at the question of legislation and sovereignty in all matters, large and small.

Let us now proceed to give a brief outline of the *sūrah* and its special features before we begin to discuss it in detail.

The Sūrah's Revelation

Several reports by Ibn `Abbās, Asmā' bint Yazīd, Jābir, Anas ibn Mālik and `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd confirm that this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah on one occasion.

Nothing in these reports or in the subject matter of the *sūrah* indicates the particular time of its revelation in the Makkan period. According to the most likely chronological order of revelation, this *sūrah* comes after *Sūrah* 15, *Al-Ĥijr,* which gives it number 55 in that order. But as we said in the Prologue to *Sūrah* 2 (Vol. I), we cannot, on the basis of this information, make any definitive judgement as to the time of revelation of different *sūrahs.* The reports we have on this particular point speak mainly of the revelation of the beginning, not the whole, of any particular *sūrah.* It may be that some later parts of an earlier *sūrah* are revealed after parts of a later *sūrah.* The *sūrah* we are discussing in this volume was revealed in its entirety at one go, but we cannot define the exact date of its revelation, although we feel it likely that it was after the early years of the Islamic message, maybe in the fifth or sixth year. In stating this probability we rely only on its number in the order of revelation and the wide variety of subjects it tackles at length. All this suggests a long ongoing argument with the unbelievers, who persisted in their rejection of the Prophet's message. This is, perhaps, what requires a detailed discussion of issues on the lines we have here, and necessitates comforting God's Messenger so as to remove the effects of long and determined opposition to his message.

Another report by Ibn `Abbās and Qatādah suggests that the entire *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, with the exception of two of its verses which were revealed later in Madinah. The first of these is Verse 91, which states: "*No true understanding of God have they when they say: 'God has never revealed anything to any human being.' Say: Who, then, revealed the Book which Moses brought to people as a light and a guidance? You transcribe it on sheets to show around, while you suppress much. You have been taught [by it] what neither you nor your forefathers had ever known. Say: God, and leave them to their play and foolish chatter.*" The report suggests that it refers to two Jewish men, Mālik ibn al-Ṣayf and Ka`b ibn al-Ashraf. The second verse in question is the one stating: "*It is He who has brought into being gardens – both of the cultivated type and those growing wild – and the date palm, and fields bearing different produce, and the olive tree, and the pomegranates, all resembling one another and yet so different. Eat of their fruit when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor) what is due to them on harvest day. But do not waste, for He does not love the wasteful.*" (Verse 141) This verse is reported to refer to Thābit ibn Qays al-Anṣārī, although Ibn Jurayj and al-Māwardī suggest that it refers to Mu`ādh ibn Jabal.

In so far as the report goes concerning Verse 91, it is possible, considering that it mentions the Torah, the book Moses brought as a light and guidance, and that it addresses the Jews directly. However, different reports by Mujāhid and Ibn `Abbās suggest that the reference to those who denied God's revelation to anyone were the idolaters in Makkah and hence the verse is a Makkan revelation. A different reading of the verse gives it in the third person, saying, ` *They transcribe it on sheets to show around, and they suppress much.*' According to this reading, which is admissible and

favoured by al-Ṭabarī, this statement gives information about the Jews and does not address them. Thus, the entire verse is concerned with the unbelievers.

As for the second verse, it cannot be a Madinan revelation, because it comes in between verses revealed in Makkah and if it was to be left out until later, the flow of discourse would be interrupted. Thus, the verses before it would be cut off from those after it, while the topic discussed does not allow such interruption.

What has caused some scholars to consider Verse 141 a Madinan revelation is that they consider the order included in it, "*Eat of their fruit when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor) what is due to them on harvest day*", to refer to *zakāt*. Details of *zakāt* legislation concerning agricultural produce were given in Madinah. But this is not imperative in understanding this statement. We have other authentic reports stating that it refers to charity in general, not to *zakāt* in particular, or that it means that Muslims are required to feed those who pass by their farms on harvest day or on the day when fruits are picked. These reports state that *zakāt* on agricultural produce was later specified at the rate of 10 per cent in certain situations and 5 per cent in others. This means that this verse is also a Makkan revelation.

Al-Tha`labī states that this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah with the exception of verses 91-3 and 151-3. As for the first three, we have shown that the first of these could only have been revealed in Makkah. The same applies to the other two. As for the second group, to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single report attributed to any of the Prophet's Companions or their successors suggesting that they are Madinan revelations. Their subject matter does not indicate that either. They speak about certain concepts and practices of the days of ignorance. These are closely related to the theme of permissibility and prohibition in respect of slaughtered animals and offerings to which we have already referred. Therefore, we are inclined to consider these verses as Makkan revelations.

In the Amīrī edition of the Qur'ān it is suggested that verses 20, 23, 91-2, 114, 141 and 151-3 were revealed in Madinah. We have discussed most of these. The others, 20, 23 and 114 do not include anything that suggests their revelation in Madinah except that the people of earlier revelations are mentioned in them. But this is not clear evidence, because we have other references to the people of earlier revelations in other Makkan verses.

In the light of the foregoing, we are more inclined to take the reports stating that the entire *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah on the same night. These reports are given by two of the Prophet's Companions, `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās and Asmā' bint Yazīd. The report by Asmā' mentions a particular incident in which she was present. She says: "The *sūrah* entitled *al-An`ām,* or Cattle, was bestowed from on high in full to the Prophet when I was holding the rein of the Prophet's she-camel. Its weight almost

broke the she-camel's bones". (Related by Sufyān al-Thawrī through Layth and Shahr ibn Hawshab.)

Al-Ṭabarānī relates the other report by Ibn `Abbās: "The *sūrah al-An`ām* was revealed at night in full in Makkah, with seventy thousand angels around, raising their voices with glorification of God."

These two reports are more reliable than those which suggest that some of its verses were revealed in Madinah. Our objective analysis supports this. In fact, the whole body of the *sūrah* and its flow makes it a complete unit, and suggests that it is like a flowing river, or a rushing flood, without barriers or impediments. Its construction confirms or at least markedly strengthens these reports.

The Main Theme

We have referred briefly to the main theme and overall characteristics of the *sūrah.* We need to add here a brief word on them.

Anas ibn Mālik quotes the Prophet as saying: "The *sūrah al-An`ām* was bestowed from on high, with a great many angels in attendance, blocking the horizon, raising their voices with God's glorification, and the earth shaking under them." God's Messenger was repeating: "Limitless in His glory is God Almighty."

This great procession of angels and this shaking of the earth impart a clear impression to the *sūrah.* Indeed, the *sūrah* itself may be described as a procession which makes our hearts and the whole universe shake. It provides multitudes of situations, scenes, inspirations and rhythms, which flow like waves one after another. As one wave reaches its breaking place, the next one follows very closely on its heels, almost reaching out to the one that precedes it. The flow remains continuous, unending.

Its central theme is seen as a whole. It is not possible to break the *sūrah* into sections, each dealing with a particular aspect of the main theme. What we have is a succession of waves, or rounds, each picking up where the previous one left off and complementing it. Hence, we are not going to discuss in these introductory remarks the topics the *sūrah* touches on. We will only give samples of its successive waves.

The *sūrah* starts with a confrontation with the idolaters who associate partners with God, while the indicators of God's oneness stare them in the face, presenting themselves everywhere, both in the great universe and within their own souls. It puts to them the truth of Godhead, presented in panoramic touches depicting the whole universe as also their own existence. All this in three quick verses showing universal existence at its widest and deepest: *"All praise is due to God, who has created the heavens and the earth, and brought into being darkness and light; yet those who disbelieve*

regard other beings as equal to their Lord. It is He who has created you out of clay, and then has decreed a term (for you), and there is another term known only to Him. Yet you are still in doubt. He alone is God in the heavens and on earth. He has full knowledge of all that you keep secret and all that you do openly. He knows what you earn." (Verses 1-3) Three short verses the first comprises the whole universe and its existence, the second speaks of the human world in its entirety, and the third shows how Godhead encompasses both types of existence. How splendid! How comprehensive!

Against such a universal view testifying to the Creator's oneness, idolatry and doubt sound extremely singular. They have no place in the universal system or in human nature, or in people's hearts and minds.

At this very moment the second wave begins by presenting the attitude of those who deny all the signs and indicators they see in the world around them and within themselves. As this singular attitude is shown, it is immediately followed with a warning, coupled with a reminder of the destruction of earlier communities. God's overwhelming power is, thus, seen in full view. The stubborn attitude of those rejecting the truth in the face of such manifest truth appears to be strange indeed. We realize that it is not proofs that they lack but rather sincerity and an open mind. (Verses 4-11)

Immediately after that another wave begins, defining the truth of Godhead as it is clearly reflected in God's ownership of everything in the heavens and earth, and what takes its rest at night or day. It is also seen in the fact that God is the only one who provides for all creation, the one who feeds them and is fed by none. Hence, He is the only guardian and the only protector, to whom all creatures must submit themselves. It is He who punishes the disobedient ones in the life to come, who can bring benefit and cause harm, and who has power over all things. (Verses 12-19)

A fourth wave speaks of the fact that the people of earlier revelations are aware of this newly revealed book, i.e. the Qur'ān, which is rejected by the idolaters. It describes idolatry as the worst type of wrongdoing. It also shows the idolaters as they are gathered on the Day of Judgement. They are asked about the partners they used to associate with God, and their surprising answer is to deny having done so. In this round, the idolaters are shown with unfunctioning faculties of reception: they cannot pick up any inspiration to accept the faith, and their hearts cannot appreciate the signs calling on them to believe. Hence they describe the Qur'ān as `fables of the ancients'. They are told here that they only ruin themselves when they counsel others not to respond to divine guidance. They are shown as they are brought before the Fire on the Day of Judgement. In their predicament, they wish that they could be returned to this life so that they would not deny God's revelations, but join the believers instead. This round then takes us back to this life to see the unbelievers denying resurrection and life after death. By way of comment, they are shown

standing before their Lord on the Day of Resurrection, carrying their burdens on their backs, and being asked about their denial. It concludes with an unequivocal statement that those who deny the meeting with their Lord on the Day of Judgement are certainly the losers, and that this present life is too trivial in comparison to what the God-fearing receive in the hereafter. (Verses 20-32)

The fifth wave addresses the Prophet to comfort him and dispel his grief at the denial he receives from the unbelievers. He is told that he has a good example in the cases of earlier messengers sent by God. They were denied and received hostile opposition, but they remained steadfast until God gave them victory. It states that the laws God has set in operation will not be changed, but they cannot be hastened either. If the Prophet cannot withstand their rejection, then he may try to bring them a miracle by his own human endeavour. Had God so willed, He would have brought them all to His guidance. But His will has so determined that those whose natural receptive faculties are not switched off will respond to divine guidance, while those who are dead will not make such a response. He will resurrect them and they will all return to Him. (Verses 33-6)

The *sūrah* goes on wave after wave, along the same lines as the examples we have just given. Some of the later waves are even higher than the ones we have cited. In dealing with some aspects its rhythm is of an even stronger beat and higher cadence.

Unique Subject Treatment

We have already said that this *sūrah* deals with its subject matter in a very unique way. At every turn, in every situation or scene, it brings out in sharp relief all the awesome splendour of what is being portrayed, keeping us spellbound, breathless as we follow it. Now we will refer to particular verses confirming this, and the reader needs to carefully consider these for full appreciation. No matter how hard we try to describe this effect, we cannot give more than a vague feeling of it.

The central theme of the *sūrah is* to state the truth of Godhead and to give human beings sufficient knowledge about their true Lord so that they submit themselves to Him alone. Thus, it has much to say about providing proper witnesses and demarcating the lines that separate the believers from the unbelievers. Thus, this truth becomes clear in a believer's mind and he is able to declare it with power and firmness in the face of those who take the opposite attitude. (Verses 14-19)

On warnings, the *sūrah* shows how God's power encompasses all. When confronted with God's power, human nature is freed of all stifling pressures and turns to its true Lord, forgetting the false deities people associate with Him. (Verses 40-7)

The *sūrah* has much to say about God's knowledge of all that is secret or concealed, and the time appointed for the death of every living thing. He has full power over everything on land and sea, day and night, in this life and in the life to come. (Verses 59-62)

Human nature will undoubtedly turn towards God once it opens up to receive the inspiring guidance seen clearly in the world around us. Numerous are the pointers that address human nature appealing to its innate purity. (Verses 74-82)

The *sūrah* paints several scenes of life opening up. Thus we see images of the break of day, the approach of night, the bright stars, the darkness on land and sea, the pouring rain, growing vegetation, ripening fruits. In all this the unity of God, the only Creator and Originator is seen in perfect clarity. To ascribe partners or children to God sounds most absurd indeed. (Verses 95-103)

Finally on addressing our prayers to God alone, offering our worship, life and death purely to Him, denouncing any attempt to seek a Lord other than Him, and acknowledging His authority over this life and the designation of man's role in it, and over the hereafter and the question of reckoning and reward, the *sūrah* ends with a humble prayer. (Verses 161-5)

These are only six examples of the breathtaking splendour the *sūrah* employs at every turn and in every scene. We should also refer here to the exceptional harmony the *sūrah* provides in drawing its different scenes. We will, however, give but three examples, leaving the full explanation to our detailed commentary.

The *sūrah is* full of different scenes and situations, but they all share one aspect in common. In each, the *sūrah* practically brings the listener to the scene to look at it carefully and to reflect on the situation described. This is done through words that almost show us the movement physically. Thus, the scenes painted include people whom the listener sees with his own eyes. Consider in this respect verses 27, 30, 93-4 and also 22-4.

When the *sūrah* warns the unbelievers against God's punishment and His overwhelming power, they are physically brought before such punishment, as though they see how it is inflicted. Consider here verses 40-1 and 46-7.

In describing the situation of sinking into error after one has recognized the truth through divine guidance, the *sūrah* shows us a moving scene which we stop to look at very carefully, even though the text does not include any order or suggestion that we should do so. This is given in verses 71-3.

Similarly the *sūrah* brings the listener before the picture of ripening fruit in gardens where we see life springing up and manifesting in the colours and fruits that could only be produced by God's hand. All this is seen at its best in Verse 99. Indeed,

such perfect harmony is the common feature of all the scenes and situations described in the *sūrah.*

Another aspect of such perfect harmony, which is not unrelated to what we have already said, are the scenes bringing in or calling for witnesses. The scenes of the Day of Resurrection are portrayed as though they are providing witnesses for what the unbelievers do in this life, or scenes denouncing the unbelievers and drawing attention to them. Examples of these have been given, and they all start with "If you could but see...". Closely related to these are the scenes calling for witnesses to testify to the faith itself, and then to testify to divine law. Both are treated in the same way. At the beginning of the *sūrah* witnesses are called to testify to the truth of faith in its entirety, as we see in Verse 19. Then when a special occasion arises, concerning the question of prohibition and permissibility, the *sūrah* paints a new scene and calls for witnesses on this particular issue, in the same way as witnesses are called for the faith. This implies that the two are the same and ensures perfect harmony which is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style. This call for witnesses occurs in Verse 150.

Another type of harmony is that of expression, which is seen in repeating certain words and phrases in different contexts to indicate that they refer to the same point in different ways. Thus, in the first verse of the *sūrah,* the unbelievers are said to regard certain beings as equal to their Lord in order to indicate that they associate partners with Him. Then in Verse 150, those who formulate legislation for themselves are also described as regarding others as equal to their Lord. Thus, the same description is given to associating partners with God and to the exercise of the authority to legislate. This is especially significant both in the idea it expresses and in the way it is expressed.

The term 'God's way' is used to refer to the Islamic faith in general (Verse 126) and in speaking about legislation with regard to permissibility and the prohibition of slaughtered animals and agricultural produce. (Verse 153) This indicates that the issue of legislation is the same as the issue of faith. To accept God's legislation is to follow His way, and to reject it is to deviate from His way. Thus, it is shown as a question of faith or unfaith, *jāhiliyyah* or Islam.

We move on now to look at the *sūrah* in more detail. However, instead of dividing it into chapters as we have done with other *sūrahs*, we will, in this instance, follow the natural pattern of this particular sūrah, as it moves through one wave after another.

1
The Origin of Life

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ وَٱلنُّورَ ۖ ثُمَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِرَبِّهِمْ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١﴾

All praise is due to God, who has created the heavens and the earth, and brought into being darkness and light; yet those who disbelieve regard other beings as equal to their Lord. (1)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن طِينٍ ثُمَّ قَضَىٰٓ أَجَلًا ۖ وَأَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى عِندَهُۥ ۖ ثُمَّ أَنتُمْ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

It is He who has created you out of clay, and then has decreed a term (for you), and there is another term known only to Him. Yet you are still in doubt. (2)

وَهُوَ ٱللَّهُ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَفِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ يَعْلَمُ سِرَّكُمْ وَجَهْرَكُمْ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٣﴾

He alone is God in the heavens and on earth. He has full knowledge of all that you keep secret and all that you do openly. He knows what you earn. (3)

A Framework Is Set

These three opening verses strike the basic notes as they lay the foundation for the subject matter of the *sūrah*, namely, faith. *"All praise is due to God, who has created the heavens and the earth, and brought into being darkness and light; yet those who disbelieve regard other beings as equal to their Lord."* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* starts with praising God and glorifying Him as only He, the Creator and

Originator of all things, deserves to be praised and glorified. Thus, the initial touches stress the foremost quality of Godhead, namely, creation. To start with, it refers to creation in the two widest expanses of existence, the heavens and earth. It then adds the two greatest phenomena that result from the creation of the heavens and the earth according to a deliberate plan, namely, darkness and light. This initial touch, then, takes into view the magnificent stars and planets which we see in the universe, the unimaginable distances separating them and the numerous phenomena which result from their orbital movements. It then wonders at those people who behold this awesome existence, itself a great testimony to the infinite ability of the Supreme Creator and His faultless planning, but who still refuse to believe in God, acknowledge His oneness or praise Him. Instead, they associate partners with Him whom they allege to be His equals: "*Yet those who disbelieve regard other beings as equal to their Lord.*" All this clear evidence in the universe thus loses its effect on the human mind and soul. The irony is of the same magnitude as the stars and the planets, the endless distances separating them and the all-enveloping phenomena that result from their creation. It is indeed greater.

The picture continues to unfold with its reference to human existence which follows the existence of the universe and the two phenomena of darkness and light. This is a remarkable Qur'ānic touch taking us from the darkness of clay to the light of active life. We perceive here the full artistic harmony at work, with the reference to darkness and light made at the outset. Another closely intertwined subtlety prepares us for a first term appointed for death and a second term appointed for resurrection known only to God. We, thus, have two contrasting notions to contemplate, namely idleness and movement and a dull clay contrasted with life created by God. The gap between these opposites both in time and nature, is wide indeed. All this should inspire every human heart with the certainty that it is all part of God's scheme and that we will all be gathered to Him. Yet those who are addressed by this *sūrah* continue to have doubts: "*Yet you are still in doubt.*" (Verse 2)

A third touch in these short verses combines the two previous ones within the same framework, making it clear that God is the only deity in the whole universe, including the human world: "*He alone is God in the heavens and on earth. He has full knowledge of all that you keep secret and all that you do openly. He knows what you earn.*" (Verse 3)

The One who has created the heavens and the earth is the only God in them. All attributes and qualities of Godhead belong to Him alone and both the heavens and the earth acknowledge them without hesitation. This acknowledgement is reflected in their submission to the laws God has set in operation in them and in their willing fulfilment of His commandments. The same should apply to human life. God is the Creator of man, the heavens and earth alike. In man's original making is the clay of

this earth. All his qualities which combine to make of him a human being have been given to him by God. His physical entity is subject to the laws of nature God has set in operation. Man has no say in all this. He is created and given his existence by God's will, not by his parents' design. They may have intercourse, but they cannot effect conception by their own will. Man is born according to the laws God has established for the term of pregnancy and the conditions of childbirth. Man uses for breathing the air God has placed over the earth in the quantities and ratios He has willed. His breathing conforms to the quantity and method God has chosen for him. He feels pain, hunger, thirst, happiness, or in short, he lives in accordance with God's law; he has no say in any of it. In all this he is in the same position as the heavens and the earth.

Moreover, God knows what man keeps secret and what he does in the open. He knows what he does and what he earns, be it done in public or in private. It is, then, more befitting for man to follow God's laws in that area of his life over which he has been given full control. This includes his chosen faith, values and practices. If he does, he achieves harmony between his natural life which is subject to God's law and his free-will in those areas where he exercises his free choice. Thus, he precludes internal conflict and saves himself from being pulled in opposite directions by two unequal laws: one set by God and one made by man. The two cannot be placed on the same level.

This powerful opening to the *sūrah* addresses man's heart and mind, pointing out the evidence derived from creation and from life, for man is able to see such evidence in the world around him and within himself. It is an address which moves away from theology and philosophy in order to awaken human nature as it portrays the movement of creation according to a deliberate scheme and in a manner that states facts without indulging in argumentation. The creation of the heavens and the earth, their organization according to a clear system, and the creation of life — the most important aspect of which is human life — and its movement along its definite course, put human nature face to face with the truth and strongly reassure it of God's oneness. God's oneness is the core topic of the whole *sūrah.* It is what the entire Qur'ān aims to establish. The question is not confined to God's existence, as such. Throughout human history, the basic problem was not that of accepting the existence of a deity, but rather the inability of recognizing that true deity and giving Him His true attributes.

The pagan Arabs addressed initially by this *sūrah* did not deny God's existence altogether. Indeed, they acknowledged His existence and that He was the Creator who provided sustenance to His creation, and who owned the universe and caused life and death. They acknowledged many of His attributes as the Qur'ān states. The reason then for classifying them as pagans was their unwillingness to come to the

logical conclusion of God's actual existence, in other words, that God must be given authority over their whole lives, without their associating any partners with Him in that. Nor did they acknowledge their duty to implement God's law as the only acceptable law in human life. It was not enough for them to acknowledge God's existence and to give Him those attributes which would make them believers. Here at the beginning of this *sūrah*, the fact that God is the Creator of both man and the universe, and that He governs the life of both and has full knowledge of men's secret thoughts and their public actions and what they hide and reveal are stated as an introduction which leads to the inevitable conclusion that all sovereignty belongs to God alone.

Both sets of evidence concerning creation and life represented the most perfect evidence put to the unbelievers so that they may acknowledge the major concept of God's oneness and sovereignty and act on it in their practical life. Furthermore, both concepts represented perfect refutations of all new concepts denying God's existence, hollow or sophisticated as they might be.

In point of truth, it is exceedingly doubtful that those atheists actually believed themselves. Most probably, the whole concept of atheism started as a manoeuvre to confront the Church. Zionism then exploited it for its own ends, because it tries to demolish the basic foundation of human life, so that no human community other than its own can take it as a basis for its code of living. This they state in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The result they aim to achieve is the collapse of humanity so that they can exercise control over it, since they preserve for themselves the source of true power, namely faith.

When Evil Schemes Seem to Triumph

No matter how much they scheme, the Zionists cannot overpower human nature which, deep at heart, knows that there is a Lord who has created this universe. Human nature, however, may not be able to recognise the right attributes of the true Lord of the universe and it may deviate through giving authority to others beside Him. When such deviation occurs in human nature, it becomes unbeliever or idolater. Some individuals, however, may have a corrupt nature that leads to the malfunctioning of their natural faculties and responses. It is such individuals who may succumb to wicked designs aiming to make them deny God's existence altogether. Such individuals will remain only a small minority. Indeed, the real atheists today do not number more than a few millions in Russia and China, compared to the hundreds of millions who suffer under the tyranny of those atheists. All the efforts which have gone on unabated for over forty years to utilise the means

of education and information to spread atheism could not achieve more than this.[3]

The Zionists' wicked designs have sought to reduce religion to a set of rituals, thus seeking to minimise its influence on practical life. In this way, they are able to persuade people that they remain believers while acknowledging that other lords legislate for them and regulate their practical activities. Hence, the Zionists undermine humanity altogether, even though people maintain the delusion that they are believers.

Their ultimate aim has always been to destroy Islam, because they know from their own history that they can never overcome it as long as it continues to be implemented in practice. They also know that they can overcome Muslims only when they do not truly implement Islam, regardless of the fact that they may consider themselves Muslim. Presenting the notion that religion is properly followed when it actually has little or no influence on people's life is necessary for the Zionist plot to succeed.

I feel, although God knows best, that the Zionist Jews and the Christian neo-Crusaders have reached the point of despair in their attempts to uproot Islam from its strongholds in Africa, Asia and Europe as well. They have lost all hope that they can make Muslim populations adopt atheism through materialistic creeds, and they no longer entertain any hope of being able to convert Muslims to other religions through missionary work or direct colonialism. This is due to the fact that atheism is repugnant to human nature. It is even rejected by pagans, let alone by Muslims. For their part, other religions do not even hope or attempt to replace Islam in the mind of any Muslim.

Perhaps it is because of this despair that Zionist Jews and Christian neo-Crusaders have changed their tactics. They no longer try to confront Islam openly through Communism or missionary work. They have adopted more subtle and wicked designs. They now try to establish systems and regimes which give themselves a superficial Islamic colour and which pay lip-service to Islam. Once they have donned this mask, such regimes start to carry out all the projects and plans recommended by missionary conventions and Zionist protocols, which could not be implemented in a direct and open manner.

These regimes may profess to be Muslim, or at least declare that they respect religion, but at the same time, they suspend God's law altogether and replace it with a man-made one that makes lawful what God has declared unlawful. They advocate concepts of life and moral values that undermine Islamic ones, using in the process all methods and media that influence public opinion against religious views and beliefs. In strict adherence to the conclusions of missionary conventions and Zionist

[3] These comments were written in the early 1960s. — Editor's note.

protocols, they force Muslim women out of their homes, pleading the cause of progress, civilisation and the interests of development, work and productivity. This they do when millions remain unemployed, living below the poverty line. They promote permissiveness among both sexes while claiming to respect faith and to adhere to it. Despite all this, people continue to think that they live as true Muslims in a Muslim society. Is it not true, they ask, that the good among them continue to offer their prayers and observe their fasting? The central question of whether sovereignty belongs to God alone or to a diversity of deities no longer concerns them since they have been tricked into thinking that it has nothing to do with religion and that they can continue to be Muslims while conducting their lives on the basis of values and laws that are not derived from Islam.

In order to ensure the success of their trickery and to hide their involvement, world Zionism and neo-Crusaders stir up superficial conflicts and hostilities which show these regimes to be opposed to them. This they do at the same time as providing them with material and moral support, protecting them both discreetly and openly, and using their own intelligence services to ensure their survival. In this way, they remove all suspicion from their puppets who fulfil for them what they have been unable to fulfil for themselves after more than three centuries of effort to destroy the faith and moral values of the Muslims. Thus, these regimes do the work of the Zionists and Christian missionaries and deprive the Muslims of their first source of power, namely, conducting their lives on the basis of their faith.

A minority of people in the vast area of the Muslim world, nevertheless, remain undeluded and cannot be brought round to accept unfaith as an image of Islam. They reject the deception that paints transgression and permissiveness as progress and civilisation. All sorts of false accusations are levelled at this minority. It is subjected to a war of extermination while international news agencies and the mass media remain deaf, dumb and blind. Even simple, well-meaning Muslims may think that it is only a clash of personalities or a sectarian battle that has nothing to do with the unabating fight against the religion of Islam. Those of them who are perturbed to see the weakening of religious and moral values are naively preoccupied with trying to correct some minor offences, thinking that they fulfil their task by speaking up against them. They are fully preoccupied with side issues when the foundations of this faith are being destroyed, God's authority is being usurped and human life is governed by false gods that they have been ordered to reject.

The Zionist Jews and Christian neo-Crusaders are pleased with themselves for having pulled off this trick. They had long despaired of managing to undermine Islam by spreading atheism or converting Muslims through missionary work.

We have, however, unlimited hope that God will render their efforts futile. Our trust in the power of this religion of Islam knows no limit. They will continue to

scheme, but God will foil their schemes. It is He who says: *"They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains. Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, able to exact retribution."* (14: 46-7)

At the beginning of the *sūrah,* the evidence of creation and life is placed in a powerful confrontation with atheism. When it is put to atheists, they find themselves driven to false and devious arguments.

When we consider the existence of this universe and the system that governs it, we are bound to conclude that, naturally and logically, it is the work of a Creator who has devised its elaborate system. It is impossible for us to perceive that something comes into existence out of nothing, unless we acknowledge the existence of a deity who creates, originates and brings into existence. By contrast, atheists try to mend the flaws in their argument by saying that it is not necessary to suppose that non-existence preceded existence. One of them even became known as the philosopher of spiritualism, as he defends it against materialism. Some naïve Muslims may speak highly of him and quote him in support of their faith as if they want to support the faith God has revealed by a statement of one of His servants. This philosopher was a Jew named Bergson who claimed that the existence of the universe was not preceded by non-existence.

What basis does he provide for his claims? Does he rely on human intellect? Certainly not. He himself admits that the human mind can only perceive of existence coming after non-existence. Does he rely on inspiration from God? He makes no such claim, although he says that by intuition, mystics have always come to the conclusion of the existence of a deity. Hence, we must accept this intuition, which has been so consistent. [The deity Bergson talks about is not God, as we conceive of Him. The deity, to him, is life.] Upon what other source does he rely, then, to prove his theory? We simply do not know.

We must always come back to acknowledging the existence of a creator who has made this universe and brought it into existence. We simply cannot explain the existence of the universe without resorting to this concept. The point, however, is not merely that the universe exists, but rather that it operates according to laws and measures which never fail. Every possibility is calculated accurately in devising these laws. After long contemplation, the human mind can still only comprehend a small portion of them.

The same applies to life. We cannot explain how the gulf between life and matter — whatever definition we give to matter, including radioactivity — is crossed unless we admit it to be the work of a deity who creates according to a deliberate and elaborate scheme. He has created the universe in a condition which allows the

emergence and sustainability of life. With all the remarkable characteristics distinguishing human life, it has to be classified as higher than animal life. However, man has been created of clay, which means that he is made of the same material as this earth. There must then have been a will that gave him life as well as his human characteristics according to a definite purpose.

All attempts by atheists to explain the emergence of life have failed, even by the standards of the human mind itself. The latest I have read in this field was an attempt by the American philosopher Durant who tries to draw some sort of analogy between the type of movement within the nucleus, which he calls a degree of life, and the type of life which we know. He, indeed, makes a great effort to bridge the gap between dull matter and active life, only to be in a position of denying the concept of the creator who gives life to what is lifeless.

His tireless efforts have not availed him or other materialists of anything. If we were to presume that life is an innate quality within matter, and that there is no other power endowed with a will to originate life, we have to explain why life, which is within matter, manifests itself in several degrees, some of which are higher and more sophisticated than others. Why does life manifest itself in a mechanical, unintelligent movement in the nucleus, while it appears in an organic form in plants and in a more sophisticated organic form in other living things? If all matters have an innate quality of life, how is it that some matters take of this quality more than others, in the absence of a will and elaborate planning? How is it that life has several degrees? We can only understand this gradation if it is the work of a conscious will which plans and chooses. If it is left to matter, assuming that it has life, to do according to its own designs, our human intellect cannot understand or explain this gradation.

The Islamic view of the origin of life in its different grades is the only acceptable explanation of this phenomenon which cannot be explained by the materialists no matter how hard they try. In this commentary, we do not move away from the Qur'ānic method. Hence, we confine ourselves to confronting the fallacies of atheism by the evidence of creation, life and deliberate planning. The Qur'ān does not consider the question of God's existence as its main question because God knows that human nature rejects the premises of atheism. The real question is that of God's oneness and the establishment of His authority on human life. This is the basic question elaborated in this *sūrah,* as we have seen in its opening verses.

2
Stubborn Rejection

وَمَا تَأۡتِيهِم مِّنۡ ءَايَةٖ مِّنۡ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ إِلَّا كَانُواْ عَنۡهَا مُعۡرِضِينَ ٤

Whenever a revelation comes to them from their Lord, they [who are unbelievers] turn their back upon it. (4)

فَقَدۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِٱلۡحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡۖ فَسَوۡفَ يَأۡتِيهِمۡ أَنۢبَٰٓؤُاْ مَا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ٥

Thus they have denied the truth now that it has come to them. In time, they shall have full information about that which they used to deride. (5)

أَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ كَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا مِن قَبۡلِهِم مِّن قَرۡنٖ مَّكَّنَّٰهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مَا لَمۡ نُمَكِّن لَّكُمۡ وَأَرۡسَلۡنَا ٱلسَّمَآءَ عَلَيۡهِم مِّدۡرَارٗا وَجَعَلۡنَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرَ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهِمۡ فَأَهۡلَكۡنَٰهُم بِذُنُوبِهِمۡ وَأَنشَأۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡ قَرۡنًا ءَاخَرِينَ ٦

Do they not see how many a generation We have destroyed before them — people whom We had made more powerful in the land than We have made you, and for whom We sent down abundant water from the sky, and made rivers flow at their feet? Yet We destroyed them for their sins, and raised up another generation in their place. (6)

وَلَوۡ نَزَّلۡنَا عَلَيۡكَ كِتَٰبٗا فِي قِرۡطَاسٖ فَلَمَسُوهُ بِأَيۡدِيهِمۡ لَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ٧

Even if We had sent down to you a book written on paper, and they had touched it with their own hands, surely the unbelievers would still say: "This is nothing but plain sorcery". (7)

وَقَالُواْ لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡهِ مَلَكٞۖ وَلَوۡ أَنزَلۡنَا مَلَكٗا لَّقُضِيَ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ ثُمَّ لَا يُنظَرُونَ ٨

They say: "Why has not an angel been sent down to him?" If We had sent down an angel, all would have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further

respite. (8)

And even if We had appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man, and thus We would have confused them just as they are now confusing themselves. (9)

Indeed other messengers have been derided before your time, but those who scoffed at them were eventually overwhelmed by the very thing they have derided. (10)

Say: Go all over the earth and see what was the fate of those who denied the truth. (11)

وَلَوۡ جَعَلۡنَٰهُ مَلَكٗا لَّجَعَلۡنَٰهُ رَجُلٗا وَلَلَبَسۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم مَّا يَلۡبِسُونَ ٩

وَلَقَدِ ٱسۡتُهۡزِئَ بِرُسُلٖ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ فَحَاقَ بِٱلَّذِينَ سَخِرُواْ مِنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ١٠

قُلۡ سِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ ثُمَّ ٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ١١

Overview

This is the second opening passage of the *sūrah,* following the first that spoke of the truth of God's existence as it is reflected in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the origination of darkness and light. It is further reflected in the creation of man from the very substance of this earth, determining the term of his first life that ends in death while keeping secret another time fixed for resurrection, and in God's full knowledge of what people may do and have done both in public and in private.

This existence of the Divine Being is unique, unlike any other existence, because there is no creator other than God. It is so clear and overpowering that to deny it, in spite of all the great signs testifying to it, is an unjustifiable enormity.

When the *sūrah* portrays the attitude of the unbelievers who oppose the Islamic message in the face of such undeniable and overpowering existence, their attitude appears singularly insupportable. Thus, the Qur'ān wins this first round, scoring its win in the depth of people's nature, despite their apparent and stubborn rejection.

This passage of the *sūrah* portrays this unreasonable stubbornness, issuing on the one hand a stern warning and on the other a reminder of the fate of earlier rejecters. The admonition is stacked with various but highly effective touches that follow the initial jolt that shakes people's hearts at the outset of the *sūrah.*

Social Attitudes and the Decline of Nations

> *Whenever a revelation comes to them from their Lord, they [who are unbelievers] turn their back upon it. Thus they have denied the truth now that it has come to them. In time, they shall have full information about that which they used to deride. Do they not see how many a generation We have destroyed before them – people whom We had made more powerful in the land than We have made you, and for whom We sent down abundant water from the sky, and made rivers flow at their feet? Yet We destroyed them for their sins, and raised up another generation in their place.* (Verses 4-6)

It is clear that turning away from the truth is an obstinate position taken by the unbelievers, and this in the face of all the evidence pointing to its error. They do not lack signs and pointers which guide people to faith, nor do they lack evidence to prove the truth of the message and the genuine honesty of the Messenger conveying it, nor do they lack evidence of Godhead. These are the basic concepts they are called upon to accept. All they lack is the will to respond to clear evidence, overcome irrational stubbornness and reflect on the truth presented to them: "*Whenever a revelation comes to them from their Lord, they [who are unbelievers] turn their back upon it.*" (Verse 4) Such deliberate obstinacy against all evidence and clear signs needs the threat of severe punishment to jolt them out of their attitude, remove the barriers of their conceit and reawaken their natural responses: "*Thus they have denied the truth now that it has come to them. In time, they shall have full information about that which they used to deride.*" (Verse 5)

The truth has come to them from the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who has brought into being darkness and light and created man out of clay. It is He alone who is God in the heavens and on earth, and who has full knowledge of all that people keep secret or do openly, as well as all that they earn. What has come to them from Him is the truth, and they have rejected it, insisting on describing it as false, turning away from Divine revelations and deriding the call to faith. Hence, they are told to watch for the true information which is certain to come to them concerning that which they used to scorn. This is a general threat given without any details of its nature or timing. Thus, they are kept in suspense, waiting, expecting at every moment to receive what they are threatened with of unspecified suffering.

Their attentions and minds are drawn to the calamities that befell past nations which, like them, rejected the truth. They even had some knowledge of those nations and what happened to them in the remains of the people of `Ād of al-Aĥqāf and Thamūd of al-Ĥijr. The Arabs of Makkah used to pass by these remains when they went on their winter and summer journeys to Yemen and Syria respectively. They also passed by the destroyed towns of the Prophet Lot's people, Sodom and

Gomorrah, and were aware of the tales that were in circulation concerning what happened to those people. They should, therefore, reflect on these peoples' fate: "*Do they not see how many a generation We have destroyed before them – people whom We had made more powerful in the land than We have made you, and for whom We sent down abundant water from the sky, and made rivers flow at their feet? Yet We destroyed them for their sins, and raised up another generation in their place.*" (Verse 6)

Those earlier generations were well established in the land and given power which was much greater than that enjoyed by the Quraysh, the first people addressed by the Qur'ān. God also sent them rain which brought into their lives fertility, growth and abundance. But they disobeyed their Lord and were subsequently destroyed by Him. God then raised up another generation to take over and wield power. No matter how powerful a community may be, God can easily inflict severe punishment on them. When those people were destroyed, the earth did not feel their absence since another generation was raised in their place. Life continued as if nothing had happened.

People tend to overlook this fact when they are prosperous. They forget that it is God who gives them power in order to test them to determine how faithful they are to their pledges to worship Him alone and to follow His guidance. Will they honour their covenant with the One who has placed them in charge of His earth, or will they create false deities for themselves which usurp the rights and attributes of Godhead and treat what has been entrusted to their charge as their own property? Very often people tend to overlook this fact, and consequently deviate from the terms of their covenant with God that has placed them in charge of the earth. They, therefore, abandon the way of living God has laid down for them, unaware initially of the consequences to which they expose themselves. Corruption gradually creeps into their lives and they move further away from divine guidance. This continues until they reach such a stage that the threats outlined by God are inevitably put into effect. Doom may take different processes: God may eliminate some people altogether, inflicting on them suffering that engulfs them from above or springs from beneath their feet. At other times, God may punish them with famine, a heavy death toll and poor harvests. Both types of punishment were inflicted on different nations. God may, alternatively, cause some of them to endure the might of others until trust can no longer exist between them, and they are considerably weakened. God may give power over them to some of His servants, who may or may not abide by God's code, this to weaken their forces and uproot them from the land in which they exercised their power. Life continues in this cycle. It is a happy person who realises that it is a manifestation of God's laws in operation and that it is all a test. He is then true to his part of his covenant with God. By contrast, it is a miserable person who overlooks this fact and deludes himself with thoughts that he has been able to acquire strength and prosperity by his own knowledge or methods, or by mere coincidence.

People are often deceived when they see a despotic ruler, a corrupt or atheist person enjoying power on earth, able to escape punishment. But people are hasty. They see only the beginning or the middle of the route but not its end to which such person arrives at the appropriate time. We can see examples of it in how ancient generations who defied God and His messengers were destroyed. In the Qur'ān, our attention is drawn to their fates so that we realise that the end is not what we see at a particular point in time. The statement, *"We destroyed them for their sins"*, is often repeated in the Qur'ān in a variety of ways. Such repetition aims to establish a certain fact and to clarify a part of the Islamic interpretation of historical events. It shows that sins do destroy sinners and that it is God who brings about their destruction. This is a law which remains in operation although an individual or a generation may not see it within their own limited life span. It simply engulfs nations when they allow sins to become an essential part of their lifestyle.

As we have said, this statement gives us a glimpse of the Islamic interpretation of history, because the destruction of past nations and their replacement with new generations are due in part to the effect of sin on the constitution of nations. They create a condition which inevitably leads to destruction, either through a sudden calamity that God causes to befall them as used to happen in ancient history, or through natural, progressive decline which weakens nations as they wander aimlessly in a sinful maze.

In relatively recent history, we have enough examples of the effects on nations of uncontrolled indulgences, permissiveness, promiscuity and treating women as little more than sexual objects. The collapse of the Greek and Roman Empires provide such examples, but we can also discern the beginning of the decline of nations that still seem to enjoy power and affluence such as France and Britain.

A materialistic interpretation of history gives this aspect no room whatsoever, because it does not recognise the moral aspect of life or the religious foundations on which it is based. It is, thus, forced into accepting some laughable justifications of events in human history which have their very foundations in the religious and moral aspects of human life.

On the other hand, comprehensive, serious and realistic as it is, the Islamic interpretation of history gives the material aspect its due importance while recognising other influential factors that are denied by others who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge all the facts of life. With the Islamic interpretation, we visualise God's will operating behind all that takes place in the universe. We see how consciousness, feelings, beliefs and concepts do change within man and do influence human behaviour. This interpretation does not overlook any single factor of God's law which regulates life in general.

Stubborn Rejection of Evident Facts

The *sūrah* goes on to describe the nature of obstinate rejection, delineating for us a very strange type of people whom we meet in every age and every community. These are people who deny what is so clear and undeniable. The Qur'ān depicts this type of people in its own inimitable style, using only a few words to bring it to life in front of our eyes: *"Even if We had sent down to you a book written on paper, and they had touched it with their own hands, surely the unbelievers would still say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery'."* (Verse 7)

What causes them to turn away from God's revelations is not the lack of strong and clear evidence of their truthfulness. They are only being unreasonably stubborn. Their denial is firmly held as though it was a matter of principle. Such an attitude allows no consideration of any evidence or proof. Had God chosen to send down the Qur'ān to His Messenger by means other than revelation, which they cannot see, and put it on paper which they can feel and see, and had they touched this paper with their own hands, they would still reject the evidence of their own hands and eyes. They would emphatically claim: *"This is nothing but plain sorcery."* (Verse 7)

This is an image of a singularly contemptible nature, one which invites strong hostility. With such a nature there is no room for argument or scholarly discussion. Yet we meet such people in all communities and across all generations. Depicting their nature in this way serves more than one purpose: it delineates to the rejecters themselves their spiteful attitude in its true colours, just like one who lifts the mirror in front of a person with an ugly face so that he can see himself and put a stop to his overbearing behaviour. It also gives the believers an added incentive to adhere strongly to the truth, uninfluenced by the general atmosphere of denial and rejection they see around them. They are, thus, more resilient in the face of oppression and persecution.

It also tells us how compassionate and forbearing God is, as He gives those rejecters a chance to mend their ways and does not smite them immediately for their stubbornness. All these elements were part of the weaponry available to the Muslim community in their fight against the unbelievers.

The *sūrah* then gives us an example of the suggestions made by the unbelievers, and this reveals both their hardened stubbornness and their ignorance. They suggest that an angel could have accompanied the Prophet in conveying his message to give proof that he was truly God's Messenger. The reply shows how ignorant they were of the angels' nature and why God sent them to do the tasks He assigned to them. It is only because of His mercy that God does not act on their suggestion: *"They say: 'Why has not an angel been sent down to him?' If We had sent down an angel, all would have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further respite. And even if We had*

appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man, and thus We would have confused them just as they are now confusing themselves." (Verses 8-9)

This was not a new suggestion made by the Quraysh unbelievers. Many communities before them had muted the same as we are told in the Qur'ān. The suggestion and the Qur'ānic reply to it at this point raise a number of issues, as we will presently see.

Firstly, the pagan Arabs did not deny God altogether, but they wanted proof that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was truly His Messenger and that the book he recited to them was truly revealed to him by God. They wanted a particular proof, namely, that an angel be sent to him to confirm his claim. This was just one of the numerous suggestions reported in the Qur'ān. A number of these are mentioned in *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey: "*They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or [till] you have a garden of date trees and vines, and you cause running waters to flow through it, or till you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or till you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or till you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring a book for us to read.' Say, All glory belongs to my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.' Nothing has ever prevented people from believing [in God] whenever guidance has come to them except for their saying: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His Messenger?' Say, 'Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven.'*" *(17:* 90-5)

Such suggestions betray both obstinacy and ignorance. They had known God's Messenger for a long time and their long experience told them much about his honesty and truthfulness to the extent that they gave him the title *Al-Amīn,* which means `the trustworthy'. They continued to deposit their valuables with him for safekeeping, even when they were fiercely opposed to him. When he left for Madinah, he entrusted his cousin `Alī with the task of returning to the Quraysh the valuables they had kept with him. He even did this at the time when they were plotting to assassinate him in his own home.

They were as certain of his truthfulness as they were of his honesty. When, in compliance with God's command, he stood on top of the hill of al-Şafā to call on them, as a community, to believe in his message, he started by asking them whether they would believe him if he were to tell them a piece of news of which they were totally unaware. They all replied in the affirmative, relying on their experience of him as a man who always told the truth. Had they truly wanted to know whether he was telling the truth when he said that he was God's Messenger, his past would have been more than sufficient as proof.

Later in the *sūrah,* God tells His Messenger that those rejecters do not actually reject his message as false: *"We know too well that what they say grieves you. Yet it is not you that they charge with falsehood; but it is God's revelations that the wrongdoers deny."* (Verse 33) It is, then, just their persistent attitude of rejection, motivated only by a stubborn turning away from the truth. They never doubted the truthfulness of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him).

Moreover, they had in the Qur'ān itself a proof which was more telling than the material proofs they demanded. In itself, and in its inimitable style, the Qur'ān tells that it has been revealed by God whose existence they did not deny. Most assuredly, they realised this and knew it for certain. They possessed a fine literary and artistic sense which must have made it clear to them that, in its excellence, the Qur'ān greatly surpassed the farthest limits of human ability. A person who has the gift of artistic expression is better able to recognise and appreciate this than one who has not. Anyone with this gift will tell us clearly that the Qur'ān surpasses all that human literary excellence can produce. No one denies this except a person who deliberately tries to suppress what he knows.

Moreover, the contents of the Qur'ān, i.e. the concepts of faith and the method it utilises to drive these concepts home to people, as also its touches and influences, were all totally new to human minds. They were unknown in human artistic expression. The Arabs were not unaware of all these facts. They recognised them within themselves. Their statements and attitudes showed that they did not doubt that the Qur'ān was revealed by God.

All this makes it clear that, in point of fact, their suggestions were not made to seek a proof. They were simply born out of an unyielding stubbornness. Their position was truly as God describes in the preceding verse: "*Even if We had sent down to you a book written on paper, and they had touched it with their own hands, surely the unbelievers would still say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery.'*" (Verse 7)

A World of Creation Beyond Human Senses

The second issue was that the Arabs knew about the angels and requested that God should send down an angel to support His Messenger and confirm the truth of his message. They knew nothing, however, of the nature of this type of creation, i.e. the angels, which is known only to God. Hence, they formulated their own arbitrary conceptions of these creatures and the sort of relationship which existed between them and their Lord on the one hand, and with the earth and its inhabitants on the other. The Qur'ān refers to the Arabian misconceptions about the angels and the legends of pagan nations. It points out their errors so that anyone who is guided to accept the Islamic faith will revise their concepts about the universe and its creatures.

As such, Islam provides a method to set man's reason, feelings, heart and conscience on the right course and to rectify both situations and practices. One of the Arabs' ill-conceived concepts, identified in the Qur'ān as having been formulated in their pre-Islamic days, was their belief that the angels were God's daughters. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything that people may ascribe to Him! As such, they believed angels were able to intercede with God and their intercession was never refused. It is thought that some of the more important idols were symbols of angels.

The Qur'ān refutes on several occasions the first erroneous concept the Arabs held. For example, in *Sūrah* 53, The Star, we read: *"Have you ever considered al-Lāt and al-`Uzzā as well as Manāt, the third of this tirade? Why for yourselves would you choose only male offspring, whereas to Him you assign female: that is indeed an unfair division! These [idols] are nothing but empty names which you have invented, you and your forefathers, for which God has bestowed no warrant from on high. They who worship them follow nothing but surmise and their own wishful thinking, although right guidance has indeed come to them from their Lord. Does man imagine that it is his due to have all that he might wish for, despite the fact that both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? For, however many angels there be in the heavens, their intercession can be of no avail to anyone, except after God has given leave [to intercede] for whomever He wills and with whom He is well-pleased. It is only such as do not really believe in the life to come that regard the angels as female beings; and since they have no knowledge of that at all, they follow nothing but surmise: yet never can surmise take the place of truth."* (53: 19-28)

The Qur'ān also provides the true facts, correcting the Arab unbelievers' erroneous concept about the angels' nature. This is provided in these two verses in this *sūrah* as it is given elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"They say: 'Why has not an angel been sent down to him?' If We had sent down an angel, all would have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further respite."* (Verse 8)

This is part of the information provided in the Qur'ān on the nature of the angels created by God. The unbelievers proposed that an angel should be sent down, but it has been part of God's law that He sends down angels to this planet only to destroy a particular community for having rejected their messenger. Had God responded to the Arab unbelievers' suggestion and sent down an angel, then the whole issue would have been resolved and they would have been destroyed without allowing them any further time to consider their position. Was this the alternative they wished for? Would it not be better for them to realize how limitless God's grace is when He does not respond to their suggestion, because it would have brought about their own destruction? They are, thus, made to see the facts with their own eyes, so that they may realise how ignorant they are about their own interests and about the process of sending down angels. It is their ignorance which has brought them to the edge of

ruin and which causes them to reject proper guidance and divine mercy. Hence, they persistently demand evidence and proof.

The other part of the definition of the angels as God's own servants is provided by the second verse: *"And even if We had appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man, and thus We would have confused them just as they are now confusing themselves."* (Verse 9)

What they demand is that God sends an angel to confirm the Prophet's message. As creatures, angels are different from human beings. They have their own nature which is known only to God. Since we know nothing about them other than what we are told by God who has created them, we know that they cannot walk on earth in their own form of creation, because they do not live on this planet. However, they have the ability to take human form when they undertake a task relevant to human life, such as conveying God's message or destroying those unbelievers whom God wishes to destroy, or giving support to believers or fighting against their enemies. The Qur'ān tells us of other duties they may be commanded to fulfil, and they do not disobey God in whatever He bids them to do. They simply do what they are bid.

Therefore, if God wanted to send an angel to confirm His Prophet's message, that angel would have appeared to mankind in the form of a man, not in his own angelic form. This would have made the confusion persist, especially when Muĥammad (peace be upon him) would sometimes say to them, "I am Muĥammad whom you have known very well. God has sent me as a messenger to warn you and give you happy news". How much greater would their confusion be if an angel came to them in the form of a man whom they did not know and said, "I am an angel sent by God to confirm the message preached by His Messenger"? To them, that angel would only appear as a man like them. They were confusing simple facts. If God were to send an angel, He would have given it human form and would have confused the very thing the unbelievers were themselves confusing. They would not have been able to see right guidance.

Thus, God points out their ignorance about the nature of His creation and His law. Additionally, their stubborn rejection, which has neither justification nor supporting evidence, is also exposed.

Angels: Their Life and Role

The third issue raised in these verses is that of the nature of Islamic philosophy, particularly with regard to the world we see all around us and the worlds which lay beyond our perception. Islam teaches its followers to formulate a particular understanding of these worlds and a proper approach to them. One of these is the world of angels in whom we believe. Believing in the angels is an essential

component of Islamic faith which requires every Muslim to believe in God, His angels, books, messengers, the Last Day and destiny, believe in an imperceptible world represents a great departure in man's life, helping him to break out of his limited and narrow physical existence and to perceive the existence of a world beyond.

Thus, man is not limited to the narrow world of physical perception. Indeed, to impose such a limitation is to force human perception backwards. This is advocated by some materialistic doctrines which claim to be progressive. Fuller treatment of this subject follows later on, when we comment on Verse 59 of this *sūrah.* Here, we limit our discussion to the angels who are part of the world which lies beyond our human senses.

The Qur'ān tells us about some of the qualities and attributes of the angels. These are sufficient for us to formulate a proper concept of them and of our relationship with them. They are a species of God's creation who submit themselves totally to God and who obey Him all the time without hesitation. They are near to God although we do not know what sort of proximity is meant here. "*They say: 'The Most Gracious has taken to Himself a son!' Limitless is He in His glory! No; they are but His honoured servants. They do not speak until He has spoken, and they act at His behest. He knows all that lies before them and all behind them. They do not intercede for any but those whom He has already graced with His goodly acceptance, since they themselves stand in reverent awe of Him."* (21: 26-8) "*Those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary of that. They extol His limitless glory by night and day, without ever flagging."* (21: 19-20)

They carry God's Throne and surround it on the Day of Judgement. We do not know how this happens, because we only know what God has revealed to us of the world beyond: "*Those who bear God's Throne and those who stand around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise and believe in Him."* (40: 7) "*You will see the angels surrounding the Throne, extolling their Lord's glory and praise. Judgement would have been passed in justice on all, and the word will be spoken: all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (39: 75)

They provide the keepers of the heavens and hell, receive the inhabitants of the first with greetings and prayer, while they receive those bound to hell with reproach and warnings of great suffering. "*In throngs the unbelievers shall be urged on towards hell, till, when they reach it, its gates will be opened and its keepers will ask them: Have there not come to you messengers from among yourselves who proclaimed to you your Lord's revelations and warned you of the coming of this your Day [of Judgement]?' They will answer: 'Yes, indeed!' And thus the sentence of suffering would have already fallen due upon the unbelievers. They will be told, 'Enter the gates of hell, therein to abide!' How vile an abode for those who were given to false pride. But those who were God-fearing will be urged on in*

throngs to Paradise till, when they reach it, they will find its gate wide open; and its keepers will say to them, 'Peace be to you! Well have you done: enter this Paradise, herein to abide'." (39: 71-3) *"We have appointed none but angels to guard the Fire."* (74: 31)

The angels deal with people on earth in various ways. They watch over them by God's decree and they follow their deeds and keep a record of everything that human beings do or say. They also cause them to die when their time is over: *"He alone holds sway over His servants. He sends forth guardians to watch over you until, when death approaches any one of you, Our messengers cause him to die. They leave no part of their duty unfulfilled."* (Verse 61) *"Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command."* (13: 11) *"Each word he utters shall be noted down by a vigilant guardian."* (50: 18)

Angels also deliver God's revelations to His messengers (peace be upon them all). God has also informed us that Gabriel (peace be upon him) is the one chosen among them to fulfil this task: *"He sends down angels with this Divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on any of His servants He may wish: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity but Me: so fear Me'."* (16: 2) *`Say: Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel should know that he revealed it [the Qur'ān] to your heart by God's leave..."* (2: 97) God describes Gabriel as one who has been endowed with power. He confirms that His Messenger, Muĥammad, has seen Gabriel in his angelic form twice, while he has seen him in various shapes and forms when he gave him other revelations: *"Consider the star when it sets, this fellow man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he conveys to you] is but a revelation with which he is inspired. He is taught by one who is very mighty, [an angel] endowed with surpassing power, who manifested himself in his true shape and nature, appearing on the uppermost horizon, and then, drew near, and came close, until he was within two bows' length or even closer, and revealed to His servant that which he revealed. The servant's heart did not deny what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him as to what he saw? And indeed he saw him a second time, by the lote-tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of promise."* (53: 1-15)

The angels also join the believers giving them support and help, steadying their feet in their great, unabating battle against evil and tyranny. They busy themselves with what happens to the believers. They glorify their Lord, pray to Him to forgive the sins of those who believe in Him. In their supplication for the believers, which is mentioned in the Qur'ān, they appear to be so caring, kind and loving. They also give the believers, at the time of their death, the happy news that they are going to heaven. When they arrive in the next world, they also give them their happy news and greet them in heaven.

On the other hand, they receive the unbelievers in hell with reproach and warning of their impending suffering. They may also fight against them in the battle that rages on between truth and falsehood. When they die, they pluck out their souls in a

manner which afflicts and humiliates the unbelievers.

ngels have also had a relationship with human beings ever since the creation of Adam, the first man.

understanding of this universe and enables man to feel his existence, his s and reactions in a much wider world. In this way what we witness in our world is closely related to orld beyond.

ose who wish to deprive man of this world, and of the expanse of the realm that lies beyond our human ption, have nothing but evil in store. They want to confine man to the narrow, material world, thus g him into the animal world. God has given man the ability of conception, which enables him to stand what no animal can understand, allowing him to live in a wider realm of knowledge and feeling, g him the facility to look at this world through his heart and mind, and helping him to purify himself as oves towards this spreading light.

their pre-Islamic days, the Arabs held all sorts of misconceptions, but they were nevertheless better d than the advocates of today's materialism who deride the whole idea of a world beyond. These be believing in an imperceptible world as naive, unscientific. They consider the two mutually sive. We will discuss their claims, which are devoid of any scientific or religious substance when we ent on Verse 59. Here we are only speaking briefly about the angels.

wonder: what does science divulge to those who claim to believe only in `scientific' rationalism to them categorically deny the existence of the angels, making them outside the realm of belief? Science t preclude the existence of life, of a type other than the one that exists on earth, on other planets or which differ from earth in nature, conditions and atmosphere. How can they deny the existence of such s when they have no single evidence to prove that they do not exist?

his, we are not asking them to submit to the rule of our faith or to God's words. We are simply asking to submit to the dictates of their own `science', which they have made into a deity. Although they can de no evidence based on their science, they persist in their totally unscientific denial. Yet it is no eration to say that the imperceptible world which they deny is the very truth which human knowledge me to recognise, even in our world which we touch and see.

God's Message is Met with Derision

s passage concludes with a reference to what happened to those who derided God's messengers. The ejecters of the faith are called upon to reflect on the fate of those who preceded them. They are told to all over the earth to see for themselves the fate of earlier unbelievers, because that tells them of God's hich never fails: *"Indeed other messengers have been derided before your time, but those who scoffed at them ventually overwhelmed by the very thing they have derided."* (Verse 10)

ving shown their attitude as stubborn rejection and their suggestions as marks of total ignorance, and g established that God's refusal to act on their suggestions is an aspect of His mercy and forbearance, *rah* refers to the treatment received by earlier messengers. Such reference has a dual purpose. It firstly des some solace to the Prophet who was at the receiving end of their obstinate rejection of the truth. It ures him that God will certainly punish those who deride and scoff at His messengers. It tells him that ejection is not a new phenomenon. Earlier messengers received similar treatment from their peoples, ose who scoffed at them Were soon to suffer God's punishment. Ultimate victory belongs to the Truth.

ondly, it reminds the Arabs who rejected the Prophet's message of the fate of their earlier counterparts. ilar fate awaits them if they persist in their ridicule and rejection. God's punishment destroyed earlier ations who were much more powerful and who enjoyed greater wealth. This reference, then, shakes earts violently.

us reflect a little here on this Qur'ānic directive: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see what was the fate of who denied the truth."* (Verse 11) To travel all over the earth for the simple objective of reflection and ng lessons on the basis of past events and on history told by one generation to the next was something new to the Arabs. It shows how great was the gulf between their level of ignorance and the much r level of intelligence, knowledge and reflection to which Islam carried them. They used to travel for and to earn their living. Travelling to gain knowledge and draw lessons was unheard of. This new ic method took them by the hand, elevating them from the depths of their ignorance and gently ng them along the road to the high zenith they were soon to achieve.

reover, it was totally new for mankind in that period of time to try to interpret human history

ding to methodical and well-defined rules based on cause and effect, such as those pointed out by the n to the Arabs. All people can easily observe these laws and formulate their own concept of premises, and results. Up to that period in time, the best that people knew of history was the recording of events arratives about customs and social habits. No particular method, whether analytic or synthetic, was ved to determine links between events or to relate results to premises. The Qur'ān elevated mankind to horizon and gave them a method to analyse and reflect upon the events of human history. This od does not represent a stage in the development of human knowledge. Rather, it is the only method can give us a true picture of human history.

period of one quarter of a century is insufficient to bring about a dramatic development in economic tions. Those who are amazed at the great advances achieved by the Arabs in such a short period of rom the outset of the Islamic message will cease to be amazed if they switch their attentions away from g economic factors for this change. They should try instead to discover the secret of this advancement new Divine method which God, in His wisdom, gave them through His Messenger, Muĥammad e be upon him). It is in this method that the secret of the miracle experienced by the Arabs lies. Any pt to find the secret with the false deity created by modern materialism, namely, economy, will remain For what dramatic economic development took place in Arabia to explain the formulation of new pts and beliefs, systems of government, methodical thought, moral values, new social status and new of knowledge which the Arabs witnessed within just a quarter of a century? None, it was simply the n and its message.

e Qur'ān established a new system of thought. Totally unknown to man previously, this system was both unique and valid for all times. It is the one pointed out by numerous Qur'ānic verses, such as with which this passage concludes: "*Say: Go all over the earth and see what was the fate of those who denied uth.*" (Verse 11) A similar pointer is an earlier verse in this passage: "*Do they not see how many a tion We have destroyed before them – people whom We had made more powerful in the land than We have made nd for whom We sent down abundant water from the sky, and made rivers flow at their feet? Yet We destroyed or their sins, and raised up another generation in their place.*" (Verse 6)

3
A Commitment to Mercy

3

A Commitment to Mercy

To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth? Say: To God. He has committed Himself to bestow grace mercy. He will certainly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, about which there is no doubt. Those who dered their own souls will not believe. (12)

m belongs whatever takes its rest in the night or in the day. He alone hears all and knows all. (13)

Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to d Himself needs none? Say: I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be those who associate partners with Him. (14)

ndeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. (15)

o is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph. (16)

d were to expose you to affliction, none can remove it but He. And if He were to bless you with good fortune — well, s power over all things. (17)

ne holds sway over all His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware. (18)

What is weightiest in testimony? Say: God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that thereby warn you and all whom it may reach. Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? bear no such witness. Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him. (19)

فَوْقَ
ج
ٱلْحَكِيمُ
١٨
أَىُّ
أَكْبَرُ
قُلِ
شَهِيدٌ
ج
إِلَىَّ
نُ
كُم
وَمَنْ
بِنَّكُمْ
ونَ
مَعَ
ءَالِهَةً
ج
قُل

ۚ
هَدُ
ا هُوَ
وَٰحِدٌ
بَرِيٓءٌ
شۡرِكُونَ

ngels have also had a relationship with human beings ever since the creation of Adam, the first man.

understanding of this universe and enables man to feel his existence, his s and reactions in a much wider world. In this way what we witness in our world is closely related to orld beyond.

ose who wish to deprive man of this world, and of the expanse of the realm that lies beyond our human ption, have nothing but evil in store. They want to confine man to the narrow, material world, thus g him into the animal world. God has given man the ability of conception, which enables him to stand what no animal can understand, allowing him to live in a wider realm of knowledge and feeling, g him the facility to look at this world through his heart and mind, and helping him to purify himself as oves towards this spreading light.

their pre-Islamic days, the Arabs held all sorts of misconceptions, but they were nevertheless better d than the advocates of today's materialism who deride the whole idea of a world beyond. These be believing in an imperceptible world as naive, unscientific. They consider the two mutually sive. We will discuss their claims, which are devoid of any scientific or religious substance when we ent on Verse 59. Here we are only speaking briefly about the angels.

wonder: what does science divulge to those who claim to believe only in `scientific' rationalism to

them categorically deny the existence of the angels, making them outside the realm of belief? Science t preclude the existence of life, of a type other than the one that exists on earth, on other planets or which differ from earth in nature, conditions and atmosphere. How can they deny the existence of such s when they have no single evidence to prove that they do not exist?

his, we are not asking them to submit to the rule of our faith or to God's words. We are simply asking to submit to the dictates of their own `science', which they have made into a deity. Although they can de no evidence based on their science, they persist in their totally unscientific denial. Yet it is no eration to say that the imperceptible world which they deny is the very truth which human knowledge me to recognise, even in our world which we touch and see.

God's Message is Met with Derision

s passage concludes with a reference to what happened to those who derided God's messengers. The ejecters of the faith are called upon to reflect on the fate of those who preceded them. They are told to all over the earth to see for themselves the fate of earlier unbelievers, because that tells them of God's hich never fails: *"Indeed other messengers have been derided before your time, but those who scoffed at them ventually overwhelmed by the very thing they have derided."* (Verse 10)

ving shown their attitude as stubborn rejection and their suggestions as marks of total ignorance, and g established that God's refusal to act on their suggestions is an aspect of His mercy and forbearance, *rah* refers to the treatment received by earlier messengers. Such reference has a dual purpose. It firstly des some solace to the Prophet who was at the receiving end of their obstinate rejection of the truth. It ures him that God will certainly punish those who deride and scoff at His messengers. It tells him that rejection is not a new phenomenon. Earlier messengers received similar treatment from their peoples, ose who scoffed at them Were soon to suffer God's punishment. Ultimate victory belongs to the Truth.

ondly, it reminds the Arabs who rejected the Prophet's message of the fate of their earlier counterparts. ilar fate awaits them if they persist in their ridicule and rejection. God's punishment destroyed earlier ations who were much more powerful and who enjoyed greater wealth. This reference, then, shakes hearts violently.

us reflect a little here on this Qur'ānic directive: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see what was the fate of who denied the truth."* (Verse 11) To travel all over the earth for the simple objective of reflection and ng lessons on the basis of past events and on history told by one generation to the next was something new to the Arabs. It shows how great was the gulf between their level of ignorance and the much r level of intelligence, knowledge and reflection to which Islam carried them. They used to travel for and to earn their living. Travelling to gain knowledge and draw lessons was unheard of. This new ic method took them by the hand, elevating them from the depths of their ignorance and gently g them along the road to the high zenith they were soon to achieve.

reover, it was totally new for mankind in that period of time to try to interpret human history ding to methodical and well-defined rules based on cause and effect, such as those pointed out by the

n to the Arabs. All people can easily observe these laws and formulate their own concept of premises, and results. Up to that period in time, the best that people knew of history was the recording of events arratives about customs and social habits. No particular method, whether analytic or synthetic, was ved to determine links between events or to relate results to premises. The Qur'ān elevated mankind to horizon and gave them a method to analyse and reflect upon the events of human history. This od does not represent a stage in the development of human knowledge. Rather, it is the only method can give us a true picture of human history.

period of one quarter of a century is insufficient to bring about a dramatic development in economic tions. Those who are amazed at the great advances achieved by the Arabs in such a short period of rom the outset of the Islamic message will cease to be amazed if they switch their attentions away from g economic factors for this change. They should try instead to discover the secret of this advancement new Divine method which God, in His wisdom, gave them through His Messenger, Muĥammad e be upon him). It is in this method that the secret of the miracle experienced by the Arabs lies. Any pt to find the secret with the false deity created by modern materialism, namely, economy, will remain For what dramatic economic development took place in Arabia to explain the formulation of new pts and beliefs, systems of government, methodical thought, moral values, new social status and new of knowledge which the Arabs witnessed within just a quarter of a century? None, it was simply the n and its message.

e Qur'ān established a new system of thought. Totally unknown to man previously, this system was both unique and valid for all times. It is the one pointed out by numerous Qur'ānic verses, such as with which this passage concludes: "*Say: Go all over the earth and see what was the fate of those who denied uth.*" (Verse 11) A similar pointer is an earlier verse in this passage: "*Do they not see how many a tion We have destroyed before them – people whom We had made more powerful in the land than We have made nd for whom We sent down abundant water from the sky, and made rivers flow at their feet? Yet We destroyed or their sins, and raised up another generation in their place.*" (Verse 6)

3
A Commitment to Mercy

3

A Commitment to Mercy

To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth? Say: To God. He has committed Himself to bestow grace mercy. He will certainly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, about which there is no doubt. Those who dered their own souls will not believe. (12)

m belongs whatever takes its rest in the night or in the day. He alone hears all and knows all. (13)

Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to d Himself needs none? Say: I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be those who associate partners with Him. (14)

ndeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. (15)

o is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph. (16)

d were to expose you to affliction, none can remove it but He. And if He were to bless you with good fortune — well, s power over all things. (17)

ne holds sway over all His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware. (18)

What is weightiest in testimony? Say: God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that thereby warn you and all whom it may reach. Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? bear no such witness. Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him. (19)

فَوْقَ
ج
ٱلْحَكِيمُ
١٨
أَىُّ
أَكْبَرُ
قُلِ
شَهِيدٌ
ج
إِلَىَّ
نُ
كُم
وَمَنْ
لَتَشْهَدُونَ
مَعَ
ءَالِهَةً
ج
قُل

ۚ
هَدُ
ا هُوَ
وَٰحِدٌ
ىَٓءٌ
رِكُونَ

Overview

The early passages in this *sūrah* sound like waves following one another in quick succession. Rising high and with a deep, mysterious rhythm, this third wave comes after a discussion about denying the truth of Islam, turning away from it, meeting its advocates with derision and ridicule. The discussion in the earlier passage included very strong threats and a reminder of the fate of earlier nations that took a similar attitude to God's messages. The first passage, representing the first wave, discussed the truth of Godhead as reflected in the creation of the wide universe and highly complex human beings. This new wave also discusses the same truth of Godhead but it includes different aspects, employing different rhythms and a new inspiration. Thus, the discussion on denying the truth comes in between the opening and the present passages, and this adds to its unpleasant reality.

In the opening passage, Godhead is reflected in the creation of the heavens and earth, darkness and light, the creation of man out of clay, his first term of life, and the setting of another term for resurrection. It made clear that the whole universe submits itself to God, whose knowledge of mankind includes what everyone does both in public and in private. None of these qualities is approached in the *sūrah* in a theoretical, philosophical or theological way. Rather, the approach aims to establish what they mean to human life: complete and total faith in God alone, entertaining no doubts about Him whatsoever, and acceptance that His Godhead comprises all aspects of the universe and human life. Thus, human submission to God's sovereignty in all affairs becomes the natural and logical option in the same way as the universe submits to the same sovereignty.

In this new wave, the reality of Godhead is shown in a variety of aspects: ownership, direct action, the provision of sustenance, care, overwhelming power,

bringing benefit and causing harm. Again, we do not see a theoretical, philosophical or theological approach here. The aim is to define the meaning of all these aspects in human life: namely, the unity of allegiance and worship as a practical demonstration of the unity of submission. Thus, when God's Messenger is directed to denounce the very thought of having any master other than God, this denunciation is based first of all on the fact that it is God who provides nourishment while He needs none. It is also based on the fact that the acknowledgement of a master other than God is contrary to His orders requiring him to submit himself to God alone.

The presentation of the reality of Godhead in this form and for this objective is accompanied by a host of powerful and inspiring effects. It starts with explaining that God owns all, provides sustenance to all creatures while He needs nothing from anyone. It then refers to the great suffering the mere avoidance of which represents an act of mercy granted by God and a great success. It also mentions God's power to administer benefit or harm, His authority over all creatures, and His infinite wisdom. All this is associated with a powerful rhythm, provided by the repeated Divine order, 'Say... Say... Say...'.

When the presentation is completed, the conclusion is given with increased rhythm, calling out witnesses to God's oneness and denouncing the very thought of associating partners with Him, all this within a clear demarcation of positions. Here again the strong rhythm is enhanced by the repeated order, `Say... Say... Say...'. Thus, the passage delivers a sense of awe and seriousness.

A Commitment Made by God

> *Say: To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth? Say: To God. He has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy. He will certainly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, about which there is no doubt. Those who squandered their own souls will not believe. To Him belongs whatever takes its rest in the night or in the day. He alone hears all and knows all.* (Verses 12-13)

Here, the *sūrah* adopts an attitude of confrontation that aims to state the issues very clearly before drawing the lines that separate the believers from all others. It gives the Prophet certain instructions to take up this confrontation with those who are fully aware that God is the Creator of the whole universe, but who, nevertheless, worship other beings even though these have no power to create anything equal to Him. That is, they associate partners with Him whom they claim have a say in how they conduct their lives. The Prophet is instructed to confront them with a question about the ownership, which follows creation, of everything in the heavens and on earth. As the question is put, it is meant to include every single element in the whole

universe. It is followed by a statement of fact over which they did not and could not argue. The Qur'ān tells us elsewhere that they used to acknowledge it fully: *"Say: To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth? Say: To God."* (Verse 12)

Despite the depth of their ignorance, which resulted in deviant concepts that devalued their quality of life, the Arabs in their pre- Islamic days were superior in this particular aspect to later-day *jāhiliyyah.* This new *jāhiliyyah* shuts its mind to this fact while the Arabs used to recognise and admit that God owned everything in the heavens and on earth. However, they did not bring that recognition to its logical conclusion which would have required them to acknowledge God's total authority over what He owns and that the only proper way to use what God has created is to obtain His permission and to act according to His law. Because of this, the Arabs were described as idolaters and their lifestyle as ignorant. How then should those who deny God's authority to legislate for human existence and, instead, exercise that authority themselves, be described? They must be given a description other than that of idolatry. God describes them as unbelievers, as wrongdoers and transgressors, no matter how strongly they claim to be Muslims and regardless of what religion is entered on their birth certificates.

The Qur'ānic verse follows this statement asserting God's ownership of the heavens and earth by stating that *"He has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy."* (Verse 12) He is the sole, undisputed owner of the whole universe. He, however, out of His generosity and by His own will, has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy. No one could suggest this exercise of bestowing grace to Him or require it of Him, apart from His absolutely freewill and His compassionate lordship over the universe. Grace and mercy provide the basic rules in His treatment of, and judgement over, His servants both in this present life and in the life to come. Believing in this rule is one of the constituents of the Islamic concept of life. Even when God tests His servants with hardship, His mercy takes precedence. Indeed, the test is meant to prepare a group of them for the fulfilment of the trust He assigns to them after they have proven their dedication to His cause and preparedness to sacrifice themselves for it. He actually sorts out the good from the bad among them: those among them who are keen to follow God's Messenger distinguish themselves from those who turn back on their heels. The exercise of mercy and the bestowing of grace in all this are clearly manifest.

If we were to try to make an exhaustive list of the incidents and occasions wherein God bestows His mercy and how it is reflected in life, we would need to devote our whole lives to it. Indeed, generations can come and go before this task could be accomplished. In every moment God's grace is showered over people. We have only identified that mercy which is reflected in hard tests, because often people do not see it as such. We have no intention to attempt a full list of the occasions and the

incidents where God's mercy is brought into action. We will instead only make some brief references to it. However, we need to reflect a little on the way this Qur'ānic statement is phrased: *"He has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy."* (Verse 12) The same statement is repeated again in Verse 54 of this *sūrah* with a slight variation: *"Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy."*

What immediately attracts our attention in this statement is the fact that God, the Creator, the Owner, the Almighty who has power over all His servants, has granted them the favour of making the exercise of His mercy and grace a commitment to which He has bound Himself out of His own free-will. This is a great fact, one which we can hardly contemplate let alone appreciate. There is, however, yet another favour here which attracts our attention. This is manifested in the fact that He has also favoured His servants by telling them about this commitment. Who are human beings that they deserve the favour of being told of what God has willed, and for the communication to be given in God's own words through His Messenger? It is nothing short of a great favour that can only be bestowed by God, the Most Gracious.

When we reflect on this fact in this way, we feel a mixture of surprise and happiness that no words can describe. Indeed, such facts and the effects they have on the human mind are indescribable in human language. Humans, however, can appreciate these facts even though they may not be able to define them.

To appreciate this fact forms a part of our understanding of the nature of Godhead and the relationship between God and His servants. It is a pleasant, comforting and reassuring understanding which makes us wonder at those perverted minds which level accusations at Islam because it rejects the very idea of God having a son. Islam has no time for such insupportable visions. At the same time, it describes the relationship of grace and mercy between God and His servants in a way that has a profound effect on peoples' hearts and minds. God's mercy is extended to all His servants throughout their lives. Here, we can only refer to some of its main aspects. It is reflected in the very existence of mankind who originate from where they do not know and who are given a noble position, easily recognised in the qualities God bestows on many of His servants. It is also reflected in the forces and resources of the universe which God has made subservient to man. This is, indeed, the broader view of the meaning of the provisions God has given to man to enable him to live in comfort and affluence. It is further reflected in granting man the ability to learn and to make his talents and abilities responsive to the world around him. The result is the knowledge man achieves through God's grace and on account of which some miscreants reject God's existence. Again, the knowledge God has given to man is part of the grace He has bestowed on him.

God's grace is clearly seen in the role God has assigned to man as His vicegerent, and the care He takes of him by sending messengers to him to give him guidance.

Nevertheless, God treats man with forbearance despite his stubborn refusal to listen to the warnings of God's messengers. It is so easy for God to punish him but God's grace oversteps His punishment.

It is further reflected in the fact that God forgives man his sins every time he repents of them. In the same vein, we can mention the fact that when God punishes man, His punishment is administered on the basis of what is exactly equivalent to his bad deeds. On the other hand, God rewards man for his good deeds at least ten times their value and He may increase that manifold for whomever He wills. Furthermore, a good deed erases bad ones. All this is part of God's grace because no human being can earn admission into heaven on the basis of his or her actions alone, unless God bestows His mercy on them. God's Messenger states that this also applies to him, thereby acknowledging man's shortcomings and God's grace.

It is only appropriate to acknowledge that it is impossible for us to attempt to make an exhaustive list of the aspects of God's mercy and grace. Suffice it to say that it is beyond human ability to fully reflect on and appreciate the full significance of one moment in which God opens the gates of His mercy to His servant so as to give him security and reassurance. To describe such a moment and the feelings it generates is a much harder task.

An Outline of Divine Mercy

Let us now consider a number of *aĥādīth* which give us an insight into how the Prophet portrayed God's grace so as to make it properly appreciated by ordinary people.

Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "When God created His creation, He wrote in a book which He keeps with Him above the Throne: My grace overspeeds My anger." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim with slight variations.) In another version related by al- Bukhārī, the last sentence is quoted as, "My grace oversteps My anger."

Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that God's Messenger said that: "God has made mercy into one hundred parts. He then retained ninety-nine parts and placed on earth one part. It is from that one part that creatures show mercy to one another, to the extent that a female animal lifts its hoof away from its young in order not to harm it."

Muslim also relates on the authority of Salmān that God's Messenger said: "God has one hundred acts of mercy. One of these is the one by which creatures show mercy to one another. The other ninety-nine parts are reserved to the Day of Judgement."

In yet another *Ĥadīth* related by Muslim, we read: "When God created the heavens and the earth, He also created one hundred mercies, each one of them filled the space between the heavens and the earth. He placed one mercy on earth. It is through this that a mother is compassionate to her baby, and so are wild beasts and birds. On the Day of Judgement, God complements them with this one mercy."

This is an inspiring description by the Prophet, one which makes it easy for the human mind to visualise the extent of God's grace. We only need to reflect on how mothers are so kind-hearted to their youngsters and the sympathy and kindness people show towards the very young and very old, the sick and the invalid, and to relatives and friends. We should also contemplate how birds and animals sometimes manifest their mercy to one another in amazing ways. Now let us consider that all this mercy is the result of a single part out of one hundred parts of God's mercy. We can, thus, appreciate the extent of God's abounding, and inexhaustible grace.

Time after time, the Prophet spoke to his Companions about God's grace, reminding them that its benefits go to His servants. `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb reports that once a group of slaves was sent to the Prophet in Madinah. A woman slave was seen walking fast with her breast oozing with milk. She found a young boy among the slaves, picked him up and put him to her breast to feed him. The Prophet put this question to his Companions: "Do you think that this woman would throw her boy in the fire?" They replied: "No! By God, she would not if she has any way of avoiding that." He said: "God is more merciful to His servants than this woman to her child." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.) How could it be otherwise when the woman's kindness to her child is produced by her share of a single mercy God has placed into the world out of one hundred He has created?

Having taught his Companions this important fact and its great significance in such an inspiring way, God's Messenger moved them on another step so that they became merciful in their dealings with others and so that they were compassionate to one another and to all living things. The Prophet wanted them to enjoy the happiness of being merciful, just as they were happy to appreciate the extent of God's grace.

`Abdullāh ibn `Amr quotes the Prophet as saying: "The merciful are granted mercy by God. Show mercy to those on earth so that you are shown mercy by the One in heaven." (Related by Abū Dāwūd and al- Tirmidhī.) Jarīr quotes God's Messenger as saying: "God does not bestow His grace on those who do not show mercy to people." (Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.) Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "No one but a miserable creature is deprived of mercy." (Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.)

Abū Hurayrah also reports that God's Messenger (peace be upon him) kissed al-Ĥasan ibn `Alī, his grandson, when al-Aqra` ibn Ĥābis was in the Prophet's presence.

Al-Aqra` said: "I have ten children but I never kissed any one of them." The Prophet looked at him and said: "Mercy is not granted to one who is not merciful." (Related by al- Bukhārī and Muslim.)

In teaching his Companions, the Prophet did not stop at extending mercy to mankind. He was fully aware that God's grace encompasses everything, and that the believers are required to cultivate within themselves the moral principles which form the attributes of God. Man does not attain his full humanity unless he is merciful to every living thing. The Prophet's instructions in this regard were, as always, highly inspiring. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "A man was travelling along a road when he was very thirsty. He found a well, so he went down into it to drink. As he came up he found a gasping dog who was apparently so thirsty that he licked the dust. The man thought, `this dog is now as thirsty as I was a short while ago'. Therefore, he went down the well again and filled his shoe with water. Holding it in his mouth, he came up and gave the water to the dog to drink. God rewarded him for his action by forgiving him. "The Prophet's audience asked: `Messenger of God, are we to be rewarded for kindness to animals?" He answered: "You get a reward for every kindness you do to any living creature." (Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Mālik.)

In another report, a prostitute is mentioned as having seen a dog walking to and fro in front of a well on a very hot day. His tongue was hanging out because of his thirst. She used her shoe to give him water to drink. So, God forgave her because of her kindness.

`Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Abdullāh transmits the following report by his father, who says: "We were travelling with God's Messenger when we saw a small bird with two chicks. We took the chicks away. The bird came over us lowering her wings and flying close to the earth. When the Prophet came over, he asked, `Who has taken the chicks of this bird? Give her back her chicks.' He also saw that we burnt a number of ant dwellings. When we owned up to the fact in response to his question, he said, `No one may punish any creature with fire except the Lord of the Fire'." (Related by Abū Dāwūd.)

Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "An ant bit one of the earlier prophets, so he ordered the ant dwellings to be burnt. Through inspiration God asked him: If you are bitten by an ant, would you burn a whole nation which glorifies God?" (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.)

Such was the Prophet's method in cultivating among his Companions a keen sense of appreciation of Qur'ānic guidance. This enabled them to appreciate how limitless God's grace is, through their own mercy to one another. It was clear to them that all aspects of mercy in their world come only from one out of a hundred parts of

God's mercy.

When All Gather for Judgement

When this concept of mercy is engrained in a Muslim's thinking, it leaves a profound impact on his life, his view of things and his manners and moral values. A full study of such impact is beyond the scope of this commentary. Therefore, we have to be content with only a few very brief observations.

When a Muslim truly appreciates the significance of God's commitment to being merciful to His servants, he experiences a profound sense of reassurance which remains with him even when he goes through periods of hardship and severe trials that are enough to turn people away from their Lord. A believer is certain that at every moment and in every situation and condition, God's grace is present and sure to be bestowed. He knows that his Lord does not put him to the test because He has abandoned him or denied him His mercy. God does not deny His grace to anyone who sincerely hopes to receive it. It is human beings who deny themselves God's mercy when they disbelieve in Him and reject His grace. A believer's reassurance that God's grace is close at hand fills his heart with strength, perseverance, hope and comfort. He knows that he is in good, caring hands and he enjoys the comfort of God's grace as long as he does not go far astray.

Moreover, when a believer recognises this fact in this particular manner, his sense of modesty in front of God is enhanced. Hoping for God's mercy and forgiveness does not motivate people to disobey God as some would have us believe. Indeed, it makes a believer very shy in his dealings with God, the Much-Forgiving, the Merciful. A person who is tempted to disobey God because of God's mercy is one who has not experienced the true taste of being a believer. For example, some Sufis or mystics claim that they deliberately indulge in sin, in order to enjoy the sweetness of God's forbearance, forgiveness and mercy. This is twisted logic, which is alien to the proper nature of a believer.

A true recognition by a believer of God's unfailing grace is bound to leave a very strong influence on his moral values and manners. He knows that he is required to cultivate within himself the same manners and values as God. As he recognises that despite his shortcomings, slips and mistakes, he still enjoys an abundance of God's grace, he learns that he must show mercy to others, forgive them their mistakes and treat them with forbearance. It is to strengthen this principle that the Prophet tried to cultivate a sense of mercy in his Companions.

One of the aspects of God's mercy which is stated in the Qur'ānic verse is that God has decreed that all people will be gathered together on the Day of Judgement. This undoubted gathering is certainly an aspect of His grace. It tells us that for certain,

God looks after His servants whom He has created for a particular purpose, and placed them in charge of this earth for a definite objective. He has not created them in vain and has not abandoned them altogether. He has made the Day of Resurrection the end of their journey, as travellers arrive at their destination. He will then give them the reward of their endeavours and compensate them for their toil in this life. Nothing is lost and no one is without reward on the Day of Judgement. In taking such care of His servants, an important aspect of God's grace is discerned. Other aspects are manifest in the fact that God's punishment of any sin is equivalent to it, but He rewards a person with ten times the value of his good deeds, and may multiply that further to whomever He wills. He may also forgive any slips or sins to whom He chooses of His servants.

Before God favoured the Arabs with this religion and elevated them to its noble level, they used to deny the Day of Resurrection in the same way as the proponents of the present-day *jāhiliyyah* deny it. Hence, this fact of gathering God's creatures has been expressed in the most emphatic style: "*He will certainly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, about which there is no doubt.*" (Verse 12)

The only losers on that day are those who have not believed during this life. These shall not gain anything to compensate for their loss, because they have lost everything. Indeed, they have lost themselves and are no longer capable of anything. After all, man tries to make a gain for himself. When he has lost his own soul, what can he gain? And for whom? "*Those who squandered their own souls will not believe.*" (Verse 12)

Since they have forfeited their souls, they no longer have what they need in order to believe. It is a very apt and accurate description of a real condition. Those who reject this religion, in spite of its profound appeal to human nature and despite its irrefutable arguments and all the signs and pointers which direct them to faith, must have already lost their share of uncorrupted nature. Their receptive and responsive systems must have either been totally destroyed or locked up and screened over. In such a condition, they lose themselves and they are unable to believe since they no longer have the souls that will respond to faith. This is the underlying explanation of their refusal to believe despite all the evidence around them supporting faith. Alas! This is what determines their destiny on the Day of Resurrection. That destiny is the greatest loss of all that comes in consequence of their having lost themselves.

The *sūrah* then refers to all creatures in terms of time, as it has referred to them in terms of place in the preceding verse. It states that God, limitless is He in His glory, owns them all, has full knowledge of them and hears everything they say and do: "To *Him belongs whatever takes its rest in the night or in the day. He alone hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 13)

The Arabic term used in the Qur'ānic verse and rendered here by the phrase `takes its rest' also means `to dwell, stop moving, etc.' The reference in the verse is then made to every creature that rests at night or in the day. As such, it includes all creatures. The Qur'ānic verse states the fact that they all belong to God alone. This is the second statement of this fact although it came in the first verse in terms of place: "*Say: 'To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth?' Say:' To God.'*" (Verse 12) The reference here, in the second verse, is made in terms of time: "*To Him belongs whatever takes its rest in the night or in the day. He alone hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 13) This tendency to include all, and to use every aspect, is perfectly familiar in the Qur'ān.

The final comment is that which concerns God's attributes of hearing all and knowing all. It implies having complete and perfect knowledge of all these creatures and all that is said about them by the unbelievers. The pagan Arabs used to acknowledge that the Creator and the Owner is one. Nevertheless, they claimed for their false gods a portion of the fruits, cattle and children as will be told later, in Verse 136 of this *sūrah.* Hence, their acknowledgement of God's ownership of everything is stated clearly here so that they will be confronted with it later on as part of a reference to what they assign to those partners they associate with God. Moreover, the establishment of this fact of God's ownership of everything is given here as a prelude to the statement that God has mastery over everything and all creatures since He is the owner of all, who hears and knows everything that is said and done.

God's Oneness: The Fundamental Question

So far, the basic fact that God is the only Creator and the only owner of everything that exists in the universe has been established. This is now followed by a strong denunciation of seeking support from, or addressing worship to, anyone other than God. All such deeds contradict the fundamental fact of submission to God since they are acts of polytheism that do not fit with Islam. A number of God's attributes are also stated here, including that He is the Creator of the heavens and earth, the sustainer of all, the Almighty. The general air of awe is enhanced by a mention of God's severe punishment.

> *Say: 'Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to all and Himself needs none'? Say: 'I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be among those who associate partners with Him. Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. He who is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph. If God were to expose you to*

> *affliction, none can remove it but He. And if He were to bless you with good fortune — well, He has power over all things. He alone holds sway over all His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware.* (Verses 14-18)

This is, indeed, the basic issue: taking God alone for our Master, or *waliy,* in every sense of the word. He alone is the Lord to be worshipped. We submit to Him as He is the only Sovereign. No support may be sought from anyone other than Him. In every grave situation, we appeal to Him alone for help. This is the basic question of faith. When we take Him as master, in every sense of the word, and submit to Him alone, we are true Muslims. Those who associate others with Him in any aspect of His mastery are guilty of associating partners with God. This is something that cannot be entertained by any Muslim.

This fundamental issue is stated in these verses in the strongest terms and is contained within a powerful rhythm: "*Say: Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to all and Himself needs none? Say: I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be among those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 14)

This Qur'ānic verse reflects human nature's powerful logic. To whom does mastery belong and who alone is to be viewed as patron, if not the Creator who has originated the heavens and the earth? To whom, if not to the One who provides sustenance and nourishment to every creature in the heavens and on earth while He Himself needs none? "*Say: 'Am I to take for my master anyone but God'",* when such are His attributes? What logic allows that anyone other than God be taken as master? If it is help and support that one needs from a master, then God, the originator of the heavens and the earth has the supreme power in both. If the objective of taking a master is to get provisions and sustenance, then it is God who provides sustenance to all creatures in the universe. How then can mastery be attributed to anyone other than the Almighty who provides for all?

This is followed by another instruction to the Prophet: "*Say: I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be among those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 14) To submit oneself to God and not to associate partners with Him means that we must not accept anyone other than God as a master. To do so is to be guilty of polytheism and polytheism cannot be equated with Islam.

It is all a single issue that admits no equivocation. Either we turn to God alone, receive His instructions, submit to Him and obey Him, seek His support, worship Him alone, and acknowledge only His authority over all matters, pledge our loyalty and allegiance to Him in both worship and law-making and thus become Muslims, or we claim that any one of His creatures has a say or partnership with Him in any of these matters and we, thus, become guilty of polytheism. Needless to say, Islam, i.e.

submission to God, and the association of partners with Him cannot exist side by side.

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) was commanded to declare all this without ambiguity. He was ordered to face the unbelievers with it, that is those who were trying to persuade him to accept a compromise and allow a place in his faith for their gods in return for their acceptance of it. They also tried to obtain a concession from him such that some of them were allowed certain attributes of Godhead in order that they could retain their prestige and safeguard their interests. Had he afforded them this concession and allowed them in particular the authority to forbid things or make them lawful, they would have offered to stop opposing him, would have made him their chief, given him much of their wealth and married him to the prettiest of their girls. They tried hard, waving a stick in one hand, representing torture, hardship and war, and holding a carrot of reconciliation and peace in the other.

In reply to this dual attempt, the Prophet was commanded to make this powerful and decisive denunciation of their beliefs and to state the principles of Islam in the clearest of terms. He was also ordered to warn and frighten them, declaring at the same time how seriously he viewed the whole issue and how he dreaded God's punishment, should he be guilty of disobedience to Him: *"Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. He who is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph."* (Verses 15-16)

This verse is a faithful portrayal of the feelings of God's Messenger in respect of the commandments he received from God, and how he truly feared God's punishment. To be spared that punishment is considered an act of grace bestowed by God and a clear triumph for the recipient over all temptation. In addition, these two verses violently shook the hearts of the unbelievers at that time, as they continue to do at all times. They describe the torment of the Day of Judgement as something fearsome, moving fast towards its victim and surrounding him before claiming him altogether. The only way to avert it is through the power of the Almighty who diverts it away. As we view this scene depicted in this verse, we hold our breaths, waiting for the final image.

But why should man take a master for himself other than God? Why does he allow himself to sink into paganism when he has been forbidden to do so? Why does he not do what he is commanded to do, namely to submit himself to God? Why does he expose himself to the grievous torment which follows upon such disobedience? Does he think that people will come to his help if he experiences misfortune? Or does he hope to receive kindness from them? All this can only be granted to him by God, who has supreme power and who can cause everything to happen and who holds sway over all His creatures. It is He alone who grants and denies people's wishes according to His wisdom and His knowledge of their conditions: *"If God were to*

expose you to affliction, none can remove it but He. And if He were to bless you with good fortune – well, He has power over all things. He alone holds sway over all His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware." (Verses 17-18)

Here we see how the Qur'ān penetrates the depth of the human soul to touch on its latent desires and innermost fears. It brings all this into the open and subjects it to the light of faith which distinguishes good from evil. It presents the issues clearly and defines the nature of Godhead succinctly. This fits well with the importance of the central question with which the sūrah deals at this point and which the Qur'ān tackles on many occasions.

A Testimony to Settle All Issues

Now comes the climax of this passage, which employs a profound rhythm so as to re-emphasise the right attitude of a believer. The final verse of the passage serves as a clear statement of position, a warning and a move away from everything that has an element of setting partners with God. The style here is both strong and decisive: *"Say: What is weightiest in testimony? Say: God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may thereby warn you and all whom it may reach. Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? Say: I bear no such witness. Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him."* (Verse 19)

This verse is made up of a series of short statements which follow each other in very quick succession. This, to give us quick images of the different attitudes which can be held in relation to the central issue. Nevertheless, the painting is so vivid that we can see all expressions on the faces of the characters drawn and we can even penetrate their thoughts. What we see first is a command given by God to His Messenger. This is immediately followed by a scene wherein God's Messenger confronts the unbelievers who are associating partners with God and who want him, i.e. the Prophet, to endorse their falsehood before they accept his message. They imagine that such an exchange is feasible and that Islam and idolatry can exist side by side in someone's heart. It is sad to say that some people still think that this is possible. They argue that a person can submit himself to God while he conducts his life on the basis of teachings he receives from other sources and while he acknowledges the authority of other powers and seeks the help and patronage of other beings.

Thus, God's Messenger (peace be upon him) confronts the unbelievers. He makes it clear to them that he and they follow two separate roads that cannot meet. He outlines the difference between what he advocates of believing in God's oneness and submitting to Him and their beliefs and practices which associate partners with God. He tells them that the starting points of both camps are so wide apart that no

compromise between them can be worked out unless they abandon their beliefs and accept His faith.

This confrontation is depicted in a public scene calling for an open testimony: *"Say: What is weightiest in testimony?"* (Verse 19) Who is the best witness in the whole universe? Who is the One whose testimony refutes every other argument? Who has the final word? In order to make the generalisation total so that nothing in the whole universe is discounted as a possible witness, the question is asked in this manner: *"What is weightiest in testimony?"* (Verse 19)

The Prophet is ordered to put the question, and he is also ordered to provide the answer. The addressees themselves acknowledge that there is no other answer to give: *"Say: God."* (Verse 19) Yes, indeed. God — limitless is He in His glory — is the One who provides the weightiest testimony. He tells the truth and He is the best to provide the final answer to all issues and questions. When He has made His testimony, all matters are settled.

Having declared this indisputable fact, that God's testimony is strongest and weightiest, the Prophet declares that God Almighty is the witness between them and Him in this central issue: *"God is witness between me and you."* (Verse 19) The Arabic text admits a break in this statement, making it more in line with the general scene and giving it a more powerful and dramatic effect. In the first instance, the sentence is given in the same way as it is rendered in the translation: *"Say: 'God is witness between me and you."* (Verse 19) If we break it up, it reads as follows: *"Say: 'What is weightiest in testimony? Say: 'God. is witness between me and you.'"* (Verse 19)

When the principle of referring to God for arbitration in this central issue has been established, the Prophet declares to the unbelievers that God's testimony is included in the Qur'ān which He has revealed to him to warn them as well as everyone who comes to know of the Qur'ān during the Prophet's lifetime or subsequently. Thus, the Qur'ān is taken in evidence against them and against all those whom it reaches, because it contains God's testimony in this central issue which provides the basis of human existence and universal existence as a whole. "This *Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may thereby warn you and all whom it may reach."* (Verse 19)

Thus, every human being who becomes aware of the Qur'ān and what it contains in a language he understands has been duly warned. He incurs God's punishment if he rejects the message of Islam after it has been conveyed to him. A person who does not know the language of the Qur'ān and, therefore, cannot understand its message is not held accountable in the same way. However, Muslims are deemed to be at fault for not conveying the message of the Qur'ān to others in a language which they know well enough to understand the true meaning of this testimony.

Having made it clear to them that God's testimony is included in the Qur'ān, the

Prophet goes on to sum up this testimony in a challenging way which discards the unbelievers' own testimony, since it is fundamentally at variance with God's own. The Prophet also declares to them that he totally rejects their assertions and believes them to be false. He further declares that he firmly believes in the oneness of God, the Supreme Lord of the universe. As such, he parts company with them at the outset and dissociates himself most emphatically from their polytheism: *"Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? Say: I bear no such witness. Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him."* (Verse 19)

With such powerful rhythm and short, emphatic sentences, the Qur'ānic text touches people's hearts in a way no other style can do. I, therefore, do not wish to make any comment which could affect its flow and powerful impact.

A Perfectly Clear Attitude

However, I wish to discuss the central question in this passage, namely that of faith and its fundamental principle: God's oneness and the break with unbelievers. Those of us today who belong to the Muslim community should reflect very deeply on this passage and the way it tackles this central issue. The small community of true believers today are faced with well entrenched *jāhiliyyah* throughout the world, in the same way as the first generation of Muslims were when these verses were revealed. In the light of these verses, the proper attitude to be adopted by the Muslim community must be defined now as it was defined then.

The situation of mankind today is in many ways identical to what it was at the time when the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). At that time, Islam, as a faith and a code of living was established on a central principle which required people to declare their acceptance that `there is no deity other than God'. It is a declaration which has a special meaning as outlined by Rab`ī ibn `Āmir, a messenger sent by a Muslim army commander to Rustom, the Persian commander, before the two armies fought a decisive battle. The latter asked him what brought the Muslims out of their land. He answered: "It is God who ordered us to march out so that we may help to free those who are willing to be freed from the worship of creatures to the worship of God alone, and from the restrictions of this present life to the expanse of its universal link with the life to come, and from the oppression exercised by other religions to the justice of Islam." That Muslim messenger was keenly aware that Rustom and his people did not consider their emperor, Khusraw, as the lord who created the universe, nor did they offer worship rituals to him. They simply acknowledged him as the sovereign who enacted laws for them. As such, they made themselves subservient to him in the particular sense that is diametrically opposed to Islam. Thus, the Muslim messenger informed the

Persian commander that the Muslims were fulfilling God's orders to help free people from situations where one group of them worship another. They do so by attributing to rulers an essential quality of Godhead, i.e. sovereignty and what it imparts of authority to legislate, and implementing their legislation in practice, which is a form of religion. The mission of the Muslim armies was to free people so that they would worship God alone and enjoy the justice of Islam.

We are today in a situation similar to that which prevailed when the religion of Islam declared to mankind that 'there is no deity other than God'. Human beings have reverted to the worship of other creatures and accepted the oppression of different forms of religion and abandoned the principle of God's oneness in its true sense. It is true that some groups of people still make the declaration on mosque minarets that `there is no deity other than God', but they hardly know its true sense, and as such, they do not mean it. Nor do they reject the claims of others to sovereignty, which is synonymous with Godhead. It does not matter whether individuals, legislative councils or nations claim the authority. For none of these is a god to exercise that authority. It is only the relapse of humanity into *jāhiliyyah* that assigns to such creatures the attributes of Godhead. As such, humanity no longer manifests a firm belief in God's oneness or total devotion to Him alone.

This applies to all mankind, including those everywhere in the world, who repeat the declaration of God's oneness from minarets without giving it its true meaning or putting it into practice. These incur a bigger sin, one which is more severely punishable on the Day of Judgement, because they have sunk back into the worship of creatures after they have received proper guidance and embraced the true faith.

The advocates of Islam should reflect deeply on these verses, starting with the one which outlines the relationship of patronage: "*Say: 'Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to all and Himself needs none? Say: 'I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be among those who associate partners with Him.'*" (Verse 14) Such reflection would bring home to them that to take anyone other than God for a patron or master, submitting to him and seeking his help, is contrary to Islam. It is, indeed, the sort of idolatry from which Islam endeavours to free mankind. They will also come to know that the first manifestation of such a relationship is to accept laws enacted by any being other than God, whether they relate to faith or practical life. Needless to say, all mankind are in this position today. Hence, the advocates of Islam must define their objective to free all mankind from subservience to other creatures so that they submit to God alone. In carrying out their noble task, they face the same sort of ignorance as that faced by God's Messenger when he received the Qur'ān from God.

Moreover, the advocates of Islam need to contemplate the basic facts outlined in

the following verses: "*Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. He who is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph. If God were to expose you to affliction, none can remove it but He. And if He were to bless you with good fortune — well, He has power over all things. He alone holds sway over all His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware.*" (Verses 15-18)

Anyone who faces ignorance, its tyranny, might, deviousness, arrogance, corruption and wickedness needs to keep these facts in mind and preserve these feelings in his heart as a precaution against falling into sin as also to ward off the terrible punishment which awaits sinners. This will enhance his conviction that the only one who can benefit or harm him is God, who holds sway over all His servants and whose judgement cannot be overturned. The task of establishing Islam anew in the face of the overwhelming opposition posed by *jāhiliyyah* is hard indeed, requiring a long and enduring struggle. It cannot be undertaken by anyone who does not keep the above facts in mind and who does not nurture the aforementioned feelings.

When the advocates of Islam have made certain what their present task is, they need to adopt the same decisive attitude of dissociating themselves totally from the type of idolatry practised by societies that are deep in *jāhiliyyah,* and to seek the right witnesses for their stand. They should say what God's Messenger was commanded to say in this position, and to confront *jāhiliyyah* with it in the same way as the Prophet did in fulfilment of what he was bidden by God: "*Say: What is weightiest in testimony? Say: God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may thereby warn you and all whom it may reach. Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? Say: I bear no such witness. Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him.*" (Verse 19)

This is the word of truth which must be stated loudly, decisively and without ambiguity. When the advocates of Islam have declared it in this way, they must turn to God in full realisation that He has power over all things. Even the mightiest of tyrants are weaker than flies, for they cannot retrieve anything a fly takes away from them. With all their might, they cannot harm or benefit anyone unless God lets them. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose. Most people, however, do not know this fact.

The advocates of Islam must also be certain that they will not triumph or enjoy the fruits of God's promise to grant them power or establish them in the land, unless they part company with *jāhiliyyah* at the outset. They must first confront tyranny and *jāhiliyyah* in the clearest of terms.

The Qur'ān was not revealed to confront a single situation at a particular moment in history. It is an approach which cannot be restricted by the limitations of time and place. Whenever the Muslim community finds itself in a situation similar to that which prevailed at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, it must adopt this

approach. As we have already said, we face today the same situation which prevailed at the time the Qur'ān was revealed. Therefore, an unshakeable certainty of the truth of this religion, a complete awareness of God's absolute power and a categorical rejection of falsehood and its advocates must constitute part of the strength of the Muslim community. *"God is the best guardian and of those who show mercy He is the most merciful."* (12: 64)

4
Preference to Remain Blind

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يَعۡرِفُونَهُۥ كَمَا يَعۡرِفُونَ أَبۡنَآءَهُمُۘ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ فَهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٢٠

Those to whom We had given revelations know this as they know their own sons. But those who have squandered their own souls will never have faith. (20)

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوۡ كَذَّبَ بِـَٔايَٰتِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٢١

Who is more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God or denies His revelations? The wrongdoers shall never achieve success. (21)

وَيَوۡمَ نَحۡشُرُهُمۡ جَمِيعٗا ثُمَّ نَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُوٓاْ أَيۡنَ شُرَكَآؤُكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ٢٢

One day We shall gather them all together, then We shall say to those who associate partners with God: "Where, now, are those partners which you have been claiming?" (22)

ثُمَّ لَمۡ تَكُن فِتۡنَتُهُمۡ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُواْ وَٱللَّهِ رَبِّنَا مَا كُنَّا مُشۡرِكِينَ ٢٣

They will have no contention then other than to say, "By God, our Lord, we have never associated partners with Him." (23)

ٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَذَبُواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡۚ وَضَلَّ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ٢٤

Behold how they have lied to themselves and how they have been forsaken by whatever they have fabricated. (24)

وَمِنْهُم مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَجَعَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَن يَفْقَهُوهُ وَفِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا ۚ وَإِن يَرَوْا۟ كُلَّ ءَايَةٍ لَّا يُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِهَا ۚ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءُوكَ يُجَـٰدِلُونَكَ يَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ إِنْ هَـٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَـٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Some of them listen to you. But over their hearts We have laid veils which prevent them from understanding what you say, and into their ears, deafness. Were they to see every sign, they would still not believe in it. When they come to you to contend with you, the unbelievers say: "This is nothing but fables of the ancients." (25)

وَهُمْ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنْهُ وَيَنْـَٔوْنَ عَنْهُ ۖ وَإِن يُهْلِكُونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

They forbid [others] to listen to it and go far away from it. They ruin none but themselves, though they do not perceive it. (26)

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰٓ إِذْ وُقِفُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ فَقَالُوا۟ يَـٰلَيْتَنَا نُرَدُّ وَلَا نُكَذِّبَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ رَبِّنَا وَنَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

If you could but see them when they will be made to stand before the Fire! They will say: "Would that we could return! Then we would not deny our Lord's revelations, but would be among the believers." (27)

بَلْ بَدَا لَهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يُخْفُونَ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَلَوْ رُدُّوا۟ لَعَادُوا۟ لِمَا نُهُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَـٰذِبُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾ وَقَالُوٓا۟

Indeed, that which in the past they used to conceal will manifest itself to them; and if they were to return to life they would go back to that which they have been forbidden. They are indeed liars. (28)

إِنْ هِىَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا ٱلدُّنْيَا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَبْعُوثِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

They say: "There is nothing beyond our life in this world, and we shall never be raised to life again." (29)

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰٓ إِذْ وُقِفُوا۟ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ قَالَ أَلَيْسَ هَـٰذَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا ۚ قَالَ فَذُوقُوا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

If you could but see them when they are made to stand before their Lord! He will say: "Is this not the truth?" They will say: "Yes, indeed, by our Lord!" He will then say, "Taste, then, the suffering in consequence of your having refused to believe'." (30)

قَدۡ خَسِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِلِقَآءِ ٱللَّهِۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَتۡهُمُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ بَغۡتَةً قَالُواْ يَٰحَسۡرَتَنَا عَلَىٰ مَا فَرَّطۡنَا فِيهَا وَهُمۡ يَحۡمِلُونَ أَوۡزَارَهُمۡ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِمۡۗ أَلَا سَآءَ مَا يَزِرُونَ ٣١

Lost indeed are they who deny that they will have to meet God. When the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, they cry, "Alas for us! We have neglected much in our lifetime!" And they will be carrying their burdens on their backs. Evil indeed is that with which they are burdened. (31)

وَمَا ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَآ إِلَّا لَعِبٞ وَلَهۡوٞۖ وَلَلدَّارُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةُ خَيۡرٞ لِّلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَۗ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٣٢

The life of this world is nothing but a sport and a passing delight. Surely the life in the hereafter is by far the better for those who are God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? (32)

Overview

This new wave or round takes us back to the confrontation with the unbelievers who deny the truth of the Qur'ān and refuse to believe in resurrection and life after death. This time, however, it does not describe their stubborn rejection; nor does it remind them of the destruction of earlier generations who took the same attitude before them. Instead, it holds before their eyes their destiny on the Day of Resurrection which they deny, and the recompense they will be made to suffer in their next life which they refuse to accept, both described in the most vivid of scenes. It confronts them with all this when they are gathered together, putting to them questions full of reproach, and loaded with amazement at their attitude: *"Where, now, are those partners which you have been claiming?"* (Verse 22) They are overwhelmed by fear, realising their weakness, helpless and bewildered. They swear by God, acknowledging that He is the only Lord: *"By God, our Lord, we have never associated partners with Him."* (Verse 23)

Once again they are confronted with their past attitude as they stand before the fire. Worried, afraid, repentant and full of sorrow, they say: *"Would that we could return! Then we would not deny our Lord's revelations, but would be among the believers."* (Verse 27) The same confrontation is repeated again as they stand before their Lord, overwhelmed by shame, sorrow and fear. He, in His majesty, will ask them: *"Is this not the truth?"* (Verse 30) They will humbly answer: *"Yes, indeed, by our Lord!"* (Verse 30) But this admission will have come too late to be of any benefit to them, for God will say to them: *"Taste, then, the suffering in consequence of your having refused to believe."* (Verse 30)

The same confrontation is made time and again, until eventually they realise that they have lost everything. They carry their burdens on their backs, crying in grief for having refused to believe in the hereafter and for having squandered their chances.

Scene after scene the terrible outcome is shown in a way that shakes hearts. It opens both eyes and minds to the truth presented to them by God's Messenger in the Book which they deny. However, those who have received revelations in the past recognise its truth, just like they know their own children.

Wilful Denial of Known Facts

"Those to whom We had given revelations know this as they know their own sons. But those who have squandered their own souls will never have faith." (Verse 20) The Qur'ān mentions on several occasions that the people who received earlier revelations, i.e. the Jews and the Christians, recognize the Qur'ān and the truthfulness of the Prophet Muĥammad's message as well as the fact that the Qur'ān was revealed to him by God. At times, the people of these earlier revelations are confronted by this fact because of their hostile attitude towards the Prophet and Islam. At other times, the Arab idolaters are told this so that they realize that the people of earlier revelations, are fully aware of the nature of revelation, recognize the Qur'ān and that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) tells only the truth when he states that God revealed it to him in the same way as He bestowed messages from on high to earlier prophets.

Since this verse was most probably revealed in Makkah, its reference to the people of earlier revelations suggests that it was addressed to the idolaters, emphasizing that the people of earlier revelations recognize the Qur'ān as they recognize their own sons. It is true that the majority of them do not believe in it but this is only because they have squandered their own souls. In this, they are the same as the pagan Arabs who rejected this faith and, thereby, also squandered their souls. Both the preceding and following verses also speak of the idolaters, a fact which lends weight to the view that it is a Makkan revelation.

Commentators on the Qur'ān generally suggest that this verse means that the people of earlier revelations know that the Qur'ān is truly revealed by God, and that the Prophet was truly a messenger of God to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high. This is undoubtedly part of the meaning of this verse. However, a glance at the history and attitude of the people of earlier revelations towards the Islamic faith indicates another aspect to the meaning of this verse which God wants the Muslim community to fully understand.

Since the people of earlier revelations recognize the validity of the Qur'ān as a message revealed by God, they are fully aware of its powerful effect, undoubted

authority, the goodness it produces, the impetus it gives to its followers, and the moral values and the system it establishes. They take all this into account and realise that they cannot co-exist with the advocates of this faith. They know the truth of this message and their own falsehood. It is clear to them that the *jāhiliyyah* into which they have sunk and their deviant morals and systems cannot be tolerated by Islam. Hence, the battle between *their jāhiliyyah* and Islam is inevitable and it will continue to rage until God's authority prevails on earth and all people spened was another miracle. God promised to support him with nine miraculous signs of the type of which he had just seen two. At this point Moses is also told of his assignment, for which he has been given such preparation. *"[This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people."* (Verse 12)

Here, the

ng full knowledge of it. This religion of Islam moves to destroy falsehood and *jāhiliyyah* and repel those who usurp God's authority. Its aim is to make mankind submit to God alone. They, however, try to reduce it to a mere academic exercise, lifeless research and futile discourse in divinity and theology. They try to find ways and means to mould Islamic concepts in forms and colours that are alien to the nature of Islam, raising in front of its people the delusion that their faith is respected. They also work tirelessly to fill the vacuum that remains when faith is drastically weakened with other concepts and concerns. All this, so as to remove the sentimental traces of faith from the hearts of Muslims.

The people of earlier revelations study this religion of Islam in depth, but they do not undertake such a study in search of the truth, or to be fair to its followers, as some naive Muslims think when they come across a good word about Islam by an Orientalist. They are out to discover a vulnerable point in this religion through which they hope to put an end to it. They want to block its ability to enter into people's hearts and minds. They want to know how best to resist it and how to utilize its methods in order to substitute for it some hollow concepts. It is to achieve these goals that they study it in full, to the extent that they recognize it as they do their own children. It is our duty to know this and to realise that we should be the ones who know our own faith as we know our own children.

The history of fourteen centuries of Islam gives credence to the fact stated in this verse of the Qur'ān: "*Those to whom We had given revelations know this as they know their own sons.*" (Verse 20) This fact, however, appears most true in this period of history, when we see that an average of one book a week is written about Islam in a foreign

language. All this research testifies to the thorough knowledge of the people of earlier revelations of our religion, its nature, history, strengths and the methods to resist and distort it. Needless to say, most of these authors do not state their intentions openly because they realise that an open attack on Islam has always provoked resistance. They are aware that the movements that rose up to repel armed aggression against Islam, represented in imperialism, had a religious basis. Even an intellectual attack on Islam is bound to make people rally to its defence. Hence, most of them resort to more wicked methods, praising this religion in order to win the confidence of their readers before presenting their poisonous ideas. This religion, they tell us, is great; but it has to develop its concepts and systems in order to match those of modern civilization. It must not object to recent developments in social practices, methods of government and moral standards. It should demonstrate itself in the form of personal faith leaving the theories, practices and experiences of modern civilization to regulate our practical lives. In this way, it would give its blessings to whatever false lords decree. As such, it would remain great.

Such authors try further to give an impression of fairness and objectivity by extolling the strengths of Islam. They, however, are simply drawing the attention of their own people to Islam's strengths so that they know where to direct their attacks in future and how to suppress Islam altogether.

The secrets of the Qur'ān will continue to reveal themselves to its followers, as long as they try to understand it and contemplate its leanings. They, however, should go into the battle of faith armed with the lessons of history, aware of the full significance of the present and equipped with the light God has provided in order to show us the truth and enlighten our way.

A Contention Contrary to Reality

> *Who is more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God or denies His revelations? The wrongdoers shall never achieve success. One day We shall gather them all together, then We shall say to those who associate partners with God: "Where, now, are those partners which you have been claiming?" They will have no contention then other than to say, `By God, our Lord, we have never associated partners with Him. "Behold how they have lied to themselves and how they have been forsaken by whatever they have fabricated.* (Verses 21-4)

These verses place in front of the idolaters' eyes the truth of their attitudes and practices, as they are viewed by God Almighty. It begins with a rhetorical question to establish the fact of their wrongdoing as they fabricate lies against God. They profess to follow His faith, as preached by the Prophet Abraham. They further allege that

what they make lawful or forbidden of meat, food and worship rituals, which will be detailed in Verses 136-40, have been ordered by God, when they have not. Similarly, some of those who describe themselves as Muslims today falsely claim to follow the Divine faith preached by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). The fact is that they enact rules and laws, bring about situations and establish values by which they claim for themselves God's authority. They allege that all these inventions are nothing other than the divine faith. Some people who have bartered away their faith for a dwelling in hell also endorse their false claims. They also reject the divine revelations which the Prophet brought them, deny their truth, claiming that they have not been bestowed from on high. Conversely, they claim that their own practices, immersed in *jāhiliyyah,* have been sanctioned by God. All this still happens today in many societies.

God denounces all this and describes it as the worst injustice: *"Who is more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God or denies His revelations? The wrongdoers shall never achieve success."* (Verse 21) Reference is made here to idolatry as injustice in order to enhance its most horrible image. Indeed, it is the most frequent description of idolatry in the Qur'ān. Moreover, it is accurate since idolatry is an act of injustice perpetrated against the truth, against oneself and against mankind in general. It is an offence against God's own right to be worshipped alone, without partners, and against oneself as it leads the perpetrator to ruin. It is also an offence against mankind who are thus led away from the path of submission to God alone in order to establish regimes and conditions that ruin human life altogether. As such, idolatry is a great injustice, as it is described by the Lord of all the worlds. Neither idolatry nor the idolaters will, however, achieve any success: *"The wrongdoers shall never achieve success."* (Verse 21) Here God states the full facts and the end result of idolatry and the idolaters, or injustice and the wrongdoers. What short-sighted people may see of the affluence that some enjoy in the short run cannot be described as success or prosperity because it is no more than a short-lived situation which leads to eventual ruin. Who can be more truthful than God?

As an example of their loss, their situation on the Day of Resurrection is described very vividly: *"One day We shall gather them all together, then We shall say to those who associate partners with God: 'Where, now, are those partners which you have been claiming.? They will have no contention then other than to say, 'By God, our Lord, we have never associated partners with Him.' Behold how they have lied to themselves and how they have been forsaken by whatever they have fabricated."* (Verses 22-4)

There are numerous forms and types of idolatry and idolaters and the partners they associate with God. A naïve image of people worshipping statues, stones, trees, etc. is by no means the only form j of idolatry. In essence, associating partners with God is to acknowledge any one of the qualities attributable to God alone as

belonging to others as well, whether such quality relates to His conduct or control of events, destinies, or to the offering of worship rituals, or to the enactment and implementation of man-made laws. All these are forms of idolatry practised by different groups of unbelievers who associate different forms of partners with God.

The Qur'ān describes all these forms as polytheism or idolatry. It portrays scenes from the Day of Judgement which depict many of these and show that the destiny and punishment of different types of idolatry are the same in this life and in the life to come.

The pagan Arabs used to practise all types of idolatry. They believed that some types of God's creation have a say in the conduct of events and the determination of destinies, through intercession which is binding on God. These were the angels. Others, like the *jinn,* they claimed, had the ability to harm them, whether they acted on their own initiative or were manipulated by sorcerers and fortune-tellers. They also assigned abilities to the spirits of their forefathers. Idols were symbols of all these creatures. They attributed to fortune-tellers the ability to talk to these idols which would then issue their decrees of prohibition or permissibility. The truth, then, was that the fortune-tellers themselves were the partners they associated with God.

Idolatry was practised in the form of addressing worshipful rituals to those idols and presenting offerings to them, which actually went to the monks and fortune-tellers themselves. Some borrowed from the Persians the belief that planets have a say in the running of events and, therefore, they addressed their rituals to them. They also practised a third type of idolatry by enacting for themselves, through their monks and notables, laws of which God does not approve. They used to claim that these represented God's law in the same way as some people do today.

In this scene of gathering and confrontation, all types of idolaters are questioned about the partners they associate with God. These other deities are nowhere to be seen, nor can they avail their worshippers of anything: "*One day We shall gather them all together, then We shall say to those who associate partners with God: 'Where, now, are those partners which you have been claiming.'*" (Verse 22) We almost behold the scene with our own eyes: the gathering of all creatures and the question to which no answer is given.

The awesome scene has its effect: human nature is rid of all that has blinded it and it realises that no partners with God have ever existed. They have to face up to their test and to make the truth appear before all. In that awesome situation, they will have no contention other than to say: "*By God, our Lord, we have never associated partners with Him.*" (Verse 23) As they realise the truth, they abandon their past in total and acknowledge the Lordship of God alone. They disown their idolatry when it is too late. Their acknowledgement of the truth cannot save them because it is time

for reward or punishment, not for action. They cannot go back to life, rather they are faced with what they used to do during their life on earth. The Prophet is invited to wonder at their situation as God states that they have lied to themselves when they associated partners with God, for He has no partners. On the Day of Judgement, their falsehood fails them and they have no option but to acknowledge the truth: *"Behold how they have lied to themselves and how they have been forsaken by whatever they have fabricated."* (Verse 24)

This is the interpretation I find most logical concerning their oaths on the Day of Judgement, made in the presence of God, that they did not associate partners with Him. On that Day they dare not utter any falsehood against God and cannot make a false oath deliberately. On that Day, they hide nothing from God. It is simply that their nature sees the truth for what it is and falsehood leaves no trace whatsoever in their senses. Hence, the invitation by God to wonder at their lies to themselves which, on the Day of Judgement, leave no mark on their minds or senses. God knows best the meaning of His words. Here, we only present a possible interpretation.

The *sūrah* goes on to describe how some of the unbelievers stubbornly block their minds as they listen to the Qur'ān. Having resolved to reject it altogether, they argue with the Prophet alleging that the Qur'ān is nothing but fables told by the ancients. They turn away from it and they forbid others to listen to it. Having depicted the attitude they adopt in this life, the Qur'ān describes their miserable state as they are made to stand before the fire of hell, facing the horror of their destiny, powerless, and without support. The only thing they can do is wish to go back to life in order to change those views and practices which led them to this horrible end. Their wishes, however, are rejected as petty and childish.

> *"Some of them listen to you. But over their hearts We have laid veils which prevent them from understanding what you say, and into their ears, deafness. Were they to see every sign, they would still not believe in it. When they come to you to contend with you, the unbelievers say: "This is nothing but fables of the ancients." They forbid [others] to listen to it and go far away from it. They ruin none but themselves, though they do not perceive it. If you could but see them when they will be made to stand before the Fire! They will say: "Would that we could return! Then we would not deny our Lord's revelations, but would be among the believers". Indeed, that which in the past they used to conceal will manifest itself to them; and if they were to return to life they would go back to that which they have been forbidden. They are indeed liars.* (Verses 25-8)

Here, we have two contrasting scenes: the one in this life is characterized by stubborn rejection, while the other, in the hereafter, is a situation of profound regret. They are portrayed in such a way so as to help awaken human nature that has been

left to rust for a long time. If only human nature would open up to the Qur'ān and reflect on its message, it would gain the chance to be spared a fearful destiny.

"Some of them listen to you. But over their hearts We have laid veils which prevent them from understanding what you say, and into their ears, deafness. Were they to see every sign, they would still not believe in it." (Verse 25) This is a description of a particular type of people who listen but do not understand as if they do not have minds to help them comprehend, or ears to help them hear. This type of person may exist any time, anywhere. Their listening to what is being said has no effect whatsoever. Their ears do not function and their comprehension is sealed, so that the meaning of what they hear does not register with them.

"Were they to see every sign, they would still not believe in it. When they come to you to contend with you, the unbelievers say: This is nothing but fables of the ancients." (Verse 25) Their eyes are open, but they do not seem to see, or what they see delivers no message to their minds.

What has happened to them, then? What prevents them from responding when they have ears, eyes, and minds? God tells us: *"Over their hearts We have laid veils which prevent them from understanding what you say, and into their ears, deafness. Were they to see every sign, they would still not believe in it."* (Verse 25) It is God who has willed that their faculty of comprehension remains unable to grasp the truth and that their hearing does not function. We should try, then, to understand the wisdom behind God's will.

God, limitless is He in His glory, says: *"Those who strive hard for Our cause, We shall most certainly guide onto paths that lead to Us."* (29: 69) He also says: *"By the Soul and its moulding, and inspiration with wickedness and piety. Successful is the one who keeps it pure*

and ruined is the one who corrupts it." (91: 7-10) It is God's will that He guides those who strive to follow His guidance, and that anyone who purges his soul from corruption will be successful. Those people have neither sought guidance nor tried to make use of their natural responses. These are the two things people need to do to ensure that God will guide them and help them give the proper responses. They started by knocking their nature out of action and, in consequence, God has placed a veil between them and His guidance. It is God's will, then, that people should bear the consequences of their initial attitude and action. Everything occurs according to God's will. It is His will to guide those who seek guidance and to grant success to those who work to purify themselves. It is also His will to place veils over the hearts and minds of those who turn away from His message and to make them deaf and unresponsive to the signs they see. Those who try to put the blame for their sins and their disbelief on God's will surely make a fraudulent claim. God confronts them with the truth as He reports and derides their claims: *"Those who associate partners with God say, 'Had God so wished, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped any*

other than Him, nor would we have declared anything forbidden without a commandment from Him.' Those before them said the same. Do the Messengers have to do anything other than to clearly deliver the Message? Indeed, We have raised a Messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.' Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance, while others were inevitably doomed by their error. Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who gave the lie to the truth." (16: 35-6) It is clear from these verses that God rejects their claims: it was inevitable that they should fall prey to grievous error after they had been given sufficient warnings to mend their ways.

People have often raised questions about predestination, compulsion and free choice, man's will, etc. They have made of these topics an academic debate which they tackle on the basis of their own assumptions. Their approach is contrary to the simple and straightforward Qur'ānic exposition of these questions. The Qur'ān states that everything takes place by God's will, and that man chooses the line he follows and that his choice is part of his nature, endowed to him by God. The direction he chooses to follow will entail certain consequences in this life and in the life to come. These consequences are part of God's will. Hence, the ultimate power behind everything is God's will which dictates the consequences of the freedom of choice God has given to man. Anything that goes beyond this simple statement is false.

All indicators to the truth and pointers to the right way and to faith were displayed in front of the idolaters. The Qur'ān repeatedly drew their attention to countless signs and indications which they recognise within themselves and in the world around them. Had they only thought objectively about these, they would have awakened to the truth and responded to it. But they have made no effort to receive guidance. On the contrary, they suppressed their own nature, and in consequence, God placed a veil between them and proper guidance. They did not go to the Prophet with open hearts, ears and eyes in order to listen, see and reflect. They went to argue and dispute: *"When they come to you to contend with you, the unbelievers say: 'This is nothing but fables of the ancients.'"* (Verse 25)

They were well aware that the Qur'ān bears no resemblance to such fables or legends which speak of supernatural events that happen to heroes and deities and which constitute a part of the beliefs of idolatrous communities. In their attempts to justify their rejection of the message of Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), they give all types of false arguments. Since the Qur'ān recited to them by the Prophet contains stories about former prophets and their nations, as well as the fate of those who, in the past, denied God's messages, the unbelievers claimed that the Qur'ān was no more than the fables of the ancients. What a futile claim based on the least convincing of arguments.

Truth and Fables

In order to give more credence to their false description of the Qur'ān and to turn people away from it, a man like Mālik ibn al-Naḍr, who had learnt some Persian epics about Rustom and other Persian legendary heroes, used to sit at a short distance from the Prophet when he recited the Qur'ān. After the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) had finished, Mālik ibn al-Naḍr used to say to his audience: "If Muĥammad could tell you some fables of the ancients, I can tell you better ones." He would then relate to them some of the epics and histories he had learnt, hoping that in this way, he could prevent them from listening to the Qur'ān. Indeed, the chiefs of Makkah who commanded a position of authority and respect used to forbid others to listen to the Qur'ān, and they tried to stay away from its reading so that they did not submit to its powerful logic and irrefutable argument. In other words, they feared to be influenced by it: "They *forbid [others] to listen to it and go far away from it. They ruin none but themselves, though they do not perceive it."* (Verse 26)

In this battle between the powerful authority of truth and the feeble structure of falsehood, it was not enough that a man like Mālik ibn al-Naḍr sat down to relate the epics and histories of the ancients. Instead, the Quraysh chiefs forbade their followers from listening to the Qur'ān and they also distracted themselves lest they too be unable to resist its influence. A story mentioned in the history of the Prophet about al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, Abū Sufyān ibn Ĥarb and `Amr ibn Hishām, and their secret listening to the Qur'ān is well known.[4]

All this effort which they exerted to refrain and prevent others from listening to the Qur'ān and allowing themselves to be influenced by it or respond to it was a recipe for disaster: *"They ruin none but themselves, though they do not perceive it."* (Verse 26) Whom would a person ruin if all his efforts were geared towards preventing himself and others from listening to proper guidance and following the right way that ensures salvation?

Poor and wretched indeed are those who take such a goal for themselves, even though they may appear to other people as very powerful and having much influence. Wretched indeed they are because their efforts ensure their own ruin both in this life and in the life to come. At times, it may appear to them and to others that they are on a winning course, but this is all delusion.

A Wish Availing Nothing

If we want to know the ultimate end of their efforts, we need only look at the

[4] A full report of this incident is given in the next chapter. — Editor's note.

result: *"If you could but see them when they will be made to stand before the Fire! They will say: 'Would that we could return! Then we would not deny our Lord's revelations, but would be among the believers.'"* (Verse 27)

This is the scene which contrasts with their situation in this life. Now they are in a state of regret, humility and total loss. This is compared with their attitude when they turned away from guidance, using their power to force others to also turn away, and boasting about their own strength and influence.

"If you could but see them when they will be made to stand before the Fire!" (Verse 27) Now they cannot turn away, use their argumentation, or repeat their falsehoods. If we were to see them ourselves in such a position, we would be sure to see something fearful. Their dearest wish would be: *"Would that we could return! Then we would not deny our Lord's revelations, but would be among the believers."* (Verse 27) They know that the Qur'ān is God's revelation, and their desire to return to earth is such that they may have a second chance when they no longer deny these revelations. They claim that they would make sure that they would be among the believers.

All these are wishes that have no way of coming true. They do not know their own nature, which will always reject the faith. When they say that if they could return they would be believers is nothing but a lie, because it does not match with what they would do if their wishes were answered. They only make these assertions because they have come to realize how wicked and evil they are. What they used to conceal from their followers in order to portray an image of themselves as successful and prosperous is now laid bare: *"Indeed, that which in the past they used to conceal will manifest itself to them; and if they were to return to life they would go back to that which they have been forbidden. They are indeed liars."* (Verse 28)

God knows their nature very well and He is fully aware that they will stubbornly continue in their falsehood. He is also fully aware that it is only the fearsome situation in which they find themselves as they stand by the fire that causes them to utter such wishes and to make these promises. But the real situation is this: *"If they were to return to life, they would go back to that which they have been forbidden. They are indeed liars."* (Verse 28) They are, thus, left to their miserable destiny. This answer confronts them with the truth as they endure their humiliation.

Contrasting Concepts and Values

The *sūrah* now opens two new pages to draw two contrasting scenes. The first looks at this present life where the unbelievers make their assertions that there will be no resurrection, accountability or reward. The other is in the hereafter when they are stood before their Lord, and He asks them about the positions they adopted in their first life: *"Is this not the truth?"* (Verse 30) The very question jolts them violently.

They answer in complete humility: "*Yes, indeed, by our Lord!*" (Verse 30) They are then put face to face with what awaits them of painful suffering. The *sūrah* goes on to portray how overwhelmed they are in the Last Hour, caught unawares, after they disbelieved in the meeting with their Lord. They are full of sorrow, carrying their burdens on their backs. This is concluded with a statement showing the real value of this life as opposed to the life to come, according to God's true measure.

> *They say: "There is nothing beyond our life in this world, and we shall never be raised to life again." If you could but see them when they are made to stand before their Lord! He will say: "Is this not the truth?" They will say: "Yes, indeed, by our Lord!" He will then say, "Taste, then, the suffering in consequence of your having refused to believe." Lost indeed are they who deny that they will have to meet God. When the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, they cry, Alas for us! We have neglected much in our lifetime!" And they will be carrying their burdens on their backs. Evil indeed is that with which they are burdened. The life of this world is nothing but a sport and a passing delight. Surely the life in the hereafter is by far the better for those who are God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verses 29-32)

The concept of resurrection, reward and retribution in the life to come is central to the Islamic faith. Indeed, it ranks second only to the concept of Godhead as the foundation upon which the structure of Islam as a faith, law, system and code of conduct is built. God tells the believers in the Qur'ān that He has perfected their religion for them and completed with it the grace He has bestowed on them and has chosen it for them as a faith. It is then, a complete and coherent way of life in which the ideological concept is in perfect harmony with the moral values it upholds, as well as the laws and regulations it proclaims. All these are based on the same basic foundation: the Islamic concept of Godhead and the life hereafter.

According to Islam, life is not the short period of time which an individual lives, nor is it the limited period which represents the lifespan of a nation. Indeed, it is not even the longer period of time which represents the duration of human existence in this world. Life, in the Islamic view, has a much longer time span, much wider horizons and a much deeper and varied context than the period of time which is assigned to it by those who overlook the next world and do not believe in it.

According to Islam, life stretches out to include this present life of ours and the life to come, which is of a duration unknown to anyone but God. Compared to it, human life on earth is no longer than an hour in a day's work. It also stretches out in space to include this earth on which we live and added to it a paradise which is as vast as the heavens and the earth, as well as a hell which can accommodate the majority of people across all the generations that have existed and will exist on earth.

It stretches out further to add to this world's existence which we know another about which we know nothing except what God has told us. Its true nature is only known to God. This latter existence starts from the moment of our birth and reaches its fullness in the abode of the hereafter. When we speak of death and the hereafter, we are actually speaking of things the nature of which God has kept to Himself. Human existence continues in these worlds in forms and patterns known only to God alone.

Life has a further extension in its essence: it includes the type familiar to us in our world and other types which will be experienced in the next world, in heaven and hell. These types will have tastes and sensations that are different from what we know now. Compared to it, this present life is less than even the span of a mosquito's wings.

In the Islamic concept, humanity extends into these dimensions of time and place and into these deeper levels of worlds and existences. It is in proportion to its understanding of this fact that its appreciation of all existence, life, bonds, values and concerns becomes more profound. By contrast, the people who do not believe in the hereafter continue to have a very narrow and limited concept of the universe and human existence. They continue to confine their concepts, values and struggle to their very narrow corner in this world.

This difference in outlook leads to the adoption of different values and systems. It tells us clearly that this religion of Islam is a complete and coherent way of life. We can appreciate the importance of belief in a second life to its conceptual, ideological, moral, behavioural and legal structure. A man who lives in such a vast expanse of time, place, world and feelings is totally different from one who lives in a narrow corner and has to fight others for it, awaiting no compensation for that from which he is deprived and no reward for what he does in this present world, apart from his life on earth and what he receives during it from his fellow human beings.

A profound and varied concept will, by nature, elevate human concerns and refine human aspirations. This will, by itself, lead to the adoption of moral values and behaviour different from those which are characteristic of people living in their own narrow corners. When we adopt this profound concept, based on absolute justice in the life to come, and when we realize that a much larger compensation awaits us than what is here missed out on, then those who adopt this concept work hard to establish the truth and ensure that goodness prevails. They know that this is what God wants them to do and that reward and compensation are based on the fulfilment of God's bidding. When any human being believes in the hereafter as Islam views it, his manners and behaviour are set on the right footing. Similarly, all systems and laws acquire the right orientation; and what is more is that people will not allow them to be abused or corrupted. This is because people realise that if they keep quiet

when they see corruption around them, they not only miss out on the benefits and goodness of this life, but they are deprived of reward in the hereafter. Thus, they lose in both worlds.

Some people are quick to speak against belief in the hereafter, claiming that it causes people to adopt a negative attitude towards this life, exerting no effort to improve it. They abandon it to dictators and their corrupt regimes, because they prefer to aspire to the blessings of the hereafter. This is an unfair criticism, one which combines injustice with ignorance. They group belief in the hereafter as advocated in Church concepts that have deviated from Christianity under the same classification as its Islamic concept. In the Islamic view, this life is where you place your investment in order to reap the benefits in the hereafter. To strive to put this life on the right course, to purge it from evil and corruption, to repel all assaults on God's authority, to smash tyrants and ensure justice and goodness to all people are the keys to the hereafter. It opens, for those who so strive, the gates to heaven and compensates them for everything they sacrifice during their struggle against evil and for the harm they may suffer.

How is it possible that the followers of such a faith could abandon this life and allow it to stagnate, deviate or become corrupt? How could they allow injustice and tyranny to establish their roots and spread? How could they allow it to remain backward, undeveloped when they aspire to receive reward from God in the hereafter? That reward is not given for a negative attitude.

The Only Faith Worthy of Man

There were periods of time when people adopted a negative attitude allowing corruption, evil, injustice, tyranny, ignorance and backwardness to prevail in their life while claiming at the same time that they were Muslims. They did this only because their understanding of Islam was faulty and their belief in the hereafter was shaken and weakened. Their negative attitude could not be the result of a true understanding of this faith or the belief that they have to face God on the Day of Judgement. No one who believes in this inevitable meeting with God and understands the nature of this religion can adopt a negative attitude towards life or allow himself to remain backward or to accept evil, corruption and tyranny.

While going through life, a true Muslim feels that he is bigger and more sublime than life itself. He may enjoy its comforts or ignore them, knowing that they are lawful and permissible to him in this life, placed at his disposal on the Day of Judgement when no one else can claim them. He strives to promote and improve this life and to use its potentials and abilities, happy in the knowledge that this is the duty assigned to him by God when He placed him in charge of the earth. He fights

evil, corruption and injustice willingly, bearing any hardship and making every sacrifice, including his own life, knowing that he is simply adding to his credit in the hereafter. Understanding his religion well, he knows that this life is the one in which the seeds are planted, for the fruits to be reaped in the hereafter. There is simply no way to success in the life to come which does not go through this world of ours. True, this life is very small and cheap, but it is part of God's grace which makes it a stage towards the greatest blessings and grace He bestows on man.

Every detail in the Islamic system takes due account of the life to come, and the broadness, beauty and elevation it imparts to people's visions and concepts. It also adds to the refinement, purity and forbearance which are inherent in the Islamic moral code. It enhances its followers' determination to establish what is right and to prevent evil and avoid disobedience to God. It helps set human activities on the right course. For all that, Islamic life is not properly achieved without a firm belief in the hereafter. Hence, the great emphasis placed in the Qur'ān on the fact that we will be raised up for our next life.

In their ignorance, as much as because of it, the pagan Arabs could not conceive of a second life or believe in it. They could not simply imagine another world, different from this present one of ours. They could not conceive how a human being could aspire to horizons beyond the physical world. Their concepts and feelings were not much different from those of animals. It is the same situation we witness today in the modern type *of jāhiliyyah,* whose exponents describe as 'scientific'.

"They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world, and we shall never be raised to life again'." (Verse 29) God knows very well that beliefs of this type do not allow the emergence of a noble type of human life. The limited scope of beliefs makes man strongly attached to the earth and to that which is physical and tangible in it, just like animals. Our limited time span and area tend to loosen a forceful desire to seek a self-aggrandisement which enslaves man to worldly pleasures. His physical desires are set loose without restraint. He feels that unless he satisfies his profane desires, which can hardly be elevated above those of animals, he misses out on his pleasure without hope of compensation. Systems and regimes are established on earth based on a very selfish and narrow view of time and space. This leads to a life devoid of justice and compassion. War becomes the order of the day with individuals, classes and races fighting one another. It is a jungle type of life, not that much different from the world of wild animals and brutal beasts. All this is there for us to see in the world of modern `civilization'! It is evident everywhere.

God has been aware all along of these facts. Hence why He wanted to assign to a certain community the role of leading mankind to the summit where human dignity can be seen in full play in real life. God knows that this community cannot fulfil its task unless it brings its concepts and values out of its hole in that narrow corner, the

earth, and places them over a vast horizon. That community must move out of the narrowness of this world to the expanse which combines this life with the life to come. Hence, the emphasis is placed by Islam on the future life; firstly because it is real — for God always tells the truth; and secondly because believing in it is essential for the completeness of man's existence, in ideology, morality, behaviour, systems and legal code.

This accounts for the strong and deep rhythm which we notice in this part of the *sūrah* which runs like a very fast river. God knows well that it is within human nature to respond to such a strong and deep rhythm. It opens up its receptive elements, awaiting instructions, in order to respond to them. We must not forget, however, that everything that is mentioned about the hereafter is simply the truth.

> *If you could but see them when they are made to stand before their Lord! He will say: "Is this not the truth?" They will say: "Yes, indeed, by our Lord!" He will then say, "Taste, then, the suffering in consequence of your having refused to believe."* (Verse 30)

This is the eventual destiny of those who claimed that there was nothing beyond our present life and that they would never be raised up again. It is a miserable, shameful, humiliating destiny as they are brought before their Lord, having persistently denied that they would face Him. They cannot stir. They are depicted as if they were led by the neck until they are stood in that awesome surrounding, facing the questioning: *"Is this not the truth?"* (Verse 30) What a humiliating question! There is only one possible reply: "*Yes indeed, by our Lord!"* (Verse 30) Now they are face to face with their Lord, on the occasion that they most stubbornly refused to believe in.

In a summary way, which most befits the awesome scene, the divine order is given, sealing their fate: "*He will then say: Taste, then, the suffering in consequence of your having refused to believe.'*" (Verse 30) This is the most suitable destiny for those who denied themselves the comfort of a wider human concept, following instead an exceedingly narrow material concept. They have refused to raise themselves to the level that fits a noble humanity. They conducted their lives on the basis of their profane, hollow concept. By so doing, they actually earned their own punishment and this fits with the nature of those who deny the hereafter.

What the Unbelievers Actually Reject

The scene portraying the final outcome decreed by God is now complemented with a statement of the truth of its causes: "*Lost indeed are they who deny that they will have to meet God. When the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, they cry, Alas for us! We*

have neglected much in our lifetime!' And they will be carrying their burdens on their backs. Evil indeed is that with which they are burdened." (Verse 31)

It is indeed an utter loss because it includes the loss of this world, since they have spent their lifetime caring only for what is petty, low and profane, and the loss of the hereafter as we have already seen. Those deluded, ignorant people have not taken any precautions against what comes to them as a sudden shock: "*When the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, they cry, Alas for us! We have neglected much in our lifetime!'*" (Verse 31) They are then portrayed as overladen donkeys: "*And they will be carrying their burdens on their backs.*" (Verse 31) Indeed, animals are in a better situation because they carry ordinary loads, while these have loads of sin. Animals are unloaded and set free to relax, while these march with their loads to hell, followed by the rebuke: "*Evil indeed is that with which they are burdened."* (Verse 31)

The passage then portrays a terrible scene which strikes fear in the listener's heart, followed by one of complete and utter loss. These two scenes are then followed by a statement of the real weight and value of this life and the life hereafter according to God's measure: "*The life of this world is nothing but a sport and a passing delight. Surely the life in the hereafter is by far the better for those who are God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 32) This is the final value of each of the two lives. It could not be otherwise, when we compare an hour in a day's work on this small planet with eternity in God's vast dominion. What value other than a pastime could be attached to an hour's work in this life when it is compared to the seriousness of the great world beyond.

This evaluation is absolute in nature, but it does not create any tendency to neglect this life or approach it in an isolationist or negative way. There has certainly been some of this among some Sufi or mystic movements, but this tendency has no roots in the proper Islamic vision.

It is simply borrowed from some Christian clerical concepts, Persian and Greek ideologies as they found their way into Islamic society. The great practical examples history gives us of how the Islamic concept of life works in practice have never been negative or isolationist in attitude. You have only to look at the generation of the Prophet's Companions who were able to subdue the evil tendency within themselves and overcome the prevailing systems of *jāhiliyyah,* represented by powerful empires. That generation, which understood

the true value of this life as it is in God's measure, was the same generation which set out to work for the hereafter and accomplished in the process feats that left great positive effects on human life. That generation lived a life of immense activity, great power and unstoppable

momentum.

The proper evaluation of the two lives according to God's measure gave them the benefit of not being enslaved by the pleasures of this life. They mastered this life and made use of it for God's cause, to ensure that His authority remains supreme. They gave worldly pleasures no chance to enslave them. Thus, they were able to fulfil their task of building a proper and sound structure for human life. At no time did they aim to enjoy more of the pleasures of this world but instead aimed to win in the hereafter. With this driving aim, they were able to excel over the rest of mankind in this life and to ensure that they will excel them in the hereafter.

The nature of the hereafter is something which has not been explained to us in detail. Therefore, believing in it gives us a broader vision and nobler thinking. To work for it ensures better results for the God- fearing which can easily be recognized by those who use their reason: "*Surely the life in the hereafter is by far the better for those who are God- fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 32)

Those who deny the hereafter, simply because it is imperceptible, are only ignorant people who claim to have sound knowledge. Human knowledge today has no longer any certainty other than the certainty of what lies beyond our world and what is imperceptible.

5
The Dead Cannot Hear

قَدْ نَعْلَمُ إِنَّهُۥ لَيَحْزُنُكَ ٱلَّذِى يَقُولُونَ ۖ فَإِنَّهُمْ لَا يُكَذِّبُونَكَ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

We know too well that what they say grieves you. Yet it is not you that they charge with falsehood; but it is God's revelations that the wrongdoers deny. (33)

وَلَقَدْ كُذِّبَتْ رُسُلٌ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَصَبَرُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا كُذِّبُوا۟ وَأُوذُوا۟ حَتَّىٰٓ أَتَىٰهُمْ نَصْرُنَا ۚ وَلَا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَكَ مِن نَّبَإِى۟ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Other messengers were charged with falsehood before your time, but they patiently endured all those charges and abuse, until Our help came to them. There is no power that can alter God's words. You have already received some of the history of those messengers. (34)

وَإِن كَانَ كَبُرَ عَلَيْكَ إِعْرَاضُهُمْ فَإِنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتَ أَن تَبْتَغِىَ نَفَقًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ أَوْ سُلَّمًا فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَتَأْتِيَهُم بِـَٔايَةٍ ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَجَمَعَهُمْ عَلَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ ۚ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

If you find it so distressing that they turn their backs on you, seek, if you can, a chasm to go deep into the earth or a ladder to the sky by which you may bring them a sign. Had God so willed, He would have gathered them all to [His] guidance. Do not, therefore, allow yourself to be one of the ignorant. (35)

۞ إِنَّمَا يَسْتَجِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْمَعُونَ ۘ وَٱلْمَوْتَىٰ يَبْعَثُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Only those that can hear will surely answer. As for the dead, God will bring them back to life, then to Him shall they

return. (36)

وَقَالُواْ لَوۡلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦۚ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَادِرٌ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يُنَزِّلَ ءَايَةٗ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٧

They say: "Why has no sign been sent down to him from his Lord?" Say: God is well able to send down any sign, but most of them are devoid of knowledge. (37)

وَمَا مِن دَآبَّةٖ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا طَٰٓئِرٖ يَطِيرُ بِجَنَاحَيۡهِ إِلَّآ أُمَمٌ أَمۡثَالُكُمۚ مَّا فَرَّطۡنَا فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ مِن شَيۡءٖۚ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ يُحۡشَرُونَ ٣٨

There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own. No single thing have We left out of the book. Then to their Lord shall they all be gathered. (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا صُمّٞ وَبُكۡمٞ فِي ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِۗ مَن يَشَإِ ٱللَّهُ يُضۡلِلۡهُ وَمَن يَشَأۡ يَجۡعَلۡهُ عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٣٩

Those who deny Our revelations are deaf and dumb, groping along in darkness. Whomever God wills, He lets go astray; and whomever He wills, He guides along a straight path. (39)

Overview

In this new round or wave, an address is made to the Prophet (peace be upon him). It begins with God, limitless is He in His glory, consoling and comforting him. He, honest and truthful, was particularly distressed ' at the charges of falsehood that were laid at his door. Here, he is told by his Lord that they never thought him a liar, but used this as a ploy to maintain their stubborn denial of God's signs and their rejection of the faith. He is also comforted with the information that earlier messengers of God were similarly accused of falsehood and subjected to abuse, and that they endured all this with patience. Eventually, they were given God's help to triumph, in accordance with the consistent laws He has set in operation. When the comforting and reassurance are over, the address makes clear the essential truth concerning God's message. It moves according to God's will and His laws. Its advocates have nothing to do with it other than to convey it to people and to make it clear. Other than that, it is God who decides what happens to it. Hence, its advocates, including the Prophet himself, have nothing to decide other than to continue with

their task, without hastening its moves or suggesting anything to God. They are not to pay any attention to people's suggestions concerning its strategy, the proofs that may be given of its truth or the miracles needed to prove it. The point is that those who are alive and have the power of hearing will respond. On the other hand, those whose hearts are dead will not. The ultimate decision belongs to God: He may give people life or keep them dead until they return to Him on the Day of Judgement.

The people the Prophet was addressing demanded a miracle like the ones granted earlier prophets. God is certainly able to give them such a miracle, but He, in His wisdom, does not wish to do so. If the Prophet is so distressed by their turning away, then let him try, by his own human effort, to bring them such a miracle. God is the Creator of all living creatures, and He knows all their secrets and the differences in their nature. He leaves those human beings who reject His message to wander in the deep darkness, deaf and dumb. He leaves some to go astray and guides others to the truth, according to His infallible knowledge of His different creatures.

Honest No Doubt

> *We know too well that what they say grieves you. Yet it is not you that they charge with falsehood; but it is God's revelations that the wrongdoers deny.* (Verse 33)

The pagan Arabs with their idolatrous beliefs, particularly those of them who took upon themselves the unworthy task of opposing the message of Islam, had no doubt that Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was telling the truth. They have known him to be truthful and honest. They knew that he had never told a lie before starting to convey God's message. Those who were most hardened in their opposition to him did not doubt the truthfulness of his message either. They knew that the Qur'ān could not have been authored by a human being. They, nevertheless, stubbornly refused to declare their belief or to embrace a new faith. Their reason for rejecting it was not that they could not believe the Prophet; rather, it was their realisation that his message threatened their positions and influence. Hence, they decided to deny God's revelations and to stick to their idolatrous beliefs. There are numerous reports that clearly state the reasons behind the Quraysh's attitude. We will now look at just a few of these.

Ibn Isĥāq reports on the authority of al-Zuhrī that three of the Quraysh's notables, namely, Abū Sufyān, Abū Jahl and al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, protected by the cover of darkness, took their separate ways to listen to God's Messenger as he recited the Qur'ān during his night worship. They sat just outside his house, listening to his recitation of the Qur'ān. Each was on his own, thinking that no one would know about his action. One can only assume that their motivation was either to try to judge

Muĥammad's message objectively, or to learn the truth about it, or to listen to the superb literary style of the Qur'ān. As the day began to break, each of them returned the way they had come such that their clandestine activities would not be found out. However, their individual plans were foiled when the three happened, by chance, to meet with each other. There was no need to ask each other what they were doing. There was only one reason for their presence there at that particular time. Therefore, they counselled each other against such action: "Should some of your followers see you", one of them said, you would stir doubts in their minds".

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against their irresponsible' action. Nevertheless, the third night each of them again went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they were ashamed of themselves. One of them suggested that they should give each other their word of honour not to come again. They did so before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān in his home. He asked him what he thought about what he had heard Muĥammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him.

Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocutor:

> I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him.[5]

Knowing the Truth

Commenting on the Qur'ānic verse, *"We know too well that what they say grieves you. Yet it is not you that they charge with falsehood; but it is Gods revelations that the wrongdoers deny"* (Verse 33), al- Ṭabarī quotes the following report on the authority of al-Suddī: "On the day of the Battle of Badr, al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq said to his tribesmen, the Zuhārah people, `Muĥammad is your sister's son, and you are the

[5] Ibn Isĥāq, Muĥammad, The Life of the Prophet, as quoted in A. Salahi, Muĥammad: Man and Prophet, London, 1995, pp. 161-2.

ones who defend their nephew. If he is truly a Prophet, why would you fight him today? And if he is a liar, you should repel aggression against your nephew. Wait until I meet Abū al-Ĥakam, i.e. Abū Jahl. Should Muĥammad be victorious, you will return home safely, but if he is defeated, your people will do you no harm.' [It was on that day that he was nicknamed al-Akhnas, while his real name was Ubayy.] He went to meet Abū Jahl and spoke to him in private: `Tell me about Muĥammad: is he telling the truth, or is he a liar? There is no one from the Quraysh listening to this conversation between us.' Abū Jahl said: `By God, Muĥammad is telling the truth. Muĥammad never told a lie in his life. But what would happen, should the descendants of Quşayy add prophethood to their other honours, such as holding the banner in war, providing water for the pilgrims, etc. What will remain for the rest of the Quraysh?'"[6] All this then explains the statement made in the above verse.

In considering this report, we have to realise that this incident took place on the day of the Battle of Badr, nearly two years after the Prophet had settled in Madinah, while the *sūrah* and this verse are Makkan revelations, i.e. they precede this incident. To account for this, we have to understand that commentators on the Qur'ān might report an event and cite a particular verse in connection with it, but this is not to say that the verse in question was revealed on that occasion. Rather it explains the verse in relation to life events.

The following report is given by Ibn Isĥāq in his history of the Prophet's life: One day, as `Utbah was sitting with a group of Quraysh notables, he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka`bah. `Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muĥammad and make him some offers? He may accept one or the other. If he does, we will give him that and put an end to our problem with him".

This idea was greeted with unanimous approval. As `Utbah sat with the Prophet he addressed him: "My nephew, you know you command a position of high esteem and noble birth among us. You have brought into the life of your community something very serious indeed. You have thus caused disunity to creep into their ranks; you have belittled their ideals, ridiculed their gods and their religion and spoken ill of their forefathers. Now listen to me. I am making you some offers which I would like you to consider. You may, perhaps, find some of them acceptable."

The Prophet asked him to make his proposals, and listened attentively. `Utbah said: "My nephew, if you have started this affair hoping to make money out of it, we are all willing to give you some of our own wealth so that you would be the richest among us. If it is honour and position you want, we will make you our master and seek your advice in all matters. If it is a throne you are after, we will make you our king. If, on the other hand, you are possessed and are unable to resist what

[6] Al-Ţabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 7, p. 182.

overwhelms you, we will spare no expense in seeking a medical cure for you."

When `Utbah stopped speaking, the Prophet asked him whether he had finished. As `Utbah affirmed that he had, the Prophet asked him to listen to what he had to say. The Prophet then recited the first 38 Verses of *Sūrah* 41 of the Qur'ān. `Utbah listened attentively. When the Prophet had finished his recitation, he prostrated himself in humble devotion to God, before saying to `Utbah: "You have heard what I have to say and you can make up your own mind."

`Utbah left quietly and went to his people, who realized as they saw him approaching that a change had come over him. They looked up at him curiously, listening to his words: "I have heard something the like of which I have never heard in my life. It is neither poetry nor sorcery. Take up the suggestion I am making to you, and lay the blame for the outcome at my door. Leave this man alone. What I have heard from him will certainly bring about great events. Should the rest of the Arabs kill him, you would have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish." [7]

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Baghawī reports a different ending for the above incident. He mentions that, "as the Prophet recited the opening passage of *Sūrah* 41, he read up to Verse 13, stating: *`Should they turn their backs on you, say to them, I am warning you against a calamity like those that befell the peoples of `Ād and Thamūd.'* At this point `Utbah placed his hand on the Prophet's mouth and appealed to him by his blood relationship with the Quraysh. He then went home and did not go out to see his people. When they spoke to him about this, he mentioned the warning he had heard from the Prophet and said: `I stopped him putting my hand on his mouth and appealed to him by our kinship. You know that Muĥammad does not lie. I feared that a calamity might befall you.'"[8]

Making False Accusations

Another incident reported by Ibn Isĥāq took place close to the pilgrimage season. A meeting attended by a large number of Makkans and chaired, as it were, by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, defined their strategy for a defamation campaign. In his opening address, al-Walīd said: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend [meaning the Prophet]. So you had better agree what to say when you are

[7] A. Salahi, op. cit., pp. 106-7.
[8] Al-Baghawī, *Ma`ālim al-Tanzīl,* Vol. 4, p. 110.
According to Ibn Kathīr, this version is somewhat less authentic as its chain of transmission includes Abdullāh al-Kindī who is classified as rather weak.

asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. What concerned al-Walīd most was that the opinion they would come out with should take account of the fact that Muĥammad was asking people to listen to the Qur'ān, God's message, expressed in the most beautiful language and employing the most powerful of styles. The description they would attach to Muĥammad should also account for his persuasive, eloquent argument.

Descriptions like 'fortune-teller', 'madman', 'poet' and `magician' were proposed. None was considered convincing by al-Walīd, who pointed out weaknesses in each, one after the other. He told his people that what Muĥammad said was nothing like what was said by such men. When nobody could suggest anything more plausible, they asked al-Walīd to come up with a better suggestion.

He said: "What Muĥammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan". They all approved of al-Walīd's suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign to make the pilgrims wary of Muĥammad and unwilling to meet him.[9]

Another report mentions that al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah met the Prophet once and the Prophet read him some passages of the Qur'ān. Al-Walīd seemed to have been favourably influenced by what he had heard. News of this was communicated to Abū Jahl who went straight to al-Walīd and said: "Uncle, your people are starting a collection of money for you!" Surprised, al-Walīd asked the reason for this. Abū Jahl said: "They want to give you that money because you went to Muĥammad trying to find what you may get out of him." (Abū Jahl was making this insinuation knowing that al-Walīd would be on the defensive because his pride would not allow him to appear in this light at all.) Al-Walīd answered: "All the Quraysh are aware that I am the richest among them." Abū Jahl then offered the following advice: "Then you should say something about him to reassure your people that you disagree with what he says and that you are fully against it."

Al-Walīd said: "What shall I say? None of you is a better judge of poetry than I. None of you can appreciate the finer points of poetry as I do. By God, what he says has no similarity with poetry. It is sweet, fine, overpowering and cannot be excelled." Abū Jahl said: "By God, your people will not be satisfied unless you denounce him." Al-Walīd asked for time to think the matter over. When he had done so, he came up

[9] A. Salahi, op. cit., pp. 111-12.

with the idea of describing the Qur'ān as sorcery handed down from olden times.[10] There is a reference to this in the Qur'ān: *"Leave Me alone [to deal] with the one whom I created alone, and to whom I have granted vast wealth and thriving children. I have made his progress smooth and easy; yet he greedily desires that I shall give him more. By no means! Because he has stubbornly denied Our revelations, I shall constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb. He reflects and meditates. Confound him how he meditates! Again, confound him how he meditates! He then looks around him, and then he frowns and glares; and in the end he turns his back in scornful pride and says: 'This is but sorcery handed down [from olden times]. This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I shall cast him in the Fire. Would that you knew what the Fire is like! It leaves nothing, it spares no one; it burns the skin of men. It is guarded by nineteen keepers."* (74: 11-30)

Another version of this story suggests that when al-Walīd showed signs of appreciating the Qur'ān some people in Makkah said: "If al-Walīd will desert his religion, all the Quraysh people will follow suit." Abū Jahl then said: "I will take care of him." He then went to him and said what we have learned of in the above reports. When al-Walīd came up with his ill-conceived suggestion, he justified it in the following words: "It is sorcery. We all see how it causes friction between a man and his family, children and members of his household." All these reports confirm that these unbelievers did not think that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was telling them something untrue when he conveyed God's message to them. They only persisted with their disbelief for the sort of reasons indicated in these reports and because they realized that the triumph of Muĥammad's message meant that they would have to give up their authority which rightly belonged to God, and which they had unfairly and unjustifiably usurped. They knew their language very well and they perfectly understood the meaning of the declaration that there is no deity other than God, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith. They simply did not want to put that declaration into practice, because it meant an all-out rebellion against any authority, other than that of God, which aimed to regulate human life. God certainly tells the truth when He says: *"We know too well that what they say grieves you. Yet it is not you that they charge with falsehood; but it is God's revelations that the wrongdoers deny."* The term `wrongdoers' refers to the unbelievers, and is frequently used in the Qur'ān in this context.

Who Gives a Favourable Response?

Having given the Prophet this consolation, the *sūrah* reminds him of what happened to past messengers, some of whose history is given in the Qur'ān. They endured abuse and hardship with patience and moved along the way God had

[10] Al-Ṭabarī, op. cit., Vol. 14, p. 156.

shown them until they were granted victory by God. This is, then, an assertion that meeting affliction was only natural for God's messengers. The outcome must never be precipitated even though the advocates of the divine message may be subjected to torture, abuse, denial and other hardships: "*Other messengers were charged with falsehood before your time, but they patiently endured all those charges and abuse, until Our help came to them. There is no power that can alter God's words. You have already received some of the history of those messengers.*" (Verse 34)

Advocates of God's message have continued along the same difficult way, overcoming numerous hurdles. They move along with steady steps, opposed by wrongdoers of all sorts, rejected by those who have chosen to go astray and their followers. Harm may be inflicted on some of those advocates, pressure, torture, and death. Yet the advocates of the truth will move on, maintaining their way, undeterred. The outcome remains the same, long as it may take. At the end of the road awaits victory, granted by God: "*Other messengers were charged with falsehood before your time, but they patiently endured all those charges and abuse, until Our help came to them. There is no power that can alter God's words. You have already received some of the history of those messengers.*" (Verse 34)

These are words said by God to His Messenger, Muĥammad, (peace be upon him) to remind and console him. However, these words show the advocates of Islam who will come after the Prophet the way they have to travel and the role they have to play. Indeed, the difficulties they are to expect are held up before their eyes. They are also told what to expect at the end of the road. These verses make clear that the same rules apply to all divine messages. In fact, these messages constitute a single and integral unity. The majority of people reject the message as false and inflict hardship on its advocates who, in turn, face all this with patience and perseverance. The ultimate outcome, however, is victory, which comes at the time determined by God. That outcome is not precipitated by the fact that honest and devoted advocates have to bear hardship and rejection, or that hardened criminals are able to inflict torment on innocent, defenceless people. Nor is it hastened by the fact that a totally dedicated advocate of faith is keen to see his people follow divine guidance, simply because he loves them and feels distressed when he sees them in their erroneous ways, knowing what punishment awaits them in the life to come. God does not hasten things because anyone of His creatures is over enthusiastic to see the end. There is simply no way that God's words can be altered, whether they relate to the ultimate victory or the appointed time. What we have here is a statement combining seriousness and decisiveness with consolation and reassurance.

Seriousness is further heightened in order to counter what might have been entertained by God's Messenger of a keen, kindly desire to make his people recognise guidance. It also deals with any hope he may have entertained that their

request for a sign, so that they may accept God's message, might be answered. The same desire was similarly entertained by other Muslims at the time, as later verses in this *sūrah* explain. This was a perfectly natural human desire. However, in order to make a final statement about the nature of this message, its method, the roles of earlier messengers and people in its promotion and progress, the Qur'ān makes this very clear delineation of the right attitude: *"If you find it so distressing that they turn their backs on you, seek, if you can, a chasm to go deep into the earth or a ladder to the sky by which you may bring them a sign. Had God so willed, He would have gathered them all to (His] guidance. Do not, therefore, allow yourself to be one of the ignorant. Only those that can hear will surely answer. As for the dead, God will bring them back to life, then to Him shall they return."* (Verses 35-6)

These are majestic words, portraying an awesome scene. We cannot appreciate fully the whole idea unless we recall vividly that these are words addressed by God, the Lord of all worlds, to his noble Prophet who has shown maximum perseverance and who is one of the small number of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. He patiently endured all that his people tried to inflict on him. He never uttered a prayer akin to that of the Prophet Noah, despite his long and arduous suffering. He is being told how God's law works. If he finds their rejection and aversion too much to cope with and wants to bring them a miraculous sign, then he is free to do so. He may, in the process, try to find a chasm to go deep into the earth or a ladder to ascend to heaven for the purpose.

That people should follow divine guidance does not depend on their having a miraculous sign or receiving any clear proof. This was not what they found lacking in Muĥammad's message. Had it been God's will, he would have united them all under His guidance, either by making their nature akin to that of angels, so that they could follow proper guidance, or by directing their hearts to enable them to receive such guidance and respond to it. Alternatively, He could, if He so wished, accomplish something of a miraculous nature in the face of which they would have to give up their stubborn rejection. There are other ways and means and all of them are within God's ability.

However, in His superior wisdom, God has created man for a particular purpose of His own, giving him certain abilities that are different from those of angels. This has meant that man should contain within himself a varying ability to receive guidance and pointers to faith and able to make different responses to them. He has a range of ability to determine his direction so that justice is maintained, as he receives reward for following guidance or punishment for his deliberate error. For this reason, God has not brought all mankind together to His guidance by a decree He promulgates. He has only commanded them to follow His guidance, and given them the ability to choose either to obey or disobey Him. At the end, everyone will have

his fair reward. The Prophet is told to keep this in mind and not to ignore it: "*Had God so willed, He would have gathered them all to [His] guidance. Do not, therefore, allow yourself to be one of the ignorant.*" (Verse 35) What a decisive word given by way of comment on a situation which requires such a decisive finality.

This is followed by an explanation of the nature God has given to mankind, and their different attitudes to His guidance which lacks no proof: "*Only those that can hear will surely answer. As for the dead, God will bring them back to life, then to Him shall they return.*" (Verse 36)

In their attitude to the truth sent down by God from on high and preached by His Messenger, people can be divided into two groups: one who are alive, opening up their receptive faculties and responding to divine guidance. They find such guidance to be strong, clear, consistent with human nature and easily heard. Hence, there is no problem with responding to it: "*Only those that can hear will surely answer.*" (Verse 36)

The other group are dead, their nature out of order and, as such, they cannot listen or respond. They do not lack any evidence of the truth, because the evidence is inherent in it. Once it touches human nature, response is certain. What this group actually lack is to have their nature awakened and their responses activated. The Prophet can do nothing to such people. Proofs have no use for them. Their case is left to God. He may raise them up if they show that they deserve to be brought to life. By the same token, however, He may not raise them up at all in this life. He may leave them dead despite their moving about in this world, until they return to Him in the hereafter: "*As for the dead, God will bring them back to life, then to Him they shall return.*" (Verse 36)

This is, then, the full explanation of responding to guidance or rejecting it. It sets out all the issues clearly, outlining the role of God's Messenger and leaving the ultimate decision to God who accomplishes what He wills.

Who Needs Miraculous Evidence?

The *sūrah* then refers to the unbelievers' request that a sign in the form of something supernatural be sent down to the Prophet. It points out that such a request betrays ignorance of God's law and the mercy He shows them by not responding to their request. Were they to continue with their rejection after a supernatural sign is given them, they would be destroyed.

What they requested was a physical miracle such as those given to earlier messengers. They were not satisfied with the permanent sign embodied in the Qur'ān, which heralds the ultimate stage of mankind's maturity. It makes a final address to man's mature mind. Moreover, its significance is not limited to the

generation that sees it, as is the case with material miracles; its miraculous message will continue to address the human intellect until the Day of Judgement.

As they made their requests for a miracle, they overlooked the divine law which brought immediate punishment to those who continued to deny divine messages after a miraculous sign had been given them. They simply did not appreciate God's kindness by not responding to their request, when He knew that they would continue to deny Him, as earlier people had done. That would have sealed their fate. God wanted to give them an extended chance to believe in Him. Those who continue to reject faith may have children who grow up as believers. Needless to say, they did not thank God for His grace in giving them such an extended chance.

The *sūrah* mentions their request and comments that most of them do not know what it entails or the reason for its rejection. It states that God is certainly able to give them the miraculous sign they want, but His wisdom and grace have stopped the woeful doom that is certain to follow: "*They say: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him from his Lord?' Say: God is well able to send down any sign, but most of them are devoid of knowledge."* (Verse 37)

The Qur'ān then begins another gentle approach to awaken their senses, inviting them to reflect on the numerous pointers to faith which they see all around them: "*There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own. No single thing have We left out of the book. Then to their Lord shall they all be gathered."* (Verse 38)

Human beings are not the only residents of this universe, so as to consider that they come into existence by sheer coincidence, or that human life is meaningless. There are numerous creatures in the world and they all have their lives regulated in a way that indicates careful planning and elaborate design. Moreover, they all confirm the oneness of the Creator and the consistency of His law of creation.

All animals that walk on earth, be they insects, reptiles, or vertebrates and all flying creatures, including every winged insect or bird, and indeed every living creature, belong to a community which shares certain characteristics and a particular way of life, just as human beings do. God has not left any type of His creation without providing it with an elaborate plan to organize its existence and without taking account of what it does with its life. At the end, all creatures are gathered to their Lord for judgement.

This short verse, which makes an all-important statement about life and the living, has a strong effect on our hearts as it describes God's complete supervision, elaborate planning, total knowledge and superior power. We cannot elaborate here on each of these aspects, because such elaboration is beyond the scope of this work. What we need to say is that directing our attentions to the system of creation, God's

management and knowledge of them and His ultimate gathering of them to Himself, is much greater than providing physically miraculous signs, seen only by one isolated generation.

This round concludes with a statement that God's will and law remain operative when people choose either to follow His guidance or to go astray: *"Those who deny Our revelations are deaf and dumb, groping along in darkness. Whomever God wills, He lets go astray; and whomever He wills, He guides along a straight path."* (Verse 39)

This is indeed a reiteration in a new form, using a different scene, of what has been stated earlier in this passage concerning the fact that only those who listen attentively will respond, while those who are dead can make no response. Those who deny God's signs which are present all over the universe, and who also deny God's revelations, do so because their receptive faculties have been knocked out of order. They are deaf, unable to hear; dumb, unable to speak; groping in total darkness, unable to see. This is not a description of their physical status, because they indeed have eyes, ears and mouths. It is rather that their faculty of comprehension is not working, which makes their senses of no value, as if they cannot receive or transmit any signal. This is an apt description because God's revelations have their own inherent effect, if they are only properly received. Only a person whose nature has been corrupted turns away from them because he is no longer able to benefit by guidance or rise to the higher level of life which divine revelations promote.

God's will is seen to work behind all this. It is God's will which has determined that this particular species of creation, known as man, has the dual ability to follow guidance or go astray, according to his own free choice, not as a result of any compulsion. This is how God lets whomever He wills go astray and how He helps whomever He wills follow the straight path. His will helps everyone who strives to implement divine guidance, while it abandons and lets go astray anyone who stubbornly rejects guidance. It does no injustice to anyone.

A human being may follow guidance or may allow himself to go astray: both possibilities are part of his nature. Both directions have been created by God's will. Similarly, the consequences that follow upon a person's choice to follow one way or the other are also determined by God's will which is active, absolute. Reckoning, judgement and reward are based on man's choice of the course he follows. That choice is of his own making, although the ability to choose either has been planted in him by God's will.

A System Bearing No Comparison

Having looked at this passage, we need to take a short pause to point out the extent of the directives it contains to all advocates of God's message throughout all

generations. These directives transcend the historical occasion which required them to be issued. They delineate a system of advocating God's faith that applies to all advocates, free of all constraints of time and place. We cannot, in this commentary, speak about this system in detail. We will only indicate its main features.

The road the advocates of Islam have to follow is tough and full of hardship. Although God will undoubtedly grant victory to the truth, this victory comes at the time God, in His wisdom, chooses. Moreover, God keeps the timing of this victory to Himself, giving no information of it to anyone, not even His Messenger. The hardship along this road has two basic sources. The first is the denial and rejection with which the message of Islam is confronted at the beginning, as well as the harm inflicted on its advocates. The second source is the natural human desire felt by every advocate to guide people to the truth he himself has experienced, his enthusiasm to support the truth and his desire to see it victorious. Contending with this desire is no less difficult than facing up to denial, rejection and the infliction of harm.

We see in this passage how the Qur'ān tackles both aspects. It states that those who reject this faith and try to suppress it know full well that they are only called upon to follow the truth. They realise that the Messenger who conveys it to mankind tells the truth. Nevertheless, they refuse to respond. Indeed they persist, for certain ulterior motives, in their stubborn rejection. They realize that this truth has an intrinsic evidence to support it: it addresses human nature which responds to it positively once it is alive and receptive: "*Only those that can hear will surely answer.*" (Verse 36) Those, on the other hand, who oppose the truth have dead hearts and they themselves are "*deaf and dumb, groping along in darkness*". (Verse 39) The Messenger cannot make those who are dead or deaf hear. An advocate of the truth is not required to bring the dead back to life. This is something only God can do. On the other hand, God is certain to grant victory to His message. But that victory comes at the right time, according to God's law and by His will. God's law cannot be precipitated or changed with regard either to the certainty of ultimate victory, or to its timing. God does not hasten things simply because the advocates of His message, or even His messengers are made to endure rejection, harm and suffering. Indeed, an advocate of God's cause is required to submit himself to God's will, without trying to precipitate it. He is also required to show patience in the face of adversity and to demonstrate his certainty of the ultimate victory.

The Qur'ān also defines the role of God's Messenger, as also successive generations of advocates of Islam. All that is required of them is to convey God's message and to follow the road God has chosen for them, despite the hardships they may have to face. People's responses to the same are beyond their terms of reference. People follow guidance or error in accordance with a divine law that will never change, even to accommodate God's Messenger's desire to get some of those whom

he loves to follow the guidance he brings them from God. Nor will this law change as a result of his distress at what is done by those whom he must confront. His own person is not considered here. He will not be accountable for the number of those who follow guidance as a result of his efforts. He is judged on the basis of his efforts and his obedience of his instructions. What happens to people afterwards is determined by their Lord: *"Whomever God wills, He lets go astray; and whomever He wills, He guides along a straight path."* (Verse 39) *"Had God so willed, He would have gathered them all to [His] guidance. Do not, therefore, allow yourself to be one of the ignorant."* (Verse 35)

As we have already explained, an advocate of God's message may not act on the suggestions of people whom he addresses nor can he force the divine method. He must not try to adapt Islam to his own liking. The unbelievers used to request miracles, as was expected at their time. Such requests are mentioned in several places in this *sūrah* and in other *sūrahs* as well: "*They say: 'Why has not an angel been sent down to him?'*" (Verse 8) "*They say: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him from his Lord?'*" (Verse 37) "*They swear by God most solemnly that if a miracle be shown to them they would believe in it."* (Verse 109)

In other *sūrahs* we have even more amazing suggestions: "*They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or [till] you have a garden of date trees and vines, and you cause running waters to flow through it, or till you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or till you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or till you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring a book for us to read.'''* (17: 90-3) "*Yet they say: 'What sort of messenger is this [man] who eats food and goes about in the market place? Why has not an angel been sent down to him, to act as a warner together with him? Or, [why has not] a treasure been granted to him? Or, he should at least have a garden, so that he could eat from its fruits.'''* (25: 7-8)

The Qur'ānic directive in this passage makes it clear to God's Messenger and the believers that they must not entertain any desire to have a miraculous sign given to them, regardless of its type. The Prophet is told in plain terms: *"If you find it so distressing that they turn their backs on you, seek, if you can, a chasm to go deep into the earth or a ladder to the sky by which you may bring them a sign. Had God so willed, He would have gathered them all to [His] guidance. Do not, therefore, allow yourself to be one of the ignorant. Only those that can hear will surely answer. As for the dead, God will bring them back to life, then to Him shall they return."* (Verses 35-6) Those believers who entertained the desire to have the unbelievers' request for a sign granted, when those unbelievers vowed that they would certainly believe once they saw such a sign, have been told: *"Miracles are in the power of God alone. How can you tell that even if one is shown to them, they may still not believe? We will turn their hearts and eyes away [from the*

truth] since they did not believe in it the first time. We shall leave them to blunder about in their overweening arrogance." (Verses 109-10) The believers should know that those who deny the truth do not lack a sign nor is it true that they cannot find evidence to support the truth. The believers also know that this religion follows a set pattern which does not change. It is far too sublime to modify its methods in accordance with the desires of those who make whatever suggestions come into their heads.

This leads us to the wider implication of this Qur'ānic directive which is not limited to any particular period of time, or concerned with a particular incident or suggestion. Times change, and so do people's desires and suggestions. The advocates of the divine faith must not allow themselves to be swayed by people's desires. Indeed, it is the tendency to respond to other people's suggestions that makes some of the advocates of Islam in our time try to shape the Islamic faith into a theory similar to man-made ones. These, as we know, are shown, with the passage of time, to be full of defects and contradictions. It is the same desire which makes some advocates of Islam try to fashion the Islamic system into a theoretical system or draft laws regulating certain situations of modern *jāhiliyyah* that have nothing to do with Islam. They do this in order to counter what people say about Islam to the effect that it is merely a faith that has nothing to do with the practical affairs of society. Some of the advocates of Islam try to provide people with such theoretical drafts while the people themselves continue to follow their own ways, unwilling to implement God's law or abide by it. All such attempts are contemptible and must not be entertained by any advocate of Islam.

Even more contemptible is the attempt of those who try to impart certain colours to Islam because they happen to be popular at a particular period of time, such as describing Islam as socialist or democratic, etc. They think that they are doing Islam a service by donning it with such colours. Socialism is a man-made economic and social doctrine. Like any other such system, whether it be democracy or whatever, it may be right or it may be wrong in its details. Islam is a way of life that includes an ideological concept and economic, social and executive systems. It is made by God and, as such, is free of all defects. How much of a true Muslim is the person who seeks to justify God's system by showing it as akin to human systems, or who seeks to make God acceptable to people by endorsing their statements?

The Islamic Doctrine's Starting Point

All that the Arab idolaters did in their ignorant days was that they took for their patrons certain creatures hoping that the latter could win them favour with God: *"And yet they who take for their protectors other beings beside Him, say: 'We worship them for no other reason than that they bring us nearer to God.'"* (39: 3) This manner of seeking

favour for oneself with God by being patronized by some of His servants is described in the Qur'ān as idolatrous. What description would then fit those who are guilty of a much more ghastly practice as they try to win favour for God, limitless is He in His glory, with His servants by associating His message with a man-made doctrine or code of practice?

Islam has its own distinctive characteristics while socialism and democracy are what they are. Islam is a code of living devised by God and it admits no title or description other than that given to it by God Himself. Socialism and democracy are man-made systems based on human experience. If people want to choose them, then they must be fully aware of the basis of their choice. A believer who advocates the implementation of the faith chosen by God must never allow himself to yield to the temptation of anything that happens to be temporarily fashionable, deluding himself that he is doing the divine faith a favour.

I would like to put a question to those whose faith has sunk so low in their valuation and who have no true understanding of the Divine Being. If you present Islam to people today associating it with socialism and democracy because these are fashionable trends in this present time, you should remember that capitalism was, for a period of time, people's favourite system when it replaced the feudal system. Similarly, there were periods of time when absolute power was a desirable pattern of government, particularly when the objective was the unification of small provinces into a national set-up as happened in the cases of Germany and Italy under Bismark and Mazzini. Only time will tell what sort of social system and method of government will be preferred in the future. So, what sort of colour will you be giving Islam tomorrow in order to present it to people in the guise they like most?

It is no coincidence that the Qur'ānic directives make it clear that the advocates of Islam must think highly of their faith and refuse to consider futile suggestions. They must not try to delude themselves and present this faith to people under any name or description which does not belong to it, or to give it any method other than its own. God has no need of anyone. Those who do not respond to Islam by way of submitting themselves to God alone are not needed by this faith, nor does God have any need of anyone, be he obedient or disobedient to Him.

Moreover, this religion has its own distinctive characteristics and constituent elements which God wants to prevail in human society. Similarly, it has its own distinctive method of operation and its particular style of addressing human nature. The One who bestowed this religion from on high and gave it its distinctive characteristics and constituent elements, as well as its method of operation, is the One who has created man and who knows what man's innermost soul whispers within him. All glory and praise be to Him.

In this passage, we have one of the various ways in which the Qur'ān addresses human nature. It establishes a link between human nature and the existence of the universe, leaving the latter to work its full inspiration on it. God knows that when such inspiration, profound and strong as it is, touches human nature it will certainly respond: "*Only those that can hear will surely answer.*" (Verse 36)

The pattern which we have in this passage begins in this way: "*They say: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him from his Lord?' Say: God is well able to send down any sign, but most of them are devoid of knowledge.*" (Verse 37) This verse reports what is said by those who denied God's revelations and demanded a miracle which would have had a temporary effect on their own generation. It then refers to the destruction which would have followed, had the suggestion been acted upon. God is certainly well able to accomplish any miracle, but it is the bestowing of His mercy that prevents it. It is His wisdom that precludes acting on their suggestion. Then, suddenly, their attention is made to turn from their little world to the wide expanse of the universe with all the great signs which they see in the universe around them and which are far greater than the one they demanded. The signs in the universe are permanent, available for all generations to behold: "There *is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own. No single thing have We left out of the book. Then to their Lord shall they all be gathered.*" (Verse 38)

This is a great fact which at that time, when humanity had not developed and regulated its branches of science, they could understand by mere observation alone. They could see animals, birds and insects grouping in communities, each of which has its own characteristics and rules. As human knowledge develops, this fact has greater application, but human knowledge cannot add to its basis. Relevant to it, however, is the fact that God's knowledge is absolute and total and it is He who manages everything in the universe. The facts that people can observe around them testify to the great truism of God's oneness and His Lordship over all the universe. Could the physical miracle they demanded provide more than that? They have the great miracle of creation in front of them. They see its manifestations and effects in every direction they turn.

In this particular example, the Qur'ānic method presents human nature neither with theoretical or dialectic argument, nor any material or logical theory. It only puts it face to face with practical existence, what is perceptible of it and what is imperceptible. It then invites human nature to react to it and respond to its inspiration within a well-defined and regulated system, so that it does not lose its way.

It then provides the following comment on the attitudes of those who deny such magnificent signs; "*Those who deny Our revelations are deaf and dumb, groping along in darkness. Whomever God wills, He lets go astray; and whomever He wills, He guides along a*

straight path." (Verse 39) What an apt description of the rejecters for they are indeed deaf and dumb, groping along in darkness. The Qur'ānic verse states God's law with regard to guidance and error, stating that God's will operates either way in accordance with the nature God has given to man.

We, thus, have a full concept of man's position. We have a clear idea of the appropriate method of presenting Islam to others. We also have a definitive statement of how an advocate of Islam should operate and make his address to human beings in all situations and at all times.

6
To Avert Sudden Punishment

قُلۡ أَرَءَيۡتَكُمۡ إِنۡ أَتَىٰكُمۡ عَذَابُ ٱللَّهِ أَوۡ أَتَتۡكُمُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ أَغَيۡرَ ٱللَّهِ تَدۡعُونَ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Say: If God's punishment befalls you or the Hour comes upon you, can you see yourselves calling upon anyone other than God? [Answer me] if you are truthful! (40)

بَلۡ إِيَّاهُ تَدۡعُونَ فَيَكۡشِفُ مَا تَدۡعُونَ إِلَيۡهِ إِن شَآءَ وَتَنسَوۡنَ مَا تُشۡرِكُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

No, on Him alone you will call, whereupon He will, if He so wills, remove the ill which caused you to call on Him; and you will have forgotten all those you associate as partners with Him. (41)

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أُمَمٖ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ فَأَخَذۡنَٰهُم بِٱلۡبَأۡسَآءِ وَٱلضَّرَّآءِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَضَرَّعُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Indeed We sent messengers before your time to other nations, and visited them with misfortune and hardship so that they might humble themselves. (42)

فَلَوۡلَآ إِذۡ جَآءَهُم بَأۡسُنَا تَضَرَّعُواْ وَلَٰكِن قَسَتۡ قُلُوبُهُمۡ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ مَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

If only, when the misfortune decreed by Us befell them, they humbled themselves! Rather, their hearts were hardened and Satan made their deeds seem goodly to them. (43)

فَلَمَّا نَسُواْ مَا ذُكِّرُواْ بِهِۦ فَتَحۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ أَبۡوَٰبَ كُلِّ شَيۡءٍ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فَرِحُواْ بِمَآ أُوتُوٓاْ أَخَذۡنَٰهُم بَغۡتَةٗ فَإِذَا هُم مُّبۡلِسُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Then, when they had clean forgotten what they had been reminded of, We threw open to them the gates of all good things, until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted, We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter

despair. (44)

فَقُطِعَ دَابِرُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ۚ وَٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Thus the last remnant of the wrongdoing people was wiped out. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (45)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَخَذَ ٱللَّهُ سَمْعَكُمْ وَأَبْصَٰرَكُمْ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِكُم مَّنْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِهِ ۗ ٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ نُصَرِّفُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ ثُمَّ هُمْ يَصْدِفُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Say: Do but consider, if God should take away your hearing and your sight and seal your hearts, what deity but God is there to restore them to you. See how varied and multifaceted We make Our signs, and yet they turn away! (46)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتَكُمْ إِنْ أَتَىٰكُمْ عَذَابُ ٱللَّهِ بَغْتَةً أَوْ جَهْرَةً هَلْ يُهْلَكُ إِلَّا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Say: Do but consider, if God's punishment befalls you suddenly or in a perceptible manner, would any but the wrongdoing folk be destroyed? (47)

وَمَا نُرْسِلُ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ ۖ فَمَنْ ءَامَنَ وَأَصْلَحَ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. Those who believe and act righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (48)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَمَسُّهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

But those that deny Our revelations shall be afflicted with suffering as a result of their sinful deeds. (49)

Overview

In this new wave, the *sūrah* puts the idolaters' nature face to face with God's might; indeed, it puts them face to face with their own nature when it confronts the prospect of being smitten by God's might. What happens to human nature when it is overwhelmed by the terrible prospects ahead? It is certain to shed all its burdens, whether of false concepts or false deities, and turn to its true Lord, whom it knows well. It appeals to Him alone for help to be saved from the impending doom.

The *sūrah* takes the idolaters by the hand to show them how earlier communities were destroyed. Along the way, it describes how God's law and His will operate. It makes clear how, after those earlier communities had rejected God's messengers and

denied their messages, they were set one test after another, sometimes with hardship and misfortune, and sometimes with comfort and affluence. They were given chance after chance to wake up from their deep slumber. When they had had all their chances, remained oblivious to trials and hardship, and were deluded by the comforts and pleasures they enjoyed, God's will came into operation. Punishment overtook them suddenly: "*Thus the last remnant of the wrongdoing people was wiped out. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 45)

Just as this scene that violently shakes people's hearts begins to disappear, a new scene shows them exposed to God's might. Their hearing and sight are taken away and their hearts are sealed off. They cannot find a deity other than God to replace their faculties of hearing, seeing and comprehension.

Against the background of these two awesome scenes, they are told about the role of the messengers who are sent to give good news and to warn. That is all they are required to do. They do not bring any miraculous events, or respond to suggestions and requests. They simply convey the messages entrusted to them. Some people believe and do well, and, as a result, they are safe, experiencing no fear or grief. Others deny the messengers and turn away, and, in consequence, they are exposed to punishment. The choice is open to all: either to believe or disbelieve. The end result is made clear.

The Only Hope

> *Say: If God's punishment befalls you or the Hour comes upon you, can you see yourselves calling upon anyone other than God? [Answer me] if you are truthful! No, on Him alone you will call, whereupon He will, if He so wills, remove the ill which caused you to call on Him; and you will have forgotten all those you associate as partners with Him.* (Verses 40-1)

Here we have one of the various methods the Qur'ān employs to address human nature in order to present to it the Islamic faith. We have already seen how the Qur'ān draws people's attentions to the elaborate system of life and the multitude of living creatures, and how God's knowledge is total, flawless, absolute. Here, the Qur'ānic address makes use of God's power and how human nature reacts when it reflects on any aspect of God's might, shaking off all traces of idolatry. Thus, human nature regains its freedom and tears off what used to prevent it from acquiring proper knowledge of its Lord and believing in His oneness: "*Say: If God's punishment befalls you or the Hour comes upon you, can you see yourselves calling upon anyone other than God? [Answer me] if you are truthful!*" (Verse 40)

Human nature is, thus, put face to face with the possibility of total destruction

which may come as punishment in this life, or with the totally unexpected arrival of the Last Hour. Once human nature is made to visualize this eventuality, it responds positively to the truth. God knows that such a positive response remains latent within it. Human nature is shaken as it must own up to the truth it knows. God puts the question to the unbelievers, demanding a verbal answer to express their true, natural feelings: "*can you see yourselves calling upon anyone other than God? [Answer me] if you are truthful!*" (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* then states the true answer which corresponds to their natural feelings, although they may not give it verbal expression: "*No, on Him alone you will call, whereupon He will, if He so wills, remove the ill which caused you to call on Him; and you will have forgotten all those you associate as partners with Him.*" (Verse 41)

Thus, all thoughts of idolatry are forgotten. The fearful prospect lays human nature bare, and thus it turns to God alone for security. Its knowledge of the true Lord is deeply rooted within it. Idolatrous beliefs are no more than a superficial, thin covering that beclouds human nature through external factors. When human nature is shaken by this fearful prospect, this covering falls off and the truth comes to the surface. Thus, man's natural reactions operate and he turns to His Lord, praying to be spared that fate to which it has no answer.

Within this description of the natural human reaction to the prospect of God's punishment, we are told of God's response. He may, if He so pleases, respond to their supplication and remove what they fear. His will is free, unrestrained. It is His choice whether to respond to them or not and whether to remove the ill they fear in full or in part. In this, the only operative factors are His knowledge, wisdom and will.

Having outlined the attitude of human nature towards idolatry, into which it sinks as a result of deviation from the right path, it is pertinent to ask about its attitude towards atheism and the denial of God's existence altogether. As I have said on several occasions, I have serious doubts that those who profess to be atheists, completely denying the existence of God, truly believe what they say. I doubt that anyone created by God can sink so deep into ignorance as to obliterate totally the distinctive mark of the hand that originated him, when he continues to have within him the same mark reflected in every one of his cells. Atheism is simply the result of long suffering at the hands of the Church, and the brutal struggle against it. The Church resorted to oppressive practices and denied natural human impulses at the same time as churchmen indulged in deviant pleasures.

That long history of suffering, endured for centuries by Europe, was responsible for pushing the Europeans into their professed atheism, simply to flee from their tormentors. Besides, Jewish forces have exploited this historical legacy to tempt the

Christians away from their faith so that they spread immorality and its attendant misery among them. This facilitates what the Zionist Jews see as the manipulation of the `asses', to use the expression as contained within the Talmud and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. It would have been impossible for those evil forces to achieve any of this, or to drive people to atheism, without the exploitation which occurred during that grim period of European history.

These tireless efforts have been given their most striking picture in the efforts of Communism, itself a Jewish invention. Despite all the work of the Soviet Communists, over more than half a century, using all the state suppressive agencies, to spread atheism, the Russian people themselves continue to indicate that deep at heart they yearn to have a faith based on belief in God. Stalin himself, described by his successor Khrushchev as exceedingly brutal, was forced into a period of truce in his fight against the Church. This was during the Second World War when Stalin was forced to release the Russian Archbishop. The war left him no option but to admit that faith in God was deeply entrenched in human nature. His own view and that of the few atheists wielding power with him was of little account.

The Jews have tried, with the help of the `asses' from among the Christians they used, to spread atheism among the nations which professed to follow the Islamic faith. Although Islam was considerably weakened among the people of the Muslim world, their attempt, pioneered by Kemal Ataturk, the hero of Turkey, could achieve very little despite all the praise and glory they heaped on it and its hero. Numerous books have been written in praise of this leading experience. More recently, they have tried to benefit from the lessons of the Ataturk experience. They no longer give any new experience an atheistic colour. Indeed, they give it an Islamic banner so that it does not represent a shock to human nature as was the case with Ataturk's experience. However, they put under that banner everything they want of immorality, promiscuity and all that filth, as well as all the machinery which works to destroy the proper human element in the Muslim world.

The fact remains that human nature recognises its Lord well and submits to Him declaring its belief in His oneness. Should it fall for a while under a covering that screens facts and prevents it from seeing them, all that covering will fall off once human nature is shaken by a calamity. It regains its vision and returns to its Lord, humble, submissive, believing. All the schemes of the enemies of faith require no more than a clear declaration of the truth, and they will soon collapse. Human nature thus returns to faith. Evil will not have total mastery while there remains on the face of this earth people who will make this declaration. By the grace of God, there will always remain people to make this declaration of the truth, no matter how the advocates of falsehood try to wipe them out.

Trials Serve as Reminders

> *Indeed We sent messengers before your time to other nations, and visited them with misfortune and hardship so that they might humble themselves. If only, when the misfortune decreed by Us befell them, they humbled themselves! Rather, their hearts were hardened and Satan made their deeds seem goodly to them. Then, when they had clean forgotten what they had been reminded of We threw open to them the gates of all good things, until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted, We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter despair. Thus the last remnant of the wrongdoing people was wiped out. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 42-5)

These verses place before our eyes an historical example of how people expose themselves to God's might and what happens to them in consequence. God gives them one chance after another and issues them with successive reminders, but they still forget. If the trials they encounter do not persuade them to turn to God and implore Him, and if His grace which they enjoy does not prompt them to be grateful and to guard against evil, then their nature has become irremediably corrupt and their lives are no longer worth extending. God's punishment befalls them and their world is destroyed: *"Indeed We sent messengers before your time to other nations, and visited them with misfortune and hardship so that they might humble themselves. If only, when the misfortune decreed by Us befell them, they humbled themselves! Rather, their hearts were hardened and Satan made their deeds seem goodly to them."* (Verses 42-3)

Human history has known many such nations and the Qur'ān gives us accounts of them which date back to periods long before recorded history. Such history is new and it contains only a small portion of human history on earth. Short as it is, this history recorded by human beings is full of misrepresentation and falsehood. It is also marked by its inability to take full account of all factors which influence the movement of human history. Some of these lie deep in the human soul, while others remain beyond the realm of what is perceptible by man. Only some of these factors are made visible, but these are nevertheless not identified or interpreted properly or correctly. Indeed, people cannot distinguish the false from the true in these factors. For any human being to claim that he has full knowledge of human history, can interpret it 'scientifically' and is able to predict its inevitable future events is to say the greatest lie a human being may utter. Nevertheless, some people do make such claims. What is even more amazing is that some people believe such claims. Had the claimant said that he is mainly relating what he 'expects' to happen, not what is 'inevitable', his claim may be reasonable. When a liar finds people gullible enough to believe him, he will certainly invent lies to tell them.

God certainly tells the truth. He also knows what happened and the reasons that

led to it. Out of His grace, He tells His servants some aspects of the working of His law and how His will operates, so that they may take heed. They are, thus, placed in a position of knowing the interaction of inner factors and manifest reasons that have led to the events of history. They can then have a realistic expectation of what will happen in accordance with God's law which God has revealed to them and which never changes.

In these verses we have a full outline of an example that has repeated itself several times: communities that have received God's messengers but rejected their messages. God then tested them with hardship and tribulation that involved their lives, properties and general situations. Such hardship and tribulation obviously fell short of the punishment of total destruction to which reference is made in the preceding verse.

The Qur'ān mentions a specific example of these communities and the tribulations visited upon them in the account it gives of Pharaoh and his people: *"Most certainly did We afflict Pharaoh's people with drought and poor harvests, so that they might take heed. But whenever something good came their way, they would say, `This is but our due'; and whenever affliction befell them, they would blame their evil fortune on Moses and those who followed him. Surely, their ill fortune had been decreed by God, though most of them did not know it. They said [to Moses]: 'Whatever sign you may produce before us in order to cast a spell on us, we will not believe in you.' So We plagued them with floods, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood: clear signs all; but they continued in their arrogance, for they were evil-doing folk."* (7: 130-3)

This is just one of numerous examples to which this Qur'ānic verse refers. God visited these people with hardship and tribulation so that they might awaken to the truth. He wanted them to examine their situation. The hardship might have prompted them to appeal to God in all humility, and might have helped them to get rid of their arrogance and to pray with open, sincere hearts. Had they done so, God would certainly have opened the gates of His mercy to them. But they did not turn back to God. The hardship did not soften their hearts, open their minds and help them rid themselves of their stubbornness. Satan continued to portray their erring ways to them as fair and appealing:

> *"Their hearts were hardened and Satan made their deeds seem goodly to them."* (Verse 43)

When hardship fails to make a human being turn to God for help, that person's heart is certainly hardened. Its natural receptive quality is no longer functioning. It does not feel the compunction which normally brings life back to hearts and makes them fully receptive. God puts His servants through a test of hardship. He who is

alive will be awakened by it and it is he who returns to his Lord. The hardship is, thus, an act of mercy which God has committed Himself to bestow on His servants. He who is dead will benefit nothing by it. Indeed, it leaves him without any excuse for his attitude. He is made more miserable by it since it serves as an introduction to God's punishment.

The communities whose history God relates to His Messenger and his followers have benefited nothing by the trials to which they were put. They made no appeal to God. They did not mend their erring ways but persisted with their rejection of the truth, which Satan portrayed to them as good and proper. God then allowed them a respite and gave them provisions in plenty: *"Then, when they had clean forgotten what they had been reminded of We threw open to them the gates of all good things, until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted, We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter despair."* (Verse 44)

People may be tested with a life of plenty just as they may be tested with hardship. Indeed, God may test both His obedient servants and those who are disobedient, either with abundance or with hardship. The test of abundance is even harder and more difficult to endure. A believer who is tested with hardship perseveres and shows his steadfastness, and when he is tested with abundance, he is grateful to his Lord. Thus, whatever happens to him, the result is certainly good. The Prophet says: "Wonderful is the lot of a believer. Whatever may happen brings him good. This applies to no one other than a believer, because when good fortune comes his way, he is grateful and that is good for him. When misfortune befalls him, he endures patiently and that is good for him." (Related by Muslim.)

Those communities who rejected God's messengers and whose histories are given in the Qur'ān were on a different course. They were reminded of the proper attitude but they ignored it. When their destruction was inevitable, God visited them with hardship and tribulation so that they would awaken and mend their ways, but they did not. He then put them to the test of abundance. The Qur'ān gives us a very vivid description of how they were put to that test: *"We threw open to them the gates of all good things."* (Verse 44) All provisions, luxuries and power are shown here flowing like unhindered floods. They come to them without any need for them to put in even the smallest of effort.

We have here a wonderful scene depicting a state full of life in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān. "*We threw open to them the gates of all good things, until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted."* (Verse 44) They enjoyed abundance of provisions and endless luxuries, but showed no gratitude to God for the grace He had bestowed on them. All they cared for was to indulge in the pleasures of this world, leaving no room in their lives for higher concerns. This corruption of their hearts and morals was followed by a corruption of their systems, and this naturally

led to corruption being the mark of their lives. That was enough to trigger God's law which never fails: *"We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter despair."* (Verse 44)

God's punishment befell them when they were fully drunk with the pleasures of this life. They were left confused, hopeless, unable to think where to turn. They were destroyed: *"Thus the last remnant of the wrongdoing people was wiped out."* (Verse 45) The Arabic text refers to the very last one of each of these communities. If this one was wiped out then everyone else faced the same destiny. The phrase, `the wrongdoing people', means here those who associated partners with God. This is a frequently used expression in the Qur'ān referring to idolatry as wrongdoing and idolaters as wrongdoers.

"All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 45) This comes by way of commenting on the destruction of the people who did wrong, or rather those who associated partners with God, after they were put to different tests. Can we think of any blessing greater than the eradication of the wrongdoers from the face of the earth or imagine an act of grace shown to God's servants better than such a purge? Praise, then, must be offered to God for this blessing.

God allowed this law to operate for the people of Noah, Hūd, Ṣālih, Lot, as well as the followers of Pharaoh, the Greeks, the Romans and many others. Beyond the rise of each of these civilizations and their decline and destruction lies this secret destiny and the operation of God's law. This is the proper and true interpretation of the events of history known to us.

These communities attained standards of civilization, power and affluence which were equal, if not in certain respects superior, to what is enjoyed today by the mighty communities of the world, intoxicated as they are with their power. Their might deceives those who do not know God's law that operates tests of hardship and abundance. These communities cannot even imagine that God is simply putting them to a test. As they look at them, other communities may be dazzled with the great power and affluence they enjoy. They think that God has given these communities everything when they refuse to worship Him, rebel against His authority, claim His attributes for themselves, spread corruption on earth and deal unjustly with people after they have usurped God's authority.

When I was in the United States,[11] I could see with my own eyes, the practical manifestation of this Qur'ānic statement: *"Then, when they had clean forgotten what they had been reminded of We threw open to them the gates of all good things."* (Verse 44) The

[11] The author was given an Egyptian government scholarship in the US to do a Masters Degree. He lived there for two years, from 1949-51, and wrote a book on his observations of American society, but it was never published in full. Extensive quotations from it are made in his other works. — Editor's note.

scene portrayed in this verse of provisions flowing unchecked cannot be seen anywhere on earth as clearly as it can be seen there. I also witnessed the arrogance of these people, imparted to them by their wealth. They behaved as if that abundance was always exclusive to the white man. I saw them treating coloured people, especially those who were Muslim, with hateful arrogance and much brutality. Their conceit surpassed by far that of the Nazis of whom the Jews have made a symbol of arrogance.

As I witnessed all this, I used to remember this Qur'ānic verse, expecting God's law to come into operation. Indeed, I could see it coming to catch people unaware: *"Until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted, We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter despair. Thus the last remnant of the wrongdoing people was wiped out. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all-worlds."* (Verses 44-5)

After the Prophet Muĥammad's mission, God suspended the punishment of total destruction. However, other types of punishment remain in force. Mankind today, particularly those nations enjoying abundance, experience different types of punishment, in spite of their affluence.

The psychological problems, spiritual vacuum, sexual perversion and immorality suffered by these communities today almost negate the effects of the great productivity and affluence they enjoy. They impart to the lives of these communities an air of worry, stress and total misery. In addition, we hear every now and then about political scandals when state secrets are sold in return for enjoying pleasures or indulging in perversion. These are simply the forerunners that herald unfailing punishment.

This is only the beginning. The Prophet certainly tells the truth as he says: "When you see that God has given a person plenty of what he likes in this world, despite his sinful practices, know that it is only a temptation and a test." He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse: *"Then, when they had clean forgotten what they had been reminded of We threw open to them the gates of all good things, until just when they were rejoicing in what they had been granted, We suddenly took them to task; and they were plunged into utter despair."* (Related by Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Ĥātim.)

It is necessary to point out that God's law of destroying falsehood and evil requires that the truth be established on earth in the shape of a community. When this happens, God causes the truth to overwhelm falsehood and it is, thus, totally destroyed. The advocates of the truth must never sit idle, waiting for God's law to operate, without putting in any effort. If they do this, then they disqualify themselves as advocates of the truth. The truth can only be represented by a community that exerts all its efforts to implement God's law and overpower those who claim for themselves God's attributes and authority. This is the most basic element of the truth. *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would*

have been utterly corrupted." (2: 251)

Important Points for Reflection

As the *sūrah* moves on, it puts those who associate partners with God face to face with His might and how it may strike them personally, taking away their hearing and eyesight and sealing their hearts. They are defenceless against it, and they can find no deity other than God to return what God may take away from them. The scene depicted here is very vivid, showing them their total powerlessness against God's might. It also paints for them the stark reality of those partners they associate with God when they have to face a truly grave situation. The scene shakes them violently. God, the Creator of human nature knows how far it is affected by this scene and the truth it describes. Human nature realizes that God is able to take away people's hearing and sight and seal their hearts. None of these organs can then function at all. Should He do this, there is no other deity to reverse what He has done.

As this scene sends a shiver into people's hearts, it shows how hollow and erroneous the concept of idolatry is. The *sūrah* wonders at those who are shown different, wide-ranging and multi-faceted signs, beckoning them to faith, and yet still they turn away. Here, their attitude is painted in the image of a camel which has a particular disease in its legs, causing it to limp outwardly as it walks. The scene was familiar to the Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. It fills us with a feeling of contempt for those who turn away: *"See how varied and multifaceted We make Our signs, and yet they turn away!"* (Verse 46)

They are hardly allowed to take their breath before they are put face to face with another possibility that may well not be far away from them. They are shown their own destruction as they are indeed the wrongdoers, a term which is often used interchangeably with those who associate partners with God. The scene here paints the destruction of the wrongdoers when they are taken unawares or when God's punishment is inflicted on them in open daylight: *"Say: Do but consider, if God's punishment befalls you suddenly or in a perceptible manner, would any but the wrongdoing folk be destroyed?"* (Verse 47)

Divine punishment may come in any form and in any situation. Whether it comes suddenly when least expected or it comes gradually, in broad daylight when they are fully prepared, total destruction would be the lot of the wrongdoing folk, a description often used in the Qur'ān to refer to the idolaters. This punishment will be visited on them alone. They cannot protect themselves against it whether it comes suddenly or openly, for they are too weak to repel it. Nor can any of the partners they associate with God spare them this punishment, because those partners are

among God's servants who are equally weak and powerless.

The *sūrah* raises this prospect before them, so that they may take the necessary steps to avoid it before it happens. Limitless is God in His glory: He knows that this prospect touches certain cords within human nature which know and truly fear what it entails.

When this passage of warning has reached its peak, having portrayed several scenes, making inspiring comments on each of them and giving serious warnings which have their effect on people's hearts, it is concluded with a statement outlining the task of God's messengers. Their communities demand supernatural miracles but their duty is merely to convey a message, bringing happy news and giving stern warnings. They have no say in people's fate, which is determined by the attitudes people choose to adopt for themselves: "*We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. Those who believe and act righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. But those that deny Our revelations shall be afflicted with suffering as a result of their sinful deeds.*" (Verses 48-9)

This faith of Islam began by preparing mankind for a stage of maturity which would enable it to use fully God's great gift. With such usage people recognise and understand the truth which the Qur'ān reveals and to which it directs human intellect. Numerous signs pointing to this truth are present everywhere in the universe, as well as in the different stages of life and in every aspect of creation.

To attain such maturity requires a complete departure from the stage of physical miracles which confront those who deny the truth with what forces them to submit. Instead, the human intellect is directed to observe the final touches of what God creates in the whole universe. These are indeed miraculous, but they are permanent miracles upon which the whole universe is founded. The human mind is addressed with a superb book revealed by God, which is absolutely miraculous in its style, method and the social set-up it aims to create. This set-up remains unique, with nothing similar having ever existed previously or since.

For the human intellect to be familiar with this new high level which the departure from physical miracles represents, man has undergone careful education and instruction. This was necessary for man to begin to read the open book of the universe with his mind, under divine guidance and according to Qur'ānic directives and the Prophet's teachings. Such reading should combine positive realism with the recognition of what lies beyond the realm of human perception. It should steer away from those abstract concepts that characterise a part of Greek and Christian philosophies, as well as the materialistic concepts which pervaded parts of Greek philosophy as well as Indian, Egyptian, Buddhist and Magian philosophies. Needless to say, it also required the discarding of naïve materialism characterized by some

ignorant Arabian beliefs.

Part of that education was represented by the definition of the task of God's Messenger and the nature of his role with regard to the divine message. The Messenger is a human being to whom God assigned the task of giving happy news as well as warnings. When he had completed that, his task was fulfilled and the response was left to human beings to determine. God's will operates through this response and the reward or punishment is determined on its basis. He who believes and does good works need not worry about what he may encounter, or grieve over what he might have done. If he has slipped, he will be forgiven. If he has done well, he will be rewarded for it. But those who deny the signs the Prophet has brought, and to which their attention has been drawn, will have to be punished for their disbelief, or for "their sinful deeds", to use the relevant reference in this passage. We should remember that the Qur'ān often uses the terms `wrongdoing' and `sinful deeds' to denote associating partners with God and total disbelief.

The result is a plain concept, which has no complication or ambiguity, and a clear outline of the Prophet's task and his terms of reference. According to this concept, all attributes of Godhead are given to God alone. Everything happens by God's will. But within that framework, man is given freedom of action and is required to account for what he chooses. The divergent destinies of God's obedient servants and those who disobey Him are described in perfect clarity. All legends and arbitrary concepts that have prevailed in *jāhiliyyah* societies about the role of the Messenger are shown to be false. All this helps elevate mankind to maturity without letting it drift into the maze of abstract philosophies and futile arguments which continue to waste the energy of the human mind for generation after generation.

7
Accountability and Grace

قُل لَّآ أَقُولُ لَكُمۡ عِندِي خَزَآئِنُ ٱللَّهِ وَلَآ أَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ وَلَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمۡ إِنِّي مَلَكٌۖ إِنۡ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّۚ قُلۡ هَلۡ يَسۡتَوِي ٱلۡأَعۡمَىٰ وَٱلۡبَصِيرُۚ أَفَلَا تَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٥٠

Say: I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me; nor do I know what is beyond the reach of human perception; nor do I say to you that I am an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me. Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Will you not reflect? (50)

وَأَنذِرۡ بِهِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ أَن يُحۡشَرُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ لَيۡسَ لَهُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ وَلِيٌّ وَلَا شَفِيعٞ لَّعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَّقُونَ ٥١

Warn with this [Qur'ān] those who fear that they will be gathered to their Lord, when they shall have none to protect them from Him or to intercede with Him, so that they may be God-fearing. (51)

وَلَا تَطۡرُدِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدۡعُونَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلۡغَدَوٰةِ وَٱلۡعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجۡهَهُۥۖ مَا عَلَيۡكَ مِنۡ حِسَابِهِم مِّن شَيۡءٖ وَمَا مِنۡ حِسَابِكَ عَلَيۡهِم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَتَطۡرُدَهُمۡ فَتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٥٢

Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure. You are in no way accountable for them, just as they are in no way accountable for you. Should you drive them away, you would be among the wrongdoers. (52)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ فَتَنَّا بَعۡضَهُم بِبَعۡضٖ لِّيَقُولُوٓاْ أَهَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِم مِّنۢ بَيۡنِنَآۗ أَلَيۡسَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَعۡلَمَ بِٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ٥٣

It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: "Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?" Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful? (53)

وَإِذَا جَآءَكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا فَقُلۡ سَلَـٰمٌ عَلَيۡكُمۡۖ كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمۡ عَلَىٰ نَفۡسِهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَةَۖ أَنَّهُۥ مَنۡ عَمِلَ مِنكُمۡ سُوٓءَۢا بِجَهَـٰلَةٍ ثُمَّ تَابَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ وَأَصۡلَحَ فَأَنَّهُۥ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿٥٤﴾

When those who believe in God's revelations come to you, say: Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy: if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and then repents and mends his ways, He will be much-forgiving, merciful. (54)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ ٱلۡأٓيَـٰتِ وَلِتَسۡتَبِينَ سَبِيلُ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

Thus do We make plain Our revelations; so that the path of the evildoers may be clearly distinct. (55)

Overview

Yet another round of confrontation with the idolaters concerning the truth of the divine message and the nature of the Messenger gets underway in this passage. It seeks to rectify preconceived ideas among mankind generally about God's messages and messengers. Such ideas had been further distorted during periods of ignorance among the Arabs and other communities, such that they had moved away from the truth of prophethood, revelation, and messengers. They had even added legends, superstitions, myths and the like to confuse the whole issue with sorcery, fortune-telling, the *jinn* and even with madness. Thus, a Prophet would be asked to predict the future, produce miracles and do what a medium or a sorcerer normally does.

The Islamic faith does away with all this nonsense, presenting its ideology in clear, simple and practical terms. It purges the concept of prophethood of all the myths and superstitions that had been attached to it in practically all *jāhiliyyah* communities, including those introduced by different Jewish and Christian sects. All these had badly distorted the image of prophets and prophethood.

The Qur'ān then presents the Islamic faith to people free of all temptations or adornments that are alien to it. The Messenger advocating it is an ordinary human being, who has no access to God's treasures, no knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception, and who makes no claim to be an angel. He receives his message only from his Lord, and follows nothing other than what is revealed to him. Those who accept his message are the most honourable in God's view. It is his duty to be with them, welcome them and convey to them the fact that God has committed Himself to bestow mercy and grace and to grant forgiveness. He must also warn those whose consciences are alert to the truth of the life to come, so that they may

work hard and become God-fearing. So, these two aspects represent his full role, in the same way as the facts of his humanity and of his being the recipient of revelations represent the nature of his status as a messenger of God. When we bear this in mind, we have the correct concept of both his nature and role. What is more, the path followed by the evil-doers becomes very distinct. Truth and falsehood go their separate ways, all confusion and ambiguity are clarified, and believers and unbelievers are aware of what separates them.

Intertwined with these facts, the *sūrah* outlines certain aspects of Godhead and how they relate to God's Messenger and to people generally. It adds certain points about following God's guidance, and going astray. To be aware of the truth of Godhead is to have good sight and to be unaware of what it is to be blind. Moreover, God has committed Himself to mercy, which means that He forgives those of His servants who ignorantly slip into error but then repent and mend their ways. He wants the way of the evil-doers to be clearly marked, so that those who believe or choose to turn their backs on faith may do so after having received clear evidence of the truth. Everyone takes his stance once all confusion has been removed.

A Call for Proper Reflection

> *Say: I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me; nor do I know what is beyond the reach of human perception; nor do I say to you that I am an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me. Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Will you not reflect?* (Verse 50)

Stubborn in their rejection of Islam, the people of the Quraysh demanded that the Prophet (peace be upon him) perform a miracle for them so as to win their acceptance. As we have already mentioned, they were certain that he was truthful. Indeed, they had no doubt about that. Nevertheless, they demanded, on occasion, that he transform the two hills of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah into gold! At times, they demanded that both hills be removed from Makkah altogether so as to have in their place a fertile area which could yield crops and fruits. At other times, they demanded that they be informed of what would happen in the future. Alternatively, they demanded that an angel be sent down to endorse the Prophet's message, or that a written statement be sent down to him from on high.

All these demands were simply a cover-up for their stubborn rejection. They were born out of the myths, superstitions and legends which were associated with the status and role of a prophet, as conceived by *jāhiliyyah* societies. The closest of these to them were the myths and legends held by the Jews and Christians after they had deviated from the truth preached to them by God's messengers.

A number of false prophecies were commonly held in *jāhiliyyah* societies, claimed by false prophets and believed by those deceived by them. These included prophecies with origins based in sorcery, fortune- telling, astrology and hallucination. Such false prophets claimed access to withheld information through contact with *the jinn* and other spirits. They further claimed an ability to influence natural phenomena through prayers, supplications, charms or other methods. Falsehood is a common feature of all these, although they may differ in type, form, rites and methods.

> Prophecies based on magic are largely concerned with the manipulation of evil spirits in order to gain knowledge of the world beyond or to manipulate events. On the other hand, prophecies by fortune-tellers are assumed to be the fruit of a relationship with the gods who do not obey the fortune-teller. They answer his prayers and supplication by granting access to the world of the unknown, when he is either asleep or awake, or by giving him some guidance through special features or dreams. Nevertheless, not all prayer and supplication are answered. Both types of prophecy remain different from that associated with being possessed. Sorcerers and fortune-tellers are fully aware of what they request and they try to achieve it through supplication and insistent prayer. A possessed person or a madman has no control of himself. He simply hallucinates and repeats what he does not mean or may not even understand. When this type of prophecy is common in a particular community, it is often the case that such a possessed person is accompanied by an interpreter who claims to know what he means and explain his symbols. In ancient Greece, they called such a possessed person *manti* and his companion who spoke for him 'prophet'. European languages have borrowed this term in all its connotations to refer to prophets and prophecies. Fortune-tellers and possessed people rarely agree, unless the fortune-teller is the one who interprets what the possessed person says and provides the key to his symbols. More often, however, they fall into dispute because they have two different social roles and widely different backgrounds. A possessed person is a rebel who does not conform to social values and traditions. A fortune-teller, on the other hand, is conservative by nature and often receives his knowledge from his parents and forefathers. Fortune- telling is normally seen in areas where there are temples and hermitages in nearby and remote areas. Possession is not limited to this area, because it may occur in the wilderness as well as in urban areas.[12]

[12] A.M. Al-`Aqqād, *Haqā'iq al-Islām wa Abātīl Khuşūmih,* [Arabic], Cairo, p. 60. We should mention here that we disagree with the author's line explaining the development of human concepts of Godhead and prophethood as reflected in different religions, including the divine ones, until it reaches its full

Prophets were numerous among the Israelite tribes. It is understood that in their successive generations, they were similar to the Sufi shaikhs of modern times. In certain cases, they were numbered in their hundreds. They used similar methods to those used nowadays by Sufis who aspire to being possessed, through physical mortification or through listening to music. In Samuel, Book I: 19 we read that, "Saul sent messengers to take David. When they saw the company of the prophets in a frenzy, with Samuel standing in charge of them, the spirit of God came upon the messengers, and they also fell into a prophetic frenzy. When Saul was told, he sent other messengers, and they also fell into a frenzy... He [i.e. Saul] too stripped off his clothes, and he too fell into a frenzy before Samuel. He lay naked all that day and all that night."

> Also in Samuel we read this promise: "You shall meet a group of prophets descending from the hill, with a tambourine, a flute and a lute in front of them. They will be in a prophetic frenzy and the spirit of God will come upon them. You will be in a prophetic frenzy with them and will become a different man."
>
> Prophecy was passed from father to son, as mentioned in the Second Book of Kings: "the prophet's children said: Eliasha, ahead of you is the place where we are staying. It has become too small for us. Let us go to Jordan."
>
> They also had a service attached to the army in certain places. It is mentioned in Chronicles I: "David and the army commanders assigned the tribe of Asaf for service together with other prophets and gave them lutes, rebabs and cymbals."[13]

Ignorant communities, including those that deviated from the proper concept elaborated by the divine messages, were rife with such false ideas about the nature of prophethood and prophet. People expected anyone who claimed to be a prophet to come up with such miracles. They required him at times to make prophecies and at other times to influence natural phenomena, either through fortune-telling or sorcery. Indeed, it was in this vein that the pagan Arabs in Makkah made their demands of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). To rectify such misconceptions, the Qur'ān makes repeated statements on the nature of the divine message and the Messenger conveying it. One of these statements is the one we are currently discussing: "*Say: 'I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me; nor do I*

---

maturity under Islam. The fact is that these concepts are the same in all true divine messages, regardless of the distortions that crept into them over time. The Qur'ān, a perfect record, establishes this very clearly. We uphold this and disregard what Western theologists may assume. — Author's note.

[13] Al- `Aqqād, ibid., p. 66.

know what is beyond the reach of human perception; nor do I say to you that I am an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me'. Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Will you not reflect?'" (Verse 50)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is commanded by his Lord to introduce himself as an ordinary human being who entertains nothing of the misconceptions that prevailed in *jāhiliyyah* communities about the nature of prophets and prophethood. He is further commanded to present his faith free of any temptation: no wealth is promised and no wild claims are made. It is simply a faith conveyed by a Messenger who is granted divine guidance. He follows nothing but divine revelations informing him of things that he has not known. He does not possess God's treasures in order to make rich gifts to those who follow him. Nor does he know what has been hidden in order to inform his followers of what may happen in the future. Nor is he an angel, nor can he meet their demands that God sends them an angel. He is simply a human Messenger preaching a faith that is clear, pure and simple.

This faith is the one to which human nature responds. It is the foundation of this life and the guide to happiness in the life to come and to earning God's pleasure. It requires neither decoration nor adornment. Whoever wants it for itself may have it, and it will be to him the most supreme of all values. On the other hand, a person who wants quick material gain out of it does not understand it or appreciate its value. Hence, it gives him nothing.

Which Path the Prophet Follows

The Prophet is, therefore, ordered to present it to people as it is, without adornment or temptation. It requires none of these. Those who adopt it should know that they are not going to gain any material wealth or position by it. They shall have no distinction over other people except through their good actions. They are only opting for divine guidance which is much more valuable than wealth, position or distinction. *"Say: 'I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me; nor do I know what is beyond the reach of human perception; nor do I say to you that I am an angel. I only follow what is revealed to me.'"* (Verse 50)

When they accept and adopt this, they should know that they bring themselves out of darkness and blindness into light and enlightenment: *"Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Will you not reflect?"* (Verse 50) Besides, following divine revelations is, in itself, following proper guidance. A person who is left without such guidance remains blind. This is stated plainly in this verse. What role, then, is left to the human mind?

From the Islamic point of view, the answer to this question is very simple. The mind with which God has endowed man is able to receive His revelation and

comprehend it. This is its role. Moreover, it is the opportunity available to man to follow God's guidance and to be equipped with the proper, infallible criterion.

When the human mind is left to its own devices, isolated from divine guidance, it is exposed to deviation, blurred vision, miscalculation and error. This is due to its very nature, which tends to look at the universe as small, separate parts, and not as a complete whole. It limits its outlook to individual events, experiences and situations. As such, it cannot acquire a comprehensive view of the universe from which to derive conclusions and establish a comprehensive and balanced system. Isolated from divine guidance, the human mind continues to experiment, change views and systems, vacillate between action and reaction, wavering between one extreme and another. In doing so it tramples over some honoured human beings and destroys noble human faculties. If it would only follow divine revelations, it would spare humanity all this evil. Experiments and changes would then be limited to things, materials, appliances and machines, which constitute the natural field where the human mind can have its full play. Any losses incurred in this field are material losses, not human beings.

There is another factor which exposes the human mind to all this. That is the desires and whims that have been made part of the human constitution. These require a discipline that guarantees that they play their part in the continuity and development of human life. They must not be allowed to go beyond that level, because they would then contribute to the erosion and destruction of human life. The discipline cannot come from our human mind alone, because it wavers under the pressures of desires and whims. A discipline to control the human mind and to protect it from error is needed. Only this can serve as a point of reference before any new experience for the purposes of evaluating such experience.

Some people claim that the human mind is essentially right, just like divine revelations. They maintain that since both the mind and revelation have been made by God, they must be in agreement. Such arguments are advanced by human philosophers, but they have no divine foundations.

Other people claim that the human mind can play the role of revelation. But even if they claim this for the most intelligent person to have ever walked the earth, they contradict what God has said. God has made His own revelation and His message the basis for accountability. He has not defined that basis as the human mind or as human nature, despite the fact that human nature tends to seek its Lord and believe in Him. God knows that when left to its devices, the human mind may err, and human nature may deviate. The only way to prevent such error and deviation is to follow the guidance provided by God's revelations, because with this guidance we have both light and enlightenment.

Likewise, some people claim that philosophy can put the human mind in a position where it has no need for religion, or that humanity will not need divine guidance if it opts for science, which is, after all, a product of the human mind. Such claims rely on no true evidence and no practical example in the real world. Practical life testifies to the fact that human systems, based either on philosophical doctrines or scientific progress, have led man to endure a most miserable life, even in the most affluent of societies where production and income are at their maximum and where the means of comfort are plentiful. The alternative to this is not a life based on ignorance and spontaneity. Anyone who claims this must have vested interests. Islam offers a way of life that provides the human mind with safeguards against its own defects and against the pressures of desires and whims. It also establishes for man foundations and rules to ensure a direct and honest approach to wider knowledge and progressive scientific achievements. It also ensures a straightforward and clean, practical life based on divine law. As such, man becomes free from any pressure that leads to the adoption of deviant concepts or methods.

Equipped with divine revelation and guidance, the human mind can see things clearly. Deprived of them, it is blind. We note that in the Qur'ānic verse, the statement that the Prophet follows only what is revealed to him from on high is immediately followed by a reference to blindness and clear sight. It concludes with an exhortation to think and reflect: *"I only follow what is revealed to me. Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Will you not reflect?"* (Verse 50) Such a sequence is particularly significant. Reflection is certainly needed, and the Qur'ān calls on people to reflect. However, reflection must be guided by divine revelation so that it remains enlightened. There is no virtue in reflection that is blind, groping in the dark, without guidance.

When the human mind uses its faculties within the framework provided by divine revelation, it has a very wide field in which to play its role. It has the whole universe to reflect upon, which includes both the realms of the perceptible and the imperceptible, as well as the whole human soul and all aspects of life. Divine revelation does not restrain the movement of the human mind except to prevent it from following a deviant method or from succumbing to evil desires. Indeed, divine revelation provides continuous motivations for the working of the human mind. When God has endowed man with his great gift, the mind, He has required him to use it actively and provided him with guidance so that he can steer himself away from deviation and error.

A Warning Loud and Clear

Warn with this [Qur'ān] those who fear that they will be gathered to their Lord, when

> *they shall have none to protect them from Him or to intercede with Him, so that they may be God-fearing. Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure. You are in no way accountable for them, just as they are in no way accountable for you. Should you drive them away, you would be among the wrongdoers. It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: 'Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?" Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful? When those who believe in God's revelations come to you, say: Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy: if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and then repents and mends his ways, He will be much forgiving, merciful.* (Verses 51-4)

It is a mark of the Islamic faith that it pays little regard to worldly values and petty human considerations. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) has been commanded to present it to human beings as it is, without decoration, adornment or tempting promises. He was also commanded to pay particular attention to those who are likely to respond positively to his call and to ally himself with those who receive it well, willing to make a sincere effort to win God's pleasure. He was not to attach any weight to the values of a *jāhiliyyah* society. His task was to warn those who fear what may happen to them when they are gathered to their Lord, on the Day of Resurrection, when they shall have none to support or intercede for them. The fact remains that no one can intercede with God unless he is given permission to do so. Even with this permission, he can only intercede on behalf of those for whose benefit God allows intercession. Those who genuinely fear what will happen on that day have a strong claim to know the warning with which God's Messenger has been sent. They are more likely to benefit by it and respond to it.

If the Prophet explains it to them, they may be able to avoid in this life what may expose them to God's punishment in the life to come. The warning with which the Prophet has been sent outlines to them what they must avoid and gives them the motivation to do so: *"Warn with this [Qur'ān] those who fear that they will be gathered to their Lord, when they shall have none to protect them from Him or to intercede with Him, so that they may be God-fearing."* (Verse 51)

"Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure." (Verse 52) The Prophet is also ordered not to drive away those who pray to God and who call on Him with sincerity, every morning and every evening, seeking only to please Him. This is an example of dedication, love and good manners. A person does not address his worship and supplication to God alone unless he is truly dedicated. He does not seek only God's pleasure unless he profoundly loves Him. When he combines the two qualities of worshipping God alone and seeking only His pleasure, he will have adopted the sort of manners

worthy of a true believer.

It is reported that some of the Arabian 'notables' felt it unbecoming of them to respond to the Islamic call because the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) kept his door open to poor and unsupported people such as Şuhayb, Bilāl, `Ammār, Khabbāb, Salmān, Ibn Mas`ūd and others. These were poor people who could not change their sweat-stained clothes when they visited him. Their social position did not qualify them to be in the same meeting place as the Quraysh chiefs. Therefore, the chiefs asked the Prophet to drive them away, but he refused. They suggested to him that he should meet the two groups separately in order to give the chiefs their privileges, just as they enjoyed them in pre-Islamic society. Keen as he was to persuade them to accept Islam, the Prophet considered the possibility of granting their request. His Lord made His command clear to him: *"Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure."* (Verse 52)

Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş, a prominent Companion of the Prophet, reports: "Six of us were with the Prophet (peace be upon him) when the unbelievers said to him: drive away these so that they are not encouraged to go above their standing with us. With me were `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a man from the Hudhayl, Bilāl and two others." The Prophet felt whatever God might have let him feel. He was deep in thought when God revealed to him the verse stating: *"Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure"*. [Related by Muslim.] Those Quraysh chiefs spoke ill of the poor whom the Prophet received well. They pointed to their poverty and weakness and claimed that their presence with God's Messenger was the reason behind the negative attitude adopted by the upper classes towards Islam. God gave his final ruling on this question, totally refuting their claims: *"You are in no way accountable for them, just as they are in no way accountable for you. Should you drive them away, you would be among the wrongdoers."* (Verse 52)

Each is accountable for himself. If those individuals were of straitened means, then that is what God gave them. You, Prophet, have nothing to do with it. Similarly, whether you are rich or poor is not of anyone else's concern. Wealth or poverty have nothing to do with faith and its criterion for determining people's positions. The Prophet is told that if such people were driven away from his company on account of their financial status, he would not be attaching to such considerations their value as determined by God's measure. Hence, he would be a wrongdoer. Far be it from the Prophet to be so.

The result of this was to let those who were rich in character, although financially poor, remain with the Prophet, occupying their rightful positions which they had earned by virtue of their faith and their pursuit of God's pleasure. They did so through calling on Him and by appealing to Him. Islamic values were thus given supremacy.

The arrogant Quraysh chiefs were not impressed. They wondered: how could God choose the poor and the weak to grant them guidance in preference to us? Had it been true that the message Muĥammad preached was a message of goodness, they would not have been ahead of us in embracing it. God would have certainly guided us to it before them. They wondered: is it possible that God would grant them His favours in preference to us, when we are the people exercising power and enjoying wealth and high position in this city. This was, indeed, a test God set for those proud people. They were hardened on account of their wealth and distinguished family backgrounds. Yet they fared very badly because they could not appreciate the true nature of this faith and the type of social order it wanted people to establish. Needless to say, the social order that Islam establishes takes humanity by the hand to elevate it to heights it cannot attain through any other means. When Islam was allowed to have its full play in the life of Arabia, the Arabs rose to heights they could not have imagined possible at the time. Indeed, even today, they cannot be imagined possible even by the most advanced of democratic systems.

The Most Deserving of God's Grace

"It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?'" (Verse 53) This is a rhetorical question asked by the arrogant Arab chiefs. The Qur'ān provides the perfect answer: *"Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful?"* (Verse 53) It is an answer loaded with pointed connotations. It clearly suggests that following right guidance is a reward given by God to those whom He knows to be truly grateful. In this way, they are favoured with this particular aspect of divine grace. No amount of gratitude is sufficient in return for this act of grace. God, however, accepts the best that His servants can do and rewards them for it. His reward is always exceedingly generous.

The answer also suggests that accepting faith is a blessing that has nothing to do with the values that may prevail in any society following man-made systems. God bestows it on those whom He knows to be grateful for it, even though they may be poor and have no influence. Human values have no weight on God's scales.

It is clear from God's answer to that arrogant question that it is those people's sheer ignorance that gives rise to their objection to the selection of people on whom God bestows His grace. Those who raise the question do not realise that God bestows this favour on the basis of His perfect knowledge. It is He who knows those who deserve such a favour from among His servants. Such ignorant objections also betray the objectors' bad manners.

God commands His Messenger to be the one who starts by greeting those on

whom God has bestowed the grace of being among the early Muslims; the very ones whom the Quraysh chiefs ridiculed. The Prophet is further commanded to give them the happy news that God has committed Himself to grant them His mercy, as He will forgive those among them who mend their ways after having committed any bad deed out of ignorance. *"When those who believe in God's revelations come to you, say: Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy: if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and then repents and mends his ways, He will be much forgiving, merciful."* (Verse 54)

Having given them the blessing of adopting the faith, and promised them easy reckoning on the Day of Judgement, God now honours them with His mercy. Indeed, He commits Himself to showing mercy to those who believe in Him. He also commands His Messenger (peace be upon him) to convey to them this commitment. God's grace is so plentiful that it ensures forgiveness of all bad deeds, once those who commit them repent and mend their ways. The qualification mentioned here, which describes a bad deed as being committed `out of ignorance', is interpreted by scholars as intrinsic to committing sins. All human sins are committed `out of ignorance'. According to this interpretation, this statement includes every bad deed: once the person who has done it repents and mends his ways, he will be forgiven. Other statements support this interpretation as they describe forgiveness as surely forthcoming upon repentance and doing well. This is the practical exercise of grace, which God has committed Himself to bestow.

It is useful to mention here some of the reports about the circumstances which led to the revelation of these verses. Together with the Qur'ānic statements, these reports indicate the great departure Islam brought about in human life. It enables human beings to attain a summit far higher than any they would otherwise be able to reach.

Al-Ṭabarī relates on the authority of Ibn Mas`ūd: "A group of Quraysh notables passed by the Prophet when he was with a group of Muslims who were of low status in Makkan society, including Ṣuhayb, `Ammār, Bilāl and Khabbāb. The notables said to the Prophet: `Muĥammad, are you happy to be with these from among your people? Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us? Are we to follow these? Drive them away, for if you do so, we may follow you'. God then revealed the Qur'ānic verses which states: *"Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure."* (Verse 52) *"It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?' Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful?""*[14] (Verse 53)

Al-Ṭabarī also attributes to Khabbāb, one of the Prophet's Companions, the

[14] Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` *al-Bayān, Dār* al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984., Vol. 7, p. 200.

following report of the incident which led to the revelation of Verse 52:

> Al-Aqra ibn Ĥābis of the tribe of Tamīm and `Uyaynah ibn Ĥişn of the Fazār once found the Prophet sitting with Bilāl, Şuhayb, `Ammār, Khabbāb and others who commanded no influence in Arabian society. They looked on them with contempt. They said to the Prophet: "We would like you to establish a special time for us so that the Arabs will recognize our high position. Delegations come to you from all parts of Arabia and we feel ashamed to be seen with such people. When we come to see you, tell them to leave. When we depart, you may sit with them if you wish." The Prophet agreed. They said: "Could you put this in writing for us." The Prophet asked for a sheet of writing material and called `Alī to write the same down. We were sitting a little further away. Then Gabriel, the angel, was sent down with these verses: "*Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure. You are in no way accountable for them, just as they are in no way accountable for you. Should you drive them away, you would be among the wrongdoers. It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?' Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful? When those who believe in God's revelations come to you, say: 'Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy.'*" (Verses 52-4) The Prophet dropped the sheet and called us. We went to him and he said: "*Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy*". Thereafter, we used to sit with him. When he wished to leave, he would stand up and go. But then God revealed to him the verse: "*Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world.*" (18: 28) After that God's Messenger would sit with us. When it was his usual time to leave, we would leave first so that he could leave, if he so wished.[15]

---

[15] Al-Ţabarī, ibid., Vol. 7, p. 201

In his famous commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr comments: "The authenticity of this *hadīth* is questionable, because this verse was revealed in the Makkan period, while al- Aqra` ibn Ĥābis and `Uyaynah embraced Islam long after the Prophet's migration to Madinah." I cannot agree with Ibn Kathīr's comments. There is no doubt that these two men said what they did before they embraced Islam. They could not after all have said such a thing after they had become Muslims. Hence, it might be that they did not accept Islam when their suggestion was refused, but then they embraced it much later. — Author's note.

I may add that Ibn Kathīr's objection is perhaps more valid, because when the Prophet was still in Makkah he went to meet pilgrims from other tribes. He did not receive Arab delegations referred to in this report until late in his Madinan period. — Editor's note.

Subsequent to the revelation of these verses, the Prophet would always be the first to greet them, every time he saw them. He would say: "Praise be to God who has made among my followers some people whom I am ordered to be the first to greet".

An authentic report related by Muslim mentions that Abū Sufyān passed by Salmān, Şuhayb, Bilāl and others. They said: "The swords of God's soldiers have not taken their dues from this enemy of God." Abū Bakr said: "Do you say this about the leader of the Quraysh?" He then mentioned this to the Prophet who said: "Abū Bakr, you may have offended them. If you have, then you have offended your Lord." Abū Bakr then went to them and said, "Brothers! Have I offended you?" They said, "No. May God forgive you, brother."

To Bridge a Wide Gulf

We need to cast another long look at this whole passage, as it is of exceeding importance to humanity as a whole. Its verses have a much greater significance than the listing of values and theoretical principles on human rights. They represent something great that has been achieved in human life when this faith took humanity by the hand to bridge a very wide gulf. In just one stage of history, humanity attained the brightest summit. Despite its long retreat from that summit, the greatness and reality of that achievement cannot be taken lightly. Since humanity has reached that summit once, it can certainly repeat its performance. The summit remains there. Human beings and the religion of Islam remain the same. What is needed is the determined resolution to try again and the confidence that the summit is once again attainable.

These verses draw for humanity the rising curve, marking each stage in order to show the low level of ignorance at which the Arabs were situated before Islam took them to the highest summit. When they attained it, they took the rest of mankind with them.

The depths in which the Arabs, and the whole of humanity, lived in their days of ignorance is brought before our eyes as the Quraysh chiefs say to the Prophet, with an overtone of reproach: "Muĥammad, are these the ones you have chosen for company from among your people? Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us? Are we to be the followers of these? Drive them away for, then, we may consider following you." We see it again in the way al-Aqra` and `Uyaynah looked contemptuously on the early Companions of the Prophet such as Bilāl, Şuhayb, `Ammār, Khabbāb and other seemingly unsuitable people. The two chiefs said to the Prophet: "We would like you to establish a special time for us so that the Arabs will recognize our high position. Delegations come to you from all parts of Arabia and we feel ashamed to be seen with such people. When

we come to see you, tell them to leave. When we depart, you may sit with them if you wish."

This is the uglier face of ignorance and its petty values, which attach importance to social standing and considerations of wealth and class. Those individuals despised by the Arabian chiefs were either non-Arabs, or they lacked wealth and social standing. The same values prevail in all *jāhiliyyah* societies, even modern ones.

Islam attaches no value whatsoever to all these considerations. For Islam has come from on high, and did not spring from the earth. Indeed, the earth represents that low level which could not have supported such a new and noble plant. Islam gives a specific order to the first person to carry out Islamic orders, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), the recipient of divine revelations who belonged to the leading family of the top clan, Hāshim, of the leading Arabian tribe, the Quraysh, and to Abū Bakr, the Prophet's Companion and successor, concerning those people of very low status. For these individuals abandoned allegiance to anyone and dedicated themselves to the service of God alone. That enabled them to attain all those spectacular achievements.

If the low depth of ignorance is represented by the suggestions of the Quraysh chiefs and the feelings of al-Aqra` and `Uyaynah, the great height of Islam is delineated by God's order to His Messenger (peace be upon him): "*Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure. You are in no way accountable for them, just as they are in no way accountable for you. Should you drive them away, you would be among the wrongdoers. It is in this way that We try some of them by means of others, so that they may say: Are these the ones upon whom God has bestowed His favour from among us?' Does not God know best as to who is truly grateful? When those who believe in God's revelations come to you, say: 'Peace be upon you. Your Lord has committed Himself to bestow grace and mercy: if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and then repents and mends his ways, He will be much forgiving, merciful.'*" (Verses 52-4) It is also highlighted by the Prophet's attitude towards those weaker individuals whom God has ordered him to be the first to greet and to stay with until they leave. This order is given to none other than Muĥammad ibn `Abdullāh, God's Messenger, the best and most noble creature that ever lived.

The height of Islam is also represented by the way those individuals looked at their position with God. They considered their swords as God's swords and they were not impressed by Abū Sufyān, the elder and chief of the Quraysh. His rank among Muslims was a low one, since he was among those pardoned by the Prophet as they accepted Islam when Makkah surrendered to him. Their high position was earned by their early acceptance of Islam, when that acceptance exposed them to a great deal of suffering. When Abū Bakr took issue with them concerning Abū Sufyān, the Prophet warned him that he might have angered them and by so doing he might have incurred God's displeasure. How splendid. No comment is adequate

here. We can only reflect on this totally new outlook on social status. Abū Bakr goes to those very individuals to make sure that he has not angered them. He says to them: "Brothers! Have I offended you?" They said, "No. May God forgive you, brother."

What a great achievement for humanity! What a great divide separates the new situation, with all its new values, concepts and feelings from what prevailed in the days of ignorance! The earth remained the same, with the same environment, the same people, and the same economy. The only difference is that something has been sent down from on high to human beings. The revelations combined power and authority. They addressed human nature in its purity. It signalled those lurking at the bottom to start their march up to the great heights, the scaling of which was made possible with Islam.

Yet humanity has now retreated from that summit and has tumbled back to its lower depths. We see in New York, Washington, Chicago, Johannesburg and other centres of `civilisation' a later-day prevalence of the same stinking bigotry based on ties of race, colour, nationhood and class.

At the same time, Islam remains at the summit telling mankind that, by God's grace, it can lift itself out of the mud and aspire to a bright, glorious future. To do this, it has to listen to the divine guidance and to implement the code embodied in this religion of Islam. For it is this that ensures for mankind a place up there at the summit.

Within the approach I have set myself in this work, I cannot elaborate much further. Nevertheless, I repeat my call on people to reflect in depth on these Qur'ānic statements in order to visualize the great expanse which opens up for human beings as they start to climb up from the depths of ignorance to the great heights, guided by Islam. They should then reflect on the great difference between that and how low they can sink when they respond to the beckoning of materialistic civilisation, which is totally devoid of faith and its spiritual dimensions. Such reflection should be enough to make people understand where the implementation of Islam will lead them today, after they have experienced the multiple failure of a great many doctrines, creeds, systems, concepts and situations. All these have been invented by men in isolation from divine guidance. Hence, they have failed to guide mankind again to the summit or to ensure a proper standard of human rights. In contrast, we see Islam giving people a sense of reassurance as it accomplishes that great departure without strife, persecution, conflict or extraordinary measures that deny people their basic rights. It employs no special measures of terror, torture, hunger, poverty or any element of suffering which people experience as they try to move from one man-made system to another. Nevertheless, under all these systems, people subjugate one another and endure much misery.

We have to satisfy ourselves with these comments and try to appreciate the powerful effect of the Qur'ānic statement and its strong implications.

Tearing Off the Masks of Evildoing

Now we come to the conclusion of this passage which has outlined very clearly the nature of the last message revealed by God and the task assigned to His last Messenger. It has further outlined the essentials of faith as they are, unadorned, giving us an insight into the values and principles Islam wants to establish in human life and those it wants to abolish. At the conclusion of this passage we are reminded that this detailed outline is given on purpose in order to lay down everything very clearly and to leave no room for confusion. Thus, the truth will be known to everyone, without any need for miraculous proofs. Such clarity is provided by the Qur'ānic approach, of which this passage is an example.

The final verse in this passage is expressed in two short clauses: the first refers to all signs of guidance, pointers to faith and statements of the truth that have been given so far in this *sūrah: "Thus do We make plain Our revelations"*. The second clause in this short verse fills us with wonder: *"So that the path of the evildoers may be clearly distinct."* (Verse 55)

This statement tells us that the Qur'ānic approach endeavours to clarify the truth and states it very plainly, but its purpose is not merely to make the path of the believers clearly distinct. It also endeavours to clearly and plainly portray falsehood so that the path of the evildoers is also clearly distinct. Clarity of the one necessitates clarity of the other.

This approach of the Qur'ān has been chosen by God as it is most effective with the human mind. God knows that believing in the truth requires knowledge of falsehood and adding total certainty to faith requires a clear-cut distinction between falsehood and evil on the one hand and truth and goodness on the other. The momentum a believer requires in his advocacy of the truth is not merely generated by his feeling that he follows the truth. The extra power is given by realizing that opposition to his efforts comes from falsehood, advocated by the evildoers, who have always been the ones to oppose prophets. As God states in another verse: *"Thus, against every prophet We have set up an enemy from among the evildoers."* (25: 31) Thus, the Prophet Muĥammad and the believers know for certain that those opposing them are none other than evildoers.

It is an important objective of the Qur'ānic approach that evil and falsehood be very clearly identified, so that the truth and goodness become clear and distinct. Confusion about the first may lead to confusion about the second because the two move along paths that cannot meet. Therefore, every Islamic movement should begin

with a clear identification of the methods and features of the believers, as well as those of the evildoers. This identification should be based on what we see in the real world, not confined to theories and an abstract world. The advocates of Islam should be able to know who are the believers in their community and who are the evildoers.

Such total clarity and complete distinction was witnessed when Islam confronted the unbelievers in Arabia. The path of Muslims was that marked out by God's Messenger and those supporting him. Those who did not join them followed the path of the unbelievers and evildoers. Even with this clear demarcation, the Qur'ān was being revealed, in absolute clarity, to make the path of the evildoers readily apparent and clearly distinct. Moreover, whenever Islam confronted polytheism, atheism or other creeds that have deviated from earlier religions distorted by human beings, each of the two paths was clearly marked out. No confusion was possible.

The greatest difficulty that confronts the Islamic movements of today is represented by what we see in the lands that used to belong to Islam, where the Islamic faith was supreme. We find all over this area people of Islamic descent, but both the land and its people have abandoned Islam in reality, although they continue to claim to be Muslims. They disown the basic Islamic principles in faith and practice, although they may think that they still believe in Islam as a faith. We know that Islam is essentially the belief outlined by the declaration that there is no deity other than God. This declaration entails an unshakeable belief that God alone is the Creator of the whole universe who manages all its affairs, and that to Him alone all acts of worship, and indeed all human activities, should be addressed. From Him alone should people receive their laws and according to His wishes they should conduct all their affairs. Anyone who does not declare his belief that there is no deity other than God, realizing the full significance of this declaration does not actually bear witness to this fact and has not yet become a Muslim, although he may have a Muslim name. Any land that does not implement the declaration that, "There is no deity other than God", in its full significance is not a land which submits to Islam.

The real difficulty encountered by the Islamic movements of today is represented by the ambiguity and lack of clarity associated nowadays with the concept of God's oneness as the basic principle of Islam. This has led to a corresponding ambiguity of what constitutes this belief. Thus, the path of the true believers is not as clearly distinct from the path of the evildoers as it should be. Titles and features have been muddled up. No clear demarcation of ways and methods is made.

The forces hostile to Islam are aware of this and they are busy adding to the confusion and deepening it. Thus, when Muslims nowadays raise their voices advocating clear distinction, a grave accusation is levelled at them, namely, that they consider fellow Muslims as unbelievers! They face severe punishments for their `crime', as social tradition is given the final say on who is a Muslim and who is not.

Needless to say, the ultimate arbiter in all this is God and His Messenger.

The greatest difficulty facing the advocates of Islam in every new generation is represented by this first stumbling block. Advocacy of a faith must begin by making the path of the believers clearly distinct from that of the evildoers. The advocates of Islam must raise their voices loud with the word of the truth. They must fear no blame or reproach. They must pay no attention to anyone who claims that they classify Muslims as unbelievers.

Islam is not as wet as some people think. It has its clearly distinctive features. It is represented by the declaration that there is no deity other than God, bearing fully the significance we have just outlined. Anyone who does not believe in it fully, and does not implement it in human life as it should be, runs the risk of being judged by God and His Messenger as unbeliever, evildoer and transgressor: "*Thus do We make plain Our revelations; so that the path of the evildoers may be clearly distinct.*" (Verse 55)

The advocates of Islam must pass this hurdle and must have a clear view of the basic issues. This enables them to pool all their efforts and use all their potential in the service of the call they advocate, unimpeded by any confusion or ambiguity. They cannot achieve this unless they believe with full certainty that they themselves are the Muslims and those who oppose them and turn people away from God's path are evildoers. The point is that they will not be able to endure the difficulties along their way unless they are clear in their minds that they are fighting the battle of faith against unfaith. They must realize to the full that they follow one religion while the rest of their people follow another: "*Thus do We make plain Our revelations; so that the path of the evildoers may be clearly distinct.*" (Verse 55) God always tells the truth.

8
The Extent of God's Knowledge

قُلْ إِنِّى نُهِيتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ ٱلَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ
مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُل لَّآ أَتَّبِعُ أَهْوَآءَكُمْ ۙ قَدْ
ضَلَلْتُ إِذًا وَمَآ أَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Say: I am forbidden to worship those beings whom you invoke instead of God. Say: I do not follow your whims, for then I would have gone astray, and would not be on the right path. (56)

قُلْ إِنِّى عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّى وَكَذَّبْتُم بِهِۦ ۚ
مَا عِندِى مَا تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ بِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنِ
ٱلْحُكْمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ ۖ يَقُصُّ ٱلْحَقَّ ۖ وَهُوَ خَيْرُ
ٱلْفَٰصِلِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Say: I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, yet you deny Him. It is not in my power to produce] that which you so hastily demand. Judgement rests with God alone. He declares the truth and He is the best of arbiters. 57)

قُل لَّوْ أَنَّ عِندِى مَا تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ بِهِۦ
لَقُضِىَ ٱلْأَمْرُ بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ
بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Say: If that which you so hastily demand were in my power, the case between me and you would have been decided. But God knows best as to who are the wrongdoers. (58)

۞ وَعِندَهُۥ مَفَاتِحُ ٱلْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَآ إِلَّا
هُوَ ۚ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ ۚ وَمَا
تَسْقُطُ مِن وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٍ فِى
ظُلُمَٰتِ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٍ وَلَا يَابِسٍ إِلَّا
فِى كِتَٰبٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٥٩﴾

With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He. He knows all that the land and sea contain; not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness, nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book. (59)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَتَوَفَّىٰكُم بِٱلَّيۡلِ وَيَعۡلَمُ مَا جَرَحۡتُم بِٱلنَّهَارِ ثُمَّ يَبۡعَثُكُمۡ فِيهِ لِيُقۡضَىٰٓ أَجَلٞ مُّسَمًّىۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيۡهِ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٦٠

It is He who causes you to be like the dead at night, and knows what you do in the daytime. He raises you again to life each day in order that a term set by Him be fulfilled. In the end, to Him you must return; and then He will tell you all that you have done. (60)

وَهُوَ ٱلۡقَاهِرُ فَوۡقَ عِبَادِهِۦۖ وَيُرۡسِلُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ حَفَظَةً حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَ أَحَدَكُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ تَوَفَّتۡهُ رُسُلُنَا وَهُمۡ لَا يُفَرِّطُونَ ٦١

He alone holds sway over His servants. He sends forth guardians to watch over you until, when death approaches any one of you, Our messengers cause him to die. They leave no part of their duty unfulfilled. (61)

ثُمَّ رُدُّوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَوۡلَىٰهُمُ ٱلۡحَقِّۚ أَلَا لَهُ ٱلۡحُكۡمُ وَهُوَ أَسۡرَعُ ٱلۡحَٰسِبِينَ ٦٢

They are then brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. Indeed, His alone is all judgement; and He is most swift in reckoning. (62)

قُلۡ مَن يُنَجِّيكُم مِّن ظُلُمَٰتِ ٱلۡبَرِّ وَٱلۡبَحۡرِ تَدۡعُونَهُۥ تَضَرُّعًا وَخُفۡيَةً لَّئِنۡ أَنجَىٰنَا مِنۡ هَٰذِهِۦ لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ٦٣

Say: Who is it that saves you from the dark dangers of land and sea, when you call out to Him humbly and in secret: "If He will but save us from this peril, we will most certainly be grateful"? (63)

قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يُنَجِّيكُم مِّنۡهَا وَمِن كُلِّ كَرۡبٖ ثُمَّ أَنتُمۡ تُشۡرِكُونَ ٦٤

Say: God alone saves you from these and from every distress; and still you associate partners with Him. (64)

قُلۡ هُوَ ٱلۡقَادِرُ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يَبۡعَثَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابٗا مِّن فَوۡقِكُمۡ أَوۡ مِن تَحۡتِ أَرۡجُلِكُمۡ أَوۡ يَلۡبِسَكُمۡ شِيَعٗا وَيُذِيقَ بَعۡضَكُم بَأۡسَ بَعۡضٍۗ ٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ نُصَرِّفُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَفۡقَهُونَ ٦٥

Say: It is He alone who has the power to let loose upon you suffering from above you and from beneath your feet, or to divide you into disputing groups, causing the one to suffer at the hands of the other. See how We make plain Our revelations so that they may understand. (65)

Overview

In this new round the *sūrah* again picks up the theme of the true nature of Godhead, after having discussed in the previous passage the nature of God's message and the Messenger to whom it is entrusted. The discussion in Chapter *7* ended with a clear demarcation of the separate paths followed by the believers and the evildoers.

In this passage the nature of Godhead is brought out clearly in a number of areas which we will first outline very briefly. It is first of all clear in the Prophet's heart as he knows that he has clear evidence given him by God. He is absolutely certain of this evidence, and his firm belief will not admit any doubts as a result of the attitude of unbelievers who deny his message. Hence, he devotes himself to his faith, and takes his stand away from his people. His certainty that they are in deep error is as strong as his certainty of the truth that he is rightly guided. (Verses 56-7)

The nature of Godhead manifests itself in God's forbearance when He does not act on the unbelievers' requests for a physical miracle. Should He give them such a miracle and should they continue to disbelieve, their continued rejection of the truth would ensure their total destruction. Had the Prophet been able to grant them what they hastily demanded, he would have done so. As a human being, he would have been fed up with their stubborn rejection. To allow them an indefinite chance is an aspect of God's grace, one which reflects His Godhead. (Verse 58)

Again, the nature of Godhead is clearly reflected in God's knowledge that encompasses everything that takes place throughout the universe. This is described in a way that cannot apply to anyone other than God, and cannot be painted by anyone but Him. (Verse 59)

Moreover, the truth of Godhead is seen in the fact that God holds sway over all His creatures in all situations, whether asleep or awake, in life and after death, in this present world and in the next one. (Verses 60-2)

Finally, it is manifested in the nature of the unbelievers themselves. When they are overwhelmed by serious danger, they call for help on none other than God. Yet, they associate partners with Him, forgetting that the one to whom they appeal for delivery from danger is able to inflict punishment on them that none can remove. (Verses 63-5)

A Law Not to Be Violated

Say: I am forbidden to worship those beings whom you invoke instead of God. Say: I

> *do not follow your whims, for then I would have gone astray, and would not be on the right path. Say: I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, yet you deny Him. It is not in my power [to produce] that which you so hastily demand. Judgement rests with God alone. He declares the truth and He is the best of arbiters. Say: If that which you so hastily demand were in my power, the case between me and you would have been decided. But God knows best as to who are the wrongdoers.* (Verses 56-8)

This passage is particularly inspiring. It seeks to influence the addressees by stating the true nature of Godhead, explaining its different aspects, using varying cadences and a most effective style. One particularly inspiring feature is the use of the address form, "Say... Say... Say..." making it profoundly clear that this is an address to God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He is required to deliver his Lord's message as it is revealed to him. We are told with absolute clarity that the Messenger does not have or follow anything other than this message and seeks none other than its guidance: *"Say: 'I am forbidden to worship those beings whom you invoke instead of God'. Say: 'I do not follow your whims, for then I would have gone astray, and would not be on the right path.'"* (Verse 56)

God commands His Messenger to declare to the unbelievers that his Lord forbids him to worship those beings on whom they call instead of God and whom they make partners with God. He is forbidden to follow their whims. The fact is that they invoke those beings, giving them a divine status, as a result of their whims and caprice. This cannot be the outcome of any certain knowledge or any truth. If he responded to their whims, he too would then go astray and find no guidance whatsoever. Their whims can only cause him and them to deviate from the path of the truth and to lose their way altogether.

God instructs his Messenger to put the issues so clearly to the unbelievers and to explain to them how his way and their way cannot meet. Indeed, this is not the first time God issues such an order to His Messenger in this *sūrah.* Earlier, He ordered him to say: *"Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God? Say: 'I bear no such witness'. Say:' He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him.'"* (Verse 19)

The unbelievers used to try to tempt God's Messenger (peace be upon him) to endorse their beliefs in return for their endorsement of his faith. They suggested to him that he should bow to their deities and, likewise, they would prostrate themselves before his, as if this could ever happen, and as if idolatry and Islam, with its emphasis on submission to God alone, could exist side by side in the heart of any one person, or worship of God alone could join hands with the worship of other beings. Nothing of this could ever be imagined. God is the One who is least in need of any partners. He requires His servants to submit to Him alone. He makes it clear

to them that He will never accept their submission if they allow any traces of polytheism to creep into it.

Let us now consider an important linguistic usage in this verse: *"Say: 'I am forbidden to worship those beings whom you invoke instead of God.'"* (Verse 56) This statement makes it clear that the Prophet must tell the unbelievers that he is forbidden to worship any of their idols or any other beings they worship. This applies to whatever being is invoked besides God. However, the rules of Arabic grammar indicate that use of the relative pronoun 'whom' in this statement is significant. Normally, its usage is limited to beings with minds of their own. Had the prohibition only meant idols and similar inanimate objects, the relative pronoun `what' would have been used instead. The reference here must, then, include some intelligent beings to justify the use of the relative pronoun 'whom'. This interpretation is consistent with the practical facts and with general Islamic terminology in this respect.

In practice, the Arab idolaters did not only worship idols. They also associated *jinn,* angels and human beings as partners with God. The partnership they ascribed to human beings manifested itself only in giving those human beings the authority to legislate. They set for them their norms and traditions and arbitrated in their disputes, in accordance with the prevailing customs and what they thought fit. We need, then, to look at how this is described in Islamic terminology. Islam considers all this as a form of idolatry. When human beings are given the authority to regulate people's affairs in accordance with their own legislation, they are actually considered equal to God. This is as strongly forbidden in Islam as any actual prostration before idols. Both actions are manifestations of polytheistic beliefs. Both ascribe divinity to beings other than God.

The Prophet is then ordered by God to declare to those idolaters who deny the absolute oneness of their Lord his own firm belief and unshakable conviction that God is the only Lord in the universe and that He sends down revelations to him: *"Say: 'I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, yet you deny Him. It is not in my power [to produce] that which you so hastily demand. Judgement rests with God alone. He declares the truth and He is the best of arbiters.'"* (Verse 57)

This is, indeed, what earlier prophets and messengers felt. They expressed it in similar terms. The Prophet Noah used practically the same wording: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has favoured me with grace from Himself, to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it?"* (11: 28) Similarly did the Prophet Ṣāliĥ speak to his people, the Thamūd: *"Think, my people! If take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God, should I disobey Him? You are, in such case, only augmenting my ruin."* (11: 63) Abraham said it somewhat differently: *"His people*

argued with him. He said: 'Do you argue with me about God, when it is He Who has given me guidance?" (Verse 80) The Prophet Jacob stated the same idea to his children: *"When the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he recovered his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?"* (12: 96)

This is, then, the nature of Godhead as it is fully understood by God's most obedient servants. They feel its truth bringing them total reassurance and unshakeable faith. When the unbelievers in Arabia demanded miracles from the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), God commanded him to declare this truth as he felt it, putting it clearly in front of those unbelievers: *"Say: 'I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, yet you deny Him.'"* (Verse 57)

They also demanded that the Prophet accomplish for them some miracle or let God's scourge loose on them so that they could believe that what he preached was revealed by God. He was ordered, in response, to declare to them the true nature of his message and what it meant to be God's Messenger. He was commanded to make an absolutely clear distinction between this and the nature of Godhead. He had to declare that he had no control whatsoever over what they tried to hurry. It is controlled only by God. He himself was only a messenger, not a deity: *"It is not in my power [to produce] that which you so hastily demand. Judgement rests with God alone. He declares the truth and He is the best of arbiters."* (Verse 57)

Hastening the punishment of the unbelievers when they continued to deny God even after miraculous proof had been given them is in effect a judgement put into effect. Hence, it belongs to God who tells the truth and who arbitrates between the one who advocates the truth and those who deny His message. No creature has been given any such authority to judge others.

The Prophet thus denies that he himself has any power or any say in what judgement God passes against His servants. The Prophet is no more than a human being who receives revelations which he conveys, discharging his duty as a warner. God alone passes judgement. That is the perfect distinction between the nature of God and His attributes on the one hand and the nature of His servants on the other.

The Prophet is then ordered to explain to them a particularly effective argument about how the whole affair rests with God and operates according to His will. Had the accomplishment of miracles, including the subsequent administration of punishment been within his power, then, as a human being, he could not have refused it as they were insisting so strongly on a miracle. Since such a decision belongs to God alone, He treats them with forbearance and withholds miracles so that they do not put themselves in a position whereby their own destruction becomes inevitable, as happened to earlier communities: *"Say: 'If that which you so hastily demand were in my power, the case between me and you would have been decided. But God*

knows best as to who are the wrongdoers." (Verse 58) Human beings have a limited capacity for forbearance. It is only God, the Supreme, the Almighty who can show such forbearance to human beings when they persist with their disobedience and boastful rejections.

God certainly tells the truth. We see some people behaving in a way which totally exhausts our patience and makes us absolutely angry. Nevertheless, God forbears with them, lets them enjoy His provisions, feeds them and gives them abundance. In such a situation, one can only say: "My Lord, how forbearing You are!" This is, indeed, what Abū Bakr said when the unbelievers in Arabia beat him so badly that his nose could not be distinguished from his eye. God forbears with them when He knows them full well: "*God knows best as to who are the wrongdoers*". When He gives them a respite, He certainly has a purpose behind His decision. He forbears with them when He is certainly able to respond to their suggestions and to let loose His scourge to destroy them.

Knowledge Unlimited

Developing the point of God's knowledge of who are the wrongdoers, and continuing with the explanation of the nature of Godhead, the *sūrah* gives us an image of this knowledge as it pertains to one of its unique areas, namely, that of *ghayb.* This term will be explained presently.

> *"With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He. He knows all that the land and sea contain; not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness, nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verse 59)

This is an image of God's complete knowledge that leaves out nothing in terms of time or place, land, sea or sky, in the depths of the world or in the wild expanse of space, including what is dead or alive, dry or fresh, green or withering away. But how prosaic is our own description as compared to the fine Qur'ānic portrayal? Wholly inadequate when the latter combines within itself a purely arithmetic statement with a profoundly inspiring image!

This short verse causes our human imagination to come to life trying to explore the horizons of what we know and what lies beyond our knowledge. We try to imagine the limitless nature of God's knowledge as it encompasses the whole universe and goes far beyond what we know of that universe. We are in awe as we receive one image after another from all directions and as we try to lift the curtains drawn over what is kept hidden, whether it relates to the past, the present or the

future. This is a complete world extending beyond our imagination. But the keys to all of it are with God, and He alone knows them. Our minds may try to discover what has so far been unknown to us in the land or at sea, realizing that everything in them is perfectly known to God. We visualize the leaves that drop from the trees: innumerable as they are, yet every single one of them, wherever it falls, is seen by God. Every single grain, buried in the darkest depths of the earth, is beheld by God who sees everything, whether fresh or dry, dead or alive, anywhere in the universe. Nothing escapes God's knowledge.

Minds are left dizzy as they contemplate the picture this verse draws of God's knowledge. Its lines are infinite, stretching endlessly in time and place, across the visible and the unseen. This endless expanse, which exhausts our minds to just imagine, is painted with absolute precision in only a few words.

Every time we look at this short verse, we cannot fail to recognize its miraculous style which tells of the author of the Qur'ān. One look at its subject matter is sufficient to make us absolutely certain that this is something no human being would say. Human intelligence does not stretch to limitless horizons when it describes perfect, unfailing knowledge. Instead, the human intellect has different characteristics and set limits, because its images reflect its own concerns. Why should human beings care about the number of leaves falling from the trees all over the globe? Why should they bother about grains buried in the deep dark recesses of the earth? What concern is it to them to know everything that is fresh or dry? People simply do not care about falling leaves, let alone about counting them. They care about the seeds they plant, hoping to have a good harvest. Otherwise, they would not care about the grains buried in the earth. They certainly like to use what they have of fresh and dry things, but none of these matters is thought of as evidence of perfect knowledge. It is only the Creator who knows and cares about every falling leaf, buried grain and the like, as He does about other things, fresh or dry.

No human being could ever contemplate that each falling leaf, each buried grain, every fresh object and also every dry one should be recorded in a clear book. They cannot see any benefit to them from keeping such a record. But the Sovereign of the whole universe is the One who has all that recorded because everything in the whole universe, large or small, visible or hidden, distant or close, apparent or unknown, is part of His dominion and, as such, is accounted for.

This is an expansive scene, one which leaves a profound effect on the human mind. The human intellect does not even try to paint such a scene comprising the leaves falling from every tree throughout the world and every grain hidden in the soil and every fresh and dry thing on earth. Indeed, neither our eyes nor our imagination care to visualize it in the first place. Nevertheless, it is a powerful scene that tells us much about God's knowledge, reminding us that God oversees and

records everything. His will takes care of what is large or small, highly important or infinitely insignificant, visible or hidden, distant or close, apparent or unknown.

Those of us who react to what we experience and have the talent of expression are keenly aware of our human limitations to visualize and express things. We know from personal experience that it does not occur to any human mind to paint such a scene and that no human being can use such a mode of expression. I invite anyone who disputes this to look into everything that human beings have ever written in an attempt to see if human literary talent has ever ventured in this direction. Indeed, this verse and similar ones in the Qur'ān are sufficient for us to know the Author of this glorious book.

If we look at the artistic excellence in this verse, we soon realize that it surpasses everything that human beings have ever attempted: *"With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He."* (Verse 59) The verse takes us first into the unfathomable reaches of the world beyond, stretching into time and place, as well as the past, present and future and into what takes place both in this life and in our imagination.

"He knows all that the land and sea contain." (Verse 59) The picture here is of the seen world, stretching infinitely over the horizon so that the world we see is stretched into an infinite existence to provide harmony with the limitless nature of the world beyond.

"Not a leaf falls, but He knows it." (Verse 59) This depicts the movement of death, the fall from above and disappearance after the end of life.

"Neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness." (Verse 59) This depicts the movement of growth and life, starting in the deep and going up onto the surface. We see how the dead quickens and the moving forward with vigour.

"Nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book." (Verse 59) This is an overall generalization that comprises both life and death, the thriving and the withering away of everything that lives on earth. Who other than God would begin with such material in order to paint such an expansive scene? And who would give it such beauty and harmony to add to its excellence? Who other than God can do that?

Beyond Our Perception

We need now to say a word about the first clause in this verse, which states: *"With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He."* (Verse 59)

It is important to define what we describe in English as lying "beyond the reach of human perception" and the keys to it as being known only to God. This expression is

given in the Arabic text in one word, *ghayb,* which is an essential element of the Islamic concept of faith, existence and life. The term is derived in Arabic from a root which denotes "absence, disappearance, hiding, shielding from people's senses and understanding".[1]

We need to speak about *ghayb* because it is frequently contrasted nowadays with `science' and what is 'scientific'. The Qur'ān states that there is something to describe as *ghayb* which lies beyond the reach of human perception, and that the keys to this world are known only to God. The Qur'ān also states that the knowledge man has been given is scanty, but sufficient for man and appropriate for his potential. Beyond the factual knowledge given them by God, people only indulge in guesswork, which is no substitute for the truth. God states that He has set into operation certain laws for this universe, and He has taught man how to understand some of these laws and deal with them according to his ability. He further states that He will reveal to man of these laws what strengthens his faith. This does not violate the unchangeable laws of nature or affect the world that remains beyond the reach of human perception. Nor does it affect God's absolute will or the fact that everything occurs in accordance with His will. We will now touch briefly on these facts.

In the Qur'ān, God often describes the believers as those who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception. This quality is indeed essential to faith: *"This [the Qur'ān] is the Book, there is no doubt about it, a guidance for the God-fearing, who believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, observe prayers and give of what We bestow upon them. [They are] those who believe in what has been revealed to you and what was revealed before you, and are certain of the hereafter. Those follow their Lord's guidance, and they shall surely prosper."* (2: 2-5)

To believe in God (limitless is He in His glory) is to believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception. It is not possible for human beings to comprehend the nature of God. When they believe in Him, they recognize the results of His actions, but they cannot conceive His nature or what He works. Similarly, the life to come also lies beyond the reach of human perception. Everything that relates to the Day of Judgement: the reckoning, the reward, and the punishment — all belong to the world beyond. We believe in all these because God has told us about them.

The *ghayb* which we are required to accept in order to have true faith includes other facts mentioned in the Qur'ān as God describes the believers and their faith: *"The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do all the believers. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His books, and His messengers. We*

[1] Many translators of the Qur'ān have chosen to render it in English as "unseen, invisible or hidden". I feel that the rendering of Muĥammad Asad, "What lies beyond the reach of human perception", is closer to its true sense, because *ghayb* suggests a world that we cannot fathom by any means of knowledge acquisition. — Editor's note.

make no distinction between any of His messengers. And they say, `We hear and we obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord; to You we shall all return." (2: 285) Every believer, then, must also believe in what God has revealed to His Messenger (peace be upon him) which includes some knowledge of the *ghayb* which God imparts to His Messenger, in a measure He determines, as explained in another Qur'ānic verse: *"He alone knows what lies beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not reveal it to anyone except those whom He chooses to be His messengers."* (72: 26-7)

Believing in the angels is also part of believing in the imperceptible, because we only know about angels what God has chosen to tell us. In addition, we have to believe in God's will and its operation. That is also part of *ghayb.*

Man is, however, surrounded by imperceptibles in every direction. Part of this relates to time: past, present and future. Another part exists within man himself, and more is available in the universe. What does man know about the origin of this universe, its existence, nature and motion? What does he know about life and its cycles? All this lies beyond his perception. Indeed, man does not know what occurs within him at the present moment, let alone what occurs during the next moment or in the universe with its atoms and electrons, etc.

The human intellect floats in an ocean of the unknown, stopping every now and then at little islands which, to him, represent the landmarks of his world. Without God's grace and His will to make this world subservient to man and to teach him a number of the rules of nature, man would not have been able to do anything. But he remains ungrateful to God: *"Few of My servants are truly grateful."* (34: 13) Indeed, some men these days boast of the scanty knowledge God has given them and the laws of nature He has shown them to claim that "man stands alone"[1] and that he is in no need of God. Sometimes, man's boasting suggests that science is the opposite of the imperceptible and that scientific thinking contrasts with imperceptibility. The two, as he claims, are opposite extremes.

It is useful here to cast a glance at what some scientists have said about *ghayb,* remembering that man has only been given scanty knowledge. We do not need to look at what they say in order to confirm what God has said. A believer does not confirm a divine statement by a human one. We simply quote these scientists in order to put their statements in front of the eyes of those who are always talking about science, as the opposite of *ghayb* or the imperceptible. In this way, they may realize that they need to increase their knowledge in order to live in their world, and not to be left behind. This enables them to realize that the existence *of ghayb* is the only scientific fact that is proven by human experience and scientific achievement.

They would thus realize that, in the light of recent discoveries and experiments,

[1] This is the title of a book by Julian Huxley, an atheist author. — Author's note

`scientific' goes hand in hand with `imperceptible'. What truly contrasts with believing in what lies beyond the reach of human perception is ignorance. It is a sort of ignorance that might have been acceptable in the last three centuries, but it is certainly unacceptable in the twentieth century.

Describing the 'facts' proven by science generally, a contemporary American scientist says:

> Science is tested knowledge, but it is still subject to human vagaries, illusions and inaccuracies. It is legitimate only within the confines of its own areas. It is rigidly restricted to quantitative data for description and prediction. It begins and ends with probability, not certainty. Its results are approximations subject to 'probable error,' especially in measurements and correlations. Its products are tentative and are modified frequently by new data. There is *finality* in scientific inferences. The scientist says: "Up to the present, the facts are thus and so."[1]

This sums up the nature of all scientific conclusions. Since these conclusions are the ones which man arrives at, working with his available means and within his own world which remains limited in comparison to the everlasting existence, these conclusions have a human mark. Like man, they are of limited scope, liable to error and admit of amendment.

Man arrives at his conclusions through experiment and analogy. He begins with a limited experiment and then generalizes his conclusions by comparison, all of which can only lead a scientist to admit a probability, not a certainty. One way of arriving at a certainty is to apply the result of a particular experiment to everything with the same nature, occurring at any time and under any conditions. This is not available to man. The only way to arrive at a certainty and absolute truism is through divine guidance. What this boils down to is that we have the certainties that God has chosen to give us through His messengers. Beyond these, human knowledge remains within the range of what is probable, not what is certain.

Scientific and Imperceptible

Ghayb exists all around us, beyond the realm of our knowledge which continues to be based on probabilities. Man looks at the universe around him and continues to work out hypotheses and theories about its origin, nature and movement, and about time and place, their inter-relationship with each other and with what takes place in

[1] Merritt Stanley Congdon, "The Lesson of the Rosebush", a paper in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* Ed. J.C. Monsma, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1958, p. 34.

the universe. Man also tries to think about life: its source, origin, nature, continuity, the factors and forces that influence it and how it relates to material existence. He also thinks about himself: how is man different from matter and what distinguishes him from other living things? How did he come to exist on this earth; and how does he behave? What is human intellect, and what are its distinctive features? What happens to him after death? Even if we take the human body: what occurs inside it of chemical interactions at every moment and how do such interactions happen?

All these belong to the realm *of ghayb*. Science stops at its peripheries, unable to penetrate through them even to assign relative probabilities to different hypotheses. We will leave aside for the moment the subjects which scientists do not care to enlist among their priorities and preoccupations, such as the nature of Godhead and the nature of God's other creatures, such as angels and *jinn,* the nature of death, and the hereafter. It is sufficient for our purposes to speak only about that sort *of ghayb* which is closer to us. Here also we find science acknowledging its limited ability. Let us take one or two examples.

The first example concerns the atom which, according to modern science, is the basic unit in the structure of the universe. Yet it is not the smallest unit, because it consists of protons with a positive electric charge, electrons with a negative charge and neutrons with a static charge. With an atomic fusion, electrons are released, but they do not stick to a uniform behaviour in a laboratory. At one time, they move like waves of light, and at another like missiles. We cannot determine their future behaviour in advance. This is subject to the law of probability. The same differences of behaviour apply to a single atom and a group of atoms forming a small unit.

Sir James Jeans, a prominent British physicist says:

> The old science had confidently proclaimed that nature could follow only one road, the road which was mapped out from the beginning of time to its end by the continuous chain of cause and effect; state A was inevitably succeeded by state B. So far the new science has only been able to say that state A may be followed by state B or C or D or by innumerable other states. It can, it is true, say that B is more likely than C, C than D, and so on; it can even specify the relative probabilities of states B, C and D. But, just because it has to speak in terms of probabilities, it cannot predict with certainty which state will follow which; this is a matter which lies on the knees of the gods — whatever gods there be.[1]

This, then, is what is meant by *ghayb,* which relates to God's will into which human knowledge cannot penetrate. All that human knowledge and scientific

[1] James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe,* Cambridge University Press, 1931, pp. 18-19.

experiment can reach are only peripheries. Further than that, it cannot go. Professor Jeans gives the example of radiation and how the atoms of the radium are transformed into lead and helium. Throughout this process, they are subject to laws which remain closed to human knowledge:

> It is known that the atoms of radium, and of other radioactive substances, disintegrate into atoms of lead and helium with the mere passage of time, so that a mass of radium continually diminishes in amount, being replaced by lead and helium. The law which governs the rate of diminution is very remarkable. The amount of radium decreases in precisely the same way as a population would if there were no births, and a uniform death-rate which was the same for every individual, *regardless of his age*. Or again, it decreases in the same way as the numbers of a battalion of soldiers who are exposed to absolutely random undirected fire. In brief, old age appears to mean nothing to the individual random atom; it does not die because it has lived its life, but rather because in some way fate knocks at the door.[1]
>
> To take a concrete illustration, suppose that our room contains two thousand atoms of radium. Science cannot say how many of these will survive after a year's time, it can only tell us the relative odds in favour of the number being 2000, 1999, 1998, and so on. Actually the most likely event is that the number will be 1999; the probabilities are in favour of one, and only one, of the 2000 atoms breaking up within the next year.
>
> We do not know in what way this particular atom is selected out of the 2000. We may at first feel tempted to conjecture it will be the atom that gets knocked about most or gets into the hottest places, or what not, in the coming year. Yet this cannot be, for if blows or heat could disintegrate one atom, they could disintegrate the other 1999, and we should be able to expedite the disintegration of radium merely by compressing it or heating it up. Every physicist believes this to be impossible; he rather believes that every year fate knocks at the door of one radium atom in every 2000, and compels it to break up; this is the hypothesis of "spontaneous disintegration" advanced by Rutherford and Soddy in 1903.[2]

What example may illustrate the imperceptible operation of God's will better than the disintegration of atoms, in which neither the atoms nor anyone on earth has any

[1] This is what this scientist says, but we are concerned only with the scientific conclusion he is describing. His view that the death of radium atoms occurs at random does not concern us. We know that these atoms die by God's will at a specified time, which He has set for a particular purpose. "Every age has a term decreed." (13: 38.) This law stated in the Qur'ān applies to the atom of radium and to every living thing. People die when the time appointed for each one of them is over.

[2] James Jeans, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

say or choice.

We observe that the scientist who has given us this example is not trying to prove the operation of God's will. Indeed, he tries hard to counter the pressure of the conclusions to which scientific research leads. The truth *of ghayb* in the Islamic sense stares him and all scientists in the face.

The truism of *ghayb,* or the imperceptible, also imposes itself on the rules governing the emergence of life. Professor Russell Charles Artist, Professor of Biology at Frankfurt-on-the-Main, Germany, says:

> Many theories have been brought forward in the attempt to derive living cells from inanimate matter. Certain investigators are claiming that life has originated through the protogene, or through an aggregation of large protein molecules, which may leave the impression that at last the gap between the lifeless and the living has been spanned. Actually it must be admitted that all attempts to produce living matter experimentally from inanimate matter have failed utterly.
>
> Furthermore, it is not by direct evidence that the one who denies the existence of God proves to a waiting world that a fortuitous aggregation of atoms and molecules is life, capable of maintaining and directing itself as do the cells described here. Not at all. He accepts this as a *belief.* It is his private interpretation of the facts visible to us all, that an accidental concourse brought the first cell into being. But this is to accept an even greater miracle than to believe that Intelligence called it into being!
>
> I maintain that each of these single cells (each a system so intricate and delicate that its complete functioning has so far escaped our study), and all the trillions of them on this earth, definitely present a justifiable inference — one of Mind, or Intelligence, or Thought, which we call God. Science both admits and accepts this inference.
>
> I believe firmly that there is a God.[1]

We have quoted this example here only to emphasise that the secret of life and its origin belongs to the realm of what God has withheld from our knowledge. All human explanations are only hypothetical. God tells the truth when He says: *"I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation."* (18: 51)

We take a giant stride to look at man and his life. One drop of man's semen

[1] R.C. Artist, "Trillions of Living Cells Speak Their Message", in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* op. cit., p. 124.

contains about 60 million sperms, all of which race to fertilize the female egg. No one knows which of these millions will win the race, because that is part of God's will to which human beings have no access, not even the couple involved. The fertilized egg produces the foetus. The chromosomes in the female egg are all female, while those in the sperm have male and female characteristics. Hence, the sex of the child is determined by the male chromosomes. This is again subject to God's will. No human being can influence it in any way, not even the child's parents: *"God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him every thing has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the great One, the highly exalted."* (13: 8-9) *"To God alone belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wills: He bestows the gift of female offspring on whomever He wills, and the gift of male offspring on whomever He wills; or He gives both male and female (to whomever he wills), and causes to be barren whomever He wills: truly, He is all-knowing, infinite in His power."* (42: 49-50) *"He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness. Thus is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion; there is no deity other than Him. How, then, can you lose sight of the truth?"* (39: 6)

The above are three examples showing how human knowledge in the twentieth century recognizes *ghayb,* acknowledging what lies beyond the reach of human perception. Those who remain influenced by the attitude of past generations continue to say that *ghayb* and science are contradictory. Science in this twentieth century readily admits that its conclusions are only statements of probabilities. The only certainty is that there is a world that cannot be reached by human perception.

The Imperceptible and the Nature of Islamic Faith

Before we conclude we need to say a few words on the nature of *ghayb* as understood in the Islamic faith.

The Qur'ān, the basic source of Islamic faith, states very clearly that there is a world beyond the reach of human perception and another world that can be perceived. Not everything around man is *ghayb,* and not all forces of the universe are unknown. There are certain laws that operate in the universe without fail. Man can know some of these in as much as this knowledge can be tolerated or is needed by him to fulfil his role on earth.

God has given him the power to know this much of the laws of the universe and to manipulate these forces in accordance with these laws. He will then be able to accomplish his mission and make use of the potentials of the earth and promote life.

Side by side with these constant laws, God's will operates free of all restrictions. It

is God's will that sets these laws in operation every time they operate. Theirs is not a purely automatic motion. Although they operate in accordance with the rules God has set for them, it is God's will that operates them. That will is part of *ghayb,* which is not known to anyone with any degree of certainty. The maximum that people can know of it remains within the range of assumptions and probabilities. Science readily admits this.

Millions of processes and interactions occur within man at every given moment, all of which are, to him, imperceptible, while he is also unaware of millions of processes and interactions occurring in the world around him. Indeed, the imperceptible engulfs the past, the present and the future as they relate to man or to the universe. This works side by side with the constant laws of nature some of which are known to man, who benefits by them regularly and scientifically as he works to fulfil his role. Man comes into this world against his will and without any prior knowledge of his arrival here. He departs from it unwillingly and without any knowledge of his departure time. This applies to every living thing. No matter how much man increases his knowledge, this will remain the same. The Islamic mentality is a scientific one and it believes in the imperceptible, because science recognizes the imperceptible and accepts its existence.

Denying it is an exercise of ignorance in spite of all the claims of those who make such a denial. The Islamic mentality combines believing in what lies beyond the reach of human perception, the secrets of which are known only to God, with the belief in the constant laws of nature. Hence, a Muslim benefits by scientific achievements. At the same time, he remains at peace with the fact that there is a complete world which our faculties cannot fathom, and which is known only to God who determines how much He reveals of it to those whom He chooses.

It is animals that cannot comprehend anything beyond the reach of their senses. When a person believes in *ghayb,* he elevates himself to the rank of man who realizes that the universe is far greater and wider than the limited scope of his senses. Such a belief represents a great departure in an individual's perception of the nature of existence, the forces operating in the universe, and the Power which controls all that. This belief has a profound effect on man's own life. A person confining his concerns to the limited field in which his senses operate has a much narrower outlook than that of one who recognizes his place in the spacious universe which is far greater, in time and space, than whatever he can imagine in his limited life. He, therefore, recognizes that beyond all this existence there is a greater Truth, namely, the Supreme Being who gives the universe its existence, whom we cannot see with our eyes and whose nature we cannot comprehend with our minds.

Believing in the imperceptible is the point which signals the elevation of man high above the world of animals. However, those among us who have a materialistic

outlook, and these can be found in every age, want man to sink back to the rank of animals where there is no recognition of anything beyond what the senses can perceive. Yet they call this progress, when it is actually a set-back against which God protects the believers. Their distinctive characteristic is that "they believe in what lies beyond the reach of human perception". Praise be to God for His grace.

Those who reject the belief in the imperceptible as contrary to scientific progress also speak of `historical inevitability', as if the future is certain. As we have seen, scientists today speak of probabilities, and tell us that there are no inevitabilities. Karl Marx used to speak about inevitabilities, but which of his prophecies has been realized? He predicted that England was certain to become communist, because it was the leading nation in industrial progress. As such, it was the leading capitalist country where the labour force suffered most. Communism was adopted instead by countries which were industrially backward, such as Russia, China and a handful of other nations. Likewise, Lenin and Stalin predicted that war was inevitable between the capitalist and the communist blocs. Their successor, Khrushchev, raised instead the banner of peaceful coexistence.

We need not dwell much on these prophecies. They are too trivial to merit any discussion. There is only one certainty, which is that of the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Everything else belongs to the world of probabilities. There is also one inevitability, which is that God's will shall come to pass. His will is part of the *ghayb* known only to Him. Nevertheless, there are constant laws of nature which man may study and recognize, and even utilize for his benefit. At the same time, the door remains open for God's will to operate as He chooses. This is the absolute certainty. *"This Qur'ān guides to the path that is straightest."* (17: 9)

Having emphasized that God's knowledge includes everything in the universe, the *sūrah* cites one aspect of this absolute knowledge which relates to man himself, and another aspect which asserts God's absolute power over everything in the universe: *"It is He who causes you to be like the dead at night, and knows what you do in the daytime. He raises you again to life each day in order that a term set by Him be fulfilled. In the end, to Him you must return; and then He will tell you all that you have done."* (Verse 60) In a few simple words, this verse explains that all human life is in God's hands, within His knowledge and subject to His will. This includes people's sleep and awakening, death and resurrection, reckoning and judgement. The description follows the inimitable method of the Qur'ān in portraying everything vividly, alive. Thus it is able to touch people's hearts with every image drawn and every movement described.

"It is He who causes you to be like the dead at night." (Verse 60) It is then a form of death that occurs to people when they are overtaken by sleep. Their senses do not operate, their minds stop functioning and their consciousness stops. Human beings

cannot yet discover the secret of what happens to them when they sleep, although they know its effects. This is, then, one of the numerous forms *of ghayb* that engulfs human life. As they sleep, human beings lose all their power, including their consciousness. They are in God's hands, as they are certainly all the time. He alone can bring them back to life. How weak we are in comparison to Him.

"*He knows what you do in the daytime.*" (Verse 60) Whatever good or evil we do, and whatever our hands take or leave, is known to God. None of our movements is left out.

"*He raises you again to life each day in order that a term set by Him be fulfilled.*" (Verse 60) It is He who awakens you in the day from your slumber so that you complete the term He has appointed for each one of you. This covers the status of human beings within the range set by God. His will is inescapable.

"*In the end, to Him you must return.*" (Verse 60) You return to Him just like sheep coming back to their shepherd at the end of the day. "*Then He will tell you all that you have done.*" (Verse 60) This is when the record that includes everything is laid open. Absolute justice is then administered to all.

Although this is a short verse composed of a few words, it nonetheless includes a long sequence of scenes and images, statements of fact and wide-ranging connotations. Who other than God can produce such a style? What is miraculous if this is not a miracle? Yet those who reject the faith choose not to see it in its true colour. They demand instead a physical miracle despite the fact that this would inevitably be followed by God's punishment, should they continue to reject Him afterwards.

When All Efforts Are of No Avail

An important feature of Godhead is that which combines absolute power over all creation and a constant, alert watch. That which combines the predetermination of the life span of every individual, and our inescapable destiny with the final reckoning which is both prompt and unfailing. All this belongs to the realm of those imperceptibles which encompass human life.

> *He alone holds sway over His servants. He sends forth guardians to watch over you until, when death approaches any one of you, Our messengers cause him to die. They leave no part of their duty unfulfilled. They are then brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. Indeed, His alone is all judgement; and He is most swift in reckoning.* (Verses 61-2)

"*He alone holds sway over His servants.*" (Verse 61) All power belongs to Him, and

all creatures are subject to His power. In front of Him, they are powerless. In front of the Almighty, they are no more than submissive slaves. This is the truth confirmed by the realities of human life. Despite all the freedom of action they are given and the degree of knowledge they are allowed, and the ability instilled in them to fulfil the task assigned to them, their every breath is allowed them in accordance with a specific measure; their every action is subject to God's power. Such is the basic law of human life which they cannot violate, although this law may manifest itself each time in accordance with a specific divine will. This even applies to every individual breath or action.§

"*He sends forth guardians to watch over you.*" (Verse 61) The nature of those guardians is not mentioned here. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, we are told that they are angels who record everything we do. The point here is to impart a feeling that there is a close supervision over everyone. No single person is left all alone, not even for a moment. Watchers count and record every word we say, every action we do and every movement we make. When we imagine this, we are at the height of our alertness.

"*Until, when death approaches any one of you, Our messengers cause him to die. They leave no part of their duty unfulfilled.*" (Verse 61) The same atmosphere is generated again by a different image. Every soul is left until a particular moment which always remains unknown to it, although it is specified by God. It can be neither advanced nor delayed. Every soul has an angel close at hand watching over it, counting its every breath, mindful of his task and never neglecting anything. He is a guardian angel. At the appointed moment, when the human soul is fully preoccupied with its affairs the guardian completes his task and the messenger delivers his message. As we think of this, we are bound to shiver as we feel that we are totally in the hands of a destiny which remains unknown to us. We realize that we could meet death at any moment.

"*They are then brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme.*" (Verse 62) He is indeed our true Lord, while all other deities are false. It is He who has originated us and given us our lives, keeping us all the time under His unfailing supervision. He then gathers us back to Him for final judgement: "*Indeed, His alone is all judgement; and He is most swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 62) It is He alone who reckons and judges. Both His judgement and reward are readily delivered. The reference to His speed here is meant to make us feel that we are not given even a short period of grace before we are held to account.

This sort of image which is outlined by the basic Islamic concept of life, death,

§ For further discussion on the *Fawqiyyah* and *`Uluw* attribute, please refer to section 1.2 in *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

resurrection, reckoning and reward, is sufficient to ensure that a Muslim acknowledges without hesitation God's authority to rule over people's lives on earth. The reckoning, reward and judgement in the hereafter are based on what people actually do in this life. People cannot be held to account for what they do here in this world unless they are given a law which details for them what is lawful and what is forbidden. This explains the need for a single authority over both this life and the life to come.

When a law other than that of God's is enforced in this world, how can people be judged in the hereafter? According to the law they implemented here? Or according to the divine law which they did not implement?

Human beings must realize that God will hold them to account on the basis of His own law. They must be aware that if they do not conduct their lives and establish their relationships as well as their worship, according to God's law, then this will be the first thing for which they have to account. They will be questioned why have they not chosen God as their Lord on earth, preferring instead to claim other deities? This means that they will have to account for denying God or associating partners with Him. This they do by following God's law in matters of worship but adopting a different law in their social, political and economic systems as well as their interactions, dealings and relationships. We know that God forgives whomever He pleases, but only that which is short of associating partners with Him.

The Only Saviour

They are then called upon to listen to the voice of their very nature. Indeed, human nature recognizes the truth of Godhead and turns to God alone when it faces dangers and difficulties. The *sūrah* paints for them their nature when they are in distress, and describes how they go against its appeals when they go through a period of ease and comfort.

This is all portrayed in a short, fast, clear scene, producing a profound effect. They are reminded that great distress is not limited to the Day of Resurrection when they have to face their reckoning. They, indeed, go through periods of great distress in the deep darkness of land and sea. At such moments, they turn only to God, recognizing that only He can save them. Still they revert to their erring ways in periods of ease: *"Say: 'Who is it that saves you from the dark dangers of the land and sea, when you call out to Him humbly and in secret: If He will but save us from this peril, we will most certainly be grateful? Say: God alone saves you from these and from every distress; and still you associate partners with Him."* (Verses 63-4) At times, it is sufficient to visualize danger and remember distress to soften people's hearts and help them restrain their wild desires. People can then remember their feelings of weakness as they remember God's grace

when He alleviates their distress.

"Say: Who is it that saves you from the dark dangers of land and sea, when you call out to Him humbly and in secret: 'If He will but save us from this peril, we will most certainly be grateful?'" (Verse 63) Such an experience is well known to everyone who has gone through a period of distress or witnessed and observed what people in distress feel. There are indeed many types of darkness involving perils of different types on land and at sea. It is not necessary that the night should spread its mantle for darkness to prevail: losing one's way and danger are two types of darkness and what awaits people on land and at sea is screened from them by darkness. Wherever people find themselves in the midst of darkness they realize that they must turn only to God, praying to Him in earnest or appealing to Him in private. At such a moment, human nature sheds its burden and comes face to face with the truth implanted deep inside it, that is the truth of God's oneness. Therefore, it turns to God alone, addressing Him without any partners, because it recognizes then the absurdity of idolatry and polytheism and the non-existence of any partners with God. At such a moment, those who are in distress are quick to make solemn pledges: *"If He will but save us from this peril, we will most certainly be grateful."* (Verse 63)

God commands His Messenger to remind them of the truth: *"Say: God alone saves you from these and from every distress."* (Verse 64) There is no one to respond to them other than He, and no one else to remove their distress. But the Prophet is also commanded to remind them of their singularly queer attitude: *"Still, you associate partners with Him."* (Verse 64)

Diverse Ways to Expound Revelations

The *sūrah* reminds them of God's power which could smite them after they have been saved. It is not like a momentary distress which is not replaced once it is over. They are reminded of God's unlimited ability to bring about suffering that they cannot endure: *"Say: It is He alone who has the power to let loose upon you suffering from above you and from beneath your feet, or to divide you into disputing groups, causing the one to suffer at the hands of the other. See how We make plain Our revelations so that they may understand."* (Verse 65)

To visualize suffering coming from above or from beneath in overwhelming force has a much more powerful effect on the human mind than to visualize it coming from the right or the left. Anyone may imagine that he can resist the latter type coming sideways, but the type of suffering which is brought down from above or which overwhelms people from beneath must be irresistible. In its inspiring style, the *sūrah* adds this forceful effect as it states in plain terms that God is able to overwhelm people with suffering from any direction and in any method He chooses. It then adds

another type of suffering which is slow and long lasting. This type does not destroy them all in a flash, but lingers with them so that they experience it day after day and night after night: *"[He has the power] to divide you into disputing groups, causing the one to suffer at the hands of the other."* (Verse 65)

This is an image of long-lasting suffering which they bring upon themselves and make each other experience. God allows them to split into hostile groups which can hardly be distinguished, one from the other. There is no clarity of separating lines. These groups are in a state of constant hostility, argument and dispute. Therefore, they bring suffering upon one another.

In many periods of its history, humanity has experienced this type of suffering, whenever it deviated from the divine method, allowing people, in their weakness and ignorance, to conduct human life in accordance with their desires. Thus we find people groping in the dark as they devise their own systems, laws and values for human life. This is followed by one group trying to impose these systems, laws and values on others. The result is that one group may resist and those who have power try to crush their resistance. The desires, ambitions and concepts held by different groups would thus be involved in a bitter conflict, with one group made to suffer the tyranny of another. Thus, mutual hatred becomes widespread. When you analyze this state of affairs, you are bound to conclude that it is caused by the fact that humanity does not apply the same standard given them by their Supreme Lord to whom all human beings must submit. While people may not find it easy to recognise the authority of others, none of them feels himself humiliated when he submits to God alone.

The most terrible situation in human life is that in which some human beings claim for themselves the rights of Godhead and try to impose these in practice on the rest of mankind. This is the sort of confused situation which splits people into hostile groups: on the surface, they may appear to be one community, but in reality some of them are subservient to others. One group wields power, using it in a tyrannical way because they are not restrained by God's law. The others are embittered and nurse their grudges. Both groups are made to suffer the might and tyranny of each other. They do not form a single nation although they may not be easily distinguished, one from the other. When we look at mankind today, we realize that the whole world is engulfed by this slow, long-lasting suffering.

This leads us to consider the attitude of the advocates of Islam. They must form a community which moves swiftly to distinguish itself from the state of *jāhiliyyah* surrounding it from all directions. *Jāhiliyyah* refers to every situation, regime, community and society which does not implement God's law or which does not recognize that Godhead and sovereignty belong to God alone. The advocates of Islam must abandon any *jāhiliyyah* society, fully aware that they are completely

distinguished as a community from those in their society who prefer to maintain ways and implement laws, systems and values different from those bestowed from on high.

Only if the advocates of Islam distinguish themselves in this way can they spare themselves the suffering with which God threatens those who reject His call: *"[He has the power] to divide you into disputing groups, causing the one to suffer at the hands of the other."* (Verse 65) This mental distinction of the advocates of Islam applies by necessity to faith, feelings and code of living. It must continue until Islam is established in a geographical area and is an authority that extends protection to all advocates of Islam. Those advocates of the divine faith must feel themselves to be the Muslim community, and that all others who refuse to accept their method belong to the world *of jāhiliyyah.*

They should make their attitude clear to all people, telling them that their dispute with them is over faith and their code of living. They then pray to God to judge between them and their people in accordance with the truth. Unless the advocates of Islam make this distinction, the threat made here by God applies to them. They remain a group in a society which is not clearly distinguished from others. They are then made to endure the slow, long-lasting suffering.

Such total distinction may require the advocates of Islam to make sacrifices and endure hardships. But these will never be anywhere near what happens to them if their attitude is not distinguished from the rest of the community, and if they are lost in the un-Islamic society surrounding them.

When we review the history of the call to the divine faith pioneered by God's messengers, we are certain that God will not grant victory to his messengers and their followers until the advocates of the divine faith have distinguished themselves from the rest of their people over the basic issue of submission to God alone. They must also implement the code of living He has chosen for His servants. Such a split over faith and a practical constitution is always the starting point.

We must realize that the divine method has only a single way to follow. It cannot choose today a path other than that followed by God's messengers (peace be upon them all) throughout history: *"See how We make plain Our revelations so that they may understand."* (Verse 65) We pray to God to include us among those who understand as He expounds to them His revelations.

9
Point of Separation

وَكَذَّبَ بِهِۦ قَوْمُكَ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَقُّ ۚ قُل لَّسْتُ عَلَيْكُم بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿٦٦﴾

Your people have rejected this [i.e. the Qur'ān], although it is the very truth. Say: I am not responsible for you. (66)

لِّكُلِّ نَبَإٍ مُّسْتَقَرٌّ ۚ وَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Every piece of news has a time set for its fulfilment, as you will come to know. (67)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخُوضُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَـٰتِنَا فَأَعْرِضْ عَنْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يَخُوضُوا۟ فِى حَدِيثٍ غَيْرِهِۦ ۚ وَإِمَّا يُنسِيَنَّكَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ فَلَا تَقْعُدْ بَعْدَ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ مَعَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

Whenever you see those who indulge in vain discourse about Our revelations, turn away from them until they talk of other things. Should Satan ever cause you to forget, do not, once you remember, stay with such wrongdoing folk. (68)

وَمَا عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ مِنْ حِسَابِهِم مِّن شَىْءٍ وَلَـٰكِن ذِكْرَىٰ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Those who are God-fearing are in no way accountable for them. It is their duty, however, to admonish them, so that they may become God-fearing. (69)

وَذَرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ دِينَهُمْ لَعِبًا وَلَهْوًا وَغَرَّتْهُمُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَذَكِّرْ بِهِۦٓ أَن تُبْسَلَ نَفْسٌۢ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِىٌّ وَلَا شَفِيعٌ وَإِن تَعْدِلْ كُلَّ عَدْلٍ لَّا يُؤْخَذْ مِنْهَآ

Stay away from those who, beguiled by the life of this world, take their religion for a pastime and a sport; but remind them with this (Qur'ān), lest every human being should be held in pledge for whatever he has done, when he shall have none to protect him from God, and none to intercede for him. If he were to offer any conceivable ransom, it shall not be accepted from him.

Those are the ones who are held in pledge for what they have done. Scalding water shall they drink, and grievous suffering awaits them because they were unbelievers. (70)	أُوْلَـٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُبْسِلُواْ بِمَا كَسَبُواْ ۖ لَهُمْ شَرَابٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ وَعَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Overview

This passage re-endorses the issues elaborated upon in Chapter 8. It was the Prophet's own people who rejected his message although it was the very truth. Hence, all relations between him and his people were severed. He is instructed to declare to them that he could not be responsible for their erring ways. He had to leave them to their inevitable destiny. He is further instructed not to sit with them when they engage in idle talk about religion, taking it as a sport and fun, showing no due respect to it. His instructions are very clear: he has to remind and warn them, convey his message to them and explain to them what they will have to face on the Day of Judgement. However, he must realize that although they are his people, they belong to two different nations. No considerations of nationality, race, clan or family are of much value in Islam. It is faith that causes relationships to be established or severed. When the bond of faith is established all other bonds may establish their roots. When the bond of faith is severed, however, no other ties can be established.

Consistent Attitude

> *Your people have rejected this [i.e. the Qur'ān], although it is the very truth. Say: I am not responsible for you.* (Verse 66)

The passage starts with an address to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) which gives him and all believers who follow him complete confidence and reassurance that his message is the very truth. His people may persist in rejecting it and describing it as lies. This should not, however, affect him in any way. His people are not to arbitrate on this. The final word belongs to God. He states that this message is the truth. Hence, its rejection by any group of people is of no consequence.

God then instructs His Messenger to dissociate himself from his people, making his attitude clear to them. He is also to inform them that he has no say over their fate. Neither is he responsible for their behaviour, nor can he guide their hearts. That is not up to him. Once he has conveyed to them his message, he has discharged his

duty and he has to leave them to their inevitable destiny. Everything comes to its appointed end, and they will come to know the result of their efforts: *"Every piece of news has a time set for its fulfilment, as you will come to know."* (Verse 67) Although this is a very general statement, providing no details, it is nonetheless intimidating.

The believers have that reassurance imparted to them by their knowledge that what they follow is the very truth and that evil is doomed to failure, even though it may appear very powerful. They are confident that God will destroy those who deny His message, at the time He has appointed for them. They realise that what God has said will undoubtedly come true, and that every living thing is certain to meet its destiny. The advocates of Islam who face a similar rejection from their own people and who are made to feel as though they are strangers among their own families and who, as a consequence, endure much hardship and endless affliction need such confidence and reassurance and this the Qur'ān gives them in plenty.

The Prophet is further commanded not to sit with the unbelievers, even for the sake of explaining his message or reminding them of God and their need to believe in Him, especially if he finds them engaged in idle talk about divine revelations. If they talk about religion in any way other than with respect and seriousness, or make it, by word or deed, an object of fun, he must remove himself from their company.

If he were to do otherwise, his action could be construed as an implicit acceptance of what they do. Alternatively, it may be taken as a carelessness with the faith, when a Muslim should place his religion at the top of what he cherishes. Should he forget all this and sit with them, he must immediately upon remembering the correct approach rise up and leave their company: *"Whenever you see those who indulge in vain discourse about Our revelations, turn away from them until they talk of other things. Should Satan ever cause you to forget, do not, once you remember, stay with such wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 68)

This order to the Prophet, which could be interpreted as applying to all Muslims, was issued in Makkah where the Prophet's task was limited to the advocacy of his faith. At that time, the Prophet was not ordered to fight anyone. Indeed, the approach was to avoid all physical conflict with the unbelievers wherever that was possible. Nevertheless, the Prophet was ordered not to sit with them if they spoke disrespectfully of God's revelations. Should he forget and sit with them, then, he should leave them immediately upon remembrance. All Muslims, according to some reports, were ordered likewise. The term, `wrongdoing folk', used here refers to the unbelievers, as it is frequently used in the Qur'ān.

When Islam established its state in Madinah, the Prophet's attitude towards the unbelievers was totally different. The Prophet could resort to every type of struggle, even war, in order to ensure that submission to God prevailed. No one was to be

allowed to engage in idle talk or vain discourse concerning God's revelations.

The *sūrah* then asserts the complete separation between believers and unbelievers, in the same way as this was established between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and those who associate partners with God. Responsibilities are different and so are destinies: "*Those who are God-fearing are in no way accountable for them. It is their duty, however, to admonish them, so that they may become God-fearing*". This means that there is simply no common responsibility between the God-fearing and the unbelievers. They are two separate communities or nations, although they may belong to the same race and the same nationality. These considerations are of little consequence in God's view. The God- fearing are a nation on their own, and the unbelievers are a totally different nation. Those who fear God share nothing of the burden of the wrongdoers and they are accountable for none of their deeds. They only try to remind them of their duty towards God in the hope that they follow suit and join their camp. If they continue to reject the faith based on God's oneness, then there is nothing to share between the two camps.

This is indeed, the attitude of Islam as stated clearly by God. Anyone may choose a different stance, but he must know first that by so doing he abandons the divine faith altogether.

When Support is in Short Supply

The *sūrah* continues to reiterate the complete distinction between the two communities, outlining the limits within which dealings and interactions may be conducted.

> *Stay away from those who, beguiled by the life of this world, take their religion for a pastime and a sport; but remind them with this (Qur'ān), lest every human being should be held in pledge for whatever he has done, when he shall have none to protect him from God, and none to intercede for him. If he were to offer any conceivable ransom, it shall not be accepted from him. Those are the ones who are held in pledge for what they have done. Scalding water shall they drink, and grievous suffering awaits them because they were unbelievers.* (Verse 70)

This verse re-emphasises the distinction between the two communities, making several important points.

1. The Prophet, and indeed every Muslim, is commanded to ignore, by word and deed, those who treat religion as a pastime and as idle play. This description applies to anyone who does not give his faith respect by making it the basis of all aspects of his life: worship, beliefs, practices, moral values, and a legal

code. It also applies to anyone who describes the principles and legislations of this faith in derogatory terms, such as those who ridicule the concept of *ghayb,* or believing in the world beyond the reach of human perception, which is an essential part of the Islamic faith. The same is the case with people who talk disrespectfully of *zakāt* which is one of the pillars upon which the structure of Islam is built, or describe morality and chastity as the values of rural and feudal societies, and those who speak disapprovingly of the Islamic rules of marriage, or describe as fetters the sort of guarantees God has given to Muslim women to help them maintain their chastity. It applies above all to those who deny God's absolute sovereignty and His authority to legislate for human life in political, social, economic and legal fields, claiming that human beings may legislate for themselves without reference to God's law. All those are included as ones who, *`take their religion for a pastime and a sport'*. Every Muslim is commanded to stay away from them except to remind them of their duty towards God. They are among the wrongdoers and unbelievers described in this verse as ones who are *held in pledge for what they have done'*. They are threatened with having to drink boiling water and having to endure painful suffering for their disbelief.

2. The Prophet, and indeed every Muslim is further instructed to remind these people of God and warn them against being held in pledge and destroyed in consequence of what they have done. They are to be reminded that they cannot enjoy any support against God, and no one can intercede with Him on their behalf. No ransom will be accepted from them. The Qur'ānic style here is exceedingly beautiful and effective: "*Remind them with this (Qur'ān), lest every human being should be held in pledge for whatever he has done, when he shall have none to protect him from God, and none to intercede for him. If he were to offer any conceivable ransom, it shall not be accepted from him.*" (Verse 70) Every single soul will have to account for itself, without support, and when no ransom is of any use. As for those who have taken their religion in jest and been beguiled by the life of this world, they are already held in pledge for what they have done. Their doom is sealed: "*Those are the ones who are held in pledge for what they have done. Scalding water shall they drink, and grievous suffering awaits them because they were unbelievers.*" The scalding water, which boils in their throats and stomachs, and the painful suffering which ensues are a fitting recompense for their ridicule of faith.

3. Speaking of the unbelievers, God describes them as *'Those who take their religion for a pastime and a sport'*. Is it truly *their* religion? This description fits perfectly those who declared their acceptance of Islam and then treated their religion as an object of ridicule. There were some people like that to whom the appellation `hypocrites' was given, but they were in Madinah. Can the same

statement apply to unbelievers who did not embrace Islam in the first place? Well, Islam is the religion of all mankind, including those who do not believe in it, since it is the only faith God accepts from human beings ever since the revelation of the message preached by the Prophet Muĥammad, the last of all messengers. Hence, anyone who rejects it actually rejects his own faith. Hence, it is significant that the possessive pronoun is used in the beginning of this verse: "*Stay away from those who take their religion for a pastime and a sport.*" It is most probably, and God knows best, a reference to the fact that Islam is a religion for all mankind. Whoever makes fun of it, even though he may be an idolater, actually makes fun of his own religion.

We probably still need to explain who are meant by the term `idolaters'. They are those who claim that any being has a share of God's attributes. This may take the form of believing in the existence of deities other than God, or offering worship and performing rituals to anyone other than God, or acknowledging the authority to legislate to anyone besides God. Needless to say, the term idolaters also includes those who claim for themselves any of these, however strongly they may profess to be Muslims. We should then be clear about who belongs to our faith.

4. The last point concerns the limits within which it is permissible to sit with the wrongdoers, or idolaters, and those who take religion as an object of fun and ridicule. As we have already mentioned, this is permissible only when it is done to remind them of divine faith and to warn them against disobeying God. It can have no other purpose. Once we realize that they engage in idle talk about God's revelations or treat them as an object of ridicule we must leave their company immediately. In commenting on this verse, al-Qurṭubī explains the rulings mentioned in the Qur'ān: "This verse provides an answer in God's Book to anyone who claims that high standing Imams and their followers may have social contacts with wrongdoers, or may try to protect themselves by pretending to accept their views as correct."[23]

Our view is that the Qur'ānic verse allows mixing with the wrongdoers in order to admonish and warn them, and to correct their erring views. Mixing with them and keeping quiet about what they say and do in order to protect ourselves is unacceptable, because it imparts an impression of accepting falsehood and rejecting the truth. In addition, it deceives people and degrades the divine faith and its advocates. Such a situation is totally unacceptable.

Al-Qurṭubī quotes a few statements by other scholars: "Ibn Khuwayz Mindād says: `Anyone who engages in vain discourse about God's revelations should be

[23] Al-Qurṭubī, Jāmi` *li-Ahkām al-Qur'ān,* Vol. *7,* p. 12.

boycotted, whether he is a believer or an unbeliever. Our colleagues also disallow entry into the land ruled by the enemy or entry into their churches and temples, as well as mixing socially with unbelievers and those who invent deviant practices and claim them to be Islamic. It is also not permissible to be sympathetic to them or to argue with them. One of these inventors once said to Abū `Imrān al-Nakha`ī: "Let me say one word to you". Al-Nakha`ī turned away, saying: "Not even half a word". The same attitude was reported of Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī. Al-Fuđayl ibn `Iyād says: "If one loves a person who practises deviant inventions, God will cause his good actions to be wasted and will cause his conviction to be shaky. A person who gives his daughter in marriage to a deviant inventor is unkind to her, and one who mixes with such a person has no share of wisdom. If God knows a person to truly dislike deviant inventors, I hope He will forgive him his sins." The Prophet is quoted by his wife, `Ā'ishah as saying: He who respects a person practising deviant inventions actually helps to destroy Islam'.[24]

All these statements speak about a person who practises deviant inventions, although he continues to believe in the divine faith. Needless to say, he is in a much better position than the person who claims for himself the attributes of Godhead by promulgating laws that are in conflict with divine law, or one who acknowledges his authority to do so. Such claims indicate total disbelief or polytheism. Early scholars did not have to deal with such situations after the establishment of Islam. No one made any such claims while saying at the same time that he was Muslim. This was unknown until the French occupation of Egypt under Napoleon when the majority of people turned their backs on their faith. Obviously, the statements of past scholars do not apply to the present situation which exceeds by far what they have described and the rulings they made concerning it.

[24] Al-Qurṭubī, ibid., p. 133.

10
Sovereign of All the Worlds

قُلۡ أَنَدۡعُواْ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنفَعُنَا
وَلَا يَضُرُّنَا وَنُرَدُّ عَلَىٰٓ أَعۡقَابِنَا بَعۡدَ إِذۡ
هَدَىٰنَا ٱللَّهُ كَٱلَّذِي ٱسۡتَهۡوَتۡهُ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ فِي
ٱلۡأَرۡضِ حَيۡرَانَ لَهُۥٓ أَصۡحَٰبٞ يَدۡعُونَهُۥٓ
إِلَى ٱلۡهُدَى ٱئۡتِنَاۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ
هُوَ ٱلۡهُدَىٰۖ وَأُمِرۡنَا لِنُسۡلِمَ لِرَبِّ
ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٧١

Say: Shall we invoke, instead of God, something that can neither benefit nor harm us, and shall we turn back on our heels after God has given us guidance, like one whom the satans have lured away in the land, blunders along perplexed. Yet he has companions who call out to him, "Come to us for guidance." Say: In truth, God's guidance is the only guidance. We are commanded to surrender ourselves to the Lord of all the worlds. (71)

وَأَنۡ أَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَٱتَّقُوهُۚ وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ
إِلَيۡهِ تُحۡشَرُونَ ٧٢

And to attend regularly to prayers and to fear Him. It is to Him you all shall be gathered. (72)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۖ وَيَوۡمَ يَقُولُ كُن
فَيَكُونُۚ قَوۡلُهُ ٱلۡحَقُّۚ وَلَهُ ٱلۡمُلۡكُ يَوۡمَ
يُنفَخُ فِي ٱلصُّورِۚ عَٰلِمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِۚ
وَهُوَ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٱلۡخَبِيرُ ٧٣

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in truth. Whenever He says, "Be," it shall be. His word is the truth. All sovereignty shall be His on the Day when the trumpet is blown. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that is manifest. He alone is truly wise, all-aware. (73)

Overview

This short passage of three verses is characterized by a powerful rhythm. It begins with a statement of the essential characteristics of Godhead and a denouncement of those who turn away from guidance to sink back into disbelief and their associating partners with God. It portrays a person who is totally lost, bewildered, not knowing where to turn, and this emphasizes the meaning of turning away from faith after having believed in God. The passage then emphasizes that God's guidance is the only true guidance. It ends on a high note as it speaks of God's total sovereignty and His complete authority over all creation. On the Day of Resurrection, even the most hardened atheists cannot entertain any doubt about His complete sovereignty, and then to Him all creation returns.

Bewilderment After Guidance

> *Say: Shall we invoke, instead of God, something that can neither benefit nor harm us, and shall we turn back on our heels after God has given us guidance, like one whom the satans have lured away in the land, blunders along perplexed. Yet he has companions who call out to him, "Come to us for guidance." Say: In truth, God's guidance is the only guidance. We are commanded to surrender ourselves to the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 71)

The passage starts with the instruction, *`Say'*. This is used often in this *sūrah* to formulate a recognition that all authority belongs to God and that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is the one chosen to convey a message and warn people against its rejection. As it imparts a feeling of the seriousness of the message, we are also made to understand that the Prophet does no more than what he is bidden. He implements his instructions with complete dedication.

"Say: Shall we invoke, instead of God, something that can neither benefit nor harm us?" (Verse 71) This is an order to the Prophet to tell the unbelievers that what they do is to invoke and appeal to beings other than God, allowing those beings to lead them where they please, when they cannot actually benefit or harm them in any way. This is true, whether those beings whom they invoke are idols of stone, trees, spirits, angels, devils or other human beings. They only have one quality in common, namely, that they can bring no benefit and cause no harm. Every movement in the universe occurs by God's will. Hence, what God does not sanction cannot take place. Nothing happens except what He approves of. Thus, the Prophet is instructed to denounce every type of worship, submission or appeal to anyone other than God and to make it clear that every action of this sort is absolutely absurd.

This instruction to the Prophet might have been given by way of reply to the suggestions made by the unbelievers to the Prophet for working out a compromise whereby he would join them in invoking their deities in return for their joining him in worshipping his Lord. On the other hand, it might have been an outright denunciation of the practices of the idolaters and a declaration by the Prophet and the believers that their way could have no meeting point with that followed by the unbelievers. Either way, the final result is the same. We have a strong denunciation of this absurdity which no human intellect can accept once it is freed of inherited traditions and prevailing values and is allowed to judge objectively for itself.

To emphasise the association of partners with God and to strengthen its denunciation, the *sūrah* portrays these beliefs in contrast to the concept of God's oneness and submission to Him alone. It is to this concept that He has guided the believers: "*Say: 'Shall we invoke, instead of God, something that can neither benefit nor harm us, and shall we turn back on our heels after God has given us guidance?'*" (Verse 71) To revert to idolatry is, then, a turning back on one's heels in a retrogressive movement after one has achieved considerable progress.

This is followed by a vividly realistic and inspiring scene: "*Like one whom the satans have lured away in the land, blunders along perplexed. Yet he has companions who call out to him, 'Come to us for guidance.'*" (Verse 71) The scene is full of life. It describes the loss and bewilderment that inevitably overwhelms any person who reverts to idolatry after having believed in God's oneness. He finds himself torn between believing in the Supreme Lord who has no partners, and numerous deities who are powerless. He is confused, unable to determine where to turn for guidance. He is lost, bewildered. How miserable is his lot for being lured away, perplexed and for committing blunders. The word `lure' is highly descriptive. The person we see in this scene does not follow the direction into which he is lured in order to establish a well-defined objective, even though it leads to error. He has, on the other side, friends and companions who have followed proper guidance, and who beckon him to come over to them. Between the lure of the devils and the beckoning of his guided companions this person continues to blunder along, unable to determine where to go and which side to join. His psychological suffering looms large, so much so that we actually feel it as it is described.

Every time I read these verses I can see this scene in front of me and feel all the confusion, hesitation and bewilderment with which it overflows. But that was merely a mental exercise. More recently, I have known real-life cases that answer this description very accurately. All the confusion was there to see and all the suffering to feel. These were examples of people who had known the faith and experienced what it meant to believe, but who then turned back on their heels in order to worship false deities, under the pressure of fear or temptation. No matter how strong or otherwise

their faith was, their turning back subjected them to this utter misery. As I saw these people, the full import of these verses became much clearer to me.

The scene is followed by a clear statement outlining the right way which all people should follow: *"Say: 'In truth, God's guidance is the only guidance. We are commanded to surrender ourselves to the Lord of all the worlds, and to attend regularly to prayers and to fear Him.'"* (Verses 71-2) This decisive statement fits perfectly with the psychological situation described here. When someone fully appreciates the type of bewilderment the Qur'ānic verse describes and the suffering of anyone who so experiences such bewilderment, he is ready to receive with reassurance such a decisive statement and accept it without hesitation. *"Say: 'In truth, God's guidance is the only guidance.'"* (Verse 71) This is an absolute certainty. Whenever people abandon this guidance and replace it with man-made concepts, regimes, laws and values they find themselves lost in absolute bewilderment.

Guidance Followed by Complete Submission

God has given man the ability to recognize and appreciate some of the laws of nature, its forces and potentials so that he may be able to use these in discharging the task assigned to him of building the earth and promoting human life and civilization. But man has not been granted by God the ability to get to the core of the absolute truths of the universe or to fathom the world which lies beyond the reach of his perceptions. This world includes the workings of his own mind and soul, and even the workings of his own organs and the causes which enable his body to function properly, according to a definite system and a particular fashion.

Hence, man is in need of divine guidance concerning everything that relates to his own nature, including faith, morals, values and standards, systems and laws. Only with such guidance can man regulate his life as it should be regulated. Whenever man adopts God's guidance, he finds himself following the right track, because *"God's guidance is the only guidance"*. Whenever man abandons God's guidance completely or deviates from it partially in order to replace it with something else, he loses his way. This is due to the fact that whatever is in conflict with God's guidance represents error and loss. There is simply no third cause: *"What is in conflict with the truth other than error."* (10: 32)

Humanity continues to endure the terrible effects of going astray, for these are inevitable when mankind moves away from God's guidance. Indeed, this is the one historical inevitability which is certain to take place because, unlike those inevitabilities claimed by the advocates of different philosophies, this one is determined by God. Anyone who wishes to look closely at the misery to which people expose themselves when they deviate from God's guidance does not need to

look far. That misery is everywhere for us to see. Those who are endowed with insight and intelligence continue to raise their voices to warn against it.

The Qur'ānic verse states clearly that human beings must submit themselves to God alone, offer worship to Him and continue to fear Him alone: *"We are commanded to surrender ourselves to the Lord of all the worlds, and to attend regularly to our prayers and to fear Him."* (Verses 71-2)

The instructions given to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) are such that he has to declare in absolute clarity that God's guidance is the only guidance. As such, we are commanded to submit to the Lord of all the universe, because to Him alone all the worlds submit. Why should man be the only exception out of all creation when everything in the universe submits to God's absolute Lordship? The reference made here to the fact that God is `the Lord of all the worlds' comes at the right time. It emphasizes an undeniable fact that all the worlds, whether known or unknown to us, submit to the laws God has set in operation and cannot break away from them. Biologically, man is also subject to the laws of nature. What he needs to do, then, is to submit also in the area in which he has been given a choice: to follow guidance or to sink in error. When man chooses to submit to God in the same way as he does biologically, all his affairs will be set aright, because harmony will be established between his constitution and his action, between his body and his soul, between his present life and his life to come. The declaration made by God's Messenger and his followers that they have complied with the commandment to surrender themselves to God is enough to inspire anyone to open his mind and make himself ready to respond to the divine instruction.

After the declaration of surrender to the Lord of all the worlds is given, some of the duties required of man are given in terms of acts of worship and attitudes: *"Attend regularly to prayers and to fear Him."* (Verse 72) The most essential thing, then, is complete submission to God and the acknowledgement of His Lordship over the universe. The offering of worship and the moulding of conscious attitudes follow from this, because these cannot be done properly unless they are based on the solid foundation of man's submission to God.

The final note in this passage brings together a number of essential components of the concept of faith, namely, resurrection, creation, wisdom and awareness of all that takes place in the universe. All these are attributes so that our concept of God is properly formulated: *"It is to Him you all shall be gathered. He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in truth. Whenever He says, Be,' it shall be. His word is the truth. All sovereignty shall be His on the day when the trumpet is blown. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that is manifest. He alone is truly wise, all-aware."* (Verses 72-3)

Since all creation will be gathered before the Lord of all the worlds, submission to Him alone is absolutely essential. It is only wise that people should consider their future in the light of the fact that they will inevitably be gathered to God. They better submit to Him, as all the worlds and all creation do, before they are brought to account in front of Him. We see how the fact of resurrection is used here to convince people that it is in their best interests to submit to God right at the beginning. Especially since they have no option but to submit to Him in the end.

"*He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in truth.*" (Verse 73) This is another undeniable fact mentioned here to influence people into choosing the right course of submission to God. If they do, they only surrender to the One who has created the heavens and the earth. Needless to say, the one who creates is the one who owns, controls and determines the destiny of the heavens and the earth and all that lives in or on them. Moreover, this creation has been made *`in truth'*. This is to refuse all the conjectural theories advanced by philosophers, particularly Plato and the Utopians, which suggest that this physical world of ours is a delusion and has no real substance. The Qur'ānic statement goes further than refuting such theories. It makes it clear that the truth is an essential element in the foundation, as well as the destiny of this universe. The truth which people seek and to which they turn is supported by the truth which is essential in the nature of existence. Thus, it becomes an overpowering force which sweeps all falsehood away. Indeed, falsehood cannot establish any roots in the structure of the universe. It is only *`like an evil tree torn out of the earth and shorn of all its roots'*. Falsehood is like swelling foam surfacing over running water: it has no substance. This is again a profoundly powerful statement of fact.

A believer feels that the truth which he advocates and feels within himself is directly linked to the greater truth manifested in the universe, and this, in turn, is directly linked to the absolute truth of God. In another *sūrah,* we read this Qur'ānic statement: "*Indeed, God is the ultimate truth.*" (22: 62) Equipped with this realization a believer views falsehood as no more than a large bubble which is certain to explode. Falsehood may indeed manifest itself as large and powerful and able to cause believers much harm. The fact remains, however, that it has no root to support its structure. It soon disappears and becomes forgotten as if it never existed.

When an unbeliever contemplates this truth, he is bound to experience a feeling of awe. He may give up his falsehood and accept God's guidance.

"*Whenever He says, 'Be,' it shall be.*" (Verse 73) His power dominates all, and His will is unrestrained. He creates, changes and replaces as He pleases. This fact is mentioned here for a dual purpose: it helps the proper formulation of the correct concept of faith in the believers' hearts and it inspires those who are called upon to submit to God, the Lord of all the worlds, the Creator of everything, the One who

says to anything He wishes to create, "Be", and it is instantly there.

"His word is the truth." (Verse 73) This fact applies to God's word, *"Be"*, which causes creation. This His commandment that all creation should submit to Him alone, this His word providing legislation for mankind to implement, and this His word which tells us about the past, present and future, the origin of creation, resurrection, reckoning and reward. In all this, His word is the truth. Hence, those who associate with Him partners that can cause no benefit or harm, those who follow the bidding of anyone other than Him, or who adopt any philosophy other than that of the divine faith, or who implement any legislation other than His code are advised to surrender themselves to Him alone.

"All sovereignty shall be His on the Day when the trumpet is blown." (Verse 73) On the Day of Resurrection, the trumpet is sounded in a way that no human being has thus far heard. It is part of what God has kept to Himself. The nature of that trumpet and how people respond to it remain unknown to anyone other than God. The reports available to us suggest that it is a horn-like trumpet, made of light. It is blown by an angel. As the dead in their graves hear it, they immediately rise up. Indeed, this is the second blow given on that trumpet. The first one causes all creatures in the heavens and on earth to be stunned, with the exception of those God chooses to exempt. This is mentioned in verse 68 of *Sūrah* 39: *"The trumpet will be sounded, and all creatures that are in the heavens and all that are on earth will fall down senseless, unless they be such as God wills to exempt. And then it will be sounded again, and they all stand up and will begin to see."* These descriptions of the trumpet and the effects of its blowing make it clear to us that it is something different from what human beings have seen or heard on this earth or what they visualize. It belongs to the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception. We know about it only by virtue of what God has chosen to inform us of its shape and effect. We confine ourselves to this information so as not to indulge in speculation which lacks solid foundation.

On that day when the trumpet is sounded, even the rejecters and the blind will begin to see and realize that all sovereignty belongs to God alone. No one has any power other than Him. No will can operate other than His. Hence, those who in this life refuse to submit to Him willingly are well advised to change their attitude before they have to submit to His absolute power on the day when the trumpet is blown.

"He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that is manifest." (Verse 73) His knowledge is perfect, absolute. It includes everything that is kept away from us as well as that which we see in the universe. Nothing of people's affairs and no part of their lives can be hidden from Him. Again, they will follow good counsel if they surrender themselves to Him, worship Him and be God-fearing. This fact is mentioned here for its own sake and is used as something with which to influence those who reject the faith.

"*He alone is truly wise, all-aware.*" (Verse 73) He conducts all the affairs of the universe which He has created, as well as the affairs of the creatures over whom He has absolute power in this life and in the life to come. All that He does is characterized by wisdom and is based on unbounded knowledge. When they submit to His law, they will enjoy the happiness that is imparted to their lives by His wisdom. They will bring themselves out of their loss and bewilderment to enjoy His guidance and learn happiness from His wisdom.

11
Guidance for All Nations

۞ وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ ءَازَرَ أَتَتَّخِذُ أَصْنَامًا ءَالِهَةً ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰكَ وَقَوْمَكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٧٤﴾

Thus Abraham said to his father Azar: "Do you take idols for gods? I see that you and your people have obviously gone astray." (74)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُرِىٓ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ مَلَكُوتَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَلِيَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُوقِنِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

Thus did we give Abraham an insight into [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth; so that he may become a firm believer. (75)

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ ٱلَّيْلُ رَءَا كَوْكَبًا ۖ قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّى ۖ فَلَمَّآ أَفَلَ قَالَ لَآ أُحِبُّ ٱلْءَافِلِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

When the night drew its shadow over him, he saw a star; and he exclaimed: "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said: "I do not love things that set." (76)

فَلَمَّا رَءَا ٱلْقَمَرَ بَازِغًا قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّى ۖ فَلَمَّآ أَفَلَ قَالَ لَئِن لَّمْ يَهْدِنِى رَبِّى لَأَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Then when he beheld the rising moon, he said: "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said: "If my Lord does not guide me, I will most certainly be one of those who go astray." (77)

فَلَمَّا رَءَا ٱلشَّمْسَ بَازِغَةً قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّى هَٰذَآ أَكْبَرُ ۖ فَلَمَّآ أَفَلَتْ قَالَ يَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّمَّا تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

Then when he beheld the sun rising, he said: "This is my Lord! This is the greatest of all!" But when it also set, he said: "My people, I disown all that you associate with God." (78)

إِنِّي وَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّذِي فَطَرَ
ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ حَنِيفًا ۖ وَمَآ أَنَا۠
مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾

وَحَآجَّهُۥ قَوْمُهُۥ ۚ قَالَ أَتُحَٰٓجُّوٓنِّي فِي ٱللَّهِ
وَقَدْ هَدَىٰنِ ۚ وَلَآ أَخَافُ مَا تُشْرِكُونَ
بِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ رَبِّي شَيْـًٔا ۗ وَسِعَ رَبِّي
كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عِلْمًا ۗ أَفَلَا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَكَيْفَ أَخَافُ مَآ أَشْرَكْتُمْ وَلَا
تَخَافُونَ أَنَّكُمْ أَشْرَكْتُم بِٱللَّهِ مَا لَمْ
يُنَزِّلْ بِهِۦ عَلَيْكُمْ سُلْطَٰنًا ۚ فَأَىُّ
ٱلْفَرِيقَيْنِ أَحَقُّ بِٱلْأَمْنِ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ
تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوٓا۟ إِيمَٰنَهُم بِظُلْمٍ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمُ ٱلْأَمْنُ وَهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

وَتِلْكَ حُجَّتُنَآ ءَاتَيْنَٰهَآ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ عَلَىٰ
قَوْمِهِۦ ۚ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَٰتٍ مَّن نَّشَآءُ ۗ إِنَّ
رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٨٣﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُۥٓ إِسْحَٰقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۚ كُلًّا
هَدَيْنَا ۚ وَنُوحًا هَدَيْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَمِن
ذُرِّيَّتِهِۦ دَاوُۥدَ وَسُلَيْمَٰنَ وَأَيُّوبَ
وَيُوسُفَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى

"I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God." (79)

His people argued with him. He said: "Do you argue with me about God, when it is He who has given me guidance? I do not fear those beings you associate with Him, [for no evil can befall me] unless my Lord so wills. My Lord embraces all things within His knowledge; will you not, then, reflect?" (80)

"And why should I fear anything you worship side by side with Him, when you are not afraid of associating with God partners without His ever giving you any warrant? Which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure, if you happen to know?" (81)

"Those who believe and do not taint their faith with wrongdoing are the ones who will feel secure, as they follow the right path." (82)

This was Our argument with which We furnished Abraham against his people. We raise whom We will, degree after degree. Your Lord is Wise, All- Knowing. (83)

We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and We guided each of them as We had guided Noah before them. Among his offspring were [the Prophets] David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward those who do good. (84)

ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

وَزَكَرِيَّا وَيَحۡيَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَإِلۡيَاسَۖ كُلّٞ مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَإِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَٱلۡيَسَعَ وَيُونُسَ وَلُوطٗاۚ وَكُلّٗا فَضَّلۡنَا عَلَى ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَمِنۡ ءَابَآئِهِمۡ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمۡ وَإِخۡوَٰنِهِمۡۖ وَٱجۡتَبَيۡنَٰهُمۡ وَهَدَيۡنَٰهُمۡ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ﴿٨٧﴾

ذَٰلِكَ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ يَهۡدِي بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦۚ وَلَوۡ أَشۡرَكُواْ لَحَبِطَ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَٱلۡحُكۡمَ وَٱلنُّبُوَّةَۚ فَإِن يَكۡفُرۡ بِهَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ فَقَدۡ وَكَّلۡنَا بِهَا قَوۡمٗا لَّيۡسُواْ بِهَا بِكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَدَى ٱللَّهُۖ فَبِهُدَىٰهُمُ ٱقۡتَدِهۡۗ قُل لَّآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ أَجۡرًاۖ إِنۡ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكۡرَىٰ لِلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

وَمَا قَدَرُواْ ٱللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدۡرِهِۦٓ إِذۡ قَالُواْ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ بَشَرٖ مِّن شَيۡءٖۗ قُلۡ مَنۡ أَنزَلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ ٱلَّذِي جَآءَ بِهِۦ مُوسَىٰ نُورٗا وَهُدٗى لِّلنَّاسِ تَجۡعَلُونَهُۥ قَرَاطِيسَ تُبۡدُونَهَا وَتُخۡفُونَ كَثِيرٗاۖ وَعُلِّمۡتُم مَّا لَمۡ تَعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنتُمۡ وَلَآ ءَابَآؤُكُمۡۖ قُلِ ٱللَّهُۖ ثُمَّ

And Zachariah, John, Jesus and Elijah; who were all righteous. (85)

And Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot. Every one of them did We favour above all people. (86)

And [We exalted likewise] some of their forefathers, their offspring and their brethren. We chose them and guided them to a straight path. (87)

Such is God's guidance; He bestows it on whomever He wills of His servants. Had they associated partners with Him, in vain would certainly have been all that they ever did. (88)

On these did We bestow revelation, wisdom and prophet- hood. If this generation were to deny this truth, We have certainly entrusted it to others who will never deny it. (89)

Those are the ones whom God has guided. Follow, then, their guidance, [and] say: "No reward do I ask of you for this. It is but an admonition to all mankind." (90)

No true understanding of God have they when they say: "God has never revealed anything to any human being." Say: Who, then, revealed the Book which Moses brought to people as a light and a guidance? You transcribe it on sheets to show around, while you suppress much. You have been taught [by it] what neither you nor your forefathers had ever known. Say: God, and leave them to their play and

ذَرۡهُمۡ فِي خَوۡضِهِمۡ يَلۡعَبُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

foolish chatter. (91)

وَهَٰذَا كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ مُبَارَكٞ مُّصَدِّقُ ٱلَّذِي بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ وَلِتُنذِرَ أُمَّ ٱلۡقُرَىٰ وَمَنۡ حَوۡلَهَاۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦ وَهُمۡ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمۡ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

This is a blessed book which We have revealed, confirming what came before it, that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it. Those who believe in the life to come do believe in it, and they are ever- mindful of their prayers. (92)

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوۡ قَالَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ وَلَمۡ يُوحَ إِلَيۡهِ شَيۡءٞ وَمَن قَالَ سَأُنزِلُ مِثۡلَ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُۗ وَلَوۡ تَرَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ فِي غَمَرَٰتِ ٱلۡمَوۡتِ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ بَاسِطُوٓاْ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ أَخۡرِجُوٓاْ أَنفُسَكُمُۖ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ تُجۡزَوۡنَ عَذَابَ ٱلۡهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ غَيۡرَ ٱلۡحَقِّ وَكُنتُمۡ عَنۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ تَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, or says: "This has been revealed to me," when nothing has been revealed to him? Or one who says, "I can reveal the like of what God has revealed"? If you could but see the wrongdoers when they are in the throes of death and the angels stretch out their hands [and say]: "Give up your souls!" Today you shall be rewarded with a humiliating punishment for having attributed to God something that is untrue and, in your arrogance, scorned His revelations. (93)

وَلَقَدۡ جِئۡتُمُونَا فُرَٰدَىٰ كَمَا خَلَقۡنَٰكُمۡ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٖ وَتَرَكۡتُم مَّا خَوَّلۡنَٰكُمۡ وَرَآءَ ظُهُورِكُمۡۖ وَمَا نَرَىٰ مَعَكُمۡ شُفَعَآءَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ زَعَمۡتُمۡ أَنَّهُمۡ فِيكُمۡ شُرَكَٰٓؤُاْۚ لَقَد تَّقَطَّعَ بَيۡنَكُمۡ وَضَلَّ عَنكُم مَّا كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

And now, indeed, you have come to Us individually, just as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind all that We conferred on you. Nor do We see with you those intercessors of yours whom you had claimed to be partners in your affairs. Broken are the ties which bound you, and that which you have been asserting has failed you. (94)

Overview

Here begins a very long passage which stretches across twenty-one verses but which constitutes a single unit, tackling one subject, which is indeed the main theme

running throughout the whole *sūrah.* As has already been explained, the *sūrah* establishes this theme on a solid foundation, strengthened by a comprehensive explanation of the nature of Godhead, servitude to God and the links between them. The approach adopted here, however, is different from the one we encountered earlier in the *sūrah.* Here, we find a story followed by comments, coupled with a number of inspiring elements. One element used here that deserves particular mention is an elaborate scene depicting our approaching deaths.

This long passage provides a vivid picture of the long procession of the faithful, beginning with the Prophet Noah and travelling down the ages until the time of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon them both). Before this procession is shown, the nature of Godhead is outlined as instinctively perceived by a saintly servant of God, the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him). We have a splendid scene of unperverted human nature seeking the true Lord, whose presence it clearly senses, although at the surface it comes face to face with distortions and misconceptions. It continues its search until it can formulate a proper and correct concept that corresponds to the true image it has deep down of its true Lord. From within it, it has strong proof of that concept which is more firmly founded than what is superficially apparent. This is outlined in the argument Abraham advances to refute his people's theories, after he has been reassured that his new concept is the true one.

The *sūrah* continues with the long procession of the faithful, led by the noble prophets and messengers. As we look attentively at this procession, all concepts of polytheism and all the arguments of those who reject the truth are shown to be worthless. All the faithful across all ages are seen as constituting one nation and one community, the later generations of which follow the same guidance received by earlier generations. Thus, considerations of time, place, race, nationality, lineage or colour are seen to be of no value whatsoever. The tie that links all the faithful is the single faith preached by the noble prophets (peace be upon them all).

This is a splendid picture followed by a powerful commentary making it clear that whoever turns his back on God's guidance shall find that all his deeds avail him nothing. People are required to follow the divine guidance outlined by the prophets who seek no wages for teaching their people. They only fulfil the mission entrusted to them by God.

This is followed by a denunciation of those who claim that God neither sent messengers nor vouchsafed revelations to any human being.

It denounces those who do not hold God in the position He deserves, because they claim, in effect, that He abandons people to their own devices. These are they who rely on their finite reason, influenced as it is by their desires and shortcomings, to come up with codes and concepts to implement in their lives. Needless to say, this

does not fit with God's Lordship, knowledge, wisdom, justice and grace. Indeed, all these attributes of Godhead require that He sends messengers to His servants and that He gives some of them revelations so that they guide mankind to their Lord and keep their nature pure from any influences that blind them to the truth. An example of this is the book revealed to Moses. Another example is the Qur'ān which endorses all past divine revelations.

As this long passage draws to a close, it denounces those who indulge in false fabrications, claiming that they receive revelations when they do not, or who claim that they are able to produce revelations similar to those God has given to His messengers. Some of the opponents of Islam have indeed made such claims: from receiving inspiration and revelation from God to claiming full prophethood.

The passage concludes with a picture of the unbelievers facing the moment of truth as death approaches them. "*And now, indeed, you have come to Us individually, just as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind all that We conferred on you. Nor do We see with you those intercessors of yours whom you had claimed to be partners in your affairs. Broken are the ties which bound you, and that which you have been asserting has failed you.*" (Verse 94) It is a scene that sends fear into people's hearts and shows the unbelievers' humiliation as part of their punishment for rejecting the truth and concocting false fabrications.

An Instinctive Rejection of Idolatry

> *Thus Abraham said to his father Azar: "Do you take idols for gods? I see that you and your people have obviously gone astray." Thus did we give Abraham an insight into [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth; so that he may become a firm believer. When the night drew its shadow over him, he saw a star; and he exclaimed: "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said: "I do not love things that set." Then when he beheld the rising moon, he said: "This is my Lord!" But when it set, he said: 'If my Lord does not guide me, I will most certainly be one of those who go astray." Then when he beheld the sun rising, he said: "This is my Lord! This is the greatest of all!" But when it also set, he said: "My people, I disown all that you associate with God. I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God."* (Verses 74-9)

This is a splendid scene which the *sūrah* uses to portray healthy human nature initially rejecting all ignorant concepts of idolatry. To undistorted nature, idolatry is no more than an unfounded and totally unacceptable superstition. Rejecting it without hesitation, human nature begins to seek its true Lord with vigorous activity.

It has an innate feeling of the Lord, although it has no well-formulated concept of Him. Hence, it looks up to anything that presents itself as a possible manifestation of God. Soon it discovers that such an object cannot be the true Lord. It does not correspond to what is deeply implanted within human nature of the reality and nature of God and His attributes.

It then experiences the truth revealing itself and shining within. This gives man his greatest joy. He declares his unshakeable belief as he realizes the complete and total correspondence between his innate picture of the Lord and the reality he has consciously discovered. All this is shown in the splendid scene of Abraham and his search for his Lord. In a few short verses, the great experience of Abraham is outlined. As faith establishes its firm roots within him, he declares his belief, fearing no opposition or objection. He is not prepared to make any compromise with his father, family, clan or nation. Every believer must, then, adopt the same attitude as Abraham who faced up to his father and his people with undeniable firmness: "*Thus Abraham said to his father Azar: 'Do you take idols for gods? I see that you and your people have obviously gone astray.'*" (Verse 74)

This is the instinctive argument of nature voiced by Abraham who had not yet consciously recognized his true Lord. When human nature is free of deviation and perversion, it simply cannot accept that those idols worshipped by Abraham's people were gods. It should be remembered here that the ancient Chaldeans, who lived in Iraq at that time, used to worship idols as well as the stars and planets. To Abraham, the deity to be worshipped, to whom people turn for help in all situations, and who has created all living things, cannot be an idol made of stone or wood. It is obvious that those idols cannot create, listen, respond or provide sustenance. Hence, they are not worth worshipping. Indeed, they cannot be considered as deities even if they are given the limited role of being intermediaries between the Lord of the universe and human beings. Such a set-up and practices are, then, all erroneous. Abraham (peace be upon him) recognized this instinctively at the first instant. Indeed, he provides a complete example of human nature as created by God: pure, and free of perversion. It confronts error and deviation with clarity and decisiveness, stating the whole truth, since the matter is one of faith: "*Do you take idols for gods? I see that you and your people have obviously gone astray.*" (Verse 74)

Abraham, the best natured of all people, forbearing, tolerant and fine-mannered, as we gather from his frequent descriptions in the Qur'ān, makes a clear and strong declaration to his father. It would have been expected that his attitude towards his father would be rather different but the question here is one of faith. This supersedes all ties of parenthood and the duties of a son towards his father. It simply overrules the dictates of parenthood and generosity. We should not forget that Abraham is the example that God orders Muslims to follow. This story is related here in the Qur'ān

so that it should be followed by Muslims for all generations to come.

As he demonstrated such a fine, pure nature dedicated to the truth, Abraham deserved that God reveal to him some of the secrets of the universe and some of the pointers to the truth that He has placed everywhere around us. *"Thus did we give Abraham an insight into [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth; so that he may become a firm believer."* (Verse 75)

Nature's Way to the Truth

When Abraham demonstrated that he was not prepared to pervert his nature or becloud his vision, and that he was determined to reject falsehood and follow the truth, God showed him some aspects of the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He let him into some of the secrets of the universe, so that he could reflect on some of the great signs of the truth with which the world around us abounds. Thus, he would be able to make the correct linkage between his pure nature and the pointers to the right faith and guidance. This would then enable him to move from the stage of rejecting falsehood to the stage of conscious recognition of God, the true Lord.

This is indeed the proper line to be followed by human nature. It should demonstrate a consciousness unaffected by false ideas and an open mind which studies the miraculous working of God's power. Such contemplation is certain to benefit by the lessons of what God has created in the universe and receive proper guidance from God as a result.

Let us follow this very interesting journey with Abraham's pure nature. Easy and comfortable as it may appear, it is certainly a tough and demanding journey starting from the point of instinctive belief and ending with a conscious acceptance of faith. It is the sort of faith that initiates action, defining a task to fulfil and a law to implement. God does not abandon human beings or require them to achieve that degree of faith using their reason alone. He shows it to them, clearly outlined in the messages with which He sends His messengers. Thus, He makes the message, not human nature or intellect, the basis of their accountability and the determinant of their destiny. In this, His perfect knowledge of human nature works in conjunction with His justice and His grace.

We should remember that Abraham was God's chosen friend, the father of the nation that includes all people who surrender themselves totally to God Almighty.

"When the night drew its shadow over him, he saw a star; and he exclaimed: 'This is my Lord." But when it set, he said: 'I do not love things that set.'" (Verse 76) The *sūrah* portrays here an image of Abraham as he begins to have serious doubts and then rejects the idols worshipped by his community. He was fully preoccupied with the

question of faith. As we read the Qur'ānic expression, *`When the night drew its shadow over him'*, we see the whole image rising before our eyes. It is as if the night covers Abraham alone, isolating him from all other beings, so that he remains alone with his thoughts and the issue that preoccupies him: *"When the night drew its shadow over him, he saw a star; and he exclaimed: 'This is my Lord."* (Verse 76)

As we have already said, his people worshipped the stars and planets as well as idols. As he despaired of recognizing his true Lord among those idols, he might have hoped to find Him among the other things which his people worshipped. He was certainly aware of the sort of beliefs his people entertained particularly the worship of stars. Nor was this the first time he saw a star. On this night, however, the star spoke to him in an entirely new fashion. The inspiration of the star was in line with Abraham's preoccupations: *"He said: 'This is my Lord.* "'Its shining light and its elevation made the star more plausible to be the Lord than the idols worshipped on the ground. But he soon realized the error in his thinking: *"But when it set, he said: I do not love things that set.'"* (Verse 76) The star, then, sets and can no longer be seen by ordinary creatures. Who, then, will take care of all these creatures when it sets?

Certainly the star cannot be the Lord, because the Lord is always present. This is the simple logic of nature. It cares nothing for theoretical hypotheses or questions of logic. It is simple and decisive. It expresses the instinctive, natural reaction: *"I do not love things that set."* (Verse 76) The relationship that exists between nature and the Lord is one of love, and Abraham's nature has no love for things that set. The deity that nature loves does not set at any time.

"Then when he beheld the rising moon, he said: 'This is my Lord!' But when it set, he said: 'If my Lord does not guide me, I will most certainly be one of those who go astray.'" (Verse 77) This is a very similar experience, as if Abraham has never seen the moon before, and does not know that his people worshipped the moon. To him on that particular night, it was something new: *"He said: 'This is my Lord.'"* Its light spreads all over the place: it is a beautiful light singling it out in the sky. Nevertheless, it sets, while the Lord, as Abraham knows Him instinctively through his unadulterated nature, does not set.

At this moment, Abraham realizes that he needs help from his true Lord, the existence of whom he feels in the depths of his soul. He loves his Lord although he has not yet recognized Him in his consciousness. Therefore, he feels he will remain astray unless his Lord helps him with His guidance and shows him the way. Hence, when he sees the moon setting, he says: *"If my Lord does not guide me, I will most certainly be one of those who go astray."* (Verse 77)

> *Then when he beheld the sun rising, he said: "This is my Lord! This is the greatest of all!" But when it also set, he said: "My people, I disown all that you associate with*

> *God. I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God."* (Verses 78-9)

This is Abraham's third experience with stars, and it is with the sun, the largest, brightest and hottest of visible stars. The sun rises and sets every day, but now it appears to Abraham as something brand new. He is searching for the Lord whom he can recognize with certainty and who can give him reassurance. After his long search, he feels that now he can make a decision: "This *is my Lord! This is the greatest of all!"* (Verse 78) But the sun also sets.

At this moment, everything becomes clear. Contact is made between pure nature and God, the true Lord. Light shines within his searching heart and spreads over the visible world and over man's reason and consciousness. At this moment, Abraham finds his true Lord and realizes that there is complete identity between what he feels deep in his heart and his new, clear concept. He realizes that his Lord is not a bright planet, a rising moon or a shining sun. He is not one to be seen with the human *eye* or felt with other physical senses. He is the one recognized by man's heart, nature, reason and consciousness all alike. He is the one seen everywhere in the universe, the creator of everything eyes behold, senses feel and intellects recognize.

At this point Abraham realizes that there can be no meeting point between him and his people while they continue to worship their false deities. With complete clarity, he dissociates himself from all that they worship and from their methods and philosophies. It should be remembered that they were not atheists who denied God completely, but were rather used to associating those false deities as partners with God. Abraham, on the other hand, turned to God alone. Thus, when the sun set, he said: *"My people, I disown all that you associate with God. I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God."* (Verses 78-9)

This is a firm and decisive decision taken by Abraham who now turns with complete devotion to God, entertaining no hesitation or doubt. How can he do otherwise, when the identity is complete between what he feels deep in his heart and the conclusions he has arrived at after such a long and meaningful search?

A Stronger Claim to Security

Once again we see with our eyes the splendid scene of faith when it is clearly manifest, with established roots and shining over man's whole being. Man is thus reassured, at ease with himself and with the universe around him. The full splendour of this scene comes to its climax in the verses that follow.

We witness the case of the Prophet Abraham as he realizes with all his consciousness the truth of his Lord. He has complete peace of mind as he feels that God has taken him by the hand to guide him to the straight path. His people come to him with their arguments about his declared belief in God's oneness and to warn him against what their idols and deities might inflict on him: *"His people argued with him. He said: Do you argue with me about God, when it is He who has given me guidance? I do not fear those beings you associate with Him, [for no evil can befall me] unless my Lord so wills. My Lord embraces all things within His knowledge; will you not, then, reflect? And why should I fear anything you worship side by side with Him, when you are not afraid of associating with God partners without His ever giving you any warrant? Which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure, if you happen to know?"* (Verses 80-1)

When human nature departs from the right path, it goes astray, and then it is automatically led further astray. The angle between its line and the right path becomes wider and wider, to make any return far more difficult. Abraham's people used to worship idols, planets and stars. They could not appreciate the great divide that separated them from Abraham after he had been helped by God and guided aright. In spite of the clear flimsiness of their concepts and beliefs, they came to him with their arguments.

Abraham, who could feel God within himself and in the universe around him, confronted them with decisiveness and reassurance: *"Do you argue with me about God, when it is He who has given me guidance?"* (Verse 80) He tells them that God Himself has helped him, opened his mind and shown him the right guidance. He has seen Him clearly, consciously in everything He has placed in the universe. How can they, then, argue with him about something he feels deep down within himself? The fact that God has guided him provides all the evidence and argument he needs.

"I do not fear those beings you associate with Him." (Verse 80) This is both natural and logical. Having known God, what and whom would any person fear, when every power other than God's is of no consequence? However, with his strong faith, Abraham does not make any final statement without attaching it to God's free-will and perfect knowledge, *"[for no evil can befall me] unless my Lord so wills. My Lord embraces all things within His knowledge."* (Verse 80) He, thus, entrusts himself to God's care, reassured of His protection. He declares that he fears nothing whatsoever from their deities, since he knows that nothing befalls him except by God's will and with God's knowledge.

"And why should I fear anything you worship side by side with Him, when you are not afraid of associating with God partners without His ever giving you any warrant? Which of the two parties has a better right to feel secure, if you happen to know?" (Verse 81) This is the logic of a believer who has a true understanding of the truth to be found in the universe. If anyone should entertain fear, that person is certainly not Abraham who

believes in God and follows His guidance. How could he fear deities that are powerless, no matter what they are, even though they may wear the mask of tyrannical powers? After all, compared to God's power, theirs is insignificant. How could Abraham, then, fear such powerless deities while his people do not entertain fear as a result of having associated partners with God whom He has not sanctioned? Which party has a stronger claim to security: those who believe in God's oneness and reject the notion of Him having any partners, or a person who ascribes divinity to anything which has no power whatsoever? He tells them that they should answer him if they have any knowledge or true understanding.

But the answer is given by God who passes His verdict with absolute clarity: "*Those who believe and do not taint their faith with wrongdoing are the ones who will feel secure, as they follow the right path.*" (Verse 82) Those who believe and submit themselves purely to God, associating with Him no partners whom they obey or worship, are the ones who deserve security and receive guidance.

"*This was Our argument with which We furnished Abraham against his people. We raise whom We will, degree after degree.*" (Verse 83) This was the argument with which God inspired Abraham to refute all his people's arguments. He showed him how petty and worthless were their concepts and claims that their deities could harm him. It is clear that Abraham's people did not deny God's existence altogether, and did not deny that He had the ultimate power and authority in the universe. They only associated those partners with Him. Abraham confronted them with the fact that a person who submits himself totally to God does not fear anyone besides Him. On the other hand, a person who ascribes divinity to beings other than God is the one to experience fear. Thus, their arguments collapsed while Abraham's argument was triumphant. Abraham was thus raised above his people in rank, faith, argument and position. God thus raises in rank whomever He wills, in accordance with His knowledge and wisdom: "*Your Lord is Wise, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 83)

Before we move on to the next verses in this passage, let us reflect on the sort of life led by the Prophet's Companions as they were addressed by the Qur'ān. They certainly contemplated its meaning, appreciated its teachings and requirements, abiding by its instructions and committing themselves not to deviate from them. We cannot but admire their serious commitment which moulded their generation of believers in a way that enabled them to achieve, by God's will, and in a very short period of time, heights that were superior to anything humanity had ever known.

A report quoted by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, says: "When this verse was revealed, speaking of *Those who believe and do not taint their faith with wrongdoing',* the Prophet's Companions felt down-hearted and wondered: who of us does not wrong himself? God's Messenger told them: `It is not as you think. This is a reference to what Luqmān said to his son: *Do not associate partners with God;*

for, to associate partners with God is serious wrongdoing.[25]

Al-Ṭabarī also reports that after `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb once read, *`Those who believe and do not taint their faith with wrongdoing',* he was much alarmed. He went to Ubayy ibn Ka`b and asked him: "Who is safe after the revelation of this verse? Who of us does not wrong himself? Ubayy said: "May God forgive you. Have you not heard what God says: *To associate partners with God is indeed serious wrongdoing.* (31: 13) This verse means that true believers do not taint their faith by the association of partners with God".[26]

Al-Ṭabarī also reports that a man said to Salmān, one of the Prophet's Companions: "I am very scared by a Qur'ānic verse I read, saying: *Those who believe and do not taint their faith with wrongdoing."* Salmān said: "It refers to associating partners with God." The man said: "To hear this from you is far more welcome to me than having twice as much of everything I own."[27]

These incidents give us an idea of how those people treated the Qur'ān very seriously. They took it as direct commandments which must be implemented and as a final judgement that could not be contested. If they felt that their limited ability could not cope with what was assigned to them, they were scared lest they should be held accountable for it. Their worry would not quieten until they were reassured by God and His Messenger. In their attitude we also recognize the nature of those people whom God has used to accomplish His will in human life.

The Bearers of Divine Guidance

The *sūrah* goes on to provide us with a glimpse of the procession of the faithful, led by the noble messengers, from the time of Noah and Abraham to the last of all prophets and messengers, Muĥammad (peace be upon them all). This procession is shown to be continuous, uninterrupted, particularly since the time of Abraham and the prophets among his offspring. Those prophets are not given here in chronological order, which is the case elsewhere in the Qur'ān, because it is the fact that the procession has been a continuous one that is given importance here, not its historical order.

> *We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, and We guided each of them as We had guided Noah before them. Among his offspring were [the Prophets] David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward those who do good. And Zachariah, John, Jesus and Elijah; who were all righteous. And Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot.*

[25] Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` *al-Bayān,* Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 7, p. 255.
[26] Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 257.
[27] Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 256.

> *Every one of them did We favour above all people. And [We exalted likewise] some of their forefathers, their offspring and their brethren. We chose them and guided them to a straight path. Such is God's guidance; He bestows it on whomever He wills of His servants. Had they associated partners with Him, in vain would certainly have been all that they ever did. On these did We bestow revelation, wisdom and prophethood. If this generation were to deny this truth, We have certainly entrusted it to others who will never deny it; those are the ones whom God has guided. Follow, then, their guidance, (and] say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is but an admonition to all mankind.'"* (Verses 84-90)

These verses mention altogether seventeen messengers and prophets in addition to Noah and Abraham. There is also a reference to others among *`their forefathers, offspring and brethren'.* The verses which name these prophets are concluded with the comments, "*Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 84) *"Every one of them did We favour above all people."* (Verse 86) *"We chose them and guided them to a straight path."* (Verse 87) All these comments endorse the nobility of this group of honourable prophets and the fact that they have been chosen by God and have been guided to the right path. All this, however, is made by way of an introduction to the three statements that follow.

"*Such is God's guidance; He bestows it on whomever He wills of His servants. Had they associated partners with Him, in vain would certainly have been all that they ever did."* (Verse 88) This first statement limits the sources of guidance in this world to what has been preached by God's messengers. The part of which we are absolutely certain and which we must follow is the Qur'ān, the single source which God Himself declares to be His guidance, and to which He guides whomever He wills of His servants. If those guided human beings deviate from the path of believing in God's oneness and change the source from which they receive their guidance, associating partners with God, in faith or worship, then they will see all their labours go to waste. The Arabic expression draws on an image of cattle grazing in a poisoned area: their bellies swell and then they die. This is the linguistic association of the expression used here for the wasting of their labours.

"*On these did We bestow revelation, wisdom and prophethood. If this generation were to deny this truth, We have certainly entrusted it to others who will never deny it."* (Verse 89) The first statement defines the source of guidance, limiting it to what has been given to God's messengers and conveyed by them. The second statement makes it clear that those messengers mentioned in the preceding verses were the ones to whom God has given the Book, wisdom, authority and prophethood. The Arabic word used for wisdom in this context also connotes power and authority. Both aspects are acceptable within the context of this verse. Some of these messengers were given scriptures, such as the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms given to David and the

Gospel given to Jesus. Others were given power, such as David and Solomon. All of them were given authority in the sense that their revelations detailed God's verdict, and the religion they preached outlined God's authority over their hearts and all affairs. God has sent His messengers to be obeyed and revealed His book to be implemented, as clearly stated in other verses.

All these prophets and messengers were also given wisdom and prophethood. They have been entrusted with God's message: to convey it to mankind and to supervise its implementation. If the Arab idolaters deny it, God has no need of them. Those prophets and the people who have followed them and believed in them are more than sufficient. This is an old fact that had established its roots and spread them wide. It is a long procession that continues uninterrupted. The same message has been conveyed by one messenger after another, accepted by those whom God has guided, knowing that they deserve His guidance.

This statement gives reassurance to the believers, although they may be few in number. Their community does not stand alone, isolated. It forms a branch of a huge tree with some roots and branches reaching to the sky. They are a group forming part of an honourable and noble procession that enjoys God's guidance. Every individual believer, everywhere on earth and in every generation is strong indeed and enjoys a noble position. He belongs to a community of believers that has continued for countless generations throughout human history.

"*Those are the ones whom God has guided. Follow, then, their guidance, [and] say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is but an admonition to all mankind.*" (Verse 90) Those noble leaders of the procession of faith are the ones who have been given God's guidance. What they received from God provides an example to be followed by God's Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad, and those who follow him. He should follow only that guidance and submit only to its ruling. It is the only guidance which he preaches. As he does so, he says to those who are called on to believe in it: "*No reward do I ask of you for this. It is but an admonition to all mankind.*" (Verse 90) It is not the monopoly of any community, race or generation. It is God's guidance given to mankind in all ages and generations. The Messenger seeks no reward for his effort. His reward comes only from God.

Acknowledgement of God's Glory

The *sūrah* continues with the theme of God's messengers and their messages, and denounces those who deny the divine messages, describing them as having no true understanding of God, His wisdom, grace and justice. It states that the final message follows the same pattern of earlier messages, and that the Qur'ān, the last of the Books revealed by God, endorses earlier scriptures. All this fits beautifully with the

procession of the faithful, led by the noble prophets, which was the subject matter of the preceding verses.

> *"No true understanding of God have they when they say: 'God has never revealed anything to any human being.' Say: Who, then, revealed the Book which Moses brought to people as a light and a guidance? You transcribe it on sheets to show around, while you suppress much. You have been taught [by it] what neither you nor your forefathers had ever known. Say: God, and leave them to their play and foolish chatter. This is a blessed book which We have revealed, confirming what came before it, that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it. Those who believe in the life to come do believe in it, and they are ever- mindful of their prayers."* (Verses 91-2)

The unbelievers used to stubbornly argue that God had never sent a human messenger, nor had he ever revealed anything to a human being. They maintained this in spite of the fact that there lived alongside them in the Arabian Peninsula a number of Jewish communities. The Arab idolaters did not deny that the Jews had a revealed book or that the Torah was sent down to Moses (peace be upon him). Those Arabs made this argument in the midst of their stubborn refusal to accept the message given to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Hence, the Qur'ān denounces their claims and reminds them of Moses's scriptures.

"No true understanding of God have they when they say: 'God has never revealed anything to any human being.'" (Verse 91) This claim by the ignorant unbelievers in Makkah is reiterated by unbelievers in every period of history. It is even reiterated nowadays by those who claim that religions where invented by human beings and that they developed and became more sophisticated with the progress of human civilization. Such people make no distinction between man-made ideologies, such as idolatrous and pagan beliefs past and contemporary, which are indeed influenced by the stage of progress of their adherents, and divine religions preached by God's messengers. They ignore the fact that the main principles of these divine religions are the same, and that they are elaborated by every messenger. In each case, the divine religion was accepted by a community of believers and rejected by other people. As time passed, deviation occurred and distortion crept in. Thus, people reverted to their days of ignorance, awaiting the appearance of a new messenger to preach the divine faith.

This claim is reiterated in all ages by people who do not have any clear and true understanding of God and who are blind to God's grace, mercy and justice. They may say, as the Arabs at the time of the Prophet used to say, that God would not send a human messenger. Had He willed to send anyone, He would have chosen an angel for a messenger. Or they may say that the creator of this vast and great

universe would not pay any attention to man, an insignificant creature in an exceedingly small planet called earth, to the extent of sending him messengers and revelations to guide him in his small world. This view was advanced by some philosophers in the past as also in modern times. Or they may say with the atheists that there is neither God nor a message to be revealed to anyone. They claim all this is the product of human fancies to enable some people to deceive others using the guise of religion.

All this betrays a shameful lack of understanding of God: His justice, mercy, wisdom, knowledge and grace. For it does not fit with God's grace to abandon man completely, when it is God who has created him and who knows his abilities and weaknesses. When it is God who knows his need for a proper standard by which to evaluate his concepts, notions, views, actions, traditions and systems, in order to choose what is right of all these and abandon what is bad or false. God also knows that the human mind is subjected to enormous pressures from a whole host of desires, whims and ambitions. Besides, man has been placed in charge of the earth, which God has made subservient to him. It is not his task to formulate an absolute concept of the universe or the essential principles of life. This is part of the domain of faith which God gives him so that he can formulate a proper concept of life and existence.

God does not abandon man to his own reason. Nor does He make his guidance to the truth dependent only on what He has planted in human nature of an innate yearning to know the true Lord. He does not leave him to reflect only on the fact that in times of great distress and hardship, man turns instinctively to God for help. Human nature may become distorted by internal and external pressures, and by the great variety of temptations. Therefore, God provides human beings with His revelations and sends them His messengers to put their nature back on a straight course and to keep their minds on the right track. It is part of the task assigned to God's messengers that they should remove all traces of distortion and delusion that may creep into human nature, whether of internal or external origin.

This is indeed what fits with God's grace, mercy, justice, wisdom and knowledge. He would not have abandoned human beings after having created them. Nor would He hold them to account on the Day of Judgement without first sending them a messenger: *"We would not have punished (people) without first sending (them) a messenger."* (17: 15) Hence, a true understanding of God requires an acceptance that He has sent messengers to save mankind from a multitude of philosophies and pressures so that the mind remains free to contemplate and evaluate. It also requires that we believe that those messengers have been given the method of advocating faith and that some of them have been given scriptures to be maintained by their people for a period of time, as is the case with the scriptures of Moses, David and

Jesus, or maintained for all time, as in the case of the Qur'ān.

Since the message of Moses and the people of earlier scriptures were known to the Arabs, God instructs His Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), to confront the unbelievers who denied revelation altogether with these facts. Thus, he asks them: "*Who, then, revealed the Book which Moses brought to people as a light and a guidance? You transcribe it on sheets to show around, while you suppress much. You have been taught [by it] what neither you nor your forefathers had ever known.*" (Verse 91)

One interpretation suggests that this particular verse was revealed in Madinah and was addressed to the Jews. Another interpretation, which the present author prefers,[28] maintains that this verse was, like the rest of the *sūrah,* revealed in Makkah. It addresses the unbelievers among the Arabs, telling them how the Jews used to play games with the Torah, showing only certain parts of it, which endorsed their treacherous methods and allowed them to change divine rulings. They suppressed much which censured their behaviour. The Arabs knew only a little of that, but God has told them in the Qur'ān much of what they did not know. Although this reference is made in the form of an address, another authentically reported reading of it makes it in the form of a reported speech, which endorses the view we prefer.

Thus, the Prophet is instructed to ask the Arabs: "*Who revealed the Book which Moses brought to people as a light and a guidance?" The* Jews show of it only some parts but suppress others in order to achieve their own selfish ends. The Prophet is further instructed to remind them that God has taught them much that they did not know. It behoves them, then, to show their gratitude to God for revealing the Qur'ān, not to deny its truth by claiming that God has not sent down any revelations to His messengers.

They have not been given a chance to answer the question. God instructs His messenger to put a decisive end to this argument, in order not to allow it to become protracted. "*Say: 'God, and leave them to their play and foolish chatter.'*" (Verse 91) It is God who has revealed it. The Prophet is instructed not to pay any attention to their arguments, described here as play and foolish chatter. This description implies a contemptuous look at their arguments and a serious threat. When foolishness is carried so far as to cause people to make such claims, the appropriate course of action is to make a final and decisive statement that leaves no room for any further argument.

Endorsement of Earlier Revelations

The *sūrah* now speaks of the new Book, the Qur'ān, whose revelation the

[28] This view is expressed most clearly by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 7, pp. 268-9.

unbelievers continue to deny. They are told that it is only a stage in a continuing chain. It is no new invention, but only one of the books God has revealed to His chosen messengers.

> *This is a blessed book which We have revealed, confirming what came before it, that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it. Those who believe in the life to come do believe in it, and they are ever-mindful of their prayers.* (Verse 92)

That God should send messengers and give them revelations and scriptures is one of the laws He has set in this world. The new Book is blessed indeed, as God describes. It is blessed in its origin, since God has given it His blessings when He revealed it. It is also blessed in its destination, as it is engraved on Muĥammad's pure, large and noble heart. Furthermore, it is blessed in its size and contents. Compared to voluminous works written by human beings, it comprises a small number of pages; but its inspiration, impact, directives and meaning are far superior to those contained in scores of those books, each one of which is several times its size. A person who has been preoccupied with the art of expression and dealt with the relationship between words and meanings is better able to appreciate the fact that the Qur'ān, with its unique style, is blessed. It is simply impossible that human beings could express all the meanings, concepts and inspiration of the Qur'ān in a work which is a great many times its size. Many a single verse includes the meanings, facts and concepts that make it quotable in a variety of situations and for numerous purposes. This is a unique quality of the Qur'ān which has no parallel in the works of human beings.

The Qur'ān is also blessed in its effect. It addresses human nature and man as a whole, in a way which is remarkable, direct and gentle. It puts its facts before human nature in every direction, taking care of all its aspects. Its effect on it cannot be matched by the effect of anything else. The fact remains that it enjoys the authority of God. No other speech enjoys a similar authority.

We are constrained to go any further in describing the blessings of this Book. Whatever we say remains far short of the fact that God Himself describes it as a blessed Book. This is indeed the truth.

The next quality of the Qur'ān mentioned in this verse is that it confirms *"what came before it"*. It confirms all that has been revealed by God in its original, undistorted form. This confirmation is based on the fact that all those revelations established the basic truth about the question of faith. Apart from this, God has given every nation its own code and constitution within the framework of the basic belief in Him.

Those who write about Islam saying that it is the first religion to preach the whole

faith of God's oneness, or the complete concept of the message and the Messenger, or the resurrection, reckoning and reward in the life to come, do so in an attempt to praise Islam. Yet these people do not read the Qur'ān. Had they read it carefully, they would have realized that God Himself states that all His messengers (peace be upon them all) preached the message of His absolute oneness, and that their messages, in all their forms, admitted no form or trace of polytheism whatsoever. All of them informed their communities, and mankind at large, that a messenger is a human being, like them.

He has no power to bring benefit or cause harm to them, or even to himself. He does not know what God has not informed mankind about, and cannot increase or reduce what God chooses to give to any one of His servants. They all warned their peoples about the resurrection and the life to come as well as the accountability, reward and punishment. The basic concept of faith, based on complete submission to God, has been preached by every messenger. The last message, the Qur'ān, confirms the Books revealed before it.

Those writers think that they are giving Islam a higher position when they claim that it is the most developed monotheistic faith. In this they are greatly influenced by European culture which claims that the human faith, including divine religions, have evolved and progressed in parallel with the evolution and progress of human communities. However, it is not permissible to defend Islam by undermining its fundamental concept, stated in the Qur'ān. Writers and readers alike should be cautious of such pitfalls.

The purpose of revealing this last message is so that the Prophet (peace be upon him) can use it to warn the people of Makkah, the Mother City, and its neighbouring areas: *"That you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it."* (Verse 92)

Makkah was called the Mother City because it is honoured by the first house ever to be built for mankind where they worship God alone, associating no partners with Him; a sanctuary where everyone enjoys peace. It is from that House that the universal call to every human being on earth was announced. It was never previously so universal. It is to that House that believers go on pilgrimage declaring their submission to God and honouring the House which is the birthplace of His call.

Some Orientalists who are hostile to Islam try to twist the meaning of this Qur'ānic statement in order to assert that the Islamic call was meant only for the people of Makkah and its surrounding area. They single out this statement to claim that in the early period, Muĥammad (peace be upon him) did not intend to address his message to anyone other than the people of Makkah and a few nearby towns. They claim that his ambition could not go beyond this area. They further say that he only broadened his scope to include the whole Arabian Peninsula, and then to carry

it further, as a result of certain coincidences which he could not have envisaged at the outset. These coincidences only came about as a consequence of his migration to Madinah, where he established his state. All these claims are lies. In the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* revealed at Makkah, in the early period of Islam, we read statements addressed by God (limitless is He in His glory) to His Messenger asserting that his message is addressed to all mankind: *"We have sent you forth but as a blessing to mankind."* (21: 107) *"We have sent you forth to all mankind, so that you may give them good news and forewarn them."* (34: 28) When these verses were revealed, the Islamic call was still confined to small enclaves in Makkah where its advocates endured much persecution.

"Those who believe in the life to come do believe in it, and they are ever-mindful of their prayers." (Verse 92) It is true that those who believe in the life to come, when people will have to account for their deeds and be rewarded or punished for them, also believe that God will no doubt send to mankind a messenger to convey to them His revelations. They have no problem in believing in this messenger. Indeed, they are inclined to believe in him.

Because they believe in the life to come and in the Qur'ān, they are always mindful of their prayer, so that they continue to maintain a close link with God and continue to demonstrate their obedience to Him. This is, then, all a part of human nature. When we believe in the hereafter, we accept that this Book, the Qur'ān, is revealed by God and we are keen to obey Him in order to enhance our closeness with Him. We need only to look at different types of human beings to be sure that all this is absolutely true.

The last two verses in this long passage portray a very vivid image of those wrongdoers, i.e. the unbelievers, who fabricate falsehood against God. Some of them go as far as to make blatantly false claims that they receive revelations from on high or that they can produce something similar to the Qur'ān. They are painted here when they are actually in the throes of death, with the angels coming to them, hands outstretched, to inflict their punishment, requiring them to yield up their souls. They face such a strong reproach when they leave everything behind them.

> *Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, or says: "This has been revealed to me", when nothing has been revealed to him? Or one who says, `I can reveal the like of what God has revealed"? If you could but see the wrongdoers when they are in the throes of death and the angels stretch out their hands [and say]: "Give up your souls!" Today you shall be rewarded with a humiliating punishment for having attributed to God something that is untrue and, in your arrogance, scorned His revelations. And now, indeed, you have come to Us individually, just as We created you in the first instance; and you have left behind all that We conferred on*

> *you. Nor do We see with you those intercessors of yours whom you had claimed to be partners in your affairs. Broken are the ties which bound you, and that which you have been asserting has failed you.* (Verses 93-4)

A number of scholars like Qatādah and Ibn `Abbās say that the first verse refers to Musaylamah, the Liar, his wife Sajāĥ bint al-Ĥārith and al-Aswad al-`Ansī. All three made claims during the Prophet's lifetime that they themselves were also prophets and that they received revelations from God. Another report attributed to Ibn `Abbās suggests that the one who boasted that he would reveal something similar to God's revelations, or said that he received revelations himself, was Abdullāh ibn Sa`d ibn Abī Sarĥ. He had embraced Islam and the Prophet used to ask him to write down Qur'ānic revelations as he received them. He was once called in by the Prophet to write down some verses which are included in *Sūrah* 23, The Believers. *`Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, then We place him, a living germ, in a safe enclosure. Then We create out of this living germ a clot of congealed blood, and out of the clot We create an embryonic lump. Then We create within the embryonic lump bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We then bring this into being as another creation. Exalted be God, the best of creators." (23:* 12-14) When the Prophet dictated these verses, up to the phrase, *"We then bring this into being as another creation"*, `Abdullāh marvelled at the details given in the Qur'ān about the creation of men. He said, "Exalted be God, the best of creators." The Prophet said to him: "This is exactly what has been revealed to me." This stirred up doubts in `Abdullāh's mind. He thought: "If Muĥammad was truthful, I have received the same revelations, but if he was a liar, I have said the same as he did." He turned away from Islam and rejoined the unbelievers. According to this report, it is to him that reference is made by the sentence, "*Or one who says, I can reveal the like of what God has revealed.'*" (Verse 93)

The scene painted here of the punishment administered to those wrongdoers, i.e. the idolaters, fills us with awe and fear. The wrongdoers are shown when they are in the throes of death, totally overwhelmed, and angels stretching their hands out to punish them. They demand that they yield up their souls and reproach them for their misdeeds: "*If you could but see the wrongdoers when they are in the throes of death and the angels stretch out their hands [and say]: 'Give up your souls!' Today you shall be rewarded with a humiliating punishment for having attributed to God something that is untrue and, in your arrogance, scorned His revelations.*" (Verse 93) The humiliating punishment is a fitting reward for arrogance, and the public reproach answers their falsehood, which they invent against God. All this imparts to the scene shades of total misery and depression.

This is followed by a strong rebuke by God Himself about whom they asserted their fabrications. They stand in front of Him in a position of total misery: "*And now, indeed, you have come to Us individually, just as We created you in the first instance.*"

(Verse 94)

You have nothing except your own selves, and you come as individuals, each one for himself. That is how you face your Lord, just as He created you: each is born alone, naked, helpless. You have left behind everything you have had; everybody else has deserted you; you have no power or authority over anything God had given to you: "*You have left behind all that We conferred on you.*" (Verse 94) All your wealth, children, prestige, position and power you have left behind because you could not bring them with you, even if you had so wished.

"*Nor do We see with you those intercessors of yours whom you had claimed to be partners in your affairs.*" (Verse 94) You used to claim that those beings would intercede on your behalf anytime you go through a hardship. You used to assign to them a portion of your lives and a share of your wealth, claiming that they would intercede for you with God. This is similar to their claim in defence of their idolatrous practices, when they said: "We only worship these (idols) so that they may bring us closer to God." These assumed intercessors may take different shapes and forms. They may be human, such as priests and people of power and authority, or they may be statues of stone, idols, *jinn,* angels, planets or indeed any being, which symbolized their gods. Yet they even went further than this, assigning to these beings a share of their lives, wealth and offspring, as will be explained later in this *sūrah.* (Verses 136-9)

Now that they have come to their Lord individually, each on his or her own, they are asked where have those partners and intercessors gone? The answer is given in the Qur'ānic verse in these terms: "*Broken are the ties which bound you.*" (Verse 94) Every link, and every tie has been broken. There is no longer anything to group them together in any way or form. "*And that which you have been asserting has failed you.*" (Verse 94) They used to make all sorts of assertions, including what they maintained about those beings whom they claimed to be partners with God or whom they alleged to be able to intercede with God. All these claims are now proven false. All trust they had put in anyone or anything has failed them. They are totally powerless.

This scene violently shakes the human heart as it holds out a vivid and awesome image, imparting its overtones to us so that we are able to contemplate its powerful message. This is just one example of the inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

12
The Miracle of Creation

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ فَالِقُ ٱلْحَبِّ وَٱلنَّوَىٰ ۖ يُخْرِجُ ٱلْحَىَّ مِنَ ٱلْمَيِّتِ وَمُخْرِجُ ٱلْمَيِّتِ مِنَ ٱلْحَىِّ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

It is God who splits the grain and the fruit-stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive. Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth? (95)

فَالِقُ ٱلْإِصْبَاحِ وَجَعَلَ ٱلَّيْلَ سَكَنًا وَٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ حُسْبَانًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

He is the One who causes the day to break. He has made the night to be [a source of stillness], and the sun and the moon for reckoning. All this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (96)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلنُّجُومَ لِتَهْتَدُوا۟ بِهَا فِى ظُلُمَٰتِ ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ ۗ قَدْ فَصَّلْنَا ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

It is He that has set up for you the stars, so that you may be guided by them in the deep darkness of land and sea. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people who have knowledge. (97)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنشَأَكُم مِّن نَّفْسٍ وَٰحِدَةٍ فَمُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمُسْتَوْدَعٌ ۗ قَدْ فَصَّلْنَا ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

He it is who has brought you all into being from a single soul and has given you a dwelling and a place of sojourn. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people of understanding. (98)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَخْرَجْنَا بِهِۦ نَبَاتَ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ فَأَخْرَجْنَا مِنْهُ خَضِرًا نُّخْرِجُ مِنْهُ حَبًّا مُّتَرَاكِبًا

And He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type and out of these We bring forth verdure from which We bring forth

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّخۡلِ مِن طَلۡعِهَا قِنۡوَانٞ دَانِيَةٞ وَجَنَّٰتٖ مِّنۡ أَعۡنَابٖ وَٱلزَّيۡتُونَ وَٱلرُّمَّانَ مُشۡتَبِهٗا وَغَيۡرَ مُتَشَٰبِهٍۗ ٱنظُرُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ ثَمَرِهِۦٓ إِذَآ أَثۡمَرَ وَيَنۡعِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكُمۡ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٩٩

grain piled tight, packed on one another;

and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of vines; and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: all so alike, and yet so different. Behold their fruit when they come to fruition and ripen. Surely in these there are clear signs for people who truly believe. (99)

وَجَعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ شُرَكَآءَ ٱلۡجِنَّ وَخَلَقَهُمۡۖ وَخَرَقُواْ لَهُۥ بَنِينَ وَبَنَٰتَۢ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖۚ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ١٠٠

Yet they make the jinn equals with God, although He created them; and in their ignorance they invent for Him sons and daughters. Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above all that which they attribute to Him. (100)

بَدِيعُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لَهُۥ وَلَدٞ وَلَمۡ تَكُن لَّهُۥ صَٰحِبَةٞۖ وَخَلَقَ كُلَّ شَيۡءٖۖ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٞ ١٠١

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. How can He have a child when He has never had a consort? He has created everything and has full knowledge of all things. (101)

ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمۡۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۖ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ فَٱعۡبُدُوهُۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَكِيلٞ ١٠٢

Such is God, your Lord; there is no deity other than Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him alone. He is the Guardian of everything. (102)

لَّا تُدۡرِكُهُ ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرُ وَهُوَ يُدۡرِكُ ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرَۖ وَهُوَ ٱللَّطِيفُ ٱلۡخَبِيرُ ١٠٣

No power of vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all vision; He is above all comprehension, yet is all-aware. (103)

قَدۡ جَآءَكُم بَصَآئِرُ مِن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ فَمَنۡ أَبۡصَرَ فَلِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَنۡ عَمِيَ فَعَلَيۡهَاۚ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ عَلَيۡكُم بِحَفِيظٖ ١٠٤

Means of insight have come to you from your Lord. Therefore, whoever chooses to see does so for his own good, and whoever chooses to remain blind only himself does he

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُصَرِّفُ ٱلْأَيَٰتِ وَلِيَقُولُوا۟
دَرَسْتَ وَلِنُبَيِّنَهُۥ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾
ٱتَّبِعْ مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ ۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ
إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾
وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَآ أَشْرَكُوا۟ ۗ وَمَا جَعَلْنَٰكَ
عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم بِوَكِيلٍ
﴿١٠٧﴾
وَلَا تَسُبُّوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ
فَيَسُبُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ عَدْوًۢا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ زَيَّنَّا
لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلَهُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِم مَّرْجِعُهُمْ
فَيُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٠٨﴾
وَأَقْسَمُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ جَهْدَ أَيْمَٰنِهِمْ لَئِن جَآءَتْهُمْ
ءَايَةٌ لَّيُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهَا ۚ قُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْأَيَٰتُ عِندَ
ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَمَا يُشْعِرُكُمْ أَنَّهَآ إِذَا جَآءَتْ لَا
يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾
وَنُقَلِّبُ أَفْـِٔدَتَهُمْ وَأَبْصَٰرَهُمْ كَمَا لَمْ
يُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِهِۦٓ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَنَذَرُهُمْ فِى
طُغْيَٰنِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾
۞ وَلَوْ أَنَّنَا نَزَّلْنَآ إِلَيْهِمُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ
وَكَلَّمَهُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ وَحَشَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ
قُبُلًا مَّا كَانُوا۟ لِيُؤْمِنُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ
وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ يَجْهَلُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

hurt. I am not your keeper. (104)

Thus do We spell out Our revelations in diverse ways, that they may say, "You have studied this", and that We may make it clear to people of knowledge. (105)

Follow what has been revealed to you by your Lord, other than whom there is no deity, and turn your back on those who associate partners with God. (106)

Had God so willed, they would not have associated partners with Him. We have not made you their keeper, nor are you responsible for them. (107)

Do not revile those whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance. Thus have We made the actions of every community seem goodly to them. Then to their Lord shall they all return, and He will explain to them all that they have been doing. (108)

They swear by God most solemnly that if a miracle be shown to them they would believe in it. Say: "Miracles are in God's power." For all you know, even if one is shown to them, they may still not believe? (109)

We will turn their hearts and eyes away since they did not believe in it the first time. We shall leave them to blunder about in their overweening arrogance. (110)

Even if We were to send down angels to them, and if the dead were to speak to them, and even if We were to range all things before them, they would still not

believe unless God so willed. Yet most of them are ignorant. (111)

Overview

We need to remind ourselves here of what we said in our Prologue to this *sūrah.* Most of all we need to remember how its waves follow close on the heels of each other in an endless flow, and how its scenes are portrayed in a breathtaking splendour, coupled with a superbly inspiring rhythm.

This *sūrah* tackles its subject matter in a unique way. At every turn, in every situation or scene, it brings out in sharp relief all the awesome splendour of what is being portrayed, keeping us spellbound, breathless. We follow its scenes and changing, powerful rhythm.

In its quick flow of scenes, inspirations, rhythms, images and shades, it resembles a fast, wide river flowing with white water. As one wave reaches its breaking place, the next one follows very closely, almost reaching out to the one that has just gone by. The flow remains continuous, unending.

In every one of these flowing and closely successive waves, the same rich splendour is there to see. And in all the scenes portrayed, we have superb harmony. Thus, we are absolutely enchanted; first by the splendid scenes, then their lively images, the powerful music, the inimitable expression, the flood of inspiring figures of speech. The *sūrah* addresses man's heart and mind from every angle and in every way possible.

All these features are seen at their clearest in this passage. The reader feels as though the scenes spring to life, with all their colour and brightness, jumping up in front of us just as the rhythm flows with the words that are recited, striking a note of perfect harmony. Each scene spreads itself before us like a bright spark appearing from the distance, and gradually exhibiting its full, captivating splendour before our very eyes. Another spark is then produced by the very expressions that are used, and its rhythm strikes harmony between the scenes portrayed and the meanings illustrated. Consistency is felt in the flow of expression and harmony is unmistakable in the brilliantly painted scenes.

Beauty is the main feature here: the *sūrah* attains its breathtaking climax, with scenes that are chosen for their beauty and wording and construction that are meticulously selected for their rhythm and power of expression. In addition, even the

ideas floated here address the basic truth of the Islamic faith, with its infinitely rich meaning, and all from the angle of beauty. Thus, this truth appears to swim in a sea of absolute perfection.

The passage includes specific directives for us to appreciate the beauty which is all too visible in the flourish of life: *"Behold their fruit when it comes to fruition and ripens."* (Verse 99) This draws our attention directly to this splendid beauty, so that we may look and appreciate, but with open minds.

The beauty is brought to its perfect, enthralling climax at the end of those scenes which describe the universe and which reach out to the One beyond. In this way we behold the Originator of the heavens and earth who has placed all these wonderful things in the universe. The *sūrah* speaks of Him in images and expressions the beauty of which cannot be intimated except by the Qur'ānic text itself: *"No power of vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all vision; He is above all comprehension, yet is all-aware."* (Verse 103)

In this passage we see the open book of the universe. People pass by it all the time without pausing for a moment to look at its miraculous features, its telling signs and wonderful features. The Qur'ān takes us on a tour of this universe, and we feel as if we see it for the first time. We want to look at its wonders, contemplate its beauty and enjoy its splendour.

It stops us in front of the miracle that occurs at every moment of the night and day: the miracle of life as it stirs in the midst of the dead world around it. How does it start? Where does it come from? It simply comes from God, and starts by His will. No human being can fathom its nature, let alone originate it.

It then stops us in front of the great, accurate movement of the cosmos. This is superior to all the miracles people demand. What is more is that it goes on at every moment without fail.

It then stops us again at the initiation of human life, from a single soul, and its procreation in the familiar way. We also stop at the origination of life in plants, rain pouring in torrents, growing plants of every type and colour, ripening fruits. All these give us a picture of the whole range of life which is so very worthy of reflection, if we could only see it all with open minds.

Then we look at the universe as a whole, and it is presented to us as if we are seeing it for the first time. It is alive, moving, interacting with us, remarkable in its effect on our senses and feelings, testifying to its Creator, displaying its features one by one all of which clearly point to God's great power.

As the *sūrah* places this rich and varied tapestry in front of unbelievers, the very concept of polytheism is felt to be infinitely absurd. Indeed, everyone who

contemplates the great many signs pointing to the truth and indicating the source of guidance will find this concept too hideous to deserve even a moment's consideration. The whole argument of those unbelievers who associate partners with God falls to pieces.

In its presentation of the truth of God's existence and nature to mankind the Qur'ān demonstrates God's power which creates, provides and manages all matters, without partners, as the inspiring evidence to prove what it advocates. It simply calls on people to surrender themselves to God, purge their beliefs of any trace of polytheism, offer their worship to God alone and submit to His will. In this passage we are also required to offer all worship to God alone. This means that all Godhead belongs to Him alone, and that He is the ultimate arbiter in all affairs of human life.

In this passage we find an example of the linkage the Qur'ān makes between pure worship and recognizing that Godhead belongs only to God, the Creator and guardian of all: "*Such is God, your Lord; there is no deity other than Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him alone. He is the Guardian of everything.*" (Verse 102)

At the end of the passage, the demand to produce miracles is shown to be stupid, and betrays the obstinate nature of the unbelievers. They do not reject the faith on the grounds of insufficient evidence of the truth. They reject it because of their twisted nature. Miraculous signs are everywhere in the universe, if they could only see them.

The Early Signs of Life

> *It is God who splits the grain and the fruit-stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive. Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth?* (Verse 95)

This is the great miracle whose secret remains unknown to all creatures and which cannot be emulated by anyone. This is the miracle of life, its initiation and progress.[29] At every moment, a grain or seed splits open to produce a shoot of plant and a fruit-stone breaks open to begin the life of a tree. This life which remains latent in the seed, grain and the fruit-stone, and which is evident in plant and tree remains, is in both

[29] Atheists nowadays make a great fuss about man's ability to produce some substances which until recently could not have been produced except through interactions taking place within a living creature. They should know that there is a great difference between an organic substance and a living one. Moreover, this processed substance has been made out of material that has been created by God. Human beings will never be able to create it themselves. — Author's note.
This was written in the early 1960s, before the recent developments in various aspects of life study and the new techniques in genetic engineering. Still his view is valid, as none of these techniques attempts anything close to creation, not even cloning. These techniques rely on using what is created by God to modify the process of reproduction. — Editor's note.

substance and source, a secret which is known only to God. Having observed all the various characteristics and stages of life, mankind remains today in the same position as the first man on earth. We know the outer aspects of life and its purpose, but its source and substance remain an unknown secret. Yet life goes on and the miracle of starting life occurs every second.

Right at the beginning, God brought forth the living out of the dead. The universe, or at least our planet earth, existed, but there was no life on it. Then life began after God originated it from something that was dead. How did He do that? We certainly do not know. Ever since that moment, life has been created out of what is dead. Dead particles are transformed every moment, through living creatures, into organic living substances that form part of living bodies. Although they are originally dead particles, they are transformed into living cells. The reverse also takes place. At every moment, living cells become dead particles, until one day a complete living entity becomes a dead body. *"He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive."* (Verse 95)

No one can do this other than God. It is God alone who can originate life from something that is dead, and it is He alone who gives a living entity the ability to transfer dead particles into living cells. Again, He alone can complete the cycle and transform the living cells into dead particles. No one has ever acquired certain knowledge of this cycle: when did it start and how does it proceed? We only have assumptions, theories and probabilities.

Every attempt to explain the origination of life in any way other than its being created by God has ended in total failure. At one stage, Europeans ran away from the Church in a flight similar to the one described by the Qur'ān as a flight of those who wilfully turn away from divine guidance *"like terrified asses, fleeing from a lion." (74:* 50-1) Ever since, they have been trying to find an explanation for the evolution of the universe and for life without having to admit that it is all God's work. All their attempts, however, have ended in miserable failure. In the twentieth century, there remained only a few lingering attempts, all totally devoid of sincerity. They all share a distinctive characteristic, namely, pigheadedness.

An increasing number of scientists admit that there is no way to explain the beginning and progress of life except by a clear acknowledgement that it is all God's work. What these scientists say is characteristic of the present attitude of modern science to this whole question. Nevertheless, some people in our part of the world continue to feed on the leftovers of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europeans. They turn away from religion because it speaks of `imperceptibles', while they claim to be `scientific'. Their assertions need no comment from us. What they really need to do is to refer to what scientists nowadays acknowledge and that is that the origins of life lie with God alone. We will select only a few quotations from some Western

scientists.

Frank Allen, Professor of Biophysics at the University of Manitoba, Canada, says:

> If in the origin of life there was no design, then living matter must have arisen by chance. Now chance, or probability as it is termed, is a highly developed mathematical theory which applies to that vast range of objects of knowledge that are beyond absolute certainty. This theory puts us in possession of the soundest principles on which to discriminate truth from error, and to calculate the likelihood of the occurrence of any particular form of an event.
>
> Proteins are the essential constituents of all living cells, and they consist of the five elements, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen and sulphur, with possibly 40,000 atoms in the ponderous molecule. As there are 92 chemical elements in Nature, all distributed at random, the chance that these five elements may come together to form the molecule, the quantity of matter that must be continually shaken up, and the length of time necessary to finish the task, can all be calculated. A Swiss mathematician, Charles Eugene Guye, has made the computation and finds that the odds against such an occurrence are 10^{160} to 1, or only one chance in 10^{160}, that is 10 multiplied by itself 160 times, a number too large to be expressed in words. The amount of matter to be shaken together to produce a single molecule of protein would be millions of times greater than that in the whole universe. For it to occur on the earth alone would require many, almost endless billions (10^{243}) of years.
>
> Proteins are made from long chains called amino acids. The way those are put together matters enormously. If in the wrong way they will not sustain life and may be poisonous. Professor J.B. Leathes (England) has calculated that the links in the chain of quite a simple protein could be put together in millions of ways (10^{48}). It is impossible for all these chances to have coincided to build one molecule of protein.
>
> But proteins as chemicals are without life. It is only when the mysterious life comes into them that they live. Only Infinite Mind,[30] that is God, could have foreseen that such a molecule could be the abode of life, could have constructed it, and made it live.[31]

Irving William Knobloch, Professor of the Natural Sciences at Michigan State University, says:

---

[30] This is a philosophical expression used by the author as it is part of his culture. A Muslim does not refer to God Almighty except by the attributes He has outlined. — Author's note.

[31] Frank Allen, "The Origin of the World — By Chance or Design?" in *The Evidence of God in an expanding Universe,* (edited by John Clover Monsma), G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1958, pp. 23-4.

> Science has no adequate explanation for the origin of the many sub-microscopic particles of matter known to exist. It cannot explain, solely upon the laws of chance, how atoms and molecules could have come together to form life. The theory which states dogmatically that all higher forms of life have evolved to their present state by chance mutations, recombinations, polyploidy or hybridization, requires an act of faith for adherence to it, an act of unreasoned acceptance.[32]

Albert McCombs Winchester, Chairman of the Department of Biology at Stetson University and former President of Florida Academy of Sciences, says:

> My field of study has been in the broad field known as biology, the science of the study of life. Of all the magnificent creations of God, there is none which can surpass the living things which inhabit our planet.
>
> Consider a small clover plant growing by the roadside. Where among all the marvellous man-made machines can we find its equal? Here we have a living "machine" which unobtrusively, but consistently, day in and day out, brings about thousands of complex chemical and physical reactions, all under the direction of protoplasm, the material of which all physical life is composed.
>
> From whence came this complex, living "machine"? God did not personally mould it with His own hands and shape every leaf and root on it. No — He has created life with the ability of self- perpetuation; the ability to continue the species down through the generations with all the characteristics which make it recognizable as a clover plant. To me, this is the most fascinating branch of biology and the greatest revelation of the majesty of God. Here we are dealing with a world of infinite smallness, because the pattern for the construction of a new clover plant must be contained within a portion of a single cell, so small that it can be seen only with a powerfully lensed microscope. Every vein, every hair, and every branch on the stems, roots and leaves have been formed under the direction of tiny engineers within the one cell from which the plant grew.[33]

There is a definite beauty in the way this Qur'ānic verse relates the operation of the life and death cycle to God alone. It first makes a clear statement: *"It is God who splits the grain and the fruit-stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive."* (Verse 95) It then attributes all to God: *"Such is God."*

He is the originator of this ever-renewable miracle which remains covered with secrecy. He is the Creator and the Lord to whom everyone should submit themselves

---

[32] I.W. Knobloch, in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* ibid., pp. 87-8.
[33] A.M. Winchester, in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* ibid., pp 165-6.

and obey without hesitation: *"Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth?"* (Verse 95) This is the truth which is clearly apparent to eyes, hearts and minds. How can anyone pretend not to see it or refuse to admit it?

The Qur'ān frequently mentions the miracle of bringing life out of that which is dead, as also the creation of the universe in order to turn our attentions to the nature of Godhead and the manifestations of the oneness of the Creator. The inevitable conclusion is that submission must be to God alone who is the only God and the only Lord. People must, then, address all their worship to Him alone and refer to Him in order to make their laws and formulate their code of living.

None of these aspects is mentioned in the Qur'ān in a form of an abstract, philosophical theory or religious dogma. This religion of Islam is too serious to allow people to waste their energies in such discussions. It aims to give people a proper concept, outlining true beliefs for them, so that they can enjoy a proper and sound life both in public and in private. This can only be achieved by freeing people from enslavement to other creatures so that they worship God alone and submit themselves only to Him in this life, in all its entirety. People will then refuse to acknowledge any authority claimed by usurpers who supposedly exercise the rights of Godhead, making their own laws and legislation for human life. Such people try to make of themselves false gods. By doing so, they undermine human life and cause people to be enslaved. Hence, this verse which begins with a wonderful description of the miracle of life concludes with this comment: *"Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth?"* (Verse 95)

Such is God who alone deserves to be acknowledged as the overall Lord who sustains life, provides guidance, exercises control and rules over the whole universe. Hence, no one else can be acknowledged as Lord.

Perfectionism at Its Best

> *He is the One who causes the day to break. He has made the night to be [a source of stillness], and the sun and the moon for reckoning. All this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verse 96)

He who splits the grain and the fruit-stone is the One who causes the break of dawn. He has made the night a period of time when living things have their repose. Moreover, He has given the sun and the moon cycles that can be calculated with great accuracy. It is His power that controls everything in the universe. His knowledge overlooks nothing.

In the Arabic text the word used to denote the break of dawn is the same that

describes the splitting of grains and fruit-stones. Life begins to spread as a result of dawn breaking in the same way as a plant shoots out of a grain that has been split. Aspects of vigour, liveliness and beauty are common to both phenomena. Moreover, there is an added link between these two phenomena and the stillness of the night. The cycles of morning and evening, activity and stillness in this planet have a direct bearing on plants and life. The fact that the earth revolves on its axis in front of the sun, the sizes given to the sun and the moon, the distances between them and the earth and the temperature of the sun are all determined by the Almighty who is in full control of all things and whose knowledge is faultless. Had these been different, life would not have sprung out of this earth in this fashion. We would not have had plants and trees sprouting forth from grains and fruit-stones.

Everything in the whole universe has been calculated and determined most accurately in order to determine the type and degree of life that exists in each part of it. There is simply no room for any coincidence in the universe. Indeed, even what some people call coincidence, or the result of chance, is subject to a definite law and is accurately calculated.

Some people say that life has been no more than a side affect in a small corner of the universe, to which the rest of the universe is blind or even hostile. They maintain that the fact that this type of life has taken place on a very small planet confirms the same. Indeed, some of them go further and say that the smallness of the earth suggests that had there been a god in control of the universe, he would not have bothered himself with this life. They assert such absurdities describing them at times as 'scientific logic' or 'philosophical theories', when they do not merit any discussion whatsoever.

Such people allow their prejudices to dictate their views. They do not pay heed to the results of their own scientific work which stares them in the face. When you read their writings you sense that they do everything in their power in order to evade a truism which they have already decided not to face. They see all the pointers asserting God's existence, His oneness and absolute power everywhere in the universe, but they flee from acknowledging these facts. Every time they take a route hoping to avoid such a confrontation and manage to reconcile themselves to the universal fact, they find that they come to the same end. Agitated and scared, they hurriedly try another route, but again they come to the same end. They find that they must acknowledge God's existence and His absolute power. Poor and helpless is what they are. One day they broke loose from the tyrannical rule of the Church, which was in the habit of imposing its fetters on people's minds and souls. In their flight, they behaved *"like terrified asses, fleeing from a lion." (74: 50-1)* But they continued in their flight until the early decades of the twentieth century, not daring to turn back and find out whether the Church was pursuing them, or whether it too

was breathless like them.

They are indeed poor and helpless, because they have to face today the inescapable conclusions of their scientific work. Where can they flee?

Frank Allen, the Biophysicist whom we have already quoted, says in the same article:

> The adjustments of the earth for life are far too numerous to be accounted for by chance. First, the earth is a sphere freely poised in space ("He hangeth the earth upon nothing" — Job 26: *7),* in daily rotation on its polar axis, giving the alternation of day and night, and in yearly revolution around the sun. These motions give stability to its orientation in space, and, coupled with the inclination (23 degrees) of the polar axis to the plane of its revolution (the ecliptic), affords regularity to the seasons, thus doubling the habitable area of the earth and providing a greater diversity of plant life than a stationary globe could sustain.
>
> Secondly, the atmosphere of life-supporting gases is sufficiently high (about *500* miles) and dense to blanket the earth against the deadly impact of twenty million meteors that daily enter it at speeds of about thirty miles per second. Among many other functions the atmosphere also maintains the temperature within safe limits for life; and carries the vital supply of fresh water- vapour far inland from the oceans to irrigate the earth, without which it would become a lifeless desert. Thus the oceans, with the atmosphere, are the balance-wheel of Nature.[34]

Scientific evidence piles up in front of them and scientific facts support one another confirming that the theory of coincidence cannot give any plausible explanation for the origin of life. For life to begin, develop, progress, continue, be sustained and varied requires an endless number of balances and compatibilities in the design of the whole universe. Every scientist is aware of many of these in his own field, but beyond the total sum of these there are countless other balances and compatibilities that are required. How could they have come about except by the will and determination of the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who has given everything its shape and form, and guided it along its course of life, and who has created everything according to an established measure?

The *sūrah* continues with this awe-inspiring scene of the universe and relates it to human life and people's interests and concerns. The whole space, with its sun, moon and stars, is portrayed as directly relevant to people's lives: *"It is He that has set up for you the stars, so that you may be guided by them in the deep darkness of land and sea. We*

[34] Frank Allen, *Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* ibid., pp. 20-1.

have made Our revelations plain indeed to people who have knowledge." (Verse 97)

On land and at sea people continue to find themselves lost at times and feel themselves to be in total darkness, and they continue to be guided by the stars. This used to be the case in ancient times, and it continues to be so today. Methods of being guided by stars may vary, and may indeed be wider in scope as a result of scientific discoveries, but the rule remains the same: these stars provide guidance out of darkness, whether the darkness be of the physical or mental type that affects people's thinking and colours their concepts. The Qur'ānic statement remains valid at all times. It addresses mankind in their primitive days, and they find its address true in their lives. It also addresses human beings after they have made great scientific advances and far-reaching discoveries relating to man and the universe. They continue to find the Qur'ānic statement true in their practical world.

The Qur'ānic method remains unique. As it addresses men, it does not portray universal facts in the form of a theory. It portrays them as they are, so that we see beyond them the work of the Creator: His elaborate design and His grace. It, thus, addresses people's hearts and minds, urging them to reflect and to make use of whatever knowledge they have in order to arrive at the great truth beyond. Hence, the verse which refers to the stars God has made to provide people with guidance in the darkness of land and sea is concluded with this inspiring comment: *"We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people who have knowledge."* (Verse 97)

In order to be guided by the stars, people need to have knowledge of their positions, orbits and cycles as well as knowledge of how all these point to the Creator and His wisdom. As we have already said, the guidance is provided out of the physical darkness as well as the mental one. Those who make use of the stars to determine their route, without relating the information they receive from the stars to their Creator, do not receive their full benefit and do not have their full guidance. Such people overlook the relationship between the marvels of this universe and their definite pointer to the great Creator.

> *He it is who has brought you all into being from a single soul and has given you a dwelling and a place of sojourn. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people of understanding."* (Verse 98)

This time the *sūrah* provides a direct touch referring to the single human soul in which both the male and the female have one nature. With that single soul life begins its first step towards procreation with a fertilized cell. Thus we have a soul which provides a dwelling place for this cell in the body of the male and a soul which gives it its place of sojourn in the female's uterus. Life then begins its cycle of development, progress and procreation. The result is different races, tribes, nations, characteristics,

colours and languages: countless patterns and widely different communities.

"We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people of understanding." (Verse 98) A quality of understanding is necessary here in order to appreciate what God does with each single soul in order to bring out of it all those diverse communities and endless patterns. It also helps men to understand the remarkable compatibilities which are necessary to make conception the means for procreation and to always provide the appropriate numbers of human males and females, in order to establish the institution of marriage within which the process of conception and procreation operates. Marriage also provides the proper conditions for children to grow up within so that they, in turn, become fit to play their roles in promoting human life.

It is beyond the scope of this commentary to go deeper into this notion of necessary compatibilities. That would require a more specialized study. It is sufficient for our purposes here to mention that the sperm originates with male or female characteristics, and then the proper distribution dictated by God ensures that sufficient numbers of males and females are produced to sustain life and ensure its progress. We have mentioned earlier in this commentary that God's will, which is free and absolute, determines whether the fertilized egg produces a male or a female child.

As God operates His will every time a human conception takes place, giving whomever He wills of His servants daughters or giving them sons, He ensures that a permanent balance is maintained between the numbers of males and females in the whole world. There may be local or temporary variations, but at the level of humanity as a whole, the balance is never disturbed. Its function is not merely to ensure procreation, but it also serves for the establishment of stable marital life. Conception and procreation can take place with a minimum number of males. However, God does not wish to make the preservation of the human species the sole purpose of the union between the male and the female. The purpose which distinguishes human beings from animals is the creation of a stable marital life between a man and a woman. Such stability ensures the most important result of allowing young children to be taken care of by their parents within a family atmosphere. In this way, the parents do not merely provide food and physical protection for their offspring, as animals do, but they also prepare them for their human role which requires that the children stay a much longer time with their parents than young animals do.

Maintaining such a permanent balance is a sufficient indication of the Creator's elaborate planning and wisdom, provided people are endowed with understanding: *"We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people with understanding."* (Verse 98) But the obstinate rejecters of the truth, particularly those who boast of their scientific approach and ridicule the notion of a world beyond, continue to persist in their

obstinate rejection: *"Even though they may see every sign of the truth, they do not believe in it."* (7: 146)

The Ever-Renewable Miracle of Creation

The *sūrah* now begins to draw our attention to scenes of life as they open up everywhere around us. We see life with our eyes and feel it as it springs out. As we contemplate it, we see the beauty of God's creation. The *sūrah* portrays these scenes as they actually are. It draws our attention to what they show of the various stages, shapes and forms of life. All this gives us a very distinct awareness of life as it grows and spreads, and also of the power that originates life. It also gives us a strong desire to look at and enjoy the beauty of life.

> *And He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type and out of these We bring forth verdure from which We bring forth grain piled tight, packed on one another; and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of vines; and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: all so alike, and yet so different. Behold their fruit when they come to fruition and ripen. Surely in these there are clear signs for people who truly believe.* (Verse 99)

Water is frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān within the context of life and vegetation: *"He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type."* (Verse 99) That water is necessary for the growth of every type of plant is something that all human beings know, whether they are primitive or civilized, illiterate or educated. Yet water plays a far greater and more important role than that, and the Qur'ān here reminds us of this. By God's will, water was instrumental in making the face of the earth of the type of soil we know, which is plant-supporting. (This assumes that the theory which suggests that the face of the earth burned for a period of time, before it solidified but could still not support plant life is correct. Then water and other atmospheric elements combined to transform it into soft soil) Water has then continued to play an important role in making this soil fertile by causing nitrogen to fall on it from the atmosphere. Every time there is lightning, the electric sparkle separates the nitrogen which dissolves in water. It thus falls with the rain to give the soil added fertility. Nitrogen is the main component of the fertilizers people now produce in the same way, learning from the laws of nature. Indeed, nitrogen is so essential for vegetation that without it the face of the earth would be completely barren.

"And He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type and out of these We bring forth verdure from which We bring forth grain piled tight, packed on one another; and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters;

and gardens of vines; and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: all so alike, and yet so different." (Verse 99) All plants begin green, but the Arabic text uses for the description for the colour of the plants a word which imparts a gentler and more familiar sense than would be understood by the word `green'. Out of this green vegetation God brings forth grain piled tight, as we see in ears of wheat and corn which are *"packed on one another"*. We then have an image of the palm tree and its spathe: *"Out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters."* (Verse 99) Here the Qur'ān uses in its description a term which generally denotes a small branch, but in the palm tree it refers to the stick on which the dates grow. These sticks are described as bending down, bearing the clusters of dates to impart a sense of beauty and tranquillity. *"And gardens of vines, and the olive tree and the pomegranate",* (Verse 99), which are mentioned here as examples of different types and species of plants. All of them are *"so alike and yet so different"*.

The Qur'ān invites us to look at these and attentively contemplate with open minds how God causes all of them to grow, adds to their beauty and watches over them when they come to fruition: *"Behold their fruit when they come to fruition and ripen."* (Verse 99) We are not invited to eat of its fruit, but rather to contemplate the beauty of that ripening fruit because the emphasis here is on the splendid aspects of creation and on the perfection which is the essential characteristic of God's work.

"Surely in these there are clear signs for people who truly believe." (Verse 99) It is faith which opens people's hearts and minds and alerts them to the close link between themselves and the universe. It then invites us to believe in God, the Creator of all. Yet numerous are the hearts which remain closed, the eyes which choose not to see and the natures which determine not to respond. They look at all this splendid creation and all these inspiring signs but they remain unresponsive. It is as the Qur'ān says: *"Only those that can hear will surely answer."* (Verse 36) These signs inspire only those who believe.

Once the *sūrah* has portrayed this universal scene with all its pointers to God's existence and His ability and perfect design, it then describes the beliefs of those who ascribe partners to God. Against this inspiring set up, these beliefs appear so singular. Their assertions are shown to be revolting delusions, and they are strongly denounced: *"Yet they make the jinn equals with God, although He created them; and in their ignorance they invent for him sons and daughters. Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above all that which they attribute to Him."* (Verse 100)

Some of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic days of ignorance used to worship *the jinn* while not knowing exactly who those jinn were. These were merely the delusions of paganism. When a human being deviates from believing in the absolute oneness of God, even partially, he is bound to increase his deviation. At first, the point of diversion seems to be too small to notice, but then the gap grows wider and wider.

Those ancient Arabs used to follow the faith preached by the Prophet Ishmael, which was based on the belief in God's oneness as preached by the Prophet Abraham. They subsequently deviated from this sound concept. Their deviation must have started in a small way, but then it went as far as to consider *the jinn* partners with God, when He Himself created them: *"Yet they make the jinn equals with God, although He created them."* (Verse 100)

Different forms of pagan communities were aware that there were evil beings, i.e. something similar to devils, and they feared those beings, whether they considered them evil spirits or evil creatures. Therefore, they used to provide offerings to them in order to circumvent their fury. Thereafter, they began to worship them. This form of paganism that prevailed in Arabia before Islam is just one of many forms in which such misconceptions flourished and led to the worship of the *jinn* describing them as God's partners. The *sūrah* uses a very simple sentence, conveyed in the Arabic text by just one word, to describe the stupidity of such beliefs: *"Although He created them"*. (Verse 100) The sarcasm here is very clear. If it is God, the Glorious who has created them, how is it, then, that they are His partners, sharing with Him the qualities of Godhead and Lordship of the universe?

Their misconceptions were not confined to this aspect alone. Once idolatry or polytheism takes root, deviation never stops and delusions become rife. Those idolaters used to allege that God — limitless is He in His glory — had sons and daughters: *"in their ignorance they invent for him sons and daughters."* (Verse 100) It is all their inventions. The Qur'ān uses here a particularly expressive word to denote 'invention', one which gives an impression of physical and noisy fabrication.

Among those who have invented sons for God were the Jews who claimed that Ezra was so and for the Christians it was Jesus Christ. As for the pagan Arabs, they claimed that the angels were God's daughters, even though they had no way of knowing what gender, if any, the angels took. None of these claims is based on any measure of sound knowledge. They are all the product of total ignorance. Hence, the Qur'ānic comment: *"Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above all that which they attribute to Him."* (Verse 100)

A Clear Concept of the Creator

The *sūrah* puts these allegations face to face against the absolute truth of God. It makes its arguments against these misconceptions in such a way that reveals how hollow they are: *"He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. How can He have a child when He has never had a consort? He has created everything and has full knowledge of all things."* (Verse 101)

He who originates the whole universe out of nothing is in no need of a son.

Offspring are needed by mortals as an extension of their existence and they are needed by the weak who want help and by the dull who can invent nothing. Moreover, those inventors were aware of how procreation takes place. Anyone who desires offspring must have a mate or a female consort from his own species. How, then, can God have a son when He has never had a consort, and when He is one, single, and has no similarities with anyone or anything? How can any offspring be born without a mate?

Here the *sūrah* makes use of a recognized fact in order to address their minds, giving them examples that are relevant to their own lives and what they see around them. Moreover, the *sūrah* gives special emphasis to the fact that all beings are created in order to disprove any suggestions of a multiplicity of gods. What is created can never be a partner to the Creator. The essence of the Creator and that of the created are totally different. The *sūrah* speaks of God's knowledge as absolute, while the unbelievers' knowledge is based on delusions and guesswork: "*He has created everything and has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 101)

The same truth of creation is re-emphasized in order to assert another aspect. It tells that the One who is worshipped and obeyed and to whom submission is made is the creator of all things. Hence, there is no deity save Him, the only Lord in the universe: "*Such is God, your Lord; there is no deity other than Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him alone. He is the Guardian of everything.*" (Verse 102)

The fact that God, the Almighty, is the only Creator makes Him the only sovereign of the universe, and that, consequently, makes Him the only one who takes full care of His creation. As He is the Creator of all, He also provides sustenance to all using resources in which He has no partners. Whatever all creatures eat and whatever they enjoy in this life is part of what is the sole property of God. When it has been confirmed that God has all these qualities of creation, sovereignty and provision of sustenance, another fact is also established; that is, His Lordship of the universe. No one else shares with Him these qualities: He controls everything, His is the authority to which everything submits, and He operates the system by which He takes care of His servants. So He is the One to be worshipped in the full sense of the word, which denotes obedience and full submission.

In their days of ignorance, the Arabs did not deny that God was the Creator of the universe and human beings. Nor did they deny that He was the One who provided sustenance to all of them, or that there was no place or dominion other than His from where to obtain provisions and sustenance. Other deviant communities did not deny these facts either, apart from a few Greek philosophers who advocated materialism. The materialist creeds of today have spread much wider than those advanced by Greek philosophers. This meant that in Arabia Islam faced the sort of deviation which allowed worship to be offered to different deities, who were claimed to be

God's partners, in the hope that they would intercede with God on behalf of those who worshipped them. It also faced the other form of deviation by which people received their legislation and traditions from other sources. In other words, Islam did not face in Arabia the sort of atheism which some people profess today. Such people deny the very existence of God, making boastful claims that have no basis in knowledge, and no guidance or revelation on which they are founded.

The truth remains that those who argue about the existence of God are few, and they will remain so. The basic deviation continues to be the same as that which prevailed in the days of pre-Islamic ignorance — that people receive legislations and laws concerning their lives from sources other than God. This is the traditional and basic form of idolatry that flourished in ignorant Arabia, and indeed in all *jāhiliyyah* communities.

The deviant minority which today disputes God's existence may boast about being scientific, but they have no scientific basis for their claims. Human knowledge cannot justify atheism or prove it, and cannot provide evidence for it based on science or the nature of the universe. It is all a misconception caused initially by the desire to break with the Church and its God whom it tried to impose on people and by means of which it subjugated them in a way that could not be approved of by faith. There is also the added reason of the nature of those who advance these arguments, which leads to a disuse of the basic functions of human beings.

The truth of creation and its deliberate design, as well as the truth of the origination of life, are not cited in the Qur'ān in order to prove God's existence. Arguments against His existence are too petty to merit any attention by the Qur'ān. Instead, these truths are given in order to help people return to the path of truth, so that they can implement in their lives what is entailed by the fact that God is the only God and the only Lord who has power and control over all things. This means that they have to submit to Him alone and worship Him alone, associating with Him no partners whatsoever. Nevertheless, the truths of creation and the origination of life provide irrefutable arguments against those who dispute God's existence. Confronted with this, they have no escape except through boastfulness and futile argument which borders on absolute stupidity.

We do not wish to refer such people who grope in the dark to the Qur'ān, nor do we wish to impose on them our logic which is guided by the Qur'ān. We refer them to some eminent scientists who make a serious and rational approach to this whole question based on human knowledge.

John Cleveland Cothran, Professor of Chemistry and Chairman of Science and Mathematics Division, Duluth Branch, University of Minnesota, says:

> Can any informed and reasoning intellect possibly believe that insensible and

mindless matter just chanced to originate itself and all this system, then chanced to impose the system upon itself, whereafter this system just chances to remain imposed? Surely the answer is "No!" When energy transforms into "new" matter, the transformation proceeds "according to law" and the resulting matter obeys the same laws that apply to the matter already existing.

Chemistry discloses that matter is ceasing to exist, some varieties exceedingly slowly, others exceedingly swiftly. Therefore the existence of matter is not eternal. Consequently matter must have had a beginning. Evidence from chemistry and other sciences indicates that this beginning was not slow and gradual; on the contrary, it was sudden, and the evidence even indicates the approximate time when it occurred. Thus at some rather definite time the material realm was *created* and ever since has been obeying *law,* not the dictates of chance.[35]

Now, the material realm not being able to create itself and its governing laws, the act of creation must have been performed by some non-material agent. The stupendous marvels accomplished in that act show that this agent must possess superlative intelligence, an attribute of *mind.* But to bring mind into action in the material realm, as, for example, in the practice of medicine and in the field of parapsychology, the exercise of *will* is required, and this can be exerted only by a *person.* Hence our logical and inescapable conclusion is not only that creation occurred but that it was brought about according to the plan and will of a Person endowed with supreme intelligence and knowledge (omniscience), and the power to bring it about and keep it running according to plan (omnipotence). That is to say, we accept unhesitatingly the fact of the existence of "the supreme spiritual Being, God, the Creator and Director of the universe," mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

The advances that have occurred in science since Lord Kelvin's day would enable him to state more emphatically than ever: "If you think strongly enough, you will be forced by science to believe in God."[36]

A further quotation from biophysicist Frank Allen is also useful:

It has often been made to appear that the material universe has not needed a Creator. It is undeniable, however, that the universe exists. Four solutions of its origin may be proposed: first, that it is an illusion — contrary to the

[35] We have already said that all conclusions made by science remain within the sphere of probability. We do not use these quotations to prove the truth of Islam. We only put them as a counter argument for those who rely only on science. — Author's note.
[36] J.C. Cothran, in The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe, ibid., pp. 41-2.

preceding statement; second, that it spontaneously arose out of nothing; third, that it had no origin but has existed eternally; fourth, that it was created.

The first proposed solution asserts that there is no problem to solve except the metaphysical one of human consciousness, which has occasionally itself been considered an illusion! The hypothesis of illusion has been lately revived in physical science by Sir James Jeans[37] who states that from the concepts of modern physics "the universe cannot admit of material representation, and the reason, I think, is that it has become a mere mental concept." Accordingly, one may say that illusory trains apparently filled with imaginary passengers cross unreal rivers on immaterial bridges formed of mental concepts!

The second concept, that the world of matter and energy arose of itself out of nothing, is likewise too absurd a supposition for any consideration.

The third concept, that the universe existed eternally, has one element in common with the concept of creation: either inanimate matter with its incorporated energy, or a Personal Creator, is eternal. No greater intellectual difficulty exists in the one concept than in the other. But the laws of thermodynamics (heat) indicate that the universe is running down to a condition when all bodies will be at the same extremely low temperature and no energy will be available. Life would then be impossible. In infinite time this state of entropy would already have happened. The hot sun and stars, the earth with its wealth of life, are complete evidence that the origin of the universe has occurred in *time,* at a fixed point of time, and therefore the universe must have been *created.* A great First Cause, an eternal, all-knowing and all-powerful Creator must exist, and the universe is His handiwork. [38]

The fact that God is the Creator of all and that He is the only deity in the universe is the basic rule given in the Qur'ān for the need to worship and submit to God alone. It explains the fact that He is the Lord who controls everything and directs the whole universe: "*Such is God, your Lord; there is no deity other than Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him alone. He is the Guardian of everything.*" (Verse 102) He not only controls human beings; rather, He controls everything, since He has created all things. This is the reason for stating this fact which the unbelievers do not deny. They simply do not recognize what it entails: submission to God, obedience of His laws and acknowledgement of His absolute authority.

---

[37] James Jeans, The Mysterious Universe, Cambridge University Press, 1931, p. 169.

[38] Frank Allen, in The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

The Choice to Remain Blind

The *sūrah* follows this with a description of God which is so powerful that it impresses man's whole being with connotations which I believe to be indescribable by any human language. Let us then allow these impressions to formulate as we behold the scene which allows God's reassuring attributes to be more prominent than His fear-inspiring attributes: *"No power of vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all vision; He is above all comprehension, yet is all-aware."* (Verse 103)

Those who demonstrate their naivety by demanding to see God are the same as those who demonstrate their arrogance by demanding tangible evidence of His existence. Neither group understand what they say. The senses and mental faculties of human beings have been created so that they can interact with the world around them, fulfil their task of building human life on earth, and observe and understand what the world and the universe contain of pointers to God's existence and His work. As for the nature of God Himself, they have not been given the power to conceive of it, because a created mortal cannot comprehend what is ever present and immortal. Besides, such comprehension is not an essential requirement for them to fulfil their task on earth. They have, indeed, been given what they need for its fulfilment and are fully equipped for the same.

It may be possible to understand that ancient people were naive, but the arrogance of later groups is totally unacceptable. They talk about the atom, electrons, protons and neutrons when none of them has ever seen any of these. It has not been possible yet to make a microscope powerful enough to allow scientists to see such infinitely small particles.[39] Nevertheless, those people accept their theoretic existence and determine the practical effect of their presence. When they see these effects, they declare with absolute certainty that such particles are present. They do so in spite of the fact that the ultimate conclusion to which their experiment leads is `the possibility' of the presence of those particles. But when they are told of God's existence and are directed to the evidence of His presence, they dispute that fact, giving arguments that have no basis in scientific knowledge, proper guidance or revelation. They demand tangible evidence which they can see with their own eyes, as if this whole universe and all the wonders of life are not sufficient evidence.

The *sūrah* then comments on what it has already listed of signs and evidence available everywhere in the universe, and within the human soul itself. What follows serves also as a comment on the statement that concerns God's nature: *"No power of vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all vision; He is above all comprehension, yet is all-aware."* (Verse 103)

[39] The author wrote this in the early 1960s. — Editor's note.

We have already said that no human language can explain or commentate on such a description. It imparts its own clear sense to our minds. However, it is followed by a significant comment: "*Means of insight have come to you from your Lord. Therefore, whoever chooses to see does so for his own good, and whoever chooses to remain blind only himself does he hurt. I am not your keeper.*" (Verse 104) What God has given us is indeed the means of insight which provides guidance and points to the right way. The choice is then left to every individual. He who chooses to see will find himself in the light, equipped with guidance. Inevitably, the alternative is total blindness. No one deliberately persists in error after having seen these signs and received these insights except one who shuts out his senses, suppresses his feelings, stifles his conscience and remains blind. The Prophet is instructed to declare that he dissociates himself from them: "*I am not your keeper.*" (Verse 104)

Perhaps it is important to draw the readers' attention to the fact that in the Arabic text these verses use, in addition to their powerful rhythm, a few unmistakeable and beautiful stylistic elements, such as alliteration and the juxtaposition of opposites. Thus, their effect, as we read them in Arabic, is immeasurably enhanced.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, pointing out how revelations and signs of God's existence have been spelled out and explained in a way that could not fit with the Prophet's social environment or the fact that he could not read and write. For any open-minded person, this, in itself, is sufficient evidence to prove that these revelations were from God. But the idolaters did not wish to have such convincing evidence. Hence, they used to say that Muĥammad had studied these questions of faith and those aspects of the universe with a Christian or a Jewish scholar. They did not realize that no Christian or Jew could have attained the standard of knowledge which remotely approached what the Prophet said to them. Indeed, no one on earth today can hope to reach anywhere near this level, superior as it is to all human knowledge. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to follow what has been revealed to him and to turn away from the unbelievers: "*Thus do We spell out Our revelations in diverse ways, that they may say, 'You have studied this', and that We may make it clear to people of knowledge. Follow what has been revealed to you by your Lord, other than whom there is no deity, and turn your back on those who associate partners with God. Had God so willed, they would not have associated partners with Him. We have not made you their keeper, nor are you responsible for them.*" (Verses 105-7)

God spells out His revelations at a level that was totally unknown to the Arabs, because it did not originate from their social environment or indeed from any human environment. His explanation leads to two opposing results: those who accept and those who reject God's guidance. The latter who do not wish to learn or strive to know the truth will try to find some sort of argument to explain the superior excellence which characterizes the Prophet's address to them. They allege what they

know to be false. They were aware of every detail in Muĥammad's life before he began to receive his message and after that. Nevertheless, they said to him: "Muĥammad, you have studied all this with Christian and Jewish scholars and learned it from them." No Christian or Jew had ever known anything like the Qur'ān. Their books are still available to us now. The gulf between what they have and the Qur'ān is very wide indeed. Now, all they have is merely a few inconsistent accounts of the histories of Prophets and Kings, mixed with legends and superstitions invented by unknown authors. This is the essence of what we find in the Old Testament.

As for the New Testament, it also contains some reports related by the disciples of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him), several decades after he was raised to heaven. Synods then introduced amendments and distortions of these. Even moral and spiritual teachings were subjected to distortions, amendments and omission. How does all this compare with the Glorious Qur'ān? In their ignorance, the Arab idolaters used to make such statements. What is most singular is that some ignorant people of our present day, including some Orientalists and some who claim to be Muslims, repeat such impudent claims. What is even more singular is that their claims are alleged to be the result of `scientific study' or `scholarly research', which only Orientalists are equipped to pursue!

As for those who have true knowledge, the spelling out of revelations in the Qur'ānic way allows them to realize the truth: *"That We may make it clear to people of knowledge."* (Verse 105) As a result, the separation occurs between people endowed with knowledge and insight who know the truth, and people who are blind and ignorant.

Well-Defined Attitudes

This is followed by a divine order to the Prophet to follow what God has revealed to him and to turn away from pagan people who associate partners with Him. He is not to pay any attention to them or their petty arguments and not to worry about their stubborn rejection of his message. His task is to implement his message by moulding his life and the attitudes of his followers on the basis of the divine message. He is to care nothing for the unbelievers: *"Follow what has been revealed to you by your Lord, other than whom there is no deity, and turn your back on those who associate partners with God."* (Verse 106)

Had God so willed, He would have imposed His guidance on them. He could, if He so willed, have created them knowing no way other than that of His guidance, in the same way as angels are bound always to obey Him. He, however, has created man with the ability to follow either right guidance or error. He has left him to

choose his way and has held him accountable for his choice. All this is, of course, within the framework of God's absolute free will which governs everything that occurs in the universe, without imposing a choice on any human being. God has created man in this fashion for a purpose He knows. He has a role to play assigned to him by God, using his abilities and talents: *"Had God so willed, they would not have associated partners with Him."* (Verse 107)

The Prophet is not responsible for their actions, and he has not been assigned as a watchdog over their hearts: *"We have not made you their keeper, nor are you responsible for them."* (Verse 107) This instruction to the Prophet defines the area around which he should concentrate his efforts. The Prophet's successors and those who advocate his faith in every generation and every community are also made aware of their area of activity and its limits.

An advocate of God's message must not attach too much importance to, or pin his hopes on, those who turn their backs on His call and who do not respond to the pointers to faith and divine guidance. He should give top priority to, and concentrate his hopes on, those who listen and respond to his call. These are the ones who need to mould their whole existence on the basic rule of faith, which is the cornerstone of their religion. They also need to formulate a total concept of existence and life, and to regularize their moral values and conduct, and indeed all the affairs of their community, on the same basis. These tasks require and deserve all efforts the advocates of Islam can exert. Those who choose to remain in the opposing camp after having had God's message conveyed to them, deserve nothing but to be ignored. As the cause of the truth acquires strength, the rules God has set in operation complete their cycle when God hurls the truth at falsehood, and when the truth triumphs and falsehood is no more. What is extremely important is that the truth should exist in its completeness. When it does, falsehood has no sway: it just disappears, totally.

Moreover, the believers are instructed to adopt, as they turn away from the unbelievers, an attitude of propriety, decency and refinement which suits those who believe in God. They are instructed not to revile the idols or deities of the unbelievers so that the latter do not start to revile God, without knowing His true position and His majesty. Thus any abuse by the believers of their worthless deities would be taken as an excuse to abuse God, the Almighty: *"Do not revile those whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance. Thus have We made the actions of every community seem goodly to them. Then to their Lord shall they all return, and He will explain to them all that they have been doing."* (Verse 108)

It is human nature that when a person does something, whether good or bad, he thinks that he has done well and he defends his actions. If he follows guidance, he finds it good; and if he is in error, he still believes that his error is good. The unbelievers ascribed partners to God and appealed to them instead of appealing to

Him; yet they accepted that God is the One who creates and provides sustenance. If the Muslims had reviled the unbelievers' deities, the latter would have disregarded what they believed of God's position and abused God Himself in order to defend their concepts and worship of other deities. Hence, the believers are required to let them alone: "*Then to their Lord shall they all return, and He will explain to them all that they have been doing*." (Verse 108)

This is the sort of decent attitude which is worthy of a believer who is sure that the faith he follows is that of the truth and who does not indulge in what is useless or unbecoming. Abusing the deities worshipped by unbelievers will not put those unbelievers on the course of guidance. Instead, it will only add to their stubbornness. Why, then, should believers engage in what is useless, when it could lead them to hearing what they do not like, as the unbelievers begin to retaliate by abusing God?

The passage concludes by mentioning those unbelievers who used to swear most solemnly that if only a miracle, like those given to earlier prophets and messengers, were shown them they would certainly believe. On hearing such assurances, some Muslims suggested to the Prophet (peace be upon him) that he should pray to Cod to show them such a miracle. Here they are given a clear answer, which shows the nature of those people and their obstinate rejection of the divine faith: "*They swear by God most solemnly that if a miracle be shown to them they would believe in it. Say: 'Miracles are in God's power'. For all you know, even if one is shown to them, they may still not believe? We will turn their hearts and eyes away since they did not believe in it the first time. We shall leave them to blunder about in their overweening arrogance. Even if We were to send down angels to them, and if the dead were to speak to them, and even if We were to range all things before them, they would still not believe unless God so willed. Yet most of them are ignorant.*" (Verses 109-11)

A person who does not believe when his attention has been drawn to the miraculous nature of creation and to all the pointers in the world around him directing him to faith adopts a very strange attitude. A person who looks at all the signs and indicators that he sees within himself and everywhere around him and still does not turn to his Lord and declare his belief in Him is one who follows a twisted logic. What hinders such people from believing in the truth in the first instance will certainly stop them from accepting the faith after a miracle has been shown to them. How could Muslims who suggested showing them a miracle tell that it could be otherwise? It is God alone who knows the nature of those people. He leaves them to blunder about in their arrogance, because He knows that they will not respond. They actually deserve the punishment their rejection of the faith incurs. God knows that they would not believe even if He did send down the angels or resurrect the dead to speak to them, in response to their suggestions. Nor would they believe even if He ranged everything in the universe in front of them to call on them to accept the faith.

They do not believe unless God wills, and He does not will that because they do not strive to find guidance. This fact describes in a nutshell the nature of their hearts and minds. What those who stubbornly follow error and turn away from faith lack is not a proof or a sign. They are simply sick at heart, having shut down their natural responses and stifled their consciences. Guidance is a reward deserved only by those who strive for it.

Basic Facts on Faith and God's Power

Moreover, these verses outline certain basic facts that we must consider. The first of these facts is that to accept the faith or to deny it, to follow the right guidance or to remain in error, does not depend on the provision of proofs and evidence of the truth. The truth is its own proof and it can easily prevail over the human mind to accept it and submit to it with reassurance. There are impediments that may prevent a person from accepting the truth. Indeed, God refers to these as He addresses the believers: *"For all you know, even if one [i.e. a miracle] is shown to them, they may still not believe? We will turn their hearts and eyes away since they did not believe in it the first time. We shall leave them to blunder about in their overweening arrogance."* (Verses 109-10) What prevented them the first time round from accepting divine guidance could happen again even after a miracle is shown them, and they could, thus, continue to go astray and reject guidance.

The pointers to faith are latent within man himself and are inherent within the truth itself. They do not relate to any external factor. It is imperative, therefore, that man's heart is purged of all external factors impeding its acceptance of the faith.

The second fact is that God's will is the ultimate factor which determines who follows guidance and who goes astray. God has willed that human beings be tested, allowing us the freedom of choice to determine which course we follow. Anyone who utilizes this freedom in order to seek guidance with the intention of following it once it is received, though he may not know at that moment where he stands, will find that God, by His will, is helping him and showing him the right way. Conversely, a person who uses this freedom of choice to turn away from guidance and the pointers to faith, will find himself further away from the truth, because God's will has determined that he should drift further astray and continue to grope in the dark. God's will prevails over human beings in all situations. It is He who determines everything in the end.

It is to this fact that the passage we are discussing refers: *"We will turn their hearts and eyes away since they did not believe in it the first time. We shall leave them to blunder about in their overweening arrogance. Even if We were to send down angels to them, and if the dead were to speak to them, and even if We were to range all things before them, they*

would still not believe unless God so willed. Yet most of them are ignorant." (Verses 110-11) Indeed, two earlier verses in this passage also refer to this fact: *"Follow what has been revealed to you by your Lord, other than whom there is no deity, and turn your back on those who associate partners with God. Had God so willed, they would not have associated partners with Him. We have not made you their keeper, nor are you responsible for them."* (Verses 106-7)

A further reference to this fact is provided in the verse that begins the next passage: *"Thus We have set up against every prophet enemies: the evil ones among human beings and the jinn, who inspire each other with varnished and deluding falsehood. Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it. Therefore, leave them to their own inventions."* (Verse 112)

Everything is thus left to God's will. It is He who has willed not to guide them, because they did not take the necessary measures to seek and follow His guidance. He has also willed to allow them this measure of freedom to test them. It is He who guides them if they strive for guidance and leaves them to go astray if they choose to do so. According to the Islamic concept, there is no contradiction between the fact that God's will is absolutely free and that He has allowed human beings this measure of freedom to test them.

The third fact is that those who obey God and those who disobey Him are equally subject to His power; He controls everyone's destiny. They cannot do anything except in accordance with God's will which has determined the laws that govern human life. In the area of choice left for man, a believer achieves harmony between the fact that he is inevitably subject to God's authority in the way he is made, his physical and spiritual constitution, the function of every part of his body, etc. and his willing submission to God as the natural result of choosing to follow God's guidance. Thus, a believer lives at peace with himself because what is inevitable and what is the result of free choice in his life follow the same law and submit to the same authority. The unbelievers cannot break away from God's law which governs their constitution and their natural needs. They have to submit to God's law. However, where they have freedom of choice, they rebel against God's authority and refuse to implement His law and constitution. This conflict leaves them miserable. Ultimately, they remain within God's power and He controls their destinies. They indeed cannot do anything Without His will.

This last fact is particularly relevant to the issues which will be presented in the remaining part of this *sūrah.* Hence, it is going to be repeated in different forms. The rest of the *sūrah* tackles the question of God's authority over people's lives and the law they implement. Hence, the *sūrah* repeatedly emphasizes that all authority belongs to God who continues to govern the destiny of those who disobey Him and turn away from His constitution. These people cannot do any harm to believers,

unless God so wills. Indeed, they are too weak to have any authority over themselves, let alone over believers. What takes place in life is simply the fulfilment of God's will as it relates to both those who obey Him and those who refuse to do so.

"Even if We were to send down angels to them, and if the dead were to speak to them, and even if We were to range all things before them, they would still not believe unless God so willed. Yet most of them are ignorant." (Verse 111) Al-Ṭabarī, a famous scholar and commentator on the Qur'ān says of this verse: "God says to His Messenger (peace be upon him): Muĥammad, you should give up any hope of success for those who equate idols with their Lord and who claim that they would believe if they are given a sign. Even though We would send the angels down to them so that they may see them with their own eyes, and if we cause the dead to come back to life and speak to them supporting you and confirming your prophethood and assuring them that your message is the truth, and even if we would range everything in front of them testifying to your message, they would still refuse to believe in you and would continue to deny your message, unless God wills otherwise. Most of those unbelievers are ignorant of this fact. They think that accepting the faith or denying it is their prerogative. This is not true. It is all within My power. Only those I guide to success accept the faith, and those I turn away deny it."

What al-Ṭabarī says here is true, but it requires the clarification that we have given, taking into account the import of all Qur'ānic statements relevant to guidance, error, God's will and man's endeavour. To accept the faith is an event, and so is rejecting it. No event takes place in the universe except by God's will: *"Indeed, We have created everything in due measure and proportion."* (54: 49)

The law which operates God's will, so that one person becomes a believer and one rejects the faith, is explained by the total sum of the relevant Qur'ānic statements. Every man is tested with a measure of free choice which determines his direction. If he sets himself on the route to guidance and strives to achieve it, he will certainly be guided by God's will. If he chooses the other way and turns away from guidance, God will send him further astray. In this respect, both following God's guidance and turning away from it are accomplished by God's will. Man remains within God's power and his life continues according to God's will, which is free, absolute and unrestrained.

13
On Permissibility and Prohibition

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَا لِكُلِّ نَبِيٍّ عَدُوًّا شَيَٰطِينَ ٱلْإِنسِ وَٱلْجِنِّ يُوحِى بَعْضُهُمْ إِلَىٰ بَعْضٍ زُخْرُفَ ٱلْقَوْلِ غُرُورًا ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ رَبُّكَ مَا فَعَلُوهُ ۖ فَذَرْهُمْ وَمَا يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Thus We have set up against every prophet enemies: the evil ones among human beings and the jinn, who inspire each other with varnished and deluding falsehood. Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it. Therefore, leave them to their own inventions, (112)

وَلِتَصْغَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِ أَفْـِٔدَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَلِيَرْضَوْهُ وَلِيَقْتَرِفُوا۟ مَا هُم مُّقْتَرِفُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

o that the hearts of those who do not believe in the life to come may be inclined to what they say and, being pleased with it, persist in their erring ways. (113)

أَفَغَيْرَ ٱللَّهِ أَبْتَغِى حَكَمًا وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مُفَصَّلًا ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُۥ مُنَزَّلٌ مِّن رَّبِّكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمُمْتَرِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

Am I to seek for judge anyone other than God, when it is He who has revealed the Book to you, clearly spelling out the truth. Those to whom We previously gave revelations know that it is the truth revealed by your Lord. So, do not be among the doubters. (114)

وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ صِدْقًا وَعَدْلًا ۚ لَّا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿١١٥﴾

Perfected are the words of your Lord in truth and justice. No one can change His words. He hears all and knows all. (115)

وَإِن تُطِعۡ أَكۡثَرَ مَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ يُضِلُّوكَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۚ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَإِنۡ هُمۡ إِلَّا يَخۡرُصُونَ ١١٦

If you were to pay heed to the greater part of those on earth, they would lead you away from God's path. They follow nothing but conjecture and they do nothing but guess. (116)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعۡلَمُ مَن يَضِلُّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعۡلَمُ بِٱلۡمُهۡتَدِينَ ١١٧ فَكُلُواْ

Your Lord surely knows best who strays from His path, and best knows He those who are right-guided. (117)

مِمَّا ذُكِرَ ٱسۡمُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهِ إِن كُنتُم بِـَٔايَٰتِهِۦ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ١١٨

Eat, then, of that over which God's name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His revelations. (118)

وَمَا لَكُمۡ أَلَّا تَأۡكُلُواْ مِمَّا ذُكِرَ ٱسۡمُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهِ وَقَدۡ فَصَّلَ لَكُم مَّا حَرَّمَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِلَّا مَا ٱضۡطُرِرۡتُمۡ إِلَيۡهِۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا لَّيُضِلُّونَ بِأَهۡوَآئِهِم بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٍۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعۡلَمُ بِٱلۡمُعۡتَدِينَ ١١٩

And why should you not eat of that over which God's name has been pronounced when He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you (to eat) unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity? Many people lead others astray by their errant views and lack of knowledge. Your Lord is fully aware of those who transgress. (119)

وَذَرُواْ ظَٰهِرَ ٱلۡإِثۡمِ وَبَاطِنَهُۥٓۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَكۡسِبُونَ ٱلۡإِثۡمَ سَيُجۡزَوۡنَ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَقۡتَرِفُونَ ١٢٠

Abstain from all sin, be it open or secret. Those who commit sins will be requited for what they have committed. (120)

وَلَا تَأۡكُلُواْ مِمَّا لَمۡ يُذۡكَرِ ٱسۡمُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهِ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَفِسۡقٌۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ لَيُوحُونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَوۡلِيَآئِهِمۡ لِيُجَٰدِلُوكُمۡۖ وَإِنۡ أَطَعۡتُمُوهُمۡ إِنَّكُمۡ لَمُشۡرِكُونَ ١٢١

Hence, do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful. The evil ones do whisper to their friends to argue with you. Should you pay heed to them, you will end up associating

partners with God. (121)

أَوَمَن كَانَ مَيْتًا فَأَحْيَيْنَٰهُ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُۥ نُورًا يَمْشِى بِهِۦ فِى ٱلنَّاسِ كَمَن مَّثَلُهُۥ فِى ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ لَيْسَ بِخَارِجٍ مِّنْهَا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ زُيِّنَ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge? Thus do their deeds seem goodly to the unbelievers. (122)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَا فِى كُلِّ قَرْيَةٍ أَكَٰبِرَ مُجْرِمِيهَا لِيَمْكُرُوا۟ فِيهَا ۖ وَمَا يَمْكُرُونَ إِلَّا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

And thus in every city have We placed arch-criminals so that they weave their schemes there. But it is only against themselves that they scheme, though they do not perceive it. (123)

وَإِذَا جَآءَتْهُمْ ءَايَةٌ قَالُوا۟ لَن نُّؤْمِنَ حَتَّىٰ نُؤْتَىٰ مِثْلَ مَآ أُوتِىَ رُسُلُ ٱللَّهِ ۘ ٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ حَيْثُ يَجْعَلُ رِسَالَتَهُۥ ۗ سَيُصِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ أَجْرَمُوا۟ صَغَارٌ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَعَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَمْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

When a sign comes to them, they say: "We shall not believe unless we are given the same as God's messengers were given." But God knows best whom to entrust with His message. Humiliation before God and severe suffering will befall those guilty of evildoing for all their scheming. (124)

فَمَن يُرِدِ ٱللَّهُ أَن يَهْدِيَهُۥ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُۥ لِلْإِسْلَٰمِ ۖ وَمَن يُرِدْ أَن يُضِلَّهُۥ يَجْعَلْ صَدْرَهُۥ ضَيِّقًا حَرَجًا كَأَنَّمَا يَصَّعَّدُ فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَجْعَلُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّجْسَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self- surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies. Thus does God lay the scourge on the unbelievers. (125)

وَهَٰذَا صِرَٰطُ رَبِّكَ مُسْتَقِيمًا ۗ قَدْ فَصَّلْنَا ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ﴿١٢٦﴾

Such is the path of your Lord, a straight path. We have made Our revelations plain for people who reflect. (126)

۞ لَهُمْ دَارُ ٱلسَّلَٰمِ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ وَهُوَ وَلِيُّهُم بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

Theirs shall be an abode of peace with their Lord. He will be their patron in reward for

what they have been doing. (127)

Overview

With this passage we begin discussion of the great issue treated in the remainder of this *sūrah.* The groundwork for this discussion has been prepared throughout the *sūrah,* including the discussion of major faith concepts. Further preparation is given in the first two verses of this passage which speak of the continuing battle launched against every prophet by the evil ones among human beings and the *jinn,* and how this battle is resolved. The preparation may also be seen in earlier references to the rules that govern divine guidance and how people react to it. Now the *sūrah* dwells on the issue of what is lawful or forbidden of slaughtered animals, and whether God's name is invoked at the time of their slaughter or not. This theme reiterates the basic Islamic concept acknowledging God's absolute authority over everything in the universe, and His unquestionable sovereignty and right to legislate. Human beings are denied any share of this authority and sovereignty. Within the framework of this concept, every violation, large or small, acquires the same degree of importance. A ruling may relate to a very simple issue such as the definition of which slaughtered animals to eat from, or it may be very serious, relating to the state, the system of government and social relations. Within the light of the basic principle, both equally concern the recognition or rejection of God's absolute authority and His Lordship over the universe.

The Qur'ān emphasizes this principle on every occasion. It is reiterated when any new legislation is outlined. This is because this principle is central to faith and submission to God. Once this principle is settled, what remains is its implementation in matters of detail.

We will see in this passage, and in the rest of the *sūrah,* that this principle is repeated in various ways, as the *sūrah* refers to some of the laws and traditions of pre-Islamic society. The relationship between these laws and traditions on the one hand and a rejection of Islam on the other is made clear by virtue of the fact that their enactment and practice is possible only when Godhead is attributed to an entity other than God Almighty. Hence, the Qur'ān launches a sustained attack on them, using different ways and methods, but always linking its campaign to the basic issue of faith and submission to God alone.

Enemies of the Prophets

The first two verses complement the passage discussed in the previous chapter. They also serve as a prelude to the important issues that relate to authority, law and sovereignty which take up the remaining part of this *sūrah.*

> *Thus We have set up against every prophet enemies: the evil ones among human beings and the jinn, who inspire each other with varnished and deluding falsehood. Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it. Therefore, leave them to their own inventions, so that the hearts of those who do not believe in the life to come may be inclined to what they say and, being pleased with it, persist in their erring ways.* (Verses 112-13)

The first word here reminds us that God has ruled that those unbelievers who demand miracles in order to believe and who turn away from the pointers to faith which are present everywhere around them do not actually ever come to accept the faith, even though they may be shown every miracle they can possibly imagine. By God's same free-will, He has assigned to every prophet enemies who are the evil ones among human beings and the *jinn.* Those evil ones inspire each other with varnished falsehoods, half-truths and delusive whispers in order to resist God's guidance and combat His messengers. It is God's will also that those who do not believe in the hereafter shall listen attentively to such deceptive falsehood and half-truths and be pleased with what they hear. This enables them to continue with their opposition to God's messengers and the truth they preach, endeavouring to spread corruption on earth.

All this occurs as God has determined and according to His freewill. Had he willed otherwise, they would not have done so. His will is accomplished in the manner which pleases Him, leading to different results. In a nutshell, nothing of what happens in the universe comes about as mere coincidence, or through human power or authority. When we realize that everything that takes place on earth actually happens according to God's will, including the unabating fight between truth and falsehood, God's messengers and evil forces, then we should try to understand God's purpose in so letting it take place: "*Thus We have set up against every prophet enemies: the evil ones among human beings and the jinn, who inspire each other with varnished and deluding falsehood.*" (Verse 112)

It was God's will and planning that every prophet faced enemies, and that those enemies were the evil ones among the human race and *jinn.* The Arabic term used here for `the evil ones' is 'satans'. From a linguistic point of view, to be a satan is to rebel, to follow every error and to give oneself up completely to evil. This can be true of human beings as well as the *jinn.* If such rebellion and dedication to evil by

anyone from the *jinn* makes him a satan, the same title is given to any human being who does likewise. Indeed, this description can be applied to an uncontrollable animal that causes endless harm. It is said in Arabic: "The black dog is a Satan."

Those satans, be they human or *jinn,* whom God has made enemies to every prophet, deceive one another by falsehood that is given a bright and unreal glitter. Thus, they urge one another to continue in their rebellion, evil and disobedience to God. Evil human beings are easily identifiable; and their work is familiar.

All the different patterns of their hostility towards prophets, the truth they preach and to the believers who follow them are well known. The satans among the *jinn,* and indeed all the *jinn,* are creatures about whom we know only what God, who knows all, has chosen to tell us. In principle, we accept without hesitation what God has told us about the existence of creatures other than man and the living species known to man. We accept God's statement as it is, within the limits He has set for it. Those who claim to follow a scientific approach and who use this in order to deny what God has stated in this regard do not base their argument on any solid foundation. They do not claim that their knowledge is aware of every type of living species on this planet, let alone what exists on other planets. All that human science can assume is that the type of life which exists on earth may or may not exist on other planets and stars. Even if these assumptions prove to be true, they cannot preclude the possibility that other types of life and beings may inhabit other parts of the universe which remain totally unknown to man. Therefore, it is far too arrogant for anyone to deny the existence of such a living world on the basis of human knowledge or science.

The nature of the *jinn,* some of whom like *Iblīs* and his offspring give themselves up totally to evil, remains unknown to us except in as far as God tells us in the Qur'ān and His Messenger in the *Ĥadīth.* On the basis of these accurate statements we know that the *jinn* have been created out of fire and that they are able to live on the face of the earth, inside it or even outside it. They can move much more swiftly than human beings. They include some who are good believers and some who reject the faith totally. They can see human beings, while human beings cannot see them in their original form. This is not surprising, because there are numerous species that see man while man does not see them. We know also that satans have access to human beings and that they tempt them to stray. We do not know how this is done, but we know that these satans have no power over true believers. A Satan constantly remains with a believer: when the believer remembers God, the satan shrinks and disappears, but when the believer is absorbed with worldly matters, the satan tries to tempt him. All satanic scheming is hollow and weak if the believer continues to remind himself of God. The *jinn* will also be resurrected at the same time as human beings, and all will be held to account. *The jinn* will either be rewarded with heaven

or punished in hell, in the same way as human beings. Compared to angels, the *jinn* are very weak and powerless.

From this verse we learn that God has set up enemies for every prophet from among the evil ones, human and *jinn* alike. Had it been God's will, they would have done nothing of this. They would not have rebelled, given themselves up to evil, fought against the prophets, harmed the believers and tried to turn people away from God's path. God could have compelled them to follow His guidance, or made it easy for them to follow it, should they have shown the inclination to do so. Furthermore, He could have made them totally incapable of standing up to the prophets and the believers. He has, however, left them this measure of free choice, and enabled them to cause His servants harm in order to test them. Likewise, He tests His enemies by the choice He has given them. They certainly can cause no servant of God any harm beyond what God has willed. *"Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it."* (Verse 112)

The Limits of Evil Power

What conclusions can we draw from the statements made in this verse? The first is that those who are hostile to every prophet and who try to cause harm to those who follow the prophets are evil whether they belong to the human race or to the *jinn.* They all work for the same end. Some of them may deceive others, but they all rebel against God's guidance, follow evil ways and maintain their hostility towards the believers.

Second, these devils cannot do any of this through any inherent ability of their own. They are subject to God's will. He uses them to test those who believe in Him for a definite purpose of His own. He puts the believers to such a test so that they may show how determined they are to defend the truth entrusted to them. He also wants their hearts to be purged of anything that is unacceptable to Him. When they come through the test with their heads raised high, He stops their enemies from harming them any further. These enemies, who are indeed God's own enemies, find themselves powerless, humiliated, shouldering their heavy burdens and lacking the support of others.

Third, it is God's wisdom that has allowed these evil ones to give themselves up totally to evil. God tests them within the limits of the ability and choice He has allowed them, and He leaves them, for a while at least, with some ability to harm the believers. By the same process, He tests believers so that they show their perseverance and dedication to the cause of the truth they serve. When falsehood seems to have complete power over them, are they able to show that they have completely dedicated themselves to God and that they are willing to sacrifice their all

for His cause? Those who persevere in times of both hardship and ease can thus distinguish themselves. All this is part of God's purpose. Otherwise, He is always able to prevent anything from happening.

Lastly, those devils, be they human or *jinn,* and the scheming and harm they cause are not to be given any great importance. They have no independent power of their own. Indeed, they cannot exceed the limits God has allowed them. When a believer realizes that it is his Lord who has all the power and who determines everything according to a definite measure, he should look down upon the devils who set themselves up in hostility to Him whatever power and authority they claim to command. Hence, the divine instruction to God's Messenger (peace be upon him): "*Therefore, leave them to their own inventions.*" (Verse 112) Let them do whatever they want, because I, the Lord of the universe, am able to smite them whenever I wish. Their retribution is kept in store for them.

There is another purpose for this enmity, which differs from testing both the believers and the evil ones. This is stated clearly in the second verse in this passage: "*So that the hearts of those who do not believe in the life to come may be inclined to what they say and, being pleased with it, persist in their erring ways.*" (Verse 113) This means that those who do not believe in the hereafter will listen to such glittering and deluding falsehood. Such people attach all importance to the life of this world. As they see the devils standing up to every prophet, inflicting harm and hardship on their followers and deluding one another with sweet words and deceptive action, they are ready to follow these devils wherever they lead them. They admire their power, unreal as it is, and they are impressed by their deception. They thus commit sin and error, and indulge in disobedience and corruption.

This is also something that God has willed and has allowed to happen because of what it involves of testing people. Thus, everyone has a chance to prove himself, do what he likes and earn his reward or punishment in all fairness. Human life is thus maintained, the truth is shown distinctly, and goodness is identified through perseverance in times of hardship. The evil ones will shoulder all their burdens on the Day of Judgement. Everything takes place in accordance with God's will whether it is a matter that relates to God's enemies or to His obedient servants.

The scene painted in the Qur'ān showing the battle between the evil ones, human and *jinn,* on the one side and the prophets and their followers on the other, as well as God's overpowering will, is certainly worth contemplating. It is a battle in which the universal forces of evil combine, with determined cooperation and coordination, to achieve a definite objective. Their uniting force is their enmity to the truth, which is represented by the messages God has sent down through His prophets. To achieve their objective, they have a well-defined plan in which they employ specific methods: they "*inspire each other with varnished and deluding falsehood.*" (Verse 112) They supply

one another with the means of temptation, and at the same time they try to cause one another to yield to temptation. This phenomenon applies to every evil force which aims to suppress the truth and subdue its advocates. The evil ones cooperate among themselves and they help one another to persist in error. They never try to guide one another to the truth. Indeed, they always counsel each other to persist with their hostility to the truth.

But nothing of this scheming is free of restraints. It remains within the realm of God's will. The evil ones cannot accomplish any part of it beyond the extent that God's will allows. Great and overpowering as their scheming may seem, mustering the combined forces of evil, it remains constrained, unable to have a free rein. It cannot help anyone, nor can it escape questioning or being held to account. Indeed, dictators and tyrants try to convince their subjects that they are not accountable to anyone so that their subjects remain submissive towards them. This, however, is false. These tyrants' will and power are indeed subject to God's will and can operate only within the limits God has allowed them. They cannot cause any of God's servants any harm except within the limits God has allowed them in order to test that servant. Eventually, all power belongs to God.

The advocates of the truth are well advised to look carefully at the scene which portrays the evil ones working together to carry out a unified plan, so that they can realize the nature of that plan and its method. They also should contemplate that scene which portrays God's controlling power and His overpowering will because this should give them confidence and reassurance. They should always look up to God's will, which cannot be resisted, and His authority to which the whole universe submits. When they do so, they will not care for what the evil ones desire. The believers will then be able to continue along the way God has chosen for them. They continue to establish the truth in their everyday life after having established it in their hearts. The hostility of the evil ones does not worry them, because they leave it all to God who will certainly take care of it: "*Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it. Therefore, leave them to their own inventions.*" (Verse 112)

A Revelation to Explain All Issues

The passage then emphasizes once more that the authority to legislate in all matters that relate to human life belongs to God alone. This is preliminary to stating that it is God who determines which slaughtered animals are lawful to eat and which are forbidden. Those who associate partners with God often exercise this authority in blatant aggression against God and His sovereignty. We note that a long prelude is included here before the issue is clearly tackled: "*Am Ito seek for judge anyone other than God, when it is He who has revealed the Book to you, clearly spelling out the truth.*

Those to whom We previously gave revelations know that it is the truth revealed by your Lord. So, do not be among the doubters. Perfected are the words of your Lord in truth and justice. No one can change His words. He hears all and knows all. If you were to pay heed to the greater part of those on earth, they would lead you away from God's path. They follow nothing but conjecture and they do nothing but guess. Your Lord surely knows best who strays from His path, and best knows He those who are right guided." (Verses 114-17)

These four verses serve as a long preamble, introducing the main subject and closely relating it to the central issue of acceptance or denial of the faith: *"Eat, then, of that over which God's name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His revelations. And why should you not eat of that over which God's name has been pronounced when He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you (to eat) unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity?"* (Verses 118-19)

Before the discussion of the question of permissibility and prohibition is completed, the *sūrah* gives a number of instructions with strong overtones of authority and warning: *"Many people lead others astray by their errant views and lack of knowledge. Your Lord is fully aware of those who transgress. Abstain from all sin, be it open or secret. Those who commit sins will be requited for what they have committed:"* (Verses 119-20)

The question of permissibility and prohibition is then resumed and linked directly to the question of submission to God alone, as opposed to associating partners with Him: *"Hence, do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful. The evil ones do whisper to their friends to argue with you. Should you pay heed to them, you will end up associating partners with God."* (Verse 121)

This is followed by further discussion on the nature of faith and disbelief, which too serves as a comment on the question of permissibility and prohibition. Such emphasis and re-emphasis as well as the links between matters of detail and major issues serves to outline how Islam views the basic issue of legislation for matters of ordinary day-to-day life.

"Am I to seek for judge anyone other than God, when it is He who has revealed the Book to you, clearly spelling out the truth. Those to whom We previously gave revelations know that it is the truth revealed by your Lord. So, do not be among the doubters." (Verse 114) This verse comes in the form of a question asked by God's Messenger, denouncing the very idea of seeking anyone other than God for judgement in any matter whatsoever. It follows this with stating that the authority to legislate in all matters belongs indisputably to God alone. There is simply no one other than God to turn to for judgement in any matter of human life:

"Am Ito seek for judge anyone other than God?" (Verse 114) This initial rhetorical question is supplemented by an outline of the factors which make turning to

someone other than God for judgement an extremely singular attitude. God has explained all things, leaving nothing obscure or confusing. There is absolutely no need for human beings to turn to any other authority to judge over any matter or question: *"It is He who has revealed the Book to you, clearly spelling out the truth."* (Verse 114)

This Book has been revealed in order to settle human disputes in all fairness. It outlines God's authority to legislate and explains what Godhead means practically. Moreover, this Book sets forth, in detail, the basic principles which serve as the foundation for the Islamic constitution regarding human life. It also includes detailed rulings for those questions which God wants to settle, regardless of the economic and scientific progress of any human community. Together, these give the revealed Book its status, removing any need to refer to anyone other than God for judgement on any matter of life. This is what God states in His Book. Let anyone, then, claim that during a particular stage of development, mankind does not find this Book sufficient for their purposes. But he should also say in conjunction with this claim that he does not believe in this religion, and that he rejects what the Lord of this universe states.

There is another factor which makes any attempt to seek a judgement other than God's ruling, on any matter, exceedingly strange. Those who were given divine revelations in the past recognize that this Book, the Qur'ān, is revealed by God. They should know, since they were also given scriptures: *"Those to whom We previously gave revelations know that it is the truth revealed by your Lord."* (Verse 114) This factor was present in Makkah and the Arabian Peninsula. Hence, God mentions it to the unbelievers, whether the people of earlier revelations acknowledge it or not. Indeed, some of them did acknowledge it and these were guided to the truth of Islam. Others denied it. However, the truth of this Book has been established by the fact that God tells us that the people who received earlier revelations know that the Qur'ān is revealed by God with the truth. Indeed, the truth is its subject matter and it is revealed by God simply to explain that truth.

The fact is that the people of earlier revelations continue to realize that the Qur'ān is revealed by God and that the strength of Islam comes from the fact that there is nothing in the Qur'ān but the truth. Knowing all this, they continue in their unabating war against this religion and its Book. This war is most determined when it comes to the attempt to usurp God's authority to legislate by abandoning the law of the Qur'ān and replacing it with man-made laws. In this way, someone other than God is called upon for judgement. The end result is that God's Book is not implemented and faith disappears. It is to this end that the people of earlier revelations, be they Crusaders or Zionists, support every system and government which aims to change the character of the land of Islam, distinguished by its people's submission to God alone and their implementation of the law outlined in His Book.

The *sūrah* then addresses God's Messenger and, by implication, those who believe in His message, telling them not to take to heart the determined opposition they encounter from those who disbelieve or the suppression of the truth by some of the people of earlier revelations: *"So, do not be among the doubters."* (Verse 114) The truth is that God's Messenger has never entertained any doubt. An authentic report states: "When God revealed to him the verse which says, *If you are in doubt concerning what We have sent down to you, ask those who have read the Scriptures before you. It is surely the truth that has come to you from your Lord. Do not, then, be among the doubters'.* (10: 94) God's Messenger said, `I do not doubt, and I am not going to ask anyone.'"

This directive, however, and similar ones in the Qur'ān which aim to strengthen the Prophet's resolve to advocate the truth, give us an impression of the size of the opposition, denial and scheming the Prophet and the early Muslim community had to put up with. They also show how kind God was to them, constantly giving them this reassurance.

The *sūrah* then tells us that God's decisive word has been passed and it cannot be altered by human efforts, no matter what means they employ: *"Perfected are the words of your Lord in truth and justice. No one can change His words. He hears all and knows all."* (Verse 115) Indeed, God's word is perfect. Whatever He says is the truth and whatever ruling or legislation He pronounces is just. Hence, no one else may say anything different whether it relates to faith, concepts, principles, values, law, custom or tradition. No one may amend His rulings or revise them. Indeed, He hears everything His servants say and He knows their every intention. He knows what is good for them and what establishes their life on the right basis: *"He hears all and knows all."* (Verse 115)

All Erring Ways to be Abandoned

Having stated that the truth is simply what is contained in the Book revealed by God, the *sūrah* states that what human beings legislate is the result of following conjecture which is devoid of all certainty. To follow it leads to one clear outcome: error. It also explains that human beings cannot be certain of the truth and cannot follow it unless they receive it from its only source. The *sūrah* also warns God's Messenger (peace be upon him) against obeying people in what they say or advocate, no matter how great their number may be. Ignorance remains the same even though it gathers a very large following: *"If you were to pay heed to the greater part of those on earth, they would lead you away from God's path. They follow nothing but conjecture and they do nothing but guess."* (Verse 116)

At the time when the Qur'ān was revealed, most people on earth belonged to the world *of jāhiliyyah,* as is certainly the case today. They did not refer to God for

judgement in all their affairs. Nor did they make the divine law contained in His revealed Book the law which they implemented. Nor did they derive their concepts, ideas, thoughts and code of living from God's guidance. Hence, they followed the way of ignorance, as they certainly do today. They could not formulate any opinion or advocate any ruling based on the truth, and they could not lead anyone who followed them except into error. Just as people do today, they abandoned certitude in order to follow conjecture and guesswork. Hence, God warns His Messenger and his followers against obeying them so that they do not stray from His path. This warning has a general import, although it is given in connection with the prohibition of certain types of slaughtered animals and permitting others, as is later explained.

The Qur'ān then states that it is God alone who decides which of His servants follow right guidance and which go astray. It is God alone who knows what is in people's inmost hearts, and it is He who determines what constitutes proper guidance and what takes people away from it: "*Your Lord surely knows best who strays from His path, and best knows He those who are right-guided.*" (Verse 117)

It is necessary, then, to have a proper rule to evaluate people's beliefs, concepts, values, standards, activities and actions. This rule will determine what is true and what is false, so that nothing of it is judged according to people's changing desires or ill-founded criteria. It is also necessary that a sovereign authority establishes standards to evaluate all these matters so that people may refer to it for verdicts.

Here God declares that He alone has that authority as well as the authority to judge people as to whether they follow guidance or error. It is not `human society' that is empowered to issue such verdicts according to its changeable values. Society changes its forms and material foundations, and such changes are bound to lead to an amendment of its values and verdicts. Human beings have held different values and moral standards depending on whether society is based on agricultural, industrial, capitalist, socialist or communist lines. The criteria to judge people and their actions differ in accordance with the different bases adopted by these societies.

But Islam does not recognize this at all. Islam establishes its own values which are determined by God and which remain constant despite the different forms human society may take. Any society which abandons these has its own title according to Islamic terminology: it is un-Islamic, *jāhilī,* unbelieving because it allows human beings to establish criteria, values, concepts, systems and situations other than those established by God. This is the only classification of societies, values and moral standards Islam acknowledges. These can be either Islamic or *jāhiliyyah,* regardless of their shape or form.

Having made this long factual introduction, the *sūrah* moves on to discuss the question of slaughtered animals based on the fundamental principle: "*Eat, then, of*

that over which God's name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His revelations. And why should you not eat of that over which God's name has been pronounced when He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you (to eat) unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity?" (Verses 118-19) Before discussing the details of the legislation contained in these verses, we should point out the basic principles of faith to which these verses refer.

There is first an order to eat of animals over which God's name has been pronounced at the time of their slaughter. Such a pronouncement determines people's direction and highlights the relationship between accepting the faith and obeying this directive given to them by God: "*Eat, then, of that over which God's name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His revelations.*" (Verse 118) They are then asked why they should not eat of such animals over which God's name has been mentioned. They are reminded that God has detailed for them what He has forbidden them, unless they are compelled to eat it out of necessity. With such explanation, every argument concerning the permissibility or prohibition of meat is over: "*And why should you not eat of that over which God's name has been pronounced when He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you (to eat), unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity?"* (Verse 119)

These statements directly addressed a major issue in Arabian society. The unbelievers used to forbid themselves the eating of certain animals which God had made lawful, and they made lawful certain animals which God had forbidden. They claimed that their action relied on God's legislation. Hence, the *sūrah* gives its verdict concerning those who made false claims and who sought to exercise an authority that belongs to God alone. It states that what they legislated was a manifestation of their own vain desires, one based on total ignorance. They led people astray by the laws they issued and usurped God's authority to legislate: "*Many people lead others astray by their errant views and lack of knowledge. Your Lord is fully aware of those who transgress.*" (Verse 119)

They are then commanded to abandon all sin, whether open or secret. Part of that sin was to lead people astray with vain desires and errant views, all totally baseless. They actually compelled them to implement laws that God had not promulgated, falsely claiming that these were divine laws. They are, therefore, warned against this grave sin: "*Abstain from all sin, be it open or secret. Those who commit sins will be requited for what they have committed.*" (Verse 120)

Eating Meat with God's Permission

This is followed by a strict order not to eat from any slaughtered animal over which God's name has not been pronounced at the time of slaughter. The Arabs in

pre-Islamic days used to pronounce the names of some of their idols when they slaughtered animals for eating, or when they slaughtered them for gambling or drawing lots. This prohibition covers the eating of carrion, which refers to animals that die naturally. The unbelievers used to argue with the Muslims about this prohibition, claiming that such animals had been killed by God. Thus, they wondered that the Muslims would eat of what they themselves slaughtered but would not eat of what God had slaughtered. This is just one of the infinitely stupid arguments that people of ignorance may advance, prompted by the evil ones among them and the *jinn.* Hence, the command given in this verse is coupled with a warning: *"Hence, do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful. The evil ones do whisper to their friends to argue with you. Should you pay heed to them, you will end up associating partners with God."* (Verse 121)

This statement requires some reflection, for it is decisive in its reference to the authority every Muslim should obey. It clearly demonstrates that even in matters of detail, obedience by a Muslim to anyone who orders him to do something which is at variance with God's law and which does not recognize God's sovereignty and authority to legislate takes that Muslim out of Islam and leads him to associate partners with God.

In discussing the statement, *"should you pay heed to them, you will end up associating partners with God"* Ibn Kathīr says: This means that when you have abandoned God's law, disregarded His commandments and preferred someone else's law, then you are guilty of associating partners with Him. This is comparable to God's description of the followers of earlier religions: *"They have taken their rabbis and their monks for their lords beside God."* (9: 31) In his interpretation of this verse, al-Tirmidhī reports that `Adī ibn Ĥātim said to the Prophet: "Messenger of God, they did not worship them." The Prophet said: "Yes, indeed. They (meaning the rabbis and monks) made lawful to them what God has made unlawful, and they have forbidden them what God has made lawful, and they (meaning the followers of those religions) followed them. That is indeed their worship of them."

Similarly, Ibn Kathīr quotes al-Suddī in his commentary on the Qur'ānic statement, *They have taken their rabbis and monks for lords beside God.'* Al-Suddī says: "They have taken the views of human beings, abandoning God's Book and His law. Hence, God follows this with the statement, *`they have been ordered only to worship the one God'*, (9: 31) referring to the One who has the authority to forbid and make lawful and who must be obeyed whatever He legislates."[40]

Both distinguished scholars, al-Suddī and Ibn Kathīr, state with total clarity, that whoever obeys any man-made law which is at variance with God's law, even in a

[40] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm,* Vol. 2, p. 159.

matter of detail, associates partners with God. If he is a Muslim yet continues to do so, he actually leaves the fold of Islam altogether, even though he declares verbally that he believes in God's oneness. This is because he receives his laws from an authority other than God's. When we look everywhere on earth today, we find ignorance and the association of partners with God among all peoples, with the exception of those God has guided to His path. These are the ones who refuse to accept the claims of all deities to any of the attributes of Godhead. They reject all such laws and legislation, except when they are compelled to accept them by force.

Let us now consider the implication of the divine statement, *"Do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful."* (Verse 121) We need to learn from this statement which animals are lawful to eat and which are not, and whether God's name is pronounced or omitted at the time of slaughter. Ibn Kathīr sums up the various views of a large number of scholars as follows:

> This Qur'ānic verse provides the evidence supporting the view that when God's name is not pronounced at the time of the slaughtering of any animal, it becomes unlawful to eat, even though the man carrying out the slaughter is a Muslim. Leading scholars have three different views in this respect. The first view is that such an animal is unlawful to eat, whether the omission of pronouncing God's name at its slaughter has been deliberate or out of forgetfulness. This view is supported by Abdullāh ibn `Umar, Nāfi`, `Āmir al-Sha`bī and Muĥammad ibn Sīrīn. It is also reported to be one view held by Imāms Mālik and Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal. Some early and later scholars of the Ĥanbalī school support this view. It is also supported by Abū Thawr and Dāwūd al-Żāhirī. It is the preferred view of Muĥammad al-Ṭā'ī, of the Shāfi`ī school in his book, *Al-Arba`īn.* These scholars support their view with this verse and the verse concerned with the permissibility of hunted animals which states: *"you may eat of what they catch for you. But mention God's name over it."* (5: 4) This prohibition is further confirmed by the statement, *"for that is sinful."* (Verse 121) The pronoun, 'that', is understood to refer either to the eating or the slaughtering without pronouncing God's name. This view is also supported by the *aĥādīth* ordering the pronouncement of God's name at slaughter and hunting, such as: "If you set your trained dog and mention God's name, you may eat of what it catches for you." (Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.) "You may eat of animals whose blood is spilled and over which God's name has been pronounced." (Related by al- Bukhārī and Muslim.)
>
> The second view is that the pronouncement of God's name at the time of slaughter is recommended, and not obligatory. If it is omitted, whether deliberately or through forgetfulness, it does not affect the fact that the animal is permissible to eat. This is the view of Imām al-Shāfi`ī and all his

disciples. It is also reported to have been expressed by Imāms Aĥmad and Mālik, as well as Ibn `Abbās, Abū Hurayrah and `Atā'. As for the Qur'ānic statement, *"Do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful,"* (Verse 121), al-Shāfi`ī interprets this as referring to animals dedicated to deities or beings other than God. Imām al-Shāfi`ī's view is considered to be strongly supported. A report attributed to Ibn Abbās suggests that the statement, *"Do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced',* refers to carrion. A *ĥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "An animal slaughtered by a Muslim is permissible to eat, whether he pronounces God's name or not, because if he is to mention any name, he would pronounce only God's name." This ĥadīth is not strongly authentic, but it is endorsed by one related by al-Dāraquṭnī who quotes Ibn `Abbās as saying: "If a Muslim slaughters an animal without pronouncing God's name, he may eat of it, because a Muslim bears a name of God."

The third view makes it clear that if the pronouncement of God's name is omitted out of forgetfulness, the animal is lawful to eat; while if it is omitted deliberately, the slaughtered animal is unlawful. This is the view most commonly associated with the Mālikī and Ĥanbalī schools. It is the one to which Imām Abū Ĥanīfah and his school subscribe. It is supported by many other scholars, such as Isĥāq ibn Rāhawayh, `Alī, Ibn `Abbās, Sa`īd ibn al-Musayyib, `Aṭā', Ṭawūs, al-Ĥasan al-Başrī, Abū Mālik, Ibn Abī Laylā, Ja`far al-Şādiq, and Rabī`ah ibn `Abd al-Raĥmān.

Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī mentions that scholars hold different views with regard to whether any part of the rulings in this verse have been abrogated. Some of them say that no abrogation has taken place; its import is certainly clear. This is the view of Mujāhid and most scholars.[41] However, `Ikrimah and al-Ĥasan al-Başrī, two prominent scholars, refer to the verses in this *sūrah: "Eat, then, of that over which God's name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His revelations."* (Verse 118) *"Hence, do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced; for that is sinful."* (Verse 121) They also refer to a verse in another *sūrah:" The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them."* (5: 5) These scholars quote Makhūl as saying: "God revealed in the Qur'ān, *"Do not eat of that over which God's name has not been pronounced'.* Then God abrogated it out of mercy shown to Muslims, saying: *"Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. The food of those who were given revelations is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them".* (5: 5) Thus, the abrogation of the first verse is effected as God has made the animals slaughtered by people of earlier revelations lawful for Muslims to eat." Al-

[41] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 8, p. 21.

> Ṭabarī adds: "The fact is that there is no conflict between making the food of the people of earlier revelations lawful and prohibiting the meat of animals over which God's name has not been pronounced." His view is certainly right. Those early scholars who say that the earlier ruling has been abrogated actually mean that it has been qualified.[42]

Incomparable Situations

Next we have a full treatment of the nature of both faith and disbelief. The following verses speak of God's will that manifests itself in every community, even where the most hardened of criminals scheme and give themselves airs. Their arrogance prevents them from accepting the faith. This concludes with a splendid image portraying the faith that opens people's hearts and minds, contrasting it with the oppressive situation of disbelief, which weighs heavily on people's minds. The whole passage relates to the question of prohibition and permissibility concerning slaughtered animals, in the same way as a basic rule is related to a detailed application.

> *Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge? Thus do their deeds seem goodly to the unbelievers. And thus in every city have We placed arch-criminals so that they weave their schemes there. But it is only against themselves that they scheme, though they do not perceive it. When a sign comes to them, they say: "We shall not believe unless we are given the same as God's messengers were given." But God knows best whom to entrust with His message. Humiliation before God and severe suffering will befall those guilty of evildoing for all their scheming. Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies. Thus does God lay the scourge on the unbelievers.* (Verses 122-5)

These verses delineate the nature of faith and divine guidance in a factual statement describing a true fact. The apparent allegory magnifies this in an inspiring way, but the statement itself expresses a practical fact. Indeed, the nature of that fact requires the use of such splendid images. We are speaking here of a spiritual and intellectual fact, one which can only be appreciated when experienced. Its description brings this whole experience into full relief, particularly to those who have actually gone through it.

---

[42] Ibn Kathīr, op. cit., Vol. 2, pp. 157-8.

It is true that faith revives people's hearts after they have been dead and gives them light to bring them out of darkness. Their new life enables them to appreciate and evaluate all things in a new light and according to a new measure they did not previously know. The light they are given makes everything appear new. It is as if it has never been seen by those hearts that now bask in the light of faith.

This experience cannot be described in words, because it is known only to those who have actually gone through it. The Qur'ānic statement is the strongest that can express for us the nature of this experience, because it depicts it in its true colours.

Rejection of the divine faith is indeed a break with the true life which is ever present, eternal. It is a self-imposed isolation from the effective power that influences the whole of existence, and a breakdown of all natural systems of reception and response. Hence, it is an effective death. Faith, on the other hand, is a real bond of communication and response. As such, it is life.

Denial of the divine truth is a cover that prevents the soul from looking around, a screen over human powers and feelings, and a state of complete loss. Hence, it is darkness. Faith, on the other hand, means opening up, looking around, appreciating and understanding. As such, it is the true light.

Disbelief means shrinking within oneself, so it signifies narrowness. It is a deviation from the natural, easy method; hence, it signifies difficulty and affliction. It is a deprivation of security and reassurance; hence, it signifies worry. Faith, on the other hand, signifies openness, ease and reassurance.

How do we describe an unbeliever? He is no more than a parasitic growth that has no real roots in the soil of this universe. He is an isolated individual who has no tie with the Creator of the universe. Consequently, his ties with the universe are very flimsy, extending only within the limitations of his own existence. In other words, unbelievers are confined to the limitations placed on the physical world of animals.

When a believer establishes his bond with the Creator and makes faith the basis of all his ties with other people, he actually reaches out, within his short life, to that existence which was there before the beginning of time and to immortality which has no end. He also establishes firm ties with the universe and with all aspects of life. He also establishes ties with the procession of the faithful who constitute a single nation whose history stretches back to time immemorial and extends far into the future, indeed for as long as human life continues. Thus, a believer has a great treasure of ties going well beyond his own limited lifetime.

As a believer feels the light in his heart, he begins to discover the basic facts of this religion and its method of action. The scene that extends before man's eyes is breathtaking because it portrays the unique harmony in the nature and the details of this religion and the elaborate complementarity of its method of action. The believer

then begins to look at this religion, not as a set of beliefs, acts of worship, laws and directives but as a complete whole which is alive, interacting with nature like an intimate and loving friend.

With this light in his heart, a believer begins to discover the facts behind existence, life, people and the facts of the events that take place on earth and in the universe. Again, within this wonderful scene he sees the perfect divine laws that relate starting premises to their natural conclusions in an elaborate, but natural and easy system. He sees how God's free-will determines the law and its operation, while continuing to be free, absolute. He sees that people and events react to natural laws which remain subject to God's will.

This light also gives man complete clarity in all matters and events. He is clear about the thoughts and intentions he entertains and the actions he plans. He sees with absolute clarity the events that take place around him, whether they are the result of the laws of nature or of people's actions and plans. To him, the whole history of mankind and the universe becomes an open book that he reads with absolute transparency. His thoughts and feelings become bright; he has no worry about his existence or his future; events and happenings take place and he is relaxed, reassured.

The Qur'ān describes all this with inspiring touches: "*Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge?*" (Verse 122)

This verse describes the situation of Muslims before they came to believe in this religion, and before faith breathed life into their souls to release within them their great store of ability, action and forward- looking qualities. Their hearts were dead, and their spirits were in darkness, but when faith touched their hearts they quickened and light brightened their souls. Thus they were able to bring guidance, reassurance and freedom to mankind, showing them the way and making an all-important declaration that man has been reborn. With faith, man is liberated, enlightened, submitting to no authority other than that of God's.

Can they be compared: the one in whom God has breathed life and to whom He has given light, and the one who lingers in darkness, knowing no way out of it? The two worlds are set widely apart. Why do people, then, linger in darkness when the light is bright all around them? "*Thus do their deeds seem goodly to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 122)

This is the secret then. Disbelief, darkness and even death have been made to seem good to the unbelievers. This is part of God's will which has made men, by nature, susceptible to the dual lure of light and darkness. Thus, man is put to a test to find out whether he chooses darkness or light. When he chooses darkness, it is made to

look good to him so that he goes deeper and deeper into it. Additionally, the evil ones among both human beings and *jinn* continue to inspire each other with fabricated falsehoods and continue to make their actions seem goodly to the unbelievers. A heart that has been cut off from life, faith and light listens to evil whispers in the dark, because it cannot see or feel or distinguish guidance from error. How can it make such a distinction in the depth of the darkness into which it has sunk?

Who May be Entrusted with a Divine Message?

By the same token and for the same reasons, God has placed in every land criminals who enjoy a position of power so that they can scheme and plot. Their scheming allows the test to be completed, and God's will to take effect. Everyone is thus able to follow the path made easy and reap his reward at the end of the day: *"And thus in every city have We placed arch-criminals so that they weave their schemes there. But it is only against themselves that they scheme, though they do not perceive it."* (Verse 123)

It is an aspect of the law God has set in operation that in every main or capital city, a group of those who have power and are hardened in sin take a very hostile attitude towards divine faith. This is due to the fact that divine faith begins by depriving such people of the power which enables them to establish their authority over others, making them subservient and for whom they claim they have the power to legislate. It re-establishes God's authority as He is indeed the Lord, King and God of mankind. It is part of the laws of human nature that God sends His messengers with the truth which deprives those who claim Godhead of every aspect of lordship and authority over mankind. Hence, such people declare their opposition to the divine faith and to God's messengers. They weave their schemes and try to inspire one another with deceptive falsehoods, cooperating with the evil ones among the *jinn* to try to win their battle against the truth and divine guidance. Thus they work hard spreading falsehood and error, deceiving people with their scheming.

The fight is inevitable because it is caused by the inherent and complete opposition between the basic principle of faith, which declares that all sovereignty belongs to God, and the ambitions of those criminals occupying positions of power. Every prophet will inevitably fight this battle because he cannot avoid it. Similarly, those who believe in a prophet will inevitably be engaged in this battle to the end. God reassures the believers that no matter how great and powerful the scheming of these criminals may appear to be, it will inevitably turn against them in the end. The believers are not alone in this battle, because God is their patron. That is sufficient for them, because it is He who makes the scheming of the criminals turn against them:

"But it is only against themselves that they scheme, though they do not perceive it." (Verse 123) Let the believers then be reassured.

The *sūrah* then reveals the arrogant nature of those who are hostile towards God's messengers and His religion. It is their arrogance which prevents them from surrendering themselves to God because that would place them on the same level as the rest of God's servants. They want a place of distinction to preserve their positions among their followers. They feel that it is beneath them to believe in the Prophet after having enjoyed a position of lordship over others. Hence, they come out with their singularly stupid declaration: *"When a sign comes to them, they say: 'We shall not believe unless we are given the same as God's messengers were given.'"* (Verse 124)

Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, one of the tribal chiefs of the Quraysh, said to the Prophet: "Had prophethood been true, I would have been more entitled to it than you, because I am older and richer than you." Abū Jahl, the most hardened opponent of Islam among the Quraysh said: "By God, we shall never accept or follow Muĥammad, unless we are given revelations just as he receives."

It is clear that their self-esteem and the special position they enjoyed among their followers and the fact that their orders were obeyed were the real reasons to justify their opposition and hostility to God's messengers and the divine faith. God replies to their singular statement by making it clear first that the question of choosing messengers to be entrusted with His message is something that He determines in accordance with His knowledge of who may be trusted with it. He then warns them that they will suffer great humiliation: *"God knows best whom to entrust with His message. Humiliation before God and severe suffering will befall those guilty of evildoing for all their scheming."* (Verse 124)

The divine message is something very serious because it provides a link between God's will and a single one of His servants, and between the supreme society and the limited world of human beings. Through the message a linkage is made between heaven and earth, this life and the life to come. The eternal truth is placed in human hearts and implemented in human society and becomes the initiator of historical events. A human being is purged of every trace of self-interest so that he or she may be totally dedicated to God, not only in intention, purpose and action, but in their whole being. Thus, God's Messenger (peace be upon him) has a direct link with this truth and its source. Such a direct link can only be established with a soul that is worthy of this honour, of receiving the truth directly without impediments. God alone knows whom to entrust with His message. He chooses that person from among billions of people, and assigns to him his mission.

Those who aspire to be given that honour or demand that they be given similar revelations are unsuitable by their very nature for this task, because they think

themselves to be the pivot around which the whole universe turns. Messengers are of a totally different nature, because they receive their message with complete surrender, dedicate themselves to it and have no aspirations or ambitions of their own: "*You could never aspire to that this Book would be offered to you, but it [came to you] only by the grace of your Lord.*" (28: 86) Moreover, such people are ignorant of the seriousness of the divine message and do not know that it is God alone who chooses His messengers. Hence, God gives them His decisive answer: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (Verse 124) He certainly chose for it the noblest souls among His creation and the most dedicated of them. These were the messengers of whom Muĥammad was the last.

This is followed with a warning that humiliation and severe suffering awaits those criminals: "*Humiliation before God and severe suffering will befall those guilty of evildoing for all their scheming.*" (Verse 124) The humiliation is an answer to their arrogance and their impudent aspiration to be given divine messages. Their severe suffering is a fitting retribution for their scheming and hostility towards God's messengers and the believers.

Choosing Divine Guidance

The whole passage concludes with a description of the state that ensues when divine guidance is followed, when the faith is accepted and the effect it has on people's hearts. "*Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies. Thus does God lay the scourge on the unbelievers.*" (Verse 125)

God has set in operation a law that ensures guidance for everyone who wishes to be guided and who takes the necessary action to achieve that guidance. All this remains within the limits of choice given to human beings by way of a test. Within this law, when God wishes to guide a person, "*He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self- surrender (to God).*" (Verse 125) He thus receives the concept of surrendering himself to God with willingness and reassurance. Again, in accordance with God's law that He leaves anyone who turns his back on guidance and closes his mind to it to his own devices, it is said of God that: "*He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted.*" (Verse 125) His mind is shut and he finds difficulty in accepting God's guidance. He is just like one who "*is climbing up into the skies.*" (Verse 125) This is a mental state described in terms of a physical condition which combines difficult breathing, stress and the exhaustion which accompanies climbing up stage after stage into the skies. The very word chosen here to denote `climbing up' imparts a sense of difficulty and strenuous physical effort. Thus, the whole scene is in perfect harmony

both with the physical condition and the verbal expression describing it.

The scene is concluded with a fitting comment: "*Thus does God lay the scourge on the unbelievers.*" (Verse 125) Just as it is God's will to cause the bosom of a person who wishes to be guided to open wide with willingness to surrender himself to God, and causes the one who chooses to go astray to find things hard and difficult, so does God lay a scourge on those who do not believe. The Arabic term which is rendered here as `scourge' has a variety of meanings. It denotes `suffering, blight, ignominy, etc.' Together, its nuances give us a picture of a person who is completely incapable of rescuing himself. He continues to endure most severe suffering without any hope of salvation.

We need to say something further about this verse: "*Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies. Thus does God lay the scourge on the unbelievers.*" (Verse 125)

This verse and similar ones in the Qur'ān refer to the essential relationship between God's will and people's choices, and what befalls them of either being guided or going astray and the consequent reward or punishment they receive. To fully appreciate the facts such verses describe requires a level of human understanding different from that of intellectual logic. All the controversy that has taken place around this issue over the years, in the history of Islamic thought, particularly between the Mu`tazilah, the Murji'ah and the mainstream Sunnīs, and in the history of divinity and philosophy, and all that has been written about it have a distinct intellectual drift.

But as we have said, this whole question requires the use of a different level of understanding. It also requires us to deal with practical facts, not intellectual arguments. The Qur'ān describes the true facts within the human self and the universe at large. These portray distinctly the close interrelation between what God determines and man's choice and action in a way that cannot be properly appreciated by intellectual logic.

To say that God's will pushes man into taking one of two ways, either guidance or error, is not compatible with practical reality. Nor is this reality compatible with saying that man's will determines his destiny. Instead, the practical reality is made up of an elaborate mixture which combines the freedom and authority of God's will on the one hand and man's free choice on the other, without these being in conflict with each other.

As has already been stated, understanding this reality cannot be done within the confines of intellectual logic or argument. It is the nature of a certain reality that

determines how it should be approached and expressed. Understanding this reality as it is also requires going through a complete spiritual and psychological experience. When people move towards surrendering themselves to God, they find that their hearts open up warmly to such surrender. This is certainly of God's own doing. To feel inclined to something takes place only by God's will. On the other hand, a person who prefers the path which leads astray feels his bosom tightening and constricted. This is again of God's own doing, because it is an event that cannot come about unless God wills it to be. But this is not the will of force. It is the will that has set a particular law in operation so that man is tested with the measure of choice he has been given. Moreover, it is God's will to determine the consequences of the type of choice man makes and whether he follows guidance or error.

When one intellectual issue is set against another, and when the benefit of practical experience of how to deal with these intellectual issues is not made use of, we cannot have a complete and accurate understanding of the practical reality involved. This is the shortcoming of all intellectual arguments on these issues, whether we find them in Islamic philosophy or elsewhere. Hence, a different approach is needed.

Let us now pick up the thread of our commentary on this passage, which is stated as a comment on the question of which slaughtered animals it is permissible to eat. All these issues form a single unit in the Qur'ān, in a Muslim's mind and in the structure of the Islamic faith. The question of which meat is lawful is a question of legislation, and this is a question of authority, which is, in turn, a question of faith. This means that this approach to faith is the right one, given in the right place.

The final comment in this passage provides the last link between the issues of faith and legislation. Together they form God's straight path. To violate either of them is to abandon the path set by God. To stick to them both is to follow the path which leads to the abode of peace and ensures God's patronage to those who do well: "*Such is the path of your Lord, a straight path. We have made Our revelations plain for people who reflect. Theirs shall be an abode of peace with their Lord. He will be their patron in reward for what they have been doing.*" (Verses 126-7)

The path is described as `the path of your Lord' to add a sense of reassurance about the outcome. His law governing guidance and error has been outlined, and His legislation concerning permissibility and prohibition has been spelled out. Both enjoy equal importance in God's sight. Both are approached in the same way in His Book, the Qur'ān.

God has made plain His revelations, but it is those who take heed and do not overlook these revelations that benefit by such a detailed statement. A believer's heart is always alert, wide open, happy, alive, responsive. Those who reflect and take

heed will enjoy the abode of peace with their Lord. Their reward will not fail to come. God will grant them His support as He takes good care of them to reward them for what they have been doing. They have passed the test well and their reward is generous indeed.

Once more we find ourselves looking at one of the fundamental issues of this faith, showing God's straight path to reflect the recognition of His sovereignty and the following of His code. Beyond both lies faith. Together they define the nature of the Islamic faith as stated by the Lord of the universe.

14
Judgement According to Deeds

وَيَوْمَ يَحْشُرُهُمْ جَمِيعًا يَـٰمَعْشَرَ ٱلْجِنِّ قَدِ ٱسْتَكْثَرْتُم مِّنَ ٱلْإِنسِ ۖ وَقَالَ أَوْلِيَآؤُهُم مِّنَ ٱلْإِنسِ رَبَّنَا ٱسْتَمْتَعَ بَعْضُنَا بِبَعْضٍ وَبَلَغْنَآ أَجَلَنَا ٱلَّذِىٓ أَجَّلْتَ لَنَا ۚ قَالَ ٱلنَّارُ مَثْوَىٰكُمْ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢٨﴾

On the day when He shall gather them all together, (He will say): "O you company of jinn! A great many human beings have you seduced." Those who were their close friends among human beings will say: "Our Lord, we have enjoyed each other's fellowship, and we have now reached the end of our term which You have appointed for us." He will say: "The fire shall be your abode, where you shall remain, unless God wills it otherwise." Indeed, your Lord is wise, all-knowing. (128)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُوَلِّى بَعْضَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ بَعْضًۢا بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾

In this manner do We cause the wrongdoers to be close allies of one another, because of that which they do. (129)

يَـٰمَعْشَرَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ رُسُلٌ مِّنكُمْ يَقُصُّونَ عَلَيْكُمْ ءَايَـٰتِى وَيُنذِرُونَكُمْ لِقَآءَ يَوْمِكُمْ هَـٰذَا ۚ قَالُوا۟ شَهِدْنَا عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِنَا ۖ وَغَرَّتْهُمُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَشَهِدُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ كَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

"O you company of jinn and humans! Have there not come to you messengers from among yourselves who related to you My revelations and warned you of the coming of this your day?"

They will reply: "We bear witness against ourselves." The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers. (130)

ذَٰلِكَ أَن لَّمْ يَكُن رَّبُّكَ مُهْلِكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ بِظُلْمٍ وَأَهْلُهَا غَـٰفِلُونَ ﴿١٣١﴾

وَلِكُلّٖ دَرَجَٰتٞ مِّمَّا عَمِلُواْۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٣٢

And so it is that your Lord would never destroy a community for its wrongdoing, while they remain unaware. (131)

وَرَبُّكَ ٱلۡغَنِيُّ ذُو ٱلرَّحۡمَةِۚ إِن يَشَأۡ يُذۡهِبۡكُمۡ وَيَسۡتَخۡلِفۡ مِنۢ بَعۡدِكُم مَّا يَشَآءُ كَمَآ أَنشَأَكُم مِّن ذُرِّيَّةِ قَوۡمٍ ءَاخَرِينَ ١٣٣

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds. Your Lord is not unaware of what they do. (132)

Your Lord is the self-sufficient One, the Merciful. If He so wills, He may remove you altogether and cause whom He wills to succeed you, just as He brought you into being out of other people's seed. (133)

إِنَّ مَا تُوعَدُونَ لَأٓتٖۖ وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعۡجِزِينَ ١٣٤

That which you are promised will inevitably come, and you cannot elude it. (134)

قُلۡ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡمَلُواْ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمۡ إِنِّي عَٰمِلٞۖ فَسَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَ مَن تَكُونُ لَهُۥ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلدَّارِۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ١٣٥

Say: "My people! Do all that may be in your power, and I will do what I can. You shall come to know to whom the future belongs. Never will the wrongdoers attain success. (135)

Overview

This whole passage is a continuation of the previous one. Since the *sūrah* previously outlined the destiny of those who follow the path acceptable to God, it now outlines the fate of satans, be they human or *jinn.* On the other hand, it continues to tackle the great issue of faith and its rejection, which is mentioned here within the framework of God's sovereignty and authority to legislate. It links the issue of sovereignty with the main issues of the Islamic faith, including that of reward in the life to come for what people do in this present life. Other issues linked with this are God's ability to remove all satans, their friends and all mankind, and to replace them with others, as also mankind's weakness in the face of God's irresistible power. All these faith issues are mentioned here within the context of the prohibition and permissibility of animal food, which has already been discussed, and the forthcoming discussion of offerings of crops, animals and offspring, as well as other

ignorant traditions and *jāhiliyyah* concepts. Thus all these issues appear to be closely related. They are seen in their appropriate positions as designated by Islam. That is, they are all faith questions, equally treated according to God's measures established in His revealed Book.

The Power of the Wicked

The previous passage of the *sūrah* contained a full discussion of the situation of those whose hearts God opens up to receive the message of surrender to Him. They remain conscious of God and continue to watch Him in all their actions, move towards a life of peace, assured that they will have the patronage of their Lord. As it is customary in the Qur'ān for contrasting scenes of the Day of Judgement to be portrayed, we now have a sketch showing the lot of the evil ones among humans and *jinn*. These spend their lives inspiring one another with deceptive falsehood, supporting one another in their hostility to every prophet and messenger pointing out to each other what arguments to use with the believers in order to raise doubts in their minds about what God has made lawful and what He has forbidden. All this is portrayed in a very vivid sketch, characterized by dialogue, confession and reproach.

> *On the day when He shall gather them all together, (He will say):"O you company of jinn! A great many human beings have you seduced." Those who were their close friends among human beings will say: "Our Lord, we have enjoyed each other's fellowship, and we have now reached the end of our term which You have appointed for us." He will say: "The fire shall be your abode, where you shall remain, unless God wills it otherwise." Indeed, your Lord is wise, all-knowing. In this manner do We cause the wrongdoers to be close allies of one another, because of that which they do. "O you company of jinn and humans! Have there not come to you messengers from among yourselves who related to you My revelations and warned you of the coming of this your day?" They will reply: "We bear witness against ourselves." The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers."* (Verses 128-30)

Full of life, the scene is shown first to be one of the future, when all creation will be gathered before God. Yet it soon becomes a scene of the present, held in front of the eyes of every listener. This is achieved by the omission of one Arabic word which means in English, "He will say", included in the translation between brackets for clarity. The omission of this phrase, expressed in a single Arabic word, brings the whole scene right into the present so as not to speak of something to be awaited in future but of something that is taking place now. This method is characteristic of the inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

Let us now look at what is sketched out in this scene. It begins with an address to the *jinn: "On the day when He shall gather them all together, (He will say): 'O you company of jinn! A great many human beings have you seduced."* (Verse 128) You have managed to gather a large following from among human beings who listen to your inspiration, follow in your footsteps and obey your suggestions. Although this is given in the form of a factual statement, it is not meant to merely impart information. The *jinn* know what they have done. Rather, the statement is intended to record the crime of leading such a large number of humans astray and to reproach the *jinn* for so doing. In this gathering of all humans and *jinn* on the Day of Judgement, all evidence of the crime is shown. Therefore, the *jinn* do not make any reply. However, the imbeciles among human beings who take satanic inspiration lightly are the ones to answer: *"Those who were their close friends among human beings will say: 'Our Lord, we have enjoyed each other's fellowship, and we have now reached the end of our term which You have appointed for us.'"* (Verse 128)

The answer betrays their lack of awareness, and demonstrates to them how Satan finds his way into their thinking. They used to enjoy the ideas, the lack of discipline, the pleasures and the sinful ways which the *jinn* portrayed to them in attractive colours. It was their keenness to enjoy themselves that provided Satan with the opportunity to lure and play tricks on them. Thus were they made to work for the fulfilment of Satan's goal.

Yet those imbeciles also used to think that the enjoyment was mutual and that they were giving as much pleasure as they were receiving. Hence they state in their answer: "*Our Lord, we have enjoyed each other's fellowship."* (Verse 128) That enjoyment lasted for the duration of their life on earth. On the day when they are gathered, they will know that they have always been subject to God's power and that it was He who gave them this span of time to reflect and respond: *"We have now reached the end of our term which You have appointed for us."* (Verse 128) With that knowledge, the judgement is made so that they receive their fair punishment: "*He will say: 'The fire shall be your abode, where you shall remain, unless God wills it otherwise.'"* (Verse 128)

The fire is, then, their abode. Abodes are meant for continuity. But the qualification is added, "*unless God wills it otherwise."* (Verse 128) This qualification is in line with the fact that God's will is free, subject to no restraining factor. Indeed, it is not subject even to what it has determined. This is a basic principle of the Islamic faith.

"*Indeed, your Lord is wise, all-knowing."* What He determines for people is based on His unflawed and perfect knowledge.

A comment on this part of the scene is inserted here before the dialogue is resumed to complete it: *"In this manner do We cause the wrongdoers to be close allies of*

one another, because of that which they do." (Verse 129)

It is in the manner that established the fellowship between the *jinn* and the human beings and the ultimate end to which this fellowship has come that wrongdoers get to be closely allied, on account of what they do. The similarity of their nature, the unity of their direction and goal, and the fact that their end will be the same establishes an alliance between them. This is a statement that goes beyond its immediate occasion. It speaks of the nature of the fellowship between all evil ones, *jinn* and human. The wrongdoers who associate partners with God in one form or another gather together in one camp to oppose the truth and divine guidance. They establish a relationship of mutual support against every prophet and those who believe in Him. It is not only that they share the same nature, despite their different appearances, but they also have the same interest which can only be served by usurping the rights of Lordship over mankind and giving unrestrained rein to their desires.

Indeed, we see them in every age supporting one another in every fight against faith and believers, despite their own internal rivalry and differences. Hence, their common nature and common objectives help to establish their alliance. The evil they do and the sins they commit determine that they will suffer the same fate in the hereafter, as is portrayed in this scene.

In our present day we see a grand alliance of evil, in which Zionists, Crusaders, pagans and Communists work together despite their great differences. This alliance has been going on for centuries, united by its hostility to Islam and its determination to crush Islamic revivalist movements wherever they function. It is, indeed, a mighty alliance. It benefits from its experience of long centuries of combat against the principle of submission to God. Furthermore, it mobilizes material and cultural forces and makes use of systems and machinery available within the Muslim world to serve its evil plans. It is a confirmation of God's own words: *"In this manner do We cause the wrongdoers to be close allies of one another, because of that which they do."* (Verse 129)

But the reassurance given by God to His Messenger also applies here: *"Had your Lord willed otherwise, they would not have done it. Therefore, leave them to their own inventions."* (Verse 112) This reassurance, however, requires that the community of believers continues to follow in the footsteps of God's Messenger recognizing that they have to hold the banner and defend the cause of Islam and Muslims, whatever sacrifice they may have to make.

Let us consider now the last part of this scene: "'O *you company of jinn and humans! Have there not come to you messengers from among yourselves who related to you My revelations and warned you of the coming of this your day?' They will reply: 'We bear*

witness against ourselves.' The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers." (Verse 130)

The question here is not meant to seek information but to provide it and record the facts as they took place. God who is infinite in His Glory knows what their situation in this life was. Their answer to this question is simply an acknowledgement on their part that they deserve the punishment of the hereafter.

This question is addressed to the *jinn* as well as humans. Does this mean that God has sent messengers to *the jinn* from among themselves, in the same way as He sent messengers to human beings? God alone knows the nature of this species of His creation, the *jinn,* who remain unknown to us human beings. However, the Qur'ānic statement may be interpreted to mean that the *jinn* have been able to listen to the revelations sent down to God's Messenger and to convey it to their people, warning them against continuing in their disbelief. An example of this is reported in *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, or *al Aĥqāf:*

> *Tell how We sent to you a band of jinn who, when they came and listened to the Qur'ān, said to each other: "Listen attentively." As soon as its recitation was ended, they betook themselves to their people and gave them warning. "Our people", they said, "We have just been listening to a revelation bestowed from on high after that of Moses, confirming what was revealed before it, and guiding to the truth and to a straight path. Our people, answer the call of the one who summons unto God and believe in Him! He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from a woeful scourge. Those that give no heed to the one who calls unto God can never elude Him on earth, nor can they have any to protect them besides Him. Surely they are in evident error." (46: 29-32)*

It is probable that the question put by the *jinn* and human beings and the answer they receive are based on this fact. The whole matter is part of the knowledge God has kept for Himself. It is useless to try to go any further in establishing any clear answer on this point.

Anyhow, those of the *jinn* and humans who are addressed in this way recognize that the question is not meant to solicit information but to record it and to add an element of reproach for their attitude. Therefore, they make a full confession and state that they deserve the punishment they are bound to receive: "*They will reply: 'We bear witness against ourselves.'*" (Verse 130) At this point we have a comment to make: "*The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers."* (Verse 130) This comment describes their situation in this life, lured on by pleasures, with an arrogance that has led them to be unbelievers. On the Day of Judgement, they testify against themselves because they realize that

denial is of no use. Can there be any situation more miserable than to find oneself in a fix where one cannot say in one's own defence even a word of denial, let alone a word of justification?

Let us reflect for a moment on the remarkable Qur'ānic style which paints future events so that we can visualise them now, as if they were taking place in front of our very eyes. The Qur'ān is revealed so that it is read to people in this life, in their own surroundings. But it portrays the scenes of the life to come as if they are taking place now, while scenes of this life belong to an era which has long since passed. In this way, we forget that the Day of Judgement is still to come. We feel that it is here, now. This is only made possible by the remarkable style of the Qur'ān: *"The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers."* (Verse 130)

When the scene is complete, the address is made to God's Messenger (peace be upon him), his followers and to mankind generally. The address includes a comment on the judgement made against evil human beings and *jinn* and the fact that such a great multitude are condemned to the fire. Their fate is sealed only after they have testified against themselves that they continued to disbelieve despite receiving messengers who related to them God's revelations and warned them against what awaited them of God's punishment if they continued to reject the faith. The comment here makes it clear that God's punishment does not befall anyone without warning. God does not hold people accountable and does not punish them for their disbelief until after they have been shown the fact and received warnings from God's messengers who relate His revelations to them: *"And so it is that your Lord would never destroy a community for its wrongdoing, while they remain unaware."* (Verse 131)

God's grace is such that in spite of the fact that He has shaped human nature in a way which makes it always keen to seek its Lord, and the fact that He has given human beings intelligence and understanding, He does not punish them for their disbelief until He sends them messengers to warn them. Their nature may deviate and their intellect may be lured away. Indeed, all human responses may be defective despite all the signs and indicators man sees in the world around him. Hence, God has assigned to His messengers the task of saving human nature and intellect from deviation and of making their receptive qualities open to what He has placed of indicators so that they can give the right responses. Punishment only comes after deliberate denial and rejection of the faith despite God's warnings and messages.

So man's nature and intellect do not provide immunity from error nor do they guarantee guidance to the truth and resistance to desire. Rather, all these must be supported by faith.

Another rule is stated concerning reward and punishment. It is applicable to

believers and evil ones in equal measure: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds. Your Lord is not unaware of what they do.*" (Verse 132) The believers have their grades, one above the other, while the evil ones have their own grades, one sinking below the other. They attain or sink into their grades according to their deeds which have been monitored to the finest detail: "*Your Lord is not unaware of what they do.*" (Verse 132)

Emphasis on Practical Details

God sends His messengers to human beings as a gesture of His grace. He Himself has no need of them, their worship or even their belief in Him. When they do well, they only benefit themselves both in this life and in the life to come. His grace is also seen in the fact that He grants a chance to the disobedient generation which continues to do wrong and to deny Him altogether, while He is able to destroy it completely and bring in its place a different generation: "*Your Lord is the self-sufficient One, the Merciful. If He so wills, He may remove you altogether and cause whom He wills to succeed you, just as He brought you into being out of other people's seed.*" (Verse 133) Therefore, human beings must never forget that they survive only by God's grace, and that their existence depends on His will. Whatever power they enjoy, has been given to them by God. Theirs is not an intrinsic power or a self-determined existence. No one has any choice with regard to their coming into being, and no one determines what sort of power he can exercise. To remove them altogether and to bring another community in their place is very easy for God. After all, it is He who has brought them into being from the seed of a past generation so that they succeed that generation by His will.

This verse shakes the hearts of those wrongdoers who scheme, exceed their bounds, claim for themselves the authority to forbid things and make others lawful, and who argue about the validity of God's law. Yet they remain all the time within God's grasp. He can let them be or remove them altogether when He wills, and bring about whomever He pleases to succeed them. At the same time, these strong tones reassure the Muslim community of the rightness of its course of action, at a time when it faces the wicked designs, power and hostility of those who are evil. All are powerless when it comes to resisting God's will.

This is followed by another strong warning note: "*That which you are promised will inevitably come, and you cannot elude it.*" (Verse 134) You are all the time within God's grasp and subject to His will. It is He who determines your fate, and you cannot resist Him or escape from your fate. The Day of Resurrection, a scene from which has just been painted, awaits you. It will inevitably come. When it does, nothing will avail you against God Almighty.

The final comment includes an implicit, but highly effective warning: *"Say: 'My people! Do all that may be in your power, and I will do what I can. You shall come to know to whom the future belongs. Never will the wrongdoers attain success."* (Verse 135)

This is a warning made by one who is certain that he follows the truth and who has complete trust in the power of the truth, and of the great power that supports the truth. The warning is made by God's Messenger (peace be upon him) who says that he is disclaiming any responsibility for them, confident that what he has is the truth, absolutely certain of his way. He is also certain that what they follow is error and their prospects are very gloomy indeed: *"Never will the wrongdoers attain success."* (Verse 135) This is an unfailing rule. Those who associate partners with God will never be successful, because success is granted only by God. Those who do not follow His guidance are in deep error and will end up as miserable losers.

Why the Method of Slaughter is Important

This passage falls between two passages which differ greatly: the first speaks of slaughtered animals and the need to mention God's name at the time of slaughter, while the next passage speaks about fruit, cattle and children which are pledged for charity or made as offerings. This middle passage includes a number of facts which relate to pure faith and a number of scenes and statements that relate to the nature of believing in God or denying Him. It also speaks of the battle between those who are evil on the one side and the prophets and those who follow them on the other. It also contains a large number of inspirational elements similar to those included earlier in the *sūrah* when it spoke of the basic principles of faith.

It is worth our while to reflect on the fact that the Qur'ān attaches such importance to practical details of human life and how they are brought in line with God's law. It also emphasizes that they must always be based on the fundamental principle that the authority to legislate, or indeed the overall lordship in the universe, belongs only to God. It is pertinent perhaps to ask here why the Qur'ān gives such importance to this question.

The answer from the Islamic point of view, is that it is the summing-up of the question of faith and religion. In Islam, the central principle is belief in God's oneness: He is certainly the only God in the universe. When a Muslim declares that he believes that there is no deity other than God, he purges his mind of all traces of any concept that assigns Godhead to anyone other than God Almighty. Consequently, he is absolutely clear that all sovereignty and the authority to legislate belong solely to God. Making laws and regulations on matters of detail is the same as making them on larger issues: it is an exercise of the authority to legislate, which means that it is an exercise of Godhead. A Muslim can never accept this. Religion in

the Islamic lexicon means that people submit in their practical life, as well as in their faith, to God alone. They accept no submission to anyone else. If issuing legislation is an exercise of Godhead, accepting such legislation is submission to that Godhead. A Muslim cannot attain the status of a believer, unless he submits to God alone in all matters, and rejects all submission to anyone else.

It is in this light that we should view the emphasis given in the Qur'ān to these principles of faith. We see an example of this emphasis in this *sūrah* which was revealed in Makkah, before the Prophet's migration to Madinah. As we have already said, the parts of the Qur'ān which were revealed in the Makkan period did not tackle the question of the Islamic system of government or the laws that govern the life of the Muslim community. They simply tackled the question of faith. Nevertheless, the *sūrah* attaches such great importance to the establishment of this basic principle concerning God's sovereignty and His authority to legislate for human life. This is profoundly significant in itself.

15
Intertwining Laws and Concepts

وَجَعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ مِمَّا ذَرَأَ مِنَ ٱلۡحَرۡثِ وَٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ نَصِيبٗا فَقَالُواْ هَٰذَا لِلَّهِ بِزَعۡمِهِمۡ وَهَٰذَا لِشُرَكَآئِنَاۖ فَمَا كَانَ لِشُرَكَآئِهِمۡ فَلَا يَصِلُ إِلَى ٱللَّهِۖ وَمَا كَانَ لِلَّهِ فَهُوَ يَصِلُ إِلَىٰ شُرَكَآئِهِمۡۗ سَآءَ مَا يَحۡكُمُونَ ١٣٦

Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: "This is for God" — or so they pretend — "and this is for the partners we associate [with Him] ". Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners. How ill they judge! (136)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ زَيَّنَ لِكَثِيرٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ قَتۡلَ أَوۡلَٰدِهِمۡ شُرَكَآؤُهُمۡ لِيُرۡدُوهُمۡ وَلِيَلۡبِسُواْ عَلَيۡهِمۡ دِينَهُمۡۖ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَا فَعَلُوهُۖ فَذَرۡهُمۡ وَمَا يَفۡتَرُونَ ١٣٧

Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions. (137)

وَقَالُواْ هَٰذِهِۦٓ أَنۡعَٰمٞ وَحَرۡثٌ حِجۡرٞ لَّا يَطۡعَمُهَآ إِلَّا مَن نَّشَآءُ بِزَعۡمِهِمۡ وَأَنۡعَٰمٌ حُرِّمَتۡ ظُهُورُهَا وَأَنۡعَٰمٞ لَّا يَذۡكُرُونَ ٱسۡمَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهَا ٱفۡتِرَآءً عَلَيۡهِۚ سَيَجۡزِيهِم بِمَا

They say: "Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit" — so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions. (138)

كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿١٣٨﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ مَا فِى بُطُونِ هَٰذِهِ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ خَالِصَةٌ لِّذُكُورِنَا وَمُحَرَّمٌ عَلَىٰٓ أَزْوَٰجِنَا ۖ وَإِن يَكُن مَّيْتَةً فَهُمْ فِيهِ شُرَكَآءُ ۚ سَيَجْزِيهِمْ وَصْفَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٣٩﴾

قَدْ خَسِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَتَلُوٓا۟ أَوْلَٰدَهُمْ سَفَهًۢا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَحَرَّمُوا۟ مَا رَزَقَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱفْتِرَآءً عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ قَدْ ضَلُّوا۟ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٤٠﴾

۞ وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنشَأَ جَنَّٰتٍ مَّعْرُوشَٰتٍ وَغَيْرَ مَعْرُوشَٰتٍ وَٱلنَّخْلَ وَٱلزَّرْعَ مُخْتَلِفًا أُكُلُهُۥ وَٱلزَّيْتُونَ وَٱلرُّمَّانَ مُتَشَٰبِهًا وَغَيْرَ مُتَشَٰبِهٍ ۚ كُلُوا۟ مِن ثَمَرِهِۦٓ إِذَآ أَثْمَرَ وَءَاتُوا۟ حَقَّهُۥ يَوْمَ حَصَادِهِۦ ۖ وَلَا تُسْرِفُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿١٤١﴾

وَمِنَ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ حَمُولَةً وَفَرْشًا ۚ كُلُوا۟ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا۟ خُطُوَٰتِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٤٢﴾

ثَمَٰنِيَةَ أَزْوَٰجٍ ۖ مِّنَ ٱلضَّأْنِ ٱثْنَيْنِ وَمِنَ ٱلْمَعْزِ ٱثْنَيْنِ ۗ قُلْ ءَآلذَّكَرَيْنِ حَرَّمَ أَمِ ٱلْأُنثَيَيْنِ أَمَّا ٱشْتَمَلَتْ عَلَيْهِ أَرْحَامُ ٱلْأُنثَيَيْنِ ۖ نَبِّـُٔونِى بِعِلْمٍ إِن كُنتُمْ

They also say: "That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women." But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is wise, all-knowing. (139)

Losers indeed are those who, in their ignorance, foolishly kill their children and declare as forbidden what God has provided for them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God. They have gone astray and they have no guidance. (140)

It is He who has brought into being gardens — both of the cultivated type and those growing wild — and the date- palm, and fields bearing different produce, and the olive, tree, and the pomegranates, all resembling one another and vet so different. Eat of their fruit when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor) what is due to them on harvest day. But do not waste, for He does not love the wasteful. (141)

And of the cattle some are reared for work and others for food. Eat of that which God has provided for you as sustenance and do not follow Satan's footsteps; he is your open foe. (142)

Of cattle you have eight in [four] pairs: a pair of the sheep and a pair of the goats. Say: Is it the two males that He has forbidden, or the two females, or that which the wombs of the two females may contain? Tell me plainly if you are men of truth.

صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٤٣﴾

وَمِنَ ٱلۡإِبِلِ ٱثۡنَيۡنِ وَمِنَ ٱلۡبَقَرِ ٱثۡنَيۡنِۗ قُلۡ ءَآلذَّكَرَيۡنِ حَرَّمَ أَمِ ٱلۡأُنثَيَيۡنِ أَمَّا ٱشۡتَمَلَتۡ عَلَيۡهِ أَرۡحَامُ ٱلۡأُنثَيَيۡنِۖ أَمۡ كُنتُمۡ شُهَدَآءَ إِذۡ وَصَّىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَاۚ فَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبٗا لِّيُضِلَّ ٱلنَّاسَ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٍۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٤٤﴾

قُل لَّآ أَجِدُ فِي مَآ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ مُحَرَّمًا عَلَىٰ طَاعِمٖ يَطۡعَمُهُۥٓ إِلَّآ أَن يَكُونَ مَيۡتَةً أَوۡ دَمٗا مَّسۡفُوحًا أَوۡ لَحۡمَ خِنزِيرٖ فَإِنَّهُۥ رِجۡسٌ أَوۡ فِسۡقًا أُهِلَّ لِغَيۡرِ ٱللَّهِ بِهِۦۚ فَمَنِ ٱضۡطُرَّ غَيۡرَ بَاغٖ وَلَا عَادٖ فَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿١٤٥﴾

وَعَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ حَرَّمۡنَا كُلَّ ذِي ظُفُرٖۖ وَمِنَ ٱلۡبَقَرِ وَٱلۡغَنَمِ حَرَّمۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ شُحُومَهُمَآ إِلَّا مَا حَمَلَتۡ ظُهُورُهُمَآ أَوِ ٱلۡحَوَايَآ أَوۡ مَا ٱخۡتَلَطَ بِعَظۡمٖۚ ذَٰلِكَ جَزَيۡنَٰهُم بِبَغۡيِهِمۡۖ وَإِنَّا لَصَٰدِقُونَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

فَإِن كَذَّبُوكَ فَقُل رَّبُّكُمۡ ذُو رَحۡمَةٖ وَٰسِعَةٖ وَلَا يُرَدُّ بَأۡسُهُۥ عَنِ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ

(143)

And, likewise, a pair of camels and a pair of oxen. Say: Is it the two males that He has forbidden, or the two females, or that which the wombs of the two females may contain? Is it, perchance, that you were witnesses when God gave you these commandments? Who could be more wicked than one who, without any real knowledge, invents lies about God in order to lead people astray? God does not guide the wrongdoers(144)

Say: In all that has been revealed to me, I do not find anything forbidden to eat, if one wishes to eat thereof, unless it be carrion, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine for all that is unclean — or a sinful offering over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if one is driven by necessity, neither intending disobedience nor exceeding his bare need, then know that your Lord is much- forgiving, merciful. (145)

To those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all animals that have claws; and We forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones. Thus did We requite them for their wrongdoing. We are certainly true to Our word. (146)

If they accuse you of lying, then say: Limitless is your Lord in His grace; but His punishment shall not be warded off

ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ﴿١٤٧﴾

سَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُواْ لَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَآ أَشۡرَكۡنَا وَلَآ ءَابَآؤُنَا وَلَا حَرَّمۡنَا مِن شَيۡءٖۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ حَتَّىٰ ذَاقُواْ بَأۡسَنَاۗ قُلۡ هَلۡ عِندَكُم مِّنۡ عِلۡمٖ فَتُخۡرِجُوهُ لَنَآۖ إِن تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَإِنۡ أَنتُمۡ إِلَّا تَخۡرُصُونَ ﴿١٤٨﴾

from evildoing folk. (147)

قُلۡ فَلِلَّهِ ٱلۡحُجَّةُ ٱلۡبَٰلِغَةُۖ فَلَوۡ شَآءَ لَهَدَىٰكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

Those who associate partners with God will say: Had God so willed, neither we nor our fathers would have associated any partners with Him; nor would we have declared anything as forbidden. In like manner did those who have lived before them deny the truth, until they came to taste Our punishment. Say: Have you any certain knowledge which you can put before us? You follow nothing but conjecture, and you do nothing but guess. (148)

قُلۡ هَلُمَّ شُهَدَآءَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَشۡهَدُونَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَرَّمَ هَٰذَاۖ فَإِن شَهِدُواْ فَلَا تَشۡهَدۡ مَعَهُمۡۚ وَلَا تَتَّبِعۡ أَهۡوَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَهُم بِرَبِّهِمۡ يَعۡدِلُونَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

Say: With God alone rests the final evidence. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright. (149)

۞ قُلۡ تَعَالَوۡاْ أَتۡلُ مَا حَرَّمَ رَبُّكُمۡ عَلَيۡكُمۡۖ أَلَّا تُشۡرِكُواْ بِهِۦ شَيۡـٔٗاۖ وَبِٱلۡوَٰلِدَيۡنِ إِحۡسَٰنٗاۖ وَلَا تَقۡتُلُوٓاْ أَوۡلَٰدَكُم مِّنۡ إِمۡلَٰقٖۖ نَّحۡنُ نَرۡزُقُكُمۡ وَإِيَّاهُمۡۖ وَلَا تَقۡرَبُواْ ٱلۡفَوَٰحِشَ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنۡهَا وَمَا بَطَنَۖ وَلَا تَقۡتُلُواْ ٱلنَّفۡسَ ٱلَّتِي حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَّا بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ وَصَّىٰكُم

Say: Bring forward your witnesses who will testify that God has forbidden this. If they so testify, do not you testify with them; and do not follow the wishes of those who deny Our revelations, and those who do not believe in the life to come and who consider others as equal to their Lord. (150)

Say: Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden to you: Do not associate partners with Him; [do not offend against but, rather,] be kind to your parents; do not kill your children because of your poverty — We provide for you and for them; do not commit any shameful deed, whether open or secret; do not take any human being's life — which God has made sacred, except in the course of justice. This He has enjoined upon you so that you

بِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَعۡقِلُونَ ﴿١٥١﴾

may use your reason. (151)

وَلَا تَقۡرَبُواْ مَالَ ٱلۡيَتِيمِ إِلَّا بِٱلَّتِي هِيَ أَحۡسَنُ حَتَّىٰ يَبۡلُغَ أَشُدَّهُۥۖ وَأَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡكَيۡلَ وَٱلۡمِيزَانَ بِٱلۡقِسۡطِۖ لَا نُكَلِّفُ نَفۡسًا إِلَّا وُسۡعَهَاۖ وَإِذَا قُلۡتُمۡ فَٱعۡدِلُواْ وَلَوۡ كَانَ ذَا قُرۡبَىٰۖ وَبِعَهۡدِ ٱللَّهِ أَوۡفُواْۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ وَصَّىٰكُم بِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

Do not touch the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except to improve it. Give just weight and full measure. We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. When you speak, be just, even though it be against one of your close relatives. Be true to your covenant with God. This He has enjoined upon you so that you may bear it in mind. (152)

وَأَنَّ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطِي مُسۡتَقِيمٗا فَٱتَّبِعُوهُۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُواْ ٱلسُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمۡ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ وَصَّىٰكُم بِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path. Follow it, then, and do not follow other ways, for they cause you to deviate from His way. All this He has enjoined upon you so that you may remain God-fearing. (153)

Overview

This long passage speaks of legislation and the authority to promulgate laws and regulations. What is surprising about this passage, together with the two preceding it and the comments interspersed within them, is that they are included in a *sūrah* revealed in Makkah, when the subject matter of all Qur'ānic revelation was faith. Indeed, portions of the Qur'ān revealed in Makkah do not tackle any Islamic laws, except to establish the ideological basis of such legislation. This was due to the fact that there was no Islamic government to implement Islamic law. Hence, God did not wish that His law become a matter of theoretical discourse or academic study before the establishment of a society that submitted to God alone and which worshipped Him by obeying His law, or before the existence of a sovereign state to implement that law in everyday life. Thus, outlining the legal details was linked to people's practical ability to implement them. This is just one aspect of the serious and yet practical nature of the Islamic faith.

The fact that this long passage of detailed legislation occurs in a Makkan *sūrah* is indicative of the nature of this question. It is indeed a question of faith, one which

acquires added seriousness in the general outlook of this religion of Islam. It is indeed its principal issue. However, before we comment on this passage and its provisions in detail, we would like to provide a general overview of its contents and a foretaste of its import.

The passage begins with a brief reference to a host of concepts that prevailed in *jāhiliyyah* days, and the pagan practices of the Arabs concerning their agricultural produce, livestock and children. In other words, these practices related to their economic and social set-up. The following are given by way of example:

1. They divided the provisions of sustenance God gave them, their crops and cattle into two portions, assigning one to God and claiming that they did this in accordance with God's law. They assigned the other portion to the deities they invented and who they considered as partners with God, having power over their lives, wealth and children: *"Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – and this is for the partners we associate [with Hind.'"* (Verse 136)
2. Having done so, they deal unfairly with the portion they assigned to God. They add a part of it to the portion assigned to their other deities or partners and never do the same with the other portion: *"Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners."* (Verse 136)
3. They willingly kill their children, having been induced to do so by their partners. The partners in this case are their priests and lawmakers who initiate traditions which acquire a force of their own, relying on social pressure and ancient legends with their religious overtones. Such killing of children claimed the lives of their daughters in the first place for fear of poverty and shame. Occasionally, it claimed the life of a son, particularly when the slaughter of a son was made in the form of a religious offering. An example of this was the pledge made by `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's grandfather, that should God give him ten sons to protect him, he would slay one of them as an offering to the gods: *"Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith."* (Verse 137)
4. They consecrated certain portions of their livestock and certain types of produce, falsely claiming that they could not be eaten without special permission from God. They also made certain animals unlawful to ride, and prohibited that God's name be mentioned over them at the time of slaughter or riding. They also prohibited such animals from being ridden at pilgrimage time, because pilgrimage involved glorifying God. They further claimed that

all these restrictions had been ordered by God Himself: *"They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce Gods name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him."* (Verse 138)

5. They also consecrated what was in the bellies of their cattle to their men, prohibiting them to their women. However, if it happened to be stillborn, they would allow both males and females to partake of it. They attributed such absurdities to God: *"They also say: "That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women." But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is wise, all-knowing."* (Verse 139)

Such were the concepts and traditions which characterized Arabian society in ignorant, pre-Islamic days. This long passage, occurring in a Makkan *sūrah,* seeks to put an end to them and to purge people's hearts and souls of their effects. The Qur'ān follows a deliberate, slow and detailed approach in order to achieve its purpose.

It begins first by declaring that those who in their ignorance kill their children and forbid themselves what God has provided for them are indeed losers. These concepts they attribute to God are declared to be both absurd and erroneous.

The Qur'ān then draws their attention to the fact that it is God who has given them their wealth which they misuse. It is He who has given them gardens, both of the cultivated and wild types. It is He who has created their cattle for them. The one who provides sustenance in this way is the one who exercises control and promulgates laws concerning the use of what He has provided. The Qur'ān uses here a host of images, such as scenes of produce, fruits as well as cultivated and wild gardens. It also reminds them of the cattle God has created, making some for riding and carrying goods and others for eating, with their hide, wool and hair usable in various ways. The Qur'ān refers to the life-long enmity between human beings and Satan. How is it, then, that they follow the footsteps of Satan and fulfil his bidding when he is their declared enemy?

The *sūrah* then speaks in full detail of the absurdity of their concepts concerning their cattle. These concepts are made to appear hollow, stupid and inconsistent. It concludes by asking them what basis they have for such absurd laws: *"Is it, perchance, that you were witnesses when God gave you these commandments?"* (Verse 144) Was it, then, a secret that you have been let into, or a commandment given specially to you? It follows this by describing the ghastly nature of the crime of inventing falsehood against God and trying to lead people astray. This condemnation is one of the most

effective aspects of the Qur'ānic method.

The Qur'ān then states clearly who has the authority to legislate, outlining what this authority has actually made forbidden to Muslims.

It also mentions what God forbade the Jews in particular, while making it lawful to Muslims. It then discusses how the Arab idolaters used to attribute to God's will the fact that they lived in ignorance, evidenced by their association of partners with God and the forbidding of what God had made lawful. Both actions carry the same legal status in God's view. It quotes their statements: *"Had God so willed, neither we nor our fathers would have associated any partners with Him; nor would we have declared anything as forbidden."* (Verse 148) The *sūrah* makes it clear that such a statement can only be made by an unbeliever who denies the truth. Earlier generations of unbelievers maintained the same assertions until they were struck with God's might: *"In like manner did those who have lived before them deny the truth, until they came to taste Our punishment."* (Verse 148) To associate partners with God is the same as the unauthorized declaration of anything as forbidden. Both are done by those who deny God's revelations. A rhetorical question is put to them concerning the basis of their assertions: *"Say: Have you any certain knowledge which you can put before us? You follow nothing but conjecture, and you do nothing but guess."* (Verse 148)

The discussion is brought to a conclusion by inviting them to make an unequivocal declaration and clear testimony of their stand. This is the same invitation as the one made at the beginning of the *sūrah* concerning the very basis of faith. In both cases, the same expression, indeed the same terminology is used in order to indicate that the two aspects are the same: associating partners with God and legislating without His permission: *"Say: 'Bring forward your witnesses who will testify that God has forbidden this.' If they so testify, do not you testify with them; and do not follow the wishes of those who deny Our revelations, and those who do not believe in the life to come and who consider others as equal to their Lord."* (Verse 150) This verse makes it clear that those who promulgate these legislations are indeed the ones who follow their own desires, deny God's revelations and disbelieve in the life to come. Had they believed in what God has revealed and in the Day of Judgement, and had they followed God's guidance, they would not have legislated for themselves or for mankind anything that God has not permitted. Nor would they have described things as lawful or unlawful without God's permission.

The *sūrah* goes on to outline what God has actually forbidden. Here we have a collection of the basic principles of social life, beginning with the belief in God's oneness. Some of these principles include certain orders, but the prohibitions form the larger part. Therefore, they provide the overall title. God has forbidden that divinity be ascribed to anyone other than Him. He has commanded all people to be kind to their parents and He has forbidden the killing of children out of poverty,

reassuring people that He provides for them. He has also forbidden all types of indecency and shameful sin, whether committed in the open or in secret, as well as the killing of other human beings except in a just cause. He has also forbidden any tampering with the property of an orphan, except to improve it, until he has come of age. He has ordered that people should deal in fair weights and measures and ordered that justice be maintained in all types of statements and testimony. He has further ordered that people should fulfil their covenants with God. All this has been enjoined by God on people. Hence, they are reminded that it is their duty to fulfil it.

The passage as a whole gives prominence to the basic concept of faith and to the principles of Islamic legislation. The two aspects are closely intertwined in a perfectly consistent exposition, the significance of which is made clear to everyone who understands the Qur'ānic approach and what it drives at. At the end of this passage, with all that it has to say about faith and legislation, God's statement is absolutely clear: "*Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path. Follow it, then, and do not follow other ways, for they cause you to deviate from His way. All this He has enjoined upon you so that you may remain God- fearing.*" (Verse 153) The import of this whole passage is thus highlighted in a single statement which combines clarity with decisiveness.

Islamic law is just the same as Islamic faith with regard to describing a person or a situation as pagan or Islamic. Indeed, the law is part of the faith in this respect, or indeed it is the faith, since it is concerned with its practical implementation. This is a basic fact that is made clear in several Qur'ānic statements.

The concept of faith in the minds of those who believe in this religion of Islam has consistently moved away from this basic fact over a period of centuries. A great variety of evil means and methods have been used for this purpose. The result is that a great number of those who enthusiastically believe in this religion, let alone its opponents and those who are careless about religion altogether, have come to consider the question of legislation as separate from that of faith. Hence, their hearts do not warm to the question of legislation as they do to faith. Nor do they consider its cancellation or abrogation a departure from faith in the same way as the cancellation of a certain belief or a certain act of worship. This religion of Islam does not recognize any separation between faith, worship and law. What we see today is the result of a progressive departure induced by well- trained forces over a number of centuries. Their aim has always been to reduce the importance of the question of law and make it fade away in the minds of even those who are enthusiastic supporters of Islam. This is the central question in this Makkan *sūrah,* which is not meant to discuss the Islamic system or Islamic law, but rather devote itself to the discussion of the Islamic faith. The *sūrah* employs all manner of literary and linguistic stylistics and makes all sorts of statements when discussing a matter of detail concerned with social traditions. The reason is that this small matter is related to the

much wider question of sovereignty which, in turn, has a direct bearing on the very basis of this religion and its very existence.

Those who describe idolaters as pagan and do not give the same description to those who receive their legislation from any oppressive authority, or claim that this description applies to the first but not to the second, neither read the Qur'ān properly nor understand the nature of Islam. They need to read the Qur'ān as it has been revealed and to take seriously what God states clearly: *"Should you pay heed to them, you will end up associating partners with God."* (Verse 121)

Some of those of who try to defend Islam with zeal and vigour make much ado about whether a particular law, regulation or even statement is in harmony with the divine law or in conflict with it. They are aggrieved when they see some offences being committed here and there. Their attitude suggests that Islam is actually being implemented, but its application needs some improvement by preventing such offences. Enthusiastic and committed to Islam as these people are, they unwittingly do Islam a disservice, damaging its cause by concentrating on such petty preoccupations. What they actually do is to divert the power of faith that remains in society, concentrating it on such side issues. By so doing, they implicitly endorse the prevailing *jāhiliyyah* systems suggesting that they have an Islamic character and that they only need to make certain modifications or take some corrective measures in order to be fully Islamic. The fact is that in such societies, the Islamic faith is non-existent since it does not express itself in a set-up that gives sovereignty to God alone.

For Islam to come into existence requires that sovereignty belongs to God alone. If this basic rule does not exist in practice, then the entire religion of Islam is non-existent. The problem which Islam faces today is the fact that certain tyrannical powers usurp God's authority and give themselves the right to promulgate laws, making certain allowances and restrictions concerning people's lives, fortunes, wealth and children. It is indeed the same problem the Qur'ān addresses with such clear and decisive statements, establishing a direct link between it and the concept of Godhead and people's submission to God. It is the issue that separates Islam from *jāhiliyyah.*

The main battle which Islam fought in order to establish itself was not against atheism, nor did it aim at the mere adoption of certain Islamic practices. Furthermore, the fight was not against social or moral corruption. These battles came later, after the battle seeking to establish the very existence of faith had been won. The main battle Islam fought in order to establish itself was over sovereignty and to whom it belonged. This was indeed the battle fought in Makkah, when Islam was striving to establish the faith, making no reference to its law or social system. The aim of that effort was to establish in people's minds that sovereignty cannot be

claimed by a Muslim, nor can a Muslim accept that it belongs to anyone other than God. When this basic concept of faith was truly established in the minds of the small Muslim community in Makkah, God facilitated for them its implementation when they migrated to Madinah. Let those enthusiastic advocates of Islam today take another look at what they do and what they should do, after they properly understand the true meaning of Islam.

Let us now consider the verses of this passage in detail.

Temptation on the Way to Ruin

> *Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: "This is for God" – or so they pretend – "and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]". Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners. How ill they judge!"* (Verse 136)

In discussing the concepts and traditions of ignorant Arabian society in relation to agricultural produce and cattle, the *sūrah* states clearly that it is God who creates crops and cattle. No one other than God provides sustenance for people, whether originating in the earth or emanating from the sky. The *sūrah* then follows this with a reference to their practices in respect of what God has provided for them. They divided it into parts, assigning a portion to God and another portion for the idols and deities they associated with Him. Needless to say, that portion ended up in the homes of the guards or the custodians attending those deities. Yet they deal unfairly with the portion they assign to God, as the Qur'ānic verse explains.

Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and Companion, reports: "When those people have taken stock of the food they have, they make it in lots, assigning a portion of it to God and another portion to their deities. If the wind blows from the side of the portion they have assigned to their deities so as to carry some of it and place it on top of what they have assigned to God, they take it back and put it where it was. However, if the wind blows in the other direction, they take no action, leaving what has been carried by the wind from God's portion to the portion of their deities where it landed. That is why God says about their action: *`How ill they judge!"* (Verse 136)

Mujāhid reports: "They used to set aside a portion of their crops for God, and another portion for the partners they associated with Him. If the wind took something from the first portion to land it on the portion of their partners, they left it there. On the other hand, if something of the portion of their partners was transferred by wind to God's portion, they took it back. They justified their action by saying that God was in no need of this."

Qatādah reports: Some ignorant people in the days of *jāhiliyyah* used to assign a portion of their crops and cattle to God, and a portion to the partners they associated with Him. If a part of what they kept to God was transferred accidentally to the portion they gave to their partners, they left it there. It the reverse happened, they would take back what came by accident to God's portion. If they suffered a drought or shortage of crops, they would not touch what they assigned to their partners, but they would use up what they assigned to God. Hence God says: *`How ill they judge!"* (Verse 136)

Al-Suddī reports: They used to give a portion of their property to God and assign to Him a certain area of their agricultural land and a similar one to their deities. Whatever crops were yielded in the portion of their deities was spent on those deities, and what was yielded in the portion left to God was given to charity. Should the portion given to their deities be used up or give a small yield, while the one going to God gave abundant yield, they would say: our deities need to be properly served and that requires funds. Therefore, they would take what they had assigned to God and spend it on their deities. On the other hand, if the land assigned to God delivered a poor yield, while the one given to their deities gave in abundance, they would say: had God so willed, He would have made His land yield more. They would not transfer to Him anything of what had been yielded to their deities. God says that had they been honest in their division, they would not have judged ill. How is it that they take from Me but they do not give to Me? That is the meaning of the concluding comment in this verse: *"How ill they judge!"* (Verse 136)[43]

Ibn Jarīr says: "The comment at the end of this verse, *`How ill they judge'*, is a description by God of what those unbelievers did. God the Almighty says that they have judged ill, since they take from His portion to give to their partners, and do not give Him any part of their partners" share. Thus God denounces them for their ignorance and lack of fairness. They not only set up partners which they claimed to be equal to the One who created them, but they also provided them with sustenance and bestowed His grace on them. Those deities which they claimed to be equal to Him can cause them no harm or benefit. Nevertheless, they give preference to them in what they assign"[44]

It is such absurdities that evil human beings and *jinn* referred to so that they could argue with the believers concerning their cattle and crops. It is evident that these practices served only their evil interests. For example, pagan priests and custodians of those deities and other chiefs, have vested interests in maintaining their influence on their followers, so as to make them adhere to false concepts and beliefs. They also

---

[43] All four reports are quoted by Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi` *al-Bayān,* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 8, pp. 40-1.

44 Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 8, p. 42.

have their own personal interests to serve. As a result of what they implant in their followers' minds, they are able to take to themselves what the unthinking masses assign to their deities. On the other hand, the evil *jinn* have a vested interest in leading human beings astray so that they bring them to ruin and confuse them in their faith. In this way, they lead human beings to ruin in this life and to hell in the life to come.

Such practices prevailed in the ignorant Arabian society, but similar practices prevailed in other *jāhiliyyah* societies in Greece, Persia and Byzantium. Similar ones continue to be practised in Africa, India and a number of Asian countries. All these are simply methods of using one's property in a way that God does not sanction. Since such practices continue to be followed in today's *jāhiliyyah* societies, these latter ones are the same in their polytheism as the old ones. Ignorance is the basis of any situation which allows people's affairs to be conducted in conflict with what God has legislated. What form the conducting of such affairs takes is immaterial. The essence is the same although forms and appearances may differ.

> *Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions.* (Verse 137)

The *sūrah* says that in the same way as the evil ones made it acceptable for people to assign part of their crops and cattle in a particular fashion, they also made the killing of their own children seem goodly to them. This is a reference to what people in Arabia used to do, when they buried their daughters alive for fear of poverty or shame. They even went beyond this and killed some of their sons in fulfilment of pledges they made to their deities. It is well known that `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's grandfather, pledged to slaughter one of his sons, if God would favour him with ten sons.

It is clear that all these practices were accepted as normal in the ignorant society of Arabia. These were traditions established by human beings and followed by human beings. The partners mentioned in this verse are the evil ones among human beings and *jinn,* including the priests, the guards of temples and tribal chiefs as well as the evil ones among the *jinn* who whisper to their partners. The *sūrah* makes the purpose of all this deception very clear: "*Seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith.*" (Verse 137) Thus, they not only bring them to ruin but they also place them in utter confusion with regard to their faith, so that they lack a clear concept.

The ruin is evident. They kill their own children and they corrupt their own social life. As a result, people become like animals led by corrupt shepherds in whichever

way those shepherds find their interest. The evil ones are thus able to exercise complete authority over the lives, the children and the property of the masses, killing and ruling them, while the masses are forced to submit with humility. This is the result of the mutual effects produced by confused concepts of faith and their influence on human beings and the prevalent social traditions. Together those concepts and traditions exercise enormous pressure to which people have to submit, unless they seek protection in a clearly outlined faith and unless they place all their affairs within a consistent standard.

False Absurdity or Absurd Falsehood?

Such blurred, confused concepts and the social traditions they establish to weigh heavily on the masses are not limited to the types known in bygone ignorant or *jāhiliyyah* societies. We find clearer versions of them in modern societies, in the form of customs and traditions which people feel to be inescapable, even though they are very hard to observe. Take, for example, the case of fashion and other observances which impose themselves on people, costing them at times what they cannot afford, taking a high position on their list of concerns and ultimately corrupting their moral values and whole lives. Nevertheless, people feel that they must comply with all these dictates: a particular fashion for morning, another for afternoon, and a different one for evening. One fashion imposes short dress, another dictates tight clothes, and a third makes people wear that which is ridiculous. In addition, there is an endless variety of cosmetics, and hair styles, etc. Who imposes all this humiliating subjugation and who lends it support and backing? When we look for the facts we find that it is backed by the major fashion houses, manufacturers and dressmakers, as well as the usurious banks and finance companies who lend money to the industry in order that they themselves win a large share of the profits. It is also supported by the Zionists who work hard to weaken all mankind so that they become the masters of the world. They do not give their support in the shape of heavy armour and military prowess. They support it by the concepts and values they initiate and then formulate in the shape of theories and cultural beliefs. Then they help to translate these into a code of social behaviour. They realize that theories are of little effect unless they are seen in practice *in* the shape of systems of government, a social structure and an unambiguous social code that people accept without question because its roots and branches are irretrievably interlinked.

It is all perpetrated by evil human beings and the *jinn.* The result is different forms and shapes of *jāhiliyyah,* but they all have the same roots and origins.

We certainly do not give the Qur'ān its due position *if we* read and understand it as a reference only to ancient forms of *jāhiliyyah.* It, indeed, refers to its countless

forms in all periods of human life. It confronts every deviant situation, trying to put it back on the straight path defined by God.

Wicked as their schemes against the divine message are, and heavy as the pressures on it are, the Qur'ān makes little of the might *of jāhiliyyah.* It exposes its reality, something which could easily be overlooked because of its apparent strength. The fact remains that these evil ones and their patrons and supporters are within God's grasp and subject to His authority. They have no power of their own to enable them to do what they want. They can only do it because God has enabled them to play their game for a while in order to accomplish His purpose in putting His servants to a test. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have been able to do or achieve anything. Hence, the Prophet and the believers should pay little attention to those evil ones and should pursue their own objectives. As for the evil ones, the believers should leave them to God to punish them for their invented falsehood: *"Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions."* (Verse 137)

We need to mention here that they dare not admit that they originated these concepts and practices. Instead, they lie to God, alleging that He originated them, asserting that these concepts and practices were derived from the religion preached by the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael.

The evil ones in modern *jāhiliyyah* do the same. The vast majority of them feel unable to deny God publicly and denounce His faith as atheist Communists do. They resort instead to the same old tactics of the evil ones in ignorant Arabia, asserting that they respect religion, and alleging that their own legislation is based on that religion. This approach is all the more wicked because it blurs religious feelings in people's hearts. It must be re-emphasized that these feelings do not represent Islam, because Islam is a clear, practical code of living which must be implemented in real life. It is not an ambiguous emotion. By their wicked approach, evil people these days channel other's intrinsic religious zeal into non-Islamic structures.

With all this we find that people who are most enthusiastically religious concentrate all their power and efforts on the denunciation of some practical details which are largely marginal. They find these details highly objectionable, not realizing that the whole set-up is a non-Islamic one, totally usurping God's authority and denying His Godhead. By their naïve enthusiasm they actually promote these non-Islamic set-ups, imparting to them an Islamic colour. They, thus, implicitly endorse them as having a religious basis, although they deviate from religion in such matters of detail. Those enthusiastic people, then, play their part in strengthening those systems, serving in the same capacity as official religious institutions which claim to speak for Islam.

It is well known that the religion of Islam has no clerical order and has no official spokesmen who wear the guise of priests, monks, or indeed any other guise.

> *They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit" – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions.* (Verse 138)

Al-Ṭabarī, a leading commentator on the Qur'ān, says: "Here God Himself, limitless is He in His Glory, is telling us that those idolaters used to forbid certain things and make others lawful, at their own behest, without referring to any authority or permission from God."[45]

As has already been mentioned, those usurpers of God's authority who claimed to derive their legislation from God's law, assigned certain portions of their agricultural produce and cattle, dedicating them to the partners they associated with God. Then they said that such assigned cattle and produce were forbidden to them to eat. Indeed, they asserted that none would be permitted to eat from them except those which God permitted. Needless to say that the decision in such matters was usually left to priests, clerics and chiefs. They also assigned certain types of cattle and determined that they were forbidden to ride. It is said that those were mentioned in the previous *sūrah* and given the Arabic titles *Bahīrah, Sā'ibah, Waṣīlah* and Hāmī. They also assigned other cattle and prohibited God's name from being mentioned over them when they were ridden, milked or slaughtered. This is because they consecrated these to partners they associated with God and whose names they did mention. All these claims were lies they had fabricated against God.

Al-Ṭabarī says: "God describes their action saying that by their practices, they invent a lie against God. This means that when they outlined their prohibitions and made their claims, they were simply lying to God and asserting falsehoods against Him. This is because they attributed their prohibitions, as described in God's Book, to His own authority, claiming that it is He Who had forbidden them. God denies this, making their lies appear as they are, and telling His Messenger and the believers of their false claims."[46]

The Absolute Losers

Once again we find here a repeated example of the people of ignorance and their

[45] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 8, p. 44.
[46] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 8, p. 47.

thoughts, some arrogantly boasting that life is matter, with others, unable to deny God altogether, claiming that faith is merely a matter of beliefs and has nothing to do with social, economic or political systems.

We should always be aware, however, that ignorant societies like these which establish a system giving sovereignty and the authority to legislate to human beings, rather than to God, claim at the same time that they respect religion and derive their system from it. Theirs is a very sly and wicked approach. International Zionist and Christian forces hostile to Islam have adopted this method in areas that used to be the home of the Islamic faith where God's law was implemented. These forces have now realized that their experience in Turkey, carried out by the false hero they created, has ended in failure. Nonetheless, their efforts played an important part in destroying the Islamic Caliphate, the last symbol of Islamic unity. But the experience, adopting an open secular stand as it did, failed to provide a model system to be emulated by other countries in the region. By wrenching itself totally from religion, it gave itself an alien colour which was too hard for people still entertaining some religious sentiments to accept. Hence, in their subsequent attempts to achieve the same goal, international Zionist and Christian forces hostile to Islam tried not to repeat the mistake they made with Kemal Ataturk. They began to dress their new experiments around a religious mask. They allowed their new heroes to establish institutions with a superficially religious character. They stressed that in two ways: by direct, straightforward propaganda or by allowing these institutions to denounce some unimportant details so as to give the impression that the system's major aspects were religiously sound.

These Christian and Zionist institutions which we see mobilizing their forces, harnessing their alliance and benefiting from their past experience, continue to try to repair the damage which followed the Turkish experience. They claim that Ataturk's initiative was essentially an Islamic revivalist movement, that it was not secular in nature and, therefore, could not be said to have nothing to do with religion.

Orientalists, who provide intellectual support to Christian and Zionist imperialism, continue to exert strenuous efforts in order to show that Kemal Ataturk's experience was not an atheist one. But once we expose the Kemalist experience as essentially atheistic we curtail its role, confining it to its destruction of the last vestige of Islamic unity. This is certainly important, but Ataturk's efforts failed to produce anything further unlike other experiments in the region which aimed at channelling religious concepts and enthusiasm into endorsing un-Islamic systems and situations. These later experiments sought to change the very essence of Islam while at the same time claiming to be Islamic. They wanted to corrupt sound, well-established values in the name of Islam. Indeed, they wanted to impart an Islamic colour to *jāhiliyyah* itself, so that it could fulfil its task wherever ill-defined

religious sentiments provided the necessary driving force. In this way, they offer a false leadership which seeks to drive the Muslim world astray and eventually deliver it to Zionist and Christian forces. Thus they hope to achieve the same goal which past Crusading and Zionist efforts, launched over a period of 1300 years, failed to achieve.

"They also say: 'That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women'. But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is wise, all-knowing." (Verse 139) They had gone too far in adopting false concepts and misguided practices based on polytheism and idolatry. They had gone even further in giving human beings the authority to make certain types of cattle lawful and others forbidden, claiming that what they did was sanctioned by God. Thus they claimed that what was in the wombs of those cattle should be given to their men and forbidden for their women. However, if any of these were stillborn, it was shared out by all. Try as you may to find a reason or justification for this, you are bound to find nothing. It is merely the whims of those who invent a confused sort of religion.

The Qur'ānic comment here gives an implicit warning to those who have enacted these laws and falsely claimed that they form a part of divine faith: *"He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is wise, all-knowing."* (Verse 139) He knows the facts as they are, and deals with them in accordance with His infallible wisdom.

When we look at these practices and the losses and sacrifices made willingly by those who adopted them, we wonder at the costs people are prepared to incur when they deviate from the straight path established by God. We wonder at the heavy burden imposed by superstition and the delusions of those who have gone astray. How can people accept to fetter themselves with false beliefs? How is it that they can accept that these beliefs claim the lives of their own children and create endless complications in their own lives? How is it that they accept such deviant beliefs when they have in front of their eyes the surety of faith and God's Oneness; a faith to release human minds from the chains of delusion, superstition and blind imitation. It releases human society from ignorance and its imposed burden. It liberates men from servitude to other creatures in the form of man-made laws and man-made values and standards. In place of all this, it establishes a well-defined, clearly understood, logical and disciplined faith and a practical code of living. It provides a clear vision of the truth of existence and human life. It not only liberates man from subservience to other creatures but it elevates him to the position of God's servant. That is the summit only prophets can achieve.

When humanity deviates from the straight path provided by God and sinks into ignorance, accepting subservience to false gods, it suffers a great loss here in this life, before the one it incurs in the life to come: *"Losers indeed are those who, in their ignorance, foolishly kill their children and declare as forbidden what God has provided for*

them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God. They have gone astray and they have no guidance." (Verse 140)

They are absolute losers, because they have lost both this life and the life to come. They have lost their children, their own souls and minds and the position of dignity which God gave them when He released them from subservience to beings other than Himself. Instead, they willingly submit themselves to other deities which are themselves subject to God's power. Above all, they lost God's guidance when they lost His faith. Their loss is doubly confirmed and now they can hope for no guidance whatsoever: *"They have gone astray and they have no guidance."* (Verse 140)

The Originator of All Creation

The *sūrah* then puts them face to face with the eternal truth that they strayed away from. It has already referred to it when speaking of how the Arabs assigned a portion of their agricultural produce and cattle to God and another portion to the false deities which they associated with Him. Now the *sūrah* states clearly to them that although they dispense of such produce and cattle in ways suggested by evil beings, human and *jinn,* these have had no say whatsoever in their creation. It is God who created them all so that people could benefit from them and praise God for what He has created and worship Him alone. It must be stated here that God does not need their praise or worship, for He has no need of anything or anyone. He is compassionate and He knows that through praising and worshipping Him alone, people achieve what sets their world on the right course as they adopt the right faith. How is it then that they allow those who have created nothing to rule over the produce and cattle God has created? How is it that they give a portion of these to God and another portion to other beings, and even cheat with the portion they assign to God?

The Creator who gives sustenance is the Lord who owns all. Hence, it is not permissible for anyone to have any authority over the use of what He has created except by His permission stipulated in the law He has laid down. This law is fully explained in the message conveyed by His Messenger, not in what is claimed by those deities trying to usurp God's authority: *"It is He who has brought into being gardens – both of the cultivated type and those growing wild – and the date palm, and fields bearing different produce, and the olive tree, and the pomegranates, all resembling one another and yet so different. Eat of their fruit when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor) what is due to them on harvest day. But do not waste, for He does not love the wasteful. And of the cattle some are reared for work and others for food. Eat of that which God has provided for you as sustenance and do not follow Satan's footsteps; he is your open foe."* (Verses 141-2)

All praise is due to God who has created all those gardens, bringing life out of

what is dead. Some of these gardens are of the cultivated type which human beings tend and support with trellis, posts and weed killing, and some are of the wild type that requires little or no attention or help from man. God has also made the palm tree and other types of cultivation, giving them different colours, tastes and shapes. It is God who has created the olives and the pomegranates with a wide range of varieties and yet all so similar. Furthermore, God has created the cattle and made some of them stand on high legs so that they can carry large loads and made others of shorter height and supplied them with wool or hair which can be used for making clothes.

It is God who has originated life on earth and given it such wide variety so as to satisfy the needs of human beings in their life on earth. In spite of these clear facts of creation, people still refer to beings other than God for rulings over the distribution of crops, cattle and wealth. We often find references in the Qur'ān to the fact that it is God alone who provides the means of sustenance for people. This fact is often given as an argument in support of the principle that people should refer to God alone to determine how they conduct their affairs. The Creator who alone provides sustenance is, without question, the One who alone combines the overall Lordship of human life with total sovereignty, including the full authority to rule and legislate. At this point, we are given a variety of scenes showing growing plants, the yielding of fruits, cattle and what God has provided for us in them all. These are given in order to add strength to the Islamic point of view concerning the authority to legislate just as they are also used to support the fact that Godhead belongs to God alone. In this way, both questions are made to appear a complete unit, as indeed they are in the Islamic faith. When plants and fruits are mentioned, God says: *"Eat of their fruit when they come to fruition, and give (to the poor) what is due to them on harvest day. But do not waste, for He does not love the wasteful."* (Verse 141) The order to give to the poor what is due to them on harvest day is perhaps the reason why some reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madinah. We have said in the Prologue to this *sūrah,* however, that this verse was also revealed in Makkah, because it is not possible that the Makkan parts of the *sūrah* could have been revealed without this verse. Had it been delayed until revelation was given in Madinah, there would be a gap in the passage. The order to give to the poor what is their due on harvest day does not necessarily refer to *zakāt.* Some reports suggest that this simply refers to charity which is not specified. *Zakāt,* however, and its specified measures were outlined in the second year after the Prophet's settlement in Madinah.

The Qur'ānic statement: *"Do not waste, for He does not love the wasteful",* can be construed as referring to charitable donations or to eating and personal use. It has been suggested that the early Muslims competed in giving to charity to a degree which made their action wasteful. Hence God orders them not to be prodigal.

Referring to cattle, God says to them: *"Eat of that which God has provided for you as*

sustenance and do not follow Satan's footsteps; he is your open foe." (Verse 142) Thus God reminds them that all the sustenance they have been given is provided by Him, the Creator of all. Satan has created nothing. How is it, then, that people follow Satan's dictates on how they should use what God has provided for them? He follows this with a reminder that Satan is their manifest enemy. How, then, can they follow Satan' s footsteps?

The *sūrah* then sheds ample light on the points around which ignorant misconceptions concentrate. These are examined in detail in order to expose their unjustifiable and indefensible absurdity. They realize that with regard to such misconceptions they have no leg to stand on: *"Of cattle you have eight in [four] pairs: a pair of the sheep and a pair of the goats. Say: Is it the two males that He has forbidden, or the two females, or that which the wombs of the two females may contain? Tell me plainly if you are men of truth. And, likewise, a pair of camels and a pair of oxen. Say: Is it the two males that He has forbidden, or the two females, or that which the wombs of the two females may contain? Is it, perchance, that you were witnesses when God gave you these commandments? Who could be more wicked than one who, without any real knowledge, invents lies about God in order to lead people astray? God does not guide the wrongdoers."* (Verses 143-4)

The cattle over which all this controversy is about, and which is certainly created for them by God, as stated in the previous verse, are eight types, made in four pairs. Thus we have a pair of sheep and a pair of goats. Which of them has God forbidden? Or has He made what is in their wombs forbidden? *"Tell me plainly if you are men of truth."* (Verse 143) There is no room in such matters for guesswork. No legislation may be put into effect concerning them without clear authority.

As for the other types, we have a male and a female camel, as well as a male and a female cow. Again the question is asked: which of the two has God forbidden? Or is it that He has forbidden what is in their wombs? Besides, what authority is there to support such a prohibition? *"Is it, perchance, that you were witnesses when God gave you these commandments?"* (Verse 144) Were you present to witness God's commandments? The fact is that there is no prohibition without a clear order by God. He alone has the authority to forbid anything. Clear evidence must be given in support of any prohibition.

Thus all legislation must come from the same source. Since they falsely claimed that their laws enjoyed the backing of God's authority, they are immediately given a very stern warning: *"Who could be more wicked than one who, without any real knowledge, invents lies about God in order to lead people astray? God does not guide the wrongdoers."* (Verse 144) There can be no one more unjust or wicked than a person who invents a law which is not sanctioned by God and then claims that it is God's law in order to lead people astray. Such a person has no real knowledge. He only relies on his own conjecture or desire. Such people can never receive God's guidance, because they

have severed themselves from all means of guidance. They have attributed partners to God without His approval. God does not grant guidance to those who are wrongdoers.

Prohibitions by the Most Gracious

The Arabs' absurdity exposed, they are now made to realize that the false concepts they held before Islam have no foundation whatsoever. They are given an example to reflect upon in that God has brought into existence all their crops and cattle, yet they felt they had the right to determine how these were allocated, either by following their own whims or acting on the inspiration of evil ones. They did so knowing that those who were evil did not create the crops and cattle, but that these were of God's creation. Hence, it is He who determines what use is to be made of His creation given to His servants as sustenance or property.

In these verses God spells out clearly to them what He has actually forbidden, making His prohibition clear through revelations, not through guesswork and imagination. It goes without saying that God has the authority to legislate, and that what He forbids is totally forbidden and what He makes lawful is absolutely lawful. No human being can have any say in this, and He has no partners to make a similar decision or to add to or amend His prohibition. Within the same context, we have here an explanation of what God has forbidden the Jews in particular, although He has made it lawful to the Muslims. This prohibition was by way of punishment to the Jews for their wrongdoing and their deviation from God's law.

> *Say: 'In all that has been revealed to me, I do not find anything forbidden to eat, if one wishes to eat thereof unless it be carrion, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine — for all that is unclean — or a sinful offering over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if one is driven by necessity, neither intending disobedience nor exceeding his bare need, then know that your Lord is much forgiving, merciful. To those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all animals that have claws; and We forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones. Thus did We requite them for their wrongdoing. We are certainly true to Our word. If they accuse you of lying, then say: "Limitless is your Lord in His grace; but His punishment shall not be warded off from evildoing folk."* (Verses 145-7)

Al-Ṭabarī, a leading early commentator on the Qur'ān, says:

> God, limitless is He in His glory, gives here clear instructions to His Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). He is to say to those who had assigned a

> portion of God's creation of crops and cattle to Him and another portion to the partners they associated with Him, who had made certain types of cattle and crops forbidden so that none may eat of them save those whom they permitted, who made some cattle forbidden to ride, or made what was in the wombs of their cattle forbidden to their women, lawful to their men, who made unlawful what God provided for them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God; he should ask them all: "Has a messenger sent by God come to you with such prohibitions? If so, then tell us about that. Or is it that you yourselves have been present, witnessing the issuing of God's commandments of prohibition? Or could it be that you heard Him as He made the prohibition and you acted on that? If so, then you are liars inventing falsehood against God. Should you make any such claim, people will know that you are liars.
>
> The Prophet is further instructed to make it clear to them that he does not find in what has been revealed to him of God's Book anything forbidden to eat, including all that they claimed to be unlawful, except for four types: *"carrion"*, which refers to an animal dying by itself without being properly slaughtered, or *"blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine"*. All three types are pronounced to be *"unclean"* which means that they are impure. The fourth forbidden type is *"a sinful offering"* which refers to an animal slaughtered by an idolater and consecrated to one of the idols they associated with God. Such an offering is forbidden to make and to eat by anyone who believes in God.
>
> Thus God, limitless is He in His glory, tells those unbelievers who argued with the Prophet and his Companions concerning the prohibition of carrion that God has made forbidden the very thing they were arguing about. As such, it is unlawful. On the other hand, that which the idolaters claimed to be forbidden remains lawful, since God has made it so. They were lying when they claimed that their prohibition relied on God's authority.[47]

Al-Ṭabarī then explains the proviso made in the concluding part of the same verse, *"But if one is driven by necessity, neither intending disobedience nor exceeding his bare need, then know that your Lord is much forgiving, merciful."* (Verse 145)

> This means that if a person finds himself in a position which drives him to eat something of what God has forbidden: either carrion, or blood, or pork, or a sinful offering, he may eat that. The condition is that he must not intend any enjoyment by his eating or merely to satisfy an ordinary case of hunger, and he must not intend any transgression by eating what God has forbidden or eating

[47] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 8, p. 69.

> more than what is absolutely necessary to save himself from starving to death. God tells us that He is much-forgiving, merciful. He forgives him what he has done, although He could punish him if He so willed. His mercy is manifested by the fact that He has allowed that person to eat something forbidden when he is driven to it by sheer necessity. Again, God could have made that forbidden even in these extreme cases.[48]

There are considerable differences among scholars with regard to the degree of necessity which allows a Muslim to eat forbidden food and the limits of what he may eat of that food. Some scholars say that what is permitted is simply an amount which ensures that one does not perish, and only when the fear of death is real. Other scholars say that a person in such a situation may eat a full meal, while others allow him to carry with him a further quantity to eat again, if he fears that he may still be without food for a long time. We do not wish to discuss these views in detail. This brief reference to them is sufficient for our purposes.

Other things were forbidden to the Jews such as animals that have undivided hoofs. These included camels, ostrich, geese and ducks. The fat of oxen and sheep was also forbidden, except for that in certain parts of their bodies. The entirety of this prohibition was a punishment for their transgression beyond the limits set by God: "*To those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all animals that have claws; and We forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones. Thus did We requite them for their wrongdoing. We are certainly true to Our word.*" (Verse 146)

Here the reason for this prohibition is made absolutely clear. It is a special case for the Jews only. It is emphasized here that this is the truth, not what is claimed by the Jews that their grandfather Jacob, who was also called Israel, had forbidden himself all this and that they followed in his footsteps. All this was perfectly permissible to Jacob. It was forbidden to them after they transgressed. They were simply forbidden to have such types of food which were wholesome.

"*If they accuse you of lying, then say: 'Limitless is your Lord in His grace; but His punishment shall not be warded off from evildoing folk.'*" (Verse 147) Your Lord is most gracious, and His grace is bestowed on us and on every believer, as well as on other people. Indeed His grace is extended to those who are God-fearing and to evildoers. He does not inflict His punishment straightaway on those who deserve it, but leaves them for a while as a gesture of His grace. Some of them may repent and mend their ways. However, when He decides to inflict His punishment on those who deliberately do evil, they cannot ward it off in any way. If He delays it, He only does so until He inflicts it at the time He chooses. This should be enough to ensure people

[48] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., Vol. 8, p. 72.

pray for God's grace because God's power is limitless. His punishment is so severe. If they fear the prospect of His punishment, then they should seek to avoid it through His grace. God, who has created people and who knows how we think, touches on both our hopes and fears so that we may consider, reflect and respond.

The Ultimate Argument in Defence of Falsehood

At this point in the passage, their last argument with which they tried to justify their erroneous beliefs and misguided practices comes under close scrutiny. They claim that they did not adopt those ill- founded beliefs by choice; rather, they were compelled to do so. Had God wished that they did not believe in these other gods and deities, He would have prevented them from doing so, since He is certainly able to accomplish whatever purpose He has in mind: *"Those who associate partners with God will say: 'Had God so willed, neither we nor our fathers would have associated any partners with Him; nor would we have declared anything as forbidden.' In like manner did those who have lived before them deny the truth, until they came to taste Our punishment. Say: Have you any certain knowledge which you can put before us? You follow nothing but conjecture, and you do nothing but guess. Say: With God alone rests the final evidence. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright."* (Verses 148-9)

The question of free-will, free choice or compulsion has been the subject of lengthy and intense argument in the history of Islamic thought. Different schools of thought and intellectual groups and sects were always ready to defend their points of view. Greek philosophy and logic and Christian schools of divinity provided further ammunition in this fierce argument, complicating it still more and making it totally alien to the Islamic standpoint. Had those people on all sides of the argument adopted the simple, uncomplicated, serious and direct method of the Qur'ān, their arguments would not have taken this complicated course. Instead, they would have been spared much of their futile effort.

For our part, we examine the unbelievers' argument and the Qur'ānic reply only to find that the whole question is clear, simple and precise: *"Those who associate partners with God will say: 'Had God so willed, neither we nor our fathers would have associated any partners with Him; nor would we have declared anything as forbidden'."* (Verse 148) In other words, they argue that their idolatrous beliefs, their unsanctioned prohibitions as well as their false assertions are all part of divine law, and they blame it all on God's will and what He has determined for them. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have associated any partners with Him and would not have made anything unlawful.

What is the Qur'ānic reply to this claim? The Qur'ān declares that they lie the same way as those who had gone before them lied and denied the truth. Those

earlier people who persisted with their denial of the truth were made to suffer God's punishment and experience His might. The same fate awaits the new liars who follow in their footsteps: *"In like manner did those who have lived before them deny the truth, until they came to taste Our punishment."* (Verse 148) This statement should shake and awaken people so that they reflect on the lessons that can be learned from the experience of earlier peoples.

The second point in the Qur'ānic reply aims at correcting the human method of reflection and deliberation. God has given people certain orders to fulfil and forbidden them certain things. They can have absolutely certain knowledge of all this. As for God's will, it belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human thought or human perception. They have no way of knowing it for certain. If this is the case and they cannot know the dictates of God's will for certain, how is it, then, that they use this argument? *"Say: 'Have you any certain knowledge which you can put before us? You follow nothing but conjecture, and you do nothing but guess.'"* (Verse 148) God's orders and prohibitions are known to all with certainty. Why, then, do these people ignore such truth, in order to indulge in guesswork and follow paths that can lead them nowhere?

This is all that can be said on this question. God does not require people to know what He has chosen to keep to Himself of His will and how it operates. He only wants them to know what commandments He has issued to them and what things He has forbidden them so that they conduct their lives in accordance with these orders and prohibitions. When they try to acquire this knowledge, God states that He will guide them to it and open their hearts to receive it so that they may declare their submission to God. This is all that human beings need, it is all so clear and simple, and free from all the ambiguity imparted by endless controversy.

God is able, should He so will, to create human beings with a nature that can only follow His guidance. He is certainly able to force them to follow His guidance or to put His guidance in their minds so that they follow it without compulsion. However, He has willed otherwise. It is His will that He tests us by giving us the ability to follow His guidance or to remain in error. He wants to extend His help to those who wish to follow His guidance and make it easy for them, and, on the other hand, He wants to let those who follow error continue in their misguided ways. His will is done and it is manifested in the situation that shapes human life.

"Say: With God alone rests the final evidence. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright." (Verse 149) The whole issue is very clear and expressed in a plain and simple statement to ensure that it is perfectly understood by all human beings. The endless debates and arguments about it are alien to the Islamic approach. Not a single school of philosophy or divinity has been able to arrive at a comfortable conclusion as a result of its treatment of this question. This is due to the fact that the

methods adopted by these schools have always been unsuitable to the nature of the question.

It is the nature of any fact that determines the method of its treatment and how it should be expressed. When we deal with a material truism, we cannot adopt the laboratory approach. Similarly, a mathematical truth cannot be the subject of intellectual hypotheses. Hence, a truth that relates to the realm beyond human perception must be treated in a totally different way, relying, as we have already explained, on the practical manifestation and appreciation of this truth in its own field. It is most important that this question of choice and compulsion should be expressed in a way that is different from the type of intellectual approach that has given rise to all kinds of controversy in most communities and generations.

This religion of Islam has been revealed in order to establish a practical situation governed by clear commandments and prohibitions. To try to involve divine will, which cannot be perceived by our senses, is to try to traverse uncharted regions without guidance. It is a total waste of effort, which can be used more constructively elsewhere.

A Very Clear Course to Follow

Finally, God instructs His Messenger (peace be upon him) to confront the idolaters asking them to bring witnesses who can support them over the question of legislation, in the same way as He challenged them at the beginning of the *sūrah* to produce witnesses over the question of Godhead. Early in the *sūrah,* God says to His Messenger: "*Say: 'What is weightiest in testimony?' Say: 'God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may thereby warn you and all whom it may reach. Will you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God?' Say: 'I bear no such witness'. Say: 'He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him.'*" (Verse 19) At this particular point, God gives him this instruction: "*Say: Bring forward your witnesses who will testify that God has forbidden this. If they so testify, do not you testify with them; and do not follow the wishes of those who deny Our revelations, and those who do not believe in the life to come and who consider others as equal to their Lord.*" (Verse 150)

This is a tremendous and decisive challenge, giving a clear idea of the nature of this religion of Islam which treats all forms of associating partners with God on the same level. Thus, the open and manifest form of claiming that certain beings are deities is equal to the implicit one represented by usurping the authority to legislate and enacting laws that are not sanctioned by God. Their claim that their legislation is God's law is totally discounted. The Qur'ān also denounces as liars those who make such an attempt to usurp God's sovereignty and His authority to legislate, who deny God's revelations, who do not believe in the life to come, and who consider others as

equal to Him. The expression used here is the same as that used in the opening verse of this *sūrah* to describe the unbelievers: *"All praise is due to God, who has created the heavens and the earth, and brought into being darkness and light; yet those who disbelieve regard other beings as equal to their Lord."* (Verse 1)

This, then, is God's verdict concerning those who usurp His sovereignty and exercise His authority to legislate. The verdict is made without any consideration of those people's claims that their laws are part of God's law. When God has given His verdict, no one can voice any different opinion.

If we want to understand why God makes such a verdict, and why He considers them as liars denying His revelations, and as unbelievers denying the life to come, the door is open to us to deliberate on this. Indeed, such deliberation is required of Muslims.

Perhaps it should be explained first that the Arabic term used in this verse to mean God's `revelations' is often used to refer to `the signs' God has placed in the universe pointing to Him, or to refer to His `revelations' vouchsafed to His Messenger. If we take the first meaning, and consider that God describes them as liars denying His signs in the universe, then the description is true, because all these signs give the same message and the same testimony that God alone is the Creator who has no partners and who gives sustenance to all His creation. Hence, He is the owner of the universe, which means that He alone has the power to conduct all the affairs of the universe as He wishes. Therefore, anyone who does not acknowledge that sovereignty belongs solely to God is an unbeliever in all these signs in the universe. On the other hand, if we take the verse to mean that they do not believe in the Qur'ānic revelations, the description is again true. All these revelations are clear and decisive. They require people to believe that all sovereignty and authority to legislate for human life belongs to God alone. It is His law that should be implemented, and we should submit to His authority and rule.

They are also denounced as unbelievers in the life to come. A person who believes in such a life and is certain that he will come face to face with his Lord on the Day of Judgement will never make an act of aggression against God and His most essential quality of Godhead. He will never claim for himself something that belongs to God alone, namely, the right to legislate.

They are finally denounced as people who consider other beings as equal to their Lord. In other words they are idolaters in the same way as those Arabs who worshipped idols were unbelievers. Had they believed in God's oneness, they would not have attributed sovereignty and the authority to legislate to anyone else. Nor would they have accepted any claim by anyone that he has such an authority.

This is what appears to me to be the reason for God's judgement of those people

who usurp His authority to legislate and who enact laws not sanctioned by Him. As has already been explained, the verdict describes them in three ways: as liars, denying God's signs or revelations, as liars who do not believe in the life to come and as idolaters. No Muslim can argue with this verdict. It is the final word which needs no further comment. Let every Muslim take heed and speak in a becoming manner about the verdict of the Almighty, the Wise.

Detailed Commandments for Human Life

Having challenged the unbelievers to produce their witnesses and rejected their claims concerning what they considered as forbidden, the *sūrah* gives a detailed outline of what God has truly forbidden. Side by side with the list of prohibitions, we find some positive commandments that must be observed. Failure to act on these is also forbidden. The list begins with the most important prohibition of all, namely, associating partners with God. Indeed, the first article of faith which establishes the principle of God's oneness provides the foundation for all prohibitions.

> *Say: Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden to you: Do not associate partners with Him; [do not offend against but, rather,] be kind to your parents; do not kill your children because of your poverty – We provide for you and for them; do not commit any shameful deed, whether open or secret; do not take any human being's life – which God has made sacred, except in the course of justice. This He has enjoined upon you so that you may use your reason. Do not touch the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except to improve it. Give just weight and full measure. We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. When you speak, be just, even though it be against one of your close relatives. Be true to your covenant with God. This He has enjoined upon you so that you may bear it in mind. Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path. Follow it, then, and do not follow other ways, for they cause you to deviate from His way. All this He has enjoined upon you so that you may remain God-fearing.* (Verses 151-3)

When we reflect on these commandments, we find that they provide an outline of our religion as a whole. They form the most essential element in the life of the human conscience as they establish the principle of God's oneness. They are also most essential for the life of the human family and human community since they ensure mutual security within society and make cleanliness an important quality of all social transactions. They are indeed pivotal for human life, since they guarantee the rights of every individual, linking them to the need to fulfil the covenant that exists between God and His servants. This keeps these commandments on the right course outlined by the starting principle of believing in God's oneness.

When we look at the comment made at the end of these commandments, we find that God, limitless is He in His glory, states that they constitute the right path leading to Him. All other routes and tracks are deviant, leading away from Him.

It is an especially important issue that these three verses tackle. They follow immediately after the discussion on what may appear to be only a side issue regarding the practices *of jaīhiliyyah* society. But this issue relates, in fact, to the most fundamental question of faith. Hence why it is linked to this most important list of commandments.

"Say: 'Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden to you.'" (Verse 151) The Prophet is here instructed to speak to people and tell them what their Lord has forbidden to them, not what they allege to have been forbidden. It is their Lord who has made the following items forbidden, because His alone is the position of Lordship which includes the aspects of fostering and directing, as well as issuing legislation. Hence, He is only exercising His authority, because He is the Lord. God alone is the one who enjoys all rights of Lordship.

"Do not associate partners with Him." (Verse 151) This is the foundation upon which the structure of faith is built. It is to this rule that all duties and obligations should refer and from which all rights and privileges are derived. It must be properly established before any discussion of commandments, prohibitions, obligations, systems and laws can take place. The first and most important requirement is that people should acknowledge that God is their Lord who governs their lives in the same way as they believe in His oneness. No partner can be associated with Him either as a deity or as a Lord. People must acknowledge that God alone controls the universe and conducts its affairs, as He indeed holds them accountable on the Day of Judgement for what they have done in this life and rewards them accordingly. They must also acknowledge at the same time and in the same measure that He alone has the authority to provide the law which human beings must administer and enforce.

This guiding principle, then, purges human conscience of all traces of associating partners with God, purges the human mind from all traces of superstition, human society from the traditions of ignorance and purifies human life from people's submission to one another.

All forms of associating partners with God are included under the first and most important thing to be forbidden, because they lead to every objectionable thing. It is the practice which should be most forcefully denied so that people can acknowledge that God is their only God, Lord, King and Sovereign. Hence, they address all their acts of worship to Him alone. Believing in God's oneness is, thus, the most important rule which cannot be replaced by any type of worship, moral value, human quality or action. Hence, the list of commandments begins with it: *"Do not associate partners*

with Him." (Verse 151)

It is important that we should consider what this Qur'ānic passage tells us before it details these commandments. In other words, we should know exactly what is meant by associating partners with God, which is the first of all forbidden things. The whole drift of this *sūrah* focuses on a single issue, which is God's sovereignty and authority to legislate. The verse preceding these three verses challenges the unbelievers to produce their witnesses. It begins with this instruction to the Prophet: *"Say: 'Bring forward your witnesses who will testify that God has forbidden this'. If they so testify, do not you testify with them; and do not follow the wishes of those who deny Our revelations, and those who do not believe in the life to come and who consider others as equal to their Lord."* (Verse 150)

We need to remember this verse and what we said earlier in order to understand what is meant by associating partners with God. It is indeed the association of partners with respect to Godhead and to God's sovereignty.

We need this constant reminder because Satan and his disciples' strenuous efforts to split this faith from its most essential concept have unfortunately resulted in the separation of two intertwined questions, namely sovereignty and faith. This is the reason that makes some well-meaning people who are keen to serve Islam focus their efforts on establishing the proper form of a particular act of worship or denouncing a certain moral aspect or legal violation. They seldom speak about the concept of legislation and to whom it belongs or its central position in the Islamic faith. They give importance to malpractices of secondary importance, but little do they care about the most important violation of God's law which seeks to establish human life on a principle different from the one that assigns to God alone the whole authority to legislate.

Before giving man any order, God states His commandment that partners must not be associated with Him. He states this at a point in the *sūrah* which demonstrates precisely what is meant by such an association. This is the rule which provides enlightenment between human beings and God, and provides the life of the community with a standard to which it must refer in all situations. It imparts to human life its basic values, so that it is no longer subject to human whims or to traditions based on such whims.

"Be kind to your parents; do not kill your children because of your poverty – We provide for you and for them." (Verse 151) This highlights the family tie between human generations. God knows that He is more kind and compassionate to human beings than their parents or children. Hence, He enjoins upon children to be kind to their parents and on parents to be kind to their children. He links this commandment to the recognition of His absolute Godhead and the acknowledgement of His unique

Lordship. He tells them that He alone provides for their sustenance. Hence, they must not impose any severe conditions on parents in their old age or on children in their tender years. They must not fear poverty, because God provides sustenance for parents and children alike.

Forbidden to People of Sound Mind

"Do not commit any shameful deed, whether open or secret." (Verse 151) Since God has urged His servants to take good care of their families, He has also impressed upon them the need to maintain the family foundation, which is also the basis of society. This equates with purity, decency and chastity. Hence, they are forbidden to commit all types of indecency, whether openly or secretly. This prohibition is then closely related to the commandment immediately preceding it and to the first commandment. No family can survive and no community can prosper if they sink into shameful indecency, whether open or secret. Purity, cleanliness and chastity are the basic essentials for the healthy living of both the family and the community. Those who like to see indecency spread throughout the community are the ones who try to weaken the structure of the family and to bring about society's collapse.

The Arabic term translated here as 'shameful indecency' refers, from the linguistic point of view, to everything that goes beyond its proper limits. The term is also frequently used to denote a particular type of indecency, namely adultery and fornication. It is most probably in this sense that the term is used here. The present context is one of enumerating certain forbidden beliefs and practices. Adultery is the one particularly meant here. If we were to take the general meaning of the word, we should remember that, murder and the squandering of an orphan's property are both indecencies, but associating partners with God is the greatest indecency of all. Hence, giving the term 'indecency' the narrower sense of adultery in this context is perhaps more fitting to the general drift of the *sūrah.* It also explains why the plural form is used here. The crime of adultery is normally preceded by actions and circumstances that are also indecent. Clothing which is too revealing, wanton behaviour, uninhibited flirtation with the opposite sex, shameless behaviour, speech and laughter, deliberate temptation and inviting adornments are all indecencies, leading to the ultimate one of adultery. All these may be brought into the open or kept secret. Some may be entertained within oneself, while others are expressed in words and actions. They all work together to destroy the structure of the family and to weaken the community from within. In addition, they leave their stains on people's consciences and limit their concerns to what is petty and abject. Hence, this prohibition follows immediately upon the commandments concerned with the relationship between parents and children.

Because all these indecencies have their own attraction and temptation, the *sūrah* tells us not to go near them. Staying away from them is the best way to avoid the preliminaries and attractions which could weaken one's resolve. Hence, to cast a second, penetrative look at a woman, after the first casual one, is forbidden, while mixing between men and women is kept within the limits of what is necessary. Wearing too many adornments, even using perfumes when going out are forbidden for women. Tempting movements and loud laughter are also disallowed in a pure Islamic social life. Islam does not like people to expose themselves to attraction as it only makes resistance harder. Islam believes in taking protective measures before there is any need to inflict punishments. It protects consciences, feelings and senses. God knows His creation best and He helps protect them, for He is compassionate and all-knowing.

Those who provide all types of temptation and attraction, trying to unleash wild desires, utilizing verbal expression, pictures, films, stories, mixed camps as well as other methods of communication have a certain objective in mind. We know the purpose of their schemes, and we know what they would love to do with this religion and what they try to do to the life of the family and the community.

"Do not take any human being's life – which God has made sacred, except in the course of justice." (Verse 151) These three offences, associating partners with God, adultery and murder are frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān in quick succession as things to avoid. This is because they are, in a sense, crimes of murder. The first, associating partners with God, murders sound human nature, while the second, adultery, is a murder of the community, and the third is a murder of individuals. When human nature is not nurtured by belief in God's oneness, it becomes dead.[49] The community which allows adultery to spread is a dead community, heading straight for destruction. We need only to remember the examples of the Greek, Roman and Persian civilizations, which all provide historical evidence supporting this fact. We can also see the beginnings of collapse and the eventual demise of the modern Western civilization after it has allowed this plague to corrupt its very structure and social fabric. Again, a society in which killing and vengeance killing are tolerated is one which is threatened with destruction. Hence, Islam prescribes very severe punishments for all these crimes, because it wants to protect its community from destruction.

Killing children by reason of poverty has already been forbidden. This is now followed by a prohibition of killing any human being. The way this prohibition is

[49] Reference may be made to the comments given on Verse 122, which states: "*Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge? Thus do their deeds seem goodly to the unbelievers.*" [Chapter 13, pp. 298-301].

phrased suggests that every individual crime of murder seeks to kill the human soul in general. This is supported by the verse in the preceding *sūrah* which states: *"If anyone slays a human being, for anything other than in punishment of murder or for spreading corruption on earth, it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; and if anyone saves a human life, it shall be as though he had saved all mankind."* (5: 32) The aggression used in killing is against the right to life and against humanity in general. It is on the basis of this rule that God has guaranteed that human life shall always be considered sacred. In addition, the Muslim community feels safe and secure in the land of Islam. Every individual in that community feels secure as he works and contributes to the life of that community. He is exposed to no risk except by the dictates of justice. Such justice which allows a human being to be killed is clearly explained in God's law. This is not left to anyone's decision or interpretation. Furthermore, its detailed explanation only became law after the Muslim state was established and had acquired enough power to be able to implement its laws.

This last point tells us something about the nature of this religion and how it operates in practical life. These rules which are essential to society were only explained in the Qur'ān at the appropriate time.

Before continuing with the list of prohibitions and commandments, the *sūrah* separates what has already been mentioned from what is to come by highlighting God's directives and commandments: *"This He has enjoined upon you so that you may use your reason."* (Verse 151)

This comment is given in accordance with the Qur'ānic method which makes it clear that every instruction and every prohibition is given by God. This serves to enhance the impression that the authority which bids and forbids in human life belongs to God alone. This adds much weight to the effectiveness of these instructions and prohibitions. There is also a reference here to using our reason. Indeed, it is only logical that this authority is the only one to whom people submit. We have already mentioned that this authority belongs to God, the Creator, who provides sustenance and who controls every aspect in human life and in the life of the universe.

One last word remains which is to point out that the first group of commandments are perfectly harmonious within themselves, while the second group also contains its own harmony. Hence, each group is outlined in a separate verse, but the two verses maintain a perfect rhythm.

Maintaining the Path Leading to God

"Do not touch the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except to improve it." (Verse 152) Every orphan feels weak within the community because he has lost his

father who is supposed to bring him up well and protect him. His weakness, then, imposes a duty on the Muslim community, on the basis of the principle of mutual social solidarity which is central to the Islamic social system. An orphan used to find himself in total loss in pre-Islamic Arabian society. The frequent and varied Qur'ānic directives concerning the care that should be taken of orphans, and the stern warning occasionally added to these directives give us an impression of how orphans used to be badly treated in society. This continued to be the case until God selected an honoured orphan from that community to entrust him with the most noble task of all. He made that orphan, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), the bearer of His final message to mankind. He also made taking proper care of orphans one of the practices encouraged by Islam which gives its followers this kind of directive: *"Do not touch the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except to improve it."* (Verse 152)

Therefore, anyone who is looking after an orphan must not touch that orphan's property except in a way which is certain to bring a good return to the orphan. He must protect that property and try to improve it until the orphan comes of age and becomes physically and mentally able to receive his property and make good use of it. Thus, the community adds to its ranks a useful member who obtains his full rights.

Scholars have different views concerning the stage when a person comes of age. According to `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Zayd and Imām Mālik, it signifies the attaining of puberty. According to Imām Abū Ĥanīfah, a person comes of age when he is twenty-five, while al-Suddī raises that higher to the age of thirty. Scholars of Madinah set two criteria for that stage: attaining puberty and showing maturity. No particular age is specified.

"Give just weight and full measure. We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear." (Verse 152) This clearly applies to commercial transactions and requires people to do their best to ensure that everyone gets what is due to them. The *sūrah* provides a direct link between these transactions and faith, because this is the Islamic attitude. It is God who gives this directive and who urges people to give just weight and full measure.

Commercial transactions thus have a very real link with the question of Godhead and servitude. They are mentioned here in a context which clarifies that faith has a direct relationship with all aspects of life. *Jāhiliyyah* societies, past and present, separate faith and worship on the one side and laws and human dealings and transactions on the other. An example of this separation is related in the Qur'ān as it tells us about the Prophet Shu`ayb's people who said to him: *"shu`ayb, does your praying require you to demand of us that we give up all that our forefathers used to worship, or that we refrain from doing whatever we please with our property?"* (11: 87) Hence, the Qur'ān makes this link between the rules governing financial and commercial

transactions on the one hand and faith on the other, in order to make it clear that Islam makes both faith and human dealings integral parts of it, firmly established within its constitution.

"When you speak, be just, even though it be against one of your close relatives." (Verse 152) Here the Qur'ān elevates the human conscience, already refined through a sense of watching God, to the even higher level of being guided by belief in God and the need to fulfil His commandments. Within the context of blood relations there lies a human weakness. People tend to think that family relations dictate mutual support in all situations. A human being knows that he himself is weak and lives only a limited period of time. With his relatives he finds strength. The wider his relations extend, the more firmly established is his existence. It is through his relations that his presence in this world is extended to future generations. For all this, a man is weak when it comes to testifying for or against his relatives or to making a judgement between them and other people. Hence, the Qur'ān provides the necessary support so that a Muslim's conscience prompts him to say words of truth and justice, thinking only of his relationship with God and watching Him alone. This gives him the strength which outweighs by far any support he may have from his relatives, as he places his obligation towards God above his duties to his relatives.

Again this particular instruction seeks to remind people of their covenant with God: *"Be true to your covenant with God."* (Verse 152) It is part of that covenant that people should speak the truth, even when it affects their relatives. This covenant also requires people to give just weight and full measure and that they do not come near the property of an orphan except to improve it, and to treat human life as sacred, killing no one except in the course of justice. But before all this, the covenant which exists between human beings and God dictates that they must associate no partners with Him. This is a pledge made by them and is strongly impressed on their nature by its very constitution. It is God who has made human nature firmly related to its Creator, feeling His presence through the laws that cover its own existence and the existence of the universe.

The Qur'ānic comment on all these directives is a most appropriate one: *"This He has enjoined upon you so that you may bear it in mind."* (Verse 152) They must always remember this covenant with God in all its details and its binding duties.

These basic rules are made crystal clear. They also provide a summary of the Islamic faith and its social legislation. They start with God's oneness and they conclude with the mention of man's covenant with God. They were preceded by a long discourse on sovereignty and the fact that it belongs to God alone. These rules, then, outline the straight path leading to God. Any path that deviates from this one can only lead to complete loss: *"Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path. Follow it, then, and do not follow other ways, for they cause you to deviate from His way. All*

this He has enjoined upon you so that you may remain God-fearing." (Verse 153)

With this verse, a long part of the *sūrah* is concluded. It starts with the verse saying: *"Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge? Thus do their deeds seem goodly to the unbelievers."* (Verse 122) The conclusion, as we can observe, is highly inspiring and leaves us with a general but profound effect. Between the outset and the conclusion the question of sovereignty and the authority to legislate is presented in full clarity. As its discussion concentrates on certain points of detail, such as those concerned with agricultural produce, cattle, slaughtered animals and offerings, it is closely linked to the central question of faith in order to make it clear that it is part of it. This is why the Qur'ān deals with this question of sovereignty at such length and relates it to all other aspects of the *sūrah* which discusses the whole question of faith and explains basic issues of Godhead and servitude to God in a most unequivocal way.

God's path is a single one leading to Him. This is the path of maintaining that Lordship belongs only to God and that people must submit to Him alone. People must realize fully that sovereignty belongs only to Him and they must translate this into practice by accepting only His legislation in their practical life. Any path that differs with this can only lead them astray.

"All this He has enjoined upon you so that you may remain God- fearing." (Verse 153) It is being conscious of God and fearing Him that ensures purity of faith and action. It is through remaining conscious of God and fearing Him that people can strengthen their resolve to always turn to God alone.

16
The Law of Divine Retribution

ثُمَّ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَى ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ تَمَامًا عَلَى
ٱلَّذِيٓ أَحۡسَنَ وَتَفۡصِيلٗا لِّكُلِّ شَيۡءٖ
وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لَّعَلَّهُم بِلِقَآءِ رَبِّهِمۡ
يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٥٤

Moreover, We gave Moses the Book in fulfilment [of Our favour] upon him who would do right, clearly spelling out everything, and providing guidance and grace, so that they might believe in the meeting with their Lord. (154)

وَهَٰذَا كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ مُبَارَكٞ فَٱتَّبِعُوهُ
وَٱتَّقُواْ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ١٥٥

And this is a Book which We have bestowed from on high, a blessed one. Follow it, then, and be conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy. (155)

أَن تَقُولُوٓاْ إِنَّمَآ أُنزِلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبُ عَلَىٰ
طَآئِفَتَيۡنِ مِن قَبۡلِنَا وَإِن كُنَّا عَن دِرَاسَتِهِمۡ
لَغَٰفِلِينَ ١٥٦

[It has been given to you] lest you say, "Only two groups of people before our time have received revelations from on high; and we were unaware of what they learned." (156)

أَوۡ تَقُولُواْ لَوۡ أَنَّآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡنَا ٱلۡكِتَٰبُ لَكُنَّآ
أَهۡدَىٰ مِنۡهُمۡۚ فَقَدۡ جَآءَكُم بَيِّنَةٞ مِّن
رَّبِّكُمۡ وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٞۚ فَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ
مِمَّن كَذَّبَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَصَدَفَ عَنۡهَاۗ

Or lest you say, "If a Book had been revealed to us, we would surely have followed its guidance better than they did." Now then a clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord, and guidance, and grace. Who could be more wicked than he who denies God's revelations and turns away from them in disdain?

سَنَجۡزِي ٱلَّذِينَ يَصۡدِفُونَ عَنۡ ءَايَٰتِنَا سُوٓءَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَصۡدِفُونَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

We shall punish those who turn away from Our revelations in disdain with grave suffering for so turning away. (157)

هَلۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّآ أَن تَأۡتِيَهُمُ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَ رَبُّكَ أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَ بَعۡضُ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّكَۗ يَوۡمَ يَأۡتِي بَعۡضُ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّكَ لَا يَنفَعُ نَفۡسًا إِيمَٰنُهَا لَمۡ تَكُنۡ ءَامَنَتۡ مِن قَبۡلُ أَوۡ كَسَبَتۡ فِيٓ إِيمَٰنِهَا خَيۡرٗاۗ قُلِ ٱنتَظِرُوٓاْ إِنَّا مُنتَظِرُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

Are they waiting for the angels to come to them, or for your Lord [Himself], or certain of your Lord's signs to appear? On the day when certain of your Lord's signs do appear, believing will be of no avail to any human being who did not believe before, or who did not put its faith to good uses. Say: Wait if you will; we too are waiting. (158)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ فَرَّقُواْ دِينَهُمۡ وَكَانُواْ شِيَعٗا لَّسۡتَ مِنۡهُمۡ فِي شَيۡءٍۚ إِنَّمَآ أَمۡرُهُمۡ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

As for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, you certainly have nothing to do with them. Their case rests with God. In time He will tell them the truth of what they were doing. (159)

مَن جَآءَ بِٱلۡحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُۥ عَشۡرُ أَمۡثَالِهَاۖ وَمَن جَآءَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ فَلَا يُجۡزَىٰٓ إِلَّا مِثۡلَهَا وَهُمۡ لَا يُظۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

Whoever does a good deed shall be credited with ten times as much; and whoever does an evil deed will be requited with no more than its like. None shall be wronged. (160)

قُلۡ إِنَّنِي هَدَىٰنِي رَبِّيٓ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ دِينٗا قِيَمٗا مِّلَّةَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ حَنِيفٗاۚ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾

Say: My Lord has guided me to a straight way, to an ever-true faith; the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who associate partners with God. (161)

قُلۡ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحۡيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦٢﴾

Say: My prayers, my worship, my living and my dying are for God alone, the Lord

لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُۥ ۖ وَبِذَٰلِكَ أُمِرْتُ وَأَنَا۠ أَوَّلُ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٦٣﴾

of all the worlds. (162)

He has no partner. Thus have I been commanded, and I shall be the first of those who surrender themselves to Him. (163)

قُلْ أَغَيْرَ ٱللَّهِ أَبْغِى رَبًّا وَهُوَ رَبُّ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ ۚ وَلَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ إِلَّا عَلَيْهَا ۚ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ۚ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُم مَّرْجِعُكُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٦٤﴾ وَهُوَ

Say: Am I, then, to seek a lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things? Whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone. No one shall be made to bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return; and then He will tell you the truth of all that over which you were in dispute. (164)

ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَكُمْ خَلَٰٓئِفَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَرَفَعَ بَعْضَكُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَٰتٍ لِّيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِى مَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْعِقَابِ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَغَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٦٥﴾

He it is who has made you inherit the earth and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you. For certain, your Lord is swift in retribution; yet, He is indeed much-forgiving, merciful. (165)

Overview

The main theme in the last part of the *sūrah,* which concentrates on God's sovereignty, authority to legislate, and their inter-relation with faith, continues in this passage. It speaks of the main principles of faith with regard to sovereignty and legislation, while the first part of the *sūrah* dealt with these main principles as they relate to faith. In this way the *sūrah* makes it clear that the issues relevant to law and sovereignty are the same as those that are relevant to faith. The Qur'ān asserts this fact most emphatically. As we study the *sūrah,* we realize that the same inspirations, scenes and expressions used in the first part are employed again in the second part.

This means that this second part of the *sūrah*

- Refers to divine books, God's messengers, revelation and the miracles unbelievers demanded;

- Speaks of the destruction that follows denying the truth after miracles have been shown;
- Speaks of the life to come and the rules concerning accountability and reward and punishment there;
- Refers to the total separation between God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and his people who regard certain beings as equal to their Lord, acknowledge other deities besides Him and accept the laws these deities enact for them. It directs the Prophet to declare decisively the true nature of his faith, clear, free of all equivocation and ambiguity;
- Makes it clear that there is one Lord for all the worlds. No believer may acknowledge any other lordship whatsoever;
- States God's ownership and control of everything in the universe. He assigns the role He wants human beings to play. It makes it clear that God is able to remove any group or community as He wills.

These very issues were also employed earlier in the *sūrah* when dealing with the greater question of faith in its totality and the relationship between God and His servants. That they are employed in both parts of the *sūrah* is clearly significant and easily appreciated by anyone who studies how the Qur'ān addresses its concerns.

This last passage of the *sūrah* begins by speaking about the book revealed to Moses, i.e. the Torah. This continues the discussion of God's straight way at the end of the last passage which concluded with the verse stating: "*Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path. Follow it, then, and do not follow other ways, for they cause you to deviate from His way.*" (Verse 153) This suggests that God's way stretches long in history, as was outlined in previous divine messages. The most recent code of law given in these messages prior to Islam was that of Moses. To him, God revealed a book in which He spelled out everything, providing guidance and bestowing grace, in the hope that his people would believe in the resurrection and the meeting with their Lord: "*Moreover, We gave Moses the Book in fulfilment [of Our favour] upon him who would do right, clearly spelling out everything, and providing guidance and grace, so that they might believe in the meeting with their Lord.*" (Verse 154)

The *sūrah* then moves on to mention the new blessed book, which is closely related to the one revealed to Moses. It gives full details of the faith and the law which people are required to accept and implement consciously. This will ensure that people receive God's grace in both this life and the life to come: "*And this is a Book which We have bestowed from on high, a blessed one. Follow it, then, and be conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy.*" (Verse 155)

This new book, the Qur'ān, was revealed so as to refute any argument the Arabs

would have had. Thus, they would not be able to claim that they had not received a book similar to those vouchsafed to the Jews and Christians, or that they would have done better than them had they received such revelations. Now that they have a book revealed by God, anyone who denies it deserves a painful punishment: *"[It has been given to you] lest you say, 'Only two groups of people before our time have received revelations from on high; and we were unaware of what they learned.' Or lest you say, `If a Book had been revealed to us, we would surely have followed its guidance better than they did.' Now then a clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord, and guidance, and grace. Who could be more wicked than he who denies God's revelations and turns away from them in disdain? We shall punish those who turn away from Our revelations in disdain with grave suffering for so turning away."* (Verses 156-7)

All arguments are ended with the revelation of this new book, but they continued to assign partners to God and enact legislation which they claimed to be part of God's law. How can they do this when God's book is readily available, containing nothing of what they allege to be God's law? Moreover, they persist in demanding miracles so that they can believe in God's book. Had these miracles been given to them, they would have spelled their inevitable doom: *"Are they waiting for the angels to come to them, or for your Lord [Himself], or certain of your Lord's signs to appear? On the day when certain of your Lord's signs do appear, believing will be of no avail to any human being who did not believe before, or who did not put its faith to good uses. Say: Wait if you will; we too are waiting.'"* (Verse 158)

At this point, God demarcates the line between His Prophet and all religions that do not acknowledge God's oneness, in both faith and law. He makes it clear that they will all return to Him when He will hold them to account and will reward them in accordance with His justice and grace: *"As for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, you certainly have nothing to do with them. Their case rests with God. In time He will tell them the truth of what they were doing. Whoever does a good deed shall be credited with ten times as much; and whoever does an evil deed will be requited with no more than its like. None shall be wronged."* (Verses 159-60)

The remaining verses of the *sūrah* provide its final rhythm in a devotional but decisive glorification of God. It sums up the most profound truism of the Islamic faith: God's absolute oneness and man's total submission to Him. It reflects the seriousness of the hereafter and individual responsibility and accountability in this life. It describes God's sovereignty as the Supreme Lord of all, and His assignment of vicegerency to whom He pleases. This extended glorification of God also gives us a splendid image of how the truth of Godhead is viewed in the purest and most sincere human heart; the heart of Muĥammad, God's Messenger (peace be upon him). It is an image only the Qur'ān can describe: *"Say: 'My Lord has guided me to a straight way, to an ever-true faith; the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who associate partners with God. Say: My prayers, my worship,*

my living and my dying are for God alone, the Lord of all the worlds. He has no partner. Thus have I been commanded, and I shall be the first of those who surrender themselves to Him. Say: Am I, then, to seek a lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things? Whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone. No one shall be made to bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return; and then He will tell you the truth of all that over which you were in dispute. He it is who has made you inherit the earth and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you. For certain, your Lord is swift in retribution; yet, He is indeed much forgiving, merciful." (Verses 161-5)

Let us now look at this passage in detail.

A Book to Bring Mercy to Mankind

"Moreover, We gave Moses the Book in fulfilment [of Our favour] upon him who would do right, clearly spelling out everything, and providing guidance and grace, so that they might believe in the meeting with their Lord." (Verse 154) This verse starts with the conjunction, 'moreover', while in Arabic the conjunction used signifies `then', but there is no time gap in the text here. The conjunction relates the statement following it to what occurs before it. That is, the instruction to the Prophet: *"Say: Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden to you."* (Verse 151) This is followed by the statement: *"Know that this is the way leading to Me, a straight path."* (Verse 153) The present statement starting with `moreover' is added to the two earlier statements as part of what the Prophet is instructed to convey to people, detailing with what God has forbidden, outlining the path to follow and showing the continuity from earlier messages.

The interpretation of the next clause, *"in fulfilment [of Our favour] upon him who would do right"*, according to al-Ṭabarī, is as follows: "We have given the Torah to Moses so as to complete the favours We have bestowed on him. Thus We perfect the honour We have granted him in reward for his obedience to his Lord and implementation of his religion. It spells out every thing he and his people need to know in order to put their faith in practice."[50]

According to Qatādah, the phrase, *clearly spelling out everything'*, means that it gives a detailed outline of what is permissible and what is forbidden. Moreover, the Torah revealed to Moses provides his people with guidance and ensures mercy to them so that they may believe that they will meet their Lord and receive His grace that wards off His punishment.

The same purpose applies to the Book addressed to you. With it you may have

[50] Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-Bayān, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 8, p. 92.

guidance in addition to God's mercy: "*And this is a Book which We have bestowed from on high, a blessed one. Follow it, then, and be conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy.*" (Verse 155)

The Qur'ān is indeed a blessed book, as we have explained in Chapter 11: "*This is a blessed book which We have revealed, confirming what came before it, that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it. Those who believe in the life to come do believe in it, and they are ever-mindful of their prayers.*" (Verse 92) This Book was mentioned there within the context of faith in general. It is mentioned here in a similar statement, but in the context of jurisprudence. People are ordered to follow it, because receiving God's grace is made conditional on such following.

The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān are told that with the revelation of this blessed book spelling out everything most clearly, all arguments and excuses are useless. Now that you have the Qur'ān, you do not need to refer to anything else. It covers all aspects of life. Therefore, they do not need to legislate for any purpose without guidance: "*[It has been given to you] lest you say, 'Only two groups of people before our time have received revelations from on high; and we were unaware of what they learned.' Or lest you say, If a Book had been revealed to us, we would surely have followed its guidance better than they did.' Now then a clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord, and guidance, and grace. Who could be more wicked than he who denies God's revelations and turns away from them in disdain? We shall punish those who turn away from Our revelations in disdain with grave suffering for so turning away.*" (Verses 156-7)

It has been God's will that every messenger was sent to his people, speaking their language. When He willed to send His final message, He sent the last of all prophets, Muĥammad, to all mankind. As His final Messenger, it is only right that he should address all mankind equally.

God forestalls the Arabs' argument should they say that Moses and Jesus were sent to their own people, while they, i.e. the Arabs, were oblivious of what the Jews and the Christians studied in their Books. They might have argued that had they received a book in their own language, addressed to them and providing guidance and warnings, they would have been better guided than the Jews and the Christians. Now this Book has been revealed and given to them by a Messenger from among them, even though he is a Messenger to all mankind. The Book he brings is, in itself, a clear proof of its truth. It gives them some very clear, unambiguous and unequivocal information. It provides them with guidance out of the error in which they live, and ensures God's grace will be bestowed on them in this life as well as in the life to come.

Bearing all this in mind, who could be more in the wrong than one who denies God's revelations and turns his back on them when they show him the way to

goodness and success? Who is more unjust to himself and to mankind by denying himself and others all these blessings, and by spreading corruption on earth through upholding ignorant concepts and laws? Those who turn away from the truth have a malignant nature, just like the disease that affects a camel's hoof, causing it to become lop-sided. They are lop-sided in the sense that they cannot maintain a straight path to the truth. Their attitude qualifies them for the worst punishment: *"We shall punish those who turn away from Our revelations in disdain with grave suffering for so turning away."* (Verse 157)

The Qur'ān uses this particular expression, borrowed from a physical condition to describe a mental one, so that the original sense imparts an added connotation. This is frequently employed in the Qur'ān. It describes an arrogant person as one who `turns his cheek away from people' (31: 18). This is borrowed from the image of a disease affecting camels and humans, giving them a stiff neck, so that they lift their cheeks and turn them away. It also describes the useless deeds of the unbelievers as swelling and coming to nothing, giving an image of a camel grazing in a poisoned area. Its belly swells then it dies. In all this, the physical image is used to describe a mental situation in a highly vivid and inspiring manner.

Further Warnings

More warnings are added to answer their demands for physical miracles in order to believe in God's revelations. Similar warnings were given earlier in the *sūrah* where it addressed their denial of the faith altogether. Here the warnings are in relation to their denial of God's law and the need to implement it in life. Earlier in the *sūrah* we read: *"They say: 'Why has not an angel been sent down to him?' If We had sent down an angel, all would have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further respite."* (Verse 8) Here, at the end of the *sūrah,* the matter is clearly explained: *"Are they waiting for the angels to come to them, or for your Lord [Himself], or certain of your Lord's signs to appear? On the day when certain of your Lord's signs do appear, believing will be of no avail to any human being who did not believe before, or who did not put its faith to good uses. Say: Wait if you will; we too are waiting."* (Verse 158)

This is a very clear and decisive warning. It has always been God's law that should a miracle been given and the unbelievers continue to reject the truth, they will inevitably be destroyed. Here, God tells them in plain terms that if only some of the signs they ask for were shown to them, they would be destroyed thereafter should they continue to disbelieve. They are further told that when some of God's signs are shown, they spell the end that renders all subsequent actions futile. Accepting the faith should come before this, and should be translated into practical action. Good action is always associated with true faith, as it is, in the Islamic view, the practical

translation of faith.

A number of reports suggest that what is meant by the phrase, *'when certain of your Lord's signs do appear',* (Verse 158), is certain signs of the Day of Judgement, the appearance of which renders the acceptance of the faith and doing good works of no avail. Some scholars even mention some particular signs of the Day of Judgement. However, it is better to interpret this verse according to God's law that operates in this life. A similar warning was given earlier in the *sūrah: "They say: 'Why has not an angel been sent down to him?' If We had sent down an angel, all would have been decided, and they would have been allowed no further respite."* (Verse 8)

It should be noted that the *sūrah* repeats what it has said within the context of faith and belief when it speaks about God's sovereignty and law. This is clearly seen and intentionally used to emphasize a particular fact. Hence, it is better to interpret the statements that occur here at

the end of the *sūrah* in the same light as those which occur at its beginning, reading them as referring to the laws of nature God has set in operation. This is sufficient to understand the Qur'ānic statements without having to resort to something that we cannot fathom because it is beyond the reach of our perception.

Only One of a Kind

At this point the *sūrah* addresses God's Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), singling him out with his faith, law, way of life and operational mode. His faith is different from all creeds and religions known to mankind, including the erring ways of the Arab idolaters: *"As for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, you certainly have nothing to do with them. Their case rests with God. In time He will tell them the truth of what they were doing."* (Verse 159)

This is the parting point between God's Messenger and his faith on the one hand and all other doctrines and creeds on the other. In the latter group we may include the idolaters who were divided into groups, sects, tribes and clans on the basis of the myths, traditions and disputes of *jāhiliyyah,* the Christians and Jews with their unending disputes and rivalries which break them into quarrelling blocs and states, as well as other creeds, ideologies, theories, and regimes that may surface at any time until the Day of Judgement.

God's Messenger has nothing to do with any of these. His faith is Islam, his law is God's book and his way of life is unique and independent. The Islamic faith cannot mix with any sort of belief or ideology; its law and system cannot merge with other systems and theories. No legal system or regime can carry a dual status of being Islamic and something else at the same time. Islam is independent of all creeds and

colours; its legal, social, political and economic systems are clearly Islamic and have no other description. The Prophet has nothing to do with any other situation or condition at any time.

When a Muslim is faced with any faith other than Islam, his attitude to it is that of outright rejection. The same applies to any regime or situation where sovereignty is not acknowledged to God alone; or, in other words, where Godhead and Lordship are not recognized as belonging only to God. A Muslim takes a clear stand at the outset, rejecting all these creeds before trying to identify any similarities or conflict between them and Islam. According to God's standard, true religion is that of self-surrender to Him alone. The Prophet has nothing to do with anything produced by those who differed over their faith and did not establish their attitudes on the principle of self-surrender to God.

In God's sight, religion incorporates a law and a way of life. And God's Messenger has nothing to do with anyone who adopts a law and a way of life other than those approved by God. The question is viewed in its totality, without pausing to look at different details.

As for those who have split into groups over their faith, and about whom God has declared that His Messenger will have nothing to do with them, they will be judged by God, and then they will have to account for all their deeds: *"Their case rests with God. In time He will tell them the truth of what they were doing."* (Verse 159)

As accountability and reward are mentioned here, God states what mercy He has committed Himself to show to His servants. He will reward every good deed done by a believer ten times its value. It is a condition that such a good deed is done by a believer, because with rejection of faith no deed remains good. On the other hand, a person who does a bad deed is requited with its like only. God will never be unjust to anyone or stint his or her reward: *"Whoever does a good deed shall be credited with ten times as much; and whoever does an evil deed will be requited with no more than its like. None shall be wronged."* (Verse 160)

A Heart-Felt Appeal

At the end of the *sūrah* with its long discourse on legislation and sovereignty we have a devotional glorification of God which carries with it a pleasant rhythm and a decisive verdict. The beat is repeated in each verse as it starts with the same word, *'Say'*. Each verse touches the heart, where the core of oneness lies: the oneness of the creed, goal, Lord and worship. It also provides a total look at the universe and its laws: *"Say: 'My Lord has guided me to a straight way, to an ever-true faith; the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who associate partners with God'. Say: 'My prayers, my worship, my living and my dying are for God alone, the*

Lord of all the worlds. He has no partner. Thus have I been commanded, and I shall be the first of those who surrender themselves to Him.' Say: 'Am I, then, to seek a lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things? Whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone. No one shall be made to bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return; and then He will tell you the truth of all that over which you were in dispute. He it is who has made you inherit the earth and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you. For certain, your Lord is swift in retribution; yet, He is indeed much- forgiving, merciful." (Verses 161-5)

This long and final comment, together with the opening of the *sūrah,* plays a fascinating, perfectly harmonious tune. Yet it is a comment which concludes the discourse on animal slaughtering, offerings, agricultural produce and all the regulations alleged by the people of ignorance to be laid down by God. All that they say is a shameless lie. So, what do we make of this comment? In fact we do not need to make any further explanation after all that we have already said on the subject.

"Say: 'My Lord has guided me to a straight way, to an ever-true faith; the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who associate partners with God.'" (Verse 161) This declaration expresses gratitude and trust, and overflows with certainty. We see the certainty in both the verbal expression in worship and its mental effect. The trust is derived from the bond with the Lord who guides and takes care of His servants. The gratitude is felt for being guided to a straight way that is free of diversion and crookedness. This straight way is the `ever true faith' of Abraham, the father of this community who submitted himself to God in total devotion: *"the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who associate partners with God."* (Verse 161)

"Say: 'My prayers, my worship, my living and my dying are for God alone, the Lord of all the worlds. He has no partner. Thus have I been commanded, and I shall be the first of those who surrender themselves to Him.'" (Verses 162-3) This expresses complete dedication, with every pulse and every life movement. It is a form of glorification of God and submission to Him in the most absolute of terms: it combines obligatory and voluntary prayer, life and death. All is dedicated to God alone, the Lord of all the worlds, who controls and sustains them all and conducts and determines all their affairs. It is the sort of submission to God that leaves out nothing within oneself, one's conscience or in life, without dedicating it totally to God. *"Thus have I been commanded"*, and I understood and obeyed, and *"I shall be the first of those who surrender themselves to Him."* (Verse 163)

"Say: 'Am I, then, to seek a lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things? Whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone. No one shall be made to bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return; and then He will tell

you the truth of all that over which you were in dispute." (Verse 164) This is a word that encompasses all the heavens and earth as well as all that is in or on them, every creature known or unknown to man, everything to be done or to take place in public or private. It puts them all under the umbrella of God's Lordship of everything in the universe. They must all submit to God's absolute sovereignty in faith, worship and law.

This verse asks rhetorically and in amazement: "*Am I, then, to seek a lord other than God, when He is the Lord of all things?"* (Verse 164) Am I to seek a lord other than God to be my master who conducts my affairs and determines my course in life, when I am accountable to God for my intentions and actions, and will be rewarded for whatever obedience or disobedience to God I do? Am I to seek a lord other than God when this whole universe is in His hand, and both you and I are sustained by Him?

Am I to seek a lord other than God when everyone will be requited for his or her sins? No one shall bear responsibility for anyone else's actions. "*Whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone. No one shall be made to bear the burden of another."* (Verse 164) Am I to seek a lord other than God when to Him you must all return and face His reckoning of all that over which you are in dispute?

Am I to seek a lord other than God when it is He who has placed human beings on earth to inherit it, and placed some of them above others in their mental and physical abilities and in the provisions they receive. He does all this to test them, so that they may prove whether they are grateful or ungrateful to Him.

Am I to seek a lord other than God when He is swift in retribution, and He is the One who grants grace and forgiveness to all those who repent of their misdeeds? Am I to seek a lord other than God so as to replace his law, orders and rulings for those of God, when I have all these indications, inspirations and evidence pointing to the truth of God being the only Lord of the universe?

As we have said, these verses are a devotional prayer and a glorification of God's oneness, reflecting the splendid image of pure faith as God's Messenger (peace be upon him) feels it in his heart. It is an image the splendour of which cannot be expressed in human terms. Only the Qur'ān, God's own word, can express it fully in its unique style.

And as we have said, this last beat in the *sūrah* addressing the question of sovereignty and legislation is in full harmony with the early part of the *sūrah* where the issue addressed was that of faith. We see this clearly in verses like these: "*Say: 'Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who gives nourishment to all and Himself needs none?' Say: 'I am commanded to be the first of those who surrender themselves to God, and not to be among those who associate partners with Him.' Say: 'Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an*

awesome day. He who is spared that shall have received His grace. This will be a manifest triumph.'" (Verses 14-16)

A Final Word

We do not need to repeat here what we have said time and again about the significance of such pairs of thoughts, expressions and rhythms that occur in both the early and later parts of the *sūrah.* They are simply different facets of the same truth, reflected at one time as a belief and faith, and at another as a code of living.

Now that the *sūrah* is completed, if we look back at its great dimensions, the wide range it covers and the profound depths it goes into, we are overwhelmed. It all takes a small number of pages, 165 verses and a limited number of clauses and sentences. Had this space been used by a human being, it would not have covered one-hundredth of this great panorama of scenes, truths, inspirations and indications, let alone the sublime level it attains and the superb expression it uses.

The *sūrah* has taken us on a fascinating and breathtaking journey, to look at the great truths of existence. It is a journey that covers the major and fundamental Islamic concepts.

It portrays the truth of Godhead in all its awesome glory, majesty, splendour and beauty. It holds in front of our eyes the truths of the universe, life and what lies beyond life which we cannot perceive with our limited faculties. It shows us the truth of God's will and how it initiates and obliterates, gives life and causes death, and runs the universe and all living things. It reflects the truth of the human soul: its depths, apparent and hidden pathways, desires and leanings, the guidance it follows and the errors it commits, how it reacts to the whispers of evil humans and *jinn,* as well as how it is led along the right or wrong way.

It portrays scenes of the Day of Judgement, the gathering of all creatures, their moments of great distress and moments of hope and happiness. It gives us scenes of human history on earth, and shots of the history of life and the universe.

The panorama it shows us is vast and extensive. We cannot sum it up in words. It can only be seen through the *sūrah* itself, with its surpassing excellence and inimitable style of expression. No wonder it is part of this blessed book.

All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

> *He it is who has made you inherit the earth and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you. For certain, your Lord is swift in retribution; yet, He is indeed much forgiving, merciful."* (Verse 165)

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol VI

Sūrah 7

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Al-A'rāf **1**

Prologue *1*
Mankind's Long Journey 2
Telling a Story to Face Reality 4
On the Starting Line 6
The Ultimate Finish 7
One Message and Many Messengers 8
Between Moses and Pharaoh 9
The Central Issue 11
Sealed Hearts, Closed Minds 14
Drawing the Lines 15

1 The Purpose of the Divine Message *18*
Issues Spelt Out 20
A Revelation to Admonish Believers 23
A Sudden Inflection of Punishment 26

2 The Start of Human Life *30*
Overview 32
The Start of Human Life on Earth 34
Three Different Natures 37
Temptation of the Forbidden Tree 40
The Fall from Heaven 42
Full Harmony in the System of Creation 44
Man's Honour and Role 47
The Battle Rages On 49

3 Man's Finest Garment *53*
Overview 54
A Warning to Be Always Heeded 57
When the Enemy is the Protector 59
Forbidding What Is Lawful 62
Distortion of Concepts and Values 65

4 Much Pleading, Little Use *69*
Preview 72
To Testify Against Oneself 75
A Scene in Contrast 78
Dialogue Across the Divide 79
The Heights 80

5 To Whom All Authority Belongs *83*
Preview 84
A Clear Concept of God 85
Calling on God with Fear and Hope 88
Bringing the Dead Back to Life 89

6 The Qur'ānic Approach to Faith *93*
Preview 99
Fallacy in the Study of Comparative Religion 101
Putting Human Life Back on the Right Course 105

Noah Rejected by Blind People 106
When All Argument Is Futile 109
Most Flagrant Defiance 112
Taking the Lead in Perversion 115
Maintaining Justice in All Transactions 118
No Retreat Contemplated 121
The Meaning of True Submission 123
No Sorrow for Unbelievers' Fate 125

7 Lessons to Learn *128*
Preview 129
Trials of Adversity 130
A Sure Way to Receive God's Blessings 133
A False Sense of Security 136
A History Recorded by God 138

8 A Confrontation with Pharaoh *140*
Preview 145
As the Story Begins 146
The Truth, the Whole Truth 147
Confrontation and Mobilization 150
Squaring Up to Sorcery and Falsehood 152
No Permission to Believe in God 154
A Decisive Victory 156
What Constitutes Corruption 157
How the Truth Unnerves Tyrants 159
To Whom the Future Belongs 160
Who Brings Bad Omen 162
The Promises of Unbelievers 165
Wreaking Vengeance on Hardened Unbelievers 167

9 Relapse into a State of Ignorance *170*
Preview 177
Trampling Over God's Favours 179
An Appointment with the Supreme Lord 182
A Request to See the Lord 183
A Serious Approach to Divine Law 185
A Deliberately Wrong Choice 187
Miserable Return to Old Ways 189
A Sad Return for Moses 191
A Fitting Judgement 192
The Seventy Chosen Israelites 194
The Recipients of God's Mercy 196
God's Messenger to All Mankind 198
Straying Away from God's Commandments 201
Response to God's Care 202
Temptation Overcomes Willpower 203
Abundant Grace, Swift Punishment 206
A Strong Motivation for Believers 208
Unfailing Reward 211

10 Bearing Witness *213*
Preview 217
A Scene to Defy All Imagination 218
A Pledge Given by Human Nature 221
An Analogy to Leave Everyone Speechless 224
The Example and Its Application 225
Losers by Choice 228
Sealing All Means of Perception 231

A Community with a Well Defined Purpose 233
Points for Reflection 235
Reflect and Consider 238
A Question That Needs No Answer 240
The Hour That Will Come to Pass 242
All Created From One Soul 245
Sophisticated Paganism 247
A Call Foolishly Turned Down 250
Patronage That Never Fails 252

11 The Road to Mercy *255*
Preview 256
When and Where to Seek Refuge 257
The Means for Clear Insight 259
The Undeniable Appeal of the Qur'ān 261
Mercy Through Listening to the Qur'ān 264
Staying Permanently Close to God 266

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 7
Al-A‘rāf
(The Heights)

Prologue[1]

Like the preceding *sūrah,* al-An`ām, or Cattle, this *sūrah*[2] was revealed in Makkah. Hence, its main subject matter is faith, which runs throughout Makkan revelations. But the two domains in which these two *sūrahs* work are widely different.

Every *sūrah* of the Qur’ān has its unique character and distinctive features. It adopts a special approach, uses a particular style and allows itself a specialized area in explaining its theme, making it clearly understood. All Qur’ānic *sūrahs* have a common theme and share in a common objective. Each, however, has its special characteristics and unique approach. They are similar, in this respect, to human beings who all share the same characteristics and biological and physiological constitution. Apart from that, they exhibit an endless range of variety. We may see similarities between them in certain details, but we find each of them making a special pattern of his or her own which would have made him or her absolutely unique, had it not been for common human qualities and characteristics.

I have reflected on, and dealt with, the Qur’ānic *sūrahs* in this light, after having ‘lived’ with them and recited them over a very long period of time. I have thus been able to identify the distinctive characteristics of each. As a result, I find in the Qur’ānic *sūrahs* a great variety resulting from different patterns, a friendliness which can be attributed to the close personal approach, and an enjoyment that is ever renewed. All of these *sūrahs* are friends imparting an air of friendliness, love and

[1] This prologue is an amalgamation of the two Introductions the author gives: the first at the beginning of the *sūrah,* and the second at the start of *Sūrah7.* The Arabic edition is arranged on the basis of what is known as the *ajzā’* of the Qur’ān, dividing God’s book into 30 parts of equal length. Many of these begin in the middle of a *sūrah.* In the English edition, we have followed the given division into *sūrahs* of different lengths, because every *sūrah* is a unit on its own. (Editor’s note.)

[2] In Arabic, this *sūrah* is given the title, al-A`rāf, which most translators render as The Heights. However, the name also connotes `understanding, or discernment’ — Editor’s note.

enjoyment. Each gives you a different set of inspirations to impress on you its uniqueness. To take a journey with a *sūrah* from beginning to end involves looking at a great many worlds, contemplating a large number of facts and truisms, and delving into the depths of the human soul as well as contemplating the great scenes of the universe. However, each is a special journey that is bound to give you something unique.

Mankind's Long Journey

As has already been said, the subject matter of both this *sūrah* and the preceding one is faith. However, the preceding *Sūrah,* Cattle or al-An`ām, outlines the nature and essence of faith. It confronts the *jāhiliyyah,* or the state of ignorance which prevailed in Arabia at the time, as well as every type of *jāhiliyyah,* in any community, with the attitude of a person who knows the truth and advocates it. In this confrontation, the *sūrah* makes use of all inspiring indicators available all around us in the universe. These have already been discussed in detail.[3]

On the other hand, the present *sūrah* adopts a totally different approach as it discusses the same question of faith. It provides for it with the panoramic setting of human history. It starts with mankind's journey as it begins in heaven and where it aims to return. Along this great expanse, we see the procession of faith starting with the Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) to the last of all prophets and messengers, Muhammad (peace be upon him). The procession holds the banner of faith and advocates, throughout human history, that the only way to human happiness is for people to adopt the faith based on God's oneness. The *sūrah* outlines what reception this call received in different periods of history; how the leaders of this procession put the message across to mankind, and the responses they received; how the people in power went about conducting their campaigns of opposition and how the procession of believers brushed them aside and went along its way. This *sūrah* also portrays the fate that befell opponents of faith in this life and the different destinies in the hereafter of both believers and unbelievers.

It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* takes us along, stage by stage, making a stop at every landmark to indicate that the road is clearly demarcated with well-known starting and finishing lines. All mankind travels along, aiming to return to the point where it started, in heaven, with the Supreme society.

Mankind began at the starting point with two individuals, Adam and Eve, the first human beings on earth. Satan also started along with them, having been granted God's permission to try to lead them and their offspring astray. At the same time,

[3] See the Prologue to *Sūrah* 6 in Vol. V, pp. 1-27.

Adam and Eve are bound with a covenant with God that applies to their offspring as well. They are given a measure of choice so that they can either fulfil their covenant with God with strong resolve or lean towards Satan, their enemy who drove their parents away from heaven. They either listen to the revelations conveyed to them by the noble group of messengers God sends them, or they listen to Satan's temptation who mobilizes all his power to undermine their position.

Thus, man's march starts with his Lord, before he descends to earth. Here on earth, every human being is supposed to work hard, repair or undermine, build or destroy, compete, fight, and, in general, play his or her part in the toil which no human being can escape. Humanity then returns to its Lord who had set it on its journey. Each individual returns carrying what they have earned on their trip, be it bright or shameful, precious or cheap, good or evil. It is the end of the day at the dawn of which humanity started its march.

As it comes towards the end, we see that humanity carrying a very heavy burden that bends its back. When it arrives at the finishing line, all human beings put their loads on the scales, with a sense of worry, apprehension and expectation. Everyone comes alone, without support. If the burden is too heavy and help is needed in its carriage, no such help is to be found. Everyone receives his or her results on his or her own and realizes what prospect that result signifies for him or her. The *sūrah,* however, continues to follow one group or community of mankind after another, until the doors are closed after the last human beings have completed their journey. They have returned to discover whether their end is in heaven or in hell. After all, on earth they were only visitors and their time there now is up: *"As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return: some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable. For, they will have taken Satans for their protectors in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path."* (Verses 29-30)

In between the stages of this journey, with humanity going forward or suffering setbacks, the battle between truth and falsehood is portrayed. The fighters include messengers and believers on the one side and arrogant tyrants and their subjugated followers on the other. Of these the *sūrah* portrays similar scenes and similar destinies. The images portrayed show the faithful in a clearly relaxed and highly inspiring situation, while the images of Satans and unbelievers are gloomy, particularly when they show the destruction of certain groups of unbelievers. These are given in the *sūrah* as a reminder to present and future generations.

At the end of each stage we have a suitably placed pause. It is as if the *sūrah* stops to say a couple of words by way of comment, just as a reminder to future generations, before it continues with its message.

This is the story of mankind representing the march of this faith, right from the beginning of human history, and outlining the results it achieves in its endless endeavour. It finally arrives at the finishing line, which was also the starting point. Thus, in presenting the great issue of faith, this *sūrah* moves along a totally different route to that followed by the preceding *Sūrah,* Cattle, or al-An`ām. The two converge at certain points when they present scenes of how unbelievers receive God's messages, scenes of the Day of Judgement, and others of the universe. However, the methods of image painting used in the two *sūrahs* are completely different.

A few words need to be said about the style employed in both *sūrahs.* In the preceding *Sūrah,* al-An`ām, the style moves in successive waves sometimes presenting an impression of glitter, accompanied by a powerful rhythm that at times reaches a very high pace. In this *sūrah,* the approach is much slower and calmer with a reassuring rhythm that is deliberate and weighted. It is similar to that of one who, with melodious voice, drives a caravan along, step by step, and stage by stage. At times the rhythm is given extra pace, particularly when it comments on certain events, but it soon returns to its original slow lilt. The two *sūrahs* still belong to the same period, for both were revealed in Makkah before the Prophet's migration to Madinah.

Telling a Story to Face Reality

The *sūrah* does not present the history of faith or the journey of mankind from its first origins to its ultimate return in story fashion. Rather, it presents it as a battle with *jāhiliyyah,* the state of ignorance that affects individuals and communities. Hence, its theme is presented in scenes and attitudes, showing us a living community standing in opposition to the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān, therefore, confronts that community with this long story, pointing out the lessons to be drawn from it, reminding and warning people, and engaging them in a real battle. Hence, the comments given after every important stage are addressed in the first instance to those first combatants, as also to all people who adopt the same attitude to faith in every future generation.

The Qur'ān relates a story only to use it as a means of dealing with an existing situation. It only states a truth in order to remove a falsehood. It takes practical measures within a living environment. It neither makes a premise for academic purposes, nor relates a story for intellectual pleasure.

In this *sūrah* we note that, in its comments, it lays special emphasis on reminders and warnings on the one hand, and on the starting and finishing lines in the human journey on the other. It gives accounts of the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Lot and Shu`ayb, but treats the history of Moses at much greater length and with stronger

emphasis.

In this Prologue, we can only give brief examples of the points of emphasis in the *sūrah.* It opens in the following manner: "*Alif. Lām. Mīm. Ṣād. This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers. Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord, and follow no masters other than Him. How seldom do you keep this in mind.*" (Verses 1-3) Thus, right from the outset, it takes the form of an address to the Prophet and to the people to whom he directs his efforts, equipped with the Qur'ān. All that is subsequently presented in the *sūrah,* including the historical accounts of past communities, the long human journey and its final destination, the scenes portrayed of the universe and the Day of Judgement, is an indirect address, though it takes at times a direct stance, to the Prophet and his people, serving as a warning and a reminder.

The statement addressed to the Prophet, "*This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it,*" describes a practical situation which is only appreciated by one who lives in a state of *jāhiliyyah* and advocates Islam, knowing that his goal is hard and his way full of difficult obstacles. What he aims to achieve is to establish a faith that provides a new set of standards and values, and a social set-up that differs with what exists anywhere in the world. But he encounters *jāhiliyyah* with its lingering concepts, values and standards exercising enormous pressures on people's minds, souls, feelings and social practices. He then discovers that the truth he is advocating sounds strange, objectionable, too demanding, because it seeks a total change in people's ideas, values, laws, traditions, bonds and social relations. Hence, he finds himself reluctant to confront people with this truth and its heavy demands. This reluctance creates that doubt which God tells His Messenger not to entertain. Instead, he should go ahead, warning and reminding, caring little for whatever he meets with of people's surprise, objection, opposition and even active resistance.

Taking into consideration all such objection, opposition, resistance and active hostility to the change faith wants to bring about in human life, the *sūrah* then delivers an early and strong warning. It reminds the addressees of the fate of earlier communities, before it begins to give detailed historical accounts of such communities: "*How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting. And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: `We have indeed been wrongdoers.' We shall most certainly question those to whom a message was sent, and We shall most certainly question the messengers themselves. And most certainly We shall reveal to them Our knowledge [of what they have done]; for never have We been absent. On that day, the weighing will be true and accurate: and those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance are the ones who*

are successful; whereas those whose weight is light in the balance are the ones who have lost their own souls because of their wilful rejection of Our revelations." (Verses 4-9)

Having made this introduction, the *sūrah* talks of how mankind has been given power on earth. It is God who has established rules and balances in the universe allowing human life to continue and flourish on earth. He has also given man certain qualities that fit with the universe and which enable man to understand universal laws and phenomena and to utilize them for his benefit: *"We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 10)

On the Starting Line

All this is preliminary to giving an account of how human life came into being, showing its starting point and where it began its long journey. The *sūrah* concentrates on this point. It also uses it by way of reminder and warning, utilizing every element that strikes a strong note in human consciousness. (Verses 11-25)

In this starting point scene, the entire outcome of the journey and the destinies of the travellers are outlined. We see the making of the great fight, which continues with no respite, between all mankind and their declared enemy. We also see man's weaknesses and how Satan tries to exploit these. Therefore, the *sūrah* uses this scene to provide long comments, warning human beings against falling into the same trap set for their first parents by their avowed enemy. Also, in the light of this scene in which we see Satan standing face to face with Adam and Eve, and the results of this first encounter, the *sūrah* addresses its reminders to all mankind, warning people against heading to the same fate.

> *Children of Adam, We have sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness, and garments pleasing to the eye; but the robe of God- consciousness is the finest of all. In this there is a sign from God, so that they may reflect. Children of Adam, do not allow Satan to seduce you in the same way as he caused your [first] parents to be turned out of the Garden. He stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness. Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them. We have made the devils as patrons for those who do not believe. (Verses 26-27) Children of Adam! Whenever there come to you messengers from among yourselves to relate to you My revelations, then those who are conscious of Me and live righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who deny and scorn Our revelations are the ones destined for the fire, where they shall abide. (Verses 35-36)*

We note how the scene of nakedness, as a result of disobedience to God, and Adam and Eve's attempt to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden, is followed by a reminder of God's blessing of fine clothing. People are warned that

they must not allow Satan to tempt them to uncover themselves as he did with their first parents. We also note that this part of the story and the comments given after it addressed a practical situation in the idolatrous Arabian society. Influenced by certain deviant traditions and myth, some Arabs used to do their *ṭawāf* around the Ka`bah naked. They prohibited themselves certain types of clothes and food during the pilgrimage period, alleging that this was all part of God's law, and that it was God who enforced such prohibitions. Hence, in this story of mankind and the accompanying comments we find suitable answers to this practical situation in Arabian *jāhiliyyah,* and indeed in every state *of jāhiliyyah.* A common feature of all states *of jāhiliyyah* is to undress, lose one's sense of modesty and to have no fear of God.

This points to an important feature of the Qur'ānic approach. Even when the Qur'ān employs a story, it only does so to deal with an existing situation. Since it always deals with a different situation, the portions of the story related each time are those which fit with the particular situation the Qur'ān is addressing, giving it the sort of emphasis that draws the lesson required. As we said in the Prologue to the preceding *sūrah,*[4] the Qur'ānic approach does not include anything that is not needed to address an existing situation. It does not store information, rulings, or even stories, so that they may be used when the need arises.

The Ultimate Finish

Before the travellers set out on their long journey; before God's messenger provides them with guidance; before giving any details of the history of faith after Adam and Eve and their first experience; the *sūrah* provides a scene of the ultimate end of the entire journey. This method is often used in the Qur'ān: the two ends of the journey are set in contrast, in the life of this world and in the life to come, showing it to be one uninterrupted trek.

Here we have one of the richest and most detailed scenes of the Day of Resurrection given in the Qur'ān. The scene portrays a long succession of images and gives details of dialogues that take place then. This scene, occurring as it does immediately after man's fall from heaven and God's warning to mankind against listening to Satan's promptings, serves as a confirmation of what God's messengers have said to their peoples. Thus, those who obey Satan and do his bidding are forbidden admission into heaven, just like their first parents who were turned out of heaven by Satan. By contrast, those who obey God and turn their backs on Satan are returned to heaven after their long journey. The scene is too long to be quoted here in the Prologue but we will be discussing it in detail at its appropriate place.

[4] Vol. V, pp. 1-25.

Nonetheless, the *sūrah* also uses this scene to warn those who disbelieve in the Qur'ān, requiring miracles so that they can accept that it is God's word. It warns them against a greatly miserable end. (Verses 52-53)

After showing this long trip, from first creation to resurrection, the *sūrah* pauses for comments, stating the nature of Godhead and Lordship in the universe with breathtaking scenes. This is all in line with the Qur'ānic method of using the universe as a field in which the truth of Godhead appears in full view, producing its great inspiration to any human heart that warms to it. The aim of this portrayal of universal scenes is to present the central issue of faith, namely that the entire universe submits to, and worships God alone, its only Lord. It behoves man not to be the only jarring note in the superb symphony of faith played by the universe. He must not be the only creature to disclaim himself a servant of God, the overall Lord of the universe, the Lord of all the worlds. (Verses 54-58)

One Message and Many Messengers

So the journey continues and the story unfolds. The long line of noble advocates of faith, formed by God's messengers, call out with compassion to erring mankind, reminding them of the truth and warning them against following a course that is certain to lead to ruin. But those who are deep in error confront this compassionate address with rejection at first and later with force, persecution and tyranny. When God's messengers have fulfilled their duties of reminding and warning, standing up to opposition and persecution by their peoples, ultimately moving away and declaring their allegiance to faith, God Himself takes over the conduct of the fight.

The *sūrah* gives accounts of the prophets Noah, Had, Ṣāliĥ, Lot and Shu`ayb with their respective communities. They all present one never-changing truth: *"My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him."* (Verses 59, 65, 73, 85) Their peoples argued with them, rejecting the very concept of God's oneness and His being the only Lord in the universe. They also wondered about God sending human messengers. Some of them argued that religion had nothing to do with people's lives or with the regulation of financial and business transactions. This is echoed by some people in today's *jāhiliyyah,* despite the passage of many centuries. They describe their old, ignorant and futile argument as `liberalism,' and `progress'. At the end of each account, the *sūrah* shows the fate of those who rejected God's message.

When we look carefully at the way these stories are presented, we cannot fail to note that all messengers said the same words to their communities: *"My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him."* Every messenger presents this central truth to his people in the manner of a caring and honest adviser who fears for his people the inevitable doom of which they remain oblivious. None of these

communities appreciated the advice given by their messenger. None thought about their fate. None recognized the profound sincerity of their messenger, nor of his having no personal interest in the matter.

At this point we may refer to the first account of the Prophet Noah (Verses 59-64) and the last one referring to the Prophet Shu`ayb (Verses 85-93). These two show the truth of the single faith which all God's messengers preached, each to his own people. All received the same rejection by people in power and their weak followers. In each account we cannot fail to note the clarity and power of faith in the hearts of the messenger and the believers who follow him, or the messenger's keen desire to guide his people to the truth, or his taking a stand away from them after having completed his mission.

At this point the *sūrah* pauses for comment. It outlines God's law of dealing with people who receive a message from Him but who continue to deny the truth. He tests them first with tribulation and hardship so that they may be alerted to the truth and respond to it. If they continue in their rejection, then He tries them with affluence, which is an even harder test. Thus, they may be confused and mistake God's law. Ultimately, He takes them suddenly, when they are totally unaware. When this law has been outlined, they are strongly alerted to the danger engulfing them. How could they be sure that God's law is not about to strike them while they remain heedless? Should they not reflect on the fate of earlier generations when they are living in the old dwellings of those past communities? (Verses 94-102)

Between Moses and Pharaoh

The *sūrah* then moves on to relate the story of Moses, giving first an account of the events that took place between Moses and Pharaoh, before it gives a detailed account of the struggle Moses had to undertake against his own people, the Children of Israel. The history of Moses related in this *sūrah* is the longest and most detailed of any account given of it in any other *sūrah*. It should be remembered that certain episodes of the story of Moses are given in many places in the Qur'ān, in addition to brief references to it in several other *sūrahs*. It is the story mentioned most frequently in the Qur'ān. The great details of the history of this particular nation are perhaps given in the Qur'ān for the reasons we have already outlined. Let us remind ourselves of these purposes here:

One purpose relates to the fact that the Children of Israel were the first to confront the Islamic message with wicked designs, plots and open warfare both in Madinah and the whole of Arabia. Their hostile attitude could be traced back to the very early days of the Islamic message. It was they who encouraged and nurtured hypocrisy and the hypocrites in Madinah, providing them with the means to scheme against

Islam and the Muslims. They also incited the pagan Arabs to fight the Muslim community and gave them their active support. It was they who started the war of false rumours against the Muslim community raising among them doubts and suspicions about the Muslim leadership and circulating distortions of the Islamic faith before they confronted the Muslim community in open warfare. It was necessary, therefore, to expose them to the Muslim community so that it knew its enemies: their nature, history, methods and means as well as the nature of the battle it had to fight against them.

Another purpose can be seen in the fact that the Israelites were the followers of a Divine faith revealed before the final faith of Islam. They had a long history before Islam, during which distortions crept into their faith and they repeatedly violated their agreement and covenant with God. The practical consequences of these violations and deviations were seen in their lives, their moral values and their traditions. As the Muslim nation is the heir to all divine messages and the custodian of the monotheistic divine faith as a whole, it is necessary that it be made fully aware of the history of the Israelites with all its ups and downs. This gave the Muslim community an accurate knowledge of the way it should follow, what slips lay ahead of it and the consequences of such slips, as these are reflected in the history and morality of the Jews. This enabled the Muslim community to add the experience of the Jews to the total sum of its own experience and to benefit by it in future. It could, thus, avoid the slips and deal effectively with deviation right at the start before it had a chance to develop.

Yet another purpose relates to the fact that over their long history the experience of the Jews was highly varied. God is aware that with the passage of time, people may change, and certain generations may deviate from the right path. As the Muslim nation will continue until the end of life, it is bound to go through certain periods which are not dissimilar to what the Jews have gone through. God has, therefore, chosen to make available to the leaders of the Muslim community and its reformers in different generations, clear examples of what could befall nations so that they may be able to diagnose the disease of their particular generation and administer the proper cure. It is a fact of life that those who deviate after having known the truth are the most resistant to calls and appeals to follow right guidance. Those without any prior knowledge of the truth are more responsive because they find something new which appeals to them and helps them shake off the burden of ignorance. They are most impressed by the first call that makes its appeal to them. Winning over those with an earlier experience requires a much more strenuous effort and a great deal of perseverance on the part of advocates of the Divine faith.[5]

Certain episodes in the history of Moses and the Children of Israel are discussed in

[5] Vol. IV, pp. 59-61.

this commentary on the Qur'ān,[6] which is arranged according to the final order of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs,* and not the chronological order of their revelation. In looking at the order of revelation, however, we should point out that the parts of the story given in this *sūrah* were revealed earlier than those given in *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, such as *Sūrahs* 2, 3 and 5, discussed in volumes 1, 2 and 4 respectively. This is evident in the way the story is told here and in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah. Here it is related like a story, while there it confronts the Jews in Madinah, reminding them of its events and the attitudes of their ancestors to each event.

The story is told in more than 30 places in the Qur'ān, but it is given in detail in ten *sūrahs,* six of which are more detailed than the others. The parts revealed in this *sūrah* represent the first detailed account, making the longest exposition. However, the episodes related here are less than those in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā.

In the present *sūrah,* the story begins with Moses presenting his message to Pharaoh and his people. In *Sūrah* 20, it begins with Moses receiving his Lord's call by Mount Sinai, while in *Sūrah* 28, The Story, or al-Qaşaş, it starts with the birth of Moses during the time when the Children of Israel were exposed to persecution. In perfect harmony with the general ambience of the *sūrah* and its objectives, the story opens by drawing attention to the fate suffered by Pharaoh and his people as a result of their rejection of God's message: "*Then after those We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his people, but they wilfully rejected them. Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption.*" (Verse 103) Then the story unfolds, showing scenes of Moses confronting first Pharaoh and his clique, then confronting the deviousness and corruption of the Israelites. As we will be discussing the story in detail in due course, we will only refer here very briefly to its main features and general import.

The Central Issue

Moses (peace be upon him) faces Pharaoh and the chiefs of his people, declaring the fact that he, Moses, is a Messenger of God, the Lord of all the worlds: "*Moses said: 'Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, and may say about God nothing but the truth. I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord. So, let the Children of Israel go with me.'*" (Verses 104-105) The same fact is driven home to Pharaoh when Moses wins the confrontation with Pharaoh's sorcerers and they declare their acceptance of God's oneness: "*The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: `We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.*" (*Ver*ses 120-122) Again when Pharaoh threatens them with severe punishment, they turn to their Lord and declare that they will always turn to Him in life, death and future life: "*They replied: `To our Lord we shall indeed return. You want to take vengeance on us only because*

[6] Volumes I-IV.

we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us. Our Lord, grant us abundance of patience in adversity, and let us die as people who have surrendered themselves to You.'" (Verses 125-126)

As Moses teaches his people their faith, we frequently see him emphasizing to them who their true Lord is. This is the case when Pharaoh threatens them with general persecution, and later when they deviate and ask him to make them a deity like those of the people they came across after their salvation from Pharaoh. (Verses 128-129 and 138-140) Such Qur'ānic statements made within the story confirm the true nature of the religion preached by the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and the sort of beliefs that result from it. These are the same beliefs Islam calls for and which are advocated by every divine message. Moreover, these Qur'ānic statements prove the fallacy of the theories advanced by Western `experts' in the history of religion, and the error of anyone who adopts their method and premise about the development of human faith.

These Qur'ānic statements also show the different sorts of deviation that occurred in Jewish history and the perverted nature of the Israelites, even after Moses was given his message. Examples of this are seen in their request: *"Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have."* (Verse 138); and in their adoption of the calf when Moses went for his appointment with his Lord; and in their demand to see God in order to believe in Him. None of these represents the faith Moses preached. These are deviations which may not be attributed to the faith. The claim that these were part of the Jewish religion which later developed into a monotheistic faith is indeed false.

The confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh illustrates the nature of the battle between the divine faith, in its totality, and *jāhiliyyah,* in all its forms and aspects. It shows how the evil forces look at this faith, feeling the danger it represents to the very existence of these forces. It further shows how believers view the battle between them and tyrannical evil forces.

The *sūrah* reports how Moses said to Pharaoh: *"I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, and may say about God nothing but the truth. I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord. So, let the Children of Israel go with me."* (Verses 104-105) At that very moment, the aim was clear. It is a call to believe in `the Lord of all the worlds', which means that all sovereignty belongs to God alone. It was under this clear principle that Moses demanded the release of the Israelites. Since God is the Lord of all the worlds, then it is not up to any servant of His — the tyrant Pharaoh in this case — to impose his authority over them. They submit only to God. Moreover, the declaration that God is the Lord of all the worlds means that all sovereignty, which is a manifestation of Lordship, belongs to Him alone. It is clearly demonstrated when all creatures submit to Him. Hence, people do not truly acknowledge God's Lordship and sovereignty unless they submit to Him alone. Should they accept anyone else's

sovereignty, implementing his laws, they deny God's Lordship over them.

Pharaoh and his chiefs realized what danger the message declaring God as the Lord of all the worlds represented. They felt that to accept God as the only Lord meant depriving Pharaoh of his authority and, consequently, the loss of their own authority derived from his. They expressed their fear in this way: "*The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: 'This man is indeed a sorcerer of great skill, who wants to drive you out of your land!' [Said Pharaoh] 'What, then, do you advise?'*" (Verses 109-110) "*The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: 'Will you allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and to forsake you and your gods?'*" (Verse 127) What they really meant is that the only import of this call advocating God's Lordship of all the worlds was that all authority is taken away from people and returned to its rightful owner, God Almighty. To them, this was an act of spreading corruption in the land.

Today, in contemporary forms of *jāhiliyyah,* this same call is described as an attempt to overthrow the government. To such regimes which practically exercise God's sovereignty, even though they may not say so verbally, the success of this call means the overthrow of government. In every *jāhiliyyah* system, government means the assignment of Lordship to one of God's servants, enabling him to rule over others. By contrast, acknowledging God's Lordship over all the worlds means that only God is the Lord of mankind.

Then, the sorcerers were overwhelmed by the truth and declared their belief in God, the Lord of all the worlds, freeing themselves from subjugation to Pharaoh. At this point, Pharaoh accused them of scheming to drive the people out of their land, threatening them with the worst type of torture and persecution: "*Pharaoh said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! This is indeed a plot you have contrived in this city in order to drive out its people, but you shall soon come to know [the consequences]. I shall have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and then I shall crucify you all.*" (Verses 123-124)

On the other hand, those sorcerers, who believed in God, submitting to Him alone and declaring their freedom from subjugation by those who usurped God's authority, realized the nature of the battle between them and the tyrannical forces of falsehood. They knew that it was a battle over faith. Once the declaration of God's Lordship over all the worlds is made, this faith poses a threat to all tyrants, aiming to strip them of their usurped authority. Hence, their reply to Pharaoh's accusation was: "*You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us.*" (Verse 126) Then they turned to their Lord with this prayer: "*Our Lord, grant us abundance of patience in adversity, and let us die as people who have surrendered themselves to You.*" (Verse 126) Thus, when true submission to God took hold of their hearts, it became their distinctive criterion.

Sealed Hearts, Closed Minds

The story also relates how God subjected Pharaoh's people to several trials, allowing different types of hardship to afflict them. Nevertheless, they persist in their rejection of God's message, making all types of excuses. Eventually destruction befalls them. (Verses 130-136)

In this passage we realize how adamantly and persistently tyranny clings to its falsehood, resisting with all its might the message declaring God's Lordship over all the worlds. These tyrants realize, with perfect certainty, that such a message undermines their position. Indeed, it does not recognize their claims to such a position. Tyranny will never allow the declaration of God's oneness, or His Lordship over all the worlds, unless these words lose their true meaning, becoming mere words of little significance. In such a situation, they represent no threat to tyranny. On the other hand, when a group of people adopt these words and take them seriously, in their true meaning, tyranny will not tolerate them. It immediately realizes the threat they represent to its usurped authority which enables it to exercise sovereignty and lordship over its subject people. Thus, Pharaoh could not tolerate that Moses should advocate faith in God, the Lord of all the worlds, or that the sorcerers should declare their belief in Him. He and his chiefs persisted with their rejection of this truth when signs were shown to them, and then when different types of hardship afflicted them, one after another. To them, all this was easier to tolerate than to acknowledge God as the Lord of all the worlds, because that would have ended their usurped authority.

We see also in the way the *sūrah* speaks of the signs and the trials how God deals with those who deny His messages. He first tries them with hardship and tribulation, then with affluence and plenty, before He finally smites them with a severe punishment. The believers, who have been weak and subjugated, are then given power and established in the land. "*We caused the people who were persecuted and deemed utterly low to inherit the eastern and western parts of the land which We had blessed. Thus your Lord's gracious promise to the Children of Israel was fulfilled, because they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built.*" (Verse 137)

But the Israelites soon succumbed to their deviant nature, and they disobeyed God, as the Qur'ān makes clear. They played tricks on Moses, their Prophet and saviour, remained ungrateful for God's blessings, and turned away from the straight path of faith. This happened time after time, with God forgiving them on each occasion, until eventually they earned God's punishment: "*Then your Lord declared that He would most certainly raise against them people who would cruelly oppress them till the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord is swift indeed in His retribution, yet He is certainly much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verse 167) God's warnings came true, and they will

continue to come true in the future. They may have their day in the cycle of history, but when they spread corruption and resort to injustice, God will raise against them people who will punish them severely. This will continue to be the case until the Day of Judgement.

Our last point in this Prologue on the history of the Israelites is that this *sūrah,* revealed in Makkah, tells us much about the Children of Israel, their deviation, disobedience, and wicked nature. Yet many Orientalists, Christians and Jews alike, allege that Muhammad, (peace be upon him), did not attack the Jews in the Qur'ān until he had settled in Madinah. These Orientalists claim that the Prophet tried to maintain good relations with the Jews when he was in Makkah and in his early period in Madinah. They further allege that the Qur'ān which Muhammad preached at that time spoke about their common ancestry as descendants of Abraham, hoping that they would accept his message. But when he gave up on them, he attacked them in no uncertain terms. These Orientalists are certainly lying. Here we have in a Makkan *sūrah* the whole truth about the Jews. It follows the same lines as *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, which was revealed later in Madinah, in stating the truth.

Verses 163-170 of this *sūrah,* which include the warning to the Jews that they would be repeatedly subjected to punishment by other people, are undoubtedly Madman revelation, while the rest of the *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah. However, the verses that immediately precede and directly follow this Madman passage state the same truth about the Israelites. They mention their worship of the calf, their demand that Moses should set up a deity for them when they had left Egypt for the sake of God, the only deity in the universe. They also include the punishment inflicted on them because of their declared stand that they would not believe unless they saw God, and their alteration of God's words when they were told to enter the city. All this goes to show these Orientalists distorting history in addition to their fabrication of falsehood against God and His Messenger. Yet some writers who speak about Islam are willing to take such Orientalists for their teachers!

Drawing the Lines

This story of Moses is given in such detail for another purpose. It depicts the nature of faith and unbelief as reflected by the personalities and events of that history. It concludes with the scene of accepting the covenant of the Children of Israel after they have witnessed how God's might strikes. This is followed by the great scene showing human nature making its covenant with God. We then have a scene showing the one who reneges on this covenant as he discards God's revelations after he has learnt them. It is a very powerful scene serving to warn against such a line of action. A comment follows this scene describing the nature of divine guidance

and the nature of unbelief, making clear that the latter indicates a failure of man's faculties of perception, leading to utter ruin. (Verses 171-179)

The *sūrah* then turns to the unbelievers in Makkah who were denying the truth of the message of Islam, distorting God's names in order to coin up names for their false deities. It warns them against suffering God's punishment. It also invites them to reflect deeply and clearly on the status of God's Messenger who called on them to follow divine guidance. When they do so, they should remove their prejudices that cause them to accuse the Prophet of madness. They should contemplate the kingdoms of heaven and earth and what they contain of pointers to the truth of divine guidance. A touch is added reminding them of death that could come when they are totally unaware. (Verses 180-186)

The *sūrah* takes on the unbelievers who deny the Last Hour signalling the arrival of the Day of Resurrection and their questions about its timing. It shows that this is a grave matter, but they refer to it lightly. It states the nature of God's message and the role of the Messenger who delivers it. It states the truth of Godhead and that all its attributes belong to God alone, including the knowledge of the realm that lies beyond man's perception, and the bringing about of the Last Hour at its appointed time. (Verses 187-188)

Within the context of this confrontation with the unbelievers, the *sūrah* gives an outline of the nature of idolatry and the story of deviation from the covenant made with human nature to always believe in God's oneness. It shows how such deviation occurs within man, as if it is describing the deviation of that very generation which opposed the Prophet, while their early ancestors followed Abraham's faith. (Verses 189-192)

Since it aims to describe the situation of those particular idolaters whom the Qur'ān was addressing at the time of its revelation, the *sūrah* moves immediately from the case it outlines to a direct address to them. It directs the Prophet to challenge them and their deities. (Verses 193-198)

As the *sūrah* comes to its conclusion, it addresses the Prophet and the Muslim community to deal gently with people as they present God's message to them. They must not give way to anger at people's slackness. They need to seek refuge with God against Satan who tries to fuel their anger. (Verses 199-203) This directive reminds us of what is stated at the beginning of the *sūrah: "This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers."* (Verse 2) It makes it clear that the task is tough, because it involves calling on all people to accept the faith, putting up with all their impediments, including traces of erroneous beliefs, deviation, desire, negligence, etc. It requires much perseverance and tolerance.

It also requires moving along the road to its final destination. Hence, the *sūrah* reminds us of what helps us to overcome the difficulties involved. Here we are reminded of the need to read the Qur'ān and listen attentively to it, remembering God in all situations and never to be heedless. We should take our cue in this from the angels who do not tire of remembering God and worshipping Him: *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy. And bethink yourself of your Lord humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the morning and evening; and do not be negligent. Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves."* (Verses 204-206) This is the best equipment along the road. It outlines the manner of worship that good believers should adopt. It is the one followed by God's best servants.

1
The Purpose of the Divine Message

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓصٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Ṣād. (1)

كِتَٰبٌ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ فَلَا يَكُن فِى صَدْرِكَ حَرَجٌ مِّنْهُ لِتُنذِرَ بِهِۦ وَذِكْرَىٰ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢﴾

This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high — so do not entertain any doubt about it — in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers. (2)

ٱتَّبِعُوا۟ مَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُم مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord, and follow no masters other than Him. How seldom do you keep this in mind. (3)

وَكَم مِّن قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَٰهَا فَجَآءَهَا بَأْسُنَا بَيَٰتًا أَوْ هُمْ قَآئِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting. (4)

فَمَا كَانَ دَعْوَىٰهُمْ إِذْ جَآءَهُم بَأْسُنَآ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥﴾

And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: "We have indeed been wrongdoers." (5)

فَلَنَسْـَٔلَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَنَسْـَٔلَنَّ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

We shall most certainly question those to whom a message was sent, and We shall most certainly question the messengers themselves. (6)

فَلَنَقُصَّنَّ عَلَيۡهِم بِعِلۡمٖۖ وَمَا كُنَّا غَآئِبِينَ ٧

And most certainly We shall reveal to them Our knowledge [of what they have done]; for never have We been absent. (7)

وَٱلۡوَزۡنُ يَوۡمَئِذٍ ٱلۡحَقُّۚ فَمَن ثَقُلَتۡ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ٨

On that day, the weighing will be true and accurate: and those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance are the ones who are successful; (8)

وَمَنۡ خَفَّتۡ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَظۡلِمُونَ ٩

whereas those whose weight is light in the balance are the ones who have lost their own souls because of their wilful rejection of Our revelations. (9)

Issues Spelt Out

The *sūrah* begins with four separate letters, similar to those that occur at the beginning of the second and third *sūrahs*. When we discussed such separate letters in our commentary on these *sūrahs,* we expressed our support of the view that these letters are meant as a reference to the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of words made up of the Arabic alphabet which Arabs use in their language. Nevertheless, it is impossible for them to make up from these letters and sounds a discourse similar to that of the Qur'ān. This in itself proves that the Qur'ān is not composed by a human being. How else can we explain the fact that these letters, sounds and words were available to the Arabs and yet they could not make of them anything similar to the Qur'ān. There must be, then, some other element which gives the Qur'ān its unique character. We feel that this is perhaps the most likely interpretation of these separate letters occurring at the beginning of some *sūrahs.* God knows best the purpose He has in mind for using them. It is possible, therefore, to consider these four letters together as the subject of a sentence, which is given in the translation as, "this", which means that those letters and what is composed of them and of other letters are "the book bestowed from on high". On the other hand, we may take these letters as sounds serving to alert us to the meaning that follows which suggests that the book has been revealed from on high.

"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high." (Verse 2) This book, then, is revealed for warning, so that the Prophet is able to confront with its message all mankind, although they may not like to be so confronted. Its message is thus set in opposition to beliefs, traditions, social norms and set-ups. This is reason enough for entertaining feelings of doubt and hardship with regard to the duty it imposes. This can only be appreciated by those who wish to implement this instruction and raise the message of this book high in society. In so doing, they aim to achieve a complete and total change of the social set-up of the human community, beginning with its foundations and finishing with its outward appearance and points of detail. Hence, the Prophet, the one who was to deliver the message of this book for the first time, must have felt all this when he confronted the state of ignorance, *or jāhiliyyah,* prevailing in Arabia and throughout the world.

This state of affairs is not limited to the situation that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula at the time, or to what prevailed in surrounding areas. Islam is not a mere event of history which took place at a particular point in time. It is a permanent confrontation that continues to the end of time. Today, Islam puts its message before humanity, as it did the first time, and as it does whenever humanity reverts to *jāhiliyyah* in a repeated `reactionary' cycle. Whenever this happens, Islam comes forward to pick up humanity from the mud of reaction and to set it along the way to

progress and civilization. Every time the advocates of Islam warn people on the basis of the Qur'ānic message, they face the same difficulty and hardship endured by the first advocate of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was he who first warned people that their lives were a continuing endurance of the darkness *of jāhiliyyah* which combined the blindness of erring concepts, unrestrained desires, with the oppression of tyranny and subjugation to momentary—whims and fleeting pleasures. Whoever takes up the duty of conveying the Islamic message in order to try to save mankind from the depth of its ignorance will inevitably appreciate the significance of this directive to the Prophet: "*This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message.*" (Verse 2)

It is real facts that tell us who the believers to be admonished with the Qur'ānic revelations are and who the unbelievers to whom the warning is addressed are. To the advocate of Islam, the Qur'ān is always a new message, revealed at this moment in time, to confront a situation which is bound to impose on him a very hard struggle.

Today, mankind is in a similar position to that which prevailed when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was instructed by his Lord to start his warning and admonition, entertaining no feeling of anxiety or difficulty, aiming to bring about a very radical change in the life of humanity as a whole. Time has moved full circle since that day, and mankind has reverted to a state of complete ignorance which affects the basis and practical aspects of all its values, norms and practices. In its very concept of faith, humanity has reverted back to some absurdities that prevailed in the past. This applies even to those whose fathers and forefathers used to believe in this religion of Islam, submit themselves to God and associate no partners with Him. The concept of faith held by these new generations has also been distorted.

This religion of Islam has been revealed so that it changes the face of the world, in order to establish a new world order which acknowledges God's absolute authority and removes the authority of all tyrants. In this world order, worship, in its very comprehensive sense, is offered to God alone. When this world order is established, God enables whomever He pleases of His servants to submit himself to God alone instead of submitting to other authorities. In this world order, a new human being is born, who is free and noble, having overcome the tyranny of his desires and the authority of anyone other than God.

This religion of Islam is meant to establish a solid foundation. Indeed, every prophet, in all periods of history, subscribed to this foundation, declaring its motto loud and clear: "There is no deity other than God." This declaration has only one meaning, which is that sovereignty in human life, and indeed in the entire universe, belongs only to God alone. It is He who rules over the universe as He exercises His

will, and it is He who controls the lives of human beings in accordance with the law He has laid down and the way of living He has prescribed. On the basis of this rule, a Muslim is a firm believer in God's oneness and that He controls the whole universe. He addresses his worship to God alone. From Him he receives his laws and values. By correlation, he rejects every authority that seeks to replace God's authority in any way.

This is the basic foundation of the religion of Islam. How far away from it does humanity stand today? Mankind can be classified into several groups all of which belong to the realm of *jāhiliyyah.* To start with, there is an atheist group which denies God's existence altogether. Their case needs no elaboration. Another group are idolaters. They recognize the existence of God but associate with Him other partners and deities as we see in India, Central Africa and other parts of the world.

A third group are normally described in the Qur'ān as "the People of the Book", which is a reference to the Jews and Christians. These reverted to polytheism when they claimed that God had begotten a son. They also considered their priests and rabbis as lords alongside God, since they acknowledged their authority to legislate and accepted whatever legislation those priests and rabbis gave them. It is true that the Christians and Jews did not worship those people, but they acknowledged their legislative authority. Today, they deny God's authority to legislate altogether, establishing instead capitalist or socialist systems and adopting democratic or dictatorial styles, etc. By doing so, they abandon the rule of faith altogether and revert to an ignorant system similar to that which prevailed in ancient Rome or Greece.

A fourth group claims to be Muslim, but it nevertheless follows those systems of the "People of the Book" step by step. Thus they remove themselves from the proper Islamic system and adopt a different one. The religion acceptable to God includes a code of living, a law, a system and a complete constitution for life. The religions of human beings include their own systems and laws and their own setups.

Time has come full circle, and we are today in a situation similar to that which prevailed when God revealed this religion of Islam. None of these human groupings follows the divine faith. The Qur'ān is now confronting humanity in the same way as it confronted it the first time. It wants humanity to adopt Islam anew as a faith, before it starts to implement its laws and regulations. Hence, any person who advocates such a revival is bound to feel the hardship and difficulty felt by the Prophet as he started his call to mankind. Today the advocates of Islam aim at establishing the faith in the minds of people, so that they can consciously and positively make the declaration: "I bear witness that there is no deity other than God." This will inevitably lead to the establishment of a new social order in which God is worshipped by people. This signals another rebirth for man, where man is

liberated from worshipping human beings or worshipping his own caprice and desire and is made free to enjoy the worship of God alone.

A Revelation to Admonish Believers

Islam is not a mere event of history that took place at a particular point in time and completed its role. Today it has a role to play similar to that which it played when it first confronted humanity. Indeed, the circumstances, social systems, beliefs, values and traditions that prevail in the world today are not dissimilar to those which prevailed when Islam first addressed mankind. The term *jāhiliyyah* refers to a state of affairs, not to a particular period in history. Today, it prevails everywhere and applies to all types of beliefs, doctrines, systems and circumstances. It is based on assigning sovereignty and legislative authority to human beings instead of acknowledging that such authority belongs to God alone. The very foundation of this state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* makes human caprice or desire or thought the ultimate arbiter in human affairs instead of adopting the divine code as the law to implement. *Jāhiliyyah* may take different shapes and forms, adopt different names, follow a variety of creeds, but in all its versions it has the same basic role determining its nature.

Adopting this criterion, it is clear that a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* prevails today throughout the world. Islam, on the other hand, has ceased to exist as an entity. Its advocates have the same objective for which the Prophet Muhammad, God's Messenger (peace be upon him) dedicated himself. They face the same type of opposition he faced. Hence, they should listen to the same reminder contained in this Qur'ānic verse: "*This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers.*" This fact needs some elaboration.

Human communities today are, generally speaking, overwhelmed *by jāhiliyyah,* and as such, they are `backward' or `reactionary', in the sense that they have reverted to a state of ignorance after Islam had saved them from it. It is Islam that is called upon today to save these communities from their backwardness and reaction and to set them along the road to progress and civilization which makes the divine values and standards prevail. It is only when a community acknowledges that the top authority belongs to God, and when this is manifested in practice by the implementation of God's law, that human beings in that community are truly free from subjugation to their own desires or to those of other human beings.

This is indeed the only true image of Islam or civilization, according to the divine standard, because the civilization God wants human beings to enjoy must be based on total freedom and dignity for every individual. How can an individual enjoy such

freedom and exercise such dignity if he must submit himself to other human beings? Dignity and freedom cannot truly exist in a community in which some individuals exercise sovereignty and claim to be the ultimate arbiters while others have to submit to them. When we speak of sovereignty in this sense we do not only refer to the authority to legislate and the process of law making. Rather, values, standards, morals and traditions also come under the same heading of legislation, because people submit to them consciously or subconsciously. Such a society can only be described as reactionary and backward, or, to use the Islamic terminology, *jāhilī'*, or unbeliever.

When the bond in a community is that of faith, and when intellectual concepts and the way of life are derived from divine revelations, not subject to the will of any human being, then that community is progressive and civilized, or, to use the Islamic terminology, `a Muslim community that surrenders itself to God.' The basis of such a community, then, reflects the highest qualities of man which shape his spirit and intellect. On the other hand, when the bond that unites a community is that of race, colour, tribe or geographic area, the community is then backward and reactionary, or, to use the Islamic terminology, an ignorant community. Such bonds do not relate to any of the supreme qualities of man, because a human being retains his human status regardless of his race, colour, tribe, nation or country, while beyond his spirit and intellect, he has no human existence.

On the other hand, by his own free will — which is the highest blessing God has given him — man can change his faith, intellectual concepts or mode of living. He can adopt divine guidance once he has taken care to try to understand it and reflect on its blessings. He can never change his race, colour or nation. He cannot determine beforehand where he will be born or in what nation or to which parents he will belong. A community where people come together on the basis of something they choose by their own free will is much higher and more civilized than one in which people are united on the basis of something over which they have no control.

On the other hand, when materialism in any shape or form, is considered the supreme value, either theoretically as in Marxism, or in the shape of material production as in America, Europe and other capitalist societies, then that community is, in Islamic terminology, both *jāhilī* and idolatrous, or reactionary and backward in the broadest sense. This is due to the fact that such a society sacrifices all human values, particularly moral values, for its supreme bond of materialism.

It is important to remember here that a Muslim community does not despise or deride matter or materialism, either in the form of theory or in that of productivity. What people produce helps man to fulfil the task that has been assigned to him when God made him vicegerent on earth. To enjoy what is wholesome and useful of human production is something that Islam encourages, as this *sūrah* makes clear.

However, it cannot be considered the supreme value in society.

It is the values and morals which prevail in a community that determine its character and whether it is civilized and progressive, or, to use the Islamic terminology, Islamic. Such human values and morals are neither vague nor changeable. These are the morals and values that promote the qualities of man which distinguish him from animals, not the ones which he has in common with them. When the question is placed on this basis, we can easily visualize a clear line of demarcation which negates the whole concept of evolution. We will not have then agricultural morals as opposed to industrial ones, or capitalist morals as opposed to socialist ones. Nor can there be pauper values contrasting with those of the bourgeoisie. Morals will not be the product of the environment and the standard of living, treating these as independent factors shaping moral values and traditions, or following an inevitable course of development. There can only be sound human values and morality which Muslims adopt in their civilized community. These may only contrast with morality and values that we may loosely describe as `animal'. These latter ones can only be adopted by a backward community. To use the Islamic terminology, there can only be Islamic values and morality, and reactionary or ignorant ones, i.e. *jāhiliyyah.*

The communities in which `animal' values, morality and desires prevail cannot be civilized communities, no matter how scientifically advanced they are. In *modern jāhiliyyah* societies, the concept of morality has become so weak that it is no longer concerned with what distinguishes man from animals. In these communities, for example, illegitimate sexual relationships, and indeed perverted ones, are not considered immoral. Moral values are only confined to personal or economic or political transactions, and even these are sometimes limited to the interest of the country itself. In such communities, writers, journalists, novelists, the media and all sources of education and information make it clear to young people of both sexes that free sex is not immoral. Such communities, then, are, from the human point of view, backward, not civilized. If we are to consider human progress, we describe these communities as non-Islamic as well. The line Islam follows is that of liberating man from his desires, lust, and other animal inclinations in order to enhance and develop within him his human qualities.

Perhaps this is all that we can say for the present in describing such human communities and how they sink deep in *jāhiliyyah.* Indeed, *jāhiliyyah* characterizes all aspects of these communities, from faith to morality and from concepts to practices. What we have said is sufficient to make it clear that these communities are indeed in a state of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah.* It also makes it clear that the objective of the Islamic message today is the same as it was at the beginning: to call on people to adopt Islam as a faith, a moral system and a way of life. It is the objective which the Prophet set

for himself when he started to fulfil the task assigned to him by God. The advocates of Islam today have to adopt the same attitude and set themselves the same objective, remembering what God said to the Prophet at the beginning: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers."* (Verse 2)

A Sudden Inflection of Punishment

As God assigns this task to His Messenger, He follows it with an order given to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān for the first time, and indeed to all nations and communities whom Islam tries to save from the shackles of *jāhiliyyah.* All such communities are ordered to follow what is revealed in this divine scripture and to refrain from following any masters other then God. This is the crux of the matter: whom are we, human beings, to follow in conducting our lives? If we follow divine orders, then we are Muslims who submit ourselves to God. Those who follow the orders of other beings are idolaters. The two situations are diametrically opposed and there cannot be any meeting point between them. This is the central issue in the message of Islam: *"Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord, and follow no masters other than Him. How seldom do you keep this in mind"* (Verse 3)

It should be noted here that when the Prophet was addressed in person, the hook is described as having been sent down to him personally: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high."* (Verse 2) At the same time, when all mankind are addressed, the book is described as having been sent down to them from their Lord: *"Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord."* (Verse 3) In the case of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the book is revealed to him so that he believes in it and warns people and reminds them with its message. In the case of other human beings, the book is revealed to them so that they believe in it and follow it to the exclusion of any other source. In both cases, honour is made by this revelation. A human being to whom God sends down a book, choosing him for this task and bestowing on him all this bounty and blessings, should remember and should be thankful. He must also address himself to the task with strength and resolution.

The task is great. It aims to bring about a total change in human communities, encompassing their concepts, ideals, values, moral standards, traditions, social systems, economic set-ups as well as their relationships with God, the universe and other human beings. Hence, the *sūrah* seeks to strongly shake people's consciences so that they wake up to the task and start examining their situation. This is achieved by portraying the destinies of past communities who denied the divine message, how they were destroyed in this life and the sort of destiny awaiting them in the life to come.

> *How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting. And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: "We have indeed been wrongdoers."We shall most certainly question those to whom a message was sent, and We shall most certainly question the messengers themselves. And most certainly We shall reveal to them Our knowledge [of what they have done]; for never have We been absent. On that day, the weighing will be true and accurate: and those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance are the ones who are successful; whereas those whose weight is light in the balance are the ones who have lost their own souls because of their wilfull rejection of Our revelations. (Verses 4-9)*

The destruction of past nations and communities serves as a very good reminder and warner. The fact that they were so severely punished is utilized in the Qur'ān as an inspiring element which should alert human minds that have so far been oblivious of their situation and their duty. Numerous have been those communities which were destroyed because of their rejection of the message of the truth. Invariably, they were taken unawares, either in the dead of the night or at midday when people relax and sleep, feeling a sense of security: *"How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting."* (Verse 4)

Both the depth of the night and the middle of the day when people have their siesta are normally thought of as periods of security, when people can relax and sleep. To be punished so severely at this particular time sounds much more horrific. It should also serve as a stronger reminder, helping people to take more heed.

What happened then? Those people who were taken unawares could do nothing other than to own up to their situation and confess to the attitude they had taken: *"And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: `We have indeed been wrongdoers."* (Verse 5)

Normally a human being makes every sort of claim, but does not confess his crime, particularly if it means that he faces a terrible prospect. But in their situation, those communities could do nothing other than admit their guilt and condemn themselves as `wrongdoers'. It is a very terrible situation in which they have found themselves, because the maximum they could do to try to alleviate their situation is to make a full confession. Besides, the `wrongdoing' to which they refer here means the rejection of the faith and the adoption of idolatrous beliefs. This is the most frequent usage of this term in the Qur'ān. To be an idolater or polytheist is to do wrong and to be unjust. The reverse is also true: to do wrong and insist on injustice is to deny God and associate partners with Him. Is there any greater injustice or wrongdoing than the association of partners with God?

When this confession is made, it avails them of nothing, because the time for

repentance has lapsed. When God's punishment is administered, there can be no return and no more chance to mend one's ways. When the scene of punishment in this life is portrayed, the *sūrah* immediately moves on with its audience to portray this situation in the life to come. There is no intermission between the two scenes. The move seems to bypass all considerations of time and place in order to link this life with the life to come showing us the punishment in this world strongly linked to the suffering in the hereafter. In no time, we are looking at the scene on the Day of Judgement: *"We shall most certainly question those to whom a message was sent, and We shall most certainly question the messengers themselves. And most certainly We shall reveal to them Our knowledge [of what they have done]; for never have We been absent. On that day, the weighing will be true and accurate: and those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance are the ones who are successful; whereas those whose weight is light in the balance are the ones who have lost their own souls because of their wilful rejection of Our revelations."* (Verses 6-9)

This style which relies on portraying images in succession is peculiar to the Qur'ān. The journey human beings take, representing their life on earth, is thus portrayed in a quick image, taking only a line in a book, so that this life is intertwined with the life to come. Thus the beginning is tied to the end. When those who suffered God's punishment in this life are brought in front of God for questioning, their confession made at the time when they were destroyed in this world is not sufficient. They have to face a new line of questioning which makes their wrongdoing known to all generations of mankind who are gathered together on that great day: *"We shall most certainly question those to whom a message was sent, and We shall most certainly question the messengers themselves. And most certainly We shall reveal to them Our knowledge [of what they have done]; for never have We been absent."* (Verses 6-7)

This line of questioning is detailed and seeks to throw everything out in the open. It will be directed to those who received messages and to the messengers themselves, so that the whole story, with all its details and hidden aspects is fully publicized. The people who received messengers are asked first and they make their full confession. The messengers themselves are then questioned and they give their full answers. Then the Lord who knows everything and who is fully aware of every detail will relate to them every point they had overlooked but was always well known to Him. He has been witness to it all. This touch is a profound reminder to all mankind, warning them against rejecting God's faith.

"On that day, the weighing will be true and accurate." (Verse 8) There is no room for deception, wrong judgement or arguments. *"Those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance are the ones who are successful."* (Verse 8) This means that what those people bring to weigh on God's accurate scales will be found heavy. Thus they have

earned their great reward which ensures their ultimate success. What success can be greater than avoiding Hell and the return to Heaven at the end of a journey that has extended throughout one's life?

"Whereas those whose weight is light in the balance are the ones who have lost their own souls because of their wilful rejection of Our revelations." (Verse 9) This is because what they bring to weigh on God's absolutely accurate scales is seen to be unmistakably light. They have lost their own souls. What gain can they make thereafter? Human beings try to gather wealth and make gains in order to ensure their own future. When they have lost their own souls, what is left for them? This loss has been made *"because of their wilful rejection of Our revelations"* (Verse 9). Here the Qur'ānic verse uses the same word as 'wrongdoing' which also means `injustice'. As we have already explained, these two terms are frequently used in the Qur'ān as synonymous with disbelief or associating partners with God: *"To associate partners with God is indeed an act of great injustice."* (31: 13)

We have no intention of discussing the nature of the weighing that takes place or the nature of the scales with which this weighing is made. There has been much argument about these over the long period of Islamic history, but such argument has been approached in a rather un-Islamic manner. What we know is that what God does cannot be resembled or likened to anything else, because there is simply no one who bears any similarity to God. It is sufficient for us to state the facts mentioned in the Qur'ān, emphasizing that the reckoning on the Day of Judgement will be most fair and accurate, and no one shall suffer any injustice. Every action, little as it may be, shall be taken into account.

2
The Start of Human Life

وَلَقَدۡ مَكَّنَّٰكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَجَعَلۡنَا لَكُمۡ فِيهَا مَعَٰيِشَۗ قَلِيلٗا مَّا تَشۡكُرُونَ ١٠

We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful. (10)

وَلَقَدۡ خَلَقۡنَٰكُمۡ ثُمَّ صَوَّرۡنَٰكُمۡ ثُمَّ قُلۡنَا لِلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسۡجُدُواْ لِأٓدَمَ فَسَجَدُوٓاْ إِلَّآ إِبۡلِيسَ لَمۡ يَكُن مِّنَ ٱلسَّٰجِدِينَ ١١

We have indeed created you, and then formed you. We then said to the angels: "Prostrate yourselves before Adam!" They all prostrated themselves, except for Iblīs: he was not one of those who prostrated themselves. (11)

قَالَ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَلَّا تَسۡجُدَ إِذۡ أَمَرۡتُكَۖ قَالَ أَنَا۠ خَيۡرٞ مِّنۡهُ خَلَقۡتَنِي مِن نَّارٖ وَخَلَقۡتَهُۥ مِن طِينٖ ١٢

And [God] said: "What has prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you?" Answered [Iblīs]: "I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay." (12)

قَالَ فَٱهۡبِطۡ مِنۡهَا فَمَا يَكُونُ لَكَ أَن تَتَكَبَّرَ فِيهَا فَٱخۡرُجۡ إِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰغِرِينَ ١٣

[God] said: "Off with you hence! It is not for you to show your arrogance here. Get out, then; you will always be among the humiliated." (13)

قَالَ أَنظِرۡنِيٓ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ يُبۡعَثُونَ ١٤

Said he: "Grant me a respite until the Day when all will be raised [from the dead]." (14)

قَالَ إِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُنظَرِينَ ١٥

God replied: "You shall indeed be among those granted respite." (15)

قَالَ فَبِمَآ أَغۡوَيۡتَنِي لَأَقۡعُدَنَّ لَهُمۡ صِرَٰطَكَ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمَ ١٦

[Iblīs] said: "Since You let me fall in error, I shall indeed lurk in ambush for them all along Your straight path, (16)

ثُمَّ لَأَتِيَنَّهُم مِّنۢ بَيۡنِ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَمِنۡ خَلۡفِهِمۡ وَعَنۡ أَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡ وَعَن شَمَآئِلِهِمۡۖ وَلَا تَجِدُ أَكۡثَرَهُمۡ شَٰكِرِينَ ١٧

and I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left; and You will find most of them ungrateful." (17)

قَالَ ٱخۡرُجۡ مِنۡهَا مَذۡءُومٗا مَّدۡحُورٗاۖ لَّمَن تَبِعَكَ مِنۡهُمۡ لَأَمۡلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ١٨

[God] said: "Get out of here, despised, disgraced. As for those of them that follow you, I shall fill Hell with you all. (18)

وَيَٰٓـَٔادَمُ ٱسۡكُنۡ أَنتَ وَزَوۡجُكَ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ فَكُلَا مِنۡ حَيۡثُ شِئۡتُمَا وَلَا تَقۡرَبَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٩

And (as for you), Adam: dwell you and your wife in this Garden, and eat, both of you, whatever you may desire; but do not come near this tree, lest you become wrongdoers." (19)

فَوَسۡوَسَ لَهُمَا ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ لِيُبۡدِيَ لَهُمَا مَا وُۥرِيَ عَنۡهُمَا مِن سَوۡءَٰتِهِمَا وَقَالَ مَا نَهَىٰكُمَا رَبُّكُمَا عَنۡ هَٰذِهِ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ إِلَّآ أَن تَكُونَا مَلَكَيۡنِ أَوۡ تَكُونَا مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰلِدِينَ ٢٠

But Satan whispered to them both, so that he might show them their nakedness, of which they had previously been unaware. He said to them: "Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree lest you two become angels or immortals." (20)

وَقَاسَمَهُمَآ إِنِّي لَكُمَا لَمِنَ ٱلنَّٰصِحِينَ ٢١

And he swore to them: "I am indeed giving you sound advice." (21)

فَدَلَّىٰهُمَا بِغُرُورٖۚ فَلَمَّا ذَاقَا ٱلشَّجَرَةَ بَدَتۡ لَهُمَا سَوۡءَٰتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخۡصِفَانِ عَلَيۡهِمَا مِن وَرَقِ ٱلۡجَنَّةِۖ وَنَادَىٰهُمَا رَبُّهُمَآ أَلَمۡ أَنۡهَكُمَا عَن تِلۡكُمَا ٱلشَّجَرَةِ وَأَقُل لَّكُمَآ إِنَّ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَ لَكُمَا عَدُوّٞ مُّبِينٞ ٢٢

Thus he cunningly deluded them. And when they both had tasted the fruit of the tree, their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden. Their Lord called out to them: "Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you both that Satan is your open enemy?" (22)

قَالَا رَبَّنَا ظَلَمۡنَآ أَنفُسَنَا وَإِن لَّمۡ تَغۡفِرۡ لَنَا وَتَرۡحَمۡنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Said they: "Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves; and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall certainly be lost." (23)

قَالَ ٱهۡبِطُواْ بَعۡضُكُمۡ لِبَعۡضٍ عَدُوٌّۖ وَلَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُسۡتَقَرّٞ وَمَتَٰعٌ إِلَىٰ حِينٖ ﴿٢٤﴾

Said He: "Get you down hence, [and be henceforth] enemies to one another, having on earth your abode and livelihood for a while." (24)

قَالَ فِيهَا تَحۡيَوۡنَ وَفِيهَا تَمُوتُونَ وَمِنۡهَا تُخۡرَجُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

"There shall you live," He added, "and there shall you die, and from there shall you be brought forth [on the Day of Resurrection]." (25)

Overview

This is the starting point of the great journey of human life. It begins by giving the human race power so that it can settle on earth. Here the reference is to an absolute fact that precedes the creation of mankind.

"We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful." (Verse 10) The Creator of both the earth and man is the One who has made it possible for the human race to establish itself on earth. It is He who has given the earth its qualities and characteristics and made all these balances which allow human life to prosper and provide people with sustenance and other means of livelihood.

It is indeed He who has made the earth suitable for sustaining human life, by giving it its atmosphere, its particular size, shape and make-up, its appropriate distance from the sun and the moon. It is He who has set it in its orbit in order to enable it to move round the sun, and given it its particular speed and determined the angle it makes with its axis. All these balances are as important as giving the earth the potential to produce sustenance and sources of energy to enable human life to continue and prosper. It is also God who has made man the master of all creation on earth, giving him the ability to utilize the earth's potential and resources by his ability to identify and use the laws of nature.

Had it not been for the fact that God has established man on earth and given him all these qualities, man, a weak creation as he certainly is, would not have been able to make his `conquest of nature', as people *in jāhiliyyah* communities, past and present, say. He would not have been able to stand up to the enormous, overwhelming forces that operate in the universe.

It is unfortunate that ancient Greek and Roman concepts continue to impart their colour to present-day *jāhiliyyah*. It is these concepts that portray the universe as hostile to man, and universal forces as opposed to man's existence and action. They try to show man engaged in a fight against natural forces, with every discovery of natural law man makes portrayed as a triumph of man against nature.

All these concepts are both absurd and evil. Had it been true that the natural laws of the universe are hostile to man and that they work in opposition to what man does, and had it been true that these forces operate without any control by a wise will, man would have never come into existence in the first place. How could he have existed? How could he survive in a hostile universe and environment when these are subject to no external will or power whatsoever? How could he have sustained his life, when all these great forces are opposed to him? The question becomes even more forceful if we are to accept the claim that these forces are subject to no control other than their own.

Only the Islamic concept of life provides a coherent concept that relates all these details to their original and consistent line. It is God who has created both man and the universe. His will and wisdom has determined the nature of this universe making it possible for human life to maintain itself and prosper. He has also endowed man with the ability that makes it possible for him to identify certain natural laws and utilize them for his own needs. This perfect coherence and harmony is the one worthy of God's creation, because God's work is characterized by its perfection in every aspect. He does not place His creation on a war footing so that they are always hostile to one another.

Under this concept, man lives in a friendly universe, enjoying the care of a wise, supreme power. He is at peace with himself, reassured, able to move steadily in order to fulfil his task as vicegerent on earth. He feels that he can rely on unfailing help and he deals with the universe in an attitude of mutual friendship. He praises God every time he is able to discover a new secret or a new law of the universe which enables him to fulfil his task and makes it possible for him to make progress and increase his comfort.

This concept does not discourage man from working to discover the secrets of the universe and identify its laws. On the contrary, it encourages him to do so with confidence and reassurance. He is not in confrontation with a hostile universe that guards its secrets from him and withholds its help. He is not in conflict with an enemy who tries to forestall his efforts, his hopes and ambitions.

The great tragedy of the philosophical creed known as existentialism is this ill-conceived principle which describes the universe, and indeed, the collective existence of humanity, as naturally hostile to the existence of the human individual, trying

with all its might to crush it. It is a sick concept that is bound to lead to an inward-looking approach giving little value to one's existence, or to a careless, rebellious and self-centred attitude to life as a whole. Both situations cause much worry and misery, both physical and mental. They leave man in total loss, although the sense of loss may differ a little in each situation.

But the tragedy is not that of a single European intellectual creed; it is indeed the tragedy of all European intellectual thought, with all its creeds and doctrines. Furthermore, it is also the tragedy of *jāhiliyyah* as a whole, in all times and environments. Islam stops this tragedy altogether by its comprehensive faith that lays the foundation of a correct concept of this universe and the wise power that controls it.

Man is the son of this earth and this universe. God has created him out of this earth and established him on it, and He has provided him with the means of sustenance and livelihood. Moreover, He has enabled him to acquire knowledge and discover the secrets of the universe. He has made the laws of nature move in harmony with human existence, so that man is able to make use of these laws in order to set his life on the road to progress. What he needs for this is to try to identify these laws with an open mind.

But human beings are seldom grateful, because when they are in the depths of ignorance, they do not know what blessings God has given them. Even those who know are unable to thank God in full for the grace He has bestowed on them. How can they ever thank Him enough? It is an aspect of God's grace that He accepts from them what they can do. In both situations, the Qur'ānic statement is true: "How seldom are you grateful."

The Start of Human Life on Earth

What we are about to learn is the story of human life with all its exciting events. It begins with an announcement of the forthcoming birth of mankind. The announcement is made in a majestic celebration attended by the Supreme Society, a Qur'ānic term that refers to the angels. As a further evidence of honour, no one other than God Almighty makes the announcement when the angels are gathered, and Iblīs is present, though he is not one of the angels. The whole event is witnessed by the heavens and the earth and all that God has created. It is indeed a great event in the history of the universe:

> *We have indeed created you, and then formed you. We then said to the angels: "Prostrate yourselves before Adam!" They all prostrated themselves, except for Iblīs: he was not one of those who prostrated themselves. And [God] said: "What has*

> *prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you?" Answered [Iblīs]: "I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay." [God] said: "Off with you hence! It is not for you to show your arrogance here. Get out, then; you will always be among the humiliated. "Said he: "Grant me a respite until the Day when all will be raised [from the dead]." God replied: "You shall indeed be among those granted respite." [Iblīs] said: "Since you let me fall in error, I shall indeed lurk in ambush for them all along Your straight path, and I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left; and You will find most of them ungrateful." [God] said: "Get out of here, despised, disgraced. As for those of them that follow you, I shall fill Hell with you all. "(Verses 11-18)*

This is the first scene, which is both exciting and very serious indeed. It is perhaps more appropriate to look properly at the scenes in this story, making our comments at the end when we can better try to understand its importance.

> *We have indeed created you, and then formed you. We then said to the angels: "Prostrate yourselves before Adam!" They all prostrated themselves, except for Iblīs: he was not one of those who prostrated themselves.* (Verse 11)

'Creation' may mean initiation, while `formation' may mean the assigning of a particular form and special characteristic. These are grades not stages of existence. The conjunction `then' may signify giving a higher status without having any element of a chronological order. To give something a form is more advanced than its mere existence, for the latter may be limited to the raw material only. Formation, in the sense of giving a special human form and characteristic, is certainly much more significant than mere existence. Hence, the Qur'ānic statement should be understood as not signifying mere existence but also giving that existence a number of higher characteristics. This is akin to the Qur'ānic statement which refers to God Himself as the One *"who has given everything that exists its true form and then guided them."* (20: 50).

Everything has been given its characteristics and tasks and was guided to its fulfilment at the time of its creation. There was no time gap between the creation of everything and the assigning of its characteristics and duties and then the guidance to the fulfilment of those duties. The meaning remains the same if 'guided' in the above Qur'ānic statement refers to their knowledge of their Lord. Again, that form of guidance has been given to all creation at the time when it came into existence. Adam was also formed and fashioned and given his human characteristics when he was created. Hence, it is much more correct to say that in the Qur'ānic verse which states. *"We have indeed created you and then formed you,"* the conjunction, 'then', signifies enhancement of grade not allowing for a time gap.

The total import of Qur'ānic statements that speak of the creation of Adam (peace be upon him) and the start of human life indicates very strongly that this particular creation was given its human characteristic and special tasks at the time of its coming into existence. Evolution in human history took the form of developing these characteristics and gaining further experience in utilizing them. It is not an evolution of existence which suggests, as Darwinism would like us to believe, that a process of evolution of species has reached its climax with the advent of man.

There might have been stages of advanced animals, with one coming after the other, as evidenced by the theory of natural selection. But this is no more than a theory that does not aspire to any degree of certainty, because the estimation of the ages of rocks in geological strata is again a theoretical process. It is the same as estimating the ages of different stars and planets on the basis of the characteristics of their rays. Future discoveries may amend or change these theories.

But even if we were to learn the ages of rocks with absolute certainty, there is nothing to prevent the existence of different species of animals, some of which are higher than others, in different time periods, and that their advancement makes them particularly suited for the prevailing circumstances. Some of them may disappear when circumstances change drastically to make it difficult for the earth to sustain their existence. That does not make it inevitable that these species have evolved one from the other. All the studies and observations of Charles Darwin and those who followed him cannot prove more than that. They cannot say with any certainty that one species evolved from a preceding one, on the basis of fossils and where they have been found. It simply proves that a subsequent species was higher than a preceding one. This can easily be explained as we have already said: the prevailing circumstances at one particular time allowed the existence of one species. The circumstances subsequently prevailing allowed the existence of another species and the disappearance of the first one.

All this means that the appearance of human beings was independent of other species. It took place at a time when the prevailing circumstances on earth facilitated the existence, development and advancement of this particular type of creation. This is the total sum of the Qur'ānic statements on the creation of man.

The fact that biologically, physiologically, mentally and spiritually, man has unique characteristics is so clear that it has been acknowledged by neo-Darwinists who include a number of atheists. This uniqueness also supports the view that human existence was totally independent of the existence of all other species. It simply has no biological interrelationship with them.

Be that as it may, God Himself, in all His Majesty, made the announcement of the birth of man in a great gathering of the Supreme Society: *"We then said to the angels:*

'Prostrate yourselves before Adam!' They all prostrated themselves, except for Iblīs: he was not one of those who prostrated themselves." (Verse 11)

The angels are a different type of God's creation who have their distinctive characteristics and special tasks. We do not know anything about them except what God has told us, which we have stated earlier.[7] Iblīs belongs to yet another type of creation, different from the angels. God states in the Qur'ān, in reference to Iblīs: *"He belonged to the jinn and acted contrary to his Lord's command."* (18: 50) The *jinn* are also a type of creation different from the angels and we have already summarized earlier[8] what God has told us about them. It will be stated later in this *sūrah*[9] that Iblīs was created out of fire. Hence, most certainly he never was an angel, although he was commanded to prostrate himself to Adam together with the angels in that great event when the Almighty announced the forthcoming appearance of man, the unique creature.

As for the angels, who never disobey God in whatever He may order them and simply do what they are bid, they all prostrated themselves in total obedience to God. None hesitated; none showed any indication of arrogance, because none contemplated disobedience of God for any reason. Such is their nature and such are their characteristics. Here we see clear evidence of the honour God has given to man, and of the total obedience that is always shown by the type of God's servants to whom we refer as the angels.

As for Iblīs, he wilfully disobeyed God, defying His orders. We will soon learn what thoughts were in his mind and what caused him to take this stance although he was perfectly aware that the One who was giving the orders was his Lord who had created him and who had control of his destiny as also of the destiny of the whole universe. Iblīs never entertained any doubt about all this. Nevertheless, he still disobeyed God.

Three Different Natures

The scene portrays three different types of God's creation: the first is that given to absolute obedience and complete self-surrender. In this scene, its role is completed with the submission it makes which manifested itself in the angels prostrating themselves, one and all, to Adam as commanded by their Lord. The second type is that of absolute disobedience and spiteful arrogance, while the third is that of human nature. We will be discussing shortly the characteristics of these latter types and how they work.

[7] Vol. V, pp. 45-47.
[8] Vol. V, pp. 263.
[9] Verse 12

> *And [God] said: "What has prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you?" Answered [Iblīs]: "I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay"* (Verse 12)

Iblīs here claims for himself a private opinion and a right of discretion to consider whether to comply with an order given by God or not. He wants to base his action on what appears to him to be justifiable. Needless to say, when a clear order is given by God no one has the right of discretion. The only thing that is left is complete obedience and perfect compliance. However, fully aware that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all creation and who controls the universe to the extent that nothing takes place without His permission and consent, Iblīs refuses to comply, justifying his disobedience by his own logic: *"I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay."* (Verse 12) Immediately, he received the right answer to his arrogance: *"[God] said: Off with you hence! It is not for you to show your arrogance here. Get out, then; you will always be among the humiliated."* (Verse 13)

Neither his knowledge of God nor his belief in God's existence and attributes were of any benefit to Iblīs. The same applies to anyone who receives a divine order and claims for himself a degree of discretion about whether to accept or refuse that order, or claims the right to refuse God's ruling on any question whatsoever. For this entails disbelief in spite of knowledge and certitude. Iblīs was not at all lacking in either his knowledge of God or his certainty of His attributes. He was expelled from Heaven and deprived of God's grace. He incurred God's displeasure and was condemned to permanent humiliation.

Evil and obstinate as he is, Iblīs does not forget the cause of his expulsion and God's displeasure with him: namely, Adam. He does not want to accept his miserable fate without trying to avenge himself. Furthermore, he wants to fulfil his task in accordance with the evil nature which he has come to symbolize: *"Said he: 'Grant me a respite until the Day when all will be raised [from the dead].' God replied: 'You shall indeed be among these granted respite.' [Iblīs] said: 'Since You let me fall in error, I shall indeed lurk in ambush for them all along Your straight path, and I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left; and You will find most of them ungrateful.'"* (Verses 14-17)

His attitude, then, is one of complete determination to follow the evil path, and absolute insistence on trying to lead people astray. Here we see his nature revealing its main characteristic of a deeply entrenched, deliberate evil, and not a passing or temporary one.

We also see here a concrete outline of thoughts, concepts and reactions, all portrayed with exceptional vividness. Iblīs requests his Lord to give him respite until the Day of Resurrection, knowing that what he is asking can only be granted by

God's will. God granted his request and gave him respite until the *"Day of the appointed time"* as it is described in another *sūrah.* A number of reports explain that this is a reference to the Day of the blowing of the Trumpet when everything that exists in the heavens and the earth is stunned unconscious, with the exception of whomever God wills. In other words, his respite does not extend to the Day of Resurrection.

As he has been granted prolonged life, Iblīs announces with wicked arrogance that he will concentrate his efforts in leading astray the very creature on whom God has bestowed His honour and who was the cause of Iblīs's own tragedy and rejection. His endeavour to tempt human beings away from the right path is shown here by drawing the practical import of what he declared: *"I shall indeed lurk in ambush for them all along Your straight path, and I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left."* (Verses 16-17)

He wants always to be close to God's straight path watching for Adam and his offspring, trying to turn away any human being who tries to pass along. The way to God cannot be a concrete one, because God is above being confined to a certain place. It is, then, the road of faith and obedience which leads to God's pleasure. Iblīs, then, will have to come at human beings from every direction: *"I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left."* (Verse 17) His aim will always be to try to prevent them from believing in God and obeying Him. This is a very lively portrait of Iblīs falling upon human beings in his never-ending endeavour to tempt them away from God's path so that they cannot believe in God or show their gratitude to Him, except for a small number of them who manage to escape Iblīs's efforts: *"You will find most of them ungrateful"*

Gratitude is mentioned here because it is in harmony with what was mentioned earlier in this *sūrah: "How seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 10) We have here the reason for this lack of gratitude on the part of human beings. Its real cause is Iblīs's endeavour and the fact that he lurks in ambush for human beings to prevent them from believing in God. Human beings are then alerted to the designs of their enemy who tries to stop them from following divine guidance. They should be on their guard, since now they know the reason for their ingratitude.

Iblīs's request has been granted because God has willed human beings to find their own way since their nature is susceptible to good and evil. Furthermore, man has been given a mind to think, reflect and choose, and he has been given reminders and warnings through God's messengers. Furthermore, he has been given the means to control and correct himself. It is God's will that he receives signals of right guidance and error, and that goodness and evil should have their fight within him so that his faith is determined in accordance with the law God has set in operation. God's will is thus accomplished by testing human beings. Whether they follow right

guidance or go astray, God's law is thus accomplished.

The *sūrah* here does not state clearly that any permission has been given to Iblīs to put his threat into effect. At least not in the same way as it clearly states that his request to be given respite has been granted. Rather, we are not told the result of that threat. But we are informed of Iblīs's humiliating expulsion and that he had fallen completely from grace. Furthermore, the *sūrah* tells us that God has warned that He will fill hell with Iblīs's offspring and all those human beings who follow him into error: "*[God] said: 'Get out of here, despised, disgraced. As for those of them that follow you, I shall fill Hell with you all.'*" (Verse 18)

His followers among human beings may simply follow him in his knowledge of God and his belief that God is the supreme deity and overall Lord, but they may, nevertheless, reject God's sovereignty and legislative authority. They may follow Iblīs in claiming that they have discretion to look into God's orders and to determine whether to implement them or not. On the other hand, Iblīs's human followers may simply follow his footsteps and thus they are turned away from guidance altogether. Both situations represent following Iblīs and both earn hell as a reward.

God has granted Iblīs and his offspring the chance to lead people away from the right path. He has also given Adam and human beings in general the freedom of choice so that He can put them to the test. It is this choice which makes man a special type of creation: he belongs neither to the realm of angels who obey God in all situations nor to the world of satans who disobey Him all the time. Man has a totally different role to play.

Temptation of the Forbidden Tree

Fast on the heels of the scene ending with Satan's expulsion from Heaven follows a scene in which we see God looking at Adam and his wife. Only at this point do we realize that Adam has a wife of his own species. We do not know how she came to exist. This passage which relates this story of the creation of man and similar passages in the Qur'ān do not tell us anything about the creation of the female human being. All the reports that speak of her being created out of Adam's rib belong to Israelite literature. As such, they are not totally reliable. What we can say without fear of being contradicted is that God created for Adam a spouse of his own type, to make them a couple. Making all species in couples is the law applicable to all creation. God says in the Qur'ān: "*Of all things We have created couples so that you may reflect.*" (51: 49) Keeping this rule in mind, it seems to us that it was not long before Eve was created, and that it must have been in the same manner as Adam's creation.

Be that as it may, both Adam and his wife are now addressed to outline God's commandment to them. They are to be given their experiences so that they are

prepared for the fulfilment of their basic role for which they have been created. This is the role of vicegerency on earth, as is stated clearly in the second *sūrah,* The Cow, or, Al-Baqarah, in which we are told: *"Your Lord said to the angels: I am appointing a vicegerent on earth."* (2: 30)

"And (as for you), Adam: dwell you and your wife in this Garden, and eat, both of you, whatever you may desire; but do not come near this tree, lest you become wrongdoers." (Verse 19) The Qur'ān remains silent about what kind of tree it was, because providing any specific information on this point does not add any particular information about the purpose of its prohibition. Withholding such information lends weight to the view that the prohibition itself was the objective. God has permitted Adam and his wife the enjoyment of what He has made lawful, and commanded them to steer away from what has been forbidden. It was necessary to identify something as forbidden so that the human race could learn that people must not exceed their limits. Thus man's will is restrained such that he controls his desire and caprice. He is thus able to elevate himself above the level of animals who respond involuntarily to their desires and cannot control them. This is indeed the quality that distinguishes man from animals.

Now Satan begins to play the role for which he dedicated himself. This against a unique creation whose birth God so graciously announced Himself before the Supreme Society in grand celebration. Furthermore, He ordered the angels to prostrate themselves to him, and expelled Satan from heaven on his account. We are told how God created man with a dual nature, capable of following both the right and wrong paths. He has inherent weaknesses and desires which can lead him astray, unless he observes God's commandments.

Thus Satan saw his chance and began to play on human desires: *"But Satan whispered to them both, so that he might show them their nakedness, of which they had previously been unaware. He said to them: 'Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree lest you two become angels or immortals.' And he swore to them: 'I am indeed giving you sound advice.'"* (Verses 20-21)

We do not know how the whisperings of Satan took place, because we do not even know Satan's nature or from what he is made, let alone understand how he acts. We cannot say how he establishes his contact with man or how he tempts him. But we know for certain, on the basis of true information given to us by the only source acceptable in connection with such matters known only to God, that temptation to do what is evil does actually happen in order to encourage man to do what he is forbidden. Such temptation relies on the weaknesses in human nature, but such weakness can be transformed into strength through faith and remembrance of God. None of Satan's schemes can be of any effect with a believer who remains conscious of his Lord.

Thus Satan whispered to them in order to show them their nakedness. This was his aim. They certainly had unsightly parts of which they were unaware because they were made not to see them. We will soon learn from the Qur'ānic passage that these were in their physical constitution, requiring to be covered. Hence, we may understand this as a reference to their private parts. Satan did not reveal to them his objective but continued to play on their desires: *"He said to them: 'Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree lest you two become angels or immortals.'"* (Verse 20) He knew the inner desires of man who loves to be immortal or at least to have a very long life. He also loves to be an angel who is not limited to a short lifespan.

The Arabic word in the Qur'ānic text which refers to 'angels' is also read in a different form so as to make it mean 'kings'. Only a change of a short vowel, which is not normally written in Arabic script, is needed to make the word denote either meaning. This second reading is further supported by the statement reporting Satan's word in *Sūrah* 20, "Ṭā Hā", when Satan is quoted as saying to them: *"Adam, shall I lead you to the tree of life eternal, and to a kingdom that will never decay?"* (20: 120) According to this reading, the temptation offered by Satan was that of everlasting wealth and immortality. They represent man's two strongest desires. It may be said that sexual desire itself is only a means to fulfil a desire for immortality, perpetuating human existence one generation after another. If we take the first reading which makes Satan's words refer to angels: *"Your Lord has only forbidden you this tree lest you two become angels or immortals"*, then the temptation is slightly different. He is tempting them with removal of the limitations of their bodies so that they are like angels and with unending life. Although the first reading, speaking of an everlasting kingdom, is less well-known, it is more in line with the other Qur'ānic statement quoted above and fits more perfectly with Satan's scheming when he tries to play on man's desires.

The Fall from Heaven

Wicked as he is and knowing that prohibition of that tree was firmly rooted in their minds, Satan thought to shaken its effect by assuring them that they had nothing to fear. He coupled that by tempting them with the fulfilment of their desires. He swore to them that he only gave them sound advice and that he was sincere in that advice: *"And he swore to them: I am indeed giving you sound advice."* (Verse 21).

Upon the influence of their desires and the reassuring effect of his oath, Adam and his wife forgot that Satan was their enemy who would never point out something good to them. They became oblivious of the fact that God had issued a commandment to them which they had to obey, whether they recognized its purpose

or not. They further forgot that everything takes place in accordance with God's will. If it is God's will that they should not be immortal or should not have an everlasting kingdom, then they will have neither. They forgot all this and yielded to Satan's temptation. *"Thus he cunningly deluded them. And when they both had tasted the fruit of the tree, their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden. Their Lord called out to them: `Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you both that Satan is your open enemy?"* (Verse 22)

The temptation was thus complete and yielded its bitter fruit. With their error, Satan brought them down from the level of obeying God to that of disobeying Him. Thus he caused their delusion: *"Thus he cunningly deluded them."* (Verse 22) Now they realized that they were naked after they were unaware of those bodily parts which should remain covered. They began to gather leaves from the trees of heaven and patch them together to cover their nakedness. The way all this is expressed in the Qur'ān suggests that it is a reference to the physical private parts which a human being is naturally too shy to expose. He only exposes them when his nature is corrupted under the pressure of traditions and practices that may prevail in *jāhiliyyah* societies.

Their Lord called out to them: *"Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you both that Satan is your open enemy?"* (Verse 22) They heard their Lord's reproach for their disobedience and for taking no heed of His advice. As to how this reproach was made and how they heard it, these are matters of which we have no knowledge other than that they took place. We accept that as we accept the statement that their Lord spoke to them the first time and also spoke to the angels and to Iblīs. God does what He wants.

With this address from on high, the other side of man's nature is revealed. He is liable to forget and to err. He has a weakness which gives Satan the opportunity to delude him. He does not always maintain the right path. However, he recognizes his mistake and regrets it, and seeks God's help and forgiveness. He is ready to turn back to God. He does not insist on his disobedience as Satan did, nor does he request his Lord to help him sink deeper into error: *"Said they: 'Our Lord.' We have wronged ourselves; and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall certainly be lost.'"* (Verse 23) This is one of man's main characteristics, establishing his bond with his Lord. This opening of the doors leading to his Lord involves recognition of his error, repentance, seeking forgiveness, feeling his own weakness, seeking God's help and mercy. He is all the time certain that his own power is of no avail unless God helps him and bestows His mercy on him. Otherwise he is lost.

Thus the first experience is completed. Man's main characteristics are thus outlined. He has become aware of these characteristics and he has gone through this experience. It all provides him with the necessary equipment to fulfil his task as

vicegerent on earth. He can now enter into the battle against his enemy which is meant to be an unabating battle: *"Said He: 'Get you down hence, [and be henceforth] enemies to one another, having on earth your abode and livelihood for a while.'"* (Verse 24)

"There shall you live, " He added, 'and there shall you die, and from there shall you be brought forth [on the Day of Resurrection]." (Verse 25) They all fell down, descending to this earth. But where were they? Where is Heaven? All that belongs to the realm which remains unknown to us except in so far as God, who holds the keys to that realm, tells us. Any attempt to discover that realm after revelations have ceased is bound to be futile. Any denial of it based on what is familiar or what is known today to human beings is a mark of arrogance. Man's knowledge certainly falls short of trying to discover this unknown world without the proper tools and means. Man is both conceited and arrogant when he denies the existence of that realm which lies beyond the perception of his senses, when it is all around him. In the world of matter, which is within man's own world, what is unknown is much greater than what is known.

All of them: Adam and his wife, Iblīs and his host, fell down to earth where they began their fight fuelled with hostility. The battle rages between two natures, one of them devoted completely to evil while the other has a dual aspect which responds to good and evil. Thus the test begins and God's will is done.

Adam and his offspring are destined to remain on earth where they have the power to build it and to enjoy its comforts for a while. On earth they live and they die, before they are resurrected, when they return to their Lord at the end of their great journey. He then assigns them either to heaven or to hell.

The first round in the battle is over, but it is to be followed by numerous rounds. Man will also be victorious when he seeks help from his Lord and follows the path He has shown him. He will end up in defeat whenever he defers to his enemy.

Full Harmony in the System of Creation

What we are told in this *sūrah* about Adam's creation is not a mere story. It is a presentation outlining the truth of the creation of man, explaining his nature and origin as well as the world around him and what control he has over his life. It also seeks to explain the code which God wants him to implement, the test to which he is put and the destiny awaiting him. All these are basic elements in the Islamic concept of life. We will tackle these only briefly in our commentary, because they are tackled in greater depth in a separate book.[10]

[10] This work by the author, in two volumes, is entitled *Khaṣā'is al-Taṣawwur al-Islāmī wa Muqawwimātuh,* or The Main Characteristics and Basic Principles of the Islamic Concept, Dar al-

The first fact which we derive from studying the history of human existence and how man came into being demonstrates that there is full and complete harmony between the nature of the universe and the creation of man. Divine planning, which is characterized by being elaborate and careful, encompasses both man and the universe. It is this planning which makes man's existence the outcome of a deliberate plan, not a mere coincidence. It also makes harmony between man and the universe the norm.

Those who do not have a proper concept of God and do not properly understand His nature or give Him the respect due to Him, apply their own human measures to His will and actions. When they realize that man is only one of numerous creatures which live on earth, and discover that the earth is no more than a small particle in the ocean of the universe, they claim that "it does not stand to reason" that man's existence has a definite purpose or that man has a role to play in the overall universal system. Some claim that human existence was a mere coincidence and that the universe is hostile to human existence and life in general. These are no more than blind thoughts that result from imposing human standards on God's actions.

Clearly, had man been the owner of this vast universe, he would have paid no attention whatsoever to this earth, or to man, the creature walking here and there on the face of the earth. That is because human concerns cannot be addressed to everything that exists in this great creation or to the establishment of harmony between them. But the Lord of the universe is God (limitless is He in His glory) who does not allow a single particle in any part of the heavens or the earth to escape His attention. He is the sovereign of this great kingdom in which nothing can exist without His will or survive without His care. The problem with man is that when he deviates from divine guidance and follows his own desires, which he may call occasionally as science and knowledge, he forgets what God is like and gives Him a picture of his own making. He then starts to measure His actions by his own standards. As a result, he imposes the dictates of his desire, thereby distorting the truth.

As an example of the many erroneous human concepts let us look at this statement by Sir James Jeans:

> Standing on our microscopic fragment of a grain of sand, we attempt to discover the nature and purpose of the universe which surrounds our home in space and time. Our first impression is something akin to terror. We find the universe terrifying because of its vast meaningless distances, terrifying because of its inconceivably long vistas of time which dwarf human history to the twinkling of an eye, terrifying because of our extreme loneliness, and

---

Shurūq, Cairo. — Editor's note.

> because of the material insignificance of our home in space — a millionth part of a grain of sand out of all the sea sand in the world. But above all else, we find the universe terrifying because it appears to be indifferent to life like our own; emotion, ambition and achievement, art and religion all seem equally foreign to its plan. Perhaps indeed we ought to say it appears to be actively hostile to life like our own. For the most part, empty space is so cold that all life in it would be frozen; most of the matter in space is so hot as to make life on it impossible; space is traversed, and astronomical bodies continually bombarded, by radiation of a variety of kinds, much of which is probably inimical to, or even destructive of, life.
>
> Into such a universe we have stumbled, if not exactly by mistake, at least as the result of what may properly be described as an accidents[11]

We have already explained that to assume that the universe is hostile to the emergence of life, together with the assumption that there is no deliberate planning or controlling force, and the fact that life exists in spite of all this cannot be entertained by any man of reason, let alone a scientist. How is it possible that life could appear in a hostile environment assuming there is no controlling power that determines what takes place? Is life stronger than the universe so as to emerge despite its hostility to it? Is it possible to imagine that, even before he comes into existence, man is stronger than the universe which already exists? This is the only meaning of their statement that man existed despite the hostility of the universe.

Such concepts do not deserve a moment's attention. Had those `scientists' limited their role to telling us about what they see and discover, through the means available to them, in the universe, without venturing into such metaphysical concepts that have no basis whatsoever, they would have played a constructive role, limited as it may be, in making the nature of the universe known to mankind. But they go beyond the area of safe knowledge into the maze of theories and assumptions, without any guidance other than their own whims and caprice.

Praise be to God for His guidance! We, for our part, do not feel any sense of fear when we look at this great universe. We certainly have a sense of awe when we consider the creation of this universe and we feel the greatness of its Creator, and the beauty of His creation. We feel safe and secure with this friendly universe in which God has placed us and with which He made our existence harmonious. We are overawed by its greatness and its elaborate systems, but we fear nothing. Nor do we experience any sense of loss or forthcoming destruction. The Lord of the universe is God, our Lord. With the universe we deal with ease, friendship and confidence. We expect to find in it provisions to sustain our life and comforts to make it more

[11] Sir James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe,* Cambridge University Press, 1931, pp. 2-3.

enjoyable. We hope to remain always grateful to God: *"We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 10)

Man's Honour and Role

The second fact to be concluded from the story of the start of human life is that man is not only unique among living creatures, he is also noble and honoured. Moreover, a great task has been assigned to him. He moves within a wide expanse and deals with a variety of worlds, within the framework of his submission to God alone. This concept is diametrically opposed to man-made materialistic philosophies which ignore his role in the universe and give all importance to matter and its inevitable influence. It is also opposed to the theory of evolution which sends man down to the animal world and cares little for his unique and distinctive characteristics. Similarly, it is contrary to the Freudian philosophy which uses psychiatric analysis to depict man as totally lost in the quagmire of sex, to the extent that he can only sublimate himself through sexual behaviour. But the nobility and honour Islam assigns to man does not make of him a god, as he is depicted by the philosophical theories formulated in the Age of Enlightenment. The Islamic concept is distinguished by being factual and balanced at the same time.

Based on the import of all the Qur'ānic statements that speak of man's existence, we are more in favour of the view that man's existence was an independent one, but we cannot say that with absolute certainty. The birth of this unique species was announced in a great gathering witnessed by the Supreme Society. The announcement was made to this noble gathering and to the whole universe by God Almighty. In another account of this event, related in the second *sūrah,* man's mission as vicegerent on earth is also announced at the beginning of his creation. Then he faced his first test in heaven to prepare him for discharging the duties of vicegerency. Qur'ānic statements in other *sūrahs* also make it clear that God has made the whole universe, not only the earth, helpful to him. He has made all things in the heavens and on earth subservient to him.

In this we note the great task assigned to man by his Creator. To build life on a whole planet and to be in charge of it by God's will, regardless of the size of the planet, is certainly a great honour.

What appears from this story and from other statements in the Qur'ān, is that man is a unique creature, not only in respect of this planet of ours but also in the universe. Other worlds of creation like the angels and the *jinn,* and other types known only to God, have other tasks, and have been created with suitable natures that differ from that of man. Man has his own characteristics and tasks giving him a unique position

in God's system of creation. This is further supported by God's statement in the Qur'ān: *"We offered Our trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains, but they refused to bear it because they were afraid of it. Yet man took it up, for he has always been prone to be a wrongdoer and foolish."* (33: 72) This makes man a species on his own, with unique characteristics which include being a wrongdoer and foolish. He has also been given freedom of choice within limits, the ability to learn and acquire progressive knowledge, and a free will of his own. He has the ability to maintain justice and acquire great knowledge in the same way as he has the ability to be unjust and sink into ignorance. This dual ability is indeed his distinctive quality.

All this shows how false is the view of man, based on the very small size of the planet on which we live, compared to other great entities in the universe. Size counts for little. The qualities of a knowledge- absorbing mind, a will that is independent, within the limits of submission to God, the freedom of choice and the ability to weigh up things are all far more important elements than the size of the earth upon which Sir James Jeans and others base their views of man and his role.

The importance which this story and other Qur'ānic statements give to mankind is not limited to man's role as vicegerent on earth, with all his unique characteristics. That importance is complemented by a careful look at the vastness of the world within which man moves to fulfil his task and the worlds with which he deals. To start with, he has a direct relationship with his Lord, limitless is He in His Glory. It is his Lord who made man with His own hand, and it is He who has announced his birth to the Supreme Society and throughout the universe, and then placed him in heaven to eat of its fruit as he pleases, with the exception of the forbidden tree. It is his Lord who then put him in charge of the earth and gave him the basis of knowledge, as related in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, in which God states: *"He taught Adam the names of all things."* (2: 31) We understand that statement as referring to man's ability to assign verbal symbols and names to matters and ideas. That is the basis which enables human beings to exchange knowledge and make it available throughout the human race. His Lord then gave him His instructions while still in Heaven and later after he came down to earth. He gave him all the abilities making the human race unique. He then sent him messengers with His guidance, and committed Himself to bestow mercy on man, forgive him his slips and accept his repentance. Indeed the blessings God has bestowed on this unique creation are endless.

Man also deals with the Supreme Society, for God has ordered the angels to prostrate themselves to him. He also assigned angels to guard man, and gave some of them the task of delivering revelations to His messengers. He sends down some of the angels to give happy news to those who declare that God is their Lord and maintain an attitude of obedience to Him. Angels are also sent to support those who fight for God's cause. He gives some angels the task of fighting unbelievers, killing

them and taking away their souls. The dealings between angels and human beings continue in this life and in the life to come as well.

And man also deals with the *jinn,* whether believers or unbelievers. The Qur'ān portrays in vivid scenes the first battle between man and Satan. That battle still rages and will continue until the appointed day when the life of this world comes to an end. Man's dealing with the believers among the *jinn* is mentioned in other Qur'ānic statements. Making the *jinn* serve man is also stated clearly in the story of the Prophet Solomon (peace be upon him).

Man also deals with this material world, particularly the earth and the not-too-distant planets and stars. He is God's vicegerent placed in charge of the earth. God has made all potential sources, provisions and latent powers available to him. He has the ability to uncover some of its secrets, and identify some of its laws which help him in discharging his great role. Hence, he deals with all that lives on and in the earth. Finally, with his dual nature and ability, he has an unlimited scope within himself. He can be so sublime as to elevate himself above the rank of angels when he makes his submission to God pure, absolute. And he sinks down far below the level of animals when he makes himself subservient to his desire. For then he sheds his human characteristics and sinks into a bottomless pit. Between these two the gap is far greater than that separating the heavens from the earth in our material sense.

Nothing of all this is available to any creature other than man, as we understand from this story and other Qur'ānic accounts.

The Battle Rages On

The third fact which we can deduce from this story is that despite the uniqueness of man, or because of it, he is weak in certain aspects of his constitution. His weakness makes it possible for him to be led by his desire to evil and to bottomless depths. His two main weaknesses are his love of survival and his possessive desire. He is at his weakest when he leaves God's guidance and submits to his desire or to his sworn enemy who has taken it upon himself to try to seduce him and never let him go.

But God has shown His grace to man by not leaving him alone to carve his path on the basis of the dictates of his nature and reason without any further help. God has sent him messengers to remind and warn him, as we will see in a following verse. This represents man's salvation indeed. He is saved from his caprice and desire by turning to God, and he is saved from his enemy who flies away whenever man remembers his Lord and seeks His mercy and reward.

All these elements strengthen man's resolve and help him elevate himself above

his desires and weaknesses. He received his first training in this area whilst still in heaven. He was told then that a particular tree was forbidden him. That training aimed to strengthen his will and to highlight its opposition to temptation and weakness. If he failed in his first experience, that experience should stand him in good stead in the future.

By the grace of God, the door of repentance and return remains open to man at every moment. Should he remember after a slip or a lapse of memory, and should he repent after having fallen into sin, then he finds the door open. God will accept his repentance and forgive him his slips. When he maintains the right path thereafter, God substitutes good deeds for bad ones and multiplies his reward as many times as He pleases. God has not made man's original sin a curse that chases him and his offspring, for there is simply no permanent, everlasting or inherited sin. No one bears the burden of another.

This basic element in the Islamic concept relieves mankind of the burden and the myth of original, inherited sin which forms the basis of Church concepts in Christianity. It also provides the basis for a great mass of rituals and superstitions. It depicts Adam as a sinner whose sin becomes a curse threatening mankind all the time. The only way to save man, according to this concept, is for God to take the form of the son of man, the Christ who, bearing the burden of atonement for this inherited sin, is allegedly crucified. Thus, forgiveness is granted only to those who are in communion with Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself to atone for Adam's sin inherited by his offspring.

The Islamic concept is much simpler and much easier. Adam forgot his instructions and slipped into sin, but he then repented and prayed for forgiveness. God accepted his repentance and forgave him. That puts an end to that first sin. What remains of it is the experience which helps mankind in its ongoing fight against sin and temptation. How simple, how clear and how easy.

The fourth and final conclusion to be derived from this story is that man's battle with Satan is real, serious and unabating. As it is related, the story tells us of the great persistence of this avowed enemy to chase man in all situations and to try to delude him at every moment and attack him from every corner: "*[Iblīs] said: 'Since You let me fall in error, I shall indeed lurk in ambush for them all along Your straight path, and I shall most certainly fall upon them from the front and from the rear, and from their right and from their left; and You will find most of them ungrateful.'*" (Verses 16-17) The evil one has chosen to be given a very long life in which to continue his wicked scheming. He opted for this wickedness in preference to turning to God in sincere repentance, praying to Him to forgive him his sin committed openly in public after he heard His command in person. He made it clear that he would lie in ambush for human beings trying to turn them away from God's path, and attack them from

every corner in order to divert them from God's guidance.

Satan can only play on man's weaknesses and tempt him with fulfilling his desires. Man cannot protect himself against Satan except through consolidating his strength with faith and remembrance of God and by raising himself above desires and making these desires subject to the guidance he has received from God.

The battle with Satan is the major encounter, because it is a fight against desire through the following of divine guidance, and a fight against caprice through enhancing will-power, and a fight against evil and corruption to which Satan leads those who befriend him. It is a fight conducted through following the divine law which sets life on earth on the right path. This fight takes place within man's conscience and in his daily life, with the two linked together because Satan continues to stir the fight on both its fronts.

Tyrants who try to subjugate people to their rules, laws, standards and values and exclude those derived from divine faith are evil human beings who listen to the whispering of the evil ones among the *jinn.* The fight against those tyrants is the same as the fight against Satan himself.

This means that the major battle which rages on is that fought against Satan himself and those who befriend him. As a Muslim engages in the fight against his caprice and profane desires, against Satan's friends who tyrannize on earth, their servants and soldiers, and against the evil, corruption and immorality they spread in the land, he realizes that it is all a single, ferocious battle fought in earnest, because his enemy, Satan, is intent to fight him to the bitter end. Thus the fight goes on and *jihād,* or the struggle for God's cause, continues until the Day of Judgement, taking numerous forms and shapes.

Finally, the story and the comments that follow it refer to an intrinsic aspect of human nature, which makes man too shy to willingly appear naked: *"But Satan whispered to them both, so that he might show them their nakedness, of which they had previously been unaware."* (Verse 20) *"Thus he cunningly deluded them. And when they both had tasted the fruit of the tree, their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden."* (Verse 22) *"Children of Adam, We have sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness, and garments pleasing to the eye; but the robe of God-consciousness is the finest of all. In this there is a sign from God, so that they may reflect. Children of Adam, do not allow Satan to seduce you in the same way as he caused your (first) parents to be turned out of the Garden. He stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness."* (Verses 26-27)

These verses emphasize the importance of this question showing that it touches on something deeply rooted in human nature. Clothing is not merely an adornment to man, but it also covers his physical nakedness, in the same way as fearing God

covers his mental nakedness.

Sound, uncorrupted human nature abhors revealing its physical and mental nakedness. Those who try to persuade people to cast off their clothes and the garment of God-consciousness and fearing Him, in order to make them appear naked, unashamed, aim only to deprive man of some of his basic natural qualities. This attempt is supported by many who speak up or write or utilize the media in order to paint this nakedness as normal, using every means for this evil end. Their goal is to deprive man of some aspects of his humanity which distinguishes him from other creatures. They all want to put man at the mercy of his enemy, Satan, who has always wanted to undress him and expose his nakedness. Such people are only putting into practice some evil Zionist schemes, aiming to destroy humanity, and spread promiscuity so that all mankind submits without resistance to the kingdom of Zion, after they have lost their distinctive human characteristics.

Nakedness is a quality of animal nature. Man does not prefer nakedness except when he sinks down to a level below that which befits man. Those who find nakedness beautiful suffer from a distortion of human taste. Some primitive peoples in the heartland of Africa are always nude, but when Islam penetrates into these areas, the first aspect of civilization it imparts to them is that they start to wear clothes. In modern, `progressive' jāhiliyyah people sink into the depths from which Islam rescues those who are backward and puts them on the road to civilization in the Islamic sense, which promotes the distinctive characteristics of man.

Psychological and mental nakedness, which sheds the sense of shame and fear of God, is strongly advocated by many people in the media, but it is simply a step back into *jāhiliyyah.* It is a far cry from the superior level of advancement and civilization, although its advocates try to depict it as so.

The story of the creation of man as told in the Qur'ān emphasizes these values and standards and explains them fully. We praise God for having guided us and saved us from following the whispers of Satan and rescued us from the quagmire of ignorance and *jāhiliyyah.*

3
Man's Finest Garment

يَٰبَنِيٓ ءَادَمَ قَدۡ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡكُمۡ لِبَاسٗا يُوَٰرِي سَوۡءَٰتِكُمۡ وَرِيشٗاۖ وَلِبَاسُ ٱلتَّقۡوَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ خَيۡرٞۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ٢٦

Children of Adam, We have sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness, and garments pleasing to the eye; but the robe of God-consciousness is the finest of all. In this there is a sign from God, so that they may reflect. (26)

يَٰبَنِيٓ ءَادَمَ لَا يَفۡتِنَنَّكُمُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ كَمَآ أَخۡرَجَ أَبَوَيۡكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ يَنزِعُ عَنۡهُمَا لِبَاسَهُمَا لِيُرِيَهُمَا سَوۡءَٰتِهِمَآۗ إِنَّهُۥ يَرَىٰكُمۡ هُوَ وَقَبِيلُهُۥ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ لَا تَرَوۡنَهُمۡۗ إِنَّا جَعَلۡنَا ٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ أَوۡلِيَآءَ لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٢٧

Children of Adam, do not allow Satan to seduce you in the same way as he caused your [first] parents to be turned out of the Garden. He stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness. Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them. We have made the devils as patrons for those who do not believe. (27)

وَإِذَا فَعَلُواْ فَٰحِشَةٗ قَالُواْ وَجَدۡنَا عَلَيۡهَآ ءَابَآءَنَا وَٱللَّهُ أَمَرَنَا بِهَاۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَأۡمُرُ بِٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِۖ أَتَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٨

When they commit a shameful deed, they say, "We found our fathers doing it," and, "God has enjoined it upon us." Say: "Never does God enjoin what is indecent. Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?" (28)

قُلۡ أَمَرَ رَبِّي بِٱلۡقِسۡطِۖ وَأَقِيمُواْ وُجُوهَكُمۡ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسۡجِدٖ وَٱدۡعُوهُ مُخۡلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَۚ كَمَا بَدَأَكُمۡ تَعُودُونَ ٢٩

Say: "My Lord has enjoined justice, and that you set your whole selves [to Him] at every time and place of prayer, and call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone. As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return: (29)

فَرِيقًا هَدَىٰ وَفَرِيقًا حَقَّ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةُۗ إِنَّهُمُ ٱتَّخَذُواْ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ أَوۡلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَحۡسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهۡتَدُونَ ٣٠

some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable. For, they will have taken satans for their protectors in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path. (30)

۞ يَٰبَنِيٓ ءَادَمَ خُذُواْ زِينَتَكُمۡ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسۡجِدٖ وَكُلُواْ وَٱشۡرَبُواْ وَلَا تُسۡرِفُوٓاْۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُسۡرِفِينَ ٣١

Children of Adam, dress well when you attend any place of worship. Eat and drink but do not be wasteful. Surely He does not love the wasteful. (31)

قُلۡ مَنۡ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِيٓ أَخۡرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِۦ وَٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ مِنَ ٱلرِّزۡقِۚ قُلۡ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا خَالِصَةٗ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۗ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لِقَوۡمٖ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٢

Say, "Who is there to forbid the beauty which God has produced for His servants, and the wholesome means of sustenance? Say, They are [lawful] in the life of this world, to all who believe — to be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection. Thus do We make Our revelations clear to people of knowledge. (32)

قُلۡ إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ رَبِّيَ ٱلۡفَوَٰحِشَ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنۡهَا وَمَا بَطَنَ وَٱلۡإِثۡمَ وَٱلۡبَغۡيَ بِغَيۡرِ ٱلۡحَقِّ وَأَن تُشۡرِكُواْ بِٱللَّهِ مَا لَمۡ يُنَزِّلۡ بِهِۦ سُلۡطَٰنٗا وَأَن تَقُولُواْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٣

Say, My Lord has only forbidden shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and all types of sin, and wrongful oppression, and that you should associate with God anything for which He has given no authority, and that you attribute to God any- thing of which you have no knowledge. (33)

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلٞۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهُمۡ لَا يَسۡتَأۡخِرُونَ سَاعَةٗۖ وَلَا يَسۡتَقۡدِمُونَ ٣٤

For every community a term has been set. When [the end of] their term approaches, they can neither delay nor hasten it by a single moment. (34)

Overview

This passage provides a pause for comment, which is one of a few instances in this

sūrah. It is a long pause after the first scene in the great story of mankind. A similar pause is made at the end of every stage, as if we are told: let us stop here to reflect on the lessons of the previous epoch before we go further on our unique journey.

This pause comes at the beginning of the battle which is about to rage between Satan and man. It is meant as a warning against Satan's schemes and exposes the numerous ways and fashions his scheming may take. But the Qur'ān does not issue any directive unless it is needed to face a practical situation, and does not relate a story unless it is relevant to the day-to-day life of the Islamic movement. It does not relate a story for the sake of literary enjoyment, and does not state a fact only to place it in a theoretical context. Islam is serious and practical, and its statements and directives are meant only to deal with realities which the Islamic movement may have to face.

This comment on the story of man's fall from heaven is given here by way of facing up to the Arabian *jāhiliyyah* when, prior to the advent of Islam, the Quraysh, the major tribe in Arabia, had claimed for itself certain rights against the unbelievers of the rest of Arabia who went to Makkah for pilgrimage and paid homage to the idols which were placed in the Ka`bah. The Quraysh based its claims on concepts which it alleged to be part of the divine faith. It formulated these in laws, claiming them to be part of the divine law. How else could the Quraysh have won acceptance to its claim by the rest of Arabia? It had to resort to the same tactics followed by priests, chiefs and leaders in every ignorant community. The Quraysh gave itself a special name, al-Hums, and claimed for itself special privileges, some of which relate to the ritual of *ṭawāf* which takes the form of walking round the Ka`bah, the first house ever to be dedicated for worshipping God. They claimed that al-Hums, or the Qurayshīs, were the only people to have the privilege of doing ṭawāf wearing ordinary clothes. The rest of the Arabs could not do *ṭawāf* wearing clothes that had previously been worn. Instead, they had to borrow clothes from al-Hums people, or wear brand new clothing. Otherwise, they had to do *ṭawāf* in the nude, even though they had their women with them.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr states:

> The Arabs, other than the Quraysh, did not do ṭawāf around the Ka`bah wearing clothes that they had already used. Their argument was that they could not do *ṭawāf* wearing clothes that they had worn when committing disobedience to God. The Quraysh, who called themselves al-Hums, were the only ones to wear their ordinary garments when they did *ṭawāf.* If anyone was able to borrow a garment from a Qurayshī man, he could use it for *ṭawāf*
>
> Anyone who had a brand new garment could also use it in *ṭawāf,* provided that he threw it away on finishing his ritual and that no one else used it

afterwards. Otherwise, he had to do *ṭawāf* naked. Even women were naked when they did *ṭawāf,* but they could partially cover their private parts. However, women mostly did ṭawāf at night. This was something they invented, following the footsteps of their fathers, and believing that what their fathers did was based on divine orders. God reproached them for that, saying: "*When they commit a shameful deed, they say, `We found our fathers doing it,' and, `God has enjoined it upon us.'*" (Verse 28) In reply God tells His Messenger, Muhammad, to answer their claims by saying: "*Never does God enjoin what is indecent. Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?"* (Verse 28)

Thus, he condemns their practice as unacceptable indecency. God would never enjoin anything like that: "*Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?"* Would you allege that God has said something when you do not know it to be correct? God also instructs His Messenger to tell his people that He only orders justice, the maintaining of the right path and sincere devotion: "*Say: My Lord has enjoined justice, and that you set your whole selves [to Hind at every time and place of prayer, and call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone.*" (Verse 29) That is to say that wherever you wish to worship God, you have to be sincere in your worship, following in the footsteps of messengers to whom God gave miracles to endorse the laws they gave you. Moreover, you have to be truly sincere in your worship, because God does not accept any action unless it combines these two essentials: that it is in line with His law and dedicated purely to Him alone.[12]

To deal with this practical state of ignorance and its manifestations in the shape of regulations for worship, *ṭawāf* and dress, as well as similar traditions concerning food, and all that is claimed to be part of God's law, the Qur'ān gives these comments on the first stage in the life of humanity. This stage involves the permission to eat of the fruit of the garden of heaven, except for what God has forbidden, and mentions man's need to have clothes. We have learned how Satan seduced Adam and his wife and persuaded them to eat of the forbidden tree in order to expose their nakedness. Their natural shyness is also mentioned and the fact that they tried to cover their nakedness with leaves.

What is related of the events of the story and the comments made on those events are thus meant as an answer to a particular situation that prevails in an ignorant community unity. The story is mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, addressing other situations. Every time certain scenes and events are emphasized in order to give comments and statements that relate to those other situations. Everything that is

[12] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Azīm,* Beirut, Vol. 2, pp. 193-194

mentioned is true and accurate but the choice is made at each time to confront a relevant situation. Thus harmony is established on every occasion with the subject matter to be emphasized.

> *Children of Adam, We have sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness, and garments pleasing to the eye; but the robe of God-consciousness is the finest of all. In this there is a sign from God, so that they may reflect.* (Verse 26)

This address contrasts with the scene of exposed nakedness and the patching up of leaves from the garden to cover that nakedness. That exposure came as a result of disobeying an express order given by God and eating something He had forbidden. It is not the sin mentioned in certain legends which has inspired endless artistic images in the West as also Freud's poisonous suggestions. That sin was not eating the fruits of the tree of knowledge, as claimed in the legend of the Old Testament.

There is no truth in the absurd claim that God felt jealous of man and feared that he would eat of the tree of life and become a God as well. Nor is the sin the sexual pleasure around which much of the European artistic imagery is concentrated in order to interpret all life activities in terms of sexual pleasure as Freud's disciples try to affirm.

A Warning to Be Always Heeded

In contrast to the nakedness that followed Adam's sin we have here a fitting reply to the arbitrary impositions of nakedness practised by the unbelievers in the days of ignorance in Arabia. In His address, God reminds people of His grace as He taught them and made things easy for them, and made it a law for them that they should wear garments to cover their nakedness so that they replace naked ugliness with the beauty of dressing up. In the Arabic text, the term used here for dressing with clothes, *"We have sent down to you clothing"*, is often used to denote `revelation'. This gives the Qur'ānic statement added connotations so as to mean, "We have legislated in the revelations We have sent down to you, etc." The term used in the Arabic text for `clothing' may denote underwear which covers the private parts, and may also denote general clothing, and the term denoting `garments' gives the sense of top outfits normally selected for their beautiful appearance. It may also connote wealth and comfortable living. These meanings often go hand in hand:

"*Children of Adam, We have sent down to you clothing to cover your nakedness, and garments pleasing to the eye.*" (Verse 26) This is followed by a mention of the robe of piety, described here as 'fine': "*But the robe of God-consciousness is the finest of all. In this there is a sign from God, so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 26)

`Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Aslam, an early scholar, says: "When a person fears God, he covers his nakedness. Thus he clothes himself with the robe of piety." In divine law, then, there is a close relationship between garments that a person wears to cover his nakedness and to give himself a fine appearance on the one hand and fearing God and being pious on the other. Both are garments, with one covering mental or abstract nakedness and the other physical nakedness. Both give a human being a fine appearance and both go together. When a person is conscious of God and feels ashamed to appear in a way which is unpleasing to Him, he feels physical nakedness to be abhorrent and shies away from it. On the other hand, a person who feels no sense of shame in front of God and does not fear Him is one who does not hesitate to appear naked or to call people to do likewise. Being modest and covering one's body are not matters of social tradition, as claimed by those who try to destroy the humanity of people by attacking their sense of shame and chastity in order to carry out the wicked designs of the Protocol of the Elders of Zion. To have a sense of shame is something that God has implanted in human nature and embodied in His law which He sent down to be implemented in human life. He has made them able to implement this law by giving them talents, abilities and provisions.

God reminds the children of Adam of His grace as He requires them to cover their nakedness with dress in order to protect their humanity against sinking to the level of animals. Everything He has facilitated for them is also an aspect of His grace. He reminds them of it *"so that they may reflect."* (Verse 26) A Muslim, then should never overlook the clear link between the attacks on people's morality and sense of shame while calling for physical nudity in the name of friendliness and civilization, and the Zionist scheme which aims to destroy their humanity and spread immorality as a prelude to forcing them to submit to Zion's power. He should also realize that there is a direct link between all this and the schemes trying to uproot even the vague religious sentiments that remain in the hearts of Muslim people. Even these vague sentiments are not tolerated. The aim is to eradicate them all. Hence, a wicked and shameless campaign advocating physical and mental nudity is launched with the support of writers and media working in the service of world Zionism. Human beauty is that of dress and cover while animal beauty is that of nudity. Human beings in this day and age are sinking into the depth of ignorant reaction that sends them down to the level of animals. Hence they do not remember God's grace which enables them to protect and maintain their humanity.

> *Children of Adam, do not allow Satan to seduce you in the same way as he caused your [first] parents to be turned out of the Garden. He stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness. Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them. We have made the devils as patrons for those who do not believe. When they commit a shameful deed, they say, "We found our*

> *fathers doing it," and, "God has enjoined it upon us." Say... Never does God enjoin what is indecent. Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge? Say... My Lord has enjoined justice, and that you set your whole selves [to Him] at every time and place of prayer, and call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone. As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return: some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable. For, they will have taken satans for their protectors in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path. (Verses 27-30)*

This is the second address to the children of Adam in this passage. It provides comments on the story of their first parents and their experience with Satan, and the scene of nakedness in which he placed them after they had forgotten their Lord's commandment and listened to this wicked whispering. This address becomes easier to understand when we bear in mind the traditions of pagan Arabia, particularly those relating to the nudity imposed by the people of Makkah on the rest of the Arabs in ṭawāf rituals. What made their action worse was that they alleged that the practices of their fathers must be part of religion and must have been ordered by God.

The first address to the children of Adam speaks of the affliction caused to their first father, and of God's grace when He ordered human beings to wear clothes, to cover their nakedness, and gave them fine garments pleasing to the eye. In this second address there is a warning to human beings in general and most directly to the pagans whom Islam addressed at the time of its revelation. This warning makes it clear to them that they must not obey Satan in whatever laws they enact for themselves and any traditions they may observe. If they do, he will certainly seduce them just as he seduced their first parents when he caused them to be driven out of heaven and exposed their nakedness showing them what had previously been hidden. Hence revealing much of the body, which is characteristic of all ignorant societies, past and present, is the direct result of listening to Satan's whisperings. He is a most persistent enemy who utilizes nudity to achieve his goal of seducing Adam and his offspring. This is part of the unabating battle that rages on between man and Satan. Human beings, then, should be wise enough not to allow their enemy to seduce them. For his victory means that he will cause hell to be filled with a great many of mankind.

When the Enemy is the Protector

In order to emphasize the urgency of His warning, their Lord tells mankind that Satan and his tribe can see them whereas they cannot see or perceive satans. Satan, then, has a greater ability to seduce them, utilizing his subtle means. They need to be

on their guard all the time so that they are not taken unawares: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (Verse 27) Then follows an increased heightening of the effect by saying that God has allowed a relationship of patronage to develop between satans and unbelievers. Doomed indeed is the one whose patron is his enemy. For this enables his enemy to direct him the way he wishes, when he has no real help or support and cannot resort to God's patronage since he is an unbeliever: "We *have made the devils as patrons for those who do not believe.*" (Verse 27)

It is a true fact that Satan is the patronizing friend of the nonbelievers, while God is the protector of believers.

The effect of this state of affairs is far-reaching, but it is mentioned here in absolute terms before the pagans are given an example of its operation in their real world. We are thus made to feel how Satan's patronage can distort people's concepts and ruin their lives: "*When they commit a shameful deed, they say, 'We found our fathers doing it,' and, 'God has enjoined it upon us.'*" (Verse 28)

That was indeed what the pagan Arabs used to do and say. They performed ṭawāf around God's sacred house in the nude, accompanying their women. This they claimed God had ordered them to do, just as He had ordered their fathers: in other words, they inherited the practice from them. Despite their paganism, the Arabs did not make boastful claims similar to those used by people of latter day ignorance who wonder why religion should interfere with human life. They claim that they are the only ones who have any authority to enact laws, develop values and standards, and endorse habits and traditions while the pagan Arabs used to make their false inventions and claim that God ordered them to do so. That may be a more sly and cunning method because it deceives those who still maintain some religious sentiment to the extent that they imagine that their practices are acceptable to God. Nevertheless, it is less impudent than the attitude of those who claim that they have the right to enact legislation in preference to God's.

God commands the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to make it clear to them that their inventions are false and that their claims to have God's endorsement are insupportable. He is further ordered to declare that God's law is incompatible with indecency. God would not command anything that is indecent: "*Say: 'Never does God enjoin what is indecent. Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?'*" (Verse 28)

The word `indecency' refers to any act which goes beyond the limits of what is acceptable. Nudity is one such act. Hence, God does not enjoin it, for how would He enjoin the transgression of the limits He laid down, and the violation of His orders to cover one's nakedness and to be always modest and God-fearing? Besides, who told

them that God enjoined that? What God orders and enjoins cannot be the subject of unsupported claims. These are contained in the Books He has revealed to His messengers. There is simply no other source from which to learn what God says and enjoins. No one can describe any matter as belonging to divine law unless he can rely on a statement in the divine book or by God's Messenger. This is the only way to know for certain what God enjoins. If everyone claims that whatever he sees fit belongs to God's law, then humanity will end up in endless chaos.

Jāhiliyyah is a state of ignorance that always maintains its essential characteristics. Every time people revert *to jāhiliyyah,* they make similar allegations and uphold similar concepts despite the great differences in time and place.

In the *jāhiliyyah* of our contemporary times, we find that every now and then a liar comes up with whatever whims he has and claims that they belong to God's law. Time after time, a shameless impudent person, stands up to deny the clearly stated divine orders and commandments, claiming that divine religion could not order this or that. He has no justification for his claim other than his own prejudices. Hence the rhetorical question: *"Would you attribute to God something of which you have no knowledge?"* (Verse 28)

Having denounced their claims that God has ordered them to follow such indecent practices, God tells them that His commandments run in the opposite direction. God has enjoined justice and moderation in all matters, not indecency. He has also ordered people to follow what He has laid down in matters of worship, and to derive their laws and values from what He has revealed to His Messenger. He has not left matters disorganized, allowing everyone to state what he wants and then claim that his prejudices are endorsed by God. He has also commanded that submission to Him should be pure and complete so that no one submits to anyone else.

> *Say: 'My Lord has enjoined justice, and that you set your whole selves [to Him] at every time and place of prayer, and call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone.'* (Verse 29)

This is what God has enjoined. It runs opposite to their practices in which they follow their fathers and implement their man-made laws. It is also contrary to exposing one's nakedness after God has given human beings, out of His grace, clothing to cover themselves and garments with which they appear beautiful. Furthermore, it is contrary to having two different sources of reference in their lives, one for lawmaking and another for worship; for that is a practical form of associating partners with God.

At this point they are given a reminder and a warning. They should always

remember that they will return to God after they have finished their present life which is meant as a test for them. When they return to God they will be in two groups: those who followed God's commandments and those who followed Satan: *"As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return: some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable. For, they will have taken satans for their protectors in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path."* (Verses 29-30)

This is a remarkable picture showing the starting point and the finishing line in the great journey of life: *"As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return."* (Verse 29)

When they started the journey, they were in two groups: Adam and his wife in one group, and Satan and his tribe in the other. They will return in the same classification: the obedient will return together with their father, Adam, and their mother, Eve, who were both believers, submitting themselves to God, and following His commandments. In the other group, the disobedient will return together with Satan and his tribe and they will fill Hell because of their mutual patronage of Satan. What is singular is that these people always think that they follow the right path.

God guides whoever seeks His patronage, and He leaves anyone who takes Satan for patron to go astray. In the end they come back to their different destinations: *"some [of you] He will have graced with His guidance, whereas for some a straying from the right path will have become unavoidable. For, they will have taken satans for their protectors in preference to God, thinking all the while that they have found the right path."* (Verse 30)

Forbidding What Is Lawful

A new address is now made to mankind, serving as a pause to comment on the events related earlier before resuming the main theme in the *sūrah: "Children of Adam, dress well when you attend any place of worship. Eat and drink but do not be wasteful. Surely He does not love the wasteful. Say, 'Who is there to forbid the beauty which God has produced for His servants, and the wholesome means of sustenance?' Say, 'They are [lawful] in the life of this world, to all who believe — to be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection.' Thus do We make Our revelations clear to people of knowledge. Say, 'My Lord has only forbidden shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and all types of sin, and wrongful oppression, and that you should associate with God anything for which He has given no authority, and that you attribute to God anything of which you have no knowledge.'"* (Verses 31-33)

In this address, we note the emphasis on the basic principle of faith in order to stress the falsehood of the practices of the pagan Arabs. One of the clearest examples is to link their arbitrary prohibition of good wholesome things God has provided for

His servants with ascribing partners to God. This is indeed the proper description of anyone who falsely claims the authority to make such a prohibition, attributing to God things of which he has no knowledge.

God tells mankind to don their best clothes, which He has given them and taught them how to make, whenever they attend to any act of worship, including *ṭawāf,* which means walking round the Ka`bah glorifying God, acknowledging His Lordship and asking Him to grant our wishes. Those Arabs used to do ṭawāf naked, forbidding themselves the wearing of any garments when God did not forbid them that. On the contrary, He made the provision of such clothes an aspect of His grace. The proper thing to be expected is that they should obey Him and make use of what He has given them, not taking off their clothing in a grossly indecent manner: *"Children of Adam, dress well when you attend any place of worship."* (Verse 31) He also tells them to enjoy the wholesome provisions He has given them, without being extravagant: *"Eat and drink but do not be wasteful. Surely He does not love the wasteful."* (Verse 31)

It has been reported that the Arabs also used to forbid themselves certain types of food in a similar manner to their prohibition of certain types of clothing. All these were inventions perpetrated by the Quraysh, the ruling tribe in Makkah.

In an authentic report related by Muslim on the authority of `Urwah who quotes his father, a companion of the Prophet, as saying: "The Arabs used to do ṭawāf around the Ka`bah completely naked with the exception of the Hums, a title given to the Quraysh people and their descendants. They would go around the Sacred House in the nude unless they wore clothes given them by the Hums. Some of the men of Quraysh might give some of their clothes to other men and their women might give to other women. During pilgrimage, the Hums would stay at Muzdalifah, going no further, while the rest of the pilgrims would go as far as 'Arafat. They justified this by saying: `We, the Quraysh, are the dwellers of the Ĥaram (i.e. the sacred area). No person from the rest of Arabia may do ṭawāf wearing any clothes other than our clothes or eating any food other than ours.' Thus, any Arab who did not have a friend in Makkah to lend him a garment, or did not have the money to hire such a garment, faced the choice of either doing *ṭawāf* naked or wearing his own clothes which he must throw away after he completed his *ṭawāf.* No one else was allowed to touch those clothes after they had been thrown away. Such clothes were considered as discarded clothes, or *liqā."*

In his commentary known as *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān,* al-Qurṭubī, a famous scholar, says: "It has been reported that in pre-Islamic days, the Arabs used not to eat any rich food during their pilgrimage, limiting themselves only to eating very little, and they used to do *ṭawāf* naked. They were told: *'Dress well when you attend any place of worship. Eat and drink but do not be wasteful."* (Verse 31) This is a clear indication that they must not

forbid themselves what is lawful. From the linguistic point of view, the term used for 'being wasteful' could mean extravagance and could also denote the prohibition of what is lawful. In each case, the practice involves going beyond the proper limits."

The *sūrah* does not stop at calling on people to dress well when they attend to any act of worship or to enjoy wholesome food and elegant dress. It censures the prohibitions of such adornment which God has provided for His servants as well as the prohibition of wholesome provisions. The authority to prohibit any thing belongs only to God who has given us the details of what He has forbidden and what He has made lawful in the legal code He has enacted for human life. "*Say: 'Who is there to forbid the beauty which God has produced for His servants, and the wholesome means of sustenance?'*" (Verse 32)

This clear disapproval is followed by a statement making clear that such adornment and means of sustenance are for the enjoyment of believers on account of their belief in God, their Lord, who has produced them for the believers. If such matters are also made available in this life to unbelievers, they will be reserved exclusively for believers on the Day of Resurrection. Unbelievers will have no share in them: "*Say, 'They are [lawful] in the life of this world, to all who believe – to be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection.'*" (Verse 32) This could not have been the case if such adornments and provisions were forbidden. God would not have given them something forbidden to be theirs alone in the life to come. "*Thus do We make Our revelations clear to people of knowledge.*" (Verse 32) Indeed, those who know the essence of this faith well are the ones to benefit by this explanation.

God has certainly forbidden neither what is reasonable of adornment and clothing nor wholesome food and drink. What He has truly forbidden is what those unbelievers used to practise: "*Say: 'My Lord has only forbidden shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and all types of sin, and wrongful oppression, and that you should associate with God anything for which He has given no authority, and that you attribute to God anything of which you have no knowledge.'*" (Verse 33)

This is in a nutshell the total sum of what God has forbidden. It includes every excess that goes beyond the limits God has laid down, whether committed openly or in secret. It also includes sin, which denotes every disobedience to God, and oppression, which denotes every type of injustice or violation of other people's rights which God has made clear to all. It further includes ascribing the qualities of Godhead to any being other than God. This includes what used to be practised in ignorant Arabia and what happens in every ignorant society when people accept legislation from any source other than God. God has also forbidden that people should attribute to God something of which they have no knowledge. This includes, by way of example, what they used to assert of prohibition and attributing that to God Himself without any true or sound basis.

A most amazing example of the reaction of the unbelievers who were the first to be addressed by these verses, considering the denunciation of their false prohibitions, is given by al-Kalbī, a renowned scholar in the early generations of Islam: "When Muslims went on their *ṭawāf around* the Ka`bah wearing their clothes, the unbelievers criticized their action and ridiculed them. This verse was then revealed to answer their ridicules. This is a most amazing example of how ignorance can twist human logic. Here we have human beings who go around the sacred house of worship in the nude. Their nature has been corrupted and moved far away from sound human nature to which the Qur'ān refers in the story of Adam and Eve and their experience in heaven: *"When they both had tasted the fruit of the tree, their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden."* (Verse 22) But when these unbelievers see the Muslims doing their worship around the Ka`bah wearing their clothes, they criticize and ridicule them. Yet what have the Muslims done except put on their garments which God has given them. He wants them to appear dignified and well covered, so that their sound human qualities are given a chance to grow and be firmly established, and animal nakedness becomes abhorrent to them."

Such is the effect of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* on people. It distorts their nature, taste, concepts and values. If we look at the *jāhiliyyah* prevailing today in our world we find that it affects people in the same way as the pre-Islamic ignorance affected the pagan Arabs, Greeks, Romans, Persians and all other pagan nations. Modern *jāhiliyyah* also fools people so that they take off their clothes and shed their sense of shame. Moreover, it describes that as progress and civilization. Chaste Muslim women are described as reactionary and old fashioned, simply because they maintain their standard of propriety when they appear in public. It is the same twisted logic which distorts human nature and turns values and standards upside down. It is also coupled with the same type of arrogance that insists on adhering to what is false and what is unlawful. It is as the Qur'ān says: *"Have they, perchance, handed down this [way of thinking] as a legacy to one another? Nay, they are filled with overweening arrogance."* (51: 53)

Distortion of Concepts and Values

The question that arises here concerns the link between such nakedness, twisted logic, overweening arrogance by associating partners with God and accepting laws from deities other than God.

Those pagan Arabs received their notions concerning their nakedness from false lords who were able to fool them and manipulate their ignorance to ensure their supremacy in Arabia remained unchallenged. Other *ancient jāhiliyyah* societies

followed the same pattern and received their notions from their priests and chiefs. The same applies to the unbelievers of today who cannot challenge the concepts that false lords are keen to establish.

Fashion houses and designers, and cosmetic manufacturers and sellers are the lords who advocate the stupidity which is blindly followed by men and women in the *jāhiliyyah* societies of today. Those lords have only to set their standards, and they are slavishly obeyed by the multitude of fools throughout the world. Whether this year's fashion or the cosmetics in vogue are suitable to a particular woman or not, she must still obey, or be subjected to the ridicule of other fools who have no say in their own affairs.

It is important to ask who controls those fashion houses and cosmetic companies? Who feeds the campaign promoting nakedness? Who promotes all those films, pictures, novels, magazines and papers that are in the forefront of this campaign? Some of these are nothing less than an epitomized brothel. Indeed it is important to ask, who controls all this? The answer is that the main control is in the hands of Zionism. It is the Zionist Jews who usurp the qualities of God's lordship, subjugating all these fools to their bidding. They achieve their aims, for which they organize sustained campaigns throughout the world, trying to keep the whole world preoccupied with such filth. They try hard to spread immorality and corrupt human nature so that it can be moulded by fashion designers and cosmetic manufacturers. Beyond that, they also have economic objectives which they achieve through the wasteful usage of dress material, cosmetics and other ancillary products.

The question of dress and fashion is not separate from God's law and the way of life He has laid down for mankind. Hence, it is linked in the *sūrah* to the question of faith. There are indeed several aspects linking it to faith and divine law. It has, first of all, a direct relationship with the question of Lordship and the authority which has the power to issue legislation in these matters that have a profound influence on morals, the economy and other aspects of life. Fashion and dress also have a direct bearing on enhancing the human qualities in man and giving them prominence over carnal qualities.

Jāhiliyyah distorts concepts, values and tastes, making nakedness, which is an animal quality, an aspect of progress and advancement, while considering propriety backward and old fashioned. There can be no clearer distortion of human nature.

We find some people advocating *such jāhiliyyah* and protesting: what has religion got to do with fashion, cosmetics and how women dress? This is only the twisted logic that is characteristic of *jāhiliyyah* everywhere and in all generations.

Because this question, which often appears to be only a side issue, has such great importance in the Islamic view — since it relates to the question of faith and to

promoting sound human nature and proper human values — the *sūrah* concludes its discussion with a very strong and inspiring comment that is normally used with major issues of faith. The comment reminds human beings that their term on earth is limited, and that when it draws to a close, they cannot delay or hasten it at all: *"For every community a term has been set. When [the end of] their term approaches, they can neither delay nor hasten it by a single moment."* (Verse 34)

This is a basic concept of faith which serves here as a reminder so that dormant hearts wake up and realize that they must not let themselves be deluded by an apparently unending life.

The term mentioned in this verse could apply to the end of every generation, which is determined by death, or the term that is allowed for every nation to be strong and prosperous. Whichever meaning we apply to the Qur'ānic verse, the term is pre-determined, and they cannot either delay their deadline or hasten it.

Before we finish our commentary on this passage, we better remind ourselves of the great similarity in how the Qur'ān deals with *jāhiliyyah* concepts, whether they relate to slaughtered animals, what is lawful of them and what is forbidden, as explained in the previous *sūrah,* and the way it deals with ignorance and its arbitrary concepts concerning dress and food.

When the previous *sūrah* discussed the question of slaughtered animals and crops that are pledged for certain purposes, it explained the practices of the Arabian *jāhiliyyah* society and its false claims that such practices were sanctioned by God. It then challenged them to produce evidence supporting their claim that God has forbidden what they claimed to be forbidden and made lawful what they considered as such: "Is *it, perchance, that you were witnesses when God gave you these commandments? Who could be more wicked than one who, without any real knowledge, invents lies about God in order to lead people astray? God does not guide the wrongdoers."* (6: 144) It then confronted them face to face when they tried to evade giving a proper answer, claiming that it all belonged to God's will, and that it was God's will that caused them to maintain their practices: *"Those who associate partners with God will say: `Had God so willed, neither we nor our fathers would have associated any partners with Him; nor would we have declared anything as forbidden.' In like manner did those who have lived before them deny the truth, until they came to taste Our punishment. Say: Have you any certain knowledge which you can put before us? You follow nothing but conjecture, and you do nothing but guess. Say: 'With God alone rests the final evidence. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright.' Say: 'Bring forward your witnesses who will testify that God has forbidden this.' If they so testify, do not you testify with them; and do not follow the wishes of those who deny Our revelations, and those who do not believe in the life to come and who consider others as equal to their Lord."* (6: 148-150)

When *Sūrah* 6 has totally refuted their false claims, it offers to give them a detailed

account of what God has ordered them to do and what He has forbidden them. It proceeds to outline such prohibitions in three very clear verses: 151-153.

This *sūrah* follows the same pattern. First it describes their indecent practices, promoting nakedness and associating partners with God.

Thus, they assume for themselves the authority to pronounce certain types of dress and food as lawful or forbidden. It then warns them against these, reminding them of the painful lessons their first parents learned in heaven and their suffering as a result of Satan's scheming against them. It also reminds them of God's grace, as He has provided them with fine garments. It denounces their claims that what they practised was part of God's law: "*Say, 'Who is there to forbid the beauty which God has produced for His servants, and the wholesome means of sustenance?' Say, 'They are [lawful] in the life of this world, to all who believe — to be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection. Thus do We make Our revelations clear to people of knowledge.'*" (Verse 32) This is coupled with a reference to the absolutely certain knowledge upon which concepts of faith, acts of worship and laws must be established. When all their claims have been refuted, the *sūrah* reiterates what God has actually forbidden: "*Say, 'My Lord has only forbidden shameful deeds, be they open or secret, and all types of sin, and wrongful oppression, and that you should associate with God anything for which He has given no authority, and that you attribute to God anything of which you have no knowledge.'*" (Verse 33) Prior to that, the *sūrah* clarified divine instructions concerning dress and food: "*Children of Adam, dress well when you attend any place of worship. Eat and drink but do not be wasteful.*" (Verse 31)

In both types of confrontation, the whole question is linked directly to the question of faith. This is due to the fact that in essence, the question is that of sovereignty and to whom it belongs, and people's servitude and to whom it should be addressed. It is the same question, treated in the same manner, following the same steps. This unity of approach appears to be much more important when we remember the different natures of the two *sūrahs* and the scope each of them takes in dealing with the question of faith. That difference of scope does not affect the adoption of the same approach in dealing with basic questions and the confrontation with *jāhiliyyah* over these questions. Limitless is God in His glory who has revealed this Qur'ān.

4
Much Pleading, Little Use

يَٰبَنِيٓ ءَادَمَ إِمَّا يَأۡتِيَنَّكُمۡ رُسُلٞ مِّنكُمۡ يَقُصُّونَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِي فَمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰ وَأَصۡلَحَ فَلَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ٣٥

Children of Adam! Whenever there come to you messengers from among yourselves to relate to you My revelations, then those who are conscious of Me and live righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (35)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ عَنۡهَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٣٦

But those who deny and scorn Our revelations are the ones destined for the fire, where they shall abide. (36)

فَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوۡ كَذَّبَ بِـَٔايَٰتِهِۦٓۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَنَالُهُمۡ نَصِيبُهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُنَا يَتَوَفَّوۡنَهُمۡ قَالُوٓاْ أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡ تَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ قَالُواْ ضَلُّواْ عَنَّا وَشَهِدُواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡ أَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ كَٰفِرِينَ ٣٧

Who is more wicked than one who invents lies about God or denies His revelations? These shall have whatever has been decreed to be their lot [in life]. When Our messengers come to carry off their souls, they will say: "Where, now, are those whom you used to invoke besides God?" They will reply: "They have forsaken us!" Thus, they will bear witness against themselves that they had been unbelievers. (37)

قَالَ ٱدۡخُلُواْ فِيٓ أُمَمٖ قَدۡ خَلَتۡ مِن قَبۡلِكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡجِنِّ وَٱلۡإِنسِ فِي ٱلنَّارِۖ كُلَّمَا دَخَلَتۡ أُمَّةٞ لَّعَنَتۡ أُخۡتَهَاۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا ٱدَّارَكُواْ فِيهَا جَمِيعٗا قَالَتۡ أُخۡرَىٰهُمۡ لِأُولَىٰهُمۡ رَبَّنَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ أَضَلُّونَا فَـَٔاتِهِمۡ عَذَابٗا ضِعۡفٗا مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِۖ قَالَ لِكُلّٖ ضِعۡفٞ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٨

[God] will say: "Enter into the fire to join the hosts of the jinn and humans who have gone before you." Every time a host enters [the fire], it will curse its fellow host. When all are gathered there, the last of them will say of the first: "Our Lord, these are the ones who have led us astray, so give them double suffering in the fire." He will answer: "Every one of you shall have double suffering, although you may not know it." (38)

وَقَالَتۡ أُولَىٰهُمۡ لِأُخۡرَىٰهُمۡ فَمَا كَانَ لَكُمۡ عَلَيۡنَا مِن فَضۡلٖ فَذُوقُواْ ٱلۡعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَكۡسِبُونَ ٣٩

And the first of them will say to the last: `In no wise were you superior to us. Taste, then, this suffering on account of what you have been doing.' (39)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ عَنۡهَا لَا تُفَتَّحُ لَهُمۡ أَبۡوَٰبُ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَلَا يَدۡخُلُونَ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ حَتَّىٰ يَلِجَ ٱلۡجَمَلُ فِي سَمِّ ٱلۡخِيَاطِۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ٤٠

For those who deny Our revelations and scorn them the gates of heaven shall not be opened; nor shall they enter paradise any more than a thick, twisted rope can pass through a needle's eye. Thus do We reward the evil-doers. (40)

لَهُم مِّن جَهَنَّمَ مِهَادٞ وَمِن فَوۡقِهِمۡ غَوَاشٖۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٤١

Hell shall be their resting place, and sheets of fire shall cover them. Thus do We reward the wrong-doers. (41)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَا نُكَلِّفُ نَفۡسًا إِلَّا وُسۡعَهَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٤٢

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We never burden a soul with more than it can bear. They are destined for paradise, where they will abide. (42)

وَنَزَعۡنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنۡ غِلّٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهِمُ ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۖ وَقَالُواْ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِي هَدَىٰنَا لِهَٰذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لِنَهۡتَدِيَ لَوۡلَآ أَنۡ هَدَىٰنَا ٱللَّهُۖ لَقَدۡ جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِٱلۡحَقِّۖ وَنُودُوٓاْ أَن تِلۡكُمُ ٱلۡجَنَّةُ أُورِثۡتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٤٣ وَنَادَىٰٓ

We shall remove any rancour that may be lingering in their hearts. Running waters will flow at their feet; and they will say: "All praise is due to God who has guided us to this. Had He not given us guidance, we would certainly have not found the right path. Our Lord's messengers have certainly brought us the truth." [A voice] will call out to them: "This is the paradise you have inherited by virtue of what you used to do." (43)

أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلنَّارِ أَن قَدۡ وَجَدۡنَا مَا وَعَدَنَا رَبُّنَا حَقّٗا فَهَلۡ وَجَدتُّم مَّا وَعَدَ رَبُّكُمۡ حَقّٗاۖ قَالُواْ نَعَمۡۚ فَأَذَّنَ مُؤَذِّنُۢ بَيۡنَهُمۡ أَن لَّعۡنَةُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٤٤

The dwellers of paradise will call out to the inmates of the fire: "We have found what our Lord promised to be true. Have you, too, found the promise of your Lord to be true?" They will answer: "Yes," whereupon someone from their midst will proclaim: "Cursed indeed are the wrongdoers (44)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَبۡغُونَهَا عِوَجٗا وَهُم بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ كَٰفِرُونَ ٤٥

who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, and who reject the truth of the life to come." (45)

وَبَيۡنَهُمَا حِجَابٞۚ وَعَلَى ٱلۡأَعۡرَافِ رِجَالٞ يَعۡرِفُونَ كُلَّۢا بِسِيمَىٰهُمۡۚ وَنَادَوۡاْ أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ أَن سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ لَمۡ يَدۡخُلُوهَا وَهُمۡ يَطۡمَعُونَ ٤٦

Between the two parties there will be a barrier, and on the Heights there will be men who recognize everyone by their looks. They will call out to the dwellers of paradise: "Peace be upon you", — not having entered it themselves, but longing still [to be there]. (46)

۞ وَإِذَا صُرِفَتۡ أَبۡصَٰرُهُمۡ تِلۡقَآءَ أَصۡحَٰبِ ٱلنَّارِ قَالُواْ رَبَّنَا لَا تَجۡعَلۡنَا مَعَ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٤٧

And whenever their eyes are turned towards the inmates of the fire, they will say: "Our Lord, do not place us alongside such wrongdoing people." (47)

وَنَادَىٰٓ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡأَعۡرَافِ رِجَالٗا يَعۡرِفُونَهُم بِسِيمَىٰهُمۡ قَالُواْ مَآ أَغۡنَىٰ عَنكُمۡ جَمۡعُكُمۡ وَمَا كُنتُمۡ تَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ ٤٨

Then those on the Heights will call out to certain people whom they recognize by their looks, saying: "What have your great throngs and your false pride availed you? (48)

أَهَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ أَقۡسَمۡتُمۡ لَا يَنَالُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِرَحۡمَةٍۚ ٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ لَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَلَآ أَنتُمۡ تَحۡزَنُونَ ٤٩

"Are these the self-same people whom you swore that God would never show them mercy?" (Now they have been told,) "Enter Paradise. You have nothing to fear, nor will you grieve." (49)

وَنَادَىٰٓ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ أَنۡ أَفِيضُواْ عَلَيۡنَا مِنَ ٱلۡمَآءِ أَوۡ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُۚ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَرَّمَهُمَا عَلَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٥٠

And the inmates of the fire will cry out to the dwellers of paradise: "Pour some water on us, or give us some of the sustenance God has provided for you." They will reply: "God has forbidden both to the unbelievers, (50)

ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُواْ دِينَهُمۡ لَهۡوٗا وَلَعِبٗا وَغَرَّتۡهُمُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۚ فَٱلۡيَوۡمَ نَنسَىٰهُمۡ كَمَا نَسُواْ لِقَآءَ يَوۡمِهِمۡ هَٰذَا وَمَا كَانُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَجۡحَدُونَ ٥١

who have taken their religion for a pastime and an idle sport, and who have been beguiled by the life of this world." Today We shall be oblivious of them as they were oblivious of the meeting on this day of theirs, and as they used to deny Our revelations. (51)

وَلَقَدۡ جِئۡنَٰهُم بِكِتَٰبٖ فَصَّلۡنَٰهُ عَلَىٰ عِلۡمٍ هُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥٢

We have indeed given them a Book which We have clearly and wisely spelled out, a guidance and a grace for people who have faith. (52)

هَلۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا تَأۡوِيلَهُۥۚ يَوۡمَ يَأۡتِي تَأۡوِيلُهُۥ يَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ نَسُوهُ مِن قَبۡلُ قَدۡ جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُ رَبِّنَا بِٱلۡحَقِّ فَهَل لَّنَا مِن شُفَعَآءَ فَيَشۡفَعُواْ لَنَآ أَوۡ نُرَدُّ فَنَعۡمَلَ غَيۡرَ ٱلَّذِي كُنَّا نَعۡمَلُۚ قَدۡ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ وَضَلَّ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ٥٣

Are they waiting for its final meaning to unfold? On this Day when its final meaning unfolds, those who previously were oblivious of it will say: "Our Lord's messengers have surely told us the Truth. Have we, then, any intercessors who could plead on our behalf? Or could we live our lives again, so that we may act differently from the way we used to act." They have lost their souls and all that which they invented has failed them. (53)

Preview

The previous passage in the *sūrah* provided a long comment on the story of man's creation and the confrontation with the ignorant Arabian society, and indeed *all jāhiliyyah* societies, over the question of propriety and decency. Such values require that bodies be covered with appropriate dress and that souls be adorned with fear of God. The whole question relates directly to the major issue of faith.

This new address to mankind tackles the central issue to which the question of dress was related in the previous passage. It deals with the question of whom to follow in connection with religious rites and practices, as well as in legal issues, and indeed in all matters of life. Mankind must follow the messengers who bring them revelations from their Lord. It is on the basis of their response to those messengers that accountability and reward on the Day of Judgement will be determined. *"Children of Adam! Whenever there come to you messengers from among yourselves to relate to you My revelations, then those who are conscious of Me and live righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who deny and scorn Our revelations are the ones destined for the fire, where they shall abide."* (Verses 35-36)

It is the covenant God has made with Adam and his children, and the condition that He stipulated for man to be given the task of vicegerency on earth. After all, it is God who has created the earth and made it suitable to support life before assigning the task of building it to mankind and giving them the necessary talents, aptitudes and means to fulfil their obligations in accordance with God's covenant. Unless human beings follow the messengers God sends them, then whatever they do in this life will be rejected. No one who submits himself to God will accept such actions which will become on the Day of Judgement a burden that will inescapably lead to hell: *"Children of Adam! Whenever there come to you messengers from among yourselves to relate to you My revelations, then those who are conscious of Me and live righteously shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 35)

Fearing God helps human beings to steer away from sin and indecency. Indeed, the most wicked aspect of gross indecency is to associate partners with God and to claim for oneself God's authority and Godhead qualities. Fearing God also helps human beings maintain the path of obedience and to do only what is right. Thus, it brings a sense of security which is totally free from worry about one's eventual destiny. *"But those who deny and scorn Our revelations are the ones destined for the fire, where they shall abide."* (Verse 36) This is only because denying God's revelations and scorning the duty of abiding by God's covenant puts any person in one camp with Satan who most unashamedly scorned his duty of submission to God. Thus, God's warning to Satan and his followers shall come to pass: *"As for those of them that follow you, I shall fill Hell with you all."* (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* moves on to portray the scene of approaching death, or the term to which the last verse in the previous passage refers: *"For every community a term has been set. When [the end of] their term approaches, they can neither delay nor hasten it by a single moment."* (Verse 34) This is followed by the scene of resurrection and reckoning, judgement and reward. These come by way of setting in detail what was at first briefly stated. It describes what happens to those who fear God and those who deny His revelations after their term has been completed. The description uses the

unique Qur'ānic method of depicting vivid scenes that are held before our eyes as if we see them now and hear what takes place.

The Qur'ān has taken good care in describing the scenes on the Day of Judgement, including resurrection, accountability, eternal bliss and horrifying suffering. What God has promised and warned against is no longer a far-away scene which is described to us in words. Indeed, it is painted before our eyes in a way that brings it to life so that we actually see and feel it. Muslims feel as if they actually experience that world beyond: their hearts warm at one point; they shiver at another. They experience fear at one scene and feel secure at another. They actually feel the heat of the fire and experience the fresh breeze of Heaven. Hence, they are fully aware of what the life to come shall bring, even before their promised day arrives. When you consider what believers say about their feelings concerning the life to come, you will realize that they actually live in that world beyond more than they live their present life. All their feelings move towards the next world in the same way as man moves from one home to another or from one country to another. The life to come is no longer a distant future; it is experienced here and now.

Perhaps the scenes the *sūrah* portrays are the longest scenes of the Day of Judgement in the Qur'ān. They are perhaps the most vivid, portraying a succession of images coupled with extensive dialogue. Our amazement is endless at how simple words can replace vision and paint with sounds and words a complete scene that we actually visualize.

These scenes of the Day of Judgement are given in the *sūrah* by way of commentary on the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from Heaven as a result of yielding to Satan's temptation. Human beings are warned by God against temptation from Satan who drove their first parents out of Heaven. They are warned against following their old enemy in whatever he whispers to them. This is coupled with a threat that Satan will be their patron and guardian if they choose to obey him in preference to obeying God's messengers and their proper guidance. The *sūrah* then portrays the scene of approaching death followed by scenes of the Day of Judgement as if these come immediately after that of the approaching death without any time interval. What actually takes place confirms what those messengers have told. Those who obeyed Satan are denied admittance into heaven, because they have been tempted away from it in the same way as their first parents were driven out of it. On the other hand, those who disobeyed Satan choosing instead obedience to God are returned to heaven after they have been addressed from on High: *"This is the paradise you have inherited by virtue of what you used to do."* (Verse 43) Their entry into heaven is thus a return of a person who had spent a long time away from home.

The harmony between the previous story and the comments on it, on the one hand, and the scenes of the Day of Judgement from start to finish on the other, adds

much beauty to this style and to this *sūrah* as a whole. The story begins up there with the Supreme Society, in the presence of angels who witness God's creation of Adam and his wife and their dwelling place in heaven. It was Satan who brought them down from their position of complete obedience and submission to God so as to drive them out of heaven. The story also ends with the Supreme Society in the presence of angels. Thus, the beginning and the end are directly linked. They are separated by this period of human life on earth and the scene of death at its end. Thus the middle part is linked directly with the beginning and the end.

To Testify Against Oneself

We have now a series of scenes portraying the end of this life and the beginning of the next one. We see first a scene of death as it overwhelms those who fabricate false claims against God, alleging that their inherited concepts and philosophies and the traditions and laws they enact for themselves have been sanctioned by God. Such people deny God's revelations when they are conveyed to them by His messengers although these contain a perfect divine code. Thus, they prefer their suspect, unconfirmed knowledge to the confirmed truth of God's revelations. They have already received what was decreed to be their lot of the comforts of this world. They have completed the period of test God had willed them to go through, and received their part of the revelations God has given to His messengers who, in turn, conveyed it to them: "*Who is more wicked than one who invents lies about God or denies His revelations? These shall have whatever has been decreed to be their lot [in life]. When Our messengers come to carry off their souls, they will say: `Where, now, are those whom you used to invoke besides God?' They will reply: 'They have forsaken us!' Thus, they will bear witness against themselves that they had been unbelievers.*" (Verse 37)

Here we see portrayed before our eyes the scene of those who invented lies against God and denied His revelations. The angels come to gather their souls and cause them to die, at which point certain remarks are exchanged between the two groups. The angels ask them: "*Where, now, are those whom you used to invoke besides God?*" (Verse 37) What happened to the fabricated claims you used to emphasize? Where are the gods you invoked and worshipped, which caused you to turn away from the truth conveyed to you by God's messengers? Where are they now at this very critical point in time when your lives have come to an end, and you find no one to give you an extra hour beyond the deadline appointed to you by God?

They have only one answer to make. It is a clear, unambiguous and factual answer: "*They have forsaken us*!" They have simply gone away, far away. We do not know where they are, nor do they have a clear way of returning to us. Lost indeed are those whose gods cannot find them or who cannot help them in their hour of

need. Worthless are the gods who know no way to reach their servants when they need them most.

"Thus, they will bear witness against themselves that they had been unbelievers." (Verse 37) This is the same attitude described earlier in the *sūrah* showing their reaction at the time when God's might overwhelms them in this life. Their reply then was a clear acknowledgement of being in the wrong: *"When Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: 'We have indeed been wrongdoers."* (Verse 5)

When this scene of approaching death is over, we are immediately presented with another scene showing those who were about to die having been thrown in to hell. The *sūrah* drops completely the period between their actual death and their resurrection and gathering on the Day of Judgement. Thus, it gives the impression that those who are about to die will actually be taken from their homes directly to hell.

> *[God] will say: "Enter into the fire to join the hosts of the jinn and humans who have gone before you." Every time a host enters [the fire], it will curse its fellow host. When all are gathered there, the last of them will say of the first: "Our Lord, these are the ones who have led us astray, so give them double suffering in the fire." He will answer: "Every one of you shall have double suffering, although you may not know it." And the first of them will say to the last: "In no wise were you superior to us. Taste, then, this suffering on account of what you have been doing." (Verses 38-39)*

"Enter into the fire to join the hosts of the jinn and humans who have gone before you." (Verse 38). Join, then, your colleagues and patrons from among the *jinn* and human beings, here in hell. After all, is it not Iblīs who disobeyed his Lord? Is he not the one who drove Adam and his wife out of heaven? Is he not also the one who has led astray so many of Adam's children? It is also he whom God has promised to gather in hell with all those who do his bidding and go astray. Enter, then, all of you, into the fire, whether you belong to the earlier or later generations. All of you are equal and patrons to one another.

In this life of ours all these communities and nations are in the same camp, with the latter ones following in the footsteps of those who preceded them. Those who were in a position of power were able to dictate to those who were weaker.

Let us find out what sort of attitude they take towards one another there, after knowing their fate: *"Every time a host enters [the fire], it will curse its fellow host."* (Verse 38) What a dreadful end is that which makes a son condemn his father and a beneficiary deny his patron!

"When all are gathered there," and the last of them joins the first, and the distant becomes near to the one who is close, arguments and disputes among them become

rife. Thus, "*the last of them will say of the first: 'Our Lord, these are the ones who have led us astray, so give them double suffering in the fire.'*" Thus, their comic tragedy begins. We see those who were allies and friends taking a hostile attitude towards one another, exchanging accusations and curses. Each prays to 'Our Lord' to give the other double punishment. Note how they make this appeal to 'Our Lord' about whom they used to fabricate lies and whose revelations and messages they denied. Today they turn to Him alone. The answer is to grant their request, but in a special manner.

"*He will answer: 'Every one of you shall have double suffering, although you may not know it.'*" (Verse 38). The double suffering you have requested will apply both to you and to them.

This shows that those who are condemned maliciously show some rejoicing at the misfortune of those who condemned them as they hear God's answer to them. They speak to them, pleased that they all have the same fate: "*The first of them will say to the last: In no wise were you superior to us. Taste, then, this suffering on account of what you have been doing.*" (Verse 39) Thus the painful scene is concluded. It is followed by an emphatic assertion that this will be the end of all those who turn their backs on God's message and deny His revelations.

> *For those who deny Our revelations and scorn them the gates of heaven shall not be opened; nor shall they enter paradise any more than a thick, twisted rope can pass through a needle's eye. Thus do We reward the evil-doers. Hell shall be their resting place, and sheets of fire shall cover them. Thus do We reward the wrongdoers. (Verses 40-41)*

Reflect as you wish on this remarkable scene, with a very thick twisted rope held opposite to a needle's eye. When that tiny hole allows the twisted rope to go through it, then and only then, will the gates of heaven be opened to those arrogant people and their supplications or repentance be accepted. The fact is that the time allowed to them has lapsed. Hence, until such a rope goes through a needle's eye they will remain in the fire of hell where they are all gathered, cursing one another and trying to get their punishment doubled. Such is the retribution God has in store for the evil-doers. [It should perhaps be noted that the Arabic word used here for 'thick, twisted rope' also means 'camel'. Thus, the scene acquires a sarcastic touch as we visualize a camel trying to go through a needle's eye — Editor.]

Their situation in the fire is then described: "*Hell shall be their resting place, and sheets of fire shall cover them.*" (Verse 41). The fire actually engulfs them from above and from beneath. Thus they have beneath them a raging fire which is sarcastically described as a resting place or a couch, when it bears nothing of such characteristics. Moreover, from above they have sheets of fire drawn over them. "*Thus do We reward the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 41) This last description means the criminals and also refers to

unbelievers who deny God's revelations and invent falsehood against God. All these descriptions are synonymous in Qur'ānic usage.

A Scene in Contrast

Let us now look at the opposite scene: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We never burden a soul with more than it can bear. They are destined for paradise, where they will abide. We shall remove any rancour that may be lingering in their hearts. Running waters will flow at their feet; and they will say: All praise is due to God who has guided us to this. Had He not given us guidance, we would certainly have not found the right path. Our Lord's messengers have certainly brought us the truth.' (A voice) will call out to them: 'This is the paradise you have inherited by virtue of what you used to do.'*" (Verses 42-43)

Here we have a description of the destiny of those who believe and do righteous deeds as best they can. These return to paradise, because they are, by God's grace, its rightful owners. He has granted it to them as a reward for their good deeds which are motivated by faith. It is they who followed God's messengers, obeyed the commandments of their Lord, the Almighty, the Merciful and disobeyed Satan, their age- old enemy. Had it not been for God's grace, their actions would not have been sufficient, considering their limited ability. The Prophet says in an authentic *ĥadīth* related by Muslim: "No one of you will be admitted into heaven by virtue of his action." His companions asked: "Not even you, Messenger of God?" He replied: "Not even me, unless God bestows His mercy and grace on me."

There is no contradiction or discrepancy between what God says in this regard and what is stated in this *ĥadīth* by His Messenger, who does not say anything related to religion on his own initiative. All scholastic debate that has taken place among Islamic schools of thought concerning this question did not rely on an accurate understanding of this religion. God knows that human beings are too weak to earn admittance into heaven by virtue of their own actions. Indeed, whatever they do is insufficient to repay for a single aspect of His grace which God bestows on them in this life on earth. Therefore, He has committed Himself to bestow His mercy on them and accept from them their meagre efforts and give them heaven as a reward, but only through His grace. Thus they earn it by their action combined with God's mercy and grace.

In contrast to the scene of mutual hatred surfacing among the evildoers in hell, even against their former close and intimate friends, we see the believers demonstrating their perfect love for one another in heaven. They are brethren who harbour no ill-feeling to anyone. They enjoy perfect peace and bliss: *"We shall remove any rancour that may be lingering in their hearts."* (Verse 43) They are only human, and

they lived the life of human beings. In this life on earth they may have had some disagreements and disputes that brought about ill-feeling. As believers, they tried hard to overcome these feelings and allowed their brotherhood to predominate. Nevertheless, there might have remained some lingering traces of rancour.

Al-Qurṭubī, a leading commentator on the Qur'ān, says: "God's messenger (peace be upon him) says: `Rancour stays at the doorstep of heaven just like camels are seated outside people's dwellings. God removes it from believers' hearts.' It is also reported that Alī said: `I hope that `Uthmān, Ṭalĥah, al-Zubayr and myself are among those about whom God says: *"We shall remove any rancour that may be lingering in their hearts."*

As already stated, the people of hell are engulfed by fire that overwhelms them from above and beneath. By contrast, the people of heaven have running waters which give an air of freshness to the whole scene: *"Running waters will flow at their feet."* (Verse 43). While the former group is always quarrelling and exchanging accusations, the people of heaven praise God and acknowledge their own shortcomings: *"They will say: 'All praise is due to God who has guided us to this. Had He not given us guidance, we would certainly have not found the right path. Our Lord's messengers have certainly brought us the truth.'"* (Verse 43).

The former group is strongly rebuked and told: *"Enter into the fire to join the hosts of the jinn and humans who have gone before you."* (Verse 38). The latter are addressed with respect and given a warm welcome: *"A voice will call out to them: 'This is the paradise you have inherited by virtue of what you used to do'."* (Verse 43)

Dialogue Across the Divide

The contrast between the two groups is total, but the *sūrah* moves on to raise before our eyes a scene that comes later than the one we have just witnessed. Now we see the people of heaven having settled down comfortably in their dwelling place, while the people of hell are now certain of their doom. The former group calls out to the latter asking them about God's promise: *"The dwellers of paradise will call out to the inmates of the fire: 'We have found what our Lord promised to be true. Have you, too, found the promise of your Lord to be true?' They will answer: 'Yes,' whereupon someone from their midst will proclaim: 'Cursed indeed are the wrongdoers who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, and who reject the truth of the lift to come.'"* (Verses 44-45)

The question itself is full of irony. The believers are absolutely certain that what God has warned against has actually come to pass in the same way as His promise has been fulfilled. Nevertheless, they ask the people of hell about it. The answer is given in a single word: "Yes".

Thus the dialogue that takes place across the great divide between heaven and hell comes to a stop as a voice is heard by the two groups. Someone will proclaim in their midst: "*Cursed indeed are the wrongdoers who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, and who reject the truth of the lift to come."* (Verses 44-45) This statement clearly defines the meaning of `the wrongdoers' which is often used in the Qur'ān as a synonym for `unbelievers'. It is the ones who are devoid of faith that turn people away from God's path and try hard to make it appear crooked. They do not believe in the life to come.

The description of the wrongdoers as the ones who "*try to make it appear crooked,"* points out the true aim of those who turn people away from God's path. They prefer the crooked way to the straight path. There is simply one straight way which follows what God has revealed and implement His law. Every other way is crooked. As these people prefer it that way, they are in the same line as unbelievers. No one who believes in the Day of Judgement and who ascertains in his mind that he will return to his Lord will ever try to turn people away from God's path or select for himself a path that moves away from it. It is a description that clearly delineates the nature of those who reject God's law.

The Heights

At this juncture, the *sūrah* draws our attention to something additional painted in this scene. We see that the two camps are separated by a barrier over which stand some people who recognize the dwellers of heaven and the inmates of the fire by their looks and features. It is important to find out who these people are and what have they got to do with the two groups destined either for heaven or hell.

> *Between the two parties there will be a barrier, and on the Heights there will be men who recognize everyone by their looks. They will call out to the dwellers of paradise: "Peace be upon you" – not having entered it themselves, but longing still [to be there]. And whenever their eyes are turned towards the inmates of the fire, they will say: "Our Lord, do not place us alongside such wrongdoing people." Then those on the Heights will call out to certain people whom they recognize by their looks, saying: "What have your great throngs and your false pride availed you? Are these the self-same people whom you swore that God would never show them mercy?" (Now they have been told,) "Enter Paradise. You have nothing to fear, nor will you grieve." (Verses 46-49)*

It has been reported that those people on the Heights which separate heaven and hell are human beings whose good deeds are equal in weight and measure to their bad ones. Hence, their good deeds are not enough to guarantee their admission into heaven, nor have their sins condemned them to the fire. They remain in between,

waiting for God's grace to be bestowed on them. They recognize the people of paradise by their looks, probably by the fact that their faces are white and bright, or by the light which accompanies them. They also recognize the people destined to the fire by their features, probably by their dark faces or the marks printed on their noses which they used to raise as a gesture of arrogance. The printing of this mark on their noses is mentioned in *Sūrah* 68, The Pen. They greet the people of heaven with the greeting of peace, clearly entertaining hope that God will bestow His mercy on them and admit them to heaven as well. When their eyes fall on the people of the fire, whom they are deliberately made to see, they plead to be spared their destiny.

> *Between the two parties there will be a barrier, and on the Heights there will be men who recognize everyone by their looks. They will call out to the dwellers of paradise: "Peace be upon you", – not having entered it themselves, but longing still [to be there]. And whenever their eyes are turned towards the inmates of the fire, they will say: "Our Lord, do not place us alongside such wrongdoing people." (Verses 46-47)*

They then see some leading figures among the wrongdoing people and they recognize them by their features. They rebuke them for what they have been doing: *"Then those on the Heights will call out to certain people whom they recognize by their looks, saying: 'What have your great throngs and your false pride availed you?'"* (Verse 48) You see now that you are in Hell, where your armies and great multitude are of no use to you, nor indeed are your arrogance and vain pride.

They remind them of what they used to say about the believers in this life, accusing them of being in error and that they would never be granted God's mercy: *"Are these the self-same people whom you swore that God would never show them mercy? (Now they have been told,) 'Enter Paradise. You have nothing to fear, nor will you grieve.'"* (Verse 49)

Then from the direction of the fire we hear a voice, begging, imploring: *"And the inmates of the Fire will cry out to the dwellers of Paradise: 'Pour some water on us, or give us some of the sustenance God has provided for you.'"* (Verse 50). From the other side comes a reproachful reminder in reply: *"God has forbidden both to the nonbelievers, who have taken their religion for a pastime and an idle sport, and who have been beguiled by the life of this world."* (Verses 50-51)

All human voices then die down and the Almighty, the Lord of the universe whose rule is final, gives His judgement: *"Today We shall be oblivious of them as they were oblivious of the meeting on this day of theirs, and as they used to deny Our revelations. We have indeed given them a Book which We have clearly and wisely spelled out, a guidance and a grace for people who have faith. Are they waiting for its final meaning to unfold? On this Day when its final meaning unfolds, those who previously were oblivious of it will say: 'Our Lord's messengers have surely told us the Truth. Have we, then, any intercessors who*

could plead on our behalf? Or could we live our lives again, so that we may act differently from the way we used to act.' They have lost their souls and all that which they invented has failed them." (Verses 51-53)

The scene moves in quick succession, with a glimpse of what happens in the hereafter and a glimpse of what takes place in this world. At one moment we see the sufferers in hell who have been forgotten because they themselves forgot about the meeting on the Day of Judgement and because they denied God's revelations which were given to them in a clearly spelled out book. It is God Himself who has stated it clearly on the basis of His knowledge, but they nevertheless abandoned it and preferred to follow their caprice and held on to their own misconceptions. Then we look at them again when they are still in this world waiting for the final outcome of this book and whether its warnings will come true. But they are warned against this final outcome, because it is exactly what they are made to see in this scene. It is certainly a remarkable scene which cannot be so vividly painted except in this miracle of a book.

Thus this panoramic preview comes to a close, followed by comments that are in complete harmony with the opening. We have a reminder of the Day of Judgement and its awesome scenes, and a warning against denying God's revelations and taking a hostile attitude towards His messengers. There is also a warning against waiting for the full meaning of this book, the Qur'ān, to unfold, because once it is unfolded, there will be no time for repentance, no return for a retest and there will be no intercession on behalf of anyone to reduce his or her sufferings.

As the panoramic preview is over, we come back to ourselves after having been fully absorbed in contemplation of a spectacular scene. We find ourselves back in this present life, after having made a very long return trip. It is the trip of this whole life, as well as the gathering, resurrection, reckoning and reward that follow it. At the beginning we saw man as he was created and then we witnessed his fall to this world and his life on it.

Thus the Qur'ān makes us travel throughout the universe and across time. It shows us the past, the present and the future in quick snippets so that we may get the warning and heed the reminder: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers."* (Verse 2)

5
To Whom All Authority Belongs

إِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلْأَرْضَ فِى سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى
ٱلْعَرْشِ يُغْشِى ٱلَّيْلَ ٱلنَّهَارَ يَطْلُبُهُۥ حَثِيثًا
وَٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ وَٱلنُّجُومَ مُسَخَّرَٰتٍ
بِأَمْرِهِۦٓ ۗ أَلَا لَهُ ٱلْخَلْقُ وَٱلْأَمْرُ ۗ تَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ
رَبُّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Your Lord is God who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne. He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit. The sun, the moon and the stars are made subservient to His command. Surely all creation and all authority belong to Him. Blessed is God, the Lord of the worlds. (54)

ٱدْعُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ تَضَرُّعًا وَخُفْيَةً ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُعْتَدِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

Call upon your Lord with humility, and in the secrecy of your hearts. He does not love those who transgress the bounds of what is right. (55)

وَلَا تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بَعْدَ إِصْلَـٰحِهَا
وَٱدْعُوهُ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا ۚ إِنَّ رَحْمَتَ ٱللَّهِ
قَرِيبٌ مِّنَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾ وَهُوَ

Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. Call on Him with fear and hope. Truly, God's grace is ever near to the righteous. (56)

ٱلَّذِى يُرْسِلُ ٱلرِّيَـٰحَ بُشْرًۢا بَيْنَ يَدَىْ
رَحْمَتِهِۦٓ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَقَلَّتْ سَحَابًا ثِقَالًا
سُقْنَـٰهُ لِبَلَدٍ مَّيِّتٍ فَأَنزَلْنَا بِهِ ٱلْمَآءَ
فَأَخْرَجْنَا بِهِۦ مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ
نُخْرِجُ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

He it is who sends forth the winds heralding His coming mercy, and when they have gathered up heavy clouds, We may drive them towards dead land and cause the water to fall upon it, and thus We cause all manner of fruit to come forth. Thus shall We cause the dead to come to life, so that you may keep this in mind. (57)

وَٱلۡبَلَدُ ٱلطَّيِّبُ يَخۡرُجُ نَبَاتُهُۥ بِإِذۡنِ رَبِّهِۦۖ وَٱلَّذِي خَبُثَ لَا يَخۡرُجُ إِلَّا نَكِدٗاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نُصَرِّفُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لِقَوۡمٖ يَشۡكُرُونَ ٥٨

Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave, but from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth. Thus do We expound Our revelations in various ways for the benefit of those who are grateful. (58)

Preview

The *sūrah* has taken us along a trip that extends over epochs and generations, from the very beginning of human life to resurrection after death. Now it takes us along another trip to the depths of the soul of the universe and what appears of it before our eyes. It tells us about the creation of the heavens and the earth after having told us of the creation of mankind. Our attentions are drawn to what the universe contains, its secrets, aspects and phenomena, referring to the night as it follows the day in quick pursuit, and to the sun, moon and stars which are subservient to God's will, and the winds that move along in space, carrying the clouds to a land that is dead, and in no time, it quickens and becomes full of life, yielding all types of fruit.

This reflection on different aspects of God's kingdom comes immediately after relating the story of the creation of mankind and describing both the beginning and the end of man's life journey. The *sūrah* also refers to the attitude of those who follow Satan and who arrogantly refuse to follow God's messengers. It also describes some concepts of *jāhiliyyah,* or ignorance that may prevail in human society, and the traditions people invent for themselves having no sanction by God's law. All this the *sūrah* portrays in order to motivate human beings to return to their Lord who created the universe and made it subservient to His will and who runs it according to His laws and will. Indeed, to Him alone belong all creation and all authority.

This places strong emphasis on the fact that all creation and all existence submit to God's will. In such an atmosphere of complete obedience to God and perfect submission to His will, man's arrogance sounds extremely singular.

When these scenes have been portrayed and its strong rhythm has ensured even greater effectiveness, the *sūrah* calls on human beings to attend to their duties: "*Call upon your Lord with humility, and in the secrecy of your hearts. He does not love those who transgress the bounds of what is right. Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. Call on Him with fear and hope. Truly, God's grace is ever near to the righteous.*" (Verses 55-56)

To submit to God with dedication and to admit complete servitude to Him are no

more than the natural correlative of the submission and servitude of the whole universe to God's authority. It is this concept which the Qur'ān seeks to establish in people's minds. Any person who reflects with an open mind on what God has created in the universe, the laws of nature which operate in it along with the physical and apparent outcome of the working of these laws is bound to recognize that it is God who runs, plans and controls this universe and everything that takes place in it. This realization is bound to leave a great effect on him as he acknowledges that all creation and authority in the universe belong to God alone. This is the first step to motivate the human mind to respond positively to God's call, and submit to His authority along with everything else in the universe.

The Qur'ānic method uses the universe as its main domain to explain the nature of Godhead and make people realize the true essence of submission to God. They begin to recognize its full effect with the reassurance generated by their realization that everything else speaks the same language and uses the same wavelength. The Qur'ān does not portray all this in order to provide some rational evidence in support of man's need to submit to God. Indeed, alongside this rational evidence the Qur'ān wants man to feel the reassurance and happiness generated by his sharing the same faith with the whole universe. This gives submission and servitude to God a different colour and taste. A Muslim is happy and content to be God's servant and to submit to Him. There is no compulsion in the matter, no force used to achieve that status. The basic motive for this attitude, even before the divine order, is a believer's love, reassurance and the objective of being in harmony with the rest of the universe. Thus, a Muslim does not try to rebel or avoid compliance with what he has been ordered to do. By his servitude to God, he is only fulfilling a natural need which contributes to his happiness. Submission to God enables man to be free from subjugation by, or servitude to, any other being. He submits with dignity and nobility to God alone, the Lord of the universe.

Such submission gives us the practical meaning of faith and gives belief its distinctive colour and taste. It tells us what Islam really means and imparts to it its nature and spirit. It is the basic rule that must be established before any order is given, before any aspect of worship is laid down, and before any law is enacted. This is the reason for the great importance the Qur'ānic method attaches to this basic rule which is clearly elucidated and firmly established in believers' minds.

A Clear Concept of God

> *Your Lord is God who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne. He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit. The sun, the moon and the stars are made subservient to His command. Surely all creation and*

all authority belong to Him. Blessed is God, the Lord of the worlds. (Verse 54)

The monotheistic Islamic faith allows no room for any attempt by human beings to work out by themselves any particular concept of God: what He is like or how He acts. There is simply nothing similar to God in any way whatsoever. Hence, it is not up to human intellect to try to picture the Supreme Being. A human concept can only be worked out within the framework that the human intellect can define, on the basis of what it makes out of the world around it. Since there is simply nothing similar to God, then the human intellect cannot draw any definite picture of what God is like. Moreover, it simply cannot visualize how His actions take place. The only alternative available to man is to reflect on the effects of God's actions in the universe around him.

Hence, questions like: `How did God create the heavens and the earth?, `In what form is He established on the throne?', and `What sort of throne is this on which He has established Himself?' do not arise in a believer's mind. In fact, all these and similar questions are totally irrelevant and meaningless. To try to give answers to such questions is even more irrelevant and cannot be attempted by a person who properly understands the basic rule we have explained. Unfortunately, some Islamic groups who have tried hard to discuss such questions and wasted much time over them were influenced in their attempts by Greek philosophy.§

The Qur'ān uses the expression *yawm*, which means 'day', as it speaks of the span of time in which God created the heavens and the earth. Their creation was over six such *yawm,* or six days. Again, this belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Nothing of this creation has been witnessed by any human being or indeed by any creature: *"I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation."* (18: 51)

Whatever is said about these six days is not based on any certain knowledge. They may be six stages of creation or six epochs, or six of God's days which cannot be measured by our time which is the result of the movement of certain planets and stars. Before these were created, time, as we know it, did not exist. Still, the six days to which the Qur'ānic verse refers may be something totally different. Hence, no one may claim that he has certain knowledge of what this figure truly means.[1]

Any attempt to interpret this statement, and similar ones, on the basis of human

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

[1] This is the reason for choosing 'aeon', i.e. an extremely long period, in our English rendering of the verse. In his translation of the Qur'ān, Muhammad Asad writes in a footnote: "The word *yawm,* commonly translated as 'day', but rendered above as `aeon', is used in Arabic to denote any period, whether extremely long (aeon) or extremely short (moment): its application to an earthly 'day' of twenty-four hours is only one of its many connotations." — Editor's note.

theories, and to justify that as being `scientific' is simply arbitrary. It betrays defeatism under the pressure of 'science' which can do no more in this area than the formulation of theories that cannot be proven.

We, for our part, prefer not to go into such discussion because it contributes nothing to our understanding of the Qur'ānic statement.

We move along with the *sūrah* in its inspiring journey through depicting what we see of the universe and its hidden secrets.

> *Your Lord is God who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne. He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit. The sun, the moon and the stars are made subservient to His command. Surely all creation and all authority belong to Him. Blessed is God, the Lord of the worlds.* (Verse 54)

God, who has created this vast and awesome universe and established His own high position, conducting the operation of the universe and administering its affairs, is the One who throws the veil of the night over the day in swift pursuit. Thus, the night follows the day in quick succession. It is He who has made the sun, the moon and the stars subservient to His will and He is the Creator and the controller of all. It is He, then, who is worthy of being "your Lord", giving you sustenance. He gives you the system which ensures your unity and the legislation which settles your disputes. To Him belongs all creation and all authority. Since He is the only Creator, He is also the only one who has any authority. It is this question of Godhead, Lordship and sovereignty, as well as the fact that all belong to God alone which constitute the theme of this passage, and indeed the whole *sūrah.* Its correlative is the question of submission by human beings to God and their implementation of His law in their lives. This is outlined in this *sūrah* in relation to questions of dress and food, as was discussed in the previous *sūrah,* Cattle, [Volume V], in relation to questions of animals, crops, rituals and pledges.

The great issue that the Qur'ān wants to settle should not make us overlook the remarkable nature of the scenes portrayed, their liveliness and powerful inspiration. Indeed, the greatness of the scene is on the same level as the greatness of the objective.

Our minds move along with the cycle of the day and night as they succeed each other in quick pursuit. Our consciousness cannot just be idle without following this cycle, overwhelmed with awe, almost out of breath, waiting with great interest for what will come next.

There is such finesse as these verses reflect the liveliness and beauty of the movement, portraying the day and the night in the form of persons with a clear aim and with a will to achieve the same. Such finesse of style and expression is far

beyond the reach of human artistic talent.

Long familiarity kills the beauty of the majestic scenes of the universe in our minds and makes us look at them in a dull and uninterested way. But this familiarity is easily cast away here to make us look at the scene as if we see it for the first time. The night and day are not simple, natural phenomena that we see in endless repetition. They come alive with feeling, clear direction and a definite purpose. They have sympathy with human beings as they share with them the same movement of life and its essential aspect of struggle and competition.

The same is the case with the sun, the moon and the stars. We see them as living entities that have lives and souls. They receive their orders from God and carry them out in full submission. They are made subservient in the sense that they do what they are bid just as living believers obey God.

All this has its profound effect on the human conscience, motivating it to join the rest of living things that respond to God's call. This gives the Qur'ān its great effect on the human mind which no other literary style can achieve. It addresses human nature with the great authority that belongs to the One who has revealed the Qur'ān and who is fully aware of what touches human hearts and makes them responsive.

Calling on God with Fear and Hope

Thus, the human consciousness is overawed by the lively scenes of the universe which it used to look at in a dull inattentive way. Coupled with this is the realization that all these great creatures submit to the authority of the Creator. At this point, the *sūrah* reminds human beings of their only Lord and directs them to call upon Him with humility and full submission. They must acknowledge His Lordship in order to keep within the limits of their submission to Him, recognizing His authority and refraining from creating or spreading corruption in the land by abandoning His law and following their own capricious desires. *"Call upon your Lord with humility, and in the secrecy of your hearts. He does not love those who transgress the bounds of what is right. Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. Call on Him with fear and hope. Truly, God's grace is ever near to the righteous."* (Verses 55-56)

This directive is made at the most appropriate point, with human beings in the proper frame of mind. They are directed to call upon their Lord and address Him with humility and submission. They should also call on Him in the secrecy of their hearts, not making loud noises. A secret appeal to God is much more befitting because it affirms the close relationship between man and his Lord. Muslim, the renowned *ĥadīth* scholar, relates this authentic *ĥadīth* on the authority of Abū Mūsā who reports: "We were with God's Messenger on one of his travels — (in one version it is stated that this took place when they were on a military expedition) — and

people started to glorify God out loud. God's Messenger said to them: O you people, gently and quietly. You are not calling on someone who is deaf or absent. You are calling on the One who hears all and is close at hand. He is indeed with you."

The Qur'ānic drift stresses the consciousness that God, in His Majesty, is so close to man. This is described here in its practical form as we make our supplication to God. A person who is conscious of God's majesty feels too modest to appeal to Him in a loud voice. If we realize that He is so close to us we can have no reason for appealing to Him loudly. Along with this scene of sincere supplication to God and complete humiliation before Him, an order is issued not to try to usurp His authority as the Arabs used to do in their days of ignorance, when they claimed sovereignty for themselves, while all sovereignty belongs to God alone. They are further commanded not to spread corruption in the land by following their capricious desires, after God has set the earth in proper order and laid down the law to govern both the earth and human life. A believing soul, which calls on its Lord with humility and in secrecy, feeling His closeness and ready response, is not given to aggression and corruption. The two attitudes are closely related in the depth of the human soul and feelings. In its approach, the Qur'ān touches on those feelings. It is an approach designed by the Creator who knows His creation and is fully aware of everything.

"*Call on Him with fear and hope,*" (Verse 56), fearing to incur His anger and punishment, and hoping to earn His pleasure and reward. "*Truly, Gods grace is ever near to the righteous,*" (Verse 56), who worship God as though they actually see Him. If they do not see him, they are fully aware that He sees them. This is the attitude defined by the Prophet as belonging to the righteous.

Bringing the Dead Back to Life

Once more the *sūrah* gives us a panoramic scene of the universe raising it before our eyes to contemplate, but people often pay little attention to it and remain unaware of what it conveys. The idea that we have just discussed speaks of God's grace, and the new scene provides an example of God's grace in action. We see and feel it in the rain that pours down, the growing vegetation and the life that quickens: "*He it is who sends forth the winds heralding His coming mercy, and when they have gathered up heavy clouds, We may drive them towards dead land and cause the water to fall upon it, and thus We cause all manner of fruit to come forth. Thus shall We cause the dead to come to life, so that you may keep this in mind.*" (Verse 57)

All these are manifestations of what God's Lordship brings about in the universe, in accordance with an elaborate plan. They are all of God's own making. He, then, should be acknowledged by all human beings as their only Lord. It is He who creates and provides sustenance through the operation of the natural laws which He sets in

motion as a sign of His mercy which He bestows on His servants. At every moment winds blow and cause the clouds to gather up, prompting a rainfall. But attributing all this to God's action, as it is indeed the case, is the new element outlined most vividly in the Qur'ān as if we actually see it as we contemplate the portrayed scenes.

It is God who sends the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace. The winds blow according to the natural laws which God has set in place in the universe, for it is a basic fact that the universe could not have initiated itself and set for itself these laws dictating its movement. The Islamic concept of existence, however, is based on the belief that everything that takes place in the universe is the result of a special act of will which brings it into the realm of reality, although it actually happens as a product of the operation of the natural laws God has set in operation. The initial commandments for these laws to operate is in no way contradictory with the belief that every single event that takes place in accordance with these laws is the result of God's will. The blowing of the wind, in accordance with natural laws, is a single event that occurs as a result of a separate act of will.

Similarly, when winds gather up heavy clouds, they do so in accordance with the natural laws God has devised for the universe. Yet, this also happens by a separate act of will. Then God may drive these clouds, by yet another separate act of will, to a land that is dead, such as a barren desert, and He may cause the water in the clouds to fall upon it, by yet again a separate act of will, and thus He causes crops and fruits to come forth, by His own will. Nevertheless all these aspects happen as a result of the operation of the laws God has set in motion to give the universe and life their nature.

The Islamic concept of existence rules out the possibility that anything could happen in the universe involuntarily or by blind coincidence. This applies to the universe coming into existence for the first time, and to every single movement, change or amendment that takes place anywhere in the universe. It also rules out that it could take place in an impulsive, mechanical way, which would imagine the universe as a machine that has been set to operate in a particular method and left to run automatically.

The Islamic concept makes it absolutely clear that creation takes place by God's will and according to a plan. It acknowledges the laws of nature that have been set in operation, but adds to these the conscious will that determines every application and operation of these laws. That divine will is free, unrestrained by the laws it has put in place.

Thus, our hearts are freed from the dullness of the involuntarily mechanical concept of events. They remain always alert and watchful. Whenever something happens in conformity with the divine laws of nature, our minds are quick to see

God's hand behind it and His will being done. Thus, we glorify God and we cannot lose sight of His greatness. Thus, the Islamic concept keeps hearts alive and minds alert. We see God's action taking place all the time, and we glorify the Creator whose active hand controls every movement and every event that takes place at any time of the day and night.

The Qur'ānic text links the reality of life that has come into being by God's will and His control of all that takes place on the face of this earth, with the second creation that will also take place by God's will in the same manner as we see in the initiation of this first life: *"Thus shall We cause the dead to come to life so that you may keep this in mind."* (Verse 57)

The miracle of life with all its forms, aspects and circumstances has the same nature. This is implied in the final comment we have just quoted with which the Qur'ānic verse concludes. Just as God initiates life out of the dead on this planet of ours, He will also bring the dead to life at the end of the journey. The will that blows life into every living thing on earth is the same that causes them to quicken after they have been dead. The analogy is given here so that *"you may keep this in mind."* (Verse 57). People tend to overlook this reality and lose sight of it, entertaining instead countless misconceptions.

At the end of this journey that encompasses the whole universe and touches on the secrets of existence, the *sūrah* gives an example of good and evil hearts. But the analogy relies heavily on the scene that has just been portrayed in order to maintain harmony between what we see and what is outlined of different natures: *"Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave, but from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth. Thus do We expound Our revelations in various ways for the benefit of those who are grateful."* (Verse 58)

A good heart is often likened in the Qur'ān and the *ĥadīth* to a good land and good soil, while an evil heart is likened to a bad land and soil. For both the heart and the soil can support plants that come forth and yield fruits. The heart is the place where intentions and feelings, reactions and responses, directions and wills are translated into actions that give their results in practical life. The land, on the other hand, supports plants that give fruits of different colours, shapes and tastes.

"Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave." The vegetation is wholesome, growing easily and giving its goodness in abundance. *"But from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth."* (Verse 58) It brings with it harm, difficulty and hardship. Revelation, guidance, good counsel and admonition have the same effect on the heart as rainfall on soil. If the heart is good, it opens up with a newly felt freshness and gives its goodness to its owner and those around, in the

same way as good land does. If the heart is evil, it can only harden up and deliver nothing but evil, in the same way as bad land brings forth thorny, harmful plants.

"Thus do We expound Our revelations in various ways for the benefit of those who are grateful." (Verse 58) Gratitude only comes out of a good heart, indicating a welcoming reception and a goodly reaction. It is to those who are grateful and who receive good counsel well that God's revelations are expounded, because it is they who benefit by these revelations and work according to their guidance in order to make their benefits available to all.

Gratitude is often mentioned in this *sūrah,* side by side with warnings and reminders. This is not the first time it has been mentioned in the *sūrah,* but we will have more of it as we move along, in the same way as more reminders and warnings are given.

6
The Qur'ānic Approach to Faith

لَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦ فَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥٓ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ٥٩

We sent Noah to his people, and he said: "My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day." (59)

قَالَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ مِن قَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِنَّا لَنَرَىٰكَ فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ٦٠

The great ones among his people replied: "We certainly see that you are in obvious error." (60)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ لَيۡسَ بِي ضَلَٰلَةٞ وَلَٰكِنِّي رَسُولٞ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٦١

Said he: "My people, I am not in error, but I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. (61)

أُبَلِّغُكُمۡ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّي وَأَنصَحُ لَكُمۡ وَأَعۡلَمُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٦٢

I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere counsel, for I know [through revelation] from God what you do not know. (62)

أَوَعَجِبۡتُمۡ أَن جَآءَكُمۡ ذِكۡرٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٖ مِّنكُمۡ لِيُنذِرَكُمۡ وَلِتَتَّقُواْ وَلَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ٦٣

Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you, and that you may keep away from evil and be graced with His mercy?" (63)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡفُلۡكِ وَأَغۡرَقۡنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآۚ إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ قَوۡمًا عَمِينَ ٦٤

But they accused him of lying, so We saved him together with all those who stood by him, in the ark, and caused those who rejected Our revelations to drown. Surely they were blind

people. (64)

And to `Ād [We sent] their brother Had. He said: "My people, worship God alone, you have no deity other than Him. Will you not, then, be God-fearing." (65)

Said the great ones among his people who disbelieved: "We clearly see that you are weak-minded, and, truly, we think that you are a liar." (66)

Said [Hal]: "Weak-minded I am not, my people", he said: "I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. (67)

I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere and honest counsel. (68)

Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you? Do but remember that He has made you successors of Noah's people, and given you a larger stature than other people. Remember, then, God's favours so that you may attain success." (69)

They answered: "Have you come to tell us to worship God alone, and give up what our forefathers used to worship? Bring about, then, whatever you are threatening us with, if you are a

۞ وَإِلَىٰ عَادٍ أَخَاهُمْ هُودًا ۗ قَالَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنْ إِلَٰهٍ غَيْرُهُۥٓ ۚ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

قَالَ ٱلْمَلَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ مِن قَوْمِهِۦٓ إِنَّا لَنَرَىٰكَ فِى سَفَاهَةٍ وَإِنَّا لَنَظُنُّكَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

قَالَ يَٰقَوْمِ لَيْسَ بِى سَفَاهَةٌ وَلَٰكِنِّى رَسُولٌ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

أُبَلِّغُكُمْ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّى وَأَنَا۠ لَكُمْ نَاصِحٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿٦٨﴾

أَوَعَجِبْتُمْ أَن جَآءَكُمْ ذِكْرٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنكُمْ لِيُنذِرَكُمْ ۚ وَٱذْكُرُوٓا۟ إِذْ جَعَلَكُمْ خُلَفَآءَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَزَادَكُمْ فِى ٱلْخَلْقِ بَصْۜطَةً ۖ فَٱذْكُرُوٓا۟ ءَالَآءَ ٱللَّهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

قَالُوٓا۟ أَجِئْتَنَا لِنَعْبُدَ ٱللَّهَ وَحْدَهُۥ وَنَذَرَ مَا كَانَ يَعْبُدُ ءَابَآؤُنَا ۖ فَأْتِنَا بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٧٠﴾

قَالَ قَدۡ وَقَعَ عَلَيۡكُم مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ رِجۡسٞ وَغَضَبٌۖ أَتُجَٰدِلُونَنِي فِيٓ أَسۡمَآءٖ سَمَّيۡتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمۡ وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّا نَزَّلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلۡطَٰنٖۚ فَٱنتَظِرُوٓاْ إِنِّي مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡمُنتَظِرِينَ ٧١

man of truth." (70)

Said [Hūd]: "You are already beset by loathsome evil and by your Lord's condemnation. Are you arguing with me about some names you and your forefathers have invented, and for which God has given no warrant? Wait, then, if you will. I too am waiting." (71)

فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥ بِرَحۡمَةٖ مِّنَّا وَقَطَعۡنَا دَابِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَاۖ وَمَا كَانُواْ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ٧٢

So, by Our grace, We saved him together with all those who stood by him, and We wiped out the last remnant of those who denied Our revelations and would not believe. (72)

وَإِلَىٰ ثَمُودَ أَخَاهُمۡ صَٰلِحٗاۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥۖ قَدۡ جَآءَتۡكُم بَيِّنَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ هَٰذِهِۦ نَاقَةُ ٱللَّهِ لَكُمۡ ءَايَةٗۖ فَذَرُوهَا تَأۡكُلۡ فِيٓ أَرۡضِ ٱللَّهِۖ وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوٓءٖ فَيَأۡخُذَكُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ٧٣

And to Thamūd [We sent] their brother Sālih. He said: My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord. This she-camel belonging to God is a token for you, so leave her alone to pasture on God's earth and do her no harm, lest grievous punishment befall you. (73)

وَٱذۡكُرُوٓاْ إِذۡ جَعَلَكُمۡ خُلَفَآءَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ عَادٖ وَبَوَّأَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ تَتَّخِذُونَ مِن سُهُولِهَا قُصُورٗا وَتَنۡحِتُونَ ٱلۡجِبَالَ بُيُوتٗاۖ فَٱذۡكُرُوٓاْ ءَالَآءَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ٧٤

Remember that He has made you the successors of `Ād and settled you firmly in the land. You build for yourselves palaces on its plains and carve out houses on the mountains. Remember, then, God's favours and do not go about spreading

corruption in the land." (74)

قَالَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ مِن قَوۡمِهِۦ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتُضۡعِفُواْ لِمَنۡ ءَامَنَ مِنۡهُمۡ أَتَعۡلَمُونَ أَنَّ صَٰلِحٗا مُّرۡسَلٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦۚ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرۡسِلَ بِهِۦ مُؤۡمِنُونَ ٧٥

The great ones among his people who gloried in their arrogance towards all who were deemed weak, said to the believers among them: "Do you really know that Ṣāliḥ is a Messenger sent by his Lord?" They answered: "We do believe in the message he has been sent with." (75)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرُوٓاْ إِنَّا بِٱلَّذِيٓ ءَامَنتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ٧٦

The arrogant ones said: "For our part, we reject what you believe in." (76)

فَعَقَرُواْ ٱلنَّاقَةَ وَعَتَوۡاْ عَنۡ أَمۡرِ رَبِّهِمۡ وَقَالُواْ يَٰصَٰلِحُ ٱئۡتِنَا بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ٧٧

They cruelly slaughtered the she- camel, and insolently defied the commandment of their Lord, and said: "Ṣāliḥ, bring about the (punishment) with which you have threatened us, if you are truly one of (God's) messengers." (77)

فَأَخَذَتۡهُمُ ٱلرَّجۡفَةُ فَأَصۡبَحُواْ فِي دَارِهِمۡ جَٰثِمِينَ ٧٨

Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes. (78)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنۡهُمۡ وَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ لَقَدۡ أَبۡلَغۡتُكُمۡ رِسَالَةَ رَبِّي وَنَصَحۡتُ لَكُمۡ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُحِبُّونَ ٱلنَّٰصِحِينَ ٧٩

He turned away from them, and said: "My people, I delivered to you my Lord's message and counselled you sincerely, but you do not like those who give sincere counsel." (79)

وَلُوطًا إِذۡ قَالَ لِقَوۡمِهِۦٓ أَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلۡفَٰحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُم بِهَا مِنۡ أَحَدٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٨٠

And Lot said to his people: "Will you persist in

إِنَّكُمۡ لَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ شَهۡوَةٗ مِّن دُونِ ٱلنِّسَآءِۚ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٞ مُّسۡرِفُونَ ٨١

the indecencies none in all the world had ever committed before you? (80)

With lust you approach men instead of women. Indeed, you are given to excesses." (81)

وَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوٓاْ أَخۡرِجُوهُم مِّن قَرۡيَتِكُمۡۖ إِنَّهُمۡ أُنَاسٞ يَتَطَهَّرُونَ ٨٢

His people's only answer was: "Drive them out of your land; for they are indeed people who would keep chaste." (82)

فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَهُۥ كَانَتۡ مِنَ ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ٨٣

We saved him together with his household, except his wife: she was one of those who stayed behind. (83)

وَأَمۡطَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم مَّطَرٗاۖ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ٨٤

We let loose a heavy rain upon them. Behold what happened in the end to those criminal people." (84)

وَإِلَىٰ مَدۡيَنَ أَخَاهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٗاۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥۖ قَدۡ جَآءَتۡكُم بَيِّنَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ فَأَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡكَيۡلَ وَٱلۡمِيزَانَ وَلَا تَبۡخَسُواْ ٱلنَّاسَ أَشۡيَآءَهُمۡ وَلَا تُفۡسِدُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ بَعۡدَ إِصۡلَٰحِهَاۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٨٥

And to Madyan [We sent] their brother Shu`ayb. He said: "My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord. Give full measure and weight [in your dealings], and do not deprive people of what rightfully belongs to them. Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. That is best for you, if you are true believers. (85)

وَلَا تَقۡعُدُواْ بِكُلِّ صِرَٰطٖ تُوعِدُونَ وَتَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ مَنۡ ءَامَنَ بِهِۦ وَتَبۡغُونَهَا عِوَجٗاۚ وَٱذۡكُرُوٓاْ إِذۡ كُنتُمۡ قَلِيلٗا فَكَثَّرَكُمۡۖ وَٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ

Do not squat on every road, threatening and turning away from God's path anyone who believes in Him, and trying to make it appear

كَانَ عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَإِن كَانَ طَآئِفَةٌ مِّنكُمْ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أُرْسِلْتُ بِهِۦ وَطَآئِفَةٌ لَّمْ يُؤْمِنُوا۟ فَٱصْبِرُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يَحْكُمَ ٱللَّهُ بَيْنَنَا ۚ وَهُوَ خَيْرُ ٱلْحَـٰكِمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

۞ قَالَ ٱلْمَلَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ مِن قَوْمِهِۦ لَنُخْرِجَنَّكَ يَـٰشُعَيْبُ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَكَ مِن قَرْيَتِنَآ أَوْ لَتَعُودُنَّ فِى مِلَّتِنَا ۚ قَالَ أَوَلَوْ كُنَّا كَـٰرِهِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

قَدِ ٱفْتَرَيْنَا عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا إِنْ عُدْنَا فِى مِلَّتِكُم بَعْدَ إِذْ نَجَّىٰنَا ٱللَّهُ مِنْهَا ۚ وَمَا يَكُونُ لَنَآ أَن نَّعُودَ فِيهَآ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّنَا ۚ وَسِعَ رَبُّنَا كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عِلْمًا ۚ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا ۚ رَبَّنَا ٱفْتَحْ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَ قَوْمِنَا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَأَنتَ خَيْرُ ٱلْفَـٰتِحِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

وَقَالَ ٱلْمَلَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ مِن قَوْمِهِۦ لَئِنِ ٱتَّبَعْتُمْ شُعَيْبًا إِنَّكُمْ إِذًا لَّخَـٰسِرُونَ ﴿٩٠﴾

فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ ٱلرَّجْفَةُ فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ فِى دَارِهِمْ جَـٰثِمِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ شُعَيْبًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَغْنَوْا۟ فِيهَا ۚ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ شُعَيْبًا كَانُوا۟ هُمُ

crooked. Remember when you were few and how He caused you to rapidly increase in number. Behold what happened in the end to those who spread corruption. (86)

If there be some among you who believe in the message with which I am sent, and others who do not believe, then be patient until God shall judge between us. He is the best of all judges." (87)

Said the great ones among his people, who gloried in their arrogance: "We shall indeed expel you, Shu`ayb, and your fellow believers from our land unless you return to our fold." He said: "Even though we are unwilling? (88)

We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them. It is not conceivable that we should return to them, unless God, our Lord, so wills. Our Lord has full knowledge of everything. In God we place our trust. Our Lord, lay open the truth between us and our people; for You are the best to lay open the truth." (89)

The great ones who disbelieved among his people said: If you follow Shu`ayb, you shall indeed be losers." (90)

Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in

their homes, (91)

ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ٩٢

as if those that rejected Shu`ayb had never prospered there. Those that rejected Shu`ayb were indeed the losers. (92)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنۡهُمۡ وَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ لَقَدۡ أَبۡلَغۡتُكُمۡ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّي وَنَصَحۡتُ لَكُمۡۖ فَكَيۡفَ ءَاسَىٰ عَلَىٰ قَوۡمٖ كَٰفِرِينَ ٩٣

He turned away from them and said: "My people, I delivered to you my Lord's messages and counselled you sincerely. How, then, could I grieve for people who persist in unbelief." (93)

Preview

In this long passage we have a glimpse of the history of the procession of faith, with the prophets as its leaders and their actions marking its way. We have a detailed account of what is to be expected along this road. It is the history of faith and how it addresses itself to humanity as it travels along its long journey on this planet. It makes its address every time human beings stray away from the straight path, laid down by God, in order to follow other paths, tempted by the fulfilment of carnal desires. It is indeed Satan who seeks to satisfy his grudge against mankind, fulfil his threats and lead human beings by the collar, through these desires, to hell. In the opposite camp, the noble procession of prophets and messengers hold out guidance for humanity, give it light and present it with the prospect of endless happiness in heaven, warning it against the schemes of its old, accursed enemy, Satan.

It is an awesome scene portraying the age-old struggle that encompasses the whole of life and continues along the whole length of the journey. Human history is so complex because man has a dual nature and a highly sophisticated constitution. He is made of two totally different elements, brought together by God's will: the clay of which he is made and the breath of the divine spirit which made of this clay a human being. This unique being moves along, with his unique nature, and deals with highly complicated and mutually interactive elements, as well as different worlds. He deals with the Divine Being, His will, irresistible might, boundless grace and forthcoming mercy. He also deals with the Supreme Society, the angels, and with Satan and his tribe. Furthermore, he deals with this world and its operative laws, as well as the living things on this earth; and with other human beings. In all his dealings, he relies on this same human nature, served also by his talents and abilities that may pull in one or opposite directions.

It is in this complicated multitude of links and relations that human history is formed, influenced by man's strengths and weakness, the guidance he receives, the righteousness he tries to maintain, his contacts with this world and with the world beyond, and his dealings with the material and the spiritual in this universe, and ultimately with God's will. It is from all these dealings that his history is formed, and in the light of this extreme complexity that his history should be explained.

Those who try to explain human history in either economic, political, biological, spiritual, psychological or rational terms look only at one aspect of the interactive elements that influence man, or the distinctly separate worlds with which he deals. Only the Islamic explanation of human history takes such a broad view which encompasses all this complexity and looks at human history in such a perspective.

Here we have some real scenes of this greatly complex history. In the first scene of creation, at which we have already looked, all the worlds and the elements, apparent and hidden, which man will have to deal with were present right in the first moment. We have seen the essential abilities given to man, and his honour in the Supreme Society, when the angels were ordered to prostrate themselves to him and God Himself announced his birth. We have also seen his weakness and how it has been exploited by his enemy. We have seen his fall to earth and how he has to deal with its elements and the laws of nature as they operate in it.

We then saw that as man fell to earth, he was a believer in his Lord, appealing for forgiveness, and giving the pledge of his vicegerency on earth, which committed him to follow the guidance that he would receive from his Lord and not to follow Satan or his own caprice. In order to help him fulfil that pledge, the first experience was granted to him. Time passed and man had to swim in the sea of the universe, with waves taking him this way and that. All the complicated elements both within him and in the universe continued to have an impact on his life. Here we see him having been led to a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.* It is true that man may forget or he overcome by his weakness. That gives power to his enemy, Satan, and hence man must be rescued.

When man fell to earth, he repented and sought forgiveness for his sin, pledging to follow guidance and always to believe in God's oneness, but here we find him having strayed far away, associating partners with God. He has been thrown far off course, but he has still the guidance which could bring him back. He has the divine message. Indeed God's mercy has dictated that man is never left without guidance. Here in this *sūrah* we see the procession of faith, with its standard bearers, God's noble messengers, Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Lot, Shu`ayb, Moses and Muhammad peace be upon them all. We see how these noble messengers try, by God's guidance, to rescue mankind from the precipice into which Satan attempts to sink them. Scenes of the struggle between guidance and error, truth and falsehood, the noble messengers and

the evil ones from among the *jinn* and humans are portrayed here. We also see at every stage how the unbelievers are destroyed and how the believers are rescued.

It is not always that stories are related in the Qur'ān according to chronological order, but here in this *sūrah* they are, because the *sūrah* gives a glimpse of the line followed by humanity ever since its first creation. It also portrays how those in the procession of faith try to rescue man every time he strays far away from the right path. As we look at this panoramic scene we can detect certain broad lines which deserve to be discussed briefly before we look at the passage in detail.

Fallacy in the Study of Comparative Religion

1. Human beings often stray from the path of guidance from where they started in order to sink into a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* that is characterized by associating partners with God. This happens as a result of the interplay of the complex elements that exist in man's own constitution and the elements which he has to deal with. When this state of affairs is reached, God sends a messenger to human beings explaining to them the very same truth they had had before sinking into *jāhiliyyah.* Some of them write their own destruction, while others are able to spare themselves by returning to the truth of faith. These are the ones who accept that they have a single God and submit willingly and totally to Him alone. It is they who listen to their messenger as he says to them: "*My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.*" (Verses 59, 65, 73, 85) This is indeed the essence of the divine faith throughout human history. Every messenger preached this same message to his people who had succumbed to Satan's design and associated partners with God, although these partners may differ in different *jāhiliyyah* societies. It is this basic truism that is at the core of the battle between truth and falsehood. It is people's attitudes to this basic fact that puts them in the camp of those who are destroyed, or those who are saved by God. The Qur'ān relates how all these messengers expressed this essential fact in their various languages, using the same wording throughout: "*My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.*" This serves to emphasize the unity of the divine faith throughout history, even in its verbal expression. The wording itself is so precise in expressing the essence of faith, and its repeated usage portrays in a very tangible way the unity of this faith. This is in itself significant.

   This emphasis the Qur'ān places on the unity of the divine faith serves to show the great divide between the Qur'ānic method and the approach of comparative religion. We can see very clearly that there has never been any gradual approach to the basic concept of faith, or development of that concept,

which all messengers have preached as they received it from God. Those who speak of the development or progress of human faith and include the divine message in this gradual development make a claim that is at variance with what God states. As we see clearly in the Qur'ān, divine faith has always stressed the same basic concept which the Qur'ān relates in the same wording: "*My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.*" This God, to whom all messengers refer, is "the Lord of all the worlds" who will gather all human beings for the reckoning on a great day. No messenger sent by God has ever preached a belief in a Lord of a particular tribe, nation or race, and no messenger preached a belief in a duality or multiplicity of Godhead. No messenger urged his people to worship totems, stars, spirits or idols. No religion sanctioned by God omitted to speak of a life to come, as claimed by so-called 'religious experts' who study the different forms of ignorance and claim that such ignorant beliefs were the religions known to humanity in those particular periods of time.

All messengers, one after the other, preached the message of God's absolute oneness and His Lordship over the universe, as well as the reckoning and reward on the Day of Judgement. But the deviation that took place with every new form of *jāhiliyyah* led to a multitude of ignorant concepts. It is these concepts that are studied by 'experts in religion' who claim that they form the line of religious progress.

At any rate, we have here what God states, and it is the truth that we should follow, particularly those of us who tackle this subject when they explain the Islamic faith or defend it. Those who do not believe in the Qur'ān may say what they want, but God tells the truth and His word is final.

2. Every one of God's messengers peace be upon them all came to his people after they had deviated from the principle of monotheism which was already established in their community by their earlier prophet or messenger. The first generation of human beings were monotheists, believing in God, the supreme Lord of the universe. This was the faith in which Adam and his wife believed. When the Prophet Noah (peace be upon him) was sent after humanity had deviated into polytheism, he called on his people to return to the monotheistic faith and to believe in God alone. Then the floods destroyed the unbelievers and only the believers survived to repopulate the earth believing in God alone, as they were taught by the Prophet Noah. Succeeding generations did likewise but after a long period of time, they began to deviate into ignorance as did those who lived earlier. With the Prophet Hūd, the same story happened again with the unbelievers being destroyed by great storms. The story was repeated again and again.

Every one of these messengers was sent to his people and he said to them: *"My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him."* Every one also said: *"I am giving you honest counsel."* In this way, every messenger made it clear to his people that the matter was very serious, and that their arrogant refusal to accept the faith could land them in great trouble in this life and expose them to a heavier punishment in the hereafter. He also expressed his keen desire that his people should follow divine guidance. However, on each occasion the notables in the community and those who were in leading positions stood against the truth, refusing to submit themselves to God, the Lord of all mankind. It is submission to God alone which is the central issue in the divine faith in all its forms of expression contained in the messages delivered by God's messengers. Faced with such a stubborn refusal, each one of those messengers declared his stand, totally opposed to tyranny and evil. In the case of each messenger, his people were split into two communities on the basis of faith. Thus, the ties of nationality and family relations were severed to be replaced by the ties of faith. With such a split, God made a judgement between the community following his guidance and the one deviating from the truth. This judgement brought about the destruction of the unbelievers and rescued those who submitted to God. It is God's law that no such judgement be passed until the respective community is divided into two on the basis of faith, with its followers declaring their submission to God alone, disassociating themselves from their compatriots who followed some other faiths and making their own stand very clear. This is endorsed by the history of the divine faith ever since the early days of human life.

3. The central issue in every message was the same: that all people should submit to God alone, their Lord and the Lord of the universe. Such submission and the removal of authority from all its usurpers is the foundation of every good thing in human life. The Qur'ān does not go into any great details of those earlier messages, after explaining this common denominator in all divine messages. The details are based on this basic principle. The importance of this central issue is the reason why the Qur'ān highlights it in this way, and singles it out in painting the main features of the procession of faith. We should remember here what we have said in our Prologue to the sixth *sūrah,* Cattle, or al-An`ām, [Vol. V], that this central issue provided the subject matter of all Qur'ānic revelations in Makkah, while the revelations vouchsafed to the Prophet in Madinah outlined Islamic law as it addressed the needs of the community of believers.

   This religion of ours has a central truth, and it adopts a very distinctive approach in outlining this truth. The approach is in no way less important

than the truth itself. Therefore, we must know the basic truth outlined by Islam and follow the approach in which it is outlined. This approach highlights, frequently repeats and endorses the fact of God's oneness. This is the reason why this basic issue stands out in the stories given in this *sūrah.*

4. These accounts describe the nature of faith and the nature of unbelievers among human beings. It shows two types of hearts: one ready to receive the faith and another ready to deny it. In the case of every messenger, those who believed were willing to submit themselves to God and obey His messenger. They did not find it surprising that God chose one of them to deliver His message warning them against disbelief. The unbelievers in each case were those unwilling to relinquish the authority they had usurped and to acknowledge that it belonged to God alone, to whom all creation and all authority belonged. They were unwilling to listen to a single person among them. Those were the great ones, the chiefs who enjoyed positions of authority and leadership among their people. Thus we can recognize the central point in this faith, namely, that of sovereignty and authority. Those leaders were always aware of the meaning of what each messenger said: *"Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him";* and his statement: *"I am only a messenger from the Lord of the universe."*

   They felt that acceptance of God's oneness meant that sovereignty would be acknowledged to belong to its rightful owner, God, the only Lord, in the universe. What they had usurped of it would have to be restored to Him. They were ready to resist that even to the point of their destruction. They were not prepared to learn the lessons of earlier communities. On the contrary, they were prepared to follow in their footsteps to destruction and even to hell. The doom that befell those communities follows the same consistent pattern: a community forgets God's message and moves away from His guidance; a messenger is sent to deliver a message of warning; the same community adopts an arrogant attitude refusing to submit to God; the lure of affluence causes further disregard of the warning and even an invitation to hasten doom; persecution of the believers who are determined to stick to their faith; and finally destruction of the arrogant unbelievers in accordance with God's law that has remained in operation throughout history.

5. Equipped with power, falsehood does not tolerate even the mere existence of the truth. Even when the truth wants to stay well away from falsehood, leaving judgement between them to God, falsehood will not accept this attitude. It will continue to chase the truth and persecute it. The Prophet Shu`ayb said to his people: *"If there be some among you who believe in the message with which I am sent, and others who do not believe, then be patient until God shall*

judge between us. He is the best of all judges." (Verse 87) But they did not accept this offer from him. They could not tolerate seeing the truth in existence, or seeing a group of people freed from the tyranny of evil and submitting to God alone. *"Said the great ones among his people, who gloried in their arrogance: 'We shall indeed expel you, Shu`ayb and your fellow believers from our land unless you return to our fold.'"* (Verse 88) At this juncture, Shu`ayb declared his commitment to the truth, and refused the tyrants' offer: *"He said: 'Even though we are unwilling? We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them. '(*Verses 88-89)

This will teach the advocates of Islam that the battle against tyranny is imposed on them. They simply cannot avoid it, no matter how they try, because the forces of evil will never let them alone unless they abandon their faith and accept the beliefs of tyrannical forces. They must remember, however, that God has rescued them from those beliefs as soon as they declared their submission to God alone and freed their hearts from submission to tyranny. Hence, they must, by necessity, fight their battle, remaining steadfast, until God grants them victory. They have to say, as the Prophet Shu`ayb said: *"In God we place our trust. Our Lord, lay open the truth between us and our people; for You are the best to lay open the truth."* (Verse 89) Then, they should let God's law run its course as it has done before in all periods of history.

Putting Human Life Back on the Right Course

The procession of faith, led by the noble messengers God has sent to mankind, is clearly demonstrated in the *sūrah.* This is preceded by the greater procession of faith in the whole universe: *"Your Lord is God who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne. He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit. The sun, the moon and the stars are made subservient to His command. Surely all creation and all authority belong to Him. Blessed is God, the Lord of the worlds."* (Verse 54)

All messengers sent by God advocated submission to the Supreme Being who created the heavens and the earth, and established Himself on the throne, and who set the night to pursue the day, and set the sun, moon and stars in motion making them subservient to His will. It is He who has created all and possesses authority over all. Indeed, His messengers call on all mankind to submit to God, the Lord of all the worlds, striving to save mankind from Satan's schemes who endeavours to divert humanity away from God and to a state of ignorance. That state has endless forms, but all these forms have in common the characteristic of associating partners with God, claiming that they share Lordship with Him.

The Qur'ānic method often links the submission of the universe to God and the call on people to be in harmony with the universe and to submit to God as the rest of the universe has done and by whose will the universe is set in motion. This universal fact is bound to violently shake man's heart, urging him from within to join in this willing submission, in order not to be the only odd note in the whole universal system.

The noble messengers do not call on mankind to do anything odd. Indeed, they call on mankind to believe in the truth implanted in the universe and forming the basis of its existence. It is the same truth implanted in human nature. When people are swayed by their carnal desires they enable Satan to take them away from the original truth, and it is then that Satan becomes certain that they have blinded their eyes and closed their minds to the truth.

This is a fundamental fact that clearly manifests itself when we listen to historical accounts as they are given in proper order in this *sūrah.*

Noah Rejected by Blind People

> *We sent Noah to his people, and he said: "My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day." The great ones among his people replied: "We certainly see that you are in obvious error. "Said he: "My people, I am not in error, but I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere counsel, for I know [through revelation] from God what you do not know. Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you, and that you may keep away from evil and be graced with His mercy?" But they accused him of lying, so We saved him together with all those who stood by him, in the ark, and caused those who rejected Our revelations to drown. Surely they were blind people. (Verses 59-64)*

This first historical account gives us a brief history of Noah. It does not include the details given elsewhere in the Qur'ān where these are required by the main theme under discussion in *Sūrahs,* Had and Noah. The main purpose of giving it here is to describe the main features which we have already discussed, the nature of faith, how to deliver God's message, how people receive it and the messenger's reaction to the response he gets, and finally the infliction of the punishment against which they were warned. Hence, only those aspects of the story which outline these points are mentioned here, following the general method of Qur'ānic historical accounts.

This passage opens with the statement, "*We sent Noah to his people.*" (Verse 59) This follows the pattern adopted by God, which meant that a messenger was chosen from among his own people, speaking their own language in order to win over those

whose nature remained undistorted and to facilitate discussion and communication. Those whose nature is already distorted wonder at this pattern and feel it beneath them to respond to human beings, demanding that the message be delivered to them by angels. This is no more than an excuse, because they would not have responded positively to divine guidance, whatever its means of delivery.

As Noah was sent to his people, he stressed the central point of all divine messages: "*He said: 'My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.'*" (Verse 59) This is the solid unchangeable basis of divine faith, the mainstay of human life that guarantees the unity of direction and goal. It ensures that human beings are free from enslavement by their desires or by other human beings. It helps those who accept it to rise above all that they desire and to resist all temptation and threats.

The divine faith is a code for living based on the fundamental principle that all authority in human life belongs to God alone. This is the essential meaning of worshipping God alone and that God is the only deity acknowledged by human beings. When we speak of authority we include the belief that He is the Lord of both the universe and mankind who has originated them and conducts their affairs by His will and power. At the same level, we include belief in God's Lordship over man's day-to-day practical life and that man should conform to God's will and abide by His law, in the same way as worship is offered to Him alone. All this is one integral whole. Otherwise, we come very close to associating partners with God, worshipping others alongside Him, or instead of Him.

Noah conveyed this single message to his people, and warned them against rejecting it, speaking to them as a brother deeply concerned for their well-being and as a herald giving them honest counsel: "*I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.*" (Verse 59) Here we note that the faith preached by Noah, which is the most ancient faith, included belief in the hereafter and the reckoning and reward on an awesome day, with Noah fearing for his people what punishment and suffering may await them. Here we realize the clear divergence between God's system and what it tells us about the origin of faith on the one hand, and, on the other, the system of the `religious specialists' who grope in the dark and ignore what the Qur'ān says.

How was this clear, straightforward address received by Noah's deviant people? "*The great ones among his people replied: 'We certainly see that you are in obvious error.'*" (Verse 60) This is also how the idolatrous Arabs responded to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when they accused him of being an apostate who had renounced the faith of Abraham.

Deviation can extend as far as making a person believe that the one who advocates a return to divine guidance is in error! When human nature is corrupted, and standards are perverted and personal desire reigns supreme, then people can be so

insolent and describe divine guidance as erroneous. Consider, if you will, what ignorant societies of today say about those who follow God's guidance. They are often described as having gone astray, and they are always offered some temptation to bring them back to the fold. That is, the fold of the filth in which *jāhiliyyah* finds its pleasure. Besides, what does contemporary *jāhiliyyah* say to a young woman who covers her body, and to a young man who looks with contempt at cheap flesh? Their purity is described as reactionaryism, backwardness and primitiveness. Indeed, *jāhiliyyah* employs all means of influence and all media outlets at its command to drag them from their clean standard down into the filth by which it surrounds itself. Again, what does contemporary *jāhiliyyah* say about a person who chooses for himself serious preoccupations and refuses to be football crazy or television and video crazy, or refuses to waste his time in parties and discotheques? He is described as reserved, introvert, inflexible, uncultured, etc. He is offered a variety of temptations to toe the line. All *jāhiliyyah* is essentially the same, although appearances and circumstances may differ.

Noah denies that he is in error, and explains to his people the true nature of his call and its origin. He has not invented it, but he is simply a messenger bearing a message from the Lord of mankind, and delivering it with honest advice, based on the fact that he knows of God what they do not know. He feels that knowledge within himself, because he has his link with God: "*Said he: 'My people, I am not in error, but I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere counsel, for I know [through revelation] from God what you do not know.'*" (Verses 61-62)

Here we note a gap in the story. It seems that they have wondered that God should choose a human being, one of their number, to bear a message from Him to them, and that this human messenger should find within himself knowledge about his Lord which is not available to those who are not similarly chosen. This gap is indicated by what comes next: "*Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you, and that you may keep away from evil and be graced with His mercy?*" (Verse 63)

There is nothing strange about this choice. Indeed, everything about human beings is amazing. Man deals with all the worlds and can have a direct link with his Lord because of what God has imparted to him and settled in his nature as a result of breathing into him of His soul. God certainly knows best whom to choose as His messenger. If God chooses a human being to bear His message, then this honoured person can receive the message through his latent ability to be in contact with God who gives him his special status as a human being receiving honours no other creature receives.

Noah reveals to them the goal of his message: "*That he might warn you, and that you*

may keep away from evil and be graced with His mercy." (Verse 63) There is first the warning so that their hearts respond and steer away from evil, as a prelude to eventually receiving God's grace. Noah himself has no personal interest or purpose other than this noble one.

But when human nature reaches a certain limit of corruption, it ceases to reflect and use its reason. At this stage, no warning or reminder is of any use: *"But they accused him of lying, so We saved him together with all those who stood by him, in the ark, and caused those who rejected Our revelations to drown. Surely they were blind people."* (Verse 64) We have already seen how blind they are, that they cannot recognize right guidance, honest warning or sincere advice. Indeed, it is their blindness which caused them to reject the truth and let them suffer their inevitable destiny.

When All Argument Is Futile

History moves along and the *sūrah* moves on to another stage. We are now face to face with the people of `Ād, to whom the Prophet Had was sent.

> *And to `Ād [We sent] their brother Hūd. He said: "My people, worship God alone, you have no deity other than Him. Will you not, then, be God-fearing.'" Said the great ones among his people who disbelieved: "We clearly see that you are weak-minded, and, truly, we think that you are a liar." Said [Hūd]: "Weak-minded I am not, my people', he said: "I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere and honest counsel. Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you? Do but remember that He has made you successors of Noah's people, and given you a larger stature than other people. Remember, then, God's favours so that you may attain success." They answered: `Have you come to tell us to worship God alone, and give up what our forefathers used to worship? Bring about, then, whatever you are threatening us with, if you are a man of truth." Said [Hūd]: "You are already beset by loathsome evil and by your Lord's condemnation. Are you arguing with me about some names you and your forefathers have invented, and for which God has given no warrant? Wait, then, if you will. I too am waiting." So, by Our grace, We saved him together with all those who stood by him, and We wiped out the last remnant of those who denied Our revelations and would not believe. (Verses 65-72)*

It is the same message, the same dialogue and the same end. God's law applies to all people in all generations. The people of `Ād were descendants of Noah and those who survived with him in the ark. Some reports put their number at only thirteen. There is no doubt that the descendants of those believers, saved in the ark, followed the faith preached by the Prophet Noah (peace be upon him) which is based on complete submission to God. They definitely worshipped God alone, acknowledging

no deity other than Him and believing that He is the Lord of all the worlds. That was what Noah told them. Then with the passage of time, their descendants travelled and settled in different parts of the world. Satan continued to try to lead them away from divine guidance, and exploited their desires, particularly for wealth and enjoyment. Thus they abandoned God's law. Those people of `Ād found it strange that the Prophet sent to them should call on them to worship God alone.

"And to `Ād [We sent] their brother Hūd. He said: 'My people, worship God alone, you have no deity other than Him. Will you not, then, be God-fearing.'" (Verse 65) This is exactly what Noah said to his people earlier, and they refused to accept it and suffered their well-known destiny. God has given power to the people of `Ād, but the *sūrah* does not mention here where they lived, although we learn from another *sūrah* that they were settled at al-Aĥqāf, which is a reference to the high sand dunes close to the Yemen border between Yamāmah and Ĥadramawt. They followed the same pattern as Noah's people, rejected the warnings, and refused to reflect on what happened to those who went along before them. Therefore, Mild adds in his address to them this sentence: "Will *you not, then, be God-fearing."* (Verse 65) This implies a strong criticism of their attitude as they show no fear of God and no worry about a terrible destiny.

The elders and the chiefs of his people found it too much that one from among them should call on them to follow divine guidance and denounce them for not fearing God. They found his attitude rather impudent, exceeding the limits and showing them little respect. Hence, they started to accuse their Prophet with being both foolish and a liar, paying him no respect. Without proper reflection, deliberation or sound evidence, they made their accusations: *"Said the great ones among his people who disbelieved: 'We clearly see that you are weak-minded, and, truly, we think that you are a liar.'"* (Verse 66) But he replied decisively: "' *Weak-minded I am not, my people', he said: `I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds. I am delivering to you my Lord's messages and giving you sincere and honest counsel."* (Verses 67-68)

His denial of being foolish or weak-minded combines simplicity with truthfulness, just in the same way as Noah denied that he was in error. Also like Noah before him, Hūd explains to them the source and goal of his message and that as he delivers it to them, he is giving them sound advice and ensuring honesty in its delivery. He says all that to them with the compassion of a person giving advice, and the truthfulness which is the mark of a trustworthy person. But like Noah's people before them, they wondered that he should be chosen as God's messenger, and at the message entrusted to him. Thus, we find Hūd saying to them the same words Noah had said before him, as if the two persons had one soul: *"Do you think it strange that a reminder from your Lord should come to you through a man from among yourselves, so that he might warn you?"* (Verse 69)

He then adds something relevant to their own situation as the successors of the people of Noah and the fact that they had been given greater strength and larger stature which fits with their mountainous area: *"Do but remember that He has made you successors of Noah's people, and given you a larger stature than other people. Remember, then, God's favours so that you may attain success."* (Verse 69) All that they have been given should have made them grateful and should have warned them against being cocky and conceited so that they would not suffer the same fate as earlier nations. They had not made a covenant with God to suspend the laws of nature He had set in operation, in accordance with His design for life on earth. To remember God's favours encourages gratitude for them, and to be grateful for God's blessings requires that what has led to them should be assiduously maintained and preserved. Only in this way can we ensure prosperity in this life as well as in the life to come.

However, when human nature deviates, it ceases to think, reflect and heed warnings. Those elders behaved in the most arrogant of manners. They stopped the argument and precipitated God's punishment, showing boredom with sincere, honest advice and paying little heed to God's messenger's serious warning. Their answer shows that they can hardly tolerate the manner their Prophet spoke to them in. They do not want to even consider it: *"They answered: 'Have you come to tell us to worship God alone, and give up what our forefathers used to worship?'"* (Verse 70)

This is a depressing scene of how familiar traditions exercise a blinding pressure over hearts and minds. This pressure deprives man of one of the most basic of his human qualities: that is, the freedom to think, reflect and choose his beliefs. Thus, man is enslaved by custom and tradition and by what his own and other people's desires impose on him. Every window of knowledge and every light of hope is closed. Those people precipitated their own doom because they did not wish to face the truth or to reflect on the absurdity of their falsehood. They said to their Prophet who gave honest advice: *"Bring about, then, whatever you are threatening us with, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 70)

The Prophet's answer was quick and decisive, as he said: "*You are already beset by loathsome evil and by your Lord's condemnation. Are you arguing with me about some names you and your forefathers have invented, and for which God has given no warrant? Wait, then, if you will. I too am waiting."* (Verse 71)

He thus told them what fate was about to befall them and which they could no longer avoid. It was his Lord who told him of the suffering they would inevitably endure, together with God's condemnation. He also made it clear to them that their beliefs were absurd: *"Are you arguing with me about some names you and your forefathers have invented, and for which God has given no warrant?"* (Verse 71) What you have associated with God has no reality. They are mere names invented by you or your forefathers. God has never given any sanction for their worship. Hence, they have no

power and no proof to support their status.

A short sentence that is often repeated in the Qur'ān is particularly significant. God says, in connection with the worship of anyone or anything other than Him that *'God has given no warrant'* for such worship. This refers to a fundamental principle which tells us that every word, law, tradition or concept which is not sanctioned by God has little or no effect and will soon disappear. Human nature receives all this lightly, but when a word comes from God, it acquires additional weight, causing it to penetrate right through people's minds, because it derives its power from God. Numerous are the theories, doctrines and concepts which received a great deal of publicity backed by strong authority. But once they found themselves face to face with God's word, they soon appeared as they truly are: weak, hollow and insupportable.

With all the confidence of a true believer, Hūd challenges his people: *"Wait then, if you will. I too am waiting."* (Verse 71) It is this confidence that gives strength to the advocates of faith who are certain that falsehood is truly weak although it may temporarily have the appearance of material power and great following. The advocates of faith are certain that the power and authority of the truth they advocate will eventually triumph because it is derived from God's power.

In the story of Hūd and his people, the waiting is not long: *"So, by Our grace, We saved him together with all those who stood by him, and We wiped out the last remnant of those who denied Our revelations and would not believe."* (Verse 72) It is total destruction from which no one is saved. This is understood from the expression, *"wiped out the last remnant."* In the Arabic text, the term used signifies the last person in a caravan who moves a short distance behind it.

Another page of the history of communities denying the truth is thus turned, with the warning given full effect after all reminders have been rejected. This *sūrah* does not go into details of how the destruction took place. This is explained in other *sūrahs.* Therefore, we leave its discussion for now.

Most Flagrant Defiance

> *And to Thamūd [We sent) their brother Ṣāliĥ. He said: 'My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord. This she-camel belonging to God is a token for you, so leave her alone to pasture on God's earth and do her no harm, lest grievous punishment befall you. Remember that He has made you the successors of `Ād and settled you firmly in the land. You build for yourselves palaces on its plains and carve out houses on the mountains. Remember, then, God's favours and do not go about spreading corruption in the land." The great ones among his people who gloried in their arrogance towards*

> *all who were deemed weak, said to the believers among them: "Do you really know that Ṣāliĥ is a Messenger sent by his Lord?" They answered: "We do believe in the message he has been sent with." The arrogant ones said: "For our part, we reject what you believe in." They cruelly slaughtered the she-camel, and insolently defied the commandment of their Lord, and said: "Ṣālīĥ, bring about the (punishment) with which you have threatened us, if you are truly one of (Gods) messengers." Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes. He turned away from them, and said: `My people, I delivered to you my Lord's message and counselled you sincerely, but you do not like those who give sincere counsel." (Verses 73-79)*

This is yet another episode in the history of mankind. Yet another sinking into ignorance and a confrontation between the truth and falsehood that ends in another destruction of the unbelievers.

"And to Thamūd [We sent) their brother Ṣāliĥ. He said: My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.'" (Verse 73) It is the same single statement with which the creation of man started and to which humanity will certainly return. It is also the same method of belief, direction, confrontation and delivery of the message. Here we also have an addition referring to the miracle which was given with the Prophet Ṣāliĥ's message when his people demanded it in order to believe in him: *"Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord. This she-camel belonging to God is a token for you."* (Verse 73)

As the *sūrah* gives a quick presentation of the history of faith, the results of believing in it and the consequences of its rejection, it does not go into the details of the people's request for a miracle. It simply refers to its existence as soon as it has outlined the essence of the message given by the Prophet Ṣāliĥ. Nor does this *sūrah* give us any details about the she-camel other than describing it as *"a clear evidence of the truth ... from your Lord ... a she-camel belonging to God ... a token from Him."* From all this we realize that she was a very special she- camel, or that she was brought up for them in an extraordinary way to make of her a clear proof, and to make its belonging to God particularly significant, confirming Ṣāliĥ's prophethood. We refrain from adding anything about the she-camel which is not mentioned in this most accurate of sources. Indeed, what is mentioned here is more than sufficient.

"So leave her alone to pasture on God's earth and do her no harm, lest grievous punishment befall you." (Verse 73) Since she is God's camel, then she should be left alone to graze on God's earth, or else the warning will take effect.

After having given them the miracle and made the warning clear, Ṣāliĥ begins to counsel his people to remember and reflect, bearing in mind the fate of past nations. He also reminds them that it is their duty to show their gratitude for the power they have been given as successors to those nations: *"Remember that He has made you the*

successors of `Ād and settled you firmly in the land. You build for yourselves palaces on its plains and carve out houses on the mountains. Remember, then, God's favours and do not go about spreading corruption in the land." (Verse 74)

We are not told here in which area the people of Thamūd lived, but we are told in another *sūrah* that they were at al-Ĥijr, which lies between Ĥijāz and Greater Syria. From Ṣāliĥ's reminder we realize that the Thamūd were given power and affluence, and we can also visualize the nature of the area in which they lived. It incorporates plains and mountains, and they used to have their palaces in the plains and their homes in the mountains. We can conclude from this short statement that they were a civilized nation that excelled in architecture. Ṣāliĥ also reminds them that they were chosen to succeed the people of `Ād, although they did not live in the same area. It seems that theirs was the architectural civilization that flourished after that of `Ād. It also seems that their power extended beyond their own area, giving them added strength and making them feared by other nations. Hence, Ṣāliĥ warns them against being arrogant and conceited. He tells them not to spread corruption in the land, as the lesson of `Ād and their fate must not be lost on them.

Here again we notice a gap in this story necessitated by the need for brevity. A section of Ṣāliĥ's people have accepted the faith, while another section rejected it with arrogance. Those of high position are the last to believe in a faith which deprives them of personal power and attributes all power to God, the Lord of all the worlds. Hence, they inevitably try to punish the believers who have rebelled against tyranny by declaring their servitude to God alone, submitting to no one other than Him. Thus, we find the proud and arrogant chiefs of Thamūd very clear in their threats to those who have believed, particularly those who are weak: *"The great ones among his people who gloried in their arrogance towards all who were deemed weak, said to the believers among them: Do you really know that Ṣāliĥ is a Messenger sent by his Lord?'"* (Verse 75)

It is clear that the question here implies a threat. The elders simply denounce them for their beliefs and ridicule them for accepting his statement that he has been sent by God. But those believers are no longer weak. Their faith has given them strength and self confidence as well as a powerful argument. They are certain of their position. So, what effect will the denunciation and the ridicule by the elders signify? *"They answered: 'We do believe in the message he has been sent with.'"* (Verse 75)

At this moment, the arrogant chiefs clearly identify their attitude which implies a strong warning: *"For our part, we reject what you believe in."* (Verse 76) This is, then, what they say despite the clear proof given to Ṣāliĥ, which leaves no doubt in anybody's mind. It is not the proof which those people needed in order to believe in the message. What turns them away from faith is the fact that their power and authority are threatened when they submit to the only Lord in the universe. It is their

lust for power, a deeply rooted desire, which Satan manipulates in order to lead people astray.

They did not wait long before carrying out their threat. They targeted for their assault the she-camel which was a token from God giving support to His Messenger. They slaughtered it despite their Prophet's warnings that they would be severely punished if they harmed her: *"They cruelly slaughtered the she-camel, and insolently defied the commandment of their Lord, and said: 'Ṣāliḥ, bring about the (punishment) with which you have threatened us, if you are truly one of (God's) messengers.'"* (Verse 77)

This is a clear example of the arrogance which goes hand in hand with disobedience, described here as 'insolent defiance' in order to point out those people's frame of mind when they actually slaughtered the she-camel. It is this frame of mind that leads them to adopt their careless attitude, challenging the Prophet Ṣāliḥ to bring about their doom.

The *sūrah* immediately declares the outcome, which is not given here in any detail: *"Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their homes."* (Verse 78) The earth quake and their lying lifeless are shown as a punishment that befits their arrogance. With an earthquake, fear strikes people. The way they laid lifeless shows total powerlessness. It is most fitting that an arrogant and insolent person should tremble with fear, and that an aggressor is deprived of all power. The punishment fits the crime and the image given here of their destiny is highly expressive.

They are left in that position, lifeless on the ground to show us Ṣāliḥ as he saw those who had rejected and challenged him: *"He turned away from them, and said: My people, I delivered to you my Lord's message and counselled you sincerely, but you do not like those who give sincere counsel."* (Verse 79)

He is simply seeking witnesses for his honesty and sincerity in delivering his message and giving sound advice to his people. He also makes it clear that he could not be blamed for the fate they brought upon themselves by their insolent defiance and rejection of God's message.

Yet another page of the history of the nations that rejected God's message is turned over. Those who reject it anew must heed God's warnings.

Taking the Lead in Perversion

As history moves on we come to the time of the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him), but the *sūrah* does not refer here to Abraham's history, because it only wants to discuss the fate of those nations who rejected the divine message. This is in line with the fourth verse in the *sūrah* which says: *"How many a community have We destroyed,*

with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting." (Verse 4) These stories of earlier communities give some details of what this statement sums up. Abraham's people were not destroyed because the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) did not request his Lord to destroy them. Instead, he abandoned them and the deities they worshipped instead of God. We have here a brief account of the story of the people of Lot, who was Abraham's nephew and contemporary, because the story involves giving warnings, rejection by unbelievers, and destruction. It thus fits in with what the *sūrah* is all about.

> *And Lot said to his people: "Will you persist in the indecencies none in all the world had ever committed before you? With lust you approach men instead of women. Indeed, you are given to excesses. His people's only answer was: "Drive them out of your land; for they are indeed people who would keep chaste." We saved him together with his household, except his wife: she was one of those who stayed behind. We let loose a heavy rain upon them. Behold what happened in the end to those criminal people. (Verses 80-84)*

The story of Lot's people tells us about one special aspect of perverted human nature and tackles an issue different from that of Godhead and God's oneness which was the central point in the earlier stories. However, it is not far removed from it. Believing in God, the only Lord in the universe, is bound to lead the believer to accept God's law and conform to the rules of nature He has set in operation. It has been God's will to create human beings in two sexes, male and female, who perfectly complement each other. Survival of this species is effected through reproduction that results from intimate contact between male and female. Hence, it is part of their nature to be physically and psychologically attracted to each other and to make the contact that leads to reproduction. The pleasure they receive from it is profound, and the desire to have that pleasure is deeply rooted. Both desire and pleasure provide the motive for them to seek that contact despite the difficulties they are sure to encounter later with pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, maintenance, and the upbringing and education of children. It also ensures that the male and female remain united in a family where the offspring are reared, because they require fostering over a much longer period than animal offspring. Moreover, it fulfils God's will for human life to continue.

This is the way God has ordained things. To understand it and conform to it is directly related to believing in God and His wisdom in planning and creation. Therefore, to deliberately deviate from this norm is closely related to deviation from faith and from the code of living God has laid down.

Perversion of human nature is presented so clearly in the story of Lot's people. It is clear that Lot, the Prophet, does not mince words about the fact that they are the

abnormal ones among God's creation, and that their ugly perversion is unprecedented: "*And Lot said to his people: 'Will you persist in the indecencies none in all the world had ever committed before you? With lust you approach men instead of women. Indeed, you are given to excesses.'*" (Verses 80-81)

The excess to which Lot is referring is that they go beyond the limits of the divine order of things which is reflected in upright human nature. They indeed go to excess with regard to the energy God has given them in order to play their role in the survival and progress of human life, by expending it wastefully in a place other than that of fertilization. It thus becomes no more than a perverted lust. God has made both man and woman derive proper and natural pleasure in the fulfilment of natural law. When a person finds his pleasure in something contrary to this natural law, then that is a mark of the perversion and corruption of nature, let alone its being a corruption of moral values. Indeed, there is no difference between the two, because Islamic morality is an embodiment of natural moral values, free of corruption and perversion.

Just like her psychology, woman's physical constitution is the one that allows the male to have his proper and natural pleasure when the two share contact which is not meant merely to satisfy a desire. Indeed, the pleasure that attends such a contact is an aspect of God's grace and blessing. It is He who has made this activity the source of pleasure, equal to its attendant responsibility. At the same time it fulfils His will that ensures the continuity of life. The male's physical constitution cannot provide uncorrupted human nature with pleasure if this desire is to be fulfilled with another male. Indeed, a feeling of disgust is immediately generated which blocks such a leaning as long as human nature is normal and upright.

The nature of the faith on which a particular system is based has a decisive influence in this respect. We need only to look at contemporary *jāhiliyyah* in Europe and America to find the same sexual perversion rapidly increasing. No justification may be advanced for it other than the fact that people there have deviated from the right beliefs and the way of life that can be based on them. The media, often controlled by Zionist interests, is directed to undermine human life through the spreading of immorality and promiscuity. Hence it has been trying hard to stress the misconception that women's adoption of a position of conservative propriety is the reason for the spread of such abnormal indecencies. But the facts contradict this most glaringly. In Europe and America, there is no longer any impediment to complete social and private contacts between men and women. People there often justify this, taking their lead from the animal world. Nevertheless, perverse sexual practice continues to increase. Indeed, it is no longer limited to homosexuality between males; lesbians are also on the increase. Anyone who still wants to argue in the face of these glaring facts should read first, "Men's sexual behaviour" and "Women's

sexual behaviour" in the McKenzie Report. The controlled media nevertheless continues to repeat this falsehood, attributing perversion to women's religious dress. In this way, they are only fulfilling the aims of the protocols of the Elders of Zion and implementing the recommendations of missionary conventions.

Let us now turn our attention to Lot's people to find perversion staring us in the face as we listen to their reply to the Prophet Lot: *"His people's only answer was: 'Drive them out of your land; for they are indeed people who would keep chaste.'"* (Verse 82) How amazing! The person who prefers to be chaste and maintains the path of purity is driven out of town, so that only those immersed in filth remain.

But why should we wonder when we see modern *jāhiliyyah* doing the same thing. It chases those who maintain their chastity and refuse to sink into the filth of *jāhiliyyah* societies, falsely described as progress and as liberation of women from bondage. Such people are exposed to enormous pressures at home and at work and they are condemned personally and intellectually. Their presence in society is hardly tolerated, because only those who are prepared to sink into the filth of ignorance are welcome. The same logic of ignorance wherever and whenever *jāhiliyyah* exists!

The fate of those people is mentioned briefly in the same way as the fate of other nations and communities: *"We saved him together with his household, except his wife: she was one of those who stayed behind. We let loose a heavy rain upon them. Behold what happened in the end to those criminal people."* (Verses 83-84)

Those who were threatened by the criminals are saved, and the issue is settled on the basis of faith and the way of life it lays down. Lot's wife, the closest person to him, is not saved because she belonged to his people and shared their beliefs and practices. A rain was sent pouring down over them, accompanied by powerful storms. We wonder, was this torrential rain meant to purify the earth from their filth and impurity? It may be so, but another case of rejection of the divine faith was thus settled forever.

Maintaining Justice in All Transactions

The next account of communities rejecting the divine faith in those ancient days is the last given in this *sūrah.* It speaks about the people of Madyan and their Prophet, Shu`ayb.

> *And to Madyan [We sent] their brother Shu`ayb. He said: "My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord. Give full measure and weight [in your dealings], and do not deprive people of what rightfully belongs to them. Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. That is best for you, if you are true believers. Do not squat on*

every road, threatening and turning away from God's path anyone who believes in Him, and trying to make it appear crooked. Remember when you were few and how He caused you to rapidly increase in number. Behold what happened in the end to those who spread corruption. If there be some among you who believe in the message with which I am sent, and others who do not believe, then be patient until God shall judge between us. He is the best of all judges."

Said the great ones among his people, who gloried in their arrogance: "We shall indeed expel you, Shu`ayb, and your fellow believers from our land unless you return to our fold. " He said: "Even though we are unwilling? We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them. It is not conceivable that we should return to them, unless God, our Lord, so wills. Our Lord has full knowledge of everything. In God we place our trust. Our Lord, lay open the truth between us and our people; for You are the best to lay open the truth. "The great ones who disbelieved among his people said: "If you follow Shu`ayb, you shall indeed be losers." Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their homes, as if those that rejected Shu`ayb had never prospered there. Those that rejected Shu`ayb were indeed the losers. He turned away from them and said: "My people, I delivered to you my Lord's messages and counselled you sincerely. How, then, could I grieve for people who persist in unbelief" (Verses 85-93)

Compared to the other accounts given in this *sūrah,* we note that this one is rather longer because, in addition to the question of faith, it includes a reference to business transactions. Nevertheless, the account follows the same pattern of concentration on the main issues.

"And to Madyan [We sent] their brother Shu`ayb. He said: 'My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.'" (Verse 85) It is the same, consistent basis of the divine faith that admits no change or modification. But then we have some details about the message of the new Prophet, starting with a statement: *"Clear evidence of the truth has come to you from your Lord."* (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* does not mention the type of that clear proof or its nature, as it did in the account given of the history of the Prophet Ṣāliĥ. Nor can we ascertain its nature from the other accounts of this history given in other *sūrahs. We* are simply told that clear proof was given to the Prophet Shu`ayb, confirming his statement that he had been sent by God. Clear evidence of the truth has been shown to them as the basis of the commandments given to them by their prophet. These required them to give full and just measure and weight, refrain from spreading corruption on earth and from threatening people as they go about their business, and to stop their efforts to persuade believers to change their faith: *"Give full measure and weight [in your dealings], and do not deprive people of what rightfully belongs to them. Do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered. That is best for you, if you are true*

believers. Do not squat on every road, threatening and turning away from God's path anyone who believes in Him, and trying to make it appear crooked. Remember when you were few and how He caused you to rapidly increase in number. Behold what happened in the end to those who spread corruption." (Verses 85-86)

We understand from these injunctions that Shu`ayb's people were unbelievers who associated partners with God and did not implement in their own dealings the divine law which ensures justice for all. Instead, they devised their own rules and regulations for their business transactions. It may be that in this particular aspect that they associated partners with God, and that made them very unpleasant to deal with in business. In addition, they were the perpetrators of corruption, threatening people and preventing them from attending to their business. They were also wrongdoers, trying to turn those who believe away from their faith, making it difficult for them to follow the right path and trying to show God's straight path as crooked.

Shu`ayb begins by calling on them to worship God alone, submitting to His authority over every aspect of their lives, and attributing Godhead purely to Him alone. Shu`ayb knows that this forms the basis that gives rise to every good system and deals with every situation. It also forms the basis for regulations governing personal behaviour, morals and human dealings. He seeks to give more effectiveness to his admonition by certain reminders which, to them, must have been particularly inspiring, recalling to their minds some of God's blessings: "*Remember when you were few and how He caused you to rapidly increase in number.*" (Verse 86) He also warns them against suffering the fate of corrupt communities that lived before their time: "*Behold what happened in the end to those who spread corruption.*" (Verse 86)

Shu`ayb also wants them to exercise patience and tolerance, and to maintain justice. They must not tempt those who have favourably responded to divine guidance away from their faith, and must not squat on every road, issuing threats and manipulating their might to strike fear in people's hearts. The proper course for them, if they do not wish to accept the faith and believe in God, is to wait until God has judged between the two parties: "*If there be some among you who believe in the message with which I am sent, and others who do not believe, then be patient until God shall judge between us. He is the best of all judges.*" (Verse 87)

This is indeed the fairest plan. Shu`ayb made every reconciliatory move and took his stand at the last position behind which he could not retreat an inch. He called on them to accept a plan of peaceful coexistence, with every party leaving the other to practise their religion and implement their faith, until God judged between the two. Needless to say, God is the fairest of all judges. His is the judgement that shows no favouritism whatsoever.

But the tyrants do not accept that faith should have a following and that believers

should form a community that rejects tyranny. The very existence of a community that submits totally to God, acknowledging no authority other than His, and implementing no code of living other than the one He has laid down represents a threat to the authority of those tyrants. Even if this community of believers should mind its own business, leaving the tyrants to God's judgement, its existence is conceived as a threat.

Tyranny will dictate that a battle is fought with the Muslim community, even though it prefers not to engage in such a battle. It is in the nature of things that the very existence of the truth is a source of trouble to falsehood, making a battle between the two inevitable. This is how God has ordained things. Hence, the unbelievers among the people of Shu`ayb rejected his offer and insisted that no mode of peaceful coexistence was acceptable to them: "*Said the great ones among his people, who gloried in their arrogance: `We shall indeed expel you, Shu`ayb, and your fellow believers from our land unless you return to our fold.* " (Verse 88) Thus, the battle was set. The believers with Shu`ayb could not avoid a confrontation, because the unbelievers refused every mode of coexistence between the two parties.

No Retreat Contemplated

Threats and warnings cannot shake or intimidate a strong faith. Shu`ayb made his stand taking a position from which he could not budge an inch. That was the position of peaceful coexistence which would allow every individual to adopt the faith of his or her choice and submit to the authority which he or she acknowledged, awaiting God's judgement between the two groups. No advocate of a divine faith can make even the smallest compromise beyond this point, great as the pressures to which he is exposed may be. Otherwise, he would betray the truth he advocates. When the arrogant chiefs of his people responded to his offer by threats of expulsion from their land unless he toed their line, Shu`ayb stood up for the truth, declaring that he would not go back to the false faith after God had rescued him from it. He turned to his Lord and protector, appealing to Him for support against the advocates of evil: "*He said: 'Even though we are unwilling? We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them. It is not conceivable that we should return to them, unless God, our Lord, so wills. Our Lord has full knowledge of everything. In God we place our trust. Our Lord, lay open the truth between us and our people; for You are the best to lay open the truth.* "(Verses 88-89)

These few words epitomize the nature of faith and its effect on the believers as well as the nature *of jāhiliyyah* and its hateful effects. We also see clearly how the divine truth makes the Prophet's heart come alive: "*He said. 'Even though we are unwilling?'*" (Verse 88) His attitude is one of total denunciation of their despotic threats: "*We shall indeed expel you, Shu`ayb, and your fellow believers from our land unless*

you return to our fold." (Verse 88) He asks them whether they are prepared to go all the way and force him and his fellow believers to return to their faith after God has saved them from it: *"We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them."* (Verse 89)

A person given guidance by God but who reverts to false beliefs which do not require people to submit themselves totally to God and to obey Him alone makes false testimony against God and His faith. The sum of that testimony is that he could not find anything good in divine faith, so he abandoned it to readopt the creed of the tyrants. Or at least his testimony means that the tyrants' creed also has the right to exist and exercise power, and can exist side by side with divine faith. Thus, he returns to it and recognizes it after he has believed in God. Such a testimony is far more serious than that of a person who has not experienced God's guidance and declared his submission to God. It acknowledges as legitimate the tyrants who usurp God's authority over human life.

Shu`ayb also denounces the tyrants' threats to force him and his followers back into erroneous faith: *"It is not conceivable that we should return to them."* (Verse 89) It is simply impossible. Shu`ayb makes this statement in the face of threats backed by the might of the tyrants. Indeed, tyranny adopts the same attitude towards every Muslim community, wherever it exists, once it declares its rejection of tyranny and submits at the same time to God alone, associating no partners with Him.

Hard as the cost of rejecting tyranny and submitting to God alone may be, it is far easier to bear than the burden of submitting to tyrants. The latter submission may appear to ensure safety, security and a life of peace where a person can work and earn his living, but its cost is too hard and long lasting. The cost is paid out of man's very humanity, because man does not fulfil himself if he submits to another human being. What submission is worse than yielding to the laws enacted by another human being? What submission is worse than attaching one's destiny to the will of a fellow human being and to his pleasure and capricious desire? What could be worse than a human being with a bridle by which another person leads him wherever he wishes?

But the matter does not rest at this high level of beliefs and authority. It becomes more and more mundane so as to claim, under tyranny, people's property which will not be safeguarded by any law. It claims also their very children who are brought up to accept whatever concept, ideas, morals, traditions and customs, tyranny wishes them to adopt. In addition, tyranny imposes its control over their souls and lives, making of them an offering for its own caprice and erecting of their skulls and remains a monument for its glory. It then claims their honour. Under tyranny, no father can protect his daughter from disgrace, either by being flagrantly raped, as happens throughout history, or through implanting in her mind certain concepts that

facilitate for her promiscuity under any guise and make her an easy target for unscrupulous seducers. Whoever imagines that he protects his property, honour, life and the lives of his sons and daughters under tyranny which usurps God's authority is living in self delusion. Under tyranny people lose their sense of reality.

To submit to tyranny is to burden oneself with an extremely heavy cost in terms of personal esteem, honour and property. Whatever burden a person finds himself required to bear for submitting himself to God is far easier and more profitable even by the standards of this present world. This is not to speak of what submission to God is worth by God's own measure.

The Meaning of True Submission

Maulana Mawdūdī says in his scholarly work *The Moral Foundation of the Islamic Movement*:

> Even a person with superficial insight into human life cannot fail to realize that the whole question of human well-being depends entirely on who exercises control over human affairs. A train runs only to the destination determined by its driver. All passengers can travel only to the same destination, whether they like it or not. In the same way, the train of human civilization travels to where those who exercise power dictate. It is only too apparent that humanity as a whole cannot refuse the plan imposed by those who are in obvious control of all power throughout the world. It is those who conduct human affairs, and up to whom the masses look for the achievement of their goals and ambitions. Such people have the means of shaping ideas and theories, formulating them in an appealing fashion. They can influence personal habits, control social systems and mould moral values. If such leaders are good believers who fear God and who hope to receive reward from Him on the Day of Judgement, then the whole system of life will inevitably be set on the course of goodness and proper guidance. Evil people will be easily reformed and will realize that the path charted by faith is the proper one. Every good value becomes well established and begins to yield its fruit. The least benefit of social influence is that evil will be contained if not vanquished. On the other hand, if leadership is assumed by people who have deviated from the path laid down by God and His Messenger, and followed instead their own desires, exceeded their limits and led an undisciplined life, then the whole system of life will be based on tyranny, excesses and indecencies. Corruption will creep into concepts, theories, education, morality, politics, culture, civilization, as well as business transactions, law and justice. Evil will spread unchecked...

It is clearly apparent that the first thing divine faith requires of its followers is that they serve God alone, submitting to Him totally, so that they acknowledge no authority other than His and feel themselves to be free of all subjugation. It also requires that they recognize no law in their lives other than that laid down by God Himself and communicated to us and explained by God's Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him). Islam also requires people to ensure the eradication of all corruption and elimination of all evil practices that incur God's displeasure. Nothing of these noble goals can be achieved while the leadership over human beings and the control over their affairs continue to be in the hands of unbelievers. In such a situation those who follow the divine faith are forced to accept the authority of those unbelievers and submit to their tyranny, staying in their own little sanctuaries where they glorify God, isolating themselves from people's lives, benefiting by any pardon or reprieve or guarantee the tyrants may feel pleased to grant them. This shows clearly the importance of good government and how it is instrumental in the implementation of divine law. Hence, the establishment of such good government that undertakes such a task is one of the objectives of faith. It is a fact that man cannot achieve God's pleasure through his own actions if he is to neglect this duty. Consider, if you will, what the Qur'ān and the *Ĥadīth* say about being always part of the Muslim community and obeying its leadership. Indeed, people expose themselves to capital punishment if they were to abandon the community of believers, even in a small way, although they may pray, fast and claim to be Muslims. This is because the true aim of faith is the establishment of a proper Islamic system and well-guided leadership. This cannot be achieved except by the unity of the community. Whoever weakens the community does Islam and Muslims a great disservice that cannot be compensated for through prayer or even through the verbal acknowledgement of God's oneness. Consider also the high position Islam gives *to jihād,* so that the Qur'ān describes as hypocrite those who are too lazy to join in a campaign of *jihād.* It should be remembered that *jihād* denotes the exertion of continuous effort for the establishment of the system of the truth. The Qur'ān considers *this jihād* the measure which is used to ascertain that a person is a believer. In other words, a person who believes in God and His Messenger cannot accept a system based on falsehood and cannot hesitate to sacrifice his life and property for the establishment of the truth. If a person appears to be reluctant or too weak to join in such an effort, then he lacks strength of faith. How is such a person to benefit by any of his actions?

The establishment of good government in God's earth is of vital importance in the Islamic system. A person who believes in God and His Messenger and

submits himself properly to God in accordance with the true faith does not discharge all his obligations if he concentrates his full efforts on moulding his own life in accordance with Islamic teachings. As a believer, he must utilize everything within his power to remove unbelievers, wrongdoers and transgressors from power so that it can be assumed by pious people who fear God and realize that they are going to meet Him when He will hold them to account for what they do in this life. That is the way to ensure that the proper system which God has approved will be implemented, because it is the system which sets this life on its proper course.[14]

No Sorrow for Unbelievers' Fate

As Islam calls upon people to retrieve all authority usurped by human beings in order to return it all to God, it simply calls on them to rescue their humanity and save themselves from submission to fellow creatures. When they make a positive response, they actually save their souls and their property from the designs of tyrants, that serve their desires. In so doing, Islam requires its followers to bear the full burden of fighting tyranny, under its own banner, giving all the sacrifices such a fight may require. But at the same time, it spares them having to give sacrifices that are much more costly and humiliating. It protects their dignity and ensures their own safety at the same time. Hence, the Prophet Shu`ayb [peace be upon him] makes his statement loud and clear: *"We should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them. It is not conceivable that we should return to them."* (Verse 89)

Thus Shu`ayb stands up to the arrogant chiefs of his people, making his attitude absolutely clear and with his head raised high. Yet at the same time, he hangs his head down before his Lord, declaring his submission to Him alone, recognizing that His knowledge encompasses everything in the universe. As he refers to his Lord, he makes no final statement concerning what may happen. He simply declares that he has surrendered himself completely to God: *"It is not conceivable that we should return to them, unless God, our Lord, so wills. Our Lord has full knowledge of everything."* (Verse 89)

This is an indication of complete submission to God by Shu`ayb and the believers who followed him. He makes clear that he can, at his own behest, refuse what tyrants require him to do of returning to their faith. He declares that he and his followers have no desire for such a return which sounds in principle totally unacceptable. But he, nevertheless, makes no categorical statement concerning what God may do with

[14] Mawdūdī's detailed view appear in *The Islamic Movement: Dynamics of Values, Power and Change,* Leicester, Islamic Foundation, 1998.

him or his followers. God's will is free and absolute. Neither he, nor those who have believed with him, have any knowledge of what God may decide to do with them, while their Lord has full knowledge of everything. Hence, they submit to God's will and knowledge. This is the mark of good manners which believers are keen to demonstrate in their dealings with God.

At this point, Shu`ayb leaves his people and their threats aside, declaring that he relies totally, and with absolute confidence, on God who is certain to judge between him and his people in accordance with the truth: *"In God we place our trust. Our Lord, lay open the truth between us and our people; for You are the best to lay open the truth."* (Verse 89)

These few words portray a fascinating scene when the truth of Godhead is clearly seen and properly felt by His friend and Prophet. The Prophet knows the source of all power and the secure refuge that can be found there, and he realizes that it is his Lord who can judge in truth between faith and tyranny. He places his trust completely in his Lord before he goes into the battle that is imposed on him and his followers. He realizes that he cannot win that battle unless his Lord grants him victory.

At this moment, the unbelievers turn to those who have believed with Shu`ayb to warn and threaten them, hoping to turn them away from their faith: *"The great ones who disbelieved among his people said: 'If you follow Shu`ayb, you shall indeed be losers."* (Verse 90)

The same aspects of the continually raging battle are seen very clearly. The tyrants try first with the advocates of divine faith hoping to stop them. If they stand firm, showing that they trust only in their Lord and that they are determined to fulfil their task and deliver His message, paying little heed to the warnings of unbelievers and to the power they may possess, then the tyrants turn to those who have accepted such advocacy, trying to turn them away from their faith with stern warning and serious threats. Those tyrants have no solid argument to justify their falsehood, but they have brute force. They cannot win hearts over to their *jāhiliyyah,* particularly the hearts of those people who have recognized the truth and no longer pay respect to falsehood. But the tyrants can still persecute those who insist on following the divine faith and submitting to God alone.

But it is a rule that God has established in human life that when truth and falsehood have adopted their respective stands and become clearly distinct, confronting each other on the basis of principle, then God's law will come into operation. This was what took place with Shu`ayb and his people: *"Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes."* (Verse 91)

The earthquake and their lying lifeless clearly contrast with their threats and arrogance and with their persecution of believers. Thus, the punishment seems to perfectly fit the arrogant attitude. The *sūrah* also replies to their earlier warnings to the believers that if they follow Shu`ayb, they will be losers. This was a serious threat that they intended to carry out. But the *sūrah* states with clear derision that it was not Shu`ayb's followers that turned out to be losers. "*As if those that rejected Shu`ayb had never prospered there. Those that rejected Shu`ayb were indeed the losers.*" (Verse 92) It was only a split second and they were lying lifeless, motionless, in their homes, as if they had never lived.

The account is concluded with remonstrations and a declaration of dissociation by the Prophet sent to them. He used to be their brother, but then they parted company and, in consequence, their respective destinies were totally different. He no longer felt any sadness or sorrow for what befell them. "*He turned away from them and said: 'My people, I delivered to you my Lord's messages and counselled you sincerely. How, then, could I grieve for people who persist in unbelief.'*" (Verse 93) They belonged to two different phases, and thus they were two separate communities. Ties of family and nationhood are of no consequence in this faith and of no weight in God's measure. The only solid tie is that of faith. True bonds between human beings can only be established on the basis of their strong ties with God's faith.

7
Lessons to Learn

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا فِي قَرۡيَةٖ مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّآ أَخَذۡنَآ أَهۡلَهَا بِٱلۡبَأۡسَآءِ وَٱلضَّرَّآءِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَضَّرَّعُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

Never have We sent a prophet to any city without trying its people with tribulations and hardship that they may supplicate with humility. (94)

ثُمَّ بَدَّلۡنَا مَكَانَ ٱلسَّيِّئَةِ ٱلۡحَسَنَةَ حَتَّىٰ عَفَواْ وَّقَالُواْ قَدۡ مَسَّ ءَابَآءَنَا ٱلضَّرَّآءُ وَٱلسَّرَّآءُ فَأَخَذۡنَٰهُم بَغۡتَةٗ وَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

We then replaced the affliction with good fortune till they throve and said, 'Hardship and good fortune befell our forefathers as well.' We then smote them, all of a sudden, while they were totally unaware. (95)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّ أَهۡلَ ٱلۡقُرَىٰٓ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱتَّقَوۡاْ لَفَتَحۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم بَرَكَٰتٖ مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبُواْ فَأَخَذۡنَٰهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكۡسِبُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

Yet had the people of those cities believed and been God-fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing. (96)

أَفَأَمِنَ أَهۡلُ ٱلۡقُرَىٰٓ أَن يَأۡتِيَهُم بَأۡسُنَا بَيَٰتٗا وَهُمۡ نَآئِمُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

Do the people of these cities feel secure that Our might would not strike them at dead of night when they are asleep? (97)

أَوَأَمِنَ أَهۡلُ ٱلۡقُرَىٰٓ أَن يَأۡتِيَهُم بَأۡسُنَا ضُحٗى وَهُمۡ يَلۡعَبُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

Or do the people of these cities feel secure that Our might would not strike them in broad daylight when they are playing around? (98)

أَفَأَمِنُوا۟ مَكْرَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَلَا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

Do they feel themselves secure from God's designs? None feels secure from God's designs except those who are losers. (99)

أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَهْلِهَآ أَن لَّوْ نَشَآءُ أَصَبْنَٰهُم بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۚ وَنَطْبَعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

Is it not plain to those who have inherited the earth in succession of former generations that, if We so willed, We can punish them for their sins and seal their hearts, leaving them bereft of hearing. (100)

تِلْكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآئِهَا ۚ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا كَانُوا۟ لِيُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِمَا كَذَّبُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٠١﴾

We have related to you parts of the history of those communities. Messengers from among themselves came to them with clear evidence of the truth; but they would not believe in what they had formerly rejected. Thus does God seal the hearts of the unbelievers. (101)

وَمَا وَجَدْنَا لِأَكْثَرِهِم مِّنْ عَهْدٍ ۖ وَإِن وَجَدْنَآ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

We found that most of them were untrue to their commitments; indeed We found most of them to be transgressors. (102)

Preview

This passage of the *sūrah* comments on the accounts that have just finished of the histories of the communities to whom the Prophets Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot and Shu`ayb were sent. We have here an explanation of the rule God has laid down which ensures that His will is done when He punishes those who deny His messages. It is the same rule and principle which shapes human history in one very important aspect. God inflicts tribulations and hardship on those who reject His messengers so that their hearts may soften and they turn to God, acknowledging His oneness and recognizing that the only course of action open to them is to submit to His overpowering authority. If they do not respond, then He tries them with affluence and good fortune. He opens up for them all types of blessings and leaves

them for a while to enjoy their prosperity. All this, however, is a means of trial. People's prosperity causes them to lead a life of recklessness, negligence and heedlessness, because they tend to think that fortunes change by themselves, and a life of plenty is simply bound to follow a period of hardship, without any particular purpose or design.

When they feel that what they have experienced is the same as was experienced by their forefathers, without any particular purpose in all this design, God's punishment is certain to take them unawares. They do not understand God's purpose when He tries them with affliction and prosperity. They cannot comprehend why people's situations change every now and then. They have not guarded against incurring God's anger, preferring to live like animals until they are smitten by God's punishment. Had they believed in God and followed the right course, their situation would have changed and blessings would have opened up to them. God would have bestowed His grace on them and they would have been made to receive His blessings from everywhere, giving them reassurance and a happy future.

God then warns the new generations against a life of recklessness. He calls on them to be alert and to appreciate the lessons of past generations and how they met their doom. They themselves are also subject to God's laws of nature, which will remain in operation, exercising their influence on human history across all periods and generations.

This short commentary concludes with an address to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), telling him that these histories are being related so that he learns how God's law has been given effect. It tells him of the true position of those communities: *"We found that most of them were untrue to their commitments; indeed We found most of them to be transgressors."* (Verse 102) He is the last Messenger, and his followers are the nation which inherits the divine message in its totality. They are the ones to benefit by past lessons.

Trials of Adversity

> *Never have We sent a prophet to any city without trying its people with tribulations and hardship that they may supplicate with humility. We then replaced the affliction with good fortune till they throve and said, `Hardship and good fortune befell our forefathers as well.'" We then smote them, all of a sudden, while they were totally unaware. Yet had the people of those cities believed and been God-fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing. (Verses 94-96)*

We are not told here of any particular incident, but an important aspect of the

natural law God has set in operation is highlighted. We are told how fate is determined. We thus learn that there is a law which sets matters into a particular pattern, dictating events, and shaping human history on earth. We learn that the divine message itself, important as it is, can be regarded as one of the means of implementing the divine constitution, which is far greater in scope than the message. Matters do not simply happen by themselves. Man does not stand alone, as alleged by later day atheists. Whatever takes place in the universe is part of an elaborate scheme, and has a definite purpose, serving an ultimate aim. The law of nature is devised by an absolutely free will which has shaped the constitution. It was in accordance with that law, operated by God's free will, that those communities, whose history was related in this *sūrah,* met their fate.

According to the Islamic concept, man's will and action are factors of great importance in determining the direction of his history and how it is to be interpreted. But man's will and action must be seen within the context of God's free will and absolute power. Within this context, man's will and action come into direct interaction with the entire universe. This means that there are many factors and situations which have a strong bearing on human history giving it greater scope and depth. When we understand this, then, any attempt to explain human history in purely economic, biological or geographical terms is far too narrow and petty.

"Never have We sent a prophet to any city without trying its people with tribulations and hardship that they may supplicate with humility." (Verse 94) Far be it from God to punish His servants physically or cause them to go through adversity that affects their persons or their property for idle play. Such trials could never be motivated by hatred or the desire for revenge, as pagan legends make out. God tries with tribulations and adversity those who deny His message. By nature, such a trial reawakens human hearts and rekindles the light of goodness encouraging weak human beings to turn to God Almighty, their Creator, humbly appealing to Him to grant them forgiveness and bestow His mercy on them. By such humble supplication they declare their submission to Him, which is the ultimate aim of human existence. God does not need that human beings should supplicate humbly to Him and declare their submission: *"I have not created the jinn and human beings to any end other than that they may worship Me. No sustenance do I ever demand of them, nor do I demand that they feed Me. Truly, God Himself is the provider of all sustenance, the Lord of all might, the eternal."* (51: 56-58)

As clearly stated in a sacred, or *qudsī ĥadīth,* if all human beings and *jinn* were as pious and obedient to God as the most pious and obedient person that ever lived, that would not increase God's kingdom in any way. Conversely, if all human beings and *jinn* were as wicked as the most wicked person that ever lived, that would not decrease God's kingdom in any way. But people's supplication and submission to

God is of great benefit to them. It sets their lives on the right course. When human beings declare that they submit to God alone, they actually free themselves from submission to anyone else, particularly to Satan who tries hard to lead them astray, as mentioned earlier in this *sūrah.* They also free themselves from the yoke of their desires. They break the shackles of subjugation to other people and feel too ashamed to follow Satan's guidance or to incur God's displeasure through any action or purpose, particularly when they realize that they seek His help to remove any affliction they may suffer. This helps them follow the right course.

It is because of this that God's will is such that He tries any community who rejects His guidance, provided through His prophets and messengers, causing them to experience physical adversity and loss of property. Such pain may open up the elements of goodness in their nature and awaken their consciences. Thus, they may turn to God, seeking His mercy and appealing to Him to replace their affliction with comfort and reassurance.

But then God may decide to change the type of trial: *"We then replaced the affliction with good fortune."* (Verse 95) Thus, every aspect of difficulty is replaced by an aspect of comfort and happiness. People begin to enjoy affluence, ease, blessings, good health, fertility, numerical strength and security after they had experienced poverty, hardship, depression, poor health, sterility, numerical weakness and fear. But the change of fortunes is no more than a new trial.

A test exposing people to hardship may be met with perseverance, because hardship may sharpen the elements of determined resistance. It may remind those who are good at heart of God, so they turn to Him with earnest supplication which gives them hope, reassurance and a promise of better things to come. A trial with affluence is withstood by only a few, because affluence makes people forget and riches cause them to feel self-sufficient. Hence, they indulge themselves seeking every type of pleasure. Such a test is passed only by a very small number of people.

"We then replaced the affliction with good fortune till they throve and said, Hardship and good fortune befell our forefathers as well:" (Verse 95) This statement indicates that they had increased in numbers and enjoyed an easy life, tasting every pleasure, to the extent that they no longer hesitated to do anything they desired, nor did they feel embarrassed by any action. The Arabic term which is translated here as "they throve" also connotes a certain attitude of mind which is rather careless, even bordering on recklessness. It views everything as easy, and acts on impulse. This attitude is very common among affluent people who enjoy riches for a long period, whether at the individual or community level. It is an attitude that suggests a blunted sensitivity and a care-free attitude. They spend and enjoy themselves with recklessness and they care little for the rights of others. No cardinal sin or ghastly crime seems to worry them. They do not care if they incur God's wrath or people's

criticism. They do not reflect on the trials to which other people have been exposed. They think that life just goes on, without a purpose or a definite goal.

"*They throve and said, 'Hardship and good fortune befell our forefathers as well.'*" (Verse 95) They look at it as if it is the turn of a repeated cycle. They have had their turn in adversity and now they are due for some good fortune. This all just happens without any particular consequence. At this moment, when they are totally heedless, indulging themselves in all sorts of transgression, their fate is sealed in accordance with God's law: "*We then smote them, all of a sudden, while they were totally unaware.*" (Verse 95) They had gone so far astray that they no longer felt ashamed of anything they did. To fear God does not occur to them at all.

Thus we see how God's law operates, fulfilling His will. Human history thus moves by human will and human action, within the context of God's will and the laws He has set in operation. The Qur'ān reveals this fact to human beings and warns them that they must prove themselves when they are subjected to a trial of adversity or a test of affluence. It kindles in them a state of alertness which brings back to them a sense of fearing the outcome which befits what they do in this life. Those who do not respond, and continue in their erring ways wrong only themselves because they expose themselves to God's punishment which is certain to engulf them. No one will suffer any injustice.

A Sure Way to Receive God's Blessings

"*Yet had the people of those cities believed and been God fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing.*" (Verse 96) This is the other part of the natural law God has set in operation. Had the people of those cities believed instead of denying God's messages, and had they been God-fearing instead of being careless, God would have opened up for them blessings from heaven and earth. They would have been given such blessings in abundance, without restriction. God's blessings would have come to them from above and beneath. The Qur'ānic expression is so general that it imparts a sense of great abundance that is not limited to what is familiar to human beings of provisions and sustenance.

This statement and the one preceding it put in front of our eyes certain facts that relate to faith on the one hand and to human life in this world on the other. They also touch on a factor that has a great influence on human history, even though it is often overlooked and indeed denied by man-made theories and philosophies. That fact tells us that the question of having faith in God and fearing Him is not isolated from the reality of life and the course of human history. To believe in God and to fear Him qualify people to receive blessings from heaven and earth. This is a promise given by

God, and God is always true to His promises.

We who believe in God accept this promise as true without having to ask first about its reasons or causes. We have no hesitation in expecting that it will come true. We believe in God, and consequently in what lies beyond human perception; therefore, we believe in the fulfilment of God's promises. But when we reflect on God's promise, as indeed we are ordered to do by our faith, we soon realize its causes. A person who believes in God has an alert nature, sound natural reception, accurate understanding, a healthy human constitution and a keen interaction with the universe. All these elements tend to ensure success in real life.

Moreover, faith in God represents a strong motivation. It streamlines all aspects of the human constitution and directs them to a single goal, allowing them to derive strength from God's power and release them to implement His will in building human life on earth and safeguarding it from all elements of corruption. Again, all this tends to ensure success in practical life.

To believe in God is to be free from being enslaved by desire or by other people. There is no doubt that a human being who achieves his freedom through submission to God is, as a result, better able to fulfil man's task of building human life on earth. To fear God is to combine awareness with wisdom so that we can steer away from rashness, recklessness and conceit as we go about our business in this life. It is a quality that directs human effort sensibly and carefully so that whoever has that quality does not transgress or exceed the limits of acceptable behaviour.

When people maintain a balance between incentives and restraints, working on earth but always looking up to heaven, free from the tyranny of human desire, submitting to God Almighty, human life maintains a steady course and yields wholesome fruits. In this way people deserve God's help after having earned His pleasure. Hence, it will be a blessed life that earns success and prosperity. Viewed from this angle, the whole question is one of visible facts that have their unidentifiable causes, in addition to its being part of God's promise.

The blessings God promises to those who believe in Him and fear Him are given a strong emphasis. They come in a wide variety of shapes and forms but they are not outlined in detail or mentioned in name. The Qur'ānic statement, however, gives an impression of abounding grace that comes from every direction, without any limiting definition. Hence, the reference is to all types and forms of blessings, whether those that are familiar to human beings or those that can only be visualized in their imagination. But they also include what human beings cannot conceive or imagine.

Those who imagine that faith in God and steering away from what incurs His anger are questions of pure worship and have no bearing on practical life have no true knowledge of faith or life. They are better advised to look at this very real

relationship which God Himself confirms. Needless to say, His testimony is more than enough to prove anything. Nevertheless, this relationship can be recognized by people if they will only look at different situations in life and recognize their causes: "*Yet had the people of those cities believed and been God fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing.*" (Verse 96)

Nevertheless, we see communities and people who claim to be Muslims going through hard times when they experience drought and very poor crops. At the same time, we see communities who are devoid of faith and have no fear of God, yet they enjoy abundance, power and influence. These contrasting situations lead people to ask: where is this unfailing law of nature, and why does it not operate?

But all this is mere delusion based on appearances. The people who claim to be Muslim are not believers in reality, nor do they truly fear God. They do not sincerely submit to God alone, nor do they implement in practical life the basic article of faith which requires them to declare that there is no deity other than God. They submit themselves to fellow human beings who claim for themselves a position of Godhead and begin to legislate laws for them and set values and standards. Such people are not believers, because a believer will never acknowledge that any creature can fill the position of Godhead. He will never allow a fellow human being to determine the laws that shape his life. When the predecessors of those who today claim to be Muslims were true believers, they became the masters of the world. Blessings from heaven and earth were opened up for them in fulfilment of God's promise.

Those others enjoying a life of affluence are only going through a different stage of the operation of the law of nature: "*We then replaced the affliction with good fortune till they throve and said, 'Hardship and good fortune befell our forefathers as well.'*" (Verse 95) It is then a test of plenty, which is far more difficult than a trial of adversity. There is an essential difference between what such people enjoy and the blessings God promises to those who believe in Him and fear Him. Blessings can be given with limited means if people can use those means well and combine them with goodness and a sense of reassurance, security and happiness. Many a rich and powerful community goes through a life of misery, insecurity and hollow ties between its people. The people themselves are worried, apprehensive of losing their power. It is a situation of strength without security, affluence without contentment, plenty without goodness. It is a bright present to be followed by a miserable future. It is a test that is certain to lead to doom.

The blessings that come with faith and a God-fearing attitude can be experienced in all situations, both within the human being himself and in his feelings, as well as within all enjoyable aspects of life. These blessings give growth and elevate life to a higher standard. They are so different from affluence that is combined with misery

and immorality.

A False Sense of Security

The *sūrah* has thus established the fact that God's law is set in operation and will never fail, as confirmed by the history of former communities. Now that feelings are high about the doom that befell those who rejected the faith and overlooked the purpose of their test, the *sūrah* addresses those who have so far overlooked these facts of life. It tries to awaken in them a sense of expectation, alerting them to the fact that God's might may strike them at any time of day or night, when they are asleep, at work or having fun: *"Do the people of these cities feel secure that Our might would not strike them at dead of night when they are asleep? Or do the people of these cities feel secure that Our might would not strike them in broad daylight when they are playing around? Do they feel themselves secure from God's designs? None feels secure from God's designs except those who are losers. Is it not plain to those who have inherited the earth in succession of former generations that, if We so willed, We can punish them for their sins and seal their hearts, leaving them bereft of hearing."* (Verses 97-100)

Having been told of God's law that exposes people and communities to tests of adversity and affluence, and having seen the doom that befell those who rejected the divine message in former times, do the people of the present generation feel so secure that they assume that God's might will not strike when they are totally unaware? Do they feel so immune against God's might striking at dead of night when they are fast asleep? They should remember that a sleeping person is powerless, unable to take precautions or even repel a weak, small insect. How could he prevent a mighty strike from God, when no human being, however alert and strong can resist or prevent it?

Or do they feel secure that God's might will not strike in broad daylight when they are engaged in their play? Enjoyable activities, or play and fun, normally preoccupy man and totally distract his attention. A person who is absorbed in his play, having fun, can hardly resist an enemy's strike. How can he resist a strike from God when no human being, at his most alert and highest state of preparedness can avert it?

The fact is that God's might is far too powerful to be resisted by all human beings, whether they are asleep or awake, preoccupied or alert, but the *sūrah* points out the moments of human weakness to shake people and attract their attention. This is the effect of expecting a strike at a moment of weakness when one is totally unaware while realizing that people cannot escape such a strike even at their moments of strength. In both situations, man is totally powerless when confronted by God's might.

"*Do they feel themselves secure from God's designs?*" (Verse 99) Can they have any immunity against what God plans for human beings when He does not reveal those plans to them so that they can guard against them? If they feel so secure, then the fact is that "*none feels secure from God's designs except those who are losers.*" (Verse 99)

Utter loss is indeed the result of an attitude that continues to overlook the facts of history and prefers a sense of false security. Those who adopt such an attitude earn such a loss. How can they feel secure, when they have inherited the earth from people that have been destroyed as a result of their erring ways, and who were punished for adopting the same attitude of disregarding those basic facts? The destiny of those nations should have taught them some good lessons.

> *Is it not plain to those who have inherited the earth in succession of former generations that, if We so willed, We can punish them for their sins and seal their hearts, leaving them bereft of hearing.* (Verse 100)

The laws of nature God has set in operation will never fail, and His will is certain to always be done. So what guarantees people's security against the punishment God may inflict on them for the sins they have committed, in the same way as He punished earlier communities? How can they be safe from having their hearts sealed so that they cannot even listen to divine guidance? For that would ensure that they receive punishment for following the wrong path. The fate of earlier communities and the fact that the laws of nature remain operative should give them sufficient warning to make them fear God and follow His guidance. This would require them to get rid of their sense of false security and to be on their guard. They should benefit by the lessons of earlier communities so that they do not have to suffer the same fate.

In giving this warning in the Qur'ān, God does not want people to always live in fear, worrying that He may cause their immediate destruction at any moment of the night or day. Such a constant fear of the unknown, and permanent worry about the future, and such an expectation of destruction may paralyse people, deprive them of their abilities and lead them to a state of despair. They would then stop working and refrain from fulfilling the task of building human life on earth. What God wants from them is that they should always be on the alert, watching their own actions, paying heed to other people's experience, identifying the elements that shape human history and remain always in touch with God, not allowing prosperity to make them lead an easy, careless life.

God promises human beings a life of security, reassurance and prosperity in this world and in the world to come, if they would only submit to His will and fear Him enough to avoid everything that leaves a stain on human life. He invites them to enjoy security under His protection, trusting to His might, rather than their own

material power. They should seek what He has in store for His obedient servants, rather than the luxuries of this world.

Life has known generations of believers who feared God and never thought themselves immune from His will or trusted to anyone other than Him. Such people had a keen sense of their faith, and because they enjoyed God's support they felt reassured, able to overcome Satan and his designs. They lived a goodly life, implementing God's guidance, fearing no human beings, because they feared God alone.

This is how we should understand the constant warnings against the overwhelming might of God and His designs that cannot be foiled. We will then realize that such warnings should not lead us to worry and fear, but to be keenly alert. These warnings do not paralyse life but make sure that it does not sink into a state of carelessness and transgression.

At the same time, the Qur'ānic method addresses all human situations and stages of development, at the individual and community levels, providing the right treatment to each one of them, at the right time. It administers a dose of security, trust and reassurance that God's help will be forthcoming whenever they are threatened by hostile forces. At the same time, it provides a sense of keen apprehension that God's punishment may be forthcoming whenever people yield to worldly forces and temptations. God certainly knows best how His creation responds to all elements and influences.

A History Recorded by God

Having outlined, with highly inspiring touches, the operative rules of nature, the *sūrah* addresses God's Messenger (peace be upon him) informing him of the net outcome of putting those communities to trial, pointing out certain facts about the nature of faith and disbelief, as well as the nature of human beings, as seen in those communities: *"We have related to you parts of the history of those communities. Messengers from among themselves came to them with clear evidence of the truth; but they would not believe in what they had formerly rejected. Thus does God seal the hearts of the unbelievers. We found that most of them were untrue to their commitments; indeed We found most of them to be transgressors."* (Verses 101-102)

This history is clearly stated to have been revealed by God. The Prophet could not have learnt it from any source other than revelation.

"Messengers from among themselves came to them with clear evidence of the truth." (Verse 101) But no evidence was of benefit to them, because they continued to reject the message after having received that evidence in the same way as they rejected it

before such evidence was given them. They simply would not believe in what they had already rejected. No matter how clear the evidence of the truth is, it will not lead such people to adopt the faith. What those people lacked was not plain proof of the truth, but rather open hearts and minds, and a keen desire to receive guidance. They lacked an active nature that receives and responds. When they refused to open their minds to elements of guidance, God sealed their hearts and they could no longer give any proper response: *"Thus does God seal the hearts of the unbelievers."* (Verse 101)

The history of those communities reveals a predominant fact: *"We found that most of them were untrue to their commitments; indeed We found most of them to be transgressors."* (Verse 102) The commitment mentioned in this verse may refer to the pledge God has received from human nature and to which reference is made later in the *sūrah: "Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves: Am I not your Lord?' – to which they answer: 'Yes, indeed, we do bear witness that You are.'"* (Verse 172) It may also refer to the commitment to faith given by their forefathers who followed God's messengers, but subsequent generations deviated, as happens indeed in every community. Successive generations deviate gradually until they go out of the fold altogether and sink back into ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.*

Whatever the commitment is to which the *sūrah* is referring here, the fact remains that most of those communities were untrue to it. They followed their own fleeting whims and shifting desires. They could not fulfil their pledges.

"Indeed we found most of them to be transgressors." (Verse 102) They deviate from God's faith and from their original commitment. This is the result of following one's capricious desires and taking solemn commitments lightly. Whoever turns away from God's guidance, lacking the determination to fulfil the commitments he has made to Him, is hound to move away from faith into corruption and transgression. That was true of the people of those communities, and that was their end.

8
A Confrontation with Pharaoh

ثُمَّ بَعَثۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِم مُّوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَظَلَمُواْ بِهَاۖ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ١٠٣

Then after those We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his people, but they wilfully rejected them. Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption. (103)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ يَٰفِرۡعَوۡنُ إِنِّي رَسُولٞ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٠٤

Moses said: "Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, (104)

حَقِيقٌ عَلَىٰٓ أَن لَّآ أَقُولَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلۡحَقَّۚ قَدۡ جِئۡتُكُم بِبَيِّنَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ فَأَرۡسِلۡ مَعِيَ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ١٠٥

and may say about God nothing but the truth. I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord. So, let the Children of Israel go with me." (105)

قَالَ إِن كُنتَ جِئۡتَ بِـَٔايَةٖ فَأۡتِ بِهَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ١٠٦

He answered: "If you have come with a sign, produce it then if you are so truthful." (106)

فَأَلۡقَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعۡبَانٞ مُّبِينٞ ١٠٧

Moses threw down his staff, and it immediately became a plainly visible serpent. (107)

وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُۥ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيۡضَآءُ لِلنَّٰظِرِينَ ١٠٨

And he drew forth his hand, and it was [shining] white to the beholders. (108)

The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: "This man is indeed a sorcerer of great skill, (109)

قَالَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ مِن قَوۡمِ فِرۡعَوۡنَ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَٰحِرٌ عَلِيمٞ ١٠٩

who wants to drive you out of your land!" [Said Pharaoh] "What, then, do you advise?" (110)

يُرِيدُ أَن يُخۡرِجَكُم مِّنۡ أَرۡضِكُمۡۖ فَمَاذَا تَأۡمُرُونَ ١١٠

They said: "Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities (111)

قَالُوٓاْ أَرۡجِهۡ وَأَخَاهُ وَأَرۡسِلۡ فِي ٱلۡمَدَآئِنِ حَٰشِرِينَ ١١١

to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill." (112)

يَأۡتُوكَ بِكُلِّ سَحَّارٍ عَلِيمٖ ١١٢

The sorcerers came to Pharaoh and said: "Surely there will be a handsome reward for us if it is we who prevail." (113)

وَجَآءَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ فِرۡعَوۡنَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ لَنَا لَأَجۡرًا إِن كُنَّا نَحۡنُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبِينَ ١١٣

Answered [Pharaoh]: "Yes; and you will certainly be among those who are close to me." (114)

قَالَ نَعَمۡ وَإِنَّكُمۡ لَمِنَ ٱلۡمُقَرَّبِينَ ١١٤

They said: "Moses! Either you shall throw [first] , or we shall be the first to throw?" (115)

قَالُواْ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِمَّآ أَن تُلۡقِيَ وَإِمَّآ أَن نَّكُونَ نَحۡنُ ٱلۡمُلۡقِينَ ١١٥

He answered: "You throw [first]." And when they threw [their staffs], they cast a spell upon people's eyes and struck them with awe, making a display of great sorcery. (116)

قَالَ أَلۡقُواْۖ فَلَمَّآ أَلۡقَوۡاْ سَحَرُوٓاْ أَعۡيُنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَٱسۡتَرۡهَبُوهُمۡ وَجَآءُو بِسِحۡرٍ عَظِيمٖ ١١٦

We then inspired Moses: "Throw your staff". And it swallowed up their false devices (117)

وَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنۡ أَلۡقِ عَصَاكَۖ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَلۡقَفُ مَا يَأۡفِكُونَ ١١٧

Thus the truth prevailed and all their doings were proved to be in vain. (118)

They were defeated there and then, and became utterly humiliated. (119)

فَوَقَعَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَبَطَلَ مَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١١٨﴾

The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, (120)

فَغُلِبُواْ هُنَالِكَ وَٱنقَلَبُواْ صَٰغِرِينَ ﴿١١٩﴾

and said: "We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, (121)

وَأُلۡقِيَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ سَٰجِدِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

the Lord of Moses and Aaron." (122)

قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾

Pharaoh said: "You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! This is indeed a plot you have contrived in this city in order to drive out its people, but you shall soon come to know [the consequences]. (123)

رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

قَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ ءَامَنتُم بِهِۦ قَبۡلَ أَنۡ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمۡۖ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَمَكۡرٞ مَّكَرۡتُمُوهُ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ لِتُخۡرِجُواْ مِنۡهَآ أَهۡلَهَاۖ فَسَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

I shall have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and then I shall crucify you all." (124)

لَأُقَطِّعَنَّ أَيۡدِيَكُمۡ وَأَرۡجُلَكُم مِّنۡ خِلَٰفٖ ثُمَّ لَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

They replied: "To our Lord we shall indeed return. (125)

قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us. Our Lord, grant us abundance of patience in adversity, and let us die as people who have surrendered themselves to You." (126)

وَمَا تَنقِمُ مِنَّآ إِلَّآ أَنۡ ءَامَنَّا بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّنَا لَمَّا جَآءَتۡنَاۚ رَبَّنَآ أَفۡرِغۡ عَلَيۡنَا صَبۡرٗا وَتَوَفَّنَا مُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿١٢٦﴾

The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: "Will you allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and to forsake you and your gods?" He replied: "We shall put their sons to death and shall spare only their women. We

وَقَالَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ مِن قَوۡمِ فِرۡعَوۡنَ أَتَذَرُ مُوسَىٰ

وَقَوْمَهُۥ لِيُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَيَذَرَكَ وَءَالِهَتَكَ ۚ قَالَ سَنُقَتِّلُ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ وَنَسْتَحْىِۦ نِسَآءَهُمْ وَإِنَّا فَوْقَهُمْ قَـٰهِرُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

shall certainly overpower them." (127)

قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ ٱسْتَعِينُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱصْبِرُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱلْأَرْضَ لِلَّهِ يُورِثُهَا مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ ۖ وَٱلْعَـٰقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٢٨﴾

Moses said to his people: "Turn to God (alone) for help and remain steadfast. The whole earth belongs to God. He allows it to be inherited by whomever He wills of His servants. The future belongs to those who are God-fearing." (128)

قَالُوٓا۟ أُوذِينَا مِن قَبْلِ أَن تَأْتِيَنَا وَمِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جِئْتَنَا ۚ قَالَ عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُهْلِكَ عَدُوَّكُمْ وَيَسْتَخْلِفَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرَ كَيْفَ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾

They said: "We have been oppressed before you came to us and since you have come to us." He replied: "It may well be that your Lord will destroy your enemy and leave you to inherit the earth. He will then see how you conduct yourselves." (129)

وَلَقَدْ أَخَذْنَآ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ بِٱلسِّنِينَ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣٠﴾

We afflicted Pharaoh's people with drought and poor harvests, so that they might take heed. (130)

فَإِذَا جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلْحَسَنَةُ قَالُوا۟ لَنَا هَـٰذِهِۦ ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَطَّيَّرُوا۟ بِمُوسَىٰ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥٓ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّمَا طَـٰٓئِرُهُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَـٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣١﴾

Whenever something fine came their way, they would say: "This is our due", but whenever affliction befell them, they attributed their ill omen to Moses and those who followed him. Surely, whatever befalls them has been decreed by God, though most of them do not know it. (131)

وَقَالُوا۟ مَهْمَا تَأْتِنَا بِهِۦ مِنْ ءَايَةٍ لِّتَسْحَرَنَا

They said [to Moses]: "Whatever sign you may produce before us in order to cast a spell on us, we shall not believe in you." (132)

So We plagued them with floods, and locusts, and lice, and frogs, and blood: clear signs all; but they gloried in their arrogance, for they were evil-

بِهَا فَمَا نَحْنُ لَكَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٢﴾

doing folk. (133)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلطُّوفَانَ وَٱلْجَرَادَ وَٱلْقُمَّلَ وَٱلضَّفَادِعَ وَٱلدَّمَ ءَايَٰتٍ مُّفَصَّلَٰتٍ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ وَكَانُوا۟ قَوْمًا مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

Whenever a plague struck them, they would cry: 'Moses, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. If you lift the plague from us, we will truly believe in you, and we will let the Children of Israel go with you." (134)

وَلَمَّا وَقَعَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلرِّجْزُ قَالُوا۟ يَٰمُوسَى ٱدْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا عَهِدَ عِندَكَ ۖ لَئِن كَشَفْتَ عَنَّا ٱلرِّجْزَ لَنُؤْمِنَنَّ لَكَ وَلَنُرْسِلَنَّ مَعَكَ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿١٣٤﴾

But when We had lifted the plague from them, for a term they were sure to reach, they broke their promise. (135)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ ٱلرِّجْزَ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ هُم بَٰلِغُوهُ إِذَا هُمْ يَنكُثُونَ ﴿١٣٥﴾

So We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea, because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them. (136)

فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُوا۟ عَنْهَا غَٰفِلِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

We caused the people who were persecuted and deemed utterly low to inherit the eastern and western parts of the land which We had blessed. Thus your Lord's gracious promise to the Children of Israel was fulfilled, because they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built. (137)

وَأَوْرَثْنَا ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ يُسْتَضْعَفُونَ مَشَٰرِقَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَغَٰرِبَهَا ٱلَّتِى بَٰرَكْنَا فِيهَا ۖ وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ عَلَىٰ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ بِمَا صَبَرُوا۟ ۖ وَدَمَّرْنَا مَا كَانَ يَصْنَعُ فِرْعَوْنُ وَقَوْمُهُۥ وَمَا كَانُوا۟

يَعۡرِشُونَ ١٣٧

Preview

This passage relates much of the history of Moses with Pharaoh and his people. It starts when Pharaoh and the leading figures among his people are confronted with the fact that God is the Lord of all the universe, and ends with the drowning of Pharaoh and his army. In between these events, the *sūrah* tells us of the contest between Moses and the magicians which ends up with a triumph for the truth, and the declaration by the sorcerers that they believe in the Lord of all the worlds, according to the concept preached by Moses and his brother Aaron. The *sūrah* tells us of Pharaoh's threats to punish those magicians and to put them to death. Nevertheless, the truth had taken such a hold of their hearts that they no longer cared for Pharaoh. They were prepared to sacrifice their lives for their faith.

The *sūrah* also tells us of the persecution to which the Children of Israel were subjected and how God punished Pharaoh and his people with poor harvests and also inflicted on them floods, and pests of locusts, ants, frogs and blood. Each time, they appealed to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift the punishment. However, whenever a punishment was lifted, they reverted to their erring ways, declaring that they would not believe, no matter what signs they were shown. Eventually, God's law overtook them and they were drowned because of their rejection of the clear evidence shown to them and because they overlooked the purpose of the tests to which God may subject any community. According to God's law, He tests unbelievers with hardship and affluence before destroying them. Then, power in the land was given to Moses's people as a reward for their perseverance through the test of hardship. That meant a new test with affluence.

We have chosen to divide the story of Moses, as related in this *sūrah,* into two passages, devoting the second passage to the events that took place after the Israelites were saved and Pharaoh and his people were drowned.

The story opens here with a brief outline of its beginning and end, highlighting the purpose for which it is related in this *sūrah: "Then after those We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his people, but they wilfully rejected them. Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption."* (Verse 103)

Thus, we are clearly told the purpose behind relating this history here. It is to tell

us about the end faced by the spreaders of corruption. Having made this brief outline, the *sūrah* goes on to relate one episode after another, in clear and detailed scenes that serve the overall purpose.

The story is divided into a number of vivid scenes, each of which is full of life, employing significant dialogue. Each is clearly inspiring, with certain distinctive features. In between, we have some relevant instructions pointing out the lessons that should be learned from the story. In essence, the passage demonstrates in sharp relief the nature of the battle between the call to faith, which declares that God is the Lord of all the worlds, and the tyrants who impose their authority on mankind, claiming to have lordship over the world. We also see how faith asserts itself, paying little heed to tyrannical power and caring nothing for threats of impending punishment.

As the Story Begins

"Then after those We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his people, but they wilfully rejected them. Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption." (Verse 103) We first learn that Moses's mission came after those communities to whom earlier prophets were sent. The *sūrah* has given us an account of each of those communities and what happened to their people who rejected the messages of those Prophets.

The *sūrah* now begins the story of Moses from when he confronted Pharaoh and the leaders of his government with the divine message. It then tells us very briefly the sum of their response, and refers to the fate they suffered. Pharaoh's people wilfully and wrongfully rejected the signs shown to them by God, without proper consideration or reflection. We find that the Qur'ān often uses terms like, `wrongful, unjust, oppression or transgression' in place of `disbelief' or `associating partners with God'. Here the Arabic text uses the phrase `resorted to injustice' for what is rendered in the translated text as `wilful rejection'. The fact is that the association of partners with God or rejecting divine faith is the worst type of injustice and the most ghastly transgression. Those who reject faith adopt a wrongful attitude towards the basic truism of God's oneness. They also wrong themselves by exposing themselves to destruction in this life, as well as severe punishment in the life to come. They are also unjust to other human beings because they try to take them away from submission to God, the only Lord in the universe, in order to force them to submit to different deities and authorities. There can be no worse injustice than this. Hence, to disbelieve in God is to be unjust, and, as the Qur'ān states, *"Truly, the unbelievers are the wrongdoers."* (2: 254) Similarly, a person who rejects faith is a transgressor, because he turns away from the straight path leading to God in order to follow other

paths that lead only to hell.

Pharaoh and his people certainly took a wrongful and oppressive attitude, rejecting God's signs and revelations. Hence, "*Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption.*" (Verse 103) Their fate will be presently outlined in the *sūrah.* Let us for now reflect on the import of the term, 'spreaders of corruption', which is used here as a synonym for `unbelievers' and 'wrongdoers'.

Here they are described as 'spreaders of corruption' because of their wrongful rejection of God's signs. The fact is that to disbelieve is the worst type of corruption and indeed a wilful spreading of such corruption. Human life cannot flourish and prosper unless it is built on the foundation of believing in God as the only deity in the universe, and on submission to Him alone. Life on earth will certainly suffer corruption when people refrain from such submission, which means that there is only one master for mankind, to whom they address their worship. They will then submit to His law alone which frees their lives from submission to fleeting human desires. When human beings acknowledge the Lordship of several deities in preference to that of God alone, corruption does not affect merely their social lives, but also their concepts and beliefs. The fact is that human life on earth was not set on the proper footing and did not prosper except when they declared that they submit only to God in faith, worship and law. Man did not achieve his liberation except under the single Lordship of God. Hence, God says in reference to Pharaoh and his people: "*Behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption.*" (Verse 103) Every tyrant who imposes his law on human beings in preference to God's law is a spreader of corruption.

The Truth, the Whole Truth

This opening of the story represents a particular Qur'ānic method of relating historical accounts. It is certainly the most appropriate method for this *sūrah,* because it fits in well with its central theme. It tells us the outcome right at the beginning. It then moves on to give the details, so that we may follow the events right up to their conclusion. What happened, then, between Moses and Pharaoh?

> *Moses said: 'Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, and may say about God nothing but the truth. I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord. So, let the Children of Israel go with me." He answered: "If you have come with a sign, produce it then if you are so truthful." Moses threw down his staff and it immediately became a plainly visible serpent. And he drew forth his hand, and it was [shining] white to the beholders. The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: "This man is indeed a sorcerer of great skill, who wants to drive you out of your land!" [Said Pharaoh] "What, then, do you advise?" They said: "Let him and his brother wait a*

while, and send heralds to all cities to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill." (Verses 104-112)

Here is the first encounter between truth and falsehood, faith and rejection. It is a scene which brings the Messenger, who calls on people to believe in the Lord of all the worlds, face to face with the tyrants who claim, and indeed practise, lordship over their people.

"Moses said: 'Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, and may say about God nothing but the truth. I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord. So, let the Children of Israel go with me.'" (Verses 104-105) He addresses him with his plain title, "Pharaoh". He does not call him, "My lord", as do those who do not really know who the true Lord is. Moses combines good manners with self assurance, addressing Pharaoh with his simple title in order to point out to him his true position while asserting at the same time the greatest fact in the universe: *"I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 104)

Moses reasserts the fact stated by every messenger that preceded him. It is the fact that God is the only Lord of the universe: just one God and one Lord, and total submission by the whole universe to Him alone. This is contrary to what is advanced by `comparative religion' specialists and their disciples who grope in the dark as they make their claims about the development of religion, making no provision for the messages given by God to all His messengers. The faith preached by all those messengers is the same, repeated by every single one of them, stating that God is the Lord of all the worlds. This faith has not developed from a primitive pagan one which believed in numerous deities, progressing then to dualism, before eventually reaching its highest form of belief in one god. For when people deviate from divine faith and sink into a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* there is no end to chaos. They then have a multitude of erring beliefs, ranging from the worship of totems, spirits, multiple gods to the worship of the sun and stars, to dualism, and to a monotheism that retains traces of paganism. No such deviant form of belief could ever be placed on the same level as the divine messages which consistently preached clear monotheism.

Moses (peace be upon him) confronted Pharaoh and his powerful clique with this basic truth which every Prophet before or after him proclaimed in the face of all types of deviant beliefs. He stated it clearly to his face, knowing that it meant revolution against Pharaoh, his regime and government. A primary result of God's Lordship of the universe and all the worlds is that every regime and form of government, which exercises power over human beings without following God's law or abiding by His commandments, is illegitimate. It also means the removal of every form of tyranny that seeks to subjugate people to its own laws. Moses confronted

Pharaoh with this great fact in his own capacity as a Messenger from the Lord of the universe, committed to stating the truth about God who gave him his message: *"I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds, and may say about God nothing but the truth."* (Verses 104-105) A messenger who knows the true nature of God can only say the truth about Him. How can he say anything else when he knows God's power and authority?

"I have come to you with a clear evidence from your Lord." (Verse 105) It tells you that I am truly a Messenger from the Lord of the universe. In his capacity as a Messenger, and under the authority of the Lord of the universe, Moses demanded that Pharaoh should release the Children of Israel to him.

The Children of Israel are God's own servants. It is not up to Pharaoh, then, to proclaim himself as their master. Human beings must not serve any masters other than God. Whoever is God's own servant cannot serve anyone beside Him. Because Pharaoh subjugated the Children of Israel to his own will, Moses declares to him that God is the only Lord of the universe. Such a declaration renders Pharaoh's action invalid.

The declaration that God is the Lord of all the worlds implies that man is free from subjugation and servitude to anyone other than God. He is released from the tyranny of man-made laws, traditions and from human desires and authority. This declaration of God's Lordship over the universe is incompatible with submission by any human being to anyone other than God. It is also diametrically opposed to the assigning of sovereignty to anyone who may implement any law other than divine law. Those who think themselves to be Muslims while submitting to man-made laws only delude themselves. They cannot be believers in divine faith for a single moment while acknowledging the sovereignty of anyone other than God or implementing any law other than His. They would be followers of their ruler, whoever that ruler may be. It is on this basis that Moses was commanded to demand that Pharaoh should release to him the Children of Israel: *"Pharaoh, I am a Messenger from the Lord of all the worlds... so let the Children of Israel go with me."* (Verses 104-105) The first statement is the preamble to the logical conclusion given in the second. The two go hand in hand and cannot be separated.

Pharaoh and the leaders of his government were fully aware of the import of the declaration that God is the Lord of all the worlds. They were aware that the declaration implied the termination of Pharaoh's authority, the overthrow of his government and the end to his tyranny. They felt, however, that they had a chance to denounce Moses as a liar. Hence, Pharaoh demands a sign to prove Moses's claim: *"If you have come with a sign, produce it then if you are so truthful."* (Verse 106)

Confrontation and Mobilization

Pharaoh felt that if he could prove that Moses was a liar, then all his claims could be refuted and all danger would be removed. But Moses had the complete answer: *"Moses threw down his staff, and it immediately became a plainly visible serpent. And he drew forth his hand, and it was [shining] white to the beholders."* (Verses 107-108) This came as a complete surprise to Pharaoh and the elders of his people. The staff became a real serpent which was "plainly visible". It is described in another *sūrah* as "a scurrying snake".[15] (20: 20) Moreover, Moses was a man of dark complexion, but when he took his hand out of his pocket, it was seen as very white, without any sign of illness. This in itself was a miraculous sign, because he only had to put his hand in his pocket again for it to regain its original dark complexion.[16]

So, Moses had the signs and proofs to confirm his statement that he was a Messenger from the Lord of the universe, but would Pharaoh and his people accept such a dangerous claim and acknowledge God, the Lord of all the worlds? What basis would Pharaoh then have for his rule as the king of Egypt? What justification would his aides have for occupying such influential positions when these were given them by Pharaoh himself? How could the whole system be justified if all authority in the universe belonged to its Lord, the only God? If this Lordship is acknowledged, then God's law must prevail, and God would be the only one to be obeyed. What then would be Pharaoh's position when his rule is neither based on God's law nor relies on His commandments? When people acknowledge God's Lordship, they can have no other lord who imposes on them his rule and legislation. They submit to Pharaoh's law when Pharaoh is their lord. Whoever can impose his legislation on a community is the Lord of that community, and they simply accept his religion whatever he tells them.

It is not in the nature of falsehood to surrender easily or to admit that it has no legitimacy. Pharaoh and the great ones among his people were certainly aware of the import of the great truth declared by Moses. They indeed declared it plainly, but they also tried to divert attention from it by accusing Moses of sorcery: *"The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: 'This man is indeed a sorcerer of great skill, who wants to drive you out of your lane [Said Pharaoh], `What, then, do you advise?'"* (Verses 109-110) The net result of this clear declaration is thus stated openly: it is to be driven out of the land, to relinquish power, or, to use modern terminology, to overthrow the government.

The whole earth belongs to God, and so do all creatures. So, if sovereignty in

[15] Animal specialists differentiate between serpents and snakes, but they belong to the same species.
[16] This means that the transformation of Moses's hand was only temporary, as his hand would resume its original colour until he needed to show God's sign again. — Editor's note.

God's land is acknowledged to belong to God alone, then no shred of sovereignty will belong to those who impose a law other than that of God. In real terms, this means that not a particle of sovereignty can belong to claimants of lordship who exercise Godhead by subjugating people to their own laws. Thus, people given high positions by Godhead claimants have no real authority. After all, they are given such positions in order to ensure that people acknowledge the lordship of their deities.

Pharaoh and his aides were aware of the danger represented by Moses's message. Indeed, tyrants always recognize that danger. As a simple bedouin Arab, totally unsophisticated, remarked after hearing the Prophet Muhammad calling on people to accept that there is no deity other than God and that Muhammad is His Messenger: "This is something that kings dislike." Another similarly unsophisticated bedouin said to the Prophet: "You will be opposed by Arabs and non- Arabs alike." Both of them were keenly aware of what those words signified. They understood that the declaration of God's oneness means a rebellion against every ruler who does not implement God's law. The Arabs felt the seriousness of this declaration. They realised that to make this declaration and accept a rule based on any law other than that of God was a contradiction in terms. Their understanding of the declaration of God's oneness was totally different from that of those who today claim to be Muslims. The understanding of later day Muslims cannot be supported.

Hence, the great ones began their consultations with Pharaoh: *"This man is indeed a sorcerer of great skill, who wants to drive you out of your land!' [Said Pharaoh], `What, then, do you advise?"* (Verses 109-110) Their consultations were concluded with agreement on a certain procedure: *"Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill."* (Verses 111-112)

At that time Egypt was full of priests in all types of temples, and those priests actually practised sorcery. In all pagan beliefs, religion was closely linked with sorcery. Hence, those who specialize in comparative religion speak of magic and sorcery as a stage in the development of human faith. Those among them who are atheists claim that religious beliefs will one day be abandoned in the same way as sorcery was abandoned. They claim that science will put an end to the reign of faith just as it put an end to the reign of sorcery. Their confusion knows no limit, yet they call it science.

Pharaoh's aides determined, after their lengthy discussions, that Pharaoh should gain time and fix an appointment with Moses. Meanwhile, he would send heralds to summon to his presence all skilful sorcerers, so that they could overpower what they claimed to be Moses's sorcery. Despite all that we know about Pharaoh's tyranny, his action in this regard was much milder than what twentieth-century tyrants did when they confronted the advocates of divine faith who proclaimed that God is the only Lord in the universe, and thereby threatened the authority of self-proclaimed

rulers.[17]

Squaring Up to Sorcery and Falsehood

The Qur'ānic account skips over all the measures taken by Pharaoh and his aides in gathering all the sorcerers from every corner of the kingdom. The curtain falls after the first scene to be raised again with the contest progressing in full view in order to show this history as if it is happening now, in front of us. This is a characteristic of the inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

"The sorcerers came to Pharaoh and said: 'Surely there will be a handsome reward for us if it is we who prevail.' Answered [Pharaoh]: 'Yes; and you will certainly be among those who are close to me.'" (Verses 113-114) They are mere professionals. To them, both sorcery and priesthood are professions. Their ultimate aim in carrying on with both vocations is to enjoy a handsome financial reward. Being in the service of rulers and overpowering tyranny is the task undertaken by professional clergy. Whenever the general situation in a country or a community moves away from pure submission to God, acknowledging all sovereignty to Him alone, and whenever a form of false, arbitrary authority replaces God's law, those exercising such an authority find themselves in need of such professional clergy. The false authority is always ready to remunerate such clergy for their services. It is a deal which serves the mutual interests of both parties; the clergy acknowledge that false authority in the name of religion, and those exercising power provide them with wages and give them high positions.

Pharaoh assured them that they would be paid for their services, and promised them positions in the circle closest to him to increase the temptation and to encourage them to make their best efforts. Neither Pharaoh nor the sorcerers realized that the situation did not call for any professional expertise, skill or deception. They were placing themselves in confrontation with a miracle given by God who has power over all things, and a message revealed by Him. No sorcerer or tyrant can stand up to these.

Pharaoh's sorcerers were reassured that they would have a generous reward, and they looked forward to be in positions close to Pharaoh. They came ready for the match, and began by an open challenge to Moses. Little did they realize that God was storing for them something far better than their promised wages: *"They said: Moses! Either you shall throw [first], or we shall be the first to throw?' He answered: 'You throw [first].'"* (Verses 115-116) It is a clearly apparent challenge. As they gave Moses the choice, they demonstrated their confidence that they would triumph. But we also see

[17] The author was writing in the second half of the twentieth century. Needless to say, his remark about contemporary dictators applies today in the same manner. — Editor's note.

Moses unperturbed by the challenge, full of confidence as he answered: "*You throw first.*" That short answer reveals how completely assured Moses was. We often find the Qur'ān using a single word to impart such rich connotations.

But then the *sūrah* delivers a surprise. Indeed, Moses himself was surprised as he found himself face to face with very skilful sorcery that strikes awe in people's hearts: "*And when they threw [their staff], they cast a spell upon people's eyes and struck them with awe, making a display of great sorcery.*" (Verse 116)

It is sufficient for us that the Qur'ān describes their work as "great sorcery" to imagine how skilful they truly were. It is also enough that we should know that they could "cast a spell upon people's eyes", in order to be able to imagine the nature of the situation. Indeed, the Qur'ān uses here a very vivid term to describe that the sorcerers were able to create a very real feeling of fear among all beholders. We also learn from another Qur'ānic statement that Moses himself felt fear creeping into his heart.

But something totally unexpected takes place to surprise Pharaoh and his aides, these sorcerers and the masses gathered in the large square which served as a stage for this contest: "*We then inspired Moses: 'Throw your staff' And it swallowed up their false devices. Thus the truth prevailed and all their doings were proved to be in vain. They were defeated there and then, and became utterly humiliated.*" (Verses 117-119)

Falsehood may appear powerful. It may dazzle people's eyes, strike fear in their hearts and give the majority of people the impression that it is unstoppable and that it has its own rights. But once it comes into confrontation with the truth, with its intrinsic characteristics of calmness and self confidence, falsehood's bubble bursts and its fire dies down. The truth is thus seen to be much weightier, with firmer roots and a more solid foundation. The Qur'ānic expression here makes all these connotations clear as it describes the triumph of the truth as an accomplished fact, solid and stable. Everything else disappears and all the sorcerers' doings prove to be in vain. Falsehood and its advocates are vanquished, humiliated. This contrasts with the great display they tried to put out: "*They were defeated there and then, and became utterly humiliated.*" (Verse 119)

But the surprise is not over yet. The scene brings yet another, even greater surprise: "*The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: `We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.'*" (Verses 120-122)

How does this happen? It is simply the truth exercising its authority over people's feelings and consciences. It opens up hearts to prepare them to receive its light and accept its reassurance. The sorcerers are the best people to know how far their skill can go, and they are the best to evaluate the nature of what Moses worked out and whether it was an act of skilful sorcery or something brought about by a power far

greater than any human being can have. A learned specialist in any field is the first to acknowledge the truth in that field whenever it appears clearly to him, because he can recognize the truth much quicker than those who have only superficial knowledge of his specialty. This explains how the sorcerers moved from open challenge to total submission, after having recognized the truth with open minds.

No Permission to Believe in God

No tyrant enjoying absolute power can ever understand how light penetrates human hearts, or how people can enjoy the reassurance of faith and experience the happiness it imparts. Tyrants continue to exercise power for a long time, seeing that people accept whatever they say. With the passage of time they come to believe that their authority extends over people's minds, hearts and souls, when these actually submit only to God. Hence, Pharaoh was totally surprised to see the sorcerers accept the faith so quickly, especially as he could not see the faith penetrating into their hearts and could not realize how their minds worked. But he was quick to recognize how serious this development was and that it threatened his very authority. Those sorcerers, who were actually the attendants in temples throughout Egypt, were gathered in order to prove Moses's and Aaron's message as false. It was those same sorcerers who accepted that message and declared their submission to God, the Lord of the universe and of Moses and Aaron.

Pharaoh felt his throne shake, and it is well known that the throne and the crown represent all that is in the life of a tyrant. Tyrants are always ready to commit any crime, without hesitation, in order to retain power: "*Pharaoh said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! This is indeed a plot you have contrived in this city in order to drive out its people, but you shall soon come to know [the consequences]. I shall have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and then I shall crucify you all.'*" (Verses 123-124)

He haughtily exclaims: "*You believe in Him even before I have given you permission!*" (Verse 123) He really expects them to seek his permission before their hearts, consciences and souls open up to receive the truth, when they themselves have no control over these and cannot prevent anything from touching or penetrating them. Perhaps Pharaoh wanted them to repel the truth as it penetrated their souls, or to stifle their faith as its shoots began to spring up and blossom inside their souls, or to cover their eyes so that they could not see the light. That is tyranny: ignorant and stupid, but at the same time arrogant and conceited.

There is another element which influences Pharaoh's attitude: namely, fear that his power is threatened. "*This is indeed a plot you have contrived in this city in order to drive out its people.*" (Verse 123) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān where the history of Moses and

Pharaoh is related, Pharaoh is quoted as saying to the sorcerers in reference to Moses: *"He is your chief who has taught you sorcery."* (20: 71)

The whole question is absolutely clear. It is the fact that Moses calls on people to believe in `God, the Lord of all the worlds' that causes all this worry and fear. The tyrants realize that they can have no peace of mind if they allow that message to be preached. Their power relies on dismissing God's Lordship of mankind through ignoring His law. Instead, they appoint themselves as deities enacting legislation for human society and forcing people to submit to the laws they enact. These two methods can have no meeting point, because they move in opposite directions. They are two contradictory religions addressing worship to different lords. Pharaoh and the elders among his people were aware of this, and they were frightened when they realized that Moses and Aaron advocated submission to the Lord of the universe. Now that the sorcerers prostrated themselves in submission to God, Pharaoh and his elders were increasingly alarmed. Those sorcerers were the clergy in a pagan faith that attributed Godhead to Pharaoh himself. They were the ones who ensured that he exercised absolute power in the name of religion.

Hence, it was only expected that Pharaoh should issue his fearful warning: *"You shall soon come to know [the consequences]. I shall have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and then I shall crucify you all."* (Verses 123-124) Torture, disfigurement and unabating persecution: these are the methods to which tyranny resorts when it finds itself in confrontation with the truth. The tyrants realize that they cannot refute the argument of the truth, therefore they have to suppress it by force.

But when the truth of faith takes hold of a human being, he looks with contempt at the tyrants and their power. Faith takes over as the top priority, even ahead of life itself. A firm believer feels this life contemptible when it is compared to the eternal life of the hereafter. A human being who believes in the message of the truth does not stop to inquire: "What shall I gain and how much will I benefit?" He will not even think of what cost he will have to incur or what sacrifices he is called upon to give. The bright horizon opens up for him right in front of his eyes, so he does not look to anything along the way: *"They replied: 'To our Lord we shall indeed return. You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us.'"* (Verses 125-126) It is the unshakeable faith that will not submit to any worldly power. It is the faith which is reassured about the future, in the knowledge that all human beings will return to their Lord. With faith, people have the reassurance of being close to Him: *"To our Lord we shall indeed return."* (Verse 125)

When a person realizes the nature of the battle against tyranny, and that it is a battle over the central issues, he takes his stand firmly, without hesitation. He would never seek the clemency of an enemy who is not prepared to accept anything from

him short of abandoning his faith altogether, because, after all, that is the issue over which the fight takes place: "*You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us.*" (Verse 126) When anyone realizes what the battle is all about and to whom he should turn for help, he will not ask his enemy to ensure his own safety. He will only pray to his Lord to give him patience and perseverance in times of adversity, and to help him to continue in an attitude of submission to God until he dies: "*Our Lord, grant us abundance of patience in adversity, and let us die as people who have surrendered themselves to You.*" (Verse 126)

Tyranny stands helpless as it finds itself in confrontation with faith based on clear understanding. Tyranny realizes that it can do nothing to human hearts although it used to think that even hearts and consciences were subject to its power as human bodies are. Now it discovers that only God can have power over people's hearts and consciences. What can human power do to any heart or soul that seeks God's protection and prefers to wait for God's reward?

As attitudes were shaping up between Pharaoh and his elders on the one side and Moses and those who believed with him on the other, human history was witnessing one of its most decisive moments. It was a moment when faith triumphed over life and when souls became stronger than pain, and man overpowered Satan. It was a moment when true freedom was born. What does freedom mean if not defeating tyranny with the power of faith? When a person is free, he thinks very lightly of a brute force that cannot subjugate his heart and soul, although it can inflict physical pain and cause death. When brute force is unable to subjugate hearts, true freedom is actually born.

A Decisive Victory

It was a decisive moment in the history of mankind because it witnessed the bankruptcy of brute force. Those free individuals who only a few moments earlier were asking Pharaoh for their reward and hoping to win favour with him were now able to rise above Pharaoh's standard, having no fear of him, paying little attention to his threats and preparing themselves to face persecution. Nothing in their lives or in the material world around them had changed. Only a subtle touch that connects a mortal human being to the power of immortality. Hearts and souls were now able to feel God's power, and consciences were ready to receive divine guidance and its light. That subtle touch brings about a fundamental change in the material world and elevates man to a standard he could never have dreamed possible. Warnings and threats, then, sound hollow, meaningless. Faith goes along its way steadily, unhesitatingly and with complete reassurance.

At this point the curtain falls and the Qur'ānic account of this encounter is over.

The scene has reached its climax. Its powerful description serves the psychological purpose behind relating this account. It is the method of the Qur'ān that addresses hearts and souls with the message of faith and the language of artistic expression in a degree of harmony that only the Qur'ān can achieve.

The first point to be made as we conclude our discussion of the scene that witnessed how the sorcerers declared their submission to God is that Pharaoh and his top aides recognized immediately that this represented a threat to their system of government. This is due to the fact that the foundation of faith is in conflict with the basis upon which Pharaoh established his authority. We have discussed this previously, but we wish to restate here this fundamental principle. There can be no coexistence either in one person's mind or in the same land or under the same regime between the two concepts of God's Lordship over all the worlds and the exercise of power by a human being who proceeds to enact his own legislation for his people. These are aspects of two different faiths that have no common ground.

We should also note that once the sorcerers felt the light of faith penetrating their hearts, they began to recognize that the ensuing battle between them and Pharaoh's regime was over faith. He had nothing to take against them except the fact that they believed in God, the Lord of the universe, a faith representing a threat to his power, and the position and authority he confers on his -aides. In other words, it threatened Pharaoh's claimed lordship and the values of that pagan community. It is imperative that advocates of divine faith, who call on people to believe in God as the only Lord in the universe, should be fully aware of the nature of the battle. Such awareness enables believers to think little of all that they may be forced to endure for the sake of their faith. They will be able to face death with fortitude because they are certain that they are the ones who believe in the Lord of the universe while their enemy follows a different religion. Indeed the very way that their enemy exercises power and subjugates people to his will is a denial of God's lordship. Thus, the enemy is an unbeliever. It is not possible for believers to advocate the divine message, with all that awaits them of persecution along the way, unless they have both these issues clear in their minds: that they are the believers while their enemies are unbelievers, and that they are being so persecuted because of their faith, which is the only issue taken against them.

We also have to note how remarkable and fascinating is the scene which describes the triumph of faith over life, human will over agony and man over Satan. Indeed, it is a breathtaking scene which we simply cannot adequately describe in human language. Let us, then confine ourselves to admiring its description in God's own language as He paints it in the Qur'ān.

What Constitutes Corruption

Let us now pickup the thread of the story as the curtains are drawn back to reveal a fourth scene where conspiracy is taking place. Pharaoh's advisers felt that they simply could not allow Moses and those who believed with him, a small minority as they were, to go unpunished. They began to plot and instigate. They wanted Pharaoh to take strong action against Moses and his followers, raising before him the spectre of losing all his power and position, should he take a lenient attitude. They warned him against the possibility that the new faith, based on God's oneness and Lordship of the universe, could be allowed to establish roots in society. Pharaoh was furious and began to issue his warnings feeling that he had the power to suppress the rebellion: *"The great ones among Pharaoh's people said: `Will you allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and to forsake you and your gods?' He replied: 'We shall put their sons to death and shall spare only their women. We shall certainly overpower them.'"* (Verse 127)

Pharaoh did not claim Godhead in the sense that he was the creator and controller of the universe, or that he had power over natural forces. He simply claimed to be the god of his subjugated people, in the sense that he ruled them according to his own law and that they were subject to his will in all their affairs. This is still claimed by every ruler who enforces his own law and imposes his own will. This is lordship in both its linguistic and practical senses.

Nor did the Egyptians serve Pharaoh in the sense that they addressed their worship rituals to him. They had their own deities as did Pharaoh himself. This is clearly understood from his aides' statement where he is warned against being abandoned by Moses and his followers: *"And to forsake you and your gods."* (Verse 127) This is also confirmed by what we know of the history of ancient Egypt. They served Pharaoh in the sense that they accepted his authority and never violated his law or disobeyed his orders. This is the practical and linguistic meaning of worship. Hence, if people in any community receive their laws from a human being and obey him, then they actually worship him. Indeed this is what the Prophet himself indicated when he interpreted the Qur'ānic verse which says in reference to the Jews and Christians: *"They make of their clerics and monks lords besides God."* (9: 31) `Adiy ibn Ĥātim, who was formerly a Christian tribal chief, heard this verse at the time he accepted Islam. He said to the Prophet: "Messenger of God, they did not worship them." The Prophet said to him: "Yes, indeed they did. They permitted them what was forbidden and forbade them what was lawful, and they accepted that. This is their worship of those clerics and monks." (Related by al-Tirmidhī)

At one time, Pharaoh says to the elders of his nation: *"Nobles, you have no other God that I know of except myself"* (28: 38) But this statement is interpreted by yet another reported in the Qur'ān: *"My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, and are these rivers which flow at my feet not mine also? Can you not see? Am I not better than this despicable*

wretch, who can scarcely make his meaning plain? Why have no bracelets of gold been given him, or angels sent down to accompany him?" (43: 51-52) It is clear that he was comparing his authority and the gold that he had as a king with Moses's plain appearance. His proclamation, "*You have no other God that I know of except myself*" (28: 38) was simply an assertion that he was the only one to have the authority to make any order, and that he was the one to be obeyed at all times. Exercising such power is, in the linguistic sense and in practical terms, a claim to Godhead. The one who legislates for people and imposes his will on them exercises Godhead, whether he claims it verbally or not. It is in this light that we should understand the instigation of Pharaoh's aides as they said to him: *"Will you allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and to forsake you and your gods?"* (Verse 127)

In their view, to declare that God is the only Lord in the universe is to spread corruption, because it entails that Pharaoh's regime is illegitimate and his rule invalid. That regime was founded on giving all sovereignty to Pharaoh, or, to use a synonymous term, making him lord of his people. Hence, to them, corruption is spread in the land by overthrowing that regime and destroying the social set-up based on the lordship of human beings in order to establish a totally different situation which assigns lordship only to God. It is for this reason that they equated Moses' forsaking of Pharaoh and his gods with spreading corruption in the land.

How the Truth Unnerves Tyrants

Pharaoh used to derive his authority from the religion based on the worship of those gods, making out that he was the favourite son of those gods. It was not a physical parenthood, because people knew very well that Pharaoh was born to a human couple. It was a symbolic relationship, which ensured for him the authority to exercise his power. If Moses and his people were to worship God, the Lord of all the worlds, forsaking those deities worshipped by the Egyptians, then they are practically destroying the foundation of Pharaoh's spiritual authority over his people. We must remember here that the people themselves were transgressors, and hence their obedience to Pharaoh, as God Himself states: "*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were indeed transgressors.*" (43: 54)

This is indeed the correct interpretation of history. Pharaoh could not have been obeyed by his people when he made fools of them, had they not been transgressors. A believer simply does not allow tyranny to fool him and will not obey tyranny in any respect, because he knows such obedience cannot be endorsed by true faith. This was what represented a threat to Pharaoh's regime and power, as Moses called on people to believe in God, the Lord of all the worlds. The threat was embodied by the sorcerers' positive response, coupled with the acceptance of the new faith by a

minority of Moses's own people. Similarly, every social set-up established on the lordship of some human beings over others feels threatened by any call that aims to acknowledge the Lordship of God alone, or declaring that there is no deity other than God. We are speaking here of the true sense of this declaration which brings people into the fold of Islam, not its watered-down sense that prevails these days.

We can now understand why Pharaoh was enraged by these words, feeling that his whole regime was seriously threatened. Hence, he made his brutal intentions clear: *"We shall put their sons to death and shall spare only their women. We shall certainly overpower them."* (Verse 127)

The Children of Israel suffered persecution on a similar scale by Pharaoh and his clique, as stated in *Sūrah* 28, The Story, in which we read: *"Pharaoh made himself a tyrant in the land. He divided his people into casts, one group of which he persecuted, putting their sons to death and sparing only their daughters. Truly, he was an evildoer."* (28: 4) This is characteristic of tyranny everywhere, in all periods of history. It still resorts today to the same methods it employed centuries ago.

To Whom the Future Belongs

The *sūrah* leaves Pharaoh and his clique to cook up their conspiracy and portrays a new scene that imparts to us the impression that Pharaoh put his threats and warnings into effect. Now we see the Prophet Moses speaking to his people in the language and with the passion of a prophet who truly knows His Lord and how His will works. He impresses on them the need to endure adversity with patience and to seek God's help to overcome it. He enlightens them about the rules God has put in place in the universe, making it clear to them that the whole earth belongs to God alone and that He causes it to be inherited by any group of His servants according to His will. The ultimate trial will inevitably be given to those who fear none other than God. They complain to him that before he came they endured a wave of persecution and torture similar to that which they now suffer after his arrival. They feel that such persecution is endless. He declares that he sincerely hopes that God will destroy their enemy and cause them to be the heirs of the land to see how they conduct themselves when they are given the trust of building human life on earth: *"Moses said to his people: 'Turn to God (alone) for help and remain steadfast. The whole earth belongs to God. He allows it to be inherited by whomever He wills of His servants. The future belongs to those who are God-fearing.' They said: 'We have been oppressed before you came to us and since you have come to us.' He replied: It may well be that your Lord will destroy your enemy and leave you to inherit the earth. He will then see how you conduct yourselves."* (Verses 128-129)

This is how a prophet sees the nature of Godhead and how it enlightens his heart.

He is aware of what takes place in the universe, the forces operating in it, the laws God has established in it and what those who remain steadfast, holding firmly to their faith, may hope for the future. The advocates of the true faith have only one safe haven and one protector who is God Almighty. They have to be patient in adversity until God, their protector, in His perfect wisdom, determines the time when He grants them victory. They may not precipitate matters because they cannot foretell the future and they do not know what will work for their own good.

The whole earth belongs to God; while Pharaoh and his people are there only for a transitory period. God will allow, in His wisdom and according to the rules He has established, the earth to be inherited by whomever He chooses of His servants. Hence, the advocates of the true faith may not judge by appearances, which could give the impression that tyranny is firmly established on earth and cannot be driven out. It is the owner of the earth who decides when to kick those tyrants out. The God-fearing will sooner or later be triumphant. Hence, the advocates of the true faith must not worry about the future or consider for a moment that those unbelievers will continue to have the upper hand for ever.

Such is a prophet's vision of the essential facts that govern what happens in the universe. But the Children of Israel have their typical characteristics: "*They said: 'We have been oppressed before you came to us and since you have come to us.'*" (Verse 129) These words carry an implicit complaint. They are telling him that his coming to them as a Prophet has not changed anything. Their oppression seems to be everlasting.

But the noble Prophet does not change his characteristic attitude: he continues to remind them of God. He counsels them to put all their trust in Him and raises before them the prospect that God may destroy their enemy and grant them victory. He couples this with a warning that victory brings to them a new test, which they have to take in order to prove themselves: "*He replied: 'It may well be that your Lord will destroy your enemy and leave you to inherit the earth. He will then see how you conduct yourselves.'*" (Verse 129)

Moses's vision is that of a Prophet who recognizes the laws of nature God has established, and how they operate in line with what He has promised both to those who remain steadfast and to those who deny Him. He can see as a reality that tyranny will be destroyed and that those who show steadfastness and who turn to God alone for help will be given victory. He thus points out the way to his people, which is sure to give them what they want. He tells them right at the outset that when they are allowed to inherit the earth, they are actually being put to a test. They will not be given it because they claim to be God's favourite sons. Nor should they assume that He will not punish them for their sins, or that their power will continue for ever. It is all a test in which they have to prove themselves: "*He will then see how*

you conduct yourselves." (Verse 129) Needless to say, God knows what is going to happen even before it happens. But His justice determines that He does not put human beings to account until they have actually done what He already knows they will do. He is certainly the One who knows all, and He is the most fair of judges.

Who Brings Bad Omen

> *We afflicted Pharaoh's people with drought and poor harvests, so that they might take heed. Whenever something fine came their way, they would say: "This is our due", but whenever affliction befell them, they attributed their ill omen to Moses and those who followed him. Surely, whatever befalls them has been decreed by God, though most of them do not know it. (Verses 130-131)*

Here we have another scene in the story whereby Pharaoh and his people begin to taste the fruits of injustice and tyranny, while the promises Moses has given to his people, based on his trust in his Lord, come true. The warnings, stressed in the entire *sūrah* and endorsed throughout the story, are also seen to be true.

The scene starts on a quiet note, but we can feel the storm gathering slowly. When the curtains are about to fall, the storm is at its highest, wreaking destruction and wiping the tyrants out. We also learn that the Children of Israel have been well rewarded for their steadfastness, while Pharaoh and his people were punished for their transgression. Both God's promises and warnings have come true. The law of nature which He has established, sentencing unbelievers to destruction after testing them with hardship and affluence, has also operated in full:

> *We afflicted Pharaoh's people with drought and poor harvests, so that they might take heed. Whenever something fine came their way, they would say: "This is our due", but whenever affliction befell them, they attributed their ill omen to Moses and those who followed him. Surely, whatever befalls them has been decreed by God, though most of them do not know it. They said [to Moses]: "Whatever sign you may produce before us in order to cast a spell on us, we shall not believe in you." So we plagued them with floods, and locusts, and lice, and frogs, and blood: clear signs all; but they gloried in their arrogance, for they were evil-doing folk. Whenever a plague struck them, they would cry: `Moses, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. If you lift the plague from us, we will truly believe in you, and we will let the Children of Israel go with you. "But when We had lifted the plague from them, for a term they were sure to reach, they broke their promise. So We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea, because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them. We caused the people who were persecuted and deemed utterly low to inherit the eastern and western parts of the land which We had blessed. Thus your Lord's gracious promise to the Children of Israel was fufilled, because they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his*

people had wrought, and all that they had built. (Verses 130-137)

The shift in the sequence of the story suggests that Pharaoh and his group actually put their warnings into effect, killing men and sparing women. Moses and his followers where patient when this adversity befell them, proving that they were true believers hoping for intervention by God to lift their affliction. Thus, the whole situation was clearly identified: faith versus rejection of God's message, tyranny against steadfastness, and human force opposing God.

At this stage in the conflict, the Supreme Power intervenes to settle the issue between the two camps. *"We afflicted Pharaoh's people with drought and poor harvests, so that they might take heed."* (Verse 130) This was a first warning given in the form of drought and poor harvests. In the richly fertile land of Egypt, this was a highly worrying situation that called for reflection and reconsideration. But the tyrants, and those who are fooled by tyrants because of their own transgression, do not wish to reflect or reconsider. They simply do not accept that poor harvests and drought came in fulfilment of God's warnings. They do not wish to admit the close relationship between the values of faith and practical life, because that relationship belongs to the realm that lies beyond human perception. They have been too hardened in their ignorant ways to be able to see anything beyond the material world. When they see some aspect of a world beyond, they cannot recognize God's hand in it, or His free will. They attribute everything to blind coincidence.[18]

Similarly, Pharaoh's people preferred to overlook the early signs that should have awakened them as they pointed to the fact that God's mercy is bestowed on people, even when they continue to disbelieve in Him. Paganism and its superstitions had corrupted their nature, so that they could not recognize or understand the elaborate laws maintaining the fine order of the universe and influencing human life. These are only recognized and appreciated by true believers; for they realize that the universe has not been created in vain, and that it is governed by strict and well-defined laws. This is indeed the correct scientific mentality, which does not deny what lies beyond our perception, because there is simply no conflict between scientific facts and such a world beyond. Nor does it deny the relationship between the values of faith and practical life, because these have been set by God Himself who wants His servants to believe in Him and to build human life on earth. He lays down for them laws that are in harmony with those operating in the universe so that there is no conflict between their existence and their world.

18 When the former Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc suffered poor harvests, Khrushchev could find no explanation other than to say, "nature is opposing us." This came from the man who insisted on denying any unseen force and claimed to believe in scientific socialism. His attitude was one of deliberate blindness. Otherwise, what is this "nature" which has a will to oppose human beings?

So, Pharaoh's people did not see the connection between their transgression and the oppression they wreaked on God's servant on the one hand, and their affliction with drought and poor harvests in the richly fertile land of Egypt on the other. It was a gesture of God's mercy to raise this fact before their very eyes, so that they could reflect. They should have remembered that the land of Egypt could always feed its people, except at times when God decided to try them with poor harvests after they had transgressed. Pharaoh's people considered every good fortune that came their way as their due. Affliction and poor harvests were attributed to Moses and his followers as people who brought bad omen: *"Whenever something fine came their way, they would say: 'This is our due', but whenever affliction befell them, they attributed their ill omen to Moses and those who followed him."* (Verse 131)

When human nature turns away from faith, it cannot see God's hand conducting its affairs, or His will initiating events. At this stage, it loses all its appreciation of the constant laws of the universe. It starts to give events isolated, disjointed interpretations and accepts all sorts of superstition, which lack even the slightest degree of coherence. A simple example is the statement made by Khrushchev, the advocate of scientific socialism, explaining poor harvests in the Soviet Union as the opposition of nature to the socialists. Those who try to explain events in allegedly `scientific' terms, while denying God's will, provide another example. What is singular is that some of them still claim to be Muslims when they deny the foundations of faith altogether.

It was in the same vein that Pharaoh and his people interpreted events. Good fortune was their due, and it came to them because they deserved it, while affliction was the ill-omen Moses and his followers brought about. The word used here for "ill-omen" has the same root as a "flying bird". The connection originates from an Arabian pagan practice. When an Arab wanted to choose a course of action, he came to a bird's nest and frightened the bird inside. If the bird flew to the right, the man felt that was a good omen and he followed his chosen line of action. If the bird flew to the left, the man considered that a bad omen and he stopped short. Islam stopped all this superstition and replaced it by a truly scientific line of thinking. It attributed matters to the laws God operates in the universe, and to God's will ensuring the operation of all these laws. Events are valued on a scientific basis, which takes note of man's intention, action and effort. All these are placed within the context of God's free will: *"Surely, whatever befalls them has been decreed by God, though most of them do not know it."* (Verse 131)

Whatever happens to human beings has the same source, because it is decreed by God. It is to this source that their trial with affliction is attributed, as well as their trial with affluence: *"We test you all with evil and good by way of trial. To Us you all must return."* (21: 35) The same source causes their punishment when they are punished

for their misdeeds. But most of them do not recognize this. These ancient unbelievers were the same as those who in our present day claim for themselves `scientific pragmatism' in order to justify their denial of God's will and His control of what lies beyond our world. Similar to them are those 'scientific socialists' who attribute their poor harvests to an antagonistic nature! All of them are ignorant, devoid of knowledge.

The Promises of Unbelievers

But Pharaoh's people were too arrogant, always persisting with their evil ways and paying no heed to God's signs or to any test to which they were put. They said to Moses: *"Whatever sign you may bring before us in order to cast a spell on us, we shall not believe in you."* (Verse 132) It is an attitude of arrogance that will heed no reminder and will not respond to any proof. It is the attitude of a person who does not want to look or evaluate, because he declares his insistence on rejecting the message, even before proof is shown to him. Thus, he feels able to dismiss the proof altogether. This is an attitude which is frequently demonstrated by unbelievers after they have been overwhelmed by the truth and its clear proofs, while they recognize that their interests, wealth, authority and power belong elsewhere and are better served by denying the truth altogether.

At this juncture, the supreme power of God intervenes: *"So We plagued them with floods, and locusts, and lice, and frogs, and blood: clear signs all."* (Verse 133) All these clear signs were meant as a test and a warning. Their import was very clear, and all of them gave the same message, with each subsequent one endorsing what had gone beforehand. These clear signs were shown to them separately, but the *sūrah* mentions them altogether here. Each time one of these plagues afflicted them, they rushed to Moses imploring him to pray to his Lord to save them. Every time they promised to let the Children of Israel go with him, if he would only relieve their affliction. They recognized that they themselves had no means of lifting their hardship: *"Whenever a plague struck them, they would cry: 'Moses, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. If you lift the plague from us, we will truly believe in you, and we will let the Children of Israel go with you.'"* (Verse 134) Every time they broke their promise and resorted to their same ways and practices before the plague had smitten them. But the plague was lifted only in accordance with God's will so as to let them alone for a while until their appointed term had come: *"When We had lifted the plague from them for a term they were sure to reach, they broke their promise."* (Verse 135)

As we have already said, the *sūrah* groups all these signs together, as if they came all at once, and as if they broke their promises once only. The fact remains that all

these trials were essentially one, and their ultimate result was the same as well. This is a method of presentation often employed in the Qur'ān in relating different events and their consequences to indicate that they are the same. It is in the nature of a sealed heart that it will always look at various experiences as one, benefiting nothing from them and learning no lesson.

Now, how did these miraculous signs take place? We have only the Qur'ānic statement, and we have not found in authentic *ĥadīths* any further details. We maintain our method that we have followed in this work, going only as far as the Qur'ānic or authentic *ĥadīths* go. This ensures that we steer away from any superstition or unfounded report. Many of these have found their way into some older commentaries on the Qur'ān. Indeed, the commentary written by Imām al-Ṭabarī and the one written by Ibn Kathīr, valuable indeed as they are, have not escaped such pitfalls.

Al-Ṭabarī includes in his work on history and in his commentary on the Qur'ān several reports attributed to earlier scholars, explaining these signs. We will mention only one of these, given on the authority of Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, a famous scholar from the generation that followed the Prophet's companions:

> When Moses asked Pharaoh to release to him the Children of Israel, Pharaoh refused. God plagued Pharaoh's people with flooding rain. When they feared that it might have been a penalty, they said to Moses: "Pray to your Lord to cause this rain to cease, and we will send the Children of Israel with you." He prayed to his Lord, and the rain stopped, but they, nevertheless, refused to believe in him. And did not let the Children of Israel go with him.
>
> God gave them that year plentiful harvests which gave them fruits and crops as they had never known before. They said: "We now have all that we ever wished for." God then plagued them with the locusts which started ruining their meadows. When they saw what the locusts were doing to their meadows, they realized that they would also ruin all their harvest. Therefore, they appealed to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift the plague of locusts and promised that they would believe in him and let the Children of Israel go with him. He prayed to his Lord and the locusts went away. Nevertheless, Pharaoh's people refused to believe in him or to release the Children of Israel.
>
> Thus, they had their harvest safe, and stored all their crops at their homes and storehouses. When they completed their work, they were very pleased with themselves. God then sent on them lice. A person would take out ten full sacks of his grains to the mill, but he would not get even one sack of flour. Once again, they rushed to Moses, imploring him to pray to his Lord to lift this plague. They again promised to believe in him and to release the

Children of Israel. Once more, he prayed to his Lord and He lifted their hardship, but they nevertheless rejected his message and refused to release the Children of Israel.

Moses was sitting with Pharaoh when he heard the sound of a frog. He said to Pharaoh: "You and your people will soon suffer from this." Pharaoh said: "What harm could this one do?" They hardly reached the evening when the frogs were all over them. A man would be up to his neck in frogs. If he opened his mouth to speak, frogs would jump into it. They again appealed to Moses to pray to his Lord to make the frogs go away. They again promised solemnly to believe in him and to release the Children of Israel. When that plague was lifted, they reverted to their hardened attitude.

Now, God plagued them with blood. Every time they collected water from any river or any well, and indeed all the water they had in their containers, it turned into blood. They complained to Pharaoh and said that they had nothing to drink. He suggested that Moses had cast a spell on them. They said: "How could he have done that, when we find every drop of water that has been in our containers has turned into blood?" Again, they rushed to Moses and implored him to pray to his Lord, making the same solemn promises. He prayed as they had requested, and God answered his prayer and lifted the plague of blood off them. Nevertheless, they continued to refuse to believe in Moses and would not release the Children of Israel.[19]

God knows best which of these stories corresponded to fact, and in what form each one of these signs was given. Any differences that might have occurred would not affect the message of these verses. God sent these signs by His own will, at a time He had determined, in order to test a particular people according to His law which punishes the rejecters so that they may turn to Him.

Wreaking Vengeance on Hardened Unbelievers

Despite their pagan religion, their total ignorance, and their transgression which enabled Pharaoh to take them as fools, they still rushed to the Prophet Moses, time and again, beseeching him to pray to his Lord on account of the covenant he had with Him. They felt that was the only way for the plague to be lifted. But those in power refused to honour their promises because their whole authority was based on their claim that Pharaoh was the Lord of his people. They feared what would have happened if God's Lordship was to be recognized. That would have meant that the

[19] Al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Jarīr, *jāmi` al-Bayān,* Beirut, Vol. 6, p. 34

entire system, which assigned sovereignty and legislative authority to Pharaoh, would collapse, giving way to a system which recognized sovereignty as belonging only to God.

In present-day jāhiliyyah, God may allow pests to threaten harvests, but people do not turn back to God at all. If the farmers experience the natural feeling which occurs to human beings, even unbelievers, in times of hardship, that it is God who sends these plagues, and if they turn to God praying to Him to lift this affliction, the advocates of false `science' tell them that their action is deeply rooted in superstition and metaphysics. They adopt a very sarcastic attitude in order to turn them back to a state of rejection that is far worse than that of ancient pagans.

The end then takes place in accordance with God's law of punishing unbelievers after having tested them both with affliction and affluence.

Having given Pharaoh and his people every chance, and assigned for them a term which they were certain to reach, God destroyed Pharaoh and his clique. He also fulfilled His promise to the oppressed who remained patient in adversity: *"So We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea, because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them. We caused the people who were persecuted and deemed utterly low to inherit the eastern and western parts of the land which We had blessed. Thus your Lord's gracious promise to the Children of Israel was fulfilled, because they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built."* (Verses 136-137)

The *sūrah* refers very briefly here to the drowning of Pharaoh and his people. The details are not given here in a relaxed pattern as they are given in other *sūrahs.* What happens here instead is to give an air of swift punishment after the unbelievers have had a long time to reconsider. Hence, the details are overlooked. The swiftness of the punishment has its effect which fills us with awe. *"So We inflicted Our retribution on them, and caused them to drown in the sea."* (Verse 136) Just one strike and they are all destroyed. Proud, arrogant and despotic they certainly were, and suddenly they sink right to the bottom of the sea. It is certainly a fitting recompense, *"Because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them."* (Verse 136) The compatibility is made clear between their attitude of denying God's signs, choosing to remain heedless of them and this fitting destiny. We are clearly told that events do not come as a result of coincidence. They do not just happen haphazardly, as simple people tend to think.

To enhance the atmosphere of swiftness and decisiveness, the *sūrah* also portrays the opposite picture of giving power to the oppressed. This is brought forward because the Children of Israel were not given power in Egypt, where Pharaoh and his people lived. Instead, they were given power when they were at their best in following divine guidance, before they deviated and incurred the punishment of humiliation and dispersal. Their kingdom was in Palestine, several decades after the

drowning of Pharaoh, and long after the Prophet Moses had passed away, and indeed after their forty years in the wilderness which is mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. But the *sūrah* glides over all these events and shifts from one period of time to another in order to highlight the fact that they were established and given power to be free to conduct their own affairs. This provides a clear contrast with their state of weakness when they endured Pharaoh's persecution: *"We caused the people who were persecuted and deemed utterly low to inherit the eastern and western parts of the land which We had blessed. Thus your Lord's gracious promise to the Children of Israel was fulfilled, because they were patient in adversity; and We destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built."* (Verse 137)

Restricted by the limitations of time as we are, we, human beings, speak of a time order because we record events in accordance with their occurrence and the moment when we note their happening. For this reason, we say that the power that was given to those who were oppressed came after the event of Pharaoh's drowning. That is our own understanding of events. What could "before" and "after" signify to God in His absolute knowledge, we cannot tell. All that takes place clearly appears to Him in full vision, with nothing partially or totally screened by limitations of time and place. To Him everything is known absolutely perfectly, while our knowledge remains scanty indeed.

Thus the curtain falls with the scene of total destruction on the one side and that of a new power to build a new civilization on the other. Pharaoh, yesterday's tyrant, is drowned with his people. All that they had built in this life, and all the edifices and towers they raised on great pillars, and all their construction, vineyards and riches lie in ruin. All this takes place in a fraction of a moment, and all is portrayed in a few short words.

This is an example given by God to the small band of believers in Makkah who suffered persecution by the pagan Arabs. It also provides a wider perspective to every group of believers suffering persecution at the hands of the new pharaohs of this world. They can always look at the oppression they suffer in the same light as those believers suffered at Pharaoh's hands. They remained steadfast and showed patience in adversity, so God caused them to inherit the blessed land to see how they would conduct themselves.

9
Relapse into a State of Ignorance

وَجَٰوَزۡنَا بِبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلۡبَحۡرَ فَأَتَوۡاْ عَلَىٰ قَوۡمٖ يَعۡكُفُونَ عَلَىٰٓ أَصۡنَامٖ لَّهُمۡۚ قَالُواْ يَٰمُوسَى ٱجۡعَل لَّنَآ إِلَٰهٗا كَمَا لَهُمۡ ءَالِهَةٞۚ قَالَ إِنَّكُمۡ قَوۡمٞ تَجۡهَلُونَ ١٣٨

We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said [the Children of Israel]: "Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have." He replied: "You are indeed an ignorant people. (138)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مُتَبَّرٞ مَّا هُمۡ فِيهِ وَبَٰطِلٞ مَّا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٣٩

As for these people: their method will inevitably lead to destruction, and worthless is all that they have been doing." (139)

قَالَ أَغَيۡرَ ٱللَّهِ أَبۡغِيكُمۡ إِلَٰهٗا وَهُوَ فَضَّلَكُمۡ عَلَى ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٤٠

[And] he said: "Am I to seek for you a deity other than God, although He has favoured you above all other people?" (140)

وَإِذۡ أَنجَيۡنَٰكُم مِّنۡ ءَالِ فِرۡعَوۡنَ يَسُومُونَكُمۡ سُوٓءَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ يُقَتِّلُونَ أَبۡنَآءَكُمۡ وَيَسۡتَحۡيُونَ نِسَآءَكُمۡۚ وَفِي ذَٰلِكُم بَلَآءٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ عَظِيمٞ ١٤١

We have indeed saved you from Pharaoh's people, who oppressed you cruelly: they slew your sons and spared your women. Surely that was an awesome trial from your Lord. (141)

۞ وَوَٰعَدۡنَا مُوسَىٰ ثَلَٰثِينَ لَيۡلَةٗ وَأَتۡمَمۡنَٰهَا بِعَشۡرٖ فَتَمَّ مِيقَٰتُ رَبِّهِۦٓ أَرۡبَعِينَ لَيۡلَةٗۚ وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَخِيهِ هَٰرُونَ ٱخۡلُفۡنِي فِي قَوۡمِي وَأَصۡلِحۡ وَلَا تَتَّبِعۡ سَبِيلَ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ١٤٢

We appointed for Moses thirty nights, to which We added ten, whereby the term of forty nights set by His Lord was complete. Moses said to his brother Aaron: "Take my place among my people and act righteously. Do not follow the path of those who spread corruption." (142)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَٰتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُۥ رَبُّهُۥ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِيٓ أَنظُرۡ إِلَيۡكَۚ قَالَ لَن تَرَىٰنِي وَلَٰكِنِ ٱنظُرۡ إِلَى ٱلۡجَبَلِ فَإِنِ ٱسۡتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُۥ فَسَوۡفَ تَرَىٰنِيۖ فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّىٰ رَبُّهُۥ لِلۡجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُۥ دَكّٗا وَخَرَّ مُوسَىٰ صَعِقٗاۚ فَلَمَّآ أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبۡحَٰنَكَ تُبۡتُ إِلَيۡكَ وَأَنَا۠ أَوَّلُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١٤٣

When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: "My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You." Said [God] : "You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me." When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: "Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You." (143)

قَالَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّي ٱصۡطَفَيۡتُكَ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ بِرِسَٰلَٰتِي وَبِكَلَٰمِي فَخُذۡ مَآ ءَاتَيۡتُكَ وَكُن مِّنَ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ١٤٤

He said: "Moses, I have chosen you of all mankind and favoured you by entrusting My messages to you and by My speaking to you. Take then what I have given you and be thankful." (144)

وَكَتَبۡنَا لَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأَلۡوَاحِ مِن كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ مَّوۡعِظَةٗ وَتَفۡصِيلٗا لِّكُلِّ شَيۡءٖ فَخُذۡهَا بِقُوَّةٖ وَأۡمُرۡ قَوۡمَكَ يَأۡخُذُواْ بِأَحۡسَنِهَاۚ سَأُوْرِيكُمۡ دَارَ ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ١٤٥

We wrote for him on the tablets all manner of admonition, clearly spelling out everything, and (said to him): "Implement them with strength and determination, and bid your people to observe what is best in them. I shall show you the abode of the transgressors. (145)

سَأَصۡرِفُ عَنۡ ءَايَٰتِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَكَبَّرُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ بِغَيۡرِ ٱلۡحَقِّ وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ كُلَّ ءَايَةٖ لَّا يُؤۡمِنُواْ بِهَا وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرُّشۡدِ لَا يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلٗا وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ سَبِيلَ ٱلۡغَيِّ يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُواْ عَنۡهَا غَٰفِلِينَ ١٤٦

"I will turn away from My revelations those who, without any right, behave arrogantly on earth: for, though they may see every sign, they do not believe in it. If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path; because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them. (146)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَلِقَآءِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ حَبِطَتۡ أَعۡمَٰلُهُمۡۚ هَلۡ يُجۡزَوۡنَ إِلَّا مَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٤٧

"Those who deny Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter will see all their works collapse. Are they to be rewarded for anything other than what they have done?" (147)

وَٱتَّخَذَ قَوۡمُ مُوسَىٰ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ مِنۡ حُلِيِّهِمۡ عِجۡلٗا جَسَدٗا لَّهُۥ خُوَارٌۚ أَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ أَنَّهُۥ لَا يُكَلِّمُهُمۡ وَلَا يَهۡدِيهِمۡ سَبِيلًا ٱتَّخَذُوهُ وَكَانُواْ ظَٰلِمِينَ ١٤٨

In his absence, the people of Moses took to the worship of the effigy of a calf made of their ornaments, which gave a lowing sound. Did they not see that it could neither speak to them nor give them any guidance? Yet they took to worshipping it, for they were evildoers. (148)

وَلَمَّا سُقِطَ فِيٓ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَرَأَوۡاْ أَنَّهُمۡ قَدۡ ضَلُّواْ قَالُواْ لَئِن لَّمۡ يَرۡحَمۡنَا رَبُّنَا وَيَغۡفِرۡ لَنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ١٤٩

When they were later afflicted with remorse, having realized that they had gone astray, they said: "If our Lord does not have mercy on us and forgive us, we shall certainly be losers." (149)

وَلَمَّا رَجَعَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِۦ غَضْبَٰنَ
أَسِفًا قَالَ بِئْسَمَا خَلَفْتُمُونِى مِنۢ بَعْدِىٓ
أَعَجِلْتُمْ أَمْرَ رَبِّكُمْ ۖ وَأَلْقَى ٱلْأَلْوَاحَ وَأَخَذَ
بِرَأْسِ أَخِيهِ يَجُرُّهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِ ۚ قَالَ ٱبْنَ أُمَّ إِنَّ
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱسْتَضْعَفُونِى وَكَادُوا۟ يَقْتُلُونَنِى فَلَا
تُشْمِتْ بِىَ ٱلْأَعْدَآءَ وَلَا تَجْعَلْنِى مَعَ
ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

When Moses returned to his people, full of wrath and sorrow, he said: "What an evil thing you have done in my absence! Have you tried to hurry up your Lord's command?" He put down the tablets and, seizing his brother by the head, he pulled him to himself. Cried Aaron, "Son of my mother, the people felt I was weak and they almost killed me. Do not let our enemies rejoice over my affliction, and do not count me among the evil-doing folk." (150)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱغْفِرْ لِى وَلِأَخِى وَأَدْخِلْنَا فِى
رَحْمَتِكَ ۖ وَأَنتَ أَرْحَمُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾

Said [Moses]: "My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us to Your grace: for You are indeed the most merciful of those who are merciful." (151)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ ٱلْعِجْلَ سَيَنَالُهُمْ غَضَبٌ
مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَذِلَّةٌ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ
وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُفْتَرِينَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

Those who took to worshipping the calf have surely incurred their Lord's wrath, and disgrace [will be their lot] in this life. Thus do We reward those who invent falsehood. (152)

وَٱلَّذِينَ عَمِلُوا۟ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ثُمَّ تَابُوا۟ مِنۢ
بَعْدِهَا وَءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهَا
لَغَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٥٣﴾

But those who do evil deeds and, later repent and truly believe will surely, after such repentance, find your Lord to be much-forgiving, most merciful. (153)

وَلَمَّا سَكَتَ عَن مُّوسَى ٱلْغَضَبُ أَخَذَ
ٱلْأَلْوَاحَ ۖ وَفِى نُسْخَتِهَا هُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلَّذِينَ
هُمْ لِرَبِّهِمْ يَرْهَبُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

Then when his wrath had subsided, Moses took up the tablets, upon which was inscribed a text of guidance and grace to those who stood in awe of their Lord. (154)

وَٱخۡتَارَ مُوسَىٰ قَوۡمَهُۥ سَبۡعِينَ رَجُلٗا لِّمِيقَٰتِنَاۖ فَلَمَّآ أَخَذَتۡهُمُ ٱلرَّجۡفَةُ قَالَ رَبِّ لَوۡ شِئۡتَ أَهۡلَكۡتَهُم مِّن قَبۡلُ وَإِيَّيَۖ أَتُهۡلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ مِنَّآۖ إِنۡ هِيَ إِلَّا فِتۡنَتُكَ تُضِلُّ بِهَا مَن تَشَآءُ وَتَهۡدِي مَن تَشَآءُۖ أَنتَ وَلِيُّنَا فَٱغۡفِرۡ لَنَا وَٱرۡحَمۡنَاۖ وَأَنتَ خَيۡرُ ٱلۡغَٰفِرِينَ ١٥٥

Moses chose out of his people seventy men to come at a time set by Us. Then, when they were seized by violent trembling, he said: "My Lord, had it been Your will, You could have destroyed them, and myself too, long ago. Would You destroy us because of what the weak-minded among us have done? This is only a trial You have ordained, whereby You allow to go astray whom You will, and You guide aright whom You will. You alone are our guardian: grant us, then, forgiveness and bestow mercy on us. You are the best of all those who do forgive. (155)

۞ وَٱكۡتُبۡ لَنَا فِي هَٰذِهِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا حَسَنَةٗ وَفِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ إِنَّا هُدۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَۚ قَالَ عَذَابِيٓ أُصِيبُ بِهِۦ مَنۡ أَشَآءُۖ وَرَحۡمَتِي وَسِعَتۡ كُلَّ شَيۡءٖۚ فَسَأَكۡتُبُهَا لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٥٦

Ordain for us what is good, both in this world and in the life to come. To You alone we turn." [God] answered: "I afflict anyone I wish with My torment while My grace encompasses all things; so I will confer it on those who steer away from evil, and spend in charity, and who believe in Our signs— (156)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ ٱلرَّسُولَ ٱلنَّبِيَّ ٱلۡأُمِّيَّ ٱلَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُۥ مَكۡتُوبًا عِندَهُمۡ فِي ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةِ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلِ يَأۡمُرُهُم بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَيَنۡهَىٰهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡخَبَٰٓئِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنۡهُمۡ إِصۡرَهُمۡ وَٱلۡأَغۡلَٰلَ ٱلَّتِي كَانَتۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡۚ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ بِهِۦ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَٱتَّبَعُواْ ٱلنُّورَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ مَعَهُۥٓۙ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ١٥٧

those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel that are with them. He commands them to do what is right and forbids them to do what is wrong, and makes lawful to them the good things of life and forbids them all that is foul. He lifts from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them. Those, therefore, who believe in him, honour and support him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him shall indeed be successful." (157)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنِّى رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَـَٔامِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ٱلنَّبِىِّ ٱلْأُمِّىِّ ٱلَّذِى يُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَكَلِمَٰتِهِۦ وَٱتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

Say: Mankind, I am indeed God's Messenger to you all. It is to Him that sovereignty over the heavens and the earth belongs. There is no deity other than Him. He alone grants life and causes death. Believe, then, in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His words. And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided. (158)

وَمِن قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰٓ أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَبِهِۦ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Yet among the folk of Moses there are some who guide (others) by means of the truth and act justly in its light. (159)

وَقَطَّعْنَٰهُمُ ٱثْنَتَىْ عَشْرَةَ أَسْبَاطًا أُمَمًا ۚ وَأَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱسْتَسْقَىٰهُ قَوْمُهُۥٓ أَنِ ٱضْرِب بِّعَصَاكَ ٱلْحَجَرَ ۖ فَٱنۢبَجَسَتْ مِنْهُ ٱثْنَتَا عَشْرَةَ عَيْنًا ۖ قَدْ عَلِمَ كُلُّ أُنَاسٍ مَّشْرَبَهُمْ ۚ وَظَلَّلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْغَمَٰمَ وَأَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْمَنَّ وَٱلسَّلْوَىٰ ۖ كُلُوا۟ مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا رَزَقْنَٰكُمْ ۚ وَمَا ظَلَمُونَا وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

We divided them into twelve tribes, each a community. And when his people asked Moses for water to drink, We inspired him: "Strike the rock with your staff." Twelve springs gushed forth from it, and each tribe knew its drinking- place. We caused the clouds to draw their shadow over them and sent down for them manna and quails, [saying]: "Eat of the good things We have given you as sustenance." Yet they could do Us no wrong, but they certainly wronged themselves. (160)

وَإِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱسْكُنُوا۟ هَٰذِهِ ٱلْقَرْيَةَ وَكُلُوا۟ مِنْهَا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمْ وَقُولُوا۟ حِطَّةٌ وَٱدْخُلُوا۟ ٱلْبَابَ سُجَّدًا نَّغْفِرْ لَكُمْ خَطِيٓـَٰٔتِكُمْ ۚ سَنَزِيدُ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾

It was said to them: "Dwell in this city and eat of its food whatever you may wish, and say: "Lord, relieve us of our burden," and enter the gate in humility. We will forgive you your sins, and We will richly reward those who do good." (161)

فَبَدَّلَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ قَوۡلًا غَيۡرَ ٱلَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمۡ فَأَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ رِجۡزٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَظۡلِمُونَ ١٦٢

But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their wrongdoing. (162)

وَسۡـَٔلۡهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِ ٱلَّتِي كَانَتۡ حَاضِرَةَ ٱلۡبَحۡرِۘ إِذۡ يَعۡدُونَ فِي ٱلسَّبۡتِ إِذۡ تَأۡتِيهِمۡ حِيتَانُهُمۡ يَوۡمَ سَبۡتِهِمۡ شُرَّعٗا وَيَوۡمَ لَا يَسۡبِتُونَ لَا تَأۡتِيهِمۡۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَبۡلُوهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡسُقُونَ ١٦٣

Ask them about the town which stood by the sea: how its people profaned the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days. Thus did We try them because of their disobedience. (163)

وَإِذۡ قَالَتۡ أُمَّةٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوۡمًا ٱللَّهُ مُهۡلِكُهُمۡ أَوۡ مُعَذِّبُهُمۡ عَذَابٗا شَدِيدٗاۖ قَالُواْ مَعۡذِرَةً إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمۡ وَلَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَّقُونَ ١٦٤

When some among them asked: "Why do you preach to people whom God is certain to destroy, or at least to punish severely?" [others] replied: "So that we may be free from blame in the sight of your Lord, and that they may become God-fearing." (164)

فَلَمَّا نَسُواْ مَا ذُكِّرُواْ بِهِۦٓ أَنجَيۡنَا ٱلَّذِينَ يَنۡهَوۡنَ عَنِ ٱلسُّوٓءِ وَأَخَذۡنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ بِعَذَابِۭ بَـِٔيسِۭ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡسُقُونَ ١٦٥

When they had forgotten all the warnings they had been given, We saved those who had tried to prevent evil, and overwhelmed the transgressors with dreadful suffering for their iniquitous deeds. (165)

فَلَمَّا عَتَوۡاْ عَن مَّا نُهُواْ عَنۡهُ قُلۡنَا لَهُمۡ كُونُواْ قِرَدَةً خَٰسِـِٔينَ ١٦٦

And when they insolently persisted in doing what they had been forbidden to do, We said to them: "Turn into despicable apes." (166)

وَإِذۡ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكَ لَيَبۡعَثَنَّ عَلَيۡهِمۡ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مَن يَسُومُهُمۡ سُوٓءَ ٱلۡعَذَابِۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَسَرِيعُ ٱلۡعِقَابِۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَغَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ١٦٧

Then your Lord declared that He would most certainly raise against them people who would cruelly oppress them till the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord is swift indeed in His retribution, yet

He is certainly much forgiving, merciful. (167)

وَقَطَّعْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ أُمَمًا ۖ مِّنْهُمُ ٱلصَّٰلِحُونَ وَمِنْهُمْ دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَبَلَوْنَٰهُم بِٱلْحَسَنَٰتِ وَٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

We dispersed them all over the earth as separate communities; some of them were righteous, and some far from that, and We tried them with blessings and misfortunes, so that they might mend their ways. (168)

فَخَلَفَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ وَرِثُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ يَأْخُذُونَ عَرَضَ هَٰذَا ٱلْأَدْنَىٰ وَيَقُولُونَ سَيُغْفَرُ لَنَا وَإِن يَأْتِهِمْ عَرَضٌ مِّثْلُهُۥ يَأْخُذُوهُ ۚ أَلَمْ يُؤْخَذْ عَلَيْهِم مِّيثَٰقُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ أَن لَّا يَقُولُوا۟ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلْحَقَّ وَدَرَسُوا۟ مَا فِيهِ ۗ وَٱلدَّارُ ٱلْءَاخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ ۗ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

They were succeeded by generations who inherited the Book. Yet these are keen to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this lower world and say, "We shall be forgiven." Should some similar pleasures come their way, they would certainly be keen to indulge them. Have they not solemnly pledged through their Scriptures to say nothing but the truth about God? And have they not studied well what is in [the Scriptures]? Surely the life in the hereafter is better for all who are God-fearing. Will you not use your reason? (169)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُمَسِّكُونَ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَأَقَامُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُصْلِحِينَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

As for those who hold fast to the Scriptures and attend regularly to their prayers, We shall not fail to reward those who enjoin the doing of what is right. (170)

۞ وَإِذْ نَتَقْنَا ٱلْجَبَلَ فَوْقَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُۥ ظُلَّةٌ وَظَنُّوٓا۟ أَنَّهُۥ وَاقِعٌۢ بِهِمْ خُذُوا۟ مَآ ءَاتَيْنَٰكُم بِقُوَّةٍ وَٱذْكُرُوا۟ مَا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧١﴾

We suspended the mountain over them as if it were a shadow, and they thought that it would fall down on them [We said]: Hold fast with all your strength to what We have given you and bear in mind all that it contains, so that you may remain God- fearing. (171)

Preview

This passage discusses a new episode in the history of Moses and the Children of Israel, after God has saved them from their enemy. In the previous passage we see

how Pharaoh and his people were drowned in the sea and all that they had done and built was destroyed. In this episode, Moses does not confront the tyranny of Pharaoh and his people, for that battle is over. He fights a different sort of battle, which may be longer and more ferocious. He is fighting against the human self. Traces of ignorance and humiliation still had their effects on the nature of the Children of Israel, allowing traits of deviousness, cruelty, cowardice and weakness to reveal themselves in their attitude. These traits are bound to take their toll on human nature, because nothing corrupts human nature more than living for a long while under tyranny and in an atmosphere of terror and fear that compels people to resort to devious scheming in order to avoid trouble.

The Children of Israel lived under this type of suffering for a long while. They endured a reign of terror, coupled with Pharaoh's idolatrous faith. At first, Pharaoh killed their sons but spared their women. When this type of brutal tyranny abated, it only gave way to a life of humiliation and subjugation. A long life in these conditions was certain to corrupt their nature, leading them to wrong concepts and filling them with cowardice and a cruel bitterness. Equipped with the fine insight granted by God to His best servants, `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, recognized the interactions of human nature when he gave his instructions to those whom he appointed as governors of various provinces, urging them to take good care of their subjects, and saying: "Do not thrash them, because that would humiliate them." He realized that a physical beating is likely to humiliate people. His Islamic faith wanted him to make sure that people living under an Islamic government should have their integrity preserved. They must never be beaten by rulers, because they are not slaves to be subjugated by their rulers. They are servants of God only and their integrity is clearly evident when they deal with anyone else.

The Children of Israel were beaten and thrashed under Pharaoh's rule until they became too humble and submissive. Indeed, physical beating was the mildest type of humiliation they suffered in peaceful times. The Egyptians were also beaten and thrashed until they also became submissive and Pharaoh could make fools of them. They were beaten under Pharaoh's tyranny as also under Roman tyranny. It was under Islam that they were saved from all this humiliation, because Islam granted them their freedom and made them serve only the Lord of all mankind. During `Amr ibn al- `Ās's reign, who liberated Egypt and brought it under the rule of Islam, his own son thrashed a young Coptic Egyptian who probably still bore the marks of flogging by the agents of the Byzantine authority. The Copt's father was furious because his son had suffered one lash from the whip of the governor's son. He travelled for a month on camel's back to put his complaint to `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the Caliph, who was the overall ruler of the Muslim state. Yet only a few years earlier the father endured endless flogging under the Byzantines.

This transformation was a miracle achieved by Islam when it reawakened the feeling of integrity in the hearts of the Egyptian Copts and all those who came under Islamic rule wherever they were. Even those who did not come to accept Islam regained their integrity. This was indeed a miracle, reclaiming those hearts and souls after they had endured centuries of humiliation and submissiveness. Their rediscovered integrity could only have been given back to them by Islam.

It is within this reclamation process of the hearts and minds of the Children of Israel that we will witness sin in this forthcoming passage of the *sūrah.* It represents Moses's task in this new episode, after he has crossed the sea with the Children of Israel, leaving Egypt behind them. In the Qur'ānic account we will see how the Israelites had to cope with the responsibilities of freedom and the divine message after having endured submissiveness and ignorance for a very long time. We will *see* them dealing with Moses with all the deviousness, ignorance and transgression that had left their marks on their nature. We will also see how Moses (peace be upon him) faced up to this mammoth task, and the troubles he had to endure as he tried to reform their natures.

These troubles are encountered by every advocate of the divine message when he tries to reform people that have for long lived under tyranny and acquired a submissive nature. The situation is even worse if those people have known the divine faith but have forgotten it following years of abandonment. In such a situation, the message of the divine faith appears lifeless to such people. Hence, the advocate of divine faith needs to double his efforts and his patience. He needs an inexhaustible wealth of patience in order to cope with such people's deviousness, transgression, rigid nature and petty concerns. He also needs to be able to cope with sudden setbacks that will jolt him at every stage as he finds those people trying time and again to relapse into ignorance.

This is perhaps one reason why the Qur'ān frequently relates to the Muslim community the history of the Children of Israel in such detail. Their history and experience are of benefit to the advocates of the divine faith in every generation.

Trampling Over God's Favours

> *We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said [the Children of Israel]: "Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have." He replied: "You are indeed an ignorant people. As for these people: their method will inevitably lead to destruction, and worthless is all that they have been doing. "[And] he said: `Am I to seek for you a deity other than God, although He has favoured you above all other people?" We have indeed saved you from Pharaoh's people, who oppressed you cruelly: they slew your sons and spared your women. Surely that was an awesome trial from your Lord.*

(Verses 138-141)

This picture of the Children of Israel after having crossed the sea is the seventh scene in this story. We clearly see here the deviant, incorrigible nature of those people encumbered by their long history. It has not been long since they were subjected to cruel oppression under the paganism of Pharaoh and his people. A short while earlier, they were saved from that oppression at the hands of their Prophet and leader, Moses, in the name of God, the only Lord in the universe, who destroyed their enemy and parted the sea for them to cross. Yet hardly had they crossed the sea than they came upon pagan people, dedicated to the worship of idols. At that moment, they asked Moses, the Prophet sent by the Lord of the universe preaching self-surrender to the One God, to set up for them a deity to worship. *"We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said [the Children of Israel]: 'Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have.'"* (Verse 138)

Diseases of the soul are contagious just like diseases of the body, yet the infection cannot be passed on except to souls that are ready to receive it. As accurately and faithfully portrayed in the Qur'ān, the nature of the Children of Israel is weak, totally lacking in resolve. It hardly begins to follow proper guidance when it relapses into deviation. Scarcely does it begin to elevate itself before it tumbles again. When it has gone only a short distance along the straight path, it suffers a sudden setback. All this is accompanied by a rigid and hardened attitude that will not abide by the dictates of the truth. Here we see their nature brought out in full relief. Hardly had they come across people engaged in worshipping deities than they began to overlook what they had been taught over a period extending more than twenty years since Moses first called on them to believe in God's oneness. Some reports mention that Moses spent twenty-three years in Egypt from the day when he first put his message to Pharaoh and his people to the day when he crossed the sea with the Children of Israel. They even forgot the miracle that had only a short while ago saved them from Pharaoh and drowned him and his army. Those who were with Pharaoh subjugated and oppressed the Children of Israel in the name of idolatry. Pharaoh's aides tried to provoke him so that he would punish Moses and his followers. They said to him: *"Will you allow Moses and his people to spread corruption in the land and to forsake you and your gods?"* (Verse 127) Yet those very Children of Israel forgot all this and made their singular request of Moses, the messenger sent by the Lord of the universe, to set up a god for them! Had they themselves made such gods, the matter would appear less strange than asking Moses to provide them with one. But such is the nature of the Israelites.

Motivated by his faith in God, the Lord of the universe, Moses was very angry. He could not understand how his people could relapse into paganism. He said to them:

"You are indeed an ignorant people." (Verse 138) He did not specify what they were ignorant of, because he wanted this description to apply in its fullest sense. In the Arabic original, the term "ignorant" is used in two senses, contrasting with knowledge and wisdom. Such a request betrays a total lack of both. This tells us that deviation from the faith based on God's oneness into paganism can only happen to those who are both ignorant and stupid. Knowledge and wisdom will inevitably lead to believing in God's oneness. No true knowledge or true wisdom can lead anywhere else. When science and reason look at this universe and the laws that operate in it they understand that all these laws point to the single Creator who has set everything in motion. These laws do not reflect only God's careful planning, but also the unity, the complementarity and coherence between these laws and the effects of their operation. All this would readily appear to anyone who reflects properly on the universe and what takes place in it. No one will turn a blind eye to all that except ignorant and stupid people, although they may claim to have knowledge, as they often do.

Moses explains to his people what may result out of their request, pointing to the terrible end that awaits those whom they wanted to imitate, making gods similar to theirs: *"As for these people: their method will inevitably lead to destruction, and worthless is all that they have been doing."* (Verse 139)

Their idolatry, and the type of life they lead on the basis of such beliefs are in vain. The large army of functionaries and clerics, and the rulers who derive their authority from such a chaotic mess and all the erroneous concepts and corrupted life that result from deviating away from belief in one God are of no avail. They will all end in ruin.

But Moses's anger at his people's attitude takes an even stronger expression and in a higher pitch that also wonders at how they could so quickly forget God's grace when its manifestations are still there: *"Am I to seek for you a deity other than God, although He has favoured you above all other people?"* (Verse 140)

That they were favoured above all mankind in their own time was reflected in the fact that they were chosen to be the bearers of the divine message of God's oneness. This is the greatest favour of all. They were also chosen to be the heirs to inherit the blessed land, which was at that time in pagan hands. How could they, after all this, request their Prophet to seek for them a deity other than God, when they were at that very moment enjoying God's grace? As typical of the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* follows the argument made by Moses with an address by God Himself: *"We have indeed saved you from Pharaoh's people, who oppressed you cruelly: they slew your sons and spared your women. Surely that was an awesome trial from your Lord."* (Verse 141) Such a direct link between the two speeches is a gesture of sublime honour to those prophets and advocates of the divine message.

This favour given to the Children of Israel was still present in their minds at that time. It should have been enough to remind them of their duty to be grateful to God for His blessings. God draws their attention to the lessons that they should have learnt from their suffering and trials, followed by their salvation. It was a trial of affliction followed by a trial of peace and security: *"Surely that was an awesome trial from your Lord."* (Verse 141) None of this happened aimlessly. It was all a lesson which should equip them for a great test. If the test fails to set their minds and hearts on the right course and they incur, as a result of that failure, God's punishment, then they know that the punishment is well deserved.

An Appointment with the Supreme Lord

Now we move on to witness the eighth scene in the story when Moses is preparing himself for a meeting with his great Lord in this life. He gives specific instructions to his brother, the Prophet Aaron, before he leaves for that meeting: *"We appointed for Moses thirty nights, to which We added ten, whereby the term of forty nights set by His Lord was complete. Moses said to his brother Aaron: `Take my place among my people and act righteously. Do not follow the path of those who spread corruption.'"* (Verse 142)

The first stage of the mission assigned to Moses had been completed. He had saved the Children of Israel from a life of affliction, humiliation and subjugation by Pharaoh and his people. He crossed over with them from the land of tyranny and humiliation into the open desert, on the way to the Holy Land. They, however, were not yet prepared to undertake the great task awaiting them, which was the implementation of God's law on earth. We have seen how they wanted to revert to paganism once they saw a group of people dedicated to the worship of their idols. The faith preached by Moses, based on God's absolute oneness, was shaken in their hearts after only a short while. It was necessary for those people to have a detailed message to prepare them to shoulder their forthcoming responsibilities. It was to give Moses that detailed message that God appointed those nights for him. The appointment would prepare Moses himself for the great meeting ahead.

The period of preparation was thirty nights, to which ten more were added in order to complete forty nights during which Moses would be completely free from all preoccupations of this world in order to concentrate on dedicating himself to God alone. Thus, his soul would achieve purification and refinement, and his resolve would be strengthened to fulfil the great trust which was about to be given to him.

Just before leaving for his period of seclusion and dedication, Moses gave his instructions to the man who was to deputize for him: *"Moses said to his brother Aaron: 'Take my place among my people and act righteously. Do not follow the path of those who*

spread corruption.'" (Verse 142) Moses was aware that his brother, Aaron, was also a Prophet sent alongside him by his Lord. But a believer always gives good counsel to other believers. This is the right and duty of Muslims. Moses was aware of the heavy burden Aaron was about to shoulder, and of the nature of the Children of Israel. Aaron welcomed the good advice given him by his brother. Advice is felt to be a burden only by wicked people who want to break loose, or by arrogant people who feel that to take advice is beneath them. It is a small man who refuses to take a supporting hand in order to show that he can cope on his own.

As regards the thirty nights and the addition of ten more, Ibn Kathīr states in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "God mentions in His book that He appointed thirty nights for Moses. Commentators say that Moses (peace be upon him) fasted during these days and ate practically nothing. When the term was over, Moses took the skin of a tree and rubbed his teeth with it. God commanded him then to continue for ten more days."

A Request to See the Lord

Then we come to the ninth scene which is unique. In this scene we find that God has chosen His Prophet Moses [peace be upon him] to talk to him directly, without any intermediary. It is a scene where an insignificant mortal makes contact with the everlasting existence, without any catalyst or intermediary. A human being is thus able to receive instructions directly from God, the eternal, when that human being is still on earth. As for us, we do not know how this took place. We do not know how God spoke to His servant Moses, nor do we know with what sense or organ Moses received God's commandments. To try to describe this for certain is impossible for us, human beings, because we are limited by our own experience and confined within our own practical world.[§] What we can do is to utilize that aspect of our constitution which results from the fact that God has breathed of His soul into man in order to look up to that great horizon. When we do this, we must not ruin that experience by asking how it all took place, trying to limit it to our own experience.

> *When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: "My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You." Said [God]: "You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me." When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself he said: "Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You." He said: "Moses, I have chosen you of all mankind and favoured you by entrusting My*

[§] For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

> *messages to you and by My speaking to you. Take then what I have given you and be thankful." We wrote for him on the tablets all manner of admonition, clearly spelling out everything, and (said to him): "Implement them with strength and determination, and bid your people to observe what is best in them. I shall show you the abode of the transgressors. I will turn away from My revelations those who, without any right, behave arrogantly on earth: for, though they may see every sign, they do not believe in it. If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path; because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them. Those who deny Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the Hereafter will see all their works collapse. Are they to be rewarded for anything other than what they have done?'" (Verses 143-147)*

We need to concentrate all our mental ability into visualizing this great and unique scene in order to begin to understand what Moses must have felt: *"When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.'"* (Verse 143) In that awesome scene when Moses was receiving his Lord's commandments, his soul was looking up to something greater, eager to reach out to what is most desirable. He forgets himself and his nature, and requests what no one can have or can tolerate while on earth. He requests to see the Lord Himself, prompted by his hope, genuine love and keenness to have the greatest prize of all. But he is brought back to reality by a decisive word: *"Said [God]: 'You shall not see Me.'"* (Verse 143)

But then the great Lord is kind to him, so He explains to him why he cannot see Him. His constitution cannot tolerate it: *"But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me."* (Verse 143) A mountain is certainly much firmer and less affected by outside powers than a human being. But what happened? *"When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down."* (Verse 143) How did God reveal His glory to the mountain? We simply cannot describe or understand this. We can only have a feeling of it when we use that secret aspect of our constitution which holds a bond between us and God, when our souls are purified, with all filth purged away, and we concentrate all our thinking and understanding on God and His power. Simple words cannot express it at all. Therefore, we will not try to describe with words how God revealed His glory to the mountain. We prefer to discount all the reports that try to explain it, because none of them is authentically attributed to the Prophet himself, while the Qur'ān has said nothing on it.

"When the Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down." (Verse 143) The whole mountain was thus levelled down with no obtrusions on the surface of the earth. Moses was overawed and *"Moses fell down senseless."* (Verse 143) He was completely unconscious.

"When he came to himself" realizing the limits of his ability, and recognizing that he overstepped his limits when he made his request, *"he said: 'Limitless You are in Your glory.'"* He thus realized that God is too glorious to be seen by the naked human eye. *"To You I turn in repentance,"* for having overstepped my limit in making such a request. *"I am the first to truly believe in You."* (Verse 143) God's messengers are always the first to believe in the greatness of their Lord and in His revelations. God commands them to declare that they are the first to believe. The Qur'ān reports in several instances that they comply and make that declaration.

Once more God's grace was bestowed on Moses in abundance. He soon received the happy news of his being chosen to carry God's message to his people after they had been saved. His message to Pharaoh and his people focused on that deliverance: *"He said: Moses, I have chosen you of all mankind and favoured you by entrusting My messages to you and by My speaking to you. Take then what I have given you and be thankful."* (Verse 144)

We understand from this statement that Moses was favoured over all his contemporaries. Messengers were sent before Moses and other messengers were sent after his time. It is, then, a favour over a whole generation of mankind. What was unique to Moses alone was the fact that God spoke to him directly. Moses was also commanded by God to take what he was given and to be grateful for being favoured and for having been given God's message. Thus he was instructed how to react to God's favour. All messengers [peace by upon them] provide guidance to people and present them with a good example. Hence, all people should accept whatever is given to them by God and show their gratitude for it so that they can receive more blessings and guard against arrogance and conceit, and maintain a good relationship with God.

A Serious Approach to Divine Law

The *sūrah* then tells us how Moses was given the message and its contents: *"We wrote for him on the tablets all manner of admonition, clearly spelling out everything."* (Verse 145) Reports and commentators give different accounts of these tablets. Some of them give very detailed descriptions which we imagine to have been taken from Jewish sources. Such accounts have found their way into commentaries on the Qur'ān. None of these details is authentically reported to have been given by God's Messenger (peace be upon him). Therefore, we confine ourselves to the true Qur'ānic statement, not going an inch beyond it. Those descriptions neither add to, nor detract anything from the nature of those tablets. What were these tablets and how they were written are matters that do not concern us, since no authentic report has provided us with any details. What is important is the contents of those tablets. They

included all aspects that were of the essence of the divine message, its aim of providing a true concept of God and details of His law, and the instructions needed to reform the Israelite community whose nature had been corrupted by enduring tyranny and humiliation for a long time.

"Implement them with strength and determination, and bid your people to observe what is best in them." (Verse 145) This is a divine order to Moses (peace be upon him) to take those tablets and implement their contents with strength and determination. Moreover, he was to bid his people to fulfil their tough obligations because these were the best for them and the most certain to bring about a great transformation in their situation. The way this order is given suggests that this was the proper approach to reform the nature of the Israelites. They needed to show seriousness and determination to fulfil their obligations outlined to them in God's message. But the order given to Moses also suggests that this is the approach to be followed by every community towards divine faith.

Faith is a matter of great importance in God's view, and in as far as this universe is concerned and how God conducts its affairs by His will. It is also a matter of great importance in human history, man's life on earth, and in the hereafter as well. The code of living detailed by the divine faith is based on the basic concept of God's oneness, the only Lord in the universe, to whom all mankind are servants. It thus transforms human life in general, giving it a direction that is totally different from all courses chartered by ignorance that assign lordship in the universe to beings other than God.

What is viewed so seriously by God and enjoys such importance in the universe, human life and history must be taken seriously and cannot but have a strong effect on people. It simply cannot be trifled with or taken lightly. It is a serious matter in itself, and it demands serious action. But such seriousness cannot be tolerated by people who, by their nature, take everything very lightly. This does not mean any rigidity, complexity or extremism. None of these have anything to do with divine faith. It simply means that the approach must be serious and the implementation must be carried out with strength and determination.

The nature of the Children of Israel in particular required such a serious instruction after it had been corrupted by a long period of humiliation in Egypt. It is noted that all commandments given to the Children of Israel were coupled with added emphasis in order to train them to be serious, straightforward and determined. This applies to any community that may have suffered a long period of subjugation, humiliation and tyranny. After such a period, it is only natural that people should become devious in the way they approach all matters, because their priority has been to avoid trouble and do only that which is easy. We can see this very clearly in many contemporary communities which try to evade faith in order

not to fulfil its obligations. They simply join the crowd, because being one of a crowd does not cost much.

In return for carrying out God's orders, God promises Moses and his people to establish them in the land and to cause them to inherit the land which was then in the hands of a transgressor community: *"I shall show you the abode of the transgressors."* (Verse 145)

Most probably this is a reference to the Holy Land which was at the time in the hands of a pagan community. Thus, this was happy news given to the Israelites that they were certain to take over the Holy Land. It is true that the Children of Israel did not enter the Holy Land in Moses's lifetime, but that was because their reformation was as yet incomplete, and their nature not yet straightened. We should remember that they stood at its borders, saying to their Messenger: *"Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter."* (5: 22) When two believers who truly feared God urged them to force their way into the Holy Land, they spoke to Moses with all the rudeness only cowards can command, just like a mule that kicks its driver, saying: *"We will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (5: 24) This describes their cowardly nature which cannot stand up to any serious obligation. The faith and the law given to the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and the divine commandment that he should take it seriously and implement it with strength and determination aimed at transforming that nature. Hence, he was also ordered to bid his people to stand up to the difficulties involved in implementing God's law.

A Deliberately Wrong Choice

At the end of this scene we have a clear statement of what will eventually happen to those who defy every right and behave arrogantly, turning away deliberately from every sign God has given and every directive He has issued. The statement plainly and accurately describes the nature of this type of people, using all the artistic touches of the Qur'ānic style.

> *I will turn away from My revelations those who, without any right, behave arrogantly on earth: for, though they may see every sign, they do not believe in it. If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path; because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them. Those who deny Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the Hereafter will see all their works collapse. Are they to be rewarded for anything other than what they have done? (Verses 146-147)*

God declares that it is His will to turn such people away from His revelations so that they cannot respond to them. Thus, they will not benefit by His signs in the open book of the universe, or by His revelations that He has sent down to His messengers. This is the result of their own action, because it is they who have disbelieved in God's revelations and paid no heed to them.

Such people are brought vividly before our own eyes so that we can see through the Qur'ānic words how they move about and how they smile, for they *"without any right, behave arrogantly on earth."* (Verse 146) Needless to say, no one can be rightfully arrogant and proud. Indeed, pride is an attribute that belongs to God alone, and He shares it with no other partner. Whenever a human being makes pride the mark of his behaviour, he does so without any right. The worst type of pride is to claim lordship over other people, enacting legislation that is at variance with God's law, and forcing people to submit to such false legislation. It is from this basic aspect of pride that all arrogant behaviour emanates. All other aspects are secondary to it: *"If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path."* (Verse 146)

This is then an erring nature that moves away from the path of righteousness whenever it sees it, and prefers the path of error at every opportunity. It seems to have a mechanism that prompts it in such a fashion. This is the main characteristic of such arrogant people whom God has willed to punish for rejecting His signs. Thus, He turns them away from these signs forever. We meet such people and recognize them by their features and characteristics. It is as if they turn away from righteousness and choose error without effort or contemplation. They are blind to the right indicators, always receptive of what leads to error. At the same time, they are turned away from God's signs and revelations, so that they will never respond to them.

Limitless is God in His Glory. Through quick touches and simple Qur'ānic expressions, these people appear in front of us so vividly that we almost declare: yes we know them. In other words, the description perfectly fits someone we know by name.

The punishment that ensures ruin in this life as well as in the life to come is indeed the just and fitting punishment for this type of person. It is the type who rejects God's revelations and turns away from them, behaving arrogantly on earth and moving away from the path of righteousness whenever they see it, rushing always to follow the path of error. It is their own action that merits such punishment and leads them to ruin: *"Because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them."* (Verse 146)

"Those who deny Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter will see all their works collapse. Are they to be rewarded for anything other than what they have done?" (Verse 147) The Qur'ānic statement uses a special term for the "collapse" of those people's works. It is derived from what happens to a she-camel which eats poisonous plants causing her belly to swell before she dies. This is an apt description which fits the falsehood reiterated by those who deny God's revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter. They give themselves airs, trying to impress people of their assumed greatness. Their falsehood leads them to ruin just like the she-camel which eats poisonous plants. But how will the works and actions of those rejecters collapse?

From the point of view of faith, we believe that God's warnings will certainly come true, regardless of any contrary appearances. Whoever denies God's revelations and the certainty that all people will be gathered to Him in the hereafter will have all his works ruined. In practice, we find that this is truly the case in human life. Those who deny the signs God has placed all over the universe or deny the revelations He has vouchsafed to His Messenger, and consequently deny the certainty of meeting God on the Day of Judgement, have gone astray. They continuously move away from the nature of the universe, because the universe submits to God's law. They have no link with the universe and have no motivation to link themselves with the action that fulfils the purpose of universal existence. Hence, every action that such people perpetrate will certainly collapse, even though it may appear to be flourishing. This is because such action is not linked to the motives that are deeply rooted in the very basis of the universe or its goal. It is just like a little stream that gets cut off from the main spring. It will eventually dry out.

Those who see no close relationship between the values of faith and the movement of human history, and those who overlook God's will which defines the destiny of everyone that denies such values are indeed the ones who continue to pay no heed to God's signs and revelations. It is to those that God's declaration applies. They are the ones whom God will turn away from His revelations and leave them to their inevitable destiny.

Those who admire the apparent success achieved by some unbelievers, unaware that it is only a short term success, are like those who admire the swollen belly of a she-camel that has eaten poisonous plants, thinking it to be indicative of good health, unaware that its death is so close. Past nations provide very clear examples. Those who have succeeded them should learn the lessons to be derived from their experience and watch how God's law never fails. God's will is certain to be done.

Miserable Return to Old Ways

When Moses was on this unique trip, attending with all his faculties to his meeting with his Lord**,** something else was happening with his people. He was fully engaged with a mission that our minds can only contemplate but we cannot visualize; a mission our thoughts cannot conceive, but to which our spirits warm. But at that very same time, his people were relapsing into paganism, and taking to themselves a lifeless calf that issues a lowing sound, making of it a deity for worship in place of God. There is, then, a wide gulf between the ninth and tenth scenes of the story. The former took us into a sublime horizon in which we look up to the resplendent glory of God, while the latter brings us to a low depth of deviation, superstition and disbelief:

> *In his absence, the people of Moses took to the worship of the effigy of a calf made of their ornaments, which gave a lowing sound. Did they not see that it could neither speak to them nor give them any guidance? Yet they took to worshipping it, for they were evildoers. When they were later afflicted with remorse, having realized that they had gone astray, they said: 'if our Lord does not have mercy on us and forgive us, we shall certainly be losers." (Verses 148-149)*

That was typical of the nature of the Israelites who could hardly move one step along the straight path before they deviated. They were hardly able to elevate themselves, in their beliefs and concepts, above what is physical and tangible. Even a short lull in exhortation and reminders could see them relapsing into disbelief.

We saw earlier how they tried to persuade their Prophet to set up a deity for them to worship. They did so only because they saw pagan people worshipping idols. Their Prophet rebuked them severely for entertaining such thoughts. But when they were left to themselves and saw a mere body of a calf of gold made by the Sämirī in a way that allowed the calf to make a lowing sound, they were so excited and addressed their worship to it. The Sarnia said to them: "This is your and Moses's God, whom Moses has gone to meet, but has forgotten his appointment." Perhaps this was said because of the ten extra nights that were added to the period appointed for Moses, of which his people were not aware. When Moses did not return after the thirty original nights, the Sarnia said to his people: "Moses has forgotten his appointment with his God, so now his God is here. This is it." The strange thing is that those people forgot all the teachings of their Prophet who had repeatedly told them that they must only worship their Lord, the Lord of the universe, who cannot be seen by the naked human eye. They did not even reflect on the nature of that calf which was shaped and fashioned by a man among them. They belonged to a disgraceful type of people. The Qur'ān wonders at such people as they are presented to the unbelievers in Makkah who worshipped idols and statues.

"Did they not see that it could neither speak to them nor give them any guidance? Yet they

took to worshipping it, for they were evildoers." (Verse 148) Who is a worse evildoer than one who worships something made by a human hand, when it is God who has created human beings and all that they do?

Aaron, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was still among them, but he was unable to stop them from sinking into this stupid idiocy. There were also a few wise people, but these could not restrain the masses who scrambled to touch the golden calf, particularly because it was made of gold, the true idol of the Israelites.

Eventually, the farce died down, the truth was clear to all, and it was plain to everyone how far into stupid error they had sunk. Error gave way to remorse: *"When they were later afflicted with remorse, having realized that they had gone astray, they said: 'If our Lord does not have mercy on us and forgive us, we shall certainly be losers.'"* (Verse 149)

The original Arabic statement gives an impression that they were at a total loss, unable to determine how to get out of the trouble in which they had landed themselves. They realized that this relapse could not be corrected, because it had actually taken place. Hence, their admission: *"If our Lord does not have mercy on us and forgive us, we shall certainly be losers."* (Verse 149) This statement suggests that they had still retained some willingness to follow the right guidance. Their hearts had not yet hardened to the extent of their being harder than stones, as God describes them in the Qur'ān (2: 74). When they recognized their error, they were afflicted with remorse and realized that they could only be saved by God's mercy.

A Sad Return for Moses

All this took place when Moses was with his Lord, addressing his appeal to Him. He was unaware of what his people had done in his absence. At this point, scene eleven is raised before our eyes: *"When Moses returned to his people, full of wrath and sorrow, he said: 'What an evil thing you have done in my absence! Have you tried to hurry up your Lord's command?' He put down the tablets and, seizing his brother by the head, he pulled him to himself. Cried Aaron, 'Son of my mother, the people felt I was weak and they almost killed me. Do not let our enemies rejoice over my affliction, and do not count me among the evil-doing folk.' Said [Moses]: 'My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us to Your grace: for You are indeed the most merciful of those who are merciful.'" (Verses (Verses* 150-151)

We see how terribly angry Moses was. Anger can be felt in both what he said and did, particularly seizing his brother by the head and dragging him: *"'What an evil thing you have done in my absence! Have you tried to hurry up your Lord's command?' Seizing his brother by the head, he pulled him to himself"* (Verse 150)

Yet it was only right that Moses should feel very angry. He had received a terrible shock and a painful surprise. Hence he exclaimed: *"What an evil thing you have done in*

my absence!" (Verse 150) I left you following right guidance, and you relapsed into error. Before I left, you were worshipping God alone, and while I was away you took to the worship of a mere lifeless calf that gave a lowing sound. *"Have you tried to hurry up your Lord's command?"* (Verse 150) This could mean that they were trying to hurry God's judgements and punishment, or it could mean that they tried to hasten his appointment.

"He put down the tablets and, seizing his brother by the head, he pulled him to himself" (Verse 150) This is a very strong reaction. Those tablets contained the law God had given him. Moses would not put those tablets down except in a state of extreme anger which caused him to lose control of himself. Again, dragging his brother by the head is indicative of the same reaction, because Aaron was a noble Prophet, full of faith and piety.

Aaron appeals to the bond of brotherhood that he had with Moses, in order to cool his temper. He explained his attitude and that he spared no effort in trying to give good counsel to his people: *"Cried Aaron, 'Son of my mother, the people felt I was weak and they almost killed me.'"* (Verse 150)

This statement gives us an impression of how the Israelites scrambled to worship the golden calf. They almost killed Aaron when he tried to restrain them. *"Son of my mother!"* That address is an appeal to a bond of compassion. *"The people felt I was weak and they almost killed me."* (Verse 150) That is a vivid description of his own attitude. *"Do not let our enemies rejoice over my affliction."* (Verse 150) Again, Aaron is appealing to a bond that should ensure mutual support between the two brothers, because their enemies would gloat over his affliction.

"And do not count me among the evil-doing folk." (Verse 150) I did not share in their error or evil deeds. I dissociated myself from their action.

At this point, Moses begins to cool down, because his brother did not meet anger with anger. He simply explained himself and his attitude. Therefore, Moses turns to his Lord and seeks forgiveness for himself and his brother from the most merciful. *"Said [Moses]: 'My Lord, forgive me and my brother, and admit us to Your grace: for You are indeed the most merciful of those who are merciful...'"* (Verse 151)

A Fitting Judgement

At this point, the final judgement is passed by the One who has the authority to give such a judgement. God's words follow directly on what the Qur'ān relates of the words in the familiar Qur'ānic fashion: *"Those who took to worshipping the calf have surely incurred their Lord's wrath, and disgrace [will be their lot] in this life. Thus do We reward those who invent falsehood. But those who do evil deeds and later repent and truly*

believe will surely, after such repentance, find your Lord to be much-forgiving, most merciful." (Verses 152-153)

This is a judgement and a promise. The people who worshipped the calf were certain to incur God's anger and were certain to be at the receiving end of disgrace in this life. At the same time, God's rule remains valid: those who repent after having misbehaved are certain to receive God's forgiveness and His mercy. This means that God is fully aware that those who worshipped the calf would never turn back to God in sincere repentance. They were sure to do enough to make that permanent rule inapplicable to them. History shows that this was the case. The Children of Israel continued to do one sinful act after another, and God continued to forgive them time after time, until eventually they incurred God's permanent rejection: "*Thus do We reward those who invent falsehood."* (Verse 152) This applies to all the inventors of falsehood. Whenever the crime is repeated, time after time, whether by the Children of Israel or any other people, then its punishment is certain to apply.

God's promise will certainly come true. He has condemned those who took to worshipping the calf to be subject to His anger and to be disgraced. The last part of His condemnation was that He would be sending them, time after time, until the Day of Judgement, people who would inflict on them great suffering. It may happen that in a certain period of history they appear to exercise so much power and influence which enables them to behave arrogantly towards the Gentiles. They may appear to have enormous wealth which gives them so much power. They may be able to control the world's media; and they may even have a decisive say in bringing in governments, in different countries, that do their bidding. We may see all this and a great deal more, but this does not contradict God's warning to them or His condemnation. All these actions will work against them, as people will nurture their hatred which will eventually destroy them.

They can overcome the people in Palestine, for example, because those people have abandoned their faith and are no longer Muslims. They do not rally under the banner of the Islamic faith, but instead they hoist a nationalist or racist banner. Their efforts end in failure and Israel is able to overcome them. But this state of affairs will not last forever. These Arab people have been in a state of total unawareness of the only method, weapon and banner which saw them victorious for a thousand years, and which is certain to make them victorious again. When they abandon them, they are sure to be defeated. Such lack of awareness comes as a result of the poison injected in the Muslim community by Zionist and Christian imperialist forces, which try to perpetuate such a state of affairs through the regimes they establish in the Muslim world. But all this will not last. There will be a re-awakening of the Muslim community. Future Muslim generations will equip themselves with the same weapons as their forefathers. Who knows, but humanity will one day wake up to

recognize the tyranny of the Zionist Jews. They will then act to make God's warnings come true and return the Zionist Jews to the state of humiliation and disgrace to which God has condemned them. If humanity will not wake up, then certainly future Muslim generations will. We are absolutely certain of this.

Those two verses serve as a pause in order to comment on the ultimate destiny of those who worshipped the calf inventing falsehood against God. They come in the middle of this scene, but then the *sūrah picks* it up again: "*Then when his wrath had subsided, Moses took up the tablets, upon which was inscribed a text of guidance and grace to those who stood in awe of their Lord.*" (Verse 154)

The Qur'ānic style personifies anger as if it is a living thing that exercises control over Moses, dictating his actions. But when it subsides and its promptings die down, Moses regains his self-control. He picks up the tablets, which, as we are told again, contain the guidance and mercy for those who fear God and open their hearts to receive His guidance and mercy. Indeed, the very provision of guidance is an act of grace. No one is more miserable than a deviant person who cannot see the light, or a soul that is lost without faith and without guidance. It is the fear of God that opens hearts to receive guidance and prepares them to respond properly. It is God, the Creator of hearts, who states this fact. Who knows these hearts better than the Lord who created them?

The Seventy Chosen Israelites

The *sūrah* then begins a new scene, in which we see Moses selecting seventy men from among his people: "*Moses chose out of his people seventy men to come at a time set by Us. Then, when they were seized by violent trembling, he said: 'My Lord, had it been Your will, You could have destroyed them, and myself too, long ago. Would You destroy us because of what the weak-minded among us have done? This is only a trial You have ordained, whereby You allow to go astray whom You will, and You guide aright whom You will. You alone are our guardian: grant us, then, forgiveness and bestow mercy on us. You are the best of all those who do forgive. Ordain for us what is good, both in this world and in the lift to come. To You alone we turn. [God] answered. I afflict anyone I wish with My torment while My grace encompasses all things; so I will confer it on those who steer away from evil, and spend in charity, and who believe in Our signs — those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel that are with them. He commands them to do what is right and forbids them to do what is wrong, and makes lawful to them the good things of life and forbids them all that is foul. He lifts from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them. Those, therefore, who believe in him, honour and support him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him shall indeed be successful.'*" (*Ver*ses 155-157)

Reports differ as to the reason for this appointment. It may have been set so that they would declare their repentance and pray to God to forgive the Children of Israel after they had sunk back into error and disbelief. In the second *sūrah,* The Cow, we learn that the penance imposed on the Israelites was that they should kill themselves, which means that the good ones among them should kill those who were disobedient. They did just that until God told them to stop and accepted their penance. Those seventy men were the best among them. The way the choice is expressed in Arabic makes them stand out from the whole community of Israelites.

Nevertheless, what happened to this choice group? They were seized by a violent trembling and dropped unconscious. The reason for this, as mentioned in another *sūrah,* was that they asked Moses to show them God so that they would believe him and accept the law He has given them in the tablets. This is typical of the nature of the Children of Israel. It applies to all of them, whether good or bad, in different measures. The most singular thing is that they should make such a request when they were supposed to declare their repentance and seek God's forgiveness.

Moses, on the other hand, turned to his Lord imploring Him to bestow His forgiveness and mercy, declaring his total submission to Him: "*When they were seized by violent trembling, he said: 'My Lord, had it been Your will, You could have destroyed them, and myself too, long ago.'*" (Verse 155) That is the mark of total submission to God's power. Moses makes sure to declare his own submission as he addresses his supplication to God to forgive his people, end their test and to spare them from destruction because of the deed perpetrated by some fools among them: "*Would You destroy us because of what the weak- minded among us have done?"* (Verse 155) Moses puts his appeal in a questioning form to emphasize his request that God does not destroy them. It is as if he is saying: my Lord, Your grace makes it absolutely unlikely that You should destroy us on account of what some fools among us have done. "*This is only a trial You have ordained, whereby You allow to go astray whom You will, and You guide aright whom You will."* (Verse 155)

Thus Moses declares his understanding of what was taking place, that it was all a trial. In every trial, God guides those who understand its nature and recognize it as a test. He also lets those who ignore it to go deeper into error. Moses reiterates his recognition as a prelude to an appeal to God for His help to enable him and his people to pass the trial successfully: "*You alone are our guardian."* (Verse 155) Give us your help so that we pass the test, and earn Your forgiveness and Your grace: "*Grant us, then, forgiveness and bestow mercy on us. You are the best of all those who do forgive."* (Verse 155)

"*Ordain for us what is good, both in this world and in the life to come. To You alone we turn."* (Verse 156) We are returning to You in repentance. We seek Your protection and support.

We see here how the appeal for forgiveness and mercy by Moses was preceded by a declaration of full submission to God and recognition of the purpose of his trial. It is concluded with a declaration of a return to God to seek His protection. Thus, it serves as an example for supplication to be followed by every good servant of God, the glorious, the beneficent.

This is followed by God's reply: *"God answered: 'I afflict anyone I wish with My torment while My grace encompasses all things.'"* (Verse 156) This is a statement of God's free will which chooses a rule and implements it as a matter of free choice. It is true that the rule is always enforced in accordance with the truth and justice, but this is also a matter of choice. Justice is an attribute of God which is seen in every aspect of the working of His will, because this is His choice. His punishment is visited only on those who deserve it, as a matter of will. His mercy encompasses all, but it is given only to those who deserve it; again as a matter of choice. He does not will to punish or show mercy to anyone in a haphazard manner. Far be it from God to do so.

The Recipients of God's Mercy

Having thus informed His Prophet, Moses, of this rule, God then tells him something about the future and the community which will advocate the final version of His message and who will earn His mercy that encompasses everything. The expression here shows that God's grace and mercy is far greater than the whole universe whose dimensions are impossible for human beings to visualize. Great indeed is the mercy whose measure is only known to God Himself.

> *My grace encompasses all things; so I will confer it on those who steer away from evil, and spend in charity, and who believe in Our signs – those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel that are with them. He commands them to do what is right and forbids them to do what is wrong, and makes lawful to them the good things of life and forbids them all that is foul. He lifts from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them. Those, therefore, who believe in him, honour and support him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him shall indeed be successful. (Verses 156-157)*

This is an extremely important piece of news confirming that the Children of Israel had been given, most emphatically, confirmed information of the advent of the unlettered Prophet. This was given them by their Prophets Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them both) a long time ago. Both informed them of his mission, description, the method his message would follow and the distinctive features of his faith. He is `the unlettered Prophet' who enjoins people to do what is good and forbids them what is evil. He will also lift off the shoulders of those among the Children of Israel

who will believe in him the burdens and shackles God knew would be imposed on them because of their disobedience. They will continue to apply to them until the unlettered Prophet lifts them from those who believe in him. His followers fear their Lord, steer away from evil, pay zakāt and believe in God's signs. The Children of Israel have also received the most certain news that those who believe in this unlettered Prophet, honour and support him and follow the light that has been sent down with him *"shall indeed be successful."*

This early information given to the Children of Israel by their Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) makes it clear what future form God's message will take, who will bear its banner, who will follow that standard bearer and what course of action will ensure receiving His mercy. Thus, there is no excuse for the followers of earlier religions not to follow the message of Islam, having received such an early warning of it.

This absolutely true piece of information, given by the Lord of the universe to Moses (peace be upon him) when he and the seventy chosen people were at their appointment with their Lord, reveals the extent of the crime perpetrated by the Jews and their attitude to the unlettered Prophet and the religion revealed to him. They adopted an uncompromisingly hostile attitude to him and his message in spite of what it contained of reducing their burden and giving his followers the certain promise of success. They have perpetrated this crime despite their being fully aware of the facts. They have spared no effort in pursuing their hostility. History records that the Children of Israel have been the most hardened opponents of this Prophet and his religion.

The Jews come first, followed closely by extremist Christians. The war they have launched against this Prophet, his faith and followers is an ugly, wicked, determined and cruel war.

We need only refer to what the Qur'ān mentions about the way the people who received earlier Scriptures fight Islam and Muslims. There are detailed accounts of this in *Sūrahs* 2, 3, 4 and 5. Such references give us a glimpse of the broad front over which they have conducted their wicked war with this religion. Reference to historical events, ever since the first day Islam established its state in Madinah, to the present moment is sufficient to reveal their unhesitating and obstinate resolve to fight this religion and to try to exterminate it altogether.

Zionism and Christian Imperialism have employed in these modern times various methods of combat, scheming and plotting against this religion which are far superior to what they used over past centuries. In our modern time, they are trying to put an end to the Islamic faith altogether, thinking that they are fighting their final decisive battle. Therefore, they re-employ the methods and schemes they used in the

past, in addition to what the present advancements enable them to use. At the same time, some naïve people, who claim to belong to Islam, call in a most simplistic and naïve way for cooperation between Muslims and the followers of other religions against the tide of atheism and materialism. They overlook the fact that those followers of other religions are slaughtering Muslims everywhere and waging against them a war that combines all the ugliness of the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, either using their own forces in their colonies in Asia and Africa, or through the regimes they support in so-called independent states. They try hard to replace Islam with secular creeds which claim to be `scientific', in order to deny everything that lies beyond the reach of common perception. These creeds also call for the `modernization' of moral values in order to adopt animal `freedom' and a standard of `morality' that only fits animals. They want also to `modernize' Islamic law, convening Orientalists' seminars and conferences for this purpose, with the aim of finding ways to legalize usury, promiscuity and other practices that Islam forbids.

All these are aspects of the ferocious war fought against this religion by those who claim to follow earlier Scriptures, although they are the ones who were given the news of this final religion and the Prophet who calls for it.

That news was given to them a very long time ago, but they nevertheless have chosen to oppose this religion with evil and hardened determination.

God's Messenger to All Mankind

The *sūrah* pauses at this point in its relating of Moses and the Children of Israel's story to address the unlettered Prophet himself, giving him God's order to declare that his message applies to all mankind, in fulfilment of God's promise: "*Say: 'Mankind, I am indeed God's Messenger to you all. It is to Him that sovereignty over the heavens and the earth belongs. There is no deity other than Him. He alone grants life and causes death. Believe, then, in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His words. And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided.'*" (Verse 158)

This is, then, the final, universal message that is not confined to a particular community, area or generation. Earlier messages were limited to a certain community or a certain period of time which extended until the appearance of a new messenger. Mankind made certain limited progress in the light of those messages, in preparation for this last message. Every new message incorporated certain modifications of the divine law that took into account human progress. The final message is complete and perfect in essence leaving room for flexibility in the implementation of its details. It is meant for all mankind, and there will be no subsequent local messages for any particular community or generation. It responds to basic human nature, which means that it is suitable for all mankind. Hence, it was

conveyed by the unlettered Prophet whose nature remained pure, refined only by the care he received from God. Hence, the Prophet's pure nature conveyed the naturally pure message, addressing the very nature that is common to all mankind: *"Say: 'Mankind, I am indeed Gods Messenger to you all.'"* (Verse 158)

This Qur'ānic verse which commands God's Messenger (peace be upon him) to address his message to all mankind was revealed in Makkah. It thus provides the perfect answer to the falsehood alleged and promoted by some followers of earlier divine religions who claim that Muhammad could not have contemplated, when he was in Makkah, to address his message to anyone outside it. They further claim that he only started to go beyond the tribe of Quraysh, and then to move to a larger area in order to address his message to the followers of earlier religions, and then to go beyond the Arabian Peninsula after the successes he was fortunate to achieve. This is merely a lie that serves them in their age-long war against his religion and its followers, and which continues unabating even today.

It is not surprising that the followers of earlier religions should mobilize their forces against Islam, or that the Orientalists who write such lies take the lead in the unabating onslaught against the followers of Islam. What is surprising and most unfortunate is that many simpleminded and naive people among those who claim to be Muslims are happy to be students to those who invent falsehood against the Prophet of Islam and who continue to fight Muslims and the Islamic faith itself. They are happy to accept their ideas about Islam and to quote them on the history of this faith. Those naïve people have the audacity to describe themselves as `intellectuals'.

Having commanded the Prophet to declare that his message applies to all mankind, the Qur'ānic verse continues to make it clear that the Prophet's role is to make people fully aware of who is their true Lord: *"It is to Him that sovereignty over the heavens and the earth belongs. There is no deity other than Him. He alone grants life and causes death."* (Verse 158)

The Prophet, then, is a Messenger to all mankind from their Lord who is the Sovereign of the whole universe to which they themselves belong. He is the only God to whom everything in the universe submits. The clearest manifestation of His Godhead and His power is seen in the fact that He alone grants life and causes death. His religion, which His Messenger conveys to mankind, is the one that deserves to be accepted by all humanity because it is the religion that makes people fully aware of the true nature of their Lord. Thus, their submission to Him is an enlightened one, entailing complete obedience to God's Messenger: *"Believe, then, in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in God and His words. And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided."* (Verse 158)

This final address makes some important, though subtle, points which should be outlined. To start with, this address implies an order to believe in God and His Messenger. This is the same implication as the declaration that there is no deity other than God and that Muhammad is God's Messenger. This is certainly the essence of faith. This order is preceded by an outline of God's essential attributes: *"It is to Him that sovereignty over the heavens and the earth belongs. There is no deity other than Him. He alone grants life and causes death."* (Verse 158) Hence, it is an order to believe in God, having learnt His true and essential attributes, and learnt that this message applies to all mankind.

It also implies that the unlettered Prophet (peace be upon him) believes in God and His word. While this goes without saying, drawing attention to it here is quite important. Before a person advocates a certain cause, he himself must believe in it and must have its essentials clear in his mind so that he knows the true nature of what he advocates. Hence, the Prophet sent as God's Messenger to all mankind is described as one *"who believes in God and His words."* (Verse 158) This is exactly what he calls on people to believe.

The address also refers to the practical requirements of the faith which the Prophet calls on people to accept. When they have accepted faith, they are required to abide by its law and to follow its teachings. This is stated clearly in God's own words: *"And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided."* (Verse 158) There is simply no way that people can benefit by the guidance given to them through God's Messenger unless they follow in practice what that Messenger says. It is not sufficient that they should believe in it, unless that belief is endorsed by practice. This is the essence of Islam.

This faith of Islam makes its own nature clear at every occasion. It is not simply a set of beliefs that find their way into people's minds and hearts. Nor is it merely a set of rituals that have to be observed. It means the complete adherence in practice to everything that God's Messenger has conveyed to us as part of his message. The Prophet has not confined himself to telling people to believe in God and His Messenger, or merely to do the various aspects of worship, but he has also conveyed to them, in word and deed, God's law which must be implemented in human life. There is no way that people can have full guidance unless they follow the Prophet in all these aspects, which, together, form the religion God has given them. This religion of Islam has no version other than that indicated by the command to believe in God and His Messenger, coupled with this order: *"And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided."* (Verse 158) Had the Islamic faith been merely a matter of beliefs only, it would have been sufficient to say: *"Believe, then, in God and His Messenger."* (Verse 158) But God has followed this by the order to follow the Prophet in everything that he has given us.

Straying Away from God's Commandments

The *sūrah* resumes its account of the certain aspects of the history of the Israelites, picking it up after the violent trembling that seized the seventy people Moses had chosen for the appointment set by God. Moses was absorbed in a heartfelt supplication to his Lord to save them. We know from the accounts given in other *sūrahs* that these seventy people were resurrected and returned to their folk, full of faith. The *sūrah* picks up the thread of this story, but begins first by stating that not everyone among the Israelites was in error: *"Yet among the folk of Moses there are some who guide (others) by means of the truth and act justly in its light."* (Verse 159)

This describes their situation at the time of Moses, and after him, which meant that there was among them a group who were keen to follow the truth and show its guidance and maintain justice. It was such people who received the Prophet Muhammad's message with ready acceptance, since they were informed in the Torah of his forthcoming appearance. The most notable of these was `Abdullāh ibn Sallām (may God be pleased with him), a companion of the Prophet who stood up to the Jews in Madinah pointing out to them what the Torah says about the unlettered Prophet as well as the fact that Islamic law endorsed a number of Jewish laws.

The *sūrah* then resumes its account of the historical events: *"We divided them into twelve tribes, each a community. And when his people asked Moses for water to drink, We inspired him: 'Strike the rock with your staff' Twelve springs gushed forth from it, and each tribe knew its drinking-place. We caused the clouds to draw their shadow over them and sent down for them manna and quails, [saying]: 'Eat of the good things We have given you as sustenance.' Yet they could do Us no wrong, but they certainly wronged themselves."* (Verse 160)

These are aspects of God's care which continued to be extended to Moses and his people, even after they strayed away and worshipped the calf, then atoned for their error as God told them and He accepted their repentance. This also comes after they demanded to see God Himself and were stunned by the trembling, before God brought them back to life in answer to Moses's prayers. God's care is demonstrated here in organizing them into twelve communities, according to their ancestry. Each community traced their ancestry to one of the children of the Prophet Jacob, who was also known as Israel. They confirmed their allegiance on tribal lines: *"We divided them into twelve tribes, each a community."* (Verse 160)

God's care is also manifest in assigning a spring to each community so that none of them would try to take what belonged to others: *"When his people asked Moses for water to drink, We inspired him: 'Strike the rock with your staff'. Twelve springs gushed forth from it, and each tribe knew its drinking place."* (Verse 160)

Another aspect of God's care was to send clouds to give them shade from the

burning desert sun, and to bestow on them from on high manna, a kind of wild honey, and quails to provide them with food after their drink had been guaranteed: *"We caused the clouds to draw their shadow over them and sent down for them manna and quails."* (Verse 160) A further aspect of God's care was the fact that all these good things were made lawful to them, as nothing had been forbidden them yet in punishment for their disobedience: *"Eat of the good things We have given you as sustenance."* (Verse 160)

God's care is manifest in all that, but the Israelite nature continued to be rebellious, unwilling to keep to the path of guidance, as clearly appears from the final comment of this verse which mentions all these blessings that gave them water out of the rock, shade in the burning desert sun and wholesome, delicious food: *"Yet they could do Us no wrong, but they certainly wronged themselves."* (Verse 160) Disobedience to God and straying away from His path were the manifestations of their wronging themselves. Such disobedience could cause God no harm, because God has no need of the Israelites or anyone else. Indeed, His kingdom is not affected at all even if they and all creatures were to unite in total disobedience to Him. Nor is His kingdom increased in any way, if all creatures were to continue to obey Him without fail. People simply wrong themselves by disobedience to God and straying away from His path.

Response to God's Care

How did the Children of Israel respond to God's care? What steps did they take on the long road pointed out to them? *"It was said to them: Dwell in this city and eat of its food whatever you may wish, and say: "Lord, relieve us of our burden," and enter the gate in humility. We will forgive you your sins, and We will richly reward those who do good.' But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their wrongdoing."* (Verses 161-162)

God forgave them their sin of worshipping the calf, and He also forgave them after they were seized by the trembling when they were on the mountain. He has given them all His blessings; yet again their nature takes them away from the straight path. Again they disobey and change God's words. They are told to enter a particular city, the name of which is not given in the Qur'ān because knowing its name does not add to the significance of the story, and God makes lawful for them all its fruits and provisions, provided that as they enter they say a particular supplication and prostrate themselves on entry. That last gesture was required as a declaration of their submission to God at the time of victory when they felt very powerful, just as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) prostrated himself many centuries later, on the back of his camel, when Makkah fell to Islam. In return for their obedience,

God promised to forgive them their sins and to increase the reward of those among them who did well. But why would they disobey? There is no explanation other than the fact that deviation was in their nature: *"But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given."* (Verse 162)

At this point, God let loose against them a scourge from heaven. It was the same heaven from which He sent down manna and quails, and which carried the clouds that gave them shade and comfort: *"Therefore We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their wrongdoing."* (Verse 162) Thus, the fact that a group of them disbelieved constituted what is termed in the Qur'ān as 'wronging themselves' and made them liable to God's punishment. The Qur'ān does not tell us exactly the nature of the suffering to which they were subjected, because the purpose of this account is achieved without specifying it. All that is needed here is to explain that disobedience entails the enforcement of the threats, giving the guilty their fair punishment.

Temptation Overcomes Willpower

Once more the Children of Israel are guilty of sinful disobedience. In this particular case, they do not openly contravene God's law, but they try to find loopholes to evade what the law requires. They cannot remain steadfast in the face of the trial to which they are exposed, because steadfastness requires a nature that can control desires and ambitions: *"Ask them about the town which stood by the sea: how its people profaned the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days. Thus did We try them because of their disobedience. When some among them asked: 'Why do you preach to people whom God is certain to destroy, or at least to punish severely?' [others] replied: So that we may be free from blame in the sight of your Lord, and that they may become God-fearing.' When they had forgotten all the warnings they had been given, We saved those who had tried to prevent evil, and overwhelmed the transgressors with dreadful suffering for their iniquitous deeds. And when they insolently persisted in doing what they had been forbidden to do, We said to them: 'Turn into despicable apes.' Then your Lord declared that He would most certainly raise against them people who would cruelly oppress them till the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord is swift indeed in His retribution, yet He is certainly much forgiving, merciful."* (Verses 163-167)

There is a change of style here as the method of reporting historical events is dropped in preference for confronting the descendants of the Israelites who opposed the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Madinah. The passage beginning with this verse up to verse 171 was revealed in Madinah to give answers to its Jewish population. However, it is incorporated in this Makkan *sūrah* to complete the history of the Israelites with their Prophet Moses.

Here God orders His Messenger (peace be upon him) to ask the Jews about this well-known event in their former history. They are questioned about it here because they were keen to assert their ancestry and that they belonged to a nation with a history extending over many generations. It reminds them of their old disobedience and the fact that their disobedience doomed a group of them to a complete change of form in this life, and condemned them all to a long history of humiliation. The only exceptions are those ready to follow the last Prophet who would certainly relieve them of the burdens and the shackles that tied them down.

The name of the city by the sea is not mentioned, because it was well known to the addressees. The event itself was perpetrated by a group of Jews who were living in a coastal city. The Children of Israel had requested that a day should be assigned to them for rest and total devotion, so that none of them would need to work on that day. Hence the appointment of the Sabbath for them. They were then subjected to a test so that they would learn how to demonstrate their willpower and resist temptation. They certainly needed to learn how to fulfil their commitments, particularly in the case of a conflict between duty and desire. That was absolutely necessary for the Children of Israel whose characters were badly weakened as a result of the humiliation they had long suffered. Their will needed to be liberated after such a long history of subjugation, so that they could get used to facing challenges and resisting temptations.

Besides, this is needed by everyone who aspires to be an advocate of God's message, and to fulfil the trust God has given to human beings on earth. Indeed, the test of willpower was the first to which Adam and Eve were subjected. They could not stand up to it, and were tempted by Satan to eat of the fruit of the tree, which he described to them as the tree of everlasting life and imperishable wealth. Every community of advocates of God's cause must go successfully through this test before they can be trusted with the task assigned to mankind as they are placed in charge of the earth. The nature of the test remains the same, but its methods may vary.

A group of the Children of Israel were unable to face the challenge and pass the test this time. This was the result of their repeated disobedience. Fish of different types used to come very close to the shore on Sabbath days, appearing to be so easy to catch. Yet they could do nothing to catch them because of the sanctity of the Sabbath, which they needed to observe. When the Sabbath day ended the fish were no longer there. They had gone deep into the sea. This is the event which the Prophet Muhammad was ordered to remind them of, in addition to giving them a reminder of what they did and what happened to them as a result: "*Ask them about the town which stood by the sea: how its people profaned the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days. Thus did We try them because of their disobedience.*" (Verse 163)

How did all this happen? What made the fish behave in this way? How could the fish out-manoeuvre them? This is a miracle that takes place by God's will at the time He chooses. Those who are devoid of knowledge are keen to deny that God's will can operate in any way other than what they describe as 'the laws of nature'. But the Islamic concept, endorsed by the facts of life, has a different view. It is God (limitless is He in His glory) who has created this universe and set its laws in operation, in accordance with His absolute, free will. This means that God's law is not restrained by those laws of nature, or that it must operate within them. God's will remains free and absolute after these laws have come into operation, just as it was before them. This is the fact ignored by those who are devoid of knowledge. It is certainly an aspect of God's grace which He bestows on His servants that these laws of nature remain constant, but that does not mean that His will becomes subject to them or restrained by them. Whenever He, in His wisdom, wants something to take place in a fashion that breaks these laws of nature, His will is certainly done. Moreover, every time these constant laws operate, their operation takes place by a new act of God's will, which is specific to that particular instance. These laws do not operate automatically, of their own accord, or without God's will. This is indeed the case, despite the fact that the laws of nature remain constant, unless God determines otherwise. Whether the constant laws of nature operate or some other laws operate in their place, whatever actually happens in the universe is subject to a special act of God's will. Hence, the operation of the laws of nature and the accomplishment of something supernatural are equal and at the same level. There is nothing in the system of the universe that happens automatically, not even once, as those who are devoid of knowledge are keen to assert. In fact, they have recently started to recognize this.

Be that as it may, the temptation was too strong for those people of the city facing the sea. A group of them found the temptation irresistible, and all their willpower collapsed. They forgot their covenant with their Lord and began, as is typical of the Jews, to try to find subtle ways of fishing on the Sabbath. When faith is weak in people's hearts, many a deviant way can be found, since people start to deal with the law as a mere restriction which they need to evade. No law can be properly enforced by its mere statements, or by a police force. A law is safeguarded by God-fearing hearts who are keen to please God and to avoid His punishment. People will continue to try to evade the law when they have an interest in evading its provisions. Therefore, a law cannot be safeguarded by material power or a police force. No strong-handed tactics can give a government enough power to appoint a policeman to watch every individual to ensure observance of the law. That can only be achieved through faith, when people are God-fearing, keen to abide by God's law in public and private.

Abundant Grace, Swift Punishment

Hence, all situations which do not rely on the inner motivation of God-fearing hearts are bound to fail. Also doomed to failure are all man-made theories and regimes which do not rely on God's authority. Hence, all human systems to ensure the enforcement of the law remain ineffective, because no police force can watch over all people, all the time.

In this particular case mentioned in the *sūrah,* the inhabitants of that city began to seek ways and means to get around the prohibition of fishing on the Sabbath day. It has been reported that they put up certain barriers on the Sabbath day so that the fish could not return to the sea, and on the Sunday they would be quick to take their catch. They claimed that they did not do the fishing on the Sabbath, because the fish remained in the water, behind the barriers. A second group recognized the deviousness in all this, and warned those people who perpetrated it against God's punishment, dissociating themselves from their schemes.

A third group said to the ones urging their community to comply with God's orders: what use is your admonition to those erring people, when they persist in their erring ways? God is certain to destroy them or to inflict severe punishment on them: *"When some among them asked: 'Why do you preach to people whom God is certain to destroy, or at least to punish severely?'"* (Verse 164) Warnings and admonition are no longer of use, after they have condemned themselves to destruction or severe punishment by violating God's law. The second group replied: "*So that we may be free from blame in the sight of your Lord, and that they may become God-fearing.*" It is a duty on us to enjoin what is right and warn against what is evil and against violating God's law. When we have done our duty, we hope to be free from blame. Besides, it may be that our admonition will touch a sensitive heart and cause at least some disobedient people to repent.

Thus, the inhabitants of that city were divided into three groups, or three communities. In Islamic terminology, a nation or a community is a group of people who believe in one faith, have the same concept, and admit allegiance to a single leadership. It is thus different from the definitions given to it in non-Muslim societies, ancient and modern, which make a nation any group of people living in a particular area and governed by a particular regime. This concept is alien to Islam.

Hence, we say that the inhabitants of that city were divided into three groups: a clearly disobedient one, and one opposed to the sly schemes of disobedience to God, taking a positive action or denouncing disobedience and giving admonition. A third group adopted a negative attitude, disapproving of those disobedient schemes but taking no positive action to repel them. Each group had its own concept and line of action, which made each of them a separate nation.

When warnings and admonition were apparently useless, and the disobedient group persisted with their erring ways, God's warnings had to be fulfilled. Those who admonished them were saved, while the disobedient community suffered a very severe punishment, as will be explained presently. The *sūrah* does not mention what happened to the third group or community, perhaps in order to indicate that they were of no consequence, because they refrained from taking positive action and were satisfied to disapprove of God's disobedience only in a negative way. Hence, they deserved to be ignored although they did not incur punishment: *"When they had forgotten all the warnings they had been given, We saved those who had tried to prevent evil, and overwhelmed the transgressors with dreadful suffering for their iniquitous deeds. And when they insolently persisted in doing what they had been forbidden to do, We said to them: `Turn into despicable apes.'"* (Verses 165-166)

We note here how the Qur'ān equates disobedience with denying the faith, and refers to this as `wrongdoing', or `transgression'. This occurs very frequently in the Qur'ān, which gives these terms a different concept to what is used in the works of scholars of later generations.

The dreadful suffering inflicted on those scheming people who disobeyed God was to transform them into despicable apes. They forfeited their humanity when they abandoned their will, which could control their desires. They simply sank into the world of animals.

Hence, it was a befitting punishment that they should be given the appearance of apes.

How did they become apes, and what happened to them thereafter? Did they perish, as would every creature that is transformed into another shape? Or did they procreate in the form of apes? There are so many different reports in books of Qur'ānic commentary. However, none of these questions is given an answer in the Qur'ān, and we do not have any authentic statement by the Prophet to give answers to them.

Hence, we will not delve into these areas.

The same order which initiates creation and gives creatures their forms and shapes was given in order to bring about a change of form or a transformation. The word used in all these cases is, "Be", and whatever God desires immediately takes place. "*We said to them: 'Turn into despicable apes,'*" with the Arabic text using the formula, "*Be despicable apes*". (Verse 166) That was sufficient for them to be apes that are despicable, and to live in humiliation. That was the order that no power could repel, issued by the One who always accomplishes His purpose.

This was followed by an everlasting curse, which spared only those who would believe in the unlettered Prophet and follow him. This curse was also earned because of their long persistence in disobeying God. Hence, God issued the verdict that was certain to be implemented: "*Then your Lord declared that He would most certainly raise against them people who would cruelly oppress them till the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord*

is swift indeed in His retribution, yet He is certainly much forgiving, merciful." (Verse 167)

That declaration will last for ever, although its fulfilment started the day it was issued. In different periods of history, there were those who dealt very severely with the Jews and were ready to oppress them. The declaration will continue to operate, and there will from time to time be those who will deal cruelly with them. Whenever the Jews gain power and tyrannize in disobedience of God, they will certainly come to suffer at the hands of people whom God will raise against them. This is because they will continue to move from one act of disobedience of God to another, and will not mend their ways before they start with new erring ways.

At times we may think that the curse is no longer operative, and that the Jews have gathered so much power and influence. The fact is that this will only be for a limited period of history. It is God alone who knows whom He will raise against the Jews in the next round, and the round to follow that, until the Day of Resurrection. God has made this declaration, and informed His Messenger of it in His own book, the Qur'ān, and concluded this declaration with a statement outlining the two attributes of God that He is at the same time swift in retribution, much forgiving and merciful: "*Your Lord is swift indeed in His retribution, yet He is certainly much forgiving, merciful."* (Verse 167) With His swift punishment, He overwhelms those who earn that punishment, as happened to those dwellers of that city by the seaside. With His forgiveness and mercy He accepts the repentance of those of the Israelites who are ready to follow the unlettered Prophet who is clearly described in the Torah and the Gospel. His punishment is not the result of any grudge, but it is the fitting retribution for those guilty of disobedience. God's mercy and forgiveness are always there to be extended to those who earn them.

A Strong Motivation for Believers

The Qur'ānic account follows the historical events after Moses. It refers to succeeding generations up to the Jewish generation that lived in Madinah at the time when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) established the first Muslim community there.

> *We dispersed them all over the earth as separate communities; some of them were righteous, and some far from that, and We tried them with blessings and misfortunes, so that they might mend their ways. They were succeeded by generations who inherited the Book. Yet these are keen to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this lower world and say, "We shall be forgiven." Should some similar pleasures come their way, they would certainly be keen to indulge them. Have they not solemnly pledged through their Scriptures to say nothing but the truth about God? And have they not studied well what is in [the Scriptures]? Surely the life in the hereafter is better for all*

> *who are God-fearing. Will you not use your reason? As for those who hold fast to the Scriptures and attend regularly to their prayers, We shall not fail to reward those who enjoin the doing of what is right. We suspended the mountain over them as if it were a shadow, and they thought that it would fall down on them. [We said]: Hold fast with all your strength to what We have given you and bear in mind all that it contains, so that you may remain God-fearing. (Verses 168-171)*

These verses, revealed in Madinah and added to this Makkan *sūrah,* serve as a complement to the history of the Children of Israel after the Prophet Moses had passed away. The Jews were dispersed across the earth, divided into groups of varying concepts and different schools, trends and leanings. Some of them were righteous indeed, while others were not. In His wisdom, God continued to set them one test after another, trying them at times with ease and comfort, and at others with affliction and misfortune. All these tests were meant to help them see things in the right perspective and choose the path of righteousness: *"We tried them with blessings and misfortunes, so that they might mend their ways."* (Verse 168) It is an act of divine mercy that God puts His servants to one test after another, because these tests serve as reminders to them so that forgetfulness will not let them think too highly of themselves. Such thoughts can easily lead people to self-condemnation.

"They were succeeded by generations who inherited the Book. Yet these are keen to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this lower world and say, `We shall be forgiven.' Should some similar pleasures come their way, they would certainly be keen to indulge them." (Verse 169) This new generation of Israelites have certain characteristics that are described in the Qur'ān. They have inherited the Scriptures and learned them well. However, they did not take the Scriptures to heart, so that they would bring their behaviour and practices in line with their dictates. In other words, their approach to faith was an academic one, taking their faith as mere knowledge to be learned, but having no practical purpose. Whenever a worldly pleasure offered itself to them, they took it up and indulged in it. They then claimed that they would be forgiven by God.

This state of affairs was repeated time after time. Hence, the Qur'ān poses this rhetoric question: *"Have they not solemnly pledged through their Scriptures to say nothing but the truth about God? And have they not studied well what is in [the Scriptures]?"* (Verse 169) In their very Scriptures they pledged never to try to manipulate the provisions of divine law, or give them a false interpretation. They also vowed not to say anything about God but the plain truth. How is it possible, then, for them to claim that they will be forgiven when they are keen to indulge in every worldly pleasure that presents itself to them? How can they justify such indulgence by making a false statement about God, assuring themselves of His forgiveness, when they are well aware that God forgives only those who truly repent of their mistakes and resolve not to repeat them? This does not apply to them, because having studied the

Scriptures well and known everything they contain, they remain ready to indulge in every fleeting pleasure of this low world.

A mere academic study of religion is of little benefit, as long as faith does not establish itself in the heart of the person studying it. Many of those who study religion let their hearts drift away from it. They simply study it in order to find justification for their deeds by twisting the meaning of religious statements. Thus they try to find loopholes to justify their indulgence in worldly pleasures. Indeed, the true enemies of religion are those who have an academic approach to it, without truly believing in it and without fearing God.

"Surely the life in the hereafter is better for all who are God-fearing. Will you not use your reason?" (Verse 169) Indeed, the abode of the hereafter is the one to seek. Its value, as it is recognized by those who are God-fearing, is bound to tilt the scales. Seeking it provides the determination to resist the fleeting pleasures that present themselves now, in the life of this world. It is the motivation to gain admission into that abode of the hereafter that mends hearts and sets life on the proper footing. Without observing the requirements for such future life, this present life will go awry. How else can a human being resist the great pressure of indulging the immediate pleasures of this life? What stops a human being from indulging his greed or taking away what belongs to others? What can tame people's urges, cravings and powerful aspirations? What can give people the reassurance that what is lost in this life struggle will not have been totally lost at the point of death? Rather, there is still more to come in a future, everlasting life. What gives the believers support in the battle between good and evil, truth and falsehood, when they see life's pleasures slipping away from their hands, and find evil gaining increased power and imposing tyrannical authority?

Nothing can give such strength and help to believers to remain steadfast in the face of misfortunes and changing circumstances during an unabating battle with falsehood except the firm belief in the life to come and that it is far better and superior for those who are God- fearing. That abode belongs to those who forgive, rise above the fleeting pleasures of this world, show determination to follow the truth and to do what is good, remain unshakeable, as they go along the way, reassured that what God has for them is infinitely better than what they may have in this world.

This abode of the hereafter is something that lies beyond the reach of our human perception. The advocates of `scientific socialism' want to obliterate the belief in it from our hearts, faith and life in order to replace it with an ignorant, atheistic concept, which they describe as 'scientific'. But their attempt relates to the corruption of hearts and souls, and the corruption of life itself. So many social ills, such as bribery, greed, oppression, negligence, apathy and treachery break loose, but nothing can check them except faith. To place what is 'scientific' in opposition to what is

'imperceptible' is no more than an ignorant phenomenon that spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but human knowledge has abandoned it altogether. In the twentieth century, it has only been upheld by a small minority. This whole phenomenon is in conflict with human nature. Hence, it corrupts lives to the extent that it exposes all mankind to the risk of destruction. It is part of the Zionist plan, which tries to rob humanity of the most important factors that give it health and strength. In this way, they hope to eventually make the whole world submissive to the kingdom of Zion. Such flimsy ideas are repeated by some human parrots, scattered here and there, while the regimes that Zionism has put in power in most parts of the world continue to implement the wicked Zionist plan. What is worse is that they implement it knowing its aim and purpose.

Unfailing Reward

Because the questions of the hereafter and fearing God are central to faith and life, the Qur'ān tells those who are keen to indulge in the fleeting pleasures of this world to use their minds: *"Surely the lift in the hereafter is better for all who are God-fearing. Will you not use your reason?"* (Verse 169) Had reason had the final say, and had the final verdict been that of true knowledge, rather than ignorance given the guise of knowledge, the hereafter would have been seen as far superior to the fleeting pleasures of this lower world. Fearing God would have been seen as strengthening faith and achieving success in this life: *"As for those who hold fast to the Scriptures and attend regularly to their prayers, We shall not fail to reward those who enjoin the doing of what is right."* (Verse 170)

Clear criticism of those who have given their pledges through the Scriptures and who have studied them thoroughly is implied. That is because they do not hold fast to the Scriptures they studied, and do not implement their teachings, or refer to them in formulating their concepts and deciding their behaviour. However, this verse remains general in its import, addressing all generations and all situations.

The very expression, *"hold fast to the Scriptures"*, gives a vivid image that we can almost see and feel. It is the image of holding the book with strength and seriousness. This is how God likes His book to be approached, without rigidity or narrow-mindedness. Strength and seriousness are totally different from rigidity and narrow-mindedness. They are not opposed to ease, broad vision and compatibility with day-to-day life, but they are opposed to looseness, carelessness, and giving human practices precedence over God's law. Indeed, what people do must always be subject to God's law.

Holding fast with strength and seriousness to what God has revealed and attending regularly to prayers, which is here a reference to all aspects of worship, are

the twin essential factors of the divine method that aims at setting human life on the right footing. The way this Qur'ānic verse clearly links holding fast to the Scriptures with attending to worship is significant. It shows that implementing divine revelations in human life gives it the right basis, and that proper worship reforms human rights. Thus, the two operate in everyday life as well as in human hearts and set them both aright. This is further emphasized by the reference to doing right at the conclusion of the Qur'ānic verse: "*As for those who hold fast to the Scriptures and attend regularly to their prayers, We shall not fail to reward those who enjoin the doing of what is right.*" (Verse 170)

The plain fact is that all human life suffers as a result of abandoning these two essential factors of the divine method. When the revealed message is taken lightly, it has no effect on everyday life, and when worship is abandoned, people's hearts become prone to corruption. This leads to evading the law, as was the practice of the people of earlier Scriptures. The same applies to the followers of any Scripture when their hearts take worship lightly, and in consequence, their fear of God weakens.

The divine system is a complete whole, which establishes life on the basis of a divine writ, and reforms hearts through worship. Thus, hearts are healthy and human life is also wholesome. That is the divine method, which is abandoned in preference for another only by those who are bound to suffer misery in this world and punishment in the life to come.

At the end of the story, as related in this *sūrah,* an account is given of how God accepted the pledges of the Children of Israel: "*We suspended the mountain over them as if it were a shadow, and they thought that it would fall down on them. [We said]: Hold fast with all your strength to what We have given you and bear in mind all that it contains, so that you may remain God-fearing.*" (Verse 171) That covenant cannot be forgotten, because it was taken in unforgettable circumstances. It was taken at a time when God suspended the mountain over the Children of Israel's heads, just as though it was a shadow. For all intents and purposes, they thought it was going to fall on them. Just prior to that, they were reluctant to give any pledges, but when they experienced that supernatural event, they hastened to make their pledges. That in itself should have prevented any relapse on their part. With such a miracle taking place before their eyes, they were ordered to take their pledges seriously, and to fulfil them conscientiously. They were warned against any slackness or complacency. They must always remember their pledges and work for their fulfilment, so that their hearts soften and remain conscious of God. But the nature of the Israelites remains the same. They soon broke their pledges and sank into disobedience. Thus, they incurred God's wrath. They proved that they could not be grateful for God's favours and the grace He had bestowed on them. Hence, they incurred God's punishment on account of breaking their pledges to Him. God never deals unjustly with anyone.

10
Bearing Witness

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنۢ بَنِىٓ ءَادَمَ مِن ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ ۛ شَهِدْنَآ ۛ أَن تَقُولُوا۟ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَـٰذَا غَـٰفِلِينَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves. [He said]: "Am I not your Lord?" They replied: "Yes, indeed, we bear witness to that." [This He did] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were truly unaware of this;" (172)

أَوْ تَقُولُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَآ أَشْرَكَ ءَابَآؤُنَا مِن قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِّنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ أَفَتُهْلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ ٱلْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿١٧٣﴾

or lest you say, "It was our forefathers who, in times gone by, associated partners with God, and we were only their late offspring. Will You destroy us on account of what those inventors of falsehood did?" (173)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ ٱلْـَٔايَـٰتِ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٧٤﴾

Thus We make plain Our revelations so that they may return [to the right path]. (174)

وَٱتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَاتَيْنَـٰهُ ءَايَـٰتِنَا فَٱنسَلَخَ مِنْهَا فَأَتْبَعَهُ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ فَكَانَ مِنَ ٱلْغَاوِينَ ﴿١٧٥﴾

Tell them of the man to whom We give Our revelations, and who then discards them. Satan catches up with him and he strays, like many others, into error. (175)

وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَرَفَعْنَـٰهُ بِهَا وَلَـٰكِنَّهُۥٓ أَخْلَدَ إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ ۚ فَمَثَلُهُۥ كَمَثَلِ ٱلْكَلْبِ إِن تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثْ أَوْ تَتْرُكْهُ يَلْهَث ۚ ذَّٰلِكَ مَثَلُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا ۚ فَٱقْصُصِ ٱلْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

Had We so willed, We would have exalted him by means of those (revelations), but he clings to the earth and succumbs to his desires. He may be compared to a dog: no matter how you drive him off, he pants on away, and if you leave him alone, he still pants on. That is what the people who reject Our revelations are like. Tell them, then, such stories, so that they may take heed. (176)

سَآءَ مَثَلًا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا وَأَنفُسَهُمْ كَانُوا۟ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

A dismal example is that provided by those who reject Our revelations; for it is against their own selves that they are sinning. (177)

مَن يَهْدِ ٱللَّهُ فَهُوَ ٱلْمُهْتَدِى ۖ وَمَن يُضْلِلْ فَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْخَـٰسِرُونَ ﴿١٧٨﴾

He whom God guides is on the right path; whereas those whom He lets go astray are indeed losers. (178)

وَلَقَدْ ذَرَأْنَا لِجَهَنَّمَ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ ۖ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ ءَاذَانٌ لَّا يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَآ ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ كَٱلْأَنْعَـٰمِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ ۚ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْغَـٰفِلُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

We have destined for Hell many of the jinn and many human beings; they have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear. They are like cattle; indeed, they are even further away from the right way. They are the truly heedless. (179)

وَلِلَّهِ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ فَٱدْعُوهُ بِهَا ۖ وَذَرُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِىٓ أَسْمَـٰٓئِهِۦ ۚ سَيُجْزَوْنَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

God has the finest names, so appeal to Him by these and stay away from those who blaspheme against His names. They shall be requited for all they do. (180)

وَمِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَآ أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَبِهِۦ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿١٨١﴾

Among those whom We have created there is a community who guide others by means of the truth and with it establish justice. (181)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُم مِّنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨٢﴾

As for those who deny Our revelations, We will lead them on, step by step, from whence they cannot tell; (182)

وَأُمْلِى لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ كَيْدِى مَتِينٌ ﴿١٨٣﴾

for although I may give them respite, My subtle scheme is mighty. (183)

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا۟ ۗ مَا بِصَاحِبِهِم مِّن جِنَّةٍ ۚ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٨٤﴾

Have they not thought things over? Their companion is no madman; he is only a plain warner. (184)

أَوَلَمۡ يَنظُرُواْ فِي مَلَكُوتِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ مِن شَيۡءٖ وَأَنۡ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ قَدِ ٱقۡتَرَبَ أَجَلُهُمۡۖ فَبِأَيِّ حَدِيثِۭ بَعۡدَهُۥ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٨٥

Have they not considered [God's] dominion over the heavens and the earth, and all that God has created, and [reflected] that it may well be that their own term is drawing near? In what other message after this will they, then, believe? (185)

مَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَلَا هَادِيَ لَهُۥۚ وَيَذَرُهُمۡ فِي طُغۡيَٰنِهِمۡ يَعۡمَهُونَ ١٨٦

Those whom God lets go astray will have no guide; and He leaves them in their overweening arrogance to stumble along blindly. (186)

يَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلسَّاعَةِ أَيَّانَ مُرۡسَىٰهَاۖ قُلۡ إِنَّمَا عِلۡمُهَا عِندَ رَبِّيۖ لَا يُجَلِّيهَا لِوَقۡتِهَآ إِلَّا هُوَۚ ثَقُلَتۡ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ لَا تَأۡتِيكُمۡ إِلَّا بَغۡتَةٗۗ يَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ كَأَنَّكَ حَفِيٌّ عَنۡهَاۖ قُلۡ إِنَّمَا عِلۡمُهَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ١٨٧

They ask you about the Last Hour: "When will it come to pass?" Say: Knowledge of it rests with my Lord alone. None but He will reveal it at its appointed time. It will weigh heavily on the heavens and the earth; and it will not fall on you except suddenly. They will ask you further as if you yourself persistently enquire about it. Say: Knowledge of it rests with God alone, though most people remain unaware. (187)

قُل لَّآ أَمۡلِكُ لِنَفۡسِي نَفۡعٗا وَلَا ضَرًّا إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُۚ وَلَوۡ كُنتُ أَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ لَٱسۡتَكۡثَرۡتُ مِنَ ٱلۡخَيۡرِ وَمَا مَسَّنِيَ ٱلسُّوٓءُۚ إِنۡ أَنَا۠ إِلَّا نَذِيرٞ وَبَشِيرٞ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٨٨

Say: It is not within my power to bring benefit to, or avert evil from, myself, except as God may please. Had I possessed knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception, I would have availed myself of much that is good and no evil would have ever touched me. I am no more than one who gives warning, and a herald of good news to people who believe. (188)

۞ هُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفۡسٖ وَٰحِدَةٖ وَجَعَلَ مِنۡهَا زَوۡجَهَا لِيَسۡكُنَ إِلَيۡهَاۖ فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّىٰهَا حَمَلَتۡ حَمۡلًا خَفِيفٗا فَمَرَّتۡ بِهِۦۖ فَلَمَّآ أَثۡقَلَت دَّعَوَا ٱللَّهَ رَبَّهُمَا لَئِنۡ ءَاتَيۡتَنَا صَٰلِحٗا لَّنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ١٨٩

It is He who has created you all from a single soul, and out of it brought into being its mate, so that he might incline with love towards her. When he has consorted with her, she conceives a light burden, which she carries with ease. Then, when she grows heavy, they both appeal to God, their Lord: "Grant us a goodly child and we will be truly grateful." (189)

فَلَمَّآ ءَاتَىٰهُمَا صَٰلِحًا جَعَلَا لَهُۥ شُرَكَآءَ فِيمَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمَا ۚ فَتَعَٰلَى ٱللَّهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٩٠﴾

Yet when He has granted them a goodly child, they associate with Him partners, particularly in respect of what He has granted them. Exalted is God above anything people may associate with Him as partners. (190)

أَيُشْرِكُونَ مَا لَا يَخْلُقُ شَيْـًٔا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿١٩١﴾

Do they associate with Him those that can create nothing, while they themselves have been created, (191)

وَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ لَهُمْ نَصْرًا وَلَآ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَنصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٢﴾

and neither can they give them any support nor can they even help themselves. (192)

وَإِن تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ لَا يَتَّبِعُوكُمْ ۚ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ أَدَعَوْتُمُوهُمْ أَمْ أَنتُمْ صَٰمِتُونَ ﴿١٩٣﴾

If you call them to guidance they will not follow you. It is all the same whether you call them or keep silent. (193)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ عِبَادٌ أَمْثَالُكُمْ ۖ فَٱدْعُوهُمْ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لَكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٩٤﴾

Those whom you invoke beside ' God are God's servants, just like you. Invoke them, then, and let them answer you, if what you claim is true. (194)

أَلَهُمْ أَرْجُلٌ يَمْشُونَ بِهَآ ۖ أَمْ لَهُمْ أَيْدٍ يَبْطِشُونَ بِهَآ ۖ أَمْ لَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَآ ۖ أَمْ لَهُمْ ءَاذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۗ قُلِ ٱدْعُوا۟ شُرَكَآءَكُمْ ثُمَّ كِيدُونِ فَلَا تُنظِرُونِ ﴿١٩٥﴾

Have they, perchance, feet on which they could walk, or hands with which to grasp things, or eyes with which to see, or ears with which to hear? Say: Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. (195)

إِنَّ وَلِيِّىَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى نَزَّلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ۖ وَهُوَ يَتَوَلَّى ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٩٦﴾

My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous. (196)

وَٱلَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَكُمْ وَلَآ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَنصُرُونَ ﴿١٩٧﴾

Those whom you invoke beside Him cannot give you any support, nor can they even help themselves. (197)

وَإِن تَدۡعُوهُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡهُدَىٰ لَا يَسۡمَعُواْۖ وَتَرَىٰهُمۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيۡكَ وَهُمۡ لَا يُبۡصِرُونَ ١٩٨

If you pray to them for guidance, they will not hear you. You may see them looking at you but they do not see. (198)

Preview

The historical accounts given in this *sūrah* have centred on the theme of God's oneness. In all these accounts, God's messengers emphasized the truth of God's oneness to their peoples, and warned them against associating partners with Him. In each account we see how the warnings of those messengers came to pass. Now the *sūrah* moves on to deal with the central issue of God's oneness from a different angle, which refers particularly to human nature as created by God. It speaks of a firm pledge with far-reaching implications for human nature and its constitution. Indeed, acknowledging God as the only Lord in the universe is ingrained in human nature, which admits to it by its very existence and by what it feels deeply at heart. Divine messengers bring reminders and warnings to those who deviate from their essential nature. Believing in God's oneness is the basic issue of a covenant between human nature and the Creator of human beings. Therefore, they have no justification for breaking this covenant, even if God did not send them any messenger to remind and warn them. But it is God's grace that dictates that human beings should not be left to their nature alone, because it may deviate, or to their minds because they may err. Hence, He sends them messengers to bring them happy news and to warn them so that people may not have an argument to press against God after He sent them those messengers.

Tackling the question of God's oneness from this angle the *sūrah* follows several lines. The first of these is a narrative speaking of a situation that, according to some reports, took place in the past history of the Children of Israel. More accurately, its speaks of a type of people that may exist at any time or place. In any society or generation, we come across those who have enough knowledge to lead them to the truth and to follow guidance, but they nevertheless defy their own knowledge and sink into error just as those who are devoid of all knowledge. Indeed, their own knowledge adds to their misery and deviation because they remain devoid of the faith, which makes knowledge a guiding light.

Another narrative line describes how nature moves gradually away from believing in God's oneness to associating partners with Him. Here we have a married couple who are full of hope with respect to the child they are expecting. By nature, they turn to their Lord making all pledges to Him to be very grateful if He would

give them a healthy and dutiful child. When their wishes are granted, they begin to deviate and associate partners with God.

A third line is descriptive, showing how receptive human systems stop functioning until people go a very long way into error so as to sink below the level of animals. This deservedly turns them into fuel for Hell. They have minds, eyes and ears, but they understand, see and hear nothing. This leaves them hardened in error.

A further line is inspirational, trying to resuscitate those receptive systems so that people may think and reflect. They are encouraged to look at what is in the heavens and the earth and to contemplate God's creation. It also reminds them of the predetermined moment of death and invites them to reflect on the position of the noble Messenger who calls on people to follow guidance. Yet those who have gone astray describe him as mad. And we have a line that disputes their claims about their alleged deities, which lack all qualities of Godhead, and indeed lack the essential qualities of life.

All this ends with a directive to the Prophet to challenge them and their deities, and to declare that he dissociates himself from their community, beliefs, deities and worship, and turns to the only true patron and guardian *"who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous."* (Verse 196)

The previous passage concluded the story of the Children of Israel with the scene of the pledges they gave to God in the shadow of the suspended mountain. This new passage follows on that final scene and begins with a discussion of the broader covenant God has taken from human nature. The scene is even more awesome and splendid than that of the suspended mountain.

A Scene to Defy All Imagination

> *Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves. [He said]: "Am I not your Lord?" They replied: "Yes, indeed, we bear witness to that." [This He did] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were truly unaware of this;" or lest you say, It was our forefathers who, in times gone by, associated partners with God, and we were only their late offspring. Will You destroy us on account of what those inventors of falsehood did?" Thus We make plain Our revelations so that they may return [to the right path]. (Verses 172-174)*

In this short passage we have the central issue of faith and human nature portrayed in a uniquely vivid scene that shows the generations of the faraway future, as they are still in the loins of human beings, before they make their appearance in this visible world. All of them are gathered in front of their Creator who asks them:

"Am I not your Lord?" (Verse 172) They all acknowledge His Lordship, admit their position as obedient servants and His status as the only Lord. They are no bigger than small atoms held in the hand of the great Creator.

This is a sublime scene with no equivalent in human language or its imaginative portraits. Its remarkable nature becomes even greater when our minds try, as hard as we can, to visualize it, looking at all these countless cells being gathered together and brought forth. They are then addressed as rational beings, on account of the innate qualities God has placed in them. They respond like rational beings, acknowledging their position and status and giving their pledges when they are still in the loins of their ancestors. We are filled with awe as we contemplate this splendid scene, looking at these tiny cells, each holding a potential life. Each is the seed of a complete human being, with unique qualities, waiting for permission to grow and appear in its special form reserved for it in the world beyond. It gives its pledge and enters into a covenant before it appears into this world of ours.

The Qur'ān portrays this splendid scene describing a great truth, which is deeply established in human nature. This Qur'ānic description was made fourteen centuries ago, when no human being had any vision of the reality of human creation, apart from myth that had no foundation. Now after all these centuries, human beings have come to know some rudimentary elements of that truth. Today, biological science tells us that genes keep a record for every human being, showing his or her qualities or characteristics when they are still in the loins of their ancestors. These genes, which keep the records of no less than three thousand million human beings, may be pooled together in a space not exceeding one cubic centimetre. Had this fact been stated at that time, it would have been met with derision and incredulity. But God certainly says the truth, as He states: *"In time We shall make them see Our signs in the utmost horizons (of the universe) and within themselves so that it will become clear to them that this revelation is the truth."* (41: 53)

Ibn `Abbās, a companion of the Prophet who is renowned for his scholarship, reports: "Your Lord went over Adam's back with His hand, and out came every human being He would be creating until the Day of Resurrection. He took their pledges and made them bear witness about themselves, saying to them: *"Am I not your Lord? They replied 'Yes, indeed.'"* (Verse 172)

How did this event take place? How did God take the offspring of Adam's children from their loins to make them testify? How did He ask them, "Am I not your Lord?" And how did they reply, "Yes, indeed." The answer to all these questions is that our human perception cannot understand how God acts, since it cannot perceive God's own nature. Perceiving the `how' is subsequent to perceiving the nature of the one who does. There are numerous actions that the Qur'ān attributes to God, such as the following few examples: *"He then applied His design to*

the skies, which were yet but smoke" (41:11); *"He is established on the throne of His Almightiness"* (10: 3); *"God annuls or confirms whatever He pleases"* (13: 39); *"The heavens will be folded up in His right hand"* (39: 67); "Your *Lord comes down with the angels, rank upon rank"* (89: 22); and *"Never can there be a secret confabulation between three persons without His being the fourth of them."* (58: 7) All these actions and many others reported in authentic *ĥadīths* as having been done, or will be done by God must be accepted as perfectly true, without any attempt on our part to understand how. It is just as we have mentioned that the perception of 'how' is subsequent to perceiving the nature of the one who does it. There is simply nothing that resembles God in any way. Hence, there is no way that we can perceive His nature or how He accomplishes His deeds. There is no possibility that we can resemble His action to anything we know, since there is nothing that resembles God in any way. Any attempt to do so will end in error and failure. All philosophers who tried to describe how God acts could do no more than come up with theories of endless confusion.

One interpretation of this statement suggests that the pledge God has taken from the offspring of Adam's children relates to their nature. He has established in their nature the tendency to acknowledge His Lordship as the only God in the universe. They grow up with this tendency until they deviate as a result of external factors of one sort or another.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr reports that many scholars are of the view that this testimony from the offspring of Adam's children refers to the fact that in their very nature, they have a tendency to accept God's oneness. This is why the Qur'ānic statement says, *"Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam"*, rather than saying, "from the loins of Adam himself or from his loins." And the statement speaks of "their offspring", to indicate the succession of their generations, one after another. This is similar to the Qur'ānic statement: *"It is He who has given you the earth to inherit."* (27: 62) God also says: *"He brought you into being out of other people's seed."* (6: 133) Here, in the verse we are discussing, God goes on to say: *"And called them to bear witness about themselves. [He said]: 'Am I not your Lord?' They replied: 'Yes, indeed'."* (Verse 172) This means that He has created them admitting this fact, testifying to it at the very moment of their existence. Scholars also say that testimony is sometimes given verbally as in the Qur'ānic verse: *"They will reply: `We bear witness against ourselves.' The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers."* (6: 130) At other times, the testimony can be made by adopting a certain position or attitude, as that described in the Qur'ānic verse stating: *"It is not for the idolaters to visit or tend God's houses of worship, while they bear witness against themselves for being unbelievers."* (9: 17) This means that their situation testifies against them, not that they make a statement to this effect. The same applies to the Qur'ānic verses: *"Man is surely ungrateful to his Lord, and of this he himself is a witness." (100:* 6-7)

Requests also can be made verbally or by adopting a particular position. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic verse stating: *"He gives you of everything you ask Him for."* (14: 34) Scholars say that a factor that supports this view is the fact that this testimony is counted against them as they associate partners with God. Had this taken place in the way some people suggest, then everyone would have remembered it, and it would have been taken against them. It is suggested that its being reported by the Prophet is sufficient as a proof of its taking place. This is true, but we should remember that those unbelievers rejected everything that God's messengers have stated. Since this is stated as an argument against them, it must be a reference to their nature, which admits God's Lordship and oneness. For this reason, the Qur'ānic passage goes on to say: *"[This He did] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, `We were truly unaware of this;' or lest you say, 'It was our forefathers who, in times gone by, associated partners with God.'"* (Verses 172-173)

A Pledge Given by Human Nature

The *Ĥadīths* to which Ibn Kathīr refers as confirming this Qur'ānic statement are quoted here. Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate in their authentic collections, the *Ṣahīh,* a *Ĥadīth* narrated by Abū Hurayrah who quotes the Prophet as saying: "Every human being is born with upright nature. [One version puts the statement as: every human being is born believing in this faith.] His parents then make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian."

A *Ĥadīth* related by Muslim quotes the Prophet as saying: "God says I have created My servants following the pure faith. Satans then assaulted them and removed them from their faith, forbidding them what I have made lawful."

Al-Aswad ibn Sarī`, one of the Prophet's companions who belonged to the Sa`d clan reports: "I joined God's Messenger in four expeditions. Once, when our people had killed enemy fighters, they also attacked their children. On hearing this, the Prophet was very angry and rebuked them, saying: 'How is it that some people attack children?' One man said: 'Messenger of God, are they not the children of unbelievers?' He said: `The best among you have been born to unbelievers. Let it be known that every human being is born following the right faith. He will continue to do so until he is able to express himself. His parents then make of him a Jew or a Christian.'"

For our part, we do not exclude the possibility that the event related in this Qur'ānic verse took place as is described, i.e. literally: *"Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves."* (Verse 172) We believe that it could easily happen as God has described, because there is nothing to stop it happening when God wills. But at the same time

we do not exclude the interpretation outlined by Ibn Kathīr and approved by other scholars. At any rate, we can conclude that there is a pledge made by human nature to God Himself, declaring that human nature believes in His oneness and will continue to do so. This means that the essence of God's oneness is well established in human nature, and every human child is born with this clear tendency. It deviates from it only when an external factor corrupts its nature by the manipulation of the dual susceptibility of human beings to follow right guidance or to deviate from it. This is a latent susceptibility which can be influenced by external factors and circumstances.

We go beyond this to say that the truth of God's oneness is also well established in the nature of all existence, of which human nature forms only a part. It continues to be a part of that whole existence, governed by the same laws and reacting to whatever takes place. The great truth of God's oneness is acknowledged by the nature of the whole universe, as it is also established within human nature itself.

The law of unity which governs the whole existence is clearly evident in the outer appearance of the universe as well as its coherence, the perfect compatibility between its different parts and components, as well as its consistent movement and action. It is also reflected in the complete absence of conflict between the various rules and laws operating in the universe and their practical effects. Furthermore, we see it in the unity of the essence of atoms, according to the latest findings of human knowledge. That essence is radiation that results from all matters when their atoms are made to split and release their charge.

As human knowledge advances, it uncovers more and more of the law of unity that applies to this whole universe, and the rules that dictate its actions and reactions, not automatically, but by God's free will that operates consistently at every moment and every turn. However, we do not rely merely on what is uncovered by human knowledge, which can never be absolute, considering the means available to human beings. We simply take this human knowledge as supporting evidence. Our foremost basis in establishing any universal truth is what is stated by the Creator Himself who knows perfectly what He has created. The Qur'ān leaves no room for doubt that the law which governs this whole universe is the law of unity, set in operation by the consistent will of the single Creator who is limitless in His glory. Nor does the Qur'ān leave any room for doubt that this whole universe submits to its Lord, acknowledges His oneness and worships Him in the way and fashion known to God. Of these we only know what God has told us. We certainly see the effects of this worship in the consistency and coherence that we observe in the universe and its operation.

This same law also applies to man who is, after all, a creature living in this universe. It is firmly rooted in human nature, which feels it instinctively and acts in

consistency with it, as long as it remains sound, far from corrupting influences. When human nature suffers corruption, it becomes less instinctively aware of this law and allows fleeting desires to dictate its action, instead of following its perfect law that is well established within its own constitution.

This law is a covenant that has been made between human nature and its Creator. It is established in every single living cell from the moment it comes into existence. It predates God's messages and messengers. According to this covenant every cell testifies to the Lordship of the one God who has a consistent will that has established a single law to govern the whole universe as well as its own actions and reactions. With such a covenant made with human nature, no one can argue that he is unaware of God's revelations that explain the divine faith or that he knows nothing of God's messages that call on people to believe in His oneness. There is no validity in the argument advanced by anyone who says: "I was born into a family of unbelievers. Therefore, I had no chance of knowing the faith based on belief in God's oneness. I had to follow the footsteps of my forefathers who had erred and caused me to err. Therefore, the responsibility is theirs, not mine". Hence, the Qur'ānic comment on the testimony given by the offspring of Adam's children is stated most clearly: *"[This He did] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, `We were truly unaware of this;' or lest you say, 'It was our forefathers who, in times gone by, associated partners with God, and we were only their late offspring. Will You destroy us on account of what those inventors of falsehood did?'"* (Verses 172-173)

But God knows that human nature is likely to go astray when subjected to the pressures exercised by satans, whether human or *jinn,* who manipulate human weaknesses. He is fully aware that human beings can go far astray once they are set on the way to error. Hence, He has determined, out of His grace, not to hold them to account merely on the basis of this covenant with their nature or the reason He has given them to judge and evaluate matters. He has determined to send them messengers who are given plain revelations, and to make His signs clear so that human nature can be saved from the effects of pressure. In the same way, the human intellect is freed from the shackles of its weaknesses and desires. Had God's knowledge shown that nature and reason were sufficient for people to follow the right path without sending them messengers and messages, He might have made these the basis of accountability. But God's grace has dictated that this basis must be His message: *"Thus We make plain Our revelations so that they may return [to the right path]."* (Verse 174)

They may turn back to their nature and honour their covenant with God. When they operate the faculties of perception and understanding God has established within their souls and constitution, the reality of God's oneness becomes so clear in their minds and causes them to adhere firmly to the faith based on that reality.

Hence, we have to look on those messages and messengers sent by God as an aspect of His grace.

An Analogy to Leave Everyone Speechless

The *sūrah* then gives an example of the practical effects of deviation from sound human nature, betraying its covenant and abandoning God's revelations after having learnt them. The example is shown through a person who has been given God's revelations, plain, direct and easy to grasp. However, he discards them, turning away, clinging to the life of this world and following his desire. This means that he neither fulfils his first covenant nor follows the revelations providing him with clear guidance. Hence, Satan overpowers him and he stands rejected by God, unable to enjoy security or peace.

In its inimitable style, the Qur'ān does not describe this example in such terms. It brings it within a very lively scene, with violent movement, distinctive lines, clear reactions combining both the effect of a bustling life with that of a highly inspiring style: "*Tell them of the man to whom We give Our revelations, and who then discards them. Satan catches up with him and he strays, like many others, into error. Had We so willed, We would have exalted him by means of those (revelations), but he clings to the earth and succumbs to his desires. He may be compared to a dog: no matter how you drive him off he pants on away, and if you leave him alone, he still pants on. That is what the people who reject Our revelations are like. Tell them, then, such stories, so that they may take heed. A dismal example is that provided by those who reject Our revelations; for it is against their own selves that they are sinning.*" (Verses 175-177)

This is a remarkable scene, absolutely new to all that human language knows of vocabulary, expression and image. Here we see a man on whom God bestows His grace, giving him His revelations and favouring him with knowledge to give him a perfect chance to follow the right path and to exalt himself. But he discards it all. The Qur'ānic description shows this man's action as if he is peeling God's guidance off his own body, as if those revelations form a skin that gives him his appearance. Therefore, discarding them requires a very strong action and the exercise of much effort. It is like taking the skin off of a person who is still alive. But this is an apt description, because believing in God is so essential to human existence as a skin to a living creature. Nevertheless, this man, given God's revelations, is exercising a strong effort to take off his protective shield in order to follow his desire and deviate from God's guidance. Thus he falls from the bright and sunny horizon in order to cling to the dark clay. He becomes easy prey for Satan, without any protection from his designs. Satan thus catches up with him and exercises his power over him.

We then look at a miserable and horrific scene in which this creature appears covered with mud, clinging to the earth, taking the shape of a dog that pants away whether he is driven off or left alone. All these scenes follow in quick succession and we follow the rapid change from one scene to the other with complete amazement. When the last scene of a dog always panting away is raised before our eyes, we have the highly significant comment on the whole panorama: "*That is what the people who reject Our revelations are like. Tell them, then, such stories, so that they may take heed. A dismal example is that provided by those who reject Our revelations; for it is against their own selves that they are sinning.*" (Verses 176-177)

That example is certainly applicable to them. Signs indicating guidance and pointers guiding to faith have been provided for them in such a way that these are felt within their own nature and constitution as well as the whole universe around them. They, nevertheless, discard all these to corrupt their own souls and to fall from the position of man to the position of animals. They find themselves just like a dog covered with mud. Faith would have provided them with wings to fly up to an elevated position, and their nature would have ensured for them the fairest form and the best position, but they have chosen instead to come down and occupy a position that can only be described as 'the lowest of the low.'

"*A dismal example is that provided by those who reject Our revelations; for it is against their own selves that they are sinning.*" (Verse 177) Can there be a more dismal example than that? Can there be a worse action than discarding guidance and pulling oneself away from divine revelations? Is there anything more disgraceful than clinging to the lowly life of this earth and succumbing to desires? Can any human being cause himself more wrong than the one who does this? By so doing, he tears apart that protective shield which could have ensured his safety. Instead, he leaves his soul easy prey for Satan and sinks to the level of animals, with all that it entails of worry and uncertainty. He is soon seen as a dog constantly panting away.

Can we think of a more vivid, lively and inspiring description of this case? The Qur'ānic style is at its most effective when it gives such descriptions and examples.

It is pertinent to ask here whether these verses tell a story that actually took place or whether they refer to a particular case that happens frequently. If it is the latter, then it is perfectly right to tell it as a story.

The Example and Its Application

There are reports which tell that these verses speak of a man from Palestine who used to lead a very pious life, prior to the arrival of the Children of Israel in the Holy Land. These reports describe in great detail how he deviated from the truth and then rejected it altogether. No one who has studied the numerous reports that have been

derived from the books of Jewish history, some of which found their way into the commentaries on the Qur'ān, could discount the possibility that the story of this person is just another of these unauthentic reports. It is impossible to be certain of all the details that are given in this story. Moreover, these reports suffer from a great deal of contradiction, compelling us to approach them very cautiously. Some reports suggest that the man belonged to the Children of Israel, and that his name was Bel`am ibn Bā`ūrā'. It is also reported that he belonged to the powerful Philistines. Yet in some other reports he is said to have been an Arab named Umayyah ibn al-Şalt. It is even suggested that the description applies to a man who was contemporary with the Prophet and that his name was Abū `Āmir who earned the title, 'al-Fāsiq', which means `the transgressor'. Other reports suggest that he was a contemporary of the Prophet Moses, while still others mention that he lived at the time of Joshua, who, with the Israelites, fought the Philistines and defeated them. This took place when the Children of Israel had completed forty years in the wilderness after having refused to enter Palestine with Moses. The Qur'ān reports that they said to the Prophet Moses, at that time: *"Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here."* (5: 24) It is mentioned also that the revelations which this man was given included the greatest name of God which ensures the answering of any supplication. On the other hand, it is mentioned that he was given scriptures and that he himself was a prophet. More conflicting details are given.

For our part we have chosen not to go into the details of any of these reports, since there is nothing in the Qur'ānic text itself to support any of them and there is no authentic *ĥadīth* attributing to the Prophet any statement to give any of them more probability. This is in line with our approach which we have chosen in this commentary. We concentrate on the significance of this story describing the conditions of those who deny God's revelations after they have recognized them and deviated from the line they demarcate. This is a frequently encountered state of affairs in human life. Many are those who receive religious education but turn their backs on the guidance it provides. They simply use their knowledge in order to twist the meaning of Qur'ānic revelations so that it can serve the interests of those who are in power, and consequently, their own worldly interests as they see them.

We have seen many a scholar ready to state that Islam, God's religion, adopts a certain attitude when they fully know that what they are saying is in conflict with the truth. They manipulate their knowledge in order to issue rulings that aim to support a ruler that has usurped God's authority and violated His law.

Some of these acknowledge that the authority to legislate belongs to God alone, and that whoever claims such an authority actually claims Godhead and he is, therefore, an unbeliever. They go on to state that whoever acknowledges that authority as belonging to such a person is also an unbeliever. But contrary to their

knowledge of this fact, which is essentially known to all believers, such scholars are ready to include such tyrannical rulers in their prayer, describing them as Muslims and their practices as the highest form of Islam. They conveniently forget their earlier statements that classify such rulers as unbelievers. We have also seen some of these scholars writing lengthy theses on the prohibition of usury, and yet a nod is enough to make them spend long hours writing articles and theses that claim usury to be lawful. Some of them are ready to bless wanton practices and promiscuity giving it a religious guise.

What can all these be other than examples confirming the story of the person who had discarded God's revelations after having received them? Hence, Satan is able to catch up with him and push him further into error. How can such a person be described except in the terms stated by God about the original person in the Qur'ānic example: "*Had We so willed, We would have exalted him by means of those (revelations), but he clings to the earth and succumbs to his desires. He may be compared to a dog: no matter how you drive him off he pants on away, and if you leave him alone, he still pants on.*" (Verse 176)

Had it been God's will to exalt him by means of the knowledge he had received, He would have done so, but He has not, because the person who has received knowledge of God's revelations had chosen to cling to the earth and to follow his own desires in preference to following God's teachings. He is, then, an example of everyone who turns his back on divine religion after having learnt it. Instead of following God's guidance, he pulls himself away from God's blessings in order to be a humiliated follower of Satan and ends up in the derogatory state of animals.

What about the panting that never ceases? As we understand the story and contemplate its various scenes as painted in the Qur'ān, we feel that it refers to that continuous coveting of the worldly pleasures of this life. It is for such pleasures and other trivialities of this world that people discard their knowledge of God's revelations. It is a worried coveting that is never satisfied. Whatever advice you give to such covetous people, they will continue to run after these pleasures and trivialities.

Every day we see new examples of such people everywhere and in all communities. Long periods of time may pass and we hardly see a scholar who does not follow this example. Only a small minority cling to God's guidance and refuse to succumb to Satan or follow their desires. They seek God's support in order not to covet the trifling pleasures of this world that can be bestowed by those who are in power. Hence, the example given in the Qur'ān is not limited to a single case, but occurs in every society and in every generation.

God has commanded His Messenger (peace be upon him) to tell his community,

who were receiving God's revelations, of this type of person so that they may guard against falling to the same temptation. This story is meant to be in the Qur'ān so that it continues to be recited. It may, thus, serve as a warning to those who are given any amount of knowledge, so that they are aware of the need to protect themselves against ending up in such a miserable condition if they run after trivial pleasures. If they do this, they will wrong themselves in a way that no enemy can match. If they allow themselves to move towards such a miserable end, they hurt none but themselves.

In our present time, we have seen some of these imitations of the person mentioned in the Qur'ān. They appear so keen to wrong themselves and so eager to preserve for themselves a position in the depths of hell, as if they fear that their competitors may take it away from them. Every morning they come up with something that puts them firmly in their place in hell. They continue to pant on, coveting this position until they depart from this life.

In comment, we only say: Our Lord, protect us from such a situation; grant us patience and perseverance; strengthen our resolve to follow Your guidance and gather us to You at the end of our lives as true believers who submit themselves to You.

We need now to have another look at this story and how the Qur'ān relates it.

Losers by Choice

What we have here is an example of knowledge that does not provide support or protection against the pressure of desires. Therefore, the person who has such knowledge will nevertheless cling to the earth, unable to free himself from its attractions, and will thus succumb to his desires. Satan then catches up with him and leads him by a leash made of such desires.

Because mere knowledge is not sufficient for protection, the Qur'ān tries to shape Muslim souls and Islamic life on the basis of knowledge formulated into a faith that provides the motive for implementation in everyday life. The Qur'ānic method does not present the faith in the form of a theory to be studied. Such knowledge has no practical effect, either in people's consciences or in life. It does not help man to repel Satan and his schemes. Indeed, it sometimes facilitates Satan's work.

Nor does the Qur'ān present the Islamic faith in the form of a series of studies in Islamic legal or economic systems, or studies in other disciplines relating to the universe or to the human soul. It presents it as a living faith that imparts life to people's hearts and minds and makes its followers aspire to a higher standard. Once this faith is firmly established in a person's heart, it gives him the motivation to put it

into practice. It alerts the system of reception and response in human nature, in order to put man back on the right track. Thus, human nature can respond to its original covenant with God. In fact, the Qur'ān draws human nature to higher concerns and aims, and gives it freedom from worldly concerns, so that it never clings to the life of this world, or to use the Qur'ānic expression, it does not cling to the earth.

The Qur'ān also presents the Islamic faith as a system for reflection and reasoning that is far superior to all human systems. It has indeed been laid down to save human beings from the defects inherent in their own systems that suffer from errors and a deliberate twisting to facilitate desire-satisfaction and surrender to Satan's temptations.

The Qur'ān also presents this religion as a criterion for the truth, putting human minds on the right course and allowing them to evaluate their thoughts, concepts and actions. Whatever is judged as correct by this criterion should be pursued, and whatever is rejected must be abandoned as erroneous.

This religion of Islam is also presented by the Qur'ān as a plan for action that leads humanity step by step along the road that climbs up it to its highest standard and noblest situation. Each step is determined by the Qur'ān itself and in accordance with its concepts and values. Through this practical action it provides human beings with a code of living, basic principles of law, as well as the foundation of an economic, social and political system. When human thinking has been moulded by the Qur'ān, people are able to formulate their own legislation, and their approaches to scientific disciplines that study the universe and human psychology, as well as all that they need in their practical lives. They approach all this from the standpoint of believing in this religion, and strengthen it with the seriousness and practicality of the Islamic law on the one hand and with the requirements of practical life on the other.

Such is the Qur'ānic approach to moulding Muslim minds and Islamic life. An academic study gives only mere knowledge that does not protect people from the temptation of desire and Satan's schemes. It simply cannot do any good for human life.[20]

The *sūrah* then makes a short pause to comment on the example provided in this scene of a person to whom God has given His revelations, but who discards them. In this comment, the *sūrah* tells us that true guidance is provided by God alone: "*He whom God guides is on the right path; whereas those whom He lets go astray are indeed losers.*" (Verse 178) God certainly guides those who make an effort to find guidance. God says in another *sūrah:* "*Those who strive for Us, We shall certainly guide along Our ways.*" (29: 69) He also says elsewhere in the Qur'ān: "*God does not change the condition of a certain people until they themselves initiate change.*" (13: 11) He further says: "*By the*

[20] For further discussion, reference may be made to the Prologue of *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, in Vol. V.

soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and piety. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it." (91: 7-10)

Similarly, God lets go astray anyone who wishes to go astray. He allows him to turn away from the elements of guidance and pointers to the right faith, sealing his heart, ears and eyes in order that he does not hear, see or understand. The next verse in the *sūrah* states: *"We have destined for Hell many of the jinn and many human beings; they have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear. They are like cattle; indeed, they are even further away from the right way. They are the truly heedless."* (Verse 179) They are described in another *sūrah* as follows: *"There is sickness in their hearts, and God has aggravated their sickness."* (2: 10) God also says in the Qur'ān: *"Those who disbelieve and persist in wrongdoing will find that God will never forgive them, nor will He guide them onto any road, except the road to hell, wherein they will abide beyond the count of time."* (4: 168-169)

When we study carefully all the texts that mention guidance and going astray, relating them to one another and taking them as a whole, we find a consistent line that abandons all the controversy of the different Muslim sects or the controversies of Christian scholastic debate and the various philosophies concerning the whole question of predestination. God's will, which applies to human beings, is that God creates every man and woman with equal ability to follow guidance or go astray. In addition, God plants in human nature the ability to recognize the truth of the One God and to follow it, and He gives every human being a mind to distinguish guidance from error. Furthermore, He sends messengers with plain revelations to reawaken human nature when it lies dormant, and to provide guidance to the human mind when it goes astray. After all this there remains the dual susceptibility to follow guidance or error, for man has been created with this in his very nature. God's will has also determined that whoever strives for guidance shall have it. On the other hand, anyone who chooses not to use the mind God has given him, or not to use his sight and hearing in understanding the signs and pointers that are placed everywhere in the universe, and those contained in divine messages, shall be left to go astray.

Thus, in all situations, it is only God's will that is fulfilled. This means that everything happens only by God's will, not by the power of anyone else. This would not have been so, except for the fact that God has so willed. Then, in the universe there is no other will to initiate matters and events. Within the framework of this great work, man chooses his line of action and reaps the results of either following right guidance or going astray.

This is the Islamic concept, which is derived from the numerous Qur'ānic statements when taken together as mutually complementary. These statements must never be taken individually according to the prejudices of different sects. They must

never be set in opposition to each other for argument and debate.

Sealing All Means of Perception

"*He whom God guides is on the right path; whereas those whom He lets go astray are indeed losers.*" (Verse 178) This verse sets out the terms very clearly. According to this law, which has already been explained in detail, whoever has God's guidance is truly on the right path, and will surely attain his goal. He will be able to follow guidance in order to attain success and prosperity in the hereafter. Conversely, a person whom God lets go astray, in accordance with the same law, is indeed the loser, because he has lost everything and gained nothing, no matter how much he has in this life. All this accounts for nothing. We need only to remember that such a person has lost himself. What gain can such a person have after incurring such a loss?

This explanation of this verse is supported by the next verse: "*We have destined for Hell many of the jinn and many human beings; they have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear. They are like cattle; indeed, they are even further away from the right way. They are the truly heedless.*" (Verse 179) Those large numbers *of jinn* and human beings are destined for hell. Why? And what for? There are two aspects to consider here. The first is that God's perfect knowledge shows that such creatures will inevitably go to hell. For God to know this does not require that actions which earn the punishment of hell actually take place. God's knowledge is absolute, free from the constraints of time, action and place. Nothing is added to God's knowledge as a result of a motion or an action that takes place in our world.

The second aspect to consider is that God's perfect knowledge does not in any way direct these creatures to go astray so as to incur the punishment of hell as a result. It is they who are just like the Qur'ānic verse describes: "*They have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear.*" (Verse 179) It is they who have not opened their hearts and minds to learn and understand. Proofs, signs, indications and pointers of all sorts are available throughout the universe and in the divine messages, providing guidance which can easily be understood by hearts and minds that are kept open. It is they who have chosen not to open their ears to listen to God's revelations. They have kept all these means of perception and understanding idle and unused. As a result, they live a life of wilful ignorance: "*They are like cattle; indeed, they are even further away from the right way; they are the truly heedless.*" (Verse 179)

Those who are heedless of the signs God has placed in the universe and in life itself, and choose not to reflect on the events that take place around them, and do not see God's will behind them all, are indeed further astray than cattle. Animals have

natural tendencies to guide them. Human beings and *jinn* have been given hearts, minds, eyes and ears to hear, look and understand. If they choose not to open their means of perception, and prefer instead to go about life without reflecting about its meaning and aim, and without looking at its events and what they signify, or hearing its messages, they place themselves below animals who have only been given their natural tendencies. As a result, they are destined for hell. It is God's will that drives them there ever since He has given them their dual susceptibility and made the law of punishment and reward. God knows right at the beginning that their action and attitude will lead them to hell.

The *sūrah* follows this with a clear instruction to the believers to ignore those who deviate from the right path and go astray. At the time of the Prophet, those were the unbelievers who used to maintain idolatry in opposition to the Islamic message. They used to blaspheme against God's names, twist His attributes, and assign them to some of the idols they ascribe as partners to God. "*God has the finest names, so appeal to Him by these and stay away from those who blaspheme against His names. They shall be requited for all they do.*" (Verse 180)

The Arabic word in this Qur'ānic verse which is translated here as '*blaspheme against His names*' signifies also twisting and distortion. The idolaters among the Arabs distorted God's fine names and gave them to their alleged deities. They distorted the name Allah so as to call one of their idols al-Lāt, and twisted His attribute, al-`Azīz, which means the Mighty, to call another idol, al-`Uzzā. The Qur'ānic verse states clearly that these fine names and attributes belong to God alone. It instructs the believers to call Him alone by these names, without any distortion or twisting. They are also instructed to ignore the twisters who have gone far astray, and not to bother about them. They are left to God who determines their punishment. This is a very serious warning indeed.

This instruction to ignore those who blaspheme against God is not limited to that particular occasion or to those who twist and distort God's names and attributes, or who assign them to their alleged deities. It applies to all sorts of blasphemy, such as those who adopt a twisted or deviant concept of Godhead. These include those who claim that God has a son or those who allege that His will is subject to the laws of nature, or those who claim that His actions are similar to the actions of human beings, when there is no-one and nothing like Him. It also applies to those who claim that He is the deity in heaven who conducts the affairs of the universe and who determines people's destiny in the hereafter, but who negate at the same time His position as the deity on earth and in human life. Such people claim that He may not legislate for human life, because people are the ones who legislate for themselves in the light of their experience and guided by their interests, as they themselves see these interests. In this respect, the people are their own deities, or some of them are

the deities of others. All this is deviation and blasphemy against God, His names and attributes. Muslims are commanded to ignore all this and not to bother about it. The blasphemers and deviants are warned here that they will receive the right punishment for what they do.

A Community with a Well Defined Purpose

The *sūrah* has so far described types of people, particularly those whom God has destined to abide in hell. These are described as ones who *"have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear."* (Verse 179) A group of them are described as ones who `blaspheme against God's names' and distort them. The *sūrah* goes on to describe other types of people, telling us about a community which holds fast to the truth and calls on people to believe in it, and implement it with determination and conscientiousness. At the other extreme there is a community of people who deny the truth and reject God's revelations. The *sūrah* tells us clearly that the first community exists without a shred of doubt. They guard the truth and hold tight to it when other people abandon it and deviate far away from it. When others reject the truth as a lie, they remain steadfast. The *sūrah* further explains that the others shall have a dreadful end, as God will punish them through His mighty schemes: *"Among those whom We have created there is a community who guide others by means of the truth and with it establish justice. As for those who deny Our revelations, We will lead them on, step by step, from whence they cannot tell; for although I may give them respite, My subtle scheme is mighty."* (Verses 181-183)

Humanity would not have deserved any honour had it not been for the fact that there will always be, even in the worst circumstances, that community which God calls by its Islamic term, *ummah.* By definition, the *ummah* is a community which believes in the same faith that remains its basic bond, and obeys the same leadership that supervises the implementation of that faith. It is then the community that adheres to, and implements the truth, in all situations. It is the guardian of God's trust, the witness to His covenant with people, and it is the community to provide God's evidence against those who go astray turning their backs on His covenant.

The description given here of this community deserves reflection. It is a community *"who guide others by means of the truth and with it establish justice."* (Verse 181) This community will continue to be present at all times, even though it may at certain periods be very small in number. Its main characteristic is that those who belong to it *"guide others by means of the truth"*. (Verse 181) They call on people to accept the truth, and will never relinquish their task of advocating the truth. They are not happy to keep it to themselves, or to be inward looking. They try to publicize the truth they know, and guide other people to it. Thus, they have a role of leadership

among those around them who have strayed away from this truth, and who have violated their covenant. They adopt a positive attitude, which is not limited to knowing the truth but goes beyond that knowledge in order to advocate the truth and guide to it.

But this is not all that they do about the truth. Their other characteristic is that they `establish justice' with the truth. This means that they go well beyond knowing the truth and advocating it, to take positive steps to implement the truth in human life and make it the criterion for judgement in order to establish justice that cannot be based on anything other than the truth. The crux of the matter is that the truth has not been revealed only to remain a mere branch of knowledge studied by scholars, or even an admonition to point out the right path. The truth has been revealed so that people conduct their lives according to it. It should govern people's concepts so that these are moulded in accordance with it, and it should govern people's rites of worship so that these provide a practical image of the truth in as far as the relationship between human beings and their Lord is concerned. The truth has also been revealed in order to mould practical life so that all systems are in line with its principles and subject to the laws derived from it. It also shapes people's habits, traditions, moral values and behaviour, as well as their philosophical doctrines, culture and all branches of knowledge, providing the criteria to evaluate all these. When all this takes place, the truth is present in human life, and justice, which can only be based on the truth, is established. Thus, the establishment of the truth in human life is the task undertaken by this community, after having made the truth known and worked to guide other people to it.

This religion of Islam has a nature that is too plain to admit any ambiguity, and too solid to allow any equivocation. Those who stand against this faith find it exceedingly hard to force it out of its clear and solid nature. Therefore, they exert tireless efforts and mount ceaseless campaigns, utilizing all means and methods, in order to change its direction and obscure its nature. They resort to unrestrained brutality to crush the advocates of Islamic revival in any part of the world, utilizing certain regimes that they establish and support. They even utilize professional scholars to work against this faith, distorting God's words, and making lawful what God has forbidden. These professional scholars try to make God's law appear equivocal and they bless indecency and promiscuity, even giving them Islamic labels. They pat on the back those who are fascinated by materialistic culture and admire its theories and systems. Their aim is to manoeuvre Islam into imitating these theories and situations and to borrow materialistic laws and methods. The Islamic faith, which provides a system to govern all aspects of life, is described by such people as a historical event that took place in the past and cannot be brought back! At the same time, they lavish praise on this past to pacify the Muslims of today. They then tell

them that Islam should remain alive today in the hearts of its followers as a set of beliefs and acts of worship, not as a law or code of living. Islam and Muslims should be satisfied with their glorious past. Alternatively, they go on, Islam should be subject to evolution, so that it submits to the realities of life, endorsing everything that people wish to adopt of concepts and laws.

To consolidate the regimes they create in the world that was Islamic, they provide theories that take the form of a faith and religion to replace the old Islamic faith. They even provide for these theories a Qur'ān to be recited and studied so that it can replace the Qur'ān revealed by God. As a last resort, they try to change the nature of society in these countries, in the same way as they try to change the nature of this religion, so that Islam will not find receptive hearts to accept its guidance. They transform communities into human beings that are lost in the quagmire of pleasure, sex and lust, preoccupied with the necessities of life to ensure their survival, and unable to find these necessities without hard toil. Thus they ensure that after having worked hard for food and sex, people are unable to listen to any voice of guidance or to think of religion.

It is a ferocious fight against this faith and the community who guide others by means of its truth and try to establish justice with it. It is a fight where no qualms are shown about using any type of weapon, in which all means are used and for which all the forces, talents, media and international organizations and machinery are mobilized. Indeed, it is merely to sustain this fight and add to its fuel that we see certain regimes supported and patronized by world powers. Needless to say, such regimes would not survive for a day without such support.

Nevertheless, the clear and solid nature of this religion stands firm in this ferocious battle. The Muslim community that guards the truth despite its small number and poor equipment, continues to resist with success the brutal efforts that aim to crush and exterminate it. God will certainly accomplish His purpose.

Points for Reflection

"As for those who deny Our revelations, We will lead them on, step by step, from whence they cannot tell; for although I may give them respite, My subtle scheme is mighty." (Verses 182-183) This is indeed the power they do not reckon with when they launch their ferocious battle against this faith and the community that follows it with conscientiousness and makes it its basic bond. Those who deny God's revelations remain always unaware of this power, and can never think that whatever means they are given are no more than something with which to lead them on, step by step. They are only given respite for a while. They do not believe in the might of God's subtle schemes. They support one another, and they only believe in the power they see with

their eyes on earth. As a result, they forget about the Almighty, the One who commands all the power. But God's law in respect of those who deny His revelations remains the same. He gives them free rein, and allows them time to indulge in their excesses and disobedience. But all this only leads them along the road to ruin. A subtle but mighty scheme is being prepared for them. The question is: by whom? It is by the Almighty who has all power. While they remain unaware, the great prize is prepared for the believers who guide others by means of the truth and work for the establishment of justice on its basis.

This serious and alarming threat was directed first of all at certain people in Makkah who denied God's revelations, but Qur'ānic statements always go beyond the immediate occasion to have a more general import. It threatens these people because of their attitude towards the Muslim community, described here according to Islamic terminology as a nation or *ummah*. They are warned that they are only being given respite, and led on by a mighty scheme. This threat is followed by calling on them to use their hearts, eyes and ears, in order to spare themselves the fate of Hell. The Qur'ān also calls on them to reflect on the position of God's Messenger who explains the truth to them and guides them to it, and to consider God's dominion of the heavens and the earth and the indicators placed in this kingdom. It draws their attention to the fact that time passes and that their appointed hour is drawing near, while they remain unaware.

> *Have they not thought things over? Their companion is no madman; he is only a plain warner. Have they not considered [God's] dominion over the heavens and the earth, and all that God has created, and [reflected] that it may well be that their own term is drawing near? In what other message after this will they, then, believe? (Verses 184-185)*

The Qur'ān shakes them and wakes them up in order to rescue their nature, minds and feelings from the pressures that weigh heavily on them. It addresses their humanity with all its systems of reception and response. It does not make an academic argument, but tries to address their whole nature: "*Have they not thought things over? Their companion is no madman; he is only a plain warner.*" (Verse 184)

In their propaganda campaign against the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the notables of the Quraysh[21] tried to deceive the public by saying that Muhammad was a madman who uttered strange words, unfamiliar to normal human beings.

Those notables of the Quraysh were fully aware that they were lying. Numerous reports suggest that they were fully aware of the truth concerning the Prophet and

[21] The Prophets tribe which lived in Makkah and which was dominant in Arabia. — Editor's note.

his message. They could not even stop themselves listening to the Qur'ān and responding to its appeal. A well-known report mentions that three of them, al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, Abū Sufyān and Abū Jahl met one another on three consecutive nights after having sat for a long while during the night listening to the Qur'ān.[22] Another well-known report describes how `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah was deeply touched when the Prophet recited to him a long passage of *Sūrah 41*.[23] There is also a famous report describing how they held a conference as the pilgrimage season approached, to discuss what to say to pilgrims from faraway areas about the Qur'ān. Al-Walīd ibn Al- Mughīrah finally instructed them to say that the Qur'ān was the product of sorcery.[24] All these reports confirm that they were not unaware of the truth of this faith. They only adopted an arrogant attitude and feared for their authority which they felt to be threatened by the declaration that there was no deity other than God and that Muhammad was His Messenger. That declaration constituted a threat to all types of human tyranny as it put an end to all human attempts to force people to submit to anyone other than God.

They manipulated the unique style of the Qur'ān and the fact that it was so different from all familiar human styles. They also made use of the common belief concerning a relationship between prophecy and madness that originates from the fact that a mad person may say incomprehensible words and utterances which someone close to him might interpret any way he likes, claiming that it was given him from another world. Those Arabs manipulated that legacy in order to deceive people alleging that what Muhammad said was the product of madness.[25]

The Qur'ān calls on them to consider and reflect: they had known this companion of theirs, i.e. the Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him), for a long time and they had never experienced any fault with him. Indeed, they themselves testified to his honesty, truthfulness and wisdom. They accepted him as an arbiter when a quarrel erupted between them over which tribe was to have the honour of putting the Black Stone back in its position. They accepted his judgement which spared them a potentially very costly battle. They trusted him with their valuables which they kept in his custody until the day when he left Makkah to migrate to Madinah. His cousin, `Alī, returned every valuable article to its owner.

The Qur'ān calls on them to consider and reflect on all this. They had known Muhammad for a very long time and were fully aware of his character. Was he a man to experience any madness? Were any of his words or actions indicative of

[22] Vol. III, p. 346, and Vol. V, pp. 92-93.
[23] Vol. V, pp. 94-95.
[24] This will be discussed in detail in our commentary on *Sūrah* 74.
[25] For further discussion of the link between prophethood and madness in *jāhiliyyah* communities, see Vol. V, pp. 124-127.

madness? Certainly not: *"Their companion is no madman; he is only a plain warner."* (Verse 184) There is certainly nothing wrong with his mind or with his speech. He speaks plainly to warn people about what is awaiting them. His statements could never be confused with those of mad people and his actions were certainly the actions of a very wise person.

Reflect and Consider

And then comes this inviting question: *"Have they not considered [God's] dominion over the heavens and the earth, and all that God has created?"* (Verse 185) This serves as another deeply touching call. They are invited to open their eyes and hearts to this vast kingdom with all that it contains. Reflection with open heart and mind is sufficient to revive human nature and make it receptive to the truth underlined by God's inimitable creation and all its miraculous aspects testifying to its being the work of God, the only Creator. Reflection over anything God has created — and His creation is so greatly varied in the kingdoms of heaven and earth — is bound to leave both heart and mind in a genuine state of speechless amazement. The mind will then start to look for the origin of this creation, and the power that has made it all in such a perfect system. Why has each creature taken its present shape and not taken an alternative form from among the countless shapes which exist in nature? Why has the system of creation followed this particular route to the exclusion of all other possible ones? Why have all creatures persisted in following this particular way, without changing it over the centuries? What is the secret behind the unity that we can detect in the nature of all creation, unless it is the result of a single will that gives practical manifestation to a consistent act of creation?

A living body, indeed a single living cell is so miraculous in its existence, make-up and behaviour. Its process of transformation continues all the time, yet it preserves its existence and has the means to give birth to new generations of its kind. Moreover, it knows its function and manages to keep it up in its successive generations. Who can reflect on the existence of a single cell and make a statement that this universe is run without God, or that God has partners to do the job with Him? Who can be rationally at ease when he makes such a statement? How can he make his nature and conscience agree with it?

The very fact that life continues through marriage and procreation is a testimony to the elaborate scheme of creation made by God, the only Creator. This should be reflected upon by every thinking human being. If it was not for God, who would guarantee that life would always enjoy the proper ratio of males and females, generation after generation, to ensure the continuity of marriage and procreation? How is it that there never comes a time when life produces only the male or the

female variety? Should this ever happen, then procreation would come to an end. It is important to ask: who maintains the right balance in every generation?

Yet balance is clearly visible throughout God's dominion of the heavens and the earth, not merely in this single life phenomenon. We recognize it in the make-up of the atom, just as we see it in the constitution of the galaxy. Proper balance is also noticeable between living things and inanimate objects as well. Should this balance be tilted by a fraction one way or the other, this whole universe would instantly collapse. Who maintains this fine balance in the heavens and the earth?

The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān did not have the knowledge to realize the extent of this balance and coherence in the heavens and the earth and in all God's creation. But human nature itself responds to the universe in an unspoken language that it certainly feels in its depth. It is sufficient that a human being should reflect over what he sees in the universe, with an open eye and a receptive mind in order to receive its guidance and inspiration.

When they received these signals, human beings recognized by their nature that God had created them. They were never unaware of this fact, but they were drawn to error in identifying their true Lord, until they were provided with guidance through God's messages. However, the neo-atheists, who advocate so-called `scientific socialism', are nonentities who have corrupted their nature. Indeed, they deny their own nature and reject its consistent pointers. When one of them, an astronaut, went into space and beheld that dazzling scene of the earth looking as a ball suspended in mid-air, he cried out naturally, "Who holds it in position like that?" But when he returned to earth and remembered the tyranny of the Communist state, he said that he did not find God over there.[26] He simply suppressed the discourse of his nature as he reflected on an aspect of the kingdom of the heavens and the earth.

God who addresses man with the Qur'ān is the One who has created man and knows his nature. He concludes this invitation to reflect and consider with a reminder of death that may come suddenly taking them unawares: *"Have they not considered [God's] dominion over the heavens and the earth, and all that God has created, and [reflected] that it may well be that their own term is drawing near?"* (Verse 185) Can they tell that their term is not fast drawing to a close? Why do they prefer to remain heedless of God's reminders when they cannot fathom what God has kept hidden and when they cannot break loose from His will?

This last touch on the unknown end that may come suddenly shakes the human heart violently, so that it may wake up, think and reflect. God, who has revealed the

[26] This is a reference to the astronaut sent on the second Soviet manned space mission, when the Soviet authorities made a fuss about this statement. It is noted that the author refers to scientific socialism as the epitome of atheism. This was the trend when he was writing, particularly in Egypt which adopted such policies in the early 1960s. — Editor's note.

Qur'ān and created man, knows that this emphasis is bound to re-awaken every heart and open every mind. Yet some people may still choose to deliberately deny the truth: *"In what other message after this will they, then, believe?"* (Verse 185) This message is the final one, and there will not be any following message to soften the hearts of those who choose to disbelieve.

We note how a single verse uses several ways and means to show us that when the Qur'ān addresses human nature, it does not leave any aspect of it untouched. It does not present a cold, logical argument, nor does it ignore the human intellect either. Indeed, it ensures that the mind is awakened just as the Qur'ān puts its message to the whole human being. When the human mind has been reawakened, it is invited to think, consider and reflect as life begins to send messages to it. This must remain the method of those who advocate faith. Human beings remain in their human status. They have not evolved into a different species. The Qur'ān remains the eternal work of God. God's address to man remains the same, even though human knowledge may have developed and greatly increased.

A Question That Needs No Answer

Now, the *sūrah* takes a short pause to restate God's law that is concerned with guidance and error. God has willed to provide guidance to everyone who seeks it and works for it. On the other hand, anyone who turns away from guidance and closes his mind and heart to the pointers to faith will be left alone to go astray. This law is restated here in connection with the situation of those people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. As we have seen, the Qur'ān makes use of a single case or a particular example in order to state a consistent law.

"Those whom God lets go astray will have no guide; and He leaves them in their overweening arrogance to stumble along blindly." (Verse 186) Those who go astray do so because they choose not to consider and reflect. When people turn their minds away from the signs placed by God in the universe, they will be left to go astray. They will have none to guide them after that: *"Those whom God lets go astray will have no guide."* (Verse 186) And whoever is so left alone in accordance with God's law that we have explained will continue with his arrogance and will, therefore, be left to stumble along blindly. There is no injustice in that. Those people have chosen to keep their eyes and hearts shut, and not to reflect on the miraculous aspects of creation and the secrets of the universe. They have decided not to listen to the testimony of everything that God has created. Wherever one looks in the universe, one is bound to find a sign or a telling message pointing one in the right direction. Whatever man looks at, either within himself, or in the world around him, he is bound to recognize God's hand and His inimitable way of creation. If he chooses to remain blind to all this, he is left in

his blindness. If he chooses to adopt an attitude of arrogance and to ignore the truth, he is left to his own devices, until he finally lands himself in ruin: *"He leaves them in their overweening arrogance to stumble along blindly."* (Verse 186)

Some of those arrogant, misguided and blind people who prefer not to see what is around them, questioned the Prophet (peace be upon him) about the final Hour, the timing of which God has chosen not to reveal. They are the same as the one who does not see what is under his feet but wants to see what lies beyond the horizon. Hence, their questioning: *"They ask you about the Last Hour: 'When will it come to pass?' Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with my Lord alone. None but He will reveal it at its appointed time. It will weigh heavily on the heavens and the earth; and it will not fall on you except suddenly'. They will ask you further as if you yourself persistently enquire about it. Say: Knowledge of it rests with God alone, though most people remain unaware."* (Verse 187)

The call to believe in the hereafter and its related concept of punishment and reward came as a complete surprise to the idolatrous Arabs. Although this concept is fundamental to Abraham's faith, the grandfather of those idolatrous people, and also to the faith of their noble father, Ishmael, their links with the faith of submission to God preached by Abraham and Ishmael were completely severed. The concept of the hereafter had been erased from their minds and they received it again with total amazement and complete surprise. They wondered at the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) because he told them about life after death, resurrection, reckoning, punishment and reward. This is stated clearly in the Qur'ān: *"The unbelievers would say: 'Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that [after your death,] when you will have been scattered in countless fragments, you shall be in a new act of creation? Does he attribute his own lying inventions to God, or is he a mad man?' Truly, those who deny the life to come are doomed, for they have gone far astray."* (34: 7-8)

God knows that no community may be able to assume the leadership of mankind and bear testimony against them, as is the task of the Muslim community, unless the concept of the hereafter is clear in their minds, deeply entrenched in their consciences. To think of life as only this limited period confined to this world will not raise such a community to assume such a task.

To believe in the hereafter provides broadness of concept and vision as well as a wider perspective. It also opens up life to make it go beyond this limited world. This is necessary for the formation of the human self so that it is fit to assume its great role. It is also necessary to enable human beings to control their desires and narrow ambitions. Moreover, it gives human beings the sense of broadness they need to overcome the feeling of despair when they encounter short-term adverse results, or when they have to make painful sacrifices. If believers were to despair, they would not be able to continue with the propagation of the truth and all its goodness, or to lead mankind to all that is good. All such qualities are necessary to fulfil man's great

task.

Believing in the hereafter is the dividing line between the broadness and narrowness of vision and perspective. Their broadness is natural to man, while their narrowness results from concentrating only on the physical and the carnal. Adopting an animal perspective can never be suitable for assuming the leadership of humanity, or the fulfilment of God's trust given to man as the creature God has placed in charge of the earth.

For all this, strong emphasis has been laid on believing in the hereafter in all divine religions. This is brought to its climax in Islam which gives such belief in the hereafter its greatest clarity, broadness and depth. This is what makes the sense of the hereafter much stronger among the Muslim community than its sense of this world in which we actually live. That is indeed what makes the Muslim community fit to lead mankind and to make its leadership characterized by wisdom and right guidance.

The Hour That Will Come to Pass

At this point in the *sūrah* we look at the scene of the unbelievers' surprise, wonder and incredulousness towards the concept of the hereafter. This is all seen in their questioning that is given in overtones of ridicule and derision: *"They ask you about the Last Hour: `When will it come to pass?"* (Verse 187)

That Hour is part of a store of knowledge that God has kept to Himself and revealed to no creature. But the unbelievers questioned the Prophet about it either to test his knowledge, or to express their surprise and amusement, or to portray their contempt and derision. They ask about the time when it will take place: *"When will it come to pass?"* (Verse 187)

But the Prophet (peace be upon him) is a human being who never made any claim to know anything that lies beyond the reach of human perception. He is instructed to leave that to the Lord, and to tell people that its knowledge is part of the attributes of Godhead. As a human being, he does not make any claim to anything that goes beyond the limits of humanity. He knows only what his Lord has vouchsafed to him of divine revelations.

"Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with my Lord alone. None but He will reveal it at its appointed time.'" (Verse 187) God, who alone knows the Hour and its timing, will not reveal it until its appointed time. No one else can say anything about it with any degree of certitude.

Their attentions are turned away from asking about its time to consider its nature and to reflect on its seriousness. It is certainly a matter of great importance, and its

burden is heavy indeed. Its weight is felt in the heavens and the earth. Besides, it comes suddenly when people who do not pay attention to it are still unaware of its approach: *"It will weigh heavily on the heavens and the earth; and it will not fall on you except suddenly."* (Verse 187) Therefore, it is only wise to be prepared for it before it comes suddenly, when no precaution will be of use. Preparations and precautions must be taken well in advance, when time is ample and people still expect to live longer. No one knows when it will exactly arrive. Therefore, everyone should prepare for it now, without losing a moment or an hour, because it may come at any time.

The *sūrah* wonders at those who question the Prophet (peace be upon him) about the Hour. They do not understand the nature of the divine message or the Messenger, and they do not know the nature of Godhead, and the attribute of humility the Prophet adopts towards his Lord. *"They will ask you further as if you yourself persistently enquire about it."* (Verse 187) They always ask about it, as if you are required to disclose its time. But God's Messenger does not ask his Lord about something when he is aware that God has chosen to keep it to Himself: *"Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with my Lord alone.'"* (Verse 187) He has chosen to keep that information to Himself and not to reveal it to any of His creatures, *"though most people remain unaware."* (Verse 187)

But this does not apply to knowledge of the Hour only. It applies to everything in the realm which lies beyond the reach of human perception. It is God alone who knows all that there is in that realm. He does not give knowledge of any of it, except to someone He chooses, at the time and in the measure He determines. Hence, people do not have the ability to cause themselves any benefit or harm. They may do something which they hope to be beneficial to them, but they soon discover its consequences to be very harmful. Or they may take an initiative to remove some harm but they do not reckon with its adverse results. Or they may do something reluctantly, because they are forced to do it, and then discover it to be very beneficial for them. Alternatively, they may approach something with enthusiasm, only to discover that it results in their own suffering: *"It may well be that you hate a thing although it is good for you, and love a thing although it is bad for you."* (2: 216)

This is summed up by an Arab poet who says: "Would that someone shows me my destination before I start my journey! How could that be when one has to complete a journey to get to one's destination."[27] This is the human position in relation to what lies beyond human perception. Human beings may achieve great progress, but when it comes to what God has chosen to keep away from them, they will remain confined to the limitation of their human knowledge.

[27] Ibn al-Rūmī.

In his great position of honour and his closeness to his Lord, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is commanded to declare to mankind that when it comes to the realm that lies beyond our perception, he is only a human being who can cause himself neither benefit nor harm. This is because he is not given that knowledge, nor is he one to know the destination before starting the journey, or the consequences of actions before they take place. Hence, he cannot choose his actions on the basis of their consequences, because these are withheld from him. He has to choose his actions, and then the result takes place as God has determined: "*Say: 'It is not within my power to bring benefit to, or avert evil from, myself, except as God may please. Had I possessed knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception, I would have availed myself of much that is good and no evil would have ever touched me. I am no more than one who gives warning, and a herald of good news to people who believe.'*" (Verse 188)

With this declaration, the monotheistic faith of Islam is completely and absolutely purged of every trace of idolatry of whatever shape or form. God has His 'unique attributes in which no human being has any share, not even Muhammad, God's chosen and beloved Messenger (peace be upon him). Human power and knowledge stop at the point of *ghayb,* which is the Islamic term for what lies beyond the reach of human perception. Within the limitations of humanity, God's Messenger himself stands, and his role is well-defined: *"I am no more than one who gives warning, and a herald of good news to people who believe."* (Verse 188)

God's Messenger is indeed a warner and a bearer of good news to all mankind. But the believers alone benefit by the warnings he conveys and the good news he brings. They are the ones to understand and appreciate his message, and they realize what it is all about. Moreover, they are the elite of all mankind. After all, from among all mankind, they are the ones to follow God's Messenger.

A statement does not impart its true significance except to an open heart and a receptive mind. The Qur'ān does not open its treasures or give its secrets except to true believers. Some of the Prophet's companions used to say that they had faith before they were given the Qur'ān. It is that faith which enabled them to grasp the meaning of the Qur'ān so fully and understand its meanings and objectives so comprehensively. Thus they were able to scale the unscaleable in the shortest imaginable period of time.

That unique generation of the Prophet's companions found the Qur'ān so charming, enlightening and decisive to a degree that can only be appreciated by people who attain to the same standard of faith. It is true that the Qur'ān directed their souls to faith, but it was faith that opened for them in the Qur'ān treasures that could have never been opened through any other means. They lived by the Qur'ān and for the Qur'ān. Hence, they became a unique generation the like of which history has never witnessed again in the same standard and in the shape of a whole, large

community. However, throughout history, there have been individuals who follow in the footsteps of that uniquely great generation. They dedicated themselves for a very long period to the Qur'ān alone. Its clear spring remained untainted by any human ideas. In addition to the Qur'ān, there was only the guidance provided by God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and that guidance drew on the same lines as the Qur'ān. Hence, that generation could easily make its remarkable achievements.

Any community of people who aspire to make similar achievements should follow in the footsteps of that generation. They should conduct their lives on the basis of the Qur'ān and live for it over a long period of time, freeing their hearts and minds from any other human ideas. Only in this way can they begin to be like that generation.

All Created From One Soul

The *sūrah* then begins a new drive to re-emphasize the question of God's oneness. It starts first with a story which describes the initial deviation within the human mind from believing in God's oneness to associating partners with Him. This story serves as a model for the deviation of the Arab idolaters from the faith of their first father, the Prophet Abraham. They are then put face to face with their own practices and the deities they associate with God. That all this is false and ludicrous is instantly apparent. Then God's Messenger is directed to challenge those pagan Arabs and the deities they worship, declaring at the same time, that, for his part, he believes in God alone, his patron and protector.

> *It is He who has created you all from a single soul, and out of it brought into being its mate, so that he might incline with love towards her. When he has consorted with her, she conceives a light burden, which she carries with ease. Then, when she grows heavy, they both appeal to God, their Lord: "Grant us a goodly child and we will be truly grateful.' Yet when He has granted them a goodly child, they associate with Him partners, particularly in respect of what He has granted them. Exalted is God above anything people may associate with Him as partners. Do they associate with Him those that can create nothing, while they themselves have been created, and neither can they give them any support nor can they even help themselves. If you call them to guidance they will not follow you. It is all the same whether you call them or keep silent. Those whom you invoke beside God are God's servants, just like you. Invoke them, then, and let them answer you, if what you claim is true. Have they, perchance, feet on which they could walk, or hands with which to grasp things, or eyes with which to see, or ears with which to hear? Say: Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous. Those whom you invoke beside Him cannot give you any support, nor can they even help themselves. If you pray to them for guidance, they will not hear you. You may see them looking at you but they do not see. (Verses 189-198)*

This whole drive explains that once people start to adopt deviant ideas and move away from believing in, and worshipping God alone, their foolishness and deviation will know no limit, and they can no longer think and reflect properly. We see how deviation that starts on a small scale takes people far away from the truth of the right path.

> *It is He who has created you all from a single soul, and out of it brought into being its mate, so that he might incline with love towards her. When he has consorted with her, she conceives a light burden, which she carries with ease. Then, when she grows heavy, they both appeal to God, their Lord: "Grant us a goodly child and we will be truly grateful."* (Verse 189)

It is the pure nature with which all human beings are born. By nature, they turn to God, acknowledging that He is their only Lord, in situations of fear and hope alike. The example given here for human nature begins with the origin of creation and the make-up of couples and families: *"It is He who has created you all from a single soul, and out of it brought into being its mate, so that he might incline with love towards her."* (Verse 189)

It is thus a single soul and a single nature, although it has different functions for the male and the female. These differences also serve as a means to make a man incline with love towards his wife and find comfort with her. This is the Islamic outlook on the nature of man and the role of marriage. It is a complete, integrated and honest outlook stated by this religion over fourteen centuries ago when other religions that had deviated from the right path used to consider the woman as the root of human misery. She was looked on as a curse, an impurity and a tool for seduction that man should guard against as much as he could. Pagan beliefs continue even today to consider the woman as little more than an article at home, or, at best, a servant who is not to be given any status at all.

The original purpose of the meeting of a human couple is to provide love, comfort, and a settled happy life, which provides an ideal setting for the rearing of young children. It is in such a happy and loving environment that a new human generation is prepared to take over the task of promoting and adding to human civilization. The meeting of a human couple is not meant only to satisfy a fleeting desire or give a temporary pleasure. Nor is it made the basis of a quarrel, or a stage for a conflict between rules and specializations, or for a duplication of such rules and specializations. Ignorant communities, past and contemporary, have often fallen into such traps.

The story then begins, right at the first stage: *"When he has consorted with her, she conceives a light burden, which she carries with ease."* (Verse 189) The Qur'ān employs a

highly refined expression, particularly in the Arabic text, when it describes the initial relationship between a married couple, *"When he has consorted with her."* It selects such fine expressions to provide, and to impart refinement to the meeting itself so that it is not felt as merely physical. This gives human beings an impression that their approach to their physical desire has a human element that distinguishes it from the rough and physical form of animals. Conception is described as "light" in its initial stage, when a mother carries it with ease, practically unnoticed.

The second stage is then described: "*Then, when she grows heavy, they both appeal to God, their Lord: 'Grant us a goodly child and we will be truly grateful.'*" (Verse 189) Now that the pregnancy is ascertained, it gives great hopes to the parents-to-be. They now pin their hopes that the newborn will be healthy, pretty, cute, etc., bringing into reality all that parents wish to have in their children when they are still in the embryonic stage. With such hopes, pure human nature is awakened, and it turns to God acknowledging that He is the only Lord, and appealing to Him to bestow His grace. This they do because they truly feel that God is indeed the only source of strength, blessings and grace in the whole universe. Hence, they make their heartfelt appeal "*to God, their Lord: 'Grant Us a goodly child and we will be truly grateful.'*" (Verse 189)

Sophisticated Paganism

"*Yet when He has granted them a goodly child, they associate with Him partners, particularly in respect of what He has granted them. Exalted is God above anything people may associate with Him as partners.*" (Verse 190) Some reports mentioned in commentaries on the Qur'ān suggest that this is a true story that occurred to Adam and Eve, whose children used to be deformed when born. Satan came to them and persuaded Eve to call the child she was carrying `Abd al-Ĥārith, when al-Ĥārith was the name of Satan himself. He told her that she would then ensure that her child would be healthy and would survive. She did so, persuading Adam to agree with her. Needless to say, this report can only have an Israelite origin. Distorted Jewish and Christian concepts blame Eve for all human error. This is contrary to the correct Islamic concept.

We have no need for such Israelite reports to interpret this Qur'ānic statement. The Qur'ānic account describes the stages of deviation in human beings. The idolaters at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and prior to his time, used to pledge their children to serve their deities or be servants in temples and houses of worship. They did so in order to gain favour with God. Although at the beginning they used to turn to God alone, they then deflected from the summit of believing in God's oneness and fell into the depths of abject idolatry. In their error,

they used to pledge their children to such idols and deities, hoping that by doing so their children would have a healthy life and would be protected against dangers. It is the same as some people do today when they make pledges to saints dedicating to them certain parts of their children's bodies. Some people may keep a boy's hair to grow, pledging that his first hair cut will be undertaken at the tomb or shrine of a saint, or they keep the boy uncircumcised until his circumcision is undertaken at such a tomb or shrine. Yet these people acknowledge that God is one, but follow this acknowledgement with such idolatrous practices. Human beings remain the same. *"Exalted is God above anything people may associate with Him as partners."* (Verse 190) Rejected is all the idolatry they believe and practise.

Today we see various aspects of idolatry practised by people who claim to believe in God's oneness and say that they submit to Him. These practices provide an example of the stages of paganism depicted in the Qur'ānic verses. Today, people glorify certain gods which they may call, `the nation', or `the motherland', or `the people', or a host of other names. These are no more than unshaped idols similar to the stupid forms of idols the pagans of old had. They are deities assigned a share of God's creation and to which children are pledged in the same way as they were pledged to the old idols. Sacrifices are offered to these deities on a wide scale in the same way as sacrifices used to be offered in temples.

People acknowledge God as their Lord; it is true. But they then abandon His commandments and His laws while they consider the orders and requirements of their own idols and deities as sacred. For the implementation of the latter, God's laws are contravened, and even totally disregarded. If such practices of later day *jāhiliyyah* are not to be considered as paganism, then what does constitute paganism? How are deities adopted? And how are they given a portion of people's children? Indeed, ancient paganism used to be even more polite with God. It used to acknowledge certain deities to which offerings of children, crops, fruits and sacrifices were made only as a means for them to draw closer to God. Today's *jāhiliyyah* considers the orders of its deities as having greater priority than what God commands. Indeed, it abandons His commandments altogether.

We deceive ourselves when we limit paganism to the stupid old form of having idols and statues, treating them as deities, and to the practices of worship which people used to offer to those deities, appealing to them for support. It is only the shape and form of deities and paganism that has changed, and practices of worship that have become more sophisticated, offered under different headings. The essence of paganism remains the same behind all these. We must not lose sight of this fact.

God — limitless is He in His glory — issues a clear commandment that human beings should observe chastity, dress modestly and lead a virtuous life. But the `motherland' or `productivity' requires women to go out revealing their beauty, all

made up, and to work as hostesses in hotels in a way that is not much different from that of the geisha girls in pagan Japan. Which deity's orders are those people following? Are they abiding by God's commandments? Or by those of their false deities? God — most exalted is He — commands that people should come together with the bond of faith forming the basis of their community. But `nationalism' or `the motherland' orders that religion be totally disregarded and replaced by ties of race and nation. Do people then follow God's orders or those of the partners they associate with Him? Similarly, God orders that His law should be implemented, but a single human being, or a group of people reject this and claim that human beings have the authority to legislate and whatever laws they enact must be implemented. Which orders then should people follow: those of God or those of their false deities?

All these are but examples of what takes place today the whole world over. These examples show the true nature of the prevailing paganism and the nature of the idols that are worshipped in place of the old idols and statues in the old pagan days. We must never allow changing shapes and practices to blind us to the true nature of idolatry and *jāhiliyyah.*

The Qur'ān argues with those who advocated the earlier form of naive paganism and clear ignorance. It addresses their minds so that they can abandon unbecoming naivety and wake up to the truth. It comments on that form *of jāhiliyyah* and how paganism creeps into human beings by saying: *"Do they associate with Him those that can create nothing, while they themselves have been created, and neither can they give them any support nor can they even help themselves."* (Verses 191-192)

It is only the Creator who deserves to be worshipped. The partners they associate with God can create nothing. Indeed, they themselves are created. How can they be raised to the status of deities? How come they assign to those deities a portion of themselves and their children? Power and authority are amongst the most essential attributes of Godhead. The One who can support His servants and protect them with His power is the One who deserves to be worshipped. All their alleged deities are powerless and without authority. How can they give them support when they cannot even help themselves? How are they to be treated as partners with God?

Hence, humanity today stands in the same old position and needs to be addressed by the Qur'ān anew. It needs someone to rescue it from its new *jāhiliyyah,* and present Islam to it; someone to take it from darkness into light and to save its hearts and minds from the new paganism and idolatry. This religion saved it the first time and it can certainly save it from the new folly into which it has sunk.

The way this Qur'ānic verse is phrased suggests that it also serves as a strong reproach to them for having adopted human deities: *"Do they associate with Him those that can create nothing, while they themselves have been created, and neither can they give*

them any support nor can they even help themselves." (Verses 191-192)

The Arabic text uses the plural form that refers only to a group which includes human beings. This suggests that there are some human beings who are considered or treated as gods. It has never been suggested that, in their pagan days, the Arabs used to have human deities whom they treated as gods or to whom they offered worship. They only gave them the position of deities in the sense that they accepted the social laws they had enacted for them and accepted their arbitration in their own quarrels, which meant that they gave them the status of Godhead. The Qur'ān refers to all this as associating partners with God. It equates it with idolatry that offers worship to statues and idols. Indeed, Islam treats both forms of paganism in the same way, just as the Qur'ān considers those who accepted the laws and verdicts given to them by rabbis and priests as polytheists, associating partners with God. They definitely did not believe that those rabbis and priests were gods or deities, and they did not offer any act of worship to them. Nevertheless, all such attitudes deviate from the concept of God's oneness, which is the cornerstone of the divine faith. That concept takes its clearest form in the declaration that "there is no deity other than God." This endorses what we have already stated, that the new forms of *jāhiliyyah* are just as idolatrous as its old form.

A Call Foolishly Turned Down

The reference in the Qur'ān to deviation from the truth starting within the human soul as represented in the story of a married couple and the birth of their baby, applies to every form of polytheism and idolatry. It is intended to alert those who are to be addressed by the Qur'ān to the absolute folly of their idolatry that leads them to believe in those deities, which can neither create anything nor support their worshippers. They are indeed created; and they are powerless, unable to help themselves. This is their state whether they are human beings or of any other type. None of them can create or provide help. Now the *sūrah* changes the mode of relating a story in order to adopt a style that fits a direct confrontation with the pagan Arabs, but it continues the previous address.

> *If you call them to guidance they will not follow you. It is all the same whether you call them or keep silent. Those whom you invoke beside God are God's servants, just like you. Invoke them, then, and let them answer you, if what you claim is true. Have they, perchance, feet on which they could walk, or hands with which to grasp things, or eyes with which to see, or ears with which to hear? (Verses 193-195)*

Arab paganism was, as we have already explained, too foolish by the standards of any stage of the human intellect. Hence, the Qur'ān tries to alert the Arabs' minds to

their folly as they ascribed divinity to such deities. Those idols did not have feet with which to walk, hands with which to grasp, eyes with which to see, or ears with which to hear. Yet they themselves had these senses. How could they then worship statues made of stone that could not even do the things they themselves could do? Sometimes they considered these idols as symbols of the angels or of their own forefathers. Yet these were creatures like themselves who could not create anything or give support to anyone, because they themselves are created and cannot help themselves.

There was this apparent element of applying double standards in the beliefs of the pagan Arabs, vacillating between the physical idols and what they symbolized. We assume that this is the reason for the frequent change in the Qur'ānic address as it refers sometimes to these idols using the animate pronoun to point to the symbols behind them, and at others using the pronoun for inanimate objects to denote that the idols themselves are lifeless. Yet the whole concept of idolatry is apparently false by the pure standards of the simple human mind. Hence, the Qur'ān alerts our minds to the need to steer away from this unbecoming lack of awareness.

At the end of this argument, God directs His Messenger to challenge them together with all their powerless deities, and to declare his clear faith, acknowledging the patronage of God alone: "*Say: 'Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous. Those whom you invoke beside Him cannot give you any support, nor can they even help themselves. If you pray to them for guidance, they will not hear you. You may see them looking at you but they do not see.*" (Verses 195-198)

This is the type of challenge, which an advocate of the true faith would throw to *jāhiliyyah.* God's Messenger (peace be upon him) said it exactly as his Lord directed him, and put the challenge to all his contemporary idolaters and their alleged deities: "*Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite.*" (Verse 195)

He invites them to muster all their scheming powers, and those of their deities, and to strike against him without waiting for a moment. As he threw out this challenge, he was fully confident, reassured that God would protect him against all their scheming: "*My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous.*" (Verse 196) He thus declares what sort of support He relies on. He simply trusts to God who has revealed the Book. By this revelation, God has indicated His will that His Messenger should confront people with the truth embodied in that Book, and that He has willed that this truth will triumph over all falsehood. He has also willed to protect his righteous servants who convey His message believing in its truthfulness.

The same challenge should be thrown down by every advocate of God's message who follows in the footsteps of God's Messenger (peace be upon him). It is the same challenge everywhere and at all times: *"Say: 'Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous.'"* (Verses 195-196) An advocate of the divine faith must not rely on any earthly power, instead he must rely only on God's power. This will enable him to rise above all earthly powers. These are certainly of no substance, no matter how strong they may appear at first sight: *"Mankind, an analogy is given here; so listen to it: Those whom you invoke instead of God will never create (as much as] a fly, even though they would join all their forces for the purpose. And if a fly robs them of anything, they cannot retrieve it. Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought."* (22: 73) *"Those who take beings other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a house. Surely the frailest of all houses is that of the spider, if they could only understand this."* (29: 41)

Patronage That Never Fails

An advocate of the truth relies on God. What use can other forces and masters be to him? What respect do they command, even though they may be able to cause him harm? Such harm can only be caused with God's will, and God is his patron. It is not as though God was unable to protect him, or that God lets His servants down. Far be it from God to do so. But he permits this as a test and training to His servants, and also to lead the wrongdoers on, giving them their chance before He strikes at them with force.

Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion, was subjected to much harm. The idolaters hit him in the face with their shoes, and directed their strikes at his eyes, so that when they left him, his eyes were indistinguishable from his mouth. Despite this wicked assault, he kept repeating: "My Lord, how forbearing You are! How great is Your forbearance!" Deep at heart, he realized what lay behind this attack on him and how forbearing God is. He was certain that God was fully able to destroy his enemies and that He would never let His good servants down.

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, one of the Prophet's companions, went close to the pagan Arabs when they were meeting in the Ka`bah and recited the Qur'ān aloud so that they could hear it. They attacked him so badly and left him unable to stand. After this attack, he said: "By God, I had no respect whatsoever for them then." He realized that they were standing in opposition to God Himself, and he knew that whoever does this is certain to be vanquished. Hence, they could earn no respect from the advocates of God's message.

Another of the Prophet's companions, `Uthmān ibn Maz`ūn, felt it unbecoming for

him, a believer, to be under the protection of an unbeliever, `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah, when some of his own brethren were tortured for no reason other than faith. Therefore, he disclaimed `Utbah's protection. Immediately, the idolaters gathered around him, causing him physical harm and badly injuring his eye. `Utbah offered him his protection again, but he said to him: "I am under the protection of one who is much more powerful than you." `Utbah said to him: "My nephew, you could have spared your eye all this harm." But `Uthmān replied: "No. By God, my other eye is eager to have the same treatment in the service of God's cause." He was absolutely certain that the protection given him by God is much more effective than that offered by human beings. He knew that his Lord would not let him down. If He allowed him to be harmed in this manner, then it was only to help him rise to such a sublime standard that enabled him to say what he did about his other eye in so far as he was eager to make that a similar sacrifice for God's cause.

These were examples of that great generation which was brought up in line with the Qur'ānic teachings, under the guidance of Muhammad, the Prophet (peace be upon him), who fully understood his Lord's instructions as He said to him: "*Say: 'Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous.'*" (Verses 195-196)

What happened after they had willingly tolerated all this aggression from scheming idolaters? What happened to them when they sought only the shelter of God who revealed the Book, and who is the patron of the righteous? This is well known in history. The eventual triumph and power belonged to God's servants. Defeat and misery were the lot of the tyrants. Those of them who eventually responded positively to Islam joined the Muslim community where they had a lower position than those who were ahead of them in accepting the faith and who endured all hardship with a great trust in God. The advocates of the divine faith, wherever they may be and in whichever generation they may live, will not achieve anything unless they have such trust in God and such firm resolve to serve His cause: "*My guardian is God who has bestowed the Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous.*" (Verse 196)

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) was commanded to challenge the idolaters, and he did so. He was ordered to explain to them the powerlessness of their deities and the folly of believing in such deities, and he acted on his instructions: "*Those whom you invoke beside Him cannot give you any support, nor can they even help themselves.*" (Verse 197) Just as this statement applied to the primitive form of idols the Arabs used to have in their ancient ignorant days, it applies in equal measure to all deities claimed by modern states of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.*

The advocates of neo-paganism address their appeals to those who have physical

power on earth, taking them as patrons instead of God. But these patrons cannot offer them any support or even help themselves when God's will is done at its appointed time. If the primitive deities of the pagan Arabs could not hear, and their eyes were made of pearls or diamonds giving the appearance of looking without actually seeing, some of the new deities are also unable to see or hear. We need only to think of the motherland, nation, national production, machines and the inevitable process of history and the rest of the endless list of alleged deities to which new *jāhiliyyah* pay homage. Human beings who are given the status of Godhead in the form of the authority to enact ultimate legislation may have seeing and hearing senses, but even these do not actually hear or see. They are among those in reference to whom God says in the Qur'ān: *"We have destined for Hell many of the jinn and many human beings; they have hearts they cannot understand with, and they have eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear. They are like cattle; indeed, they are even further away from the right way. They are the truly heedless."* (Verse 179)

An advocate of the divine faith normally finds himself confronting one of the numerous forms of *jāhiliyyah.* He must always adopt the attitude God has instructed His Messenger (peace be upon him) to adopt. He should always be ready to declare: *"Appeal to those you claim to be partners with God, and scheme against me, and give me no respite. My guardian is God who has bestowed this Book from on high. It is He who is the guardian of the righteous. Those whom you invoke beside Him cannot give you any support, nor can they even help themselves. If you pray to them for guidance, they will not hear you. You may see them looking at you but they do not see."* (Verses 195-198) Indeed they are the same everywhere, and at all times.

11
The Road to Mercy

خُذِ ٱلۡعَفۡوَ وَأۡمُرۡ بِٱلۡعُرۡفِ وَأَعۡرِضۡ عَنِ ٱلۡجَٰهِلِينَ ١٩٩

Make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant. (199)

وَإِمَّا يَنزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ نَزۡغٞ فَٱسۡتَعِذۡ بِٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّهُۥ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٢٠٠

If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all. (200)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَواْ إِذَا مَسَّهُمۡ طَٰٓئِفٞ مِّنَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ تَذَكَّرُواْ فَإِذَا هُم مُّبۡصِرُونَ ٢٠١

If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly. (201)

وَإِخۡوَٰنُهُمۡ يَمُدُّونَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡغَيِّ ثُمَّ لَا يُقۡصِرُونَ ٢٠٢

Their [evil] brethren try to draw them into error with unceasing determination. (202)

وَإِذَا لَمۡ تَأۡتِهِم بِـَٔايَةٖ قَالُواْ لَوۡلَا ٱجۡتَبَيۡتَهَاۚ قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَتَّبِعُ مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ مِن رَّبِّيۚ هَٰذَا بَصَآئِرُ مِن رَّبِّكُمۡ وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٞ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٢٠٣

When you do not bring them a sign, they say: "Why do you not seek to have one?" Say: "I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord: this [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe." (203)

وَإِذَا قُرِئَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانُ فَٱسۡتَمِعُواْ لَهُۥ وَأَنصِتُواْ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ٢٠٤

When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with

God's mercy. (204)

وَٱذۡكُر رَّبَّكَ فِي نَفۡسِكَ تَضَرُّعًا وَخِيفَةً وَدُونَ ٱلۡجَهۡرِ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡلِ بِٱلۡغُدُوِّ وَٱلۡأٓصَالِ وَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلۡغَٰفِلِينَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾

And bethink yourself of your Lord humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the morning and evening; and do not be negligent. (205)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ عِندَ رَبِّكَ لَا يَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ عَنۡ عِبَادَتِهِۦ وَيُسَبِّحُونَهُۥ وَلَهُۥ يَسۡجُدُونَ ۩ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves. (206)

Preview

This last passage of the *sūrah* contains very important directives from God to those under His patronage, i.e. His Messenger and those who have accepted His message. They were still in Makkah, facing the onslaught of the ignorant society in Arabia, supported by ignorant, or *jāhiliyyah,* societies all over the world. These directives define the attitude of the believers in their confrontation with *jāhiliyyah* and human beings who have gone astray. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is called upon to show forbearance and to encourage everything that simple human nature can recognize as good, without any need for complication or rigidity. He is further directed to turn away from the advocates of *jāhiliyyah* and not to engage in futile argument with them. If they go beyond the limits of reason, so as to infuriate him by their obstinate attitude, and Satan stirs up this anger further, then he should seek refuge with God who alone can give him reassurance: "*Make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant. If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all. If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly.*" (Verses 199-201)

He is then given clear information about the nature of those ignorant people and what prompts them to go further astray. A brief reference is made to their attitude to the Prophet and how they demand miracles from him. He is then given instructions on what to say to them so that they can understand the nature of the message and the Messenger, and his relationship with his Lord: "*Their [evil] brethren try to draw them into error with unceasing determination. When you do not bring them a sign, they say: 'Why do you not seek to have one?' Say: 'I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord: this*

[revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe.'" (Verses 202-203)

With this reference to the Qur'ānic revelations vouchsafed to the Prophet, the believers are given relevant instructions on how to listen to the Qur'ān and the proper attitude to adopt when they remember their Lord, as they should always do. The angels who do not commit any sin are always glorifying God and prostrating themselves to Him. Human beings who are liable to slip and commit sins have better reasons to be always in remembrance of God, and to glorify Him and prostrate themselves to Him: *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy. And bethink yourself of your Lord humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the morning and evening; and do not be negligent. Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves."* (Verses 204-206)

When and Where to Seek Refuge

> *Make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant. If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all. If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly. (Verses 199-201)*

The first directive given in this passage is to make allowances for the weaknesses of human beings and accept what is decent and easy from them. The Prophet is instructed not to require perfection or expect a very high standard of morality. He should overlook their shortfalls and weaknesses. But all that applies in personal matters, not in questions of faith or religious duties. There can be no overlooking of the essentials of faith or Islamic law. Forbearance can apply in business and personal dealings. Such forbearance is the appropriate attitude to be shown by those who are strong towards people who are weak. God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is a guide and a teacher. Hence, forbearance and forgiveness are appropriate qualities for him. Indeed, these were distinctive qualities of the Prophet Muhammad. He never showed anger over personal matters. But if something related to the faith made him angry, then his anger was feared by all. All advocates of the divine faith are required to follow the Prophet's suit. An advocate of the divine message, who inevitably deals with human beings, must be kind and easy, but without being negligent.

"Enjoin the doing of what is right." (Verse 199) This order applies to everything that is clearly good and generally accepted as such by honest people with sound, uncorrupted nature. When people get used to doing what is good, they become ready to do it voluntarily, feeling that it is no burden. Nothing stops people from

doing what is good like rigidity and complication particularly in the early days of being aware of their religious duties. In the early stages, they should be given duties that are easy and common to all so that they get used to responding properly. This enables people to get ready for what requires more effort and approach it without difficulty.

"*And turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant.*" (Verse 199) As used here, ignorance may be understood as the opposite of wisdom, or the opposite of knowledge. Both meanings are closely related. Turning away from them is just to ignore them and show how petty all their ignorant actions are. One must not enter into any argument with them because that is a waste of time. Ignoring them altogether may get them to revise their attitude and soften their hearts. Argument, on the other hand, may lead to polarization and stubbornness. Even if it does not soften their hearts, they remain isolated from anyone who is good at heart. The latter will realize that the advocates of the divine message are forbearing, unwilling to enter into a slanging match while ignorant people continue with their stupid attitude. Every advocate of faith should realize the importance of this divine directive, because God knows what influences people and what may get through to them.

But God's Messenger is a human being. He may be infuriated by people's ignorance and stupidity. If he can deal with such a situation, it may be too much for his followers. When a person is too angry, Satan might find a chance to stir him up. In such a situation, he is commanded to seek refuge with God so that he will cool down and forestall Satan's design: "*If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 200) This final remark states that God hears whatever the ignorant people say and all the stupidities they may utter, and He knows what the advocates of the faith may experience as a result. That should be enough to set people's hearts at ease. It is sufficient that God hears all and knows all. When we know that God is aware of everything that happens to us, what else do we need?

The *sūrah* takes a different approach in order to emphasize to the advocates of faith that they should face all situations with resigned acceptance, and they should remember God when they are angry so that Satan will not be able to get the better of them: "*If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly.*" (Verse 201)

This short verse is highly inspiring, pointing out some profound facts within the human soul. This is made possible only through the unique Qur'ānic style. The way the verse is concluded adds new meanings to its beginning, which are not indicated by the opening words. The conclusion, "*and they begin to see things clearly,*" suggests that Satan's thoughts can cause people to be blind, unable to see anything clearly. But fearing God and guarding against incurring His anger keeps hearts alert and

reminds them of God's guidance. When they are so reminded, they begin to see things clearly. A tempting thought from Satan is, then, a cause of blindness while the remembrance of God is a cause of opening eyes and hearts. Satan's thoughts send people into darkness and turning to God gives them light. When people equip themselves with following divine guidance, Satan can have no power over them.

The Means for Clear Insight

The God-fearing, then, remind themselves of God whenever they experience an evil thought that may tempt them away from the right path. But this is given as a side issue that intervenes between the divine order to the Prophet to turn away from ignorant people and an explanation of who and what motivates them to adopt ignorance which determines all their behaviour. When the attitude of the God-fearing has been explained, the *sūrah* goes back to explaining the motivation of the ignorant: "*Their [evil] brethren try to draw them into error with unceasing determination. When you do not bring them a sign, they say: `Why do you not seek to have one?' Say: 'I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord: this [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe.'*" (Verses 202-203)

Their brethren who try to sink them deeper into error are the satans from among the *jinn.* They may well be the satans of human beings as well. These satans never tire of driving them deeper into error. Hence they continue to act in folly, unaware of where they are being led.

The unbelievers were very persistent in demanding miracles from God's Messenger (peace be upon him). The *sūrah* quotes here some of their statements that betray their ignorance of the nature of God's message and the role of His Messenger: "*When you do not bring them a sign, they say: 'Why do you not seek to have one?'*" (Verse 203) They suggest to the Prophet that he should pray to God to give them a miracle, or they even suggest to him that he himself should perform a miracle. To them, he should be able to do so, since he claims to be a Prophet. This shows that they do not understand the Prophet's role. They certainly could not appreciate his humble attitude towards his Lord, nor that he only takes what God gives him. He does not suggest approaches or measures to his Lord, nor does he initiate matters at his own behest. God orders him to explain this to them: "*Say:' I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord.'*" (Verse 203) I am not one to suggest to Him or to invent matters. I only have what is revealed to me, and I only do what I am commanded. For their part, they could only think of those impostors who claimed to be prophets in every period of ignorance. Hence, their demands.

The Prophet is also commanded to explain to them the nature of the Qur'ān that has been revealed to him. If they would only consider the plain guidance that is

contained in the Qur'ān, they would certainly stop making foolish requests for signs and miracles: *"This [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe."* (Verse 203) It provides clear insight and it is an aspect of overflowing blessings and grace. But that is the case only for those who believe and avail themselves of its unending blessing.

In their ignorance, the Arabs at the time of the Prophet turned away from the Qur'ān and sought to have a physical miracle like the ones given to earlier prophets. Those earlier prophets preached the divine message when humanity was still in its infancy, and were sent to certain communities, not to mankind as a whole. Their miracles could serve their purpose only at the time and place they were given, and could be appreciated only by those who witnessed them. What can be said about later generations and nations?

No physical miracle can be as superb or miraculous as the Qur'ān, no matter what type of miracle people required. Besides, it gives its message to all mankind in all generations till the end of time.

Given the importance the Arabs attached to fine, literary style, which was a source of pride for them, the artistic expression of the Qur'ān was perhaps the most immediately apparent aspect of its miraculous nature. But the Qur'ān remains a book of surpassing excellence, posing a challenge that defies human ability. God challenged the Arabs then, and the challenge continues today, to produce anything similar to it. Human beings who have the gift of fine expression and appreciate the depth of human ability in this field are the ones who can best recognize that the Qur'ānic style is uniquely superb, refined, outstanding. This applies to all people with a natural taste for fine speech, whether they believe in Islam or not. The challenge is based on objective criteria that challenge believers and unbelievers alike. In their ignorance, the elders of the Quraysh found themselves utterly powerless when faced with the Qur'ān. They hated such a position but they could not help it. The same thing is experienced today and will continue to be experienced by everyone who adopts the same attitude.

Beyond that great secret of this unique book and its excellence, there remains its overpowering attraction to human nature, once it is allowed to put its address freely to people. Even those who are hardened in their opposition to the Qur'ān often find its logic too powerful. They cannot but recognize its truth when they listen to it.

Many are those who speak out with eloquence. They may express principles, doctrines, ideas and philosophies of all sorts. But the Qur'ān has a unique and overpowering appeal to human nature in everything that it says. The elders of the Quraysh used to say to their followers, and indeed to themselves: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but cut short its reciting with booing and laughter, so that you may gain the upper*

hand." (41: 26) They did so because they felt that the Qur'ānic logic was irresistible. Many of those in power today try to turn people away from the Qur'ān, offering them instead their own ideas. But in spite of all this, the Qur'ān remains overpowering. Whenever a verse or passage of the Qur'ān is quoted in the context of human speech, it stands out by its rhythm and logic, appealing directly to the hearts of its audience. The rest of human speech that might have been finely composed seems, by comparison, of little use.

But beyond all this, the subject matter of the Qur'ān remains its outstanding strength. A few pages in this book cannot aspire to give justice to explaining the subject matter of the Qur'ān. Whatever we may say here is too little. Besides, how much can we say in a few pages? We can possibly give a brief outline, but a fair treatment takes volumes.

The Undeniable Appeal of the Qur'ān

The fact is that the Qur'ān has a remarkable method in presenting the truth of existence to human nature. It appeals to it as a whole, yet it addresses every one of its aspects in every single context. It goes through every opening in human nature, deals with all its thoughts and feelings. The Qur'ānic method is also remarkable as it tackles the main issues of existence, revealing certain aspects of it which are readily acknowledged both by human nature and the human intellect. They respond to these and formulate their clear vision on them. It also answers the needs of human nature, releases its potentials and puts it on the right course.

We cannot but marvel at the unique Qur'ānic approach as it takes human nature by the hand and moves up with it gently, step by step, yet with much energy and clarity of vision. It takes it to a sublime height, giving it true knowledge, definite response, firm reassurance, consistency of action and a clear and relaxed awareness of the fundamental truths of existence.

The Qur'ānic approach is unparalleled as it appeals to human nature from angles where no response could have been imagined to come. Yet we find human nature ready with its positive response. The fact is the One who has revealed the Qur'ān is the Creator of man who knows His creation. He is closer to man than his jugular vein.

So far for the approach, but what about the subject matter the Qur'ān tackles? Here we find ourselves looking at an expanse that no words can adequately describe: *"Say: 'If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it.'"* (18: 109) *"If all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea were ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is almighty, wise."* (31: 27)

The present author spent, by God's grace, twenty-five years with this Book as his companion, studying carefully the fundamental facts it addresses and the way it tackles various aspects of human knowledge. He has been reading at the same time what human beings have attempted to reveal in some of these aspects. He could see the great wealth and openness of the Qur'ān compared to the attempts of human beings. Compared to the great ocean of the Qur'ān, these attempts are no more than small, isolated lakes, tiny pools or even stagnant pits.

Take, if you will, the Qur'ān's holistic approach to existence, its nature, truth, aspects, origin, secrets and hidden things, as well as what it contains of living entities and potential life. Human philosophy tackles some of these aspects.

Reflect also on how the Qur'ān takes man as a complete entity, and explains his origin, potentials, fields of action, moulding, reactions and responses, as well as his different modes and inner self. Biology, psychology, sociology, education and religious studies address certain aspects of these. Consider also the unique Qur'ānic approach to the system of human life, its practical activities, areas of collaboration, renewed human needs and how these should be organized. Social, economic and political theories and doctrines may address some of these.

In all these areas a careful student of the Qur'ān is bound to find an amazing wealth of statements and directives that are comprehensive, profound, rich and truthful. Not once did I find myself in need of a single statement from outside the Qur'ān, concerning any of these fundamental issues, with the exception of God's Messenger's *Ĥadīths*. These may be collectively described as an explanatory memorandum of the Qur'ān. Indeed, no other statement, correct though it may be, will appear of much value compared to what a careful student finds in this remarkable book. This is due to the practical nature of these statements. It is also the result of long reflection on, and study of, how these topics are tackled. Yet I am not attempting to praise this book. Who am I, and who are human beings to add anything to God's book by their praise?

This book, the Qur'ān, was the source of knowledge, education and proper moulding of a unique generation of human beings that was never repeated in human history. That was the generation of the Prophet's companions who brought about a greatly profound development in human history that has not yet been properly studied. This Book was responsible, by God's will, for this great miracle in human history. All supernatural miracles that testified to earlier divine messages appear small in comparison to this miracle that was practised in a human society. Indeed, that generation was an unparalleled historic phenomenon.

The society that was formed for the first time by their generation survived for more than one thousand years. It was governed by the law stated in this book and

firmly based on its standards, values and directives. That very society was a human miracle. We have only to compare it to other human societies which, as a result of human material progress, surpassed it in material abilities, but could not come near to it in human civilization.

Nowadays, in modern *jāhiliyyah* societies, people seek to satisfy their own needs as well as the needs of their communities in isolation of the Qur'ān. People in ignorant Arabia used to require miracles other than the Qur'ān. Their naive outlook, profound ignorance and their various interests prevented the old Arabs from appreciating the great miracle represented by this remarkable book. The people of contemporary *jāhiliyyah* have different obstacles preventing them from appreciating the miracle of the Qur'ān. These include the arrogance derived from their superior material knowledge, their sophisticated organization of human life, its apparent progress and maturity, which all come naturally with the accumulation of experience of one generation after another and with more complex and sophisticated needs. But they are also prevented from appreciating the Qur'ān by the die-hard Zionist and imperialist opposition that has continued to scheme and plot against this faith and its revealed message for fourteen centuries. They continue with their unceasing attempts to divert Muslims away from the Qur'ān and its directives. This is because the Zionists and the imperialists have learnt through long experience that they cannot be a match for the Muslims as long as they adhere to the Qur'ān in the same way as the first generation of Muslims did. It is not sufficient that Muslims continue to pay lip service to the Qur'ān while they conduct their lives in a fashion that is in conflict with it.

Such scheming continues today with more resolve and wickedness. The final outcome of this scheming is the sort of societies in which people who claim to be Muslims live today, when they cannot be truly Muslims unless they implement Islamic law. We see the outcome of this scheming in various attempts all over the world to remove every trace of Islam, putting in place of the Qur'ān some other sort of constitution, giving it the status of ultimate arbiter in all disputes and on all issues of life. True Muslims refer only to God's book in all such matters.

The Qur'ān is ignored today by its people who know it only as hymns to be chanted and charms to be worn. They have been diverted away from it for centuries and driven deep into a state of *jāhiliyyah* that corrupts minds and hearts. The people of old *jāhiliyyah* used to divert the masses away from the Qur'ān, demanding physical miracles. The people of modern *jāhiliyyah* try to divert the masses away from the Qur'ān by putting in its place a false bible which they promote through all mass media and information channels. Yet it is the Qur'ān that is described in these words by God who knows all: *"This [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe."* (Verse 203) It is then a means

of clear insight, providing true guidance and abounding grace and blessings for true believers. It is only those who truly believe that find all this in the Qur'ān.

Mercy Through Listening to the Qur'ān

Because the Qur'ān is such, the believers are given an express directive: *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy."* (Verse 204) This verse comes towards the end of the *sūrah* which begins with a clear reference to the Qur'ān: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers."* (Verse 2)

There are various reports suggesting different situations when the order applies to listen attentively and in silence to Qur'ānic recitation. Some scholars are of the view that it applies in obligatory prayer when the imām reads aloud. An authentic *ĥadīth* related by Imām Aĥmad as well as Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah mentions a report by Abū Hurayrah that one day, on finishing a prayer in which he recited aloud, the Prophet said: "Has any of you read something of the Qur'ān while I was reading?" A man said: "Yes, Messenger of God!" The Prophet said: "I was wondering why the Qur'ān was being pulled away from me." From that day, people stopped reading the Qur'ān in prayer when the Prophet was reading aloud. Another report mentions that `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a leading scholar among the Prophet's companions, was praying when he heard some people in the congregation reading the Qur'ān with the imām. When he finished, he said: "When will you understand? When will you use your reason? You must do as God has commanded you: *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it and listen in silence."* (Verse 204)

Other scholars say that this was a directive to the Muslims so that they do not do like the unbelievers who used to come to the Prophet when he stood for prayer and would say to one another in Makkah: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān. Cut short its recital with booing and laughter, so that you may gain the upper hand."* (41: 26) In reply to them, God revealed this verse: *"When the Qur'ān is recited hearken to it and listen in silence."* (Verse 204) Al-Qurṭubī mentions this and says that it was revealed in relation to prayer.

Another reason for revealing this verse is mentioned by Ibn Jarīr al- Ṭabarī who quotes `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd as saying: "Some of us used to greet others in prayer, but then the Qur'ānic verse was revealed which says, *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy."* In his commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Qurṭubī mentions a report by Muhammad ibn Ka`b al-Qurażī who says, "When God's Messenger used to read the Qur'ān aloud in

prayer, those in the congregation read with him. When he said, `In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent,' they would say likewise, until he finished reading the Fāṭiĥah and another *sūrah.* The situation continued like that for some time until the verse was revealed which says, *"When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy."* This suggests that the order to listen attentively to the Qur'ān means to stop reading it aloud with the Prophet when he recited it in prayer.

Al-Qurṭubī also mentions a report by Qatādah concerning this verse, which says: "A man may come when a prayer is in progress and ask people in the congregation: `How many *rak`ahs* have you completed? How many are left?' Then God revealed this verse: *`When the Qur'ān is recited, hearken to it, and listen in silence, so that you may be graced with God's mercy.'"* Mujāhid also mentions that they used to speak in prayer, and then God ordered them to listen so that they may be graced with mercy.

Those who consider this verse to apply only to recitation in prayer quote a report mentioned by al-Ṭabarī which mentions that a man named Ṭalĥah saw `Aṭā' ibn Abī Rabāĥ, a leading scholar, talking to `Ubayd ibn `Umayr when a man was reading the Qur'ān. Ṭalĥah said to them: "should you not be listening to the recitation so that you receive what has been promised? (i.e. referring to God's mercy which is promised to those who listen attentively to the Qur'ān). They looked at me, and continued their conversation. I repeated what I said, and they looked at me and said: that relates to prayer." In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr also mentions that Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the early period of Islam, also mentions that this verse applies to prayer only. Several scholars are of the view that if a man is reading the Qur'ān in any situation other than prayer, then people may speak if they wish.

Other scholars, such as Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, `Amr ibn Dīnār, Yazīd ibn Aslam and `Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak suggest that the Qur'ānic verse applies to recitation in prayer and in sermons that are given on Fridays and on weekdays. Al-Qurṭubī says that such a suggestion "is not practically sound, because the Qur'ān constitutes only a small portion of such sermons, when people are required to listen to all the sermon. Besides, this verse is a Makkan revelation, when there was no sermon or Friday prayer held in Makkah."

Al-Qurṭubī mentions in his commentary on the Qur'ān a report by al-Naqqāsh who says: all commentators on the Qur'ān are unanimous that listening attentively to the Qur'ān in obligatory and voluntary prayer is a binding duty. Al-Naĥĥās says: from the linguistic point of view, this attentive listening must apply in all situations, unless we have cause to believe that it is restricted.

For our part, we do not feel that any of the causes for the revelation of this verse

restricts it to recitation in prayer, whether obligatory or voluntary. The verse mentions a general statement that need not be restricted by the cause of its revelation. It is more appropriate to say that this is a general statement, unrestricted in application. Whenever the Qur'ān is recited, listening attentively to it is the proper course of action, because it demonstrates people's respect of the Qur'ān, the word of God the Almighty. When God speaks, it behoves human beings to listen attentively. Besides, this listening is in the hope of being graced with mercy. What restricts that to prayer only? Whenever the Qur'ān is recited, and people listen attentively to it, they may understand and respond to it. This puts them in a position which may bring them mercy in this life and in the life to come as well.

People incur a great loss that cannot be compensated when they turn away from the Qur'ān. At times, listening to one verse of the Qur'ān brings about remarkable interaction, response, clear insight, appreciation, reassurance together with an enlightened understanding that can only be appreciated by a person who has had a similar experience. When the Qur'ān is listened to carefully, not merely heard for enchantment and pleasure by its recitation, it provides the listener with a clear, penetrative insight, reassurance, knowledge, energy and a firmly positive attitude that cannot be produced by any other means.

To view the fundamental facts of existence and the basic realities of life, through the Qur'ānic description, and to view human life itself, its nature and needs, through Qur'ānic statements, is of immense value. It provides clear and accurate insight that helps man to approach life in a totally different spirit from that provided by all human philosophies and doctrines. All that invites God's mercy. It can take place in prayer and in other situations as well. We do not find any reason to restrict this general Qur'ānic directive to prayer only, as mentioned by al-Qurṭubī and others.

Staying Permanently Close to God

The *sūrah* then gives a final directive: "*And bethink yourself of your Lord humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the morning and evening; and do not be negligent. Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves.*" (Verses 205-206)

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, the famous scholar, Ibn Kathīr says: "God gives this general order that we should remember Him often at the beginning and end of each day, just as He ordered that we should worship Him at these two times, when He says: "*Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise before the rising of the sun and before its setting.*" (50: 39) This used to be the case before the daily prayers were made obligatory during the Prophet's night journey." This present verse was revealed in Makkah. Here God says that we should remember Him "*in the morning and evening*",

and this should be done humbly, and with awe, without raising our voices; this is the best way to remember God, not to address Him loudly. The Prophet's companions asked him: "Is our Lord near to be addressed softly, or distant so that we should appeal to Him aloud?" In reply God revealed the Qur'ānic verse: *"When My servants ask you about Me, well, I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls to Me."* (2: 186) Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate in their *Ṣahīh* collections on the authority of Abū Mūsā al-Ash`arī: "Once on a journey, people raised their voices when they made their supplication. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to them: `People, watch what you do. You are appealing to someone who is neither deaf nor far away. The One whom you are calling hears all that is said, and He is close at hand. Indeed, He is closer to each one of you than the neck of his camel."

Ibn Kathīr does not accept the interpretation of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī and others who say that this statement is an order to anyone who is listening to the Qur'ān to remember God in this particular fashion. He says that this view has not been endorsed. What is meant here is to emphasize the importance of people remembering God at all times, particularly in the morning and evening, so that they may not be among the negligent. The angels are praised because they glorify God at all times, without hesitation or slackening. Hence, they are described here as follows: *"Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves."* (Verse 206) Their action is praised here so that people can follow their suit in their worship and obedience of God.

We feel that what Ibn Kathīr says and the *ĥadīths* he quotes show how the Qur'ān and the Prophet's guidance were able to give the Arabs true knowledge of their Lord and the nature of the universe around them. From their questioning and the reply given to them we recognize how far they were brought by means of the glorious Qur'ān and the Prophet's instructions. They were far removed from their past, and in this they recognized God's blessings and mercy.

God's remembrance is not the mere mentioning of His name verbally; it can only be achieved when both heart and mind are brought into it. It is the type of remembrance that makes hearts tremble and minds respond. Unless it is coupled with a feeling of humility and awe, it will not be true remembrance of God. Indeed, it could border on impoliteness towards God. When we remember God, we should think of His greatness, fear His punishment and hope for His mercy. Only in that way, can we achieve spiritual purity. When we mention His name as we remember His greatness, and we join the physical action with the spiritual, we must show our humility, speaking in a low voice, without singing or showing off.

"And bethink yourself of your Lord humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the morning and evening." (Verse 205) This is to ensure that our hearts remain in

contact with God at both ends of the day. Remembering God is not limited to these two times; indeed it must be present all the time. We should be constantly on our guard against slipping into error. But in these two particular periods we can observe the clear change that takes place in the universe as the night changes into day, and the day changes into night. Human hearts feel in touch with the universe around them, as they witness how God accomplishes this transition of day and night and the great change that takes place as one gives way to the other.

God — limitless He is in His glory— knows that at these two particular times, human hearts are most likely to be impressed and to respond positively. There are frequent directives in the Qur'ān to remember God and glorify Him at the time when the whole universe appears to interact with the human heart, sharpen its impressions, and motivate it to remain in touch with God Almighty: *"Bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise before the rising of the sun and before its setting, and in the night too, extol His glory, and at every prayer's end."* (50: 39-40) *"Extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment."* (20: 130) *"Bear in mind your Lord's name early in the morning and before sunset, and during some of the night, and prostrate yourself to Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night."* (76: 25-26)

There is no need to say that this order to remember God at this particular time was before the daily prayers were made obligatory at their appointed times, because this may give the impression that these obligatory prayers have superseded this order. The fact is that this remembrance of God is wider than obligatory prayers. Its timing and its form are not limited to obligatory prayer. It may be a remembrance in private, or something in which both heart and mouth share without the movements that prayer includes. It is indeed wider than that, because it involves constant remembrance of God's Almightiness, when one is alone or with people, before any action, large or small, and before resolving to do anything. However, the early morning, the end of the day as the sun begins to set, and the depth of the night are mentioned because these are times that have special appeal to human hearts. God who has created man and who knows his nature is fully aware of all this.

"Do not be negligent". (Verse 205) This is a reference to people who neglect to remember God, not by word of mouth, but in their hearts and minds. It is the remembrance that keeps the heart alive to deter man from doing anything or following any course in which he feels embarrassed to be seen by God, and who watches God before doing anything. This is the type of remembering God that is ordered here. Otherwise, it would not be true remembrance of God if it does not lead to obeying Him and implementing His orders.

Do not let yourself be negligent of remembering God and watching your actions.

Man needs to remain in constant touch with his Lord so that he is able to resist the temptation that Satan may place before him: *"If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all."* (Verse 200) In its early part, the *sūrah* painted a panoramic scene of the battle between man and Satan. Throughout, it showed the procession of faith as the satans from among the *jinn* and human beings tried to force it out of its way. Satan was also mentioned in the story of the person to whom God gave His signs, but he pulled himself away from them, and chose to remain in error. At its end, it mentions the temptations of Satan and how people should seek shelter from him with God, who hears all and knows all.

Here we see a constant line that concludes with the instruction to remember God humbly and with awe, and not to be among the negligent. This order comes as part of the divine instruction to the Prophet to *"make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant."* (Verse 199) Thus it adds to the landmarks along the way which God approves. It also equips those who follow His guidance with what enables them to overcome all difficulties that they encounter along the way.

God then gives the example of angels commanding a high position. They do not entertain any tempting or evil thought, because Satan has no influence on their nature. They have no overpowering desire or fleeting whim. Nevertheless, they constantly glorify God and extol His praises. They are never too proud to worship Him. Man has a much more pressing need to remember God, glorify Him and worship Him. He has a difficult road to cover. By nature, he is susceptible to Satan's temptation. Negligence may lead him to ruin. He has a limited ability which can only be increased through worshipping God and glorifying Him: *"Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves."* (Verse 206)

Worship and the remembrance of God constitute a basic element in the practical application of this religion. Its method does not rely on theoretical knowledge or philosophical argument. It adopts a practical approach aiming to bring about a drastic change in human society which, inevitably, has rules that are well established in people's minds and practices. Changing this situation into the type which God wants people to follow is a difficult task that requires sustained efforts and much perseverance. With the limited ability human beings have, an advocate of this religion can only approach this difficult task if added strength is granted to him by his Lord. Knowledge on its own does not provide such strength, unless it is coupled with proper worship and with seeking God's help.

This *sūrah* begins with an address by God to His Messenger: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers."* (Verse 2) The *sūrah*

also gives glimpses of the procession of faith, led by God's messengers, and the impediments placed in its way through the scheming of Satan and his helpers from among *the jinn* and human beings, as well as arrogant people and tyrants who try to exercise absolute power. This last directive points out the proper equivalent for those who want to join this noble procession along its hard way.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol VII
Sūrah 8

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Al-Anfāl **1**

Prologue *1*
Characteristics of the Islamic Approach 3
The Liberation of Mankind 7
How Defensive Is Jihād? 10
A Stage of No Fighting 12
What Justification for Jihād? 15
A Gulf Too Wide! 19
A Further Point of View 21
The Battle of Badr 32
Rejecting Wise Counsel 40
Qur'ānic Comments 48
Why Believers Fight 49
To Sum up 51

1 Different Types of Victory *55*
Overview 59
Dispute Over the Spoils of War 60
Essential Qualities of Believers 62
Practising What We Preach 65
Better than the Believer's Desire 69
An Aim Superior to All Human Hopes 73
An Appeal and a Response 75
God's Support in All Forms 78
Except for Tactical Reasons 81
God's Planning and Human Implementation 85
Much Power, Little Avail 86
Response to a Call to Life 89
Victory Coming on the Heels of Hardship 93
A Reassuring Criterion 94

2 In Defiance of the Truth *98*
Overview 100
A Scheme to Put an End to Islam 101
Feeble Manoeuvres 102
A Sophisticated Version of an Old Ploy 105
No Limit to Human Folly 108
Separating the Good from the Bad 110
A Positive Approach to Reality 112

3 God's Will at Work *115*
Overview 118
When the Fighting is Over 118
If You Truly Believe 121
A Criterion of Distinction 123
In Clear Evidence of the Truth 126
A Purpose to Be Accomplished 128
Eliminating Causes of Failure 130
False Pretences, False Promises 133
Deception Compounded by Short-Sightedness 137
Divine Justice for All 139
What Changes God's Blessings? 141

4 Delineation of Loyalties *144*
Overview 147
When Treaties Are Breached 149
The Worst of All Creatures 152
Striking Terror into the Enemy 153
Getting All Forces Ready 155
When Peace is a Real Prospect 157
Where to Place All Trust 159
Uniting Believers' Hearts 162
Matching Superior Forces 164
Rulings on Captives of War 166
God's Preferred Option 168
Seeking to Deceive God 169
Definition of Relations 171
Loyalty in a Muslim Community 172
The Practical Manifestation of Islamic Theory 174
Demarcation of Loyalties in Islamic Society 177
True Believers 179
The Nature of Islamic Society 181
A Community of Mankind 182

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 8

Al-Anfāl

(The Spoils of War)

Prologue

Like *Sūrahs* 2-5, discussed in Volumes I—IV, this *sūrah* was revealed in the Madinah period of the Prophet's mission, while *Sūrahs* 6 and 7, discussed in Volumes V and VI, were revealed earlier when the Prophet was still in Makkah. As is already clear, our approach in this commentary is to follow the order adopted in the Qur'ān, in preference to the chronological order of revelation. For one thing, it is not possible to be absolutely certain about the time of revelation of each *sūrah,* except in general terms indicating that one *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation and another belongs to the Madinah period, but even then there are some differences of views. To try to determine the exact order of when each verse, passage or *sūrah* was revealed is practically impossible, despite the fact that in the case of a small number of verses we have confirmed reports concerning the exact time of revelation.

Valuable as the endeavour to trace the chronological order of revelation may be in trying to establish the pattern of progress of the Islamic movement at the time of the Prophet, the lack of clear and firm evidence makes this endeavour both hard and problematic. The conclusions that we may arrive at will always remain uncertain, and could lead to serious or erroneous results. Therefore, I have chosen to present the Qur'ān in the traditional order given in the original copy finalized at the time of `Uthmān, the third Caliph. However, I try to look at the historical events associated with the revelation of each *sūrah,* knowing that this can only be done in general and tentative terms. In so doing, I am only trying to give a general and tentative idea of the circumstances leading to the revelation of each *sūrah.*

This *sūrah,* al-Anfāl, or The Spoils of War, was revealed after *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, shortly after the Battle of Badr which took place in Ramaḍān, in the second year of the Islamic calendar, approximately 19 months after the Prophet's migration to

Madinah. However, when we say that it was revealed after *Sūrah* 2, our statement does not give a complete picture, because *Sūrah* 2 was not revealed in full on one occasion. Some of its passages were revealed early in the Madinan period, and some towards its end, stretching over a period of nearly nine years. The present *sūrah,* al-Anfāl, was revealed sometime between these two dates, while *Sūrah* 2 was still in the process leading to its completion. This meant that a passage would be revealed and placed in its appropriate position, according to divine instruction given through the Prophet. Normally, however, when we say that a particular *sūrah* was revealed on such and such date, we are simply referring to the beginning of its revelation.

Some reports suggest that verses 30-36 were revealed in Makkah, since they refer to events that took place there before the Prophet's migration to Madinah. This, however, is not a sufficient reason to draw such a conclusion. Many are the verses revealed in Madinah that refer to past events from the Makkan period. In this *sūrah,* verse 26 provides such a case. Moreover, verse 36, the last one in the passage claimed to have been revealed in Makkah, speaks of how the idolaters allocated funds to prepare for the Battle of Uĥud, which took place after their defeat at Badr.

The reports that claim that these verses were a Makkan revelation also mention a conversation that is highly improbable. They mention that "Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle who provided him with protection, asked the Prophet: 'What are your people plotting against you?' He answered: 'They want to cast a magic spell on me, or to banish or kill me.' He said: 'Who told you this?' The Prophet replied: `My Lord.' Abū Ṭālib then said: 'Your Lord is a good one. Take care of him.' The Prophet said: 'I take care of Him! No, it is He who takes good care of me.' By way of comment on this, verse 26 was revealed, saying: *"Remember when you were few and helpless in the land, fearful lest people do away with you: how He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support and provided you with many good things so that you might be grateful."* (Verse 26)

Ibn Kathīr mentions this report and discounts it, saying: "This is highly improbable, because this verse was revealed in Madinah. Besides, the entire event, when the Quraysh convened a meeting of its notables to discuss how they could get rid of the Prophet and the suggestions they made of imprisoning, banishing or killing him, took place on the eve of the Prophet's migration, about three years after Abū Ṭālib's death. When Abū Ṭālib died, the Prophet lost his uncle who had given him full support and protection. The Quraysh were thus able to abuse him and concoct a plot to kill him."

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq, a very early biographer of the Prophet, transmits a couple of long reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin who was an eminent scholar, concerning these plots by the Quraysh. He concludes by saying: "God then gave him permission to depart. After he settled in Madinah, He revealed to him the *sūrah* entitled *al-Anfāl,* reminding him of His grace: "*Remember how the*

unbelievers were scheming against you, seeking to keep you in chains or have you slain or banished. Thus they plot and plan, but God also plans. God is above all schemers." (Verse 30)

This report by Ibn `Abbās fits well with the general text of the complete *sūrah,* and its reminders to the Prophet and his companions of His grace. When they remember these aspects of God's grace, they are motivated to fulfil their duty, fight the enemies of their faith and stand firm. Hence, to say that the whole *sūrah* was revealed after the Muslims' migration to Madinah is more accurate.

Characteristics of the Islamic Approach

This *sūrah* takes up the Battle of Badr as its subject matter. This battle, its circumstances, results and effects on human history constitute a major landmark in the progress of the Islamic movement. God describes this battle as "*the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle."* (Verse 41) He also makes it the parting point not merely in this life or in human history, but also in the life to come. He says in the Qur'ān: "*These two adversaries have become engrossed in contention about their Lord. For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the torment of fire.' God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where silk will be their raiment. For they were guided to the best of words; and so they were guided to the way that leads to the One to whom all praise is due."* (22: 19-24) Some reports suggest that these verses speak of the two hosts that met in battle at Badr. This confirms that this battle provides the criterion by which people shall be distinguished in the life to come. This statement by God Almighty is sufficient to give us a clear idea of the importance of that day of battle. We will try to give an idea of its great value as we discuss the battle, the events leading to it and its outcome.

Exceptionally important as that battle is, its true value cannot be clearly seen unless we understand its nature and realize that it was merely one episode of *jihād.* To appreciate it fully we also need to understand the motives and objectives of *jihād;* and we certainly cannot understand those unless we fully understand the nature of Islam itself.

In his priceless book *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Imām Ibn al-Qayyim includes a chapter with the title, The Progress of the Prophet's Guidance on Dealing with the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites from the Start of His Mission to the End of His Life. This is given below in a highly summarized form:

> The first revelation given to the Prophet by his Lord — limitless is He in

His glory — was his order to him, "*Read in the name of your Lord who created man out of a germ-cell.*" (96: 1-2) This was the start of his prophethood. The instruction to him was to read within himself. At that point, He did not order him to convey anything to anyone. He subsequently revealed to him: "*You who are enfolded, arise and warn!*" (74: 1-2) This means that God made him a prophet by telling him to read, and He gave him his mission by saying, "*You who are enfolded, arise and warn!*" (74: 1-2) God then ordered him to warn his immediate clan. Subsequently, he gave the same warning to his own people, then to the surrounding Arabian tribes, then all Arabs, then mankind generally.

For more than a decade after the start of his prophethood, Muĥammad [peace be upon him] continued to advocate the faith without resorting to fighting or the imposition of any loyalty tax, i.e. *jizyah.* Throughout this period he was ordered to stay his hand, forbear patiently and overlook all opposition. Later, God gave him permission to migrate [from Makkah to Madinah] and permitted him to fight. He then instructed him to fight those who wage war against him and to maintain peace with those who refrain from fighting him. At a later stage, God ordered him to fight the idolaters until all submission is made to God alone.

After the order was given to the Prophet to strive and fight for God's cause [i.e. *jihād],* unbelievers were in three categories with regard to their relations with him: those with whom he was in peace and truce, combatants fighting him, and those under his protection [i.e. *ahl al-dhimmah].* God ordered him to honour his treaties with those whom he had a peace treaty, as long as they honoured their commitments. If he feared treachery on their part, he was to revoke the treaty but would not fight them until he had informed them of the termination of their peace treaty. On the other hand, he was to fight those who violated their treaties with him.

When *Sūrah* 9, *al-Tawbah,* was revealed, it outlined the policy towards all these three categories. The Prophet is ordered there to fight his enemies from among the people of earlier faiths until they submit to his authority, paying the loyalty tax, *jizyah,* or embrace Islam. He is also ordered in the same *sūrah* to strive hard against the unbelievers and the idolaters. He strove against the unbelievers with arms, and against the hypocrites with argument and proof.

A further order to the Prophet in *Sūrah* 9 was to terminate all treaties with unbelievers, classifying such people into three groups. The first group he was ordered to fight, because these were the ones who violated their treaties with him and who were untrue to their commitments. He fought them and was victorious. The second group consisted of those with whom he had a peace treaty which they had honoured fully, and the treaty was to run for a specific

term. They had given no support to any person or group who opposed the Prophet. With these he was to honour the peace treaty until it had run its course. The third group included those with whom the Prophet had no treaty and no previous fighting engagements, as well as those who had an open-ended agreement. The Prophet was instructed to give these groups four months' notice, after which he was to fight them. The Prophet acted on these instructions, fought those who violated their treaties, and gave four months notice to those who had no treaty or had one without a specific term. Those who honoured their treaty were to have it honoured by the Prophet until the end of its term. All these embraced Islam before the end of their term. As for those who pledged loyalty to him, they were to pay the loyalty tax, *jizyah.*

Thus, after the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, the unbelievers were in three different categories with regard to the Prophet's relations with them: combatants, or bound by a specified-term treaty, or loyal. The second category embraced Islam shortly thereafter, leaving the other two groups: combatants who feared him, and those who were loyal. Thus, all mankind were divided into three classes: Muslims who believed in the Prophet's message; those at peace with him who enjoyed security; and those who were hostile and feared him.

As for the hypocrites, he was instructed to accept from them what they professed, leaving the final verdict on them to God. He was to strive against them with informed argument. He was further instructed to turn away from them and to be hard so that he would deliver his message to them in a way that they could not refute. He was forbidden to pray for them when they died, or to visit their graves. He was informed that if he were to pray for them to be forgiven, God would not forgive them.

Such was the Prophet's policy towards his opponents, both unbelievers and hypocrites.[1]

This excellent summary of the different stages of the development of *jihād,* or striving for God's cause, reveals a number of profound features of the Islamic approach which merit discussion; but we can only present them here very briefly.

The first of these features is the serious realism of the Islamic approach. Islam is a movement confronting a human situation with appropriate means. What it confronts is a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* which prevails over ideas and beliefs, giving rise to practical systems that are supported by political and material authority. Thus, the Islamic approach is to confront all this with vigorous means and suitable resources. It presents its arguments and proofs to correct concepts and beliefs; and it strives with power to remove the systems and authorities that prevent people from adopting the

[1] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Mu'assasat Al-Risālah, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 3, pp.133-136.

right beliefs, forcing them to follow their errant ways and worship deities other than God Almighty. The Islamic approach does not resort to the use of verbal argument when confronting material power. Nor does it ever resort to compulsion and coercion in order to force its beliefs on people. Both are equally alien to the Islamic approach as it seeks to liberate people from subjugation so that they may serve God alone.

Secondly, Islam is a practical movement that progresses from one stage to the next, utilizing for each stage practically effective and competent means, while at the same time preparing the ground for the next stage. It does not confront practical realities with abstract theories, nor does it use the same old means to face changing realities. Some people ignore this essential feature of the Islamic approach and overlook the nature of the different stages of development of this approach. They cite Qur'ānic statements stating that they represent the Islamic approach, without relating these statements to the stages they addressed. When they do so, they betray their utter confusion and give the Islamic approach a deceptive appearance. They assign to Qur'ānic verses insupportable rules and principles, treating each verse or statement as outlining final Islamic rules. Themselves a product of the sorry and desperate state of contemporary generations who have nothing of Islam other than its label, and defeated both rationally and spiritually, they claim that Islamic *jihād* is always defensive. They imagine that they are doing Islam a service when they cast away its objective of removing all tyrannical powers from the face of the earth, so that people are freed from serving anyone other than God. Islam does not force people to accept its beliefs; rather, it aims to provide an environment where people enjoy full freedom of belief. It abolishes oppressive political systems depriving people of this freedom, or forces them into submission so that they allow their peoples complete freedom to choose to believe in Islam if they so wish.

Thirdly, such continuous movement and progressive ways and means do not divert Islam from its definitive principles and well-defined objectives. Right from the very first day, when it made its initial address to the Prophet's immediate clan, then to the Quraysh, and then to the Arabs and finally putting its message to all mankind, its basic theme remained the same, making the same requirement. It wants people to achieve the same objective of worshipping God alone, submitting themselves to none other than Him. There can be no compromise over this essential rule. It then moves towards this single goal according to a well-thought-out plan, with progressive stages, and fitting means.

Finally, we have a clear legal framework governing relations between the Muslim community and other societies, as is evident in the excellent summary quoted from *Zād al-Ma`ād.* This legal framework is based on the main principle that submission to God alone is a universal message which all mankind must either accept or be at

peace with. It must not place any impediment to this message, in the form of a political system or material power. Every individual must remain free to make his or her absolutely free choice to accept or reject it, feeling no pressure or opposition. Anyone who puts such impediments in the face of the message of complete submission to God, must be resisted and fought by Islam.

The Liberation of Mankind

Writers with a defeatist and apologetic mentality who try to defend Islamic *jihād* often confuse two clearly different principles. The first is that Islam comes out clearly against forcing people to accept any particular belief, while the second is its approach that seeks to remove political and material forces that try to prevent it from addressing people, so that they may not submit themselves to God. These are clearly distinct principles that should never be confused. Yet it is because of their defeatism that such writers try to limit *jihād* to what is called today 'a defensive war'. But Islamic *jihād* is a totally different matter that has nothing to do with the wars people fight today, or their motives and presentation. The motives of Islamic *jihād* can be found within the nature of Islam, its role in human life, the objectives God has set for it and for the achievement of which He has sent His final Messenger with His perfect message.

We may describe the Islamic faith as a declaration of the liberation of mankind from servitude to creatures, including man's own desires. It also declares that all Godhead and Lordship throughout the universe belong to God alone. This represents a challenge to all systems that assign sovereignty to human beings in any shape or form. It is, in effect, a revolt against any human situation where sovereignty, or indeed Godhead, is given to human beings. A situation that gives ultimate authority to human beings actually elevates those humans to the status of deities, usurping God's own authority. As a declaration of human liberation, Islam means returning God's authority to Him, rejecting the usurpers who rule over human communities according to manmade laws. In this way, no human being is placed in a position of Lordship over other people. To proclaim God's authority and sovereignty means the elimination of all human kingship and to establish the rule of God, the Lord of the universe. In the words of the Qur'ān: "*He alone is God in the heavens and God on earth.*" (43: 84) "*All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordered that you should worship none but Him. That is the true faith, but most people do not know it.*" (12: 40) "*Say: 'People of earlier revelations! Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'*" (3: 64)

Establishing the rule of God on earth does not mean that sovereignty is assigned to a particular group of people, as was the case when the Church wielded power in Christian Europe, or that certain men become spokesmen for the gods, as was the case under theocratic rule. God's rule is established when His law is enforced and all matters are judged according to His revealed law.

Nothing of all this is achieved through verbal advocacy of Islam. The problem is that the people in power who have usurped God's authority on earth will not relinquish their power at the mere explanation and advocacy of the true faith. Otherwise, it would have been very simple for God's messengers to establish the divine faith. History, however, tells us that the reverse was true throughout human life.

This universal declaration of the liberation of man on earth from every authority other than that of God, and the declaration that all sovereignty belongs to God alone as does Lordship over the universe, are not a theoretical, philosophical and passive proclamation. It is a positive, practical and dynamic message which seeks to bring about the implementation of God's law in human life, freeing people from servitude to anyone other than God alone. This cannot be achieved unless advocacy is complemented with a movement that confronts the existing human situation with adequate and competent means.

In actual life, Islam is always confronted with a host of obstacles placed in its way: some belong to the realm of beliefs and concepts, others are physical, in addition to political, social, economic, racial obstacles. Deviant beliefs and superstitions add further obstacles trying to impede Islam. All these interact to form a very complex mixture working against Islam and the liberation of man.

Verbal argument and advocacy face up to beliefs and ideas, while the movement confronts material obstacles, particularly political authority that rests on complex yet interrelated ideological, racial, class, social and economic systems. Thus, employing both verbal advocacy and its practical movement, Islam confronts the existing human situation in its totality with adequately effective methods. Both are necessary for the achievement of the liberation of all mankind throughout the world. This is a very important point that merits strong emphasis.

This religion of Islam is not a declaration for the liberation of the Arabs, nor is its message addressed to the Arabs in particular. It addresses itself to all humanity, considering the entire earth its field of work. God is not the Lord of the Arabs alone, nor is His Lordship limited to Muslims only. God is the Lord of all worlds. Hence, Islam wants to bring all mankind back to their true Lord, liberating them from servitude to anyone else. From the Islamic point of view, true servitude or worship, takes the form of people's submission to laws enacted by other human beings. It is

such submission, or servitude, that is due to God alone, as Islam emphasizes. Anyone that serves anyone other than God in this sense takes himself out of Islam, no matter how strongly he declares himself to be a Muslim. The Prophet clearly states that adherence to laws and authorities was the type of worship which classified the Jews and Christians as unbelievers, disobeying God's orders to worship Him alone.

Al-Tirmidhī relates on the authority of `Adiy ibn Ĥātim that when the Prophet's message reached him, he fled to Syria. [He had earlier accepted Christianity.] However, his sister and a number of people from his tribe were taken prisoner by the Muslims. The Prophet [peace be upon him] treated his sister kindly and gave her gifts. She went back to her brother and encouraged him to adopt Islam, and to visit the Prophet. People were speaking about his expected arrival. When he came into the Prophet's presence, he was wearing a silver cross. As he entered, the Prophet was reciting the verse which says: "*They [i.e. the people of earlier revelations] have taken their rabbis and their monks, as well as the Christ, son of Mary, for their lords beside God.*" (9: 31) `Adiy reports: "I said, `They did not worship their priests.' God's Messenger replied, 'Yes they did. Their priests and rabbis forbade them what is lawful, and declared permissible what is unlawful, and they accepted that. This is how they worshipped them."'

The explanation given by the Prophet is a clear statement that obedience to man-made laws and judgements constitutes worship that takes people out of Islam. It is indeed how some people take others for their lords. This is the very situation Islam aims to eradicate in order to ensure man's liberation.

When the realities of human life run contrary to the declaration of general human liberation, it becomes incumbent on Islam to take appropriate action, on both the advocacy and the movement fronts. It strikes hard against political regimes that rule over people according to laws other than that of God, or in other words, force people to serve beings other than God, and prevent them from listening to the message of Islam and accepting it freely if they so desire. Islam will also remove existing powers whether they take a purely political or racial form or operate class distinction within the same race. It then moves to establish a social, economic and political system that allows the liberation of man and man's unhindered movement.

It is never the intention of Islam to force its beliefs on people, but Islam is not merely a set of beliefs. Islam aims to make mankind free from servitude to other people. Hence, it strives to abolish all systems and regimes that are based on the servitude of one person to another. When Islam has thus freed people from all political pressure and enlightened their minds with its message, it gives them complete freedom to choose the faith they wish. However, this freedom does not mean that they can make their desires their gods, or that they choose to remain in

servitude to people like them, or that some of them are elevated to the status of lordship over the rest. The system to be established in the world should be based on complete servitude to God alone, deriving all its laws from Him only. Within this system, every person is free to adopt whatever beliefs he or she wants. This is the practical meaning of the principle that `all religion must be to God alone.' Religion means submission, obedience, servitude and worship, and all these must be to God. According to Islam, the term `religion' is much wider in scope than belief. Religion is actually a way of life, and in Islam this is based on belief. But in an Islamic system, it is possible that different groups live under it even though they may choose not to adopt Islamic beliefs. They will, however, abide by its laws based on the central principle of submission to God alone.

How Defensive Is Jihād?

When we understand the nature of Islam, as it has already been explained, we realize the inevitability of *jihād,* or striving for God's cause, taking a military form in addition to its advocacy form. We will further recognize that *jihād* was never defensive, in the narrow sense that the term `defensive war' generally denotes today. It is this narrow sense that is emphasized by the defeatists who succumb to the pressure of the present circumstances and to the Orientalists' wily attacks. Indeed the concept of striving, or *jihād,* for God's cause represents a positive movement that aims to liberate man throughout the world, employing appropriate means to face every situation at every stage.

If we must describe Islamic *jihād* as defensive, then we need to amend the meaning of the term `defence' so that it means the defending of mankind against all factors that hinder their liberation and restrict their freedom. These may take the form of concepts and beliefs, as well as political regimes that create economic, class and racial distinctions. When Islam first came into existence, this world was full of such hindrances, some forms of which persist in present- day *jāhiliyyah.*

When we give the term `defence' such a broader meaning we can appreciate the motives for Islamic *jihād* all over the world, and we can understand the nature of Islam. Otherwise, any attempt to find defensive justification *for jihād,* within the contemporary narrow sense of defence, betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of Islam and its role in this world. Such attempts try to find any evidence to prove that early Muslims went *on jihād to* repel aggression by their neighbours against the Muslim land, which to some people is confined to the Arabian Peninsula. All this betrays stark defeatism.

Had Abū Bakr, `Umar and `Uthmān, the first three Caliphs, felt secure against any attack on Arabia by the Byzantine or the Persian Empires, would they have refrained

from carrying the message of Islam to the rest of the world? How could they present Islam to the world when they had all types of material obstacles to contend with: political regimes, social, racial and class systems, as well as economic systems based on such social discrimination; and all these are guaranteed protection by the state? *Jihād* is essential for the Islamic message, if it is to be taken seriously as a declaration of the liberation of man, because it cannot confine itself to theoretical and philosophical arguments. It must confront existing situations with effective means, whether the land of Islam is secure or under threat from neighbouring powers. As Islam works for peace, it is not satisfied with a cheap peace that applies only to the area where people of the Muslim faith happen to live. Islam aims to achieve the sort of peace which ensures that all submission is made to God alone. This means that all people submit themselves to God, and none of them takes others for their lords. We must form our view on the basis of the ultimate stage of the *jihād* movement, not on the early or middle stages of the Prophet's mission. All these stages led to the situation described by Imām Ibn al-Qayyim as follows:

Thus, after the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, the unbelievers were in three different categories with regard to the Prophet's relations with them: combatants, or bound by a specified-term treaty, or loyal. The second category embraced Islam shortly thereafter, leaving the other two groups: combatants who feared him, and those who were loyal. Thus, all mankind were divided into three classes: Muslims who believed in the Prophet's message; those at peace with him who enjoyed security; and those who were hostile and feared him.[2]

Such is the attitude that is consistent with the nature of Islam and its objectives.

When Islam was still confined to Makkah, and in the early period of the Prophet's settlement in Madinah, God restrained the Muslims from fighting. They were told: "*Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt.*" (4: 77) They were later permitted to fight, when they were told: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events.*" (22: 39-41) They were then required to fight those who fight them, but not other people: "*Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression.*" (2: 190) But then they

[2] Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibid, p. 161.

were ordered to fight against all idolaters: "*fight against the idolaters all together as they fight against you all together.*" (9: 36) They were also told: "*Fight against those among the people of the scriptures who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth until they pay the submission tax with a willing hand and are utterly subdued.*" (9: 29) This means, as Ibn al-Qayyim puts it, that "fighting was first forbidden, then permitted, then ordered against those who fight Muslims, and finally against all unbelievers who associate partners with God."

The seriousness that is characteristic of the Qur'ānic texts and the Prophet's traditions on *jihād,* and the positive approach that is very clear in all events of *jihād* in the early Islamic periods and over many centuries make it impossible to accept the explanation concocted by defeatist writers. They have come up with such an explanation under pressure from the present weakness of the Muslim community and the unsavoury attacks on the concept of *jihād* by Orientalists.

When we listen to God's words and the Prophet's traditions on *jihād,* and follow the events of early Islamic *jihād,* we cannot imagine how anyone can consider it a temporary measure, subject to circumstances that may or may not come into play, or having the limited objective of securing national borders.

In the very first Qur'ānic verse that gives Muslims permission to fight for His cause, God makes it clear to believers that the normal situation in this present life is that one group of people is checked by another so as to prevent the spread of corruption on earth: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God.' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed.*" (22: 39-40) We thus see that it is the permanent state of affairs for truth to be unable to co-exist with falsehood on earth. Hence, when Islam makes its declaration for the liberation of mankind on earth, so that they may only serve God alone, those who usurp God's authority try to silence it. They will never tolerate it or leave it in peace. Islam will not sit idle, either. It will move to deprive them of their power so that people can be freed of their shackles. This is the permanent state of affairs which necessitates the continuity of *jihād* until all submission is made to God alone.

A Stage of No Fighting

Holding back from fighting in Makkah, by divine order, was only a stage in a long-term strategy. The same was the case in the early days after the Prophet's

migration to Madinah. However, what made the Muslim community in Madinah take its stance was not merely the need to defend Madinah and make it secure against attack. This was certainly a primary objective, but it was by no means the ultimate one. Achieving this objective provided the means and the secure base from which to remove the obstacles that fettered man and deprived him of his freedom.

Besides, it is perfectly understandable that Muslims should refrain from taking up arms in Makkah. Advocacy of Islam was reasonably free. Assured of protection by his own clan, the Hāshimites, the Prophet was able to declare his message, addressing it to individuals and groups and putting to them its clear principles and beliefs. There was no organized political power to stop him from doing so, or to stop individuals from listening to him. Hence, there was no need at this stage to resort to force. There were other reasons which we outlined in Volume III, pp. 197-198, when commenting on the verse that says: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt*... ?'" It may be useful to quote here a part of what we stated there:

1. One reason could be that the Makkan period was one of training, educating and preparing a particular group of people under certain conditions. One of the aims of such a programme is to discipline the Arab mind to persevere and endure personal and collective hardship as a means to transcend personal egos. One's own self and immediate community should no longer be the focus and prime movers in one's life. People needed to be taught restraint and self-control and how not to react with immediate rage and anger, as was their nature. They needed to learn to behave as members of an organized society with a central leadership to be consulted and obeyed in all matters, regardless of how different that was from their customs and traditions. This was the cornerstone in remodelling the Arab character to establish a civilized, orderly, non-tribal Muslim society that recognizes a governing leadership.
2. Another possible reason is that peaceful action was more effective in that particular Arab society of the Quraysh, which attached much importance to self-image and honour. The use of force in such a situation could only harden attitudes and result in fresh bloody grudges, reminiscent of the famous inter-Arab feuds of Dāĥis and al-Ghabrā', and of al-Basūs which raged for many years, wiping out complete tribes. Such a new conflict would always be associated in the Arab memory with Islam as the cause of vengeance and bloodshed rather than Islam as a universal Divine mission. The basic essence of Islam would, in that case, be forever obscured and obliterated.
3. There was also the need to avoid a bloodbath within every Arab household in Makkah since there was no organized authority perpetrating the persecution

of Muslim converts. The harassment was unsystematic, following no specific order. Every household dealt with their converts as they saw fit. Prescription of armed confrontation in such circumstances would mean battles and massacres in every home for which Islam would be blamed. In fact, the Quraysh propaganda, spread during the pilgrimage and trading seasons, was already blaming Islam for family splits, feuds and divisions among the Arabs even before the use of force was eventually permitted.

4. Another reason for the delay in prescribing *jihād* by force of arms could be God's prior knowledge that many of the tormentors and perpetrators of maltreatment against the Muslims would, one day soon, find themselves be converts and ardent defenders, indeed leaders, of Islam. Was not `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb one such person?

5. Another reason could be that Arab tribal chivalry was known to provoke sympathy with the weak and the oppressed when they persevere in the face of adversity, especially if some of these hailed from the noble sections of society. This is borne out in several incidents including that whereby Ibn al-Dughunnah tried to persuade Abū Bakr, a noble man, not to leave Makkah and offered him protection, seeing it as a shame on all the Arabs that he should have to emigrate. Another incident was the repeal of the boycott on Hāshim, Muĥammad's clan, and the ending of their siege in the Hāshimite quarters in Makkah, after an extended period of starvation and hardship. In other ancient civilizations, persecution might have led to the adulation of the oppressor and further humiliation for the oppressed, but not in Arab society.

6. It could have been due to the small number of Muslims at the time and their confinement in Makkah when Islam had not spread widely in Arabia, and the neutral stand that other Arab tribes would take in an internal conflict within Makkah. Confrontation could very well lead to the annihilation of the small band of Muslim converts, even if they were to kill twice as many as their own number, and the infidels would thus prevail. In this case, the religion of Islam, which was meant to be a universal way of life and a practical and realistic system, would no longer exist.

As for the early period in Madinah, the treaty the Prophet agreed with the Jews and the Arab unbelievers in the city and the neighbouring areas was a suitable arrangement at this stage. Besides, there was an open opportunity for delivering God's message, with no political authority standing in opposition to it. All groups recognized the new Muslim state and the Prophet as its leader who conducted its political affairs. The treaty stipulated that no party or group could wage war against, or make peace or establish any relations with, any outside group without the express

permission of the Prophet. Moreover, it was clear that real power in Madinah was wielded by the Muslim leadership. Hence, God's message could be freely addressed to people and they could choose to accept it if they so wanted.

Moreover, the Prophet wanted to concentrate his efforts at this stage on the struggle against the Quraysh, whose relentless opposition to Islam constituted a hard obstacle preventing its spread to other tribes. Most Arabian tribes adopted a wait-and-see attitude to the struggle which they viewed as an internal conflict between the Quraysh and a group of its own members. Hence the Prophet started to send out expeditions, beginning in Ramaḍān, only seven months after his migration to Madinah when his uncle Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib was the first commander.

Other expeditions followed, with the second taking place nine months after the Prophet's migration, and another after 13 months, and a fourth three months later on. Shortly after that the Prophet sent a small company commanded by `Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh, 17 months after his migration. It was on this particular expedition that fighting took place for the first time and one man was killed. This was in one of the four sacred months. In a comment on this incident the Qur'ān says: *"They ask you about fighting in the sacred month. Say, 'Fighting in it is a grave offence, but to turn people away from God's path, to disbelieve in Him and in the Sacred Mosque, and to expel its people from it – [all this] is far more grave in God's sight.' Religious persecution is worse than killing. They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (2: 217)[3]

In Ramaḍān of the same year, the Battle of Badr took place, on which the present *sūrah* provides detailed commentary.

What Justification for Jihād?

When we review the situation with all its relevant circumstances, we realize that the argument that *jihād* is nothing more than a defensive war, in the narrow sense of the term, cannot hold. Those who try to find pure defensive reasons to justify the expansion of Islam find themselves cornered by Orientalists' attacks at a time when Muslims are powerless. Indeed Muslims today are far removed from Islam, except for a small minority who are determined to implement the Islamic declaration of man's liberation from all authority except that of God.

The spread of Islam does not need to find any justification other than those stated in the Qur'ān:

Let them fight in God's cause – all who are willing to barter the life of this world for

[3] For details of this expedition with our commentary on this verse please refer to Vol.I, Chapter 13.

the life to come. To him who fights in God's cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant a rich reward. And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, "Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us." Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan. (4: 74-76)

Say to the unbelievers that if they desist, all that is past shall be forgiven them; but if they persist [in their erring ways], let them remember what happened to the like of them in former times. Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this giver of support. (8: 38-40)

Fight against those among the people of earlier revelations who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth until they pay the submission tax with a willing hand and are utterly subdued. The Jews say: "Ezra is the son of God", while the Christians say: "The Christ is the son of God." Such are the assertions they utter with their mouths, echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! They make of their rabbis and their monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God. Yet they have been ordered to worship none but the One God, other than whom there is no deity. Exalted be He above those to whom they ascribe divinity. They seek to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will not allow anything to interfere with His will to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (9: 29-32)

The justification carried in these verses is that of the need to establish the truth of Godhead on earth, and implement the way of life God has decreed in human life. Moreover, satanic forces and methods must be chased out and abolished; and the lordship of one man over others must be ended. Human beings are God's creatures and they serve Him alone. No one may be allowed to hold authority over them so as to make them his servants or enact arbitrary laws for them. This is sufficient justification, not forgetting at the same time the main principle that "*there shall be no compulsion in religion.*" (2: 256) No one will ever be compelled or pressurized to adopt the Islamic faith after the liberation of all people and the acknowledgement that all submission must be to God alone, and that all authority belongs to Him.

It is sufficient to remember that Islam aims to free all mankind from servitude to creatures so that they may serve God alone to justify Islamic *jihād*. This was clearly in

the minds of the early Muslims when they went out to fight the Byzantine and the Persian Empires. None of them justified their action by saying, 'We want to defend our country against external threats,' or, `We want to repel Byzantine or Persian aggression,' or, 'We want to annex land and add to our wealth.' Their representatives, Rib`iy ibn `Āmir, Ĥudhayfah ibn Muĥsin and al-Mughīrah ibn Shu`bah, each met Rustam, the Persian army commander in the Battle of al-Qādisiyyah, alone on three successive days. In response to Rustam's question about their objectives, they all said the same thing: "It is God who has commanded us so that we may liberate anyone who wishes from servitude to human beings into the service of God alone, from the narrowness of this world into the expanse of this world and the hereafter, and from the injustices of different religions to the justice of Islam. God has sent His Messenger to deliver His message to His creatures. Whoever accepts it from us, we let him be, turn back and give him his land. We fight only those who rebel until we achieve martyrdom or victory."

The justification for *jihād* is inherent in the nature of this faith, its declaration of man's liberation, and its confrontation with existing human situations using adequate and effective means, suitably adapted and renewed for every stage. This justification exists in the first place, even though there may be no threat to the Muslim land or the Muslim community. It is of the essence of the Islamic approach and the nature of the practical obstacles that stand in its way in different communities. Islamic jihād cannot be linked merely to some limited and temporary defensive needs.

It is sufficient that a Muslim goes out on jihād laying down his life and sacrificing all his money, for God's cause, not for any considerations of any personal gain. Before going out on jihād a Muslim would have won the greater battle within himself, against his own desires, ambitions, personal and national interests and against any motive other than serving God and establishing His authority on earth after winning it back from rebellious usurpers.

People who try to justify Islamic jihād on the grounds of protecting or defending the Islamic homeland underrate the Islamic way of life, placing its importance below that of the homeland. Theirs is a new consideration that is alien to the Islamic outlook. The faith, the way of life based on it and the community that implements it are the considerations valued by Islam. The land in itself has no significance. It acquires its value when the Islamic way of life is implemented in it, so as to become the cradle of the faith, the practical model, the homeland of Islam, and the starting point for the liberation of mankind.

It is true that defending the homeland of Islam means protecting the faith, the way of life and the Muslim community, all at the same time; but this is not the ultimate objective of Islamic jihād. Defending the homeland of Islam is the means to establish

God's authority within it, and to use it as the base from which to address all mankind. Islam is a message to all humanity, and the whole earth is its sphere of action.

As already stated, any effort that tries to spread the Islamic way of life is bound to meet obstacles created by the power of the state, the social system and the general environment. Islam aims to remove all these obstacles so that it can address people freely, appealing to their minds and consciences, after breaking their fetters so that they have genuine freedom of choice.

We must not be intimidated by the Orientalists' attacks on the concept of Islamic jihād, or allow the pressures of world political powers to weigh heavily on us, so as to seek justifications for jihād that do not fit with the nature of Islam.

When we look at historical events, we must not lose sight of the inherent factors in the nature of Islam, its universal declaration and practical way of life. We must not confuse these with temporary defensive needs. It was inevitable that Islam would defend itself against aggression, because its very existence, general objective, the movement it forms under a new leadership, and the birth of a new community which recognizes only God's sovereignty — all this is bound to provoke other societies, based on jāhiliyyah, into trying to smash it in order to defend their own interests. It is inevitable that the new Muslim community will also have to defend itself. This is an inescapable situation that arises with the advent of Islam in any society. There is no question that Islam wants to fight such a battle; it is imposed on it, and the struggle that follows is a natural one, between two systems that cannot co-exist for long. All this is undeniable. Hence, Islam has no choice but to defend itself against aggression.

A much more important fact, however, is that, by nature, Islam will take the initiative and move to save humanity and free people throughout the world from servitude to anyone other than God. It is not possible that Islam will confine itself to geographical boundaries, or racial limits, abandoning the rest of mankind and leaving them to suffer from evil, corruption and servitude to lords other than God Almighty.

A time may come when enemies of Islam may find it expedient not to try to suppress Islam if it is willing to leave them alone, practising within their national boundaries their own systems that allow some people to be lords over others. They may offer such a state of coexistence if Islam is willing not to extend its declaration of universal freedom to their people. But Islam will not accept such a truce, unless they are willing to acknowledge its authority in the form of paying the loyalty or submission tax, jizyah, to guarantee that the message of Islam may address their people freely, without putting any material obstacle in its way.

Such is the nature of Islam and its role of liberating all mankind from servitude to

anyone other than God. The gulf is wide indeed between this understanding and confining Islam to a local status within national borders or racial limits, acting only to defend itself against outside aggression. To think of Islam in this light is to deprive it of its reasons for action.

The underlying reasons for jihad are clearly identified when we remember that Islam is the way of life God has given to man. It is not a system devised by an individual or a group of people, nor is it the ideology of a certain race. It is only when we begin to lose sight of this fundamental truth of God's absolute sovereignty and people's servitude to Him that we try to find external reasons to justify jihad. No one who is fully cognizant of this basic Islamic principle will need to look for any other justification for jihad.

The gulf may not seem too great between thinking that Islam had to fight a war imposed on it by the very fact of its existence alongside jāhiliyyah societies, which were bound to attack it, and the recognition that Islam would have taken the initiative and embarked on its struggle. In both situations, Islam would have had to fight. But at the end the gulf between the two views is very wide indeed. It gives Islamic ideas and concepts a totally different colour. This is very serious indeed.

A Gulf Too Wide!

Islam is a system given by God and it aims to establish the fundamental principle of God's sovereignty and people's servitude to Him alone. It gives practical implementation of this principle in the form of a human society where people are totally free from servitude to anyone other than God. Thus, people are governed only by God's law, demonstrating His authority, or, in other words, His Godhead. As such, Islam has the right to remove all obstacles in its way and address people freely, without any impediments such as a political system or social customs and traditions. Viewing Islam in this way is far removed from viewing it as a local system of a particular country or nationality, having the right to defend itself within its national borders.

The two views are worlds apart, even though in both cases Islam would have had to fight. However, the reasons, motives, objectives and results of jihad under the two concepts are widely different. Our understanding of these is part of our beliefs, strategies and aims.

It is the right of Islam to take the initiative. It is not the creed of a particular people or the system of a particular country. It is a system given by God for the entire world. As such, it has the right to take action to remove all obstacles that fetter man's freedom of choice. It is a faith that does not force itself on any individual; it only attacks situations and regimes in order to free individuals from

deviant influences that corrupt human nature and restrict man's freedom.

It is right that Islam should liberate people from servitude to other individuals in order that they serve God alone. It thus puts into practice its universal declaration of God's Lordship over the entire universe and the liberation of all mankind. Servitude to God alone cannot be realized, from the Islamic point of view and in practice, except under the Islamic system. It is only under this system that God's law applies equally and in the same way to all people, rulers and ruled, white and black, rich and poor. Under all other systems, people serve other people who enact laws for them. Legislation is a most fundamental attribute of Godhead. Any human being who claims the right to decree laws of his own for a community of people actually and practically claims Godhead, even though he may not put such a claim in words. Anyone who recognizes such an authority as belonging to a human being admits that Godhead belongs to that human being, whether he calls it as such or not.

Islam is not a mere ideology to be explained to people by normal ways of communication. It is a way of life represented in a social setup that takes the necessary action to liberate mankind. Other communities try to prevent it from addressing their individuals to convince them of adopting its way of life. Therefore, it becomes imperative that Islam should try to remove those regimes that impede the freedom of mankind. As stated earlier, this is the meaning of ensuring that all submission is made to God alone, so that no submission or obedience is given to any human being on account of his own position or status, as is the case with all other systems.

Defeated by the combined pressures of the present situation and Orientalists' attacks, some contemporary Muslim writers feel too embarrassed to state these facts. Orientalists have tried to paint a false picture of Islam, showing it to have been spread by the sword. These Orientalists know very well that this is absolutely false, but they deliberately try to distort the underlying reasons for Islamic jihād. In reply, some of our people try to disprove this charge by seeking defensive justifications for jihād, overlooking the nature of Islam, its role in human life and its right to take the initiative to liberate mankind. Such defeatist writers are heavily influenced by the Western outlook and how it views religion as a mere set of beliefs that have nothing to do with day-to-day life. Hence, to fight for a religious cause means fighting to compel people to adopt a particular faith.

But this is not the case with Islam, which is a way of life given by God for all mankind, ascribing Lordship and sovereignty to God alone, and providing a system for the conduct of all life affairs. To fight for Islam is to fight for the implementation of this way of life and its systems. Faith, on the other hand, is a matter for free personal conviction, after the removal of all pressures and obstacles. The whole issue

thus appears in a totally different light.

Thus, whenever an Islamic community comes into existence and begins to implement the Islamic way of life, God gives it the right to move, take power and establish that system, guaranteeing total freedom of belief. The fact that God held back the early Muslim community from fighting at a particular stage is only a question of strategy, not a matter of principle.

When we have this fundamental principle clear in our minds, we can easily understand the different Qur'ānic texts, applicable to different historical stages, without being confused as to their overall significance in relation to the constant Islamic approach.

A Further Point of View

Further explanation of the nature of *jihād* and the nature of Islam itself is given in a paper written by the great Muslim scholar, Abū'l A`lā Mawdūdī, which we will quote here at length.[4] This is very important for anyone who wishes to formulate a clear understanding of this issue which is central to the way of thinking of the Islamic movement.

> In common parlance the word *jihād'* equates with holy war in English. For a considerable time now unfriendly interpreters have been adding spin to it as if it were nothing but pure zealotry — giving an image of a horde of religious fanatics surging forward, swords in hands, beards tucked under their lips, and chanting *Allāhu Akbar* (God is great). To intensify this imagery, their eyes are shown as filled with blood. Wherever they see an infidel (non- Muslim) they lay their hand on him and force him to declare that there is no deity except God or face execution. The spin masters have thus painted us masterly with their tag: "This nation's history smells of blood."
>
> Ironically, our picture makers are our old well wishers who have themselves been involved in an unholy war for the past many centuries against the poor and the wretched of the earth. History reveals a very ungainly picture of Westerners: equipped with all kinds of deadly weapons, they have thrown themselves on the peoples of the world establishing markets for their goods, searching for raw material resources, looking for lands to colonize, and

[4] This translation of Mawdūdī's quote relies on the Urdu version of his paper, which was originally a speech given in Lahore in 1939. Sayyid Quṭb quoted from an Arabic translation which appears to have been expanded in some places and abridged in others. It also appears that the Arabic translation utilizes an expansive style, using many synonymous phrases and expressions. Hence, a reader who compares this text with the Arabic quote is bound to notice differences in many paragraphs. However, the ideas expressed are the same, and the lines the two versions follow are identical. — Editor's note.

minerals to exploit so that they can fuel their never-ending lust for other people's wealth. Their war is not for God but for greed to satisfy the demands of their baser selves. For them, it is enough of a reason for their bloodletting pursuits if others have resources to enrich them. Worse, they have annexed other people's lands where they have settled their surplus manpower. Some people even qualified themselves for such punitive action if their geographical areas provided access to a territory that they wanted to overpower.

What we, Muslims, have done is now history while the West's accomplishments are part of the contemporary scene witnessed by humanity every day. Asia, Africa, Europe, America — which part of the world is left unsoiled with the blood of the innocents owing to the West's unholy war? Horrible as it is, it redounds to their painting skills that they have brushed us in such exaggerated colours. Ghastly as it may be, they have succeeded in concealing their own ugly face behind ours. And so great is our naivety that when we see our portrait thus made we are so terrified that we forget to see the faces of the painters behind it. Worse, we become apologetic, pleading: "Your Excellencies, we do not have anything to do with war; we are as peaceful a missionary as the Buddhists and the priests are. All we do is to refute a few beliefs and replace them with some others. Weapons are not our business. We do, however, admit that occasionally when someone comes to beat us we counter him against our will. But now we have discarded even our right to self-defence. To please your Excellencies we have officially proscribed weapon-wielding jihād. Now *jihād* is an effort waged with our mouths and pens. To fight with weapons is your prerogative."

Misgivings about jihād

Rhetoric aside, when we try to analyze the causes that have made *jihād* for God's sake an ungainly proposition for the non-Muslims as well as Muslims, we find two primary misconceptions behind it. The first lies in the fact that Islam has been misconceived as just another religion. The second centres around the fact that the Muslims are being viewed as a nation in the sense that this noun is generally perceived. Thus, two misconceptions have distorted not only the concept of *jihād* but have also damaged the whole complexion of Islam, giving Muslims a very bad image.

In common parlance, religion is nothing but a combination of a few articles of faith, and a few worship rituals. In this sense religion is doubtless a matter of private concern. One has the right to choose any faith one likes. One can also

follow one's conscience in worshipping any deity one wants. And if one feels comfortable with it, one can even become part of the effort to spread it across the globe engaging others in polemics. This kind of faith does not need a sword for support. The proponents of traditional religion may rightly ask: "Do you want to beat people into embracing your faith?" This is a valid question that will inevitably be asked if one reduces Islam to a religion, in the common nuance of the word. In fact, once Islam is reduced to just another faith, then *jihād* invalidates itself in the overall scheme of Islam.

Likewise, what is a nation other than a homogeneous group of people which assumes distinction from other groups on account of its shared belief in some foundational values. In this sense a group having become a nation may rise in arms only for two reasons: when others attempt to deprive it of its legitimate rights or when it invades others to divest them of their rights. In the first situation, it has the moral ground to fight back; but even then some pacifists may disapprove. The second situation lacks moral content to justify armed invasion. None, other than a ruthless dictator, tries to justify such aggression. Indeed, intellectuals and statesmen of modern-day empires like France and Britain would not try to justify it.

The essence of jihād

Thus, if Islam is a religion and the Muslims are a nation, then *jihād* loses its most significant qualities that make it an important part of Islamic worship. Strictly speaking, Islam is neither a mere religion in the common sense, nor is the denomination "Muslim" the name of a nation.

So what is Islam? Islam is a revolutionary concept and a way of life, which seeks to change the prevalent social order and remould it according to its own vision. Based on this definition, the word `Muslim' becomes the name of an international revolutionary party that Islam seeks to form in order to put its revolutionary programme into effect. *Jihād* signifies that revolutionary struggle involving the utmost use of resources that the Islamic party mobilizes in the service of its cause.

Like other revolutionary concepts, Islam avoids common words already in currency and opts for a more precise terminology so that its radical aspects stand distinct. As part of this special terminology, *jihād* serves a clear purpose. Islam deliberately discards words denoting war. Instead, it uses the word *jihād,* which is the equivalent of the English word "struggle". The Arabic word, however, is far more expressive and carries broader connotations, as it stands for exerting one's utmost endeavour to promote a

cause.

One may ask why the old words were discarded and new expressions coined? The answer lies in the fact that the word `war' has always been used for armed conflict between nations and empires aiming to achieve personal or national interests, devoid of any ideology or higher principles. Since Islam is not concerned with such mundane considerations, it dropped the old vocabulary altogether. Nor does Islam feel itself bound by a national concern. It has no interest in who occupies a particular piece of land. The only thing that matters for Islam is the well-being of humanity, for which it has its own particular perspective and action plan. Wherever there are governments opposed to its perspective, Islam aims to change them, regardless of where they function and the people they govern. Its ultimate objective is to establish its way of life and to put in place governments that implement its programme. Islam wants space — not a piece of the earth but the whole planet. It has no wish to monopolize resources for the benefit of a particular community; on the contrary, it wants to give all humanity spiritual and moral elevation through the implementation of its unique programme. To make it happen, it marshals every bit of manpower and material resource.

Islam gives the name *jihād* to such cumulative efforts. This includes efforts to change people through verbal advocacy. It also includes the possible armed struggle to end an oppressive system and establish justice. Spending money for the cause and physical exertion are also *jihād.*

For God's cause

Islamic *jihād* is not the mere exertion of effort; it has to be for God alone. Thus, it is imperative that *jihād* be undertaken only for God's cause, or to use the Arabic phrase, *`fī sabīlillāh'*. This is a special phrase that belongs to the particular repertoire of terminology that I have mentioned. Literally translated, it means `in the way of God.' True as this translation is, some narrow- minded people imagine that coercing others to accept Islam falls under this heading. Such understanding only betrays their rigidly narrow concepts. The fact remains that in the Islamic lexicon it has much wider connotations and implications.

For example, any work that involves collective well-being with no worldly considerations is for God. That is why a charity dispensed by a person for a moral or material return is not altruistic. If, however, the intention is to please God by helping the poor, it will fall within the purview *of fisabīlillāh.* Thus, this term is specific to those works that are unsoiled by selfish considerations,

solely motivated by the desire to help improve the human situation. And that in doing so will please God the Exalted, who is the end-all of all human endeavours. This is the sole reason for adding the condition of *ft sabīlillāh.* Meaning thereby that when a person aims at replacing a system of life with Islam he should have no self-centred considerations. In other words, he should not seek to replace Caesar with another Caesar. Nor should his struggle for the mission bear even a shade of seeking wealth, fame, or honour for himself. Instead, his whole effort and sacrifice should be directed toward establishing a just system for humanity, and to please no one but God.

Says the Qur'ān: "*Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan. Feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan."* (4: 76)

The word *ṭaghūt* has its root in *ṭughyān,* which means crossing the limits. When a river swells outgrowing its banks, we say it is flooded. Likewise, when a person goes beyond his limits and uses power to become god over humanity or garners for himself monetary and other benefits then he follows the way of *ṭaghūt.* Opposed to this is fighting in the way of God to establish His laws of justice, and which calls for a sense of altruism not found elsewhere.

Thus says the Qur'ān: "*As for that happy life in the hereafter, We grant it only to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth, nor yet to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God- fearing."* (28: 83)

A *ĥadīth* says that a person asked the Prophet "what does fighting in the way of God mean? One person fights for booty, another fights to prove his bravery; and a third fights for enmity toward someone or because he has a bias for his nation. Among them whose fight is in God's way?" The Prophet's reply was as follows: "Nobody's. The fight *fī sabīlillāh* is only of a person who has no other considerations but that the word of God prevails."

Another *ĥadīth* says "if a person fought and had the intention to secure for himself even a camel's halter, he would lose his reward." God accepts only that deed which is performed solely for Him without any personal or group considerations. Thus, the conditionality of *fī sabīlillāh* is crucial from the Islamic viewpoint. For every living being (animal or human) is engaged in the *jihād* of survival with the full vigour of its existence.

Among the radical concepts of the revolutionary party named "Muslim" the most foundational is to engage every rebellious force that comes in Islam's way: fight them, muster everything possible to replace them. But make sure that you do not become rebellious instead. Your mandate is contingent on

your cleansing the world of rebellion and wickedness and subjecting it to God's laws of justice and fair play.

After spelling out *jihād's* meaning and its link with *fī sabīlillāh,* I will now deal with Islam's revolutionary message so that you may understand the reason for waging jihād as a tool for the spread of Islam.

Islam's revolutionary message

One can summarize the Islamic message as follows: "*Mankind, worship your Lord who has created you and those who lived before you, so that you may become God-fearing.*" (2: 21) Islam does not address itself to the farm holders and the moneyed class of industrialists, or to the peasants and industrial workers, but rather to the whole of mankind. Its audiences are human beings (not classes): for if you are subservient to someone other than God, then you should give this up. If you crave to be a deity over humanity, then push this out of your mind for none has the right to exalt himself over others. You must all enter into God's servitude as equals. Thus, the Islamic call is universal, inviting a total change. It is to God alone that the right to rule belongs, and none else. Expressed differently, nobody has the authority to become the master of others, dictating to them what he thinks is right and wrong. To acknowledge anyone as such is to attribute Godhead to him, which undoubtedly complicates the human situation.

What causes distortion in the true human self and derails humans from the God-given straight path is that they lose sight of Him in their lives and thus forget their true nature. The result it formulates is equally disastrous. On the one hand, some people, class or group rise with claims to divinity and by virtue of their power reduce others into their servitude. On the other hand, because of this tendency to oust God from our lives and the consequent distortion of our true nature, a large number of people surrender themselves to the divinity of the powerful, accepting their right to decide for them. This, as I said, is the source of oppression in the world: Islam makes its first strike at this apparatus of divinity. It says loudly and clearly: "*Pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses — those who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights.*" (26: 151-152) "*Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds.*" (18: 28) "*Those [are the ones] who debar others from the path of God and would have*

it crooked, and who deny the life to come." (11: 18)

Islam asks people: do you want to continue with a servitude forced upon you by these small and petty multitude of deities or do you want one God who is all-powerful? If you refuse to return to the worship of one God, you will never liberate yourselves from the slavery of these hordes of self-made gods. They will overpower you one way or the other and cause disruption throughout human life. "*She said: `Whenever kings enter a country, they corrupt it, and turn the noblest of its people into the most abject. This is the way they always behave.'"* (27: 34) "*Yet, no sooner does he turn his back than he strives to spread corruption in the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption."* (2: 205)

Without elaborating upon it further, I will be brief in presenting to you the fact that Islam's advocacy of God's oneness was not toward a religion, which invites people to certain articles of belief constituting a faith.

In fact, it was a social revolution that gave a direct blow to the stratified classes, which had institutionalized themselves into a priesthood, a kingship, moneylenders, feudal lords and cartel owners reducing people to bondage.

In some places they had even become gods unto themselves asking people in the name of their birth or class right to surrender themselves to their worship. In other places, while making use of the masses' ignorance, the ruling regime had carved for them artificial gods and built temples inducing them to accept their claims to divinity, under the patronage of those gods.

Thus, when Islam, opposed to idol worship and polytheism, invited humanity to worship one true God, the people in power and those who supported them and shared the privileges arising from power felt threatened. Hence why whenever a prophet raised the call of "My people, worship God alone, for you have no God other than Him," it triggered opposition towards him. The power elite along with the exploitative classes combined to crush the message, for they knew it was not merely a metaphysical proposition but a call for social change. In its very first reverberation they smelled rebellion of a political nature.

Characteristics of the call for an Islamic change

There is not a shadow of doubt that all the prophets were revolutionary leaders. And the most revolutionary among them was Muĥammad (peace be upon him). However, what separated the prophets from the rest of the revolutionaries is their balanced approach towards life, their untainted sense

of justice and equality. The non-prophet revolutionaries, despite their being well intentioned, had a tilted sense of justice and equality. [The problem being their relative backgrounds.]

Either such revolutionaries came from the oppressed classes or they rose with their support. Small wonder then that they viewed everything from a class perspective. Their vantage was coloured by their class bias and not by humanity considerations or impartiality. They swung between hatred for a particular class and their bias for the class that supported them. Hence why their solution for oppression was reactive, leading them to fall into the same trap and making them a new class of oppressors. For them to formulate a balanced collective system was an impossible proposition. Contrary to this, no matter how much the prophets and their companions were persecuted, their revolutionary movement remained free from resentment and bitterness. This was possible for they worked under the direct supervision of God, the Exalted, who does not suffer from any human weakness nor does He have a particular relation with any class of people or a grudge against anyone. This is why the prophets viewed things with justice. Their sole desire was to make sure that humanity's interests were served by bringing about a system in which people could exercise their due rights while living within legitimate means, and by creating a perfect balance between individual and societal interests. This perhaps explains why the prophet-led movements never turned into class warfare. Their reconstruction programme was not designed to impose one class over another. Rather, they followed the course of justice in a manner that people had equal space for their material and spiritual growth.

The need for jihād and its objective

In this short presentation it is difficult for me to spell out the entire socio-political order of Islam. Keeping within the constraints of my subject, I wish to emphasize the point that Islam is not merely the amalgamation of certain dogmas and rituals but rather a comprehensive code of life that seeks to blot out all oppressive modes of life and introduce its own programme for human welfare.

To meet this end, Islam seeks a wider audience by embracing humanity and not just a particular group. In fact, it even goes to the extent of inviting oppressors, including kings and the super rich, to come and live within the legitimate bounds fixed by their Creator. If they accept the truth, it says, they will have peace and security. Here, there is no enmity toward human beings.

If there is hostility, it is towards oppression, social disorder, and immorality. In other words, it is towards those who by taking what is not theirs, transgress their natural limits.

Besides, whoever embraces this message no matter to what class, race, nation, and state he or she belongs, will have equal rights and status in the Islamic society, creating thus that universal revolutionary party which the Qur'ān describes as "*Hizb Allāh*" or what is also known as the "Islamic party" or "the Muslim ummah".

The moment this party comes into being, it takes up *jihād* to pursue the objectives of its creation. This should not be surprising for it is logical to the demand of its existence — that it will strive to replace paganism in human life with a balanced code of social reconstruction that the Qur'ān alludes to as *kalimatullāh,* or God's word.

Thus, sluggishness on its part to any change in the current administrative set-up aiming at substituting it with Islamic governance will deny it its justification to continue, for that is the sole purpose of its inception. Explaining the reason for its birth, the Qur'ān says: "*You are the best community that has ever been raised for mankind; you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God.*" (3: 110)

It is not a party of preachers and missionaries but rather of divine enforcers. Its mission is to blot out, by force if necessary, oppression, moral anarchy, social disorder and exploitation so as to finish the so-called divine role of self-styled gods and replace evil with good. "*Fight them,*" the Qur'ān says, "*until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.*" (Verse 39) "*Unless you do likewise, there will be oppression on earth and much corruption.*" (Verse 73) "*He it is who has sent forth His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to the end that He may cause it to prevail over all religions, however hateful this may be to those who associate partners with God.*" (9: 33)

Thus, this Muslim party has no choice but to go for and control the power centres, for the simple reason that an oppressive immoral civilization derives its sustenance from an immoral governmental set-up. Likewise, a righteous state apparatus cannot be implemented unless the reins of government pass from the mischief-makers to the peacemakers.

That being the case, not to talk of reforming the world, this party will not be able to live up to its convictions if the ruling system is tied to some other mode of thought. For example, a person of a socialist bent will not be able to live by the norms of his preferred system if he resides under the capitalist systems of Britain and the United States. Likewise, if a Muslim seeks to live in

a non-Islamic ambience, his desire to live a Muslim life will be hard to realize. This is due to the fact that the laws he considers defective, the taxes he considers wrong, the matters he considers illegitimate, the culture he considers ridden with immorality, the education system he considers horrible will be imposed upon him and his family, and he will not find a way out. Thus a person or a group who believes in a value system is forced by the logic of its truth to seek its establishment in place of the opposing value system. If he does not become part of the effort to change the situation, he will prove himself to be false in his faith. "*May God forgive you (Prophet)! Why did you grant them permission to stay behind before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars? Those who believe in God and the Last Day will not ask you to exempt them from striving with their wealth and with their persons. God has full knowledge as to who are the God-fearing. Only those who do not truly believe in God and the Last Day ask for exemption. Their hearts are filled with doubt, and so do they waver." (9: 43-45)*

In the preceding words the Qur'ān gives a clear verdict that an Islamic party must strive to make its value system reign supreme for that is the only touchstone to validate its sincerity. Should it accept the supremacy of the opposite value system, the falsity of its claim starts to unravel itself. That such a group will eventually lose even its alleged faith in Islam is only natural, though this happens in phases. It starts with the tacit acceptance of the reigning value system as a compulsive situation which is hard to change followed by an imperceptible shift of feeling from discomfort to ease with a non-Islamic situation. So much so that you will become part of the auxiliary forces supporting the system. You will give your wealth and your life in the cause of sustaining the reigning value system and opposing the call of Islam. At this point, there will hardly remain any difference between you and the unbelievers other than some hypocritical claims to belief in Islam. In a *ĥadīth,* the Prophet clearly describes the consequence of such a state: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, you will either call for goodness [to the people] and restrain them from evil and hold the hand of the evildoer and turn him toward the truth by force or God's natural law will move to its inexorable result: the evildoers will affect your hearts as well and like them you will become the accursed ones."

The universal revolution

The discussion so far should clarify the point that Islamic *jihād* seeks to replace the dominance of non-Islamic systems. This revolution is not territorial but international, though as a starter the members of the Muslim

party, wherever they live, should focus on that place. Their eventual goal should, however, be a world revolution for the simple reason that any revolutionary ideology, which is humanity specific and seeking universal welfare, cannot reduce itself to a particular state or nation. It is innate in its nature to embrace the whole world, for the truth refuses to be confined to geography. For it, truth is indivisible: if it is truth on one side of a river, it is the same truth on the other side as well. No segment of humanity should be barred of its compassion. Wherever humans are oppressed, it must come to their rescue. Such is the dictate of its message. The Qur'ān says the same: "*And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, 'Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us.'*" (4: 75)

Besides, split as the peoples are into national confines, human relations are universal by their nature. In fact, no state can live up to its ideological moorings if neighbouring states do not share its vision of humanity. For the spread of the Muslim party's mission of improving the human situation, it is thus inevitable that the Islamic system should rise above the parochial outlook and embrace the universal. On the one hand, it should seek a global reach for its message inviting everyone to its fold for a better life. On the other hand, depending on its power resource, it should force non-Islamic governments to clean their stables or face the cleansing sweep of Islamic governance.

This was the policy that the Prophet [peace be upon him] and his successors followed. Arabia, the birthplace of the Muslim party, was Islamized first, and this was followed by extending the Islamic call to neighbouring states. It was only when they refused to accept the call and set on a direct course of opposing it that military action was taken against them. The Tabūk Expedition was the beginning of this policy. After the Prophet, his successor Abū Bakr engaged the non-Islamic empires of Rome and Persia. `Umar concluded the conquest. At first, the Egyptians and Syrians took the new event in history as an extension of Arabian imperialism. Looking for its parallel in the past, they thought that like previous nations which annexed other lands to enslave their populations, it wanted to tread the same path. For this very reason the Egyptians and Syrians came out to fight the Muslims under the banners of Caesar and Kisrā. But when they came to know the revolutionary message of the Muslim party they could not believe it: the Muslims were not the bearers of an aggressive nationalism; they were above national interests and had come to deliver them from the inhuman yoke of their tyrant rulers. Those who were exploited thus felt themselves inclined

toward the Muslim party and thus began a process of disenchantment in Caesar's and Kisra's camps. Where they were forced to fight the Muslims, they fought without any real zest, paving the way for those spectacular strings of victories in the early period of Muslim history. This is also because once the Islamic system was introduced and people saw it functioning they willingly joined the cadres of this international Muslim party and embraced its cause to facilitate its spread elsewhere.

The Battle of Badr

In the light of this exposition of the nature of Islam, the role of *jihād* and its importance, as well as the way of life Islam seeks to implement and its strategy of *jihād* and what it involves of progressive stages we can now consider the Battle of Badr and its importance. This was a battle which God describes as the Day of Distinction. We can also look at this *sūrah, al Anfāl,* which comments on this battle.

As stated earlier, the Battle of Badr was not the first action of Islamic *jihād.* Prior to it, a number of expeditions were sent out, but fighting took place during only one of these, involving the small company led by `Abdullāh ibn Jaĥsh, 17 months after the Prophet's migration to Madinah. All of these were in line with the fundamental principle underlying the concept of Islamic *jihād,* which I have fully discussed in this Prologue. They were all, it is true, directed against the Quraysh which drove the Prophet and his noble companions away from their homes, violating the sanctity of the Inviolable House of worship that was rightly observed under Islam and prior to its advent. But this was not the basis upon which the concept of Islamic *jihād* is founded. The basis is that Islam wants to liberate all mankind from servitude to any creature, so that they may serve only the Creator. It wants to establish Godhead as belonging to God alone, and remove all tyrannical authority that enslaves human beings. The Quraysh was the immediate tyrannical power which prevented people in Arabia from turning to the worship of God alone and acknowledging only His sovereignty. Hence, in line with its overall strategy, Islam had no option but to fight this tyrannical power. This had the added advantage of removing the injustice suffered by the noble companions of the Prophet in Makkah, and ensuring the security of the Muslim homeland in Madinah against any possible aggression. However, when we state these immediate or local causes, we must not lose sight of the nature of Islam and its strategy that allows no power to usurp God's sovereignty, bringing people into servitude to anyone other than God.

We need to give a brief outline of the events of the Battle of Badr[5] before

[5] For a full discussion of the Battle of Badr, its events and consequences, see Adil Salahi, *Muĥammad. Man and Prophet,* The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 253-295. — Editor's note.

discussing this *sūrah* which comments on it. This will enable us to appreciate the general atmosphere prevailing at the time of its revelation, understand the meaning of its text, its practicality both in dealing with events and in explaining them. Qur'ānic statements cannot be properly understood on the basis of their linguistic import alone. Their proper understanding requires, first and foremost, that we try to live in their historical atmosphere, appreciate their practical and positive approach to events and circumstances. Although their significance stretches well beyond the historical reality they deal with, Qur'ānic statements do not reveal the full extent of their significance except in the light of such historical reality. Thus, they will continue to have their permanent significance and inspiration for those who work for the implementation of Islam, facing situations and circumstances that are not unlike those faced by the early Muslims. The Qur'ān will never reveal its secrets to those who passively deal with its statements on the basis of their linguistic import alone.

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq[6] reports:

> Intelligence was brought to the Prophet (peace be upon him) that a large trade caravan, in which almost every household in the Quraysh had a share, was returning from Syria, led by Abū Sufyān ibn Ĥarb, and travelling with 30 or 40 men from the Quraysh. He suggested to his Companions: "Here is a caravan of the Quraysh, with much of their wealth. If you intercept it, God may reward you with it." People began to get ready, while others did not. No one thought that the Prophet would have to fight a battle.

In *Zād al-Ma`ād* and in *Imtā` al-Asmā`* it is mentioned that the Prophet only ordered those whose mounts were ready to move immediately to march, without giving too much importance to numbers. Ibn al-Qayyim states:

> The total number of Muslims to take part in Badr was 317 men, 86 of them were from the Muhājirīn, 61 from the Aws and 170 from the Khazraj. The number of the Aws people was much less than the Khazraj, despite the fact that the Aws were the stronger fighters and more steadfast, because their quarters were further away from the city, and the call to get ready came as a surprise.
>
> The Prophet said that he wanted only those who were ready to move, and had their mounts available. Some people who lived in the outskirts requested him to wait until they got their mounts, but he refused. Indeed, there was no

[6] Muĥammad ibn Ishāq was one of the earliest biographers of the Prophet. His report of the Battle of Badr is the basis of its account in *al-Bidāyah wa'l-Nihāyah* by Ibn Kathīr. In his book, *Imtā` al-Asmā`*, al-Maqrīzī provides more or less the same account. Similarly, Imām Ibn al-Qayyim gives a summarized version of it in *Zād al-Ma`ād,* as does Imām 'Ali ibn Hazm in *Jawāmi` al-Sīrah. We* have incorporated parts of all these accounts into our summary of the events of this battle.

> intention to fight a battle, and no preparations were taken for such an eventuality, but God caused them to meet their enemy when they were totally unprepared.[7]

As Abū Sufyān drew near the Hijaz, he tried to obtain intelligence, seeking information from any traveller he met on his way. He was worried for the safety of people's property he carried with him. Some travellers told him that Muĥammad had mobilized his followers to intercept his caravan. Abū Sufyān hired Damdam ibn `Amr al Ghifārī, sending him to Makkah to alert its people to the need to defend their property and to tell them that Muĥammad and his Companions were about to intercept the caravan. Damdam moved very fast towards Makkah. Al-Maqrīzī reports:

> The people of Makkah were alarmed to hear Damdam shouting: "People of the Quraysh! Descendants of Lu'ayy ibn Ghālib! A tragedy! A disaster! Your property with Abū Sufyān is being intercepted by Muĥammad and his Companions. I doubt whether you can save the caravan. Help! Help!" To indicate the gravity of his message Damdam cut his camel's ears, and tore his own shirt. The Quraysh immediately started to mobilize all their resources, getting ready in three days, and in only two days according to some reports. The strong among them helped those who were weak. Suhayl ibn `Amr, Zam`ah ibn al-Aswad, Tu`aymah ibn `Adiy, Ĥanżalah ibn Abī Sufyān and `Amr ibn Abī Sufyān were all urging people to join the Quraysh army. Suhayl said to his people: "Are you going to allow Muĥammad and the apostates from Yathrib to confiscate your property and caravan? Whoever needs money or power, he may have these." Umayyah ibn Abī al- Şalt praised him in a short poem.
>
> Nawfal ibn Mu`āwiyah al-Dīlī spoke to a number of rich people urging them to make financial contributions so as to provide mounts for people to join the army, who did not have their own. 'Abdullāh ibn Abī Rabī`ah gave him 500 Dinar [a gold currency] to spend in the way he wished in strengthening the army. He also received 200 Dinars from Ĥuwayṭib ibn `Abd al-`Uzzā, and a further 300 Dinars to buy arms and mounts. Tu`aymah ibn `Adiy provided 20 camels and undertook to look after the fighters' families. Anyone who did not wish to join the army in person sent someone in his place. They spoke to Abū Lahab, but he refused to join or send anyone in his place, but it is also reported that he sent in his place al-`Āşī ibn Hishām ibn al-Mughīrah, who owed money to him, saying to him that he would write off his debt if he went in his place, which he did.

[7] Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibid, p. 188.

`Addās,[8] a Christian slave, tried hard to dissuade his masters, `Utbah and Shaybah, sons of Rabī`ah, as well as al-`Āş ibn Munabbih from joining. Umayyah ibn Khalaf, on the other hand, decided not to join the army, but `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayţ and Abū Jahl rebuked him severely. He said to them: "Buy me the best camel in this valley." They bought him a camel for 300 Dirhams [a silver currency], but it was part of the spoils of war taken by the Muslims.

None was less enthusiastic to go than al-Ĥārith ibn `Āmir. Đamđam ibn `Amr had seen the valley of Makkah with blood running from both of its two ends. `Ātikah bint `Abd al-Muţţalib, the Prophet's aunt, had seen in her dream, warning of death and blood in every home. Hence, people known for sound judgement were disinclined to march for war. They began to exchange views. Among those unwilling to go were al-Ĥārith ibn `Āmir, Umayyah ibn Khalaf, `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah, Shaybah ibn Rabī`ah, Ĥakīm ibn Ĥizām, Abū al-Bakhtarī ibn Hishām, `Alī ibn Umayyah ibn Khalaf, and al-`Āş ibn Munabbih, but Abū Jahl rebuked them all, aided in this task by `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayţ and al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith ibn Kildah. Thus the Quraysh settled for marching to meet the Muslims.

The Quraysh army left in a festive mood, with singers and music playing, and feeding themselves well. Their army was 950 men strong, with 100 horses mounted by 100 heavily armoured soldiers, and a large number of body armour for those who were walking. They had 700 camels. They were most aptly described in the Qur'ān: *"Do not be like those who left their homes full of self-conceit, seeking to be seen and praised by others. They debar others from the path of God; but God has knowledge of all that they do."* (Verse 47)

As they marched, they were nursing great hatred against the Prophet and his Companions because of their intention to intercept their trade caravan. The Muslims had earlier killed `Amr ibn al-Hađramī and took the small caravan he was leading.[9] Abū Sufyān was leading the caravan accompanied by 70 men,[10] among whom were Makhramah ibn Nawfal and `Amr ibn al-`Āş. The caravan had no less than 1000 camels, loaded with merchandise. When they were near to Madinah, they were extremely alarmed, particularly because they felt that Damdam ibn `Amr and the help from the Quraysh were slow in

[8] When the Prophet went to Ţā'if some four years earlier to address its people with the message of Islam, they treated him very badly, and set on him their slaves and children to stone him, and his two feet bled as a result. He sought refuge in an orchard belonging to `Utbah and Shaybah, and when they saw him, they sent `Addās to him carrying a bunch of grapes. When Addās spoke to the Prophet he recognized his position and kissed his hands and feet.

[9] That was the incident in which the expedition led by `Abdullāh ibn latish was involved.

[10] As mentioned earlier, they were only 30-40 men according to Ibn Isĥāq's report.

> coming. As Abū Sufyān arrived in Badr at the head of the caravan, he was worried lest he should be detected. Therefore, he changed route and took his caravan closer to the sea, leaving Badr to his left and marching with speed.
>
> Meanwhile, the Quraysh army was marching at leisure, feeding anyone who caught up with them and slaughtering many camels for food. Then Qays ibn Imri' al-Qays came to them with a message from Abū Sufyān advising them to go back "so that you do not leave yourselves liable to be killed by the people of Yathrib [i.e. the old name of Madinah]. You have only marched to protect your trade caravan and your property. Now that it is safe by God's help, you have no further purpose." He tried to persuade the Quraysh to go back, but they refused. Abū Jahl said: "We will not go back, but we shall march on to Badr, where we shall stay for three days to celebrate. We shall slaughter camels for food, feed whoever cares to come to us, drink wine in abundance and be entertained by singers and dancers. The whole of Arabia shall hear about us and hold us in awe for the rest of time."[11]

Qays went back to Abū Sufyān and told him that the Quraysh army marched on. He said: "Woe to my people! This is all the work of `Amr ibn Hishām [i.e. Abū Jahl]. He does not want to go back because he assumed leadership and went too far. Excess spells a bad omen. If Muĥammad gets the upper hand, we will be humiliated."[12]

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq reports:

> Al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, who was an ally of the Zuhrah clan, said to his people: "God has saved your property and spared your tribesman, Makhramah ibn Nawfal. You have mobilized to save him and his property. Put the blame on me if you are accused of cowardice, and let us go back. There is no need for you to go on a fighting course for nothing. Do not listen to what this man [meaning Abū Jahl] says." They accepted his advice and went back home. Not a single man from Zuhrah took part in the Battle of Badr. The rest of the Quraysh clans succumbed to the pressure and had some of their men participating, except for the clan of `Adiy ibn Ka`b. Moreover, Ṭālib ibn Abī Ṭālib was with the Quraysh army, but some people said to him: "We know you, the Hāshimites, well. Even though you may come with us, your sympathy is with Muĥammad." Therefore, he went back home without continuing with the marchers.
>
> Meanwhile, the Prophet marched with his Companions in the month of Ramaḍān. They had only 70 camels which they rode in turns. The Prophet,

[11] Al-Maqrīzī, Aĥmad ibn `Alī, *Imtā` al-Asmā`,* Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 85-89
[12]Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *`Uyūn al-Āthār,* Dār al-Turāth, Madinah, Vol. I, p. 389.

> `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Marthad al-Ghanawī shared one camel. Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, and the two servants of the Prophet, Abū Kabshah and Anasah had one camel to share, while Abū Bakr, `Umar and `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf shared another.[13]

In *Imtā` al-Asmā`,* al-Maqrīzī reports:

> The Prophet marched on until he approached Badr when he received intelligence of the march of the Quraysh army. He consulted his Companions. Abū Bakr was the first to speak, and his words were reassuring to the Prophet. `Umar was next, and he spoke in the same vein, before adding: "Messenger of God! It is indeed the Quraysh defending its honour. They have never been humiliated since they achieved their present honourable position, and they have never believed ever since they sunk into disbelief. By God, they would never compromise their position of honour and they will most certainly fight you. Hence, you had better be prepared."
>
> Al-Miqdād ibn `Amr, the next to speak, said: "Messenger of God! Go ahead and do whatever you feel is best. We will never say to you as the Israelites said to Moses: `Go with your Lord and fight the enemy while we stay behind!' What we will say is: `Go with your Lord and fight the enemy and we will fight alongside you.' By Him who has sent you with the message of truth, if you ask us to march with you to Bark al-Ghimād [a remote place in Yemen] we will fight with you anyone who stands in your way until you have got there." The Prophet thanked him and prayed for him.
>
> But the Prophet continued to say to his Companions: "Give me your advice." He particularly wanted to hear from the *Anşār,* because he felt they might think that they were only bound to defend him against those who attacked him in Madinah when they pledged to protect him as they protected their women and children.[14] Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh stood up and said: "I will answer for the *Anşār.* You seem to want to know our opinion, Messenger of God?" When the Prophet indicated that it was so, Sa`d said: "It seems to me that you might have set out for a certain objective and then you received revelations concerning something different! We have declared our faith in you and accepted your message as the message of truth. We have made firm pledges to you that we will always do as you tell us. Go ahead, therefore, Messenger of God, and do whatever you wish, and we go with you. By Him who has sent you with the message of truth, if you take us right to the sea, we will ride

[13] Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah,* Dār al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. II, pp. 264-270

[14] That pledge was given at the time of the second `Aqabah commitment, which was the basis of the migration to Madinah by the Prophet and his Companions.— Editor's Note

with you. None of us shall stay behind. Make peace with whomever you will and cut relations with whomever you will, and take from our wealth and property what you may. Whatever you take is better placed than what you leave. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, I have never come this way, and I do not know it. Yet we have no qualms about encountering our enemy tomorrow. We fight hard and with strong determination when war breaks out. We pray to God to enable us to show you what would please you. You march, then with God's blessings."

Another report mentions that Sa 'd said to the Prophet: "We have left behind some of our people who love and obey you as much as we do; but they did not turn up because they thought it was only the trade caravan. Shall we erect for you a shed to stay in, and we will have your mount ready? We will then fight our enemy. If we win by God's grace, then that is what we want. If it is the other eventuality, then you will ride your horse to join the rest of our people." The Prophet said some kind words to him and added: "Or God may will something better."

The Prophet then said to his Companions: "March on, with God's blessings. God has promised me one of the two hosts. By God, it is as if I can see the place where some of them will be killed." As they heard these words, the Prophet's Companions realized that they would be involved in a battle, and that the trade caravan would manage to escape. As they heard the Prophet's words, they hoped for victory. The Prophet assigned banners to three people, one he gave to Muş`ab ibn `Umayr, and two black ones were given to `Alī and a man from the *Anşār,* [said to be Sa 'd ibn Mu`ādh]. He put out the weapons. When the Prophet left Madinah, he had no banner holder.

The Prophet arrived at the bottom of the Badr plain on Friday night, 17 Ramađān. He later sent `Alī, al-Zubayr, Sa 'd ibn Abī Waqqāş and Basbas ibn `Amr to gather intelligence around water wells. He pointed out a knoll and said: "You may get some news there." They found there a number of camels for carrying water, belonging to the Quraysh. Most of the men with the camels fled. One of them called `Ujayr shouted to the Quraysh: "Your man [meaning the Prophet] has taken your water carriers. This sent an air of disturbance among them. Rain was pouring over them. That night, they took with them Abū Yasār, a slave belonging to `Ubaydah ibn Sa`īd ibn al-'Āş, Aslam who belonged to Munabbih ibn al-Hajjāj and Abū Rāfi` who belonged to Umayyah ibn Khalaf. All three were brought to the Prophet when he was praying. They declared that they were responsible for fetching water to the Quraysh, but the Prophet's Companions disliked that and beat them. So, they said that they were travelling with Abū Sufyān and his caravan. So they left

them and waited. As the Prophet finished his prayer, he said to his Companions: "If they tell you the truth, you beat them; and if they lie, you leave them alone!" He then asked the captives about the Quraysh, and they told him that they were beyond the hill, and that they slaughtered nine or ten camels every day for food, and named some of those who were in the army. The Prophet said: "The host is between 900 and 1,000 strong. Makkah has sent you its dearest children."

The Prophet consulted his Companions about the place to encamp. Al-Ĥubāb ibn al-Mundhir ibn al-Jamūĥ said: "Take us forward, right to the nearest well to the enemy. I know this place and its wells. One of its wells is plentiful in fine water, where we can encamp, make a basin and throw in our containers. We will thus have water to drink when we fight. We will also close the rest of the wells." The Prophet said to him: "You have given good counsel."[15] He rose and marched on to encamp at the well indicated by al-Ĥubāb.

The Prophet spent that night, Friday 17 Ramaḍān, praying with his face turned towards the stem of a felled tree. There was a rainfall, but it was light where the Muslims were, making the ground firm but not difficult to walk on, but the rain was much heavier where the Quraysh were, although the two hosts were not far apart. Indeed the rain was a blessing for the believers and a real adversity for the unbelievers. That night the Muslims experienced deep slumber, so much so that a man might have his head on his chest and not feel it until he fell to one side. A young man, Rifā`ah ibn Rāfi` ibn Mālik had a wet dream and managed to bathe before the night was out. The Prophet sent `Ammār ibn Yāsir and `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd to go around the place where the Quraysh encamped. When they came back, they told him that the unbelievers were in fear and it was pouring with rain.

A shed was erected for the Prophet near the well, and Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh stood at the door with his sword in his hand. The Prophet went around the area where the battle was to take place, and pointed out certain places to his Companions, saying this person will be killed here and that person will be killed there. None of the ones he named was killed beyond the place the Prophet indicated. The Prophet marshalled his Companions and went back to the shed with Abū Bakr.[16]

---

[15] This exchange is reported somewhat differently by Ibn Isĥāq. According to him, al-Ĥubāb asked the Prophet: `Are we encamping here because God has told you to do so and we are not to move forward or backward from here? Or is it your own judgement that this is the right place to gain advantage against the enemy?" The Prophet answered that it was the latter. Therefore, al-Ĥubāb said that it was not the right place, and gave the Prophet his advice as reported in the text. — Editor's Note

[16] Al-Maqrīzī, Ibid, pp. 93-98

Rejecting Wise Counsel

Ibn Isĥāq reports:

> The Quraysh marched on in the morning to draw near to the Muslims. When the Prophet saw them coming into the valley, he said: "My Lord, this is the Quraysh demonstrating all its conceit to contend against You and call Your Messenger a liar. My Lord, grant me the victory You have promised me. My Lord, destroy them today." The Prophet saw `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah riding a red camel, and said: "If any of these people has some wisdom, it is the man with the red camel. If they obey him, they will follow good counsel."
>
> Khufāf ibn Aymā' ibn Raĥđah al-Ghifārī, or his father, sent to the Quraysh some slaughtered animals he had prepared for them as a gift as they passed close to his quarters. He also sent them a message that he was ready to support them with men and arms. They sent him a message of thanks, and added: "You have done more than your duty. If we are fighting men like us, we are more than a match for them, but if we are fighting God, as Muĥammad says, then no one can stand up to God."
>
> When the Quraysh encamped, some of their men, including Ĥakīm ibn Ĥizām, came up to the Prophet's basin and the Prophet ordered his Companions to let them do what they wanted. Every one of them who drank from the basin was killed in Badr, except for Ĥakīm ibn Ĥizām who later became a good Muslim. Subsequently, if he wished to swear very firmly, he would say: "By Him who saved me on Badr day."
>
> When the Quraysh had encamped, they sent `Umayr ibn Wahb of Jumaĥ to make a good guess at the number of Muslim troops. He went around the troops on his horse before returning to his people to say: "They are three hundred, give or take a few. But hold on a while and I will see if they have any hidden support." He went far into the valley, but found nothing. He came back with this report: "I have found no hidden support, but I can see a catastrophe and much killing. They simply have no protection apart from their swords. I think that we will not kill any one of them without him killing one of us first. Should they be able to kill their number from our side, life would not be worth living. You make your own decision."
>
> When Ĥakīm ibn Ĥizām heard that, he went to `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah and said to him: "You are the honourable man of the Quraysh and its obeyed master. Shall I tell you something which would bring you high praise for the rest of time?" When `Utbah showed his interest, Ĥakīm said: "Tell the Quraysh to go back and you will pay the indemnity for the death of Ibn al-Ĥadramī, for

he was your ally. You also bear the loss of his looted caravan." Recognizing the great advantages of this course of action `Utbah immediately accepted and asked Ĥakīm to act as his witness. He also said to him: "Go to Ibn al-Ĥanżaliyyah [meaning Abū Jahl], because I fear that he is the only one to oppose that."

`Utbah then stood up and addressed the Quraysh, saying: "Take it from me and do not fight this man [meaning the Prophet] and his Companions. You will gain nothing by fighting them. Should you win, many a man among us will look around and see the killer of his father or brother. This will lead to much enmity and hostility in our ranks. Go back and leave Muĥammad to the rest of the Arabs. If they kill him, they will have done what you want. If they do not, you will meet him without having such barrier of enmity."

Ĥakīm reports: "I went up to Abū Jahl and I found him preparing a spear. I said to him: 'Abū al-Ĥakam', `Utbah has sent me with this message to you.' And I told him what `Utbah said. He said: `His cowardice has surfaced now that he has seen Muĥammad and his Companions. We shall not go back until God has judged between our two parties. `Utbah does not believe what he says. It is simply that having seen that they are few in number and that his son is among them, he fears that his son may be killed."

Abū Jahl also sent a message to `Āmir ibn al-Ĥađramī, saying: "Your ally is trying to take the people back now that you have the chance to get your revenge. Stand up and appeal to the Quraysh by your brother's blood to get your revenge." `Āmir did that and shouted, `Woe to `Amr'. Thus, the air was one of war, and people were more determined to fight. Abū Jahl frustrated the good counsel `Utbah had given. When `Utbah was told what Abū Jahl had said, he answered: "This woman-like person will soon know whose cowardice has surfaced: mine or his."

As the army moved, one of its number, al-Aswad ibn `Abd al-Asad of the Makhzūm clan, a vulgar ill-bred man, sprang out from the ranks, saying: "I pledge to God to drink from their reservoir, or I will pull it down, or I will die in my attempt." Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's uncle struck him with his sword, chopping off his leg. Al-Aswad, however, continued to crawl towards the reservoir and Ĥamzah followed him until he killed him at the reservoir.

`Utbah ibn Rabī`ah, his brother Shaybah and his son al-Walīd came out of the Quraysh army and offered a six-man duel. Three young men from the *Anşār*, `Awf ibn al-Ĥārith and his brother Mu`awwadh and a third man said to be `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah, answered the challenge. The challengers asked them

> who they were, and when they told them that they were from the *Anşār,* they said that they had no business with them. It is said that `Utbah said to them: "You are honourable equals, but we only want some of our own people." One of them shouted: "Muĥammad, let our equals come out for a duel." The Prophet sent out three of his own relatives: Ĥamzah, his uncle, and his two cousins `Alī and `Ubaydah ibn al-Ĥārith. `Ubaydah, the eldest of the three fought `Utbah, Ĥamzah fought Shaybah and 'Ali fought al-Walīd. In no time, Ĥamzah and 'All succeeded in killing their two opponents, while `Utbah and `Ubaydah struck each other at the same time. Both fell to the ground wounded. Ĥamzah and `Alī then made sure that `Utbah was killed, and carried `Ubaydah with them to the Prophet.
>
> The two armies began to draw near to each other. The Prophet ordered his companions not to move forward until he had given them the order. "When they approach, try to repel them with your arrows." He then marshalled them and went to his shed with Abū Bakr. His prayers included: "My Lord, I appeal to you for the fulfilment of Your promise to me. Should this company of believers be overrun, You will not be worshipped again on earth." Abū Bakr said to him: "Messenger of God! Not so hard with your appeal to Your Lord. He will surely grant you what He has promised you."[17]

Al-Maqrīzī mentions in *Imtā` al-Asmā`:*

> Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah said to the Prophet: "Messenger of God! I counsel you — knowing that God's Messenger is far greater and more knowledgeable than to need counsel — that God is too great in His majesty to be appealed to for the fulfilment of His promise." The Prophet said to him: "Should I not appeal to God to fulfil His promise? God never fails to fulfil a promise."[18]

Ibn Isĥāq continues:

> The Prophet was momentarily overtaken by sleep. When he woke up he was markedly cheerful. He said to his companion: "Rejoice, Abū Bakr. Victory is certainly coming from God. This is the Angel Gabriel holding the rein of his horse with dust all over it."
>
> Mahja`, a slave belonging to `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, was killed when he was hit by an arrow, and thus he was the first casualty among the Muslims. Ĥārithah ibn Surāqah, from the Najjār clan was also hit in his neck by an arrow as he was drinking from the reservoir, and he died.

[17] Ibn Hishām, Ibid, pp. 191-195
[18] AI-Maqrīzī, Ibid, p.103

The Prophet went on encouraging his Companions, saying: "By Him who holds Muĥammad's soul in His hand, anyone who is killed fighting these people, dedicating his life for the cause of God, moving forward not backward, shall be admitted by God into heaven." On hearing this, `Umayr ibn al-Ĥamām from the Salamah clan, said as he held a few dates in his hand and was eating them: "Well, Well! All that separates me from heaven is that these people should kill me!"

`Awf ibn al-Ĥārith asked the Prophet: "What would make God smile at a servant of His?" The Prophet said: "His determined fight without protection." He took off his body armour and threw it away, picking up his sword and fighting until he was killed.

As the two armies drew closer, Abū Jahl said: "Lord! Let the side which severs relations of kinship, and invents falsehood, be destroyed today." His was a prayer to ensure his own ruin.

The Prophet took a handful of dust and said: "Let these faces be hung down." He then blew the dust at the Quraysh. He then ordered his Companions to fight hard, and they did to ensure the defeat of the Quraysh. God caused the killing and capture of so many of the Quraysh's nobility.

When the Muslims started to take enemy prisoners, the Prophet, who was in his shed with Sa 'd ibn Mu`ādh and a group of the *Anşār* standing at the door, swords in hands, guarding him, the Prophet noticed that Sa`d looked displeased. He said to him: "You do not seem to be pleased with what our people are doing?" He said: "Indeed. This is the first defeat God has inflicted on the idolaters. I would have preferred killing their men rather than sparing them."

At one point the Prophet said to his Companions: "I have come to know that a few men from the Hāshim clan and others have been made to join the army against their will. They have no quarrel with us. Any one of you who meets any Hāshimite should not kill him. If you come across Abū al-Bakhtarī ibn Hishām, do not kill him. If you meet al- `Abbās ibn `Abd al-Muţţalib, do not kill him. He came out against his will." Abū Ĥudhayfah ibn `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah said on hearing this: "Are we to kill our fathers, sons, brothers and tribesmen and let al-`Abbās alone? By God, if I see him, I will certainly hit him with my sword." The Prophet said to `Umar ibn al-Khaţţāb: "Abū Ĥafş[19] Is God's Messenger's uncle to be hit with the sword in his face?" `Umar said:

[19] Umar comments as he reports on this incident that it was the first time the Prophet called him Abū Ĥafş, following the Arabian tradition of calling a man as the father of his child, with Abū meaning father and Hafş a short version of his daughter's name.

"Messenger of God! Allow me to kill him, for he is a hypocrite."[20] Abū Ĥudhayfah used to say afterwards: "I am always worried about what I said that day, and fear that it may condemn me, unless it is atoned if I gain martyrdom." He was to die a martyr in the Battle of al-Yamāmah.

The Prophet singled out Abū al-Bakhtarī ibn Hishām, ordering that he should not be killed, because he was the most moderate among the Quraysh in his attitude towards the Prophet. Never did he try to harm the Prophet, or say something against him. Besides, he was one of the five men who successfully mounted the campaign to end the three-year boycott of the Prophet's clan by the rest of the Quraysh.[21]

`Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf reports: "Umayyah ibn Khalaf was a friend of mine when we were in Makkah. My name at the time was `Abd `Amr, but when I became a Muslim, I changed my name to `Abd al-Raĥmān. He said to me once when we were still in Makkah: `Abd `Amr! Do you reject a name given to you by your father?' I confirmed that. He said: `I do not know who is al-Raĥmān. Let us agree on a name I call you by, so that you do not reply to me if I call you by your original name and I do not call you by what I do not know.' Afterwards, if he called me `Abd `Amr, I would not reply. Then I said to him: 'Abū `Alī, you choose whatever you are comfortable with.' He said: `I will call you `Abd al-Ilāh [another name of God].' I agreed. After that, when I passed by him, he would call me `Abd al-Ilāh, and I would respond and have some conversation with him.

On the Day of Badr, I passed by him as he was standing with his son `Alī, holding his hand. I was carrying some body armour which I had looted. When he saw me, he called me `Abd `Amr, and I did not respond. He called me again `Abd al-Ilāh and I responded. He said: `Would you rather have me, for I am a better gain for you than this body armour.' I agreed and told him to come with me, and threw the body armour away. I took him and his son prisoners and walked away. He said: `I have never seen a day like this! Do you not need milk?'[22] I proceeded leading them away.

Umayyah asked me as I walked between him and his son, holding both their hands: ` `Abd al-Ilāh, who is the man in your host who has an ostrich feather

---

[20] The Prophet refused `Umar's request, as he refused to allow any killing of people that professed to be Muslims, even though they were known to be hypocrites. Abū Hudhayfah might have said this after seeing his father, brother and uncle being killed at the start of the battle, but he was a good Companion of the Prophet. May God be pleased with him.

[21] Abū al-Bakhtārī was nevertheless killed in this battle, because he refused to be taken prisoner.

[22] What he meant was that if he was taken prisoner, he would then buy his freedom by several camels that would produce much milk.

on his chest?' I told him that he was Ĥamzah ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib. He said: `He is the one who has done us a great deal of harm.' Then, as I was leading them away, Bilāl saw him with me. It was Umayyah who used to torture Bill in Makkah to force him to abandon Islam. He would take him out to the sandy area when it was extremely hot, and cause him to lie back on the sand, and place a large rock on his chest, telling him that he would remain so until he abandoned Muĥammad's faith. Bilāl's reply was always: `He is One! He is One!' Now, when Bilāl saw him, he shouted: `Umayyah, head of idolatry, may I perish if he survives!' I said to him: `Bilāl! Would you kill my two prisoners?' He said: `May I perish if he survives.' I said: `Do you hear me, you son of a black woman!' He repeated his words. Bilāl appealed to the *Anşār:* `Supporters of God's cause! Here is Umayyah, head of idolatry. May I perish if he survives.' A group of the *Anşār* surrounded us forming a circle and I was trying to defend him, but one of the men struck Umayyah's son's leg and he fell down. Umayyah uttered a loud cry, the like of which I never heard before. I said to him: `Try to escape, but there seems to be no escape for you. By God, I cannot defend you.' They soon killed both of them." `Abd al-Raĥmān used to say afterwards: `May God forgive Bilāl! I lost my loot and he killed my two prisoners.'[23]

Ibn Isĥāq later adds:

When the battle was over, the Prophet instructed some people to look for Abū Jahl among the dead. The first man to meet Abū Jahl in the battle was Mu`ādh ibn `Amr ibn al-Jamūĥ of the Salamah clan. He reports: "I noticed a group of men standing around him like a siege, saying to one another: 'Abū al-Ĥakam[24] shall not be reached.' When I heard them saying that, I resolved to get to him. I made a determined attack towards him and when he was within my reach I struck him with my sword once, which was enough to send half his leg high into the air, as a date stone flies from underneath the date-stone crusher. His son, `Ikrimah, struck back at me and cut off my arm, which remained attached to my body by a thin piece of my skin. I was prevented by the raging battle from coming back on him. I, however, kept on fighting for the rest of the day, pulling my arm behind me. When it became too troublesome I bent down and put my hand under my foot and stood up to cut off my arm."

As Abū Jahl was wounded, Mu`awwadh ibn al-Ĥārith passed by him and hit

[23] Ibn Hishām, Ibid, pp. 196-199

[24] Abū al-Ĥakam was Abū Jahl's name among the Quraysh, and it has the opposite meaning of the nickname given to him by the Muslims, i.e. Abū Jahl, which means `the father of ignorance.' — Editor's note.

him hard until he could not get up. He then left him, not quite dead. Mu`awwadh went on fighting until he was killed.

When the Prophet ordered a search for Abū Jahl among the dead, `Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd found him. The Prophet had told his Companions: `If you cannot identify him among the dead, look for a cut on his knee. When we were young, he and I pushed each other when we were attending a banquet held by `Abdullāh ibn Jud`ān. I was a little thinner than him. When I pushed him, he fell on his knees, badly injuring one of them.' `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd reports: "I found him at his last breath. When I recognized him, I put my foot over his neck. Once in Makkah he had attacked and hurt me. Now I said to him: `You enemy of God, haven't you been humiliated?' He said: `How? Am I not a man of merit you have killed? Tell me, who is victorious today?' I said: `God and His Messenger." Some people from Abū Jahl's clan of Makhzūm later claimed that Ibn Mas`ūd mentioned that Abū Jahl said to him as he put his foot over his neck: `You have climbed high, you little shepherd.'[25] `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd continues his report: "I chopped off his head and took it to the Prophet and said: `Messenger of God! This is the head of Abū Jahl, God's enemy.' He said: `God is One. There is no deity other than Him.' I put his head before the Prophet and he praised God."[26]

Ibn Hishām says:

It is reported that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to Sa`īd ibn al-`Āş when he passed by him: `I see that you harbour some feelings and that you may think that I killed your father. Had I killed him, I would not apologize to you; but I killed my uncle al-`Āş ibn Hishām ibn al-Mughīrah. As for your father, I passed by him as he was searching like a bull with his horns and I sidestepped him. His cousin `Alī went to him and killed him.'[27]

Ibn Isĥāq reports on the authority of `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife:

When the Prophet ordered that the killed be buried, they were all buried in one grave except for Umayyah ibn Khalaf, whose body swelled inside his armour. When they tried to remove it, his flesh was cut. So, they left it on him and buried him. When they were all buried, the Prophet stood at the grave and said to them: `People in the grave! Have you found out that what your Lord has promised you to be true? I have found that His promise to me has

[25] This is a reference to Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd's background who was a small man working as a shepherd in Makkah.
[26] Ibn Hishām, Ibid, pp. 201-202
[27] Ibn Hishām, Ibid, p. 202

come true.' Some of his Companions asked him: `Messenger of God! Do you speak to dead people?' He said: `They have known that what God has promised is true.' Some people mention that he said, `They hear what I say to them.' But the Prophet only said, `They have known."'...

When the Prophet ordered that they should be buried, the body of `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah was drawn towards the grave. The Prophet looked at his son Abū Ĥudhayfah and saw that he was sad. He asked him: "Abū Ĥudhayfah! You may be experiencing some misgivings concerning what happened to your father." He said: "No, Messenger of God. I have no doubt about my father and his death. But I knew him to be a sagacious and honourable man and I hoped that this would guide him to accept Islam. When I saw what happened to him and remembered that he died an unbeliever, I felt sad." The Prophet prayed for Abū Ĥudhayfah and said some kind words...

The Prophet then ordered that all the booty picked up by the Muslims be collected together. As it was collected, people differed concerning it. Those who picked up the booty claimed it, while those who were fighting and chasing the enemy said to them: "Had it not been for us, you would not have picked it up. We kept the people preoccupied while you took it away." A third group providing a guard to the Prophet said: "You do not have a claim stronger than ours. We had the booty close to us, and we could have picked it up, but we feared that the enemy would attack the Prophet and kept guarding him."

Asked about *Sūrah* al-Anfāl, or The Spoils of War, `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit answered: "It was revealed concerning us, the people of Badr, when we disputed about the booty and were impolite about it. God removed it from us and gave it up to His Messenger who divided it equally among the Muslims."...

When the Prophet arrived in Madinah, he assigned the prisoners to various groups of his Companions and said to them: "Look after the prisoners well." Among the prisoners was Abū `Azīz ibn `Umayr ibn Hāshim. He reports that his brother, Muṣ`ab passed by him as he was being taken captive by a man from the *Anṣār.* Muṣ`ab said to the *Anṣārī* man: "Hold tight to him. His mother is rich and she might give a good ransom for him." Abū `Azīz says: "I was assigned to a group of the *Anṣār.* When they laid out their lunch or dinner, they would give me the bread while they themselves ate dates without bread.[28] This was because of the Prophet's instructions to them.

[28] Dates were the most common food in Madinah, while bread was not always available. Bread is also filling; thus someone who ate bread would not feel the pangs of hunger like someone who ate only dates. — Editor's note.

> Every time any one of them had a piece of bread he would give it to me. Sometimes I felt embarrassed by their hospitality and I gave the bread to any one of them who was around. He would return it without taking a single bite."
>
> Ibn Hishām explains: Abū `Azīz was the holder of the banner of the unbelievers in Badr, next to al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith. When his brother Muş`ab ibn `Umayr said this to Abū al-Yusr, the man who held him captive took hold of him tightly, whilst Alma `Azīz remonstrated with him: "Is this what you recommend about me?" Muş`ab said: "He is my brother, ahead of you." His mother asked what the highest ransom paid for a man from the Quraysh was, and she was told that it was 4000 dirhams. She sent that amount as his ransom. Then the Quraysh sent ransom for other prisoners.[29]

Qur'ānic Comments

It was in comment on the Battle of Badr, of which we have given a brief outline, that this *sūrah* was revealed. It portrays the obvious events of this battle, and also shows the ultimate power behind the events and how God determined the sequence of events. Beyond that, it shows the line followed throughout human history. It describes all this in the unique language of the Qur'ān and its inimitable style. We will speak about all these in detail as we discuss the text. Here we will only highlight the main lines of the *sūrah.*

A particular event reported by Ibn Isĥāq on the authority of `Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit, the Prophet's Companion who says in reference to this *sūrah:* "It was revealed concerning us, the people of Badr, when we disputed about the booty and were impolite about it. God removed it from us and gave it up to His Messenger who divided it equally among the Muslims."

This event sheds ample light on the opening of the *sūrah* and the line it takes. The Prophet's Companions disputed over the little booty they gained in a battle that God considered a landmark in human history for the rest of time. But God wanted to teach them, and all humanity in succeeding generations, some highly important facts.

The first thing He wanted them to understand was that this battle was far more important than the spoils of war over which they were in dispute. Therefore, He called the day that witnessed it "*the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle.*" (Verse 41)

He also wanted them to know that this greatly important event was accomplished

[29] Ibn Hishām, Ibid, pp.204-209

by God's will and planning, in every step and every move. He had a purpose which He wished to accomplish. This means that they had nothing to do with the planning and accomplishment of this great victory or with its outcome and consequences. Both its small booty and great consequences were the result of God's will and design. He only put the believers, by His grace, through a fair test of His own making.

He wanted to show them the great gulf between what they wished for themselves, which was to take the caravan, and what He wanted for them, and for all humanity, through the escape of the caravan and the encounter with the Quraysh army.

The *sūrah* starts with recording their questions about the spoils of war, and explains God's ruling concerning them. It gives the spoils of war to God and His Messenger, calling on the believers to remain God-fearing and set to right their internal relations, after they were impolite concerning the booty, as `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit, the Prophet's Companion describes. They are further called upon to obey God and His Messenger, reminding them of their faith which requires them to be so obedient. Furthermore, right at the outset, the *sūrah* paints a highly inspiring and awesome picture of the believers: "*They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set to right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers. True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them. In their Lord do they place their trust. They attend regularly to their prayers and spend on others some of what We have provided them with. It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions.*" (Verses 1-4)

This is followed by a reminder of what they wished and hoped for themselves and what God wanted for them. It describes what they *see* of what is happening on earth and God's unlimited power beyond them and the events they see. (Verses 5-8) This is followed by a further reminder of the support God had given them, the victory He facilitated for them, and the reward He has, by His grace, set for them. (Verses 9-14)

Thus the *sūrah* proceeds, recording that the whole battle was fought by God's will and under His direction, with His help and support. It is all by His will, and for His sake and to serve His cause. Thus, the fighters have no claim to the spoils of war, as they belong to God and His Messenger. Thus, when God gives them back the spoils of war, this becomes an act of His grace. They must be purged of any desire to gain such booty, so that their *jihād* and struggle is undertaken purely for God's sake. (Verses 17-18, 26, 41-44)

Why Believers Fight

Since every battle believers fight is of God's own planning, under His command and for His cause, the *sūrah* mentions time and again the need to remain steadfast, prepare well for it remembering that God's support is certain to come, guard against the lure that keeps believers away from it, including property and offspring. They have to observe all values related to it, and guard against any element of showing off. The Prophet is ordered to encourage the believers to fight it. (Verses 15-16, 24, 27-28, 45-47, 60, 65)

While orders are given to remain steadfast and stand firm in battle, the *sūrah* provides clarifications of different aspects of the Islamic faith, strengthening its roots, making it the source of every commandment and every judgement. Thus, orders are not left as individual and unrelated items; they are seen to be stemming from the same clear, consistent and profound source.

1. On the question of the spoils of war, the believers are reminded of the need to remain God-fearing, to feel their hearts filled with awe when He is mentioned, and of the close and permanent manifestation of faith by obedience to God and His Messenger: "*They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set to right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers. True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them. In their Lord do they place their trust. They attend regularly to their prayers and spend on others some of what We have provided them with. It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions.*" (Verses 1-4)
2. On the battle strategy, they are reminded of God's will, power and planning. It is He who intervened to direct every stage: "*[Remember the day] when you were at the near end of the valley and they were at the farthest end, with the caravan down below you. If you had made prior arrangements to meet there, you would have differed on the exact timing and location. But it was all brought about so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done.*" (Verse 42)
3. On the events and results of the battle, they are reminded of God's leadership, help and support: "*It was not you who slew them, but it was God who slew them. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but God's, so that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making.*" (Verse 17)
4. When the order is given to the believers to remain steadfast, they are reminded of the fact that God wants them to have a true and worthy life, and that He is able to stand between a man and his heart. It is He who guarantees victory to those who place their trust in Him alone: "*Believers, respond to the call*

of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that which will give you life, and know that God comes in between a man and his heart, and that to Him you shall all be gathered." (Verse 24) *"Believers, when you meet an enemy force, be firm, and remember God often, so that you may be successful."* (Verse 45)

5. Defining the ultimate objective of the battle, God commands: *"Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone."* (Verse 39) *"It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land."* (Verse 67) "God *promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers."* (Verses 7-8)
6. On the organization of the Muslim community's international relations, faith is seen as the basis of the community and its distinctive character. It is faith values that determine position and loyalty. (Verses 72-75)

In this *sūrah,* the line that is seen to be clearly prominent, side by side with the line of faith, is that of *jihād.* It is given its high value both in concept and in strategy. It is also purged of all personal elements. Its essential justification is clarified so that it is well understood by all those who fight for God's cause at any time. They reiterate this justification with confidence, reassurance and pride. Overall, the *sūrah* gives this impression, but we may refer to some verses that are particularly relevant and will elaborate upon it when we discuss them. These are verses 15-16, 55-57, 60, 65, 67, 74.

The *sūrah* also sets the Muslim community's international relations on the basis of faith, as we have already stated. It outlines the rules that form the basis of such relations with other communities in times of war and peace, up to the time when this *sūrah* was revealed. It details rulings on the distribution of the spoils of war; and also on international treaties, providing fundamental principles that govern all these areas. (Verses 1, 15-16, 20-21, 24, 27, 38-39, 41, 45-47, 55-62, 64-71, 72-75)

To Sum up

Such are the main lines of the *sūrah.* When we remember that it was revealed to comment on the Battle of Badr, we can appreciate some aspects of the method the Qur'ān follows in the education of the Muslim community, preparing it for the leadership of humanity. We can also recognize how Islam looks at what happens on earth and in human life, in order to give Muslims the right perception.

Badr was the first major battle when the Muslims inflicted a very heavy defeat on their idolater enemies. But the Muslims did not leave their homes for this purpose or

with this intention. They only marched to intercept a trade caravan belonging to the Quraysh, the tribe that confiscated all their homes and property. They wanted to regain some of their losses, but God wanted something else. He wanted the caravan to escape and the Muslims to meet in battle their most hardened enemies who were able to place Islam under siege in Makkah. They further plotted to kill God's Messenger [peace be upon him] after they had mounted an uncompromising campaign of persecution against his companions.

God willed that this battle would be the criterion that separates the truth from falsehood, and that it be a landmark in the line of Islamic history and, consequently in human history. He willed that this battle should show the great gulf between what people may plan for themselves, believing it to serve their best interests, and what God chooses for them, even though they may think little of it at first sight. He wanted the emerging Muslim community to properly learn the factors that bring victory and those that bring defeat, receiving these directly in the battlefield, from none other than God, their Lord and protector.

The *sūrah* includes highly inspiring directives pointing to these highly important issues, as well as much of the rules that govern states of peace and war, captives and booty, treaties and pacts, and what ensures victory or defeat. All these are given in the most enlightening and instructive style of the Qur'ān which begins by expounding the faith and its main concepts, making it the prime mover in all human activity. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic method of looking at events and evaluating them.

The *sūrah* also portrays scenes of the battles and images of thoughts and feelings before, during and after the battle. These scenes and images are so vivid and lifelike that they enable the reader and the listener to interact with them.

At times, the *sūrah* gives glimpses of the life the Prophet and his companions lived in Makkah, when they were few in number, weak, fearing that others may do away with them. Now when they remember what their life was like then, they will realize the extent of God's grace in giving them this great victory. They know that they can only achieve victory with God's help, and by following the faith they preferred to their own life and property. The *sūrah* also portrays some images of the life of the unbelievers before and after the Prophet's migration to Madinah, as well as images of the doom suffered by earlier unbelievers such as Pharaoh and his people. These are given in order to establish the law that never fails, which gives victory to believers and defeat to God's enemies.

The second half of the *sūrah* mirrors the first, beginning with a definitive ruling on the sharing out of the spoils of war, coupled with a call to believe in God and His revelations. It expounds on God's planning in this battle that gave the Muslims such

spoils of war, portraying images of what actually took place in the battle. We clearly see that the believers were only a means through which God accomplished His purpose. Believers are then urged to always remain steadfast when they meet their enemy in battle, remembering to glorify God, obey Him and His Messenger, and steer away from internal conflict, lest they weaken and be defeated. They must also guard against showing off and against being deceived by Satan's wicked schemes. They must always place their full trust in God who alone can bring them victory. It tells them of the rule God has established in punishing unbelievers for their sins.

In the first half, the *sūrah* mentioned how the angels were ordered to support the believers and strike the unbelievers' necks and hands. Here in the second half, we see them striking the unbelievers on their faces and backs. The description of the unbelievers as the worst of all animals which occurs in the first half is repeated in the second in the context of their violation of every treaty or promise they make. This leads to the rules defined by God for the conduct of international relations by the Muslim community, both with those who take a hostile attitude and those who wish to live in peace with it. Some of these rules are provisional and some final.

Up to this point, the nature and sequence of issues discussed in the second half of the *sūrah* mirror the first half, with some more details on rules governing relations with other communities. As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it adds certain issues and rules to complete the picture. God reminds His Messenger and the believers of His favour of bringing about unity of their hearts, which could not have been accomplished except through God's will and grace. The Prophet and the believers are also reassured that God will protect them. God then commands His messenger to encourage his followers to fight, making it clear that, with their faith and if they remain steadfast, they are a good match to a force of unbelievers ten times their number, because the unbelievers are devoid of understanding, since they do not believe. When they are at their weakest, the believers are equal to twice their number, provided they remain steadfast. God is sure to support those who are steadfast in the defence of His cause.

God then takes issue with the believers because of their taking ransom from their prisoners of war, in return for their release, when the Muslims had not yet fought hard to irretrievably weaken their enemy and establish their own authority. Thus the policy of the Islamic movement in different stages and conditions is established and shown to be flexible, looking at every stage and what responses are suitable for it. The *sūrah* tells the believers how to treat prisoners of war, and how to present the Islamic faith to them in a fair manner to encourage them to embrace it. God makes it clear to the prisoners of war that to resort to treachery again is futile. It was God who gave the believers mastery over them when they played false to Him by refusing to believe in Him and His Messenger. Should they try to play false to the Prophet, God

will most certainly hand them over to him.

The final passage in the *sūrah* organizes internal relations within the Muslim community, and its relations with groups that embrace Islam but remain away from the land of Islam. It also regulates relations between the Muslim community and unbelievers in certain cases, and in general. These rules clearly show the nature of the Muslim community and the Islamic approach to its relations with others. It is absolutely manifest that Islam will always exist in a positive, forward- looking and proactive community. All the rules governing its internal and external relations are based on this fact. It is simply not possible to separate the faith and the law from the positive, proactive approach and the sound structure of the Muslim community.

1
Different Types of Victory

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

يَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلْأَنفَالِ ۖ قُلِ ٱلْأَنفَالُ لِلَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولِ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَصْلِحُوا۟ ذَاتَ بَيْنِكُمْ ۖ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١﴾

They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers. (1)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ ٱللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَـٰتُهُۥ زَادَتْهُمْ إِيمَـٰنًا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them. In their Lord do they place their trust. (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَـٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣﴾

They attend regularly to their prayers and spend on others some of what We have provided them with. (3)

أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ حَقًّا ۚ لَّهُمْ دَرَجَـٰتٌ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions. (4)

كَمَآ أَخْرَجَكَ رَبُّكَ مِنۢ بَيْتِكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَإِنَّ فَرِيقًا مِّنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ لَكَـٰرِهُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some

of the believers were averse to it. (5)

يُجَٰدِلُونَكَ فِي ٱلۡحَقِّ بَعۡدَ مَا تَبَيَّنَ كَأَنَّمَا يُسَاقُونَ إِلَى ٱلۡمَوۡتِ وَهُمۡ يَنظُرُونَ ٦

They would argue with you about the truth even after it had become manifest, just as if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes. (6)

وَإِذۡ يَعِدُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ إِحۡدَى ٱلطَّآئِفَتَيۡنِ أَنَّهَا لَكُمۡ وَتَوَدُّونَ أَنَّ غَيۡرَ ذَاتِ ٱلشَّوۡكَةِ تَكُونُ لَكُمۡ وَيُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ أَن يُحِقَّ ٱلۡحَقَّ بِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦ وَيَقۡطَعَ دَابِرَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٧

God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. (7)

لِيُحِقَّ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَيُبۡطِلَ ٱلۡبَٰطِلَ وَلَوۡ كَرِهَ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ٨

Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show false- hood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers. (8)

إِذۡ تَسۡتَغِيثُونَ رَبَّكُمۡ فَٱسۡتَجَابَ لَكُمۡ أَنِّي مُمِدُّكُم بِأَلۡفٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ مُرۡدِفِينَ ٩

When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: `I will reinforce you with a thousand angels advancing in ranks.' (9)

وَمَا جَعَلَهُ ٱللَّهُ إِلَّا بُشۡرَىٰ وَلِتَطۡمَئِنَّ بِهِۦ قُلُوبُكُمۡۚ وَمَا ٱلنَّصۡرُ إِلَّا مِنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ١٠

God made this only as good news with which to reassure your hearts, for victory comes only from God. Indeed, God is Almighty, Wise. (10)

إِذۡ يُغَشِّيكُمُ ٱلنُّعَاسَ أَمَنَةٗ مِّنۡهُ وَيُنَزِّلُ عَلَيۡكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ لِّيُطَهِّرَكُم بِهِۦ وَيُذۡهِبَ عَنكُمۡ رِجۡزَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ وَلِيَرۡبِطَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِكُمۡ وَيُثَبِّتَ بِهِ ٱلۡأَقۡدَامَ ١١

He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him, and He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to remove from you Satan's filth, to strengthen

your hearts and steady your footsteps. (11)

إِذْ يُوحِي رَبُّكَ إِلَى ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ أَنِّي مَعَكُمْ فَثَبِّتُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ۚ سَأُلْقِى فِى قُلُوبِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ٱلرُّعْبَ فَٱضْرِبُوا۟ فَوْقَ ٱلْأَعْنَاقِ وَٱضْرِبُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ كُلَّ بَنَانٍ ﴿١٢﴾

Your Lord inspired the angels, saying: `I am with you. So, give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip.' (12)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ شَآقُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۚ وَمَن يُشَاقِقِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿١٣﴾

This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution. (13)

ذَٰلِكُمْ فَذُوقُوهُ وَأَنَّ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٤﴾

This is for you, [enemies of God]! Taste it, then. The unbelievers shall be made to suffer the torment of fire. (14)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا لَقِيتُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ زَحْفًا فَلَا تُوَلُّوهُمُ ٱلْأَدْبَارَ ﴿١٥﴾

Believers, when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, do not turn your backs to them in flight. (15)

وَمَن يُوَلِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ دُبُرَهُۥٓ إِلَّا مُتَحَرِّفًا لِّقِتَالٍ أَوْ مُتَحَيِّزًا إِلَىٰ فِئَةٍ فَقَدْ بَآءَ بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَمَأْوَىٰهُ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٦﴾

Anyone who turns his back to them on that day, except when manoeuvring for battle or in an endeavour to join another troop, shall incur God's wrath, and hell shall be his abode: how vile a journey's end. (16)

فَلَمْ تَقْتُلُوهُمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَتَلَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ رَمَىٰ ۚ وَلِيُبْلِيَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْهُ بَلَآءً حَسَنًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

It was not you who slew them, but it was God who slew them. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but

ذَٰلِكُمْ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مُوهِنُ كَيْدِ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

God's, so that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making. Indeed, God hears all and knows all. (17)

إِن تَسْتَفْتِحُوا۟ فَقَدْ جَآءَكُمُ ٱلْفَتْحُ ۖ وَإِن تَنتَهُوا۟ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن تَعُودُوا۟ نَعُدْ وَلَن تُغْنِىَ عَنكُمْ فِئَتُكُمْ شَيْـًٔا وَلَوْ كَثُرَتْ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

That is so; it is God who shall make feeble the schemes of the unbelievers. (18)

If you were seeking a judgement, then a judgement has come to you. If you desist, it will be best for you; and if you revert to your erring ways, We will also be back [with Our punishment]. Your host, numerous as it may be, shall avail you nothing; for God is with the believers. (19)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَا تَوَلَّوْا۟ عَنْهُ وَأَنتُمْ تَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Believers, obey God and His Messenger, and do not turn away from him now that you have heard [his message]. (20)

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ سَمِعْنَا وَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Do not be like those who say: `We have heard,' while they do not listen. (21)

۞ إِنَّ شَرَّ ٱلدَّوَآبِّ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلصُّمُّ ٱلْبُكْمُ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Indeed, the worst of all creatures, in God's sight, are the deaf and dumb who are devoid of reason. (22)

وَلَوْ عَلِمَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا لَّأَسْمَعَهُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ أَسْمَعَهُمْ لَتَوَلَّوا۟ وَّهُم مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

If God had known of any good in them, He would certainly have made them hear. But even if He were to make them hear, they would have turned away and refused to listen. (23)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ لِمَا يُحْيِيكُمْ ۖ وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَحُولُ بَيْنَ ٱلْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَأَنَّهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Believers, respond to the call of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that

which will give you life, and know that God comes in between a man and his heart, and that to Him you shall all be gathered. (24)

وَٱتَّقُواْ فِتۡنَةٗ لَّا تُصِيبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنكُمۡ خَآصَّةٗۖ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلۡعِقَابِ ٢٥

Beware of temptation that does not lure only those among you who are wrongdoers. Know that God is severe in retribution. (25)

وَٱذۡكُرُوٓاْ إِذۡ أَنتُمۡ قَلِيلٞ مُّسۡتَضۡعَفُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ تَخَافُونَ أَن يَتَخَطَّفَكُمُ ٱلنَّاسُ فَـَٔاوَىٰكُمۡ وَأَيَّدَكُم بِنَصۡرِهِۦ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ٢٦

Remember when you were few and helpless in the land, fearful lest people do away with you: how He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support and provided you with many good things so that you might be grateful. (26)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَخُونُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلرَّسُولَ وَتَخُونُوٓاْ أَمَٰنَٰتِكُمۡ وَأَنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٧

Believers, do not betray God and the Messenger, nor knowingly betray the trust that has been reposed in you. (27)

وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّمَآ أَمۡوَٰلُكُمۡ وَأَوۡلَٰدُكُمۡ فِتۡنَةٞ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عِندَهُۥٓ أَجۡرٌ عَظِيمٞ ٢٨

Know that your worldly goods and your children are but a trial, and that with God there is a great reward. (28)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِن تَتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ يَجۡعَل لَّكُمۡ فُرۡقَانٗا وَيُكَفِّرۡ عَنكُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمۡ وَيَغۡفِرۡ لَكُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلۡفَضۡلِ ٱلۡعَظِيمِ ٢٩

Believers, if you remain God- fearing, He will give you a standard by which to discern the true from the false, and will wipe off your bad deeds, and forgive you. God's bounty is great indeed. (29)

Overview

This opening passage of the *sūrah* provides God's ruling over the booty that Muslims may gain in their campaigns to serve God's cause. Those who fought in the

first major battle that took place at Badr between the newly-established Muslim state and the pagan Arabs disputed among themselves over its distribution. God gives here His ruling and reminds them of their need to fear and obey Him, and also obey His Messenger. He reminds them of their faith and that they need to live up to its values.

God also reminds them that they had hoped to gain a trade caravan, but God wanted something much better for them: strength and victory. He further puts before their eyes the factors that made the battle go in their favour when they were facing an enemy who was far superior to them in numerical strength and equipment. They were given support by angels. Rain gave them water to drink, and made the terrain firmer so that they were not impeded by a sandy battleground. Slumber overwhelmed them to give them calmness and reassurance. Their enemies were overwhelmed with fear, and ended up suffering stern punishment.

The believers are commanded to remain steadfast in every battle, no matter how strong and unassailable their enemies may initially appear to be. It is God who plans, acts and kills. They are merely a means with which He accomplishes His will. He may do with them what He pleases.

The *sūrah* then ridicules the unbelievers who, before the battle, were keen to precipitate God's will, appealing to God to bring about the defeat of the party which was far more astray and ready to sever relations of kinship. He tells them that their appeal is granted. It also warns the believers against behaving like the hypocrites who hear God's message but do not listen or respond to it.

The passage concludes with appeals to the believers to respond to God and His Messenger when he calls on them to follow the path that gives them life, although it may appear at first sight to involve death and being killed in battle. It reminds them of the days when they were few in number, oppressed, living in fear, but God gave them shelter and granted them support and victory. It promises them that God will give them a clear criterion if they continue to fear Him. That will be in addition to forgiveness of their sins and abounding grace that makes all spoils of war appear petty and trivial.

Dispute Over the Spoils of War

> *They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: "The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers." True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them. In their Lord do they place their trust.*

> *They attend regularly to their prayers and spend on others some of what We have provided them with. It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions. (Verses 1-4)*

We mentioned in the Prologue a number of reports speaking about the reasons for the revelation of these verses. It is useful to add here some more reports in order to be fully aware of the prevailing atmosphere at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, particularly those verses that speak of the spoils of war. This will give us a clear view of the actual situation of the Muslim community after its first major battle since the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr quotes a report related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and others on the authority of Ibn `Abbās who says: "On the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet said: `Whoever does this or that shall have so and so.' The young ones among the Muslims fought hard to establish their claims, while the older people held the banners. When it was time to distribute the booty, they pressed their claims. The older people said: `Do not take it all for yourselves, for we were providing you with support. Had you suffered a setback, you would have needed our cover.' There was a dispute over the matter between them. So God revealed the opening verse of the *sūrah.*"

Another report by Ibn `Abbās goes as follows: "On the day of Badr, the Prophet said: `Whoever kills an enemy soldier shall have this and that, and whoever brings a prisoner shall have so and so.' A man called Abū al-Yasīr brought two men he had taken prisoner and said: `Messenger of God, you have promised us.' Sa`d ibn `Ubādah said: `Messenger of God, if you were to give only to these people, nothing will be left for your Companions. We did not stay behind because we thought little of the reward or out of cowardice. We only stayed behind to provide you with protection, should the enemy attack you from behind.' A dispute broke out, and the first verse of the *sūrah* was revealed. God also revealed Verse 41 which outlines the distribution of the spoils of war.

Imām Ahmad relates on the authority of Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ: "On the day of the Battle of Badr, my brother, `Umayr, was killed. However, I managed to kill Sa`īd ibn al-`Āṣ and took his sword which was called Dhu'l-Kuthayfah. I brought it to the Prophet, but he said: `Go and put it with the rest of the booty.' As I went back, only God could know how distressed I was as a result of the killing of my brother and being deprived of my gain. I walked only a short distance before the *sūrah* entitled al-Anfāl was revealed. God's Messenger said to me: `Go and claim your gain."'

Imām Ahmad also relates a different version on the authority of Sa'd himself who says: "I said to the Prophet: `Messenger of God, by God's grace I have taken my revenge against the unbelievers. Grant me this sword.' He said: `This sword belongs

neither to you nor to me. Put it down.' I did, and went away saying to myself that he may give the sword to someone who might not have fought as hard as I did. A voice was then calling me from behind. I said: `Has God revealed something concerning me?' He said: `You asked me to give you the sword when it was not mine. Now it has been given to me, and I gift it to you.' He added that it was then that the opening verse of the *sūrah* was revealed."

These reports describe the general atmosphere that prevailed at that time. Some of us may wonder at the fighters at Badr disputing over the spoils. These fighters were the followers of Islam in its very early days. They belonged either to the *Muhājirīn,* who migrated from Makkah, their hometown, leaving behind all their possessions for no reason other than to serve God's cause, or to the *Anşār* of Madinah who received the *Muhājirīn* and shared with them their homes and property, denying them nothing. These were the ones who are described by God in the Qur'ān as ones *"who love those who have come over to them; they harbour in their hearts no grudge for whatever the others have been given, but rather give them preference over themselves, even though poverty be their lot."* (59: 9) But these reports give us part of the answer. Being given something of the spoils of war was in itself a testimony for having fought hard. Those people were keen to have such a testimony from God's Messenger and from God Himself, in the first major battle which saw them triumph over the unbelievers. That keenness overshadowed something of great importance, namely, to maintain kindly relations and to promote bonds of brotherhood among themselves. When these verses were revealed, they recognized their fault. `Ubādah ibn al-Şāmit says: "These verses speak about us, the people of Badr, when we disputed over the spoils of war and behaved in an unbecoming way. God took it away from us and gave it to His Messenger (peace be upon him)."

God gives them a verbal and practical lesson. The whole question of dividing the spoils of war was taken away from them and given to the Prophet himself. Then He revealed His verdict on how all spoils of war should be shared out. It was no longer the right over which they might dispute. It was something that was given to them by God's grace, and the Prophet would divide it among them in accordance with his Lord's instructions. In addition to this edifying experience, they were given directives that begin with this opening verse: "*They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: 'The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers.'*" (Verse 1)

Essential Qualities of Believers

Thus, the opening verse of the *sūrah* reminds the hearts of those who disputed over the booty that they should maintain fear of God. Glory be to the Creator who

knows all hearts' secrets. It is only the fear of God and the desire to earn His pleasure in this life, as well as in the life to come, that turns human hearts away from valuing the riches and pleasures of this world and disputing over them, even though such a dispute should also have an overtone of having a testimony for fighting hard to serve God's cause. A heart that does not turn in its totality to God, fearing to incur His anger and seeking to earn His pleasure, will never be able to get rid of the temptation of worldly comforts and riches. Fearing God is what makes people's hearts willing to be guided with ease and humility so that they can maintain friendly relations and promote bonds of brotherhood between them: *"So, have fear of God and set right your internal relations."* (Verse 1) It is through fearing God that they are led to total obedience of God and His Messenger: *"Obey God and His Messenger, if are true believers."* (Verse 1)

The first aspect of obedience in this connection is to submit to His ruling over the spoils of war. It no longer belonged to any one of the fighters. The entire booty belongs to God and His Messenger, and they have sole discretion over its use. Those believers could only submit to God's ruling and the Prophet's division of the booty with easy hearts and happy minds. They also needed to maintain their brotherly relationship which nothing could weaken, provided that *"you are true believers"*. (Verse 1)

Faith must have a practical example to testify to its applicability and to demonstrate how it works. The Prophet says: "Faith does not come about through wishful thinking or maintaining appearances. True faith is that which establishes roots in people's hearts and to which action gives credence." This is the reason for frequently repeating this final phrase in the Qur'ān in order to stress the meaning of faith outlined by the Prophet. It thus becomes a practical definition of faith so that it is no longer thought to be a mere verbal statement that has no practical correlative.

This is followed by an outline of the qualities of true faith, as God wants it to be: *"True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them. In their Lord do they place their trust. They attend regularly to their prayers and spend on others some of what We have provided them with. It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions."* (Verses 2-4)

The Qur'ānic style is extremely accurate in its choice of words, in order to provide a very clear statement of the meaning it wants to impart. Here we have the phrase "only those" in order to limit the meaning of having faith to those who have these qualities. When we have such a limiting expression, no one could try to give a subjective interpretation of these qualities, claiming for example that they refer to `people with complete faith'. Had God meant it that way He would have said it. What we have here is a highly definitive statement which tells us that only the

people who have such qualities and who act and feel in this way are believers. Those who do not have all these qualities are not believers. At the end of these opening verses, a repeat statement is given to re-emphasize this fact: *"It is those who are truly believers."* (Verse 4) People who are not `truly' believers do not believe at all. Qur'ānic expressions and statements interpret one another. God says elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"What may differ with the truth other than error."* Hence, only error stands opposite to the truth. Those who do not belong to the `truly believers' cannot be described as `having faith, though it may be less than complete'. A definitive Qur'ānic statement cannot be interpreted at will in such an ambiguous manner.

The early Muslims realized that a person who does not have such qualities and whose actions do not conform to these descriptions is not a believer at all. Commenting on the Qur'ānic verse that states, *"True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned,"* Ibn `Abbās says: "When hypocrites perform worship duties, nothing touches their hearts as they mention God. They do not believe in any of God's signs, and they do not rely on Him. When they are alone, they neither pray nor pay *zakāt.* Hence, God describes them as unbelievers, and then He describes the believers, saying: *"True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned."* Hence, they do the duties He requires them to do. *"And whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them."* They feel the truth of these revelations as they listen to them. *"In their Lord do they place their trust."* They rely only on Him, seeking nothing from anyone else."

As we proceed with our commentary, we will see clearly that without such qualities, faith does not exist. It is not a matter of having complete or less than complete faith, but whether faith exists or not.

"True believers are only those whose hearts are filled with awe whenever God is mentioned." (Verse 2) It is a feeling of awe that fills a believer's heart when God's name is mentioned in connection with any duty. The believer feels God's greatness and majesty, and he remembers God's greatness and how imperfect his own attitude is. All this provides strong motivation for him to act. Or it may be described in the words of Umm al-Dardā', a lady Companion of the Prophet who said: "A feeling of awe is similar to a burning sensation that causes you to tremble. When you experience that, then pray to God, for such prayer is sure to give you comfort." It is a situation that leaves its effect on people's hearts, and they need to appeal to God for comfort. This is exactly what a believer experiences when he is reminded of God in connection with any order. He will then do what he is bid and refrain from what he is forbidden.

"And whose faith is strengthened whenever His revelations are recited to them." (Verse 2) A believing heart is sure to find in the Qur'ānic verses what gives him strength of

faith and reassurance. The Qur'ān deals directly with human hearts, without any intermediary. Only disbelief can place a barrier between human hearts and the Qur'ān. When the barrier is removed by faith, a believing heart will begin to appreciate the Qur'ān and watch his faith grow stronger until he finds complete reassurance. Just as the Qur'ānic effect strengthens the faith of a believer, a believing heart is the only one to appreciate the Qur'ānic directives. Hence, this fact is often stressed in statements like: "*Surely, in this there are signs for believers.*" And "*Certainly, in this there are signs for people who believe.*" This is succinctly expressed by one of the Prophet's Companions who describes their community as one which was given faith before it was given the Qur'ān.

Practising What We Preach

The Prophet's Companions were indeed models of true believers. The Qur'ān had a special effect on them, enhanced by the general atmosphere in their community in which people tried their best to practically live by the Qur'ān and not confine themselves to an intellectual appreciation of its meaning. We have mentioned certain reports that relate the incident leading to the revelation of the opening verse of the *sūrah.* These reports speak of Sa`d ibn Mālik[30] who requested the Prophet to give him a particular sword before the revelation that gave the Prophet complete control over the spoils of war and how they were to be distributed. The Prophet said to him: "This sword belongs neither to you nor to me. Put it down." When Sa`d complied with this instruction and went away, and was then called back, he feared that his request might have been answered by revelation. Quoting Sa`d, the report goes on: "I said: Has God revealed something concerning me?" The Prophet told him: "You asked me to give you this sword when it was not mine. Now it has been given to me, and I gift it to you." Thus did they live with their Lord and with the Qur'ān which was being revealed. That was great indeed, taking place in a remarkable period of human history. Those Companions of the Prophet were thus able to appreciate the Qur'ān in their own exemplary way. The fact that they conducted their own practical affairs, guided by the Qur'ānic directives made their own appreciation of the Qur'ān both practical and highly effective. While no repeat of the first aspect is possible in the sense that no human community could receive the Qur'ān directly anymore, yet the type of interaction with the Qur'ān that characterized the community of the Prophet's Companions can certainly be repeated. It only requires a community of believers to try to establish this religion of Islam in practical life just like the first Muslim community did. Such a community of believers will certainly have the same type of appreciation of the Qur'ān and will have their faith increased whenever it is recited, because, to start with, it is a believing community. For them, true faith

[30] Mālik is also known as Abū Waqqāṣ. Therefore Sa`d is often referred to as Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ.

requires that they take action to establish this religion in practice after *jāhiliyyah* had regained control over the whole world. To them, faith is not confined to wishful thinking, but it means something that is deeply rooted in one's heart and to which credence is given through action.

"In their Lord do they place their trust." (Verse 2) The way this statement is phrased signifies that they rely on God alone, associating no one with Him from whom to request help. Ibn Kathīr explains the significance of this statement fully as he says: "They place their hopes in none other than Him, turn to no one other than Him, seek no one else's protection, address their appeals only to Him and turn for help to no one other than Him. They know that whatever He wishes will be accomplished and what He does not will never take place. They also know that He alone has complete control over the whole universe, with no one needed to endorse, ratify, or confirm His judgement. He is also fast in reckoning. For this reason, Sa`īd ibn Jubayr says: "True reliance on God is the net sum of faith."

This is the practical meaning of pure faith in God's oneness, addressing all worship completely and purely to Him alone. It is not possible for any person to have true faith in God as the only Lord in the universe and yet rely on someone other than Him. Those who find themselves relying on someone other than God must first of all search in their own hearts to discover whether they truly believe in God.

To rely on God alone does not prevent anyone from taking action or precaution. A believer takes precautions against any eventuality as a sign of believing in God and obeying Him, as He has ordered us to do so. But a true believer does not consider his actions and precautions as the only causes to give the effects they produce, to the extent that he relies only on such actions and precautions. What produces these effects, and indeed brings their causes into being, is God's will. In a believer's heart, the cause and effect relationship is not self-enforcing. A believer takes action in order to obey God. But the results and effects come about by God's own will which is totally independent from the causes leading to it. Such will is determined by God alone. In this way, a believer does not feel controlled by such actions and causes. Nevertheless, he tries his best to take every precaution hoping that he will be rewarded for doing so in obedience to God.

Modern *jāhiliyyah* which describes itself as `scientific' has tried hard to emphasize the "inevitability of natural laws", in order to deny God's will and whatever God has chosen not to make known to us. All its attempts and the manipulation of all means at its disposal have shown it to be powerless in the face of God's will. It was eventually forced to admit its inability to make future predictions with any degree of certainty or inevitability. It then resorted to what it terms `the theory of probabilities' in the material world. Whatever used to be `inevitable' in its lexicon has come to be considered only `probable'. *Ghayb,* which is the Qur'ānic term for what lies beyond

the reach of human perception, remains a sealed secret. Furthermore, God's will remains the only true certainty. The only inevitable law is that expressed in the Qur'ānic statement: *"You never know but God may well cause something new to come about." (65:* 1) This statement refers to the fact that God's will is free, unrestrained. It lies behind the natural laws which God has set into operation to control the universe according to His will.

Sir James Jeans, a renowned British physicist says:

The old science had confidently proclaimed that nature could follow only one road, the road which was mapped out from the beginning of time to its end by the continuous chain of cause and effect; state A was inevitably succeeded by state B. So far the new science has only been able to say that state A may be followed by state B or C or D or by innumerable other states. It can, it is true, say that B is more likely than C, C than D, and so on; it can even specify the relative probabilities of states B, C and D. But, just because it has to speak in terms of probabilities, it cannot predict with certainty which state will follow which; this is a matter which lies on the knees of the gods — whatever gods there be.[31]

When a person has rid his mind of the pressure of apparent causes, it is left with the only alternative of relying completely on God. It realizes that God's will is the only cause for all that happens, and that this is the only true certainty. Apparent causes produce only probabilities. With this truth, Islamic faith enables the human mind to bridge a great gulf. Modern *jāhiliyyah* has spent three centuries in order to arrive at the first intellectual stage in bridging that gulf. But it has not made any progress towards bridging it in as far as beliefs are concerned, or with regard to the far-reaching practical effects that result from it, in accepting God's will and dealing with it as apparent causes and forces. Bridging that gulf means the total liberation of mankind, intellectually, politically, socially and morally and, above all, in matters of faith. It is not possible for man to achieve this freedom if he were to remain under the yoke of `inevitabilities' that would undoubtedly lead him to submission to the will of human beings or the will of nature. Any inevitability other than that of God's will serves as a basis for submission to something else. Hence, the Qur'ān emphasizes the need to rely on God alone, making it an essential condition of faith. In Islam, the basic concept of belief is a complete whole. It must interact as such in the practical model which this religion of Islam provides for human life.

"They attend regularly to their prayers." (Verse 3) In this quality we find a visible aspect of faith, after we had seen some of its invisible ones. Faith is defined as that which is deeply rooted in one's heart and to which credence is given through action. Action is, therefore, the practical aspect of faith which appears to all people

[31] Sir James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe,* Cambridge University Press, 1931, pp. 18-19.

signifying that the person who takes such action is a person of faith. Regular attendance to prayer does not signify its mere performance. It is the performance which befits a servant standing in the presence of his Master (limitless is He in His glory). It is not the mere recitation, movement, bowing and prostration when one's mind is totally oblivious to what one is actually doing. In its proper performance, prayer is a true evidence of faith.

"And (they) spend on others some of what We have provided them with." (Verse 3) This applies to *zakāt* and other forms of charity. These people spend on others `some of what We have provided them with.' It is God who is the provider, and whatever they donate is part of His provision. Qur'ānic statements are always rich in their connotations and the impressions they leave. Those people have not created their wealth. It is only part of the countless abundance which God has provided for them. Whatever they may spend is only part of it. They retain the rest; for whatever they have has been provided for them by God alone.

These are the qualities God mentions here as signifying faith. They include believing in God's oneness, responding to the mentioning of His name, being influenced by His revelations, placing one's trust only in Him, offering prayer to Him alone and donating to others some of what He has provided for them. These qualities do not represent the details of faith as they have been explained elsewhere in the Qur'ān; but they deal with a certain situation when the Prophet's companions disputed with one another over the spoils of war, allowing ill feelings to develop between themselves. Hence, only those qualities of the believers which are particularly relevant to dealing with such a situation are mentioned here. At the same time, they outline certain essential qualities of proper faith. If all these qualities are lacking, a person cannot be a true believer. It is not necessary to enlist all the qualities of faith here. The Qur'ānic method of cultivating the finer human qualities with the Qur'ān tackles only those aspects and provides only those directives that are useful in dealing with certain practical situations. Besides, the Qur'ān provides a practical method for human life, not a mere theory that it wishes to present. Hence, the final comment on these qualities is as follows: *"It is those who are truly believers. They shall be given high ranks with their Lord, and forgiveness of sins and generous provisions."* (Verse 4)

Here we find highlighted those qualities of true believers which are particularly relevant to the situation prevailing at the time of their revelation. Those companions of the Prophet were keen to attain martyrdom through fighting hard for God's cause. A clear reference to this is given in the fact that those whose qualities are such *"shall be given high ranks with their Lord."* (Verse 4) We also have a reference to what `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit describes as bad manners and unbrotherly relations being clearly apparent. The passage tells us that those believers who have all these qualities

shall be given forgiveness by their Lord. The *sūrah* also refers to the dispute over the spoils of war that took place after the battle, stating that people with such qualities of true believers shall have `generous provisions' given to them by their Lord. Thus, all aspects of the situation are covered, whether they appeared in practical attitudes or were confined to feelings only. At the same time, this passage makes it very clear that a person who does not have any of these qualities is certainly not a true believer.

"*It is those who are truly believers.*" (Verse 4) The first Muslim community was being taught that faith has an essence which must be felt by every believer. Faith is not merely a claim or a verbal statement, or wishful thinking. In an authentic *ĥadīth,* a man from the *Anşār* named al-Ĥārith ibn Mālik is reported to have met the Prophet who asked him: "How do you feel this morning, Ĥārith?" The man said: "I feel myself to be a true believer." The Prophet said: "Reflect on what you say, for everything has an essence. What is the essence of your faith?" He answered: "This world is no longer of much appeal to me. Therefore, I am staying up at night and enduring thirst by day. (This means that he spent much of his nights in worship and he frequently fasted voluntarily.) I feel as though I am looking at my Lord's throne in full view. I almost see the dwellers of heaven visiting one another there, and the people of hell uttering cries of anguish. "The Prophet said: "Ĥārith, you have come to know the facts, so maintain your attitude." He repeated his advice three times.

This Companion of the Prophet deserved the Prophet's testimony that he was in full knowledge of the facts. Yet, when he answered the Prophet's question he not only mentioned his feelings, but the type of action he did in response to his knowledge. A person who can almost see his Lord's throne in full view, and the dwellers of heaven visiting one another, and the people of hell making their cries of anguish will not merely look at these scenes. They leave very strong impressions on him that generate powerful feelings characterizing every move and action he makes. It is because of what he has experienced that he spends so much of his time in night worship and he fasts frequently, trying to refine his nature.

True faith must be taken very seriously. It is not a mere word that people say while practice remains in conflict with what is said. Taking true faith seriously and approaching it with determination are highly important, particularly for any community of believers who try to re-establish the faith of Islam in practice after *jāhiliyyah* has imparted its ugly colour to human life everywhere.

Better than the Believer's Desire

Now that the sūrah has established at the outset the nature of true faith, it refers to the battle which allowed the Muslim community to gain the spoils of war that became the subject of their dispute to the extent that their behaviour was not all that

becoming, as the Prophet's Companion, `Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit, candidly states. The sūrah refers in a general way to the various events that took place, and how the Prophet's companions felt and behaved in response. This reference makes it clear that the Prophet's Companions were merely the means through which God's will was accomplished. It is clear that all those events, and the situation that arose from them, including the spoils of war over which they disputed, were only made possible through God's will, His planning and the help He gave to those believers. What they had hoped to achieve from this battle was only a small, limited gain. It could not be compared to what God wanted for them, to be the ones through whom the great divide between truth and falsehood is established in the heavens and on earth. It is this great criterion which is the main preoccupation of the Supreme Society in heaven as well as the preoccupation of the people on earth and human history generally. The sūrah reminds them that a group of them went into the battle against their preferred choice. Another party did not like that the spoils of war should be divided among them. Now God wanted them to realize that what they had preferred is not to be compared with what God prefers or what He chooses to accomplish. He knows the results of all matters.

> *Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some of the believers were averse to it. They would argue with you about the truth even after it had become manifest, just as if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes. God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers. When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: I will reinforce you with a thousand angels advancing in ranks.' God made this only as good news with which to reassure your hearts, for victory comes only from God. Indeed, God is Almighty, Wise. He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him, and He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to remove from you Satan's filth, to strengthen your hearts and steady your footsteps. Your Lord inspired the angels, saying: I am with you. So, give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip.' This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution. This is for you, [enemies of God]! Taste it, then. The unbelievers shall be made to suffer the torment of fire.* (Verses 5-14)

God willed that the spoils of war be totally left to God and His Messenger, so that the Messenger (peace be upon him) would distribute them equally among them after retaining one-fifth which would be spent in a way to be outlined later in the *sūrah.*

That would ensure that the community of believers would no longer entertain any thoughts about the spoils of war, which would mean that no dispute would ever arise over them. The Prophet would have complete authority over their distribution, in accordance with what God taught him. Thus, those who actually took the spoils of war and found themselves receiving the same shares as others would not entertain any ill feeling.

God gives them this example of what they wanted for themselves and what He wanted for them, and accomplished through them. Thus, they know now that God's choice is best for them, whether it relates to the spoils of war or to anything else. People know only what they have in front of them. Their knowledge does not stretch far beyond their own immediate world. The example given is taken from their practical situation, the battle that gave them their booty. What did they hope for when they went into battle? What did God want to establish for and through them? How do the two compare? The gulf between the two eventualities is wide indeed, stretching far beyond what human beings can visualize.

> *Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some of the believers were averse to it. They would argue with you about the truth even after it had become manifest, just as if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes. (Verses 5-6)*

Giving authority over the spoils of war to God and His Messenger, their subsequent distribution equally among all soldiers, despite expressed reservations by some of them is similar in a sense to the fact that God brought His Messenger forth from his home to fight the well-armed host when some of the believers were very reluctant to go into such a battle.

In our narration of the events of the battle, as related in history books, we mentioned that Abū Bakr and `Umar spoke well and the Prophet consulted his companions after the trade caravan of the Quraysh was able to slip away and evade its pursuers. The battle looked imminent after it was known that the Quraysh had raised a large, well- equipped army. Al-Miqdād ibn `Amr also spoke well, saying: "Messenger of God, go ahead and do whatever you feel is best. We will never say to you as the Israelites had said to Moses: `Go with your Lord and fight the enemy while we stay behind!' What we will say is: go with your Lord and fight the enemy and we will fight alongside you." We also mentioned that all this determination was expressed by people from among the *Muhājirīn.* When the Prophet asked again for the views of his Companions, the *Anṣār* recognized that he wanted to hear their view. Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh spoke out in a very decisive and highly assuring manner.

But all that was said by Abū Bakr, `Umar, al-Miqdād and Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh (may

God be pleased with them all) was not shared by all those who came out of Madinah with the Prophet. Some of them were very reluctant to fight. They did not have the necessary equipment and did not have the necessary preparation for a major battle. They came out chasing a trade caravan, expecting to confront only a relatively small band that guarded it. When they learned that the Quraysh had mobilized its forces and brought forth its best fighters, they strongly disliked the prospect of confronting that army. Their dislike is described so vividly in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān: *"Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some of the believers were averse to it. They would argue with you about the truth even after it had become manifest, just as if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes."* (Verses 5-6)

A report by Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī runs as follows: "God's Messenger said to us when we were in Madinah: `I have been told that the great caravan led by Abū Sufyān is on its way. What would you say to going out to intercept it? It may be that God will gift it to us.' We agreed and went out with him. After we had marched for a day or two, he said to us: `What do you say to fighting the enemy? They have been told about you coming out to intercept the caravan.' We said most firmly that we were not a match for the enemy, and that we wanted the trade caravan. He then repeated the same question, asking us what we would say to fighting the enemy. We repeated the same answer. Al-Miqdād ibn `Amr, however, said: `We will not say to you, Messenger of God, what Moses was told by his people when they said, "Go with your Lord and fight while we stay behind." We, the *Anṣār,* wished that we had said the same as al-Miqdād ibn `Amr. That would have been far more preferable to us than being in great wealth." God then revealed to His Messenger the verses starting with: *"Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some of the believers were averse to it."* (Verse 5)

Such, then, were the feelings of some Muslims. To them fighting was unwelcome. The Qur'ān describes their attitude in these words: *"As if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes."* (Verse 6) That was the situation when the truth was clearly manifest, and when they knew that God had promised them that one of the two enemy hosts would fall to them. They realized that they had no choice left after one host, the trade caravan, had escaped them. Their only choice was to confront the other host, the Quraysh army, which God willed to fall to them, regardless of the disparity between the two parties in terms of fighters and military equipment.

This is a situation where human weakness is exposed in the face of imminent danger. Here we see the effect of actual confrontation, despite firm conviction. The picture the Qur'ān paints should make us more realistic when we assess the requirements of conviction in the face of practical pressures. We must not overlook

human ability at the time of confrontation. We must not despair when people generally, including our own group, shake as they face danger, although they are true believers at heart. It is sufficient that people proceed along the proper way and face up to the danger, making a solid stand after the initial hesitation. Those people were the ones who fought the Battle of Badr and concerning whom the Prophet said: "How can you tell? It may be that God has looked at the people of Badr and said: `Do as you please, for I have forgiven you all." That is all that may be said here.

An Aim Superior to All Human Hopes

The Muslim group continued to wish that they would have to face the less powerful host, rather than the Quraysh army. "*God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours.*" (Verse 7) This was their wish, but God wanted a different prospect for them. He wanted to accomplish a different purpose through them: "*But it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers.*" (Verses 7-8)

By His grace, God did not want the encounter to be one that brings materialistic gains. He wanted it to be a full-fledged battle between truth and falsehood, so that the truth could triumph and be well established, and falsehood be proven and seen as false. He wanted the unbelievers to be routed, suffering heavy losses and many of them to be taken captive. Thus, they would be humiliated and their power greatly weakened while the banner of Islam would remain hoisted high and God's will enforced. In this way, God gives power to the Muslim community which implements the code of living God has revealed. Through such implementation, the principle of God's oneness is firmly established, while tyranny and falsehood are completely shattered. God wanted all this to be earned and merited through endeavour and hard struggle both in practical life and on the battlefield, not to be a gift granted haphazardly, for God does not do anything haphazardly.

Yes, God willed that this Muslim community should become a nation and a state having power and authority. He wanted it to measure its true power against that of its enemies, and to gain the upper hand using only a portion of its power. Thus, it would learn that victory is not guaranteed by numerical strength, heavy armament, material power or wealth. True victory is guaranteed by the strength of the bond that links believers' hearts and minds with God's might which overpowers everything. God's will was such that all this should come through practical experience, and not be limited to a conceptual belief. Such an experience would give the small Muslim community a guiding line for its whole future. Every Muslim group, whenever and

wherever it lives, can be certain that it can overcome its enemies, no matter how greatly superior they may be in numbers and equipment. This fact could not have been so profoundly impressed on the believers' minds without that experience of a decisive battle between faith and tyranny.

Anyone can see at any time the vast gulf between what that small Muslim community wanted for itself and what it thought to be of benefit on the one hand, and the much better outcome God willed for it on the other. As he appreciates the difference, he knows how mistaken people are when they think that they can choose for themselves better than what God chooses for them, or when they are deeply hurt by taking some small risks or experiencing minor harm to which God may expose them, while it is calculated to bring them unthinkable and immeasurable benefit.

How do the hopes of that Muslim community compare with what God willed and chose for them? Had they been given the trade caravan, or the band with little power, their encounter would have been nothing more than a small raid that gained them a caravan. The Battle of Badr, on the other hand, remains and will always be remembered in history as a story of faith, a profound victory that distinguishes truth from falsehood. It is the story of the triumph of truth, supported by a small, poorly equipped host over enemies that boasted great superiority in numbers and equipment. It is the story of the triumph of hearts that have been purged from their own weakness and that have established a firm bond with God. Not only so, but it is the story of the triumph of a small band of hearts that included quite a few who were reluctant to fight. As these hearts still had firm conviction of the soundness of the values of the message they believed in and were certain where true power lay, they were able to triumph first over their own desires. They went into the battle when every indication showed the side of falsehood to be overpowering, but through faith that community overturned the scales and the truth was triumphant.

In all its particular circumstances, the Battle of Badr sets a great example in human history, setting out the law that brings victory or defeat and revealing the true factors of each. It is an open book to be read by all generations at all times and in all places, giving the same message that remains always true. It speaks of a law that God willed to remain operative as long as the heavens and the earth remain in existence. The Muslim community that struggles today for the rebirth of Islam on earth, after the whole world has succumbed to *jāhiliyyah,* should reflect deeply on Badr and the decisive values it presents. This community must reflect on the great difference between what human beings may wish for themselves and what God may will for them: "*God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the*

evildoers." (Verses 7-8)

The Muslim community which tries today to re-establish Islam in human life may not have attained the standard of that small Muslim community that fought the Battle of Badr. However, the standards, values and general directives that applied to Badr, its circumstances and outcome, as well as the Qur'ānic comments on that Battle, remain applicable to it. They point out the attitude the Muslim community should adopt at every stage, because those standards, values and directives remain valid as long as life continues in the heavens and on earth, and as long as there remains on this planet a Muslim community facing up to *jāhiliyyah* and trying to re-establish Islam in practice.

An Appeal and a Response

At this point, the *sūrah* recalls the atmosphere of the Battle of Badr, the circumstances leading to it and the attitudes adopted prior to the Battle and during it. It paints a complete picture of the conditions that the Muslims were in, what God planned for them and how the victory they attained was part of His planning. In the inimitable style of the Qur'ān, the whole situation is brought back to them with its different scenes, events, feelings and reactions so that they could relive it, but this time in the light of Qur'ānic directives. Thus they are able to appreciate its true dimensions that go far beyond Badr, the Arabian Peninsula and the whole earth to stretch across the universe and reach up to the Highest Society. It also goes beyond the day of Badr, Arabian and human history in general, and beyond this life to reach to the time of reckoning in the life to come and the perfect reward. The Muslim community is thus enabled to appreciate its value in God's sight, and how He values the moves and actions of individuals and communities in the service of their faith.

> *When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: "I will reinforce you with a thousand angels advancing in ranks." God made this only as good news with which to reassure your hearts, for victory comes only from God. Indeed, God is Almighty, Wise. He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him, and He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to remove from you Satan's filth, to strengthen your hearts and steady your footsteps. Your Lord inspired the angels, saying: "I am with you. So, give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip." This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution. This is for you, [enemies of God]! Taste it, then. The unbelievers shall be made to suffer the torment of fire.* (Verses 9-14)

The whole battle is conducted by God's will and according to His careful planning. The actors are God's soldiers whom He directs and commands. The whole scene is painted so vividly through the Qur'ānic expressions that bring it alive as if it is happening here and now.

As for the appeal for God's help, Imām Ahmad relates on `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's authority: "On the Day of Badr, the Prophet looked at his Companions who numbered a little over three hundred, and he looked at the unbelievers who were over one thousand. The Prophet turned his face towards the *qiblah* (i.e. the direction faced by Muslims in prayer), wearing both his garments and prayed earnestly, saying: `My Lord, fulfil Your promise to me. My Lord, if this group of believers are left to perish, You will not be worshipped on earth.' He continued his imploring prayer until his top garment fell off his shoulders. Abū Bakr took his garment and put it back on him. He held him from behind and said: `Messenger of God, not so hard in your appeal to your Lord. He will surely grant you what He has promised you.' The verse was then revealed which says: "*When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: 'I will reinforce you with a thousand angels advancing in ranks.'*" (Verse 9)

There are numerous detailed reports that mention the angels who came to support the Muslims on the day of Badr, their number, how they took part in the battle, what they said to reassure the believers and what they said to dishearten the unbelievers. Following our method in this work, we confine ourselves in all matters that relate to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception only to the authentic statements in the Qur'ān and the *ĥadīth.* The Qur'ānic text in this connection gives us enough information: "*When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: 'I will reinforce you with a thousand angels advancing in ranks.'*" (Verse 9) This is then the angels' number. "*Your Lord inspired the angels, saying: 'I am with you. So, give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip.'*" (Verse 12) Such is, then, the task assigned to them. We need not go into any details beyond this statement. It is sufficient for our purposes that we should know that God did not abandon the Muslim community to their own devices on that day, when they were much inferior in number to their enemies. The Highest Society played an active part in the determination of what happened to the Muslim army and to Islam, along the lines described by God Himself in the Qur'ān.

In a chapter entitled, The Angels' Presence at Badr, al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Rifā`ah ibn Rāfi`: "Gabriel came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and said: 'What status do you assign to the people of Badr among you?' He answered: 'They are among the best Muslims', or he might have said something similar. Gabriel said: `And so do we count the angels who were present at Badr.'' [Related by al-Bukhārī].

"When you implored your Lord for help, He answered: 'I will reinforce you with a

thousand angels advancing in ranks.' God made this only as good news with which to reassure your hearts, for victory comes only from God. Indeed, God is Almighty, Wise." (Verses 9-10) Their Lord, then, answered their appeal and informed them that He had decided to reinforce them with a thousand angels moving in close ranks. Greatly significant as this decision is, indicating the great value assigned by God to those believers and the faith of Islam, God does not want the Muslims to understand that there is a mechanical process of a direct cause leading to a definite effect. The whole matter is referred back to Him so that the Muslims maintain the right beliefs and concepts. This whole response, enforcement, and the revelation announcing it were merely given as happy news to reassure the believers' hearts. Victory itself comes only from God. This is a basic fact of faith restated here so that Muslims do not attach undue importance to any particular cause or factor.

It was sufficient that the Muslims should do their best and exert their maximum effort, overcoming the initial shock some of them experienced as they found themselves facing real danger. All they needed to do was to actually proceed in obedience of God, assured of His support. In other words, they needed to fulfil their part and leave the rest to God's will. It is He who plans matters for them and dictates the final outcome of their efforts. The rest was merely a piece of happy news, giving reassurance to the believers to calm their hearts and enable them to face up to the real danger. A community of believers does not need more than to feel that they are supported by God's soldiers for their hearts to be set at rest and to go into battle with courage and perseverance. Victory then comes from God, who alone can grant it. He is, mighty indeed, able to accomplish His purpose, and He is wise, putting everyone and everything in the proper place.

> *He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him, and He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to remove from you Satan's filth, to strengthen your hearts and steady your footsteps.* (Verse 11)

This slumber that overcame the believers before the battle is a manifestation of a remarkable state that can only take place by God's will. The Muslims were shaken when they saw themselves facing a much superior force and taking a risk they had not reckoned with and for which they had not prepared themselves. Slumber momentarily falls upon them and they presently wake to find themselves in complete reassurance, with their hearts set at rest.

The same took place at the Battle of Uĥud when the Muslims experienced fear. The same condition of slumber was repeated and the same reassurance was given. I used to read these verses mentioning this slumber, and I used to understand it as an event reported to us by God who alone knows its secret. I then experienced a hard

situation when I went through a period of stifling stress and worried apprehension. It was around sunset when I was overtaken by slumber that lasted only for a few moments. I woke up to find myself a totally different man, reassured, at peace with everything around me. It was a profound feeling that set me at ease. I simply cannot tell how it all happened, or how this whole transformation took place. After this experience, I have come to appreciate what happened at Badr and Uĥud, not merely mentally, but by my whole being. I go through this whole experience again, not merely visualize it. I see in it God's hand at work, and I am reassured.

God's Support in All Forms

This slumber and reassurance were part of the reinforcement God granted to the Muslim host at Badr. *"He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him."* (Verse 11) The wording here is very significant; "fall upon you", "slumber", "assurance" are all words that impart a feeling of confidence and friendliness. The *sūrah* paints the complete picture and highlights the great value of that moment which separated two opposite situations experienced by the Muslim host.

The water or the rain was, then, another form of support given to the Muslim fighters. A report by `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās tells the story as follows: "When the Prophet marched towards Badr, he and his Companions stopped at a barren area with the unbelievers closer to the wells. The Muslims were apparently exhausted. Satan began to whisper into their ears trying to create doubts and suspicions. He said: 'How can you claim that God is your patron and His Messenger is among you, when the idolaters have beaten you to the water to the extent that you now offer your prayers when you are in the state of ceremonial impurity?' God sent rain pouring down which enabled the Muslims to drink and cleanse themselves. God thus removed Satan's filth from them. The sandy area where they were became much firmer to enable people and animals to walk easily. They marched towards their enemies. God then supported His Messenger with one thousand angels, with the angel Gabriel leading five hundred of them on one side, and the angel Michael leading another five hundred on the other side."

This was before the Prophet carried out the advice given him by his Companion, al-Ĥubāb ibn al-Mundhir, who suggested that they should encamp right at the main well of Badr and that they should dump the other wells. Ibn Kathīr reports: "It is well known that when the Prophet arrived at Badr, he encamped at the nearest well he found. Al-Ĥubāb ibn al-Mundhir came forward and asked him: `Messenger of God, has God ordered you to encamp here so that we are not allowed to move further, or have you chosen this place as part of your strategy for the battle?' The Prophet told him that it was his own choice and strategy. Al-Ĥubāb then said: `Messenger of God,

this is not the proper place to encamp. Take us forward until we reach the source of water closest to them, and then we dump all the other wells. We can also fill the reservoirs so that we have water while they do not.' The Prophet acted on his advice."

On that night, then, and before al-Ĥubāb ibn al-Mundhir gave his advice, the Muslims were in this situation of which they are here reminded. The support they received was of a material and spiritual nature. In the desert, water is the source of life and a means to achieve victory. An army without water in the desert is bound to be demoralized even before the battle starts. Besides, there was this psychological uncertainty that came as a result of Satan's whispering, with the believers feeling uneasy about praying when they were in a state of ceremonial impurity and had no water to wash themselves. At that time, they had not been granted the concession of dry ablution, or *tayammum*. That concession was given in a later battle they fought in the fifth year of the Islamic calendar. In such a situation, worries and uncertainties abound. Satan may try to go through the door of faith in order to increase such worries. When people go into a battle experiencing worry and doubt of this type, they can easily be defeated. At this moment, support is very timely: *"He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to remove from you Satan's filth, to strengthen your hearts and steady your footsteps."* (Verse 11) Thus, the spiritual support comes together with the material one. The worry is removed as water becomes abundant, and uncertainty is replaced by assurance after they had cleansed themselves. Their march is steadier as the land becomes firmer.

In addition to this, God inspired the angels to encourage the believers and promised to strike fear in the hearts of the unbelievers. He also commanded the angels to take an active part in the battle: *"Your Lord inspired the angels, saying:' lam with you. So, give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip.'"* (Verse 12)

This is indeed the greatest aspect of this whole battle. It is the fact that God Almighty was with the angels in this battle, and the angels took part in it alongside the Muslim army. We must not lose sight of the importance of this fact by trying to find out how the angels took part. How many enemy soldiers did they kill? Or how they killed them? The great fact is that when the Muslim community takes action to establish God's faith in the land, their action is valued so highly as to deserve God's presence with the angels in battle and the angels' participation in it.

We believe that among God's creation there is a type called the angels. We know of their nature only what God, their Creator, has told us. We cannot fathom how they participated in the Muslim victory at Badr except in as far as the fact is stated in the Qur'ān. Their Lord inspired them saying that He was with them and commanded them to encourage the believers. They complied, because they always do what they

are commanded. We, however, do not know how they fulfilled this task. God also ordered them to strike the unbelievers over their necks and strike off their fingertips. So they did all this, but in a fashion unknown to us. Knowledge of all this is merely a detail of knowing the nature of the angels, but we know of this nature only what God has chosen to tell us. Furthermore, God promised to strike terror in the hearts of the unbelievers, and this was certainly the case because God always fulfils His promises. However, we do not know how this was done. It is God who is the Creator, and He knows His creation. Indeed, God may cause a split between a person and his heart, and He is closer to any person than his own jugular vein.

To try to go into the details of all these matters is contrary to the serious nature of this faith and its practical approach. But these questions have featured prominently among the concerns of different Muslim schools and scholastic theology generally in later generations when people were no longer seriously interested in this faith. Instead, they pursued intellectual luxury. Reflection on the great significance of God's presence with the angels in the battle and the active participation of the angels in the battle itself is much more beneficial.

At the end we have a statement clarifying the reality beyond the battle and the rule that shapes events to bring about victory or defeat: "*This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 13) It is not by mere coincidence that God has granted support to the Muslim army and has stricken terror into the hearts of its enemies and commanded the angels to fight them in support of the Muslims. All this took place because they had defied God and His Messenger, adopting a line of action and an attitude that was in opposition to those of God and His Messenger, trying to prevent the code of living God had revealed from being established.

"*Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 13) He is certainly able to punish severely those who defy Him and His Messenger. They are too weak to show any resistance.

This is an established rule, not merely a coincidence. Whenever a Muslim community takes active steps to establish the principle of God's oneness and to implement His message, it will be granted victory against any enemy that opposes it in defiance of God and His Messenger. Terror will be stricken in the hearts of those engaged in such defiance, and they will end up in defeat as long as the Muslim community holds on to its principles, relying totally on God, certain of His support.

At the end of the scene, the unbelievers who defied God and His Messenger are told directly that the terror they felt and the defeat they experienced were not all. The whole question of this faith, its implementation, and the opposition to it are not of the concerns of this world alone. It goes further, extending to the life to come. Its

dimensions go far beyond our immediate world: *"This is for you, [enemies of God]! Taste it, then. The unbelievers shall be made to suffer the torment of fire."* (Verse 14) This is the real end. That torment is incomparable to what they had already experienced of terror, defeat and the striking off of their necks and their fingertips.

Thus far, the *sūrah* has reminded the Muslims of the conditions in which the Battle of Badr took place, showing them different scenes of the battle itself and what preceded it. It makes clear to them that at every step, it was God who dictated events and moved them in the direction He wanted, in order to accomplish His purpose.

Except for Tactical Reasons

Now that the decisive victory has been attributed to its true factors: God's planning, support, the believers' reliance on Him alone and acceptance of whatever eventuality He determines — now with all minds visualizing the whole event, and all hearts ready for the best response, the believers are given an order to remain steady whenever they meet unbelievers in battle. They must never run away, since victory or defeat are determined by God's will and the factors contributing to either of them are different from the factors people may see. The whole battle and all its events are of God's own making and planning: *"Believers, when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, do not turn your backs to them in flight. Anyone who turns his back to them on that day, except when manoeuvring for battle or in an endeavour to join another troop, shall incur God's wrath, and hell shall be his abode: how vile a journey's end."* (Verses 15-16)

These verses begin with a strong warning, a fearsome threat. Should the believers face their enemies who may in essence present themselves in a great show of power, they must not, under any circumstances, turn away, except for tactical reasons. These may include choosing a better position, carrying out a more effective plan, joining another group of believers, or moving to another Muslim stronghold in order to resume the fight. Deserters and people who turn away in flight deserve the most terrible double punishment of incurring God's wrath and being thrown into hell.

Some scholars have expressed the view that this ruling applies only to the people of Badr, or to a battle in which the Prophet himself took part. But the overwhelming majority of scholars have emphasized its general application. They consider fleeing from battle as one of the gravest sins. In the two *Ṣaḥīh,* the most authentic collections of the Prophet's *ĥadīth,* al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah, that God's Messenger says: "Steer away from the seven ruining sins." When he was asked which these were, the Prophet answered: "Associating partners with God, black magic, killing a human being except for a legitimate cause, devouring usury, pilfering an orphan's property, running away from battle and

falsely accusing chaste believing women of adultery."

In his scholarly work, *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān* or Qur'ānic Rulings, al-Jaşşāş, a leading Ĥanafī scholar, explains in detail the different views on this point. It is useful to quote here what he says:

> God says: "*Anyone who turns his back to them on that day, except when manoeuvring for battle or in an endeavour to join another troop...*" (Verse 16) Abū Nađrah mentions that this statement applies only to the Battle of Badr. Abū Nađrah argues that had they turned away on that day, they could only have joined the unbelievers, because there were no other Muslims on that day. But this statement is not particularly accurate, because there were numerous Muslims in Madinah who were not ordered by the Prophet to join the army. They had not gone out with the Prophet because they believed that no battle was imminent and the whole affair would merely be a case of intercepting a trade caravan. The Prophet was joined by those who were ready and quick to move out with him in the circumstances. Hence, Abū Nađrah's view that there were no other Muslims at that time and that they would have only joined the unbelievers is wrong.
>
> It has also been said that they were not permitted to join any other group on that day because the Prophet was with them and they were not allowed to leave him, as God says in the Qur'ān: "*It is not open for the people of Madinah and those Bedouins living nearby to hold back from following God's Messenger or to care for their own selves more than for him.*" (9: 120) This shows that they could not let God's Messenger down or abandon him, even though God had taken it upon Himself to protect him as He clearly states in the Qur'ān: "*God will protect you from all men.*" (5: 67) That was imperative on them, whether their enemies were small or large in number. Moreover, the Prophet himself was the rallying force for the Muslims on that day. Anyone turning away could only do so for tactical reasons, in an endeavour to join a company of believers. On the day of Badr, they could only join the Prophet. Ibn `Umar reports: "I was with an army when we had a quick round before returning to Madinah. People accused us of fleeing, but the Prophet said: `I am your group.' This means that a person who is in a position away from the Prophet and wants to turn away from the unbelievers could only do so in order to join the Prophet. If the Prophet was in the army, then there was no group other than his. In such a case, no turning away was possible. Al-Ĥasan says that this verse, beginning with "*Anyone who turns his back to them*", defined the situation for the people of Badr. God says in the Qur'ān: "*Those of you who turned away on the day when the two hosts met in battle, Satan caused them to slip only in consequence of something that they themselves had done.*" (3: 155) This is

due to the fact that they turned away leaving the Prophet in battle. Similarly, on the day of Ĥunayn, they deserved God's punishment for leaving the Prophet and turning away: *"On the Day of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your great numbers and they proved of no avail whatever to you. The earth, despite its vastness, became too narrow for you and you turned back, retreating."* (9: 25) This was then the ruling applicable when they were with the Prophet fighting any enemy that mustered small or large forces. In another verse, God says: *"Prophet, urge the believers to fight. If there are twenty steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a hundred of you, they will defeat a thousand of those who disbelieve, for those are devoid of understanding."* (Verse 65) This applied perhaps — and God knows best — to a situation when the Prophet was with them. A company of twenty had to fight two hundred, remaining steadfast. If the hostile force was greater than that, then they were allowed to try to join another group in order to resume the fight. But this was later abrogated by the Qur'ānic statement: *"Now God has lightened your burden, for He knows that you are weak. So, if there are a hundred steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a thousand of you they will, by God's will, defeat two thousand."* (Verse 66)

According to Ibn `Abbās: It was a commandment that one man must not turn away in flight if he was facing ten enemy soldiers. This was then reduced by the Qur'ānic verse, *"God has lightened your burden, for He knows that you are weak."* You are now commanded that one hundred may not flee from two hundred unbelievers. Ibn `Abbās states: "If one man runs away from two enemy soldiers, then he is a deserter. If he flees when he faces three, he is not." Desertion refers to turning away in flight as mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse.

The verse makes it compulsory for a Muslim soldier to fight when he faces two unbelievers. If they are more than two, then it is permissible for a single soldier to try to join a company of Muslims that may give him support. If he wants to join a group of Muslims who will not support him in the fight, he is under the threat mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse: *"Anyone who turns his back to them on that day, except when manoeuvering for battle or in an endeavour to join another troop, shall incur God's wrath."* (Verse 16) For this reason the Prophet says: "I am company to every Muslim." When `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb heard that Abū `Ubayd ibn Mas'ūd fought hard without thinking of retreat until he was killed, `Umar said: "May God have mercy on Abū `Ubayd. Had he joined me, I would have been company for him." When Abū `Ubayd's fellow soldiers arrived, `Umar said to them: "I am your company." He did not take issue with them over their retreat. This ruling is confirmed in our school of law, [i.e. the Ĥanafī school], and it remains in force unless the Muslim army is

> 12,000 in number, in which case they may not flee from a force which is more than double their size, except for tactical reasons. They may move to a position where they can engage their enemy better, or may take a different step that does not constitute fleeing from battle, or join a group of Muslims who will fight with them. Muĥammad ibn al-Ĥasan (a leading Ĥanafī scholar) mentions that if a Muslim army is 12,000 in number, they may not turn away in flight, although their enemy may be much greater. There is no difference among our scholars (i.e. Ĥanafī scholars) on this point. In support of this view, a *ĥadīth* reported by Ibn `Abbās is cited in which the Prophet is quoted as saying: "The best group of friends is four, and the best expedition is 400, and the best host is 4,000. An army of 12,000 shall not suffer on account of inferior numbers, and shall not be defeated." In another version: "An army of 12,000 shall not be defeated if they are truly united." Mālik was asked: "Is it open for us not to join a battle against those abandoning God's law in favour of a different law?" Mālik answered: "If you have 12,000 with you, you may not stay behind. Otherwise, staying behind is permissible." The person who put the question to him was `Abdullāh ibn `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz ibn Abdullāh ibn `Umar. This confirms what is stated by Muĥammad ibn al-Ĥasan. The authentic reports attributed to the Prophet with regard to an army of 12,000 constitute a basic principle in this respect. An army of such numbers may not turn away in flight from any enemy, even though that enemy may be several times their number, because the Prophet says: "If they are truly united." God has commanded believers to be always truly united.[32]

Ibn al-'Arabī also comments on this difference of views. He writes in his book bearing the same title, *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān* or Qur'ānic Rulings:

> People have disputed whether the turning away in flight applies only to the Battle of Badr or to all battles Muslims may fight at any time until the Day of Judgement. Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī reports that this order applies only to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims had no other company or troop other than God's Messenger. This view is supported by Nāfi`, al-Ĥasan, Qatādah, Yazīd ibn Ĥabīb and al-Đaĥĥāk. Ibn Abbās and all other scholars are of the view that this Qur'ānic verse applies at all times until the Day of Judgement. Those who have taken a different view, saying that it applies to Badr only have misinterpreted the statement, "*Anyone who turns his back to them on that day,*" making the phrase 'on that day' a reference to the Day of Badr only. But this is not so. It refers to the day of battle whenever a battle takes place. In evidence we take the fact that this Qur'ānic verse was revealed after the Battle of Badr was over with all that it involved. The Prophet is authentically quoted

[32] Al-Jaşşāş, Aĥmad Ibn `Alī, *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān.* Dār al-Kitāb al-`Arabī, Beirut, Vol. III, pp. 47-48

> to list fleeing from battle as one of the worst cardinal sins. In itself, this *Ĥadīth* should settle all disputes and make the ruling absolutely clear. We have clarified how the confusion arose that led some scholars to think that it applied to Badr only.[33]

For our part, we support Ibn `Abbās's view and all other scholars as reported by Ibn al-`Arabī. To flee from battle deserves such condemnation because of the magnitude of its serious consequences on the one hand, and because it has a bearing on the very question of having faith. A believer should be firm and resolute, able to resist any force on earth, since he believes that God's power can overcome all powers. If a believer's heart experiences a tremor at a moment of danger, such a tremor should not go as far as making him flee from battle. The moment of anyone's death is determined by God alone. Hence, no believer may flee from battle fearing for his life. This should not constitute too much of a burden for anyone. A believer is a human being who encounters an enemy, who, in turn, is a human being. Hence, they are of the same nature. The believer, however, has the advantage of relying on the overpowering might of God Himself. Moreover, he is under God's care while he is alive, and he entrusts himself to God's care if he attains martyrdom. This means that in all situations he is stronger than his enemy who defies God and His Messenger. Hence this absolute ruling: "*Anyone who turns his back to them on that day, except when manoeuvering for battle or in an endeavour to join another troop, shall incur God's wrath, and hell shall be his abode: how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 16)

We should reflect a little here on the mode of expression and its remarkable connotations. The statements, "*Do not turn your backs to them in flight*", and, "*Anyone who turns his back to them on that day*", portray a sense of defeat as it manifests itself physically. They also add a strong condemnation as the whole action is shown to be repugnant, particularly the image of turning one's back to one's enemies. Then we have the expression, "*shall incur God's wrath.*" In the Arabic text, there is a connotation that a defeated person is carrying with him God's wrath right to his abode in hell, which is an awful end to his journey. Thus these connotations add to the sense and effectiveness of the statement. Together they spread a feeling of abhorrence of the very act of fleeing from battle.

God's Planning and Human Implementation

The *sūrah* then moves on to show God's hand as He dictates events, killing the enemies of the believers, and throwing whatever is thrown. The believers, nevertheless, receive the reward, because God wants to perfect His grace on them,

[33] Ibn al-`Arabī, Muĥammad Ibn `Abdullāh, *Aĥkām al-Qur'ān.* Dār al-Ma`rifah, Beirut, Vol. II, pp. 843-844

helping them to pass well the test He has set for them, and to reward them well for it: *"It was not you who slew them, but it was God who slew them. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but God's, so that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making. Indeed, God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 17)

Many authentic reports explain that the throwing mentioned here refers to the handful of dust the Prophet threw in the direction of the unbelievers, saying "Ugly are those faces! Ugly are those faces!"' The dust hit the faces of those God had predetermined to be killed. But the Qur'ānic statement has a much wider import. It refers to God's planning of the whole affair, beyond the actions of the Prophet and his Companions. This is the reason for following it with God's words: *"So that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making."* (Verse 17) This means that God guides the believers to prove themselves by going through the test with great determination, so that He grants them victory through it and gives them reward for it. This is the sort of abounding grace that God bestows on His servants.

"Indeed, God hears all and knows all." (Verse 17) He listens to your appeals and knows your situation. He makes of you a means to accomplish His purpose when He is certain that you are dedicated to His cause. He grants you victory and reward, just as He bestowed both on you at Badr.

"That is so; it is God who shall make feeble the schemes of the unbelievers." (Verse 18) This follows on the heels of the first aspect of grace. God's planning does not end by letting you kill your enemies with your own hands, hitting them with what His Messenger threw at them. Nor is it over with granting you strength to enable you to make a good showing in the test He set for you, and to reward you handsomely for it. He adds to all that the frustration of the designs of the unbelievers. There is no room, then, for fear or defeat. Nor is there any reason for the believers to turn their backs to the unbelievers in flight.

These statements are related to all the circumstances of the battle. Since it is God who killed the unbelievers, threw everything at them, helped the believers to put up this good show, and frustrated the designs of the unbelievers, then how come that they dispute over the spoils of war? The whole battle was conducted according to God's plan and by His will. Their role in it was merely to act as a manifestation of God's planning and His will.

Much Power, Little Avail

When the *sūrah* has clearly stated that God is certain to make feeble the unbelievers' scheming it directs its address to certain people among the unbelievers. Just before the start of battle, those unbelievers sought a divine judgement, praying that the party which they described as more astray, fabricating what was unheard of

and severing ties of kinship should end in miserable defeat. That was exactly Abū Jahl's prayer, seeking God's judgement. Defeat was then the outcome of the unbelievers' endeavours. Now they are addressed directly and their prayer for a judgement is decried. They are assured that what happened at Badr was the rule not the exception. Their forces, numerous as they may be, will avail them of nothing, because it is a consistent rule that God will always be on the side of the believers: *"If you were seeking a judgement, then a judgement has come to you. If you desist, it will be best for you; and if you revert to your erring ways, We will also be back [with Our punishment]. Your host, numerous as it may be, shall avail you nothing; for God is with the believers."* (Verse 19)

You have sought God's judgement between the Muslims and yourselves, and you have prayed to Him to destroy the party which was in error and which severed ties of kinship. God has responded, and defeat was your lot, as you have requested. Now you know for certain which party is more erring and which severs ties of kinship.

With facts giving clear pointers, they are invited to abandon their rejection of the truth and their hostile attitude to Muslims, as well as their defiance of God and His Messenger: *"If you desist, it will be best for you."* (Verse 19) These are words of persuasion coupled with a clear warning: *"And if you revert to your erring ways, We will also be back [with Our punishment]."* The outcome is well known and cannot be changed by any gathering of forces and equipment no matter how great these are: *"Your host, numerous as it may be, shall avail you nothing."* (Verse 19) Of what use can any great force be, when God is decidedly on the side of the believers? *"For God is with the believers".* (Verse 19) Such a battle will never be even. On one side there will be the believers who have God Himself with them. On the other, there will be the unbelievers who have only human beings fighting with them. The outcome of such a battle is a foregone conclusion.

The unbelievers among the Arabs were well aware of these facts. Their knowledge of God was neither ambiguous nor superficial as those influenced by the generalizations of history books tend to think. Disbelief among the Arabs did not take the form of a denial of God's existence or total ignorance of the truth. It was mostly represented in the fact that they did not submit totally to Him and derived their laws and their code of living from sources other than Him. That was certainly inconsistent with their acknowledgement of God and their knowledge of Him as the Supreme Lord.

When the Quraysh army was moving across the desert, a man called Khufāf ibn Aymā' ibn Raḥḍah al-Ghifārī, or his father, sent them a gift consisting of a number of camels he had slaughtered for food. He also sent them a message that he was prepared to supply them with equipment and fighters. They only had to ask. They sent him this reply with his son: "You have done more than your duty and we are

very grateful to you. If we are going to fight human beings, we are certainly a match for them. But if we are going to fight God, as Muĥammad alleges, then no force may stand up to God."

As we reported earlier, al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, an unbeliever, said to his clan of Zuhrah: "God has spared you the loss of your property and saved your man, Maĥraqah ibn Nawfal, etc." Likewise, Abū Jahl who is described by the Prophet as the Pharaoh of the Arabs, said: "Our Lord, destroy this day the party which is more guilty of severing ties of kinship and fabricating what is false." When `Utbah ibn Rabī`ah sent him a man to persuade him not to fight, Abū Jahl, said: "No. By God we shall not return until God has made a judgement between us and Muĥammad."

These examples show their concept of God's nature and how it was present in their minds on all serious occasions. It was not a question of total ignorance of God or lack of awareness that He is overpowering or that He can make a complete judgement between the two parties. It was a question of associating partners with Him. This was represented initially through deriving their code of living and their laws from sources other than God. The same type of disbelief is practised today by people who think themselves to be Muslims, following the faith of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Indeed, the non-believers of Makkah thought that they were following the faith of the Prophet Abraham. It was that misguided belief which prompted Abū Jahl himself to seek that judgement, praying to God to destroy the party which was deeper in error and more guilty of severing ties of kinship.

It is true that they worshipped idols, but they never attributed to those idols any concept of godhead similar to that which they recognized as belonging to God. The Qur'ān explains their concepts of such idols and the basis of their rituals of worship which they offered to them: "*Those who took for themselves patrons other than God (would say): We only worship them so that they may bring us closer to God.*'" (39: 3) This then was the basis of their idolatry: they felt that their idols could intercede with God on their behalf. But the essence of their polytheistic beliefs were not these. Nor was it enough for any of them to simply abandon such a concept of intercession by those idols in order to be a Muslim. Otherwise, the people known as *al-Ĥunafā'*, or the pure, who dissociated themselves from the worship of those idols and believed in God alone, would have been considered Muslims. But they were not. Islam comprises conceptual beliefs, the offering of worship to God and attributing all sovereignty to Him alone. Those who do not acknowledge Him as the overall sovereign, wherever and whenever they may happen to live, are polytheist, even though they acknowledge that there is no deity other than God and offer worship to Him. When they stop at that, they are the same as those people known as *al-Ĥunafā'* whom no one describes as Muslims. People become Muslims when they complete the circle and add to their concepts and worship the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty

which entails a rejection of any law, set-up, value or tradition that is not derived from God. This is the only true meaning of Islam because it is the true import of the declaration that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is His Messenger. Moreover, those people who have this understanding of the declaration must join a single movement under an Islamic leadership that separates itself from the society of *jāhiliyyah* and its leadership.

This must be fully understood by those people who want to be Muslims so that they are not deceived by the thought that they are Muslims in belief and practice. This is not sufficient for people to become Muslims unless they acknowledge that all sovereignty belongs to God alone. This is represented in practice by rejecting all claims that sovereignty belongs to anyone else and until they have no loyalty whatsoever to *jāhiliyyah* societies and their leaderships.

Many good-natured and well-meaning people who want to be true Muslims fall prey to this trick. It is important, therefore, that they make certain of the only true form of Islam. They should also know that the idolatrous Arabs were no different from them. They knew who God was and made of their idols partners who could intercede with Him on their behalf. Thus, their true disbelief centred around sovereignty and to whom it belonged.

Moreover, the Muslim community which strives to re-establish this religion in daily life must be fully and clearly aware of this fact. They must also make it decisively clear to all people. This is the starting point. If an Islamic movement deviates from this fact at any moment, it is bound to go astray, even though it may have abundance of sincerity, perseverance, and determination to fulfil its duties.

Response to a Call to Life

Earlier, the *sūrah* mentioned the believers making it clear that God is on their side. Now they are addressed repeatedly to encourage them to obey God and His Messenger and to warn them against turning away from Him. Should they do so they will be in the same position as those who hear God's revelations being recited and who pay no heed to them. They are deaf and dumb although they may have ears to hear with and tongues to speak with. These are the vilest of all creatures on earth because they are not guided by what they hear.

> *Believers, obey God and His Messenger, and do not turn away from him now that you have heard [his message]. Do not be like those who say: 'We have heard,' while they do not listen. Indeed, the worst of all creatures, in God's sight, are the deaf and dumb who are devoid of reason. If God had known of any good in them, He would certainly have made them hear. But even if He were to make them hear, they would have turned*

away and refused to listen. (Verses 20-23)

The believers are asked to obey God and His Messenger and not to turn away when they listen to His revelations. This address follows a number of inspiring introductions and an account of the events of the battle in which God's hand was clearly seen at work as He determined the course of events and provided help and support. All this reassured the believers that God was with them and He was certain to foil the schemes of the unbelievers. Thereafter the only proper course of action was for them to listen and obey. To turn away from God's Messenger and pay no heed to his orders after all that had happened would clearly be seen as totally unbecoming of anyone who has a mind to think and reflect.

The mention of animals occurs at its appropriate place. The Arabic term used here to refer to animals includes human beings because this is derived from the act of walking. Human beings also walk on earth. However, the term used here is most commonly used for quadruped animals. Hence, its usage gives clear connotations so as to make those who are `deaf, dumb and devoid of reason' appear like animals. Indeed, they are the worst type of animals. Animals do have ears, but they only hear unintelligible words, and they have tongues but they can only make unintelligible noises. Yet by their nature, animals are guided to what is needed for their lives. Those humans, on the other hand, do not make use of their faculty of understanding. As such, they are fittingly described in the Qur'ānic verse: "*The worst of all creatures, in God's sight, are the deaf and dumb who are devoid of reason.*" (Verse 22)

"*If God had known of any good in them, He would certainly have made them hear.*" (Verse 23) This means that He would have made their minds receive well what they hear with their ears. But He — limitless is He in His Glory — does not know of any goodness in them or any desire to follow proper guidance. They have perverted their natural receptive faculty. Therefore, God does not open their hearts which they have shut down or repair their nature which they have perverted. Even if God made them understand the truth of what is being presented to them, they would not open their hearts to it and they would not respond to what they understood. "*But even if He were to make them hear, they would have turned away and refused to listen.*" (Verse 23) A person may understand something with his mind, but he may still keep his heart closed, unresponsive. Even if God were to make these people understand, they would turn away and refuse to respond. A positive response is the outcome of proper listening. Many are those who may understand or choose to keep their hearts closed, unresponsive.

A further address is made to the believers calling on them to respond to God and His Messenger, providing encouragement for a positive response and warning them against turning away. They are reminded of God's blessings which they have

enjoyed when they responded to God and His Messenger. "*Believers, respond to the call of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that which will give you life, and know that God comes in between a man and his heart, and that to Him you shall all be gathered. Beware of temptation that does not lure only those among you who are wrongdoers. Know that God is severe in retribution.*" (Verses 24-25)

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) calls on them to follow what would certainly give them life. It is a call to life in its fullness, with all its connotations. He calls on them to believe in a faith that keeps hearts and minds alive, free from the restrictions *of jāhiliyyah,* ignorance and superstition, the pressures of legends, misconceptions and submission to superficial causes and inevitabilities. It is a faith that frees them from submission to anyone other than God and from being humiliated or subjugated by human beings or desires.

God's Messenger also calls on them to implement a divine law that proclaims man's freedom. In itself, this imparts a great honour to man because he will then believe in something that comes from God directly, and before which all human beings are equal. There is no room for the tyranny of a single person over a whole community, or a race or nation over another. All human beings are made free, enjoying equal status before the law that has been formulated and laid down by God, for the benefit of mankind. God's Messenger also calls on them to adopt a code of living and a set of thoughts and beliefs that set them free from every bondage other than checks of nature established by God. It is He who created man and knows what He has created. These checks are meant to preserve the constructive potential of man and make the best use of it, without wasting any part of it or deviating from its constructive operation.

He also calls on them to have power and to feel exalted through their faith and constitution, having full confidence in their religion and their reward. This will enable them to fulfil their duty, to take appropriate initiative aiming at the liberation of the human race as a whole, breaking the chains of submission to creatures in order to acknowledge submission to God alone. Thus the honoured position of man which tyrants have taken away will be retrieved and re-established.

God's Messenger further calls on them to strive for God's cause so that the position of God as the Supreme Lord in this world and in human life will be re-established. All claims to Godhead would thus be refuted. Usurpers of God's authority, sovereignty and power would be chased away, until they have submitted to God's sovereignty. When this takes place all submission is acknowledged to God alone. If believers die when they strive in this way, they achieve martyrdom. A new life is thus imparted to them.

This is in a nutshell what God's Messenger calls on them to do. This is indeed a

call to life in the full sense of the word. This religion is a complete way of living, not a mere concept of belief. It is a practical method that allows life to flourish and prosper. Hence, it is a call to life in all its connotations, forms and aspects. The Qur'ān sums up all this in a few inspiring words: "*Believers, respond to the call of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that which will give you life.*" (Verse 24) Make this response willingly, with obedience. After all, God is able to force you to follow His guidance if He so desires.

"*Know that God comes in between a man and his heart.*" (Verse 24) This is an awesome picture of God's power and its subtle operation. He thus forces a split between a human being and his heart and mind, making that heart His property, so that He directs it wherever He wishes. The person himself will be totally unable to influence the heart that beats within him. This is certainly an awe-inspiring image that our hearts can contemplate as we listen to it in the Qur'ān. Human expression, however, cannot describe its effects on our hearts and how we respond to it. But the ultimate message of this statement should always keep us on the alert, so that we watch our feelings and guard against any tendency that may lead us to slip, or any fleeting thought that may push us along the way to disobedience of God. We must always be on guard so that we maintain the path that earns God's pleasure and not deviate from it during any moment of self-indulgence or negligence.

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) who was immune to sin often used to say in his supplication: "My Lord. You are the One who changes people's hearts. Make my heart constant in following Your faith." Compared to this, what should the attitude of ordinary people be when they are neither given a message, nor granted immunity to sinful temptation?

A believer is bound to feel his heart shiver as he contemplates this image, looking at his own heart placed in God's own hand, while he himself has no power to influence it in any way, although it remains inside him beating all the time.

This image is presented to the believers as they are called upon to respond to God and His Messenger when He calls on them to accept what will give them life. He is thus telling them that God can make them give the response He wants and force them to follow His guidance. But God honours them by giving them the choice and calling on them to respond willingly, so that they can earn a reward from Him, and exercise their own will which enhances their position and brings them up to the level worthy of God's trust. This is the trust of following God's guidance and exercising the role He has assigned to them on earth, as He placed them in charge of it. When people do this, they exercise their freedom of choice on the basis of clear knowledge and well-defined objectives.

"*To Him you shall all be gathered.*" (Verse 24) You cannot escape Him, either in this

world or in the Hereafter, because your hearts are in His hands and to Him you shall all be gathered. Nevertheless, He calls on you to respond to Him by your free choice to earn His reward. A forced response is not worthy of man.

Victory Coming on the Heels of Hardship

They are then warned against adopting a negative attitude to *jihād,* or making a negative response to the call to life, or refraining from the fulfilment of their duty to change what is wrong, whatever form it may take: *"Beware of temptation that does not lure only those among you who are wrongdoers. Know that God is severe in retribution."* (Verse 25) A community that allows a section of its members to be unjust will be guilty of injustice or wrongdoing. When a community does not stand up to wrongdoers, when it does not take any positive steps to punish transgressors, it deserves to share in the punishment of those wrongdoers and transgressors. It should be said that the worst type of wrongdoing is to abandon God's law which He has laid down to be implemented in human life. As a system, Islam has a serious outlook based on mutual help and solidarity within the community. Islam does not allow its followers to sit idle when injustice, corruption and wrongdoing continue on the rampage, let alone sees God's faith abandoned and His Godhead denied in order to be substituted by false claims. Such people cannot hope to be spared trial and temptation simply because they are good within themselves.

Since resistance to injustice and wrongdoing requires great sacrifices of lives and property, the Qur'ān reminds the first Muslim community of its own weakness, small numbers, the fear and persecution it endured. It also reminds those early Muslims of how God extended His shelter to them and granted them security and good provision. It must never, then, hesitate to respond to the type of life to which God's Messenger calls it, or to meet the responsibilities of this life that ensures its dignity, freedom and independence: *"Remember when you were few and helpless in the land, fearful lest people do away with you: how He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support and provided you with many good things so that you might be grateful."* (Verse 26)

You must remember this in order to be absolutely certain that God's Messenger calls you to that which will give you life. Remember it so that you do not ever feel reluctant to resist injustice of any type or form. Remember the days when you were weak and afraid. These were the days before God instructed you to fight the unbelievers, and before His Messenger called on you to face the mighty host in spite of your reluctance. Reflect on your situation after you have responded to this call and how you are now enjoying victory, God's reward, and the many good things He has provided for you. When you reflect on all this, you will then express your gratitude and gain further reward for that gratitude.

The *sūrah* paints a very powerful image of their inferior numbers and strength, as well as their worry and fear: *"fearful lest people do away with you."* (Verse 26) The Arabic expression emphasizes the connotations of worry, apprehension and fearful expectation that we can almost see their worried features, restless eyes and clear apprehension.

However, a transformation takes place and we have a scene of security, strength, victory and enjoyable provision, all granted by God who has extended His protection to them: *"How He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support and provided you with many good things."* (Verse 26) Coupled with this is a directive to them to demonstrate their gratitude in order to earn more reward: *"So that you might be grateful."* (Verse 26) Who can contemplate this great transformation and decline to respond to a call to a secure life that enjoys strength and affluence? This is the call of the noble Prophet who conveys God's message. Who can enjoy such a transformation without showing his gratitude to God for all His grace, when both scenes of weakness and strength, worry and security are held up in front of his eyes?

Yet those people actually lived both situations. They are reminded of their past and present. Hence they appreciated fully what the Qur'ān said.

The Muslim community which strives today to re-establish this faith in human life may not have gone through both stages or experienced both states. The Qur'ān, nevertheless, describes this transformation to this and every Muslim community. If a Muslim community finds itself in the stage of weakness such as that described in the Qur'ān: *"Remember when you were few and helpless in the land, fearful lest people do away with you,"* then it will do well to respond to the call to life conveyed by God's Messenger. It can await with certainty the fulfilment of God's promise. He fulfilled it to the first Muslim community and He has promised to fulfil it to every community that follows the same course of action and makes the required sacrifices. It can then look forward to a situation to which the same description applies: *"He sheltered you, strengthened you with His support and provided you with many good things so that you might be grateful."* (Verse 26) In all this, a Muslim community is actually dealing with God and His promise that will always come true. They need be in no doubt of that.

A Reassuring Criterion

Another address to the believers follows. God knows that property and children may discourage people from giving the proper response to such a call as they tend to enhance traits of fear and miserliness. Therefore, the Qur'ān highlights the fact that property and children may be the subject of a trial and warns against weaknesses that may cause people to fail in such a trial. They may feel too reluctant to respond to the call of *jihād,* or to shoulder the responsibilities of the trust God placed in them

and the pledges of loyalty they have given. To refrain from the fulfilment of such duties is a betrayal of God and His Messenger, and a betrayal of the trust God has assigned to the Muslim community on earth. This trust requires the Muslim community to strive to make God's word triumphant, establish His Godhead as absolute, and maintain truth and justice. Coupled with this warning is a reminder of the great reward that God has in store for them which outweighs by far the value of property and children: "*Believers, do not betray God and the Messenger, nor knowingly betray the trust that has been reposed in you. Know that your worldly goods and your children are but a trial, and that with God there is a great reward.*" (Verses 27-28)

To abandon the duties God has assigned to the Muslim community is a betrayal of God and His Messenger. The basic issue in the Islamic faith is that of attributing Godhead purely and solely to God alone, following only what has been conveyed to us by His Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Throughout human history, people did not deny God altogether, but they mostly associated partners with Him. On a few occasions, this took the form of beliefs and worship, but the form of attributing sovereignty and authority to others beside Him was much more common. Therefore, the basic issue is not to make people believe in God, but to make such a belief pure of all distortion. The declaration that "there is no deity other than God" means that He is the sovereign over their life on earth, as they acknowledge His sovereignty in the universe. This is embodied in the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth.*" (43: 84) This basic issue also entails that God's Messenger is the only source to convey what God wants of human beings, and this means that they must follow all his orders and directives. As this includes both conviction and action, the Muslim community, which has declared its belief in God, is warned against abandoning this whole issue. To do so is equal to betraying God and His Messenger.

Believers are also warned against betraying the trust they have accepted when they pledged their loyalty to God's Messenger and declared their acceptance of Islam. Islam means submission to God. This is not merely a verbal statement, but a complete code of living that must be implemented, even though such implementation faces numerous obstacles and difficulties. It is a code that aims to build human life on the basis of the declaration that there is no deity other than God. This means that people should submit only to their true Lord, and the whole community should accept His sovereignty and implement His law. The usurpers who tyrannize people and claim sovereignty for themselves must be taken to task. Right and justice must be maintained for all people. Human life must be built entirely on the basis of the divine constitution. All these are aspects of the trust God has placed in the Muslim community. Those who do not fulfil their trust actually betray their pledges to God and His Messenger.

It is, then, a fully integrated code that comprises concepts of beliefs, directives and education, as well as duties and responsibilities. It is a code that has been devised by God who knows what suits man, because it is He who has created man: *"Does He not know what He has created when He is fully aware of all things?"* (67: 14)

The last address to the believers in this passage of the *sūrah* requires them to remain God-fearing. People cannot fulfil such heavy responsibilities unless they are fully aware of their true position, equipped with light that clears all misunderstandings and a determination that steadies their footsteps along the road they have to traverse. They can only have that when they have the sensitivity imparted by fearing God and benefit by the light He provides: "*Believers, if you remain God-fearing, He will give you a standard by which to discern the true from the false, and will wipe off your bad deeds, and forgive you. God's bounty is great indeed."* (Verse 29)

This is, then, the equipment needed along the road. It is the sense of fearing God which makes people's hearts alive and keeps them fully alert. With God's light they can *see* clearly; their vision is not clouded by anything. Besides, fearing God is the proper equipment which ensures forgiveness for errors and sinful deeds. It provides reassurance and security, as well as great hope for a great bounty from God on the Day of Judgement when people discover that their actions have fallen short of expectation.

It is a fact of life that fearing God provides people with a standard to distinguish truth from falsehood. Like all facts of faith, however, this can only be appreciated by those who have experienced it. Description cannot begin to give a feeling of this fact to those who have no experience of it. Matters remain intermingled in people's minds and thoughts, and falsehood tries to always cling to the truth, particularly at points of divergence. Argument may silence objections, but cannot provide conviction, and polemics remain futile unless people are equipped with a sense of fearing God. When such a God-fearing sense is present, minds are open to see the truth, and the way ahead is defined. Thus, people can enjoy security and reassurance, and walk along with steady steps.

The truth itself may not be lost to human nature because God has made this nature responsive to the truth. But people's desires may force a separation between the truth and human nature. It is such desires that becloud people's vision and cause them to lose their way. People's desires are not overcome by argument, but by a sense of fearing God. Hence, the standard to discern truth from falsehood is all important to enlighten the way to those who wish to follow it. It is a priceless gift from God. God's grace, however, does not stop at that. God adds to it the forgiveness of sins as well as a great bounty. This can only be provided by the Lord whose grace is great, limitless, unceasing.

2
In Defiance of the Truth

وَإِذْ يَمْكُرُ بِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِيُثْبِتُوكَ أَوْ
يَقْتُلُوكَ أَوْ يُخْرِجُوكَ ۚ وَيَمْكُرُونَ وَيَمْكُرُ
ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ خَيْرُ ٱلْمَٰكِرِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Remember how the unbelievers were scheming against you, seeking to keep you in chains or have you slain or banished. Thus they plot and plan, but God also plans. God is above all schemers. (30)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا قَالُوا۟ قَدْ سَمِعْنَا
لَوْ نَشَآءُ لَقُلْنَا مِثْلَ هَٰذَآ ۙ إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ
أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them, they would say: 'We have heard them. If we wanted, we could certainly compose the like of this. This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (31)

وَإِذْ قَالُوا۟ ٱللَّهُمَّ إِن كَانَ هَٰذَا هُوَ
ٱلْحَقَّ مِنْ عِندِكَ فَأَمْطِرْ عَلَيْنَا حِجَارَةً
مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَوِ ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

They would also say: 'God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us.' (32)

وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيُعَذِّبَهُمْ وَأَنتَ فِيهِمْ ۚ
وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ مُعَذِّبَهُمْ وَهُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ
﴿٣٣﴾

But God would not punish them while you were present in their midst, nor would God punish them when they may yet ask for forgiveness. (33)

وَمَا لَهُمْ أَلَّا يُعَذِّبَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَهُمْ
يَصُدُّونَ عَنِ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ وَمَا
كَانُوٓا۟ أَوْلِيَآءَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنْ أَوْلِيَآؤُهُۥٓ إِلَّا
ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

What [plea] have they now that God should not punish them, when they debar other people from the Sacred Mosque, although they are not its rightful guardians? Its only guardians are those that fear God; but of this most of these [evildoers] are unaware. (34)

٣٤

وَمَا كَانَ صَلَاتُهُمْ عِندَ ٱلْبَيْتِ إِلَّا مُكَآءً وَتَصْدِيَةً ۚ فَذُوقُواْ ٱلْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Their prayers at the House are nothing but whistling and clapping of hands. Taste then this punishment in consequence of your disbelief. (35)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يُنفِقُونَ أَمْوَٰلَهُمْ لِيَصُدُّواْ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَسَيُنفِقُونَهَا ثُمَّ تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِمْ حَسْرَةً ثُمَّ يُغْلَبُونَ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ يُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

The unbelievers spend their riches in order to turn people away from the path of God. They will go on spending them, and then this will become a source of intense regret for them; and then they shall be defeated. The unbelievers shall into hell be driven. (36)

لِيَمِيزَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَبِيثَ مِنَ ٱلطَّيِّبِ وَيَجْعَلَ ٱلْخَبِيثَ بَعْضَهُۥ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ فَيَرْكُمَهُۥ جَمِيعًا فَيَجْعَلَهُۥ فِى جَهَنَّمَ ۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

God will separate the bad from the good. The bad He will place one upon another, so He may heap them all up together, and then cast them into hell. Those indeed are the losers. (37)

قُل لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِن يَنتَهُواْ يُغْفَرْ لَهُم مَّا قَدْ سَلَفَ وَإِن يَعُودُواْ فَقَدْ مَضَتْ سُنَّتُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

Say to the unbelievers that if they desist, all that is past shall be forgiven them; but if they persist [in their erring ways], let them remember what happened to the like of them in former times. (38)

وَقَٰتِلُوهُمْ حَتَّىٰ لَا تَكُونَ فِتْنَةٌ وَيَكُونَ ٱلدِّينُ كُلُّهُۥ لِلَّهِ ۚ فَإِنِ ٱنتَهَوْاْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. (39)

وَإِن تَوَلَّوْاْ فَٱعْلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَوْلَىٰكُمْ ۚ نِعْمَ

But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this

giver of support. (40)	ٱلۡمَوۡلَىٰ وَنِعۡمَ ٱلنَّصِيرُ ﴿٤٠﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* continues its address showing glimpses from the past and compares them with the present. It paints a scene showing a great gulf between the two situations for the benefit of the Muslim community which fought the battle and achieved a great victory. Thus Muslims are able to appreciate God's grace as manifested in what He had planned for them. Compared to that, all the spoils of war appear trivial and all sacrifices of little consequence.

The first passage described the general situation of the Muslims in Makkah, and also in Madinah before the battle. They were small in number, poor in equipment to the extent that they always feared their enemies could launch an onslaught against them. However, by God's grace all that was changed to a situation of strength, security and good provision. In the present passage, the *sūrah* describes the attitude of the unbelievers as they scheme against God's Messenger shortly before his departure to Madinah. They turn away from God's revelations, claiming that they could produce something similar if they so wished. Their attitude is so stubborn that they appeal for God's punishment to come sooner if Muĥammad's message from God is true. They prefer this to accepting it and following its guidance. The passage also includes a reference to the fact that they allocate their resources so as to turn people away from God's guidance and pool their money in order to launch an onslaught on God's Messenger. They are warned that all their efforts will end in total failure in this life, and then they will be driven to hell in the life to come. Loss in both worlds will be the result of their scheming and plotting.

Ultimately God directs the Prophet to confront the unbelievers with a choice between two alternatives. The first is that they stop their stubborn denial of the truth and their hostility to God and His Messenger, in which case God will forgive them all the sins and evil deeds they committed in the past. Alternatively, they continue with their attitude, in which case the fate that engulfed earlier communities will befall them too. They will then suffer the punishment God will determine for them.

God then commands the Muslims to fight them until all their power is destroyed. Thus, they will no longer be able to scheme against the Muslims and turn them away from their faith. The fight should continue until all Godhead is recognized

throughout the earth as belonging to God alone, and all submission is made to Him. If they, then, give up and surrender, the Prophet (peace be upon him) will accept that from them. As for their thoughts and intentions, these are known to God. He will hold them accountable for these. However, if they turn away and continue with their campaign against the Muslim community, denying God's Lordship over the whole universe and refusing to submit to Him, the Muslims will then continue to fight them, trusting to God, their Master, who will provide them with His support.

A Scheme to Put an End to Islam

"Remember how the unbelievers were scheming against you, seeking to keep you in chains or have you slain or banished. Thus they plot and plan, but God also plans. God is above all schemers." (Verse 30) This is a reminder of the situation in Makkah before things underwent a total transformation. This reminder serves also as a reassurance concerning the future, and draws attention to the wisdom behind the operation of God's will. Those Muslims who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān were fully aware of both situations, having experienced both. A reminder of their immediate past, as well as the fear and worry they experienced in those days, was sufficient to make them appreciate the safety and security of the present. They were aware of the unbelievers' scheming and what they planned to do with the Prophet. But not only their schemes were totally foiled; the unbelievers also suffered a humiliating defeat.

The unbelievers were considering alternatives: they thought of arresting God's Messenger and putting him in chains until he died, and they also considered killing him so that they could get rid of him once and for all. They also thought of driving him away, sending him into exile. Having considered the pros and cons of each of these alternatives, they chose to kill him, entrusting the task to a number of young men, each belonging to a different tribe, so that all tribes would share in his assassination. His own clan, Hāshim, would thus be unable to fight all the Arabs at once. They would then accept an offer of blood money and the whole matter would finish at that.

Commenting on this verse, Imām Ahmad relates on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās: "The Quraysh were in consultation one night in Makkah. Some of them suggested that the following morning they should put the Prophet in chains; but others suggested that they should kill him, while still others suggested that it was sufficient to have him banished. God revealed to the Prophet what they were scheming. That night, `Alī slept in the Prophet's bed, while the Prophet (peace be upon him) moved out of the city until he reached the cave. The unbelievers spent the night watching `Alī, but thinking him to be the Prophet. In the morning, they rushed

to him, but instead they discovered `Alī sleeping in his bed. They realized that their scheming had been foiled. They asked him: 'Where is your companion?' He answered: `I do not know.' They traced his footsteps, but when they reached the mountain, they could no longer distinguish his trace. They climbed up the mountain and passed by the cave and saw that spiders had weaved their webs over its entrance. They thought that if he had gone into the cave, there would be no spider's web at the entrance. All in all he stayed in that cave three nights."

"*They plot and plan, but God also plans. God is above all schemers.*" (Verse 30) These words paint a picture that leaves a profound effect, particularly when we stretch our minds to imagine that meeting of Quraysh idolaters and how they held their consultations discussing alternatives, looking at the advantages and disadvantages of every suggestion that was put forward. Yet, God Almighty was fully aware of all they said and decided. He rendered their schemes futile, but they were totally unaware of His planning. The whole scene is full of acute irony. But it is at the same time an awe-inspiring scene. How could those human beings, weak and clumsy as they were, be compared to God? Could anything they devised be compared to His design, able as He is to accomplish every purpose of His? The Qur'ānic style paints this image in the same inimitable method of the Qur'ān, bringing it alive so that it shakes hearts and set minds thinking.

After this brief but highly suggestive reference to the scheming of the Quraysh and what they plotted against the Prophet, the *sūrah* moves on to describe the attitude of the unbelievers, their deeds, fabrications and claims. They went as far as claiming they were able to produce something similar to the Qur'ān, if only they chose to do so. At the same time, they described the Qur'ān as fables of the ancients. *"Whenever Our revelations are recited to them, they would say: 'We have heard them. If we wanted, we could certainly compose the like of this. This is nothing but fables of the ancients.'"* (Verse 31)

Feeble Manoeuvres

In his scholarly commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr mentions that the person who said this was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ĥārith:

> Al-Naḍr had been to the Persian Empire where he learnt Persian history and read accounts of past Persian kings, such as Rustam and Isfandayar. When he returned home, he saw God's Messenger (peace be upon him) after he had been entrusted with God's message, and he listened to him reciting the Qur'ān to people. When the Prophet finished talking to any group of people, al-Naḍr would sit with them and tell them stories of those ancient kings. He would then ask them: 'Tell me, by God, who tells better stories: I or

> Muĥammad?' Hence, when he fell captive on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet ordered that he should be executed. His order was carried out, thank God.[34]

The Prophet's Companion who had taken him prisoner was al- Miqdād ibn al-Aswad, as Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī reports:

> The Prophet ordered the execution of `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ, Tu`aymah ibn `Adiy and al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith. When he ordered the killing of al-Nadr, al-Miqdād, the Prophet's Companion who had taken him prisoner, said: 'Messenger of God, he is my prisoner!'[35] The Prophet said: 'He used to say things against God's book.' The Prophet again ordered al-Nadr's execution. Al-Miqdād again said: `Messenger of God, he is my prisoner!' The Prophet said: `My Lord, enrich al-Miqdād with Your bounty.' Al-Miqdād commented that all he had hoped for was to have such a prayer by the Prophet.
>
> It was in reference to al-Nađr and what he used to say about the Qur'ān that this verse was revealed: *"Whenever Our revelations are recited to them, they would say: 'We have heard them. If we wanted, we could certainly compose the like of this. This is nothing but fables of the ancients.'"* (Verse 31)[36]

The unbelievers' claims that the Qur'ān was nothing but the tales of ancient people is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān. In another *sūrah* we read: *"And they say: 'Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him in the morning and the evening.'"* (25: 5)

This was only one episode in a chain of manoeuvres which they attempted in order to resist the Qur'ān and stop its profound effect. They realized that the Qur'ān put its address to human nature, based on the truth implanted in its very constitution. Hence, its response was bound to be positive. It confronted minds with its overpowering authority and they yielded to its irrefutable logic. Therefore, the elders of the Quraysh concocted some manoeuvres which they knew to be without foundation. Nevertheless, they tried to find in the Qur'ān something similar to the fables and legends of ancient communities in order to spread confusion among the masses. Their aim was simply to maintain their sway over those masses.

Those elders of the Quraysh recognized the nature of the Islamic message, because they were fully aware of the meaning of its terms and expressions in their language.

---

[34]Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al- `Azīm,* Beirut, Vol. II, p. 279

[35] Al-Miqdād's words were meant as a reference to the ransom he would have collected in return for al-Nađr's release. He was not objecting to the Prophet's order, but he hoped for something different as is clear from the report. — Editor's note.

[36] Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, Vol. VI, pp. 231-232

They recognized that the declaration, 'there is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is God's Messenger,' signified a rebellion against all human authority, a complete rejection of the sovereignty of human beings and an acknowledgement that all sovereignty belonged to God alone. It also signified that putting such submission into practice meant following the teachings of Prophet Muĥammad, God's Messenger, to the exclusion of all those who claimed to speak for God. They were aware that those of them who made that declaration rebelled immediately against the Quraysh's authority, leadership and sovereignty. Without hesitation, they joined the community led by the Prophet, acknowledging his authority. They no longer entertained any feeling of loyalty to family, clan, tribe, leadership or human authority. All their loyalty was given to this new leadership and the community under its care.

This is certainly the true significance of the declaration that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger. This was a reality witnessed by the elders of the Quraysh who recognized the threat it constituted to their social, political, economic and religious set-up. The new Muslims' declaration did not have the hollow and feeble significance demonstrated by those who nowadays claim to be Muslims. They make such a claim only because they repeat this declaration verbally and offer some worship rituals. However, they pay little heed to the fact that God's Lordship no longer has any practical significance in human life, since human beings allow man-made laws and ignorant leadership to conduct and manage all society affairs.

It is true that in Makkah, Islam had neither a legal code to put forward nor a state to implement such a code, had it been there. However, those who made the declaration that brought them into the fold of Islam immediately acknowledged the leadership of the Prophet Muĥammad and gave all their loyalty to the Muslim community. They rebelled against the leadership of the Arabian *jāhiliyyah* society, and disclaimed any loyalty to family, clan, tribe, etc. Hence, their declaration had its true political significance.

This was indeed what worried the Quraysh's elders as they recognized the threat posed by Islam and the Qur'ān. In earlier days, they were not at all worried when some individuals of foresight disowned the beliefs and rituals of the unbelievers, declaring that they believed in God's oneness and worshipped Him alone. Those individuals disowned all idolatry, offering no worship ritual to any of the Arabian idols. If the whole matter is confined to this, those who wield authority in any *jāhiliyyah* society would not care, because they do not see any threat to their authority in mere beliefs and worship rituals. Unlike what some kind and sincere people who wish to be Muslims may think, Islam is not confined to this. Islam is a positive movement that accompanies this declaration. It requires its followers to dissociate

themselves from *jāhiliyyah* society, its conceptual beliefs, values, leadership, laws and authority. It also requires its followers to acknowledge loyalty only to the Muslim leadership which wants to bring Islam into practice. This was extremely worrying to the elders of the Quraysh, so they tried to resist it by various means, including their false claim that the Qur'ān was nothing but fables of the ancients, and that they could produce something similar to it. They certainly had no power to do so. The Qur'ān has challenged them time and again to produce even one *sūrah* similar to it. Every time they tried, their attempts ended in miserable failure.

A Sophisticated Version of an Old Ploy

A fable is an old tale that includes some superstitious beliefs about deities and the supernatural courage of legendary heroes. It speaks of imaginary events that involve so much superstition.

Those Quraysh elders referred to the accounts given in the Qur'ān of earlier nations and communities, the miracles shown to them and to the Qur'ānic descriptions of how God destroyed the unbelievers and saved the believers and said to the masses that such accounts were only fables of ancient people. They alleged that Muĥammad had it all written down in order to relate the same to the Arabs in Makkah, claiming that they had been revealed to him by God. Al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith would take the Prophet's place after he had finished speaking to people, and would relate to them fables and legends which he had learnt on his travels in Persia. At times, al-Nađr would even have a group of people in a circle sitting next to the group addressed by the Prophet. He would then say to his audience: "These legends are similar to the fables related by Muĥammad, but I do not claim to be a Prophet or to receive any revelations. His are all fables and legends of the same type."

Such claims must, no doubt, have created some confusion among people, particularly at the beginning, before those legends were clearly seen as totally different from the Qur'ān. Hence, we appreciate why the Prophet issued an announcement before the Battle of Badr that al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith should be killed. Then, when he was taken prisoner, the Prophet ordered his execution along with a couple of other prisoners for whom the Prophet was not prepared to accept ransom.

However, such matters did not last long in Makkah. These ploys were seen for what they really were. With its overpowering logic and profound truth that directly appealed to human nature, the Qur'ān could easily overcome all such ploys and manoeuvres. Nothing of them was able to resist the Qur'ān in any way. Hence, the elders of the Quraysh were in terrible fear and called on all their followers: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān. Cut short its recitation with booing and laughter, so that you may gain the upper hand."* (41: 26) But their leaders, such as Abū Sufyān, Abū Jahl and al-

Akhnas ibn Sharīq went secretly at night, each on his own, to listen to the Qur'ān being recited. None of them could bring himself to refrain from being there night after night, to listen to the Prophet as he recited God's revelations. Each one of them thought he was totally alone. When they discovered each other, they made a firm pledge of honour not to do it again. They feared that they would be seen by young people who would then listen to the Qur'ān and accept the Islamic faith.

Al-Naḍr's attempt to attract people's attention to his stories in order to turn them away from the Qur'ān was not the last of its kind. It was repeated in different shapes and forms, and it will continue to be repeated. In our present times, the enemies of this faith have also tried to turn people's attentions away from the Qur'ān. But when they realize that all their attempts end in failure, they try to reduce the Qur'ān to a collection of hymns that reciters sing to enchant their audience. They also make of it charms and talismans which people wear or put in their pockets or under their pillows. When people do so, they imagine that they are Muslims and they think that they have paid the Qur'ān all its due respect.

The Qur'ān is no longer the guideline for human life. The enemies of this religion have managed to provide flimsy substitutes for it to which people refer for directives concerning all matters of life. Indeed, it is from such flimsy alternatives that people derive their concepts, laws, values and standards. These enemies then tell the masses that religion is held in a position of respect and that the Qur'ān is intact. It is being recited for you morning and evening, and at all times. You may listen to such recitations and be enchanted with them. What else do you want the Qur'ān to do for you? As for your concepts, systems, laws, constitutions, values and standards, you may refer to other things which are the authority for all that.

It is the same ploy as employed by al-Naḍr ibn al-Ĥārith, but with more sophistication to suit modern life with all its complexities. Indeed, it is just one of numerous forms. Throughout its history, this religion of Islam has never been short of enemies scheming against it.

What is remarkable about the Qur'ān is that it remains overpowering, despite the ever more sophisticated schemes that seek to undermine it. This divine book has such remarkable characteristics and such great appeal to human nature that it is able to overcome all the scheming of the forces of evil on earth, as well as the scheming of the Zionist Jews and imperialists, with all the international centres of power they erect everywhere and at all times. This book continues to crush its enemies the world over, forcing them to allocate a slot for it on all radio stations addressing the Muslim world. We listen to it being broadcast from Jewish and Christian radio stations as well as those controlled by their agents who falsely claim to be Muslims.

It is true that they broadcast it only after they have succeeded in reducing it in the

minds of the Muslim masses to little more than hymns and recitals, or charms and talismans. They have also succeeded in dislocating it in the minds of the Muslim masses, so that it is no longer their guideline for life. They have replaced it with other sources of guidance. Nevertheless, this book continues to do so and there will continue to be a Muslim community that assigns to the Qur'ān its proper position, making it its only source of guidance. This community awaits the fulfilment of God's promise of victory so that they can re-establish Islam on earth. This had happened once and will certainly happen again, despite all persecution and extermination attempts to which the Muslim community is being subjected in many areas of the world.

No Limit to Human Folly

The *sūrah* goes on to describe an attitude of most amazing stubbornness by the unbelievers. They try to wrestle with the truth and they are defeated. Pride, however, prevents them from acknowledging the truth and its authority or submitting to it. Hence, they appeal to God to rain down stones over them or to smite them with grievous suffering, if the Qur'ān were the truth revealed by Him. Instead of praying to God to guide them to the truth and enable them to follow it, they pray for their own undoing: "*They would also say: 'God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us.'*" (Verse 32)

This is certainly a very strange appeal which betrays a state of unwavering stubbornness that prefers total ruin to yielding to the truth, even when it is the absolute truth. When sound human nature experiences doubt, it prays to God to show it the truth and guide it to it. Sound human nature does not find that at all demeaning. But when it is corrupted by uncontrolled pride, arrogance drives it into sin to the extent that it prefers suffering and ruin to acknowledging the truth when it becomes clear, irrefutable. It is with this type of obstinacy that the unbelievers in Makkah resisted the Prophet's message. But this message was victorious in the end, despite such persistent obstinacy.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that they certainly deserved that stones be rained on them from the skies, or that painful suffering be inflicted on them, just as they had prayed for. Nevertheless, God willed not to inflict on them the type of extermination He had inflicted on earlier communities. This is because God's Messenger was still in their midst, calling on them to follow His guidance. Nor would God punish them for their sins if they continued to seek forgiveness after committing them.

It is untrue that their punishment was postponed because they were the guardians of the Sacred Mosque. Indeed, they were not its true guardians, because its rightful guardians are those who fear God: "*But God would not punish them while you were present in their midst, nor would God punish them when they may yet ask for forgiveness. What [plea] have they now that God should not punish them, when they debar other people from the Sacred Mosque, although they are not its rightful guardians? Its only guardians are those that fear God; but of this most of these [evildoers] are unaware. Their prayers at the House are nothing but whistling and clapping of hands. Taste then this punishment in consequence of your disbelief*" (Verses 33-35)

It is, then, through God's grace that they are not punished for their arrogance and obstinacy, or for turning people away from the Sacred Mosque. They were indeed debarring Muslims from offering pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque, the while they did not prevent anyone else from visiting the Mosque. It is through God's grace that

they were given respite, so that, perchance, some of them might on a later date find faith creeping into their hearts and that they might follow divine guidance. As long as God's Messenger remained among them, calling on them to believe in God, then the possibility that some would have a positive change of heart remained. Hence, the respite they are given is in honour of God's Messenger. The way remains open for them to avoid the punishment of extermination. They only have to give a positive response and seek God's forgiveness for what they have done in the past: "*But God would not punish them while you were present in their midst, nor would God punish them when they may yet ask for forgiveness.*" (Verse 33)

If God were to treat them on the basis of their present situation, they would certainly deserve to be punished: *"What [plea] have they now that God should not punish them, when they debar other people from the Sacred Mosque, although they are not its rightful guardians? Its only guardians are those that fear God; but of this most of these [evildoers] are unaware."* (Verse 34)

What delays their punishment is not their claim that they are the heirs of Abraham and the custodians of the Sacred Mosque. This is merely a claim that has no substance or foundation. They are not the owners or the guardians of this House of worship, i.e. the Ka`bah. Indeed, they are its enemies. God's Sacred Mosque, the Ka `bah, is not a place of property which one generation inherits from its predecessor. It is God's own house which is inherited by those who fear God. False also is their claim that they are the heirs of the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him). It is not through blood and lineage that Abraham's legacy is inherited. It is only inherited through faith and religion. Those who fear God are the only ones to inherit Abraham and the House he built for God's sake. But those unbelievers were turning away from it, its true guardians who believed in Abraham's faith. Hence, they could not be guardians of this Sacred Mosque, although they may offer their prayers there. Indeed, theirs was not a true prayer. It was no more than whistling and hand clapping. It involved much chaos that imparted no air of serenity or atmosphere of humility before God. It did not inspire any feeling of sacredness of that mosque.

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar says: "They used to place their cheeks on the ground, whistling and clapping. This brings to mind the image of musicians who produce a great deal of noise, and who put their heads at the feet of those in high position in many countries which claim to be Muslim. This is no more than an aspect of *jāhiliyyah* that is highlighted here. It is shown here after a clear picture *of jāhiliyyah* has been raised, showing how people impose a sort of divine authority on earth, and claim sovereignty over people. When this type of *jāhiliyyah* occurs, all other forms and styles of *jāhiliyyah* may follow.

"*Taste then this punishment in consequence of your disbelief*" (Verse 35) This refers to the suffering inflicted on them in the Battle of Badr at the hands of the Muslim

community. As for the suffering they prayed for, which involves extermination, it is simply postponed by God's mercy, as a gesture of honour to God's Messenger and his great position. It may be that they will eventually repent what they have been doing and pray to God to forgive them.

Separating the Good from the Bad

It is a common characteristic of unbelievers that they spend their money to cooperate in turning people away from God's path. This they did on the day of the Battle of Badr. They did the same thing again after Badr to prepare for the next battle. God warns them that their purpose will be foiled and that they will come to rue the loss of their money. He promises them defeat in this life and the punishment of hell in the life to come: *"The unbelievers spend their riches in order to turn people away from the path of God. They will go on spending them, and then this will become a source of intense regret for them; and then they shall be defeated. The unbelievers shall into hell be driven. God will separate the bad from the good. The bad He will place one upon another, so He may heap them all up together, and then cast them into hell. Those indeed are the losers."* (Verses 36-37)

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq and others report:

> When the Quraysh suffered their major setback at the Battle of Badr, and their defeated army arrived back in Makkah, Abū Sufyān and his trade caravan had already returned there. 'Abdullāh ibn Rabī`ah, `Ikrimah ibn Abī Jahl, Şafwān ibn Umayyah and a number of other people from the Quraysh who suffered the loss of their fathers, brothers or sons at Badr went to Abū Sufyān and his fellow merchants who had major shares in that trade caravan. They said to them: `Elders of the Quraysh, Muĥammad has levelled a heavy blow on you and killed a number of the best people among you. Help us to fight him by donating this money to the war effort. This may enable us to secure revenge against him. All of them agreed. It is in comment on their action that God revealed this Qur'ānic verse: *"The unbelievers spend their riches in order to turn people away from the path of God. They will go on spending them, and then this will become a source of intense regret for them; and then they shall be defeated."* (Verse 36)

What happened before and after Badr was only an example of this continuous effort by the enemies of this faith. They spend their money, concentrate their efforts and use all their ability to turn people away from the path of God. They set up obstacles to impede the progress of this religion and to suppress the Muslim community everywhere and at all times.

This war against Islam will not cease. Hostile forces will not leave this religion of Islam alone. They will not allow its advocates any time of peace and security. Hence, the method of this religion is to move forward to attack *jāhiliyyah.* It is the duty of its advocates to take pre-emptive measures to smash the ability of *jāhiliyyah* to wage aggression, and then to raise God's banner high, immune from attacks by its enemies.

God warns those unbelievers who spend their money to turn people away from His path that they will come to rue their actions. They allocate their resources for a futile purpose. They will eventually be defeated and the truth will be triumphant. They will suffer the fate of hell, where they will taste the greatest regret. All this has the purpose outlined in the following statement: *"God will separate the bad from the good. The bad He will place one upon another, so He may heap them all up together, and then cast them into hell. Those indeed are the losers."* (Verse 37) But how will this come about?

The money and other resources that are so allocated enable evil to sustain its aggression. The truth counters such aggression with a determined struggle, i.e. *jihād,* and moves to smash the ability of evil and falsehood to sustain their aggression. In this hard fought battle, natures crystallize and the truth is separated from the evil, as are the advocates and supporters of each side. Indeed, such separation takes place even within the ranks that initially join the side of the truth, and this before it begins to endure trials and hardship. Those who are firm believers, determined fighters and unwavering in their support of the truth are distinguished. These deserve to be granted victory by God, because they are well able to undertake the trust of its message. They will not abandon it under any circumstances, no matter what pressures and trials they are made to endure.

At this stage, God groups all the evil ones together and casts them into hell, where they suffer the greatest loss. The Qur'ānic expression shows evil as a sizeable mass, as if it is nothing more than a huge heap of dirt which is cast in hell with little regard: *"The bad He will place one upon another, so He may heap them all up together, and then cast them into hell."* (Verse 37) This image gives the expression a stronger impact on our minds, as is always the case with Qur'ānic imagery.

With this clear outline of the destiny of heaped evil and allied falsehood, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to issue a final warning to the unbelievers. The Muslim front is also commanded to fight until there is no more oppression on earth and human beings are all free to submit to God alone. The Muslim fighters are reassured that they receive support from God, their protector. Hence, they will not be overcome by any force or devious ploy.

> *Say to the unbelievers that if they desist, all that is past shall be forgiven them; but if they persist [in their erring ways], let them remember what happened to the like of*

> *them in former times. Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this giver of support.* (Verses 38-40)

The Prophet is ordered to make it clear to the unbelievers that they have an open chance to mend their ways, to stop forming alliances against Islam and its advocates, and allocating resources to turn people away from God's path. The way is open to them to turn to God in repentance. If they do, God promises to forgive them all their past actions. The adoption of Islam waives all that a person has done in his past. He is just as innocent as a new-born child. But if they revert to their erring ways and continue with their aggression and rejection of the faith, then the laws God has set in operation in the universe will have their effect. These laws brought God's punishment on the unbelievers of the past after they were warned and given clear proof of the truth. It is also God's law to grant victory to the believers and to establish them in a position of power. This law will never fail. The unbelievers may make their choice now that they are at the crossroads. Thus the address to the unbelievers is concluded.

A Positive Approach to Reality

The *sūrah* now addresses the believers: "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this giver of support.*" (Verses 39-40)

This is the purpose and the limit of *jihād,* or struggle for God's cause, not only at a particular period in time, but at all times. The statements related to *jihād* and the laws of war and peace in this *sūrah* are not the final ones. The final version is that included in *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, or *al-Tawbah.* On the other hand, Islam is a positive movement which deals with human situations employing means that are suitable for different situations. Moreover, it is a well structured movement that uses fitting means and methods for every stage. Nevertheless, we have here a statement that lays down a permanent principle that defines the objectives of the confrontation between Islam and un-Islamic social set-ups. This is embodied in the verse which says: "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.*" (Verse 39)

In our Prologue to this *sūrah* we mentioned that Islam is a general declaration of the liberation of man on earth from subjugation to other creatures, including his own desires, through the acknowledgement of God's Lordship over the universe and all creation. We also pointed out that this declaration signifies a total revolution against

assigning sovereignty to human beings, whatever forms, systems and situations such sovereignty may take. There are two essential prerequisites for the achievement of this great goal. The first is to put an end to all oppression and persecution which targets the followers of this religion who declare their own liberation from human sovereignty and submit themselves to God alone. This cannot take place unless a community of believers establish their own movement and their own leadership that tries to put this general declaration into practice. This movement will be ready to continue its struggle against every tyrant who persecutes the followers of this religion or uses force, pressure and oppression to turn people away from it.

The second prerequisite is the destruction of every force that is established on the basis of submission to human beings, in any shape or form. This will guarantee the achievement of the first goal and put into effect the declaration that all Godhead and Lordship on earth belong to God alone. Thus, there will be no submission to anyone other than God and no authority except His. We are talking here about submission to God's authority, not merely believing in Him.

We need to add here a point of clarification, because some people may feel uneasy about what we say, particularly in the light of the Qur'ānic verse: *"There shall be no compulsion in [matters of] religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error."* (2: 256) What we have mentioned about the nature of *jihād* in Islam, particularly what we have quoted from Mawdūdī's book *Jihād for God's Cause* is clear enough. Nevertheless, some further clarification is in order, because of the great fuss that has been made about it by the enemies of Islam.

The statement, *'all submission is made to God alone,'* means the removal of physical impediments to people's submission to God. These impediments take the form of tyrannical authorities that impose their will on individuals. When these physical impediments are removed, all authority on earth will belong to God and human beings will not be subjugated by any tyrannical authority. Human beings will then be able to make their individual choices of what faith to adopt, in total freedom, without any pressure. Any faith other than Islam that people may choose must not establish a grouping that acquires physical force to exercise pressure on others and prevent them from following divine guidance. It must never resort to oppression against those who dissociate themselves from any power other than that of God. As individuals, human beings are free to choose the faith they want. But they are not free to establish a tyrannical authority to subjugate other human beings. Every human being must be free to submit himself, or herself, to the Lord of mankind, the Lord of the universe.

Human beings will not achieve the position of honour God has guaranteed them, nor will mankind all over the earth be liberated unless submission is made to God alone, to the exclusion of anyone and anything else. It is for this noble objective that

the Muslim community fights: "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.*" (Verse 39) Whoever accepts this principle and abides by it will be at peace with the Muslims who will accept such a position, making no attempt to search into motives and intentions. They will leave all that to God. "*If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do.*" (Verse 39) But whoever persists in opposing God's authority will be fought by the Muslims who rely on God's help: "*But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this giver of support.*" (Verse 40)

Such is the positive, practical and serious attitude of this religion of Islam as it moves to establish itself in practical life and ensure that Lordship is acknowledged to God alone by all mankind. This religion is not a theory that people learn from a book to enjoy its intellectual subtleties and to boast about their knowledge. Nor is it a negative faith that is confined to a relationship between human beings and their Lord. On the other hand, it is not merely a set of worship practices which people offer to their Lord. This religion is a general declaration for the liberation of mankind. It takes a realistic and practical approach that employs suitable means to confront any human situation. When it is impeded by obstacles of understanding, it speaks out, making its message absolutely clear. But when it faces the impediments of social systems and tyrannical authorities, it confronts them with a physical struggle, launching a campaign of *jihād* to destroy all tyranny and establish God's authority in its place.

This religion of Islam moves within a human practical situation. Its struggle against ignorance is not one between theories. As *jāhiliyyah* is represented in a social order and an authority, then this religion must have its own social order and authority in order to confront *jāhiliyyah* with equal and suitable means. Moreover, it must begin its struggle to ensure that religion belongs entirely to God, which means that no submission may be offered to anyone else.

Such is the positive and practical approach of this religion of Islam. It is nothing like the defeatists say, even though they may be sincere and well intentioned. They may even wish to be Muslims but the true image of this religion may be obscure in their minds.

For our part, we praise God for having guided us to this understanding. We would not have been able to have such clarity of understanding without God's guidance.

3
God's Will at Work

۞ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّمَا غَنِمۡتُم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَأَنَّ لِلَّهِ
خُمُسَهُۥ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡيَتَٰمَىٰ
وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱبۡنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ إِن كُنتُمۡ
ءَامَنتُم بِٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِنَا يَوۡمَ
ٱلۡفُرۡقَانِ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡتَقَى ٱلۡجَمۡعَانِۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ
كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٌ ٤١

Know that one-fifth of whatever booty you may acquire in war is for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. [This you must observe] if you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle. God has power over all things. (41)

إِذۡ أَنتُم بِٱلۡعُدۡوَةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَهُم بِٱلۡعُدۡوَةِ
ٱلۡقُصۡوَىٰ وَٱلرَّكۡبُ أَسۡفَلَ مِنكُمۡۚ
وَلَوۡ تَوَاعَدتُّمۡ لَٱخۡتَلَفۡتُمۡ فِي ٱلۡمِيعَٰدِ
وَلَٰكِن لِّيَقۡضِيَ ٱللَّهُ أَمۡرٗا كَانَ
مَفۡعُولٗا لِّيَهۡلِكَ مَنۡ هَلَكَ عَنۢ بَيِّنَةٖ
وَيَحۡيَىٰ مَنۡ حَيَّ عَنۢ بَيِّنَةٖۗ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
لَسَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٤٢

[Remember the day] when you were at the near end of the valley and they were at the farthest end, with the caravan down below you. If you had made prior arrangements to meet there, you would have differed on the exact timing and location. But it was all brought about so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done, and so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth. God certainly hears all and knows all. (42)

إِذۡ يُرِيكَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِي مَنَامِكَ قَلِيلٗاۖ وَلَوۡ
أَرَىٰكَهُمۡ كَثِيرٗا لَّفَشِلۡتُمۡ وَلَتَنَٰزَعۡتُمۡ
فِي ٱلۡأَمۡرِ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَلَّمَۗ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمُۢ
بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٤٣

God made them appear to you in your dream as few in number. Had He shown them to you as a large force, you would have lost heart and would surely have been in dispute about what to do. But this God has spared you. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (43)

وَإِذۡ يُرِيكُمُوهُمۡ إِذِ ٱلۡتَقَيۡتُمۡ فِيٓ أَعۡيُنِكُمۡ قَلِيلٗا وَيُقَلِّلُكُمۡ فِيٓ أَعۡيُنِهِمۡ لِيَقۡضِيَ ٱللَّهُ أَمۡرٗا كَانَ مَفۡعُولٗاۗ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ٤٤

When you actually met, He made them appear few in your eyes, just as He made you appear as a small band in their eyes, so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done. To God shall all things return. (44)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا لَقِيتُمۡ فِئَةٗ فَٱثۡبُتُواْ وَٱذۡكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرٗا لَّعَلَّكُمۡ تُفۡلِحُونَ ٤٥

Believers, when you meet an enemy force, be firm, and remember God often, so that you may be successful. (45)

وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَا تَنَٰزَعُواْ فَتَفۡشَلُواْ وَتَذۡهَبَ رِيحُكُمۡۖ وَٱصۡبِرُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ٤٦

Obey God and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, lest you lose heart and your moral strength. Be patient in adversity, for God is with those who are patient in adversity. (46)

وَلَا تَكُونُواْ كَٱلَّذِينَ خَرَجُواْ مِن دِيَٰرِهِم بَطَرٗا وَرِئَآءَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا يَعۡمَلُونَ مُحِيطٞ ٤٧

Do not be like those who left their homes full of self-conceit, seeking to be seen and praised by others. They debar others from the path of God; but God has knowledge of all that they do. (47)

وَإِذۡ زَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ أَعۡمَٰلَهُمۡ وَقَالَ لَا غَالِبَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ مِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَإِنِّي جَارٞ لَّكُمۡۖ فَلَمَّا تَرَآءَتِ ٱلۡفِئَتَانِ نَكَصَ عَلَىٰ عَقِبَيۡهِ وَقَالَ إِنِّي بَرِيٓءٞ مِّنكُمۡ إِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰ مَا لَا تَرَوۡنَ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَۚ وَٱللَّهُ شَدِيدُ ٱلۡعِقَابِ ٤٨

Satan made their deeds seem fair to them, and said: 'No one can overcome you today, and I will stand firm by you.' But when the two hosts came within sight of each other, he turned on his heels and said: 'I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I fear God, for God is severe in retribution.' (48)

إِذْ يَقُولُ ٱلْمُنَـٰفِقُونَ وَٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ غَرَّ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ دِينُهُمْ ۗ وَمَن يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

The hypocrites and those in whose hearts there was disease said: `Their faith has deluded these people.' But he who puts his trust in God knows that God is Almighty, Wise. (49)

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰٓ إِذْ يَتَوَفَّى ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ۙ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَـٰرَهُمْ وَذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابَ ٱلْحَرِيقِ ﴿٥٠﴾

If you could but see how the angels gather up the souls of the unbelievers. They strike them on their faces and their backs and [say]: `Taste the punishment of burning, (50)

ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلَّـٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٥١﴾

in return for what your own hands have committed. Never does God do any injustice to His servants.' (51)

كَدَأْبِ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ ۙ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَوِىٌّ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they denied God's revelations; so God took them to task for their sins. God is Mighty, severe in retribution. (52)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَمْ يَكُ مُغَيِّرًا نِّعْمَةً أَنْعَمَهَا عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا۟ مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ ۙ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in their hearts. God hears all and knows all. (53)

كَدَأْبِ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ ۙ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَهْلَكْنَـٰهُم بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَأَغْرَقْنَآ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ وَكُلٌّ كَانُوا۟ ظَـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they disbelieved in their Lord's revelations; so We destroyed them for their sins, as We caused Pharaoh's people to drown. They were wrongdoers all. (54)

Overview

The transition from the end of the previous passage to the beginning of the present one is very smooth. The beginning here continues to outline rulings concerning fighting, which were started with the last couple of verses in the previous passage. Those ran as follows: "*Say to the unbelievers that if they desist, all that is past shall be forgiven them; but if they persist [in their erring ways], let them remember what happened to the like of them in former times. Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is this giver of support.*" (Verses 38—40) The opening verse in this passage continues these rulings, outlining those that apply to spoils that are gained as a result of victory in battle.

The ultimate objective of any campaign of *jihād* was clearly stated in the statement instructing the believers to "*fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.*" (Verse 39) It is undertaken for the sake of God, and for well-defined goals that are related to the faith God has revealed and the code of living He has laid down. Ownership of the spoils of war has also been settled, with a statement that they belong to God and His Messenger. The fighters themselves are given no say in this, so that their effort is made purely for God's sake, to earn His pleasure. Nevertheless, the Qur'ānic approach provides practical regulations for practical situations. The fact remains that there are fighters and spoils of war. The fighters go on a campaign of *jihād* ready to sacrifice their lives and property, paying for their own arms and equipment, and also providing equipment for other fighters who cannot buy their own weapons. Those same fighters take the booty which is only the result of their own steadfastness and determination. Since God has already purged their hearts of any greedy thoughts concerning this booty, declaring that it belongs totally to God and His Messenger, it is now appropriate that they are given part of it. They feel that this new gift is being made to them by God and His Messenger to meet practical needs and satisfy real feelings, leaving no room for any dispute over its division.

Such is the nature of the code of living laid down by God who is well aware of human nature. It is finely balanced, holistic in its approach, satisfying real needs and feelings, and ensuring no ill feelings over such material gains.

When the Fighting is Over

"*Know that one-fifth of whatever booty you may acquire in war is for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. [This you*

must observe] if you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle. God has power over all things." (Verse 41) Much controversy is found in reports and among scholars on several points relating to the meaning of this verse. The main points of debate are as follows:

- Are the "spoils of war" mentioned in the opening verse of the *sūrah* the same as the "booty" mentioned here or are they two different things? The Qur'ānic text uses two different terms to refer to them.
- Since four-fifths are given to the fighters and divided among them, how is the remaining portion of one-fifth to be divided? Is the one-fifth portion that belongs to God to be divided in turn into five equal shares? If so, one of these belongs to God, but is this share the same as that which belongs to God's Messenger? Or is the Messenger's share a separate one?
- Does the Messenger's share (i.e. one-fifth of one-fifth of the whole booty) belong to him personally? Or is it transferred to every Muslim ruler after him?
- Is the share assigned to "the near of kin" exclusive to the Prophet's relatives of the clans of Hāshim and `Abd alMuṭṭalib, as was the case during the Prophet's time? Or does a Muslim ruler have any discretion over its distribution?
- Are these fixed and equal shares into which the original portion of one-fifth of the booty must be divided? Or do the Prophet and the Muslim rulers who succeed him have discretionary authority over its usage and spending?

There are further points of debate over other matters of detail. Following our usual approach in this commentary, we prefer not to discuss such controversial points, leaving them to be pursued in specialized studies. Moreover, the whole question of spoils of war is far removed from the practical realities of the Muslim world today. This is not something that is facing us at the present time. We do not have a Muslim state led by an Islamic leadership, fighting a campaign of *jihād* which may give it spoils of war that need to be divided according to Islamic regulations. Our situation today is similar to the period when Islam was addressing humanity for the first time. Human beings have reverted to the type of *jāhiliyyah,* or ignorance, that prevailed then, associating partners with God that give them their man-made laws. This religion has gone back to its starting point calling on human beings to adopt it anew. It wants them to declare that they believe that "there is no deity other than God and Muĥammad is God's Messenger." This means in practical terms that Godhead, sovereignty and all authority belong to God alone. In all these aspects we receive guidance from God's Messenger only. We acknowledge allegiance only to an Islamic leadership that strives to re-establish Islam in practical life, dissociating

ourselves from all other types of society and leadership.

This is the real issue that confronts the Islamic faith today. At the outset there is no other issue to consider. There is no question of booty because no campaign of *jihād* is being launched. Indeed there is no single organizational or community issue, either at the internal or external level. The reason for this is very simple: there is no independent Islamic entity in need of specific rules to regulate its relations with other communities and societies.

Islam employs a very practical and realistic method. It does not preoccupy itself with issues that have no significance in reality. Hence, it does not concern itself with providing rules for such issues. Its outlook is too serious for that. Such an exercise may be pursued by those who devote their spare time to academic discussion that has no bearing on reality. Their time, however, would have been much more fruitfully utilized, had they dedicated it for the re-establishment of Islamic society according to the practical Islamic approach, starting with a call on people to believe in God's oneness and the message of the Prophet Muĥammad. For this leads to a situation where some people accept the faith. They, thus, establish a community that has its own leadership, allegiance and independent entity. God then settles the dispute between this community and other people on the basis of truth. Only at this stage would scholars need to deduce rules and regulations to address the various questions that may confront that community, internally and externally. This is when such scholarly exercise has real value, because it is relevant to practical and real questions and issues.

Recognizing this serious approach of Islam, we do not wish to engage in any discussion of the juristic details concerning the question of booty and spoils of war until the time is right for such discussion. That is when God wills to bring into being an Islamic society which launches a campaign of *jihād* that leads to the acquisition of spoils of war. When that occurs, regulations will be needed to divide such spoils. In this commentary it is sufficient for our purposes to concentrate on the basic issue of faith in the historical progress of the Muslim community and the method of education to which it is exposed. This is a constant factor we find in God's book which is not subject to change at any time. Everything else is of secondary value.

The general rule outlined in the Qur'ānic verse states: "*Know that one-fifth of whatever booty you may acquire in war is for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need.*" (Verse 41) This rule assigns four-fifths of anything gained in battle to the fighters themselves. The remaining one-fifth is left to God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and Muslim leaders implementing God's law and striving to further God's cause. They are required to dispense with it only "for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need," so as to satisfy real needs when such booty has been gained.

If You Truly Believe

Following this, we have a permanent directive in the following statement: "*[This you must observe] if you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 41)

True faith has certain essential indicators to prove it. God makes His recognition of true faith for the fighters in Badr conditional on their acceptance of His ruling on the question of the spoils of war. If they accept then they are truly believers in God and what He revealed to His Messenger. In fact such acceptance is a practical demonstration of faith.

The real meaning of faith is thus stated clearly in the Qur'ān, without equivocation. It does not admit anything of the wide variety of interpretations and controversial details introduced by the different schools and sects. Such schools opened the way for argument, academic controversy and logical debate, which led, in turn, to accusations and counter accusations. It then became possible to brand someone as an unbeliever and for the refutation of such an allegation to no longer rely on the clear and basic essentials of faith. Instead, they relied on prejudice and the need to score a point against opponents. Thus people began to accuse others of unbelief because of disagreement on points of detail, while others sought to refute such accusations by following very strict lines of thought and action. Both attitudes were products of historical circumstances. The divine faith is clear, well defined, free from ambiguity and extremism. The Prophet says: "To be a true believer does not come about through wishful thinking. True faith is that which is firmly rooted in one's heart and to which credence is given by practice." To be a true believer presupposes acceptance of God's law and its implementation in real life. Conversely, the rejection of God's law and the implementation of a law other than the one He has laid down, in matters large or small, constitutes unbelief.

God's law provides rulings that are clear and decisive. One example of these is provided in this verse: "*Know that one-fifth of whatever booty you may acquire in war is for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. [This you must observe] if you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle.*" (Verse 41) The same applies to all categorical statements that delineate the nature of true faith and its framework which we read in the divine book.

God has taken away the ownership of the spoils of war from those who actually collected them on the battlefield, and assigned that ownership to God and His Messenger, as stated clearly at the opening of the *sūrah.* His purpose was that those who fight for God's cause may have only pure motives. Thus, they would be able to

remove from their minds all thoughts and temptations that relate to the life of this world. They would be able then to submit themselves totally to God, fighting the battle for God's cause, under His banner, in obedience to Him and to earn His pleasure. They accept His rule over their lives as they accept it over all their affairs, making no dissent or objection. This is the practical meaning of true faith, as clearly explained in the first verse of the *sūrah* which vested all authority over the spoils of war in God and the Messenger: *"They ask you about the spoils of war. Say: 'The spoils of war belong to God and the Messenger. So, have fear of God and set right your internal relations. Obey God and His Messenger, if you are true believers.'"* (Verse 1)

When they accepted God's ruling, demonstrating that faith is deeply rooted in their hearts, God gave them back four-fifths of the spoils of war, and retained one-fifth in its original ownership, i.e. belonging to God and His Messenger. The Prophet was then to dispense with it for the welfare of those in the Muslim community who needed help, be they near of kin, orphans, needy or wayfarers. When the share of four- fifths was given back to them, the Muslims were well aware that they did not own it by right of fighting or victory. They went to war for God's sake, and achieved victory for His faith. They only deserved this share of four-fifths because God granted it to them, just as He determined the outcome of the battle and indeed all their affairs, and just as He granted them victory. They are reminded here anew that obeying this new order is a manifestation of faith. It is indeed both the condition and the outcome of being true believers: *"Know that one- fifth of whatever booty you may acquire in war is for God and the Messenger, and for the near of kin, the orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. [This you must observe] if you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle."* (Verse 41) We see clearly how Qur'ānic statements support one another in confirming an essential and decisive principle of Islam that relates to the true meaning of having faith.

Let us now reflect for a moment on God's description of His Messenger (peace be upon him) as "Our servant", at this particular point where the ownership of the spoils of war is stated as clearly belonging to God and the Messenger: *"If you believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day when the true was distinguished from the false, the day when the two hosts met in battle."* (Verse 41) It is indeed an inspiring description. Being a truly obedient servant of God is the essence of faith, and, at the same time, the highest position any human being can achieve when being honoured by God. Hence it is expressly mentioned at the point when God's Messenger is required to convey God's orders and assign the task of dispensing what God placed at his disposal.

This is indeed the case in real life: being a servant of God is not merely a position of honour; it is the highest position to which a human being can aspire. True

submission to God alone protects people from being enslaved by their own desires or by other human beings. No human being can attain this highest position unless he refuses to submit to his own desires or to anyone other than God.

Those who are too proud to submit themselves to God alone are automatically enslaved by their own desires and caprice, which is the worst type of slavery. They lose their sense of free will with which God has favoured human beings. They sink to the level of animals and soon descend to the worst rank of animals. They take themselves down to a level that God describes as *"the lowest of the low,"* (95: 5) after they have been created *"in the fairest form."* (95: 4) They are willing to accept enslavement by others like them when they allow such people to conduct their lives according to narrow-minded theories and philosophies that are ignorant, deficient and arrogant.

Such people are also ready to submit to `certainties' which they are told to be inevitable and to admit no discussion, such as the certainties of history, economic development and evolution! There is indeed a long list of such materialist certainties and inevitabilities which enslave man and keep his head in the sand.

A Criterion of Distinction

We need now to discuss the description of the Battle of Badr as the *"day when the true was distinguished from the false,"* as it occurs in the first verse of the present passage.

The Battle of Badr, which started and finished according to God's own planning, direction and help, was indeed a criterion of distinction between truth and falsehood, as most commentators say. However, we are speaking here of a distinction that is much wider and far more profound. The truth, as meant here, is that original truth on the basis of which the whole structure of the heavens and the earth is established, as also the nature of all living things. It is the truth represented in the concept of God's oneness, and His being the only deity who has the overall sovereignty, and authority over the universe. It is He who plans all that takes place. Everything in the universe: the heavens, the earth, animate and inanimate objects submit to His authority that admits no partnership with anyone. His will is enforceable without question. Falsehood, on the other hand, is incidental, although at the time of Badr it spread over the whole earth, beclouding people's vision so that they could not distinguish the original truth. It also created tyrannical deities that ruled over people's lives and conducted their affairs. That was the nature of the distinction that took place at Badr, when the original truth was distinguished from the tyrannical falsehood so that they could no longer be confused.

The far-reaching and profound significance of the distinction between the truth

and falsehood that took place at Badr was multidimensional. It separated the truth from falsehood within people's hearts and consciences. This provided, in effect, a complete distinction between absolute monotheism that assigns authority over human feelings, behaviour, morals, worship and submission to God alone, and polytheism in all its shapes and forms. This certainly includes mental submission to anyone other than God, be that a human being, a desire, a social value or a tradition.

Badr also separated truth from falsehood in daily life situations. It provided a clear separation between people's practical enslavement by other people, desires, values, laws and traditions on the one hand, and accepting, in all these matters, God's judgement, recognizing that He has no associate or partner, and that He is the only Lord and legislator. Thus human beings were able to raise their heads high, rejecting all tyranny and bending to no authority other than that of God, the only law-giver.

The Battle of Badr also separated two different stages in the history of the Islamic movement: the stage of grouping, perseverance and steadfastness, and the stage of strength, pre-emption and taking the initiative. The religion of Islam represents a new concept of life, a code of living, a social order and a system of state and government. All these are results of the liberation of humanity all over the world which Islam achieves through the establishment of God's sovereignty in human life and by rejecting all tyranny. As such, Islam must always acquire strength and take the initiative. It is not in the nature of Islam to remain in waiting for events and developments. It cannot remain a collection of beliefs that are represented in worship rituals and moral behaviour. It must take action to establish its new concept, practice its code of living and lay the foundation of its new social order and state. This requires the removal of all physical and material impediments that hinder the practical implementation of its constitution in the life of the Muslim community at first, and later in human life as a whole. Needless to say, God has given us all these for practical implementation.

Badr also separated two epochs in human history. Prior to the establishment of the Islamic system, humanity as a whole was a totally different entity. The new Islamic concept of life and the new Muslim community meant a rebirth of humanity, while the new set of values provided the foundation of a new social order and a new code of law. After Badr, these were no longer the sole property of the Muslims alone. They gradually became the property of all humanity, which came to be profoundly influenced by them, within the land of Islam and outside it. This applied to those who adopted a friendly attitude to Islam, and also to those who were hostile. The Crusaders who marched from the West to exterminate Islam in its own territory were strongly influenced by the traditions of the Muslim society they came to destroy. When they went home, they put an end to the feudal system that prevailed in Europe, after they had seen the lingering traditions of the Islamic system.

Encouraged by the Jews and Crusaders living in the Muslim areas, the Tartars marched from the East to put an end to Islam. They, however, were eventually influenced by the Islamic faith. They not only adopted Islam, but went further to spread it across vast new areas and establish a new Islamic state that flourished close to the European hinterland from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Ever since the Battle of Badr, human history is strongly influenced by that great distinction between the truth and falsehood, whether in the land of Islam or in the land of its opponents.

Badr also provided a clear distinction between two outlooks defining the causes of defeat and victory. The battle took place at a time when all apparent factors clearly indicated a victory for the unbelievers and predicted a defeat for the Muslims. The hypocrites and those sick at heart declared: *"Their faith has deluded these people."* (Verse 49) Since it was the first major battle between the unbelieving majority and the Muslim minority, God willed that it should take place in this particular fashion in order to provide a clear distinction between causes of victory and defeat. Strong faith was thus able to overcome numerical strength and superior equipment so that people should know that victory belongs to the faith that has the elements of strength and is designed to bring out the best in human beings. Those who believe in the true faith must strive hard and join the battle against falsehood, without waiting until they have the same material strength as their enemy. They should be aware that they have another type of strength that can tip the balance in their favour. These are not idle words. This is an evident reality.

The Battle of Badr was also a distinction between the truth and falsehood in a different sense, which we derive from God's statement in the early part of the *sūrah: "God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers."* (Verses 7-8)

Those Muslims who marched with the Prophet from Madinah wanted only to capture the trade caravan led by Abū Sufyān. God, however, wanted something else for them. He wanted them to miss out on capturing the trade caravan and to meet in battle the army led by Abū Jahl. He wanted them to go through a hard battle when fighters are killed and prisoners are taken. He did not want them to have an easy mission which ended in the capture of handsome booty. Furthermore, He told them that He willed this in order to *"establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false."* (Verse 8)

This is a clear reference to a fundamental issue. In human society, the truth cannot be established and falsehood cannot be clearly seen as false on the basis of any

theoretical exposition of each, or even by an academic belief that the one is true and the other is false. The establishment of truth and the eradication of falsehood in the real world can only come about when the might of falsehood is smashed and the authority of truth is triumphant. This takes place when victory is achieved by the army of truth over the forces of falsehood. This religion is not a mere theory for debate. It is a practical code of living.

God's purpose was certainly achieved with the truth firmly established as true and falsehood clearly seen as false. He has indeed stated His purpose behind bringing His Messenger out of his hometown with the truth, allowing the caravan (the host of little might) to escape its chasers and bringing about the encounter with the mighty host, so that the battle could take place.

All this is a criterion of distinction characteristic of the method of operation of Islam. We are thus able to clearly see the nature of this method of operation and how it is perceived by Muslims. Today we feel the need and the importance of this criterion as we witness ambiguity creeping into people's perception of basic Islamic concepts. Indeed some of those who call others to embrace this religion are not free from such ambiguity.

The Battle of Badr was indeed a way to separate the true from the false in the sense of this whole range of concepts.

"*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 41) The Battle of Badr was an indisputable example of the working of God's power. It was an event that cannot be explained in any way other than its being brought about by God's power which can easily accomplish whatever He wants.

In Clear Evidence of the Truth

At this point the *sūrah* refers once more to the Battle of Badr, portraying its scenes and events in a splendid style, to bring it all alive before our eyes. It also points out the fact that it was God who conducted the battle, so that we almost see God's hand shaping events as they take place. Moreover, the *sūrah* tells us the purpose behind God's determination of the course of events.

> *[Remember the day] when you were at the near end of the valley and they were at the farthest end, with the caravan down below you. If you had made prior arrangements to meet there, you would have differed on the exact timing and location. But it was all brought about so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done, and so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth. God certainly hears all and knows all. God made them appear to you in your dream as few in number. Had*

> *He shown them to you as a large force, you would have lost heart and would surely have been in dispute about what to do. But this God has spared you. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. When you actually met, He made them appear few in your eyes, just as He made you appear as a small band in their eyes, so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done. To God shall all things return.* (Verses 42-44)

The battle is about to start, with each of the two combatants taking position, and with a clear pointer to the subtle and elaborate planning behind it all. We can visualize how God's hand brings each party to its position, while the caravan manages to slip away. The very words unveil God's planning as the Prophet sees his dream, and as each party sees the other as small in number, which tempts each party with the prospect of victory. Only the Qur'ānic style can portray scenes so vividly, and bring them alive in such a concise method of expression.

Reference has already been made to the scenes portrayed in this part of the *sūrah.* When the Muslims left Madinah, they finally encamped at the end of the valley that was closer to Madinah, while the army of unbelievers took its position at the other end. There was a small hill separating the two sides. As for the caravan, Abū Sufyān managed to slip away with it to the coastal area, below the positions of both hosts.

Neither of the two armies was aware of the position of the other. It was God who brought them both to their positions by the hill, in order to accomplish a certain purpose of His own. Indeed, had they made prior arrangements to meet, they would not have taken their positions so close to each other and they would not have arrived there at the same time, as they actually did. God reminds the Muslim community of all this so that they always remember how God can accomplish any purpose He may have at any point in time. "*[Remember the day] when you were at the near end of the valley and they were at the farthest end, with the caravan down below you. If you had made prior arrangements to meet there, you would have differed on the exact timing and location. But it was all brought about so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done.*" (Verse 42) Behind such an unplanned meeting there was certainly a purpose which God made the Muslim community the means to achieve. Moreover, He arranged all the circumstances that helped its accomplishment.

What is this matter for the accomplishment of which God arranged all the necessary circumstances? It is the one which He describes in these terms: "*So that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth.*" (Verse 42) The verb `perish' may be used to express its direct meaning, or may be used to denote disbelief and rejection of the faith. The same applies to `live' which could express life and may refer to faith itself. The latter meaning is nearer and clearer in this particular instance.

In the same sense God says in the Qur'ān: *"Is he who was dead and whom We have raised to life, and for whom We set up a light to see his way among men, to be compared to one who is in deep darkness out of which he cannot emerge?"* (6: 122) Here denial of the true faith is described as death, while embracing the divine faith is portrayed as having life. This is indeed how Islam views the nature of faith and denying it. The basis for giving more weight to this meaning in this particular instance is the fact that the Battle of Badr was, as God describes it, a day which separated truth from falsehood. Hence, anyone who denies the faith after Badr does so in clear evidence of the truth. Likewise, anyone who believes does so on the basis of the clear evidence pointing to the truth provided by the battle itself.

With all the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Badr, the battle itself provided an irrefutable evidence of elaborate planning that dwarfs, by comparison, any plans human beings may devise, and points to a power that is totally different from that of human beings. It proved that this faith is supported by the Lord who takes care of its advocates when they demonstrate their sincerity and remain steadfast in their struggle for its cause. Had material strength been the decisive factor the unbelievers would not have been vanquished on the day of Badr, and the believers would not have scored such a great and decisive victory.

The unbelievers themselves said to their own ally who offered to support them with a battalion of his tribesmen: "If we are fighting men like us, we are more than a match to them. But if we are fighting God, as Muĥammad claims, then no human force can stand in opposition to God." Had mere knowledge been sufficient, they were certainly aware that they were taking a stand in opposition to God Himself, as they were told by Muĥammad, the man who personified honesty and spoke nothing but the truth. They were certain that no one was a match for God Almighty. If after all this they perished on account of their denial of the faith, they perished after having had very clear evidence of the truth.

A Purpose to Be Accomplished

Such are the thoughts that come immediately to mind when we try to understand God's statement: *"So that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth."* (Verse 42) However, the statement also imparts a different sense.

That the truth achieved victory in the battle between its advocates and the supporters of falsehood, after it had also triumphed in people's hearts, helps to put matters clearly in front of our eyes. No ambiguity or confusion is left after the victory at Badr has clarified all issues. Anyone who chooses to perish, i.e. rejects the true faith, no longer has any doubt concerning the truth after it had made its presence so

clearly felt. Similarly, anyone who chooses life, i.e. embraces the faith, has no doubt that he is making his choice in favour of the truth which will always enjoy God's support against the tyrants who try to suppress it.

This takes us back to what we mentioned in our introduction when we spoke of the need to launch a *jihād* campaign to destroy the forces of evil and tyranny, and to enable the truth to triumph. Such *jihād* helps to make the truth clear to all, "*so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth.*" (Verse 42) Again, this understanding of the statement makes it easier for us to understand the significance of a later statement in this *sūrah,* in which the following directive is given: "*Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster, so that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies.*" (Verse 60) Putting forces on the alert to frighten the enemy may help to make the truth clear in certain hearts and minds which only understand the language of force.

The comment that follows on this aspect of God's planning and execution of the battle and the purpose behind it all takes the following form: "*God certainly hears all and knows ail.*" (Verse 42) Nothing that is said by the parties supporting truth or falsehood, and nothing that they may harbour in their hearts behind their words or actions escapes God as He puts His plan into action in full knowledge of all that is hidden or apparent. He does indeed hear all and know all.

This statement and the comment that follows occur in the middle of the account given in the *sūrah* of the events of the battle and its course. The next verse continues with this account: "*God made them appear to you in your dream as few in number. Had He shown them to you as a large force, you would have lost heart and would surely have been in dispute about what to do. But this God has spared you. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 43) Part of God's planning for the battle was that His Messenger should see the unbelievers in his dream as small in number, having no real strength. He told his companions of this and it gave them encouragement. Here God's Messenger is told the reason for this vision. Had God shown him a large force, it would have demoralized his Companions, who were no more than a small group of believers who joined him on an expedition, neither expecting a battle nor prepared for one. This would have weakened them and caused them to be in dispute over whether to fight or to avoid a confrontation. Such a dispute is the worst thing to happen to an army on the verge of meeting an enemy force: "*But this God has spared you. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 43)

It was an aspect of God's grace that He, knowing the weakness of the Muslim group in that particular situation, showed the unbelievers to His Messenger as small in number, whereas they were truly a much larger force. That dream had true significance. Their numerical strength was of little consequence, as their minds were

devoid of broad vision, and their hearts deprived of faith. It was this true picture that God showed to His Messenger to reassure the small Muslim force. God was fully aware of their feelings and their inmost thoughts, as they were aware of their numerical weakness and lack of equipment. He was also aware of what would be the effect on them of their knowledge of their enemy's numerical superiority. Needless to say, they would have been reluctant to confront the enemy. It was, then, part of God's planning that they should think their enemy to have a smaller fighting force than it actually had.

When the two hosts actually met face to face, that which the Prophet saw in his true dream was repeated, but it was this time by actual eyesight and by both sides. This was again part of God's elaborate planning of which the believers are reminded in this review of the battle and its events: *"When you actually met, He made them appear few in your eyes, just as He made you appear as a small band in their eyes, so that God might accomplish something He willed to be done. To God shall all things return."* (Verse 44) This particular aspect of God's scheme encouraged both parties to go to war. The believers saw their enemies as a small force because they were looking at them from the viewpoint of real strength, while the unbelievers considered the believers to be of little consequence, because they judged them only by appearances. With the two facts shaping the way each party looked at the other, the purpose of God's planning was accomplished and His will was done. *"To God shall all things return."* (Verse 44) This is the appropriate comment on the accomplishment of what God willed. This is a matter that rests with God alone. He brings it into being by His will and shapes it with His power. It is never removed from His will or His divine wisdom. Indeed nothing takes place in the whole universe except what He has willed.

Since all things are conducted by God and victory is granted by Him, while neither numerical strength nor superior firepower can resolve a confrontation or determine the outcome of a battle, the believers should remain steadfast and persevere when they meet unbelievers in battle. What they should do, however, is to have the proper equipment for the battle and take the measures that keep on the right footing their relationship with God who has the final say over all matters. It is He who grants effective support and commands all power and authority. They must also avoid the causes of defeat which led the unbelievers to be vanquished despite their great numbers and superior equipment. They must rid themselves of conceit, arrogance and falsehood. They should guard against falling prey to Satan's deception, for it was he who led the unbelievers to their destruction. They must place their trust in God alone.

Eliminating Causes of Failure

> *Believers, when you meet an enemy force, be firm, and remember God often, so that you may be successful. Obey God and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, lest you lose heart and your moral strength. Be patient in adversity, for God is with those who are patient in adversity. Do not be like those who left their homes full of self-conceit, seeking to be seen and praised by others. They debar others from the path of God; but God has knowledge of all that they do. Satan made their deeds seem fair to them, and said: No one can overcome you today, and I will stand firm by you. 'But when the two hosts came within sight of each other, he turned on his heels and said: 'I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I fear God, for God is severe in retribution.' The hypocrites and those in whose hearts there was disease said: Their faith has deluded these people.' But he who puts his trust in God knows that God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 45-49)

In these verses we have a host of inspiring touches, rules, directives, scenes and attitudes; all relating to the battle. Ideas, feelings and inner thoughts are portrayed which normally need much greater space to describe, but they are all most vividly delineated here in the unique style of the Qur'ān. They start with an address to the believers, which is one of many in the *sūrah,* instructing them to stand firm when they meet their enemy. They should also try to acquire all that is needed to ensure victory. This includes a steadfast attitude, frequent remembrance of God to maintain their relationship with Him, obedience to God and His Messenger, avoidance of internal conflict and dispute, patience in adversity, perseverance in battle, and steering away from conceit, showing off and persecution of others.

Steadfastness is the first step to victory, and the party that is more steadfast is the one which has the upper hand. Although the believers cannot tell, their enemy may be suffering even more than what they themselves are suffering. Their enemy may even be enduring more pain, although that enemy could not hope to receive support from God as they hope to do. It may be that if the believers only remain steadfast for a moment longer, their enemy will collapse and be vanquished. Why should the believers ever feel shaken when they are certain that they will have either one of the best two alternatives: victory or martyrdom? Their enemy, on the other hand, aims at nothing further than the life of this world. This explains why unbelievers are so keen to achieve material superiority in this life which is the ultimate they hope for, since they have no hope in the life to come.

Frequent remembrance of God at the time when an encounter with the enemy is imminent is a constant directive to believers. It is a consistent teaching that becomes well engraved in the hearts of believers. Indeed the Qur'ān shows it as a feature of the community of believers in their long history.

The Qur'ān tells us about the sorcerers Pharaoh gathered for a contest with Moses.

When they submitted to the faith after they had realized that it represented the truth, Pharaoh issued them with a highly frightening warning outlining the punishment which he would inflict on them, unless they abandoned their new faith. Their response was: *"You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us. Our Lord, grant us abundance of patience in adversity, and let us die as people who have surrendered themselves to You."* (7: 126) The Qur'ān also mentions the case of a small band of believers among the Children of Israel who were facing the might of Goliath and his army: *"When they came face to face with Goliath and his troops, they prayed, 'Our Lord, grant us patience, make firm our steps, and grant us victory over the unbelievers.'"* (2: 250)

In the Qur'ānic accounts of the attitudes of believing communities as they were fighting their battles we read the following statement: *"Many a Prophet has fought with many devout men alongside him. They never lost heart on account of what they had to suffer in God's cause, and neither did they weaken nor succumb. God loves those who are patient in adversity. All that they said was this: 'Our Lord! forgive us our sins and our excesses in our affairs. Make firm our steps, and give us victory over the unbelievers.'"(3: 146-147)*

This type of education was well taken by the early Muslim community. They adopted the same attitude whenever they had to meet an enemy in battle. Later, the Qur'ān speaks about those who suffered a reversal in the Battle of Uĥud. When they were required to go on a new campaign the following day, they showed that they could rise to the highest level of steadfastness: *"When other people warned them: 'A big force has gathered against you, so fear them,' that only strengthened their faith and they answered: `God is enough for us; He is the best Guardian."* (3: 173)

Remembering God at the time of encountering an enemy is useful in a variety of ways. To start with, it provides a direct link with the Power that can never be overcome. It is a demonstration of placing all trust in God who is certain to support His servants. At the same time it brings to the forefront the nature of the battle, its causes and goals. It is a battle for God, to establish His authority on earth and to overthrow all tyrants who try to usurp this authority. In short it is a fight to make God's word supreme. It has no motive of imposing the authority of any person, group or nation, or making any personal or national gain. It also emphasizes the importance of the duty of remembering God even at the most difficult time.

Obedience to God and His Messenger ensures that the believers go into the battle submitting themselves totally to God. There will be no room for any cause of conflict or dispute: *"Do not dispute with one another, lest you lose heart and your moral strength."* (Verse 46) People fall into dispute when they have different authorities which they look to for leadership and guidance, or when desire is the ultimate factor that shapes people's views and ideas. When people obey only God and His Messenger, the main cause of dispute between them disappears, no matter how much their views differ

over the question under discussion. Having different views is never a cause of dispute and conflict. What causes conflict is desire, making everyone insist that his view is the one to follow, even when it appears to be wrong. Desire causes 'self' to be placed in opposition to 'right' and attaching more importance to self in the first place. For this reason, Muslims are given this directive to obey God and His Messenger at the time of battle. It is a question of discipline that is essential in battle. It is an obedience to the High Command which reflects itself in a genuine obedience to the leader in command of the Muslim forces. Thus it is different from the rigid and superficial discipline in the ranks of armies that do not fight for God's cause, and in which loyalty to commanders is not based on loyalty and submission to God. The gulf between the two is great indeed. Steadfastness and patience in adversity are also essential in any fight, whether internal within oneself, or on the battlefield: *"Be patient in adversity, for God is with those who are patient in adversity."* (Verse 46) Being with God will certainly ensure success and victory for those who are steadfast.

The last directive is given as follows: *"Do not be like those who left their homes full of self-conceit, seeking to be seen and praised by others. They debar others from the path of God; but God has knowledge of all that they do."* (Verse 47) The purpose of this directive is to protect the community of believers against going out to fight, with an attitude of conceit, keen to show off, boasting of their own strength and using the blessing of power God has granted them for a purpose other than that of which He approves. Believers go out to fight for God's cause, to establish His authority and Lordship over human life, and to ensure people's submission to Him alone. They seek to destroy the tyrants who usurp God's authority and claim sovereignty for themselves, having no basis for their claim in the form of a permission granted by God or His law. They fight to declare the liberation of mankind throughout the world from any bondage to any authority, since such bondage represents a humiliation of man. Believers fight in order to protect people's rights, freedom and integrity, not to humiliate other races and peoples through the abuse of the power God has granted them. They go out to fight seeking no personal gain whatsoever. Victory brings them nothing other than having obeyed God's command to go *on jihād,* to establish the code of living He has revealed, to make God's word supreme and to seek His grace and pleasure. Even the spoils of war that believers may gain are viewed as an aspect of grace bestowed by none other than God.

False Pretences, False Promises

The believers had just seen the Quraysh leave their homes full of self-conceit, eager to be praised by others. They also witnessed the consequences of such an arrogant demonstration. The Quraysh mustered all their pride, power and prestige to defy God and His Messenger. By the end of the day the Quraysh returned home with

their pride tarnished, their prestige shattered and their might totally destroyed. Here God reminds the community of believers of a recent situation that gave them much to think about: *"Do not be like those who left their homes full of self-conceit, seeking to be seen and praised by others. They debar others from the path of God; but God has knowledge of all that they do."* (Verse 47)

All the arrogance, self-conceit, and praise-seeking were clear in what Abū Jahl, who commanded the Quraysh forces in the battle, said to Abū Sufyān's messenger. The latter was the leader of the trade caravan the Muslims sought to intercept in compensation for their property confiscated by the Quraysh. When he and his caravan managed to escape unharmed by his Muslim pursuers, he sent a message to Abū Jahl asking him to return with the Quraysh army, as there was no longer any reason for the Quraysh to fight the Muslims. Abū Jahl said: "No. By God we will not go back home until we have reached Badr. We will stay there for three days, slaughtering camels for food, feeding whoever comes to us, drinking wine and listening to music and singers. The Arabs will then hold us in awe for the rest of time." When Abū Sufyān's messenger told him of Abū Jahl's answer, he said: "Pity to my people. This is the action of `Amr ibn Hishām (i.e. Abū Jahl). He does not wish to come back because he put himself at the helm and acted unjustly. Injustice brings shame and bad omen. If Muĥammad wins the fight, we will be humiliated." Abū Sufyān was a man of foresight: Muĥammad (peace be upon him) scored a great victory and the unbelievers were badly humiliated as a result of their arrogance, injustice and debarring of other people from God's path. The Battle of Badr was a very severe blow to them. *"God has knowledge of all that they do."* Nothing escapes Him. Nor can their might stand up to His power. He overpowers them and knows all their actions.

The *sūrah* goes on to describe how Satan persuaded the unbelievers to go out for a fight that led to their defeat and humiliation: *"Satan made their deeds seem fair to them, and said: 'No one can overcome you today, and I will stand firm by you.' But when the two hosts came within sight of each other, he turned on his heels and said: 'I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I fear God, for God is severe in retribution.'"* (Verse 48)

We have several reports that refer to this verse and to what it relates. However, none of these is attributed to the Prophet himself, with the exception of one that is graded as poor in authenticity. This report attributes the following statement to the Prophet: "Iblīs is never seen to be more insignificant, humiliated or depressed as he normally is on the day of attendance at `Arafāt, as he witnesses God's forgiveness, mercy and grace being bestowed on people; except for what he saw on the day of Badr." People asked the Prophet: 'What did he see on the day of Badr?' He answered: "He saw Gabriel marshalling the angels."

The other reports quote `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, `Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, Qatādah, al-

Ĥasan and Muĥammad ibn Ka`b. Here are some examples of these, related by al-Ṭabarī: "Ibn `Abbās reports: Iblīs came on the day of Badr with a company of satans raising a banner in the form of a man from the Mudlij clan, while Satan himself took the form of Surāqah ibn Mālik. He said to the unbelievers, 'No human host can overcome you today, and I will stand firm by you.' When the two armies were marshalled, the Prophet took a handful of dust and threw it at the unbelievers. They started to flee. Jubayr came to Iblīs only to find him holding a man from the unbelievers by the hand. Iblīs withdrew his hand quickly and retreated with his assistants. The man said: `Surāqah, have you not pledged to stand firm by us?' He said: `I see what you cannot see. I fear God, for God is severe in retribution.'"

`Urwah ibn al-Zubayr reports: "When the Quraysh made up their minds to go out in defence of the caravan, they remembered the conflict between them and the Bakr tribe. They were so worried that they began to have second thoughts. Iblīs appeared to them in the shape of Surāqah ibn Mālik of the Mudlij clan, who was a highly respected chief of the Kinānah tribe. He said to them: `I shall stand firm by you and make sure that the Kinānah will not try to attack you from behind while you are away.' They continued with their preparations and moved fast."

Qatādah reports on the subject of the verse mentioning how Satan persuaded the unbelievers to take up arms against the Muslims: "We have been told that he (meaning Satan) saw Gabriel with the angels coming down to support the believers and he claimed that he had no power to counter that of the angels. He said as he saw them: *"I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I fear God."* (Verse 48) He was certainly lying for he, a sworn enemy of God, had no fear of God in his heart. He realized that he had no power and could extend no protection to anyone. It is in his nature to let down those who believe in him and do his bidding. Once the truth comes face to face with falsehood, he turns away, unscrupulously letting them down and declaring that he has nothing to do with them."

Following our chosen approach in this commentary, we prefer not to discuss matters which relate to the world that lies beyond our human perception in any degree of detail, when we do not have a Qur'ānic statement or a highly authentic *ĥadīth* to explain them. Such matters require a statement of this type to formulate a conceptual belief. However, we do not adopt a negative attitude either. In this particular case, we have a Qur'ānic statement that tells us that Satan did make their deeds seem fair to the unbelievers and encouraged them to raise an army and march to fight the Muslims, promising them support and protection. Later when the two hosts were within sight of each other, *"he turned on his heels and said: 'I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I fear God, for God is severe in retribution.'"* (Verse 48) Thus he let them down, keeping no promise he had given them, and leaving them to suffer the outcome of their actions on their own. We have no idea how he made their

actions seem fair to them, nor how he said to them that they could not be overcome by any human power on that particular day. Neither do we have any idea how Satan promised them support and assured them of his protection, nor how he turned on his heels and said what is reported in the Qur'ān of his statements.

We cannot say anything about `how' all these matters took place and in what form they were done. Everything that concerns Satan belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of our human perception. We have no way of knowing exactly `how' such matters occur, except in as much as the Qur'ānic statement relates. The statement we have here confirms the event but does not mention how it happened. We prefer not to go any further than that.

We do not support the line of thinking advocated by the school of Sheikh Muĥammad `Abduh which tries to find an interpretation that denies any physical presence or effect for anything that belongs to the world beyond. In connection with this particular verse, Shaikh Rashīd Ridā says:

> *"Satan made their deeds seem fair to them, and said: No one can overcome you today, and I will stand firm by you."* The verse implies an order to the Prophet to tell the believers how Satan made the deeds of the unbelievers seem fair to them by his whispering to them and giving them the impression that no force could overcome them, whether it be the weak band of Muĥammad's followers or any other tribe, because they could command a larger and more courageous force. He further impressed on them that he was going to give them firm support. Al-Baydāwī says in his commentary: `Satan misguided them into believing that by following him in such actions as they might have thought to earn God's pleasure would be sufficient to protect them. They were so deceived that they prayed to God to give victory to the group which followed the better of the two religions.'
>
> *"When the two hosts came within sight of each other, he turned on his heels."* When the two armies drew close to each other and each could have a clear idea of what situation the other was in, and before the actual battle started, he drew back and turned away. Commentators who say that `coming within sight of each other' means drawing close to each other are rather mistaken. What is meant here is that at this juncture he stopped his whisperings to them and his attempts to delude them. The statement is figurative in the sense that Satan's whispering is depicted in terms of a movement similar to that of a person coming towards something he wants, and the stopping of these whispers as leaving that thing alone and turning away from it. The Qur'ānic account goes further to indicate that Satan abandons them and disassociates himself from them altogether: "(*He) said: I am done with you, for I can see what you cannot. I*

> *fear God, for God is severe in retribution.*''' This means that as he declared he had nothing to do with them, he feared that they were doomed, particularly since he saw that God had sent the angels to support the Muslims. The phrase ending this verse, "*God is severe in retribution,*" may be part of Satan's own statement and it may be a new statement commenting on the event itself...
>
> The meaning of these statements, then, is that the disciples of the evil one were active among the unbelievers, working on their evil souls, whispering to them to delude them and to give them a false sense of power. At the same time the angels were working on the noble souls of the believers to give them support and to increase their confidence that God's promise of victory would certainly come true.[37]

There is a clear tendency here to interpret the actions of the angels as merely making an impression on the souls of the believers. This commentator also states firmly that the angels did not take part in the fighting, despite the fact that God says to the angels: "*Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip.*" (Verse 12) He further describes Satan's actions as working on the unbelievers' souls. Such interpretation is typical of the line this school follows. It is similar to the interpretation given by Shaikh Muĥammad `Abduh when he comments on *Sūrah* 105 which describes how God destroyed the Abyssinians who came with a large army to destroy the Ka`bah and at the head of the army marched an elephant. The *sūrah* states: "*Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? Did He not cause their treacherous plan to be futile, and send against them flights of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like devoured dry leaves.*" (105: 1-5) In his commentary Shaikh Muĥammad `Abduh says that those 'stones of sand and clay' could be only the smallpox virus. Such an approach carries matters too far. It unnecessarily seeks to interpret matters that belong to the world beyond in terms of what is familiar to us in our world, when there is nothing to prevent these statements from meaning exactly what they say. All that is needed is not to try to go further than the clear meaning of every such statement. This is our chosen approach.[38]

Deception Compounded by Short-Sightedness

While Satan was working hard, trying to delude the unbelievers and encouraging them to go out in force to fight the believers then abandoning them at their time of need, the hypocrites and those who were sick at heart thought the worst of what fate the Muslims would be facing. They looked at the small band of believers facing up to

[37] M. Rashīd Ridā, *Tafsīr al-Manār.* Dār al-Ma`rifah, Beirut, Vol. X, pp. 27-28

[38] The author comments on this *sūrah* in detail and discusses Shaikh `Abduh's view in Vol. XVIII pp. 252-257. — Editor's note.

a much superior force. Thinking only in material terms, they felt that the believers brought upon themselves a woeful doom, deluded by their faith, thinking that faith would bring them victory or at least give them protection: "*The hypocrites and those in whose hearts there was disease said: 'Their faith has deluded these people.'*" (Verse 49) Some scholars say about this group that they were Makkans who looked favourably upon Islam but who stopped short of accepting it. They went out with the Quraysh army, uncertain of their own attitude. When they realized how superior the forces of the unbelievers were they said this about the Muslims.

The hypocrites and those who are sick at heart are unable to understand the true causes of defeat or victory. They only look at appearances and have no means of understanding the true nature of anything that is not physically apparent. They cannot appreciate the power of faith and what effect trusting God and relying on Him bring about. They cannot see how believers cannot be overawed by forces that do not rely on a firm belief in God. Hence it is understandable that they should think the believers to be deluded by their faith, bringing themselves to ruin as they faced a far superior force.

Any situation may have the same physical appearance in the eyes of believers and those whose hearts are devoid of faith. What is different, however, is how they look at any situation and how they evaluate it. Unbelievers do not see anything beyond the physical appearance, while those who have faith see the reality that lies beyond it. They are able to see all the forces that have an influence on it and balance between them accurately. The fact that believers understand and from which they derive reassurance is that to which the conclusion of this verse alludes: "*But he who puts his trust in God knows that God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 49) But this fact is withheld from those hearts that have no faith. Yet it is the one that tilts the balance and determines the outcome of the conflict between the two groups every time and everywhere.

On the day of Badr the hypocrites and those who were sick at heart said about the Muslim group, "*their faith has deluded these people.*" This is the same thing that such people say whenever they see the advocates of Islam confronting the mightier forces of tyranny, when their main equipment is basically this religion, their unshakeable faith in its truth, their burning desire to defend what God has made sacred and their reliance on God and trust in Him.

The hypocrites and those who are sick at heart stand idle, watching the advocates of Islam as they firmly stand up to the forces of falsehood, deriding their attitude that makes little of the dangers to which they expose themselves when they take on such mightier forces. At the same time, they are full of admiration for such people who are willing to take such great risks for their cause. They cannot understand why anyone should be willing to be exposed to such great dangers. They view everything in life, including faith and religion, as little more than a business deal. If they feel they can

profit by it then they will take it up without question, but if it involves risk taking, then they do not want to have anything to do with it. They are unable to see matters from the point of view of a believer, and they cannot evaluate matters using the perspective of faith. From a believer's point of view, the deal is a highly profitable one in all circumstances. It leads to one of the two best eventualities: victory which brings about the implementation of faith in practical life or martyrdom which ensures admittance into heaven. Besides, the balance of power is viewed differently by the believer. God Himself is involved, but the hypocrites and those who are sick at heart do not take God's power into account.

The advocates of Islam, wherever they may be and in whichever period in history they live, are called upon to use the standard of faith when they evaluate matters. They must look at everything in the light of God's guidance. They must not be overawed by the mighty forces of evil, thinking that they have little power of their own. How could they think themselves to be weak when they have God on their side? They must always pay heed to the instructions God gives to the believers: *"He who puts his trust in God knows that God is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 49)

Divine Justice for All

At this juncture the *sūrah* portrays a scene of God's direct intervention in the battle. We see the angels acting on God's instructions and by His permission, reproaching the unbelievers and meting out punishment to them. They gather their souls in a very harsh manner and dole out to them the sort of treatment that befits their arrogance and conceit. Even in the most difficult of times they remind them of their evil deeds and tell them of their inevitable destiny. There is no injustice in what they are about to suffer. It is only what they deserve. When this scene is painted, the *sūrah* follows it by a statement making clear that punishing the unbelievers for their misdeeds is a constant law that God has set into operation: *"Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them."* (Verses 52 and 54) *"This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in their hearts."* (Verse 53)

It is according to this law that He took Pharaoh and his people to task, and according to it He takes to task any person or community guilty of the same type of action: *"If you could but see how the angels gather up the souls of the unbelievers. They strike them on their faces and their backs and [say]: 'Taste the punishment of burning, in return for what your own hands have committed. Never does God do any injustice to His servants.' Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they denied God's revelations; so God took them to task for their sins. God is mighty, severe in retribution. This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in their hearts. God hears all and knows all. Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they disbelieved in their Lord's revelations; so We destroyed them for their sins,*

as We caused Pharaoh's people to drown. They were wrongdoers all." (Verses 50-54)

The first two of these verses may be intended to refer to what the unbelievers were made to suffer at the Battle of Badr when the angels took part in the fighting carrying out God's orders. He had issued to them an express order: *"Strike, then, their necks and strike off their every fingertip. This is because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God and His Messenger [will find out that] God is severe in retribution."* (Verses 12-13) When we commented on this statement, we mentioned that we do not know how the angels strike the necks of human beings or how they strike off their fingertips. However, our ignorance of how this is done should not tempt us to try to give this statement any meaning other than its apparent one, which makes it clear that there was an order from God to the angels to strike. We know that the angels *"do not disobey God in whatever He commands them, but always do whatever they are bidden to do."* (66: 6) In this case these two verses serve as a reminder of what the angels did on the day of Badr and an explanation of what they actually did to the unbelievers.

These two verses, however, may also be taken as a reference to a continuing situation that applies whenever the angels gather the souls of unbelievers. In this case the opening phrase, "*if you could but see*", may be understood as an address to anyone with eyes to see. This type of address is used frequently to direct attention to certain matters that need to be contemplated.

Whichever possibility we take, the Qur'ānic statement portrays a fearful picture of the unbelievers as the angels gather their souls, adding humiliation to their misery and combining physical suffering with death: *"If you could but see how the angels gather up the souls of the unbelievers. They strike them on their faces and their backs."* (Verse 50) The mode of expression then changes from that of reporting to an address: *"Taste the punishment of burning."* This serves to bring the scene alive as though it is happening now in front of our eyes. We almost see the fire of hell and how it burns fiercely. The unbelievers are severely reproached as they are pushed into it: *"[this is] in return for what your own hands have committed."* (Verse 51) It is all a fitting recompense. You deserve it all on account of what you have done: *"Never does God do any injustice to His servants."* (Verse 51)

This statement and the scene of the punishment of burning it portrays raise the question: is it a warning the angels give to the unbelievers pointing out to them what they are going to suffer and showing it as if it is taking place now? Or do they actually suffer the punishment of burning as soon as their souls are gathered by the angels? Both situations are possible. There is no reason to preclude either. We do not wish to add anything further because this is again something that belongs to the world that lies beyond human perception. It is known only to God. As for us, we only need to believe that it will definitely take place. Indeed there is nothing to stop it happening. But when will that be? The answer is known only to God whose

knowledge is absolute, encompassing the universe and all that it contains.

The sūrah then states a fundamental fact that is relevant to this scene. The infliction of suffering and humiliation on the unbelievers is a permanent law that does not change. It was set into operation a long time ago and it continues to operate without fail: *"Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they denied God's revelations; so God took them to task for their sins. God is mighty, severe in retribution."* (Verse 52) God does not determine the fate of human beings haphazardly or on the basis of sudden whims. Their fate follows a law that is meant to apply at all times. What happened to those unbelievers at Badr is likely to happen to them at all times. The same type of thing happened to Pharaoh's people and to other communities before them, because *"they denied God's revelations; so God took them to task for their sins."*(Verse 52) They could not protect themselves against His punishment: *"God is mighty, severe in retribution."* (Verse 52)

What Changes God's Blessings?

God had bestowed His grace on them, giving them plenty of provisions, granting them power, and allowing their generations to follow one another. All this God grants to human beings to test them so that they may choose whether to be grateful to Him for His blessings or not. But they chose to be ungrateful, denying God and using His blessings to tyrannize. They felt that the power they were given was theirs by right and they denied God's revelations. Hence they deserved their severe punishment in accordance with the law God had set in operation. Therefore, God altered the blessings with which He had favoured them, and destroyed them altogether: *"This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in their hearts. God hears all and knows all. Like Pharaoh's people and those who lived before them, they disbelieved in their Lord's revelations; so We destroyed them for their sins, as We caused Pharaoh's people to drown. They were wrongdoers all."* (Verses 53-54)

God destroyed them only after they had denied His revelations. He did not punish them with destruction prior to that, although they were unbelievers, because He is Compassionate, Merciful: *"We would never inflict punishment on anyone until We have sent a Messenger." (17: 15)* Pharaoh's people and those who had gone before them adopting the same attitude of denying God's revelations and suffering the punishment of destruction are described here as "wrongdoers". This is a very frequent usage in the Qur'ān, depicting the rejection of the faith or the association of partners with God as "wrongdoing".

We need to reflect a little on the statement that this verse makes: *"This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in*

their hearts." (Verse 53) It confirms the essential aspect of fairness in God's treatment of human beings. He does not deprive them of any favour He has granted them unless they change their intentions, attitudes, behaviour and general situation. By doing so, they deserve that God should alter what He has given them by way of testing them and withdrawing the favours and blessings He has bestowed on them. They have shown no gratitude for such blessings and favours. On the other hand, God bestows a great honour on man when He makes His will applicable to man on the basis of man's own actions. A change in the fate of human beings depends on a practical change in their own intentions, behaviour, practices and general situation. All this they choose for themselves. Moreover, human beings are given a great responsibility, commensurate to the great honour God has granted them. They can ensure that the grace and favours God grants them remain permanently with them and that they are given an increase of this by knowing, appreciating and showing gratitude. On the other hand, they can ensure that all these are removed from them if they behave with arrogance, deny God's favours, entertain evil intentions and adopt deviant practices.

This great fact is central to the Islamic concept of man, how God's will applies to him as well as his relationship with the universe and what takes place in it. Here we see the position of honour granted by God to man and we appreciate the latitude man has been given in determining his own destiny and shaping the events that take place around him. He is indeed an actor who makes his contribution by God's permission. Indeed the working of God's will takes place through his deeds and actions. Thus man is freed from the humiliating state of passivity imposed on him by materialistic philosophies which regard him as a passive creature who has no influence on the major trends that continue their inevitable movement with total disregard to him and his actions. These include economy, history and evolution. According to these philosophies, man has no option other than to submit to these trends with all humility.

The same fact makes it absolutely clear that there is an inevitable relationship in human life between action and reward. It also gives us a clear idea of God's absolute, unfailing justice that transforms this relationship into a law set into operation by God's will. It ensures that not a single one of God's servants will suffer the slightest injustice:

> *Never does God do any injustice to His servants.* (Verse 51)

> *This is because God would never alter the favours He bestows on a community unless they change what is in their hearts.* (Verse 53)

> *We destroyed them for their sins, as We caused Pharaoh's people to drown. They were wrongdoers all.* (Verse 54)

All praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

4
Delineation of Loyalties

إِنَّ شَرَّ ٱلدَّوَآبِّ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فَهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

Indeed, the worst of all creatures in God's sight are the ones who have denied the truth, and therefore will not believe; (55)

ٱلَّذِينَ عَٰهَدتَّ مِنۡهُمۡ ثُمَّ يَنقُضُونَ عَهۡدَهُمۡ فِي كُلِّ مَرَّةٖ وَهُمۡ لَا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

those with whom you have concluded a treaty, and then they break their treaty at every occasion, entertaining no sense of fearing God. (56)

فَإِمَّا تَثۡقَفَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡحَرۡبِ فَشَرِّدۡ بِهِم مَّنۡ خَلۡفَهُمۡ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them, so that they may reflect and take it to heart. (57)

وَإِمَّا تَخَافَنَّ مِن قَوۡمٍ خِيَانَةٗ فَٱنۢبِذۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡ عَلَىٰ سَوَآءٍۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلۡخَآئِنِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

And if you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous. (58)

وَلَا تَحۡسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ سَبَقُوٓاْۚ إِنَّهُمۡ لَا يُعۡجِزُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Let not those who disbelieve reckon that they shall escape. They can never be beyond [God's] grasp. (59)

وَأَعِدُّواْ لَهُم مَّا ٱسۡتَطَعۡتُم مِّن قُوَّةٖ وَمِن رِّبَاطِ ٱلۡخَيۡلِ تُرۡهِبُونَ بِهِۦ عَدُوَّ ٱللَّهِ وَعَدُوَّكُمۡ وَءَاخَرِينَ مِن دُونِهِمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُهُمۡۚ وَمَا تُنفِقُواْ مِن شَيۡءٖ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ يُوَفَّ إِلَيۡكُمۡ وَأَنتُمۡ لَا تُظۡلَمُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster, so that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, but of whom God is well aware. Whatever you may spend in God's cause shall be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged. (60)

۞ وَإِن جَنَحُواْ لِلسَّلۡمِ فَٱجۡنَحۡ لَهَا وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَى ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٦١

If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as well, and place your trust in God. He alone hears all and knows all. (61)

وَإِن يُرِيدُوٓاْ أَن يَخۡدَعُوكَ فَإِنَّ حَسۡبَكَ ٱللَّهُۚ هُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَيَّدَكَ بِنَصۡرِهِۦ وَبِٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٦٢

Should they seek to deceive you, God is all-sufficient for you. He it is who has strengthened you with His help and rallied the believers round you, (62)

وَأَلَّفَ بَيۡنَ قُلُوبِهِمۡۚ لَوۡ أَنفَقۡتَ مَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا مَّآ أَلَّفۡتَ بَيۡنَ قُلُوبِهِمۡ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَلَّفَ بَيۡنَهُمۡۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٦٣

uniting their hearts. If you were to spend all that is on earth you could not have so united their hearts, but God has united them. He is Mighty and Wise. (63)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ حَسۡبُكَ ٱللَّهُ وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٦٤

Prophet, God is enough for you and those of the believers who follow you. (64)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ حَرِّضِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ عَلَى ٱلۡقِتَالِۚ إِن يَكُن مِّنكُمۡ عِشۡرُونَ صَٰبِرُونَ يَغۡلِبُواْ مِاْئَتَيۡنِۚ وَإِن يَكُن مِّنكُم مِّاْئَةٞ يَغۡلِبُوٓاْ أَلۡفٗا مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِأَنَّهُمۡ قَوۡمٞ لَّا يَفۡقَهُونَ ٦٥

Prophet, urge the believers to fight. If there are twenty steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a hundred of you, they will defeat a thousand of those who disbelieve, for those are devoid of understanding. (65)

ٱلۡـَٰٔنَ خَفَّفَ ٱللَّهُ عَنكُمۡ وَعَلِمَ أَنَّ فِيكُمۡ ضَعۡفٗاۚ فَإِن يَكُن مِّنكُم مِّاْئَةٞ صَابِرَةٞ يَغۡلِبُواْ مِاْئَتَيۡنِۚ وَإِن يَكُن مِّنكُمۡ أَلۡفٞ يَغۡلِبُوٓاْ أَلۡفَيۡنِ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ مَعَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ٦٦

Now God has lightened your burden, for He knows that you are weak. So, if there are a hundred steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a thousand of you they will, by God's will, defeat two thousand. God is with those who are steadfast. (66)

مَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَن يَكُونَ لَهُۥٓ أَسۡرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ يُثۡخِنَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ تُرِيدُونَ عَرَضَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةَۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٦٧

It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. (67)

لَّوۡلَا كِتَٰبٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ سَبَقَ لَمَسَّكُمۡ فِيمَآ أَخَذۡتُمۡ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ٦٨

Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken. (68)

فَكُلُواْ مِمَّا غَنِمۡتُمۡ حَلَٰلٗا طَيِّبٗاۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٦٩

Enjoy, then, what you have gained, as lawful and good, and remain God-fearing; indeed God is much Forgiving, most Merciful. (69)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ قُل لِّمَن فِيٓ أَيۡدِيكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَسۡرَىٰٓ إِن يَعۡلَمِ ٱللَّهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمۡ خَيۡرٗا يُؤۡتِكُمۡ خَيۡرٗا مِّمَّآ أُخِذَ مِنكُمۡ وَيَغۡفِرۡ لَكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٧٠

Prophet, say to the captives who are in your hands: If God finds goodness in your hearts, He will give you something better than all that has been taken from you, and He will forgive you your sins. God is much Forgiving, Merciful. (70)

وَإِن يُرِيدُواْ خِيَانَتَكَ فَقَدۡ خَانُواْ ٱللَّهَ مِن قَبۡلُ فَأَمۡكَنَ مِنۡهُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ٧١

Should they seek to play false with you, they were previously false to God Himself, but He gave [you] mastery over them. God is All-knowing, Wise. (71)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَهَاجَرُواْ وَجَٰهَدُواْ بِأَمۡوَٰلِهِمۡ وَأَنفُسِهِمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاوَواْ وَّنَصَرُوٓاْ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ بَعۡضُهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءُ بَعۡضٖۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَلَمۡ يُهَاجِرُواْ مَا لَكُم مِّن وَلَٰيَتِهِم مِّن شَيۡءٍ حَتَّىٰ يُهَاجِرُواْۚ

Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard, with their possessions and their lives, for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support — these are friends and protectors of one another. As for those who believe but have not migrated [to join you], you owe no duty of protection to them until they have migrated.

وَإِنِ ٱسْتَنصَرُوكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ فَعَلَيْكُمُ ٱلنَّصْرُ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُم مِّيثَٰقٌ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٧٢﴾

Yet, should they appeal to you for support, on grounds of faith, it is your duty to support them, except against a people with whom you have a treaty. God sees all that you do. (72)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍ ۚ إِلَّا تَفْعَلُوهُ تَكُن فِتْنَةٌ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَفَسَادٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿٧٣﴾

The unbelievers are allies of one another. Unless you do likewise, there will be oppression on earth and much corruption. (73)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَهَاجَرُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاوَوا۟ وَّنَصَرُوٓا۟ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ حَقًّا ۚ لَّهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٧٤﴾

Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support are indeed the true believers. Forgiveness of sins, and most generous provisions await them. (74)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنۢ بَعْدُ وَهَاجَرُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟ مَعَكُمْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَأُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَرْحَامِ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلَىٰ بِبَعْضٍ فِى كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌۢ ﴿٧٥﴾

And those who subsequently come to believe, and migrate and strive hard with you [for God's cause] shall also belong to you. Those who are bound by ties of blood have the first claim on one another in accordance with God's decree. God has full knowledge of everything. (75)

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* includes a number of rules for dealing with other camps and communities in times of peace and war. It also speaks of the internal organization of the Muslim community and the regulation of its relations with other communities. It speaks of the Islamic view of pledges and covenants in all situations, as well as the ties of blood, race, homeland and faith. This gives us a host of rules and regulations in all these matters. Some of these are final and apply in all situations, while others are provisional, dealing with the situation that prevailed at the time. These were to be amended later, when *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed towards the end of the Madinan period. These rules and regulations include:

- Those who enter into a treaty with the Muslims and then break their treaty are the worst creatures. The Muslims should, therefore, teach them a lesson that strikes fear in their hearts and in the hearts of those who follow them, contemplating a similar breach of their own treaty or thinking of launching a treacherous attack on the Muslim community.
- Those groups who have concluded a treaty with the Muslims, but the Muslim leadership has reason to believe that they may be involved in treacherous action, may be put on notice of termination of their treaty. When this is done, the Islamic leadership is free to fight them, teach them a lesson and make of them an example for those who take a similar attitude.
- The Muslim community, which represents the camp following God's guidance, must always be prepared, maintain a position of strength, be as well equipped as possible, so that it is always held in awe by other communities. This will ensure better security for the land of Islam, as hostile forces will think twice before launching an attack on it. It will also make such forces submit to the requirement of allowing the advocates of the faith to fulfil their task of making God's message known to people and calling on them to accept it. They will also refrain from trying to prevent anyone in their land from accepting the faith if he wishes to do so. Sovereignty will thus be acknowledged to belong to God alone, and no one other than Him may lay claim to it.
- If any party of unbelievers is inclined to have an agreement of peaceful co-existence with the Muslim community, the Muslim leadership will accept this and conclude such an agreement. If they entertain thoughts of treachery, and there is no visible evidence of such thoughts, the Muslims will entrust the whole matter to God who will take care of any would-be traitors.
- *Jihād* is a duty of Muslims, even when they are heavily outnumbered. With God's help, they can achieve victory. Each one of them is equal to ten of the enemy. In the worst situations when the Muslims are at their weakest, everyone of them is equal to two of the enemy force. The duty of *jihād* does not wait until parity with the enemy is achieved. All that the Muslims should do is to mobilize their best forces, place their full trust in God, remain patient in adversity and steadfast in battle. Moreover, they must leave the rest to God. After all, they have a power that other camps do not have.
- The first goal of the Muslim community is to destroy the power of tyranny by all available means. If the taking of captives in battle and releasing them for ransom does not help achieve that, then such measures are to be discounted. It is a permanent rule that God's Messengers and their followers should not take captives until they have demonstrated their power, destroyed the might of

their enemy and established their own authority. When that has been accomplished, there may be no harm in taking captives and receiving ransom for their release.

- Spoils of war are permissible for the Muslims to take. The same is the case with ransom in return for the release of any captives they might have taken after they have strenuously battled and demonstrated their power.
- When captives are taken by the Muslims, these captives should be given a good idea of Islam. They should also be encouraged to accept it. They should be told that God promises them what is superior to what is taken from them, whether in spoils of war or in ransom. They should also be warned against any attempt of treachery.
- The central bond that brings people together in Muslim society is that of faith. Loyalty and allegiance in that society are based on faith and organization at the same time. Those who have accepted the faith and migrated to its land and those who welcomed them into their land, giving them full support, are one single group with mutual ties of faith and duties of protection. By contrast, those who accepted the faith without moving to the land of Islam have no commitment of mutual protection with the Muslim camp. This means that there is no duty binding the Muslim state to give them support. The Muslim community will give them active support only when they are attacked because of their faith by a group who have no covenant with the Muslims.
- The fact that the central bond in Muslim society is faith does not preclude that relatives have an added bond of loyalty when the two main requirements of faith and organization are fulfilled. Blood relationship does not initiate any tie of loyalty when the bond of faith is not in existence.

This is a brief outline of the rules and regulations included in this final passage of the *sūrah,* outlining the most important elements of the Islamic system dealing with internal and external affairs.

When Treaties Are Breached

Verses 55-63 at the beginning of this passage deal primarily with a real situation that the Muslim community had to come to grips with at the time when the first Muslim state was established in Madinah. These verses provided the Islamic leadership with guidance and rules to apply in dealing with that situation. They represent a basic element in the international relations between the Muslim community and other groups. They remained in force, with minor amendments that were subsequently incorporated.

These verses make it clear that it is perfectly appropriate to conclude agreements of peaceful co-existence with other communities and groups, as long as such agreements are certain to be taken seriously, respected and honoured. If the other camp manipulates these agreements and uses them as a shield to cover up its treacherous designs, taking steps to launch an assault against the Muslims, then the Muslim leadership is fully entitled to terminate these agreements, making the other side fully aware of that termination. Once this is done, the Muslim leadership is free to choose the time when to attack, making sure that any such attack is powerful enough to strike fear in the heart of all who contemplate a hostile attitude towards the Muslim society, whether openly or in secret. On the other hand, those who are interested in a genuine peace with the Muslim camp, have no intention of opposing the Islamic message or stopping its advocacy, and demonstrate their inclination to peace, may enjoy such a relationship of real peace.

All this was clearly meant to deal with real situations that affected relations between the Muslim state and neighbouring camps. When the Muslim state enjoys security, having no physical impediments to its task of conveying God's message to people everywhere, it has no reason to refuse peaceful co-existence. At the same time, it does not allow for peace agreements to be used as a cover-up for intended treachery.

The practical situation in Madinah that these verses addressed resulted from the circumstances of the early period of the Prophet's settlement in that city. These are outlined by Imām Ibn al-Qayyim in his priceless rook *Zād al-Ma`ād.* Although this summary is quoted in the Prologue to this volume, it is useful to repeat it here.

This is a chapter setting an outline of the Prophet's attitude to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, right from the time when he first received his message until he departed from this life:

The first revelation bestowed on him was "*Read in the name of your Lord who created.*" (96: 1) This was the point at which he became a Prophet. It was an order to him to read, alone. No order was given at this point that he should deliver any message. Later on, God revealed to him: "*You that are wrapped up in your cloak! Arise and warn.*" (74: 1-2) Thus He made him a Prophet when He said to him, `Read', and then made him a Messenger when He told him, `Arise and warn.' He then ordered him to warn his immediate clan. He followed this by warning his own people, then the other Arab tribes close to Makkah, then all the Arabs, and finally all mankind.

The Prophet thus spent more than a dozen years after his initial prophethood advocating his message, without fighting. He was ordered throughout this period not to take up arms; rather, he should remain patient and forbearing. Then he received permission to migrate, and another permission to fight. God then ordered

him to fight those who wage war against him, and not to fight those who stand aside, refraining from such a fight. Later, the Prophet was ordered to fight the unbelievers until all submission is made only to God.

At this point, the unbelievers were divided into three categories with regard to their relationship with the Prophet (peace be upon him). In the first category were those with whom he concluded a peace treaty. The second category included those who were at war with the Prophet, while the third were those who had submitted to his authority and were under his protection.

The Prophet was ordered to fulfil his obligations under any peace treaty as long as the other party fulfilled their obligations. Should he fear that they may resort to treachery, he should give them notice of the termination of their treaty. He must not fight them until he had informed them of such termination. He was also ordered to fight any parry which violated their peace treaty with him.

When *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed, it outlined the rulings applicable to each of the three categories. Thus, the Prophet was ordered to fight those of the people of earlier revelations who waged war against him until they had been subdued and agreed to pay submission tax, or *jizyah,* or accept Islam. He was further ordered to strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites. Thus, he struggled against the unbelievers with sword and spear, and against the hypocrites with logic and argument. He was also ordered in *Sūrah* 9 to declare a general disavowal, terminating all treaties with unbelievers.

However, the people who held peace treaties with the Prophet were divided into three groups. The first were those who had been unfaithful to their treaties and were in clear violation of them: these he was ordered to fight. He actually fought them and was victorious. The second group included those with a treaty lasting for a specific time. If these had honoured their obligations under the treaty and did not aid others against the Prophet and the Muslim community, the Prophet was ordered to honour their treaty for as long as it lasted. The third group included those who had no treaty with the Prophet but had not fought with him and also those who had an open treaty specifying no time. He was ordered to give all these groups four months' notice, after which he could fight them.

Thus, the Prophet fought and killed those who were treacherous, violating their treaty, and put on four-months' notice those without a treaty or with an open-ended one. He was also to honour his obligations to those who honoured theirs under their treaties. All those in this category adopted Islam before the end of their respective terms. He imposed *jizyah* or submission tax on those under his authority.[39]

[39] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma 'ād,* Mu'assasat al-Risālah, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 158-161.

When we closely examine this scholarly summary in the light of the events of the period and the dates of the revelation of the different Qur'ānic verses and *sūrahs* outlining these rules and regulations we definitely conclude that the verses we are looking at in this *sūrah* represent a middle stage between the situation in the early days of the Islamic reign in Madinah and that which prevailed after the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, Repentance. All relevant statements must be studied in this light. Although the verses we have here include some very basic rules, they do not put these in their final form. These are finally stated in *Sūrah* 9. The events which took place later in the Prophet's lifetime represent a practical example of how these rules are to be implemented.

The Worst of All Creatures

> *Indeed, the worst of all creatures in God's sight are the ones who have denied the truth, and therefore will not believe; those with whom you have concluded a treaty, and then they break their treaty at every occasion, entertaining no sense of fearing God.* (Verses 55-56)

The Arabic term used in this verse for "creatures" signifies walking, which makes the description sound like, "the worst of those that walk on earth." This term applies to all walking creatures, particularly animals, but includes human beings. However, it has clear additional connotations when it refers to humans. It makes those to whom it refers appear like animals. Thus those humans become the worst of all animals that walk on earth. These are the hardened unbelievers who will not accept the faith. They are the ones who break their treaties all the time and do not entertain any sense of fearing God.

Several reports speak of which groups were meant in this statement. Different reports mention the three Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā`, al- Nađīr and Qurayżah, while other reports suggest that they were the Bedouin Arabs in the areas around Madinah. Historical events and the statement itself admit all these possibilities, as all of these groups did break their treaties with the Prophet, one after the other. The pagan Arabs were guilty of this on several occasions. What is important is that we should know that these verses speak of actual events that took place before the Battle of Badr and after it, till the time when these verses were revealed. However, the rule that they outline, which also explains the nature of those who break their treaties, applies to all such situations. Those who have become hardened in disbelief "*will not believe.*" Their very nature has gone awry and they have become the worst of creatures. They break every agreement they make. Thus they shed yet another human characteristic, namely, faithfulness. They run loose, like animals, except that animals are restricted

by their nature while these know no restriction. In God's sight, they are the worst of all creatures.

Those people who cannot be trusted to honour an agreement they make must not be allowed to feel secure, just like they deprived others of enjoying a sense of security. Their punishment is that they should live in fear and that they should become an example to those who follow their suit. God's Messenger and his followers in succeeding generations are commanded to mete out punishment to them on every occasion: "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them, so that they may reflect and take it to heart.*" (Verse 57)

This verse paints an image of a ferocious attack that is bound to strike fear into the hearts of the enemies. The image is so powerful that hearing it is enough to make people flee. We need not ask about those who are at the receiving end of such punishment. God commands His Messenger to level such a powerful strike against those who are in the habit of violating their treaties and who have broken all human restraints. Such a strike has the dual purpose of protecting the Muslim community and destroying the power of those who try to undermine its position. This should deter all people from trying to stop the Islamic march.

Striking Terror into the Enemy

Those who believe in Islam should have a clear understanding of the nature of its method of operation. It is essential that Islam should have real power as well as a reputation of power. Thus, as it starts its mission to liberate mankind all over the world from tyranny, it strikes fear into the hearts of all tyrants who do their utmost to check its tide. Those who think that this religion will confine itself to preaching and to the explanation of its message when the forces of evil try to put every type of impediment in its way have little understanding of its true nature.

This is the first ruling which deals with the case of actual violation of treaties that have been concluded with the Muslim community. The violators are to be dealt a heavy blow so that they, as well as those who sympathize with them, are intimidated and are actually overawed by the Muslims.

The second ruling deals with a different situation: that of fearing and expecting treachery. There should be clear signs that a particular group or community are actually contemplating such violation of a treaty. In this case the Prophet is directed to take the following approach: "*And if you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (Verse 58)

Islam here sets out a code of practice. When a treaty is concluded, the Muslim community will undoubtedly honour it. If they fear that the other party is about to

violate it, then the Muslims declare the termination of the treaty, without any attempt to cheat or deceive the other party. What is meant here is an open and clear termination of a treaty so that each party realizes that peaceful relations are over. Islam attaches a very high value to honesty and integrity in order to ensure peace and security. Launching a treacherous attack on people who rely on covenants that remain in force is alien to the nature of Islam. Islam does not terrorize those who have not taken precautions even when it fears treachery from them. However, when a treaty has been publicly terminated, then trying to outwit the enemy is perfectly acceptable because each side should be on its guard. If an enemy falls for a trick, they pay the price of naivety. No method of outwitting the enemy can then be described as treachery.

Islam wants humanity to rise above worldly temptations and to be sublime. Hence, it does not allow treachery for the sake of achieving a cheap victory at a time when it strives for the noblest of causes and aims. People who have honourable aims cannot utilize dishonourable means. Islam finds treachery repugnant and looks at traitors who violate their treaties with contempt. Therefore, it does not accept that Muslims violate their covenants for the achievement of any objective, noble as it may be. The human soul is a complete whole. When it allows itself to resort to disgraceful means it cannot maintain its noble aims. He is not a Muslim who claims that the ends justify the means. Such a principle is alien to Islamic thinking and cannot fit with Islamic sensitivities. Within the human self there can be no gulf to separate the ends from the means. Reaching a clean shore does not tempt a Muslim to walk through a muddy pool, because the shore will not remain clean after dirty feet have walked there. Hence, *"God does not love the treacherous."* (Verse 58)

We should remember that these regulations were revealed at a time when the whole of the humanity could not have aspired to such a high level. The law of the jungle, which meant that the powerful could use their power without restraint, was the one that prevailed. The same law of the jungle continued to dominate in all *jāhiliyyah* communities until the eighteenth century. Europe had no concept of international codes and laws except for what it learnt through its dealings with the Muslim world. Yet in practical reality Europe has not attained any level approaching this high peak, not even after it adopted, only in theory, something it calls `international law'. Those who admire so- called 'advanced law making' should try to understand the realities as they compare Islamic law to all contemporary legal codes.

In return for such clear honesty God promises victory to the Muslims and He tells them that the unbelievers have no real power: *"Let not those who disbelieve reckon that they shall escape. They can never be beyond [God's] grasp."* (Verse 59) Their treachery will not enable them to take the lead and outstrip the Muslims, because God will not

abandon the Muslims or allow the traitors to triumph. The unbelievers are too weak to escape from God when He moves against them. Nor can they escape from the Muslims when God is supporting them. Hence those who resort only to clean and lawful means, seeking God's pleasure, need not worry when they see others who employ foul means surging ahead. They achieve victory through God's help, because they strive to implement His law and make His word supreme. Their efforts aim to liberate humanity from the worship of creatures, so that it may worship only the Creator.

Islam, however, sets out to make real preparations that are within the capability of the Muslims so that victory becomes achievable. It does not raise the sights of the Muslim community towards that sublime horizon without making sure that it has firm ground on which it can stand. Islam also takes every practical step which has been proven through experience to be of immense value in the achievement of victory. Islam also makes sure that the Muslim community is well prepared for its practical tasks that serve its sublime objectives: *"Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster, so that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, but of whom God is well aware. Whatever you may spend in God's cause shall be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged."* (Verse 60)

To make all practical preparations is a duty that goes hand in hand with the duty of *jihād.* The verse gives a clear order to prepare all forces and power within the means of the Muslim community. It makes special mention of cavalry because that was then the main equipment in war. Had the Qur'ān ordered them to prepare equipment that was unknown to them, they would have found these a complete mystery. Far be it from God to address anyone with mysteries. What is most important to remember here is that the directive is of a very broad nature. Hence, in our translation of the verse we use the expression `war mount' to denote every necessary type of feasible equipment: *"Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster."* (Verse 60)

Getting All Forces Ready

Islam certainly needs physical might which is kept ready to use for the fulfilment of its mission of liberating mankind throughout the world. The first purpose that this power serves is to establish peace and security for those who choose to accept the Islamic faith so that they do not suffer any persecution as a result of their choice. Secondly, it deters the enemies of Islam from contemplating aggression against it the land of Islam. Thirdly, such enemies should be so intimidated that they do not ever entertain any thought of trying to check the tide of Islam as it goes about the

fulfilment of its mission of liberation. Lastly, this power is to be used to break any force that claims the attributes of God and enforces its laws and legislation on human beings and refuses to accept that all sovereignty belongs to God alone.

Islam is not merely a system of divinity that is established once it has been consciously accepted as a faith and practised as a set of worship rituals. Islam is a practical code of living which stands face to face against other codes and systems that are supported by physical force. Hence, Islam has no option but to break those forces and remove the authorities that implement those codes which stand in opposition to its code of living devised and revealed by God Himself.

No Muslim should ever mince words when he declares this basic truth. There is nothing to be ashamed of in the nature of the Islamic approach. Islam does not have a man-made system, and does not seek to establish the authority of a leader, a state, a class, or a race. It does not try to enslave serfs so that they cultivate the plantations of the aristocracy, like the Romans used to do. Nor does it try to exploit markets and raw materials, as Western capitalism has been doing. It is not the aim of Islam to impose a human system devised by a shortsighted, narrow-minded and ignorant human being, as Communism was keen to do. Islam has a system devised by God whose knowledge and wisdom are absolute. It aims to establish God's absolute sovereignty in order that all mankind be free from subjugation to any worldly authority.

This is the fundamental truth which needs to be driven home to those defeatists who put Islam on the defensive, trying to seek excuses for *jihād* in Islamic history.

It is pertinent to know the limits of the Muslim community's duty to prepare its forces. The Qur'ānic verse states: "*Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster.*" This goes as far as the maximum ability of the Muslims, so that they do not overlook any element of power which they are able to get ready. The verse also makes clear the prime purpose for which such forces are mobilized: "*So that you may strike terror into the enemies of God who are also your own enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, but of whom God is well aware.*"

The objective, then, is to strike terror into the hearts of God's enemies who are also the enemies of the advocates of Islam throughout the world, be they open with their hostility and known to the Muslim community, or others who may be discreet with their real feelings, not openly stating their hostile attitude to Islam. God is certainly aware of their true feelings and sympathies. Such people are intimidated by the might of Islam even though they may not suffer its consequences directly. The Muslims are required to gather all the strength they can have so that they remain feared by other people. This is essential so that God's word remains supreme and all submission is to God alone.

Acquiring such forces and having them ready can only be done if the resources are there. Since the Islamic system lays much stress on collective responsibility and mutual support, the duty of *jihād* goes hand in hand with the duty of spending money for God's cause: *"Whatever you may spend in God's cause shall be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged."* (Verse 60) Both *jihād* and spending money for God's cause are thus purged of all worldly and personal aims and purposes as well as all national and community feelings and aspirations. They must always be pure, undertaken `for God's cause,' to establish His authority and to earn His pleasure.

Thus, right at the outset, Islam rules out any war undertaken for the glory of individuals and states. It rejects all campaigns that seek to exploit resources and open markets, or to subjugate and humiliate other communities. Islam has nothing to do with any war that tries to establish the superiority of one class, race, nation, or state over another. The only type of campaign which Islam approves of is one undertaken for God's cause. Needless to say, God does not wish to grant supremacy to any one race, nation, class, or individual. He only wants His own sovereignty and authority to be recognized by all people. God is in no need of anyone or any community. The recognition of His sovereignty and submission to Him alone bring honour, freedom, goodness and blessings to all mankind.

When Peace is a Real Prospect

The third ruling given in this passage deals with the case of those who wish to live in peace with the Muslim community and give clear indications by word and action that they are genuine in their desire to have a friendly and peaceful relationship with the Muslims. With respect to these, the Prophet is instructed: *"If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as well, and place your trust in God. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 61) The use of the term `incline' here is very apt as it gives connotations of a gentle attitude that prefers peace and friendly relations. The instruction to be inclined to peace is coupled with that of placing our trust in God who hears and knows everything and is certainly aware of all that is harboured behind words and appearances. Placing our trust in God is sufficient for ensuring protection and security.

It is important to recall here Imām Ibn al-Qayyim's summary which we quoted earlier, outlining the various categories of unbelievers and their attitudes to the Prophet Muĥammad and his attitude to each of them, from the time when he first settled in Madinah to the Battle of Badr when this new ruling was revealed. Referring to this summary, we realize that this particular ruling applied to those unbelievers who did not fight against the Prophet, preferring to have peaceful relations with the Muslim community. God instructs His Messenger here to leave

this group alone, and to extend friendly and peaceful relations to them. This remained in effect until the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, several years later. That *sūrah* gives a four-months' notice to all groups which had no treaty with the Prophet or had a treaty with no specific time limit to define their attitudes. Their decisions would then determine what their relations with the Muslim state would be like in the future. Hence the ruling we have here is not final. Its provisions do not apply to all people. We have to consider it within the framework of its relevant circumstances and the attitude taken by the Prophet later in his life, as he received new revelations on the subject.

The ruling, however, had a kind of general application at the time. The Prophet implemented it until the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, Repentance. One aspect of its implementation was the conclusion of the peace treaty of al-Ĥudaybiyah in the sixth year after the Prophet's settlement in Madinah.

Some scholars tend to consider this ruling final and permanent. They explain the inclination to peace as the acceptance of *jizyah,*[40] or submission tax. This interpretation, however, does not fit with the historical events of the period. The provisions that regulate levying *jizyah* are included in the next *sūrah,* revealed sometime after the eighth year of the Islamic calendar, while the present verse was revealed in the second year, after the Battle of Badr, when the rules of *jizyah* had not yet been outlined. When we review events and the dates of various revelations and consider the practical nature of the Islamic approach, we come to the conclusion that it is perhaps more accurate to say that this particular ruling was not meant to be final at the time. It was amended later when the final rulings were revealed in *Sūrah* 9, which classified all people according to their attitude to Islam into three groups: those who are hostile and fighting Islam, those who are Muslims implementing God's law, and those who accept the Islamic rule, paying *jizyah* and honouring their agreements with Muslims. These are the final rules that represent the final outcome of Islamic *jihād.* Any other situation should be changed into one of these three in order to fall in line with the final pattern. These three situations are outlined by the following *Ĥadīth* related by Muslim and Imām Ahmad on the authority of Yazīd ibn al-Khaṭīb:

> When the Prophet despatched an expedition or an army, he would enjoin its commander to remain God-fearing and to take good care of the Muslims under his command. He would then say to them: "Set out on your campaign in the name of God and to serve His cause. Fight those who deny God. When you meet your enemies call on them to accept one of three options. Accept

[40] *Jizyah* is a submission tax paid by non-Muslims in areas which accept the rule of the Muslim state in return for protection by the Muslims from any outside aggression. — Editor's note.

> from them whichever option they prefer and leave them alone. Call on them to accept Islam. If they respond favourably, then accept that from them and call on them to move from their land to that of the *Muhājirīn* [i.e. the Prophet's Companions who migrated with him to Madinah]. Inform them that if they do so, they will have the same obligations and privileges that apply to the *Muhājirīn*. If they choose to remain in their own land, then make it clear to them that they will be in the same position as the desert Arabs who are Muslims. All rules that apply to believers are also applicable to them but they will have no share of any spoils gained in war or without a fight unless they join forces with the Muslims in their *jihād* campaigns. If they refuse, then make it clear to them that they have to pay *jizyah.* If they are willing to do so, then accept that from them and leave them alone. If they refuse then pray for God's help and fight them."

This *ĥadīth* is problematic in one aspect, namely because it mentions the *Muhājirīn* and *jizyah* at the same time. It is confirmed that the *jizyah* was not imposed until the eighth year. It was not levied from the Arabs who were unbelievers because they accepted Islam before its provisions were revealed. It was applied to the Magians who were similarly unbelievers. Had those provisions been revealed at a time when there were unbelievers in the Arabian Peninsula, it would have been levied from them, as Imām Ibn al-Qayyim points out. This is also the view of Abū Hanīfah and one of two views attributed to Imām Ahmad.

Be that as it may, what we conclude is that there is no final rulings of universal application in this verse: *"If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as well, and place your trust in God. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 61) At the time when this *sūrah* was revealed, God instructed His Messenger to remain at peace with those groups who refrained from fighting him and the Muslims, whether they entered into a formal treaty with the Muslims or not. The Prophet continued to accept a peaceful relationship with unbelievers and people of earlier revelations until *Sūrah* 9 was revealed, when he could only accept one of two alternatives: either they embraced Islam or paid *jizyah* which indicated a state of peace. Otherwise, the only alternative was war, whenever this was feasible for the Muslims to undertake, so that all people submit to God alone.

Where to Place All Trust

I have dwelt rather extensively on the provisional nature of the rule outlined in this verse, which requires the Prophet and the Muslims to reciprocate any inclination to peace by the unbelievers. My aim is to clarify a certain aspect of confusion that arises from the spiritual and intellectual defeatism reflected in the work of many of

those who write about Islamic *jihād.* Such people feel the pressure of modern values that prevail in international relations. Lacking a clear understanding of the true nature of Islam as they are, they find it too much for the divine faith to adopt a single and permanent approach towards all humanity, giving all people a choice between three alternatives: acceptance of Islam, payment of *jizyah* or being at war with Islam. They realize that all forces of *jāhiliyyah* are mobilized against Islam and its followers, while those who profess to be Muslims, without fully understanding or seriously appreciating the true nature of Islam, are too weak to stand up to the combined forces of other creeds and religions. They also feel that those at the forefront of Islamic advocacy are too small in number and have little power to reckon with. Hence, such writers try to impose a different interpretation on Qur'ānic statements and *aĥadīth* so that they can be seen to be in line with the situation in our present world with all its pressures on contemporary Muslims. They find the single approach of Islam and the three choices it offers too hard to swallow.

Such writers often interpret statements that have a provisional nature or qualified application as final, permanent and having general and universal application. When they tackle the final statements they interpret these in the light of those provisional ones to which they have applied a final import. Thus, they come up with the idea that Islamic *jihād* is merely a defensive operation to protect Muslim people and their land when they are attacked, and that Islam will always accept any offer of peace. To them, peace is merely a state of non- belligerence which, in practical terms, means that the other camp will not attack the land of Islam. According to their understanding, Islam should shrink inside its borders at all times. It has no right to call on others to accept its message or to submit to God's law, unless such a call takes the form of a speech, statement or bulletin. When it comes to material forces, Islam has no right to attack the ruling forces in *jāhiliyyah* societies unless it first comes under attack, in which case Islam is right to defend itself.

Had those spiritually and intellectually defeatist people wanted to find in the rules and laws of their faith elements which can deal with a situation like the present one, without imposing any arbitrary interpretation on any statement, they would have been able to understand how Islam faced a situation that is not dissimilar to what we face today. They would then have been able to say that in similar situations Islam adopted such and such policy, but that does not constitute the final or the permanent Islamic attitude. It was merely a set of temporary measures that were necessary in a special situation or in an emergency. Within the same context, it is useful to look at examples of rulings and practices of a transitional nature, undertaken to meet emergencies.

- In the early days after his settlement in Madinah, the Prophet concluded a peace and defence treaty with the Jews and the

unbelievers in and around Madinah. The treaty made it clear that the supreme authority in Madinah belonged to the Prophet, and committed the other groups to defend the city against the Quraysh. The signatories agreed that they would not extend any support to any aggressor who attacked Madinah. None would make any pact with the unbelievers who were hostile to the Muslims without the prior agreement of the Prophet. At the same time, God instructed the Prophet to extend peaceful and friendly treatment to any group who were inclined towards peace, even though they did not sign a treaty with him. He was to maintain that peaceful situation as long as they were committed to peace. All this changed later, as already explained.

- When the events known as the Expedition of the Moat took place, with the Arab unbelievers mobilizing large forces and surrounding Madinah, the Qurayżah Jews violated their treaty with the Muslim state. The Prophet was worried that the Muslims might be in very serious trouble as a result of a planned pincer attack. To ease the situation the Prophet offered to make a deal with the chiefs of the second largest force, namely the Ghaṭafān tribe, which would have them withdrawing all their forces in return for having one-third of Madinah's harvest. That agreement would have left the Quraysh alone in the position of attack and the Muslims would most probably have been able to gain a quick victory against them. This was only an offer and no agreement was signed.
- Before having the agreement signed and witnessed, the Prophet consulted the two leaders of the *Anṣār,* Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh and Sa`d ibn `Ubādah. They asked him: "Is this something you would like us to do? In this case, we will accept it for your sake. Or is it something God has ordered and we have to accept it? Or is it something you are doing for our sake?" The Prophet answered: "I am doing it for you, having seen all the Arabs joining forces against you." He added that all he wanted was to break up the unity of their enemies for the present.

Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh said:

> Messenger of God, when we were, like these people, idolaters, unaware of any religion other than the worship of idols, they did not hope to get a single fruit from Madinah except as a present from us or if we sold it to them. Now that God has honoured us with Islam and guided us to it and has given us the honour and strength of having you in our midst, would we willingly give them our goods? We have no need for this agreement. We will give them

nothing but the sword until God makes His judgement between us.

The Prophet was pleased with this reply and said: "You do what you wish." Turning to the Ghaṭafān chiefs, he said: "You may go now, for we have nothing to offer you except the sword." What the Prophet thought of doing on this occasion was merely a temporary measure in an emergency situation. It was by no means indicative of a final rule.

- The Prophet also concluded the peace agreement at al-Ĥudaybiyah with the Quraysh when they were still associating partners with God. The terms of the agreement were far from satisfactory to many Muslims. The agreement stipulated that neither party would go to war against the other for ten years. People would live in peace and security. The Prophet and his companions would go back without entering Makkah, to return in a year's time when they would be allowed in the city for three days only, having no armament other than swords in their shields. If an unbeliever should seek to join the Muslims, they would turn him back, but if a Muslim sought to join the unbelievers, they would not have to send him back. Acting on God's instruction, the Prophet accepted those seemingly unfair conditions for a definite purpose known to Him. In similar circumstances the leaders of the Muslim community could take action on a similar basis.

The practical nature of the Islamic faith makes it necessary to face up to any situation with adequate means. Islam takes a practical and flexible approach which is at the same time clear and firmly based. If we seek in Islamic teachings a basis for positive action to deal with any practical situation, we will not need to twist Qur'ānic or *aĥadīth* statements, or give them arbitrary interpretations. What is needed is to fear God and to refrain from any attempt to make His faith subservient to evil and ignorant realities. We must also guard against adopting a defeatist attitude which puts Islam on the defensive when it is a faith that is meant to govern and regulate people's lives. It satisfies, from a position of strength, all the needs of practical life. Praise be to God for having guided us to His faith.

Uniting Believers' Hearts

When God instructed His Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), to accept the state of non-belligerency from any community which offered him it and to incline to peace whenever they so inclined, He also directed him to rely on Him and place his trust in Him. He further reassured him that He knows precisely what all people hide as guarded secrets: "*If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as*

well, and place your trust in God. He alone hears all and knows all." (Verse 61)

Furthermore, God assured him that they would not be able to deceive him, should they try to do so. If their peace offer was merely a cover- up for their real intentions of treachery, he could always rely on God who is sure to protect him. It was He who granted him victory in the Battle of Badr, when He strengthened him with His own help and with the believers. It was He who established their brotherhood based on faith and united their hearts which could not have been united by any other means: *"Should they seek to deceive you, God is all-sufficient for you. He it is who has strengthened you with His help and rallied the believers round you, uniting their hearts. If you were to spend all that is on earth you could not have so united their hearts, but God has united them. He is Mighty and Wise."* (Verses 62-63)

The Prophet is here reassured that he would not need anything other than God's help, for that is more than sufficient for protection from any treachery. It was He who gave strength and support to His Messenger in the first place, when he rallied the believers round him. They were true to their pledges. They came to be a united force, after they had had divergent loyalties. They were often in open hostility against one another and fought their tribal wars with determined ferocity. The reference here may be to the two tribes of Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, who constituted the *Anşār.* In pre-Islamic days, their enmity and protracted disputes were so fierce that there could not be any sort of peace between them, let alone a bond of brotherhood which Islam forged. However, this verse may also be intended as a reference to the *Muhājirīn,* who migrated with the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah. They also had the same sort of internal disputes and enmity as the *Anşār.* Or it may be that the verse means them all together. Indeed the whole of Arabia was alike in its internal hostilities.

It was a great miracle which could never have been accomplished by anyone other than God, through the faith He revealed. Hearts that had always been hostile, and natures that had been rebellious, were solidly united. Their hostility was replaced by love and unity of a standard that serves as a symbol for life in heaven: *"We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest] as brothers, face to face, on raised couches."* (15: 47)

This faith is remarkable indeed. When it touches people's hearts, it pours into them a mixture of love, familiarity and compassion that is certain to soften them and establish between them a firm and deeply- rooted bond. Words, looks, touches and heartbeats all become lyrics and odes expressing mutual love, compassion, loyalty, support and forbearance. What is the secret of such a profound transformation? The secret is known only to God. However, its effects are clear to the believers themselves.

The faith of Islam makes its appeal to mankind on the basis of pure love that has its roots in faith in God and is nourished by dedication to His cause. When human beings make a favourable response to that appeal, the miracle that can only be worked out by God takes place in reality.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Some of God's servants who are neither prophets nor martyrs shall have on the Day of Judgement a position so close to God that prophets and martyrs would love to have." His Companions said: "Messenger of God, will you please tell us who these people are." He said: "These are people who love one another for God's sake only. They have no relation of kinship or business interests with one another. By God, their faces are radiant with light, and they have light. They shall experience no fear or sadness when other people are overtaken by fear and sadness." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

The Prophet also said: "When a Muslim meets his Muslim brother and they shake hands, their sins shall fall off just like leaves fall off a dry tree on a windy day. Their sins shall be forgiven them, even though they appear to be as huge as sea foam." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.]

God's Messenger made several statements on this point. His actions confirm that such love, and unity constitutes an essential factor in his message. The community that he built on the basis of love provides the best proof that such love was not merely flowery words or idealistic actions by a few individuals. It was a firmly established reality that came into being by God's will. It is only He who can bring about such a real unity of hearts.

Matching Superior Forces

The *sūrah* moves on to reassure the Prophet and the Muslim community yet again that God is on their side. This is more than enough for them to ensure their victory. The Prophet is also instructed to encourage the believers to fight for God's cause. They are equal to a force that outnumbers them by ten to one. Even at their weakest, the believers are more than a match for twice their number.

> *Prophet, God is enough for you and those of the believers who follow you. Prophet, urge the believers to fight. If there are twenty steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a hundred of you, they will defeat a thousand of those who disbelieve, for those are devoid of understanding. Now God has lightened your burden, for He knows that you are weak. So, if there are a hundred steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a thousand of you they will, by God's will, defeat two thousand. God is with those who are steadfast.* (Verses 64-66)

We pause here a little to contemplate the difference between God's invincible, overwhelming power and the small force which tries to suppress the advocates of the divine message. The difference is too huge to allow any meaningful comparison. Hence, the outcome of the battle is a foregone conclusion. This is what is implied in the statement: "*Prophet, God is enough for you and those of the believers who follow you.*" (Verse 64)

This is followed by an order to the Prophet to urge the believers to fight for God's cause, now that every soul is ready for the engagement, every heart is full with expectation and all are confident, reassured: "*Prophet, urge the believers to fight.*" (Verse 65) Rouse them to arms, for they are a match for their enemies, even though they may be much inferior in number: "*If there are twenty steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a hundred of you, they will defeat a thousand of those who disbelieve.*" (Verse 65) The reason for such a great difference in real power comes as a surprise, but it is true, incisive: "*For those are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 65)

What is the link between understanding and victory? There may be very little on the surface, but the link is very real and strong. The believers are distinguished by the fact that they know their way which they have chosen after deep thought. They understand the course they follow in this life and they are well aware of the purpose of their existence and their goals. They have a perfect understanding of the nature of Godhead and the nature of servitude to God. They know that God must be the only master in the universe, and that none of His servants can associate any partners with Him. They realize that they, the Muslim community, are the group that follow divine guidance, whose task is to liberate humanity, by God's will, from servitude to creatures so that they worship God alone. They are the ones to be entrusted with power on earth, not to exercise superiority over others, but to ensure that the word of God reigns supreme. Their mission is to struggle for God's cause, build a proper human civilization, and establish the rule of justice among all people.

All this understanding pours enlightenment, confidence, strength and reassurance into the believers' hearts. They are thus motivated to go into their campaigns of *jihād* with certainty of the outcome. This alone multiplies their strength. Their enemies, on the other hand, are "devoid of understanding". Their hearts are sealed, and their eyes are blinded. Their forces are without power, although they may appear to be superior. That is because their link to the source of real power has been severed.

This relative power of one to ten is the original balance of power between the believers who are full of understanding and the unbelievers who are devoid of it. Even when the Muslims who remain steadfast are at their weakest, this ratio is two to one: "*Now God has lightened your burden, for He knows that you are weak. So, if there are a hundred steadfast men among you, they will overcome two hundred, and if there are a*

thousand of you they will, by God's will, defeat two thousand. God is with those who are steadfast." (Verse 66)

Some scholars and Qur'ānic commentators have taken these verses to imply a commandment to the believers that, when they are strong, no one may run away from ten of the unbelievers, or from two in the case of weakness. There are considerable differences on points of detail, which we prefer not to go into. It is our considered opinion that these verses make a statement of fact in estimating the believers' strength when they confront their enemies. This is an estimate made according to God's own measure, which is the true measure. These verses are also meant to inform the believers of this fact so that they have more confidence and reassurance. God certainly knows best, but in our considered view, these statements do not stipulate rules to be implemented.

Rulings on Captives of War

The *sūrah* moves on to outline certain rulings that are relevant to taking prisoners of war and what to do with them. This comes in the context of the Prophet's action with regard to the captives taken in the Battle of Badr. The captives themselves are invited to accept the faith, which provides them with a prospect giving them more than fair compensation for the loss they suffered:

> *It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is almighty, wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken. Enjoy, then, what you have gained, as lawful and good, and remain God-fearing; indeed God is much forgiving, most merciful. Prophet, say to the captives who are in your hands: 'If God finds goodness in your hearts, He will give you something better than all that has been taken from you, and He will forgive you your sins. God is much forgiving, merciful.' Should they seek to play false with you, they were previously false to God Himself but He gave [you] mastery over them. God is All-knowing, Wise.* (Verses 67-71)

Ibn Isĥāq relates within the context of his account of the events of the Battle of Badr: "The Prophet was in the shed erected for him, with Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh and a number of the *Anşār* close on hand guarding the Prophet against any possible surprise attack by the unbelievers. When the Muslim fighters started to take prisoners, the Prophet noticed that Sa`d did not look very pleased. He asked him: 'You do not seem very happy, Sa`d with what our Companions are doing?' Sa`d answered: `That is true, Messenger of God. This is the first major defeat God has

inflicted on the unbelievers. I would have preferred to do away with their men, rather than keep them alive."'

Imām Ahmad relates on the authority of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "On the day of the battle, God inflicted a heavy defeat on the unbelievers, with 70 of them killed and 70 taken prisoner. The Prophet consulted some of his companions about what to do with the prisoners. Abū. Bakr said: `Messenger of God, these are our cousins and tribesmen. I suggest that you take ransom from them, which we could use to improve our position *vis-à-vis* the unbelievers. Besides, they will still have a chance to follow God's guidance and thus come to support us.' The Prophet then asked `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb for his view, and `Umar said: `I do not share Abū Bakr's view. I suggest that you give me my relative to kill, and you give `Aqīl ibn Abī Ṭālib to his brother `Alī to kill, and you give Ĥamzah his brother to kill. We thus demonstrate in front of God that we have no sympathy whatsoever with the unbelievers. After all, these are their elite.' The Prophet felt more inclined to Abū Bakr's view and accepted ransom from them."

`Umar continues his account of this event: "On the next day, I went to the Prophet to find him and Abū Bakr with tears in their eyes. I said: `What makes you and your Companion cry? If I find it in me to cry, I will, and if not, I will pretend to join you in your crying.' The Prophet said that they were crying `because of what our Companions advised of taking ransom. I have been shown the punishment you would have suffered closer to you than this tree, (pointing to a nearby tree.)' Soon afterwards, these verses were revealed*: "It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken. Enjoy, then, what you have gained, as lawful and good, and remain God-fearing; indeed God is much Forgiving, most Merciful."* (Verses 67-69) This last verse makes it clear that the spoils of war are lawful to take." [This ĥadīth is also related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, and al-Tirmidhī with different chains of transmission]

Imām Ahmad relates on Anas's authority: "The Prophet consulted his companions concerning the captives taken in the Battle of Badr, saying to them: 'God has given you power over them.' `Umar stood up and said: `Messenger of God, kill them.' The Prophet turned away from him, and then said: 'God has given you power over them, and only yesterday they were your brethren.' `Umar repeated his suggestion, but the Prophet turned away from him and repeated his question. Abū Bakr stood up and said: 'Messenger of God, it may be wise to pardon them and accept ransom from them.' The Prophet's face cheered up. Then God revealed the verse saying: *"Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.'"* (Verse 68)

God's Preferred Option

Yet another *Ĥadīth* reported by `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd explains this incident. "On the day of Badr the Prophet asked his Companions what they thought he should do about prisoners of war. Abū Bakr said: `Messenger of God, they are your own people and your tribesmen. Spare them and offer them the chance to repent of their past attitude.' `Umar said: `Messenger of God, they have accused you of lying and they have chased you out of your city. Put them to death.' `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah said: `Messenger of God, you are now in a valley where there is a lot of wood. Light a big fire and throw them into it.' The Prophet remained silent making no rejoinder, then he went into his home. Some people thought he would take Abū Bakr's view, and others thought `Umar's view would be upheld, while still others felt that the Prophet might adopt the view of `Abdullāh ibn RawāĤah. The Prophet then came out and said: `God makes some people's hearts so soft that they become softer than milk, and He makes other people's hearts harden until they become harder than bricks. Abū Bakr, your attitude is similar to that of Abraham (peace be upon him) as he said, '*he that follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are surely most Forgiving, Merciful.*' (14: 36) And you are also like Jesus (peace be upon him) as he said: '*If You punish them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are indeed Almighty, Wise.*' (5: 118) As for you `Umar, you are like Moses (peace be upon him) as he said: '*Our Lord, wipe out their wealth and firm up their hearts so they would not believe until they see painful torment.' (10:* 88) And you are also like Noah (peace be upon him) as he said: '*My Lord, do not leave on earth a single unbeliever.*' (71: 26) You are in poverty, so no one may be set free without a ransom, or else, he should be beheaded."

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd reports: "I said: 'Messenger of God, except Suhayl ibn Bayđā'. For he is considering becoming a Muslim.' The Prophet was silent for a while. Never until that day did I fear that rocks could fall on my head from the sky. I remained so worried until the Prophet said: `With the exception of Suhayl ibn Bayđā'.' Shortly afterwards God revealed the verses: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken. Enjoy, then, what you have gained, as lawful and good, and remain God-fearing; indeed God is much Forgiving, most Merciful.*" (Verses 67-69)

The killing mentioned in these verses aims to give strength to the Muslims and weaken their enemies, until the Muslims reached a stage when they could set prisoners free either as a favour or for a ransom. Hence the reproach of the Muslims. The Battle of Badr was the first major battle between the Muslims and the unbelievers. The Muslims were still small in number, compared with the unbelievers.

Hence, any reduction of the number of fighters among the unbelievers would have a weakening effect on them, and would hurt their pride, deterring them from launching another campaign against the Muslims. This would have achieved a much higher objective than they could achieve by taking ransom, poor as they were.

There was another concept to establish in people's hearts, which was beautifully stated by `Umar: "We demonstrate in front of God that there is no sympathy whatsoever in our hearts with the unbelievers."

We feel — and God knows best — that these are the two main reasons why God did not like the Muslims to take prisoners at Badr and then set them free for ransom. It was in the light of these circumstances that God said: *"It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land."* (Verse 67) Hence the Qur'ānic reproach of the Muslims who accepted ransom in return for setting the prisoners free: *"You may desire the fleeting gains of this world."* (Verse 67) Because of this preference for the fleeting good of the present life you have taken them prisoners instead of killing them, and you accepted ransom in return for their freedom. *"But God desires for you the good of the life to come."* (Verse 67) Needless to say, the Muslims should prefer the option God prefers, because it is always the one to bring them good. To seek the hereafter means to abandon the pursuit of the fleeting comforts of this world.

"God is Almighty, Wise." (Verse 67) He has enabled you to achieve victory for a specific, wise purpose which He accomplishes through inflicting such a heavy defeat on the unbelievers. *"Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers."* (Verse 8) *"Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken."* (Verse 68)

God had previously decreed that He would forgive the believers who took part in the Battle of Badr whatever they might subsequently do. That preceding decree spared them the punishment which would have attended their acceptance of the ransom. God then showered on them more of His grace, by making the spoils of war lawful for them to take, while it was forbidden to the followers of earlier prophets. He reminds them of their need to remain God-fearing as He also reminds them of His grace and forgiveness. Thus their feelings towards their Lord remain well balanced. They are not tempted by God's mercy to the extent that they lose sight of their need to remain always God-fearing: *"Enjoy, then, what you have gained, as lawful and good, and remain God-fearing; indeed God is much-Forgiving, most Merciful."* (Verse 69)

Seeking to Deceive God

Now the *sūrah* addresses those captives, giving them hope and promising a future which is far better than the life they used to lead. They are also promised what is superior to the property they lost, in addition to forgiveness and mercy: "*Prophet, say to the captives who are in your hands: 'If God finds goodness in your hearts, He will give you something better than all that has been taken from you, and He will forgive you your sins. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful.'*" (Verse 70) But all this depends on them opening their hearts to the light of faith. God will then find goodness in them. That goodness is the very fact of believing in God. It is goodness at its purest. Indeed all goodness stems from it.

From the Islamic point of view, keeping prisoners of war in the hands of believers is only a means of opening up the essence of goodness that may be deep in their hearts. Thus their nature becomes recipient to the call to accept the divine faith and follow guidance. No vengeance is to be exacted on those prisoners of war. Such was the practice of the Byzantines and other conquerors. But Islam follows a totally different approach.

Al-Zuhrī relates that the Quraysh sent people to pay the ransom of their prisoners. Each clan paid whatever was accepted from them in ransom. Al-`Abbās (the Prophet's uncle who was among the captives) said: "Messenger of God, I have been a Muslim." The Prophet said: "God knows better whether you were truly a Muslim. If it is true, He will certainly reward you. To all appearances, you were against us. Therefore, you have to pay ransom for yourself, your two nephews, Nawfal and `Aqīl, and also for your ally `Utbah ibn `Amr." He said: "I do not have enough for all this, Messenger of God." The Prophet said: "What about the money you and your wife, Umm al-Faḍl, have hidden underground. You said to her: If I am killed on this trip of mine, this money is to be shared between my three sons, al-Faḍl, `Abdullāh and Qutham." He said: "I do know for certain that you are God's Messenger. This is something of which no one has any knowledge except myself and my wife. Will you please, then, count as advance payment the 20 ounces of gold your companions have taken from me?" The Prophet said: "No. That is something God has given to us." Al-`Abbās then paid the ransom money for himself, his two nephews and his ally. God then revealed the verse which says: "*Prophet, say to the captives who are in your hands: If God finds goodness in your hearts, He will give you something better than all that has been taken from you, and He will forgive you your sins. God is much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 70) Al-`Abbās later said: "God has replaced my loss, giving me for those 20 ounces twenty slaves who carry on with my business. I am still hoping for God's forgiveness as well."

At the same time that the captives are given this prospect of hope, they are warned against any attempt to play false with God's Messenger (peace be upon him). They have already experienced the outcome of playing false to God: "*Should they seek to*

play false with you, they were previously false to God Himself but He gave [you] mastery over them. God is All-knowing, Wise." (Verse 71) Their treachery to God took the form of associating partners with Him after He had formed their nature to always recognize Him as the only Lord, but they were never true to their pledges. If they seek to play false with God's Messenger when they are captives in his hands, they should remember the result of their first treachery which led them to be taken prisoner and gave mastery over them to God's Messenger and his followers. God is certainly aware of the thoughts they harbour and He is wise as He inflicts punishment on them: "*God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 71)

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Qurṭubī quotes Ibn al-`Arabī's comments:

> When those unbelievers were taken prisoners, some of them started talking about adopting Islam, without showing any real intention to do so, nor did they make any unequivocal acknowledgement of its being the true faith. It looked as if they might have wanted to win favour with the Muslims without moving themselves away from the unbelievers. Our scholars have made it clear that when an unbeliever does that and only pays lip service to Islam without taking steps to be a true believer, he remains an unbeliever. If the same is done by a believer, he is not a believer at all, unless it all be only thoughts that occur to him and he is unable to get rid of them. God has pardoned people such fleeting thoughts. God tells His Messenger the truth as He says to him: "*Should they seek to play false with you,*" which means that if they are only trying to deceive you with what they say about Islam and their willingness to accept it, then this is only their habit. "*They were previously false to God Himself,*" when they disbelieved and tried to kill you and then waged war against you. However, should what they are saying be honest and there is true goodness in their hearts, God will certainly be aware of that and will accept it from them. He will then reward them with something which is far superior to what was taken from them and with His forgiveness of their past treachery.[41]

Definition of Relations

The *sūrah's* final passage outlines the internal and external relations of the Muslim community. Rulings concerning these relations are also outlined. This gives us a clear idea of the nature of the Muslim community itself and the basis on which it is founded. The essential ties which bring that community together are not those of blood, land, race, history, language or economy. Ties of family, country, nation or

[41] M. al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi` li-Aĥkām al-Qur'ān*, Vol. VIII, p. 55

financial interests are of no importance. The only ties which are given weight and importance are those of faith, organized movement and its leadership. Hence, those who believe, migrate to the land of Islam, abandon all their earlier links with their own land, homes and nation, sacrifice their lives and possessions and strive for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support and join them in their faith under the same leadership and in the same movement — all those are friends and protectors of one another. On the other hand, those who believe but have not yet migrated may not aspire to such status that provides for mutual protection. This is because they have not yet pledged their full loyalty to the Islamic leadership and have not yet abandoned all ties with the unbelievers, except the bond of faith. Within the Muslim community itself, blood relations have priority in inheritance and other matters. The unbelievers, on the other hand, are also patrons and allies of one another.

These are the main lines delineating loyalties and relationships as shown in these very clear verses: "*Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard, with their possessions and their lives, for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support — these are friends and protectors of one another. As for those who believe but have not migrated [to join you], you owe no duty of protection to them until they have migrated. Yet, should they appeal to you for support, on grounds of faith, it is your duty to support them, except against a people with whom you have a treaty. God sees all that you do. The unbelievers are allies of one another. Unless you do likewise, there will be oppression on earth and much corruption. Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support are indeed the true believers. Forgiveness of sins, and most generous provisions await them. And those who subsequently come to believe, and migrate and strive hard with you [for God's cause] shall also belong to you. Those who are bound by ties of blood have the first claim on one another in accordance with God's decree. God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 72-75)

Loyalty in a Muslim Community

In the early days of Islam, until the major Battle of Badr, the social bond that tied Muslims together involved inheritance and obligatory mutual support, sharing in the payment of any blood money for accidental killing. These ties replaced those of blood and family. When the state was established and acquired additional strength after God enabled it to score its most remarkable victory at Badr, the obligation of giving loyalty and support was maintained. As for inheritance and help in the payment of blood money, these were now confined, by God's order, to blood relatives within the Muslim community itself.

The migration mentioned here as a condition of such mutual commitment, in its special and general aspects, refers to the physical departure, by those who can, from

the land of the unbelievers to the land of Islam. Those who were able to migrate but chose not to do so, because they did not want to abandon their ties, whether financial or family, with the unbelievers had no claim for protection by the Muslim community. This provision applied to some Bedouins and some individuals in Makkah who were not prevented from migrating. The Muslim community had an obligation to come to the support of those believers, particularly when they appealed for help on account of being harassed or persecuted on grounds of faith. The only exception was if they wanted such help against a people with whom the Muslim community had a treaty, as such treaties had a stronger claim to be honoured by the Muslims.

These statements and the rulings and provisions they outline give us a clear idea of the nature of the Muslim community, its essential factors and basic values. Nevertheless, a word about the emergence of this community and its foundation, method of action and commitments will clarify that better.

The message of Islam conveyed by God's Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), is the last link in the long history of the call advocating submission to God alone undertaken by the noble prophets. Throughout history, this message has remained the same: that human beings should recognize their true Lord and Sustainer, God the only deity, and that they should submit to Him alone. All claims to lordship by human beings are null and void. Except for a few individuals here and there in history, mankind as a whole has never denied the existence of God or His sovereignty over the universe. It has rather erred in its understanding of His real attributes, or associated partners with Him, either in belief and worship or in assigning sovereignty. Both of these are forms of polytheism which take people out of the faith altogether. Each one of God's Messengers taught humanity the religion God wants people to follow. After a long while, people would start to deviate and steer away from it, back into *jāhiliyyah,* ignorance and polytheism, i.e. associating partners with God, either in belief and worship or in attributing sovereignty to them or both.

Throughout history the call to believe in God has had the same nature. Its purpose is self-surrender to God, which means to bring human beings into submission to the Supreme Lord alone, to free them from servitude to human beings so that they may devote themselves to the one true God. Thus, they would be freed from the clutches of human lordship and man-made laws, value systems and traditions. They would be able to acknowledge the sovereignty and authority of the one true God and follow His law in all spheres of life. This is the central issue of the message of Islam as preached by the Prophet Muĥammad and all the noble prophets and messengers sent before him (peace be upon them all). It wants people to acknowledge God's sovereignty, which is readily acknowledged by all the universe. Human life must be

regulated by the same authority that regulates the entire universe. Thus, human beings will not have their own code of living and will not submit to an authority other than those governing the whole universe, including those aspects of human life over which human beings have no say.

As is well known, human beings are subject to the laws of nature God has set into operation in matters that affect their birth, growing up, health, illness, death and also those that determine the consequences of their own choices in the areas where they can exercise their free-will. They cannot change God's laws governing the universe or these aspects of their own life. It is only wise then for them to submit to God in those aspects of their life in which they have a free choice. When they do so they make God's law govern both aspects of their life, the one which follows God's natural laws and the one subject to their own will. They thus bring harmony into their life.

Jāhiliyyah, which may be defined as a state of ignorance based on giving sovereignty to human beings, is bound to bring about a clash between the natural and the free-will aspects of human life. To counter *jāhiliyyah* in human life all prophets, including Muĥammad, God's final Messenger, advocated submission to God alone. It must be said that ignorance is not represented by an abstract theory. In certain periods of history, ignorance had no theoretical representation whatsoever. However, it always takes the form of a living movement in a society which has its own leadership, its own concepts and values, and its own traditions, habits and feelings. It is an organized society and there is close co-operation and loyalty between its individuals. It is always ready to defend its existence consciously or unconsciously. It crushes all elements which seem to be dangerous to its personality.

Since *jāhiliyyah* takes the form of an active movement in this fashion, rather than of a theory, then any attempt to abolish *jāhiliyyah* and bring people back to God through representing Islam merely as a theory is both useless and ineffective. *jāhiliyyah* controls the practical world, and for its support there is a living and active organization. In this situation, mere theoretical efforts cannot be a match for it. When the purpose is to abolish the existing system and to replace it with a new one that is different in character, principles, as well as in all general and particular aspects, it stands to reason that this new system should come into the battlefield as an organized movement and a viable community. It must also have the advantage of a more powerful strategy, social organization and firmer ties between its individuals. Only then can it hope to replace the existing system.

The Practical Manifestation of Islamic Theory

The theoretical foundation of Islam, in every period of history, has been the

declaration by which a human being bears witness that `there is no deity other than God.' This means that God is the sustainer, the ruler and the real sovereign. This must take the form of a firm belief that is deeply rooted in one's heart and manifested in both addressing all worship to God alone and putting His laws into practice. This declaration cannot be deemed to have been truly made with such complete acceptance of its meaning. It is only when a person accepts its significance fully that he is deemed to be a true Muslim.

From the theoretical point of view, the establishment of this rule means that people must refer to God in conducting any aspect of their lives. They cannot decide on any affair without first referring to God's injunctions that may be relevant to it and implement them. There is only one source to know God's guidance; that is, His Messenger. Thus, in the second part of the declaration by which a person becomes a Muslim we declare that we `bear witness that Muĥammad is God's Messenger.'

This theoretical basis of the Islamic doctrine provides a complete code of living for the entirety of human life. A Muslim approaches every aspect of his individual or social life, whether within or outside the Islamic community, from the perspective of this code of living which also regulates the internal and external relations of the Muslim community.

As has already been explained, Islam cannot confine itself to a mere theory which people accept as a belief practised merely as worship rituals while remaining within the structure of the existing *jāhiliyyah* society. If true believers, numerous as they may be, do that, their presence within the *jāhiliyyah* society cannot lead to a real and practical existence of Islam. Those 'theoretical' Muslims who are part of the structure of the *jāhiliyyah* society will inevitably have to respond to its requirements. Whether they like it or not, they will try, consciously or subconsciously, to fulfil its basic needs and defend its existence, and they will try to counter whatever forces or factors are threatening that existence. Any living entity will always complete these tasks using all its organs without even consulting them. In practical terms, those individuals, who are theoretically Muslims, will continue to practically support and strengthen the *jāhiliyyah* society which they should, in theory, be trying to dismantle. They will remain living cells within its structure, supporting its continuing existence with all their talent, experience and capability. Their efforts should in fact be directed to using all their power, talent and experience for the establishment of an Islamic society.

For this reason, it is necessary that the theoretical foundation of Islam, i.e. the belief, should take in practice the form of an organized and active group right at the outset. It is also necessary that this group should separate itself from *jāhiliyyah* society and remain independent of, and distinct from it. After all, Islam aims to dismantle *jāhiliyyah* society altogether. At the centre of this new group there should

be a new leadership. Such leadership first came in the person of the Prophet himself. In later generations, it has been delegated to those who strive for bringing people back to believing in God as the only deity in the universe and who accept His sovereignty, authority and laws. Every person who bears witness that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger should cut off relations of loyalty to *jāhiliyyah* society, which he has forsaken, and its ignorant leadership, whether it takes the guise of priests, magicians or astrologers, or in the form of political, social or economic leadership, as was the case with the Quraysh at the time of the Prophet. Full and complete loyalty must be given to the new Islamic movement and the new Muslim leadership. This decisive step must be taken at the very moment when a person makes this verbal declaration bearing witness that `there is no deity other than God and Muĥammad is God's Messenger.' A Muslim society cannot come into existence without this. It does not become a reality when it is no more than a belief held by individual Muslims, numerous as they may be. They must form themselves into an active, harmonious and cooperative group with a separate and distinct existence. Like the limbs of a human body, all individuals in this group work together to strengthen its foundation, and to enable it to expand and defend itself against any external attack which threatens its existence. In all this, they must work under a leadership that is independent of that of *jāhiliyyah* society. The role of this leadership is to regulate, harmonize and direct their efforts to the strengthening of their Islamic character and to resist and abolish the hostile, *jāhiliyyah* set-up. It was in this way that Islam was established the first time. It was founded on a creed which, though concise, encompassed all life. This creed immediately brought into action a viable and dynamic group of people who became independent and separate from the *jāhiliyyah* society that rose to challenge it. It never came as an abstract theory devoid of practical existence. Similarly, it can be brought about in the future only in the same manner. There is no other way for the survival of Islam, in any area or period of time, unless it wants to remain under the yoke *of jāhiliyyah.* Efforts to bring about a revival of Islam must always be equipped with a thorough understanding of its character which tries to be represented in a movement and in an organic system.

When we understand these basic elements in the nature of Islam and its method of action we can fully understand the import of the provisions that we read in the final passage of this *sūrah.* These organize relations within the Muslim community between those who migrated from Makkah and those who provided them with shelter and support in Madinah, and the relations of these together with those who did not migrate. All these relations are based on the understanding of the active and organized emergence of Islamic society.

Equipped with this understanding, we can now look at the relevant passage and the provisions it outlines.

Demarcation of Loyalties in Islamic Society

> *Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard, with their possessions and their lives, for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support – these are friends and protectors of one another. As for those who believe but have not migrated [to join you], you owe no duty of protection to them until they have migrated. Yet, should they appeal to you for support, on grounds of faith, it is your duty to support them, except against a people with whom you have a treaty. God sees all that you do. The unbelievers are allies of one another. Unless you do likewise, there will be oppression on earth and much corruption.* (Verses 72-73)

Everyone in Makkah who declared his or her belief that `there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger' also disclaimed all loyalty to their family, clan, tribe or to the leadership of the *jāhiliyyah* society represented by the Quraysh. At the same time, they pledged every loyalty to Muĥammad, God's Messenger, and to the nucleus of the new society emerging under his leadership. On the other hand, the *jāhiliyyah* society tried to defend itself against the danger represented by the new group which broke away from it even before they clashed in the battlefield. It certainly tried to crush the new group in its early days.

At the same time, the Prophet established a bond of brotherhood between the members of the new group. In other words, he transformed those individuals who broke away from the *jāhiliyyah* society into a new community where a new bond of mutual loyalty was established. In the new community, the bond of faith replaced that of blood and family in other societies. Everyone in that community pledged their total loyalty to the new leadership and the new entity, thus replacing all past bonds and loyalties.

When a number of people in Madinah accepted Islam and pledged their total loyalty to the Islamic leadership, they made it clear that they would obey that leadership in all situations. They also pledged to strive to protect God's Messenger against his enemies, in the same way as they protected their own women, children and property. When all this was set in place, God allowed the Muslims of Makkah to migrate to Madinah. Thus, the new Muslim state was established in Madinah under the leadership of God's Messenger. The Prophet again established a bond of brotherhood between the *Muhaījirīn,* i.e. the migrants, and the *Anşār,* i.e. the supporters. Again this brotherhood replaced the bonds of blood and family with all that they entailed, including inheritance, payment of blood-money and other compensations for which the family and the clan were liable. "*Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard, with their possessions and their lives, for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support – these are friends and protectors of one*

another." (Verse 72) They are mutual protectors in as much as they provide one another with support, and they are friends in as much as they inherit one another and provide help in the payment of blood-money for accidental death, and other compensations, as well as fulfilling the commitments and honouring the pledges that result from blood relations.

Other individuals then accepted Islam as a faith without practically joining the Muslim community, because they did not migrate to the land of Islam where God's law was implemented and the Muslim leadership was in full control. Those individuals were not part of the Muslim community which was able to fulfil its whole existence in its own land.

These individuals were in Makkah or were Bedouins living in the areas surrounding Madinah. This means that they adopted the faith but did not join the Islamic society, nor did they pledge their full loyalty to its leadership. These were not regarded as part of the Muslim community. With these, God did not require that the Muslim community have full loyalty, in all its aspects, because they were not, in practical terms, part of Islamic society. Hence, the rule regarding these individuals stated: *"As for those who believe but have not migrated [to join you], you owe no duty of protection to them until they have migrated. Yet, should they appeal to you for support, on grounds of faith, it is your duty to support them, except against a people with whom you have a treaty."* (Verse 72)

This rule is perfectly understandable because it fits with the nature of Islam and its practical method of action. Those individuals were not part of the Muslim society and, therefore, they could not have a relationship of allegiance with it. Nevertheless, there is the bond of faith which, alone, does not provide for duties towards such individuals which the Islamic society is bound to fulfil. However, in the case where these individuals suffer aggression or an attempt to turn them away from their faith a provision in their favour is clearly stated. Should they in such a situation appeal to Muslims in the land of Islam for support, the Islamic society must support them. The only proviso is that giving such support should not violate any provision of a treaty the Muslim society might have with another party, even though that party might be the aggressor. What we have to understand here is that the first priority is given to what serves the interests of the Muslim community and its method of action with whatever contracts or transactions that this might produce. These have to be honoured even in the case where aggression is made against believers who have not joined the Islamic society which represents the practical existence of the Islamic faith.

This shows the great importance Islam attaches to its own active organization. The comment on this rule added at the end of the verse says: *"God sees all that you do."* (Verse 72) Whatever human beings may do, God is aware of all their actions. He knows the preliminaries, incentives, motivations, the deeds as well as their effects

and consequences.

Thus, Islamic society is an active and organic grouping where individuals are united by their loyalty, allegiance and mutual support of one another. The same characteristics apply to ignorant or *jāhiliyyah* societies: *"The unbelievers are allies of one another."* (Verse 73) By nature, a *jāhiliyyah* society does not act as mere individuals. It behaves like a living entity whose organs move by nature to defend its existence and independence. Hence, the people in that society are, to all intents and purposes, friends and protectors of one another. Therefore, Islam must confront them as a society which demonstrates the same characteristics to a stronger and firmer degree.

Should the Muslims refrain from confronting them as a community whose individuals are united by mutual ties of loyalty and friendship, these Muslims would be subject to persecution by the *jāhiliyyah* society. They would not be able to resist that society since it moves against them as an integrated whole. Thus, *jāhiliyyah* would gain the upper hand against Islam, sovereignty would be given to human beings and people would be forced to submit themselves to other people. All this leads to much persecution and the worst type of corruption. *"Unless you do likewise, there will be oppression on earth and much corruption."* (Verse 73)

This is a very serious warning. Muslims who do not establish their existence on the solid foundation of an active organization bound by a single loyalty and working under a single leadership shall have to answer to God for all the oppression and the corruption that results from their actions, in addition to what they suffer in their own lives as a result.

True Believers

Once more, the *sūrah* states the true nature of faith: *"Those who believe and have migrated and striven hard for God's cause, as well as those who give them shelter and support are indeed the true believers. Forgiveness of sins, and most generous provisions await them."* (Verse 74) This is the true picture reflecting true faith. This verse tells us exactly how Islam gains its real existence. Islam does not become a reality with a declaration of its theoretical basis, or its adoption as a conceptual belief, or even with offering its worship rituals. The religion of Islam is a code of living which needs an active organization to implement it and put it into practice. When it remains in the form of beliefs only, its existence remains abstract. It does not become a true and practical existence without such an active organization dedicated to its implementation.

Those who belong to such an active organization are the true believers who are promised forgiveness and generous provisions. The provisions are mentioned here in relation to their striving, sacrificing their wealth, supporting their brethren and giving them shelter, with all the costs they bear in meeting these responsibilities. But

in addition to such generous provisions, they are given forgiveness of sins, which counts as the best type of God's bounty.

Grouped with the first Muslim community of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār* are all those who later migrate and strive for God's cause, but the first community had its degree of excellence, as stated in other Qur'ānic verses. The addition is stated here to make it clear that these also belong to the Muslim community, and give it their allegiance. "*And those who subsequently come to believe, and migrate and strive hard with you [for God's cause] shall also belong to you.*" (Verse 75)

The requirement of migration continued to apply until Makkah had fallen to Islam. At that time, the whole of Arabia acknowledged the Islamic leadership and its entire population formed the Islamic community. The Prophet made it clear then that the requirement of migration was no longer operative, but people were required to work for Islam and strive hard in serving its cause. That was in the first round of Islamic triumph which ushered in a period of Islamic rule that continued for nearly twelve centuries. Throughout that period, Islamic law was implemented and the Muslim leadership acknowledged God's sovereignty and fulfilled its obligations under Islamic law. Today, when the whole world has reverted *to jāhiliyyah,* God's law is no longer implemented, sovereignty is usurped by tyrants everywhere and one group of people submit themselves to another, a new round begins. In this round, all provisional laws that applied in the first round may be applicable. Thus, a land may be established where Islam is implemented and to where Muslims should migrate. At a later stage, the rule of Islam will, by God's will, stretch over a wide area when migration will no longer be required. The duty of individual Muslims at this stage is again to work and strive hard for the Islamic cause, just as was the case in the first round.

The first period of building the Islamic existence had its own provisional laws and special duties. Loyalty on the basis of faith replaced blood and family relations in all shapes and forms, as well as rights and duties, including inheritance and mutual support in the payment of penalties and compensation for accidental killing. When the structure of Islamic society became well established after the resounding victory at Badr, the provisional laws applicable to that special period of construction were amended. The amendments re-established inheritance and mutual support in financial liabilities on the basis of family relationships, but only within the Muslim community in the land of Islam: "*Those who are bound by ties of blood have the first claim on one another in accordance with God's decree.*" (Verse 75)

To give priority in such matters to family and relatives, within the general framework of the Muslim community, after the practical existence of Islam has been firmly established meets a certain need of human nature. There is no harm in satisfying people's natural feelings as long as there is no conflict between such

satisfaction and the fulfilment of Islamic duties. Islam does not negate or obliterate natural feelings, but it controls them so that they work in line with the more important requirements of its own existence as a faith. Thus, the satisfaction of people's natural needs and feelings is provided within the general framework of Islam and its requirements. This means that some special periods may have special provisions which are not included among the final provisions of Islamic law which are applicable in a well-established and secure Islamic community. This is how we must understand the requirements of the initial building stage as well as the general nature of Islam and its laws.

"God has full knowledge of everything." (Verse 75) This is the appropriate comment on all these laws and regulations and how they interact and are coordinated. They have their basis in God's knowledge which is flawless, perfect and absolute.

The Nature of Islamic Society

As it builds the Muslim community on the basis of its unique approach, establishing its active organization which is bound together by the bond of faith, Islam aims to highlight and enhance the human qualities of man, giving them prominence in all aspects of life. We cannot fail to notice the clear consistency of the Islamic approach, with all its rules, regulations and laws.

There are certain aspects which man has in common with other animate objects, and some which he shares even with inanimate objects. These have caused those who advocate what may be termed as 'scientific ignorance' to claim on occasions that man is just another animal and on others that he belongs to the world of matter, like inanimate objects. Yet besides these features which man has in common with animals and matter, he has his own qualities and characteristics that distinguish him from both and make him absolutely unique. Ultimately, and under the pressure of undeniable facts, those who belong to `scientific ignorance' have acknowledged man's uniqueness.

With its special approach defined by God Almighty, Islam highlights, enhances and strengthens the qualities that contribute to man's unique status. This is indeed the reason for making the bond of faith the basis of unity in the Muslim community and the mainstay of its organization.

Faith appeals to the highest human qualities and characteristics. Islam does not establish the Muslim community on any bond of descent, language, land, race, colour, interests or common destiny. These are ties which men have in common with animals.

These ties bring together flocks of animals and they can be seen in operation in

stables, grazing land and in animal language. Faith, on the other hand, provides man with a full and complete explanation of his origin, existence and destiny, as well as those of the universe in which he lives. It makes him a creature far superior to matter. Faith is something which relates to man's spirit and understanding, the two qualities that make him unique and raise his humanity to its highest level to which no other creature can aspire.

The bond of faith and ideology is a free one which human beings choose by their own free-will, after proper consideration and study. The other ties are not only more fitting for animals, but are also imposed on man and he has no say in them. No human being can change his family descent or the race to which he belongs. Nor does he have any choice of the colour of his skin. All these matters are settled before he is even born. The same applies to the land or the country of his birth, and the language he speaks as a result of being raised within his particular community. Man has certain material interests and a common destiny with others, but these are also very difficult to change, because they apply to him as well as to his community. There is little room for man's free-will in all these matters. For this reason, Islam does not adopt any of these as the basic bond uniting its community. Faith, ideology and its practical approach of implementation are all matters of free choice. At any moment, a human being can declare his choice of these and determine the community to which he wishes to belong. No restriction is imposed on this choice as a result of man's colour, language, race, descent, the land of his birth or his material interests which may change from one community to another. This sums up the great honour assigned to man in Islamic philosophy.

A Community of Mankind

This Islamic approach making faith the basic social tie in Islamic society has produced remarkable results. Instead of stressing those traits which are common to both man and animal, the Islamic approach promotes and nurtures man's human qualities so that they become the dominant factors. The concrete remarkable result of this attitude was that the Islamic society became an open and all-inclusive community in which people of various races, nations, languages and colours were members. No obstacle prevented them from forming a coherent and open society. The rivers of higher talents and various abilities of all races of mankind flowed together into this vast ocean and worked in perfect harmony. Such a coherent mix gave rise to a high level of civilization in a very short period of time. It harnessed the capabilities, ideas and wisdom of all those peoples to produce a great civilization, in spite of the fact that in those times, travel was difficult and the means of communication were slow.

In this unique Islamic society Arabs, Persians, Syrians, Egyptians, Moroccans, Turks, Chinese, Indians, Romans, Greeks, Indonesians, Africans and people of other nations and races were gathered together. Their various characteristics were united, and with mutual cooperation, harmony and unity they took part in the construction of the Islamic community and the Islamic culture. This marvellous civilization was not an `Arab' civilization but an Islamic one. At no time did it acquire a nationalistic guise, but was instead always based on faith.

All these peoples came together on an equal footing in a relationship of love, with their minds set on a single goal. They used their best abilities, developed the qualities of their races to the fullest, and brought the essence of their personal, national and historical experiences for the development of this united community, to which they all belonged as equal members and in which their common bond was through their relationship with their Lord. In this community their `humanity' developed without any hindrance. Such characteristics were never witnessed in any other community in the entire history of mankind.

The best known society in ancient history was that of the Roman Empire. Peoples of various races, languages and characteristics lived in that society. But nothing of this was based on `human relationship', nor did it aspire to any sublime ideal such as faith. Their society was ordered on a class system which provided for a class of `nobles' and one of `slaves'. Moreover, the Roman race, in general, had the leadership, and the other races were considered its subjects. Hence, this society could not rise to that high level of Islamic society, nor could it produce results and blessings of the type produced by Islamic society.

In recent history there have appeared other societies grouping together different peoples. We may cite the example of the British Empire. It bore a strong resemblance to the Roman society to which it was an heir. It was based on national greed, in which the British nation had the leadership because it was able to exploit the territories which it colonized. The same is true of other European empires. The Spanish and Portuguese Empires in their time, and the French Empire were equally oppressive. They all shared the same contemptible and ugly outlook.

Communism, on the other hand, wanted to establish a new type of society, demolishing the walls of race, colour, nation and land. But its society was not established on the basis of a universal human relationship, but on a class system. Thus, Communist society only reverses the emphasis of the old Roman society: nobles had the distinction in Rome, while in Communist society the proletariat dominate. The underlying emotions in this society are envy and hatred. Such a selfish and vengeful society cannot generate in its individuals anything except base emotions. Its very basis aims to excite, develop and strengthen animalistic characteristics. In its view, the most fundamental needs of human beings are those

which they share with animals. These are food, shelter and sex. To Communism, the whole of human history is nothing but a struggle for food.

Islam, then, is the only divine way of life which brings out the noblest human characteristics, developing and using them for the construction of human society. In this respect, Islam has always remained unique. Those who opt for any other system, whether based on nationalism, colour and race, or on class struggle, or similar corrupt theories, are truly enemies of mankind. They are the ones who do not want man to develop those noble characteristics which have been given to him by his Creator. Nor do they wish to see a human society benefit from the harmonious blending of all those capabilities, experiences and characteristics which have been developed among the various races of mankind. Such people swim against the current and try to reverse the tide of human development. They wish human society to be based on the same factors which group animals together: a stable and a grazing land. They are not happy with that sublime level to which God has raised man and which provides a fitting basis for uniting human society.

It is most odd that a society based on the harnessing of the best human qualities is labelled as fanatic and reactionary, while the one that promotes animal characteristics is hailed as progressive and civilized. All values and considerations are turned upside down only to avoid making faith the basis of human society, when belief is the highest human characteristic.

But God will most certainly accomplish His purpose. This type of reversal into *jāhiliyyah,* or ignorance, and its animal values will not survive for ever in human life. God's will is certain to prevail. Humanity will try one day to establish its society on the basis by which God has honoured man and which provided the foundation of the first Islamic society that attained a highly distinctive position in human history. The image of that society will continue to loom large on the horizon and mankind will aspire to attain the same high level which it had experienced at a particular stage in history.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol VIII

Sūrah 9

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **IV**

Al-Tawbah **1**

Prologue *1*
A Historical View 5
Early Indications of Weakness 7
The Process of Integration 12
Advances and Weaknesses 13
Jihād and its Final Rulings 16
The Final and Provisional Rulings 19
Special to This Sūrah 23

1 The Basis of Inter-Communal Relations *25*
Overview 30
Peace or No Peace 33
Under Strong Pressure 36
The Nature of Islamic International Relations 40
Crystallizing Attitudes 42
An Announcement is Made 46
The Principles of International Relations 49
Honouring Commitments 51
When the Period of Grace is Over 53
Asylum for the Enemy 55
No Peace Possible 58
No Obligation Honoured 60
An Attitude Confirmed by History 62
Hostility Unabated 65
Doubts Dispelled 66
An Order to Fight 69
Who May Tend God's Houses 71
Attitudes Shaped by Feelings 73
Reminder of a Great Event 74
Large Forces Avail Nothing 76

2 Relations with Other Religions *79*
Overview 80
The Truth of People of Earlier Revelations 82
Denying a Known Truth 84
Clarity of Attitudes 88
Jewish Attitudes towards Islam 90
History Tells its Tale 92
A Fight Until Submission 95
When Scriptures are Ignored 97
A Claim Only Unbelievers Make 99
Clear Order and Perverse Response 106
An Order and its Distorted Application 108
A True Promise 111
Hoarding Gold and Silver 113
The Truth will Out 116

The Reality Outlined 118

3 A Higher Degree of Unbelief *121*
Overview 121
Changing the Order of Time 123
A Change Not Sanctioned by God 125

4 The Supreme Word of God *127*
Overview 128
A Slackening Resolve 128
The Best Choice for Believers 130

5 Manifestations of Hypocrisy *133*
Distinguishing True Believers from Liars 143
Absurdity Carried Too Far 147
Possessed by Fear 149
Contented with God's Gifts 151
Fair Distribution Ordered by God 153
The Beneficiaries of Zakāt 155
The Prophet's Care 156
Dreading Exposure 157
The Trodden Path of Hypocrisy 160
The Believers' Dwelling Place 162
All Out Effort to Fight Unbelievers 165
Lying to God 167
Never to be Forgiven 170
Pleased with One's Misdeeds 171
Staying Behind at a Time of Mobilization 173
Eager but Without Means 176
Hollow Excuses 178

6 A Mosque for the Hypocrites *181*
Overview 183
Where Hypocrisy is Hardest 185
The Gap Separating Faith and Hypocrisy 187
Those Who Lead the Way 188
Mixing Good Deeds with Bad Ones 195
Awaiting God's Judgement 198
A Mosque to Promote Unbelief 199
Houses of False Worship 201

7 The Earth's Suffocating Expanse *204*
Overview 208
A Very Special Contract 211
A True Promise and a Profitable Deal 213
The Characteristics of True Believers 216
An Example to Follow 218
Acceptance of Repentance 221
A Turn of Mercy 223
The Hour of Difficulty 226
The Case of One Honest Man 228
Vacillating between Extremes 233
The Whole World Seems Too Narrow 235
A Reward for Every Little Thing 237
A Task Akin to Fighting 239
Uncompromising Fight 242
Islamic War Ethics 246
Hypocritical Attitudes 248
The Prophet's Relationship with the Believers 250
Conclusion 251

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 9

Al-Tawbah

(The Repentance)

Prologue

Revealed in Madinah, this *sūrah* is one of the last, if not actually the last[1] Qur'ānic revelation. Hence, it contains final rulings on relations between the Muslim community and other people. It also includes the classification of the Muslim community itself, establishing its values together with a full description and outline of the status of each of its groups or classes.[2]

As such, the *sūrah* has a particular importance in clarifying the nature of the Islamic method of action, its different steps and stages. However, we need to review its final rulings in the light of the provisional ones given in earlier *sūrahs.* Such a review will show this method of action to be at one and the same time both flexible and firm. Yet without such a holistic reading, rules, pictures and judgements become very confused. This is what happens whenever verses that outline provisional rulings are taken to be final, while the verses giving final rulings are read in such a way as to match provisional ones, particularly in relation to *jihād* and the relations between the Muslim community and other groups. We pray to God to enable us to set the record straight and present a full and clear picture, both in this Prologue and in the discussion of the *sūrah* and its passages.

[1] According to the weightier opinion, *Sūrah* 110, Victory, was the last to be revealed.

[2] The classes we are referring to here are not the same as the narrow sense of the term 'social classes'suggests. These are classes based on purely Islamic values, as in the case of the very early Muslims among the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* the People of Badr, and those who pledged their lives to the Prophet, those who fought and donated generously before the al-Hudaybiyyah peace treaty or after it, and, by contrast, the people who did not join campaigns *of jihād,* the hypocrites, etc.

From an objective study of the text of the *sūrah* in the light of the reports giving the immediate circumstances leading to the revelation of its different parts, as well as the various events during the Prophet's lifetime, we can conclude that the *sūrah* as a whole was revealed in the ninth year of the Prophet's settlement in Madinah. However, we also have to say that it was not revealed in one single instance. Although we cannot give a conclusive judgement of the accurate timings of the revelation of the different passages of the *sūrah,* we can say that its revelation occurred over three time stages: the first was prior to the expedition to Tabūk, which took place in Rajab of year 9, while the second stage extended over the period of preparation for the expedition until it was actually in progress. The third stage occurred after the Muslims had returned home. However, the first passage, from verse 1 to verse *28,* was the last of its passages to be revealed, towards the end of that year, shortly before the pilgrimage season, i.e. either in the month of Dhu'l-Qa`dah or even in Dhu'l-Hijjah. This is in short what we believe to be the case.

In its first section, verses 1-28, the *sūrah* defines the final shape of relations between the Muslim community and the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula, highlighting the practical, historical and ideological bases of these relations. All this is given in the inimitable Qur'ānic style, with its strong rhythm and the powerful impressions it creates. (See in particular verses 1-16, 23-24, and 28.)

The style employed in these verses, and in the passage as a whole, and the strong emphasis laid on fighting the idolaters in Arabia and the encouragement to take part in such fighting make it clear that at least a section of the Muslim community was very reluctant to take such a decisive step. We will explain here, and in the subsequent commentary, the different factors that came into play to cause such reluctance.

The second section defines the final shape of relations between the Muslim community and the people of earlier revelations generally, also outlining their practical, historical and ideological bases. The passage also shows the independent nature of Islam, as well as the deviation of the people of earlier revelations from the divine faith, both in beliefs and behaviour. Hence, from the Islamic point of view, they are no longer following a divine faith. (Verses 29-35)

The Qur'ānic style in this passage shows very clearly that the Muslims were particularly reluctant to adopt the type of relations defined in the first verse of this passage towards the people of earlier revelations generally, or the great majority of them. The fact is that the confrontation was initially intended with the Byzantines and their allies, the Arab Christians in Syria and beyond. This is clearly intimidating, considering that the Byzantine Empire was the main superpower of the day. Yet the texts apply to all the people of earlier revelations who have the same qualities and

characteristics given in this verse. More of this later.

The third section begins its denunciation of those who have been called upon to get ready for the expedition, but who hesitated or were too lazy to join. Not all of these were hypocrites, as will be seen. This fact explains how hard the whole affair was for the Muslims. When we discuss the passage, we will, God willing, explain the factors making it so hard. (Verses 38-41)

We note in this passage the repeated reproaches, coupled with threats and reminders to the believers that God had supported His Messenger when the idolaters drove him out of his home town. No human being had taken part in providing such support. We also note the uncompromising order to the believers to join the Prophet and march with him, no matter what their position might be. All this gives us a clear indication of the hardships involved, leading to much reluctance, fear and an inclination to stay behind. Hence, the repeated reminders, reproaches and clear orders to the community of believers.

The fourth section, the longest in the *sūrah,* is devoted to exposing the hypocrites and their methods in undermining the Muslim community. It describes their psychology, as well as their attitude at the time of the Tabūk Expedition, as well as their previous and later attitudes. It exposes their true intentions, scheming and devious methods, as well as their flimsy excuses with which they try to justify their staying behind and their attempts to weaken the believers' morale.

It also speaks about how they tried to hurt the Prophet and devoted believers. This exposure of the true nature of the hypocrites is further emphasized by a warning to the believers against the hypocrites' schemes. The *sūrah* defines the nature of the relations between the two camps, which must be set on a clear basis that distinguishes each group through its own actions. This section, taking up more than half of the *sūrah,* shows that hypocrisy was more widespread after the fall of Makkah to Islam, while it had almost disappeared prior to that. We will explain the reasons for this later. (Verses 42, 47-50, 56-59, 61-68, 73-77, 79-85)

This sustained attack reveals the extent of the hypocrites' scheming to undermine the Muslim community and to divert the attentions of the Muslims from pursuing their goals by means of false claims. It also shows that there were certain weaknesses within the ranks of the Muslim community during that period. This is indicated by the statement: "*There are among you some who would have lent them ear.*" (Verse 47) Another indication is seen in the emphatic order not to pray for the hypocrites or appeal to God for their forgiveness. This situation was a by-product of the fact that large groups declared their acceptance of Islam, when they were not yet committed to the new faith. They had not acquired the proper Islamic attitudes. All this will come in for detailed discussion when we look at the classification the *sūrah* provides

of the groups living within the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet.

We find this classification in the fifth section of the *sūrah.* We learn in this section that in addition to the leading group of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* which constituted the solid base of the Muslim community, there were several other groups. There were, for example, the Bedouin Arabs among whom there were some good believers and others who were either hypocrites or unbelievers. There were also hypocrites among the people of Madinah. Others were those who mixed good and bad deeds and had not yet fully integrated into the Muslim community. Another group was of unknown status. This group is left to God to judge on the basis of His knowledge of their true nature. There were also some who conspired against the Muslim community under a religious guise. The *sūrah* speaks about all these groups in a brief but adequate way. It defines how they should be treated within the Muslim community, directing the Prophet and the believers to respond to them in the way so described. (Verses 97-103, 106-108)

That such a multiplicity of groups, classes and standards existed within the Muslim community at the time points to the extent of incoherence that existed after Makkah had fallen to Islam. Prior to the conquest of Makkah, the Muslim community in Madinah had almost rid itself of such weaknesses.

The sixth and final section of the *sūrah* provides a clear definition of the nature of the Islamic pledge the believers give to God to strive for His cause. It also defines the nature of this struggle, or *jihād,* and the duty of the people of Madinah and the Bedouins living close to them. It makes it clear that they cannot stay behind when the Prophet marches forth, seeking their own safety. They need to disassociate themselves from unbelievers and hypocrites. Within the context of this section a judgement is given on the cases of those who did not join the Muslim army, although they were good believers who entertained no hypocrisy. It also describes certain aspects of the attitude of the hypocrites towards Qur'ānic revelations. (Verses 111, 113-114, 117-118, 120-123, 127)

The *sūrah* then concludes with a description of God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and a directive to him to place His trust in God alone. (Verses 128-129)

We have cited here numerous verses to refer to before discussing them in detail. This is done deliberately because the *sūrah* paints a full picture of the Muslim society in Madinah in the days following the conquest of Makkah, describing its organic composition. It is clear from this picture that there was a lack of consistency in the way people approached faith, in addition to structural weaknesses. Certain phenomena are described, such as apathy, unwillingness to sacrifice, hypocritical attitudes, reluctance to do one's Islamic duties, confusion with regard to relations between the Muslim community and others. None of this, however, detracts from the

fact that the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşā*r constituted a solid base that showed no sign of weakness.

We have already mentioned that this state of affairs was due to the fact that after the conquest of Makkah large and divergent groups of people declared their acceptance of Islam, but did not receive the kind of education necessary for full integration within the Muslim community. But this general statement cannot be fully understood unless we review the historical situation before and after the conquest of Makkah, which we will now turn to.

A Historical View

The Islamic movement in Makkah encountered difficulties right from the time when it was born. *Jāhiliyyah,* represented in this instance by the Quraysh, soon sensed the danger it was facing from the message declaring that `there is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is God's Messenger.' It realized that this new message was an outright revolution against all authority not derived from God's own. It was a rebellion against all tyranny, seeking God's protection. *Jāhiliyyah* also sensed that the new message, led by God's Messenger, began to form a new organic grouping pledging sole and complete allegiance to God and His Messenger. Thus, it rebelled against the leadership of the Quraysh and the situation prevailing under *jāhiliyyah.* No sooner did the Quraysh sense this danger than it launched a determined attack on the new message, grouping and its leadership. It utilized in this attack all its power to inflict physical harm and to sow discord through intrigue and wicked designs.

In fact this *jāhiliyyah* society sought every means to defend itself against a danger it felt to threaten its very existence. This is the normal state of affairs whenever a movement begins to advocate God's Lordship in a community where Lordship is exercised by some people over others. Whenever such advocacy is undertaken by an organized movement that has its own leadership, it will be in direct confrontation with *jāhiliyyah* society, as the two cannot be accommodated within the same community.[3]

At this stage, every individual in the new Islamic grouping was subjected to oppression and persecution in every way, to the extent that many were killed. At the time, only a person who had dedicated himself and his life to God, and who was willing to endure persecution, hunger and even a ghastly death would join the new group, declaring his belief that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger.

[3] For a full discussion of this, refer to the commentary of Verses 8: 72-75, in Vol. 7, Chapter 4.

In this way a solid foundation was established for Islam, comprising the most determined individuals in Arabian society. Others who could not endure the hardship succumbed to the pressure and reverted to unbelief. But there were very few of these because the issues were clear at the outset. It was only people of distinction that were willing to take the decisive step and join Islam, despite the great danger that such a move involved.

This is how God chose those rare elements to be the early supporters of His message and to form the solid foundation of Islam in Makkah, i.e. the *Muhājirīn,* then to join the early *Anşār* to form its core group in Madinah. Although the *Anşār* were not subjected to the same pressures and persecution as the *Muhājirīn,* the pledge they gave to the Prophet at `Aqabah indicated that they were equal to the task required by Islam. On that night when the pledge was given, as Ibn Kathīr reports, `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah said to the Prophet: 'Stipulate whatever you wish for your Lord and yourself.' He said: As for my Lord, my condition is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And as for myself, my condition is that you protect me as you would protect yourselves and your property.' They asked: `What will be our reward in return?' He said: `Paradise.' They said: `It is a profitable deal. We accept no going back and we will not go back on it ourselves.'

Those who made this deal with God's Messenger, seeking no reward other than Paradise, and declaring that they would accept no going back, either by themselves or the Prophet, were aware that it was no easy option they were undertaking. In fact, they were certain that the Quraysh would fight them determinedly, supported by all the other Arabs. They realized that they would never again be able to live in peace with *jāhiliyyah* which had its roots deep in the whole of Arabia, including the areas adjoining Madinah.

> Jābir ibn `Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: For ten years in Makkah, God's Messenger continued to approach people in their encampments at `Ukāz, al-Majannah and in the pilgrimage season. He would ask: 'Who will give me shelter and support until I have delivered my Lord's message, and he will be in Paradise in return?' No one would extend to him a hand of support. Indeed, a man would be about to set out from the Yemen, or from his tribe of Muđar, and his people and relatives would warn him, 'Beware lest the Qurayshi man tempt you.' He would go among them and they would point to the Prophet with their hand. This continued to be the case until God sent us to him from Yathrib, when we gathered to him and believed in him. A man from among us would go to him and declare his acceptance of his message. The Prophet would teach him the Qur'ān, and the man would come back to his people and they would follow his suit and embrace Islam. Indeed, every quarter of the *Anşār* had a number of Muslims

who declared their faith.

Then we all conferred and said: 'Until when are we going to leave the Prophet approaching different people, being chased around and in fear?' A group of 70 people from among us went out to meet him in the pilgrimage season.[4] We agreed to meet him at `Aqabah. We went there individually or two men at a time, until we all gathered there. We asked him: 'Messenger of God! What pledge do we give you?' He said: 'You pledge to me to obey and comply in situations of ease and hardship, and to donate for God's cause in times of poverty and plenty, and to enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil, and to stand up for God's cause fearing no blame from anyone, and to support me and protect me when I come to you as you protect yourselves, your wives and children. Your reward will be Paradise.'

We stood up to give him our pledges, but As`ad ibn Zurārah, who was one of the youngest among them,[5] said: 'Cool it, people of Yathrib. We have not travelled all this distance to meet him without knowing that he is certainly God's Messenger. However, to take him from his people will be an act of confrontation with all the Arabs, which could mean that the best among you may be killed and that swords will be put into you. If you accept to take all that patiently, you take him and seek your reward from God. On the other hand, if you fear that you may slacken, leave off now, and explain your reasons. This may be better for you in God's sight.' They said: 'Step aside, As`ad. By God, we will not turn away from our pledge, and we will not let anyone take it away from us.' We stood up and gave him our pledges. He stipulated his conditions, and promised us that we will be rewarded with Paradise.[6]

The *Anşār,* then, were fully aware of the likely consequences of their pledge once they had given it. They were also aware that they were not promised anything in this world in return for their efforts. They were not even promised victory over their enemies. The only reward they were promised was admittance into heaven. Yet they were still keen to offer their pledges. Hence, they were definitely with the early *Muhājirīn* in taking the necessary preparations so that they would constitute the solid foundation of the first Islamic society in Madinah.

Early Indications of Weakness

[4] The fact is that they were 72, but the Arabs often round their figures.
[5] In al-Bayhaqī's version, 'He was the youngest of the 70 apart from me.'
[6] Reported by Ibn Kathīr in his book *Al-Bidāyah wal-Nihāyah,* Maktabah al-Ma`ārif, Beirut and Riyadh, 1996, Vol. 3, p. 159, as related by Imām Ahmad. There are several versions of this *ĥadīth,* reported by *Ĥadīth* scholars.

But the Madinah society did not maintain this level of purity despite the spread of Islam. Many people, especially those who were in positions of influence, felt they had to take a similar stand to their people in order to maintain their positions. When the Battle of Badr took place, the leading figure among these, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, thought that Islam had established firm roots and could not be easily dislodged. Hence, he pretended to be a Muslim. It was perhaps inevitable that many accepted Islam in order to keep abreast of their people. They were not hypocrites, but they had not fully understood Islam or moulded themselves according to it. This meant that the community in Madinah had different levels of commitment to the new faith.

At this point, the unique Islamic method of education began its work under the Prophet's supervision in order to mould these new elements. It aimed to achieve coherence within the Muslim community at the ideological, moral and behavioural levels.

When we read the *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, in the approximate order of their revelation, we note the great effort that aimed to absorb and remould the new elements in the Muslim community, particularly because there were always newcomers. This was the case despite the determined opposition of the Quraysh and its attempts to win other Arabian tribes to its side, and despite the wicked designs of the Jews and their efforts to marshal hostile forces to the new faith and its advocates. Hence, the effort to bring newcomers to the same level as the elite, for this was needed if they were to continue with determination.

Nonetheless, weaknesses continued to surface, particularly in times of difficulty. There were indications of hypocrisy, reluctance, unwillingness to make physical or financial sacrifices, and a general turning away from danger. There were also signs of confusion concerning the relationship between a Muslim and his non-Muslim relatives. Qur'ānic texts in different *sūrahs* provide a clear idea of these phenomena and the method the Qur'ān employed to deal with them. Examples of these texts are given below:

> *Just as your Lord brought you forth from your home for the truth, even though some of the believers were averse to it. They would argue with you about the truth even after it had become manifest, just as if they were being driven to certain death and saw it with their very eyes. God promised you that one of the two hosts would fall to you. It was your wish that the one which was not powerful to be yours, but it was God's will to establish the truth in accordance with His words and to wipe out the unbelievers. Thus He would certainly establish the truth firmly and show falsehood to be false, however hateful this might be to the evildoers. (8: 5-8)*

He it is who has sent down to you the Book, containing verses which are clear and precise – and these are the essence of the Book – and others are allegorical. Those whose hearts have swerved from the truth pursue that part of it which is allegorical, seeking to create dissension and trying to give it an arbitrary meaning. None save God knows its final meaning. Those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: 'We believe in it; it is all from our Lord.' But only those who are endowed with insight take heed. 'Our Lord, let not our hearts swerve from the truth after You have guided us; and bestow on us mercy from Yourself. You are indeed the great giver. Our Lord, You will indeed gather mankind together to witness the Day of which there is no doubt. Surely, God never fails to keep His promise.' (3: 7-9)

Are you not aware of how the hypocrites speak to their unbeliever brethren from among the people of earlier revelations: 'If you are driven away, we shall most certainly go forth with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if war is waged against you we shall most certainly come to your succour.' But God bears witness that they are most flagrantly lying. Indeed, if those are driven away, they will not go forth with them; and if war is waged against them, they will not come to their succour; and even if they succour them, they will most certainly turn their back in flight, and in the end will themselves find no succour. You strike more fear in their hearts than God. This, because they are people who fail to grasp the truth. (59: 11-13)

Believers! Remember the blessings which God bestowed on you when [enemy] hosts came down upon you, whereupon We let loose against them a stormwind and hosts that you could not see. Yet God saw all that you did. They came upon you from above you and from below you, and when your eyes became dim and your hearts came up to your throats, and when most conflicting thoughts about God passed through your minds. It was there and then that the believers were tried, and severely shaken. The hypocrites and those whose hearts are diseased said, 'God and His Messenger have promised us nothing but delusions.' A group of them said, 'People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand the enemy here. Therefore, go back.' A party among them asked leave of the Prophet, saying, 'Our houses are exposed!' The fact is that they were not really exposed. They simply wanted nothing but to flee. Now if their town had been stormed, and they had been asked to commit apostasy, they would have done so without much delay... (33: 9-14)

Believers, be fully prepared against danger, and go to war either in small groups or all together. There are indeed among you such as would lag behind, and then, if a calamity befalls you, say, 'God has bestowed His favours upon me in that I was not present with them!' But if good fortune comes to you from God, he is sure to say – just as if there had never been any question of love between you and him – 'Oh,

would that I had been with them; I would surely have had a [share in a] mighty triumph.' (4: 71-73)

Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your zakāt [i.e. the purifying dues]? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!' Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high.' Yet, when a good thing happens to them, some [people] say, 'This is from God,' whereas when evil befalls them, they say, 'This is from you!' Say, All is from God' What is amiss with these people that they are in no wise near to grasping the truth of what they are told? (4: 77-78)

The life of this world is but a play and a passing delight. But if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your deserts, and will not demand of you to sacrifice your property. If He were to demand it of you, and urge you, you would niggardly cling to it, and so He would bring out your moral failings. Now, you are called upon to spend freely in God's cause; but there are among you those who turn out to be niggardly! He who acts niggardly [in God's cause] is but niggardly towards his own self. For God is indeed self-sufficient, whereas you stand in need of Him. And if you turn away from Him, He will cause other people to take your place, and they will not be the likes of you. (47: 36-38)

Are you not aware of those who would be friends with people whom God has condemned? They are neither of you nor of those others. They knowingly swear to a falsehood. God has readied for them severe suffering. Evil indeed is what they are wont to do. They have made their oaths a cover, and thus they turn others away from God's path. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their worldly possessions nor their offspring will be of the least avail to them against God. It is they who are destined for the fire, therein to abide. On the Day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they now swear before you, thinking that they are on firm ground. They are indeed the liars. Satan has gained mastery over them, and has caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. Such as these are Satan's partisans. Most certainly, the partisans of Satan will truly be the losers. Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall find themselves among the most abject. God has ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed Powerful, Almighty. You cannot find people who believe in God and the Last Day and [at the same time] love anyone who contends against God and His Messenger, even

though they be their fathers, sons, brothers or their kindred. It is they [the believers] in whose hearts He has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with inspiration from Himself and whom He will admit into gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Well- pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are God's partisans. Most certainly, God's partisans shall be the ones who are successful. (58: 14-22)

Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers. Yet you see those who are sick at heart rush to their defence, saying, 'We fear lest a change of fortune should befall us.' God may well bring about victory [for believers] or some other event of His own making, and those [waverers] will terribly regret the thought they had secretly harboured within themselves. The believers will say: Are these the self-same people who swore by God their most solemn oaths that they were with you?' All their works are in vain and they will lose all. (5: 51-53)

Believers, do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your allies, showing them affection even though they do not believe in the truth that has come to you. They have driven the Messenger and yourselves away, only because you believe in God, your Lord! If you have gone forth from your homes to strive in My cause, and out of a longing for My goodly acceptance, [do not] incline towards them in secret affection. I am fully aware of all that you may conceal and all that you do openly. Any of you who does this has already strayed from the right path. If they could but overcome you, they would remain your foes, and would stretch forth their hands and tongues against you with evil intent; for they desire that you should be unbelievers. Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you on Resurrection Day when He will decide between you. God sees all that you do. Indeed, you have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We are quit of you and of all that you worship instead of God. We deny whatever you believe; and between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred, to last until such a time as you come to believe in the One God.' The only exception was Abraham's saying to his father, I shall pray for God's forgiveness for you, although I do not have it in my power to obtain anything from God on your behalf. Our Lord! In You have we placed our trust, and to You do we return. To You is all journey's end.' (60: 1-4)

These ten quotations, each drawn from a different *sūrah* are sufficient to give us a fair idea of the weaknesses that might naturally and inevitably appear in the Muslim community as a result of the constant influx of new elements. For it takes time and effort before they are fully integrated with the solid base of the community.

The Process of Integration

However, the structure of the Muslim community in Madinah remained generally sound, because it essentially relied on its solid foundation, made up of the elite of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār*. This foundation gave the Muslim community its strong constitution that withstood all weakening elements and overcame all hazards that might have been brought in by newcomers who had not yet been integrated into it.

Gradually, these new elements were integrated into the solid core, and the numbers of the weak, the hypocrites, and those who lacked the ideological clarity that serves as the basis of all relations and ties dwindled. Shortly before the conquest of Makkah, the Muslim community in Madinah was very close to complete integration, providing the closest model of society Islamic education seeks to bring into existence.

There undoubtedly remained different levels of participation according to the various actions different individuals undertook for Islam. Some groups were distinguished by the dedication, work and sacrifice they made to serve God's cause. Examples of these were the earliest to believe in Islam among the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* the people of Badr, those who were party to the pledge given to the Prophet at al-Ĥudaybiyyah, and generally those who donated and fought before the conquest of Makkah. Qur'ānic and *Ĥadīth* texts, as well as the practical situation in the Muslim community confirmed these distinctions that resulted from action taken for Islam.

- "*As for the first to lead the way, of the Muhājirīn and the* Anşār, *as well as those who follow them in [the way of] righteousness, God is well pleased with them, and well pleased are they with Him. He has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph.*" (9: 100)
- "It may well be that God has looked at the people of Badr and said: `Do as you like, for heaven is indeed your deserved reward." (This occurs in an authentic *Ĥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī. It comes as the Prophet's reply to `Umar when he requested the Prophet's permission to kill Ĥāţib ibn Abī Balta`ah who, in a moment of weakness, sent word to the Quraysh telling them of the Prophet's intention to march to Makkah.)
- "*Well pleased indeed was God with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under that tree. He knew what was in their hearts; and so He bestowed inner peace upon them from on high, and rewarded them with the happy news of a victory soon to come and of many war gains which they would achieve. God is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (48: 18-19)
- "*Not equal are those of you who spent and fought in God's cause before the victory. They are of a higher rank than those who would spend and fight after it, although God*

has promised the ultimate good to both. God is aware of all that you do." (57: 10)

- "Take it easy, Khālid! Leave my Companions alone. By God, had you had Mount Uĥud in gold and you spent it all for God's cause, you could not match a single trip of any one among my Companions, nor a return trip." (This *ĥadīth* is mentioned by Ibn al-Qayyim in *Zād al-Ma'ād.* It is the Prophet's reply to Khālid ibn al-Walīd when he fell out with `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf — may God be pleased with them both. There is no doubt that Khālid ibn al-Walīd is the man given the title *Sayf Allāh,* or God's Sword, for his great achievements as a commander of Muslim armies. `Abd al-Raĥmān, however, was one of the very first people to accept Islam. Hence, the Prophet's words in describing such a group of special distinction in the Muslim community of Madinah.)

That there were these different grades on the basis of strength of faith was no barrier to bridging the gap between them in the Madinah society before the conquest of Makkah. In fact, most of the apparent weaknesses within the ranks of the Muslim community were remedied, and their symptoms disappeared. Hence the whole of Madinah society could be considered as forming a solid Islamic basis.

However, when Makkah fell to Islam in year 8, followed by the surrender of the Hawāzin and the Thaqīf tribes, which were the last two large tribes to put up resistance to Islam, this ushered in a great influx of new Muslims. Needless to say, these were of different levels with regard to their outlook. Some among them were hypocrites, while others simply adopted Islam, the new overpowering force. Others still needed to be won over to Islam. Mostly, however, these were people who had not yet understood the fundamentals of Islam and their souls had not yet interacted with its values and principles.

The stubborn opposition of the Quraysh continued to act as a barrier preventing the advance of Islam into the rest of Arabia. The Quraysh tribe had the ultimate say in all religious matters in Arabia, and it exercised a very strong influence over economic, political and social matters. Hence its determined and uncompromising opposition to the new faith ensured that the rest of Arabia turned away from it, or at least adopted a wait and see attitude until the fight between the Quraysh and one of its children had produced a clear winner. When the Quraysh declared its submission, followed by the major tribes of Hawāzin and Thaqīf, and when the three main Jewish tribes in Madinah had previously been subdued, and those of Khaybar had been defeated, people embraced the new faith in flocks. The whole of Arabia submitted to Islam within one year.

Advances and Weaknesses

This rapid expansion in the geographical area of Islam heralded the resurgence, on

an even more intensive scale, of all the symptoms experienced after the resounding victory the Muslims achieved in the Battle of Badr. The Muslim community had almost managed to rid itself of those, thanks to the seven-year-long education process it had enjoyed after that battle. The rapid geographical expansion of Islam in Arabia could have had some serious negative effects, had it not been for the fact that Madinah had become, in its entirety, the solid base of Islam. It was God Almighty who looked after the new faith and charted its course. He had prepared the first core of believers, the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* to be the first solid base of Islam after the relatively important expansion that followed the victory at Badr. He also made the whole of Madinah the solid base which would withstand the great expansion brought about by the splendid triumph achieved when Makkah was won over to Islam. God certainly knows what forces to mobilize in support of His message.

The first symptom of the new dangers appeared on the day of the Battle of Ĥunayn, mentioned in this *sūrah: "God has granted you His support on many a battlefield, and also in the Battle of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned back in flight. God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers, and He sent down forces whom you could not see, and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers."* (Verses 25-26)

One of the apparent reasons for the defeat at the beginning of the battle was that 2,000 of those the Prophet had pardoned in Makkah, and who embraced Islam after the fall of that city, had joined the 10,000-strong army which originally travelled from Madinah to subdue the Quraysh in Makkah. The presence of those 2,000 men alongside the others who came from Madinah was a cause of imbalance in the Muslim ranks. There was also the fact that the Hawāzin took the Muslims by surprise. What that meant was that the army did not wholly belong to the solid, well-knit base which had been nurtured over the several years separating the Battle of Badr and the conquest of Makkah.

Similarly, the negative symptoms that appeared at the time of the Tabūk Expedition were a natural result of this rapid expansion and the great influx of new Muslims with varying standards of faith. These symptoms are discussed fully in this *sūrah* in a long exposition with varied styles and methods of treatment.

We now go on to review the historical events in the Muslim community within two years of the fall of Makkah. When the Prophet passed away, most parts of Arabia abandoned Islam. Only the Muslim society in Madinah, the solid base of Islam, remained steadfast. Now we can easily explain this phenomenon. Two years were not sufficient to allow the truth of Islam to settle in the hearts of the great multitude of people who declared their acceptance of Islam after the fall of Makkah. With different levels of faith, the Prophet's death sent a shock wave throughout

Arabia, leading to uncertainty. The solid base, however, remained firmly committed. Pure, strong and united, it was able to reverse the tide of apostasy and return all Arabia back to Islam.

This fact gives us a clear idea that God allowed the campaign of persecution mounted against the Muslims in Makkah to continue for many years for a definite purpose. In His wisdom, God left the tyrants of idolatry to continue their persecution to the extent of bloodshed, killing some Muslims and torturing many others. God knew that this was part of the proper education of the first Muslim community to form the solid base for Islam. Without such a long trial, people do not grow sufficiently solid to withstand great pressures. It is such a degree of steadfastness, dedication and commitment — in the face of torture, hardship, and killings, with people turned away from their homes, suffering hunger and hardship, yet being small in number and without any human support — that is needed by the hard core of the new faith as it makes its first march.

This hard core of the early *Muhājirīn* was subsequently joined by the early *Anṣār*, and both groups formed the solid base in Madinah, before the Battle of Badr. They were the ones who remained strongly committed when elements of weakness appeared following the influx of newcomers who accepted Islam after the Badr victory, but who had not had time to integrate with the hard core or achieve its level of commitment.

The solid base itself grew in numbers so as to include, just before the fall of Makkah, the whole Madinah society. Again, this solid base was the one to protect Islam and spare it several pitfalls after the Makkan victory, and then again at the time of the Prophet's death, when most parts of Arabia rebelled against Islam.

While this fact explains the wisdom behind allowing the hard trial the Muslims endured in Makkah and the great dangers faced by the Muslim society in Madinah, up to the time of signing the al-Ĥudaybiyah peace treaty, it also gives us an insight into the method of action the Islamic message follows at all times and in all societies.

All efforts should be directed at first to establish the hard core of true believers, who withstand trials and cannot be shaken. They need further education in their faith so as to grow in strength and awareness. Extreme caution should be exercised in order to guard against horizontal expansion before this hard core comes into being: solidly committed and having profound insight. Indeed, shallow horizontal expansion represents grave dangers that threaten the very existence of any Islamic movement, because it would then be following a different way from that of the first Islamic community and adopting a different method of action.

Yet it is God who ensures that His message follows the right way. Whenever He wishes to allow a truly Islamic movement to emerge, He exposes its early advocates

to a long trial. He lets victory be slow coming, and leaves them few in number, with other people taking a negative attitude towards them, until they show their steadfastness and firm commitment. Thus, they prove that they are able to form the hard, enlightened core who can be trusted with His message. He will then show them their way ahead. God is able to achieve His purpose, but most people do not know this.

Jihād and its Final Rulings

Now we will have a brief look at the main topics addressed in the *sūrah,* particularly the final rulings concerning relations between the Muslim community and other communities. Since the rulings given in this *sūrah* are the final ones, they represent the ultimate line of action.

We need to quote here what we stated in the Prologue to *Sūrah* 8 (Volume 7) about the nature of the Islamic method of action. We can only understand the present final rulings in the light of the earlier, provisional ones. Even though this may be repetitive in this book, a reminder of these is certainly both useful and important.

In his priceless book *Zād al-Ma'ād,* Imām Ibn al-Qayyim includes a chapter with the title, `The Progress of the Prophet's Guidance on Dealing with the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites from the Start of His Mission to the End of His Life'. This is given below in a highly summarized form:

> The first revelation given to the Prophet by his Lord — limitless is He in His glory — was His order to him, "*Read in the name of your Lord who created man out of a germ-cell.*" (96: 1-2) This was the start of his prophethood. The instruction to him was to read within himself. At that point, He did not order him to convey anything to anyone. He subsequently revealed to him: "*You who are enfolded, arise and warn!*" (74: 1-2) This means that God made him a prophet by telling him to read, and He gave him his mission by saying, "*You who are enfolded, arise and warn!*" (74: 1-2) God then ordered him to warn his immediate clan. Subsequently, he gave the same warning to his own people, then to the surrounding Arabian tribes, then to all Arabs, then to mankind generally.
>
> For more than a decade after the start of his prophethood, Muĥammad [peace be upon him] continued to advocate the faith without resorting to fighting or the imposition of any loyalty tax, i.e. *jizyah.* Throughout this period he was ordered to stay his hand, forbear patiently and overlook all opposition. Later, God gave him permission to migrate [from Makkah to Madinah] and permitted him to fight. He then instructed him to fight those who wage war

against him and to maintain peace with those who refrain from fighting him. At a later stage, God ordered him to fight the idolaters until all submission is made to God alone.

After the order was given to the Prophet to strive and fight for God's cause [i.e. *jihād],* unbelievers were in three categories with regard to their relations with him: those with whom he was in peace and truce, combatants fighting him, and those under his protection [i.e. *ahl al-dhimmah].* God ordered him to honour his treaties with those whom he had a peace treaty, as long as they honoured their commitments. If he feared treachery on their part, he was to revoke the treaty but would not fight them until he had informed them of the termination of their peace treaty. On the other hand, he was to fight those who violated their treaties with him.

When *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed, it outlined the policy towards all these three categories. The Prophet is ordered there to fight his enemies from among the people of earlier faiths until they submit to his authority, paying the loyalty tax, *jizyah,* or embrace Islam. He is also ordered in the same *sūrah* to strive hard against the unbelievers and the idolaters. He strove against the unbelievers with arms, and against the hypocrites with argument and proof.

A further order to the Prophet in *Sūrah* 9 was to terminate all treaties with unbelievers, classifying such people into three groups. The first group he was ordered to fight, because these were the ones who violated their treaties with him and who were untrue to their commitments. He fought them and was victorious. The second group consisted of those with whom he had a peace treaty which they had honoured fully, and the treaty was to run for a specific term. They had given no support to any person or group who opposed the Prophet. With these he was to honour the peace treaty until it had run its course. The third group included those with whom the Prophet had no treaty and no previous fighting engagements, as well as those who had an open-ended agreement. The Prophet was instructed to give these four months' notice, after which he was to fight them. The Prophet acted on these instructions, fought those who violated their treaties, and gave four-months' notice to those who had no treaty or had one without a specific term. Those who honoured their treaty were to have it honoured by the Prophet until the end of its term. All these embraced Islam before the end of their term. As for those who pledged loyalty to him, they were to pay the loyalty tax, *jizyah.*

Thus, after the revelation of *Sūrah* 9, the unbelievers were in three different categories with regard to the Prophet's relations with them: combatants, or bound by a specified-term treaty, or loyal. The second category embraced Islam shortly thereafter, leaving the other two groups: combatants who

> feared him, and those who were loyal. Thus, all mankind were divided into three classes: Muslims who believed in the Prophet's message; those at peace with him who enjoyed security; and those who were hostile and feared him.
>
> As for the hypocrites, he was instructed to accept from them what they professed, leaving the final verdict on them to God. He was to strive against them with informed argument. He was further instructed to turn away from them and to be hard so that he would deliver his message to them in a way that they could not refute. He was forbidden to pray for them when they died, or to visit their graves. He was informed that if he were to pray for them to be forgiven, God would not forgive them.
>
> Such was the Prophet's policy towards his opponents, both unbelievers and hypocrites.[7]

This excellent summary of the different stages of the development of *jihād,* or striving for God's cause, reveals a number of profound features of the Islamic approach which merit discussion; but we can only present them here very briefly.

The first of these features is the serious realism of the Islamic approach. Islam is a movement confronting a human situation with appropriate means. What it confronts is a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* which prevails over ideas and beliefs, giving rise to practical systems that are supported by political and material authority. Thus, the Islamic approach is to confront all this with vigorous means and suitable resources. It presents its arguments and proofs to correct concepts and beliefs; and it strives with power to remove the systems and authorities that prevent people from adopting the right beliefs, forcing them to follow their errant ways and worship deities other than God Almighty. The Islamic approach does not resort to the use of verbal argument when confronting material power. Nor does it ever resort to compulsion and coercion in order to force its beliefs on people. Both are equally alien to the Islamic approach as it seeks to liberate people from subjugation so that they may serve God alone.

Secondly, Islam is a practical movement that progresses from one stage to the next, utilizing for each stage practical, effective and competent means, while at the same time preparing the ground for the next stage. It does not confront practical realities with abstract theories, nor does it use the same old means to face changing realities. Some people ignore this essential feature of the Islamic approach and overlook the nature of the different stages of development it contains. They cite Qur'ānic statements stating that they represent the Islamic approach, without relating these statements to the stages they addressed. When they do so, they betray

[7] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Mu'assasah al-Risālah, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 158-161.

their utter confusion and give the Islamic approach a deceptive appearance. They assign to Qur'ānic verses insupportable rules and principles, treating each verse or statement as outlining final Islamic rules. Themselves a product of the sorry and desperate state of contemporary generations who have nothing of Islam other than its label, and defeated both rationally and spiritually, they claim that Islamic *jihād* is always defensive. They imagine that they are doing Islam a service when they cast away its objective of removing all tyrannical powers from the face of the earth, so that people are freed from serving anyone other than God. Islam does not force people to accept its beliefs; rather, it aims to provide an environment where people enjoy full freedom of belief. It abolishes oppressive political systems depriving people of this freedom, or forces them into submission so that they allow their peoples complete freedom to choose to believe in Islam if they so wish.

Thirdly, such continuous movement and progressive ways and means do not divert Islam from its definitive principles and well-defined objectives. Right from the very first day, when it made its initial address to the Prophet's immediate clan, then to the Quraysh, and then the Arabs and finally putting its message to all mankind, its basic theme remained the same, making the same requirement. It wants people to achieve the same objective of worshipping God alone, submitting themselves to none other than Him. There can be no compromise over this essential rule. It then moves towards this single goal according to a well-thought-out plan, with progressive stages, and fitting means.

Finally, we have a clear legal framework governing relations between the Muslim community and other societies, as is evident in the excellent summary quoted from *Zād al-Ma'ād.* This legal framework is based on the main principle that submission to God alone is a universal message which all mankind must either accept or be at peace with. It must not set up any impediment to this message, in the form of a political system or material power. Every individual must remain free to make his or her absolutely free choice to accept or reject it, feeling no pressure or compulsion. Anyone who puts such impediments in the face of the message of complete submission to God, must be resisted and fought by Islam.

The Final and Provisional Rulings

In the light of this excellent exposition we can understand the reasoning behind the final rulings outlined in this *sūrah.* These include the termination of treaties with idolaters, except for the ones with treaties specifying a term of expiry, provided that they had not violated their treaties or collaborated with others against Islam. Others who had open-ended treaties, or with no treaties, or who had violated the terms of their treaties are given a period of four months grace, during which they are safe.

When this grace period was over, they were to be taken and killed wherever they happened to be found. They could not move in safety. We can also understand the rulings about fighting the people of earlier revelations who had deviated from the true divine religion until they are humbled and agreed to pay the submission tax. We understand the final rulings concerning jihād against the hypocrites, together with the unbelievers, and being harsh to them, unwilling to pray for their dead or stand over their graves. All these rulings amend earlier, provisional ones given before the revelation of the present *sūrah.* We believe that this amendment is now clear.

We cannot speak here in detail about these final rulings, or even about the provisional ones, or about other topics addressed in this *sūrah.* All this will come in for detailed discussion as we comment on the Qur'ānic text.

However, we need to clarify that those provisional rulings have not been abrogated in the sense that they can no longer be implemented in any situation the Muslim community finds itself in. The fact is that the practical situation faced by the Muslim community in different circumstances, places and times may determine, through absolute scholarly effort and discretion, which ruling is most suited to a particular situation, time and place. However, sight must not be lost of the final rulings to which the community should revert whenever it is able to implement them, as was the case at the time when this *sūrah* was revealed. These rulings were subsequently implemented during the Islamic conquests, in the treatment of both unbelievers and the people of earlier revelations.

Some defeatist elements are overwhelmed by the pressures resulting from the desperate situation of present-day Muslims, who have nothing of Islam other than its name, and from the wicked attack by the Orientalists on the concept *of jihād.* Hence they try to find excuses by relying on provisional rulings and ignoring the true basis of the Islamic approach that moves forward to liberate mankind from servitude to other human beings, so that they can worship God alone. Its aim is to destroy tyrannical forces and regimes which force people to submit to a rule different from that of God, and apply a law other than His own.

Such defeatists quote verses like: "*If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as well, and place your trust in God.*" (8: 61) "*As for such [of the unbelievers] who do not fight against you on account of your faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity.*" (60: 8) "*Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love aggressors.*" (2: 190) "*Say: 'People of earlier revelations! Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'*" (3: 64)

They go on to say that Islam, then, does not fight anyone other than those who fight against the people in the land of Islam, within its area, or those who threaten it from outside. They further cite the fact that the Prophet signed the peace treaty with the idolaters at al- Ĥudaybiyah, and prior to that he had a treaty with the Jews and idolaters in Madinah. This defeatist logic means that Islam has nothing to do with the rest of mankind. It does not, or should not, care what deities they worship, or if one group of people are made lords over others, as long as it is safe within its own territory. This smacks of disrespect for Islam and God Almighty, resulting from a feeling of utter defeat.

What is worse, when these people feel unable to change the miserable conditions of today's Muslims, or face up to international forces hostile to Islam, they do not see that their weakness is the result of their moving away from Islam. On the contrary, they persistently try to attribute their own weakness and defeat to Islam, the noble faith God has laid down for mankind.

The texts to which they resort are provisional ones, addressing a particular situation. The state of affairs they addressed may happen again. In such conditions, the provisional rulings may be applied because the Muslim community lives a similar situation to the one they addressed the first time. But this does not mean that these are the ultimate rulings, and the approach they follow is the final one Islam provides. What it means is that the Muslim community needs to persist in trying to improve its situation, removing any impediments standing in its way, until it can apply the final rulings given in this last *sūrah.* Needless to say, these addressed a situation entirely different from that addressed by the provisional ones.

In relation to the idolaters, the final statements say:

> *Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty. [Announce to them:] You may go freely in the land for four months, but you must realize that you can never escape Gods judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers. And a proclamation from God and His Messenger is hereby made to all mankind on this day of the greater pilgrimage: God is free from obligation to the idolaters, and so is His Messenger. If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape Gods judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering, except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous. When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt,*

> *let them go their way. For God is Much- forgiving, Merciful. If any of the idolaters seeks asylum with you, grant him protection, so that he may hear the word of God, and then convey him to his place of safety. That is because the idolaters are people who lack knowledge. (Verses 1-6)*

And in relation to the people of earlier revelations, the final rulings are: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (Verse 29)

If the Muslims today, in their present situation, cannot implement these final rulings, then they are not, now and for the time being, required to do so. For God does not charge anyone with more than he or she can do. They may resort to the provisional rulings, approaching them gradually, until such a time when they are able to implement these final rulings. But they may not twist the final texts in order to show them as consistent with the provisional ones. They may not impose their own weakness on the divine faith, which remains firm and strong. Let them fear God and not attempt to weaken God's faith under the pretext of showing it to be a religion of peace. It is certainly the religion of peace, but this must be based on saving all mankind from submission to anyone other than God. Islam is the code God has given to mankind so that they may elevate themselves to be worthy of it, and to enjoy its good fruits. It is not devised by any human being. Hence, its advocates must not be ashamed of declaring that their ultimate goal is to destroy all forces that stand in its way of liberating mankind from any shackle that prevents the free choice of adopting Islam.

When people follow human codes and apply man-made laws to regulate their lives, every doctrine and code has the right to live in peace within its own area, as long as it does not entail aggression against others. In this case, coexistence of different creeds, regimes and social orders should be the norm. But when there is a divine code requiring complete submission to God alone, and there are alongside it systems and conditions that are man-made, advocating submission to human beings, the matter is fundamentally different. In this case, it is right that the divine system should move across barriers to liberate people from enslavement by others. They will then be free to choose their faith in a situation where people surrender themselves to God alone.

Those defeatists twist texts in order to save themselves from their imagined embarrassment in trying to explain why Islam moves beyond its original borders to save mankind from submission to anyone other than God. They forget the great truth of a divine system based on submission to God alone facing man-made systems

under which people submit to one another.

From the Islamic point of view, *jihād* has its own justification, derived from its own system. Defeatists will be well advised to examine this justification. Perhaps when they do so, God will give them added strength and a criterion which He has promised to His God-fearing servants.

Special to This Sūrah

Finally, unlike all other *sūrahs,* this one does not have the usual phrase we find at the beginning of each *sūrah* in the original master copies written at the time of `Uthmān.

> Al-Tirmidhī reports that `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, a close and learned Companion of the Prophet, said that he had asked `Uthmān ibn `Affān, the third Caliph who is universally recognized as having authorized the compilation of the Qur'ānic text as we have it today, why *Sūrah* 8, al-Anfāl, consisting of less than 100 verses, was placed before *Sūrah* 9, al-Tawbah, which comprises over 100 verses, and which, unlike other *sūrahs,* does not contain the usual opening phrase of "*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*"? He further enquired of him why *Sūrah* 8 was grouped with the seven long *sūrahs* [that appear at the beginning of the Qur'ān]?
>
> `Uthmān answered, "The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to receive verses or passages from several *sūrahs* at the same time. He would call the scribes and instruct them to put specific verses at specified places in their respective *sūrahs.* Al-Anfāl was one of the earliest *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah while al-Tawbah was one of the latest, but their subject matter was very similar that I suspected they might be one *sūrah.* The Prophet passed away without clarifying this particular point. Therefore, I placed them one after the other without separation."

This report is the most acceptable explanation for the juxtaposition of the two *sūrahs* without separating them by the normal line of *In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.* It also gives us a clear statement that the position of each verse in all *sūrahs* and the order they were placed in the Qur'ān was made on the basis of instructions given by the Prophet himself. More than one *sūrah* might be in the process of revelation at the same time. Hence, when one or more verses were revealed to address a particular situation or to outline or prepare for a definitive ruling, according to Islam's practical approach and method of action, the Prophet would order that these verses be placed in their particular position in the *sūrah* in which they should be included. Thus, every verse was given its position, and every

sūrah was given its proper order.

We have repeatedly said that each *sūrah* has its own character and features. Moreover, each has its own ambience, and employs particular phrases that bring out in full relief its character and distinctive features. Perhaps the preceding paragraph and the *ĥadīth* quoted before it explain this clear Qur'ānic phenomenon.

1
The Basis of Inter-Communal Relations

بَرَآءَةٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦٓ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ عَـٰهَدتُّم مِّنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١﴾

Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty. (1)

فَسِيحُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ أَرْبَعَةَ أَشْهُرٍ وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّكُمْ غَيْرُ مُعْجِزِى ٱللَّهِ ۙ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مُخْزِى ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢﴾

[Announce to them:] You may go freely in the land for four months, but you must realize that you can never escape God's judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers. (2)

وَأَذَٰنٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦٓ إِلَى ٱلنَّاسِ يَوْمَ ٱلْحَجِّ ٱلْأَكْبَرِ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَرِىٓءٌ مِّنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ۙ وَرَسُولُهُۥ ۚ فَإِن تُبْتُمْ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّكُمْ غَيْرُ مُعْجِزِى ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣﴾

And a proclamation from God and His Messenger is hereby made to all mankind on this day of the greater pilgrimage: God is free from obligation to the idolaters, and so is His Messenger. If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape God's judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering, (3)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ عَـٰهَدتُّم مِّنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَنقُصُوكُمْ شَيْـًٔا وَلَمْ يُظَـٰهِرُوا۟ عَلَيْكُمْ أَحَدًا فَأَتِمُّوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِمْ عَهْدَهُمْ إِلَىٰ مُدَّتِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous. (4)

فَإِذَا ٱنسَلَخَ ٱلۡأَشۡهُرُ ٱلۡحُرُمُ فَٱقۡتُلُواْ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ حَيۡثُ وَجَدتُّمُوهُمۡ وَخُذُوهُمۡ وَٱحۡصُرُوهُمۡ وَٱقۡعُدُواْ لَهُمۡ كُلَّ مَرۡصَدٖۚ فَإِن تَابُواْ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَوُاْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ فَخَلُّواْ سَبِيلَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٥

When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt, let them go their way. For God is Much-forgiving, Merciful. (5)

وَإِنۡ أَحَدٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ٱسۡتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرۡهُ حَتَّىٰ يَسۡمَعَ كَلَٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ أَبۡلِغۡهُ مَأۡمَنَهُۥۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ قَوۡمٞ لَّا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٦

If any of the idolaters seeks asylum with you, grant him protection, so that he may hear the word of God, and then convey him to his place of safety. That is because the idolaters are people who lack knowledge. (6)

كَيۡفَ يَكُونُ لِلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ عَهۡدٌ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَعِندَ رَسُولِهِۦٓ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ عَٰهَدتُّمۡ عِندَ ٱلۡمَسۡجِدِ ٱلۡحَرَامِۖ فَمَا ٱسۡتَقَٰمُواْ لَكُمۡ فَٱسۡتَقِيمُواْ لَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٧

How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters, unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing. (7)

كَيۡفَ وَإِن يَظۡهَرُواْ عَلَيۡكُمۡ لَا يَرۡقُبُواْ فِيكُمۡ إِلّٗا وَلَا ذِمَّةٗۚ يُرۡضُونَكُم بِأَفۡوَٰهِهِمۡ وَتَأۡبَىٰ قُلُوبُهُمۡ وَأَكۡثَرُهُمۡ فَٰسِقُونَ ٨

How [else could it be] when, should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you? They try to please you with what they say, while at heart they remain adamantly hostile. Most of them are transgressors. (8)

ٱشۡتَرَوۡاْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ثَمَنٗا قَلِيلٗا فَصَدُّواْ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُمۡ سَآءَ مَا كَانُواْ

They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do. (9)

يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors. (10)

لَا يَرْقُبُونَ فِي مُؤْمِنٍ إِلًّا وَلَا ذِمَّةً ۚ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُعْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Yet, if they repent, take to prayers and pay the zakāt, they are your brethren in faith. Clear do We make Our revelations to people of knowledge. (11)

فَإِن تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ فَإِخْوَانُكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ ۗ وَنُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

But if they break their pledges after having concluded a treaty with you, and revile your religion, then fight these archetypes of faithlessness who have no [respect for a] binding pledge, so that they may desist. (12)

وَإِن نَّكَثُوا أَيْمَانَهُم مِّن بَعْدِ عَهْدِهِمْ وَطَعَنُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ فَقَاتِلُوا أَئِمَّةَ الْكُفْرِ ۙ إِنَّهُمْ لَا أَيْمَانَ لَهُمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَنتَهُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Will you not fight against people who have broken their solemn pledges and set out to drive out the Messenger, and who were the first to attack you? Do you fear them? It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers. (13)

أَلَا تُقَاتِلُونَ قَوْمًا نَّكَثُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ وَهَمُّوا بِإِخْرَاجِ الرَّسُولِ وَهُم بَدَءُوكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ ۚ أَتَخْشَوْنَهُمْ ۚ فَاللَّهُ أَحَقُّ أَن تَخْشَوْهُ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, and will bring disgrace upon them; and will grant you victory over them and will grant heart-felt satisfaction to those who are believers, (14)

قَاتِلُوهُمْ يُعَذِّبْهُمُ اللَّهُ بِأَيْدِيكُمْ وَيُخْزِهِمْ وَيَنصُرْكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَيَشْفِ صُدُورَ قَوْمٍ مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

removing all angry feelings from their hearts. God will turn in His mercy to whom He wills. God is All-knowing and

وَيُذْهِبْ غَيْظَ قُلُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَيَتُوبُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ

مَن يَشَآءُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Wise. (15)

أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَن تُتْرَكُوا۟ وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ جَٰهَدُوا۟ مِنكُمْ وَلَمْ يَتَّخِذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا رَسُولِهِۦ وَلَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلِيجَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Do you think that you will be left alone, unless God takes cognizance of those of you who strive hard for His cause and establish close association with none other than God, His Messenger and the believers? God is well aware of what you do. (16)

مَا كَانَ لِلْمُشْرِكِينَ أَن يَعْمُرُوا۟ مَسَٰجِدَ ٱللَّهِ شَٰهِدِينَ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِم بِٱلْكُفْرِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حَبِطَتْ أَعْمَٰلُهُمْ وَفِى ٱلنَّارِ هُمْ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

It is not for the idolaters to visit or tend God's houses of worship; for they are self-confessed unbelievers. Vain shall be their actions and they shall abide in the fire. (17)

إِنَّمَا يَعْمُرُ مَسَٰجِدَ ٱللَّهِ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ وَأَقَامَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَى ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَلَمْ يَخْشَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ ۖ فَعَسَىٰٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَن يَكُونُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

If God's houses of worship may be tended only by those who believe in God and the Last Day, are constant in prayers, pay zakāt (i.e. the obligatory charity) and fear none other than God. It is those who are likely to be rightly guided. (18)

۞ أَجَعَلْتُمْ سِقَايَةَ ٱلْحَآجِّ وَعِمَارَةَ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ كَمَنْ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ وَجَٰهَدَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ لَا يَسْتَوُۥنَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Do you, perchance, consider that the provision of drinking water to pilgrims and tending the Sacred Mosque are equal to believing in God and the Last Day and striving for God's cause? These are not equal in God's sight. God does not provide guidance for people who are wrongdoers. (19)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَهَاجَرُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ أَعْظَمُ دَرَجَةً عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَآئِزُونَ

Those who believe, and leave their homes and strive hard for God's cause with their property and their lives stand higher in

rank with God. It is they who shall triumph. (20)

٢٠

يُبَشِّرُهُمْ رَبُّهُم بِرَحْمَةٍ مِّنْهُ وَرِضْوَانٍ
وَجَنَّٰتٍ لَّهُمْ فِيهَا نَعِيمٌ مُّقِيمٌ ٢١

Their Lord gives them the happy news of bestowing on them His grace, and acceptance, and of the gardens of eternal bliss (21)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عِندَهُۥٓ أَجْرٌ
عَظِيمٌ ٢٢

where they shall reside for ever. God's reward is great indeed. (22)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تَتَّخِذُوٓا۟
ءَابَآءَكُمْ وَإِخْوَٰنَكُمْ أَوْلِيَآءَ إِنِ ٱسْتَحَبُّوا۟
ٱلْكُفْرَ عَلَى ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُم
مِّنكُمْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٢٣

Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith. Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers. (23)

قُلْ إِن كَانَ ءَابَآؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَآؤُكُمْ
وَإِخْوَٰنُكُمْ وَأَزْوَٰجُكُمْ وَعَشِيرَتُكُمْ وَأَمْوَٰلٌ
ٱقْتَرَفْتُمُوهَا وَتِجَٰرَةٌ تَخْشَوْنَ كَسَادَهَا
وَمَسَٰكِنُ تَرْضَوْنَهَآ أَحَبَّ إِلَيْكُم مِّنَ
ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَجِهَادٍ فِى سَبِيلِهِۦ فَتَرَبَّصُوا۟
حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِىَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَمْرِهِۦ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ٢٤

Say: 'If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your clan, and the property you have acquired, and the business in which you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure, are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God shall make manifest His will. God does not provide guidance to the evildoers.' (24)

لَقَدْ نَصَرَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِى مَوَاطِنَ كَثِيرَةٍ ۙ
وَيَوْمَ حُنَيْنٍ ۙ إِذْ أَعْجَبَتْكُمْ كَثْرَتُكُمْ
فَلَمْ تُغْنِ عَنكُمْ شَيْـًٔا وَضَاقَتْ
عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضُ بِمَا رَحُبَتْ ثُمَّ

God has granted you His support on many a battlefield, and also in the Battle of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned

وَلَّيْتُم مُّدْبِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

back in flight. (25)

ثُمَّ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَأَنزَلَ جُنُودًا لَّمْ تَرَوْهَا وَعَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers, and He sent down forces whom you could not see, and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers. (26)

ثُمَّ يَتُوبُ ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

God will then turn in His mercy to whom He wills, for God is Much-forgiving, Merciful. (27)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُشْرِكُونَ نَجَسٌ فَلَا يَقْرَبُوا۟ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ ٱلْحَرَامَ بَعْدَ عَامِهِمْ هَٰذَا ۚ وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ عَيْلَةً فَسَوْفَ يُغْنِيكُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦٓ إِن شَآءَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Believers, know that the idolaters are certainly impure. So, let them not come near to the Sacred Mosque after this year is ended. If you fear poverty, then in time God will enrich you with His own bounty, if He so wills. Truly, God is All-knowing, Wise. (28)

Overview

This opening passage was revealed later than the rest of the *sūrah.* We have explained in earlier volumes that the final ordering of the verses in each *sūrah* followed instructions given by the Prophet himself. This means that such ordering is final and done on the basis of instructions received by the Prophet from on high.

This passage terminates treaties and agreements that were in force at the time between the Muslims and the unbelievers. A notice of four months is given to those who have treaties running indefinitely, or those who have violated their treaties. Others who have treaties running for a specified term and have honoured their obligations under those treaties, without ever backing or aiding anyone against the Muslims, are promised to have their treaties honoured by the Muslims to the end of their specified terms. Thus, the final outcome is the termination of all treaties with

unbelievers in the Arabian Peninsula, and an end to the very concept of having a treaty with idolaters. This takes the form of a disavowal of all obligations towards idolaters and questioning the very idea of idolaters having a treaty or covenant with God and His Messenger.

The passage also includes a ban on idolaters from doing the *ṭawāf,* which is the ritual walk around the Ka`bah, or visiting it for worship in any way or form. This abrogates the earlier mutual pledges of security between the Prophet and the idolaters ensuring the safety of all people in the Ka`bah and during the sacred months.

When we review the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime so as to draw an outline of the historical progress and nature of the proactive approach of Islam, its progressive stages and ultimate goals, we see very clearly that this decisive step was taken at its most appropriate time. It was now possible to reorganize relations between the Islamic community and other camps, whether idolaters or people of earlier revelations.

Stage after stage and event after event, it was practically demonstrated that it was impossible to achieve coexistence between two diametrically opposed ways of life with such deep-rooted and fundamental differences that affect every detail of concepts, beliefs, moral values, social behaviour, as well as social, economic and political structures.

Such fundamental differences were bound to surface as a result of the differences in beliefs and concepts. We have one way of life based entirely on submission of all mankind to God alone who has no partners, and another that makes people submit to other human beings and false deities. The two are bound to be in conflict at every step and in every aspect of life.

It was not just a coincidence that the Quraysh should take such a permanently hostile attitude to the Islamic call which raised the banner that "there is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is God's Messenger." Its hostility continued throughout the period when the Prophet was in Makkah and sought to crush it in open warfare after he migrated to Madinah. Nor was it by coincidence that the Jews in Madinah should stand up in opposition to the Islamic message or that they should join forces with the idolaters, in spite of the Scriptures in which they professed to believe. Both the Quraysh and the Jews tried to forge an alliance grouping all Arab tribes in an all-out effort to exterminate the whole Muslim community. They felt that the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah on the basis of faith and its implementation of the divine way of life represented a danger that threatened them and which they felt they had to remove.

We will learn presently that the same can be said for the Christians' attitude

towards the Islamic message despite the fact they also had divine Scriptures. This was the case in Yemen, Syria and beyond both these areas, and at all times. It is all in the nature of things.

Those who adopt other creeds and philosophies know that it is in the nature of the Islamic approach to insist on the establishment of a state based on belief in God. It aims to liberate all mankind from submission to other creatures so that they may submit to God alone, and to remove all physical and material impediments that prevent human beings from exercising their right to freedom of choice. It is also natural that those who follow other creeds try to crush the divine way of life in which they see a real threat to their very existence, their systems and social set-ups. Such a polarization is, then, inevitable.

Such hostility, inevitable as it certainly is, surfaced in a variety of forms, time after time, and served to emphasize the need for this final step announced in this *sūrah.* The immediate causes mentioned in some reports were only episodes in a long chain of events that had been going on ever since the early days of the Islamic message.

When we adopt such a broad perspective and try to delve into the root causes dictating attitudes and actions, we can properly understand the need for this final step. We must not overlook the immediate causes because these, in turn, were only episodes in a long series of events.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Imām al-Baghawī quotes earlier commentators as saying: "When the Prophet set out on his expedition to Tabūk, the hypocrites started to spread rumours while the idolaters began to violate the treaties they had with the Muslims. God then revealed this verse which is applicable to the latter group. He gave them four months' notice if their treaties were of shorter duration, and announced the termination of longer-lasting treaties after four months."

Reviewing the views of other commentators, Imām al-Ṭabarī says:

> As for the notice given by God permitting idolaters with a treaty to *'go freely in the land for four months,'* perhaps the more accurate view is to say that this notice is given by God to those idolaters who, despite having peace treaties, collaborated with others against the Prophet and the Muslim community violating their treaties before they ran out. As for those who fulfilled their obligations under such treaties and refrained from collaborating with others, God — limitless is He in His glory — ordered His Messenger to honour his treaty with them until their term had been completed. This is clear in the Qur'ānic statement: *"Except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have*

> *not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous."* (Verse 4)[8]

Al-Ṭabarī also quotes Mujāhid as saying:

> In the statement, *'Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty,'* the reference here is made to the tribe of Mudlij and the Arabs bound by a treaty with the Muslims and all other peoples with similar treaties. It is reported that when the Prophet returned from Tabūk, he wanted to go on pilgrimage. He then thought, 'the Ka`bah is visited by idolaters who do the *ṭawāf* naked. I would rather delay my pilgrimage until such a practice is stopped.' He sent Abū Bakr and `Alī who went to see people at Dhu'l-Majāz and other markets, as well as their encampments in pilgrimage. They gave notice to all people who had treaties with the Prophet that they would have four months of peace. When those four consecutive months, beginning with the twenty days remaining of Dhu'l-Hijjah to the tenth day of Rabī` II, were over, the treaties would come to an end. All people in Arabia would then be in a state of war with the Muslims unless they believed in God and His Messenger. The whole Arab population of Arabia became Muslims and none continued with their old religion.[9]

A number of immediate causes were naturally a factor in taking this final and decisive step. Nevertheless they were only links in a long chain which arises from the basic conflict between the two ways of life which cannot coexist except for short periods and which are bound to come to an end sooner or later.

Peace or No Peace

The late Shaikh Muĥammad Rashīd Riđā', a leading scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tries to identify these links in the chain right from the early days of the Islamic message. However, he does not try to outline the basic and permanent conflict which gives rise to the whole episode, leading eventually to the natural result outlined in this *sūrah.* In his commentary, *al-Manār,* he writes:

> An indisputable fact known to all people is that God sent His Messenger, Muĥammad, the last of all prophets, with the message of Islam that provides a complete and final version of the divine faith. His greatest proof is the Qur'ān, which defies human beings with a multifaceted challenge that we

8 Muĥammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, Jāmi` al-Bayān, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 10, pp. 62-63.
9 Al-Tabarī, ibid., pp. 61-62.

have outlined in our commentary on verse 3 of *Sūrah* 2. The essence of advocacy of the divine message is based on irrefutable rational and scientific evidence.[10] He has also established clearly that compulsion could in no way be adopted as a means of spreading the faith. This has been outlined in our commentary on verse 256 of *Sūrah* 2.

The idolaters took an attitude of resistance, subjecting the believers to a campaign of persecution and torture to force them to turn away from Islam. They also tried to forcibly prevent the Prophet from conveying his message to people. No one who accepted the new faith and believed in the Prophet's message felt safe or secure from death and torture unless he enjoyed the protection of an ally or a relative. Hence they had to migrate time after time.

Then they escalated their campaign against the Prophet. They considered arresting him permanently, and they also thought of banishing him, and they also considered killing him openly in their meeting place. They finally opted to murder him. God then ordered him to emigrate, as we have explained when commenting on verse 30 of *Sūrah* 8.[11] The Prophet emigrated with those of his Companions who were able to do so. They settled in Madinah where they found support by the *Anşār* who were believers in God and His Messenger, showing their love of those who migrated to settle in their land, and extended to them fine hospitality and a most generous treatment.

The conditions that prevailed between them and the idolaters of Makkah and other areas in Arabia were naturally war conditions, as would have been expected at the time. The Prophet entered into a peace treaty with the Jews in Madinah and the surrounding area. But they violated their treaty and forged an alliance with the idolaters, supporting them in their campaigns against the Prophet and Islam. We have outlined all this in commenting on *Sūrah* 8.

At al-Ĥudaybiyah, the Prophet entered into a peace treaty with the idolaters which provided for peace and security for ten years. He accepted conditions which were most favourable to the idolaters, but this was an act of magnanimity, not weakness. He wanted peace to prevail so that he could ensure the propagation of his faith through clear argument and irrefutable evidence.[12] The tribe of Khuzā`ah entered into a treaty with the Prophet,

10 It should be stated here that Shaikh Rashid Riđā'was a proponent of the same school of Imām Muĥammad `Abduh, which is clearly influenced by Descartes and his philosophy, which is alien to Islam. This school places very strong emphasis on reason, allowing it great scope in matters of faith. Hence, it is important to add to rational and scientific proofs the simple, instinctive and natural evidence which appeals to the entire human make up, including mind and feeling.

[11] *Sūrah* 8 is discussed in Volume 7. — Editor's note.

[12] This is true if it means that the initial and basic standpoint is to try to spread the faith by argument and conviction. However, it goes too far if it means to argue that *jihād* is only a defensive strategy to

while the tribe of Bakr joined an alliance with the Quraysh. The latter launched an aggression against the former and they were helped in this by the Quraysh who supported them with arms, thus violating their treaty with the Prophet.

This was the cause for ending the peace and returning to a situation of war which resulted in the Prophet's campaign that ended with Makkah falling peacefully to Islam. This was an event that considerably weakened and humiliated the idolaters. However, they continued to fight against the Prophet whenever they felt strong enough to do so. Experience had shown that they could never be relied upon to honour their pledges, whether their position was one of strength or weakness. We will presently see, in verse 7, the exclamation, "*How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger...*" leading to the instruction in verse 12: "*Fight these archetypes of faithlessness who have no [respect for a] binding pledge, so that they may desist.*" This means that they will never honour their pledges or fulfil their obligations. What the *sūrah* emphasizes here is that Muslims cannot coexist with them under the provisions of their treaties, in order to ensure peace and security, while they remain idolaters, observing no well-defined law which would have committed them to fulfil the conditions of their treaty. Indeed, the people of earlier Scriptures, who should have demonstrated a greater degree of integrity and honour, were even quicker to violate their covenants and breach their treaties.[13]

This is the basis of the provisions outlined in this *sūrah* which abrogated their open-ended treaties, and allowed other treaties to run their course, provided they remained faithful to such treaties. The reason for this was to remove idolatry from the Arabian Peninsula so that it became wholly and purely for the Muslims. All this is done while observing at the same time and as far as possible the earlier rules, such as '*Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression,*' (2: 190), and '*If they incline to peace, then incline you to it as well.*' (8: 61) Nevertheless, many scholars are of the view that this latter verse has been abrogated by the verse instructing the

protect the Muslims, and that peace is obligatory in any other situation as Shaikh Muĥammad Rashid Riđā'(may God shower His mercy on him) seems to have maintained.

[13] Shaikh Riđā' (may God bless his soul) touches here on the fundamental truth that it is impossible for the Muslims to coexist with idolaters and the people of earlier revelations on the basis of treaties, except for a certain period. Nevertheless, he is more inclined to argue that relations between the Muslim state and other camps should generally be based on peace agreements, unless the Muslims are victims of aggression in their own land. He feels that this is always possible while the lack of such peace treaties is the exception. He says that the whole question concerns the idolaters in Arabia at the time of the Prophet. While this is basically true, what applied to them applies to all idolaters everywhere.

Muslims to abrogate treaties with the idolaters and to fight them.[14]

It is clear from this presentation and the subsequent comments, as well as what follows in Shaikh Muĥammad Rashīd Riđā's commentary that he properly defines the real cause of this long series of treacherous actions by the idolaters who were always on the look-out for an opportunity to suppress Islam and overpower its advocates. Nevertheless, he does not dig deep enough to see how outstretched the roots behind this attitude were. Nor does he visualize the fundamental quality in the nature of this religion and its method of action, or the nature of radical differences between the divine way of life and those devised by God's creatures. Such differences make a meeting between the two practically impossible. Hence, there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence between a community implementing God's law and other communities.

Under Strong Pressure

By contrast, in his book, *al-Tafsīr al-Ĥadīth,* Muĥammad `Izzat Darwazah goes far beyond the root causes on which the Islamic attitude to other communities is based. Like other contemporary authors writing under oppressive pressures of the miserable conditions of today's Muslims and the all-too-visible strength of contemporary idolaters, atheists and followers of other religions, he has a clear purpose in mind. Hence, he tries hard to prove that Islam is a religion of peace, aiming at nothing more than to live within its borders in peace. Wherever it is possible to make a peace treaty, Islam should be keen to put it in place, making it its clear objective.

Hence, Muĥammad `Izzat Darwazah finds no reason for these new and final provisions, included in this present *sūrah,* other than the violation by some idolaters of their treaties. As for those who honoured their treaties, whether these were of limited or indefinite duration, the *sūrah* gives instructions to the Muslims to honour them. Indeed, he claims that new treaties may be concluded with them after the expiry of their present ones. The same applies, in his view, to the violaters of their present treaties. He considers the verses giving provisional rulings to prevail over the principles given in the final verses.

In his discussion of the first passage of the *sūrah* he identifies the following verses: *"except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous. When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them,*

[14] Muĥammad Rashid Riđā', *Tafsīr al-Manār,* Dār al-Ma`rifah, Beirut, Vol. 10, pp.149-150.

and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt, let them go their way. For God is Much-forgiving, Merciful." (Verses 4-5) He then says:

> In these two verses and the ones preceding them we have scenes of life towards the end of the Madinah period at the time of the Prophet. We note from these verses that there were peace agreements between Muslims and unbelievers which were in force after the fall of Makkah to Islam, and perhaps were signed before that event. We note that some idolaters honoured their agreements while others violated them, or contemplated such violations.
>
> We stated earlier that commentators describe the second of these two verses as 'the verse of the sword', and treat it as abrogating every previous verse which gives instructions to adopt a reconciliatory attitude towards the idolaters and allowing them time to make their position clear, and to forbear and let matters take their course. They consider this verse to order fighting them as the proper attitude. Some commentators make an exception in the case of those who have a treaty allowing such treaties to run to the end of their terms. Others do not make such exceptions, saying that their only option after the revelation of this verse is that they must embrace Islam. We also made it clear that such an explanation is too extreme and contradicts a number of definitive rulings that prohibit fighting anyone other than enemies and orders fair and kindly treatment of those who adopt a peaceful attitude.
>
> When discussing this verse, commentators repeatedly quote reports attributed to the earliest commentators on the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, for example, quotes Ibn `Abbās's view that the verse contains an order to the Prophet to take up arms against those with whom he had a treaty until they have embraced Islam. He is further ordered to terminate the conditions he approved when negotiating such treaties. The same commentator quotes a singular view attributed to Sulaymān ibn `Uyaynah which groups these verses together with other verses in this and other *sūrahs* that do not refer to fighting and calls these verses, the swords. He claims that the Prophet sent his cousin `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to convey these verses to people on the day of the greater pilgrimage. These included this verse which he describes as a sword on the Arab idolaters. Another sword was against the hypocrites, and it is included in the later verse: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled*" (Verse 29) A third sword against the hypocrites is included in this verse: "*Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the*

hypocrites, and press on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end." (Verse 73) A fourth sword is levelled against rebels, which is included in *Sūrah* 49: *"If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment."* (49: 9) What is most singular is that al-Ṭabarī expresses the view that this present verse (i.e. Verse 5) applies equally to those who are bound by a treaty and those with no treaty. Yet he himself takes a different view when commenting on the following verse: "*For such of the unbelievers as do not fight against you on account of your faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity. Surely God loves those who act equitably."* (60: 8) He says that this last verse is definitive, making clear that God does not forbid extending kindly and fair treatment to those who adopt an attitude of peaceful coexistence and neutrality, whatever their faith may be. These may not even be bound by a treaty.

All this when it is clear that the verse refers, in context and import, to fighting only the idolaters who violate their treaties. It is reasonable to say that considering it a sword pointed at all idolaters, regardless of their position and attitude, is to impose on it an interpretation it cannot admit. The same may be said about the claim that it abrogates several earlier statements given in a form of definitive principles, such as the prohibition of compulsion in matters of religion and faith, the advocacy of the divine message with wisdom, kindly admonition and fair argument, the order to extend kindly and fair treatment to those who do not fight against the Muslims and not to drive them out of their homeland. A few verses on, the *sūrah* also includes a clear order to all Muslims to remain faithful to their commitments towards people with whom they have concluded treaties in the vicinity of the Sacred Mosque, as long as the latter continue to honour their obligations. This last verse gives clear support to our view.

Two points may be raised concerning the rulings included in the two verses quoted above. The first refers to the exception made in the first verse in respect of the completion of the term of a treaty. The question asked here is whether the idolaters who have such a treaty will be included in the disavowal declared by God and His Messenger, and in this case must they be fought? Commentators generally seem to answer this question in the affirmative. We for our part have not seen any authentic report attributed to the Prophet on this particular point. Hence, what commentators say may be questioned if they treat it as universally applicable. The whole matter requires clarification.

Those unbelievers who are party to a treaty with the Muslims could have been prior to the treaty either enemies who fought the Muslims in war and then negotiated a peace treaty with them, as was the case with the Quraysh when they signed the al- Ĥudaybiyah peace treaty, or else they might have wished to have such a peace treaty without ever having been at war against the Muslims. Consider this following verse: *"Except in the case of those of them who have ties with people to whom you yourselves are bound by a covenant, or those who come to you because their hearts shrink from the thought of fighting you or fighting their own people. Had God so willed, He would have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. Therefore, if they leave you alone, and do not make war on you, and offer you peace, God has given you no way against them."* (4: 90) We believe that this verse speaks of a true situation.

In the Prophet's history we have several examples, such as the report by Ibn Said to the effect that the Prophet made an agreement with the Şakhr clan of the Kinānah tribe that neither party would raid the other, and that they would never aid any party against the Prophet and his Companions. All this was put in a written agreement. There is nothing in this verse, or indeed in any other verse, to prevent the renewal of the treaty or extending its term, should the other party desire that, without having ever given any indication of violating their commitments. Muslims may not refuse such an extension because they are ordered to fight only those who wage war or launch an aggression against them. A later verse in the *sūrah* includes an express order to the Muslims to remain true to their treaties with idolaters as long as those idolaters continue to honour such treaties. This supports our view.

The second point concerns the last part of the second verse which makes releasing the idolaters and stopping the fight against them that resulted from their treaty violations conditional upon a fundamental change indicated by turning away from idolatry, attending regularly to prayer and paying the obligatory charity, i.e. *zakāt.*

What appears to me is that by violating their original treaties and fighting the Muslims, the idolaters actually forfeited their right to have a new treaty. It is right that the Muslims should now impose the condition that guarantees their safety and security, which is that they should accept Islam and fulfil its worship requirements, ritual and financial. This does not constitute any compulsion to force them to become Muslims. Suffice it to say that idolatry represents a very low ebb to which humanity may sink when it allows its reason to be subservient to ideas and forces that have no trace of truth or logic. Besides, idolatry is an ignorant system governed by oppressive tradition and bizarre habits. When they embrace Islam, they are certain to rid

> themselves of all that and rise to a position of respectability in thought, morality, faith, belief, worship and daily practices. Besides, we do not see any reason to prevent the renewal of treaties with those whom the Muslims have fought for violating their original treaties, should the interests of the Muslim community require such renewal.

These paragraphs and many similar ones in the author's commentary make it clear that he does not even consider that Islam has an inalienable and absolute right to move forward to liberate mankind from the evil of submission to other human beings so that people may submit themselves to God alone. Islam does so whenever it is feasible, regardless of whether the Muslim community is under attack or not. This concept, which is the basis *of jihād* in Islam, does not figure at all in this author's thinking. Without it Islam is denied its right to remove physical obstacles impeding its progress, and it loses its serious, practical approach which requires facing obstacles with suitable and adequate means. It will have to confront physical powers with verbal advocacy. This is far from satisfactory.[15]

It is also clear that this author does not pay sufficient attention to the method of action Islam adopts, which requires that any situation should be faced with adequate means. He attaches final rulings to provisional texts and rulings which were given earlier. In so doing, he does not take into consideration the fact that the earlier rulings dealt with practical situations different from the ones that prevailed at the time of the revelation of the final verses. It is true that the earlier rulings are not abrogated in the sense that makes them inapplicable to any situation. They remain in force but only to face new situations that are largely similar to the ones they originally addressed. However, these earlier rulings do not restrict the Muslims should they face situations similar to the ones that prevailed at the time when the final rulings were revealed. The whole question requires broader knowledge, and a good understanding of the nature of Islam and its method of action.

The Nature of Islamic International Relations

At the beginning of our commentary we said: "When we review the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime so as to draw an outline of the historical progress and nature of the proactive approach of Islam, its progressive stages and ultimate goals, we see very clearly that this decisive step was taken at its most appropriate time. It was now possible to reorganize relations between the Islamic community and other camps, whether idolaters or people of earlier revelations."

One experience after another had revealed the nature of the law that governs

[15] Reference may be made to the Prologue of Vol. 7, pp. 1-54, where this is discussed at length.

relations between Islamic society which attributes Godhead, Lordship, sovereignty and the authority to legislate to God alone, and ignorant or, to use the Islamic term, *jāhiliyyah* societies which assign all this to some beings other than God, or claim that God has partners sharing with Him all these attributes. This law is essentially one of conflict, which is expressed in God's statements in the Qur'ān: *"Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would have been destroyed."* (22: 40) *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted''* (2: 251)

The practical results of this essential law were manifested in two practical phenomena. The first was that Islam moved from one step, expedition and stage to the next following the divine approach and conveying God's message to one area and tribe after another. This was a necessary step towards conveying the message to all mankind and removing all material obstacles that prevented the divine message from reaching all people. This continued to be the case until Makkah fell to Islam and the Quraysh tribe, the major obstacle in the face of the Islamic march, was vanquished. The large tribes of Hawāzin and Thaqīf, which were akin to the Quraysh in strength, also surrendered to the Muslim state. Islam had then enough power to strike fear in the hearts of its enemies. It was thus able to take the final and decisive step in the Arabian Peninsula, in preparation for taking the same step across the rest of the world, as and when circumstances allowed. The ultimate aim being that there should be no strife on earth and all submission be made to God alone.

The other phenomenon was the violation of treaties and covenants which were made with the Muslims in different circumstances, whenever a chance presented itself to violate such treaties with impunity. At the first suggestion that the Muslims were going through some difficulty which made the idolaters, and even the people of earlier revelations, feel they could safely violate their treaties, such violations were certain to come. The treaties were not made in the first place as a result of any keen desire to live in peace with the Muslims. The enemies of Islam were compelled, by force of circumstance, to go into such treaties to serve their own interests. *Jāhiliyyah,* which is the name Islam gives to any society that rejects God's law, does not like to see Islam establishing its solid presence when it contradicts the very basis of its existence and every detail of the programmes of such societies. Jāhiliyyah knows that by virtue of the active nature of Islam, and its instinctive desire to stamp out tyranny from human life, it will work hard to bring people back to the worship of God alone.

It is to emphasize this last phenomenon that God says with reference to the unbelievers: *"They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (2: 217) He also says about the people of earlier revelations: *"Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief now that you have*

embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them." (2: 109) Concerning them He also says: "*Never will the Jews nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith."* (2:120) In all these categorical statements God makes it clear that all those in the camp of *jāhiliyyah* have the same objectives when it comes to dealing with Islam and Muslims. They pursue their goals with clear persistence that never fades with the passage of time, nor does it change as a result of changing circumstances.

Unless we understand this essential law that is inherent in the nature of the relationship between the Muslim community and the camp of *jāhiliyyah,* we cannot understand the nature of Islamic *jihād,* or the motives for that long struggle between the two. Nor can we, without such understanding of this law, comprehend the motives of the early Muslims, or the secrets of Islamic conquests, or the war that has been waged against Islam by hostile forces over the 14 centuries of Islamic history. It continues to be waged against the children of Muslim communities, despite the fact that these have sadly abandoned true Islam, with its holistic approach to life, and are content to keep it in name only. The war continues to be waged against those latter-day Muslim communities, even those living in the midst of hostile creeds such as communism and idolatry of all forms, whether in Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Albania, India, Kashmir, Ethiopia, Zanzibar, Cyprus, Kenya, South Africa or the United States. All this comes on top of the brutal attempts to exterminate the advocates of Islamic revival in the Muslim World, or more accurately, the world which used to be Muslim. Communism, idolatry, and other world powers collaborate with, and give active support to, the regimes that undertake such extermination efforts against the advocates of Islamic revival. They pour their aid on these governments to the extent that they practically give them every type of help to ensure that they stay in power. Their support often takes the form of tacit or silent approval of what they are doing to those noble believers who seek to persuade people to believe in God and implement His law.

Such understanding of all these aspects can only be achieved when we understand the essential law we have talked about and the phenomena it brings into our life. This law demonstrated itself in the period leading to the conquest of Makkah, in the two phenomena we have outlined. At that time, it appeared clearly that a decisive step must be taken in the Arabian Peninsula, against the idolaters, which we will discuss presently, and against the people of earlier revelations which we will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.

Crystallizing Attitudes

The need for such a decisive step might have been very clear for the Islamic

leadership at the time, but that did not necessarily mean that it was similarly clear to all groups in the Muslim community, particularly the newcomers to Islam and those who were only on friendly terms with the Muslims.

Some people in the Muslim community, perhaps among the noblest and most dedicated Muslims, might have felt uneasy about the termination of all treaties with the unbelievers on the terms outlined in the *sūrah:* after four months for those who violated their treaties, and those with treaties that did not specify a term, and those whose treaties ended in less than four months and those who had no treaties and were not at war with the Muslims. Those who had treaties with specified terms and continued to honour their obligations would have their treaties respected and observed for the remainder of their terms. Such conscientious Muslims might have understood that the treaties with the violators and those from whom violation was expected should be terminated, as was clear in the provisional instructions given to the Prophet in the previous *sūrah: "if you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous."* (8: 58) However, the termination of treaties after four months or after their term was over might have appeared to those people contrary to the familiar practice of maintaining peaceful relations with those who did not adopt any hostile attitude. God, on the other hand, had a far greater objective than maintaining what was familiar practice.

Other people in the Muslim community, perhaps also among the noblest and most dedicated Muslims, might have felt that there was no longer any need to fight the idolaters generally after Islam had attained supremacy in Arabia, leaving only scattered pockets of resistance which represented no threat whatsoever. On the contrary, they were expected to change their attitude to Islam gradually after peace would have been maintained for sometime in Arabia. Such Muslims might have felt particularly uneasy about fighting against relatives and friends as well as people with whom they might have had social and economic relations. After all there was still hope that such people would still see the light of Islam without resorting to such a drastic measure. But God wanted faith to be the basic bond that united people in a cohesive community. He also wanted the Arabian Peninsula to be a secure base for Islam, as He was aware of the plots the Byzantines were preparing against the Muslim state. This will be explained later.

Yet others in the Muslim community, some of whom might have been among the noblest and most dedicated Muslims, might have feared economic depression ensuing from the disruption to business transactions in Arabia as a result of declaring war against all Arabian idolaters. That was bound to affect the pilgrimage season, particularly after it had been announced that no idolater would be allowed to go on pilgrimage after that year, and that idolaters would not be allowed to enter into mosques and places of worship. Such people's fears were made even greater by

the fact that such a step was not particularly necessary. Its outcome could have been reached in a slower but more peaceful way. But, as we have said, God wanted the basic bond to unite people in the Muslim community to be the bond of faith, so that faith should be felt to have far greater weight than blood relationships, friendships and economic interests. He also wanted the Muslims to realize that He alone gave them all the provisions they had and was their only provider. The means they might have had to earn their living were not the only ones He could have granted them.

There were others in the Muslim community who lacked strength of faith, or were hesitant, or who were hypocrites, or who might have been among the large numbers who embraced Islam but had not yet fully absorbed its truth. Most of these feared the possibility of open warfare with the idolaters, the economic depression that might result from war, the lack of security for trade and travel, the disruption of contacts and transport and worried about the likely costs of mounting a *jihād* campaign. Such people might have not reckoned with such a prospect of full-scale war. They might have been encouraged to embrace Islam by the fact that it appeared victorious, and that it would have enjoyed security and stability. To them, embracing Islam might have seemed the best alternative that allowed them to gain much for a little outlay. Newcomers to Islam as they were, they felt ill at ease with what was required of them. God, on the other hand, wanted to test people's intentions and their commitment and determination. He says to the believers: *"Do you think that you will be left alone, unless God takes cognizance of those of you who strive hard for His cause and establish close association with none other than God, His Messenger and the believers? God is well aware of what you do."* (Verse 16)

All these aspects made it necessary to give a detailed account which employs various modes of expression and produces varied effects which are calculated to remove the traces of weakness in people's hearts and remove whatever doubts they might be entertaining. Hence the *sūrah* opens with a general announcement of disavowal by God and His Messenger of all dealings with the idolaters. The same disavowal is repeated another time, with similar forcefulness and clarity after only one verse in the *sūrah* so that no believer will entertain any thought of maintaining relations with such people when God and His Messenger are acquitting themselves of any dealings with them. *"Disavowal by God and His Messenger (is hereby announced) to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty."* (Verse 1) *And a proclamation from God and His Messenger is hereby made to all mankind on this day of the greater pilgrimage: God is free from obligation to the idolaters, and so is His Messenger."* (Verse 3)

The believers are also reassured while the unbelievers are threatened with misery and humiliation. Those who turn away are warned that they cannot escape God's judgement: *"You may go freely in the land for four months, but you must realize that you can never escape God's judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers."*

(Verse 2) "*If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape Gods judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering.*" (Verse 3)

The very idea that idolaters may have a treaty with God and His Messenger is questioned, except for those who had shown true commitment in observing their treaty with honesty. With these the existing treaties were to be honoured for the rest of their terms, as long as the unbelievers remained faithful to them. The believers are warned, however, that the idolaters would try to do them harm whenever they could as also feeling that they would escape punishment. "*How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters, unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing. How [else could it be] when, should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you? They try to please you with what they say, while at heart they remain adamantly hostile. Most of them are transgressors. They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do. They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors.*" (Verses 7-10)

The believers are further reminded of their own bitter experiences with them, and their feelings of happiness at the crushing of their enemy by God's might. "*Will you not fight against people who have broken their solemn pledges and set out to drive out the Messenger, and who were the first to attack you? Do you fear them? It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers. Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, and will bring disgrace upon them; and will grant you victory over them and will grant heart felt satisfaction to those who are believers, removing all angry feelings from their hearts. God will turn in His mercy to whom He wills. God is All-knowing and Wise.*" (Verses 13-15)

They are told that they must cut themselves off, as far as family relations with the unbelievers were concerned. They are required to weaken the effects of their family ties with the unbelievers. They are told to choose between those ties of blood and friendship on the one hand and God and His Messenger on the other. "*Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith. Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers. Say: 'If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your clan, and the property you have acquired, and the business in which you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure, are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God shall make manifest His will. God does not provide guidance to the evildoers.'*'' (Verses 23-24)

They are also reminded of the numerous victories they achieved with God's help, the most recent of which was the Battle of Ĥunayn. They were able to achieve victory only when God provided them with His help and gave reassurance to His Messenger who remained steadfast: "*God has granted you His support on many a battlefield, and also*

in the Battle of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned back in flight. God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers, and He sent down forces whom you could not see, and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers." (Verses 25-26)

They are also reassured about their provisions, and that they should not fear any loss of trade or lack of business. What they get is subject to God's will, not to the apparent causes people associate with profitable business: "*Believers, know that the idolaters are certainly impure. So, let them not come near to the Sacred Mosque after this year is ended. If you fear poverty, then in time God will enrich you with His own bounty, if He so wills. Truly, God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 28)

All these concerns which required reassurance and clear judgement are indicative of the situation that prevailed in the Muslim state in Madinah. Had it not been for the fact that the Muslim community in Madinah was firm in its belief, stable and enlightened, these conditions might have represented a serious threat to it, and to the very existence of Islam itself.

Having given this detailed preview, we now begin to discuss the verses of this passage in more detail.

An Announcement is Made

> *Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty. (Announce to them:) You may go freely in the land for four months, but you must realize that you can never escape God's judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers. And a proclamation from God and His Messenger is hereby made to all mankind on this day of the greater pilgrimage: God is free from obligation to the idolaters, and so is His Messenger. If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape God's judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering, except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous. When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt, let them go their way. For God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. If any of the idolaters seeks asylum with you, grant him protection, so that he may hear the word of God, and then convey him to his place of safety. That is because the idolaters are people who lack knowledge. (Verses 1-6)*

These verses and the following ones, up to verse 28, provide a framework demarcating relations between the Muslim community, now well established in Madinah and the Arabian Peninsula generally, and the unbelievers in Arabia who chose not to accept Islam. Relations were thus regulated with those Arabs who had violated their treaties with the Prophet when they felt that the Muslims were about to meet their match from the Byzantines at Tabūk. Relations were also put on a proper footing with those Arabs without a treaty but who maintained good relations with the Muslims, and those who had a treaty which they continued to observe, entertaining no thoughts of treachery.

The style employed in these verses takes the form of a general declaration coupled with high resonance to ensure perfect harmony between the subject matter, the general atmosphere surrounding the whole issue and the mode of expression.

Several reports speak of the general conditions prevailing at the time when this declaration was made, as well as the method and the person chosen for its announcement. Perhaps the most accurate and more fitting with the prevailing situation of the Muslim community and the nature of the Islamic approach is the one chosen by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, an early commentator on the Qur'ān. We will quote here some of his comments on the various reports which support our view of the event and how it took place. The following report he attributes to Mujāhid:

> In the statement, *'Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty,'* the reference is made to the tribe of Mudlij and the Arabs bound by a treaty with the Muslims and all other peoples with similar treaties. It is reported that when the Prophet returned from Tabūk, he wanted to go on pilgrimage. He then thought, `the Ka`bah is visited by idolaters who do the *ṭawāf* naked. I would rather delay my pilgrimage until such a practice is stopped.' He sent Abū Bakr and `Alī who went to see people at Dhu'l-Majāz and other markets, as well as their encampments in pilgrimage. They gave notice to all peoples who had treaties with the Prophet that they would have four months of peace. When those four consecutive months, beginning with the twenty days remaining of Dhu'l-Hijjah to the tenth day of Rabī` II, were over, the treaties would come to an end. All people in Arabia would then be in a state of war with the Muslims unless they believed in God and His Messenger. All the population of Arabia became Muslims and none continued with their old religion.[16]

Examining the views of other commentators, Imām al-Ṭabarī says:

> As for the notice given by God permitting idolaters with a treaty to *'go freely*

[16] Al-Tabarī, op.cit., p. 62.

in the land for four months,' perhaps the more accurate view is to say that this notice is given by God to those idolaters who, despite having peace treaties, collaborated with others against the Prophet and the Muslim community violating their treaties before they ran out. As for those who fulfilled their obligations under such treaties and refrained from collaborating with others, God — limitless is He in His glory — ordered His Messenger to honour his treaty with them until their term had been completed. This is clear in the Qur'ānic statement: "*Except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under that treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous.*" (Verse 4)

Some people may feel differently, taking the order to mean that once the truce was over, the Muslims were meant to kill all unbelievers. They may quote in support of their view the next verse which states: *'When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them.'* (Verse 5) But this view is wrong. Verse 7 confirms our view and shows the opposite as wrong: *'How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters, unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing.'* Those people to whom this verse refers are idolaters, and God commands the Prophet and the believers to remain faithful to their treaty with them as long as they kept their part and fulfilled their obligations.

Numerous are the reports which confirm that when the Prophet sent `Alī to declare the disavowal of treaties to people, he also commanded him to make it clear that "whoever had a treaty with the Prophet, that treaty continued until its specified expiration date." This provides the clearest support of our view. God did not order the Prophet to terminate a treaty with any group of people who remained faithful to it. He only put on four-month notice those who had violated their treaties and those whose treaties had no specified term. The treaties which ran for a specific term and were observed properly by the other side were to remain in force until their term was over. The Prophet sent his Companions to announce this during the pilgrimage, for this would ensure the announcement was well publicized.[17]

In another comment on the various reports concerning treaties, al- Ṭabarī says:

The four-month notice was made to those whom we have mentioned. As for those whose treaties specified a term of expiry, God did not allow the Prophet and the believers to terminate such treaty in any way. Hence, the

[17] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., pp. 62-63.

> Prophet fulfilled God's order and honoured his commitments under these treaties to their final dates. This is clearly stated in God's revelations, and confirmed by many reports attributed to the Prophet.[18]

If we discard the reports which are doubtful and overlook those which might have been coloured by the political differences between the Shiah and the Sunnis, we may say with confidence that the Prophet sent Abū Bakr as the leader of pilgrimage that year. The reason for that was that the Prophet did not like to perform the pilgrimage when the idolaters continued with their abominable practice of doing the *ṭawāf,* or the ritual walk around the Ka`bah in the nude. After Abū Bakr had left for pilgrimage, the opening passage of this *sūrah,* Repentance, was revealed. The Prophet despatched `Alī to join Abū Bakr and make the declaration. He did this outlining all its final provisions at the gathering which ensured that all people in Arabia would be aware of them. Among these provisions was the one which made it clear that no idolater would be allowed in Makkah to do the *ṭawāf or* the pilgrimage.

Al-Tirmidhī relates a report which quotes `Alī as saying: "God's Messenger sent me after the revelation of the *sūrah* Repentance to announce four points: no one may do the *ṭawāf* naked, and no idolater may come near the Sacred Mosque after that year, and whoever had a treaty with God's Messenger, their treaty would be observed until it had expired, and that no one may enter heaven except one who submits totally to God." This report is the most authentic in this connection.

The Principles of International Relations

"Disavowal by God and His Messenger [is hereby announced] to those of the idolaters with whom you have made a treaty." (Verse 1) This is a general declaration, carrying a sharp rhythm, which outlines the basic principles that governed relations between the Muslims and the idolaters at the time, throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The treaties to which it refers were those that the Prophet had concluded with the idolaters in Arabia. The disavowal of these treaties by God and His Messenger defines the attitude of every Muslim. It generates a very strong impression on Muslim minds to leave no room whatsoever for hesitation or second thought.

This general statement is followed by qualifications and explanations: *"[Announce to them:] You may go freely in the land for four months, but you must realize that you can never escape God's judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers."* (Verse 2) This statement clarifies the terms now given to the unbelievers: they are given a period of four months during which they can move about freely to carry out business transactions, fulfil their commitments and modify their situations in peace.

[18] Al-Ṭabarī, ibid., p. 66.

Those were four months when they would be sure that their treaties would be scrupulously honoured. That included even those idolaters who were quick to violate their treaties, when they felt that the Prophet and his followers would never return from their expedition to Tabūk, but would instead be taken captive by the Byzantines. That was also the eventuality expected by the hypocrites in Madinah.

It is pertinent to ask here: when was this notice outlining this period of truce and security given? It followed a long period of treaty violations by the unbelievers, whenever they felt that they could get away with it and remain immune from punishment. It came after a long series of events which showed clearly that the idolaters would continue to fight the Muslims until they had turned them away from their faith, if they could. At what period in history was it announced? It was at a time when humanity was governed by the law of the jungle. What dictated relations between communities was merely the ability to invade others: no notice was given, no hint was dropped, no commitment was considered binding. Once the opportunity was there, it was taken mercilessly.

Islam maintains the same position it adopted at the outset, when it was first revealed. Its constitution is outlined by God and its principles and foundations are not meant to be influenced or modified by the passage of time. Time allows human beings to develop and improve their conditions within the framework of Islamic principles. Islam deals with changing human conditions using appropriate methods.

With this four-month notice period, the idolaters are reminded of God's will which in turn sends fear into their hearts. They are meant to open their eyes to the fact that they can never escape God's judgement. They cannot seek refuge against what God has determined for them, which was certain disgrace and humiliation: "*You must realize that you can never escape God's judgement, and that God shall bring disgrace upon the unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) How could they escape God's judgement and what refuge could they seek when they, and the whole world, were in His grasp? He has predetermined to inflict misery and disgrace on the unbelievers. No power can ever stop God's will.

This is followed by specifying the time when this disavowal was to be announced to the unbelievers, so that they would be fully aware of the time limits it included: "*And a proclamation from God and His Messenger is hereby made to all mankind on this day of the greater pilgrimage: God is free from obligation to the idolaters, and so is His Messenger. If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape God's judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering.*" (Verse 3)

Reports vary on which is the day of the greater pilgrimage: the day of `Arafāt or the day of sacrifice? It is perhaps more accurate to say that it is the day of sacrifice.

The Arabic term used in this passage for `proclamation' signifies an assurance that those to whom the proclamation is made have received it. This properly took place during the pilgrimage, when the disavowal by God and His Messenger of all treaties with all idolaters was made. An exception was then added in the next verse which allowed certain treaties to run their term. This is most appropriate. First the general principle is outlined because it is the one which constitutes the permanent situation. Then the exception is made because it applied to specific cases that would end once the term specified had been reached.

With the termination of all treaties and the proclamation of absolute disavowal, the unbelievers are encouraged once again to seek and follow divine guidance and warned against the consequences of remaining in error: *"If you repent, it shall be for your own good; and if you turn away, then know that you can never escape God's judgement. Give the unbelievers the news of grievous suffering."* (Verse 3)

This warning and encouragement to the unbelievers to mend their ways, coming as they do in this particular context of disavowal of treaties, are indicative of the Islamic approach. It is first and foremost an approach seeking to give guidance to people. The idolaters are given this four-month grace period not only because Islam does not like to take them by surprise but also because it does not want to inflict on them unnecessary humiliation. These have always been the essence of power relations, except under Islam. The truce also gives the idolaters a chance to reflect and reconsider their options. Hence they are encouraged to choose divine guidance and turn back to God in submission. They are warned against turning away and shown that it will inevitably lead them to a position of grievous suffering in the hereafter, which compounds their humiliation in this life.

At the same time it provides reassurance to the Muslims which removes any lingering worries or fears of what may happen. The whole matter has been determined by God Himself. The eventual outcome has been sealed.

Honouring Commitments

The exception is then made in the case of treaties specifying a term of validity. These were allowed to remain in force for the rest of their term: *"Except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations [under the treaty] in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous."* (Verse 4)

Perhaps the most accurate report concerning the identity of those people who benefited by this exception is that they were a clan of Bakr, named the Khuzaymah ibn `Āmir clan of the Bakr ibn Kinānah tribe. They were party to the Treaty of al-

Ĥudaybiyah which the Prophet had concluded with the Quraysh and their allies. This clan did not take part in the attack made by the Bakr against the Khuzā`ah tribe. That aggression, in which the Bakr were aided by the Quraysh, violated the al-Ĥudaybiyah peace treaty. Thus, that treaty which was to last for ten years, was treacherously breached after only two years. This Khuzaymah clan continued to observe the terms of their agreement while other unbelievers did not. The Prophet is here instructed to honour his obligations under the treaty to those people for the rest of the term agreed.

This report which we endorse is related by Muĥammad ibn `Abbād ibn Ja`far, who quotes al-Suddī as saying: "These were two clans of Kinānah known as Đamrah and Mudlij." Mujāhid, an authoritative early scholar says: "The tribes of Mudlij and Khuzā`ah had entered into treaties and these were the ones meant in the instruction: *"To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous."* (Verse 4) It should be noted, however, that the Khuzā`ah tribe embraced Islam after the conquest of Makkah, but this statement of exception applied to the idolaters who did not accept Islam.

Our view is confirmed by a statement that follows: *"How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters, unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 7) These two clans from Kinānah were among those who were party to the peace treaty at al-Ĥudaybiyah. They did not violate their treaty and were true to their obligations under it, aiding no party against the Muslims. It is to these, then, that the exception applies, as confirmed by early scholars and commentators on the Qur'ān, and by Shaikh Muĥammad Rashīd Riđā.

Muĥammad `Izzat Darwazah, however, expresses his opinion that the phrase, *"with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque,"* refers to a group of people other than those mentioned in the first exception. This is in line with his view which permits the negotiating and concluding of permanent treaties with idolaters. Relying on the instruction, *"so long as they are true to you, be true to them,"* he concludes that Islam does not object to the negotiation of treaties with unbelievers. This view seems extremely odd and does not fit with the nature of the Islamic method of operation and general attitudes.

Islam has honoured its obligations to those who were true to theirs. It did not give them notice of termination, as it did with all others. It allowed their treaties to run their term in recognition of their faithful observance of their obligations. This was the Islamic attitude, although Islam was in urgent need of eradicating all idolatry from the whole of Arabia, so that the Peninsula could become its safe base. The enemies of Islam in neighbouring countries were alerted to the danger to themselves that Islam represented. They began to make preparations for an eventual encounter with the

Muslims, as we will explain in our discussion of the Tabūk Expedition. Indeed, the earlier Battle of Mu`tah served as a warning of the preparations the Byzantines had started for a battle with Islam. Moreover, they were in alliance with the Persians in Yemen, in southern Arabia.

Subsequent events, as mentioned by Ibn al-Qayyim, witnessed that all those in whose favour the exception was made and with whom treaties were to be observed embraced Islam before their treaties expired. Indeed the others who were keen to violate their treaties as well as the rest of those put on four-month notice also opted for acceptance of Islam. No one remained an idolater for the rest of the four-month notice.

As He determined the path of the Islamic message and the various steps it would take in practical matters, God was aware that it was time for this decisive step which represented a final attack at the roots of idolatry. Suitable preparations were made for such a decisive step, which took place in accordance with God's design for the progress of His message.

It is important to reflect on the comment which concludes the verse that requires the Muslims to remain true to their obligations: *"To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous."* (Verse 4) It relates the fulfilment of obligations to righteousness and to God's love of the righteous. Thus, God makes the fulfilment of obligations to people an act of worship addressed to Him and an aspect of the righteousness He loves. This is the basis of Islamic ethics. Islam does not act on the basis of gain and interest, or on the basis of constantly changing traditions. All Islamic ethics are based on worshipping God and fearing Him, which is the essence of righteousness. A Muslim brings his behaviour in line with that which he knows to please God. His aim is to win God's pleasure and to ensure that He is not displeased with him. This is the essence of the strong hold Islamic ethics have on Muslims. These ethics also serve people's interests and work for their benefit. They establish a society in which friction and contradiction are reduced as much as possible. They also help human beings in their continuous march to a higher standard of humanity.

When the Period of Grace is Over

Thus the opening verses of the *sūrah* make it clear that God and His Messenger would have no dealings whatsoever with the idolaters, whether or not they had a treaty with the Prophet. They were given a four-month period of grace in which they were safe. When this period was over, treaties would continue to be observed to the end of their terms, but only with those who were true to their obligations under those treaties, and did not collaborate with any enemy of the Muslims. Now the *sūrah*

mentions what the Muslims were to do when the four-month grace period was over.

The Qur'ānic instruction is very clear. A state of all-out war was then to be declared: *"When these months of grace are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way. For God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 5)

The word which is used here to describe those four months in the Qur'ānic text is *'ĥurum'*, which is the one that describes the four months when fighting is not allowed except to repel aggression. These form two periods every year when people can go freely, secure from any danger of war. Because of the same usage scholars have disagreed in their interpretations of this statement here, on whether the four months meant the same ones observed annually, i.e. Dhu'l-Qa`dah, Dhu'l-Ĥijjah, Muĥarram and Rajab. In that case, the remaining period of grace given after the declaration of the termination of treaties would only be the rest of Dhu'l-Hijjah and Muĥarram, i.e. 50 days. Or were these four months, when fighting was forbidden, to start on the day of sacrifice and to end on 10 Rabī` II? A third point of view suggests that the first interpretation applies in the case of those who had violated their treaties and the second applies to those who did not have any treaty and those who had treaties with an unspecified duration.

The correct interpretation, in our view, is that the four months meant here are different from the four sacred months observed annually. The same description is given to both because fighting during them is forbidden. This new period of grace also applied to all, except in the case of those who had treaties lasting for a specified length of time, in which case such treaties were to be honoured in full. Since God has said to them: "*You may go freely in the land for four months,"* then the four months must start from the day when the announcement was made to them. This fits with the nature of this announcement.

God's instructions to the Muslims were clear: when the four months were over, they were to kill any idolater wherever he was found, or they were to take him captive, or besiege him if he was in a fortified place, or lie in wait for him so that he could not escape without punishment, except for those to whom obligations were to be observed for as long as their treaties remained in force. Indeed the idolaters were given enough notice, which meant that they were not taken by surprise. Nor did they fall victim to any treachery. Their treaties were terminated publicly and they were made fully aware of what was to be done with them.

Moreover, this was not meant as a campaign of vengeance or extermination, but rather as a warning which provided a motive for them to accept Islam. *"If they should repent, take to prayer and pay the zakāt, let them go their way. For God is Much-Forgiving,*

Merciful." (Verse 5) For 22 years they had been listening to the message of Islam put to them in the clearest possible way. For 22 years they were, nevertheless, trying to suppress the message of Islam by persecution, open warfare and forging alliances to destroy the Islamic state. This was a long history that contrasted with the never failing tolerance of Islam, as demonstrated by God's Messenger and his Companions. Nevertheless, Islam was now opening its arms to them. Instructions are here issued to the Prophet and the Muslims, the very victims of persecution who were driven out of their homeland and suffered a war of aggression, to extend a hand of welcome to those idolaters should they turn to God in repentance. Such repentance should be genuine, confirmed by their observance of the main duties of Islam. That is because God never rejects anyone who turns to Him in sincere repentance, no matter how great his sins are: "*For God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 5)

We do not here want to go into any of the arguments which are frequently found in books of commentary on the Qur'ān or Islamic jurisprudence, i.e. *fiqh,* concerning the proviso mentioned in this verse: "*If they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way."* (Verse 5) These arguments discuss whether these are the essential conditions of being a Muslim, in the sense that a person who does not observe them is considered an unbeliever. They also discuss whether these are sufficient for the acceptance of anyone who declares repentance without going into the other basic duties of Islam. We do not feel this verse is concerned with any such argument. Rather, it simply tackles a real situation involving the idolaters in Arabia at the time. None of these would have declared their repentance, prayed regularly and paid the *zakāt* without the full intention of submitting themselves to God and being Muslims in the full sense of the word. Hence the Qur'ānic verse specifies the declaration of repentance, regular prayers and *zakāt* payment as a mark of the acceptance of Islam in full with all its conditions and significance. The first of these is naturally the submission to God by declaring one's belief that there is no deity other than God and belief in the Prophet Muĥammad's message by declaring that Muĥammad is God's Messenger. This verse is not, then, about making any rulings on legal matters, but it outlines practical steps to deal with a particular situation where certain circumstances applied.

Asylum for the Enemy

Yet despite the declaration of war against all the idolaters after the four months are over, Islam continues to demonstrate its grace as well as its serious and realistic approach. It does not seek to exterminate all idolaters. On the contrary, it also declares a campaign of guidance whenever that is possible. Individual idolaters who are not part of a hostile and belligerent community are guaranteed safety in the land of Islam. God instructs His Messenger to give them asylum so that they may listen to

God's word and become aware of the nature of the Islamic message before they are given safe conduct to their own domiciles. All this, even though they are still idolaters: *"If any of the idolaters seeks asylum with you, grant him protection, so that he may hear the word of God, and then convey him to his place of safety. That is because the idolaters are people who lack knowledge."* (Verse 6)

This shows how Islam was keen to reach out to every heart with its guidance. No single case was to be taken lightly. Whoever appeals for protection shall be granted it. Anyone who seeks such asylum cannot at the same time try to join a hostile force seeking to undermine the Muslim community. Hence granting protection to such a person provides him with the opportunity to listen to the Qur'ān and to get to know the true nature of the Islamic faith. When God's word is heard in such an atmosphere, hearts may well respond positively. Even if they do not, the Muslims are still required to ensure the safety of anyone who appeals for their help until he is returned to a place where he feels secure.

This is one of the sublime heights to which Islam raises its community. Protection is provided for an idolater, an enemy who might have participated in persecution of the Muslims themselves. Now they are required to give him safe conduct until he has reached a place where he feels secure outside the Muslim state. This is a mark of the Islamic method of action. It is a method of guidance, and guidance remains its ultimate goal even when its efforts are concentrated on the protection of the land of Islam.

Yet some people claim that the purpose of Islamic *jihād* was to compel people to accept Islam. There are others who try to defend Islam against such a charge by claiming that *jihād* was merely a war of self defence within national borders. Both need to look at this great instruction given to the Prophet and the Muslim community: *"If any of the idolaters seeks asylum with you, grant him protection, so that he may hear the word of God, and then convey him to his place of safety. That is because the idolaters are people who lack knowledge."* (Verse 6)

This religion seeks to provide knowledge to those who lack such knowledge, and to give protection to whoever appeals for protection, even though they may belong to the enemy camp and who might have fought to suppress the Islamic message. It resorts to the use of force only to destroy physical forces that prevent people from listening to God's word and stop them from knowing what He has revealed. Such forces deprive them of the chance to follow God's guidance and force them into submission to beings other than God. When such physical forces have been destroyed and impediments have been removed, individuals are given protection, despite choosing to remain unbelievers. Islam only informs them of God's word without subjecting them to fear or pressure, and grants them protection and security, the fact that they continue to reject God's message notwithstanding.

There are countless regimes extant today where the dissenter has no sense of security for his life, property, honour or human rights. Yet people who see this taking place in front of their own eyes try to defend Islam against this false charge by distorting the image of the divine message. They try to portray Islam as nothing more than a passive message that confronts swords and guns with nothing more than words, whether in our own time or at any other time.

This is, then, an outline of the final rulings that determine the relations between the Muslim community and the remaining idolaters in Arabia. They mean an end to the state based on peace agreements with all idolaters, after four months in some cases and at the end of their specified terms in others. The eventual outcome of these rulings is that there will only be one of two situations: either repentance, mending of ways, attending to prayers and payment of *zakāt,* which in essence means the acceptance of Islam, or fighting idolaters, taking them captive and chasing them out of their hiding places.

This termination of the state of peace based on treaties and agreements is followed by a rhetorical question stating that it is just not possible that idolaters should have such covenants with God and His Messenger. The very principle of having such agreements is rejected outright: *"How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters?"* (Verse 7)

This outright denunciation, coming as it does in the verses that follow the opening ones, may be understood to abrogate the first rulings which allowed the continued observance of treaties with those who fulfilled their obligations under those rulings and did not provide any assistance to any group hostile to the Muslim community. In order to dispel any such misunderstanding, the ruling is restated once more: *"Unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 7)

This restatement adds a new provision. The first instruction required the Muslims to honour their obligations to those who had shown their true commitment to their peace agreements and fulfilled their own obligations under such agreements. Now the instruction to keep faith with them is qualified, making it clear that the Muslims were to honour their obligations to them for as long as they themselves continued to observe their treaties in full, as they did in the past. Here we note the careful phraseology of texts relating to dealings, transactions and relations with others. Implicit understanding is not sufficient. It is followed by a clear statement.

Considering the different aspects that prevailed in the Muslim community at the time and the way this decisive step was likely to be received by the Muslim community, the *sūrah* reminds the Muslims of the true nature of the idolaters, their

feelings, intentions and attitudes towards the Muslims. We are told by God Himself that the idolaters will never respect an agreement or honour an obligation or observe a moral value or a tradition once they are sure they can get away with such treachery. Hence, they cannot be trusted to honour their obligations. The only way is for them to accept Islam and show their commitment to it.

No Peace Possible

"How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters?" (Verse 7) The idolaters do not submit themselves truly to God, nor do they acknowledge His Messenger or the message he conveys to them. How could they, then, have a treaty with God and His Messenger? They do not simply deny a creature like themselves, or a constitution devised by human beings. Rather, they deny the One who has created them and continues to provide them with sustenance to preserve their lives. By so doing they place themselves in opposition to God and His Messenger. How is it conceivable, then, that they should have a treaty with them? The rhetorical question posed by the *sūrah* addresses the very principle of having such a treaty. It is not concerned with any particular application of the principle.

It may be said here that some of the idolaters had such treaties and God ordered that some of these treaties must be honoured. There were also treaties concluded after the establishment of the Muslim state in Madinah, some of which were with the idolaters and some with the Jews. Moreover, the peace agreement of al-Ĥudaybiyah was signed in the sixth year of the Islamic calendar. Earlier *sūrahs* included verses that clearly permitted such treaties, although they also permitted the termination of such treaties in case of surmised or actual treachery. So if it is the very principle of having agreements that is condemned here, how was it possible that such treaties were permitted and concluded?

Such an argument does not stand when we understand the nature of the Islamic method of operation, which we discussed in the introductions to this *sūrah* and the preceding one, The Spoils of War. These treaties dealt with existing situations with adequate means. The final ruling, however, is that the idolaters should not have any treaty with God and His Messenger. These treaties were made under provisional rulings. Otherwise, the ultimate goal of the movement which aims to establish Islam is that there should not be any idolatry on the face of the earth. All submission must be to God alone. Islam has declared this ultimate goal from the very first day, deceiving no one. The prevailing circumstances in a certain period made it necessary to conclude a peace agreement with those who wanted peace so that it could deal with those hostile forces trying to suppress its message. Islam does not lose sight of its ultimate goal. It does not overlook the fact that the idolaters themselves looked at

those agreements as only temporary. They were bound to launch new aggressions against the Muslim community. They would not leave the Muslims alone when they were aware of the aim of Islam. They would not remain at peace with the Muslim community for long when they had completed their preparations for a new confrontation. God said to the believers right at the beginning: *"They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (2: 217) This continues to be their attitude at all times. The verse describes a permanent situation, not one that applies in certain circumstances.

Although the principle itself is denounced, God has permitted the honouring of treaties with those who continued to honour their obligations. He only made the proviso that this should be reciprocated, which means that treaties were to be honoured by the Muslims as long as the idolaters continued to honour them: *"Unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God- fearing."* (Verse 7)

Unlike what some contemporary commentators have understood, those people who had a treaty signed at the Sacred Mosque were the same group as they to whom reference was made earlier in the *sūrah: "Except for those idolaters with whom you have made a treaty and who have honoured their obligations (under the treaty) in every detail, and have not aided anyone against you. To these fulfil your obligations until their treaties have run their term. God loves those who are righteous."* (Verse 4) The two verses refer to the same group. However, the first reference makes an exception in their case as opposed to all those whose treaties are terminated. They are mentioned again in verse 7, in connection with the denunciation of the principle of making peace agreements with idolaters. Their second mention is necessary to make it clear that there is no abrogation of the first ruling in their favour. The righteous and the God-fearing are mentioned on both occasions, using the same Arabic word for both, and highlighting the fact that God loves those who are righteous and God-fearing, to indicate that the subject matter is the same. The second statement completes the conditions stated earlier. In the first, their past attitude of honouring their obligations is mentioned, and in the second the condition of their continued observance of these obligations is made clear. The careful phraseology requires that both statements are taken together to grasp the meaning in full.

The principle of making peace with the idolaters is then denounced on historical and practical grounds, after it had been denounced on grounds of faith. Both sets of reasons are grouped together in the verses that follow: *"How (else could it be) when, should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you? They try to please you with what they say, while at heart they remain adamantly hostile. Most of them are transgressors. They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do.*

They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors." (Verses 8-10)

How is it conceivable that the idolaters should have a covenant with God and His Messenger when they do not make any agreement with you unless they are unable to overcome you? Should they prevail over you, they would subject you to their wrath, observing no agreement, honouring no commitment and heeding no moral or ethical value. They would respect no pledge and allow no limit in the punishment they would inflict on you if only they could prevail against you in war. They would not even respect the values of their own society, risking any criticism they might incur for not abiding by these limits. No matter what agreements they may have with you, their blind hatred of you causes them to trespass all limits and violate all commitments, if only they can prevail over you. What prevents them from doing that now is not the sort of agreements they have with you. They are only prevented by the fact that they cannot achieve victory over you in battle. Now that you are too strong for them, they try to please you with what they say and by showing that they are true to their commitments. But in truth, their hearts are full of grudges against you. With such heart-burning animosity, they will always wish you ill. They have no desire to be in a relation of friendship with you and they harbour no good intention towards you.

No Obligation Honoured

"*Most of them are transgressors. They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verses 8-9) There is a basic reason for their treacherous attitude: that they are transgressors who have deviated widely from God's guidance. They have bartered away God's revelations for a paltry price in the shape of fleeting pleasures and temporary comforts. They fear that adopting Islam will deny them some or all of these interests or that it may involve some financial cost. Hence they do not merely refuse to accept Islam, but they also try to debar others from its path. This is, then, the result of the deal they made when they exchanged God's message for a paltry price. Hence, they turn away from God's path and debar others from following it. What they do is evil indeed, as God Himself states: "*Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 9)

The grudge they harbour is not directed against you personally, nor are their evil actions levelled at you as individuals or a particular group. Their grudge is against every believer, and their evil deeds shall always be levelled against every Muslim. It is an animosity directed at the very Duality of faith, or indeed against faith itself. This has always been the case with the enemies of faith, in all periods of history. Thus said the sorcerers to Pharaoh when he threatened them with torture, vengeance

and a woeful doom: "*You want to take vengeance on us only because we have believed in the signs of our Lord when they were shown to us.*" (7: 126) The same was said by the Prophet, on God's instructions, to the people of earlier revelations who opposed him: "*Say: 'People of earlier revelations! Do you find fault with us for any reason other than we believe in God alone?'*" (5: 59) In reference to the People of the Pit who in former times burned the believers with their women and children, God says: "*They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, the Praised One.*" (85: 8)

Faith is then the cause of all their hatred for the believers. Hence their ill-will and atrocities are directed against every believer: "*They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors.*" (Verse 10) It is in their nature that they are aggressors. Their aggression begins with their hatred of the divine faith and their rejection of its message. It is their aggression that leads them to stand in opposition to faith and adopt a hostile attitude to the believers, respecting no treaty or obligation of honour. Hence, should they prevail and feel that they can get away with what they want, they will resort to any atrocity without limit.

God then gives His instructions on how the believers should react to this state of affairs: "*Yet, if they repent, take to prayers and pay the zakāt, they are your brethren in faith. Clear do We make Our revelations to people of knowledge. But if they break their pledges after having concluded a treaty with you, and revile your religion, then fight these archetypes of faithlessness who have no [respect for a] binding pledge; so that they may desist.*" (Verses 11-12)

In view of such a long history as well as the nature of the inevitable battle between God's message, which seeks to free mankind from subjugation by other creatures in order that they submit to God alone, and *jāhiliyyah* systems which seek to make some people tyrannize over others, God gives a very clear and decisive directive to the Muslims: "*Yet, if they repent, take to prayers and pay the zakāt, they are your brethren in faith. Clear do We make Our revelations to people of knowledge. But if they break their pledges after having concluded a treaty with you, and revile your religion, then fight these archetypes of faithlessness who have no respect for a binding pledge, so that they may desist.*" (Verses 11-12)

The choice before them, then, is clear. They may accept what the Muslims have accepted and repent of whatever aggression and transgression they have committed. In this case, the Muslims will forgive them for whatever they might have committed against them in the past. A new relationship will then be established which makes these new Muslims brothers of the older Muslims and the past is forgiven and forgotten altogether: "*Clear do We make Our revelations to people of knowledge.*" (Verse 11) These rulings are best appreciated and acted upon by the people of knowledge who are the believers.

Having made pledges and concluded a treaty with the believers, the other choice they had was to violate their pledges and speak ill of the Islamic faith. In such a situation they would assume the leadership of disbelief and faithlessness. No treaty would be valid in their favour and no obligation to them need be respected. The Muslims are required then to fight them, for they may, perchance, reflect on their situation and see the truth for what it is. As we have already said, the strength of the Islamic camp and its success in *jihād* may influence people to recognize its truth. They would thus see that the truth is triumphant because of its being the truth and because it relies on God's power and support. They would recognize that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was only saying the truth when he told them that God, and His Messenger, are overpowering. That should lead them to repentance for their past misdeeds and a resolve to follow divine guidance, not by force and compulsion, but through conviction that often comes as a result of seeing the truth triumphant.

An Attitude Confirmed by History

It is now pertinent to ask: to what stages of history and to what communities do these statements apply? What sort of historical and social dimensions apply to them? Are they valid only in the case of Arabia at the time of revelation? Or do they extend to other times and places? These verses reflect a situation that prevailed at the time in Arabia between the Muslims and the camp of idolatry. There is no doubt that the rulings they outline deal with that situation; the idolaters they mention are those in Arabia at that particular time. All this is true; but how far are they applicable and in which situations? In order to answer these questions, we need to review the attitudes idolaters have adopted towards the believers throughout history.

As for the Arabian stage, the events that took place during the lifetime of the Prophet are sufficient to give us a clear answer. In our commentary on this *sūrah* alone we have enough information to describe the attitude of the idolaters towards this religion and its followers ever since its early days in Makkah up to the time of the revelation of these verses. It is true that the later and much longer-lasting conflict was between Islam on the one hand and the Jews and Christians on the other, rather than between Islam and idolatry. Nevertheless, the idolaters have always adopted the same attitude towards Muslims as described in these verses: "*How [else could it be] when, should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you? They try to please you with what they say, while at heart they remain adamantly hostile. Most of them are transgressors. They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do. They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors.*" (Verses 8-10) As for the people of earlier revelations, i.e. the Jews and Christians, and their attitude towards the Muslims, this will be discussed at

length in Chapter 2 of this volume. We need to reflect now on the history of the idolaters with the Muslims.

If we consider that Islam, which is the faith based on the principle of submission to God alone, concluded, rather than started, with the message of the Prophet Muĥammad, we are bound to recognize that the attitude of idolaters towards every one of God's Messengers and to divine messages reflects the attitude of idolatry towards faith. This should place matters in the right perspective. We see this attitude for what it is in reality, as truthfully described in these Qur'ānic verses. It is an attitude that we recognize in all periods of history.

What did the idolaters do to those noble prophets and messengers: Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Abraham, Shu`ayb, Moses, Jesus, (peace be upon them all), each in his own time? And what did they do to the Prophet Muĥammad and his followers? They certainly respected no agreement or obligation of honour, until they had been overcome. Again, what did the idolaters do to the Muslims in the second great campaign mounted against Islam, when the banner of idolatry was this time hoisted by the Tartars? Even today, fourteen centuries after the revelation of these verses, what is being done to the Muslims by the idolaters and the atheists everywhere? They simply do what the Qur'ān states: *"They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer"* (Verse 10)

When the Tartars won victory over the Muslims in Baghdad, an unprecedented massacre took place. We will mention here only a brief account of what is recorded by the historian Ibn Kathīr in his book, *al-Bidāyah wa'l-Nihāyah,* as he describes the events of the year 656 H. (1258 CE):

> When the Tartars descended on the city of Baghdad, they killed whomever they met of men, women and children, young and old. Many people tried to hide in wells, rubbish dumps and sewers, where they stayed for several days. Some people locked themselves in inns and guesthouses, but the Tartars broke into every such house, and chased the people they found there to the roofs where they killed them. Gutters and alleys were overflowing with blood, and so were mosques and other places of worship. The only survivors were the Jews and the Christians in the city and those who sought refuge with them, and those who were given shelter in the house of Ibn al-`Alqamī, the Shi`ite minister. A group of businessmen were also spared and given safety after they had paid large sums of money for the purpose. Baghdad, which used to be the most friendly and peaceful of cities, was totally in ruin, inhabited only by a small portion of its original population, and even these were living in fear, hunger and humiliation.
>
> Reports on the number of the Muslims killed in Baghdad in this battle vary,

with some estimating the dead to be eight hundred thousands, while other reports suggest the dead numbered a million, and still others putting the estimate at two million people. We can only say what Muslims are recommended to say at the time of a calamity: "*To God we belong and to Him do we return... All power belongs to God, the Most High, the Almighty.*"

The Tartars entered Baghdad towards the end of the month of Muĥarram, and continued the killing of its population for forty days. The Caliph, Al-Musta`şim Billāh, was killed on Wednesday, 14 Şafar and his grave was erased. On the day of his death he was 46 years of age and 4 months. His reign lasted for 15 years, 8 months and a few days. His eldest son, Aĥmad Abū al-`Abbās, was killed at the same time at the age of 25, while his middle son, `Abd al-Raĥmān, who was 23, was killed a short while later. His youngest son, Mubārak, and his three sisters, Fāṭimah, Khadījah and Maryam, were taken prisoner.

The most prominent scholar in Baghdad, Shaikh Yūsuf ibn Shaikh Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī, who was hostile to the Minister, was killed together with his three sons, `Abdullāh, `Abd al-Raĥmān and `Abd al-Karīm. All the nobility in the city were killed one by one. Prominent among these were Mujāhid al-Dīn Aybak, and Shihāb al-Dīn Sulaymān Shāh and many others. Anyone who belonged to the `Abbās ruling family might be called out, and he would have to go with his women and children to al-Khallāl graveyard, where he would be slaughtered like a sheep. The Tartars might choose some of his daughters or other women in his household to keep as prisoners. The most prominent and eldest scholar in Baghdad, `Alī ibn al-Nayyār, who had educated the Caliph when he was young, was also killed as well as most imāms and scholars in the city. Mosques were abandoned and no congregational or Friday prayer was held in any mosque for several months in Baghdad.

After forty days, when the massacre was over, Baghdad was in total ruin, with only the odd person walking about. Dead bodies were placed in heaps in the streets. Rain had changed their colour and their bodies had begun to rot. The smell in the city was most awful and there were outbreaks of several diseases which moved far and wide, reaching as far as Syria. People were then facing scarcity of necessary commodities, an unabating massacre, as well as epidemics. Those were indeed hard times.

When safety was announced for the survivors, those who were hiding in holes and graveyards came out. They looked so pale as though they were brought back from the dead. They were practically unrecognizable, to the extent that a father might not recognize his son, and brothers might not

recognize each other. They were vulnerable to any disease and many of them soon died....[19]

Hostility Unabated

Such were the facts of history when the idolaters overpowered the Muslims. They respected no provision of any treaty, nor any obligation of honour. The question to be asked here is whether this was an isolated episode of ancient history, typical only of the Tartars at that particular period of time?

The answer is certainly a negative one. In modern history we find examples of similarly ghastly atrocities. What the Indian idolaters did at the time of the partition of India is by no means less hideous or appalling than what the Tartars of old did. Eight million Muslims decided to migrate to Pakistan when they were in fear of their lives as a result of the barbaric attacks launched against those Muslims who decided to stay in India. Only three million of them managed to reach the Pakistani borders. The other five million were killed on the way. They were attacked by well organized Hindu militia. These were well known to the Indian government, and indeed were controlled by some highly placed officials in the Indian government itself. Those five million Muslims were slaughtered like sheep. Their bodies were left along the roads after many of them were disfigured in a way which was no less horrendous than what the Tartars of old did in Baghdad.

The most horrible single incident was that involving the train which carried no less than 50,000 Muslim employees from different parts of India on their way to Pakistan. It was agreed at the time when the partition agreement was made that any government official who wanted to migrate to Pakistan would be allowed to do so. The train carried all those thousands of employees. It had to travel through a tunnel at the Khaybar Pass close to the borders, but when the train came out of the tunnel, it carried no living soul. Its cargo was nothing other than the dead bodies of all its passengers, having been torn to pieces. What happened was that those same Hindu militia stopped the train inside the tunnel and killed all its passengers. The train was allowed to proceed only when this most ghastly massacre was over. God certainly tells the truth as He says: *"Should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you?"* (Verse 8) Such massacres continue to be committed in a variety of ways.

We then ask what have Communist Russia and China done to their Muslim populations? Within a quarter of a century they exterminated 26 million of them, with an average of one million a year. The policy of exterminating the Muslims is still

[19] Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wal-Nihāyah,* Beirut, 1996, Vol. 13, pp. 199-203.

going on. This is not to say anything about the horrible methods of torture that have become common practice in those countries. Only this year,[20] the Chinese sector of Muslim Turkmanistan witnessed events that outbid all the Tartars' atrocities. A leading figure of the Muslim community was placed in a hole specially dug for him in the middle of the road. Members of his community were forced to bring their stools, which were normally used by the state in the manufacture of fertilizers, and throw them on their leader standing in his hole. This continued for three days until the man slowly suffocated and died.

Communist Yugoslavia has also been guilty of similar atrocities against its Muslim population. One million Muslim people have been killed there since the Communist takeover in that country at the end of the Second World War. Muslim men and women were thrown into meat mincers to come out as a minced whole. This is only an example of the continuing massacres and torture being committed there.

The same sort of evil tactics are employed by all Communist and pagan countries, even today in the twentieth century. True indeed is God's statement: *"Should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you."* (Verse 8) *"They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors."* (Verse 10)

God's description of the unbelievers' attitude towards the Muslims is not limited to a special situation that prevailed in Arabia at a particular period of history. Nor was what happened in Baghdad at the hands of the Tartars an isolated case. Indeed that statement describes a typical attitude that we meet everywhere, whenever a community of believers who submit themselves to God alone are confronted by idolaters or atheists who submit to beings other than God.

Hence, although these statements were meant to deal with a particular situation in the Arabian Peninsula, and outlined a framework for dealing with the idolaters in Arabia, they have far greater significance. They, in fact, address any similar situation, wherever it takes place. They are to be acted upon whenever their implementation is possible as was the case in Arabia. It is the Muslims' ability to put them into effect that counts, not the particular circumstances that led to their revelation.

Doubts Dispelled

> *Will you not fight against people who have broken their solemn pledges and set out to drive out the Messenger, and who were the first to attack you? Do you fear them? It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers. Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, and will bring disgrace upon them; and will grant you*

[20] This was written in 1962 or 1963. — Editor's note.

> *victory over them and will grant heart felt satisfaction to those who are believers, removing all angry feelings from their hearts. God will turn in His mercy to whom He wills. God is All-knowing and Wise. Do you think that you will be left alone, unless God takes cognizance of those of you who strive hard for His cause and establish close association with none other than God, His Messenger and the believers? God is well aware of what you do.* (Verses 13-16)

These verses come immediately after questions have been raised over the very principle of a treaty or a covenant being granted to the idolaters by God and His Messenger. In the same verses the idolaters were given the choice either to accept the faith based on submission to God alone or open warfare, except for the person who may seek refuge with the Muslims. Such a person is given shelter and made to listen to God's revelations before he is given safe conduct to his place of security. The reason for questioning the principle itself is that the idolaters will never respect any agreement or obligation of honour with regard to any believer when they prevail over the Muslims.

These verses are given here to answer any doubts felt within the Muslim community, at all levels, and the reluctance of some of the believers to take such drastic action by terminating existing treaties. It also responds to the desire felt on the part of some believers that the remaining idolaters in Arabia would eventually come round to recognize the truth of the Islamic message and accept it without the need to fight them, with all that a war involves of risk to life and property.

The Qur'ān answers all these feelings and fears by reminding the Muslims of their own experiences of the idolaters' attitude to their treaties with the believers. It reminds them of the time when the idolaters tried to expel God's Messenger from Makkah before he left to settle in Madinah. It also reminds them that it was the idolaters who were the aggressors when they first attacked the Muslims in Madinah. It then arouses their sense of shame if they fear confronting the idolaters on the battlefield. If they are true believers, then they should fear God alone. It encourages them to fight the unbelievers, so that God may inflict punishment on them at their hands. This means that the believers would be the means to accomplish God's will when He determines to punish His enemies and bring about their humiliation, giving at the same time satisfaction to the believers who have suffered at their hands. These verses also answer the excuses that are made to justify a reluctance to fight those idolaters, including the hope that those unbelievers might eventually accept Islam without the need to fight them. The Muslims are told that true hope should be pinned on the victory of the Muslims in the war against them. When the idolaters are defeated by God's will, some of them may turn to God in repentance and accept Islam. Finally, these verses draw the attentions of the believers to the fact that it is only God's will that He tests believers with such duties so that they may prove

themselves. Such laws which God has set in operation will continue to apply as long as human life on earth remains.

"Will you not fight against people who have broken their solemn pledges and set out to drive out the Messenger, and who were the first to attack you? Do you fear them? It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers." (Verse 13) The whole history of the idolaters with the believers is one of violating solemn pledges and breaching agreements. The most recent example was the violation of the peace treaty concluded at al-Ĥudaybiyah. Acting on instructions from his Lord, the Prophet accepted in that agreement their conditions which were felt by some of his best Companions to be totally unfair to the Muslims. He fulfilled his obligations under that agreement as meticulously as possible. For their part, the idolaters did not respect their agreement, nor did they fulfil their obligations. Within two years, and at the first opportunity, they committed a flagrant breach of their obligations, extending active support to their allies who launched a treacherous attack against the Prophet's allies.

Moreover, it was the idolaters who tried to expel the Prophet from Makkah, and who were determined finally to kill him. This was before he migrated to Madinah. It was in the Sacred Mosque, the Inviolable House of Worship, where even a murderer was sure to be unharmed. Anyone might meet there someone who had killed his father or brother and he would not lift a finger against him. In the case of Muĥammad, God's Messenger who advocated submission to God alone and the following of His guidance, they did not respect even that obligation of honour. They did not even respect their traditions which they observed even with vengeance killers. They went as far as plotting to kill him in the Sacred Mosque itself.

It was also the idolaters who tried to fight the Muslims in Madinah. Under Abū Jahl's leadership, they insisted on fighting the Muslims after their trade caravan had been able to escape. They went on the offensive in the Battles of Uĥud and the Moat, and they mobilized other tribes against the believers in the Battle of Ĥunayn. All these encounters and events were still fresh in the memories of the believers. They all confirm the persistent attitude of the idolaters which is described by God in the Qur'ān: "*They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can.*" (2: 217) This is clear in the nature of the relationship between the camp which worships all sorts of deities and the one which worships God alone.

After this reminder, God asks them: *"Do you fear them?"* (Verse 13) They should not refrain from fighting the idolaters, after this long history of treachery, unless they were afraid of them. But this question is followed by a statement which stirs new feelings of determination and courage: *'It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers."* (Verse 13) A true believer fears no creature whatsoever, because he only fears God. So they should examine their true feelings, because if they are true believers they will fear no one other than God.

An Order to Fight

The feelings of those early Muslims were heightened when they were reminded of those events: how the idolaters plotted to assassinate the Prophet, and how they repeatedly violated their agreements with the Muslims and launched a treacherous attack against them, taking them by surprise whenever a chance presented itself. They also remembered how the idolaters, in their despotic insolence, were the first to attack them. With their feelings so heightened, they are encouraged to fight the idolaters and are promised victory over them: "*Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, and will bring disgrace upon them; and will grant you victory over them and will grant heart felt satisfaction to those who are believers, removing all angry feelings from their hearts.*" (Verses 14-15)

When you fight them, God will make you the means of the execution of His will, and He will bring about their punishment by your hands, causing them to be defeated and humiliated after they have arrogantly been demonstrating their power. With the victory He will grant you, God will make the believers who had been at the receiving end of the idolaters' repression and persecution happy. This happiness will come about as a result of the complete victory of the truth and the defeat of falsehood and its advocates.

But this is not all. There is more good news and more reward for certain people: "*God will turn in His mercy to whom He wills.*" (Verse 15) When the Muslims achieve victory some of the idolaters may open their hearts to the truth. They may be able to recognize that this victory was achieved with the help of a power that is totally superior to all that human beings can muster. They may appreciate the effects faith brings about in the outlook and behaviour of the believers and feel that faith makes its followers better people. All this takes place in reality. Hence the believers receive the reward for their *jihād* and struggle against disbelief, and they are rewarded for enabling unbelievers to see the truth of faith. Islam will gain in strength as a result of those who join its ranks after the victory of the believers: "*God is All-knowing and Wise.*" (Verse 15) He knows the outcome of events before they even take place, and in His wisdom, He is aware of the results and effects of forthcoming actions and moves.

The emergence of the power of Islam and its establishment as a force to be reckoned with will inevitably attract the hearts and minds of people who may prefer to turn away from Islam when it is weak or when its power and influence are not clearly demonstrated. The advocates of Islam will have a much easier task in trying to make the truth of Islam clear to people when they have the sort of power which causes their community to be held in awe by others. It must be remembered, however, that when God educated the small, persecuted Muslim community in Makkah, implanting the Qur'ānic principles in their hearts, He promised them only one thing, which was heaven, and He made only one requirement of them, which

was perseverance. When they demonstrated their perseverance and sought the prize of admittance into heaven and nothing else, God granted them victory and encouraged them to achieve it so that it would soothe their hearts and bring them full satisfaction. In such circumstances, victory is not granted to the Muslim community as individuals or as a community; it is granted to God's message. The Muslims are only the means for the execution of His will.

It was also necessary that the Muslims should launch their struggle against all the idolaters as one camp, and that all treaties with all the idolaters should be terminated at the same time, and that the Muslims would form a solid, united camp against all idolaters. Thus, those who had harboured different intentions and sought excuses of business, blood relations or other interests to justify their continued dealings with the idolaters should make their true position clear, free of all ambiguity. All such excuses had to be tested so that those who make of them a means to maintain close relations with the idolaters, in preference to their association with God, His Messenger and the believers should be known. If such excuses could be made in the past when relations between different camps had not crystallized, there was no room for any ambiguity now: *"Do you think that you will be left alone, unless God takes cognizance of those of you who strive hard for His cause and establish close association with none other than God, His Messenger and the believers? God is well aware of what you do."* (Verse 16)

As happens in all communities, there was a group among the Muslims that was skilled in manoeuvres, climbing over fences and making plausible excuses. Making use of the fluid situation when relations between the different camps had not crystallized, such people continued to make contacts with the enemy behind the backs of the Muslim community, seeking to serve only their own interests. Now that the situation was finally outlined, with each camp making its standpoint very clear, all such loopholes and back doors were finally and firmly closed.

It is certainly in the interest of the Muslim community and the interest of the Islamic faith to make the situation clear and to lay all intentions bare, so that those who strive hard for no reason other than earning God's pleasure are distinguished by their sincerity. Similarly those who have different intentions, and those who try to circumvent Islamic rules in order to pursue their own interests with the unbelievers are also known.

God has known such people all the time. Nothing is added to God's knowledge as a result of any event or action. *"God is well aware of what you do."* (Verse 16) He, however, holds people to account only for what appears of their reality through their own actions. It is His method to test people so that their true feelings and what they harbour in their innermost hearts are made to appear. The best way to do this is to test them with hardship.

Who May Tend God's Houses

> *It is not for the idolaters to visit or tend God's houses of worship; for they are self-confessed unbelievers. Vain shall be their actions and they shall abide in the fire. God's houses of worship may be tended only by those who believe in God and the Last Day, are constant in prayers, pay zakāt (i.e. the obligatory charity) and fear none other than God. It is those who are likely to be rightly guided. Do you, perchance, consider that the provision of drinking water to pilgrims and tending the Sacred Mosque are equal to believing in God and the Last Day and striving for God's cause? These are not equal in God's sight. God does not provide guidance for people who are wrongdoers. Those who believe, and leave their homes and strive hard for God's cause with their property and their lives stand higher in rank with God. It is they who shall triumph. Their Lord gives them the happy news of bestowing on them His grace, and acceptance, and of the gardens of eternal bliss where they shall reside for ever. God's reward is great indeed.* (Verses 17-22)

With the declaration and disavowal made at the beginning of the *sūrah* concerning the termination of the treaties with the unbelievers, there can be no excuse for anyone who refuses to fight the idolaters. Moreover, there might have been some hesitation to forbid them entry to the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, which they used to enjoy in pre-Islamic days. The *sūrah* questions the claims of the idolaters to visit the Sacred Mosque, for that is an exclusive right of the believers who attend to their duties of worshipping God alone. That the idolaters used to visit the Mosque and provide drinking water to the pilgrims did not alter the situation in any way. These verses address those troubled Muslims who might not as yet have fully understood this basic Islamic principle.

"*It is not for the idolaters to visit or tend God's houses of worship, for they are self-confessed unbelievers.*" (Verse 17) It is totally wrong that this should ever happen because it is contrary to the nature of things. God's houses of worship belong to Him alone, and only His name should be glorified in them. No other name should be invoked beside His name. How could it be acceptable then that those who associate partners with Him should ever tend these houses of worship when they are self-confessed unbelievers. "*Vain shall be their actions.*" (Verse 17) Whatever they do is without value, including their tending of the Ka`bah, the Inviolable House of Worship. That is because none of their actions is based on the fundamental principle of God's oneness. As a result of their open and clear rejection of the truth of faith, "*they shall abide in the fire.*" (Verse 17)

Worship is simply an expression of faith. If the faith is wrongly based, then the worship offered on its basis is wrong as well. Hence any act of worship, including the visiting and tending of the houses of worship, is of little benefit unless hearts are

full of faith which translates itself into action that is totally dedicated to God alone. *"God's houses of worship may be tended only by those who believe in God and the Last Day, are constant in prayers, pay* zakāt *(i.e. the obligatory charity) and fear none other than God."* (Verse 18) We note that the two conditions relating to belief and action are coupled with a third stipulating that those believers who do good deeds must fear none other than God. This is not an idle condition. It is important that a believer should be totally dedicated to God alone and should rid himself of all traces of idolatry in his feelings, beliefs and behaviour. To fear anyone beside God is a subtle aspect of polytheism. Hence the *sūrah* warns against it specifically so that believers may make sure that their faith is pure and that their actions are intended to earn God's pleasure. When they do that they deserve to tend houses of worship and to be graced with God's guidance: *"It is those who are likely to be rightly guided."* (Verse 18)

First, concepts are formulated and beliefs are held, then action is undertaken on the basis of faith. God will then reward people with His guidance and with success and prosperity.

This is a criterion which God states clearly to the believers and unbelievers alike, because it determines who may tend God's houses and provides a basis for the evaluation of actions of worship and rituals. Those who tended the Ka`bah and provided drinking water for pilgrims in pre-Islamic days when their faith was not based on submission to God alone cannot be placed in the same position as those who have accepted the divine faith and striven hard for God's cause to help make His word supreme: *"Do you, perchance, consider that the provision of drinking water to pilgrims and tending the Sacred Mosque are equal to believing in God and the Last Day and striving for God's cause? These are not equal in God's sight."* (Verse 19) It is God's scale and His measure that are the important ones. Nothing else is of any value.

"God does not provide guidance for people who are wrongdoers." (Verse 18) The wrongdoers meant here are the idolaters who reject the true faith, even though they may tend and maintain the Ka`bah, the Sacred Mosque, and provide drinking water for pilgrims. The point here is concluded with a statement which speaks of the high position of those believers who strive hard to make God's word triumph. We are also told of the eternal bliss and great reward that await them: *"Those who believe, and leave their homes and strive for God's cause with their property and their lives stand higher in rank with God. It is they who shall triumph. Their Lord gives them the happy news of bestowing on them His grace, and acceptance, and of the gardens of eternal bliss where they shall reside for ever. God's reward is great indeed."* (Verses 20-22)

It should be pointed out here that the comparative stated in this verse, *"stand higher in rank with God,"* does not imply two positions on the same scale, or that the others have a lesser rank with God. It indicates an absolute preference. We have already been told about the others, i.e. the idolaters, and that *"vain shall be their*

actions and they shall abide for ever in the fire." (Verse 17) Hence the two situations cannot be compared.

The *sūrah* continues to stress the need to purge feelings and relations within the Muslim community of any influence other than that of faith. It calls on the believers to give no importance to ties of kinship or to other interests. It groups together all worldly pleasures as well as family and social ties in order to weigh them against loving God and His Messenger and striving for His cause. The choice is then left to Muslims to make: "*Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith. Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers. Say: 'If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your clan, and the property you have acquired, and the business in which you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure, are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God shall make manifest His will. God does not provide guidance to the evildoers.'"* (Verses 23-24)

The Islamic faith cannot accept any partners in its followers' hearts and minds. A person can be either totally dedicated to it or can leave it altogether. There is no requirement here to cut off all ties with one's children, family, clan or neighbourhood, nor to reject wealth or different types of pleasure and enjoyment. That is not the point meant here. What is required is total dedication and wholehearted love. This means in practical terms that the faith becomes the prime mover and the paramount motivation. When this is the case, people may have their pleasures and enjoyment because they will be able to sacrifice all these whenever such sacrifice is required by their faith.

The determining factor is whether faith has the overall control over man's attitudes and actions or not. Would the final decision in any situation be based on considerations of faith or on some other interests or worldly matters? When a Muslim is certain that he has given all his heart to his faith then he may enjoy his family life and have all the happiness of having a wife and children. He may maintain and strengthen his social ties as he wishes and he may have his business and fine dwelling. He may enjoy all the pleasures of this world, without being too extravagant or adopting an arrogant attitude. Indeed to enjoy these pleasures is encouraged as a means of showing gratitude to God for His bounty.

Attitudes Shaped by Feelings

"*Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith."* (Verse 23) All ties of blood and family relations are severed if the tie of belief does not take its place in people's hearts. Family loyalty is nullified when loyalty based on faith is nonexistent. The first bond is that which exists between man

and God. It is the bond which unites all humanity. When this is severed, no relationships, ties or bonds may exist. *"Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers."* (Verse 23) The term `wrongdoers' here means the idolaters, because to maintain ties of loyalty and alliance with family and community when they prefer unbelief to faith is a form of idolatry which believers may not entertain.

The *sūrah* does not merely state the principle. It goes on to list all types of ties, ambitions and pleasures, grouping them all together and putting them in the scale against faith and its requirements. Thus we have in the first group fathers, children, brothers, spouses and clan (i.e. ties of blood and family), property and business (i.e. the natural desire to have money), and comfortable houses and dwellings (i.e. the pleasures of affluence). Against all this is placed love of God and His Messenger and striving for God's cause. It is important to realize that striving here implies a great deal of hardship and sacrifice. It may mean suffering oppression, going to war and sacrificing one's life altogether. Moreover, all this striving must be purged of any desire to be known or to be publicly appreciated or recognized. Once this striving aims at such recognition, it earns no reward from God.

"Say: 'If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your clan, and the property you have acquired, and the business in which you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you take pleasure, are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God shall make manifest His will.'" (Verse 24) What is required here is certainly hard, and it is certainly of great importance. But thus are God's requirements. Otherwise, *"wait until God shall make manifest His will."* (Verse 24) The only alternative is to have the same fate as those who perpetrate evil: *"God does not provide guidance to the evildoers."* (Verse 24) This requirement is not obligatory merely on individuals. The whole Muslim community, and indeed the Muslim state, are also required to make the same choice. There is no consideration or bond which may have priority over those of faith and the struggle for God's cause.

God does not impose this obligation on the Muslim community unless He knows that its nature can cope with it. It is indeed an aspect of God's grace that He has given human nature this strong ability to cope with great demands when motivated by dedication to a noble ideal. Indeed He has given it the ability to feel a more sublime pleasure which is far superior to all the pleasures of this world. This is the pleasure or the ecstasy of having a tie with God Himself and the hope of winning His pleasure. It is also the pleasure of rising above human weaknesses, family and social pressures while looking forward to a bright horizon. If human weakness sometimes pulls us down, the bright horizon that looms large will give us a renewed desire to break loose of all worldly pressures to give faith its due importance.

Reminder of a Great Event

The *sūrah* follows this with a quick reminder of some of the events that the first Muslim generation experienced. The Muslims are reminded of the many battles when they were weak and poorly equipped but where God granted them victory. They are also reminded of the Battle of Ĥunayn when they were defeated despite their numerical strength, but then God granted them His support. On that day, the army which achieved the conquest of Makkah was joined by 2,000 of its people who were pardoned by the Prophet. On that day, there was a time when, for a few seconds, the Muslims overlooked their reliance on God to admire their strength and large following. The events of that day taught the Muslims the lesson that complete dedication to God's cause and strengthening their ties with Him are the best equipment for victory. These will never fail them, while wealth, friends and even closest relatives may do so.

> *God has granted you His support on many a battlefield, and also in the Battle of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned back in flight. God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers, and He sent down forces whom you could not see, and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers. God will then turn in His mercy to whom He wills, for God is Much forgiving, Merciful.* (Verses 25-27)

The victories they achieved in many battles were still fresh in their memories, requiring only a brief reference to bring them back in all clarity. The Battle of Ĥunayn took place shortly after the conquest of Makkah, in the eighth year of the Islamic calendar.

> When the Prophet settled matters after Makkah had fallen to him, and its people accepted Islam and were pardoned by the Prophet, he was informed that the tribe of Hawāzin were mobilizing forces to fight him, under the leadership of Mālik ibn `Awf al-Naḍrī. They were joined by the whole Thaqīf tribe as well as the tribes of Jusham and Sa 'd ibn Bakr. Also allied with them were some forces of the clans of Hilāl, `Amr ibn `Āmir and `Awf ibn `Āmir. They marched bringing with them their women and children as well as their cattle and property to make it a battle to the bitter end.
>
> The Prophet marched at the head of the army which conquered Makkah, estimated at the time to be around 10,000 strong, composed mostly of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anṣār*. He was joined by 2,000 of the pardoned people of Makkah. The two hosts met at a valley known as Ĥunayn. The battle started before the break of day, as the Muslim army was going down into the valley. The Hawāzin forces had been lying in ambush. They took the Muslims by

surprise and showered them with arrows and put up a determined fight. In no time, the Muslim soldiers were on the retreat, as God says here.

The Prophet remained steadfast, mounting his she-camel, with his uncle, al-`Abbās, holding its rein on the right and his cousin, Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ĥārith holding it on the left, trying to slow her. He was calling out to his followers to come back to him, mentioning his name and saying: "You, God's servants, rally to me, for I am God's Messenger." He also said out loud: "I am the Prophet, no doubt. I am the son of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib." A number of his Companions who might have been no more than 80 or 100, according to various reports, stood firm by him. Among these were Abū Bakr, `Umar, al-`Abbās and his son, al-Faḍl, `Alī, Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ĥārith, Ayman and Usāmah ibn Zayd. The Prophet then asked his uncle, al-`Abbās, who had a loud voice, to shout to the Muslims reminding them of the pledge they had given under the tree, which was a pledge to fight with him until death, and for which they earned God's pleasure. He did so, adding some variations to remind the Muslims of their position. As they heard him, they would respond verbally and rally to the Prophet in his position. If any of them found his camel unwilling to turn round in the confusion, he would take his armament and dismount to join the Prophet.

When a core group of them had rallied, the Prophet told them to fight with total dedication. Soon the idolaters were in flight, and the Muslims were chasing them, killing some of them and taking others prisoner. By the time the rest of the Muslim army had regrouped and rallied, the prisoners were in chains in front of God's Messenger.[21]

Large Forces Avail Nothing

Such was the battle in which the Muslims had for the first time an army which was 12,000 strong. They felt confident when they looked at their numbers. They overlooked the most essential cause of victory. So God allowed defeat to befall them at first so that they might remember. He then granted them victory at the hands of the small group which remained steadfast with the Prophet and defended him with all the bravery they could muster. The *sūrah* portrays some scenes of the battle in order to recall the feelings experienced by those who were on the battlefield: *"When you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned back in flight."* (Verse 25)

This describes how the excessive confidence felt by a large force led to spiritual

[21] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-`Aẓīm,* Beirut, AI-Maktabah al-`Aṣrīyah, 1996, Vol. 2, p. 314.

defeat causing the Muslims to feel such a heavy burden that made the vast earth seem too narrow. This then led to a physical defeat and those large forces were on the retreat. But what happened next?

"God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers." (Verse 26) This `inner peace' seems as if it were a garment which people wore to pacify their feelings and give them tranquillity. *'And He sent down forces whom you could not see."* (Verse 26) We do not know the nature of these forces and whom they really were. No one other than God Himself knows what forces He may bring in. *"And He punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers."* (Verse 26) The killing of some of their soldiers and taking others captive, and the defeat that befell them all were part of the punishment they received in this life, which is only a fitting reward for their denial of God and rejection of the faith. However, the door to repentance is always open to receive those who wish to mend their ways. *"God will then turn in His mercy to whom He wills, for God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 27)

The *sūrah* refers to the Battle of Ĥunayn in order to portray the consequences of turning away from God and relying on any power other than His. The events of the battle, however, highlight the real forces on which every faith should rely. Numerical strength is of little importance. Power lies with the hard core who are totally dedicated to their faith and cannot be shaken. Sometimes the multitude may cause defeat, because some people may join in without really knowing the truth of the faith they profess. At times of hardship, courage deserts them and this may lead to confusion within the ranks of believers. Besides, large numbers may lead to a feeling of complacency which causes people to overlook the need to strengthen their ties with their Lord. The triumph of faith has always come about through the efforts of the hard core of firm believers who are ready to sacrifice all for their faith.

At this point the *sūrah* concludes its statement on the unbelievers who associate partners with God and gives its final verdict concerning them. This verdict remains valid for the rest of time: *"Believers, know that the idolaters are certainly impure. So, let them not come near to the Sacred Mosque after this year is ended. If you fear poverty, then in time God will enrich you with His own bounty, if He so wills. Truly, God is All-knowing, Wise."* (Verse 28)

The *sūrah* emphasizes the abstract impurity of the idolaters to make it their essential quality. This shows them to be totally and completely impure. This statement gives the feeling that we should seek to purify ourselves when we have anything to do with them, although their impurity is abstract. Their bodies are not really impure. In its unique style, the Qur'ān often resorts to magnification, giving abstract matters a physical shape and entity. *"The idolaters are certainly impure. So, let them not come near to the Sacred Mosque after this year is ended."* (Verse 28) Here we

have the strictest injunction prohibiting their presence in the Haram area. The order implies that they must not even come near it, because they are impure while the Haram is a source of purity.

The whole commercial season which the people of Makkah await every year, and their business which provides livelihood for most people and the two business trips in summer and winter which are so essential for the continued prosperity of the people of Makkah will all be jeopardized as a result of banning the idolaters from pilgrimage and declaring *jihād* against them all. This may be true, but when it comes to faith, God wants people's hearts to be totally dedicated to their faith. When they do this, they will not worry about their livelihood, because God ensures that everyone gets his or her share in the normal way and through recognized means: *"If you fear poverty, then in time God will enrich you with His own bounty, if He so wills."* (Verse 28) When God wills, He may replace certain causes with others, and He may close certain doors in order to open others. *"Truly, God is All- knowing, Wise."* (Verse 28) He manages all matters and conducts all affairs in accordance with His knowledge and wisdom.

In this *sūrah* the Qur'ān is addressing the Muslim community as it was composed immediately after the conquest of Makkah, when standards of faith were not at the same level. We can see from reading the *sūrah* carefully that there were gaps in that community, and we can also see how the Qur'ān has set about filling these gaps and the great effort made to educate the Muslim community.

The method of the Qur'ān was to guide the footsteps of the Muslim community to bring it up to the high summit of total dedication to God and to the divine faith. Faith becomes the standard by which any relationship or source of pleasure in life is accepted or rejected. All this was accomplished through educating people in the real difference between God's method which makes all people serve God alone and the methods of *jāhiliyyah* which enable some people to enslave others. The two are essentially different and they cannot be reconciled.

Without this proper understanding of the nature of this religion and its method, and also the nature of *jāhiliyyah,* or the state of ignorance that Islam always comes up against, we cannot recognize the true value of Islamic rules and regulations that govern dealings and transactions between the Muslim community and other communities.

2
Relations with Other Religions

قَٰتِلُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَلَا بِٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَلَا يُحَرِّمُونَ مَا حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥ وَلَا يَدِينُونَ دِينَ ٱلۡحَقِّ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ حَتَّىٰ يُعۡطُواْ ٱلۡجِزۡيَةَ عَن يَدٖ وَهُمۡ صَٰغِرُونَ ٢٩

Fight against those who — despite having been given Scriptures — do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled. (29)

وَقَالَتِ ٱلۡيَهُودُ عُزَيۡرٌ ٱبۡنُ ٱللَّهِ وَقَالَتِ ٱلنَّصَٰرَى ٱلۡمَسِيحُ ٱبۡنُ ٱللَّهِۖ ذَٰلِكَ قَوۡلُهُم بِأَفۡوَٰهِهِمۡۖ يُضَٰهِـُٔونَ قَوۡلَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِن قَبۡلُۚ قَٰتَلَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۚ أَنَّىٰ يُؤۡفَكُونَ ٣٠

The Jews say: 'Ezra is the son of God,' while the Christians say: 'The Christ is the son of God.' Such are the assertions they utter with their mouths, echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! (30)

ٱتَّخَذُوٓاْ أَحۡبَارَهُمۡ وَرُهۡبَٰنَهُمۡ أَرۡبَابٗا مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡمَسِيحَ ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ وَمَآ أُمِرُوٓاْ إِلَّا لِيَعۡبُدُوٓاْ إِلَٰهٗا وَٰحِدٗاۖ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۚ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٣١

They make of their rabbis and their monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God. Yet they have been ordered to worship none but the One God, other than whom there is no deity. Exalted be He above those to whom they ascribe divinity. (31)

يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُطْفِـُٔوا۟ نُورَ ٱللَّهِ بِأَفْوَٰهِهِمْ وَيَأْبَى ٱللَّهُ إِلَّآ أَن يُتِمَّ نُورَهُۥ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (32)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all [other] religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters. (33)

۞ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلْأَحْبَارِ وَٱلرُّهْبَانِ لَيَأْكُلُونَ أَمْوَٰلَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلْبَٰطِلِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَكْنِزُونَ ٱلذَّهَبَ وَٱلْفِضَّةَ وَلَا يُنفِقُونَهَا فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَبَشِّرْهُم بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

Believers, some of the rabbis and monks wrongfully devour people's property and turn people away from God's path. To those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend them in God's cause, give the news of a painful suffering, (34)

يَوْمَ يُحْمَىٰ عَلَيْهَا فِى نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ فَتُكْوَىٰ بِهَا جِبَاهُهُمْ وَجُنُوبُهُمْ وَظُهُورُهُمْ ۖ هَٰذَا مَا كَنَزْتُمْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ فَذُوقُوا۟ مَا كُنتُمْ تَكْنِزُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

on the day when it will all be heated in the fire of hell, and their foreheads, sides and backs will be branded with them. [They will be told]: 'This is what you have hoarded up for yourselves. Taste, then, what you have been hoarding.' (35)

Overview

This second passage of the *sūrah* provides the final rulings concerning the relations between the Muslim community and the people of earlier revelations, just like the first passage defined the final rulings on relations between the Muslim community and the idolaters in Arabia. However, the first passage addressed the situation that prevailed at the time in Arabia, speaking about the Arab idolaters and referring to their attitudes and events relating specifically to them. In this second passage we

note that its statements are more general in phraseology and import, and are applicable to all people of earlier revelations, whether in Arabia or elsewhere.

These new rulings include a number of substantial amendments to the rules governing relations between the Muslim community and people of earlier revelations, particularly the Christians. By the time this *sūrah* was revealed, all encounters and military conflicts with the Jews had already taken place, but no such conflict took place with any Christian community.

The main amendment the new rulings include is the order given to fight those who deviate from the divine faith until they pay the *jizyah,* or submission tax, after they have been humbled. No peace agreement may be made with them except on this basis of submission evident by the payment of a special tax which gives them the right to live in peace with the Muslims. On the other hand, if they become convinced of the truth of Islam and accept it, they are considered part of the Muslim community.

Never will they be forced to accept the Islamic faith. A basic and definitive Islamic rule states: *"There shall be no compulsion in religion."* (2: 256) But they are not given a peaceful status unless they are bound by covenant with the Muslim community on the basis of paying the submission tax.

This last amendment cannot be clearly understood unless we are fully aware of the nature of the inevitable relations between the divine system and other systems opposed to it. We must also understand the nature of the Islamic method of action, with its progressive stages and the different means it employs to face up to a changing situation in human life.

Inevitably, coexistence between the divine system and human systems opposed to it is possible only in certain situations and under specific conditions. These ensure that no material impediments are placed in the way of the implementation of the universal Islamic declaration of the liberation of man from submission to any authority other than God. The divine system wants to prevail so that people are liberated from submission to other human beings and can submit to God alone. By contrast, the other systems want to defend their own status by crushing the movement aiming to establish the divine system in human life.

By nature, the Islamic method of action will confront this human situation with similar and more powerful action, progressing from one stage to another and employing the proper methods that suit every stage. These methods and means are represented in the provisional and final rulings governing relations between the Muslim community and other communities. In order to define the nature of these relations the *sūrah* explains in this passage the beliefs and attitudes adopted by the people of earlier revelations, making it clear that these are `a form of idolatry,

representing disbelief and are certainly false.' The passage cites the basis of this judgement. We find that it relies on the actual beliefs of those people and the similarity between these beliefs and those of the unbelievers of old. It also relies on their actions and behaviour.

The Truth of People of Earlier Revelations

The present text states that those people of earlier revelations:

1. Do not truly believe in God and the Last Day;
2. Do not forbid what God and His Messenger have made forbidden;
3. Do not follow the religion of truth;
4. The Jews among them claim that Ezra was the son of God, while the Christians claim that Jesus Christ was the son of God. In making these false claims they are merely echoing the false claims of the unbelievers of old times, Greeks, Romans, Indians and Egyptians, or other idolaters. [We will show that the concept of the Trinity was borrowed by the Christians from old idolatrous beliefs, as were the Christian and Jewish claims that God has a son. None of these was part of the origin of Christianity or Judaism.]
5. They treated their rabbis and monks, as well as Jesus himself, as lords alongside God. Thus they transgressed the principles of God's oneness they were bid to uphold. As such, they are idolaters;
6. They are hostile to God's faith, trying to put out God's light with their mouths. As such, they are unbelievers; and
7. Many of their monks and rabbis devour people's money and property against all right, and they turn people away from God's path.

It is on the basis of such beliefs and practices that the truth of the people of earlier revelations is stated, and the final rulings governing their relations with the believers who implement God's message are defined.

This definitive statement may come as a surprise and may be seen as contrary to what the Qur'ān had stated previously about the people of earlier revelations. Certainly the Orientalists and the Christian missionaries, as well as their disciples make such claims, saying that the Prophet changed his attitude when he felt he was strong enough to confront them.

However, a thorough review of Qur'ānic statements, revealed both in Makkah and Madinah, concerning the people of earlier revelations will clearly show that nothing has changed in the Islamic view about their beliefs. The Qur'ān has always made it

clear that they upheld deviant, false and polytheistic beliefs, while they disbelieved in the true divine religion, or even its portion given to them. The new amendments are confined to the way the Muslim community should deal with them. This is subject to the prevailing practical conditions, which change all the time.

We will look now at some of the Qur'ānic statements about the people of earlier revelations and the concepts and beliefs they uphold. We will then consider their practical attitude to Islam and its followers which led to the final rulings on how to deal with them.

There were no Jewish or Christian communities to reckon with in Makkah. There were only some individuals whom the Qur'ān states to have been overjoyed when they heard of the new message and they believed in Islam. They confirmed that the Prophet Muĥammad was God's Messenger who confirmed what they had of God's revelations. Those must have been among the minority of Jews and Christians who continued to believe in God's oneness. It is in reference to these that Qur'ānic verses like the following ones were revealed: "*Those to whom We vouchsafed revelation in former times believe in this; and whenever it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Even before this have we surrendered ourselves to Him.'*" (28: 52-53) "*Say, 'You may believe in it or you may not.' Those who were given knowledge before it has been revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, and say, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.' And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and [its recitation] increases their humility.*" *(17:*107-109) "*Say, 'Consider, if this be truly [a revelation] from God and yet you deny its truth? — even though a witness from among the Children of Israel bears witness to one like it, and has believed while you glory in your arrogance.' God does not grace evildoers with His guidance.*" (46: 10) "*Thus have We bestowed this Book on you from on high. Those to whom We previously gave revelations believe in it, just as some among these do believe in it. None will reject Our revelations other than those who deny the truth.*" (29: 47) "*Am I to seek for judge anyone other than God, when it is He who has revealed the Book to you, clearly spelling out the truth. Those to whom We previously gave revelations know that it is the truth revealed by your Lord. So, do not be among the doubters.*" (6: 114) "*Those to whom We have given this revelation rejoice at what has been bestowed on you from on high, but among different factions there are some who deny part of it. Say: 'I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.'*" (13: 36)

Similarly, a positive response was given by a number of individuals in Madinah, and we find mention of these in some *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah. These references make it clear that those people were Christians. The Jews in Madinah, apprehensive about the rise of Islam, took a different attitude to that adopted by some individual Jews in Makkah. "There *are indeed among the people of earlier revelations some who believe*

in God and in what has been bestowed from on high upon you and in what has been bestowed upon them, humbling themselves before God. They do not barter away God's revelations for a trifling price. They shall have their reward with their Lord. Swift is God's reckoning." (3: 199) *"You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians.' This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognize. They say: 'Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?' And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good."* (5: 82-85)

Denying a Known Truth

However, the attitude of these individuals was not representative of the attitude of the majority of the people of earlier revelations in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the Jews. Once they felt that Islam represented a threat to them, the Jews in Madinah launched a wicked campaign against it, using all the methods mentioned in several places in the Qur'ān. Needless to say, they refused to adopt Islam, and denied the references in their own Scriptures to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and the fact that the Qur'ān confirmed what remained with them of their true revelations. By contrast, those goodly and honest individuals acknowledged all that openly. The Qur'ān records all their denials and points out their deviation and corruption. However, the Qur'ān also includes clear statements of the beliefs of the people of earlier revelations, such as: *"When Jesus came with all evidence of the truth, he said: I have now come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you are at variance. Hence, fear God and pay heed to me. God is indeed my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone: this is a straight way!' But factions from among them began to hold divergent views. Woe, then, to the evildoers for the suffering [they will endure] on a painful day!"* (43: 63-65) *"They broke up their unity, through their own wickedness, only after knowledge was given to them. And but for a word that had already gone forth from your Lord, [postponing a decision] until an appointed term, all would have been decided between them. Those who inherited the Scriptures after them are now in grave doubt."* (42: 14) *"It was said to them: Dwell in this city and eat of its food whatever you may wish, and say: "Lord, relieve us of our burden," and enter the gate in humility. We will forgive you your sins, and We will richly reward those who do good. 'But the wrongdoers among them substituted other words for those which they had been given. Therefore We let loose against them a scourge from heaven in requital for their wrongdoing. Ask them about the town which stood by the sea: how its people profaned the Sabbath. Each Sabbath their fish appeared before them*

breaking the water's surface, but they would not come near them on other than Sabbath days. Thus did We try them because of their disobedience." (7: 161-163) *"Then your Lord declared that He would most certainly raise against them people who would cruelly oppress them till the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord is swift indeed in His retribution, yet He is certainly Much forgiving, Merciful."* (7: 167) *"They were succeeded by generations who inherited the Book. Yet these are keen to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this lower world and say, 'We shall be forgiven.' Should some similar pleasures come their way, they would certainly be keen to indulge them. Have they not solemnly pledged through their Scriptures to say nothing but the truth about God? And have they not studied well what is in [the Scriptures]? Surely the life in the hereafter is better for all who are God-fearing. Will you not use your reason?"* (7: 169)

The Qur'ānic *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah provide the final word about the people of earlier revelations and their attitudes. The Qur'ān describes in detail the wicked tactics and the spiteful methods they employ in their campaign against Islam. Examples of these are found in long passages of *Sūrahs* 2-5 and elsewhere in the Qur'ān. In this *sūrah* the final verdict on them is given. Here are only a few examples of what the Qur'ān says about them:

> *Do you hope that they will accept your message when some of them would listen to the word of God then, having understood it, knowingly distort it? When they meet the believers, they say, 'We believe,' but when they find themselves alone, they say to one another, Need you inform them that which God has disclosed to you? They will only use it in argument against you before your Lord? Will you not use your reason?' Do they not know that God is well aware of all that they conceal and all that they reveal? There are among them illiterate people who have no real knowledge of the Scriptures, entertaining only wishful beliefs and conjecture. Woe, then, to those who write down, with their own hands, [something which they claim to be of] the Scriptures, and then say, 'This is from God', in order to get for it a trifling price. Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they earn. (2: 75-79)*

> *We gave Moses the Book and caused a succession of messengers to follow him. To Jesus, son of Mary, We gave clear proofs and supported him with the Holy Spirit. Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you with a message that does not suit your fancies, you glory in your arrogance, charging some (messengers) with lying and slaying others? They say, 'Our hearts are sealed. 'No! God has cursed them for their disbelief. They have but little faith. And now that a Book confirming their own has come to them from God, and they had repeatedly forecast its coming to the unbelievers, they have denied what they know to be the truth. God's curse be upon the unbelievers! Vile is that for which they have bartered their souls, because they have denied what God has revealed, grudging that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants. Thus they have incurred God's wrath over and over again. Ignominious suffering is in store for the unbelievers. When it is*

said to them, 'Believe in what God has revealed,' they say, 'We believe in what has been revealed to us.' They deny everything else, although it is the truth, corroborating the revelations they have. Say, 'Why, then, did you in the past kill God's prophets, if you were true believers?' (2: 87-91)

Say: People of earlier revelations, why do you disbelieve in God's revelations, when God Himself is witness to all that you do?' Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why do you try to turn those who have come to believe away from the path of God, seeking to make it appear crooked, when you yourselves bear witness [to its being straight]? God is not unaware of what you do. (3: 98-99)

Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. (4: 51-52)

Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary' The Christ himself said: Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever associates partners with God, God shall forbid him entrance into Paradise and his abode will be the Fire. Wrongdoers will have no helpers. Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity' Of certain, there is no god save the One God. Unless they desist from so saying, grievous suffering will surely befall those of them who are unbelievers. Will they not, then, turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. The Christ, son of Mary, was but a Messenger: other messengers have passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman. They both ate food [like other human beings]. Behold how clear We make [Our] revelations to them and behold how perverted they are. (5: 72-75)

A review of these texts and many similar ones in the Qur'ān is sufficient to show that these latest revelations maintain the same view concerning the deviation of the people of earlier revelations from the true divine faith. Their description in this *sūrah* as deviant, transgressors, unbelievers and idolaters is by no means a new development. We also note that the Qur'ān continues to praise those of them who accept God's guidance and follow it. Thus we find statements like: *"Yet among the folk of Moses there are some who guide [others] by means of the truth and act justly in its light."* (7: 159) *"Among the people of earlier revelations there is many a one who, if you trust him with a treasure, will return it to you intact; and there is among them many a one who, if you trust him with a small gold coin, will not return it to you, unless you keep standing over him. For they say: 'We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles.' Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie."* (3: 75) *"Ignominy shall be pitched over them wherever they may be, save when they have a bond with God and a bond with men. They have incurred the*

wrath of God and humiliation shall overshadow them. That is because they persisted in denying God's revelations and killing the Prophets against all right. That is because they persisted in their disobedience and transgression. They are not all alike. Of the people of earlier revelations there are some upright people who recite the revelations of God in the depth of night, and prostrate themselves in worship. They believe in God and the Last Day and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid what is wrong and vie with one another in doing good works. These belong to the righteous. Whatever good they do, they shall never be denied its reward. God knows those who fear Him." (3: 112-115)

The modifications which were introduced concerned the rules on how to deal with the people of earlier revelations. The changes occurred stage after stage, as events took place, and in line with the practical Islamic approach to other people and their behaviour towards Muslims.

There was a time when Muslims were given instructions like: "*Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations except in a most kindly manner – unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing. And say: 'We believe in that which has been bestowed on us from on high, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you. For our God and your God is one and the same, and it is to Him that We all submit ourselves.'*" (29: 46) "*Say [all of you], 'We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and in what all prophets have been given by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to God we have surrendered ourselves.' If they come to believe in the way you believe, they will be rightly guided; but if they turn away, they will be in schism, but God will protect you from them; He hears all and knows all.*" (2: 136-137) "*Say: 'People of earlier revelations. Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God.'*" (3: 64) "*Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief now that you have embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them; so forgive and forbear until God makes known His decree. Indeed, God has power over all things.*" (2: 109)

And then God issued His decree to the believers: events took place, rulings were modified and the practical Islamic method of action followed its course leading to the final rulings we have in this *sūrah.* Nothing was modified in the way Islam views the deviant beliefs of the people of earlier revelations, their disbelief and association of partners with God. What were modified were the rules regulating dealings with them. These are governed by the principles we have outlined at the beginning of this Overview: this last amendment cannot be clearly understood unless we are fully aware of the nature of the inevitable relations between the divine system and other systems opposed to it, and we understand the nature of the Islamic method of action, with its progressive stages and the different means it employs to face up to the

changing situation in human life.

Clarity of Attitudes

We will now discuss the nature of relations between the Muslim community and the followers of earlier religions, putting it in both its substantial and historical contexts. These were the major elements in defining the final rulings governing these relations.

In order to form a clear and accurate idea of the nature of such relations, it is important first to study what God states concerning these relations in His Book which is the absolutely true word that admits no error or falsehood. Such statements are free of errors resulting from human bias and faults of reasoning and deduction. Then we have to look at the events and attitudes which confirm these statements.

The nature of the attitude of the people of the earlier revelations towards the Muslims is stated several times in the Qur'ān. On certain occasions, God speaks of them alone, while on others, He groups them with the unbelievers, since the two groups are united in their attitudes towards Islam and the Muslim community. At times, the Qur'ān speaks of certain positions they have taken which expose their alliance against Islam. The statements themselves are too clear and decisive to require any comment: *'Neither the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations nor the idolaters would like to see any blessing ever bestowed upon you by your Lord."* (2: 105) *"Many among the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you back to unbelief now that you have embraced the faith. This they do out of deep-seated envy, after the truth has become manifest to them."* (2: 109) *"Never will the Jews nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith."* (2: 120) "A *party of the people of earlier revelations would love to lead you astray."* (3: 69) "A *party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: 'Declare at the beginning of the day that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they may go back on their faith. But do not really trust anyone who does not follow your own faith." (3:* 72-73) *"Believers, if you pay heed to some of those who have been given revelations, they will cause you to renounce the truth after you have accepted the faith."* (3: 100) "*Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of divine revelations, now barter it away for error, and want you too to lose your way? But God knows best who are your enemies."* (4: 44-45) *"Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers."* (4: 51)

These examples are sufficient to make the attitude of the people of earlier revelations towards the believers absolutely clear. They would dearly love the believers to sink back into disbelief, although they know them to be following the

truth. Their only motive is selfishness. They define their final and irrevocable attitude towards the believers in terms of insistence that they must become Jews or Christians. They will not enter into true peace with them unless the believers do so and thus abandon their faith altogether. They go further than this and testify to the idolaters that their idolatry is better guided than Islam.

To determine the ultimate objectives of their attitudes towards Islam and the Muslims, we may recall the following statements God has revealed in the Qur'ān: *"They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (2: 217) *"The unbelievers would love to see you oblivious of your weapons and your equipment, so that they might swoop on you with one assault."* (4: 102) *"If they could overcome you, they would surely remain your enemies, and would stretch forth their hands and their tongues against you with evil intent. They dearly desire that you should disbelieve."* (60: 2) *"Should they prevail over you, they will respect neither agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you."* (Verse 8) *"They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer"* (Verse 10)

When we review God's statements, we find that the unbelievers' ultimate objectives towards the believers are identical to the objectives of those who are described as the people of earlier revelations. Indeed both sets of statements are expressed in more or less the same words. This shows that the nature of the attitudes of both groups is exactly the same.

The Qur'ānic statements concerning both groups are expressed as if they are stating established facts. God says about the unbelievers: *"They shall not cease to fight you until they force you to renounce your faith, if they can."* (2: 217) He also says about the people of earlier revelations: *"Never will the Jews nor yet the Christians be pleased with you unless you follow their faith."* (2: 120) This method of expression suggests that these are definitive statements describing permanent attitudes not individual or temporary cases.

When we cast a quick glance at the history of these relations, on the basis of the attitudes adopted by the Jews and the Christians towards Islam and the Muslims in all periods of history, we will appreciate the full import of these true statements by God Himself. We also realize that such hostile attitudes are the rule, not the exception.

There have certainly been some exceptions. Indeed the Qur'ān reports, and historical facts speak of, the cases of certain individuals or small communities who have been friendly to the Muslims, and who made it clear that they believed in the truth preached by the Prophet Muĥammad, and in his message. They eventually adopted Islam. However, beyond these instances, we find nothing but a long history of determined hostility to, and wicked scheming against, this faith of Islam which

have continued unabated ever since God vouchsafed His message to His final Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him).

Jewish Attitudes towards Islam

Several *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān refer to the Jews' hostility towards Islam which manifested itself in wicked scheming and conspiracies aiming to undermine the Muslim community. Indeed this hostility has always been manifest, ever since their first confrontation with Islam in Madinah up to the present moment. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to provide a full account of such a hostile history, but we will make only a few brief references to episodes of the unabating war the Jews have launched against Islam.

When the Prophet migrated to Madinah, the Jews there gave him the worst reception that could have been given by the followers of a divine message to a Messenger of God whom they knew to be honest and conveying a true message. They invented lies and raised doubts among the followers of the new faith, resorting to the most devious means to spread these fabrications. They expressed doubts about the Prophet himself when they were certain of his honesty and true position. They allied themselves with the hypocrite Arabs and taught them how to make false accusations and spread them around. They manipulated every possible event, such as the change in direction when Muslims offer their prayers and the false accusations levelled against the Prophet's wife, as well as numerous other instances. Several comments in the Qur'ān, in *Sūrahs* 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 33 and 59, refer directly to such incidents. Here are some examples:

> *And now that a Book confirming their own has come to them from God, and they had repeatedly forecast its coming to the unbelievers, they have denied what they know to be the truth. God's curse be upon the unbelievers! Vile is that for which they have bartered their souls, because they have denied what God has revealed, grudging that He should, by His grace, send down His revelations to whom He chooses from among His servants. Thus they have incurred God's wrath over and over again. Ignominious suffering is in store for the unbelievers. (2: 89-90)*

> *Now that a Messenger from God has come to them, confirming what is already in their possession, some of those who had been given the Scriptures cast God's Book behind their backs as though they know nothing.* (2: 101)

> *The weak-minded among people will say, 'What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have so far observed?' Say, 'To God belong the east and the west. He guides whomever He wills to a straight path.'* (2: 142)

People of earlier revelations! Why do you disbelieve in God's revelations when you yourselves bear witness [to their truth'? People of earlier revelations! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood, and knowingly conceal the truth? A party of the people of earlier revelations say [to one another]: 'Declare at the beginning of the day, that you believe in what has been revealed to the believers, and then deny it at the end of the day, so that they might go back on their faith.' (3: 70-72)

There are some among them who twist their tongues when quoting the Scriptures, so that you may think that [what they say] is from the Scriptures, when it is not from the Scriptures. They say: 'It is from God,' when it is not from God. Thus, they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie. (3: 78)

Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why do you disbelieve in God's revelations, when God Himself is witness to all that you do?' Say: 'People of earlier revelations, why do you try to turn those who have come to believe away from the path of God, seeking to make it appear crooked, when you yourselves bear witness [to its being straight'? God is not unaware of what you do.' (3: 98-99)

The people of earlier revelations ask you to have a book sent down to them from heaven. They asked Moses for something even greater than that, when they said: Make us see God with our own eyes.' The thunderbolt smote them for this their wrongdoing. After that, they took to worshipping the calf even after clear evidence of the truth had come to them. (4: 153)

They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (Verse 32)

History witnessed repeated violations by the Jews of their treaties with the Muslim state in Madinah, as also their scheming against the Muslims. These violations led to the encounters with the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā`, al-Nadīr and Qurayzah and also the Battle of Khaybar. Their efforts to bring together all the forces hostile to Islam in an unholy alliance, with the aim of exterminating Islam altogether, are well known.

They have continued to scheme against Islam and the Muslim community ever since. They were instrumental in the chaotic events that led to the assassination of the third rightly-guided Caliph, `Uthmān ibn Affān, and to the emergence of division in the Muslim community. They were the main culprits in the conflict that took place between `Alī and Mu`āwiyah. They led the way in the fabrication of false statements attributed to the Prophet, historical reports and baseless interpretations of Qur'ānic

statements. They also paved the way to the victory of the Tartars and their conquest of Baghdad and the fall of the Islamic Caliphate.

In modern history, the Jews have been behind every calamity that has befallen the Muslim communities everywhere. They give active support to every attempt to crush the modern Islamic revival and extend their protection to every regime that suppresses such a revival.

History Tells its Tale

The other people of earlier revelations, the Christians, have been no less hostile. Enmity between the Byzantines and the Persians went back for centuries. Nevertheless, as soon as the Church felt that Islam, the new faith, represented a threat to its concocted version of Christianity, which was no more than a collection of ancient pagan legends, misguided inventions and a handful of statements from the Prophet Jesus, both camps buried all their past enmity and age-old hatred to confront the new faith together.

The Byzantines, and their puppet Arab regime of Ghassān, started to raise forces to fight the new faith. They killed the Prophet's messenger, when messengers were traditionally given full protection. When the Prophet sent a force of 3,000 men to stop the provocation, they were confronted by an army that included, according to historical reports, 100,000 of the Byzantines and a similar force of Christian Arabs under their rule. This was the Battle of Mu'tah, which took place in year 8 H, corresponding to 630 CE, and in which three Muslim commanders, Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib and `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah, fell as martyrs.

Then the expedition to Tabūk, which is the major subject of discussion in this *sūrah,* took place, followed by the march of the army commanded by Usāmah ibn Zayd. This was prepared by the Prophet and dispatched by his successor, Abū Bakr, in a demonstration of power to confront the Byzantine forces being mobilized to suppress the voice of Islam. Then the Muslims achieved a great victory in the Battle of Yarmūk against the Byzantines. This ushered in the liberation of wide areas of Syria, Egypt, North Africa and the Mediterranean from Byzantine colonialism, and the consolidation of an Islamic base in Andalusia. From then on the hostility of the Crusaders to Islam was in full swing.

Everybody has heard of the campaigns known as the Crusades, but these were not the only ones launched by the Church against Islam. Indeed there were much earlier campaigns, which started when the Byzantines patched up their long hostility with the Persians to lend them a helping hand against Islam in the southern areas of Arabia. The Battle of Mu'tah was another early confrontation, but there were more battles to come after the great victory achieved by the Muslims in Yarmūk. This

hostility was at its most brutal when Europe, motivated by Crusader zeal, swept over the Islamic base in Spain and committed atrocities without parallel in history. The same sort of hatred and unscrupulous brutality were demonstrated during the Crusades that showed no respect for any value or pledge of honour.

Gustav Le Bon, a French Christian author who wrote a book speaking favourably of the Arab Civilization refers to the compassionate treatment Muslims extended to their enemies. He states that during the Crusades, the first thing Richardo did was that he killed at the Muslim camp 3,000 prisoners who had surrendered to him after he had given them his pledges of honour to spare them. He then ran riot with his soldiers killing and looting. This angered Saladin who had extended noble and compassionate treatment to the Christians in Jerusalem, and went as far as sending medicines, drinks and provisions to Philip and Richard, the Lion-Heart when they were ill.

Another Christian writer also quoted in Arabic sources reflects that the Crusaders made the worst start to their march to Jerusalem. A group of Christian pilgrims went about killing those whom they found in the palaces that fell to them. They demonstrated their brutality by opening their victims' stomachs to look for any gold articles they might have swallowed. In contrast, when Saladin conquered Jerusalem, he granted security to the Crusaders, and fulfilled all his pledges to them. The Muslims showed their beaten enemies unparalleled magnanimity. King al-`Ādil, Saladin's brother, set 1,000 prisoners free, and ensured the safety of all the Armenians. He allowed the Patriarch to hold and carry the Cross and all church ornaments. The Queen and the princesses were also allowed to visit their husbands.

A proper examination of the long line of Christian hostility to Islam over the centuries is beyond the scope of this commentary. We will only say, however, that this hostility has never ended. We need only recall what happened recently in Zanzibar, when an extermination campaign was launched against the Muslims there. About 12,000 were killed and the remaining 4,000 Muslims were put to sea to go into exile. We may also recall the brutality witnessed in Cyprus where neither food nor drink was allowed to reach the Muslim areas, with the aim of starving the Island's Muslim inhabitants to death. We only need to remember the atrocities committed by Ethiopia in Eritrea and other Muslim areas, and the persecution of about 100,000 Muslims of Somali origin in Kenya, only because they wanted to join their people in Somalia. Indeed we need go no further than what the Christian missionaries have been trying to do in the south of the Sudan.[22]

[22] The author is referring here to events that took place in the early 1960s in these different places. For example, a *coup* took place in Zanzibar against its Muslim rulers, encouraged by the government of Tanganyika, and shortly afterwards the Island of Zanzibar joined its African mainland neighbour to form Tanzania. In Cyprus, persecution of the Muslim minority continued after the Island's

To describe the Christians' hostile view of Islam we may quote the following paragraph by a European author, George Brown, writing in 1944:[23]

> We used to be warned against dangers posed by different nations, but experience has shown that there is no cause for worry. We were warned against the Jewish threat and the threat of the yellow races and the Bolshevik threat. But none of these warnings has come true. We have found the Jews to be very good friends, which means that anyone who persecutes them is our enemy. We have also found out that the Bolsheviks are our allies. The yellow races are being taken care of by powerful democracies. The only real threat is that of Islam because of its dynamism and ability to spread and attract new followers. It is the only real obstacle that stands up to Western imperialism.

We cannot go much further than this to review the various aspects of the determined war that continues to be launched by Christianity against Islam. We have referred on various occasions to the nature of this age-long war and its various aspects. The preceding remarks should be sufficient and further details may be sought elsewhere.

Let us now recall that, on the one hand, Islam represents a general declaration for the liberation of mankind and that, on the other, the camp *of jāhiliyyah* the world over seeks to crush any implementation of this declaration. With this in mind, we realize that the final rulings contained in this *sūrah* on the relationship between Islam and other camps are the cumulative and natural reaction to all these facts. They are not limited to a particular period or a special case. At the same time, the earlier provisional rulings are partially abrogated, in the sense that they can be implemented in situations and conditions similar to those which prevailed at the time of their revelation. It is in the nature of Islam that real situations are faced with attitudes and actions that are suited to them.

These final rulings, as they are stated in this *sūrah,* deal with a specific situation that obtained in Arabia, and serve, in a sense, as a legislative prelude to the Tabūk campaign, the central issue of the *sūrah,* which sought to confront the Byzantine mobilization close to the Arabian borders. But the attitude of the people of earlier revelations and their hostility to Islam and the Muslim community were not the result of any particular historical event, or limited to any stage. That is a permanent reality. They will continue to be at war with Islam until the Muslims have abandoned their faith altogether. This hostility and the war it launches will continue to be fed by all possible means. Hence, the rulings outlined in this *sūrah* remain in full effect,

---

independence. In Sudan, a very large contingent of Christian missionaries were encouraging civil strife, which forced the government of General Abboud to expel 300 missionaries. — Editor's note.

[23] As quoted by Muṣṭafā Khālidī and `Umar Farrūkh in *Al-Tabshīr wal-Isti`mār fi al-Bilād al-`Arabīyyah.*

unlimited to a particular period of history. However, implementation of rulings must come within the framework of putting into effect the proactive Islamic approach. People must study this approach fully before they start to talk about the rulings themselves and before those latter-day Muslims, who know nothing about Islam except its name, blame Islam for their weakness and subjugation.

Legal Islamic rulings have always been, and will continue to be, the result of action taken in accordance with the Islamic method and approach. There is a great deal of difference between looking at Qur'ānic statements as theoretical models and looking at them within the context of action taken according to the Islamic approach. This last qualification, `according to the Islamic approach', is extremely important. We are not talking here about any action, in which any situation is acceptable as a basis. Any human situation will become an important factor if it results from the implementation of Islam.

If we keep this rule in mind, we can see the final rulings determining the relationship between the people of earlier revelations and the Muslim community. We will now look more closely at the verses included in the present passage.

A Fight Until Submission

> *Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.* (Verse 29)

This verse and the ones that follow were meant to prepare the Muslims for their expedition to Tabūk and the confrontation with the Byzantines and their puppet regime of Christian Arabs, known as the Ghassānīd. This suggests that the descriptions we have here were true of the people on the other side of the confrontation. They simply show the reality of those people. These descriptions are not mentioned here as conditions for fighting the people of earlier revelations, but as qualities inherent in their distorted beliefs and the actual reality of those people. Hence they provide the justification for fighting them. The ruling also applies to all those who share the same beliefs and characteristics.

This verse specifies three such characteristics. (1) They do not believe in God and the Last Day; (2) they do not treat as forbidden what God has forbidden; and (3) they do not believe in the religion of truth. The verses that follow show how these characteristics apply to them.

Firstly, the Jews claim that Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians assert that Christ is His son. These claims echo similar ones made by the pagans of former times. Hence, they are to be treated on the same basis as people who do not believe in God and the Last Day.

Secondly, they treat their rabbis and their monks, as well as Jesus Christ, as their Lords, in place of God. This is in total conflict with the principles of the faith of truth which is based on total submission to God alone, who has no partners. As they make such claims they demonstrate that they are idolaters who do not follow the true faith.

Thirdly, they try to put out the light of God's guidance with their mouths. In other words, they are at war with the divine faith. No one is ever at war with the divine faith if he truly believes in God.

Fourthly, many of their monks and rabbis devour people's property without any justification. They do so knowing that their claims to such property are false. Hence they do not treat as forbidden what God and His Messenger have made forbidden, whether we take this statement as referring to the Messenger sent to them or to the Prophet Muĥammad.

All these characteristics were true of the Christians in Syria and the Byzantines, as well as other Christians ever since Church Synods distorted the faith preached by Jesus Christ and claimed that he was the son of God and invented the concept of the Trinity, the conflict between the different sects and churches over the concept of Trinity notwithstanding.

What we have here then is a general order stating a universal rule that applies to all those among the people of earlier revelations who share the same characteristics as the Christians of Syria and Byzantium. This general application is not restricted by the exceptions the Prophet made with regard to how Muslims behave in war towards women, children, the elderly, or monks who stay in places of worship, on account of the fact that these are not fighters. Islam indeed does not allow attacks against such non-fighters whatever their religion may be.

These exceptions were not made by the Prophet because such groups did not launch an aggression, but rather because they do not normally launch any aggression at all. Therefore it is not right to try to interpret this exception as restricting the general order by saying that it applies only to aggressors, as done by those who adopt an apologetic attitude in trying to defend Islam. Aggression has been committed in the first place, against God's Lordship of the universe and against human beings who are forced to submit to deities other than God. As Islam tries to defend God's Lordship and human dignity, ignorance will try to stop it by aggression and war. This is the reality we have to realize.

This Qur'ānic verse commands the Muslims to fight against those among the

people of earlier revelations who "do not believe in God and the Last Day." A person who claims that Ezra or Jesus is the son of God cannot be described as a believer in God. The same applies to a person who says that the Christ is the Lord, or that God is one of a Trinity, or that He manifested Himself in Jesus. It further applies to all concepts formulated by the Synods, diverse as these concepts are.

Nor can we describe as believers in God and the Last Day those who say that they will suffer God's punishment only for a few days no matter what sins they may commit because God loves them as His sons and daughters, or because they are God's chosen people. The same applies to those who claim that all sins are forgiven through a holy communion with Jesus Christ, which is the only way to achieve forgiveness. Neither of these two groups can be described as believers in God or in the Last Day.

This verse also describes the people of earlier revelations as ones who do not treat as forbidden what God and His Messenger have made forbidden. Whether the term 'His Messenger' refers to the Messenger whom God sent to them in particular or to the Prophet Muĥammad, the import is the same. The following verses explain this by saying that they devour other people's property by false claims, an action which has been forbidden in all divine messages and by all God's messengers. Some of the clearest examples of this are usurious transactions, the sale of bonds of forgiveness by the Church, opposition to the divine faith with brutal force as well as trying to turn believers away from their faith. Another clear example is forcing people to submit to beings other than God, and forcing them to implement laws other than those revealed by God. All these examples are covered by the description: *"who do not treat as forbidden what God and His Messenger have forbidden."* All this applies today to the people of earlier revelations as was applicable to them when this verse was revealed.

The Qur'ānic verse also describes them as not following `the religion of truth.' This is clear from what we have already said. It is not part of the religion of truth to believe in the Lordship of anyone other than God, or to apply a law different from God's law, or to accept legislation enacted by any authority other than God, or to submit to anyone other than Him. All these qualities are today true of the people of earlier revelations, as it was true of them then.

When Scriptures are Ignored

The condition which the Qur'ānic verse lays down for not fighting them is not that they should accept Islam. No. There is simply no compulsion in matters of faith, and no one is forced to accept Islam at any time. The condition is simply that they should pay the tribute, or the submission tax, with a willing hand and that they be utterly

subdued. What is the purpose of this condition, and why is it the end at which all fighting must stop?

The answer is found in the fact that with such characteristics, the people of earlier revelations place themselves at war with the divine faith, both in belief and in practical terms. They are also at war with Islamic society because of the inherent conflict between the codes of living derived from the divine faith on the one hand and ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* on the other. As described in these verses, the people of earlier revelations belong to *jāhiliyyah* in both beliefs and practices. History also proves the nature of conflict, and the impossibility of coexistence between the two codes. The people of earlier revelations were determined in their opposition to the Islamic faith in the period preceding the revelation of this verse, and in the period following it, up to the present day.

As the only religion of truth that exists on earth today, Islam takes appropriate action to remove all physical and material obstacles that try to impede its efforts to liberate mankind from submission to anyone other than God. That submission is translated in following the religion of truth, provided that every human being is given free choice. There must be no pressure either from the religion itself or from those forces putting up the physical obstacles.

The practical way to ensure the removal of those physical obstacles while not forcing anyone to adopt Islam is to smash the power of those authorities based on false beliefs until they declare their submission and demonstrate this by paying the submission tax. When this happens, the process of liberating mankind is completed by giving every individual the freedom of choice based on conviction. Anyone who is not convinced may continue to follow his faith. However, he has to pay the submission tax to fulfil a number of objectives:

Firstly, by paying this tax, known as *jizyah,* he declares that he will not stand in physical opposition to the efforts advocating the true Divine faith. Secondly, he contributes to the defence expenses for himself, his property, honour and family. Islam guarantees such protection for those who pay the *jizyah* to place themselves under Islamic protection. To ensure this, Islam defends those under its protection against all internal and external enemies with its own soldiers. Thirdly, he contributes to the treasury of the Muslim state which guarantees a decent standard of living for all those who are unable to work, including those who pay the submission tax, without any distinction between them and those Muslims who pay *zakāt.* We do not here want to enter into polemics on who should pay the submission tax and who are exempt from it, and how much each one or each category should pay, and the methods of imposing this tax and its collection. The whole question is not under discussion today as it was at the time when Muslim scholars gave their different rulings on these matters on the basis of scholarly discretion, or *ijtihād.* So today this

question is considered historic rather than practical. Nowadays Muslims do not engage in *jihād,* because there is practically no Muslim community in the real sense of the term. Indeed the issue to be discussed is that of the existence of Islam and Muslims.

As we have said on several occasions, Islam takes a very serious approach which refuses to enter into any discussion of hypothetical matters. It is simply against the nature of this approach to engage in academic discussion on matters that have no practical relevance, since there is no single Islamic society that conducts all its affairs in accordance with God's law. Indeed Islam has little time for people who occupy themselves with issues that are far removed from the realities of the present day. Such people are given a funny Arabic nickname which means `the hypothesists', because they are always putting forward hypotheses and trying to find answers to them.

The starting point today is the same as it was in the early days of Islam. There must be a group of people, living in a certain area, who believe in the religion of truth and declare that they believe in God's oneness and in Muĥammad as God's Messenger. They also believe that all sovereignty belongs to God, which means that He alone has the authority to legislate. They implement all this in their lives and move on to implement Islam's general declaration to liberate mankind. Only when this happens will there be a chance to implement Islamic rules governing the relations between the Muslim community and other societies and communities. At that time it is possible to enter such discussions about the rules that are applicable to situations that the Muslim community face in practice.

We have only discussed this verse in principle because it relates to a question of faith and to the nature of the Islamic approach. We limit our discussion to this aspect, without entering into the legal differences out of respect for the Islamic approach which is always serious, practical and realistic.

A Claim Only Unbelievers Make

As we have seen, God issued His order to the Muslims to fight the people of earlier revelations, i.e. the Jews and the Christians, "*till they pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (Verse 29) When this order was given certain circumstances, discussed in the Prologue to this *sūrah,* affected the Muslim community in Madinah at that time. These circumstances required that this order should be reiterated and emphasized. Its reasons needed to be clarified. The uneasiness felt by some Muslims about its purpose required reassurance. To obey this order meant opposing the Byzantines in southern Syria. Before the advent of Islam, the Arabs held the Byzantines in awe, particularly because they held control

over the north of Arabia for a long time. Some Arab tribes collaborated with them, and they had a puppet state where the Ghassān tribe assumed power.

This was not the first encounter the Muslims had with the Byzantines. With Islam, God gave the Arabs a sense of dignity which enabled them to stand up to both the Persians and the Byzantines. Formerly, all the bravery they demonstrated was in internal conflict and the looting raids they launched against one another, tribe against tribe. Yet there was still a lingering fear of the Byzantines, particularly among those who had not yet acquired the true Islamic attitude. Moreover, the last major encounter with the Byzantines had not gone in favour of the Muslims. In that battle, the Byzantines and their Arab stooges marshalled large forces which some reports put at no less than 200,000 men.

All these circumstances, whether relating to the structure of the Muslim community at the time, or to the old fear of the Byzantines, or to the expedition itself which was termed 'the expedition of hardship,' and also the feeling that the Byzantines and the Christian Arabs allied with them followed earlier Scriptures required further clarification and more categorical statements to show that the fight against them was inevitable. All doubts had to be removed and unease needed to be countered with reassurance by explaining the reasons for that inescapable eventuality.

In this verse, the Qur'ān makes it clear why those people of earlier revelations were following deviant beliefs which echoed those of the Arab idolaters, Roman idolaters of old as also other nations and communities. They had not maintained the right faith which was outlined in their Scriptures. Hence they could not be considered as followers of any divine message, since they held beliefs contrary to all messages revealed by God. What is worth noting is the mention of the Jews and their assertion that Ezra was the son of God when these verses are meant to prepare the Muslims for a confrontation with the Byzantines and their Arab Christian allies. Most probably there are two reasons for this:

The first relates to the fact that these verses are given as a general statement, and the order to fight the people of earlier revelations until they pay the submission tax with a willing hand and are subdued is also of general import. In view of this it is necessary to outline the ideological basis of this general order that applies to both Christians and Jews.

The second reason is that the Jews had to be included in this order because they were in a position to put up obstacles to impede the Muslim expansion into southern Syria. They had moved from Madinah to areas close to Syria after a hard fight against the Muslims which had led to the evacuation of the tribes of Qaynuqā` and al- Nadīr.

The Christian claim that Jesus Christ is the son of God is well known. This has been their belief ever since Paul distorted the Christian faith. On the other hand, the claim by the Jews that Ezra was the son of God is not known today. What we find today in Jewish religious writings about Ezra is a description which shows him as a skilful scribe of the Torah and that he dedicated himself to the pursuit of knowledge of the Lord's law. Nevertheless, the fact that the Qur'ān attributes to them this assertion that Ezra was the son of God is irrefutable evidence that at least some of them, particularly the Jews of Madinah, used to believe so and that this was commonly accepted among them. The Qur'ān faced the Jews and the Christians in an open and clear way. Had there been anything untrue in what it attributed to them, they would have found in it a valid argument to support their denial of the truth of the Prophet's message.

The late Shaikh Rashīd Riđā' gives a useful summary about Ezra's position and status as viewed by the Jews and adds his own comments. It is useful to quote a few of these paragraphs here so that we have an insight into what the Jews believe.[24]

> *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (1903 edition) mentions that Ezra marks the springtime in the national history of Judaism. "The flowers appear on the earth" refers to Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was worthy of being the vehicle of the Law, had it not been already given through Moses. It was forgotten but Ezra restored it. But for its sins, Israel in the time of Ezra would have witnessed miracles as in the time of Joshua... Ezra re-established the text of the Pentateuch, introducing therein the Assyrian or square characters, apparently as a polemical measure against the Samaritans. He showed his doubts concerning the correctness of some words of the text by placing points over them... the beginnings of the Jewish calendar are traced back to him.
>
> In the *Dictionary of the Bible,* Dr George Box says that Ezra was a Jewish priest, a famous scribe who lived for a time in Babylon in the reign of Artaxerxes, of the long hands. In the seventh year of his reign he permitted Ezra to take a large number of the Jewish people to Jerusalem around 457 BC. (Ezra p. 7) The journey took them four months...
>
> `In Jewish tradition, Ezra's position is comparable to that of Moses and Iliya. It is said that he founded the large assembly, collected the books of the Holy

[24] This quotation is translated from Arabic. It contains portions which were originally in English or other languages. I have tried hard to find the quoted parts in their original language, but I met with only little success. What also hampered my efforts was the fact that in the early part of the twentieth century, when Shaikh Riđā'was writing, referencing in Arabic writings lacked any standard pattern. Besides, we often find a quoted text unmarked because it was sufficient that an author mentions the name of the author he was quoting. Moreover, the spelling of many of the names mentioned could be easily mistaken. — Editor's note.

Book, introduced the Chaldean alphabet in place of the old Hebrew alphabet, and wrote the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah of the Old Testament. The book of Ezra (pp. 4: 8, 6: 19 and 7: 1-27) is written in the Chaldean language because when the people returned from exile, they could understand Chaldean better than Hebrew.'

It is widely known to historians, including Jews and Christians, that the Torah which Moses wrote and kept in or near the casket was lost before the time of Solomon. When the casket was opened during his reign, there was nothing in it other than the two tablets containing the ten commandments,[25] as seen in the first book of Kings. It was Ezra who, after the end of slavery, wrote the Torah and other things in Chaldean letters, and the Chaldean language mixed with whatever was left of the old Hebrew, which the Jews had largely forgotten. The people of earlier revelations maintain that Ezra wrote it as it originally was, having been inspired by God. But this is not accepted by other communities. Many objections are raised which we find at the appropriate place in specialized books, even those authored by them, such as *Dhakhīrat al-Albāb* for Catholics, written originally in French. The author devotes Chapters 11 and 12 to objections to the view that the five books were those of Moses. Concerning this, he says:

`It is mentioned in the book of Ezra (4: 14.21) that all holy books were burnt with fire at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, when he said: "The Law is burnt, and no one knoweth the works that thou hast done,[26] or what thou art about to do."[27] It is added that with inspiration by the Holy Spirit, Ezra re-wrote the five books burnt with fire, and he was assisted by five contemporary scribes. Therefore, we see St Thertholianus, St Irinaous, St Ironemus, St John the Golden, St Basilius and others call Ezra `the one who revived Jewish holy books'[28]

Shaikh Rashīd Riđā' further:

This is sufficient for our purposes. We wish to make it clear that all the people of earlier revelations are indebted to Ezra with regard to the foundation of their faith and their holy books. We wish also to show that this foundation is feeble, relying on weak support. This has been clearly shown by European

[25] As regards this event, the Qur'ān says: "*The portent of his kingship is that a casket shall be brought to you, wherein you shall have peace of reassurance from your Lord, and a legacy left behind by the House of Moses and the House of Aaron. It will be borne by angels.*" (2: 248)
[26] G.H. Box, *The Apocalypse of Ezra,* London, 1917, p. 110.
[27] We say that what the Qur'ān mentions is the truth, and the Qur'ān states that a `legacy'was left behind.
[28] M.R. Riđā', *Tafsīr al-Manār,* Dār al-Ma`rifah, Beirut, Vol. 10, 1930, pp. 322-324.

freethinking scholars.[29] Under his entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* his writing of the law — confirmed in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah — is mentioned. Then the entry says that later reports claim that he did not merely re-write for them the law that had been burnt, but also all the Hebrew books which had been lost. He further re-wrote 70 unauthorized books. The writer of the entry comments that this legend about Ezra has been written by some historians of their own accord, relying on no other reference. Hence, modern writers consider it as mere fabrication.

To sum up, the Jews venerated and still venerate Ezra, to the extent that some of them call him the son of God. We do not know if using this description was a kind of honouring Ezra, in the same way as Israel, David and others were honoured, or it was akin to what their philosopher Philo later claimed. This latter claim is close to Indian philosophy, which is the origin of Christian beliefs.[30] Qur'ānic commentators are in agreement that the claim attributed to the Jews about Ezra being the son of God was made by some Jews, not all of them.

The Jews who said this were some of those who lived in Madinah. It is the same as the Qur'ānic reference: "*The Jews say: 'God's hand is shackled!' It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills.*" (5:64) The same applies to others whom the Qur'ān mentions in the following verse: "*God has certainly heard the words of those who said: 'God is poor, and we are rich.* – *(3:*181) These people uttered this mouthful in reply to God's invitation: "*Who is it that will offer up to God a goodly loan, which He will amply repay?*" (57:11) It may be that some earlier ones said the same thing, but it was not reported to us.

Ibn Isĥāq and others report: "Sallām ibn Mishkam, Nu`mān ibn Awfā, Abū Anas, Shās ibn Qays and Mālik ibn al-Sayf said to the Prophet: `How can we follow you when you have abandoned our *qiblah [i.e.* the direction faced in

[29] Perhaps we should say here that terms like `free-thinking scholars'are used by writers who followed Shaikh Muĥammad `Abduh and his way of thinking. This school was generally influenced by Western ideas and thoughts that are alien to the Islamic approach. It is this influence that made this school praise opponents to the Church and those who advocated freedom and democracy as free-thinking. It also spoke approvingly of the European way of life, saying that we should adopt `what is good of European ideas and traditions.'This is a very slippery road. It should be said that Lord Cromer and other colonialists encouraged this trend. The matter requires much more careful consideration, based on an independent Islamic approach.

[30] For our part we find no justification for this uncertainty. The Qur'ānic statement makes it clear that the Jewish claim, `Ezra is the son of God,'is the same as the Christian assertion that `Jesus is the son of God.'Both echo the assertions of the unbelievers of old times, alleging that God has a son. Anyone who makes such a claim takes himself out of the fold of divine religion and joins the unbelievers and the idolaters.

> prayer] and you do not accept that Ezra was the son of God."
>
> It is well known that some Christians who claimed that Jesus was the son of God were originally Jews. Philo, a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria who was a contemporary of Jesus, says that God has a son who is His word with which He creates all things. Hence, it is perfectly possible that some Jews claimed prior to the advent of Islam that Ezra was the son of God.[31]

By quoting this Jewish assertion in this context the Qur'ān makes clear that some of the people of earlier revelations held such distorted beliefs as could not fit with their being believers in God or their following the religion of truth. These are the main characteristics which form the basis for the ruling given to the Muslims to fight them. The purpose of such a fight is not to compel them to be Muslims, but to subdue them so that they do not stand in opposition to Islam and so that they accept its authority. Thus individuals would be free of all influences restricting their freedom to make a choice to believe in God and follow His message.

As we have said, the Christian assertion about Jesus being the son of God is very widely known. Indeed all Christian churches have been making this assertion ever since Paul distorted the message of Jesus Christ which, like all divine messages, was based on God's oneness. The Church Synods carried the distortion further and practically killed the concept of God's oneness.

For a summary of Christians' beliefs we will similarly quote from Shaikh Muĥammad Rashīd Riđā's commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Manār*. Under the heading 'Trinity', we read:

> The Trinity is a term used by Christians to refer to three manifestations of God. These are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is part of the teachings of the Catholic and Eastern Churches, as well as almost all Protestants. Those who adhere to this concept allege that it is absolutely in line with the Holy Bible. Scholars of Divinity have written extensively in interpreting and explaining this concept, based on the teachings of the old Synods and the writings of the former fathers of the Church. Much of their writings discuss the way the second manifestation was born and how the third manifestation came about, and the relationships of the three manifestations, their distinctive qualities, names and titles. The term, `Trinity', is not used in the Bible. No verse of the Old Testament specifically mentions the Trinity. Yet old Christian writers cite many verses that refer to a collective presence of God. The point here is that if these verses admit more than one interpretation, they cannot be cited as clear evidence in support of

[31] Muĥammad Rashid Riđā', op.cit., pp. 326-327.

the concept of the Trinity. They are used as reference to clear revelations they believe to be included in the New Testament. Two large sets of verses from the New Testament are quoted in support of this concept. The first set consists of verses that mention the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together, and the second mentions them separately, emphasizing some of their attributes and the relationship between them.

Dispute about the three persons of the Trinity started at the time of the Apostles. Most probably it emanated from the ideas of Hellenic philosophers. Theophilus, the second century Bishop of Antioch, used the Greek word *trinus,* while subsequently Tertiliyanus was the first to use its synonym *trinitas,* which means three. Much dispute about this concept took place prior to the Council of Nicea, particularly in the East. The Church branded many views as heretic. Among these were the views of the Abionians who believed that Christ was no more than a human being, the Sabilians who believed that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were three different manifestations by which God shows Himself to people, the Airisis who believed that the Son was not ever present like the Father; rather, the Father created the Son before creating the universe. Hence, the Son has a lower status and is subject to the Father's will, and the Macedonians deny that the Holy Spirit is a person of God.

The Church concept was approved by the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, and the Constantinople Synod in 381. Both ruled that the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to the Father in the Trinity, and while the Son was born through the father before the start of time, the Holy Spirit emanated from Him. The Toledo Synod of 589 CE also ruled that the Holy Spirit emanated from the Father. The Latin Church unanimously accepted this addition and held on to it. As for the Greek Church, it showed little resistance at the beginning, but later gave its argument against changing the law, considering that as heresy.

The phrase 'And also from the Son' continues to be a barrier preventing the unity between the Greek and Catholic Churches. The writings of the followers of Martin Luther and the Reformist churches adopt the same concept of the Trinity as the Catholic Church. However, beginning with the thirteenth century, a large number of divinity specialists have opposed this, as also some new groups such as the Susinians, Germans, Unitarians and the Universalists, who all consider that concept contrary to the Holy Bible and to reason. Suweid Tiragh makes the Trinity the Christ given a tri-mark. He speaks of one in three, not three in one. What he understands is that the divine in Christ is the Father, while the divine which is in union with the human in Christ is the Son, and the divine that emanated from Him is the

> Holy Spirit. The influence of the rationalists on the Protestant and Reformist churches weakened the Trinity concepts among many German divines.
>
> Kant considers that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit signify three essential attributes of God, which are power, wisdom and love, or three main activities, which are creation, protection and control. Both Higgins and Shling tried to establish an abstract basis to the concept of the Trinity, and they were followed by later German divines who tried to defend the concept on abstract lines. Some divines who rely on the Scriptures do not strictly follow the Church line as stated by the Nicea and Constantinople Councils. In later years many tried to defend the views of the Sabilians in particular.[32]

Indeed, no longer do any Christian churches believe in the religion of truth based on God's oneness; nor do they accept that nothing and no one is similar to Him in any way, or that He does not beget anyone; limitless indeed is He in His glory.

It is often mentioned that some groups of Christians, particularly those referred to in Islamic literature as the Arīsīs, believed in God's oneness. To say this is inaccurate. This group is not unitarian in the sense we find in the divine faith. Their concepts are rather confused. While they state that, unlike God, Jesus Christ is not eternal — which is true — they also claim that he is the Son, and that he has been created by the Father before the universe. All this has nothing to do with the proper concept of God's oneness.

Indeed a clear verdict has been given by God that those who say that Christ is the son of God, or say that Christ is God, or say that God is one of a Trinity are unbelievers. The same faith cannot lead to belief and unbelief at the same time. No one can simultaneously be a believer and an unbeliever.

Clear Order and Perverse Response

Commenting on the assertions by the Jews and the Christians that Ezra or Jesus is the son of God, the Qur'ān emphasizes that they echo the assertions and concepts of unbelievers in former times: *"Such are the assertions they utter with their mouths, echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old."* (Verse 30) First of all this comment emphasizes that these assertions were made by them and not reported by others. This is the reason for mentioning `their mouths' to add a physical image, following the Qur'ānic method of expression. It is evident that whatever they say or assert must be said by word of mouth. The deliberate mention of their mouths is neither redundant — far be it from God to unnecessarily add what is redundant — nor does it make the statement verbose. The Qur'ānic style pictures how they make their

[32] M.R. Riđā', ibid., pp. 329-331.

assertions and gives us a very real image that we can see as we listen to the statement. There is also an additional connotation stressing that the words do not describe any thing that exists in reality. These are merely words uttered and have no real significance.

Then we have another aspect of the uniqueness of the Qur'ān which points to its origin and that it is God's revelation. This we find in the statement: "*echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old.*" (Verse 30) Commentators on the Qur'ān used to say that this means that their assertions about God having a son are similar to what the Arab idolaters used to say that the angels were God's daughters. The similarity between the two assertions is true, but this statement has a wider implication which has transpired only recently when the faiths of idolaters in India, ancient Egypt and Greece were studied. The study has brought to light the origins of the distorted beliefs of the people of earlier revelations, particularly the Christians. They were simply derived from those forms of pagan faiths which found their way firstly into Paul's teachings and finally into those of the Church Synods.

The Egyptian trinity of Osiris, Isis and Horus forms the basis of Pharaonic idolatry, with Osiris representing the 'father' while Horus represents the 'son'. In the Alexandrian divinity, which was taught many years before Christ, the assertion is made that "the word is the second deity," and it is also called "the first son of God".

The Indians believed that God might take three different states: Brahma which signified creation, Vishnu which signified lordship and the provision of sustenance, and Siva which signified destruction. In this faith Vishnu is considered the son of Brahma.

The Assyrians believed in the 'Word' which they called Mardookh whom they described as the first son of God.

The Greeks also believed in three states of God. When their priests slaughtered for sacrifice, they sprinkled the alter with holy water three times, and they handled incense from the censer with three fingers, and they splashed those around the alter with the holy water three times. All these rituals are symbols of the trinity. Together with the pagan beliefs they represented, these rituals were introduced by the Church into Christianity, to echo the beliefs of the unbelievers of old times.

A careful look at the ideologies of the ancient idolaters, which were not known to people at the time when the Qur'ān was revealed, in the light of this Qur'ānic statement: "*echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old,* " (Verse 30) will prove two points. It shows that the people of earlier revelations do not follow the faith of truth and do not have the right concepts of God. It also reveals a certain aspect of the uniqueness of the Qur'ān, pointing to its source and that it is revealed by God whose knowledge is perfect, absolute.

This verse, which makes it clear that the people of earlier revelations have adopted idolatrous beliefs, is concluded with these words: *"May God destroy them! How perverse they are!"* (Verse 30) Yes indeed. "May God destroy them!" How they overlook the simple truth which is clear and straightforward to adopt ambiguous and complex idolatrous concepts which have no logical or coherent basis.

The *sūrah* then describes another type of deviation from the truth manifested by the people of earlier revelations. This time the deviation is not confined to verbal statements and beliefs only; it translates itself into practices based on erroneous beliefs: *"They make of their rabbis and their monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God. Yet they have been ordered to worship none but the One God, other than whom there is no deity. Exalted be He above those to whom they ascribe divinity."* (Verse 31)

This verse comes at its most appropriate place in this passage which dispels all lingering doubts that those people may still be following a divine faith. For this verse states that they are no longer following any religion revealed by God. This is proven by their beliefs and practices. They were ordered to worship God alone, but they took their rabbis and monks as lords besides God. They also made Jesus Christ the Lord. All this is a form of idolatry which associates partners with God. From the standpoint of beliefs, they are not true believers in God, and in practice, they do not follow the religion of truth.

An Order and its Distorted Application

Before we explain how they took their monks and rabbis for lords, we wish to mention some authentic reports which include the Prophet's own interpretation. His is undoubtedly the correct and final interpretation.

Al-Tirmidhī and several major scholars of *Ĥadīth* report on the authority of `Adiy ibn Ĥātim, who was a Christian before he met the Prophet and adopted Islam: "When I first came to see the Prophet, he was reciting this verse of the *sūrah* entitled Repentance: *'They make of their rabbis and their monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God.'* He explained: "They certainly did not worship these (rabbis and monks). But when they permitted them something they treated it as permissible, and when they prohibited something they treated it as forbidden."

A second authentic report is transmitted by Imām Aĥmad, al- Tirmidhī and al-Ṭabarī on the authority of `Adiy ibn Ĥātim:

> When `Adiy, who in pre-Islamic days was a Christian, heard of the Islamic message, he fled to Syria. His sister was taken prisoner together with a group of his tribesmen. The Prophet treated his sister kindly, granted her freedom and gave her some gifts. She went to her brother and urged him to adopt

> Islam and to meet the Prophet. `Adiy took his sister's advice and travelled to Madinah. He used to be the chief of his tribe, Ṭayyi', and his father was widely renowned for his unparalleled generosity. People were speaking about his arrival in Madinah. When he went to see the Prophet he was wearing a silver crucifix which he hung around his neck. The Prophet was reading this verse: *'They make of their rabbis and their monks...lords besides God.'* *'A*diy said: `They have not worshipped them.' The Prophet said: `Yes, indeed they did. They followed them when they forbade them what was lawful and permitted them what was forbidden. That is how they worshipped them.'

Al-Suddī, a learned commentator on the Qur'ān says: "They have sought the advice of human beings and abandoned God's Book. Hence He says: *'Yet they have been ordered to worship none but the One God,'* which means the One who may forbid something and it is treated by all as forbidden and may permit another and it is treated as lawful. His law is to be obeyed and His verdict is final."

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Ālūsī, a scholar of the modern period says: "That they made them lords does not mean that they treated them as if they were gods in control of the universe. What is meant is that they obeyed them in what they have bidden and forbidden."

From the very clear Qur'ānic statement and its interpretation by the Prophet, which provides the ultimate judgement, and also from the observations of scholars, old and new, we may deduce a number of very important conclusions concerning religion and beliefs which we will state here very briefly:

- According to the Qur'ān and the Prophet's interpretation, worship means the following of the law. The Jews and the Christians did not make their rabbis and monks as lords in the sense that they treated them as gods or that they offered their worship rituals to them. Yet God describes them in this verse as `associating partners with Him' and, in a later verse in the *sūrah,* as `unbelievers' only because they followed the laws they devised for them. This alone, regardless of beliefs and rituals, is sufficient to make anyone who does it a person who associates partners with God, which takes him out of faith altogether and puts him in the category of unbelievers.
- The Qur'ānic statement attaches the descriptions of `associating partners with God' and `unbelief' to both the Jews who accepted the laws made for them by their rabbis and put those laws into practice and the Christians who believe that Christ is their Lord and offer worship rituals to him. Both actions are the same in the sense that both make their perpetrators polytheists ascribing lordship to beings other than God.
- Polytheism, or idolatry, comes into being merely by assigning the authority to

> legislate to anyone other than God, even though this is not accompanied by a belief that such a legislator is a deity or by offering worship rituals to it.

The primary aim of pointing out these facts is to deal with the circumstances of the Muslim society at the time, particularly the reluctance to confront the Byzantines and the feeling that they were believers on account of their having received revelations. Yet these facts are of general application and serve to emphasize the nature of the true religion.

The religion of truth which is the only one that is acceptable to God from any human being is 'self surrender'. Such surrender is manifested by implementing God's law, after having believed in His oneness, and offering worship to Him alone. If people are to implement a law other than that of God, then what God has said about the Jews and the Christians will apply to them as well. In other words, they would be idolaters and unbelievers, no matter how emphatically they assert that they believe in God. Those descriptions will apply to them once they willingly implement a law devised by human beings in total disregard of God's law, unless they protest that they only follow such laws against their will and they have no power to repel that compulsion.

The term 'religion' has nowadays lost much of its significance in the minds of most people, so much so that they confine it to beliefs to which they may hold and rituals they may offer. This was exactly the situation of the Jews who are described by this categorical verdict, as interpreted by the Prophet (peace be upon him), as unbelievers, associating partners with God and disobeying His clear command not to worship anyone besides Him. This same Qur'ānic statement tells us that they have taken their rabbis as lords besides God.

The most essential meaning of 'religion' is `to submit and to follow'. This is most clearly evidenced by following the law as it is proven by offering worship. The matter is very serious. It admits no ambiguity of the sort that considers people who follow laws other than God's law, without being compelled to do so, as believers and as Muslims, simply because they profess to believe in God and because they offer their worship to Him.

This ambiguity is perhaps the most serious threat to this religion of Islam at the present time. It is the worst weapon levelled at it by its enemies who depict some people and situations as Muslim and Islamic, even though these people are similar to the ones God describes as unbelievers taking as lords beings other than God and turning away from the religion of truth. If the enemies of this religion try to associate such people and situations with Islam, then it is the duty of the advocates of Islam to deny them that description and to uncover their reality. They would thus show them as they are: people who do not believe in God's oneness and who take for themselves

lords other than God when "*they have been ordered to worship none but the One God, other than whom there is no deity. Exalted be He above those to whom they ascribe divinity.*" (Verse 31)

A True Promise

The *sūrah* goes a step further in encouraging the believers to fight: "*They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all [other] religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters.*" (Verses 32-33)

The people of earlier revelations do not stop at mere deviation from the religion of truth and worshipping lords and other beings instead of God, as well as refusing to believe in God and the Last Day in the true sense of such a belief. They go further by declaring war against the religion of truth and trying hard to extinguish God's light, represented by this religion, the movement advocating it and the system it provides for human life.

"*They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths.*" (Verse 32) So, they are hostile to God's light, trying to prevent its spread. They fabricate lies and sew the seeds of discord and division. They also mobilize their followers to stand in opposition to this religion and its followers, as was the case when these verses were revealed. This has continued to be the case ever since. Although this statement aimed primarily at enhancing the determination of the Muslims at the time, it also describes the true nature of the attitude the people of earlier revelations always adopt towards God's light as reflected by His true faith providing guidance for mankind.

"*But God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 32) This is a true promise by God reflecting His permanent law which ensures that His light will always be perfected and that His religion will always prevail in spite of the unbelievers' attempts to stifle it. This promise will reassure the believers and motivate them to continue along their way, full as it may be with hardships, and to stand up to all the unbelievers' wicked scheming. In this instance, the term `unbelievers' refers to those people who were given Scriptures in former times. The promise also implies a clear threat to those unbelievers and all who follow in their footsteps.

The *sūrah* re-emphasizes the promise and the threat at the same time: "*It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all (other) religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters.*" (Verse 33)

It is clear from this statement that the religion of Islam, preached by God's last

Messenger, is the one to which reference is made in the previous Qur'ānic statement: *"Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled."* (Verse 29) It is also clear that this order to fight is targeted against those who do not believe in this religion.

This is true however we may interpret this verse. Generally speaking, the religion of truth means submission to God alone as reflected in beliefs, worship rituals and laws. This is the basic foundation of all divine faith which takes its final form in the message of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace he upon him). Any individual and any community who do not clearly submit totally to God alone in beliefs, worship and laws may be described as ones who do not believe in the religion of truth. Therefore, they are included among those to whom the verse of fighting applies. However, we have always to consider the nature of the Islamic method of action, and the different stages the message of Islam may go through and the tools and means it may employ.

"It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all [other] religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters." (Verse 33) This statement confirms God's first promise: *"But God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers."* (Verse 32) The confirmation, however, takes a much more specific form. The light which God, who is limitless in His glory, has decided to bring to full perfection is the religion of truth with which He has sent His last Messenger so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions.

As we have already explained, the religion of truth is submission to God in beliefs, worship and laws altogether. It is represented in every divine message given to any former prophet. Needless to say, it does not include any form of the distorted versions that the Jews and Christians of today profess, as these have been adulterated with pagan beliefs. Nor can be included under it any situation that raises the banner of faith while at the same time assigning lordship to beings other than God, and associating partners with God in the form of following laws and legislations enacted by those partners without reference to God's law.

God, limitless is He in His glory, says that He has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth in order to make it prevail over all other religions. We must take the term 'religion' in its broader sense which we have outlined in order to appreciate the scope of God's promise. Since 'religion' means 'submission', then it includes every creed and system which requires people to submit to its edicts and follow its rules. God also declares His ruling that the religion of truth will surely prevail over all religion, in this broad sense of the word. This means that all submission will be to God alone, and the final triumph will be for the system which

reflects this total submission.

This promise was fulfilled once at the hands of God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and his successors, as well as those who succeeded them, for a very long period of time when the religion of truth was the one which prevailed. All other religions, which were not based on true submission to God alone, stood in awe. Then there followed a time when those who professed to believe in the religion of truth started to abandon it, step by step, due to various factors relevant to the internal structure of Muslim societies on the one hand, and to the long war against this religion by its different enemies. In this war a wide variety of weapons and tactics are employed in order to suppress Islam. But this is not the end of the road. God's promise will always come true. It will be fulfilled by the Muslim community which will raise the banner of Islam and start its activities at the very beginning where the Prophet himself started when he began his call, preaching the religion of truth and guided by God's light.

The *sūrah* takes the final step in this passage, describing how the people of earlier revelations do not treat as forbidden what God and His Messenger have declared forbidden. A reference to this fact has already been made in the statement: *"They make of their rabbis and monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God." (Verse* (Verse 31) We have already mentioned the Prophet's explanation of this statement: "They (i.e. the rabbis and monks) permitted them what is forbidden and forbade them what is lawful, and they followed them." This means that they listen to their monks and rabbis, not to God and His Messenger, in determining what is lawful and what is forbidden.

Hoarding Gold and Silver

This last step in exposing the reality of those people of earlier revelations who have distorted God's message is given in two verses addressed to the believers: *"Believers, some of the rabbis and monks wrongfully devour people's property and turn people away from God's path. To those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend them in God's cause, give the news of a painful suffering, on the day when it will all be heated in the fire of hell, and their foreheads, sides and backs will be branded with them. [They will be told]: 'This is what you have hoarded up for yourselves. Taste, then, what you have been hoarding.'"* (Verses 34-35)

The first verse elaborates on the roles of the rabbis and monks whom those people of earlier revelations have made as lords, following their bidding in their day-to-day transactions, and also in their worship.

Indeed the rabbis and monks enjoy being treated as lords whose orders are always obeyed. In what they legislate for their followers, they devour people's property on

the basis of false claims and they also turn people away from God's path.

Devouring people's property always takes various forms. One of these is the money they receive in return for issuing rulings that make lawful what is really forbidden and prohibiting what is permissible. Such rulings are always meant to serve the interests of those who possess wealth or power or both. Another way is what a priest might receive for listening to people's confessions and his forgiveness of their sins, using the authority allegedly given to the Church. The worst and most common way of devouring people's property without lawful basis is usury. There are, however, many other methods.

Another method of such wrongful devouring of people's wealth is the raising of funds which they use to fight the religion of truth. Many were the priests, bishops, cardinals and popes who raised millions and millions to finance the successive Crusades. They continue to do so in order to finance missionary work and Orientalist research, all of which aim at turning people away from God's path.

It is important to note here the care exercised in giving an accurate and honest statement which is characteristic of divine justice. In this verse, God says: *"Many of the rabbis and monks..."* This is to guard against making a generalization that would be unfair to the few who do not indulge in such wrongful practices. In any community there will always be good individuals who maintain virtuous and honest practices. God will never do any injustice to anyone.

Many of those rabbis and monks hoard up the wealth they acquire by wrongful means. The history of those communities has seen great wealth amassed by rabbis, clerics and churches. In certain periods of history they were wealthier than despotic kings and emperors. The Qur'ān describes in detail how they will be punished in the hereafter and the suffering of all those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend them to serve God's cause. This is portrayed in a very vivid way that produces an awesome effect: *"To those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend them in God's cause, give the news of a painful suffering, on the day when it will all be heated in the fire of hell, and their foreheads, sides and backs will be branded with them. [They will be told]: 'This is what you have hoarded up for yourselves. Taste, then, what you have been hoarding.'"* (Verses 34-35)

The scene is portrayed in full detail, with the whole operation described from its first step to its conclusion. Thus the scene is deliberately made to linger in our minds so that we contemplate it longer.

The description starts with a general statement: *"To those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend them in God's cause, give the news of a painful suffering."* (Verse 34) The verse ends here with a general reference to the punishment of the hereafter. But then the full details are given: *"On the day when it will all be heated in the fire of hell."*

(Verse 35) As we listen we wait for the heating up to be completed, then we see it red hot and gathered in readiness. Now the suffering starts with foreheads being branded with all that gold and silver. When all foreheads have been branded, those who are being punished are made to turn on their sides so that they can be branded there as well. With that over, they are made to turn yet again in order to brand them a third time with the red hot gold and silver on their backs. When this type of their punishment is completed, they are severely rebuked: *"This is what you have hoarded up for yourselves."* (Verse 35) It is the very thing you were keen to have and keep for your pleasure and enjoyment. It is now a means to inflict on you this grievous suffering: *"Taste, then, what you have been hoarding."* (Verse 35) Taste it in reality, because it is the very thing which is branding your foreheads, sides and backs.

It is a horrifying scene, portrayed at length, in full detail, so as to bring the image it describes in sharp relief. The scene is portrayed here in order to explain first the destiny that awaits many of the rabbis and monks. It also describes in detail the destiny of those who hoard gold and silver without spending to serve God's cause. Portraying it at this juncture also serves as a prelude to the 'expedition of hardship', which is the subject matter of the longer part of the *sūrah.*

We need to pause a little here to comment on God's statement which explains the true nature of the faith of the people of earlier revelations, the religion to which they adhere, the moral values they adopt and also their practices. We have referred to these previously, but we need to add more here.

Making the reality of the people of earlier revelations clear is a more pressing need than showing the truth of the idolaters who openly admit their idolatry, and participate in rituals based on such beliefs. Exposing the reality that those people of earlier revelations are devoid of any true belief in God is necessary because the Muslims will not wholeheartedly confront *jāhiliyyah* unless they are aware of its absolute reality. Such a reality is well known in the case of the idolaters, but it is not so commonly accepted in the case of the people of earlier revelations. (This also applies to people who similarly claim to follow the divine faith, as is the case with the majority of today's Muslims.)

Setting out to confront the idolaters has required that a long portion of this *sūrah* be devoted to explaining their true situation and attitude. We have explained the reasons for this in the Prologue and in the Overview of Chapter 1. In the opening passage, God says to the believers:

> *How can there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for the idolaters, unless it be those of them with whom you have made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque? So long as they are true to you, be true to them; for God loves those who are God-fearing. How [else could it be] when, should they prevail over you, they will respect neither*

agreement made with you, nor obligation of honour towards you? They try to please you with what they say, while at heart they remain adamantly hostile. Most of them are transgressors. They barter away God's revelations for a paltry price and debar others from His path. Evil indeed is what they do. They respect neither agreement nor obligation of honour with regard to any believer. Those indeed are the aggressors. (Verses 7-10)

Will you not fight against people who have broken their solemn pledges and set out to drive out the Messenger, and who were the first to attack you? Do you fear them? It is God alone whom you should fear, if you are true believers. Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, and will bring disgrace upon them; and will grant you victory over them and will grant heart felt satisfaction to those who are believers, removing all angry feelings from their hearts. God will turn in His mercy to whom He wills. God is All-knowing and Wise. (Verses 13-15)

It is not for the idolaters to visit or tend God's houses of worship; for they are self-confessed unbelievers. Vain shall be their actions and they shall abide in the fire. (Verse 17)

Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith. Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers. (Verse 23)

The Truth will Out

Although the reality of the idolaters was very clear, confronting them on the battlefield required a carefully prepared campaign by the Muslim community. By contrast, the confrontation with the people of earlier revelations required an even stronger and more profound campaign which aimed, at the outset, to expose the reality of those people. It also required the removal of their nameplate which no longer reflected their reality. They needed to appear as they truly were: unbelievers, associating partners with God, and at war with God and His message. Moreover, they were too far astray, devouring people's wealth and property without justification and turning people away from God's path. This exposure comes in statements like the following:

Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled. The Jews

> *say: Ezra is the son of God,' while the Christians say: 'The Christ is the son of God.' Such are the assertions they utter with their mouths, echoing assertions made by the unbelievers of old. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! They make of their rabbis and their monks, and of the Christ, son of Mary, lords besides God. Yet they have been ordered to worship none but the One God, other than whom there is no deity. Exalted be He above those to whom they ascribe divinity. They want to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will not allow anything but to bring His light to perfection, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all [other] religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters. Believers, some of the rabbis and monks wrongfully devour people's property and turn people away from God's path...* (Verses 29-34)

To this should be added all the decisive statements in several *sūrahs,* some of which are of the Makkah period while others were revealed in Madinah. These explain the ultimate reality of the people of earlier revelations and that they no longer belong to the divine faith preached by their prophets. Added to this must be their attitude to God's final message. It is on the basis of this attitude that it may be determined whether they are believers or not.

Earlier *sūrahs* confronted them with the fact that they no longer had any solid foundation of divine faith to support their claims to be believers: *"Say: 'People of earlier revelations, you have no ground to stand upon unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which has been revealed to you by your Lord' That which is revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them even more stubborn in their arrogance and disbelief But do not grieve for unbelieving folk."* (5: 68)

Other Qur'ānic statements describe them, Jews or Christians or both, as having no belief in God and group them with the idolaters. As examples of these we may cite the following: *"The Jews say: 'God's hand is shackled!' It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills. But that which has been revealed to you by your Lord is bound to make many of them more stubborn in their overweening arrogance and unbelief"* (5: 64) *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary.'"* (5: 72) *"Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity.'"* (5: 73) *"Those who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations and the idolaters could have never departed [from their erring ways] until there had come to them the Clear Proof."* (98: 1) We have also cited other examples. Indeed statements of this nature are numerous in the Qur'ān. It is true that the Qur'ān also gives certain privileges to the people of earlier revelations which are not given to the idolaters, such as allowing the Muslims to eat of their food and to marry their chaste women. Such privileges are not based on any acknowledgement that the beliefs they profess have any basis in divine faith.

Most probably, they have been given such privileges because originally they had divine Scriptures and a true faith, although they no longer implemented that faith. It is then possible to deal with them on the basis of that original code they claim to follow. In this respect, they are different from the idolaters who have no scriptures and no original faith to be taken as a basis. As to the present beliefs and religion of the people of earlier revelations, the Qur'ānic statements are very clear and decisive in maintaining that they have nothing to do with the faith revealed by God. They had indeed abandoned that in order to follow their rabbis, clerics, monks, synods and churches in what they had devised for them. What God says is the final verdict which may not be subject to any argument.

The Reality Outlined

What does this exposure by God of the beliefs of the people of earlier revelations signify?

The deceptive front they present acts as a check on the advocates of the Islamic message in their confrontation with the *jāhiliyyah.* Hence, it must be removed, so that they can no longer present a false image. We must not overlook the importance of the prevailing circumstances of the Muslim community at the time, including the organic structure of that community and the fact that the Tabūk Expedition took place at a time of economic hardship which was not made any easier by the extreme heat of the Arabian summer. Moreover, the Muslims were reluctant to confront the Byzantines in open warfare, because the Arabs had always held them in awe. They were even more uneasy about the general order given to them to fight the people of earlier revelations, when they were following divine Scriptures revealed by God.

The enemies of this faith who are watching carefully the Islamic revivalist movements of today are fully aware of what may influence human nature, and of the history of Islam as well. Therefore, they are keen to give an outward `Islamic' appearance to the regimes, movements, values, traditions and philosophies they nurture and support in order to crush the Islamic revivalist movements the world over. They do so, because this outward `Islamic' appearance may prevent the true advocates of Islam from confronting the *jāhiliyyah* reality that lies behind this false appearance.

They were forced, in certain instances, to reveal the reality of such regimes and movements and their hostility to Islam. The clearest example of these was in the case of Ataturk and his movement in Turkey which was uncompromising in its enmity to everything Islamic. They needed to reveal its reality because of the urgency they felt to bury the Caliphate system which was the last aspect of Muslim unity. Although it was merely a formal aspect, they needed to do away with it before they could attack

more fundamental aspects such as worship and prayer. This reminds us of the Prophet's statement: "This religion will be undermined, one aspect after another. The first aspect to be undermined is government and the last is prayer."

Once the need for open hostility was over, those atheists and self- proclaimed followers of earlier religions, who revive their alliance only when they fight Islam, reverted to their secret ways. They were now even keener to give an Islamic appearance to other regimes which were in reality of the same orientation in opposing Islam as Ataturk's. They have become so inventive in hiding the reality of these regimes which they support politically, economically and culturally. Their intelligence services, wide-reaching media and other resources are all used to protect such regimes. Atheists and religious enemies of Islam alike cooperate in supporting such regimes which try to achieve for them the task left unfulfilled by the Crusades, old and new.

Some Muslims, including many of those who advocate the need for an Islamic revival, are deceived by this `Islamic' appearance which is portrayed by present-day jāhiliyyah. Hence they are reluctant to unmask these hostile regimes and show them as they truly are. All this impedes an open confrontation with *jāhiliyyah.* Thus the false `Islamic' appearance exercises a sedative influence on the Islamic revivalist movements. It creates a barrier that prevents the launching of a determined effort to stand up to contemporary *jāhiliyyah* which tries to pull out the last remaining roots of this faith.

In my view, those naïve advocates of Islam present a more serious threat to the Islamic revivalist movement than the sly enemies of Islam who give a false `Islamic' appearance to regimes, set-ups, movements, values, traditions and social trends which they manipulate so that they can crush Islam for them.

This religion of Islam will always be victorious when its advocates, in any generation and any place, achieve a certain degree of awareness of its reality and the reality of the *jāhiliyyah* trying to suppress it. The real danger to this religion does not come from strong and skilful open enemies. The real danger is that posed by naïve friends who allow its enemies to wear an Islamic mask while they mount their unwavering efforts to uproot it. Indeed the first duty of the advocates of Islam is to remove these masks so that the reality of regimes and set-ups hostile to Islam and determined to crush it is laid bare. Indeed the starting point for every truly Islamic movement is to remove the false attire of *jāhiliyyah* and expose it for what it is: unbelief and idolatry. It must describe people as they really are. Only then can the Islamic movement go onwards to achieve its goals. Indeed, these people themselves will only then be aware of their own situation, which is similar to that with which the people of earlier revelations ended up, as we are told by the One who is aware of all things and who knows the reality of all situations. Who knows but such a new

awareness may provide such people with a motive to mend their ways hoping that God will then replace their misery and suffering with happiness and bliss.

This unnecessary reluctance and unwise acceptance of false appearances can only delay the initial march of any Islamic movement. Consequently, it serves the goals of the enemies of Islam for which they have given such regimes a false `Islamic' appearance. Such enemies are well aware that when Ataturk and his movement were exposed and appeared for what they truly were, they could not serve any new purpose after they had ended the last forum to unite the Muslims of the world on the basis of faith. Indeed a very sly, shrewd and cunning Orientalist has tried to give Ataturk's movement a cover to hide its reality. In his book, *Islam in Modern History,* Wilfred Cantwell Smith tries to deny that the Ataturk movement was of atheistic orientation. He describes it as the greatest and wisest movement of Islamic revival in modern history.

3
A Higher Degree of Unbelief

إِنَّ عِدَّةَ ٱلشُّهُورِ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱثْنَا عَشَرَ شَهْرًا
فِى كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ يَوْمَ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلْأَرْضَ مِنْهَآ أَرْبَعَةٌ حُرُمٌ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ
ٱلدِّينُ ٱلْقَيِّمُ ۚ فَلَا تَظْلِمُوا۟ فِيهِنَّ
أَنفُسَكُمْ ۚ وَقَٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ كَآفَّةً
كَمَا يُقَٰتِلُونَكُمْ كَآفَّةً ۚ وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ
ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

The number of months, in God's sight, is twelve as set by God's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth. Of these, four are sacred, according to the ever-true law [of God]. Therefore, do not wrong yourselves by violating them. But fight against the idolaters all together as they fight against you all together, and know that God is with those who are God- fearing. (36)

إِنَّمَا ٱلنَّسِىٓءُ زِيَادَةٌ فِى ٱلْكُفْرِ ۖ يُضَلُّ بِهِ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يُحِلُّونَهُۥ عَامًا وَيُحَرِّمُونَهُۥ
عَامًا لِّيُوَاطِـُٔوا۟ عِدَّةَ مَا حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ فَيُحِلُّوا۟
مَا حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ زُيِّنَ لَهُمْ سُوٓءُ أَعْمَٰلِهِمْ ۗ
وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

The postponement [of sacred months] is only an excess of unbelief, in which the unbelievers are led astray. They declare it permissible one year and forbidden another year, so that they may make up the number of the months which God has sanctified, and thus they make lawful what God has forbidden. The evil of their deeds thus seems fair to them. God does not guide those who are unbelievers. (37)

Overview

These two verses form a short passage that continues the process of removing obstacles that impeded the fight against the Byzantines and their Christian Arab allies in the northern parts of Arabia. Mobilization for this expedition took place in the month of Rajab, which is one of the four sacred months. However, due to a certain ploy, Rajab in that year did not fall at its right time because of postponement,

which is denounced in the second verse of this passage. According to reports, the month of Dhu'l-Hijjah that year was also out of place, and it was meant to fall in the preceding month of Dhu'l-Qa`dah, which meant that Rajab was actually in Jumādā II. This mess was due to the fact that the *jāhiliyyah* society had played about with its traditions and only outwardly honoured sanctities. There will always be interpretations and views to support any transgression as long as the question of permissibility and prohibition is assigned to human beings, as is the case in all *jāhiliyyah* societies.

It may be useful to give a more detailed account of how this situation arose. God has made four months in the year sacred: three consecutive ones which are Dhu'l-Qa`dah, Dhu'l-Hijjah and al-Muĥarram and a single one occurring later, which is the month of Rajab. It is clear that this sanctity started when the pilgrimage was ordained as a duty at its appointed time every year since the time of Abraham and Ishmael. Much as the Arabs have distorted the faith of Abraham and wide as their deviation from its teachings was, they continued to treat these months as sacred because their sanctity related to the pilgrimage which was a season so vital to the livelihood of the Arabs of Hijaz, particularly the people of Makkah. In these sacred months Arabia was free from all fighting. Peace was observed and this allowed pilgrims to travel and conduct useful business during the season.

However, at times certain needs were so important to some Arab tribes and these could not be met while observing the sanctity of these sacred months. Here personal needs came into play, and there would have been no shortage of advocates for making one of the sacred months unsacred by postponing it one year or putting it forward in another. In this way they kept the sacred months as four in number, although their identity changed, in order to keep the numbers as God had ordained. However, this process meant in effect making lawful what God had forbidden. In the ninth year of the Islamic calendar, the true month of Rajab and the true month of Dhu'l-Hijjah did not fall at their respective times. Rajab was observed when the month was that of Jumādā II and Dhu'l-Hijjah was in Dhu'l-Qa`dah. Thus mobilization for this expedition truly took place in Jumādā II which was nominally declared to be Rajab because of the practice of postponing months.

These verses outlaw the practice of postponement and show it, in essence, to be a violation of the divine faith which assigns the authority to make things lawful or forbidden to God alone. For human beings to practise this authority in any way which is not sanctioned by God is actually an act of unbelief, and indeed "*an excess of unbelief*" as God describes. Thus this passage in the *sūrah* removes any reluctance to mobilize felt by some Muslims because it gave the impression of violating the sanctity of Rajab. At the same time, the passage establishes a basic principle of Islam which gives the authority to legislate and make things lawful or forbidden to God

alone. It also relates this principle to the basic truth on which the whole structure of the universe is founded ever since God created the heavens and the earth. What God legislates for mankind is only part of His overall legislation for the universe and all His creation. Deviating from it is, then, a violation of the basic principle on which the universe is founded. Hence it is *"an excess of unbelief in which the unbelievers are led astray."* (Verse 37)

Another fundamental fact stated here relates to what has been explained in the preceding passage which made it clear that the people of earlier revelations are unbelievers. They are grouped together with the idolaters as hostile people whom the Muslims should fight as one united community, as they themselves do fight the Muslims all together. This assertion is borne out by historical events exactly as it is stated by God. It shows that they are all united by their goals of suppressing Islam and crushing its followers. It also shows that they all stand in the same camp when the battle is against Islam and the Muslims. They find it easy to overlook their differences and work together to stem Islamic *jihād* and destroy the Muslim community.

These two verses express two basic facts. The first is that the people of earlier revelations have sunk into idolatry and have joined the idolaters in fighting the Muslims so as to form one united front. Hence all Muslims must fight them together. The second fact is that the postponement of sacred months is an excess of unbelief because it involves legislating for mankind things that God has not legislated. Hence it adds a practical aspect to unbelief. It is by these two basic facts that this passage is linked to what precedes it and what follows it in this *sūrah* which addresses various factors impeding a general mobilization to confront all opponents, be they idolaters or people of earlier revelations.

Changing the Order of Time

> *The number of months, in God's sight, is twelve as set by God's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth. Of these, four are sacred, according to the ever-true law [of God].* (Verse 36)

This Qur'ānic statement refers the origin of time and the way it runs to the nature of the universe and how God created it, and to the origin of creation of both the heavens and the earth. It tells us that there is a permanent cycle of time consisting of twelve months. That it is permanent is evident from the fact that in every cycle there are twelve months. This is included in God's decree, which means that it is part of the divine law for the universe. Hence, the cycle is permanent and the months are twelve, without any possibility of increase or decrease. Its movement is in

accordance with the divine law set into operation when God created the heavens and the earth.

The reference to the fact that this time cycle is permanent serves as a prelude to making certain months sacred. Their selection and sanctity is part of God's decree or His law which cannot be changed at will. It simply cannot be made subject to people's desires who may wish to bring one month forward and put another back. Its permanence is similar to that of the seasons which follow one another according to a constant law: *'according to the ever-true law of God."* (Verse 36) This religion is, then, in perfect harmony with the law which governs the creation of the heavens and the earth and their functions.

This short passage refers to a series of important aspects that follow and strengthen one another. It includes certain universal facts which contemporary scientific research tries hard to explain through its own experiments. It establishes a firm link between the laws of nature and the requirements and obligations of this religion of Islam, so that people truly appreciate its solid foundation and deep roots. In the Arabic text of the Qur'ān, all this takes no more than 21 simple words which are easy to understand.

All this about the number of months and those of them which are sacred is *"according to the ever-true law [of God]. Therefore do not wrong yourselves by violating them."* (Verse 36) You should not wrong yourselves in these four sacred months, the sanctity of which relates to a law of nature which applies to the whole universe. This law makes it clear that God is the Legislator in human life and in the universe at large. Do not wrong yourselves by violating the sanctity of these months which God has willed to be a period of peace and security for all. Whenever human beings violate God's rules they wrong themselves because they actually expose themselves to punishment in the life to come and to fear and worry in this life when all months become a period of war without intermission.

"But fight against the idolaters all together as they fight against you all together." (Verse 36) This obviously applies throughout the rest of the year, not in the sacred months, except when the unbelievers launch an attack, in which case the Muslims must repel the aggression in these months. To take a unilateral decision not to fight will weaken the forces of goodness which are required to defend sanctities and repel aggression by forces of evil. It will also lead to the spread of corruption in the land and the disruption of the laws of nature. Repelling aggression in the sacred months is a means to preserve their sanctity and prevent their violation.

"But fight against the idolaters all together as they fight against you all together." (Verse 36) Fight them all without exception, because they do not make any exception of any single person or community when they fight you. The battle is truly between idolatry

and believing in God's oneness, between proper guidance and going astray. It is a battle between two clearly distinguished camps which cannot come to a complete agreement or make permanent peace because the differences between them are not over details or over conflicting interests where a compromise could be worked out, or over borders which may be demarcated anew. The Muslim community would be deluded if it believes, or is led to understand, that its battle with the idolaters, whether pagan or people who had distorted their Scriptures, is over issues of politics or economics, national independence or strategy. It is first of all an ideological battle, and it is over the system laid down by this ideology, which means religion. Such a battle cannot be sorted out by compromises worked out through negotiations. It is sorted out only by *jihād* and dedicated struggle. This is God's law which never changes, and over which the whole universal system is founded. It is the law at the core of the divine faith and which controls the operation of conscience. It has been set in operation on the day when God created the heavens and the earth.

"*And know that God is with those who are God fearing.*" (Verse 36) Those who fear to violate God's sanctities or to make lawful what He has forbidden, or to disrupt His laws are the ones who will be granted victory. Muslims then must never hesitate to fight the unbelievers all together, or fear to engage in an all-out campaign of *jihād.* Theirs is a campaign of struggle for God's cause, in which they do not violate its rules or moral standards. They dedicate their struggle to God and watch Him when they are alone as much as they do when they are with other people. Victory is theirs because God is with them, and whoever is on God's side shall certainly be victorious.

A Change Not Sanctioned by God

> *The postponement [of sacred months] is only an excess of unbelief in which the unbelievers are led astray. They declare it permissible one year and forbidden another year, so that they may make up the number of the months which God has sanctified, and thus they make lawful what God has forbidden. The evil of their deeds thus seems fair to them. God does not guide those who are unbelievers.* (Verse 37)

Mujāhid, an authoritative commentator on the Qur'ān, says that a man from the tribe of Kinānah used to come every year to the pilgrimage riding his donkey and say: "I am not one who may be criticised or return with failure. No one may reject what I say. We have made al-Muĥarram sacred and let Şafar come later." The following year he would come again and say: "We have made Şafar sacred and let al-Muĥarram come later." This is the reference in God's statement to their making up the number of months God has sanctified, which are four. When they delay a sacred month they actually make lawful what God has forbidden.

`Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Zayd ibn Aslam, another leading commentator on the Qur'ān, mentions that this was done in pre-Islamic days by a man from the tribe of Kinānah called al-Qulummus. In those days the Arabs would stop fighting or launching raids on one another in the sacred month. A man would meet his father's killer and he would not lift a hand to harm him. One day this man gave orders to set out for a raid. When he was told that it was the month of al-Muĥarram, he said: "We will delay it this year. There are two Şafar months this year. Next year we will compensate for this by making them two Muĥarrams." Indeed the following year, he told them not to launch any raid in Şafar, so that it too was made sacred.

These are two interpretations of the verse and two versions of postponement. In the first version Şafar is made sacred in place of al-Muĥarram to make the sacred months four in number, but not the ones which God has specified since al-Muĥarram is made unsacred. In the other version three months are made sacred one year and five the next year to make up eight, with an average of four a year. This means in effect that the sanctity of al-Muĥarram is lost one year and Şafar is made sacred in another. Both actions represent a violation of God's law, making lawful what He has forbidden. Both are, as God says, *"an excess of unbelief,"* because they involve an assumption of the authority to legislate which is an act of unbelief that is added to the actual rejection of the faith.

In this act which is described as an 'excess of unbelief,' "*the unbelievers are led astray.*" (Verse 37) They actually deceive themselves with their ploys and tricks. *'The evil of their deeds thus seems fair to them.*" (Verse 37) They see as fair what is evil and they think deviation from the truth to be a virtue. They are totally unaware of how far astray they have gone and to what depths of unbelief they have sunk.

"God does not guide those who are unbelievers." (Verse 37) They have placed a shield between their hearts and divine guidance. Hence God abandons them to their unbelief in which they live in total darkness, far removed from God's guidance.

4
The Supreme Word of God

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَا لَكُمْ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمُ ٱنفِرُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ٱثَّاقَلْتُمْ إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ أَرَضِيتُم بِٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا مِنَ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ ۚ فَمَا مَتَـٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا فِى ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

Believers, what is amiss with you that, when it is said to you: 'Go forth to fight in God's cause,' you cling heavily to the earth? Are you content with the comforts of this world in preference to the life to come? Paltry indeed are the enjoyments of life in this world when compared with those to come. (38)

إِلَّا تَنفِرُوا۟ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا وَيَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ وَلَا تَضُرُّوهُ شَيْـًٔا ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

If you do not go forth to fight [in God's cause], He will punish you severely and replace you by other people. You will not harm Him in any way, for God has power over all things. (39)

إِلَّا تَنصُرُوهُ فَقَدْ نَصَرَهُ ٱللَّهُ إِذْ أَخْرَجَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ثَانِىَ ٱثْنَيْنِ إِذْ هُمَا فِى ٱلْغَارِ إِذْ يَقُولُ لِصَـٰحِبِهِۦ لَا تَحْزَنْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَنَا ۖ فَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَيْهِ وَأَيَّدَهُۥ بِجُنُودٍ لَّمْ تَرَوْهَا وَجَعَلَ كَلِمَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ٱلسُّفْلَىٰ ۗ وَكَلِمَةُ ٱللَّهِ هِىَ ٱلْعُلْيَا ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

If you do not help him [the Prophet]; God [will, as He] supported him at the time when the unbelievers drove him away. He was only one of two. When these two were alone in the cave, he said to his companion: 'Do not grieve, for God is with us.' Thereupon God bestowed on him the gift of inner peace, and sent to his aid forces which you did not see. He brought the word of the unbelievers utterly low, while the word of God remained supreme. God is Mighty, Wise. (40)

Go forth, whether you be lightly or heavily armed, and strive in God's cause with your wealth and your lives. This will be best for you if you but knew it. (41)	ٱنفِرُواْ خِفَافًا وَثِقَالاً وَجَٰهِدُواْ بِأَمۡوَٰلِكُمۡ وَأَنفُسِكُمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٤١

Overview

It is perhaps most likely that the present passage was revealed after the order was given for general mobilization for the Tabūk Expedition. The Prophet received intelligence that the Byzantines were deploying large forces in southern Syria near the borders with Arabia. He was also informed that the Byzantine Emperor had ordered that all soldiers taking part should be given their salaries a year in advance. A number of Arab tribes in the area, such as Lukham, Judām, `Amilah and Ghassān had also joined the Byzantine forces, and advance units had already been deployed in al-Balqā' in Palestine. Therefore, the Prophet issued an order to prepare for war against the Byzantines.

It was the Prophet's standard strategy when he set out of Madinah to confront an enemy that he kept his destination unknown in order to maintain an element of surprise. This time, however, he made his objective very clear because of the long travelling expected and the difficult circumstances. The timing of this expedition coincided with the burning heat of summer, when people would seek the shade and be keen to enjoy the summer fruits. At such a time all physical activity, let alone military confrontation a long way from home, was to be avoided. Hence, the symptoms we mentioned in the Prologue started to appear among the Muslims. The hypocrites felt this to be their chance to dissuade the Muslims from joining the Prophet. They advised them not to march in the hot summer, and warned them against the might of the Byzantines and the long, weakening travel they would have to endure. Hence some people began to feel uneasy. This passage, then, deals with this type of reluctance.

A Slackening Resolve

The passage begins with a word of reproach and a warning against the reluctance to join the campaign of *jihād,* or struggle for God's cause. The believers are reminded of the help God gave to His Messenger even before any one of them had joined him, and also of His ability to help him to victory without them. In such an eventuality they would have nothing except their disobedience of God and their failure to support His Messenger.

> *Believers, what is amiss with you that, when it is said to you: 'Go forth to fight in God's cause,' you cling heavily to the earth?* (Verse 38)

Such reluctance to march forth in support of God's cause is only motivated by worldly considerations and ambitions. People may fear for their lives and their property. They are keen to protect their interests and preserve their pleasures, and would prefer a settled life of ease and comfort. They think primarily of their present life, immediate objectives, close relatives and physical needs. The words chosen here give a vivid impression of "clinging heavily to the earth". It is as if we are looking at a heavy object that has been in its position for a long time. It is lifted up by a group of people, but it soon falls down with a strong gravitational pull.

Joining a *jihād* campaign for God's cause represents freedom from the shackles of this earthly life and physical pleasures. It emphasizes the yearning for freedom after the shedding of narrow needs, and the expanse of eternity after getting rid of this limited worldly life: *"Are you content with the comforts of this world in preference to the life to come? Paltry indeed are the enjoyments of life in this world when compared with those to come."* (Verse 38)

No one who believes in God would hesitate to set out to fight for God's cause unless there is some weakness in his faith. The Prophet says: "A person who dies without having ever joined an expedition fighting for God's cause or having thought about joining such an expedition must surely have a characteristic of hypocrisy." Hypocrisy, which is essentially a weakness of faith, is the characteristic which holds a person who claims to believe in God from joining a fight for God's cause, because he fears death or poverty when life and death are determined by God, and all provisions and wealth are granted by Him. Besides, all the comforts and pleasures of this life are petty and meaningless when compared with what is in store for the believers in the life to come.

A stern threat then follows:

> *If you do not go forth to fight [in God's cause], He will punish you severely and replace you by other people. You will not harm Him in any way, for God has power over all things.* (Verse 39)

The address here is made to certain people at a certain period of time, but its import applies to all those who believe in God. The punishment with which they are threatened is not limited to the life to come, but it also includes a punishment in this life. They will suffer the humiliation which afflicts all those who refrain from fighting for God's cause when their enemies have power over them. They are also deprived of the enjoyments and comforts of this life which will be taken up by their enemies. In

addition their loss of life and property is far greater than what they will lose when they fight in support of God's cause. Whenever a community abandons *jihād* and refuses to fight for God's cause, it is bound to suffer humiliation. Its eventual loss is much greater than it would need to sacrifice when it fights with the spirit of *jihād.*

"*He will ... replace you by other people,*" (Verse 39) who will guard their faith and who are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices without ever submitting to God's enemies. "*You will not harm Him in any way,*" (Verse 39) and you can have no effect on the outcome. "*For God has power over all things.*" (Verse 39) He can easily cause you to perish and bring about a different community to take your place. In the final balance you will count for nothing.

To elevate oneself above the shackles of the earth and over one's own weaknesses is to enhance one's noble existence. It represents the higher meaning of life. To give in to fears for one's life and the attractions of this worldly life is to condemn one's humanity to extinction. This is the real death knell of the spiritual aspect which distinguishes human life.

The Best Choice for Believers

God then gives them an example of the history which they themselves had witnessed, showing them how He supported His Messenger and gave him a great victory without need for their support. After all, victory is granted by God to whom He pleases:

> *If you do not help him [the Prophet]; God [will, as He] supported him at the time when the unbelievers drove him away. He was only one of two. When these two were alone in the cave, he said to his Companion: Do not grieve, for God is with us.' Thereupon God bestowed on him the gift of inner peace, and sent to his aid forces which you did not see. He brought the word of the unbelievers utterly low, while the word of God remained supreme. God is Mighty, Wise.* (Verse 40)

This is a reference to the time when the Quraysh had lost all patience with Muĥammad and his message. It is the same with every tyrannical authority when it loses patience with the message of the truth after it realizes that it cannot stifle or suppress it. They held their consultations and decided to assassinate Muĥammad. God then informed the Prophet of what the Quraysh had plotted and instructed him to leave. He set out of Makkah alone except for his trusted Companion, Abū Bakr. He had neither troops nor weapons with which to confront his numerous enemies. The odds were heavily against him.

The *sūrah* describes vividly the situation of the Prophet and his friend: "*When these*

two were alone in the cave," (Verse 40) with several bands of the Quraysh chasing them in all directions. Abū Bakr had no fear for his own life, but he feared for the Prophet. The pursuers were so close to them at one point that he said to the Prophet: "Should any one of them look down where he is standing, he would surely see us." But the Prophet had all the calmness of the inner peace bestowed on him by God. He reassured his Companion, saying to him: "Abū Bakr, what do you think of two men who have God on their side?"

What was the result of this confrontation when all the material power was on one side while the Prophet and his Companion stood alone with no such power? A fantastic victory was granted, employing troops whom no human being could see. A humiliating defeat engulfed the unbelievers: *"He brought the word of the unbelievers utterly low."* (Verse 40) God's word remained mighty, victorious, supreme: *"while the word of God remained supreme."* (Verse 40) God is certainly *'Mighty"* and those who advocate His cause will never be humiliated, and He is *"Wise,* "which means here that He determines when to grant victory to those who deserve it.

That confrontation was an example of God's help to His Messenger and how His word remains supreme. God is certainly able to repeat such a victory at the hands of other people who do not cling heavily to the earth and who are not reluctant to fight for His cause. This is an example from the near history which the Muslims themselves had witnessed. Yet no evidence is needed when God has stated His word.

They are then called upon to mobilize their forces and not to allow any impediment to stand in their way. If they wish to attain what is best for them in this life as well as in the life to come, then they should not allow any factor to interfere with their response to such a call:

> *Go forth, whether you be lightly or heavily armed, and strive in God's cause with your wealth and your lives. This will be best for you if you but knew it.* (Verse 41)

They must march whatever the circumstances, and must strive hard, and be ready to sacrifice their wealth and their lives, seeking no excuses and allowing no impediments to stand in their way: *"This will be best for you if you but knew it."* (Verse 41)

The sincere believers realized that this is best and they set forth on their campaign in support of God's cause. All sorts of impediments stood in their way and they had no shortage of excuses if they wished to justify staying behind, but they sought none and marched on. Hence, God enabled them to liberate the hearts and minds of other communities and to liberate their lands as well. He allowed His word to triumph at their hands and enhanced their position by being its advocates. He thus enabled

them to achieve miraculous victories, unparalleled in history.

Abū Ṭalĥah, one of the Prophet's Companions, after reading this verse, said to his sons: "I see that God has ordered us to go on *jihād* whether we are young or elderly. Prepare my equipment." His sons protested: "You fought in all the battles with the Prophet until he passed away, and you fought with Abū Bakr until he died, then with `Umar until his death. Now let us fight do your behalf." He refused and insisted on doing his share. He joined an expedition by sea, but soon he died. No island was near where he could be buried. His body remained in the boat for nine days without showing any change of colour. They then came to an island where he was buried.

Abū Rāshid al-Ĥarrānī reports: "I visited al-Miqdād ibn al-Aswad, a great warrior and a Companion of the Prophet. I found him sitting on a wooden box, looking so thin, but he nevertheless wanted to join an army on an expedition. I said to him: `You are certainly excused by God.' He said: `I have been reading this *sūrah* and read God's order, *Go forth, whether you be lightly or heavily armed, and strive in God's cause with your wealth and your lives.*'" (Verse 41)

Al-Ṭabarī, the famous historian also reports on the authority of Ĥayyān ibn Zayd al-Shar`abī: "We went on a campaign with Ṣafwān ibn `Amr, the Governor of Hums, until we reached a place called al-Jarājimah when I saw a man looking very old with his eyebrows practically covering his eyes. He was from Damascus, riding his camel and taking part in the fight. I went to him and said, `Uncle, God has certainly excused those who are like you.' He lifted his eyebrows and said: `Nephew, God has called upon us to go forth and strive in His cause, whether we be lightly or heavily armed. God will test a person whom He loves, and then He will let him live. God tests those of His servants who thank and praise Him and those who remain steadfast in adversity, as well as those who worship God alone.'"

It is with such a serious attitude to God's words that Islam was able to march on in the land, carrying its message which sought to liberate mankind from submission to other creatures so that they would submit to God alone. The result was the greatest victories ever achieved in the history of mankind.

5
Manifestations of Hypocrisy

لَوْ كَانَ عَرَضًا قَرِيبًا وَسَفَرًا قَاصِدًا
لَّٱتَّبَعُوكَ وَلَٰكِنۢ بَعُدَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلشُّقَّةُ ۚ
وَسَيَحْلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ لَوِ ٱسْتَطَعْنَا لَخَرَجْنَا
مَعَكُمْ يُهْلِكُونَ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِنَّهُمْ
لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Had there been [a prospect of] an immediate gain, and a short journey, they would certainly have followed you; but the distance was too far for them. Yet they will swear by God: 'Had we been able, we would surely have joined you.' They bring ruin upon themselves. God knows indeed that they are liars. (42)

عَفَا ٱللَّهُ عَنكَ لِمَ أَذِنتَ لَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ
يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكَ ٱلَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا۟ وَتَعْلَمَ
ٱلْكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

May God forgive you [Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay behind] before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars (43)

لَا يَسْتَـْٔذِنُكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ
وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ أَن يُجَٰهِدُوا۟ بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ
وَأَنفُسِهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Those who believe in God and the Last Day will not ask you to exempt them from striving with their property and with their lives. God has full knowledge as to who are the God-fearing. (44)

إِنَّمَا يَسْتَـْٔذِنُكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْـَٔاخِرِ وَٱرْتَابَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ فَهُمْ
فِى رَيْبِهِمْ يَتَرَدَّدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Only those who do not truly believe in God and the Last Day ask you for exemption. Their hearts are filled with doubt; and troubled by doubt, they do waver. (45)

۞ وَلَوۡ أَرَادُواْ ٱلۡخُرُوجَ لَأَعَدُّواْ لَهُۥ عُدَّةٗ
وَلَٰكِن كَرِهَ ٱللَّهُ ٱنۢبِعَاثَهُمۡ فَثَبَّطَهُمۡ
وَقِيلَ ٱقۡعُدُواْ مَعَ ٱلۡقَٰعِدِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Had they really intended to set out [with you], they would surely have made some preparations for that. But God was averse to their going, so He caused them to hold back; and it was said to them: 'Stay behind with those who stay.' (46)

لَوۡ خَرَجُواْ فِيكُم مَّا زَادُوكُمۡ إِلَّا خَبَالٗا
وَلَأَوۡضَعُواْ خِلَٰلَكُمۡ يَبۡغُونَكُمُ ٱلۡفِتۡنَةَ
وَفِيكُمۡ سَمَّٰعُونَ لَهُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمُۢ
بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Had they set out with you, they would have added nothing to you but trouble, and would have scurried to and fro in your midst, seeking to sow discord among you. There are among you some who would have lent them ear. Certainly God has full knowledge of the wrongdoers. (47)

لَقَدِ ٱبۡتَغَوُاْ ٱلۡفِتۡنَةَ مِن قَبۡلُ وَقَلَّبُواْ لَكَ
ٱلۡأُمُورَ حَتَّىٰ جَآءَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَظَهَرَ أَمۡرُ ٱللَّهِ
وَهُمۡ كَٰرِهُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

They had, even before this time, tried to sow discord, and devised plots against you, until the truth was revealed and the will of God prevailed, no matter how hateful it is to them. (48)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَقُولُ ٱئۡذَن لِّي وَلَا تَفۡتِنِّيٓۚ أَلَا
فِي ٱلۡفِتۡنَةِ سَقَطُواْۗ وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ
لَمُحِيطَةُۢ بِٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

There is among them [many a] one who may say: 'Give me leave to stay behind, and do not expose me to temptation.' Surely they have succumbed to temptation. Hell is certain to engulf the unbelievers. (49)

إِن تُصِبۡكَ حَسَنَةٞ تَسُؤۡهُمۡۖ وَإِن
تُصِبۡكَ مُصِيبَةٞ يَقُولُواْ قَدۡ أَخَذۡنَآ أَمۡرَنَا
مِن قَبۡلُ وَيَتَوَلَّواْ وَّهُمۡ فَرِحُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Your good fortune grieves them; but if a disaster befalls you, they will say: 'We are lucky to have taken our precautions.' Thus they turn away rejoicing. (50)

قُل لَّن يُصِيبَنَآ إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ
مَوۡلَىٰنَاۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلۡيَتَوَكَّلِ
ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Say: 'Nothing will befall us except what God has decreed. He is our Guardian. In God alone should the believers place their trust.' (51)

قُلۡ هَلۡ تَرَبَّصُونَ بِنَآ إِلَّآ إِحۡدَى ٱلۡحُسۡنَيَيۡنِۖ وَنَحۡنُ نَتَرَبَّصُ بِكُمۡ أَن يُصِيبَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِعَذَابٖ مِّنۡ عِندِهِۦٓ أَوۡ بِأَيۡدِينَاۖ فَتَرَبَّصُوٓاْ إِنَّا مَعَكُم مُّتَرَبِّصُونَ ٥٢

Say: 'Are you waiting for something [bad] to happen to us?; but [nothing may happen to us except] one of the two best things. On our part we are waiting for God to inflict upon you a scourge, either directly from Himself or by our hands. Wait, then, if you will; we shall also be waiting.' (52)

قُلۡ أَنفِقُواْ طَوۡعًا أَوۡ كَرۡهٗا لَّن يُتَقَبَّلَ مِنكُمۡۖ إِنَّكُمۡ كُنتُمۡ قَوۡمٗا فَٰسِقِينَ ٥٣

Say: Whether you spend willingly or unwillingly, it will not be accepted from you; for you are indeed wicked people.' (53)

وَمَا مَنَعَهُمۡ أَن تُقۡبَلَ مِنۡهُمۡ نَفَقَٰتُهُمۡ إِلَّآ أَنَّهُمۡ كَفَرُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَبِرَسُولِهِۦ وَلَا يَأۡتُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ إِلَّا وَهُمۡ كُسَالَىٰ وَلَا يُنفِقُونَ إِلَّا وَهُمۡ كَٰرِهُونَ ٥٤

What prevents their spending from being accepted from them is that they have disbelieved in God and His Messenger, and they only come to prayer with reluctance, and never donate anything [for a righteous cause] without being resentful. (54)

فَلَا تُعۡجِبۡكَ أَمۡوَٰلُهُمۡ وَلَآ أَوۡلَٰدُهُمۡۚ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ لِيُعَذِّبَهُم بِهَا فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَتَزۡهَقَ أَنفُسُهُمۡ وَهُمۡ كَٰفِرُونَ ٥٥

Let neither their riches nor their children rouse your admiration. God only wishes to punish them by means of these in this worldly life, and that their souls perish while they are unbelievers. (55)

وَيَحۡلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ إِنَّهُمۡ لَمِنكُمۡ وَمَا هُم مِّنكُمۡ وَلَٰكِنَّهُمۡ قَوۡمٞ يَفۡرَقُونَ ٥٦

They swear by God that they belong to you, when certainly they do not belong to you, but are people overwhelmed by fear. (56)

لَوۡ يَجِدُونَ مَلۡجَـَٔا أَوۡ مَغَٰرَٰتٍ أَوۡ مُدَّخَلٗا لَّوَلَّوۡاْ إِلَيۡهِ وَهُمۡ يَجۡمَحُونَ ٥٧

If only they could find a place of shelter, or cavern, or any hiding place, they would rush headlong into it. (57)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَلۡمِزُكَ فِي ٱلصَّدَقَٰتِ فَإِنۡ أُعۡطُواْ مِنۡهَا رَضُواْ وَإِن لَّمۡ يُعۡطَوۡاْ مِنۡهَآ إِذَا هُمۡ يَسۡخَطُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Among them there are those who speak ill of you concerning the distribution of charity. If they are given a share of it, they are pleased, but if no share is given to them, they are enraged. (58)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ رَضُواْ مَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥ وَقَالُواْ حَسۡبُنَا ٱللَّهُ سَيُؤۡتِينَا ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ وَرَسُولُهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ رَٰغِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Yet [how much better it would have been for them] had they contented themselves with what God and His Messenger have given them, and said: 'God is sufficient for us. God will give us out of His bounty, and so too will His Messenger. To God alone do we turn in hope.' (59)

۞ إِنَّمَا ٱلصَّدَقَٰتُ لِلۡفُقَرَآءِ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱلۡعَٰمِلِينَ عَلَيۡهَا وَٱلۡمُؤَلَّفَةِ قُلُوبُهُمۡ وَفِي ٱلرِّقَابِ وَٱلۡغَٰرِمِينَ وَفِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱبۡنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِۖ فَرِيضَةٗ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٞ ﴿٦٠﴾

Charitable donations are only for the poor and the needy, and those who work in the administration of such donations, and those whose hearts are to be won over, for the freeing of people in bondage and debtors, and to further God's cause, and for the traveller in need. This is a duty ordained by God, and God is All- knowing, Wise. (60)

وَمِنۡهُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡذُونَ ٱلنَّبِيَّ وَيَقُولُونَ هُوَ أُذُنٞۚ قُلۡ أُذُنُ خَيۡرٖ لَّكُمۡ يُؤۡمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَيُؤۡمِنُ لِلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَرَحۡمَةٞ لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنكُمۡۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡذُونَ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ﴿٦١﴾

And among them are others who hurt the Prophet and say: 'He is all ear.' Say: 'He is an ear listening to what is good for you. He believes in God, trusts the believers and he is a mercy to those of you who are true believers.' Those who hurt God's Messenger shall have painful suffering. (61)

يَحۡلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ لَكُمۡ لِيُرۡضُوكُمۡ وَٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥٓ أَحَقُّ أَن يُرۡضُوهُ إِن كَانُواْ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٦٢﴾

They swear to you by God in order to please you. Yet it is God and His Messenger that they should strive to please, if indeed they are believers.

أَلَمۡ يَعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّهُۥ مَن يُحَادِدِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَأَنَّ لَهُۥ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدٗا فِيهَاۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡخِزۡيُ ٱلۡعَظِيمُ ٦٣

(62)

Do they not know that anyone who defies God and His Messenger shall have the fire of hell, therein to abide? That is the ultimate disgrace. (63)

يَحۡذَرُ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقُونَ أَن تُنَزَّلَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ سُورَةٞ تُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمۡۚ قُلِ ٱسۡتَهۡزِءُواْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡرِجٞ مَّا تَحۡذَرُونَ ٦٤

The hypocrites dread lest a sūrah be revealed about them, making clear to them what is really in their hearts. Say: 'Scoff, if you will; God will surely bring to light the very thing you are dreading.' (64)

وَلَئِن سَأَلۡتَهُمۡ لَيَقُولُنَّ إِنَّمَا كُنَّا نَخُوضُ وَنَلۡعَبُۚ قُلۡ أَبِٱللَّهِ وَءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَرَسُولِهِۦ كُنتُمۡ تَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ٦٥

Should you question them, they will say: 'We have only been indulging in idle talk and jesting.' Say: 'Was it, then, at God, His revelations and His Messenger that you have been mocking?' (65)

لَا تَعۡتَذِرُواْ قَدۡ كَفَرۡتُم بَعۡدَ إِيمَٰنِكُمۡۚ إِن نَّعۡفُ عَن طَآئِفَةٖ مِّنكُمۡ نُعَذِّبۡ طَآئِفَةَۢ بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ مُجۡرِمِينَ ٦٦

Make no excuses. You have disbelieved after you have professed to be believers. Though We may pardon some of you, We shall punish others, on account of their being guilty. (66)

ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقُونَ وَٱلۡمُنَٰفِقَٰتُ بَعۡضُهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡضٖۘ يَأۡمُرُونَ بِٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَيَنۡهَوۡنَ عَنِ ٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَيَقۡبِضُونَ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡۚ نَسُواْ ٱللَّهَ فَنَسِيَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ هُمُ ٱلۡفَٰسِقُونَ ٦٧

The hypocrites, both men and women, are all of a kind. They enjoin what is wrong and forbid what is right, and tighten their fists. They have forgotten God and so He has chosen to forget them. Surely the hypocrites are the transgressors. (67)

وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱلۡمُنَٰفِقَٰتِ وَٱلۡكُفَّارَ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۚ هِيَ حَسۡبُهُمۡۚ وَلَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُۖ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ مُّقِيمٞ ٦٨

God has promised the hypocrites, both men and women, and the unbelievers the fire of hell, where

كَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ كَانُوٓاْ أَشَدَّ مِنكُمۡ قُوَّةٗ وَأَكۡثَرَ أَمۡوَٰلٗا وَأَوۡلَٰدٗا فَٱسۡتَمۡتَعُواْ بِخَلَٰقِهِمۡ فَٱسۡتَمۡتَعۡتُم بِخَلَٰقِكُمۡ كَمَا ٱسۡتَمۡتَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِكُم بِخَلَٰقِهِمۡ وَخُضۡتُمۡ كَٱلَّذِي خَاضُوٓاْۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ حَبِطَتۡ أَعۡمَٰلُهُمۡ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ٦٩

they shall abide. It shall be sufficient for them. God has rejected them, and theirs is a lasting torment. (68)

Yours is just like the case of those before you. They were more powerful than you and had greater wealth and more children. They enjoyed their share. And you have been enjoying your share, just as those who preceded you enjoyed their share; and you have been indulging in idle talk just like they did. Their works have come to nothing in this world and shall come to nothing in the life to come. They are indeed the losers. (69)

أَلَمۡ يَأۡتِهِمۡ نَبَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ قَوۡمِ نُوحٖ وَعَادٖ وَثَمُودَ وَقَوۡمِ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَأَصۡحَٰبِ مَدۡيَنَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡتَفِكَٰتِۚ أَتَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِۖ فَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَظۡلِمَهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ٧٠

Have they not heard the histories of those who preceded them, such as Noah's people, 'Ād and Thamūd, and Abraham's people, and the folk of Madyan and the ruined cities? Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth. It was not God who wronged them; it was they who wronged themselves. (70)

وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتُ بَعۡضُهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءُ بَعۡضٖۚ يَأۡمُرُونَ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَيَنۡهَوۡنَ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ سَيَرۡحَمُهُمُ ٱللَّهُۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٧١

The believers, men and women, are friends to one another: they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong; they attend to their prayers, and pay their zakāt, and obey God and His Messenger. It is on these that God will have mercy. Surely, God is Almighty, Wise. (71)

وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا وَمَسَٰكِنَ طَيِّبَةٗ فِي جَنَّٰتِ عَدۡنٖۚ

God has promised the believers, men and women, gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide, and goodly dwellings in the garden

وَرِضْوَٰنٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٧٢﴾

of Eden. Yet God's acceptance is the greatest blessing of all. This is indeed the supreme triumph. (72)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِىُّ جَٰهِدِ ٱلْكُفَّارَ وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٧٣﴾

Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (73)

يَحْلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ مَا قَالُوا۟ وَلَقَدْ قَالُوا۟ كَلِمَةَ ٱلْكُفْرِ وَكَفَرُوا۟ بَعْدَ إِسْلَٰمِهِمْ وَهَمُّوا۟ بِمَا لَمْ يَنَالُوا۟ ۚ وَمَا نَقَمُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ أَنْ أَغْنَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ ۚ فَإِن يَتُوبُوا۟ يَكُ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَتَوَلَّوْا۟ يُعَذِّبْهُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۚ وَمَا لَهُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٧٤﴾

They swear by God that they have said nothing [wrong]. Yet they certainly uttered the word of unbelief, and disbelieved after they had professed to submit to God, for they aimed at something which they could not attain. They had no reason to be spiteful, except that God and His Messenger had enriched them out of His bounty. If they repent, it will be for their own good; but if they turn away, God will cause them to endure grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. They shall find none on this earth to be their friend or to give them support. (74)

۞ وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ عَٰهَدَ ٱللَّهَ لَئِنْ ءَاتَىٰنَا مِن فَضْلِهِۦ لَنَصَّدَّقَنَّ وَلَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

Some of them have pledged to God: 'If He gives us of His bounty, we will certainly spend in charity, and we will be among the righteous.' (75)

فَلَمَّآ ءَاتَىٰهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦ بَخِلُوا۟ بِهِۦ وَتَوَلَّوا۟ وَّهُم مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

But when He had given them of His bounty they grew niggardly and turned away, heedless [of their pledges]. (76)

فَأَعْقَبَهُمْ نِفَاقًا فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يَلْقَوْنَهُۥ بِمَآ أَخْلَفُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مَا وَعَدُوهُ وَبِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

In consequence, He caused hypocrisy to take root in their hearts till the Day on which they will meet Him, because they have been untrue to the pledges they made to God, and because of the lies they

أَلَمْ يَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ سِرَّهُمْ

وَنَجۡوَىٰهُمۡۚ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَّٰمُ ٱلۡغُيُوبِ ٧٨

used to tell. (77)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَلۡمِزُونَ ٱلۡمُطَّوِّعِينَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ فِي ٱلصَّدَقَٰتِ وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ إِلَّا جُهۡدَهُمۡ فَيَسۡخَرُونَ مِنۡهُمۡ سَخِرَ ٱللَّهُ مِنۡهُمۡ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ٧٩

Do they not realize that God knows both their secret thoughts and what they talk about in private, and that God has full knowledge of all things that are hidden away? (78)

It is those hypocrites that taunt the believers who donate freely, as well as those who have nothing to give except what they earn through their toil, and deride them all. God derides them, and grievous suffering awaits them. (79)

ٱسۡتَغۡفِرۡ لَهُمۡ أَوۡ لَا تَسۡتَغۡفِرۡ لَهُمۡ إِن تَسۡتَغۡفِرۡ لَهُمۡ سَبۡعِينَ مَرَّةً فَلَن يَغۡفِرَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمۡۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَفَرُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡفَٰسِقِينَ ٨٠

You may pray for their forgiveness or may not pray for them, [for it will all be the same]. Even if you were to pray seventy times for their forgiveness, God will not forgive them, for they have denied God and His Messenger. God does not guide those who are transgressors. (80)

فَرِحَ ٱلۡمُخَلَّفُونَ بِمَقۡعَدِهِمۡ خِلَٰفَ رَسُولِ ٱللَّهِ وَكَرِهُوٓاْ أَن يُجَٰهِدُواْ بِأَمۡوَٰلِهِمۡ وَأَنفُسِهِمۡ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَقَالُواْ لَا تَنفِرُواْ فِي ٱلۡحَرِّۗ قُلۡ نَارُ جَهَنَّمَ أَشَدُّ حَرّٗاۚ لَّوۡ كَانُواْ يَفۡقَهُونَ ٨١

Those who were left behind rejoiced at having stayed at home after [the departure of] God's Messenger, for they were averse to striving with their property and their lives in God's cause. They said [to one another]: 'Do not go to war in this heat.' Say: 'The fire of hell is far hotter.' Would that they understood. (81)

فَلۡيَضۡحَكُواْ قَلِيلٗا وَلۡيَبۡكُواْ كَثِيرٗا جَزَآءَۢ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكۡسِبُونَ ٨٢

They shall laugh but a little, and they will weep much, in return for what they have earned. (82)

فَإِن رَّجَعَكَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَىٰ طَآئِفَةٖ مِّنۡهُمۡ فَٱسۡتَـٔۡذَنُوكَ لِلۡخُرُوجِ فَقُل لَّن تَخۡرُجُواْ مَعِيَ أَبَدٗا وَلَن تُقَٰتِلُواْ مَعِيَ عَدُوًّاۖ إِنَّكُمۡ رَضِيتُم بِٱلۡقُعُودِ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٖ فَٱقۡعُدُواْ مَعَ

If God brings you back and you meet some of

ٱلۡخَٰلِفِينَ ٨٣

them, and then they ask leave to go forth with you, say: 'Never shall you go forth with me, nor shall you fight an enemy with me. You were happy to stay behind on the first occasion, so you stay now with those who remain behind.' (83)

وَلَا تُصَلِّ عَلَىٰٓ أَحَدٖ مِّنۡهُم مَّاتَ أَبَدٗا وَلَا تَقُمۡ عَلَىٰ قَبۡرِهِۦٓۖ إِنَّهُمۡ كَفَرُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَمَاتُواْ وَهُمۡ فَٰسِقُونَ ٨٤

You shall not pray for any of them who dies, and you shall not stand by his grave. For they have denied God and His Messenger and died as hardened sinners. (84)

وَلَا تُعۡجِبۡكَ أَمۡوَٰلُهُمۡ وَأَوۡلَٰدُهُمۡۚ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ أَن يُعَذِّبَهُم بِهَا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَتَزۡهَقَ أَنفُسُهُمۡ وَهُمۡ كَٰفِرُونَ ٨٥

Let neither their riches nor their children excite your admiration. God only wishes to punish them by means of these in the life of this world, and that their souls perish while they are unbelievers. (85)

وَإِذَآ أُنزِلَتۡ سُورَةٌ أَنۡ ءَامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَجَٰهِدُواْ مَعَ رَسُولِهِ ٱسۡتَـٔۡذَنَكَ أُوْلُواْ ٱلطَّوۡلِ مِنۡهُمۡ وَقَالُواْ ذَرۡنَا نَكُن مَّعَ ٱلۡقَٰعِدِينَ ٨٦

When a sūrah was revealed from on high calling on them to believe in God and to strive alongside His Messenger, those of them who were well able to do so asked you to give them leave and said to you: Allow us to stay with those who remain behind.' (86)

رَضُواْ بِأَن يَكُونُواْ مَعَ ٱلۡخَوَالِفِ وَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمۡ فَهُمۡ لَا يَفۡقَهُونَ ٨٧

They are well-pleased to remain with those who are left behind. And their hearts are sealed, so that they are unable to understand the truth. (87)

لَٰكِنِ ٱلرَّسُولُ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ جَٰهَدُواْ بِأَمۡوَٰلِهِمۡ وَأَنفُسِهِمۡۚ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمُ ٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتُۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ٨٨

But the Messenger and those who have believed with him strive hard in God's cause with their property and their lives. These shall have all the

أَعَدَّ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡفَوۡزُ ٱلۡعَظِيمُ

good things. These shall certainly prosper. (88)

﴿٨٩﴾

God has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide. That is the supreme triumph. (89)

وَجَآءَ ٱلۡمُعَذِّرُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡأَعۡرَابِ لِيُؤۡذَنَ لَهُمۡ وَقَعَدَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَبُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥۚ سَيُصِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ﴿٩٠﴾

Some of the Bedouins who had excuses to offer turned up, begging to be granted exemption; while those who denied God and His Messenger stayed behind. Grievous suffering shall befall those of them that disbelieved. (90)

لَّيۡسَ عَلَى ٱلضُّعَفَآءِ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلۡمَرۡضَىٰ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ مَا يُنفِقُونَ حَرَجٌ إِذَا نَصَحُواْ لِلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦۚ مَا عَلَى ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ مِن سَبِيلٖۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿٩١﴾

No blame shall be attached to the weak, the sick or those who do not have the means, if they are sincere towards God and His Messenger. There is no cause to reproach those who do good. God is Much-forgiving, Merciful. (91)

وَلَا عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا مَآ أَتَوۡكَ لِتَحۡمِلَهُمۡ قُلۡتَ لَآ أَجِدُ مَآ أَحۡمِلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ تَوَلَّواْ وَّأَعۡيُنُهُمۡ تَفِيضُ مِنَ ٱلدَّمۡعِ حَزَنًا أَلَّا يَجِدُواْ مَا يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

Nor shall those be blamed who, when they came to request you for transport and you said: 'I have no means of transporting you', turned away with their eyes overflowing with tears, sad that they did not have the means to cover their expenses. (92)

۞ إِنَّمَا ٱلسَّبِيلُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَسۡتَـٔۡذِنُونَكَ وَهُمۡ أَغۡنِيَآءُۚ رَضُواْ بِأَن يَكُونُواْ مَعَ ٱلۡخَوَالِفِ وَطَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ

But blame shall certainly attach only to those who

قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

ask you for exemption even though they are rich. They are well pleased to be with those who are left behind. God has sealed their hearts, so that they have no knowledge. (93)

يَعْتَذِرُونَ إِلَيْكُمْ إِذَا رَجَعْتُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ ۚ قُل لَّا تَعْتَذِرُوا۟ لَن نُّؤْمِنَ لَكُمْ قَدْ نَبَّأَنَا ٱللَّهُ مِنْ أَخْبَارِكُمْ ۚ وَسَيَرَى ٱللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُۥ ثُمَّ تُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

They shall come to you with their excuses when you return to them. Say: 'Do not offer any excuses, for we shall not believe you. God has already enlightened us about you. God will see how you act, and so will His Messenger; and in the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do.' (94)

سَيَحْلِفُونَ بِٱللَّهِ لَكُمْ إِذَا ٱنقَلَبْتُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ لِتُعْرِضُوا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۖ فَأَعْرِضُوا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ رِجْسٌ ۖ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

When you return to them they will swear to you by God so that you may let them be. Let them be, then: they are unclean. Hell shall be their abode in recompense for what they used to do. (95)

يَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ لِتَرْضَوْا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۖ فَإِن تَرْضَوْا۟ عَنْهُمْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَرْضَىٰ عَنِ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٩٦﴾

They swear to you trying to make you pleased with them. Should you be pleased with them, God shall never be pleased with such transgressing folk. (96)

Distinguishing True Believers from Liars

At this point the *sūrah* speaks about certain groups that demonstrated weakness, but it reserves more space for exposing the hypocrites who pretended to believe in

order to join the Muslim ranks after Islam had shown its strength and looked certain to triumph. They felt it safer to bow their heads to Islam so as to acquire whatever they might by way of other gain. Simultaneously, and with open hostility no longer feasible, they could also undermine the Muslim community from within. Here, then, we will encounter all those aspects of weakness to which we referred in the Prologue.

> *Had there been [a prospect of] an immediate gain, and a short journey, they would certainly have followed you; but the distance was too far for them. Yet they will swear by God: 'Had we been able, we would surely have joined you.' They bring ruin upon themselves. God knows indeed that they are liars. May God forgive you [Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay behind] before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars. Those who believe in God and the Last Day will not ask you to exempt them from striving with their property and with their lives. God has full knowledge as to who are the God-fearing. Only those who do not truly believe in God and the Last Day ask you for exemption. Their hearts are filled with doubt; and troubled by doubt, they do waver. Had they really intended to set out [with you], they would surely have made some preparations for that. But God was averse to their going, so He caused them to hold back; and it was said to them: Stay behind with those who stay.' Had they set out with you, they would have added nothing to you but trouble, and would have scurried to and fro in your midst, seeking to sow discord among you. There are among you some who would have lent them ear. Certainly God has full knowledge of the wrongdoers. They had, even before this time, tried to sow discord, and devised plots against you, until the truth was revealed and the will of God prevailed, no matter how hateful it is to them.* (Verses 42-48)

The first thing highlighted here is that had the situation involved the prospect of immediate gain or the undertaking of a short journey, which represented no serious risk, they would have joined the Prophet. But the undertaking was not an easy one. The destination was much too far for those with a weak resolve and a frail aptitude for glory. The effort required was not for those with weak hearts. People were called upon to rise to a great occasion, one which would prove their metal. Hence we find in the community a type of people that we encounter across all generations: "*Had there been [a prospect of] an immediate gain, and a short journey, they would certainly have followed you; but the distance was too far for them.*" (Verse 42)

Countless people turn their backs when they see a road leading to a high summit. When they realize that it is a long way that they must traverse, they withdraw, preferring to seek immediate gain, petty as it may be. Such people are found in every community and in all generations. They are not a small group found in the Madinah community only; they are encountered everywhere. They languish on the margins of life, although they may think that they have attained their goals without having to

pay a hefty price. A paltry price can only buy what is trivial, worthless.

"They will swear by God: 'Had we been able, we would surely have joined you.'" (Verse 42) Lying goes hand in hand with cowardice and weakness. Only the weak and faint-hearted resort to lies, even though they may occasionally appear to command considerable power. A strong person will not hesitate to face any eventuality head on, while the weak will always remain evasive. It is a rule that never fails. *"They bring ruin upon themselves."* (Verse 42) They certainly ruin themselves by their false swearing which they imagine will save them in the eyes of other people. However, God knows the truth and He reveals it to mankind. Thus the liar is ruined in this life by the effects of his falsehood and he ruins himself in the hereafter when he cannot deny his true motives before God, because *"God knows indeed that they are liars."* (Verse 42)

"May God forgive you [Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay behind] before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars?" (Verse 43) Here we have an example of God's kindness as He begins with stating His pardon before His reproach. Those hypocrites who stayed behind were able to hide their true colours when the Prophet allowed them to stay behind after they had presented their excuses. This was a chance to expose their falsehood, because they would have stayed behind anyway, even though the Prophet would have withheld his permission. They would have been seen as they truly were, without their false guise.

But since this did not happen, the Qur'ān exposes them and states clearly the rules which distinguish the true believers from the hypocrites: *"Those who believe in God and the Last Day will not ask you to exempt them from striving with their property and with their lives. God has full knowledge as to who are the God-fearing. Only those who do not truly believe in God and the Last Day ask you for exemption. Their hearts are filled with doubt; and troubled by doubt, they do waver."* (Verses 44-45)

This is the rule which will never fail. Those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgement do not wait for permission in order to fight for God's cause. They will not hesitate to answer the call to strive hard, offering their wealth and their lives. They will rush to respond, whether they are lightly or heavily armed, as God has commanded. They obey Him, assured that they will meet Him on the Day of Judgement, certain of His reward, and hoping to win His pleasure. They are quick to volunteer, and so they do not need any encouragement, let alone special permission. Those who seek permission are the ones whose hearts have little faith. Hence they slacken, seeking all kinds of excuses. Indeed they hope for something to happen which will prevent them from fulfilling the tasks required by the faith they pretend to have, when they are waverers, full of doubt.

The way leading to God's pleasure is straight and clearly marked. Only a person who does not know the way, or one who knows it but tries to avoid its hardship, is reluctant to follow it. Those who stayed behind at the time of the Tabūk Expedition were able to join the army, had they wished to do so. They had all the means at their disposal. Among them were people like `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and al-Jadd ibn Qays, both of whom were rich and from among the nobility. "*Had they really intended to set out [with you], they would surely have made some preparations for that. But God was averse to their going.*" (Verse 46)

This is due to what He knew of their nature and their hypocrisy, as well as their ill intentions towards the believers, as we will see. Hence, "*He caused them to hold back,*" and did not give them the motivation to set forth with the believers. So, "*it was said to them: 'Stay behind with those who stay.'*'' (Verse 46) Thus they stayed behind with the elderly, the women and the children who were not required to fight. This is the right place for faint-hearted waverers who lack faith.

However, this was certainly better for Islam and the Muslims: "*Had they set out with you, they would have added nothing to you but trouble, and would have scurried to and fro in your midst, seeking to sow discord among you. There are among you some who would have lent them ear. Certainly God has full knowledge of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 47)

Wavering hearts are likely to spread cowardice and reluctance to meet the enemy. Traitors are a real danger to any army. Had those hypocrites set out with the Muslim army, they would not have added to the strength of the Muslims. Indeed they would only have added chaos and trouble, and they would have scurried to and fro, sewing discord and counselling retreat. At that time, there were among the Muslims some who would listen to them, thinking them to be honest in their counsel. However, God who takes care of His message and extends His protection to those who are dedicated believers, spared the Muslims all this by letting the hypocrites stay behind: "*Certainly God has full knowledge of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 47) The description, wrongdoers, in this instance means 'the idolaters,' which in effect means that they also belong to the idolaters.

Their past confirms their evil intentions and their lack of faith. They had opposed God's Messenger exerting their utmost in such opposition. When all their opposition and schemes were foiled, they declared their acceptance of his message, but deep at heart they lacked belief: "*They had, even before this time, tried to sow discord, and devised plots against you, until the truth was revealed and the will of God prevailed, no matter how hateful it is to them.*" (Verse 48)

This was at the time the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) migrated to Madinah and before God enabled him to achieve victory over his enemies. Then the truth triumphed and God's word was supreme. The hypocrites had to bow before it,

hateful as that was to them. However, they remained on the look out for a chance to cause trouble for the Muslims.

Absurdity Carried Too Far

The *sūrah* goes on to report some of their fabricated excuses and to expose their ill intentions towards the Prophet and the Muslim community: *"There is among them [many a] one who may say: 'Give me leave to stay behind, and do not expose me to temptation.' Surely they have succumbed to temptation. Hell is certain to engulf the unbelievers. Your good fortune grieves them; but if a disaster befalls you, they will say: 'We are lucky to have taken our precautions.' Thus they turn away rejoicing. Say: 'Nothing will befall us except what God has decreed. He is our Guardian. In God alone should the believers place their trust.' Say: 'Are you waiting for something [bad] to happen to us?; but [nothing may happen to us except] one of the two best things. On our part we are waiting for God to inflict upon you a scourge, either directly from Himself or by our hands. Wait, then, if you will; we shall also be waiting.'"* (Verses 49-52)

It is authentically reported by several authorities that one day when the Prophet was making preparations for the Tabūk Expedition, he said to al-Jadd ibn Qays, of the Salamah clan: "What would you say, Jadd, to a confrontation with the Byzantines?" He answered: "Or would you rather excuse me, Messenger of God, so that I am not exposed to temptation? My people are aware that no one is more fond of women than me. I fear that should I see the Byzantine women, I would not be able to resist them." The Prophet turned away from him and said: "You are excused." It is to al-Jadd ibn Qays that this verse refers.

This is typical of the absurd excuses proffered by the hypocrites. What answer has the Qur'ān for them? *"Surely they have succumbed to temptation. Hell is certain to engulf the unbelievers."* (Verse 49) The *sūrah* portrays here a scene in which temptation is shown like an abyss in which the tempted fall, and behind them stands hell ready to engulf them, blocking all openings for escape. This image suggests that they have committed an unmitigated sin and that their punishment is inevitable. It is a punishment for their falsehood, staying behind at a time of war and offering such absurd excuses. It confirms their total lack of faith, despite the fact that they were keen to pretend that they believed in God and His Messenger.

They certainly do not wish the Prophet or the Muslims well. They are grieved when the Prophet and the Muslims meet good fortune: *"Your good fortune grieves them."* (Verse 50) Indeed they are so happy when misfortune or a disaster befalls the believers, or when they encounter hardship: *"If a disaster befalls you, they will say: 'We are lucky to have taken our precautions."* (Verse 50) Thus they consider having stayed behind when the Muslims left to fight the Byzantines a wise precaution. *"Thus they*

turn away rejoicing." (Verse 50) They are so pleased that they have ensured their own safety and did not expose themselves to the hardship the Muslims endured.

Their attitude shows their superficial outlook. They consider any hardship to be evil which must be avoided at all costs. They think that they make great gain by staying behind. Their hearts are devoid of any element of submission to God and accepting His will, believing it to be for their own good. A true believer does his best, fearing no outcome, because he believes that whatever good or evil he experiences is tied to God's will, and that God will help him and grant him success: *"Say: 'Nothing will befall us except what God has decreed. He is our Guardian. In God alone should the believers place their trust.'"* (Verse 51)

God has promised the Muslims eventual victory. Therefore whatever hardship they are made to suffer, and however hard their test appears to be, they are being prepared for their promised victory. The believers will certainly have their victory after they have passed their test. It will come by the means God has ordained so that it is treated as a valuable, not a cheap, victory. Thus the Muslims will defend their position of honour, ready to give any sacrifice for it. It is God who gives help and grants victory: *"In God alone should the believers place their trust."* (Verse 51)

To believe in God's will and to rely on Him totally are in no way contradictory with making all the necessary preparations. God gives us a very clear order when He says: *"Make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you can muster."* (8: 60) Placing one's trust in God truly means carrying out His orders, taking all necessary precautions, and understanding the laws He has set into operation without allowing them to deviate from their respective courses in order to please any human being.

It should be mentioned that a believer will only get what is good for him, whether he achieves victory or martyrdom. An unbeliever will only end up with what is evil, whether he is made to taste God's punishment directly or at the hands of the believers: *"Say: 'Are you waiting for something [bad] to happen to us?; but [nothing may happen to us except] one of the two best things. On our part we are waiting for God to inflict upon you a scourge, either directly from Himself or by our hands. Wait, then, if you will; we shall also be waiting.'"* (Verse 52)

What do the hypocrites expect to happen to the believers? It will be something good anyway. They will either achieve victory which causes God's word to triumph, and this would be the believers' reward in this life; or else, they will achieve martyrdom, which secures for them the highest position with God. What do the believers expect to happen to the hypocrites? It will only be a calamity which overpowers them as happened to earlier unbelievers; or else, they will be defeated and humiliated at the hands of the believers, as happened to the idolaters. They are to wait, then, because the Muslims will be waiting as well. The end will certainly be

in favour of the believers.

Possessed by Fear

Some of the hypocrites who tried to stay behind, hoping to spare themselves hardship, offered to help finance the campaign. In this way, they were holding the stick in the middle, like all hypocrites do at all times. God foiled their attempt and instructed His Messenger to declare that their spending was unacceptable by God. Their offers were motivated by fear and hypocrisy, not by genuine faith. Hence, even if the offer were made voluntarily to deceive the Muslims, or they were forced to make it for fear of being exposed for what they truly were, it was of no value. It was rejected by God and earned them no reward whatsoever: *'Say: 'Whether you spend willingly or unwillingly, it will not be accepted from you; for you are indeed wicked people.' What prevents their spending from being accepted from them is that they have disbelieved in God and His Messenger, and they only come to prayer with reluctance, and never donate anything [for a righteous cause] without being resentful."* (Verses 53-54)

This detailed description is true of all hypocrites wherever they happen to be. They are always full of fear, sly, deviant, making pretences that are void of all substance. They are keen to give a false impression in order to escape confrontation. The Qur'ān describes them very accurately: *"They only come to prayer with reluctance."* (Verse 54) They only put up false appearances, and do not approach prayer with sincerity which would enhance their honesty. Hence, they are reluctant when they pray, because they are forced to do it. They have no real motivation to pray, except to impress the Muslims that they belong to them, when in reality they do not. The same is the case with what they spend. It is all a question of appearances.

God does not accept such false pretences which are not motivated by true faith. Indeed it is the motive which gives value to any action, and the intention behind it provides the standard by which it is judged.

Many of those hypocrites were people of affluence, having many children and occupying positions of nobility and honour in their tribes. All this counts for nothing with God and so it should be with His Messenger and the community of believers. Such privileges were not a bounty given to them by God to enjoy; they were only a means of trial which would ensure their punishment: *"Let neither their riches nor their children rouse your admiration. God only wishes to punish them by means of these in this worldly life, and that their souls perish while they are unbelievers."* (Verse 55)

Wealth and children may be a blessing that God grants to any one of His servants when He guides them to be grateful for what they have been granted and to use it for good purposes. Whatever they do with God's bounty, it is motivated by their desire to please God, and this gives them a feeling of security and reassurance. They are

thus certain of the outcome: whenever they donate something they feel it a saving for their life to come, and when a calamity befalls their children or their wealth, they accept it with resignation. This gives them new reassurance and hope that God will replace their loss with something better.

On the other hand, wealth and children may be a trial by means of which God tests any of His servants whom He knows to be wicked at heart. Concerns about his wealth and children will soon give him a taste of hell, while his desire to protect what he has been given and to increase it gives him many a sleepless night. He spends his money on what will hurt him and cause his soul to perish. He will be miserable when his children fall ill, and he will be miserable when they recover. Numerous indeed are the ones who suffer in different ways on account of their children.

The hypocrites at the time of the Prophet, and those who are like them everywhere, may have plenty of wealth and plenty of children, which people may admire. Yet to them they are only a cause of suffering in one way or another. This suffering is their lot in this life. What is worse is that, because of their hypocrisy which is perfectly known to God, they are certain to end up dying as unbelievers. This abyss is the worst outcome that any human being can experience.

The statement, "*and that their souls perish,*" imparts its connotations to give us a sense of restless, perturbed souls, lacking all sense of security. They try to escape but are lost, perished. This impression fits in well with that of suffering as a result of having wealth and children. It is, then, all worry and misery in this life as well as the life to come. No one can be envied for such appearances which involve a very hard test indeed.

The hypocrites tried to place themselves in the ranks of believers, not because of their faith — for they had none — but because of fear coupled with hope and expectation. Hence they would swear that they were believers and that they were convinced of the truth of Islam. This *sūrah* exposes their reality. Hence it is described as `the *sūrah* which reveals the reality,' since it shatters falsehood and tears off the mask of hypocrisy: "*They swear by God that they belong to you, when certainly they do not belong to you, but are people overwhelmed by fear. If only they could find a place of shelter, or cavern, or any hiding place, they would rush headlong into it.*" (Verses 56-57)

They are indeed cowards, and here we are presented with a very vivid picture of their cowardice. It is painted in a physical and mental sweep: "*If only they could find a place of shelter, or cavern, or any hiding place, they would rush headlong into it.*" (Verse 57) They will always look for a shelter, whatever it may be, a fort or a cave or even a tunnel, as long as it gives them protection from an imminent calamity. They are in terrible fear, chased by internal and spiritual cowardice. Hence, "*They swear by God*

that they belong to you," (Verse 56) using all means of emphasis and assertion in order to cover up what they harbour at heart. They only hope to ensure their safety. It is a very miserable picture of cowardly fear which only the unique style of the Qur'ān can depict as it shows the inner feelings of hearts vividly brought before our eyes.

Contented with God's Gifts

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of the hypocrites' attitude and what they may say or do, betraying their real feelings and intentions, hard as they may try to hide them. Some of them speak ill of the Prophet's way of distributing charitable donations, with an implicit accusation of injustice, when he always maintained the highest moral standard. Some say that he listens to any speaker and believes whatever is said to him, when he is in fact most discerning, wise and thoughtful. Some utter a wicked mouthful in private, and when it becomes known, he tries to shelter himself by lies, making false oaths to escape punishment. Some are always in fear lest revelations should give them away, and their reality become known to all Muslims.

Here, the *sūrah* exposes the true nature of both hypocrisy and the hypocrites. Their case is linked to that of the unbelievers which was discussed earlier. Those unbelievers were destroyed after having enjoyed their portion for a time. Thus the difference between them and the believers is clearly shown.

> *Among them there are those who speak ill of you concerning the distribution of charity. If they are given a share of it, they are pleased, but if no share is given to them, they are enraged. Yet [how much better it would have been for them] had they contented themselves with what God and His Messenger have given them, and said: 'God is sufficient for us. God will give us out of His bounty, and so too will His Messenger: To God alone do we turn in hope.' Charitable donations are only for the poor and the needy, and those who work in the administration of such donations, and those whose hearts are to be won over, for the freeing of people in bondage and debtors, and to further God's cause, and for the traveller in need. This is a duty ordained by God, and God is All-knowing, Wise.* (Verses 58-60)

Some of the hypocrites may hurt the Prophet accusing him of injustice when it comes to the distribution of charitable donations, implying that he favours certain people. They do not say this for any love of justice, or to express their enthusiasm for the truth and the values of faith. They only make their claims for vested interests and ulterior motives: *"If they are given a share of it, they are pleased."* (Verse 58) They would not care then about justice, the rights of others or about religious values, because they would have had their share, and that is all that counts with them. *"But if no share is*

given to them, they are enraged." (Verse 58)

There are several reports about the immediate incident which led to the revelation of this verse. They refer to particular people who spoke ill of the Prophet and his undoubtedly fair distribution of material benefits. One of these reports is related by al-Bukhārī and al-Nasā'ī on the authority of Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī who said: "The Prophet was sharing out something when Dhu'l-Khuwayşir al-Tamīmī came forward and said: "Be fair, Messenger of God." The Prophet said to him: "Who would be fair if I am unfair?" `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to the Prophet: "Allow me to strike his head off." The Prophet said: "Leave him alone. He has companions compared to whom you may think very little of your prayer and fasting, yet they split away from the faith as an arrow penetrates into game." Abū Sa`īd says that it is concerning them that this verse was revealed.

Another report quotes `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, the Prophet's Companion, as saying: "When the Prophet distributed the spoils of war after the Battle of Ĥunayn, I heard a man saying, 'This distribution has not been done for God's sake.' I went to the Prophet and mentioned this to him. He said: 'May God bestow His mercy on Moses. He was accused of what is worse than this, but he tolerated it patiently.' Following this incident this verse was revealed: *"Among them there are those who speak ill of you concerning the distribution of charity."* (Verse 58)

Another report attributed to Dāwūd ibn Abī `Āşim says: "A sum of money given in charity was brought to the Prophet and he sent a share of it here and a share there until it was all gone. A man from the *Anşār* who saw this said: `This is unfair.' This verse was then revealed."

Qatādah, a leading commentator on the Qur'ān, says in his explanation of this verse: "Some of them would criticize the Prophet as to the distribution of charity. It has been mentioned that a Bedouin who had only recently embraced Islam came to the Prophet when he was sharing out some gold and silver. He said to him: `Muĥammad, if God has ordered you to be fair, then you have not been fair.' The Prophet said: "Look what you are saying! Who would be fair to you if I am not?'"

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān tells us that the statement was made by some hypocrites who had no qualms about the implementation of religious values. They only expressed their anger at not having been given a share. This is the clearest proof of their hypocrisy. No one who truly believes in Islam would entertain any doubt about the fairness of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) who was renowned for his truthfulness and honesty long before he started to receive the divine message. Fairness and justice is a branch of the trust God has assigned to all believers, but more so to His messengers who call on mankind to be believers. It is clear that these Qur'ānic statements refer to certain events and incidents that had

happened earlier. However, they relate these within the context of the expedition to Tabūk in order to describe the nature of all hypocrites at all times.

Within the same context, the *sūrah* outlines the attitude that befits true believers: *"Yet [how much better it would have been for them] had they contented themselves with what God and His Messenger have given them, and said: 'God is sufficient for us. God will give us out of His bounty, and so too will His Messenger. To God alone do we turn in hope.'"* (Verse 59)

Such are the attitudes and the manners that befit true believers. They accept with complete satisfaction whatever division is made by God and His Messenger. It is not a forced acceptance. They feel that whatever God gives them is good and sufficient, and He will certainly give His servants what will satisfy them. They hope for God's grace and bounty, and seek His pleasure with complete devotion, free from any expectation of material gain. Such are the proper manners of true believers. Of course these manners are unknown to hypocrites who have never experienced the happiness generated by faith in God and His Messenger. Never had the light of faith shined in their hearts.

Fair Distribution Ordered by God

Having established the right attitude a Muslim should have towards God and His Messenger, which is an attitude of total acceptance of their judgement in all situations, the *sūrah* makes clear that the final decision on the distribution of charity does not belong to the Prophet. It is all God's decision, and it is He who determines which groups of people are entitled to receive a share. The Prophet's role is only to execute what God has ruled. Obligatory donations are taken from the rich in fulfilment of God's commandment, and they are given to the poor also in fulfilment of His same commandment. Its beneficiaries are certain groups of people specified in the Qur'ān. There can be no addition to, or reduction from, these groups by anyone, not even the Prophet himself.

> *Charitable donations are only for the poor and the needy, and those who work in the administration of such donations, and those whose hearts are to be won over, for the freeing of people in bondage and debtors, and to further God's cause, and for the traveller in need. This is a duty ordained by God, and God is All-knowing, Wise.* (Verse 60)

Thus *zakāt,* which is referred to here as `charitable donations', occupies its important position in Islamic law and the Islamic social system. It is not given as a favour by those from whom it is due, but is rather an incumbent duty. Nor is it given

as a gift in an amount determined by the one who distributes it, but rather its amount is properly calculated. It is a major Islamic duty collected by the state in order to fulfil a particular social service. The one who gives it does not hold a favour for doing so, and the beneficiary does not have to beg for it. No, the Islamic social system could never be based on begging.

The basis of the Islamic system is work, in all its various ways. It is the duty of the Muslim state to make sure that anyone who is able to work has a job. It should provide training opportunities, and it should take the necessary measures for job creation. Furthermore, it should ensure that those who work receive fair wages. Those who are able to work have no claim to *zakāt,* because *zakāt* is a social security tax that functions between those who are able and those who are deprived. The state administers its collection and distribution when any society runs its affairs on the basis of Islam, putting God's law into effect, seeking no law or social system other than that devised by God.

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "Charity is not lawful to be given to anyone who is rich or to anyone who is strong and fit." Two men came to the Prophet and asked him to give them a share of *zakāt.* When he looked at them carefully, he found them strong and able. He said to them: "If you wish I will give you, but you should know that no one who is rich or able to work and earn has any claim to a share in it."

Zakāt is a branch of the Islamic system of social security, and this system is far wider and more comprehensive than *zakāt,* because it works along several lines that comprise all aspects of life and all sides of human ties. *Zakāt* is only an important one of these lines.

Zakāt is collected at the rate of one-tenth, or a half or a quarter of one-tenth of the principal property, depending on the type of property held. It is collected from everyone who owns more than the threshold of *zakāt* when a year has passed since he or she has had that threshold. This means that most members of the community make their contribution to the *Zakāt* Fund. The proceeds are then spent according to the system outlined in the verse we are discussing. The first groups of its beneficiaries are the poor and the needy. The poor are those who have less than what they need to live on. The needy are also in the same position, but they do not show their need or ask for help.

Some among the people who qualify as *zakāt* payers and pay their *zakāt* one year may find their position has changed the following year. Their property may have decreased and they may not have enough for their needs. Thus they qualify as *zakāt* beneficiaries. Some may not have ever paid any *zakāt* but they nevertheless qualify as beneficiaries. In both these cases we see *zakāt* as a means of social security. However,

it is first and foremost a duty imposed by God. A human soul is purified as one pays *zakāt* as a form of worship. It is purged of all traces of miserliness, and it triumphs over its love to retain money and property.

The Beneficiaries of Zakāt

Let us now look at the groups who should benefit by *zakāt. "Charitable donations are only for the poor and the needy, and those who work in the administration of such donations."* (Verse 60) We have already explained who the poor and the needy are. The third group of beneficiaries are the people who actually work in the collection and distribution of *zakāt.*

"And those whose hearts are to be won over." This description applies to several groups of people. Among them may be people who are newcomers to Islam and it is felt that they may be helped to consolidate their conviction of its truth. Also included in this category are those whom we hope to win over to the faith. Similarly, we may include here people who have already become Muslim, but we may give them *zakāt* money to win over some of their colleagues and friends who may start to think about Islam when they see that those who have become Muslim are being given gifts.

There are differences among scholars as to whether this category of beneficiaries still exists, given the fact that Islam has firmly established itself. The fact is that, given the nature of the Islamic system and the various situations in which the Muslim community may find itself, there may often be a need to pay *zakāt* to some individuals or group of people under this heading. The purpose may be either to strengthen their resolve to follow Islam, if they are being subjected to discrimination on account of having adopted Islam, or to help them formulate a favourable idea about Islam. This may apply to people who are not Muslim themselves, but may render some service to Islam by speaking favourably of it in their own circles. When we consider this we recognize how God's wisdom takes good care of the Muslims in all situations.

"For the freeing of people in bondage." In olden days, slavery was an international system where captives of war were enslaved. There was no escape from this system where it had to be applied on the basis of `an eye for an eye,' until the world could get rid of that system and replace it with something that does not involve enslaving anyone. This portion of *zakāt* funds was used to help anyone who could buy his own freedom in return for a sum of money which he would pay to his master. Alternatively, slaves would be bought with *zakāt* funds and then set free by the Muslim authorities.

"And debtors." This category includes anyone who has incurred debts for a purpose that does not involve committing a sin. They are helped in the repayment of

their debts, instead of forcing them to go bankrupt, as happens in a materialistic civilization where business people who are unable to repay their debts have no other option. Islam is a system based on social security, where no honourable human being is left to go by the wayside, and no honest person is lost. Under man-made law, or should we say the law of the jungle, people are allowed to eat one another like fish, although they give the process a legal guise.

"*To further Gods cause.*" *Under* this heading any activity which brings benefit to the Muslim community and serves the advancement of God's cause may be included.

"*And for the traveller in need.*" This includes anyone who might have spent or lost his money while on a journey. He is given what will see him home, even though he may be rich in his hometown.

This is then the *zakāt* system which some people criticize these days, describing it as a system of begging and handouts. It is simply a social duty, discharged in the form of an act of Islamic worship, to purge people's hearts of all traces of miserliness and a grudging love of money. It establishes a bond of mutual care and compassion between all people in the Muslim community. It gives human life an element of loving care while providing a comprehensive system of social security. It retains at the same time its essential nature of being an act of worship which strengthens the bond between man and God, as well as the social human bond.

It is after all: "*a duty ordained by God,*" who knows what is good for humanity and who provides the best system for it based on His wisdom. For, "*God is All-knowing, Wise.*"

The Prophet's Care

This explanation of the *zakāt* system and how *zakāt* is to be distributed shows at the same time how ignorant and ill-mannered were those people who criticized the Prophet and made unfavourable remarks about his honesty. The *sūrah* gives further examples of hypocrites and what they used to say and do: "*And among them are others who hurt the Prophet and say: He is all ear.' Say: He is an ear listening to what is good for you. He believes in God, trusts the believers and he is a mercy to those of you who are true believers.' Those who hurt God's Messenger shall have painful suffering.*" (Verse 61)

Here their extremely bad manners in their dealings with the Prophet appear in a different way. They find him extremely accessible, listening to all people with full attention, and always making them welcome. He treats them as they profess to be, without judging their intentions, as he is indeed required to do according to the principles of his faith. They describe his exemplary attitude and refined manners by the wrong adjectives. Describing the Prophet (peace be upon him), they say: "*He is all*

ear." By this they mean that he listens to all people, and that he can easily be taken in by lies and false assertions. He believes anyone who is ready to swear to him, and he accepts whatever is being said to him with a false air of conviction.

They say this to one another in order to reassure themselves that he will not see their reality or discover their hypocrisy. They may also say it in criticism of the Prophet because he believes the true believers who would report to him whatever they might come to learn of the reality of the hypocrites and what they might say about Islam, or about God's Messenger and his genuine Companions. Various reports confirm both attitudes as a reason for the revelation of this verse. Indeed it may be taken to refer to either attitude. As for the hypocrites, they said these words intending either meaning at different times.

The Qur'ān uses their very words to silence them with its reply: *"And among them are others who hurt the Prophet and say: 'He is all ear'"* (Verse 61) Yes, indeed, but what sort of ear? *"Say: 'He is an ear listening to what is good for you.'"* (Verse 61) He is a good ear, listening to what God reveals and communicating it to you as it is. In it you have what is most beneficial to you, ensuring a very good outcome for you. Besides, he listens to you most politely, without confronting you with your hypocrisy and scheming, aware of all that as he certainly is.

Moreover, he *"believes in God."* (Verse 61) He certainly believes what God tells him about you and about any other people. He also *"trusts the believers,"* (Verse 61) and he believes what they tell him. He knows them to be true believers and he knows that true faith deters its adherents from saying anything false or putting up any false appearance. But above all the Prophet is: "a *mercy to those of you who are true believers."* (Verse 61) He leads them by the hand to all that is good. *"Those who hurt God's Messenger shall have painful suffering."* (Verse 61) That suffering will undoubtedly be inflicted by God on anyone who hurts His Messenger. He will not allow anyone who hurts His Messenger to escape punishment.

Dreading Exposure

"They swear to you by God in order to please you. Yet it is God and His Messenger that they should strive to please, if indeed they are believers." (Verse 62) They are always ready to swear by God in order to persuade others to believe them. Here the aim of their swearing is also to please the believers. This is typical of the hypocrites everywhere. They say and do whatever they want behind people's backs, but they are too cowardly to admit to their real attitude. They will not say openly what should be said. Hence, they try to seek every sort of cover and put on any false appearance in the hope of pleasing other people.

"Yet it is God and His Messenger that they should strive to please, if indeed they are

believers." (Verse 62) Why should they care about other human beings? What power or influence do they have? But a person who does not believe in God and does not submit to Him will always fear and submit to a human being like him. He would be much better off submitting to God in front of whom all people are alike. A person who submits to God will never suffer any humiliation. The only people who are humiliated and who feel their own inadequacy are those who turn away from God and fear their fellow human beings.

"Do they not know that anyone who defies God and His Messenger shall have the fire of hell, therein to abide? That is the ultimate disgrace." (Verse 63) This is a question of censure and rebuke. They profess to be believers, and a believer knows for certain that there can be no offence greater than defying God and His Messenger and taking a stand in opposition to Him. Hell stands in waiting for anyone who commits such an offence. Moreover, humiliation is the fitting reward of rebellion. If they are truly believers, as they claim to be, how is it then that they do not know such an elementary fact?

They fear God's creatures and swear to them in order to please them and to deny what the others have heard about them. How is it, then, that they do not fear the Creator when they hurt His Messenger and oppose the faith He has chosen for human beings? Their attitude is the same as being at war with God Himself. Most sublime is God for anyone to choose to be at war with Him. These verses, then, simply magnify their wickedness and aim to strike fear into the hearts of those who hurt God's Messenger and scheme against His faith.

They are much too cowardly to confront the Prophet and the believers openly. They fear that God will expose their reality and reveal their intentions to His Messenger: *"The hypocrites dread lest a sūrah be revealed about them, making clear to them what is really in their hearts. Say: Scoff if you will; God will surely bring to light the very thing you are dreading.' Should you question them, they will say: 'We have only been indulging in idle talk and jesting.' Say: 'Was it, then, at God, His revelations and His Messenger that you have been mocking?' Make no excuses. You have disbelieved after you have professed to be believers. Though We may pardon some of you, We shall punish others, on account of their being guilty."* (Verses 64-66)

This is a general statement that applied to all hypocrites who feared that revelations might be sent down to expose what they entertained in their hearts. They would then be out on a limb, with all that they had carefully concealed being brought out into the open. However, we have several reports of certain events that led to the revelation of these verses.

One report tells that one of the hypocrites said: "I see that those among us who are most keen to read the Qur'ān are gluttons, liars and cowardly." This was reported to the Prophet. When the man learned of this, he went to the Prophet to find him

having mounted his camel, ready to depart. He said to him: "Messenger of God, we were only engaged in idle talk and jesting." The Prophet said to him: *"Was it, then, at God, His revelations and His Messenger that you have been mocking? Make no excuses. You have disbelieved after you have professed to be believers. Though We may pardon some of you, We shall punish others, on account of their being guilty."* (Verses 65-66) As the Prophet replied, he did not face the man who kept holding on to the Prophet's sword, his feet hitting the rocks.

Another report mentions that a group of hypocrites, including Wadī`ah ibn Thābit, as well as a man called Makhshī ibn Ĥimyar, an ally of the tribe of Salamah, were with the Muslim army when the Prophet headed for Tabūk. Some of them tried to frighten the believers and spread doubt in their ranks. They said: "Do you think fighting the Byzantines the same as internal warfare between Arabian tribes? We can even now see how you will all be taken captive tomorrow and be put in chains." Makhshī said: "I wish we could escape with only 100 lashes each, without having verses of the Qur'ān revealed to expose us as a result of what you have said."

The Prophet was informed of this and he said to `Ammār ibn Yāsir: "Rush to those people for they are burnt. Ask them about what they have said and if they deny it, tell them that they have said these very words." `Ammār went to them and told them exactly what the Prophet said. They came to the Prophet to apologize. Wadī`ah ibn Thābit said to the Prophet as he mounted his camel, and Wadī`ah holding its reins: "Messenger of God, we were only talking idly and jesting." Makhshī said: "Messenger of God, my name and my father's name prevented me from leaving these people." (This is a reference to the fact that he was only an ally occupying a weak position.) He was the one, among those to whom this verse refers, who was pardoned. He changed his name to `Abd al-Raĥmān and appealed to God to grant him martyrdom where his body would not be found. He was killed when he was fighting with the Muslim army at Yamāmah against the apostates. His body was lost without trace.

Another report says that a group of hypocrites were in the army going to Tabūk, and some of them said: "Does this man (meaning the Prophet) hope to take hold of the palaces and forts of Syria? Far be it from him." God informed His Messenger of what they said. The Prophet ordered his Companions to have them isolated and he came to them and confronted them with what they had said. They replied: "Messenger of God, we were only engaged in idle talk and jesting." God then revealed these verses.

"We have only been indulging in idle talk and jesting." (Verse 65) As if such important matters which are closely related to the very fundamentals of faith can at all be the subject of idle talk and careless jesting. Hence the reply: *"Say: 'Was it, then, at God, His revelations and His Messenger that you have been mocking?'"* (Verse 65) Their offence is

grave indeed. Hence they are confronted with the reality that they have disbelieved after they had professed to be believers. They are warned of grave suffering which some of them might escape because they have hastened to declare their repentance and were keen to maintain the path of the faithful. Others who remained hypocrites and continued to mock at God's revelations as well as His Messenger and His faith could never escape that torment, on account of their being genuinely guilty.

The Trodden Path of Hypocrisy

So far, the *sūrah* has given us a number of examples of what the hypocrites said and did, as well as the way their concepts and views are formulated. Now it moves on to describe their true nature and their distinctive qualities which set them as a class apart from true believers. It also defines the punishment awaiting all hypocrites: *"The hypocrites, both men and women, are all of a kind. They enjoin what is wrong and forbid what is right, and tighten their fists. They have forgotten God and so He has chosen to forget them. Surely the hypocrites are the transgressors. God has promised the hypocrites, both men and women, and the unbelievers the fire of hell, where they shall abide. It shall be sufficient for them. God has rejected them, and theirs is a lasting torment."* (Verses 67-68)

So, all the hypocrites have the same nature and the same characteristics, regardless of the time and the place where they are found. Their actual actions and statements may differ but they all share the same essence and go back to the same roots. They all have the same essential characteristics: wickedness at heart, ill intentions towards others, and evil scheming against them, because they feel themselves to be too weak and cowardly to enter into an open confrontation, etc. Their behaviour is similarly wicked: they urge others to do what they know to be wrong, and discourage them from doing what is right. They are also tight-fisted with their money. They will not give financial support to any good cause except when they need to do so in order to give a false impression about themselves.

At the same time, they deride those who do right and belittle the committing of wrong deeds. But in all that, they conceal their motives and notions. Whatever they say about right and wrong, they say it in whispers, or sly remarks, ridiculing people and slandering them, because they have no courage to confront anyone with their true convictions. Only when they feel secure do they come out with what is truly in their hearts.

"They have forgotten God," (Verse 67) so they only consider their own interests and weigh up other people's reactions. They only fear those who are powerful among fellow human beings. With such, they are humble and submissive. They try their best to please them and to carry favour with them. As a result, God *"has chosen to forget them."* (Verse 67) He gives them no weight and no consideration. Such indeed is their

situation in this life, and so it is in the life to come. People only give due importance to those who are strong, ready to speak up and make their position clear, defending their beliefs and trying to impress others with their ideas, and who fight or make peace in open daylight. Such people pay little attention to human beings in order to give all importance to the Lord of mankind. As they take their position in support of the truth, they fear no one. Such people are given their due respect by others.

"*Surely the hypocrites are the transgressors.*" (Verse 67) They have abandoned the path of faith, and chosen the path of error. Hence God promises them the same fate as that He promised the unbelievers. That is indeed a sorrowful destiny: "*God has promised the hypocrites, both men and women, and the unbelievers the fire of hell, where they shall abide. It shall be sufficient for them.*" (Verse 68) It is a fitting recompense for their crimes. There is no need for any other punishment. Nevertheless, they are denied access to God's mercy: "*God has rejected them, and theirs is a lasting torment.*" (Verse 68)

Such a wicked nature is not something new; it has its parallels and forerunners in history. Previous communities had their own cases of hypocrisy. Those hypocrites of old faced a doom which befitted their offences, after they had their apportioned share of what this earthly life had to offer. Despite the fact that those were even more powerful than the hypocrite Arabs and possessed greater wealth and had more numerous children, nothing of all this was of any use to them when God inflicted His punishment on them.

Hence the Qur'ān reminds those Arabs of what happened to those communities before them, and warns them that as they follow the same route, they are likely to face the same outcome. If heeded, such warnings should be enough to guide them to follow the message of truth: "*Yours is just like the case of those before you. They were more powerful than you and had greater wealth and more children. They enjoyed their share. And you have been enjoying your share, just as those who preceded you enjoyed their share; and you have been indulging in idle talk just like they did. Their works have come to nothing in this world and shall come to nothing in the life to come. They are indeed the losers.*" (Verse 69)

They are deluded by the fact that they have power, wealth and children. Hence they adopt such an attitude. However, those who recognize the greatest power of God have no such delusions about any earthly or material power. They only fear the One who has the greatest power, and, therefore, they use their own power in demonstrating their obedience to Him and ensuring that His word reigns supreme. Their wealth and children do not give them any false sense of power, because they realize that it is God who has given them these. They are keen to show their gratitude to Him and to use what He has given them in what pleases Him. It is only those who have taken themselves away from the source of real power that are ungrateful and arrogant. Their style of life is that of eating and enjoyment, just like animals.

"*Their works have come to nothing in this world and shall come to nothing in the life to come.*" (Verse 69) Indeed whatever they do is worthless, because it is the same as a plant which has no roots: it cannot stand, grow or blossom. "*They are indeed the losers.*" (Verse 69) They have ended with complete loss with nothing left for them.

The *sūrah* now makes a general address, wondering at those who follow in the footsteps of those communities which suffered God's punishment without learning the lesson: "*Have they not heard the histories of those who preceded them, such as Noah's people, `Ād and Thamūd, and Abraham's people, and the folk of Madyan and the ruined cities? Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth. It was not God who wronged them; it was they who wronged themselves.*" (Verse 70)

The *sūrah* then puts a question with regard to those who just seek enjoyment and tread the path of destroyed nations: "*Have they not heard the histories of those who preceded them?*" There were many of them who suffered painful doom. There were first the people of Noah, destroyed by the great flood; and the people of `Ād, victims of a furious wind storm, and the people of Thamūd, overwhelmed by a stunning blast. There were also the people of Abraham whose despotic ruler was destroyed, while Abraham himself was saved by God. The folk of Madyan suffered the violent quake and were suffocated, and the people of Lot had their cities ruined. Now have these latter day hypocrites not heard the histories of those communities to whom "*their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth.*" (Verse 70) But they choose to deny such clear evidence and follow the path of error instead. Hence God punished them for what they did: "*It was not God who wronged them; it was they who wronged themselves.*" (Verse 70)

Yet the lessons of the past benefit only those who open their hearts and minds for the contemplation of the working of the laws God has set in operation. These laws make allowances for no one, regardless of their position. Many of those whom God tests with power and affluence choose to overlook what happened to those before them. So they are doomed when God's law applies to them, and God takes them with a mighty hand. It is often the case that those given power and wealth are blinded to realities. Only those who serve God sincerely are spared such a blinding attitude which spells a miserable doom.

The Believers' Dwelling Place

In contrast to the unbelievers and the hypocrites stand the true believers. They are characterized by their totally different nature, different behaviour and different destiny: "*The believers, men and women, are friends to one another: they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong; they attend to their prayers, and pay their zakāt, and obey God and His Messenger. It is on these that God will have mercy. Surely, God is Almighty, Wise. God*

has promised the believers, men and women, gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide, and goodly dwellings in the garden of Eden. Yet God's acceptance is the greatest blessing of all. This is indeed the supreme triumph." (Verses 71-72)

While the hypocrites are all of a kind, having the same characteristics, the believers are by nature a community united in furthering every good thing and promoting what is right. Despite having the same qualities, the hypocrites cannot achieve a status of friends or community. That requires mutual solidarity which is alien to the nature of hypocrisy. Such solidarity cannot be achieved even within a group of hypocrites, who remain weak individuals, despite their identical qualities and behaviour. The Qur'ān points this out in describing both groups: *"The hypocrites, both men and women, are all of a kind."* (Verse 67) *"The believers, men and women, are friends to one another."* (Verse 71) An individual believer has the same qualities of the community, where the values of solidarity and mutual care are upheld to promote what is good and prevent what is wrong: *"They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong."* (Verse 71)

To achieve the goals of promoting what is good, enjoining what is right and fighting what is wrong and evil requires close ties within the community, mutual solidarity and true co-operation. Thus the community stands united allowing no divisive element to have any influence on it.

Whenever division appears within the community, it must be a signal pointing to the existence of a strange factor which is alien to its nature and its faith. There must be a purpose or an ailment which prevents the first characteristic of the Muslim community from taking root. That characteristic is described by God, the All-knowing who is aware of all details: *"The believers, men and women, are friends to one another."* Their friendship motivates them to enjoin what is right and to censure and forbid what is wrong. Their aim is to make God's word reign supreme, and to make their community fulfil its role in human life.

"They attend to their prayers," for prayer gives them their bond with God. *'And pay their* zakāt," for *zakāt* is the duty which cements the bonds within the Muslim community. It reflects the material and spiritual solidarity within this community. *"And obey God and His Messenger."* (Verse 71) They have no desire other than to discharge God's orders and obey Him and His Messenger. They have no law other than that revealed by God, and no constitution other than the faith revealed by God to His Messenger. When God and His Messenger determine something concerning their affairs, they accept it realizing that this is the choice they have. This gives them unity of goals, approaches and methods of action. They have a single course which they follow, paying no attention to other courses of action which may cause disunity in their ranks.

"It is on these that God will have mercy." (Verse 71) Mercy is not bestowed only in the hereafter. It is first bestowed in this life, and it is granted first to the individual who fulfils his duties of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is evil, attends to his prayer and pays his *zakāt.* It is also granted to the community which is made up of individuals of such qualities. It is manifested in the reassurance felt by such people and in their bond with God who looks after them and spares them much strife and friction. God's mercy is also seen in the unity and co-operation which are characteristic of such a community where every individual enjoys a contented life, and is reassured by God's acceptance.

These four characteristics of the believers: enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, attending to prayer and paying *zakāt* are contrasted with four characteristics of the hypocrites, namely, enjoining what is wrong, forbidding what is right, forgetting God and tightening their fists. God's mercy which He bestows on the believers is shown here in contrast to His rejection of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. It is for maintaining these characteristics that God has promised the believers victory and establishment in the land. Thus they will be able to put them into effect when they exercise their role as the leaders of mankind.

"Surely, God is Almighty, Wise." (Verse 71) He is able to give power to the believers so that they can help one another to discharge their duties. His wisdom is also seen in granting victory to such a community which sets human life on the right footing, and ensures that God's word reigns supreme.

As we have seen, suffering in hell is the destiny awaiting the hypocrites and unbelievers. They cannot escape God's curse. The fact that He will forget them shows that they are of little importance, suffering deprivation. In contrast, the happiness of being in heaven is what awaits the believers: *"God has promised the believers, men and women, gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide, and goodly dwellings in the garden of Eden."* (Verse 72) That is then their dwelling place.

But there is something much greater that awaits them: *"Yet God's acceptance is the greatest blessing of all."* (Verse 72) Indeed, heaven and all the bliss and happiness that are assured for those who are admitted into it appear to be so small when compared to being accepted by God: *"Yet God's acceptance is the greatest blessing of all.''* Indeed one moment of being in communion with God, contemplating His majesty; a moment of release from the restraints of a physical constitution, and the limitations of this earth and its petty concerns; a moment when a ray of that light which cannot be seen by our eyes lightens our hearts; a moment when the human soul is enlightened by a glimpse of God's mercy; any moment of these which are experienced only by a small number of people when they have clear, undisturbed vision is far greater than all enjoyments and all aspirations. How do people feel when His acceptance overwhelms their souls and they receive it without interruption?

Hence these verses conclude with a highly appropriate comment: *"This is indeed the supreme triumph."* (Verse 72)

All Out Effort to Fight Unbelievers

Thus the *sūrah* has given us a clear outline of the essential characteristics of true believers and those of the hypocrites who claim to be believers. This is now followed by an order from God to His Messenger to strive against the unbelievers and the hypocrites. The Qur'ān makes it clear that the hypocrites certainly disbelieved after they had claimed to be Muslims. They tried something that only their disbelief could have led them to contemplate, but God foiled their attempts. It wonders at their hostile attitude to the Prophet when they have gained nothing but good from his message. It invites them to repent and change their attitude.

> *Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. They swear by God that they have said nothing [wrong]. Yet they certainly uttered the word of unbelief and disbelieved after they had professed to submit to God, for they aimed at something which they could not attain. They had no reason to be spiteful, except that God and His Messenger had enriched them out of His bounty. If they repent, it will be for their own good; but if they turn away, God will cause them to endure grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. They shall find none on this earth to be their friend or to give them support.* (Verses 73-74)

The Prophet had been very lenient with the hypocrites, turning a blind eye to much of what they did and forgiving them much. At this point, however, such leniency is no longer useful. He is commanded by his Lord to start a new phase in his dealings with them. They are grouped here with the unbelievers; and the Prophet is ordered to strive against both as hard as he can. There are times when it is more suitable to take a hardened attitude while at others it is wiser to take the side of leniency. When a period of patience and tolerance is no longer advisable, then it is time to be tough. A practical movement has different requirements at different times, and its method of action may move from one stage to another. A soft attitude may sometimes bring about more harm than good.

Early scholars differ on what is meant by pressing hard in striving against the hypocrites, and whether it means fighting them with arms as suggested by `Alī ibn Abī Nib, or by general treatment and clear disapproval which make the reality of their position clear to all. This latter view is expressed by Ibn `Abbās. In practical terms, the Prophet did not kill any hypocrite.

"They swear by God that they have said nothing [wrong]. Yet they certainly uttered the word of unbelief, and disbelieved after they had professed to submit to God, for they aimed at something which they could not attain." (Verse 74) Taken in general terms, this statement portrays the consistent attitude of the hypocrites reflected in a whole range of incidents. It also refers to various attempts they made to cause harm to the Prophet and the Muslim community. There are, however, several reports which mention a specific incident in connection with the revelation of this verse.

Qatādah says: "This verse refers to `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy concerning an event when a man from the tribe of Juhaynah quarrelled with a man from the *Anşār,* with the first gaining the upper hand. `Abdullāh said to the *Anşārī* man: 'Will you not support your brother? Our position with Muĥammad is similar to that of a man who feeds his dog until the dog becomes so fat and eats him.' He further said: 'When we go back to Madinah, the honourable among us will drive out the humble.' A Muslim heard what he said and informed the Prophet who sent someone to ask him about it and he swore that he did not utter those words. God then revealed this verse making clear that he did.

Al-Ṭabarī reports that the Prophet was once sitting in the shade of a tree when he said to his Companions who were with him: "A man will come soon, looking at you with the eye of the devil. Do not talk to him." Shortly afterwards a blue looking man came over. The Prophet asked him: "Why do you and your friends speak ill of me?" The man went away and brought his friends who repeatedly swore that they had said nothing, until the Prophet pardoned them. God then revealed the verse which quotes their assertions: *"They swear by God that they have said nothing wrong."* (Verse 74)

`Urwah ibn al-Zubayr and others report that this verse concerns a man called Al-Jallās ibn Suwayd who had a stepson called `Umayr ibn Sa`d. Al-Jallās once said: "If what Muĥammad says be true, then we are worse than these donkeys of ours." `Umayr said: "You know that you are the dearest of all people to me, and I would rather spare you all harm. But you have said something which would put me in a very bad light if I report it, and would destroy me if I keep it to myself. One of these alternatives is easier than the other." He went to the Prophet and told him, but al-Jallās denied having said it and swore to that effect. When these verses were revealed, he retracted and said: "I have certainly said this, but I am offered a chance to repent. I regret what I said and turn to God in repentance." This was accepted.

All these reports, however, do not take account of the next statement in this verse, *"They aimed at something which they could not attain."* (Verse 74) This supports the other reports which say that the verse refers to a group of hypocrites who plotted to kill the Prophet on his way back from Tabūk. It is useful to mention one of these reports.

Imām Aĥmad reports: "When the Prophet was on his way back from the expedition to Tabūk, he ordered someone to announce that he himself had taken a narrow climbing route and no one else should take it. The Prophet went along with the help of two of his Companions, Ĥudhayfah and `Ammār. A group of masked men soon came and attacked `Ammār as he was leading the Prophet's camel, but `Ammār chased them hitting the faces of their camels. The Prophet told Ĥudhayfah to be patient with his camel until he dismounted. When `Ammār came back to the Prophet, he asked him whether he was able to recognize those people. `Ammār said: 'I could recognize most of the camels but the people themselves were masked.' The Prophet asked him whether he could find out what they wanted. `Ammār said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' The Prophet said: 'They wanted to frighten the camel of God's Messenger so that he would fall to the ground.' `Ammār went to one of the Prophet's Companions and said: 'I appeal to you by God Almighty, do you know how many people were in that narrow route?' The man said that they were fourteen. `Ammār said to him: 'If you were with them, then they were fifteen.' The Prophet named three of them who said: 'By God we did not hear the Prophet's announcer when he made the announcement and we were totally unaware what those people were up to.' `Ammār said: 'I bear witness that the other twelve are enemies of God and His Messenger in this life and on the Day of Judgement.'

This event betrays what those people harboured of ill intentions. Whether this event or a similar one is meant here, it remains very surprising that they should be so treacherous. The Qur'ān wonders at their attitude: *"They had no reason to be spiteful, except that God and His Messenger had enriched them out of His bounty."* (Verse 74) Islam had caused them no harm to justify such hostility. The only reason that could be thought of was perhaps the wealth they were able to gain as a result of the advances made by Islam. It may be that the easy life they were able to lead accounted for their hostility!

This is followed by a clear verdict concerning their case: *"If they repent, it will be for their own good; but if they turn away, God will cause them to endure grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. They shall find none on this earth to be their friend or to give them support."* (Verse 74)

The door to repent and mend one's ways remains wide open. Whoever is keen to do himself good, let him get in through that open door. But those who wish to continue along their evil path should also know their fate. They will be made to suffer God's severe punishment in this life and in the life to come, while they can rely on no one's support in this whole world. Since the alternatives have been made clear, they can make their choice.

Lying to God

The *sūrah* goes on to portray more cases of hypocrisy and how the hypocrites behave. *"Some of them have pledged to God: 'If He gives us of His bounty, we will certainly spend in charity, and we will be among the righteous.' But when He had given them of His bounty they grew niggardly and turned away, heedless [of their pledges]."* (Verses 75-76)

Some of these hypocrites pledge solemnly to God that if He would bestow His grace on them and give them some of His bounty, they would be very charitable to the poor and behave in the way expected of righteous people. Such a pledge, however, is given at a time when those people are poor, when their poverty makes them yearn for a time of plenty. Yet when God answers their prayers, and favours them with His bounty, they forget all about their pledges, and behave like misers. They turn away unwilling to honour their pledges. This violation of their promises and lying to God make hypocrisy take root in their hearts. Hence they continue to be hypocrites until they die.

Human beings are weak and niggardly, except for the few who manage, by God's grace, to elevate themselves. They cannot rid themselves of their miserliness unless their hearts become full of faith, raising them above the needs of this world and freeing them of their eagerness to protect their immediate interests. This is easy if they hope to achieve something better in the hereafter, and aspire to receive God's acceptance, which is far superior to all comforts and enjoyments. A believer's heart is reassured by faith, does not fear to be poor as a result of spending in charity or for God's cause, because he knows that what people may have will be exhausted and what God has in store is inexhaustible. His knowledge motivates him to pay in furthering God's cause willingly, without any fear that he will be left in need. Even if he becomes without money, what he hopes to receive from God is infinitely better and far greater.

When a person's heart is devoid of true faith, his natural instinct to keep his wealth for himself is aroused whenever he is called upon to give in charity or to spend something for God's cause. The fear of poverty overrides his weaker desire to respond to such a call. He is imprisoned within his niggardliness, feeling insecure. A person who makes a pledge to God and then reneges on his pledge and lies to God is not free from hypocrisy. The Prophet is authentically quoted as saying: "The mark of a hypocrite is threefold: he lies when he speaks, reneges on his promises and betrays his trust."

Hence their deliberately unfulfilled pledges and their repeated lies breed hypocrisy which settles permanently in their hearts, as the Qur'ānic verse describes: *"In consequence, He caused hypocrisy to take root in their hearts till the Day on which they will meet Him, because they have been untrue to the pledges they made to God, and because of the lies they used to tell."* (Verse 77)

"Do they not realize that God knows both their secret thoughts and what they talk about in private, and that God has full knowledge of all things that are hidden away?" (Verse 78) Since they claim to be believers, do they not know that God knows all that there is in people's innermost hearts, and what they may say to each other even in the most private of situations? He is certainly aware of all that is kept hidden, and aware of the most secret of intentions. Since they know all this, they should not try to conceal any bad intention, hoping that God will not be aware of it. They should not have harboured any thoughts of leaving their pledges unfulfilled, or of lying to Him.

There are several reports on the incident or incidents which led to the revelation of this verse. Whichever one is correct,[33] the statement is general in its import. It describes a general condition and a pattern of people who have not let faith establish its roots in their hearts. If we compare the attitude of such people with that of the early Muslims, we find that those Muslims considered the payment of *zakāt* an aspect of God's grace. If a person did not pay it or if it was not accepted from him, he was the loser who should be pitied for his loss. They fully understood the meaning of the following verse which gives this order to the Prophet: *"Take a portion of their money as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby."* (Verse 103) Indeed the payment of *zakāt* was a gain not a loss. This is the difference between a duty fulfilled for the sake of God in the hope of earning His pleasure and a tax which is imposed by the law and paid to avoid punishment under the law.

The *sūrah* then describes another version of the hypocrites' view of *zakāt* which is contrary to that of the true believers. It also shows how the hypocrites are always given to taunting and slandering others, an indication of their perverted nature: *"It is those hypocrites that taunt the believers who donate freely, as well as those who have nothing to give except what they earn through their toil, and deride them all. God derides them, and grievous suffering awaits them."* (Verse 79)

The story associated with the revelation of this verse describes the hypocrites' crooked outlook on spending for God's cause. It is reported that the Prophet encouraged the believers to spend freely for equipping the army which was to go to Tabūk. `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf carried 4,000 dirhams and said to the Prophet:

[33] The author mentions one of these reports, concerning Tha`labah ibn Ĥāṭib. It is a long and detailed story which is often quoted. It shows that Tha`labah pledged to give much in charity if he were given wealth. When his wealth was enormous, he refused to pay *zakāt* at first, but when he repented and tried to pay it, it was not accepted from him. However, a piece of scholarly research has clearly concluded that the story is greatly lacking in authenticity. Moreover, it runs against the established Islamic principle that God accepts genuine repentance, and in the story Tha`labah appears to have genuinely repented. Since the story is clearly suspect with regard to its authenticity, and since the person involved is one of the Prophet's Companions, I feel it is better left out, since the message of the verses is, as the author says, general and abundantly clear. Perhaps I should add that the research I have referred to was published long after the author's death. Nevertheless, the author seems doubtful about its authenticity. — Editor's note.

"Messenger of God, I have 8,000, of which I have brought you half and kept half for my family." The Prophet said to him: "May God bless you for what you have kept and what you have given." Abū `Aqīl came with a small quantity of dates and said: "Messenger of God, all I have is some dates of which I have brought half and kept the other half for my family." The hypocrites derided them both and said: "Abd al-Raḥmān only gave that much to show off; but do God and His Messenger need such a small quantity of dates?" Other reports suggest that they scoffed at Abū `Aqīl suggesting that he only brought his dates to remind the Prophet of his poverty.

This is how they scoffed at the believers who were prompt in giving what they could, willingly and generously, eager to contribute as best as they could to the *jihād* campaign. They simply do not understand the motives of any true believer and why he gives willingly, nor do they understand that a believer's conscience urges him to do so. They do not appreciate the pure feelings which respond readily to the call to sacrifice. Hence, they describe the one who gives much as showing off and say of the one who has only little to give away that he reminds others of his poverty. They thus abuse the rich person because he gives generously, and deride the poor person because he has only very little to give. Thus, no one who gives freely is immune from their derision. They do all this while they themselves stay behind, give nothing and remain niggardly. If they give anything away, they do it only out of hypocrisy. That is the only motive they understand.

Hence they are given the decisive answer: "*God derides them, and grievous suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 79) What a painful ridicule which they will suffer. How can we imagine a few weak individuals suffering the ridicule of the Almighty and destined for His punishment. That is a woeful end no doubt.

Never to be Forgiven

> *You may pray for their forgiveness or may not pray for them, [for it will all be the same]. Even if you were to pray seventy times for their forgiveness, God will not forgive them, for they have denied God and His Messenger. God does not guide those who are transgressors.* (Verse 80)

This verse refers to the hypocrites who deride the true believers when they come forward with their contributions and donations. Such people have a well-known destiny which will not change. They shall not benefit by any request for forgiveness. "*God will not forgive them,*" whether such requests are made on their behalf or not. It seems that the Prophet used to pray to God to forgive those who committed mistakes or sins in the hope that they would mend their ways and earn God's forgiveness. As for the hypocrites, their fate has been sealed. There is no going back, and that is for a

very good reason: "*For they have denied God and His Messenger. God does not guide those who are transgressors.*" (Verse 80)

These are the ones who have deviated so widely that there can be no hope of them ever mending their ways. Hence, God tells His Messenger: "*Even if you were to pray seventy times for their forgiveness, God will not forgive them.*" (Verse 80) The number seventy is normally mentioned to indicate a large, not specific, number. Hence the statement means that they cannot hope for forgiveness, because there is no way they will repent and mend their ways. That is because when a human heart reaches a certain stage of corruption, it becomes impossible to reform. Similarly when a person has gone so far astray, he cannot follow guidance. It is God who knows best how hearts respond.

Pleased with One's Misdeeds

The *sūrah* resumes its comments on the attitude of those who stayed behind when the Prophet had marched to Tabūk:

> *Those who were left behind rejoiced at having stayed at home after [the departure of] God's Messenger, for they were averse to striving with their property and their lives in God's cause. They said [to one another]: 'Do not go to war in this heat. 'Say: The fire of hell is far hotter.' Would that they understood. They shall laugh but a little, and they will weep much, in return for what they have earned. If God brings you back and you meet some of them, and then they ask leave to go forth with you, say: 'Never shall you go forth with me, nor shall you fight an enemy with me. You were happy to stay behind on the first occasion, so you stay now with those who remain behind.' You shall not pray for any of them who dies, and you shall not stand by his grave. For they have denied God and His Messenger and died as hardened sinners. Let neither their riches nor their children excite your admiration. God only wishes to punish them by means of these in the life of this world, and that their souls perish while they are unbelievers.* (Verses 81-85)

Such people are so keen to ensure their continued personal comfort and are unwilling to spend anything of their wealth for God's cause. They are devoid of all desire to strive because their hearts are devoid of faith. The adjective used in the Arabic text to refer to them has the added connotation of showing them to be left behind as if they were dispensable articles of little value. They are delighted at having secured their own safety when they stayed at home after the Prophet and his Companions had departed on their blessed mission. They spared themselves the toil and hardship willingly undertaken by the believers who were ready to strive for God's cause, thinking that personal safety is a goal coveted by all men. Hence: "*They*

were averse to striving with their property and their lives in God's cause. They said [to one another]: 'Do not go to war in this heat.'" (Verse 81) Such words are only said by a person who is keen to indulge himself in every luxury. Such a person is not fit to do anything which only men of endurance can undertake.

They are a fitting example of people with no will power. Numerous indeed are those who dislike to go through any hardship and turn away when they are required to make a real effort, preferring cheap comfort to noble effort and humble safety to a position of honour that involves taking risks. They collapse in utter exhaustion behind the rows of believers who move on with seriousness, knowing that the advocacy of the true message requires great sacrifices. Nevertheless, those believers march forth and pay little attention to the size of the opposition or the tough impediments they face, because they know that it is part of human nature to try to overcome impediments. This is far more befitting and satisfying to man than staying behind, betraying ineptitude and lack of will.

The *sūrah* answers them coupling the truth with sarcasm: "*They said [to one another]: Do not go to war in this heat.' Say: 'The fire of hell is far hotter.' Would that they understood."* (Verse 81) If they fear the heat of the summer and prefer the comfort of staying in the shade, how will they tolerate the heat of the Are of hell, when it is much more intense and longer lasting? Although this sounds like a remark full of derision, it only states the truth. The choice they had to make was between striving for a certain period in defence of God's cause, tolerating the heat of the earthly summer or being thrown in hell for an extended period the length of which is known to God alone.

"*They shall laugh but a little, and they will weep much, in return for what they have earned."* (Verse 82) Their laughter takes place in this life which lasts only for a certain number of days, but their tears are poured in the hereafter with its much longer days. Indeed each one of God's days is equal to one thousand years of ours. Their tears are "*in return for what they have earned." It* is then a befitting and just reward.

Those hypocrites who preferred to stay behind during a time of hardship, when all Muslims were called upon to join the jihād campaign, are not fit to join any campaign or to take part in any effort undertaken for God's cause. Hence, leniency is not the proper policy to follow with them. They are not to be given the chance of earning the honour of participating in *jihād* at any time. The Prophet is directed to make this clear to them whenever the occasion arises: "*If God brings you back and you meet some of them, and then they ask leave to go forth with you, say: 'Never shall you go forth with me, nor shall you fight an enemy with me. You were happy to stay behind on the first occasion, so you stay now with those who remain behind.'"* (Verse 83)

Every message or ideology is in need of people who are dedicated, willing to undertake any effort in their support and advocacy. When the ranks of any such

ideology are infiltrated by weak elements, it cannot tolerate hardship. Hence, such weaklings must be isolated from its ranks which need to remain steadfast. If those who join the ranks at a time of ease and desert them at a time of hardship are to be easily tolerated, their continued presence will work to the detriment of the whole message and its true advocates. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to make it clear to them that they have no place in the ranks of the believers: "*Say: 'Never shall you go forth with me, nor shall you fight an enemy with me.'*" (Verse 83) And the reason for this attitude is also made clear: "*You were happy to stay behind on the first occasion.*" (Verse 83) That deprived them of the privilege of being able to join the ranks of the fighters for God's cause and the honour of going forth with the Prophet. Going on *jihād* is a responsibility which may only be shouldered by those who are fit to undertake it. This religion of Islam does not admit any partiality or favouritism. Hence they are told: "*Stay now with those who remain behind.*" (Verse 83) You may stay with such people as are like you in their attitude. You all prefer to absent yourselves when the occasion requires sacrifices.

This way of continuous striving, marked out by God Himself for His Messenger, remains the one to be followed by the advocates of this religion of Islam for as long as life continues on earth. Advocates of Islam should remain aware of this at all times.

Staying Behind at a Time of Mobilization

This last instruction to the Prophet meant that he was not to allow those hypocrites who stayed behind when he called on all Muslims to join him on the expedition to Tabūk to be part of any subsequent campaign. They were to be deprived of the privilege of joining any effort aimed at defending God's cause. The Prophet is also commanded not to give such people any semblance of honour: "*You shall not pray for any of them who dies, and you shall not stand by his grave. For they have denied God and His Messenger and died as hardened sinners.*" (Verse 84)

Commentators on the Qur'ān have mentioned certain events to which this verse relates, but the message of this verse is much wider in application than any individual event. The verse sets out a principle which denies any aspect of honour in the system implemented by a community which strives for God's cause to those who prefer laziness to struggle, and comfort to making an effort. There is to be no favouritism in giving each individual his rank in the community. The standard by which this is determined is based on dedication, steadfastness, perseverance and unwavering determination.

The *sūrah* gives here the reason for this instruction: "*For they have denied God and His Messenger and died as hardened sinners.*" (Verse 84) This explanation applies to the

order not to pray for the dead among them and for the Prophet not to stand at any of their graves. But the principle itself has a wider application. Prayer and standing at the grave of a deceased person are aspects of honour. The Muslim community must not accord such an honour to anyone who stays behind at a time *of jihād.* The standing of any person in the Muslim community is related to what that person is ready to give, do or sacrifice at the time when he is called upon to do so. True Muslims give their all, remain steadfast at times of hardship and are always ready to strive with their wealth and persons. Hence they receive the honour they deserve.

On the other hand, those who stay behind deserve neither the apparent honour seen by everyone in the community, nor the type of mental appreciation that is felt by people though may not be demonstrated in any action: *"Let neither their riches nor their children excite your admiration. God only wishes to punish them by means of these in the life of this world, and that their souls perish while they are unbelievers."* (Verse 85) The general meaning of this verse has already been explained when a similar one was mentioned earlier in the *sūrah.* It is repeated here for a different reason. What is meant here is that no significance should be attached by the Muslim community to the wealth or the children of these hypocrites, because to admire these is to give such people a degree of mental honour or appreciation which they do not deserve. The only thing they deserve is to be ignored and looked upon with contempt.

> *When a sūrah was revealed from on high calling on them to believe in God and to strive alongside His Messenger, those of them who were well able to do so asked you to give them leave and said to you: Allow us to stay with those who remain behind.' They are well- pleased to remain with those who are left behind. And their hearts are sealed, so that they are unable to understand the truth. But the Messenger and those who have believed with him strive hard in God's cause with their property and their lives. These shall have all the good things. These shall certainly prosper. God has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide. That is the supreme triumph.* (Verses 86-89)

These verses tell of two different natures, one of hypocrisy, weakness, and self-abasement, and another full of faith, strength and sacrifice. These give rise to two different attitudes: one of deviousness, humbleness and lack of self-respect, and another which is straightforward, dignified and ready to sacrifice.

When a *sūrah* or a passage of the Qur'ān is revealed from on high, giving an explicit order to the believers to strive for God's cause, then those who have the means to give physical and financial sacrifices come forward. They do not show up in order to take their positions in the front, as their ability and gratitude to God would require. They come forward to make stupid excuses and to request exemption so that they can stay behind with women, doing nothing to defend sanctity or home.

They do not realize how abject and humiliating their request is. They are only interested in their own safety. Those who make their own safety paramount do not feel any shame, because "*they are well- pleased to remain with those who are left behind. And their hearts are sealed, so that they are unable to understand the truth.*" (Verse 87) Had they been able to understand it, they would have realized that it is when one strives for God's cause that one feels strong, leading a life of dignity and honour, and when one stays behind, one lives in weakness and abject humiliation.

Humility imposes its tax on human beings like dignity does. However, the tax imposed by humility is often heavier by far. Weak people may think that the tax of dignity is much too heavy, and try to evade it by accepting an abject position of humility. They live in fear and anxiety, thinking each loud cry a call to attack them. They remain in constant fear for their lives. Such people pay a far heavier tax than that which would have been required by a dignified life. The tax they pay for their humble living is taken from their honour, prestige, social standing, reputation, security and often also from their lives, although they may not readily perceive this. But who are these? They are the ones who "*are well pleased to remain with those who are left behind, and their hearts are sealed, so that they are unable to understand [the truth].*" (Verse 87)

"*But the Messenger and those who have believed with him*" are a totally different type of people. These "*strive in God's cause with their property and their lives.*" (Verse 88) They fulfil the duties imposed on them by their faith and work hard to achieve the dignity which cannot be attained while one stays behind. Hence, "*these shall have all the good things.*" (Verse 88) Such good things are of both the type enjoyed here in this life and the one attained in the life to come. In this world they enjoy dignity, honour and a position which guarantees that people respect what they say. In the hereafter, they receive the best and fullest reward, as they attain God's acceptance. "*These shall certainly prosper.*" (Verse 88) They prosper in this life as they enjoy good living, and they prosper in the life to come as they receive their mighty reward. "*God has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 89)

> *Some of the Bedouins who had excuses to offer turned up, begging to be granted exemption; while those who denied God and His Messenger stayed behind. Grievous suffering shall befall those of them that disbelieved.* (Verse 90)

The first group are the ones who have real excuses which merit their exemption. Hence no blame is attached to them for their request. The others have no real excuse. They stay behind and lie to God and His Messenger. The unbelievers among these have grievous punishment awaiting them. Those who repent and do not disbelieve

are not discussed here because they may face a different fate.

Eager but Without Means

The *sūrah* then provides a definitive statement with regard to who should join the army when there is a general call of mobilization. It is not obligatory that all people, whether able or not, should fight. Islam is a religion that does not overburden people. God does not charge anyone with more than he or she can bear. Those without the means or the ability to fight cannot be blamed because of their situation:

> *No blame shall be attached to the weak, the sick or those who do not have the means, if they are sincere towards God and His Messenger. There is no cause to reproach those who do good. God is Much forgiving, Merciful. Nor shall those be blamed who, when they came to request you for transport and you said: I have no means of transporting you turned away with their eyes overflowing with tears, sad that they did not have the means to cover their expenses.* (Verses 91-92)

Those who are weak because of a certain disability or old age, and those who are ill and do not have the physical strength to move and make the sort of effort required in war, and those who do not have the financial means to pay for their food and transport will not be blamed if they stay behind. They are, however, required to be sincere, providing honest advice and making whatever effort they can to protect the land of Islam, such as keeping guard or looking after the women and children of the fighters, or any other jobs that are of benefit to the community. No blame can be attached to them because they do the best they can. Blame is only attached to those who do wrong.

Nor is there any blame to be attached to those who may be physically able to fight but have no means of transport to take them to the battlefield. When they realize that they are unable to join the army for this reason, their eyes overflow with tears of sadness. Their feelings are genuine as they grieve at their inability to take part in a struggle for God's cause. This was true of a number of people at the time of the Prophet whose names are variously given in different reports but which all agree that the event was real indeed.

A report attributed to Ibn `Abbās mentions that "the Prophet ordered his Companions to get ready for a campaign. A group of his Companions, among whom was `Abdullāh ibn Mughaffil al-Māzinī, went to him and said: `Messenger of God, could you give us some mounts, for we have none.' The Prophet said to them: "*I have no means of transporting you.*" (Verse 92) They were weeping as they went away, because it hurt them not to be able to join the campaign and they could not find any

means of transport nor cover their own expenses. Hence God states their exemption in His revelation.

Mujāhid says that this verse refers to a group from Muqarrin, a clan of Muzaynah.

Muĥammad ibn Ka`b mentions seven people whom he lists by name and tribe. Ibn Isĥāq says in his report on the expedition to Tabūk: "A group of Muslims, seven in number, including Sālim ibn `Umayr, `Ilyah ibn Zayd, `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Ka ID, `Amr ibn al-Ĥamām ibn al-Jamūh, `Abdullāh ibn Mughaffal, Ĥaramī ibn `Abdullāh and `Iyād ibn Sāriyah, requested the Prophet for mounts as they were too poor to be able to find their own transport. He said to them: *"I have no means of transporting you."* (Verse 92) When they heard this they left with tears in their eyes, saddened at their inability to cover their own expenses.

With this spirit Islam was able to be victorious and establish its power. We should reflect on our own commitment in comparison to such people. If we believe that we possess some of their attributes, we may appeal to God for victory. Otherwise we should concentrate on improving our situation.

The issue is clear, then. The weak, disabled, ill and also those who are too poor to pay their own expenses and for whom the Prophet cannot provide transport will not be blamed for staying behind. The real blame attaches to those who come to the Prophet with their thinly disguised excuses, when they have the means to go to battle and have no real reason for staying behind. *"But blame shall certainly attach only to those who ask you for exemption even though they are rich."* (Verse 93)

It is the ones happy to stay behind that are to be blamed, because they have no real desire to take part in a struggle for God's cause. They do not give what is due to God when He has given them wealth and ability, nor do they fulfil their duties to Islam when it has given them power and dignity, or to their community which gives them protection and honour. Hence God's description of them: *"They are well pleased to be with those who are left behind."* (Verse 93) They are then weak of heart, spineless, and content, though without reason, to remain with those who stay behind for valid reasons such as women, children and disabled men who are exempt from *jihād.*

In view of this: *"God has sealed their hearts, so that they have no knowledge."* (Verse 93) With what they have preferred for themselves of laziness and inactivity, staying away from active participation in efforts that open new horizons for the Islamic cause, God has sealed their means of reception, feeling and understanding. No one prefers idle safety and miserable inactivity unless he has no aspiration for higher things and no motivation to participate in a community which seeks to make its mark on life and influence its direction. Indeed idleness and cheap comforts seal minds and hearts and inactivate feelings and interaction. Action is the mark of life and it also inspires life. Facing danger heightens senses, taps latent capabilities,

enhances physical ability and makes use of all potential. It makes human beings better able to utilize all their resources whenever there is a need to do so. All these may be included under the heading of knowledge of which those who prefer lazy comfort are deprived.

Hollow Excuses

The *sūrah* continues its description of those people of plentiful means who prefer to stay behind at a time when the Prophet and the Muslim community are marching to face a powerful enemy. There is something behind such preference with what it entails of adopting a humiliating attitude and being always evasive when asked to come clean and state their position openly.

"They shall come to you with their excuses when you return to them." (Verse 94) This is a piece of information which God gives to His Messenger and the faithful among his Companions. It tells them of what those hypocrites will be doing when the Muslims return from their arduous expedition. This confirms that these verses were revealed when the Muslim army was on its way back from the expedition, and before they had arrived in Madinah. The hypocrites would come with their excuses, because they would be ashamed to let their action be seen in its true light. It would be disgraceful to let it be seen with its real motives, which were a weak faith, a preference for personal safety and an unwillingness to fight a great power: *"Say: 'Do not offer any excuses, for we shall not believe you. God has already enlightened us about you.'"* (Verse 94) The Prophet is instructed to tell them to spare themselves the trouble of offering excuses, because they are not to be believed. It is no longer the case that these hypocrites can be taken on the basis of appearances. God has revealed the truth about them to His Messenger and He has informed him of their motives which are now *seen* for what they truly are. The Arabic expression used here is highly significant. The words indicating refusal to accept the excuses of the hypocrites are identical to those used in reference to being believers. This connotes verbal acceptance, rational trust, and inner faith and reassurance. It also involves a believer's trust in his Lord, and a mutual trust between all believers.

Those offering their excuses are told not to do so, because words are of no use. They need to show what they do. If their action confirms what they say, then their assertions will be true. If not, there can be no trust or acceptance. *"God will see how you act, and so will His Messenger."* (Verse 94) God sees every action and knows every secret hidden in every heart. He knows the real intentions of all His creation. The Prophet was to take what people say in conjunction with what they do. That would be the basis of internal relationships in the Muslim community.

Moreover, matters will not end in this life on earth. There will eventually come the

reckoning and the reward which will be based on God's absolute knowledge of what is done openly and what remains in people's hearts: *"In the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do."* (Verse 94)

The phrase *"beyond the reach of human perception"* means what people do not know, while *"what is manifest"* refers to what they see and what comes to their knowledge. God knows all this when the statement is read in this simple sense, but it also has a wider and more profound sense. God knows everything in this world which is seen and experienced, and He knows everything in the worlds beyond, of which we know nothing. There is an intended meaning in what God says to those whom He addresses in this verse: *"He will tell you what you used to do."* (Verse 94) They know what they do, but God — limitless is He in His glory — knows their doings better than they, and He will tell them about these. It is often the case that a person may not be aware of an inner motive for something he does. God knows it better than he. An action may very often produce an outcome that may remain unknown to the person who performed it. What is meant here is that God gives people the results of what they used to do. That is the reward they will have for their actions. Here, though, they are only informed and the reward itself is not specified.

> *When you return to them they will swear to you by God so that you may let them be. Let them be, then: they are unclean. Hell shall be their abode in recompense for what they used to do.* (Verse 95)

This is another piece of information given by God to His Messenger, telling him what the hypocrites will be doing when he and his faithful Companions return to Madinah; an encounter the hypocrites thought they would never return from. God knew, and He told His Messenger as much, that they would try to make their excuses easier to accept by swearing to their truth. By doing so, they hoped to make the Muslims overlook what they had done so that they might forgive them their negligence without question.

God instructs His Messenger to leave them alone, not as a sign of forgiveness, but as a sign of turning away from them, because they are abominable: *"Let them be, then: they are unclean."* (Verse 95) This gives a physical expression of mental impurity. They are not physically or bodily unclean, but they are unclean mentally, as a result of their actions. The physical description gives an image that is much more abominable, revolting and contemptible. They are more concerned with their personal safety than striving for the cause of the community and are hence described as unclean. Their impurity contaminates souls, spreads disease and fills people with disgust, just like a rotten, dead body left in their midst.

"*Hell shall be their abode in recompense for what they used to do.*" (Verse 95) They feel that they gain by staying behind, securing their safety and comfort and enjoying their wealth. The fact is that in this life they are unclean, while they waste their share of the life to come. They end up in utter loss. God certainly tells the truth.

The *sūrah* goes on to tell more of what they will do after the Muslim fighters return home: "*They swear to you trying to make you pleased with them. Should you be pleased with them, God shall never be pleased with such transgressing folk.*" (Verse 96) They first request the Muslims to overlook what they have done. Then, they gradually ask for more, trying to make the Muslims feel easy with them so that they can secure their own safety within the community. They want to ensure that the Muslims continue to accept their outward appearances, treating them on that basis, and not mounting a campaign against them as God has ordered them in this final, definitive description of relations between Muslims and hypocrites.

God makes it clear that they have transgressed by staying behind because their action is motivated by their lack of faith. He also tells the Muslim community that He will never be pleased with wrongdoing people, even though they may be able to win acceptance with the Muslims through their swearing and excuses. It is God's verdict that is final. People's acceptance, though they may be Muslims, will not change their position with God and will avail them nothing. The only way to win God's acceptance is to change their attitude and to embrace the true faith leading to God's pleasure.

God has thus revealed the true situation of those living among the Muslim community and staying behind without having any real cause for exemption. He has also defined the sort of relations that should prevail between the Muslim community and the hypocrites in the same way as He defined the relationship between this community and the idolaters on the one hand, and between it and the followers of earlier revelations on the other. This *sūrah* gives the details of this final verdict.

6
A Mosque for the Hypocrites

ٱلۡأَعۡرَابُ أَشَدُّ كُفۡرٗا وَنِفَاقٗا وَأَجۡدَرُ أَلَّا يَعۡلَمُواْ حُدُودَ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٞ ٩٧

The desert Arabs are more tenacious in unbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the ordinances which God has revealed to His Messenger. But God is All- knowing, Wise. (97)

وَمِنَ ٱلۡأَعۡرَابِ مَن يَتَّخِذُ مَا يُنفِقُ مَغۡرَمٗا وَيَتَرَبَّصُ بِكُمُ ٱلدَّوَآئِرَۚ عَلَيۡهِمۡ دَآئِرَةُ ٱلسَّوۡءِۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٩٨

Some desert Arabs regard what they may spend [for God's cause] as a loss, and wait for some misfortune to befall you. The evil turn of fortune will be theirs. God hears all and knows all. (98)

وَمِنَ ٱلۡأَعۡرَابِ مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡيَوۡمِ ٱلۡأٓخِرِ وَيَتَّخِذُ مَا يُنفِقُ قُرُبَٰتٍ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَصَلَوَٰتِ ٱلرَّسُولِۚ أَلَآ إِنَّهَا قُرۡبَةٞ لَّهُمۡۚ سَيُدۡخِلُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِي رَحۡمَتِهِۦٓۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٩٩

till other desert Arabs believe in God and the Last Day, and regard what they spend [for God's cause] as a means to bring them closer to God and of [their being remembered] in the Messenger's prayers. It shall certainly be for them a means of drawing near to God. God will admit them to His grace, for God is Much- forgiving, Merciful. (99)

وَٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ٱلۡأَوَّلُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُهَٰجِرِينَ وَٱلۡأَنصَارِ وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُم بِإِحۡسَٰنٖ رَّضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَرَضُواْ عَنۡهُ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي تَحۡتَهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡفَوۡزُ ٱلۡعَظِيمُ ١٠٠

As for the first to lead the way, of the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār, as well as those who follow them in [the way of] righteousness, God is well-pleased with them, and well-pleased are they with Him. He has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide for

ever. That is the supreme triumph. (100)

وَمِمَّنْ حَوْلَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ مُنَٰفِقُونَ ۖ وَمِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْمَدِينَةِ ۖ مَرَدُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنِّفَاقِ لَا تَعْلَمُهُمْ ۖ نَحْنُ نَعْلَمُهُمْ ۚ سَنُعَذِّبُهُم مَّرَّتَيْنِ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَذَابٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٠١﴾

Some desert Arabs around you are hypocrites, and so are some of the people from Madinah, who are indeed persistent in their hypocrisy. You do not know them, but We know them. Twice shall We punish them, and then they will be given over to a grievous suffering. (101)

وَءَاخَرُونَ ٱعْتَرَفُوا۟ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ خَلَطُوا۟ عَمَلًا صَٰلِحًا وَءَاخَرَ سَيِّئًا عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَتُوبَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٠٢﴾

There are others who have acknowledged their sins, after having mixed righteous deeds with evil ones. It may well be that God will accept their repentance. God is Much- forgiving, Merciful. (102)

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِم بِهَا وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ إِنَّ صَلَوٰتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَّهُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٠٣﴾

Take a portion of their money as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby; and pray for them: for your prayers are a source of comfort for them. God hears all and knows all. (103)

أَلَمْ يَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ يَقْبَلُ ٱلتَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَأْخُذُ ٱلصَّدَقَٰتِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Do they not know that it is God alone who accepts repentance from His servants, and He is truly the One who takes charitable offerings, and that God is the only One to accept repentance and bestow mercy? (104)

وَقُلِ ٱعْمَلُوا۟ فَسَيَرَى ٱللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُۥ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ۖ وَسَتُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

Say to them: 'Do as you will. God will see your deeds, and so will His Messenger, and the believers; and in the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do.' (105)

وَءَاخَرُونَ مُرْجَوْنَ لِأَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ إِمَّا يُعَذِّبُهُمْ وَإِمَّا يَتُوبُ عَلَيْهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ

And yet there are others who must await God's

حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٠٦﴾

judgement. He will either punish them or turn to them in His mercy. God is All- knowing, Wise. (106)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُواْ مَسۡجِدٗا ضِرَارٗا وَكُفۡرٗا وَتَفۡرِيقَۢا بَيۡنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَإِرۡصَادٗا لِّمَنۡ حَارَبَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ مِن قَبۡلُۚ وَلَيَحۡلِفُنَّ إِنۡ أَرَدۡنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡحُسۡنَىٰۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَشۡهَدُ إِنَّهُمۡ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

And there are those who have established a house of worship out of mischievous motives, to promote unbelief and disunity among the believers, and to provide an outpost for those who have already been warring against God and His Messenger. They will certainly swear: 'We have only the best of intentions.' God bears witness that they certainly are liars. (107)

لَا تَقُمۡ فِيهِ أَبَدٗاۚ لَّمَسۡجِدٌ أُسِّسَ عَلَى ٱلتَّقۡوَىٰ مِنۡ أَوَّلِ يَوۡمٍ أَحَقُّ أَن تَقُومَ فِيهِۚ فِيهِ رِجَالٞ يُحِبُّونَ أَن يَتَطَهَّرُواْۚ وَٱللَّهُ يُحِبُّ ٱلۡمُطَّهِّرِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

Never set a foot there. Only a house of worship that from the very first day has been founded on piety is worthy of you standing to pray there. In it are men who love to grow in purity, for God loves those who purify themselves. (108)

أَفَمَنۡ أَسَّسَ بُنۡيَٰنَهُۥ عَلَىٰ تَقۡوَىٰ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضۡوَٰنٍ خَيۡرٌ أَم مَّنۡ أَسَّسَ بُنۡيَٰنَهُۥ عَلَىٰ شَفَا جُرُفٍ هَارٖ فَٱنۡهَارَ بِهِۦ فِي نَارِ جَهَنَّمَۗ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

Who is better: a man who founds his building [motivated by a sense of] being God-fearing and seeking His goodly acceptance, or one who founds his building on the edge of a crumbling precipice, so that it tumbles with him in the fire of hell? God does not guide the wrongdoers. (109)

لَا يَزَالُ بُنۡيَٰنُهُمُ ٱلَّذِي بَنَوۡاْ رِيبَةٗ فِي قُلُوبِهِمۡ إِلَّآ أَن تَقَطَّعَ قُلُوبُهُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿١١٠﴾

The structure which they have built will continue to be a source of disquiet in their hearts, until their hearts are torn to pieces. God is All-knowing, Wise. (110)

Overview

This new passage gives an account of the different groups and classes that lived within the Muslim community at the time of the Tabūk Expedition. It describes those groups which were part of its overall structure and their true attitudes to faith as well as their deeds and distinctive characteristics.

We have outlined, in the Prologue to this *sūrah,* the historical causes that led to the presence of such different standards of acceptance of the faith among the Muslim community in Madinah. We will quote here the last few paragraphs in that introduction in order to remind ourselves of the general situation at the time and the circumstances influencing it in this way.

> The stubborn opposition of the Quraysh continued to act as a barrier preventing the advance of Islam into the rest of Arabia. The Quraysh tribe had the ultimate say in all religious matters in Arabia, and it exercised a very strong influence over economic, political and social matters. Hence its determined and uncompromising opposition to the new faith ensured that the rest of Arabia turned away from it, or at least adopted a wait-and-see attitude until the fight between the Quraysh and one of its children had produced a clear winner. When the Quraysh declared its submission, followed by the major tribes of Hawāzin and Thaqīf, and when the three main Jewish tribes in Madinah had previously been subdued, and those of Khaybar had been defeated, people embraced the new faith in flocks. The whole of Arabia submitted to Islam within one year.
>
> This rapid expansion in the geographical area of Islam heralded the resurgence, on an even more intensive scale, of all the symptoms experienced after the resounding victory the Muslims achieved in the Battle of Badr. The Muslim community had almost managed to rid itself of those, thanks to the seven-year-long education process it had enjoyed after that battle. The rapid geographical expansion of Islam in Arabia could have had some serious negative effects, had it not been for the fact that Madinah had become, in its entirety, the solid base of Islam. It was God Almighty who looked after the new faith and charted its course. He had prepared the first core of believers, the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anṣār,* to be the first solid base of Islam after the relatively important expansion that followed the victory at Badr. He also made the whole of Madinah the solid base which would withstand the great expansion brought about by the splendid triumph achieved when Makkah was won over to Islam. God certainly knows what forces to mobilize in support of His message.
>
> The first symptom of the new dangers appeared on the day of the Battle of Ĥunayn, mentioned in this *sūrah: "God has granted you His support on many a*

battlefield, and also in the Battle of Ĥunayn, when you took pride in your numerical strength, but it availed you nothing. For all its vastness, the earth seemed too narrow for you, and you turned back in flight. God then bestowed from on high an air of inner peace on His Messenger and on the believers, and He sent down forces whom you could not see, and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward for the unbelievers." (Verses 25-26)

One of the apparent reasons for the defeat at the beginning of the battle was that 2,000 of those the Prophet had pardoned in Makkah, and who embraced Islam after the fall of that city, had joined the 10,000-strong army which originally travelled from Madinah to subdue the Quraysh in Makkah. The presence of those 2,000 men alongside the others who came from Madinah was a cause of imbalance in the Muslim ranks. There was also the fact that the Hawāzin took the Muslims by surprise. What that meant was that the army did not wholly belong to the solid, well-knit base which had been nurtured over the several years separating the Battle of Badr and the conquest of Makkah.

Similarly, the negative symptoms that appeared at the time of the Tabūk Expedition were a natural result of this rapid expansion and the great influx of new Muslims with varying standards of faith. These symptoms are discussed fully in this *sūrah* in a long exposition with varied styles and methods of treatment.

Where Hypocrisy is Hardest

Bearing this in mind, we can now discuss the verses included in this passage: "*The desert Arabs are more tenacious in unbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the ordinances which God has revealed to His Messenger. But God is All-knowing, Wise. Some desert Arabs regard what they may spend [for God's cause] as a loss, and wait for some misfortune to befall you. The evil turn of fortune will be theirs. God hears all and knows all. Still other desert Arabs believe in God and the Last Day, and regard what they spend [for God's cause] as a means to bring them closer to God and of [their being remembered] in the Messenger's prayers. It shall certainly be for them a means of drawing near to God. God will admit them to His grace, for God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 97-99)

These verses begin with mentioning different classes of desert Arabs, some of whose tribes lived close to Madinah. Earlier, they had attacked the land of Islam in Madinah, but later, when they accepted Islam, they belonged to either one of the two groups mentioned in this passage. The descriptive outline of these groups begins with establishing a rule about their general nature: "*The desert Arabs are more tenacious in unbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the ordinances which God has*

revealed to His Messenger. But God is All-knowing, Wise." (Verse 97)

This description outlines a constant characteristic of desert and nomadic people, or bedouins. It is in their nature that they should be more tenacious in their unbelief and hypocrisy, and that they should be ignorant of God's directives as He reveals these to His Messenger. Their ignorance stems from their life circumstances and the way these affect them. Thus they grow up rather hostile, having little knowledge and less inclination to abide by rules and regulations, developing a strongly materialistic outlook. Faith modifies their nature, elevates their values and brings them to a wider and more sublime horizon.

There are countless reports which mention the bedouin's lack of refinement. Ibn Kathīr mentions some of these in his commentary on the Qur'ān:

> A bedouin attended the circle of Zayd ibn Ṣūĥān, a scholar who had a hand injured in the Battle of Nihāwand.[34] The bedouin said to him: "What you say is admirable, but your hand makes me worried." Zayd said: "What worries you about my hand? It is my left hand anyway." The bedouin said: "I am not sure which hand they cut, the right or the left." [He was referring to the punishment for theft which implied his suspicion that this respected scholar might have been punished for stealing.] Zayd said: "God certainly tells the truth, and so does His Messenger: "*The desert Arabs are more tenacious in unbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the ordinances which God has revealed to His Messenger."* (Verse 97)
>
> Imām Aĥmad relates on the authority of Ibn `Abbās that the Prophet said: "Whoever lives in the desert develops a rough edge, and whoever chases game loses concentration, and whoever attends rulers may yield to temptation." Because desert people are rough, God has not selected His Messengers from among them. Prophets have always been chosen from among city dwellers: *"We have only sent before you men from among city dwellers to whom We send down Our revelations."* (12: 109)
>
> When a bedouin gave a present to the Prophet, the Prophet gave him back a much more valuable gift so that he was well pleased. He then said: "I feel I should not accept any gift unless it comes from a man from the Quraysh, Thaqīf, the Anṣār or the Daws." Needless to say that these were far more gentle in character and behaviour, because they were the dwellers of the main centres in Arabia at the time, Makkah, Ṭā'if, Madinah and in Yemen respectively.

[34] The Battle of Nihāwand was a major battle the Muslims fought against the Persian Empire only a few years after the Prophet had passed away.

> Muslim reports on the authority of `Ā'ishah: "Some desert Arabs came in a delegation to meet God's Messenger. They asked whether the people of Madinah used to kiss their sons. When they were given an answer in the affirmative, they said: 'But we definitely would not kiss our sons.' The Prophet said: 'What can I do for you if God has taken mercy out of your hearts?'"[35]

The rough nature of the desert Arabs is well established, even after they had accepted Islam. It is only natural, therefore, that they would be harder in their stubborn rejection of the faith or in their hypocrisy. They were too brutal when victorious, and very hypocritical when subdued. They were aggressive and would observe no limits.

"God is All-knowing, Wise." (Verse 97) He knows His creation, their circumstances, characteristics and nature. He has given them a variety of talents, capabilities and specialities, and He made them into races, communities and nations. All this is in manifestation of His wisdom.

The Gap Separating Faith and Hypocrisy

Having given a general description of the desert Arabs, the *sūrah* classifies them further on the basis of what changes in their characteristics the faith has produced, and the gap that has emerged between hearts that have experienced the happiness generated by faith and those that remained unbelieving, hypocritical. This description is drawn against the background of the situation of the Muslim community at that time: *"Some desert Arabs regard what they may spend [for God's cause] as a loss, and wait for some misfortune to befall you. The evil turn of fortune will be theirs. God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 98) Most probably the hypocrites among the desert people are mentioned first in order to group them with the hypocrites in Madinah who were the subject of discussion in the previous passage. This complements the discussion of hypocrites from both areas.

"Some desert Arabs regard what they may spend [for God's cause] as a loss." (Verse 98) Such a person needs to give some of his money in *zakāt* and to contribute to the *jihād* campaigns. In this way he gives evidence of his being a Muslim and is thus able to enjoy the comforts of life in the Muslim community. He is also able to win favour with the Muslims who were the major power in Arabia. To him, what he spends is a clear loss which he is forced to pay. He does not give it out of any good will towards Islam or the Muslims. He does not like that they are victorious. Indeed his real attitude is quite different. He *"waits for some misfortune to befall you."* (Verse 98) He

[35] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-`Aẓīm.* Al-Maktabah al-`Aşrīyah, Beirut, 1996, Vol. 2, pp. 348-349.

would love to see the Muslims return from battle soundly defeated. He would be thrilled if misfortune befell them.

Hence a supplication against them is stated here. A supplication by God signifies certainty. Hence the supplication is given here in the form of a statement: *"The evil turn of fortune will be theirs."* (Verse 98) The Arabic expression describes evil as if it has a circle which closes in on them and from which they can have no escape. It turns them round and they are seized in the middle with no let up. This abstract notion, described in vivid and concrete terms, brings the meaning closer to our minds. *"God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 98) His hearing and knowledge are attributes which fit in perfectly with the atmosphere of ill intention, the waiting for misfortune to befall the Muslim community, and the hypocrisy that fills their hearts, although they try hard to conceal it. God certainly hears what they say, and He knows what they hide and what they keep in the open.

Another group however have experienced the happiness and delight that come with faith: *"Still other desert Arabs believe in God and the Last Day, and regard what they spend [for God's cause] as a means to bring them closer to God and [of their being remembered] in the Messenger's prayers. It shall certainly be for them a means of drawing near to God. God will admit them to His grace, for God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 99) What motivates these people to spend their money is their belief in God and the Day of Judgement. They have no fear of people, and they feel no need to flatter those in power. They make no calculation of profit and loss which they are likely to make in this world.

This group of believers wish that what they spend of their wealth will bring them closer to God and are eager to be remembered in the Prophet's prayers. That remembrance would demonstrate that he is pleased with them. His prayers are certainly answered by God as he devotes them to believers who spend their money for God's sake. The *sūrah* states clearly that what they give is indeed a means to give them what they wish of being close to God: *"It shall certainly be for them a means of drawing near to God."* (Verse 99) They are further given the news of an even happier destiny as a certain promise by God: *"God will admit them to His grace."* (Verse 99) Again mercy is described in rather concrete terms to set it in contrast with the `evil turn'. Mercy is described here as if it is a house into which they are admitted. *"God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 99) He accepts repentance and charity. He forgives past sins and bestows His mercy on those who seek it.

Those Who Lead the Way

Having classified the desert Arabs, now the *sūrah* classifies the whole community, in urban and desert areas alike, into four groupings: the vanguard who took the lead

among the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār* as well as those who followed in their footsteps, those who were hardened in their hypocrisy whether they lived in Madinah or in the desert nearby, those who combined good deeds with bad ones, and those whose cases were deferred for judgement. These groups are outlined in the following verses:

> *As for the first to lead the way, of the Muhājirīn and the Anşār, as well as those who follow them in [the way of] righteousness, God is well pleased with them, and well pleased are they with Him. He has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. Some desert Arabs around you are hypocrites, and so are some of the people from Madinah, who are indeed persistent in their hypocrisy. You do not know them, but We know them. Twice shall We punish them, and then they will be given over to a grievous suffering. There are others who have acknowledged their sins, after having mixed righteous deeds with evil ones. It may well be that God will accept their repentance. God is Much forgiving, Merciful. Take a portion of their wealth as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby; and pray for them: for your prayers are a source of comfort for them. God hears all and knows all. Do they not know that it is God alone Who accepts repentance from His servants, and He is truly the One who takes charitable offerings, and that God is the only One to accept repentance and bestow mercy? Say to them: Do as you will. God will see your deeds, and so will His Messenger, and the believers; and in the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do.' And yet there are others who must await God's judgement. He will either punish them or turn to them in His mercy. God is All-knowing, Wise.* (Verses 100-106)

It appears that these verses, making this classification, were revealed after the Prophet's return from Tabūk. By that time, different people, most of whom were hypocrites, had presented their excuses. The true believers who did not join the expedition made their real regret apparent, and some of them tied themselves to a pillar in the mosque declaring that they would not release themselves until the Prophet himself released them. Others did not make any excuses, hoping that God would accept their sincere repentance. These were three of the Prophet's Companions whose cases were not settled until God accepted their repentance, as will be discussed in full in Chapter 7. Together these groups represented the total variety of people around the Muslim area in Arabia after the expedition. God wanted to reveal the whole of the battlefield in front of His Messenger and the true believers with him. They would then understand the situation that prevailed at the time, which was close to the end of the first epoch, close to the time and birth place of this religion of Islam.

Such a revelation was necessary before the Islamic message made its move to liberate the whole of mankind throughout the globe. All communities needed to be liberated from serving any deities other than God, and from submitting themselves to anyone beside God. Before making such a move, the Muslim community needed to fully understand the prevailing situation so that it would be able to chart its course of action with clarity and a thorough perception of what was needed.

"*As for the first to lead the way, of the Muhājirīn and the* Anşār, *as well as those who follow them in [the way of] righteousness, God is well- pleased with them, and well pleased are they with Him. He has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 100) This class of Muslims, with its three groupings, the *Muhājirīn,* the *Anşār* and those who followed closely in their footsteps, formed the hard core of the Muslim community in Arabia after the conquest of Makkah. This was the group that ensured the unity of the Muslim community in every hardship as well as every period of ease and comfort. It is often the case that a trial of ease and comfort is more difficult to overcome than a trial of hardship.

In our view, this description of "*the first to lead the way*" refers to those of the *Muhājirīn* who migrated to Madinah before the Battle of Badr and the *Anşār* who embraced Islam in the same period as well. Those who "*follow them in the way of righteousness*" refers to those who followed the same course, were true believers, strove hard for God's cause and shared with them the sublime heights of faith. The earlier ones still enjoy a higher position on account of their response to the call of Islam in the early, hard period that preceded Badr.

Scholars have expressed different views about who were the *'first to lead the way.'* Some suggest that they were the ones to migrate or give their support before Badr, and others say they were the ones who were believers before the direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Makkah. Some also say that these were the ones who fought at Badr, while others are of the opinion that they were the believers before the signing of the peace agreement at al-Ĥudaybiyah, and still others say that they were the ones who accepted to fight to the finish in the pledge known as Riđwān. In our close study of the various stages of the building of the Muslim community, we feel that the view which we expressed earlier is the correct one, but God knows best.

We will quote here a few pages from the Prologue describing the different stages of building the first Muslim community for ease of reference:

> The Islamic movement in Makkah encountered difficulties right from the time when it was born. *Jāhiliyyah,* represented in this instance by the Quraysh, soon sensed the danger it was facing from the message declaring that `there is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is God's Messenger.' It realized

that this new message was an outright revolution against all authority not derived from God's own. It was a rebellion against all tyranny, seeking God's protection. *Jāhiliyyah* also sensed that the new message, led by God's Messenger, began to form a new organic grouping pledging sole and complete allegiance to God and His Messenger. Thus, it rebelled against the leadership of the Quraysh and the situation prevailing under *jāhiliyyah.* No sooner did the Quraysh sense this danger than it launched a determined attack on the new message, grouping and its leadership. It utilized in this attack all its power to inflict physical harm and to sow discord through intrigue and wicked designs.

In fact this *jāhiliyyah* society sought every means to defend itself against a danger it felt to threaten its very existence. This is the normal state of affairs whenever a movement begins to advocate God's Lordship in a community where Lordship is exercised by some people over others. Whenever such advocacy is undertaken by an organized movement that has its own leadership, it will be in direct confrontation with *jāhiliyyah* society, as the two cannot be accommodated within the same community.[36]

At this stage, every individual in the new Islamic grouping was subjected to oppression and persecution in every way, to the extent that many were killed. At the time, only a person who had dedicated himself and his life to God, and who was willing to endure persecution, hunger and even a ghastly death would join the new group, declaring his belief that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger.

In this way a solid foundation was established for Islam, comprising the most determined individuals in Arabian society. Others who could not endure the hardship succumbed to the pressure and reverted to unbelief. But there were very few of these because the issues were clear at the outset. It was only people of distinction that were willing to take the decisive step and join Islam, despite the great danger that such a move involved.

This is how God chose those rare elements to be the early supporters of His message and to form the solid foundation of Islam in Makkah, i.e. the *Muhājirīn,* then to join the early *Anşār* to form its core group in Madinah. Although the *Anşār* were not subjected to the same pressures and persecution as the *Muhājirīn,* the pledge they gave to the Prophet at `Aqabah indicated that they were equal to the task required by Islam. On that night when the pledge was given, as Ibn Kathīr reports, `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah said to the

[36] For a full discussion of this, refer to the commentary of Verses 8: 72-75, in Vol. 7, Chapter 4, pp. 169-182

Prophet: 'Stipulate whatever you wish for your Lord and yourself.' He said: As for my Lord, my condition is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And as for myself, my condition is that you protect me as you would protect yourselves and your property.' They asked: 'What will be our reward in return?' He said: 'Paradise.' They said: 'It is a profitable deal. We accept no going back and we will not go back on it ourselves.'

Those who made this deal with God's Messenger, seeking no reward other than Paradise, and declaring that they would accept no going back, either by themselves or the Prophet, were aware that it was no easy option they were undertaking. In fact, they were certain that the Quraysh would fight them determinedly, supported by all the other Arabs. They realized that they would never again be able to live in peace with *jāhiliyyah* which had its roots deep in the whole of Arabia, including the areas adjoining Madinah...

The *Anşār,* then, were fully aware of the likely consequences of their pledge once they had given it. They were also aware that they were not promised anything in this world in return for their efforts. They were not even promised victory over their enemies. The only reward they were promised was admittance into heaven. Yet they were still keen to offer their pledges. Hence, they were definitely with the early *Muhājirīn* in taking the necessary preparations so that they would constitute the solid foundation of the first Islamic society in Madinah.

Early Indications of Weakness

But the Madinah society did not maintain this level of purity despite the spread of Islam. Many people, especially those who were in positions of influence, felt they had to take a similar stand to their people in order to maintain their positions. When the Battle of Badr took place, the leading figure among these, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, thought that Islam had established firm roots and could not be easily dislodged. Hence, he pretended to be a Muslim. It was perhaps inevitable that many accepted Islam in order to keep abreast of their people. They were not hypocrites, but they had not fully understood Islam or moulded themselves according to it. This meant that the community in Madinah had different levels of commitment to the new faith.

At this point, the unique Islamic method of education began its work under the Prophet's supervision in order to mould these new elements. It aimed to achieve coherence within the Muslim community at the ideological, moral and behavioural levels.

When we read the *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, in the approximate order of their revelation, we note the great effort that aimed to absorb and remould the new elements in the Muslim community, particularly because there were always newcomers. This was the case despite the determined opposition of the Quraysh and its attempts to win other Arabian tribes to its side, and despite the wicked designs of the Jews and their efforts to marshal hostile forces to the new faith and its advocates. Hence, the effort to bring newcomers to the same level as the elite, for this was needed if they were to continue with determination.

Nonetheless, weaknesses continued to surface, particularly in times of difficulty. There were indications of hypocrisy, reluctance, unwillingness to make physical or financial sacrifices, and a general turning away from danger. There were also signs of confusion concerning the relationship between a Muslim and his non- Muslim relatives. Qur'ānic texts in different *sūrahs* provide a clear idea of these phenomena and the method the Qur'ān employed to deal with them....

The Process of Integration

However, the structure of the Muslim community in Madinah remained generally sound, because it essentially relied on its solid foundation, made up of the elite of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār.* This foundation gave the Muslim community its strong constitution that withstood all weakening elements and overcame all hazards that might have been brought in by newcomers who had not yet been integrated into it.

Gradually, these new elements were integrated into the solid core, and the numbers of the weak, the hypocrites, and those who lacked the ideological clarity that serves as the basis of all relations and ties dwindled. Shortly before the conquest of Makkah, the Muslim community in Madinah was very close to complete integration, providing the closest model of society Islamic education seeks to bring into existence.

There undoubtedly remained different levels of participation according to the various actions different individuals undertook for Islam. Some groups were distinguished by the dedication, work and sacrifice they made to serve God's cause. Examples of these were the earliest to believe in Islam among the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* the people of Badr, those who were party to the pledge given to the Prophet at al-Ĥudaybiyah, and generally those who donated and fought before the conquest of Makkah. Qur'ānic and *ĥadīth* texts, as well as the practical situation in the Muslim community confirmed these

distinctions that resulted from action taken for Islam...

That there were these different grades on the basis of strength of faith was no barrier to bridging the gap between them in the Madinah society before the conquest of Makkah. In fact, most of the apparent weaknesses within the ranks of the Muslim community were remedied, and their symptoms disappeared. Hence the whole of Madinah society could be considered as forming a solid Islamic basis.

However, when Makkah fell to Islam in year 8, followed by the surrender of the Hawāzin and the Thaqīf tribes, which were the last two large tribes to put up resistance to Islam, this ushered in a great influx of new Muslims. Needless to say, these were of different levels with regard to their outlook. Some among them were hypocrites, while others simply adopted Islam, the new overpowering force. Others still needed to be won over to Islam. Mostly, however, these were people who had not yet understood the fundamentals of Islam and their souls had not yet interacted with its values and principles.

This account clearly shows the position of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār* and those who followed them with regard to their strength of faith and readiness to sacrifice their all for God's cause. Theirs is a highly significant role in the building of the structure of the Muslim community and giving the message of Islam a practical manifestation. Their role will continue to influence every group of people who want to live their lives in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

"God is well pleased with them and well pleased are they with Him." (Verse 100) That God is pleased with them means that He will be rewarding them generously. Indeed His pleasure with them is the highest reward to which they may aspire. That they are pleased with Him means that they are reassured by being on His side, confident that whatever He determines for them is right and good. They are grateful when they receive His bounty and they remain steadfast when they endure hardship. However, usage of the term "*well pleased*" in both conditions imparts an air of total happiness, which is mutual between God and this elite group of His servants. It elevates this group to a high position in which they reciprocate God's feelings towards them when He is their supreme Lord and they are His servants whom He created. Language cannot adequately describe such a situation; it is merely felt as we read the Qur'ānic expression and reflect on it with an open mind and a spirit that aspires to the sublime.

That is their situation with their Lord. It is a permanent situation: *"God is well pleased with them and well pleased are they with Him."* The signs of this mutual pleasure await them: *"He has prepared for them gardens through which running waters flow, where they shall abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 100) What triumph can be

greater than this? It is indeed the supreme triumph.

Mixing Good Deeds with Bad Ones

The second group is in total contrast with the one we have just described: "*Some desert Arabs around you are hypocrites, and so are some of the people from Madinah, who are indeed persistent in their hypocrisy. You do not know them, but We know them. Twice shall We punish them, and then they will be given over to a grievous suffering.*" (Verse 101) We have discussed at length the nature of the hypocrites, whether they lived in Madinah or in the Arabian desert. The *sūrah* has given numerous examples of their attitude. Here, however, it points to a special type of hypocrite who acquired great skill in hiding their true attitude to the extent that they remain unknown to the Prophet, despite his profound insight and great experience. What is so special about such hypocrites?

God declares that such hypocrites were in Madinah, as well as among the nearby desert Arabs. He reassures His Messenger and the believers that the hypocrites' scheming will come to nothing. He also warns the hypocrites who were adept at hiding their true position that they will not escape God's punishment. Indeed their punishment will be doubled in this life as well as in the life to come. "*You do not know them, but We know them. Twice shall We punish them, and then they will be given over to a grievous suffering.*" (Verse 101) Perhaps the closest interpretation of the double punishment in this life is that they worry lest their reality be discovered by the Muslim community, and the punishment inflicted on them by the angels when they gather their souls, hitting them on their faces and backs. Alternatively, it refers to the pain they feel when they see the Muslims triumph over the forces of falsehood and their fear lest their true feelings are discovered. God knows best the precise meaning of His statement.

If those were the two extreme groups, there is a third one in between: "*There are others who have acknowledged their sins, after having mixed righteous deeds with evil ones. It may well be that God will accept their repentance. God is Much forgiving, Merciful. Take a portion of their wealth as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby; and pray for them: for your prayers are a source of comfort for them. God hears all and knows all. Do they not know that it is God alone who accepts repentance from His servants, and He is truly the One who takes charitable offerings, and that God is the only One to accept repentance and bestow mercy? Say to them: 'Do as you will. God will see your deeds, and so will His Messenger, and the believers; and in the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do.'*" (Verses 102-105)

The fact that God instructs His Messenger to take a certain action with this group

suggests that they were known in person to the Prophet. It is reported that these verses refer to a particular group who did not join the Prophet on the Tabūk Expedition, but soon regretted their action, admitted their guilt and repented. Their bad action was to stay behind, and their good action was their regret and repentance.

Al-Ṭabarī reports in his commentary on this verse: "It refers to Abū Lubābah and his companions who did not join the Prophet when he set out to Tabūk. When the Prophet approached Madinah on his way back they blamed themselves for staying behind. They said: `Do we stay behind enjoying food, comfort and the company of our women while the Prophet strives for God's cause enduring much hardship!' They tied themselves to pillars, determining not to release themselves unless the Prophet himself untied them. Only three among them did not tie themselves to pillars. When the Prophet saw what they did, he was told of their regret and their determination that they would be released only by him. He said: `I will not release them until I am commanded to do so, and I will not excuse them until God has accepted their regrets. They preferred to spare themselves the hardship of joining a campaign of Muslims.' God then revealed the verse: *"There are others who have acknowledged their sins, after having mixed righteous deeds with evil ones. It may well be that God will accept their repentance. God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 102) When God uses the expression *'it may well be'*, it signifies certainty.

There are several other reports, one of which suggests that it refers only to Abū Lubābah who alerted the Jews of Qurayżah to the death sentence awaiting them by making a sign of cutting his throat. This is highly unlikely, because these verses were revealed long after what happened then. Other reports suggest that it refers to the desert Arabs.

Al-Ṭabarī comments on these reports: "Perhaps the nearest to the truth is that which suggests that they refer to those who acknowledged their mistake when they stayed behind and did not join the *jihād* campaign with the Prophet when he marched out to face the Byzantines. Those were a group of people among whom was Abū Lubābah. We say that this is the closest to the truth because God — limitless is He in His glory — refers in this verse to a group of people who acknowledged their guilt. This means that they were not one person. All the reports we have make it clear that the only group to do so consisted of people who did not join the Prophet when he went on his expedition to Tabūk. We say that Abū Lubābah was among them because all commentators say so."

Having described this group of people who regretted their staying behind and repented having done so, the *sūrah* goes on to say: *"It may well be that God will accept their repentance. God is Much forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 102) As al-Ṭabarī has explained, when God says, *'it may well be,'* the expression suggests realization. It is a prospect raised by the One Who can fulfil it. The acknowledgement of error in this

way and feeling one's guilt are indications of an alert and sensitive conscience. Hence, repentance is likely to be accepted and forgiveness is likely to follow. God has certainly accepted their repentance and forgiven them.

God says to His Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him): "*Take a portion of their money as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby; and pray for them: for your prayers are a source of comfort for them. God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 103) Those were people with alert consciences which prompted their regret and repentance for what they had done. Hence they deserved to be reassured and to receive the sympathy which opened up for them hopeful prospects. As the Prophet was moulding a whole community and establishing a system, he felt he needed to wait for instructions from God regarding their cases. Al-Ṭabarī reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās: "When the Prophet released Abū Lubābah and his two Companions, they brought him some money and said: 'Take this money of ours and give it away as *Ṣadaqah,* i.e. charity, and pray for us.' In other words they requested him to pray for their forgiveness and for the purity of their souls. The Prophet said: `I am not taking any of it until I have received instructions.' God then revealed this verse: '*Take a portion of their money as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby; and pray for them: for your prayers are a source of comfort for them.*' (Verse 103) The Prophet then did as he was instructed."

Thus we see how God favoured them with His acceptance as He knew that they were good at heart, sincere in their repentance. He ordered His Messenger to take some of their money for charitable uses, and to pray for them. Taking charity from them brought them back as full members of the Muslim community. They could once again share in its duties and participate in meeting its responsibilities. They were thus neither rejected nor expelled. Their charitable donation added to the purity of their hearts. The Prophet's prayer on their behalf gave them reassurance.

"*God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 103) He hears supplications and prayers, and He knows what is in peoples' hearts. He judges all in accordance with what He hears and knows, for He is indeed the One who hears all and knows all. It is He who makes the final judgement on His servants, accepting their repentance and their charity. His Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), carries out what God commands. He does not initiate any part of this himself.

To establish this fact God says in the following verse: "*Do they not know that it is God alone who accepts repentance from His servants, and He is truly the One who takes charitable offerings, and that God is the only One to accept repentance and bestow mercy?*" (Verse 104) This is a form of question which signifies an emphatic statement, meaning: let them know that it is God who accepts repentance, takes charitable offerings and bestows mercy on His servants. None of this belongs to anyone beside God. As al-Ṭabarī says: "When the Prophet refused to release those who tied

themselves to the pillars after they had stayed behind, and when he did not accept their charity after their release, he was simply making it clear to all that none of this was within his authority. It all belonged to God alone. The Prophet himself would only do these things if he were authorized to do so."

Finally those who had repented after they had stayed behind are addressed directly: "*Say to them: 'Do as you will. God will see your deeds, and so will His Messenger, and the believers; and in the end you shall be brought before Him who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is manifest when He will tell you what you used to do.'*" (Verse 105) The Islamic system is based on faith as well as action that gives credence to professed beliefs. The real proof of their repentance is their action which is apparent to all. It is seen by God, His Messenger and the believers. In the hereafter, they are returned to the One whose knowledge encompasses what is manifest and what is thought to be hidden, as well as physical actions and inner feelings.

Regretting slips and mistakes and repenting past errors do not represent the end. It is the action that follows such repentance that counts. It may either give credence to such feelings of regret and build new actions on their basis or undermine them and deprive them of their value.

Islam is a practical code of living in which feelings and intentions count for little unless they are transformed into real action. A good intention has its place, but the final verdict is not determined on its basis. A good intention is added to the action following it in order to determine its value. This is the import of the *ĥadīth* in which the Prophet says: "Actions are but by intentions." So intention on its own is of little value unless it is acted upon.

Awaiting God's Judgement

The fourth group of people in the society that lived in Madinah and its surrounding area at the time of the revelation of this *sūrah* are left to God to judge in their case: "*And yet there are others who must await God's judgement. He will either punish them or turn to them in His mercy. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 106)

This is the fourth group of people who did not join the expedition, and whose cases were deferred for judgement. These were different from the hypocrites, the apologetic, and the repentant who admitted their error. Until the revelation of these verses, nothing had been determined in the case of this group. Their cases were left to God for judgement. Neither they nor anyone else were aware of what decision would be taken. It is reported that this verse speaks specifically about Murārah ibn al-Rabī`, Ka`b ibn Mālik and Hilāl ibn Umayyah. These three did not take part in the expedition out of laziness and in preference for the comforts of life at home to

marching in the desert heat. They were treated differently by the Prophet, and their cases will be discussed in full later.

Al-Ṭabarī reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās: "After the revelation of the verse which says, "*Take a portion of their money as charity, so that you may cleanse and purify them thereby,*" the Prophet took money from Abū Lubābah and his companions and gave it away in charity on their behalf. There remained three more who did not chain themselves like Abū Lubābah. They were neither excused nor given any mention. They were in dire trouble and felt the whole earth too tight for them. It is in reference to these that God says: "*And yet there are others who must await God's judgement. He will either punish them or turn to them in His mercy. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 106) Some people said that these people were ruined as no acceptance of their repentance had been mentioned, while others continued to hope that they would be forgiven by God. Thus, their cases were deferred for judgement by God Himself. Then the later verses were revealed which state: "*God has assuredly turned in His mercy to the Prophet, the* Muhājirīn *and the* Anşār, *who followed him in the hour of hardship, when the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered. Then again He turned to them in mercy; for He is compassionate towards them, merciful. And [so too] to the three who were left behind.*" (Verses 117-118) Thus they were included among those to whom God has turned in His mercy. This report sounds more authentic.

Since their cases were deferred for judgement, we prefer to postpone discussion of their cases till we discuss these later verses, God willing.

A Mosque to Promote Unbelief

> *And there are those who have established a house of worship out of mischievous motives, to promote unbelief and disunity among the believers, and to provide an outpost for those who have already been warring against God and His Messenger. They will certainly swear: 'We have only the best of intentions.' God bears witness that they certainly are liars. Never set a foot there. Only a house of worship that from the very first day has been founded on piety is worthy of you standing to pray there. In it are men who love to grow in purity, for God loves those who purify themselves. Who is better: a man who founds his building [motivated by a sense of] being God-fearing and seeking His goodly acceptance, or one who founds his building on the edge of a crumbling precipice, so that it tumbles with him in the fire of hell? God does not guide the wrongdoers. The structure which they have built will continue to be a source of disquiet in their hearts, until their hearts are torn to pieces. God is All-knowing, Wise.* (Verses 107-110)

The story of this mosque intended for mischief is prominent in the events of the

expedition to Tabūk. This is the reason for making specific mention of the hypocrites who built it. Their case is discussed at length after completing the discussion of the various groups of people in the Muslim society at the time.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr reports:

> The reason for the revelation of these verses is that before the Prophet's arrival in Madinah, there lived in it a man from the tribe of the Khazraj called Abū `Āmir and nicknamed al-Rāhib. He had adopted Christianity and read the Bible. He used to be a man of devotion before the advent of Islam, and he enjoyed a position of great honour among the Khazraj. When the Prophet arrived in Madinah and the Muslims there rushed to his support, Islam began to gather strength. Then the Prophet and his Companions achieved their resounding victory in the Battle of Badr, but Abū `Āmir was in distress at their success and he was now open with his hostility. He then left Madinah secretly and joined the unbelievers in Makkah encouraging them to fight God's Messenger. They gathered their forces and were joined by other tribes to attack Madinah for the Battle of Uĥud which was a test for the believers and the final outcome was in favour of those who were God-fearing.
>
> This evil man dug large holes in the ground in the area separating the two hosts. The Prophet fell into one of them and received an injury to his face, and his right lower front tooth was broken. There was a cut on his forehead. At the beginning of the battle, Abū `Āmir stepped forward and addressed his clansmen among the *Anşār,* calling on them to support him. When they recognized him and understood his purpose, they abused him, describing him as an enemy of God. He went back to the Quraysh saying some evil had befallen his people after he had left them.
>
> Before Abū `Āmir left Madinah, the Prophet had called on him to believe in God and he recited the Qur'ān to him, but he stubbornly refused. The Prophet then prayed that he would die in a far away land, without support. That was indeed his end. When the Battle of Uĥud was over and the Muslims were able to overcome its effects, he felt that the Prophet would move from strength to strength. He then fled to join Hercules, the Byzantine Emperor, and tried to persuade him to fight the Prophet. He promised him something to satisfy him and Abū `Āmir stayed in his court. He started to write to a group of hypocrites from his tribe, promising them that he would come at the head of a large army to defeat the Prophet. He asked them to establish an outpost where anyone he would be sending could stay, and where he himself would establish residence when he came. They started to build what ostensibly was a mosque at a place not far away from the Qubā' Mosque.

> The building was completed before the Prophet marched towards Tabūk. The hypocrites who built it came to the Prophet and asked him to come over and pray in their mosque, hoping that they would use that prayer as an endorsement of their action. They told the Prophet that they intended it to be used by the weak and the ill on a rainy night. However, God protected him against praying in such a place. He said to them: "We have embarked on a travel. So let it be until we come back, God willing." When the Prophet was on his way back from Tabūk, and at a distance of one day's travel from Madinah, or even less, the Angel Gabriel came down with the true story of this mosque intended for evil and to sow seeds of discord among the believers who used to pray in the Qubā' Mosque which was founded right from the first day on piety. The Prophet dispatched some of his Companions to pull this other mosque down before he arrived in Madinah.[37]

This is then the story of the mosque which was built by the hypocrites to further their designs against Islam. The Prophet was instructed not to pray there, but to pray in the first mosque built in the Islamic period, i.e. the Qubā' Mosque which was founded on piety right from the first day. It was frequented by people who were keen to do everything that helped them to grow in purity, and "*God loves those who purify themselves.*" (Verse 108)

Houses of False Worship

It was then at the time of the Prophet that a mosque for mischief making was built by the hypocrites, intended to scheme against Islam and to undermine the position of the Muslims. Its purpose was to promote unbelief and to provide a cover for those who plotted against the Muslim community, co-operating with the enemies of Islam while pretending to be believers. The same types of mosque are still being established in a great variety of forms, making use of advanced evil. These may take the form of an activity which ostensibly seeks to promote Islam, but works in reality to obliterate or disform it or to deprive it of its true character. They may also establish regimes or social orders which raise a false religious banner, when in reality they undermine Islam. They can also take the form of organizations, books and research which take on a religious guise in order to pacify those who feel ill at ease as they see Islam being attacked by its enemies. These organizations and books try to quieten their worries, reassuring them that Islam is still in a healthy position.

Because there are so many masks and disguised places of mischief, it is important that they should be known and identified. They should be made to appear in their

[37] Ibn Kathīr, op.cit., p. 353.

true colours, and their reality laid bare. If we do this, we will only be doing what was done to this mosque once its true nature was unmasked so clearly and powerfully: *"And there are those who have established a house of worship out of mischievous motives, to promote unbelief and disunity among the believers, and to provide an outpost for those who have already been warring against God and His Messenger. They will certainly swear: 'We have only the best of intentions.' God bears witness that they certainly are liars. Never set a foot there. Only a house of worship that from the very first day has been founded on piety is worthy of you standing to pray there. In it are men who love to grow in purity, for it God loves those who purify themselves. Who is better: a man who founds his building [motivated by a sense of] being God-fearing and seeking His goodly acceptance, or one who founds his building on the edge of a crumbling precipice, so that it tumbles with him in the fire of hell? God does not guide the wrongdoers. The structure which they have built will continue to be a source of disquiet in their hearts, until their hearts are torn to pieces. God is All-knowing, Wise."* (Verses 107-110)

The inimitable Qur'ānic style draws here a very vivid picture showing the end which awaits every deceptive structure built close to a real mosque or centre of piety, and intended to play the same role as that of the first such mosque built by the hypocrites of Madinah. It reassures the true advocates of faith who are keen to purge themselves of the evil designs of the enemies of Islam: *"Who is better: a man who founds his building [motivated by a sense of] being God-fearing and seeking His goodly acceptance, or one who founds his building on the edge of a crumbling precipice, so that it tumbles with him in the Fire of Hell? God does not guide the wrongdoers."* (Verse 109)

Let us pause for a moment to look at the solid foundations of a building established on fear of God. It is firm, solid and well established. Let us then look at the other side and see the swift and violent movement which shakes the deceptive structure. It is founded on the edge of a precipice which is crumbling, about to collapse. We see it now shaking, sliding and falling into a deep precipice. And that precipice is the fire of hell. For God provides no guidance for the unbelievers who have built this edifice to use it as a place of scheming against Islam and the Muslims.

This remarkably vivid scene which is full of movement is painted and brought alive with just a few words, which reassure the advocates of the truth that the scheming of the hypocrites and the unbelievers will come to nought. Thus those who build their structure on a proper foundation of fear of God will be able to face up to others who scheme against this religion of Islam.

The *sūrah* paints another remarkable scene showing the effects on the evil builders of their deceptive structure: *"The structure which they have built will continue to be a source of disquiet in their hearts, until their hearts are torn to pieces. God is All-knowing, Wise."* (Verse 110) The edge has crumbled and the ill-intended structure built on it has collapsed and fallen into the precipice, into the fire of hell, and good riddance!

Yet the effects of that building remain in the hearts of its builders in the form of doubt, worry and confusion. It will continue to deprive them of any comfort and stability until their hearts are torn into pieces and collapse from their positions.

The image of a collapsing building is complementary to that of doubt, instability and worry. The first depicts a physical picture and the other a mental one. Both are held side by side in the remarkable scene painted by the inimitable Qur'ānic style. They also complement each other in practical human situations in every age. The deviant schemer will always be shaken, confused, unstable, worried lest his reality is unmasked. This is perhaps the secret of the surpassing excellence of the Qur'ān. It depicts feelings with artistic beauty and remarkable complementarity and contrast. At the same time it maintains simplicity and clarity of expression and vividness in its imagery.

Beyond all this there is a definite purpose served by the unmasking of the true nature of the mosque built by the hypocrites, and by the classifying of the community into those levels of belief. Thus the path is charted for the Islamic movement and its field of operation is clearly drawn.

As it was revealed, the Qur'ān was providing leadership, direction and education for the Muslim community, and preparing it to undertake its great task. The Qur'ān will not be properly understood unless it is taken within its great field of operation. It will only be understood by people who undertake to move with it along its clear path.

7
The Earth's Suffocating Expanse

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱشۡتَرَىٰ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ
أَنفُسَهُمۡ وَأَمۡوَٰلَهُم بِأَنَّ لَهُمُ ٱلۡجَنَّةَۚ
يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَيَقۡتُلُونَ
وَيُقۡتَلُونَۖ وَعۡدًا عَلَيۡهِ حَقّٗا فِي
ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةِ وَٱلۡإِنجِيلِ وَٱلۡقُرۡءَانِۚ وَمَنۡ أَوۡفَىٰ
بِعَهۡدِهِۦ مِنَ ٱللَّهِۚ فَٱسۡتَبۡشِرُواْ بِبَيۡعِكُمُ
ٱلَّذِي بَايَعۡتُم بِهِۦۚ وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡفَوۡزُ
ٱلۡعَظِيمُ ١١١

God has bought of the believers their lives and their property, promising them heaven in return: they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed. This is a true promise which He has made binding on Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān. Who is more true to his promise than God? Rejoice, then, in the bargain you have made with Him. That is the supreme triumph. (111)

ٱلتَّٰٓئِبُونَ ٱلۡعَٰبِدُونَ ٱلۡحَٰمِدُونَ
ٱلسَّٰٓئِحُونَ ٱلرَّٰكِعُونَ
ٱلسَّٰجِدُونَ ٱلۡأٓمِرُونَ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ
وَٱلنَّاهُونَ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَٱلۡحَٰفِظُونَ
لِحُدُودِ ٱللَّهِۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١١٢

[It is a triumph for] those who turn to God in repentance, who worship and praise Him, who contemplate [God and His creation], who bow down and prostrate themselves, who enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and keep within the limits set out by God. Give you [Prophet] glad tidings to the believers. (112)

مَا كَانَ لِلنَّبِيِّ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَن
يَسۡتَغۡفِرُواْ لِلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ وَلَوۡ كَانُوٓاْ أُوْلِي
قُرۡبَىٰ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمۡ أَنَّهُمۡ
أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ١١٣

It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives, after it has become clear that they are

destined for the blazing fire. (113)

وَمَا كَانَ ٱسْتِغْفَارُ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ لِأَبِيهِ إِلَّا عَن مَّوْعِدَةٍ وَعَدَهَآ إِيَّاهُ فَلَمَّا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُۥٓ أَنَّهُۥ عَدُوٌّ لِّلَّهِ تَبَرَّأَ مِنْهُ ۚ إِنَّ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ لَأَوَّٰهٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿١١٤﴾

Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him; Abraham was most tender-hearted, most clement. (114)

وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيُضِلَّ قَوْمًۢا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَىٰهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُبَيِّنَ لَهُم مَّا يَتَّقُونَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

Never will God let people go astray after He has given them guidance until He has made plain to them all that they should avoid. God has perfect knowledge of all things. (115)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۚ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿١١٦﴾

To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He alone gives life and causes death. Besides God, you have none to protect or support you. (116)

لَّقَد تَّابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَى ٱلنَّبِىِّ وَٱلْمُهَٰجِرِينَ وَٱلْأَنصَارِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُ فِى سَاعَةِ ٱلْعُسْرَةِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا كَادَ يَزِيغُ قُلُوبُ فَرِيقٍ مِّنْهُمْ ثُمَّ تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِهِمْ رَءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١٧﴾

God has assuredly turned in His mercy to the Prophet, the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, who followed him in the hour of hardship, when the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered. Then again He turned to them in mercy; for He is compassionate towards them, Merciful. (117)

وَعَلَى ٱلثَّلَٰثَةِ ٱلَّذِينَ خُلِّفُوا۟ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا ضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْأَرْضُ بِمَا رَحُبَتْ وَضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ أَنفُسُهُمْ وَظَنُّوٓا۟ أَن لَّا مَلْجَأَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّآ إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَتُوبُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلتَّوَّابُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١١٨﴾

And [so too] to the three who were left behind: when the earth, vast as it is, seemed to close in upon them, and their own souls had become too constricted, they realized that there was no refuge from God except by returning to Him. He then turned to them in mercy, so that they might repent. God is indeed the One who accepts

repentance, the merciful. (118)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَكُونُواْ مَعَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿١١٩﴾

Believers, have fear of God and be among those who are truthful. (119)

مَا كَانَ لِأَهْلِ ٱلْمَدِينَةِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ أَن يَتَخَلَّفُواْ عَن رَّسُولِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا يَرْغَبُواْ بِأَنفُسِهِمْ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ لَا يُصِيبُهُمْ ظَمَأٌ وَلَا نَصَبٌ وَلَا مَخْمَصَةٌ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا يَطَـُٔونَ مَوْطِئًا يَغِيظُ ٱلْكُفَّارَ وَلَا يَنَالُونَ مِنْ عَدُوٍّ نَّيْلًا إِلَّا كُتِبَ لَهُم بِهِۦ عَمَلٌ صَٰلِحٌ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

It does not behove the people of Madinah and the bedouins who live around them to hold back from following God's Messenger, or to care for themselves more than for him; for, whenever they endure thirst, stress, or hunger for the sake of God, or take any step which would irritate the un- believers, or inflict any loss on the enemy, a good deed is recorded in their favour. God does not suffer the reward of those who do good to be lost. (120)

وَلَا يُنفِقُونَ نَفَقَةً صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً وَلَا يَقْطَعُونَ وَادِيًا إِلَّا كُتِبَ لَهُمْ لِيَجْزِيَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَحْسَنَ مَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢١﴾

And whenever they spend anything for the sake of God, be it little or much, or traverse a valley [in support of God's cause], it is recorded for them, so that God will give them the best reward for what they do. (121)

۞ وَمَا كَانَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِيَنفِرُواْ كَآفَّةً ۚ فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِن كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِّنْهُمْ طَآئِفَةٌ لِّيَتَفَقَّهُواْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ وَلِيُنذِرُواْ قَوْمَهُمْ إِذَا

It is not desirable that all the believers should go out to fight. From every section of them some should go forth, so that they may acquire a deeper knowledge of the faith and warn their people when they return to them, so that they may take

رَجَعُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهِمۡ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَحۡذَرُونَ ١٢٢

heed. (122)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ قَٰتِلُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ يَلُونَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡكُفَّارِ وَلۡيَجِدُواْ فِيكُمۡ غِلۡظَةٗۚ وَٱعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ١٢٣

Believers, fight those of the unbelievers who are near you, and let them find you tough; and know that God is with those who are God-fearing. (123)

وَإِذَا مَآ أُنزِلَتۡ سُورَةٞ فَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَقُولُ أَيُّكُمۡ زَادَتۡهُ هَٰذِهِۦٓ إِيمَٰنٗاۚ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ فَزَادَتۡهُمۡ إِيمَٰنٗا وَهُمۡ يَسۡتَبۡشِرُونَ ١٢٤

Whenever a sūrah is revealed, some of them say: 'Which of you has this strengthened in faith?' It certainly strengthens the believers in their faith, and so they rejoice. (124)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٞ فَزَادَتۡهُمۡ رِجۡسًا إِلَىٰ رِجۡسِهِمۡ وَمَاتُواْ وَهُمۡ كَٰفِرُونَ ١٢٥

But as for those whose hearts are diseased, it only adds wickedness to their wickedness, and so they die unbelievers. (125)

أَوَلَا يَرَوۡنَ أَنَّهُمۡ يُفۡتَنُونَ فِي كُلِّ عَامٖ مَّرَّةً أَوۡ مَرَّتَيۡنِ ثُمَّ لَا يَتُوبُونَ وَلَا هُمۡ يَذَّكَّرُونَ ١٢٦

Do they not see that they are tested once or twice every year? Yet they do not repent, and they do not take warning. (126)

وَإِذَا مَآ أُنزِلَتۡ سُورَةٞ نَّظَرَ بَعۡضُهُمۡ إِلَىٰ بَعۡضٍ هَلۡ يَرَىٰكُم مِّنۡ أَحَدٖ ثُمَّ

Whenever a sūrah is revealed, they look at one another [as if to say]: 'Is anyone watching?' Then they turn away. God has turned their hearts away, for they are people devoid of understanding.

(127)

ٱنصَرَفُواْ ۚ صَرَفَ ٱللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُم بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

Indeed there has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves: one who grieves much that you should suffer; one who is full of concern for you; and who is tender and full of compassion towards the believers. (128)

لَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُم بِٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢٨﴾

Should they turn away, then say to them: "God is enough for me! There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne. (129)

فَإِن تَوَلَّوْاْ فَقُلْ حَسْبِيَ ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ ۖ وَهُوَ رَبُّ ٱلْعَرْشِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿١٢٩﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* outlines a number of final rulings that govern the Muslim community's relations with other groups and communities. It starts with defining the relationship between a Muslim and his Lord, the nature of Islam and an outline of Islamic duties and methods of action.

- Embracing Islam is described as a deal in which the buyer is God while the believer is the seller. Since it is a sale to God, believers have no say over anything in their lives. Neither their property nor their person can be withheld from serving God's cause. The final product is that God's word should be supreme, and all submission is made to God alone. The price a believer receives in this deal is admittance into heaven, which is far superior in value to the commodity he offers. Therefore, he receives it as a favour from God: *"God has bought of the believers their lives and their property, promising them heaven in return: they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed. This is a true promise which He has made binding on Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān. Who is more true to his promise than God? Rejoice, then, in the bargain you have made with Him. That is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 111)
- The people who enter into this deal are a select few with distinctive qualities, some of which apply to them in their direct relationship with God, their

feelings and the worship they offer. Their other qualities are concerned with the duties under this deal, which requires them to work for the establishment of the divine faith on earth, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and to see to it that God's bounds are respected: *"[It is a triumph for] those who turn to God in repentance, who worship and praise Him, who contemplate [God and His creation], who bow down and prostrate themselves, who enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and keep within the limits set out by God. Give you [Prophet] glad tidings to the believers."* (Verse 112)

- The verses that follow in this passage show that relations between the believers who make this deal and all others, including their close relatives, are severed. The two groups move in opposite directions, towards opposite ends. Those who are party to this deal go to heaven, while the others go to hell. The two meet neither in this world nor in the next. Hence, blood relationships cannot establish a bond between the two: *"It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives, after it has become clear that they are destined for the blazing fire. Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him; Abraham was most tender-hearted, most clement."* (Verses 113-114)
- A believer's loyalty must be purely to God. It is on the basis of this unified loyalty that all ties and bonds are established. Here we have a clear statement by God clarifying all issues and leaving no room for error. It is more than enough for the believers that they have God's protection and support. With these promised by the One who is the master of the universe, they need nothing from anyone else: *"Never will God let people go astray after He has given them guidance until He has made plain to them all that they should avoid. God has perfect knowledge of all things. To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He alone gives life and causes death. Besides God, you have none to protect or support you."* (Verses 115-116)
- With the nature of the deal being such, reluctance to join an expedition serving God's cause is a very serious matter. However, God has pardoned those whom He knew to have good intentions and a firm resolve to do their duty after having once failed. Thus, He turned to them in mercy: *"God has assuredly turned in His mercy to the Prophet, the* Muhājirīn *and the* Anṣār, *who followed him in the hour of hardship, when the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered. Then again He turned to them in mercy; for He is compassionate towards them, merciful. And [so too] to the three who were left behind: when the earth, vast as it is, seemed to close in upon them, and their own souls had become too constricted,*

they realized that there was no refuge from God except by returning to Him. He then turned to them in mercy, so that they might repent. God is indeed the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful." (Verses 117-118)

- This is followed by a clear definition of the duties of the people of Madinah and the Bedouins that live nearby on account of' their pledges given to the Prophet. It should be remembered that those formed the solid base of the Muslim community that was the standard-bearer of Islam. Strong objections are raised to staying behind, coupled with a clear statement of the terms of the deal and the actions to be taken in fulfilment of those pledges: *"It does not behove the people of Madinah and the bedouins who live around them to hold back from following God's Messenger, or to care for themselves more than for him; for, whenever they endure thirst, stress, or hunger for the sake of God, or take any step which would irritate the unbelievers, or inflict any loss on the enemy, a good deed is recorded in their favour. God does not suffer the reward of those who do good to be lost. And whenever they spend anything for the sake of God, be it little or much, or traverse a valley [in support of God's cause], it is recorded for them, so that God will give them the best reward for what they do."* (Verses 120-121)
- This encouragement to go forth on *jihād* for God's cause is coupled with a clarification that shows the limits of general mobilization, particularly after the land area of the Muslim state had become much bigger and the number of Muslims increased manifold. It is now feasible that only some of them should go to fight the enemy and acquire a more profound knowledge of the faith. The rest should stay behind to look after the needs of the community, provide logistic support and discharge other duties. All these efforts converge at the end: *"It is not desirable that all the believers should go out to fight. From every section of them some should go forth, so that they may acquire a deeper knowledge of the faith and warn their people when they return to them, so that they may take heed."* (Verse 122)
- The next verse defines the line the *jihād* movement should follow after the entire Arabian Peninsula has become the base of Islam. Now *jihād* should mean fighting the unbelievers all together, so that all oppression is ended and people submit only to God. The same applies *to jihād* against the people of earlier revelations until they pay the submission tax: *"Believers, fight those of the unbelievers who are near you, and let them find you tough; and know that God is with those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 123)
- Now that a full clarification of the pledge and the responsibilities it lays down, and the line the Muslim community should follow is given, the *sūrah* provides two contrasting pictures showing the opposite attitudes of the believers and unbelievers towards the Qur'ān as it is being revealed. Needless to say, the

Qur'ān opens up positive responses to faith within people's hearts, outlines practical duties, and censures the hypocrites for their paying no heed to reminders and tests: *"Whenever a sūrah is revealed, some of them say: 'Which of you has this strengthened in faith?' It certainly strengthens the believers in their faith, and so they rejoice. But as for those whose hearts are diseased, it only adds wickedness to their wickedness, and so they die unbelievers. Do they not see that they are tested once or twice every year? Yet they do not repent, and they do not take warning."* (Verses 124-126)

- The final two verses of the *sūrah* describe the Prophet's concern and compassion for the believers. The Prophet himself is directed to place his trust totally in God and to pay little heed to those who reject God's guidance: *"Indeed there has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves: one who grieves much that you should suffer [in the life to come]; one who is full of concern for you; and who is tender and full of compassion towards the believers. Should they turn away, then say to them: 'God is enough for me! There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne."* (Verses 128-129)

This brief outline of this final passage reflects the strong emphasis placed on *jihād,* the alignment of loyalties on the basis of faith, the advocacy of the Islamic faith throughout the world, in line with the terms of the pledge of loyalty required of believers. This pledge is shown here as a deal by which believers sell their lives and property in return for heaven. This means fighting to establish the divine order, with the emphasis on God's sovereignty over people and land. No acknowledgement of sovereignty to anyone else can be condoned.

Perhaps this quick outline of the passage shows the extent of defeatism that overwhelms people who try hard to explain the Qur'ān in such a way that limits *jihād* to the narrow sense of defending the `land of Islam'. Yet the verses here declare very clearly the need to fight unbelievers who live next to this land of Islam, without reference to any aggression they might have perpetrated. Indeed their basic aggression is the one they perpetrate against God as they submit themselves and other people to deities other than Him. It is this type of aggression that must be fought through *jihād* by all Muslims.

A Very Special Contract

God has bought of the believers their lives and their property, promising them heaven in return: they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed. This is a true promise which He has made binding on Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān. Who is more true to his promise than God? Rejoice, then, in the bargain you have made with Him. That is the supreme triumph. (Verse 111)

I have heard this verse recited and have read it myself countless times over a long period starting from when I first memorized the Qur'ān and later when I used to recite and study it over a period of more than a quarter of a century. But when I began to reflect on it in order to write about it in this commentary, I began to understand it in a way that did not occur to me previously.

It is an inspiring verse, revealing the nature of the relationship between the believers and God, and the nature of the deal they make with God when they adopt Islam and which remains in force throughout their lives. Whoever makes this deal and remains true to it is the one who may truly be described as a believer reflecting the nature of faith. Otherwise his claim to be a believer remains short of proof.

The nature of this deal, or this contract of sale, as God graciously describes it, is that He has taken for Himself the souls and property of the believers, leaving them nothing of all that. They do not retain any part of that which they would feel too dear to sacrifice for His cause. They no longer have any choice whether to spend it in furthering His cause or not. It is indeed a deal that has been concluded and sealed. The buyer may do what He likes, as He pleases, with what He has bought. The seller has no option other than to fulfil the terms of the deal. He cannot argue or make any choices. He can only do what the deal specifies. The price given for this purchase is paradise, and the way to be followed by the sellers is that of *jihād,* fighting and sacrificing their lives, and the end result is either victory or martyrdom.

"*God has bought of the believers their lives and their property, promising them heaven in return: they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed.*" (Verse 111) Whoever is party to this deal, signing the contract, paying the price agreed is a true believer. It is with the believers that God has made this deal of purchase. He has bestowed His grace on them by specifying a price. He is, after all, the One who gives life and property to all His creation, and He has also given human beings the ability to make a choice. He then bestowed further grace on human beings by making them able to make contracts, even with God Himself, and holding them to their contracts. He makes the honouring of their contract an evidence of their humanity, while going back on it is evidence of sinking back to the level of animals, and the worst of animals: "*Indeed, the worst of all creatures in God's sight are the ones who have denied the truth, and therefore will not believe; those with whom you have concluded a treaty, and then they break their treaty at every occasion, entertaining no sense of fearing God.*" (8: 55-56) He has also made the honouring or violation of such deals the criterion of reckoning and reward.

It is indeed an awesome deal, but it remains binding on every believer who is able to honour its terms. He is not to be exempt from it unless he goes back on his faith. Hence the sense of dread that I feel now as I am writing these words. "*God has bought of the believers their lives and their property, promising them heaven in return: they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed.*" (Verse 111) My Lord, we certainly need Your help.

The deal fills us with awe. Yet those who are claiming to be Muslims everywhere, from the far east to the far west are sitting idle, unwilling to strive hard in order to establish the fundamental truth of God's Lordship on earth, or to remove the tyranny which usurps the qualities of Lordship over human life on earth. They are unwilling to fight, kill and be killed for God's cause, and unwilling to undertake a struggle that does not involve fighting and sacrificing one's life.

These words touched the hearts of the early Muslims at the time of the Prophet and were transformed into a reality that they would experience in life. They were not mere words carrying certain abstract meanings for contemplation and reflection. They were meant for immediate implementation. This is how `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah felt at the time of the second pledge given by the *Anşār* to the Prophet at `Aqabah as reported by Muĥammad ibn Ka`b al-Qurażī and others: " `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah asked God's Messenger to specify God's conditions and his own conditions. The Prophet said: `As for God, the condition is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And as for myself, the condition is that you protect me like you protect yourselves and your property.' He said: 'What do we get in return if we fulfil these terms?' The Prophet said: 'Paradise.' They all said: 'This is a profitable deal. We accept no going back and we will not go back on it ourselves.'"

That is how they felt about the whole contract: it was a profitable deal that allows no going back by either party. They treated it as a final deal concluded and sealed, with no opting out clause. The price, which is paradise, is paid, not deferred. Is it not a promise made by God Himself? Is He not the purchaser? Is He not the One who has made an old promise specifying the price in all His revelations: *"This is a true promise which He has made binding on Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān."* (Verse 111)

"Who is more true to his promise than God?" (Verse 111) Indeed a promise by God is certain to be honoured. No one fulfils his promises like He does.

Jihād, or striving for God's cause, is a deal made by every believer, ever since the first Messenger was sent to mankind with a religion setting out the principles of faith. It is a course of action that is necessary to put life on a proper footing. Without it human life will not follow its right course. It is as God says in the Qur'ān: *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted."* (2: 251) And He also says: *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, monasteries, temples, houses of worship and mosques, wherein God's name is often praised, would have been pulled down."* (22: 40)

A True Promise and a Profitable Deal

The truth must certainly move along its well-known way, and it is inevitable that

falsehood should try to obstruct its march. The true faith revealed by God must set forth to liberate all mankind from submission to other creatures and to return them to serve and submit to God alone. Tyranny is certain to try to stop it and foil its efforts. The aim of the faith is to reach all corners of the world and liberate all mankind. The truth must set out along its way, without hesitation in order to prevent falsehood from gaining access to it. As long as unbelief and falsehood continue to exist anywhere in the world, and as long as people continue to submit to beings other than God, thus causing man to be humiliated, then striving for God's cause must continue. The deal made by every believer must be fulfilled, or else he is not a believer. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "Whoever dies without having joined a campaign of *jihād,* or at least considered joining it, betrays an aspect of hypocrisy." [Related by Aĥmad, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

"Rejoice, then, in the bargain you have made with Him. That is the supreme triumph." (Verse 111) Yes, people should rejoice at having dedicated their souls and their property for God's cause in return for admittance into heaven, as God Himself has promised. What does a believer miss out on when he honours his part of the deal? He certainly does not miss out on anything. He is certain to die anyway, and his wealth is certain to go, whether he spends it to serve God's cause or in any other way. Being in paradise is a great gain which a believer actually gets for nothing, since the price he offers would be gone anyway, whichever course of action he follows.

We need not mention the position of honour man attains when he conducts his life in line with what God requires of him. If he attains victory, then it is a victory achieved to make God's word supreme, to establish the faith God has revealed and to liberate God's servants from subjugation by human beings. If he attains martyrdom, then he is a martyr sacrificing his life for God's cause, making a testimony that he values his faith as more precious than his life. At every moment and at every step he feels himself to be stronger than the shackles and bonds of life, and that the burdens of this earthly life cannot stop his march. His faith triumphs over pain, and over life itself.

On its own this is a great victory, because it represents the fulfilment of man's humanity through his release from the burdens of his needs. When admittance to heaven is added as a reward, then the sale he has made calls for him to rejoice as it represents a great triumph indeed: *"Rejoice then in the bargain you have made with Him. That is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 111)

We need to pause here a little to reflect on God's statement which says: *"This is a true promise which He has made binding on Himself in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān."* (Verse 111) The promise God has made in the Qur'ān to those who strive for His cause is well known and is repeated several times. It leaves no room for any doubt about the fact that striving for God's cause is an essential part of the Islamic

way of life as revealed by God Himself. Such striving is indeed the means to counter any human situation, at any place or time. It is to be remembered that the state of ignorance, *or jāhiliyyah,* is found in a human grouping or community that resorts to physical force to protect itself. It is not a theoretical concept standing in opposition to another. It takes practical steps to resist the divine faith and to overcome any Islamic grouping that upholds it. It prevents people from listening to the general declaration Islam makes which emphasizes that God is the only Lord to whom all human beings should submit; the declaration that ensures the liberation of all mankind throughout the world from submission to creatures of any sort. It actually stops people from joining the liberated Islamic community. Hence Islam has no choice but to confront the physical power that protects *jāhiliyyah* groupings, which, in turn, try their utmost to crush the Muslim revivalist groups and suppress their declaration announcing the liberation of mankind.

God's promise in the Torah and the Gospel to those who strive for His cause needs clarification. The Torah and the Gospel that are today in circulation cannot be described as the ones which God — limitless is He in His glory — revealed to His Messengers, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them both). Even the Jews and the Christians do not claim that. They agree that the original versions of these Scriptures are not in existence. What they have today was written long after the revelation of these books, when all that was left was the little committed to memory after more than one generation. Much was added to that small memorized portion.

Nevertheless there remain in the Old Testament clear references to *jihād* and much encouragement to the Jews to fight their pagan enemies in order to ensure the triumph of their faith. Having said that, we should remember that distortion has crept into their concept of God and what striving for His cause means.

On the other hand, the Gospels that circulate among Christians today do not include any reference to *jihād.* We must, however, revise the concepts people have of the nature of Christianity, because these are taken from those Gospels which are not authentic, a fact conceded by Christian scholars. Besides, their lack of authenticity has been stated by God Himself in His last book, the Qur'ān, which admits no falsehood whatsoever. And in the Qur'ān God says clearly that His promise to grant heaven to those who strive for His cause, kill and be killed, was spelled out in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān. This is, then, the true fact which no counter argument can disprove.

What this statement means is that *jihād,* or striving for God's cause, is a deal binding on everyone who believes in God, ever since God sent messengers to mankind to preach His faith. But striving for God's cause does not mean rushing to fight the enemy. It is the practical translation of a principle of faith which influences the feelings, attitudes, behaviour and worship of the believers. Those with whom

God has made this deal reflect their faith by their true characteristics outlined in the next verse.

The Characteristics of True Believers

> *Those who turn to God in repentance, who worship and praise Him, who contemplate [God and His creation], who bow down and prostrate themselves, who enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and keep within the limits set out by God. Give you [Prophet] glad tidings to the believers.* (Verse 112)

The first of these qualities is that they "turn to God in repentance." They appeal to Him for forgiveness, regretting any slip they may make and resolving to turn to Him and follow His guidance in their future days. They will not revert to sin. They will endeavour to do only good actions in order to make their repentance a reality. It is then a means of purging themselves of the effects of temptation and of mending their ways so that they can earn God's acceptance.

"Who worship and praise Him." (Verse 112) They submit and dedicate their worship to Him alone, acknowledging that He is God, the only Lord. This is a basic quality of theirs which is manifested by their worship, and also by their dedicating all their actions and statements to the pursuit of God's pleasure. Their worship, then, is meant as a practical confirmation of their belief in God's oneness. They praise God acknowledging His grace which He bestows on them. They praise Him continuously, in times of happiness and in times of adversity. When they are happy they praise God for His blessings, and when they go through difficult times they praise Him because they know that the difficulty is a test which they need to pass. They realize that God will show them His mercy when they prove their metal by going through the test with their faith unshaken. True praise is not that expressed only in times of ease and happiness. It is the praise genuinely expressed in times of adversity, recognizing that God, the Just and Merciful, would not put a believer through a trial unless it is eventually for his own good. A believer may not know that at the time, but God certainly knows it.

"Who contemplate [God and His creation.]" (Verse 112) The meaning of the Arabic term which is translated here in this fashion is not readily apparent. There are several interpretations of what it means.

Some people suggest that it refers to those who leave their homes to support God's cause, while others suggest that it refers to those who strive hard for its triumph. Other scholars suggest that it refers to those who travel in pursuit of knowledge, and still others say that it refers to people who fast. We feel that the interpretation we have chosen is closer to its meaning. It is in reference to such a

quality that God says elsewhere in the Qur'ān: "*In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed signs for men endowed with insight, who remember God when they stand, sit and lie down, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: 'Our Lord, You have not created all this in vain. Limitless are You in Your glory. Guard us, then, against the torment of the fire.'*" (3: 190-191) The quality of contemplation and reflection is better suited to the context here. With repentance, worship and praising of God comes the quality of reflecting on God and His dominion which will inevitably lead to turning to Him, acknowledging His wisdom manifested in all His creation. The contemplation and reflection are not meant for their own sake or for gaining more knowledge of the world around us, but they should be made the basis on which human society is built.

"*Who bow down and prostrate themselves.*" (Verse 112) They attend to their prayers which becomes an essential part of their life. Praying is thus made one of their distinctive characteristics.

"*Who enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong.*" (Verse 112) When a Muslim community that conducts its life in accordance with God's law is established, making clear that it submits to God and no one else, then the quality of enjoining the doing of what is right and forbidding what is wrong is seen to be fully operative within this community. It addresses any errors of implementation of, or deviation from, the code of living God has revealed. But when there is no Islamic community which gives supremacy to the implementation of God's law, then this quality of enjoining what is right should be addressed totally to the most important thing, which is acceptance of God's oneness, submission to His authority and the establishment of a truly Islamic community.

Similarly, the forbidding of what is wrong should also address the greatest wrong, namely, submission to authorities other than God's through enforcing laws that are at variance with His law. Those who responded to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and believed in his message, migrated, and strove to establish the Muslim state that implements God's law and a Muslim community that is governed on its basis. When this was achieved, they continued to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, addressing matters that related to the details of worship or violation of the Islamic code of living. They never spent any time addressing these details before the establishment of the Islamic state and its Muslim community, because these details only arose as a later and practical development. The concept of doing what is right and forbidding what is wrong must be understood in the light of reality. No matter of detail, whether right or wrong, need be addressed before the basic and essential one is completed, as happened when the first Islamic community came into being.

"*And keep within the limits set out by God.*" (Verse 112) That is to say, they make sure

of the implementation of God's law in their own life and in the life of the community, and they resist anyone who tries to forestall it. Like the previous one, this quality can only work in a Muslim community governed by God's law in all its affairs. By definition, such a community acknowledges God's sovereignty as the only God, Lord and Legislator, and rejects any authority which seeks to implement laws that are not revealed by God. Efforts must concentrate first of all on the establishment of such a community. Only when it comes into being, will those who *"keep within the limits set out by God"* have their rightful place in it, as happened in the first Islamic community.

Such is the Islamic community with whom God has made this deal, and such are its distinctive qualities: repentance brings a human being back to God's way, stops him from committing sin and motivates him to do what is right; worship maintains a close relationship with God and sets the winning of His pleasure as people's aim; praising God in times of happiness and in adversity is a manifestation of total submission to Him alone and complete trust in His justice and wisdom; reflecting on God's attributes and the signs that indicate His wisdom and perfection of creation; enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong to expand people's role so as to ensure that the whole community is set on the right course; and keeping within the limits set out by God to ensure their implementation and to prevent any violation.

Such is the believing community which is bound by a deal with God which guarantees heaven in return for their lives and property which they sell to God. It thus implements a rule that has been in force since the start of the divine faith, and the revelation of God's first message to mankind. The deal means fighting for God's cause with the aim of making His word supreme, killing those who stand in opposition to God's message or falling as martyrs in the continuing battle between the truth and falsehood, Islam and *jāhiliyyah,* God's law and tyranny, divine guidance and error.

Life is not all play, or all enjoyment and eating as animals eat. Nor is it cheap, humble safety and comfort. True living means doing what is necessary in support of the truth, striving for the cause of goodness, the achievement of victory for God's cause or sacrificing one's life for that, and then earning God's pleasure and admittance into heaven. This is the true life which the believers are called upon to seek: *"Believers, respond to the call of God and the Messenger when he calls you to that which will give you life."* (8: 24)

An Example to Follow

The believers whose lives and property God has bought in return for His promise to admit them to paradise are a unique community, because faith is their only bond which unites them and makes of them a well-knit community. This *sūrah* which

outlines the relationship between the Muslim community and others who do not belong to it also makes a final judgement in respect of relationships not based on this bond, particularly after the rapid expansion of the Muslim community following the conquest of Makkah, when large numbers of people embraced Islam without being fundamentally affected by its way of life. They continued to attach great importance to blood relations. The verses that follow sever the ties that existed in the past between the believers who have made this deal and those who have not taken part in it, even though they may be related to them by blood. This is because they have two different courses to follow and two widely different ends in the hereafter.

> *It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives, after it has become clear that they are destined for the blazing fire. Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him; Abraham was most tender-hearted, most clement. Never will God let people go astray after He has given them guidance until He has made plain to them all that they should avoid. God has perfect knowledge of all things. To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He alone gives life and causes death. Besides God, you have none to protect or support you.* (Verses 113-116)

It appears that some Muslims used to pray to God to forgive their parents who were unbelievers, and to request the Prophet to pray for their forgiveness. These verses were then revealed to state that such prayer was evidence of their continued attachment to blood relations which was unacceptable from true believers. It was not right or up to them to do so. But the question arises here: how can the believers be certain that those relatives were destined for hell-fire? Most probably that ensues once those relatives die without having accepted the divine faith, when they can no longer believe.

Faith is the great bond that regulates all human bonds and relationships. If it is severed then all other bonds are uprooted. There can be no more value for bonds of blood or marriage relationships, or bonds of race and nationality. It is either that faith unites people and maintains their bonds, or there are no relationships when faith does not exist: "*Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him; Abraham was most tender-hearted, most clement.*" (Verse 114)

Abraham's example in this regard should not be followed, because he was only fulfilling a promise which he made to his father to pray for his forgiveness in the hope that he would follow God's guidance. At the time Abraham said to his father: "*Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to*

me. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest." (19: 47-48) When his father died an unbeliever and Abraham realized that he was an enemy of God, he disowned him and severed all relations with him.

"Abraham was most tender-hearted, most clement." (Verse 114) He used to pray to God very often and with great sincerity. He was also clement and he would forgive those who treated him badly. His father ill-treated him but he was forbearing. Yet only when he realized that there was no hope that he would ever believe in God, did he give up on him.

It has been reported that when these verses were revealed those believers who were in the habit of praying for the forgiveness of their relatives feared that they might have gone far astray because their action was against God's law. The following verse was then revealed to reassure them that no punishment could be incurred prior to a clear definition of error: *"Never will God let people go astray after He has given them guidance until He has made plain to them all that they should avoid. God has perfect knowledge of all things."* (Verse 115)

God does not hold against people anything He has not made clear that they should avoid. He does not let them go astray because of certain actions unless these are of a type which He has clearly forbidden them in advance. Human knowledge is limited and it is God alone who has perfect knowledge of all things. God has made this religion easy to follow, explaining what should be done and what should be avoided with all clarity. He has left certain things without giving a clear verdict on them. This is done on purpose to make things easier for people. He has made it clear that we need not ask about those matters where a clear verdict has not been given, lest such questioning should lead to more restrictions. Hence no one may forbid what God has not clearly forbidden.

At the end of this passage, in an atmosphere which calls for abandoning blood ties and being ready to sacrifice one's life and property, the *sūrah* makes a clear statement that it is God alone who protects and supports the believers. He is the One who has sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and it is He who controls life and death: *"To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth; He alone gives life and causes death. Besides God, you have none to protect or support you."* (Verse 116) All property, all human beings and all creation, the heavens and the earth, life and death, support and protection are all in God's hands. To maintain a strong tie with Him is sufficient for anyone.

These categorical statements concerning blood relations indicate the hesitation that some people might have shown and their leaning at one time to such ties and at another to their bond of faith. It is fitting that this final definition is made in this *sūrah*

which outlines the final shape of the relationship between the Muslim community and other communities. It was not permissible to pray to God to forgive those who died unbelievers. This is meant to purge the hearts of believers from any lingering bonds. The only tie to unite the advocates of Islam is that of faith. It is an aspect of their conceptual beliefs and also of their method of action. This is made abundantly clear in this *sūrah.*

Acceptance of Repentance

With the nature of the deal between God and the believers being such, to refrain from joining *a jihād* campaign by people who are able to do so is a very serious matter indeed. Hence it was necessary to examine why some people were reluctant to join such an expedition. The passage we are looking at explains how much grace God bestows on the believers, overlooking their hesitation and their slips, serious as these may be. It also speaks of the three people whose cases were deferred for judgement.

> *God has assuredly turned in His mercy to the Prophet, the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, who followed him in the hour of hardship, when the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered. Then again He turned to them in mercy; for He is compassionate towards them, merciful. And [so too] to the three who were left behind: when the earth, vast as it is, seemed to close in upon them, and their own souls had become too constricted, they realized that there was no refuge from God except by returning to Him. He then turned to them in mercy, so that they might repent. God is indeed the One who accepts repentance, the merciful.* (Verses 117-118)

That God turned in His mercy to the Prophet should be understood with reference to the events of this expedition as a whole. It seems to be in line with what God said earlier to the Prophet: *"May God forgive you [Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay behind] before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars?"* (Verse 43) That was when some of them who were really able to join the expedition came to him with fabricated excuses and he allowed them to stay behind. God pardoned him for his attitude which was based on his own discretion. He is told that it would have been better to wait until he had learnt who really had valid reasons for staying behind.

As for turning in mercy to the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anṣār,* the verse outlines its causes. They are the ones *"who followed him in the hour of hardship, when the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered."* (Verse 117) Some of them were slow to join the Muslim army, but they joined as it marched, as will be given in detail. These were among the most sincere of believers. Others listened to the hypocrites as they tried to

dissuade the believers from going out to confront the Byzantines whom they described as fearsome fighters. Those, however, joined the army after their initial reluctance.

We will review briefly some of the events of this expedition in order to capture a sense of the prevailing atmosphere which God describes as `the hour of hardship.' This may give us an insight into the feelings and actions that shaped the different attitudes.[38]

An earlier verse in the *sūrah* gives the following instructions: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (Verse 29) Upon receiving this revelation the Prophet instructed his Companions to get ready to fight the Byzantines. [It should be noted here that the first engagement against the Byzantines was at the Battle of Mu'tah which preceded the revelation of these verses. Hence, these orders simply outline a permanent course of action which the Muslim community should always follow.]

This call to arms occurred at the height of the summer, when resources were scarce, the weather was extremely hot, and when fruits had ripened. At such a time people would prefer to stay at home and do very little work; travelling in the desert was almost unbearable. It was the Prophet's habit, whenever he intended to attack any people that he would not specify the particular place he was going to, or the particular people he wanted to attack, hoping to take his enemies by surprise. This time, the difficulties presented by the journey made him inform the Muslims exactly where they were going, so that they could prepare themselves as best as they could for the difficult task ahead.

Some hypocrites went to the Prophet seeking leave to stay behind, giving the absurd excuse that they might be infatuated with Byzantine girls when they saw them, and he let them stay. It is in connection with this that God remonstrated with the Prophet, but this remonstration opens with the statement that God has pardoned the Prophet and turned to him in mercy: "*May God forgive you [Prophet]! Why did you grant them permission [to stay behind] before you had come to know who were speaking the truth and who were the liars?*" (Verse 43) In their reluctance to join the campaign *of jihād,* and the doubts they raised about the truth of the Islamic message and their hostility to the Prophet, the hypocrites advised one another not to join the army because the hot summer was not a suitable time for war. Commenting on this, the following verse was revealed: "*They said [to one another]: 'Do not go to war in this heat.'*

[38] This account is a consolidated summary of the detailed reports of the Tabūk Expedition given in *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah* by Ibn Hishām, *Imtā` al-Asmā`* by al-Maqrīzī, as well as *Al-Bidāyah wa'l-Nihāyah* and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-`Aẓīm,* both by Ibn Kathīr.

Say: 'The fire of hell is far hotter' Would that they understood. They shall laugh but a little, and they will weep much, in return for what they have earned." (Verses 81-82)

The Prophet was informed that a group of hypocrites were meeting in the house of a Jew called Suwaylim to discourage people and dissuade them from joining the expedition. He sent Ṭalĥah ibn `Ubaydullāh with a group of his Companions giving them instructions to burn the house down. Ṭalĥah carried out the Prophet's instructions. One of the people inside called al-Daĥĥāk tried to run away from the back of the house and he fell and broke his leg, but later repented. The others also jumped to safety.

The Prophet then gave orders to his Companions to speed up their preparations and urged those with money and property to spend generously, and to provide camels and horses for those who had none. Many of those who were rich came forward with generous donations. The one who gave the greatest donation was `Uthmān ibn `Affān. One report suggests that `Uthmān's donation was 1,000 dinars (which was the gold currency). The Prophet said: "My Lord, be pleased with `Uthmān, for I am pleased with him."

Another report transmitted by Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal says: "When the Prophet made his speech encouraging his Companions to donate generously, `Uthmān said: `My commitment is to provide 100 camels with all their equipment.' As the Prophet descended one step from the pulpit, `Uthmān made a further equal commitment. The Prophet came one step further down and `Uthmān increased his commitment to 300 camels, fully equipped. The Prophet was so deeply touched by the donation made by `Uthmān that he waved with his hand to express his admiration. He also said: "`Uthmān will not suffer in consequence of anything he does in future.'

Other reports mention the donations given by various people, each according to his means. `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn `Awf brought a donation of 4,000 dirhams (the silver currency at the time). He said to the Prophet: "All I own is 8,000 dirhams. I brought one half and kept the other half." The Prophet said to him: "May God bless you for what you have kept and what you have donated." Abū `Aqīl brought a quantity of dates and said: "Messenger of God, I have only some dates and I brought half of what I have, retaining the other for my family." The hypocrites spoke ill of him, saying he only did this to remind the Prophet of his poverty. They further asked: would God and His Messenger be in need of this amount of dates?

A Turn of Mercy

Some Muslims were so poor that they could not find transport for themselves to join the army. There were seven people, mostly from the *Anşār,* who could obtain neither a camel nor a horse. They, therefore, went to the Prophet to explain their

situation and requested him to provide them with some transport. The Prophet explained that he had nothing available. All the horses and camels were allotted to other people and he had none left. The seven men went back to their homes with tears in their eyes. They were made entirely helpless by their poverty.

Two of the seven men, `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Ka`b and `Abdullāh ibn Mughaffil, were still in tears when they met a man called Yāmīn ibn `Umayr. He asked them why they were crying and they told them that they were prevented from joining the army by their poverty and the fact that the Prophet did not have any spare camels to give them. He offered them a camel of his own to share between them and also gave them some dates to eat on their journey. Thus they were able to join.

Another report speaks of another man among the seven, `Ilbah ibn Zayd. That night, knowing he could not join the army, he prayed for a long while. He reflected on the situation and tears sprang to his eyes. Then he addressed God with this emotional prayer: "My Lord, You have commanded us to go *on jihād* and You have encouraged us not to abandon this duty. Yet You have not given me what I need in order to be able to go on this campaign. Your Messenger cannot give me any means of transport. I, therefore, give in charity to every Muslim any right which I hold against him for a wrong he has done to me, whether in matters of money or self or honour."

The following morning, the man joined the dawn prayers as he always did. The Prophet asked, "Where is the man who was charitable last night?" Nobody replied. The Prophet repeated the question and said, "Let this man stand up." `Ilbah stood up and explained to the Prophet what he had done. The Prophet said, "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, this has been credited to you as *zakāt* accepted by God."

The Prophet then ordered the Muslims who joined him to march. There were about 30,000 in the army, made up of the people of Madinah and the bedouin tribes in the surrounding area. A few individuals among the Muslims did not join the army, although they did not entertain any doubt about the truth of Islam, or their duty to be in the army. Among these were Ka`b ibn Mālik, Murārah ibn al- Rabī` and Hilāl ibn Umayyah, [these were the three whose cases will be discussed in detail shortly] and also Abū Khaythamah and `Umayr ibn Wahb al-Jumaĥī. The Prophet ordered his forces to encamp at a place called Thaniyyat al-Wadā`, just outside Madinah, while Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, known as the chief of the hypocrites, encamped with his followers separately a short distance apart. One report by Ibn Isĥāq suggests that his group was claimed to be of similar strength, but this was highly unlikely. Other reports confirm that those who actually stayed behind were less than one hundred. When the Prophet moved on, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy stayed behind along with other hypocrites.

The Prophet and his army then started their march. The going was very tough indeed. It was only natural that among the 30,000 who were in the army, there would be some who might not be able to keep pace with the rest. Every time a man fell behind, his case was reported to the Prophet. Every time the Prophet gave the same answer: "Leave him alone. If he is good, God will see to it that he will catch up with you. If he is otherwise, good riddance."

At one stage of the journey, a man of no lesser standing in the Muslim community than Abū Dharr, one of the *Muhājirīn* and also among the earliest of them to accept Islam, was falling behind. His camel was no longer able to keep pace with the army. Some people went to the Prophet to report the fact, but he gave them the same answer: "Leave him alone. If he is good, God will see to it that he will catch up with you. If he is otherwise, good riddance."

Abū Dharr gave his camel every chance to pick up strength. He then realized that it was useless: the camel was absolutely exhausted. Feeling that there was no alternative, Abū Dharr dismounted, took his belongings off his camel and walked at a fast pace, hoping to catch up with the Prophet.

Soon, the Prophet stopped for a short while to allow the army a little rest. This stop gave Abū Dharr the chance to catch up. Someone standing near the Prophet pointed to the direction from which Abū Dharr was coming and said, "Messenger of God, there is a man walking alone in our trail." The Prophet said, "Let it be Abū Dharr." When the man drew nearer, they said: "Messenger of God, it is indeed Abū Dharr." The Prophet said, "May God have mercy on Abū Dharr: he walks alone, dies alone and will be resurrected alone."

One of the few believers who stayed behind in Madinah was Abū Khaythamah. A few days after the army had moved out, he went back home to rest on a day when it was extremely hot. He had two wives.

At home, there were all the comforts one needed on such a hot day. Each of his two wives had prepared her sitting place in a well-shaded area of the yard. Each had prepared food and cold water for her husband. When he came in, he looked at his two wives and what they had prepared for him. He reflected a little, then he said to his wives: "God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is suffering the burning sun and the stormy wind, while I, Abū Khaythamah, enjoy the cool shade and delicious food in the company of two pretty women in my own home? This is unfair. By God, I will not enter either of your two places until I have caught up with God's Messenger. Prepare some food for me to keep me going on my journey." When the food was prepared, he mounted his camel and went as fast as he could. He did not manage to catch up with the army until it arrived at Tabūk.

On his way, Abū Khaythamah met `Umayr ibn Wahb al-Jumaĥī, who was also

travelling fast to catch up with the army. Apparently, `Umayr had some good reason for his delay. The two travelled together until they were close to Tabūk. Abū Khaythamah then said to `Umayr: "I have perpetrated something bad. It may be advisable for you to slow down a little until I catch up with the Prophet (peace be upon him)."

`Umayr slowed down and Abū Khaythamah continued to travel at speed. When his figure was visible to the army encamping at Tabūk, some of the Prophet's Companions drew his attention to the person travelling alone. The Prophet said: "Let it be Abū Khaythamah." When the man drew nearer, they said: "Messenger of God, it is indeed Abū Khaythamah."

When he reached the place where the Prophet was, he dismounted and greeted the Prophet. The Prophet spoke to him a phrase which implied warning. Interpreters suggest that it meant that he, Abū Khaythamah, had brought himself very close to destruction. Abū Khaythamah related his story, and the Prophet prayed to God to forgive him.

The Hour of Difficulty

One factor that contributed to the difficulty facing the Muslims was the attitude of the hypocrites who not only tried to seek excuses for themselves to stay behind, but also tried to show the decision to fight the Byzantines as lacking careful planning and consideration.

A report mentions that a group of hypocrites, including Wadī`ah ibn Thābit, as well as a man called Makhshī ibn Ĥimyar, an ally of the tribe of Salamah, were with the Muslim army when the Prophet headed for Tabūk. Some of them tried to frighten the believers and spread doubt in their ranks. They said: "Do you think fighting the Byzantines the same as internal warfare between Arabian tribes? We can even now see how you will all be taken captive tomorrow and will be put in chains." Makhshī said: "I wish we could escape with only 100 lashes each, without having verses of the Qur'ān revealed to expose us as a result of what you have said."

The Prophet was informed of this and he said to `Ammār ibn Yāsir: "Rush to those people for they are burnt. Ask them about what they have said and if they deny it, tell them that they have said these very words." `Ammār went to them and told them exactly what the Prophet said. They came to the Prophet to apologize. Wadī`ah ibn Thābit said to the Prophet as he mounted his camel, and Wadī`ah holding its reins: "Messenger of God, we were only talking idly and jesting." Makhshī said: "Messenger of God, my name and my father's name prevented me from leaving these people." (This is a reference to the fact that he was only an ally occupying a weak position.) He was the one among those to whom this verse refers who was

pardoned. He changed his name to `Abd al-Raĥmān and appealed to God to grant him martyrdom where his body would not be found. He was killed when he was fighting with the Muslim army at Yamāmah against the apostates. His body was lost without trace.

Another report suggests that when the Prophet and the Muslim army were on the way back from Tabūk, a group of hypocrites tried to assassinate him by throwing him from the top of a high peak along the road. He was informed of their design. He ordered the bulk of the army to travel through the valley, while he went up the mountain trail, instructing two of his trusted Companions, `Ammār ibn Yāsir and Ĥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, to go with him. `Ammār held the rein of his she-camel while Ĥudhayfah drove it. They were followed by that group of hypocrites trying to catch up with them, having drawn their headcovers over their faces to hide their identities. When the Prophet heard the sound of their camels travelling close behind, he was angry. Ĥudhayfah recognized how angry he was, and he went back towards them. He held out his shield to stop their camels. When they saw him, they thought that their scheming was discovered. So they made haste to join the bulk of the army and mix among them. Ĥudhayfah went back to the Prophet who instructed him and `Ammār to make haste until they passed the peak of the trail, and rejoined the road. They stopped for the army to catch up with them.

The Prophet asked Ĥudhayfah whether he recognized those people? He said: "I could only see their camels as it was dark when I met them." The Prophet asked both his Companions: "Do you know what those people were after?" When they answered in the negative, he told them of their conspiracy, and named them asking his two Companions to keep that information to themselves. They wondered: "Messenger of God, should you not order their execution?" He said: "I hate that people should say that Muĥammad is killing his Companions." Another report suggests that the Prophet told only Ĥudhayfah of their names.

As for the hardship encountered by the Muslims in this expedition, a number of reports give us a clear picture of it. Some of these emphasize that the expedition took place at a time of scarcity, in the height of a very hot summer, when provisions and water were in extremely short supply. Qatādah, an early scholar, says: "They set out to Tabūk when it was burning hot, and they encountered great difficulty. It is reported that two men would share a single date. Indeed a few men would all share one date, with one of them sucking it a little and drinking some water, then he would give it to another to do the same, and so on. God then turned to them in mercy and brought them back safely."

Al-Ṭabarī, a leading historian and scholar, mentions a report that `Umar was asked about the difficulty. He answered: "We marched with the Prophet to Tabūk. We encamped at a place where we were so thirsty that we felt our throats were

cracking with thirst. Any one of us might go out looking for water, and by the time he came back he would have felt his throat cut. Any of us might slaughter his camel and take out its inside, extracting all the fluid to drink. He would place the rest over his belly."

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Tabarī mentions the following comments on this verse: "*God has assuredly turned in His mercy to the Prophet, the* Muhājirīn *and the* Anşār, *who followed him in the hour of hardship.*" (Verse 117) This refers to the scarcity of funds, transport, equipment, provisions and water. "*When the hearts of a group of them had almost faltered.*" (Verse 117) They almost deviated from the truth. With all the difficulties they encountered, doubts might have crept in about the Prophet's message. "*Then again He turned to them in mercy.*" (Verse 117) He guided them to revert to the truth and to show real steadfastness. "*He is compassionate towards them, Merciful.*" (Verse 117)

These reports depict for us a picture of the reality of the Muslim community at the time. We see a whole spectrum of different standards of faith. We see those who had unshakeable faith, and those who were seriously shaken as a result of the hardship, as well as those who stayed behind, although they had no doubt about the truth of Islam or their duty to join the expedition. We also *see* a whole range of hypocrisy, with some hypocrites adopting a soft attitude and others speaking out bluntly, and still others conspiring to kill the Prophet. This gives us an impression of the overall structure of society at the time. It also shows us how hard this expedition was, not only in respect of a fearsome enemy but also in terms of the hardship faced by the Muslim community. It was a test to the core so that people could prove their metal. Perhaps it was intended by God to serve as such.

The Case of One Honest Man

Such was the hardship which some people tried to evade. The majority of these were hypocrites, and their case has already been discussed. Some, however, were believers who entertained no doubt about Islam or the Prophet's message. They were simply people who preferred the comforts of home when the going got tough. These include two groups, one of whom received their judgement earlier. They had added some bad deeds to their good ones and acknowledged their mistake. The case of the second group was deferred for judgement: "*God would either punish them or turn to them in His mercy.*" (Verse 106) This group included three people whose case now comes in for detailed treatment.

Before we say anything about the statement describing their case, and before we speak about the artistically miraculous picture the *sūrah* paints in describing it, let us look at the account given by one of them, Ka`b ibn Mālik:

I have never stayed behind when the Prophet went on any expedition, except that of Badr. Neither God nor the Prophet blamed anyone for staying behind at the time of Badr, because the Prophet set out from Madinah to intercept a trade caravan which belonged to the Quraysh. The battle took place without any preparation or prior planning. On the other hand, I had attended the pledge of the *Anşār* to the Prophet at `Aqabah when we made our commitment to Islam absolutely clear. I would not exchange my attendance there with taking part in the Battle of Badr, although Badr is the more famous occasion.

Nevertheless, I failed to join the army of the expedition of Tabūk. I was never in better circumstances or more physically able than I was then. At no time did I have two means of transport except on that occasion. It was the habit of the Prophet to keep his destination secret. This time, however, setting his destination so far away, and moving in an exceptionally hot climate, he made it clear to the people that he intended to attack the Byzantines. Those who joined the Prophet were in such large numbers that no register of them could have been kept.

In the circumstances, anyone who wished to stay behind might have thought that he would not be noticed, unless God chose to inform the Prophet about him by revelation. The Prophet decided to launch that attack at a time when fruits were abundant and people preferred to stay in the shade. The Prophet and the Muslims, however, were busy getting ready for their impending task. I went out day after day to the marketplace in order to get my equipment, but I always came back having done nothing. I always thought that I was able to get whatever I needed in no time. Nevertheless, I continued in that condition until it was time to move. The Prophet and the army with him started their march and I had not got my preparations under way. I thought to myself: 'I can still get myself ready in a day or two and should be able to catch up with them.' When they had covered quite a distance, I went out to the market and came back having done nothing. This continued day after day. By this time, the army must have covered quite a long distance. I thought I must make a move now and catch up with them. I wish I had done that, but I did not. Every time I went out after the Prophet and the army had left, I was troubled by the fact that I saw only people who were known to be hypocrites or people who were physically unable to join the army. My place was not with either group. I was told that the Prophet did not mention me until he had arrived at Tabūk. He remarked once to those who were present at Tabūk: 'What has happened to Ka`b ibn Mālik?' A man from the tribe of Salamah said to him: `Messenger of God, his wealth and arrogance made him stay behind.'

Mu`ādh ibn Jabal said to him: 'What a foul remark! Messenger of God, we have known nothing bad of the man.' The Prophet made no comment.

I soon heard that the Prophet and his Companions had started on their journey back from Tabūk. I felt very sad. To tell a lie was paramount in my mind. I started thinking about what to say to the Prophet tomorrow, after his arrival, in order to spare myself his anger. I sought the help of everyone in my household. When it was mentioned that the Prophet was soon to arrive, all thoughts of seeking a false excuse disappeared from my mind. I realized that the only way to spare myself the Prophet's anger was to tell the truth. I was determined, therefore, to say exactly what happened.

The Prophet then arrived in Madinah. It was his habit when he came back from travelling to go first to the mosque and pray two *rak`ahs* before sitting to meet the people. When he did that, those who had stayed behind went to him and stated their excuses, swearing to their truth. They were over 80 people. The Prophet accepted their statements and oaths and prayed to God to forgive them, leaving it to God to judge them by His knowledge. I then followed and greeted the Prophet. He met my greeting with an angry smile. He then told me to come forward. I went to him and sat down facing him. He said, 'What caused you to stay behind? Have you not bought your transport?'

I said to him, 'Messenger of God, had I been speaking to anyone on the face of the earth other than you, I would have been able to avoid his anger by giving some sort of an excuse. I can make a case for myself. But I know for certain that if I were to tell you lies in order to win your pleasure, God would soon make the truth known to you and I would incur your displeasure. If, on the other hand, I tell you the truth and you are not happy with me because of it, I would hope for a better result from God. By God, I have no excuse whatsoever. I have never been more physically able or in better circumstances than I was when I stayed behind.' The Prophet said to me: 'You have certainly said the truth. You await God's judgement.'

After I left, some men from the clan of Salamah followed me and said: `We have never known you to commit a sin before this. You could certainly have given the Prophet an excuse like all those who stayed behind. You would have been spared this trouble had the Prophet prayed to God to forgive you, as he would surely have done.' They continued pressing me on this to the extent that I wished to go back to the Prophet and tell him that I was lying. Before I did that, however, I asked whether anyone else said the same thing as I did. They replied that two more people said the same and were given the same answer. When I asked their names, they mentioned Murārah ibn al-Rabī` and Hilāl ibn Umayyah. I knew these two to be men of faith and sincere

devotion. I realized that the proper attitude for me was to be in their company. I therefore made no further move.

The Prophet ordered all his Companions not to speak to us three. He made no similar instruction concerning anybody else of those who stayed behind. All people were now evading us. Their attitude was changed. It was very hard for me that I did not even know myself or the place I was in. This was no longer the town I lived in. My world had changed. We continued in this condition for 50 days.

My two Companions, Murārah ibn al-Rabī` and Hilāl ibn Umayyah, stayed at home. I was the youngest of the three. I continued to go out and attend the congregational prayers with other Muslims. I frequented all the markets, but nobody would speak to me. I would also go to the Prophet and greet him as he sat down after prayers. I would always think to myself: 'Have I detected any movement on his lips suggesting that he has answered my greeting?' I would pray close to him and look at him stealthily. When I was preoccupied with my prayers, he would look at me, but when I looked towards him, he would turn his face the other way.

When this boycott by all the Muslim community seemed to have lasted too long, I climbed the wall of an orchard which belonged to a cousin of mine named Abū Qatādah, who was very close to me. I greeted him, but he did not answer. I said to him: Abū Qatādah, I beseech you by God to answer me: do you know that I love God and His Messenger?' He did not answer. I repeated my question three times, but he still did not answer.

I then beseeched him once again, and his answer came: 'God and His Messenger know better.' Tears sprang to my eyes and I came down. I went to the market and as I was walking I saw a man, apparently a stranger from Syria, enquiring about me. People pointed me out to him. He came to me and handed me a letter from the King of Ghassān, the Arab tribe in Syria. The letter was written on a piece of silk and read: 'We have learnt that your friend has imposed a boycott on you. God has not placed you in a position of humiliation. If you join us, we will endeavour to alleviate all your troubles.' When I read it, I thought it to be yet another test of my sincerity. I have reached so low that an unbeliever hopes that I would willingly join him. I put the letter in an oven and burnt it.

When we had spent 40 nights in that situation, a messenger from the Prophet came to me and said: 'God's Messenger (peace be upon him) commands you to stay away from your wife.' I asked whether that meant that I should divorce her and he answered in the negative. He told me only to stay away

from her. My two Companions also received the same instruction. I told my wife to go to her people's home and stay there until God had given His judgement in this matter.

Hilāl ibn Umayyah was an old man. His wife went to the Prophet and said, `Messenger of God, Hilāl ibn Umayyah is very old and has no servant. Do you mind if I continue to look after him?' He said, 'That is all right, but do not let him come near you.' She said, 'By God, these things are far from his mind. He has not stopped crying ever since this has happened to him. I indeed fear for his eyesight.' Some people in my family suggested that I should seek the Prophet's permission to let my wife look after me. I said, 'I am not going to ask him that. I do not know what his answer would be, considering that I am a young man.'

Another ten nights passed, to complete 50 nights since the Prophet instructed the Muslims not to talk to us. At dawn after the 50th night I prayed at the top of one of our houses. I was still in that condition which I have described: the world seemed to me suffocatingly small and I did not recognize myself any more. As I sat down after the dawn prayers, however, I heard a voice from the direction of Mount Sal saying: 'Ka 'b ibn Mālik! Rejoice!' I realized that my hardship was over, and I prostrated myself in gratitude to God.

What happened was that the Prophet informed the congregation after finishing the dawn prayer that God has pardoned us. People moved fast to give us that happy news. A man came at speed on horseback to bring me the news, while another from the tribe of Aslam went on top of the mountain to shout it to me. His voice was quicker than the horse. When I heard that man's voice giving me the happiest piece of news I ever received, I gave him my two garments as a gesture of gratitude. By God, they were the only clothes I had at the time. I borrowed two garments and went quickly to the Prophet. People were meeting me in groups, saying, 'Congratulations on being forgiven by God.' I entered the mosque and saw the Prophet sitting with a group of people around him. Ṭalĥah ibn `Ubaydullāh came quickly towards me, shook my hand and congratulated me. He was the only one from the *Muhājirīn* to do that. I will never forget Ṭalĥah's kindness.

When I greeted the Prophet, he said to me, with his face beaming with pleasure, 'Rejoice, for this is your happiest day since you were born!' I asked him: 'Is my pardon from you, Messenger of God, or is it from God?' He said, `It is from God.' When the Prophet was pleased at something, his face would light up and look like the moon. We always recognized that."

When I sat down facing him, I said to him, 'Messenger of God, I will make

my repentance complete by giving away all my property in charity.' The Prophet said, 'Keep some of your property, for that is better for you.' I answered that I would keep my share in Khaybar. I then added that I was forgiven only because I told the truth, and I would make my repentance complete by never telling a lie at any time in my life.

I feel that the greatest grace God has bestowed on me ever since He guided me to accept Islam is my telling the truth to the Prophet on that day. Had I invented some false excuse, I would have perished like all those who told him lies. God has described those people in the worst description ever. He says in the Qur'ān: *'When you return to them they will swear to you by God so that you may let them be. Let them be, then: they are unclean. Hell shall be their abode in recompense for what they used to do. They swear to you trying to make you pleased with them. Should you be pleased with them, God shall never be pleased with such transgressing folk.'* (Verses 95-96) I have never knowingly or deliberately told a lie ever since I said that to the Prophet. I pray to God to help me keep my word for the rest of my life.[39]

Vacillating between Extremes

This is then the story of the three people whose cases were deferred, as related by one of them, Ka`b ibn Mālik. There is a lesson in it at every juncture. It gives us a very distinct picture of the solid base of the Muslim community, how closely knit it is, the purity of its people, the clarity of their vision with respect to their community and their duties towards their faith, the importance of the commands issued to them and their need to obey these commands.

Those three people stayed behind at a time of hardship. Human weakness got the better of them when they preferred the shade and comfort of their own homes. That seemed much more preferable than enduring the summer heat and a long traverse. Yet when the Prophet and his Companions had left Madinah, Ka`b felt that he was committing a terrible error. Everything around him pointed to it: "Every time I went out after the Prophet and the army had left, I was troubled by the fact that I saw only people who were known to be hypocrites or people who were physically unable to join the army." Those in the latter group were people who were either sick or weakened by old age, or those who could not find any means of transport. This means that the hardship did not cause the Muslims to give a cold shoulder to the Prophet's command to get ready for a very tough expedition. The only ones who

[39] This account is related in detail in all early biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) but we have retained its English account as given by Adil Salahi, *Muḥammad: Man and Prophet,* The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 711-717. — Editor's note.

stayed behind were those suspected of hypocrisy, or those who had genuine excuses. The solid base of the Muslim community was strong enough to overcome the hardship and to give the right response.

The second point is that of fearing God. When a sinner is truly God-fearing, he will certainly acknowledge his error, and leave judgement in his case to God. In his account Ka`b states why he did not try to give the Prophet a false excuse: "Had I been speaking to anyone on the face of the earth other than you, I would have been able to avoid his anger by giving some sort of an excuse. I can make a case for myself. But I know for certain that if I were to tell you lies in order to win your pleasure, God would soon make the truth known to you and I would incur your displeasure. If, on the other hand, I tell you the truth and you are not happy with me because of it, I would hope for a better result from God. By God, I have no excuse whatsoever. I have never been more physically able or in better circumstance than I was when I stayed behind."

This shows how an errant believer was keen to watch God and seek not to incur His anger. He was certainly keen to win the Prophet's pleasure, which in those days could lift a person to the highest standard or allow him to fall into an abyss, and make a Muslim enjoy high esteem or leave him in total oblivion. Nevertheless, fearing God was a stronger motivation, and the hope to win His forgiveness was more deeply entertained.

Let us look at another aspect of the story: "The Prophet ordered all his Companions not to speak to us three. He made no similar instruction concerning anybody else of those who stayed behind. All people were now evading us. Their attitude was changed. It was very hard for me that I did not even know myself or the place I was in. This was no longer the town I lived in. My world had changed. We continued in this condition for 50 days.

"My two Companions, Murārah ibn al-Rabī` and Hilāl ibn Umayyah, stayed at home. I was the youngest of the three. I continued to go out and attend the congregational prayers with other Muslims. I frequented all the markets, but nobody would speak to me. I would also go to the Prophet and greet him as he sat down after prayers. I would always think to myself: 'Have I detected any movement on his lips suggesting that he has answered my greeting?' I would pray close to him and look at him stealthily. When I was preoccupied with my prayers he would look at me, but when I looked towards him he would turn his face away.

"When this boycott by all the Muslim community seemed to have lasted too long, I climbed the wall of an orchard which belonged to a cousin of mine named Abū Qatādah, who was very close to me. I greeted him, but he did not answer. I said to him: Abū Qatādah, I beseech you by God to answer me: do you know that I love God

and His Messenger?' He did not answer. I repeated my question three times, but he still did not answer. I then beseeched him once again, and his answer came: 'God and His Messenger know better.' Tears sprang to my eyes and I came down."

These details give us a clear impression of the level of discipline and obedience in the Muslim community, despite all the looseness that crept in after the fall of Makkah to the Muslims, and the confusion that accompanied the preparations for the expedition to Tabūk. The Prophet gave his instructions that nobody should speak to those three, and hence no one uttered a word to them. None would even meet Ka`b with a smiling face, and none would give or take anything from him. Even his closest cousin and friend would not return his greeting or answer his question, after Ka`b had climbed the fence to enter his garden. When he answered after much beseeching, his answer was far from reassuring. He only said: "God and His Messenger know better."

In his eagerness to know his position, after his whole world had changed, Ka`b would try to detect a faint movement on the lips of the Prophet to know whether he had answered his greetings. He would look sideways to find out whether the Prophet had looked at him in a way which would renew his hopes, and tell him that his situation was not totally desperate.

Left all alone, with no one saying a word to him even as a gesture of charity, he receives a letter from the King of Ghassān offering him a position of honour and influence. He turns his back on all this in a single movement. His only reaction is to throw the letter into the fire, considering this tempting offer as part of his trial.

Yet the boycott is extended and he is ordered not to go near to his wife, so that he is totally alone, isolated, hanging in the air. He feels too shy to request the Prophet to let his wife look after him, because he was unsure what the answer would be like.

The Whole World Seems Too Narrow

This should be contrasted with the piece of really happy news subsequently given to the three offenders. It is the news of rehabilitation, acceptance of the three men's repentance and their return to the fold and to life. Let us remind ourselves of Ka`b's own account of that happy moment:

> I was still in that condition which I have described: the world seemed to me suffocatingly small and I did not recognize myself any more. As I sat down after the dawn prayers, however, I heard a voice from the direction of Mount Sal `saying: 'Ka`b ibn Mālik! Rejoice!' I realized that my hardship was over, and I prostrated myself in gratitude to God.
>
> What happened was that the Prophet informed the congregation after

> finishing the dawn prayer that God had pardoned us. People moved fast to give us that happy news. A man came at speed on horseback to bring me the news, while another from the tribe of Aslam went on top of the mountain to shout it to me. His voice was quicker than the horse. When I heard that man's voice giving me the happiest piece of news I ever received, I gave him my two garments as a gesture of gratitude. By God, they were the only clothes I had at the time. I borrowed two garments and went quickly to the Prophet. People were meeting me in groups, saying, 'Congratulations on being forgiven by God.' I entered the mosque and saw the Prophet sitting with a group of people around him. Ṭalĥah ibn `Ubaydullāh came quickly towards me, shook my hand and congratulated me. He was the only one from the *Muhājirīn* to do that. I will never forget Ṭalĥah's kindness.

Such was the true value of events in that community. An accepted repentance was given such importance that a man would ride on horseback to deliver the news to its recipient, and another would go to the top of a mountain to shout it over so that he could be faster than the herald on horse. Joy felt by a brother and genuine congratulations are felt as a kindness that will never be forgotten by yesterday's outcast who has just been rehabilitated. His is a day that is fittingly described by the Prophet: "Rejoice, for this is your happiest day since you were born!" As Ka`b says, the Prophet's face was shining with delight. How kind and compassionate the Prophet was that his face beamed with pleasure because three of his Companions had been returned to the fold.

This, then, was the story of the three people who were left behind until God accepted their repentance. We have highlighted some of the impressions it gives us of the life of the early Muslim community and its values. As related by one of the three people who went through its experience, the story brings clear before our minds the meaning of the verse which states: "*when the earth, vast as it is, seemed to close in upon them, and their own souls had become too constricted, they realized that there was no refuge from God except by returning to Him.*" (Verse 118)

"*When the earth, vast as it is, seemed to close in upon them.*" (Verse 118) What is the earth? Its world is that of its inhabitants and the values that are upheld by them. Its expanse is as vast as the relationships between its people make it to be. Hence the description here is very truthful in its practical significance, as much as it is truthful in its artistic beauty. It shows the whole expanse of the earth becoming too narrow for those three. Its outer limits are brought too near to make it extremely tight, closing in on them. "*And their own souls had become too constricted.*" (Verse 118) It is as if their souls are a sort of a container that has become too small and tight. They can hardly breathe as it tightens over them. What happened then was that "*they realized that there was no refuge from God except by returning to Him.*" (Verse 118) That applies to

all creation. None can have any refuge from God except in Him, because He has power over the whole universe. Yet stating this fact at this point, in an atmosphere of sadness imparts an air of stress and despair that can only be cleared by God Himself.

Then hope is restored and release is granted: "*He then turned to them in mercy, so that they might repent. God is indeed the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful.*" (Verse 118) He has turned to them in mercy with regard to this particular error, so that they might make a general repentance which covers all their past sins. This means that they would watch God eagerly to guard against any future error. This is explained by Ka`b:

> When I sat down facing him, I said to him, 'Messenger of God, I will make my repentance complete by giving away all my property in charity.' The Prophet said, 'Keep some of your property, for that is better for you.' I answered that I would keep my share in Khaybar. I then added that I was forgiven only because I told the truth, and I would make my repentance complete by never telling a lie at any time in my life. I feel that the greatest grace God has bestowed on me ever since He guided me to accept Islam is my telling the truth to the Prophet on that day... I have never knowingly or deliberately told a lie ever since I said that to the Prophet. I pray to God to help me keep my word for the rest of my life.
>
> That is all that we can say in comment on this highly inspiring story and the unique style in which it is reported in the Qur'ān. We praise God for what He has guided us to write about it here, and we hope to make a longer discussion of it in future.[40]

A Reward for Every Little Thing

The element of truth is highly significant in the story of those three Companions of the Prophet. To give this element its due importance, all believers are advised to fear God and to align themselves with those truthful people of the early believers. On the other hand those people in Madinah and the surrounding desert who stayed behind are strongly criticized. This is followed by a promise of generous reward to those who strive for God's cause: "*Believers, have fear of God and be among those who are truthful. It does not behove the people of Madinah and the bedouins who live around them to hold back from following God's Messenger, or to care for themselves more than for him; for, whenever they endure thirst, stress, or hunger for the sake of God, or take any step which*

[40] The author apparently intended to write a whole book discussing the events that took place at the time of the Prophet and his Companions and highlighting the lessons that could be learnt from them and how Muslims today can benefit by them in shaping their lives in accordance with Islamic guidance. He did not live to see that project implemented. — Editor's note.

would irritate the unbelievers, or inflict any loss on the enemy, a good deed is recorded in their favour. God does not suffer the reward of those who do good to be lost. And whenever they spend anything for the sake of God, be it little or much, or traverse a valley [in support of God's cause], it is recorded for them, so that God will give them the best reward for what they do." (Verses 119-121)

The people of Madinah were the ones who rushed to support the Islamic message, which meant that they were truly its basic core of supporters. They had given shelter to God's Messenger, pledged their total loyalty to him and constituted the hard nucleus of the Islamic faith in the Arabian Peninsula. The bedouin Arabs in the surrounding area, having also adopted Islam as a faith and a way of life, formed the outer belt of defence. Hence those two groups could not refrain from joining the Prophet or spare themselves from any risk to which they might be exposed. When God's Messenger set out to attend to a certain task that served Islamic interests, then the people of Madinah, the vanguard of the Islamic message, and those of the surrounding area could not but join him. Whether this happened to be in the burning summer heat or the extreme winter cold, in times of strict hardship or easy affluence, it does not behove them, being so close to the Prophet, to try to spare themselves a difficulty that God's Messenger is undertaking. They could not excuse themselves by protesting ignorance or lack of awareness of the real task in hand.

The *sūrah* appeals to them to fear God and to join the truthful believers who have never entertained any thoughts of staying behind and who have maintained their strong commitment to their faith at times of hardship. Those were the cream among the early believers and those who followed in their footsteps: *'Believers, have fear of God and be among those who are truthful."* (Verse 119)

The *sūrah* follows this appeal by a strong censure of the very thought of staying behind when God's Messenger is setting out: *"It does not behove the people of Madinah and the bedouins who live around them to hold back from following Gods Messenger, or to care for themselves more than for him."* (Verse 120) The statement implies a strong reproach. No Companion of God's Messenger can be reproached in a stronger way than by saying that he puts his own safety ahead of the Prophet's. How could he when he is the Prophet's Companion and follower? The same applies to the advocates of Islam in all generations and periods. It does not behove a believer to try to spare himself a risk that the Prophet himself was willing to undertake for the cause of Islam. How could he when he claims that he is an advocate of the cause of Islam, and a follower of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him)?

Taking up such a responsibility is a duty imposed by God's order and emphasized by our love of the Prophet that makes any believer too ashamed to put himself ahead of him. At the same time it earns a very generous reward indeed: *"Whenever they endure thirst, stress, or hunger for the sake of God, or take any step which would irritate the*

unbelievers, or inflict any loss on the enemy, a good deed is recorded in their favour. God does not suffer the reward of those who do good to be lost. And whenever they spend anything for the sake of God, be it little or much, or traverse a valley [in support of God's cause], it is recorded for them, so that God will give them the best reward for what they do." (Verses 120-121)

Every feeling is rewarded, be it thirst, hunger or mere stress and tiredness. Taking up a position which irritates the unbelievers and inflicting any loss or damage on them is credited as a good deed. When a believer goes out on a *jihād* campaign, he is included among those who do good. God will not suffer the reward of such servants of His to be lost. Furthermore, any financial contribution, be it little or much, and the mere walking across a valley are also rewarded as God rewards the best of His servants. By God, this is a rich reward indeed. It is a reward by God whose generosity is beyond any limit. How embarrassing to us all that such a great reward is given for something that is much less than the hardship suffered by the Prophet himself for the cause of Islam. It is the advocacy of this cause that we should now assume. Most certainly, we must be true to our trust.

A Task Akin to Fighting

As we have seen in this *sūrah,* the Qur'ān repeatedly denounces, in very clear terms, those who stay behind at the time when a *jihād* campaign is announced, particularly those from Madinah and the bedouins in the surrounding area. This denunciation made people come to Madinah in large numbers, particularly from the tribes living nearby, so that they would be ready to join the Prophet at any moment. Hence it was necessary to spell out the limits of all-out mobilization at the appropriate time.

The Muslim area had expanded. With the whole of Arabia practically adopting Islam, large numbers were ready to fight. At Tabūk, there were about 30,000 of them, which was a much larger number than at any earlier battle the Muslims had fought. It was time that different people should attend to different tasks, so that no area, such as agriculture or trade or social concerns, was neglected. All these are necessary for an emerging nation, whose needs are far more sophisticated than those of a tribal community. Hence the present verse was revealed to set out certain limits: *"It is not desirable that all the believers should go out to fight. From every section of them some should go forth, so that they may acquire a deeper knowledge of the faith and warn their people when they return to them, so that they may take heed."* (Verse 122)

Several reports have been mentioned in explaining the meaning of this verse, giving different views on which group is to acquire deeper knowledge in faith so as to warn their people when they return. The view which we find to be soundest

suggests that a section from each group in the Muslim community should go out to fight, with a system that allows alternation between the fighters and those who stay behind to attend to other tasks. The group of fighters acquires a more profound understanding of this faith as they take practical action seeking to consolidate its base. Hence these fighters are the ones who, on their return, warn their people against any complacency in attending to their duties.

This interpretation is based on views expressed by such leading commentators as Ibn `Abbās, al-Ĥasan al-Başrī and Ibn Kathīr. It is also the view of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. Its central point is that this faith has its own method of action, and it cannot be properly understood except by those who actively implement it. Hence those who go out to fight for its cause are the ones most likely to understand it best. Its underlying meanings, its implications, its practical implementation and its main features unfold to them as they move under its banner. Those who stay behind are the ones who need to be informed by those who take practical action, because the latter are the ones who witness and learn all these aspects. They are the ones who probe its secrets. This is particularly so, if the campaign they join is one led by the Prophet himself. However, every jihād campaign is a means to acquire a better understanding of this faith.

This is perhaps the reverse of what may appear at first sight, with those who are not on a *jihād* campaign being the ones who devote time to studying and understanding this faith. But this is a delusion that does not fit with the nature of this faith, which makes action one of its basic requirements. Hence it is understood more profoundly by those who take action and strive to establish it as a code of living in spite of the opposition they encounter from the forces of *jāhiliyyah*. Experience confirms that those who are not involved in the method of action to serve this faith do not understand it properly, no matter how much time they spend in studying it from books. That is a cold study, while real insight is acquired only by those who join the efforts aiming to establish it as a practical code of living. It is never acquired by those who only look at books and papers.

Proper understanding of this faith does not evolve except where action is taken to serve its cause. It cannot be taken from a scholar who stays idle when action is needed. Those who occupy their time with studying books to deduce rulings and `renew' or `develop' Islamic law, as the Orientalists say, do not really understand the nature of this faith. They take no part in the movement which aims to liberate humanity from different tyrannical authorities, and from submission to others, so that they may submit to God alone. With such lack of action, they cannot put its laws and concepts into their proper form.

Islamic law came about after Islamic action had moved ahead. First, submission to God was properly established when a community had determined to submit itself to

God alone and to abandon the laws, customs and traditions of *jāhiliyyah.* That community also decided that no aspect of its life could be governed by human law. The community then started to shape its life on the basis of the main Islamic laws, without neglecting the details outlined in the sources of this law. As the community continued to do so, new issues came up in its practical life that needed to be sorted out on the basis of Islamic law. At this point new rulings were deduced and *Fiqh,* or the formal study of Islamic law, started to develop. It is then the action itself which allowed *Fiqh* to develop and flourish. It did not develop as a cold academic study that had no bearing on active and practical life. Thus scholars were able to develop a profound insight into this faith based on interaction with a real community shaping its life on the basis of this religion and striving to make its cause triumphant.

What do we find today in place of that? No one can claim that a proper Islamic community, determined to submit to God alone and to live by His law, rejecting any laws and regulations that are not based on His guidance exists anywhere. Hence no true Muslim who has an insight into this religion of Islam, its method of action and its history would try to 'develop' or 'renew' Islamic law in communities that are unwilling to declare that they recognize no other law. Serious Islamic action should start by making submission to God alone the first step, followed by acknowledging that sovereignty belongs only to Him. Hence no legislation is acceptable unless it is based on His law. To do otherwise is no more than a silly joke. Moreover, to imagine that one can have a proper understanding of this faith looking only at books and papers, without being involved in real action to serve the Islamic cause betrays deep ignorance of this religion.

Submission to God alone gives rise to an Islamic community, which in turn helps Islamic scholarship to flourish. This is the proper order. There can be no situation where specially tailored Islamic laws are prepared in advance for an Islamic community that is expected to be established. The fact is that every ruling seeks to implement the Islamic law, and its basic principles, in a practical case that has its own clear shape, dimensions and circumstances. Such cases arise from practical life within the Islamic community which gives it its particular shape, dimensions and circumstances. Hence a ruling that addresses each particular case is deduced. The rulings that we find today in books of *Fiqh* addressed similar practical cases in the past, when Islamic law was implemented by an Islamic community. They were not ready made in advance. Today we need to have similar rulings that address our own issues, provided that the community decides first of all to submit to God alone and to accept no ruling unless based on God's law.

When this happens, then our efforts will yield proper fruits. Striving for God's cause, or *jihād,* will open people's eyes and give them real knowledge and understanding of the faith. Unless we do this, then we are evading our real duty *of*

jihād, seeking flimsy excuses of 'developing' or 'renewing' the study of Islamic *Fiqh.* It is far better to acknowledge our weakness and lack of effort, seeking God's forgiveness, than to resort to such evasiveness.

Uncompromising Fight

We then have a verse outlining the plan and extent *of jihād,* which was implemented by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and his successors generally. The only exceptions were limited cases dictated by special circumstances: *"Believers, fight those of the unbelievers who are near you, and let them find you tough; and know that God is with those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 123)

The jihād movement marched on, confronting those who were near to the land of Islam, one stage after another. When practically the whole of Arabia had adopted Islam, after Makkah itself fell to Islam, leaving only scattered individuals and groups who did not form any threat to the land of Islam, the Tabūk Expedition took place, threatening the outer areas of the Byzantine Empire which were closest to the Muslim state. This was followed by open warfare, with the Muslim armies moving far into the lands of both the Byzantine and Persian Empires, leaving no pockets behind them. The areas that were now under Islam were united, having continuous borders. It was a vast land area with solid loyalty to one authority.

Weakness only crept in after its division into different units, with artificial borders to allow the governments of certain ruling families or certain races and nationalities. This was the outcome of plans that the enemies of Islam tried hard to bring to fruition, as they still do today. The different ethnic communities which Islam united in a single nation or community in the land of Islam, superseding the divisions of race, language and colour, will continue to suffer from inherent weaknesses until they return to their faith. Only when they once again follow the guidance of God's Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and allow only a single banner to unite them shall they recognize the implications of divine leadership which will once again bring them power and victory. When that happens, it will ensure that they are held in awe by other nations and powers.

Let us now reflect on this verse: *"Believers, fight those of the unbelievers who are near you, and let them find you tough; and know that God is with those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 123) What we find here is an order to fight those unbelievers who are near to the Muslim state, without specifying whether these have launched any aggression on the Muslims or their land. We understand that this is the final situation which makes the need to carry Islam forward the basis of the principle *of jihād.* This will ensure that Islam is available to mankind. It does not have a defensive outlook, as was the case with the provisional orders in the early days after the establishment of the

Muslim state in Madinah.

Some of those who speak about the Islamic view of international relations or about the rulings that govern *jihād,* as well as those who write essays interpreting the Qur'ānic verses speaking about *jihād,* try to show this verse, which is the final one, limited by the earlier provisional rules. Hence they impose on it a restriction, limiting its application to cases of aggression being launched or expected against the Muslim community. But this statement is general and has no restriction attached to it. Besides, it is the final one. What we have learnt is that when the Qur'ān lays down legal provisions, it states them in a clear and precise way, without referring one situation to another. It resorts to precise expression, adding at the same point any exceptions, limitations or restrictions it wants the Muslim community to observe.

We have already commented in detail, in the Prologue and Chapters 1 and 2, on the meanings of the verses and the final rulings they provide, shedding light on the nature of the Islamic method of action.

However, those speakers and writers find it incomprehensible that Islam lays down such an order commanding the believers to fight those unbelievers who are near to them, and to continue to do so as long as there remain unbelievers in their vicinity. Hence they try to find limits restricting this general statement, but they can only find these in the earlier statements which were, by nature, provisional.

We understand why they find it so incomprehensible. They simply forget that *jihād* is meant to serve God's cause. It aims to establish God's authority and to remove tyranny. It liberates mankind from submission to any authority other than that of God. "*Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone.*" (8: 39) *jihād* does not aim to achieve the hegemony of one philosophy or system or nation over another. It wants the system laid down by God to replace the systems established by His creatures. It does not wish to establish a kingdom for any one of God's servants, but to establish God's own kingdom. Hence it has to move forward throughout the earth in order to liberate the whole of mankind, without discrimination between those who are within the land of Islam and those who are outside it. The whole earth is populated by human beings who are being subjected to different types of tyrannical authority wielded by fellow human beings.

When they lose sight of this fact they find it odd that one system and one nation should move forward to remove all systems and dominate all communities. If things were such, that would be odd indeed. But the systems that exist today are all man-made. None of them has any right to say that it alone should dominate the others. The same does not apply to the divine system which sets out to overthrow all man-made systems in order to liberate all mankind from the humiliation of submission to other human beings, so that they can submit to God alone and worship Him only

without any partners. Moreover, they find it odd because they face a concentrated and wicked crusade which tells them that the Islamic faith managed to spread only because it used the sword. *Jihād,* it claims, wanted to force other people to accept Islam, depriving them of the freedom of belief.

Had things been so, they would have been odd indeed. But the truth is totally different. Islam lays down a rule stating that "*There shall be no compulsion in religion. The right way is henceforth distinct from error.*" (2: 256) Why does Islam, then, move forward to fight, and why has God bought the believers' souls and property, so that "*they fight for the cause of God, kill and be killed*"? (Verse 111) The answer is that *jihād* has a reason which is totally different from compelling other people to accept Islam. Indeed *jihād* seeks to guarantee the freedom of belief.

As we have stated on several occasions, Islam is a declaration which liberates mankind throughout the earth from submission to human beings. As such, Islam always faces tyrannical forces and systems which seek to subjugate people and dominate their lives. These systems are backed by regimes and powers of different sorts, which deprive people of the chance to listen to the Islamic message and to adopt it if they are convinced of its truth. Or they may force people, in one way or another, to turn away from the Islamic message. That is an ugly violation of the freedom of belief. For these reasons, Islam moves forward, equipped with suitable power, to overthrow these systems and destroy their forces.

What happens then? It leaves people entirely free to adopt the faith they like. If they wish to be Muslims, they will have all the rights and duties that apply to all Muslims. They will have a bond of real brotherhood with those who have been Muslims long before them. On the other hand, if they wish to maintain their religions, they may do so. They only have to pay a tribute, i.e. *jizyah,* which has a clear purpose: to acknowledge the freedom of movement for Islam among them, to contribute to the treasury of the Muslim state which is required to protect them against any outside aggression, and to look after those of them who are ill, disabled and elderly in the same way as Muslims are looked after.

Never in its history did Islam compel a single human being to change his faith. That is alien to Islamic beliefs and practice. On the other hand, crusades were launched to kill, slaughter and eliminate entire communities, such as the people of Andalusia in the past and the people of Zanzibar in recent history, in order to compel them to convert to Christianity. Sometimes, even conversion was not accepted. They were killed only because they were Muslims, or because they followed a brand of Christianity which was different from that of the dominating Church. For example, 12,000 Egyptian Christians were burnt alive only because they differed with the Byzantine Church over matters of detail, such as whether the soul originated with the Father alone, or with the Father and the Son together, or whether Jesus had a

single divine nature or a united one in which both the divine and the human combine. These are basically the causes which make some writers about Islam find the general statement in this verse rather odd, and they try to explain it away by limiting the *jihād* movement to a defensive strategy only.

Moreover, the thought of moving forward to confront the unbelievers who are near to the Muslim state sounds too awesome to those defeatists who look at the world around them today and find this requirement totally impractical. Are those who have Muslim names in communities that are weak, or subject to foreign domination, to move forth in the land, challenging all nations in open warfare, until there is no more oppression and all submission is declared to God alone? That is totally unrealistic. It cannot be imagined that God would give such an order.

All such people forget the timing and the circumstances leading to this order. It was given after Islam had established its state, and the whole of Arabia adopted the Islamic faith and started to organize its life on its basis. Prior to that a community was established which dedicated itself totally to its cause, with everyone in that community ready to sacrifice his life and property in order for Islam to triumph. This community was given victory in one battle after another, stage after stage. Today we are in a situation which is highly similar to that which prevailed at the time when Prophet Muĥammad was sent to call on mankind to believe in God's oneness and to declare that "*There is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is His Messenger.*" Together with the small band who believed in him, the Prophet strove hard until he managed to establish the first Muslim state in Madinah. The orders to fight the unbelievers were modified stage after stage, facing the prevailing situation at each stage, until it reached its final version.

The gulf that separates people today from that final version is wide indeed. Hence, they have to start again at the beginning, with the declaration that "*There is no deity other than God, and Muĥammad is His Messenger.*" They will have to move forward on the basis of this declaration until they reach, in their own good time and with God's help, the final stage. At that time they will not be the sort of powerless multitude divided by a variety of creeds and desires, and declaring their affiliation to different races and nationalities, as they are today. They will be a united Muslim community that accepts no banner, or manmade creed or system. They will only move with God's blessings to serve His cause.

Encumbered with their pathetic weakness, people will not understand the rules of this religion. It is only those who strive in a movement dedicated to the establishment of God's sovereignty on earth, and the removal of false deities, that fully understand its rules. Understanding this religion in its true nature cannot be taken from those who deal only with books and papers. Academic study is insufficient on its own to formulate any real understanding of Islam, unless it is

coupled with striving in a movement.

Finally, this verse, giving such a clear order, was revealed in circumstances that suggest that the first to be meant by it were the Byzantines, who belonged to an earlier religion, or, to use the Islamic term, People of the Book. The *sūrah,* however, has already made it clear that they had distorted their faith and obeyed man-made laws and systems, so they were truly unbelievers. We should reflect here on the line of action Islam takes towards communities of the People of the Book who have turned away from their faith and adopted manmade laws. This line of action applies to all such communities everywhere. God has commanded the believers to fight those unbelievers who are near to them, and to be tough on them, but then concluded the verse making this order by saying: "*Know that God is with those who are God-fearing.*" (Verse 123) This is a significant comment on the order preceding it. The type of fearing God that He appreciates and gives His support to those who have it is the same that emboldens believers to show toughness in fighting the unbelievers. This means that there is no compromise "*until there is no more oppression and all submission is made to God alone.*" (8: 39)

Nevertheless, everyone should know that this toughness is directed against only those who fight, and it remains controlled by Islamic ethics. Before Muslims fight, they give a warning and offer the other party a choice between three alternatives: to adopt Islam, or to pay the tribute, i.e. *jizyah,* or to fight. If there is a treaty between the Muslim state and another community and the Muslim state fears that there may be treachery on the latter's part, then a notice terminating the treaty should be served on them. It is useful to mention here that treaties may be given only to communities that are ready to be bound by a peace agreement and to pay the *jizyah.* The only other situation where a treaty may be signed is that when the Muslim community is lacking in power. In this situation, some provisional rules are applicable to it.

The Prophet himself set out the ethics of war which must be observed by the Muslim community in any battle it may fight.

Islamic War Ethics

Buraydah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports:

> When the Prophet appointed someone to command an army or an expedition, he would recommend him to be God-fearing in his public and private affairs, and to take good care of those who were under his command. Then he would tell them: 'March by God's name and to serve His cause. Fight those who deny God. March on; but do not be unfair, and do not commit any treachery. Do not disfigure the bodies of any enemy soldiers killed in battle.

> Never kill any children. When you meet your enemies, call upon them to choose one of three alternatives. If they choose one of them, accept it from them and do not fight them. Call on them first to accept Islam. If they agree, accept their pledges and do not fight them. Then ask them to move over to the land of the *Muhājirīn,* and tell them that they would then have the same duties and privileges of the *Muhājirīn.* If they do not wish to move from their quarters, tell them that they would then be in the same position as the bedouin Muslims. They will be subject to God's orders that are applicable to all believers, but they will have no share of any booty that is gained through war or peaceful campaigns, unless they fight with the Muslims. If they refuse to accept Islam, then offer them the alternative of paying *jizyah* [or tribute]. If they agree, accept it from them and do not fight them. If they refuse, then seek God's help and fight them.

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar, a Companion of the Prophet reports: "A woman was found killed in one of the Prophet's expeditions. He immediately issued an order that no women or children may be killed." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

The Prophet sent his Companion Mu`ādh ibn Jabal to the Yemen to teach the people there. As he departed the Prophet said to him: "You will be among people who follow earlier revelations. Call on them to believe that there is no deity other than God and that I am God's Messenger. Should they accept that from you, then tell them that God has commanded them to pray five times every day. If they accept that from you, then tell them that God has imposed on them the payment of *zakāt,* i.e. a charity which is to be levied from the rich and given to the poor among them. If they accept that, then do not touch their good earnings. Guard against an appeal to God by a person who suffers injustice, for such an appeal goes straight to God, without any hindrances."

Abū Dāwūd relates that the Prophet said: "You may fight some people and overcome them. They may then try to protect themselves and their children from you by their money, and they may make an agreement with you. Do not take anything from them over that, for it is not lawful to you."

Al-Irbād ibn Şāriyyah reports: "We arrived at Khaybar Castle with the Prophet when he had a large number of Muslims with him. The chief of Khaybar, an arrogant gigantic man, came to the Prophet and said, 'Muĥammad! Do you permit yourselves to slaughter our cattle, devour our produce, and force our women?' The Prophet was very angry. He said, `Ibn `Awf! Mount your horse and announce: Only believers are admitted into heaven. Then, gather around for prayers.' They were all gathered and the Prophet led the prayers. When he finished, he stood up and said, 'Does any of you think as he reclines over his couch that God has not forbidden anything other

than what is stated in the Qur'ān? I have certainly admonished you, given certain orders and forbidden certain things. These are as much prohibited as those in the Qur'ān or even more so. God has not permitted you to go into the homes of the people of the earlier revelations without first having permission, nor has He allowed you to force their women or devour their produce when they have paid what is due from them."

After a certain battle, it was reported to the Prophet that a few boys were killed during the fighting. He was very sad. Some of his Companions said, "Why are you so sad when they are only the sons of unbelievers?" The Prophet was angry and said words to this effect: "These were better than you, because they still had uncorrupted natures. Are you not the children of unbelievers. Never kill boys. Never kill boys."

These instructions by the Prophet were strictly followed by his successors. Abū Bakr is reported to have said: "You will find people who claim that they have dedicated themselves to God. Leave them to their dedication. Never kill a woman, a child or an elderly man." Zayd ibn Wahb reports that the army he had joined received written instructions from the Caliph, `Umar, in which he said: "Do not be unjust; or commit treachery; or kill a young person. Fear God in your treatment of peasants." His instructions to his commanders always included the following: "Do not kill an elderly person, a woman or a child. Guard against accidentally killing them when you engage your enemy in battle and when you launch any attack."

Reports are numerous which make clear the general method Islam adopts in fighting its enemies, as well as its commitment to a high standard of ethics in war, giving high respect to human dignity. Fighting is targetted only against real forces which prevent people's liberation from subjugation by other creatures, so that they submit to God alone. Kind treatment is extended even to enemies. As for toughness, this applies only to fighting when Muslims are expected to fight hard. It has nothing of the barbarism against children, women and elderly people who do not fight in the first place, or the disfigurement of dead bodies. These practices are often committed by the barbaric armies of countries which these days claim to be highly civilized. Islam has given more than adequate orders to ensure the safety of those who do not fight, and to respect the humanity of the fighters. The toughness required is that sort of attitude which ensures that the confrontation does not fizzle away. As Muslims have been ordered time and again to show mercy and kindness, an exception needs to be made in the state of war, in as much as that state requires, without allowing any extreme practices of torture or disfigurement of bodies.

Hypocritical Attitudes

Since the *sūrah* has spoken extensively about the hypocrites, we have here some

verses showing how those hypocrites used to receive any new revelation outlining certain duties imposed by the faith they falsely claimed to accept. This is contrasted with the way believers used to receive the revelation of new verses of the Qur'ān: *"Whenever a sūrah is revealed, some of them say: 'Which of you has this strengthened in faith?' It certainly strengthens the believers in their faith, and so they rejoice. But as for those whose hearts are diseased, it only adds wickedness to their wickedness, and so they die unbelievers. Do they not see that they are tested once or twice every year? Yet they do not repent, and they do not take warning. Whenever a sūrah is revealed, they look at one another [as if to say]: 'Is anyone watching?' Then they turn away. God has turned their hearts away, for they are people devoid of understanding."* (Verses 124-127)

It is a strange and suspicious question the first verse quotes: *"Which of you has this strengthened in faith?"* It is asked only by one who has not felt the impact of the new *sūrah* as it is revealed. Otherwise he would have spoken about its effect on him instead of wondering how it has affected other people. At the same time, it betrays a sense of belittling the importance of the new revelation and its effect on people's hearts and minds. Hence a decisive reply is given by the One who has the ultimate knowledge: *"It certainly strengthens the believers in their faith, and so they rejoice. But as for those whose hearts are diseased, it only adds wickedness to their wickedness, and so they die unbelievers."* (Verses 124-125)

The believers receive with every new *sūrah* and new revelation a new pointer to the truth of the faith. They also remember their Lord when they listen to His revelations, and they appreciate the care He takes of them by sending down these revelations. All this adds to the strength of their faith. On the other hand, those who have sickness in their hearts, the hypocrites, will have their wickedness increased. They will die unbelievers. This is a true piece of information given by God who knows everything.

Before the *sūrah* portrays the opposite picture, it wonders at those hypocrites who never take an admonition, and never reflect on an event to gather the lesson that may be learnt from it: *"Do they not see that they are tested once or twice every year? Yet they do not repent, and they do not take warning."* (Verse 126) The test may have taken the form of exposing their reality, or that the believers achieve victory without those hypocrites taking any part. There could be many other forms of test, which were all too frequent at the time of the Prophet. Still hypocrites today are tested and they pay no heed.

The next verse portrays a vivid scene, full of details, showing their behaviour: *"Whenever a sūrah is revealed, they look at one another [as if to say]: 'Is anyone watching?' Then they turn away. God has turned their hearts away, for they are people devoid of understanding."* (Verse 127)

When we read this verse, the scene of these hypocrites is large in front of us. We

see them at the moment when a new *sūrah* is revealed, with some of them looking at each other winking and wondering: *"Is anyone watching?"* (Verse 127) Then they feel that the believers are preoccupied with their own business, so they go out stealthily, hoping not to be noticed: *"Then they turn away."* (Verse 127) But the eye which never loses sight of anything follows them with a curse that suits their suspicious deed: *"God has turned their hearts away."* (Verse 127) Their hearts are turned away from the right guidance. They deserve to remain deep in error, *"for they are people devoid of understanding."* (Verse 127) This is because they have kept their hearts and minds idle, unable to function properly. All of this scene is portrayed so skilfully and vividly using only a few words.

The Prophet's Relationship with the Believers

The *sūrah* concludes with two verses which different reports suggest were revealed in Makkah or Madinah. We are inclined to support the latter view, as these verses fit with various aspects of the last passage in the *sūrah* and with its general message. The first of these two verses explains the bond between God's Messenger and his people, and how compassionate and full of concern he was for them. This is perfectly fitting with the tasks assigned to the Muslim community who are required to support the Messenger, convey his message, fight his enemies and endure whatever trouble or hardship they may face in doing so. The final verse directs the Messenger to rely only on his Lord when people turn away from him. It is sufficient for him to have God's help and support.

"Indeed there has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves: one who grieves much that you should suffer; one who is full of concern for you; and who is tender and full of compassion towards the believers. Should they turn away, then say to them: 'God is enough for me! There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne.'" (Verses 128-129) The statement here does not say 'a Messenger from among you' has come to you. Instead it describes the Messenger as being one 'from among yourselves' to add connotations of closer contact and firmer ties. It shows the type of bond that exists between them and their Messenger. He is one of them, with very close contact between them, and he feels for them.

Another characteristic of this Messenger is that he is *"one who grieves much that you should suffer."* (Verse 128) He is keen that you should come to no hardship. He is also *"full of concern for you... tender and full of compassion towards the believers."* (Verse 128) He would never lead you to ruin. If he calls on you to strive for God's cause, and to endure any difficulty in doing so, then you should know that he does not take this lightly, and that there is no cruelty in his heart. His call is a manifestation of compassion. He simply does not like to see you humiliated. He is too concerned that you should not suffer the ignominy of sin. He is keen that you should have the

honour of conveying this message, earn God's pleasure and admittance into heaven.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, showing him what attitude to take when people turn away from him and his message. It points to the source of power which gives him all the protection he needs: "*Should they turn away, then say to them: 'God is enough for me! There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne.'*" (Verse 129) To Him belong all power, dominion, greatness and honour. His support is sufficient for everyone who seeks His patronage.

The *sūrah* which concentrates mainly on fighting and striving for God's cause is thus concluded with the directive to rely on God alone, trust Him and seek His powerful support. After all "*He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne.*" (Verse 129)

Conclusion

This *sūrah* outlines the final rulings on the permanent relations between the Muslim community and the outside world, as explained in our commentary on its various passages. Hence we have to refer to its latest statements since these represent the final say on these relations. These statements must not be restricted or narrowed down in their applicability on the basis of earlier statements and rulings, which we described as provisional. In doing so, we have relied on the chronological order of the revelation of these verses and statements, and on the progress of the Islamic movement at the time of the Prophet, as well as the events marking that progress.

We have also been guided by our understanding of the nature of the Islamic message and its method of action which we have explained in our presentation of the *sūrah* and our commentary on its verses. This method of action is only understood by those who deal with this faith of Islam as a movement striving to establish itself in human life. As we have explained, the goal of that striving is to liberate mankind from submission to others so that they submit to God alone.

There is a wide gap between an understanding based on active striving and one based on academic study which is bound to ignore action. The first type of understanding looks at Islam as it conducts its direct confrontation with the system *of jāhiliyyah,* taking one step after another and moving from one stage to the next. It also looks at it as it proclaims its legislation to deal with the changing situation in its confrontation.

Moreover, these final laws and verdicts outlined in this last *sūrah* were actually revealed when the general situation of the Muslim community and the world around it required such legislation. Prior to that, when the situation required different rulings, these were given in earlier *sūrahs* to serve as provisional rulings.

When a new Muslim community emerges again and starts to strive for the establishment of this faith in human life, it may be appropriate for this community to apply the provisional rulings, provided that it remains well aware that these are only provisional. It should also be aware that it must strive to reach the stage when only the final rulings govern its relations with the world around it. God will certainly help that community and guide it on its way.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol IX

Sūrahs 10-11

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Yūnus **1**

Prologue *1*
Error and Challenge 12
Human Dignity and Divine Faith 15

1 A Book Full of Wisdom *19*
Preview 25
Something to Marvel at 27
Why a Human Messenger? 30
The Lord to Be Worshipped 32
Justice for All 34
Addressing Human Nature 37
Man's Changing Attitude 38
A Demand to Change the Qur'ān 41
Knowing Something Unknown to God 43
When All Are Powerless 44
A Description of Life in This World 46

2 Addressing the Human Mind *49*
Preview 57
When Deities Quarrel with Their Worshippers 58
Giving Life and Causing Death 60
Who Guides to the Truth 63
A Book of God's Own Devising 65
An Amazing Experience with the Qur'ān 68
Characteristics of the Qur'ān 70
Areas Unfathomed in Human Writings 74
Conjecture Preferred to Fact! 79
When God Is the Witness 81
Why Precipitate God's Punishment? 83
A Cure for What is in People's Hearts 85
Rejoice at God's Grace 87
God's Grace and People's Ingratitude 88
A Cure for Hearts 90
Confusion Compounded 91
Fabricated Claims of Divinity 93

3 Unheeded Warnings *97*
Preview 103
Noah's Challenge 104
Different Communities, Same Response 106
Truth or Sorcery 107
Fear Barring Belief 109
No Hope of a Positive Response 111
When Accepting the Faith Means Nothing 113
No Doubts Entertained 115
Even When Punishment is Due 118
Minds Shut to All Evidence 120

4 Clarification of Issues *123*
Preview 124

Perseverance until Final Judgement 124

Hūd 127

Prologue 127
Several Messengers, One Message 128
A Community Apart 129
Comforting the Prophet 132
Different Uses of Historical Events 133
Varied Effects 138

1 The Message Spelled Out 140
Preview 145
The Main Issues 146
Hiding Away from God 151
Matching Science with the Qur'ān 153
Man in Different Moods 156
Short-Sighted Requests 158
A Challenge Never to be Met 159
Testimony in Support of Clear Evidence 162
Unshakeable Belief in the Truth 164
The Greatest Losers 166

2 A Historical Perspective 169
Preview 174
When a Prophet is Described as a Liar 174
A Prophet's Passionate Plea 177
Prophets Act on Their Instructions 180
A Rebellious Son 182
A Father's Plea 184
The Origin of Monotheistic Religions 186
Ties and Families 191
The Nature of Islamic Society 195
A Unique Community 198
For Whom Miracles Happen 199

3 The Promise That Never Fails 203
Preview 206
Health, Rain and the God-Fearing 207
A Lesson in Futile Argument 210
Destruction of the `Ād 211
The Real Issue of Contention 214
Faith, the Truth and Human Welfare 216
High Hopes, Arrogance and a Woeful Doom 219
Historical Similarities 222

4 Abraham's Special Guests 224
Preview 226
Good News for Abraham 226
Familiar or Miraculous? 227
Perversion Brings a Painful Doom 228

5 Social Perspective 232
Preview 235
Faith and Fair Trading 235
Religion and Financial Dealings 237
A Kind Prophet's Argument 239
When All Arguments Fail 241
A Double Curse for Pharaoh's People 243

6 Single Message, Different People *245*
Preview 249
Summing up Past Lessons 250
The Safe Path to Follow 253
A Needed Reminder 255
What Saves Erring Communities 257
Why Let Differences Occur 258
The Central Theme 260
The Concept of God's Worship 262
True Freedom 265
Loss Compounded 267
Past and Present 269
Historical Progress 270
Different Messengers, One Attitude 272
Who Understands the Qur'ān? 273

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 10

Yūnus

(Jonah)

Prologue

In this *sūrah,* we return to those parts of the Qur'ān revealed in Makkah, the two preceding *sūrahs* both being Madinan revelations. Although the Makkan revelations share the common Qur'ānic features and the uniqueness that separates the Qur'ān, in subject, style and mode of expression, from any human discourse, they also have their own ambience.[1] This is generated by their subject matter and the way in which it is tackled. The *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah mainly concentrate on the nature of Godhead, servitude, and relations between God and man; providing a full understanding of who the true Lord is so that people may worship and submit to Him alone implementing His law; purging the true faith of all deviation and confusion, and charting the way for people to return to the true faith based on self-surrender to God alone. The way these themes are tackled in Makkan revelations is especially inspiring, adding as they do effective rhythms, powerful speech, and even sound effects. These we explained in the Prologue to *Sūrah* 6[2], and we will make further reference to them throughout the present *sūrah.*

The last Makkan revelations discussed in this work were *Sūrahs* 6 and *7,* Cattle and The Heights. Although these two *sūrahs* are placed together in their Qur'ānic order, they did not have the same sequence in the chronological order of revelation. They are followed in the Qur'ān by *Sūrahs* 8 and 9, The Spoils of War and The Repentance, which feature the special characteristics and themes of the later part of the Qur'ān revealed in Madinah. Now, however, we have two Makkan *Sūrahs,* Jonah and Hūd, which have the same sequence in both chronological order and Qur'ānic arrangement. We note a remarkable similarity between the two earlier Makkan

[1] For further discussion, reference may be made to the Introduction to Volume I, and to the Prologue to *Sūrah* 3 in Volume II.

[2] See the Prologues to *Sūrahs* 6 and 7 in Volumes V and VI respectively.

sūrahs and the two present ones, both in subject matter and presentation. *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, concentrates on the essence of faith, confronting the unbelievers with it and refuting all erring beliefs and practices. *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, on the other hand, speaks about the practical implementation of faith in human life and its confrontation with *jāhiliyyah* during different periods of history. The same is true of the two *sūrahs* in this volume, Jonah and Hūd. However, *Sūrah* 6 is distinguished from *Sūrah* 10 by its very powerful rhythm, quick pulse and sophistication of scene and movement. *Sūrah* 10, on the other hand, has a more relaxed rhythm and easy flow of scene and movement. *Sūrahs* 7 and 11, The Heights and Hūd display great similarity in theme, presentation and rhythm. Nevertheless, every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān has its own character, special features and distinctive properties.

Sūrah 10 follows its own distinctive approach to the subject matter of the Makkan revelations, and this reflects its character and features. In this Prologue we will do no more than provide a brief introduction to the themes the *sūrah* tackles.

- It first addresses the idolaters' attitude to the fact that the Prophet received revelations from on high, and to the Qur'ān itself. It makes clear that there is nothing to wonder about with regard to revelation. It further asserts that the Qur'ān could not have been invented by anyone who might have then attributed it to God.

> *These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom. Does it seem strange to people that We have inspired a man from their own midst: 'Warn all mankind, and give those who believe the glad tidings that they are on a sound footing with their Lord?' The unbelievers say: 'This is plainly a skilled enchanter.' (Verses 1-2)*
>
> *When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, those who have no hope of meeting Us say: 'Bring us a discourse other than this Qur'ān, or else alter it.' Say: It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread the torment of an awesome day if I should disobey my Lord!' Say: 'Had God so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have brought it to your knowledge. I spent a whole lifetime among you before it [was revealed to me]. Will you not, then, use your reason?' Who is more wicked than one who attributes his lying inventions to God or denies His revelations? Indeed those who are guilty shall not be successful. (Verses 15-17)*
>
> *This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of [revelations] that went before it, and a full explanation of God's Book, about which there is no doubt. It certainly comes from the Lord of all the worlds. If they say: 'He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.' Indeed they*

disbelieve what they cannot grasp, particularly since its inner meaning has not become clear to them. Likewise did those who lived before them disbelieve. But see what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (Verses 37-39)

- It also addresses the unbelievers' demand to be shown some supernatural sign — other than the Qur'ān — and their suggestion to hasten the fulfilment of the Qur'ānic warnings. The *sūrah* makes clear to them that the basic evidence of the truth of the Islamic faith is the Qur'ān itself which embodies, through its superior qualities, evidence of its divine nature. Hence, the challenge to all unbelievers to produce a single *sūrah* similar to the Qur'ān. It also explains that signs and evidence are given by God and subject to His will. The time when they receive their reward is determined by God alone. The Prophet has no say in this, as he is only a servant of God, like the rest of God's creation. All this contributes to the expostulation on the Islamic concept of Godhead and people's submission to Him.

  Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave. (Verses 13-14)

  They ask: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him by his Lord?' Say: 'God's alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.' (Verse 20)

  To every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement is passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged. They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?' Say: 'I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself except as God may please. For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.' Say: 'Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten?' 'Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?' (Verses 47-51)

- The *sūrah* also addresses the unbelievers' confused ideas about God and people's relation to Him. This is essentially what the Prophet talked to them about, but they denied the truth of revelation, expressed doubts about it, demanding at times that the Prophet should produce a different Qur'ān, and

at other times that he should produce a physical miracle. Meanwhile they continued to worship things that they claimed to be God's partners, things which would cause them neither benefit nor harm. They falsely claimed that such alleged partners could intercede with God on their behalf. They also falsely claimed that God had a son. The *sūrah* explains to them the attributes of God, the true Lord of the universe, and how His power is manifested in the universe, and within themselves, as well as in a multitude of universal phenomena. It reminds them of how they appeal to Him alone when things go wrong and they find themselves powerless in the face of danger. This is the central issue which takes up large portions of the *sūrah* and leads to its other themes. (Verses 3-6; 18; 22-23; 31-36; 66-70)

> *Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and established Himself on the Throne, regulating and governing all that exists. There is none who may intercede with Him unless He first grants leave for that. That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone. Will you not then keep this in mind? To Him you shall all return. This is, in truth, Gods promise. He originates all His creation, and then brings them all back to life so that He may reward, with equity, those who have believed and done good deeds. As for the unbelievers, they shall have a scalding drink and a grievous suffering for their unbelief He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and determined her phases so that you may know how to compute the years and measure [time]. God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth. He makes plain His revelations to people of knowledge. Indeed in the alternating of night and day, and in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for people who are God fearing. (Verses 3-6)*

> *They worship, side by side with God, what can neither harm nor benefit them, and say: 'These will intercede for us with God.' Say: Do you presume to inform God of something in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Limitless is He in His glory, and exalted above whatever they may associate with Him.' (Verse 18)*

> *He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea. Then when they are on board ships, and sailing along in a favourable wind, they feel happy with it, but then a stormy wind comes upon them and waves surge towards them from all sides, so that they believe they are encompassed [by death]. [At that point] they appeal to God, in complete sincerity of faith in Him alone: 'If You will save us from this, we shall certainly be most grateful.' Yet when He has saved them, they transgress in the land, offending against all right. Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound. [You care only for] the enjoyment of this present life, but in the end you will return to Us when We will tell you the truth of what you were*

doing [in this life]. (Verses 22-23)

Say: 'Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth? Or, who is it that has power over hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive? Who regulates all affairs?' They will say: 'God.' Say, then: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' 'Such is God, your true Lord. Apart from the truth, what is left but error? How is it, then, that you turn away?' Thus is the word of your Lord proved true with regard to those who do evil: they will not believe. Say: Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] originate creation, and then bring it back [to life] again?' Say: 'It is God alone who originates creation and then brings it back [to life] again. How is it, then, that you are so misled?' Say: Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] guide to the truth?' Say: 'God alone guides to the truth. Who is more worthy to be followed: He that guides to the truth, or he who cannot find the right way unless he is guided? What is then amiss with you? How do you judge?' Most of them follow nothing but mere conjecture. But conjecture can in no way be a substitute for truth. God has full knowledge of all that they do. (Verses 31-36)

Indeed, to God belong all those who are in the heavens and earth. Those who invoke other beings beside God do not follow any real partners with Him. They follow mere conjecture, and they utter nothing but falsehood. It is He who has made the night for you, so that you may have rest, and the day, so that you may see. In this there are certainly signs for those who listen. They say: 'God has taken unto Himself a son.' Limitless is He in His glory. Self-sufficient is He. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. No evidence whatever have you for this. Would you say about God something which you do not know? Say: 'Those who invent falsehood about God shall not be successful. They may have a brief enjoyment in this world, but then to Us they must return, and We will then make them suffer severe torment for their unbelief' (Verses 66-70)

- The *sūrah* also illustrates for the unbelievers God's presence in all that has a bearing on human life, and in all that people themselves do. This fills us with awe and keeps us on our guard. To give but one example of this we may quote: "*In whatever business you may be engaged, and whatever part you may recite of the Qur'ān, and whatever deed you [mankind] may do, We will be your witnesses from the moment you are engaged with it. Not even an atom's weight [of anything whatsoever] on earth or in heaven escapes your Lord, nor is there anything smaller or larger than that, but is recorded in a clear book.* " (Verse 61)

- A sense that God's punishment may come at any moment is imparted to people in order to help them shake off the false sense of security that results from enjoying an abundance of riches and luxuries.

  This present life may be compared to rain which We send down from the sky, and which is then absorbed by the plants of the earth from which men and animals eat. Then, when the earth has been clad with its fine adornments and well embellished, and its people believe that they have full mastery over it, Our command comes down upon it, by night or by day, and We make it like a field that has been mowed down, as if it did not blossom but yesterday. Thus do We spell out Our revelations to people who think. (Verse 24)

  Say: Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten?' 'Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?' (Verses 50-51)

- Furthermore, the *sūrah* points out that the unbelievers often have a false sense of security in this life, overlooking the hereafter and denying man's inevitable meeting with God on the Day of Judgement. It warns them against such indulgence, showing them that it is a raw deal that they choose for themselves when they neglect the life to come in preference for this life and its enjoyments. It explains to them that this present life is only a test and the outcome is determined on the Day of Resurrection. It adds a number of scenes of that day, particularly in relation to the alleged partners of God who will disown those who worship them. It also makes clear that no offering will be accepted from anyone on the Day of Judgement to release them from their deserved punishment.

  Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us, but are content with the life of this world, and feel well at ease about it, and those who pay no heed to Our revelation, shall have the Fire as their abode in requital for what they used to do. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will he guided aright by their Lord by means of their faith. Running waters will flow at their feet in the gardens of bliss. There they will call out: 'Limitless are You in Your glory, God,' and their greeting will be, 'Peace!' Their call will conclude with the words: All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds!' (Verses 7-10)

  Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the

truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave. (Verses 13-14)

God calls to the abode of peace, and guides him that -wills to a straight path. For those who do good there is a good reward, and more besides. Neither darkness nor any disgrace will overcast their faces. These are destined for paradise, where they will abide. As for those who have done evil, an evil deed is rewarded with its like. Ignominy will overshadow them – for they will have none to protect them from God – as if their faces have been covered with patches of the nights own darkness. Such are destined for the fire, where they will abide. One day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say to those who associated partners with God: 'Keep to your places, you and those you associated with God as partners.' We will then separate them from one another. Then those whom they associated as partners with God will say: 'It was not us that you worshipped.' 'God is sufficient as a witness between us and you. We were, for certain, unaware of your worshipping us.' There and then every soul will realize what it had done in the past; and all will be brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. All their invented falsehood will have forsaken them. (Verses 25-30)

On the Day when He will gather them together, [it will seem to them] as though they had not sojourned in this world more than an hour of a day, getting to know one another. Lost indeed will be those who [in their lifetime] disbelieved in meeting God and did not follow the right guidance. (Verse 45)

Should every wrongdoer possess all that the earth contains, he will gladly offer it all as ransom. They will harbour feelings of remorse when they see the suffering. Judgement will be passed on them in all fairness; and they will not be wronged. (Verse 54)

- The *sūrah* deals with the consequences of the unbelievers' confused concept of Godhead, denial of the resurrection and the life to come, and also their denial of divine revelations and disbelief of the Prophet's warnings. Such confusion led them to claim for themselves some of God's attributes, such as the authority to legislate for themselves, making things lawful or forbidden just as their pagan beliefs allowed them to do. Thus, they allocated certain things to their deities which they claimed to be God's partners. Such allocations included priests issuing decrees of prohibition and permissibility as they deemed fit. The priests then take for themselves what they claimed to be allocated to God: *"Say: Do but consider all the means of sustenance that God has bestowed on you! Some of it you then made unlawful, and some lawful.' Say: 'Has God given you leave to do so, or do you fabricate lies against God?' But what will they*

think, those who invent lies against God, on the Day of Resurrection? God is truly bountiful to mankind, but most of them are ungrateful." (Verses 59-60)

In order to present and establish such facts and ensure their proper effect on the hearts and minds of its audience, the *sūrah* employs a wide variety of special effects that are characteristic of the Qur'ānic style. Profound and moving as these inspiring effects are, they are of a type that suits the special nature of this *sūrah.* For example:

- The *sūrah* portrays a variety of universal scenes that impress on our minds the truth of Godhead, His elaborate planning of the universe and conducting of its affairs. These scenes highlight the fact that a multitude of factors need to come together in perfect balance so as to allow for the emergence of life and the support of human life in particular. The Qur'ān presents the basic theme of Godhead in such an inspiring fashion, without resort to any philosophical argument or logical treatise. God knows that it is sufficient to direct human nature to contemplate the universe and its visible aspects in order to awaken its receptive faculties and interact with them. Hence, the Qur'ān employs this particular address to human nature in a language it readily understands. Here are some such inspiring examples:

  Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and established Himself on the Throne, regulating and governing all that exists. There is none who may intercede with Him unless He first grants leave for that. That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone. Will you not then keep this in mind? (Verse 3)

  He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and determined her phases so that you may know how to compute the years and measure [time]. God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth. He makes plain His revelations to people of knowledge. Indeed in the alternating of night and day, and in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for people who are God-fearing. (Verses 5-6)

  Say: 'Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth? Or, who is it that has power over hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive? Who regulates all affairs?' They will say: 'God.' Say, then: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' 'Such is God, your true Lord. Apart from the truth, what is left but error? How is it, then, that you turn away?' (Verses 31-32)

  It is He who has made the night for you, so that you may have rest, and the day, so

that you may see. In this there are certainly signs for those who listen. (Verse 67)

Say: 'Consider all that there is in the heavens and the earth.' But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe? (Verse 101)

- This *sūrah* is full of scenes portraying events that people witness and participate in, even though they remain unaware of their full significance and elaborate planning. The Qur'ān presents them with pictures of their own lives as these develop. It raises a mirror before people's eyes so that they can see themselves for what they truly are. A couple of examples follow:

  When affliction befalls man, he appeals to Us, whether he be lying on his side, sitting, or standing, but as soon as We relieve his affliction, he goes on as though he had never appealed to Us to save him from the affliction that befell him. Thus do their deeds seem fair to those who are given to excesses. (Verse 12)

  Whenever We let people taste grace after some hardship has afflicted them, they turn to scheme against Our revelations. Say: More swift is God's scheming. Our messengers are recording all that you may devise.' He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea. Then when you are on board ships, and sailing along in a favourable wind, they feel happy with it, but then a stormy wind comes upon them and waves surge towards them from all sides, so that they believe they are encompassed [by death]. [At that point] they appeal to God, in complete sincerity of faith in Him alone: If You will save us from this, we shall certainly be most grateful.' Yet when He has saved them, they transgress in the land, offending against all right. Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound. [You care only for] the enjoyment of this present life, but in the end you will return to Us when We will tell you the truth of what you were doing [in this life]. (Verses 21-23)

- The *sūrah* includes a host of information about the fate suffered by earlier communities. At times this is given in the form of a report, while at others an account of the history of earlier messengers is given. Such information portrays a very powerful picture of the destruction of those who denied the truth in the past. Thus, it gives a warning against suffering a similar fate. People must not be deluded by the comforts of this present life, for it is merely a brief test, lasting no more than an hour in which people get to know one another before reaching their final abode, either in long-lasting suffering or in eternal bliss.

Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave. (Verses 13-14)

Relate to them the story of Noah. He said to his people: My people! If my presence among you and my reminders to you of God's revelations are repugnant to you — well, in God have I placed my trust. Decide, then, what you are going to do, and [seek the help of] those whom you associate as partners with God. Be clear about your course of action, leaving no room for uncertainty, then carry out against me whatever you may have decided and give me no respite. But if you turn away, [remember that] I have asked of you no reward whatsoever. My reward rests with none but God. I have been commanded to be one of those who surrender themselves to Him.' But they disbelieved him. So We saved him and all those who joined him in the ark, and made them inherit the earth. And We drowned the others who denied Our revelations. Reflect on the fate of those who were forewarned. (Verses 71-73)

Then after those [prophets] We sent Moses and Aaron with Our signs to Pharaoh and his nobles, but they persisted in their arrogance, for they were hardened offenders. When the truth came to them from Us, they said: 'This is clearly nothing but sorcery. 'Moses replied: Do you say this to the truth when it has come to you? Can this be sorcery? But sorcerers will never be successful.' (Verses 75-77)

And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression. But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said. I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself' [But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs.' (Verses 90-92)

What are they waiting for except a repetition of the days [of calamity] experienced by those who have gone before them? Say: 'Wait, then, if you will. I am also waiting.' Thereupon, We save Our messengers and those who believe. Thus have We willed it upon Ourselves: We save those who believe. (Verses 102-103)

- The *sūrah* also portrays scenes of the Day of Resurrection when both unbelievers and believers will receive their wages for their deeds in this life. The presentation here is effectively animated, leaving a profound effect on our

hearts. Along with the scenes of destruction that overwhelms the guilty ones and the salvation of the believers, we are presented with two contrasting scenes of life in the hereafter, and two more of the beginning and the end:

> *For those who do good there is a good reward, and more besides. Neither darkness nor any disgrace will overcast their faces. These are destined for paradise, where they will abide. As for those who have done evil, an evil deed is rewarded with its like. Ignominy will overshadow them – for they will have none to protect them from God – as if their faces have been covered with patches of the night's own darkness. Such are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (Verses 26--27)*

> *One day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say to those who associated partners with God: 'Keep to your places, you and those you associated with God as partners. ' We will then separate them from one another. Then those whom they associated as partners with God will say: 'It was not us that you worshipped.' 'God is sufficient as a witness between us and you. We were, for certain, unaware of your worshipping us.' There and then every soul will realize what it had done in the past; and all will be brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. All their invented falsehood will have forsaken them. (Verses 28-30)*

> *Should every wrongdoer possess all that the earth contains, he will gladly offer it all as ransom. They will harbour feelings of remorse when they see the suffering. Judgement will be passed on them in all fairness; and they will not be wronged. (Verse 54)*

- Another special effect is that of challenging the unbelievers who denied the very idea of revelation to produce a single *sūrah like* the Qur'ān. When the challenge is made, the Prophet is instructed to leave them to their fate, which is the same as that of earlier wrongdoers. He should follow his own way, paying no attention to what may happen to them. The whole sequence of the challenge followed by the Prophet leaving them and carrying on with his mission is bound to impress on them the fact that he was absolutely certain of the truth of his message, and assured of the care he was promised by his Lord. Such confidence was bound to shake them violently.

> *This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of [revelations] that went before it, and a full explanation of God's Book, about which there is no doubt. It certainly comes from the Lord of all the worlds. If they say: 'He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.' Indeed they*

> *disbelieve what they cannot grasp, particularly since its inner meaning has not become clear to them. Likewise did those who lived before them disbelieve. But see what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (Verses 37-39)*
>
> *Say: Mankind, if you are still in doubt as to what my faith is, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship beside God, but I worship God alone who will cause all of you to die. I have been commanded to be one of those who believe. And adhere exclusively and sincerely to the true faith, and do not be one of those who associate partners with God. Do not invoke, instead of God, anything that can neither benefit nor harm you. For if you do, you will surely be among the wrongdoers.' Should God afflict you with any hardship, none other than He can remove it; and if He wills any good for you, none can withhold His bounty. He bestows it on whomsoever He wills. He is truly Forgiving, truly Merciful. Say: Mankind, the truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever chooses to follow the true guidance, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, does so at his own peril. I am not responsible for your conduct. ' Follow whatever is revealed to you, and be patient in adversity, until God shall give His judgement. He is the best of all judges. (Verses 104-109)*

With such clarity, the *sūrah* is concluded.

Error and Challenge

This *sūrah,* number 10, was revealed after *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey, at a time when the unbelievers were engaged in a heated debate concerning the truth of revelation, the Qur'ān and its denunciation of their erroneous beliefs and ignorant practices. The Qur'ān exposed the fundamental contradictions in their beliefs. From the old divine religion of Abraham and Ishmael, the Arabs retained the belief that God was the Creator, Sustainer, who gives life and causes death, and who has power over all things. In stark contradiction to these, they claimed that God had children and that the angels were His daughters, representing them as idols and appealing to them to intercede with God on their behalf. Needless to say this confusion in beliefs had far- reaching effects on their life, most important among which was the authority claimed by their chiefs and monks to pronounce certain types of cattle and fruits as lawful and others as forbidden. They also allocated a portion of these to God, and another portion to their false deities.

They countered the Qur'ānic criticism of their absurd beliefs and contradictory concepts by rejecting the Prophet, his message and revelations, and by accusing him of being a sorcerer. They demanded that he should show them some miracle to prove that he received revelations from on high. They made different demands, as related

in *Sūrah* 17, in which God says: "*They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or [till] you have a garden of date trees and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or till you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or till you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or till you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'All glory belongs to my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a messenger.' Nothing has ever prevented people from believing [in God] whenever guidance has come to them except for their saying: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?'" (17:* 90-94) Also in this *sūrah,* God says: "*They ask: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him by his Lord?' Say: 'God's alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.'*" (Verse 20)

They also demanded that the Prophet bring them a different Qur'ān which contained no criticism of their idols, beliefs and practices. They Promised that they would then believe in him. The *sūrah* states: *"When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, those who have no hope of meeting Us say: 'Bring us a discourse other than this Qur'ān, or else alter it.' Say: 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread the torment of an awesome day if I should disobey my Lord!' Say: Had God so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have brought it to your knowledge. I spent a whole lifetime among you before it [was revealed to me]. Will you not, then, use your reason?' Who is more wicked than one who attributes his lying inventions to God or denies His revelations? Indeed those who are guilty shall not be successful."* (Verses 15-17)

It was in such an atmosphere that the *sūrah* was revealed. It is clearly apparent from its flow that it is all a single unit. In fact it is difficult to try to divide it into sections and passages. This disproves the argument that verses 40 and 94-96 were revealed later in Madinah. These verses are closely linked to the rest of the *sūrah.* Indeed, if we were to leave out any verse, we cause a disruption in the flow of the *sūrah.*

The unity of purpose in the *sūrah* is clearly apparent as we see when we compare its opening and its end. It opens with the verses saying: "*Alif. Lām. Rā. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom. Does it seem strange to people that We have inspired a man from their own midst: 'Warn all mankind, and give those who believe the glad tidings that they are on a sound footing with their Lord?' The unbelievers say: 'This is plainly a skilled enchanter.'* (Verses 1-2) Its final verse reads: "*Follow whatever is revealed to you, and be patient in adversity, until God shall give His judgement. He is the best of all judges."* (Verse 109) Thus, the theme of revelation is brought up at the beginning and the end, as it is frequently highlighted throughout the *sūrah.*

The same unity is noticed in the different special effects employed in the *sūrah.* For example, the unbelievers who opposed the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) try to hasten the punishment they have been warned against. But they are told here that such punishment occurs suddenly, when no repentance or declaration of acceptance of the true faith will be of any avail. When historical accounts are later given in the *sūrah* we see the same scene as it took place in earlier communities and their sudden punishment.

In answer to their request to speed up their punishment, the *sūrah* has the following to say: "*They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?' Say: 'I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself, except as God may please. For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.' Say: Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten?' 'Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?' Then it will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste the long-lasting torment. Is this requital anything other than the just due for what you used to do?'*" (Verses 48-52)

When the story of Moses and his encounter with Pharaoh is given later in the *sūrah,* it concludes with a scene that may be taken as the physical implementation of the earlier warning: "*And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression. But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself' [But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs.'*" (Verses 90-92)

Throughout the *sūrah* we are given several scenes of how communities which stubbornly denied the truth were taken unawares as God's punishment overwhelmed them. All this provides clear links between themes, scenes and modes of expression.

Similarly, at the beginning of the *sūrah* the unbelievers' accusation against the Prophet is reported: "*This is plainly a skilled enchanter.*" (Verse 2) When the encounter between Moses and his opponents is told later, we read: "*When the truth came to them from Us, they said: 'This is clearly nothing but sorcery.'*"[3] (Verse 76)

Although the *sūrah* is named after the Prophet Jonah, there is no more than a very brief reference to Jonah and his people as follows: "*Had it believed, every community*

[3] Although different words, 'enchanter' and 'sorcery', are used in translation, the same word is used in the original Arabic text. The translation tries to capture the particular connotations emphasized in each instance. — Editor's note.

would have profited by its faith. It was so only with Jonah's people. When they believed, We lifted from them the suffering of disgrace in this life, and allowed them to enjoy things for a while." (Verse 98) The case of Jonah's people is the only clear example of a community which saved themselves before being overwhelmed by God's punishment. They believed in God when there was still time for them to do so. Moreover, they provided the only instance among those receiving God's messages of an entire community accepting the faith after having first given a negative response. Hence, they were saved from the punishment their Prophet warned them against.

All these examples demonstrate the *sūrah's* complete unity. It is a single unit which is difficult to divide into sections.

Human Dignity and Divine Faith

It is clear from the texts we have quoted in this Prologue that the main issue the *sūrah* centres around is that of explaining the true concepts of Godhead and people's position in relation to God, and how these influence human life. The other themes in the *sūrah,* such as revelation, the hereafter, and earlier divine messages, are used to illustrate the main issue and to explain its influence on people's lives, beliefs, worship and action.

In fact, this is the central issue of the Qur'ān as a whole, particularly those parts revealed in Makkah. Defining God and His position as the Lord, the Sovereign who controls all, and the meaning of being a servant of God and the limitations of that position, so as to make people submit to Him alone, acknowledging His Lordship and sovereignty is indeed what the Qur'ān is all about. Whatever else is given by way of emphasis, illustration, and re-emphasis.

When carefully considered, this fundamental issue of Godhead deserves such profound explanation. It equally deserves that God should send all His messengers to advocate it, and that all His messages explain it: *"Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone."* (21: 25)

Human life on earth will not be set on the right track unless this fundamental truth is absolutely clear in people's minds, and finds its full implementation in their lives.

Without this fundamental truth, human life will not take its rightful position in relation to the universe we live in and interact with. When people are confused about this issue they begin to ascribe divinity to animate and inanimate objects, and indeed to ghosts and fantasies. They enslave themselves in a ludicrous, but miserable way to these false deities. On the instigation of clerics and con men who will always try to deceive people for their own personal gain, they make offerings to their false deities,

sacrificing some of their earnings given to them by God, their only Lord and Sustainer. Yet these things and beings have no power whatsoever; they cannot cause people any harm or benefit. They live either in fear of these false deities, or try to curry favour with them, when like them, these beings are subject to God's power. This is how God describes their situation:

> *Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him].' Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners. How ill they judge! Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions. They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions. They also say: 'That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women.' But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is Wise, All-knowing. Losers indeed are those who, in their ignorance, foolishly kill their children and declare as forbidden what God has provided for them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God. They have gone astray and they have no guidance.*[4] *(6: 136-140)*

These are merely some examples of serving deities other than God with property and children being made offerings for some creatures, without any sanction granted by God.

Similarly, human life will not be set straight in the way people deal with each other unless they hold the right concepts of God and man, and until they reflect these in their practices and general code of living. Man will not maintain his full dignity and realize complete freedom under any system that does not assign all Lordship and sovereignty to God alone. Such a system must be based on the belief that life, both in this world and in the life to come, in public and private, is subject to God who alone has the authority to legislate.

This is a fact borne out by human history. Every time people deviated from the true faith that required them to submit themselves to God alone in belief and practice, law-making and worship, they suffered the loss of their humanity, dignity and freedom.

[4] For a full explanation of these verses, see Volume V, pp. 278-286.

The Islamic reading of history attributes the humiliation of the masses by tyranny to the basic factor of deviation by the masses from the divine faith based on attributing Godhead, Lordship, sovereignty and all authority to God alone. Speaking of Pharaoh and his people, God says: "*Pharaoh issued a call to his people, saying: My people! Does not the dominion over Egypt belong to me, since all these running waters flow at my feet? Can you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible man who can hardly make his meaning clear? And then, why have no golden armlets been given to him, and why have no angels come together with him?' Thus he incited his people to levity, and they obeyed him; for they were a community of transgressors.*" (43: 51-54) Thus the fact that Pharaoh was able to incite his people and get his way with them is attributed to the fact that they were transgressors. No tyrant can get his people to do his bidding and incite them to do what is frivolous if they truly believe in God alone, acknowledging no Lordship or sovereignty to anyone else.

What happened with those who rebelled against submission to God alone, allowing some of their numbers to rule over them implementing a law other than God's law, is that they ended up enduring the misery of submission to others. Such submission, however, squanders away their dignity and freedom, regardless of the type of government, even though they may think that some forms of government ensures such dignity and freedom.

When Europe rebelled against a Church that tyrannized under the false guise of religion, it tried to run away from God. People in Europe thought that they could best preserve their freedom, dignity and humanity under democratic government. They pinned their hopes on the guarantees provided by democratic constitutions, parliamentary systems, a free press, judicial and legal checks, majority rule, and similar ideals. But what happened in practice? Capitalism managed to exercise tyrannical power reducing all checks and institutions into little more than slogans or myths. The great majority of the people became subservient to the powerful minority that owned the capital which enabled it to control the parliamentary majority, the constitution, the press and all other checks and balances that people imagined would guarantee their freedom and other rights.

Certain groups turned away from individualistic or democratic systems which usher in a tyranny of capital or class and established 'collective' systems. But what has this meant in practice? They simply replaced subservience to the capitalist class with subservience to the working class. Or we may say, they replaced subservience to capitalists and big companies with subservience to the state which controlled capital and enjoyed total power. This made the tyranny of the state an even worse tyranny.

In every situation or regime where some people are subservient to others, a heavy tax is paid to different deities, in cash and kind. Submission is inevitable. If it is not

made to God, then it is made to others. When submission is purely to God, it sets people free, and preserves their dignity and honour. By contrast, submission to other beings destroys people's humanity, dignity, freedom and all their good qualities, wastes their money and ruins their material interests.

Hence, the central issue of Godhead and people's relation with Him is given such careful and detailed attention in all divine messages and Scriptures. This *sūrah* is an example of this care. The basic issue here is not concerned with the worship of statues in the ignorant societies of the ancient past; its concerns are man throughout all generations, and all forms *of jāhiliyyah,* past and present. Indeed, *all jāhiliyyah* systems are based on making people subservient to others.

This is the reason why the central issue in all divine Scriptures is to make clear that all Godhead and Lordship belong to God alone: "*Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone.*" (21: 25)

Hence, the conclusion of this *sūrah* runs as follows: "*Say: 'Mankind, if you are still in doubt as to what my faith is, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship beside God, but I worship God alone who will cause all of you to die. I have been commanded to be one of those who believe. And adhere exclusively and sincerely to the true faith, and do not be one of those who associate partners with God. Do not invoke, instead of God, anything that can neither benefit nor harm you. For if you do, you will surely be among the wrongdoers. Should God afflict you with any hardship, none other than He can remove it; and if He wills any good for you, none can withhold His bounty. He bestows it on whomsoever He wills. He is truly Forgiving, truly Merciful.' Say: 'Mankind, the truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever chooses to follow the true guidance, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, does so at his own peril. I am not responsible for your conduct.' Follow whatever is revealed to you, and be patient in adversity, until God shall give His judgement. He is the best of all judges.*" (Verses 104-109)

1
A Book Full of Wisdom

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓرٓ ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Rā. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom. (1)

أَكَانَ لِلنَّاسِ عَجَبًا أَنْ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَنْ أَنذِرِ ٱلنَّاسَ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَنَّ لَهُمْ قَدَمَ صِدْقٍ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۗ قَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَٰحِرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢﴾

Does it seem strange to people that We have inspired a man from their own midst: Warn all mankind, a nd give those who believe the glad tidings that they are on a sound footing with their Lord? The unbelievers say: 'This is plainly a skilled enchanter.' (2)

إِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ فِى سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ۖ يُدَبِّرُ ٱلْأَمْرَ ۖ مَا مِن شَفِيعٍ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ إِذْنِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and established Himself on the Throne, regulating and governing all that exists. There is none who may intercede with Him unless He first grants leave for that. That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone. Will you not then keep this in mind? (3)

إِلَيْهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا ۖ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقًّا ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
يَبْدَؤُا۟ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ لِيَجْزِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۚ
وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَهُمْ شَرَابٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ
وَعَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٤﴾

To Him you shall all return. This is, in truth, God's promise. He originates all His creation, and then brings them all back to life so that He may reward, with equity, those who have believed and done good deeds. As for the unbelievers, they shall have a scalding drink and a grievous suffering for their unbelief. (4)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ ٱلشَّمْسَ ضِيَآءً
وَٱلْقَمَرَ نُورًا وَقَدَّرَهُۥ مَنَازِلَ لِتَعْلَمُوا۟
عَدَدَ ٱلسِّنِينَ وَٱلْحِسَابَ ۚ مَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ
ذَٰلِكَ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ يُفَصِّلُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ
يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥﴾

He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and determined her phases so that you may know how to compute the years and measure [time]. God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth. He makes plain His revelations to people of knowledge. (5)

إِنَّ فِى ٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَمَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ
فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Indeed in the alternating of night and day, and in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for people who are God-fearing. (6)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَآءَنَا وَرَضُوا۟
بِٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱطْمَأَنُّوا۟ بِهَا وَٱلَّذِينَ
هُمْ عَنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us, but are content with the life of this world, and feel well at ease about it, and those who pay no heed to Our revelation,

(7)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ مَأْوَىٰهُمُ ٱلنَّارُ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨﴾

shall have the Fire as their abode in requital for what they used to do. (8)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ يَهْدِيهِمْ رَبُّهُم بِإِيمَٰنِهِمْ ۖ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهِمُ ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٩﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be guided aright by their Lord by means of their faith. Running waters will flow at their feet in the gardens of bliss. (9)

دَعْوَىٰهُمْ فِيهَا سُبْحَٰنَكَ ٱللَّهُمَّ وَتَحِيَّتُهُمْ فِيهَا سَلَٰمٌ ۚ وَءَاخِرُ دَعْوَىٰهُمْ أَنِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

There they will call out: 'Limitless are You in Your glory, God,' and their greeting will be, 'Peace!' Their call will conclude with the words: All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds!' (10)

۞ وَلَوْ يُعَجِّلُ ٱللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ ٱلشَّرَّ ٱسْتِعْجَالَهُم بِٱلْخَيْرِ لَقُضِىَ إِلَيْهِمْ أَجَلُهُمْ ۖ فَنَذَرُ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَآءَنَا فِى طُغْيَٰنِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

If God were to hasten for mankind the ill [they have earned] as they would hasten the good, their end would indeed come forthwith. But We leave those who have no hope of meeting Us in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. (11)

وَإِذَا مَسَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ ٱلضُّرُّ دَعَانَا لِجَنۢبِهِۦٓ أَوْ قَاعِدًا أَوْ قَآئِمًا فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُ ضُرَّهُۥ مَرَّ كَأَن لَّمْ يَدْعُنَآ إِلَىٰ ضُرٍّ مَّسَّهُۥ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ زُيِّنَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

When affliction befalls man, he appeals to Us, whether he be lying on his side, sitting, or standing, but as soon as We relieve his affliction, he goes on as though he had never appealed to Us to save him from the

affliction that befell him. Thus do their deeds seem fair to those who are given to excesses. (12)

وَلَقَدۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا ٱلۡقُرُونَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ لَمَّا ظَلَمُواْ وَجَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَمَا كَانُواْ لِيُؤۡمِنُواْۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ١٣

Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. (13)

ثُمَّ جَعَلۡنَٰكُمۡ خَلَٰٓئِفَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡ لِنَنظُرَ كَيۡفَ تَعۡمَلُونَ ١٤

Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave. (14)

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَاتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٖ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَرۡجُونَ لِقَآءَنَا ٱئۡتِ بِقُرۡءَانٍ غَيۡرِ هَٰذَآ أَوۡ بَدِّلۡهُۚ قُلۡ مَا يَكُونُ لِيٓ أَنۡ أُبَدِّلَهُۥ مِن تِلۡقَآيِ نَفۡسِيٓۖ إِنۡ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّۖ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ إِنۡ عَصَيۡتُ رَبِّي عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ١٥

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, those who have no hope of meeting Us say: 'Bring us a discourse other than this Qur'ān, or else alter it.' Say: 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread the torment of an awesome day if I should disobey my Lord!' (15)

قُل لَّوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَا تَلَوۡتُهُۥ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَلَآ أَدۡرَىٰكُم بِهِۦۖ فَقَدۡ لَبِثۡتُ فِيكُمۡ عُمُرٗا مِّن قَبۡلِهِۦٓۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ١٦

Say: 'Had God so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have brought it to your knowledge. I spent a

whole lifetime among you before it [was revealed to me]. Will you not, then, use your reason?' (16)

فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ كَذَّبَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفْلِحُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Who is more wicked than one who attributes his lying inventions to God or denies His revelations? Indeed those who are guilty shall not be successful. (17)

وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنفَعُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ شُفَعَـٰٓؤُنَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُلْ أَتُنَبِّـُٔونَ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا لَا يَعْلَمُ فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَلَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ سُبْحَـٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَـٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

They worship, side by side with God, what can neither harm nor benefit them, and say: 'These will intercede for us with God.' Say: 'Do you presume to inform God of something in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Limitless is He in His glory, and exalted above whatever they may associate with Him.' (18)

وَمَا كَانَ ٱلنَّاسُ إِلَّآ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً فَٱخْتَلَفُوا۟ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ فِيمَا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

All mankind were once but one single community, and then they disagreed among themselves. Had it not been for a decree from your Lord that had already gone forth, all their differences would have been resolved. (19)

وَيَقُولُونَ لَوْلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ ۖ فَقُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْغَيْبُ لِلَّهِ فَٱنتَظِرُوٓا۟ إِنِّى مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْمُنتَظِرِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

They ask: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him by his Lord?' Say: 'God's alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.' (20)

وَإِذَآ أَذَقْنَا ٱلنَّاسَ رَحْمَةً مِّنۢ بَعْدِ ضَرَّآءَ مَسَّتْهُمْ إِذَا لَهُم مَّكْرٌ فِىٓ ءَايَاتِنَا ۚ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ أَسْرَعُ مَكْرًا ۚ إِنَّ رُسُلَنَا يَكْتُبُونَ مَا تَمْكُرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Whenever We let people taste grace after some hardship has afflicted them, they turn

to scheme against Our revelations. Say: 'More swift is God's scheming. Our messengers are recording all that you may devise.' (21)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُسَيِّرُكُمۡ فِى ٱلۡبَرِّ وَٱلۡبَحۡرِۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا كُنتُمۡ فِى ٱلۡفُلۡكِ وَجَرَيۡنَ بِهِم بِرِيحٍ طَيِّبَةٍ وَفَرِحُواْ بِهَا جَآءَتۡهَا رِيحٌ عَاصِفٌ وَجَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡجُ مِن كُلِّ مَكَانٍ وَظَنُّوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ أُحِيطَ بِهِمۡ دَعَوُاْ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ لَئِنۡ أَنجَيۡتَنَا مِنۡ هَٰذِهِۦ لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea. Then when you are on board ships, and sailing along in a favourable wind, they feel happy with it, but then a stormy wind comes upon them and waves surge towards them from all sides, so that they believe they are encompassed [by death]. [At that point] they appeal to God, in complete sincerity of faith in Him alone: 'If You will save us from this, we shall certainly be most grateful.' (22)

فَلَمَّآ أَنجَىٰهُمۡ إِذَا هُمۡ يَبۡغُونَ فِى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ بِغَيۡرِ ٱلۡحَقِّۗ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّمَا بَغۡيُكُمۡ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِكُمۖ مَّتَٰعَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيۡنَا مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَنُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Yet when He has saved them, they transgress in the land, offending against all right. Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound. [You care only for] the enjoyment of this present life, but in the end you will return to Us when We will tell you the truth of what you were doing [in this life] . (23)

إِنَّمَا مَثَلُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا كَمَآءٍ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَٱخۡتَلَطَ بِهِۦ نَبَاتُ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مِمَّا يَأۡكُلُ ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمُ حَتَّىٰٓ

This present life may be compared to rain which We send down from the sky, and

which is then absorbed by the plants of the earth from which men and animals eat.

إِذَآ أَخَذَتِ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ زُخۡرُفَهَا وَٱزَّيَّنَتۡ وَظَنَّ أَهۡلُهَآ أَنَّهُمۡ قَٰدِرُونَ عَلَيۡهَآ أَتَىٰهَآ أَمۡرُنَا لَيۡلًا أَوۡ نَهَارٗا فَجَعَلۡنَٰهَا حَصِيدٗا كَأَن لَّمۡ تَغۡنَ بِٱلۡأَمۡسِۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لِقَوۡمٖ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٢٤

Then, when the earth has been clad with its fine adornments and well embellished, and its people believe that they have full mastery over it, Our command comes down upon it, by night or by day, and We make it like a field that has been mowed down, as if it did not blossom but yesterday. Thus do We spell out Our revelations to people who think. (24)

وَٱللَّهُ يَدۡعُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ دَارِ ٱلسَّلَٰمِ وَيَهۡدِي مَن يَشَآءُ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٢٥

God calls to the abode of peace, and guides him that wills to a straight path. (25)

Preview

This *sūrah* is a single unit, difficult to divide into sections and subunits. In this respect it is similar to *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, which takes up Volume V of this work. However, each of the two *sūrahs* has its own distinctive character. This *sūrah* also flows in successive waves to inspire our hearts, choosing various rhythms for its address. It wonders at the outset how the unbelievers received the Qur'ān, the new revelation from on high, and follows this with scenes of the universe which reflect the truth of God's creation and His control of the universe. This is followed with scenes of the Day of Judgement. It reflects on how people react to the events they witness and on the fate of earlier communities. Its other themes have already been referred to in the Prologue.

If we have to divide the *sūrah* into sections, then the first one occupies more than its first half and this flows with perfect ease. This is followed by a short account of the Prophet Noah and his mission, and a brief reference to the prophets sent after him, before giving an account of the history of the Prophet Moses and a reference to the Prophet Jonah and his community. These accounts and references form another section. The final verses in the *sūrah* form a section of their own.

In view of the nature of this *sūrah,* we will attempt to discuss it in groups of waves addressing related themes.

This first section begins with three individual letters, *Alif, Lām, Rā,* in the same way as *Sūrahs* 2, 3 and *7* discussed in Volumes I, II and VI respectively. We explained in our commentary on these earlier *sūrahs* our view about why these *sūrahs* begin with such individual letters.[1] To recap, from a linguistic point of view, these three individual letters form a subject while the predicate is the sentence that follows: *'These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom.'* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* then refers to a number of things which reflect the wisdom to which reference is made in the description of this book, the Qur'ān. These start with a revelation to God's Messenger so that he could warn all people and deliver a piece of happy news to the believers. It refutes the objection voiced by some people that God has chosen a human being to be the recipient of His revelations. It also refers to the creation of the heavens and the earth and how their affairs are conducted and regulated, as well as making the sun a source of bright light while the moon reflects light. Mention is also made of the stages the moon goes through and how people use these to calculate the years and measure time. The alternation of the night and day is also mentioned by way of reference to the wisdom involved in such alternation.

After presenting these scenes, the *sūrah* moves on to speak of those who do not reflect on such miracles and who do not expect to meet with their Lord, who creates and regulates all things. It refers to the black end that awaits those who choose to remain unaware of the import of God's creation and, by contrast, the perfect happiness that is in store for believers. The *sūrah* also refers to the wisdom behind delaying the punishment till its appointed day. Had God decided to speed up the awful result of their work, they would immediately face their end.

The *sūrah* then reflects on the attitude of human beings to good and evil. It shows how they appeal earnestly to God to lift their suffering, and how they forget Him after He has responded to their appeals: they unhesitatingly go back to their old,

[1] It is useful to summarize our view here: these individual letters are simply an implicit reference to the fact that this divine revelation, the Qur'ān, is composed of-letters of the same nature as those which some sūrahs open with. They are the same letters of the language of the Arabs, the first community to be addressed by the Qur'ān. Yet they form this Book which is of a miraculous nature. Those Arabs, masters of eloquence and poetic description, cannot produce a single sūrah similar to the Qur'ān. This miraculous excellence appears clearly in everything God makes. The earth is composed of particles of different elements with well-known characteristics, but the utmost that people can make of them is a brick, a tool, a machine, etc. On the other hand, from these very particles and elements God makes life, which no one else can do. From these letters and sounds, people make words and sentences in prose or verse, but God makes of them the Qur'ān which provides the infallible criterion to distinguish the truth from falsehood. The difference between people's language and the Qur'ān is the same as the difference between a lifeless object and a creature full of life. — Editor's note.

errant ways. In short, they take no lesson from what happened to earlier communities who met their doom.

Although the fate of those communities was clear to the Arabs whom the Prophet Muĥammad addressed, calling on them to accept God's message, the unbelievers asked the Prophet to bring them a different Qur'ān or change parts of it. They would not consider that the Qur'ān was revealed by God, and as such admits no change or modification. They worshipped idols which could bring them no benefit and cause them no harm, and they relied on no sound proof to support their beliefs. At the same time they denied God in spite of the revelations they received from on high supporting the call to believe in Him alone.

Furthermore, they demanded miracles, ignoring the clearly miraculous nature of the Qur'ān itself, and turning a blind eye to all signs scattered in the world around them confirming that God is the Lord of the universe.

This first passage then portrays a vivid example of how people receive God's grace and how they react when hardship or disaster befalls them. This is given in a scene that is full of life, with people boarding ships that go easily in the sea before they face a raging storm that brings them into contact with ferocious waves from every direction.

This passage then draws another scene which describes the deceptive fleeting nature of this life, and how all its glitter vanishes in an instant, while people are dazzled by its brightness, unaware of the impending doom. At the same time, God calls on them to seek the life of peace, security and reassurance which does not end suddenly, like the present life. He states that all these signs are explained for a definite purpose: *'Thus do We spell out Our revelations to people who think."* (Verse 24) It is such people who understand God's wisdom in His creation and the way He conducts and regulates all matters.

Something to Marvel at

"Alif. Lām. Rā. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom." (Verse 1) These are three letters of the Arabic alphabet from which all the verses of this divine book that is full of wisdom are composed. The unbelievers deny that God revealed this book to His Messenger. Furthermore, whilst they realize that these are the letters of their language, they are unable to produce a single verse similar to what the Qur'ān contains. In fact the *sūrah* includes a challenge to them to do so. Yet their inability to take up that challenge does not lead them to reflect that the thing which God's Messenger has and they lack is the revelation he receives from on high. Had it not been for revelation, he would have had the same difficulty, and would have been

unable to compose out of these letters that are available to all a single verse like the Qur'ān.

"*These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom.*" (Verse 1) It is indeed a wise book which addresses human beings with what suits human nature. It portrays in the present *sūrah* some aspects that are always true of human nature, reflected across every generation. In its wisdom it calls on those who remain unaware to wake up and reflect on the signs they see all around them in the wide universe, in the heavens and the earth, in the sun and the moon, in the night and day, in the fate of earlier communities and how they had responded to the appeals of their messengers, and in everything that points to the great power that conducts and regulates all existence.

"*Does it seem strange to people that We have inspired a man from their own midst: 'Warn all mankind, and give those who believe the glad tidings that they are on a sound footing with their Lord?' The unbelievers say: 'This is plainly a skilled enchanter.'*" (Verse 2) This is a rhetorical question which wonders at the attitude which considers the very concept of revelation strange.

Every one of God's messengers was received with the same disbelieving question: "*Has God sent a human being as His messenger?*" (17: 94) This question stems from the fact that people do not appreciate the value of 'humanity' which they themselves represent. They find it hard to believe that a human being could be chosen as God's messenger and that God sends down to him revelations, commanding him to make the way of guidance for others clear. They imagine that God would send an angel or some other creature belonging to a category superior to mankind. They do not realize how God has honoured man, and part of that honour is that man is well qualified to bear God's message, and that God chooses certain human beings with whom He has this special relationship.

At the time of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), this was the main point of contention among the unbelievers who refused to believe in his message. The same was true of the unbelievers of earlier generations and communities. In this modern age of ours, some people invent a similarly absurd doubt. They wonder: how does contact happen between a human being with his limited physical nature and God who is totally unlike everything else and whose nature is unlike the nature of everything He has created?

Such a question cannot be asked except by one who fully comprehends the nature of God Himself with all its aspects, and who also understands all the characteristics God has given to man. No one in his right mind, aware of the limitations of his reason, would make such a claim. Such a person knows that the characteristics of human nature are still being discovered today, and that scientific discovery has not

come to an end. Beyond the reach of human perception and understanding there will always remain worlds unknown to man.

What this means is that human beings have latent potential known only to God. God certainly knows best to whom to assign His message. Knowing this ability is beyond all people and it may even be unknown to the person who is chosen for the task, until that choice is made. God, who has breathed of His soul into man knows every little detail of every nature. He can endow any human being with the ability to undertake this unique contact and bond in a way which can be appreciated only by those who experience it.

A number of contemporary commentators on the Qur'ān have endeavoured to prove the fact of revelation through scientific means so as to make it easier to understand. We however object to this approach. Science has its own scope and domain, and it has certain tools to suit its domain and to move within its scope. Science has not even claimed to have arrived at any certainty with regard to the spirit and human soul, because it is well beyond its domain. The spirit is not subject to the sort of material experiment which science can make. Therefore, those scientific disciplines that work within recognized scientific principles have avoided discussion of anything relating to the spirit. So-called 'spiritual studies' are merely attempts that have doubtful methods and very suspicious aims. The only way to arrive at any certainty in this area is to refer to the only sources of certainty which we have, namely, the Qur'ān and the *Ĥadīth.* We take any statement in these two sources at its face value, without adding anything to it or modifying it in any way and without drawing any conclusion on the basis of analogy. Addition, modification and analogy are all mental processes, but in this area the human mind is outside of its domain, and has no suitable tools to work with.

"Does it seem strange to people that We have inspired a man from their own midst: Warn all mankind, and give those who believe the glad tidings that they are on a sound footing with their Lord?" (Verse 2) This is in a nutshell the purpose of revelation: to warn people of the consequences of their disobedience and to deliver happy news to the believers as to the outcome of their obedience. This inevitably includes an outline of the duties that are to be fulfilled and the prohibitions to be avoided. The warning is addressed to all mankind, because it should be conveyed to all people, who must be made aware of the consequences of their actions. The happy news though is given only to the believers.

Indeed all human beings need to be warned so that they are aware of what may happen to them when they reject God's message and refuse to follow His guidance. On the other hand, only the believers receive the happy news of reassurance and of being on firm ground. The connotations generated here by the Arabic text all point to a general atmosphere of warning. The believers are '*on a sound footing*' which means

that they are sure of their steps, unhesitating, unshakeable even during the most worrying of times. They are "*on a sound footing with their Lord,*" in a presence where believers find reassurance and safety while others worry as they contemplate their impending doom.

Why a Human Messenger?

God's wisdom is clearly apparent in choosing to send down His revelations to a man from among themselves and one whom they knew well. Thus they could give and take from him without difficulty or embarrassment. His wisdom in sending messengers is even clearer. By his very nature, man can accept and follow good or evil. His tool to distinguish between the two is his reason. This reason needs to have an accurate criterion to which it can refer whenever things become doubtful and unclear, or whenever temptations or immediate interests affect his judgement. He needs a measure which is totally unaffected by anything that influences the human body, mentality or temperament, so as to give him the right answer concerning any uncertainty. This measure and criterion is nothing other than God's guidance and His law.

This requires that divine faith should provide a firm basis to which the human mind refers all its concepts and ideas in order to determine which of them are correct and which are false. To say, by contrast, that divine faith always reflects how people conceive this faith which is, consequently, liable to evolve and develop, is to make his basis subject to influence by human concepts and logic. This undermines the whole basis and leaves no proper measure or criterion to evaluate human concepts.

Such a view is not much different from saying that religion is of human making. The ultimate result is the same. The risk is too strong and the trap is very dangerous. Hence it is imperative that we always be on our guard against its short and long term results.

Although the question of revelation is so clear, the unbelievers receive it as though it is very strange: "*The unbelievers say: 'This is plainly a skilled enchanter:'*" (Verse 2) They describe him as an enchanter or a sorcerer because what he says is beyond the power of human beings. Yet they should acknowledge the fact of revelation on account of this, because sorcery is incapable of including statements about universal facts or of delivering a complete code of living, laws and moral principles which make for a highly civilized society. They tended to confuse revelation with sorcery because in all pagan beliefs, sorcery was a part of religion. They did not have the clarity that a Muslim possesses with regard to the nature of divine faith. This realization saves Muslims from all the legends and superstitions of pagan beliefs.

> *Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and established Himself on the Throne, regulating and governing all that exists. There is none who may intercede with Him unless He first grants leave for that. That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone. Will you not then keep this in mind? To Him you shall all return. This is, in truth, God's promise. He originates all His creation, and then brings them all back to life so that He may reward, with equity, those who have believed and done good deeds. As for the unbelievers, they shall have a scalding drink and a grievous suffering for their unbelief. He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and determined her phases so that you may know how to compute the years and measure [time]. God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth. He makes plain His revelations to people of knowledge. Indeed in the alternating of night and day, and in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for people who are God-fearing. (Verses 3-6)*

This, the question of Lordship, is the main issue of faith. The unbelievers did not seriously deny the concept of Godhead. They acknowledged God's existence — for human nature cannot entirely reject the basic concept of God except in few highly unusual cases — but they associated other deities with Him and to these they addressed their worship. In some cases, the unbelievers considered their false deities to be intermediaries who could bring them closer to God. Others thought they could give themselves certain powers which belong to God alone, thereby enacting legislation which God had not sanctioned.

The Qur'ān does not enter into any cold philosophical argument, of the type introduced in Muslim cultural circles by the influence of Greek philosophy, concerning the questions of Godhead and Lordship. Instead it resorts to the simple, straightforward logic of human nature. It states that God is the One who created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. He is the One who has made the sun a source of radiant light and given the moon its quality to reflect light, determining its stages. He also made the day and night alternate. All these natural phenomena can awaken man's heart and mind if he would only contemplate them and reflect on the power that controls them. God who has created all this and controls its movement is the One who deserves to be the Lord to whom people address their worship, assigning to Him no partners from among His creation. This is a simple logical conclusion which does not need any long argumentative debate based on cold deductive reasoning that touches no heart and awakens no mind.

This vast universe, with its heavens and earth, sun and moon, night and day, and all that is created in the heavens and the earth and lives in them of plants, birds, animals and other communities, follow the laws of nature God has set in operation.

The deep dark night with its still silence, disturbed only by the movement of phantoms; the dawn that opens up into it like a smiling, happy babe; the movement that the early breath of the morning brings to start a new day full of life; the calm shades that seem still to the beholder when they are in fact moving along gently; the birds that hop and fly here and there in never ending movement; the emerging plants that look forward to continued growth; the countless creatures that come and go everywhere; the unending cycle of birth and death; and the life that continues along its way determined by God, are all countless images, forms, types, movements that start and finish; cycles that take people to old age or to start young lives, to invigoration and fading away, to birth and death, and so on through a continuous life cycle that never stops. All this calls on every sense and atom in human beings to pause and reflect. It only takes an alert mind and an open heart to contemplate such signs as are everywhere in the universe. The Qur'ān directly awakens hearts and minds so that man can so reflect.

The Lord to Be Worshipped

"*Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days.*" (Verse 3) Your Lord who deserves to be worshipped alone is the Creator of all that is. It is He who created the heavens and the earth according to an elaborate plan of creation and to wise purpose. He did all this '*in six days*'. We will not delve into any argument about these six days, for they are mentioned here only to point to the wisdom behind the elaborate planning of creation and how the affairs of the universe are conducted so as to suit God's purpose. Anyway, these six days belong to the realm that God has kept to Himself. We cannot find what they are unless He chooses to inform us. Hence, we do not go beyond what is stated about them in the Qur'ān.

"*And established Himself on the Throne.*" (Verse 3) This expression indicates a position of a firm, overall authority exercised by a higher being. It gives a physical image in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān. The conjunction, 'and', is used in the Arabic text in the form of 'then', but it does not indicate any chronological order. It only indicates a mental dimension. Time has no significance in this context. There is simply no state or form applicable to God which came into existence after it was not there. Limitless is God in His glory. He is not subject to an event taking place, and all that events entail of time and location.§ Hence we emphatically say that 'and', in the present context, indicates a mental dimension.

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

"Regulating and governing all that exists." (Verse 3) He determines the beginning and the end, the shape and the form, the preliminaries and the conclusions, and chooses the laws that govern its stages and its final place.

"There is none who may intercede with Him unless He first grants leave for that." (Verse 3) All decisions and judgements belong to Him alone. There are no intercessors who may bring anyone closer to Him. No one of His creatures may intercede with Him unless He grants him permission to do so, in accordance with His wise planning. Intercession may be earned through firm belief and good deeds, not by appealing to false intercessors. This answers what the Arabs used to say about the angels: that statues of them which they worshipped enjoyed an inalienable right of intercession. How absurd!

What all this means is that the Creator has the absolute authority to govern and regulate all matters, and no one may intercede without His permission. "*That is God, your Lord*' who is worthy of having His Lordship acknowledged by all. '*So worship Him alone."* (Verse 3) For He is the One to whom all submission should be addressed. "*Will you not then keep this in mind?"* (Verse 3) The whole thing is so clear and so firmly established that it only requires a mere admonition for the truth to be well engraved in people's minds.

We need to pause a little to reflect on the statement that follows all the universal phenomena pointing to God and His Lordship: "*That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone."* (Verse 3) As we have already said, the unbelievers among the Arabs did not seriously deny the existence of God. They acknowledged that He is the Creator who gives sustenance, initiates life, causes death, regulates all matters and is able to do whatever He wills. This acknowledgement though was not followed by its logical consequence of acknowledging His Lordship over their lives. That would have been reflected by submitting to Him alone in all matters, addressing all worship rituals to Him and accepting His rule in all their affairs.

That is precisely the meaning of the statement: "*That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone."* Worship means submission, obedience and acknowledging all these attributes as belonging to God alone.

In all structures based on *jāhiliyyah*[1] the concept of Godhead is drastically narrowed down. People begin to think that by merely acknowledging the existence of God, they have attained to faith, and that once people make that acknowledgement they have then done all that is required of them. They thus avoid

[1] *Jāhiliyyah* is an Islamic term that refers in the first instance to the state of affairs that prevailed in Arabia in the period immediately before the advent of Islam. The word is derived from a root that signifies `ignorance'. In its broader usage it refers to any situation that is not based on belief in God's oneness, implying that such a situation is generated by, or based on, a state of ignorance. — Editor's note.

the natural consequence of that acknowledgement, which requires submission to God alone, who is the overall Sovereign and ruler, and against whom no one has any authority unless it comes from Him.

Similarly the meaning of 'worship' is seriously curtailed in any *jāhiliyyah* society. It becomes synonymous with offering worship rituals. People then think that once they address these rituals to God, they are worshipping Him alone. The fact is that the term 'worship', `ibādah in Arabic, is derived from the root *`abada* which signifies submission. Worship rituals are only one aspect of submission, which remains much wider in import.

Jāhiliyyah is not a period of history or a particular stage of development. It is a state characterized by the curtailment of the concepts of Godhead and worship on the above lines. Such curtailment leads people to associate partners with God while they imagine that they are following His faith, as is the case today in all parts of the world. This includes those countries whose populations have Muslim names and address their worship to God, but who have Lords other than God. Yet the Lord is the One whose authority over us all should be acknowledged, whose law should be implemented, to whom we should submit, carry out His orders and refrain from what He forbids, and whom we should obey in all matters. This is how the Prophet explained worship to his companion, `Adiy ibn Ĥātim, as he told him: 'They obeyed their [rabbis and monks who legislated for them as they pleased], and that is how they worshipped them."[1]

Justice for All

To emphasize this meaning of worship, a later verse in this *sūrah* states: "*Say: 'Do but consider all the means of sustenance that God has bestowed on you! Some of it you then made unlawful, and some lawful.' Say: 'Was God given you leave to do so, or do you fabricate lies against God?'" (Verse* 59) Our situation today is not at all different from what prevailed during that period of ignorance and to whose people God clearly states: "*That is God, your Lord: so worship Him alone. Will you not then keep this in mind?"* (Verse 3) So, worship Him, associating no partners with Him. For to Him you shall return to face the reckoning when He gives each one, believer or unbeliever, his or her fitting reward: "*To Him you shall all return. This is, in truth, God's promise."* (Verse 4) You return to none of the partners or the intercessors you claim. He has promised that you will return to Him and His promise is certain to be fulfilled. For resurrection is the completion of creation.

[1] A full treatment of this *ĥadīth* is given in Volume VIII, pp. 108-111. — Editor's note.

"*He originates all His creation, and then brings them all back to life so that He may reward, with equity, those who have believed and done good deeds. As for the unbelievers, they shall have a scalding drink and a grievous suffering for their unbelief.*" *(Verse* 4) Administering justice to all is in itself one of the aims of original creation and bringing all creatures back to life. Similarly, giving pure happiness and enjoyment without any unwelcome consequences to spoil its effects is another aim of the process of creation and resurrection. This is the utmost point of perfection which humanity can reach. Such a zenith cannot be attained in this life on earth which is always mixed with worry and distress. No happy experience in this life is free of a hiccup or an unwelcome aftermath, except perhaps for pure spiritual happiness which is very rarely experienced by human beings.

Had the inevitable termination of the happiness of this world been the only feeling people acknowledge, it would have been enough to make it imperfect and incomplete. In this life, humanity does not attain its highest potential, which implies getting rid of its weaknesses, shortcomings, and their consequences, as well as an enjoyment that is free of fear, worry, and apprehension of quick termination. Such happiness, graphically described in the Qur'ān, is attained in heaven. As such, it is only proper that one of the aims of creation and resurrection is to enable those human beings who follow divine guidance, implementing the right code of living, to attain the highest standard of humanity.

The unbelievers have put the divine code of living aside and have chosen not to move along the way that leads to the attainment of human perfection. According to the laws of nature that never fail, their deviation keeps them well short of that level of perfection. As Shaikh Rashīd Riđā' says, they will have to suffer the consequences of their errant ways just like one who violates the rules of health: he suffers disease and debility and they suffer distress after distress. The end result will be unmitigated misery, in contrast to the pure happiness the believers enjoy: "*As for the unbelievers, they shall have a scalding drink and a grievous suffering for their persistent disbelief*" (Verse 4)

The *sūrah* then highlights some of the cosmic phenomena which are next to the creation of the heavens and the earth in their magnificence: "*He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and determined her phases so that you may know how to compute the years and measure [time]. God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth. He makes plain His revelations to people of knowledge.*" (Verse 5) These are two very clear scenes which we take for granted because of our long familiarity with them and their continuous repetition. Who could imagine the awesome feelings of majesty and magnificence of a person who sees the sun rising and setting for the first time, or the full moon making its first appearance followed by its first setting? The Qur'ān reminds us of these two very familiar scenes

so as to bring them back to us anew. It awakens in our hearts a desire to look and reflect over such great phenomena.

The Qur'ān draws our attention to the elaborate design clearly seen in their creation: *"He it is who made the sun a source of radiant light."* (Verse 5) We feel that it is almost ablaze. *"And the moon a light [reflected]."* It shines and illuminates. *"And determined her phases."* (Verse 5) It stands every night in a new position which gives it a corresponding shape. This is seen by all of us when we look at the moon, night after night. We do not need to have any specialized knowledge of astronomy to realize this. The purpose is clear: *so that you may know how to compute the years and measure time.'* (Verse 5) Today, we all still calculate time on the basis of the sun and the moon's movements.

Is all this a pastime, a coincidence or something false? Certainly not. Such an elaborate system, providing such perfect harmony and accuracy which never fail, could not be without purpose. It is neither false nor a coincidence: *"God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth."* (Verse 5) The truth is its tool, substance and objective. The truth is constant and firmly rooted, and these phenomena which point to the truth are also clear, constant and permanent. *"He makes His revelations plain to people of knowledge."* (Verse 5) Knowledge and learning are needed to understand the elaborate planning behind these magnificent scenes.

The heavens, the earth, the blazing sun, and the illuminating moon combine to produce the succession of day and night. This is a telling phenomenon which inspires anyone who opens his heart and mind to the messages contained in the universe: *"Indeed in the alternating of night and day, and in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth, there are signs for people who are God-fearing."* (Verse 6) The Arabic term used for the 'alternating of night and day' refers both to their succession and their varying length. Both are well-known aspects which lose their significance with familiarity, except in those moments when man's soul and conscience are awakened and he begins to contemplate the rise and setting of different stars and planets like a man reborn, responding to every aspect and every phenomenon. Only in such moments does man truly live, shaking away the rust of familiarity and repetition which becloud his vision and blunt his responses.

"And in all that God has created in the heavens and the earth." (Verse 6) If man just stood for a moment watching what *'God has created in the heavens and the earth'* and looked at the countless number of species, forms, situations and material conditions, he would have sufficient material for a life of reflection and contemplation. For in all this, *'there are signs for people who are God-fearing.'* (Verse 6)

It is only such people who have a conscience, sharpened by their fear of God, who are alert and responsive to the evidence of God's great might. For it is all clearly apparent in the perfection of His creation.

Addressing Human Nature

To appeal to human nature is a central part of the Qur'ānic approach. The Qur'ān utilizes the signs that are seen everywhere around us in the universe to point to God as the Lord Creator. God knows that these address human nature in a clear and telling way. The Qur'ān does not employ the argumentative style of later philosophers, for God knows that this does not appeal to people's hearts. It remains instead within its area of cold reasoning which neither generates motivation nor contributes to building human life.

The proofs presented by the Qur'ān remain the most convincing to hearts and minds alike. The very existence of the universe, its harmonious movement, and whatever changes and transformations that take place in it — according to laws that were set in operation long before they were discovered by man — cannot be explained without acknowledging the existence of an able hand that controls it all. Those who dispute this fact do not offer any plausible alternative. They merely say that the universe has long existed with its operative laws, and that its existence does not need any explanation. Anyone who finds such argument acceptable or reasonable may please himself.

Such arguments were made in Europe when breaking away from the tyranny of the Church led people to deny God altogether. Now they are also said in our countries as a means of getting away from the practical implications of belief in God. Most people in the unbelieving communities of times gone by acknowledged God's existence, but disputed His Lordship, as was the case in Arabian *jāhiliyyah,* where the Qur'ān made its first address to mankind. The Qur'ānic proof refuted their belief in God's existence and His attributes, and demanded that they should take their beliefs to their natural conclusion and so acknowledge God's Lordship. In other words the Qur'ān demanded that they submit to Him alone in laws and worship alike. The state of ignorance that prevails in our own time tries to rid itself of this powerful logic by denying God's existence altogether.

What is strange is that even in countries claiming to be Islamic, this is promoted in a variety of ways under the guise of science. Thus we hear that what is 'metaphysical' has no place in 'scientific' methodology. Everything that is related to God is thus considered 'metaphysical'. Those running away from God try to use this back door, only because they fear and try to deceive others. As for fear of God, this is a quality of which they are devoid.

Nevertheless, the very existence of the universe and its meticulously accurate and harmonious systems remains a proof too strong for the unbelievers to face. Human nature, in heart, mind and soul, responds to this proof. The Qur'ānic approach addresses human nature as a whole in the broadest and most direct way. *'Fire for their abode in requital for what they used to do.'* (Verse 8) This is a fitting end.

The believers by contrast realize that there is something much superior to this present life. Their deeds are righteous because their faith motivates them to obey God's commands and expect His generous reward in the hereafter. These are the ones who *'will be guided aright by their Lord by means of their faith.'* (Verse 9) Having faith establishes a relationship between them and God who guides them to do what is right. As a result of this guidance, their hearts are alive, fully aware of the straight path they have to follow. Their conscience is alert, directing them always to do what is good and what earns God's pleasure. These are the ones who are admitted into heaven where *'running waters will flow at their feet.'* (Verse 9) The reference here to running waters in heaven is at the same time a reference to water generally which is always associated with growth, fertility and life.

What are their preoccupations once in heaven? What do they wish for? They have no need for wealth, position, or personal gain. What God gives them is far better than any such concern which is in any case now behind them. Instead, their preoccupation, their top priority, is described as their 'appeal' or 'call' to glorify God in the beginning and praise Him in the end. In between times they greet one another and are greeted by the angels: *"There they will call out: 'Limitless are You in Your glory, God,' and their greeting will be, Peace!' Their call will conclude with the words: 'All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds!'"* (Verse 10)

All the concerns and worries of this life are over. Its needs are no longer of any value. They enjoy an atmosphere of perfect bliss where God is praised and glorified. This is when man attains perfection.

Man's Changing Attitude

The *sūrah* then picks up the challenge posed by the pagan Arabs to God's Messenger, whereby they required him to deliver forthwith the punishment he warned them against. They are told that postponing such punishment to a specified time is an aspect of God's mercy. A scene is then drawn to demonstrate how they behave when they suffer some affliction. At that moment, their nature returns to its purity and they appeal to God, their Lord. When the affliction is relieved, those who habitually go beyond the limits revert to their erring ways. They are then reminded of the fate of earlier communities who also transgressed. This serves as a warning to

stop them exceeding their limits. After all, this present life is a test which determines their destiny.

> *If God were to hasten for mankind the ill [they have earned] as they would hasten the good, their end would indeed come forthwith. But We leave those who have no hope of meeting Us in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. When affliction befalls man, he appeals to Us, whether he be lying on his side, sitting, or standing, but as soon as We relieve his affliction, he goes on as though he had never appealed to Us to save him from the affliction that befell him. Thus do their deeds seem fair to those who are given to excesses. Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave. (Verses 11-14)*

The pagan Arabs used to challenge the Prophet, asking him to immediately deliver God's punishment. They asked him to do so in different ways. For example, in this *sūrah* it is stated: "*They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?'*" (Verse 48) In another *sūrah: "They challenge you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have come to pass before their time."* (13: 6). Or in similar vein, they say: *"God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us."* (8: 32)

All this describes their stubborn attitude to God's guidance. In His wisdom, God chose not to inflict a collective punishment on them as He did with earlier communities. Instead, He knew that the great majority of them would eventually accept the faith and that they would work to establish its roots firmly in the land. This took place after Makkah had fallen to the Prophet. At the time they made their ignorant challenge, it was not conceivable that such a change would come to pass. But this was the real good which God wanted for them, which was infinitely better than the type they wanted to experience quickly. He also warns them against ignoring His purpose behind delaying their fate. Yet those who entertain no expectation of meeting with God continue in their arrogance until they eventually meet their fate.

In connection with the challenge to hasten evil, the *sūrah* portrays the situation of those who suffer affliction. Here we have a clear case of contradiction with people asking for evil to be brought forthwith when they are unable to endure modest affliction. Yet when such affliction is removed, they revert to those practices which caused the affliction in the first place: *"When affliction befalls man, he appeals to Us, whether he be lying on his side, sitting, or standing, but as soon as We relieve his affliction, he*

goes on as though he had never appealed to Us to save him from the affliction that befell him. Thus do their deeds seem fair to those who are given to excesses." (Verse 12)

It is an ingeniously drawn picture of a frequently occurring situation. Man may move along in life, committing all types of sin and excess. He pays little attention to what is permissible and what is not, as long as he is in good health and enjoying comfortable conditions. Only those who are conscious of God remember in such a situation, that after health and strength there will be illness and weakness. Affluence makes people forget and power leads to excess. But when affliction overtakes man he is worried, vulnerable and helpless. He appeals earnestly to God, unable to endure the hardship, eager to have his affliction replaced with comfort. When his appeal is granted and the affliction removed, he does not reflect on the lessons of this experience. Instead, he reverts to his old ways, heedless of the consequences.

The *sūrah* co-ordinates this image with the psychological condition it describes and the type of person it delineates. Thus the affliction is shown to last a long time. '*When affliction befalls man, he appeals to Us, whether he be lying on his side, sitting, or standing.*' (Verse 12) All such situations are described so that we have a feeling of how man stops when the energy he derives from his health, wealth or power is cut off. It is just like something moving by impetus suddenly hitting a block. When the block is removed, it dashes along. Here we have the verb, 'goes on', describing man's violent movement which leaves no time for reflection, learning or gratitude: '*As soon as We relieve his affliction, he goes on as though he had never appealed to Us to save him from the affliction that befell him.*' (Verse 12)

It is this kind of nature — i.e. remembering God when suffering affliction, but not once it is removed — which makes those people who exceed their limits think that their excesses are only normal and fair. '*Thus do their deeds seem fair to those who are given to excesses.*' (Verse 12)

It is only right that people should reflect on what happened in the past to those who indulged in excesses: '*Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty.*' (Verse 13) Their transgression beyond the limits, which is another way of describing their disbelief in God's oneness and their association of partners with Him, led to their ruin. Their fate was clear for the Arabs to see in those areas which were once inhabited by the `Ād and the Thamūd and in Sodom and Gomorra where the people of Lot dwelt. Their fate should be a sufficient lesson to all people.

Having been shown the fate of those who turned away from God's guidance after it had been explained to them by their prophets, the unbelievers are reminded that they are now their successors, having power in the land so that they can show

themselves worthy of God's trust: *"Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave."* (Verse 14) This is a powerful statement. They now enjoy something that once belonged to others but from whom it was removed. They too will leave it after their test is over, and they will be rewarded in accordance with what they do.

Thus Islam shows man the facts as they are so that he is not deceived by appearances. This creates in the human heart an alertness based on consciousness and fear of God. This alertness works as a safety valve for both the individual and the community. When man realizes that he is being tested in this earthly life and that everything he possesses or enjoys during this life is a part of this test, such realization gives him immunity against arrogance and delusion. He no longer seeks abundance of enjoyment at any cost, because he realizes that he will have to account for what he enjoys. There is, in essence, a constant feeling of being watched. This is clear in God's statement: '*so that We might see how you behave.*' (Verse 14) This should make man extra careful, keen to do well, and pass his test.

Here we have the basic difference between the way Islam nurtures a believer's mind and philosophies which give no place to God's watchfulness over man or reckoning in the hereafter. A believer in Islam and a follower of any philosophy will never share common ground in respect of their views, morality, or lifestyle.

A Demand to Change the Qur'ān

Once they have been made aware that they are the successors to earlier guilty communities, the *sūrah* then provides examples of their deeds: *"When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, those who have no hope of meeting Us say: 'Bring us a discourse other than this Qur'ān, or else alter it.' Say: 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread the torment of an awesome day if I should disobey my Lord!' Say: Had God so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have brought it to your knowledge. I spent a whole lifetime among you before it [was revealed to me]. Will you not, then, use your reason?' Who is more wicked than one who attributes his lying inventions to God or denies His revelations? Indeed those who are guilty shall not be successful. They worship, side by side with God, what can neither harm nor benefit them, and say: 'These will intercede for us with God.' Say: Do you presume to inform God of something in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Limitless is He in His glory, and exalted above whatever they may associate with Him.' All mankind were once but one single community, and then they disagreed among themselves. Had it not been for a decree from your Lord that had already gone forth, all their differences would have been resolved. They ask: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him by his Lord?' Say: 'God's alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.'"* (Verses 15-20)

Such was their attitude to God's Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), when they were given power in the land. *"When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, those who have no hope of meeting Us say: 'Bring us a discourse other than this Qur'ān, or else alter it.'"* (Verse 15) This is a very strange request which betrays a lack of seriousness and a total ignorance of the role of the Qur'ān in human life and the reason for its revelation. Those who expect to meet God would never entertain such a request.

The Qur'ān is a complete constitution for human life. It is so well formulated that it satisfies all human needs at both individual and community levels. It takes human life along the road to perfection, in as much as man can achieve this in this world, then to complete perfection in the life to come. Those who realize the nature of the Qur'ān would not even think of asking for a different one let alone changing some of it.

Most probably those who did not have any expectation of meeting God tried to be too clever. They looked on the matter as a kind of literary challenge. All that Muĥammad needed to do was to accept the challenge and compose a different discourse, or to replace some parts of it. Here he receives clear instructions: *"Say: 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread the torment of an awesome day if should disobey my Lord!'"* (Verse 15) The matter is not one of a competition, demonstrating skills or poetic talent. The Qur'ān is a constitution outlining a complete code of living devised by the One who controls the whole universe. He is the One who has created man and knows what suits him best. The Prophet cannot alter it on his own initiative. He only conveys God's message and follows what is revealed to him. Any change in the Qur'ān represents a very serious act of disobedience to God, and such a person is liable to severe punishment on the Day of Judgement. That is indeed a prospect to dread.

> *Say: 'Had God so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have brought it to your knowledge. I spent a whole lifetime among you before it [was revealed to me]. Will you not, then, use your reason?' (Verse 16)*

The Qur'ān is a revelation given by God. That it must be conveyed to you is also an order issued by God, and one which must be obeyed. Had God willed that the Prophet not recite it to you, he would not have done so, and had He willed not to bring it to your knowledge, He would have kept it from you. Its revelation and recitation to people so that they become aware of its message are all matters decided by God alone. The Prophet is commanded to say all this to people and to further say that he had spent a lifetime among them, forty full years, without ever telling them anything about the Qur'ān, because it had not yet been bestowed to him from on

high. Had it been within his power to produce something similar to it, or even like some parts of it, why would he have waited a whole lifetime to do so? It again boils down to the fact that the Qur'ān is God's revelation. The role of the Prophet is simply to convey it to mankind.

The Prophet is further instructed to make it clear that he would never have invented a lie and attributed it to God. Far be it from him to do anything of the kind. He would never have claimed to have received revelations unless that were absolutely true. For the one who attributes a fabrication to God and the one who denies His revelations go too far in the wrong: *"Who is more wicked than one who attributes his lying inventions to God or denies His revelations?" (Verse* 17) As the Prophet warns them strongly against committing the second of these two very grave wrongs, he himself would not even commit the first by inventing fabrications and attributing them to God. *"Indeed, those who are guilty shall not be successful."* (Verse 17)

Knowing Something Unknown to God

The *sūrah* continues with its account of what they said and did after they had succeeded earlier communities. So what comes after their absurd request for a new Qur'ān? *"They worship, side by side with God, what can neither harm nor benefit them, and say: 'These will intercede for us with God.' Say: Do you presume to inform God of something in the heavens or on earth that He does not know? Limitless is He in His glory, and exalted above whatever they may associate with Him." (*Verse 18)

When people deviate from the truth, there is no end to their absurdity. The numerous deities to whom they address their worship can neither harm nor benefit them in any way. Nevertheless, they think they have a role to play, claiming that they *'will intercede for us with God.'* (Verse 18)

In reply, the Prophet is instructed to say to them: *"Do you presume to inform God of something in the heavens or on earth that He does not know?"* (Verse 18) God does not know anyone who can intercede with Him. Do you then presume to know what is unknown to God Himself? Are you, by implication, informing Him of the existence, in the heavens or on earth, of beings He is unaware of? Here the Qur'ān adopts sarcasm as the means to best counter their unrivalled absurdity. But this is followed with a statement of God's glorification which makes it clear that all their claims are absolutely false: *"Limitless is He in His glory, and exalted above whatever they may associate with Him." (*Verse 18)

Thereafter, the Qur'ān clarifies that the claim that God has partners is an incidental development. Originally, human nature believed in God's oneness. Only later did people begin to disagree about this: *"All mankind were once but one single community, and then they disagreed among themselves."* (Verse 19) In His wisdom, God

has determined to let all of them be until their appointed time. His will is done, and His purpose is accomplished: *"Had it not been for a decree from your Lord that had already gone forth, all their differences would have been resolved."* (Verse 19)

Then the account of what those new generations given power on earth said is continued: *"They ask: 'Why has no sign been sent down to him by his Lord?' Say: 'God's alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.'"* (Verse 20) All the signs that this great revelation includes do not seem to be enough for them. Nor are they satisfied with all the signs that they see in the universe. They appeal for a miracle like the ones shown to earlier communities. Their request shows them to be totally oblivious to the nature of the Prophet's message and its own great miracle. That is not a temporary miracle which is over and done with once a community has seen it. It is the Qur'ān, a permanent miracle which addresses our hearts and minds from one generation to another.

In reply to this request, God directs His Messenger to refer them to Him, for He alone knows what He has in store, and He alone will determine whether He shows them some miracle or not: *"Say: 'Gods alone is the knowledge of what is beyond the reach of human perception. Wait, then, if you will: I too am waiting.'"* (Verse 20) This reply implies a delay and a warning. It also provides, by implication, an outline of the limitations of God's servants. Muĥammad (peace be upon him), who was the greatest of all God's prophets and messengers, had no knowledge of what God chose to keep to Himself. He had no influence over what would happen to people, for that is determined by God alone. Thus the distinction between God and His servants is clearly delineated.

When All Are Powerless

Now the *sūrah* goes on to speak of human nature when people are shown God's grace after having experienced misfortune and hardship. It gives them an example of what actually takes place in real life. The scene so depicted is vivid and powerful.

> *Whenever We let people taste grace after some hardship has afflicted them, they turn to scheme against Our revelations. Say: More swift is God's scheming. Our messengers are recording all that you may devise.' He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea. Then when you are on board ships, and sailing along in a favourable wind, they feel happy with it, but then a stormy wind comes upon them and waves surge towards them from all sides, so that they believe they are encompassed [by death]. [At that point] they appeal to God, in complete sincerity of faith in Him alone. If You will save us from this, we shall certainly be most grateful.' Yet when He has saved them, they transgress in the land, offending against all right. Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound. [You care only for] the enjoyment*

> *of this present life, but in the end you will return to Us when We will tell you the truth of what you were doing [in this life]. (Verses 21-23)*

Strange indeed is this human creature, for he does not remember God except in times of hardship and affliction. He does not remove from his nature all the bad influences that distort it, bringing it back to its purity, except when he feels the pressure of misfortune weighing heavily upon him. But when he feels safe and secure, he either forgets or transgresses. The only exceptions are those who follow God's guidance. Their nature remains pure and responsive all the time. It enjoys the purity of faith which keeps it clean and shining. *"Whenever We let people taste grace after some hardship has afflicted them they turn to scheme against Our revelations."* (Verse 21) Thus did Pharaoh's people with Moses. Whenever they were overwhelmed by God's punishment, they cried out, sending their earnest appeals for its lifting, and promising to change and mend their ways. Once they were shown God's mercy, they started to scheme against God's revelations, giving them wrong interpretations. They even claimed different reasons for the lifting of their afflictions. The Quraysh, the Arab tribe living in Makkah at the Prophet's time, did the same. When they experienced drought and feared for their lives, they came to the Prophet, appealing to him by their ties of kinship, to pray to God on their behalf. He did and God answered his prayers, sending rain in abundance. But the Quraysh did not fulfil their pledges. They schemed against God's revelations and persisted in their erring ways. Indeed this is a constant phenomenon, unless man accepts the divine faith and follows God's guidance.

"Say: 'More swift is God's scheming. Our messengers are recording all that you may devise.'" (Verse 21) God is certainly more able to plan and make their scheming ineffective. All that which they scheme is laid open before Him. When their scheming is known in advance, it is very easy to foil. *"Our messengers are recording all that you may devise."* Nothing of it is overlooked or forgotten. As for the identity of those messengers and how they record and write, all we know is that which we can glean from statements like the present one. We accept these statements as they are, without trying to interpret them further.

Then we are given a very vivid scene which is portrayed as if it is happening before our eyes. We react to it with feeling and emotion. It begins with establishing the fact of God's power that controls both what is moving and what is motionless: *"He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea."* (Verse 22) The whole *sūrah* emphasizes the fact of God's limitless power which controls the whole universe and the destiny of all creatures that live in it.

The full scene then unfolds before us: *"Then when you are on board ships..."* (Verse 22) As we look we see the ships moving on their way: *"and sailing along in a favourable*

wind..." (Verse 22) We also learn about the feelings of those who are on board: "*they feel happy with it..."* (Verse 22) In the midst of this atmosphere of complete serenity, and the happiness that it spreads, everyone is suddenly jolted: "*a stormy wind comes upon them..."* (Verse 22) What a calamity! "*And waves surge towards them from all sides..."* (Verse 22) The ships start to shake violently, and the waves hit against them time and again, and they spin like a feather in the air. Those on board are overtaken with fear, feeling that there is no escape: "*and they believe they are encompassed [by death]..."* (Verse 22) There is simply nowhere to turn.

At that moment, and in the midst of all this furore, their nature sheds all the filth it accumulated, blunting its reactions. Their minds rid themselves of all erring thoughts. Their nature reverts to its original condition, undistorted. It acknowledges God as the only Lord in the universe and submits to Him alone: "*[At that point] they appeal to God, in complete sincerity of faith in Him alone: 'If You will save us from this, we shall certainly be most grateful.'"* (Verse 22)

Then the winds subside, and the waves die down. The people on board begin to catch their breath, and their pounding hearts slow down. Soon the ships reach the shore, and the people feel secure. When they step on land, feeling its firmness, they are sure that they are not about to perish. They have their lives ahead of them. Then what?

A Description of Life in This World

"*Yet when He has saved them, they transgress in the land, offending against all right."* (Verse 23) This also comes as a complete surprise.

This in itself is a whole scene, and we miss none of its totality and fine detail. Nor do we miss any feeling or reaction it induces. In essence we are given a picture of a real event, but it is also a mental scene describing the nature of many people regardless of the generation they were born into. Hence the *sūrah* follows it with comments addressed to mankind throughout history.

"*Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound."* (Verse 23) Whether these offences are committed against oneself, by sending it on the way to perdition, letting it indulge in disobedience that is certain to make it the loser, or offences against all humanity since humanity represents one soul, the offenders will suffer the consequences. These consequences will also be shared by those who allow them to offend.

The worst type of offence is that which represents an aggression against God Himself, usurping His Lordship and sovereignty, claiming these for the usurpers themselves. When people are guilty of this type of offence, they suffer its wretched

consequences in this present life before they endure its punishment in the hereafter. These consequences are manifested in corruption that spreads into the whole life. All mankind are miserable because of it. No human dignity, freedom or virtue is left untouched by it.

The basic point here is that people should submit themselves purely to God, or else they will find themselves submitting to tyrants who try to impose their authority on them. The struggle to establish the principle of God's oneness in human life and to acknowledge God as the only Lord is a struggle for human dignity, freedom and morality, and indeed for every value which helps man to break his shackles, and lift himself to the high standards that befit him.

"Mankind, it is against your own souls that your offences rebound. [You care only for] the enjoyment of this present life." (Verse 23) That then is all that you will have. *"In the end you will return to Us when We will tell you the truth of what you were doing [in this life]."* (Verse 23) That is the reckoning and reward that take place in the hereafter, when all the misery and suffering of this life is clearly over.

So how much are the pleasures of this life worth? What is the reality of their enjoyment? This is described in the *sūrah* in a Qur'ānic scene that portrays aspects of everyday activity, but to which most people pay little attention: *"This present life may be compared to rain which We send down from the sky, and which is then absorbed by the plants of the earth from which men and animals eat. Then, when the earth has been clad with its fine adornments and well embellished, and its people believe that they have full mastery over it, Our command comes down upon it, by night or by day, and We make it like a field that has been mowed down, as if it did not blossom but yesterday. Thus do We spell out Our revelations to people who think. God calls to the abode of peace, and guides him that wills to a straight path."* (Verses 24-25)

This is the reality of the life of this world, where people have only its pleasures which they are content with, seeking no higher aspiration and hoping for no better abode. Rain comes down from the sky and is soon absorbed by plants which grow and blossom. The earth takes on its finest adornments, as if she were a bride preparing for her happiest night. People take pleasure in looking on, feeling that its fine appearance is the result of their own efforts. In the back of their minds they think they control everything on earth and that nothing can change this.

Yet in the midst of all this pleasure and fine celebration, their confidence is suddenly shattered. What has happened? The answer is simple: *"Our command comes down upon it, by night or by day, and* We *make it like a field that has been mowed down, as if it did not blossom but yesterday."* (Verse 24) It all happens in a moment. It is all expressed in a sentence. Such mode of expression is a deliberate contrast to the detailed description which paints the land's fertility and beauty, as well as people's pleasure and confidence.

Such is the life of this world which some people regard as their utmost aspiration, and for the pleasures of which they sacrifice their future life. It is a life in which there is no settlement or security. People's control over it is very limited indeed. The *sūrah* then contrasts this image with the other world: *"God calls to the abode of peace, and guides him that wills to a straight path."* (Verse 25) The contrast is remarkable. In one place there is no security. Even the most perfect of enjoyments can be replaced with complete misery in a matter of seconds. The other is the home of peace to which God invites people. It is reserved for those who keep their hearts and minds receptive of God's guidance and who endeavour to attain the happiness of the life to come, which is indeed the life of peace.

2
Addressing the Human Mind

۞ لِّلَّذِينَ أَحۡسَنُواْ ٱلۡحُسۡنَىٰ وَزِيَادَةٞۖ وَلَا يَرۡهَقُ وُجُوهَهُمۡ قَتَرٞ وَلَا ذِلَّةٌۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٢٦

For those who do good there is a good reward, and more besides. Neither darkness nor any disgrace will overcast their faces. These are destined for paradise, where they will abide. (26)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَسَبُواْ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ جَزَآءُ سَيِّئَةٖ بِمِثۡلِهَا وَتَرۡهَقُهُمۡ ذِلَّةٞۖ مَّا لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۡ عَاصِمٖۖ كَأَنَّمَآ أُغۡشِيَتۡ وُجُوهُهُمۡ قِطَعٗا مِّنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ مُظۡلِمًاۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٢٧

As for those who have done evil, an evil deed is rewarded with its like. Ignominy will overshadow them — for they will have none to protect them from God — as if their faces have been covered with patches of the night's own darkness. Such are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (27)

وَيَوۡمَ نَحۡشُرُهُمۡ جَمِيعٗا ثُمَّ نَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُواْ مَكَانَكُمۡ أَنتُمۡ وَشُرَكَآؤُكُمۡۚ فَزَيَّلۡنَا بَيۡنَهُمۡۖ وَقَالَ شُرَكَآؤُهُم مَّا كُنتُمۡ إِيَّانَا تَعۡبُدُونَ ٢٨

One day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say to those who associated partners with God: 'Keep to your places, you and those you associated with God as partners.' We will then separate them from one another. Then those whom they associated as partners with God will say: 'It was not us that you worshipped. (28)

God is sufficient as a witness between us and you. We were, for certain, unaware of your worshipping us.' (29)

فَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًۢا بَيۡنَنَا وَبَيۡنَكُمۡ إِن كُنَّا عَنۡ عِبَادَتِكُمۡ لَغَٰفِلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

There and then every soul will realize what it had done in the past; and all will be brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. All their invented falsehood will have forsaken them. (30)

هُنَالِكَ تَبۡلُواْ كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ مَّآ أَسۡلَفَتۡۚ وَرُدُّوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَوۡلَىٰهُمُ ٱلۡحَقِّۖ وَضَلَّ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Say: 'Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth? Or, who is it that has power over hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive? Who regulates all affairs?' They will say: 'God.' Say, then: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' (31)

قُلۡ مَن يَرۡزُقُكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَمَّن يَمۡلِكُ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرَ وَمَن يُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡحَيَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمَيِّتِ وَيُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡمَيِّتَ مِنَ ٱلۡحَيِّ وَمَن يُدَبِّرُ ٱلۡأَمۡرَۚ فَسَيَقُولُونَ ٱللَّهُۚ فَقُلۡ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Such is God, your true Lord. Apart from the truth, what is left but error? How is it, then, that you turn away? (32)

فَذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمُ ٱلۡحَقُّۖ فَمَاذَا بَعۡدَ ٱلۡحَقِّ إِلَّا ٱلضَّلَٰلُۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُصۡرَفُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Thus is the word of your Lord proved true with regard to those who do evil: they will not believe. (33)

كَذَٰلِكَ حَقَّتۡ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ فَسَقُوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] originate creation, and then bring it back [to life] again?' Say: 'It is God alone who originates creation and then brings it back [to life] again. How is it, then, that you are so misled?' (34)

قُلۡ هَلۡ مِن شُرَكَآئِكُم مَّن يَبۡدَؤُاْ ٱلۡخَلۡقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥۚ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يَبۡدَؤُاْ ٱلۡخَلۡقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤۡفَكُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

قُلۡ هَلۡ مِن شُرَكَآئِكُم مَّن يَهۡدِيٓ إِلَى ٱلۡحَقِّۚ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يَهۡدِي لِلۡحَقِّۗ أَفَمَن يَهۡدِيٓ إِلَى ٱلۡحَقِّ أَحَقُّ أَن يُتَّبَعَ أَمَّن لَّا يَهِدِّيٓ إِلَّآ أَن يُهۡدَىٰۖ فَمَا لَكُمۡ كَيۡفَ تَحۡكُمُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] guide to the truth?' Say: 'God alone guides to the truth. Who is more worthy to be followed: He that guides to the truth, or he who cannot find the right way unless he is guided? What is then amiss with you? How do you judge?' (35)

وَمَا يَتَّبِعُ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ إِلَّا ظَنًّاۚ إِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغۡنِي مِنَ ٱلۡحَقِّ شَيۡـًٔاۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمُۢ بِمَا يَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Most of them follow nothing but mere conjecture. But conjecture can in no way be a substitute for truth. God has full knowledge of all that they do. (36)

وَمَا كَانَ هَٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانُ أَن يُفۡتَرَىٰ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَٰكِن تَصۡدِيقَ ٱلَّذِي بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ وَتَفۡصِيلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا رَيۡبَ فِيهِ مِن رَّبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of [revelations] that went before it, and a full explanation of God's Book, about which there is no doubt. It certainly comes from the Lord of all the worlds. (37)

أَمۡ يَقُولُونَ ٱفۡتَرَىٰهُۖ قُلۡ فَأۡتُواْ بِسُورَةٖ مِّثۡلِهِۦ وَٱدۡعُواْ مَنِ ٱسۡتَطَعۡتُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

If they say: 'He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if

what you say is true.' (38)

بَلۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِمَا لَمۡ يُحِيطُواْ بِعِلۡمِهِۦ وَلَمَّا يَأۡتِهِمۡ تَأۡوِيلُهُۥۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۖ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٣٩

Indeed they disbelieve what they cannot grasp, particularly since its inner meaning has not become clear to them. Likewise did those who lived before them disbelieve. But see what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (39)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يُؤۡمِنُ بِهِۦ وَمِنۡهُم مَّن لَّا يُؤۡمِنُ بِهِۦۚ وَرَبُّكَ أَعۡلَمُ بِٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ٤٠

Some of them do believe in it, while others do not. But your Lord is fully aware of those who spread corruption. (40)

وَإِن كَذَّبُوكَ فَقُل لِّي عَمَلِي وَلَكُمۡ عَمَلُكُمۡۖ أَنتُم بَرِيٓـُٔونَ مِمَّآ أَعۡمَلُ وَأَنَا۠ بَرِيٓءٞ مِّمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٤١

If they disbelieve you, then say: '1 shall bear the consequences of my deeds, and you your deeds. You are not accountable for what I do and I am not accountable for your doings.' (41)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَسۡتَمِعُونَ إِلَيۡكَۚ أَفَأَنتَ تُسۡمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ وَلَوۡ كَانُواْ لَا يَعۡقِلُونَ ٤٢

Yet some of them [pretend to] listen to you; but can you make the deaf hear you, incapable as they are of using their reason? (42)

وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَنظُرُ إِلَيۡكَۚ أَفَأَنتَ تَهۡدِي ٱلۡعُمۡيَ وَلَوۡ كَانُواْ لَا يُبۡصِرُونَ ٤٣

And some of them [pretend to] look towards you; but can you show the way to the blind, bereft of sight as they are? (43)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَظۡلِمُ ٱلنَّاسَ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱلنَّاسَ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ٤٤

وَيَوْمَ يَحْشُرُهُمْ كَأَن لَّمْ يَلْبَثُوٓاْ إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّنَ ٱلنَّهَارِ يَتَعَارَفُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ قَدْ خَسِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِلِقَآءِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا كَانُواْ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Indeed, God does not do the least wrong to mankind, but it is men who wrong themselves. (44)

On the Day when He will gather them together, [it will seem to them] as though they had not sojourned in this world more than an hour of a day, getting to know one another. Lost indeed will be those who [in their lifetime] disbelieved in meeting God and did not follow the right guidance. (45)

وَإِمَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى نَعِدُهُمْ أَوْ نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِلَيْنَا مَرْجِعُهُمْ ثُمَّ ٱللَّهُ شَهِيدٌ عَلَىٰ مَا يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Whether We show you some of what We have promised them or We cause you to die, it is to Us that they shall return. God is witness of all that they do. (46)

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولٌ ۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ رَسُولُهُمْ قُضِىَ بَيْنَهُم بِٱلْقِسْطِ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

To every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement was passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged. (47)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَـٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَـٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?' (48)

قُل لَّآ أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِى ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۗ لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلٌ ۚ إِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهُمْ فَلَا يَسْتَـْٔخِرُونَ سَاعَةً ۖ وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Say: 'I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself, except as God may please. For every community a term has

been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.' (49)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَتَىٰكُمْ عَذَابُهُۥ بَيَٰتًا أَوْ نَهَارًا مَّاذَا يَسْتَعْجِلُ مِنْهُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Say: 'Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten? (50)

أَثُمَّ إِذَا مَا وَقَعَ ءَامَنتُم بِهِۦٓ ءَآلْـَٰٔنَ وَقَدْ كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?' (51)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابَ ٱلْخُلْدِ هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Then it will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste the long- lasting torment. Is this requital anything other than the just due for what you used to do?' (52)

۞ وَيَسْتَنۢبِـُٔونَكَ أَحَقٌّ هُوَ ۖ قُلْ إِى وَرَبِّىٓ إِنَّهُۥ لَحَقٌّ ۖ وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

They will ask you: 'Is all this true?' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord. It is most certainly true, and you will never be beyond God's reach.' (53)

وَلَوْ أَنَّ لِكُلِّ نَفْسٍ ظَلَمَتْ مَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ لَٱفْتَدَتْ بِهِۦ ۗ وَأَسَرُّوا۟ ٱلنَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ ۖ وَقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُم بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۚ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Should every wrongdoer possess all that the earth contains, he will gladly offer it all as ransom. They will harbour feelings of remorse when they see the suffering. Judgement will be passed on them in all fairness; and they will not be wronged. (54)

أَلَآ إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the

heavens and earth. God's promise always comes true, but most of them do not know it. (55)

هُوَ يُحۡيِۦ وَيُمِيتُ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٥٦

He alone gives life and causes death, and to Him you shall all return. (56)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ قَدۡ جَآءَتۡكُم مَّوۡعِظَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ وَشِفَآءٞ لِّمَا فِي ٱلصُّدُورِ وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٞ لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٥٧

Mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for all that may be in your hearts, and guidance and grace for all believers. (57)

قُلۡ بِفَضۡلِ ٱللَّهِ وَبِرَحۡمَتِهِۦ فَبِذَٰلِكَ فَلۡيَفۡرَحُواْ هُوَ خَيۡرٞ مِّمَّا يَجۡمَعُونَ ٥٨

Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.' (58)

قُلۡ أَرَءَيۡتُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُم مِّن رِّزۡقٖ فَجَعَلۡتُم مِّنۡهُ حَرَامٗا وَحَلَٰلٗا قُلۡ ءَآللَّهُ أَذِنَ لَكُمۡ أَمۡ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ تَفۡتَرُونَ ٥٩

Say: 'Do but consider all the means of sustenance that God has bestowed on you! Some of it you then made unlawful, and some lawful.' Say: 'Has God given you leave to do so, or do you fabricate lies against God?' (59)

وَمَا ظَنُّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَفۡتَرُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡكَذِبَ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضۡلٍ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡكُرُونَ ٦٠

But what will they think, those who invent lies against God, on the Day of Resurrection? God is truly bountiful to mankind, but most of them are ungrateful. (60)

وَمَا تَكُونُ فِي شَأۡنٖ وَمَا تَتۡلُواْ مِنۡهُ مِن قُرۡءَانٖ وَلَا تَعۡمَلُونَ مِنۡ عَمَلٍ إِلَّا كُنَّا عَلَيۡكُمۡ شُهُودًا إِذۡ تُفِيضُونَ فِيهِۚ

In whatever business you may be engaged, and whatever part you may recite of the

وَمَا يَعۡزُبُ عَن رَّبِّكَ مِن مِّثۡقَالِ ذَرَّةٖ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَلَآ أَصۡغَرَ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكۡبَرَ إِلَّا فِي كِتَٰبٖ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٦١﴾

Qur'ān, and whatever deed you [mankind] may do, We will be your witnesses from the moment you are engaged with it.

Not even an atom's weight [of anything whatsoever] on earth or in heaven escapes your Lord, nor is there anything smaller or larger than that, but is recorded in a clear book. (61)

أَلَآ إِنَّ أَوۡلِيَآءَ ٱللَّهِ لَا خَوۡفٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يَحۡزَنُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَكَانُواْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

For certain, those who are close to God have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve; (62)

لَهُمُ ٱلۡبُشۡرَىٰ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَفِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۚ لَا تَبۡدِيلَ لِكَلِمَٰتِ ٱللَّهِۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡفَوۡزُ ٱلۡعَظِيمُ ﴿٦٤﴾

for they do believe and remain God-fearing. (63)

وَلَا يَحۡزُنكَ قَوۡلُهُمۡۘ إِنَّ ٱلۡعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًاۚ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ﴿٦٥﴾

Theirs are the glad tidings in the life of this world and in the life to come: there is no changing the word of God. This is the supreme triumph. (64)

أَلَآ إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَمَا يَتَّبِعُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ شُرَكَآءَۚ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَإِنۡ هُمۡ إِلَّا يَخۡرُصُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Be not grieved by what they say. All might and glory belong to God alone. He alone hears all and knows all. (65)

Indeed, to God belong all those who are in the heavens and earth. Those who invoke other beings beside God do not follow any

real partners with Him. They follow mere conjecture, and they utter nothing but falsehood. (66)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ لِتَسۡكُنُواْ فِيهِ وَٱلنَّهَارَ مُبۡصِرًاۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٍ لِّقَوۡمٍ يَسۡمَعُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

It is He who has made the night for you, so that you may have rest, and the day, so that you may see. In this there are certainly signs for those who listen. (67)

قَالُواْ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَدًا سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥۖ هُوَ ٱلۡغَنِىُّۖ لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِنۡ عِندَكُم مِّن سُلۡطَٰنِۭ بِهَٰذَآۚ أَتَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

They say: 'God has taken unto Himself a son.' Limitless is He in His glory. Self-sufficient is He. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. No evidence whatever have you for this. Would you say about God something which you do not know? (68)

قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَفۡتَرُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡكَذِبَ لَا يُفۡلِحُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Say: 'Those who invent falsehood about God shall not be successful. (69)

مَتَٰعٌ فِى ٱلدُّنۡيَا ثُمَّ إِلَيۡنَا مَرۡجِعُهُمۡ ثُمَّ نُذِيقُهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابَ ٱلشَّدِيدَ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَكۡفُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They may have a brief enjoyment in this world, but then to Us they must return, and We will then make them suffer severe torment for their unbelief.' (70)

Preview

This new passage touches the human conscience with a flow of observations that aim to put human nature face to face with clear evidence of God's oneness, the

truthful address of His Messenger and the concept of the Day of Judgement, the reckoning and justice that are certain to be administered to all on that day. These touches work on the whole of the human soul, taking it on a grand tour of the universe, opening up for it the broad horizons of its own world. It moves from ancient times to the present, and from this life to the real one beyond. The previous passage contained similar aspects, discussed in Chapter 1, but the present ones are clearer, certain to receive the right response from any person with an uncorrupted nature. The unbelievers genuinely feared that the Qur'ān would weaken them considerably. Hence they urged one another not to listen to it because they wanted to continue with their erring beliefs and practices.

When Deities Quarrel with Their Worshippers

> *For those who do good there is a good reward, and more besides. Neither darkness nor any disgrace will overcast their faces. These are destined for paradise, where they will abide. As for those who have done evil, an evil deed is rewarded with its like. Ignominy will overshadow them – for they will have none to protect them from God – as if their faces have been covered with patches of the night's own darkness. Such are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (Verses 26-27)*

The last verse in the preceding passage said: "*God calls to the abode of peace, and guides him that wills to a straight path.*" (Verse 25) Here we have an outline of the rules that determine the reward of those who follow God's guidance and those who turn away from it. It shows God's grace, mercy, fairness and justice in both types of reward.

Those who do well in their choice of belief and practice, recognizing the right path and understanding the universal law which leads to the 'abode of peace' will have a goodly reward which is the fair outcome of what they do. But they will also have something more of God's unlimited bounty: '*For those who do good there is a good reward, and more besides.*' (Verse 26) They will be spared the misery of the Day of Resurrection, and the stress experienced by others before judgement is passed on all creatures: "*Neither darkness nor any disgrace will overcast their faces.*" (Verse 26) The Arabic phrase incorporates two words for darkness and disgrace. The first denotes dust, darkness and a pale colour that comes as a result of unhappiness or distress. The other denotes humiliation, shame and subjection to insults. They are free of all this. The verse portrays a dense crowd, afflicted with misery, fear, and humiliation, as evidenced by the marks on people's faces. To be spared all this is a great gain, an act of grace which is added to the expected reward.

Such people who enjoy this high position *"are destined for paradise."* (Verse 26) They are its owners and dwellers, and there *"they will abide."* (Verse 26)

"As for those who have done evil." (Verse 27) A more literal translation of this phrase would be 'those who have earned evil'. The earnings they have made out of the transaction of this life are simply evil. They will have their fair reward, which means that they will not have their punishment increased or doubled. They are simply given their reward, like for like. *"An evil deed is rewarded with its like."* (Verse 27) They are the ones to endure humiliation which weighs down heavily on them: *"Ignominy will overshadow them – for they will have none to protect them from God."* (Verse 27) There is simply no one to provide them with protection against the inevitable workings of divine law which metes out punishment to those who choose the path of evil.

The *sūrah* then paints an image of the mental darkness that overshadows them and leaves its impact on their terrified faces. They look '*just as if their faces have been covered with patches of the night's own darkness.*' (Verse 27) The whole atmosphere is dark, causing much fear and apprehension. People's faces are made to look as if they are wearing the cover of the dark night.

Those who are abandoned in the midst of all this darkness '*are destined for the fire.*' (Verse 27) They are its owners and dwellers, and there '*they will abide.*' (Verse 27)

But where are those whom they claimed to be God's partners and the ones they thought would intercede on their behalf? How come they could not provide them with any protection? What is happening to them on this fearful Day of Resurrection: *"One day We shall gather them all together, and then We shall say to those who associated partners with God: 'Keep to your places, you and those you associated with God as partners.' We will then separate them from one another. Then those whom they associated as partners with God will say: 'It was not us that you worshipped. God is sufficient as a witness between us and you. We were, for certain, unaware of your worshipping us. 'There and then every soul will realize what it had done in the past; and all will be brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme. All their invented falsehood will have forsaken them."* (Verses 28-30)

What we have here is a scene depicting one aspect of the Day of Judgement. It is painted in such a way that makes it far more effective than a clear statement to the effect that the partners they associate with God and their intercessors will not protect their worshippers against God, and can avail them of nothing. They are all brought together: the unbelievers and the false deities they associated as partners with God. The Qur'ān describes the latter as 'their partners' in a sarcastic manner which also denotes that they are of their own invention, and hence never partners with God.

To all these, unbelievers and partners, an order is given: *"Keep to your places, you and those you associated with God as partners."* (Verse 28) Stop where you are. That is

the order. They must stand still the moment the order is issued, for an order given on that day is complied with immediately, without question. Then one group is set apart from the other: *"We will then separate them from one another."* (Verse 28)

At this point the unbelievers do not speak. It is their claimed partners that speak to exonerate themselves from the crime committed by the unbelievers when they worshipped them in place of God, or in association with Him. They speak to make it clear that they were totally unaware of their being worshipped. As such, they have had no role in the crime. They appeal to God to be their witness: *"Then those whom they associated as partners with God will say: 'It was not us that you worshipped. God is sufficient as a witness between us and you. We were, for certain, unaware of your worshipping us.'" (*Verse 29)

Thus is the status of those who were worshipped. They are weak, appealing to be exonerated of the sinful practices of their worshippers.

They seek to be absolved of an offence in which they took no part, and want God to be their witness.

At this point when everything is laid open, every soul will know the true nature of the deeds it did, realizing its inevitable outcome: *"There and then every soul will realize what it had done in the past."* (Verse 30) What is abundantly clear to all at that moment is the fact that there is only one God to whom all shall return. Everything else is false: *"All will be brought back to God, their true Lord Supreme."* (Verse 30)

There the idolaters will find nothing of what they used to claim and fabricate. All prove to have no real existence. *"All their invented falsehood will have forsaken them."* (Verse 30) It is a vivid scene which is raised before our eyes so that we can examine all its details and the truth it reflects. It is painted in a few words which have an effect far superior to what a mere statement of facts supported by clear arguments would have produced.

Giving Life and Causing Death

The first round in this passage took us to the gathering of all on the Day of Resurrection when all false claims and fabrications are shown to have no validity whatsoever. God's is the only power on that day. Now the *sūrah* speaks of matters human beings see in their lives, and in their own souls, admitting that they are only done by God and subject to His control.

> *Say: 'Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth? Or, who is it that has power over hearing and sight? Who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive? Who regulates all affairs?' They*

> *will say: 'God.' Say, then: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' Such is God, your true Lord. Apart from the truth, what is left but error? How is it, then, that you turn away? (Verses 31-32)*

The pagan Arabs, as has been explained, did not deny God's existence, nor did they deny that He is the One who creates, provides sustenance for His creation and controls the whole universe. They simply ascribed divinity to other beings whom they considered to be God's partners. They claimed that these were able to bring them nearer to God or that they had their own power, independent of God's. Here the *sūrah* addresses them taking their own beliefs as its starting point. It aims to alert their consciousness and make them reflect, so that they can discard their ill-conceived ideas. "*Say: 'Who is it that provides for you from heaven and earth?'*" (Verse 31) Who brings down the rain which quickens the land and brings up the plants? Who produces all the crops, birds, fish and animals? Who provides people with everything they get from the heavens and earth for their own and their animals' food? This is what they used to understand when reference was made to the provisions from heaven and earth. Reality however is much greater than this. Today, we can still discover new provisions that He gives us, and we can still uncover more and more about the laws of nature. People can use what God provides for them in beneficial or harmful ways, in line with their sound or false beliefs. They get their provisions from the surface or bottom of the earth; from water running in its courses on the surface of the earth or stored underground; from the sun with its heat and the moon and its light. Even the putridity of organic material contains something that is used in medicine to produce cures for diseases.

"Or, *who is it that has power over hearing and sight?*" (Verse 31) Who is it that gives these organs their power or deprives them of it; who makes them healthy or malfunctioning? Who is it that makes them see and hear what they like or dislike? Although that was then the limit of their understanding of the functioning of these senses, it was enough to enable them to understand the significance of such a question. However, we are still learning something new about the nature of hearing and sight, and the fine complexity of both these senses, to make the question wider in implication. The structure of the eye and the optic nerve, and how the whole system works to define what is seen, and also the structure of the ear, its different parts and how it captures sound frequencies are extraordinary wonders, particularly when they are compared to the most sophisticated machines of our modern scientific achievements. Yet although man-made machines are insignificant as compared with God's work, people still ignore the miracles of creation which are all around them in the universe and in their own souls.

"*Who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive?" (Verse* 31) People considered everything that was motionless to be dead. On the other hand, motion and growth indicated life. Therefore the drift of the question was clear to them: it was no different from seeing a plant coming out of a seed and a seed contained in a plant; a chick coming out of an egg and an egg produced by a bird; and numerous other cycles of creation. To them this was especially remarkable, and it remains remarkable even though we have come to know that the seed and the egg should be classified among the living on account of the potential life they contain. Indeed life potential, with all its hidden qualities, hereditary characteristics and unique features, is one of the most remarkable and wonderful things made by God's will.

A pause to consider the phenomenon of a seed and a stone bringing forth a plant and a date tree, and also an egg and a cell bringing forth a chick and a human being, may lead to a whole lifetime of thinking and reflecting. Let us just consider where in the seed the roots, sticks, leaves and fruits lie hidden? Where in the date stone does the core, the bast, the tall trunk and fibres we see in the date tree hide? Where are the taste, flavour, colour and smell stored, and how do we account for what we see of the great variety of dates? Where in the egg do the bones, meat, feathers, colour, flapping of the wings and the singing of the bird hide? Even more remarkably, where in the female cell does the human being with all its complex characteristics hide? Where are a person's features stored until they are transmitted by genes that gather their qualities from past and distant generations? Where do the distinctive qualities of every human being come from: the way he talks, looks, turns his head, feels things around him, etc. and the features and qualities that he inherits from his parents, family and race, as well as those that give him his unique personality?

Is it sufficient to say that this endless world of creation lies hidden in a seed, a stone, an egg and a female cell? Is this sufficient to end our wonder? There is no escaping the recognition that it is all done by God's will and produced by His power.

Human beings continue to uncover some of the secrets of life and death, and how the living is brought forth out of the dead and the dead out of the living. At different stages, elements experience death or come back to life. All this adds to the great significance of the question asked here and its broader perspective. The food we eat dies as a result of cooking and exposure to heat, but it is then transformed inside the living body into blood, which in turn becomes dead waste as a result of body processes. The more we learn about this process the more remarkable it appears, and yet it continues during every moment of the night and day. Indeed life continues to be a great exciting mystery that poses for man a question he cannot answer unless he admits that it is God the Creator who gives life.

"Who regulates all affairs?" (Verse 31) This question applies to all that has just been mentioned and to everything else, whether it relates to the affairs of the universe or to human affairs. Who regulates the great universal system that conducts the movement of all worlds in such a fine and elaborate manner? Who regulates the cycle of life and sets it along its finely tuned system? Who regulates the social laws that govern human life, without the slightest deviation from its course? The list of such questions is endless.

"They will say: 'God.'" They, i.e. the Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān did not deny God's existence, or His control of these great issues. But as they deviated from the path of the truth, they began to associate partners with God, and to address worship rituals to such partners. Furthermore, they put into operation laws that God had not sanctioned.

"Say: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?'" (Verse 31) Since He is the One who provides sustenance, controls hearing and sight, brings the living out of the dead and the dead out of the living, and regulates all matters and affairs, should you not fear Him? The One who has all these attributes is indeed the true Lord who has no partners to be associated with Him.

Who Guides to the Truth

"Such is God, your true Lord." (Verse 32) Since the truth is one and cannot be present in more than one form at the same time, then whoever goes beyond it is in fundamental error. *"Apart from the truth, what is left but error? How is it, then, that you turn away?"* (Verse 32)

When the truth is clearly evident, how can anyone look elsewhere for guidance?

The outcome of the unbelievers' deliberate denial of the truth, despite their acknowledgement of its basis, is that God has made it a law of human nature that those who deviate from the sound logic of nature and the overall laws of creation will not be believers: *"Thus is the word of your Lord proved true with regard to those who do evil: they will not believe."* (Verse 33) He does not prevent them from believing. Indeed the pointers to the truth and true faith are everywhere in the universe, and its logical basis is acknowledged by them. It is simply because they themselves refuse to take the way leading to faith and deliberately turn their backs on the logical conclusion of the premise they accept. It is an outcome they choose by disregarding the logic of nature.

The *sūrah* then resumes its line of drawing attention to aspects of God's power and asks whether any of the partners the unbelievers associate with Him have any share in such power: *"Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] originate*

creation, and then bring it back [to life] again?' Say: 'It is God alone who originates creation and then brings it back [to life] again. How is it, then, that you are so misled?' Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] guide to the truth?' Say: 'God alone guides to the truth. Who is more worthy to be followed: He that guides to the truth, or he who cannot find the right way unless he is guided? What is then amiss with you? How do you judge?'" (Verses 34-35)

The questions now addressed to them, concerning re-creation and guidance to the truth, are not taken for granted like the first group. These are posed on the basis of what they accept as true. They relate to conclusions they should arrive at with reflection. No answer is required of them. The answer is placed in front of them, outlining the conclusions to the premises they have accepted: "*Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] originate creation and then bring it back [to life] again?'"* (Verse 34)

They accept that God has initiated creation, but they do not acknowledge that He will bring it back to life. They refuse to believe in the resurrection, reckoning and reward. Yet God's purpose is not complete by simply originating creation, giving creatures their span of life, letting them die without receiving their reward for doing well and following divine guidance, or their punishment for deliberately following falsehood. That would be a journey cut short, and that would not be designed by a Creator whose attributes include deliberate planning and perfect wisdom. Indeed believing in the Day of Judgement is a logical requirement of believing in the wisdom, justice and mercy of the Creator. This fact needs to be stated clearly to them, since they believe that God is the Creator, and acknowledge that He is the One who brings the living out of the dead. In fact the second life is closely similar to the process of bringing what is alive out of what is dead: "*Say: 'It is God alone who originates creation and then brings it back [to life] again.'*" (Verse 34) It is singularly strange that they should turn away from this fact when they accept its premise: "*How is it, then, that you are so misled?"* (Verse 34) How is it that you choose error and accept false beliefs?

"*Say: 'Does any of your partners [whom you associate with God] guide to the truth?'"* (*Verse* 35) Does any such partner reveal scriptures, send messengers, lay down a law and a code of living, give warnings and direct people to the truth? Does any of them explain the signs and pointers that are available in the universe and within human nature, awakening minds that have been left in deep slumber and alerting disused faculties? They were aware of all this since God's Messenger presented it to them for their guidance. This was not something that they had already known and accepted, but rather something that actually took place before their very eyes. The Prophet was among them fulfilling the task God had assigned to him. Hence it is put to them as

evidence of the truth they are called upon to acknowledge. *"Say: 'God alone guides to the truth.'"* (Verse 35)

This leads to another question with a ready answer: *"Who is more worthy to be followed: He that guides to the truth, or he who cannot find the right way unless he is guided?"* (Verse 35) There can only be a single answer to this question. Naturally, the one who guides mankind to the truth is the one to be followed, in preference to the one who is in need of guidance. This applies whether those who are worshipped are made of stone or trees, or whether they are stars or human beings. In fact it applies to Jesus Christ [peace be upon him]. Although God sent him to give guidance to people, being himself human, he too was in need of God's guidance. It therefore applies even more to those who are falsely claimed to be God's partners.

"What is then amiss with you? How do you judge?" (Verse 35) What has come over you that you clearly misjudge matters and deviate so badly from the truth?

When the questions put to them are completed, and the answers dictated by natural logic and accepted premises are clearly stated, the *sūrah* points out what they actually do in respect of reflection, arriving at conclusions, and formulating beliefs. They have no certainty in anything that relates to belief or worship. They do not base their arguments and beliefs on any fact that human nature and reason can accept as true. They indulge in conjecture, and that has nothing to do with the truth.

"Most of them follow nothing but mere conjecture. But conjecture can in no way be a substitute for truth. God has full knowledge of all that they do." (Verse 36) They think that God has partners, but they do not try to test such thoughts either by reasoning or in practical terms. They think that their forefathers would not have worshipped idols unless those idols had something to deserve worship. But they do not question this false premise, nor do they free their minds from the shackles of following such thoughts blindly. They assume that God would not reveal anything to a man from among them, but they do not question why God would not do so. They also assume that the Qur'ān is authored by Muĥammad, but they do not try to verify whether Muĥammad is capable of authoring the Qur'ān, when they themselves, human beings like him, are totally incapable of producing a *sūrah* similar to the Qur'ān. Thus they go about life nourishing a host of assumptions and thoughts that have no foundation. As the Qur'ān describes it, they thrive on conjecture but this does not give them anything of substance. It is God alone who knows fully what they do. *"God has full knowledge of all that they do."* (Verse 36)

A Book of God's Own Devising

The *sūrah* now begins a new round speaking of the Qur'ān itself. It starts with a categorical statement that there is no way that the Qur'ān could have been invented

by anyone, followed by a challenge to the unbelievers to produce a single *sūrah* like it. It then shows their judgement to be hasty, lacking solid ground. This is followed by stating the nature of their attitude to the Qur'ān, coupled with encouragement to the Prophet to remain steadfast regardless of the response he receives from them. The round concludes with a reference to the destiny awaiting those who are stubborn in their erroneous beliefs. It is a just and fitting destiny, determined by their deeds.

> *"This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of [revelations] that went before it, and a full explanation of God's Book, about which there is no doubt. It certainly comes from the Lord of all the worlds. If they say: He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.' Indeed they disbelieve what they cannot grasp, particularly since its inner meaning has not become clear to them. Likewise did those who lived before them disbelieve. But see what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. Some of them do believe in it, while others do not. But your Lord is fully aware of those who spread corruption. If they disbelieve you, then say: I shall bear the consequences of my deeds, and you your deeds. You are not accountable for what I do and I am not accountable for your doings.' Yet some of them [pretend to] listen to you; but can you make the deaf hear you, incapable as they are of using their reason? And some of them [pretend to] look towards you; but can you show the way to the blind, bereft of sight as they are? Indeed, God does not do the least wrong to mankind, but it is men who wrong themselves." (Verses 37-44)*

"This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God." (Verse 37) Such unique characteristics of topic and expression; such perfection of order and harmony; such completeness of the faith it preaches and the code for human life it lays down; such a thorough concept of the nature of Godhead, as well as the nature of life, human beings and the universe could never have been designed by anyone other than God. Only He is able to combine all this, because He is the One who knows the beginnings of all things and their ends, the apparent and the hidden. No one else can devise a system that is perfect, free of shortcomings and based on perfect knowledge.

"This Qur'ān could not have been devised by anyone other than God." (Verse 37) What is negated here is the very possibility that the Qur'ān could ever have been fabricated or authored by anyone other than God. This is much more comprehensive and emphatic.

"It is a *confirmation of [revelations] that went before it."* (Verse 37) It confirms all the revelations and Scriptures given to earlier messengers. It confirms the original faith outlined by those messages and the good things they advocated. It is also *"a full explanation of God's Book."* (Verse 37) It is the same Book, outlining the same message preached by all messengers. There may be differences of detail in these messages, but

the basic principles are the same. The Qur'ān explains God's Book fully, making clear all the methods and means of goodness it outlines and how these are to be fulfilled and followed in human life. The faith is the same and the basic substance is the same, but the methods of goodness and the legislation outlined are given each time in a degree of detail that suits human progress and development. When mankind came of age, they were addressed by the Qur'ān as adults. They were no longer addressed by physical miracles that defy human intellect.

Moreover, it is a Book "*about which there is no doubt. It certainly comes from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 37) This is an assertion that the Qur'ān could never have been fabricated or attributed falsely to God. It is indeed a revelation by '*the Lord of all the worlds.*'

Having stated the truth about the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* speaks of a certain possibility: "*If they say: 'He has invented it.'" (Verse* 38) In other words, if Muĥammad is alleged to have invented it let them then mobilize their resources and invent a single *sūrah* like it, if they can. "*Say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can besides God, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 38)

The challenge is permanent, as is their inability to meet it. It continues for the rest of time and no one will ever be able to meet it. Anyone who appreciates the strength, beauty and artistic expression of the Arabic language will recognize that the Qur'ānic style is unique, and that no human being could produce anything similar to it. So will those who study human social systems and legal principles. If they study the system laid down in the Qur'ān, they will realize that its approach to the organization of the human community is absolutely unique. It enacts appropriate regulations for all aspects of human life, while at the same time allowing a sufficient degree of practicality and flexibility to meet any type of development. That is a task too great to be undertaken by a single human mind, or by the minds of any group of human beings in a single generation or throughout human history. The same applies to those who study human psychology and methods of influencing people on the one hand, and the Qur'ān and the way it addresses the human mind on the other.

It is not merely the incomparability of the Qur'ānic style and mode of expression; instead the absolutely miraculous nature of the Qur'ān is easily recognized by experts in diverse disciplines such as language, society, law and psychology.

Those who are adept at using artistic expression, and have an insight into fine literary styles are better able to appreciate the miracle of the Qur'ān in this particular aspect, while experts in the different disciplines of sociology, law, psychology are able to appreciate its superior treatment of their themes. Each will appreciate better than anyone else the miracle of the Qur'ān in their respective disciplines. I admit that

it is practically impossible to describe this miracle and its true dimensions but I will nonetheless attempt to give a glimpse of its nature.

An Amazing Experience with the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān is readily distinguishable from any human expression. It has a powerful effect on people's hearts which no human style can achieve. Such an effect is sometimes felt by people who have no knowledge of Arabic. Some remarkable events, which may not be the rule, cannot have any other explanation. I am not giving any example witnessed by anyone else. I am only relating something that happened to me about 15 years ago, for which I have no less than six witnesses.[8]

We were seven Muslim passengers travelling on board an Egyptian ship across the Atlantic to New York. There were also 120 foreign passengers, none of whom was a Muslim. It occurred to us to hold Friday prayers on board, in the middle of the ocean. God knows that we were not that keen on the prayer itself, but we were driven to show our religious feelings when we saw a missionary exercising his mission with the passengers. He even approached us. The Captain, an Englishman, facilitated our task and allowed any of the crew and other workers, all of whom were Nubian Muslims, to join the prayer, provided that they were not on duty at the time. They were overjoyed by this, as it was, in their experience, the first time ever that Friday prayers had been held on board. I delivered the *khuṭbah,* or sermon, and led the prayers, while many of the foreign passengers were watching nearby.

When the prayer was over, many of them congratulated us on a 'successful service'. That was how they viewed our prayers. One particular lady, whom we were later informed was a Christian from Yugoslavia fleeing from the oppression of Tito's Communist regime, was particularly touched. In fact she could not control her feelings and her eyes were full of tears. She shook our hands warmly and said in broken English that she was profoundly touched by the discipline and spiritual calm of our prayers. She then asked which language the 'priest' was speaking. She simply could not imagine that prayers could be led by a layman, but we made sure to explain this point to her. She also said that although she could not understand a word of what was being said, the language had a remarkable musical rhythm. She then added something that was a great surprise to us all. She said that certain phrases or sentences which he used were different from the rest of his speech. They were more clearly musical with an even more profound rhythm. These phrases filled her with awe. It was as if the imām was deriving his speech from the Holy Spirit. We

[8] The author is referring here to his trip to the United States, in 1950, when he was sent on a scholarship to undertake research to determine the best means of developing education in Egyptian universities. — Editor's note.

reflected on what she had said and concluded that she meant the Qur'ānic verses quoted in the *khuṭbah* and recited during the prayer. The whole thing was truly remarkable as the lady did not understand a word of Arabic.

As I have said, this is not the rule. Yet this incident, and similar ones reported by different people, confirm that the Qur'ān has some secret which enables certain hearts to react to it when they hear its recitation. It might have been that this lady had a keen religious sense which, coupled with the fact of her flight from Communist tyranny in her own country, refined her interaction with God's revelations. But why do we wonder at this when we see thousands of uneducated Muslims greatly influenced by the rhythm of the Qur'ān, despite their inability to understand it. In a sense, they are not much different from this Yugoslav lady.

I have felt it necessary to speak about this subtle power of the Qur'ān before turning to other aspects which are well known to those who are skilled in the art of expression and those who are endowed with a refined sense or who think and contemplate.

A distinctive feature of the Qur'ānic method of expression is that it tackles great issues in a space which, by human standards, is far too short. Nevertheless, it covers them in the fullest, finest, most vivid and accurate way, maintaining at the same time a perfect harmony between the words it uses, the style, rhythm, connotations and the overall feeling it generates. It combines artistic beauty with precision in a way that makes it impossible to replace one word with another, and does not allow the needs of fine style to overshadow those of precise meaning or vice versa. In this respect, it achieves a standard of excellence that surpasses anything that men of letters recognize as the zenith that can be attained by any human being.

This main feature brings about another distinctive characteristic of the Qur'ān, one which enables a single statement to provide different meanings that run side by side, with each given its fair share of clarity. There is no ambiguity or confusion between different meanings. Each aspect and each fact to which the text refers is given its full and appropriate space. Thus the same statement is quoted in different contexts but on each occasion it fits the context perfectly, as if it were only meant to express the particular issue in question. This feature is well known, and it only requires brief mention for people to appreciate it.

The Qur'ānic method of expression is also distinguished by its ability to paint pictures in a way no human expression can approximate. Anyone who tries to imitate it sounds confused and incoherent. How can people express the following ideas in the same way as the Qur'ān:

"And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression. But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said: 'I

have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself.'" (Verse 90) Up to this point, this is an account of certain events. But it is followed immediately with a direct remonstration brought up as though it were taking place right before us: *"Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you."* (Verses 91-92) This is then followed with a concluding comment on the scene itself: *"For a great many people do not heed Our signs."* (Verse 92)

"Say: 'What is weightiest in testimony?' Say: 'God is witness between me and you. This Qur'ān has been revealed to me that I may thereby warn you and all whom it may reach.'" (6: 19) So far this is an instruction received by God's Messenger. Then immediately we see the Messenger questioning his people: "Will *you in truth bear witness that there are other deities beside God?"* (6: 19) The next moment, we see him again receiving instructions concerning the very point he is questioning his people about and receiving their answer: *"Say: 'I bear no such witness.' Say: He is but one God. I disown all that you associate with Him.'"* (6: 19)

Note also the frequent switch of tense or address often employed in the Qur'ān, as in the following passage: *"On the day when He shall gather them all together, [He will say]: 'O you company of jinn! A great many human beings have you seduced. 'Those who were their close friends among human beings will say: 'Our Lord, we have enjoyed each other's fellowship, and we have now reached the end of our term which You have appointed for us.' He will say: 'The fire shall be your abode, where you shall remain, unless God wills it otherwise.' Indeed, your Lord is Wise, All-knowing. In this manner do We cause the wrongdoers to be close allies of one another, because of that which they do. 'O you company* of jinn *and humans! Have there not come to you messengers from among yourselves who related to you My revelations and warned you of the coming of this your day?' They will reply: 'We bear witness against ourselves.' The life of this world has beguiled them. So they will bear witness against themselves that they were unbelievers. And so it is that your Lord would never destroy a community for its wrongdoing, while they remain unaware."* (6: 128-131)

There are numerous similar examples in the Qur'ān. Its style is thus totally different from any human style. Anyone who wishes to argue about this can try as hard as he wishes to produce something like it, but he will certainly fail. He will be totally unable to come up with any meaningful piece of writing, let alone having any degree of artistic beauty, inspiring rhythm and perfect coherence.

Characteristics of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān addresses the human entity as a whole. It does not address different faculties such as logical reasoning, pulsating hearts or excited feelings, one at a time.

It simply makes its appeal in the most direct manner, touching all human receptive faculties at once. Thus it generates feelings, impressions and concepts of the truth of existence that no other method known to mankind can ever generate. Moreover, all these are profound, comprehensive, precise, lucid and inimitably expressed.

I would like to quote here a few paragraphs from a book I am now working on[9] which may express this fact better. These speak of the Islamic approach in elucidating the constituent elements of the Islamic concept of life in a beautiful, comprehensive, coherent and balanced way. The most distinctive features of this approach are:

> Firstly, it portrays the facts as they are using a style that reveals all their aspects, dimensions, links and consequences. Comprehensive as it is, it does not complicate any fact or make it ambiguous. It then makes its address to all humanity, at all levels.[10] God has not wished to make the attainment of any standard of knowledge or education a necessary requirement for the proper perception of the Islamic concept of life. Faith is the first need in human life. When it is accepted by people, it formulates in their hearts and minds a concept which defines their method of dealing with the whole universe. It also gives them a method to follow in the pursuit of any branch of knowledge. This concept provides for them a complete explanation and understanding of the universe and what happens in it. Since it is founded on the truth of faith, God wants it to be the basis of all their knowledge and scientific study. This is the most solid basis since it is the ultimate truth.
>
> All that man learns, and all the knowledge he attains, from any source other than faith remain within the field of probability. It is neither final nor absolute, not even when it relies on scientific experiment. Empirical science relies on analogy and induction to draw its conclusions. It is not based on thorough and exhaustive investigation and universal application. That is not possible for human beings to do in any experiment, even if we assume that all human observations and final conclusions are correct. The ultimate that scientific research can achieve is to conduct a number of experiments and make observations and conclusions that are applied generally. Scientists admit that their conclusions remain within the realm of probability; they are never final. Besides, every single experiment aims to determine the degree of

9 This is the second volume of the author's work Khaṣā'iṣ al-Taṣawwur al-Islāmī wa Muqawwimātuh, or Distinctive Features of the Islamic Concept and its Constituent Elements. The first volume was published in 1963. The author wrote a few chapters of the second volume after his release from prison in 1964. These were posthumously published as the second volume. — Editor's note.

10 Human expression cannot achieve this, because every author addresses a particular level of understanding. Those who belong to a different level can hardly understand him.

probability of a certain aspect. Hence, the only certain knowledge that human beings can acquire is that which they receive from the One who knows all, and is fully aware of all secrets and minute details. He is the One who speaks the truth and explains the ultimate certainty.[11]

Secondly, it is free of any flaws of disjointedness or incoherence which are observed in scientific studies, philosophical treaties and refined artistic writings. It does not approach each aspect of a coherent, beautiful whole separately as all human styles of expression do. It portrays them all in an integrated approach which links perceptible features with the realm that lies beyond our reach. Thus it establishes a link between the truth of the universe, life and man and the truth of God; between this life and the life to come; and between our world here and the Supreme Society of angels. All this is done in a unique, inimitable style. When human beings try to imitate this characteristic, they fall far short and the outcome is incoherent, ambiguous, and ill-defined. This is the opposite of what we readily observe in Qur'ānic style.

Strong as the link is between different facts tackled in a particular Qur'ānic passage or *sūrah,* the emphasis on any one of them may frequently change, yet the link remains clear. For example, when the emphasis is placed on explaining to people who their true Lord is, we find this great truth portrayed in describing His magnificent work in the universe and within human life, in our own world which we see and feel and in the world beyond. Elsewhere the emphasis may be on elucidating the truth about the universe and its existence. Here, then, we have the nature of the relationship between Godhead and the universe clearly outlined, with frequent references to the nature of life and living creatures and also to the natural laws God has set in operation in the universe at large.

Similarly, when the nature of man is emphasized, it is portrayed with its links with God, the universe and other living creatures; and also with the present world and the world beyond. If the emphasis happens to be on the life to come, this life is also discussed, and both are related to God and to other important facts. The same applies when the truth about the present life comes in for special emphasis.

Thirdly, the Qur'ān not only portrays the truth as an integrated whole with all its aspects in perfect harmony, but it also gives each aspect in this complete whole its due share of space and importance, commensurate with

11 This is why on listening to the Qur'ān people feel it is clearly more authoritative than any other writing.

its weight on God's accurate scales. Hence the nature and qualities of God, and the question of godhead and servitude appear to be the dominant issues. Indeed explaining the facts relevant to these issues appears to be the basic theme of the Qur'ān.[12] Similarly, the theme of the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception, including God's will, predestination and the life to come, occupies substantial space. So does the nature of man, the universe and life, with each being given mutually complementary importance that fits with the harmony and complementarity of these questions in real life. Thus no important fact is overlooked, ignored or gloated over.

We have spoken elsewhere about the Islamic concept being well balanced. It admires the accuracy of the laws governing the material world and the perfect harmony between its various components. However, this admiration does not lead to making the material world a deity, as did some communities of old. In fact this is still done by some people in modern times when they ascribe divinity to material worlds or to stars and planets. Nor does the admiring look at the miracle of life and how it defines its functions and fulfils them, or its harmony with the universe around it, lead to giving it the position of a deity, as do some modern existentialists. Similarly the wonderful creation of man, his unique qualities and potential, manifesting themselves in his interaction with the universe, causes much admiration. However, this admiration does not lead to making man, or human intellect, a deity in one way or another, as the idealists generally do. On the other hand, the recognized majesty of the divine truth, or God Himself, does not lead to the discarding of the material world or to looking at it or at man with contempt, as Hindu, Buddhist and distorted Christian philosophies do. In fact, a well-balanced outlook is the main characteristic of the Islamic concept of life generally.

Similarly, the Qur'ānic method in presenting the constituent elements of this concept and the facts upon which it is based is also well balanced, giving prominence where it is due. Thus they are all clearly apparent every time the Qur'ān outlines this concept in its totality. This unique Qur'ānic quality is beyond the ability of human expression, refined as it may be.

Fourthly, the Qur'ān combines accuracy and precision with an inspirational vitality that imparts to these facts a rhythm, life and beauty unknown in any human presentation or expression. However, this accuracy does not encroach on a lively and beautiful style, nor does the demarcation spoil the rhythm and harmony.

[12] The reasons for attaching special importance to the theme of Godhead are fully discussed in the Prologue to this *sūrah.*

> Interaction with the Qur'ānic approach is the best way to appreciate it. Much as we try, we cannot fairly describe, in our human style, its main features so as to begin to appreciate it in the same way. Nor can our study of the main characteristics and constituent elements of the Islamic concept of life, man and the universe, be as complete as its picture given in the Qur'ān. Our attempt to present this study to people is made only because people have drawn far away from the Qur'ān. They have chosen to make their social environment vastly different from that which prevailed in the community which received the Qur'ānic revelations. They no longer experience the same circumstances and concerns of that community which established the Islamic society. Hence people are no longer able to appreciate the Qur'ānic approach and interact with it. Nor are they able to enjoy its beauty and finer characteristics.

Areas Unfathomed in Human Writings

The Qur'ān sometimes explains the basic truisms of faith in a way that the human mind would never attempt, because, by their nature, these are not things which preoccupy or attract human attention. A clear example is the verse which describes God's infinite knowledge: *"With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He. He knows all that the land and sea contain; not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness, nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book."* (6: 59) These broad places and situations, visible and hidden, are not normally frequented by human thought in this way, when it tries to express knowledge that embraces everything. Let us quote here a few paragraphs of what we stated in our commentary on this verse.

Every time we look at this short verse, we cannot fail to recognize its miraculous style which tells of the author of the Qur'ān. One look at its subject matter is sufficient to make us absolutely certain that this is something no human being would say. Human intelligence does not stretch to limitless horizons when it describes perfect, unfailing knowledge. Instead, the human intellect has different characteristics and certain set limits, because its images reflect its own concerns. Why should human beings care about the number of leaves falling from trees all over the globe? Why should they bother about grains buried in the deep dark recesses of the earth? What concern is it to them to know everything that is fresh or dry? People simply do not care about falling leaves, let alone about counting them. They care about the seeds they plant, hoping to have a good harvest. Otherwise, they would not care about the grains buried in the earth. They certainly like to use what they have of fresh and dry things, but none of these matters is thought of as evidence of

perfect knowledge. It is only the Creator who knows and cares about every falling leaf, buried grain and the like, as He does about other things, fresh or dry.

No human being could ever contemplate that each falling leaf, buried grain, every fresh object and also every dry one should be recorded in a clear book. They cannot see any benefit to them from keeping such a record. But the Sovereign of the whole universe is the One who has all that recorded because everything in the whole universe, large or small, visible or hidden, distant or close, apparent or unknown, is part of His dominion and, as such, is accounted for.

This is an expansive scene, one which leaves a profound effect on the human mind. The human intellect does not even try to paint such a scene comprising the leaves falling from every tree throughout the world and every grain hidden in the soil and every fresh and dry thing on earth. Indeed, neither our eyes nor our imagination care to visualize it in the first place. Nevertheless, it is a powerful scene that tells us much about God' s knowledge, reminding us that God oversees and records everything. His will takes care of what is large or small, highly important or infinitely insignificant, visible or hidden, distant or close, apparent or unknown.

Those of us who react to what we experience and have the talent of expression are keenly aware of our human limitations to visualize and express things. We know from personal experience that it does not occur to any human mind to paint such a scene and that no human being can use such a mode of expression. I invite anyone who disputes this to look into everything that human beings have ever written in an attempt to see if human literary talent has ever ventured in this direction. Indeed, this verse and similar ones in the Qur'ān are sufficient for us to know the Author of this glorious book.

If we look at the artistic excellence in this verse, we soon realize that it surpasses everything that human beings have ever attempted: *"With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He."* (Verse 59) The verse takes us first into the unfathomable reaches of the world beyond, stretching into time and place, as well as the past, present and future and into what takes place both in this life and in our imagination.

"He knows all that the land and sea contain." (Verse 59). The picture here is of the seen world, stretching infinitely over the horizon so that the world we see is stretched into an infinite existence to provide harmony with the limitless nature of the world beyond.

"Not a leaf falls, but He knows it." (Verse 59). This depicts the movement of death, the fall from above and disappearance after the end of life.

"Neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness." (Verse 59). This depicts the movement of growth and life, starting in the deep and going up onto the surface. We see how the dead quickens and the idle moving forward with vigour.

"Nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book." (Verse 59) This is an overall generalization that comprises both life and death, the thriving and the withering away of everything that lives on earth. Who other than God would begin with such material in order to paint such an expansive scene? And who would give it such beauty and harmony to add to its excellence? Who other than God can do that?[13]

Let us now take another example expressing the same idea: *"He knows all that enters the earth, and all that comes out of it, as well as all that descends from the skies, and all that ascends to them. And He alone is the Most-merciful, Truly forgiving."* (34: 2)

Reflect for a moment on this image drawn with the use of only a few words and you will see an endless number of things, movements, shapes, sizes, forms and abstractions that defy the imagination. Should all the people on earth dedicate their entire attention throughout their lives to monitoring and enumerating what takes place in a single moment, of all that to which this verse refers, they would not be able to compile a comprehensive list of which they would be certain.

How many things enter the earth in a single moment? How many grains are buried into all corners of the earth, and how many find their way into them? Think for a moment of the number of worms, insects, particles and crawlers that go underneath the surface of the earth throughout the globe. Think of the number of drops of water, gas molecules as well as rays and radiation that go into the earth at every point of its vast expanse. Think of all this and remember that it is all watched by God whose eyes never blink.

Then how many things come out of the earth? How many plants shoot up, springs issue forth, volcanoes erupt, and gases spread out? How many buried things reveal themselves, and how many insects come out of their hiding places? How many are those things, visible or invisible, known to humans or unknown, that come out of the earth in a single moment? The number is beyond human reckoning.

Reflect on the number of things that come down from the skies: the drops of rain, the meteors, the blazing rays and other rays that bring us light. Think also of every divine command brought down to accomplish God's will, and the mercy God bestows on the whole universe or on particular creatures; and think of all the provisions God grants to His servants in abundance or in restricted measure. All this comes down from the skies, as do numerous other things known only to God Himself.

---

[13] Sayyid Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'ān,* Leicester, 2002, Vol. V. pp. 147-149.

Reflect also on what ascends to the skies: how many breaths of air come out of every plant, animal, human or other creature? How many supplications are addressed to God in public or in private, heard only by God? Think of the spirits of creatures that are gathered to God; the angels carrying God's orders, and other spirits that go about totally unknown to anyone other than God. Think also how many particles of vapour ascend from the seas, and how many gas molecules ascend from different types of creation.

How many of all these take place in a single moment? How much knowledge do human beings need to make a record of all that takes place in a single moment? Would they come close even if they devoted a lifetime to such counting and recording? But God's knowledge, which is complete and perfect, encompasses all that at every moment and every place. Indeed every heart and mind, every intention and thought, every movement and stoppage is under God's watchful eye. Yet His grace ensures that they remain private, and He also often forgives, for "*He alone is the Most-merciful, Truly forgiving.*" (34: 2)

Indeed many similar verses of the Qur'ān indicate that it is not of human writing. Such cosmic thoughts do not occur to human beings, because there is nothing in human nature that gives rise to them. Moreover, the simple touches that serve to encompass a universal expanse indicate that they come from the Maker of the universe, whose style no one can emulate.

Certain things and happenings which appear to us to be of little significance are often used by the Qur'ān to prove great concepts. Here they are portrayed in a different light showing them to be very important indeed, and most fitting to prove the concepts in question. For example: "*It is We who have created you: why, then, do you not accept the truth? Have you ever considered that seed which you emit? Is it you who create it, or are We the source of its creation? We have indeed decreed that death shall be ever-present among you; but there is nothing to prevent Us from changing the nature of your existence and bringing you into being anew in a manner as yet unknown to you. And since you are indeed aware of the miracle of your coming into being in the first instance, why, then, do you not bethink yourselves of Us? Have you ever considered the seed which you cast upon the soil? Is it you who cause it to grow, or are We the cause of its growth? For, were it Our will, We could indeed turn it into chaff; and you would be left to wonder and to lament, 'Indeed we are ruined! Nay, but we have been deprived of our livelihood!' Have you ever considered the water which you drink? Is it you who cause it to come down from the clouds or are We the cause of its coming down? Were it Our will, We could make it burningly salty and bitter: why, then, do you not give thanks? Have you ever considered the fire which you kindle? Is it you who have brought into being the tree that serves as its fuel, or are We the cause of its coming into being? It is We who have made it a means to remind [you of Us], and a comfort for all who are lost and hungry in the wilderness [of their lives]. Extol, then, the limitless glory of your Lord's mighty name.*" (56: 57-74)

The Qur'ān makes of such familiar phenomena universal issues of great importance, revealing the great laws in the universe, and formulating the basis of a profound faith and a complete way of existence. At the same time, it makes these familiar happenings the centre of thought and contemplation, a tool that refreshes hearts and souls and awakens feelings and sensitivities. It alerts people to phenomena which they tend to overlook although they are in front of them morning and evening. It makes them sensitive to the wonderful and miraculous events that take place in the universe. It does not leave them in need of special, preternatural and infrequent events. Nor does it require them to look for miracles and signs that are alien to them and to their lives, or to look far beyond the laws of nature that affect their own world. It does not lead them to dig into complex philosophies, entangled questions of logic, or scientific experiments that may not be comprehensible to all, in order to formulate in their minds a faith and a concept of life based on it.

They themselves are made by God, and the natural phenomena functioning all around them are set in operation by His will. Everything that He creates is miraculous. Moreover, the Qur'ān is His own book. Hence, it turns their minds to the miracles that are within them or present in their own world. It leads them by the hand to reflect on the miracles that are familiar to them, but because of this familiarity are overlooked and ignored. It opens their eyes to make them see the great secret that is embodied in their existence. It is the secret of the creative power and God's absolute oneness, and the secret of the eternal divine law that operates in their own selves and in the universe around them. This law embodies all the pointers to, and proofs of, the truth of faith. These are brought alive within their human nature.

This is the method followed in the Qur'ān as it portrays aspects of God's power seen in people's own creation, in the plants they grow, the water they drink and the fire they kindle. These are among the most basic things that they see all the time. It also portrays the moment when life on earth comes to its end, and the life of the other world begins. This is the moment which will be faced by everyone, when nothing within human power is of any avail. Thus the Qur'ān brings all human beings face to face with God's absolute power which controls the whole universe. There is no room for any argument. No excuse is valid. The truth stares people in the eye.

The Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature is itself a proof of its source. It is indeed the same source that has given the universe its existence. Its very structure follows the same method of building the universe. The most simple of material is used to produce the most sophisticated shapes and forms, as well as the largest and greatest of creatures. It is thought that the atom is the matter from which the universe is built, and the cell is the matter from which life is formed. Minute as it is, the atom

is itself a miracle. Similarly, the tiny cell is a great wonder. In the Qur'ān, the most simple and familiar things are used to formulate the most profound religious beliefs and the broadest universal philosophy. The scenes portrayed are those known and experienced by everyone. They are concerned with offspring, plants, water, fire and death. Even the most primitive man, in his old cave has witnessed the inception of embryonic life, the shoot of a plant, the fall of water, the kindling of fire and the moment of death. On the basis of these scenes, familiar as they are to all human beings, the Qur'ān formulates its ideological beliefs. In this way, the Qur'ān is able to address its message to every human being in every community. But these simple and familiar scenes epitomize the great truth of the universe, and most profound secrets of God's ability. Simple as they are, they address human nature in general, and their greatness remains the central preoccupation of the most knowledgeable of scientists and scholars to the end of time.

Conjecture Preferred to Fact!

"If they say: 'He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, one sūrah like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.'" (Verse 38) At this point, with the *sūrah* presenting this challenge, all argument is stopped and a clear statement is made to establish the fact that they rely only on conjecture, judging what they do not know.

Right judgement must be preceded by thorough knowledge, and not rely on personal preferences or unproved views. What they are judging is the revelation of the Qur'ān and the truth of its promises and warnings. They have denied all these without having any firm knowledge to justify their denial, and without waiting for its true interpretation: *"Indeed they disbelieve what they cannot grasp, particularly since its inner meaning has not become clear to them."* (Verse 39) In this they have followed in the footsteps of former communities who rejected God's revelations and associated partners with their Lord. They should consider the fate of those earlier communities in order to know what awaits them if they continue to reject the faith. *"Likewise did those who lived before them disbelieve. But see what happened in the end to those wrongdoers."* (Verse 39)

Although most of them deny something of which they do not have certain knowledge, and instead follow conjecture and caprice, there are those who do believe in the truth of this revealed book: *"Some of them do believe in it, while others do not. But your Lord is fully aware of those who spread corruption."* (Verse 40) These spreaders of corruption are the unbelievers. Corruption on earth is certainly caused and mostly spread by turning away from belief in the true Lord. Indeed all corruption starts by submission to beings other than God, including the evil that

follows such submission. This is the root cause of following one's desire in what affects oneself or others. It is this which leads to the rise of false gods which corrupt everything so that they can maintain their false lordship. They corrupt people's morals, spirits, thinking, concepts, as well as their interests and property, seeking only to preserve their own power. The history of mankind, old and new, is full of examples of such corruption spread by those who are devoid of faith.

Having explained their attitude to the Qur'ān the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, telling him not to let himself be affected by their rejection of the truth. He is to disown them and their deeds, declaring that he has nothing to do with them, and by sticking to the truth, stating it clearly and decisively: *"If they disbelieve you, then say: 'I shall bear the consequences of my deeds, and you your deeds. You are not accountable for what I do and I am not accountable for your doings.'"* (Verse 41)

This directive to the Prophet is also meant to touch their consciences. They and their actions are disowned by the Prophet. Now they can face the fate they have been told about without his support. It is yet another way of awakening their hearts, just like a child stubbornly refusing to walk with his parents being left alone to face the consequences of having lost their support in an unexpected eventuality. Such warnings are often successful.

The *sūrah* goes on to portray how they behave with the Prophet. They listen to him and look at him, but they have already sealed their hearts and minds. Hence their faculty of perception cannot make any sense of what they hear and see: *"Yet some of them [pretend to] listen to you; but can you make the deaf hear you, incapable as they are of using their reason? And some of them [pretend to] look towards you; but can you show the way to the blind, bereft of sight as they are?"* (Verses 42-43)

Those who cannot use their reason to understand what they hear or appreciate what they see are always present in large numbers everywhere. The Prophet (peace be upon him) cannot do anything for them because they refuse to learn how to discern and reason. The Prophet cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. Only God can do that. He, however, has set a law in operation and left His creatures to reap the results of their dealings according to this law. He has given them ears, eyes and minds to hear, see and reason with, so that they may follow the true guidance He has sent them. If they decide to put these faculties out of order, they will reap the consequences according to His law. Such consequences are their fair reward, for God does not treat anyone with injustice: *"Indeed, God does not do the least wrong to mankind, but it is men who wrong themselves."* (Verse 44)

These last few verses are meant to reassure the Prophet and relieve his sorrow at their stubborn rejection of the truth. God reassures him that their rejection is not the result of any lack of effort on his part, or lack of conviction on the part of his

message. It is simply that they behave as though they were deaf and blind. It is only God who gives ears and eyes their faculties. It has nothing to do with the message itself or the person who preaches it. These verses also provide a clear definition of the nature of servitude to God. The Prophet himself is a servant of God, and all his abilities remain within the limits of God's servants. The final say belongs to God alone.

When God Is the Witness

The next verses quickly touch the hearts of the unbelievers, portraying as they do a scene from the Day of Judgement. In this scene the whole of life which is so heavily present in their consciousness, and which encompasses all their concerns and preoccupations appears to be no more than a short trip which people undertake before returning to their permanent abode: "*On the Day when He will gather them together, [it will seem to them] as though they had not sojourned in this world more than an hour of a day, getting to know one another. Lost indeed will be those who [in their lifetime] disbelieved in meeting God and did not follow the right guidance.*" (Verse 45)

In this very fast round, we see those who are gathered on the Day of Judgement to be totally bewildered. It all comes to them as if by total surprise. It is as if their journey through this life has been a very short one, lasting barely an hour in which they get to know one another before it is all over. Or we may take this as an analogy showing how we spend our whole lives just meeting and getting to know one another. Although it is given by way of example, it is a completely true statement. Do people ever complete the process of getting to know one another? We come and go, and each individual or group barely gets to know the rest.

Reflect, if you will, on individuals who are in conflict with one another all the time: have they got to know one another as they should do? And then those warring nations which constantly fight over material and petty gains, hardly able to finish one quarrel before starting another. Do they get to know each other? The comparison is drawn here in order to emphasize the fact that this present life is very short.

In this way the loss of those who give this momentary trip all their attention is highlighted. They deny the fact of their forthcoming meeting with God, and instead turn away from Him. They make no preparations for their meeting with God or for their much longer stay in the life to come: "*Lost indeed will be those who [in their lifetime] disbelieved in meeting God and did not follow the right guidance.*" (Verse 45)

This is followed by an address to the Prophet concerning the warnings God gives to those who deny the truth of His revelations. It is a clear warning wrapped in a cover of mystery. They do not know whether it will come to pass within a day or so, or whether they will have to wait until the Day of Judgement. Thus it remains a

constant threat to them, so that they may take heed and mend their ways. Gradually the passage which begins with a warning moves on to conclude with a description of the situation when nothing is of any use, and no one can buy his escape from God's punishment, not even if he had the whole world to offer. On the Day when God sits in judgement, no one shall suffer any injustice. Again we find here an example of the Qur'ānic method which links this life with the life to come, in just a few touching words. But it also describes the link between the two lives as it is in reality, and as they should always be viewed from an Islamic standpoint.

> *Whether We show you some of what We have promised them or We cause you to die, it is to Us that they shall return. God is witness of all that they do. To every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement was passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged. They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?' Say: 'I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself except as God may please. For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.' Say: Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten? Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?' Then it will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste the long-lasting torment. Is this requital anything other than the just due for what you used to do?' They will ask you: 'Is all this true?' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord. It is most certainly true, and you will never be beyond God's reach.' Should every wrongdoer possess all that the earth contains, he will gladly offer it all as ransom. They will harbour feelings of remorse when they see the suffering. Judgement will be passed on them in all fairness; and they will not be wronged. (Verses 46-54)*

This passage begins with a clear statement reaffirming the fact that such people will undoubtedly return to God, whether they experience some of what the Prophet has warned them against in his life or after his death. The return in both cases is to God who is a witness of all they do at all times, during the lifetime of the Prophet or afterwards. Nothing of what they do will ever be lost. The Prophet's death will not exempt them from facing the reckoning.

"Whether We show you some of what We have promised them or We cause you to die, it is to Us that they shall return. God is witness of all that they do." (Verse 46) Everything takes place according to deliberate planning. Nothing is lost or changed on account of any emergencies or special circumstances. Every community is left to wait until its messenger comes to warn them and explain all the facts to them. Thus they are given their rights in accordance with the condition God has imposed upon Himself that He would not punish any community until He has sent them a messenger with a clear

message. When this has taken place, they will have no excuse. They will be judged fairly, on the basis of their response to the messenger: *"To every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement was passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged."* (Verse 47)

The last two verses should be taken as the basis of a proper understanding of the nature of Godhead and servitude to Him. The Qur'ān is keen to explain it at every occasion, in different ways and methods. Here the Prophet is told that what is to become of this faith and the people to whom it is addressed belongs entirely to God. The Prophet himself has no say in it. His role is that of conveying the message he has been given. Anything beyond that belongs to God alone. His lifetime may end and he may not see the end of those people who stubbornly opposed him or who tried to cause him harm. It is not imperative that God should let him see the fate of his opponents or how God will punish them. That is something determined by God alone. Every one of God's messengers should fulfil the task assigned to them of conveying God's message. When a messenger has done that, he then leaves everything to God to determine. Thus all creatures know their positions. The advocates of faith will not then be hasty trying to precipitate God's judgement, no matter how long they may take in advocating the message or how much hardship they are made to endure.

Why Precipitate God's Punishment?

"They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?'" (Verse 48) The question was asked by way of a challenge. They were actually demanding that whatever the Prophet warned them against be fulfilled, and that God's judgement be made just as it had been on earlier communities which denied God's messengers. But the answer the Prophet is instructed to give makes all issues succinctly clear: *"Say: 'I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself except as God may please. For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.'"* (Verse 49)

If God's Messenger does not have any power to bring harm or benefit to himself, he certainly cannot bring such harm or benefit to them either. It should be pointed out here that harm is mentioned before benefit because they were precipitating harm. In a different context, benefit is mentioned first because it is more fitting to the situation. This occurs in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, or *Al-A`rāf,* when he says: *"Had I possessed knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception, I would have availed myself of much that is good and no evil would have ever touched me."* (7: 188)

"Say: 'I have no power over any harm or benefit to myself except as God may please.'" (Verse 49) It is all, then, by God's will. He brings His word to pass and He puts His

warnings into effect whenever He pleases. His law will never fail, and the term He has set will fall due as He has determined: "*For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.*" (Verse 49) The term may end with physical destruction, as happened to earlier communities, or it may take a metaphorical form, which leaves a community lost, vanquished. This may last for some time and the community may then rise again, or it may be permanent and the community continues its decline. Individuals may remain but its existence as a community is over. All this takes place in accordance with God's law which never changes. There is no element of coincidence, favouritism or prejudice. Only those communities which fulfil the requirements of vigorous existence will live, and those which abandon them will decline or die. It is clearly established that the Muslim community will lead an active and solid life if it follows God's Messenger who calls on it to take what ensures its continued life. Belief in the Prophet and his message is not sufficient on its own. Action is needed as clearly defined by Islam in all fields of life. The code of living laid down by God must be followed and the values He has set must be adhered to. Otherwise, the term set will come to pass as per God's law.

The *sūrah* then adds a surprising touch. The unbelievers are led from a position where they challenge and ridicule to one where they are threatened: "*Say: 'Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten?'*" (Verse 50) God's punishment will come at a time and place unknown to human beings. It may come during the night when people are asleep, or in the day when they are awake and alert. Yet their alertness will not prevent it. So why should they wish to hasten it when it brings them no good?

While they are still in shock at the idea that their punishment may be very close, the next verse delivers an even greater shock, showing that punishment as having actually occurred when it has not. This is done to alert people's consciences and heighten their feelings to its reality. "*Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?*" (Verse 51) The image shows the punishment as having been inflicted, and they as having believed in it. It is as if they are being rebuked now for not believing when they had every reason to do so before they were punished. To complete this future scene, painted as if it is happening now, the next verse says: "*Then it will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste the long-lasting torment. Is this requital anything other than the just due for what you used to do?'*" (Verse 52) Thus the *sūrah* takes us to the moment of reckoning and punishment while a few moments and a couple of verses earlier we are still in this life, listening to God's address to His Messenger, telling him of the fate of those who persist in denying his message.

The scene concludes with the unbelievers asking the Prophet about whether the warning and punishment are really true. Deep inside, they are shaken. The answer is emphatic, asserted with an oath that it is most certain: "*They will ask you: 'Is all this true?' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord. It is most certainly true, and you will never be beyond God's reach.'*" (Verse 53) That is a remarkable reply indeed: '*Yes, by my Lord.*' I know my Lord and His power, and I do not make a false oath. I only swear to assert the truth in a most serious manner: "*It is most certainly true, and you will never be beyond God's reach.*" (Verse 53) He can always gather you and bring you to the reckoning and then administer His reward or punishment, as you deserve.

While we are still following this question and answer, the *sūrah* suddenly takes us deep into the time when people are made to account for their deeds and their fate is determined. First a supposition is made: "*Should every wrongdoer possess all that the earth contains, he will gladly offer it all as ransom.*" (Verse 54)

But such a ransom will not be accepted, even should it be offered. But before the verse is concluded, we see that what was supposed has come to pass and the whole matter is done and finished with: "*They will harbour feelings of remorse when they see the suffering.*" (Verse 54) It has all come as a great surprise which leaves them powerless. The image here is one of gloomy faces, full of sadness, their lips unable to utter a word: "*Judgement will be passed on them in all fairness; and they will not be wronged.*" (Verse 54) The whole scene which started only half a verse earlier as a supposed probability is concluded as a reality and a foregone conclusion. This is an example of how the Qur'ān paints impressive scenes that penetrate into our consciousness.

A Cure for What is in People's Hearts

To emphasize the concept of resurrection and reckoning the *sūrah* gives us yet another image of God's power as it appears in the heavens and the earth, life and death. It is a quick scene serving to reassert that what God promises will come to pass. This is followed by an appeal to all mankind to make the best use of, and receive the maximum benefit from the Qur'ān, which brings them an admonition, guidance and a cure for all that their hearts may harbour. "*Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. God's promise always comes true, but most of them do not know it. He alone gives life and causes death, and to Him you shall all return. Mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for all that may be in your hearts, and guidance and grace for all believers. Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'*" (Verses 55-58)

We have first a clear and loud proclamation: "*Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verse 55) The One to whom everything in heaven and on earth belongs is certainly able to make His promise come true. No barrier or impediment

can prevent Him from fulfilling it: *"God's promise always comes true, but most of them do not know it."* (Verse 55) In their ignorance, they doubt this or deny it altogether. Then another of His great attributes is mentioned: *"He alone gives life and causes death."* (Verse 56) The One who controls life and death is able to bring His creation back to life and hold them to account: *"To Him you shall all return."* (Verse 56) This is a passing comment added to a scene of resurrection, reckoning, reward and punishment.

Then follows a comprehensive address to all people: *"Mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for all that may be in your hearts, and guidance and grace for all believers."* (Verse 57) It is in this very book, about the origin of which you entertain doubts, that you have an admonition from your Lord. It is neither a fabricated hook nor are its contents written by a human being. This admonition is meant to revive your hearts and cure you of all superstition, doubt and worry. It is given by way of reassurance, security and peace. Whoever has faith will find in it guidance along the road that leads to success, and a mercy from all error and punishment: *"Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'"* (Verse 58)

They should rejoice at the favours and grace which God has given them in abundance. Wealth and other worldly riches deserve no rejoicing because they all come to an end. Rejoicing should be subliminal, releasing people from the lure of worldly comforts and riches. Such items are here to serve people in life, not be served, to be controlled and not in control. Islam does not despise worldly comforts, nor does it encourage people to turn away from them. It only gives them their proper position, so that people enjoy them whilst retaining their free will, setting for themselves higher goals. For such people, having faith is God's grace, and the fulfilment of what faith prescribes is their goal. Beyond this, believers feel that they own the world, while it has no control over them.

An authentic report mentions that when the tax levied on the land and farms of Iraq arrived at the outskirts of Madinah, `Umar went out to have a look at it, accompanied by a servant. `Umar started counting the camels that the tax included, but they were too numerous. `Umar repeated the words: 'Praise be to God; Thanks to God.' His servant said: 'This is indeed part of God's bounty and grace.' `Umar said: 'You are wrong. It is not to such matters that the Qur'ānic verse refers when it commands: *"Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'"* (Verse 58)

Those early Muslims had a different sense of values. They realized that the greatest aspects of God's grace were admonition and guidance. Money, wealth and even victory over their enemies were all matters that came as a result. Hence, victory was assured to them, and wealth came to them with no effort on their part. The way

the community of believers must follow is very clear. It is the one clearly marked out by the Qur'ān, and easily followed by the early Muslims who developed a thorough understanding of Islam. It is the only way to follow.

Neither wealth and property, nor material values determine people's status and position in this present life, let alone the life to come. Material provisions, facilities and values may be the cause of human misery, not only in the next world, but also in our present life. Hence, it is necessary to have different values to guide human life. These values assign to material provisions and facilities their proper position in people's lives. It is values that can make such material comforts the source of real happiness. Moreover, it is the system that regulates the life of a certain community that determines the value of material provisions in the life of that community, making them either a source of happiness or a cause of misery; a means of elevation or a cause of downfall. Hence the emphasis on the value of their faith to the believers: "*Mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for all that may be in your hearts, and guidance and grace for all believers. Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'*" (Verses 57-58)

Rejoice at God's Grace

Those who were first to receive the Qur'ān recognized this superior value. Hence `Umar denied that the camels and cattle he, as the ruler of the Muslim state, received in land tax were aspects of the bounty and grace God bestowed on them, and for which they should rejoice. `Umar had a keen insight into the Islamic faith. Hence, he realized that the most important aspects of God's grace and bounty were what God had revealed to them: an admonition from their Lord, a cure for what is in people's hearts, as well as guidance and mercy for believers. Material wealth had nothing to do with it. They appreciated the great change which Islam had brought about in their lives. They were able to remove themselves from the abyss of ignorance to something far superior.

Islam brings about people's freedom from enslavement to others, and ensures their submission to God alone. This determines that their concepts, values, morals and manners are placed on a much higher level. Their whole life is transformed from bondage to freedom. Material provisions, facilities and power all come as a result of such freedom, as happened in the history of the early Muslims. When they gained power and became the undisputed masters, they showed the rest of humanity how to believe in God, so that they too would enjoy what God bestows of His grace.

Those who lay too much emphasis on material values are the enemies of humanity. What they advocate is not promoted with good intent. Rather, what they want is to destroy the values inculcated by faith and the belief which makes people

aspire to something higher than animal needs, without overlooking their own human needs. It gives them further necessities which they seek to fulfil together with their needs for food, shelter and sex.

Much fuss is being made of material values and production, making them people's central preoccupation. Thus human beings become no more than machines, whilst spiritual and moral values are lost and trampled on. Yet this does not come about by itself; it is all according to an elaborate plan which seeks to replace old idols with new ones, and treat these as the supreme power that controls all values.

When material production is thus transformed into an idol around which people turn in reverence, all values and considerations, including morality, family, honour, freedom and security, are sacrificed for its sake. Nothing is allowed to have a negative effect on material production. If anyone disputes that this is a worshipped idol, let him tell us what a worshipped idol is like. It is not necessary that idols be made of stone or wood. An idol may take the form of a certain value, a concept or principle.

The supreme value then must continue to be assigned to God's bounty and grace, epitomized in His guidance which cures people's hearts, gives them their freedom and attaches more importance to human values. Under this supreme value, people can continue to enjoy, and benefit from, the provisions God has given them and the material comforts generated by industrialization. They will feel their burden lightened by such comforts, but they will be free of the pressures characteristic of *jāhiliyyah* societies.

Without such a supreme value, material provisions, facilities and production become a curse that brings misery and distress to all humanity. In the absence of this supreme value, these are used to enhance animal values and needs at the expense of human ones. God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*Mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for all that may be in your hearts, and guidance and grace for all believers. Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'*" (Verses 57-58)

God's Grace and People's Ingratitude

Having highlighted God's bounty and grace, represented by His revelations and the guidance and cure they provide, the *sūrah* now speaks of people's practices that are at variance with God's guidance.

These are nothing less than an assault on God's authority whereby He makes things lawful or unlawful.

> *Say: 'Do but consider all the means of sustenance that God has bestowed on you! Some of it you then made unlawful, and some lawful.' Say: 'Has God given you leave to do so, or do you fabricate lies against God?' But what will they think, those who invent lies against God, on the Day of Resurrection? God is truly bountiful to mankind, but most of them are ungrateful. (Verses 59-60)*

The Prophet is instructed to ask them about the sustenance God has given them, especially in light of the fact that everything they have has been bestowed on them by Him. All this they should use in accordance with what He has legislated. Instead, though, they use it as they desire. Furthermore, without sanction from God, they make some of it lawful and some unlawful. In effect, an enactment of legislation, which is a manifestation of sovereignty. Yet sovereignty belongs to God alone. Hence they do what God has not given them permission to do. "*Say: 'Has God given you leave to do so, or do you fabricate lies against God?'" (Verse* 59)

This issue is frequently raised in the Qur'ān, because, next to believing in God's oneness, it is the most important issue.

Indeed it is the main aspect of translating belief into reality. To acknowledge that God is the One who creates and sustains entails that He is the One to be worshipped and the One who determines all matters relating to human life. These include the means of sustenance God has provided. The unbelievers in Arabia acknowledged God as the Creator and the Provider of sustenance,-as do some who call themselves Muslims today. Like these latter-day self-styled Muslims, those unbelievers also gave themselves the authority to prohibit part of what God gave them and to make others lawful. In this way then the Qur'ān paints them as both contrary and idolaters. The same description applies to all who are guilty of such contradiction, no matter what labels they give themselves. Islam is not a title that people attach to their names; it is a belief with practical implications.

Also like today's self-styled Muslims, the pagan Arabs used to claim that they had God's sanction for their actions, or what they even described as God's law. In *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, God mentions some of their claim: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' — so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions.*" (6: 138) As is clear from this verse, they used to falsely claim that God wants this and not that, just as some Muslims today claim that what they legislate is God's own law.

God puts the whole issue clearly in front of them. He asks what they think His attitude will be like on the Day of Judgement when they make these false claims against Him: "*But what will they think, those who invent lies against God, on the Day of*

Resurrection?" (Verse 60) This verse refers to all those who are guilty of fabrication against God. What do such people think their destiny will be on the Day of Judgement? It is a question to test even the most stubborn and hardened of unbelievers.

A Cure for Hearts

"God is truly bountiful to mankind, but most of them are ungrateful." (Verse 60) God is always bountiful to mankind. He has placed on earth and in the universe the means of man's material sustenance. He has further given man the ability to know its sources as well as the natural laws that affect those sources, and to know how to enrich its variety of shapes and forms through analysis and synthesis. Indeed everything in the universe and every talent and potential people have is provided by God. Moreover, His bounty is epitomized in the code of living He has laid down, providing guidance for mankind and a cure for anything that may trouble their hearts and minds. When they implement this, they tap their highest potential and follow a way that brings about the best in the life of this world and in the life to come. They establish harmony between their human life and the life of the universe around them.

But most people do not show any gratitude for God's bounty. Instead they digress from His code, and ascribe partners to Him. This leads to their distress and misery, because they make no use of what God has revealed as a cure for what may trouble their hearts.

This is a profound truism. The Qur'ān is a cure for people's hearts in every connotation of the word 'cure'. It penetrates into people's hearts and minds just like a cure penetrates into a body weakened by illness. It makes its way through with its powerful rhythm and instructions which alert the natural human receptive mechanism, to open up and respond. It also penetrates into people's minds with its laws and regulations which guarantee the minimum conflict between groups and communities. It generates reassurance that justice will be done, that goodness will triumph and that the end will be good. Furthermore, it embraces numerous meanings and connotations that no human expression can imply. Yet they are all made clear in this remarkable verse.

Most people do not show any gratitude. They remain ungrateful although God is aware of everything, whether apparent or hidden. Nothing in the heavens or on earth escapes His knowledge. This is added here in order to awaken people's hearts and consciousness. It is followed by reassurance to the Prophet and his followers of God's care: the unbelievers who associate partners with God will not be able to cause them any harm.

Confusion Compounded

> *In whatever business you may be engaged, and whatever part you may recite of the Qur'ān, and whatever deed you [mankind] may do, We will be your witnesses from the moment you are engaged with it. Not even an atom's weight [of anything whatsoever] on earth or in heaven escapes your Lord, nor is there anything smaller or larger than that, but is recorded in a clear book. For certain, those who are close to God have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve; for they do believe and remain God-fearing. Theirs are the glad tidings in the life of this world and in the life to come: there is no changing the word of God. This is the supreme triumph. Be not grieved by what they say. All might and glory belong to God alone. He alone hears all and knows all. Indeed, to God belong all those who are in the heavens and earth. Those who invoke other beings beside God do not follow any real partners with Him. They follow mere conjecture, and they utter nothing but falsehood. It is He who has made the night for you, so that you may have rest, and the day, so that you may see. In this there are certainly signs for those who listen. (Verses 61-67)*

The first verse in this passage reminds us that God is with us in all situations. "*In whatever business you may be engaged, and whatever part you may recite of the Qur'ān, and whatever deed you [mankind] may do, We will be your witnesses from the moment you are engaged with it.*" (Verse 61) It is a feeling that brings reassurance and awe at the same time. For how is it that God is with us, witnessing whatever we do? God in His almightiness, the Creator who controls everything in the universe with total ease, is with each human being who, without God's care, is no more than a small particle floating aimlessly in the air. This is indeed awesome, yet at the same time, reassuring, inspiring us with confidence and security. We are not alone without good care and protection. God is with us at all times: "*In whatever business you may be engaged, and whatever part you may recite of the Qur'ān, and whatever deed you [mankind] may do, We will be your witnesses from the moment you are engaged with it.*" (Verse 61) It is not merely God's knowledge that is complete, but His care and watch are also total: "*Not even an atom's weight [of anything whatsoever] on earth or in heaven escapes your Lord, nor is there anything smaller or larger than that, but is recorded in a clear book.*" (Verse 61)

Let our imagination think of all the particles and atoms that are on earth or in heaven, and of what is smaller and larger, then remember that God's knowledge encompasses all. We are bound to experience awe and feel our own humility, but faith will reassure us and remind us of the peace that we should feel in God's presence. With such peace and reassurance, a proclamation is made: "*For certain, those who are close to God have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve; for they do believe and*

remain God-fearing. Theirs are the glad tidings in the life of this world and in the life to come: there is no changing the word of God. This is the supreme triumph." (Verses 62-64)

How could those who are close to God feel fear or experience grief when God is with them at every moment and in every action? These are the ones who watch God in all situations, trying always to do what pleases Him: *"They do believe and remain God-fearing."* (Verse 63) What could cause them to feel fear or grieve when they have been given glad tidings that apply to both their present life and to their future life? This is a true promise that is never changed and never fails, for there is no changing of God's word. Indeed, *"this is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 64)

Those whom the *sūrah* describes as being close to God are the true believers who are God-fearing. Faith is something that penetrates deep into the heart and to which credit is given by action, which, in turn means the implementation of God's commandments. This is how the concept of being close to God should be understood. By extension, those who command wealth and influence will achieve nothing: *"Be not grieved by what they say. All might and glory belong to God alone. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 65)

In this instance, might and glory are attributed to God alone. In a different context in the Qur'ān, they are also said to belong to the Prophet and the believers. Here the *sūrah* is speaking of God's protection of the believers, which makes it more fitting that might and glory should be shown as belonging to God alone, as indeed they are. The Prophet and the believers derive their power and glory from Him, while other people receive nothing of them at all. The mighty Quraysh were only a group of such other people. The Prophet (peace be upon him) enjoys God's protection, so he should not be saddened by what they say. God, who hears their plotting and knows their scheming, is with him, giving him and his followers all the protection they need.

Everyone in the heavens and the earth, whether human, *jinn* or angels, obedient or disobedient, are subject to His power: *"Indeed, to God belong all those who are in the heavens and earth."* (Verse 66) The reference here is to animate creatures in order to emphasize that all of them, weak or strong, are under God's control. *"Those who invoke other beings beside God do not follow any real partners with Him."* (Verse 66) Those presumed partners have no real partnership of any kind with God. Indeed those who claim them to be God's partners are uncertain of their claims: *"They follow mere conjecture, and they utter nothing but falsehood."* (Verse 66)

This is followed by a statement portraying some aspects of God's power as reflected in the universe. These aspects are often overlooked because of familiarity: *"It is He who has made the night for you, so that you may have rest, and the day, so that you may see. In this there are certainly signs for those who listen."* (Verse 67) The One who controls all stillness and movement, who makes the night a time for rest, and gives

the day its light, enabling people to act and see, has absolute control over all people. Hence, He is able to protect those who are close to Him: *"In this there are certainly signs for those who listen."* (Verse 67) They do not stop at the mere listening, but they also reflect and contemplate.

The Qur'ān often employs scenes from the universe when it discusses the subject of Godhead and servitude, because the universe, its existence and details, is a powerful witness which imposes its argument on human nature. The Qur'ān also addresses people drawing their attention to the harmony in their relationship with the universe. They actually feel this in their lives. The night in which they rest, and the day during which they are able to see, are two phenomena closely linked to their lives. The harmony between these phenomena and their lives is felt by all human beings, even those who are not conversant with scientific matters. Their innate nature understands the silent language of the universe.

Human beings were not deaf to the language of the universe until modern science revealed its secrets! Rather, people understand this language by their natural ability. Hence it is not surprising that God referred to this language so many centuries ago. Yet this language is self-renewing, taking into account every increase and progress in human knowledge. Indeed the richer people's knowledge, the greater their understanding of the language of the universe, provided that their hearts are enlightened with faith, and their minds alert to its address.

Fabricated Claims of Divinity

Among those who associate partners with God are those who allege that He has a son. Far be it from Him to need a son. The pagan Arabs in similar vein used to claim that the angels were God's daughters. The verses we are now looking at tackle this type of fabrication. They begin with providing irrefutable arguments that are relevant to this world and warn against punishment in the hereafter.

> *They say: 'God has taken unto Himself son.' Limitless is He in His glory. Self-sufficient is He. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. No evidence whatever have you for this. Would you say about God something which you do not know? Say: 'Those who invent falsehood about God shall not be successful. They may have a brief enjoyment in this world, but then to Us they must return, and We will then make them suffer severe torment for their unbelief' (Verses 68-70)*

The belief alleging that God has a son is naïve, based on a faulty concept of Godhead. One that does not appreciate the huge gulf between the nature of the eternal God, and the nature of mortal humans. Nor does it appreciate the great

wisdom that allows mortals to procreate, so that they compensate for the short duration of their lives. This shortcoming does not apply to God.

Human beings die, and human life extends to an appointed time. It is God's wisdom that has allowed human life to continue until it reaches its ultimate point. Such continuity is made possible through procreation. Human beings get older and weaker. When they have children, their offspring compensate for their creeping weakness with the vitality of their youth, helping to continue the process of building human life on earth. Moreover, the young provide the necessary help to the elderly through their years of weakness. People also have to struggle within their environment, and against their enemies, whether human or animal. Hence they need support which is more likely to come from offspring. People also seek to have abundance of what they earn, and their children help them with their efforts which increase their earnings.

The same applies to all aspects that God has made necessary for the building of human life on earth, until the time appointed when God's will concerning its future is to be accomplished. None of this applies to God who does not need to have any continuity through offspring, or help in old age, or support in any endeavour. He has no need of anything. Hence there is no need for Him to have a son because His nature is such that He needs nothing to be accomplished by outside help. God has made human beings reproductive because, by nature, they have a definite need for such continuity.

Hence, the false claim that, *'God has taken unto Himself a son,'* is rebuffed by the assertion: *"Limitless is He in His glory. Self-sufficient is He. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and earth."* (Verse 68)

"Limitless is He in His glory." This is said by way of emphasizing that His sublime nature is far above this level of thinking. *"Self-sufficient is He."* This is to stress that He is in no need of anything whatsoever, whether real or imaginary, which requires the presence of a son. It is well known that needs are the causes of what satisfies them. Nothing is given existence without a need or a purpose. *"To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and earth."* (Verse 68) Everything belongs to Him. He does not need a son in order to gain anything whatsoever. Hence, attributing a son to Him is idle play, and far be it from Him to admit idle play.

The Qur'ān does not enter into any theoretical debate about the nature of God or man of the type that prevails in many philosophies. Instead, it deals with the subject itself. Here it only briefly mentions man's need of offspring. This does not, however, apply to God who owns all that is in heavens and earth. This should be sufficient either to convince or silence them, without any need for theoretical argument.

They are then brought face to face with the reality which shows that they have no proof to support their claims. The Qur'ānic verse uses the term *'sultan'* which means authority, in place of 'evidence' because authority provides strength, and the one who has a proof to support his claim is in a position of strength: "*No evidence whatever have you for this.*" (Verse 68) Indeed you have no argument, let alone solid proof: *"Would you say about God something which you do not know?"* (Verse 68)

To say something concerning a subject about which one knows nothing is unbecoming of intelligent human beings. When what is said is fabricated against God Himself, it becomes a terrible offence. For one thing, it contradicts all that is due to God of worship, respect and glorification, because it attributes to Him all that is associated with an event of imperfection and inability. Moreover, it is based on a faulty concept of the relationship between the Creator and His creation, leading to further errors in all relations between people, since the latter are essentially based on the former. All the authority claimed by the priests of pagan religions or by the Christian churches is based on the misconception of the relationship between God and His 'angel daughters' or between Him and Jesus Christ who is alleged to be His son. Moreover the concept of original sin, which has led to the practice of confession, and giving Christ's church an intermediary role between human beings and the One whom they describe as Christ's father, stems from a basic error in understanding the relationship between the Creator and His creation.

Hence the matter is not merely an erroneous belief, but rather, it is man's whole life that is affected. All the hostility that took place between the Church and scientists, and even between it and human intellect, is based on this fundamental error. This hostility was only brought to rest when society got shot of the Church's authority, and even of religion itself. Once the relationship between God and His creation is ill-conceived, much evil is bound to happen. Humanity has suffered this evil whenever materialistic doctrines have corrupted human life.

Hence the Islamic faith has taken extra care to make this relationship perfectly clear. God is the Creator, the Eternal, the Sustainer. The relationship between Him and all people, without exception, is that which exists between the Creator and His creation. The universe, life and the living exist according to certain laws that God has put into operation. These never fail and they apply to all people in equal measure, without favouritism or prejudice. Whoever observes these rules will be successful, and whoever puts them aside will end up the loser. All people will return to God, and He accepts no intercession. Everyone comes to Him on his or her own. They will have their individual reward for what they have done in this life. God will not treat anyone with injustice.

It is a simple faith that admits no erroneous interpretation. It does not take the human mind along any mysterious or confused way. Everyone stands in front of

God in the same position. Everyone is addressed by God's message and is required to implement it. This ensures that relations between people are set on the right footing, as a result of forging the right and solid relationship between them and God.

"*Say: 'Those who invent falsehood about God shall not be successful.'*" (Verse 69) They will have no prosperity whatsoever, whether in this life or in the life to come. True success is that which results from leading a life that is consistent with the laws God has set in operation. These lead to all goodness, elevating human beings to a higher level of humanity and setting their social structure on the right basis. Prosperity is not limited to material progress. Such progress is only superficial and temporary if it is combined with the destruction of human values, replacing them with animal values.

"*They may have a brief enjoyment in this world, but then to Us they must return, and We will then make them suffer severe torment for their unbelief*" (Verse 70) Their enjoyment is brief and temporary. It has no permanent link with the enjoyment reserved for the hereafter. Indeed, it is followed by 'severe torment' for turning away from the laws of nature which God has devised.

3
Unheeded Warnings

۞ وَٱتۡلُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ نَبَأَ نُوحٍ إِذۡ قَالَ لِقَوۡمِهِۦ يَٰقَوۡمِ إِن كَانَ كَبُرَ عَلَيۡكُم مَّقَامِي وَتَذۡكِيرِي بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوَكَّلۡتُ فَأَجۡمِعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَكُمۡ وَشُرَكَآءَكُمۡ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُنۡ أَمۡرُكُمۡ عَلَيۡكُمۡ غُمَّةٗ ثُمَّ ٱقۡضُوٓاْ إِلَيَّ وَلَا تُنظِرُونِ ٧١

Relate to them the story of Noah. He said to his people: 'My people! If my presence among you and my reminders to you of God's revelations are repugnant to you — well, in God have I placed my trust. Decide, then, what you are going to do, and [seek the help of] those whom you associate as partners with God. Be clear about your course of action, leaving no room for uncertainty, then carry out against me whatever you may have decided and give me no respite. (71)

فَإِن تَوَلَّيۡتُمۡ فَمَا سَأَلۡتُكُم مِّنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱللَّهِۖ وَأُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ ٧٢

But if you turn away, [remember that] I have asked of you no reward whatsoever. My reward rests with none but God. I have been commanded to be one of those who surrender themselves to Him.' (72)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَنَجَّيۡنَٰهُ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡفُلۡكِ وَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ خَلَٰٓئِفَ وَأَغۡرَقۡنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَاۖ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُنذَرِينَ ٧٣

But they disbelieved him. So We saved him and all those who joined him in the ark, and made them inherit the earth. And We drowned the others who denied Our revelations. Reflect on the fate of those who were forewarned. (73)

ثُمَّ بَعَثۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ رُسُلًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِمۡ فَجَآءُوهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا كَانُواْ لِيُؤۡمِنُواْ بِمَا كَذَّبُواْ بِهِۦ مِن قَبۡلُۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَطۡبَعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ ٱلۡمُعۡتَدِينَ ٧٤

Then after him We sent forth other messengers to their respective peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth, but they would not believe in what they had once denied. Thus it is that We seal the hearts of those who transgress. (74)

ثُمَّ بَعَثۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِم مُّوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ وَكَانُواْ قَوۡمٗا مُّجۡرِمِينَ ٧٥

Then after those [prophets] We sent Moses and Aaron with Our signs to Pharaoh and his nobles, but they persisted in their arrogance, for they were hardened offenders. (75)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِنۡ عِندِنَا قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ٧٦ قَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ أَتَقُولُونَ لِلۡحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَكُمۡۖ أَسِحۡرٌ هَٰذَا وَلَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلسَّٰحِرُونَ ٧٧

When the truth came to them from Us, they said: 'This is clearly nothing but sorcery.' (76)

Moses replied: 'Do you say this to the truth when it has come to you? Can this be sorcery? But sorcerers will never be successful.' (77)

قَالُوٓاْ أَجِئۡتَنَا لِتَلۡفِتَنَا عَمَّا وَجَدۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ءَابَآءَنَا وَتَكُونَ لَكُمَا ٱلۡكِبۡرِيَآءُ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا نَحۡنُ لَكُمَا بِمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٧٨

They said: 'Have you come to turn us away from what we found our forefathers believing in, so that the two of you might become supreme in the land? We will never believe in you.' (78)

وَقَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ ٱئۡتُونِي بِكُلِّ سَٰحِرٍ عَلِيمٖ ٧٩

Then Pharaoh commanded: 'Bring before me every learned sorcerer.' (79)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ قَالَ لَهُم مُّوسَىٰٓ أَلْقُواْ مَآ أَنتُم مُّلْقُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And when the sorcerers came, Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you may wish to throw.' (80)

فَلَمَّآ أَلْقَوْاْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ مَا جِئْتُم بِهِ ٱلسِّحْرُ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَيُبْطِلُهُۥٓ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُصْلِحُ عَمَلَ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

And when they had thrown, Moses said to them: 'What you have contrived is mere sorcery which God will certainly bring to nothing. God does not further the work of those who spread corruption. (81)

وَيُحِقُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

By His words, God proves the truth to be true, much as the guilty may dislike it.' (82)

فَمَآ ءَامَنَ لِمُوسَىٰٓ إِلَّا ذُرِّيَّةٌ مِّن قَوْمِهِۦ عَلَىٰ خَوْفٍ مِّن فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِمْ أَن يَفْتِنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ لَعَالٍ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَمِنَ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

None except a few of his people believed in Moses, for they feared Pharaoh and their nobles, lest they persecute them. Surely Pharaoh was mighty on earth and was indeed given to excesses. (83)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ يَٰقَوْمِ إِن كُنتُمْ ءَامَنتُم بِٱللَّهِ فَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلُوٓاْ إِن كُنتُم مُّسْلِمِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

Moses said: 'My people, if you believe in God, then place your trust in Him — if you have truly surrendered yourselves to Him.' (84)

فَقَالُواْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

They replied: 'In God have we placed our trust. Our Lord, do not let us suffer at the hands of evil-doing people. (85)

وَنَجِّنَا بِرَحْمَتِكَ مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Save us, by Your grace, from the people who disbelieve.' (86)

وَأَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ وَأَخِيهِ أَن تَبَوَّءَا لِقَوْمِكُمَا بِمِصْرَ بُيُوتًا وَٱجْعَلُوا۟ بُيُوتَكُمْ قِبْلَةً وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

And thus did We inspire Moses and his brother: 'Take for your people some houses in Egypt, and make your houses places of worship, and be constant in prayer.' And give glad tidings to all believers. (87)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ رَبَّنَآ إِنَّكَ ءَاتَيْتَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَأَهُۥ زِينَةً وَأَمْوَٰلًا فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا رَبَّنَا لِيُضِلُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِكَ ۖ رَبَّنَا ٱطْمِسْ عَلَىٰٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَٱشْدُدْ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَلَا يُؤْمِنُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يَرَوُا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Moses said, 'Our Lord! You have bestowed on Pharaoh and his nobles splendour and riches in this life, with the result that they have been leading people astray from Your path. Our Lord! Wipe out their riches and harden their hearts, so that they do not believe until they face the grievous suffering.' (88)

قَالَ قَدْ أُجِيبَت دَّعْوَتُكُمَا فَٱسْتَقِيمَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعَآنِّ سَبِيلَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

He replied: 'Your prayer is accepted. Continue, both of you, steadfastly on the right path, and do not follow the path of those who are devoid of knowledge.'(89)

۞ وَجَٰوَزْنَا بِبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْبَحْرَ فَأَتْبَعَهُمْ فِرْعَوْنُ وَجُنُودُهُۥ بَغْيًا وَعَدْوًا ۖ

And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression.

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَدۡرَكَهُ ٱلۡغَرَقُ قَالَ ءَامَنتُ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِيٓ ءَامَنَتۡ بِهِۦ بَنُوٓاْ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ وَأَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said: 'I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself.' (90)

ءَآلۡـَٰٔنَ وَقَدۡ عَصَيۡتَ قَبۡلُ وَكُنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

[But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. (91)

فَٱلۡيَوۡمَ نُنَجِّيكَ بِبَدَنِكَ لِتَكُونَ لِمَنۡ خَلۡفَكَ ءَايَةٗۚ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرٗا مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَنۡ ءَايَٰتِنَا لَغَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs.' (92)

وَلَقَدۡ بَوَّأۡنَا بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ مُبَوَّأَ صِدۡقٖ وَرَزَقۡنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ فَمَا ٱخۡتَلَفُواْ حَتَّىٰ جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡعِلۡمُۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقۡضِي بَيۡنَهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُواْ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

We settled the Children of Israel in a most goodly abode and We provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life. It was not until knowledge was given. them that they began to disagree among themselves. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection regarding that on which they differed. (93)

فَإِن كُنتَ فِي شَكّٖ مِّمَّآ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ فَسۡـَٔلِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَقۡرَءُونَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبۡلِكَۚ لَقَدۡ جَآءَكَ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ فَلَا

If you are in doubt concerning what We have bestowed on you from on high, ask those who read the Scriptures [revealed] before you. It is surely the truth that has come to you from your Lord. Do not, then, be among the doubters. (94)

تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمُمۡتَرِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾

And do not be among those who deny God's revelations, for then you shall be among those who are lost. (95)

وَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾

Surely, those against whom your Lord's word [of judgement] has come true will not believe, (96)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّتۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

even though every sign should come to their knowledge, until they are faced with the grievous suffering. (97)

وَلَوۡ جَآءَتۡهُمۡ كُلُّ ءَايَةٍ حَتَّىٰ يَرَوُاْ ٱلۡعَذَابَ ٱلۡأَلِيمَ ﴿٩٧﴾

Had it believed, every community would have profited by its faith. It was so only with Jonah's people. When they believed, We lifted from them the suffering of disgrace in this life, and allowed them to enjoy things for a while. (98)

فَلَوۡلَا كَانَتۡ قَرۡيَةٌ ءَامَنَتۡ فَنَفَعَهَآ إِيمَٰنُهَآ إِلَّا قَوۡمَ يُونُسَ لَمَّآ ءَامَنُواْ كَشَفۡنَا عَنۡهُمۡ عَذَابَ ٱلۡخِزۡيِ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَمَتَّعۡنَٰهُمۡ إِلَىٰ حِينٖ ﴿٩٨﴾

Had your Lord so willed, all people on earth, in their entirety, would have believed. Do you, then, try to compel people to believe? (99)

وَلَوۡ شَآءَ رَبُّكَ لَأٓمَنَ مَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ كُلُّهُمۡ جَمِيعًاۚ أَفَأَنتَ تُكۡرِهُ ٱلنَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُواْ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٩٩﴾

No human being can believe, except by God's leave. It is He who lays abomination on those who will not use their reason. (100)

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفۡسٍ أَن تُؤۡمِنَ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۚ وَيَجۡعَلُ ٱلرِّجۡسَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ لَا

يَعۡقِلُونَ ١٠١

قُلِ ٱنظُرُواْ مَاذَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَمَا تُغۡنِي ٱلۡأٓيَٰتُ وَٱلنُّذُرُ عَن قَوۡمٖ لَّا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٠١

فَهَلۡ يَنتَظِرُونَ إِلَّا مِثۡلَ أَيَّامِ ٱلَّذِينَ خَلَوۡاْ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۚ قُلۡ فَٱنتَظِرُوٓاْ إِنِّي مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡمُنتَظِرِينَ ١٠٢

ثُمَّ نُنَجِّي رُسُلَنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كَذَٰلِكَ حَقًّا عَلَيۡنَا نُنجِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١٠٣

Say: 'Consider all that there is in the heavens and the earth.' But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe? (101)

What are they waiting for except a repetition of the days [of calamity] experienced by those who have gone before them? Say: 'Wait, then, if you will. I am also waiting.' (102)

Thereupon, We save Our messengers and those who believe. Thus have We willed it upon Ourselves: We save those who believe. (103)

Preview

Reference was made earlier in the *sūrah* to ancient communities and what happened to them when they denied the messages of their prophets. Another generation was made to succeed them: *"Indeed, We destroyed generations before your time when they persisted in their wrongdoing. The messengers sent to them brought them veritable evidence of the truth, but they would not believe. Thus do We reward the guilty. Then We made you their successors on earth, so that We might see how you behave."* (Verses 13-14)

Another reference was made to the fact that every community had a messenger sent to them to deliver God's message. "To *every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement was passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged."* (Verse 47)

Now the *sūrah* speaks in more detail about such earlier messages, highlighting certain aspects of the stories of Noah and Moses. The consequences of denying God's

messages are emphasized in both accounts. A brief reference is also made to Jonah, whose community accepted the faith when they were about to be overtaken by God's punishment, and they were thus saved. This serves to encourage those who deny God to stop so that they spare themselves an end similar to that experienced by Noah's people and Pharaoh and his host.

The previous passage concluded with an order to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) to declare that those who fabricate lies against God and associate partners with Him will come to an awful end: *"Say: "Those who invent falsehood about God shall not be successful. They may have a brief enjoyment in this world, but then to Us they must return, and We will then make them suffer severe torment for their unbelief"* (Verses 69-70) This declaration follows a reassurance given to the Prophet that the believers *"who are close to God have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 62) The Prophet is also encouraged not to pay much attention to what the unbelievers say: *"Be not grieved by what they say. All might and glory belong to God alone. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 65)

Now the Prophet is instructed to relate to them Noah's story and how he challenged his people. He was then saved with those believers who followed him, while the unbelievers who were much stronger and larger in number were destroyed.

These stories serve to emphasize the meaning of the preceding passages. In fact, all stories mentioned in the Qur'ān serve a definite purpose. They are related in different styles, highlighting different episodes as may befit the context in which they occur. Here the stories of earlier prophets highlight the absurdity of the Makkans towards the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and his small group of believers. They also stress the fact that those believers were firm in their faith despite facing an enemy mustering far superior forces.

Noah's Challenge

> *Relate to them the story of Noah. He said to his people: My people! If my presence among you and my reminders to you of God's revelations are repugnant to you – well, in God have I placed my trust. Decide, then, what you are going to do, and [seek the help of] those whom you associate as partners with God. Be clear about your course of action, leaving no room for uncertainty, then carry out against me whatever you may have decided and give me no respite. But if you turn away, [remember that] I have asked of you no reward whatsoever. My reward rests with none but God. I have been commanded to be one of those who surrender themselves to Him.' But they disbelieved him. So we saved him and all those who joined him in the ark, and made them inherit the earth. And we drowned the others who denied Our revelations.*

Reflect on the fate of those who were forewarned. (Verses 71-73)

Only the end part of Noah's story is mentioned here where we see him offering his people a final challenge. He had spent a very long time preaching and warning his people, but to no avail. There is no mention of the ark here, or of those who were taken on board and so saved from the great floods. The aim here is to highlight the challenge and the believers' reliance on God, as well as the saving of a small, powerless group of believers and the destruction of the great hordes of unbelievers. The *sūrah* reduces the whole story to a single episode so as to emphasize its final end. This is what is most fitting in the present context.

"Relate to them the story of Noah. He said to his people: My people! If my presence among you and my reminders to you of God's revelations are repugnant to you – well, in God have I placed my trust. Decide, then, what you are going to do, and [seek the help of] those whom you associate as partners with God. Be clear about your course of action, leaving no room for uncertainty, then carry out against me whatever you may have decided and give me no respite." (Verse 71) Noah tells his people that if they are completely fed up with him, unable to tolerate his presence among them and his reminders of their duty to believe in God, then let that be as it may. He will continue along his way, unperturbed by their opposition, for *"in God have I placed my trust."* He seeks no help from anyone else. *"Decide, then, what you are going to do, and [seek the help of] those whom you associate as partners with God."* (Verse 71)

They may, for all he cares, mobilize all their forces and resources. *"Be clear about your course of action, leaving no room for uncertainty."* (Verse 71) They are further told to make their position very clear, allowing no ambiguity or hesitation, and leaving no room for return. Then when they have done that, they are told: *"carry out against me [i.e. Noah] whatever you may have decided and give me no respite."* (Verse 71)

It is a clear challenge thrown out by one who is absolutely certain of his ground and power. In fact he is inviting his opponents to attack him. What were the forces at his command facilitating such a challenge? He simply had faith, which gave him a power that is superior to everything else. Numbers, careful planning and firepower are of little use when compared to faith. He had God's support, and God does not abandon those who believe in Him. It is the challenge of one who relies on the source of real power, for faith establishes a bond between the believer and the One who has power over everything in the universe. It is neither an arrogant nor a foolhardy challenge. Rather, it is the challenge of true power.

Advocates of the divine faith have in God's messengers a fine example to follow. They should have unwavering confidence as they place their trust in God and face tyranny, whatever its source may be. Tyranny will not cause them any real or lasting damage, apart from perhaps some physical pain which God allows as a test of the

believers. God does not abandon the believers to His and their enemies, but He lets them undergo this test so that true believers come through it unharmed. The end favours the believers when God's promise is fulfilled and they are victorious.

Having made his challenge clear, Noah says to his people: *"But if you turn away, [remember that] I have asked of you no reward whatsoever. My reward rests with none but God. I have been commanded to be one of those who surrender themselves to Him."* (Verse 72). If you turn a deaf ear to what I call on you to accept, then that is your choice. I have not asked for a reward for guiding you to the right path, so I do not fear that my compensation will be reduced as a result of your turning away. *"My reward rests with none but God."* (Verse 72) Your attitude will not tempt me to change my way in the least, for my orders are such that I must surrender myself completely to God: *"I have been commanded to be one of those who surrender themselves to Him."* (Verse 72)

What happened, then? *"They disbelieved him. So We saved him and all those who joined him in the ark, and made them inherit the earth. And We drowned the others who denied Our revelations. Reflect on the fate of those who were forewarned."* (Verse 73) All that happened is given in a very brief account: his rescue with the believers who followed him; their establishment as successors to the land and subsequent power; and the drowning of the multitude of unbelievers. *"Reflect on the fate of those who were forewarned."* (Verse 73) It is indeed something to be reflected upon by all people at all times, so that they may heed the lesson and follow in the footsteps of the believers who were saved.

The outcome was not merely the destruction of the unbelievers. Instead this was preceded by the saving of the believers from all danger, and their establishment in the land to rebuild human life on a sound basis.

Such is the law God has established and such is His promise to the believers. If they feel at any time that the road seems endless, they must realize that it is the only way, and that the outcome will certainly be in their favour. They must not precipitate the fulfilment of God's promise. God does not deceive believers, nor does He abandon them to their enemies. He only teaches and equips them with what is of help to them along their way.

Different Communities, Same Response

The *sūrah* then refers very briefly to a number of messengers who followed Noah, bringing clear evidence of the truth to their respective communities, and how the unbelievers received them: *"Then after him We sent forth other messengers to their respective peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth, but they would not believe in what they had once denied. Thus it is that We seal the hearts of those who transgress."* (Verse 74)

These messengers were given clear proof confirming the truth they preached. They presented these proofs to their peoples, but the *sūrah* says that those peoples were not to believe in what they had earlier denied. This statement may be taken to mean that they continued to deny God's message in the same way as they denied it prior to having such clear evidence. In other words, they stubbornly held to their attitude. It may also mean that the unbelievers who deny God's messages are classified in one group despite the passage of time, because they share the same nature. This means that present-day unbelievers would not believe in what their ancestors denied, or what they themselves denied through their ancestors. All carry the same attitude to faith and the revelations confirming it. They seal their hearts and minds against it. In this they transgress and exceed all limits, because they refuse to use their God-given ability to understand. *"Thus it is that We seal the hearts of those who transgress."* (Verse 74)

This follows the divine rule that when a person turns a deaf ear and seals his mind to divine guidance, his heart and mind become totally unreceptive. It is not God who seals their hearts and minds to prevent them from accepting the faith, but the general rule applies to them as it applies in all situations.

Truth or Sorcery

Moses' story is given in rather more detail than Noah's. It starts at the point when Moses faces the rejection of his message coupled with a challenge, and concludes with the drowning of Pharaoh and his soldiers. The account includes situations which carry strong similarity with the attitude of the pagan Arabs in Makkah to the Prophet's message, as well as the attitude of his few followers.

The part of the story related here highlights five points before making a comment elucidating the purpose of relating it in this way. The five points are given in quick succession as follows: *"Then after those [prophets] We sent Moses and Aaron with Our signs to Pharaoh and his nobles, but they persisted in their arrogance, for they were hardened offenders. When the truth came to them from Us, they said: 'This is clearly nothing but sorcery.' Moses replied: Do you say this to the truth when it has come to you? Can this be sorcery? But sorcerers will never be successful.' They said: 'Have you come to turn us away from what we found our forefathers believing in, so that the two of you might become supreme in the land? We will never believe in you.'"* (Verses 7 5-78)

The signs which Moses brought to Pharaoh and his nobles are the nine mentioned in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. They are not mentioned here in detail because the context does not require such detail. What is important in the present context is the attitude of Pharaoh and his group when they received these signs: "They *persisted in their arrogance, for they were hardened offenders."* (Verse 75)

"When the truth came to them from Us..." (Verse 76) The source of these signs is emphasized here, *'from Us',* to show clearly their terrible offence when they describe as *'clear sorcery'* the truth sent to them by God.

It is with limitless arrogance that they thus describe the truth without any evidence to support their claim. The statement sounds as if it is a standard one reiterated by all those who deny God's messages. As reported at the beginning of the *sūrah,* the pagan Arabs in Makkah said the same thing, despite the wide difference in time and place between the two communities and the great difference between the signs delivered by Moses and the Qur'ān.

"Moses replied: Do you say this to the truth when it has come to you? Can this be sorcery? But sorcerers will never be successful." (Verse 77) A part of Moses' first objection is deleted because it is indicated by his second one. It is as if he said to them: "Do you say to the truth when it has come to you that it is sorcery? Can this be sorcery?" The first question expresses horror that the truth is described as sorcery, and the second wonders that anyone should actually say it is so. Sorcery does not aim to provide guidance to people, and it does not include a faith or a clear idea about Godhead and His relationship with His servants. It cannot outline a code of living. Indeed sorcery cannot be confused with God's message. No sorcerer ever intended to work for such objectives or move in such a direction. Sorcerers' work is all false, playing tricks on people's imagination. Hence they cannot be successful.

At this point, the nobles supporting Pharaoh reveal their true motives for rejecting the truth: *"They said: 'Have you come to turn us away from what we found our forefathers believing in, so that the two of you might become supreme in the land? We will never believe in you."* (Verse 78) They feared that the new call would destroy their inherited beliefs which formed the foundation of their political and economic systems. They feared that they would lose their power which was conferred on them by the superstitious beliefs they promoted.

This is indeed the old and new reason which motivates tyrants to oppose every call to believe in God and follow His message. Hence, they fabricate all sorts of excuses, make false accusations against the advocates of the true faith, and brutally suppress them. It is their desire to remain 'supreme in the land' that forms their strongest motive. Their supremacy is based on false beliefs which the tyrants are keen to preserve in people's minds, despite their fallacy and what they may involve of superstition or deception. They know that when people's minds are open to receive the true faith, and their hearts are illumined with the new light, then that represents a danger to their long established values and positions. Indeed it shakes their very foundation and authority as perceived by the masses.

The divine faith preached by all prophets aims to establish the truth that God is the only deity and the Lord of the universe. All false deities that usurp God's authority and claim Lordship must be removed.

Tyranny never allows the truth to be presented to the masses, because it represents a general declaration liberating mankind from servitude to any authority other than God's. Tyranny realizes that its very existence is threatened by this declaration. Hence, it suppresses it with all the power at its disposal.

This is the true reason for the suppression of the Islamic call throughout history. The intelligent people of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the Prophet's message and its sublime aspects. They could not have been unaware of the falsehood of their idolatrous beliefs. But they feared for their power and position. They realized that they could only maintain these through their false beliefs, just like the nobles in Pharaoh's court. Hence they all said: *"We will never believe in you."* (Verse 78)

Fear Barring Belief

Apparently accusing Moses of sorcery sounded good to Pharaoh and his nobles. They most probably felt they could make their accusation stick in people's minds. Hence, they wanted to challenge Moses, for the signs he exhibited seemed to them to be similar to the sorcery they knew and practiced. They hoped that the challenge would show Moses to be no more than a highly skilled sorcerer. This would remove all danger to their hereditary authority, or to their monopoly of power, which was their main objective. These were, in all likelihood, the true reasons for holding this sorcery to be fair.

> *Then Pharaoh commanded: 'Bring before me every learned sorcerer.' And when the sorcerers came, Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you may wish to throw.' And when they had thrown, Moses said to them: 'What you have contrived is mere sorcery which God will certainly bring to nothing. God does not further the work of those who spread corruption. By His words, God proves the truth to be true, much as the guilty may dislike it. (Verses 79-82)*

We note here how the build-up to the challenge is given very briefly, because it is the outcome that is most relevant. When Moses said: *'What you have contrived is mere sorcery,'* he was actually replying to the accusation levelled at him. There is no real substance to sorcery. It is all tricks and deception that dazzles and bewitches people. It has no higher call, and is far from constructive. It builds nothing within the community. What Moses brought was indeed a revealed book bestowed on him from

on high. His statement that *God will certainly bring* [sorcery] *to nothing,'* demonstrates his great trust in his Lord, who will never allow sorcery, which is wicked, to score any real success: *'God does not further the work of those who spread corruption.'* These were the ones who used their sorcery to lead people astray from the right path and prevent them from following divine guidance.

'By His words, God proves the truth to be true.' (Verse 82) The phrase, *'His words',* refers here either to His expression of His will to create or do something, as when He says to something 'Be' and it comes into being as a result, or to His revelations. *'Much as the guilty may dislike it.'* (Verse 82) Their dislike does not disrupt or impede the realization of God's will. This is indeed what actually took place: sorcery was shown to come to nothing, and the truth was triumphant. However, the triumph of the truth is not mentioned at this time because the purpose intended here is served in a different way.

Here the curtains are drawn, and when they are lifted again we see Moses with those who accepted his message and believed with him. They are a small group of people. This is one of the lessons to be drawn here: *"None except a few of his people believed in Moses, for they feared Pharaoh and their nobles, lest they persecute them. Surely Pharaoh was mighty on earth and was indeed given to excesses. Moses said: My people, if you believe in God, then place your trust in Him – if you have truly surrendered yourselves to Him. ' They replied: 'In God have we placed our trust. Our Lord, do not let us suffer at the hands of evil-doing people. Save us, by Your grace, from the people who disbelieve.' And thus did We inspire Moses and his brother: 'Take for your people some houses in Egypt, and make your houses places of worship, and be constant in prayer' And give glad tidings to all believers."* (Verses 83-87)

The Arabic text uses the term *dhurriyyah* when it refers to those who believed with Moses. This term connotes a small number among the younger generation. What we understand here is that, among the Israelites, those who declared their belief and joined Moses were young people, not the bulk of the Children of Israel. There were fears that these young people might be put under severe pressure to revert back to their old ways. They might fear the persecution of Pharaoh and his authority, or the pressure that might be brought to bear on them by the leaders of their own community who have their own interests with those in authority. Pressure was also expected to be brought on them by the weaklings within their community, because these normally side with everyone who has any authority. This applies particularly to the Israelites. Needless to say, Pharaoh enjoyed great authority, and he was a tyrant who indulged in all sorts of excess. He did not hesitate to take any brutal action when he felt the need for it.

In such a situation the only course is to rely on faith in order to dispel worries and reassure people, helping them to stick to the truth they have recognized: *"Moses said:*

'My people, if you believe in God, then place your trust in Him – if you have truly surrendered yourselves to Him.'" (Verse 84) Placing one's trust in God is evidence of firm belief. Furthermore, it is the element of strength which is added to what the weaker and smaller group may have to enable it to win its confrontation with mighty tyranny. Moses mentions both faith and self-surrender, making the reliance on God and placing one's trust in Him the natural outcome of both. Those believers made the right response to their prophet's call: *"They replied: 'In God have we placed our trust.'"* (Verse 85)

They then addressed a fitting supplication to God: *"Our Lord, do not let us suffer at the hands of evil-doing people."* (Verse 85) This means that they prayed to God not to give the tyrants physical power over them, so that those tyrants and their followers do not feel that their faith is superior since they are able to win their confrontation against the believers. Such a temporary victory may take place in any situation where God wants to let people be tempted by it, so that they go deeper into error. Hence the believers pray to God not to let the tyrants have power over them even if the purpose was to lead the tyrants further astray.

The next verse adds a prayer which is even clearer with regard to the desired outcome: *"Save us, by Your grace, from the people who disbelieve."* (Verse 86) These prayers do not conflict with placing their trust in God and seeking His support. Indeed they make such reliance on Him clearer. A believer does not wish for hardship and does not aspire to be the victim of tyranny, but when he is tested by what tyrants do to him, he remains steadfast.

No Hope of a Positive Response

Thus, the two lines were drawn and the two communities were clearly identified. Some people responded positively to Moses. God then advised him and his brother, the Prophet Aaron, to choose special houses for the Children of Israel, so that they would be ready to leave Egypt at the appointed time. He also instructed them to purify their homes and their bodies, and to trust to God: *"And thus did We inspire Moses and his brother: 'Take for your people some houses in Egypt, and make your houses places of worship, and be constant in prayer.' And give glad tidings to all believers."* (Verse 87)

This may be considered an exercise of 'spiritual mobilization', running alongside ordinary mobilization. Both are necessary for individuals and communities alike, particularly before battles and during times of hardship. Some people may dismiss spiritual mobilization as being of little consequence, but experience shows that faith continues to be the most important weapon in battle. Held by a soldier who is devoid of faith, military hardware is of little benefit when the going gets tough. This

mustering is not something only the Children of Israel should do. Instead it pertains to all hard core believers in God. It is an experience based on pure faith. Believers may find themselves persecuted in a society which is devoid of faith, where tyranny is hardened by brute force, and generally people have lost their integrity and values, and where the whole environment is rotten, as was true of Pharaoh's realm. In such a situation, God tells them to abandon the *jāhiliyyah* society, with all its evil and corruption, as much as that is practical, so that they can establish their own community and purge, train and organize themselves in waiting for the fulfilment of His promise. They should also boycott the places of worship of the unbelieving society, while making use of their own homes as places of worship. In this way they can worship God in the proper manner, and make that worship an exercise of self organization.

Having despaired of any positive response from Pharaoh and his nobles, Moses turned to his Lord with a supplication that He destroy the Egyptians' property and riches because these had lured them away from the truth, so compromising their faith. Thus they had sunk deep into error. He further prayed that the rich remain hardened in their disbelief, so that they would face a grievous punishment. God answered his supplication: "*Moses said, Our Lord! You have bestowed on Pharaoh and his nobles splendour and riches in this life, with the result that they have been leading people astray from Your path. Our Lord! Wipe out their riches and harden their hearts, so that they do not believe until they face the grievous suffering.' He replied: 'Your prayer is accepted. Continue, both of you, steadfastly on the right path, and do not follow the path of those who are devoid of knowledge.*" (Verses 88-89)

Moses begins his prayer with a statement: "*Our Lord! You have bestowed on Pharaoh and his nobles splendour and riches in this life.*" (Verse 88) These riches and splendour become a means to turn people away from Your path, either by the lure that they constitute or by the power they give to those who have them enabling them to humiliate or lead others astray. There is no doubt that if the corrupt people are the ones who have all the splendour and riches, a situation is created where many people are shaken because they do not realize that these riches are no more than a test. In comparison to God's bounty, whether it is bestowed in this life or in the hereafter, they are of no value. Moses appeals to God to destroy these riches, so that the nobles no longer have the means to tempt and pressurize people away from the right path. The rest of his supplication, that Pharaoh and his nobles not believe until they witness the suffering, is the prayer of one who has despaired that any of them will ever recognize the truth. Hence, he wants them to be hardened even further until they face their due punishment. Repentance then is not acceptable, because it does not signify any real regret, or any positive change based on free choice.

"He replied: 'Your prayer is accepted.'" (Verse 89) That then brings the matter to its due end. *"Continue, both of you, steadfastly on the right path."* (Verse 89) Follow that path until the end, paying no regard to anything different. *"Do not follow the path of those who are devoid of knowledge."* (Verse 89) Such people move along without guidance.

Their plans are flawed, and they lack certainty. Hence they are worried about their destiny, unsure of the path they follow.

When Accepting the Faith Means Nothing

The next scene depicts the event as it actually happened: *"And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression. But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said: I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself.' [But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs."* (Verses 90-92)

This is a highly decisive point in the story of defiance and rejection of truth. It is shown here only very briefly, because the purpose of mentioning it in this *sūrah* is to demonstrate the result of the dispute. What is shown is the fact that God protects the believers and punishes those who choose to be His enemies, paying little attention to the signs and messages that call on them to believe in Him. They persist in disbelief until they are overwhelmed by God's punishment, when believing is of no avail. This was also explained earlier in the *sūrah: "To every community was sent a messenger. It is when their messenger had come to them that judgement was passed on them in all fairness; and never are they wronged. They say: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if you are truthful?' Say: I have no control over any harm or benefit to myself except as God may please. For every community a term has been appointed. When their time arrives, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor indeed hasten it.' Say: 'Do but consider. Should His punishment befall you by night or by day, what could there be in it that the guilty ones should wish to hasten? Is it, then, when it has come to pass that you will believe in it? Is it now, while so far you have been asking for it to come speedily?'" (Verses* 47-51)

> *And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea; but Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression. But as he was about to drown, Pharaoh said: I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself' [But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to*

those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs. (Verses 90-92)

The story is meant, then, to confirm and assert the warnings: *"And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea."* (Verse 90) They managed to cross it under Our guidance and protection. This statement, coming at this point, and attributing the guidance to God alone, is highly significant. *"But Pharaoh and his legions pursued them with tyranny and aggression."* (Verse 90) They were not chasing them to follow their suit and accept divine guidance, nor was the chasing in defence of any rightful claim they might have had, but was rather an act of aggression and tyranny. Then, in no time at all, the story moves from a scene of brute tyrannical force to one of drowning: *"But as he was about to drown,"* staring death in the eye, *"Pharaoh said. I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself"* His masks had now fallen away. He was no longer the mighty ruler whose wishes were instantly obeyed. He had shrunk and looked humiliated. Not only did he declare that he believed in God, in whom the Children of Israel believed; he went further to submit himself in total surrender. *"[But God said:] 'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land. But today We shall save only your body, so that you may become a sign to those who will come after you; for a great many people do not heed Our signs."'* (Verses 91-92)

But the response he received came as a total shock, as God said to him: *"Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land."* (Verse 91) You believe now, when you no longer have any choice or means of escape? You have been arrogant in your disbelief, rejecting all messages and warnings. *"But today We shall save only your body."* (Verse 92) His body would remain intact, uneaten by sharks or other sea creatures. It would not be allowed to drift with the waves, but would be saved so that his end would be known to all and sundry: *"So that you may become a sign to those who will come after you."* (Verse 92) It may be that when others see your body they will take heed and realize that defying God and His warnings brings certain doom. The fact is that *"a great many people do not heed Our signs."* (Verse 92) They do not turn to them with open hearts and minds, nor do they consider their significance, be they evident in the great universe or within their own selves.

The final scene in this tragedy of corruption, defiance, disobedience and tyranny is clearly shown and the curtains are drawn. The *sūrah* then continues with a brief statement of what happened to the Children of Israel over several generations: *"We settled the Children of Israel in a most goodly abode and We provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life. It was not until knowledge was given them that they began to disagree among themselves. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection regarding that on which they differed."* (Verse 93)

For 'abode' the Arabic statement uses a term which signifies security, but adds to it a description of sincerity. This gives the added connotation of a secure settlement which is not easily threatened. Sincerity and truth do not experience the sort of unease that are associated with lying and invention. The Children of Israel were settled in their secure abode after several experiences that are not mentioned here because they do not relate to the purpose of the *sūrah.* They further enjoyed goodly provisions until they started to disobey God, at which time these provisions were forbidden them. The *sūrah* only states that they started to argue about matters of religion as well as worldly matters. These disputes were not the result of ignorance. They only began after knowledge of the truth had been given to them. But they used that knowledge to arrive at false interpretations of religious matters.

Since the context here is one of giving support to those who accept the faith and ensuring the defeat of tyranny, the *sūrah* does not dwell on what the Children of Israel perpetrated after that, nor does it give any account of their disputes. It turns the page, leaving judgement on all this to God alone: "*Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection regarding that on which they differed.*" (Verse 93) The story thus maintains its seriousness and the effect is in no way diminished.

No Doubts Entertained

Now the *sūrah* begins its comments on the accounts it gives of the stories of Moses and Noah with their peoples. At the outset, it reassures the Prophet by telling him what happened to other messengers God sent before his time. It also explains to him the real reason for his people's denial of the truth. He is told that what these people lack is not more signs and clear proofs of this truth. It is simply the fulfilment of human nature with all that God has placed in it of aptitude to follow guidance or error and to be good or evil. A brief account of the Prophet Jonah's history is then added, mentioning how his people believed in the nick of time when God's punishment was about to overwhelm them. Their acceptance of the faith ensured the lifting of that punishment. This is given by way of encouraging the Arabs who denied the truth to accept it before their time too was up. The passage concludes with outlining the basic issues which the stories of past nations given in the Qur'ān are meant to emphasize. They confirm that the laws God has set in operation will apply to later communities in as much as they applied to earlier ones. This spells doom and suffering to the unbelievers who deny God and His message, while the messengers and those who follow them shall be saved. This is a commitment God has made and a law He has set. It will always come true.

> *If you are in doubt concerning what We have bestowed on you from on high, ask those who read the Scriptures [revealed] before you. It is surely the truth that has*

> *come to you from your Lord. Do not, then, be among the doubters. And do not be among those who deny God's revelations, for then you shall be among those who are lost. Surely, those against whom your Lord's word [of judgement] has come true will not believe, even though every sign should come to their knowledge, until they are faced with the grievous suffering. Had it believed, every community would have profited by its faith. It was so only with Jonah's people. When they believed, We lifted from them the suffering of disgrace in this life, and allowed them to enjoy things for a while. Had your Lord so willed, all people on earth, in their entirety, would have believed. Do you, then, try to compel people to believe? No human being can believe, except by God's leave. It is He who lays abomination on those who will not use their reason. Say: 'Consider all that there is in the heavens and the earth.' But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe? What are they waiting for except a repetition of the days [of calamity] experienced by those who have gone before them? Say: 'Wait, then, if you will. I am also waiting.' Thereupon, We save Our messengers and those who believe. Thus have We willed it upon Ourselves: We save those who believe. (Verses 94-103)*

The previous passage was concerned with the attitude of the Children of Israel who had received revelations from God. They were aware of Noah and his community's story, and they were also fully aware of Moses and his experience with Pharaoh, which was given in detail in their Scriptures. The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet telling him that if he is in doubt concerning God's revelations, including the history of past communities, then he should ask those who received revelations before his time. They have full knowledge of what they read in those Scriptures: *"If you are in doubt concerning what We have bestowed on you from on high, ask those who read the Scriptures [revealed] before you. It is surely the truth that has come to you from your Lord. Do not, then, be among the doubters."* (Verse 94)

But the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not in doubt concerning his revelations. It is reported that when this verse was revealed, the Prophet said, "I do not doubt, and I am not going to ask." Why is it, then, that he is told to ask if he is in doubt? And why is this followed by the statement that *"it is surely the truth that has come to you from your Lord?"* It is certainly more than enough for him to know that this statement is made by God.

This directive gives us an idea of the difficult situation that prevailed in Makkah after the Prophet was taken on his night journey to Jerusalem and ascended from there to heaven. Some people who had previously declared their acceptance of Islam now denied it, as they could not believe this. What aggravated the matter even more was the fact that shortly before this, the Prophet lost his wife, Khadījah, and his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, who had both provided him with much- needed support. They died within a short period of each other. Moreover, the unbelievers in Makkah

increased their physical persecution of the Prophet and those who believed in his message. The new faith was practically confined to Makkah, as the Quraysh, the predominant tribe in Arabia, fought hard to stop it from spreading to other tribes. All these circumstances weighed heavily on the Prophet's heart. Hence, he needed the reassurance that God gives him with this assertion, making it clear that his message is the message of truth.

Moreover, the doubters and those who deny God's message are assigned their place: "*And do not be among those who deny God's revelations, for then you shall be among those who are lost.*" (Verse 95) This exposure of the doubters serves to give them another chance to return to the truth. If the Prophet neither doubts nor asks questions when he is permitted to do so, then he must be absolutely certain that what has been given to him is the truth which admits no doubt. This serves as encouragement to others not to doubt or waver.

Moreover, this gives us an insight into the method God has laid down for the Muslim community. It must make sure of whatever remains uncertain. It can do so by asking those who have been endowed with great knowledge. It should ask even if the matter concerns something of the basic essentials of faith, because a Muslim is required to make sure of his faith and the law he implements. He must not follow anyone else unless he knows for certain that that person follows the truth.

One may well ask here whether there is any conflict or contradiction between the permission to ask others when one is in doubt and the subsequent directive not to be 'one of the doubters'? There is certainly neither conflict nor contradiction. What is to be avoided is remaining in doubt so that it becomes a permanent condition, without any attempt by the doubter to remove his doubts and reach a stage of certitude. For prolonged doubt is a very bad situation which leads to neither benefit nor knowledge.

Since what has been given to the Prophet is the truth that admits no doubt, how is it then that some people continue to deny it and adopt an unreasonably stubborn attitude? The answer is that God's law is such that when one does not seek guidance, one will not find it, and one who does not open his eyes and heart to the light will not see it. A person who wastes his perceptions will not benefit by what he perceives, and will end up in error. Whatever proofs and signs are available will remain of no use to him. Hence, the law God has set in operation will work against him, and God's word of punishment will overtake him: "*Surely, those against whom your Lord's word [of punishment] has come true will not believe, even though every sign should come to their knowledge, until they are faced with the grievous suffering.*" (Verses 96-97)

At this point, acknowledgement of the truth and accepting the faith will not benefit them because it does not flow from their own choice. There is no longer any

chance to test that faith in everyday life. The *sūrah* confirmed all this earlier when it depicted Pharaoh crying out at the point of drowning: *"I have come to believe that there is no deity other than Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and to Him I surrender myself"* (Verse 90) But he was told: *"'Only now? But before this you were rebelling [against Us], and you spread corruption in the land.'"* (Verse 91)

As we are assured of the inevitability of the operation of God's laws and that their outcome will never fail to apply in accordance with what people choose for themselves in this life, a window of hope is opened. Salvation is possible when the wrongdoers stop denying the truth and declare their belief before they are overtaken by God's punishment.

Even When Punishment is Due

"Had it believed, every community would have profited by its faith. It was so only with Jonah's people. When they believed, We lifted from them the suffering of disgrace in this life, and allowed them to enjoy things for a while." (Verse 98) The way this verse is phrased expresses a dear wish concerning past events. This means that what was hoped for did not take place. '*Had it believed, every community*' of those that have been mentioned would have profited by accepting the faith. But these communities did not believe as whole communities. Only a minority of each community accepted the divine faith. Hence, disbelief was the predominant feature of these communities. Jonah's people were the one exception. This verse uses the term 'town' to refer to communities thereby indicating that God's messages were centred in urban areas, and not among nomadic peoples.

The *sūrah* does not provide a detailed account of the history of the Prophet Jonah and his people. It only refers to their end, because this is what is relevant here. It is sufficient that we learn that Jonah's people were about to suffer a humiliating punishment. Then, when, at the last minute, they declared their acceptance of the divine faith and believed in God and His message, the punishment was lifted and they were allowed to enjoy life for a while. Had they persisted in their disbelief, God's punishment would have overtaken them, in accordance with the law that determines consequences on the basis of people's actions.

This makes two points very clear. The first is an urgent address to those who deny the truth to save themselves if only at the last minute, as Jonah's people did. This is the immediate purpose behind the reference to their history.

The second point is that God's law was not suspended or disrupted when the punishment was lifted and Jonah's people were left to enjoy life for a further period. In fact God's law took its full course. The law meant that they would be punished if they persisted in disbelief up to the point of punishment. But Jonah's people changed

their attitude just before, and so God's law to lift the punishment was implemented. This shows that people are free to choose their line of action, but any action they do choose will have its natural consequences determined by God.

This is followed by a general rule concerning faith and its acceptance or rejection: *"Had your Lord so willed, all people on earth, in their entirety, would have believed. Do you, then, try to compel people to believe? No human being can believe, except by God's leave. It is He who lays abomination on those who will not use their reason."* (Verses 99-100)

Had God so willed, He would have created the human race in a different mould, allowing it to know only the path of faith, as He has done with the angels. Or He would have given human beings a single susceptibility leading them all to acceptance of the faith. In His wisdom, which we may or may not understand, God has created man with a dual susceptibility towards good and evil, to follow guidance or sink into error. He has given man free-will to choose his path. Furthermore, God has so willed that when any human being uses his feelings and faculties to understand the signs pointing to the way to faith, and when he reflects on the revelations and proofs given by God's messengers, he will accept the divine faith. His belief will lead him along the way to salvation. On the other hand, when man shuts his mind and faculties to faith, his heart will be hardened and his mind closed. This leads him to deny the truth and, in consequence, to suffer the punishment God has determined for all unbelievers.

This means that accepting the faith is a matter of choice. The Prophet does not compel anyone to believe, because there can be no compulsion in matters determined by reason and conscience: *"Do you, then, try to compel people to believe?" (Verse* 99) This is a rhetorical question which serves to emphasize that compulsion is not possible.

"No human being can believe, except by God's leave." (Verse 100) This is again in accordance with the law God has set in operation and which we have already explained. No person will attain to faith if they follow the route which does not lead to faith. This statement does not mean that anyone will ever be prevented from attaining to faith if he wants to believe and follows the road of faith. What it means is that no one reaches belief and faith without following the proper steps along the route leading to faith. When a person makes this choice, God provides His guidance to that person who will then believe, by God's leave. In other words, nothing happens except by God's will. People follow their freely chosen ways, and God determines the consequences of every type of action. The result is the sum of these consequences. They receive their reward on the basis of how conscientiously they seek to be properly guided.

This is confirmed by the ending of the same verse: *"It is He who lays abomination on those who will not use their reason."* (Verse 100) Those who choose to shut their minds

and decide not to reflect on the signs and proofs pointing to the right faith will suffer abomination, i.e. the worst type of spiritual impurity. This is what they deserve for not using their reason, which has resulted in their disbelief and denial of the truth.

This is further explained by stating that signs and warnings will be of no benefit to people who will not believe. They do not reflect on them when they see them everywhere in the world around them: *"Say: 'Consider all that there is in the heavens and the earth.' But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe?"* (Verse 101) Whether we take the final part of this verse as a rhetorical question or a straightforward statement, it signifies the same thing. There are numerous signs and pointers to the truth all around us in the heavens and the earth, but none of these will benefit the unbelievers, because they have chosen to close their eyes and minds to them.

Minds Shut to All Evidence

Before we move further we need to reflect briefly on the verse that says: *"Say: 'Consider all that there is in the heavens and the earth.' But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe?"* (Verse 101)

The community which was the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān had very little scientific knowledge of what exists in the heavens and earth. But the fact is that human nature communicates with the universe in which we live in a language that is both rich and subtle at the same time. When human nature is alert and receptive, the universe has much to tell it and it listens carefully.

The Qur'ānic approach to the formulation of an Islamic concept in human consciousness makes use of what exists in the heavens and earth. It derives inspiration from the universe, and directs the human faculties of vision, hearing, perception and understanding to its discourse, without trying to disturb the balance and harmony that exist in the universe. It does not make of the universe a deity directing human life, as narrow-minded materialists claim with their 'scientific socialism'. True science and knowledge have nothing to do with all their nonsense.

Reflection on what exists in the heavens and earth gives the human heart and mind a wealth of feelings, responses and influences, as well as meaningful interaction with the universe. All this helps man to be receptive to everything in the universe that points to God's existence, majesty, power, planning, wisdom and perfect knowledge.

With the passage of time, human knowledge of the universe increases. A human being who sees God's light and follows His guidance benefits greatly from increased knowledge. He is better able to know the universe and interact with it. He joins the

universe in glorifying God, for: *"There is nothing that exists but celebrates His praises, although you may not understand their praises."* (17: 44) Only a person whose heart nurtures its bond with God understands such praises. When human knowledge is devoid of the light of faith, it increases human misery as it leads people further away from God and deprives them of the happiness that comes with faith.

"But of what benefit could all signs and warnings be to people who will not believe?" (Verse 101) What is the benefit of signs and warnings when hearts are hardened, minds are shut, receptive faculties are left idle and the whole human being is isolated from the universe, unable to listen to its glorification of God?

The Qur'ānic method of explaining the nature of God shows the universe and life generally as a great exhibition in which the truth of God's existence is seen most vividly through its extensive action. Its presence overwhelms all human faculties. This method does not make of God's existence a topic for debate. Indeed the way the Qur'ān looks at the universe and what we see in it fills our hearts with the fact of God's existence so as to leave no room for arguing about it. The Qur'ān speaks directly of the results of this existence in the whole universe, and its influence on human conscience and human life in general.

In its method, the Qur'ān relies on a basic element in the make up of human beings. After all, it is God who has created man and He knows best what He has created: *"It is We who have created man, and We know the promptings of his soul."* (50: 16) There is a basic need in human nature to have faith and to believe in a deity. In fact, when human nature is uncorrupted, it experiences a strong inner feeling directing it towards belief in a single God. The purpose of true faith is not to initiate this need to believe in God. That feeling is basic to human nature. True faith seeks to put man's concept of God on a proper footing, and to make the true God, who is the only deity in the universe, known to man, with all His attributes. It is to know God properly, not to establish His existence, that the true faith works. For it also aims to make man aware of the effects on human life of God's existence, i.e. His Lordship and Sovereignty. Indeed the mere doubt of God's existence, let alone denying it altogether, is indicative of an imbalance in human nature, and a malfunctioning of its faculties of perception. Such malfunctioning is not rectified by argument and logic.

This universe knows God, believes in Him and submits itself to Him. Every living thing in it celebrates God's praises, except for a few humans. Mankind lives in this universe where the echoes of faith in God and submission to Him are heard everywhere, as are God's praises and glorification. Therefore, someone whose nature does not perceive all this is one whose natural qualities of perception are not functioning properly. Argument is not the proper way to address such a heart and mind. The correct way is to try to alert man's faculties of perception, and awaken his nature so that it may resume its proper function. Drawing man's attention, as well as

his heart and mind, to what exists in the heavens and the earth is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses to awaken human hearts.

Those unbelievers among the pagan Arabs, and others who adopt a similar attitude, neither responded nor reflected. What were they waiting for, then? God's law will always remain in operation. The destiny of those who deny the truth is well known, and they cannot expect that God's law will not apply to them. God may give them a chance, and may withhold their punishment for a while, but those who persist in denying Him will suffer in the end: *"What are they waiting for except a repetition of the days [of calamity] experienced by those who have gone before them? Say: 'Wait, then, if you will. I am also waiting".'* (Verse 102) This is a threat that puts an end to all argument while it fills hearts with fear.

This passage is then concluded with the final outcome of every message and every opposition to it, making plain the lessons of the histories reported in the *sūrah: "We save Our messengers and those who believe. Thus have We willed it upon Ourselves: We save those who believe."* (Verse 103) This is the promise God has made: the seed of faith will retain its healthy function. It will be safe after every type of persecution to which its advocates are subjected. It will survive every denial and every torture inflicted on its advocates. The stories related in this *sūrah,* and elsewhere in the Qur'ān confirm this. Hence, the believers should be reassured.

4
Clarification of Issues

قُلْ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِن كُنتُمْ فِى شَكٍّ مِّن دِينِى فَلَآ أَعْبُدُ ٱلَّذِينَ تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَـٰكِنْ أَعْبُدُ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى يَتَوَفَّىٰكُمْ وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Say: 'Mankind, if you are still in doubt as to what my faith is, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship beside God, but I worship God alone who will cause all of you to die. I have been commanded to be one of those who believe. (104)

وَأَنْ أَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا وَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

And adhere exclusively and sincerely to the true faith, and do not be one of those who associate partners with God. (105)

وَلَا تَدْعُ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنفَعُكَ وَلَا يَضُرُّكَ فَإِن فَعَلْتَ فَإِنَّكَ إِذًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

Do not invoke, instead of God, anything that can neither benefit nor harm you. For if you do, you will surely be among the wrongdoers.' (106)

وَإِن يَمْسَسْكَ ٱللَّهُ بِضُرٍّ فَلَا كَاشِفَ لَهُۥٓ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ وَإِن يُرِدْكَ بِخَيْرٍ فَلَا رَآدَّ لِفَضْلِهِۦ ۚ يُصِيبُ بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٠٧﴾

Should God afflict you with any hardship, none other than He can remove it; and if He wills any good for you, none can withhold His bounty. He bestows it on whomsoever He wills. He is truly Forgiving, truly Merciful. (107)

قُلْ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ قَدْ جَآءَكُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ فَمَنِ ٱهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِى لِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا

Say: 'Mankind, the truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever chooses to follow the true guidance, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, does so at his own peril. I am not responsible for your conduct.' (108)

Follow whatever is revealed to you, and be patient in adversity, until God shall give His judgement. He is the best of all judges. (109)	وَمَآ أَنَا۠ عَلَيۡكُم بِوَكِيلٖ ١٠٨ وَٱتَّبِعۡ مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيۡكَ وَٱصۡبِرۡ حَتَّىٰ يَحۡكُمَ ٱللَّهُۚ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلۡحَٰكِمِينَ ١٠٩

Preview

In this its final passage, the *sūrah* brings to an end our sojourn of the universe, and reflection on aspects of human constitution, and the realms of feeling and thought. It is as if we are returning home with a wealth of riches, as also looking for relaxation after a long journey. The *sūrah* has dwelt on the central theme of faith with its main issues: the oneness of God, who has no partners and who admits no mediation or mediators; His absolute sovereignty and overpowering will; the laws He has set in operation which no one can amend or change; the truth of revelation which makes the true faith clear to all; the resurrection and the reckoning and reward on the Day of Judgement. All these issues have been clarified with historical accounts and illustrated with fine examples and analogies. Now they are summed up in a short passage. The Prophet is instructed to declare these principles to mankind, making clear that he will continue along the line he has followed until God has judged between him and those who oppose him. He is indeed the best of all judges.

Perseverance until Final Judgement

"*Say: 'Mankind, if you are still in doubt as to what my faith is, then [know that] I do not worship those whom you worship beside God, but I worship God alone who will cause all of you to die. I have been commanded to be one of those who believe.'*" (Verse 104) Here the Prophet is told to address all mankind, although the address is meant in the first instance to the Arabs in Makkah who believed in a multiplicity of deities. He tells them that if they are in doubt about the truth of the faith to which he is calling, then their doubts will never turn him away from the truth which he is preaching. He is not going to change his way so as to worship their false gods. Instead, "*I worship God alone who will cause all of you to die.*" (Verse 104) He is the One who determines everyone's span of life and the time when everyone dies. Emphasizing this aspect here is significant because it reminds them of God's power over them. He is the One to be worshipped, not those false deities which cannot give life or cause death. He is also told to make his own instructions plain to them: "*I have been commanded to be one of those who believe.*" (Verse 104) He fulfils his orders as they are given to him, without going beyond his limits.

"*And adhere exclusively and sincerely to the true faith, and do not be one of those who associate partners with God.*" (Verse 105) Here the style changes into a direct order, which is given in such a way that it sounds as if it is being given now in front of them all. This is far more effective. "*Adhere exclusively and sincerely to the true faith,*" turning to God alone and accepting what He has revealed to you as the complete truth. "*And do not be one of those who associate partners with God.*" (Verse 105) This re-emphasizes the meaning of sincere and exclusive adherence to the true faith and being one of the believers. The emphasis takes the form of a direct prohibition of associating partners with God which follows a direct order to believe. "*Do not invoke, instead of God, anything that can neither benefit nor harm you. For if you do, you will surely be among the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 106) Do not appeal to any of those beings whom the unbelievers associate with God, for they cannot bring you any benefit or cause you any harm. If you do appeal to them, you will put yourself among the wrongdoers, because God is fair to all, and He does not show any favouritism to anyone.

"*Should God afflict you with any hardship, none other than He can remove it; and if He wills any good for you, none can withhold His bounty. He bestows it on whomsoever He wills. He is truly Forgiving, truly Merciful.*" (Verse 107) God has set certain laws in operation whereby harm and benefit inevitably affect human beings when they expose themselves to their causes. So if harm afflicts you through the operation of God's laws, then no one can remove that harm unless you follow the right course of action. This means that you should cease to expose yourself to the causes of harm if you are aware of them or appeal to God to make them known to you if you do not know them. Similarly, if you follow His laws which generate benefit for you, no one will be able to stop that benefit. It will always be granted by God to those of His servants who decide to follow the means to achieve it. This is His general will and *modus operandi.* Furthermore, "*He is truly Forgiving, truly Merciful.*" (Verse 107) He forgives past sins when one sincerely repents. Furthermore, He is merciful to His servants, forgiving them their errors and increasing their reward for their good deeds when they adhere to the true path.

This is the sum of faith, as illustrated in this *sūrah.* The Prophet is ordered to declare it to mankind, and the order is given to him as though he is standing in front of them. The order is directed at each individual in person. It is a remarkably inspiring and effective method. The Prophet makes his declaration, facing up to material power, numerical strength, ignorant beliefs and a long history of associating partners with God. He makes his declaration, as commanded by God, with force and maximum clarity, when he has only a small number of followers in Makkah where the power is decidedly with the unbelievers. Thus he fulfils his duty towards the truth he is advocating, showing his unshakeable certainty in faith.

This brings us to the final declaration to all people: "*Say: Mankind, the truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever chooses to follow the true guidance, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, does so at his own peril. I am not responsible for your conduct.*" (Verse 108) It is the final, decisive word which makes it clear that everyone chooses his or her way as they please after the truth has been given to all by their Lord. Hence, "*whoever chooses to follow the true guidance, does so for his own good; and whoever chooses to go astray, does so at his own peril.*" (Verse 108) The Prophet is not required to force people to follow divine guidance. He only conveys to them his message and leaves them to choose freely, making it clear that everyone will bear the results of his or her choice.

The final address to the Prophet tells him to follow what he has been instructed and to persevere until God has made His judgement: "*Follow whatever is revealed to you, and be patient in adversity, until God shall give His judgement. He is the best of all judges.*" (Verse 109) The conclusion is in perfect harmony with the opening of the *sūrah* and its contents, following the unique method of the Qur'ān.

SŪRAH 11

Hūd

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation, despite that in some copies of the Qur'ān it is said that verses 12, 17 and 114 were revealed in Madinah. A glance at these verses within the context of the *sūrah* shows that they occur in their perfect settings. It is difficult to imagine that the *sūrah* was without these verses from the outset, or that they were added later on. Besides, these verses speak about subjects that are essentially part of what Makkan revelations address, namely faith and the Quraysh's attitude to it, how their attitude affected the Prophet and his small band of followers, and how the Qur'ān dispelled these effects.

The *sūrah* as a whole followed the revelation of *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, which succeeded *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey. This gives us a clear idea of the timing of its revelation, in the middle of a very difficult period in the early history of Islam. It was preceded by the deaths of Abu Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle who protected him against all harm from the unbelievers, and Khadījah, his wife whose comforting influence was of great help to the Prophet. Their deaths enabled the unbelievers to become bolder and harsher in their opposition, particularly after the Prophet's night journey to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to heaven before returning to Makkah in the same night.

The unbelievers ridiculed the event to such an extent that some people even renounced Islam. Furthermore, the Prophet missed Khadījah whom he loved dearly. The hostility towards him and his message was at its fiercest. Indeed, his efforts to win more support yielded few results; almost no one from Makkah and its surrounding area being prepared to embrace Islam. This continued until the first group of the *Anṣār* accepted Islam, delivering their pledges to the Prophet at `Aqabah.

Ibn Isĥāq reports:

> Both Khadījah hint Khuwaylid and Abū Ṭālib died in the same year. This meant a succession of tragedies for the Prophet, because Khadījah provided him with honest and true support, and listened to his complaints, while his uncle was a mainstay of support, providing protection and ensuring his safety. Both events took place three years before his migration to Madinah. After Abū Ṭālib's death, the Quraysh were able to cause him more trouble than they could ever perpetrate during his uncle's life."
>
> Things were so bad for the Prophet that a wretched person stopped him on the street and threw dust over his head. The Prophet then went home and one of his daughters was crying as she washed the dirt off his head. The Prophet said to her: "Do not cry, child. God will certainly protect your father." He remarked more than once: "The Quraysh could not cause me much harm before Abu Ṭālib's death."[14]

Al-Maqrīzī says: "The Prophet found things too hard after their deaths, and he called that year, the year of sorrow. He used to say: 'The Quraysh could not do me much harm until Abū Ṭālib had died.' In fact, Abū Ṭālib was his only protector in his own clan.

It is during this period that the two *sūrahs,* Jonah and Hūd, were revealed, following *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey, and *Sūrah* 25, The Criterion. All these *sūrahs* give a clear impression of the time and the extent of the Quraysh's hostility. In this present *sūrah* we also have the reassurances given to the Prophet and his followers. These comfort him in his loneliness in the midst of a hostile environment.

Several Messengers, One Message

The nature and general atmosphere of the period is reflected in the *sūrah* in different ways. One of these is a general review of the progress of divine faith in human history, starting with Noah and leading up to the last Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad. It makes clear that all messages were based on the same fundamental principles: submission to God alone, worshipping Him without the association of any partners, and following only the guidance provided by God's messengers in both submission and worship. These are coupled with the belief that this present life is only a test, with the reward given only in the life to come. Freedom of choice between truth and falsehood, which God has given to man, is the basis of this test.

The Prophet was sent as a messenger and given *"a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware."* (Verse 1) The basic contents of this book are:

[14] Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah,* Dar al-Qalam, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 2, pp. 57-58.

> *Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit. But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great day. To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things. (Verses 2-4)*

This was by no means an unprecedented message. It was the same as advocated by Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Shu`ayb, Moses and many others.

> *We sent forth Noah to his people: I have come to you with a plain warning. Worship none but God. I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day.' (Verses 25-26)*

> *To `Ād, We sent their brother Hūd. He said: My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood. No reward do I ask of you, my people, for this [message]. My reward rests with Him who brought me into being. Will you not, then, use your reason? My people! Seek your Lord's forgiveness, and then turn to Him in repentance. He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you, and will add strength to your strength. Do not turn away as guilty criminals.' (Verses 50-52)*

> *To Thamūd, We sent their brother Ṣāliḥ. He said: My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein. Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance. My Lord is ever near. He answers all.' (Verse 61)*

> *And to Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb. He said: My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. Do not give short measure and weight. I see you now in a happy state, yet I dread lest suffering befall you on a fateful day which will encompass all. My people, always give full measure and weight, in all fairness, and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs, and do not spread corruption on earth by wicked actions. That which rests with God is better for you, if you truly believe. I am not your keeper.' (Verses 84-86)*

We see clearly that all these messengers delivered the same message, advocating the same principles.

A Community Apart

Again the *sūrah* reflects the nature of the period as it describes God's messengers' attitudes to the hostility, ridicule, threats and physical harm they met. They all persevered, confident that what they preached was the truth, and that God's support would inevitably be granted. The result in this life, and indeed in the life to come, confirmed their belief when the believers were saved while the unbelievers were destroyed.

In its account of Noah, the *sūrah* portrays this scene:

> *The notables of his people who disbelieved said: 'We see you but a mortal man like ourselves. Nor can we see anyone following you except the most abject among us; those who are rash and undiscerning. We do not consider that you are in any way superior to us: indeed we think you are liars.' Noah said: 'Think, my people! If take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, and He has favoured me with grace from Himself to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it? And, my people, I ask of you no money in return; my reward rests with none but God. Nor will I drive away those who believe; they will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see people with no awareness [of right and wrong]. And, my people, who would protect me from God were I to drive them away? Will you not reflect? I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me, or that I know what lies beyond the reach of human perception. Nor do I say: I am an angel. Nor do I say of those whom you eye with contempt that God will never grant them any good. God knows best what is in their hearts – for then I would indeed be a wrongdoer.' Noah,' they replied, you have argued with us, and argued to excess. Bring upon us that with which you have been threatening us, if you are a man of truth.' He said: 'Only God can bring it upon you, if He so wills. You cannot be immune.' (Verses 27-33)*

Then a little later, the *sūrah* paints a picture of the floods and how those who opposed Noah were drowned while those who believed with him were all saved.

In the history of Hūd, we are presented with the following scene:

> *They replied: Mid, you have brought us no clear evidence. We are not forsaking our gods on your mere word, nor will we believe in you. All we can say is that one of our gods may have smitten you with something evil.' He said: 'I call God to witness, and you, too, bear witness, that I disassociate myself from all those you claim to be partners with God. Scheme against me, all of you, if you will, and give me no respite. Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. But if you turn away, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people. You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things.' (Verses 53-57)*

Then we see the outcome of their rejection:

> *And so, when Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Hūd and those who shared his faith. We have indeed saved them from severe suffering. Such were the `Ād. They denied their Lord's revelations, disobeyed His messengers, and followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant. They were pursued by a curse in this world and on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the `Ād denied their Lord. Oh, away with the `Ād, the people of Hūd. (Verses 58-60)*

And in its account of Ṣāliĥ and his people the *sūrah* portrays this scene:

> *They answered: Ṣāliĥ! Great hopes did we place in you before this. Would you now forbid us to worship what our forefathers worshipped? We are indeed in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' He said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were 1 to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin.' (Verses 62-63)*

They persist in their rejection and slaughter the she-camel God sent them as a sign confirming Ṣāliĥ's message. Thus, their fate is sealed:

> *When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Ṣāliĥ and those who shared his faith from the ignominy of that day. Indeed, your Lord is Powerful, Almighty. The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, as though they had never prospered there. Thamūd denied their Lord! Oh, away with Thamūd. (Verses 66-68)*

Of Shu`ayb and his people we have the following account:

> *They said: 'Shu`ayb, do your prayers compel you to demand of us that we should renounce all that our forefathers worshipped, or that we refrain from doing what we please with our property? You are indeed the one who is clement and right-minded!' He said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give? I have no desire to do, in opposition to you, what I ask you not to do. All that I desire is to set things to rights in so far as it lies within my power. My success depends on God alone. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him I always turn. My people, let not your disagreement with me bring upon you a fate similar to those that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd or Ṣāliĥ; nor were Lot's people far away from you. Hence, pray to your Lord to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance. My*

> *Lord is indeed Merciful and All-loving.' They said: 'Shu`ayb, we cannot understand much of what you say. But we do see clearly how weak you are in our midst. Were it not for your family, we would have stoned you. You do not command a position of great respect among us.' Said he: My people, do you hold my family in greater esteem than God? You have turned your backs on Him. My Lord encompasses [with His might] all that you do. Do what you will, my people, and so will I. You shall come to know who shall be visited by suffering that will cover him with ignominy, and who is a liar. Watch, then [for what is coming', and I shall watch with you.' (Verses 87-93)*

The outcome is also portrayed:

> *When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Shu`ayb and those who shared his faith. The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, as though they had never prospered there. Oh, away with the people of Madyan, even as the Thamūd have been done away with! (Verses 94-95)*

Comforting the Prophet

These historical accounts demonstrate to the Prophet that opposition to his message is echoed by the opposition earlier messengers received. But they all received God's support and enjoyed His care. He is directed to separate himself from those who reject his message, in the same way as earlier messengers disassociated themselves from their own people, pursuing the truth that was given to them. Moreover, the histories given are, in themselves, proof of the Prophet's claim to receive God's message and revelations.

At the end of its account of Noah's history, the *sūrah* provides this comment:

> *These accounts of things that have passed We now reveal to you. Neither you nor your people knew them before this. Be, then, patient in adversity; for the future belongs to those who are God-fearing. (Verse 49)*

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, fairly lengthy comments ensue:

> *These are some of the accounts of past communities which We relate to you. Some still remain while others are extinct, like a field mown-down. No wrong did We do to them, but it was they who wronged themselves. Those deities of theirs which they were keen to invoke instead of God availed them nothing when your Lord's judgement came to pass; they only added to their ruin. Such is your Lord's punishment whenever He takes to task any community which is bent on evil-doing;*

His punishment is indeed grievous, severe. (Verses 100-102)

Indeed, We gave the Scriptures to Moses, and there was strife over them. Had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your Lord, judgement would have been passed on them. Yet, they are in grave doubt concerning that. To each and all your Lord will surely give their full due for whatever they may have done. He is indeed aware of all that they do. Follow, then, the right course as you are bidden, together with those who, with you, have turned to Him; and let none of you transgress. Surely, He sees all that you do. Put no trust in those who do wrong, lest the fire touch you. You would, then, have none to protect you from God, nor would you find any help. Attend to your prayers at both ends of the day and in the early watches of the night. Surely, good deeds erase evil ones. This is a reminder for those who are thoughtful. And be patient in adversity; God does not fail to reward those who do good. (Verses 110-115)

All that We relate to you of the histories of earlier messengers is a means by which We strengthen your heart. Through these [accounts] there has come to you the truth, as well as an admonition and a reminder for all believers. Say to those who will not believe: Do whatever lies within your power, and so shall we. Wait if you will; we too are waiting.' God alone knows whatever is hidden in the heavens and the earth. All authority over all matters belongs to Him alone. Worship Him, then, and place your trust in Him alone. Your Lord is not unaware of what you do. (Verses 120-123)

All this serves to outline the practical aspect of Qur'ānic directives. Essentially, the historical accounts are given in the Qur'ān in order to serve as guidelines in the battle against *jāhiliyyah.* These guidelines are meant to enable the advocates of Islam to face up to all eventualities with suitable action.

Different Uses of Historical Events

In the Prologue to the preceding *sūrah,* Jonah, we wrote:

> The last Makkan revelations discussed in this work were *Sūrahs* 6 and 7, Cattle and The Heights. Although these two *sūrahs* are placed together in their Qur'ānic order, they did not have the same sequence in the chronological order of revelation. They are followed in the Qur'ān by *Sūrahs* 8 and 9, The Spoils of War and The Repentance, which feature the special characteristics and themes of the later part of the Qur'ān revealed in Madinah. Now, however, we have two Makkan *sūrahs,* Jonah and Hūd, which have the same sequence in both chronological order and Qur'ānic arrangement. We note a remarkable similarity between the two earlier

> Makkan *sūrahs* and the two present ones, both in subject matter and presentation. *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, concentrates on the essence of faith, confronting the unbelievers with it and refuting all erring beliefs and practices. *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, on the other hand, speaks about the practical implementation of faith in human life and its confrontation *with jāhiliyyah* during different periods of history. The same is true of the two *sūrahs* in this volume, Jonah and Hūd. However, *Sūrah* 6 is distinguished from *Sūrah* 10 by its very powerful rhythm, quick pulse and sophistication of scene and movement. *Sūrah* 10*,* on the other hand, has a more relaxed rhythm and easy flow of scene and movement. *Sūrahs* 7 and 11, The Heights and Hūd display great similarity in theme, presentation and rhythm. Nevertheless, every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān has its own character, special features and distinctive properties.

We need to elaborate a little here. *Sūrah* Jonah includes brief historical references, with a very short account of Noah, and a general reference to subsequent messengers, before giving a reasonably detailed account of Moses, and concluding with a brief reference to Jonah. But these historical accounts are given only as examples, confirming the basic beliefs the *sūrah* concentrates upon.

In the present *sūrah,* historical accounts constitute a major component. Although they confirm the basic beliefs outlined in the *sūrah,* it is clear that this review of the progress of divine faith in human history is the primary objective. Hence, the *sūrah* has three clearly marked sections: the opening passage covers all basic beliefs; then we have the histories of earlier prophets which take a very sizeable portion; and finally the *sūrah* comments on the historical progress of faith. Neither the opening remarks nor the concluding comments are long.

It is also clear that these three sections effectively and coherently contribute to the establishment of the ideological basis of faith, which is the primary objective of the whole *sūrah.* In each section basic beliefs are stated in the best way suited to that section and its purpose.

The essential facts the *sūrah* wants to establish are:

1. That which the Prophet Muĥammad preached and what was preached by earlier messengers is the same basic truth revealed to them from on high. Its basis is complete submission to God alone, as directed by God's messengers only, and to separate people into two communities based on their acceptance or rejection of such submission.

    - The opening passage includes the following verses speaking of the nature of the Prophet's message:

Alif. Lam. Rd. This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware. Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. (Verses 1-2)

If they say: 'He has invented it', say: 'Produce, then, ten invented sūrahs like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.' If they do not respond to you, know that it [the Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high with God's knowledge, and that there is no deity other than Him. Will you then submit yourselves to Him? (Verses 13-14)

- In the historical accounts of earlier prophets, there are numerous verses that state the nature of their message and the way they separated themselves from the rest of their people on the basis of faith. Here are some examples:

We sent forth Noah to his people: I have come to you with a plain warning. Worship none but God. I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day.' (Verses 25-26)

Noah said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, and He has favoured me with grace from Himself to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it?' (Verse 28)

Noah called out to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, my son is of my family. Surely Your promise always comes true, and You are the most just of judges.' Noah,' He answered, 'he was not of your family; his was an unrighteous conduct. Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you lest you become one of the ignorant.' (Verses 45-46)

To `Ād, We sent their brother Hūd. He said: My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood.' (Verse 50)

To Thamūd, We sent their brother Şāliĥ. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein. Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance. My Lord is ever near. He answers all.' (Verse 61)

He said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord

> *who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin. '(Verse 63)*
>
> *And to Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him.' (Verse 84)*
>
> *'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give?' (Verse 88)*

- The following verses address the same points in the final passage:

> *Put no trust in those who do wrong, lest the fire touch you. You would, then, have none to protect you from God, nor would you find any help. (Verse 113)*
>
> *God alone knows whatever is hidden in the heavens and the earth. All authority over all matters belongs to Him alone. Worship Him, then, and place your trust in Him alone. Your Lord is not unaware of what you do. (Verse 123)*

Thus all three sections converge to establish this truth.

2. In order that people should acknowledge that all Lordship belongs to God alone, the *sūrah* provides them with a clear concept of God, making it clear to them that they remain in His grasp in this life, and that to Him they will return on the Day of Resurrection when they receive their reward. Again all three sections work hand in hand to establish this truth.
   - To give but a few examples, in the opening passage we read:

> *They cover up their breasts in order to hide from Him. Surely, when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. There is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its habitation and its resting-place. All this is in a clear record. He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six days, whereas His throne has rested upon water, so that He may test you [to make manifest] which of you is best in conduct. Yet if you say to them: 'You shall be raised again after death,' those who disbelieve are sure to say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery.' If We defer their suffering for a definite term, they are sure to say: 'What is holding it back?' On the day when it befalls them there will be nothing to avert it from them; and they shall be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride. (Verses 5-8)*

As for those who desire only the lift of this world and its bounties, We shall fully repay them in this life for all they do, and they shall suffer no diminution of their just dues. It is they who, in the life to come, shall have nothing but the fire. In vain shall be all that they have done in this world, and worthless shall be all their actions. (Verses 15-16)

- In the historical accounts we have some definitive statements, such as:

Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. But if you turn away, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people. You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things. (Verses 56-57)

To Thamūd, We sent their brother Ṣāliĥ. He said: My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein. Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance. My Lord is ever near. He answers all. (Verse 61)

- And in the concluding passage we have verses like:

Such is your Lord's punishment whenever He takes to task any community which is bent on evil-doing; His punishment is indeed grievous, severe. (Verse 102)

To each and all your Lord will surely give their full due for whatever they may have done. He is indeed aware of all that they do. (Verse 111)

Had your Lord so willed, He would have made all mankind one single community. As it is, they continue to differ, except those upon whom your Lord has bestowed His grace. And to this end He created them. The word of your Lord shall be fulfilled: I shall certainly fill hell with jinn and humans all. '(Verses 1 18-119)

Thus, all three sections of the *sūrah* complement each other in driving home the nature of Godhead and the nature of the hereafter.

It is not the existence of God that the *sūrah* wants to prove. Rather, it is God's sole Lordship in human life, as indeed in the rest of the universe. There was little or no dispute over God's existence. Divine messages were primarily concerned with God's Lordship. The same applies to the final message of Islam. This is a question of

submission to God alone, ascribing no partners to Him, and of obedience to Him in all respects. All people's affairs must be referred to Him, and settled in accordance with His law. The verses we have quoted make this amply clear.

Varied Effects

The *sūrah* provides strong incentives and gives stern warnings. There is the incentive of enjoying the best in this life and in the life to come for those who respond positively to the call to submit to God alone. It promises much of what is good and beneficial for humanity. It also warns against forfeiting all that is good in this life or in the hereafter, and threatens immediate or deferred punishment for those who turn their backs on the divine message. It explains that the tyrannical leaders of those who reject the message reward their followers by leading them to hell. (See verses 15-24, 52, 57, 96-99, etc.)

The long historical accounts confirm that both the incentives and warnings are fulfilled throughout the course of divine faith. It highlights the destruction of the unbelievers and the salvation of the believers. The flood scene that destroyed Noah's people is particularly effective, and it is here that the *sūrah's* powerful rhythm reaches its zenith. (See verses 36-44)

The *sūrah* also portrays how the human soul responds to events that bring blessings or hardship. Those who reject the faith and who hasten their own punishment in reckless defiance are shown their inevitable judgement, their grief when they are deprived of their comforts and luxuries, and their arrogance when their hardship is lifted and blessings again come their way:

> *If We defer their suffering for a definite term, they are sure to say: 'What is holding it back?' On the day when it befalls them there will be nothing to avert it from them; and they shall be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride. And thus it is: if We let man taste some of Our grace, and then take it away from him, he becomes utterly in despair, totally ungrateful. And if We let him taste ease and plenty after hardship has visited him, he is sure to say: 'Gone is all affliction from me,' and he grows jubilant and boastful. Not so are the ones who are patient in adversity and do righteous deeds. They shall have forgiveness and a great reward. (Verses 8-11)*

We also have a number of scenes of the Day of Judgement and the position of the unbelievers there and how they speak to their Lord whose revelations they denied, and whose messengers they opposed. We see the great humiliation they suffer on that day, when they receive no support from any quarter. (See verses 18-22, 103-108)

Another particularly powerful effect is that produced by the statement that God Almighty is always present with us, fully aware of what we conceal in our hearts, while we remain totally unaware of His presence or His knowledge that disregards nothing.

> *To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things. They cover up their breasts in order to hide from Him. Surely, when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. There is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its habitation and its resting-place. All this is in a clear record. (Verses 4-6)*

> *Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. (Verse 56)*

Another highly effective element is the *sūrah's* review of the historical progress of the divine faith under the leadership of God's noble messengers. Each of them faced up to the *erring jāhiliyyah,* saying the same words, clearly, powerfully and decisively. Each demonstrated his unshakeable faith and unparalleled reassurance. This is shown in some of the verses we have already quoted. Other examples will be discussed as they occur in the *sūrah.* This unity of the messengers and their attitudes in confronting *jāhiliyyah,* employing exactly the same words, heightens the effect of the *sūrah.*

1
The Message Spelled Out

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓر ۚ كِتَٰبٌ أُحْكِمَتْ ءَايَٰتُهُۥ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ مِن لَّدُنْ حَكِيمٍ خَبِيرٍ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Rā. This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware. (1)

أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓاْ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّنِى لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ وَبَشِيرٌ ﴿٢﴾

Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. (2)

وَأَنِ ٱسْتَغْفِرُواْ رَبَّكُمْ ثُمَّ تُوبُوٓاْ إِلَيْهِ يُمَتِّعْكُم مَّتَٰعًا حَسَنًا إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى وَيُؤْتِ كُلَّ ذِى فَضْلٍ فَضْلَهُۥ ۖ وَإِن تَوَلَّوْاْ فَإِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ كَبِيرٍ ﴿٣﴾

Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit. But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day. (3)

إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾

To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things. (4)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمۡ يَثۡنُونَ صُدُورَهُمۡ لِيَسۡتَخۡفُواْ مِنۡهُۚ أَلَا حِينَ يَسۡتَغۡشُونَ ثِيَابَهُمۡ يَعۡلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعۡلِنُونَۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٥

They cover up their breasts in order to hide from Him. Surely, when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (5)

۞ وَمَا مِن دَآبَّةٍ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱللَّهِ رِزۡقُهَا وَيَعۡلَمُ مُسۡتَقَرَّهَا وَمُسۡتَوۡدَعَهَاۚ كُلّٞ فِي كِتَٰبٖ مُّبِينٖ ٦

There is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its habitation and its resting-place. All this is in a clear record. (6)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٖ وَكَانَ عَرۡشُهُۥ عَلَى ٱلۡمَآءِ لِيَبۡلُوَكُمۡ أَيُّكُمۡ أَحۡسَنُ عَمَلٗاۗ وَلَئِن قُلۡتَ إِنَّكُم مَّبۡعُوثُونَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ٱلۡمَوۡتِ لَيَقُولَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ٧

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six days, whereas His throne has rested upon water, so that He may test you [to make manifest] which of you is best in conduct. Yet if you say to them: 'You shall be raised again after death,' those who disbelieve are sure to say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery.' (7)

وَلَئِنۡ أَخَّرۡنَا عَنۡهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابَ إِلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٖ مَّعۡدُودَةٖ لَّيَقُولُنَّ مَا يَحۡبِسُهُۥٓۗ أَلَا يَوۡمَ يَأۡتِيهِمۡ لَيۡسَ مَصۡرُوفًا عَنۡهُمۡ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ٨

If We defer their suffering for a definite term, they are sure to say: 'What is holding it back?' On the day when it befalls them there will be nothing to avert it from them; and they shall be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride. (8)

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً ثُمَّ نَزَعْنَـٰهَا مِنْهُ إِنَّهُۥ لَيَـُٔوسٌ كَفُورٌ ﴿٩﴾

And thus it is: if We let man taste some of Our grace, and then take it away from him, he becomes utterly in despair, totally ungrateful. (9)

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَـٰهُ نَعْمَآءَ بَعْدَ ضَرَّآءَ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ ذَهَبَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتُ عَنِّىٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَفَرِحٌ فَخُورٌ ﴿١٠﴾

And if We let him taste ease and plenty after hardship has visited him, he is sure to say: 'Gone is all affliction from me,' and he grows jubilant and boastful. (10)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿١١﴾

Not so are the ones who are patient in adversity and do righteous deeds. They shall have forgiveness and a great reward. (11)

فَلَعَلَّكَ تَارِكٌۢ بَعْضَ مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيْكَ وَضَآئِقٌۢ بِهِۦ صَدْرُكَ أَن يَقُولُوا۟ لَوْلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيْهِ كَنزٌ أَوْ جَآءَ مَعَهُۥ مَلَكٌ ۚ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ نَذِيرٌ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ وَكِيلٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Is it, then, conceivable that you may omit any part of what is being revealed to you and feel distressed in your heart at their saying: 'Why has not a treasure been bestowed on him from on high?' — or, 'Why has not an angel come with him?' You are only a warner, whereas God has everything in His care. (12)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۖ قُلْ فَأْتُوا۟ بِعَشْرِ سُوَرٍ مِّثْلِهِۦ مُفْتَرَيَـٰتٍ وَٱدْعُوا۟ مَنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَـٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

If they say: 'He has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, ten invented sūrahs like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.' (13)

فَإِلَّمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لَكُمْ فَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَآ أُنزِلَ

If they do not respond to you, know that it [the Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high with God's knowledge, and that there is no deity other than Him. Will you then submit yourselves to Him? (14)

بِعِلۡمِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَن لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۖ فَهَلۡ أَنتُم مُّسۡلِمُونَ ١٤

As for those who desire only the life of this world and its bounties, We shall fully repay them in this life for all they do, and they shall suffer no diminution of their just dues. (15)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَزِينَتَهَا نُوَفِّ إِلَيۡهِمۡ أَعۡمَٰلَهُمۡ فِيهَا وَهُمۡ فِيهَا لَا يُبۡخَسُونَ ١٥

It is they who, in the life to come, shall have nothing but the fire. In vain shall be all that they have done in this world, and worthless shall be all their actions. (16)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَيۡسَ لَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ إِلَّا ٱلنَّارُۖ وَحَبِطَ مَا صَنَعُواْ فِيهَا وَبَٰطِلٞ مَّا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٦

Have you considered him who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord, followed by a testimony from Him, which is preceded by the Book of Moses [revealed as] a guide and a mercy [to people]? These believe in it. As for those, of any group, who deny its truth, the fire is their appointed place. So, be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe. (17)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ وَيَتۡلُوهُ شَاهِدٞ مِّنۡهُ وَمِن قَبۡلِهِۦ كِتَٰبُ مُوسَىٰٓ إِمَامٗا وَرَحۡمَةًۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦۚ وَمَن يَكۡفُرۡ بِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابِ فَٱلنَّارُ مَوۡعِدُهُۥۚ فَلَا تَكُ فِي مِرۡيَةٖ مِّنۡهُۚ إِنَّهُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٧

Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God? These shall be brought before their Lord, and witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.' God's curse is on the

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًاۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُعۡرَضُونَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ وَيَقُولُ

wrongdoers, (18)

ٱلْأَشْهَٰدُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَبُواْ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ أَلَا لَعْنَةُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

who debar others from the path of God and seek to make it crooked, and who deny the life to come. (19)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَبْغُونَهَا عِوَجًا وَهُم بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Never can they be immune [from punishment] on earth, nor have they any friends to protect them from God. Their suffering shall be doubled. They could not bear to hear, and they used not to see. (20)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَمْ يَكُونُواْ مُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِنْ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۘ يُضَٰعَفُ لَهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ ۚ مَا كَانُواْ يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَمَا كَانُواْ يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

These are the ones who have lost their own souls, and that which they used to invent shall fail them. (21)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Most certainly, it is they who in the life to come shall be the greatest losers. (22)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّهُمْ فِى ٱلْأَخِرَةِ هُمُ ٱلْأَخْسَرُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds and humble themselves before their Lord are destined for paradise, and there shall they abide. (23)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَأَخْبَتُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

The case of the two parties is like that of the one who is blind and deaf and the one

who sees and hears. Can the two be deemed equal? Will you not take heed? (24)

۞ مَثَلُ ٱلۡفَرِيقَيۡنِ كَٱلۡأَعۡمَىٰ وَٱلۡأَصَمِّ وَٱلۡبَصِيرِ وَٱلسَّمِيعِۚ هَلۡ يَسۡتَوِيَانِ مَثَلًاۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ٢٤

Preview

This first passage of the *sūrah* is like an introduction, followed by several accounts of past communities to whom God sent His messengers. These are then followed by a similar passage that reinforces the message the *sūrah* is meant to put across. In this introductory passage, all the fundamental issues of the Islamic faith are presented. These include self-surrender to God alone; addressing all worship to Him, associating no partners with Him; believing in the resurrection when people's actions in this life are reckoned and their rewards determined; making clear for mankind who their true Lord is, outlining His attributes that have a strong effect on their life and on the universe around them; describing the nature of the Godhead and what being a servant of God means in practice; and, finally, the fact that all will submit to God in the life to come as they do in this present life.

This introductory passage also includes an explanation of the nature of the divine message and the messenger delivering it. It adds some comfort for God's Messenger who was facing determined opposition and resistance during a particularly difficult period in Makkah. The *sūrah* throws out a challenge to all unbelievers who reject the Qur'ān to produce ten *sūrahs* like the Qur'ān. If their claim is true that the Qur'ān is a human fabrication, then they should be able to produce ten similarly fabricated *sūrahs*. This challenge serves to reassure the Prophet and his followers because it is a challenge proffered by God which the unbelievers cannot meet.

This challenge is coupled with a very stern warning to those who deny the divine message. It tells them of the suffering that awaits them in the life to come. The irony is that they hasten this punishment when they cannot tolerate that God's mercy be withdrawn from them in this present life, or that they should go through a testing period during it. Either situation is much easier to bear than the suffering in the hereafter.

This warning is then depicted in a scene of the Day of Judgement, portraying the attitude of the different groups of unbelievers who reject the Qur'ān. We see their total inability, even when they seek help from their friends and patrons, to save

themselves from the suffering that is coupled with ignominy, reproach and condemnation. In contrast, the believers who do righteous deeds are shown awaiting their fine reward in a life of complete bliss. Following the Qur'ānic method of drawing analogies to express its meaning more succinctly, we have finally a quick scene showing both parties: "*The case of the two parties is like that of the one who is blind and deaf and the one who sees and hears. Can the two be deemed equal? Will you not take heed?*" (Verse 24)

The Main Issues

> *Alif. Lām. Rā. This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All- aware. Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit. But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day. To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things. (Verses 1-4)*

These four opening verses set out the main fundamental principles of the Islamic faith:

- Confirmation of the facts of revelation and the divine message;
- Submission to God alone who has no partners;
- God's reward in this life and in the hereafter to those who follow His guidance and implement His code of living;
- His punishment in the hereafter of those who disbelieve, and the fact that all creatures, believers and unbelievers alike, will ultimately return to God;
- His absolute power and limitless authority.

'*Alif. Lām. Rā.*' These words stand for the letters, A, L, R. Like other single letters which occur at the beginning of other *sūrahs,* they set a challenge to the unbelievers. The challenge is that God's book is composed of such letters as people use in their speech and writing, but no matter how they try, they will not be able to produce anything similar to it. These three letters constitute the subject of the first sentence, while the rest of the first verse is its predicate.

"*This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware.*" (Verse 1) The Arabic term which is rendered in translation as *have been perfected* also denotes firmness of structure and precision of meaning. Every word, every phrase is used carefully to deliver exactly the required

meaning. There is no conflict or contradiction between its verses which are all *distinctly spelled out.* Each is used at its right place, under a proper heading, in order to impart a precise meaning.

Obviously the one who has so firmly perfected them, and distinctly spelled them out, is not the Messenger; he is God: *"bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware."* (Verse 1) His wisdom helps to mould their firm structure, and His comprehensive knowledge helps to give clarity to their detail. Furthermore, they come from Him directly, as delivered to His Messenger, without any distortion or alteration.

But what do they tell us? First, an outline of the basics of faith: *"Worship none but God,"* signifies that man should submit himself only to God, and obey none but Him. *"I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings."* (Verse 2) This refers to the message and its dual purpose.

"Seek forgiveness of your Lord and then turn towards Him in repentance." (Verse 3) Whenever a sin is committed, it must be followed by a return to God and submission to Him. *"He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit."* (Verse 3) Good reward then awaits those who repent and seek forgiveness. *"But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day."* (Verse 3) This is a self-evident threat to those who turn away. Finally, the return to God who has absolute power: *"To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things."* (Verse 4)

These then are the principles on which the whole structure of the Islamic faith is raised. Indeed, no religion can establish itself and delineate a complete way of life for mankind without first establishing these principles.

That all people should submit themselves to God alone is the central point in matters of faith. It is the point where people are either liberated from the shackles of myth, superstition and false authority or they continue to be enslaved by diverse deities, people who claim to be intermediaries between God and ordinary people, rulers and dictators who usurp God's sovereignty and authority to rule and legislate, thereby subjugating others.

No social or moral system, whether national or international, can be established on clear and well-defined principles, which are not subject to personal desire and distorted interpretations, unless the doctrine of God's oneness is clearly and precisely established. People cannot release themselves from the pressures of fear, humility and anxiety, and enjoy the true noble status with which God has favoured them unless the concept of God's absolute power and sovereignty is accepted without question, entertaining no rival claim, in any form, by anyone.

Throughout history the conflict between Islam and other systems, and the battle between truth and falsehood, have not been over the fact that God is the Lord of the

universe who conducts its affairs and establishes its laws of nature. The conflict has always been over who is the Lord of mankind, who enacts their laws, conducts their affairs and to whom they must submit. Tyrants of all colours and creeds have been usurping this right for themselves. By practicing it in life they subjugate people to their own power and enslave them. The divine messages and the Prophets, as well as the advocates of Islam, have always struggled to regain this usurped right in order to establish a society which acknowledges that only God has this right.

God has no need for anyone. His kingdom is neither increased by the obedience and worship of believers, nor is it decreased by the disobedience of anyone or by the tyranny of dictators. It is human beings who live in abject humility when they submit themselves to anyone other than God. On the other hand, they gain in dignity, nobility and honour when they submit to God alone and free themselves from subjugation to anyone else. Since God wants people to live in dignity and honour, He has sent His messengers with the task of returning mankind to the worship of Him alone and to liberate them from subjugation by their fellow men. This is for people's own good, not for the benefit of God who has no need for anyone.

Submission to God alone means the acknowledgement of His Lordship which, in turn, means that He is the master who can conduct their affairs by His legislation and commandment. This is the subject matter of God's book, as stated at the opening of this *sūrah: "This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All-aware. Worship none but God."* (Verses 1-2) Indeed this is the meaning of worship as recognized by the Arabs in whose language the Qur'ān was revealed.

The acknowledgement of the message is essential to the acceptance of the concepts the message aims to establish. Any doubt that all this comes from God destroys its due respect in peoples' minds and consciences. Those who think that it comes from Muĥammad, no matter what degree of greatness they assign to Muĥammad, cannot look on it with the same degree of respect which makes people hesitate before violating any of its major principles or minor details. Indeed the feeling that the message and the faith it establishes come from God is the one which causes those who contravene it to feel uneasy until they eventually return to God. It also makes the believers stand firm and resist any pressure to which they may be subjected.

Acceptance of the message also provides a controlling factor which defines what God wants of His servants. Thus in matters of faith and submission to God people acknowledge only one source. No one will then be able to claim that what he says or legislates comes from God. He will be confronted with the fact that his claim is false.

In all doctrines and social set-ups based on *jāhiliyyah* people and institutions claim sovereignty and the authority to establish values and traditions, but then say: 'This

comes from God.' Such confusion cannot be resolved unless God's word is derived from one source, namely, God's Messenger.

To seek forgiveness for one's sins is evidence that one's heart is alive, recognizes the offence committed and is keen to repent. Repentance means to actually refrain from committing sins and starting to do what God has bidden us to do. This is the practical meaning of repentance. Without it, it has no real existence, and cannot be accepted; and no forgiveness can be granted. If someone claims that he has decided to mend his ways and be a true Muslim, without submitting himself to God alone, and accepting only His legislation, conveyed to us through the Prophet, his claim remains false. It is belied by his submission to some authority other than God's.

Giving glad tidings to those who repent and warning those who turn away are fundamental to the message and its propagation. They utilize the two elements of hope and fear, which are well established in human nature, and which together give very strong and genuine motivation.

To believe in the hereafter is necessary for us to feel that beyond this life there is divine wisdom, and that the goodness to which the divine messages have called is the purpose of life. Therefore, it must be rewarded either in this life or in the hereafter, when human life reaches its perfection. Those who deviate from the way of life God has established are those who sink down and suffer. This should work as a safeguard for human nature against deviation. Thus, when someone is overcome by a fleeting desire or yields to temptation, he soon turns towards his Lord in repentance. Thus life continues in its good way on this planet. To believe in the Day of Judgement is, therefore, not only a method for gaining reward in the hereafter, as some people may think; it also provides motivation to be good in this life and to work for its proper development. Such development is not an end in itself; it is simply a means to establish the sort of life which suits man in whom God has blown of His own spirit, and elevated him above many of His creatures in order to make the goal of his life much more sublime than the goal of animal life.

This explains why the verses of the Qur'ān, perfected and clearly spelled out as they are, call upon us to seek God's forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance. Such is the beginning of good action which God rewards both in this life and in the life to come. Good action is not merely having good intentions and offering worship rituals. It is the type of action that seeks to make human life better in every sense of the word.

The promised reward is certain to come: "*He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit.*" (Verse 3) In as far as this life is concerned, goodly enjoyment may refer to the quality of life, or to having abundance and plenty. Where the life to come is concerned, it includes

both quality and quantity, as well as comforts and pleasures that no human being can begin to imagine.

Let us consider what goodly enjoyment in this life represents. We often see many good people who always seek God's forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance and who work hard advocating His message enduring a life of poverty. Where is this goodly enjoyment, then?

To understand the wider significance of the Qur'ānic text, we need to look at life from a broad angle, so as to see it comprehensively and not a mere fleeting glimpse. When any community puts in place a good system based on belief in God, submission to Him alone, acknowledgement of His Lordship as the only God, and promoting good and productive work, it will inevitably enjoy progress, a comfortable standard of living and a generally good life. Furthermore, it benefits by an equity between effort and reward, and experiences a feeling of contentedness and reassurance in the life of its individual members. Therefore, when we notice that those who are good in themselves and work hard in a particular community have to endure a life of stinted means, we conclude that that community does not implement a system based on belief in God and so does not ensure equity between effort and reward.

Nevertheless, those good and hard-working individuals in such a community will still have goodly enjoyment, even though they may be poor and subjected to harm and persecution. This was indeed the case when the idolaters in Makkah persecuted the small number of believers that responded to the call of Islam. It remains the case in many communities today, where the advocates of the divine message are subjected to much persecution. This is by no means a fanciful claim. The fact that a believer has a direct relation with God, and is reassured of the eventual outcome, more than compensates for whatever hardship he endures in this present life. Indeed, it provides goodly enjoyment for anyone who moves even a single step above the material sense.

We do not say this in order to encourage those who suffer injustice and who receive only a miserable reward for their efforts to accept such injustice. Islam does not approve of this, nor does it sit idle when faced with injustice. The Muslim community, and Muslim individuals as well, are required to remove such injustice so as to ensure goodly enjoyment for all those who work hard. We say this because it is true and it is often experienced by believers who endure poverty and limited means.

"*He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit.*" (Verse 3) Some commentators are of the view that this applies to the hereafter. I feel that it is of general import, making it applicable to both this life and the life to come. But we need to look at it in the same way as we explained what 'goodly enjoyment' in this

present life means, because, in this sense, it is achievable in all situations. A person who has merit will receive his reward at the moment he uses his merit in a good way. He will enjoy contentedness and reassurance, and strengthen his relations with God as he uses his merit to seek God's pleasure. His reward in the life to come will be an added blessing.

"*But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day.*" (Verse 3) This refers to the punishment meted out on the Day of Judgement. Some commentators say that this statement refers to the unbelievers' suffering at the Battle of Badr. When the Qur'ān speaks of a 'great day' in a general sense, this is a reference to the Day of Judgement.

This sense is reinforced by the next verse: "*To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 4) Returning to God occurs in this world and the next, at every moment and in all situations. However, Qur'ānic usage confirms that when such an expression is used, it means the return that comes after this life is over.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 4) This again reinforces the meaning we have outlined, because stating that God has power over all things fits in with the concept of resurrection which the unbelievers found too difficult to accept.

Hiding Away from God

Having thus given a brief outline of what the Qur'ān, the book with perfected and clearly spelled-out verses, contains, the *sūrah* goes on to describe how some of them receive these verses when they are read to them by God's Messenger. It describes the physical movements they make, hanging their heads down and covering their breasts to hide from God. It tells them of the absurdity of such action when God sees them even in their most private situations, and is fully aware of every move made by every creature on earth.

> *They cover up their breasts in order to hide from Him. Surely, when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. There is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its habitation and its resting place. All this is in a clear record. (Verses 5-6)*

These two verses portray an awe-inspiring scene worthy of careful study. It is enough to contemplate the fact that God has knowledge of, and power over, everything, while people of His own creation try to hide away from Him when His Messenger conveys His message.

The first verse portrays what the unbelievers did when the Prophet tried to recite to them God's revelations. They covered their breasts and hung their heads down in order to hide from God, even though they felt, in the depth of their hearts, that He was the originator of this revelation. This they intimated on more than one occasion. The same verse shows how futile such action is. God, who sent down this revelation, is watching them as they hide and as they come out of hiding. In the inimitable style of the Qur'ān this meaning is presented in an awesome personal and private situation. When they go to bed, alone, in the darkness of the night, with all their clothes and covers on, God remains with them. He sees what takes place in such a private situation, and He has power over them in this condition, as well as in any other condition: *"Surely, when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open."* (Verse 5)

God certainly knows what is much more deeply hidden and what is kept much more secret. Their shrouds and coverings cannot hide anything from His knowledge. In such a private situation, however, man feels that he is alone, unseen by anyone. Hence, the Qur'ān touches his conscience and alerts him to what he may overlook: *"He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 5)

He is, indeed, aware of the secrets people keep closely guarded. They are well hidden in people's breasts and kept there permanently. For this reason they are described in the Arabic original as belonging to the bosom, as if they were inseparable. They are, nevertheless, known to God, who is well aware of every action, whisper and movement.

"There is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its habitation and its resting-place. All this is in a clear record." (Verse 6) This is another example of God's knowledge which encompasses everything. All the creatures which live on earth; every human being and every animal, whether it walks, flies, crawls or creeps; and every creature which lives underneath the soil or in the depths of the sea is known to God. He it is who provides them with sustenance and He knows where each one of them abides and where it lies down, where it comes and where it goes. Each single one of them is part of His very detailed knowledge.

Here the Qur'ān gives us an elaborate picture of God's knowledge of His creation. Contemplating this image fills us with awe. The matter, however, does not end with mere knowledge. God also provides sustenance for every single one of this infinite number of creatures. Our minds are even less capable of imagining how all this happens, unless God favours us with some inspiration.

Out of His free-will, God has chosen to provide sustenance to every living creature on earth. He, therefore, has given the earth the ability to meet the needs of all these creatures, and has given these creatures the ability to get their sustenance which is

available on earth in some form or another. Creatures want their provisions in different forms: raw, cultivated, manufactured, resulting from chemical processes or in any other form which generates food. Some creatures for example, like fleas and mosquitoes, feed on blood which is fully digested food.

This comprehensive picture of providing sustenance is the one befitting God's wisdom, grace and compassion as manifested in the way He has created the universe, and the way He has created all creatures with the abilities He has given them. This applies most particularly to man who is put in charge of this planet, and who is given the ability to analyse and synthesise, to grow and produce, to change the face of the earth and develop all life situations as he goes about seeking production by the abilities and powers that God has planted in this universe. In this he also depends on natural laws which make the universe conducive to producing all that it does for the sustenance of all living creatures.

This verse does not mean that every creature has its own predetermined provisions which will not fail to come about even if he chooses not to work for them. Had this been the case, why would God require us to work and utilize the laws of nature? What would be the wisdom of giving all these creatures the abilities He has given them? How would life develop? How would man play his important role in this development?

Every creature has its sustenance; this is a fact. This sustenance is available in the universe, provided by God and He has established laws of nature which make production commensurate with effort. No one, therefore, can remain idle, thinking that the heavens will shower gold or silver on them. The heavens and earth, however, are full of sustenance which is sufficient for all creatures. They need to work in order to obtain their sustenance according to God's laws which neither favour any creature over another nor do ever fail.

However, what people earn can be divided into good and bad. Both come as a result of work and effort. They certainly differ in quality, as well as in the use and results to which they are put.

We should not overlook the contrast provided here by mentioning 'living creatures' and their sustenance, and the goodly enjoyment mentioned in Verse 3 which we have already discussed. The perfect style of the Qur'ān does not overlook the use of such finer elements that enhance the beauty of construction and effect.

Matching Science with the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* moves ahead by giving people a clearer idea of their true Lord, drawing their attention to the fact that He has created the heavens and the earth according to a

certain system, with well-defined stages, to serve a definite purpose. It points out certain manifestations of God's power and wisdom which fit well with the theme of resurrection and reckoning, action and reward: *'He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six days, whereas His throne has rested upon water, so that He may test you [to make manifest] which of you is best in conduct. Yet if you say to them: 'You shall be raised again after death,' those who disbelieve are sure to say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery.'"* (Verse 7)

The verse speaks of the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days, which we discussed when commenting on Verse 3 of *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, page 40 in this volume. This creation is mentioned here in order to establish that there is a definite link between the system which holds the universe together and the system that regulates human life: *"So that He may test you [to make manifest] which of you is best in conduct."* (Verse 7)

What is new in this reference to God's creation is the addition of a parenthetical clause: *"His throne has rested upon water."* This signifies that when God created the heavens and the earth, that is, when He brought them into existence in their final shape and form, water was there and God's throne rested on water.

Where, how and in what condition was this water? How did God's throne rest on it? These are questions which are not answered in the Qur'ānic text. It is not for any commentator who knows his limits to add anything to what the Qur'ānic statement signifies. In such matters, what God has chosen not to reveal to us we cannot know from any other source.

Nor is it for us to try to find some endorsement of any Qur'ānic statement by what we call 'scientific' theories, even if the Qur'ānic statement, at its face value, fits well with any particular theory. 'Scientific' theories are always liable to be turned upside down whenever scientists, having tested a new assumption, discover that it provides a more credible explanation of natural and universal phenomena than the earlier theory. Every Qur'ānic statement is true regardless of whether or not science discovers the fact it states. There is a difference between what we consider to be a scientific fact and what is a scientific theory. A scientific fact is subject to experiment, but it remains always within the realm of probability. It is never taken as absolute. On the other hand, a scientific theory is based on an assumption which aims to explain a certain natural phenomenon or phenomena. It admits changes and amendments. It may even be proved wrong. Hence, it cannot be used to explain any Qur'ānic statement, nor can it be supported by the Qur'ān. Its scope is different from that of the divine book.

To seek compatibility between Qur'ānic statements and scientific theories betrays a lack of seriousness in one's faith in the Qur'ān and one's acceptance of it as true

and as revealed by God who is well aware of all things. It betrays an overall fascination with science, giving it a far greater role than its natural one. Those who think that by attempting to establish compatibility between the Qur'ān and science do the Qur'ān and faith a service should be careful. Defeat has crept into their hearts. A faith which depends on the findings of ever-changing human knowledge and human science in order to be more firmly established is one which needs to be reviewed. The Qur'ān comes first. What it states is always true. It is immaterial whether scientific theories are in agreement or disagreement with the Qur'ān. Experimental scientific facts operate within a different area to that of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān has left such facts to us to work with them freely, and make whatever conclusions our experiments establish. On the other hand, the Qur'ān takes upon itself the task of establishing in the human mind the values of righteousness and sound reasoning and liberating it from delusion, superstition and myth. It also seeks to establish a way of life which ensures that the human mind remains sound, free and active. It gives it the freedom to operate within its scope and establish by its own experiments whatever practical facts it concludes. The Qur'ān only rarely mentions scientific facts, such as that water is the source of life and the element common to all living creatures, and that all living creatures have been created in pairs, even self-fertilizing plants which contain both male and female cells.[15]

Let us now reflect on this verse from the proper point of view, that is, faith and life: "*He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six days, whereas His throne has rested upon water, so that He may test you [to make manifest] which of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 7)

He has created the heavens and the earth in six days. There are several points not expressly stated here, but referred to later in the *sūrah.* He has created them in this span of time to make them suitable for the emergence of human life. He has also created man and made the earth and part of the heavens subject to His will. He Himself exercises His power over the whole universe: "*so that He may test you [to determine] which of you is best in conduct.*" Here, the text seems to make the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days, coupled with the fact that God has power over the whole universe, a test for man. This adds to the seriousness of the test and makes people feel their own importance.

As God, the Creator, has endowed the earth and the heavens with what makes the emergence of the human race possible, He has equipped man with certain abilities and made his nature responsive to the law which governs the universe. He has also left him an area of free choice. Man is, therefore, capable of choosing the path of right guidance, whereupon he is helped by God. Or he can choose the path which leads

[15] For a more detailed discussion of the subject of the Qur'ān and science, see Vol. I, pp. 217-222 (Revised edition 2003), and Vol. V, pp. 149-150.

him astray, and which God lets him follow. He leaves people to do whatever they want, so that He can test them and see who is the best in conduct. He does not, however, test them to find anything out. Indeed He knows, and there is no limit to His knowledge. Instead He tests them to make their secret actions appear on the surface. They then receive their reward or punishment according to God's will and justice.

Denial of the resurrection and the reckoning and the handing out of rewards sounds very strange in this context. When it is stated that testing people is linked with the creation of the heavens and the earth and is essential to this universal system and the laws of existence, those who deny it sound both absurd and totally unaware of the major facts of the creation of this universe. For this reason they are surprised and stunned by these facts: "*Yet if you say to them: 'You shall be raised again after death,' those who disbelieve are sure to say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery.'*" (Verse 7)

What a strange claim. How false it sounds in the light of the preceding Qur'ānic statement!

Man in Different Moods

In their denial of the Day of Judgement, the unbelievers are seen to be totally unaware of its close relation to the law that governs the whole universe. They demonstrate the same ignorance concerning punishment in this life. They question the fact that they have not already been overtaken by suffering and punishment. They wonder at the delay: "*If We defer their suffering for a definite term, they are sure to say: 'What is holding it back?' On the day when it befalls them there will be nothing to avert it from them; and they shall be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride.*" (Verse 8)

Where earlier prophets had produced miracles, it was to no avail for their communities which continued to reject their messages. Immediate punishment was thus their lot. This was due to the fact that the messages delivered by those prophets were addressed to a specific community, or generation. And the miracles they produced were witnessed only by that generation.

The Prophet Muḥammad, however, was given the task of delivering the final message, addressed to all generations and all communities. The miracle supporting his message was not a material one. It could, therefore, be preserved so that it could be contemplated and accepted by generation after generation. It is divine wisdom, then, that has ruled out the infliction on his community of an exterminating punishment. However, such punishment may be visited on groups or individuals of this community at particular times. The same applies to the Jews and Christians, who

received earlier Scriptures, and who also have never been subjected to the sort of catastrophe that had eliminated earlier communities.

In their ignorance the unbelievers here question why their punishment, if any, is delayed. They do not realize that it is delayed only to an appointed time. Nor do they recognize that behind this delay lies God's wisdom and compassion. When the suffering overwhelms them, as it will surely do, they will have no means of averting it. It will encompass them all for their derision, evidenced by their questioning: *"On the day when it befalls them there will be nothing to avert it from them; and they shall be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride."* (Verse 8)

A believer, indeed anyone who takes a serious view of things, does not ask for God's punishment to be hastened. Such people know that if punishment is deferred, such deferment is as a result of God's compassion and wisdom, so that those who are more responsive to faith may eventually accept it. Indeed in the period during which God chose not to inflict overwhelming punishment on the Quraysh unbelievers many of them adopted Islam and served it well afterwards. Of their offspring many were good servants of Islam. These are only partial manifestations of God's purpose and wisdom. He alone knows it in full. Man, with his finite reason and hasty view, cannot know it all.

The rest of the passage describes aspects of the psychology of man, a remarkable creature who, without faith, remains short-sighted, inconsistent and vacillating: *"And thus it is: if We let man taste some of Our grace, and then take it away from him, he becomes utterly in despair, totally ungrateful. And if We let him taste ease and plenty after hardship has visited him, he is sure to say: 'Gone is all affliction from me,' and he grows jubilant and boastful. Not so are the ones who are patient in adversity and do righteous deeds. They shall have forgiveness and a great reward."* (Verses 9-11)

This is a perfectly accurate picture of man as he is: hasty, shortsighted, living only for the present, influenced only by present circumstances, forgetful of what has passed and heedless of what may follow. He is either in despair once God's grace is removed from him, ungrateful for what he has enjoyed, or overly jubilant, boastful and arrogant when ease and plenty are his lot. He does not persevere when he tastes hardship, hoping and praying that God will have mercy on him and lighten his hardship. Nor does he moderate his jubilation when he enjoys God's abundant bounty, or consider that it may be withdrawn.

"Not so are the ones who are patient in adversity." (Verse 11) Such people remain steadfast when they enjoy ease and plenty and when they endure adversity. Many people may be too proud to show weakness when they suffer any hardship. But few indeed are those who do not give themselves airs when they enjoy bliss and affluence. *"And do righteous deeds,"* in both situations. *"They shall have forgiveness and a great reward,"* for their commendable attitude in both situations. A serious view of

faith, manifested in righteous deeds, is the only thing that protects man from despair during hardship and from arrogance during times of ease and plenty. It is the only factor which helps many adopt a consistent attitude in both situations. With faith man feels his link with God. He is thus not overwhelmed by adversity. Nor is he proud and insolent when he enjoys abundance. To a believer both situations are beneficial. As the Prophet says, only a believer derives benefit from both situations.

Short-Sighted Requests

Those who betray a total ignorance of God's purpose and wisdom in creating the universe and man demand that the messengers be angels or, at least, accompanied by angels. They underestimate the value of the message and demand that a messenger be given vast treasure. Here the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet and asks what he is going to do about such people.

> *Is it, then, conceivable that you may omit any part of what is being revealed to you and feel distressed in your heart at their saying: 'Why has not a treasure been bestowed on him from on high?' – or, 'Why has not an angel come with him?' You are only a warner, whereas God has everything in His care. (Verse 12)*

This verse does not present a direct question. Instead it imparts the impression that any human being would be distressed at such ignorance, stupidity and intransigence. Basically, the Prophet is being asked whether his distress and irritation at such people would make him leave out some parts of the revelations he receives from God, so as to avoid the sort of answers other prophets received from their communities.

The ending of the verse, however, clearly states that the Prophet's duty is to warn them: '*You are only a warner.*' Such people need to be warned. Hence this aspect of the Prophet's role is emphasized here.

As you do your duty you know that "*God has everything in His care.*" He will do with them what He wills, according to the laws He has established, and He will hold them accountable for what they do. The Prophet is not responsible for either their acceptance or denial of faith. He is only a warner.

This last verse lets us know the difficulties the Prophet faced at this time, and how he felt his burden to be very heavy indeed. It reminds us of the unbelievers' intransigence, hostility and conceit. Few were they at this time who responded favourably to the Prophet's call, and they endured great hardship. Yet, revelations continued to be bestowed on him from on high providing encouragement and reassurance.

A Challenge Never to be Met

The unbelievers often claimed that the Qur'ān was a forgery, invented by the Prophet. Here, he is instructed to challenge them to produce ten *sūrahs* similar to the Qur'ān, and to that end, they are able to seek the help of whomever they like: *"If they say: We has invented it,' say: 'Produce, then, ten invented sūrah*s *like it, and call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true.'"* (Verse 13) The same sort of challenge occurs in the preceding *sūrah,* Jonah, but there they are only challenged to produce one *sūrah* like the Qur'ān. So why are they now challenged to produce ten *sūrahs?*

Earlier commentators on the Qur'ān say that the challenge was narrowed down chronologically. They were first challenged to produce a book like the Qur'ān, then ten *sūrahs* and later the challenge was reduced to one *sūrah.* There is, however, no evidence to support this claim. It appears that *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, was revealed earlier than the present one, Hūd. The challenge there was to produce one *sūrah* while here it is ten. It is true that the chronological order of the revelation of verses does not necessarily follow the order of the revelation of the *sūrahs* in which they occur. Furthermore, more than one *sūrah* could have been revealed at the same time. A later verse could have been attached to an earlier *sūrah.* We have, nevertheless, no evidence to prove that the verse which contains the challenge in *Sūrah* 10 was revealed at a later date than the challenge in the present *sūrah.* We simply cannot make such an arbitrary claim.

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Manār,* the eminent scholar, Rashīd Riđā', tries hard to explain the challenge made here to the unbelievers to produce ten *sūrahs.* He claims this challenge is concerned with the historical accounts given in the Qur'ān. He says that up to the time this *sūrah* was revealed God's revelations included only ten *sūrahs* with such detailed accounts. In this connection, the production of a single *sūrah* would be much more difficult for them because of the different styles in which the historical accounts are told in the Qur'ān. If they were to imitate the Qur'ān they would have needed ten *sūrahs* to produce similar stories.[16]

The matter is, in my view, much easier than this. The challenge took into consideration the particular circumstances of those making the accusation that the Qur'ān was invented. As the process of its revelation continued, the Qur'ān dealt with particular conditions and cases. Each time, its response was the one most fitting to the case in hand. Hence, the challenge was once to produce a Qur'ān like the one revealed. In other situations it required them to produce a single *sūrah,* or ten *sūrahs.* No chronological order needs to be taken into consideration. The purpose was to challenge them to produce anything like the Qur'ān, in full or in part. The challenge

[16] Muĥammad Rashīd Riđā', *Al-Manār,* Vol. 12, pp. 32-41.

indeed related to the quality of the Qur'ān, not to any quantity of it. Needless to say, in quality, a single *sūrah* is the same as the Qur'ān in full.

"And call for help on all you can other than God, if what you say is true." (Verse 13) The challenge included anyone they cared to call to their aid: their deities whom they claimed to be God's partners, their finest poets as well as those among them who were endowed with the best literary talents. All they had to do to prove their allegation that the Qur'ān was invented, was produce ten *sūrahs* like those of the Qur'ān.

But all the help you seek will produce nothing. So, *"if they do not respond to you,"* then it should be enough for you to come to know the truth of revelation: *"know that it [the Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high with God's knowledge."* (Verse 14) He alone has the ability to bestow the Qur'ān. Only His knowledge could have produced it the way it is.

They must also realize *"that there is no deity other than Him."* (Verse 14) This is the net result of the inability of their gods to help compose ten *sūrahs* similar to those God revealed. The self-evident conclusion then is that there is only one God who alone is able to reveal such a Scripture.

Having stated this fact, which does not admit any contradiction, the verse concludes with a question which allows for only one answer, unless it be by those who stubbornly refuse to admit the obvious. The question is *"Will you then submit yourselves to Him?"* (Verse 14)

Despite their failure to meet the challenge, their stubborn rejection of the self-evident truth continued. Their rejection was motivated by their unwillingness to relinquish their privileges in this life. They had the wealth and power to subjugate and deprive others of a chance to respond to the call of freedom, dignity and justice, the call to believe that there is no deity but God. Therefore, the following verse describes their true situation and their inevitable destiny: *"As for those who desire only the life of this world and its bounties, We shall fully repay them in this life for all they do, and they shall suffer no diminution of their just dues. It is they who, in the life to come, shall have nothing but the fire. In vain shall be all that they have done in this world, and worthless shall be all their actions."* (Verses 15-16)

Efforts made in this life will produce their results. This is so whether the person who exercises such efforts limits his aspirations to his immediate benefit or has higher aspirations. Hence, the person whose cares are limited to this life and its luxuries and who pins his ambitions to only what this life can offer will have his results in this world to enjoy them as he wishes until the arrival of his appointed time. He will, however, have nothing in the hereafter but the fire of hell, because he has not taken the hereafter into account and has not worked for it. He receives the

rewards of his worldly actions in this world. It is natural that such work will be worthless in the hereafter. The Arabic expression provides a very apt image of an action which seems to bring fat results in this world but leads to destruction in the next.

We see all around us people, individuals and communities, whose aspirations do not go beyond this world, and who actually have abundant enjoyment. We need not wonder about and question this. For this is the rule God has established for this life: *"As for those who desire only the life of this world and its bounties, We shall fully repay them in this life for all they do, and they shall suffer no diminution of their just dues."* (Verse 15)

Having accepted this rule, we must not forget that these very people could have gone about their lives doing the same things but pinning their aspirations to the hereafter and observing God's laws in their lives. Had they done so, they would have had, as a result, the same bounties in this world and received, in addition, the bounties of the life to come.

To work for the hereafter is no impediment to working for this world. Indeed it is the same action provided that it is done with an eye to earning God's pleasure. To observe God's laws does not limit our scope of action or reduce its effects. Indeed, it increases and blesses both the effort and the result: it makes both our earnings and our enjoyment of what we earn good and blessed, and then it enhances our enjoyment of the limitless pleasures in the hereafter. The only restriction is that we should not seek the enjoyment of what is forbidden. For what is forbidden leads to ruin, not only in the hereafter, but here as well, though the latter may be delayed. This law of nature applies to both individuals and communities alike. History is a witness to the destiny of every community which over-indulged itself in forbidden desires.

Having explained these issues with such clarity, the *sūrah* points out the pagan Arabs' attitude towards the Prophet, the truth God revealed to him, the Qur'ān which testifies that what he stands for is evidenced by clear proof given by God, and that he is a messenger sent by God. Not only so, but the revelations given to Moses also testify to these facts. The aim here being to support the Prophet and the small group of believers who accepted his message. The Qur'ān also warns the unbelievers who reject his message that they will suffer the fire of hell. It paints a picture of the Day of Judgement, whereby their suffering is compounded by humiliation. This is a just retribution for their arrogance. They are unable to escape God's punishment, and cannot find anyone to support them against God. Hence they are the losers as compared with the believers. A tangible image is drawn portraying the wide gulf between the two groups, their natures and attitudes, as well as their respective positions in this life and in the hereafter.

Testimony in Support of Clear Evidence

> *Have you considered him who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord, followed by a testimony from Him, which is preceded by the Book of Moses [revealed as] a guide and a mercy [to people]? These believe in it. As for those, of any group, who deny its truth, the fire is their appointed place. So, be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe. Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God? These shall be brought before their Lord, and witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.' God's curse is on the wrongdoers, who debar others from the path of God and seek to make it crooked, and who deny the life to come. Never can they be immune [from punishment] on earth, nor have they any friends to protect them from God. Their suffering shall be doubled. They could not bear to hear, and they used not to see. These are the ones who have lost their own souls, and that which they used to invent shall fail them. Most certainly, it is they who in the life to come shall be the greatest losers. Those who believe and do righteous deeds and humble themselves before their Lord are destined for Paradise, and there shall they abide. The case of the two parties is like that of the one who is blind and deaf and the one who sees and hears. Can the two be deemed equal? Will you not take heed? (Verses 17-24)*

These verses, with varying rhythm and a multitude of pointers and references, give us an impression of what the small group of early believers faced during that critical period of the history of Islam. It tells us that the situation needed to be clearly defined and faced with positive action.

The Qur'ān cannot be truly appreciated except by those who fight the same battle as the early believers and look to the Qur'ān for guidance and instruction. Those who try to understand the meaning of the Qur'ān in a cold and detached academic manner cannot appreciate its true nature as long as they remain away from its battle. The Qur'ān never reveals its secrets to those who opt for safety and comfort even if their choice requires them to submit to some authority other than God's.

"*Have you considered him who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord, followed by a testimony from Him, which is preceded by the Book of Moses [revealed as] a guide and a mercy [to people]? These believe in it. As for those, of any group, who deny its truth, the fire is their appointed place. So, be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe.*" (Verse 17) Qur'ānic commentators express different views about the meaning of this verse, depending upon their understanding of the referent of each of the third person pronouns used: '*him who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord,*' '*a testimony from him,*' and *[it is] followed by*'.[17] To my mind, the

[17] Translators of the Qur'ān also give different renderings of this verse, since they rely on

weightier view is to say that the one *'who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord'* is the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and, by extension, everyone who believes in his message. The next phrase, *'followed by a testimony from Him,'* means that the Prophet is followed by a witness giving a testimony to the truth of his message and prophethood. This witness is the Qur'ān which is, by itself, proof of its being revealed from God, as no one can produce anything similar to it. *'Which is preceded by,'* again refers to the Qur'ān as a witness, while *'the Book of Moses'* also testifies to the truthfulness of the Prophet as it contains clear references to him as the final prophet, and also by the fact that in its original form, the Torah, which is the Book of Moses, is in full agreement with the Qur'ān.

What confirms this understanding, in my view, is the fact that there is a single and coherent mode of expression running throughout the *sūrah* as it describes the relationship between God and His messengers. They find within themselves clear evidence giving them unshakeable certainty that it is God who sends down revelations to them. Hence, their belief in God is solid, never shaken by doubt. The Prophet Noah says to his community: "*Think, my people! If take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, and He has favoured me with grace from Himself, to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it?*" (Verse 28) Ṣāliĥ (peace be upon him) also says the same words to his community: "*Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin.*" (Verse 63) And the Prophet Shu`ayb also says the same: "*Think, my people! If take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give...*" (Verse 88) There is here evidently a line of expression describing the same relationship between all noble messengers and their Lord. It describes what they feel deep in their hearts about the truth of Godhead, and the truth of their contact with Him through revelations. This single mode of expression is deliberately used throughout the *sūrah* in order to emphasize that the Prophet Muĥammad's relationship with God is the same as that of earlier messengers. This is sufficient to prove the falsehood of all the unbelievers' claims. It also serves to reassure him and his followers that his message is the truth preached by all previous messengers and accepted by all their followers who submitted themselves to God alone.

Thus, the overall meaning of this verse is as follows: consider this Prophet to whose honesty and truthfulness all evidence points. He takes his stand on clear evidence which he finds in his innermost soul, granted to him by his Lord. This clear

---

commentators to give them a clear interpretation of the meaning of each verse. The task of both commentators and translators is made even harder because Arabic uses the same form of third person pronoun for 'he' and 'it'. In our translation of this verse we follow its meaning as given by the author. — Editor's note.

evidence is followed by a testimony from God, which is the Qur'ān, a book with clear characteristics confirming its divine source. He is further supported by another testimony which was given long before him, that is, the Torah, the book revealed to Moses to be a constitution for the Children of Israel and a mercy bestowed on them from on high. The Torah gives evidence to the truthfulness of the Prophet, God's Messenger, in two ways: it tells plainly of his message and prophethood, and it includes the same ideological principles of the universal religion acceptable to God. Is it right, then, that such a prophet should face hostility, stubborn rejection, a denial of his message and accusations of forgery? This is singularly odd, considering all the evidence confirming and endorsing his message.

It then portrays the attitude of believers in the Qur'ān and those, of all races, colours and communities, who deny it, and shows the punishment awaiting them in the hereafter. It reassures the Prophet and the believers that what they have is the truth. They should not, therefore, be disturbed by the unbelievers' attitude despite the fact that they formed the majority at that time.

"*These believe in it. As for those, of any group, who deny its truth, the fire is their appointed place. So, be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe.*" (Verse 17) Some commentators find the first sentence in this section of the verse problematic. If the one who *takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord,'* is the Prophet in person, as we have explained, then the pronoun '*these*' is problematic because it is plural referring to a group who believe in God's revelations and the proof it contains. But there is no problem really. The pronoun *it*' in this sentence, '*These believe in it,*' refers to the 'testimony' which is the Qur'ān. Thus, there is nothing unusual in saying, '*These believe in it,*' meaning that they believe in the Qur'ān. Indeed the Prophet was the first to believe in what was revealed to him, followed by those who accepted his message:

"*The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do all the believers. Each one of them believes in God, His angels, His books and His messengers.*" (2: 285) The present verse refers to him and includes with him those who have accepted his message and believed in the faith which he conveyed to them. This is a method of expression often used in the Qur'ān.

"*As for those, of any group, who deny its truth, the fire is their appointed place.*" (Verse 17) The appointment will not fail, for God [limitless is He in His glory] is the One who has appointed it.

Unshakeable Belief in the Truth

"*So, be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe.*" (Verse 17) The Prophet never entertained any doubt about the

truthfulness of the revelations he was receiving. How could he have doubted when he had taken his stand on clear evidence from his Lord? However, this divine instruction, coming immediately after all the pointers and evidence made in this verse, suggests that the Prophet was concerned that his call had not made any real headway in Makkah and that it faced determined opposition from many quarters. He therefore needed some reassurance, as did the small group of his followers. Such reassurance is granted here by God, the Merciful.

The advocates of Islamic revival face a similar situation wherever they happen to be. They have to confront all sorts of rejection, hostility, ridicule, persecution as well as physical and moral repression. All forces *of jāhiliyyah,* local and international, are marshalled against them. They are subjected to the most ghastly and wicked forms of repression. Conversely, those who conduct such persecution are treated as heroes. In their present difficulty, the advocates of Islam will be well advised to understand this verse fully, with all that it states and implies. They are in urgent need of the reassurance provided by God's appropriate affirmation: "*Be not in doubt concerning it; it is the truth from your Lord, even though most people do not believe.*" (Verse 17)

Advocates of Islam need to find within themselves a share of the clear, divine evidence God's messengers had in their hearts. They need to feel His mercy which God's messengers never doubted for a moment and through which they confirmed their commitment regardless of the great difficulties they faced: "*Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin.*" (Verse 63)

Advocates of Islam nowadays face a situation that is not dissimilar to the situations faced by God's messengers (peace be upon them). In fact, our situation today is similar to that which prevailed when the Prophet conveyed his message to all of humanity. He faced the *jāhiliyyah* into which humanity had sunk after it was put on the path of Islam [i.e. submission to God] by Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, John, Jesus and the rest of the prophets.

Jāhiliyyah may or may not recognize the existence of God. In either form it appoints for people deities who rule over them in a way that is different from that revealed by God. It establishes for mankind values, traditions and legislations which make them submit to these deities, and not to God. The Islamic message to all of humanity is to renounce these false deities in order to return to God. We should believe in Him as our only Lord, submit ourselves to Him, follow only His legislation and obey only His commandments. This is indeed what starts the grinding battle between monotheism and polytheism, Islam and *jāhiliyyah,* the advocates of Islamic revival and the tyrants who rule the world in the name of their false deities.

Hence, it is necessary for advocates of Islam to refer to the Qur'ān where they may find a picture of their own situation and the battle they are fighting. This is what we mean when we say that this Qur'ān can only be appreciated by those who fight its battle, and who face situations similar to those that existed at the time of its revelation and for which it provided guidance and instruction.

The *sūrah* moves on to confront those who deny the validity of the Qur'ān and who blatantly lie against God and the Prophet alleging that the Qur'ān is fabricated. The confrontation starts with a scene from the Day of Judgement when the liars are brought to account before their Lord. Here, everything that can be described as lies against God is included: their allegation that God did not reveal the Qur'ān, their association of partners with Him and their claims that Lordship of this earth, which is an attribute of God's, belongs to them. When they are brought before their Lord on the Day of Judgement all their allegations are publicized so that everyone witnesses their fabrications and falsehood. On the other side stand the believers, happy, reassured, awaiting their fine reward. The two groups are compared to someone who is blind and deaf, and another who is in full possession of his seeing and hearing faculties.

> *Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God? These shall be brought before their Lord, and witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.' God's curse is on the wrongdoers, who debar others from the path of God and seek to make it crooked, and who deny the life to come. Never can they be immune [from punishment] on earth, nor have they any friends to protect them from God. Their suffering shall be doubled. They could not bear to hear, and they used not to see. These are the ones who have lost their own souls, and that which they used to invent shall fail them. Most certainly, it is they who in the life to come shall be the greatest losers. Those who believe and do righteous deeds and humble themselves before their Lord are destined for Paradise, and there shall they abide. The case of the two parties is like that of the one who is blind and deaf and the one who sees and hears. Can the two be deemed equal? Will you not take heed? (Verses 18-24)*

The Greatest Losers

To invent any lie is to commit a terrible crime against truth and against the person concerned. How much more terrible the crime becomes then when the lies are fabricated against God? The culprits then "*shall be brought before their Lord, and witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.'*" (Verse 18) It is a scene where their crime is publicized and they are disgraced. They are singularly pointed out and everyone is made aware that their lies were *'against their Lord'*. The scene

carries an air of defamation, and is followed by a suitably appropriate curse: *"God's curse is on the wrongdoers."* (Verse 18)

This curse is invoked by the witnesses, who are the angels, the messengers and the believers, or probably, all mankind. Thus, humiliation awaits them on that vast stage where they are brought to account. Or, perhaps, it is God's final decision in their case along with the humiliation and the disgrace which they are made to endure in front of all people. In this case it should be read not as an invocation, but as a statement of fact: *"God's curse is on the wrongdoers."* The wrongdoers are those who associate partners with God and who fabricate lies against Him in order to debar others from His path.

"And seek to make it crooked." (Verse 19) They do not wish to act with honesty and sincerity. They do not like to behave in a straightforward manner. They prefer crookedness and deviousness. The pronoun *'it'* used here refers to either the path of God or to life generally. The truth about them is emphasized, for they are those *'who deny the life to come.'* The Arabic expression here is much more emphatic, so that the enormity of their crime is portrayed in sharp relief.

Those who ascribe partners to God (limitless is He in His glory) are the wrongdoers who, indeed, wish all life to be crooked. For they deliberately take themselves away from the straightforward and honest path of Islam. Submission to any deity other than God can only bring about crookedness in every aspect of human existence. When people submit themselves to deities other than God Almighty, they bring humiliation into their own lives, whereas God wants them to enjoy dignity. They perpetrate injustice and oppression while God wants life to be based on justice and fair play. They also waste their own efforts as they try to make their own deities look big and blow up their images so that they can fill the place which belongs to God alone.

These people, cursed and turned away as they are, can never *"be immune from punishment on earth."* (Verse 20) God is always able to punish them in this life, if He so wishes. *"Nor have they any friends to protect them"* or to support them against God. It is, however, His will to defer their punishment to the future life, so that they will endure torment in this world and in the world to come. *"Their suffering shall be doubled."* (Verse 20) They have wasted their senses, and lived as if they were dispossessed of their faculties of hearing and seeing: *"They could not bear to hear, and they used not to see."* (Verse 20)

"These are the ones who have lost their own souls." (Verse 21) This is indeed the most terrible loss. For he who has lost his own soul cannot benefit from anything he gains in its place. These people have wasted their lives. They could not appreciate their dignity which is best fulfilled by lifting themselves above submission to anyone other

than God. They incurred their loss when they denied the hereafter and fabricated lies against their Lord with the expectation that they would never meet Him. In the life to come they will find that they have lost their souls.

"That which they used to invent shall fail them." (Verse 21) Their fabrications will go amiss. They cannot find the lies they invented against God. They will all disappear. *"Most certainly, it is they who in the life to come shall be the greatest losers."* (Verse 22) What loss can be greater than theirs when they have lost their own souls both in this life and in the life to come?

Contrasted with their situation is that of those who believe and maintain good and proper action. These are reassured, have total trust in their Lord, undisturbed by any doubt or worry: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds and humble themselves before their Lord are destined for Paradise, and there shall they abide."* (Verse 23) The Arabic expression used for 'humbling themselves' also denotes submission, trust and reassurance. It depicts a believer's relationship with his Lord which is one of complete satisfaction, security and freedom from all worry.

We have finally a very vivid image of each of the two groups. The first is like a person who cannot see because he is blind, and cannot hear because he is deaf. He does not put his senses and faculties to their ultimate use, serving his mind, so that he can think, reason and contemplate. He is indeed deprived of all his senses and faculties. The other group are like a person who sees and hears and is, therefore, rightly guided by his senses. *"The case of the two parties is like that of the one who is blind and deaf and the one who sees and hears."* (Verse 24) This image is then followed by a rhetorical question: *"Can the two be deemed equal? Will you not take heed?"* (Verse 24) The whole issue does not require more than taking heed. It is a simple, straightforward issue.

2
A Historical Perspective

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِنِّي لَكُمۡ نَذِيرٞ مُّبِينٌ ٢٥

We sent forth Noah to his people: 'I have come to you with a plain warning. (25)

أَن لَّا تَعۡبُدُوٓاْ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَۖ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ أَلِيمٖ ٢٦

Worship none but God. I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day.' (26)

فَقَالَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِن قَوۡمِهِۦ مَا نَرَىٰكَ إِلَّا بَشَرٗا مِّثۡلَنَا وَمَا نَرَىٰكَ ٱتَّبَعَكَ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ هُمۡ أَرَاذِلُنَا بَادِيَ ٱلرَّأۡيِۖ وَمَا نَرَىٰ لَكُمۡ عَلَيۡنَا مِن فَضۡلِۭ بَلۡ نَظُنُّكُمۡ كَٰذِبِينَ ٢٧

The notables of his people who disbelieved said: 'We see you but a mortal man like ourselves. Nor can we see anyone following you except the most abject among us; those who are rash and undiscerning. We do not consider that you are in any way superior to us: indeed we think you are liars.' (27)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ إِن كُنتُ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّي وَءَاتَىٰنِي رَحۡمَةٗ مِّنۡ عِندِهِۦ فَعُمِّيَتۡ عَلَيۡكُمۡ أَنُلۡزِمُكُمُوهَا وَأَنتُمۡ لَهَا كَٰرِهُونَ ٢٨

Noah said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, and He has favoured me with grace from Himself, to which you have remained blind, can we force it / upon you when you are averse to it? (28)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ لَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مَالًاۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِطَارِدِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاۚ إِنَّهُم مُّلَٰقُواْ رَبِّهِمۡ وَلَٰكِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰكُمۡ قَوۡمٗا تَجۡهَلُونَ ٢٩

And, my people, I ask of you no money in return; my reward rests with none but God. Nor will I drive away those who believe; they will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see people with no awareness [of right and wrong]. (29)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ مَن يَنصُرُنِي مِنَ ٱللَّهِ إِن طَرَدتُّهُمۡۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ٣٠

And, my people, who would protect me from God were I to drive them away? Will you not reflect? (30)

وَلَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمۡ عِندِي خَزَآئِنُ ٱللَّهِ وَلَآ أَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ وَلَآ أَقُولُ إِنِّي مَلَكٞ وَلَآ أَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ تَزۡدَرِيٓ أَعۡيُنُكُمۡ لَن يُؤۡتِيَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ خَيۡرًاۖ ٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا فِيٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡۖ إِنِّيٓ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٣١

I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me, or that I know what lies beyond the reach of human perception. Nor do I say: I am an angel. Nor do I say of those whom you eye with contempt that God will never grant them any good. God knows best what is in their hearts — for then I would indeed be a wrongdoer.' (31)

قَالُواْ يَٰنُوحُ قَدۡ جَٰدَلۡتَنَا فَأَكۡثَرۡتَ جِدَٰلَنَا فَأۡتِنَا بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٣٢

'Noah,' they replied, 'you have argued with us, and argued to excess. Bring upon us that with which you have been threatening us, if you are a man of truth.' (32)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَأۡتِيكُم بِهِ ٱللَّهُ إِن شَآءَ وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعۡجِزِينَ ٣٣

He said: 'Only God can bring it upon you, if He so wills. You cannot be immune.

(33)

وَلَا يَنفَعُكُمۡ نُصۡحِيٓ إِنۡ أَرَدتُّ أَنۡ أَنصَحَ لَكُمۡ إِن كَانَ ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَن يُغۡوِيَكُمۡۚ هُوَ رَبُّكُمۡ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٣٤

Nor will my counsel benefit you, much as I desire to give you good counsel, if it is God's will to let you remain in error. He is your Lord and to Him you shall return.' (34)

أَمۡ يَقُولُونَ ٱفۡتَرَىٰهُۖ قُلۡ إِنِ ٱفۡتَرَيۡتُهُۥ فَعَلَيَّ إِجۡرَامِي وَأَنَا۠ بَرِيٓءٞ مِّمَّا تُجۡرِمُونَ ٣٥

Do they claim that he [i.e. Muḥammad] has invented it? Say: 'If I have invented it, upon me be this crime of mine, but I am innocent of the crimes you perpetrate.' (35)

وَأُوحِيَ إِلَىٰ نُوحٍ أَنَّهُۥ لَن يُؤۡمِنَ مِن قَوۡمِكَ إِلَّا مَن قَدۡ ءَامَنَ فَلَا تَبۡتَئِسۡ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ٣٦

Noah received this revelation: 'None of your people will believe now apart from those who have already accepted the faith. Do not be in distress over anything they may do. (36)

وَٱصۡنَعِ ٱلۡفُلۡكَ بِأَعۡيُنِنَا وَوَحۡيِنَا وَلَا تُخَٰطِبۡنِي فِي ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓاْۚ إِنَّهُم مُّغۡرَقُونَ ٣٧

Build the ark under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. Do not appeal to Me on behalf of the wrongdoers. They shall be drowned.' (37)

وَيَصۡنَعُ ٱلۡفُلۡكَ وَكُلَّمَا مَرَّ عَلَيۡهِ مَلَأٞ مِّن قَوۡمِهِۦ سَخِرُواْ مِنۡهُۚ قَالَ إِن تَسۡخَرُواْ مِنَّا فَإِنَّا نَسۡخَرُ مِنكُمۡ كَمَا تَسۡخَرُونَ ٣٨

So he set himself on building the ark. And whenever a group of his people passed by him they scoffed at him. He said: 'If you are scoffing at us, we are indeed scoffing at you, just as you are scoffing at us. (38)

فَسَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَ مَن يَأۡتِيهِ عَذَابٞ

You will surely come to know who it is

تُخۡزِيهِ وَيَحِلُّ عَلَيۡهِ عَذَابٞ مُّقِيمٞ ٣٩

that will be visited by suffering that will cover him with ignominy, and who will be afflicted by long-lasting suffering.' (39)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا وَفَارَ ٱلتَّنُّورُ قُلۡنَا ٱحۡمِلۡ فِيهَا مِن كُلّٖ زَوۡجَيۡنِ ٱثۡنَيۡنِ وَأَهۡلَكَ إِلَّا مَن سَبَقَ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡقَوۡلُ وَمَنۡ ءَامَنَۚ وَمَآ ءَامَنَ مَعَهُۥٓ إِلَّا قَلِيلٞ ٤٠

Until, when Our will came to pass and the fountains of the earth gushed forth, We said [to Noah]: 'Take into it a pair of every species, as well as your family, except those against whom Our word has passed, and all those who have accepted the faith.' None believed with him except a few. (40)

۞ وَقَالَ ٱرۡكَبُواْ فِيهَا بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ مَجۡرٖىٰهَا وَمُرۡسَىٰهَآۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي لَغَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٤١

He said to them: 'Embark in it. In the name of God be its course and its riding at anchor. My Lord indeed is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (41)

وَهِيَ تَجۡرِي بِهِمۡ فِي مَوۡجٖ كَٱلۡجِبَالِ وَنَادَىٰ نُوحٌ ٱبۡنَهُۥ وَكَانَ فِي مَعۡزِلٖ يَٰبُنَيَّ ٱرۡكَب مَّعَنَا وَلَا تَكُن مَّعَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٤٢

And it sailed with them amid waves towering like mountains. Noah cried out to a son of his who stood apart [from the rest]: 'Embark with us, my child, and do not stay with the unbelievers.' (42)

قَالَ سَـَٔاوِيٓ إِلَىٰ جَبَلٖ يَعۡصِمُنِي مِنَ ٱلۡمَآءِۚ قَالَ لَا عَاصِمَ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ مِنۡ أَمۡرِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَۚ وَحَالَ بَيۡنَهُمَا ٱلۡمَوۡجُ فَكَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُغۡرَقِينَ ٤٣

He answered: 'I shall seek refuge in a mountain, which will afford me protection from the water.' Said (Noah): 'Today there is no protection for anyone from God's judgement, except those who shall enjoy His mercy.' Thereupon waves rose up between them and he was among those who were drowned. (43)

وَقِيلَ يَٰٓأَرۡضُ ٱبۡلَعِي مَآءَكِ وَيَٰسَمَآءُ أَقۡلِعِي وَغِيضَ ٱلۡمَآءُ وَقُضِيَ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ وَٱسۡتَوَتۡ عَلَى

And the word was spoken: 'Earth, swallow up your waters. Heaven, cease (your rain).' Thus the waters sank into the

ٱلْجُودِيِّ ۖ وَقِيلَ بُعْدًا لِّلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

earth, and God's will was done, and the ark came to rest on Mount Judi. The word was spoken: Away with these evil-doing folk.' (44)

وَنَادَىٰ نُوحٌ رَّبَّهُۥ فَقَالَ رَبِّ إِنَّ ٱبْنِى مِنْ أَهْلِى وَإِنَّ وَعْدَكَ ٱلْحَقُّ وَأَنتَ أَحْكَمُ ٱلْحَٰكِمِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Noah called out to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, my son is of my family. Surely Your promise always comes true, and You are the most just of judges.' (45)

قَالَ يَٰنُوحُ إِنَّهُۥ لَيْسَ مِنْ أَهْلِكَ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ عَمَلٌ غَيْرُ صَٰلِحٍ ۖ فَلَا تَسْـَٔلْنِ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَعِظُكَ أَن تَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

'Noah,' He answered, 'he was not of your family; his was an unrighteous conduct. Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you lest you become one of the ignorant.' (46)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّىٓ أَعُوذُ بِكَ أَنْ أَسْـَٔلَكَ مَا لَيْسَ لِى بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ ۖ وَإِلَّا تَغْفِرْ لِى وَتَرْحَمْنِىٓ أَكُن مِّنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Said (Noah): 'My Lord, I do indeed seek refuge with You from ever questioning You about anything of which I have no knowledge. Unless You grant me forgiveness and have mercy on me I shall be among the losers.' (47)

قِيلَ يَٰنُوحُ ٱهْبِطْ بِسَلَٰمٍ مِّنَّا وَبَرَكَٰتٍ عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰٓ أُمَمٍ مِّمَّن مَّعَكَ ۚ وَأُمَمٌ سَنُمَتِّعُهُمْ ثُمَّ يَمَسُّهُم مِّنَّا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

The word was spoken: 'Noah, disembark in peace from Us, and with Our blessings upon you as well as upon generations from those who are with you. As for other folk, We shall let them have enjoyment, and then there will befall them grievous suffering from Us.' (48)

تِلْكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهَآ إِلَيْكَ ۖ مَا

These accounts of things that have passed

We now reveal to you. Neither you nor your people knew them before this. Be, then, patient in adversity; for the future belongs to those who are God-fearing. (49)

كُنتَ تَعۡلَمُهَآ أَنتَ وَلَا قَوۡمُكَ مِن قَبۡلِ هَٰذَاۖ فَٱصۡبِرۡۖ إِنَّ ٱلۡعَٰقِبَةَ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٤٩

Preview

Historical accounts form the main part of this *sūrah,* but they are not independent of its theme. They are related to confirm the great truths it aims to establish. This is apparent from the *sūrah's* very opening verses: *"This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All- aware. Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit. But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day. To God you shall all return, and He has power over all things."* (Verses 1-4)

The opening passage of the *sūrah* emphasizes these truths: it reflects on God's creation of the heavens and earth, explains the wonders of human creation, and speaks about the Day of Judgement. Now the *sūrah* takes us back in history to tell us of earlier communities and how they received the message of truth. Thus it recounts the call to faith over many centuries, providing rather detailed accounts of earlier prophets. This is particularly true in the case of Noah and the great flood. These accounts include the arguments over the basic issues of faith as outlined at the *sūrah's* opening, and asserted by every messenger. Those who deny the faith are the same throughout history: they share the same mentality and nature.

The historical accounts in this *sūrah* are given in chronological order, starting with Noah, then Hūd and Ṣāliĥ. We then move on to Abraham, Lot, Shu`ayb and Moses. Thus they serve as a reminder to later generations of the fate of their predecessors.

When a Prophet is Described as a Liar

"We sent forth Noah to his people: 'I have come to you with a plain warning. Worship none but God. I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day." (Verses 25-26) These are practically the same words as used by Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and as outlined in the Qur'ān. This use of almost exactly the same wording to express the main theme is deliberate, as it emphasizes the unity of the message and the unity of the faith. We assume that what is given here is the meaning

of what Noah said to his people, not the exact words, because we do not know what language was used by Noah and his community.

"We sent forth Noah to his people: I have come to you with a plain warning." (Verse 25) The text does not include any intervening clause such as 'and he said to them', because the Qur'ān paints the scene and we see it as if it is happening now, not as a part of ancient history.

Moreover, it gives a brief statement summing up the purpose of the message in one fundamental truth: *"I have come to you with a plain warning."* This is much more emphatic.

This is followed by another brief statement summing up the central theme of the message: *"Worship none but God."* (Verse 26) This is the main issue of faith and the subject matter of the warning. But what is the warning all about: *"I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day."* (Verse 26) Thus the message is conveyed and the warning given in a few brief statements. It should be noted here that the Arabic wording should give the meaning that the day itself is in grief, awe or pain, but it is naturally not so. It is simply described as such to indicate that it senses the pain suffered by people. How about the people themselves, then?

"The notables of his people who disbelieved said: 'We see you but a mortal man like ourselves. Nor can we see anyone following you except the most abject among us; those who are rash and undiscerning. We do not consider that you are in any way superior to us: indeed we think you are liars.'" (Verse 27) This is the response of the elders who assume leadership of the community. It is practically the same response Prophet Muĥammad received from the Quraysh elders, his own tribesmen. They express the same doubts, utter the same accusations, show the same arrogance and give overall the same answer that betrays their ignorance and stupidity.

We find here the same doubt entertained by the ignorant who think that the human race is too low to be entrusted with God's message. If God wants to send a message, then let it be delivered by an angel or some other creature. This ignorant misgiving stems from a lack of trust in the human race. It stands to reason that God would have given man adequate abilities and talents to fulfil his function as vicegerent. He has also enabled certain individuals to carry and deliver God's message. These are chosen by God who knows best the special qualities with which He has equipped them.

Another mark of ignorance is what such people say about the choice of messenger. They maintain that he should have been chosen from among the elders who exercise power and influence in the community. This betrays a total ignorance of the real values attached to human beings, the race assigned the task of building life on earth. These values have nothing to do with wealth, position, or influence in society.

Instead, they have much to do with the soul and its purity, openness, the ability to receive revelations, a willingness to be true to one's trust, perseverance in the face of difficulties and other such noble qualities. But the notables among Noah's people, like the notables among every prophet's community, are blinded by their worldly positions and unable to perceive these more subtle qualities. They cannot visualize what is noble.

"We see you but a mortal man like ourselves." (Verse 27) This is their first argument, but the second is much worse: *"Nor can we see anyone following you except the most abject among us; those who are rash and undiscerning."* (Verse 27) They describe the poor among them as *the most abject'*. This is the way notables always look at the poor who have not been endowed with riches or power. Yet it is mainly such lowly folk who followed the earlier prophets. Such people are, by their nature, more likely to respond to a call which liberates the subjugated and establishes a bond between them and God Almighty. Their nature has not been corrupted by the power of wealth and luxury. Nor are they held back by their interests and social appearances. They have nothing to lose as a result of accepting the true faith. The faith based on God's oneness is indeed the real message of liberating mankind at every stage in history. Hence, it was opposed by tyrants everywhere who try to turn people away from it, levelling at it all sorts of false accusations.

"Nor can we see anyone following you except the most abject among us, those who are rash and undiscerning." This is an accusation which those in power level at the believers, accusing them of being rash, unthinking. The implication being that they would not follow suit. It does not become them to go along the same way as the unthinking, unreflecting masses or to sit idle without trying to turn the believers away from their faith.

"We do not consider that you are in any way superior to us: indeed we think you are liars." (Verse 27) Here they group together the messenger and those who follow him. They see nothing in the believers that makes them more likely to be right or following proper guidance. Had the message being advocated been right and good, they would have seen it for what it is and accepted it, without allowing those who are *'abject'* to beat them to it. They apply here the same erroneous standards that make honour commensurate with wealth, understanding with influence and position, and knowledge with power. Such standards and values gain the upper hand when the faith based on God's oneness gives way *to jāhiliyyah,* and into some form of paganism, even though it may appear in bright attire.[18] This is definitely a setback for humanity. It reduces the importance of the values that equip man to fulfil

[18] In the US, a person's position is commensurate with his income or bank balance. The new pagan *jāhiliyyah* spreads from the US to the rest of the world, including the Orient which claims to be Islamic!

the task God has assigned to him on earth, and make him worthy of receiving God's message.

"*Indeed we think you are liars.*" (Verse 27) This is the last accusation levelled at the Prophet Noah and his followers. The accusation is expressed in a gentle way that befits their social standing in society. They say, '*we think you,*' because an accusation made in absolute and clear terms is more suited to the unthinking masses. Such a form of expression and blatant accusation is beneath the ruling classes in their higher status.

The same type of argument and accusation has been repeated time and again, ever since the Prophet Noah. This is the attitude of people who have full pockets but empty hearts and minds. Their arrogance is limitless.

A Prophet's Passionate Plea

Kind and dignified, the Prophet Noah is full of confidence that his message is the message of truth. He trusts that it comes from God, and is fully aware that his path has been set clearly for him and that his method of operation is sound and honest. He remains unaffected by the false accusations, insolence and blind rejection with which his message has been received. He applies his own values and maintains his own standards. He does not make false claims or accusations as they have done. Nor does he try to give himself any false image or impart anything alien to his message.

> "*Noah said: 'Think, my people! If take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord, and He has favoured me with grace from Himself to which you have remained blind, can we force it upon you when you are averse to it? And, my people, I ask of you no money in return; my reward rests with none but God. Nor will I drive away those who believe; they will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see people with no awareness [of right and wrong]. And, my people, who would protect me from God were I to drive them away? Will you not reflect? I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me, or that I know what lies beyond the reach of human perception. Nor do I say: I am an angel. Nor do I say of those whom you eye with contempt that God will never grant them any good. God knows best what is in their hearts — for then I would indeed be a wrongdoer.'" (Verses 28-31)*

He addresses people with kindness and friendliness stressing his relationship to them: 'My people,' you object to my message saying: *'We see you but a mortal man like ourselves.'* Yet I have a relationship with my Lord which is absolutely clear to me and firmly established in my conscience. This is something that you have not been granted. What if God has bestowed on me His grace, selecting me to carry His

message? This is indeed a great mercy He has shown me. Yet what if both conditions are true, but you remain blind to them, because you are not open minded enough? *"Can we force it upon you?"* (Verse 28) It is not for me to try to force you to accept it *"when you are averse to it."* (Verse 28)

Here we see Noah trying gently to awaken their consciences, making them feel the importance of the values to which they have been blind and making them aware of the characteristics they tend to overlook when it comes to the message and the person selected to carry it. He explains to them that these matters are not decided on the basis of their superficial criteria. At the same time he establishes the right principle that faith must be based on conviction, and that conviction is the result of study and reflection. Compulsion, arbitrary authority and conceit have no bearing on faith and conviction.

"And, my people, I ask of you no money in return; my reward rests with none but God. Nor will I drive away those who believe; they will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see people with no awareness [of right and wrong]." (Verse 29) Those whom you describe as the most abject among you, Noah explains, have responded positively to my call and accepted the faith. I seek no financial gain for my call, and as such, I cannot favour the rich over the poor. All my people are equal as far as I am concerned. He who does not seek pecuniary reward from people cannot make any distinction on the basis of wealth. *"My reward rests with none but God."* He is the only One from whom reward may be forthcoming.

"Nor will drive away those who believe." (Verse 29) This statement implies that Noah's people either demanded or hinted that if he drove them away, they might consider accepting his faith. They claim that they cannot degrade themselves by meeting with such abject people or take the same route as they. Noah's statement though is very emphatic: I am not going to drive them away. I cannot bring myself to do so when they have believed. Their fate is decided by their Lord, not by me: *"They will surely meet their Lord, whereas in you I see people with no awareness."* (Verse 29) You are unaware of the true values by which people achieve their status with God. You are also unaware that all people shall return to Him.

"My people, who would protect me from God, were I to drive them away?" (Verse 30) Who will shield me from God if I contravene His rules and treat the believers among His servants unjustly, when they enjoy His pleasure? Who will protect me from Him if I confirm the false, worldly values which He sent me to change: *"Will you not reflect?"* (Verse 30) Your methods and conditions have certainly caused you to neglect the standards of a true and upright nature.

He then introduces himself and his message. His presentation is simple, devoid of any ornament and decoration, free of all false standards and values. He reminds

them of the true values, looking with contempt on all superficial ones. He disowns all superficiality and states his message as it is, pure and simple, with no false claims. He who wants it, let him take it as it is: as pure as God made it.

"I do not say to you that God's treasures are with me." I do not claim that I am rich or that I can make any of you rich. *"Or that I know what lies beyond the reach of human perception."* (Verse 31) I do not make any claim of any super-human status or allege that my relationship with God exceeds the fact that I have been entrusted with this message. *"Nor do I say: I am an angel."* (Verse 31) I do not claim to have a position which you think to be higher than that of man, so that I may gain favour or high position from you. *"Nor do Ray of those whom you eye with contempt that God will never grant them any good,"* so that I satisfy your pride or accommodate your standards and values. *"God knows best what is in their hearts."* (Verse 31) I have to go by what I see. To me, they appear deserving of honour and hope that God will grant them of His bounty. *"For then I would indeed be a wrongdoer."* (Verse 31) If I made such false claims I would be unjust to the very truth I have come to convey. I would also be unjust to myself, exposed to God's wrath, and I would be unjust to other people to whom I gave a status other than that given them by God.

Thus Noah (peace be upon him) disowns all false values and assumed pretences. He presents his message clearly: real, great, free of all falsehood. He faces them with the clarity and strength of the truth. At the same time he makes a gentle and friendly exposition of the simple truth so that they may look it in the face and decide upon their line of action. No pretence, no flattery, no attempt to win any favour with anyone at the expense of the message and its simple nature. In this Noah sets an example for all advocates of the Islamic message in all generations and provides them with a lesson in how to confront the people of authority with the simple truth, without any attempt to compromise, or flatter, but with the sort of friendliness which is not associated with submission.

At this point, it was clear to the notables that they had no chance of winning the argument. They stiffened their attitude, became determined not to accept any proof of Noah's case, logical and natural as it certainly was. Then they finally rallied themselves in order to deliver a challenge to Noah.

"'Noah,' they replied, 'you have argued with us, and argued to excess. Bring upon us that with which you have been threatening us, if you are a man of truth.'" (Verse 32) This is nothing short of deceit, an attempt to cover up their weakness by putting on a display of strength. It is a challenge made in order to mask their dread of the truth's strength.

Noah, however, remains unaffected by their outright rejection and challenge. He maintains the noble attitude befitting a noble prophet. He continues to explain to

them the truth and the facts which they have ignored when they invite him to bring on the suffering he has warned against. He restates the fact that he is only a messenger whose task is to deliver a message. Their punishment is left to God who has absolute control over their destiny. He alone decides, at His own discretion, whether it is appropriate to punish them here and now or to delay their punishment until a later date. God's will must come to pass, and Noah has no power over it. As a messenger, he has to continue to explain the truth to his people until the last moment. Their rejection and challenge must not deter him from fulfilling his task. Hence, he says to them: *"Only God can bring it upon you, if He so wills. You cannot be immune. Nor will my counsel benefit you, much as I desire to give you good counsel, if it is God's will to let you remain in error. He is your Lord and to Him you shall return."* (Verses 33-34)

If God's law determines that you will perish because of your rejection of the truth, His law will be fulfilled, regardless of my advice. It is not that God will deprive you of benefiting by my advice. It is what you do with yourselves that will, according to God's law, take you away from the right path. You cannot defy God or make yourselves immune from Him. You are always within His reach. He has absolute power over you and over your lives. You cannot escape meeting Him when He brings you to account and decides your reward: *"He is your Lord and to Him you shall return."* (Verse 34)

Prophets Act on Their Instructions

At this juncture in Noah's story we have a remarkable pause. The *sūrah* makes brief reference to the reception of a similar message by the Quraysh unbelievers. There is a remarkable similarity of attitudes, as the Quraysh claim that Muĥammad too invented these stories. The *sūrah* quickly refutes their claims before returning to Noah: *"Do they claim that he (i.e. Muĥammad] has invented it? Say: 'If I have invented it, upon me be this crime of mine, but I am innocent of the crimes you perpetrate.'"* (Verse 35) To fabricate a falsehood is to commit a crime. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to tell the Quraysh: if I have made any such fabrication, I will bear the responsibility for it. Since I am aware that it is a crime to make such fabrications, it is highly unlikely that I would do so. I am, however, innocent of all your crimes, including your false allegations, your rejection of God's message and your associating partners with God. This interjection however does not interrupt the Qur'ānic story, rather it serves the purpose of the *sūrah.*

In the next scene we see Noah receiving God's revelations and commandments. *"Noah received this revelation: None of your people will believe now apart from those who have already accepted the faith. Do not be in distress over anything they may do. Build the ark*

under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. Do not appeal to Me on behalf of the wrongdoers. They shall be drowned.'" (Verses 36-37)

Everything has come to an end: the advocacy of God's message, the warning, and the argument. *"None of your people will believe now apart from those who have already accepted the faith."* (Verse 36) Those who are susceptible to faith have already accepted it. The others are hopeless. God, who knows best what is feasible and what is not, and knows His servants well, has informed Noah of this. Hence, it is pointless to continue with the argument. He is told not to grieve at their rejection or their mockery. *"Do not be in distress over anything they may do."* (Verse 36) God's will has come to pass.

"Build the ark under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration." (Verse 37) We will look after you and give you instructions as you do so. *"Do not appeal to Me on behalf of the wrongdoers. They shall be drowned."* (Verse 37) Their destiny has been decided and you are not to plead their case. You can neither pray for them to be guided to the truth, nor can you pray for their punishment. Prayers are to no avail when God's will comes to pass. It is mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān[19] that he prayed for their destruction. It is understood that his despair came only after he received this revelation.

The next scene shows Noah building the ark, having given up arguing with his people and calling on them to accept the faith: *"So he set himself on building the ark. And whenever a group of his people passed by him they scoffed at him. He said: 'If you are scoffing at us, we are indeed scoffing at you, just as you are scoffing at us.'"* (Verse 38)

The present tense is used here to portray the scene. This brings the scene to life. We see everything happening in front of us now. Noah builds the ark and group after group of his insolent people pass by and scoff at him. They scoff at the man who said he was a messenger from God and argued long with them, but who now busies himself making a boat. They mock him because they can only see what appears to them. Noah, on the other hand, is full of confidence as he tells them that their mockery will rebound: *"If you are scoffing at us, we are indeed scoffing at you, just as you are scoffing at us."* (Verse 38) We will scoff at you because you cannot visualize that God has a definite purpose beyond all this, and you cannot imagine what awaits you: *"You will surely come to know who it is that will be visited by suffering that will cover him with ignominy, and who will be afflicted by long-lasting suffering."* (Verse 39) Will this apply to us or to you when everything will be revealed?

A scene of mobilization follows as the awaited moment draws near: *"Until, when Our will came to pass and the fountains of the earth gushed forth, We said [to Noah]: 'Take into it a pair of every species, as well as your family, except those against whom Our word has*

[19] *Sūrah* 71, Verses 26-27. — Editor's note.

passed, and all those who have accepted the faith.' None believed with him except a few." (Verse 40)

The Arabic phrase translated here as *'the fountains of the earth gushed forth'* could also be literally translated as 'the oven boiled'. There are varying reports about the meaning of this phrase. To pursue each one in an attempt to determine the precise meaning is to go into a maze without guidance. Hence, we confine ourselves to the limits of the text adding nothing to it. The most that we can say is that this phrase may be a reference to a certain signal from God to Noah. It might, on the other hand, have accompanied the execution of God's will as water started to gush forth from the earth and rain poured down in torrents.

When this took place, God said to Noah: "*Take into it a pair of every species, as well as your family, except those against whom Our word has passed, and all those who have accepted the faith.*" (Verse 40) It appears that the whole process was revealed to Noah step by step at the right moment. He first received orders to build the ark and he did. The *sūrah* does not tell us at the beginning why the ark was built, nor does it tell us that Noah was informed of the purpose, until "*when Our will came to pass and the fountains of the earth gushed forth,*" then, he received his instructions for the following stage: "*Take into it a pair of every species, as well as your family, except those against whom Our word has passed, and all those who have accepted the faith.*" (Verse 40)

Again the reports we have vary as to the meaning of the expression, '*a pair of every species.*' They smack of much exaggeration. We, however, will not let imagination carry us away in order to give this statement a precise interpretation. We will only say that Noah was ordered to take into the ark a pair of all such living species as he could take.

"*As well as your family, except those against whom Our word has passed,*" that is, those who deserved to be punished by God in accordance with the law He has laid down. "*And all those who have accepted the faith,*" meaning those who did not belong to his family. These, however, were very few as the Qur'ānic statement makes very clear.

Noah carried out his instructions as they were given to him. "*He said to them: 'Embark in it. In the name of God be its course and its riding at anchor. My Lord indeed is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.'*" (Verse 41) This statement indicates that he put himself and the ark in God's hands and trusted in Him. The ark would float and anchor under God's watchful eyes. For, what could Noah and his people do to steer the ark to safety in such a deluge?

A Rebellious Son

We then have the very awesome scene of the flood. *"And it sailed with them amid waves towering like mountains. Noah cried out to a son of his who stood apart [from the rest]: 'Embark with us, my child, and do not stay with the unbelievers.' He answered: I shall seek refuge in a mountain, which will afford me protection from the water' Said (Noah): 'Today there is no protection for anyone from God's judgement, except those who shall enjoy His mercy.' Thereupon waves rose up between them and he was among those who were drowned."* (Verses 42-43)

Two elements of fear are at work here: one emanates from nature, stormy but silent as it is; and the other is felt in one's innermost soul. Both converge as the ark moves on amidst waves as high as mountains. At this terrible, decisive moment, Noah looks in a certain direction and sees one of his sons who has not joined them in the ark. Paternal emotion is roused in Noah and he calls out to his stray child: *"Embark with us, my child, and do not stay with the unbelievers."* (Verse 42)

Disobedient as he is, the son does not respond to his loving father. A conceited youth, he does not realize the extent of the terrible event which is taking place. He says: *"I shall seek refuge in a mountain, which will afford me protection from the water."* (Verse 43) Aware of the terrible reality, the father pleads with him for the last time: *"Today there is no protection for anyone from God's judgement, except those who shall enjoy His mercy."* (Verse 43) In an instant, the scene changes and the towering waves swallow everything up: *"Thereupon waves rose up between them and he was among those who were drowned."* (Verse 43)

Today as we read this account it is as if we see these events happening now before our very own eyes. The ark is sailing amid huge waves, Noah, the worried father makes one plea after another; his conceited young son insolently turns his back, and then suddenly a towering wave settles the issue. Everything is over as if the dialogue did not take place.

The element of fear and worry in this scene is measured by its depth in the human soul, in the exchange between father and son. It is also measured by its extent in nature, as the waves rise high to submerge the tops of the mountains. Both elements are equal. This is a distinctive feature of artistic imagery in the Qur'ān.

The storm subsides, an air of calmness spreads, the matter is settled and God's will is done. The words used here give the impression of something coming to a complete standstill. *"And the word was spoken: 'Earth, swallow up your waters. Heaven, cease (your rain).' Thus the waters sank into the earth, and God's will was done, and the ark came to rest on Mount Jūdī. The word was spoken: Away with these evil-doing folk.'"* (Verse 44) The earth and the heavens are addressed as if they were human beings. Both comply with the commandment. The earth swallows up its water and the heaven stops raining. Furthermore, the earth's surface was soon dry, as excess waters penetrated deep underground.

"God's will was done and the ark came to rest on Mount Jūdī." (Verse 44) That was its final stop. *"The word was spoken: 'Away with these evil-doing folk.'"* (Verse 44) We are not told who said this, but it generates the impression that the whole affair need not be considered again. Let the evil-doers disappear beyond God's mercy for they deserve to be expelled; let them be banished from memory, for they do not deserve to be remembered.

A Father's Plea

Now that the storm has subsided and the ark has come to rest, the paternal love of a distressed father is once again felt by Noah. He makes this appeal to God: *"Noah called out to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, my son is of my family. Surely Your promise always comes true, and You are the most just of judges.'"* (Verse 45) Noah makes clear that he has absolutely no doubt that God is just and wise. Nothing He does is without reason. Yet he has been promised that his family will be safe and now he requests that God fulfil the promise He made to spare his family. God's answer states the fact which Noah has overlooked. By God's standards and according to His principles, one's family are not necessarily one's blood relations. The true relationship is that of faith. This son was not a believer, and as such he was not a member of the family of Noah, the Prophet.

The answer is firm and emphatic. Indeed there is an element of reproach and warning in the answer: *"'Noah,' He answered, 'he was not of your family; his was an unrighteous conduct. Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you lest you become one of the ignorant."* (Verse 46) A great principle of this religion states that the paramount relationship that exists between individuals is not one based on family affinity: *"He was not of your family; his was an unrighteous conduct."* Your relationship with him is thus severed despite the fact that he was your own son. Since the basic tie between the two of you does not exist, no other tie has any significance.

Since Noah's prayer requested the fulfilment of a promise which he felt had not happened, the answer includes an implicit reproach and warning: *"Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you lest you become one of the ignorant."* (Verse 46) The admonition is needed lest Noah become one of those who are ignorant of the real ties and relationships, or unaware of God's promise and its interpretation. For God's promise has been done and Noah's true family has been saved. Noah, a true believer and God's humble servant, trembles with fear that he may have erred in what he said to his Lord. He, therefore, appeals to Him, praying for His forgiveness: *"My Lord, I do indeed seek refuge with You from ever questioning You*

about anything of which I have no knowledge. Unless You grant me forgiveness and have mercy on me I shall be among the losers." (Verse 47)

God has mercy on Noah and he is reassured. He is given blessings which are also extended to the good people of his offspring. The others, however, will receive severe punishment: "*The word was spoken: 'Noah, disembark in peace from Us, and with Our blessings upon you as well as upon generations from those who are with you. As for other folk, We shall let them have enjoyment, and then there will befall them grievous suffering from Us."* (Verse 48) The end is clear: he and those who believe of his offspring will be saved and will enjoy a magnificent reward. Those who prefer the enjoyment of this worldly life, however, will have it for a while but will then be overtaken by severe punishment. The same glad tidings and the same warnings which were made at the opening of the *sūrah* are confirmed by the story in order to make them much more real to those whom the Qur'ān addresses.

The commentary on this history is summarized in one verse: "*These accounts of things that have passed We now reveal to you. Neither you nor your people knew them before this. Be, then, patient in adversity; for the future belongs to those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 49) This sums up the objectives of relating such stories in the Qur'ān:

- It establishes the fact of revelation denied by the unbelievers. These stories were unknown to the Prophet and to his people. It was part of God's knowledge and the Prophet could not have known about it except through revelation from the One who knows all.
- It also establishes the fact that the true faith has always been the same, ever since Noah, the second father of mankind. The message of the Prophet uses almost the same expressions as Noah.
- The objections and the accusations made by those who denied the message of the Prophet are always the same. Furthermore, the glad tidings and the warnings made by the Prophet will surely come to pass. This story is then a testimony from history.
- Another fact which is established by this comment is that God's laws will not fail. They do not favour anyone: "*The future belongs to those who are God-fearing."* They are the ones who will prosper and who will be given power.
- It also establishes the true tie that exists between individuals and generations. It is the tie of faith, the same faith which holds together all believers in God, the only Lord of the universe. All generations of believers have in common the fact that they submit themselves to Him alone and ascribe divinity to no one else.

The Origin of Monotheistic Religions

People often wonder whether the great flood engulfed the whole earth or just the area where Noah and his people lived. What were the boundaries of that area in the ancient world or in the new one? We simply have no definite answer for any of these questions. But then the significance of the story is in no way affected by our lack of knowledge on this point. Taken at face value, the Qur'ānic text suggests that the people of Noah constituted all mankind at that particular time. Their land was the only inhabited area of the earth. Secondly, the floods must have swept through this whole area, drowning all living creatures, except those saved in the ark.

This is sufficient for us to understand that great event which undoubtedly happened, since no lesser source than the Qur'ān tells us about it. Our history books, on the other hand, record nothing about that ancient period. The writing of history is a relatively modern art that has recorded only a fraction of the events witnessed by mankind. Besides, whatever is recorded by history is subject to error, falsification and distortion. Hence, we need not seek history's confirmation for anything which we are certain has happened, since we are told about it by God who revealed the Qur'ān.

The legends of different communities often speak of a flood far back in their history, one caused by the erring ways of their ancestors. The stories related in the Old Testament also mention the flood that overwhelmed Noah's people. None of this, however, should be discussed in conjunction with the Qur'ānic account of the flood, because that would mix the true and accurate account of the Qur'ān with myths of unknown origin and poor authenticity. However, the fact that such myths exist and are told in different communities suggests that the floods covered the lands of these communities, or that its memory travelled with the offspring of those who were saved.

We should also remember that neither the Old Testament, which includes Jewish Scriptures, nor the New Testament with its Christian Scriptures is the text revealed by God. All copies of the Torah that God revealed to Moses were burnt by the Babylonians when they enslaved the Jews. It was rewritten several centuries later by Ezra — who is probably the one mentioned in *Sūrah* 9 as Uzayr — about five centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ. He recorded what remained of the original Torah, but the rest is of human authorship. The Gospels, on the other hand, include only what Christ's disciples and their students could remember one century after Christ's life on earth had ended. Numerous stories and legends were subsequently added to them. Hence, we cannot rely on these Scriptures to establish certainty on any matter.

This is anyway a side issue. What we need to do is try to understand the moral of this great event. Indeed, the story drives home several lessons which we will now briefly discuss.

As we have seen, Noah's people were immersed in *jāhiliyyah.* Hardened in their evil ways, they stubbornly rejected his message based on God's oneness and the need for all people to submit themselves to Him only. Noah's people were Adam's progeny, and we know from Adam's history related in *Sūrahs* 7 and 2, The Heights and The Cow, that his fall was the prelude for him and his offspring to be charged with the task of building the earth. This was the purpose behind his creation. God gave him the qualities and abilities necessary to perform this task after He had told him how to repent and seek forgiveness for his error. Adam received certain commandments from his Lord and God forgave him his sin. He then pledged to God, along with his wife and offspring, that they would always follow God's guidance and never listen to Satan, their eternal enemy.

Adam, then, descended to earth with the right faith: submitting himself to God, following His guidance. He did, no doubt, teach his children the meaning of Islam, i.e. submission to God. Hence, this submission, or Islam in the general sense of the word, was the first faith ever known to man on earth. There was no other faith alongside it. Hence, if Noah's people, a later generation, were so immersed in the type of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* described in this *sūrah* we can state, in all certainty, that such *jāhiliyyah,* with all that it entailed of paganism, legends, idols, false concepts and traditions, is something more recent than the pure faith of Islam with which human life on earth started. Man's deviation from the monotheistic faith based on submission to God, i.e. Islam, in its broader sense, took place as a result of Satan's machinations. As the enemy of both God and man, Satan always exploits people's weaknesses whenever they become lax in their observance of God's commandments and deviate from His guidance. God has created man and granted him a measure of free choice, by which he is tested. With this measure he can choose to hold fast to God's guidance, fortifying himself against his enemy. Or he can deviate from God's guidance and follow any other way. When he deviates, even slightly, Satan overpowers him, eventually, pushing him to that state of ignorance experienced by Adam's offspring. Yet Adam was a prophet who taught the faith based on submission to God.

The fact that the first faith ever known on earth was Islam, or submission to God alone, makes it imperative for us to reject as conjecture the theses advanced by the masters of Comparative Religion and other evolutionists. These claim that monotheism is a recent development in human religion, preceded by several stages and forms of polytheism and dualism, worship of natural forces, spirits, planets, etc. Whatever research is made in this connection follows a particular methodology

predetermined by historical, psychological and political factors. This methodology destroys the basis of divine religions, and the very concept of revelation and divine messages, in order to establish that all religions are a human product. Once this is established it can easily be claimed that religions developed as human thought advanced.

Some of those who write in defence of Islam err, unwittingly endorsing the theories of specialists in the history of religion who conduct their research along such predetermined lines. While defending Islam so enthusiastically they unwittingly destroy the basis of the Islamic faith as stated in the Qur'ān with absolute clarity. The Qur'ān states that Adam (peace be upon him) descended on earth with the faith of Islam. It also states that Noah (peace be upon him) faced a later generation that had installed ignorance in place of Islam. He advocated basically the same faith based on the absolute oneness of God; i.e. the Islamic faith in its broader sense. The same cycle repeated itself after Noah with mankind abandoning Islam to adopt different *jāhiliyyah* doctrines. All prophets were sent with the same message of God's oneness, calling on mankind to submit themselves to God alone. At no point was there any development in the divine faith in as much as it relates to the basics of faith. Evolution, expansion and advancement addressed only the laws that accompanied the same faith. An enlightened study of the development *of jāhiliyyah* doctrines does not lead to the conclusion that people progressed to monotheism. It rather shows that the monotheistic faith, preached by successive prophets and messengers, left more traces in succeeding generations, even after they had deviated from true faith, to make their doctrines nearer to the monotheistic origins. Belief in God's oneness dates back much further than all pagan religions. This faith was complete right from the start, because it was not the result of human thinking or increased human knowledge. It was given to man by God, and as such it was true and complete from the outset.

This is clearly established in the Qur'ān. It is not for any Muslim scholar either to depart from what is stated so clearly in the Qur'ān or to follow professors of Comparative Religion as they grope for a coherent theory.

Devoting a chapter to the origins of faith in his book, *Allah,* or God, `Abbās Maĥmood al-`Aqqād, writes:

> Human beliefs developed in parallel to human development in scientific knowledge and other skills. Thus, early beliefs fit with the standards of early human life, as did human scientific knowledge and skills. This means that such early knowledge in the scientific field was no more advanced than early beliefs and worship. Neither field reflects a clearer grasp of the truth.

> Moreover, human efforts to formulate a true concept of religion must have been harder and longer lasting than those related to science and industry. The greatest truth in the universe must be harder to achieve than the truth of different areas addressed at times by science and at others by industry.
>
> People remained ignorant of how the sun functions, although it is the clearest thing our eyes see and our bodies feel. For a long time, the common belief was that it was the sun that orbited the earth. They explained its movement and other aspects in much the same way as they sought to explain mysteries and interpret dreams. People's ignorance of the nature of the sun, which may be true even today, never prompted anyone to deny its existence.
>
> This means that our reference to the origins of religion in the early periods *of jāhiliyyah* does not indicate that religiosity was false, or that it meant a search for the impossible. All that it shows is that the greatest truth is too momentous to be comprehended in full in one generation. People must gather it in stages, one generation after another, in the same way as they do with smaller truths of which their senses are more cognizant. However, the greatest truth requires them to put more toil and effort into the process.
>
> Studies in Comparative Religion have unravelled a multitude of myths and superstitions in which early humanity believed. Traces of these continue to be found among primitive communities or nations of ancient civilization. It was never presumed that such studies could make any different discoveries, or that early beliefs could be anything other than such myths. Indeed, this is the logical conclusion which scholars expected. They did not expect to unearth anything that could be the basis of a completely new outlook on the essence of belief. A scholar who imagines that his research in primitive faiths could lead him to conclude that the early humans recognized the fundamental universal truth, complete and pure, is only pursuing a mirage.[20]

In another chapter, on the 'Stages of Belief in God', al-`Aqqād writes:

> Scholars of Comparative Religion identify three main stages of belief in primitive communities: polytheism, henotheism and monotheism.
>
> In the polytheistic era, early tribes worshipped scores or even hundreds of deities. In this era, it was often the case that a large family would have its own deity which members of the family worshipped. Alternatively, they may have a charm or a symbol which deputized for the deity in accepting prayers and offerings.

[20] A.M. al-`Aqqād, *Allāh,* Cairo, 1960, pp. 13-14

> In the second stage, deities continued to be worshipped in their hundreds. However, one of them begins to acquire greater prominence, either because it is the deity of the largest tribe commanding the allegiance of other tribes, or because it commanded higher authority, such as the god of rain in a land that depends on rain for irrigation, or the deity commanding wind in an area often hit by hurricanes.
>
> The third stage witnesses the rise of nations. Each nation congregates around the same worship although different deities dominate different provinces. It could happen in this stage that one nation imposes its own religious worship on another, in the same way as it imposes its political authority. It may also accept that the deity of the defeated nation should submit to the higher authority of the deity of the victor nation, yet the former continued to be worshipped by its defeated adherents.
>
> A nation attains this stage of deficient monotheism only after going through different stages of expanding human knowledge that makes old legends and superstitions no longer acceptable. Thus, God is described in terms that are closer to perfection and holiness than were given to old deities worshipped during the polytheistic stage. Worship becomes associated with contemplation and reflection, and with God's will and superior wisdom. The main deity is often thought of as the only true Lord, while other deities are reduced to a rank similar to that of angels or gods that incurred the displeasure of the superior deity.[21]

It is clear from al-`Aqqād's views and what he attributes to other authorities in Comparative Religion that the origin of religious belief lies with human beings. Thus, it reflects their rational, scientific, political and civilizational development. Progress followed its consistent line, starting with polytheism, then moving to dualism and finishing with monotheism. Indeed this is clear in the first sentence the author writes in his Introduction: "This book discusses the rise of the belief in God, from the time man worshipped a deity until he recognized the One God and purified his belief in God's oneness."

Without a doubt, God states in His glorious book, the Qur'ān, most clearly and decisively, something that is at variance with what al-`Aqqād has written, influenced as he is by scholars of Comparative Religion. What God clearly states is that Adam, the first man on earth, was fully aware of the truth of God's oneness. He knew it to be pure, unmixed with any trace of polytheism or dualism, and he knew the meaning of submission to God alone and its practical manifestation in following only God's legislation. He also communicated this faith to his children, leading to the existence

[21] Ibid., pp. 28-29

of several generations in the earliest period of human history who knew no belief other than God's oneness and no faith other than submission to God, or Islam. As time went by, and generations of Adam's progeny succeeded one another, deviation crept in, perhaps towards dualism and perhaps towards polytheism. Nonetheless people began to submit to a multitude of false deities. Then the Prophet Noah brought back the divine faith of monotheism. The flood drowned all those who persisted with their erroneous beliefs. Only those who believed in God's oneness were saved. They were the ones who rejected all forms of polytheism and the association of partners with God. We may say without fear of contradiction that several generations after Noah continued to live under the divine faith, Islam, based on pure monotheism. But then again, with the passage of time, deviation crept in and people started to move away from the true faith. This was the case with every one of God's messengers: *"Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone."* (21: 25)

This is certainly at variance with what specialists in Comparative Religion and al-`Aqqād conclude. The two approaches are diametrically opposed in methodology and conclusion. We should remember that the views of academics and writers are theories that may contradict one another, which means that none provides a final and confirmed judgement, even by human standards.

Needless to say, when God unequivocally states something that is contradicted by others, the statement to follow is God's. This applies particularly to those who write in defence of Islam, aiming to clarify misconceptions about Islam and the origin of faith. For there is no service to Islam by undermining the fact that it came to us in the form of revelations bestowed by God. No human being has invented it. It preached the basic truth of God's oneness from the very first day, and never entertained any idea or concept that is at variance with the truth of God's oneness. Nor did it preach any concept other than that of God's oneness in any of the divine messages.

These brief remarks demonstrate the grave danger we expose ourselves to if we borrow our basic concepts from un-Islamic sources. They also show how deeply Western thought influences people who follow its methodologies, even when they try to defend Islam and refute accusations levelled at it by those who are hostile. *"Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright."* (17: 9)

Ties and Families

Another point to reflect on in Noah's history as told in this *sūrah* concerns his son, whom he was told did not belong to his family. This outlines an important aspect of the nature of the Islamic faith and how it works in human life. We need first to remind ourselves of some verses in this respect:

Noah received this revelation: 'None of your people will believe now apart from those who have already accepted the faith. Do not be in distress over anything they may do.' (Verse 36)

When Our will came to pass and the fountains of the earth gushed forth, We said [to Noah]: 'Take into it a pair of every species, as well as your family, except those against whom Our word has passed, and all those who have accepted the faith.' None believed with him except a few. (Verse 40)

And it sailed with them amid waves towering like mountains. Noah cried out to a son of his who stood apart [from the rest]: 'Embark with us, my child, and do not stay with the unbelievers.' He answered: 'I shall seek refuge in a mountain, which will afford me protection from the water' Said (Noah): 'Today there is no protection for anyone from God's judgement, except those who shall enjoy His mercy.' Thereupon waves rose up between them and he was among those who were drowned. (Verses 42-43)

Noah called out to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, my son is of my family. Surely Your promise always comes true, and You are the most just of judges.' Noah,' He answered, 'he was not of your family; his was an unrighteous conduct. Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge. I admonish you lest you become one of the ignorant.' Said (Noah): My Lord, I do indeed seek refuge with You from ever questioning You about anything of which I have no knowledge. Unless You grant me forgiveness and have mercy on me I shall be among the losers.' (Verses 45-47)

The tie which binds people together in the Islamic faith is unique. It relates to certain objectives and aspirations which are peculiar to this divine constitution.

This tie of Islamic society has nothing to do with family or blood relations, land or country, tribe or nation, colour or language, race or sex, profession or class. All such ties may exist between two individuals, yet their relations may, nevertheless, still be severed. When Noah pleaded with his Lord: *'Lord, my son is of my family,'* he was told by God: *'Noah, he was not of your family.'* The reason why his own son was not considered to belong to his family was then explained to him: *'His was an unrighteous conduct.'* The tie of faith which would have linked them together did not exist: *'Do not question Me about matters of which you have no knowledge.'* Thus, Noah was mistaken when he considered that his son belonged to his family. He simply did not, despite the fact that he was Noah's own son.

This is a clear, distinctive landmark which distinguishes the Islamic view of all ties and relationships. Different modes *of jāhiliyyah* make different ties paramount, such

as those of blood, family, land, country, tribe, nation, colour, language, race, profession or class. They sometimes give prominence to common interests, common history or common destiny. All these are *jāhiliyyah* considerations that are fundamentally in conflict with the Islamic viewpoint.

The Islamic code of living, represented by the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah,* endeavours to educate the Muslim community so that it observes this distinctive landmark in its general outlook.

In this *sūrah,* Noah and his son provide the example of what happens between father and son. The Qur'ān gives numerous other examples in order to establish the true nature of the only tie which Islam recognizes. The story of Abraham and his father, related in *Sūrah* 19, Maryam, is an example of a son's relationship with his father: "*Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Gracious. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Gracious, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.' He answered: Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!' Abraham replied: 'Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest.' When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying] the truth."* (19: 41-50)

Another example, as stated in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, concerns Abraham and his seed, and what God taught him concerning them. When Abraham made his pledge to God, he was given the happy news that the message would continue in his seed, but the wrongdoers were entitled to nothing of it.

> *When his Lord tested Abraham with certain commandments and he fulfilled them, He said, 'I have appointed you a leader of mankind. 'Abraham asked, And what of my descendants?' God said, My covenant does not apply to the wrongdoers.'* (2: 124)

> *Abraham said, 'Lord, make this a land of security and make provisions of fruits for those of its people who believe in God and the Last Day.' God said, And as for he who disbelieves, I shall let him enjoy life for a while and then I shall drive him to suffering through the fire; and what a terrible end!'* (2: 126)

The Qur'ān also gives us two examples of matrimonial relationships. On the one hand we have the prophets Noah and Lot and their wives, while on the other we have Pharaoh and his wife. *"God has set an example of unbelievers: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were married to two of Our righteous servants, but they betrayed them. Their husbands could not avail them anything against God. The word has been spoken, 'Enter the fire, together with those who shall enter it.' And God has also set an example of believers: the wife of Pharaoh, who said: 'Lord, build for me a house in heaven with You, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doings. Deliver me from all evil-doing folk.'"* (66: 10-11)

Other examples are also given in the Qur'ān where strong ties, which might have otherwise existed between believers and unbelievers, were of no significance when the tie of faith did not exist. There is the case of Abraham and his followers and the example of the people of the cave who deserted their community. With respect to the first God says: *"You have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We are quit of you and of all that you worship instead of God. We reject whatever you believe. Between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred lasting until such a time as you come to believe in God alone."* (60: 4)

And regarding the young men of the cave, God tells us: *"Do you think that the People of the Cave and the Inscription were a wonder among Our signs? When those youths betook themselves to the Cave, they said: 'Our Lord! Bestow on us Your grace, and provide for us right guidance in our affair' So We drew [a veil] over their ears in the Cave, for a number of years, and then We awakened them so that We may know which of the two parties managed to calculate the time they had tarried. We shall relate to you their story in all truth. They were young men who had believed in their Lord, so We increased them in guidance. We put courage in their hearts, so that they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him: if we did, we should indeed utter an enormity! These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs. Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God? Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, betake yourselves to the Cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs."* (18: 9-16) All these examples make the issue absolutely clear for the Muslim community. The only tie which brings people together in Islamic society is the one of faith. Numerous verses in the Qur'ān remind Muslims to hold fast to this view and establish it clearly in society. Here are some examples:

> *You cannot find people who believe in God and the Last Day and love anyone who contends against God and His Messenger, even though they be their fathers, sons, brothers or kindred. It is such [believers] in whose hearts He has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with inspiration from Himself and whom [in time] He will admit into gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Well*

pleased is God with them, and well pleased are they with Him. They are God's partisans. Most certainly the partisans of God shall be successful. (58: 22)

Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your allies, showing them affection even though they reject the truth that has come to you, and they have driven the Messengers and yourselves away, because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have gone forth to strive for My cause, and out of a longing for My goodly acceptance, [do not] incline towards them in secret affection, for I am fully aware of all that you may conceal and all that you may do openly. Any of you who does this has already strayed from the right path. (60: 1)

Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you on the Day of Resurrection, when He will decide between you. God sees all that you do. You have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We are quit of you and of all that you worship instead of God. We reject whatever you believe. Between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred lasting until such a time as you come to believe in God alone.' (60: 3-4)

Believers, do not take your fathers and brothers for allies if they choose unbelief in preference to faith. Those of you who take them for allies are indeed wrongdoers. (9: 23)

Believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers. (5: 51)

Islamic society is basically and organically distinguished from all other social orders, old and new, by this very basic principle which governs its relations with others. There can be no way which combines Islam with the adoption of any tie other than that of faith as the basis of society. Those who claim to be Muslims and then establish their social orders on the basis of ties which Islam has demolished are either ignorant of Islam or reject Islam. In either case Islam does not accept their claim as it has no practical application in their lives.

The Nature of Islamic Society

We will now consider some aspects of the divine wisdom behind making faith the supreme tie of Islamic society.

Faith is indeed the noblest characteristic of man which distinguishes him from animals. It relates to the spiritual side of human existence which no class of animal

shares. Indeed, even the most hardened atheists have come to acknowledge that faith is an essential quality that categorically distinguishes man from animals.

Hence, in a society which achieves the highest standard of human civilization, faith must be the constituent tie, because it is man's most distinctive quality. Indeed, no human grouping can be based on anything which man shares with animals, such as land, meadows, interests and borders; for these are akin to an animal enclosure with its fencing. Nor can a human society be based on ties of blood, ancestry, clan, nation, race, language or colour. Again, all these are common to both man and animals. Man is indeed distinguished from animals by his reason and what relates to his heart and mind.

Similarly, faith is closely linked to another factor that distinguishes man from animals, namely, his free-will and ability to choose. Every human being is able to choose his or her own faith when they attain a reasonable standard of maturity. Thus human beings are able to determine the type of society in which they choose to live, and the type of ideological, social, political, economic and moral system they advocate.

By contrast, no human being is able to choose his ancestry, colour, community or race. Nor can he determine in which geographical area to be born, which mother tongue to speak, or indeed any of the ties on which *jāhiliyyah* communities are based. All these are determined before a human being is born. If his destiny, both in this life and the life to come, or indeed in only this life, is based on considerations in which he has no say, then his free choice is negated. Thus, one of the most essential and distinctive characteristics of his humanity, which God has established, is lost.

When a community is based on the tie of faith, and not on any consideration in which man has no say, it can establish a society that is open to all. People of diverse races, colours, languages, lands and ethnic origins will freely choose to join this society, knowing that nothing can stop them from doing so and no artificial barriers are erected to prevent them from joining. What determines their ability to join are man's most distinctive qualities. All human potential and talents thus contribute to the establishment of a civilization that benefits by the qualities of all races. It never closes the door to any talent because of colour, race, family or land.

When Islamic society was built on this basis, it gave prominence to the distinctive qualities of man, in preference to those that man shares with other creatures. It soon achieved spectacular results for its being open to all, erecting none of the artificial obstacles that are more suited to animals. The special characteristics of different human races and communities were able to work together, without barriers, and they soon produced a superior human structure. In that superior Islamic community, Arabs, Persians, Syrians, Egyptians, North Africans, Turks, Chinese, Indians,

Byzantines, Greeks, Indonesians and Africans, as well as many others, brought in their diverse talents to contribute to the building of Islamic civilization. It was never an Arab or national civilization, but an Islamic one based on faith.

All were equal in that society, strengthened by a strong tie of love, and sharing a common objective. Their unifying tie was always their belief in the One God, their only Lord. No other grouping in human history has ever been able to achieve such unity and equality.

In history, the best known grouping of different communities in the past was that of the Roman Empire, which included a large variety of races, languages and peoples. But that group did not come about through any distinctively human characteristic, nor was it based on an ideal like faith. It was, on the one hand, based on class, dividing people into masters and slaves throughout the Empire. On the other, it was racist, giving the Romans superiority over all others. Hence, it never aspired to the level attained by Islamic society.

In recent history similar groupings flourished, such as the British Empire. Yet it was largely an heir to the Roman Empire in as much as it was nationalistic and exploitative, promoting the superiority of the British people and exploiting the resources of Britain's colonies. The same applies to all European empires: the Spanish and Portuguese at one stage, and later the French. They were all in the same low category.

Communism tried to establish a different type of grouping that overcame barriers of race, nation, land, language and colour. But it was established on a class rather than human basis. Whilst the Romans gave superiority to the aristocrats, Communism gave it to the Proletariat. Its main emotion was its unabating grudge against other classes. Such a small, hateful group could not promote anything other than man's worst qualities. Its ideal was to enhance and promote the animal aspects in human life, which it considered to be man's basic needs. These were food, shelter and sex. Needless to say, these are the basic needs of animals. It also considered human history as nothing more than a search for food.[22]

Islam, which follows a method laid down by God, is unique in promoting and enhancing the most distinctive human qualities to building human society. This certainly remains exclusive to Islam. Those who abandon the Islamic way in preference for any other method based on racial, national, patriotic or class values are indeed the enemies of man. They do not want man to benefit by his God-given superior qualities, nor do they want human society to benefit from the best talents

[22] It should be noted that the author wrote this in the early 1960s, when Egypt was moving strongly towards the Communist Bloc. — Editor's note.

and potential of its constituent races, bringing all their experiences into a harmonious whole.[23]

It should be mentioned that some of those to whom God refers when He says: *"Those to whom We granted revelation know it as well as they know their own children,"* are hostile to Islam, yet they know its points of strength and its method of action. They have not overlooked the fact that making faith the basis on which a community is founded is one of Islam's major strengths. Since they want to destroy Islamic society, or at least weaken it to a degree that enables them to control it, avenge themselves on Islam, exploit its followers and their land and resources, they are keen to disrupt the basis on which it is founded. They try hard to divert Muslims from the worship of God alone so that they turn to the worship of new idols whether it be fatherland, nation, or race. Such neo-idolatry came to prominence under different names during different epochs of history, such as *Shu`ūbiyyah* and Turanian nationalism, and more recently Arab nationalism. At times, these idols are given different names, each supported by a different group. Such groups engage in in-fighting within a single Islamic society founded on faith and regulated by Islamic law. Their aim is to weaken the foundation of Islamic society and make anyone who rejects their idols an outlaw in his community or a traitor to his country.

The most hostile camp that continues to undermine the solid foundation of Islamic society are the Jews. They successfully employed nationalism as a weapon to destroy Christendom, dividing it into several political entities, each with its own national church. In this way they were able to break through the Christian grouping within which they were encircled. Now they are trying the same tactic to divide the Muslim community.

The same was done by Christian imperialists in the Muslim world. They tried for centuries to stir ethnic, racial and national hatred within the Muslim community that embraces all ethnic entities on an equal footing. In this way, they were able to satisfy their ancient grudges against Islam, inherited from the days of the Crusades. They managed to tame the Muslims into accepting European imperialism. They will continue to do so until God enables the Muslims to destroy this evil neo-idolatry. This will open the way for the new rise of Islamic society on its solid and unique foundation.

A Unique Community

[23] The last six paragraphs are quoted in full in the author's book, *Milestones.* Although the book has been translated into English, we preferred to produce our own translation, so as to deliver the same style as employed in the current work. — Editor's note.

People cannot extricate themselves from the state of pagan *jāhiliyyah* as a community unless the basis which brings them together is that of faith. Submission to God alone is not complete unless this rule is established in their minds and in their community.

There must be only one sacred thing which is revered. There can never be a multiple of 'sacred' things. The community must have a single slogan. There must be only one *qiblah* [i.e. direction faced in prayer] which remains the focus of everyone's wholehearted attention.

Idol worship is not confined to worshipping idols made of stone or gold, or even to worshipping legendary gods; it can take numerous forms and shapes. Islam, however, cannot tolerate that people fight under the banners of such false gods when it calls on them to believe in God alone and to submit themselves to Him only. For this reason Islam divides all mankind into two nations: the nation of Muslims who follow the prophets, each in his own time until the last Messenger was sent to mankind as a whole, and the nation of non-Muslims who worship all forms of tyrannical idols.

When God identified the Muslim nation, He defined it as the nation of the followers of His messengers, each in his own time, and then said: "*Your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord, therefore worship Me alone.*" (21: 92) He did not tell the Arabs that they belonged to the Arab nation, either when they were ignorant, or when they were Muslim. Nor did He tell the Jews that their nation was that of the Children of Israel, or the Hebrew nation, both when they lived in ignorance and in those periods when they submitted themselves to God alone. The Prophet's companions, Salmān, the Persian, and Şuhayb, the Byzantine, and Bilāl, the Abyssinian, were not considered to belong to Persia, Byzantium or Abyssinia. Indeed, the Prophet said to all Muslims, Arabs, Persians, Romans and Abyssinians alike: your community is that of the believers who have earned the title of Muslims by submitting themselves truly to God throughout the ages, during the times of Moses, Aaron, Abraham, Lot, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Ishmael, Idrīs, Dhulkifl, Zachariah, John and Mary as mentioned in *Sūrah* 21, verses 48-91.

This is the Muslim nation according to God's definition. He who wishes to take a line other than God's, let him do so, but he must not claim to belong to Islam. We, who have submitted ourselves to God alone, acknowledge no nation as ours except the one God has defined for us. He indeed tells the truth and He is the best of judges.

For Whom Miracles Happen

Finally, let us reflect on the value assigned by God to a small community of Muslims. Only a handful of people, numbering no more than twelve according to

some reports, were the net result of Noah's efforts in calling people to God. This is a period which extended over 950 years, according to the Qur'ān, the only reliable and certain source in this connection.

Yet this handful of people, the fruit of such a difficult campaign, was so important that God changed the established universal phenomena for its sake. He let the floods drown everything and every living soul on inhabited land. He then made this handful of people the only heirs of the earth and mankind's second seed. They were the people entrusted with the rebuilding of the earth.

This is indeed something which must not be taken lightly. The small groups of people who work for an Islamic revival today face a state of *jāhiliyyah* which has tightened its grip around the whole earth. These advocates feel weak and lonely as they face the forces *of jāhiliyyah,* and suffer all sorts of persecution, hardship and torture. They must, however, contemplate the example of Noah's people very seriously and learn its special significance.

The fact that the Muslim seed is planted on earth is something which weighs very heavily in God's measure. It is something which He considers so deserving that He destroys all the forces *of jāhiliyyah* on earth for its sake: their land, civilization, installations, physical power and achievements. It also deserves that He protects this seed and looks after it until it is safely entrenched and able to build the earth anew.

Noah (peace be upon him) built the ark according to God's instructions and under His protection: "*Build the ark under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. Do not appeal to Me on behalf of the wrongdoers. They shall be drowned.*" (Verse 37) When Noah's people chased and repulsed him and spread all sorts of fabrications about him, as God tells us, he appealed to God, his Lord, and declared to Him that he was overcome: "*Noah's people called it a lie; and they accused Our servant of lying, saying, Mad is he!' And he was repulsed. So he called out to his Lord: 'I am defeated; come to my help.'*" (54: 9-10) He called on Him to take revenge as he saw fit. At that moment God let certain natural forces of great magnitude to be at the service of His defeated servant: "*We caused the gates of heaven to open with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs, so that the waters met for a predestined purpose.*" (54: 11-12) While these awesome forces were doing their work at such a fearful level, God Himself, limitless is He in His glory, looked after His defeated servant: "*We carried him on that vessel made of planks and nails, which floated under Our eyes: a recompense for him who had been rejected with ingratitude.*" (54: 13-14)

The vanguard of Islamic revival in every age and place must pause and contemplate this majestic scene as they are chased and overcome by the forces *of jāhiliyyah.* Such people deserve that God put in their employ awesome natural forces; these need not be the floods, for they are only one form: "*The forces of your Lord are*

known fully only to Him." (48: 4) Their task is only to remain steadfast and to continue on their way. They must be aware of the source of their strength and appeal to Him, remaining steadfast until He brings about the accomplishment of His will. They must be certain within themselves that He has power over everything in the heavens and on earth and that He will never let His servants be overcome by His enemies. They will certainly have to undergo a period of education and test; but once they pass this test God will assign a certain role to them to accomplish on earth under His protection.

This is indeed the lesson we learn from that great universal event. No one who faces *jāhiliyyah* with the message of Islam should think for one moment that God will abandon him to such forces when he calls on people to worship God alone. He must not at any moment measure his own strength against the forces of *jāhiliyyah,* believing that he stands alone against these or think that God will desert him when he cries out to Him that he is defeated and helpless.

The forces of the two camps cannot be evenly matched. *Jāhiliyyah* has its own forces, but those who call on people to submit to God rely on God's power. God can put at their service, whenever He chooses, some natural elements, the weakest of which can destroy all *jāhiliyyah,* attacking it from whence it does not expect.

The test period may be prolonged as God wishes. Noah continued to preach his message to his people for 950 years, having no more than twelve believers to show for his efforts. Yet this handful of people was so valuable, in God's measure, that He destroyed all erring mankind, so that the handful of believers would inherit the earth and establish the good seed in it.

The age of miracles is not over. Miracles occur indeed every moment, according to God's will. God, however, may substitute certain forms of miracles for others, as befits every period and age. Certain miracles may be so minute that some people may not even observe them. Those who believe in God, however, detect His will in everything they see and appreciate its unique results.

Those who follow the path leading to God's pleasure need only fulfil their duties as best as they can and leave matters to God with trust and confidence. When they are defeated they should cry out to Him who can help them, in the same way as God's noble servant, Noah, did: *"So he called out to his Lord: 'I am defeated; come to my help.'"* (54: 10) All they need to do afterwards is await God's help. Such waiting is a form of worship, so they are rewarded for it.

Once again we observe that the Qur'ān reveals its treasures only to those who fight its battle, for the cause of God, having the Qur'ān as their guide. They alone live a similar experience to that which took place at the time the Qur'ān was revealed.

Hence they can appreciate its meaning fully, because they feel that it addresses them directly in the same way as the first Muslims were addressed.

Praise be to God at the beginning and at the end.

3
The Promise That Never Fails

وَإِلَىٰ عَادٍ أَخَاهُمْ هُودًا ۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنْ إِلَٰهٍ غَيْرُهُۥٓ ۖ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا مُفْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

To ʿĀd, We sent their brother Hūd. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood. (50)

يَٰقَوْمِ لَآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا ۖ إِنْ أَجْرِىَ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱلَّذِى فَطَرَنِى ۚ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

No reward do I ask of you, my people, for this [message]. My reward rests with Him who brought me into being. Will you not, then, use your reason? (51)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ ٱسْتَغْفِرُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ ثُمَّ تُوبُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِ يُرْسِلِ ٱلسَّمَآءَ عَلَيْكُم مِّدْرَارًا وَيَزِدْكُمْ قُوَّةً إِلَىٰ قُوَّتِكُمْ وَلَا تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

My people! Seek your Lord's forgiveness, and then turn to Him in repentance. He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you, and will add strength to your strength. Do not turn away as guilty criminals.' (52)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰهُودُ مَا جِئْتَنَا بِبَيِّنَةٍ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَارِكِىٓ ءَالِهَتِنَا عَن قَوْلِكَ وَمَا نَحْنُ لَكَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

They replied: 'Hūd, you have brought us no clear evidence. We are not forsaking our gods on your mere word, nor will we believe

in you. (53)

إِن نَّقُولُ إِلَّا ٱعۡتَرَىٰكَ بَعۡضُ ءَالِهَتِنَا بِسُوٓءٖۗ قَالَ إِنِّيٓ أُشۡهِدُ ٱللَّهَ وَٱشۡهَدُوٓاْ أَنِّي بَرِيٓءٞ مِّمَّا تُشۡرِكُونَ ٥٤

All we can say is that one of our gods may have smitten you with something evil.' He said: 'I call God to witness, and you, too, bear witness, that I disassociate myself from all those you claim to be partners with God. (54)

مِن دُونِهِۦۖ فَكِيدُونِي جَمِيعٗا ثُمَّ لَا تُنظِرُونِ ٥٥

Scheme against me, all of you, if you will, and give me no respite. (55)

إِنِّي تَوَكَّلۡتُ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ رَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمۚ مَّا مِن دَآبَّةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ ءَاخِذُۢ بِنَاصِيَتِهَآۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٥٦

Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. (56)

فَإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ فَقَدۡ أَبۡلَغۡتُكُم مَّآ أُرۡسِلۡتُ بِهِۦٓ إِلَيۡكُمۡۚ وَيَسۡتَخۡلِفُ رَبِّي قَوۡمًا غَيۡرَكُمۡ وَلَا تَضُرُّونَهُۥ شَيۡـٔٗاۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٍ حَفِيظٞ ٥٧

But if you turn away, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people. You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things.' (57)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا نَجَّيۡنَا هُودٗا وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ بِرَحۡمَةٖ مِّنَّا وَنَجَّيۡنَٰهُم مِّنۡ عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٖ ٥٨

And so, when Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Hūd and those who shared his faith. We have indeed saved them from severe suffering. (58)

وَتِلۡكَ عَادٞۖ جَحَدُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ وَعَصَوۡاْ رُسُلَهُۥ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَ كُلِّ جَبَّارٍ عَنِيدٖ ٥٩

Such were the `Ād. They denied their lord's revelations, disobeyed His

وَأُتۡبِعُواْ فِي هَٰذِهِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا لَعۡنَةٗ وَيَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ عَادٗا كَفَرُواْ رَبَّهُمۡۗ أَلَا بُعۡدٗا لِّعَادٖ قَوۡمِ هُودٖ ٦٠

messengers, and followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant. (59)

They were pursued by a curse in this world and on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the `Ād denied their Lord. Oh, away with the `Ād, the people of Hūd. (60)

۞ وَإِلَىٰ ثَمُودَ أَخَاهُمۡ صَٰلِحٗاۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥۖ هُوَ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَٱسۡتَعۡمَرَكُمۡ فِيهَا فَٱسۡتَغۡفِرُوهُ ثُمَّ تُوبُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهِۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي قَرِيبٞ مُّجِيبٞ ٦١

To Thamūd, We sent their brother Ṣāliḥ. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein. Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance. My Lord is ever near. He answers all.' (61)

قَالُواْ يَٰصَٰلِحُ قَدۡ كُنتَ فِينَا مَرۡجُوّٗا قَبۡلَ هَٰذَآ أَتَنۡهَىٰنَآ أَن نَّعۡبُدَ مَا يَعۡبُدُ ءَابَآؤُنَا وَإِنَّنَا لَفِي شَكّٖ مِّمَّا تَدۡعُونَآ إِلَيۡهِ مُرِيبٖ ٦٢

They answered: 'Ṣāliḥ! Great hopes did we place in you before this. Would you now forbid us to worship what our forefathers worshipped? We are indeed in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' (62)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ إِن كُنتُ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّي وَءَاتَىٰنِي مِنۡهُ رَحۡمَةٗ فَمَن يَنصُرُنِي مِنَ ٱللَّهِ إِنۡ عَصَيۡتُهُۥۖ فَمَا تَزِيدُونَنِي غَيۡرَ تَخۡسِيرٖ ٦٣

He said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only

aggravating my ruin. (63)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ هَٰذِهِۦ نَاقَةُ ٱللَّهِ لَكُمۡ ءَايَةٗ فَذَرُوهَا تَأۡكُلۡ فِيٓ أَرۡضِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوٓءٖ فَيَأۡخُذَكُمۡ عَذَابٞ قَرِيبٞ ٦٤

And, my people, here is God's she- camel, a clear sign for you. Leave her to graze at will in God's land, and do her no harm, lest speedy punishment befall you.' (64)

فَعَقَرُوهَا فَقَالَ تَمَتَّعُواْ فِي دَارِكُمۡ ثَلَٰثَةَ أَيَّامٖۖ ذَٰلِكَ وَعۡدٌ غَيۡرُ مَكۡذُوبٖ ٦٥

Yet they cruelly slaughtered her. He said: 'You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes. This is a promise which will not be belied.' (65)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا نَجَّيۡنَا صَٰلِحٗا وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ بِرَحۡمَةٖ مِّنَّا وَمِنۡ خِزۡيِ يَوۡمِئِذٍۗ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ ٱلۡقَوِيُّ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٦٦

When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Ṣāliḥ and those who shared his faith from the ignominy of that day. Indeed, your Lord is Powerful, Almighty. (66)

وَأَخَذَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ ٱلصَّيۡحَةُ فَأَصۡبَحُواْ فِي دِيَٰرِهِمۡ جَٰثِمِينَ ٦٧

The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, (67)

كَأَن لَّمۡ يَغۡنَوۡاْ فِيهَآۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ثَمُودَاْ كَفَرُواْ رَبَّهُمۡۗ أَلَا بُعۡدٗا لِّثَمُودَ ٦٨

As though they had never prospered there. Thamūd denied their Lord! Oh, away with the Thamūd. (68)

Preview

So Noah's people became past history: the great majority who denied his message were drowned and forgotten. They were banished from life on earth as also from God's grace. The survivors were established on earth in fulfilment of God's promise: *"The future belongs to those who are God-fearing."* (Verse 49). God's promise to Noah is summed up in the following verse: *"The word was spoken: 'Noah, disembark in peace from Us, and with Our blessings upon you as well as upon generations from those who are with you. As for other folk, We shall let them have enjoyment, and then there will befall them grievous suffering from Us.'"* (Verse 48) As time passed and history took its course, God's promise was fulfilled. The `Ād were part of Noah's offspring who dispersed on earth, as were the Thamūd. Both of these communities deserved to be punished: *"As for other folk, We shall let them have enjoyment, and then there will befall them grievous suffering from Us."*

A full cycle had turned and the forces *of jāhiliyyah* were back in full sway. Successive generations of mankind, whose number is known only to God, must have lived and passed away, having been guided by true submission to God. This means that they lived according to Islam, which was the faith of their parents, Adam and Eve. They remained so until Satan cajoled them from the straight path, which, in turn, gave rise to the kind of *jāhiliyyah* Noah faced. Noah (peace be upon him), however, was saved with his followers by God. The rest of mankind were destroyed in the floods, in response to Noah's prayers. Again, numerous generations, known only to God, adopted as the basis of their social order the principle of submission to God. They continued to do so until Satan was able once again to cause them to stray. The peoples of `Ād and Thamūd belonged to *jāhiliyyah.*

The `Ād were a tribe living at al-Aĥqāf, or the sand dunes, in the south of the Arabian peninsula. The Thamūd lived in the townships of al-Ĥijr, an area between Madinah and Tabūk in North Arabia. Both tribes were extremely powerful and affluent. Both also deviated from the right path and chose idol worship in preference to the worship of God alone. They accused God's messengers of fabricating lies. Hence, their histories are full of lessons for the believers, confirming the facts outlined in the opening passage of the *sūrah.*

Health, Rain and the God-Fearing

> *To `Ād, We sent their brother Hūd. He said: My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood. No reward do I ask of you, my people, for this [message]. My reward rests with Him who brought me into being. Will you not, then, use your reason? My people! Seek your Lord's forgiveness, and then turn to Him in repentance. He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you, and will add strength to your strength. Do not turn away as*

guilty criminals.' (Verses 50-52)

Hūd belonged to the tribe of `Ād. He was, then, their brother, tied to them by the blood relations that bind all tribesmen. This tie is emphasized here because it should generate confidence, compassion and honest counsel between brethren. Hence, their attitude towards their brother and prophet seems very odd and exceedingly repugnant. The parting of the ways between the `Ād and their brother comes about because of an ideological conflict. Thus the concept of the invalidity of all ties when the bond of faith is non-existent is strongly emphasized. This bond is thus given prominence in Islamic society, making absolutely clear the nature of Islamic faith and its line of action.

Hūd commences his call recognizing that he and his people belong to the same community. They are united together by ties of family, clan, tribe and land. They end up, however, as two different nations: one submissive to God and another worshipping deities beside Him. The two are in conflict. God's promise to give victory to the believers and to destroy the unbelievers comes to pass only when the parting of the ways takes place and the two sides are clearly distinguished and separated. The Prophet and those who believe in God with him disassociate themselves from their people and consider all their former ties with them as invalid. They no longer have any loyalty to their former people and former leadership. They are loyal only to God, their Lord, and to their own Islamic' leadership which called on them to submit themselves to God alone. Only at this moment when issues are clearly outlined and directions totally marked out, with no meeting point in the middle, are they given victory.

"To `Ād, We sent their brother Hūd." (Verse 50) In the same way as Noah was previously sent to his people. He said: *"My people!" His* appeal is friendly, reminding them of the ties that unite them together so that they may have confidence in what he says. He would not have cheated his own people.

"Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him." (Verse 50) These are the very same words with which every messenger addressed his people. Deviation certainly took place after the believers with Noah disembarked from the ark. Perhaps the first deviant step was an attempt to glorify their small group who were saved in the ark with Noah. This glorification might have increased gradually with successive generations until their spirits were represented in trees and stones supposedly providing some sort of beneficial qualities. With the passage of time these stones and trees became idols which were worshipped and served by priests who made people submit to the will of others in the name of such claimed idols. This is only one of the numerous forms of *jāhiliyyah* which can overtake society. We have to remember that any deviation, even by one step, from the line of the absolute oneness of God and

total submission to Him will inevitably be followed by further steps which take mankind far away from the right path.

In any case Hūd's people were idolaters who did not submit themselves to God alone. His messenger, therefore, made the same address to them as every messenger addressed his people: "*My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood.*" (Verse 50) False inventions are the idols you worship alongside God.

Hūd then hastens to make it clear to his people that he is giving them honest and sincere counsel, for no ulterior motive, and that he seeks no reward from them. He expects his reward from God who has brought him into existence. Hūd's statement, *'No reward do I ask of you'*, suggests that he was implicitly or explicitly accused of trying to serve some personal interest when he made his call. Hence his comment: "*Will you not, then, use your reason?*" (Verse 51) It is indeed singular that people should imagine that a messenger from God would seek personal gain from human beings, when God, who has sent him, is the One who provides all people with their sustenance.

Mid then directs them to seek God's forgiveness and to turn to Him in repentance. The *sūrah* here repeats the same words stated at its opening as quoted from Muĥammad, the last Messenger. Hūd indeed gave his people the same promise and the same warning as Muĥammad did thousands of years later. "*My people! Seek your Lord's forgiveness, and then turn to Him in repentance. He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you, and will add strength to your strength. Do not turn away as guilty criminals.*" (Verse 52)

To seek God's forgiveness and to repent of one's sins opens a new page and sets for people a new way to follow, where good intentions are translated into good actions. Their reward, then, will be abundant. "*He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you.*" They will have the rain they need for their farms and animals. They will prosper and have great harvests as a result of the abundant rain. "*And will add strength to your strength.*" Their strength, for which they were renowned, would certainly increase. "*Do not turn away as guilty criminals.*" The only thing which may withhold all this is their own attitude if they choose to turn away from God and accuse His messenger of fabrication.

Reflecting on Hūd's promise we note that it relates to rain and strength. How can these depend on seeking God's forgiveness and repenting of one's sins, when they are directly influenced by the natural laws which operate in the universe?

As far as the increase in strength is concerned, the explanation is easy. When people purify their hearts and commit themselves to good action, they inevitably add to their strength. They enjoy better health because they eat in moderation and their

diet is free from harmful things. Their consciences are relaxed, free of tension; they have confidence in God and His mercy. Their social life is also healthier because they implement God's law which ensures man's freedom and dignity. They maintain their equality in front of God. Besides, faith taps the resources of all those who contribute to man's task of building the earth, without the deviation of false gods.

False deities need from their promoters and worshippers, at times, an acknowledgement that they have or exercise some of God's attributes, such as ability, knowledge, might or mercy. Only then do people submit to them. The lordship claimed by false deities needs to be coupled with godhead so that it can control people. All this requires sustained effort. It also requires that believers who submit themselves to God alone exert great effort to establish the truth and counter the effects of the promotion of such false deities.

People who do not implement God's laws in their lives may be powerful, but their power is only temporary. It will eventually collapse, according to God's laws, because it is not based on solid foundations. Such power is derived from only one side of natural law, such as hard work, discipline and a high standard of production. But these do not last. The fact that the social order and the spiritual side of life are not well founded will bring about their collapse.

Rain, on the other hand, seems to occur according to natural phenomena. This does not however preclude that rain may be beneficial in a certain time and place while it is harmful and destructive in others. God may decide to give life through rain to a certain people, or make rain the undoing of others. He may, if He chooses, fulfil His promises as well as His warnings through the manipulation of natural phenomena. After all, He is the Creator of these phenomena, and the Creator of both cause and effect. His will remains free and absolute. He accomplishes His purpose in whatever way He chooses.

A Lesson in Futile Argument

Such was the sum of the message presented by Hūd to his people. It appears that it was not supported by a miracle to convince those who persisted with unbelief. Perhaps this was so because the floods were still alive in people's memories. In another *sūrah* that gives an account of Hūd and his people we learn that he reminded them of what happened to Noah's people when they rejected God's message. However, his people still entertained bad thoughts about him: *"They replied: 'Hūd, you have brought us no clear evidence. We are not forsaking our gods on your mere word, nor will we believe in you. All we can say is that one of our gods may have smitten you with something evil.'"* (Verses 53-54)

Hūd's people had gone so far astray that they thought him deranged, that one of their deities had smitten him with something evil. They claimed that Hūd did not bring them any clear evidence of his message. Little did they consider that no evidence is needed to prove God's oneness. All that people need to accept this truism is to be properly reminded of it and guided on the line of thought they should follow. They only needed to consult their consciences. They were, however, not prepared to do that. They told God's Messenger point blank that they were not prepared to abandon their false gods just because he, Hūd, encouraged them to do so, without clear proof of the truthfulness of his message. They simply did not believe him: *"We are not forsaking our gods on your mere word, nor will we believe in you."* (Verse 53)

There was little Hūd could do at this point apart from throwing down a challenge to them and putting his trust entirely in God. In this way, he delivered a final warning to those who denied him and his message, disassociating himself completely from their erring practices.

> *He said: 'I call God to witness, and you, too, bear witness, that I disassociate myself from all those you claim to be partners with God. Scheme against me, all of you, if you will, and give me no respite. Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. But if you turn away, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people. You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things.' (Verses 54-57)*

Hūd's statement shows how he cut himself off completely from them, despite the fact that they were his brethren. He was not happy to stay among them when they had chosen a way different from God's. With the tie of faith severed the two sides had nothing to hold them together. Hūd asked God to be his witness as he disassociated himself from them altogether. He also asked them to be his witnesses so that there could be no doubt as to his final position. Throughout, Hūd had the dignity, confidence and reassurance which faith imparts.

Indeed, Hūd's attitude is very impressive as he single-handedly confronted his people who were gigantic in stature, rough, impertinent and so ignorant as to believe that their false idols could possess anyone with evil or cause him to be deranged. He goes further and challenges them to cause him any harm they could, allowing him no respite. A man full of faith, Hūd was confident that God's promises would be

Destruction of the `Ād

"He said: 'I call God to witness, and you, too, bear witness, that I disassociate myself from all those you claim to be partners with God.'" (Verse 54) I call God to be my witness that I am innocent of all those you associate with Him as His partners. You also should testify for me that I have disclaimed all your false gods. Assemble together, all of you and all your invented gods whom you claim to have smitten me with evil and scheme together against me, giving me not a moment's notice, for I do not fear anything from you. *"Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord."* (Verse 56) Your denials and rejection notwithstanding, the truth remains that God is the Lord of us all. He is indeed the only Lord of the universe. He has no partners.

"There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock." (Verse 56) This is a very real image of God's power. It portrays Him as holding every creature[24] that walks on the earth by its forelock, whether man or animal. He has indeed power over them all. His power is depicted so vividly that it fits well with the strength, roughness and insensibility of the people Hūd was addressing. This is followed by a statement that divine laws never fail: *"Straight indeed is my Lord's way."* (Verse 56) All this reflects the combination of Hūd's strength and determination. Why should he fear anything the `Ād may cause when they cannot have power over him unless God wills?

When an advocate of God's cause feels this truth within himself, he is left with no doubt as to his own destiny. He feels no hesitation to go along his way. The truth we mean here is that of Godhead which is clearly felt by those who truly believe in God.

When Hūd has made his challenge, relying on God's might which he portrays in its most majestic form, he warns his people that he has done his duty, conveyed his message and has left them to face God's power: *"If you turn away, still, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people."* (Verse 57) Such people would be more worthy of God's message because they would follow His guidance after Hūd's people had been destroyed. They have no power to cause God any harm. Their departure leaves no vacuum whatsoever. And God will surely protect His good servants and enforce His laws. The wicked have no escape: *"You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things."* (Verse 57)

This was the decisive word. All argument is over and the warnings are fulfilled: *"When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Hūd and those who shared his faith. We have indeed saved them from severe suffering."* (Verse 58) Hūd and his followers were saved by a direct act of God's mercy which singled them out and kept them safe from the general punishment which engulfed their people. The punishment is described as *'severe suffering'* because this fits with the general atmosphere and with

[24] It should be mentioned here that the word used in the Qur'ān for `living creature' generally refers to animals. In its broader use, as in this instance, it refers to all living creatures. Shades of its narrower meaning, i.e. animals, however, are always present. — Editor's note.

the fact that the `Ād were rough tyrants. Now, even though they have been removed, their crimes are recorded against them and they are pursued with a curse: *"Such were the `Ād. They denied their Lord's revelations, disobeyed His messengers, and followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant. They were pursued by a curse in this world and on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the `Ād denied their Lord. Oh, away with the `Ād, the people of Hūd."* (Verses 59-60)

"Such were the `Ād." They are far away, although just a moment ago they were shown engulfed by their punishment. Yet now they are gone, lost and forgotten.

"They denied their Lord's revelations, disobeyed His messengers." (Verse 59) They disobeyed only one messenger, but since all God's messengers preach the same message, whoever disobeys one messenger, disobeys them all. The use of the plural in reference to revelations and messengers also has a stylistic purpose. Their crime is made to look much more horrid and ghastly when we realize that they have denied revelations and disobeyed messengers. *"And followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant."* (Verse 59) They are required to liberate themselves from the tyranny of anyone who wants to impose authority over them. They must think for themselves and exercise their freedom of choice. They cannot just waste their humanity by accepting the role of blind followers.

Thus we realize that the issue between Hūd and the `Ād was that of God's Lordship over all people, and their submission to Him alone. It is the issue of sovereignty and to whom it belongs. Who is the Lord to whom all must submit? This is apparent in God's words: *"Such were the `Ād. They denied their Lord's revelations, disobeyed His messengers, and followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant."* They were punished for their disobedience of God's messenger and their following of the bidding of tyrants. Islam, on the other hand, requires its followers to obey God's messengers, because their bidding comes from Him. At the same time Muslims must also disobey all tyrants. This is indeed the parting of the ways between Islam and *jāhiliyyah,* submission to God and denial of His message.

It is abundantly clear, then, that the message of God's unity emphasizes first of all the need to liberate man from submission to anyone other than God, and the need to revolt against the authority of all tyrants who impose themselves as gods. It considers the forfeiture of freedom by the blind following of tyrants, a capital crime of disbelief in and denial of God. Such perpetrators deserve to be destroyed in this life and punished in the hereafter. God has created man to be free, to worship no fellow creature and to maintain his freedom in the face of any chief or leader. This is the essence of man's nobility. If man does not protect it, he deserves no kindness from God. No community of people can claim to have any degree of dignity and humanity when they submit themselves to anyone other than God. Those who do submit to their fellow creatures, and obey their legislation, cannot be excused. After

all, they are the majority while the tyrants are a small minority. If the majority want to liberate themselves they need only to sacrifice a small portion of what they actually sacrifice at the altars of tyrants. They willingly pay them the tax of being humiliated in every respect.

The Real Issue of Contention

Let us pause here a little to reflect briefly on the history of Hūd with his people, within the context of the *sūrah.* The Qur'ān gives this account of the history of the age-old call to Islam in order to provide landmarks for the advocates of Islam throughout all generations. These landmarks are not only relevant to the first Muslim community, the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān, and the first to make it its operational guide as opposed to *jāhiliyyah,* but also to every Muslim community which stands up to *jāhiliyyah* anywhere in the world, at any time. This is what makes the Qur'ān the permanent constitution of the Islamic message and the manual of every Islamic movement.

Every time the Qur'ān mentions the approach of any messenger sent by God to any people, it quotes the messenger as saying: *'My people, worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him.* "*I* have repeatedly stated that *'worship God alone" means* total submission to Him alone in all matters which relate to this life or to the hereafter. This is indeed the original meaning of the word. The dictionary shows the word *`abada* [which we now use primarily to denote worship] as meaning: to yield, submit and to lower one's rank to another. A *mu`abbad* road is one which has been levelled to facilitate travelling. `Abbada *is* to enslave; that is, to cause someone to submit to another. The Arabs who were first addressed by the Qur'ān did not confine the import of the term *`abada* to mere worship rituals. Indeed, when the Arabs were first addressed by this term in Makkah, no worship rituals had then been assigned to them. They understood it to mean that they were required to submit themselves to God alone in all their life affairs and to renounce submission to anyone else. The Prophet defined 'worship' in one of his pronouncements as meaning 'compliance', not as offering worship rituals. He was answering `Ādī ibn Ĥātim's question about the Jews and the Christians and their treatment of their rabbis and monks as gods. He said: "Yes, indeed. They (meaning the rabbis and monks) made lawful to them what God has forbidden, and forbade them what God has made lawful, and they complied. This is how they worshipped them."

The term 'worship' has come to signify worship rituals since these are one form of showing submission to God. This form does not by any means, however, encompass the full meaning of 'worship'. When the clear meanings of 'religion' and 'worship' faded from peoples' minds, they started to think that people abandon Islam only if

they offer worship rituals to anyone other than God, such as idols and statues. They believe that if they avoid this particular form of *jāhiliyyah* they are protected against atheism, polytheism or any other form of *jāhiliyyah* generally and remain Muslims who could not be deprived of this status. They would thus continue to enjoy all the privileges of a Muslim with regard to the protection of life, honour and property.

This is a blatant fallacy based on distortions of the word 'worship' which decides whether a person is Muslim or not. This term signifies total submission to God in all matters and all affairs. As we have already said, this is the linguistic meaning of the word and the specific definition of it by the Prophet. When the Prophet has so clearly defined a certain term, no one can provide any other definition.

I have stated this very important concept in this commentary, *In the Shade of the Qur'ān,* and in all the works God has enabled me to write about the nature of Islam and its method of operation. In the story of the Prophet Hūd, as given in this *sūrah,* we have a statement which defines the real issue of contention between Hūd and his people, the faith he preached, based on submission to God alone, and the *jāhiliyyah* they practised. It defines very clearly what he meant when he said: *"My people, worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him."* He certainly did not mean to tell his people not to offer worship rituals to anyone other than God, as imagined by those who give the term 'worship' the very narrow meaning of rituals. He meant total submission to God alone and the rejection of any false god or tyrant. The crime for which the `Ād, Hūd's people deserved to be punished, and to be pursued by a curse in this life and in the life to come, was not merely the offering of worship rituals to someone other than God. It was rather that *"they denied their Lord's revelations, disobeyed His messengers, and followed the bidding of every arrogant, unrestrained tyrant."* (Verse 59)

Their denial of God's revelations is manifest in their disobedience of His messengers and their following of arrogant tyrants. All these actions refer to the same thing. When any people disobey God's commands, they do indeed deny God's revelations and disobey His messengers. They thus go beyond the pale of Islam into polytheism. We have already shown that Islam, in its broad sense, is the original status with which human life on earth started. It is indeed the faith brought by Adam when he fell from heaven and was put in charge of this earth. It is the faith Noah re-established on earth as he disembarked after the floods. People, however, will continue to deviate from Islam and sink back into *jāhiliyyah* until the call of Islam is successful in bringing them back to Islam. The cycle has continued until the present time.

Indeed, had the true essence of worship been the mere offering of worship rituals, it would not have warranted the sending of all God's messengers. It would not have warranted the great efforts exerted by those Prophets (peace be upon them all) and

the hard suffering to which the advocates of Islam have been subjected throughout the ages. Saving mankind, however, from submission to creatures of all sorts and returning them to submission to God in all matters is indeed worth that heavy price.

The establishment of the oneness of God, the only God, Lord and Sustainer in the universe, and the only source of legislation in all matters, and the establishment of the only way of life acceptable to God are all aims which merit the sending of God's messengers. They also merit the exertion of great efforts by the messengers as well as the endurance of all the suffering the advocates of Islam have experienced throughout history. This is not because God needs to achieve these aims: He is in need of nothing and no one. They are worthy aims simply because human life cannot be put right, reformed, elevated and become worthy of man without the establishment of the faith based on God's oneness.

Faith, the Truth and Human Welfare

Let us now pause a little to listen to the Prophet Hūd speaking to his people: "*My people! Seek your Lord's forgiveness, and then turn to Him in repentance. He will cause the sky to rain abundance on you, and will add strength to your strength. Do not turn away as guilty criminals.*" (Verse 52) It is the same idea mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah,* when the Prophet Muĥammad called on his people to believe in Islam: "*Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a fill reward for his merit. But if you turn away, I dread for you the suffering of a great Day.*" (Verse 3) "*messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone.*" (21: 16-25)

> *Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a drop of sperm, then out of a germ-cell, then out of an embryonic lump complete and yet incomplete, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom. That is because God alone is the Ultimate Truth; and He alone brings the dead to life; and He has the power to will anything. And that the Last Hour is certain to come, beyond any doubt; and that God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves. (22: 5-7)*
>
> *Those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth*

from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will surely guide those who believe to a straight path. Yet the unbelievers will not cease to be in doubt about Him until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow. On that day, all dominion shall belong to God. He shall judge between them. Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store. As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider. He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased. God is surely All-knowing, Most forbearing. Thus shall it be. If one retaliates only to the extent of the injury he has received, and then is wronged again, God will certainly succour him. God is certainly the One who absolves sin, Much forgiving. Thus it is, because God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and because God hears all and sees all. Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great. Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes green. God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All-aware. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God alone is indeed free of all want, worthy of all praise. Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding? He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind. It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you back to life. Bereft of all gratitude is man. To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they should observe. Let them not draw you into disputes on this score, but call [them all] to your Lord. You are indeed on the right way. (22: 54-67)

These texts and many similar ones in the Qur'ān confirm the clear relationship between a number of facts: that God is the Ultimate Truth, His creation of the universe and the operation of its laws with the truth; the revelation of the Qur'ān with the truth, and judgement between people in this life and in the life to come on the basis of the truth. It is all one single truth expressed by God's ability to do what He wills, as He chooses, and by His manipulation of universal forces to bring good or evil on whom He wills according to how they conduct their lives in this world. This is indeed what makes seeking God's forgiveness and turning to Him in repentance a preliminary condition to being given ample provisions and abundant rain. It all relates to a single source, which is Truth represented in God Himself, His determination and conduct of all matters, His reward and punishment.

Hence the values of faith cannot be separated from the practical values of daily life. Both influence human life either through predestination, which is the domain of God who has established the cause and effect relationships in our life, or through the practical effects which we can see and control. These effects are produced by our acceptance or rejection of faith.

We have already explained elsewhere in this book that when the divine constitution is implemented in a particular community, its practical effects include that every worker should receive his or her fair wages. Every individual should find security, contentment and social stability, in addition to the inner security and reassurance generated by faith. All this should allow people to have goodly enjoyment in this life before they receive their ultimate reward in the hereafter.

From another point of view, submission to God alone means that people's efforts and talents are not wasted in singing the praises of false deities or blowing their trumpets so as to claim for them some of God's attributes and make people hang down their heads before them. Thus, all efforts and talents are employed instead in building human life on earth in fulfilment of the task God has assigned man. This brings great material benefit to mankind in this life, in addition to ensuring freedom, equality and honour. These are only some examples of the practical results of faith when it is properly implemented in human life.

Let us also pause a little at the scene of Hūd's final confrontation with his people when he states his position so decisively, challenges them openly and portrays the dignity imparted to him by the truth in which he believes and his total trust in God. *"He said: 'I call God to witness, and you, too, bear witness, that I disassociate myself from all those you claim to be partners with God. Scheme against me, all of you, if you will, and give me no respite. Indeed I have placed my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock. Straight indeed is my Lord's way. But if you turn away, I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent to you. My Lord may replace you with another people. You can do Him no harm. My Lord watches over all things.'"* (Verses 54-57)

Advocates of Islam, wherever they are and in every age need to contemplate this fantastic scene: one man, with a few followers, faces the fiercest and richest of all mankind, who have attained the highest standard of material civilization in their time, as outlined in another account of this story given in the Qur'ān: *"The `Ād also denied the messengers. Their brother Hūd said to them: 'Will you not be conscious of God? I am an honest messenger sent to you. Be then conscious of God and follow me. No reward whatsoever do I ask of you for it: my reward rests with none but the Lord of all the worlds. Will you build a monument on every high place for vain delight? You raise strong fortresses, hoping that you may last forever. When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants. Have fear of God, and follow me. Fear Him who has given you all the things you know. He*

has given you flocks and children, gardens and fountains. Indeed, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' They replied: 'It is all one to us whether you preach to us or you are not one of those who preach. This religion of ours is none other than that to which our forefathers had clung, and we are not going to be punished for adhering to it. '" (26: 123-138)

Like Hūd, advocates of Islam must feel the truth of their Lord very clearly within themselves in order to be able to stand up with dignity to the tyrannical forces of *jāhiliyyah* all around them. They must confront physical power as well as the power of industry, wealth, human knowledge, governmental regimes, sophisticated machinery, equipment and the like, knowing that God holds every creature by its forelock. We are all the same before God.

They must at one point confront their people with an uncompromising attitude. The same people are then divided into two different nations: one which submits to God alone and one which does not. When this confrontation takes place, God fulfils His promise to grant victory to His servants. Throughout the history of the divine message, God only resolves the issue between His servants and His enemies in a direct way when the believers have confronted the unbelievers on the basis of faith and made their choice of submission to God alone known to them. In this way they state clearly that they belong to God's party and rely on Him alone, and have no support except that which He grants.

High Hopes, Arrogance and a Woeful Doom

Let us now move on with the *sūrah* and look at the account it gives of the Prophet Ṣāliĥ and his people, Thamūd: *"To Thamūd, We sent their brother Ṣāliĥ. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein. Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance. My Lord is ever near. He answers all.'"* (Verse 61)

We again encounter the same words outlining the same basic issue, and the same course of action. Ṣāliĥ calls on people to believe in God's oneness, to seek His forgiveness and to feel His presence with them wherever they are and whatever they are doing. Ṣāliĥ also reminds them that they originate from the earth. This refers to the origin of the human race as well as to the fact that every human being depends on the nourishment that he receives from the earth, or from the elements which are available in it, for his growth. Despite this origin they are put in charge of the earth and given the task of building it. This applies to the human race generally and to the Thamūd in particular, in their period of history.

All this, however, does not deter them from associating partners with God. Ṣāliĥ, therefore, calls on them to *"Seek His forgiveness and then turn to Him in repentance."* (Verse 61) If they do so, He will respond favourably and answer their prayers: *'My*

Lord is ever near. He answers all." (Verse 61) Note here the use of the possessive pronoun *"My Lord"* and the attributes which are chosen here, *"ever near, He answers all."* Coming so close together, they give the impression of the reality of Godhead as felt by one of the chosen elite of believers. They impart an air of friendliness, compassion and very real contact between the benevolent prophet's heart and the hearts of his audience.

Their hearts, however, have been blinded by their corruption. They are no longer responsive. Hence, they do not feel the beauty or the majesty of the reality of Godhead, nor do they appreciate the friendliness and the care with which Ṣāliĥ addresses them. On the contrary, they are surprised and start to doubt their trusted brother. *"They answered: 'Ṣāliĥ.! Great hopes did we place in you before this. Would you now forbid us to worship what our forefathers worshipped? We are indeed in grave doubt about that to which you call us.'"* (Verse 62)

They tell him that they had placed great hopes in him. Where once they had appreciated his wide knowledge, honesty, sensibility and wisdom, they are now totally disappointed. Why? *"Would you now forbid us to worship what our forefathers worshipped?"* (Verse 62) To them, that was the calamity. They expected anything but this. And this raised grave doubts in their minds about everything Ṣāliĥ had said. *"We are indeed in grave doubt about that to which you call us."* (Verse 62)

Thus, the Thamūd are puzzled by what is straightforward. They consider as strange and singular what is right and clear. They are amazed that their brother, Ṣāliĥ, should call them to worship God alone. Their astonishment, however, is not based on any evidence, argument, or intellectual thought. They are astonished only because their forefathers worshipped such false gods. People can indeed reach this level of blindness. They base their beliefs on nothing more than the fact that their forefathers believed in the same thing. Once again we find that the faith based on God's oneness is, in essence, a call for the complete and total liberation of the human mind from its bonds of blind imitation of the past, and from the shackles of legendary illusions.

The Thamūd's attitude towards Ṣāliĥ and their statement, *"Great hopes did we place in you before this,"* remind us of the great trust the Quraysh had shown in Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and his honesty. When he, however, called on them to believe in God alone, they denounced him in the same way as Ṣāliĥ was denounced by his people. They accused him of being a sorcerer and a fabricator. They preferred to forget their own testimony to his honesty. The same attitude is always repeated.

Like Noah, his great-grandfather, Ṣāliĥ puts this simple question to his people: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on*

me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin." (Verse 63) If I have clear proof, and I feel it within me to be absolutely certain that my path is the right path, and if God has bestowed His grace on me by choosing me to deliver His message, and has given me the qualities which make me qualified for this task, who will protect me from God if, in order to preserve your hopes and trust in me, I disobey Him by not conveying to you His message? Would your hopes which you have placed in me be of any use to me against God? *"Who will save me from God were I to disobey Him?"* You raise before me nothing more than the prospect of double ruin. I will incur God's anger in addition to being deprived of the honour of being His messenger and will suffer the ignominy of this world in addition to the punishment of the hereafter. What a compound loss!

"And, my people, here is God's she-camel, a clear sign for you. Leave her to graze at will in God's land, and do her no harm, lest speedy punishment befall you." (Verse 64) The *sūrah* does not give here any description of the she-camel to which Ṣāliĥ refers as a sign given to them. However, she is *'God's she-camel,'* sent to them in particular so as to be *'a clear sign for you.'* This suggests that the she-camel had certain distinctive qualities by which they knew that it was a sign from God. They were told to allow the she-camel to graze at will in God's land and to do her no harm, or else, they would suffer a speedy punishment. The structure of the sentence in the original Arabic suggests that the punishment would fall immediately and overwhelm them totally.

"Yet they cruelly slaughtered her. He said: 'You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes. This is a promise which will not be belied." (Verse 65) Despite Ṣāliĥ's warnings, they hamstrung the she- camel and killed her. The Arabic text uses for 'slaughter' a term that indicates that they struck her hamstrings with swords before killing her. Their action was evidence of their corruption and apathy. We note that the text here does not allow for any time passing between the appearance of the she-camel and their killing of her. It is evident that this sign from their Lord did not affect their attitude to Ṣāliĥ's message. Hence, they had to be punished.

They were given a respite of three days, and were told that that was the time left for them to enjoy themselves. The punishment would then surely follow: *"When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Ṣāliĥ and those who shared his faith from the ignominy of that day. Indeed, your Lord is Powerful, Almighty."* (Verse 66) At the appointed time Ṣāliĥ and those who followed him were saved by God's grace. A special act of kindness was done to them and they were saved the humiliating destiny of the rest of the Thamūd, who died, having heard the dreadful cry, with everyone in the same position they were in before the cry.

"Indeed your Lord is Powerful, Almighty." Nothing can stand in His way and no people, powerful as they may be, can escape His judgement. Those who are on His side will always have their dignity intact.

The *sūrah* then portrays a scene which makes us wonder at the Thamūd and the speed with which they were destroyed: *"The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, as though they had never prospered there."* (Verses 67-68) It is as if they never dwelled or prospered in their magnificent dwellings. It is a scene which fills us with wonder. Nothing more than a glance separates life from death. The whole life of a human being is no more than a momentary affair.

The final comment is the usual one in the *sūrah.* It records the guilt of the people punished, the curse which pursued them and the fact that they were removed from existence and memory: *"The Thamūd denied their Lord! Oh, away with the Thamūd."* (Verse 68)

Historical Similarities

This is another episode of the history of the divine message to mankind. It is the same message, speaking about the essence of Islam, in the broad sense of the word: to worship God and submit to Him alone, associating no partners with Him. Again we are faced with a state of *jāhiliyyah* that follows deviation from the divine faith based on God's oneness. Like the `Ād before them, the Thamūd descended from the believers saved in Noah's ark, but they deviated from the right faith and ended up in a dreadful state of *jāhiliyyah.* Ṣāliĥ was sent to return them to the true faith.

They are given a miraculous sign, as they asked for, but this does not lead them to believe; rather, it makes them more hostile and they cruelly slaughter the she-camel.

The Arab idolaters also demanded that the Prophet bring them some miraculous sign to help them accept his message. But the sign given to Ṣāliĥ's people benefitted them nothing. To believe in God does not require miracles: the message is both simple and straightforward when approached with clear thinking. *Jāhiliyyah,* however, seals both hearts and minds leaving people in a state of ignorance.

Again we find here the truth of Godhead as manifested in the heart of one of the noble messengers chosen to deliver His message. It is stated by Ṣāliĥ, as he is quoted in the Qur'ān: *"Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord who has bestowed on me His grace, who will save me from God were I to disobey Him? You are, in such a case, only aggravating my ruin."* (Verse 63) He says this after having given them a clear description of his Lord as he feels His presence in his own heart: *"My Lord is ever near. He answers all."* (Verse 61)

Nowhere are the beauty, majesty and perfection of the reality of Godhead better reflected than in the hearts of this noble group of God's chosen people. These hearts stand out as a clear, unstained exhibition of this great reality.

We also find here how *jāhiliyyah* considers as erroneous what is clearly right, and looks at the truth as extremely singular! Ṣāliḥ was much appreciated by his people because of his fine character, clear thinking and wisdom. His people placed great hope in him. But once he had delivered his message to them, they looked upon him with much disappointment. Why this sudden change? It was only because he called on them to submit themselves to God alone. This was at variance with what they had learnt from their forefathers. When the human heart deviates even slightly from the true faith, its error takes it so far away as to make it unable to appreciate the truth, simple and logical as it is. By contrast, such deviant hearts are able to accept deviation that flies in the face of natural and rational logic.

Ṣāliḥ called on his people: *"My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. He it is who brought you into being out of the earth and settled you therein."* (Verse 61) He thus appealed to them by what they could easily recognize as natural and irrefutable evidence based on how they were brought into being. Never had they claimed that they were the ones who brought themselves into being, ensured their survival and provided themselves with the sustenance available on earth. They did not deny that it was God who brought them into being. But they did not follow this through to its logical outcome, namely, submission to God alone and following His guidance. This indeed was the essence of what Ṣāliḥ called on them to do: *"Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him."*

It is, then, not the issue of Godhead that is subject to contention. As always, it is the issue of God's Lordship and sovereignty and man's submission and obedience. This is the same issue throughout the battle between Islam and *jāhiliyyah.*

4
Abraham's Special Guests

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَتْ رُسُلُنَآ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ بِٱلْبُشْرَىٰ ۖ قَالُوا۟ سَلَٰمًا ۖ قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ ۖ فَمَا لَبِثَ أَن جَآءَ بِعِجْلٍ حَنِيذٍ ﴿٦٩﴾

Our messengers came to Abraham with good news. They bade him peace, and he answered: 'Peace [be to you].' He then hastened to bring them a roasted calf. (69)

فَلَمَّا رَءَآ أَيْدِيَهُمْ لَا تَصِلُ إِلَيْهِ نَكِرَهُمْ وَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً ۚ قَالُوا۟ لَا تَخَفْ إِنَّآ أُرْسِلْنَآ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِ لُوطٍ ﴿٧٠﴾

But when he saw that their hands did not reach out to it, he felt their conduct strange and became apprehensive of them. They said: 'Do not be alarmed. We are sent to the people of Lot.' (70)

وَٱمْرَأَتُهُۥ قَآئِمَةٌ فَضَحِكَتْ فَبَشَّرْنَٰهَا بِإِسْحَٰقَ وَمِن وَرَآءِ إِسْحَٰقَ يَعْقُوبَ ﴿٧١﴾

His wife, standing nearby, laughed; whereupon We gave her the happy news of [her giving birth to] Isaac and, after Isaac, Jacob. (71)

قَالَتْ يَٰوَيْلَتَىٰٓ ءَأَلِدُ وَأَنَا۠ عَجُوزٌ وَهَٰذَا بَعْلِى شَيْخًا ۖ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَشَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ﴿٧٢﴾

Said she: 'Woe is me! Shall I bear a child, now that I am an old woman and this my husband is well-advanced in years? This is a strange thing indeed.' (72)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَتَعْجَبِينَ مِنْ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ رَحْمَتُ ٱللَّهِ وَبَرَكَٰتُهُۥ عَلَيْكُمْ أَهْلَ ٱلْبَيْتِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ حَمِيدٌ مَّجِيدٌ ﴿٧٣﴾

They said: 'Do you marvel at God's decree? May God's mercy and blessings be upon you, people of this house. He is indeed ever to be praised, Glorious.' (73)

فَلَمَّا ذَهَبَ عَنْ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ٱلرَّوْعُ وَجَآءَتْهُ ٱلْبُشْرَىٰ يُجَٰدِلُنَا فِى قَوْمِ لُوطٍ ﴿٧٤﴾

When his fear had left Abraham, and he received the happy news, he began to plead with Us for Lot's people. (74)

إِنَّ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ لَحَلِيمٌ أَوَّٰهٞ مُّنِيبٞ ٧٥

Abraham was indeed most clement, tender-hearted, and devout. (75)

يَٰٓإِبۡرَٰهِيمُ أَعۡرِضۡ عَنۡ هَٰذَآۖ إِنَّهُۥ قَدۡ جَآءَ أَمۡرُ رَبِّكَۖ وَإِنَّهُمۡ ءَاتِيهِمۡ عَذَابٌ غَيۡرُ مَرۡدُودٖ ٧٦

Abraham! Leave off all this [pleading]. Your Lord's judgement must come to pass. They shall be afflicted by an irrevocable torment. (76)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُنَا لُوطٗا سِيٓءَ بِهِمۡ وَضَاقَ بِهِمۡ ذَرۡعٗا وَقَالَ هَٰذَا يَوۡمٌ عَصِيبٞ ٧٧

When Our messengers came to Lot he was troubled on their account, for he was powerless to offer them protection. He said: 'This is a woeful day.' (77)

وَجَآءَهُۥ قَوۡمُهُۥ يُهۡرَعُونَ إِلَيۡهِ وَمِن قَبۡلُ كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ بَنَاتِي هُنَّ أَطۡهَرُ لَكُمۡۖ فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَلَا تُخۡزُونِ فِي ضَيۡفِيٓۖ أَلَيۡسَ مِنكُمۡ رَجُلٞ رَّشِيدٞ ٧٨

His people came running towards him, for they had been long keen on abominable practices. He said: 'My people! Here are my daughters: they are purer for you. Have fear of God and do not disgrace me by wronging my guests. Is there not one right-minded man among you?' (78)

قَالُواْ لَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتَ مَا لَنَا فِي بَنَاتِكَ مِنۡ حَقّٖ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَعۡلَمُ مَا نُرِيدُ ٧٩

They answered: 'You know we have no need of your daughters; and indeed you well know what we want.' (79)

قَالَ لَوۡ أَنَّ لِي بِكُمۡ قُوَّةً أَوۡ ءَاوِيٓ إِلَىٰ رُكۡنٖ شَدِيدٖ ٨٠

He said: 'Would that with you I had real strength, or that I could lean on some mighty support.' (80)

قَالُواْ يَٰلُوطُ إِنَّا رُسُلُ رَبِّكَ لَن يَصِلُوٓاْ إِلَيۡكَۖ فَأَسۡرِ بِأَهۡلِكَ بِقِطۡعٖ مِّنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ وَلَا يَلۡتَفِتۡ مِنكُمۡ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَكَۖ إِنَّهُۥ مُصِيبُهَا مَآ أَصَابَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ مَوۡعِدَهُمُ ٱلصُّبۡحُۚ أَلَيۡسَ ٱلصُّبۡحُ بِقَرِيبٖ ٨١

[The angels] said: 'Lot, we are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you. Depart with your household, during the night, and let none of you look back, except for your wife. She shall suffer the same fate which is to befall them. Their appointed time is the morning. Is not the morning near?' (81)

When Our Judgement came to pass We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay, ranged one upon another, (82)	فَلَمَّا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا جَعَلۡنَا عَٰلِيَهَا سَافِلَهَا وَأَمۡطَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهَا حِجَارَةٗ مِّن سِجِّيلٖ مَّنضُودٖ ﴿٨٢﴾
marked out as from your Lord. Nor is such [punishment] far from the wrongdoers. (83)	مُّسَوَّمَةً عِندَ رَبِّكَۖ وَمَا هِيَ مِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ بِبَعِيدٖ ﴿٨٣﴾

Preview

This *sūrah* gives a brief history of the people who were left in charge of the earth after Noah's time. It refers to certain communities which received God's blessings and to others which incurred His displeasure and deserved His punishment. We now have a reference to a part of Abraham's story in which we witness God's blessings. This leads to the story of Lot's people who suffered a painful end. In both stories the dual promise God made to Noah is fulfilled. God's promise ran as follows: *"The word was spoken: Noah, disembark in peace from Us, and with Our blessings upon you as well as upon generations from those who are with you. As for other folk, We shall let them have enjoyment, and then there will befall them grievous suffering from Us.'"* (Verse 48) Thus, some of the offspring of those saved in the ark were to receive God's blessings, while other communities were left to enjoy themselves for a while before terrible punishment overwhelmed them for their misdeeds. The blessings are given to Abraham and his seed through both his sons: Isaac and his children who were the Israelite prophets, and Ishmael whose offspring included Muĥammad, the last of God's messengers.

Good News for Abraham

The account of Abraham opens here with the fact that he was to receive good news: *"Our messengers came to Abraham with good news."* (Verse 69) We are not told immediately what the good news was. This would come at the right moment, when his wife was present. The messengers were angels whose identity is left a mystery. Although some commentators on the Qur'ān mention names and numbers, we prefer not to speculate, since we have no evidence to support such contentions.

"They bade him peace, and he answered: 'Peace [be to you].'" (Verse 69) Abraham had emigrated from his birthplace in Iraq, crossed the Jordan and settled in the land of

the Canaanites which was largely a desert. Following the Bedouin tradition of hospitality, Abraham immediately went about preparing food for his guests. "*He then hastened to bring them a roasted calf*" (Verse 69) He gets a fat calf, roasts and prepares it. He presents it to his guests who, as we have already said, were angels. Angels, however, do not eat what human beings eat. Hence, they could not partake of the calf, and this worried Abraham: "*When he saw that their hands did not reach out to it, he felt their conduct strange and became apprehensive of them.*" (Verse 70) A guest who does not eat of the food given him causes worry. He makes his host nervous that he intends some kind of treachery. To this day, country people and Bedouins consider it a grave crime to act treacherously towards someone with whom they have shared food. Hence, if they refuse to eat someone's food, their action suggests that they either intend to do harm or that they do not trust the host's intentions. Hence, the messengers reveal their identity to Abraham and tell him about their mission: "*They said: Do not be alarmed. We are sent to the people of Lot.*" (Verse 70)

Abraham realized what sending angels to Lot's people meant, but then something else happens and the subject is changed: "*His wife, standing nearby, laughed.*" (Verse 71) She might have been pleased by the imminent destruction of the evil-doers! Then she is given her own news: "*whereupon We gave her the happy news of [her giving birth to] Isaac and, after Isaac, Jacob.*" (Verse 71) She was an old woman who had never given birth to a child. Hence, the news of giving birth to Isaac was extremely surprising. Yet, it was happy news of double significance because Isaac would have offspring of his own. Jacob would be born to him. Any woman, especially a sterile one, would be overjoyed at such news. But she is also confused and her confusion is evident: "*Said she: 'Woe is me! Shall I bear a child now that I am an old woman, and this my husband is well-advanced in years? This is a strange thing indeed.'*" (Verse 72)

It is strange indeed. All women cease to menstruate after a certain age. When this happens, they can no longer conceive. But nothing is strange when God wills it: "*They said: 'Do you marvel at God's decree? May God's mercy and blessings be upon you, people of this house. He is indeed ever to be praised, Glorious.'*" (Verse 73)

Familiar or Miraculous?

Nothing that God does should be considered strange. When it is the norm for something to happen in a particular fashion, this does not mean that that fashion is unchangeable. The norm can be broken when God so chooses, for a particular purpose of His own. The purpose here is to bestow His mercy and promised blessings to the believers in that household. Yet, when the norm is broken, whatever takes place as a result occurs in accordance with the overall divine laws of nature

which we do not know in full. We cannot judge God's laws according to what happens during a short, limited period of time.

Those who try to restrict God's will to the laws of nature familiar to them are ignorant of the reality of Godhead as stated by God in His book. Whatever God states is true. Our human minds have no say in all this. Even those who restrict God's will to what He Himself has stated to be His law are again unaware of the true nature of Godhead. God's will is free and not restricted by His laws.

It is true that God conducts the affairs of this universe according to the laws He has set for it. This is, however, different from restricting God's will to these natural laws after they have been set in operation. The laws of nature work by God's will all the time. They are not automatic. At any time, God may choose to cause His natural laws to operate in a different way. Whenever this happens natural laws will change to the new fashion God has determined. The overall law of nature which governs the operation of all other laws is that which states that God's will is free and absolute. Every time any particular law operates, it does so according to God's free and absolute will.

At this point, Abraham was reassured. He was delighted by the good news given him by God's messengers. This, however, did not make him overlook Lot and his people. Lot was his nephew who had emigrated with him from their birthplace and who lived in the neighbouring area. He realized that the messengers, or the angels were sent to destroy Lot's people. Compassionate and tender-hearted as Abraham was, he could not bear that the whole community should be so destroyed. He began to plead for them. *"When his fear had left Abraham, and he received the happy news, he began to plead with Us for Lot's people. Abraham was indeed most clement, tender-hearted, and devout."* (Verses 74-75)

Abraham is described in the text as clement, tender-hearted and devout. He did not lose his temper easily, he prayed to God with sincerity, and he always turned to his Lord in repentance. All these qualities prompted Abraham to plead for Lot's people. We do not know how this pleading was conducted, because the Qur'ān does not elaborate. He was told, however, that God's judgement had been passed and there was no point in his pleading: *"Abraham! Leave off all this [pleading]. Your Lord's judgement must come to pass. They shall be afflicted by an irrevocable torment."* (Verse 76)

Abraham complied and the curtains dropped in order to be raised again on a scene full of activity at Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's country.

Perversion Brings a Painful Doom

When Our messengers came to Lot he was troubled on their account, for he was

powerless to offer them protection. He said: 'This is a woeful day.' (Verse 77)

Lot was aware of the perversity of his people, who preferred to satisfy their sexual desires with men instead of women. In so doing they rebelled against nature, which avails itself of God's wisdom in creating all species in pairs so that procreation and regeneration can take place. Undistorted nature finds true pleasure in conforming to this wisdom, naturally and instinctively.

There are indeed all kinds of perversion. The case of Lot's people, however, is singular. It suggests that psychological disturbances are infectious, like physical illnesses. It is possible that a psychological disorder such as that of the people of Sodom may spread as a result of a disturbance of values in any particular society and the presence of bad examples which produces an unhealthy environment. It is possible that such a psychological disorder spreads despite the fact that it is in conflict with nature which is subject to the same law that governs life itself. This law determines that upright nature finds its pleasure in what meets the requirements of life and ensures its continuity not in what stifles life. Sexual perversion is of the latter sort because it puts the seeds of life in a wicked soil that is not conducive to their growth. For this reason, healthy human nature instinctively, not only morally, finds the practices of Lot's people repulsive. Sound human nature is subject to God's law who grants life and who has made healthy pleasure attendant on what enriches life.

Sometimes, we find pleasure in death for the achievement of a goal which is, to us, more sublime than this life. Such a pleasure, however, is moral, not physical. Besides, such death does not stifle life. On the contrary, it enriches life and elevates it to a sublime standard. There is no comparison between such a pleasure in death and a perversion that stifles life.

Knowing what scandal awaited him in front of his guests, and what ill-treatment awaited these guests from his own people, Lot was troubled on their account and exclaimed, "*this is a woeful day.*" The woeful day soon started when his people rushed towards him: "*His people came running towards him, for they had been long keen on abominable practices.*" (Verse 78) They were impelled by their desires, rushing like one who has lost self-control. This was the reason for the distress Lot felt on his guests' account.

When Lot looked at his people coming hurriedly towards his home, intent on abusing him and his guests, he tried to arouse their upright nature and direct them to the opposite sex with whom healthy nature finds pleasure. He was even ready to give his daughters in marriage to those frenzied people to satisfy their maddening desires in a clean, pure way. "*He said: 'My people! Here are my daughters: they are purer for you. Have fear of God and do not disgrace me by wronging my guests. Is there not one right-minded man among you?'*" (Verse 78) All the connotations of purity,

psychological and physical, are meant here. Lot's daughters would provide a proper, sound and natural way for the satisfaction of sexual desire, arousing healthy feelings as well. It is a situation of complete purity, natural as well as moral and religious. Moreover, they are physically purer. The will of the Creator has provided a clean, pure place for the new emerging life.

Lot also tried to appeal to their fear of God, and their sense of propriety in providing hospitality to one's guests: *"Have fear of God and do not disgrace me by wronging my guests. Is there not any right- minded man among you?"* (Verse 78)

The issue then is one of sensibility or the lack of it, in addition to its being an issue of healthy nature, and propriety behaviour. None of this, however, could counteract their perversity and psychopathic minds. Their frenzy continued in full force. Their reply was even more singular: *"They answered: 'You know we have no need of your daughters; and indeed you well know what we want.'"* (Verse 79) Here is an implicit reminder to Lot that had they had any desire to marry his daughters, they would have done so, because that was their right, and they had a claim to them. But, instead they said: *"Indeed you well know what we want."* A wicked hint to an evil practice!

Lot was confounded. He felt his position was very weak, especially since he was a stranger who had settled among these people, having emigrated from a far-away land. He realized that he had no clan or tribe to support him; he had no strength upon which he could fall back on such a difficult day. Sad and distressed, he put all his feelings in words that were full of sorrow: *"He said: 'Would that with you I had real strength, or that I could lean on some mighty support.'"* (Verse 80) He addressed this to his guests who were angels in the form of young men. Feeling that they were far from strong, he expressed his seemingly unrealistic wish for support from them or from somewhere else. In his difficulty, Lot overlooked the fact that he could indeed lean on the mighty support of God who does not fail His obedient servants.

When the Prophet recited this verse he said: "May God have mercy on my brother Lot. He had indeed the mighty support he was looking for."

When his distress was at its highest and matters had come to a head, the angels informed Lot of the mighty support he had. They informed him of their identity, so that he might be saved along with the good members of his family, with the exception of his wife who belonged to the evil people: *"[The angels] said: 'Lot, we are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you. Depart with your household, during the night, and let none of you look back, except for your wife. She shall suffer the same fate which is to befall them. Their appointed time is the morning. Is not the morning near?'"* (*Verse* 81) We note that the first instruction required that none of the good people who believed in God should delay their departure, or look back because all those who remained in the townships would be destroyed by morning. The rhetorical

question about the morning being so near was meant to help Lot relax. Once the morning appeared, God would cause Lot's people to suffer by His own strength what could never have been achieved by the strength Lot wished he had.

The final scene is one of fearful destruction which Lot's people deserved. At the appointed time, "*when Our Judgement came to pass We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay, ranged one upon another, marked out as from your Lord. Nor is such [punishment] far from the wrongdoers.*" (Verses 82-83) It is a scene of total destruction, leaving nothing standing. Note here that turning everything in those towns upside down is akin, in effect, to the perversity of Lot's people which had brought them down from man's high standard to the abject level of animals. Indeed, they were lower than animals because animals are bound by their nature. They do not distort it. The stones showered on them were a fitting means of punishment, because they were stained with mud. The stones were showered heavily "*ranged one upon another.* "We also note that these stones were *'marked out as from your Lord,"* the same way as cattle are marked out and left free for breeding. This gives the impression that these stones were left to breed and increase in order to be available at this time of need. It is a fine expression which imparts its own connotations far better than any interpretation could hope to achieve. This is followed by a statement that God's punishment is always available, at any time it is needed, and it will always overwhelm those who deserve it.

The calamity portrayed here sounds similar to some volcanic eruptions which cause subsidence, so that what has been erected on earth is swallowed up, while all this is accompanied with fire, stones, mud and lava. God has much in store for the evil-doers. We do not say this in order to suggest that Lot's people were punished by a volcano erupting at that particular time. Nor do we deny it. All we can say is that this might have happened, but we do not know for certain. We do not like to restrict God's action to any one phenomenon which is familiar to us. But it is probable that God had previously determined to cause a volcanic eruption to bring about the fate of Lot's people as had been predetermined by His knowledge. Such timing is indeed part of the manifestation of His supremacy in the universe, and His conduct of all its affairs. It is also equally possible that what happened to Lot's people occurred as a result of special action determined by God in order to destroy Lot's people in that particular fashion at that particular time. If we understand God's will as it relates to everything in the universe on the lines we have explained in commenting on the fortunes of Abraham's wife, we will have no problem in understanding any event which takes place by God's will.

5
Social Perspective

۞ وَإِلَىٰ مَدۡيَنَ أَخَاهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٗاۚ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥۖ وَلَا تَنقُصُواْ ٱلۡمِكۡيَالَ وَٱلۡمِيزَانَۚ إِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰكُم بِخَيۡرٖ وَإِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٖ مُّحِيطٖ ٨٤

And to Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him. Do not give short measure and weight. I see you now in a happy state, yet I dread lest suffering befall you on a fateful day which will encompass all. (84)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ أَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡمِكۡيَالَ وَٱلۡمِيزَانَ بِٱلۡقِسۡطِۖ وَلَا تَبۡخَسُواْ ٱلنَّاسَ أَشۡيَآءَهُمۡ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ٨٥

My people, always give full measure and weight, in all fairness, and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs, and do not spread corruption on earth by wicked actions. (85)

بَقِيَّتُ ٱللَّهِ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَۚ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ عَلَيۡكُم بِحَفِيظٖ ٨٦

That which rests with God is better for you, if you truly believe. I am not your keeper.' (86)

قَالُواْ يَٰشُعَيۡبُ أَصَلَوٰتُكَ تَأۡمُرُكَ أَن نَّتۡرُكَ مَا يَعۡبُدُ ءَابَآؤُنَآ أَوۡ أَن نَّفۡعَلَ فِيٓ أَمۡوَٰلِنَا مَا نَشَٰٓؤُاْۖ إِنَّكَ لَأَنتَ ٱلۡحَلِيمُ ٱلرَّشِيدُ ٨٧

They said: 'Shu`ayb, do your prayers compel you to demand of us that we should renounce all that our forefathers worshipped, or that we refrain from doing what we please with our property? You are indeed the one who is clement and right-minded!' (87)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ إِن كُنتُ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّي وَرَزَقَنِي مِنۡهُ رِزۡقٗا حَسَنٗاۚ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَنۡ أُخَالِفَكُمۡ إِلَىٰ مَآ أَنۡهَىٰكُمۡ عَنۡهُۚ إِنۡ أُرِيدُ إِلَّا ٱلۡإِصۡلَٰحَ مَا ٱسۡتَطَعۡتُۚ وَمَا تَوۡفِيقِيٓ إِلَّا بِٱللَّهِۚ عَلَيۡهِ تَوَكَّلۡتُ وَإِلَيۡهِ أُنِيبُ ٨٨

He said: 'Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give? I have no desire to do, in opposition to you, what I ask you not to do. All that I desire is to set things to rights in so far as it lies within my power. My success depends on God alone. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him I always turn. (88)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ لَا يَجۡرِمَنَّكُمۡ شِقَاقِيٓ أَن يُصِيبَكُم مِّثۡلُ مَآ أَصَابَ قَوۡمَ نُوحٍ أَوۡ قَوۡمَ هُودٍ أَوۡ قَوۡمَ صَٰلِحٖۚ وَمَا قَوۡمُ لُوطٖ مِّنكُم بِبَعِيدٖ ٨٩

My people, let not your disagreement with me bring upon you a fate similar to those that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd or Ṣāliḥ; nor were Lot's people far away from you. (89)

وَٱسۡتَغۡفِرُواْ رَبَّكُمۡ ثُمَّ تُوبُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهِۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي رَحِيمٞ وَدُودٞ ٩٠

Hence, pray to your Lord to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance. My Lord is indeed Merciful and All-loving.' (90)

قَالُواْ يَٰشُعَيۡبُ مَا نَفۡقَهُ كَثِيرٗا مِّمَّا تَقُولُ وَإِنَّا لَنَرَىٰكَ فِينَا ضَعِيفٗاۖ وَلَوۡلَا رَهۡطُكَ لَرَجَمۡنَٰكَۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡنَا بِعَزِيزٖ ٩١

They said: 'Shu`ayb, we cannot understand much of what you say. But we do see clearly how weak you are in our midst. Were it not for your family, we would have stoned you. You do not command a position of great respect among us.' (91)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ أَرَهۡطِيٓ أَعَزُّ عَلَيۡكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۖ وَٱتَّخَذۡتُمُوهُ وَرَآءَكُمۡ ظِهۡرِيًّاۖ إِنَّ رَبِّي

Said he: 'My people, do you hold my family in greater esteem than God? You have turned your backs on Him. My Lord encompasses [with His might] all that you do. (92)

بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ مُحِيطٞ ٩٢

Do what you will, my people, and so will I. You shall come to know who shall be visited by suffering that will cover him with ignominy, and who is a liar. Watch, then [for what is coming], and I shall watch with you.' (93)

وَيَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡمَلُواْ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمۡ إِنِّي عَٰمِلٞۖ سَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَ مَن يَأۡتِيهِ عَذَابٞ يُخۡزِيهِ وَمَنۡ هُوَ كَٰذِبٞۖ وَٱرۡتَقِبُوٓاْ إِنِّي مَعَكُمۡ رَقِيبٞ ٩٣

When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Shu`ayb and those who shared his faith. The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, (94)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا نَجَّيۡنَا شُعَيۡبٗا وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مَعَهُۥ بِرَحۡمَةٖ مِّنَّا وَأَخَذَتِ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ ٱلصَّيۡحَةُ فَأَصۡبَحُواْ فِي دِيَٰرِهِمۡ جَٰثِمِينَ ٩٤

as though they had never prospered there. Oh, away with the people of Madyan, even as the Thamūd have been done away with! (95)

كَأَن لَّمۡ يَغۡنَوۡاْ فِيهَآۗ أَلَا بُعۡدٗا لِّمَدۡيَنَ كَمَا بَعِدَتۡ ثَمُودُ ٩٥

Indeed, We sent Moses with Our signs and a manifest authority, (96)

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَسُلۡطَٰنٖ مُّبِينٍ ٩٦

to Pharaoh and his noble men. They, however, followed only Pharaoh's bidding. Pharaoh's bidding led by no means to what is right. (97)

إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَٱتَّبَعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَ فِرۡعَوۡنَۖ وَمَآ أَمۡرُ فِرۡعَوۡنَ بِرَشِيدٖ ٩٧

He will come at the head of his people on the Day of Resurrection, leading them to the fire. Vile was the destination towards which they were led. (98)

يَقۡدُمُ قَوۡمَهُۥ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فَأَوۡرَدَهُمُ ٱلنَّارَۖ وَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡوِرۡدُ ٱلۡمَوۡرُودُ ٩٨

A curse is made to follow them in this world and on the Day of Resurrection. Vile was the renewable gift which they were given. (99)

وَأُتۡبِعُواْ فِي هَٰذِهِۦ لَعۡنَةٗ وَيَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۗ
بِئۡسَ ٱلرِّفۡدُ ٱلۡمَرۡفُودُ ٩٩

Preview

This is yet another stage of the same message preaching the same faith. Here we have an account of Shu`ayb and his people, who lived at Madyan. Coupled with the main issue of faith and God's oneness, we also have here the issue of honesty and justice in business transactions. It is an issue closely related to faith in God, submission to Him alone and the implementation of His laws. The people of Madyan, however, were totally astonished at the two issues being linked together. They could not comprehend the relationship between financial transactions and prayer, which is a manifestation of submission to God.

The history given here follows the same lines as the accounts of Hūd with the `Ād, and Ṣāliĥ with the Thamūd. Its conclusion, and the style and expressions used to portray the final outcome, however, make it more akin to Ṣāliĥ's history. Indeed the two histories portray the same type of suffering, expressed in similar terms, befalling the two peoples.

Faith and Fair Trading

"And to Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb. He said: 'My people! Worship God alone. You have no deity other than Him.'" (Verse 84) Submission to God alone is the first article of faith as well as the first rule of life and the first principle of law and human transactions. It is the principle without which faith, worship or human dealings cannot take their proper shape.

"Do not give short measure and weight. I see you now in a happy state, yet I dread lest suffering befall you on a fateful day which will encompass all. My people, always give full measure and weight, in all fairness, and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs, and do not spread corruption on earth by wicked actions. That which rests with God is better for you, if you truly believe. I am not your keeper." (Verses 84-86) The main issue here is honesty and justice, which comes second only to the issue of faith and submission to God. In other words, it is the issue of the law which governs business dealings on the basis of faith. The people of Madyan, whose country was an enclave of land lying between Hijaz and Syria, used to give short measure and weight, thus wronging other people in respect of what was rightfully theirs. That is, they used to give other

people less than the value of their goods. Their misconduct reflected badly on their integrity and honour and showed that they were far from clean both externally and at heart. Their geographical position meant that they were able to control the trade route of the caravans moving between the north and the south of Arabia. This enabled them to dictate unfair terms on other peoples' trade.

Here we see the link between believing in God's oneness and submission to Him alone on the one hand, and honesty, fair trading, honourable transactions and combating all kinds of cheating and stealing, whether perpetrated by individuals or governments, on the other. This relationship appears to be a safeguard ensuring a better human life, justice and peace among people. It is the only safeguard based on fearing God and seeking His pleasure. Hence, it has a very solid foundation which cannot be influenced by special interests or personal desires.

In the Islamic view, business dealings, and morality generally, must have a solid basis which is not influenced by changeable factors. Thus Islam differs fundamentally with all other social and moral theories devised by human beings and governed by their differing bents of thought and their temporary interest.

When business dealings and morality have such a solid basis, they are not influenced by immediate or material interests or by differing environments with different factors and considerations. Hence, rules of morality and those that govern human dealings are not subject to whether people are nomadic, agrarian or industrialized. Such changeable factors lose their influence on the moral concepts of society or the moral values which govern business transactions when the basis of legislation for all spheres of life is divine law. Then the essential basis of morality is to seek God's pleasure, hoping to win His reward and avoid His punishment. All that is advanced by human-made theories and doctrines about morality being the product of the economic situation and the social conditions prevailing in a particular society become meaningless in the light of Islamic moral theory.

"Do not give short measure and weight. I see you now in a happy state." (Verse 84) God has given you ample provision for your sustenance, so you have no need to indulge in vile practices to add to your riches. You will not become poor if you give full measure and weight and give people what is rightfully theirs. Your happy state is indeed threatened by your cheating practices and your unlawful earnings. *"Yet I dread lest suffering befall you on a fateful day which will encompass all."* (Verse 84) This may come on the Day of Judgement, or it may indeed occur in this life when your cheating practices yield their bitter fruits and rebound on your society and your trade. People will then suffer injustice brought about by some of them against others.

Shu`ayb repeats his advice positively after having expressed it in the form of a prohibition. *"My people, always give full measure and weight, in all fairness."* (Verse 85)

To give full measure and weight is more expressive than not falling short on both of them. It is closer to giving others more than their due. Different forms of expression have different connotations and leave different effects. The effect of giving full measure and full weight is much more kindly than that of not falling short.

"Do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs." (Verse 85) This is much more general than what is valued according to measure and weight. It stresses the fair evaluation of everything which belongs to others, whether this evaluation is in weight, measure, price or otherwise. It also includes material as well as moral evaluations. It may be said to further encompass actions and personal qualities. The Arabic term used here includes both the material and the abstract.

When people suffer maltreatment in respect of what rightfully belongs to them, this gives rise to bitterness, grudges and despair. Such feelings can only ruin society and destroy social links as they adversely affect consciences and hearts. They leave no room for anything good in life.

"Do not spread corruption on earth by wicked actions." (Verse 85) They must not willingly seek to spread corruption because it rebounds on them. Instead, their hearts should awaken to something far better and far more rewarding than their stained earnings: *"That which rests with God is better for you, if truly believe."* (Verse 86) What is with God is far better and lasts much longer. At the outset, Shu`ayb called on his people to worship God alone. He reminds them of this here, when he mentions their lasting reward which they will receive from God if they respond to his call, and follow his advice in their business dealings. After all, his advice is part of that faith.

Having called on them to believe in God alone, he leaves them to Him, declaring that he cannot influence their destiny, and is not their guardian. He is not responsible for preventing them from error and is not answerable for their erroneous practices, should they choose to indulge in them. His task is to convey his message to them, which he has done: *"I am not your keeper."* (Verse 86) This expression awakens the addressees to the gravity of the matter and to their heavy responsibility. It puts them face to face with what awaits them in the end, when they will have no guardian or intermediary.

Religion and Financial Dealings

The people of Madyan were hardened in their corrupt practices. Their reply was sarcastic. Every word of it smacked of sarcasm. Yet it also indicated their ignorance and mulish obstinacy: *"They said: 'Shu`ayb, do your prayers compel you to demand of us that we should renounce all that our forefathers worshipped, or that we refrain from doing what we please with our property? You are indeed the one who is clement and right-minded!'"* (Verse 87)

They did not realize, nor wanted to realize, that prayers are required by faith, as a manifestation of true submission to God. Faith cannot be established without the recognition of God's oneness and the renunciation of everything else they or their forefathers worshipped. Likewise, it cannot be established unless God's legislation in matters of trade and finance, as well as in all spheres of life, are implemented. All these are a complete whole, and faith cannot be separated from prayers or legislation which caters for all aspects of human life.

The people of Madyan, who had such an ill-conceived idea of the connection between faith and worship, and between the two and business transactions lived a long time ago. But rather than denounce their attitude at length we should remind ourselves that people today stick to certain concepts which are not much different from those of Shu`ayb's people. The world of *jāhiliyyah* which we see around us today is not much better or more intelligent than the earlier one. The sort of ascription of Godhead to other beings alongside God, which was practised by Shu`ayb's people, is still practised today by most of mankind, including those who claim to be Jews, Christians, or Muslims. All try to establish a barrier separating faith and worship on the one hand and law and business transactions on the other. They claim that faith and worship belong to God and should be conducted according to His instructions, while the law and business do not concern Him. These should be conducted according to the bidding of some other authority. This is indeed the essence of attributing partners to God.

We must not forget that the Jews today are the only people who are determined to conduct their transactions according to their faith and religious law, regardless of the distortion that has crept into their faith.

The Knesset, Israel's legislative body, once held a stormy session debating the case of an Israeli ship serving its non-Jewish passengers with meals which were not approved by the Jewish religion. The company and the ship concerned were compelled to serve only kosher food, even if it meant that the company would incur financial losses. This incident should serve as a lesson for many of those who today call themselves Muslims.

We find among us today some who claim to be Muslim questioning the validity of any link between faith and morality, especially when they consider financial dealings. Some of our intellectuals who have higher degrees awarded by various universities affect amazement as they wonder: what has Islam got to do with personal affairs? Why should Islam be concerned with how we dress on the beach, or how a woman appears in public, or how we satisfy our sexual urges? Why should Islam concern itself with drinking a glass of wine, or indeed with anything done by those who classify themselves as civilized? Now we ask what is the difference between such questions and those put by the people of Madyan to their Prophet

Shu`ayb? *"Do your prayers compel you to demand of us that we should renounce all that our forefathers worshipped, or that we refrain from doing what we please with our property?" (Verse* 87)

The second part of their question implies a very strong objection to religion having anything to do with the economy. To them, business dealings have no connection whatsoever with faith or even with moral values, taken separately from faith. Why should religion be concerned with financial transactions or with devious business methods which evade man-made laws? Indeed these people, living in our midst, arrogantly claim that the economy would collapse if moral values were allowed to interfere with it. They object even to some Western economic theories, such as the moral theory, and label it as confused reactionary thinking.

Let us then not claim for ourselves a standard much higher than that of the people of Madyan in their ancient *jāhiliyyah,* when we live today in an even darker *jāhiliyyah* which boasts of its enlightenment, advanced knowledge and civilization. Our state of *jāhiliyyah* today motivates many among us to accuse those who maintain that there is an important link which groups together faith in God, personal behaviour in all spheres of life and financial dealings, of being reactionary, advocating obsolete ideas.

Faith in God's oneness cannot be rightly and firmly established in people's hearts when God's laws, which regulate individual behaviour and social and financial dealings, are abandoned in favour of manmade laws. It is not possible for faith and unfaith to coexist in the same heart side by side. Unfaith, or the acknowledgement of other gods alongside God, can take different forms such as the ones which prevail in our societies today. This still represents the acknowledgement of other gods, which is a criterion common to all unbelievers throughout history.

The people of Madyan were sarcastic when they addressed their Prophet Shu`ayb, just as certain people today resort to sarcasm when they speak of those who advocate submission to God alone in all affairs. They said to Shu`ayb: *"You are indeed the one who is clement and right-minded!"* (Verse 87) They obviously meant the opposite. To them, wisdom and right meant that they should follow in their fathers' footsteps and worship the same gods they worshipped. It also meant that they should separate worship from business. The same ideas are advocated by present-day intellectuals who do not hide their sarcasm when they speak of the advocates of Islam and describe them as reactionary.

A Kind Prophet's Argument

Shu`ayb, fully confident of the truth of his message, and aware of his people's ignorance and short-sightedness, does not let their sarcasm affect him. On the contrary, he seeks to inform them politely that he takes his stand on clear evidence

from his Lord, which he feels in his innermost heart. He explains to them that he is fully confident of the truth of what he advocates because his knowledge far exceeds theirs. When he calls on them to stick to honest dealings, the effects of such honesty also apply to him since he is a businessman. He is after no personal gain which he seeks to realize for himself. He does not intend to do behind their backs what he has forbidden them so that he enjoys a market free from competition. His call is one of reform which includes himself. The path he enjoins them to follow will not cause them any losses, as they mistakenly think.

> *He said: Think, my people! If I take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord and He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give? I have no desire to do, in opposition to you, what I ask you not to do. All that I desire is to set things to rights in so far as it lies within my power. My success depends on God alone. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him I always turn.' (Verse 88)*

Shu`ayb addresses them in a friendly and appealing way, reminding them of his close links with them: *"Think my people. 'If l take my stand on a clear evidence from my Lord.'"* I feel His presence beyond any doubt, and I am certain that it is He who bestows revelations on me, and instructs me to convey His message to you. With full confidence and certainty I take my stand, based on this evidence which is to me very real. *And He has provided me with goodly sustenance which He alone can give..."* Part of this is my own wealth with which I conduct my business.

"I have no desire to do, in opposition to you, what I ask you not to do." (Verse 88) I am after no personal gain which I may realize by so doing. *"All that I desire is to set things right in so far as it lies within my power."* (Verse 88)

It is, then, the general reform of society which Shu`ayb is after. It is a reform which brings benefit to every individual and every community. Some may think that to adhere to moral values and implement the divine law may make them lose some chances which may be open to them, or lose some gain which they would otherwise achieve. But implementing the divine law can only make them lose evil gains and wicked opportunities. It compensates them with goodly gains and lawful provisions. It also establishes a society which is characterized by the co-operation of its individuals. It is a society which is free from grudges, treachery and selfish quarrels.

"My success depends on God alone." (Verse 88) He alone can grant me success, as He knows my intentions and the sincerity of my efforts. *"In Him have I placed my trust."* (Verse 88) I depend on no one other than Him. *"To Him I always turn."* (Verse 88) From Him alone I seek help to overcome the difficulties that may beset me and to Him alone I submit my work and efforts.

Shu`ayb then tries another way of reminding them of the truth. He reminds them of the doom that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ and Lot. This may open their hardened hearts in a way which rational, cool and well-argued reminders may not. *"My people, let not your disagreement with me bring upon you a fate similar to those that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd or Ṣāliĥ; nor were Lots people far away from you."* (Verse 89)

He tells them that they must not let their opposition to him harden their attitude of blind rejection. He says to them plainly that he fears that they may bring upon themselves a doom which is not unlike that which befell earlier communities. He reminds them especially of the people of Lot who lived close by and who had recently been destroyed.

When he has raised this prospect before them he then opens the doors to forgiveness and repentance. He uses the kindest and gentlest terms in order to assure them of God's mercy and compassion: *"Hence, pray to your Lord to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance. My Lord is indeed Merciful and All-loving."* (Verse 90)

Thus Shu`ayb tries all methods of admonition and remonstration in the hope that his people's hearts will open up and respond to the truth. They, however, are so hardened in their erring ways and in their misconceptions of values and motives that their response remains negative. We have seen an example of their response in their mocking at Shu`ayb and his prayer.

When All Arguments Fail

*"They said: 'Shu`ayb, we cannot understand much of what you say. But we do see clearly how weak you are in our midst. Were it not for your family, we would have stoned you. You do not command a position of great respect among us.'"* (Verse 91) The people of Madyan made it clear to Shu`ayb that they were fed up with him and with his message. They did not want to know anything about the truth he was presenting and did not care for anything which differed with their attitude to life or with their practices. Thus, in their view, only physical strength mattered. Plain truth was of no real significance, regardless of the strength of its argument, if it was not supported by physical power: *"We do see clearly how weak you are in our midst. Were it not for your family, we would have stoned you."* What restrained them from doing so was the fact that they reckoned with the power of Shu`ayb's clan and family who were supposed to come to his defence. They did not reckon with the power of God who would not leave His messenger to the mercy of His enemies. They rudely told Shu`ayb: *"You do not command a position of great respect among us."* They had no respect for him as a noble person, nor for his own strength. They only had to consider what his clan might do if anything happened to him.

When people are devoid of proper faith, sound values and noble ideals, they care nothing for anything beyond their immediate interests or their material well-being. To them, any good cause or apparent truth has no sanctity whatsoever. They do not hesitate to assault the advocates of God's cause if these have no apparent power to protect them.

Shu`ayb was angry with his people for their arrogance towards God. He made it clear that he did not derive his power from his clan or family. He confronted them with their misjudgement of the true powers which can influence things in the universe, and pointed out to them that their insolence would not benefit them with God, aware as He always is of people's actions. Shu`ayb said his last word and parted ways with his people on the basis that there was no common ground of faith between them. He warned them against the suffering that befell all people who adopted their attitude and then left them to their destiny.

> *Said he: My people, do you hold my family in greater esteem than God? You have turned your backs on Him. My Lord encompasses [with His might] all that you do.' (Verse 92)*

Any group of people, strong and powerful as they may be, are, after all, human, subject to God's power. Hence, they are weak. How can you then give such a group of human beings more importance than you give to God? How can you fear them more than you fear Him? *"You have turned your backs on Him."* This is an image of physical rejection which heightens the enormity of their error. They turn their backs on God who has created them and who has given them all the goods they enjoy in this life. Their attitude is one of ingratitude and insolence as much as it is one of rejection of faith.

"My Lord encompasses [with His might] all that you do." The Arabic expression used here gives an image of complete and perfect knowledge, as well as complete and overall power. Angry at his people's impudence towards God, Shu`ayb takes the proper attitude of a true believer. He does not find any gratification or reassurance in the fact that his own family and clan enjoyed such respect and power that afforded him protection from possible assault. This is evidence of true faith. A true believer finds no real power or protection other than that given him by God. He is unhappy to have a community to protect him, which is held in awe by others, when God, his Lord, is not held in awe. The true loyalty of a person who submits himself to God is not to his clan or nation; it is to God and to his faith. This is the parting point between the Islamic concept of loyalties and the un-Islamic one.

Shu`ayb's anger and his disavowal of any protection given him by anyone other than God prompt him to challenge his people and then disassociate himself from

them totally. *"Do what you will, my people, and so will I. You shall come to know who shall be visited by suffering that will cover him with ignominy, and who is a liar. Watch, then [for what is coming', and I shall watch with you."* (Verse 93) He challenges them to do what they can, to go along their way to the end. He will work according to his method and programme. Time will tell who will suffer and who will prosper. The way he throws down his challenge and invites them to watch for the outcome tells of his absolute trust in God.

The curtains fall here to open up again when the issue is finally resolved. We see the people of Madyan prostrate, lifeless in their homes, after having been overtaken by a dreadful cry, similar to that which overwhelmed the Thamūd, Ṣāliĥ's people. There is great similarity between what happened to both peoples. In both cases, their houses were no longer inhabited, as if they never lived there: *"When Our judgement came to pass, by Our grace We saved Shu`ayb and those who shared his faith. The blast overtook the wrongdoers, and when morning came, they lay lifeless on the ground, in their very homes, as though they had never prospered there. Oh, away with the people of Madyan, even as the Thamūd have been done away with!"* (Verses 94-95) Another black page of history was turned after God's word came to pass against those who rejected His warnings.

A Double Curse for Pharaoh's People

In the series of historical accounts given in this *sūrah,* the final reference is made to Moses and Pharaoh. We have here only a very brief account with several references to the details of the story, but no specifics are given here. The end which Pharaoh and his people met is recorded, along with a very vivid and real scene of the Day of Resurrection. We also have a statement of a basic Islamic principle whereby individual responsibility cannot be overlooked simply because the individual concerned chooses to follow his master or ruler.

The account given here opens with God's sending Moses to Pharaoh, the great ruler of Egypt, and the chiefs of his government. God gives Moses strength and clear authority. *"We sent Moses with Our signs and a manifest authority to Pharaoh and his noble men."* (Verses 96-97) No details are given before the end is stated. The people simply obeyed Pharaoh and disobeyed God, despite all the stupidity, short-sightedness and excesses which characterized all that Pharaoh had done. *"They, however, followed only Pharaoh's bidding. Pharaoh's bidding led by no means to what is right."* (Verse 97)

The people chose to follow Pharaoh blindly, without stopping to think whether he guided them rightly or not. They degraded themselves and trampled over their own freedom and the will with which God had endowed them. Hence, it was only

natural, as the Qur'ān states, that Pharaoh will lead them on the Day of Resurrection, and that they will follow him: *"He will come at the head of his people on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse* 98)

We have so far been listening to a story that happened in the past and to a promise which will be realized in the future. The scene, however, changes here and what was to be the future is now past. Pharaoh has led his people to hell, and the matter is over: *"leading them to the fire."* (Verse 98) He has led them like a shepherd leads his flock. After all, they were sheep moving blindly. They have foregone the very basic essential of humanity, namely, the freedom of choice. He has led them to hell. The Arabic expression used here has the added connotation of aiming to lead them to a fountain where they can drink. What a drink they will have, which satisfies no thirst: *"Vile was the destination towards which they were led."* (Verse 98)

We note here that all this, the leadership of Pharaoh, and their destination to which he has led them took place a long time ago. A comment is made on it, followed by ridicule: *"A curse is made to follow them in this world and on the Day of Resurrection. Vile was the renewable gift which they were given."* (Verse 99)

The curse followed them in this life and will be sure to follow them on the Day of Resurrection. This was the gift Pharaoh gave to his people. He had indeed promised his sorcerers generous gifts. Now everyone realizes what sort of gifts Pharaoh is able to give. What is more is the fact that the gift is always renewable, never ending. *"Vile was the renewable gift which they were given."* (Verse 99)

6
Single Message, Different People

ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلۡقُرَىٰ نَقُصُّهُۥ عَلَيۡكَۖ مِنۡهَا قَآئِمٞ وَحَصِيدٞ ١٠٠

These are some of the accounts of past communities which We relate to you. Some still remain while others are extinct, like a field mown-down. (100)

وَمَا ظَلَمۡنَٰهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن ظَلَمُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡۖ فَمَآ أَغۡنَتۡ عَنۡهُمۡ ءَالِهَتُهُمُ ٱلَّتِي يَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَيۡءٖ لَّمَّا جَآءَ أَمۡرُ رَبِّكَۖ وَمَا زَادُوهُمۡ غَيۡرَ تَتۡبِيبٖ ١٠١

No wrong did We do to them, but it was they who wronged themselves. Those deities of theirs which they were keen to invoke instead of God availed them nothing when your Lord's judgement came to pass; they only added to their ruin. (101)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَخۡذُ رَبِّكَ إِذَآ أَخَذَ ٱلۡقُرَىٰ وَهِيَ ظَٰلِمَةٌۚ إِنَّ أَخۡذَهُۥٓ أَلِيمٞ شَدِيدٌ ١٠٢

Such is your Lord's punishment whenever He takes to task any community which is bent on evildoing; His punishment is indeed grievous, severe. (102)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّمَنۡ خَافَ عَذَابَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوۡمٞ مَّجۡمُوعٞ لَّهُ ٱلنَّاسُ وَذَٰلِكَ يَوۡمٞ مَّشۡهُودٞ ١٠٣

In this there is surely a sign for those who fear the suffering in the life to comet hat is a day when all mankind shall be gathered together, and that is a day which will be witnessed [by all]. (103)

وَمَا نُؤَخِّرُهُۥٓ إِلَّا لِأَجَلٍ مَّعۡدُودٖ ١٠٤

We shall not delay it beyond an appointed term. (104)

يَوۡمَ يَأۡتِ لَا تَكَلَّمُ نَفۡسٌ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِهِۦۚ فَمِنۡهُمۡ شَقِيّٞ وَسَعِيدٞ ١٠٥

When that day comes, not a soul will speak except by His leave. Some among them will be wretched, and some happy. (105)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ شَقُواْ فَفِي ٱلنَّارِ لَهُمۡ فِيهَا زَفِيرٞ وَشَهِيقٌ ١٠٦

Those who will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, they will be in the fire where, moaning and sobbing, (106)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ وَٱلۡأَرۡضُ إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ رَبُّكَۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ فَعَّالٞ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ ١٠٧

they will abide as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise. Your Lord always does whatever He wills. (107)

۞ وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ سُعِدُواْ فَفِي ٱلۡجَنَّةِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ وَٱلۡأَرۡضُ إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ رَبُّكَ عَطَآءً غَيۡرَ مَجۡذُوذٖ ١٠٨

And those who are blessed with happiness will be in Paradise, abiding there as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise: an unceasing gift. (108)

فَلَا تَكُ فِي مِرۡيَةٖ مِّمَّا يَعۡبُدُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِۚ مَا يَعۡبُدُونَ إِلَّا كَمَا يَعۡبُدُ ءَابَآؤُهُم مِّن قَبۡلُۚ وَإِنَّا لَمُوَفُّوهُمۡ نَصِيبَهُمۡ غَيۡرَ مَنقُوصٖ ١٠٩

So be not in doubt about anything which these people worship. They worship only as their fathers worshipped before them. We shall most certainly give them their full due,

without any reduction. (109)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ فَٱخْتُلِفَ فِيهِ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿١١٠﴾

Indeed, We gave the Scriptures to Moses, and there was strife over them. Had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your Lord, judgement would have been passed on them. Yet, they are in grave doubt concerning that. (110)

وَإِنَّ كُلًّا لَّمَّا لَيُوَفِّيَنَّهُمْ رَبُّكَ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١١١﴾

To each and all your Lord will surely give their full due for whatever they may have done. He is indeed aware of all that they do. (111)

فَٱسْتَقِمْ كَمَآ أُمِرْتَ وَمَن تَابَ مَعَكَ وَلَا تَطْغَوْا۟ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١١٢﴾

Follow, then, the right course as you are bidden, together with those who, with you, have turned to Him; and let none of you transgress. Surely, He sees all that you do. (112)

وَلَا تَرْكَنُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ فَتَمَسَّكُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِنْ أَوْلِيَآءَ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾ وَأَقِمِ

Put no trust in those who do wrong, lest the fire touch you. You would, then, have none to protect you from God, nor would you find any help. (1 13)

ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ طَرَفَىِ ٱلنَّهَارِ وَزُلَفًا مِّنَ ٱلَّيْلِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱلْحَسَنَٰتِ يُذْهِبْنَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ذِكْرَىٰ لِلذَّٰكِرِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

Attend to your prayers at both ends of the day and in the early watches of the night. Surely, good deeds erase evil ones. This is a reminder for those who are thoughtful. (114)

وَٱصْبِرْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١١٥﴾

فَلَوْلَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ أُوْلُواْ بَقِيَّةٍ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ ٱلْفَسَادِ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّمَّنْ أَنجَيْنَا مِنْهُمْ ۗ وَٱتَّبَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مَآ أُتْرِفُواْ فِيهِ وَكَانُواْ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١١٦﴾

And be patient in adversity; God does not fail to reward those who do good. (115)

If only there had been among the generations that have gone before you some people of virtue to speak out against the spread of corruption on earth, as did the few whom We saved from among them! The wrongdoers pursued what ensured for them a life of comfort and plenty; they were hardened in sin. (116)

وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ لِيُهْلِكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ بِظُلْمٍ وَأَهْلُهَا مُصْلِحُونَ ﴿١١٧﴾

In truth, your Lord would have not destroyed those cities, without just cause, had their people been righteous. (117)

وَلَوْ شَآءَ رَبُّكَ لَجَعَلَ ٱلنَّاسَ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً ۖ وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ ﴿١١٨﴾

Had your Lord so willed, He would have made all mankind one single community. As it is, they continue to differ, (118)

إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ رَبُّكَ ۚ وَلِذَٰلِكَ خَلَقَهُمْ ۗ وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَةُ رَبِّكَ لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ ٱلْجِنَّةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١١٩﴾

except those upon whom your Lord has bestowed His grace. And to this end He created them. The word of your Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I shall certainly fill hell with jinn and humans all.' (119)

وَكُلًّا نَّقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلرُّسُلِ مَا نُثَبِّتُ بِهِۦ فُؤَادَكَ ۚ وَجَآءَكَ فِى هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَقُّ وَمَوْعِظَةٌ وَذِكْرَىٰ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

All that We relate to you of the histories of earlier messengers is a means by which We strengthen your heart. Through these [accounts] there has come to you the truth, as well as an admonition and a reminder for all believers. (120)

وَقُل لِّلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ٱعْمَلُواْ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمْ إِنَّا عَٰمِلُونَ ﴿١٢١﴾

Say to those who will not believe: 'Do whatever lies within your power, and so shall we. (121)

وَٱنتَظِرُوٓاْ إِنَّا مُنتَظِرُونَ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Wait if you will; we too are waiting.' (122)

وَلِلَّهِ غَيۡبُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَإِلَيۡهِ يُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ كُلُّهُۥ فَٱعۡبُدۡهُ وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَيۡهِۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٢٣﴾

God alone knows whatever is hidden in the heavens and the earth. All authority over all matters belongs to Him alone. Worship Him, then, and place your trust in Him alone. Your Lord is not unaware of what you do. (123)

Preview

This is the concluding passage of the *sūrah*. Its discourse is closely related to what was said in the opening passage and to the historical accounts the *sūrah* provides. The first comment (Verses 100-102) directly relates to the historical accounts, and is followed by one which utilizes the punishment meted out to those early communities as a means of inspiring awe of punishment in the hereafter. This is given in a very awesome scene of the Day of Judgement, which is held out before our eyes. (Verses 103-108)

The following comment takes the fate of those earlier communities and the scene of the Day of Resurrection as its basis. It clarifies that those idolaters who opposed the Prophet Muĥammad put themselves in the same position as those communities with regard to their punishment in this world and the next. It is true that these would not be annihilated in *toto,* but this is due to a decree already made by God Almighty. Hence the punishment of the people of Moses has been deferred although they have disputed endlessly over their Scriptures. Yet both the people of Moses and the Arab idolaters will certainly be given their full reward. Hence, the Prophet and his followers are advised to remain steadfast, persevering with the implementation of what has been revealed to him. They must not incline towards the unbelievers who associate partners with God. They are to attend to their prayers and persevere, knowing that God will never allow the reward of the righteous to be wasted. (Verses 109-115)

The *sūrah* then refers once more to the earlier communities in which those who stood out against corruption were few in number. The large majority continued with their erring ways, thus earning their full punishment. God would never unjustly destroy the people of any community if they did good. (Verses 116-117)

The passage also explains why God has made people with different types of thought and action. He could certainly have made them all of one type, but His will has chosen to give human beings free choice. (Verses 118-119)

The *sūrah* concludes by stating that one reason for providing such historical accounts in the Qur'ān is to strengthen the Prophet's own attitude. The Prophet is instructed to say his final word to the unbelievers, leaving them to the fate they are certain to meet. In turn, he should place his trust in God, worshipping Him alone and let God's judgement be passed on all mankind. (Verses 120-123)

Summing up Past Lessons

> *These are some of the accounts of past communities which We relate to you. Some still remain while others are extinct, like a field mown-down. No wrong did We do to them, but it was they who wronged themselves. Those deities of theirs which they were keen to invoke instead of God availed them nothing when your Lord's judgement came to pass; they only added to their ruin. Such is your Lord's punishment whenever He takes to task any community which is bent on evil-doing; His punishment is indeed grievous, severe. (Verses 100-102)*

So far, the *sūrah* has portrayed the suffering which overwhelmed various ancient nations: some were drowned in floods, some perished in a devastating storm, some by an awful cry, and some found the earth under their feet subside, opening up to swallow them and their dwellings. Then when all these scenes of destruction in this world are visible before our eyes, and when our hearts are deeply touched by what has been related of events and punishments, we have the final comment: "*These are some of the accounts of past communities which We relate to you.*" (Verse 100) You, Prophet, had no knowledge of any of this. You came to know of them only through divine revelation. This is indeed one of the objectives of telling such stories in the Qur'ān.

"*Some still remain.*" (Verse 100) Their ruins which still exist testify to the standard of civilization and strength that these communities attained. Of these the ruins of `Ād at al-Aĥqāf and Thamūd at al-Ĥijr are the best examples. "*Others are extinct, like a field mown-down.*" (Verse 100) They were wiped out, without a trace, as in the cases of the peoples of Noah and Lot. After all, what are people? And what is civilization? They are but fields of human beings, similar to agricultural fields. Some plants are good

and pleasing, others are foul. Some acquire strength and spread, others wither and die.

"No wrong did We do to them, but it was they who wronged themselves." (Verse 101) They chose to be blind and to stifle their instincts and senses. They turned away from divine guidance, ignored God's signs and greeted His warnings with contempt. Hence, they brought on themselves the suffering they received, wronging themselves while no wrong was done them.

"Those deities of theirs which they were keen to invoke instead of God availed them nothing when your Lord's judgement came to pass; they only added to their ruin." (Verse 101) This verse states another objective behind relating such historical accounts in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* opened with a warning to all those who submit to deities other than God.

The same warnings were repeated by every messenger and every prophet. They were told that these false deities could not protect them from God. Their destinies confirmed the earlier warnings. When God's judgement came to pass, none of their deities could avail them of anything. None was able to spare them any portion of the suffering which befell them. Indeed, their false gods could only add to their ruin. This because when they relied on false gods, they added venom and contempt to their opposition to God's messengers and His messages. Hence, their punishment was even more severe. This is the meaning of the expression: *"they only added."* Indeed, those deities could do them neither good nor harm. They were, however, the cause of their increased punishment.

"Such is your Lord's punishment whenever He takes to task any community which is bent on evil-doing." (Verse 102) It is only when a community indulges in evil that God takes it to task and brings about its destruction. Punished communities are always bent on evildoing.

They do evil when they ascribe a share of Godhead to anyone other than God. They are unjust to themselves when they spread corruption in the land and turn their backs on calls for upright behaviour and for acknowledgement that God is the only deity in the universe. In such communities, injustice spreads and tyrants rule.

"His punishment is indeed grievous, severe." (Verse 102) God leaves people to enjoy themselves for a while. He tests them and sends them messengers and clear signs. When, however, evil reigns supreme in a community, and the advocates of truth are only a minority unable to influence the majority, bent on evil-doing; when the small community of believers disassociate themselves from the rest of their people, who are persistent in error, and consider themselves to be a separate community with their own religion, leadership and loyalties; when they make all this plain to the rest of their people and leave them to their destiny, as determined by God, then God brings about His punishment of the evil-doers which is *"grievous, severe"*

Grievous and severe as the punishment in this world is, it is only an indication of the suffering in the hereafter. This is only fully appreciated by those who dread such punishment. These are they who are farsighted enough to realize that the One who punishes evil-doing communities in this life will hold them answerable for their sins in the life to come.

Hence, they fear such future-life punishment, and do righteous deeds in this life to spare themselves.

At this point, the *sūrah* portrays scenes from the Day of Judgement, in the familiar Qur'ānic style which relates such scenes to scenes of this world with no gap evident between the two.

> *In this there is surely a sign for those who fear the suffering in the lift to come. That is a day when all mankind shall be gathered together, and that is a day which will be witnessed [by all]. We shall not delay it beyond an appointed term. When that day comes, not a soul will speak except by His leave. Some among them will be wretched, and some happy. Those who will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, they will be in the fire where, moaning and sobbing, they will abide as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise. Your Lord always does whatever He wills. And those who are blessed with happiness will be in Paradise, abiding there as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise: an unceasing gift. (Verses 103-108)*

"*In this there is surely a sign for those who fear the suffering in the lift to come.*" (Verse 103) The severe punishment meted out in this world bears some similarity to the suffering of the hereafter. Hence, it serves as a reminder of that future suffering. Such reminders, however, are appreciated only by those who fear the punishment in the hereafter. Their fear of God awakens their hearts and opens their eyes. On the other hand, those who are heedless of the hereafter do not respond to any sign. They are blind. They do not appreciate the purpose of creation and re-creation. They only see their immediate situation in this life. Indeed, they do not learn from the lessons presented in this life.

The *sūrah* then proceeds to describe the Day of Judgement: "*that is a day when all mankind shall be gathered together, and that is a day which will be witnessed [by all].*" (Verse 103) We have here a scene of all mankind being gathered together, leaving them no choice in the matter. They are led to the gathering place. All come forward, and everyone awaits the outcome.

"*When that day comes, not a soul will speak except by His leave.*" (Verse 105) A deadly silence continues without interruption. It is a scene full of awe, which overwhelms all. No one dares ask permission to speak. Permission, however, is given by God to

whomever He chooses. At this point people are divided into two groups: "*Some among them will be wretched, and some happy.*" (Verse 105)

As we read on we visualize the wretched in their misery in the fire, where they moan, sigh and sob. The air there is too hot, too suffocating. We also see "*those who are blessed with happiness*" in Paradise, where they receive their reward which continues uninterrupted. Both groups remain in their respective abodes '*as long as the heavens and the earth endure.*" This is an expression which imparts a feeling of permanence, which is indeed the intended connotation here.

That continuity is qualified in both cases by God's choice. Indeed, every situation and every law is subject to God's will. It is His will which determines the law but is yet not subject to it. His is a free-will which can change any law whenever He chooses: "*your Lord always does whatever He wills.*" (Verse 107)

In the case of the happy group, however, the *sūrah* reassures them that it is God's will that their reward will not cease, even if it is ever assumed that they would change abode and leave Paradise to go somewhere else. Such an eventuality is only supposed here to emphasize that God's will is completely free.

The Safe Path to Follow

Having spoken about the punishment of the hereafter, and its similarities with what can be meted out in this life, the *sūrah* draws some lessons for the Prophet and his few followers in Makkah, reassuring them that they follow the truth. It also warns those who deny God's message against what will befall them in the hereafter. It firstly reassures the Prophet and tells him not to entertain any doubt with regard to the fallacy of the religion the pagan Arabs were following. Like earlier communities mentioned in the *sūrah,* those Arabs were only worshipping what their forefathers before them had worshipped. Hence, they will inevitably have their befitting requital. If such punishment is deferred, as was the case with Moses' people, both will have their due reward at the right time.

> *So be not in doubt about anything which these people worship. They worship only as their fathers worshipped before them. We shall most certainly give them their full due, without any reduction. Indeed, We gave the Scriptures to Moses, and there was strife over them. Had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your Lord, judgement would have been passed on them. Yet, they are in grave doubt concerning that. To each and all your Lord will surely give their full due for whatever they may have done. He is indeed aware of all that they do. (Verses 109-111)*

You must not entertain any doubt about the falsehood those people followed. This address is made to the Prophet, but the warnings are given to his people. This approach is perhaps more effective because it implies that the whole matter is something explained objectively by God to His Prophet. There is no argument with anyone. Those who offer such false worship are not directly addressed because they do not deserve to be given attention. Thus, the objective truth, in the manner it is stated, may by itself arouse their interest more than if they were to be addressed directly. "*So be not in doubt about anything which these people worship. They worship only as their fathers worshipped before them.*" (Verse 109) Hence, the same suffering awaits them. It is, however, implied here: "*We shall most certainly give them their full due.*" (Verse 109) What is due to them is known from what befell other people before them. The *sūrah* has portrayed some examples of this.

It is possible that they may not be destroyed, just as Moses' people were not totally destroyed, despite the divisions and strife that arose between them over their faith and worship. "*Indeed, We gave the Scriptures to Moses, and there was strife over them.*" (Verse 110) God has decreed that they will be held answerable for all their deeds on the Day of Judgement: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your Lord, judgement would have been passed on them.*" (Verse 110)

There is a certain wisdom behind this decree. They were not totally destroyed because they had Scriptures. All those who received Scriptures, through any Prophet, will not be punished until the Day of Judgement. The Scriptures are clear pointers to the right path, and succeeding generations can study them and follow them, just as the generation which was first addressed by them. This cannot apply to physical miracles which are witnessed only by those who are present at the time they happen. Those who witness such miracles either believe as a result of what they see and thus save themselves, or continue to reject the faith and are punished in consequence. Both the Torah and the Gospel are full books, available to succeeding generations, until the final Scriptures are given, confirming both the Torah and the Gospel, and replacing them as guidance for all mankind. All people will be questioned on the basis of this final revelation, including the followers of the Torah and the Gospel. "*Yet, they are*" – meaning Moses' people, "*in grave doubt concerning that.*" (Verse 110) That is, concerning Moses' Scriptures which were not written until much later, when its reports suffered much confusion. Hence, its followers are not fully certain of it.

Since judgement has been deferred, everyone will receive the reward due for his actions, whether good or bad, from God, who is aware of all actions. "*To each and all your Lord will surely give their full due for whatever they may have done. He is indeed aware of all that they do.*" (Verse 111) The Arabic expression employed here contains multiple emphasis, so that the delay of accountability and reward should not induce anyone to doubt their inevitability. Such varied emphasis also serves to assert that

the beliefs of those people are totally false and that they are akin to the false beliefs of past communities.

Such strong emphasis was also necessary considering the tough phase the Islamic movement was going through at the time. The unbelievers had adopted an attitude of stubborn hostility to the Prophet and his few followers. Islam was making little headway in Makkah. Severe punishment was inflicted on the few believers, while the enemies of Islam went about their city completely secure. God's threatened punishment was delayed to its appointed time. It was, then, a critical period, when some people could not help being shaken. Indeed, even the strongest of believers can feel lonely and isolated. They need to be reassured. Nothing can reassure believers better than knowing that their enemies are God's enemies, and that they undoubtedly hold false beliefs. Again, believers are reassured when they realize God's wisdom in leaving the unbelievers alone for a while, and postponing their punishment to the day which will certainly overwhelm them.

Thus, we see how the Qur'ānic revelations set the necessary requirements for moving forward in advocating Islam. We also see how the Qur'ān sets landmarks for the Muslim community as they wage their fight against the enemies of Islam.

A Needed Reminder

The assurance is thus given that God's laws will not fail, whether they relate to His creation, the religion He has revealed, or to His promises and warnings. Believers and advocates of Islam must, therefore, follow it strictly without deviation or change. "*Follow, then, the right course as you are bidden, together with those who, with you, have turned to Him; and let none of you transgress. Surely, He sees all that you do. Put no trust in those who do wrong, lest the fire touch you. You would, then, have none to protect you from God, nor would you find any help. Attend to your prayers at both ends of the day and in the early watches of the night. Surely, good deeds erase evil ones. This is a reminder for those who are thoughtful. And be patient in adversity; God does not fail to reward those who do good.*" (Verses 112-115)

These instructions are given to the Prophet and to those with him who have turned to God in repentance. "*Follow, then, the right course as you are bidden.*" (Verse 112) The Prophet felt the power behind the order detailing these tasks and how awesome a responsibility it was. He is reported to have said: "This *sūrah,* Hūd, has made me grow grey." Here, he is commanded to follow the right path without any deviation. This requires him to always be alert, careful, watchful, and aware of his path. He was to be in full control of his feelings, for these can lead to deviation, major or otherwise.

It is worth noting here that this order to keep to the right course is followed by a negative injunction. The Prophet and his followers are not warned against complacency or slackening, but are warned against excess and transgression.

This is because the order to follow the right course may cause people to be over-alert and may lead to exaggeration, which, in turn, transforms this naturally easy religion into one that is difficult to follow. God wants the religion He has revealed to remain as it is. He wants the believers to follow the right path without exaggeration or excessive rigidity.

"*Surely, He sees all that you do.*" (Verse 112) The use of the verb 'see' is very apt here, where good and sound judgement are called into action.

"*Put no trust in those who do wrong, lest the fire touch you. You would, then, have none to protect you from God, nor would you find any help.*" (Verse 113) Do not incline towards or have any trust in tyrants who oppress and subjugate others by their sheer force, making them submit to false gods. If you trust them, or incline towards them, you are endorsing the great evil they practise, and you become party to it. Such deviation would bring about the punishment of hell and leave you without God's support or protection.

Following the right path during such times may be very hard. Indeed, believers may need to have something to comfort them. God, therefore, guides His Messenger and the believers to what gives them the greatest comfort: '*Attend to your prayers at both ends of the day and in the early watches of the night.*" *(Verse* 114) God knows that this is the source of comfort when every other source fails.

Prayers strengthen the believer's spirit, and sustain his heart and will to fulfil difficult duties. They also establish a bond between the hearts of afflicted believers and their merciful Lord, who is near and who responds to prayers. Prayers help to overcome loneliness and isolation in the face of a powerful, tyrannical society.

The verse here mentions the two ends of the day, meaning the morning and the evening, and some watches of the night. These times cover all the obligatory prayers, without specifying their number. The number and the exact timing are specified by the traditions of the Prophet.

The order to attend to prayers is followed by the statement that good does away with evil. This is a general statement which includes all good deeds. Prayer is one of the best deeds any person can do, hence it is one of the best actions for erasing sin and error. "*This is a reminder for those who are thoughtful.*" (Verse 114) Prayer is, in essence, a method of remembering God, and being thoughtful of Him. Hence, this comment is very apt here.

To follow the right course and to maintain it requires patience. Similarly, awaiting the time God has set for the fulfilment of His promises and warnings requires patience. Hence, these orders are followed by another one: *"And be patient in adversity; God does not fail to reward those who do good."* (Verse 115) To follow the right course is to do good; and to pray at the appointed times is to do good. Moreover, to be patient and to persevere against the unbelievers' schemes is to do good. God will certainly reward those who do good.

What Saves Erring Communities

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it finishes its comment on the destruction of earlier communities which turned their backs on God's messengers. It says rather indirectly that had there been among them groups of good people who tried to earn for themselves a good position with God by speaking out loud against corruption and injustice, God would not have exterminated them as He did. God does not punish any community for its injustice if its people are righteous; that is, if the righteous among its people have enough power to resist injustice and corruption. There were in each of those lands only a handful of believers who had no influence on their community and wielded no power. God saved those believers, and destroyed the rest, including both the powerful, wealthy masters and their weak and poor followers who accepted their commands without question.

> *If only there had been among the generations that have gone before you some people of virtue to speak out against the spread of corruption on earth, as did the few whom We saved from among them! The wrongdoers pursued what ensured for them a life of comfort and plenty; they were hardened in sin. In truth, your Lord would have not destroyed those cities, without just cause, had their people been righteous. (Verses 116-117)*

This explains the divine law which applies to all nations and communities. If corruption, that is, any form of subjugating people to any authority other than that of God, spreads in any community, that community will not be destroyed by God, provided that a section of its people rises to stop such corruption. On the other hand, if injustice and corruption go unchecked, or if those who speak out against them have little influence on the continued spread of these evils, then the divine law operates against these communities and they are either destroyed immediately or by gradual weakening and imbalance.

Hence, those who call on their communities to submit to God alone, and work against all other forms of submission to other authorities provide a safety net for their nations and communities. In this light, we can appreciate the value of the

struggle by the advocates of Islam who resist all forms of evil, injustice and corruption and who try to establish this religion, which is based on submission to God alone. By their struggle, they not only discharge their own responsibility towards God and towards their various nations, but they also ensure that their nations are spared God's immediate punishment which brings about their total destruction.

Why Let Differences Occur

Then follows a comment on the fact that people have different inclinations and follow different ways. "*Had your Lord so willed, He would have made all mankind one single community. As it is, they continue to differ, except those upon whom your Lord has bestowed His grace. And to this end He created them. The word of your Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I shall certainly fill hell with* jinn *and humans all.'*" (Verses 118-119)

God could have created all mankind in the same form and with the same aptitude. He could have made them copies of one original. This is, however, not the nature of the life God has chosen for this earth. He has willed to make man, to whom He has assigned the task of building the earth, a creature of varying inclinations and ways. It is God's will that man should have the freedom to choose his own line, views, and his own way of life and to be responsible for the choices he makes. It is also God's will that man should be rewarded for the choice he makes between good and evil. Whatever choice they make, people operate within the law God has set for His creation and according to His will that man should be able to choose freely.

It is, then, God's will that mankind are not made of a single community. Hence, they are bound to differ. Their differences go as far as the basics of faith. Only those who are able to stick to the truth, which is one, by definition, are spared such differences. They, however, differ with the rest of mankind who have lost sight of the truth.

"*The word of your Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I shall certainly fill hell with* jinn *and humans all.'*" (Verse 119) From this statement, we deduce that those who stick to the truth enjoy God's grace and have a different end. Heaven will be full of them, in the same way as hell will be full of those who preferred error to the truth.

The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the Prophet, explaining the reason behind relating to him such accounts of the histories of earlier communities. It is to strengthen his heart and to provide a reminder for all believers. To those who reject the faith, he should say his final word, indicating the parting of his way from theirs and leaving them to wait for whatever fate God decides for them: "*All that We relate to you of the histories of earlier messengers is a means by which We strengthen your heart. Through these [accounts] there has come to you the truth, as well as an admonition and a*

reminder for all believers. Say to those who will not believe: 'Do whatever lies within your power, and so shall we. Wait if you will; we too are waiting.' God alone knows whatever is hidden in the heavens and the earth. All authority over all matters belongs to Him alone. Worship Him, then, and place your trust in Him alone. Your Lord is not unaware of what you do." (Verses 120-123)

It is clear from these verses that the Prophet faced so much trouble from his people and their rejection of his call, and had to shoulder such a heavy burden in conveying his message particularly in respect of the unbelievers' rejection of his call. Hence he needed to be comforted by God, despite his inexhaustible treasure of patience, perseverance and confidence in the truth.

"Through these [accounts] there has come to you the truth;" that is, in this *sūrah.* Whatever has been outlined in the *sūrah* of the nature of the Islamic faith and the histories of earlier prophets and messengers, and the operation of the divine laws, especially as they relate to the fulfilment of God's promises and warnings, is true beyond any shadow of a doubt. "*As well as an admonition and reminder for all believers."* (Verse 120) In such histories, the believers are warned against what befell earlier nations. They are reminded of God's commandments and His laws.

However, those who are bent on rejecting the truth and do not believe can benefit nothing from such an admonition. There is only one attitude to take towards them, and that is a firm one indicating that there is no common ground between them and the believers. The Prophet is instructed to say to them what one of his prophet brothers, whose story is related in this *sūrah* said to his people before leaving them to their destiny: "*Say to those who will not believe: Do whatever lies within your power, and so shall we. Wait if you will; we too are waiting.'"* (Verses 121-122) What they are waiting for is known only to God:

"God alone knows whatever is hidden in the heavens and the earth. All authority over all matters belongs to Him alone." (Verse 123) Everything is in His hands, including the destiny of the Prophet, the believers and the unbelievers. All power and all authority belong to Him alone. He is, then, the One who deserves to be worshipped: *"Worship Him, then, and place your trust in Him alone."* (Verse 123) He is the protector of His obedient servants and He alone can give them victory. Moreover, He is aware of everything that every person does, whether good or bad. To each and all He gives their just rewards: "*Your Lord is not unaware of what you do."* (Verse 123)

Thus the *sūrah* concludes. It opened with the call to worship God alone, and to turn to Him in repentance, and concludes with the same message of submission. Worship God alone, seek His guidance and follow His instructions. In between, the *sūrah* dwelt at length on matters which relate to the universe, the human soul and the history of nations.

All, however, relate to one simple message. Thus the artistic coordination of the opening and the conclusion and the harmony between the stories related in the *sūrah* and the flow of its style, are coupled with the presence of an overall theme and a simple message which pervades the whole *sūrah.* We need only consider this to realize that the harmony which the Qur'ān exhibits is unparalleled. Had it been the word of someone other than God, this would not be a characteristic of the Qur'ān. Indeed, it would have suffered from a great deal of confusion.

The Central Theme

Looking at the *sūrah* in total, and indeed at the entire part of the Qur'ān revealed in the Makkan period, we find that it always reverts to the central theme of faith, outlining Islamic beliefs. Therefore, we need to reflect a little on how this central theme is addressed in the *sūrah.* We may need to repeat some of what we have already said so as to make these final comments more coherent.

The fundamental issue emphasized in the *sūrah* as a whole is the divine order to worship God alone, prohibiting the worship of anyone or anything else, making it clear that this is the sum of religion and faith. At the outset, the *sūrah* provides an outline of the Qur'ān, God's book revealed to Muĥammad, His last Messenger. This issue is addressed in this outline, while the historical accounts give a glimpse of the progress of faith in human history, and the final passage directs the Prophet on how to address the unbelievers. The *sūrah* also makes clear that all promises and warnings, reckoning, reward and punishment in the hereafter are all based on this basic principle.

We find that addressing all worship solely to God is expressed in two different ways:

1. *My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him.* (Verse 50)
2. *Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings.* (Verse 2)

It is clear that the two ways differ in the fact that one gives an order and the other states a prohibition. Do they, however, contain the same meaning? The first gives an order to worship God, making it clear that He is the only deity worthy of worship. The second prohibits the worship of anyone else. Needless to say, the second meaning is the correlate of the first, but the first verse states the first meaning in words leaving the second implied. Since this is the central issue, God in His wisdom determined not to leave the prohibition of worshipping other deities implicit. He wanted it stated separately, even though it is clearly implied in the first order. This gives us a clear sense of the seriousness Islam attaches to this issue.

The express statement of both aspects of this fundamental issue tells us that people need both to be categorically emphasized. It is not sufficient to state that there is no deity to be worshipped other than God, relying on the implicit correlate of prohibiting the worship of anyone or anything else. There have been times in human history when people did not deny God or abandon worshipping Him, but they also worshipped other beings beside Him. If this were to happen again, people would be guilty of idolatry, worshipping false deities alongside God while thinking they were Muslims who worship God alone. Hence, the Qur'ān states the concept of God's oneness as it should be manifested in peoples' lives, stating both the commandment and the prohibition so that each endorses and confirms the other, leaving no loophole for polytheism to manipulate. This dual emphasis is often repeated in the Qur'ān, in verses such as the following:

> *Alif. Lām. Rā. This is a book, with verses which have been perfected and distinctly spelled out, bestowed on you by One who is Wise, All- aware. Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. (Verses 1-2)*
>
> *We sent forth Noah to his people: I have come to you with a plain warning. Worship none but God. I certainly fear that suffering should befall you on a grievous day.' (Verses 25-26)*
>
> *To `Ād, We sent their brother Hūd. He said: My people! Worship God alone; you have no deity other than Him. You are indeed inventors of falsehood.' (Verse 50)*
>
> *God has said: Do not take [for worship] two deities, for He is but One God. Hence, of Me alone stand in awe.'* (16: 51)
>
> *Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; but he was wholly devoted to God, having surrendered himself to Him. He was not of those who associate partners with God.* (3: 67)
>
> *I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God.* (6: 79)

There is then a consistent mode of expression throughout the Qur'ān. It is certainly significant in driving home the concept of God's oneness with both its aspects. It also shows God's prior knowledge that to preserve this concept free of confusion requires such repeated and lucid emphasis. God certainly knows His creation and what suits them. His knowledge is perfect and admits no defects.

The Concept of God's Worship

We need also to reflect on the term 'worship' and how it is used in this *sūrah,* and in the Qur'ān in general. This will give us an idea of what lies beyond this unequivocal statement ordering the worship of God alone and the prohibition of any gesture of worship to anyone else.

The *Fiqh* terms 'worship', denoting dealings between a person and God, and 'transactions', referring to people's dealings with one another, were not used in the very early period of Islam, when the Qur'ān was being revealed. Their use started later. We wrote elsewhere on the history of such usage as follows:

> The division of human activities into 'worship' and 'transactions' began sometime after scholars started to write books on Islamic law, or *Fiqh.* At the beginning, the division was typically academic in nature, but regrettably, it had some negative effects in people's minds. These were later to affect Islamic life in general. People started to think that the concept of worship applied only to the first type of activity addressed in its special section in books on Islamic law. Gradually, this concept was seen to have less and less to do with the aspect addressed in the section on 'transactions' in legal works. This represents a deviation from the holistic Islamic approach which is inevitably followed by a deviation in Islamic life in general.
>
> Under Islam, there is no human activity to which the concept of worship does not apply. The Islamic code of living aims to implement this concept in all aspects of life. All Islamic legislation, whether it relates to government, economy, criminal, civil and family law, or indeed any other aspect of life, has no objective other than the implementation of the concept of worship in human life. Human activity cannot be described in such terms, so as to serve this objective which the Qur'ān describes as the aim of human existence, unless it is undertaken in accordance with the divine way of life. That is, to attribute Godhead to God alone and to address all worship to Him only. Otherwise, human activity would be in conflict with the aim of human existence, or in other words, be deviant from the divine faith.
>
> When we consider the types of human activity *Fiqh* scholars describe as 'worship' in the light of the Qur'ān, we are bound to realize that they are not addressed separately from the other type of activity such scholars call 'transactions'. Indeed, both are interlinked in the Qur'ān and its directives. Both belong to the concept of worship which puts into effect the principle of man's servitude to the One God who has no partners.

> As time passed, some people began to think that they could be Muslims when their worship activity was in accordance with Islamic rules, while their transactions were conducted according to some other system produced by some other deities which legislate for them without God's authority. But this is a great myth. Islam is a complete whole. Anyone who tries to divide it into two parts undermines its unity; or, to use a different expression, abandons Islam altogether.
>
> This is a fundamental issue that needs to be carefully considered by every Muslim who wishes to implement the true meaning of Islam and serve the goal of human existence.[25]

We may add here what we have already stated in this volume:

> The Arabs who were first addressed by the Qur'ān did not confine the import of the term *`abada* to mere worship rituals. Indeed, when the Arabs were first addressed by this term in Makkah, no worship rituals had then been assigned to them. They understood it to mean that they were required to submit themselves to God alone in all their life affairs and to renounce submission to anyone else. The Prophet defined 'worship' in one of his pronouncements as meaning 'compliance,' not as offering worship rituals. He was answering `Ādī ibn Ĥātim's question about the Jews and the Christians and their treatment of their rabbis and monks as gods. He said: "Yes, indeed. They (meaning the rabbis and monks) made lawful to them what God has forbidden, and forbade them what God has made lawful, and they complied. This is how they worshipped them."
>
> The term 'worship' has come to signify worship rituals since these are one form of showing submission to God. This form does not by any means, however, encompass the full meaning of 'worship'.[26]
>
> Indeed, had the true essence of worship been the mere offering of worship rituals, it would not have warranted the sending of all God's messengers. It would not have warranted the great efforts exerted by those Prophets (peace be upon them all) and the hard suffering to which the advocates of Islam have been subjected throughout the ages. Saving mankind, however, from submission to creatures of all sorts and returning them to submission to God in all matters is indeed worth that heavy price.

[25] S. Quṭb, Khaṣā'is al-Taṣawwur al-Islāmī wa Muqawwimātuh, Dār al-Shurūq, Cairo, pp. 129-130.
[26] In this volume, Chapter 3, p. 213.

> The establishment of the oneness of God, the only God, Lord and Sustainer in the universe, and the only source of legislation in all matters, and the establishment of the only way of life acceptable to God are all aims which merit the sending of God's messengers. They also merit the exertion of great efforts by the messengers as well as the endurance of all the suffering the advocates of Islam have endured throughout history. This is not because God needs to achieve these aims: He is in need of nothing and no one. They are worthy aims simply because human life cannot be put right, reformed, elevated and become worthy of man without the establishment of the faith based on God's oneness.[27]

We need now to add some further elaboration to these final comments on the *sūrah. We* should first look at the impact the truth of God's oneness produces on man's existence, natural needs and constitution; and how it influences his concept of life, which in turn influences his whole entity.

This holistic concept of life addresses people, their aspirations, needs and desires, setting them all to deal with One Being from whom everything may be requested and to whom all things are addressed. It is this One Being who is loved and feared; whose pleasure is sought and whose anger must be avoided, because He is the One who creates, owns and conducts everything.

At the same time, this concept refers mankind to a single source from which to derive all concepts, standards, values and laws. He is the One who has the right answer to every question that man may need to ask as he goes about his life.

Bearing all this in mind, man's whole entity is perfectly integrated, in feeling and action, faith and practice, ability and perception, life and death, health and sustenance, this present life and the life to come. This integration spares man much confusion that he would otherwise suffer.

When man is so integrated, he is in his best situation, which is a situation of unity. We should remember that unity applies to God, the Creator, and also applies to the universe despite its limitless aspects and situations, and to all living creatures with their endless variety and abilities. Unity also applies to the objective of human life, namely worship, in all its aspects and forms. This is certain to be the result whenever man searches for the truth in this world.

When man is in a position that perfectly fits with all aspects of the truth, he finds himself at the highest level of his own strength, and in full harmony with the world in which he lives, and with everything that he has a mutual impact on. This harmony

[27] Ibid., p. 214-15

allows man to play his best role in life and achieve maximum results for all his efforts.

When this truth achieved its fullness with the first Muslim community, it was able to play a great role with far-reaching effects on mankind and human history. When this happens again, as it inevitably will by God's leave, God will let it accomplish great results, no matter what impediments it may have to face. The very presence of this truth in its fullness initiates an irresistible force, because it is part of the universal power that works in harmony with the Creator's own power.

The importance of this truth is not merely to correct our concept of faith, which is an extremely important objective; it also adds to the proper and coherent appreciation of life. The value of human life is greatly enriched when it becomes, in totality, an aspect of worship, with every activity, major or minor, a part or a symbol of such worship. Needless to say, this is true only when we look at the implied significance in such activity, which is acknowledging God as the only deity to whom all worship should be addressed. This is the highest position to which man may aspire, and through which he achieves his ultimate perfection. It is the position which the Prophet achieved when he ascended to his highest rank, as a recipient of God's revelation, and when he went on his night journey: *"Blessed is He who from on high has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false."* (25: 1) *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed – so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all."*[28] (17: 1)

True Freedom

The unity of worship, in the sense of submission to God alone, has a profound impact on human life because it liberates people from submission to anyone else. Thus man ensures his true dignity and freedom which cannot be guaranteed under any system where people are subjugated by others, in one form or another. Such subjugation can be manifested in beliefs, rituals or laws, but their effects are the same, in the sense of submission to beings other than God.

People cannot live without self-surrender to one thing or another. Those who do not submit to God soon find themselves in the worst type of submission to others. They lose out to their desires which spiral out of control. Hence, they lose their very humanity: *"The unbelievers may enjoy their life in this world and eat like animals eat, but the fire is their ultimate abode."* (47: 12) The greatest loss man can suffer is the loss of his

[28] S. Quṭb, ibid., pp. 103-107.

own humanity. Moreover, they fall into different aspects of submission to other creatures, such as submission to rulers who always try to tighten their grip on power, pursuing their own self interest.

Submission to other creatures can also take subtle forms, which may even be more domineering and cruel than the political form. One example is submission to fashion houses. We ask: what power do these have over a very large section of humanity, which claims to be civilized? When a fashion deity prescribes a certain style in clothes, cars, buildings, parties, etc. people slavishly toe the line. No one even contemplates dissidence. If people submitted themselves to God in an even smaller measure than they do to fashion lords, they would be truly devout. How can submission be practically demonstrated if not in the form people follow with fashion? What is the meaning of Lordship and sovereignty if they are different from those exercised by fashion makers?

The poor woman who feels she must wear something too revealing, despite its being unsuitable for her figure, and wear make-up that leaves her subject to ridicule, simply cannot stand up to the lords of fashion with their immense power. What woman can resist such humiliation when she sees the whole of society around her toeing the line? If this is not submission to lordship, what is? Yet this is only one form of humiliating submission which people endure when they turn their backs on submission to God alone. Repugnant dictatorship is not limited to the political sphere and government.

How important is the unity of worship and submission to the preservation of people's lives, honour and property? All these become vulnerable when people submit to other human beings, whether in legal affairs, traditions or beliefs.

In the sphere of beliefs and concepts, submission to anyone other than God means falling prey to endless myths, legends and superstitions, examples of which are easily found in both pagan societies and popular myth. Pledges and sacrifices are often offered under such false beliefs. Such sacrifices may not be limited to money and property, but may also include the sacrifice of children. People live in fear of false deities, priests who claim to be in touch with deities, sorcerers who claim to have contact with the *jinn,* saints and holy men who claim to possess powerful secrets, etc. Under the influence of such fears, and similarly false hopes, people waste their talents and energy.

We have cited the example of fashion houses which human beings submit themselves to within a social context. However, we may also ask what the financial costs involved in such submission are.

An average family spends half its income on perfume, make-up, hairstyles, clothing, shoes and jewellery, etc. Similarly, an average family spends half its efforts

on being up to date with such changing tastes. What is more is that most of the fashion houses are financed by Jews who make the greatest profits from the fashion industries. Men and women never stop meeting the demands of such submission, sacrificing in the process effort, money, honour and morality.

False idols are set up, such as the motherland, nation, race, class, production, etc. Their honour is celebrated in spectacular forms, and people are urged to come forward with their offerings. Anyone who shows a reluctance to so come forward is accused of treason and made to endure humiliation. If personal honour runs against the requirements of submission to such false deities, honour is slain and the media never tires of describing such a travesty in superlative terms of praise.

Islam makes *jihād* obligatory. Its purpose is to ensure that only God is worshipped by man, and that mankind liberates itself from submission to tyrants and idols. Thus, it is the means by which humanity rises to the sublime level God wants it to achieve. Undoubtedly *jihād* requires sacrifices, but those who submit to beings other than God have to make even greater sacrifices. People who refrain from *jihād* for fear of having to make sacrifices should reckon how much submission to others costs them in terms of their lives, children and money, in addition to sacrificing morality and honour. Never does *jihād* against all worldly forces equal the heavy cost of submission to others.

Loss Compounded

Dedicating worship and submission to God alone, to the exclusion of all else, pays great returns in directing all human efforts to the task of building and improving human life. Elsewhere in this volume we identified that anyone who sets himself up in a position of a deity demanding worship, i.e. complete obedience, needs to devote all national resources for his own protection, and also for establishing himself as a deity. He also needs to have a machinery and media to sing his praises, and to blow up his image to that of a superior person fit to be worshipped. These cannot stop their praises for a moment. On the contrary, they always try to make the masses share in such worship rituals. The reason being that whenever the great praise exercise slackens even a little, the tyrant's image reverts back to that of a small powerless creature. Hence, the exercise is constantly renewed to endorse his image once again. If a portion of such efforts and funds are dedicated to ensure real progress in human life, all people in society would share in its fruits. But such energy, funds, and at times life and honour, are not spent for human benefit as long as people do not submit to God alone.

Such losses are not incurred in only one particular system. They are common to all systems, even though situations differ and types of the sacrifice required also differ.

What happened with those who rebelled against submission to God alone, allowing some of their numbers to rule over them implementing a law other than God's law, is that they ended up enduring the misery of submission to others. Such submission, however, squanders away their dignity and freedom, regardless of the type of government, even though they may think that some forms of government ensures such dignity and freedom.

When Europe rebelled against a Church that tyrannized under the false guise of religion, it tried to run away from God. People in Europe thought that they could best preserve their freedom, dignity and humanity under democratic government. They pinned their hopes on the guarantees provided by democratic constitutions, parliamentary systems, a free press, judicial and legal checks, majority rule, and similar ideals. But what happened in practice? Capitalism managed to exercise tyrannical power reducing all checks and institutions into little more than slogans or myths. The great majority of the people became subservient to the powerful minority that owned the capital which enabled it to control the parliamentary majority, the constitution, the press and all other checks and balances that people imagined would guarantee their freedom and other rights.

Certain groups turned away from individualistic or democratic systems which usher in a tyranny of capital or class and established 'collective' systems. But what has this meant in practice? They simply replaced subservience to the capitalist class with subservience to the working class. Or we may say, they replaced subservience to capitalists and big companies with subservience to the state which controlled capital and enjoyed total power. This made the tyranny of the state an even worse tyranny.

In every situation or regime where some people are subservient to others, a heavy tax is paid to different deities, in cash and kind. Submission is inevitable. If it is not made to God, then it is made to others. When submission is purely to God, it sets people free, and preserves their dignity and honour. By contrast, submission to other beings destroys people's humanity, dignity, freedom and all their good qualities, wastes their money and ruins their material interests.

Hence, the central issue of Godhead and people's relation with Him is given such careful and detailed attention in all divine messages and Scriptures. This *sūrah* is an example of this care. The basic issue here is not concerned with the worship of statues in the ignorant societies of the ancient past; its concerns are man throughout all generations, and all forms of *jāhiliyyah,* past and present. Indeed, all *jāhiliyyah* systems are based on making people subservient to others.[29]

[29] This is a quotation from the Prologue to *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, in the present volume pp. 12-13.

To sum up, what is clear in the Qur'ān is that the issue of submission, obedience and sovereignty, all of which are in this *sūrah* included under worship, is an issue of faith and belief, not one of a legal or political system. The question is whether faith and belief are truly established in human life or not. If it is, then we have the question of outlining a code for daily living which takes the form of a system of government, legal provisions and a community that implements them.

Moreover, worship is not a question of rituals to be offered, but one of submission, obedience, a political system, a legal code, provisions and practicalities. Hence, it deserves all the attention it receives in the divine system represented by Islam. It deserves that all God's messengers were sent with their messages, as well as all the sacrifices that were made by the advocates of Islam.

Past and Present

We also need to have a brief look at the order of the historical accounts given in the *sūrah* and what this signifies in terms of the progress of the faith based on submission to God alone.

In our discussion of the history of the Prophet Noah, we made clear that the first religion known to humanity was the one based on submission to God alone, i.e. islam. It was the one preached by Adam, the father of the human race, then by Noah, its second father, and then by all God's messengers. In its broad sense, Islam means belief in God's absolute oneness, offering all worship to Him alone, and belief that He is the Lord whom people must obey and submit themselves to, which means that He is the Sovereign who has the sole authority to legislate for human life.

We also explained that deviation into *jāhiliyyah,* in either beliefs and worship rituals, or submission and obedience, or in all of these, was a subsequent development, after mankind had known the true faith of islam, as explained by God's messengers (peace be upon them all). Human beliefs, and human life generally became corrupted as a result of people's submission to deities other than God. Such submission, in any form, indicates deviation from the faith based on God's oneness.

The chronological order given in the *sūrah* clearly shows the fundamental flaw in the methodology of comparative religion, which has led to erroneous conclusions. The basic flaw in this methodology is that it traces the line of successive forms of *jāhiliyyah* in human history, and ignores the line of belief in God's oneness as preached by His messengers. Even as scholars of comparative religion trace their preferred line, they refer only to what is derived from the periods of *jāhiliyyah* in human society, which correspond to those highlighted in history. We should remember that historical studies record, merely on the basis of probability, only a tiny portion of human history. What is worse is that when such scholars find some

heritage of the worship of the One God, as preached by divine messengers, surviving in a distorted form in an ancient *jāhiliyyah,* as in the case of Ekhnaton in ancient Egypt, they deliberately ignore its reference to God's messages. Ekhnaton ruled Egypt after the Prophet Joseph preached the message of God's oneness. An example of his preaching is related in the Qur'ān, in his discourse with his two fellow prisoners: "*I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it.*" (12: 37-40)

Comparative religion's approach and methodology is hostile to the religious approach. This is due to the historical hostility between the Church and scientific and academic research. Hence the methodology was devised in such a way as to ensure that its conclusions would undermine the Church and what it advocates. It is, thus, a discredited methodology because it sets its conclusions at the outset. Even when hostility to the Church weakened after its tyrannical grip on scientific research, politics and the economy was broken, the same methodology and approach continued because academics could not rid themselves of their founding principles. Flawed conclusions are inevitable when the methodology is basically flawed.

That said, we should be clear that whatever the approach, methodology and conclusions are, the outcome is basically at variance with what God has stated in the Qur'ān. If a non-Muslim researcher is free to accept conclusions that are clearly inconsistent with the Qur'ān, it is not permissible for a self-confessed Muslim researcher to do so. The Qur'ānic statements on Islam and *jāhiliyyah,* the fact that islam, in the broad sense, existed in human society long before *jāhiliyyah,* and also that belief in God's oneness was very much in people's minds long before polytheism and dualism are absolutely clear, admitting no ambiguity whatsoever. This comes under what is 'essentially known' of our faith. Anyone who wishes to adopt the conclusions of present- day research in comparative religion should make his choice: he either accepts God's statements or those of comparative religion's academics. In other words, he should choose between Islam and non-Islam, because God's word on this issue is clear and definitive; it is not implied or inferred.

Historical Progress

But this is not our main point of discussion here. We want to look at the line of progress pure faith took in human history. The faith of submission to God alone, i.e. islam in its broader sense, and *jāhiliyyah* compete for human minds. Satan tries to exploit man's weaknesses and nature as a creature with a dual susceptibility to good and evil. He tries to turn people away from the pure faith in order to sink them into *jāhiliyyah.* When people have sunk deep *into jāhiliyyah,* God sends a messenger to turn them back to the pure faith. The first thing he purges from their minds is submission to anyone other than God in any aspect of their life, not merely in worship rituals or beliefs. With this clear in our minds, we can understand humanity's situation today and determine the nature of Islamic advocacy.

Humanity as a whole reflects a return to the *jāhiliyyah* from which the Prophet Muĥammad saved it during his lifetime. This j*āhiliyyah* takes different forms. In some communities, it is reflected in the clear denial of God's very existence, which means that it pertains to faith and beliefs. The clearest example of this type is that of the Communists. In others, we see a confused recognition of God's existence and a clear deviation in worship rituals and in submission and obedience. This is the case of idol worshippers like the Hindus, and also the case of the Christians and Jews. In other communities we find a clear admission of God's existence and a proper performance of worship rituals, coupled with serious deviation in people's concept of the meaning of the declaration that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger. There is also utter confusion about the question of submission and obedience. This is the type of *jāhiliyyah* practised by people who claim to be Muslims. They imagine that simply by pronouncing the basic declaration and offering acts of worship they have become Muslims entitled to all that is due to believers in Islam, despite their flawed understanding of the meaning of this declaration and their submission to other creatures. But all these are forms of *jāhiliyyah,* which means that they are either disbelief like the first type, or association of partners with Him like all others.

This view of present-day human reality confirms that another cycle has passed and that humanity is back in *jāhiliyyah,* which defines the basic role of the advocates of Islamic revival, their basic task in rescuing humanity and their starting point. These advocates must begin by calling on people to embrace Islam anew and to abandon the miserable state of *jāhiliyyah* into which they have sunk. They must also define the basic meaning of Islam, which is: belief that all Godhead belongs to God, offering all worship to Him alone, submitting themselves to Him and obeying Him in all their affairs. Unless all these elements are met, then people have not embraced the faith of Islam and cannot be considered Muslims, enjoying the rights and privileges which Islam guarantees for them, with regard to their lives and property. If any of these elements is breached, it is a breach of all of them, taking the person

concerned out of Islam into *jāhiliyyah,* and branding him as unbeliever, or idolater, or both.

Humanity is today at a point when *jāhiliyyah* has the upper hand, and this can only be met with a turn to Islam, so as to return people to the worship of God alone. The issues must be absolutely clear in the minds of the advocates of Islam. Without such decisive clarity, they will fail to discharge their duty in this critical period of human history. They will vacillate when they confront *jāhiliyyah* society, thinking it to be Muslim. They will not be able to define their objectives, since they cannot define their starting point. They must start at the point where humanity actually is, not where it claims to be. The gulf between the reality and the claim is wide indeed.

Different Messengers, One Attitude

Every messenger was sent to his own community. At the start of his message, the messenger would be a member of his community, addressing them as a brother, desiring for them all the goodness a brother desires for his siblings. He wanted them to have all the goodness he had found in God's guidance, and for which he found clear evidence granted by his Lord. This was the attitude of every single messenger at the beginning; but it was not the same with any of them at the end.

A group from among every community responded to the message. They began to worship God alone. Thus, they surrendered themselves totally to God, forming together a community of believers, or a Muslim community, in the broader sense of the term. Another group rejected the message, denying its truth and continuing to submit to deities other than God. They remained in *jāhiliyyah.* Thus, they became a community of unbelievers.

This means that by their different attitudes towards God's messenger and his message, the same people became two communities: one Muslim and the other idolater. They were no longer one community, despite being of the same race and origin. Ties of race, land and common interests could no longer unite them and govern their relations. With the divine message a new bond came into being, uniting or dividing the same people. This is the bond of faith, with the type of submission it requires and the code of living it lays down.

What the advocates of Islamic revival today must clearly understand is that God never set the believers apart from the unbelievers until the believers themselves split away from the rest of their people. In so doing they declared their rejection of idolatry, submitted to God alone, and refused to obey any tyrannical authority. They also refused to participate in the social life of the community ruled by an authority implementing laws different from those of God.

God did not act to destroy the wrongdoers until the believers had separated themselves from them. This means that the believers must declare to the rest of their people that they are a community apart, with a distinctive faith, way of life and line of action. This is essential before God acts to fulfil His promise of granting victory to the believers and inflicting His punishment on the unbelievers.

It is particularly important that advocates of Islamic revival should understand this constant rule so as to plan their method of operation. The first step is to call on people to submit themselves to God alone, and to no one else. The same people will eventually split into two groups. The believers then separate themselves from the rest. When all this takes place, God's promise to grant victory to the believers becomes due for fulfilment, as consistently happened throughout history.

The period of advocacy and calling on people to believe may be prolonged before the separation occurs in practical terms. However, mental separation should start right at the beginning. Separating the two communities may be delayed, while one generation or more of believers provide sacrifices and endure hardship and torture. The believers must, nevertheless, remain convinced that God's promise is more true than the apparent reality. It will not fail to come at the appropriate time. God never fails to honour His promises.

Who Understands the Qur'ān?

These observations about the historical accounts given in the *sūrah* reveal to us the nature of the Islamic approach, as outlined in the Qur'ān. It is a practical approach in the face of human realities. These histories were related to the Prophet when he was in Makkah. The small number of believers were confined to their city, and the message practically besieged within it. The road ahead must have seemed to those believers to be long, arduous and without an end in sight. These histories showed them the end and outlined the different stages ahead. The Qur'ān thus took the believers by the hand, helped them on the road that had become a continuation of the march that started at the beginning of human history advocating the true faith of self-surrender to God alone. Thus, they no longer felt that their road was deserted. They felt themselves to be a new group in a continuous procession walking along a well charted road. They moved from the starting point to the finishing line according to a well defined plan.

Thus did the Qur'ān act with the Muslim community, moving it in safe and measured steps. Thus it can do today and in future with the advocates of Islamic revival, moving them along the same way. These advocates need the Qur'ān as a guiding light, marking its movement and outlining its stages.

When the Qur'ān plays this role, it is no longer treated as mere words recited for blessing. It comes alive as if it is being bestowed now from on high to guide the Muslim community which implements its directives and hopes for the fulfilment of God's promise which it clearly states.

This is what we mean when we say that this Qur'ān reveals its secrets only to the Muslim group which moves according to its guidance, to put its message into practice. It does not reveal these secrets to those who only read it for blessings, artistic or scientific study, or to appreciate its artistic beauty and fine style. None of these will truly appreciate much of the Qur'ān, because the Qur'ān was not bestowed from on high for such purposes. It was rather revealed to act as a practical guide providing directives for implementation.

Those who face up to *jāhiliyyah* with the message of Islam, and who endeavour to return erring humanity to the faith based on submission to God alone, and who strive against tyranny in order to liberate mankind from servitude to others, are the ones who truly understand the Qur'ān. They are the ones who live in an environment similar to that which prevailed when the Qur'ān was revealed. They make the same attempt made by those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. As they make their endeavours, they appreciate the meaning of its verses, because they see how such meaning applies to events and practical situations. This by itself is compensation for all the pain they have to endure and the sacrifice they have to make.

What am I saying? Is it compensation? Certainly not. It is a great blessing from God. *"Say: 'In God's bounty and grace, in this let them rejoice; for this is better than all that they may amass.'"* (10: 58)

All praise is due to God Almighty for His endless blessings.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol X

Sūrahs 12-15

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **V**

Yūsuf (Joseph) **1**

Prologue *1*
Trials in Plenty 2
A Hint of Future Prospects 3
Artistic Narrative 4
Realism and Consistency 5
Realism and Propriety 7
The Development of Joseph's Character 10
The Bereaved Father 13
The Carnal and the Sublime 16
Historical Dimension 17
Moral Lessons 21
Suitable Comments 23
Effective Harmony 25

1 A Favourite Child Is Lost *29*
The Opening of an Excellent Narrative 32
Interpretation of Dreams 34
The First Thread in a Sinister Plot 35
Deceiving an Elderly Father 37
Fast-Changing Fortunes 38

2 Facing Up to Trial *41*
Overview 43
Settling in Egypt 44
A Trial of Temptation 45
False Accusation and Irrefutable Testimony 48
A Scandal Must be Hushed 50

3 From Prison to Palace *53*
Overview 58
An Innocent Man Goes to Prison 58
A Platform to Advocate True Faith 59
A Comparison of Beliefs 61
To Whom Judgement Belongs 62
The King's Dream 65
The King's Dream Interpreted 66
Court Summons 67
Justice Must Be Seen to Be Done 68
A Great Turn in Joseph's Fortunes 70
Soliciting a High Position 71
The Birth of a Muslim Community 73
Suitability and Responsibility 74
A Maze of Our Own Making 75
Between Theory and Practice 79
High Position and Freedom for Joseph 81

4 Brothers' Reunion *83*
An Encounter with Lost Brothers 87
The Brothers Travel Again 89
Looking for Unnecessary Details 90

A Theft is Announced ... 91
Joseph Arrests His Brother ... 93
Unsuccessful Appeal ... 96

5 A Child's Dream Comes True ... *98*
The Crisis Reaches Its Climax ... 102
Meeting a Lost Brother ... 104
A Long Awaited Piece of Good News ... 106
A Happy Family Reunion ... 107

6 One Message to Mankind ... *110*
Overview ... 111
Turning Away from True Faith ... 112
The Subtle Corruption of Faith ... 114
Enlightened Advocacy of Divine Faith ... 115
The Bearers of God's Message ... 117
Qur'ānic Stories ... 119

Al-Ra 'd ... **121**

Prologue ... *121*

1 A Glance at Wide Horizons ... *126*
Overview ... 131
Scenes of Magnificent Splendour ... 131
Elaborate and Coherent Scenes ... 133
Wrongdoers, Yet Forgiven ... 136
God's Limitless Knowledge ... 137
How Thunder Glorifies God ... 139
A Call Without Response ... 141
Unequal Contrasts ... 143
Truth and Falsehood: an Illustration ... 145

2 The Nature of Faith and Prophethood ... *147*
Overview ... 153
Qualities of the Righteous ... 153
True Heart Comfort ... 157
Foul Devices with Fair Appearance ... 161
A Command to Worship ... 163
An Irrefutable Testimony ... 166
Declaring the Essentials of Faith ... 168
An Appeal to Human Feelings ... 171
The Nature of Prophethood ... 172
The Prophet's Task ... 174
Man's Actions and Future Life ... 176
Blind Rejection of the Truth ... 178
Blindness and Life Corruption ... 180

Ibrāhīm ... **183**

Prologue ... *183*
The Message of All Prophets ... 185
Gratitude for Unending Favours ... 188

1 One Message for All Mankind ... *191*
From Darkness into Light ... 197
In Their Own Language ... 200
A Reminder of God's Favours ... 202
The Dialogue between Messengers and Unbelievers ... 204
Faith Versus Tyranny ... 207

Prayers for God's Support ... 209
So Easy for God ... 210
Acrimonious Exchanges between Allies ... 212
Realities That Must be Faced ... 214
A Word to Strengthen the Believers ... 215
Messengers versus Unbelievers ... 218
One Message by All Messengers ... 219
A Style of Exceptional Refinement ... 221

2 Grace and Gratitude ... *223*
Overview ... 226
Bartering away God's Blessings ... 227
God's Numerous Blessings ... 229
Passionate Prayer by a Devoted Believer ... 232
A Prayer for All Time ... 235
No Heeding of Past Lessons ... 236
Fair Reward for All ... 238
Elimination of Pagan Concepts ... 239

Al-Ĥijr ... 243

Prologue ... *243*
Proper Understanding Required ... 243
The Nature of Opposition to Islam ... 245

1 Preserving the Qur'ān ... *248*
Unbelievers Indulge in Wishful Thinking ... 249
A Promise That Will Never Fail ... 251
Preservation of the Qur'ān ... 252
A Guarantee for All Time ... 253
Same Old Denials ... 254
Testimony by a Western Scientist ... 256

2 Great Universal Expanse ... *259*
Endless Wonders ... 260
A Clear Plan for All Creation ... 262

3 Man and His Sworn Enemy ... *265*
Overview ... 267
The Origins of Man's Creation ... 269
Man's Dual Nature ... 271
The Encounter and the Fall ... 272
A Fine Destiny for the Righteous ... 275
An Eternal Hostility ... 277

4 Lessons of History ... *280*
Overview ... 283
Abraham's Visitors ... 284
When All Values Are of Little Value ... 286
The Fate of Erring Communities ... 288

5 Keeping to the Path of Truth ... *291*
Overview ... 292
Seven Verses of Special Standing ... 293
When the Prophet is in Distress ... 295

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 12

Yūsuf (Joseph)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation, and it follows *Sūrah* 11, Hūd, in the chronological order of revelation. This means that it belonged to the critical period we mentioned in the Prologues to *Sūrahs* 10 and 11, Jonah and Hūd, respectively. This is the intervening period between what is known as the year of sorrow, when the Prophet lost his uncle Abū Ṭālib and his wife Khadījah, both of whom gave him unfailing support, and the time when the new Muslims of Madinah, the *Anṣār,* gave the Prophet their first and second pledges of loyalty and support at `Aqabah. These pledges brought in new support and heralded a far reaching change in the fortunes of the Islamic message and the Muslim community, beginning with the migration of the Prophet and his Companions to Madinah.

The whole *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, contrary to what is mentioned in some copies of the Qur'ān, stating that verses 1-3 and 7 were Madinan revelations. The first three verses read as follows: "*Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].*" These verses serve as a logical prelude to what immediately follows, namely Joseph's story: "*Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.'*" (Verse 4) Then the events of the story begin to unfold, right up to its conclusion. Hence, the reference to Qur'ānic narratives in the opening verse is a perfect prelude to the story.

Moreover, the message of the first three verses belongs fully to the Makkan Qur'ān, emphasizing that it is a revelation from on high, in Arabic, refuting the

idolaters' accusation that a non-Arab taught it to the Prophet. They state that prior to receiving this revelation, the Prophet was totally unaware of its message and the subjects it addressed.

Furthermore, this introduction to the *sūrah* fits perfectly with the comments the *sūrah* provides on the story towards the end: "*That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes.*" (Verse 102) We see how the prelude to the story dovetails with its concluding comments, indicating that the entire *sūrah,* prelude, narrative and comments, were all revealed at the same time.

As for verse 7, it is an integral part of the progressing narrative. For it to have been added later, in Madinah, is inconsistent with the whole. For one thing, verse 8 includes a pronoun that refers to Joseph's brothers mentioned in verse 7, which means that verse 8 could not be properly understood unless its were preceded by verse 7. The two verses together read: "*Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire.* (Verse 7) "*They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error.'*" (Verse 8) All this clearly indicates that the two verses were revealed together as part of the unfolding narrative.

Trials in Plenty

The *sūrah* is a single, complete unit with a clear Makkan character reflected in its subject matter, message and ambience. It reflects the nature of the critical period in which it was revealed. The Prophet was enduring a time when he felt lonely and alienated from his social surroundings, and his followers felt the strains of isolation. With the revelation of this *sūrah,* God tells His noble Messenger, Muĥammad, the story of a noble brother, one Joseph ibn Jacob ibn Isaac ibn Abraham, (peace be upon them all). Joseph too had to endure a series of tests and trials: first, his brothers schemed to get rid of him, then he was thrown into the well where he found himself in fear of his life. This was followed by his becoming a slave sold like an inanimate object, having no say in the matter and losing all the care and love of his parents. He then faced temptation and seduction, followed by the wicked scheming of his master's wife and her fellow women. He then had to endure long imprisonment after having lived comfortably in a palace. A change of fortunes then sees him in a position of power where he had full control of people's basic food requirements and their lives. He subsequently faces a trial of a totally different nature when he meets his brothers whose plot against him started this whole scenario. Throughout, however, Joseph remained a steadfast believer, using these trials to propagate the

divine message. He emerged triumphant at the end, reunited with his parents and family, witnessing the realization of his early dream in perfect relief: "*Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.*" (Verse 4)

At this point, all Joseph's thoughts and concerns are focused on turning to God, his Lord, with pure devotion and dedication, giving little importance to worldly considerations: "*When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.' 'My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.*" (Verses 99-101) This was his ultimate request at the moment when he was in a position of power and affluence, reunited with his family. All he wanted was that God should let him die in a state of complete self-surrender to Him and to admit him among the righteous. To him, this was the crowning jewel after a long series of trials, endurance and then triumph.

A Hint of Future Prospects

It is no wonder that this *sūrah,* and the account and comments it gives, was revealed to the Prophet during that particularly difficult time in Makkah, giving him and his followers solace, comfort and reassurance. Indeed the way I think about the *sūrah* gives me the feeling that it carries a subtle hint that the Muslims will be made to leave Makkah to settle somewhere else, where they will enjoy power and achieve victory. It is true that the migration appeared to be enforced by the long persecution endured by the Muslim community. But so was the case with Joseph who was taken away from his parents to endure a long series of trials and tribulations: "*Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it.*" (Verse 21) This is stated in relation to the moment when Joseph first arrived in Egypt as a young lad being sold as a slave to the Chief Minister.

These thoughts that press on my mind now give me a special appreciation of the ending of the *sūrah* with its final comments on the story. I can only refer to what I feel, though putting such feelings into words is difficult. So the best I can do is to refer to the final verses themselves: "*Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers]*

men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe." (Verses 109-111)

These verses suggest that the laws God has set in operation in human life take a certain course when God's messengers lose all hope, as did Joseph in his long series of trials. The course indicates a departure against one's will that then leads to the desired release. Such hints and inspiration are felt by believers who go through a similar period of trial and hardship as they begin to look forward to a forthcoming release, even though it seems distant.

The *sūrah* is unique in that it relates Joseph's story in full. Other stories related elsewhere in the Qur'ān are always split into episodes, given in different *sūrahs* so that each episode serves the purpose and theme of the *sūrah* in which it is narrated. When a historical account is given fully in one *sūrah,* as in the case of the stories of Prophets Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Lot and Shu`ayb, these stories are sketched in summarized form. Joseph's story, by contrast, is told in full, with complete details, in one *sūrah,* which is unique in the Qur'ān.

This unique approach suits this particular story. The story starts with relating Joseph's dream and ends with its realization. To give a partial account here, comprising one or a few episodes, and completing it in another *sūrah* would have been unsuitable. Besides, this approach fulfils all artistic aspects while, at the same time, serves the purpose for which the story is included in the Qur'ān.

Artistic Narrative

As narrated in this *sūrah,* Joseph's story provides the perfect example of the Islamic method of story-telling while enhancing its psychological and educational effects that aim to reinforce faith and strengthen trust in its line of action. Although the Qur'ān maintains the same theme and method of presentation, Joseph's story stands out as a perfect example of its artistic features.

Joseph, the main protagonist, is shown interacting with all aspects of life across a wide variety of situations. His trials, greatly varied in nature and effect, are all fully portrayed with natural human reactions in each case. Joseph, a perfect model of God's humble servant, emerges from all these trials pure, untarnished, fully

dedicated, addressing to God a heartfelt prayer that expresses his devotion.

Other characters in the story are presented with varying degrees of exposure, space and focus. The story in this way reveals profound insight into the human psyche, presenting a variety of situations, feelings, reactions and interactions. One such case is that of Jacob, a loving father full of sorrow and a reassured prophet who has been granted special knowledge. Another is that of Joseph's brothers motivated by envy, jealousy and personal grudges into devising a wicked scheme, which weighs heavily on them and leaves them weak and confused. One of them, however, emerges with a different personality that asserts itself in the various stages of the story. A third case is that of the Chief Minister's wife: driven by sexual desire, unashamedly explicit in her expression, and reflecting the situation in the palaces of Egypt during a period of *jāhiliyyah.* She is clearly delineated so as to give us an insight into her personal character and how she is influenced by her environment. We also have an example of aristocratic women in Egypt at the time. Their gossip about the Chief Minister's wife and her slave boy, (note, see my comments in later chapters about this term of reference), their attempts to seduce Joseph, and the threat he receives from his mistress in front of them all give us a clear picture of the Egyptian social environment. We also see a sample of the plots that are continually hatched in the upper echelons of society. This is clearly shown in Joseph's imprisonment. Furthermore, the Chief Minister reflects the attitude of his ruling class in dealing with crimes of honour. The King appears briefly, then moves into the background as does the Chief Minister. All these characters present a multitude of human feelings, attitudes and behaviour that accurately reflect human nature as a whole.

Artistic presentation in the story remains remarkably faithful, realistic and accurate. It does not ignore a single human reality, without creating the sort of squalor of carnal motives and wickedness certain Western circles call 'realism'. Different types of human weakness, including the inability to resist a strong sexual urge, are portrayed showing a perfectly accurate picture of human nature without overlooking a single aspect of it. Nevertheless, the story maintains the highest standard of propriety with clear realism.

Realism and Consistency

Take the case of Joseph's brothers: petty grudges grow in their hearts, reaching great proportions so as to make them lose sight of the enormity of their ghastly crime. They then come up with a 'moral justification' to quieten their consciences. This justification reflects the reality of their religious environment, since they are the children of the Prophet Ya`qūb ibn Isĥāq ibn Ibrāhīm (peace be upon them all). Their

environment leaves its clear impressions on their way of thinking, feelings and traditions. They know that they need some sort of justification so as to reduce the ghastliness of their crime:

> *Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error. Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land, so that you have your father's attention turned to you alone. After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.' One of them said: Do not kill Joseph, but rather – if you must do something – cast him into the dark depth of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.' [Thereupon] they sad [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him. ' He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' They said: If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depth of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.' (Verses 7-18)*

We subsequently see them reflecting the same characteristics on every occasion, just as we see one of them always adopting a different stance. Later on, to comply with Joseph's demand, they take his brother to him, not knowing Joseph's true identity but aware only that he is the Chief Minister of Egypt. They only want to buy their supply of grain from him during that period of drought. God, however, allows Joseph to retain his brother under the pretext of finding the King's measure in his luggage. The other brothers had no idea how this had come about, but their old grudges against Joseph immediately surface: "*They said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of*" (Verse 77)

Their old grudges manifest themselves again when they tell their father, now an old and sorrowful man, about the second calamity. They realize how this second event will renew all his grief for Joseph. Again, their old grudges against their lost brother are seen at full strength. They pay little heed to their father's old age and his

sense of bereavement: "*He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: 'By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.'*" (Verses 84-85)

The same may be said about their remarks when Joseph sent his shirt to his father after having identified himself to them. When they saw their father detecting Joseph's aura, they were upset as this indicated the profound relationship that still existed between father and absent son. They were quick to remonstrate with their father and reproach him: "*As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.'*" (Verses 94-95)

Realism and Propriety

The Chief Minister's wife is another character that reflects consistency in all situations. We see her first in the grip of desire, heeding nothing as she tries to satisfy her uncontrolled lust. She is restrained neither by feminine shyness, self respect, social position nor by a potential family scandal. She is quick to employ all her female guile and craftiness in order to show herself free of blame and at the same time protect her loved one, at whom she deliberately levelled a false accusation. Her aim here is that he should be given a mild sentence that spares his life. Again her guile helps her to answer other women's accusations, utilizing their similar weakness against sexual desire. When her own lack of control is exposed, she owns up to her determination to get what she wants, declaring this to the other women who share with her the same lust that sees nothing wrong in satisfying carnal desires.

Although the story paints this type of woman realistically and faithfully, showing the moment of uncontrolled desire at its most urgent, the Qur'ānic account, which provides the best example of Islamic artistry, maintains a very clean line throughout. Even in the description of a woman exposing her physical and mental nakedness, the Qur'ān steers away from the squalor of explicit eroticism which characterizes what is called realism in literary works of contemporary societies that pay little regard to religious values.

> *The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my*

master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment. '[Joseph] said: It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own household testified: If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed.' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.' In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave boy, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.' When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said [to Joseph]: 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no "mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been blaming me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated. ' [Joseph] said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.' His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verses 21-34)

We meet her again after Joseph had been a prisoner for years as a result of her and the other women's scheming. It was only when the King experienced his dream that Joseph's former fellow prisoner remembered that Joseph was the only one who could unravel a true interpretation of dreams. When the King ordered that he should be brought to him, Joseph refused until the King had investigated his case to determine his innocence. The King thus called the Chief Minister's wife and the other women. As she responds, we see her again as a woman in love, even though time, aging and events have left their mark on her. But we also realize that faith, which she had observed with Joseph, found its way into her heart. *"The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him.*

He has indeed told the truth. From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.'" (Verses 50-53)

Joseph, a goodly type of man, is painted faithfully. The Qur'ān does not alter the slightest feature of his character. Having been brought up in a prophet's home as very religious, he is shown as a young man facing the trial of temptation. Indeed, his real character combines his natural human tendencies with his religious upbringing. When the woman tempted him openly, he almost responded to her, but the other influence saved him from falling into her trap. He felt his own weakness as he faced the women's guile coupled with the pull of his environment and the social milieu. But he remained steadfast. There is no distortion of his character. He is faithfully painted.

Then we have the very special character of the Chief Minister, who has to balance the dignity of his position with the weakness of pride. With him, social pretences and covering up what is unbecoming are essential characteristics: *"When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'"* (Verses 28-29)

We also see the women in that society: their gossip about the Chief Minister's wife and her slave boy whom she tries to seduce; their disapproval of her conduct based on jealousy rather than the error involved; their infatuation with Joseph; their feminine cognition of the reason behind the conduct of the woman at the centre of their gossip; her awareness of this recognition prompting her to complete confession feeling completely safe to do so; their collective attempt to seduce Joseph despite their immediate recognition of his purity: *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.'"* (Verse 31) We understand all this from Joseph's prayer: *"He said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.'"* (Verse 33) It was no longer his mistress that was after him, but the whole array of upper class women.

The whole social environment is clearly seen in the way Joseph's fate is determined even though his innocence is fully established. In this way, the decision was taken to suppress the social scandal, even though a wholly innocent person was made a scapegoat: *"Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time."* (Verse 35)

The Development of Joseph's Character

If we follow Joseph across the whole story, we find his character shining throughout, reflecting its essential characteristics in every environment he finds himself in. He is a God-fearing young man brought up in a prophet's home where he acquired his faith. At no point do we see him losing sight of any of these elements. In the dark hours when he is unjustly thrown into prison, he continues to advocate his faith gently but firmly, aware of his environment and knowing how to approach people in such an environment. He realizes that he must always reflect the superiority of his faith by his conduct which maintains high moral standards and values:

> *Two young men went to prison with him. One of them said: I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.' [Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it. My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter on which you have sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.'* (Verses 36-41)

Nevertheless, he is a man with normal human weaknesses. He is eager that the King be informed of his case, hoping that the King would uncover the plot that ended with him being unjustly imprisoned. But God wanted to teach him to place his hopes in Him alone. *"And [Joseph] said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.' But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years."* (Verse 42)

We see the same personality again after the lapse of several years. During which time Joseph has gone through the divine educative process and has placed his full trust in God, reassured about his future and fate. The King has his dream and his

nobles and religious leaders cannot find a suitable interpretation for it. At this point, the released former prisoner remembers Joseph and obtains his interpretation of the King's dream. The King orders that Joseph be brought to him. But Joseph is reassured, confident of his position. He refuses to leave prison until his case is properly investigated and he is acquitted:

> *And the King said: I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.' At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.' 'Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years, but let the grain you harvest remain in its ear, except for the little which you may eat. Then after that there will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have laid up for them, except a little of what you have kept in store. Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]. The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth. 'From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.'* (Verses 43-55)

Here we see that Joseph has matured. He is fully aware of what goes on around him. He is calm, confident, reassured. From this point onward, he is the central character in the story, while the King, the Chief Minister, the women and the whole set up move out of stage. The *sūrah* prepares us for this change with a couple of verses: "*Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our*

mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed." (Verses 56-57) From this point onward, Joseph faces new types of trial, unlike those he had hitherto faced. In all these, he loses nothing of his calmness or reassurance.

First we see Joseph encountering his brothers for the first time after their crime against him. Now however he is far superior to them and in a stronger position. Yet his actions reflect his self control: "*Joseph's brothers arrived and presented themselves before him. He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him. And when he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.' They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so.' Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back.'*" (Verses 58-62)

We meet Joseph again carrying out a plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. With this we see a mature and wise person, one who is full of confidence and self control:

> *And when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother to himself and said: 'I am your brother. Do not grieve over their past deeds.' And when he had given them their provisions, he placed the [King's] drinking-cup in his brother's camel pack. Then an announcer called out: 'You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves.' Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' 'We have lost the King's goblet, "they answered. 'Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it. 'They said: 'By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' [The Egyptians] said: 'But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' They replied: He in whose camel- pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking- cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. [Joseph's brothers] said: If he has stolen — well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of' They said: 'Chief Minister, this boy has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed a generous man.' He answered: 'God*

forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.' (Verses 69-79)

Once more we see Joseph when the trial had taken its toll on Jacob and God has willed that the trials that engulfed him and his household should now come to an end. Joseph is now longing to be reunited with his parents, and he feels sympathetic towards his brothers who appear before him suffering hardship. He gently remonstrates with them as he identifies himself to them, and follows this with total forgiveness stated at the most opportune moment. All circumstances lead to such forgiveness which is the only attitude to be expected from Joseph, the God-fearing, mature, kind and reassured person.

When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: 'Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable. 'He said: Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?' They said: 'Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.' They said: By God. Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners.' He replied: None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy. Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family.' (Verses 88-93)

We finally see him at the climax, when the reunion takes place, Joseph is at the height of his power, his dream has come true and all his aspirations have been fulfilled. At this moment, he steps aside to be alone addressing a prayer of complete devotion and full humility. His position of power means nothing to him at that moment: "*My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.*" (Verse 101)

Joseph's character reflects his integrity, consistency and the environment in which he was raised.

The Bereaved Father

Another character is Jacob, the loving kindly father and confident prophet who experiences a combination of apprehension and hope when his son tells him of his

dream. He recognizes that the dream heralds a very promising future, but he fears at the same time that Satan might prompt his other children to take some undesirable action. We see him here reflecting on all aspects of his character: "*Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.' My son,' he replied, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man's open enemy. Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.'*" (Verses 4-6)

We then meet him again as his sons try to persuade him to let them take Joseph with them, followed by them giving him the shocking news of Joseph's disappearance:

> *[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him. 'He answered. 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depths of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.'* (Verses 11-18)

Again we meet him, in all his humanity, when his sons are trying once more to persuade him to part company with another son, Joseph's full brother, now the focus of all his love and kindness. For them, they must get Jacob's consent that the brother travel with them, because the Egyptian Chief Minister, whose identity is unknown to them, requires his presence in order to give them their full measure of grain.

> *When they returned to their father, they said: 'Father, any [further] grain is henceforth denied us. Therefore, send our brother with us so that we may obtain our full measure [of grain]. We will take good care of him.' He replied: Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past? But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.' When*

> *they opened their camel packs, they discovered that their merchandise had been returned to them. 'Father,' they said, 'what more could we desire? Here is our merchandise: it has been returned to us. We will buy provisions for our people, and we will take good care of our brother. We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.' He said: I will not send him with you until you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will indeed bring him back to me, unless the worst befalls you.' When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say. 'And he added: My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.' And when they entered as their father had bidden them, it did not profit them in the least against God. It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled. He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it.* (Verses 63-68)

We meet him again after his second calamity, to see him once more as a bereaved father and a reassured prophet. Joseph carried out his plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. But another of Jacob's sons, who stands out as one with a special character that distinguishes his attitude at different junctures in the story, decides to stay behind as well. He cannot face his father after having given him a solemn pledge that he could not now honour. Therefore, he decides to stay until his father gives him permission to do otherwise, or until God has judged in his case:

> *When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.' He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.' He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' He said: It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.'* (Verses 80-87)

In the last episode of his long trial we see Jacob, the old man, demonstrating the

same characteristics, holding Joseph's shirt and recognizing his son's odour. He is being reproached by his sons, but his trust in his Lord is never in doubt. *"As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.' But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?' [His sons] said: 'Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed.' He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"* (Verses 94-98)

The Carnal and the Sublime

The Qur'ānic approach of faithfully painting reality while maintaining the values of purity and propriety is not limited to the sketching of human characteristics. It is also clearly seen in the faithful narration of events, showing them as they took place, accurately outlining their circumstances, background, time and place. Every movement, feeling, reaction and indeed every word is given at the appropriate time. All this is similarly true of the characters painted.

Even sexual feelings and attitudes are given their full space, within the limits of the clean approach that suits man. We see no falsification, distortion or suppression of the human reality, its scope or integrity. However, giving these moments their proper space in relation to the rest of events does not mean focusing on them as if they were the total reality of humans and the pivotal element in their life. This is contrary to the un-Islamic or *jāhiliyyah* approach which wants us to believe that only such focus produces realist art.

Jāhiliyyah deforms man under the pretext of artistic realism. It zooms in on sex as if it were the entire object of human life, making of it a deep swamp surrounded by tempting but evil flowers. It is not faithfulness to reality that makes *jāhiliyyah* adopt this approach to sex. It is done because the Zionist Protocols encourage it. These Protocols want to see man stripped of all values except the animal and carnal, so that the Zionists are not seen as the only people who shed all nonmaterial values. They want humanity to fall into the quagmire of sex, directing all its potentials to it. This is the surest way to destroy humanity and make it prostrate before the approaching Zionist Kingdom. They make art their means to bring about all this evil. In addition, they try hard to propagate new doctrines, exploiting them in such a way that serves the same purpose, while they maintain that such doctrines are 'scientific'. Examples of these are Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism and Scientific Socialism. All these share in common the purpose of serving evil Zionist designs.

Historical Dimension

The story does not only relate events and draw characters. It goes beyond this to point out the period in history when these events took place, and describes its general features. Thus the stage acquires an international historical dimension. We will briefly refer to some of these.

Egypt was not ruled at the time by pharaohs of Egyptian descent. It was instead under the rule of a nomadic people who had learnt something about the divine faith from Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob who lived nearby. We deduce this from the fact that the ruler of Egypt at the time is given in the Qur'ān the title of King, while the ruler of Egypt in the story of Moses is given the well-known Egyptian title, Pharaoh. This distinction determines the time when Joseph was in Egypt, namely between the 13th and 17th dynasties, which belonged to the nomads whom the Egyptian people called the Hyksos. This was said to be a derogatory appellation which referred to pigs or pig farmers. Their rule in Egypt lasted about one and a half centuries.

Joseph was sent as a Messenger of God during this period. He started his advocacy of Islam, in its broader sense, which means the religion of absolute monotheism, whilst in prison. We see him there making it clear that it was the faith of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and giving an accurate outline of what it meant: "*I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it.*" (Verses 37-40)

This is a very clear and comprehensive picture of Islam, as preached by all God's messengers. It outlines the essential beliefs, including belief in God, the Day of Judgement, God's oneness without entertaining any thought of associating partners with Him, a clear understanding of God's attributes, the One, the Overpowering. It also involves a declaration that none other than God has any power, which entails that the deities given control over people have no such status. All power and authority belongs to God alone who has commanded that all worship be addressed to none other than Him. To exercise power, authority and lordship is to demand worship from people, which is contrary to God's order that all worship be dedicated to Him. It defines worship as being subject to authority, rule and lordship, while the true faith is to acknowledge that all worship and rule are God's own. In this sense,

the two are synonymous: *"All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith."* (Verse 40) This is the clearest, most comprehensive, accurate and perfect description of Islam.

It is also clear that when Joseph held the reins of power in Egypt, he continued to advocate the divine faith. There is no doubt that this faith spread in Egypt by his efforts, particularly because he did not merely hold power but also controlled people's food provisions. It must also have spread into neighbouring areas, as they sent some of their people to Egypt to buy grains which had been stored there through Joseph's wise policies. As the story describes, Joseph's brothers came from the land of Canaan with caravans that brought provisions from Egypt. This shows that the drought affected the whole area at that time.

Early in the story there are hints at some vague influence of the divine faith which the Hyksos were aware of. The first reference occurs in quoting what the women said when they were surprised by Joseph's appearance: *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel."* (Verse 31) A similar indication is seen in the Chief Minister's counsel to his wife: *"Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault."* (Verse 29) Further reference is made later by the Chief Minister's wife who clearly appears to have believed in Joseph's religion and declared her submission to God: *"The Chief Minister's wife said: 'Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth.' From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 51-53)

Since the monotheistic faith was known in Egypt before Joseph assumed power, it must have subsequently spread during his reign and in subsequent Hyksos dynasties. When the Pharaohs of Egypt regained power with the 18th dynasty, they began to suppress the monotheistic faith and its adherents, particularly Jacob's descendants, in order to reinstate the idolatry that gave the Pharaohs their authority.

This explains a major cause behind the persecution of the Children of Israel. Israel's, i.e. Jacob's, sons settled in Egypt and ruled it during the Hyksos period. When the Egyptians expelled the Hyksos, they persecuted their allies, the Children of Israel. But the conflict between the two faiths is in fact the prime reason for such persecution, because the spread of the monotheistic faith destroys the very basis of Pharaohs' rule, since it stands firmly against all tyranny.

There is a reference to this elsewhere in the Qur'ān, when it relates the argument of a believer from Pharaoh's household as he defended Moses, trying hard to

persuade Pharaoh and his people to leave Moses alone. Pharaoh felt that his very rule was threatened by the monotheistic faith Moses preached:

> *A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who had concealed his faith, exclaimed: 'Would you slay a man merely because he says, 'My Lord is God" – seeing that he has brought you all evidence of this truth from your Lord? Now if he be a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, a part at least of what he warns you is bound to befall you. God would not grace with His guidance one who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, and you have the upper hand in the land. But who will rescue us from God's punishment, should it befall us?'Said Pharaoh: I but point out to you that which I see myself and I would never make you follow any path but that of rectitude.'The man who had attained to faith said: My people! I fear for you the like of what had befallen those others who were leagued together [against God's truth], the like of what happened to Noah's people, the `Ād, the Thamūd and those who came after them. God never wishes any injustice for His servants. And, my people, I fear for you that day when people will cry out to one another, when you will turn your backs and flee, having none to defend you against God. For he whom God lets go astray can never find any guide. In times gone by, Joseph had come to you with all evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to throw doubt on all that he brought you; and when he died you said: "No messenger will God send after him." Thus God lets go astray a transgressor who is lost in doubt; those who call in question God's revelations, with no authority vouchsafed to them. Exceedingly abhorrent is [their conduct] in the sight of God and of the believers. Thus God sets a seal on every arrogant, self-exalting heart.' (40: 28-35)*

Thus we see that the true conflict was between the monotheistic faith which acknowledges Godhead and lordship as belonging to God alone and the idolatrous faith that gave the Pharaohs the basis of their power.

Perhaps the distorted version of monotheism associated with Akhenaton was a confused version of the lingering influence of the divine faith advocated by Joseph (peace be upon him) in Egypt. This could be seen more so if historical reports to the effect that Akhenaton's mother was Asian, and not of Pharaohnic descent.

The story is not confined to Egypt. It accurately reflects the historical period, with the related dreams and predictions spread across a wider area. We see this clearly reflected first in Joseph's dream and its fulfilment at the end, as also in the dreams of the two prisoners, and then the King's dream. All these dreams receive due attention from those who experience or hear them, which is an indication of the prevalent culture at the time.

Artistic elements in the story are varied and plenty. It is rich with the human element, reflected in the feelings and movements described. The narrative clearly

highlights all these. Moreover, the Qur'ānic mode of expression is always inspiring, using varying rhythms to suit the particular atmosphere of every situation.

A father's love is clearly seen in varying degrees. We see it in Jacob's love of Joseph, his brother and also in his love for the rest of his sons. His love is also reflected in the way he reacts to events involving Joseph, from the beginning of the story up to its last line.

We also see envy and jealousy between brothers born to different mothers, according to how they see their father's love expressed. The way these feelings surface also varies, with some of the brothers entertaining murder while others, aghast at the thought of such a crime, advise instead that a much less impacting scheme should be sufficient.

Another prominent trait is that of plotting and scheming. Joseph's brothers plot to get rid of him, while the Chief Minister's wife's plots target Joseph, her husband and the women who gossip against her.

Desire and sex are described, as also the different responses to these. Here we see an unrestrained drive as well as self control. Appeal and fancy on the one side and chastity and restraint on the other. Other feelings and emotions are expressed such as regret, forgiveness and delight at the reunion of long lost family members. The *sūrah* also paints some aspects of the upper class of the then *jāhiliyyah* society: at home, in prison, at the market-place and in government offices in Egypt. Other aspects of the Hebrew society are also drawn, with emphasis on dreams and prophecies.

The story begins with the dream related by Joseph to his father who tells him that he will have a great role to play, but urging him to withhold his dream from his brothers so that their jealousy does not motivate them to scheme against him. The story then proceeds as though it is a realization of the dream, fulfilling Jacob's warnings. When the dream is finally fulfilled the story is ended, unlike what the writers of the Old Testament did. It thus has an artistic closure making it serve its religious purpose fully.

A clear plot adds to the artistic aspect of the story. The fulfilment of the dream is withheld to the end, even though it unfolds little by little. At the end, the plot is explained most naturally.

The story is divided into sections, each relating a number of episodes and scenes, leaving gaps between them to be filled in by the reader. In this way, it increases the story's appeal and entertainment.

We may finally say that the story shows the way for future literary works that benefit from fine artistic features and remain faithful to reality, without indulging in any vulgarity that is unbecoming to human art.

Moral Lessons

For the Islamic movement, the story provides clear lessons, some of which are particularly relevant to certain stages of its progress, while others answer clear permanent needs. In addition, certain facts are established through the story and within the *sūrah* as a whole, particularly in its final comments. We will briefly refer to some of these.

We have already mentioned that the revelation of this *sūrah* and the story it narrates were particularly suited to the critical period the Islamic message went through in Makkah, and the hardship endured by the Prophet and his few followers. This is manifested through the relation of the trials endured by Joseph, a noble brother of Muĥammad, God's Messenger, and how he had to depart from his land until he was given power elsewhere. This gives us an aspect of the moral of the story which fits in with the needs of the Islamic message at that particular time. We thus have an insight into the action-oriented nature of the Qur'ān, as it explains the nature of the message and gives the Muslim community practical directives with clear and well defined objectives.

In our analysis of the story, we have also referred to the clear, detailed and accurate picture of the divine faith, Islam, drawn by Joseph (peace be upon him). This picture merits long reflection. It begins by establishing the unity of the faith based on full submission to God and preached by all God's messengers. We see that the basic elements of this faith are incorporated in full in every message. They are all based on perfect monotheism, emphasizing God's oneness and His Lordship of mankind, who must submit themselves completely to Him alone. This faith, in all its messages, also establishes the essential belief in the life to come. This is contrary to what is known as the study of Comparative Religion which alleges that humanity began to believe in the One God and in the hereafter only at a very late stage in human history, after having gone through different forms of idolatry and dualism. It also alleges that progress in the field of religion mirrors human progress in science and industry. Thus, Comparative Religion implies that all religions were the product of man, like science and industry.

The *sūrah* also affirms the nature of the divine faith advocated by all God's messengers. It is not confined to the oneness of Godhead, but it also includes the oneness of Lordship. All judgement in all human affairs belongs to God alone, as a result of the divine order that only God may be worshipped. The Qur'ānic statement gives a very precise definition of worship. Judgement belongs to God and people must submit to His judgement. This is indeed the true faith, and not any other form or set of beliefs. No form of worship is valid when people submit to anyone other than God even in a single matter of the whole life spectrum. To believe that God is

One means, necessarily, that the Lord is One, and in practice this means that all judgement belongs to Him, and all worship is dedicated to Him alone. The two are synonymous. The sort of worship that classifies people as Muslims or non-Muslims means submission to God and implementing His judgement, to the exclusion of anything else. This definitive Qur'ānic statement should end all argument on this issue.

Another impression that the story radiates shows pure and dedicated faith that fills the hearts of two of the noble and chosen servants of God, Jacob and Joseph. We have already spoken about Joseph's final attitude as he turns to his Lord in all humility, discarding all worldly things and addressing Him in total devotion: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous."* (Verse 101)

But this final attitude is not the only one sketched in the story. Indeed throughout his life Joseph remains close to his Lord, responding to Him and doing His bidding. When he is the target of seduction, being made very tempting offers, he says: *"God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good."* (Verse 23) And when he fears that he may weaken before the temptation, he prays: *"My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly."* (Verse 33)

Similarly, when he identifies himself to his brothers, he does not forget to acknowledge God's grace and express his gratitude for it: *"They said: 'Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.'"* (Verse 90)

All these attitudes go beyond answering the particular needs of the Islamic message in its early period in Makkah. They answer its needs in all situations at all times.

With Jacob the truth of God appears close and profound in every situation and on every occasion. As the trial deepens, this truth becomes still clearer in his heart and more sublime. At the beginning, when Joseph relates his vision, he reminds his son of God and expresses his gratitude to Him: *"Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 6) As he is given the first blow with Joseph's disappearance, he appeals to his Lord, saying: *"Your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in*

this misfortune that you have described." (Verse 18)

We see him speaking to his sons as a loving father fearing that some misfortune should befall them. He recommends them not to make their entry into the city from the same gate, but to use different gates. However, he clearly states that such a precaution would avail them nothing against God's will. The only judgement that is certain to take effect is God's. Yet his recommendation may answer a need he feels within himself: *"And he added: My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust."* (Verse 67)

He suffers another bereavement in his old age, when he had grown weak and sorrowful. But at no time does he ever lose hope that God will turn in His mercy to him: *"He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 83)

This truth reaches its most sublime as his sons reproach him for his continued sorrow for Joseph, to the extent that he loses his eyesight through crying. He tells them that he knows God as they do not know Him. Hence, he addresses his complaint to Him only and hopes for nothing other than God's grace: *"He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' He said: 'It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.'"* (Verses 84-87) He again reminds them of the truth he feels deep in his heart about God of whom he knows what they do not know. *"As the caravan set out their father said [to the people around him]: 'I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.' But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?"* (Verses 94-96)

It is a glittering picture of how God's truth fills the hearts of the chosen among God's servants. This picture generates impressions that suit the period of hardship suffered by the Muslim community in Makkah, but it also shows the fundamental truth of faith to everyone who advocates Islam at any future time.

Suitable Comments

The first comment the *sūrah* makes in its final passage that follows the long story shows the absurdity of the Quraysh's denial of the truth of revelation with a

statement based on the history related in this *sūrah.* It states that the Prophet was not present when the events of this history took place: *"That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes."* (Verse 102) This comment ties up with the introductory one at the beginning of the *sūrah: "In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3)

The introductory statement thus dovetails with the end one to form a picture of the truth. In this way it also counters the objections and denials raised.

This is followed with a comforting message to the Prophet so that he does not give those who deny his message undue importance. It shows how stubbornly they refuse to consider the signs that God has placed all around them in the universe. These signs are sufficient to alert human nature to the truth of faith and make it listen to the divine message and accept the evidence confirming it. They are threatened with God's punishment which could take them unawares: *"Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware."* (Verses 103-107) These verses deliver some fundamental truths about people who do not believe in the true divine faith. This is particularly noted in the statement: *"And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him."* (Verse 106) This is a true description of many people who have not formulated a true concept of God's oneness, allowing faith to be confused with unfaith.

At this point, the *sūrah,* with strong rhythm and decisive clarity, calls on the Prophet to define his way, showing it to be clearly distinguished from all others: *"Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.'"* (Verse 108)

The *sūrah* concludes with another telling comment, explaining the value of giving historical accounts in the Qur'ān for the Prophet and the small band of believers who follow him. The comment also provides solace and reassurance to the believers, together with a promise of better things to come. The unbelievers who persist with their unbelief are also given reminders and warnings. A further assurance is given to both believers and unbelievers of the truth of revelation to the Prophet who only tells the truth. It reasserts the truth of his message: *"Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people.*

Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelation, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe." (Verses 109-111)

Effective Harmony

It is useful at the end of this Prologue to the *sūrah* relating Joseph's story to highlight some aspects of the fine harmony that runs throughout the *sūrah,* citing some of its finer examples.

- This *sūrah* follows the same pattern of the Qur'ān when certain words and expressions are often repeated to contribute to the general atmosphere and character of the *sūrah.* For example, here knowledge is mentioned very frequently, while ignorance is mentioned on several occasions:

  Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 6)

  Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. (Verse 21)

  And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (Verse 22)

  His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verse 34)

  [Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come.' (Verse 37)

  They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the

real meaning of dreams. (Verse 44)

Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' (Verse 46)

The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' (Verse 50)

From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. (Verse 52)

Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' (Verse 55)

He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it. (Verse 68)

They said: 'By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' (Verse 73)

You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of (Verse 77)

When they despaired of [moving! him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name?' (Verse 80)

We testify only to that which we know. (Verse 81)

God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 83)

He said: It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know.' (Verse 86)

He said: 'Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?' (Verse 89)

> *He said: 'Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?'* (Verse 96)
>
> *My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements.* (Verse 101)

This is certainly a clear example of how harmony is maintained in this glorious book.

- The *sūrah* also explains some of the attributes of Godhead, notably judgement. This occurs once quoting Joseph in the sense of people being subject to God and willingly obeying Him. It occurs again quoting Jacob in the sense of people's involuntary submission to God's will. The two aspects thus are mutually complementary in defining the concept of judgement and Godhead. There is no chance that this could have been mere coincidence.

  Joseph first states within the context of refuting the claims of Egypt's rulers that they were deities, explaining that this runs against the concept of God's oneness: "*My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith.*" (Verses 39-40)

  Within the context of God's will and that it will always be done with no force able to stop it, Jacob says: "*My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.*" (Verse 67)

  The complementarity in the significance of judgement means that faith is not set on the right footing unless submission to God's will in matters of judgement is equated with submission to His will in matters of fate. Both are aspects of faith. Voluntary submission is as much part of faith as submission to what is determined by God's will, giving man no say in it.

- We see another fine example when Joseph, wise, sagacious and astute as he is, chooses the most suitable of God's attributes when he speaks of a situation that reflects God's gracious handling of all affairs: "*And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and*

bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.'" (Verse 100)

- As we mentioned earlier, harmony is shown in the complementarity of the story's introduction, the immediate comment after it has been told in full, and the final long comments that follow. All these confirm the same issues given at the beginning and at the end.

1
A Favourite Child Is Lost

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓرٰ ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿١﴾

Alif Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. (1)

إِنَّآ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ قُرْءَٰنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (2)

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ ٱلْقَصَصِ بِمَآ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ وَإِن كُنتَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦ لَمِنَ ٱلْغَٰفِلِينَ ﴿٣﴾

In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]. (3)

إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَٰٓأَبَتِ إِنِّى رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِى سَٰجِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.' (4)

قَالَ يَٰبُنَىَّ لَا تَقْصُصْ رُءْيَاكَ عَلَىٰٓ إِخْوَتِكَ فَيَكِيدُوا۟ لَكَ كَيْدًا ۖ إِنَّ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

'My son,' he replied, 'do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man's open enemy. (5)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ يَجۡتَبِيكَ رَبُّكَ وَيُعَلِّمُكَ مِن تَأۡوِيلِ ٱلۡأَحَادِيثِ وَيُتِمُّ نِعۡمَتَهُۥ عَلَيۡكَ وَعَلَىٰٓ ءَالِ يَعۡقُوبَ كَمَآ أَتَمَّهَا عَلَىٰٓ أَبَوَيۡكَ مِن قَبۡلُ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٞ ٦

Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.' (6)

۞ لَّقَدۡ كَانَ فِي يُوسُفَ وَإِخۡوَتِهِۦٓ ءَايَٰتٞ لِّلسَّآئِلِينَ ٧

Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. (7)

إِذۡ قَالُواْ لَيُوسُفُ وَأَخُوهُ أَحَبُّ إِلَىٰٓ أَبِينَا مِنَّا وَنَحۡنُ عُصۡبَةٌ إِنَّ أَبَانَا لَفِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٍ ٨

They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error. (8)

ٱقۡتُلُواْ يُوسُفَ أَوِ ٱطۡرَحُوهُ أَرۡضٗا يَخۡلُ لَكُمۡ وَجۡهُ أَبِيكُمۡ وَتَكُونُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ قَوۡمٗا صَٰلِحِينَ ٩

Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land, so that you have your father's attention turned to you alone. After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.' (9)

قَالَ قَآئِلٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ لَا تَقۡتُلُواْ يُوسُفَ وَأَلۡقُوهُ فِي غَيَٰبَتِ ٱلۡجُبِّ يَلۡتَقِطۡهُ بَعۡضُ ٱلسَّيَّارَةِ إِن كُنتُمۡ فَٰعِلِينَ ١٠

One of them said: 'Do not kill Joseph, but rather — if you must do something — cast him into the dark depths of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.' (10)

قَالُواْ يَـٰٓأَبَانَا مَا لَكَ لَا تَأۡمَنَّا عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ وَإِنَّا لَهُۥ لَنَٰصِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? (11)

أَرۡسِلۡهُ مَعَنَا غَدٗا يَرۡتَعۡ وَيَلۡعَبۡ وَإِنَّا لَهُۥ لَحَٰفِظُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.' (12)

قَالَ إِنِّي لَيَحۡزُنُنِيٓ أَن تَذۡهَبُواْ بِهِۦ وَأَخَافُ أَن يَأۡكُلَهُ ٱلذِّئۡبُ وَأَنتُمۡ عَنۡهُ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' (13)

قَالُواْ لَئِنۡ أَكَلَهُ ٱلذِّئۡبُ وَنَحۡنُ عُصۡبَةٌ إِنَّآ إِذٗا لَّخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' (14)

فَلَمَّا ذَهَبُواْ بِهِۦ وَأَجۡمَعُوٓاْ أَن يَجۡعَلُوهُ فِي غَيَٰبَتِ ٱلۡجُبِّۚ وَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡهِ لَتُنَبِّئَنَّهُم بِأَمۡرِهِمۡ هَٰذَا وَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depth of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' (15)

وَجَآءُوٓ أَبَاهُمۡ عِشَآءٗ يَبۡكُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

At nightfall they came to their father weeping, (16)

قَالُواْ يَـٰٓأَبَانَآ إِنَّا ذَهَبۡنَا نَسۡتَبِقُ وَتَرَكۡنَا يُوسُفَ عِندَ مَتَٰعِنَا فَأَكَلَهُ ٱلذِّئۡبُۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ بِمُؤۡمِنٖ لَّنَا وَلَوۡ كُنَّا صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' (17)

وَجَآءُو عَلَىٰ قَمِيصِهِۦ بِدَمٍ كَذِبٍ ۚ قَالَ
بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا ۖ فَصَبْرٌ
جَمِيلٌ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُسْتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا تَصِفُونَ
﴿١٨﴾

And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.' (18)

وَجَآءَتْ سَيَّارَةٌ فَأَرْسَلُوا۟ وَارِدَهُمْ فَأَدْلَىٰ
دَلْوَهُۥ ۖ قَالَ يَٰبُشْرَىٰ هَٰذَا غُلَٰمٌ ۚ وَأَسَرُّوهُ
بِضَٰعَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

And there came a caravan; and they sent their water-drawer, and he let down his bucket into the well — [and when he saw Joseph] he cried: 'What good luck. Here is a boy!' They concealed him with a view to selling him; but God had full knowledge of what they were doing. (19)

وَشَرَوْهُ بِثَمَنٍۭ بَخْسٍ دَرَٰهِمَ مَعْدُودَةٍ
وَكَانُوا۟ فِيهِ مِنَ ٱلزَّٰهِدِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins. Thus low did they value him. (20)

The Opening of an Excellent Narrative

This passage serves as an introduction to the *sūrah* and relates the first episode of the story, comprising six scenes. It begins with Joseph's dream and recounts the details of his brothers' conspiracy against him, until he arrives in Egypt.

> *Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].* (Verses 1-3)

This is yet another *sūrah* which begins with three separate letters, *'Alif Lām. Rā.'* These and similar letters of the alphabet, which are well known to people and always used by them, are the same that spell out the revealed verses the composition of which is well beyond human ability. They make up the book that shows the truth

clearly, i.e. the Qur'ān. God has revealed it in the Arabic tongue which uses these well-known letters, *'so that you may understand.'* (Verse 2) You will realize that the One who makes out of ordinary words a book of surpassing excellence like the Qur'ān. Hence, it stands to reason that the Qur'ān must be revelation. Human intellect is thus called upon to reflect on this fact and its inevitable implications.

Since a very large part of this *sūrah* is a story, the narrative aspect of this book has been singled out for special mention: '*In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives.*' (Verse 3) This narrative is part of the Qur'ān We have revealed to you, and it is an excellent story. What were you prior to receiving divine revelations? *'Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].'* (Verse 3) You were an unlettered person like the majority of your people who do not even reflect on such subjects as the Qur'ān discusses.

This is merely an introduction to the story. The curtains are then lifted to reveal the first scene of the first episode. We see Joseph, a young boy, relating his dream to his father: "*Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.' 'My son,' he replied, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man's open enemy. Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verses 4-6)

Joseph was a young boy, but the vision he related to his father was not of the type which boys and young people normally see in their dreams. The most that a boy like him would experience in a dream would be to see those stars and the sun and moon on his lap or close by, with him reaching out his hands to touch them. But Joseph saw them prostrating themselves to him, which means that they took the shape of intelligent creatures who bowed in respect to someone of superior status. The *sūrah* recounts very clearly what he said to his father: "*Joseph said to his father: Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon.*'" (Verse 4) Then the verb 'saw' is repeated again for greater effect: "*I saw them prostrate themselves before me.*" (Verse 4)

Endowed with wisdom and great insight, his father, Jacob, realizes that the dream is a pointer to something great that would happen to his young son. Neither he nor the *sūrah* spells it out at this stage. In fact its early indications begin to appear in the third episode, but it is not revealed completely until the end of the story when everything is made clear. He advises him not to relate his vision to his brothers, lest they should get an inkling of what it indicates for their young half brother. For that could open the way to Satan who would try to arouse their jealousy and instigate some evil scheming against him: "'*My son,' he replied, 'do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you.*'" (Verse 5) He then provides the grounds

for his fear: '*Satan is indeed man's open enemy.*' (Verse 5) He plays off one person against another, trying to make evil appear pleasant.

Jacob, Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson, feels that his young son will have some distinguished role to play, and he hopes that this will be in the realm of religion and divine guidance. He is right to do so as he himself is a prophet and he knows that his grandfather, Abraham, received God's blessings which were also bestowed on the believers in his household. He thus expects that Joseph may be the one whom God will choose from among his children to receive His blessings and continue the blessed chain among Abraham's descendants: *"Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 6)

It is only natural that Jacob should feel that Joseph's dream indicates that he may be God's choice to receive His perfect blessings, just as these were bestowed on his forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. What captures our attention here is his statement: *"And [He] will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements."* (Verse 6) The Arabic word, *ta'wīl,* rendered here as 'understanding' means literally 'knowledge of the outcome.' So, to what does the word 'statements' refer? Does Jacob mean that God will choose Joseph, teach and provide him with penetrating insight so that he knows the outcome of a statement or an event by knowing its beginning? For that is an inspiration God grants to those who have true knowledge. The comment at the end of this verse is most appropriate: "*Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 6) Or does Jacob merely refer here to dreams and visions, as actually happened to Joseph? Both are possible and both fit in well with the general atmosphere in the lives of Joseph and his father Jacob.

Interpretation of Dreams

Here we need to refer to dreams and visions which are part of the subject matter of this *sūrah.*

We must inevitably believe that some dreams prophesy something that will happen in the near or distant future. Two reasons may be identified here: the first is that Joseph's, his two fellow prisoners' and the King of Egypt's dreams all came true. Secondly, in our own lives we find that some dreams come true and this is frequent enough to make it impossible to deny the relationship.

So what is the nature of dreams then? The school of analytical psychology considers them as the subconscious expression of suppressed desires. This accounts for some dreams, but not all of them. Freud himself, despite his grossly unscientific and arbitrary approach, acknowledges that there are prophetic dreams. So what is

the nature of this type of dream?

First of all we have to say that whether we know their nature or not does not affect the fact that there are such dreams and that some of them are true. We are here only trying to understand certain aspects of man's nature, and some of the laws God has set in operation in the universe.

Our concept of these dreams is as follows: time and place constitute barriers which prevent man from seeing what we call the past, the future or the whole of the present. The past and future are screened by a time factor, while the present that is not in our immediate vicinity is screened by a place factor. A sense which we do not know about in man's make-up may at times become alert or may at times have extra strength and go beyond the time factor to see vaguely what lies beyond it. This is not true knowledge, but rather a form of discerning, similar to what happens to some people while awake and to others while asleep, when they are able to go beyond the barriers of either time or place, or indeed both. We do not in fact know anything about the true nature of time, nor is the nature of place or matter known to us fully: *"You have been given but scanty knowledge."* (17: 85) Anyway, Joseph has seen his dream, and we will consider its interpretation later.

The First Thread in a Sinister Plot

Next, we find ourselves looking at Joseph's brothers discussing some sort of plot. This begins with a clear indication that what follows is particularly important.

"Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire." (Verse 7) Anyone who looks for signs, indications and clues will find plenty in the story of Joseph and his brothers. This opening is sufficient to alert our attention and interest. Hence, it is similar to the raising of the curtains to allow events to take place.

Did Joseph tell his dream to his brothers as mentioned in the Old Testament? The sequence of the narrative here implies that he did not. They speak of their father's favouritism of Joseph and his full brother. Had they known of his dream, they would have mentioned it, because it would have been an added reason for their grudge against him. What Jacob feared would happen, should Joseph relate his dream to his brothers, did eventually happen but for different reasons, namely because of Joseph being his favourite. It had to happen anyway, because it was simply an episode in the great line of events which led Joseph to his appointed destination. All his life circumstances, his family position, and the fact that he was born to an elderly father led to his position of special favour. The youngest children, as Joseph and his brother were, are normally the dearest, particularly when the father is elderly.

"They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than

we, even though we are many.'" (Verse 8) As a group we are able to protect our family and ensure its position. *"Surely our father is in manifest error."* (Verse 8) He bestows his greatest love and favours on two young children, ignoring what we accomplish.

Their rage at this situation soon reaches its flash point, and they are no longer able to evaluate matters properly. Unimportant factors are seen by them to be of great significance, while important ones are given little attention. Sons of a prophet as they are — although they themselves are not prophets — they think lightly of murder, even when the victim is their own little, defenceless brother. That their father appears to love him more than he loves them is blown out of all proportion so that it seems equal to murder, the greatest crime on earth after that of associating partners with God. *"Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land."* (Verse 9) The two alternatives are not dissimilar in their effect. To cast a little child off in a faraway land where he has no one to look after him will most probably lead to his death. And why do they want to do this? *"So that you have your father's attention turned to you alone."* (Verse 9) Joseph would no longer be his preoccupation. It is as if they feel that when their father no longer sees Joseph his mind and heart will be free and his love and attention will be turned to them. But what about the crime itself? It is only an offence and repentance is sure to erase it. They would then be able to wipe away its consequences. *"After that you will [repent and] be righteous people."* (Verse 9)

Thus Satan weaves his schemes, making people accept what is unacceptable, when they have lost control and no longer see matters in the proper perspective. When their jealousy reaches boiling point, Satan puts forward his suggestion: *"Kill."* He wraps his wicked suggestion around an appealing prospect, that repentance will mend the offence. But repentance is not like that. Repentance is remorse and regret for an error which someone commits blindly, when he does not remember God and the consequences of his offence. Repentance is never of the ready rehearsed type prepared before the crime to reduce the sense of guilt. This does not constitute repentance. It is part of the justification of the crime, to make it appear less heinous.

One of the brothers, however, felt a shudder at the atrocity they were contemplating. He put forward a suggestion which would rid them of Joseph without killing him or abandoning him in the middle of nowhere. Thus they would have all their father's attention. He proposed that they should cast him into a well on the caravan route. It was very likely that a caravan would find him and take him to a faraway land. *"One of them said: Do not kill Joseph, but rather — if you must do something — cast him into the dark depths of this well. Some caravan may pick him up."* (Verse 10) The phrase, '*if you must do something,*' gives the impression of doubt, as if he is raising doubt in their minds about harming Joseph. This expression of reservation aims to weaken the resolve of the other party. But Joseph's brothers bore a deep grudge and they had to do something about their situation. They had no intention of going back

on what they had decided. This is clearly apparent in the next scene.

Deceiving an Elderly Father

Now we see them with their father trying to persuade him to let them take Joseph with them the following day. They are intent on deceiving their father and carrying out their wicked scheme against Joseph. *"[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers. Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.' He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost."* (Verses 11-14) Here we see through fine words and expressions how much effort they exerted in trying to win over their father's heart.

As they begin, they address him by virtue of their relationship, *"Father!"* Then they follow this with a question that suggests tacit remonstration: *"Why do you not trust us with Joseph?"* (Verse 11) This invites Jacob's denial, so that he admits what is opposite and allows Joseph to go with them. Jacob had thus far prevented Joseph from going with his brothers to the pasture land and open areas they frequented because he loved him so dearly and feared that at his young age he might not withstand the tiring journey and the hard weather. It was not because he suspected any foul play. Hence, by suggesting that their father did not trust them, the brothers sought his denial of the same. In this way, his resolve to keep Joseph at home was weakened. It was a foul trick with a foul aim in mind.

"Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers?" (Verse 11) They are emphasizing here that their hearts are full of good intentions towards their brother. However, a schemer often betrays himself. The stress they placed on wishing their brother well almost betrayed the ill feelings they harboured against him. *"Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him."* (Verse 12) Once again they emphasized their awareness of their responsibility to guard and protect Joseph. They also painted a pleasant picture of what awaited Joseph of play and pleasure to persuade their father to send him with them.

In reply to their remonstrations, Jacob indirectly denied that he did not trust them with their brother. He justified keeping Joseph with him by saying that he would miss him even if he were absent for a day or so, and he would worry about Joseph being attacked by wolves: *"He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.'"* (Verse 13) In effect, he said he always wanted Joseph beside him. This must have intensified the

brothers' grudge even further. How could it be that their father missed him even when he went out to play for a few hours! -

"I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him." (Verse 13) They must have found in his words the excuse they were looking for, for they immediately reassure Jacob that they will take good care of Joseph. *"They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.'"* (Verse 14) If a wolf should beat us when we are so many and so strong, then we are good for nothing. We lose everything.

Thus the protective father gives way to the strong persuasion and impassioned assurances of his sons. It was against his better judgement that he should let them take Joseph, but he was clearly embarrassed. Thus, God's will came to pass and the events of the story unfolded.

Fast-Changing Fortunes

Then we see them on their way, Joseph with them, and they intent on putting their wicked plot into effect. God Almighty inspires the young boy, reassuring him that it is only a trial that is certain to come to an end. He will survive and he will remind his brothers of their plot against him on a day when they will not know him to be Joseph. *"And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depths of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.'"* (Verse 15)

Their resolve, then, was to cast him into the dark depths of a well to remove him altogether from their family life. At this point when Joseph fears for his life, when there's no one to help him and ten adult and powerful brothers against him, a mere young child, reassurance comes to him through inspiration that he will be saved and will live until such a time as he reminds them of their crime. At that point in the future, they will not know that he is their brother whom they had thrown into the well.

We leave Joseph now to face his ordeal, undoubtedly reassured by God's inspiration, to look at his brothers facing their saddened father after committing their crime: *"At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.'"* (Verses 16-18)

Their blindness meant their plot was imperfect. Had they taken a calmer approach, they would not have harmed Joseph the first time their father permitted

them to take him with them. But they were impatient, fearing that they might not have another chance. We also see an aspect of their impatience in their choice of excuse, accusing the wolf. Their father warned them against this possibility only the night before, and they made the whole episode sound outrageous. It was just not plausible that they abandoned Joseph to the risk their father specifically warned them against. The same impatience is seen in the way they stained Joseph's shirt with blood, without bothering to make it look real. The action was hasty, betraying their lies, so much so that the blood itself is described as lies, or false.

They did all this and then *"At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him."* (Verses 16-17) As they said this, they seemed to realize it was all too thin. A liar often betrays himself. Hence they followed their false statement with this remark: *"But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth."* (Verse 17) You have your doubts and you do not trust us, so you will not believe us even when we say the truth.

With such strong indications, an with something in his heart telling him otherwise, Jacob felt that Joseph had not been eaten by a wolf, and that his brothers had ditched him somewhere. He realized that their story was concocted and what they described was plainly false. He faced them with this, saying that their minds had made something ghastly appear acceptable to them and urged them to commit it. He declared that he would be patient under this adversity. He would neither panic nor complain. He would seek only God's support against their fabricated lies: *"He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.'"* (Verse 18)

Now we quickly return to Joseph in the well to see the last scene of this first episode: *"And there came a caravan; and they sent their water- drawer, and he let down his bucket into the well — [and when he saw Joseph] he cried: 'What good luck. Here is a boy!' They concealed him with a view to selling him; but God had full knowledge of what they were doing. And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins. Thus low did they value him."* (Verses 19-20)

The well was by the side of the caravan route, and caravans always take water wherever they can find it, whether in wells or in pits where rain water gathers.

"There came a caravan." The term used here to refer to the caravan is *sayyārah,* which derives from long travel. *"They sent their water- drawer,"* i.e. the person assigned the task of finding water for the caravan because he is experienced in such a vital matter. He does the normal thing, letting down his bucket into the well, to make sure that it is not dry, or to fill the bucket. The *sūrah* does not mention any details of Joseph's reaction when he saw the bucket being lowered and his quick movement to attach himself to it, so as to keep it a surprise to reader and listener alike.

When the water-drawer sees Joseph, he lets out a cry: *"What good luck. Here is a boy!"* Once again, all that follows is deleted: what was said, what action was taken, and how pleased Joseph was when he was pulled out of the well. Instead, the *sūrah* speaks immediately of his situation with the caravan: *"They concealed him with a view to selling him."* (Verse 19) This means that they considered him secret merchandise and thereby something they could sell.

They realized that he was not a slave, which accounts for why they hid him. Then, they sold him on the cheap: *"And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins."* (Verse 20) That was their currency at the time. People only counted coins however when the price was low, and weighed them when the price was high. Here the *sūrah* speaks of counting the coins to indicate how cheaply they sold him.

"Thus low did they value him." (Verse 20) They wanted rid of him quickly so that they did not have to account for enslaving and selling a free child.

Thus the first trial in the life of this noble prophet is over.

2
Facing Up to Trial

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِى ٱشْتَرَىٰهُ مِن مِّصْرَ لِٱمْرَأَتِهِۦٓ أَكْرِمِى مَثْوَىٰهُ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَنفَعَنَآ أَوْ نَتَّخِذَهُۥ وَلَدًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَكَّنَّا لِيُوسُفَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلِنُعَلِّمَهُۥ مِن تَأْوِيلِ ٱلْأَحَادِيثِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَالِبٌ عَلَىٰٓ أَمْرِهِۦ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. (21)

وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥٓ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (22)

وَرَٰوَدَتْهُ ٱلَّتِى هُوَ فِى بَيْتِهَا عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ وَغَلَّقَتِ ٱلْأَبْوَٰبَ وَقَالَتْ هَيْتَ لَكَ ۚ قَالَ مَعَاذَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ رَبِّىٓ أَحْسَنَ مَثْوَاىَ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفْلِحُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' (23)

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِۦ ۖ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَآ أَن رَّءَا
بُرْهَٰنَ رَبِّهِۦ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ
ٱلسُّوٓءَ وَٱلْفَحْشَآءَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا
ٱلْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. (24)

وَٱسْتَبَقَا ٱلْبَابَ وَقَدَّتْ قَمِيصَهُۥ مِن دُبُرٍ
وَأَلْفَيَا سَيِّدَهَا لَدَا ٱلْبَابِ ۚ قَالَتْ مَا جَزَآءُ
مَنْ أَرَادَ بِأَهْلِكَ سُوٓءًا إِلَّآ أَن يُسْجَنَ أَوْ
عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment.' (25)

قَالَ هِىَ رَٰوَدَتْنِى عَن نَّفْسِى ۚ وَشَهِدَ
شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَآ إِن كَانَ قَمِيصُهُۥ قُدَّ
مِن قُبُلٍ فَصَدَقَتْ وَهُوَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

[Joseph] said: 'It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own household testified: 'If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. (26)

وَإِن كَانَ قَمِيصُهُۥ قُدَّ مِن دُبُرٍ فَكَذَبَتْ
وَهُوَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' (27)

فَلَمَّا رَءَا قَمِيصَهُۥ قُدَّ مِن دُبُرٍ قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ
مِن كَيْدِكُنَّ ۖ إِنَّ كَيْدَكُنَّ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' (28)

يُوسُفُ أَعْرِضْ عَنْ هَٰذَا ۚ وَٱسْتَغْفِرِى
لِذَنۢبِكِ ۖ إِنَّكِ كُنتِ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

'Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.' (29)

۞ وَقَالَ نِسۡوَةٞ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ ٱمۡرَأَتُ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ تُرَٰوِدُ فَتَىٰهَا عَن نَّفۡسِهِۦۖ قَدۡ شَغَفَهَا حُبًّاۖ إِنَّا لَنَرَىٰهَا فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ٣٠

In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.' (30)

فَلَمَّا سَمِعَتۡ بِمَكۡرِهِنَّ أَرۡسَلَتۡ إِلَيۡهِنَّ وَأَعۡتَدَتۡ لَهُنَّ مُتَّكَـٔٗا وَءَاتَتۡ كُلَّ وَٰحِدَةٖ مِّنۡهُنَّ سِكِّينٗا وَقَالَتِ ٱخۡرُجۡ عَلَيۡهِنَّۖ فَلَمَّا رَأَيۡنَهُۥٓ أَكۡبَرۡنَهُۥ وَقَطَّعۡنَ أَيۡدِيَهُنَّ وَقُلۡنَ حَٰشَ لِلَّهِ مَا هَٰذَا بَشَرًا إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا مَلَكٞ كَرِيمٞ ٣١

When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said [to Joseph]: 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' (31)

قَالَتۡ فَذَٰلِكُنَّ ٱلَّذِي لُمۡتُنَّنِي فِيهِۖ وَلَقَدۡ رَٰوَدتُّهُۥ عَن نَّفۡسِهِۦ فَٱسۡتَعۡصَمَۖ وَلَئِن لَّمۡ يَفۡعَلۡ مَآ ءَامُرُهُۥ لَيُسۡجَنَنَّ وَلَيَكُونٗا مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰغِرِينَ ٣٢

Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.' (32)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱلسِّجۡنُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدۡعُونَنِيٓ إِلَيۡهِۖ وَإِلَّا تَصۡرِفۡ عَنِّي كَيۡدَهُنَّ أَصۡبُ إِلَيۡهِنَّ وَأَكُن مِّنَ ٱلۡجَٰهِلِينَ ٣٣

[Joseph] said: 'My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.' (33)

فَٱسۡتَجَابَ لَهُۥ رَبُّهُۥ فَصَرَفَ عَنۡهُ كَيۡدَهُنَّۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٣٤

His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (34)

Overview

This passage relates the second episode of Joseph's story, after he had reached

Egypt where he was sold as a slave. However, the man who bought him felt that the boy was a good person. Such feelings may be sensed from a person's looks, particularly if they are coupled with good manners. Hence the man recommends his wife to take good care of the boy. Here begins the first thread in how his dream comes true.

But another trial of a totally different type was awaiting Joseph when he reached his prime. Prior to this, he would have been given wisdom and knowledge which would help him confront the forthcoming trial, one which only those on whom God bestows His grace can stand up to and resist. It was a trial of seduction in palaces where the aristocratic environment is often characterized by loose morality. Joseph emerged unscathed from it in his moral and religious values.

Settling in Egypt

> *The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son. Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it.* (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* does not as yet reveal the identity of the person who bought him. After a long time we learn that he is a person in a very high position, perhaps Egypt's chief minister. But for now we only know that Joseph has reached a safe place, and that his first trial is over, and that bright prospects await him.

"*Be kind to him.*" (Verse 21) This is how most translators of the Qur'ān render the first statement said by the man who bought Joseph. Literally the man says: "Be generous in his place of abode." Although this is meant to be an instruction to treat him kindly, the expression signifies greater kindness to be contrasted with his stay in the well and all the fears that were associated with that experience.

But the man goes further and tells his wife of what he hopes for the boy's future: "*He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.*" (Verse 21) Perhaps they did not have any children, as some reports suggest. Hence, the man started thinking that should the boy prove himself to be up to his master's expectations, with regard to intelligence, character and good looks, he might adopt him as his own.

At this point in the narrative, the *sūrah* pauses a little to state that all this was God's arrangement. It was through His design that Joseph was established in the land. This began with him occupying a firm position in the man's heart and in his home. The *sūrah* then says that Joseph would continue along the same road, and that

God would give him the faculty to interpret statements properly and accurately. It comments on the early steps in consolidating Joseph's position by saying that God's will shall always be done. Nothing can impede or stop it. He is in full control of everything in the universe. *"Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose."* (Verse 21)

Here we see Joseph caught between what his brothers wanted to do to him and what God wanted for him. Since God prevails in whatever His purpose may be, His will was done. Joseph's brothers could not achieve their purpose: *"God always prevails in whatever be His purpose, though most people may not know it."* (Verse 21) Most people do not know that God's law always operates, and that His will is always done.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that what God willed for Joseph came to pass. This is a reference to what the *sūrah* stated: *"We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements."* (Verse 21) Furthermore, when Joseph attained adulthood, more was given to him: *"And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 22) He was given a good sense to judge matters well, and also knowledge of the meaning of statements or the interpretation of dreams, or what is more general, such as knowledge of life and its different circumstances. The statement here is very general, admitting broad interpretation. That was Joseph's reward for having done well in both belief and behaviour: *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 22)

A Trial of Temptation

At this point Joseph experiences the second trial in his life. It is much more severe and profound than the first one. It comes when he has been given wisdom and knowledge as a gesture of God's grace. Hence, he faces it squarely, and he is saved from it as a reward for doing good. This trial takes the form of temptation, and the *sūrah* paints a very charged picture of the whole encounter, when Joseph was vulnerable to great risks.

> *She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment.' [Joseph] said: It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own*

> *household testified: 'If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'* (Verses 23-29)

The *sūrah* does not mention the ages of Joseph and the woman at the time. So let us consider the matter and estimate their respective ages.

Joseph was in early adolescence at the time the caravan picked him up and sold him in Egypt. He must have been around 14, or maybe less, but certainly no more than that. He was at an age when the Arabic term, *ghulām,* may be applied to him. After that he would be described as a youth, then as a man. At that time, the woman was already married, and apparently neither she nor her husband had had any children. This is implied by her husband's words, *"We may adopt him as a son"*. (Verse 21) The thought of adoption does not normally occur unless the one who entertains it is childless, and has practically given up hope of having a child. This means that she must have been married for quite a long time, which was sufficient for them to realize that they would not have a child. Moreover, the man who was Egypt's chief minister must have been at least 40 years of age, and she, his wife, around 30.

Furthermore, we expect that at the time of this event, she must have been at least 40, and Joseph probably 25 or near to that. We imagine that this was her age because her behaviour during the event and subsequently shows that she was a woman of intelligence, self-possessed but bold, scheming and infatuated at the same time. Further evidence to support this is found in the words of those women who talked about her, saying: "The *Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad."* (Verse 30) Although the Arabic word, *fatā,* rendered here as *'slave lad'* stresses the sense of his slavery, it would not have been said unless Joseph's age supported it. This is more likely, weighing up all the evidence in the text.

We have discussed all this in order to arrive at the conclusion that Joseph's trial was not merely about resisting temptation. His real trial was that he spent all his adolescent years in this palace, with this woman who was between 30 and 40 years of age, with all that goes on in palaces and in an environment which may be best described by the husband's attitude when he saw his wife with Joseph. All that he had to say was: *"Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault."* (Verse 29)

It is a social environment in which women speak ill of the chief minister's wife, and her reply is to invite them to a sumptuous banquet during which she orders Joseph to walk in front of them. They, in turn, are all infatuated with him, and make

their feelings public. She then admits to what she had done: *"Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated."* (Verse 32)

A social environment which allows these attitudes is a special one. It is that of affluent aristocracy. Joseph was a slave lad who spent his adolescent years in such an environment. That is indeed the long trial which he endured. He resisted its influences, temptations, frivolity and wicked designs. His age and that of the woman under whose roof he had lived for such a long period are significant in estimating the pressure he was under, the gravity of his trial and his long resistance. As for this particular incident, it would not have been particularly difficult for Joseph to resist, had it come suddenly, without long preparation. It would have been made easier by the fact that he was the target of temptation, not the seeker. For a man may find a woman who throws herself at him not very appealing.

Let us now examine the text as it describes the situation: *"She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.'"* (Verse 23) This time it was a bold attempt at seduction, with an open invitation to go the full course. The bolting of the doors only comes at the last moment. The woman was already at the point when desire is at its strongest. Hence, she calls out to him, 'Come'. This bold, crude invitation is never the first one made by a woman. Indeed, it is of the ultimate type which may never be used unless the woman is forced to resort to it. The young man was living in her house and his growth, strength and development were all there for her to see, just as her own femininity was at its optimum. There must, therefore, have been earlier attempts at gentle persuasion before she resorted to this crude and sudden invitation.

"He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.'" (Verse 23) First he appeals to God to protect him against doing such a grave and sinful act: *"God protect me'* (Verse 23) He then refers to God's grace when He saved him from the well and placed him in a home where he was secure and treated kindly: *"Goodly has my master made my stay here."* (Verse 23) *He* then expounds a clear principle: *"Those who do wrong come to no good."* (Verse 23) The 'wrong' intended here is the one which she wants him to do, but it represents a trespass over what God has forbidden.

The *sūrah* makes it absolutely clear that Joseph's reply to the open attempt at seduction was a straightforward refusal, coupled with remembrance of the grace God had bestowed on him, as well as remembrance of the limits which no one should violate. There was no initial compliance when she invited him openly after bolting the doors and speaking in crude terms of what she wanted him to do. This last point is given in the *sūrah* in a much milder form which hints at what actually took place. This is what we understand from the unusual Arabic expression which

we have rendered here as, *'Come'.*

False Accusation and Irrefutable Testimony

"She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord." (Verse 24) All commentators on the Qur'ān, past and present alike, have focused their attention on this last incident. Those who have taken their information from Jewish sources mention numerous legendary reports describing Joseph as one driven by insatiable desire, and God unable to restrain him despite all His evidence. He is said to have seen his father's image on the ceiling, biting his finger. Another such report suggests that he saw several plates of calligraphy, with verses of the Qur'ān, [Yes, the Qur'ān!] denouncing such action, but he continues as though he saw nothing. Then God sent the angel Gabriel, telling him to save Joseph. The angel hit him in the chest. There are many such reports, but they are all clearly groundless and manifestly fabricated.

Most commentators on the Qur'ān say that her desire was physical, whilst his was mental. Then he saw the evidence from his Lord, and he was able to resist temptation.

The late scholar, Rashīd Riđā', rejects this view altogether. He says that she desired to hit him because of his dignified resistance when she was the mistress to be obeyed. On the other hand, he desired to repel her, but he preferred to try to escape. However, she caught up with him and tore his shirt from behind. To interpret the verse as her desire to hit him and his desire to repel the aggression however is merely an attempt to draw Joseph away from responding to temptation at that particular moment. This is an arbitrary interpretation which lacks proper support.

Looking at the text here, and reviewing Joseph's situation, given that he had lived for quite some time in the palace, I feel that the Qur'ānic statement, *"She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord,"* represents the culmination of a long line of temptation on the one hand, and initial resistance on the other. This is a true description of a goodly human soul, resisting temptation, then weakening a little, then turning to God for support and escaping unscathed. The *sūrah* does not dwell for long on these conflicting emotions, because the Qur'ān does not aim to paint that moment into a panoramic scene that is far larger than what is appropriate to the story, or to human life in general. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions Joseph's resistance at the outset and at the end, with a moment of weakness in between. This then gives us a credible and practical picture.

This interpretation of the text is closer to human nature and to the protection God grants prophets. Joseph was only a human being. It is true that he was chosen by God. That is indeed the reason why his weakness was limited to feelings only, and

lasted just for a brief moment. When he saw a sign from his Lord shining in his heart and conscience, he resumed his resistance to all temptation.

"Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants." (Verse 24) When he came to himself, he wanted to rush away while she went after him, excited, out of control: *"And they both rushed to the door."* (Verse 25) As she tried to pull him away from the door, *"she tore his shirt from behind."* (Verse 25) At this moment, a totally unexpected surprise awaited them: *"And at the door they met her husband."* (Verse 25) The mature woman who is in control of the situation emerges here. An answer to the question raised by the husband to the very suspicious scene is readily given. An unhesitating accusation of Joseph being the offender is immediately stated. However, she still loves him and does not want him to collect a very severe punishment, so she suggests a safe one:: *"She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who has evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment?'"* (Verse 25) But Joseph would not accept this false accusation, so he speaks out in reply: *"It was she who sought to seduce me."* (Verse 26)

The *sūrah* states here that someone from her household came forward as a witness to put an end to the dispute. *"One of her own household testified: If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.'"* (Verses 26-27) Where and when did this witness give his testimony? Did he arrive with the husband and witness the event? Or was he called in by her husband for consultation as people sometimes call in a respectable person of the wife's family? This may fit well with the practices of the aristocracy which is often devoid of moral values.

Both alternatives are possible. Neither affects the outcome. His view is described as a testimony because it provides a way for establishing the truth, considering that the woman's word is set against Joseph's. Joseph's shirt was to be examined: if it was torn from the front, then she must have torn it as she 'tried to repel his assault'. On the other hand, if his shirt was torn from behind, then he was trying to move away from her as she chased him towards the door. In this case, she would be the one who was lying while he stated the truth. The first possibility is stated first because it would mean that she was right. After all, she was the mistress and he was the slave. It was only proper that this possibility be given prominence.

"When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind," he realized, both logically and practically, that it was the woman who tried to seduce the man, and then made her accusations against him. Here we see a picture of the high class in ignorant, or *jāhiliyyah* society. Although this picture was drawn several thousand years ago, it is still applicable today. There is clear complacency when faced with sex scandals, followed by attempts to suppress them. Such suppression is the overriding

concern. Hence, the woman's husband merely says to her: "*This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' 'Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'*" (Verses 28-29)

That is all he said: it is a matter of awesome feminine guile. It is an altogether too diplomatic approach to something that would make one's blood boil. The aristocratic lady is addressed in a very gentle way, with the question of seduction attributed to the female sex in general, with an overtone even of approval. No woman is offended when she is told, in comment on her action, that women's guile is awesome! Instead, she takes this as recognition of her full female status, able to match others with her guile.

As for Joseph, whose innocence is thus established, he is told to let the matter drop. He should not give it too much attention, and should not talk about it to others. This is the main point, so that appearances are maintained.

On the other hand, the woman who tried to seduce her slave and whose guilt is established through his torn shirt receives some admonition: "*Seek forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.*" (Verse 29)

The same sort of low morality is found in aristocratic classes and those close to government in all *jāhiliyyah* societies, with little difference in substance.

Thus the curtains are drawn and the whole incident is brought to a close. All this without using the sort of language usually associated with pornographic descriptions.

A Scandal Must be Hushed

The husband did not take any action to separate his wife and his slave. He simply let matters go on as previously, because this is how palaces deal with such affairs. But palaces are walls with ears, and gossip is always rife. For such scandals always provide interesting conversations: "*In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.'*" (Verse 30)

This is the sort of thing women say about such matters in all *jāhiliyyah* societies. For the first time we learn who the woman is, and we learn that the man who bought Joseph was Egypt's Chief Minister. This is announced as the scandal becomes public, with her position graphically described: "*The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him.*" (Verse 30) Hers is a consuming love that takes complete hold. Hence the comment: "*We see that she is clearly going astray.*" (Verse 30) She is supposed to be the role model as she is married to a leading personality in government. Yet she is infatuated with the young man her husband

had bought. Or perhaps they were merely commenting on the fact that she had become the centre of a scandal. It is not the offence itself that is reproachable, but of being found out doing it. If it remains concealed, no blame is attached.

Again we see something that happens only amongst the higher classes. We are shown a scene of that bold woman's further engineering: *"When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said (to Joseph]: 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been blaming me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.'* (Verses 31-32)

She arranged for a banquet in her own palace, which suggests that the women so invited also belonged to the same milieu. It is women in such a class that are invited to a palace banquet. They are the ones who love such gentle appearances. It seems that as they ate, they reclined on cushions and couches, as was the custom in eastern countries. Hence, she prepared this repast, and gave a knife to each one of her guests. This also suggests that material civilization had attained a high standard in Egypt at the time. Luxurious life was at a high standard. The use of knives with a meal several thousand years ago is indicative of the level of luxury that obtained. But as they were engaged with cutting meat or peeling fruit, the hostess surprised her guests with Joseph's appearance. She instructed him to: *"Come out and present yourself to them."* (Verse 31) So what was their reaction? *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him."* They were taken by surprise. *"They cut their hands."* (Verse 31) In their surprise, they cut their hands. They uttered a word that is normally used to express amazement at God's wonderful creation. *"God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel."* (Verse 31) These words also indicate that there were traces of the divine faith, based on God's oneness, in their community.

At this point she felt that she had scored her point and gained a victory over the women of her class. They could not stop their surprised admiration of Joseph. Victorious as she felt, she saw no need for modesty in front of these other women. Indeed she could boast that he was under her command. If he resisted her at one point, he could not do so forever. Hence, her statement: *"This is he on whose account you have been blaming me."* (Verse 32) You can see how handsome and manly he is, so much so that you cannot help admiring him: *"Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity."* (Verse 32)

She goes on to press the point that she was his mistress and that he would have to do as he was told. In that society, a woman in her position could afford to be boastful and arrogant. She could declare publicly in front of other women the sexual urge she

felt: "*Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.*" (Verse 32)

What a mixture of temptation, persistence and threat. And this is coupled with a new phase of temptation hidden under a mask of warning.

What could Joseph do when he heard this said openly in a social gathering of women who were undoubtedly revealing their beauty and expressing their admiration of him. What was his attitude on hearing his mistress openly declare her intention to carry on attempting to seduce him? He simply turns to his Lord with this appeal: "*My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do.*" (Verse 33)

We note here that Joseph did not say, 'what *she is* inviting me to do'. They were all part of the seduction attempt, either by word, look or movement. He felt that the only way for him to evade their tricks was to appeal to his Lord. That would be the only way he would not yield to their temptation. Hence, he declares: "*Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.*" (Verse 33) This is a declaration by one who knows his own human weakness. He prays for more of God's care and protection, because that is the best way to resist all temptation.

"*His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 34) This might have taken the form of making them despair of him ever yielding to their approaches and persuasion, or might have been in the shape of stronger resistance to their temptation.

"*It is He alone who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 33) He hears their scheming, and Joseph's prayers. He knows the intention behind the scheming and the purpose of the prayer.

Thus Joseph was able to stand firm through this second trial. He had to rely on God's grace and good care to do so, and through this managed to avoid falling into sin. With this, the second episode in Joseph's story is over.

3
From Prison to Palace

ثُمَّ بَدَا لَهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا رَأَوُاْ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِ لَيَسۡجُنُنَّهُۥ حَتَّىٰ حِينٖ ٣٥

Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time. (35)

وَدَخَلَ مَعَهُ ٱلسِّجۡنَ فَتَيَانِۖ قَالَ أَحَدُهُمَآ إِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰنِيٓ أَعۡصِرُ خَمۡرٗاۖ وَقَالَ ٱلۡأٓخَرُ إِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰنِيٓ أَحۡمِلُ فَوۡقَ رَأۡسِي خُبۡزٗا تَأۡكُلُ ٱلطَّيۡرُ مِنۡهُۖ نَبِّئۡنَا بِتَأۡوِيلِهِۦٓۖ إِنَّا نَرَىٰكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ٣٦

Two young men went to prison with him. One of them said: 'I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.' (36)

قَالَ لَا يَأۡتِيكُمَا طَعَامٞ تُرۡزَقَانِهِۦٓ إِلَّا نَبَّأۡتُكُمَا بِتَأۡوِيلِهِۦ قَبۡلَ أَن يَأۡتِيَكُمَاۚ ذَٰلِكُمَا مِمَّا عَلَّمَنِي رَبِّيٓۚ إِنِّي تَرَكۡتُ مِلَّةَ قَوۡمٖ لَّا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَهُم بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ كَٰفِرُونَ ٣٧

[Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who

deny the truth of the life to come. (37)

وَٱتَّبَعْتُ مِلَّةَ ءَابَآءِىٓ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسْحَٰقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۚ مَا كَانَ لَنَآ أَن نُّشْرِكَ بِٱللَّهِ مِن شَىْءٍ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْنَا وَعَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. (38)

يَٰصَٰحِبَىِ ٱلسِّجْنِ ءَأَرْبَابٌ مُّتَفَرِّقُونَ خَيْرٌ أَمِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْوَٰحِدُ ٱلْقَهَّارُ ﴿٣٩﴾

My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? (39)

مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَسْمَآءً سَمَّيْتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمْ وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلْطَٰنٍ ۚ إِنِ ٱلْحُكْمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ ۚ أَمَرَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِيَّاهُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلدِّينُ ٱلْقَيِّمُ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it. (40)

يَٰصَٰحِبَىِ ٱلسِّجْنِ أَمَّآ أَحَدُكُمَا فَيَسْقِى رَبَّهُۥ خَمْرًا ۖ وَأَمَّا ٱلْءَاخَرُ فَيُصْلَبُ فَتَأْكُلُ ٱلطَّيْرُ مِن رَّأْسِهِۦ ۚ قُضِىَ ٱلْأَمْرُ ٱلَّذِى فِيهِ تَسْتَفْتِيَانِ ﴿٤١﴾

My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter on which you have

sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.' (41)

وَقَالَ لِلَّذِى ظَنَّ أَنَّهُۥ نَاجٍ مِّنْهُمَا ٱذْكُرْنِى عِندَ رَبِّكَ فَأَنسَىٰهُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ذِكْرَ رَبِّهِۦ فَلَبِثَ فِى ٱلسِّجْنِ بِضْعَ سِنِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

And [Joseph] said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.' But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years. (42)

وَقَالَ ٱلْمَلِكُ إِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰ سَبْعَ بَقَرَٰتٍ سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعَ سُنۢبُلَٰتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَٰتٍ ۖ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْمَلَأُ أَفْتُونِى فِى رُءْيَىَ إِن كُنتُمْ لِلرُّءْيَا تَعْبُرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

And the King said: 'I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' (43)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَضْغَٰثُ أَحْلَٰمٍ ۖ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَأْوِيلِ ٱلْأَحْلَٰمِ بِعَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.' (44)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِى نَجَا مِنْهُمَا وَٱدَّكَرَ بَعْدَ أُمَّةٍ أَنَا۠ أُنَبِّئُكُم بِتَأْوِيلِهِۦ فَأَرْسِلُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: 'I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.' (45)

يُوسُفُ أَيُّهَا ٱلصِّدِّيقُ أَفْتِنَا فِى سَبْعِ بَقَرَٰتٍ سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعِ سُنۢبُلَٰتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَٰتٍ لَّعَلِّىٓ أَرْجِعُ

'Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated

إِلَى ٱلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' (46)

قَالَ تَزۡرَعُونَ سَبۡعَ سِنِينَ دَأَبٗا فَمَا حَصَدتُّمۡ فَذَرُوهُ فِي سُنۢبُلِهِۦٓ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا مِّمَّا تَأۡكُلُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years, but let the grain you harvest remain in its ear, except for the little which you may eat. (47)

ثُمَّ يَأۡتِي مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَ سَبۡعٞ شِدَادٞ يَأۡكُلۡنَ مَا قَدَّمۡتُمۡ لَهُنَّ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا مِّمَّا تُحۡصِنُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Then after that there will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have laid up for them, except a little of what you have kept in store. (48)

ثُمَّ يَأۡتِي مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَ عَامٞ فِيهِ يُغَاثُ ٱلنَّاسُ وَفِيهِ يَعۡصِرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]. (49)

وَقَالَ ٱلۡمَلِكُ ٱئۡتُونِي بِهِۦۖ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُ ٱلرَّسُولُ قَالَ ٱرۡجِعۡ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَسۡـَٔلۡهُ مَا بَالُ ٱلنِّسۡوَةِ ٱلَّٰتِي قَطَّعۡنَ أَيۡدِيَهُنَّۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي بِكَيۡدِهِنَّ عَلِيمٞ ﴿٥٠﴾

The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' (50)

قَالَ مَا خَطۡبُكُنَّ إِذۡ رَٰوَدتُّنَّ يُوسُفَ عَن نَّفۡسِهِۦۚ قُلۡنَ حَٰشَ لِلَّهِ مَا عَلِمۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ مِن سُوٓءٖۚ قَالَتِ ٱمۡرَأَتُ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلۡـَٰٔنَ

The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now

حَصْحَصَ ٱلْحَقُّ أَنَا۠ رَٰوَدتُّهُۥ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth. (51)

ذَٰلِكَ لِيَعْلَمَ أَنِّى لَمْ أَخُنْهُ بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى كَيْدَ ٱلْخَآئِنِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. (52)

۞ وَمَآ أُبَرِّئُ نَفْسِىٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱلنَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌۢ بِٱلسُّوٓءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّىٓ ۚ إِنَّ رَبِّى غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (53)

وَقَالَ ٱلْمَلِكُ ٱئْتُونِى بِهِۦٓ أَسْتَخْلِصْهُ لِنَفْسِى ۖ فَلَمَّا كَلَّمَهُۥ قَالَ إِنَّكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ لَدَيْنَا مَكِينٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' (54)

قَالَ ٱجْعَلْنِى عَلَىٰ خَزَآئِنِ ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ إِنِّى حَفِيظٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٥﴾

Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' (55)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَكَّنَّا لِيُوسُفَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ يَتَبَوَّأُ مِنْهَا حَيْثُ يَشَآءُ ۚ نُصِيبُ بِرَحْمَتِنَا مَن نَّشَآءُ ۖ وَلَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good.

(56)	وَلَأَجۡرُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ خَيۡرٞ لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَكَانُواْ يَتَّقُونَ ٥٧
But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed. (57)	

Overview

This third episode of Joseph's story witnesses yet another trial he has to endure. It is the third and final test of hardship in his life. What comes after this is good fortune which also constitutes a test of his perseverance. The present trial sees him thrown in jail after his innocence has been established. When an innocent person is put in prison, he finds it especially difficult, although he can console himself that he has committed no crime.

During Joseph's trial we see an aspect of the grace God bestows on him as He gives him knowledge which enables him to interpret dreams and visions, and gives him the ability to explain forthcoming events on the basis of indications he may see. Then God's grace is further bestowed on him when he is declared innocent in the presence of the King. His abilities are also recognized, giving him the chance to assume high position, coupled with the King's trust and wide powers.

An Innocent Man Goes to Prison

"Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time." (Verse 35) Such is the type of action taken in palaces. It is the action typical of the aristocracy, despotic regimes and social conditions reflecting a state of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah*. When all the signs point to Joseph's innocence, the decision is taken to put him in prison. What a travesty of justice. The Chief Minister's wife behaves with no sense of shame, throwing a party and inviting women of her class to show them the young man, Joseph. She then declares in public her infatuation with him. They experience the same feelings and so too try to tempt him. Joseph's only recourse in the face of such tantalizing appeals is to turn to his Lord for protection. His mistress declares, shamelessly, before the other women that he will have to do as he is told or else be thrown in prison where he is sure to be humiliated. His choice is prison, and ultimately this is what occurs.

Despite all this, the decision is made to imprison him. Most probably by this time the woman has despaired of him responding to her attempts. Moreover, it must have

become the subject of conversation among the public, and not confined to the aristocracy. It was, therefore, necessary to protect the reputation of high class families. Since the men in these families have been unable to safeguard their own reputation and that of their women, they are certainly able to throw a young man in prison, knowing that he has committed no offence other than not responding to the temptation of an aristocratic woman. After all, it is his resistance of temptation that made her the talk of all classes.

A Platform to Advocate True Faith

"*Two young men went to prison with him.*" (Verse 36) We will presently know that they belonged to the King's private staff.

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened to Joseph in prison, and how he was recognized as a man of integrity and kindness, and that he soon won the trust of all those around him. There must also have been quite a few among them who had had the misfortune to work in the palace or for courtiers, yet had incurred the anger of their masters for one reason or another, and, as a result, were now in jail. All this is omitted. For the *sūrah* immediately moves on to portray a scene of Joseph, in prison, speaking to two young men who had found him to be a man of wisdom. They related their dreams to him, requesting that he interpret them.

> *One of them said: I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.'* (Verse 36)

Joseph seizes the opportunity to speak to the prisoners about his faith, which is the true faith. The fact that he is in prison does not exempt him from his duty to preach the true faith and to criticize any situation that assigns lordship to human rulers. For submission to such rulers means that they usurp the rights of lordship and become pharaohs.

Joseph starts at the point which preoccupies his fellow prisoners. He reassures them that he will give them the correct interpretation of their dreams because his Lord has given him special knowledge as a result of his dedication in worshipping Him alone and his associating no partners with Him. In this way Joseph makes it clear that he follows the faith of his forefathers who were similarly dedicated. At the very outset then, he wins their trust, stating that he will rightly interpret their dreams. At the same time he also presents his faith in appealing guise.

> *[Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you*

> *before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks.'* (Verses 37-38)

The approach Joseph employs is particularly appealing. He is pleasant to listen to, moving from one aspect to the next in a relaxed, easy way. This is characteristic of Joseph throughout the story.

The first part of his statement is emphatic, inspiring confidence that he has divine knowledge whereby he is informed of what is coming and he tells it as he sees it. This indicates that what he knows is a gift given to him by God for his sincere devotion. Moreover, it is fitting with what was fashionable at the time, since prophesying was a common practice. However, his assertion that it is all taught to him by his Lord is made at the most appropriate moment so as to make them more receptive to his call on them to believe in God.

"I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come." (Verse 37) This refers to the people who raised him in Egypt, in the Chief Minister's home, and to the courtiers and aristocracy who hold sway in society. Needless to say, the two young men whom he was addressing followed the same religion as the rest of their people. Joseph does not, however, confront them with this fact, but rather speaks about people in general so that they are not embarrassed. This demonstrates Joseph's delicacy in approaching the subject and his choice of proper method to introduce his faith.

Joseph's mention of the hereafter at this point confirms, as stated earlier, that belief in the Day of Judgement has always been a fundamental concept of faith, preached by all God's messengers and prophets right from the beginning of human life. It is false to assume, as teachers of comparative religion do, that it is a recent concept in human faith in general. It may have been introduced at a late stage into pagan religions, but it has always been an essential concept of divine messages.

Joseph continues to outline the distinctive characteristics of false beliefs in order to highlight those of the true faith which he and his forefathers have followed. *"I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God."* (Verse 38) It is a faith based on the concept of God's oneness. Indeed it is part of God's grace to mankind that they are guided to believe in His oneness. To enjoy this aspect of God's grace is easy. Mankind have only to decide to accept it and it is theirs, because this belief is ingrained in their nature and in the universe around them. It is also explained in all divine messages. It is only human beings who choose

to ignore it and not thank God for it. *"This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks."* (Verse 38)

A Comparison of Beliefs

Joseph's approach is subtle, taking them carefully step by step before going deep into their hearts to reveal his faith plainly and completely. He couples this with an explanation that the misery they suffer in life is due to the false beliefs which they and their people generally hold. *"My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it."* (Verses 39-40)

In a few clear, lucid and enlightening words, Joseph outlines the main features of the true faith based on the oneness of God. He shakes violently the whole structure of polytheism and the very concept of associating partners with God.

"My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists?" (Verse 39) Joseph makes them his companions, drawing them close with his affable approach. This facilitates an easy way into the main subject, namely the essence of faith. He does not call on them directly to adopt it, but instead presents it as a subject for objective discussion: *"Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists?"* The question makes a direct and strong appeal to human nature which recognizes only one deity. How come that several beings are described as gods when the one who deserves to be Lord and to be worshipped and obeyed in all that He orders is the One who has complete sway over all beings. He is the One whose law must be implemented in life. When God is declared to be One and His absolute power in the universe is recognized, then Lordship must be declared to belong to the One Lord whose power over people's lives must also be recognized. It should never happen that people who recognize God as One and Almighty, then accept someone else as having power over them, effectively making him a lord beside God. The Lord must be God who has absolute control over the whole universe. Anyone who does not have such power cannot be taken as lord and given power over people's lives. If he cannot make the universe submit to his will, he must not be the one to whom people submit.

It is infinitely better that people should submit to God and acknowledge Him as their only Lord than that they submit to diverse, ignorant and powerless lords which they invent for themselves. This description applies to all lords other than God. No

misery that has ever been suffered by mankind is greater than that caused by acknowledging a multiplicity of lords to each of whom a section of humanity submits. These earthly lords either usurp God's power and authority directly, or are given such power and authority by ignorant human beings who may be influenced by superstition or legend. It is also true that people can be overpowered or tricked into such submission. These earthly lords cannot rid themselves for a moment of their own selfish desires, or their urge to ensure their own survival and the maintenance of their power and authority. Hence, they seek to destroy all forces and elements that constitute even the slightest threat to their power and authority. They employ all means and mobilize all resources to glorify themselves so that their power continues to be acknowledged by the masses.

God Almighty is in no need of anyone. He does not want anything from His servants other than righteousness and that they work for their own betterment, and to build human life in accordance with the code He has laid down. He then considers all this part of their worship. Even the worship rites He requires them to observe aim at keeping them on the right track, ensuring that they conduct their lives properly. Indeed He is in no need of any of His servants. *"Mankind, it is you who stand in need of God, and God is All Sufficient, Glorious."* (35: 15)

Joseph then takes another step to demonstrate the falsehood of their idolatrous beliefs: *"Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high."* (Verse 40) These lords, whether they be human or non-human, spirits, devils, angels or forces of the universe that operate by God's will are not real lords. Indeed they have nothing of the qualities of lordship. Lordship belongs to God alone, the One who has power over all things, and who creates and controls all. But in all ignorant societies, people invent names and attribute to them qualities and characteristics. The first of these is that of judgement and authority. But God has not given any authority to them, nor has He sanctioned what people invent.

To Whom Judgement Belongs

At this point Joseph makes his final and decisive point, making it clear to his interlocutors where all power and judgement lie, and to whom obedience is owed and how it must be acknowledged. Or, in short, to whom worship should be offered: *"All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it."* (Verse 40)

Judgement and authority belong to no one other than God. It is He who is the Godhead, with authority to legislate and judge. Indeed, sovereignty, belongs to Him, for sovereignty is one of God's basic attributes. Whoever claims any right to it is

indeed disputing God's power, whether the claimant be an individual, a class, a party, an organization, a community or an international organization representing mankind. Anyone who claims this very basic attribute of God's for himself disbelieves in God. His disbelief is in the form of denying a part of faith which is essentially and universally known as a fact.

Usurping the rights of sovereignty which belong to God alone does not come in one form only. For a person to claim the basic characteristic of Godhead, which is sovereignty, he need not be so crude as to say, 'I know no God whom you may worship other than myself,' or, 'I am your Lord, the Most High,' as Pharaoh did. He actually claims these rights disputing God's authority when he starts to derive laws from any source other than God's law, declaring that the source of power and authority belongs to some institution or being other than God. Even when that institution is the whole nation or all humanity, the result is the same. In the Islamic system, the nation selects the ruler, giving him the authority to govern in accordance with God's law. The nation, or the community, is not the source of sovereignty which enacts the law and gives it its power. The source of sovereignty is God. Many are those who confuse the exercise of power and its source. This confusion is found even among Muslim scholars. What we say is that human beings, in their total aggregate, do not have the right of sovereignty. They only implement what God has legislated. What He has not legislated has no legitimacy. It does not carry God's sanction.

Joseph (peace be upon him) justifies his statement that all sovereignty belongs to God alone by saying: *"All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him."* (Verse 40) We cannot understand this justification as the Arabs did at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān unless we understand the meaning of 'worship' which can only be offered to God.

The meaning of the verb, *`abada,* or 'to worship' in Arabic is 'to submit or surrender'. In the early days of Islam it never meant, in Islamic terminology, only 'to offer worship rituals'. In fact none of the worship rituals was as yet imposed as a duty. So the statement was rather understood in the manner it was meant linguistically, and this later became its Islamic meaning. What it meant then was submission to God alone, and obeying His orders and commands, whether they related to worship rituals, moral directives or legal provisions. To submit to God in all these was the essence of worship which must be addressed to God alone. It could never be addressed to any of His creatures.

When we understand the meaning of worship in this light, we understand why Joseph stated that worship can only be addressed to God as his justification for saying that all judgement and sovereignty belong to Him alone. Submission to God will not become a reality if judgement and sovereignty belong to someone else. This applies to matters where God's will is done by the laws of nature which God has set

in operation in the universe, and to matters where human beings have a choice with regard to their actions and practices. True submission to God applies in both areas.

Once more we say that to dispute God's right of sovereignty takes the disputant out of the religion of Islam altogether. This is a basic rule of Islam that is essentially known to all. This is because disputing God's right and authority means a rejection of worshipping Him alone. It is essentially an act of associating partners with God, which means that those who dispute God's rights of sovereignty are not Muslims at all. The same applies to those who approve their claims and obey them without rejecting, even mentally, their action of usurping God's right and authority. The claimant and those who obey him are the same in the Islamic view.

Joseph (peace be upon him) states that the true faith is that which assigns all judgement to God alone in implementation of His being the only one to be worshipped. *"This is the true faith."* (Verse 40) This is a statement of limitation. No faith can be true unless it gives all sovereignty to God and makes this a practical implementation of worshipping Him alone.

"But most people do not know it." (Verse 40) The fact that they do not know does not make them followers of the true faith. A person who does not know something cannot believe in it or implement it. If people do not know the essence of faith, it is illogical to say that they follow it. Their ignorance is not an excuse for describing them as Muslims. Rather, their ignorance bars them from that characteristic in the first place. To believe in something presupposes knowing it. That is a basic, logical fact.

In a few clear words Joseph (peace be upon him) outlines his faith completely, showing all its constituent elements and shaking to the core the foundations of disbelief, polytheism and tyranny.

Tyranny cannot take place in any land without its claiming the most essential quality of Godhead, namely His lordship over people's lives. This is the right to make people submit to its laws and orders, and implement its ideology. Even if it does not say so in words, it actually practises it. Tyranny does not exist unless the true faith has been removed from people's thoughts and lives. For only when people firmly believe that all sovereignty and judgement belong to God alone, because worship belongs to Him, is there no room left for tyranny in their lives.

At this point Joseph has completed his task of preaching God's faith to them, having attached it initially to the matter which preoccupied them. He therefore reverts to that point and interprets their dreams for them, so that their trust in what he says is strengthened, and they are more amenable to what he preaches: *"My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head."* (Verse 41) He does not point out directly who will

be released and who will meet the depressing end as he does not want to confront anyone with bad news. He stresses that he is certain of the knowledge imparted to him by God: "*The matter on which you have sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.*" (Verse 41) It will only be as God has decreed. There is no escape from it.

Joseph was an innocent prisoner, jailed on the strength of false accusations, without any proper investigation of his case. It may be that the incident of the Chief Minister's wife and the other women was portrayed to the King in a way that totally misrepresented the facts, as often happens in such cases. It was only natural then that Joseph wanted his case to be put to the King in the hope that he would order that it be looked into properly. Hence, Joseph "*said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.'*" (Verse 42) He actually asked him to mention his case and situation to the King and to tell him of the truth he had seen in him. He describes him as his lord because he was the ruler to whom he submitted. The term 'lord' here means 'master, ruler, a person of acknowledged authority and a legislator'. This re-emphasizes the meaning of lordship in Islamic terminology.

At this point, the *sūrah* leaves out mentioning that the two prisoners' dreams came true in exactly the manner Joseph described. There is a gap here, as well as an implication that it is sufficient for us to know that all this took place. The prisoner whom Joseph felt would be released was actually released, but he did not act on what Joseph requested. He forgot all the lessons that Joseph had taught him. He forgot to remember his true Lord as he was distracted by the demands of life in the palace after he returned there. Indeed, he forgot all about Joseph: "*But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years.*" (Verse 42)

The pronoun *'he'* in the last clause refers to Joseph. God wanted to teach him a lesson so that he would sever all ties in favour of his tie with God Himself. Hence, He did not make the achievement of what he wanted dependent on any human being or on anything relating to a human being. This is an aspect of the honour God gave Joseph. God's true servants should be totally dedicated to Him. They must leave all decisions concerning their lives to God alone. When human weakness initially makes this impossible, He bestows on them His grace and makes them unable to adopt a different attitude so that they know its blessing. They are then able to accept it out of love and obedience to God. He then gives them more of His blessings and grace.

The King's Dream

Now we move into the court with the King asking his courtiers and priests to interpret a disturbing dream he had had: "*And the King said: I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven*

others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.'" (Verses 43-44)

None could offer a plausible interpretation of the King's dream. Or they might have felt that it signalled something unpleasant and hence did not wish to put it to the King. This is often the attitude of courtiers and advisors who prefer to deliver to their masters only that which is pleasant. Hence they said that it is all *'but a medley of dreams.'* They described it as disturbed visions that did not constitute a proper dream. They followed this by saying, *"We have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams,"* i.e. when they are so blurred and confused.

So far we have mentioned three dream incidents: the first was Joseph's, the second was those of the two young men in prison and now we have the King's dream. Each time interpretation was requested. That so much emphasis was placed on dreams tells us something about the atmosphere that prevailed in Egypt and elsewhere.

At this point, Joseph's prison companion who was released remembered him and how he accurately interpreted his own dream and that of his fellow prisoner. *"At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.'"* (Verse 45)

The King's Dream Interpreted

He requests leave to go and see the man who was certain to give a true interpretation of the dream no one else dared interpret. The curtains drop here, and when they are raised again we are in the prison looking at Joseph and his former companion asking him to interpret the King's dream: *"'Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.'"* (Verse 46)

The man, who is the drink master of the King, calls Joseph a *'man of truth,'* which is testimony that Joseph always tells the truth according to the man's own experience with him. *"Tell us of the seven fat cows..."* Here the man quotes the King's own words in relating the dream. Since he was asking for an interpretation of the dream, he had to quote the description accurately. The *sūrah* uses the same words again to indicate the accuracy of the reporting, and to enable the interpretation to immediately follow the statement.

However, what Joseph gives is not a passive interpretation of the dream. Instead it is coupled with advice on how best to cope with the consequences of what is going to

happen. *"He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years."* (Verse 47) These are seven years without a gap when there is a rich harvest. Hence they are depicted in the dream as seven fat cows. *"But let the grain you harvest remain in its ear,"* (Verse 47) because that would protect the crop against insects and atmospheric effects that may cause it to decay. *"Except for the little which you may eat."* (Verse 47) What you need for eating you may take out of its ear. The rest must be stored for the following seven years of poor harvest which are depicted in the dream as seven emaciated cows.

"Then after that there will come seven hard years," (Verse 48) when the land produces little or nothing. Hence these hard years *"will devour all that you have laid up for them except a little of what you have kept in store."* (Verse 48) It is as if these years are the ones which do the devouring themselves. Their lack of harvest is described here as hunger. And they will eat all except a little which is kept from them.

"Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]." (Verse 49) This brings to an end the hard years without harvest. They are followed by a year of abundance when people will have plenty of water and a plentiful harvest. Their vineyards will yield richly and they will be able to press their wine. They will have plenty of sesame and olives which they will then press into oil.

We note here that this plentiful year is not symbolized in the King's dream. Joseph mentions it, however, on the basis of the knowledge given to him by God. He gives the happy news of the approach of this year to the man who will transmit it to the King and the people. They will be happier that the seven hard years will be followed by a year of rich harvest.

Court Summons

At this point the *sūrah* again moves to the next scene, leaving a gap between the one just ending and the one about to begin. What happens during this gap is left for us to imagine. The curtains are then once again raised in the King's palace. The *sūrah* leaves out what the man tells of the interpretation of the King's dream, and what he says about Joseph, his imprisonment and its cause, and his present situation. What we have instead is the effect of all this, embodied in the King's expressed desire to see him and his order that he should be brought before him.

"The King said: 'Bring this man before me.'" (Verse 50) Again the *sūrah* leaves out the details of carrying out the King's order. We simply find Joseph replying to the King's emissary. He has spent so long in prison that he is in no hurry to leave until his case has been properly investigated. He wants the truth to be clearly known and his innocence to be declared to all people. All the false accusations hurled at him must be known for what they were: mere lies. He has been looked after by his Lord, and the

way he has been brought up gives him reassurance and peace of mind. He is in no hurry until the truth is known.

The impact of the care God has taken of Joseph in bringing him up is clearly seen in the difference between his present attitude and his earlier one. Formerly, he had asked his prison companion to remember him to his master. Now he wants his innocence to be established first. Hence he says to the King's emissary: *"Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands."* (Verse 50) The gulf between these two situations is great indeed.

Joseph refused to go to the King until the latter had investigated his case. He specifically mentions the women who cut their hands so that the circumstances leading to this, and what happened later will all be revealed. Moreover, he wanted all this to be done before leaving prison, so that the whole truth be known and without him having to question the women himself. He could afford to do this because he was absolutely certain of his own innocence, reassured that the truth would not be suppressed.

The Qur'ān quotes Joseph using the term, *Rabb,* or Lord, in its full meaning with regard to himself and to the King's messenger. The King is the messenger's lord, because he is his master whom he obeys, while God is Joseph's Lord whom Joseph obeys and submits to.

The messenger went back to the King and reported Joseph's reply. The King called in the women and interrogated them. The *sūrah* leaves this out, allowing us to know its conclusion: *"The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?"* (Verse 51)

Justice Must Be Seen to Be Done

The Qur'ānic text uses a term much stronger than that expressed by the phrase, 'What was the matter with you.' It is much more like 'what calamity came over you.' It appears that the King asked for full information about the matter before he called them in. This the King did so that he would be appraised of the circumstances before he spoke to them. When they are brought before him, his question points an accusing finger, saying that something really serious must have happened: *"What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?"* (Verse 51)

The King's very question tells us something about what happened on that day at the Chief Minister's house. We gather something of what the women said to Joseph, or hinted at, trying to tempt him into seduction.

When faced with such an accusation in the presence of the King, the women felt that they could no longer deny the facts: *"The women said. God save us! We did not*

perceive the least evil on his part." (Verse 51) That is the truth that could not be denied, even by them. Joseph was so innocent that no one could realistically accuse him of any misdeed.

At this point, the woman who loved Joseph and could not rid herself of such love, despite her despair of him ever succumbing to her guile, comes forward to confess all in a very frank statement: "*The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth.'*" (Verse 51) It is a full confession admitting her guilt and his commitment to telling the truth.

She goes even further to reveal that she still has a soft spot for him, hoping that she will gain his respect after all that time. There is a further hint that his faith had found its way into her heart and that she believed in it: "*From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust."*[1] (Verse 52)

Her confession and what comes after is described here in highly charged but refined words which tell us much about the feelings behind it. *"It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth."* (Verse 51) This is a full testimony of his innocence and his having always said the truth. The woman does not mind what happens to her as a result of her confession. Was it then only the truth that she knew which prompted her to deliver that full confession in the presence of the King and nobles of the state?

The text of the *sūrah* implies a different motive. It suggests she was keen to win the respect of a man who is full of faith, and who paid no attention to her physical beauty. She now wanted that he respect her for her faith and honesty in giving a true account of his personality in his absence: *"From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back."* (Verse 52) She carries on with a moral statement of the type Joseph loves and appreciates: *"God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust."* (Verse 52)

She even goes a step further to express her new virtuous feelings: "*And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 53) She was a woman in love. She was several years his senior. Her hopes depended largely on a word from him or a feeling of pleasure that she might feel he entertained.

[1] In translating this verse and the one that follows we have conformed to the author's interpretation which attributes them as statements made by the Chief Minister's wife. This is certainly a valid interpretation. However, many scholars express the view that these two verses quote a statement made by Joseph, declaring his innocence of any betrayal of his master's trust, acknowledging his human susceptibilities and stating some of the principles of his divine faith. — Editor's note.

Thus the human element in the story becomes apparently clear. The story is not told as a work of art and literature, but it is given as a lesson which believers may learn. It tackles the question of faith and its advocacy. The artistic style of the *sūrah* gives a colourful and vivid account of feelings and reactions as it tells of events in an environment where varied influences and circumstances play parts that produce a harmonious effect on the main characters.

Joseph's imprisonment is over. His life now takes a different course, where the trial is one of ease and comfort, not hardship.

A Great Turn in Joseph's Fortunes

> *And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed.* (Verses 54-57)

The King established Joseph's innocence. He also learnt how adept Joseph was in the interpretation of dreams, and how wise he was when he requested an investigation of the women's behaviour. The King also learnt that Joseph was a man of dignity. He did not rush to leave the prison and meet the King of Egypt. He took the stand of an honourable man who had been wrongfully imprisoned. He wanted to prove the falsehood of the accusation even before his release. He wanted to re-establish his integrity and the truth of his faith before seeking any position of favour with the King.

His dignified attitude as a man of integrity and wisdom earned hire the King's love and respect. Hence, the King ordered: "*Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.*" (Verse 54) He does not want him brought before him so that he can release him, or just to know this learned interpreter of dreams, or to grant him audience and tell him that he is pleased with him. He wants him brought to him so that he can choose him for his own and make him a trusted advisor and even a friend.

There are those who are accused of no crime and have full freedom, who shed their dignity at the feet of rulers. They put a leash around their own necks, eagerly seeking a glimpse of satisfaction or a word of praise which keeps them as servants, not trusted advisors. I wish to God that such people would read the Qur'ān and Joseph's story so that they would know that dignity and honour bring much more

profit, even material profit, than can ever be gained through humiliating themselves before rulers and tyrants.

"*The King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.'*" (Verse 54) The text of the *sūrah* leaves out the details of how the King's new order was carried out. Instead, we find ourselves looking at the scene of Joseph and the King: "*And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.'*" (Verse 54) When the King speaks to him, he is certain that the impression he has had of him is a true one. Hence he assures him that he has a position with the King himself. He is no longer a Hebrew slave, but a man of high standing. He is no longer the accused, but one who is invested with trust. Such a position of trust and security are also with the King himself. So, what does Joseph say in response?

He does not prostrate himself before the King in a gesture of gratitude as do courtiers who strive to win a tyrant's pleasure. He does not say to him may you live long and I always be your obedient servant, as those who vie for a tyrant's favour do. He only asks to be entrusted with the task he feels himself to be the best to discharge in the forthcoming period of hardship and of which he has warned the King by interpreting his dream for him. He feels that if he is entrusted with this task he will save the country from ruin and save many lives. He recognized that the situation needed his expert planning, efficiency, honesty and integrity. Hence he said to the King: "*Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.*" (Verse 55)

The anticipated years of crisis, preceded by seven years of bumper harvests, required good management, with strict control over agriculture, managing the surplus harvest and ensuring its sound storage so that it did not decay. Joseph mentions the two qualities he possesses which he thinks the task requires: "*I am able to look after them with wisdom.*" (Verse 55) It should be noted that Joseph did not ask a personal favour from the King. This was not the time to make personal gain. Instead, he asked for that which would help the country and its people. He requests a position of very difficult responsibilities which people would rather steer away from, because it could easily cost them their careers or their lives. Hunger encourages lawlessness. A hungry multitude could easily tear apart those in power at a moment of confusion and trouble.

Soliciting a High Position

Nonetheless Joseph's request appears to violate two principles of the Islamic code. The first is a request of position, which is not allowed in Islam, as the Prophet says: "We do not give a position [of government] to anyone who asks for it." [Related by

al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The second is praising oneself, which runs contrary to the Qur'ānic instruction: *"Do not pretend to purity."* (53: 32) However, such rules were established by the Islamic system laid down at the time of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Hence they did not apply during Joseph's time. Besides, this is only a matter of organization and administration, and such matters are not necessarily the same in all messages sent by God, and they do not apply equally to all communities that accept divine guidance.

Valid as this defence of Joseph's request is, we do not wish to rely on it. The matter is far too serious to rest on such an argument. In fact it is based on different considerations which need to be properly outlined so that we can fully understand the method of deduction and construction on the basis of established statements in the Qur'ān and *Ĥadīth. We* will be able then to appreciate the dynamic nature of Islamic jurisprudence, which is totally different from the stale situation which appears to have remained with scholars upheld over generations of inactivity.

Islamic jurisprudence was not born in a vacuum, nor can it function in one. It was born when an Islamic community came into existence. It thus began to answer the needs of that community to ensure that its life was in line with Islamic principles and values. The Islamic community was not the product of Islamic jurisprudence; in fact it is the other way round: the legal code came into being so that it might fulfil the needs of the Islamic community as it began to live and function. Both facts are of great importance, for they provide us with insight into the dynamic nature of Islamic jurisprudence and its provisions.

If we were to take statements and rulings deduced from them without reference to these two facts, or to the circumstances prevailing at the time of the revelation of the statement or the deduction of the rulings, and without understanding the social environment when they were deduced and the needs they tried to meet, we would betray a lack of understanding of the nature of Islam and its jurisprudence. A dynamic jurisprudence is essentially different from an academic legal theory, although the two may be based on the same original statements. Dynamic jurisprudence takes into consideration the practical situation which prevailed at the time of the revelation of the texts and the time when the rulings were deduced and formulated. It considers the practical situation to be inseparable from the statements and rulings. If we separate the two, we place ourselves in an unbalanced situation.

This means that there is no single ruling which may be viewed in isolation of the social environment and circumstances that prevailed at the time when it was deduced. Let us cite here the example relevant to our discussion, namely, recommending oneself for public office. The rule we have is that this is forbidden, on account of the Qur'ānic statement, *"Do not pretend to purity,"* and the *ĥadīth* which states: "We do not give a position [of government] to anyone who asks for it.

This rule was formulated in an Islamic community so that it could be implemented by that community, because it serves its purposes and fits with its historical requirements and general nature. It is an Islamic rule for an Islamic community. It is not a theoretical rule for an idealistic situation. Hence, it produces its beneficial effects only when it is implemented in a community that is Islamic in origin, make-up and commitment. Any community that does not meet these criteria is merely a vacuum, in as much as this rule is concerned. It is not a fitting environment for its implementation. This applies to all provisions of the Islamic legal code, but we are speaking in detail here only about this particular rule because it is the one related to the text of the *sūrah* we are discussing.

We need now to understand why people in Islamic society must not speak about their own good qualities, and why they must not nominate themselves for positions of government. Why are they not allowed to organize an election campaign so that they can be voted into parliament, or to a leadership position? The answer is that in Islamic society people do not need any of this in order to show their suitability for such positions. Moreover, such positions in society are really a heavy burden which does not tempt anyone to seek them, except for reward from God should one be able to discharge heavy responsibilities properly, for the general interest of the community. This means that positions of government are only sought by people who have some purpose of their own which they wish to accomplish by holding office. Such people must not be given such positions. But this fact cannot be properly understood until we have understood the true nature of the Muslim community and its make-up.

The Birth of a Muslim Community

Movement is the constituent element of Islamic society, and this is what gives birth to it. Initially, the faith comes from its divine source, conveyed by God's Messenger in word and deed. In later generations, it is represented by advocates of the divine faith. Some people will respond to this advocacy, and they are met with resistance, and subjected to persecution by tyrannical regimes implementing different forms of Jāhiliyyah. Some may succumb to persecution and turn away from the faith and its advocating movement, while others remain steadfast. Some of the latter may become martyrs, and others continue the struggle until God has judged between them and their opponents. This latter group will be granted victory by God, who makes them a means of fulfilling His will. He fulfils His promise to them of victory and power, so that they can establish the rule of divine faith. The victory is not theirs as a personal gain or reward. It is a victory of their message, so that they establish God's Lordship of mankind.

This group of people do not limit their faith to a certain piece of land, or to a certain race, nation, colour, language or similarly hollow tie. Their mission is to liberate mankind, the world over, from submission to anyone other than God, and to elevate mankind far above the level of subservience to tyrants, regardless of their type of tyranny.

As this movement goes on, people's qualities become apparent, and their respective positions are identified on the basis of standards and values that are firmly rooted in this faith and acceptable to all the community. These are values such as dedication to the cause, sacrifice, piety, a high standard of morals, efficiency and ability. All these values are judged by practice, as they become apparent through action and movement. Thus the community comes to recognize those who have them. Such people do not need to make any pretension to excellence, nor do they need to seek a position of government or be elected to parliament on the basis of their own campaigns.

In such a Muslim community, the social make-up is based on the distinction achieved through movement and action to implement the values of faith. That is what happened in the first Muslim community, when distinction was achieved by the early group of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anşār,* by the army in the Battle of Badr, by those who gave the Prophet the pledge to fight till death before the signing of the Treaty of Al-Ĥudaybiyah, and by the ones who fought in different battles for Islam before the victory that regained Makkah for Islam. In subsequent generations, distinction was achieved through dedication to the cause of Islam. In such a community people do not begrudge others their dues, and they do not deny them their positions of honour, even though human weakness may overcome some people who covet personal gains. This means that people do not need to extol their own virtues and seek power for themselves.

Suitability and Responsibility

Some people may suggest that this quality belongs uniquely to the first Muslim community on the basis of its historical circumstances. They forget, however, that a true Islamic society will have no other foundation or method of existence. It will not come about unless a movement advocates a return to Islam and helps people abandon the *jāhiliyyah* into which they have sunk. That is the starting point. It will inevitably be followed by a period of hardship and trial, just like the first time. Some of its members will succumb to pressure, while others will remain steadfast. There will be martyrs among them while those who survive will be determined to continue the struggle. They will hate sinking back into *jāhiliyyah* as much as they hate being thrown into fire. They keep up the struggle until God has judged between them and

their opponents, and gives them victory as He did with the first Muslim community. This means the birth of a new Islamic system in some part of God's land. At this point, the movement will have travelled from the point of beginning to the point of establishing an Islamic society, and in the meantime it will have sorted out its advocates into different grades based on faith and the standards and values they put into effect. These will not need to nominate themselves for positions of power, because their community, which fought the campaign of *jihād* with them, will have recognized their abilities and recommended them.

Some may argue that this only applies in the initial period. That it does not extend to the next period when Islamic society is well established and well settled. This notion betrays a complete lack of awareness of the nature of Islam. This faith of Islam will never stop its movement, because its goal is to liberate all mankind throughout the whole world from submission to tyrannical power. This means that the movement will continue and distinction in the movement will remain the criterion for recognizing those who have talent, ability and dedication. It will not stop unless there is a deviation from Islam. The rule that prohibits self-promotion for positions of government will remain operative within its environment, just as when it was first put into effect.

It may also be said that when the community gets larger, people will not know each other and those who have abilities and talents will need to stand up and speak about themselves, seeking position and authority. Again such an argument is fallacious, influenced by the present-day set up. In a Muslim community, the people of every neighbourhood will know one another well, because that is intrinsic to the Muslim community and its qualities. Hence, every locality will know those of them who have talent and ability, and they evaluate these by Islamic standards. It will not be difficult for them to choose those who are dedicated and hard working for the sake of the community to represent them in local councils or in parliament. As for positions of government, the ruler, who is chosen by the whole community on the recommendation of community leaders or parliament, will fill them with people from among those who have already been identified on the basis of their dedication and ability. As we have said, the movement will continue in Islamic society and jihād will continue for the rest of time.

A Maze of Our Own Making

Those who think or write about the Islamic system and its structure today place themselves in a maze, because they try to implement the Islamic system and its rules and values in their present social set-up. Compared with the Islamic system, such a set-up is like a vacuum which provides no room for the implementation of any

Islamic rules. There is a fundamental difference in the very make-up of the two types of society. In the Islamic system, people and groups are distinguished through what they do in the process of establishing the Islamic faith in practice and in the struggle against the values and systems of *jāhiliyyah.* It is their perseverance which enables them to endure pressure, persecution and other hardships that continue until the establishment of an Islamic society in the land. Other societies belong to *jāhiliyyah,* and they are stagnating, upholding principles and values that have nothing to do with Islam. As such, they are like a vacuum that cannot support the functioning of Islamic principles and values.

Those writers and researchers look for a solution which enables them to advocate the Islamic system and its institutions, and to operate its values and laws. The first thing to trouble them is how the members of the Consultative Council are to be selected if they cannot put their names forward or speak about their own qualities. How are the right people to be known in communities such as we have today where people do not know each other's virtues and are not judged by the right standards of honesty, efficiency and integrity? They are also troubled by the method of choosing a head of state. Is he to be chosen by public referendum, or by the Consultative Council? If he is the one who nominates the members of the Consultative Council, how are these to select him in future? Will they not feel indebted to him and wish to return his favour? Besides, if they are the ones to select or elect him, will they not have leverage over him, when he is overall leader? When nominating them, will he not choose only those who are loyal to him? Such questions are endless.

The starting point in this maze is the assumption that our society today is a Muslim one, and that we only need to have the rules and laws ready to implement them, changing nothing of society's set-up, values and moral principles. When we start at this point, we are in a vacuum, and as we move on further into this vacuum, we will soon feel dizzy as if we are moving through an endless maze.

The present society in which we live is not an Islamic one, and it will not be the one in which the Islamic system and its rules and values will be implemented. They are impossible to implement in such a society because, by nature, they neither start nor operate in a vacuum. Islamic society is composed of individuals and groups that strive and struggle in order to bring it about, facing all the pressures to which they may be subjected by the state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* that prevails in other societies. The status and qualities of these individuals come to be recognized during the struggle. Thus the Islamic society is a newborn society that moves along its set course, aiming to liberate mankind, throughout the world from submission to any authority other than God.

Countless other issues are raised along with that of choosing the leader and selecting the Consultative Council. These are all tackled by writers who try to fit Islam to the present society with all its principles, moral values, and various concepts. They preoccupy themselves with questions such as banks and insurance companies and the usurious basis of their work, family planning and similar matters. In all these, they either respond to questions which people put to them, or they try to look at their status in an Islamic society. But they all begin at the point that leads them into the maze, assuming that fundamental Islamic principles will be implemented in the current social structures that have their un-Islamic basis. They think that when this is done, these societies become Islamic. This is both ludicrous and sad at the same time.

It was not Islamic jurisprudence, with all its codes and rules, that gave birth to Islamic society. It was the other way round. Islamic society faced up to *jāhiliyyah* and in the process gave birth to Islamic legal codes which were derived from the basic principles of Islam. The reverse can never take place. Islamic laws are not formulated on paper, but in the practical life of the Muslim community. Hence, it is absolutely essential that a Muslim community first comes into existence to provide the environment where Islamic law takes its roots and begins to be implemented.

In such a situation matters are totally different. There may be a need in such a society for banks, insurance companies, a family planning policy, or there may be no need for one or more of these. We cannot predict in advance what that society may or may not need in order to tailor laws to meet these needs. Moreover, the laws we have neither fit nor satisfy the needs of non-Islamic societies, because Islam does not accept these societies in the first place. It does not concern itself with their needs which arise from their own systems, nor does it trouble itself with finding solutions for them.

It is the divine faith that provides the social basis, and it is the responsibility of human beings to adjust their lives to fit it. Such adjustment can only come about through an active movement that aims to establish the basic principle of God's oneness and His Lordship over mankind, and also to liberate humanity from submission to tyranny. All this comes about through the implementation of God's law in their lives. Inevitably, such a movement will face resistance and persecution. The cycle will also continue with some believers weakening and reverting to *jāhiliyyah,* while others remain steadfast, losing some of their numbers as martyrs while the others persevere until God gives them victory. At this point Islamic society comes into existence, with its advocates having distinguished themselves with its colours and values. Their lives will then have different needs, and the methods to satisfy those needs will also be different from those available in non-Islamic societies. Deduction and construction of rules will begin to meet the needs of that society, and the legal code that is born then is one that lives in a practical environment that has definite needs.

Suppose that an Islamic society comes into existence. It collects *zakāt* and distributes it to its rightful beneficiaries; its people deal' with each other on the basis of mutual compassion and a close, caring relationship within each local community, and within the whole of society. Moreover, people have no room for extravagance and arrogant rivalry in worldly riches, but instead uphold all Islamic values. How are we to tell today whether such a society will ever need insurance companies when it has all these values that ensure common social security? If it needs insurance companies, how are we to know whether the present ones, which operate in un-Islamic society and meet its needs, will fit the insurance needs of such an Islamic

society? Similarly, how are we to tell whether an Islamic society that goes through a continuous struggle for God's cause, i.e. *jihād,* will ever need to put in place a family planning policy? If we cannot predict the needs of our society when it is based on Islam, because of the great gulf between its values, concerns and aims and those of other societies, why should we waste our time and effort in trying to adapt and modify existing rules in order to fit them to the needs of that society when it comes into existence?

As we have explained, the basic flaw is in taking the present set-up as the starting point and thinking that an exercise of simple self adjustment will bring back the divine faith into practical existence. It is time for the advocates of Islam to think well of their faith and to place it far above a position of mere service to non-Islamic societies and their needs. They have to tell people that they must first declare their acceptance of Islam and willingness to submit to its rule, or in other words, declare their submission to God alone. This means that they are willing to implement Islam fully in their lives, removing all tyranny and acknowledging only God's Lordship over the whole universe and in human life. When people, or a community of people, respond positively, an Islamic society begins to take root. It then provides the social environment for a practical Islamic code to be born and to prosper, as it provides for meeting the needs of that society in accordance with divine faith. Unless such a society comes into existence, busying ourselves with deducing rules and laws to implement now is an exercise in self-delusion which plants seeds in the air. No Islamic code will be formulated in a vacuum just as no plant will ever grow from seeds planted in the air.

Between Theory and Practice

Intellectual research in Islamic jurisprudence may be comfortable, because it involves no risks, but it is not part of Islamic advocacy. In fact it is not a part of Islamic strategy. Those who want to steer away from risk will be better off occupying themselves with literature, art or commerce. Academic study of Islamic jurisprudence on the lines described is in my personal view — and God knows best — a waste of effort and reward. The divine faith does not accept a position of subservience to *jāhiliyyah* which rebels against its rule and which, at times, ridicules it by requesting Islamic solutions for its own problems when it refuses to submit to God and the Islamic faith.

The method of birth of Islamic society is the same, and it follows the same stages. A transformation from *jāhiliyyah* to Islam will never be an easy task, and it will never start with codifying Islamic principles in preparedness for Islamic society whenever it may come into existence. Nor are these codes the ingredient that non-Islamic

societies require in order to become Islamic. The difficulty in such a transformation is not due to Islamic laws being inadequate to meet the sophisticated needs of advanced and civilized societies. That is all self-deception. What prevents such societies from becoming Islamic is tyranny that refuses to acknowledge that all sovereignty belongs to God alone. Hence they refuse to acknowledge God's Lordship over human life and over the whole world. Thus they take themselves out of Islam altogether. That is a part of Islam that is essentially known to all. Moreover, when the masses submit to tyranny, they make the tyrants lords beside God, and they obey them. Thus the masses take themselves away from believing in the oneness of God to polytheism, because acknowledging Lordship as belonging to any beings other than God is to place such beings in the same position as God. That is how *jāhiliyyah* is established as a human system. It is founded on misconceptions as much as it is founded on material power.

The codification of Islamic law, then, cannot encounter *jāhiliyyah* with adequate means. What is adequate in encountering it is a movement which calls on society to return to Islam, and which fights *jāhiliyyah* with all its structure. The normal course will then start, and God will eventually judge between the advocates of Islam and their opponents on the basis of complete and pure justice. Only at that point does the role of Islamic law start, when its rules and provisions have a natural environment in which to be implemented. They are then able to meet the needs of the newly born Islamic society, according to the nature, circumstances and extent of these needs. We cannot predict these and what they will be like. To occupy ourselves now with formulating these is not the sort of serious preoccupation that fits with the nature of the Islamic faith.

This does not mean that the laws that the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* mention are not applicable today. It only means that the society in which they are meant to operate is not yet in existence. Hence, their full application waits until that society becomes a reality. However, they must be implemented by every Muslim individual wherever he or she may be living while they work for the establishment of Islamic society.

To understand the nature of the birth of Islamic society according to the method already explained is the starting point in the real work to re-establish Islam in a real society after it has ceased to exist. It was because of the adoption of man-made laws in preference to God's law over the last two centuries that Islamic society ceased to exist, despite the presence of mosques and minarets, prayers and supplication. All this gives us a false feeling that Islamic society is still alive, when it has rather been uprooted altogether. When Islamic society came into existence the first time, no mosques or worship rituals were available. It was born when people were called upon to believe in God and to worship Him alone, and they responded to that call. Their worship of Him did not take the form of rituals like prayer, because these had

not yet been made obligatory. It was represented in their submission to Him alone. When these people acquired material power on earth, legislation was given to them. When they had to meet the practical needs of their life, they were able to deduce codes and legal provisions, in addition to what the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* legislate. That is the proper and only way.

I wish there was an easy way to transform people generally at the first call made to them to accept Islam and explain its laws to them. But this is wishful thinking. People do not abandon *jāhiliyyah* or change their submission to tyranny in order to adopt Islam and worship God alone except through the hard and arduous route along which the Islamic message advocates itself. It always starts with an individual, followed by a vanguard group. Then the conflict with non-Islamic society begins, bringing in its wake all sorts of trials and hardships. When the conflict is resolved and God grants victory to the Islamic message and its advocates, Islam is established and people enter into God's faith in groups. That faith involves a complete way of life, which is the only way acceptable to God: *"He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him."* (3: 85)

The above explanation may give us an insight into Joseph's attitude. He was not living in a society that had submitted all its affairs to God's law, thereby prohibiting seeking office or requesting a government position. He felt that the circumstances offered him a chance to be in a position of authority, not a position of subservience in *jāhiliyyah* society. Things turned out as he wished. He was then able to promote his faith in Egypt, while the Chief Minister and the King had their authority substantially curtailed.

High Position and Freedom for Joseph

Having elaborated the point about Joseph's request to be in charge of the Kingdom's store houses, and the issue of seeking government posts in Islamic society, we pick up the thread of the story again. When we consider the text of the *sūrah* we find that it does not mention the King's agreement to Joseph's request. It is as if the request itself implied the King's approval. This is an even higher honour given to Joseph, and it shows his high standing with the King. He only needed to state his request for it to be answered. This is confirmed by the following verses: *"Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed."* (Verses 56-57)

Thus the proof of Joseph's innocence in the way that it was done, and the King's admiration that he has already won, and the granting of his request, all helped to

establish Joseph in the land, giving him a firm and distinguished position.

"Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed." (Verse 56) He was free to take up the house he wanted, at the place of his choice, and to occupy the position he wished. That freedom contrasts fully with the well in which he was thrown by his brothers and the prison sentence he had to endure, with all the fears and restrictions of both situations. *"We bestow Our mercy on whom We will."* (Verse 56) We replace hardship with ease, fear with security, fetters with freedom, and humiliation with a high position of honour. *"We never fail to give their reward to those who do good."* (Verse 56) Those who demonstrate a strong, unshakeable faith and reliance on God and who deal with other people in fairness and kindness will not fail to have their reward in this life.

"But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed." (Verse 57) This is not reduced by the fact that such people receive their reward in this life. Yet it is infinitely better than this present reward. Its conditions are that a person should believe and do righteous deeds, steering away from what God has forbidden whether in public or private. Thus has God replaced Joseph's trials with his new position of power, and also with the promise of better things to come in the life to come. All this reward is for faith, righteousness and perseverance in the face of difficulty.

4
Brothers' Reunion

وَجَآءَ إِخۡوَةُ يُوسُفَ فَدَخَلُواْ عَلَيۡهِ
فَعَرَفَهُمۡ وَهُمۡ لَهُۥ مُنكِرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Joseph's brothers arrived and presented themselves before him. He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him. (58)

وَلَمَّا جَهَّزَهُم بِجَهَازِهِمۡ قَالَ ٱئۡتُونِي بِأَخٖ
لَّكُم مِّنۡ أَبِيكُمۡۚ أَلَا تَرَوۡنَ أَنِّيٓ أُوفِي
ٱلۡكَيۡلَ وَأَنَا۠ خَيۡرُ ٱلۡمُنزِلِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

And when he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? (59)

فَإِن لَّمۡ تَأۡتُونِي بِهِۦ فَلَا كَيۡلَ لَكُمۡ عِندِي
وَلَا تَقۡرَبُونِ ﴿٦٠﴾

But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.' (60)

قَالُواْ سَنُرَٰوِدُ عَنۡهُ أَبَاهُ وَإِنَّا لَفَٰعِلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so.' (61)

وَقَالَ لِفِتۡيَٰنِهِ ٱجۡعَلُواْ بِضَٰعَتَهُمۡ فِي رِحَالِهِمۡ
لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَعۡرِفُونَهَآ إِذَا ٱنقَلَبُوٓاْ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهِمۡ
لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَرۡجِعُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Joseph said to his servants: 'Place their merchandise in their camel- packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back.' (62)

فَلَمَّا رَجَعُوٓاْ إِلَىٰٓ أَبِيهِمۡ قَالُواْ يَٰٓأَبَانَا مُنِعَ
مِنَّا ٱلۡكَيۡلُ فَأَرۡسِلۡ مَعَنَآ أَخَانَا نَكۡتَلۡ
وَإِنَّا لَهُۥ لَحَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

When they returned to their father, they said: 'Father, any [further] grain is henceforth denied us. Therefore, send our brother with us so that we may obtain our full measure [of grain]. We will take good care of him.' (63)

قَالَ هَلۡ ءَامَنُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ إِلَّا كَمَآ أَمِنتُكُمۡ عَلَىٰٓ أَخِيهِ مِن قَبۡلُۖ فَٱللَّهُ خَيۡرٌ حَٰفِظٗاۖ وَهُوَ أَرۡحَمُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ٦٤

He replied: 'Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past? But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.' (64)

وَلَمَّا فَتَحُواْ مَتَٰعَهُمۡ وَجَدُواْ بِضَٰعَتَهُمۡ رُدَّتۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡۖ قَالُواْ يَٰٓأَبَانَا مَا نَبۡغِيۖ هَٰذِهِۦ بِضَٰعَتُنَا رُدَّتۡ إِلَيۡنَاۖ وَنَمِيرُ أَهۡلَنَا وَنَحۡفَظُ أَخَانَا وَنَزۡدَادُ كَيۡلَ بَعِيرٖۖ ذَٰلِكَ كَيۡلٞ يَسِيرٞ ٦٥

When they opened their camel- packs, they discovered that their merchandise had been returned to them. 'Father,' they said, 'what more could we desire? Here is our merchandise: it has been returned to us. We will buy provisions for our people, and we will take good care of our brother. We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.' (65)

قَالَ لَنۡ أُرۡسِلَهُۥ مَعَكُمۡ حَتَّىٰ تُؤۡتُونِ مَوۡثِقٗا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ لَتَأۡتُنَّنِي بِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن يُحَاطَ بِكُمۡۖ فَلَمَّآ ءَاتَوۡهُ مَوۡثِقَهُمۡ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ مَا نَقُولُ وَكِيلٞ ٦٦

He said: 'I will not send him with you until you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will indeed bring him back to me, unless the worst befalls you.' When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say.' (66)

وَقَالَ يَٰبَنِيَّ لَا تَدۡخُلُواْ مِنۢ بَابٖ وَٰحِدٖ وَٱدۡخُلُواْ مِنۡ أَبۡوَٰبٖ مُّتَفَرِّقَةٖۖ وَمَآ أُغۡنِي عَنكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَيۡءٍۖ إِنِ ٱلۡحُكۡمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِۖ عَلَيۡهِ تَوَكَّلۡتُۖ وَعَلَيۡهِ فَلۡيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلۡمُتَوَكِّلُونَ ٦٧

And he added: 'My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.' (67)

وَلَمَّا دَخَلُواْ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ أَمَرَهُمۡ أَبُوهُم مَّا كَانَ يُغۡنِي عَنۡهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَيۡءٍ إِلَّا حَاجَةً فِي نَفۡسِ يَعۡقُوبَ قَضَىٰهَاۚ وَإِنَّهُۥ لَذُو عِلۡمٍ لِّمَا عَلَّمۡنَٰهُ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٦٨

And when they entered as their father had bidden them, it did not profit them in the least against God. It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled. He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it. (68)

وَلَمَّا دَخَلُواْ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ ءَاوَىٰٓ إِلَيۡهِ أَخَاهُۖ قَالَ إِنِّيٓ أَنَا۠ أَخُوكَ فَلَا تَبۡتَئِسۡ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٦٩

And when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother to himself, and said: 'I am your brother. Do not grieve over their past deeds.' (69)

فَلَمَّا جَهَّزَهُم بِجَهَازِهِمۡ جَعَلَ ٱلسِّقَايَةَ فِي رَحۡلِ أَخِيهِ ثُمَّ أَذَّنَ مُؤَذِّنٌ أَيَّتُهَا ٱلۡعِيرُ إِنَّكُمۡ لَسَٰرِقُونَ ٧٠

And when he had given them their provisions, he placed the [King's] drinking-cup in his brother's camel-pack. Then an announcer called out: 'You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves.' (70)

قَالُواْ وَأَقۡبَلُواْ عَلَيۡهِم مَّاذَا تَفۡقِدُونَ ٧١

Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' (71)

قَالُواْ نَفۡقِدُ صُوَاعَ ٱلۡمَلِكِ وَلِمَن جَآءَ بِهِۦ حِمۡلُ بَعِيرٖ وَأَنَا۠ بِهِۦ زَعِيمٞ ٧٢

'We have lost the King's goblet,' they answered. 'Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it.' (72)

قَالُواْ تَٱللَّهِ لَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتُم مَّا جِئۡنَا لِنُفۡسِدَ

They said: 'By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' (73)

فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا كُنَّا سَٰرِقِينَ ٧٣

[The Egyptians] said: 'But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' (74)

قَالُواْ فَمَا جَزَٰٓؤُهُۥٓ إِن كُنتُمۡ كَٰذِبِينَ ٧٤

They replied: 'He in whose camel-pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' (75)

قَالُواْ جَزَٰٓؤُهُۥ مَن وُجِدَ فِي رَحۡلِهِۦ فَهُوَ جَزَٰٓؤُهُۥۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٧٥

Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. (76)

فَبَدَأَ بِأَوۡعِيَتِهِمۡ قَبۡلَ وِعَآءِ أَخِيهِ ثُمَّ ٱسۡتَخۡرَجَهَا مِن وِعَآءِ أَخِيهِۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كِدۡنَا لِيُوسُفَۖ مَا كَانَ لِيَأۡخُذَ أَخَاهُ فِي دِينِ ٱلۡمَلِكِ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُۚ نَرۡفَعُ دَرَجَٰتٖ مَّن نَّشَآءُۗ وَفَوۡقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلۡمٍ عَلِيمٞ ٧٦

[Joseph's brothers] said: 'If he has stolen — well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of.' (77)

۞ قَالُوٓاْ إِن يَسۡرِقۡ فَقَدۡ سَرَقَ أَخٞ لَّهُۥ مِن قَبۡلُۚ فَأَسَرَّهَا يُوسُفُ فِي نَفۡسِهِۦ وَلَمۡ يُبۡدِهَا لَهُمۡۚ قَالَ أَنتُمۡ شَرّٞ مَّكَانٗاۖ وَٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا تَصِفُونَ ٧٧

They said: 'Chief Minister, this lad has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed

قَالُواْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡعَزِيزُ إِنَّ لَهُۥٓ أَبٗا شَيۡخٗا كَبِيرٗا فَخُذۡ أَحَدَنَا مَكَانَهُۥٓۖ إِنَّا نَرَىٰكَ مِنَ

a generous man.' (78)	ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾
He answered: 'God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.' (79)	قَالَ مَعَاذَ ٱللَّهِ أَن نَّأْخُذَ إِلَّا مَن وَجَدْنَا مَتَٰعَنَا عِندَهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِذًا لَّظَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

An Encounter with Lost Brothers

Years went by, but the *sūrah* leaves out what happened during them. It does not speak about the years of rich harvest, and how the people went about making the best use of them in their agriculture. Nor does it speak about how Joseph managed the system, and how he stocked the unused harvest. All these seem to be implied in Joseph's own statement when he requested his appointment: *"I am able to look after them with wisdom."* (Verse 55) Nor does the *sūrah* mention the arrival of the hard years with poor harvest, or how the people received them, or how they practically lost their livelihood during them. It all seems to be implied in the interpretation of the King's dream, when Joseph said of these years: *"Then after that there will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have laid up for them, except a little of what you have kept in store."* (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* does not mention the King or any of his ministers or advisors at any future event. It thus gives us the impression that all matters of importance were left in Joseph's hands. It was he who managed the whole crisis. Joseph is the one given all the limelight, and the *sūrah* makes effective use of this historical fact.

As for the effects of the years of scarcity, the *sūrah* draws attention to this by referring to Joseph's brothers as those that came from the desert, in a faraway land, to look for food in Egypt. This gives us an idea of how widespread the famine was. We realize the sort of policy Egypt adopted under Joseph's direction. It is clear that neighbouring lands looked to Egypt for help, as it became the storehouse for the whole region. At the same time, Joseph's story and his dealings with his brothers move along in a way that fulfils a religious purpose.

Poor harvests caused famine in the Kanaanite land and its surrounding areas. Joseph's brothers, as numerous others, went to Egypt after it became known that it had plenty of supplies after having stored its surplus and managed it wisely. We see them here presenting themselves to Joseph, not knowing him for their brother. He immediately recognizes them because they have not changed much. They could not, in their wildest dreams, imagine that he was their brother. Far removed is the young

Hebrew boy whom they cast in the well over 20 years previously from the man in whose presence they now find themselves, the Chief Minister of Egypt in his court and among his assistants and guardsmen.

Joseph did not reveal his identity to them, as he felt they should first learn a few lessons: "*He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him.*" (Verse 58) But the way the story runs suggests that he accommodated them in comfortable quarters, then he prepared their first lesson: *"When he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.' They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so. 'Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back."* (Verses 59-62)

We understand from this that he managed to win their confidence so that they told him their situation in detail, mentioning that they had a young half brother whom they did not bring with them because their father loved him so dearly that he could not part with him.

Hence when he gave them what they needed and they were ready to depart, he told them that he wanted to see their brother: "*He said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side.*" (Verse 59) He justified his request by reminding them that he gives just measure to all who come to buy. He also reminds them that he is very hospitable to all who come. There was nothing to fear if their brother came with them. Indeed he would receive the kind treatment for which Joseph was well known: "*Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.*" (Verses 59-60)

As they were aware of their father's attachment to their younger brother, particularly after Joseph's loss, they explained to him that the matter was not so easy. Their father was sure to object, but they, nevertheless, would try to persuade him. They confirm their resolve to ensure that he would come with them on their next trip: "*They said: We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so.*" (Verse 61) Use of the term 'endeavour' in this context describes that the matter would involve much effort on their part.

Joseph, for his part, ordered his men to put back in their packs the merchandise they had brought with them. This might have been some wheat and cattle feed, or might have been a mixture of money and some desert produce or animal hide and hair. All such items were used in commercial exchanges in market places. Joseph, however, wanted all their original merchandise returned so that they might find it when they have arrived home: "*Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in*

their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back.'" (Verse 62)

The Brothers Travel Again

The *sūrah* takes us immediately to the land of Kanaan, where the brothers are talking to their father. The *sūrah* says nothing whatsoever about the return journey, and whether anything of importance happened. Here the brothers are telling their father the most important point that they learnt at the end of their trip: *"When they returned to their father, they said: 'Father, any [further] grain is henceforth denied us. Therefore, send our brother with us so that we may obtain our full measure [of grain]. We will take good care of him.'"* (Verse 63) They wanted their father to know this urgently, because they say this even before they open their luggage. They tell him that the Chief Minister of Egypt has decided not to give them any further provisions unless they take their younger brother with them. Hence they request their father to let him go with them so that they can buy such provisions. They promise to take good care of him.

This promise must have awakened old memories in Jacob's mind. It is an exact repeat of their promise to take good care of Joseph. Hence, he speaks of his sorrows that the new promise has revived: *"He replied: 'Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past?"'* (Verse 64) He is in effect telling them he will have nothing to do with their promises. He has no need of the care they may take of his younger son. Should he need any guardianship for him, he will seek it elsewhere: *"But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful."* (Verse 64)

Once they had rested after their long journey, they opened their camel-packs in order to store the crops they had bought, but they find instead the merchandise they had taken with them to exchange for crops. Joseph has not given them any wheat or such like, but instead returned their merchandise. So, their first report was that they have been prevented from buying crops, then on opening their camel-packs they found their merchandise. All this was intentional, as Joseph wanted them to return quickly with their brother. That was part of the lesson he wanted them to learn.

In this return of their merchandise, they had additional leverage to persuade Jacob to send their brother with them. Furthermore, it showed they had no ill intention. *"When they opened their camel packs, they discovered that their merchandise had been returned to them. 'Father,' they said, 'what more could we desire? Here is our merchandise: it has been returned to us.'"* (Verse 65) They increase the pressure on Jacob by speaking of the vital interest of his household to obtain food: *"We will buy provisions for our people."* (Verse 65) They then re-emphasize their resolve to make sure that their

brother will come to no harm: "*And we will take good care of our brother.*" (Verse 65) They tempt him with the extra load which they would be able to get easily if their brother travels with them: "*We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.*" (Verse 65)

It appears from their saying, "*We will receive an extra camel-load,*" that Joseph (peace be upon him) used to give each person a full camel- load only. He would not just give any buyer all the crops he wanted. This was wise in the years of hardship, because it ensured that there was enough food for all.

Jacob finally relents, but makes a strict condition for allowing his youngest son to go with them: "*He said: 'I will not send him with you until you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will indeed bring him back to me, unless the worst befalls you.'*" (Verse 66) He wants them to make a solemn, binding oath that they will bring their young brother back, unless they are faced with a situation that is not of their own making and which they have no means of overcoming. This situation is expressed by the proviso, "*unless the worst befalls you.*" There is no other exception to release them from their pledge, which they readily give: *"When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say.'*" (Verse 66) This acts as additional emphasis to remind them always of their pledge.

When that was settled, Jacob warns them of the dangers they may face in their new trip: "*And he added: 'My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.'*" (Verse 67)

We pause a little here to consider Jacob's statement: *"Judgement rests with none but God."* It is clear from the text that he is referring to fate which is God's inevitable judgement from which there is no escape. That is God's will which will be done no matter what people do to prevent it. Hence his statement is an expression of his belief in God's will, whether it brings benefit or harm. God's will is done and people have no choice but to submit to it. But beside this type of God's judgement, there is His judgement which people apply willingly, by choice. This is the sum of His orders which require them to do certain things and refrain from others. This also belongs to God. The only difference between the two is that people may willingly implement the latter or indeed choose not to implement it at all. Whichever course they choose will have certain consequences which will affect both their present and future lives. People are not true Muslims unless they choose God's judgement and implement it willingly as a matter of their own choosing.

Looking for Unnecessary Details

The party moves along and Jacob's children carry out their father's instructions: "*And when they entered as their father had bidden them, it did not profit them in the least against God. It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled. He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it.*" (Verse 68) What was the purpose of Jacob's instruction? Why does he want them to enter the city from different gates?

Reports and commentaries provide different explanations for which there is no need. In fact these explanations are against what the Qur'ānic text wants to impart. Had the Qur'ān wanted to enlighten us about the reason for these instructions, it would have stated it, but it does not mention anything other than saying, "*It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled.*" (Verse 68) Commentators should likewise stop at this juncture in order to retain the atmosphere the Qur'ān wants to impart. That atmosphere suggests that Jacob feared something for his children, which he felt could be prevented by their entering the city from different gates. At the same time he realizes that he could not avail them anything against God's will. All judgement belongs to God, and all trust must be placed in Him. It was only in an intuitive sense he gave his children this instruction. God had taught him, and he had learnt, that God's will is certain to be done: "*But most people do not know it.*" (Verse 68)

What Jacob feared for his children might have been an evil eye, or the King's jealousy, should he see their number and strength, or perhaps he feared highwaymen. Knowledge of that which he feared does not give us anything of substance to add to the subject of the *sūrah.* It only provides a way for commentators to deviate from the highly effective treatment of the subject in the Qur'ān. On our part, we will leave out the reason for Jacob's instructions and the whole trip with whatever events it might have witnessed, because the *sūrah* does not mention any of these. We will look at the next scene when Joseph's brothers have arrived in Egypt.

A Theft is Announced

"*And when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother to himself and said: 'I am your brother. Do not grieve over their past deeds.'*" (Verse 69) We note how the *sūrah* does not keep us in suspense but tells us very quickly that Joseph took his brother aside for a private talk telling him that he was his own brother. He also tells him not to bother himself with what his brothers did to him. The *sūrah* tells us straightaway about that, although naturally it must have happened sometime after their arrival, when Joseph has had a chance to speak to his brother in private. Nevertheless, this was the first thought in Joseph's mind when his brothers entered his place and when he saw his full brother after such a long time. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions it as the first action because it is the first thought. This is one of the finer

aspects of the style of this remarkable book.

The *sūrah* then leaves out any details of the hospitality Joseph may have offered his brothers. It simply moves straight to the last scene when the brothers are about to depart. We are made aware of Joseph's plan to keep his brother with him so that his half brothers learn some necessary lessons, which are also useful to all people and all generations: *"And when he had given them their provisions, he placed the [King's] drinking-cup in his brother's camel pack. Then an announcer called out: 'You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves.' Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' 'We have lost the King's goblet,' they answered. 'Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it.' They said: By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' [The Egyptians] said: But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' They replied: 'He in whose camel pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. [Joseph's brothers] said: If he has stolen — well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself': 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of' They said: 'Chief Minister, this lad has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed a generous man.' He answered: 'God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers."* (Verses 70-79)

This is a sensational scene, full of movement, action and surprise. Indeed it is one of the most exciting scenes portraying all sorts of reactions. But it is at the same time a real scene portrayed in a breathtaking manner. Very stealthily Joseph puts the King's goblet in the camel-pack which belonged to his younger brother to fulfil a plan which God has inspired him with, and of which we will learn presently. The King's goblet is normally made of gold. It is said that it was used for drinking, but the bottom part was used to measure the wheat, which was a scarce commodity during the years of drought and the famine they brought.

Then as they are about to depart a loud voice announces publicly: *"You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves."* (Verse 70) Joseph's brothers, the children of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, are alarmed at this announcement accusing them of theft. Hence they turn back to defend themselves, asking first: *"What is it that you have lost?"* (Verse 71) The boys who attend to getting people ready for departure, or the guard, one of whom made the announcement, said: *"We have lost the King's goblet."* (Verse 72) Then there is a further announcement pledging a reward for anyone who brings it forward voluntarily. The reward is very valuable in the prevailing

circumstances: *"Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it."* (Verse 72)

But Joseph's brothers are certain of their innocence. They have not stolen anything. Indeed they have not come to steal or to commit any violation of common law because such violation poisons relations between communities. Hence they make an oath of their innocence: *"By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land."* (Verse 73) They plead their innocence reminding the people that their own status, family and appearance speak for their character and that they would never commit such an offence: *"We are no thieves."* (Verse 73)

Joseph Arrests His Brother

At this point, a challenge was put to them by the guards or staff: *"But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?"* (Verse 74)

Here a part of the design which God has inspired Joseph to employ is revealed. It was customary in Jacob's faith that a thief be taken as a hostage or captive or that he be enslaved in compensation for what he had stolen. Since Joseph's brothers were certain of their innocence, they accepted that their law should be enforced against the one who might be proved to have stolen the goblet. Their reply defined the punishment in their own legal system: *"He in whose camel pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers."* (Verse 75) A thief is a wrongdoer and wrongdoers must be treated according to the law.

This conversation took place in front of Joseph who then ordered that their camel-packs be searched. Wise as he was, he started by searching the camel-packs of his half brothers before that of his younger brother's, so that he did not raise any doubt about the matter: *"Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag."* (Verse 76) The narrative leaves us to imagine the great shock Jacob's sons experienced when they were absolutely certain of their innocence, swearing to it in one voice. It mentions nothing of all this, leaving us instead to contemplate it.

Meanwhile it comments on certain objectives behind the story while Jacob's sons and the onlookers come to themselves: *"Thus did We contrive for Joseph."* (Verse 76) This means that it was God who devised this careful plan for Joseph. *"He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother."* (Verse 76) Had he applied the King's law, he would not have been able to detain his brother; he would have only been able to punish the thief for his theft. He only could detain his brother by the fact that his brothers declared their willingness to implement their own faith. This is the scheme God made for Joseph, inspiring him with its working, or it is what God 'contrived' for him. 'Contrivance', or the Arabic word used for it, *kidnā,* refers to a subtle design

intended for certain ends, good or bad as may be the case, but it is more often used with bad ends in mind. On the surface, this whole design seemed wicked, as it involved a misfortune happening to his young brother, and an embarrassing situation for his other brothers which they would have to face when they returned to their father. Moreover, it would be a sad event for his father, albeit temporarily. Hence, the *sūrah* calls it a contrivance or a plot, using the whole range of meanings for the word, and referring to its appearance in the first place. This is an aspect of the subtlety of Qur'ānic expression.

"He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed." (Verse 76) His will takes the course we have seen. The verse refers here to the high position achieved by Joseph: *"We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will,"* (Verse 76) and to the great knowledge he has been given, while reminding us that God's knowledge is perfect and complete: *"But above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all."* (Verse 76) This last comment is a fine way of putting things in proper perspective.

We need to pause a little here to reflect on this fine Qur'ānic expression: *"Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother."* (Verse 76) We note first that in the original Arabic text the Qur'ān uses the word *dīn* to refer to the King's law and system. This is the Arabic word for 'religion'. Its usage here defines the exact meaning of *dīn* in this context, which is, as we have just said, 'the King's law and system of government,' which did not punish a thief with slavery. That was the law of Jacob based on his faith. Joseph's brothers accepted the implementation of this law, and Joseph applied it to them when he found the King's drinking cup in his younger brother's camel-pack.

Thus the Qur'ān describes a system of government and law as *dīn.* It is a meaning all people have forgotten in these days of ignorance, including those who call themselves Muslims and those who follow un-Islamic systems, or *jāhiliyyah.* All of them limit the significance of *dīn* to beliefs and worship rituals. They consider anyone who believes in God's oneness and acknowledges the truth conveyed by His Messenger and believes in God's angels, revealed books, messengers, and in the Day of Judgement and the working of God's will, as a follower of the divine faith. They do this even though such a person may submit to, and acknowledge, the sovereignty of different lords besides God. The Qur'ān defines the King's *dīn* as his system of government and legal code. The same applies to God's *dīn,* which means His law.

The significance of the term 'God's *dīn'* has weakened and shrunken in people's perception to the extent that most people today limit it to beliefs and worship rituals. But this was not the case when this *dīn* was conveyed by Adam and Noah through to the days of Muĥammad (peace be upon them all). It has always meant submission to God alone, being committed to His law and rejecting any other legislation. It also

signifies that He alone is God in heaven and God on earth, and that He alone is the Lord of all mankind. Thus it combines God's sovereignty, law and authority. The difference between believers and unbelievers is that the first submit to God's law alone, while those who accept the 'King's *dīn'* submit to the King's system and law. Or they may take a mixture of the two, submitting to God in matters of belief and worship and to some other authority in matters of systems and laws. This is a basic concept of the Islamic faith and it is essentially known to all.

Some people try to find excuses for people on the grounds of their lack of understanding of the significance of the term 'God's *dīn'*, which prevents them from insisting on, or thinking about, the implementation of God's law. They say that their ignorance means that they cannot be classified as polytheists associating partners with God. For myself, I cannot see how people's ignorance of the truth of this faith puts them within its boundaries. To believe in a certain truth comes only after knowing it. How can people be said to believe in a faith when they do not know its true significance or what it means?

Their ignorance may exempt people from accountability on the Day of Judgement, or it may reduce their punishment, or it may put the blame for their failure on those who did not teach them the true meaning of this faith of Islam when they were fully aware of it. But this is a matter that God will decide as He pleases. Argument about reward and punishment in the hereafter is generally futile. It is of no concern to the advocates of Islam in this life. What concerns us is to say that people's beliefs today are not exactly the same as God's faith which signifies, according to clear Qur'ānic statements, the law and system He has revealed. Whoever submits to these belongs to God's faith, or *dīn,* and whoever submits to the King's system and legal code belongs to the King's *dīn.* There can be no argument over this. Those who are unaware of the true significance of this faith cannot be believers in it, because their ignorance includes its basic meaning. Logically, a person who does not know the basic meaning of a faith cannot be a believer in it.

It is indeed much better that instead of trying to find excuses for such people, we should try to make clear to them what faith, or *dīn* signifies. They will then be in a position to either accept or reject it, fully aware of the implications of their response.

This is indeed better for us and for the people themselves. It is better for us because it relieves us of the responsibility for the erroneous ways which people follow as a result of their ignorance of the true nature and significance of *dīn,* which results from lack of belief in it. Making the significance of their attitude clear to people, showing them that they are indeed following the King's *dīn* rather than God's faith, is also better for them as it may shake them to the extent that they decide to abandon their erroneous ways and follow Islam. That was indeed what God's

messengers did, and it is what the advocates of the divine faith should do in all communities and at all times when they confront a state of *jāhiliyyah.*

Unsuccessful Appeal

Turning back to Joseph's brothers whose grudge against Joseph and his brother has been aroused, we find them trying their best to deny having anything to do with theft, while they attach it to the other branch of their father's children: "*They said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.'*" (Verse 77) There are countless reports which try to endorse their statement, quoting various excuses and legends, forgetting that these people had themselves previously lied to their father about Joseph. These attempts forget that they could lie again to Egypt's Chief Minister in order to deny their responsibility for an embarrassing act. They thus try to absolve themselves of anything to do with Joseph and his younger brother. Their action shows that they still harboured a grudge against both Joseph and his brother. Hence they put the blame squarely on these two.

"*Joseph kept his secret to himself revealed nothing to them.*" (Verse 77) He simply bore their accusation without showing that he was affected by it, knowing that both he and his brother were totally innocent. He only said to them: "*You are in a far worse position.*" (Verse 77) What this means is that their false accusation put them in a far worse position in God's sight than that of the accused. His is a statement of fact, not an insult. "*God knows best what you are speaking of*" (Verse 77) This he says so as not to enter into any argument about their accusation, which he presumably had nothing to do with.

They, however, now start to feel the embarrassing situation they are in. They remembered the solemn pledge they gave to their father when he made it a condition of his consent to send their brother with them that they would "*indeed bring him back to me*", unless the worst befell them. Hence they appeal to Joseph to let their younger brother return with them, pleading the suffering that his detention would cause to his old father. They offer one of themselves in his place, if he would not free him for the sake of his aged father. They further appeal to his kindness and compassion, saying to him: "*Chief Minister, this lad has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed a generous man.*" (Verse 78)

Joseph, however, wanted to teach them a lesson, and he wanted to arouse their interest in the surprise he was preparing for them, and for his father and all who knew him, so that its effect would be appreciated by all. Hence he rejects their offer out of hand: "*God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.*" (Verse 79) He does not say that he would not take an innocent person in place of a thief, because he knew that his

brother was no thief. He expresses the situation very precisely and accurately: *"God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property."* That is the whole situation without any addition to make the accusation appear true or false. He further comments, *"for then we would be wrongdoers."* We have no wish to do anyone any wrong. That concludes the whole episode, and Joseph's brothers knew then that their appeals would not bring any desired result. They retreated to reflect on the situation they now faced.

5
A Child's Dream Comes True

فَلَمَّا ٱسْتَيْـَٔسُوا۟ مِنْهُ خَلَصُوا۟ نَجِيًّا ۖ قَالَ
كَبِيرُهُمْ أَلَمْ تَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ أَبَاكُمْ قَدْ
أَخَذَ عَلَيْكُم مَّوْثِقًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَمِن قَبْلُ مَا
فَرَّطتُمْ فِى يُوسُفَ ۖ فَلَنْ أَبْرَحَ ٱلْأَرْضَ
حَتَّىٰ يَأْذَنَ لِىٓ أَبِىٓ أَوْ يَحْكُمَ ٱللَّهُ لِى ۖ وَهُوَ
خَيْرُ ٱلْحَٰكِمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: 'Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' (80)

ٱرْجِعُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰٓ أَبِيكُمْ فَقُولُوا۟ يَٰٓأَبَانَآ إِنَّ
ٱبْنَكَ سَرَقَ وَمَا شَهِدْنَآ إِلَّا بِمَا عَلِمْنَا وَمَا
كُنَّا لِلْغَيْبِ حَٰفِظِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Go back to your father and say: Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. (81)

وَسْـَٔلِ ٱلْقَرْيَةَ ٱلَّتِى كُنَّا فِيهَا وَٱلْعِيرَ ٱلَّتِىٓ
أَقْبَلْنَا فِيهَا ۖ وَإِنَّا لَصَٰدِقُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.' (82)

قَالَ بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا ۖ فَصَبْرٌ
جَمِيلٌ ۖ عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَأْتِيَنِى بِهِمْ جَمِيعًا ۚ
إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨٣﴾

He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All- Knowing, Wise.' (83)

وَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَٰٓأَسَفَىٰ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ وَٱبْيَضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مِنَ ٱلْحُزْنِ فَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿٨٤﴾

He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief, and he was burdened with silent sorrow. (84)

قَالُوا۟ تَٱللَّهِ تَفْتَؤُا۟ تَذْكُرُ يُوسُفَ حَتَّىٰ تَكُونَ حَرَضًا أَوْ تَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْهَٰلِكِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

They said: 'By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' (85)

قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أَشْكُوا۟ بَثِّى وَحُزْنِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَعْلَمُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

He said: 'It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. (86)

يَٰبَنِىَّ ٱذْهَبُوا۟ فَتَحَسَّسُوا۟ مِن يُوسُفَ وَأَخِيهِ وَلَا تَاْيْـَٔسُوا۟ مِن رَّوْحِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يَاْيْـَٔسُ مِن رَّوْحِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.' (87)

فَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِ قَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْعَزِيزُ مَسَّنَا وَأَهْلَنَا ٱلضُّرُّ وَجِئْنَا بِبِضَٰعَةٍ مُّزْجَىٰةٍ فَأَوْفِ لَنَا ٱلْكَيْلَ وَتَصَدَّقْ عَلَيْنَآ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَجْزِى ٱلْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: 'Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable.' (88)

قَالَ هَلۡ عَلِمۡتُم مَّا فَعَلۡتُم بِيُوسُفَ وَأَخِيهِ إِذۡ أَنتُمۡ جَٰهِلُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

He said: 'Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?' (89

قَالُوٓاْ أَءِنَّكَ لَأَنتَ يُوسُفُۖ قَالَ أَنَا۠ يُوسُفُ وَهَٰذَآ أَخِي قَدۡ مَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡنَآۖ إِنَّهُۥ مَن يَتَّقِ وَيَصۡبِرۡ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجۡرَ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

They said: 'Why — is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.' (90)

قَالُواْ تَٱللَّهِ لَقَدۡ ءَاثَرَكَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡنَا وَإِن كُنَّا لَخَٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٩١﴾

They said: 'By God! Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners.' (91)

قَالَ لَا تَثۡرِيبَ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلۡيَوۡمَۖ يَغۡفِرُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡۖ وَهُوَ أَرۡحَمُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾

He replied: 'None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy. (92)

ٱذۡهَبُواْ بِقَمِيصِي هَٰذَا فَأَلۡقُوهُ عَلَىٰ وَجۡهِ أَبِي يَأۡتِ بَصِيرٗا وَأۡتُونِي بِأَهۡلِكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family.' (93)

وَلَمَّا فَصَلَتِ ٱلۡعِيرُ قَالَ أَبُوهُمۡ إِنِّي لَأَجِدُ رِيحَ يُوسُفَۖ لَوۡلَآ أَن تُفَنِّدُونِ

As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: 'I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' (94)

۝٩٤

قَالُواْ تَٱللَّهِ إِنَّكَ لَفِى ضَلَٰلِكَ ٱلْقَدِيمِ

They replied: 'By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.' (95)

۝٩٥

فَلَمَّآ أَن جَآءَ ٱلْبَشِيرُ أَلْقَىٰهُ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِۦ فَٱرْتَدَّ بَصِيرًا ۖ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ إِنِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ۝٩٦

But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?' (96)

قَالُواْ يَٰٓأَبَانَا ٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا خَٰطِـِٔينَ ۝٩٧

[His sons] said: 'Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed.' (97)

قَالَ سَوْفَ أَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّىٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ۝٩٨

He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.' (98)

فَلَمَّا دَخَلُواْ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ ءَاوَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِ أَبَوَيْهِ وَقَالَ ٱدْخُلُواْ مِصْرَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ءَامِنِينَ

۝٩٩

When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself, saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' (99)

وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّواْ لَهُۥ سُجَّدًا ۖ وَقَالَ يَٰٓأَبَتِ هَٰذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُءْيَىَ

And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has

مِن قَبۡلُ قَدۡ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقّٗاۖ

made it come true.

وَقَدۡ أَحۡسَنَ بِيٓ إِذۡ أَخۡرَجَنِي مِنَ ٱلسِّجۡنِ وَجَآءَ بِكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡبَدۡوِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ أَن نَّزَغَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنَ إِخۡوَتِيٓۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي لَطِيفٞ لِّمَا يَشَآءُۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ١٠٠

He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.' (100)

۞ رَبِّ قَدۡ ءَاتَيۡتَنِي مِنَ ٱلۡمُلۡكِ وَعَلَّمۡتَنِي مِن تَأۡوِيلِ ٱلۡأَحَادِيثِۚ فَاطِرَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَنتَ وَلِيِّۦ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۖ تَوَفَّنِي مُسۡلِمٗا وَأَلۡحِقۡنِي بِٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ١٠١

'My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.' (101)

The Crisis Reaches Its Climax

When Joseph's brothers realized that all their attempts to rescue their young brother were in vain, they left Joseph and went away. They sat in council, deeply involved in earnest consultations. We see them exchanging views in a very serious manner. The *sūrah* does not mention all that they said. It only records the last statement which formed the basis of their next steps: *"When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.'"* (Verses 80-82)

The eldest reminds them of the pledge they had given and of their carelessness

about Joseph and his welfare. He combines the two events as the basis for his own decision which is not to leave Egypt or meet his father until the latter has given him permission to do so, or God has made a judgement to which he would certainly submit.

He asks that the rest go back to their father and tell him in all frankness that his son had stolen something, and was subsequently detained on account of this. That was all that they knew. If their brother was innocent, and if there was something different about the whole situation, it was certainly hidden from them, and they could not be answerable for what God, in His wisdom, chose to conceal from them. They had not expected anything like this to happen. It could never have been foreseen. If their father doubted what they said, and did not believe them, he could ask the people of the capital city of Egypt where they had been, and the people in their caravan. They were not alone on this business. Indeed there were many caravans travelling to and from Egypt, buying its grain in those years of poor harvest.

The *sūrah* leaves out everything about their actual trip. It places them face to face with their grieved father as they tell him their distressing news. We are in fact told only his short reply which expresses his great pain and distress. Yet he does not give in to despair. He still has hope that God will return his two sons, or indeed his three sons, including his eldest who vowed not to leave Egypt until God had judged for him. It is indeed remarkable that hope should continue to fill his distressed heart: "*He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.' He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow.*" (Verses 83-84)

"*No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience!*" (Verse 83) These were his very words when he lost Joseph. However, this time he adds an expression of high hope that God will return Joseph and his brother to him, as well as his other son: "*God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 83) He certainly knows the state Jacob was in, and knows what lies beyond events and tests. He lets everything take place at the appropriate time, when His purpose is fulfilled according to His wisdom.

Where did this ray of hope come from filling the old man's heart? It is nothing more than placing all hope in God and trusting completely to His wisdom, feeling His existence and His endless compassion. It is a feeling that fills the hearts of the elite of believers and becomes more true and profound than the reality they see, hear and touch. "*He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow.*" (Verse 84)

This is an inspirational portrayal of a bereaved father. He feels that his tragedy is all his own. No one around him shares in his distress or feels his pain. Hence, he moves away to nurture the loss of his beloved son, Joseph, whom he has not forgotten despite the passage of so many years. Indeed time has not reduced his sorrow; it has all been brought back to life by the new calamity involving his youngest son, Joseph's younger brother. This is a moment when his sorrow is shown to be stronger than his patient resignation: *"Oh, woe is me for Joseph!"* (Verse 84)

But he soon suppresses his sorrow and hides his feelings. As his intense grief and sadness are suppressed, his eyes lose their sight: *"His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow."* (Verse 84)

But his sons continue to harbour their grudge, hurt that he still misses Joseph and suffers distress on his account. They do not show him any compassion. Indeed they do not even try to encourage his hopes. Instead they want to extinguish his last ray of hope. They say to him: *"By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead."* (Verse 85)

This is indeed a cruel thing to say. They are reproaching him for remembering Joseph and feeling sadness at his loss. They tell him that if he continues in such a state, his sorrow will soon deprive him of all his strength or he will die in despair. Joseph is certain not to return.

Their father tells them to leave him alone, because he is only pinning his hopes in his Lord. He makes no complaint to anyone. His relationship with his Lord is different from theirs, and he knows of Him what they do not know: *"It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know."* (Verse 86) These words describe in a most vivid way the true feelings of a firm believer concerning the truth of the Godhead. That truth itself is also brought up here in sharp relief.

Meeting a Lost Brother

Whilst everyone else despairs at Joseph's return, this has no effect on this pious old man who knows the truth about his Lord, which is a knowledge that is not readily apparent to others. Such knowledge is based on real feeling and an experience of God's ability, kindness, grace and the mercy He bestows on pious servants. His statement, 'I *know of God what you do not know,'* expresses this fact as we cannot. It embodies a truth which is only appreciated by those who have had a similar experience. Such people do not succumb to hardship or despair in the face of adversity. In fact adversity only enhances their faith and trust in God's power and mercy. We will not say more than that. We praise God for the grace He has bestowed on us. He knows and sees what is between Him and us.

Jacob then instructs his sons to go back and seek information about their two younger brothers: *"My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy."* (Verse 87) That is the attitude of a person whose heart is keenly aware of the truth of Godhead. *"My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother."* The Arabic expression for 'seek news', *taĥassasū,* adds connotations of gentleness and patient pursuit, so that they can demonstrate something of their own souls in their efforts to find out what happened to their brothers. They must never despair of God for He may yet turn to them in mercy and kindness. Even the Arabic word *rawĥ,* used here to denote 'mercy', adds connotations of a spirit experiencing release from hardship.

"None but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy." (Verse 87) Believers, on the other hand, are always in touch with God, enjoying His grace, unshaken by distress or hardship, even though the circumstances may be exceedingly tough. Indeed a believer finds in his faith and bond with his Lord a blessing that gives him reassurance, even in the most difficult moments and under enormous pressure.

For the third time Joseph's brothers go to Egypt. However, their state this time is different. The famine had affected them badly, their money had been spent, and the merchandise they carried with them to barter for food was of a low quality. Hence, they spoke in a tone that invited sympathy, which was not known in their earlier conversations. Their complaint tells of what the famine had done to them: *"When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: 'Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable.'"* (Verse 88)

At this point, and with such a passionate appeal that tells of their misfortune, Joseph is no longer able to carry on presenting himself only as the Chief Minister of Egypt, hiding his true relationship to them. The lessons he wished that they should learn have become well known to them. It is now time for the great surprise that they could never have expected. Hence he puts it to them in a careful, easy way, reminding them of the past which they alone had full knowledge of. None was aware of it besides them, except God. He says to them gently: *"Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?"* (Verse 89)

It was a voice that they might have recalled, with features they might have remembered. Perhaps they did not pay attention because they were talking to the Chief Minister in his place of government. A thought presented itself to them suddenly: *"They said: 'Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?"* (Verse 90) Could it be true? Their minds, hearts, eyes and ears could now see traces of little Joseph in the man talking to them. He replied: *"I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good."* (Verse 90)

It was a great surprise indeed. Joseph announces it, reminding them in general terms of what they did to him and his brother out of impulsive ignorance. He stops at that, adding only an acknowledgement of God's grace to him and his brother, making it clear that it was all the result of fearing God, being patient in adversity, and divine justice. In their turn, they remember vividly what they did to Joseph. They are deeply ashamed of their deeds, particularly as they stand before him acknowledging his kindness after their cruelty, his compassion after the harm they caused him. Hence they acknowledge the disparity between their two attitudes, saying: *"By God! Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners."* (Verse 91)

A Long Awaited Piece of Good News

They also acknowledged what they realized to be aspects of God's grace bestowed on Joseph, giving him high position, and qualities of forbearance, piety and benevolence. Joseph replied to their acknowledgement of guilt with charitable forgiveness that ended the need for them to feel ashamed of themselves. This shows that Joseph came through his trial with affluence and power as successfully as he came through the earlier trials with hardship and imprisonment.

Joseph is very charitable to his brothers. He replies to their statement by waiving all reproach: *"None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy."* (Verse 52) He thus shows that the events of the past have left no lingering bitterness in him. He prays to God to forgive his brothers and turns tie conversation to matters that need attention, such as his father whose sorrow was unabated, and whose eyes had become white with grief. Joseph wants to speed up the process of giving him the good news and to meet him as soon as possible. Most urgent of all, he wanted to remove his distress and to help him regain his strength and his eyesight. Hence he tells his brothers: *"Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family."* (Verse 93)

How did Joseph know that his father would regain his eyesight once he received his lost son's scent? That is part of what God had taught him. Sudden surprise may produce miraculous effects. Besides, why should there not be a miracle when both Joseph and Jacob are prophets whom God had chosen to be His messengers?

From now on, the narrative takes us from one surprise to another, until it concludes with the realization of the young Joseph's dream which he related to his father at the opening of the *sūrah.*

"As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me." (Verse 94) Smelling Joseph's breath! Anything is

easier to believe than this. No one could even think Joseph was alive after all those long years, and that his smell would be recognized by someone weakened by old age. Hence he qualifies his statement by saying that they will think he has gone crazy. If they had only credited him with what was his due, they would have believed that he really felt the smell of his long departed son.

How could Jacob smell Joseph's breath as soon as the caravan departed? And from which place of departure? Some commentators on the Qur'ān say that he sensed the scent from Joseph's shirt right from the point of the caravan's departure from Egypt. But there is no evidence to support this. It is reasonable to say that the Qur'ānic statement refers to the caravan's crossing a certain point in the land of Kanaan, heading towards Jacob's quarters. We do not say this to deny that a miracle could happen to a prophet like Jacob involving a prophet like Joseph. All that we propose is to limit ourselves to the exact meaning of the text, unless it is further explained by an authentic *ĥadīth. We* do not have such a report in this case, and the Qur'ānic statement itself does not support what the commentators say.

Those who were with Jacob did not have the same position with their Lord, and they could not smell Joseph's shirt. Hence they say to him: *"By God! You are still lost in your old illusions."* (Verse 95) They describe all Jacob's feelings about Joseph's return as mere illusions. To them Joseph had gone the way of no return.

But the great surprise is realized, followed by another surprise: *"But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight."* (Verse 96) The first surprise relates to the shirt, which is evidence of Joseph's existence and that Jacob would soon meet him. The other surprise is that of Jacob recovering his eyesight after he lost it as a result of his enduring grief. At this point Jacob refers to the fact that he has true knowledge imparted to him by God. He mentioned this to them earlier, but they could not understand him. *"He said: 'Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?"* (Verse 96)

Jacob's sons said: *"Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed."* (Verse 97) We notice here that Jacob still held something in his heart against his sons. He had not yet fully forgiven them. Yet he promises to pray to God to forgive them after he had a chance to recover. His reply suggests that. *"He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"* (Verse 98) That he promises to pray for their forgiveness at a future point in time comes from a heart that has been hurt.

A Happy Family Reunion

The *sūrah* gives us yet another surprise. Leaving out all details about this last trip, it moves directly to a highly charged final scene. We pick up our commentary with

the family approaching its appointed meeting with Joseph its long departed son. *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verses 99-100)

It is certainly a most powerful scene. Long years have passed with all that they carried of despair and lost hope, pain and distress, longing and grief, and also an urgent, silent plea for reunion. Long hard years of a test that is not easy to pass. After all that we have this powerful scene, with its intensity of feeling, pleasure, happiness and emotion. It is a final scene that is closely connected to the opening one in the story. The opening scene is long gone, but the final one is now taking place. Between the two, Joseph remembers God, never allowing himself to forget Him: *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.'"* (Verse 99)

He also remembers his earlier dream, realizing that it is now fulfilled as he raises his parents to sit on the couch where he normally sits while his brothers prostrate themselves before him. In his dream he had seen eleven stars as well as the sun and the moon prostrating themselves before him. Hence he sees its fulfilment in the scene that now took place before him: *"And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true."* (Verse 100)

He then speaks of the grace God has bestowed on him: *"He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers."* (Verse 100) He moves on to emphasize that God accomplishes His will as He pleases: *"My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes."* (Verse 100) He achieves His purpose with grace, while people are totally unaware of how His designs are accomplished. Joseph follows this by making the same statement his father did when he told him about his dream at the beginning of the *sūrah: "He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verse 100) This brings harmony between the beginning and the end, even in the way thoughts are expressed.

Before the curtains are drawn over this last emotional scene, we find Joseph pulling himself away from the overwhelming pleasure of family reunion, and also from the pleasant security of high position and real authority to glorify his Lord and express his gratitude to Him. All that he prays for at this moment is that he should die as a person who surrenders himself to God and to be grouped with the righteous: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real*

meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous." (Verse 101)

"*My Lord, You have given me power.*" (Verse 101) You have given me all that comes with a position of power: real authority, high standing, great respect and wealth. All these are blessings given in this world. And You have "*imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements.*" (Verse 101) This gives me a real understanding of where events lead and how statements and dreams are interpreted. This is a blessing of knowledge. I remember the grace You have bestowed on me and the blessings You have granted me. "*Originator of the heavens and the earth!*" (Verse 101) You have created them all by Your design and will. You remain in full control of them all, and of all creatures that take their abode in them. "*You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come.*" (Verse 101) It is You alone who gives real support.

My Lord, all that is Your blessing, and everything testifies to Your power. My Lord, I am not appealing to You to give me power, health or wealth. My appeal is for something that is much more valuable, and much longer lasting: "*Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.*" (Verse 101)

This ending removes all notions of power and position, and the happiness of meeting long missed family members. The final scene thus appears to be one in which a true servant of God appeals to Him in all humility, requesting Him to enable him to maintain his faith until He gathers him to Himself, and admits him among His righteous servants. This represents the total and perfect success in all tests and trials.

6
One Message to Mankind

ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَمَا كُنتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ أَجْمَعُوٓا۟ أَمْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ يَمْكُرُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes. (102)

وَمَآ أَكْثَرُ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. (103)

وَمَا تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۚ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. (104)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّنْ ءَايَةٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ يَمُرُّونَ عَلَيْهَا وَهُمْ عَنْهَا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. (105)

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُم بِٱللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُم مُّشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. (106)

أَفَأَمِنُوٓا۟ أَن تَأْتِيَهُمْ غَـٰشِيَةٌ مِّنْ عَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْ تَأْتِيَهُمُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware. (107)

قُلۡ هَٰذِهِۦ سَبِيلِيٓ أَدۡعُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِۚ عَلَىٰ بَصِيرَةٍ أَنَا۠ وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَنِيۖ وَسُبۡحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.' (108)

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مِن قَبۡلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالٗا نُّوحِيٓ إِلَيۡهِم مِّنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡقُرَىٰٓۗ أَفَلَمۡ يَسِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَيَنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۗ وَلَدَارُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ خَيۡرٞ لِّلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوۡاْۗ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? (109)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا ٱسۡتَيۡـَٔسَ ٱلرُّسُلُ وَظَنُّوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ قَدۡ كُذِبُواْ جَآءَهُمۡ نَصۡرُنَا فَنُجِّيَ مَن نَّشَآءُۖ وَلَا يُرَدُّ بَأۡسُنَا عَنِ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ﴿١١٠﴾

When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved] . Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. (110)

لَقَدۡ كَانَ فِي قَصَصِهِمۡ عِبۡرَةٞ لِّأُوْلِي ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِۗ مَا كَانَ حَدِيثٗا يُفۡتَرَىٰ وَلَٰكِن تَصۡدِيقَ ٱلَّذِي بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ وَتَفۡصِيلَ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe. (111)

Overview

Having narrated Joseph's story in detail, the *sūrah* now begins commenting on it, pointing out some fundamental issues. To clarify these, it touches on certain aspects that are clearly apparent in the expanse of the universe around us, and others that are deep in the human soul, or relevant to former nations and communities, or which

belong to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. We will discuss these as they occur in this final passage, pointing out at the outset that they are ordered with a specific objective in mind.

Turning Away from True Faith

Joseph's story was not one that the Arabian people among whom Muĥammad lived all his life used to relate. It includes certain secrets of which neither he nor his people were aware. In fact those secrets were known only to the people who lived through its events and took part in them. These had long gone. At the opening of the *sūrah,* God tells the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him): *"In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3) Now after the story has been told in full, the comment provided here is closely linked to its opening: *"That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes."* (Verse 102)

That story, with all its intricate details, belongs to what is beyond your knowledge and perception. It is We who reveal it to you. The fact that it is a revelation from God is clearly seen in the fact that you could not have come to know of it by any other means. In so far as you are concerned, it has been something beyond the reach of your perception. You were not present with Joseph's brothers when they indulged in their consultations to which reference was made in different parts of the *sūrah.* Nor were you with them when they indulged in their scheming against Joseph, and against their father. Nor were you present with them after Joseph had detained his younger brother, when they were involved in earnest discussion, which involved some planning and scheming. This is also a reference to the scheming of the aristocrat women against Joseph, and of the people of the court who imprisoned him. All this scheming was not witnessed by the Prophet. It is a part of the revelation bestowed on him from on high and confirmed yet again in the revelation of this *sūrah,* which also confirms other issues of faith illustrated throughout the narrative.

The truth of revelation, the stories that it contains, the various aspects that move listeners' hearts should be sufficient to make people believe in the truth of the Qur'ān. They have seen the Prophet, known his character and personality, and listened to what he had to say. Yet most of them did not believe. They pass by the various signs that are everywhere in the expanse of the universe, without paying much attention to them or understanding their message. They are just like one who turns his face away so that he does not see what is in front of him. What are they waiting for, when it is a fact that God's punishment may overtake them when they

are unaware? "*Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware.*" (Verses 103-107)

The Prophet was very keen that his people should believe, because he knew that his message contained everything that was good and he loved dearly that they should have that good in full. Moreover, he wanted to spare them the hardship that is bound to engulf unbelievers in this world and the punishment of the hereafter. However, God, who knows human nature and how people think and react, tells him that his desire will not lead the majority of unbelievers to faith. That is because they turn away from the numerous signs that are in the universe around them, staring them in the face. Their attitude takes them away from faith, making them unable to benefit from all these signs.

The Prophet is in no need of their positive response to faith. He does not seek any wages for providing them with guidance. In fact their attitude, turning away from these signs is very singular, considering that they are freely given to them. They are not asked to give anything in return: "*You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind.*" (Verse 104) You are reminding them of God's signs and messages, directing their eyes and minds to them. In fact these signs and messages are available to all mankind. They are not given specially to a particular community, race or tribe. No price is sought in return, so that rich people have an advantage over the poor. No condition is attached to them, so that those who are able to meet it would be favoured. They are a reminder for all mankind. Everyone can benefit from them without difficulty. "*Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them.*" (Verse 105)

The signs that point to God's existence, oneness and power are numerous, placed everywhere in the universe. They are held out in the heavens and the earth for all to see. They pass by them morning and evening, day and night. They almost speak to people, inviting them to reflect and contemplate. They are directly in front of all people, addressing their hearts and minds. Yet they prefer not to see them or listen to their messages. They turn a deaf ear and a sealed heart to their profound message.

It is sufficient to contemplate a sunrise or sunset for a moment, or to reflect on the shade and how it gently increases or decreases, or to look at the mighty sea, or gushing fountain. Reflect, if you will, on a growing plant, an emerging bud, a glowing flower and mature harvest. Or look at a bird flying as though it is swimming in the air, a fish swimming in water, worms that travel in the soil, ants going ceaselessly about their work. Contemplate the countless number of species and

communities of animals and insects. Only a moment of reflection in the depth of night or the great hassle of day, with the human mind receptive to the message given by life and existence is sufficient to make us shudder with awe and respond positively, recognizing the truth of God's oneness. Alas, most people pass by these signs, paying no heed to them and taking no notice of the message they all impart. Hence, the majority of people do not believe.

The Subtle Corruption of Faith

Yet even the believers among them allow an element of disbelief, in one form or another, to creep into their hearts. True faith requires being constantly alert so that any fleeting thought that Satan tries to sneak into our beliefs, and every worldly value in any action or attitude we take are removed straightaway. To do so is to ensure that we address all our actions to God alone. Pure faith needs a firm decision in the question of who has the supreme influence on people's hearts and actions. This ensures that all submission is to God alone. No one else has any position that requires even partial submission.

"*And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him.*" (Verse 106) They associate some earthly value in the way they consider events, matters and people, or give to something other than God's will or power a role in what brings them harm or benefit. Or they may acknowledge an element of submission to a ruler or master who does not confine himself to God's law alone; or they look up to someone other than God for the fulfilment of their hopes; or address their sacrifice in a way that seeks to win people's admiration; or strive to ensure some benefit or dispel harm but their striving is not done purely for God's sake; or they may allow something to creep into their worship which makes it not purely dedicated to God alone. Hence, the Prophet says: "*Shirk,* i.e. associating partners with God, may be more subtle than the creeping of an ant." [Related by Abū Ya'lā on the authority of Ma'qil ibn Yasār.]

The Prophet's statements give several examples of such subtle idolatry. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever swears by something other than God commits idolatry." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd reports that the Prophet says: "Charms and talismans are marks of idolatry." [Related by Ahmad and Abū Dāwūd.] He also says: "Whoever wears a charm associates partners with God." [Related by Ahmad.] The Prophet also relates a statement attributing it to God in a sacred *Ĥadīth:* "I am the least in need of partners. If anyone does something, associating in it someone else with Me, I will abandon him to that partner."

In another *Ĥadīth* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "When all generations, past, present and future, are gathered before God on the Day which will undoubtedly

come, an announcement will be made in the following words: 'Whoever associated a partner with God in any action he did for God's sake should seek its reward from someone other than God. For God is the least in need of partners.'"

Imām Ahmad relates that the Prophet warned: "What I fear most for you is little *shirk."* When his Companions asked him to explain what he meant by little *shirk,* he said: "Hypocrisy. When people come with their deeds on the Day of Judgement, God says to them: 'Go to those whom you used to flatter in your first life and seek your reward from them.'"

Such, then, are the subtle forms of associating partners with God. Hence constant alertness is required in order to remove any trace of it so that our faith is true and pure.

On the other hand, there is the clear and apparent form of associating partners with God, which means submission to a being other than God in any matter of this life. This may be in the form of submission to a law other than God's. This is universally accepted. There is also submission to tradition, which may take the form of festivals and other occasions that people may accept without reference to God's orders. People may submit to norms that violate God's orders, as in the case of dress and clothing which reveals what God has ordered to remain covered. What we are talking about here goes beyond submission to a tradition or social custom which people do in flagrant disregard of God's clear orders. That takes their behaviour from the realm of offences committed to make it a belief and a form of submission. This makes it far more serious indeed. Hence God says: *"And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him."* (Verse 106) This applies then to those Arabs whom the Prophet addressed directly and to other generations and communities throughout human life.

Enlightened Advocacy of Divine Faith

Now the question arises: what are those people waiting for when they continue to turn away and pay no heed to all the signs that are present in the universe pointing to God and His oneness? What are they waiting for after they have turned away from God's revelations, for which they have been asked no recompense? *"Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware."* (Verse 107)

This is a powerful touch which is meant to wake them up and shed their negligent attitude, so that they do not suffer its aftermath. The timing of God's punishment is unknown to anyone. It may strike them suddenly, or it may be that the Last Hour is so near, and the Day of Judgement, with all its suffering may come suddenly, taking them unaware. The doors leading to the world beyond are all closed, allowing no eye

or ear to penetrate through it. No one knows what the next moment brings. How is it that those who turn away from God's signs feel secure?

The verses of the Qur'ān, which embody God's message, are within their grasp, and the signs God has placed in the universe are also there for all to behold and contemplate. But most people pass by both paying no heed, associating partners with God, either openly or in a subtle way. God's Messenger, however, will follow his own way, joined by those who follow him, maintaining the right path, without any deviation, and allowing nothing to influence their determination to follow it. "*Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.'*" (Verse 108)

"*Say: 'This is my way.'*" (Verse 108) It is a straightforward road, without any crookedness or concealed turns. There is no doubt about its being the right path. "*I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me.*" (Verse 108) We follow God's guidance which illuminates our way for us. We follow it with open eyes, knowledge and understanding. There is no groping in the dark or following sudden whims or fancies that lack solid foundation. We attribute to God nothing that does not suit His Lordship of the universe. We abandon those who associate partners with Him and show ourselves to follow a road that is completely distinct from any that is followed by those who associate partners with Him. "*Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 108) I do no such thing, neither openly nor subtly. This is my way. Whoever wishes to follow me may do so. As for me, I am going along, regardless of who may wish to follow a different way.

The advocates of the divine cause must make this distinction very clearly. They must declare that they belong to a separate community that is distinct from anyone who does not belong to their faith, follow their way and obey their leadership. It is not sufficient that they should call on people to follow their religion while they themselves continue to be part of un-Islamic society. Such advocacy is of little value and produces little return. It is imperative that they should declare, right at the outset, that they are different from ignorant communities, and that they have their own distinctive community based on the bond of faith, and following Islamic leadership. They must distinguish themselves and their leadership from un-Islamic society and its leadership. If they stay within that society and constitute a part of it, deferring to its leadership, they undermine all the authority of their faith, all the results their message may achieve, and all the attraction that message may have.

This fact does not apply merely to Islamic advocacy among idolaters in pre-Islamic Arabia. It applies every time a state of *jāhiliyyah* prevails. *Jāhiliyyah* in the twentieth century does not differ, in its basic elements or distinctive features, from

any other state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* which the Islamic message has had to face in any period of history.

Those who believe that they may achieve something by being diluted within un-Islamic society, or by presenting the message of Islam in a subtle way through such a society are mistaken. They do not fully understand the nature of the Islamic faith and how it appeals to hearts and minds. The advocates of atheism declare their identity and their goals. Would not the advocates of Islam declare their true identity and make their way clear? Would they not make clear that the route they follow is totally different from that of *jāhiliyyah?*

The Bearers of God's Message

The *sūrah* now refers to the divine law concerning the messages given to prophets who delivered them. It also refers to some of the signs shown in the fate met by some past generations. As a Messenger of God, Muĥammad has many predecessors, and his message is not without precedent. Hence people should consider what happened to earlier communities which did not believe their messengers and rejected the faith. Their fate provides some signs that are clearly visible to all beholders.

"Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?" (Verse 109) Reflection on the fate of former communities is bound to shake even hardened hearts. We can imagine their movements, actions and feelings, and we can paint a picture of them going about their business in these places, going from one location to another, full of hope, fear and aspiration, and looking up to the future, then suddenly they are motionless, with all their faculties and senses completely dead. Their quarters are lifeless, and they have gone. All has come to nothing. A complete void is all that is left. Reflection on these facts is bound to shake even the most hardened and cruel of hearts. Therefore, the Qur'ān takes us by the hand to show us the fate of earlier communities, time after time.

"Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people." (Verse 109) These messengers were neither angels nor any other species of creature. They were human beings, just like the people of the towns. Like you, they were not even desert people, so that they would be gentler and more compassionate, showing more perseverance in the difficult task of advocating the faith. The Prophet's message, then, follows the same pattern of revelation given to other messengers.

"Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who

lived before them?" (Verse 109) Had they done so, they would have realized that their own fate is bound to be the same as that of those earlier communities who denied their messengers when they conveyed to them God's message. They would have realized that the pattern of God's dealings with earlier communities will apply to them, and that they themselves will soon depart along the same way.

"*Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing.*" (Verse 109) It is indeed infinitely better than this present life which is, by nature, a life of short duration. "*Will you not, then, use your reason?*" (Verse 109) You should use your reason to contemplate what happened to communities before you and guard against a similar fate. Reason will tell you to opt for the eternal life in preference to the fleeting comforts of this life.

The *sūrah* then describes the very hard period in the life of God's messengers, which precedes the decisive moment when God's promise is fulfilled and His law inevitably takes effect: "*When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty.*" (Verse 110) This is a frightful scene, describing the great difficulties messengers face: the denials, persistent abuse and arrogant refusal to accept the truth. Days and years pass while they continue to convey God's message but meet with only very limited response. Years follow years while falsehood and evil continue to enjoy power and large followings, while the believers who are few in number, muster little or no power.

These are difficult times when evil swells its power, spreads tyranny and deals harshly and treacherously with advocates of the truth. God's messengers await His promise, but it is not fulfilled in this world. At these moments, disturbing thoughts occur to them: have they been belied? Have their souls deceived them when they hoped for victory in this life? No messenger of God would be in this position unless he had been exposed to a measure of distress, hardship, suffering and stress beyond the ability of any other human being to tolerate. I have never read this verse, or the other one in *Sūrah* 2, without feeling a strong shudder as I try to imagine the horror that would cause a messenger of God to entertain such feelings. The verse in *Sūrah* 2 runs as follows:

"*Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand.*" (2: 214) Every time I read either of these two verses I could imagine this great horror giving rise to such feelings of despair, affliction and distress violently shaking a messenger of God, with his morale getting so low, and the pain in his heart so intolerable.

It is at this point when distress reaches its climax, leaving even the messenger powerless, that support is given in full measure, and victory is decisive: *"Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty."* (Verse 110)

Qur'ānic Stories

Such is the normal line of events when it comes to advocacy of God's message. Hardship and adversity are necessary until all the efforts and energy of its advocates are exhausted. When people so despair of victory, it is given by God. Those who deserve to be saved will be saved from the destruction that engulfs the others who deny the truth and from the tyranny of those who wield worldly power. God's might strikes the evil-doers and they can in no way resist it. Neither their own nor their supporters' power can prevent God's punishment.

This is the normal way because God's support does not come cheap. Had it been so, there would be a lot of frivolity about the advocacy of God's message. There would be no shortage of people claiming to be advocates of the true message, since there would only be a small price to pay before God's support were given. The message of the truth should never be treated with frivolity. It provides a complete way of life and a code to be implemented. Hence, it must be protected against false advocates who are not prepared to pay the price. When the price is high, and the truth emerges clearly against the background of hardship and adversity, true advocates are also distinguished by their steadfastness. They do not abandon their message even though they may feel that they will never see victory in their lifetime.

Advocacy of the divine message is not a short-term investment which must yield returns by a certain deadline, or people move to a different investment seeking better returns. No one who undertakes advocacy of God's message in the hostile environment of un-Islamic society which submits to a power other than God's can think that his task will be an easy one, or that his investment will yield quick returns. He must be clear in his mind that he stands against all tyranny in human life that commands physical and financial power, and which deludes the masses until they do all its bidding, even describing as black what they know to be white. Tyrants even turn the masses against the advocates of God's message, tempting them with the satisfaction of their desires and putting in their minds the notion that God's message and its advocates deprive them of such satisfaction.

Those who want to call on people to follow God's message must realize that the task they undertake is tough and demanding. Not only so, but it is even tougher to join it against the power of *jāhiliyyah.* Hence the oppressed masses will not initially join it. Only those who prefer the truth, even though it requires the sacrifice of

comfort, safety and all the pleasures of the world, will rise to it. Such people are always few in number, but God will judge between them and their community on the basis of the truth after they have striven hard. It is only when God has judged for them that the masses will join them. This is when people embrace God's message in large numbers.

In Joseph's story we read about the different types of hardship he faced and his despair of people ever coming to realize the truth about him. The outcome however was very good, just as God had promised. For God's promise will always come true. Joseph's story is but an example of the histories of God's messengers. It provides lessons for those who wish to reflect. It confirms what earlier scriptures emphasized, even though Muĥammad had no access to these scriptures. What he preached could not have been a fabricated tale. Lies do not confirm one another. They neither provide guidance nor spread an air of mercy over believers' hearts. "*Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe.*" (Verse 111)

Thus the beginning and the end of the *sūrah* are brought in line, just as the beginning and end of the story are perfectly matched. Comments at the opening and end of the *sūrah,* as well as those interspersed in the story relate perfectly to the theme and the way it is expressed. The religious objective of relating it is thus fulfilled, while providing an essential artistic element. This is coupled with the fact that it is a true story relating events that actually took place.

The whole story, from beginning to end, is told in a single *sūrah,* because its nature requires that. It is the gradual fulfilment of a dream, which evolves and takes shape day after day, and stage after stage. Hence, its lessons as well as artistic harmony cannot be clearly seen unless it is followed right through to its conclusion. This is different from relating episodes from the history of other messengers where highlighting a single episode serves a particular purpose. This is frequently done in the Qur'ān, as in the case of the story of the Prophet Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, or the birth of Mary, or that of Jesus, or the floods at the time of Noah. In all these cases, a single episode is related in order to serve a certain objective. Joseph's story, on the other hand, needs to be told altogether in order to draw its moral to the fore. God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].*" (Verse 3)

SŪRAH 13

Al-Ra ‘d

(Thunder)

Prologue

I often feel reluctant to comment on Qur’ānic texts, knowing that my style and resources are inadequate. As with *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, I find myself ill-equipped to explain the present *sūrah.* But what am I to do, realizing as I do that our generation needs to receive the Qur’ān with a detailed explanation of its nature, method, subject matter and aims? Unfortunately people have moved too far from the environment in which the Qur’ān was revealed, and from its purpose and goals. They are little aware of its import and dimensions. Even its terminology does not carry to them its true meanings. People today live in a state similar to that the Qur’ān faced at the time of its revelation, but they do not use the Qur’ān to confront this *jāhiliyyah* as the early Muslims did. Without such action, people cannot begin to formulate a proper understanding of the Qur’ān and its secrets, because such secrets remain a closed book for anyone who sits idle, unwilling to act according to Qur’ānic guidance.

Nevertheless, I am overwhelmed whenever I attempt to comment on the Qur’ān. It is impossible for me to put in words and sentences what I feel when I listen to the Qur’ān or reflect on its text. Hence, I know how wide the gulf is between the feelings the Qur’ān generates within me and what I present to my readers.

I am also profoundly aware of the great gulf that separates our generation from that which directly received the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān addressed them directly, and they felt its rhythm, viewed its images, appreciated its inspiration and recognized its hints, interacting with it and making their response clear. They aimed to fulfil its message in their approach to life and their confrontation with its opponents. Hence,

they were able to accomplish what was, by all standards, miraculous in a short time-span. They achieved a total about-turn in their feelings, concepts and life generally, and produced a similar and complete change in the life of their community, in human life generally and in the line human history would take to the end of time.

They drank at the Qur'ānic spring, allowing no intermediary between them and the Qur'ān. Their ears felt its music as it was first spoken, and they appreciated its warmth and inspiration. Hence, they took immediate action to mould their lives and thoughts in accordance with its principles, values and the facts it presented. By contrast, our present generation shapes its life pattern in accordance with this or that philosophical approach, little realizing that the opponents of such approaches are only mortals too, liable to all manner of error.

Furthermore, when we consider what those early Muslims achieved within themselves and in the life around them, which was miraculous by any standard, we try to explain such achievements by reference to our own logic based on standards and values that are fundamentally different from theirs. Hence, we err in identifying their motives and goals and in appreciating the results they achieved. We forget that they were made a different creation by the Qur'ān.

I appeal to my readers not to make the understanding of my book their aim. They should read it to draw nearer to the Qur'ān, then put the book aside and approach the Qur'ān as it is. They cannot do so unless they dedicate themselves to the implementation and fulfilment of its values and principles in their lives, fighting opposition forces under its banner.

This was my first thought as I began to look at this *sūrah,* as if I was reading it for the first time, although I had read and heard it countless times. The Qur'ān, however, gives you as much as you give to it. Each time, it opens up to you with new light, inspiration and rhythm, giving as much as you are prepared to receive. It sounds fresh every time, as though you had never read, heard or dealt with it before.

The present *sūrah* is a remarkable one, maintaining the same rhythm and giving the same ambience from start to finish.[2] Nevertheless, it presents us with a multitude of images, feelings and thoughts that fill our imagination and address our hearts and souls in every possible way. With its brilliant light and endless meanings, it travels

[2] The Qur'ānic musical rhythm uses a variety of elements, including harmony between the place and manner of articulation of individual sounds within a single word, sound harmony in each sentence or clause, the type of long vowels chosen, and the long vowels and the consonants used in the final words of each verse. [I have discussed this at length in my book *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fi al-Qur'ān.]* All the elements of rhythm used in this *sūrah* are consistent throughout, except for the long vowels and consonants in the final words of its verses. We note that the first five verses use words with an *`non (fin)*' ending. The rest of the *sūrah* uses a long *`a (ā)*' followed by a plosive, or semi-plosive consonant, such as *aab (āb), aad (ād), aal (āl), aar (ār).*'

with our hearts to wider worlds, times and horizons, keeping us fully aware, understanding everything we see and hear.

What we have here is not words and sentences; rather, a strong, hammering rhythm pervades the entire *sūrah,* permeating its images, meanings, and finer touches.

The main theme of the *sūrah,* like all Makkan revelations,[3] is faith and the main issues which surround it: God's oneness and Lordship, submission to Him in this world and in the life to come, revelation, resurrection and its correlatives. Yet this single issue with its multiple strands is never presented in the same way in any two *sūrahs,* whether revealed in Makkah or Madinah. Every time we find it presented in a new way and new light, generating a different impact and inspiration.

These issues are not presented in the form of an academic argument, based on cold logic. Instead they are presented within a framework, which is the universe and its remarkable phenomena which serve as proofs to be appreciated by open minds. These marvellous phenomena are unending. Indeed, they look new every day, as they continue to reveal their secrets time after time. Even what was revealed earlier seems to acquire a new perspective in the light of new discovery. Hence, the issues the *sūrah* tackles remain alive.

The *sūrah* takes the human heart on a grand tour, showing it the universe in a variety of spectacular images: the heavens raised without support; the sun and the moon pursuing their courses for a definite time; the night covered by day; the spread of the earth with its firm mountains and running rivers; gardens, plants and date trees with different shapes, tastes and colours yet growing in adjacent land irrigated with the same water; the lightning generating fear and hope; the thunder glorifying and praising God; the angels standing in awe; the thunderbolt God hurls against whomever He wishes; the clouds heavy with rain that pours over riverbeds; and the foam that disappears into nothing to allow what is of benefit to stay.

The *sūrah* pursues the human heart wherever it tries to go. This pursuit is based on God's absolute knowledge which encompasses every little detail, including what is concealed or moving openly in broad daylight. It is the knowledge that records every fleeting thought occurring to any living thing. At the same time, whatever happens to be beyond the reach of human perception is encompassed by God's knowledge, including what every female conceives and whatever falls short or increases in gestation.

[3] Despite the statement in some copies of the Qur'ān, based on reports indicating that the *sūrah* is a Madinan revelation, we maintain that it was revealed in Makkah. This is clearly indicated by its subject matter, method of approach, general atmosphere and ambience which is clearly noted by anyone who is well familiar with the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* gives an impression of the nature of God's power that encompasses the entire universe: the hidden and the apparent, large and small, present and removed. The part of the universe that human faculties can imagine is great and awesome indeed.

In addition, the *sūrah* includes some parables that are presented in vivid, moving scenes and images. It also adds a scene of the Day of Judgement, with its happiness for some and suffering for others, and people's reactions to both. There are also brief references to the fate of earlier generations and how they conducted themselves, and were subjected to God's law and its operation.

These are, in brief, the main themes and issues tackled in the *sūrah.* The *sūrah is* also remarkable for its artistry in presenting these issues. The general framework within which these issues are presented is the universe, with its remarkable phenomena and spectacular imagery. But the framework here has a special ambience provided by contrasting natural scenes and phenomena: heaven and earth; sun and moon; night and day; entities and shadows; firm mountains and running rivers; useless scum and penetrating water; adjacent but different pieces of land; clustered and non-clustered date trees, etc.

This element of contrast is carried further so as to include all meanings, actions and fates. Thus, the abstract contrast echoes the physical one to perfect its general atmosphere. Thus we see the clear contrast within God's supreme power as He establishes Himself on the throne making both the sun and the moon subservient; embryos in the womb fall short in gestation with others increasing; the one who speaks in whispers and the one who speaks aloud; the one who moves stealthily in the night and the one who walks in broad daylight; fear and hope regenerated by lightning; the glorification of God in praise by the thunder and in fear by the angels. The true prayer addressed to God is contrasted with the false one addressed to false deities. Similarly we see the contrast between those who know and those who are blind; the people of earlier revelations who are delighted by the Qur'ān and those who deny some parts of it; the annulment and the confirmation in God's records. Everything in the *sūrah:* its meanings, directions and movements utilize the element of contrast to the full.

Another aspect of the remarkable harmony of style is seen in the fact that because the *sūrah* raises a background of natural scenes, referring to heaven and earth, sun and moon, thunder and lightning, thunderbolts and rain, it also mentions what is carried in animal wombs, coupled with a reference to "*by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase.*" These two aspects are in harmony with the water running in riverbeds and the growth of vegetation. Harmony is a consistent aspect of the Qur'ānic style.

All this provides some explanation as to why I feel inadequate and reluctant to tackle Qur'ānic *sūrahs* with my inadequate style. But once more the need is compelling, because people in our generation do not live with the Qur'ān. I therefore seek God's help and support in this task.

1
A Glance at Wide Horizons

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓرٓ ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ۗ وَٱلَّذِىٓ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ ٱلْحَقُّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth, yet most people will not believe. (1)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى رَفَعَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا ۖ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ۖ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ ۖ كُلٌّ يَجْرِى لِأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ يُدَبِّرُ ٱلْأَمْرَ يُفَصِّلُ ٱلْأَيَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُم بِلِقَآءِ رَبِّكُمْ تُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord. (2)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى مَدَّ ٱلْأَرْضَ وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ وَأَنْهَٰرًا ۖ وَمِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ جَعَلَ فِيهَا زَوْجَيْنِ ٱثْنَيْنِ ۖ يُغْشِى ٱلَّيْلَ ٱلنَّهَارَ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. (3)

وَفِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ قِطَعٞ مُّتَجَٰوِرَٰتٞ وَجَنَّٰتٞ مِّنۡ أَعۡنَٰبٖ وَزَرۡعٞ وَنَخِيلٞ صِنۡوَانٞ وَغَيۡرُ صِنۡوَانٖ يُسۡقَىٰ بِمَآءٖ وَٰحِدٖ وَنُفَضِّلُ بَعۡضَهَا عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ فِي ٱلۡأُكُلِۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَعۡقِلُونَ ٤

And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date-palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason. (4)

۞ وَإِن تَعۡجَبۡ فَعَجَبٞ قَوۡلُهُمۡ أَءِذَا كُنَّا تُرَٰبًا أَءِنَّا لَفِي خَلۡقٖ جَدِيدٍۗ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِرَبِّهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلۡأَغۡلَٰلُ فِيٓ أَعۡنَاقِهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِۖ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ٥

But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide. (5)

وَيَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَكَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ قَبۡلَ ٱلۡحَسَنَةِ وَقَدۡ خَلَتۡ مِن قَبۡلِهِمُ ٱلۡمَثُلَٰتُۗ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو مَغۡفِرَةٖ لِّلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ ظُلۡمِهِمۡۖ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَشَدِيدُ ٱلۡعِقَابِ ٦ وَيَقُولُ

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing. Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution. (6)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦٓۗ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مُنذِرٞۖ وَلِكُلِّ قَوۡمٍ هَادٖ ٧

Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner.

ٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ مَا تَحۡمِلُ كُلُّ أُنثَىٰ وَمَا تَغِيضُ ٱلۡأَرۡحَامُ وَمَا تَزۡدَادُۖ وَكُلُّ شَيۡءٍ عِندَهُۥ بِمِقۡدَارٍ ﴿٨﴾

Every community have [their] guide. (7)

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. (8)

عَٰلِمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ٱلۡمُتَعَالِ ﴿٩﴾

He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. (9)

سَوَآءٌ مِّنكُم مَّنۡ أَسَرَّ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ وَمَن جَهَرَ بِهِۦ وَمَنۡ هُوَ مُسۡتَخۡفِۭ بِٱلَّيۡلِ وَسَارِبُۢ بِٱلنَّهَارِ ﴿١٠﴾

It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. (10)

لَهُۥ مُعَقِّبَٰتٞ مِّنۢ بَيۡنِ يَدَيۡهِ وَمِنۡ خَلۡفِهِۦ يَحۡفَظُونَهُۥ مِنۡ أَمۡرِ ٱللَّهِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوۡمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُواْ مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمۡۗ وَإِذَآ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ بِقَوۡمٖ سُوٓءٗا فَلَا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥۚ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ مِن وَالٖ ﴿١١﴾

Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (11)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي يُرِيكُمُ ٱلۡبَرۡقَ خَوۡفٗا وَطَمَعٗا وَيُنشِئُ ٱلسَّحَابَ ٱلثِّقَالَ ﴿١٢﴾

It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope,

وَيُسَبِّحُ ٱلرَّعْدُ بِحَمْدِهِۦ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ مِنْ خِيفَتِهِۦ وَيُرْسِلُ ٱلصَّوَٰعِقَ فَيُصِيبُ بِهَا مَن يَشَآءُ وَهُمْ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِى ٱللَّهِ وَهُوَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْمِحَالِ ﴿١٣﴾

and originates the heavy clouds. (12)

And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. (13)

لَهُۥ دَعْوَةُ ٱلْحَقِّ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُونَ لَهُم بِشَىْءٍ إِلَّا كَبَٰسِطِ كَفَّيْهِ إِلَى ٱلْمَآءِ لِيَبْلُغَ فَاهُ وَمَا هُوَ بِبَٰلِغِهِۦ ۚ وَمَا دُعَآءُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿١٤﴾

To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. (14)

وَلِلَّهِ يَسْجُدُ مَن فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا وَظِلَٰلُهُم بِٱلْغُدُوِّ وَٱلْءَاصَالِ ﴿١٥﴾

To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. (15)

قُلْ مَن رَّبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلْ أَفَٱتَّخَذْتُم مِّن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ لَا يَمْلِكُونَ لِأَنفُسِهِمْ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا ۚ قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ وَٱلْبَصِيرُ أَمْ هَلْ

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of

تَسۡتَوِي ٱلظُّلُمَٰتُ وَٱلنُّورُۗ

darkness equal to light?'

أَمۡ جَعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ شُرَكَآءَ خَلَقُواْ كَخَلۡقِهِۦ فَتَشَٰبَهَ ٱلۡخَلۡقُ عَلَيۡهِمۡۚ قُلِ ٱللَّهُ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَهُوَ ٱلۡوَٰحِدُ ٱلۡقَهَّٰرُ ١٦

Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.' (16)

أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ فَسَالَتۡ أَوۡدِيَةُۢ بِقَدَرِهَا فَٱحۡتَمَلَ ٱلسَّيۡلُ زَبَدٗا رَّابِيٗاۚ وَمِمَّا يُوقِدُونَ عَلَيۡهِ فِي ٱلنَّارِ ٱبۡتِغَآءَ حِلۡيَةٍ أَوۡ مَتَٰعٖ زَبَدٞ مِّثۡلُهُۥۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضۡرِبُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَٱلۡبَٰطِلَۚ فَأَمَّا ٱلزَّبَدُ فَيَذۡهَبُ جُفَآءٗۖ وَأَمَّا مَا يَنفَعُ ٱلنَّاسَ فَيَمۡكُثُ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَضۡرِبُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡأَمۡثَالَ ١٧

He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables. (17)

لِلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَجَابُواْ لِرَبِّهِمُ ٱلۡحُسۡنَىٰۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ لَمۡ يَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لَهُۥ لَوۡ أَنَّ لَهُم مَّا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا وَمِثۡلَهُۥ مَعَهُۥ لَٱفۡتَدَوۡاْ بِهِۦٓۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ سُوٓءُ ٱلۡحِسَابِ وَمَأۡوَىٰهُمۡ جَهَنَّمُۖ وَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمِهَادُ ١٨

For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting-place! (18)

Overview

The *sūrah* opens with a basic issue of faith, namely the revelation of God's book, the Qur'ān, and the truth it contains. This formulates the foundation over which all the other issues of faith are built, including those of the oneness of God, belief in the hereafter, and the need to do good in this life. All these branch out from the central point of believing that the One who gives all orders is God, and that the Qur'ān is His revelation to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him).

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. *These are verses of the Book."* (Verse 1) This is one way of reading the first statement, but it may also be interpreted as, 'These are signs that prove the truth of this Book.' They are clear evidence that it is a revelation from God. The very fact that it is composed of the same material as these separate letters, *alif lām, mīm, rā,* is sufficient proof that it comes from God, and is not the work of any creature, human or non-human.

"*That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth."* (Verse 1) That is the real and pure truth which is never coloured with any falsehood. It admits no doubt. These letters are signs that it is revealed by God, and what comes from God must be undoubtedly true. "*Yet most people will not believe."* (Verse 1) They neither believe that it is divine revelation, nor do they accept the major issues that result from believing in revelation, such as belief in God's oneness, submission to Him alone, resurrection on the Day of Judgement, and the need to do good in this life.

Scenes of Magnificent Splendour

The *sūrah's* opening sums up its theme, and points out all the issues that it discusses. It moves on to show some aspects of God's unlimited power and some of the spectacular aspects in the universe which indicate God's wisdom and elaborate planning. They clearly indicate that such wisdom requires that there should be revelation to put the issues clearly to human beings, and resurrection so that people are made to account for their deeds. God's infinite power means that He can resurrect people so that they return to Him, the Creator who has originated them and originated the universe before them.

The superb, divine paintbrush begins to draw some of the great universal images, touching on the heavens and on the earth, and a few aspects of the world we live in and life itself. It then wonders at those who deny resurrection, having looked at these great signs. Such people even hasten the infliction of God's punishment on

themselves, demanding, at the same time, that other signs are given to them: "*It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord.*" (Verse 2)

The heavens, or the skies, whatever they indicate to people in different ages, are there to be seen by all. They provide an infinite expanse which strikes us with awe should we contemplate them for even a short while. They are elevated, 'raised without support', exposed so that we can see them. This is the first spectacle of the universe to raise human consciousness. For man immediately realizes that no one can raise the heavens without support, or even with support, except God. The most that people themselves can raise, with or without support, are simply the buildings that we erect for our purposes. We then speak of the skill, mastery, artistic touches and the perfection that go into raising such buildings, heedless of the heavens above us, raised without support, and the great power and perfection that lies behind their creation. It is impossible for human beings even to imagine such power and perfection.

The *sūrah* then moves from this awesome scene to the world that lies beyond the reach of human perception: "*And established Himself on the Throne.*" (Verse 2) If the heavens are high and great, then the Throne is higher and infinitely greater. This is indeed the ultimate height, drawn in the usual manner of the Qur'ān to demonstrate relative dimensions to enable human beings to understand. This is another stroke from the same remarkable paintbrush. It adds a dimension of absolute height next to the heights we see.§

The *sūrah* then moves to the concept of making the sun and the moon subservient. The great height that people see, with all its exhilarating beauty and breathtaking greatness, is all subservient to the will of God, the Great, the Almighty.

We would like to pause a little here to reflect on the parallels drawn in this scene. We see a great height in our visible world contrasted to a height in the world beyond. We also find an exaltation that is associated with height, contrasted with the notion of subservience to God's will. We also see the sun and the moon providing contrast in kind and time: one is a star shining during the day and the other a planet showing its beauty at night.

We move on to find that exaltation and subservience are coupled with God's elaborate planning and wisdom: "*He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term.*" (Verse 2) There are definite limits

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

and well-defined laws that apply to the sun and the moon as they move in their annual and daily courses, and as they follow their respective orbits, not moving an inch beyond them. Indeed the sun and the moon continue to pursue their courses to a time limit that has been appointed by God.

"*He ordains all things.*" (Verse 2) All matters are ordained according to elaborate planning which includes the subservience of the sun and the moon. This planning applies to the entire universe with all its celestial bodies that pursue their courses for a definite time. There can be no denial of the greatness of this planning and the great wisdom that lies behind it.

Elaborate and Coherent Scenes

It is part of His planning that "*He makes plain His revelations.*" (Verse 2) The term used in the Qur'ān for 'revelations', *āyāt,* also means 'signs'. Thus He bestows His revelations and places His signs in their perfect order, showing each at the right time and for a definite purpose, "*so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your L*ord " (Verse 2) When you see these signs clearly pointing to the truth of creation, indicating also what lies beyond them of great signs in the universe, all created by God, and described plainly and clearly in the Qur'ān, in a way which speaks volumes of God's ability and elaborate planning, you will begin to think that your return to the Creator after this first life is inevitable. It is then that the deeds of human beings will be assessed and their reward determined. That is part of the planning that is absolutely perfect and wise.

This inimitable imagery then moves from the heavens to the earth to depict its wider view: "*It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think.*" (Verse 3)

The main lines here are the spreading out of the earth so that its expanse comes into view. Whatever its total shape, it is spread out to give the appearance of broadness. This is the first aspect. Then the line of firm mountains is drawn, followed by that of flowing rivers to complete the broad lines of the main view. These are made both parallel and contrasting, for they are complemented with a total picture of what the earth contains and what life in it holds. The first refers to the plants that come out of the earth: '*It is He who... has created on it two sexes of every type of fruit,*' while the other is represented in the phenomena of night and day: '*and caused the night to cover the day.*' (Verse 3)

The first of these scenes includes a fact that has only recently been fathomed by scientific research. That is that all living creatures, and plants among them, have a male and female. It used to be thought that plants have no male sex, but it was

recently discovered that one- sex plants carry the male and female organs within the same flower, or the same stem. This fact increases the effect of the scene as it urges us to contemplate the secrets of the universe after considering only its apparent aspects.

The other scene speaks of the succession of night and day, with one overwhelming the other in a never-failing system. This invites us to think more carefully about the laws of nature. The arrival of the night after the departure of the day, and the break of dawn when the night begins to move away are phenomena that we are familiar with. Familiarity may make them less striking, but only a little contemplation is needed for them to appear before us as infinitely marvellous. We only need to feel them as if it were all happening for the first time. Moreover, the very elaborate system that helps all celestial bodies move in their respective orbits, without fail, invites us to think of the power that governs all this and ensures that it continues to function with perfect accuracy. *"In all these there are signs for people who think."* (Verse 3)

We should pause again here to reflect on the contrasting features in the scene before moving to the next one. There is a contrast for example between the firm mountains that appear well established in their positions, and the flowing rivers; between the male and female in all fruits and trees; between the night and the day; and then between the earth and the sky. These last two scenes complement each other in the overall panoramic view of the universe.

As we move along with the *sūrah,* we see this highly creative paintbrush delivering further detail of the scene of the face of the earth: *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Many of us pass by these scenes not looking carefully at what we see, until our souls go back to their nature and re-establish contact with the universe of which they constitute a part. We stand aside to contemplate it before reuniting with it. *"And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land,"* with different characteristics. Had they been the same, they would have constituted a single piece or tract. But they are 'tracts', some of which are fertile and some which are not; some are rocky and some barren. In each type there are grades and colours. Some are built up, while others have subsided; some are cultivated while others abandoned; some are well-watered and others arid, etc. Yet they are all next to each other.

Then we are given yet further detail: vineyards, fields of grains and palm trees. They represent three different types of plant: the creeping grape tree, and the high, upright date-palm and the ordinary grain plants, shrubs of beans, roses, etc. The

picture is one of immense variety and colour.

The date-palms may grow in clusters or stand alone. Some date trees have one stem and others have two or more shooting from a single tree. All these are *"irrigated by the same water,"* and have the same soil, but the fruits they give taste differently: *"Yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food they provide."* (Verse 4) Who other than the Creator, the wise planner, can do all this? Who of us has not found different tastes in fruits from the same piece of land? Yet how many have looked at this aspect to which the Qur'ān draws our attention? It is with touches like these that the Qur'ān remains ever new, because it enhances our feelings and the way these are influenced by what we see around us. These are too numerous to be fully contemplated within the lifetime of any one person. In fact they are too many for all mankind to fathom. Hence the Qur'ānic comment: *"In all this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 4)

Once more the *sūrah* draws a contrast between the adjoining tracts of land that differ from one another. The date trees can be single or clustered. Moreover, tastes, plants and fruit are all of a rich variety.

The *sūrah* starts with such panoramic scenes from the vast universe, but then speaks of people who remain uninspired by all these signs around them, visible in every aspect of creation. Their hearts and minds remain oblivious to the fact that behind all these marvels lies the great power of the Creator. This is because their minds are in chains and their hearts bound. They cannot contemplate the vast universal scenes around them: *"But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide."* (Verse 5)

It is quite amazing that after all these signs people should wonder: *'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised to life in a new act of creation?'* (Verse 5) The One who has created the great universe and manages its affairs in meticulous fashion is certainly able to resurrect human beings in a new act of creation. But such people refuse to believe this, lacking faith in their Lord who created them. What holds them back are the chains and shackles that restrain their hearts and minds. Just as they are shackled in this life, so will they be in the life to come. Their punishment will only be completed when they are thrown in the fire of hell where they will abide for a very long time. They have switched off all the faculties God has given to people and honoured them on their account. They have also accepted a low position in this life. This earns them an even lower life in the hereafter, simply because they have lived their first life making no use of their faculties, feelings and emotions.

Wrongdoers, Yet Forgiven

These people wonder that God will bring them back to life after their death, yet it is their being amazed that is indeed amazing. They even ask that their punishment be hastened instead of asking that they be given God's guidance and praying for His grace: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good."* (Verse 6)

Just as they do not look at the universe around them and do not contemplate its multitude of signs, they do not look at the fate of those communities before them. Those communities adopted the same attitude, precipitating God's punishment, and it came fast upon them, making of them a lesson to any future community: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time."* (Verse 6) They are unaware even of the fate of their own past generations which carry an effective lesson for those who wish to learn. *"Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing."* (Verse 6) He bestows His mercy on them even if they commit injustice and wrongdoing, allowing them time to reconsider their position. He allows them a chance to repent so that He will forgive them. But those who persist with their evil and wrongdoing, and remain unwilling to enter the gate of forgiveness, will find that God's punishment is severe indeed. *"Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution."* (Verse 6)

At this instance, the *sūrah* puts God's forgiveness ahead of His punishment to contrast it with those who pray for punishment rather than God's guidance. This demonstrates the great gulf between the goodness that God wants for them and the evil they seek for themselves.

It speaks volumes of how misguided, blind and abject they are. They certainly deserve the fire.

The *sūrah* then moves on to wonder at these people who are unable to see all the signs in the universe, each of which is a miracle on its own. They ask the Prophet for a miraculous sign. But what will they do with such a sign when the universe around them is full of signs pointing to the Creator. *"Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) They demand a miracle when miracles are neither of the Prophet's own making nor part of his business. It is God who decides, in His wisdom, whether it is necessary. *'But you are only a warner,'* who invites people to consider and reflect, warning them of the consequence of stubborn refusal to see the facts. This is the same task given to every messenger sent before him. God has sent these messengers to their peoples so that they might guide them to the right path: *"Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) As for miraculous signs, these are God's own affair.

God's Limitless Knowledge

Now the *sūrah* enters a totally different realm, that of human souls and feelings and other creatures.

> *God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verses 8-11)*

We are overwhelmed with the effect of these fine touches in the scene drawn before our eyes and the music that is characteristic of the mode of expression. We are infinitely surprised as we imagine how penetrating God's knowledge is, and to what depth it goes. How He is fully aware of every pregnancy in every womb, the secrets in people's hearts, the stealthy who move under the cover of darkness, those who walk in open daylight, and whatever any creature says in public or private. All of these are known to Him as if each one is followed by a ray of His knowledge, and by protectors who count their thoughts and intentions. The whole scene fills us with awe. So much so that we seek refuge with God, appealing for His protection. A believer knows that God's knowledge encompasses everything, but that total concept does not afford the same breadth of feeling as the details given here in such a beautiful image.

No abstract concept or unqualified true statement comes near to the Qur'ānic description of God's absolute knowledge: "*God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure.*" (Verse 8) Our imagination starts to follow every female in this whole universe: every female in rural and urban areas, amongst nomadic tribes and city dwellers, in houses, caves, shanty towns and forests. We then consider that God follows every pregnancy carried in every womb, and knows every drop of blood that moves in or out of all these wombs.

No abstraction or generalization compares to the statement that follows: "*It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command.*" (Verses 10-11) Here our

imagination follows every whisperer and open speaker, as well as everyone who moves about under the cover of darkness or who walks in open daylight anywhere in this great universe. We imagine God's knowledge following every individual from the front and from behind, recording every little detail at any time of the night or day.

The *sūrah's* opening description of the miraculous features to be found in the open universe are no greater and no more profound than the present verses which examine the deeper secrets of the human soul, or the far reaches of the world beyond the reach of human perception. Both sets of signs are of equal magnificence. Let us now reflect on some of the finer aspects of these verses: "*God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure.*" (Verse 8)

When God's knowledge is described as total with regard to increase and decrease in gestation, this is followed by a statement saying that with God everything comes according to a clear and definite measure. So harmony is evident between the term, 'measure', and the notion of increase and decrease or falling short. Furthermore, the two situations of wombs falling short and increasing provide contrast, which is characteristic of the whole of this *sūrah.*

"*He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High.*" (Verse 9) The two attributes mentioned here, '*the Great One*' and '*the Most High*', have definite impressions that they impart, but which are so difficult to describe in words. There is nothing created that does not have some shortcoming that keeps it within finite limits. Anything of God's creation, whether action or matter, which people describe as great indeed, begins to shrink once God is mentioned. The same applies to the other attribute, '*the Most High*'. Have I said anything at all? No. Nor has any other commentator on the Qur'ān who has reflected on these two attributes, '*the Great One, the Most High*'.

"*It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day.*" (Verse 10) The contrast is very clear in this verse. But the arresting point is the use of the Arabic word, *sārib,* which is translated as 'walking openly'. Its implication suggesting almost the opposite impression of its meaning. The shade it casts is akin to stealth or something hiding, while it means 'going or moving in the open'. Motion here is the intended feature as contrasted with using the dark night for cover. This shows that both the fine sound of the word and its shades are the cause of its use, so that the general atmosphere remains undisturbed.

"*Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command.*" (Verse 11) The guardians that follow every human being, recording every

little detail, including thoughts, feelings and whims are not described or defined in any way here, except in so far as they fulfil this task *'by God's command'*. Hence, further description is pointless. We cannot say who they are, or what they are like, or how they watch, or where they are placed. We do not want to take away any of the awesome effect that the verse generates. The description is meant to give a cryptic impression. Anyone who appreciates fine style would hesitate long before trying to spoil this ambiguity by trying to explain what is better left unexplained.

"*Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) He sends His angels to watch them all the time, monitoring any changes they may introduce within themselves or in their way of living, and determines what He does with them on that basis. He does not change any grace, luxury or position of respect, or indeed any hardship or position of humiliation or weakness, until people have changed their actions, feelings and conditions. The change then fits what they themselves have changed. But God knows what they do or change even before they do it themselves, but the consequences of their action take place after they have done it.

This lays a great responsibility on human beings. It is God's will that makes what He does with them dependent on what they themselves do. His laws operate on the basis of how they tackle these laws through their actions. The statement here is very clear, allowing no other interpretation. But it also signifies the position of honour God grants human beings as He has made them and their actions the means to implement God's will with regard to their own position, status and welfare.

Having established this principle, the *sūrah* highlights God's changing the situation of any particular community for the worse. The gist of the first statement indicates that they have changed for the worse, and as a result God has willed them to suffer misfortune: "*When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* stresses this aspect rather than the opposite because it fits here with those who hasten evil rather than good. When that was mentioned forgiveness was stated first so that people's lack of awareness of the truth was highlighted. Here, only the evil alternative is mentioned so as to serve as a warning. If, by their actions, they deserve God's punishment, then it is inevitable; it will not be averted. No support will rescue them from it.

How Thunder Glorifies God

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round to a different but related stage. Here we see natural scenes and human feelings mixed in a perfect harmony of picture and effect. The whole image casts an atmosphere of awe, apprehension, expectation and appeal. We are on our guard as we watch, and the verses here produce a profound

effect on us: "*It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and originates the heavy clouds. And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'*" (Verses 12-16)

Lightning, thunder and clouds are well-known phenomena, and so are thunderbolts which occasionally accompany them. They have their clear effect on people, whether they know much about their nature or not. The *sūrah* includes here the scenes of all these phenomena, adding to them others that speak of the angels, shadows, glorification of God, prostration to Him, fear and hope, as well as a true prayer and one that remains unanswered. It also adds another picture of a thirsty person who seeks water, stretches his hands to it, and opens his mouth to receive even a drop. These images are gathered here neither haphazardly nor by coincidence. Each one imparts its effect on the whole scene, adding an air of awe and expectation, fear and hope, a prayer full of expectation and anxiety. These feelings are all brought in to depict God's power, for He alone has power over all forces, and causes benefit and harm to all. They serve to emphasize the fact that He has no partner and to warn against associating any such partners with Him.

"*It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope.*" (Verse 12) This phenomenon which you see with your eyes is initiated by the nature that He has given the universe. It is He who has moulded this nature and given it its characteristics. One aspect of it is lightning which you see in accordance with the natural laws He has set in place. You are filled with fear as a result, because, by nature, it shakes people and has a strong effect on them. The real worry is that it becomes a thunderbolt. It may herald devastating floods. At the same time people hope that it brings benefit, as it may be followed by rain that quickens barren land, and it may cause dry rivers and streams to flow again.

Again it is He who "*originates the heavy clouds.*" (Verse 12) These clouds are heavy with the water they bear. It is God who has devised the laws of nature and set them

in operation. In accordance with these laws, clouds form and rain falls. Had He created the universe in a different fashion, there would have been no clouds and no rain. The fact that we know how clouds form and gather, and how rain falls, does not detract from the importance or magnificence of this phenomenon. It works in a universal setting that has been put into place by none other than God, and according to certain laws that control that setting. None other than God has had a part in devising or operating these laws. The universe has not created itself, nor has it devised its own laws.

Thunder is the third aspect of the rainy atmosphere. This loud, explosive and resounding noise is a result of the laws of the universe set into operation by God. Whatever we may say about the nature or causes of thunder, it is a consequence of what God has set in the universe. It is a hymn of praise and glorification of the Power that has devised this whole system. Every fine and perfected product praises its Maker through what it reflects of His fine and perfect creation. However, the immediate and direct meaning of the term, 'glorify', may be the one intended here. This means that the thunder actually *'extols His limitless glory and praises Him.'* (Verse 13) If so, it is part of what God has chosen not to reveal to mankind. People have to accept this and believe in it as it is stated by God. After all, people only know very little about the world around them and even about themselves.

The fact that glorification and praise of God by thunder is mentioned here follows the established pattern which we frequently encounter in the Qur'ān. This imparts qualities and aspects of life to silent cosmic scenes, so that they participate in the action, and their action fits perfectly with the overall scene. The scene drawn here shows living things in a natural setting, and includes angels glorifying God, being in awe of Him, an earnest prayer to God, and also invocation of partners, as well as the person stretching out his hands to the water bidding it to reach his mouth, but it will not. Amidst this picture of prayer and worship, thunder is depicted as a living entity, using its distinctive sound to glorify God and pray to Him.

This image of fear, prayer, heavy clouds, lightning and thunder is completed with the mention of thunderbolts hurled by God to hit whomever He wills. Thunderbolts are also a natural phenomenon. These God hurls at those who have changed their situation for the worse, and when He decides not to give them any more chances, knowing that such chances will not produce any change in them.

A Call Without Response

What is most amazing is that in the midst of this terrifying atmosphere of lightning, thunder and thunderbolts, and in the midst of glorification of God by thunder and by the angels, and the uproar of furious tempests, some human noises

are raised to argue about the One who controls all these forces, giving them their natural characteristics which can easily drown all argument: *"Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise."* (Verse 13) Their ineffective voices are thus lost in this great and awesome scene whereby prayer and supplication resound like thunder and thunderbolts. Furthermore, these phenomena confirm the presence of God, about whose existence they argue. They also confirm His oneness, and that to Him alone all praises and glorification should be addressed by even the greatest creature in the universe, and the angels who stand in awe of Him. What effect then could the faint voices of such human beings have in their argument about God, the Almighty, the Wise?

As they argue about God, they attribute partners to Him and appeal to those alleged partners, when the prayer of truth belongs only to Him. Every other prayer is of no use, bringing only hardship to those who utter it: *"To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14)

The scene here is very much alive, vivid, expressing an eager appeal. It shows that only one prayer is a true prayer, and it is answered. It is the prayer which is addressed to God, expressing trust in Him and dependence on Him, seeking His help, mercy and guidance. All other prayers are false and futile. Do you not see what happens to those who address their prayers to false deities whom they claim to be God's partners? Here is one of them, very thirsty, seeking water and stretching his hands towards it, with an open mouth which sends an earnest prayer, asking for the water to reach his mouth, but it never does in spite of his efforts. The same applies to the prayer of those who disbelieve in God's oneness, and pray to alleged partners: *"The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14) But in what situation is this thirsty, earnestly appealing person deprived of even a drop of water? It is in an atmosphere charged with lightning, thunder and clouds heavy with rain. No wonder! These, like all other natural phenomena, operate according to God's orders.

At a time when such people associate partners with God, appealing to them for help, we see that everything in the universe submits to God's will, operating in accordance with the laws He has set. Whoever of them believes in God willingly submits to Him in total obedience, and whoever disbelieves submits by force. No one is able to challenge God's will, or to live outside the domain of the laws He has set in operation: *"To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening."* (Verse 15)

Because the general atmosphere here is one of prayer and supplication, the *sūrah*

expresses the notion of submission to God's will by the act of prostration, which is the clearest symbol of submission. It says that all creatures in the heavens and the earth prostrate themselves before God, but it adds that their shadows also do the same. They submit in the morning and also at the setting of the day when rays are broken and shadows are at their tallest. Thus the person and the shadow share in the prostration, submission and obedience. That is a fact, because shadows do what the persons themselves do. This fact adds its own connotations to the image painted. In effect, we see a double prostration, of both people and shadows. In fact the whole universe with all creatures and their shadows kneel down in submission before God, either willingly through faith or unwillingly. Yet those who are dumb still ascribe partners to God. How strange!

Unequal Contrasts

At this point the *sūrah* reverts to sarcastic questioning. In the general atmosphere the *sūrah* generates, showing the whole universe and all creatures in it submitting to God's will, voluntarily or by force, the only fitting response to anyone who persists in disbelief is that of ridicule and derision.

> *Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'* (Verse 16)

An instruction is given to the Prophet to put this question to them: *"Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?"* (Verse 16) But the question does not invite an answer, because the *sūrah* has already answered it. It is asked here simply so that they may listen to the answer as it is being said, just as they have already seen it with their eyes. *"Say: [It is] God."* (Verse 16) Then the Prophet is further instructed to put another question to them: *"Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?"* Now the question is put to them by way of a denunciation of their actions, because they have already chosen different protectors.

Yet they are still to be questioned in spite of the fact that the whole matter is as clear as the difference between truth and falsehood, or the blind and the seeing, or light and darkness. This reference to the blind and the seeing is a reference to themselves and to believers, because it is only their blindness that prevents them

from seeing the clear truth felt by all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Similarly, the reference to light and darkness is a reference to their situation and that of believers. What prevents them from seeing the manifest truth is the darkness that totally covers them. "*Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'*" (Verse 16)

Is it possible that these partners whom they associate with God have created something similar to God's creation, and as a result they cannot distinguish between God's creation and that of the alleged partners? If this were the case, they would have some justification in acknowledging such partners who have the power to create. After all, creation is an attribute which earns the creator the right to be worshipped. Without such ability to create, there is no justification for worshipping any alleged partner of God. In fact, they deserve all this bitter ridicule. They see that all things have been created by God, and they realize that their alleged partners have created nothing, and cannot create anything, because they themselves are creatures. Nevertheless the unbelievers worship them and submit to them without justification. This is the lowest depth to which human intellect can sink.

The comment at the end of all this ridicule to which no objection is made is: "*Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'*" (Verse 16) This emphasizes the fact that God is the only Creator as He is the One who controls everything, which is the ultimate degree of authority. Thus the issue of attributing partners to God is preceded at the beginning by the prostration of all who are in the heavens and the earth, as well as their shadows, to God, willingly and unwillingly. It concludes by emphasizing that God has power over everything in the heavens and on earth. Recalling also what is mentioned of lightning, thunder, thunderbolts, glorification and praising of God in fear and in hope, we ask: what heart can stand up to all this unless it is blind, living in the depths of darkness until death overtakes it?

Again there are contrasts in the scene here between fear and hope, sudden lightning and heavy clouds, for the heaviness of the clouds not only refers to the rain they carry but also contrasts with the speed of lightning. The contrasts here are also between the fact that thunder glorifies and praises God while the angels do the same, as also between a true prayer and one that goes in vain. Similarly there is a contrast between the heavens and earth, the prostration of all living things willingly and unwillingly, persons and shadows, morning and evening, the seeing and the blind, darkness and light, the overpowering Creator and alleged partners who create nothing and who can cause themselves neither benefit nor harm. The text of the *sūrah* follows the same pattern with clear accuracy and remarkable harmony.

Truth and Falsehood: an Illustration

The *sūrah* moves on to give an example of truth and falsehood, the prayer that is fulfilled and the one that goes with the wind, of quiet goodness and boasting evil. The example provided depicts an aspect of God's power and His elaborate planning of creation: "*He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables.*" (Verse 17)

The pouring down of water from the sky to make riverbeds flow and swell fits with the general atmosphere drawn in the previous picture of heavy clouds, lightning and thunder. It forms a part of the overall scene of the universe which is set as a background for the issues the *sūrah* tackles. It also testifies to the great power of God, the Almighty. The fact that each river flows according to a measure that fits its capacity and needs also testifies to God's elaborate planning that includes everything God creates. That is one of the main themes of the *sūrah.* However, both are only a framework for the parable God sets for people, drawn from their practical environment which they see at all times, but rarely contemplate.

When water pours from the sky causing the riverbeds to flow, it gathers along the way a swelling foam that floats on the surface as scum which at times is so thick that it forms a screen covering the water. This foam continues to rise and swell, but it is no more than scum. The water flows underneath, tranquil and peaceful, but it is the water that brings life and benefit. The same is seen with metals that are melted in order to make jewellery, as with gold and silver, or to make useful tools or utensils, as with iron or lead. The scum may float on top covering the metal itself, but it is merely scum that brings no benefit to anyone. It soon disappears to leave the pure and useful metal in place.

This is what truth and falsehood are like in this life. Falsehood may rise and swell so as to look in full control, but it is no more than foam or scum. It is soon ignored or cast away as it has no substance. The truth remains quiet and tranquil, to the extent that some people may think that it has disappeared, or died or has been lost, but it is the one which stays firm, like the water bringing life, or the pure metal that is full of benefit. "*Thus does God set forth His parables.*" (Verse 17) And thus He determines the eventual outcome of beliefs, advocacy efforts, actions and verbal statements. He is the One who has power over all things, and who determines what happens in the universe and the destiny of all life. He knows what is apparent and what is hidden, truth and falsehood, what remains firm and what vanishes without trace.

Whoever responds to Him will have a fine reward, and whoever turns away will

face great suffering. So much so that the latter will want to offer the earth's riches twice over, in order to release himself. But there is no chance of release. There is only an awful reckoning and a fitting abode in hell: "*For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting-place!*" (Verse 18)

Here again the contrast is clear between those who respond to their Lord and those who do not. Between the rich reward and the awful reckoning, hell and its painful abode. This follows the same pattern of the *sūrah* in providing one contrasting image after another.

2
The Nature of Faith and Prophethood

۞ أَفَمَن يَعْلَمُ أَنَّمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ ٱلْحَقُّ كَمَنْ هُوَ أَعْمَىٰٓ ۚ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُوْلُواْ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿١٩﴾

Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: (19)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَا يَنقُضُونَ ٱلْمِيثَٰقَ ﴿٢٠﴾

those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; (20)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَصِلُونَ مَآ أَمَرَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦٓ أَن يُوصَلَ وَيَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ وَيَخَافُونَ سُوٓءَ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢١﴾

and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; (21)

وَٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُواْ ٱبْتِغَآءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَنفَقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ سِرًّا وَعَلَانِيَةً وَيَدْرَءُونَ بِٱلْحَسَنَةِ ٱلسَّيِّئَةَ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عُقْبَى ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٢٢﴾

who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode: (22)

جَنَّٰتُ عَدۡنٖ يَدۡخُلُونَهَا وَمَن صَلَحَ مِنۡ ءَابَآئِهِمۡ وَأَزۡوَٰجِهِمۡ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمۡۖ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَدۡخُلُونَ عَلَيۡهِم مِّن كُلِّ بَابٖ ﴿٢٣﴾

gardens of perpetual bliss, which they will enter together with the righteous from among their parents, their spouses and their offspring. The angels will come in to them from every gate, (23)

سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيۡكُم بِمَا صَبَرۡتُمۡۚ فَنِعۡمَ عُقۡبَى ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٢٤﴾

[saying]: 'Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode. (24)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَنقُضُونَ عَهۡدَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مِيثَٰقِهِۦ وَيَقۡطَعُونَ مَآ أَمَرَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦٓ أَن يُوصَلَ وَيُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمُ ٱللَّعۡنَةُ وَلَهُمۡ سُوٓءُ ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٢٥﴾

As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode. (25)

ٱللَّهُ يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقۡدِرُۚ وَفَرِحُواْ بِٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَمَا ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَا فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ إِلَّا مَتَٰعٞ ﴿٢٦﴾

God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure. (26)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُضِلُّ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهۡدِيٓ إِلَيۡهِ مَنۡ أَنَابَ ﴿٢٧﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; (27)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَتَطۡمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُم بِذِكۡرِ ٱللَّهِۗ أَلَا بِذِكۡرِ ٱللَّهِ تَطۡمَئِنُّ ٱلۡقُلُوبُ ﴿٢٨﴾

those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. (28)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ طُوبَىٰ لَهُمۡ وَحُسۡنُ مَـَٔابٖ ٢٩

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal.' (29)

كَذَٰلِكَ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ فِيٓ أُمَّةٖ قَدۡ خَلَتۡ مِن قَبۡلِهَآ أُمَمٞ لِّتَتۡلُوَاْ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ وَهُمۡ يَكۡفُرُونَ بِٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِۚ قُلۡ هُوَ رَبِّي لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ عَلَيۡهِ تَوَكَّلۡتُ وَإِلَيۡهِ مَتَابِ ٣٠

Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' (30)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّ قُرۡءَانٗا سُيِّرَتۡ بِهِ ٱلۡجِبَالُ أَوۡ قُطِّعَتۡ بِهِ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ أَوۡ كُلِّمَ بِهِ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰۗ بَل لِّلَّهِ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ جَمِيعًاۗ أَفَلَمۡ يَاْيۡـَٔسِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَن لَّوۡ يَشَآءُ ٱللَّهُ لَهَدَى ٱلنَّاسَ جَمِيعٗاۗ وَلَا يَزَالُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ تُصِيبُهُم بِمَا صَنَعُواْ قَارِعَةٌ أَوۡ تَحُلُّ قَرِيبٗا مِّن دَارِهِمۡ حَتَّىٰ يَأۡتِيَ وَعۡدُ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُخۡلِفُ ٱلۡمِيعَادَ ٣١

Even if there should be a Qur'ān by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God's alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. (31)

وَلَقَدِ ٱسۡتُهۡزِئَ بِرُسُلٖ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ فَأَمۡلَيۡتُ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ ثُمَّ أَخَذۡتُهُمۡۖ فَكَيۡفَ كَانَ عِقَابِ ٣٢

Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution. (32)

أَفَمَنۡ هُوَ قَآئِمٌ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ نَفۡسِۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتۡۗ وَجَعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ شُرَكَآءَ قُلۡ سَمُّوهُمۡۚ أَمۡ تُنَبِّـُٔونَهُۥ بِمَا لَا يَعۡلَمُ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَم بِظَٰهِرٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡقَوۡلِۗ بَلۡ زُيِّنَ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مَكۡرُهُمۡ وَصُدُّواْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِۗ وَمَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنۡ هَادٖ ٣٣

Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]? Yet they ascribe partners to God. Say: 'Name them. Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know; or are these merely empty words?' Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide. (33)

لَّهُمۡ عَذَابٞ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَلَعَذَابُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ أَشَقُّۖ وَمَا لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَاقٖ ٣٤

They shall endure suffering in the life of this world, but, truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God. (34)

۞ مَّثَلُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِي وُعِدَ ٱلۡمُتَّقُونَۖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۖ أُكُلُهَا دَآئِمٞ وَظِلُّهَاۚ تِلۡكَ عُقۡبَى ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَواْۖ وَّعُقۡبَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٱلنَّارُ ٣٥

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire. (35)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يَفۡرَحُونَ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَۖ وَمِنَ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابِ مَن يُنكِرُ بَعۡضَهُۥۚ قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَعۡبُدَ ٱللَّهَ وَلَآ أُشۡرِكَ بِهِۦٓۚ إِلَيۡهِ أَدۡعُواْ وَإِلَيۡهِ مَـَٔابِ ٣٦

Those to whom We have given revelations rejoice at what has been bestowed on you from on high, but among different factions there are some who deny part of it. Say: 'I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.'

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ حُكْمًا عَرَبِيًّا ۚ وَلَئِنِ ٱتَّبَعْتَ أَهْوَآءَهُم بَعْدَمَا جَآءَكَ مِنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا وَاقٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

(36)

Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue. If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God. (37)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا وَذُرِّيَّةً ۚ وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَن يَأْتِىَ بِـَٔايَةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ لِكُلِّ أَجَلٍ كِتَابٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation. (38)

يَمْحُوا۟ ٱللَّهُ مَا يَشَآءُ وَيُثْبِتُ ۖ وَعِندَهُۥٓ أُمُّ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation. (39)

وَإِن مَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى نَعِدُهُمْ أَوْ نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْبَلَٰغُ وَعَلَيْنَا ٱلْحِسَابُ ﴿٤٠﴾

Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (40)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا نَأْتِى ٱلْأَرْضَ نَنقُصُهَا مِنْ أَطْرَافِهَا ۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ لَا مُعَقِّبَ لِحُكْمِهِۦ ۚ وَهُوَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٤١﴾

Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning. (41)

وَقَدْ مَكَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْمَكْرُ جَمِيعًا ۖ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ۗ وَسَيَعْلَمُ ٱلْكُفَّٰرُ لِمَنْ عُقْبَى ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٤٢﴾

Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode. (42)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَسْتَ مُرْسَلًا ۚ قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَمَنْ عِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ﴿٤٣﴾

The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are

those who have true knowledge of the Book.' (43)	

Overview

Great scenes drawn from the vast universe and the world beyond, as well as the depths of the human soul were presented in the first half of the *sūrah.* Now, this second half adds a fine rationality that deals with the great issues of revelation and the divine message, God's oneness, the unbelievers' attributing partners to Him, as well as their demand for miracles and their hastening of God's punishment.

This new phase opens with a demonstration of the natures of belief and denial of the truth. The former is evidence of true knowledge, while the latter is blindness. Another touch delineates the nature of believers and unbelievers, and the distinctive qualities of both. This is followed by a scene of the Day of Judgement and the bliss it brings to the former and suffering to the latter. We then have a description of plentiful and stinted provisions as determined by God. Then follows an image of believing hearts gaining reassurance through remembrance of God. Then we move to a description of the Qur'ān which almost makes mountains move, or the earth split apart, or the dead speak. A further image touches on the calamities that befall unbelievers or which strike a short distance from their quarters. This is followed by a sarcastic remark directed at the unbelievers' false gods. Mention is then made of the doom of past communities so as to rid the earth of them time after time. The closing part contains a stern warning to those who deny the message of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to leave them to their inevitable doom. All this shows that the strong beat we encountered in the first half of the *sūrah* now prepares us for a close look at the issues raised. Our minds are open to receive these issues and accept the message of the *sūrah.* The two parts are mutually complementary, although each has its special effects, all of which serve one issue and promote the same goal.

Qualities of the Righteous

The first question addressed in this part of the *sūrah* was already raised in the first half. Here, however, it is presented rather differently: "*Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind.*" (Verse 19)

This verse states clearly that the opposite of a person who knows that the revelation received by the Prophet from his Lord is the truth is not one who does not have that knowledge, but one who is blind. This is a unique way of expressing that which touches hearts and magnifies differences. At the same time it states the truth without any exaggeration, addition or distortion. This is a great, clear and readily apparent fact that remains unnoticed only by he who is blind. People, then, belong to

one of two groups: those who keep their eyes open, so they know it, and those who are blind, so they do not. Real blindness is that which shuts minds, intelligence and learning faculties. It is a blindness which switches off the source of spiritual knowledge. *"Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind."* (Verse 19) Those are the ones who have open minds and active faculties of understanding. When those are reminded of the truth, they keep it in mind, and when they are alerted to its indications, they appreciate them.

The *sūrah* outlines a few qualities of those who are endowed with understanding: *"Those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant."* (Verse 20) God's bond and covenant are referred to here as being absolute. This includes every bond and covenant made with all people. The greatest bond which provides a basis for all others is faith. The most important covenant which embraces all others is that which binds people to fulfil the requirements of faith.

The bond of faith is both old and new. It is as old as human nature which conforms to the law that governs all existence. Human nature is endowed with a direct understanding that there is a single power which has brought the universe into existence, and that this power belongs to the Creator who is the One to be worshipped. It also includes the covenant made with all human generations before they are born, as we interpret the relevant Qur'ānic verse: "*Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, and called them to bear witness about themselves. [He said]: Am I not your Lord?' They replied: 'Yes, indeed, we bear witness to that."* (7: 172) At the same time, it is a new bond, renewed with the messengers whom God has sent to re-establish the faith, remind people of it and provide its details.

They do not initiate the bond of faith, but they outline its requirements of submission to God alone to the exclusion of all others. This bond also requires good action, proper behaviour, and turning always to God alone who is the other party to the old covenant.

On the basis of the bond and covenant with God, all bonds and covenants with human beings are established, whether with God's Messenger or with people, relatives or strangers, individuals or communities. A person who remains true to the first bond will remain true to all bonds because this is a duty. When one fulfils the duties required by the original covenant, one will fulfil all that is required towards other people, because this is a stipulation of the original covenant. Thus, in these few words the *sūrah* outlines the basic rule upon which the whole structure of human life is built.

"And who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning." (Verse 21) The first of these qualities is expressed in

general terms, referring to everything that should remain united or joined together. Hence it means total obedience, following the established rules and the code God has laid down, without deviation. If the details were provided here about everything that should remain joined, it would be a very long list. There is no need to provide such details here. For it is enough to impress on us the need to remain constant, ready to obey, and maintain our bond with God. The last part of the verse implicitly describes the feelings that accompany such complete obedience: *"who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning."* Conscious of God, they dread the reckoning. But as they are endowed with understanding, they prepare for that reckoning before it is due, so that they will have an easy one.

"Who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord." (Verse 22) Patience takes different forms. One aspect is to persevere, fulfilling the requirements of the covenant, such as by dedicated action, diligent striving or *jihād,* and advocacy of God's message, etc. Another is to be patient in situations of affluence and poverty. However, those who are patient when they have abundance of everything are few and far between. Most people become arrogant in such situations and this may lead them to disbelief in God. A different aspect is to be patient in the face of other people's stupidities that result from ignorance. These are all adverse situations that require patience. True believers show such patience out of love for their Lord, which is implied in the expression that they 'seek His countenance'. Their motive is not to spare themselves the embarrassment of people saying that they are afraid, or to solicit the compliment that they have shown patience, or to gain any advantage or avert any harm. Their only motive is that they love God and seek His reward. Hence they endure any trial to which He subjects them, and accept what God's will dictates and are content that He brings them only what is good for them.

"And attend to their prayers." (Verse 22) This is a requirement of remaining true to God's bond and fulfilling the covenant made with Him, but it is given prominence here because it is the cornerstone of such fulfilment. It is also the practical manifestation of turning to God alone, and the relationship between Him and His servants which allows no room for any intervention by anyone else.

"And spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them." (Verse 22) This is also part of keeping together what should be united, and part of the fulfilment of the covenant made with God. It is given special mention because it is a bond between God's servants which unites them in this life on the basis of faith. It purges the giver of stinginess, and purifies the recipient of grudge. It makes life in the Muslim community worthy of human beings who co-operate with, and look after, one another and who are honoured by God. The spending is meant to be in secret and in the open. When it is secret it preserves integrity, and spares people embarrassment. When it is open, it gives a motive to others to do the same, and it

demonstrates the implementation of God's law. Both ways carry importance and value in life.

"*And who repel evil with good.*" (Verse 22) What is meant here is that in their daily dealings with others, they reply to the evil done by others by doing what is good. The verse, however, stresses the result, rather than the action leading to it. When an evil action is returned with something good, this has a dampening effect on the evil tendency in others, encouraging them to do good instead, and helping them to resist Satan's promptings. Eventually, it repels the evil action and prevents it. Hence, the verse emphasizes this result and gives it prominence by way of encouraging people to reply to an evil action with a good one.

Moreover, there is a subtle reference here to returning evil with good only when this helps to prevent, rather than encourage evil. When evil is uncompromising, it must be overpowered. To return it with good action only emboldens it, making it more intransigent.

Besides, the prevention of evil by means of good action is feasible mostly in relations between equals. When the dispute is over faith, it is normally the case that arrogant aggressors and spreaders of corruption can only be dealt with by strong, decisive action. Qur'ānic directives then should be considered and implemented on the basis of a rational and objective study of every situation to determine the best course under the circumstances.

"*Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode: gardens of perpetual bliss, which they will enter together with the righteous from among their parents, their spouses and their offspring. The angels will come in to them from every gate, [saying]: 'Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode.*" (Verses 22-24) Such people possessing such qualities have a high position in heaven where they have their permanent abode. There they will be reunited with their righteous relatives, including their good parents, spouses, children and grandchildren. Everyone of these is admitted into heaven on the basis of their own good actions, because they deserve this goodly reward from God. But they are also blessed with reunion with the people they loved in the life of this world, which is another aspect of their happiness that enhances what they have in heaven.

In this great atmosphere of happy reunion, the angels take part in their reception and hospitality, constantly moving everywhere: "*The angels will come in to them from every gate.*" (Verse 23) The image given here is very real. It is as if we see the angels and hear them welcoming the believers, saying: "*Peace be upon you, because you have persevered.' Blessed indeed is the attainment of the [ultimate] abode.*" (Verse 24) It is a great sight with people and angels meeting, greeting and honouring one another.

On the other side are the ones who are devoid of mind and insight, which means

that they neither reflect on, nor see the truth. They are the opposite of the first group in every respect: "*As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode.*" (Verse 25)

They break the covenant God has made with human nature in the first place and, in consequence, break every subsequent covenant. When the first bond is broken, all later ones established on its basis are also broken. A person who does not honour his commitment to God will never be true to any bond or covenant. Therefore, these people cut asunder whatever should be joined and remain united. This is expressed here in absolute terms so as to cover everything that comes under the same heading. They also spread corruption on earth, which contrasts with the perseverance of the first group, their attending to prayers, charitable spending and repelling evil with good. Indeed spreading corruption on earth is the opposite of all these qualities, because abandoning any of them represents or encourages corruption.

Such people are cast away, with a curse laid upon them, which means that they are rejected and turned away. This contrasts with the honour given to the other group. Moreover, they will have *an evil abode',* which is not specified because we know it as contrasting with the abode of the good who are in heaven.

This group are delighted with whatever comfort or pleasure they have in the life of this world, and as such, they do not aspire to the far superior happiness in the life to come. Yet it is God who determines what people have in this life. He gives either abundant or stinted provision, which means that He has the final say in both this present life and in the future life alike. Had such people sought the reward of the hereafter, God would not have deprived them of happiness in this life, when it is He who gives it to them in the first place: "*God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure.*" (Verse 26)

True Heart Comfort

We have already referred to the great difference between a person who knows that what has been bestowed from on high to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is the truth and one who is blind.

Now the *sūrah* speaks about the blind who do not see all the signs God has placed in the universe and who are not satisfied with the Qur'ān as a great sign. Hence they demand another miraculous sign. The *sūrah* mentions something of this earlier and comments by saying that the Prophet is only a warner, for miraculous signs rest with God. Now it mentions their demand anew, outlining the reasons that help one

person to follow divine guidance and cause another to remain in error. It also paints a picture of hearts content with alertness of God's presence. Such hearts do not worry or demand miracles in order to believe when they have the Qur'ān available to them. For the Qur'ān can make mountains move and the earth split apart. With the Qur'ān, the dead can be addressed. This is sufficient to tell us about the power and authority of the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* concludes its discussion of those who ask for miracles by explaining to the believers that they hope for nothing. It draws their attention to the examples they see before them and to what, from time to time, befalls those who deny the truth.

> *The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal. Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' Even if there should be a Qur'ān by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God's alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution."* (Verses 27-32)

The answer to their demand is that miracles are not what lead people to believe. Faith has its solid foundation within the human soul. There are causes that lead to it, but these have to originate within the soul: "*Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him.'*" (Verse 27) It is their turning to Him which makes them worthy of His guidance. It is clearly understood that those who do not turn to God are those who deserve to be left to go astray. This is indeed what happens to them. What matters, then, is one's own heart and its being ready to receive God's guidance. If so, it seeks it and appeals to God for it. Hearts which do not make any positive move to seek God's guidance remain far removed from it.

This is followed by an image of believing hearts which enjoy a congenial atmosphere of reassurance, happiness and peace: "*those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God.*" (Verse 28) They find comfort in their feeling

that their bond with God is a real one, and that they are close to Him, secure with His support.

They are without worry, and worry is normally only generated when one is left alone or when one is unsure of one's way. Such people understand God's wisdom behind man's creation, origin and destiny. They also find comfort in feeling secure against aggression, harm or evil, except as God wills for them. This is coupled with a resigned acceptance of whatever trial God wishes to test them with. They are reassured that God will always bestow on them His grace, giving them guidance, abundance and security in this life and in the life to come.

"It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort." (Verse 28) Such comfort is a profound reality in the hearts of believers who deeply and truly feel the meaning of faith. They have a bond with God which they recognize. They cannot express the meaning of such a bond in words.

It touches their hearts, generating a feeling of happiness and reassurance that they do not stand alone in this universe. Whatever surrounds them is a friend, because it is all made by God under whose protection they live.

No one on earth is more miserable than those who are deprived of the blessing of a close relationship with God. Those who, having severed the most essential bond with their Creator, feel that they have no relationship with all around them are bound to suffer great misery. Who can be more wretched than one who does not realize why he has been created, or where he is heading, or why he suffers. Forlorn indeed is the one who goes about his life feeling isolated in an endless desert, having to strive without support, guidance or help.

In life we often experience moments which none can withstand unless we are certain of God's support and protection, regardless of whatever resources of fortitude, perseverance and power may be at our command. There are moments in life that render all that useless. But such moments can be faced easily by those who find their comfort in God: *"It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort."* (Verse 28)

Those who turn to God are reassured when they remember Him, and find fine welcome when they return to Him. This is the same as the outcome of their turning to Him in this life presenting their good deeds: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal."* (Verse 29) The Arabic term, *ṭūbā,* which is used here for 'happiness' is chosen for its added connotations of greatness. Hence, their happiness is great, unending.

Conversely, those who demand a sign are those who have deprived themselves of the contentment, comfort and happiness of faith. They live in worry, and it is this anxiety that makes them demand miracles and signs. The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet

that he is not the first messenger to preach the divine message to his people. This means that they should not find the matter too strange. Before them there were numerous communities and many messengers. If they persist with their rejection of the divine faith, you, the Prophet, should continue to follow your own way, putting your trust in God alone: "*Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.'*" (Verse 30)

What is extremely odd is that they refuse to believe in God, the Most Gracious, in the remembrance of whose mercy people find inner comfort and contentedness. God's Messenger is being told that all his task requires is that he read to them what God has revealed to him. This is the purpose for which God has given him this message. If they persist in rejecting it, he has to make it clear to them that he places his trust in God alone, and that he turns to Him, seeking help from no one else.

The task the Prophet is sent to accomplish is to recite this remarkable Qur'ān to them. Had there been a divine writ with which mountains move, or the earth split asunder, or the dead made to speak, this Qur'ān would have had the necessary characteristics to achieve such supernatural phenomena. But this Qur'ān is meant to address the living who are accountable for their deeds. If they will not respond, then the believers may despair of their ever turning to God and submitting to Him. They should leave them alone until God's threat to the unbelievers has come true: "*Even if there should be a Qur'ān by which mountains could be moved, or the earth cleft asunder, or the dead made to speak! For certain, God's alone is the command in all things. Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind? As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise.*" (Verse 31)

The Qur'ān has done with those who received it and moulded themselves according to its teachings much more than moving mountains, cleaving the earth asunder or making the dead speak. In fact the miracles it achieved in and with these souls are much greater and more far-reaching in their effects on human life and indeed on the earth itself. Islam and Muslims have not only changed the course of history so often, but they have also changed all that is on the face of the earth.

The very nature of the Qur'ān, its address and expression, its treatment of its subject matter, the truth it outlines and its effect have overwhelming and penetrating power. This power is felt by everyone who appreciates and understands what is being said. Those who moulded themselves in accordance with its teachings moved what is more deeply entrenched than mountains, which is the history of nations and communities. They cut asunder what is far more solid than the earth, which is

inflexible thought and rigid tradition. They were able to send life into what was more lifeless than the dead, which is communities that had been suffering under a long history of despotism. If we look at the change that was brought about in the life of the Arabs, and their complete and far-reaching transformation, with no apparent cause other than the effect of the Qur'ān and its method of remoulding hearts and souls, we realize that it is far greater than moving mountains, splitting the earth apart and sending life into what is dead.

"*God's alone is the command in all things.*" (Verse 31) It is He who chooses what to do and the tools for the situation. If after the revelation of the Qur'ān there remain people who are not touched by it, the believers should give up trying to inspire life into such hearts. They should leave the whole matter to God. Had He so wished, He would have created all people with a single tendency to believe in Him, just as He did with the angels. Alternatively, He would have brought about something that would force them to believe. But He has not willed either scenario, because He has created man to fulfil a particular task, and He — limitless is He in His glory — knows that its fulfilment requires that man is created with both tendencies: "*Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind?*" (Verse 31) The believers, then, should leave them to God.

However, some disaster may befall them, causing them great harm and killing whoever is doomed to destruction: "*As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or will fall close to their homes.*" (Verse 31) When it does, they are left in fear that a similar one may follow, destroying them altogether. It may touch certain hearts and give them life.

This may continue "*until God's promise is fulfilled.*" (Verse 31) This is a reference to the promise God has given. He has delayed their judgement until that time. "*God never fails to fulfil His promise.*" (Verse 31) It will certainly be fulfilled and they will receive whatever they have been promised.

Examples are many, and the fate of earlier communities should provide a lesson to be acted upon before it is too late. "*Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution.*" (Verse 32) This last sentence may be read as a question, but it is rhetorical requiring no answer. For such punishment was the subject of discussion for many generations.

Foul Devices with Fair Appearance

The second point discussed here is that of the partners people associate with God. The issue was also discussed in the first part of the *sūrah.* It is raised here in the form of a sarcastic question which compares such alleged partners with God who deals

with every soul and rewards it for what it earns in this life. The scene is concluded with a description of the suffering those who invent this fallacy are certain to endure in this life and the greater suffering they will meet in the hereafter. This contrasts with the security and blessings awaiting the righteous: *"Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]? Yet they ascribe partners to God. Say: Name them. Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know; or are these merely empty words?' Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide. They shall endure suffering in the life of this world, but, truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God. Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire."* (Verses 33-35)

God, limitless is He in His glory, watches all souls, has power over them all in every situation and knows what every one of them does in public or private. The Qur'ān, in its inimitable style, describes this in a very vivid way so that we see all this for ourselves, overwhelmed with awe: *"Is, then, He who stands over every soul [and knows] all that it does [like any other]?"* (Verse 33) Now who is this watcher? It is God Himself? What soul will not feel fear to the bottom of its heart? Yet the description is real. The *sūrah* uses a rather physical image because human beings are more influenced by material than abstract matters.

If the situation is such, how come they associate partners with God? Their attitude appears here peculiarly odd. *"Yet they ascribe partners to God."* (Verse 33) Yes, indeed! They ascribe partners to God Almighty who deals with every soul according to what it has earned. None and nothing escapes His watchful eye.

"Say: 'Name them.'" (Verse 33) They are unrecognizable entities. They may have names, but the *sūrah* treats them like entities with no name.

"Would you tell Him of anything on earth which He does not know!" (Verse 33) This is particularly sarcastic. Are you, human beings, aware of something which God does not know? Do you know of earth deities unknown to God? They dare not make such a claim, yet they practically say as much when they claim that such deities exist while God asserts that there are none.

"Or are these merely empty words?" which have no real significance? Is the question of God's existence so trivial that people approach it in jest, using words that are uttered without meaning or significance?

All this ridicule comes to an end with a decisive statement that puts the issues involved very clearly: *"Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any*

guide." (Verse 33) The real issue, then, is that these people denied God, ignoring all evidence in support of faith, and choosing not to see God's guidance. Thus God's law operates against them, whilst their own souls persuade them that they are right and that their schemes against the advocates of faith is right and fair.

All this turns them away from the path that leads to the truth. A person who, by the operation of God's law, goes astray because he has chosen error over divine guidance will have none to guide him. God's law operates when the causes for its operation come together.

The natural goal for such blind hearts means their suffering: "*They shall endure suffering in the life of this world."* (Verse 34) A calamity may befall them during their lifetime, or it may strike close to them causing a great deal of apprehension, anxiety and fear. In fact, hearts that are devoid of the comfort and reassurance generated by faith, and do not recognize the presence of divine wisdom behind every event they face are indeed suffering. However, "*truly, their suffering in the life to come will be harder still."* (Verse 34) The suffering here is left undefined so that there is no limit to how we imagine it to be. "*They will have none to shield them from God."* (Verse 34) No one will extend them any protection against whatever punishment God inflicts on them.

On the other side stand those who are God-fearing. The word chosen here to describe them, *al-muttaqūn,* is derived from the same root as *wāq,* i.e. 'protector', and is used here to express the fact that the unbelievers stand without protection against God's punishment. The God-fearing actually protect themselves with their faith and righteousness against all suffering and punishment. In addition the promise given to them to be in heaven is fulfilled: "*Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God."* (Verse 35) That is an abode of perfect and complete comfort, where both shade and fruit are everlasting. It is an image that gives hearts comfort and reassurance, and which contrasts with the hardship and suffering of the unbelievers.

But the suffering on one side and the happiness of heaven on the other are the right and proper destiny of both groups: "*Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire."* (Verse 35)

A Command to Worship

The main themes of this *sūrah* are those of revelation and God's oneness. Speaking of the two together, the *sūrah* mentions the attitude of the people of earlier revelations towards the Qur'ān and the Prophet, making it clear to the Prophet that the revelations he has received from on high constitute the final judgement on what

earlier revelations included. It is indeed the final word which includes whatever God wants to remain applicable of the divine faith preached by all His messengers. It omits what God wants to be omitted, because its purpose, which is known to God, has been served. The Prophet, then, must stick to what God has revealed to Him. He must not follow the desires of those who follow earlier revelations, or those who are generally known as the 'People of the Book', in any matter, whether serious or otherwise. As for those who require him to produce a sign, they should be told that signs are given only when God wills them to be given. The Prophet's task is only to convey his message.

> *Those to whom We have given revelations rejoice at what has been bestowed on you from on high, but among different factions there are some who deny part of it. Say: I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.' Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue. If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God. We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation. God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation. Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning.* (Verses 36-40)

Those among the people of earlier revelations who are sincere in following their faith will find in the Qur'ān an endorsement of the basic rules of the faith built on God's oneness, an acknowledgement of the truth of the earlier religions and their books, a serious consideration of these faiths coupled with deep respect, and also a sincere perception of the bond which unites all those who believe in God. Hence, they rejoice and believe. This rejoicing is experienced by sincere hearts, for it is the uniting of truth, providing a strengthened belief that all God's revelations are true and are endorsed by the new divine message.

"*But among different factions there are some who deny part of it.*" (Verse 36) The factions referred to here could be found among the people of earlier revelations and also the idolaters. The *sūrah* does not mention which part they deny, because the purpose here is just to state the fact that they challenge the truth of this new revelation by denying parts of it: "*Say: 'I have only been bidden to worship God, and not to associate any partners with Him. To Him I pray, and to Him do I return.'*" (Verse 36) He alone is the One to be worshipped, and in whom we call on people to believe, and to whom we all return.

The Prophet is ordered to declare this approach when he confronts anyone who

denies a part of his book, the Qur'ān. He should declare his firm belief in the whole book revealed to him by his Lord, whether the people of earlier revelations rejoice at it or deny parts of it. The reason is that what has been revealed to him is the final arbiter, expressed in Arabic, his language which he knows well. Since the Qur'ān is God's final word on faith, all reference should be made to it only: *"Thus have We revealed it, a code of judgement in the Arabic tongue."* (Verse 37)

"If you should follow their desires after all the knowledge you have been given, you shall have none to protect or shield you from God." (Verse 37) What has been given to you is the true knowledge. Whatever the different factions say is no more than the expression of their desires which have no basis in true knowledge or established fact. This warning addressed to God's Messenger is the clearest expression of this fact. It is one whereby deviation is not tolerated, not even by the Prophet. Far be it from the Prophet to deviate from it in any way.

Anyone who objects to the fact that God's Messenger is a human being should remember that all past messengers were human beings as well: *"We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring."* (Verse 38) If the objection has something to do with him not producing a physical miracle, then that is something over which he has no control. It is determined by God: *"Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission."* (Verse 38) He determines this when He wills and according to His wisdom. If there are differences in the details of what is revealed to the Prophet Muĥammad and the revelations given earlier, these differences are due to the fact that every period of time has a suitable book. The Qur'ān is the final one to be revealed by God: *"Every age has had its revelation. God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation."* (Verses 38-39) He annuls what has served its purpose and confirms what is of benefit. He has His original decree which contains all that is confirmed or annulled. He is the One who has sent down His revelations and He does with it what He pleases, in accordance with His wisdom. His will is always done.

Whether God inflicts any of His threats upon them during the Prophet's lifetime or causes him to die before that, the fact of the matter remains the same. The nature of the message and the nature of Godhead remain the same: *"Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning."* (Verse 40) This clear and decisive directive illustrates the nature of the message and the role of its advocates. Such advocates are required to fulfil their role, as it may be at every stage. They are not responsible for reaching any goal other than that determined by God. It is not for them to precipitate the attainment of any goal. They should never entertain any thought of failure when they see that their efforts have not attained power in the land. They are merely advocates of a message, and they should never go beyond this

advocacy role.

God's might is clearly seen in everything around us. When strong and affluent communities deny God, allow corruption to spread and claim that they make their own affluence, God's hand begins to reduce their power, wealth and general standing. They are confined to a limited stretch of land after having had an extended area of rule and influence. When God determines that such communities shrink in their power and area, His rule is carried out, with no power able to stand in its way: *"Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning."* (Verse 41)

Those unbelievers in Arabia are not stronger or more powerful in their scheming than the communities which lived before them. Yet those were smitten by God who is more powerful and more elaborate in His planning: *"Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode."* (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* concludes by mentioning the fact that the unbelievers deny God's message given to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Its opening confirms the truth of his message. Thus the beginning and the end address the same point. God's testimony is called for, and it is certainly sufficient. After all, He has absolute knowledge of this book, or divine writ, and of all other revealed books: *"The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are those who have true knowledge of the Book."* (Verse 43)

Thus ends the *sūrah* which has taken us along a trip to discover the great horizons of the universe and to show us some of the inner aspects of the human soul. It makes profound and lasting impressions on our hearts and minds, leaving the final testimony to God, which is made at both the beginning and the end. It is a testimony to put an end to all arguments.

An Irrefutable Testimony

The *sūrah* draws clear outlines of the Islamic faith, following the Qur'ānic method of explaining its principles. It could be said that we should have dwelt on these aspects of the Islamic faith as they are mentioned in the *sūrah.* However, we have chosen instead not to interrupt the flow of the Qur'ānic theme in this *sūrah,* leaving such discussion to the end.

The opening of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses, as well as a number of directives it contains point clearly to the fact that it is a Makkan revelation. It certainly was not revealed in Madinah as some reports indicate. In fact it was

revealed at a time when the unbelievers' attitude was hardened, manifesting itself in outright rejection of the Islamic message, throwing challenges at the Prophet, demanding that he produce miracles and other signs, and precipitating God's punishment against which he warned them. This required a clear statement which aimed at strengthening the Prophet and his Companions so that they held on to what God had revealed, disregarding all opposition. They were to care little for all the false accusations levelled at them and the challenges put to them. They were to feel themselves as having the upper hand since they were following the truth, able to turn to God alone for support, and declare His oneness as the only Lord of the universe. They were to believe their faith as truth, no matter how vehemently it was denied or rejected by the unbelievers and the idolaters. The *sūrah* also puts some irrefutable evidence supporting this truth to the idolaters, which they could witness in the universe around them, within themselves, as also in the events of human history. All these aspects are grouped together and utilized in such a way as to make a profound address to the human mind.

Here are some of the verses stressing the fact that this revealed book, i.e. the Qur'ān, represents the truth, and that rejecting it altogether, denying its truth, or giving a slow response to its appeal does not change this great fact:

> *These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by your Lord is the truth, yet most people will not believe.* (Verse 1)

> *They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing. Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution. Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide.* (Verses 6-7)

> *To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping) that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error.* (Verse 14)

> *Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables.* (Verse 17)

> *Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in*

mind. (Verse 19)

The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord? Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort.' (Verses 27-28)

Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.' (Verse 30)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: through it running waters flow. Its fruits will be everlasting, and so will be its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who fear God, while the destiny of the unbelievers is the fire. (Verse 35)

Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (Verse 40)

The unbelievers say: 'You are no messenger of God.' Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you, and so are those who have true knowledge of the Book.' (Verse 43)

In all these verses we can clearly discern the nature of the confrontation that the idolaters used to challenge the Prophet and the Qur'ān. We also see in this challenge and the divine directives on how to respond to it the nature of the times when this *sūrah* was revealed.

Declaring the Essentials of Faith

A main feature of the divine instructions to God's Messenger is that he should face all the opposition, challenges, denunciations and difficulties thrown in his face by declaring the truth of his message in full. This means that he must declare in all clarity that there is no deity other than God, the only Lord in the universe, the Almighty who must be worshipped alone without associating any partners with Him. All people will inevitably return to Him for judgement, when they will either be admitted into heaven or thrown in hell. These are the basic truths which the

unbelievers denied and challenged the Prophet over. He is further instructed not to follow their desires, or seek compromises with them that require that any part of these truths be concealed, suppressed or delayed. In fact the Prophet is warned that God's punishment will apply to him also if he follows their desires in this respect, after all the clear knowledge that has been given to him.

This main feature clearly shows that the advocates of the Islamic message cannot deviate from the nature of the message and its method of advocacy. They must also declare the basic truths of the Islamic faith without hesitation, suppressing nothing and delaying nothing. The first of these essential truths is that all Godhead and Lordship in the universe belong to God alone. Hence, all submission must be to Him. He is the One to be obeyed in all matters. This truth must be declared, no matter what sort of opposition it meets nor how stiff the unbelievers' resistance is. Even in the face of hardship and persecution, its advocates must declare it complete. It is not for them to decide that part of this truth should be put aside, or temporarily suppressed, because tyrants dislike it or persecute those who advocate it, or turn away from the faith on its account. None of these considerations permit advocates of the Islamic message to change its strategy, starting, for example, with matters of worship or moral values, good manners or spiritual considerations. It may appear that such a course is preferable in order to avoid the wrath of tyrants but that would be a grave mistake. For advocates of the Islamic message must at all times declare God's oneness and Lordship over the whole universe, and that all submission and obedience belong to God alone.

This is the proper way to advocate the Islamic faith, as God wants it to be done. It is the strategy followed by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), as he was instructed by God. No advocate of Islam can abandon this strategy, or change its method of action. After all, the Islamic faith is God's message and He looks after it. He provides sufficient support for its advocates, and He is always able to protect them against tyrants.

The Qur'ānic method of calling people to Islam brings together the Qur'ān, God's book which we recite, and the open book of the universe. The whole universe, with all the evidence it provides of God's power and elaborate planning, is a source of inspiration for mankind. Combined with these two books is the record of human history which also contains countless proofs of God's power and planning. Human beings are shown all these, as the address is made to their minds, hearts and feelings all at the same time.

This *sūrah* contains numerous examples from the pages of the book of the universe as it addresses the whole human entity. Here are just some of them:

Alif. Lām. Mīm. Rā. These are verses of the Book. That which is revealed to you by

> *your Lord is the truth, yet most people will not believe. It is God who raised the heavens without any support that you could see, and established Himself on the Throne. And He it is who has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each pursuing its course for a set term. He ordains all things. He makes plain His revelations so that you may firmly believe that you will certainly be meeting your Lord. It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason.* (Verses 1-4)

The *sūrah* includes all these scenes so that the whole universe becomes a witness giving proof of God's power of creation, origination, and design, according to an elaborate plan. It then wonders at people who see all this evidence but who nonetheless find it difficult to believe in resurrection and a new creation. They deny God's revelations because what He reveals states very clearly this truth which should be felt to be so close at hand, considering God's limitless power which produced these marvellous scenes of creation.

> *But if you are amazed, amazing, too, is their saying: 'What! After we have become dust, shall we be raised [to life] in a new act of creation?' These are the ones who deny their Lord. They are the ones who carry their own shackles around their necks; and they are the ones who are destined for the fire wherein they will abide.* (Verse 5)

> *It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and originates the heavy clouds. And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills.* (Verses 12-13)

This scene of universal phenomena enhances the feeling of amazement at people who continue to argue about God, associating partners with Him when they can see the results of His power and Lordship, as well as the submission of the universe to Him. All this proves that He controls all matters in the universe. No one else has similar power to create, plan or control:

> *Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards*

water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.' (Verses 13-16)

An Appeal to Human Feelings

The whole universe is thus turned into a great exhibition proving God's power and pointing out what should motivate people to accept the faith. It addresses human nature with profound logic, and addresses the whole human being with all its faculties of perception and understanding. This is all done in perfect harmony.

To the great book of the universe is added a few pages of human history, together with the visible effects of God's power, control of the universe and His elaborate planning of human life:

They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time. (Verse 6)

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verses 8-11)

God grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, to whomever He wills. They [i.e. the unbelievers] rejoice in the life of this world, even though, compared to the life to come, the life of this world is nought but a fleeting pleasure. (Verse 26)

As for the unbelievers, because of their misdeeds, calamity will always befall them or

> *will fall close to their homes, until God's promise is fulfilled. God never fails to fulfil His promise. Before your time, other messengers were derided, but for a while I gave rein to the unbelievers; but then I took them to task, and how terrible was My retribution.* (Verses 31-32)
>
> *Do they not see how We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? When God judges, there is no power that could repel His judgement. He is swift in reckoning. Those who lived before them also schemed, but God is the master of all scheming. He knows what is earned by every soul. The unbelievers will in time come to know who will attain the ultimate abode.* (Verses 41-42)

The Qur'ān must always be the book to which advocates of Islam turn for guidance, before turning to any other source. It is from the Qur'ān that they must learn how to call on people to believe, and how to awaken their hearts and bring inactive souls back to life. The Qur'ān is a revelation sent down by God, the Creator of man who knows his nature, how he is influenced and in what way he reacts. We have already said that advocates of the Islamic faith should follow the strategy laid down by God, starting with making the truth plain concerning God, His oneness, Lordship over all the worlds, sovereignty and power. Similarly, they must seek to open people's hearts to the message of truth by following the method of the Qur'ān in making people truly aware of their Lord. This is the best way to make people recognize that all submission must be to God alone, the true Lord who controls the whole universe.

The Nature of Prophethood

The Qur'ān takes great care to show in the clearest of terms the nature of the message and the nature of God's Messenger. It does so in order to establish for people who their true Lord is, and to remove any trace of polytheism from their minds. There were in the past many instances of deviation from this proper concept, among the people of earlier revelations, which led to confusion between the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. The clearest example was among the Christians who added to Jesus (peace be upon him) divine qualities and qualities of Lordship that belong to God alone. As a result, the followers of different churches became involved in a maze of conflict that was contrary to the truth.

But the Christians were not the only ones whose beliefs were so confused. All pagan communities were similarly involved in such endless confusion, producing concepts that assign mysterious qualities to prophethood, or link it with magic, or clairvoyance, or with contacts with spirits and the *jinn.*

Many of these concepts found their way into the beliefs of the pagan Arabs. Hence some of them used to demand that the Prophet tell them about things beyond the reach of human knowledge. Some demanded that he should produce some physical miracles. They also accused him of being a sorcerer, or a madman who had contacts with the *jinn,* while some suggested that he should have an angel supporting what he said. The fact is that all such suggestions, demands, accusations and challenges thrown at him had their roots in the pagan concepts of the nature of prophethood and prophets in general.

The Qur'ān puts the truth of this concept in a most lucid way, outlining the nature of the message and the messenger who received it from God and conveyed it to mankind. It also outlines the unique nature of Godhead in which no other being has the slightest share, and the nature of servitude that applies to all creatures, including God's messengers and prophets. They too were human beings who had no divine qualities whatsoever, and had no contact with the *jinn* or with the world of magic. They only received revelations from God. Beyond that, they had no power to produce any supernatural miracle, except by God's will. They were chosen for a certain task while they retained their human nature and their status as God's servants.

The *sūrah* includes several examples clarifying the nature of prophethood and the message given to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). These examples serve to purge people's minds of all traces of paganism and the legends that distorted the beliefs of people who had earlier received divine revelations, leading them to a new form of paganism and a new set of legends and superstitions.

This clarification does not come in the form of an intellectual argument or a philosophical or metaphysical thesis. Instead, it provides support to believers implementing a practical method of action that stood up to the challenges of the unbelievers:

> *Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide.* (Verse 7)

> *The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him.'* (Verse 27)

> *Thus have We sent you to a community before whom other communities had passed away, so that you might recite to them what We have revealed to you. Yet they deny the Most Gracious. Say: 'He is my Lord. There is no deity other than Him. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him shall I return.'* (Verse 30)

> *We have indeed sent messengers before you and given them wives and offspring. Yet no messenger could produce a miracle except by God's permission. Every age has had its revelation.* (Verse 38)
>
> *Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning.* (Verse 40)

These verses lucidly sum up the nature of the message and the role of God's Messenger. He is only sent to warn mankind. His task is to convey his message, and all that he has to do is to recite to people the revelations he receives. It is not for him to produce any miracle, except by God's will. Beyond that he is only God's servant, to whom he will definitely return. As a human being, he gets married and begets children, and lives as a human being in all respects. He practises his servitude to God in all aspects and all situations.

With such clarity all confused beliefs, superstitions and erroneous concepts concerning the nature of prophethood are completely removed. The faith remains pure, admitting nothing of the muddled concepts advanced by different churches and pagan beliefs. In fact such confused concepts reduced Christianity after its first century to pagan status, while it was preached by Jesus Christ as a divine faith, assigning to him no more than the status of a good human servant of God who could not produce a miracle except by God's permission.

The Prophet's Task

Before we conclude our remarks on this question we should reflect a little on a point clearly stated in the verse that says: *"Whether We let you see some of what We have promised them, or cause you to die [before its fulfilment], your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning."* (Verse 40) This is said to the Prophet (peace be upon him), God's Messenger who received His revelations and was commanded to address people and call on them to believe in the Islamic faith. In a nutshell, this statement means that what becomes of this faith and message has nothing to do with him. Nothing of it is his concern. His task is to deliver his message complete. Guiding people to accept it is not his task. Guidance is provided by God alone. Whether God fulfils part of what He has promised him with regard to the fate of those people or his term in this life comes to an end before that, the nature of his task remains the same: he has only to deliver his message. The reckoning and the determination of their fate are left to God. Nothing sums up more clearly the role of the advocates of Islam and the task they are called on to perform. The outcome concerning this faith, and indeed everything else, is determined by God alone.

This should teach the advocates of Islam to recognize their limits and remain within them. They cannot precipitate results and fates. They must not try to hasten people's acceptance of the faith, or urge the immediate fulfilment of God's promise to those who follow His guidance or His warning to those who reject His message. They cannot say, 'we have been calling on people, explaining the true faith, for a long time, but only a few people have responded positively,' or that 'we have been patient for so long, but God has not punished the oppressors during our lives'. Their task is advocacy. How God deals with people in this life or in the life to come is not of any concern to His servants; it is His own affair. Hence, knowing our limits as God's servants and acknowledging our servitude to Him mean that we leave it all entirely to Him to determine as He pleases.

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah. Hence, the Prophet's task is confined to the delivery of the message. Striving for God's cause, or *jihād,* had not yet been made a duty. The Prophet was later commanded to follow the delivery of the message with *jihād.* This is something we have to understand with regard to the practical nature of this religion. Its statements have their progressive nature, moving forward to match the progress of the message and to suit and direct its development. This is often overlooked by writers on Islam in our time. Such writers concentrate on their research without looking at the progress. Hence they do not relate texts to their time of revelation and the practical situation in which they were revealed.

Many are the people who read a statement like this one, "*your duty is only to deliver your message: it is for Us to do the reckoning,*" and deduce from it that the task of Islamic advocates is merely to convey the message. Once they have delivered it and put it before people, they then consider their task complete. As for striving for God's cause, or *jihād,* I really do not know whether it has a place in their perspective.

Many others read the same statement and restrict the domain of *jihād,* without abrogating it altogether. They hardly remember that this is a text revealed in Makkah. Nor do they relate Qur'ānic texts to the progress of the Islamic message and the stage of its advocacy. This shows their lack of understanding of the practical nature of this religion. They simply read it in books and texts. This religion is never fully understood by those who sit idly without taking practical steps to advocate it. It is not a religion for the idle.

Nevertheless, delivering the message remains the basis of the task of God's Messenger, and also the task of those who follow his example in advocating his message. Indeed to deliver God's message is the first stage of *jihād.* It must, however, be approached in the right way, so that it is directed at explaining the basic truths of the faith before its details. This means that it should aim, first of all, to establish that Godhead, Lordship and Sovereignty belong to God alone, and that people must submit themselves to God and abandon all submission to anyone else. When this is

done, the un-Islamic society in which they live will take a stand against advocates of the Islamic faith. It first turns a deaf ear, and then challenges them. It then starts to subject them to oppression and iron-fist tactics. Therefore, the next stage of striving, or *jihād,* follows as a natural progression from the proper delivery of God's message: *"Thus have We set up against every prophet enemies from among hardened sinners. Yet none can give guidance and effective support as your Lord does."* (25: 31)

Such is the way, and it is the only true way.

Man's Actions and Future Life

An important feature of this *sūrah* is that it states the final word concerning the relation between a human being's attitude and action on the one hand and his fate and destiny on the other. It makes it clear that people's conditions are determined by what they do for and by themselves. At the same time, it states that every event takes place by God's will. The *sūrah* includes several statements which are relevant to this point. They are sufficient to make the Islamic concept of this very serious issue abundantly clear. Here are just a few such examples:

> *Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them.* (Verse 11)

> *For those who respond to their Lord is a rich reward. As for those who do not respond to Him, should they have all that the earth contains, and twice as much, they would gladly offer it for their ransom. Theirs shall be an awful reckoning, and hell shall be their abode, an evil resting place!* (Verse 18)

> *God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort.* (Verses 27-28)

> *Have they who believe not come to realize that, had God so willed, He would indeed have guided all mankind?* (Verse 31)

> *Indeed their own cunning devices seem fair to the unbelievers, and they are turned away from the right path. Whoever God lets go astray can never find any guide.* (Verse 33)

The first of these verses clearly states that God's will to change the lot of any community depends on, and is fulfilled through, what this community does for itself and how it changes its behaviour and actions both in attitude and practice. When a community changes their direction and actions, God changes their lot on that basis. Should their new situation require that misfortune befall them, God's will is done and nothing can stop it. There is no one to protect them from it. They will never find anyone to give them support against God.

On the other hand, if they respond to their Lord, and change their situation, God will give them what is best, ensuring that they receive it in the life of this world, or in the life to come, or in both. On the other hand, when their response is negative, God will cause misfortune to befall them, and will put them to severe reckoning on the Day of Judgement. No ransom will buy their release from God's punishment, should they return to Him without having responded to His message in this life. It is clear from the second text quoted above that the nature of people's response depends on the direction they choose for themselves and the actions they perform. God's will is fulfilled through both their attitude and action.

The third text begins with a statement asserting God's free-will to let anyone go astray, but this is followed by saying that God "*guides to Himself those who turn to Him.*" This is a definite statement that God gives His guidance to anyone who turns to Him. This shows that God lets go astray only those who do not respond to Him. He never denies His guidance to anyone who turns or responds to Him. This is in line with His promise in another *sūrah:* "*Those who strive hard in Our cause We shall certainly guide to paths that lead to Us.*" (29: 69) Thus both guidance and straying away from it are the outcome of God's will as it affects His servants. His will is done through people's own actions and what they choose for themselves, responding to their Lord or turning away from Him.

The fourth text states that God could have guided all people, had He so willed. In light of all the texts, it is clear that what this means is that God could have created all people with the same propensity to accept His guidance, or He could have forced them to follow it. But He has willed to create them in their present nature, with their dual susceptibility to either follow His guidance or go astray. It is not His will to force them either to follow guidance or to go astray — far be it for Him to force anyone to stray. He has made His will dependent on their response to the pointers to His guidance and the evidence supporting faith.

The last of these texts states that the unbelievers have turned away from the right path and that their foul devices are made to appear fair to them. Taking such a statement on its own has led to the well-known argument in Islamic history about man's free-will and predestination. But when this text is taken together with all relevant texts, the complete concept becomes clear. We then realize that such foul

devices and turning away from guidance are the result of people's negative response to God's call and their denial of the faith. Indeed the unbelievers reject the faith, and this leads to the operation of God's will so that their foul devices are made to acquire a fair appearance, and so they are turned away from the right path.

A final word is needed to clarify this point concerning which there is much controversy in all religions. The direction people choose to follow does not, by itself, bring about their fate. Fate is an event which is brought about by an act of God's will. Indeed every event that takes place in the universe is caused by a separate act which puts God's will into effect: *"We have created everything in due measure and proportion."* (54: 49) There is no mechanism in the system of the whole universe, nor is there any set of causes that lead inevitably to certain results. Both cause and effect are of God's creation, and they are created in due measure. What direction people choose for themselves allows God's will to operate in a manner that fits this direction. As for the actual working of God's will and the practical effects that depend on it, these are fulfilled by a special act for every event: *"With Him everything has its definite measure."* (Verse 8)

This concept, as we said earlier, increases the responsibility of human beings in as much as it shows the honourable position God has assigned to man in the system of the universe. Man is the only creature whose action and direction lead to the fulfilment of His will in a certain way. This is a heavy responsibility and a great honour.

Blind Rejection of the Truth

This *sūrah* provides the final word on the fact that rejecting God's religion and giving a negative response to the truth embodied in this faith is evidence of human nature going awry and the malfunctioning of its receptive system. No sound human nature, without any corrupting or distorting influences, would hesitate to respond positively to the truth, choosing submission to God, when it is presented so clearly, as it is in the Qur'ān. Deep inside, human nature knows this truth and accepts it. It is only turned away from it when a person has something that makes him choose for himself an option other than faith and its true guidance. He thus makes himself deserving of error and thereby incurs God's punishment. This is what God says in another *sūrah: "I will turn away from My revelations those who, without any right, behave arrogantly on earth: for, though they may see every sign, they do not believe in it. If they see the path of righteousness, they do not choose to follow it, but if they see the path of error, they choose it for their path; because they disbelieve in Our revelations and pay no heed to them." (7:*146)

In the present *sūrah* we have a number of similar verses which indicate the nature

of unbelief, making it clear that it is nothing other than blindness of the heart. Indeed, the mere acceptance of the truth and the following of God's guidance indicate that human nature is no longer blind. Indeed there are enough pointers and indicators everywhere in the universe which show the truth clearly to those who think and use their reason.

> *Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode.* (Verses 19-22)

> *The unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' Say: 'God lets go astray anyone who wills [to go astray] and guides to Himself those who turn to Him; those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of God. It is indeed in the remembrance of God that people's hearts find their comfort. Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have happiness and a most beautiful final goal.'* (Verses 27-29)

> *It is He who has spread out the earth and placed upon it firm mountains and rivers, and created on it two sexes of every type of fruit, and caused the night to cover the day. In all these there are signs for people who think. And there are on earth adjoining tracts of land; and vineyards, and fields of grains and date palms, growing in clusters or non-clustered. [All] are irrigated by the same water; yet some of them are favoured above others with regard to the food [they provide]. In all this there are signs for people who use their reason.* (Verses 3-4)

Here we have a clear statement indicating that those who do not respond to the truth are, as God Himself testifies, blind, and that they neither think nor use their reason. Those who respond to the truth are the ones endowed with understanding. These find a heartfelt comfort in remembering God. They relate to what they, deep at heart, know to be the truth, finding in it comfort and reassurance.

In fact we find confirmation of this fact in everyone who turns away from the truth, embodied in the divine faith, which is contained in its full and complete form in the message of Muĥammad (peace be upon him). Such people have defective and distorted natures. They suffer from the malfunctioning of their best receptors. Hence they do not react to the message presented by the whole universe as it praises God

and testifies to His oneness, ability and inimitably elaborate planning.

Since those who do not believe in this truth are blind, as confirmed by God, then no Muslim who claims to believe in God's Messenger and accepts that the Qur'ān is God's revelation can follow the lead of a blind person in any matter of importance in life. This particularly applies to matters that relate to the system which governs human life, to the values and standards that must be implemented in human life, and to behaviour, traditions and morals that are acceptable in human society.

This is our attitude to everything that non-Islamic philosophy produces, apart from physical and material sciences and their practical applications. These come under the Prophet's statement when he said to his Companions: "You know the affairs of your own world better." It is not right that a Muslim who knows God's guidance and who is fully aware of the truth preached by His Messenger to become a student learning from someone who has not responded to God's guidance and who does not know it to be the truth. Such a person is, as God says, blind. No Muslim can reject God's testimony and continue to claim to be a Muslim.

We must take this religion very seriously, and accept its clear statements as correct and valid. If we approach this matter in a hesitant, uncertain way, then this means approaching faith itself with uncertainty. On the other hand, it could mean rejecting the testimony of God (limitless is He in His glory). Such rejection means a complete rejection of faith.

This religion is very serious indeed. It admits no frivolity. Every single statement and every word contained in this religion is true. Anyone who entertains doubts about this seriousness, or who finds himself reluctant to accept this truth with full and complete trust should realize that Islam is in no need of him. In fact God is in no need of anyone whomsoever.

It is not right that the pressures of un-Islamic society should weigh heavily on any Muslim so as to make him adopt the standards of such a society in his approach to life. How can he when he knows that the message conveyed by Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is the truth, and that anyone who does not know it to be the truth is blind. How can he follow such a blind person, learning from him, after having heard God's testimony?

Blindness and Life Corruption

A final aspect of faith that the *sūrah* highlights is the close relationship between the corruption that creeps into people's life on earth and their blindness to the message of the truth God has bestowed on people guiding them to what is right, useful and beneficial. Those who do not respond either to the covenant God has made with

human nature or to the truth which has come from Him, knowing it to be the truth, are indeed the ones who spread corruption on earth. By contrast, those who know it to be the truth and respond to it are the ones who work to set matters on the right course and whose work helps life prosper.

> *Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind: those who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant; and who keep together what God has bidden to be joined; who fear their Lord and dread the terrors of the reckoning; who remain patient in adversity seeking the countenance of their Lord, and attend to their prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them, and who repel evil with good. Such will have the attainment of the [ultimate] abode.* (Verses 19-22)

> *As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established, and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth, the curse will be laid upon them; and theirs shall be an evil abode.* (Verse 25)

Human life will not be set on the right course unless its leadership is firmly in the hands of those endowed with understanding, who know that what was revealed to Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is the truth. Such people fulfil their commitment which is part of the covenant God has made with human nature on the one hand and with Adam and his offspring on the other. These covenants specify that people must worship God alone, submitting to none other than Him, receiving only His guidance and obeying only His orders. Hence, they keep together what God has ordered to be united. They fear their Lord, which means that they are always consciously trying to avoid anything that may incur God's displeasure. They also fear that they may have an awful reckoning. Hence they are constantly aware of the hereafter, watching their every action. They remain constant to their covenant, bearing the burden of such consistency. They attend regularly to their prayers, give to charity out of their provisions, which God has granted to them, and make their donations in private or openly. They repel evil and corruption with goodness and kindness.

Human life is not set aright unless it has such a wise leadership which follows God's guidance, and which moulds life in accordance with His guidance and the code of living He has laid down. It does not follow the right course when it has blind leadership which does not know that the truth is what was revealed to the Prophet Muĥammad. Such leadership follows systems that differ from that laid down by God for His good servants. Human life does not follow the right course under a feudal, capitalist or communist system, or indeed under what is termed 'scientific socialism'. Nor does it take a healthy form and style under theocracy, dictatorship or

democracy. All of these are systems devised by the blind who appoint themselves lords beside God. Such lords devise systems and enact legislation that are not sanctioned by God. They also impose their authority on people, forcing them to submit to such legislation, instead of submitting to God.

Based on the Qur'ānic text, the evidence for what we say is seen in the corruption, the *jāhiliyyah* that has spread throughout the world in the twentieth century. It is seen in the misery under which mankind writhe, both in the East and in the West, under capitalist, communist or socialist systems, and under both dictatorship and democracy. Under all such systems people suffer corruption, loss of moral values, misery and anxiety. That is because all these systems are devised by people who are blind, not knowing that what God has revealed to His Messenger, Muĥammad, is the only truth. Hence, they do not fulfil their covenant with God. Nor do they implement the code of living that is based on His guidance.

By virtue of his faith, and his knowledge that the truth is embodied in what was revealed to Muĥammad, a Muslim rejects every code of living other than that devised by God. He also rejects any social, economic or political doctrine other than what has been legislated by God, who devised it for His good servants.

The mere acceptance of the legitimacy of any code or system devised by any authority other than God's means a break from submission to God, as such submission means in practice complete surrender to Him alone. Accepting such legitimacy is not only in conflict with the central concept of Islam; it also hands over on earth to the blind who break their covenant with God after it has been confirmed. These are the ones who cut asunder what God has bidden to be united and who thus spread corruption on earth.

Throughout history mankind has suffered untold misery, as it tried, without proper guidance, a great variety of systems, laws and regimes under the leadership of blind people assuming the guise of philosophers, theoreticians, legislators and politicians. Never did mankind experience real happiness, elevate human standards, or reach the standard worthy of their role as God's vicegerents on earth except under the Islamic system.

These are some of the prominent features of this *sūrah.* Our discussion merely points to them although it can explain them but inadequately. Praise be to God who has guided us to this. It is only through His guidance that we can make the right choice.

SŪRAH 14

Ibrāhīm

(Abraham)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation. Its subject matter, namely faith, revelation and the divine message, God's Oneness, resurrection, reckoning and reward permeate Makkan *sūrahs.* Just as every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān has its distinctive character, this *sūrah* adopts a unique approach in presenting its material, with highlights and shading that accentuate the principles and issues it tackles. These may not be different from the principles and issues other *sūrahs* illustrate, but they are tackled here from a different angle so as to generate special effect and emphasis. Furthermore, certain aspects are added and others omitted, giving the reader and the listener the overall impression that they deal with new issues and principles.

The general ambience of the *sūrah* derives from its title, namely Abraham, the father of all prophets who came after him. He was a blessed man, most grateful to God, most clement, tender-hearted, and devout. All the connotations of these attributes are felt throughout this *sūrah,* in its main issues, general approach, mode of expression as also in its rhythm.

The *sūrah* addresses a number of issues relating to faith, but two of these permeate the whole *sūrah.* These are the two issues most relevant to Abraham himself. The first is the unity of the divine message and God's messengers, and their united stand, despite their different times and places, as one community against the state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.* The other is God's favours bestowed on mankind, the increase He grants to those who are grateful and the fact that most people remain ungrateful. The *sūrah* definitely includes other issues, but these two give the *sūrah* its

special ambience.

The *sūrah* begins with an outline of the mission of God's Messenger and the book revealed to him: *"This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due."* (Verse 1) It concludes with the same point, highlighting the truth of God's oneness which is at the heart of the divine message: *"This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed."* (Verse 52)

In between, the *sūrah* mentions that Moses was sent to do the same task as Muĥammad, using practically the same wording: *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, lead your people out of darkness into the light.'"* (Verse 5) It also explains that the general purpose behind sending God's messengers was to make things clear: *"Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them."* (Verse 4) In addition, it explains that because God's Messenger is human, this inevitably provides the parameters for his mission: he is to inform, explain and give warning and good counsel. He cannot, however, perform a miracle except by God's permission, and at a time God determines. Neither he nor his people have any say in this. Nor can he oblige his community to follow guidance or sink into error, for these things follow a certain rule God has set in operation according to His own free choice.

That God's messengers were all human was a matter objected to by all past ignorant communities. The *sūrah* sums up all these objections and the reply given by God's messengers, as if the objections and the reply were made all at the same time: *"They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust.'"* (Verses 10-11)

The *sūrah* also explains that taking mankind from darkness into light can only be accomplished 'by their Lord's leave'. Every messenger makes the issues clear to his people, then: *"God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. He is Almighty, truly Wise."* (Verse 4)

These are the main lines defining the nature of a messenger sent by God, and the mission assigned to him. Nothing of the nature of God's messengers or their qualities can be confused with God's nature and attributes. Thus God's oneness is shown in its full light, with no hint of similarity to anyone or anything.

The *sūrah* also speaks about the fulfilment of God's promise to His messengers

and to those who truly believe in them. This promise is fulfilled in this present life when they are given victory and power, and in the life to come with generous reward given to the believers and severe punishment to the unbelievers. This is shown at the end of the scene showing the battle between God's messengers standing together and their different communities also standing together in this world: "*The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.' And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief*" (Verses 13-15) It is also shown in the images drawn from the Day of Judgement: "*Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace:*" (Verse 23) "*On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames.*" (Verses 49-50)

The same fact is also emphasized in the analogies given for both groups: "*Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills.*" (Verses 24-27) "*The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray.*" (Verse 18)

The Message of All Prophets

The first of the two major issues that run through the whole *sūrah* is the unity of the divine message preached by all God's messengers. This is presented here in a unique way. Other *sūrahs* demonstrated this through the fact that every messenger made the same address to his people. Every one of them would state the same truth, complete his work and pass away, to be followed by other messengers, each of whom stated the same truth in the same words, receiving the same reply. The unbelievers who deny the truth suffer whatever they may suffer in this life, although some of them are given respite, so as to face their fate on the Day of Judgement. In those *sūrahs* every messenger was shown in a separate scene, like we see a film playing back different events. The best examples of this method are seen in *Sūrahs 7* and 11, The Heights and Hūd, respectively.

In this *sūrah,* all the prophets are grouped together on one side and their erring communities on the other. The battle goes on between them in this life, but does not come to an end here. On the contrary, we follow its progress until the Day of Judgement. Despite the great difference in time and place, we see in front of us the community of God's messengers and their followers standing together as a single group. Indeed time and place are two transitory factors, while the great truth of faith and unbelief is far greater than both time and place:

> *Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God let all the faithful place their trust.' The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings. 'And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him. (Verses 9-17)*

All generations starting with the time of Noah and all messengers are grouped together, while time and place dwindle into insignificance, to give prominence to the truth of the one divine message. The objections of the unbelievers remain the same throughout. Similarly, help is given to believers, for power is granted by God to good people, while failure and humiliation are the lot of tyrants, and suffering awaits them in the hereafter. All these factors apply to them all in exactly the same way. We see that what is said by Muĥammad and Moses (peace be upon them both) to their peoples is identical: "*This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that*

you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light." (Verse 1) *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light."* (Verse 5)

The battle between faith and unfaith does not end in this world. The *sūrah* follows it into the hereafter. We see it featured prominently in the different scenes and images the *sūrah* draws of the hereafter. For example:

> *They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?' [And the others] will reply: Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.' And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: 'Peace'.* (Verses 21-23)

> *Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void.* (Verses 42-43)

> *They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains. Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil! On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens, and when all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists. On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames.* (Verses 46-50)

All these examples confirm that it is all one battle that starts in this world and ends in the life to come. The two parts are mutually complementary, with no gap in between. The examples, with events starting in this world and ending in the hereafter, also bring into sharp relief the main features of this battle and its results: a good word is like a good tree; and the tree is that of prophethood, faith and goodness. By contrast, an evil word is like a corrupt tree; the tree of ignorance,

falsehood, rejection of the truth, evil and tyranny.

Gratitude for Unending Favours

Gratitude to God for what He bestows on us animates the whole *sūrah.* God enumerates His favours, which He grants to all mankind, believers and unbelievers, righteous or unrighteous, God-fearing and wrongdoers. God is most certainly compassionate and merciful when He grants such favours to unbelievers, disobedients and wrongdoers in the same way as He grants them to the faithful who strive for His cause. It is their place that they should be grateful. Here God's grace is shown extending across the widest horizon, within a framework of universal imagery: "*It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful.*" (Verses 32-34)

Indeed, sending messengers to mankind is an equal, if not greater favour: "*This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light.*" (Verse 1) Light is perhaps God's most majestic favour in the universe, but the light referred to in this verse is the greatest light that shines through our whole beings and which makes the world around us shine. The same task was assigned to Moses with his people, and indeed to all messengers, as clearly explained in the *sūrah.* We also note a favour in what God's messengers say: "*He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins.*" (Verse 10) That people are called to forgiveness is a great favour almost equal to that of light.

Within the context of God's favours, Moses reminds his people of what God bestowed on them: "*Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaohs people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.*" (Verse 6) And within the same context, the *sūrah* mentions God's promise to His messengers: "*Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.'*" (Verses 13-14) Again, this should be counted among God's many great favours.

The *sūrah* also highlights the fact that God's favours are increased when people are

grateful: "*For your Lord had declared: If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.'*" (Verse 7) It makes clear that God is in no need of gratitude, thanks or those who give them. "*And Moses said: If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.'*" (Verse 8) The *sūrah* explains that generally man does not show proper gratitude for the favours God bestows on him. "*Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful.*" (Verse 34) However, those who reflect on the signs God has placed all around them, and show insight, will persevere in the face of adversity and show gratitude for favours and blessings: "*Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].*" (Verse 5)

Both patience in adversity and gratitude are expressed by Abraham in a position of humility before God, expressed in a prayer addressed near the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. It overflows with praise and gratitude to God:

> *Abraham said: 'My Lord. Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.'* (Verses 35-41)

Because God's favours and blessings, gratitude for them and, by contrast, their denial permeate the *sūrah,* many comments at the end of verses fit with this. For example: "*provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.*" (Verse 37) "*Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].*" (Verse 5) "*Have you not seen those who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition.*" (Verse 28) "*Remember the blessings God bestowed on you.*" (Verse 6) "*All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac.*" (Verse 39)

When the prophets answer the unbelievers' objections that they, i.e. the prophets, are only human, they say: "*We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants.*" (Verse 11) Thus, God's grace is

highlighted to fit with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah,* which radiates with aspects of grace, mercy, favour and gratitude on the one side and ingratitude on the other. Thus, verbal expression is brought in harmony with the *sūrah* as a whole to perfect the Qur'ānic artistic method.

The *sūrah* can be divided into two main passages: the first explains the nature of the divine message and the messenger delivering it, portraying the battle between their community and those who deny the message. It comments on all this, giving examples of good and evil words. The other passage speaks of the favours God grants to mankind, describing those who display an arrogant ingratitude and the believers who express their gratitude. The first perfect example of the latter is Abraham. It describes the fate of the wrongdoers who deny God's favours in a series of most powerful and lively images of the Day of Judgement. Thus, the conclusion of the *sūrah is* brought into harmony with its opening: *"This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed."* (Verse 52)

1
One Message for All Mankind

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓر ۚ كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ ٱلنَّاسَ مِنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَمِيدِ ﴿١﴾

Alif Lām. Rā. This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due, (1)

ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ وَوَيْلٌ لِّلْكَٰفِرِينَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ شَدِيدٍ ﴿٢﴾

to God, to whom all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth belongs. Woe to the unbelievers; for theirs will be a severe suffering. (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَحِبُّونَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا عَلَى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَبْغُونَهَا عِوَجًا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣﴾

These are the ones who love the life of this world preferring it to the life to come, and who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked. They have gone far astray. (3)

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوۡمِهِۦ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمۡۖ فَيُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهۡدِي مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٤

Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them. But God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. He is Almighty, truly Wise. (4)

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أَنۡ أَخۡرِجۡ قَوۡمَكَ مِنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ وَذَكِّرۡهُم بِأَيَّٰمِ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٖ شَكُورٖ ٥

We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God.' Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God]. (5)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوۡمِهِ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَةَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذۡ أَنجَىٰكُم مِّنۡ ءَالِ فِرۡعَوۡنَ يَسُومُونَكُمۡ سُوٓءَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ وَيُذَبِّحُونَ أَبۡنَآءَكُمۡ وَيَسۡتَحۡيُونَ نِسَآءَكُمۡۚ وَفِي ذَٰلِكُم بَلَآءٞ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ عَظِيمٞ ٦

Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord. (6)

وَإِذۡ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمۡ لَئِن شَكَرۡتُمۡ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمۡۖ وَلَئِن كَفَرۡتُمۡ إِنَّ عَذَابِي

For your Lord had declared: "If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed."' (7)

لَشَدِيدٌ ﴿٧﴾

And Moses said: 'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.' (8)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِن تَكۡفُرُواْ أَنتُمۡ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَغَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ﴿٨﴾

Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' (9)

أَلَمۡ يَأۡتِكُمۡ نَبَؤُاْ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِكُمۡ قَوۡمِ نُوحٖ وَعَادٖ وَثَمُودَ ۛ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡ ۛ لَا يَعۡلَمُهُمۡ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُۚ جَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ فَرَدُّوٓاْ أَيۡدِيَهُمۡ فِيٓ أَفۡوَٰهِهِمۡ وَقَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا كَفَرۡنَا بِمَآ أُرۡسِلۡتُم بِهِۦ وَإِنَّا لَفِي شَكّٖ مِّمَّا تَدۡعُونَنَآ إِلَيۡهِ مُرِيبٖ ﴿٩﴾

Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof.'

۞ قَالَتۡ رُسُلُهُمۡ أَفِي ٱللَّهِ شَكّٞ فَاطِرِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ يَدۡعُوكُمۡ لِيَغۡفِرَ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمۡ وَيُؤَخِّرَكُمۡ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمّٗىۚ قَالُوٓاْ إِنۡ أَنتُمۡ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُنَا تُرِيدُونَ أَن تَصُدُّونَا عَمَّا كَانَ يَعۡبُدُ

ءَابَآؤُنَا فَأۡتُونَا بِسُلۡطَٰنٖ مُّبِينٖ ١٠ (10)

قَالَتۡ لَهُمۡ رُسُلُهُمۡ إِن نَّحۡنُ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُكُمۡ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَمُنُّ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦۖ وَمَا كَانَ لَنَآ أَن نَّأۡتِيَكُم بِسُلۡطَٰنٍ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلۡيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ١١

Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof, except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. (11)

وَمَا لَنَآ أَلَّا نَتَوَكَّلَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ وَقَدۡ هَدَىٰنَا سُبُلَنَاۚ وَلَنَصۡبِرَنَّ عَلَىٰ مَآ ءَاذَيۡتُمُونَاۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلۡيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلۡمُتَوَكِّلُونَ ١٢

And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust.' (12)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِرُسُلِهِمۡ لَنُخۡرِجَنَّكُم مِّنۡ أَرۡضِنَآ أَوۡ لَتَعُودُنَّ فِي مِلَّتِنَاۖ فَأَوۡحَىٰٓ إِلَيۡهِمۡ رَبُّهُمۡ لَنُهۡلِكَنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ١٣

The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: 'Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, (13)

وَلَنُسۡكِنَنَّكُمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَنۡ خَافَ مَقَامِي وَخَافَ وَعِيدِ

and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My

warnings.' (14)

﴿١٤﴾

وَٱسۡتَفۡتَحُواْ وَخَابَ كُلُّ جَبَّارٍ عَنِيدٖ

﴿١٥﴾

And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. (15)

مِّن وَرَآئِهِۦ جَهَنَّمُ وَيُسۡقَىٰ مِن مَّآءٖ صَدِيدٖ

﴿١٦﴾

Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, (16)

يَتَجَرَّعُهُۥ وَلَا يَكَادُ يُسِيغُهُۥ وَيَأۡتِيهِ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ مِن كُلِّ مَكَانٖ وَمَا هُوَ بِمَيِّتٖۖ وَمِن وَرَآئِهِۦ عَذَابٌ غَلِيظٞ ﴿١٧﴾

gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him. (17)

مَّثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِرَبِّهِمۡۖ أَعۡمَٰلُهُمۡ كَرَمَادٍ ٱشۡتَدَّتۡ بِهِ ٱلرِّيحُ فِي يَوۡمٍ عَاصِفٖۖ لَّا يَقۡدِرُونَ مِمَّا كَسَبُواْ عَلَىٰ شَيۡءٖۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلضَّلَٰلُ ٱلۡبَعِيدُ ﴿١٨﴾

The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray. (18)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ إِن يَشَأۡ يُذۡهِبۡكُمۡ وَيَأۡتِ بِخَلۡقٖ جَدِيدٖ ﴿١٩﴾

Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. (19)

وَمَا ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ بِعَزِيزٖ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَبَرَزُوا۟ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا فَقَالَ ٱلضُّعَفَٰٓؤُا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنتُم مُّغْنُونَ عَنَّا مِنْ عَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَىْءٍ ۚ

This is no difficult thing for God. (20)

They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?'

قَالُوا۟ لَوْ هَدَىٰنَا ٱللَّهُ لَهَدَيْنَٰكُمْ ۖ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْنَآ أَجَزِعْنَآ أَمْ صَبَرْنَا مَا لَنَا مِن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٢١﴾

[And the others] will reply: 'Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.' (21)

وَقَالَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ لَمَّا قُضِىَ ٱلْأَمْرُ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ وَعَدَكُمْ وَعْدَ ٱلْحَقِّ وَوَعَدتُّكُمْ فَأَخْلَفْتُكُمْ ۖ وَمَا كَانَ لِىَ عَلَيْكُم مِّن سُلْطَٰنٍ إِلَّآ أَن دَعَوْتُكُمْ فَٱسْتَجَبْتُمْ لِى ۖ فَلَا تَلُومُونِى وَلُومُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُم ۖ مَّآ أَنَا۠ بِمُصْرِخِكُمْ وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُصْرِخِىَّ ۖ إِنِّى كَفَرْتُ بِمَآ أَشْرَكْتُمُونِ مِن قَبْلُ ۗ إِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. (22)

وَأُدْخِلَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ تَحِيَّتُهُمْ

Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting

فِيهَا سَلَٰمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

shall be: 'Peace'. (23)

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. (24)

تُؤْتِىٓ أُكُلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍۭ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا ۗ وَيَضْرِبُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. (25)

وَمَثَلُ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ كَشَجَرَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ ٱجْتُثَّتْ مِن فَوْقِ ٱلْأَرْضِ مَا لَهَا مِن قَرَارٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. (26)

يُثَبِّتُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱلْقَوْلِ ٱلثَّابِتِ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَفِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۖ وَيُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ۚ وَيَفْعَلُ ٱللَّهُ مَا يَشَآءُ ﴿٢٧﴾

God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills. (27)

From Darkness into Light

"Alif. Lām. Rā. This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high." (Verse 1)

This book which consists of words made up of letters like these is one which you certainly have not authored. It has been revealed to you for a definite purpose, *"so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light."* (Verse 1) Your role is to take mankind out of the depths of darkness into which they have sunk, the darkness of superstition, conflicting systems and traditions; the darkness of believing in alleged deities, and false concepts, values and standards. You are to bring them, i.e. all of mankind, into the real light which removes all darkness. Not only does this light dispel all darkness from people's consciences and minds, it also affects their lives generally, setting for them new values and traditions.

Faith based on God's oneness is a light that shines within the human heart, to make the whole human being shine as well. Man is created out of cold clay in which God has blown of His spirit. Should he abandon the light of this breath of spirit, he turns back into dark clay, and becomes a mass of flesh and blood like an animal. It is indeed the flesh and blood alone that are made of the earth's clay. It is with this breath from God's spirit that light spreads over it. Then faith makes it appear in its full glory. With it the mass of flesh and blood blooms.

Faith is a light that illuminates the soul so that it can see the way leading to God, clear without any confusion caused by superstition or desires, and without any misleading fancy or greed. When the human soul sees the way so clearly ahead of it, it proceeds with steady steps, and without hesitation.

The light of faith illuminates the whole of life, making all mankind equal servants of God, united together by their bond of faith. They submit themselves to none other than God, which means that they are never divided into slaves and tyrants. With the universe around them they establish a bond based on knowledge of the great law that sets the whole universe and all its forces into operation. This brings them peace with the universe and with all creatures that live in it.

Faith is the light of justice, freedom and knowledge. It is the light of a bond with God based on compassion. It is a bond that gives us reassurance of God's justice, grace and wisdom in situations of ease and hardship. Such reassurance requires that we adopt an attitude of patience in adversity and gratitude in happier circumstances. It also adds the light of understanding that adverse situations occur for a definite purpose.

Believing in God alone as the Supreme Lord is not merely a personal faith that fills one's conscience and spreads light over one's soul. It is a complete code of living based on the concept of total submission to God alone, discarding all claims of lordship by other creatures, and rejecting any attempt that gives such creatures any form of sovereignty. This code of living fits completely with human nature so as to satisfy all its needs and fill it with happiness, light and reassurance. It is also so stable

that it protects people against the sort of upheaval experienced by societies that submit to the sovereignty claimed by others and who follow systems devised by them in politics, government, economics, social structure, morals and social behaviour, as well as in customs and traditions. Furthermore, this code of living preserves and promotes human potential. It prevents people from glorifying and singing the praises of despots.

Indeed this short phrase, "*so that you may bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light,*" covers profound truths relevant to the human mind, as also practical day to day living. It is impossible for human language to do more than point to these horizons.

"*So that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light.*" God's Messenger cannot do more than deliver the divine message, and his role is merely to explain it. As for the bringing of mankind out of darkness into light, this is done by God's leave, and according to the laws He has willed to set in operation. The Prophet is only His Messenger.

"*So that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due.*" (Verse 1) The phrase, *'the path of the Almighty,'* means His way and law which governs the whole universe, and the code which governs life. Linguistically speaking, it is used here as a substitute for 'light'. This means that the 'light' guides to 'the path of the Almighty', or that the light is His path. The second meaning is however stronger and richer. The light that illuminates the human soul is the light that illuminates the whole universe. It is the way, the law and the code of living. A soul which lives in this light will never be in error, or entertain misconceptions, or opt for wrong behaviour. It follows the straight path, "*the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due.*" He is the One who has absolute power in the universe, and who is praised by all creatures.

His might is highlighted here as a threat to the unbelievers, while the fact that He is worthy of praise is mentioned as a reminder to those who express gratitude to Him.

Then follow some of God's attributes. He is notably mentioned as the One to whom everything in the heavens and on earth belong, who is in need of no one, and who controls the universe and all creatures therein: "*God, to whom all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth belongs.*" (Verse 2) Whoever, then, comes out of darkness into light and follows guidance does well. The *sūrah* does not mention anything about such a person here. Instead, it goes on to warn the unbelievers against woeful suffering. This is inflicted on them as a result of their rejection of the greatest blessing God has bestowed on humanity, that is, sending them a Messenger whose task is to bring them out of darkness into light. That is an act of God's grace

for which we cannot show enough gratitude. Yet some people reject it outright. Hence, *"woe to the unbelievers; for theirs will be a severe suffering."* (Verse 2)

The *sūrah* then mentions a quality that tells us the reason for their rejection of the blessing God bestows on mankind through His noble Messenger: *"These are the ones who love the life of this world preferring it to the life to come, and who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked. They have gone far astray."* (Verse 3) Giving preference to the life of this world puts a person in a position of conflict with the requirements of faith, and on a collision course with the 'path of God'. The situation is reversed when preference is given to the life to come. For then, this life is set on the right course. People enjoy it with moderation, always keen to earn God's pleasure. Hence there is no conflict between their preference for the life to come and their enjoyment of this life and the pleasures it offers.

Those who turn their minds and hearts towards ensuring a happy outcome in the hereafter do not lose the pleasures of this world, as some people with faulty concepts imagine. In Islam, a happy life in this world is a prelude to a happy future life. The fulfilment of man's task as God's vicegerent on earth requires building a happy life. In Islam, there is no denunciation or renunciation of any aspect of this life as people wait for the hereafter. What Islam requires is that life should prosper with truth, justice and sound behaviour by people who seek God's pleasure and a happy life in the hereafter. This is the Islamic outlook.

Those who choose the life of this world in preference to the hereafter cannot monopolize the resources of this world, exploiting, cheating and oppressing people to serve their own interests in a society where the light of faith shines and people follow God's guidance. Hence they turn themselves and others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, devoid of truth and justice. It is only when they have done this, and managed to lead themselves away from the straight path of God and justice that they resort to their oppressive ways, cheating people and persuading them to share in their corruption. It is only in this way that they can get what they want of self- aggrandisement, taking for themselves most of the resources God has placed on earth, and behaving arrogantly towards others. People then submit to their authority without resistance.

The way of life advocated by faith protects human life against the selfishness and greed of those who are preoccupied with the life of this world in preference to the life to come. Under this way of life no one person or group can monopolize the earth's wealth and resources.

In Their Own Language

"*Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people,*

so that he might make [the truth] clear to them." (Verse 4) This is a blessing God grants to people with every message He sends to them. For a messenger to be able to bring people out of darkness into light, by their Lord's leave, he must be given his message in his own people's language. This is how he is then able to explain God's message to them. It is how the objectives of the message are fulfilled.

Although the Prophet Muĥammad is a Messenger to all mankind, he is given his message in his own people's language, so that he can explain matters to them. They are the ones who would be conveying his message to the rest of mankind. His own life is, after all, limited. Therefore, he is commanded to call first on his own people so that the Arabian Peninsula becomes purely Muslim. It will then fulfil its role as the place from which the final divine message is carried to the rest of the world. What happened in practice, as God, who knows everything, determined, was that the Prophet passed away when Islam became the religion in the whole of Arabia. The Prophet raised an army under the command of Usāmah to be dispatched to areas bordering on Arabia, but the Prophet (peace be upon him) died before the army began its march. It is true that the Prophet sent his letters and emissaries to the heads of countries outside Arabia, calling on them to accept the message of Islam, and making it clear that his message was addressed to all mankind. However, what God determined for him, which fits with the limited duration of human life, is that Muĥammad (peace be upon him) delivered his message to his own people in their own language. Then the task was completed by those who carried his message to other communities all over the world. Hence, there is no contradiction between his message being addressed to all humanity, and its being expressed in Arabic, the language of his own people.

"Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them. But God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills." (Verse 4) A messenger's task is completed when he has made the truth clear to people. What comes out of it in the form of people following guidance or going astray is not in his power, and does not follow his desire. It is entirely up to God who has subjected human beings to a law of His own making, in keeping with His free-will. Whoever follows the way of error is left to go astray, and whoever follows the way of divine guidance reaches his destination. Both are subject to God's will.

"He is Almighty, truly Wise." (Verse 4) He conducts life in accordance with His wisdom and careful planning. Nothing is left haphazard, without guidance or planning.

This applied to the message *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God. Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].*

Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord. For your Lord had declared: If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.' And Moses said: 'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.'" (Verses 5-8)

The *sūrah* uses the same wording to report the instructions given to Moses and those given to Muḥammad (peace be upon them both), so as to maintain the same style of expression. Muḥammad is told, "*This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light.*" (Verse 1) Similarly Moses is instructed, "*Lead your people out of darkness into the light.*" (Verse 5) The first applies to all mankind, while the second addressed Moses's people in particular. The ultimate goal, however, was the same.

"*Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God.*" (Verse 5) All days are indeed God's days, but what is intended here is that he should remind them of the days when people, or a group of them, encounter a special situation, reflecting either God's grace or punishment, as we will see when Moses carries out this order. He reminds them of some days they themselves had witnessed, and of others belonging to the time of the peoples of Noah, the 'Ad, and Thamūd and other communities that followed them.

"*Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].*" (Verse 5) Some of these days occasioned adversity, making of them a sign requiring patience, while others were occasions when God's grace was bestowed, and they invite gratitude. A person who qualifies as, *'patient in adversity, deeply grateful [to God],'* is the one who recognizes these signs and what lies behind them. He finds in them lessons to be learnt and reminders to be appreciated.

A Reminder of God's Favours

Moses began to fulfil his task and remind his people. "*Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.'*" (Verse 6) He reminds them first of God's grace when he delivered them from the great torment inflicted on them by Pharaoh's people. That torment was visited on them time after time, with little reprieve. One of the ghastlier features of that torment was the killing of the male but not the female population as a means of preventing them from increasing in number. This aimed to ensure their continued weakness and subjugation. The fact that God

saved them from all this was a great act demonstrating His grace. It should be remembered with gratitude.

"*That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.*" (Verse 6) Their trial consisted of the affliction visited on them by Pharaoh. It was a means to test their patience, resistance, perseverance and determination. Patience does not merely entail enduring hardship. It is rather endurance without being shaken or mentally defeated, coupled with the determination to stand up to tyranny until freedom is achieved. Endurance that only entails tolerating humiliation is not worthy of praise. The Israelites also experienced the trial of deliverance from tyranny, so as to test their gratitude for God's grace, which should be reflected in following the path of His guidance.

Moses continues to explain matters to his people after having reminded them of the Days of God, and directed them to the ultimate objective of the trial. He tells them about the reward God attaches to gratitude and His punishment for ingratitude: "*For your Lord had declared: 'If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.'*" (Verse 7)

It is useful to reflect a little here on this great truth whereby God's blessings are increased for the grateful and whereby severe punishment awaits those who adopt the opposite stance. In the first instance, we feel reassured, since it is a promise by God, and God always fulfils His promises. It must come to pass. If we want to see it in practice, and look for its material causes, we need not go very far.

Expressing gratitude for a blessing is evidence of implementing correct standards in day-to-day life. The proper reward for a blessing, according to sound human nature, is to be grateful for it. Moreover, a person who thanks God for His blessings is always watching Him when it comes to making use of such blessings. He shows no arrogance, and he never puts God's blessings to foul or evil use. Both qualities add to the purity of the human soul, and motivate it to further good action that helps such blessings grow and increase. Thus a grateful person also earns other people's good-will, and they are then ready to help. This reflects on the community as a whole, as ties within the community are placed on a sound footing. Its wealth increases with security. God's promise is however sufficient reassurance for a believer, whether he understands the causes or not. He knows that God's promise always comes true.

Denying God's grace can take many forms. For example, omitting to thank God for it or refusing to recognize that it is God who has bestowed it, and attributing it to one's own knowledge, expertise, hard work, or intelligence, as if these are not part of the grace God bestows on His servants. It may also take the form of misusing or abusing God's blessings, as when these are used to behave arrogantly when dealing with other people or to satisfy evil or corrupt desires.

The severe punishment threatened here may include being deprived of God's

blessings, either by removing them literally, or by removing their effects on one's feelings. Many a blessing may become a curse which brings unhappiness, to the extent that the person given it may envy those who do not have it. Or the punishment may be deferred to its right time either in this life or in the life to come, as God may wish. It will however undoubtedly take place, because denying God's grace does not go unpunished.

Giving thanks to God for His grace does not benefit God Himself, just as denying it and being ungrateful does not cause Him any harm. God is in no need of anyone or anything. He is praised as He is God. He does not need people's praise or gratitude. "*And Moses said.: 'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.'*" (Verse 8) Indeed it is human life that is elevated through thanking God for His grace. People's souls are purified by turning to God, and by giving thanks where thanks belong. They are reassured when they establish a bond with the One who bestows abounding grace. They do not fear that blessings are withdrawn. They do not feel heart-broken when they miss something they would have liked. God, the Most Gracious, is there and He bestows His grace in abundance. Such grace then is increased when people show their gratitude.

The Dialogue between Messengers and Unbelievers

Moses continues with his reminders, but now he no longer features in the scene painted in the *sūrah.* Instead, a picture is drawn of the raging battle between the community that follows the Prophets and *jāhiliyyah* society which denies the messengers and their messages alike. This is a remarkable aspect of the refined style of the Qur'ān which brings the scene alive, transforming it from a historical one that someone is reporting to an immediate one that we see in front of our eyes, able to listen to the people in it as they talk, and notice all their actions and reactions. In this panoramic scene, all limitations of time and space are done away with.

> *Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.'* (Verse 9)

This reminder is made by Moses, but as he goes behind the scenes the *sūrah* continues with its account of what happened to God's messengers and messages during all periods of history, and the confrontation between them and *jāhiliyyah* in its different states and societies, and the fate of those who denied these messages. It is as

if Moses is a narrator who begins with a reference to the main events of a great history, before leaving its players to take over and enact that history, and say whatever they wish. This method of narrating a story or historical account is often employed in the Qur'ān. It serves to bring the historical account alive. We see here God's noble messengers following one another, and confronting all mankind who had given in *to jāhiliyyah.* The gaps between generations and communities disappear, while the great truths stand out without being tied to a specific time or place.

"*Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God.*" (Verse 9) Thus, they are numerous. There were many other such communities than those mentioned in the Qur'ān, who lived during the intervening period between the time of Thamūd and that of Moses. The *sūrah* does not give any details of them, because there is complete unity in the message preached by all prophets, and a unity in the reaction to it.

"*Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth.*" (Verse 9) That evidence is absolutely clear, giving no room for confusion by anyone with undistorted faculties of understanding. "*But they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.*" (Verse 9) They put their hands to their mouths as does he who wishes to change the pitch of his voice so that it can be heard at a distance. He moves his hand in front of his mouth as he raises his voice, and this causes the sound to break and be heard from afar. The *sūrah* paints this movement in order to indicate the fact that they were outspoken in their denial of the divine message. Furthermore, they make such an impolite movement to reassert their open rejection of the faith.

Since what the messengers call for is belief in God's oneness, and His being the only Lord of mankind and the whole universe, casting doubts on this clear truth sounds extremely odd and peculiar. This truth is self-evident, easily recognized by human nature, and repeatedly confirmed by numerous signs that can be seen everywhere in the universe. Hence, the messengers are horrified at such doubting, pointing to the heavens and the earth as witnesses: "*Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth?*" (Verse 10) Everything in the heavens and the earth testifies to the truth of God being the Creator and Originator of all. How can there be any doubt about Him? The messengers say this because the heavens and the earth are two very clear signs of God's existence. A mere reference to them is sufficient to quickly help any straying person come back to his senses. The messengers do not add anything to this quick reference, as they know it to be sufficient. Instead, they go on to point out God's grace to mankind, as He calls on them to believe, and gives them respite while they reflect and begin to take action to avert His punishment.

"*Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins.'*" (Verse 10) The call is originally to believe in God, and that leads to the forgiveness of sins. However, the *sūrah* then makes the call a direct one for forgiveness so that God's grace and blessings are brought out in sharp relief. In such a context, it is especially odd that people adopt such a negative attitude.

"*He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.*" (Verse 10) With this call to forgiveness, God does not demand an immediate positive response, nor does He inflict His punishment immediately when they make their first rejection. He grants them another favour by giving them a period of grace, either for a time He sets in this life or to the Day of Reckoning. During this respite they may reflect on various signs and indicators, and on the messengers' warnings. Such respite is an act of grace, considering their negative response to His call.

Yet those ignorant people revert to their baseless objection: "*They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship.'*" (Verse 10) Human beings should have been proud at God's selection of one of their number to bring them His message. Instead they object to this choice and make of it grounds for suspecting the validity of the message. They claim that what the messengers call on them to believe in is a mere wish to turn them away from what their forefathers worshipped. They do not bother to ask themselves why the messengers should wish to turn them away from that. All ignorant societies are rigid. Hence people of such societies do not reflect on the true nature of what their forefathers worshipped, and why they objected to such false deities. Nor do they think about the nature of the new call. Instead, they ask for a miracle to force them to believe. "*Bring us, then, a clear proof*" (Verse 10)

The messengers do not deny their human status. On the contrary they confirm it, but they draw their attention to the favours God gives when He chooses human messengers and gives them what they need in order to be fully equipped to discharge their great duty: "*Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants.'*" (Verse 11) The phrase, *'bestows His grace,'* is used here so that the dialogue fits in harmoniously with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah.* It is an atmosphere generated by speaking about God's grace which He bestows on whomever He chooses of His servants. His grace is limitless. It is not granted only to God's messengers, but rather affects humanity as a whole. For mankind has been honoured by the choice of one of its number to undertake this great task of receiving a message from on high.

It is also a special favour granted to mankind, so that they can come out of darkness into the light. Their faculties of reception and understanding are reawakened so as to resume an active life after a long state of stagnation akin to

death. But the greatest aspect of divine grace bestowed on mankind is that they are saved from submission to others, which means humiliation and servitude to mortals like themselves.

Faith Versus Tyranny

As for producing clear proof, which means a miracle or some supernatural event, the messengers make it clear to their communities that this is something determined by God alone. The messengers try to make people realize very clearly the difference between Godhead and their own mortal beings. They want them to understand the true significance of the oneness of God who is unlike anyone else in nature and attributes. The lack of such clarity was the source of the great confusion into which pagan beliefs had sunk, as well as the church concepts which mixed Christianity with the pagan beliefs of Greece, Rome, Egypt and India. The starting point in this confusion into which Christianity had sunk was the attribution of supernatural powers to Jesus himself, leading to a great mix-up between the Divine Being and His servant, Jesus Christ (peace be upon him).

The messengers made their position very clear: *"It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave." We* do not rely on any power other than His own: *"It is in God that all believers must place their trust."* (Verse 11) The messengers announce this as a permanent truth. A believer does not place his trust in anyone other than God. He turns to no one else for help or support, and he seeks refuge with none other than Him.

The messengers then confront tyranny and rejection with an attitude based on faith, remaining steadfast in the face of adversity and abuse. They ask a question which means an assertion: *"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust."* (Verse 12)

"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths?" (Verse 12) This is a statement by one who is certain of his attitude and the way he follows. He entertains no doubts about the support he has, and believes that God who guides to the straight path will undoubtedly give him His support. What does it matter if victory is not given in this present life, when one is sure that God is guiding him along the right path?

Anyone who feels deep in his heart that God's hand guides his footsteps is someone that has real contact with God. Such a person does not mistake the sense of His existence and that He is God who controls everything. This is a feeling that leaves no room for reluctance in following the path of faith, regardless of what obstacles may lie along the way, including tyrannical forces that persecute those who

follow it. This explains why God's messengers' reply links their feeling of being guided by God with their placing their trust in Him as they faced open opposition from tyrants. It also explains their determination to go along the way despite all the threats.

Such an association is real only in the hearts and minds of people who take positive action to confront the tyranny of *jāhiliyyah* society. Such hearts and minds realize deep inside that God's hand opens windows for them to see the light that illuminates great horizons before them. They feel the comfort of faith and true knowledge, and feel reassured by their strong bond with God. Hence, they do not care about the threats they receive from tyrants. Threats and temptations do not have any effect on them, as they look down on all the tyrants on earth and their means of oppression and persecution. Why would a heart that knows its link with God fear anything that others may have?

"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution." (Verse 12) We will remain steadfast and never budge in the face of all the persecution visited on us. We will never entertain any doubt and we will never go back on our faith. *"In God alone let all the faithful place their trust."* (Verse 12)

At this point tyranny reveals its intentions. It does not argue, think or take a rational approach. It feels that it has no power to face up to faith, and that it will inevitably be defeated. Hence, it threatens the use of brute force, which is the only means to which tyranny can resort: "*The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.'*" (Verse 13)

This shows clearly the nature of the battle between Islam and ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.* The latter does not agree that Islam should have its own entity, which is independent from it. It will not tolerate a separate existence for Islam, and will not live in peace with Islam, even if Islam wants peace with it. That is because Islam wants to be represented in a social set up with its own leadership and because it claims allegiance from its followers. But *jāhiliyyah* cannot tolerate this. Therefore, the demand the unbelievers make of their messengers is not merely to stop calling on people to believe. They further demand that they return to their own ways and be fully integrated in their own society. They must not have their separate entity. But divine faith will not accept this as it is contrary to its nature. Hence, the messengers reject this demand. It is not for a person who submits to God to go back on that and return to *jāhiliyyah.*

When brute force reveals its shameless face, there is no room for argument or a peaceful call to accept the faith. But God will not abandon His messengers to face *jāhiliyyah* on their own.

By its very nature, a society based on *jāhiliyyah* does not allow anyone who submits to God to work from within its boundaries, unless the work of that believer and his efforts and potentials will support that society and contribute to its power. Those who imagine themselves able to serve their faith by penetrating un-Islamic society and working within its system do not actually understand the nature of the organic structure of that society. It is a society that forces everyone to work for its beliefs and concepts. Hence, the noble messengers' refusal to revert to their people's old ways, after they had been saved from them by God.

At this point the Supreme Power levels its blow to which no resistance can be made by weak human beings, even though they may be ruthless despots: "*Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.'*" (Verses 13-14)

Prayers for God's Support

We must realize here that the Supreme Power does not intervene to settle the issue between the messengers and their communities until the messengers themselves declare their final split with their people. The believers must make it clear that they will never return to their people's old ways after God has saved them. They must also insist on having their own separate identity, society and leadership. This means that the community is split into two which differ in faith, lifestyle, leadership and structure. This is when God intervenes to destroy the despots who persecute the believers. This is when God fulfils His promise to His messengers to grant them victory and establish the believers on earth. Such intervention will never happen while the believers are integrated in un-Islamic society, working from within its institutions. They must first have their own identity and their own separate structure and leadership.

"*Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 13) Here we have an emphatic statement. Furthermore, it adds power through its use of inversion and the plural pronoun in reference to God. It asserts a promise to destroy the tyrants who threaten the believers and, by their threats, do wrong to themselves, the truth, God's messengers and all people. "*And most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone.*" (Verse 14) This is not an act of favouritism, but the work of a fair law of nature that God has set in operation.

"*This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.*" (Verse 14) This settlement in the land after the tyrants have gone is promised to those who fear God and do not act with arrogance or overbearing pride.

Such people fear what God has warned them against, so they take measures to avoid it. They do not engage in corruption or wrongdoing against other people. Hence they deserve to be given their chance and be established on earth.

This sets the scene for a confrontation between the feeble power of wrongdoing despots and the great power of God, the Supreme Being who controls the whole universe. The messengers' task has been completed with the clear delivery of the message and the declaration of a split between themselves and the unbelievers. The tyrants marshal all their feeble power and stand to one side, and the messengers, who in all humility call people to faith, stand opposite, but they are supported by God, the Almighty. Both parties pray for victory, and the result is as expected: *"And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him."* (Verses 15-17)

This is a remarkable scene showing every hardened despot ending up in failure in this life on earth. As he takes his position of miserable failure, hell is looming large behind him. There he is made to drink putrefied fluids. He is violently forced to gulp it down, although he can hardly take a sip because it is both dirty and bitter. His disgust is evident from the look on his face, so much so that we can almost see it through the words. Death approaches him from every corner, but he will not die, because he must take his punishment in full. But beyond this is an even sterner punishment.

It is indeed a remarkable scene showing the tyrant coming to grief, engulfed by a fate that appears to him in this horrific way. The words used here add their own connotations which make the punishment fit the brute force the tyrants themselves employed to threaten the advocates of the truth.

So Easy for God

The fitting comment on the destiny of tyrants and the misery they are made to suffer is part of a scene painting the situation of the unbelievers, with its assertion of God's power, a power which can easily do away with them all and replace them with a new creation. This picture follows the last confrontation that takes place in this life. The curtains are drawn here before they open again to show what happens to both sides in the life to come.

"The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray." (Verse 18) The image of ashes

being blown about on a stormy day adds action to the concept that the unbelievers' works will come to nothing. People cannot hold on to any part of their actions, or make use of them. This image gives a far more profound effect than any expression of the same meaning of total loss in intellectual terms.

This scene expresses a basic truth about what the unbelievers do. Actions that have no basis in faith, and are not controlled by that bond relating every action to its motive, and relating that motive to God remain loose, lacking a solid entity. They are like ashes or flying particles. It is not the action itself that carries paramount value, but rather the motivation behind it. Action is a mechanical movement, but its motive is what differentiates man from machine.

The comment which follows is also very apt: "*This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray.*" (Verse 18) Just like the ashes blown far away by fierce winds, so too have they gone far astray.

The following verses then speak of the fate of the unbelievers of olden times in order to demonstrate the fate of the unbelieving Arabs of the Quraysh. These verses threaten them with God's ability to replace them with a new creation: "*Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. This is no difficult thing for God.*" (Verses 19-20)

This switch from a discussion about faith and disbelief, and the dispute between God's messengers and the unbelievers in un-Islamic societies, to a picture of the heavens and the earth is very natural in the Qur'ān. It is also natural in human feelings and perceptions. This is a further indication of the divine source of the Qur'ān. There is a secret but intelligible discourse between man and the universe. Human nature responds instinctively to this secret communication once it tunes in to it and receives its signals.

Those who do not pick up on these signals and indicators must examine their receptive faculties. For these must be faulty. Eyes may turn blind, and ears may become deaf, and a person may be dumb. Those who cannot receive the signals of the universe have defective faculties. Hence they are unsuited to positions of leadership. This includes all those who accept a materialistic philosophy which produces what is falsely called 'scientific doctrines'. Science cannot function with faulty faculties and a defective means of contact with the universe. Such people are described in the Qur'ān as blind. It is not possible for human life to prosper under a system, doctrine or philosophy promoted by someone who is blind.

The fact that the heavens and the earth have been created with the truth gives the impression of limitless ability and solid stability. The truth is solid and stable even in the sound the word 'truth' makes. This contrasts completely with the ashes blown

about fiercely on a stormy day, dispersed far and wide, as it contrasts with people going far astray.

In light of the fate suffered by despots who stubbornly took the wrong side in the battle between truth and falsehood, a strong warning is issued: *"If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation."* (Verse 19) He who is able to create the heavens and the earth can easily replace the human race with a different one, or bring about a new community of humans in place of the present one. Again the connotations of taking a community away to replace it with another fits properly with the image of ashes blown far away.

"This is no difficult thing for God." (Verse 20) The creation of the heavens and the earth testify that it is indeed easy for God. The fate of earlier unbelieving communities also testifies to it, and so do the ashes scattered hither and thither. It is indeed a remarkable feature of the Qur'ānic style that imagery and connotations slot together in perfect harmony.

Acrimonious Exchanges between Allies

At this point in the *sūrah* we note an even higher level of the inimitable style of the Qur'ān, and its power of imagery, expression and harmony between scenes and ideas. A short while ago we saw obstinate tyrants coming to grief, with an image of hell looming large behind them as they are made to suffer their greatest disappointment in this life. Now we see them on the Day of Judgement. It is at once an extraordinary and powerful scene, full of movement, reaction and dialogue between the weak and the powerful, and between both and Satan.

> *They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?' [And the others] will reply: Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.' And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace.* (Verses 21-23)

We have now moved from this world's stage to that of the next where everyone appears before God: *"They will all appear before God."* They all come forward: the arrogant tyrants who reject His message and their weak subordinates, joined by Satan, and also those who believed in the messengers and did righteous deeds. In fact they have always been exposed before God, but now they know and feel that there is no screen to give them cover or protection. They all appear in front of Him, and now the dialogue starts:

"Then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?'" (Verse 21) The weak are those who forfeited the most essential quality of the human being honoured by God when they forfeited their rights to freedom of thought, belief and choice, making themselves no more than the slaves of arrogant despots. They submitted themselves like servants to such despots like themselves in preference to submission to God alone. Such weakness is no excuse; indeed it is their crime.

God does not like that anyone should feel weak. Indeed he calls on all people to seek His protection, and find strength in His support. He does not like that anyone should abandon, willingly or unwillingly, his or her share of freedom, which is a privilege for which they deserve honour. No material force, great as it may be, can force into submission a human being who wants to remain free and hold on to his human dignity. The maximum that brute force can achieve is to have power over the body, imprisoning and tormenting it. As for the mind, conscience and spirit, these cannot be imprisoned by anyone unless the victim so agrees to hand them over.

Who has the power to make such weak people follow despots in faith, thought and behaviour? Who has the power to make them submit to anyone other than God, their Creator who is the only One to provide them with their means of sustenance? The answer is none other than their own weak souls. They are not weak because of any lack of material power, or because they have less dignity, wealth, or position than despots. All these are of little consequence. They are external or superficial aspects, and lacking them does not mean any real weakness. Instead, they are weak in their souls and dignity. They do not truly appreciate man's most essential quality.

The oppressed represent the majority while the despots are in the minority. How come, then, that the majority are subjugated by the minority? It is only a weakness of spirit and soul, and forfeiture of the dignity with which God has graced human beings. Despots cannot humiliate and subjugate the masses unless the masses are willing to be subjugated. The masses are always able to stand up to tyrants, if only they choose to do so. What is lacking, then, is the will. Humiliation does not come about without a susceptibility to being humiliated. In fact the tyrants rely only on this susceptibility.

Here we see those weak and humble 'followers' as they come on the stage of the hereafter. Addressing arrogant tyrants, they say: *"We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?"* (Verse 21) We have followed you and, as a result, we are now facing this painful destiny. Or maybe it is that after seeing the punishment that awaits them they try to reproach the tyrants for having led them to this end. The *sūrah* quotes what they say, which carries overtones of humility.

The arrogant tyrants reply to their question, saying: "*Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you.*" (Verse 21) Why should you blame us when we are facing the same destiny as you? We have not followed guidance ourselves and left you to go astray. Had God given us guidance we would have led you to it, just as we led you to error when we went astray. They attribute both their guidance and error to God, now acknowledging His great power, when once they had denied these. They exercised their tyranny, subjugating the weak to their power, in a manner which took no account of God's power. They now try to absolve themselves by attributing their error and role in leading other people astray to God. But God does not command anyone to go astray, as He says: "*Never does God enjoin what is indecent.*" (7: 28)

They go on to implicitly reproach the weak, telling them that there is no use in panic or patient endurance. God's punishment is due and it cannot be averted. The time has passed when panic could have helped those who went astray to return to God in repentance. Similarly, patience in adversity used to be of benefit, because God would bestow His mercy on those who were patient. But now this is all over. There is no more room for escape: "*It is now all one for us, whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.*" (Verse 21)

Realities That Must be Faced

Matters have been settled and there can be no room for discussion or argument. Everyone has been shown their place in the life to come. But at this point we see a remarkable portrait: it is Satan, the one who did everything in his power to divert people away from the truth and turn them towards error and falsehood, who reproaches both the weak and the tyrants. His words may sound to them worse than the torture they will soon face: "*And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store.*" (Verse 22)

What an amazing scene. Satan is truly devilish! His personality appears here in its most striking colours, just as we have seen the true character of the weak and the

powerful. Satan who was the constant whisperer, presenting every type of temptation, turning people away from the voice of truth is now stabbing his followers in the back. Now that matters have been settled, they cannot make any counter attack. They cannot even reply to him. It is he who says now, after the issues have been decided: *"God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them."* (Verse 22) He goes on to rub it in, reproaching them for responding to him when he had no power over them. It is they who gave themselves up to him, forgetting all the old enmity between themselves and Satan. They embraced his falsehood and abandoned the message of truth God had sent them.

"Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me." (Verse 22) He not only rebukes them, but calls on them to rebuke themselves for having obeyed him: *"Do not now blame me, but blame yourselves."* (Verse 22) He then adds insult to injury, lets them down unashamedly, and declares that he wants nothing further to do with them. Yet it was he who had previously given them all sorts of rosy promises. He went on to tell them that no one could ever defeat them. Now he will not even try to give them any support should they appeal to him for it, nor will they help him when he cries out: *"It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine."* (Verse 22) There is no contact or relationship between us now. He then absolves himself of their associating him as a partner with God. *"I have already disclaimed your associating me with God."* (Verse 22) He then finishes this Satanic speech with a devastating blow directed at those who followed him in every way: *"Indeed for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store."* (Verse 22)

This is what they receive from Satan, after they have followed him blindly into error. This is what they get from him for having abandoned God's messengers who called on them to follow God's guidance.

Before the curtains are drawn, we see on the other side the believers who have won the battle against Satan, and who are now enjoying their success: " *Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace."* (Verse 23) Thus the scene ends. This is the outcome of the whole story between the message and its advocates on the one side and powerful tyrants who deny God and His messengers on the other.

A Word to Strengthen the Believers

While the nature of the story is the same in every age, the believers who follow God's messengers stand in this world face to face against tyrannical ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah: "And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be*

made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him." (Verses 15-17)

While this takes place in this life, a scene of the hereafter is portrayed whereby an unusual conversation ensues between arrogant tyrants, their powerless followers and Satan. The *sūrah* also portrays the widely different destinies of good and evil people before providing an analogy of what good and bad words are like. This portrays the working of the law God has set in nature concerning good and evil in life. It also serves as a final comment on the story: "*Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills."* (Verses 24-27)

This scene describing words and utterances, good and evil, is derived from the general atmosphere of the *sūrah,* and from the history of prophets and those who deny their messages, as well as the destiny of both groups. The tree of prophethood, with its prominent figure of Abraham, the Prophet Muĥammad's ancestor, is portrayed here as it delivers its great yield every now and then, in the shape of a new prophet who spreads faith and goodness.

Yet the analogy is far more comprehensive, real and effective than just that. For the good word of truth is indeed like a great firm tree, yielding its fruits, solid, unaffected by wind and undisturbed by the storm of evil. It cannot be uprooted by evil tyranny, even though there may be times when it seems to be exposed to grave danger. As it stands high, it looks on evil, injustice and tyranny from above, even though it sometimes seems to the short-sighted that evil squeezes it into a narrow corner. Its fruits are yielded time after time, because its seeds grow within good souls, generation after generation.

The same analogy applies in reverse. An evil word of falsehood is like a foul tree which may spread its branches high and wide, and which may seem to some people to be greater and stronger than the good tree of truth. Nevertheless, it is weak and hollow. Its roots are easily pulled out, as though they stretch on the surface of the earth. One day, it will definitely be uprooted, and then it will have no stable means of existence.

Neither of these is a parable given by way of consolation or encouragement to good people. This is the reality of life, even though it may appear at times to come very slowly. Real goodness does not die or fade away, even though it may be pressed hard by evil which seems to possess enormous power. Conversely, evil exists only

while it consumes the little goodness which may be mixed with it. For evil rarely exists in a pure form. In most cases, it has some good within it, and as long as it has that good element, it continues to exist. When this good element no longer exists, evil crumbles and is destroyed, regardless of its initially great appearance. Good remains in its healthy position, enjoying good prospects, whilst evil remains in its foul position, engulfed by serious threats.

"Thus *does God set parables for people so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 25) These are examples that exist in real life, but people often forget under the pressures of life.

The *sūrah* provides several elements that contribute to the concept of stability associated with the good, firm tree. It is painted here as having firm roots, well entrenched in the earth, its branches stretching wide on the horizon, giving the clear impression of solidity, strength and firmness. As this great tree is compared to a good word, we are told that "*God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come.*" (Verse 27) And just like the bad tree that is uprooted from the face of the earth, lacking stable existence, "*the wrongdoers God lets go astray.*" (Verse 27) Thus the modes of expression fit harmoniously with the connotations stressed in the *sūrah.*

God strengthens the believers in this life and in the life to come with the good word of faith that is firmly established in human nature and conscience, yielding its fruit through good and renewed action that has a lasting impact on human life. He further strengthens them with His word contained in the Qur'ān, with the Prophet's statements, and with His true promise of victory in this life and success in the hereafter. These are all unshakeable words which will always be seen to be true. Those who believe in them will never suffer from worry or confusion.

On the other hand, God lets the wrongdoers go astray as a result of their wrongdoing and associating partners with Him. In fact, 'wrongdoing' is often used in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God, since both are manifestations of injustice. Such wrongdoers turn away from the light of divine guidance, and move aimlessly in a great maze of legend and superstition, following laws based on desire, and not on the proper guidance provided by God. As they do so, they are left to go astray. This happens in accordance with the law God has set in operation, which leads to error and confusion anyone who chooses to close his eyes to His guidance and follow his desire.

"*God does whatever He wills.*" (Verse 27) His will is free. It chooses the law it sets in operation, but is not limited or restricted by it. Whenever God's wisdom determines to change it, it is changed by God's will which is free, unimpeded by anything, irresistible. Indeed, everything in the universe takes place in accordance with God's will.

This statement serves as a final comment on the main topic that takes up more than half of the *sūrah* that is entitled Abraham, after the father of the prophets. This principal subject matter is God's message and its advocacy. The good tree with its good fruit and stretching, cool shade, and the good word that survives one generation after another, contain together the great truth of the one message which never changes, namely the message of the oneness of God, the Almighty.

Messengers versus Unbelievers

We need to pause here in order to reflect on the main facts in the history of God's messengers and their encounter with *jāhiliyyah.* We have already made brief references to these in our commentary, but they now merit further discussion.

The first basic fact which God, in His absolute wisdom and faultless knowledge, tells us is that there has been a procession of faith ever since the beginning of human history. This procession has continued uninterrupted, led by God's messengers who have advocated the same truth and followed the same method. They have advocated the oneness of God, the Lord of the universe. None of them has ever associated any partners with God. None relied on, or sought support from, or appealed to, anyone other than God.

This means that faith in the One God has not come about progressively or developed from a belief in a multiplicity of deities, to dualism and then the concept of a single God, as claimed by scholars of Comparative Religion. This claim saying that man started with the worship of totems, spirits and stars before progressing to the worship of a single deity is false. Nor is it true to claim that such progress parallels the progress of human knowledge and experience, or the development of political power in human society. All such claims are false.

Faith in God, the only deity to be worshipped, has been preached by God's messengers ever since the beginning of history. The basic truth of God's oneness was established in its full form in all divine messages. None of these messages or divine religions introduced any change in, or modification of, this truth. This is what we are told by God whose knowledge encompasses all things.

Had such scholars said that acceptability of the faith based on God's oneness developed over the centuries, and that pagan beliefs have been influenced by the different forms of the divine faith, preached by God's successive messengers who confronted such pagan beliefs, until there was a time when the masses were more ready to accept the divine faith, then their claims might have had some validity. But such scholars follow a method of research and investigation that is based on an old subtle hostility to the church in Europe. This old hostility still survives although it may go unnoticed by modern scholars. They are motivated by an underlying desire,

of which they may or may not be aware, to disprove the religious way of thinking. In this respect, they want to prove that religion never came about as revelation from on high, but was instead invented by human beings. When it is classified as such, then it is subject to all the rules applicable to human thinking, such as modification, experimentation, and revision. It is such old hostility and subtle desire that have given birth to the study of Comparative Religion which is falsely called a branch of science.

Such claims may deceive some people into accepting what such scholars say. However, no Muslim who respects his faith and its method of establishing the facts should be deceived by it for a moment. How can he, when such claims contradict clear Islamic texts that put the facts in a most lucid manner?[4]

One Message by All Messengers

A long procession of God's messengers called on humanity, right from the very first day, to believe in a single message embodying the same faith. *Jāhiliyyah,* on the other hand, confronted this call to faith with the same type of rejection. The Qur'ān portrays this confrontation, disregarding the elements of time and place, in order to show the fact that the resistance to the divine faith has not changed throughout history. This in itself is very noteworthy. *Jāhiliyyah* is the same throughout history. It is not a particular stage of human history. It is a state of mind giving rise to a belief and a social structure based on it.

The state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* is based on the submission of one group of people to another, giving the qualities of Godhead to someone other than God, or assigning lordship to anyone other than God. Whether people believe in polytheism or in a monotheism that acknowledges a multiplicity of lords, they sink into a state of ignorance, or what is described in Islamic terminology as *jāhiliyyah,* with all its secondary characteristics.

The message preached by God's messengers is essentially based on God's oneness and the rejection of all false lords. Submission to God must be pure and complete. He is the only Lord, and to Him belongs sovereignty and all authority. Hence it is in direct conflict with the conceptual foundation of *jāhiliyyah* society, constituting a direct threat to it. This is especially so when the message begins to form a separate grouping that draws its members from within that society, giving them new beliefs and a new leadership and loyalties. This is a normal and essential line of action which divine religion inevitably follows.

As a single unit, *jāhiliyyah* society begins to feel the ideological threat to its

[4] This concept is discussed at length in the commentary on *Sūrah 11,* Vol. IX, pp. 184-190

existence, particularly when the faith based on submission to God alone, or Islam, comes to be represented as a separate entity. Hence, *jāhiliyyah* society declares its hostile attitude to Islam, in its general meaning of submission to God alone.

The conflict, then, is between two entities which cannot co-exist peacefully. It is a conflict between two structures, each one of which has a basis that is totally opposed to that of the other. One of them permits submission to human beings, while the other rejects this totally. The Islamic grouping, particularly during its formative period, takes its recruits from *jāhiliyyah* society. Later, it confronts that society to take over leadership and liberate all mankind from submission to anyone other than God. Such development is inevitable when the advocates of Islam follow the right course defined by their faith. In view of this, *jāhiliyyah* society does not tolerate Islam right from the beginning. With this being the case, we can readily understand the unity of reaction by all *jāhiliyyah* societies to the messages of all God's messengers. *Jāhiliyyah* society is defending its own existence. It has usurped God's sovereignty, and it wants to keep it.

Since *jāhiliyyah* society senses the danger to its very existence represented by the Islamic message, it confronts that message with an onslaught that accepts neither a truce nor a *modus vivendi.* It is a war to the bitter end, since it is over survival. Neither *jāhiliyyah* society nor God's noble messengers indulge in any self-deception over the nature of this confrontation. Nor did God's messengers ever deceive their followers over it. "*The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.'*" (Verse 13) They do not accept that the messengers or their followers should have a separate faith, leadership or grouping. They demand that they should return to their ways, integrating in their society, or else they will be thrown out of their land altogether.

Likewise, God's messengers do not accept any reverting to full integration into *jāhiliyyah* society, or to shedding their independent personality or grouping. They realize that their community is based on a totally different foundation to that of *jāhiliyyah* society. Nor do they say, as do those who do not realize the true nature of Islam or the nature of the organic structure of societies, "Let us integrate into that society so that we can advocate our message and serve our cause from within it." The fact that a Muslim living in an un-Islamic society has his own distinct faith must inevitably be followed by having an independent community that has its own leadership and allegiance. This is not a matter of choice. It is absolutely inevitable. By its very structure, un-Islamic society is highly sensitive to the Islamic faith which has as its foundation belief in the oneness of God, to whom all people must submit themselves. It removes all false deities from positions of leadership and authority. Every Muslim who integrates into *jāhiliyyah* society becomes a servant of that society, when he should be serving the cause of Islam only.

There remains the fact of destiny which advocates of Islam must never lose sight of. The fulfilment of God's promise to His servants that He will grant them victory and authority and will judge between them and their people on the basis of the truth will not take place until the believers have separated themselves and declared their allegiance to the truth they preach. God's victory is not given while Islam's advocates are integrated within un-Islamic society, serving its interests. When such integration occurs, it delays victory. This is then a great responsibility which must be clearly understood by the advocates of Islam.

A Style of Exceptional Refinement

A brief note on the style employed in this passage should be added. It is at this juncture that we find the breathtakingly beautiful style of the Qur'ān demonstrating the procession of faith as it confronts erring *jāhiliyyah* throughout human history. It is the beauty of the truth: simple, natural, clear, confident, reassured, strong and profound: "*Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God let all the faithful place their trust.'*" (Verses 10-12)

Here we see all God's messengers marching in a single procession, confronting *jāhiliyyah* which is one in nature. This essential fact remains true despite the changing circumstances. The beauty of the Qur'ānic style is at its best where it describes the truth embodied in the message preached by the prophets as related to the truth behind the existence of the universe: "*Said the messengers sent to them: Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and earth?*" (Verse 10) "*And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths?*" (Verse 12) "*Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. This is no difficult thing for God.*" (Verses 19-20)

Thus the fundamental relationship between the truth embodied in the divine message and the truth of the existence of the universe is emphasized as one single truth, derived from God who is the truth. It is firmly established and deeply rooted, just like "*a good tree: its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky.*" (Verse 24) Everything else is false, transitory, similar to "*a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the*

earth. It cannot have a stable position." (Verse 26)

The same beauty is seen in the nature of the messengers' understanding of the nature of their Lord, and the nature of Godhead as it fills the hearts of His faithful servants: *"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust."* (Verse 12)

All these are aspects of that spectacular beauty which human expression cannot describe. It can only be pointed to, just like we point to a far away star. We do not reach it with our signal, but we draw attention to it as it lights up our horizon.

2
Grace and Gratitude

۞ أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ بَدَّلُواْ نِعۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِ كُفۡرٗا وَأَحَلُّواْ قَوۡمَهُمۡ دَارَ ٱلۡبَوَارِ ٢٨

Have you not seen those who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief, and landed their people in the House of Perdition, (28)

جَهَنَّمَ يَصۡلَوۡنَهَاۖ وَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡقَرَارُ ٢٩

hell, which they will have to endure? How vile a place to settle in! (29)

وَجَعَلُواْ لِلَّهِ أَندَادٗا لِّيُضِلُّواْ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦۗ قُلۡ تَمَتَّعُواْ فَإِنَّ مَصِيرَكُمۡ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ٣٠

They set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path. Say: 'Enjoy yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.' (30)

قُل لِّعِبَادِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ يُقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُنفِقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقۡنَٰهُمۡ سِرّٗا وَعَلَانِيَةٗ مِّن قَبۡلِ أَن يَأۡتِيَ يَوۡمٞ لَّا بَيۡعٞ فِيهِ وَلَا خِلَٰلٌ ٣١

Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship. (31)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَأَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ فَأَخۡرَجَ بِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ رِزۡقٗا لَّكُمۡۖ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡفُلۡكَ لِتَجۡرِيَ فِي ٱلۡبَحۡرِ بِأَمۡرِهِۦۖ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرَ ٣٢

It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. (32)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلشَّمۡسَ وَٱلۡقَمَرَ دَآئِبَيۡنِۖ

And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. (33)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَءَاتَىٰكُم مِّن كُلِّ مَا سَأَلۡتُمُوهُۚ وَإِن تَعُدُّواْ نِعۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِ لَا تُحۡصُوهَآۗ إِنَّ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ لَظَلُومٞ كَفَّارٞ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَإِذۡ قَالَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمُ رَبِّ ٱجۡعَلۡ هَٰذَا ٱلۡبَلَدَ ءَامِنٗا وَٱجۡنُبۡنِي وَبَنِيَّ أَن نَّعۡبُدَ ٱلۡأَصۡنَامَ ﴿٣٥﴾

رَبِّ إِنَّهُنَّ أَضۡلَلۡنَ كَثِيرٗا مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِۖ فَمَن تَبِعَنِي فَإِنَّهُۥ مِنِّيۖ وَمَنۡ عَصَانِي فَإِنَّكَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿٣٦﴾

رَّبَّنَآ إِنِّيٓ أَسۡكَنتُ مِن ذُرِّيَّتِي بِوَادٍ غَيۡرِ ذِي زَرۡعٍ عِندَ بَيۡتِكَ ٱلۡمُحَرَّمِ رَبَّنَا لِيُقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ فَٱجۡعَلۡ أَفۡـِٔدَةٗ مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ تَهۡوِيٓ إِلَيۡهِمۡ وَٱرۡزُقۡهُم مِّنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

رَبَّنَآ إِنَّكَ تَعۡلَمُ مَا نُخۡفِي وَمَا نُعۡلِنُۗ وَمَا يَخۡفَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مِن شَيۡءٖ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ ﴿٣٨﴾

ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِي وَهَبَ لِي عَلَى ٱلۡكِبَرِ إِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَإِسۡحَٰقَۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي لَسَمِيعُ

And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful. (34)

Abraham said: 'My Lord! Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. (35)

My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (36)

Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. (37)

Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. (38)

All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. (39)

ٱلدُّعَآءِ ﴿٣٩﴾

رَبِّ ٱجۡعَلۡنِي مُقِيمَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِي ۚ
رَبَّنَا وَتَقَبَّلۡ دُعَآءِ ﴿٤٠﴾

رَبَّنَا ٱغۡفِرۡ لِي وَلِوَٰلِدَيَّ وَلِلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ يَوۡمَ
يَقُومُ ٱلۡحِسَابُ ﴿٤١﴾

وَلَا تَحۡسَبَنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَٰفِلاً عَمَّا يَعۡمَلُ
ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ۚ إِنَّمَا يُؤَخِّرُهُمۡ لِيَوۡمٍ
تَشۡخَصُ فِيهِ ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرُ ﴿٤٢﴾

مُهۡطِعِينَ مُقۡنِعِي رُءُوسِهِمۡ لَا يَرۡتَدُّ
إِلَيۡهِمۡ طَرۡفُهُمۡ ۖ وَأَفۡـِٔدَتُهُمۡ هَوَآءٌ ﴿٤٣﴾

وَأَنذِرِ ٱلنَّاسَ يَوۡمَ يَأۡتِيهِمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ فَيَقُولُ
ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ رَبَّنَآ أَخِّرۡنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ قَرِيبٖ
نُّجِبۡ دَعۡوَتَكَ وَنَتَّبِعِ ٱلرُّسُلَ ۗ أَوَلَمۡ
تَكُونُوٓاْ أَقۡسَمۡتُم مِّن قَبۡلُ مَا لَكُم مِّن
زَوَالٖ ﴿٤٤﴾

وَسَكَنتُمۡ فِي مَسَٰكِنِ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓاْ
أَنفُسَهُمۡ وَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمۡ كَيۡفَ فَعَلۡنَا
بِهِمۡ وَضَرَبۡنَا لَكُمُ ٱلۡأَمۡثَالَ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَقَدۡ مَكَرُواْ مَكۡرَهُمۡ وَعِندَ ٱللَّهِ
مَكۡرُهُمۡ وَإِن كَانَ مَكۡرُهُمۡ لِتَزُولَ

My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. (40)

Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.' (41)

Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, (42)

when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void. (43)

Hence, warn mankind of the Day when suffering may befall them; when those who do wrong will say: 'Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.' 'Why? Did you not in time past swear that you would suffer no decline? (44)

And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you.' (45)

They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains. (46)

مِنْهُ ٱلْجِبَالُ ﴿٤٦﴾

فَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِفَ وَعْدِهِۦ رُسُلَهُۥٓ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ ذُو ٱنتِقَامٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

يَوْمَ تُبَدَّلُ ٱلْأَرْضُ غَيْرَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ ۖ وَبَرَزُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلْوَٰحِدِ ٱلْقَهَّارِ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَتَرَى ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّقَرَّنِينَ فِى ٱلْأَصْفَادِ ﴿٤٩﴾

سَرَابِيلُهُم مِّن قَطِرَانٍ وَتَغْشَىٰ وُجُوهَهُمُ ٱلنَّارُ ﴿٥٠﴾

لِيَجْزِىَ ٱللَّهُ كُلَّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٥١﴾

هَٰذَا بَلَٰغٌ لِّلنَّاسِ وَلِيُنذَرُوا۟ بِهِۦ وَلِيَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَا هُوَ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ وَلِيَذَّكَّرَ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil! (47)

On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens, and when all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists. (48)

On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, (49)

wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames. (50)

God will requite each soul according to what it has done. God is indeed swift in reckoning. (51)

This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed. (52)

Overview

This second part of the *sūrah* begins where the first ends. The first part outlined the purpose of the Prophet Muḥammad's message, namely, "*to bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light.*" (Verse 1) And it outlined the purpose of Moses's message: "*Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God.*" (Verse 5) He explained to them his message and reminded them of

God's favours and blessings. He also announced what God had promised them: "*If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.*" (Verse 7) He then related to them the history of prophets with communities who refused to believe them. In fact he began this narrative, but immediately disappeared to let the *sūrah* relate it with magnificent theatre, culminating in the scene where the unbelievers listen to Satan giving them a memorable lesson, which comes too late to be of any benefit.

Now the *sūrah* turns to the unbelievers among the Prophet Muĥammad's community, who have been given a long reel showing the great episodes of history. These people have indeed been blessed with many favours granted to them by God. One such major favour is the fact that God sent them a messenger to bring them out of darkness into light, and to call on them to repent so that they might receive His forgiveness. But they reject God's blessings, and deny His message. The second part of the *sūrah* starts then with an expression of amazement at such people who lead their communities to destruction, just like those before them who led their followers to hell.

It goes on to portray some of the aspects of God's favours in one of the greatest scenes of the universe. It then provides an example of thanksgiving by Abraham. This example follows a clear order to the believers to offer prayers and be kind to people as an aspect of thanksgiving. They must do so before a day comes when wealth can no longer grow and no buying or selling can take place. As for the unbelievers, they are not just forgotten. They are given respite until a day comes when eyes are opened wide. God's promise to His messengers will inevitably be fulfilled, no matter what the unbelievers scheme against them. All this indicates that the second part of the *sūrah* is in full harmony with the first, one complementing the other.

Bartering away God's Blessings

This passage begins with drawing attention to a highly singular state of affairs: "*Have you not seen those who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition, hell, which they will have to endure? How vile a place to settle in! They set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path. Say: 'Enjoy yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.'*" (Verses 28-30)

These are people who have been granted God's blessings in the form of a prophet sent to call on them to believe in God, and to lead them along the way to God's forgiveness of their sins, and to a heavenly destiny. Yet they abandon all this and choose instead a state of unbelief. These, the Prophet is told, are the chiefs of his own people who follow the same practice as the elders or the chiefs of most communities.

Thus by their singular exchange, they lead their communities to hell. Just as we have seen in the histories of past nations and communities mentioned earlier in the *sūrah,* they land their people in hell. It is a vile and ignominious abode.

The *sūrah* invites the Prophet, and every believer, to marvel at the curious behaviour of such people, particularly since they have seen what happened to earlier communities. All this has been portrayed for their benefit in this *sūrah* in a most vivid way, accounting for what took place between the unbelievers and the messengers sent to them. It was all shown to them as if it were taking place before their very eyes. In fact, the Qur'ān only portrays what is going to take place in the hereafter as if it is happening now, or just happened before our very eyes.

These people have exchanged God's blessing of a messenger sent to them with disbelief. The messenger called on them to believe in God alone and to associate no partners with Him, but they abandoned all this, and "*they set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path.*" (Verse 30) They place their false deities in a position equal to that of God, and offer worship to them as they would offer it to Him. They submit to these false deities as they would submit to Him, and they attribute to them some of the attributes that belong only to God. They thus lead people astray from the only straight path leading to God, the only deity in the universe.

The chiefs or elders have deliberately misguided their own people, leading them astray by claiming that their false deities were equal to God. The fact, however, is that the faith based on God's oneness represents a threat to the power and vested interests of tyrannical forces in every generation, not merely in this first period of *jāhiliyyah* when the Prophet preached his message. Whenever people turn away from the pure faith based on God's oneness, whatever shape this may take, and assign their leadership to others, they revert to a state of un-Islam, or *jāhiliyyah.* In such a state, people surrender their own freedom and personality, follow their desires and implement laws enacted on the basis of their leaders' desires instead of deriving them from God's revelations. In such a situation the advocacy of God's oneness becomes a threat to those chiefs and their interests. Hence, they try to avert this threat in every way open to them. In older forms of *jāhiliyyah,* this took the shape of adopting false deities, claiming that they were equal to God. In our present time, it takes the form of implementing man-made laws that permit what God has not permitted and prohibit what He has made lawful. Those who enact such laws are thus placed on an equal footing with God in the way people look at them and in everyday life as well.

Hence, the Prophet is instructed to say to such people that they may enjoy themselves in this life as they please, but that this enjoyment will last only for the limit God has determined. The eventual outcome is well known: "*Say: 'Enjoy*

yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.'" (Verse 30)

The Prophet is further instructed to leave these people alone, not to trouble himself with them any more. Instead he should address God's servants who have accepted the faith. These are the people who will take heed when they are warned against evil. They accept God's blessings and appreciate them, and will never exchange them for disbelief. The Prophet is to address these people and teach them how to be grateful for God's blessings. They should express their gratitude through worship, obedience to God and kindness to His servants: *"Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship."* (Verse 31)

God commands His Messenger to say to those who have attained to faith that they should express their gratitude to God by establishing regular prayer, for prayer is the most express form of gratitude to God. They should also spend in charity out of the sustenance God provides for them, and make such spending both in secret and in public. Secret charity protects the dignity of the taker and enhances the virtue of the giver. This ensures that charity does not become a source of pride and arrogance. Charitable spending in public serves to demonstrate obedience to God's orders, and provides a good example to others in the community. Both ways are left to the discretion and sensitivities of every believer.

The believers are told to spend on others now so that their balance which is preserved for them increases through gains they make by charitable spending. This they have to do before a day comes when there is no longer any possibility for wealth to grow, or friendship to bring any benefit. What is of benefit to people is only the good works they have already done, for their reward is stored: *"Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship."* (Verse 31)

God's Numerous Blessings

At this point, the *sūrah* opens the book of the universe where every page speaks of God's countless blessings. These extend beyond the furthest point our senses can reach, and go into the skies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the day and night, the water pouring down from the skies and the fruits of all plants on earth, the oceans and seas where ships and boats sail, and the rivers flowing with the different means of producing what sustains life. All these universal images are available for all to see, but people do not look, reflect or express gratitude. Man is truly unjust, ingrate, exchanging God's blessings for unbelief, and setting up deities which he claims to be

equal to God, when it is God who creates, sustains and controls the universe and all creatures therein: *"It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful."* (Verses 32-34)

These verses represent an onslaught that employs such universal phenomena as tools, or rather as whips with rhythm and sound to awaken the conscience of man, a creature indulging in wrongdoing and lacking gratitude. One aspect of the unique nature of the Qur'ān is the way it relates everything in the universe and every human feeling to belief in God's oneness. Thus, every flash of inspiration in the universe and in man's conscience becomes proof confirming this belief. The universe is transformed into an exhibition of God's signs where the magnificence of His hand excels so as to leave its distinct mark in every image, feature and shadow. The basic question of Godhead and servitude is not presented as a logical debate or an abstract theological argument, or an issue of metaphysical philosophy. Such methods do not appeal to, influence or inspire the human heart. The Qur'ān presents this central issue within a framework of a multitude of inspiring scenes and facts from the great universe, creation, human nature and basic thoughts and impressions, adding an element of breathtaking beauty and superb harmony.

The great scene of God's blessings that is presented here is painted with fascinating skill, drawing its lines in the same directions the different blessings take in relation to man. This is noticeable in the line of the heavens and the earth, followed by that of water pouring down from the skies and plants and fruits shooting up from the earth. We then have a line depicting the oceans with ships sailing on their surface and rivers flowing with much bounty. A new line takes us back to the skies to show us the sun and the moon, coupled with the line of the night and day, which is closely connected to the sun and moon but remains firm on earth. The final line is comprehensive, throwing its colour and shade over the whole panoramic scene: *"And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them."* (Verse 34) Here we see a harmony that incorporates every touch, line, colour and shade in a universal scene of God's blessings.

Is all this placed at man's service? Is this whole world, with its heavens, earth, seas, rivers, sun and moon, day and night, made subservient to the small creature known as man? Is it so, and still man does not give thanks or even remember God's

favours? Hence, it is indeed true that *"man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful."* (Verse 34)

"It is God who has created the heavens and the earth." (Verse 32) Yet people set up deities and regard them as equal to Him. What more injustice could there be?

"And who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance." (Verse 32) Plants are the first means of sustenance and the most visible source of God's blessings. Rain and the growth of plants run in accordance with the nature God has given this world and the natural laws that allow rain to fall, plants to shoot and fruits to ripen, making all this compatible with man and his nature. For a single seed to grow requires that the Power that controls the whole universe utilizes universal phenomena to give that seed the ability to produce a plant and then provide it with the necessary means of life, such as a fertile place, water, sunlight and air. When people hear the word *rizq,* which we often translate as sustenance or a means of sustenance, they think only of their livelihood, earning money. But the Arabic term has much wider connotations. It includes everything that God provides for man. Even the smallest of such provisions requires operating celestial bodies in accordance with a law that ensures that several hundred thousands of matching conditions fall together in a coherent and complementary way, without which man could not have come into existence and, once existing, his life could not be sustained. It is sufficient to mention the celestial bodies and phenomena referred to in these verses to understand how we can only function when we are under God's care.

"He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea." (Verse 32) It is He who has placed in the sea all that is necessary for these ships to float, and it is He who has given man the ability to understand natural phenomena and rules so as to use them for his benefit.

"And He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit." (Verse 32) The rivers flow and life flourishes, and they overflow and man gets an increase of goodness. Rivers also carry fish, weeds and many other things that are useful to man and to other creatures man uses such as birds and cattle.

"And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]." (Verse 33) Man does not use the sun and the moon directly as he uses water, the fruit, the seas, ships and rivers. Yet he benefits by them and derives from them substances and energies that are required to sustain life. Thus they are made subject to God's law which controls the universe, so that they produce what is of benefit to man in his life on earth, and indeed in the make-up and renewal of the cells of his own body.

"And has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]." (Verse 33) Again both night and day are made subservient so as to fit with the needs and constitution of

man and with his time of activity and that of rest. Had there been permanent day or permanent night, man's whole functioning would have been destroyed, as would the whole world around him. His life would have been impossible, inactive and unproductive.

Yet all that the *sūrah* portrays consists of general lines that gather glimpses of God's blessings. In each line there are countless points. Therefore, a general aspect is added here without any detail so that it fits with the overall scene: "*And He gives you of everything you ask of Him.*" (Verse 34) That includes whatever people ask of wealth, offspring, health, luxuries and refinements. "*Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them.*" (Verse 34) Indeed they are too many to be computed by any one person, or by all human beings, for humans are restricted to a period of time with definite beginning and end. They are also restricted to certain limits of knowledge within time and space. God's favours and blessings, however, are not only numerous, but also unlimited. Hence, they are beyond human reckoning.

Yet despite all this, human beings adopt false deities and consider them equal to God. And instead of thanking God for His blessings, they exchange them for unbelief. Certainly "*man is persistent in wrongdoing, totally ungrateful.*" (Verse 34)

Passionate Prayer by a Devoted Believer

When man's conscience is awakened, he looks at the universe around him and realizes that it is made for his benefit, either directly or through the harmony between its laws and human life and needs. When he looks around him, he finds it all made friendly by God's grace, and by His power and permission it is both helpful and useful. When man considers and contemplates, he must stand in awe of his Lord, prostrate himself and express his gratitude. He always looks up to his Lord to replace with ease any hardship he may be going through, and to preserve any aspect of grace and happiness he may be enjoying.

The perfect example of a human being who always remembers God and expresses his gratitude to Him is Abraham, the father of prophets. His truly thankful character imparts a definite ambience to the whole *sūrah,* which also reflects God's grace and how it is received with gratitude or ingratitude. Abraham is shown here in a scene of devotion, making a heartfelt appeal to God. His melodious supplication is inspirational as it rises to God in heaven:

> *Abraham said: 'My Lord.' Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are*

> *truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.'* (Verses 35-41)

Here Abraham is shown in front of the House he built for God in Makkah, and whose custody has passed to the Quraysh, an Arabian tribe bent on disbelief in God, yet benefiting by the House built for the worship of God alone. Abraham is shown addressing his supplication with perfect devotion and heartfelt gratitude. This should make the ungrateful reflect and revise their attitude. It should make the unbelievers turn back to faith, and the oblivious remember God. It should make people generally follow Abraham in his exemplary attitude.

Abraham begins his supplication by saying: "*My Lord! Make this land secure.*" (Verse 35) Security and safety is so important for man, for it is intertwined with his survival. The *sūrah* mentions this here so as to remind of it the people of Makkah who enjoy it as if it was theirs by right, and who do not give thanks for it. They forget that it is the result of answering the supplication made by Abraham, their first father. Hence, they follow a course which is different from that of Abraham. They turn away from pure faith, yet the second prayer in Abraham's supplication is: "*And preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols.*" (Verse 35)

This second aspect with which Abraham opens his prayer reflects his total submission to God, and his turning to Him in the deepest recesses of his heart. He appeals to Him for help in steering away, together with his children, from idol worship. He also makes it clear that to be so preserved is yet another of God's blessings. It is indeed a great blessing that one's heart is saved from the darkness of polytheism and its ignorance in order to be brought into the light of faith in God and belief in His oneness. This blessing takes a human being out of error, loss and confusion to the comfort of knowledge, reassurance and stability, and out of humiliating submission to a variety of false lords to honourable submission to God, the Lord of all worlds. Abraham appeals to God to maintain this blessing for him by preserving him and his children from the worship of idols.

Abraham is fully aware of the great number of people in his generation and previous generations who went astray when they were deluded by such idols.

Hence, he addresses his passionate appeal to God to spare him from such delusion: *"My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray."* (Verse 36)

Abraham continues his supplication stating that whoever follows his way and does not give in to idol worship belongs to him, as they would have the strongest bond of faith joining them together. *"Hence, he who follows me belongs to me."* (Verse 36) The others who disobey him he leaves to God to determine what He does with them: *"As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 36)

In this last prayer we see Abraham, the caring, forbearing and compassionate. He does not pray to God to destroy those of his offspring who leave his path of guidance. He does not precipitate God's punishment. Indeed he does not even mention punishment. Instead, he leaves them to God, to His forgiveness and mercy. Thus Abraham lends to the whole scene an air of forgiveness and compassion, leaving the taint of disobedience to disappear altogether. Compassionate as he is, Abraham does not let it appear again.

Continuing his supplication, Abraham mentions the fact that he settled some of his offspring in a barren valley where there was no cultivation, next to God's Sacred House and also states the task they were settled there to perform: *"Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers."* (Verse 37)

So this is the task for the performance of which they have migrated and for which they are to tolerate a life of poverty and lack of cultivation. *"So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them."* (Verse 37) The style here is tender, reflecting love and compassion. It describes hearts as having wings and coming from the sky to that Sacred House and its neighbours in that barren valley. Its tenderness counterbalances the hardship of a barren place with the inclination of loving hearts.

"And provide them with fruits." (Verse 37) Why does Abraham pray that they should have such fruit? To eat and enjoy themselves? Certainly, but also to bring about what Abraham, exemplary in his gratitude to his Lord, hopes for: *"so that they may give thanks."* (Verse 37) Thus the purpose of settling close to the Sacred House is given prominence. It is to establish regular prayer in the most devoted and pure form. Similarly, the purpose of the prayer to incline people's hearts to the dwellers in the neighbourhood of the Sacred House and their abundant provision from the fruits of the earth is to give thanks to God who provides all. With such a passionate prayer, there is an evident irony in the attitude of the Quraysh, the Arabian tribe living near the Ka`bah at the time of the Prophet. They offered no worship to God, and no thanks after Abraham's prayer had been answered, giving them people's love and abundant provisions.

Abraham follows this prayer with an acknowledgement that God knows all that people harbour in their hearts and when they turn to God with thanks and sincere supplication. It is not vocal appearances that are meant here. It is what a person feels deep in his heart, and the way he addresses God, who knows what we reveal and conceal. Indeed, nothing in heaven and earth is hidden from God's knowledge: *"Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God."* (Verse 38)

Abraham then mentions an aspect of grace which God has shown him, and he praises God for it and thanks Him, providing an example for all believers. They must not forget God's grace, and they must always be thankful for it. *"All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers."* (Verse 39) Giving a person children when he has attained to old age is felt more keenly, because children represent the extension of one's life into another generation. This is a great feeling for an elderly person who begins to think life is approaching its end. The need to feel the continuity represented by children is thus instinctive. Hence, Abraham praises God and prays for more of God's grace: *"Surely my Lord hears all prayers."* (Verse 39)

A Prayer for All Time

Abraham follows his thanksgiving with a supplication to God to make him always thankful. His thanks take the form of prayer, worship and obedience to God. Thus he declares his determination to always be a devout worshipper, but fears that something may divert him from it. Hence, he prays that God may help him to carry out his intention: *"My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer."* (Verse 40)

Abraham's supplication shows the irony in the Quraysh's attitude, the Arab tribe which had custody of the Ka`bah. Abraham is appealing to God for help to attend to his prayers, and to enable him to perform these at all times. They, however, turn away from it, denying the truth of what God's Messenger tells them of how Abraham prayed for himself and his offspring. Now, Abraham concludes his humble supplication by appealing to God to forgive him and forgive his parents and all believers. He prays for that forgiveness to be forthcoming on the Day of Judgement when nothing is of benefit to anyone except the good works he or she may have done in life and God's forgiveness for what they might have committed or omitted to do: *"Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass."* (Verse 41)

Abraham's long and humble supplication, which also mentions a number of God's blessings and expresses gratitude and thanks for them, employing a fine musical

rhythm, now comes to a close. It imparts an air of gentle tenderness and care which makes people's hearts long to be with God, and remember His grace and blessings. Abraham, the father of a long line of prophets, is seen as a pious servant who does not forget His Lord's grace, or his duty to be thankful for it. He is given as an example to be followed by God's servants who truly believe in Him, for, just before relating Abraham's supplication, the *sūrah* addressed them. We note how Abraham repeats several times the addressing phrase, *"My Lord"* or *"Our Lord"*. This repeated acknowledgement of God's Lordship over him and his offspring is significant. He does not mention God by His attribute of Godhead, but instead by His Lordship. Godhead has rarely been subject to controversy even *in jāhiliyyah* societies. Nor was it so in the ignorant society of Arabia at the advent of Islam. What people have always argued about is the Lordship of God, and the need to submit to Him in everyday life on earth.

This is in fact the central point between submission to God, and believing in His oneness on the one hand, and the association of partners with Him on the other. People either submit to God, and this means that they acknowledge Him as their Lord, or they submit to others who would become their lords. This makes all the difference in life. The Qur'ān relates Abraham's supplication to the Arab idolaters, emphasizing his acknowledgement of God's Lordship to draw their attention to the fact that their own way of life was in complete contrast with what this supplication truly signifies.

No Heeding of Past Lessons

The *sūrah* moves on with its presentation of these issues, speaking to those *"who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition."* (Verse 28) It speaks to them as they continue with their erring ways, before they are subjected to God's punishment. They are the ones whom the Prophet had been told to say to them: *"Enjoy yourselves in this life, for you will surely end up in hell."* (Verse 30) He is further ordered to address those who believe in God, and to command them to offer their prayers and pay their *zakāt: "Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship."* (Verse 31)

Here the *sūrah* completes the picture, showing what God has prepared for those unbelievers who deny God's blessings, and tells when they will face their inevitable destiny. This comes in quick images of the Day of Judgement which fill our hearts with fear: *"Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be*

dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void." (Verses 42-43)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) does not think that God may ever be unaware of what the wrongdoers are perpetrating. It might appear so to some people who see the wrongdoers enjoying a comfortable life in this world. Such people hear God's warning, but see nothing of it taking place in this life. This explains the deadline which is fixed for their final punishment when they are given no further respite. That takes place on the day when eyes stare fixedly in horror, unable even to wink. The fear is so great that there is no blinking of a single eyelid.

This is followed by a picture of people rushing everywhere, unable to turn their faces to anything. Their heads are raised upward, but this is unintentional for they cannot move their heads. As they see the fearsome scene ahead of them, their eyes are fixed and their hearts are void, containing nothing they remember or understand. They are all empty.

It is to this day that God delays the wrongdoers' punishment. Now they stand in their position, overwhelmed by fear. In this scene they are like a small bird caught in the claws of a predator: "*Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void."* (Verses 42-43)

The Prophet is required to warn people that when this day arrives, there can be no excuses given and no evasion of responsibility. Another picture is then drawn of this horrific day: "*Hence, warn mankind of the Day when suffering may befall them; when those who do wrong will say: 'Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.' 'Why? Did you not in time past swear that you would suffer no decline? And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you.'*" (Verses 44-45)

Warn them against the day when the suffering drawn earlier is bound to befall them. At this point, the wrongdoers turn to their Lord with an urgent appeal, saying: "*Our Lord.*" Now they say this while earlier they were bent on unbelief, associating partners with Him: "*Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.*" (Verse 44)

At this point the flow of the discourse is changed from the narrative form to that of an address, as though they are now at that point, staring fixedly in horror, making their passionate appeal. This whole world is rolled over and we seem to be already in the hereafter, and they are being reproached from on high, reminded of the wrongs they used to do in their first life: "*Why, did you not in time past swear that you would*

suffer no decline?" (Verse 44) How do you see yourselves now? Have you suffered any decline? You asserted this when you had in front of your eyes the ruins of those who went before you, giving proof of what happened to them and their inevitable destiny.

"And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you." (Verse 45) It is amazing that you should see the dwellings of former wrongdoers, testifying to what happened to them, and you dwelling in their place, and yet you swear that you would not suffer a decline. With this hard reproach the scene is completed. We understand what happens to them, and what takes place after their appeal and their disappointment.

This example repeatedly occurs throughout history. Many are the wrongdoers who succeed earlier tyrants. In fact, those tyrants were destroyed by their own hands, yet they follow in their footsteps and tyrannize like them. They take no heed of the lessons they see in front of their eyes. Hence, like them, they are put to the same fate. The same dwellings will be rid of them after a while.

The *sūrah* then turns to their present situation, and their wicked scheming against God's Messenger, and their evil devices in every aspect of life. It gives the clear impression that they will face their inevitable destiny, no matter what powerful and elaborate schemes they devise: *"They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains."* (Verse 46)

God is certainly aware of their scheming, although it may be so strong and powerful that it causes mountains, the strongest and most solid and firm creation, to move. In fact, the last thing any human being would expect to move is a mountain. However, their scheming is in no way hidden from God, and never immune from God's power. It is in front of Him, and He can foil it and do with it what He likes.

Fair Reward for All

The Prophet is told again: *"Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil!"* (Verse 47) What the unbelievers devise is of no consequence. It cannot obstruct the fulfilment of God's promise to His messengers to grant them victory and to inflict a mighty punishment on the unbelievers: *"Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil!"* (Verse 47) He does not let injustice escape punishment. Those who resort to scheming and devising foul plans will not be spared. The word "avenge" is especially suitable here as it gives the meaning that counters both injustice and wicked scheming. A perpetrator of such injustice and wickedness deserves to suffer God's vengeance, which is, from God's point of view, the exercise of divine justice.

This is certainly inevitable, "*On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens.*" (Verse 48) We do not know how this happens, nor are we aware of the nature of the new earth or the new heavens, or their respective positions. The statement only gives us an impression of God's might and His ability to change the earth and heavens. By contrast, the schemes the unbelievers devise are all too weak.

Suddenly, we see this as though it has happened: "*When all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 48) They realize that they are exposed, without cover or screen to protect them. They are neither in their homes nor in their graves. They stand in the open, in front of the Almighty. The emphasis here is on God's power which cannot be resisted, not even by the scheming of the mighty tyrants which can almost make mountains move.

Then we are shown a scene of the humiliating suffering which stands in contrast to their scheming and tyranny: "*On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames.*" (Verses 49-50) The evil-doers are thus chained, each two together, and they are made to pass in ranks. Their humiliation is again indicative of God's might. In addition to their being chained together, they wear dirty, black pitch garments that can easily catch fire. The connotations here are humiliation and combustion as they draw near to the fire.

"*Their faces [are] covered with flames.*" It is all a scene of tyrants and schemers made to suffer humiliation and burning in flames. All this is a reward for their arrogance in this life. "*God will requite each soul according to what it had done. God is indeed swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 51) All they have earned is their scheming and injustice. Its reward is that they stand powerless, humiliated. The swiftness of God's reckoning contrasts with the scheming they thought would protect them, and ensure them victory. Hence, they are dealt with swiftly to add to their humiliation.

Elimination of Pagan Concepts

The *sūrah* then ends with something similar to its opening, but it comes in the form of an open and loud declaration, intended to inform all mankind: "*This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who have insight take heed.*" (Verse 52) The essential purpose of this message and the warning it contains is that people should know that "*He is the One and Only God.*" This is the basic concept of this religion on which its code of living is built.

What is required here is not that people should merely acquire such information. The purpose is that they should conduct their lives on the basis of this knowledge. It is that people should submit to God alone, since He is the One and only God. It is

God who deserves to be the Lord, i.e. the Sovereign, the Ruler and the Legislator.

When life is conducted on this basis it becomes totally different from every type of life based on the lordship of creatures, which means that some submit to others who are considered sovereign over them. The difference involves faith, worship, morality, standards and values, behaviour and practices, as well as political, economic and social systems and every aspect of the life of the individual and society alike.

Believing in the One God is the basis of a complete system. It is not merely a matter of conviction. Faith comprises all aspects of life. In the Islamic perspective, sovereignty is a question of faith, as is morality. It is on the basis of faith that the code of life that comprises both moral values and legal matters is based.

We cannot appreciate the extent which faith takes in the Islamic perspective unless we understand the full meaning of the basic declaration every Muslim must make in order to be a Muslim: "I bear witness that there is no deity other than God, and I bear witness that Muĥammad is God's Messenger." We must also be aware of the meaning of addressing all worship to God alone. This means that submission is only to God, not merely during prayer, but in every life situation.

The worship of idols which Abraham prayed to God to spare him and his offspring from does not take only the primitive way which the pagan Arabs and other communities practised. It is not merely the worship of deities made of stones, trees, animals, birds, stars, fire or spirits. To limit the concept of polytheism to this primitive form blurs our view so that we cannot see other forms which may bedevil humanity in different states of *jāhiliyyah.* We need to have a fuller understanding of the nature of associating partners with God, its relevance to idols, and the nature of idols and how they are represented in modern states of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah.*

Associating partners with God may take any form and be represented in any situation where submission in all aspects of life is not to God alone. It is sufficient that a person should submit to beings other than God in certain aspects of his life to be in a situation of associating partners with God, even though he submits to God alone in the other aspects of his life. Worship is only one aspect of life where submission is reflected. But there are many other forms of submission in human life which give us practical examples of polytheism.

A person may believe that Godhead belongs completely to God alone, and he submits to Him in his prayers, fasting, performing pilgrimage and other aspects of worship, but he may at the same time submit to laws other than God's in his social, economic and political life. He may also submit to concepts other than those approved by God in his social standards and to other human beings in his moral values, traditions, customs and style of dress. Such a person practises polytheism in its essence, in full breach of the meaning of the declaration that "there is no deity

other than God and Muĥammad is God's Messenger". This is what people overlook. They take all such matters carelessly, without thinking that they demonstrate the same paganism that has been practised by different communities throughout history.

It is not necessary that idols be represented in primitive form. For idols are mere covers for tyranny which hides behind them in order to impose its authority over people. Yet none of these idols speak, hear or see. Its custodian or priest or the ruler was always around, chanting the idol's praises or acting as its spokesman, but saying what he wants to say. Therefore, when banners or slogans are raised in any community which give rulers or priests the power to put in place laws, values, standards and practices that are at variance with what is acceptable to God, then these are in effect, position and nature deities like those idols of old.

We see today that nationalism, patriotism or a certain class in society or people as a whole are made like banners or slogans which are adored in place of God. People are made to sacrifice for such banners their lives, property, morals and even their honour. Whenever divine law and its requirements come in conflict with what the service of such banners and slogans requires, then God's law is set aside and the requirements of these banners are met. To be more accurate we should say that it is the requirements of the tyrants standing behind these banners that are fulfilled. This is indeed a form of idol worship, because an idol need not be made of wood or stone. It can be represented in a doctrine or a slogan.

The role of Islam is not only to destroy wood or stone idols. That was not the purpose of all the efforts and sacrifices made by God's messengers and their followers in history. Islam aims rather to establish in a very clear way the difference between submission to God alone in all matters and affairs and submission to other beings or entities. It is necessary to look carefully at forms and appearances in every situation to establish whether the existing order conforms to the concept of God's oneness or to a form of paganism.

People may imagine themselves to be following the faith revealed by God because they declare, "There is no deity except God, and Muĥammad is God's Messenger", and they submit to God in all matters of worship and in marriage, divorce and inheritance. Yet when matters go beyond this narrow aspect, their submission is to other beings. They follow laws that are in clear conflict with what God has legislated. They even sacrifice their lives, property, honour and morals, willingly or unwillingly, to fulfil what this neo-paganism requires of them, even when it is in conflict with what is acceptable to God. They are thus totally mistaken when they imagine that they follow Islam. They should wake up and realize that theirs is a situation of clear paganism.

Divine faith is not as hollow as it is imagined to be by some of those who claim to

be Muslims. It is a complete way of life that comprises all the necessary details for daily life. Submission to God's law in the details of daily life, as well as in basic principles and concepts, is the core of the divine faith. It is Islam in its true sense, which is the only form acceptable to God.

As stated earlier, polytheism does not only take the form of believing in multiple deities and claiming that they are God's partners. It is instead the acknowledgement of other lords alongside Him. Idol worship is represented in adopting banners and slogans which are given the same sort of authority as belonged to idols of old. People everywhere then must examine their lives to determine whom they actually submit to. If they submit totally to God, obeying His orders and laws to the exclusion of any other, then they follow the divine faith. If not, then they have a religion based on idol worship. This is a terrible situation indeed.

> *This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed.* (Verse 52)

SŪRAH 15
Al-Ĥijr

Prologue

Proper Understanding Required

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, after the revelation of *Sūrah* 12, Joseph. The time was a very critical one, falling as it did between the 'year of sorrow' when the Prophet lost his wife Khadījah and his uncle Abū Ṭālib and the year when the Prophet migrated to Madinah. The *sūrah* thus reflects the needs and requirements of this difficult period. For specifics about this crucial time please refer to the Prologues of *Sūrahs* Jonah and Hūd, in Volume IX, and *Sūrah* Joseph in this volume.

In particular, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet and the Muslim community in how best to deal with their practical problems, and how to stand firm in the face of the unbelievers' stubborn opposition. This then is the role and nature of the Qur'ān.

At this critical juncture, the message of Islam was making little progress because of the unwavering resistance of the Quraysh, the Arabian tribe residing in Makkah, and whose leadership was recognized by the rest of Arabia. Their persecution of the Prophet and his followers was now at its zenith. Hence, the Qur'ān warns and threatens these pagan Arabs, portraying as it does the fate of earlier communities which denied God's messages and opposed His messengers. It reveals to the Prophet the real reasons behind their determined opposition. Essentially it had nothing to do with the truth of his message and much to do with their stubbornness which could not be moderated even as a result of seeing God's clear signs. Hence, the *sūrah* consoles the Prophet. It directs him to hold fast to the truth he has and to confront with it all those who reject it. He is also instructed to remain patient in adversity, conveying his message to mankind with determination.

Thus the *sūrah* shares with other *sūrahs* revealed during the same period the same subject matter and general features. Likewise, it addresses the needs and requirements of that period when the Islamic message faced the ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* that prevailed in Arabia. The same applies to any similar period in history. Indeed it even applies now.

We have always emphasized the practical nature of the Qur'ān because it is central to an understanding of this book, its goals and objectives. This means that we need to be aware of the circumstances that prevailed when a particular *sūrah* or text was revealed so that we can better recognize the drift of the text and understand its directives. We are thus able to appreciate how it deals with real life situations, and with living human beings who either actively support or oppose it. In this way, we can better understand its rulings and benefit by its directives whenever similar circumstances prevail. We particularly need to take such an attitude in our own times.

But we say this knowing full well that only those who are actively facing this present state of ignorance in their work to bring about an Islamic revival will look at the Qur'ānic texts in this light. Such people are dealing with circumstances and events similar to those faced by the first advocate of this faith, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and his early Companions. They face the same type of rejection of the great truth of this faith, which requires complete submission to God in all aspects of life: religious, moral, political, economic and social. Likewise, they face the same type of persecution which was endured by the first group of Muslims. Only such people are able to deduce the Islamic method of active advocacy which cannot be deduced in a theoretical approach.

It should be stated here that what is required in our own time is an understanding of the method to be followed by a young Islamic movement facing a totally un-Islamic state of affairs. Such a movement aims to bring mankind out of darkness into light, and out of ignorance and submission to different beings into a state where people submit themselves to God alone. These were the objectives of the first Muslim generation, even before the Islamic state in Madinah was born, and before Islam enjoyed any authority anywhere on earth.

Today we are in a position which, though not identical to that early period, has some similarities to it. Needless to say, circumstances and external factors are different. Yet we are aiming to establish an active advocacy of Islam in the face of total opposition. The fact that circumstances are different means that the needs and requirements of such advocacy are different. Hence why we need today fresh insight into the method of action that Islam approves. Such insight will fit the precedents set by the first Islamic movement, established by the Prophet, to the circumstances and requirements of the present period.

It is such insight that the newly-born Islamic movement requires. It is too early now for the development of a system of government, and the drafting of a legal code. Today, there is not a single state or community where the basic rule of human transactions is God's law and the Islamic code. The type of insight which gives birth to a system of government and a legal code comes at the appropriate time. Its details should fit the Muslim community that needs it, whenever it comes into existence, and begins to face the practical problems that apply to it. Prior to this, producing such a system and a code is no different from trying to plant seeds in the air and hoping they will sprout.

The Nature of Opposition to Islam

The first major topic the *sūrah* tackles highlights the nature of those who reject this faith of Islam, based on submission to God alone, and outlines their true motives for so doing. It also describes the terrible fate that awaits such unbelievers. The *sūrah* tackles this in several rounds, employing different subjects and techniques, such as narrative, an exhibition of scenes of the universe and scenes of the Day of Judgement, and directives and comments that either precede or follow the stories it relates.

While the general atmosphere of *Sūrah* 13, Thunder, reminds us of *Sūrah* 6, Cattle, the general atmosphere of this *sūrah* reminds us of *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. Both begin with a serious warning, and the whole *sūrah* confirms it. The two *sūrahs,* however, differ greatly in their method.

The warning at the beginning of *Sūrah 7* is stated very clearly: *"This is a book that has been bestowed on you from on high – so do not entertain any doubt about it – in order that you may warn people with its message, and admonish the believers. Follow what has been sent down to you by your Lord, and follow no masters other than Him. How seldom do you keep this in mind. How many a community have We destroyed, with Our punishment falling upon them by night, or at midday while they were resting. And when Our punishment fell upon them, all they could say was: 'We have indeed been wrongdoers.'"* (7: 2-5) The *sūrah* then relates the story of Adam and *Iblīs,* following it to its conclusion when human life on earth comes to an end and people return to their Lord where the warnings given to them will be fulfilled. This is then followed by some scenes of the universe, including images of the heavens and earth, night and day, the sun, moon and stars, the wind, clouds, water and fruit. Thereafter, we are given the stories of the Prophets Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Lot, Shu`ayb and Moses, all of which confirm the warning.

Here in this *sūrah,* the warning is given at the beginning, but it is given a continuous air of mystery to enhance its effect in anticipation of the fearful destiny: *"These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. Little do those who disbelieve wish that*

they were Muslims. Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth]. Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it." (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* then refers to some scenes from the universe: the heavens and the constellations, the expanded earth and the mountains set firm on it, the plants that demonstrate a balanced method of creation, the winds full of moisture, water and drinking, and the life, death and resurrection of all mankind. This is followed by the story of Adam and *Iblīs* leading up to the destinies of all believers and unbelievers. Then we have brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Shu`ayb and Ṣāliĥ, with the emphasis being placed on the destiny of unbelievers in each case. We note here that the Arabs were aware of the ruins left by these communities, as they passed by them on their traditional journeys to Syria.

The main line in both *sūrahs* is the same, but each has its own special features. Their rhythm is similar, but not identical. This is the system followed by the Qur'ān, tackling its topics in a variety of ways that may be similar in some aspects but totally different in others, and where they are never repeated or allowed to be identical.

The *sūrah* can be divided into five sections, each of which includes a specific topic. The first explains the law that God has set in operation concerning His message and people's attitudes to it, either accepting and believing in it or rejecting it. This starts with an implicit warning which is covered with mystery: "*These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims. Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth].*" (Verses 2-3) This section ends with a statement that the unbelievers reject the message out of stubbornness, not because they do not have sufficient evidence to lead them to faith: "*If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.'*" (Verses 14-15)

They are all of the same type: "*Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him. Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them.*" (Verses 10-13)

The second section portrays some of the signs God has placed in the universe, both in the heavens and the earth and in between. All of these have been set in accordance with God's precise wisdom, and according to a definite measure: "*We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, so that anyone who tries to*

eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see. We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure. We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up." (Verses 16-22)

It is to God that everyone and everything returns at the time appointed and known to God: *"It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verses 23-25)

The third section delivers the story of mankind and the origins of following right guidance or abandoning it in order to follow erring ways. It also shows the fates of those who follow God's guidance and those who reject it. This is shown in the way Adam was created out of clay before God breathed of his soul into him, and the arrogance of Iblīs who leads people astray.

The fourth section relates the fates suffered by the peoples of Lot, Shu`ayb and Ṣāliĥ. It starts with the verses: *"Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering."* (Verses 49-50) The stories are given in succession, showing God's mercy to Abraham and Lot, and His punishment of the peoples of Lot, Shu`ayb and Ṣāliĥ. Thus the Quraysh are told of the fate of those whose lands they pass by on their trips to Syria. Their ruins are there for them to see. *"Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still."* (Verses 75-76)

The fifth and final section reveals the truth that is at the heart of the creation of the heavens and the earth and how this relates to the Hour of Judgement and the reward or punishment that comes after that, and also to the message of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). That is the great truth in the whole universe. It relates to origin and destiny: *"It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator. We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur'ān."* (Verses 85-87)

1
Preserving the Qur'ān

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓر ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَقُرْءَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse. (1)

رُّبَمَا يَوَدُّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَوْ كَانُوا۟ مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٢﴾

Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims. (2)

ذَرْهُمْ يَأْكُلُوا۟ وَيَتَمَتَّعُوا۟ وَيُلْهِهِمُ ٱلْأَمَلُ ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth] . (3)

وَمَآ أَهْلَكْنَا مِن قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا وَلَهَا كِتَابٌ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٤﴾

Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. (4)

مَّا تَسْبِقُ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلَهَا وَمَا يَسْتَـْٔخِرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it. (5)

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِى نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ ٱلذِّكْرُ إِنَّكَ لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٦﴾

They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. (6)

لَّوْ مَا تَأْتِينَا بِٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٧﴾

Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?' (7)

مَا نُنَزِّلُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَمَا كَانُوٓا۟ إِذًا مُّنظَرِينَ ﴿٨﴾

We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite. (8)

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا ٱلذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُۥ لَحَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٩﴾

It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact. (9)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِى شِيَعِ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, (10)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١١﴾

but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him. (11)

كَذَٰلِكَ نَسْلُكُهُۥ فِى قُلُوبِ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, (12)

لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِۦ ۖ وَقَدْ خَلَتْ سُنَّةُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them. (13)

وَلَوْ فَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِم بَابًا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَظَلُّوا۟ فِيهِ يَعْرُجُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, (14)

لَقَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَا سُكِّرَتْ أَبْصَٰرُنَا بَلْ نَحْنُ قَوْمٌ مَّسْحُورُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.' (15)

Unbelievers Indulge in Wishful Thinking

This opening passage speaks about the nature of the book which the unbelievers reject as fabrication, adding a threat that they will soon witness a day when they wish they had submitted themselves to God and become Muslims. It tells them that

that day has a fixed time, and that is the reason for its delay. It mentions the challenges they make and how they demand that angels be brought to them. It threatens them by stating that when God sends down angels to unbelievers, He destroys them altogether. Finally the *sūrah* speaks of the real reason for their unbelieving attitude. It is certainly not for lack of evidence, but rather due to their entrenched stubbornness.

"*Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book, a clear discourse.*" (Verse 1) The three separate letters with which this *sūrah* starts and similar ones that occur at the beginning of some Qur'ānic *sūrahs* make up the book, i.e. the Qur'ān. They are available to all. They make the sublime verses, which are inimitable in composition and argument. These letters do not have an intrinsic meaning in themselves, but they make up the Qur'ān, which is very clear in its meaning.

People who do not believe in the revelation of this inimitable book, and describe the Qur'ān as fabricated when it is very clear in its import, will come to see a day when they will dearly wish that they had adopted a totally different attitude. They will wish that they had been believers and that their behaviour was in line with the teachings of religion. "*Little do those who disbelieve wish that they were Muslims.*" (Verse 2)

They may wish so but that will be when no wish is of use. But in fact, '*little do those who disbelieve wish*'. The way this is expressed implies a threat and a touch of derision. It also implies encouragement to make use of the available opportunity and submit to God before it is too late. For if the chance is lost and the day comes when they wish they had submitted themselves to God and accepted Islam, their wishes will be of no avail.

This is followed by another implicit threat: "*Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth].*" (Verse 3)

Leave them to their carnal desires, eating and enjoying, without reflection, contemplation or thought to what is around them. Leave them with their deluding hopes and deceiving temptations, while life passes away and the opportunity is lost. Leave them so that you do not waste your own time with those who have condemned themselves when they lost their way in idle hopes and desires. The temptation shows them that they have a long life to come and that they will achieve what they covet. They think that nothing can stop them from obtaining what they hope for, and that they have to face no reckoning and will be held to no account. They delude themselves by thinking that what they get in this life is enough to ensure their safety in the hereafter.

This image of beguiling hopes is drawn from real human life. Hope always tempts and beguiles man. So much so that he overlooks the facts of God's existence, fate and

the certainty of death. Man forgets that there is a duty to be fulfilled and a prohibition to be observed. He goes even further so as to forget God altogether and forget that he himself is going to die and then be resurrected in order to account for his deeds.

This beguiling hope is a fatal one, and it is to this hope that the Prophet is commanded to leave them. "*For they will surely come to know the truth,*" but then it will be too late for such knowledge to be of any benefit to them. The command given to the Prophet implies a threat to them, as well as a strong call aiming to wake them up so that they could see their hope for what it is: a beguiling hope that causes them to overlook their inevitable fate.

But the laws God has set in operation for the world and for human life will continue along their respective courses. The end of each nation will come at the time appointed by God. Then it is the practices of each community that determine how these laws and how God's order will operate: "*Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.*" (Verses 4-5) Therefore, they must not be deluded by the fact that God's punishment has not taken them. God's law will take its well-marked course and operate as God wants it to operate. As for them, they will certainly come to know.

That clear book and appointed term are given by God to every nation and community so that they will do their work. What they do in this life determines their fate in the hereafter. When a community believes in God, does good works, allows human life to proceed and prosper, and implements justice then God will extend its life until it deviates from these rules and becomes devoid of all goodness. That determines the end of its life, either with total loss and ruin, or with a temporary general weakness.

It may be said that there are communities which do not believe or do any good works or implement justice, but they continue to thrive and prosper. But this is nothing but delusion. Such communities must have a fair residue of goodness, even if it is limited to building a good life on earth, dealing justly among its own citizens and taking measures to ensure material prosperity within their own territories. They owe their continued existence to this residue of goodness. When it is exhausted, they face their inevitable destiny. God's law will always operate, and every community has its time: "*No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.*" (Verse 5)

A Promise That Will Never Fail

The *sūrah* then describes their bad manners in the way they addressed the Prophet, when he had only presented to them the Qur'ān which is a clear reminder

of the truth. It helps to reawaken them to face the facts instead of running after beguiling hopes. He also reminded them of God's law and its operation. But they ridiculed him and spoke to him with extreme impudence. "*They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?'*" (Verses 6-7) Ridicule is apparent in their way of addressing the Prophet, "*You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high!*" (Verse 6) They actually deny the fact of revelation and the Prophet's message altogether, but they make this mocking address.

Their rudeness is carried still further as they insult the Prophet personally: "*You are truly mad!*" (Verse 6) This they do in response to his call on them to believe in God, using the Qur'ān in all its clarity to address them. They go on to make unreasonable demands, asking for angels to come down to endorse his message: *"Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?"* (Verse 7) The demand for angels is often repeated in this and other *sūrahs,* and it is put to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) as it was put to prophets and messengers before him. This reflects man's clear ignorance, for it is he whom God has honoured when He assigned prophethood to a few chosen people.

The reply to such ridicule, impudence and ignorance takes the form of reasserting the rule which is confirmed by the fates suffered by past communities. Angels are sent down to a messenger of God only to destroy the unbelievers of his community when their term is up. At this point there can be no more respite and no further delay: *"We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers) would be given no further respite."* (Verse 8) Is this what they want and demand?

Preservation of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* then calls on them to look carefully on God's guidance and reflect on it. God only sends down the angels with the truth. He commands them to establish and implement it. In the case of persistent unbelievers, the truth is to destroy them. Not only do they deserve this, but it is also inevitable. Such destruction, then, is a truth in itself and the angels carry it out without delay. God chooses for them what is better than the choice they make for themselves. He gives them the Reminder so that they may reflect on it and follow its guidance. This is much better than sending down the angels with the final truth, if only they would reflect: "*It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact.*" (Verse 9) It is much better for them, then, to approach it positively, because it will remain intact, suffering no loss or change. It will remain pure, unaffected by falsehood, free of distortion. It guides them to the truth with God's care, if they really want the truth. If

they were asking for angels to make sure of it, they should know that God does not wish to send down angels for them, because He wants what is better for them. Hence, He sent down the Reminder which is preserved intact. That is better than sending angels to destroy them.

When we look today, after the passage of many centuries, at the fulfilment of God's promise to preserve the Qur'ān, we see a great miracle testifying to the fact that it is God's book. We see that the circumstances and situations that it has endured over the centuries could not have left it intact, suffering no change of even a single sentence or a single word, without the interference of a superior power. That power, which is greater than all situations, factors and circumstances, has preserved this book keeping it pure from change or distortion.

There was a time when many sects and groups sought to find support for their ideas in the Qur'ān and the *Ĥadīth.* The resulting conflict was fuelled by the Jews, the diehard enemies of this faith, and by those who advocated nationalism. These were known in Islamic history as *Shu`ūbiyyīn.* These groups sought to introduce foreign elements into the *Sunnah.* Only the colossal efforts of scores of bright, pious and meticulous scholars, over several decades, purged the *Ĥadīth* from that which did not belong to it.

In times of conflict and strife, such sects deliberately misinterpreted Qur'ānic verses, twisting Qur'ānic texts so that they could cite them in support of their views and rulings. But they were all, even in the darkest and hardest circumstances, totally unable to introduce a single change into the text of the Qur'ān, the book God has guaranteed to preserve. Its text has remained exactly as it was revealed by God, providing a challenge to every would-be perpetrator of distortion. This is irrefutable testimony to the fact that this Qur'ān is God's own book and He is the One who guarantees its preservation.

A Guarantee for All Time

Muslims generally have gone through a time, which we continue to endure these days, when they have been too weak to defend themselves, or their faith, way of life, land, honour, property, moral values or even their reasoning and intellectual faculties. Their enemies have managed to replace every moral value, sound belief, virtuous practice, and legal standard they have had with something foul and alien. They have tempted Muslims to accept loose morality and shameless behaviour. What is more, such behaviour has been given attractive titles such as progress, advancement, secularism, freedom, breaking one's shackles, revolution and innovation, etc. Muslims have thus become Muslims only by name. They have retained practically nothing of their profound faith. Hence, their power has been

sapped, and they have become little more than the scum that floats on the surface of a river.

Yet in spite of all their attempts, the enemies of this religion have not been able to change the text of the Qur'ān, or to distort it. This is not due to any lack of motive. They would indeed have loved dearly to alter its text if that were at all possible. But try as hard as they might, they have been unable to achieve their goal.

The enemies of this faith, particularly its Jewish elements, have utilized their great expertise, stretching over four thousand years, in scheming against the divine faith. Indeed, they have even been successful in many ways. For example, they succeeded in introducing some foreign elements into the *Sunnah* and the history of the Muslim nation. They have been able to falsify events and even implant their own people within the Muslim community so that they could play roles they could not otherwise do. They managed to destroy states, communities, systems and laws, and to dress some of their traitors in a heroic guise so that they continued their destructive work against the Muslim community. Although they have done this throughout history, they have been more successful in modern times.

One thing, however, they have not been able to achieve, although circumstances appear to make it seem easy, is tamper with this preserved book, which receives no protection from people who allege to believe in it. This is yet further evidence, if any were needed, that this is God's book. The fact that it has remained free of all distortion in spite of these conditions testifies to the fact that it was revealed by God Almighty. At the time of the Prophet, this promise to preserve the Qur'ān intact sounded a mere promise. Today, however, after all these great events and long centuries, it is indeed a great miracle confirming the indisputable fact that it is God's revealed book. No one disputes this fact except a stubborn, ignorant fool. *"It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact."* (Verse 9) God certainly tells the truth.

Same Old Denials

God consoles the Prophet (peace be upon him), and tells him that he is not unique in his position among God's messengers who, like him, were the target of much ridicule and rejection. The unbelievers are always wont to show their stubbornness in denying the true faith.

"Indeed We have sent before you messengers to communities of old, but whenever a messenger came to any of them they mocked at him." (Verses 10-11) It is the same story. Just like the unbelievers in the communities of old received what God's messengers told them, the same is the case with the unbelievers in your community. They all show the same attitude. Their hearts, having turned away from God's messages and

been hostile to God's chosen messengers, are no longer able to reflect or receive a message as it should be received: *"Thus do We cause it [i.e. this scorn of the revelation] to slip into the hearts of the guilty, who do not believe in it, although the ways of ancient communities have gone before them."* (Verses 12-13) We let it sink into their hearts as its truth is denied, subject to ridicule, because their hearts cannot receive it except in this way. This applies to all generations and communities, past, present and future. Those who deny the truth of God's message are of the same nature: *"The ways of ancient communities have gone before them."* (Verse 13)

It is not proper evidence of the truth of God's message that they lack. They are stubborn, unwilling to change, no matter what signs and proofs are given to them. At this point, the *sūrah* gives a particularly rich image of repugnant obstinacy and mean strong-headedness: *"If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.'"* (Verses 14-15) We can imagine them ascending higher and higher into the sky, going through a special door that opens for them, and they climb physically and see with their eyes the open door. Yet their stubborn attitude remains, whereby they deny the truth of what they see and feel, claiming that someone must have cast a spell over them so that they cannot see clearly. They claim that what they see is mere fantasy: *"It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched."* (Verse 15) All we see and feel is mere illusion.

There is no use arguing with such people. They have all the evidence they need to believe. What prevents them is not that the angels have not been sent down to them, because their own ascension is greater evidence and closer to them than the angels descending. Instead it is their shameless obstinacy which causes them to disregard and reject the clearly manifest truth.

This then is an example of human stubbornness which the *sūrah* paints. It is met only with a feeling of disgust and contempt. This example is neither temporary nor local, nor is it the product of a particular environment at a particular period of time. It is an example of human beings when their nature has been distorted and their faculties of reception impaired. They are cut off from the living universe around them and all the signals it gives. In our own generation, this example applies to atheists who follow materialistic creeds which they claim to be 'scientific', when they are far removed from science and knowledge, as well as from insight and inspiration.

Advocates of materialistic doctrines disbelieve in God and deny His existence. They claim that the universe exists without a Creator who controls whatever takes place in it. They then formulate on the basis of their claims and denials social, political, economic and 'moral' creeds, even stating that such are 'scientific'. Indeed, they say that their creeds are the only scientific ones.

This lack of feeling of God's existence despite all the evidence that testifies to His control of the universe clearly indicates that their receptive faculties are impaired. Their persistence in denying God is no less rude and impudent than that painted in the Qur'ānic text: "*If We opened for the unbelievers a gateway to heaven and they had ascended higher and higher, still they would surely say: 'It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched.'*" (Verses 14-15) The evidence that is available in the universe is so varied and manifest that it is stronger than their ascension to heaven. That evidence addresses every sound nature in an open and private manner, saying what is so powerful that human nature must accept without question.

When we look at the universe we find that it has countless laws working in perfect harmony to maintain its phenomena and existence. Moreover, it has so many complementary aspects which allow life to come into existence in certain parts of it. So to claim that this universe exists without a creator, is something that the human mind cannot accept. It is wholeheartedly rejected by human nature. Not only so, but the better science understands nature and the more deeply it penetrates into the universe and the more of its secrets it uncovers, the notion of self existence and uncontrolled operation seems even more far-fetched. In fact, the greater human knowledge becomes, the more clearly science admits that it is the Creator who controls the universe. Undistorted human nature accepts this truth once it receives the clear signals the universe makes. It has accepted it long before recent scientific evidence supporting it has come to light.

Testimony by a Western Scientist

The universe cannot create itself, then create the laws that control its existence. Nor can we attribute the emergence of life to a lifeless universe. Hence neither human nature nor human intelligence accepts the emergence of the universe or life without a Creator who continues to control it. Indeed material science is now rejecting it as well.

Russell Charles Artist, Professor of Biology at David Lipscomb College, Nashville, Tennessee, says:

> Many theories have been brought forward in the attempt to derive living cells from inanimate matter. Certain investigators are claiming that life has originated through the protogene, or through viruses, or through an aggregation of large protein molecules, which may leave the impression that at last the gap between the lifeless and the living has been spanned. Actually it must be admitted that all attempts to produce living matter experimentally from inanimate matter have failed utterly.

> Furthermore, it is not by direct evidence that the one who denies the existence of God proves to a waiting world that a fortuitous aggregation of atoms and molecules is life, capable of maintaining and directing itself as do the cells described here. Not at all. He accepts this as a *belief.* It is his private interpretation of the facts visible to us all, that an accidental concourse brought the first cell into being. But this is to accept an even greater miracle than to believe that Intelligence called it into being!
>
> I maintain that each of these single cells (each a system so intricate and delicate that its complete functioning has so far escaped our study), and all the trillions of them on this earth, definitely present a justifiable inference — one of Mind, or Intelligence, or Thought, which we call God. Science both admits and accepts this inference.
>
> I believe firmly that there is a God.[5]

The author did not start his investigations from a religious standpoint, but instead commented with an objective outlook, reflecting on the laws of nature. Yet he reached a conclusion that supports the truth as outlined by both natural inspiration and innate religious sense. When a truth exists, everyone who seeks it will inevitably come across it, regardless of what route he takes. It is only those whose receptive faculties have stopped functioning that cannot attain to the truth.

Those who deny God's existence are people whose argument is in conflict with the logic of nature, reason and universal existence. They seem to suffer from the malfunctioning of all their receptive faculties. They are blind, as God Himself describes them: *"Is, then, he who knows that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is the Truth like one who is blind? Only those who are endowed with understanding keep this in mind."* (13: 19)

As this is their true description, it follows that any social, political or economic theory they come up with, as well as any theory they formulate, on the universe, human life and history must be viewed by a Muslim as no more than the groping in the dark of a blind person who has lost all his senses, at least with regard to understanding human life and how it is organized. No Muslim can adopt anything such a person formulates, let alone make it the basis of his view of life or code of living.

This is a matter of faith, not an intellectual argument. A person who argues that the material world has created itself and initiated human life, and makes this concept the basis of his ideology and code of living errs in the starting point of thought and

---

[5] Russell Charles Artist, `Trillions of Living Cells Speak Their Message', a paper included in *The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe,* ed. John Clover Monsma, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1958, p. 124.

doctrine alike. All structures and rules that have such a basis cannot bring any good. They have no meeting point even with any detail in the life of a Muslim whose basic concepts and code of living start with the belief in God's oneness and His creation of the universe which remains subject to God's will at all times.

Hence, to suggest that so-called 'scientific socialism' is independent of materialism betrays ignorance. Adopting 'scientific socialism', when it has such a basis and line of thinking, constitutes a total turning away from Islam as a faith, concept and code of living. It is not possible to combine scientific socialism and belief in God. To try to do so is to try to combine Islam with unbelief.

People must choose either to believe in Islam or in materialism. If they believe in Islam, they cannot adopt scientific socialism. Islam is much more than a faith and a conviction. It is a system based on an ideology. On the other hand, scientific socialism is based on materialistic philosophy, which believes that life is matter, and denies the existence of God altogether. We simply cannot separate the two. Hence, a choice between the two must be made. Everyone is free to make his or her choice, but everyone must be responsible for their choice.[6]

[6] The author wrote his commentary at a time when so-called, "scientific socialism" was in vogue. Hence, he concentrates on this particular doctrine. However, what he says applies to all materialistic philosophy and any system based on it, including capitalism. — Editor's note.

2
Great Universal Expanse

وَلَقَدْ جَعَلْنَا فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ بُرُوجًا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا لِلنَّٰظِرِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, (16)

وَحَفِظْنَٰهَا مِن كُلِّ شَيْطَٰنٍ رَّجِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, (17)

إِلَّا مَنِ ٱسْتَرَقَ ٱلسَّمْعَ فَأَتْبَعَهُۥ شِهَابٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

so that anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see. (18)

وَٱلْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَٰهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِيَ وَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ شَىْءٍ مَّوْزُونٍ ﴿١٩﴾

We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. (19)

وَجَعَلْنَا لَكُمْ فِيهَا مَعَٰيِشَ وَمَن لَّسْتُمْ لَهُۥ بِرَٰزِقِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. (20)

وَإِن مِّن شَىْءٍ إِلَّا عِندَنَا خَزَآئِنُهُۥ وَمَا نُنَزِّلُهُۥٓ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٢١﴾

There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure. (21)

وَأَرْسَلْنَا ٱلرِّيَٰحَ لَوَٰقِحَ فَأَنزَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَسْقَيْنَٰكُمُوهُ وَمَآ أَنتُمْ لَهُۥ بِخَٰزِنِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up. (22)

It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. (23)	وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ نُحْيِۦ وَنُمِيتُ وَنَحْنُ ٱلْوَٰرِثُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾
Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. (24)	وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْنَا ٱلْمُسْتَقْدِمِينَ مِنكُمْ وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْنَا ٱلْمُسْتَـْٔخِرِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾
Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All- Knowing. (25)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ يَحْشُرُهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Endless Wonders

The *sūrah* now moves on to an exhibition of universal signs. It starts with a scene in heaven followed by one on earth, then an image of winds fully loaded with water, before we have pictures of life and death, resurrection and gathering. All these scenes are denied by those who, when a gateway to heaven is opened for them and they ascend through it higher and higher, surely say: *"It is only our eyes that are spellbound! Indeed, we must have been bewitched."* (Verse 15)

"We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold, and We have guarded them from every cursed devil, so that anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see." (Verses 16-18) This is the first line in the great universal scene which tells of God's creative power. It delivers a more telling testimony to the inimitability of God's creation than any coming down of angels. It reflects God's elaborate planning and His limitless power that puts into place this great piece of creation, the universe. The 'constellations' may refer to the stars and planets themselves with their huge entities, or it may refer to their positions which define their orbits. In both cases, they testify to the great power behind their creation and to the accuracy and beauty that they reflect. *"We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold."* (Verse 16)

The reference here to the beauty of the universe, particularly the type seen in the sky, suggests that beauty is an intended purpose behind such creation. It is not merely size or accuracy that are intended, but beauty which is clearly seen in all its aspects. A quick glance at the sky in a dark moonless night, with so many stars and planets sending their faint light our way, gives us a sense of that unique beauty. The same feeling will be aroused by a similar look at the sky in a night with a full moon,

moving along in a romantic air, with the rest of the universe holding its breath so that it does not disturb a happy dreamer. One glance like that is sufficient to indicate the depth of the beauty in the creation of the universe. It will tell us more about the Qur'ānic expression here: *"We have indeed set up in the heavens constellations, and endowed them with beauty for all to behold."* (Verse 16)

With the beauty comes preservation, pure and intact: *"We have guarded them from every cursed devil."* (Verse 17) None, then, can spoil this purity by trying to spread evil in it. Satan is allowed to do his evil work only on earth, to tempt human beings to follow his wicked designs. The sky, which is a symbol for what is exalted and sublime, is beyond his reach. He may attempt to do so, but every attempt he makes is foiled: *"Anyone who tries to eavesdrop is pursued by a flame clear to see."* (Verse 18)

Who is the devil, and what is his nature; and how does he eavesdrop, and on whom; and what does he try to hear? All these are matters that belong to a world beyond our reach. We have only the texts available to us. It is useless to try to go further into this, because it adds nothing to anyone's faith. Investigating it does not produce anything other than preoccupying man's mind with something that is not among its concerns.

Let us then be satisfied with knowing that there is no room in the heavens for the devil and his work. Its breathtaking beauty is preserved. The sublimity it symbolizes is kept free from anything impure. And if the devil so much as attempts to climb up, a fast moving flame pursues him.

The second line in this great and awesome scene draws the earth stretched as far as our sight can reach, and made easy to traverse. It shows the mountains giving it firmness and stability, and its plants and vegetation that are necessary sustenance for man and animal: *"We have spread out the earth, and placed on it firm mountains, and caused [life] of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner. We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for."* (Verses 19-20)

The sense of an immense creation is clear here. The reference first to the massive constellations whose large size is implied by their very name, and in the shooting flame which is described as being clear for all to behold, and then the mountains whose weight is alluded to by the adjective, 'firm,' all add a sense of grandeur to the scene described. Even plants are described here as 'balanced' which, in its Arabic original, *mawzūn,* suggests considerable weight. The precise meaning of this phrase, however, is that every plant on earth is created with fine measure and precision. The grand impression of the scene is further enhanced by the term, *ma`āyish,* or *'means of livelihood'*, used here in the plural and left indefinite. Still more is added by the phrase, *'those whom you do not have to provide for.'* This refers to every living thing on

earth. Hence, the scene appears massive, grand, majestic.

But the verse then refers to human beings. Your livelihood is placed on earth *'for you'*, and also for *'those whom you do not have to provide for'*. They all survive on the provisions God gives them. Humans constitute only one of the countless communities that live on earth. This community does not provide sustenance to any other. It is God that provides for it and for other types of creation. But God grants it more of His bounty as He places for its service other communities and types of creation which live on the provisions given to them by God, without placing any responsibility or burden on man.

A Clear Plan for All Creation

In fact, the provisions given to every community are determined by God, according to His will. He grants them as He pleases, at the time He chooses, and in accordance with the laws He has set in operation: *"There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure."* (Verse 21) No creature owns, or has power over, anything. The resources of everything are with God in His supreme realm. He grants it to His creation, in their respective worlds, according to a defined measure. Nothing is given or provided arbitrarily.

We have here a precise statement, *"There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure."* (Verse 21) Its import becomes apparent as man's knowledge increases and becomes more advanced. The more he knows about the universe and how it is made and operates, the better he understands the Qur'ānic statement. The meaning of the term, 'storehouses', becomes clearer after man has discovered the nature of the elements which form the material world, and their composition. Man knows that the basic 'storehouses' of water, for example, are the oxygen and hydrogen atoms. The storehouses of provisions we have in the form of green plants and vegetation include the nitrogen which is present in the air, carbon and the oxygen that form carbon dioxide, and the rays of the sun. Examples like these are numerous, giving a clear picture of the import of the expression, *"God's storehouses"*, of which man has come to know much, but this much remains only a little of what there is.

Of the things that God sends in accordance with defined measure are winds and water: *"We send forth winds heavily loaded, then We send down water from the skies for you to drink. You are not the ones who store it up."* (Verse 22) The Arabic term, *lawāqiĥ*, which signifies *heavily loaded* has been interpreted by some according to the scientific meaning of 'fertilizing', referring to the fact that the winds carry the pollen from some plants or trees to fertilize the female ones. But this does not seem to fit with the text here. We have to remember that the Qur'ān is very meticulous in drawing its

own connotations. What is referred to here is rather the fact that winds carry moisture, just like a she-camel becomes heavy with milk. God then sends down water from that moisture carried by the winds, and He allows man to drink it for his own survival. Yet man cannot retain it all: *"You are not the ones who store it up."* (Verse 22) It has not come from the storehouses of human beings, but from God's treasures. It has been poured according to a well-defined measure.

The winds move, carry the moisture and pour the water in accordance with the laws of nature. But who has determined all this in the first place? It is all determined by the Creator who has set the original law of the universe which gives rise to all aspects and operates all phenomena: "*There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure."* (Verse 21)

We note here how every move is referred to God, even the drinking of water: *"Then We send down water from the skies for you to drink."* (Verse 22) The expression, *asqaynākumūh,* given in translation as, "*for you to drink*", is given in the Arabic original as, "We send down water from the skies and We make you drink it". What is meant here is that we have fashioned you in a way which makes you in need of water, and we made the water suitable for your needs. All this is made according to a measure. It is all set in operation by God's will. This mode of expression is chosen in order to provide an element of complete harmony in the whole scene, so that everything is referred to God, even the movement of one's hand to take water to drink. The whole atmosphere is one that attributes everything in the universe to God's will that directly determines every event and movement. His law that controls the movement of stars and planets is the same as His law that controls people's actions. The first passage of the *sūrah* referred to God's law concerning those who reject God's message, and this second passage refers to His law that governs the heavens and the earth, the wind, water and drinking. All this is subject to God's will which is linked to the great truth that is behind the creation of the heavens, the earth, human beings and all other creatures.

The *sūrah* then perfects the attribution of all matters to God alone, stating that life and death, the living and the dead, the resurrection and judgement belong to Him: *"It is We who give life and cause death, and it is We who are the inheritors [of all things]. Well do We know those who lived before you and those who will come after you. Your Lord will gather them all together. He is indeed Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verses 23-25)

Thus the second passage complements the first. In the first passage we have the statement: "*Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it."* (Verses 4-5) Here, in this passage, it is emphasized that life and death are determined by God, the heir to all life, and He knows whom He has determined to die early and who will have their death delayed. It is He who gathers them all together at the end,

for "*He is indeed Wise, All Knowing.*" (Verse 25) He determines the term of every community according to His wisdom. He knows when it dies, and when it is resurrected and all that happens in between.

We note the harmony of movement in this passage and the preceding one. This is seen in the sending down of revelation, angels, the flames hitting eavesdropping devils, and water from the sky. Harmony is also evident in the general surroundings in which events take place in the whole universe: the skies, the constellations, flames, the earth, the mountains and the vegetation, the winds and the rain. When the *sūrah* provides an example of arrogance, it sets it in a scene of climbing up into the heavens through an open door. All this speaks volumes for the fine style of the Qur'ān.

3
Man and His Sworn Enemy

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ مِن صَلْصَـٰلٍ مِّنْ حَمَإٍ مَّسْنُونٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

Indeed We have created man out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape, (26)

وَٱلْجَآنَّ خَلَقْنَـٰهُ مِن قَبْلُ مِن نَّارِ ٱلسَّمُومِ ﴿٢٧﴾

whereas the jinn We had created before him out of the fire of scorching winds. (27)

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةِ إِنِّى خَـٰلِقٌۢ بَشَرًا مِّن صَلْصَـٰلٍ مِّنْ حَمَإٍ مَّسْنُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

Your Lord said to the angels: 'I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. (28)

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُۥ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِى فَقَعُوا۟ لَهُۥ سَـٰجِدِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him.' (29)

فَسَجَدَ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves. (30)

إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ مَعَ ٱلسَّـٰجِدِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves. (31)

قَالَ يَـٰٓإِبْلِيسُ مَا لَكَ أَلَّا تَكُونَ مَعَ ٱلسَّـٰجِدِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' (32)

قَالَ لَمۡ أَكُن لِّأَسۡجُدَ لِبَشَرٖ خَلَقۡتَهُۥ مِن صَلۡصَٰلٖ مِّنۡ حَمَإٖ مَّسۡنُونٖ ٣٣

[Iblis] replied: 'I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape.' (33)

قَالَ فَٱخۡرُجۡ مِنۡهَا فَإِنَّكَ رَجِيمٞ ٣٤

God said: 'Then get out of here, for you are accursed, (34)

وَإِنَّ عَلَيۡكَ ٱللَّعۡنَةَ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلدِّينِ ٣٥

and the curse shall be on you till the Day of Judgement.' (35)

قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنظِرۡنِيٓ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ يُبۡعَثُونَ ٣٦

Said [Iblīs]: 'My Lord, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be resurrected.' (36)

قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُنظَرِينَ ٣٧

[God] said: 'You are among those who are granted respite (37)

إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡوَقۡتِ ٱلۡمَعۡلُومِ ٣٨

till the Day of the appointed time.' (38)

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَآ أَغۡوَيۡتَنِي لَأُزَيِّنَنَّ لَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَأُغۡوِيَنَّهُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ٣٩

[Iblīs] said: 'My Lord, since You have let me fall in error, I shall make [evil] seem fair to them on earth, and I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, (39)

إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنۡهُمُ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ٤٠

except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.' (40)

قَالَ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ عَلَيَّ مُسۡتَقِيمٌ ٤١

Said He: 'This is, with Me, a straight way. (41)

إِنَّ عِبَادِي لَيۡسَ لَكَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ سُلۡطَٰنٌ إِلَّا مَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡغَاوِينَ ٤٢

You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you. (42)

وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ لَمَوۡعِدُهُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ٤٣

For all such, hell is the promised destiny. (43)

لَهَا سَبۡعَةُ أَبۡوَٰبٖ لِّكُلِّ بَابٖ مِّنۡهُمۡ جُزۡءٞ مَّقۡسُومٌ ٤٤

It has seven gates, with each gate having its allotted share of them.' (44)

The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. (45)	إِنَّ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّٰتٖ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٤٥﴾
[They are received with the greeting]: 'Enter here in peace and security.' (46)	ٱدۡخُلُوهَا بِسَلَٰمٍ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾
We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest] as brothers, facing one another, on couches. (47)	وَنَزَعۡنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنۡ غِلٍّ إِخۡوَٰنًا عَلَىٰ سُرُرٖ مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾
No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart. (48)	لَا يَمَسُّهُمۡ فِيهَا نَصَبٞ وَمَا هُم مِّنۡهَا بِمُخۡرَجِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Overview

With these verses the *sūrah* begins to relate the story of man's creation. It is the story of basic human nature, truth and error and their basic factors, the story of Adam and the substance from which he was created, and what took place at the time of his creation and afterwards. The Qur'ān has already referred to this story twice in previous *sūrahs,* namely *Sūrahs* 2 and 7, The Cow and The Heights. Each time it occurs it serves a special purpose, and is recounted in its own special style with a distinct atmosphere. Hence, the episodes highlighted each time are different, as are the approach and the rhythm employed.

In all three *sūrahs,* the story is introduced with reference to the establishment of mankind on earth as God's vicegerent. We note that in *Sūrah* 2, it is preceded by the verse: *"It is He who created for you all that is on earth. He then turned to heaven and fashioned it into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things."* (2: 29) And in *Sūrah* 7, the preceding verse says: *"We have established you firmly on earth and We have provided you there with means of livelihood. How seldom are you grateful."* (7: 10) Here in this *sūrah,* the story of creation is preceded by the statement: *"We have placed various means of livelihood on it for you, as well as for those whom you do not have to provide for. There is not a thing but with Us are its storehouses; and We send it down only in accordance with a defined measure."* (Verses 20-21)

Yet in each of these *sūrahs* the story of creation is told in a different context, with a definite purpose for each usage. In *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, the point of emphasis is the appointment of Adam as a vicegerent on earth, which has been placed, with all its contents, at man's service: "*Your Lord said to the angels, I am appointing a vicegerent on*

earth.'" (2: 30) As the angels wondered at this appointment, the reason for which was not readily apparent to them, they were told some of its aspects: *"He taught Adam the names of all things and then turned to the angels and said, 'Tell Me the names of these things, if what you say is true.' They said, 'Limitless are You in Your glory! We only know what You have taught us. Indeed, You alone are All-Knowing, Wise.' He said, Adam! Tell them their names.' When he had told them all their names, He said, 'Have I not said to you that I know the secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth, and I know all that you reveal and conceal?'"* (2: 31-33) The *sūrah* then relates how the angels prostrated themselves before Adam while *Iblīs,* or Satan, arrogantly refused. It tells how Adam and his wife resided in heaven before they were seduced by Satan and then their expulsion from heaven and fall to earth so that they could assume their vicegerency, having gone through such a painful experience and repented and asked God to forgive them. Comments on the story as told in *Sūrah* 2 are given in the form of an admonition to the Children of Israel to remember God's grace and honour their pledges to Him. This closely relates to the appointment of Adam, the father of mankind, as vicegerent on earth and the covenant he made with God.

In *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, emphasis is placed on the long journey from heaven and back again, highlighting Satan's unabating hostility to man from the very start. One group will go back to heaven from where Satan drove out their first parents, and these go to heaven by virtue of their disobedience of Satan. Another group, however, will go to hell because they follow the footsteps of Satan, their eternal enemy. Hence, as related in *Sūrah* 7, the story tells of the angels' prostration before Adam while Satan arrogantly refused to do so. Satan then requested God to give him respite till the Day of Judgement so that he could seduce Adam's offspring, the cause of his original expulsion. The *sūrah* then speaks of Adam and his wife situated in heaven where they could eat of all its fruits except for one tree. This prohibited fruit is made the means to test man's will and obedience. It tells us the details of how Satan tried hard to persuade Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit until they responded to him, when their nakedness was exposed. It speaks of God's admonition of them and their fall to earth where the great battle takes place. *"Said He: 'Get you down hence, [and be henceforth] enemies to one another, having on earth your abode and livelihood for a while.' 'There shall you live,' He added, and there shall you die, and from there shall you be brought forth [on the Day of Resurrection]." (7:* 24-25) The *sūrah* then follows all the stages of the journey until all have returned and stood before God on the great wide stage, before going their separate ways to heaven and hell: *"And the inmates of the fire will cry out to the dwellers of paradise: Pour some water on us, or give us some of the sustenance God has provided for you. They will reply: 'God has forbidden both to the unbelievers.'"* (7: 50) At this point the curtains fall.

Here, in this *sūrah,* as we shall see, emphasis is placed on the secret of Adam's creation and the essential factors in man's constitution, leading him to follow either

divine guidance or Satan's erring ways. Hence it begins by stating that Adam is created out of sounding clay and black mud moulded into shape, before God breathed of His noble spirit into him. It also states that Satan was created before him, out of the fire of scorching winds. It tells of the angels' prostration before Adam, while Satan refused to so prostrate before a human being created of such low material, and how, as a result, God expelled him from heaven with a curse. God then accepted Satan's request to give him respite until the Day of Judgement. It adds Satan's own admission that he has no power over God's faithful servants. His power is only over those who submit to him in preference to submitting to God. It then states, without detail, the destiny of each of the two parties. The lack of detail here fits with the point of emphasis whereby the two essential factors are the human constitution, and the domain where Satan can influence man.

The Origins of Man's Creation

"*Indeed We have created man out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape, whereas the* jinn *We had created before him out of the fire of scorching winds.*" (Verses 26-27) At the outset the difference in the two natures is clearly stated. The dry clay which gives off a sound when knocked and which is originally black mud given a specific shape is totally different from the fire described here as scorching, blowing fiercely. We learn later that another element is added to man's nature, namely, the breathing of God's spirit into it. Satan's nature, however, remained that of the fire of scorching winds.

> *Your Lord said to the angels: I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him.' Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves. God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' [Iblīs] replied: I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape.' God said: 'Then get out of here, for you are accursed, and the curse shall be on you till the Day of Judgement.'* (Verses 28-35)

These verses start with God's address to the angels. When, where and how He said all this are details that we have no way of knowing. We simply have no clear statement in the Qur'ān or the *Ĥadīth* which answers these points. Since these details belong to the realm of what lies beyond human perception, we have no way of knowing them. Hence any attempt to provide answers is futile. The same applies to man's creation out of a dry clay, moulded into shape, and infused with God's spirit.

We may refer to other statements in the Qur'ān concerning this point, particularly verse 23: 12, *"We create man out of the essence of clay,"* and verse 32: 8, *"He causes him i.e. man] to be begotten out of a line of a humble fluid."* We may say on the basis of these statements that man and life itself originally come out of the earth's clay. The basic constituents of this clay are found in the physical constitution of man and all living organisms. There are several stages between the original clay and man's creation, and to these the term, *line',* refers. That is all that may be said on the basis of the texts we have. Any addition is no more than an overload added to the text, which the Qur'ān does not need. Scientific research may proceed with whatever means available to it. It may advance theories which are then either confirmed by hard evidence or amended if they cannot be proven. It cannot, however, make conclusions that are in conflict with the facts stated in the Qur'ān, which tell us that the line of creation started with the elements of clay, and to which water was later added.

How has this clay been elevated from its original constituent nature to the horizon of organic life and then to the more sublime horizon of human life? That is a secret no human being can explain. Indeed the secret of life even in the basic organism or the initial cell remains unknown. No one claims to have fathomed it. Then there remains the secret of a human's higher life with all its special features of perception, feeling and inspiration that distinguish man from all other animals. Different theories may try to explain this secret, but they have been forced to acknowledge that man has his own distinctive features and characteristics that single him out right from the very inception of human life. They cannot prove any direct relationship with any creature that lived before man, even though some theories claim that man evolved from other creatures. Nor can any of these theories disprove the other premise that different species have emerged separately, even though some are higher than others. Man thus emerged as a separate, new species.

The Qur'ān explains man's distinction in a clear and simple statement: *"When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him."* (Verse 29) Thus it is this breath of God's spirit that takes man from the state of a humble organic entity to the noble human stage, right from his inception. It makes of him a distinguished creature worthy of being vicegerent on earth. How does this happen? In answer we ask: when was this human creature able to perceive how the Creator works?

Now we can stand on solid ground. Satan was created out of the fire of scorching wind, long before man's creation. This is as far as our knowledge goes. What Satan's nature is and how he was created are matters which we cannot delve into. However, we do understand that he shares some characteristics with the fire of scorching wind. We realize that he can affect the elements constituting mud and clay, since he is made out of fire. He also causes harm and is not slow to inflict it, since the fire he is made of is that of scorching wind. Then the story reveals to us his conceit and

arrogance, which is not far removed in our perception from the nature of fire.

Then man's creation took place, starting with the sticky mud that had dried, then the adding of sublime spirit which brought about his distinction from all living creatures. This gave him his unique human characteristics. Right from the beginning of human life, man has followed his own separate line, while animals remained in their own domain.

Man's Dual Nature

It is this breath of God's spirit that provides man's link with the Supreme Society, making him worthy of contact with God, receiving His messages, and going beyond the material world of his physical constitution to the mental world of hearts and minds. It is this breath of God's spirit which allows man to go beyond time and space, and beyond the reach of his senses and physical ability to formulate perceptions and experience feelings that, at times, seem unlimited.

All this despite the heavy nature of clay which puts him in need of all that his clay constitution requires, such as food, drink, clothing and the satisfaction of desires. He also has his weaknesses, giving rise to faulty concepts and whims. Yet right from the beginning, man is a compound of these two inseparable elements. He has the nature of a compound, not that of a mixture. We need to keep this fact clear in our minds whenever we speak about man's constitution from clay and sublime spirit. The two constituents are inseparable in his nature. In no situation does either element achieve total domination, completely excluding the other. Man is not pure clay or pure spirit even for a single moment. Every single action and every single deed involves his whole make-up which is indivisible.

Achieving a proper balance between the clay and the sublime elements is the highest level man is called on to achieve. That is the stage of human perfection. He is not required to shed either element of his constitution so as to become either angel or animal. To attempt a rise that disturbs the balance is a shortcoming that does not suit man's essential characteristics, or the purpose of his creation in this unique fashion. A person who tries to suppress his basic physical instincts is the same as one who tries to suppress his free spiritual powers. Both go beyond straight human nature, imposing on themselves something that God does not sanction. Both destroy themselves by distorting the basic compound of their very nature. They will have to account to God for such destruction.

Hence the Prophet (peace be upon him) reproached one of his Companions for deciding to remain celibate, vowing not to marry, and another for having decided to fast every day of his life and a third who decided to spend all night every night in worship. His reproach is clear in a *ĥadīth* reported by his wife `Ā'ishah, and he said at

the end: "Whoever turns away from my path does not belong to me."

Islam has formulated its own laws for human life taking into account man's constitution. It established a human system which does not suppress a single aspect of human potential. The whole purpose of this system is to establish a perfect balance between these powers, so that they all work in concert, without allowing anyone of them to encroach on another. Any such encroachment leads to the negation of the other, and every dominance leads to destruction. Man is responsible for the maintenance of the essential characteristics of his nature and his accountability to God. The system Islam establishes for human life is geared to promote these characteristics which God has given to man for a clear purpose.

Anyone who wishes to kill the animal instincts in man destroys his unique constitution, just like one who wishes to kill the essentially human instincts such as faith and believing in what lies beyond the reach of our perception. Anyone who deprives people of their faith destroys their human entity, just like one who deprives them of their food, drink and other physical needs. Both are enemies of man, and both deserve to be driven away just like we must drive Satan away.

Man is an animal with something extra. He has the same needs as an animal, but he has other needs on account of that extra element. These latter needs are not inferior to the 'essential needs' as claimed by advocates of materialistic creeds who are, in truth, enemies of mankind.

These are simply thoughts derived from the truth of our human constitution, as stated in the Qur'ān. We have referred to them only briefly so that we do not delay any further the discussion of the Qur'ānic text relating the most important story of man's creation. We shall however return to these thoughts at the end of our discussion.

The Encounter and the Fall

God said to the angels: *"I am creating a human being out of sounding clay, out of black mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him."* (Verses 28-29) And what God said immediately took effect, for His word expresses His will, and His will is always done. We cannot question how the breath of God's eternal spirit mixed with the clay that has limited life. Such arguments are no more than idle play. It is indeed a child's play with man's intellect itself. It forces the human mind out of its own realm in which it may exercise its powers of perception, reflection and comprehension. All the controversy that has been raised over this issue, past and present, betrays ignorance of the nature of the human mind, its characteristics and limitations. It simply forces the human mind to try to measure God's work by human standards. It is an altogether wrong premise.

God simply says that this has happened without saying how. Hence, the event itself is a fact that the human mind cannot deny. Yet it cannot prove it by any interpretation it invents, other than accepting what God has said. Man is a creature with a beginning, and as such, he cannot judge what is eternal, or how the eternal creates. When the human mind accepts this point, it stops expending its power in futile argument.

What happened after God issued His order to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam? *"Thereupon, the angels, one and all, prostrated themselves."* (Verse 30) That is in the nature of this aspect of God's creation, the angels. They obey God's orders whatever they are, without argument or delay. However, something else also took place at the same time: *"Not so Iblīs, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves."* (Verse 31)

Iblīs belongs to a different type of creation, separate from the angels. He is created out of fire while they are created out of light. They do not disobey God, whatever His command may be. He, on the other hand, disobeyed God, rejecting His command. For certain, then, he is not, and never was, one of the angels. That we have here a form of exception, more strongly pronounced in the Arabic text, refers to what is called in Arabic linguistics 'inconsequential exception'. It is acceptable to say in Arabic: "The Joneses have come except for Ahmad", when you know that Ahmad does not belong to the Jones family, but is always with them. Now since the order stated here has been issued to the angels, how could it apply to *Iblīs?* That the same order was issued to *Iblīs* is clearly stated in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. There the order to *Iblīs* is mentioned in a later verse, when God questions him: *"What has prevented you from prostrating yourself when I commanded you?"* (7: 12) This is clear proof that *Iblīs* was given the same order. He might have been included in the order given to the angels, if he was with them at the time, or perhaps a separate order was issued to him. However, this is not mentioned here and this shows that he is of a far lesser position than the angels. Furthermore, the texts we have, and Satan's own behaviour, all demonstrate that he was not one of the angels.

It should be also mentioned that we are dealing here with matters that belong to a different realm, and that we cannot fathom their nature or how they took place, except within the meaning of the texts we have. Neither human reason nor imagination has any role to play here.

"God said: 'Iblīs! What is your reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?' [Iblīs] replied: I am not one to prostrate myself to a human being whom You have created out of sounding clay, out of mud moulded into shape.'" (Verses 32-33) Thus the nature of this creature, who was created out of the fire of scorching winds, has surfaced. We see that arrogance, conceit and disobedience are part of his nature. *Iblīs* mentions the clay and mud, but does not mention the sublime spirit that mixes

irrevocably with that mud. In his insolence he declares that a great creature like him could not prostrate himself to a human being whom God has created out of mud moulded into shape.

Such an attitude leads to its natural consequence: "*God said: 'Then get out of here, for you are accursed, and the curse shall be on you till the Day of judgement.'*" (Verses 34-35) This is a just reward for disobedience and rebellion.

At this point, his evil characteristics come out in full force. We see how he nurses his grudges and how he plans to spread evil: "*He said: My Lord, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be resurrected.' [God] said: 'You are among those who are granted respite till the Day of the appointed time.'*" (Verses 36-38) He requests respite to the Day of Judgement, but not to have the opportunity to repent of his sin which he has committed in the presence of God Almighty. It is not to atone for his sin that he wants to be spared death until the Day of Judgement, but rather to exact revenge on Adam and his offspring. He is avenging himself against mankind for his expulsion and the curse that he has incurred. He thus blames Adam for his expulsion, instead of acknowledging that it was the result of his own sinful insolence.

"*[Iblīs] said: 'My Lord, since You have let me fall in error, I shall make [evil] seem fair to them on earth, and I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.'*" (Verses 39-40) It is Iblīs himself who has chosen the battleground, which is the earth. "*I shall make evil seem fair to them on earth.*" (Verse 39) He also states what he will use for a weapon. He will simply tempt mankind by making what is foul appear to be fair, so that they are tempted to do it. In fact, no human being resorts to foul things unless these seem fair to him by some trick perpetrated by Satan. Thus he sees such foul things in a guise which is different from what they truly are. Hence people should always remember the weapon which Satan uses. If they find something attractive and are tempted, they should make sure lest it has been made to appear so by Satan. Proper refuge is to ensure that their link with their Lord is kept in fine tuning by worshipping Him as He should be worshipped. Even according to his own statement, Satan has no power over God's faithful servants: "*I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error, except for those of them who are truly Your faithful servants.*" (Verses 39-40) God chooses from among His servants those who purge themselves of all evil and worship Him alone, as though they see Him. It is over such people that Satan holds no sway.

Satan knows that this condition which he himself has stated is one which he cannot change because it is part of the laws governing human nature. Hence, the reply to Satan's words: "*Said He: This is, with Me, a straight way. You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you.'*" (Verses 4142) This is the way established by the will of God as a final arbiter with regard to guidance and going astray. "*You shall have no power over My servants.*"

(Verse 42) They are immune to your devices and schemes, as they close all entry points to their minds and hearts. They always look to God for guidance, and they know what pleases Him by their nature which they purge of all sin. Satan has power only over 'those who choose to follow' him, as they have been in error, going far astray. Those who dedicate themselves to God will not be left without guidance.

The outcome is also clear. It is stated right at the beginning: "*For all such, hell is the promised destiny. It has seven gates, with each gate having its allotted share of them.*" (Verses 43-44) For those who go astray are of different categories. Each gate to hell will have its portion from among them, according to the nature of their deeds.

This ends the scene of the beginning of human life, putting great emphasis on the lesson to be learnt. It tells how Satan finds his way into the human soul, trying to overpower the sublimity of the spirit breathed into man with the characteristics of his clay origin. Those who maintain their links with God, emphasizing their spirit characteristics will have nothing to fear from Satan.

The destiny of the believers who follow the truth is also outlined here: "*The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. [They are received with the greeting]: 'Enter here in peace and security.' We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest] as brothers, facing one another, on couches. No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart.*" (Verses 45-48) The God-fearing are those who are on the alert, trying always to avoid what displeases God or incurs His anger. It may be said that the '*fountains*' mentioned here correspond to the gates of hell. These people enter heaven '*in peace and security*' which contrast with the fear and panic felt by those who go to hell. '*Malice*' and ill feelings are removed from their hearts, which contrasts with the grudge that Satan always feels against human beings. Their good labours in this life are rewarded by their being secure, free from all feelings of tiredness and weariness.

A Fine Destiny for the Righteous

The story of man's creation and placement on earth deserves detailed comments, but we will only touch briefly on certain aspects of it, as befits the way it is told in this *sūrah.*

The *sūrah* delivers a clear message concerning the special creation known as man. He has a unique make-up which gives him more than the physical constitution which he has in common with other living creatures. No matter how life emerged and how living creatures came into being, man is distinguished by another quality mentioned in the Qur'ān, which derives from the breathing of the divine spirit into him. This quality is not the result of the continuous evolution of man, stage after stage, as claimed by Darwinism. It came right at the inception of human life, when

man was first created. There was no time when man was only a living organic entity, then the spirit entered into his constitution to make of him the man we see today.

Neo-Darwinism, and its main advocate, Julian Huxley, have been forced to admit a part of this great fact. In this respect, it admits the uniqueness of man, and his ability to establish human civilization. Nevertheless, neo-Darwinism continues to claim that this unique human being has evolved from the animal kingdom.

It is very hard to reconcile this view of neo-Darwinism which admits the uniqueness of man with the essential concept of evolution advanced by Darwin. Yet all evolutionists adamantly persist with this attitude, giving it false scientific guise. This is only because they try to break away from the Church and whatever view it advances. The Jews have always encouraged and promoted this concept, endorsing it as scientific, because it serves their ultimate goal.

We have already discussed this point when commenting on a similar text in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. It is useful to quote here from those comments:

The total import of Qur'ānic statements that speak of the creation of Adam (peace be upon him) and the start of human life indicates very strongly that this particular creation was given its human characteristic and special tasks at the time of its coming into existence. Evolution in human history took the form of developing these characteristics and gaining further experience in utilizing them. It is not an evolution of existence which suggests, as Darwinism would like us to believe, that a process of evolution of species has reached its climax with the advent of man.

There might have been stages of advanced animals, with one coming after the other, as evidenced by the theory of natural selection. But this is no more than a theory that does not aspire to any degree of certainty, because the estimation of the ages of rocks in geological strata is again a theoretical process. It is the same as estimating the ages of different stars and planets on the basis of the characteristics of their rays. Future discoveries may amend or change these theories.

But even if we were to learn the ages of rocks with absolute certainty, there is nothing to prevent the existence of different species of animals, some of which are higher than others, in different time periods, and that their advancement makes them particularly suited for the prevailing circumstances. Some of them may disappear when circumstances change drastically to make it difficult for the earth to sustain their existence. That does not make it inevitable that these species have evolved one from the other. All the studies and observations of Charles Darwin and those who followed him cannot prove more than that. They cannot say with any certainty that one species evolved from a preceding one, on the basis of fossils and where they have been found. It simply proves that a subsequent species was higher than a preceding one. This can easily be explained as we have already said: the prevailing

circumstances at one particular time allowed the existence of one species. The circumstances subsequently prevailing allowed the existence of another species and the disappearance of the first one.

All this means that the appearance of human beings was independent of other species. It took place at a time when the prevailing circumstances on earth facilitated the existence, development and advancement of this particular type of creation. This is the total sum of the Qur'ānic statements on the creation of man.

The fact that biologically, physiologically, mentally and spiritually, man has unique characteristics is so clear that it has been acknowledged by neo-Darwinists who include a number of atheists. This uniqueness also supports the view that human existence was totally independent of the existence of all other species. It simply has no biological inter-relationship with them.[7]

An Eternal Hostility

The unique method of creation which led to the emergence of man, a creature with its own separate existence, is the fact that God breathed in him of His own spirit. This gives us a totally different picture of man and his 'essential needs' from those of all materialistic philosophies, with all the economic, social and political doctrines they produce and all the concepts and values they advance for human life.

The claim that man is nothing but an advanced animal species that has evolved from lower animals lies at the heart of the concept promoted in the Marxist Declaration that the essential needs of man are: food, drink, shelter and sex. These are certainly the basic needs of animals. Man cannot be given a more degrading position than what this outlook assigns to him. All his rights that are derived from the fact that he is unlike animals, since he has his unique human qualities, are thus denied to him. He is denied his freedom of belief, thought and expression, and his right to choose his profession and where to live, as well as his right to criticize the system of government and its intellectual basis. Indeed he is denied even the right to criticize the party in power, or those who are even less than the party, such as despotic rulers in hateful dictatorial regimes that treat human beings as though they are no more than a flock of sheep. After all, human beings, in materialistic philosophies, are no different from animals from whom they had at one time evolved. All this misery is then ennobled as 'scientific socialism'.

The Islamic concept of man, based on man's special, distinctive qualities, considers that the basic needs of man are different from those of animals. Food, drink, shelter and sex do not constitute the total sum of his basic needs. His intellectual and

[7] Sayyid Quṭb, *In the Shade of the Qur'ān,* Vol. VI, pp. 36

spiritual needs are by no means of secondary importance. Faith, freedom of thought, will and choice are also basic needs that must be placed in the same category as food, drink, shelter and sex. Indeed, these other needs are of a higher position, because these are the ones that man needs while animals do not. In other words, these are the ones that emphasize his humanity. When he is denied these, his humanity itself is denied.

Thus, in the Islamic system, freedom of faith, thought and expression, choice and will cannot be denied for the sake of increased production so that food, drink, shelter and sex are provided for humans! Nor is it permissible that moral values, as established by God, not by tradition, environment or economy, be denied in order to meet the animal needs of man.

The two outlooks are essentially different in their evaluation of man and his basic needs. Hence, they can never be reconciled in a single system. It is either Islam or materialistic doctrines with all their oppressive products, including what they call 'scientific socialism'. Indeed 'scientific socialism' is just another sordid product of materialism which degrades man whom God Himself has honoured.

The eternal battle between Satan and man on this earth is one in which Satan tries his best to lead man away from what submission to God alone entails in accepting His faith, concepts, worship, systems and laws. Human beings who submit to God alone, which means they worship Him only, are the ones over whom Satan has no power whatsoever. It is God who says to Satan, as related in this story of creation: *"This is, with Me, a straight way. You shall have no power over My servants, except for those who, having fallen into error, choose to follow you."* (Verses 41-42)

The point which separates those who follow the road to heaven, promised to the righteous, and those who follow the path leading to hell, which is the abode of evildoers, is that of submission to God. This is always referred to in the Qur'ān as worship. The alternative is to follow what Satan paints as fair and thus not submit to God. It should be pointed out here that Satan himself did not deny God's existence or His attributes. So, he did not disbelieve in Him, so to speak. What he did was to refuse to submit to Him. That is the point at issue which sends Satan and his followers to hell.

Submission to God is the central point of Islam. If those who claim to follow Islam submit to anyone other than God in a single rule, whether it relates to faith, concepts, worship, law or moral standards and values, then their claim is worthless. Islam means submission to God alone in all these. Submission to anyone else means sinking back into *jāhiliyyah.* It is not possible to separate this submission so as to make it applicable only to faith and worship, but not to systems and laws. Submission to God must be acknowledged in its totality. Such submission means

worshipping God, in both its linguistic and Islamic senses. It is over such submission that the eternal battle between man and Satan is fought.

Finally we come to what God touchingly says about the righteous: *"The God-fearing shall dwell amidst gardens and fountains. [They are received with the greeting]: 'Enter here in peace and security.' We shall have removed from their hearts any lurking feelings of malice, [and they shall rest) as brothers, facing one another, on couches. No weariness shall ever touch them there, nor shall they ever be made to depart."* (Verses 45-48)

This religion does not try to change human nature or to make mankind a different sort of creation. It acknowledges that in this life people experience malice and grudges. This is part of their human nature which faith does not totally eradicate. It simply works on it to reduce its intensity, and then elevates its domain so that believers love and hate for God's sake only. But in heaven, where their humanity attains its most sublime standard, the very sense of malice and grudge is removed. Here, people experience only pure love and brotherhood.

This is the supreme standard of the people of heaven. If someone finds that it dominates his feelings in this life, then he should look forward to being in heaven in the hereafter, as long as he is a believer. This is the essential condition which gives every action its true value.

4
Lessons of History

۞ نَبِّئۡ عِبَادِيٓ أَنِّيٓ أَنَا ٱلۡغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾	*Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful;* (49)
وَأَنَّ عَذَابِي هُوَ ٱلۡعَذَابُ ٱلۡأَلِيمُ ﴿٥٠﴾	*and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering.* (50)
وَنَبِّئۡهُمۡ عَن ضَيۡفِ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ﴿٥١﴾	*Tell them about Abraham's guests,* (51)
إِذۡ دَخَلُواْ عَلَيۡهِ فَقَالُواْ سَلَٰمٗا قَالَ إِنَّا مِنكُمۡ وَجِلُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾	*when they went in to him and said: 'Peace.' But he replied: 'We feel afraid of you.'* (52)
قَالُواْ لَا تَوۡجَلۡ إِنَّا نُبَشِّرُكَ بِغُلَٰمٍ عَلِيمٖ ﴿٥٣﴾	*They said: 'Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge.'* (53)
قَالَ أَبَشَّرۡتُمُونِي عَلَىٰٓ أَن مَّسَّنِيَ ٱلۡكِبَرُ فَبِمَ تُبَشِّرُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾	*Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?'* (54)
قَالُواْ بَشَّرۡنَٰكَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ فَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلۡقَٰنِطِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾	*They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.'* (55)
قَالَ وَمَن يَقۡنَطُ مِن رَّحۡمَةِ رَبِّهِۦٓ إِلَّا ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ﴿٥٦﴾	*He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's*

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

grace?' (56)

قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّآ أُرْسِلْنَآ إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

[Abraham] said: 'What is your business, you [heavenly] messengers?' (57)

إِلَّآ ءَالَ لُوطٍ إِنَّا لَمُنَجُّوهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

They replied: 'We are sent to a guilty nation, (58)

إِلَّا ٱمْرَأَتَهُۥ قَدَّرْنَآ ۙ إِنَّهَا لَمِنَ ٱلْغَٰبِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

except for Lot's household, all of whom we shall save, (59)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ ءَالَ لُوطٍ ٱلْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

except for his wife. We have decreed that she should remain with those who stay behind.' (60)

قَالَ إِنَّكُمْ قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

And when the messengers [of God] came to the house of Lot, (61)

قَالُواْ بَلْ جِئْنَٰكَ بِمَا كَانُواْ فِيهِ يَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

he said: You are unknown here.' (62)

وَأَتَيْنَٰكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَإِنَّا لَصَٰدِقُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

They answered: 'No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. (63)

فَأَسْرِ بِأَهْلِكَ بِقِطْعٍ مِّنَ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱتَّبِعْ أَدْبَٰرَهُمْ وَلَا يَلْتَفِتْ مِنكُمْ أَحَدٌ وَٱمْضُواْ حَيْثُ تُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed. (64)

وَقَضَيْنَآ إِلَيْهِ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْأَمْرَ أَنَّ دَابِرَ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مَقْطُوعٌ مُّصْبِحِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded.' (65)

And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will

be wiped out by the morning. (66)

وَجَآءَ أَهۡلُ ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ يَسۡتَبۡشِرُونَ ٦٧

The people of the city came [to Lot] rejoicing [at the news of the young people]. (67)

قَالَ إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ضَيۡفِي فَلَا تَفۡضَحُونِ ٦٨

Said he: 'These are my guests: so do not put me to shame. (68)

وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَلَا تُخۡزُونِ ٦٩

Fear God and do not bring disgrace on me.' (69)

قَالُوٓاْ أَوَلَمۡ نَنۡهَكَ عَنِ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٧٠

They replied: 'Have we not forbidden you to entertain any people?' (70)

قَالَ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ بَنَاتِيٓ إِن كُنتُمۡ فَٰعِلِينَ ٧١

He said: 'Here are these daughters of mine [to marry], if you must do [what you intend to do.]' (71)

لَعَمۡرُكَ إِنَّهُمۡ لَفِي سَكۡرَتِهِمۡ يَعۡمَهُونَ ٧٢

By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness, (72)

فَأَخَذَتۡهُمُ ٱلصَّيۡحَةُ مُشۡرِقِينَ ٧٣

when the blast [of punishment] overtook them at sunrise, (73)

فَجَعَلۡنَا عَٰلِيَهَا سَافِلَهَا وَأَمۡطَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ حِجَارَةً مِّن سِجِّيلٍ ٧٤

and We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay. (74)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّلۡمُتَوَسِّمِينَ ٧٥

Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. (75)

وَإِنَّهَا لَبِسَبِيلٖ مُّقِيمٍ ٧٦

Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still. (76)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٧٧

In all this there is a sign for true believers. (77)

وَإِن كَانَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡأَيۡكَةِ لَظَٰلِمِينَ ٧٨

The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan] were also wrongdoers, (78)

فَٱنتَقَمۡنَا مِنۡهُمۡ وَإِنَّهُمَا لَبِإِمَامٖ مُّبِينٖ ٧٩

and so We punished them. Both these [communities] lived by an open highway,

plain to see. (79)	وَلَقَدۡ كَذَّبَ أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡحِجۡرِ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾
Likewise, the people of al-Ḥijr also denied [God's] messengers. (80)	
We have given them Our signs, but they turned their backs on them. (81)	وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمۡ ءَايَٰتِنَا فَكَانُواْ عَنۡهَا مُعۡرِضِينَ ﴿٨١﴾
Out of the mountains did they hew their dwellings, leading a life of security. (82)	وَكَانُواْ يَنۡحِتُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾
But the blast [of punishment] overtook them at early morning. (83)	فَأَخَذَتۡهُمُ ٱلصَّيۡحَةُ مُصۡبِحِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾
Of no avail to them was all that they had acquired. (84)	فَمَآ أَغۡنَىٰ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَكۡسِبُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

Overview

This rather long passage refers to some examples of God's mercy and the punishment He inflicts. These include how Abraham was given in his old age the happy news of a son to be born to him, and how Lot and his household, except his wife, were saved from the fate that befell the wrongdoers. They also include a reference to the fateful punishments that befell the people of the Madyan and those of al-Ḥijr.

All these stories occur after an introduction that says: "*Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering.*" (Verses 49-50) Some of them thus confirm what has been said about God's mercy, and some confirm that His punishment is grievous indeed. These stories also refer to what is mentioned at the opening of the *sūrah,* confirming the warning it contains: "*Let them eat and enjoy themselves, and let their hopes beguile them. For they will surely come to know [the truth]. Never have We destroyed any community unless divine revelations have been made known to it. No community can ever forestall its term, nor can they delay it.*" (Verses 3-5) These were examples of cities destroyed by God after they ignored all the warnings they had received. Their punishment only befell them after the time they were given had lapsed. The stories we have in this passage also confirm

what is mentioned earlier in the *sūrah* concerning the angels and their mission when they are sent with God's orders: *"They say: 'You to whom this reminder has been bestowed from on high! You are truly mad. Why do you not bring the angels before us, if you are truthful?' We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite."* (Verses 6-8)

All this goes to show that the whole *sūrah* is a single unit, with every part confirming the rest. This observation we make in spite of the fact that most *sūrahs* were revealed in parts, with the possibility that later verses were often revealed before earlier ones. Yet the final ordering of the verses of each *sūrah* is made in accordance with divine instructions. Hence, there must be a clear purpose in such order. We have learnt some aspects of the wisdom behind the ordering of verses in the *sūrahs* we have discussed. Each of them appears clearly as a complete and perfect structure. Yet what we say is only a personal point of view, while true knowledge belongs to God alone. We pray to Him to guide us to what is right.

Abraham's Visitors

"Tell My servants that I alone am Much Forgiving, truly Merciful; and also, My punishment is indeed the most grievous suffering." (Verses 49-50) This order to the Prophet (peace be upon him) comes after the reward of God-fearing believers and the punishment of wrongdoers are mentioned. The link is self-evident. But God's mercy and forgiveness are mentioned before the punishment, because they fit in with the grace God has committed Himself to bestow. Sometimes, only the punishment and suffering are mentioned, or they are given precedence in the text, but that is only because there is special need for such treatment.

We are then given an account of the encounter between the Prophet Abraham and the angels sent to Lot. This episode is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, each time in a different way which fits the context in which it occurs. The story of Lot alone is also mentioned in other places.

For example, Lot's story is covered in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, and a different account of Abraham and Lot's story is given in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd. In the first we have a denunciation by Lot of the indecent practices of his community, and their reply to him: *"Drive them [i.e. Lot and his household] out of your land, for they are indeed people who would keep chaste."* (7: 82) It also refers to saving him and his household, except his wife who was destined to stay behind with those who were to be destroyed. There is no mention of the angels coming to him or the scheme of his people against them. In the second instance, a totally different layout is given to the story of the angels with Abraham and Lot. There we have more details concerning Abraham and the happy news he was given in the presence of his wife. There is also a mention of his

argument with the angels concerning Lot and his community, which is not mentioned here. Different lines are adopted in the two *sūrahs* in relating the events concerning the angels and Lot. In *Sūrah* Hūd the angels do not reveal their identity to him until his people arrived, and he had pleaded with them to spare his guests, but all his pleas fell on deaf ears. When he despaired of them, he cried out in distress: *"Would that with you I had real strength, or that I could lean on some mighty support."* (11: 80) Here in this *sūrah,* the identity of the angels is revealed right at the outset, while the design of his people against his guests is mentioned later. The point here is not to mention the story as it took place, but the confirmation of the warnings, emphasizing that when angels are sent down, their task is to inflict the punishment, giving people no further respite.

> *Tell them about Abraham's guests, when they went in to him and said: Peace.' But he replied: 'We feel afraid of you.' They said: Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge.' Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?' They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.' He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's grace?* (Verses 51-56)

In this account some of the details mentioned in other *sūrahs* are left out. The angels greet Abraham with a message of peace as they enter, but he tells them he is apprehensive about them. The *sūrah* does not mention the reason for his fear, nor does it mention that he placed a roasted calf before them, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd. There we are told: *"When he saw that their hands did not reach out to it, he felt their conduct strange and became apprehensive of them."* (11: 70) The point of emphasis here is that God's grace is always bestowed on God's servants, as made clear by His messengers. Hence the details of Abraham's story are of little importance. *"They said: 'Do not be alarmed. We bring you the happy news of the birth of a son to you who will be endowed with knowledge."* (Verse 53) The *sūrah* outlines this happy news without much detail of what else took place.

Here also we have Abraham's reply, without mentioning his wife and her intervention in the discussion that ensued: *"Said he: 'Do you give me this happy news when I have been overtaken by old age? Of what, then, is your good news?"* (Verse 54) First Abraham feels it unlikely that he would be given a son at his old age, particularly with his wife also being old and barren as mentioned in other *sūrahs.* Therefore, the angels remind him of the truth: *"They replied: 'That good news we have given you is the truth. So do not abandon hope.'"* (Verse 55) Abraham immediately returns to his normal hopeful self, stating that he never lost hope of God's grace: *"He said: 'Who but a person going far astray abandons hope of His Lord's grace?"* (Verse 56)

Here we note a reference to God's grace in Abraham's reply, which fits with the beginning. An emphasis is also placed here on the fact that only those who go far astray despair of God's grace. They go far away from the road God has laid down for people to traverse, so they do not feel His mercy, compassion and care which He bestows on all His servants. On the other hand, a person whose heart is full of faith will never despair of God's grace, no matter what hardship and difficulties he is called on to endure. Even in the thickness of darkness and the gloom of adversity, they feel that God's grace is close at hand. It will never fail to be bestowed. God has the power to initiate the causes and bring about the results, changing the present and the future.

As Abraham feels reassured he becomes eager to know the purpose they have been sent to accomplish: "*[Abraham] said: 'What is your business, you [heavenly] messengers?' They replied: 'We are sent to a guilty nation, except for Lot's household, all of whom we shall save, except for his wife. We have decreed that she should remain with those who stay behind.*" (Verses 57-60) The account we have here does not refer to Abraham's argument on behalf of Lot and his people, as mentioned in *Sūrah* Hūd. Instead, it moves on quickly from the angels' information to the realization of their mission. Abraham believes that God will bestow His grace on Lot and his household, with the exception of Lot's wife. Thus the business the angels have with Abraham is accomplished, and they proceed towards completion of their mission.

When All Values Are of Little Value

> *And when the messengers [of God] came to the house of Lot, he said: 'You are unknown here.' They answered: 'No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed. Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded.' And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will be wiped out by the morning.* (Verses 61-66)

As indicated earlier, the *sūrah* states that the angels immediately reveal their true identity to Lot and that they have come to accomplish what his people disputed about their punishment for their misdeeds. That punishment comes in fulfilment of God's warnings, confirming the fact that when angels are sent to a community, their punishment is immediate.

"*He said: 'You are unknown here.'*" (Verse 62) He said this in irritation, as he was fully aware of the habits of his people and expected what they would try to do with his guests. He was a stranger among his people, and they were arrogant in their

immorality. Hence he tells his guests that it is unwise of them to come to a city when the reputation of its people is well known. "*They answered: 'No, but we bring you news of that over which they have been disputing. We are bringing you the certainty [of its fulfilment], for we are speaking the truth indeed.'*" (Verses 63-64) All these assertions serve to tell us the extent of Lot's alarm and distress, as he wants to be hospitable yet also protect his guests against the designs of his people. Hence, they reassure him time after time, before giving him his instructions: "*Depart with your household in the dead of night, with yourself following them in the rear. Let none of you look back, but proceed to where you are commanded.*" (Verse 65) Thus Lot was to leave the town by night, before the break of dawn. He was to walk behind those who would be saved with him to make sure that no one was left behind, and no one looked behind, like displaced people unwilling to leave their homeland.

"*And We made plain the case to him, that the last remnant of those [wrongdoers] will be wiped out by the morning.*" (Verse 66) It is God, then, who has revealed to Lot this very serious piece of news, which is expressed in the Qur'ān as the last one of those people would be destroyed by the morning. Well, if the last of them is destroyed, it follows that the whole lot are destroyed, with none spared. Hence, caution must be exercised, so that no one is left behind to suffer the fate which was sure to engulf the whole city.

The *sūrah* relates this part of the story first because it is more suited to its overall theme. It now fills in the details of what happened earlier when Lot's people heard that a number of handsome young men were visiting him. To them, that was a chance not to be missed: "*The people of the city came [to Lot] rejoicing.*" (Verse 67)

The way this is expressed portrays to what low and abhorrent level those people had sunk in their eagerness to fulfil their perverse, uncontrolled desires. This is shown in the fact that the townsfolk came in a group, rejoicing at the presence of young men, openly declaring their intent to rape them in broad daylight. This shameful publicity of their wicked intentions, in addition to the filthy action itself, is so abhorrent and repulsive that we cannot imagine it, but it was certainly true. An individual may harbour some perverted desire, but he conceals the fact and tries to satisfy his perversion in secret. He is ashamed if others know of it. In fact, sound human nature prefers to keep such desire private even when it is with one's legitimate wife. Some animal species do not mate in public. But those wicked and evil people declare their lust shamelessly, come seeking it in groups, and rejoice as they expect to fulfil it. This is unparalleled perversion.

On the other side we see the Prophet Lot in distress, standing up to defend his guests and his honour. He tries to awaken in his people a sense of honour and fear of God. But he knew full well that they had no fear of God, and that such perverted natures would not respond to any compassionate, humanitarian appeal. Yet in his

distress he tries every avenue: "*Said he: 'These are my guests: so do not put me to shame. Fear God and do not bring disgrace on me.'*" (Verses 68-69) But his appeal awakens no feeling of honour or integrity. They had lost all such feelings. Instead, they rebuke Lot for entertaining any man as a guest, as if he is the offender by offering them the temptation: "*They replied: 'Have we not forbidden you to entertain any people?'*" (Verse 70)

Lot continues with his attempts, pointing out the proper line of desire, i.e. the other sex. It is women who hold natural attraction for men to satisfy their sexual urge, so that procreation continues and human life is preserved. "*He said: 'Here are these daughters of mine [to marry], if you must do [what you intend to do].'*" (Verse 71)

Lot, a prophet, does not offer his daughters in any adulterous relationship. He simply reminds the menfolk of the natural way to satisfy their urge. He knew that if they responded to his appeal they would not want to be adulterous. Hence, his offer sought recourse to their human nature, if only it would respond. But that was unlikely.

The *sūrah* portrays the scene with all the action taking place. At this moment, the mode of expression changes into an address to the Prophet who is observing it all. This takes the form of an oath, following the traditional method of Arabic emphasis: "*By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness.*" (Verse 72) This describes a state that had become part of their nature. In that state they were unlikely ever to wake up or listen to appeals based on personal integrity, fear of God or uncorrupted human nature. Hence they were doomed and God's punishment was to engulf them without delay: "*We never send down angels except in accordance with the truth. And then, [the unbelievers] would be given no further respite.*" (Verse 8)

Now we face a scene of total destruction, two towns in complete ruin with particular features that are suited to the perverted natures of their dwellers: "*By your life, they were reeling in their drunkenness, when the blast [of punishment] overtook them at sunrise, and We turned those [towns] upside down, and rained on them stones of clay.*" (Verses 72-74)

The Fate of Erring Communities

The towns were ruined by a natural phenomenon which seems similar to that of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which are sometimes accompanied by earth subsidence and a showering of stones. Sometimes complete villages and towns are so immersed. It is said that the Dead Sea was formed after this event, which witnessed the sinking of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the surface of the earth collapsed forming a lake that was later filled with water. We will not try to explain their particular punishment as an earthquake or a volcano, for our approach is based

instead on complete faith that does not admit such explanations.

We know for certain that all natural phenomena operate in accordance with a law that God has laid down for the universe. But no phenomenon or event occurs on the basis of inevitability. It occurs in fulfilment of God's will, which applies particularly to that situation. There is no conflict between the operation of God's law and the need for an act of God's will for every event. We also know for certain that in some cases God, in His wisdom, accomplishes a particular will of His through a certain event, in order to serve a certain purpose. What destroyed Lot's townships need not be an ordinary earthquake or volcano. God might have willed to inflict on them whatever scourge He might have chosen, at the time of His choice and by the method He determined. That is the approach to explain, on the basis of faith, all miraculous events that took place at the times of all prophets.

Those towns were on a road regularly traversed between Arabia and Syria. They contain good lessons for those who wish to learn from the end that befell earlier communities which defied and rejected God's messengers. But such lessons are of benefit only to those who are prepared to learn from them: *"Surely in this there are messages for those who read the signs. Those [towns] stood on a road that is trodden still. In all this there is a sign for true believers."* (Verses 75-77) Thus the warning came true. The sending of the angels was a signal for God's punishment which no one can prevent or avoid.

The same applied to the communities of the Prophets Shu`ayb and Ṣāliĥ: *"The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan] were also wrongdoers, and so We punished them. Both these [communities] lived by an open highway, plain to see."* (Verses 78-79) The Qur'ān gives detailed accounts of the history of the Prophet Shu`ayb and his people in other *sūrahs.* Here we have only a reference to the injustice they were keen to perpetrate, and to their punishment. This comes as confirmation of God's punishment. As indicated at the beginning of the *sūrah,* when the time appointed for any community lapses, their punishment is inevitable if they persist in their rejection of God's messages. The city of Madyan and the wooded dales inhabited by Shu`ayb's people were not far from Lot's townships. The reference in the dual form, 'both', here may mean Madyan and the wooded lands, which were on a clearly marked road. Or it may mean the townships of Lot already mentioned and Shu`ayb's city of Madyan. They may be grouped together as they lie on the same road between Hijaz in today's Saudi Arabia and Syria. The doom that befalls cities and townships flourishing along a well traversed road provides a great reminder as it becomes a lesson to all that pass by. Life continues all around these towns which once flourished, but now lie in ruin.

The people of al-Ĥijr are the community to whom the Prophet Ṣāliĥ was sent. Their land lies in between Hijaz and Syria. Its ruins are still seen today, because they used to build their dwellings in the mountains, cutting space for themselves there.

This indicates a high level of progress and civilization, as well as recognized power: *"Likewise, the people of al-Ĥijr also denied [God's] messengers."* The fact is that those people only rejected the message of the Prophet Ṣāliĥ, but he was certainly a representative of all God's messengers. When they denied him, they belied all messengers.

"We have given them Our signs, but they turned their backs on them." (Verse 81)

Ṣāliĥ's special miraculous sign was the she-camel who had an equal share of water to drink as the whole town with all its cattle. But the signs available in the universe are numerous, and so are God's signs within ourselves. All of these are there for people to look upon and contemplate. God did not only give them the preternatural sign which Ṣāliĥ brought them, but instead they turned away from all God's signs. No reasonable person was ready to contemplate them and reflect on the message they carried.

"Out of the mountains did they hew their dwellings, leading a life of security. But the blast [of punishment] overtook them at early morning. Of no avail to them was all that they had acquired." (Verses 82-84) What we have here is a very quick move from the secure dwellings carved out in the mountains, to a blast that overwhelms them all, leaving nothing of what they earned, acquired or built. They are destroyed suddenly. This scene touches our hearts violently. No people feel more secure than those who hew their dwellings out of mountainous rocks. No community feels more at ease than early in the morning as the sun rises and sends its warming rays. But the people of Ṣāliĥ are overwhelmed by a blast at that very tranquil moment in their very secure dwellings. They lost everything. Nothing could protect them, for no fortress is immune from God's punishment. The blast, which was the sound of storms, or a thunderbolt, destroys them all.

Thus the scenes of punishment portrayed in very quick flashes come to an end. They show us how God's law is fulfilled, and how the people who reject God's messages are destroyed when their time is over. The end of this passage is seen to be in perfect harmony with the ending of the previous three passages. They all emphasize that God's law always operates, and His promises and warnings always come true.

5
Keeping to the Path of Truth

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَءَاتِيَةٌ ۖ فَٱصْفَحِ ٱلصَّفْحَ ٱلْجَمِيلَ ﴿٨٥﴾

It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. (85)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ ٱلْخَلَّٰقُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٦﴾

Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator. (86)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَٰكَ سَبْعًا مِّنَ ٱلْمَثَانِى وَٱلْقُرْءَانَ ٱلْعَظِيمَ ﴿٨٧﴾

We have given you seven oft- repeated verses and this sublime Qur'ān. (87)

لَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِۦٓ أَزْوَٰجًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَٱخْفِضْ جَنَاحَكَ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things We have granted to some among them, and do not grieve on their account, but spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers, (88)

وَقُلْ إِنِّىٓ أَنَا ٱلنَّذِيرُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿٨٩﴾

and say: 'I am indeed the plain warner.' (89)

كَمَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَى ٱلْمُقْتَسِمِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

Just as We have bestowed from on high on those who later broke it into parts, (90)

ٱلَّذِينَ جَعَلُوا۟ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ عِضِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

and declare the Qur'ān to be a confused medley. (91)

But, by your Lord, We will call them all to account (92)	فَوَرَبِّكَ لَنَسْـَٔلَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾
for whatever they have done. (93)	عَمَّا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾
Therefore, proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God. (94)	فَٱصْدَعْ بِمَا تُؤْمَرُ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾
We shall suffice you against all who deride [this message] — all (95)	إِنَّا كَفَيْنَـٰكَ ٱلْمُسْتَهْزِءِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾
who claim that there are other deities beside God. They shall certainly come to know. (96)	ٱلَّذِينَ يَجْعَلُونَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَـٰهًا ءَاخَرَ ۚ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾
We know that you are distressed by what they say. (97)	وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ يَضِيقُ صَدْرُكَ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾
But extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, (98)	فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَكُن مِّنَ ٱلسَّـٰجِدِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾
and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you. (99)	وَٱعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ ٱلْيَقِينُ ﴿٩٩﴾

Overview

The general laws which govern life and the universe, communities and messages, right guidance and error, destiny, reckoning and reward are laws that never fail. Every passage in the *sūrah* ended with the confirmation of one of these laws or describing some aspects of it as it pertained to different situations. These laws testify to the inherent wisdom in every type of God's creation, and to the essential truth on which all creation is based.

Now in this final passage of the *sūrah* we have a statement outlining the great truth which is manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is

in between them, and the nature of the Hour which is certain to come. It is also manifested in the nature of the message preached by God's messengers and brought to its complete fulfilment in the message given to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). These are all grouped together within the framework of the great truth which manifests itself in them all. This great truth, which is essential to all creation, originates with God, the Creator of the universe: "*Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator.*" (Verse 86)

Hence the truth will establish itself, and the message that is derived from the great truth will continue along its way, and the advocate of the truth should continue his efforts, ignoring the idolaters who ridicule his message: "*Proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God.*" (Verse 94) God's laws will continue to operate without fail, relying on the great truth which originates with the All- Knowing Creator. This provides the grand finale of the *sūrah.*

Seven Verses of Special Standing

"*It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. The appointed Hour will certainly come. Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance. Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator.*" (Verses 8 5-86) The comment stating the truth which sustains the heavens and the earth, and which was the basis of their creation has great significance. It is given in a remarkable expression. Let us look at what this verse implies: "*It was only with the truth that We have created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them.*" (Verse 85) It implies that the truth is central to the design, structure and management of the universe, central to its destiny and the destiny of all that it contains.

This means that the universe has not been created as an act of idle play, nor has there been in its design and origin any element of deception, fraud or falsehood. Whatever evil there is in it, is incidental, and not an essential ingredient. Moreover, the truth is genuine in its constitution. That it is made of the constituent elements making it up is true. There is no trickery or deception. The laws that govern these elements and bring them together are also part of the truth which is firm, constant, unchanging. It is immune to any vain desire, defect or conflict. The truth is also deep in the management of the universe. It is on the basis of the truth that its affairs are conducted, according to those laws that follow the truth and justice. Besides, the truth determines its destiny. Every result occurs in accordance with its just and constant laws. Any change in the heavens and the earth is accomplished in accordance with the truth and for the truth. Every reward is based on absolute truth, without favouritism.

This provides a link between the truth which is the basis of the creation of the

heavens and the earth and the Last Hour which is most certain to come at its appointed time. This Last Hour is a part of the truth which sustains the universe. This means that the Hour itself is true and it will come to establish the truth.

"Hence overlook their faults in fair forbearance." (Verse 85) Do not allow grudges and ill-feelings to remain in your heart. The truth will certainly triumph. *"Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator."* (Verse 86) He knows who and what He has created. In fact all creation is originated by Him, which, by necessity means that the truth is of its essence, and that everything in it will return to the truth from which it originated. That truth is essential in all creation. Whatever differs with it is false and incidental. Hence it will disappear, leaving the great solid truth well established in the conscience of the whole universe.

Closely linked to this great truth is the message preached by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), and the Qur'ān revealed to him: *"We have given you seven oft-repeated verses and this sublime Qur'ān."* (Verse 87) The Arabic term, *mathānī,* translated here as *'the oft-repeated verses'* refers to the opening *sūrah,* al-Fātiĥah, composed of seven short verses. This is the more probable meaning of the term, although some commentators maintain that it refers to the seven longest *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān. These seven verses are often repeated as they are required to be read in every prayer, and they extol God's praises, which is a term derived from the same root as *mathānī.* The term, *'this sublime Qur'ān',* refers to the rest of the Qur'ānic revelations.

What is important to note here is that this statement comes immediately after mentioning the creation of the heavens and the earth on the basis of the truth and the certainty of the Last Hour. This suggests a very close link between the Qur'ān and the truth that forms the basis of the existence of the universe and the coming of the Last Hour. Indeed the Qur'ān is part of that truth, as it refers to the laws of creation, draws people's attention to them, points out the signs God has placed in their own creation and in the expanse of the universe, and urges people to recognize and respond to these. Furthermore, it points out the reasons which make people follow right guidance or go astray, the destiny of the truth and falsehood, good and evil. It then belongs to the truth and helps to illuminate it. It is as well established as the truth that forms the basis for the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is also as constant as the laws of existence and is linked to them. The Qur'ān is by no means a fleeting incidence or something that is certain to disappear. It remains influential in the direction and conduct of human life, whatever liars may say, and long as the followers of falsehood may deride it. Indeed falsehood is the incidental element that is certain to disappear.

The man who has been given these oft-repeated verses and the sublime Qur'ān which is derived from, and linked to, the great truth will not allow his eyes to hanker

after some pleasures of this life that are certain to come to an end. Nor will he worry about the destiny of stray people or care about what happens to them. He continues to follow the way of truth: *"Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things We have granted to some among them, and do not grieve on their account, but spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers, and say: "I am indeed the plain warner."* (Verses 88-89)

"Do not turn your eyes longingly to the good things..." Literally, the instruction given to the Prophet is that he must not stretch his eyes towards such enjoyments. Yet it is not the eye that is stretched, but rather the eyesight. However, the picturesque style of the Qur'ān depicts the eye itself as being stretched. It is a funny picture when we imagine it. What it means is that the Prophet should not care about the pleasures that God has allowed some people, men and women, to enjoy as part of the test they have to go through. He should not even give them much importance, or care what they do, or wish for something similar to what they enjoy. All this is of little consequence. He has the everlasting truth in those seven oft-repeated verses and the sublime Qur'ān.

When the Prophet is in Distress

This remark is sufficient to contrast the great truth and favours God's Messenger has with the little enjoyment that glitters despite its being of little consequence. This is followed by a directive to the Prophet to ignore those lost in their worldly enjoyments and to care only for the believers. For these are the ones who follow the truth which he preaches, the truth which sustains the heavens and the earth and all that is in between. The other group follow falsehood which is incidental in the universe, not part of its design.

"And do not grieve on their account." (Verse 88) You must not trouble yourself over their miserable fate which is dictated by God's justice and by the great truth. You should leave them to face the truth. On the other hand, the Prophet is told to show kindness to the believers. The Qur'ān expresses this sentence in a figurative way, telling the Prophet to *"spread the wings of your tenderness over the believers."* (Verse 88) This is an image denoting gentle treatment and good care of the believers. The Prophet is also instructed to say: *"I am indeed the plain warner."* This is the essential method of advocating the divine message. The warning is mentioned here on its own without adding the rejoinder of giving good and happy news. The warning is more suited here as the context mentions those who deride the truth, indulge in their worldly enjoyments and never contemplate the truth which is the basis of both the divine message and the existence of the universe.

"And say: 'I am indeed the plain warner.'" (Verse 89) This is the word every messenger has said to his people, including those who remain from old communities

to whom messengers were sent with a reminder similar to the one Muĥammad (peace be upon him) brought. Among such people in Arabia were some Christians and Jews who were not ready to accept the Qur'ān with complete submission. They accepted parts of it and rejected others, as their prejudice dictated. These are the ones whom God describes here as the ones who break [God's revelation] into parts.

"*Just as We have bestowed from on high on those who later broke it into parts, and declare the Qur'ān to be a confused medley. But, by your Lord, We will call them all to account for whatever they have done.*" (Verses 90-93) This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation, but the Qur'ān addresses mankind generally. These were human beings who divided the Qur'ān into parts, and they are responsible for their actions. The Qur'ān has served a clear warning on them, as did their own scriptures. The Qur'ān and the Prophet were not unfamiliar to them. God had formerly revealed scriptures to them. Therefore, they should have received the new revelations with acceptance and submission.

At this point the address turns directly to the Prophet, instructing him to continue along the way defined for him, proclaiming what God has commanded him to convey to people. Making the proclamation is described in Arabic as, *işda`*, a term which also means 'break', to denote a strong and solid stand. He must not be deterred from making such a proclamation or be deflected from his way by the unbelief of an idolater or the ridicule of those who deride his message. God will protect him against these: "*Proclaim what you are bidden and turn away from those who associate partners with God. We shall suffice you against all who deride [this message] – all who claim that there are other deities beside God. They shall certainly come to know.*" (Verses 94-96)

The Prophet is a human being who cannot help but be distressed when he hears people ascribing divinity to beings other than God, or deriding his message. He is eager to defend the truth and his message, and is upset at all the falsehood and idolatry around him. He is, therefore, instructed to glorify his Lord and praise Him. Such glorification and worship will shield him against the evil he hears. Hence he should not stop praising his Lord and extolling His glory until that which is absolutely certain, i.e. death, arrives and he is gathered to His Lord: "*We know that you are distressed by what they say. But extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you.*" (Verses 97-99)

Thus the finale of this *sūrah* is an instruction to turn away from the unbelievers, and seek God's protection. As for the unbelievers themselves, there will come to them a day when they will wish they had submitted themselves to God.

Proclaiming the truth of this faith of Islam and making clear all of its components and requirements are a necessary part of its advocacy. A strong proclamation will shake an inactive human nature and awaken placid feelings. It will also put the

argument clear for people to consider, *"so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth."* (8: 42) A soft approach which requires an advocate of Islam to declare one part of it and conceal another, so as not to offend tyrants or alienate the masses, is contrary to the correct line of advocacy of this powerful message.

A strong proclamation of this truth means neither rigidity nor rudeness, nor the adoption of an insensitive or impolite manner. Nor does a gentle approach mean too subtle a method or the concealment of any aspect of faith, cutting the Qur'ān into parts. Good proclamation means stating all the facts about the Islamic faith clearly and plainly, but with wisdom and friendly address that shows a preference for ease over hardship.

It is not the role of Islam to achieve a *modus vivendi* with the un-Islamic states and situations that prevail on earth. This was not its role when it was first revealed, and it will never be its role at any time. An un-Islamic situation is one that turns away from submission to God alone and ignores the code of living God has chosen for mankind. It seeks to derive its laws, regulations, traditions, standards and values from a source other than the divine source. Islam, on the other hand, is a message which aims to turn people from a state of *jāhiliyyah* and ignorance into submission to God alone. This is the great truth which must be proclaimed clearly by the advocates of Islam, even in the face of persecution by tyrants and rejection by the masses: *"We know that you are distressed by what they say. But extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him, and be among those who prostrate themselves before Him, and worship your Lord till the certainty [of death] comes to you."* (Verses 97-99)

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol XI

Sūrahs 16-20

Contents

Contents **2**

Transliteration Table ..... **vi**

Al-Naĥl **1**

Prologue *1*

1 God the Creator of All *4*
Overview 7
An Imminent Grave Event 7
Creation and Compassion 9
Blessings Galore 11
False Deities That Create Nothing 14

2 Divergent Outlooks and Attitudes *16*
Overview 21
Unbelief Compounded by Arrogance 22
A Wicked Campaign 23
A Perfect Contrast 26
Two Ways for Mankind 27
The Truth of Resurrection 29
Universal Submission to God's Power 32

3 The One and Only God *34*
Overview 39
All Grace Comes from God 40
Common Forms of Paganism 42
If God Were to Inflict Punishment Now 45
Clear Signs to Reflect Upon 47
The Bee and Its Honey 48
The Life Cycle 50
Incomparable Situations 52

4 Denying the Undeniable *54*
Overview 56
In the Twinkling of an Eye 57
God's Hidden Secrets 58
A Witness against Every Community 61

5 Absolute Justice *63*
Overview 67
An Order Combining All Goodness 68
Using Oaths for Deceit 70
Ideals Made Practical 72
Equal Reward for Equal Sexes 73
Attitude to Qur'ānic Recitation 74
The Nature of False Fabrication 75
Rejecting the Faith after Accepting it 78

6 Advocacy by Example *82*
Overview 84
An Example to Avoid 85
The Lawful and the Forbidden 86
The Best Method of Advocacy 89

Al-Isrā' 93

Prologue 93
A Unique Experience 96

1 God's Infinite Power 99
A Unique Journey 102
The Promise to the Israelites 103
Same Action, Same Penalty 105
Guidance in All Fields 107
Man's Hasty Characteristic 109
Personal Responsibility 110
Affluence Leading to Destruction 111
Choices and Rewards 112
No Limits to God's Grace 113

2 A Code Based on Justice 115
Overview 117
Kindness to Parents 118
Kindness to All 121
Setting Values Right 122
Adultery Outlawed 123
A Peaceful Community 125
Perfect Honesty 127
Just Weight and Measure 128
Accountability for All Actions 129

3 God: The One and Glorious 132
Overview 135
All Glorify Him 136
Deaf Ears, Sealed Hearts 137
Bringing the Dead Back to Life 140
Man's Open Enemy 142
Competition to Be Closer to God 142

4 Honour Granted to Mankind 144
Overview 147
Clear Warnings, Increased Transgression 148
An Ever-Raging Battle 150
Aspects of God's Favours 152
A Special Honour for Man 154

5 Why People Reject the Divine Message 157
Overview 164
Vain Endeavours 166
The Truth Will Triumph 168
The Qur'ānic Cure 171
Man's Scanty Knowledge 172
Only a Man and a Messenger 174
Devoid of all faculties 176
A Threat to Exterminate the Believers 177
Method of Qur'ānic Revelations 179
To Believe or Not to Believe 180

Al-Kahf 182

Prologue 182

1 A Distinctive System of Values 187
A Stern Warning for Outright Liars 192
Young Men with Clear Insight 194

Spreading Grace ... 197
The Sleepers Awake ... 198
How Many Were in the Cave? ... 201
On God We Rely ... 201
Long Was Their Sleep ... 203

2 Faith Based on Free Choice ... *204*
Overview ... 207
The Truth from Your Lord ... 208
No Rescue Available ... 210
A Gulf Too Wide ... 212
Transient Pleasures ... 214

3 Heedless of Divine Warnings ... *216*
Overview ... 219
A Record to Include All Affairs ... 219
Much Too Argumentative ... 221
Why Reject God's Guidance? ... 222

4 A Special Lesson for Moses ... *225*
Overview ... 228
Where the Two Seas Meet ... 229
First Jolting Shock ... 230
Patience Stretched to the Edge ... 232
All Made Clear and Simple ... 234

5 Accurate Historical Accounts ... *236*
Overview ... 240
The Mysterious Traveller ... 240
A Policy of Justice for All ... 243
A Barrier against Evil Forces ... 246
The Truth about Gog and Magog ... 248
Deaf and Blind ... 249
Deceptive Thoughts of Bad Action ... 250
Preparing for a Meeting with the Lord ... 252

Maryam ... **254**

Prologue ... *254*

1 God's Unbridled Will ... *257*
A Passionate Prayer Answered ... 262
A Child Is Born Against All Probability ... 264
John: A Prophet in His Own Right ... 265
Suspending the Law of Procreation ... 267
The Most Remarkable Birth in History ... 268
How Jesus Was Born ... 270
As Mary Confronts Her People ... 272
The Full Truth about Jesus ... 273

2 A Long Line of Prophets ... *276*
A Son's Passionate Appeal ... 279
Insolent Answer to a Compassionate Appeal ... 281
More Prophets ... 284
God's Door Remains Open ... 286
God's Absolute Lordship ... 287

3 Two Interlinked Lives ... *289*
Overview ... 292
The Reality of Resurrection ... 293
What Gives Better Returns ... 294

A Promise Coming True ... 296
Monstrous Claims by the Unbelievers ... 298

Ṭā Hā ... 302

Prologue ... 302

1 The Purpose of Revelation ... 304
Knowledge Going Deeper than Secrets ... 317
More Details about Moses ... 319
An Address from On High ... 321
Moses' Mission Defined ... 324
Requests Granted ... 326
Reminder of Past Favours ... 328
Moses' Mission Outlined ... 330
How to Confront a Tyrant ... 331
Calling on a Tyrant to Believe ... 333
An Argument Too Powerful ... 335
How to Avoid a Losing Argument ... 336
In Confrontation with the Sorcerers ... 338
A Tyrant's Threat ... 341
Hearts Touched by Faith ... 341
The Drowning of Pharaoh and His Army ... 343
When God Intervenes ... 344
The Price for God's Intervention ... 345
Promises Fulfilled or Broken ... 346
Justifying Deliberate Error ... 348
Temptation of the Golden Calf ... 350

2 Man's Long Drawn Battle ... 353
Overview ... 358
Reasons for Qur'ānic History ... 359
All Submit to God ... 360
Man's Lack of Purpose ... 361
Drawing the Lines of Battle ... 364
The Lessons of History ... 366
The Way to Contentment ... 367

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:

ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u

Long:

ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū

Diphthongs:

ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH 16

Al-Naĥl

(The Bees)

Prologue

Although this *sūrah* enjoys a calm rhythm with a quiet, soft beat, it nonetheless tackles several main topics within its broad framework. It makes use of several sound effects and emphatic connotations to heighten its impact. Like all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, it discusses the main topics of faith, such as God's oneness, revelation and resurrection. But it also refers to a number of secondary topics, such as the essential unity between Abraham's faith and the faith preached by Muĥammad (peace be upon them both). It outlines the true nature of God's will, and mentions the human will with regard to accepting or denying the true faith, following divine guidance or going astray. It explains the mission of God's messengers and His law that applies to those who deny them and their messages. It discusses the question of who may forbid things or leave them lawful, and the false concepts of pagan ideologies in this regard. It speaks of leaving one's community to migrate for God's sake, the persecution Muslims may suffer at the hands of unbelievers, the rejection of faith after having accepted it and what punishment any of these situations may incur. It then adds some discussion on human dealings, such as maintaining justice, ensuring kindly treatment, giving money for good purposes and the fulfilment of promises and pledges, as well as other practices that observe the principles of faith. Thus we see how the *sūrah* weaves together its interrelated subject matter.

These topics are presented within an expansive framework in which all the events take place. It includes the heavens and the earth, with the rain pouring down, the trees springing up, the day and night, the sun, the moon and the stars, the seas, the

mountains and the rivers. It is indeed this whole world with all that takes place in it as well as the life to come with all its scenery and the fates of different categories of God's creatures. It also includes the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception, and the feelings it inspires within us.

Against such a broad backdrop the *sūrah* sounds like a massive campaign aimed at profoundly influencing people's hearts and minds. It is a campaign that uses a moderate rhythm with several coherent sounds. It has nothing of the very strong beats we hear in *Sūrahs* 6 and 13, Cattle and Thunder respectively. Yet in its quiet rhythm it addresses every sense and feeling in the human soul, as well as both reason and conscience. It alerts our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our hands to touch and feel, our consciences to be alert and our minds to reflect. It portrays every aspect of the whole universe, looks at the present life and the life to come, as well as secrets of the universe and what is beyond the reach of our faculties of perception. All these are used to heighten the effect on our senses, hearts and minds. The result is a massive panorama which only a closed mind and a dead heart can ignore.

We are directed to look at the signs and messages that God has placed throughout the universe, and the great bounties and blessings He has given to mankind, and to reflect on the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the images of death, and the fate suffered by former communities. Coupled with this is a series of emotional touches that penetrate the depths of our hearts, and which refer to the different stages of human life from unborn embryos, to people in the full vigour of youth, in mid-life and in old age, as also in situations of strength and weakness, enjoying God's blessings or enduring hardship. It uses different styles and modes of expression, giving examples, drawing images, relating dialogue and presenting stories in order to make its message clear and enhance its effect.

The splendid colours that impart their shades to the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* also highlight a number of great natural phenomena, reflecting the greatness of creation, God's bounty, His knowledge and elaborate planning. These are all intermingled. The great universe created by God is subject to God's perfect knowledge and His meticulous design and planning. Yet it is meant to be a blessing for mankind, meeting not only their needs but also their wishes and expectations. Thus all needs and necessities are satisfied; adornments provided; relaxation of body and soul ensured. It is then right that people should give thanks and express their gratitude to God.

Thus throughout the *sūrah* we see God's blessings and believers expressing gratitude. There are several directives on the need to show such gratitude, coupled with various comments. Parables are given, as well as examples. The most vivid of these is that of the Prophet Abraham who is described as showing *"his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path."*

(Verse 121)

All this is given in a perfect harmony of image, connotation, expression, rhythm, issue and subject matter. We now hope to outline some of these as we discuss the *sūrah* in detail.

1
God the Creator of All

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

أَتَىٰٓ أَمْرُ ٱللَّهِ فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُوهُ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١﴾

God's judgement is bound to come; so do not seek to hurry it on. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him. (1)

يُنَزِّلُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ بِٱلرُّوحِ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦٓ أَنْ أَنذِرُوٓا۟ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّآ أَنَا۠ فَٱتَّقُونِ ﴿٢﴾

He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.' (2)

خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ تَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣﴾

He has created the heavens and the earth in truth; sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him. (3)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ فَإِذَا هُوَ خَصِيمٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٤﴾

He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious. (4)

وَٱلْأَنْعَٰمَ خَلَقَهَا ۗ لَكُمْ فِيهَا دِفْءٌ وَمَنَٰفِعُ وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

He creates cattle which give you warmth and other benefits; and from them you obtain food. (5)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا جَمَالٌ حِينَ تُرِيحُونَ وَحِينَ تَسْرَحُونَ ﴿٦﴾

And you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evening and when you take

وَتَحۡمِلُ أَثۡقَالَكُمۡ إِلَىٰ بَلَدٖ لَّمۡ تَكُونُواْ
بَٰلِغِيهِ إِلَّا بِشِقِّ ٱلۡأَنفُسِۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكُمۡ
لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٧

them out to pasture in the morning. (6)

And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. (7)

وَٱلۡخَيۡلَ وَٱلۡبِغَالَ وَٱلۡحَمِيرَ لِتَرۡكَبُوهَا
وَزِينَةٗۚ وَيَخۡلُقُ مَا لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٨

And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge. (8)

وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ قَصۡدُ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَمِنۡهَا جَآئِرٞۚ وَلَوۡ
شَآءَ لَهَدَىٰكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ٩

It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright. (9)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ لَّكُم
مِّنۡهُ شَرَابٞ وَمِنۡهُ شَجَرٞ فِيهِ تُسِيمُونَ
١٠

It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. (10)

يُنۢبِتُ لَكُم بِهِ ٱلزَّرۡعَ وَٱلزَّيۡتُونَ
وَٱلنَّخِيلَ وَٱلۡأَعۡنَٰبَ وَمِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِۗ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ
١١

And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (11)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ وَٱلشَّمۡسَ
وَٱلۡقَمَرَۖ وَٱلنُّجُومُ مُسَخَّرَٰتُۢ بِأَمۡرِهِۦٓۗ
إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَعۡقِلُونَ
١٢

And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason. (12)

وَمَا ذَرَأَ لَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُخۡتَلِفًا
أَلۡوَٰنُهُۥٓۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ
يَذَّكَّرُونَ ١٣

On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ ٱلْبَحْرَ لِتَأْكُلُوا۟ مِنْهُ لَحْمًا طَرِيًّا وَتَسْتَخْرِجُوا۟ مِنْهُ حِلْيَةً تَلْبَسُونَهَا وَتَرَى ٱلْفُلْكَ مَوَاخِرَ فِيهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed. (13)

It is He who has made the sea subservient to [His laws], so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful. (14)

وَأَلْقَىٰ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ رَوَٰسِىَ أَن تَمِيدَ بِكُمْ وَأَنْهَٰرًا وَسُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾ وَعَلَٰمَٰتٍ ۚ وَبِٱلنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way (15)

as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided. (16)

أَفَمَن يَخْلُقُ كَمَن لَّا يَخْلُقُ ۗ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? (17)

وَإِن تَعُدُّوا۟ نِعْمَةَ ٱللَّهِ لَا تُحْصُوهَآ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَغَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. (18)

وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُسِرُّونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. (19)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَا يَخْلُقُونَ شَيْـًٔا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. (20)

أَمْوَٰتٌ غَيْرُ أَحْيَآءٍ ۖ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

They are dead, not living, and they do not know

when they will be raised back to life. (21)

Overview

This first passage speaks about God's oneness. It makes use of all the tools we outlined in the Prologue: the numerous signs and indicators the great variety of God's creation exhibit, the countless favours He has bestowed on man in every stage of his life, His perfect knowledge of what is kept secret and what is left public, the life of this world and the life to come.

An Imminent Grave Event

> *God's judgement is bound to come; so do not seek to hurry it on. Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him. He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases: 'Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Me.'* (Verses 1-2)

The unbelievers in Makkah used to ask the Prophet to hasten their punishment in this life, or to hasten the punishment God has in store for them in the life to come. As time passed with no punishment being inflicted, they urged the Prophet more and more to hasten it, demonstrating that they could not care less. They thought that Muḥammad was warning them against something that would never happen. His only aim, as they imagined, was to get them to believe what he said and accept his faith. They could not understand God's wisdom in giving them time. Nor could they appreciate His grace. They would not reflect on the signs He has placed everywhere in the universe around them. Nor would they reflect on His revelations in the Qur'ān which address people's minds and hearts. That is after all a much more effective address than punishment and suffering. It is more worthy of man whom God has honoured when He gave him a mind, feelings and an independent will to study, reflect and make free choices.

The opening of the *sūrah* is very decisive: "*God's judgement is bound to come.*" It implies that the command has been given, and that God's will has been made. This is sufficient for the judgement to come to pass at the time appointed for it by God Himself. "*So do not seek to hurry it on.*" God's laws operate in accordance with His will. They cannot be hurried, nor can they be postponed to satisfy people's wishes. The statement here tells us that God's judgement, to resurrect people or to inflict His

punishment on those who deserve it, has been made. It will come to pass at the time God has determined. There will be no hurrying and no delay.

The decisive nature of this statement is especially effective, even on those who try to wear a careless face. Moreover, it expresses the truth. Whatever God wills is bound to take place. The fact that He has made a judgement means that it is carried out, and that it becomes part of reality. Hence, there is neither an overstatement of facts nor a deviation from them.

Their beliefs, associating partners with God, and all the false concepts that they formulate on that basis, are far removed from God's true nature: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything people may associate with Him."* (Verse 1) Beliefs that ascribe divinity to anyone other than God all lack foundation. They are the result of degenerate and disgraceful thinking.

God, who does not abandon mankind to their erring beliefs and baseless concepts, sends down from on high what gives them life and saves them: *"He sends down angels with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] by His will on such of His servants as He pleases."* (Verse 2) This is God's greatest favour and blessing. He not only sends down water from the sky to make the earth quicken and to give physical life, but He also sends down the angels with His divine inspiration. The Arabic expression uses the word *rah,* which also means 'spirit', for inspiration. This adds connotations of life within people's souls, consciences and feelings, and within society so as to preserve them all from corruption. This is the first thing that God sends down to people from on high, and it is His most important blessing and bounty. God's purest creation, the angels, are sent down to His chosen servants, the prophets, giving them a message that is summed up in these words: *"Warn [mankind] that there is no deity other than Me: so fear Ale."* (Verse 2)

The emphasis here is on God's oneness, which is the central point of the Islamic faith. It breathes life into people's souls. It is also the parting point between the way which gives life and the way which destroys it. A soul that does not believe in God's oneness is lost, confused, pulled in all directions by diverse and contradictory concepts and beliefs. It cannot move with its whole being towards a definite goal. Use of the term *rib* in reference to God's message implies all these. Indeed it provides a fitting reference to them at the beginning of this *sūrah* which speaks of the great variety of God's favours. It is the top of all these blessings, without which all others lose their value. Indeed man does not make a proper use or derive proper benefit from anything on earth unless his soul comes alive with the great blessing of faith.

The warning is given a special mention so as to appear to be the central point of the message, because the larger part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers who deny God's blessing, prohibit what God has made lawful, violate their covenant with

God and reject faith altogether. This makes the warning more appropriate at the outset, coupled with a call to fear God and avoid incurring His displeasure.

Creation and Compassion

The *sūrah* then begins to outline the aspects of creation that emphasize the oneness of the Creator, and the aspects of blessing that confirm that it is God alone who bestows them all. These are revealed in groups that follow one another sequentially, starting with the creation of the heavens and the earth, and moving to the creation of man: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in truth; sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him. He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.*" (Verses 3-4)

"*He has created the heavens and the earth in truth.*" (Verse 3) The truth is at the core of their creation and their existence. Indeed the truth is an essential element in managing their affairs and the affairs of all creation. Nothing is created in vain or idle play. Everything derives its existence on the basis of the truth, and leads eventually to the truth. "*Sublimely exalted is He above anything people may associate with Him.*" (Verse 3) He is exalted above their pagan beliefs and above any creatures they associate with Him. He is indeed the One who has created the heavens and the earth and all beings that live in them. No creature is worthy of being His partner. Indeed He has no partners.

"*He creates man out of a drop of sperm; yet this same man is openly contentious.*" (Verse 4) The gulf is so huge between the origin and the end, between the worthless sperm and the man in open contention. He disputes with his Lord and denies Him. He argues about His existence or His oneness. Yet the way the verse runs leaves no gap between the point of origin, the drop of sperm, and the grown up man engaged in dispute and contention. This shows the contrast to be complete and the gulf too wide. Such brevity is intended for enhanced effect.

Against the expanse of the heavens and the earth man stands out. Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions some of the creation God has made subservient to man, beginning with cattle: "*He creates cattle which give you warmth and other benefits; and from them you obtain food. And you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evening and when you take them out to pasture in the morning. And they carry your loads to distant lands, which you could not otherwise reach without much hardship to yourselves. Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful. And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show. And He creates other things of which you have no knowledge.*" (Verses 5-8)

In numerous situations that are similar to the environment where the Qur'ān was revealed, and in any agricultural set-up, which remains the principal one in the

whole world, the value of cattle is fully appreciated. Indeed mankind cannot survive without cattle. The better known cattle in Arabia at the time were camels, cows, sheep and goats. On the other hand, horses, mules and asses were for riding and show. They were not meant to be eaten. Indeed there is disagreement among scholars on the permissibility of eating the meat of these animals. Imām Abū Ĥanīfah relies on this verse which defines the uses of these animals to say that horses may not be eaten. The majority of scholars, however, maintain that they are permissible to eat. In this they rely on authentic *aĥādīth* and on practical *sunnah.*

As the Qur'ān refers to this aspect of God's blessings, it refers to the practical needs it fulfils in human life. Cattle give warmth as we use their hide, wool and hair. These have even further benefits. We also obtain milk and meat from cattle. We are reminded that cattle provide food for people and carry their loads when they travel. Without cattle, people would until recently have found great difficulty in reaching their destination. At the same time we enjoy their beauty, particularly when we drive them home in the evening and when we take them to pasture in the morning. Just looking at them moving along, strong and full of vigour, gives us pleasure. Rural people are better able than town dwellers to appreciate the meanings to which these verses refer.

Horses, mules and asses also meet other human needs. They are used as mounts to ride or, they are put on show for their beauty: "*And [He creates] horses, mules and asses for you to ride or put on show.*" (Verse 8) Here we encounter a particularly interesting point in the Islamic outlook of life, whereby beauty constitutes an important aspect. God's blessing does not merely satisfy essential needs, such as food, drink and mounts. It also satisfies healthy desires beyond basic needs. Here we find satisfaction of the sense that enjoys beauty and seeks pleasure, and also satisfies human feelings that are more sublime than animal desires and needs.

"*Your Lord is certainly Most Compassionate, Merciful.*" (Verse 7) This comment refers in particular to the carrying of heavy loads to distant lands which people could not reach otherwise without enduring much hardship. Thus the comment directs our attention to the great blessings that God has given us by creating cattle, and to the great mercy accompanying this blessing.

"*And He creates things of which you have no knowledge.*" (Verse 8) This sentence comments on the creation of cattle, horses, mules and asses and the different uses to which they are put and the benefits they provide. Thus it invites people's imagination to look beyond their immediate environment and the time in which they live. Beyond what exists at a particular location and in a particular time there are other forms and types of life. God wants people to expect this so as to broaden their vision. He also wants them to accept such other forms of life when they are available. They must not refuse to benefit by such new types, saying that they will only use the

cattle, horses, mules and asses their fathers used. Similarly, no one should be so rigid as to say that since the Qur'ān only mentioned these, no other form of transport can be used.

Islam is open minded and flexible. It equips its followers with the ability to use all potentials and resources that are available at any time. The Qur'ān thus prepares people's minds and hearts to receive whatever God creates and science discovers or produces in the future. A proper Islamic conscience is always ready to accept any new remarkable addition to God's creation or to scientific discovery. Over the years many new means of riding and carrying loads have been added, as well as many objects of beauty. None of these were known to people when the Qur'ān was revealed. There will be many more which are unknown to us. The Qur'ān prepares us to accept these without difficulty by stating that God *"creates things of which you have no knowledge."* (Verse 8)

Within the context of carriage, riding and travelling to reach certain destinations on earth, the *sūrah* adds other objectives which we can reach by travelling along mental ways. Such is the road to faith, which is a straight way that has no turnings. It does not go beyond the defined goal. There are other ways that do not lead to the same destination. Now God has undertaken to make the way leading to Him clear and well defined. He points it out through the signs He has placed in the universe and through His messengers: *"It is God alone who points to the right path. Yet many may swerve from it. Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright."* (Verse 9)

The right path is the straight one which does not bend here or there. It goes directly to its destination, allowing for no deviation. A swerving path may lead away from the destination, or may go beyond it, without stopping at it.

"Had He so willed, He would have guided you all aright." (Verse 9) But it has been His will that He creates man with the dual propensity to follow His guidance or to go astray, and to let him choose to follow either way. Hence, some people follow the right path and some follow swerving ways. Neither type goes beyond God's will which has determined to allow man free choice.

Blessings Galore

The second group of great signs in God's creation and His unlimited blessings then follow:

> *It is He who sends down water from the skies. From it you drink, and with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle. And with it He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all other kinds of fruit. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think.* (Verses 10-11)

Water pours down from the sky in accordance with laws that God has placed in nature and set into operation. It is these laws that control the running of such water and bring about its outcome in accordance with God's will. Indeed He initiates every movement and determines every result by a special act of will. The water is mentioned here as an aspect of God's grace. *"From it you drink."* So it has the quality of being suitable for drinking. Its other quality follows: *"And with it grow the plants on which you pasture your cattle."* (Verse 10) This reference fits in well with the earlier mention of cattle. It provides harmony between the pasture and cattle. A reference is also made to plants which serve as food for man, including olives, dates and grapes, and many other types of fruit.

"Surely in this there is a sign for people who think." (Verse 11) There is certainly a sign in the way God has designed the universe and set its laws so that they fit human life. Man would not have been able to survive on this planet had the laws of nature been unsuitable for his nature and life needs. That man is placed on the surface of the earth has not come about by blind coincidence. Nor is it a matter of coincidence that proportions and relativity between our planet and other planets and stars are as they are, or that climatic conditions are so suitable to support human life and satisfy man's needs and desires.

The people who think are the ones who understand that there is elaborate and wise planning in the universe. They relate a natural phenomenon such as rain and its effects of initiating life and helping plants and trees to grow and yield their fruit to the higher laws of existence and the evidence pointing to the Creator who has no partners. They appreciate that everything is part of His planning and under His management. The careless see such phenomena every morning and every evening, winter and summer, but it stirs nothing in their minds. They do not feel any urge to try to identify the One who has designed this unique and remarkable system.

A third group of signs are then added: *"And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon to be subservient to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. In this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 12)

Another aspect of the perfect design of creation and the blessings bestowed on mankind at the same time is the creation of the night, day, sun, moon and stars. All these help to meet our needs on earth. We do not say that they have been created for man, but they are made to serve his existence and to benefit him. The phenomenon of the succession of day and night has a profound effect on human life. If anyone is in doubt, let him imagine a day that is not followed by a night, or a night not followed by a day, and reflect what that would mean to the life of human beings, animals and plants on earth.

The same applies to the sun and moon. They have a direct bearing on life on earth,

its origin, maintenance and growth. Moreover, *"all the stars are subservient to His command."* (Verse 12) They serve the interests of man and other beings known only to God. All this is, again, part of the wise and elaborate planning that includes everything in the universe. The harmony and balance between all universal laws are appreciated by people who use their reason and contemplate what lies beyond these laws: *"In this there are signs for people who use their reason."* (Verse 12)

Yet another group of blessings that God bestows on mankind is also mentioned: *"On the earth He has fashioned for you objects of various hues; surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed."* (Verse 13)

What God has created and placed on the earth is fantastic in its nature and diversity. We need only to mention the metals that are available in the soil. These support the life of whole communities during different periods. It is sufficient to cast a glance at these hidden resources to appreciate the great blessing to which the *sūrah* refers. These are kept for mankind until they have achieved sufficient progress to make use of these resources when they are needed. Whenever it is said that a great treasure has been exhausted, another is discovered. All this is part of the provision God has placed at man's service. *"Surely in this there is a sign for people who take heed."* (Verse 13) Such people do not forget that it is God's able hand that has kept these treasures and resources hidden for them until they are able to make use of them.

We are then alerted to another group of God's creation which is the sea and its animal life. Its water is salty and cannot be used for drinking or irrigation. Yet it includes a fantastic range of blessings that God bestows on man: *"It is He who has made the sea subservient to (His laws), so that you may eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear. You see the ships ploughing through the waves, so that you may be able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful."* (Verse 14)

The sea and its life forms also meet many human needs and satisfy various human desires. From it we obtain fresh fish and other species to eat. In it we find pearls and corals which we use as ornaments. Some communities continue to use shells as personal ornaments or to make artefacts from them. The reference to ships also hints at the element of beauty and its satisfaction, not merely the use of shipping for transport. *"You see the ships ploughing through the waves."* (Verse 14) The expression here draws our attention to the beauty we see everywhere in the universe. Such beauty stands out just as the object we are contemplating is seen to serve a definite purpose and meet a felt need. We only need to appreciate such beauty and not confine ourselves to needs that must be satisfied.

The verses here draw our attention to the fact that we should seek what God has given us of provision and bounty, and to our duty of giving thanks to Him for having placed food, ornament and beauty for us in the salty sea: *"so that you may be*

able to go forth in quest of His bounty, and that you may be grateful." (Verse 14)

The last group of God's numerous blessings mentioned in this passage refers to different aspects of God's creation: *"He has placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with you; and rivers and paths so that you may find your way, as well as landmarks. By the stars, too, are people guided."* (Verses 15-16)

Modern science gives us several theories which explain the formation of mountains, but it does not mention their function to which the Qur'ān refers. The most important of these contradictory theories is that the surface of the earth shrank as it cooled down after its initial burning stage. This then led to the formation of valleys, hills and mountains on its surface. Yet the Qur'ān mentions that the mountains ensure that the earth remains well balanced. This function is not given due attention by scientists.

In contrast with the firm mountains, our attentions are drawn to the running rivers and the roads we follow. There is a direct link between the rivers and the mountains in this scene. Many a river starts at a mountain, where rain-water gathers. The roads also have a direct link with both mountains and rivers. They provide another link to the general atmosphere of movement, cattle, mounts and transport. Juxtaposed with the roads are the landmarks which people use to ensure that they are following the right way. These include hills, mountains and open spaces, as well as the stars which guide travellers on sea and dry land alike.

False Deities That Create Nothing

Now that the aspects of creation, blessings and great design have been completed in this first passage of the *sūrah,* a comment follows to emphasize the point at issue, namely the oneness of God who is sublimely exalted above all those beings people associate as partners with Him:

> *Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create? Will you not, then, think? Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful. God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open. Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. They are dead, not living, and they do not know when they will be raised back to life.* (Verses 17-21)

This comment comes at the most opportune time. We are all ready to accept the point it makes: *"Is He, then, who creates like one that cannot create?"* (Verse 17) Could there be more than one answer? No! Of course not! They are not alike. Is it possible that a human being can equate God who has created all these with false deities that create nothing? "*Will you not, then, think?* (Verse 17) The point needs no more than a

little reflection and the whole case is set to rest.

The *sūrah* mentions a great variety of God's blessings. Now it comments on this, saying: *"Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them."* (Verse 18) If people are unable even to compute God's blessings, they are much less likely to be able to thank God enough for them. Indeed most blessings remain unnoticed by man, because they are too familiar to him. He is thus oblivious to their importance. He only notices the importance of a blessing that he has taken for granted when it is withdrawn. We need only remember how oblivious we are of the importance of different organs and systems in our bodies. We only remember this when we are ill, because our organs are not functioning properly. Nevertheless, God's forgiveness ensures that man's shortcomings and lack of gratitude are overlooked: *"God is indeed Much Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 18)

The Creator knows full well what He has created, what is apparent of it and what is concealed: *"God knows all that you keep secret and all that you bring into the open."* (Verse 19) How can they equate Him with their alleged deities who neither create nor have any knowledge. They are indeed dead, having no life whatsoever. Indeed they have no feelings: *"Those beings that some people invoke beside God cannot create anything; they themselves are created. They are dead, not living, and they do not know when they will be raised back to life."* (Verses 20-21)

The reference here to the resurrection implies that the Creator must, for certain, know its time, because resurrection is complementary to creation. It is then that the living receive their reward for what they have done in life. The deities that do not know when their worshippers are raised to life are only a mockery. A true Creator determines when to resurrect His creation.

2
Divergent Outlooks and Attitudes

إِلَـٰهُكُمْ إِلَـٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ ۚ فَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ قُلُوبُهُم مُّنكِرَةٌ وَهُم مُّسْتَكْبِرُونَ
﴿٢٢﴾

Your God is the One God. Those who deny the life to come have hearts that persist in denying the truth. They are full of arrogance. (22)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ
وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

God surely knows what they keep secret and all that they bring into the open. He does not love those who are arrogant. (23)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُم مَّاذَآ أَنزَلَ رَبُّكُمْ ۙ قَالُوٓاْ
أَسَـٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Whenever they are asked, 'What has your Lord bestowed from on high?' they say: 'Fables of the ancients!' (24)

لِيَحْمِلُوٓاْ أَوْزَارَهُمْ كَامِلَةً يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ ۙ
وَمِنْ أَوْزَارِ ٱلَّذِينَ يُضِلُّونَهُم بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ ۗ

On the Day of Resurrection they shall bear the full weight of their burdens, as well as some of the burdens of those ignorant ones whom they have led astray. Evil is the burden they shall bear. (25)

أَلَا سَآءَ مَا يَزِرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Those who lived before them also schemed. But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive. (26)

قَدْ مَكَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ فَأَتَى ٱللَّهُ بُنْيَـٰنَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْقَوَاعِدِ فَخَرَّ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلسَّقْفُ مِن فَوْقِهِمْ وَأَتَىٰهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: 'Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?' Those who are endowed with knowledge will say: 'Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, (27)

ثُمَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ يُخْزِيهِمْ وَيَقُولُ أَيْنَ شُرَكَآءِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمْ تُشَـٰٓقُّونَ فِيهِمْ ۚ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ إِنَّ ٱلْخِزْىَ ٱلْيَوْمَ وَٱلسُّوٓءَ عَلَى ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves.' These will then offer their submission, saying: 'We have done no wrong!' [They will be answered]: 'Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing! (28)

ٱلَّذِينَ تَتَوَفَّىٰهُمُ ٱلْمَلَـٰٓئِكَةُ ظَالِمِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ ۖ فَأَلْقَوُا۟ ٱلسَّلَمَ مَا كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ مِن سُوٓءٍ ۚ بَلَىٰٓ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide.' Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant! (29)

فَٱدْخُلُوٓا۟ أَبْوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ فَلَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

But when the God-fearing are asked: 'What has your Lord revealed?' they say: 'All that is good.' For those who do good in this world, good reward [is assured]; but far better is their abode in the hereafter. Blessed is the dwelling place of the God-fearing. (30)

۞ وَقِيلَ لِلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوْا۟ مَاذَآ أَنزَلَ رَبُّكُمْ ۚ قَالُوا۟ خَيْرًا ۗ لِّلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا۟ فِى هَـٰذِهِ

ٱلدُّنۡيَا حَسَنَةٞۚ وَلَدَارُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ خَيۡرٞۚ وَلَنِعۡمَ
دَارُ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٣٠

The Gardens of Eden they will enter; through which running waters flow. There they shall have everything they desire. Thus shall God reward the God-fearing: (31)

جَنَّٰتُ عَدۡنٖ يَدۡخُلُونَهَا تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا
ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۖ لَهُمۡ فِيهَا مَا يَشَآءُونَۚ كَذَٰلِكَ
يَجۡزِي ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٣١

those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity, saying: 'Peace be upon you! Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life].' (32)

ٱلَّذِينَ تَتَوَفَّىٰهُمُ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ طَيِّبِينَۙ
يَقُولُونَ سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ
بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٣٢

Are they [who disbelieve] awaiting anything but for the angels to appear before them, or for your Lord's command to come? Those before them did the same. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves. (33)

هَلۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّآ أَن تَأۡتِيَهُمُ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ
أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَ أَمۡرُ رَبِّكَۚ كَذَٰلِكَ فَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ
مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۚ وَمَا ظَلَمَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ وَلَٰكِن
كَانُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ٣٣

The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (34)

فَأَصَابَهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتُ مَا عَمِلُواْ وَحَاقَ بِهِم
مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ٣٤

Those who associate partners with God say, 'Had God so willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped any other than Him, nor would we have declared anything forbidden without a commandment from Him.' Those before them said the same. Are the messengers bound to do anything other than to clearly deliver the message? (35)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُواْ لَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَا
عَبَدۡنَا مِن دُونِهِۦ مِن شَيۡءٖ نَّحۡنُ وَلَآ
ءَابَآؤُنَا وَلَا حَرَّمۡنَا مِن دُونِهِۦ مِن شَيۡءٖۚ

كَذَٰلِكَ فَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۚ فَهَلۡ
عَلَى ٱلرُّسُلِ إِلَّا ٱلۡبَلَٰغُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ٣٥

Indeed, We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.' Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance, while others were inevitably doomed by their error. Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth. (36)

وَلَقَدۡ بَعَثۡنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٖ رَّسُولًا أَنِ
ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱجۡتَنِبُواْ ٱلطَّٰغُوتَۖ فَمِنۡهُم
مَّنۡ هَدَى ٱللَّهُ وَمِنۡهُم مَّنۡ حَقَّتۡ عَلَيۡهِ
ٱلضَّلَٰلَةُۚ فَسِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ٣٦

However eager you may be to show them the right way, [know that] God does not bestow His guidance upon any whom He judges to have gone astray. They shall have none to support them. (37)

إِن تَحۡرِصۡ عَلَىٰ هُدَىٰهُمۡ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي
مَن يُضِلُّۖ وَمَا لَهُم مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ٣٧

They most solemnly swear by God that God never raises the dead to life. Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself, even though most people do not know it. (38)

وَأَقۡسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ جَهۡدَ أَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡ لَا يَبۡعَثُ
ٱللَّهُ مَن يَمُوتُۚ بَلَىٰ وَعۡدًا عَلَيۡهِ حَقًّا
وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٨

[Thus] He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars. (39)

لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلَّذِي تَخۡتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ وَلِيَعۡلَمَ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ كَٰذِبِينَ ٣٩

Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, Be'— and it is. (40)

إِنَّمَا قَوۡلُنَا لِشَيۡءٍ إِذَآ أَرَدۡنَٰهُ أَن نَّقُولَ لَهُۥ
كُن فَيَكُونُ ٤٠

As for those who forsake their homes for the sake of God after having suffered injustice, We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life; yet better still is their reward in the life to come, if they but knew it. (41)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُواْ فِي ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا ظُلِمُواْ

لَنُبَوِّئَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا حَسَنَةٗۖ وَلَأَجۡرُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ أَكۡبَرُۚ لَوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٤١

[Such reward is granted to] those who, having been patient in adversity, place their trust in their Lord. (42)

ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُواْ وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ٤٢

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مِن قَبۡلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالٗا نُّوحِيٓ إِلَيۡهِمۡۚ فَسۡـَٔلُوٓاْ أَهۡلَ ٱلذِّكۡرِ إِن كُنتُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٤٣

The messengers We sent before you were but men whom We inspired. So, if you have not realized this, ask those who are endowed with knowledge. (43)

بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَٱلزُّبُرِۗ وَأَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ٱلذِّكۡرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٤٤

[We sent such messengers] with clear proofs and divine books, and We have now bestowed on you the reminder so that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them, and that they may take thought. (44)

أَفَأَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مَكَرُواْ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن يَخۡسِفَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ٤٥

Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive? (45)

أَوۡ يَأۡخُذَهُمۡ فِي تَقَلُّبِهِمۡ فَمَا هُم بِمُعۡجِزِينَ ٤٦

Or that He will not suddenly take them to task in the midst of their comings and goings; for they can never frustrate His design? (46)

أَوۡ يَأۡخُذَهُمۡ عَلَىٰ تَخَوُّفٖ فَإِنَّ رَبَّكُمۡ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٌ ٤٧

Or that He will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive? Surely your Lord is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. (47)

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ مَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ مِن شَيۡءٖ

Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? (48)

يَتَفَيَّؤُاْ ظِلَٰلُهُۥ عَنِ ٱلۡيَمِينِ وَٱلشَّمَآئِلِ سُجَّدٗا لِّلَّهِ وَهُمۡ دَٰخِرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

For, before God prostrates itself every living thing in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels. They do not behave in arrogant defiance. (49)

وَلِلَّهِ يَسۡجُدُ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مِن دَآبَّةٖ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَهُمۡ لَا يَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They fear their Lord, who is high above them, and do as they are bidden. (50)

يَخَافُونَ رَبَّهُم مِّن فَوۡقِهِمۡ وَيَفۡعَلُونَ مَا يُؤۡمَرُونَ ۩ ﴿٥٠﴾

Overview

The first passage of this *sūrah* outlined a great many aspects of God's marvellous creation and His blessings which He bestows on His servants, and His knowledge of what is open and what is secret. The other beings which the unbelievers allege to have a share of divinity do not create anything; indeed they themselves are created. They are devoid of knowledge, dead and unlikely ever to come to life. They do not know when their servants are resurrected in order to face the reckoning. This clearly shows that they cannot be deities worthy of worship. Indeed it shows that all beliefs based on a multiplicity of deities are false. This was the first issue raised by the *sūrah* in connection with the question of God's oneness, with an added reference to the question of resurrection.

The present passage picks up where the last one left off, starting a new round which begins with a clear statement of God's oneness. It makes clear that those who do not believe in the Day of Judgement have hearts that are hardened in their denial of the truth. Blindness has become an essential characteristic that prevents them from admitting the truth to which signs clearly testify. Their arrogance stops them from acknowledging what they feel to be the truth and accepting its message. The passage concludes with a touching scene in which we see all shadows prostrating themselves, together with every living thing in the heavens and earth, as well as the angels, to God. These are free of arrogance. They fear God and obey His command without dissent. This scene of complete obedience contrasts with that of the hardened

unbelievers arrogantly denying the truth at the beginning of the passage.

In between these two scenes, the *sūrah* reports what the arrogant unbelievers say about revelations and about the Qur'ān. They allege that all this is merely fables of the ancients. It also reports their claims about the reasons for their associating partners with God, their prohibition of what God has made lawful, alleging that God wants them to do what is evil and that He accepts it from them. It quotes their assertions about resurrection and judgement, as they emphatically swear that God does not bring back to life anyone who has died. It answers all their claims, portraying them as they face their death, and as they are brought back to life disclaiming their false assertions.

The *sūrah* also paints scenes of the fate of earlier communities which denied the truth like the unbelievers do. It warns them against being seized by God at any moment of the day or night, when they are totally unaware, either moving around on earth, or feeling apprehensive, expecting God's punishment to overwhelm them. In this passage the *sūrah* also reports what the believers say, and what they expect when they are gathered to God, and what awaits them of goodly reward on the Day of Judgement. The passage concludes with a scene of total serenity and complete obedience demonstrated by all, including shadows, living creatures and angels, in heaven and on earth.

Unbelief Compounded by Arrogance

> *Your God is the One God. Those who deny the life to come have hearts that persist in denying the truth. They are full of arrogance. God surely knows what they keep secret and all that they bring into the open. He does not love those who are arrogant.* (Verses 22-23)

The *sūrah* provides a clear link between believing in God's oneness and believing in the Day of Judgement. Indeed it makes the one evidence for the other, as worshipping God alone is closely associated with belief in resurrection and reward. It is in the hereafter that God's wisdom and justice are clearly and fully manifested.

"*Your God is the One God.*" *All* that the *sūrah* has outlined of great signs of creation and blessing, and also of the signs of His perfect knowledge, lead to this clear truth. *A* truth with manifest effects seen in the harmony and complementarity of the laws of nature governing the universe.

Those who reject this great truth, and do not believe in the hereafter, are not short of proof and evidence. The fault lies rather with them and their own hardened natures. Their hearts persistently deny the very signs they see. They are arrogant, unwilling to accept clear evidence, submit to God, and believe in His Messenger.

God who has created them knows this. Indeed He knows what they keep secret and what they do and say in the open, and He does not like what He knows of them. They are full of arrogance. "*He does not love those who are arrogant.*" (Verse 23) An arrogant nature is unlikely to be convinced or to submit to the truth. It is their arrogance that makes them unloved by God.

> *Whenever they are asked, 'What has your Lord bestowed from on high?' they say: Fables of the ancients!' On the Day of Resurrection they shall bear the full weight of their burdens, as well as some of the burdens of those ignorant ones whom they have led astray. Evil is the burden they shall bear.* (Verses 24-25)

Those arrogant people with hardened, unresponsive hearts are asked, *'What has your Lord bestowed from on high?'* (Verse 24) But they do not give the direct and normal answer, quoting some verses from the Qur'ān or stating their import without distortion to prove their honest reporting even though they may not believe in it. They give instead a dishonest answer, saying, *'Fables of the ancients!'* (Verse 24) A fable is defined as 'a story not founded on fact, a legend or myth.' Thus do they describe the Qur'ān which addresses minds and souls, deals with life situations, human behaviour, social interactions as well as people's conditions, past, present and future. They only describe it as such because it relates some parts of the history of earlier communities. Their denial of the truth thus leads them to bear the burden of their own sins, as well as a portion of the burdens of those whom they lead astray, preventing them from believing in God and the Qur'ān, keeping them unaware of its truth and nature. The Qur'ān describes these sins as heavy burdens. Indeed, they are foul burdens. They weigh heavily on people's souls like loads weigh heavily on their backs. They trouble hearts like burdens trouble the body. Indeed they are worse and even more troublesome than physical burdens, heavy as these may be.

A Wicked Campaign

Ibn Abī Ĥātim reports: "The elders of the Quraysh met for consultation. Some of them said: 'Muĥammad is a man of fine argument. If he speaks to a man, he soon gets hold of him. Therefore, select some of your most honourable people, whose lines of ancestry are well known. Let them take their positions at every route into Makkah, at one or two day's distance, so that they turn away anyone who comes to meet Muĥammad.' People did just that. If any of them met a man sent by his people to find out about Muĥammad, he would introduce himself to him, telling him his position among his people. He would then offer to tell him about the Prophet, saying, 'He is a liar who has been followed only by slaves and ignorant people, and those who are good for nothing. All wise men among his people have taken a clear

stand against him.' This would be enough to turn many people away. It is to this that God refers in the verse stating: *"Whenever they are asked, 'What has your Lord bestowed from on high?' they say: Fables of the ancients!'"* (Verse 24)

"On the other hand, if the man sent to find out about the Prophet is one to whom God has given insight, he would say: 'I am certainly a bad intelligence gatherer if, having reached so close, I am to return now without meeting this man and listening to what he says in order to give my people a true picture of him.' He would insist on going into Makkah, where he would meet the believers and where they would tell him that all that Muĥammad says is good and fine."

This was a well orchestrated propaganda campaign mounted by the Quraysh against Islam. A similar campaign is organized in every generation by arrogant people who do not wish to submit to the truth despite all the evidence supporting it. Indeed the arrogant among the Quraysh were not the first to deny the truth or to scheme against it. The *sūrah* draws for them a picture of the fate suffered by schemers before them, and their destiny in the hereafter. It shows them what they endure from the moment their souls part with their bodies until they receive their punishment in the life to come. All this is depicted in vivid images, following the inimitable style of the Qur'ān:

> *Those who lived before them also schemed. But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive. Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: 'Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?' Those who are endowed with knowledge will say: 'Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves.' These will then offer their submission, saying: 'We have done no wrong!' [They will be answered]: 'Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing! Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide.' Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant!* (Verses 26-29)

"*Those who lived before them also schemed.*" (Verse 26) The *sūrah* paints their scheming as though it was a building with foundations, corners, ceiling and roof, which implies that it was a massive and well designed plot. But nothing can stand up to God's might: "*But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above.*" (Verse 26) This paints a picture of total destruction, overtaking them from beneath their feet and above their heads. The foundations supporting the building collapse, and the roof falls down burying them. "*And suffering befell them from where they did not perceive.*" (Verse 26) Thus the building they very carefully constructed to provide them with shelter becomes their burial ground as they are overwhelmed from every direction. Little did they think that what they built for

shelter would become the instrument of their own destruction.

The image we have here is one of complete destruction. This is the perfect irony directed at those who scheme and plot against God's message, believing that their scheming is too strong and elaborate to ever be foiled. But God's own scheming is far too weighty for them to oppose. This scene is often repeated. The Quraysh were not the first to take this stand, nor would they be the last. On the other hand, God's message goes on along its clear way, no matter what the plotters devise. People turn around from time to time, and they see that highly effective scene portrayed by the Qur'ān: *"But God struck their edifice at its foundation, and its roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them from where they did not perceive."* (Verse 26)

All this takes place in the present life on earth. But there is something else beyond: *"Then, on the Day of Resurrection He will cover them with ignominy, and say: 'Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?"* (Verse 27) This is now a scene of the hereafter, where we see the plotters stand up in shame, and when their arrogance and scheming is no longer of any use to them. They stand in front of the One to whom all creation and all authority belong. He will rebuke them, asking: *"Where are those alleged partners of Mine concerning whom you have engaged in dispute?"* You were keen to dispute with My Messenger and his followers who acknowledged My oneness, claiming that your false deities were My partners. Where are they now?

In their shame and humiliation, they will remain silent. On the other hand, those endowed with knowledge, angels, messengers and true believers, whom God permits to speak, will say plainly and forcefully: *"Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers."* (Verse 27)

Now they are taken a step backwards, and described at the moment they face death. *"Ignominy and misery shall this day befall the unbelievers, those whom the angels have gathered in death while they are still wronging themselves."* (Verses 27-28) The angels are gathering their souls which they themselves have wronged by depriving themselves of the light and reassurance of faith. By their own actions they have brought about their own ruin, and now they have to suffer punishment in hell.

The *sūrah* paints their position at the moment of their death, when they are still close to earth and to all the falsehood they asserted here, and all their evil scheming: *"These will then offer their submission, saying: 'We have done no wrong!'"* (Verse 28) Those who used to revel in their arrogance are now submissive, unable to contend. They offer complete submission! But at the same time they lie. This may be an aspect of their plotting in this life as they submissively say: *"We have done no wrong!"*

Yet the answer comes to them straightaway from God who knows their true reality: *"Yes, indeed. God has full knowledge of all that you were doing!"* (Verse 28) There

is no room now for lies or deception. They have to suffer the fate of all arrogant peoples who deny the truth: *"Enter the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant!"* (Verse 29)

A Perfect Contrast

On the other side stand the God-fearing. Their picture contrasts fully with that of the arrogant unbelievers, in origin and destiny:

> *But when the God fearing are asked: 'What has your Lord revealed?' they say: All that is good.' For those who do good in this world, good reward [is assured]; but far better is their abode in the hereafter. Blessed is the dwelling place of the God fearing. The Gardens of Eden they will enter; through which running waters flow. There they shall have everything they desire. Thus shall God reward the God fearing; those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity, saying: 'Peace be upon you! Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life.]'* (Verses 30-32)

The God-fearing realize that the very essence of the divine message and all that God has revealed of directives, commandments and laws is good and perfect. Hence when they are questioned about what God has revealed from on high, they sum it up in a word: *"All that is good."* They go on to outline this good that God has revealed, according to what they have learnt from God's revelations: *"For those who do good in this world, good reward is assured."* (Verse 30) They enjoy a good life and have a good position. However, *"Far better is their abode in the hereafter."* It is certainly better than all there is in this present life. *"Blessed is the dwelling place of the God-fearing."* (Verse 30) More details are now given about this abode of the hereafter, which is shown to be a goodly one indeed: *"The Gardens of Eden they will enter, through which running waters flow."* (Verse 31) In such a place and with such resources they have comforts and luxuries in abundance. *"There they shall have everything they desire."* (Verse 31) They will want for nothing. Every good thing is provided without any limit on what God grants them. *"Thus shall God reward the God-fearing."* (Verse 31)

Again the *sūrah* takes a step backwards to show the God-fearing believers as they are about to die. It is an easy scene, as they are comforted by the angels: *"Those whom the angels gather in death while they are in a state of purity."* (Verse 32) They are in a comfortable, pure condition, looking forward to meeting God, having nothing to fear. The angels greet them: *"Peace be upon you!"* (Verse 32) This is a greeting of welcome and reassurance. They follow this by delivering the happiest news of all: *"Enter paradise by virtue of what you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 32)

At the end of this scene with its two aspects of death and resurrection, the *sūrah* queries what the idolaters of the Quraysh are waiting for? Are they waiting for the

angels to gather their souls, or for God's command to resurrect them? For this is what happens to them on death and then on the day when resurrection takes place by God's command. Yet they have a clear lesson in what happened to earlier communities. They have been shown two images delineating what happens to both parties:

> *Are they [who disbelieve] awaiting anything but for the angels to appear before them, or for your Lord's command to come? Those before them did the same. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves. The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride.* (Verses 33-34)

The attitude of human beings is amazing. They see what happened to people of earlier generations who followed the same course they follow. But they do not take heed. They do not believe that what happened to earlier communities can happen to them. They do not realize that the laws of nature operate in accordance with a well defined pattern, and that premises lead to their natural conclusions, actions receive their just reward, and God's law will not be suspended to appease anyone.

"It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves." (Verse 33) God has given them the freedom of thought and choice. He has shown them all His signs placed in the universe around them and within their own souls, warning them against the consequences of their actions. He then left them to choose, and to bear the consequences of their own doings in accordance with His laws. Thus He has not wronged them in any way. Their fate is a case of action rebounding on the perpetrator.

Indeed God does not inflict too severe a punishment on them. Instead, their own misdeeds were severe, and it is these they have to endure the natural consequences of: *"The evil consequences of their misdeeds overtook them, and they were overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride."* (Verse 34) This verse and similar ones are very significant. People are not punished with anything other than the natural consequences of their own actions. These are the very things which sink them to a degree lower than that of human beings. Hence they are punished with something lower than what is fitting for humans. They endure a humiliating abode and painful suffering.

Two Ways for Mankind

Now the *sūrah* reports yet another argument advanced by the unbelievers, to explain the reasons for their disbelief.

> *Those who associate partners with God say, Had God so willed, neither we nor our forefathers would have worshipped any other than Him, nor would we have declared anything forbidden without a commandment from Him.' Those before them said the same. Are the messengers bound to do anything other than to clearly deliver the message? Indeed, We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.' Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance, while others were inevitably doomed by their error. Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth.* (Verses 35-36)

They lay on God's will the blame for all their own and their forefathers' deviant beliefs, their worship of false deities, as also for their misguided concepts leading them to prohibit what God had made lawful without any clear authority from Him. They allege that none of them would have done anything of the sort, had God willed to prevent it. This is a grossly mistaken view of God's will and how it operates. Furthermore, it deprives man of the most important quality which God has given him in this life.

God's will is never directed so as to make His servants associate partners with Him. Nor is He ever pleased when they prohibit what He has made lawful. This is clearly stated in His law contained in His messages to mankind. The messengers were only assigned the task of delivering His message, and they were up to the task, exerting their best efforts to fulfil it: *"We have raised a messenger in every community, [who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One.'"* (Verse 36) This is the command He issued, outlining what He wishes His servants to do. God Almighty does not order His servants to do something which He knows them to be, by nature, unable to do, or to do what He has compelled them to avoid. The clear evidence proving His displeasure with those who disobey His orders is the punishment which He inflicted in former times on those who denied His messages and messengers. Hence He draws attention here to the fate of those disobedient communities: *"Go, then, about the earth and observe what was the end of those who denied the truth."* (Verse 36)

God, the Creator, the Wise, has willed that human beings should have an equal propensity either to follow His guidance or to go astray, and that their choice of which way to follow should be completely free. He has also given them reason and intellect in order to be able to determine which way to choose. He has placed in the universe numerous pointers to guidance, and these signs are there for them to see, hear, sense and feel wherever they turn at any moment of the night or day, leading their minds to the right conclusion.

Out of His grace, which He gives in abundance, God has not left His servants to make their choice only on the basis of their reasoning. He has given in His laws, which were outlined by His messengers, a clear and constant standard for people to

follow when they need guidance. By using this standard, which is not subject to people's wishes and desires, they are able to determine right and wrong on any matter. He did not make His messengers overbearing tyrants who used brute force to compel people to believe in Him. These messengers were only carriers of His messages, assigned only the task of delivering them. They called on people to worship God alone, to steer away from every type of belief that associates partners with Him, and to shun submission to any power other than God's: *"We have raised a messenger in every community, (who said to them]: 'Worship God and shun the Evil One."* (Verse 36)

Some people respond positively to God's message: *"Among them were some whom God graced with His guidance."* (Verse 36) Another group chose error: *"Others were inevitably doomed by their error."* (Verse 36) Neither party has broken away from God's will for He did not compel them to follow one way or the other. Each chose the way for himself after having been given sufficient guidance to distinguish between truth and error. Such guidance is placed within man himself and is also made available everywhere in the universe around him.

This statement also refutes the false argument advanced by the idolaters and repeated by many of those who commit every kind of disobedience of God. Islam is very clear on this point. God orders His servants to do only what is right and good, and He forbids them only what is evil. He may sometimes choose to inflict clear punishments which plainly reflect His displeasure. But this does not mean that He intervenes to compel them to go astray and then punishes them for something over which they claim to have no choice. This is absolutely false. They are completely free to follow the way they choose, and that freedom is given them by God's will. Whatever good or evil they do, then, takes place by God's will in this sense only.

This explains the comment given in the form of an address to the Prophet outlining the law determining what people may follow of guidance or error: *"However eager you may be to show them the right way, [know that] God does not bestow His guidance upon any whom He judges to have gone astray. They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 37) People's acceptance of divine guidance is not the result of the Prophet's deliberations and efforts. This is not his task. His mission is only to deliver the message God gave him. Guidance and error are subject to God's law which never fails, bringing the same results every time. Whoever deserves to remain in error according to God's law shall not receive His guidance. That is because of the operation of the laws God has set in nature. This is His will which is always done. Hence, *"they shall have none to support them."* Besides, who can support them against God?

The Truth of Resurrection

The unbelievers make yet another argument to justify their rejection of the divine message. *"They most solemnly swear by God that God never raises the dead to life. Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself, even though most people do not know it. [Thus] He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars. Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, 'Be' – and it is."* (Verses 38-40)

The question of resurrection has been the main point of contention among many communities ever since God sent His messengers to mankind, commanding them to do what is good and forbidding them what is evil, warning them always that they are accountable for their deeds before God on the Day of Judgement.

Yet these people from the Quraysh were ready to solemnly swear that God will not raise anyone to life after death. In other words, they acknowledge God's existence but deny that the dead will be brought back to life by Him. They consider such resurrection to be impossible after bodies have decomposed, organs separated and molecules are scattered everywhere. They overlook the miraculous nature of life in the first place. They are oblivious to the nature of God's power and the fact that it cannot be compared with that of human beings or their abilities. They do not realize that to bring anything into existence does not trouble God in any way, and does not place any burden whatsoever on His power. It is sufficient for Him to decide to bring something into existence for that thing to exist.

Human beings are also oblivious of God's purpose behind resurrection. The fact is that nothing reaches its fullness in this life. People differ on truth and falsehood, right and error, good and evil, etc. Their differences and disputes cannot be settled or reach the right conclusion in this life on earth. It is a matter of God's will that some of them live long, and that they are not held to account for their deeds during this life. Thus, reward and punishment are administered in the hereafter when everything reaches its fullness.

The *sūrah* replies to the unbelievers' assertion that the dead will not be resurrected. It dispels people's doubts with an emphatic assertion: "*Yes indeed! That is a promise to which He has bound Himself*" (Verse 38) When God makes a promise, then that promise is fulfilled without fail. "*Even though most people do not know it.*" (Verse 38) People are rarely aware of the true nature of a promise made by God.

The whole thing has a definite purpose: "*He will make clear to them the reality of matters over which they differ, and the unbelievers will know that they were liars.*" (Verse 39) They lie when they allege that their methods are based on true guidance, when they accuse God's messengers of lying, and when they deny the life to come and entertain concepts and beliefs that are false and lack basis. Besides, resurrection is so easy: *"Whenever We will anything to be, We need only say, 'Be' – and it is."* (Verse 40)

Resurrection is one such easy thing. It will take place once God wills it to.

In contrast to those who persist in denying the truth, the *sūrah* provides a glimpse of the true believers who are prepared to abandon their homes and migrate in order to lend support to God's cause. Their only motivation is their faith in God and in the hereafter.

> *As for those who forsake their homes for the sake of God after having suffered injustice, We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life; yet better still is their reward in the life to come, if they but knew it. [Such reward is granted to] those who, having been patient in adversity, place their trust in their Lord.* (Verses 41-42)

These are the people who migrate, leaving their homes, abandoning all property and belongings, sacrificing an easy life with their own peoples and communities. They seek only God's reward. When they experience tyranny and injustice, they leave their homeland in order to live a life of obedience to God. Hence, God promises them in return for the loss of their homes something that they will like: "*We shall most certainly give them a fine abode in this life.*" (Verse 41) They will be well compensated for their loss: "*yet better still is their reward in the life to come,*" but people are rarely aware of the fact. Such people have important qualities which deserve God's reward. Hence when they persevere in the face of hardship, and they are *'patient in adversity,*" their reward is assured. This is because they "*place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 42) They associate no partner with Him in belief, reliance and trust.

The *sūrah* reiterates the task of God's messengers. This comes in the context of highlighting the mission of the last Messenger and the revelations bestowed on him from on high. This forms a prelude to warnings threatening the unbelievers with severe punishment.

> *The messengers We sent before you were but men whom We inspired. So, if you have not realized this, ask those who are endowed with knowledge. [We sent such messengers] with clear proofs and divine books, and We have now bestowed on you the reminder so that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them, and that they may take thought.* (Verses 43-44)

Those messengers We sent in former times were men too. We did not send angels or any other type of creation. They were men chosen for a task: "*whom We inspired,*" just like We inspire you. Their task, like yours, was simply to deliver their message. "*So... ask those who are endowed with knowledge*", i.e. the people and nations to whom messengers were sent in earlier times. Ask them, "*if you have not realized this [fact]*", to make sure whether those messengers were men or angels or belonged to some other type of creation. We certainly sent human messengers "*with clear proofs*", and We

gave divine books, and, *"We have now bestowed on you the reminder that you may elucidate to mankind all that has been bestowed on them."* (Verse 44) This applies to those who received earlier revelations but who then differed among themselves concerning the messages contained in their divine books. The Qur'ān provides a clear judgement in their disputes. This also applies to the Prophet's contemporaries, the first community to be addressed by the Qur'ān. The Prophet was there to explain it to them and to provide practical guidance on how it should be implemented in their lives. *"And that they may take thought,"* on the signs God has placed in the universe confirming the message of truth, and reflect on the Qur'ānic revelations. Indeed the Qur'ān always calls on people to reflect and use their reason.

Universal Submission to God's Power

The present passage started with a reference to those who plot and scheme. It now concludes with two highly charged emotional touches. The first warns that against God's scheme no one is safe at any time of the night or day. The other invites people to join the whole universe in extolling God's praises and worshipping Him. Only man can refuse to submit to God, while everything around him glorifies and praises God:

> *Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive? – Or that He will not suddenly take them to task in the midst of their comings and goings; for they can never frustrate His design? – Or that He will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive? Surely your Lord is Most Compassionate, Most merciful. Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? For, before God prostrates itself every living thing in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels. They do not behave in arrogant defiance. They fear their Lord, who is high above them, and do as they are bidden.* (Verses 45-50)

It is indeed most amazing that human beings see how God's hand is working yet they take no heed. Those of them who scheme continue their plotting, and those who thus far have been safe continue to feel secure against a strike that will overwhelm them just as happened to other people before them. They entertain no fear that God may inflict punishment on them at any moment, whether they are asleep or awake, mindful or oblivious of what is going on around them. The *sūrah* warns them of the impending danger which they may ignore at their peril: *"Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them, or that suffering will not befall them whence they do not perceive?"* (Verse 45) Or do they feel secure that God will not smite them at any time while they travel about on business or pleasure.

"They can never frustrate His design." (Verse 46) They are not immune from His punishment wherever they happen to be. Or do they feel safe against a strike which *"will seize them when they are alert and apprehensive?"* (Verse 47) Their expectation of danger and alertness to it will not frustrate God's will. He is just as able to seize them when they fully expect danger as He is able to take them unawares. The fact remains that God *"is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful."* (Verse 47)

The question has to be asked again: Do those who devise evil schemes feel secure against God's punishment? They are certainly totally oblivious to what is going on around them whereby the whole universe, with all its laws and phenomena, delivers a message of submission to God and acceptance of His will: *"Do people not see how every object God has created casts its shadow right and left, prostrating itself before God in complete submission? For, before God prostrates itself every living thing in the heavens and the earth, as do the angels. They do not behave in arrogant defiance. They fear their Lord, who is high above them, and do as they are bidden."* (Verses 48-50)

The image drawn here is one of shadows extending and retreating, moving and standing still. It is highly inspiring, provided that we open our hearts, alert our senses and respond to what goes on in the universe around us. The Qur'ān expresses the notion of submission to God's laws by prostration. This is indeed the most expressive aspect of submission. The *sūrah* thus alerts us to the gentle movement of shades, for it profoundly influences our feelings. It depicts all creatures, 'in complete submission'. It also adds the angels to this universal grouping. This gives us a wonderful image of living creatures, shadows, inanimate objects and angels in a position of full submission to God. It depicts their complete devotion and sincere worship. None is too proud to refuse to worship Him or to disobey His command. Only a group of arrogant human beings jarr the tune in this remarkable orchestration.

Thus this passage, having started with a reference to arrogant unbelievers, concludes with isolating such arrogant humans in a scene that comprises the whole universe.

3
The One and Only God

۞ وَقَالَ ٱللَّهُ لَا تَتَّخِذُوٓاْ إِلَٰهَيۡنِ ٱثۡنَيۡنِۖ إِنَّمَا هُوَ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۖ فَإِيَّيَ فَٱرۡهَبُونِ ٥١

God has said: 'Do not take [for worship] two deities, for He is but one God. Hence, of Me alone stand in awe.' (51)

وَلَهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَهُ ٱلدِّينُ وَاصِبًاۚ أَفَغَيۡرَ ٱللَّهِ تَتَّقُونَ ٥٢

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth, and to Him alone submission is always due. Will you then fear anyone but God? (52)

وَمَا بِكُم مِّن نِّعۡمَةٖ فَمِنَ ٱللَّهِۖ ثُمَّ إِذَا مَسَّكُمُ ٱلضُّرُّ فَإِلَيۡهِ تَجۡـَٔرُونَ ٥٣

Whatever blessing you have comes from God; and whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. (53)

ثُمَّ إِذَا كَشَفَ ٱلضُّرَّ عَنكُمۡ إِذَا فَرِيقٞ مِّنكُم بِرَبِّهِمۡ يُشۡرِكُونَ ٥٤

Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord, (54)

لِيَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمۡۚ فَتَمَتَّعُواْۖ فَسَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَ ٥٥

[as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (55)

وَيَجۡعَلُونَ لِمَا لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ نَصِيبٗا مِّمَّا رَزَقۡنَٰهُمۡۗ تَٱللَّهِ لَتُسۡـَٔلُنَّ عَمَّا كُنتُمۡ تَفۡتَرُونَ ٥٦

They assign a share of the sustenance We provide for them to what they know nothing of. By God, you shall certainly be called to account for your

false inventions. (56)

وَيَجۡعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡبَنَٰتِ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ وَلَهُم مَّا يَشۡتَهُونَ ٥٧

And they assign daughters to God, who is limitless in His glory, whereas for themselves they choose what they desire. (57)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِٱلۡأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجۡهُهُۥ مُسۡوَدّٗا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٞ ٥٨

And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (58)

يَتَوَٰرَىٰ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ مِن سُوٓءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِۦٓۚ أَيُمۡسِكُهُۥ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمۡ يَدُسُّهُۥ فِي ٱلتُّرَابِۗ أَلَا سَآءَ مَا يَحۡكُمُونَ ٥٩

He tries to avoid all people on account of the [allegedly] bad news he has received, [debating within himself] shall he keep the child despite the shame he feels, or shall he bury it in the dust? Evil indeed is their judgement. (59)

لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ مَثَلُ ٱلسَّوۡءِۖ وَلِلَّهِ ٱلۡمَثَلُ ٱلۡأَعۡلَىٰۚ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٦٠

To those who do not believe in the life to come applies the attribute of evil, whereas to God applies the attribute of all that is most sublime, for He is Almighty, Wise. (60)

وَلَوۡ يُؤَاخِذُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلنَّاسَ بِظُلۡمِهِم مَّا تَرَكَ عَلَيۡهَا مِن دَآبَّةٖ وَلَٰكِن يُؤَخِّرُهُمۡ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمّٗىۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهُمۡ لَا يَسۡتَـٔۡخِرُونَ سَاعَةٗۖ وَلَا يَسۡتَقۡدِمُونَ ٦١

If God were to take people to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single living creature on the face [of the earth]. But He gives them respite for a set term. When their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can

they hasten it. (61)

وَيَجْعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ مَا يَكْرَهُونَ وَتَصِفُ
أَلْسِنَتُهُمُ ٱلْكَذِبَ أَنَّ لَهُمُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۖ لَا
جَرَمَ أَنَّ لَهُمُ ٱلنَّارَ وَأَنَّهُم مُّفْرَطُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

They attribute to God what they hate [for themselves]. And their tongues assert the lie that theirs is the supreme reward. Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them, and they will be hastened on into it. (62)

تَٱللَّهِ لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أُمَمٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَزَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ فَهُوَ وَلِيُّهُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ
وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٣﴾

By God, We have sent messengers to various communities before your time, but Satan made their foul deeds seem fair to them. He is also their patron today. A grievous suffering awaits them. (63)

وَمَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ إِلَّا لِتُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ
ٱلَّذِى ٱخْتَلَفُوا۟ فِيهِ ۙ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

We have bestowed upon you from on high this book for no other reason than that you may make clear to them those issues on which they differ, and [to serve] as guidance and grace to people who believe. (64)

وَٱللَّهُ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ
ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَآ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً
لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

And God sends down water from the skies, giving life to the earth after it has been lifeless. In this there is surely a sign for people who listen. (65)

وَإِنَّ لَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ لَعِبْرَةً ۖ نُّسْقِيكُم مِّمَّا فِى
بُطُونِهِۦ مِنۢ بَيْنِ فَرْثٍ وَدَمٍ لَّبَنًا خَالِصًا
سَآئِغًا لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

In cattle too you have a worthy lesson: We give

وَمِن ثَمَرَٰتِ ٱلنَّخِيلِ وَٱلۡأَعۡنَٰبِ تَتَّخِذُونَ مِنۡهُ سَكَرٗا وَرِزۡقًا حَسَنًاۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٧

you to drink of that [fluid] which is in their bellies, produced alongside excretions and blood: pure milk, pleasant to those who drink it. (66)

And from the fruit of the date- palms and vines you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason. (67)

وَأَوۡحَىٰ رَبُّكَ إِلَى ٱلنَّحۡلِ أَنِ ٱتَّخِذِي مِنَ ٱلۡجِبَالِ بُيُوتٗا وَمِنَ ٱلشَّجَرِ وَمِمَّا يَعۡرِشُونَ ٦٨

Your Lord has inspired the bee: 'Take up homes in the mountains, in the trees and in structures people may put up. (68)

ثُمَّ كُلِي مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ فَٱسۡلُكِي سُبُلَ رَبِّكِ ذُلُلٗاۚ يَخۡرُجُ مِنۢ بُطُونِهَا شَرَابٞ مُّخۡتَلِفٌ أَلۡوَٰنُهُۥ فِيهِ شِفَآءٞ لِّلنَّاسِۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٦٩

Then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths your Lord has made smooth for you.' There issues from its inside a drink of different colours, a cure for people. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think. (69)

وَٱللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمۡ ثُمَّ يَتَوَفَّىٰكُمۡۚ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰٓ أَرۡذَلِ ٱلۡعُمُرِ لِكَيۡ لَا يَعۡلَمَ بَعۡدَ عِلۡمٖ شَيۡـٔٗاۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٞ قَدِيرٞ ٧٠

It is God who has created you; and in time will cause you to die. Some of you are left to the most feeble stage of life, so that they no longer know what they had previously known. God is indeed All-Knowing, infinite in His power. (70)

وَٱللَّهُ فَضَّلَ بَعۡضَكُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ فِي ٱلرِّزۡقِۚ فَمَا ٱلَّذِينَ فُضِّلُواْ بِرَآدِّي رِزۡقِهِمۡ عَلَىٰ مَا مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُهُمۡ فَهُمۡ فِيهِ سَوَآءٌۚ أَفَبِنِعۡمَةِ ٱللَّهِ يَجۡحَدُونَ ٧١

To some of you God has given more than He has given to others. Those who are so favoured are

وَٱللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنۡ أَنفُسِكُمۡ أَزۡوَٰجٗا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنۡ أَزۡوَٰجِكُم بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةٗ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِۚ أَفَبِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ يُؤۡمِنُونَ وَبِنِعۡمَتِ ٱللَّهِ هُمۡ يَكۡفُرُونَ ٧٢

unwilling to share their provisions with those whom their right hands possess, so that they are all equal in this respect. Will they, then, deny God's favours? (71)

And God has given you spouses of your own kind and has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren, and provided you with wholesome sustenance. Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings? (72)

وَيَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَمۡلِكُ لَهُمۡ رِزۡقٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ ٧٣

Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power. (73)

فَلَا تَضۡرِبُواْ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡأَمۡثَالَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعۡلَمُ وَأَنتُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٧٤

Do not, then, compare anything with God. Indeed, God knows all, whereas you have no knowledge. (74)

۞ ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلٗا عَبۡدٗا مَّمۡلُوكٗا لَّا يَقۡدِرُ عَلَىٰ شَيۡءٖ وَمَن رَّزَقۡنَٰهُ مِنَّا رِزۡقٗا حَسَنٗا فَهُوَ يُنفِقُ مِنۡهُ سِرّٗا وَجَهۡرًاۖ هَلۡ يَسۡتَوُۥنَۚ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِۚ بَلۡ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا

God makes this comparison' between a man enslaved, unable to do anything of his own accord, and a [free] man on whom We have bestowed goodly favours, and he gives of it both in private and in public. Can these two be equal? All praise is to God alone, but most people have no

knowledge. (75)

يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا رَّجُلَيْنِ أَحَدُهُمَآ أَبْكَمُ لَا يَقْدِرُ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ وَهُوَ كَلٌّ عَلَىٰ مَوْلَىٰهُ أَيْنَمَا يُوَجِّههُّ لَا يَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ ۖ هَلْ يَسْتَوِى هُوَ وَمَن يَأْمُرُ بِٱلْعَدْلِ ۙ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٧٦﴾

And God makes another comparison between two men, one of whom is dumb and can do nothing of his own accord He is a sheer burden to his master: wherever he sends him, he accomplishes no good. Can he be considered equal to one who enjoins justice and follows a straight path? (76)

Overview

This third passage of the *sūrah* is again devoted to the major issue of God's oneness. The first three verses make it clear that God is one without partners, and that to Him alone the entire universe and all that it contains belong, and that He is the One who bestows all bounty and grace. The passage concludes with two comparisons between a master who owns and provides, and a slave who is able to do nothing of his own accord. Can these two be equal? How is it, then, that God, the Master of all and the Provider for all, is assigned equals who have no power and provide nothing? How can it be said that He is God and they are gods like Him?

In this passage a picture is painted of people suffering affliction and turning to God alone for help. When their affliction is removed, they associate partners with Him.

The passage also portrays some aspects of the superstitious nature of pagan beliefs, in that their followers attribute some of what God has provided for them to their false deities, while they themselves do not share with their slaves anything they own. They attribute females to God as His daughters while they hate to have daughters born to themselves: *"When any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom."* (Verse 58) Yet at the same time they boast that they will have all the good things, and that they will be rewarded handsomely for their deeds. All these misconceptions they have inherited from earlier communities that held idolatrous beliefs.

In this passage the *sūrah* portrays a few examples of God's creation, showing how only God is able to produce such things and sustain them. In itself, this constitutes a great evidence of God's control of the whole universe. It is God who sends down water from the skies to bring life to the earth after it has been lifeless. It is He who produces pure milk from the bellies of cattle, so that people may have a wholesome drink. He it is who brings out the fruits of the date-palms and the vines, from which people make their intoxicating drinks and derive good sustenance. Through His inspiration, the bees take up their homes in hills, trees and in wooden trellises people put up, and then produce honey which provides a cure for many ailments. It is God also who creates people and then gathers them in death. Some of them He leaves to old age, when they forget what they had learnt in life and become naïve. He it is who provides for some in abundance while He gives less to others. And it is God who gives them spouses and enables them to have children and grandchildren. Yet despite all these favours, people take to worshipping beside God things that can give them no sustenance, and which are themselves powerless, claiming that such things are equal to Him. All such fabrications are indeed false.

All these aspects are within people's own environment and even within themselves. They are directed to them so that they will appreciate God's power and its work in the world around them. The conclusion depicts the two clear examples we have already referred to. Thus, the whole passage addresses the human mind and conscience, striking powerful notes that are certain to influence any human being.

All Grace Comes from God

> *God has said: Do not take [for worship] two deities, for He is but one God. Hence, of Me alone stand in awe. His is all that is in the heavens and the earth, and to Him alone submission is always due. Will you then fear anyone but God? Whatever blessing you have comes from God; and whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord, [as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth].* (Verses 51-55)

God has commanded that people do not worship two deities, for there is only one God, without partner or equal. The style here relies on the repetition of numbers for emphasis. This is not easily reflected in translation. Arabic, the language of the original text of the Qur'ān, admits a repetition of the number two to the dual form of deity in the first sentence. If we were to give a literal translation, the sentence would read: "Do not take for worship two deities in doubles." Again repetition is employed in the next sentence to emphasize God's oneness. This is re-emphasized in the use of

'alone' in the last part of the verse: *"Of Me alone stand in awe."* There is a sense of reiterated warning in this verse. This added emphasis reminds us that the issue in question is that of faith. God's oneness must be a concept of complete and perfect clarity in the mind of every believer.

God, the only deity, is also the One to whom everything belongs: *"His is all that is in the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 52) All true faith also belongs to Him: *"To Him alone submission is always due."* (Verse 52) It is a continuous process, ever since there was a faith and people to believe in it. Such belief means submission, and no faith is true unless it is based on submission to Him. He alone gives blessings and bestows grace: *"Whatever blessing you have comes from God."* (Verse 53) It is also ingrained in human nature that whenever people experience hardship and difficulty, they turn to God, seeking His help. At such times, there is no room for the superstitions of idolatry or pagan beliefs. To Him alone people turn with their appeals to remove their hardship: *"Whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help."* (Verse 53)

Thus we see that Godhead and dominion in the universe belong to God alone. All submission is addressed to Him, and all grace is bestowed by Him, and to Him alone everyone should turn in all situations. Human nature is a witness to this. When it experiences affliction, harm or hardship, it returns to its purity and turns to God alone. Yet despite all this, no sooner does God save people from some type of harm that could destroy them than some of them associate partners with Him. This leads them to disbelief in God's guidance and to denying His grace. Such people should think clearly about what will happen to them after their brief enjoyment: *"Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]."* (Verse 55)

The *sūrah* portrays here a picture of a certain type of human being which is found across every generation. When harm and affliction strikes, people's hearts turn to God for help. By nature, they know that He is the only One to protect them when no one else can. In times of comfort and pleasure, they are preoccupied with enjoyment, weakening their relationship with God: *"whenever harm befalls you, it is to Him that you cry out for help. Yet no sooner does He remove the harm from you than some among you associate partners with their Lord."* (Verses 53-54) They deviate from His path, following diverse ways which may lead to outright idolatry, or may take the form of ascribing divinity to values and situations, even though they may not describe these as deities.

Indeed deviation may be even more extreme so as to prevent people from turning to God in times of hardship. Instead they may turn to some other creature, appealing to them to save their skins. They may do so under the pretext that such creatures enjoy a special position with God, or they may have some other excuse. For example, when people appeal to 'saints' to cure their illnesses or remove their afflictions. Such people are thus even more deviant than the pagan Arabs.

Common Forms of Paganism

"*They assign a share of the sustenance We provide for them to what they know nothing of*" (Verse 56) They thus prohibit themselves some types of cattle, not allowing themselves to ride these or to eat their meat, or they allow these animals' use to men, forbidding them to women, as we saw in *Sūrah* 6, Cattle. They do this in the name of their alleged deities of which they know nothing. They are simply false inventions which they inherited from earlier ignorant generations. It is God who gave them this bounty, the cattle which they ride and use. Yet they give a portion of these to things which are in reality unknown to them. Their false deities did not give them the cattle. The cattle were created by God who has made them available to them. He calls on people to believe in His oneness, but they stubbornly associate partners with Him. The whole situation is full of irony which no human being of sound mind can accept.

Despite the fact that the faith based on God's oneness is well established, some people continue to assign a portion of the sustenance God provides for them to beings or things similar to the idols of ignorant days. Some, for example, set loose a calf, which they call, 'Sayyid Al-Badawī's calf.' The calf is thus sanctified. It is allowed to roam freely, eat whatever it will, with no one benefiting from it in any way, until it is slaughtered in honour of Sayyid Al-Badawī, a mystic buried in Ṭanṭa, an Egyptian city. Others pledge sacrificial animals to dead 'saints' in the same way as the ignorant Arabs used to do when they assigned portions of God's provisions to their idols. Such sacrificial animals are forbidden to be pledged in this way, forbidden to be eaten when they are slaughtered, even though God's name is mentioned at their slaughter, because they have been sanctified to things other than God.

"*By God, you shall certainly be called to account for your false inventions.*" (Verse 56) This is stated emphatically, with an oath. It is an invention that destroys the very foundation of faith, because it flies in the face of the concept of God's oneness.

> *And they assign daughters to God, who is limitless in His glory, whereas for themselves they choose what they desire. And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. He tries to avoid all people on account of the [allegedly] bad news he has received, [debating within himself] shall he keep the child despite the shame he feels, or shall he bury it in the dust? Evil indeed is their judgement.* (Verses 57-59)

Deviation from the right faith is not limited to beliefs. Indeed when people deviate from the essence of faith, their deviation spreads into their social life and its traditions. Whether faith is given prominence or kept in the background in any society, it continues to be the prime influence on living conditions. The Arabs of the days of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* used to claim that God had daughters, i.e. the angels, yet they themselves hated that daughters should be born to them. Thus daughters

can be assigned to God, while they give themselves the sons they love.

Such deviation from the right faith led them to bury their daughters alive, or to ill-treat or humiliate them. They feared that girls would bring them shame, if they did not guard their honour and chastity, or bring them poverty. For girls neither fought in war nor earned a living. On the contrary, they could be taken captive in the never ending tribal skirmishes, and this brought shame to the whole tribe. Alternatively, girls needed to be fed, placing a burden on family resources. The true faith is free of all such misconceptions. All sustenance is provided by God for everyone. None will take anything more than what is assigned to him or her. Moreover, human beings, male and female, are given by God a position of honour. In Islam, a woman is a human being, equal to man in status. She is the other half of the human entity, as Islam states.

The *sūrah* paints a grim picture of the practices of ignorance: "*And when any of them is given the happy news of the birth of a girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 58) He is sad and angry, trying to suppress his fury, as though the birth of a girl is a disaster when she is a gift from God, just like any boy. Man cannot fashion the foetus in the womb so as to determine the sex of his child. He cannot breathe life into it, or make the fertilized egg a human being. It is sufficient to reflect how life grows, by God's will, from a sperm into a human being, to make the birth of a child, of either sex, a joyous occasion. It is a miracle of creation despite the fact that it takes place all the time. Why should a man who is given a daughter feel sad and gloomy when he himself has no say in any stage of the process of creation. It is all done by God, while he himself is only the means to accomplish God's will.

It is divine wisdom that has determined that life is started with a couple: a male and a female. This means that the woman is as essential to the continuation of life as the man, indeed more so, because it is inside the woman that the first stage of life is completed. How can a man thus feel sad when given the news of the birth of a daughter? Why does he hide away, feeling ashamed, when life cannot continue and prosper without both spouses? This is obviously then a case of deviant social concepts and traditions. Hence the *sūrah* comments: "*Evil indeed is their judgement.*" (Verse 59)

Here we have a fair example of the role of the Islamic faith in establishing social norms and conditions on the right basis. We also appreciate the honourable view of women, and indeed of all mankind, that Islam propagates. For it was not only women but the whole of humanity who was treated unjustly in Arab pagan society. A woman is a human being, and humiliating or insulting her is an insult to mankind whom God has honoured. To bury a girl alive, like the Arabs did, is to kill half of mankind. It is contrary to the whole purpose of creation which necessitates that every living thing, not only human beings, comes from a male and a female.

Whenever human society deviates from the true faith, ignorant concepts begin to raise their ugly faces. In fact we see the same concepts that prevailed then creeping up again today. Many social classes do not welcome the birth of a girl. It is often the case that a woman is not treated on an equal footing with a man. She is not offered the same care or respect. This is an aspect of paganism the seeds of which were planted with the deviation from the true Islamic faith that has affected many communities.

It is amazing that some people criticize, even condemn, Islam and its laws, particularly with regard to women, on the basis of what they see in societies that have deviated from Islam. They do not trouble themselves to look at the relevant Islamic concepts and the fundamental changes they have produced in social conditions as well as in people's minds and feelings. What they should realize when they look at the true Islamic viewpoint with regard to women is that this viewpoint has not been the product of any practical necessity, human theory or social or economic need. It is a viewpoint that is inherent in the Islamic faith which was revealed by God who has given mankind a position of honour. This honour applies both to man and woman. Both have equal status and both are honoured by God.

If God Were to Inflict Punishment Now

By nature, Islam differs with all other creeds and societies in concepts and outlook. The difference between the two is as wide as the difference between the unbelievers' characteristics and God's own attributes. For He is far above all comparison: "*To those who do not believe in the life to come applies the attribute of evil, whereas to God applies the attribute of all that is most sublime, for He is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 60)

At this point the question of associating partners with God is closely related to that of denying the life to come. Both stem from the same sort of deviation. They are interlinked in people's minds, leading to clear influences on the individual, human society and life altogether. Whilst the unbelievers are evil, in thought, behaviour, beliefs, concepts, and practices, God has the most supreme attributes. He cannot be compared with anyone, least of all those unbelievers. He is mighty, setting everything in its right place, wise, acting always on the basis of infinite wisdom.

He certainly can punish people for their wrongdoing. Had He chosen to do so, He would have brought everything down over their heads. But in His wisdom, He has decided to give them respite, for a definite term:

> *If God were to take people to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single living creature on the face [of the earth]. But He gives them respite for a set term. When their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can they hasten it.*

(Verse 61)

God has created man and bestowed on him grace and blessings of all types. Man is the only creature on earth that spreads corruption, commits injustice, denies his Creator, allows tyranny within his own social set up and inflicts harm on other species. Yet despite all this, God is merciful to him, gives him one chance after another, and never abandons him altogether. His wisdom goes hand in hand with His might; His grace with His justice. But human beings are short-sighted, deluded by the respite given them. They do not feel how graceful God is to them until His justice brings them to account at the end of the term He has appointed for them. But *"when their time arrives, they cannot delay it by an hour, nor can they hasten it."* (Verse 61)

What is even more amazing is that those who associate partners with God assign to Him what they dislike for themselves, whether daughters or other things. They then falsely claim that they will only have what is good in return for what they do and allege. The Qur'ān states what they shall have, and this differs widely from what they claim: *"They attribute to God what they hate [for themselves]. And their tongues assert the lie that theirs is the supreme reward. Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them, and they will be hastened on into it."* (Verse 62)

The translation of this verse here is the nearest one possible. But the original Arabic expression, *taṣifu alsinatuhum al-kadhib,* describes their tongues as though they are the lie itself, or a reflection of it giving its exact likeness, as we say of a woman walking gracefully, 'she is grace itself.' Literally, the verse states, 'their lie of a tongue asserts.' They have been lying for such a very long time that they themselves represent a symbol indicating falsehood.

Their claim that they shall have the supreme reward when they assign to God what they hate for themselves is the lie their tongues reflect. Before the verse is completed however, the Qur'ān places them face to face with the truth, namely, that their reward is undoubtedly the Fire. They deserve this because of what they have done in their lives: *"Without doubt, it is the Fire that awaits them."* (Verse 62) They will be sent directly to it: *"And they will be hastened on into it."* (Verse 62)

Those Arabs were not the first community to deviate from the path of the truth, nor were they the first to attribute to God what they did not accept for themselves. Other communities before them traversed the same deviation and false claims against God. Satan made their concepts and actions seem fair to them and they accepted his bidding. Thus he became their master. God, then, sent His Messenger to save them, show them the truth and judge between them in their disputes over their faith. He provided guidance to the believers and delivered a message that is an act of grace bestowed on them:

> *By God, We have sent messengers to various communities before your time, but Satan made their foul deeds seem fair to them. He is also their patron today. A grievous suffering awaits them. We have bestowed upon you from on high this book for no other reason than that you may make clear to them those issues on which they differ, and [to serve] as guidance and grace to people who believe.* (Verses 63-64)

This means that the purpose of the last message is to judge in the disputes that arise between the different peoples who claim to believe in previous messages. The original message is based on God's oneness. Yet doubts and confusion have crept into this central concept. All types of distortion of its clarity in any way or form are absolutely false. The Qur'ān clarifies all this and serves as guidance and grace to those whose hearts are willing to receive it.

Clear Signs to Reflect Upon

At this point, the *sūrah* reviews some of the aspects pointing to God's oneness in what God has created in the universe, and in the qualities and characteristics He has given man, as well as in the aspects of grace He has bestowed on him which none but God could have provided. In the verse we have just discussed He mentions His book, the Qur'ān, which is the best aspect of grace God has bestowed on man as it imparts life to souls. Now, this is followed by mentioning the water God sends down from the sky to give physical life to man and other creatures. "*And God sends down water from the skies, giving life to the earth after it has been lifeless. In this there is surely a sign for people who listen.*" (Verse 65) Water is indeed the source of life for every living thing. This verse makes it the source of life for the whole earth, implying that this includes all that exists on earth. The One who transforms death into life is indeed the One who deserves to be God and to whom worship is addressed: "*In this there is surely a sign for people who listen.*" They should indeed reflect on what they hear and listen to its message. In fact the Qur'ān repeatedly mentions the signs pointing to God and His authority, and how He brings life into what is dead. It draws people's attentions to this, because it provides irrefutable proof for anyone who reflects on what he sees and hears.

Another sign is derived from the creation of cattle and their lives: "*In cattle too you have a worthy lesson: We give you to drink of that [fluid] which is in their bellies, produced alongside excretions and blood: pure milk, pleasant to those who drink it.*" (Verse 66) How is milk produced through the udders of cattle? It is made of what remains in the bellies of cattle after they have digested their food and the absorption of the excretions in the intestines to transform it into blood. The blood is then circulated to every cell in the body, but when it reaches the milk glands or the udder, it becomes milk through a fine process set by God. This is indeed an aspect of His fine and inimitable creation.

Indeed the whole process that transforms the food intake into blood, and gives every cell what it needs of the blood's ingredients is a highly remarkable process. Yet this goes on all the time inside the body, just like the metabolism process. At every moment complicated processes of maintenance and destruction take place in this unique organism, which continue until the spirit departs from the body. No fair minded human being could contemplate such remarkable processes without feeling that every atom in his being glorifies the Creator. Even the most complex man-made apparatus fades into insignificance when compared to the human constitution or to any one of its systems or even its countless cells.

Indeed beyond the general description of the metabolism processes we find details that fill us with wonder. Within this process, the function of a single cell in the human body is remarkably wonderful.

All this has remained a secret until recently. This scientific fact mentioned in this *sūrah* about how milk is produced alongside excretions and blood was unknown to mankind. Indeed no contemporary of the Prophet could have ever imagined it, let alone described it so accurately. No self respecting human being could ever argue about this. The mention of one such fact is sufficient to prove that the Qur'ān is God's revelation. All mankind was at the time totally ignorant of such facts.

Such pure scientific facts apart, the Qur'ān carries within its own unique characteristics irrefutable proofs of its being revealed by God, provided we appreciate such characteristics as they truly are. However, one scientific fact like this, expressed with such accuracy, refutes all arguments advanced by those who are hardened in their rejection of the truth.

"And from the fruit of the date palms and vines you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason." (Verse 67) Such fruits come out of the life which is produced through the rain pouring down from the sky. From them people make wine and other intoxicating drinks, which were not forbidden at the time this *sūrah* was revealed. People also derive from such fruits wholesome food. The way this verse is phrased implies that intoxicants are unwholesome, which serves as a preliminary indication of their forthcoming prohibition. The verse describes the situation as it was in practice. It does not imply that wines and intoxicants were permissible. On the contrary it hints that they will soon be forbidden. *"Surely in this there is a sign for people who use their reason."* (Verse 67) People with reason are sure to realize that the provider of all these fruits and other provisions is God, the One who deserves to be worshipped.

The Bee and Its Honey

> *Your Lord has inspired the bee: 'Take up homes in the mountains, in the trees and in structures people may put up. Then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths your Lord has made smooth for you. 'There issues from its inside a drink of different colours, a cure for people. Surely in this there is a sign for people who think.* (Verses 68-69)

The bees work on the prompting of their nature which God has given them. It is an inspiration that they follow. The work the bees do is so detailed, accurate and well planned that the rational mind finds it difficult to contemplate. This applies to the building of the hives, the division of the work between the tees, and to their production of pure honey.

The bees take up home, according to their nature, in hills and mountains, in trees and in structures people put up for their vines or other plants. God has smoothed things for the bees through what He has planted in their nature and through the nature of the world around them. The verse states that honey provides a cure for people. Although this has already been fully explained by some medical experts, it is also true for the simple reason that the Qur'ān states it. This is what every Muslim should believe, based on the complete truth embodied in the Qur'ān. This is what the Prophet expressed very clearly.

Al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate on the authority of Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī that "a man came to the Prophet telling him that his brother was suffering from diarrhoea. The Prophet told him: 'Give him a drink of honey.' The man did, then he came again and said: 'Messenger of God, I have given him honey, but his complaint has worsened.' The Prophet said to him: 'Go and give him a drink of honey.' The man went away again before returning the third time to say: 'Messenger of God, that has only aggravated his condition.' The Prophet said emphatically: 'God tells the truth and your brother's belly tells lies. Go and give him a drink of honey.' The man did just that and his brother took the drink and was cured." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

This report is so significant because it demonstrates the Prophet's complete trust in the face of the patient's seeming deterioration when given honey to drink. But the situation ended with a clear confirmation of the truth stated in the Qur'ān. A Muslim should always have such complete trust in the truth of what the Qur'ān says, even though reality may appear to contradict it at times. In other words, what is stated in the Qur'ān is more truthful than apparent reality, which could easily change, giving way to a new reality that will confirm the Qur'ānic statement.

We need to reflect a little on the fine harmony in portraying these blessings: the sending down of water from the sky, the production of milk alongside excretions and blood, the derivation of intoxicants and wholesome food from the fruits of date and

vine trees, and the production of honey by bees. All are drinks produced from materials that possess totally different shapes and forms. Since the context is that of drinks, the only aspect of blessings related to cattle mentioned here is their milk. This adds to the harmony of the vocabulary employed in this panoramic scene. In the next passage we will see how the *sūrah* mentions the hide, wool and hair of cattle, because the context then is one of dwellings, homes and places of refuge. Hence the aspects of cattle mentioned there are those that fit that scene. This is an essential element of the artistic harmony evident in the Qur'ān.

The Life Cycle

The *sūrah* moves on to touch on something much closer to human beings, because it relates to their very being, their life on earth, provisions, spouses, children and grandchildren. They are more likely to feel an affinity with this and to respond positively to the message it provides:

> *It is God who has created you; and in time will cause you to die. Some of you are left to the most feeble stage of life, so that they no longer know what they had previously known. God is indeed All- Knowing, infinite in His power. To some of you God has given more than He has given to others. Those who are so favoured are unwilling to share their provisions with those whom their right hands possess, so that they are all equal in this respect. Will they, then, deny God's favours? And God has given you spouses of your own kind and has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren, and provided you with wholesome sustenance. Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings? Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power.* (Verses 70-73)

The first aspect points to life and death which affect every human being. It is a simple fact that people love life, and when they reflect on this it may well bring about an appreciation of God's power and grace. Similarly, fear for one's life may engender a sense of caution and reliance on God who gives life. Furthermore, the image of the elderly, being feeble, forgetting what they have learned and languishing in a naïve state similar to that of a helpless child may make people reflect on the various stages of life and adopt a more humble attitude. They will begin to look at man's strength, knowledge and ability in a different light. The final comment of the verse is, "*God is indeed All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 70) This portrays the fact that true, absolute and eternal knowledge belongs to God alone, as does the irresistible power which is never weakened by time. All knowledge and power people possess are imperfect, partial and Limited by time.

The second aspect demonstrates what God has provided for people. In this respect

people clearly differ with some having more than others. Such differences have their reason in accordance with God's law. Nothing takes place haphazardly. A man may have intelligence, knowledge and common sense, but his talent in earning a living remains limited. This does not detract from the fact that he may be talented in other areas. Another person may appear dull, lacking in knowledge or naïve, but he has an eye for what brings profit and how to make the best of any financial investment. At a casual glance, it seems that affluence has nothing to do with ability, but the fact is that it is the fruit of a special type of ability. Moreover, it may be that God gives someone in abundance to test that person, and He may test another by giving him limited provisions. Whichever test a person has to go through is determined by God's wisdom.

That people have different means is a well-known phenomenon. This is more pronounced in communities where there is much inequity. The *sūrah* refers to this phenomenon which was clearly apparent in Arabian society, and makes use of it in order to dispel those myths that had their roots in the pagan beliefs of the Arabs. These have been referred to in an earlier *sūrah.* One such myth was their practice of allocating to false gods a share of the provisions of agricultural produce God gave them. Here the *sūrah* identifies that they do not give such provisions to their slaves to establish equity. How come, then, they give a portion of what God has granted them to false gods? *"Will they, then, deny God's favours?"* (Verse 71) Instead of expressing their thanks and gratitude to God who has given them these provisions, they associate partners with Him.

The third aspect looks at people, their spouses, children and grandchildren. It begins with a statement of the relationship between the two sexes: *"God has given you spouses of your own kind."* (Verse 72) All belong to the same human race, and the female is not an inferior species to be ashamed of when a daughter is born. He also *"has given you, through your spouses, children and grandchildren."* (Verse 72) Humans are mortal, and so they feel that their lives continue through their children and grandchildren. Touching upon this aspect is very significant. To this blessing is added the provision of sustenance, because of the similarity between the two types of blessing: "*And [He] provided you with wholesome sustenance."* (Verse 72) The comment at the end of the verse takes the form of a rhetorical question: *"Will they, then, believe in falsehood and deny God's grace and blessings?"* (Verse 72) Do they associate false partners with Him, in flagrant disobedience of His orders, when He has given them all these blessings? He is the Lord of all the world and His Lordship has practical manifestations in their lives at all times.

"*Will they, then, believe in falsehood?"* (Verse 72) Everything other than God in respect -Co beliefs is false. Thus, all their deities and myths are false, having no truth in them. They *"deny God's grace and blessings,"* when these are true, having practical

effects in their own lives.

Incomparable Situations

> *Instead of God, they worship something that can provide them with no sustenance from the heavens or the earth. Never can they have such power.* (Verse 73)

It is indeed amazing that human nature can become so twisted as to allow the worship of things that can provide people with nothing. They prefer such things to God, the Creator who provides them with all they have and all the blessings they enjoy. Yet they go even further, attributing to them similarities with God. Hence the commandment: "*Do not, then, compare anything with God. Indeed, God knows all, whereas you have no knowledge.*" (Verse 74) God has no peers, so people must never claim that there is anyone equal or similar to Him.

The *sūrah* then gives two examples of a master who can give and provide and a disabled slave who earns nothing. These examples are given to bring the eternal truth they had overlooked closer to their understanding. That truth is that God has no peers and that they must never equate God with anyone in their worship. Everyone and everything other than God is created by Him, and all are His servants.

> *God makes this comparison between a man enslaved, unable to do anything of his own accord, and a [free] man on whom We have bestowed goodly favours, and he gives of it both in private and in public. Can these two be equal? All praise is to God alone, but most people have no knowledge. And God makes another comparison between two men, one of whom is dumb and can do nothing of his own accord. He is a sheer burden to his master: wherever he sends him, he accomplishes no good. Can he be considered equal to one who enjoins justice and follows a straight path?* (Verses 75-76)

The first example is taken from their own lives. They had slaves who owned nothing and who had no power over anything. They would never put the slave who has no independent will on the same level as his master who enjoys considerable power. How then can they justify their equation of the Master and Owner of all with any of His creation, when they all serve Him?

The second example depicts a dumb, dull and weak person who understands nothing and can do no good, and another who is eloquent, able, encouraging fairness, hard working for every good cause. No reasonable person would equate the two. How is it, then, that dumb idols of stone are equated with God Almighty, who enjoins only what is reasonable and guides to the path of truth?

With these two examples we come to the end of this passage which started with

God's order that people must not worship two deities. It ends with amazement at the attitude of those who attribute Godhead to other deities. God has replaced Joseph's trials with his new position of power, and also with the promise of better things to come in the life to come. All this reward is for faith, righteousness and perseverance in the face of difficulty.

4
Denying the Undeniable

وَلِلَّهِ غَيۡبُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَمَآ أَمۡرُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ إِلَّا كَلَمۡحِ ٱلۡبَصَرِ أَوۡ هُوَ أَقۡرَبُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٧٧

To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth. The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still. God has power over all things. (77)

وَٱللَّهُ أَخۡرَجَكُم مِّنۢ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ شَيۡـٔٗا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرَ وَٱلۡأَفۡـِٔدَةَۙ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ٧٨

God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful. (78)

أَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ إِلَى ٱلطَّيۡرِ مُسَخَّرَٰتٖ فِي جَوِّ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَا يُمۡسِكُهُنَّ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٧٩

Do they not see the birds and how they are enabled to fly in mid-air? None but God holds them aloft. In this there are signs for people who will believe. (79)

وَٱللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنۢ بُيُوتِكُمۡ سَكَنٗا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّن جُلُودِ ٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ بُيُوتٗا تَسۡتَخِفُّونَهَا يَوۡمَ ظَعۡنِكُمۡ وَيَوۡمَ إِقَامَتِكُمۡۙ وَمِنۡ أَصۡوَافِهَا وَأَوۡبَارِهَا وَأَشۡعَارِهَآ أَثَٰثٗا وَمَتَٰعًا إِلَىٰ حِينٖ ٨٠

And God has made your homes as places of rest, and has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use. (80)

وَٱللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّمَّا خَلَقَ ظِلَٰلًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْجِبَالِ أَكْنَٰنًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ سَرَٰبِيلَ تَقِيكُمُ ٱلْحَرَّ وَسَرَٰبِيلَ تَقِيكُم بَأْسَكُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُتِمُّ نِعْمَتَهُۥ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

And God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains, and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence. Thus does He perfect His favours to you, sod that you may submit to Him. (81)

فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا۟ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿٨٢﴾

But if they turn away [from you, remember that] your only duty is to deliver [your message] clearly. (82)

يَعْرِفُونَ نِعْمَتَ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنكِرُونَهَا وَأَكْثَرُهُمُ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers. (83)

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا ثُمَّ لَا يُؤْذَنُ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

One day We will raise up a witness from every community, but then the unbelievers will not be allowed to make pleas, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (84)

وَإِذَا رَءَا ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ فَلَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite. (85)

وَإِذَا رَءَا ٱلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا۟ شُرَكَآءَهُمْ قَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ شُرَكَآؤُنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كُنَّا نَدْعُوا۟ مِن دُونِكَ ۖ فَأَلْقَوْا۟ إِلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقَوْلَ إِنَّكُمْ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

And when those who associate partners with God will see their [alleged] partners, they will say: 'Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You.' But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars.' (86)

وَأَلْقَوْا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ يَوْمَئِذٍ ٱلسَّلَمَ ۖ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

On that day, they shall proffer submission to God; and all their inventions will have forsaken

them. (87)

Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought. (88)

One day We will raise up within every nation a witness from among themselves to testify against them. And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]. We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God. (89)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَصَدُّواْ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ زِدْنَٰهُمْ عَذَابًا فَوْقَ ٱلْعَذَابِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يُفْسِدُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِى كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِم مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ ۖ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَىٰ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ۚ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ تِبْيَٰنًا لِّكُلِّ شَىْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* continues its discussion of the aspects confirming the truth of God's oneness, such as the great variety of creation, the perfection of God's blessings and His absolute knowledge of all things. However, in this passage, prominence is given to the question of resurrection. The Last Hours which is a Qur'ānic expression denoting the gathering and reckoning on the Day of Judgement, is one of the secrets which God keeps to Himself. The passage refers to the different hidden secrets of God's creation in the heavens and the earth, in human beings and across the wide universe. One of these relates to the Last Hour, whose timing is known to God alone. He controls it with ease: *"The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still."* (Verse 77) Another secret relates to what is created in the wombs of females. It is God alone who lets the foetus come out of the womb, with no knowledge whatsoever of the world it comes into. It is He also who gives human beings the blessings of hearing, seeing and thinking. These are favours which deserve gratitude. The *sūrah* also refers to the birds and how they are given the ability to fly. Needless to say, they are held aloft in mid-air by none other than God.

This is followed by a reference to some material blessings given to mankind. These are relevant to the aforementioned secrets. They include the blessings of abode, rest, shade and shelter in built up homes and temporary dwellings made of animal skin. The latter have the advantage of being easy to carry and re-erect when people are on

the move. Reference is also made to furniture and other articles made of animal wool, fur and hair, and to places of shelter and garments that protect people from the heat of the sun and the might of the enemy. God reminds people of His blessings and how He has perfected them, so that they may fulfil their duty: *"Thus does He perfect His favours to you so that you may submit to Him."* (Verse 81)

This is followed by details relating to resurrection, juxtaposed against pagans and the idols they worship. God's messengers bear witness against such unbelievers, while the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is witness against his own people.

In the Twinkling of an Eye

> *To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth. The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still. God has power over all things.* (Verse 77)

Resurrection is an essential question of faith that has attracted much controversy in all periods and communities. Every one of God's messengers had to deal with it. Yet it is part of the realm of what is known to God alone: "*To God belongs the hidden secrets of the heavens and the earth."* People stand before the thick curtains of *ghayb,* or God's hidden knowledge, aware of their inability and inadequacy. They may have great knowledge of their world, and may be able to discover much of the treasures of the earth and its resources and potentials, but even the greatest human scientists stand helpless when it comes to the knowledge of the immediate and distant future. He simply does not know what will happen the next moment, and whether, when he has taken the next breath in, he will be able to breathe out. A human being may entertain high hopes, stretching in different directions, yet his destiny remains behind the curtain of God's own knowledge. He himself has no means of knowing when his time will come. Yet it may come the next moment and he will be among the dead. It is in fact an aspect of God's grace bestowed on human beings that they do not know anything of what will take place beyond the present moment. Their lack of knowledge gives them hope and urges them to continue to work and produce. Whatever they manage will be taken over and completed by those who succeed them, until every individual of the next generation faces, in his or her turn, their destiny.

The Last Hour is part of the knowledge kept hidden from man. If people knew in advance when their time was to come, life would cease to function, or, at least, would be seriously disrupted. It would certainly not follow the line set out for it. The irony is that people count hours, days, months and years moving all the time

towards their pre-destined appointment when they will depart from this life.

"The advent of the Last Hour will be accomplished in a twinkling of an eye, or closer still." (Verse 77) It is close at hand, but according to a calculation different from that of human beings. To bring it on, in full preparation, does not take much time. It is merely the twinkling of an eye and it is there, ready for all mankind: *"God has power over all things."* (Verse 77) To resurrect such countless numbers of God's creation, gather them all together, reckon their deeds, assign the reward for each of them, is all easy for God whose will is accomplished in no time. Whenever He wills something, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is instantly accomplished. If this seems difficult, it only looks so to the eyes of those who see, measure and count by human standards and criteria. Hence they are grossly mistaken.

To make things easier for people to understand, the Qur'ān gives a simple example from human life. People can in no way accomplish it themselves, and they cannot formulate a clear idea of how it happens. Yet it takes place at every moment of the day and night: *"God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful."* (Verse 78)

This is something close to us, yet it is so far away. We may see the different stages a foetus goes through, but we do not know how these are accomplished, because it is part of the secret of life which is known to God alone. The knowledge man claims and boasts of, and which he wants to use in order to test the reality of the Last Hour and the secrets of God's hidden knowledge, is something acquired: *"God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge."* (Verse 78) Even the most advanced scientist is born devoid of knowledge. Whatever he subsequently learns is given to him as a blessing from God, within the limits He has set for mankind, and contingent upon what is needed for life on this planet: *"He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds."* (Verse 78) It should be mentioned here that the Arabic word, *af'idah,* rendered in the translation as 'minds', originally denotes, 'hearts'. The Qur'ān, however, uses it in reference to all human faculties of perception, which are generally referred to as constituting the human mind and intellect. The Arabic term also includes the power of inspiration, the nature and working of which are unknown to us. The Qur'ān reminds us here that God has given people all these faculties, *"so that you may be grateful."* (Verse 78) When we appreciate the value of these blessings God has given us and His other blessings, we will certainly be grateful to Him. The first step in showing our gratitude is to believe in God, the Sovereign, the Supreme, who alone deserves to be worshipped.

God's Hidden Secrets

Among the wonders that testify to God's limitless power and His control of everything in the universe is one that we see every day without giving it much thought. This is the ability of birds to fly: *"Do they not see the birds and how they are enabled to fly in mid-air? None but God holds them aloft. In this there are signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 79) Because it is so familiar to us to see birds flying in mid-air, we do not pay attention to the fascinating wonder their flying involves. Our minds do not give it much thought unless we are fully alerted to it, contemplating it with the eye of a talented poet seeking to capture every detail and nuance. The verse makes it clear that as the birds fly, *"none but God holds them aloft."* He does so through His laws of nature, which make the birds able to fly and make the atmosphere around us amenable for their flight. It is His laws that keep the birds in mid-air, floating safely, without fear that they may fall: *"In this there are signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 79)

A believer's heart is one which appreciates the wonders of creation, looks at them with awe and expresses his feelings with worship and glorification of God, the Creator of all things. Believers who are talented in expressing their thoughts and feelings write masterpieces of every type in describing the wonders of God's creation. They also describe their own feelings and how they are touched when they look at different creatures. No poet can rival their work if his heart is not kindled by the light of faith.

The *sūrah* takes us another step in reviewing some manifestations of God's power and His blessings which He bestows on man. It takes us now into the dwellings of the Arabs at the time, looking at their home comforts and furnishings:

> *And God has made your homes as places of rest, and has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use. And God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence. Thus does He perfect His favours to you, so that you may submit to Him.* (Verses 80-81)

The ease, comfort and reassurance one has at home are certainly a blessing from God but it is something best appreciated only by those who are homeless. They are mentioned here shortly after speaking about what the Qur'ān describes as *ghayb,* or what lies beyond the reach of human perception. In fact, the connotations of home comforts are not far removed from those of *ghayb,* because in both we sense that there is a reality that is kept hidden. Hence, a reminder of the comforts we find in our own homes should alert us to the value of this great blessing.

We may add a word here about the Islamic view of the home in the light of its description in the Qur'ān as a 'place of rest'. This is an expression that is inferior in its connotations to the Arabic term used in the Qur'ān, namely *sakan.* Yet it gives us an idea that Islam wants one's habitat to be a place of rest, comfort and reassurance. In the home one should feel at ease, safe and secure in one's environment and with those who share it. It is certainly not a place for contention, quarrel and conflict.

Islam guarantees the safety and sanctity of the home in order to ensure the security and peace of those who live in it. None is allowed to enter a home unless he first seeks, and obtains, permission to do so. No one forces his way in, without justification, armed with the force of authority. No one watches those living inside, or spies on them, for any reason, to disturb their peace and undermine their security. To do so constitutes a breach of the sanctity which Islam assigns to the home.

As the atmosphere in this passage is one of homes, shelter and garments, the *sūrah* refers to some fitting aspects of the creation of animals, thereby providing harmony between the two constituents of the scene. It tells people that God *"has given you dwellings out of the skins of animals, which are easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. Out of their wool, fur and hair, He has given you furnishings and articles of convenience for temporary use."* (Verse 80) We see how the verse highlights what is taken from animals to satisfy human needs. With furnishings, the *sūrah* mentions, 'articles of convenience,' which in Arabic usage denotes cushions, mattresses and blankets. All these are meant to add to people's comfort and enjoyment.

In this atmosphere of peace and security the language used in the following verse flows easily to speak about shade, places of shelter in the mountains, and the garments people use to protect themselves against climatic conditions as also against opponents in war. *"God has made for you, out of the many things He has created, shelter and shade, and has given you places of refuge in the mountains, and has furnished you with garments to protect you from the heat and other garments to protect you from your [mutual] violence."* (Verse 81) When we have proper shelter, we feel safe, and when we seek security in the mountains, we are also able to relax. Again the garments mentioned in the *sūrah,* providing two types of protection, give us a feeling of comfort and protection. All these feelings are akin to that of the comfort of one's own home. Hence, the comment that follows at the end of the verse reminds people of their need to submit to God, their Lord: *"Thus does He perfect His favours to you, so that you may submit to Him."* (Verse 81) Such submission gives us a greater feeling of safety and security.

God reminds people of all this making it clear to them that they should submit to their Lord who has created all these. However, people turn away and take no heed. They should know that God's Messenger is responsible only for delivering God's message to them and he certainly fulfilled his mission. It is up to them whether they

deny the truth which stares them in the face: *"But if they turn away [from you, remember that] your only duty is to deliver [your message] clearly. They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers."* (Verses 82-83) They are certainly aware of God's favours, but they nevertheless refuse to acknowledge them. Most of them are unbelievers.

A Witness against Every Community

As the Last Hour when the Day of Judgement arrives is mentioned at the beginning of this passage, we are given here an idea of what awaits the unbelievers when it comes.

> *One day We will raise up a witness from every community, but then the unbelievers will not be allowed to make pleas, nor will they be allowed to make amends. And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite. And when those who associate partners with God will see their [alleged] partners, they will say: 'Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You.' But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars. 'On that day, they shall proffer submission to God; and all their inventions will have forsaken them. Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought.* (Verses 84-88)

The scene begins with the prophets being called as witnesses, giving their accounts of the treatment they received from their peoples when they conveyed God's messages to them. The unbelievers will be standing there, not permitted to speak or make any plea or argument. They will not be allowed to make amends in order to satisfy their Lord, for it is too late to do so. It is a time for reckoning and the determination of fates. *"And when the wrongdoers actually see the suffering [that awaits them], it will in no way be mitigated for them, nor will they be granted respite."* (Verse 85)

Their silence however is broken when they see gathered with them those so-called 'partners' which they used to allege to have a share in God's divinity, and to worship them instead of God or alongside Him. They point to them, crying out: *"Our Lord, these are our partners whom we used to invoke instead of You."* (Verse 86) Their statement begins with an acknowledgement of God's position. They address Him as "Our Lord!" What is more is that they no longer describe the false deities they used to worship as God's partners. They refer to them as 'our partners'. Those very partners are frightened by such a description for it constitutes a serious accusation. Hence, they refute it, asserting most emphatically that those who worshipped them are liars. *"But they will throw their word back at them, saying: 'You are indeed liars.'"* (Verse 86) They turn to God in full submission. *"On that day, they shall proffer submission to God."*

(Verse 87) Thus the unbelievers will discover that none of their inventions will be of any avail to them in their very difficult situation: *"All their inventions will have forsaken them."* (Verse 87)

The scene concludes with an emphatic statement asserting that those who tried their best to turn others from the path of faith will have their punishment increased: *"Upon those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God We will heap suffering upon suffering in punishment for all the corruption they wrought."* (Verse 88) Disbelief in God is corruption, and turning others from God's path is also corruption. These people are guilty of both offences. Hence it is only right that their punishment should be increased.

This applies to all people and communities. The *sūrah* then singles out a special situation involving the Prophet with his own people: *"One day We will raise up within every nation a witness from among themselves to testify against them. And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]. We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God."* (Verse 89) What a gloomy and fraught scene is chosen as the background: that of a pagan people looking on when the false deities they used to worship declare that they are liars, and those very deities declare their own submission to God, totally disowning their former worshippers.

Against this background, the Prophet's position is clearly stated. He will be the witness against his own people. This timely piece of detail adds power to the whole scene: *"And We will bring you, [Prophet] as a witness against these [i.e. your people]."* (Verse 89) The verse mentions then that the revelations given to the Prophet *"makes everything clear,"* leaving no excuse for anyone to justify turning away from them. The revelation of the Qur'ān also provides *"guidance and grace and gives good news to those who submit themselves to God."* (Verse 89) This shows clearly that whoever wishes to follow right guidance and receive God's mercy should declare his submission to God before the arrival of that awesome and fearful day. For when it comes, no one will be given leave to justify his position or to make amends for past deeds. Thus we see that the scenes of the Day of Judgement given in the Qur'ān serve a definite purpose endorsing the message given in the section where they occur.

5
Absolute Justice

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَأۡمُرُ بِٱلۡعَدۡلِ وَٱلۡإِحۡسَٰنِ وَإِيتَآيِٕ ذِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَيَنۡهَىٰ عَنِ ٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِ وَٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَٱلۡبَغۡيِۚ يَعِظُكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَذَكَّرُونَ ٩٠

God enjoins justice, kindness [to all], and generosity to one's kindred; and He forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed. (90)

وَأَوۡفُواْ بِعَهۡدِ ٱللَّهِ إِذَا عَٰهَدتُّمۡ وَلَا تَنقُضُواْ ٱلۡأَيۡمَٰنَ بَعۡدَ تَوۡكِيدِهَا وَقَدۡ جَعَلۡتُمُ ٱللَّهَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ كَفِيلًاۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعۡلَمُ مَا تَفۡعَلُونَ ٩١

Fulfil your covenant with God whenever you make a pledge. Do not break your oaths after you have confirmed them, and have made God your surety. God certainly knows all that you do. (91)

وَلَا تَكُونُواْ كَٱلَّتِي نَقَضَتۡ غَزۡلَهَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِ قُوَّةٍ أَنكَٰثًا تَتَّخِذُونَ أَيۡمَٰنَكُمۡ دَخَلَۢا بَيۡنَكُمۡ أَن تَكُونَ أُمَّةٌ هِيَ أَرۡبَىٰ مِنۡ أُمَّةٍۚ إِنَّمَا يَبۡلُوكُمُ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦۚ وَلَيُبَيِّنَنَّ لَكُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مَا كُنتُمۡ فِيهِ تَخۡتَلِفُونَ

Be not like her who untwists the yarn which she has firmly spun, using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular community may be more powerful than another. By this, God puts you to the test. On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that

on which you now differ. (92)

﴿٩٢﴾

وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن يُضِلُّ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَلَتُسْـَٔلُنَّ عَمَّا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

Had God so willed, He would have surely made you all one single community. But He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray] and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]. You shall certainly be called to account for all that you do. (93)

وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوٓاْ أَيْمَٰنَكُمْ دَخَلًۢا بَيْنَكُمْ فَتَزِلَّ قَدَمٌۢ بَعْدَ ثُبُوتِهَا وَتَذُوقُواْ ٱلسُّوٓءَ بِمَا صَدَدتُّمْ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَلَكُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٩٤﴾

Do not use your oaths as a means to deceive one another, lest your foot should slip after it has been firm, and lest you should be made to suffer the evil [consequences] of your having debarred others from the path of God, with tremendous suffering awaiting you. (94)

وَلَا تَشْتَرُواْ بِعَهْدِ ٱللَّهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا ۚ إِنَّمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ هُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

Do not barter away- your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if you but knew it. (95)

مَا عِندَكُمْ يَنفَدُ ۖ وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ بَاقٍ ۗ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوٓاْ أَجْرَهُم بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting. We will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did. (96)

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهُۥ حَيَوٰةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُم بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُواْ

Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man

يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾

or woman, and is a believer, We shall most certainly give a good life. And We shall indeed reward these according to the best that they ever did. (97)

فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنِ ٱلرَّجِيمِ ﴿٩٨﴾

Whenever you read the Qur'ān, seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed. (98)

إِنَّهُۥ لَيْسَ لَهُۥ سُلْطَـٰنٌ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

He certainly has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord. (99)

إِنَّمَا سُلْطَـٰنُهُۥ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَوَلَّوْنَهُۥ وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِهِۦ مُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity. (100)

وَإِذَا بَدَّلْنَآ ءَايَةً مَّكَانَ ءَايَةٍ ۙ وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُنَزِّلُ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مُفْتَرٍۭ ۚ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

When We replace one verse by another — and God knows best what He reveals — they say: 'You are but a fabricator.' Indeed most of them have no knowledge. (101)

قُلْ نَزَّلَهُۥ رُوحُ ٱلْقُدُسِ مِن رَّبِّكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ لِيُثَبِّتَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَهُدًى وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Say: 'The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth, so as to strengthen the believers, and to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.'(102)

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلِّمُهُۥ بَشَرٌ ۗ لِّسَانُ ٱلَّذِى يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ أَعْجَمِىٌّ وَهَـٰذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِىٌّ مُّبِينٌ

We know full well that they say: 'It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.' But the man to whom

they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear. (103)

١٠٣

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ لَا يَهۡدِيهِمُ ٱللَّهُ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ١٠٤

Those who do not believe in God's revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (104)

إِنَّمَا يَفۡتَرِي ٱلۡكَذِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡكَٰذِبُونَ ١٠٥

It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars. (105)

مَن كَفَرَ بِٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ إِيمَٰنِهِۦٓ إِلَّا مَنۡ أُكۡرِهَ وَقَلۡبُهُۥ مُطۡمَئِنُّۢ بِٱلۡإِيمَٰنِ وَلَٰكِن مَّن شَرَحَ بِٱلۡكُفۡرِ صَدۡرٗا فَعَلَيۡهِمۡ غَضَبٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ١٠٦

As for anyone who denies God after having accepted the faith — and this certainly does not apply to one who does it under duress; while his heart remains true to his faith, but applies to him who willingly opens his heart to unbelief — upon all such falls God's wrath, and theirs will be a tremendous suffering. (106)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ ٱسۡتَحَبُّواْ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا عَلَى ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ١٠٧

This is because they love the life of this world better than the life to come. God does not bestow His guidance on those who reject the truth. (107)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمۡ وَسَمۡعِهِمۡ وَأَبۡصَٰرِهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡغَٰفِلُونَ ١٠٨

Such are those whose hearts and ears and eyes are

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمُ

sealed by God; such are the heedless (108)

ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ١٠٩

Without doubt, in the life to come they will be the losers. (109)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا فُتِنُواْ ثُمَّ جَٰهَدُواْ وَصَبَرُوٓاْ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهَا لَغَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ١١٠

But then, your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who forsake their homes after enduring trials and persecution, and strive hard [in God's cause] and remain patient in adversity. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much- Forgiving, Most Merciful. (110)

۞ يَوۡمَ تَأۡتِي كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ تُجَٰدِلُ عَن نَّفۡسِهَا وَتُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ مَّا عَمِلَتۡ وَهُمۡ لَا يُظۡلَمُونَ ١١١

One day every soul will come pleading for itself. Every soul will be repaid in full for all its actions, and none shall be wronged. (111)

Overview

The previous passage ended with a verse that included the following statement: *"We have bestowed from on high upon you the book to make everything clear, and to provide guidance and grace, and to give good news to those who submit themselves to God."* (Verse 89) This new passage begins with a clarification giving some glimpses of what the Qur'ān contains of clear guidance, grace and the good news it brings. The passage also includes orders to maintain justice and to act with kindness, particularly to relatives, and to steer away from indecency, evil and transgression, and to remain true to one's pledges and promises. It forbids going back on oaths once they have been made. All these are essential practices that we must maintain, as the Qur'ān impresses upon us.

The passage also states that those who violate pledges or swear solemn oaths to deceive others will endure tremendous suffering. It also brings good news for those who persevere in the face of adversity. These will certainly be rewarded in accordance with their best actions.

It outlines some of the good manners which must be maintained when reading the

Qur'ān, such as seeking refuge with God against Satan, so that he does not come near the place where the Qur'ān is being read. It mentions some of the fabrications the pagans used to repeat about the Qur'ān. Some plainly accused the Prophet of inventing it, while others claimed that a foreigner taught it to the Prophet. The passage concludes by stating the punishment for those who disbelieve after having accepted the faith, and the position of those who are compelled to declare their rejection of the faith while their hearts are full of the certainty of its truth. It tells us about the reward of those who are subjected to oppression on account of their faith, and who strive and fight hard, always remaining patient in adversity. All this serves as clarification, guidance, mercy and good news, as the last verse of the previous passage mentions.

An Order Combining All Goodness

> *God enjoins justice, kindness [to all], and generosity to one's kindred; and He forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed.* (Verse 90)

This book, the Qur'ān, has been revealed in order to bring a nation into existence, and to regulate a community; to establish a different world and initiate a new social order. It represents a world message for the whole of mankind, which does not allow any special allegiance to tribe, nation or race. Faith is the only bond that unites a community and a nation. It puts forward the principles that ensure unity within the community, security and reassurance for individuals, groups, nations and states, as well as complete trust that governs all transactions, pledges and promises.

It requires that justice should be established and maintained, because justice ensures a solid and constant basis for all transactions and deals between individuals and communities; a basis subject to no prejudice, preference or favouritism; a basis influenced by no family relationship, wealth or strength; a basis that ensures equal treatment for all and subjects all to the same standards and laws.

Along with justice, the Qur'ān urges kindness, which relaxes the strictness of absolute justice. It lays the door open for anyone who wishes to win the heart of an opponent to forgo part of what is rightfully his. This means that the chance is available to all to go beyond strict justice, which is both a right and a duty, to show kindness in order to allow wounds to heal or to win favour.

Kindness has an even broader sense. Every good action is a kindness. The command enjoining kindness includes every type of action and transaction. It thus covers every aspect of life, including a person's relationship with his Lord, family, community and with the rest of mankind.

Perhaps we should add here that some commentators on the Qur'ān say that 'justice' is the obligatory part, while 'kindness' is voluntary, but highly encouraged, particularly in so far as matters of worship are concerned. They say that this verse is part of the revelations received by the Prophet in Makkah, when the legal provisions had not as yet been outlined. But the way the verse is phrased uses both justice and kindness in their broadest sense. Moreover, from a purely ethical point of view, both are generally applicable principles, not mere legal provisions.

One aspect of kindness is 'generosity to one's kindred', but it is specially highlighted here in order to emphasize its importance. From the Islamic point of view, this is not based on narrow family loyalty, but on the Islamic principle of common solidarity which moves from the smaller, local circle to the larger, social context. The principle is central to the implementation of the Islamic social system.

The verse proceeds to outline three prohibitions in contrast to the three orders with which it begins, stating that God *"forbids all that is shameful, all reprehensible conduct and aggression."* (Verse 90) Under shameful conduct everything that goes beyond the limits of propriety is included, but the term is often used to denote dishonourable assault and indecency. Thus it combines both aggression and transgression. Hence it has become synonymous with shamefulness.

'Reprehensible conduct' refers to any action of which pure, undistorted human nature disapproves. Islam also disapproves of any such conduct because it is the religion of pure human nature. Human nature can however become distorted, but Islamic law remains constant, pointing to what human nature is like before distortion creeps in.

Aggression' in this context denotes injustice as well as any excess that goes beyond what is right and fair. No community can survive when it is based on the spread of shameful, reprehensible conduct and aggression. No community can hope to flourish if it does not stamp out shameful conduct, reprehensible actions and aggression. Hence human nature is bound to rebel against these whenever they are allowed to spread in society.

Human nature will not allow such destructive forces to remain in full play without staging a rebellion. This is inevitable even though such forces may be exceedingly powerful, functioning under the protection of tyrant rulers. In fact the history of humanity is full of such rebellions aiming to purge humanity of such parasites, in the same way that the human body mobilizes its defences to expel any alien organism. The very fact that human nature rebels against them proves that they are alien to proper human life. While God enjoins justice and kindness, He forbids shameful, reprehensible conduct and aggression. This is in perfect accord with what pure human nature desires. It strengthens human nature and supports its resistance

to such alien forces. Hence the final comment in the verse tells us that God *"admonishes you so that you may take heed."* (Verse 90) The admonition serves to awaken human conscience and support an undistorted human nature.

Using Oaths for Deceit

> *Fulfil your covenant with God whenever you make a pledge. Do not break your oaths after you have confirmed them, and have made God your surety. God certainly knows all that you do.* (Verse 91)

Fulfilment of God's covenant includes the pledge Muslims give to the Prophet (peace be upon him) when they accept the Islamic faith, as well as every pledge or promise that involves something permissible or encouraged. The fulfilment of promises and pledges ensures that trust is maintained in human transactions. Without such trust human society, and humanity generally, cannot have a solid foundation. The verse makes sure that those who make a pledge or a covenant are ashamed to break their oaths after having confirmed them, making God the surety for their fulfilment, and appealing to Him as their witness. This is followed by an implicit warning: *"God certainly knows all that you do."* (Verse 91)

Islam takes a very strict view on the question of fulfilling covenants, allowing no breach or violation under any circumstances. This is important because it constitutes the basis of trust in any community. Without strict fulfilment of covenants, the whole structure of the community collapses. The treatment of this point in the *sūrah* does not stop at merely stating an order to fulfil all covenants and pledges and a prohibition of their violation. It goes further than that, showing the violation of covenants in a very bad light. It also dismisses every excuse people make to justify their going back on covenants: *"Be not like her who untwists the yarn which she has firmly spun, using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular group may be more powerful than another. By this, God puts you to the test. On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that on which you now differ."* (Verse 92)

A person who goes back on his pledges is shown like a stupid, imbecile woman who has no resolve. She spins her yarn and then breaks it leaving it in loose thread. Every little detail given in the example suggests shame and ignominy. The whole picture is meant to give a completely repulsive impression. No honourable person would compromise himself to look so idiotic as the woman who spends her life doing what is of no use and no value whatsoever.

Some people tried to justify going back on the covenants they had made with the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) by saying that he and his companions were but a weak group, while the Quraysh enjoyed strength of numbers and

position. The *sūrah* makes it clear that this is no justification for making their oaths a means of deception, showing themselves ready to go back on them whenever it suited them: "*using your oaths as a means to deceive one another, simply because a particular community may be more powerful than another.*" This is a clear order not to contemplate breaking pledges in order to gain favour with a community that may appear to be more powerful.

The Qur'ānic statement includes cases when a breach of a covenant is justified on the basis of what we call today, 'national interests'. A certain country may abrogate a treaty it has signed with another, or with a group of countries, only because a stronger nation or group of nations happen to be on the other side. 'National interest' is used to justify such violation of binding covenants and treaties. Islam does not approve of such justification. It makes its firm stand that covenants must be honoured; and oaths must never be made in deception. At the same time Islam does not approve of any pledge, treaty or covenant that is not based on righteousness and God-consciousness. Islam is very clear on this. No pledge or cooperation in injustice, transgression, disobedience to God, usurpation of other people's rights or exploitation of other communities and countries is admissible in Islam. Such is the foundation on which the Muslim community and the Islamic state were built. Hence, security, trust as also sound and healthy relationships on individual and international levels were enjoyed by the whole world at the time when Islam assumed the leadership.

This Qur'ānic statement warns against seeking such an excuse. It warns that when a situation like the one described in the verse prevails, and one community appears to be far more powerful than another, it serves as a trial to Muslims. God wishes to test their resolve to honour their covenants so that they may prove their unwillingness to break a covenant when they have made God their witness to it. "*By this, God puts you to the test.*" (Verse 92) As for differences that may exist between nations and communities, these are left to God to resolve on the appointed day: "*On the Day of Resurrection He will make clear to you all that on which you now differ.*" (Verse 92) This statement serves to reassure the Muslim community as it resolves to honour its pledges to, and treaties with, communities that do not share its faith.

> *Had God so willed, He would have surely made you all one single community. But He lets go astray him that wills [to go astray] and guides aright him that wills [to be guided]. You shall certainly be called to account for all that you do.* (Verse 93)

It is God's will that people should be created with different aptitudes and susceptibilities. He could have created them with the same aptitude, but He has so willed that each individual is so unlike any other. He has set into operation rules and laws which ensure that people can follow His guidance or choose to go astray. These

fulfil His will in relation to mankind. Within these laws, everyone is responsible for the actions he or she takes. Bearing this in mind, it follows that differences of faith and beliefs cannot be used as an excuse to violate treaties and covenants. These differences have their reasons which are subject to God's will. Covenants are to be honoured regardless of differences in faith.

Do we need to comment on such clean and straightforward dealings, or such religious tolerance? The fact is that throughout history, such cleanliness and honest dealing were only experienced under Islam, when the Muslim community was truly guided by the Qur'ān.

Ideals Made Practical

The *sūrah* places even greater emphasis on the fulfilment of pledges and the prohibition of resorting to oaths in order to deceive others, lulling them into a false sense of security in order to make transitory gain. It warns that the only result of such deception is to weaken the basis of social life and undermine bonds, commitments and beliefs. It warns against God's severe punishment in the hereafter. At the same time, it holds the promise of a much better reward which more than compensates for any trivial gain they may have had to sacrifice in honouring their pledges. It reminds them that what they have in this life is transitory, certain to come to an end, while that which God holds is inexhaustible, everlasting.

> *Do not use your oaths as a means to deceive one another, lest your foot should slip after it has been firm, and lest you should be made to suffer the evil [consequences] of your having debarred others from the path of God, with tremendous suffering awaiting you. Do not barter away your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if you but knew it. Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting. We will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did.* (Verses 94-96)

When oaths are sworn only to deceive other people, the result is the weakening of faith in one's own conscience and giving to others a distorted image of it. Someone who swears in order to deceive others cannot have firm belief, and cannot walk firmly along its path. At the same time, he presents a bad image of his professed faith to those who trust him only to find themselves deceived. In this way, he sets a very bad example of believers, in effect turning others away from God's faith.

In fact whole communities accepted the faith of Islam when they realized how faithful to their trust the Muslims were. The unhesitating fulfilment by the Muslims of their promises, their true oaths and clean, straightforward dealings motivated

other communities to learn more about Islam and believe in it. Thus the resulting gain was far greater than the temporary loss that appeared to be incurred by fulfilment of pledges.

The Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet have left a very strong impression on Muslims in relation to their promises and treaties. This has remained the distinctive characteristic of their dealings with others both at individual and international levels. It is reported that a truce was made between Mu`āwiyah, the fifth Caliph, and the Byzantine Emperor. When the truce was approaching its end, Mu`āwiyah marched towards Byzantium. He was very close to the border when the truce expired, and he began military activity. `Umar ibn `Utbah, a Companion of the Prophet in his army said to him: "Mu`āwiyah! God be glorified. Honour your pledges and never violate them. I have heard God's Messenger [peace be upon him] saying: 'Whoever has a treaty with other people must not break his commitment until the term has lapsed.' Mu`āwiyah ordered his army to retreat and marched home." Examples in history of Muslims honouring treaties, even though their immediate interests would have been better served by abrogating them, are numerous.

The Qur'ān was able to make such a distinctly strong impression on Muslims through repeated warnings against violation of covenants, promises of reward for honouring them, and by making the covenant a bond with God. It shows the benefit that may result from such violation of commitment to be paltry, while God rewards generously those who are true to their word: *"Do not barter away your covenant with God for a trifling price. Surely, that which is with God is far better for you, if but knew it."* (Verse 95) The verse reminds us that what human beings may have is transitory, even though it may be all the property of one person. On the other hand, what is with God remains for ever: *"Whatever you have is certain to come to an end, but that which is with God is everlasting."* (Verse 96) Thus their determination to fulfil their commitments, even though they may be burdensome, is immensely strengthened. Those who persevere in the face of difficulty are promised generous reward: "We *will certainly grant those who are patient in adversity their reward according to the best that they ever did*" (Verse 96) The promise implies that their failings are overlooked, so that their reward takes into account only the best of their actions.

Equal Reward for Equal Sexes

The next verse lays down a general rule about action and reward: *"Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man or woman, and is a believer, We shall most certainly give a good life. And We shall indeed reward these according to the best that they ever did."* (Verse 97) The first item in this rule is that the two sexes, male and female, are equal with regard to their actions and the reward they receive for them. They enjoy the same

relationship with God and the same standing in His regard. Hence, He rewards them equally, applying one measure to both of them. Although the term, 'whoever', with which the verse opens, includes both men and women, the Qur'ānic statement emphasizes this by stating it very clearly: *"Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man or woman."* This equality is stressed emphatically in the same *sūrah* that gives us an image of how Arab *jāhiliyyah* society looked upon women.

It tells us how society looked down upon women, and the extent of the depression a father felt when he was given the news of the birth of a girl, leading him to hide away from his friends and acquaintances, because of the shame he felt.

Another aspect of this general rule is that good action must have a strong foundation, which must be faith. Without it, good action cannot be cemented into a well built structure. It remains haphazard, and it soon becomes like ashes blown in every direction by a strong wind. Faith provides the axis around which all bonds turn. It gives good action a motive and an aim. Thus it gives goodness a strong foundation so that it is not swayed by fleeting desires.

The rule also establishes that when good action is coupled with faith, it is rewarded by a goodly life in this world. It need not be a life of affluence and riches. It may be a goodly life with or without plenty of money. There are many things in life, other than money, which provide a goodly feeling and happiness. A strong bond with God and a feeling of trust in Him and His abounding grace make life happy indeed. Life may also be blessed with good health, a peaceful and blessed living, love and compassion. It may have the rejoice generated by good action and its effects on oneself and society. Money is only one aspect, and little of it is sufficient when one looks up to what is more blessed and longer lasting.

This general rule also makes clear that a goodly life in this world will not reduce in any way one's good reward in the life to come. Indeed the reward is based on the best actions believers do in this world. This implies, as we have stated earlier, that God will forgive them their sins. This is indeed the best reward to which human beings may aspire.

Attitude to Qur'ānic Recitation

The *sūrah* then speaks about the Qur'ān and the values to be observed when reciting it. It also mentions some of the false assertions the unbelievers used to make about it. *"Whenever you read the Qur'ān, seek refuge with God from Satan, the accursed. He certainly has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord. He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity."* (Verses 98-100) Seeking God's refuge against Satan prepares the atmosphere such that it is more congenial for the recitation of God's book. It gives a

sense of purity that strengthens the reader's bond with God, so that he is free from any other preoccupation, that is with any aspect of the world of evil that Satan represents.

This is all generated by seeking refuge with God from Satan and his schemes. Yet it is made clear that Satan *"has no power over those who believe and place their trust in their Lord."* (Verse 99) Those who appeal to God alone and purge their hearts of any loyalty to any other bond are free of Satan's power. Much as he may whisper to them, their bond with God protects them from toeing his line. They may slip and commit errors, but they do not submit to Satan. They will always purge their hearts of Satan's influence and turn to God in repentance. *"He has power only over those who are willing to follow him, and thus ascribe to him a share in God's divinity."* (Verse 1 00) It is such people who make Satan their patron, who allow their desires to dictate their actions under Satan's influence that are subject to his power. Indeed some of them make Satan their Lord. Indeed some have even worshipped Satan, or a similar deity of evil. However, following Satan's footsteps is a kind of associating him as a partner with God.

The Nature of False Fabrication

The *sūrah* also mentions some of the falsehoods the unbelievers circulated about the Qur'ān:

> *When We replace one verse by another – and God knows best what He reveals – they say: 'You are but a fabricator.' Indeed most of them have no knowledge. Say: 'The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth, so as to strengthen the believers, and to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.' We know full well that they say: It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.' But the man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear. Those who do not believe in God's revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them. It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars.* (Verses 101-105)

The unbelievers do not understand the role of God's book and the fact that it has been revealed to establish a global human society and create a community to lead it along its way. They do not realize that it is the final message to come from on high to mankind. They are oblivious of the essential truth that God, who has created man, knows best which concepts, principles and legislation are best suited for humanity. When He abrogates a verse that has completed its purpose, He puts another in its place which is more suitable for the stage the new community has reached, and better suited for the long future, the duration of which is known only to Him. This is

certainly His prerogative. The verses of this book may be likened to a medicine which is given in small doses to a patient until he is cured. Then he is advised to resume a normal diet which helps to protect his health.

But the unbelievers understand nothing of all this. Hence it is not surprising that they did not appreciate the purpose behind the abrogation of one verse by another and accused the Prophet of being a fabricator when he was indeed the most honest and truthful person they had ever known. Hence the verse comments: "*Indeed most of them have no knowledge.*" (Verse 101)

The *sūrah* then states the truth of the revelation of the Qur'ān: "*Say: The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth.*" (Verse 102) It could not be a fabrication when it was brought down by the Holy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel (peace be upon him). He has brought it *'from your Lord'*, not from you, and this is done *in truth'*, which means that no falsehood can ever be attached to it. The purpose of its revelation is *'to strengthen the believers,'* who maintain the bond between God and their hearts. These realize that it has come from God to spell out the truth and make it clear for all mankind. It has another purpose as well, which is '*to provide guidance and good news to those who surrender themselves to God.'* (Verse 102) They are strengthened by the fact that they are guided along the right path, as also given the happy news of achieving victory and establishing their power.

> *We know full well that they say: 'It is but a man that teaches him [all] this.' But the man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear.* (Verse 103)

This was yet another falsehood the unbelievers tried to assert. They claimed that the Qur'ān was taught to the Prophet by a man whom they named. We have different reports about the particular person they mentioned. One report points to a foreign servant attached to one clan or another of the Quraysh who used to sell goods near al-Ṣafā. The Prophet might have sat with him and spoke to him at times. But the man spoke a foreign language. His knowledge of Arabic was sufficient only to conduct necessary business transactions.

Another report by Ibn Isĥāq in his biography of the Prophet suggests that the Prophet used to sit at al-Marwah with a Christian servant named Sabī`ah, although some people called him Jabr. He was a slave owned by a man from al-Ĥađramī clan. Ibn Kathīr, the historian, and other scholars like `Ikrimah and Qatādah mention that the man's name was Ya'īsh.

Another scholar and historian, al-Ṭabarī, reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin, that the Prophet used to teach a slave called Bal`ām who spoke a foreign language. The unbelievers used to see the Prophet leaving his place. So they

came up with their ridiculous fabrication, saying that Bal`ām taught the Prophet.

God answers all these fabrications with a simple, clear statement that ends all argument: "*The man to whom they so maliciously allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is Arabic speech, pure and clear.*" (Verse 103) It is difficult to imagine that they were serious when they made such ludicrous claims. It was all most likely a part of their evil scheming which they knew to be absolutely false. They were fully aware of the merits of the Qur'ān and its literary excellence. How could they claim that a man speaking a foreign tongue could have taught it to Muĥammad. If such a man could have produced such a masterpiece, why would he not claim it for himself, without teaching it to another?

Today, with humanity having made such huge advancements, and human talent having produced such great books and masterpieces, social orders and legislation, anyone who appreciates literature, social systems and legal codes is bound to acknowledge that the Qur'ān could not have been authored by a human being.

Even the atheists of Communist Russia who wished to criticize Islam in the Conference of Orientalists held in 1954 managed no better than to claim that the Qur'ān could not have been the work of one man. It must have been the collective work of a large community. Moreover, they claimed, it could not have been written totally in Arabia. Some parts of it must have been written in other parts of the world! They felt that no individual had the talent to produce this book, and nor had one nation the knowledge embodied in it. They could not admit to the force of sound logic and attribute the Qur'ān to its true Author, God, the Lord of all the worlds. They denied God's existence. How could they acknowledge revelation and prophethood?

This is the view of some specialist scholars in the twentieth century. Compared with it, the Makkan unbelievers' claim that a foreign slave who spoke little Arabic taught it to Muĥammad appears at its most ludicrous.

The Qur'ān states the reason behind such false assertions: "*Those who do not believe in God's revelations shall not be granted guidance by God. Grievous suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 104) Those who refuse to believe in the signs given by God will not be guided to the truth concerning this divine revelation. Indeed God does not guide them to the truth concerning anything. This is the natural consequence of their unbelief and deliberate rejection of the message God's signs impart to them. Hence, "*grievous suffering awaits them,'* after they have been in continuous error.

The *sūrah* then makes it clear that false claims against God could not be made by Muĥammad, whose honesty was exemplary. Such falsehood could only be asserted by people like them refusing to believe in God: "*It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood. It is they indeed who are liars.*" (Verse 105) Lying is

a cardinal sin which no believer perpetrates. The Prophet himself made it clear that a true believer could at times commit some sinful action, but a true believer would never deliberately tell a lie.

Rejecting the Faith after Accepting it

The *sūrah* outlines here the rulings concerning anyone who disavows faith after having accepted it:

> *As for anyone who denies God after having accepted the faith — and this certainly does not apply to one who does it under duress, while his heart remains true to his faith, but applies to him who willingly opens his heart to unbelief — upon all such falls God's wrath, and theirs will be a tremendous suffering. This is because they love the life of this world better than the lift to come. God does not bestow His guidance on those who reject the truth. Such are those whose hearts and ears and eyes are sealed by God; such are the heedless. Without doubt, in the lift to come they will be the losers.* (Verses 106-109)

The early Muslims in Makkah were subjected to such brutal oppression as could only be endured by those who had made up their minds to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of a higher destiny in the life to come. Such people endure all the atrocities the unbelievers perpetrate against them, rather than revert to pagan faith.

The *sūrah* paints in ghastly colours the crime of the person who reverts to unbelief after having known the true faith, declared his acceptance of it and experienced its blessings. Such a person only reverts to unbelief because he prefers the comforts and pleasures of this world to the happiness of the life to come. Hence such people are threatened with God's wrath and tremendous suffering, in addition to being deprived of God's guidance. They are described as heedless, as having sealed their hearts, ears and eyes, and as being certain losers in the life to come. The important point here is that faith must never be subject to bargaining or to a balance of profit and loss. When a person's heart and mind submit to faith, they do not admit any worldly influence. This world has its values and considerations, while faith has its own. The two sets cannot overlap or have anything in common. Faith must not be treated in a trifling way. It is not a bargain that you make one day and reverse the next. It is far more precious. Hence the crime is painted in such ghastly colours and the punishment is seen to be extremely stern.

The only exception from such condemnation is the one who professes, under utter duress, to have rejected the faith only to save himself from certain death, while his heart remains full of faith, certain that it is the truth. It is reported that this ruling was revealed in connection with `Ammār ibn Yāsir. Al-Ṭabarī reports on the authority of

Muĥammad, `Ammār's son, that "the unbelievers in Makkah tortured his father, `Ammār ibn Yāsir, continuously until he gave in to some of their demands. He then reported this to the Prophet who asked him: 'How do you feel deep at heart?' He said: 'My heart is full of faith, entertaining no doubt whatsoever.' The Prophet said to him: 'If they try again, do likewise.' This was a concession, and it applies to anyone in similar circumstances.'[1]

Yet many believers refused to satisfy their torturers, preferring to die rather than give in, even only verbally, to their demands. This was the stance taken by `Ammār's own parents. His mother, Sumayyah, was so resolute in her resistance that she was stabbed with a spear in her vagina and died a martyr. His father also was tortured to death without giving in. Similarly did Bilāl, who was singled out for a special treatment. The unbelievers laid him down on the burning sands in the summer heat of Arabia and put on his chest a large rock and dragged him along, ordering him to reject his faith, but he refused and declared: "He is only One God." He then said to them: "Had I known anything that would give you more displeasure, I would have said it."

Another example is that of Ĥabīb ibn Zayd al-Anşārī, when Musaylamah, the liar who claimed to be a messenger of God asked him: "Do you believe that Muĥammad is God's Messenger?" Ĥabīb said: "Yes, indeed." Musaylamah asked him: "Do you believe that I, too, am God's messenger?" Ĥabīb said: "I hear nothing." Musaylamah then ordered that Ĥabīb be dismembered. He kept asking him and he kept giving the same replies until he died under such torture.

`Abdullāh ibn Ĥudhāfah of the Sahm clan of the Quraysh was a companion of the Prophet who was once taken captive by the Byzantines. He was taken to their ruler who offered him a share in his kingdom and that he would give him his own daughter as a wife if he would embrace Christianity. `Abdullāh said: "If you were to give me all your kingdom and all the wealth and property of all Arabs in return for disowning the faith of Muĥammad, (peace be upon him), I would not accept for even a blink of an eye." The Byzantine ruler said: "If you refuse, then I will kill you." `Abdullāh said: "Do what you like." The ruler then ordered that he should be crucified. Soldiers then shot at him with arrows piercing his legs and arms, but he refused to convert to Christianity despite all this.

The ruler then ordered that he should be brought down from the cross. A large pan made of copper was put over a great fire until it was boiling fiercely. Another Muslim captive was then thrown into the pan and soon his bones were visible. `Abdullāh was then told to convert to Christianity, threatened that he would suffer

[1] Abū Ja`far Muĥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ţabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān `An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān.* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1984, Vol. 8, Part 14, p. 182.

the same fate if he did not. He refused, and the ruler ordered that he should be thrown into the pan. As he was being lifted, the ruler noticed that his eyes were tearful. He ordered that he should be brought down. He then spoke to him only to be astonished by `Abdullāh's explanation of his crying. `Abdullāh said: "I only cried because I have one soul, and I am subjected to this torture for my faith. I wish I had as many souls as the number of hairs on my body and each one of them was subjected to the same fate."

Another report suggests that the Byzantine ruler then imprisoned `Abdullāh ibn Ĥudhāfah for several days without food or water. He then sent him wine and pork. `Abdullāh touched nothing of this. He was then taken to the ruler who asked him why he did not eat or drink. `Abdullāh said: "In my condition, [i.e. a case of starvation approaching death] it is lawful for me to eat and drink the otherwise forbidden things you sent me. But I will not give you the pleasure of feeling that you have broken my resolve." The ruler secretly admired `Abdullāh for his great resistance under pressure. He said to him: "Kiss my head and I will set you free." `Abdullāh said: "I will do so if you will also set free all the other Muslim captives you hold." The ruler agreed and `Abdullāh kissed his head. The ruler was true to his promise and set them all free. `Abdullāh took them all to Madinah and reported what happened to the Caliph, `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who said: "It is the duty of every Muslim to kiss `Abdullāh ibn Ĥudhāfah's head. I will be the first to do so." He then stood up and kissed `Abdullāh's head.

This shows that faith is a matter of grave importance. There can be no compromise about it. To uphold it may require paying a heavy price. But, to a Muslim, faith is far more valuable than any price. It is so also in God's view. It is a trust honoured only by one who is prepared to sacrifice his life for it.[2] Indeed the life of this world and all the comforts it may provide is of little consequence compared with faith.

> *But then, your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who forsake their homes after enduring trials and persecution, and strive hard [in God's cause] and remain patient in adversity. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful. One day every soul will come pleading for itself. Every soul will be repaid in full for all its actions, and none shall be wronged.* (Verses 110-111)

The reference here is to some believers who were among the weaker elements of Arabian society. They were subjected to great pressure and had to renounce their faith. However, they subsequently migrated and joined the believers when they had a chance to do so. They strove hard for the cause of Islam, enduring much hardship

[2] The author himself honoured this trust when he refused to succumb to all the pressure and torture he was subjected to. He sacrificed his life when he was executed for no crime other than holding his views. This was in the summer of 1966, in the reign of Nasser, the Egyptian dictator. — Editor's note.

along the way. The verse gives them the good news of God's forgiveness and an abundance of His grace: *"After all this, your Lord is Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful."* (Verse 110)

This will take place on a day when every soul will be preoccupied with its own affairs. It has no time for anyone else. The statement, *"every soul will come pleading for itself,"* gives us a sense of the seriousness of the whole matter. Everyone will be trying hard to save themselves from the suffering that awaits the wrongdoers. But pleading will be of no avail, for it is the time of reckoning and reward. Hence: *"Every soul will be repaid in frill for all its actions, and none shall be wronged."* (Verse 111)

6
Advocacy by Example

وَضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا قَرْيَةً كَانَتْ ءَامِنَةً مُّطْمَئِنَّةً يَأْتِيهَا رِزْقُهَا رَغَدًا مِّن كُلِّ مَكَانٍ فَكَفَرَتْ بِأَنْعُمِ ٱللَّهِ فَأَذَٰقَهَا ٱللَّهُ لِبَاسَ ٱلْجُوعِ وَٱلْخَوْفِ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God's favours. Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do. (112)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ وَهُمْ ظَٰلِمُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

There had come to them a messenger from among themselves, but they denied him. Therefore suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers. (113)

فَكُلُوا۟ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ حَلَٰلًا طَيِّبًا وَٱشْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَتَ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

So eat of all the lawful and good things God has provided for you, and be grateful to God for His favours, if it is truly Him that you worship. (114)

إِنَّمَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْمَيْتَةَ وَٱلدَّمَ وَلَحْمَ ٱلْخِنزِيرِ وَمَآ أُهِلَّ لِغَيْرِ ٱللَّهِ بِهِۦ ۖ فَمَنِ ٱضْطُرَّ غَيْرَ بَاغٍ وَلَا عَادٍ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

He has forbidden you only carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and anything over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if anyone is driven to it by necessity, neither desiring it nor exceeding his immediate need, then God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (115)

وَلَا تَقُولُوا۟ لِمَا تَصِفُ أَلْسِنَتُكُمُ ٱلْكَذِبَ هَٰذَا حَلَٰلٌ وَهَٰذَا حَرَامٌ لِّتَفْتَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلْكَذِبَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلْكَذِبَ لَا يُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١١٦﴾

Do not say — for any false thing you may utter with your tongues — that 'This is lawful and this is forbidden', so as to attribute your lying inventions to God. Indeed those who attribute their lying inventions to God will never be

successful. (116)

مَتَٰعٞ قَلِيلٞ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ١١٧

Brief is their enjoyment [of this life], and grievous suffering awaits them [in the life to come]. (117)

وَعَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ حَرَّمۡنَا مَا قَصَصۡنَا عَلَيۡكَ مِن قَبۡلُۖ وَمَا ظَلَمۡنَٰهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ١١٨

To the Jews We have made unlawful such things as We have mentioned to you earlier. We did them no wrong, but they were the ones who persistently wronged themselves. (118)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ عَمِلُواْ ٱلسُّوٓءَ بِجَهَٰلَةٖ ثُمَّ تَابُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَ وَأَصۡلَحُوٓاْ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهَا لَغَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ١١٩

But indeed your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent and mend their ways. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (119)

إِنَّ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ كَانَ أُمَّةٗ قَانِتٗا لِّلَّهِ حَنِيفٗا وَلَمۡ يَكُ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ١٢٠

In truth Abraham was a model, devoutly obedient to God, and true in faith. He was not one of those who associated partners with God. (120)

شَاكِرٗا لِّأَنۡعُمِهِۚ ٱجۡتَبَىٰهُ وَهَدَىٰهُ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ١٢١

He showed his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path. (121)

وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا حَسَنَةٗۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ١٢٢

We bestowed on him good in this world; and truly, in the life to come he will be among the righteous. (122)

ثُمَّ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ أَنِ ٱتَّبِعۡ مِلَّةَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ حَنِيفٗاۖ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ ١٢٣

And now We have inspired you with [this message]: 'Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.' (123)

إِنَّمَا جُعِلَ ٱلسَّبۡتُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ٱخۡتَلَفُواْ فِيهِۚ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَيَحۡكُمُ بَيۡنَهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُواْ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَ ١٢٤

[The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of

Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute. (124)

ٱدۡعُ إِلَىٰ سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلۡحِكۡمَةِ وَٱلۡمَوۡعِظَةِ ٱلۡحَسَنَةِۖ وَجَٰدِلۡهُم بِٱلَّتِي هِيَ أَحۡسَنُۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦۖ وَهُوَ أَعۡلَمُ بِٱلۡمُهۡتَدِينَ ١٢٥

Call people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path and who are rightly guided. (125)

وَإِنۡ عَاقَبۡتُمۡ فَعَاقِبُواْ بِمِثۡلِ مَا عُوقِبۡتُم بِهِۦۖ وَلَئِن صَبَرۡتُمۡ لَهُوَ خَيۡرٞ لِّلصَّٰبِرِينَ ١٢٦

If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you. But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. (126)

وَٱصۡبِرۡ وَمَا صَبۡرُكَ إِلَّا بِٱللَّهِۚ وَلَا تَحۡزَنۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا تَكُ فِي ضَيۡقٖ مِّمَّا يَمۡكُرُونَ ١٢٧

Endure, then, with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient; and do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues. (127)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَواْ وَّٱلَّذِينَ هُم مُّحۡسِنُونَ ١٢٨

God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good. (128)

Overview

Earlier in the *sūrah* God gave two examples to drive home to people an important principle of faith. Now He gives another to portray the situation of Makkah and its pagan people who denied the blessings God had bestowed on them. The example serves to make clear what destiny awaits them if they persist in their attitude. The example highlights the blessings of abundant provisions, peace and security given to the city before mentioning the good and wholesome things they prohibit themselves on the basis of their pagan myths. In fact God has made these lawful to mankind. He has clearly outlined what He has forbidden, and it does not include the matters they

prohibit themselves. This is an act of ingratitude to God, giving no thanks to Him for His blessings. By adopting this attitude they lay themselves open to God's severe punishment.

As it outlines the foul things God has forbidden to Muslims, the *sūrah* mentions the wholesome things God had forbidden to the Jews because of their wrongdoing. These were not forbidden to their forefathers at the time of Abraham who was a devout servant of God. These were indeed permissible to him and his offspring. Some were later forbidden to the Jews as a sort of punishment for their subsequent disobedience. Those who then mended their ways could receive God's forgiveness and mercy.

Then God revealed a new message to Muĥammad as the final version of His faith. Thus all wholesome things were made lawful again. The same applies to the restrictions of the Sabbath, the day on which the Jews are forbidden fishing and hunting. The Sabbath applies to its own people who disagreed over it. Some of them obeyed the orders and refrained from doing what God had forbidden, while others transgressed and incurred God's punishment. They were sent to a depth far below that of human beings.

At this point the *sūrah* comes to its close with an order given to God's Messenger to call on people to follow God's guidance. He should make his call with wisdom and goodly admonition, and with argument that is kindly. He is also told to maintain the laws of justice, replying to any aggression with similar measure, knowing that patience and forbearance are even better. The final outcome is indeed in favour of the God-fearing because God is with them, showing them the way to success, supporting and taking good care of them.

An Example to Avoid

> *God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God's favours. Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do. There had come to them a messenger from among themselves, but they denied him. Therefore suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers.* (Verses 112-113)

This case is very similar to that of Makkah where God's sacred house was built. It was made a consecrated city where everyone could feel secure. No one was threatened, even though he might be guilty of murder. All enjoyed the security of being in the neighbourhood of God's Inviolable House. People all around were threatened by all manner of dangers, while the people of Makkah enjoyed peace and security. Their provisions came to them easily from all over the world, carried by

pilgrims or trade caravans which travelled in peace. Yet they lived in a barren valley with no cultivation or vegetation. Nevertheless, ever since the days of Abraham, they enjoyed a life of prosperity in addition to their security.

Then a Messenger came to them: a man from among them whom they knew to always tell the truth and to be exemplary in his honesty. They could find nothing wrong with his character. It was God who sent him as His Messenger, bringing mercy to them and to all mankind, preaching the same faith as that of Abraham, who built the Inviolable House of worship which ensured their security and prosperity. But they were quick to reject his message, levelling at him all sorts of false accusations, and subjecting him and his followers to persecution.

The example cited here by God is practically identical with their own situation: *"God cites the case of a town living in security and ease. Its sustenance comes to it in abundance from all quarters. Yet it was ungrateful for God's favours."* (Verse 112) The result of these people's attitude is placed before their very eyes. They denied the messenger God sent them, *"Therefore, God caused it to experience the misery of hunger and fear for what its people used to do."* (Verse 112) The inevitable result was that *"suffering overwhelmed them as they were wrongdoers."* (Verse 113)

The Arabic text brings this image to life by enhancing the effects of the hunger and fear, making them a garment to be worn, but then they are also made to 'taste' or 'experience' these to generate a more profound effect than that of the image of contact between skin and garment. The text highlights the response of different senses to enhance the effect of experiencing hunger and fear and how this affects the unbelievers. The *sūrah* does this so that they may take heed and endeavour to spare themselves the same destiny which is inevitable if they persist in their wrongdoing.

In virtue of this example which highlights the blessings and the provisions given to them, and by contrast, the risks of restriction and deprivation, they are ordered to eat of the good things God has made lawful to them and to show their gratitude to Him. This is how to maintain the path of true faith, submitting totally to God alone and associating no partners with Him. It is when partners are associated with God that wholesome things are made forbidden in the name of such false deities: *"So eat of all the lawful and good things God has provided for you, and be grateful to God for His favours, if it is truly Him that you worship."* (Verse 114)

The Lawful and the Forbidden

Now the *sūrah* defines what is forbidden, listing the prohibitions in detail. The list does not include what the Arabs forbade themselves, giving these special names such as *baĥīrah, sā'ibah, waṣīlah* and *ĥām*.

We note the exclusivity in the way the prohibitions are listed: "*He has forbidden you only carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and anything over which any name other than God's has been invoked.*" (Verse 115) These are forbidden either because they are physically harmful, as in the case of dead animals, blood and pig meat, or because they are outrageous to faith or to mental well-being as when invoking a creature's name at the time of slaughter. "*But if anyone is driven to it by necessity, neither desiring it nor exceeding his immediate need, then God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 115) This faith of Islam is made easy, involving no affliction. If someone fears to die or becomes ill as a result of hunger and thirst, he may eat something of these forbidden items. We mentioned earlier the differences among scholars as to how much one may eat in such cases. The important thing is that one must neither transgress the principle of prohibition, nor exceed the limits of necessity that override the prohibition in order to permit what is normally restricted.

These are the limits of what God has prohibited or left lawful in relation to food. These limits must not be trespassed on the basis of pagan myths. No one can make a false claim describing as prohibited what God has permitted. Permissibility and prohibition are made by order from God, because they are part of legislation, which is the prerogative of God alone. Anyone who claims legislative authority for himself, on any basis other than God's orders, is an inventor of untruth. Those who invent anything without God's authority will never prosper:

> *Do not say – for any false thing you may utter with your tongues – that 'This is lawful and this is forbidden', so as to attribute your lying inventions to God. Indeed those who attribute their lying inventions to God will never be successful. Brief is their enjoyment [of this life], and grievous suffering awaits them [in the life to come].* (Verses 116-117)

This is an express order that they must not describe anything as lawful or unlawful without appropriate warrant. When they say that something is lawful and another prohibited, without a reliable statement in support, they are stating a naked lie, which they falsely attribute to God. The *sūrah* makes it clear that those who invent falsehood and attribute it to God will have nothing but brief enjoyment in this life. Beyond this, they will be made to experience grievous suffering.

Yet some people have the audacity to enact legislation of their own, relying on no valid text to serve as the basis of what they legislate. What is most amazing is that they still expect to prosper in this life and in the life to come as well.

Beyond this, God has made certain prohibitions applicable to the Jews. These were stated earlier in *Sūrah* 6, Cattle: "*To those who followed the Jewish faith did Wye forbid all animals that have claws; and Wye forbade them the fat of both oxen and sheep, except that which is in their backs and entrails and what is mixed with their bones.*" (6: 146) But this

was a punishment to the Jews in particular. It does not apply to Muslims. Now this *sūrah* states: *"To the Jews We have made unlawful such things as We have mentioned to you earlier. We did them no wrong, but they were the ones who persistently wronged themselves. But indeed your Lord [grants forgiveness] to those who do evil out of ignorance, and then repent and mend their ways. After all this, your Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 118-119)

The Jews deserved that these wholesome things be made forbidden because of their transgression and disobedience of God. It was they who thus wronged themselves, while God did them no wrong. However, a person who does wrong in ignorance, without persistently disobeying God until his death, and who follows his repentance with doing good will surely enjoy God's forgiveness. God will bestow His mercy on him. The statement here is general, so as to include the Jews who repented and anyone else who, in future, repents after committing a wrong. This applies right to the Day of Judgement.

The *sūrah* then mentions Abraham and states the truth about his faith. His mention is relevant to the prohibitions made specially applicable to the Jews. It is also relevant to the claims of the pagan Arabs of the Quraysh that they followed Abraham's faith, particularly in what they prohibited for themselves, consecrating it to their false deities. The *sūrah* makes it clear that the message of the Prophet Muĥammad is directly related to Abraham's faith:

> *In truth Abraham was a model, devoutly obedient to God, and true in faith. He was not one of those who associated partners with God. He showed his gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Him who had chosen him and guided him to a straight path. We bestowed on him good in this world; and truly, in the lift to come he will be among the righteous. And now We have inspired you with [this message]: 'Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.' [The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him. Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute.* (Verses 120-124)

The Qur'ān describes Abraham as the perfect follower of God's guidance, obedient to his Lord, grateful to Him. The Arabic term describing him here, *ummah,* means a 'nation' or a 'leader'. Thus the verse may be taken to mean that Abraham was equal to a whole nation in his faith and true obedience. Or it may be understood to mean that he was a leader to be followed in all goodly matters. In commentaries on the Qur'ān, both meanings are mentioned. In fact they are not that far apart. A leader who encourages his followers to do what is good leads a whole nation and receives his own reward and a reward similar to that given to all those whom he guides. This means that he is, in his goodness and reward, like a whole nation.

Abraham is also described as being *'devoutly obedient to God'*, always seeking to be pure in his devotion, *'and true in faith'* which means that he always sought the truth and abided by it. Since he never associated partners with God, those who do so must not claim any relationship with him, because there is no such affinity.

Abraham also showed his gratitude, by word and deed, *for the blessings bestowed by Him'*. He was totally unlike those pagans who denied God's blessings verbally and showed their ingratitude by deed. They even claimed that what they enjoyed of God's sustenance was given to them by the false deities they associated with Him. Hence God chose Abraham and *'guided him to a straight path.'* This is the path of faith based on God's absolute oneness.

This is the truth about Abraham whom both the Jews and the Arab unbelievers claimed to follow. *"And now We have inspired you with [this message]: 'Follow the creed of Abraham, who was true in faith, and who was not one of those who associated partners with God.'"* (Verse 123) This means a re-establishment of the faith based on God's oneness, followed by Abraham and reiterated in the new message revealed to Muḥammad.

The restrictions of the Sabbath apply to the Jews only, who differ on its details. It was neither a part of the faith of Abraham nor sanctioned in the faith of Muḥammad who followed Abraham's footsteps. *"[The observance of] the Sabbath was ordained only to those who differed about him."* (Verse 124) Their case is left to God who knows the truth about all matters: *"Your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they dispute."*(Verse 124)

The Best Method of Advocacy

The *sūrah* has thus clarified what similarities may appear between the faith based on believing in God's oneness as outlined by Abraham and perfected by Islam, God's final message to mankind, and the deviant beliefs to which the Jews or the pagan Arabs adhered. All this is part of what the Qur'ān has been revealed to set right. The Prophet is told to continue his efforts, calling on people to follow the divine faith, but utilizing wisdom and good exhortation, and delivering his argument in a kindly manner. If his opponents go on the offensive and act aggressively, the penalty should be of the same type as the aggression, or the Prophet may choose the better way of forgiveness and patience in adversity, despite being able to exact punishment. This is sure to bring him a better outcome. He need not grieve however over those who reject God's guidance, nor should he be afflicted by their scheming against him and his followers.

> *Call people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner. Your Lord knows best who strays from His*

> *path and who are rightly guided. If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you. But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. Endure, then, with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient; and do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues. God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good.* (Verses 125-128)

Such are the basic rules of Islamic advocacy and such are its appropriate methods. The proper approach is being shown here to the Prophet and to all who succeed him in advocating the Islamic faith. The advocate must make it clear that he simply calls on people to follow the path outlined by God. He is not calling for any personal or national cause. He is simply discharging his duty towards his Lord. He claims no credit for himself, nor does he have a favour to curry with the message itself or with those who respond to his call and follow divine guidance. He receives his reward from God alone.

Advocacy must be undertaken with wisdom. The advocate of the divine message must take into consideration the situation and circumstances of the people whom he addresses in order to determine what he tells them on each occasion. He must not make things appear difficult to them, nor should he burden them with a long list of duties before they are so prepared. He must also consider how he should address them, and how to diversify his method of address in accordance with different circumstances. He must not let his enthusiasm carry the day so as to overlook the prerequisites of wisdom.

Together with wisdom goes goodly exhortation which addresses hearts gently, seeking to kindle good feeling and response. No unnecessary reproach or remonstration should be thrown at them. An advocate of Islam does not publicize genuine mistakes which people commit with good intention. Kindly exhortation often attracts people to follow God's guidance, achieving good results that cannot be achieved through reproach or rebuke.

The third element in this proper approach to Islamic advocacy is to argue *'in the most kindly manner'*. This means that there should be no personal criticism or humiliation of an opponent. It is important in such an argument to make the other party realize that, as advocates of the cause of faith, we have no vain desire to win an argument or to boast about having an irrefutable case. Our aim must always be clear, namely, to arrive at the truth. Human beings have their pride, and they will not concede any point unless the argument is carried on in a kindly manner. No one likes to be defeated in argument. People often confuse their own prestige with the value of their opinion, considering that they are humiliated when they have to admit that their view is mistaken. It is only when argument is carried out kindly that people's sensitivity can be tempered, as they realize that their own dignity is preserved. They

then recognize that an advocate of Islam seeks only the truth and has no desire to press home personal advantage.

In order to help advocates of Islam restrain themselves and not allow themselves to be carried away by enthusiasm, the *sūrah* mentions that it is God who truly knows those who follow His guidance and those who are in error. Hence there is no need to press an argument beyond what is reasonable. Issues should be stated clearly and matters should then be left to God: *"Your Lord knows best who strays from His path and who are rightly guided."* (Verse 125)

This is the proper method of advocacy as long as it remains within the realm of verbal address and stating a point. Should the advocates of Islam suffer aggression, then the whole situation changes. Aggression is an action that must be repelled with similar force in order to preserve the dignity of the truth and to ensure that falsehood does not triumph. Response to aggression, however, must not exceed the limits of repelling it. Islam is the faith of justice and moderation, peace and reconciliation. It repels any aggression launched against it or its followers, without committing any aggression against others: *"If you should punish, then let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong done to you."* (Verse 126)

This is indeed part of the method of advocacy. To repel aggression within the limits of justice preserves the dignity of the Islamic message so that it suffers no humiliation. A humiliated message has no appeal for anyone. Indeed no one will accept that humiliation be suffered by a divine message. God does not permit His message to suffer humiliation without repelling it. Those who believe in God do not sit idle in the face of persecution and humiliation. They are entrusted with the task of establishing the truth in human life, maintaining justice between people, and leading mankind to the right path. How are they to fulfil their tasks when they do not reply to aggression or respond to unjust punishment?

Yet at the same time that the rule of equal punishment is established, the Qur'ān calls on believers to endure with fortitude and to forgive. This applies in situations when the believers are able to repel aggression and to eradicate evil. In such cases, forgiveness and patience are more effective and of greater value to the Islamic message. Their own personal position or prestige is of secondary importance when the interests of the message are better served by forgiveness and endurance. However, should such forgiveness compromise the position of the message and lead to its humiliation, then the first rule of equal retaliation is preferable.

Since endurance requires resisting one's feelings and impulses, restraining one's emotions and maintaining control over natural reactions, the Qur'ān relates it to faith and earning God's pleasure. It also assures the believers that it brings them good: *"But to endure patiently is far better for those who are patient in adversity. Endure, then,*

with patience, remembering always that it is only God who helps you to be patient." (Verses 126-127) It is God who gives a believer the strength to be patient in adversity and to control his instinctive reactions. Seeking God's pleasure is the one thing that restrains the impulse to retaliate and punish.

The Qur'ān encourages the Prophet, and every advocate of Islam as well, not to grieve when they see people turning their backs on God's guidance. They have their duty to fulfil. Guiding people aright or leaving them to go astray are matters determined by God, in accordance with His laws of nature which control people's souls and their striving to follow guidance or to turn away from it. *"Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by their intrigues."* (Verse 127) The Prophet should not be distressed when he sees such people scheme against him. God will protect him against their scheming and intrigue. He will never let them have the upper hand when he conveys his message, seeking no personal gain for himself. He may have to endure harm, but that is only to test his patience. He may feel that victory is slow in coming, but that is only to test his trust in God's support. The ultimate outcome is known in advance: *"God is indeed with those who remain God-fearing and those who do good."* (Verse 128) He who has God on his side need not worry about anyone's scheming or intrigue.

Such is the constitution that any advocacy of God's message should follow. It is the only way to ensure victory as promised by God. This is what God tells us, and God always tells the truth.

SŪRAH 17

Al-Isrā'

(The Night Journey)

Prologue

This *sūrah, Al-Isrā',* or The Night Journey, was revealed whilst the Prophet lived in Makkah. It begins with glorifying God and ends with praising Him. It includes a number of themes, most of which directly relate to the issue of faith, but some tackle certain aspects of individual and social behaviour and its moral basis of faith. It also includes stories about the Children of Israel relevant to the Aqşā Mosque, the Prophet's terrestrial destination on his night journey, as well as some aspects of the story of Adam and Satan, and the honour God has granted to mankind.

However, the most prominent element in the *sūrah* and its central point is the Prophet himself (peace be upon him). It examines the attitude adopted by the people of Makkah to him, as well as the message he preached, embodied in the Qur'ān, and the guidance it provides and how the unbelievers received it. This leads to a discussion about the nature of the message and the role of God's messengers. It points to the distinction of the Prophet's message by virtue of it having no physical, preternatural phenomenon to support it. It has been God's will that when such a phenomenon, or miracle, was formerly given in support of a divine message, those who continued to deny the message were shortly destroyed in consequence. It also states the principle of individual responsibility in matters of faith, guidance and error, and collective responsibility in matters of social behaviour. However all such responsibility applies after God has made His message clear to mankind through prophets and messengers whose task is to advise, warn and give sound counsel, and also to make everything clear: "*Most clearly have We spelled out everything.*" (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* repeatedly praises God and glorifies Him and mentions the need to praise and thank Him for all the blessings He bestows on His servants. It begins with glorifying Him: *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqşā Mosque [in Jerusalem]..."* (Verse 1) Soon afterwards, the Children of Israel are commanded to believe in God's oneness and are reminded that they belong to the offspring of Noah who was *'a truly grateful servant of Ours.'* (Verse 3) When the unbelievers' claims about their false deities are mentioned, the *sūrah* comments: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]. The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving."* (Verses 43-44) The *sūrah* quotes some of the people of earlier divine religions who say when the Qur'ān is recited to them: *"Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled."* (Verse 108) The last verse in the *sūrah* states: *"And say, All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness."* (Verse 111)

Thus the *sūrah* revolves around one axis although it tackles several subjects. Its first part mentions the night journey: *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqşā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed."* (Verse 1) It also specifies the purpose of this journey:

"so that We might show him some of Our signs." (Verse 1) In connection with the mosque in Jerusalem the *sūrah* mentions the hook revealed to Moses and what God determined in it for the Children of Israel, speaking about two episodes of destruction and diaspora because of their injustice and corruption. They are warned about a third and a fourth time if they revert to the same ways. It then states that this last divine revelation, the Qur'ān, guides to the path that is straightest, while man is often driven by uncontrollable reactions. It also states the rule of individual responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or straying away from it, and collective responsibility with regard to behaviour and practice.

The second part speaks about the truth of God's oneness, considering it the basis upon which the whole social set up should be built, including the values of work and behaviour. This central issue of faith should be the pivot around which all human life turns.

The third part speaks of pagan superstitions which attribute daughters and partners to God. It also mentions resurrection and how the unbelievers could never imagine it would take place. It shows how they received Qur'ānic revelations and the fabrications they reiterated about the Prophet (peace be upon him). It commands the

believers to say something better, unlike the falsehood of unbelievers.

In the fourth part the *sūrah* explains the reason for not giving the Prophet physical miracles or preternatural phenomena. When such miracles were given to earlier communities and they continued to deny the message of truth, the law God has set in such cases applied to them and they were destroyed. It refers to the unbelievers' attitude to the warnings based on the vision God showed to the Prophet, and their persistence in their erring ways. In this connection a part of the story *of Iblīs,* or Satan, is mentioned and his declaration that he would remain for ever man's determined foe. This part of the story appears to be an exposition of the reasons for the unbelievers going astray. It comments on this by warning mankind against incurring God's punishment, coupled with a reminder of God's grace and the honour He has given to mankind. It tells them about what awaits God's obedient servants, contrasting it with what awaits the disobedient on the day when every community is summoned by calling their leaders or guides. "*Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth.*" (Verses 71-72)

The final part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers' schemes against the Prophet (peace be upon him), and their attempts to lure him away from at least part of what was revealed to him. It mentions their attempt to expel him from Makkah. When he actually left, he did so carrying out God's orders. Had they forcibly expelled him, they would have been destroyed, as happened to communities which in former times expelled their prophets or killed them. God commands the Prophet in the *sūrah* to carry on with his mission, reciting the Qur'ān and attending to his prayers, appealing to God to enable him to enter and leave in a true and sincere manner, and to declare that the truth has come to light and falsehood is certain to wither away. The *sūrah* states that this Qur'ān is a source of cure and guidance to believers. Man's knowledge, however, remains inadequate. "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* continues to speak about the Qur'ān and its challenge to all mankind. Yet the unbelievers required physical miracles, and asked for angels to be sent down in support of the Prophet's message. They suggested that the Prophet should have a house of adornments, or a garden with date and vine trees, through which rivers run, or that he should cause a spring of water to gush forth for them, or that he himself should climb up to heaven and bring them a written letter to read. All these demands were dictated by intransigence, not by the desire to have proof to ensure conviction. The *sūrah* replies that all this is beyond the limits of the role of God's Messenger and the nature of his message. It leaves matters in this regard to God. It derides such demands and those who make them, telling them that had they had control over the

treasures of God's grace, which is always abundant, never exhausted, they would still fear to give it away. It was sufficient for them to realize that everything in the universe glorifies God. They should have remembered that the miracles given to Moses did not lead the ones determined to oppose him to change their minds and follow him. Hence, God inflicted His punishment on them.

The *sūrah* concludes with a short discourse about the truth inherent in the Qur'ān. It was revealed in passages, so that the Prophet could read it to people over a long time, as would befit different occasions and circumstances. People would then be influenced by its practical approach to living conditions. It was received by people of sound knowledge with humility. They were so influenced by it to the extent that they wept and prostrated themselves to God. The *sūrah* then concludes with praising God who has never taken to Himself a son or a partner, just as it began with glorifying Him.

A Unique Experience

The story of the night journey by the Prophet from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah to the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, and then his ascension from there to the highest heaven and the world of which we know nothing, is mentioned in several reports. It has been the subject of much controversy, which continues even today. There are various reports about the place from which the Prophet's night journey started. Some suggest that it was the mosque itself, which fits with the phraseology of the verse. One report quotes the Prophet as saying: "As I was in the mosque, at Ĥijr Ismā`īl, half asleep, Gabriel came to me with al-Burāq..." It is also reported that his journey began from the house of his cousin Umm Hānī. This report is acceptable on the basis that the term, 'the Sacred Mosque', includes the whole Ĥaram area, which surrounds the mosque. Ibn `Abbās is reported to have said, "The whole of the Ĥaram area is a mosque."

It is also reported that he was sleeping in Umm Hānī's house when he was taken on his journey and returned home before the night was over. He related the event to his cousin and told her: "I saw the prophets and led them in prayer." As he was about to leave to go to the mosque, she stopped him, saying: "I fear that people will not believe you if you tell them what you have just told me." The Prophet made clear his intention to tell them, 'even though they would not believe me.'

When the Prophet sat in the mosque, Abū Jahl, the arch-enemy of Islam, went to him and asked him whether he had any news. The Prophet told him of his night journey. Abū Jahl called on people to gather and listen to the strange news the Prophet had to tell them. As the Prophet did so, some of them started clapping as a gesture of rejecting what they heard while others put their hands on their heads in

disbelief. Some who had earlier accepted Islam now turned away declaring that they were no longer Muslims. Some went to Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest Companion, to find out what his reaction would be. When they assured him that Muĥammad actually claimed to have made the return journey to Jerusalem overnight, Abū Bakr said: "If he has actually said this, he is telling the truth." When they expressed their amazement that he would believe such a singular story, Abū Bakr said: "What is so surprising? I do believe him when he says something even more incomprehensible. He says he receives revelations from on high and I believe him." Abū Bakr was then given the title *Ṣiddīq,* which denotes 'a true and firm believer'.

Some of them had been to Jerusalem and so asked the Prophet to describe it to them. Its picture was raised before his eyes and he described it to them in detail. They said that his description was accurate. They then asked him to tell them about their trade caravan and when it would arrive. He told them the number of its camels and its condition at the time. He further told them that it would arrive at sunrise on a particular day, headed by a white camel. On the day appointed by the Prophet, they went out to make sure the caravan arrived. When the sun began to rise, they said: Here is the sun rising. Then they looked and said: And here is the caravan headed by a white camel, just like Muĥammad said. Yet still they refused to believe.

On the same night, the Prophet ascended from Jerusalem to heaven. Disagreement among scholars touches on the point of whether or not the Prophet went on this night journey when he was awake or if it was a dream-like journey. It is reported that `Ā'ishah, his wife, said: "By God, the Prophet's body was never missing, but it was his soul which ascended." Al-Ĥasan is reported to have said that it was all in a dream he saw. Other reports make it clear that it was a journey he took, body and soul, and that his bed was still warm when he came back.

The weightier view, on the basis of all the reports we have, is that the Prophet left his bed in his cousin's home and went to the Ka`bah. When he was at Ĥijr Ismā`īl, half awake, he was taken on his journey to Jerusalem and from there he ascended to heaven, before returning to his bed which was still warm.

Having clarified this, we do not see much point in the long arguments people have engaged in over the past, and still do, concerning the nature of this event which certainly took place. Whether it was a physical or spiritual trip, or a vision he saw while awake or asleep, does not make much difference. It does not alter much of the nature of this event to say that it was an act of unveiling that enabled the Prophet to see remote places and worlds in a brief moment. Those who understand even a little of the nature of God's power and the nature of prophethood will find nothing strange in this event. To God's power and ability, all matters, which appear easy or difficult by our human standards and according to what is familiar to us, are the same. What is familiar to us in our world is not to be taken as the criterion for

making a judgement in relation to God's ability. The nature of prophethood is a link with God, which may not be compared to anything familiar in human life. That a remote place or world be shown to the Prophet, or that the Prophet visited such a place by means that we know or do not know about, are no more strange or miraculous than for him to receive God's message. Indeed Abū Bakr put the matter in its proper perspective when he told the people of Makkah that he believed the Prophet in what was even more incomprehensible: the revelations he received from on high.

The Quraysh had ample hard evidence of the truth of this journey when they asked the Prophet to tell them about their trade caravan, and their subsequent verification of every point of detail he mentioned. But they were bound to meet his story with total disbelief at first. The point to be noted here is that the Prophet did not listen to his cousin, Umm Hānī, when she tried to persuade him not to tell them about his journey for fear of their reaction to what would sound totally impossible. The Prophet's trust in the truth of his message and the reality of his journey was such that he went out and told them, paying little heed to how they would receive his news. His mission was to convey to them his message complete, and he was not one to evade his duty. Some of those who had believed in the new faith turned back. Unbelievers found in his story material for ridicule and doubt about everything he said. But none of this made him hesitate to declare the truth as he saw and believed it. In this the Prophet teaches a lesson to the advocates of Islam across all generations: they must declare the truth plainly in all situations. They should not fear what reaction this brings about. They must not try to tailor their faith so as to fit in with what people like to hear.

We also note that the Prophet did not try to describe the event as a miracle or a supernatural happening that would make people believe in his message. In fact they were always asking him for a miracle to prove his claims. Now they had the miraculous event and they knew it to be true when they verified the details the Prophet identified. Islam does not rely on miraculous events to present itself to people. Instead it relies only on the nature of its message and its direct appeal to human nature when it is purged of all corrupting influences. When the Prophet spoke out about his journey, he did not seek to make it proof confirming the truth of his message. He only stated a true event, purely and simply because it was true.

1
God's Infinite Power

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَسْرَىٰ بِعَبْدِهِۦ لَيْلًا مِّنَ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ إِلَى ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْأَقْصَا ٱلَّذِى بَٰرَكْنَا حَوْلَهُۥ لِنُرِيَهُۥ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَآ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿١﴾

Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] — the environs of which We have blessed — so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all. (1)

وَءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ أَلَّا تَتَّخِذُوا۟ مِن دُونِى وَكِيلًا ﴿٢﴾

We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: 'Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. (2)

ذُرِّيَّةَ مَنْ حَمَلْنَا مَعَ نُوحٍ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَبْدًا شَكُورًا ﴿٣﴾

You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.' (3)

وَقَضَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ فِى ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَتُفْسِدُنَّ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَتَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا كَبِيرًا ﴿٤﴾

We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.' (4)

فَإِذَا جَآءَ وَعْدُ أُولَىٰهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ عِبَادًا لَّنَآ أُو۟لِى بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا۟ خِلَٰلَ ٱلدِّيَارِ ۚ وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَّفْعُولًا ﴿٥﴾

When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled.

(5)

Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever. (6)

And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. (7)

It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers. (8)

Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; (9)

and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (10)

Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty. (11)

We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ ٱلْكَرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَمْدَدْنَٰكُم بِأَمْوَٰلٍ وَبَنِينَ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ
أَكْثَرَ نَفِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

إِنْ أَحْسَنتُمْ أَحْسَنتُمْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ ۖ وَإِنْ
أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا ۚ فَإِذَا جَآءَ وَعْدُ ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ
لِيَسُۥٓـُٔوا۟ وُجُوهَكُمْ وَلِيَدْخُلُوا۟ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ
كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَلِيُتَبِّرُوا۟ مَا عَلَوْا۟
تَتْبِيرًا ﴿٧﴾

عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يَرْحَمَكُمْ ۚ وَإِنْ عُدتُّمْ عُدْنَا
ۘ وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ حَصِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

إِنَّ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ يَهْدِى لِلَّتِى هِىَ أَقْوَمُ
وَيُبَشِّرُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٩﴾

وَأَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ أَعْتَدْنَا
لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

وَيَدْعُ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ بِٱلشَّرِّ دُعَآءَهُۥ بِٱلْخَيْرِ ۖ
وَكَانَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ عَجُولًا ﴿١١﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ ءَايَتَيْنِ ۖ فَمَحَوْنَآ
ءَايَةَ ٱلَّيْلِ وَجَعَلْنَآ ءَايَةَ ٱلنَّهَارِ مُبْصِرَةً
لِّتَبْتَغُوا۟ فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ

وَلِتَعْلَمُواْ عَدَدَ ٱلسِّنِينَ وَٱلْحِسَابَ ۚ وَكُلَّ شَىْءٍ فَصَّلْنَٰهُ تَفْصِيلًا ﴿١٢﴾

وَكُلَّ إِنسَٰنٍ أَلْزَمْنَٰهُ طَٰٓئِرَهُۥ فِى عُنُقِهِۦ ۖ وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُۥ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ كِتَٰبًا يَلْقَىٰهُ مَنشُورًا ﴿١٣﴾

ٱقْرَأْ كِتَٰبَكَ كَفَىٰ بِنَفْسِكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكَ حَسِيبًا ﴿١٤﴾

مَّنِ ٱهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِى لِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا ۚ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ۗ وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ رَسُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِذَآ أَرَدْنَآ أَن نُّهْلِكَ قَرْيَةً أَمَرْنَا مُتْرَفِيهَا فَفَسَقُواْ فِيهَا فَحَقَّ عَلَيْهَا ٱلْقَوْلُ فَدَمَّرْنَٰهَا تَدْمِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ نُوحٍ ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِرَبِّكَ بِذُنُوبِ عِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرًۢا بَصِيرًا ﴿١٧﴾

مَّن كَانَ يُرِيدُ ٱلْعَاجِلَةَ عَجَّلْنَا لَهُۥ فِيهَا مَا نَشَآءُ لِمَن نُّرِيدُ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا لَهُۥ جَهَنَّمَ يَصْلَىٰهَا مَذْمُومًا مَّدْحُورًا ﴿١٨﴾

your Lord,

and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything. (12)

Every human being's action have We tied around his own neck. On the Day of Resurrection We shall produce for him a record which he will find wide open. (13)

[And We will say:] 'Read this your record! Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.' (14)

Whoever chooses to follow guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No soul shall be made to bear the burden of another. We would never inflict punishment [on anyone] until We have sent a Messenger [to give warning]. (15)

When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence. If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them. (16)

Many generations have We destroyed since Noah's time. Suffice it that your Lord is well aware of His servants' sins, and observes them all. (17)

As for those who care only for [the pleasures of] this fleeting life, We readily grant of it whatever We may please to whomever We will. In the end We consign any such person to hell, where he will

burn disgraced and rejected. (18)

But those who care only for the life to come, strive for it as it should be striven for, and are true believers, are indeed the ones who will have their endeavours well rewarded. (19)

On all — these as well as those — do We bestow the bounty of your Lord. Indeed your Lord's bounty is not denied [to anyone]. (20)

See how We have bestowed more bounty on some than on others. But the life to come will be higher in rank and greater in merit. (21)

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ ٱلْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُم مَّشْكُورًا ﴿١٩﴾

كُلًّا نُّمِدُّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَهَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مِنْ عَطَآءِ رَبِّكَ ۚ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَآءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا ﴿٢٠﴾

ٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ فَضَّلْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ۚ وَلَلْآخِرَةُ أَكْبَرُ دَرَجَٰتٍ وَأَكْبَرُ تَفْضِيلًا ﴿٢١﴾

A Unique Journey

The *sūrah* begins with glorifying God, the most fitting action to confirm the bond between God and His servants in the atmosphere of compassion and friendliness imparted by the mention of the night journey:

> *Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed – so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all.* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* emphasizes the position of man as God's servant: *"He who transported His servant by night..."* The emphasis here is needed in the context of the Prophet's ascension to heaven where no human being had gone before. It is important in this context that the status of man's servitude to God should always be remembered. There must be no confusion of status similar to that which happened in the case of Jesus on account of his birth, his being raised to heaven at the end of his life on earth, and the powers which were given to him during life. All these caused some people to confuse his status and to claim that he had a divine nature. In its simplicity and purity, Islam insists that no similarity could ever exist between God and any creature.

The Arabic text of this opening verse uses the verb, *asrā,* which denotes 'travelling

during the night'. It is sufficient then to use this verb to denote the time of the action. Yet the verse adds the phrase, *laylan,* or 'by night', to give an added sense of the still night and the ease of travel. The journey from the Sacred Mosque to the Aqṣā Mosque was one chosen by God, the Compassionate who knows everything. It provided a link between all monotheistic faiths from the time of Abraham and Ishmael to the time of the last Prophet, Muĥammad (peace be upon them all). It also established a link between the holy places in all these religions. It seems that this unusual journey served as an announcement that the last Messenger was the heir to the heritage of all former messengers. His message staked a claim to all these holy places. Thus it becomes a journey that goes beyond the scope of time and place.

The opening verse describes the Aqṣā Mosque as one with blessed environs. This description shows the blessings surrounding the mosque and flowing in abundance. This impression could not have been given with a direct description such as 'the mosque which we have blessed.' This is another example of the refined use of language characteristic of the Qur'ān.

The Prophet's night journey was a telling sign, and it was accompanied by others, as the opening verse says in stating its purpose, *"so that We might show him some of Our signs."* Covering the distance between the Sacred Mosque in Makkah and the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, in a very short period that did not allow the Prophet's bed to become cold, is a sign of God's power, whatever the means used to accomplish it. It opens our minds to new horizons in the universe and reveals latent potentials within mankind. It shows that those human beings chosen by God to be the bearers of His message have the latent ability to receive whatever greater powers God wishes to give them. It is God who has honoured man, giving him a favoured position among His creation, and endowed him with such potentials. *"He alone is the One who hears all and sees all."* (Verse 1) He indeed hears and sees all that is beyond the reach of our hearing and seeing faculties.

It is especially impressive that the opening verse of this *sūrah* starts with glorifying God, *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night".* After defining the purpose of this journey, it finishes with highlighting two of God's attributes, perfect hearing and seeing that encompass all things. This quick movement across purposes reflects the finest points of the expression used. The glorification is addressed to God Himself, and the statement about the purpose of the night journey comes from Him, while the description of God's powers is made in the form of an indisputable statement. All these forms are combined in one verse so as to give their different imports.

The Promise to the Israelites

The night journey is a remarkable sign which God wished to demonstrate. It is an amazing journey by human standards. The Aqşā Mosque in Jerusalem, which was the destination of the first part of this journey, is at the heart of the Holy Land which God assigned to the Children of Israel before He caused them to be driven out of it. Thus it is appropriate to relate in the passage that follows the history of Moses and his people, the Israelites:

> *We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours. ' We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.' When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled. Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever. And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers.* (Verses 2-8)

This episode in the Children of Israel's history is mentioned only in this *sūrah* in the Qur'ān. It refers to the fate of the Jews which led to the collapse of their state. It reveals the direct relationship between the spread of corruption and loose morality in a nation and its decline and destruction. This comes in fulfilment of a law of nature God has set in operation, and which the *sūrah* refers to. The law states that the corruption and immorality of the affluent in any community is the cause of its destruction by God.

The story begins here by mentioning Moses' revealed book, the Torah, and the warnings it gives to the Israelites. It reminds them of their great ancestor, Noah, God's obedient and truly grateful servant, and also of their ancestors who were carried with him in the ark. It should be remembered that only the believers were allowed on the ark: "*We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.*" (Verses 2-3)

Both the warning and the reminder are confirmation of the promise that the *sūrah* soon mentions. The promise makes it clear that God will not inflict punishment on

any community unless He sends them first a messenger to warn and remind them. It makes clear the primary purpose of giving the book to Moses. It serves as a source of guidance and warns them: *"Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me."* They must rely on none other than God and turn to Him only for guidance. This is the essence of faith. Anyone who seeks a guardian other than God is misguided and devoid of true faith.

The *sūrah* makes its address to them in the name of their ancestors who were carried in the ark with Noah. These were the best of mankind at the time of the first messenger on earth. Pointing out this relationship in this address serves to remind them of God's grace when He saved their forefathers with His truly grateful servant, Noah. Thus it establishes an age-long bond of faith. That Noah is described here as God's servant is intended to emphasize this point and also to highlight the essential quality of God's chosen messengers, which is their servitude to Him. In the first verse Muĥammad is described as 'God's servant'. This follows the Qur'ānic method of maintaining an air of harmony and coherence throughout each *sūrah.*

In the book which God gave Moses to serve as a source of guidance to the Israelites, He issued them with a warning that they would be doomed to destruction should they spread corruption on earth. The destruction was visited on them twice because its causes were repeated. This is followed by a warning of further episodes of destruction should they revert to their old ways of spreading corruption. This leads to the inevitable operation of God's laws of nature that never fail: "*We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.'*" (Verse 4)

This judgement is merely information given to them by God, spelling out what they will do and what will happen to them as a result. It is based on God's knowledge of their fate. It is not an act of predestination that they cannot escape, or that forces their hands so as to behave in a certain way. God does not compel anyone to be corrupt or to spread corruption. "*Say: 'never does God enjoin what is indecent.'*" (7: 28) It is the nature of God's knowledge that makes Him aware of what will happen in the future in the same way as He is aware of what is happening now. What is yet to happen, and is totally unknown to all human beings, is, to God, the same as what has already happened.

Same Action, Same Penalty

In the book He gave to Moses, the Torah, God warned the Children of Israel that they would spread corruption on earth twice and that they would gain power and be the masters in the Holy Land. Every time they held power and used it corruptly or spread corruption, God sent some of His servants against them who overpowered

and destroyed them, abusing their rights: *"When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled."* (Verse 5)

This was the first time: they gained power in the Holy Land and they established their strong state. But then they resorted to tyranny and corruption. As a result, God brought them face to face with some of His servants who combined great might with strong determination. They overran those who had erred and spread corruption, completely subjugating them. Thus the warning came to pass, as is always the case with God's promises.

After the Children of Israel were vanquished and suffered humiliation, they turned back to their Lord, mended their ways and applied the lessons they had learnt. In the meantime, their conquerors were blinded by victory and travelled along the same road of tyranny and corruption. As a result, the tables were turned. The vanquished were victorious again: *"Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous than ever."* (Verse 6) History thus repeated itself.

Before the *sūrah* continues its account of the true prophesy and warning, it states a basic rule of action and reward: *"If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves."* (Verse 7) This is a never changing rule with effects that transcend this life into the next. It makes everything a human being does, with all its results and consequences, totally his own. Thus, reward is the natural fruit of action. Hence it is determined by the nature of the action done. This is to say that a human being is responsible for himself. It is he who chooses to do good or evil, and he alone who will receive the reward or bear the consequences of what he does. He has only himself to blame when the result of his action leads him to suffer punishment.

Having established the rule, the *sūrah* goes on to complete the telling of true prophesy: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power."* (Verse 7)

The *sūrah* does not include in its text any account of how the Israelites spread corruption again after they regained power. Its mention of the first occasion is sufficient: *"Twice will you spread corruption on earth."* (Verse 4) But it tells us of what God inflicted on them the second time: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly."* (Verse 7) This is a vivid description of the widespread destruction that causes acute humiliation, visible even on their faces. Or the disgrace was physically painted on their faces, coupled with what they felt when they saw their sanctities desecrated. And they *"enter[ed] the Mosque just like [their*

predecessors] had entered it the first time." (Verse 7) They wrought total destruction, leaving nothing in place.

The warning was fulfilled. God sent enemies against the Jews who overpowered them, destroyed their kingdom and left them in their great diaspora. The Qur'ān does not specify the nationality of those God sent against the Jews, because such information adds nothing to the lesson to be drawn, or to the effect of the law God has made applicable to all communities.

The *sūrah* comments on this true warning and prophesy by saying that this destruction may be a way leading to God's mercy if the right lesson is drawn and acted upon: *"It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you."* (Verse 8) But if the Jews revert to spreading corruption on earth, then the law will inevitably operate and the punishment will again be inflicted: *"But if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]."* (Verse 8) They certainly did revert to their corrupt ways and God sent the Muslims against them who drove them out of Arabia. They did this again with the same results, until He caused them to be humiliated during the twentieth century. We see now how they have again reverted to tyranny and corruption in the state of Israel which uses very cruel tactics against the Arabs, the owners of the land. God is certain to send His servants against them who will make them suffer much for their corruption in fulfilment of His firm warning and in accordance with His law which never fails. We need only wait and see this take place.

The *sūrah* concludes this episode by defining the destiny the unbelievers will suffer in the hereafter. It is the same destiny as will be suffered by those who spread corruption: *"Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers."* (Verse 8) They will be surrounded, unable to escape. Furthermore, it is large enough to contain them all.

Guidance in All Fields

The *sūrah* now speaks about the Qur'ān, making it clear that it is a book of true and full guidance:

> *Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (Verses 9-10)*

"Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright." This is a general statement applicable to all those who are guided by the Qur'ān and the goals to which it guides. Thus, the guidance is given to communities and generations that are

not restricted by time or place. And the superiority of its guidance applies to all that they may attain when they follow any method or approach. It is also superior to every good thing to which people may be guided at any time or place.

The Qur'ān guides to that which is 'most upright' in relation to man's inner feelings and thoughts, outlining a clear faith, free of complication and ambiguity. Its guidance frees the human spirit of the burden of myth and superstition, and releases human energy so that it is constructive, bringing benefit, providing a harmonious link between the laws that govern the universe and those governing human nature.

The Qur'ān also ensures harmony between man's outward and inward existence, feelings and behaviour, faith and action. In all this it shows the way to what is 'most upright', linking all these aspects to the true and unseverable bond that exists between man and God. This enables man to look up to a higher horizon while he is still on earth. Thus what man does in his daily life becomes an act of worship, provided that he does so seeking God's acceptance. This is true even when the action itself provides him with pure enjoyment of what is available in this life.

In the field of worship also, the Qur'ān establishes a perfect balance between duties and abilities. This ensures that duties are not seen as too hard so as to constitute a heavy burden, or induce despair of ever fulfilling one's obligations. Maintaining this balance ensures that a person neither takes matters too lightly or complacently on the one hand, nor exceeds the limits of what is reasonable and perfectly bearable on the other. Thus we can say without fear of contradiction that in worship, the Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.

The same applies to human interaction whether between individuals and couples, governments and peoples, or states and races. Relations between all these groups are established on a firm basis, influenced neither by personal prejudice and interest, nor by feelings of love and hatred. This firm foundation in human relations is chosen by God, the Creator who knows His creation and what is certain to promote goodness in their lives. The Qur'ān shows the way which gives the best course of action in the fields of politics and finance, as well as in those of social and international relations.

The Qur'ān also endorses all divine religions, establishing a firm link between them, honouring all that is sacred in them, and protecting all that they hold in reverence. This ensures that humanity, with all its divine faiths live in peace. In this again the Qur'ān provides its perfect guidance. This is all summed up in the verse which says: "*Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.*" (Verse 9)

"*It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 9-10) This is the basic rule laid down by the Qur'ān in respect of action and reward. The Islamic structure is built on the two pillars of faith and good

action. Faith that is not confirmed by action is hollow, unfulfilled, while action that is not based on faith lacks firm roots. It is when both are combined that life maintains its most upright course, and with them both together guidance shown in the Qur'ān takes its proper effect.

Man's Hasty Characteristic

Those who do not follow the guidance of the Qur'ān are left to their own devices. But man is hasty, unaware of what benefits him and what causes him harm, impulsive, unable to control his reactions even when they bring about evil consequences: *"Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty."* (Verse 11) He does not know the ultimate results. He may do something that is evil and precipitate its results unaware that these only bring about immense harm to himself; or he may be aware of such results but is unable to control himself. This is a long, long way away from the assured, calm and consistent guidance given in the Qur'ān. The two ways of Qur'ānic guidance and human desire are too widely divergent.

So far the *sūrah* has pointed to some of the signs God gave to His messengers, such as the Prophet's night journey, Noah's ark, Moses' book, and, above all, the Qur'ān. Now the *sūrah* mentions some of God's universal signs and relates these to people's actions, efforts and earnings on the one hand and their fruits and reward on the other. We thus see that the laws that govern action and reward are closely linked to the laws governing the whole universe. Both are based on perfect rules that never fail. They are as accurate as the system that ensures that day and night succeed each other. They are operated by the Creator who has made them two of His signs:

> *We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything.* (Verse 12)

The universal law that governs the succession of day and night is linked to numerous aspects of human life. It is linked with people's efforts in earning their living, and their knowledge of time and calculation. It also relates to the good and evil man may earn in life and what reward he may achieve in the end for either his good or bad actions. Indeed the consequences of following guidance or error relate to it, as is the individual nature of responsibility which means that no one will have to answer for anyone else. The same universal law is linked to God's promise that He will not inflict punishment on anyone until He has sent His messengers. This link further applies to the law which governs the destruction of communities only after

the affluent among them have been guilty of immense transgression. The law further relates to the diverse destinies of those who seek the pleasures of this world and those who prefer the good reward of the hereafter, and what God grants to both in this life and in the life to come. All these aspects follow a well set system and certain immutable laws besides. Nothing takes place haphazardly.

"We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything." (Verse 12) The night and the day are two major universal signs which confirm the accuracy of the law governing the universe which operates all the time, suffering neither a failure nor a temporary need for repairs. So what is meant here by *'effacing the sign of the night'*, when we see that this sign remains operative as much as the sign of the day? It seems to me, and God knows best, that the reference here is to the darkness of the night which hides everything and during which movement slows down. The darkness gives the impression that the night is effaced when compared with the day, its light and the bustling activity that takes place under its light. It is as though the day is able to see things by its light and reveals everything for us to behold.

The effacing of the night and the full visibility of the day have a clearly specified purpose: *"so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon."* This makes things very clear: the night is for rest and recuperation, and the day for work, earning one's living and activity. The succession of the day and night enables people to compute the years and determine the seasons and set times for different transactions. *"Most clearly have We spelled out everything."* There is nothing in the universe that has been left to chance. The accuracy that is manifested in the succession of day and night confirms the elaborate and faultless design of everything God has created.

Personal Responsibility

The law of action and reward is directly linked to the meticulous law of the universe:

> *Every human being's action have We tied around his own neck. On the Day of Resurrection We shall produce for him a record which he will find wide open. [And We will say:] 'Read this your record! Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.'* (Verses 13-14)

The Arabic phraseology of this verse provides a highly graphic description which uses the word, 'bird', in place of 'action', as used in the translated text. Thus we have

here a metaphor referring to what flies of a person's actions and becomes tied around his neck, so that it never parts from him. Thus does the Qur'ān in graphically describing things in order to emphasize its point. A person's actions do not leave him, and he cannot disown them. The same applies to the wide open record of all his actions. Thus whatever he has done in life is laid bare. He cannot hide, ignore or disown it. Both descriptions, of the bird denoting action and the record thrown open, produce a very strong effect that adds to the fears experienced on that very difficult day when nothing remains hidden. Everyone is told to read their own records because, "*Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.*" (Verse 14)

Again the same accurate universal law is linked to the rules governing action and reward: "*Whoever chooses to follow guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No soul shall be made to bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 15) It is all individual responsibility. When one follows guidance, one reaps the fruits, and when one chooses error, one bears the consequences. None will bear or lighten the burden of another. Everyone will be questioned about their own actions and will have the reward for what they have done in this life. Close friends will be of no help to each other.

Yet as a sign of God's grace, He does not leave man's guidance dependent only on the signs that are available in the universe. Nor does He leave him to the covenant God has made with human nature before a person is born. He has sent messengers to warn and remind: "We *would never inflict punishment [on anyone] until We have sent a messenger [to give warning].*" (Verse 15) This is certainly an aspect of God's grace which gives everyone ample opportunity to follow His guidance. Only when they have been properly warned and still persist in error does He punish them, if He so wills.

Affluence Leading to Destruction

The same consistent and universal law that governs the succession of day and night also applies to the destruction of any community: "*When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence. If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them.*" (Verse 16)

The affluent who enjoy wealth, servants, luxuries, comfort and power are prone to carelessness and decadence in their lives. They thus lead a life of corruption, transgress all limits, trample over values, desecrate sanctities and defile other people's honour. Unless they are taken to task for their misdeeds, they will spread corruption and indecency throughout their community. They will debase the sound

values and principles which every community needs to observe in order to survive. Thus their corruption will lead to the loss of strength, vigour and means of survival by the whole community. It then becomes lifeless, and is soon overtaken by destruction.

The verse here restates this law which God has set in operation. When God determines that a certain community is to be destroyed, this is only the natural outcome of its pursuit of ways and practices that lead to destruction. The affluent become too numerous and no one takes any action to curb their transgressions. They spread corruption, and bit by bit the whole community becomes corrupt. Consequently, it is liable to the effects of the law God has set in operation, condemning such communities to destruction. Indeed the community in question is responsible for the destruction it suffers, because it did not take the necessary action to stop such foul practices. Had it done so, it would have spared itself destruction. It would not have had corrupt people to lead it astray until it has faced the dire results.

God has willed that human life should run according to set laws which never fail or change. A cause has its effect, and the effect takes place as a result of the operation of God's will that has set this law in operation. God does not approve of indecency or transgression. However, the presence of those who are exceedingly rich in a community is indicative that its fabric has become loose and that it has set itself on the way to decline. This will seal its fate, because it has set itself open to the operation of this law when it allowed those who are excessively rich to lead their corrupt life.

The mention of God's will in the verse, *"When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence,"* does not mean a commanding will which initiates the cause. It is a will that brings the effect when the cause takes place. Thus the effect becomes inevitable as a result of the operation of God's laws of nature. Similarly, the 'command' in the same statement does not refer to a directive requiring them to indulge in sin. It simply refers to the natural result which comes about in consequence of those people leading such a life. Hence, the verse states that: *"If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them."* (Verse 16)

This statement highlights the responsibility of every community, as it makes clear that this law has remained operative since Noah's time: *"Many generations have We destroyed since Noah's time. Suffice it that your Lord is well aware of His servants' sins, and observes them all."* (Verse 17)

Choices and Rewards

Someone who wishes to lead a life based solely on this world, looking up to nothing beyond this earth and its pleasures, will have whatever God has assigned to

him of these. In the life to come, hell will be waiting for him because he will have deserved it. This is because those who do not aspire to anything beyond this world are keen to immerse themselves in its carnal pleasures. This however inevitably leads them to hell: "*As for those who care only for [the pleasures of] this fleeting life, We readily grant of it whatever We may please to whomever We will. In the end We consign any such person to hell, where he will burn disgraced and rejected.*" (Verse 18) He is disgraced by his actions, rejected, suffering severe punishment.

On the other side is a totally different picture: "*But those who care only for the life to come, strive fir it as it should be striven for, and are true believers, are indeed the ones who will have their endeavours well rewarded.*" (Verse 19) Someone who desires the rich reward of the life to come must pursue his goal diligently. He should fulfil the duties God requires of him. Moreover, he must have faith which serves as the basis of his pursuit for the life to come. Faith is not a matter that people attain through idle wishes, but it is rather an idea that is firmly held as a belief, and clearly endorsed by action. Pursuit of the hereafter does not deprive anyone of the wholesome pleasures of this life. It simply opens up wider horizons before us. Thus, enjoyment and pleasure are not the driving goal. There is no harm in seeking pleasure, provided however that one is not captivated or enslaved by it.

A life that seeks nothing more than the pleasures of this world is fitting only for worms, reptiles, insects, cattle and wild beasts. It is only the life that pursues the rewards of the hereafter that is fitting for man who has been the recipient of honour bestowed on him by God. It is God who has created man and fashioned him, planting in his soul a secret that motivates him to look up to higher horizons even when his feet are solidly planted on earth.

No Limits to God's Grace

Yet both groups receive God's bounty which is open to all and restricted to none. Both those who seek only this world's pleasures and enjoy them to the full and those who pursue the reward of the life to come partake of God's bounty which God grants to all: "*On all – these as well as those – do We bestow the bounty of your Lord. Indeed your Lord's bounty is not denied [to anyone].*" (Verse 20) This bounty bestowed by God differs widely, in accordance with people's means, aims and actions. They differ despite the fact that the scope on earth is very limited and its expanse so narrow. How then will they differ when they are in the other place, where the scope is limitless? How can we compare the expanses of the two worlds, when, in God's sight, this world and all that it contains counts for less that the span of a mosquito's wings, as stated by the Prophet?

"*See how We have bestowed more bounty on some than on others. But the life to come will*

be higher in rank and greater in merit." (Verse 21) If one seeks to have the higher prize and the greater grace, then one should aim for the hereafter. For there lies the limitless expanse and scope whose boundaries are known only to God. It is for this prize that people should compete, not for the petty comforts of this world.

2
A Code Based on Justice

لا تَجۡعَلۡ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَتَقۡعُدَ مَذۡمُومٗا مَّخۡذُولٗا ﴿٢٢﴾

Do not set up any deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself disgraced, forsaken. (22)

۞ وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعۡبُدُوٓاْ إِلَّآ إِيَّاهُ وَبِٱلۡوَٰلِدَيۡنِ إِحۡسَٰنًاۚ إِمَّا يَبۡلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ ٱلۡكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَآ أَوۡ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُل لَّهُمَآ أُفّٖ وَلَا تَنۡهَرۡهُمَا وَقُل لَّهُمَا قَوۡلٗا كَرِيمٗا ﴿٢٣﴾

Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him, and that you must be kind to your parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care, never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them, but always speak gently and kindly to them, (23)

وَٱخۡفِضۡ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ ٱلذُّلِّ مِنَ ٱلرَّحۡمَةِ وَقُل رَّبِّ ٱرۡحَمۡهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرٗا ﴿٢٤﴾

and spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness, and say, 'My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child.' (24)

رَّبُّكُمۡ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا فِي نُفُوسِكُمۡۚ إِن تَكُونُواْ صَٰلِحِينَ فَإِنَّهُۥ كَانَ لِلۡأَوَّٰبِينَ غَفُورٗا ﴿٢٥﴾

Your Lord knows best what is in your hearts. If you are righteous, He is certainly most forgiving to those who turn repeatedly to Him [seeking His mercy]. (25)

وَءَاتِ ذَا ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ حَقَّهُۥ وَٱلۡمِسۡكِينَ وَٱبۡنَ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَلَا تُبَذِّرۡ تَبۡذِيرًا ﴿٢٦﴾

Give to the near of kin their due, and also to the needy and the traveller in need. Do not squander your substance wastefully, (26)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُبَذِّرِينَ كَانُوٓاْ إِخۡوَٰنَ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينِۖ

for the wasteful squanderers are Satan's brothers, and Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord. (27)

وَكَانَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ لِرَبِّهِۦ كَفُورٗا ٢٧

But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly. (28)

وَإِمَّا تُعۡرِضَنَّ عَنۡهُمُ ٱبۡتِغَآءَ رَحۡمَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكَ تَرۡجُوهَا فَقُل لَّهُمۡ قَوۡلٗا مَّيۡسُورٗا ٢٨

Do not be miserly, allowing your hand to remain shackled to your neck, nor stretch it out fully to the utmost limit, lest you find yourself being blamed or reduced to destitution. (29)

وَلَا تَجۡعَلۡ يَدَكَ مَغۡلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا تَبۡسُطۡهَا كُلَّ ٱلۡبَسۡطِ فَتَقۡعُدَ مَلُومٗا مَّحۡسُورًا ٢٩

Your Lord gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills. He is indeed fully aware of all His servants, and sees them all. (30)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقۡدِرُۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرَۢا بَصِيرٗا ٣٠

Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin. (31)

وَلَا تَقۡتُلُوٓاْ أَوۡلَٰدَكُمۡ خَشۡيَةَ إِمۡلَٰقٖۖ نَّحۡنُ نَرۡزُقُهُمۡ وَإِيَّاكُمۡۚ إِنَّ قَتۡلَهُمۡ كَانَ خِطۡـًٔا كَبِيرٗا ٣١

Do not come near adultery. It is indeed an abomination and an evil way. (32)

وَلَا تَقۡرَبُواْ ٱلزِّنَىٰٓۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ فَٰحِشَةٗ وَسَآءَ سَبِيلٗا ٣٢

Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice. If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help. (33)

وَلَا تَقۡتُلُواْ ٱلنَّفۡسَ ٱلَّتِي حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَّا بِٱلۡحَقِّۗ وَمَن قُتِلَ مَظۡلُومٗا فَقَدۡ جَعَلۡنَا لِوَلِيِّهِۦ سُلۡطَٰنٗا فَلَا يُسۡرِف فِّي ٱلۡقَتۡلِۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مَنصُورٗا ٣٣

Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise.

وَلَا تَقۡرَبُواْ مَالَ ٱلۡيَتِيمِ إِلَّا بِٱلَّتِي هِيَ أَحۡسَنُ حَتَّىٰ يَبۡلُغَ أَشُدَّهُۥۚ وَأَوۡفُواْ بِٱلۡعَهۡدِۖ

إِنَّ ٱلۡعَهۡدَ كَانَ مَسۡـُٔولٗا ٣٤

(34)

وَأَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡكَيۡلَ إِذَا كِلۡتُمۡ وَزِنُواْ بِٱلۡقِسۡطَاسِ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمِۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيۡرٞ وَأَحۡسَنُ تَأۡوِيلٗا ٣٥

And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end. (35)

وَلَا تَقۡفُ مَا لَيۡسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ عِلۡمٌۚ إِنَّ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَٱلۡبَصَرَ وَٱلۡفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ كَانَ عَنۡهُ مَسۡـُٔولٗا ٣٦

Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all he called to account. (36)

وَلَا تَمۡشِ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مَرَحًاۖ إِنَّكَ لَن تَخۡرِقَ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَلَن تَبۡلُغَ ٱلۡجِبَالَ طُولٗا ٣٧

Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height. (37)

كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ كَانَ سَيِّئُهُۥ عِندَ رَبِّكَ مَكۡرُوهٗا ٣٨

All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight. (38)

ذَٰلِكَ مِمَّآ أَوۡحَىٰٓ إِلَيۡكَ رَبُّكَ مِنَ ٱلۡحِكۡمَةِۗ وَلَا تَجۡعَلۡ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَتُلۡقَىٰ فِي جَهَنَّمَ مَلُومٗا مَّدۡحُورًا ٣٩

These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected. (39)

Overview

In the preceding passage, which comprises the first 21 verses of the *sūrah,* the rules of action and reward, guidance and error, earnings and reckoning are linked to the great universal law that governs the succession of night and day. In the current passage, the rules for behaviour, manners, individual and social duties are linked to belief in God's oneness. Indeed this belief provides the essential tie to which all other

ties are linked, within the family, community and humanity as a whole.

In the previous passage we learnt that the Qur'ān *"shows the way to that which is most upright."* We have also been told that God has most clearly *'spelled out everything.'* In this new passage, the *sūrah* gives us an outline of the commandments and prohibitions which demarcate the way to the most upright standards. They spell out in detail some rules of behaviour, telling us of permissible or prohibited practices.

This new passage begins with a commandment that prohibits the association of partners with God. It declares God's clear order that worship must be addressed to Him alone. This is followed by an outline of duties and obligations, such as maintaining kindness to one's parents, being generous without extravagance to relatives, the needy and travellers in need. It also prohibits killing one's offspring, adultery and murder under any circumstances. Further commandments make it clear that believers must take good care of orphans, ensuring that whatever property they have is well looked after, and that they must fulfil their pledges and promises. They should also conduct their transactions in fairness, giving due weight and measure, and they must endeavour to establish and maintain the truth. They are commanded not to behave arrogantly in any situation. The passage concludes with a warning against associating partners with God. Thus all the commandments and prohibitions are given between the opening and ending of the passage, clearly attached to the basic belief in God's oneness which provides the firm foundation of human life as indeed all life.

Kindness to Parents

"Do not set up any deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself disgraced, forsaken." (Verse 22) This is a commandment forbidding the association of partners with God and a warning against the results it brings about. Although it is a general order, it is nonetheless addressed to each individual so that everyone feels it is personally issued to them. Believing is a personal matter for which every individual is responsible for themselves. The outcome that awaits anyone who deviates from the path of believing in God's oneness is such that they find themselves 'disgraced' by the foul deed, 'forsaken', without support. Whoever is deprived of God's support is forsaken, no matter how numerous his supporters are. The Arabic description, *fataq`uda madhmūman makhdhūlā,* is especially graphic: in place of *lest you find yourself,* read, 'lest you sit'. This aptly describes the person who finds such disgrace too shameful that it weighs heavily on him and he sits down forsaken, weak, unable to stand and powerless. The description also suggests that this state is permanent because 'sitting down in disgrace' suggests there is no action to change the situation.

"*Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him.*" (Verse 23) This order to offer all worship to God alone follows the one prohibiting the association of partners with God. It takes the form of a decisive ruling to be implemented without fail, by all mankind. The term, *qadā,* used in the Arabic text and translated as 'ordained', signifies a final verdict imparting additional emphasis to an already emphatic order that also uses the construction of a negation and exception: "*You shall worship none but Him.*" The mode is one of total emphasis and stress. When this basic ruling is well established, individual and community duties are outlined. These rely on a firm belief in the One God. Hence, motives and goals behind actions and practices work towards the same end.

The most important bond next to that of faith is the family. Hence the *sūrah* links kindness to parents with the worship of God, in order to emphasize its importance in God's sight:

> *And that you must be kind to your parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care, never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them, but always speak gently and kindly to them, and spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness, and say, My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child.'* (Verses 23-24)

With inspirational expression that is full of tenderness the Qur'ān enhances our feelings of compassion towards our parents. As life goes on, its momentum carries the living and focuses our attention on what lies ahead, on our own children, the new generation. Rarely are we motivated to look back and attend to the former generation of parents, who represent a life that is already on the decline. Hence, as sons and daughters we need a strong charge of conscience so that we will look hack and take care of our mothers and fathers.

Parents are naturally motivated to look after their children, sacrificing everything in the process, even when the sacrifice includes them personally. An early green shoot absorbs every particle of nutrition in its seed to leave it as dust, and a chic eats up everything in the egg, leaving only the shell. Similarly, children take up all their parents' vigour, health, effort and attention, leaving them in the weakness of old age, yet happy to have given their children everything they could give. But children soon forget all this and move ahead, caring more for their spouses and own offspring. This is the natural course of life.

Thus parents do not need any encouragement to be kind to their children. It is the children who need to be reminded of their duty towards the generation that has become dry, in need of tender care, after having spent most of its vitality in bringing up their young. Hence, the divine command to take good care of parents comes in

the form of a ruling from God, following immediately after the command to worship God alone.

The *sūrah* then imparts an air of tenderness to the whole atmosphere. It engenders memories of childhood, of compassion, love and tender care: *"Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care...,"* (Verse 23) Old age commands veneration, and the weakness of the elderly imparts certain feelings. Use of the phrase, *'in your care'*, describes an elderly person weakened by advancing years needing shelter and care. Hence, sons and daughters are told: *"Never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them."* (Verse 23) This is the first step in taking care of one's parents and being kindly to them. Sons and daughters must never use words which suggest their being vexed or bothered by their parents, or say anything that betrays disrespect. On the contrary, they must *"always speak gently and kindly to them."* (Verse 23) This is a higher and more positive step. What sons and daughters say to their parents must always be coupled with genuine respect.

"And spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness." (Verse 24) At this point the Qur'ān uses very tender words to touch our hearts and consciences. Mercy and compassion are so heightened that they border on humility, making the son and daughter too respectful to look their parents straight in the face, but willing to obey them. It is as if such tenderness spreads wings over one's parents. This is followed by a prayer: *"My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child."* (Verse 24)

The prayer recalls the care and love, exercised by parents for vulnerable children. Yet now it is the parents themselves who are similarly weak and in need of tender, loving care. Hence, the address to God to bestow His grace on them. Indeed His grace is far greater, and His care is much more wide-ranging. He is better able to reward them for their kindness, while their children can never repay them for it. A *ĥadīth* mentions that "a man was carrying his mother while he was doing the *ṭawāf* [i.e. the obligatory walk around the Ka`bah] during pilgrimage. He asked the Prophet whether he had discharged his duty towards her. The Prophet said, 'No, not even for a single deep sigh.'"

This *ĥadīth* speaks of a mother so weakened she was no longer able to walk in order to fulfil her religious duty of *ṭawāf.* Her son carried her so that she could fulfil that duty, just like a mother carries her child when it is very young. However, that is far from fulfilling a mother's claim against her children, which is constituted by the constant care she took of them, with every breath of her life.

Since all feelings, actions and reactions are related to faith in the context of the *sūrah,* it adds a final comment, referring all matters to God who knows people's intentions and what lies behind words and actions: *"Your Lord knows best what is in*

your hearts. If you are righteous, He is certainly Most Forgiving to those who turn repeatedly to Him [seeking His mercy]." (Verse 25)

Coming as it does immediately before a range of orders, duties and standards, this verse serves as a guideline for everything we say or do. It also leaves the door open for anyone who makes a mistake or falls short of expectations to declare his repentance and seek forgiveness. When a person's heart is set on the right track, the door to forgiveness remains open. The verse mentions in particular those who turn back to God every time they slip or make a mistake.

Kindness to All

The *sūrah* proceeds to include all relatives and the need to be kindly to them, adding also the needy and travellers who may find themselves in difficulty. It expands on family relations so as to include all human bonds in their broadest sense:

> *Give to the near of kin their due, and also to the needy and the traveller in need. Do not squander your substance wastefully, for the wasteful squanderers are Satan's brothers, and Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord. But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly.* (Verses 26-28)

The Qur'ān makes it clear that the near of kin, the needy and stranded travellers have a right against us which may only be discharged by financial assistance. This does not come as a favour which one person does to another; it is rather a duty imposed by God and associated with worshipping Him alone. When we fulfil this duty we are only discharging our responsibility, and cultivating a close relationship between ourselves and those to whom we give. The giver has no favour against the recipient, because he is only fulfilling a duty towards God.

The Qur'ān speaks strongly against squandering, which is defined as spending one's money in the wrong way. Mujāhid says that if one spends all one's money for rightful purposes, one is not a squanderer, but if one spends a small amount in the wrong way, then one is. Thus, it is not the amount which one spends, but the purpose for which one spends it. Hence, squanderers are indeed Satan's brothers because they spend their money for evil purposes, and to finance their disobedience of God. This makes them Satan's cronies. It must be remembered that *"Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord."* (Verse 27) Both Satan and those who squander do not fulfil their duty of appreciating God's favours, which means that they should use it only in purposes that earn God's pleasure, doing His bidding and refraining from anything He has forbidden.

When a person does not have the means to do his duty by relatives, the needy and stranded travellers, and he finds it embarrassing to meet them face to face, he should turn to God praying to Him to give him good provisions and to provide for those in need. At the same time, he should promise the needy that he will give to them whenever his means improve. At the same time, he should speak to them kindly. He must not be bored with them, nor should he remain silent and so embarrass them. A kind word serves a good purpose and opens up hope: "*But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly.*" (Verse 28)

Within the context of prohibiting the squandering of money, the Qur'ān orders moderation in all spending: "*Do not be miserly, allowing your hand to remain shackled to your neck, nor stretch it out fully to the utmost limit, lest you find yourself being blamed or reduced to destitution.*" (Verse 29) Striking a proper balance is the Islamic rule. To move to either extreme leads to imbalance. The verse employs subtle imagery to enhance the intended meaning. It paints miserliness as a hand tied up to one's neck, while a spendthrift is shown as one with hands stretched out completely, unable to hold on to anything. The end of miserliness and the end of squander is drawn as a person sitting down, facing blame, powerless. It implies a position of weakness like that which makes an animal refuse to move. This applies to the miserly person whose miserliness weakens him to the point of inaction, and to the spendthrift who finds himself deprived of all power. Both are blamed in the end, one for stinginess, the other for squandering. The best attitude is a middle of the road one, tilting neither towards a tight fist nor towards careless extravagance.

The order to seek a middle course is followed with a comment stating that the provider for all is God, and it is He who may give abundant provisions or may give only in a tight measure. Yet the One who gives to all is the One who orders a middle course: "*Your Lord gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills. He is indeed fully aware of all His servants, and sees them all.*" (Verse 30) Whichever way He gives to any one of His servants is determined on the basis of His wisdom. He commands all to follow a course of moderation, prohibiting both extremes of miserliness and careless extravagance on the basis of His perfect knowledge of what is most suitable for all His servants at all times. It is He who has revealed the Qur'ān to always guide along the straight path.

Setting Values Right

As the Qur'ān makes this statement clear, it follows it with reference to the fact that some people in pre-Islamic days used to kill their daughters for fear of want and poverty. It then adds a clear order prohibiting the killing of children for any such

reason. Since God is the One who determines the means people have, there is no connection, then, between poverty and the number or sex of the children they have. The matter is fully in God's hands. When people purge their thoughts of the false notion of any direct relationship between poverty and having children, and when they adopt the correct concept in this regard, there is no reason for that ghastly crime which flies in the face of human nature and the right to life: *"Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin."* (Verse 31)

When people adopt false beliefs, these beliefs affect their everyday lives. The effect is not confined to the adoption of wrong notions or the offering of worship rituals. On the other hand, purging faith from any false notion does have a positive effect on feelings, behaviour and social life generally. The fact that people in pre-Islamic Arabia used to bury their daughters alive provides a clear case of how far religious beliefs can affect human life so as to establish such horrendous crime as an acceptable social norm. It testifies to the fact that life is affected by the sort of beliefs people adopt. Indeed faith cannot remain isolated from human life.

A word should be said here about the meticulous care the Qur'ānic style reflects in its usage. In this particular verse we note that the provision for offspring is mentioned before provision for parents. In *Sūrah* 6, Cattle or *al An`ām,* it is provision for parents which comes first: *"We provide for you and for them."* (6: 151) The usage in both cases is related to the different emphasis they have. Here the verse is translated as: *"Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin."* (Verse 31) The verse in *Sūrah* 6 reads as follows: *"Do not kill your children because of your poverty: We provide for you and for them."* (6: 151) It is clear that this *sūrah* is referring to the killing of children from fear that their presence will lead to poverty. Hence, providing for children is mentioned first. In *Sūrah* 6, the children are killed because of their parents' actual poverty. Hence, the provision for parents is mentioned first. Thus every little Qur'ānic detail, even putting something first on one occasion and second on another is for a definite reason.

Adultery Outlawed

The prohibition of killing children is followed by a prohibition against adultery:[3] *"Do not come near adultery. It is indeed an abomination and an evil way."* (Verse 32) There is a definite link between the killing of children and adultery. We find that the prohibition of adultery here intervenes between the prohibition of killing one's

[3] The Arabic word *zinā,* translated here *as 'adultery',* refers to sexual intercourse outside wedlock, regardless of whether the man or the woman is married. Thus, it includes fornication. — Editor's note.

children and that of killing oneself. This takes into account the link to which we are here referring.

Adultery represents killing in various ways. It is a killing because it wastes life matter as it puts it in the wrong place. It is often followed by a desire to get rid of its natural consequences through abortion or infanticide. If the child is spared and allowed to live, it is abandoned to a life of misery and deprivation, which is a killing in a different form. Moreover, it is a killing of the community because family relations are thus lost, and blood ties are confused. People will have little trust that the children they bring up are their own. Thus community relations become weakened and the spirit of the community more or less dies.

Adultery may also be described as a killing of the community for a different reason. The ease which it provides for the fulfilment of sexual desires makes marriage a redundant institution, and the family an unnecessary responsibility. We must not forget that the family provides the proper home where the young should be reared, and where sound human nature is consolidated. It is the home where sound upbringing can be ensured for boys and girls alike.

Throughout history, every community that allowed immorality to spread saw its own decline brought about. Some people may feel that this is not true, looking at the fact that Europe and the United States continue to enjoy power despite the fact that immorality is widespread there. Yet the results of such loose morality are now apparent in older nations, such as France. As for new nations like the US, it may take some time yet before such effects are visible. The case is like that of a young man who gives rein to his desire. The effects may not manifest themselves when he is young, but as he grows older, his decline is rapid.

The Qur'ān even warns against 'coming near' to adultery, in order to give stronger emphasis that it is something to guard against. Since adultery is committed to satisfy a strong desire, steering away from it is safer. When adultery is made easy, resisting it becomes that much harder. Hence Islam takes appropriate preventive measures. It dislikes the mixing of the two sexes where it is unnecessary, forbids that a man stay with a woman in a closed place, and prohibits the indecent appearance of women when they go out or attend social functions. It encourages marriage and recommends fasting for those who cannot marry. It disapproves of all types of barriers that prevent people from getting married such as exorbitant dowries. It makes it clear that no one should ever fear poverty as a result of having children, and encourages its followers to provide help to those who wish to marry in order to preserve their chastity. It also prescribes very severe punishments for the crimes of adultery and false accusations of adultery against others, without providing proper evidence to support the same. Such measures are taken in order to prevent the Muslim community from throwing itself on the slippery road to decline.

A Peaceful Community

The *sūrah* follows this with a prohibition of killing anyone, except for a valid reason: *"Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice. If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help."* (Verse 33)

Islam is a religion which preserves life and ensures peace. Hence it considers the killing of any human being to be a crime of the highest order, ranking next to associating partners with God. It is God who gives life. Hence, no one can take life away except by God's permission and within the limits which He has allowed. Every human life has a sanctity which cannot be violated. The limits which God has allowed for the infliction of capital punishment are very clear. They are not subject to any influence by prejudice or personal view. A highly authentic *ĥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim quotes the Prophet as saying: "No Muslim person who bears witness that there is no deity other than God and that Muĥammad is God's Messenger may be killed except for one of three reasons: a life for a life, a married adulterer and a rebel who renounces his faith and abandons his community."

The first of these three legitimate ways to inflict capital punishment ensures fair retribution. It allows the killing of one person in order to guarantee life for many others. God tells us that *"There is life for you, men of understanding, in this law of just retribution, so that you may remain God-fearing."* (2: 179) Human life is thus preserved by stopping those who are intent on assaulting and killing others for no reason. When someone intent on killing another realizes that just retribution will make him pay for his ghastly crime with his own life, he will stop short of killing. Again there is life for the community as the law of just retribution stops the relatives of the victim from vengeance killing, which often goes beyond just killing the offender. When vengeance killing is allowed free reign it leads to the killing of innocent people as the family feud ensues. On the contrary, just retribution gives security to all, making sure that no one other than the offender is threatened. Thus, everyone goes about his life in peace and security.

The second reason for executing an offender is to prevent the spread of immorality which threatens the life of the community, as we have already explained.

The third justification seeks to repel spiritual corruption which leads to chaos within the Muslim community, threatens its peace and security and destroys the system God has chosen for it. The one who rebels, renouncing his faith and abandoning his community condemns himself by his own action. He adopted Islam by choice, under no compulsion, and became a member of the community, aware of its secrets. Hence, when he abandoned it, his action constituted a threat to it. Had he

remained a non-Muslim, no one would have compelled him to adopt Islam. Indeed Islam would have ensured that he remained safe and secure if he belonged to another divine religion, or that he was protected and given safe conduct to reach his own community if he was a pagan. This represents complete fairness with those who belong to any faith other than Islam.

"Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice." (Verse 33) These are the only three reasons which justify capital punishment in Islamic law. Otherwise any killing is considered wrongful, bringing other provisions of Islamic law into operation: *"If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help."* (Verse 33) Thus wrongful killing gives the victim's heir, or his next of kin, an authority to seek the implementation of the law of just retribution. It is up to the next of kin to demand that the killer pays with his life for his crime, or to spare his life in return for the payment of blood money, or to forgive the offender altogether, demanding no compensation. This authority over the killer is given to the victim's next of kin because he is in possession of the killer's blood, as it were.

In return for this authority, Islam prohibits the victim's relatives from going too far in exercising their authority. This may take the form of exceeding their limits, killing others in addition to the actual killer of their relative. This is the way vengeance killing works in non-Islamic communities where the killer's close relatives may be murdered in revenge. They may be free of all guilt, but they are killed simply because they are relatives of the first killer. Another aspect of exceeding one's limits is to disfigure the killer when his life is taken in just retribution. The victim's next of kin may insist on the killer being executed, but he has no justification to resort to disfigurement, which is totally prohibited in Islam.

"He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help." (Verse 33) That help is given in the fact that God's law judges in his favour and the ruling authorities ensure that justice is done. Hence, he is required to remain within the confines of justice so that he receives the help he needs in order to obtain what rightfully belongs to him.

Giving the next of kin of a murder victim authority to exact just retribution, and assuring him of the help of the law and the authorities, constitutes a fair response to the demands of human nature. Relatives may be highly agitated, and even blinded by their desire for revenge. In their anger they may lash out against the innocent. But when they realize that God has given them authority to exact just retribution, and that they may demand that the killer should pay with his life for his crime, and that the ruler is required to help them achieve justice, they may well be pacified. This makes it easier for them to stop at the proper legal limits in this case. They are

assured of justice.

It is inappropriate to require people to go beyond their nature so as to stifle their burning desire for revenge. Islam acknowledges this fact and meets the demands of human nature in a way which ensures safety for the individual and the community. It does not try to impose forgiveness and reconciliation by force. Indeed it urges such forgiveness and clearly makes it the better option, assigning rich reward for forgiveness but only after it states legal rights. Thus the relatives of a murdered person may seek punishment of the killer, or they may pardon him. That they have the option is more likely to encourage them to forgive. To try to force forgiveness could be counterproductive. It could even make them more violent in seeking retribution.

Perfect Honesty

Having completed its instructions concerning the sanctity of people's honour and life, the *sūrah* tackles the question of orphans' property and the requirement of fulfilling one's promises and pledges towards them:

> *Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise.* (Verse 34)

Islam makes it clear that a Muslim's life, honour and property are to be protected and preserved. The Prophet says: "Everything that belongs to a Muslim is forbidden to be taken away by another: his blood, honour and property." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Mālik and Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī] The *sūrah,* however, makes a special case concerning the property of an orphan, ensuring its full protection. It forbids the mere coming near it except for what is best for the orphan. That is because an orphan is too weak to manage his property or defend it against assault. Hence, the Muslim community is required to take proper care of the orphan and his property until he comes of age and is able to take care of his own affairs.

An important point to be noted in connection with all these instructions is that matters which an individual needs to implement in person, as an individual, are phrased in the singular form. By contrast, the instructions that are addressed to the Muslim community are given in the plural. Thus we see that orders to be kind to parents, to be charitable to relatives, the needy and stranded travellers, and to refrain from extravagance, maintain a middle way between being tight-fisted and spendthrift, to ascertain the truth in every situation and refrain from showing arrogance and conceit, are all given in the singular form. This is due to the fact that responsibility in these areas is shouldered by the individual. On the other hand, the

plural form is used to express the instructions prohibiting the killing of children, adultery, and homicide, and those concerning the protection of an orphan's property, honouring promises and pledges, and giving fair weight and measure, because these concern the community as a whole.

Here we see that the order not to come near the property of an orphan, except with the best of intentions, is given in the plural in order to make the whole community responsible for the protection of orphans and their property. It is then a collective responsibility.

Looking after an orphan's property is an act of trust which constitutes a pledge by the whole community. Hence, it is followed with an order to honour all promises and pledges: *"Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise."* (Verse 34) God will certainly question people about their promises and will hold to account anyone who is in breach of any trust or pledge. Islam attaches great importance to the fulfilment of promises and pledges and to being true to one's trust because this is the essence of honesty and integrity, both personal and social. In fact, fulfilment of promises and honouring trust is mentioned in various ways and forms in the Qur'ān and *ĥadīth,* both with regard to pledges given to people or to God, by the individual, community or state, ruler or ruled. In practice, Islam has set an example for such fulfilment which humanity has never seen except under Islamic rule.

Just Weight and Measure

The code of conduct the *sūrah* outlines also speaks about fairness in commercial dealings:

> *And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end.* (Verse 35)

The relevance of fulfilling promises and giving fair and full measure and weight is readily apparent, both in meaning and expression. This makes the progress from one to the other easy and smooth. To be fair in transactions and to give full weight and measure are actions which mark honest dealing and good faith. Thus internal dealings within the community are set on the right footing which promotes trust and honesty, and ensures blessings all round: *"That is fair, and best in the end."* (Verse 35) It is good in this life as it maintains fairness, and better in the hereafter as it ensures good reward.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Anyone who is able to secure unlawful gain yet abandons this for no reason other than fearing God will certainly receive

from God what is better than such gain here in this life, before they receive their reward in the life to come."

Giving in to greed and stinginess in weight and measure betrays meanness and dishonesty which destroys trust within the community. It leads to poor trading, and a lack of blessings and trust in the community. This is bound to have repercussions on individuals who find themselves losers after they had thought to gain through selling people short. Whatever gain they may make is superficial and short- lived. Stagnation of trade, which is a by-product of such stinting, is certain to show its effects on individuals.

This is a fact, recognized by far-sighted business people. They maintain honesty as a business principle not because of any ethical, moral or religious motive, but because they see from practical experience that it delivers much better gain. Thus one person may be fair in business and give full weight and measure for practical and trade reasons while another does the same as part of implementing his religious convictions. The difference between the two is that the latter gets all the benefits received by the former in addition to maintaining a clear conscience and looking towards higher horizons. He benefits by a much broader vision of life. This clearly shows that Islam fulfils the objectives of practical life while building its wider concepts and happier environment.

Accountability for All Actions

A basic characteristic of the Islamic faith is that it is straightforward, clear and transparent. Nothing is permitted on the basis of suspicion, myth or unsubstantiated impression:

> *Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all be called to account.* (Verse 36)

These few words establish a complete method for the human mind and heart, incorporating the scientific approach that humanity has begun to apply only recently. It adds, however, honesty and fear of God. This is an advantage Islam adds over cold rational approaches that are devoid of spirituality.

Making certain of every report, action or situation before passing a judgement concerning it is the essence of the Qur'ānic approach. When hearts and minds faithfully follow this approach, there remains no room for superstition in matters of faith, or for suspicion in legal affairs. What is more is that there is no room for theoretical assumptions or superficial conclusions in science and research.

Scientific integrity which, in modern times, people unreservedly praise is no more

than the conscientious integrity which the Qur'ān establishes as a requirement to be accounted for. The Qur'ān makes everyone responsible and accountable for their hearing, seeing and feelings in front of God who has given them their ears, eyes and hearts. This is the integrity and honesty of senses, heart and mind. Man is accountable for all these and the organs themselves will be questioned about their actions on the Day of Judgement. When we consider the magnitude of this responsibility, we are overwhelmed because it applies to every word we say and every judgement we make.

"Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge." (Verse 36) Certain knowledge must be the only basis for judgement or conviction. Whatever is not certain must never constitute such a basis. In an authentic *ĥadīth,* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Refrain from assumption, for assumption is the basis of the worst lies." Another *ĥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "It is indeed a bad practice for a man to always begin his statements with, 'it is claimed." In another *ĥadīth* the Prophet said: "The worst falsehood is that a man makes his eyes see what they have not seen."

Thus we see how Qur'ānic verses and *aĥādīth* combine to establish such a complete and integrated system which requires the mind to make certain of its grounds for any judgement it makes. But Islam does not stop at this. It also requires the heart to make sure of its basis for whatever thoughts or feelings it entertains. Thus people must ascertain every detail, circumstance and factor before making any judgement or arriving at any conclusion. This is a practical fulfilment of the Qur'ānic statement made earlier in this *sūrah: "Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright."* (Verse 9)

These orders and instructions that are closely linked to the faith based on God's oneness are concluded with an order prohibiting conceit and arrogance: *"Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height."* (Verse 37) When man is devoid of belief in God, the Creator who has power over all creation, he may feel himself too powerful or admirable on account of his wealth, power or beauty. If only he remembers that whatever blessing he enjoys is granted to him by God and that he is powerless in front of God, he will see how misplaced his conceit is and so refrain from such arrogance.

The Qur'ān puts the conceited and arrogant face to face with their humbleness and powerlessness: *"You cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height."* (Verse 37) Physically man is small and insignificant, particularly when compared to giant creation. But he is strong when he relies on God's power, honourable with His honour, and noble with His spirit which God has breathed into him. God has given man all this so that he always remembers and remains conscious of Him.

Such humility which the Qur'ān calls upon people to adopt, decrying at the same time all types of conceit, is a mark of maintaining proper relations with God and one's fellow human beings, and a proper personal and social attitude. No one abandons such good manners except the petty and the conceited. Such people are disliked by God because they overlook His favours which they enjoy, and are hated by human beings for their arrogance. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Whoever maintains humility for God's sake, God will elevate him. Thus he looks humbly at himself but people look at him with respect. By contrast, God humiliates an arrogant person so as he rates himself highly while people look down upon him. Indeed he may be more disliked by people than a dog or a pig."[4]

As we have seen, these instructions are mainly concerned with prohibiting evil action and improper behaviour. Their outline concludes with declaring God's disapproval of them: "*All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight.*" (Verse 38) This serves as a summary and reminder that commandments are issued by God alone. The reason for prohibition is God's dislike of such evil. No mention is made here of good matters which Islam orders to be practised or maintained. It is the prohibitions that are outlined in this code of conduct which the *sūrah* gives in detail.

This outline of the Islamic code of conduct is brought to an end by showing its details again linked to faith in God's oneness, which was also stated at the outset of this passage. This is coupled with a warning against associating partners with God. Furthermore, we are told that this code is only a part of the wisdom to which the Qur'ān guides people: "*These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected.*" (Verse 39)

Thus the ending is akin to the opening, with both emphasizing the basis on which Islam builds its structure for human life, namely, the concept of God's oneness. For it is to God that all worship should be addressed.

[4] This *ĥadīth* is cited by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.

3
God: The One and Glorious

أَفَأَصۡفَىٰكُمۡ رَبُّكُم بِٱلۡبَنِينَ وَٱتَّخَذَ مِنَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ إِنَٰثًا ۚ إِنَّكُمۡ لَتَقُولُونَ قَوۡلًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٤٠﴾

Has your Lord distinguished you by [giving you] sons and taken for Himself daughters from among the angels? That which you utter is indeed an enormity. (40)

وَلَقَدۡ صَرَّفۡنَا فِي هَٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ لِيَذَّكَّرُواْ وَمَا يَزِيدُهُمۡ إِلَّا نُفُورًا ﴿٤١﴾

We have certainly explained things in various ways in this Qur'ān, so that they may take it to heart, but it only increases their aversion. (41)

قُل لَّوۡ كَانَ مَعَهُۥٓ ءَالِهَةٌ كَمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذًا لَّٱبۡتَغَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ ذِي ٱلۡعَرۡشِ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

Say: 'If there were other deities alongside Him, as some people assert, they would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne.' (42)

سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ عُلُوّٗا كَبِيرٗا ﴿٤٣﴾

Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]. (43)

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ ٱلسَّبۡعُ وَٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَمَن فِيهِنَّۚ وَإِن مِّن شَيۡءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمۡدِهِۦ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تَفۡقَهُونَ تَسۡبِيحَهُمۡۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورٗا ﴿٤٤﴾

The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving. (44)

وَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ جَعَلْنَا بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ حِجَابًا مَّسْتُورًا ﴿٤٥﴾

When you read the Qur'ān, We place an invisible barrier between you and those who do not believe in the life to come. (45)

وَجَعَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَن يَفْقَهُوهُ وَفِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا ۚ وَإِذَا ذَكَرْتَ رَبَّكَ فِى ٱلْقُرْءَانِ وَحْدَهُۥ وَلَّوْا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَدْبَـٰرِهِمْ نُفُورًا ﴿٤٦﴾

We cast a veil over their hearts which makes them unable to grasp its meaning, and their ears We make deaf. And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'ān as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion. (46)

نَّحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَسْتَمِعُونَ بِهِۦٓ إِذْ يَسْتَمِعُونَ إِلَيْكَ وَإِذْ هُمْ نَجْوَىٰٓ إِذْ يَقُولُ ٱلظَّـٰلِمُونَ إِن تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا رَجُلًا مَّسْحُورًا ﴿٤٧﴾

We are fully aware of what they are listening for when they listen to you, and what they say when they speak to each other in private. The wrongdoers say: The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' (47)

ٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ ضَرَبُوا۟ لَكَ ٱلْأَمْثَالَ فَضَلُّوا۟ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٨﴾

See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]. (48)

وَقَالُوٓا۟ أَءِذَا كُنَّا عِظَـٰمًا وَرُفَـٰتًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ خَلْقًا جَدِيدًا ﴿٤٩﴾

They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' (49)

Say: 'Be you stones or iron, (50)

۞ قُلۡ كُونُواْ حِجَارَةً أَوۡ حَدِيدًا ﴿٥٠﴾

or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life].' They will say: 'Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?' Say: 'He who created you the first time.' Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief] and ask: 'When will this be?' Say: 'It may very well be near at hand. (51)

أَوۡ خَلۡقٗا مِّمَّا يَكۡبُرُ فِي صُدُورِكُمۡۚ فَسَيَقُولُونَ مَن يُعِيدُنَاۖ قُلِ ٱلَّذِي فَطَرَكُمۡ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٖۚ فَسَيُنۡغِضُونَ إِلَيۡكَ رُءُوسَهُمۡ وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هُوَۖ قُلۡ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ قَرِيبٗا ﴿٥١﴾

On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while.' (52)

يَوۡمَ يَدۡعُوكُمۡ فَتَسۡتَجِيبُونَ بِحَمۡدِهِۦ وَتَظُنُّونَ إِن لَّبِثۡتُمۡ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ﴿٥٢﴾

Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best. Satan tries to sow discord between them. Satan is indeed man's open foe. (53)

وَقُل لِّعِبَادِي يَقُولُواْ ٱلَّتِي هِيَ أَحۡسَنُۚ إِنَّ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَ يَنزَغُ بَيۡنَهُمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَ كَانَ لِلۡإِنسَٰنِ عَدُوّٗا مُّبِينٗا ﴿٥٣﴾

Your Lord is fully aware of what you are. If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if He so wills, He will inflict punishment on you. We have not sent you, Prophet, to be their guardian. (54)

رَّبُّكُمۡ أَعۡلَمُ بِكُمۡۖ إِن يَشَأۡ يَرۡحَمۡكُمۡ أَوۡ إِن يَشَأۡ يُعَذِّبۡكُمۡۚ وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَكِيلٗا ﴿٥٤﴾

Your Lord is fully aware of all beings that are in the heavens and earth. Indeed We have exalted some of the Prophets above others, just as We gave the Psalms to David. (55)

وَرَبُّكَ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَلَقَدۡ فَضَّلۡنَا بَعۡضَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖۖ

وَءَاتَيۡنَا دَاوُۥدَ زَبُورٗا ٥٥

Say: 'Call on those whom you claim [to be gods] besides Him, but they have no power to remove any affliction from you, nor can they shift it.' (56)

قُلِ ٱدۡعُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ زَعَمۡتُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ فَلَا يَمۡلِكُونَ كَشۡفَ ٱلضُّرِّ عَنكُمۡ وَلَا تَحۡوِيلًا ٥٦

Those whom they invoke strive to obtain their Lord's favour, vying with each other to be near Him. They hope for His grace and dread His punishment. Indeed your Lord's punishment is something to beware of. (57)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدۡعُونَ يَبۡتَغُونَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمُ ٱلۡوَسِيلَةَ أَيُّهُمۡ أَقۡرَبُ وَيَرۡجُونَ رَحۡمَتَهُۥ وَيَخَافُونَ عَذَابَهُۥٓۚ إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ كَانَ مَحۡذُورٗا ٥٧

Overview

The second passage of this *sūrah,* discussed in Chapter 2, starts and finishes with a strong emphasis on God's oneness and the prohibition of associating any partners with Him. Within its two ends, it contains a number of orders, prohibitions and values that are all based on the central principle of God's oneness. The present passage begins and ends with the denunciation of the very concept of assigning a son or a partner to God, explaining its absurdity. It states that the whole universe functions on the basis of believing in God as one, having no partners: *"Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise."* (Verse 44) It stresses the fact that all shall return to God in the life to come, and that God knows everything about all creatures in the heavens and earth.

He is the One who controls the destinies of all His creatures, and no one has any say about it: *"If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if He so wills, He will inflict punishment on you."* (Verse 54)

As the passage goes on, we see the fallacy of all beliefs based on associating partners with God, and we watch how they collapse. We also see that God is the One who controls everything in this universe, this life and the life to come, what is visible

to us and what we do not see. We realize that it all addresses its praises, sincere and devoted to God alone. In such praises all creatures and living things take part.

All Glorify Him

> *Has your Lord distinguished you by [giving you] sons and taken for Himself daughters from among the angels? That which you utter is indeed an enormity.* (Verse 40)

This question implies a sarcastic response to what the unbelievers used to do, as they described the angels as God's daughters. God is indeed too exalted to take to Himself a son or a wife, and He is too sublime to have any partner or associate. The verse also ridicules the assigning of daughters to God, when the Arabs considered girls to be of lesser status than boys. They indeed killed their daughters for fear of poverty or shame. Nevertheless they considered angels to be female and made them God's daughters. When it is God who gives life and gives everyone their sons and daughters, how come He favours them with the better sons and takes to Himself the inferior daughters!

This is stated merely for argument's sake, so as to make apparent the hollowness and fallacy of their claims. The whole issue is too bizarre to merit any discussion: "*That which you utter is indeed an enormity.*" (Verse 40) It is enormously odd, impudent, false and outlandish.

"*We have certainly explained things in various ways in this Qur'ān, so that they may take it to heart, but it only increases their aversion.*" (Verse 41) The Qur'ān preaches the faith of God's oneness, presenting it in a variety of ways, styles and methods, so that people may 'take warning'. Indeed accepting the faith based on God's oneness does not require more than a reminder and a reference to uncorrupted human nature. It only needs to reflect on the various signs presented in the universe. But they only grow in their aversion to this faith whenever they listen to the Qur'ān. They show that they are averse to the faith the Qur'ān preaches, and averse to the Qur'ān itself, lest it clearly show the fallacy of their erroneous beliefs based on myth and superstition.

Here also the *sūrah* goes part of the way with them to make its argument about their alleged deities. It states that had such deities existed, they themselves would have tried to get closer to God and believe in Him: "*Say: If there were other deities alongside Him, as some people assert, they would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne.*"' (Verse 42) As linguists tell us, the construction of the sentence means that the whole supposition is false. There are no deities alongside God. What they claim to be their gods are no more than some of His creatures, be they stars, human beings,

animals, plants and trees or other inanimate objects. All these turn to God, submitting themselves to His will, in accordance with the law of nature. They find their way to God through their obedience to His will and His laws: *"They would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne."* (Verse 42)

Mention of the Throne here indicates God's clear exaltation above all creatures, including those they claim to be deities alongside Him. They are below His Throne, which means that they cannot be 'with Him'. This is followed by a clear statement glorifying God: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]."* (Verse 43)

The *sūrah* then portrays the whole universe, with all creatures living in it, under God's Throne. They all turn to God glorifying Him: *"The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving."* (Verse 44) Every single particle in this vast universe shares in this glorification. Indeed it comes alive as it praises God and glorifies Him. The scene shows the whole universe full of life and activity, sharing in a single action, addressing God in His exalted nature in a glorification that implies submission to His will and acknowledgement of His authority over everything.

Deaf Ears, Sealed Hearts

It is a powerful and majestic scene in which we see every stone, large and small, every seed and leaf, every flower and fruit, every little shoot and every tree, every insect and reptile, every animal and human being, every creature that walks the earth, swims in the water or floats in the air, in short, all creatures in the whole universe glorifying God and turning to Him in submission. We are filled with awe as we sense that everything that comes within our vision or stays beyond it comes alive. 'Whenever we stretch our hands out to touch something, and whenever we put our feet to step over something, we feel that it is alive, glorifying God.

"Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise," in its own way and language. *"But you [human beings] cannot understand their praises."* (Verse 44) Human beings are limited by their own constitution which has a clay origin. This debars them from understanding the praises of other creatures. Had they listened with their hearts, directing them to appreciate the subtle laws that operate in the universe and make everything, large or small, turn to the Creator of all, they would have appreciated something of that praise. When human souls are purified and when they hearken to every animate and inanimate object as it addresses its glorification to God alone, they are better prepared to be in contact with the Supreme Society. They are better able to understand the secrets of the universe than those who limit themselves to the

material world.

"He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving." (Verse 44) These attributes of God are mentioned here because of what seems clear of people's failing in their duties towards Him. Compared with this great show of submission to God in the whole universe, human beings seem to be in a singular position. Some associate partners with God, while others allege that He has daughters, and still others remain oblivious of their duty to praise and glorify Him. In fact human beings should have been the first among all creatures to acknowledge God, declare their submission to Him and extol His praises. Had it not been for God's forbearance and forgiveness, He would have hastened their punishment. But He allows them time, reminds and admonishes them because '*He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.*'

The leaders of the Quraysh, the Prophet's own tribesmen who rejected his call, tried hard to prevent their hearts and souls from responding positively to the truth of the Qur'ān. As a result, God raised an invisible curtain between them and the Prophet, and placed coverings on their hearts preventing them from understanding it. Their ears were in a state similar to deafness, which meant that they could not understand its message.

> *When you read the Qur'ān, We place an invisible barrier between you and those who do not believe in the life to come. We cast a veil over their hearts which makes them unable to grasp its meaning, and their ears We make deaf. And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'ān as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion. We are fully aware of what they are listening for when they listen to you, and what they say when they speak to each other in private. The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth].* (Verses 45-48)

One report states that the elders of the Quraysh issued a general order telling everyone not to listen to the Qur'ān when they heard it being recited by Muslims. But the Qur'ān had its attraction even to the most outspoken enemies of Islam. Protected by the cover of darkness, three of those elders, Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq sat just outside the Prophet's house, listening to the Qur'ān being recited from inside. Every one of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about his action. As the day began to break, each took his way home, so that no one would find out. Soon, the three of them met. There was only one reason for their presence there at that particular time. Therefore they counselled each other against such action: "Should some of your followers see you," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against their 'irresponsible' action.

Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they were ashamed of themselves. One suggested that they should each give their word of honour not to return. This they did before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān at his home. He asked him what he thought about what he had heard Muĥammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him. Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocutor: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."

It is abundantly clear then that these three elders were touched by the Qur'ān, their souls attracted to its message, but they deliberately sealed their hearts to it. As a result, God placed between them and His Messenger a secret seal that could not be seen with the human eye, yet it is felt by the heart. Its effect was to ensure that they would not benefit by the presence of God's Messenger among them and would not be guided by the Qur'ān he recited. Thus, they would speak to each other about the beauty and the truth of the Qur'ān but would pledge not to listen to it again. They might feel its power again and go out to listen to it anew, but they would remain determined to oppose it, and pledge a word of honour to stop listening to the Qur'ān and its message that addresses both mind and heart. They felt that the message of God's oneness, which is the central message of the Qur'ān, threatened their interests, privileges and pride: *"And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'ān as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion."* (Verse 46)

They were averse to the very principle of God's oneness because they felt that it threatened their social position based on the myths that prevailed in those dark ages. In fact, the elders of the Quraysh were too intelligent not to realize the hollow nature of their beliefs as compared with the profound faith of Islam. They could easily appreciate the superb nature of the Qur'ān. Indeed their very nature motivated them to listen to it, but their pride caused them to take a hostile attitude to it. Thus they even fabricated allegations against the Prophet to justify their opposition: *"The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched."* (Verse 47)

Their very words carried an implicit recognition of the nature of the Qur'ān. They realized deep inside that the Qur'ān was far too superior to be the word of a human

being. They felt that its superiority transcended the realm of human beings. They also felt that it penetrated their own feelings. Hence, they alleged that it was the word of a sorcerer. Thus they claimed that Muĥammad was not speaking for himself, but by the power of magic. Had they been fair to him and to themselves, they would have acknowledged its divine nature. Indeed no human being and no other creature could have produced anything like the Qur'ān.

"See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]." (Verse 48) They likened the Prophet to those who are bewitched when he was nothing like them. He was simply a Messenger chosen by God. As they made this analogy, they went astray. They could find no way ahead. They could not even justify their suspicions.

Bringing the Dead Back to Life

Such was what they said about the Qur'ān and the Messenger who recited it. They also denied resurrection and the life to come:

> *They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' Say: 'Be you stones or iron, or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life]. 'They will say: 'Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?' Say: 'He who created you the first time.' Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief] and ask: 'When will this be?' Say: 'It may very well be near at hand. On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while.'* (Verses 49-52)

The concept of resurrection was the subject of a long controversy between the Prophet and the unbelievers. The Qur'ān relates much of this argument. Yet the whole issue is very clear and simple for anyone who contemplates the nature of life and death, resurrection and the gathering of all creation. The Qur'ān explains it in full on various occasions. Yet people could not take it in its simple and clear nature. They could not imagine how a person could be brought back to life after the body had decomposed: *"They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?"* (Verse 49)

They simply did not reflect on the fact that there was a time when they were not alive, yet they were brought to life. Nor did they appreciate that the second origination is simpler than the first. They did not fully understand that, as far as God is concerned, nothing can be described as 'easier' or 'more difficult'. Nor did they appreciate that the method of creation is the same in all cases. It is just that God issues His command for any creature to 'Be', and it comes into existence immediately. It is immaterial whether people consider something to be easy or

difficult. When God wants it to happen, it will, without fail.

The reply comes in the form of an instruction to the Prophet to say to them: *"Be you stones or iron, or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life]."* (Verses 50-51) The bones and dust may still have some traces or memory of life, but iron and stones seem even further away from life. Hence they are told to be stones or iron or any other form that cannot ever be associated with life. Even if they are made of material that is least imagined to have life, God will bring them alive. They naturally cannot make themselves stones or iron or some other form of creation. This is given only by way of a challenge and reproach. Stones and iron have no feelings and cannot be inspired or influenced. This sounds as an implicit reference to their hardened nature.

"They will say: 'Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?" (Verse 51) Who is it that brings bones and dust, or even more lifeless objects, back to life? *'Say: 'He who created you the first time."* (Verse 51) The answer puts the whole question into its proper perspective, which is both simple and direct. The One who originated them the first time is able to bring them back to life. Yet this reply is ignored: *"Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief']."* (Verse 51) They simply shake their heads in disapproval, or even in ridicule. They try to make this sound too far fetched by asking: *"When will this be?"* (Verse 51) The Prophet is told to reply: *"It may very well be near at hand."* (Verse 51) The Prophet does not know its exact timing, but it may very well be nearer than they think. They should fear then lest it happen when they are engaged in such opposition and ridicule.

The *sūrah* then paints a speedy image of what happens when that event takes place, as it will indeed do: *"On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while."* (Verse 52) The image shows those people who were bent on denying the resurrection rising up to respond to the call that brings them back to life. As they do, they praise God in clear terms. They have nothing else to say apart from praising God. This is a strange response from those who were dogged in their denial of resurrection and the Day of Judgement altogether. They simply rise, saying nothing except: "Praised be God, praised be God." Thus this whole life is shown to be very brief, like a flickering light: *"You will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while."* (Verse 52)

Describing this life in this way is sure to belittle its importance in the minds of those to whom this address is made. It is a very short life. Nothing of its effects is of a lasting nature. It is no more than a brief moment that has passed, accompanied by a brief enjoyment.

Man's Open Enemy

After it has described their attitude of ridiculing God's promise and the Prophet's message, the *sūrah* turns away from those who deny the life to come and resurrection. It has something to say about the believers, instructing the Prophet to direct them to say only what is best. They should always be in the habit of saying a good word: *"Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best. Satan tries to sow discord between them. Satan is indeed man's open foe."* (Verse 53)

"Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best." It is a general order that applies in all situations and positions. They should choose the best to say. In this way they will be able to spoil Satan's attempts to undermine the bond of mutual love that exists between them. Indeed he always tries to sow the seeds of discord between them, helped by an impolite word said by one person, followed by a similarly rude answer by another. Thus the atmosphere of love and brotherhood is spoilt, only to be replaced by an air of alienation, estrangement and even hostility. A good word always helps to clear the air and heal grievances.

"Satan is indeed man's open foe." (Verse 53) He tries to build on every slip of a person's tongue to spread an air of alienation between brothers. Good words simply foil his attempts and protect the bond of brotherhood among all believers.

The *sūrah* then returns to those unbelievers who responded to the call to rise on the Day of Judgement. All destiny is in God's hands: He may forgive or punish. They will have to face God's judgement. The Prophet is no more than a Messenger. He is not their protector against God's will: *"Your Lord is fully aware of what you are. If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if so wills, He will inflict punishment on you. We have not sent you, Prophet, to be their guardian. Your Lord is fully aware of all beings that are in the heavens and earth."* (Verses 54-55) God's knowledge is absolute. Whatever He may determine of punishment or forgiveness is based on His knowledge. The Prophet's mission is completed when he has conveyed his message. God's knowledge encompasses all that is in heaven and earth, including the angels, prophets, human beings and *jinn,* as well as other creatures which are known only to God.

Competition to Be Closer to God

It is on the basis of this knowledge that He has exalted some prophets over others as He states here: *"Indeed We have exalted some of the prophets above others."* (Verse 55) God alone knows the reasons behind this preference. As for the practical aspects of such exaltation and preference, these were discussed in commenting on verse 253 of

Sūrah 2, which also mentions this exaltation.[5]

"*Justus We gave the Psalms to David.*" (Verse 55) This is one example of what God may give to one of His prophets, and one of the aspects of exaltation. The fact is that revelation and scripture are more lasting than supernatural events that may be witnessed by only a handful of people.

This passage, which begins with a definitive negation of the concept of God having a son or partner before calling on people to turn to God alone in all situations, concludes with a challenge to those who associate partners with God. The challenge is simply that they should call on those partners to remove any harm that befalls them, should God decide to punish them, or that they should divert His punishment to others: "*Say: 'Call on those whom you claim (to be gods] besides Him, but they have no power to remove any affliction from you, nor can they shift it.'*" (Verse 56) No one can remove hardship or change its nature or recipient except God Himself. He alone is in control of the destinies of all creation.

The *sūrah* tells them that those whom they claim to be deities, be they angels, *jinn* or human, are no more than forms of God's creation. They all try to find their way to God's pleasure, competing in this pursuit, fearing His punishment, which truly deserves to be feared: "*Those whom they invoke strive to obtain their Lord's favour, vying with each other to be near Him. They hope for His grace and dread His punishment. Indeed your Lord's punishment is something to beware of*" (Verse 57)

Some of them claimed that Ezra was the son of God, while others attributed this position to Jesus Christ and worshipped him. Others claimed that the angels were God's daughters and worshipped them. Still others associated other creatures with God. To all of them the Qur'ān says: even the closest to God of all those you invoke try hard to approach their Lord, the One God, and worship Him alone hoping to receive His grace and fearing His punishment. Indeed His punishment is severe and it should be feared. Thus, it behoves you well to turn to God, as do those you claim to be deities.

The passage, then, ends on the same note on which it began, illustrating the hollow nature of polytheistic beliefs and showing clearly that God is the only Lord in the universe. Human beings should turn to Him alone with their appeals and worship.

[5] Volume I, pp. 331-338.

4
Honour Granted to Mankind

وَإِن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا نَحْنُ مُهْلِكُوهَا قَبْلَ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُوهَا عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۚ كَانَ ذَٰلِكَ فِى ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ مَسْطُورًا ﴿٥٨﴾

There is no community but We shall destroy or severely punish before the Day of Resurrection. That is laid down in Our decree. (58)

وَمَا مَنَعَنَآ أَن نُّرْسِلَ بِٱلْـَٔايَـٰتِ إِلَّآ أَن كَذَّبَ بِهَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ۚ وَءَاتَيْنَا ثَمُودَ ٱلنَّاقَةَ مُبْصِرَةً فَظَلَمُوا۟ بِهَا ۚ وَمَا نُرْسِلُ بِٱلْـَٔايَـٰتِ إِلَّا تَخْوِيفًا ﴿٥٩﴾

Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false. To the Thamūd We gave the she-camel as a sign to open their eyes, but they did wrong in respect of her. We never send signs for any purpose other than to give warning. (59)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لَكَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ أَحَاطَ بِٱلنَّاسِ ۚ وَمَا جَعَلْنَا ٱلرُّءْيَا ٱلَّتِىٓ أَرَيْنَـٰكَ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَٱلشَّجَرَةَ ٱلْمَلْعُونَةَ فِى ٱلْقُرْءَانِ ۚ وَنُخَوِّفُهُمْ فَمَا يَزِيدُهُمْ إِلَّا طُغْيَـٰنًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٦٠﴾

We said to you that your Lord encompasses all mankind. We have made the vision which We have shown you, as also the tree cursed in this Qur'ān, only a trial for people. We seek to put fear in their hearts, but it only increases their gross transgression. (60)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِـَٔادَمَ فَسَجَدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ قَالَ ءَأَسْجُدُ لِمَنْ خَلَقْتَ طِينًا ﴿٦١﴾

When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; but not so Iblīs. He said, 'Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?' (61)

قَالَ أَرَءَيْتَكَ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كَرَّمْتَ عَلَىَّ لَئِنْ أَخَّرْتَنِ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ لَأَحْتَنِكَنَّ ذُرِّيَّتَهُۥٓ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٦٢﴾

And he added: 'You see this being whom You have exalted above me! Indeed, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway.' (62)

قَالَ ٱذْهَبْ فَمَن تَبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ فَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ جَزَآؤُكُمْ جَزَآءً مَّوْفُورًا ﴿٦٣﴾

[God] said: 'Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense. (63)

وَٱسْتَفْزِزْ مَنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتَ مِنْهُم بِصَوْتِكَ وَأَجْلِبْ عَلَيْهِم بِخَيْلِكَ وَرَجِلِكَ وَشَارِكْهُمْ فِى ٱلْأَمْوَٰلِ وَٱلْأَوْلَٰدِ وَعِدْهُمْ ۚ وَمَا يَعِدُهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا ﴿٦٤﴾

Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them wealth and offspring, and promise them [what you will] — indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception. (64)

إِنَّ عِبَادِى لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَٰنٌ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِرَبِّكَ وَكِيلًا ﴿٦٥﴾

But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.' (65)

رَّبُّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُزْجِى لَكُمُ ٱلْفُلْكَ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ لِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا ﴿٦٦﴾

Your Lord is He who makes ships go smoothly through the sea, so that you may go about in quest of His bounty. He is indeed Most Merciful to you. (66)

وَإِذَا مَسَّكُمُ ٱلضُّرُّ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ ضَلَّ مَن تَدْعُونَ إِلَّآ إِيَّاهُ ۖ فَلَمَّا نَجَّىٰكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْبَرِّ أَعْرَضْتُمْ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ كَفُورًا ﴿٦٧﴾

And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him. Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all gratitude is man! (67)

أَفَأَمِنتُمْ أَن يَخْسِفَ بِكُمْ جَانِبَ ٱلْبَرِّ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ حَاصِبًا ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُوا۟ لَكُمْ وَكِيلًا ﴿٦٨﴾

Can you feel so sure that He will not let a tract of the land cave in beneath you, or let loose against you a deadly stormwind? You will not find then anyone to protect you. (68)

أَمْ أَمِنتُمْ أَن يُعِيدَكُمْ فِيهِ تَارَةً أُخْرَىٰ فَيُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ قَاصِفًا مِّنَ ٱلرِّيحِ فَيُغْرِقَكُم بِمَا كَفَرْتُمْ ۙ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُوا۟ لَكُمْ عَلَيْنَا بِهِۦ تَبِيعًا ﴿٦٩﴾

Or can you feel so sure that He will not let you go back to sea again, and then let loose against you a violent tempest to drown you for your ingratitude? You shall not find then anyone to help you against Us. (69)

۞ وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِىٓ ءَادَمَ وَحَمَلْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ وَفَضَّلْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا ﴿٧٠﴾

We have indeed honoured the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above many of Our creatures. (70)

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا۟ كُلَّ أُنَاسٍۭ بِإِمَٰمِهِمْ ۖ فَمَنْ أُوتِىَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِيَمِينِهِۦ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَٰبَهُمْ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا ﴿٧١﴾

One day We shall summon every community by their leaders. Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. (71)

But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth. (72)

وَمَن كَانَ فِي هَٰذِهِۦٓ أَعۡمَىٰ فَهُوَ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ أَعۡمَىٰ وَأَضَلُّ سَبِيلٗا ٧٢

Overview

The passage discussed in Chapter 3 concluded with a statement making clear that God alone is the One who determines the destiny of all His creatures. He bestows His grace on them or punishes them as He pleases. The deities they worship beside Him have no power to remove harm from them or to shift it to others. They are powerless.

The present passage speaks about the ultimate destiny of all mankind, as it is determined by God's justice. All cities and communities will suffer death before the Day of Judgement, although some may suffer a doom of some sort should they incur something that deserves God's punishment. Thus, every living creature will have come to its life's end, either by natural death or by destruction.

Within the context of the destruction suffered by some communities, the *sūrah* mentions the miracles accomplished at the hands of earlier messengers ahead of such destruction. This was the case prior to the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Such miracles and supernatural events were excluded with the advent of this final message. The law that applied to earlier communities meant that they suffered inevitable doom and destruction when they denied the truth after having received such miracles. But complete destruction was, by God's grace, not to be visited on the Muslim community. Therefore, the Prophet Muḥammad was not given any material miracle. Such miracles were given to strike the fear of God into the hearts of earlier communities.

God also held people's hands away from the Prophet, meaning that they could not kill him. He showed him some of His true signs on his night journey, which was a form of test for people. It was not meant as a supernatural event as those shown to earlier communities. All people are warned against being made to eat of the cursed tree, which the Prophet saw with his own eyes, coming out of the heart of hell, but such warnings only hardened them in their transgression. This demonstrates that had they been shown any miracles, these would only have further hardened their deviant stance.

At this point in the *sūrah* reference is made to the story of Adam and Satan, and God's permission to the latter to try to seduce human beings away from the right

path, except for the God-fearing among them. Thus the *sūrah* explains the true reasons which lead people away from the truth into unbelief. They are unwilling to reflect on the signs pointing to the truth. Our emotions are touched here however as the *sūrah* mentions God's blessings bestowed on people, while they continue to deny God and His grace except when they find themselves in desperate situations. When they are in heavy seas, they appeal to God to save them. When they are safe on land, they turn away. Yet God is able to smite them on land and sea alike. Indeed God has honoured human beings and favoured them with grace that He does not bestow on other creatures, but people neither reflect nor show gratitude.

The passage concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement, when people will have the reward for their deeds. None will be saved unless his actions in this life ensure his safety.

Clear Warnings, Increased Transgression

> *There is no community but We shall destroy or severely punish before the Day of Resurrection. That is laid down in Our decree.* (Verse 58)

God has determined that the Day of Judgement will take place when the face of the earth is devoid of all life. Every living thing will have died before that promised day falls due. God has also determined that some communities will be made to suffer punishment for the sins they commit. This is part of God's knowledge which admits no uncertainty. God knows the future in the same way as He knows the present. Indeed what has taken place in the past and what will take place in the future are equally known to God.

Miraculous events took place in the past in order to endorse the messages preached by God's messengers, and to warn people against rejecting them. Such rejection ensured that the whole community was punished. Yet only those whose hearts and minds were receptive to the message of the truth declared their belief. Those with hardened hearts denied God's messages and the miraculous events that took place during their time. Hence the final message was not accompanied by any such preternatural event: *"Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false. To the Thamūd We gave the she-camel as a sign to open their eyes, but they did wrong in respect of her. We never send signs for any purpose other than to give warning."* (Verse 59)

Islam has one miracle to prove its truth. That is the Qur'ān. It is a book that maps a whole system of life, addressing both the mind and heart and meeting all the needs of human nature. It remains open to all generations to read and to believe in. It is valid for all time. A physical miracle is given to one generation, and its effects are

limited to those who witness it. Yet the majority of those who witnessed such physical miracles did not believe in them. The example given here is that of the Thamūd who were given the miracle they sought. It came in the shape of a she-camel. Yet they transgressed and slaughtered the she-camel. Hence, God's warning came to pass and they were destroyed as a result of their denials that continued even after this clear, miraculous sign had been given them. All such signs were given by way of warning. They heralded the inevitable punishment, a punishment that was bound to be inflicted should rejection of the message continue.

Past history being such, it was necessary that the final message should not be accompanied by any physical miracle. This message is not meant for one generation; it is addressed to all future generations. It is a message that addresses the human mind with all its receptive faculties. It respects man's intellect and power of understanding.

The preternatural events that took place at the time of the Prophet, or happened to him, such as that of his night journey, were not meant as proof of his message. These were given as a test for his people.

> *We said to you that your Lord encompasses all mankind. We have made the vision which We have shown you, as also the tree cursed in this Qur'ān, only a trial for people. We seek to put fear in their hearts, but it only increases their gross transgression.* (Verse 60)

Some of those who believed in the message preached by the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) reverted to unbelief after he told them about his night journey. Others, however, became firmer than ever in their belief. Hence, it is true that what God showed His Messenger on that night was meant as 'a trial for men', so that they would reaffirm their faith. The Prophet is reminded that God encompasses all mankind. This was given to him as a promise from God, assuring him of ultimate victory. In the meantime, God would protect him against any evil scheme they might devise against him. He would come to no harm at their hands.

The Prophet told his people of God's promise and what he had seen in his true vision. This included the tree of *zaqqūm* which grows in hell. It is a tree which God cites as a warning to unbelievers. However, they continued to deny the message and whatever the Prophet said. Abū Jahl, the arch-enemy of Islam even ridiculed the tree, playing on the sense given by its name. He asked for dates and butter and mixed them together and ate them. He said to those around: "Come and eat. This is the only *zaqqūm* we know."

Of what use could any miraculous event be with such people, had it constituted proof of the Prophet's message, as was the case with some messengers before him?

The whole event of his night journey and the warning about the tree of hell only caused them to become more insolent and to transgress even further.

God had not pre-determined to destroy them. Hence, He did not give them a physical miracle. It was His will to destroy those who continued to reject the truth of His message after they had been given miraculous evidence confirming it. The Arabs of the Quraysh were given more time. They were not subjected to the same fate that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliĥ, Lot and Shu`ayb. Some of those who rejected the message of the Qur'ān at first subsequently changed their mind, believed in Islam and were among its true servants. Others who died as unbelievers were the fathers of good believers. The Qur'ān — the miracle of Islam — continued to be a book open to future generations just like it was open to the generation of the Prophet's Companions. People who did not see the Prophet or his companions came to believe in it when they read it or heard it being read. It remains open to all future generations, a guide for many who are not yet born. Some future believers in the Qur'ān may be even stronger in faith and better servants of Islam than many in past generations.

An Ever-Raging Battle

The vision the Prophet was shown included a complete world that he had not known before. The verse that refers to this vision also mentions the accursed tree which provides the food eaten in hell by those who follow Satan. The *sūrah* follows this with an image in which we see the devil threatening to seduce human beings.

> *When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; but not so Iblīs. He said, Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?' And he added: 'You see this being whom You have exalted above me! Indeed, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway' [God] said: Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense. Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them wealth and offspring, and promise them [what you will] — indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception. But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.'* (Verses 61-65)

Thus the real reason behind the attitude of those who go astray is revealed. This serves as a warning to mankind to be careful, lest they go astray. They see here *Iblīs,* their enemy and the enemy of Adam, the father of all mankind, threatening to tempt them away from the truth. It is a determined effort on his part to lead them astray: *"When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated*

themselves; but not so Iblīs. He said, Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?'" (Verse 61)

Here we see the envy that eats at *Iblīs'* heart. He states that Adam was created of clay, but omits the fact that God breathed of His soul in that clay. *Iblīs* further speaks contemptuously of Adam's weakness and his susceptibility to err. He says to God in an arrogant manner, *"You see this being whom You have exalted above me!"* (Verse 62) You have given this weak creature a position of honour. Yet, *"if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway."* (Verse 62) I will have power over them, and I will be able to direct their course and subject them to my power.

Iblīs here overlooks the fact that man is equally susceptible to goodness and following divine guidance as he is to evil and error. He chooses not to see man when he is elevated by God's guidance, able to resist temptation and evil. He is unaware of this great, distinctive characteristic that places man above all creatures that follow a single route, having no element of choice. Indeed man's position of distinction lies in his free-will and the exercise of his power of choice.

It is God's will that the advocate of evil, Satan, should have his respite to try to tempt mankind away from divine guidance. Hence, God says to him: *"Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense."* (Verse 63) Go and do your utmost. If you try to tempt them, they have been given reason and will. They can follow you or reject your advances. Now anyone who follows you, preferring error to My guidance, ignoring the signs I have placed in the world around him, deserves the fate that he is bound to suffer in hell. Indeed, both Satan and his followers will have the same end: *"Hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense."* (Verse 63)

"Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry." (Verse 64) This description seeks to magnify the means employed by Satan to encompass people and impose his power over their hearts and minds. We are looking here at a battle in which loud voices are heard, and horses and soldiers employed. A loud outcry irritates opponents and brings them out of their fortifications. They may thus fall into a trap, or find themselves facing a surprise attack.

"And share with them wealth and offspring." (Verse 64) This partnership is seen in certain false beliefs. The pagans used to assign a portion of their property to their false gods, or in effect to Satan himself, and they would also assign some of their offspring as a dedication to their deities. These were indeed dedicated to Satan by virtue of their being offered to idols. The same partnership is seen in every kind of illegitimate earning, and any money spent illegally, to buy what is forbidden. It is

also manifested in every child born in sin. The statement describes a partnership between Satan and his followers that includes wealth and offspring, the two main elements in this life.

Iblīs is given leave to employ all his devices, including tempting promises: *"And promise them [what you will] – indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception."* (Verse 64) Such promises include Satan's assertions to man that he will escape God's punishment and the promise of acquiring wealth or power through easy or dirty means.

Perhaps the most tempting promise Satan makes is that of God's forgiveness of sins. It is the point which Satan uses to attack those who will not respond to his temptation of open defiance of God's orders. With such people he employs a softer attitude trying to paint sin as very tempting, and promising people that they will be forgiven by God whose mercy is greater than all sin.

While Satan has been given leave to try to seduce those who will listen to his promises, some people will not respond to him and he has no power over them. These have immunity against all his devices and can easily resist his power: *"But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian."* (Verse 65) When man's heart is kept alive by his bond with God, and when man addresses his worship purely to God, he maintains the bond that will never be severed. His soul is brightened with the sublime light of heaven. Over the hearts and souls of such people Satan has no power. "*Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.*" (Verse 65) He protects them and renders Satan's scheming futile.

Ever since that day, Satan has been trying hard to make his word come true. He enslaves those who yield to his temptation, but those who address worship purely to God, the Most Merciful, are immune from his scheming.

Aspects of God's Favours

Satan tries to inflict only evil on mankind, yet there are those who listen to his temptations and do his bidding, turning their backs on God's guidance. God is always merciful to them, provides them with help, support and guidance, facilitates their living, saves them from harm, removes their distress and responds to them when they pray to Him to lift their suffering and hardship. Yet despite all this, they turn away, denying Him and the message He has sent them:

> *Your Lord is He who makes ships go smoothly through the sea, so that you may go about in quest of His bounty. He is indeed most merciful to you. And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him. Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all*

gratitude is man! (Verses 66-67)

The *sūrah* portrays this scene of distress at sea by way of an example of hard times. At sea, people realize much more quickly and keenly that they cannot do without God's help. Any boat or ship they use is no more than a little spot of wood or metal on the surface of an endless great sea. It is subject to the winds and currents that travel in different directions. They cling to life over this little spot, their vessel, which needs God's care more than anything else.

It is an inspiring image, the effects of which come more readily to anyone who has experienced it. People remember how, in their fear and apprehension, their hearts turn only to God, no matter how large their vessel is. At times when the wind is very strong and in high seas, even huge liners, designed to cross the oceans with ease and comfort, look vulnerable, like a feather blown away by the wind.

The Qur'ān touches people's hearts as it shows them that it is God's hand that allows their ships to travel smoothly over the sea, so that they may seek God's bounty. God is indeed Most Merciful to man. It is God's grace that man's heart seeks most in such a situation of helplessness. The *sūrah* then shows them the other extreme. After a smooth phase in their journey, they experience great turbulence in high seas. Enormous waves seem to carry their vessel and throw it around in every direction. They realize then that they have no real support and no saviour except God. They turn to Him in a sincere prayer, addressed to Him alone: *"And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him."* (Verse 67)

But man remains the same. When the hardship is over and he feels himself steady, moving easily on dry land, the experience he suffered disappears gradually from his mind, and as a result he forgets God. He then allows his desire to get the better of him and overshadow the beckoning of his uncorrupted nature: *"Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all gratitude is man!"* (Verse 67) This applies to all people except those who maintain their strong bond with God. Their hearts continue to have the light of right guidance.

At this point the *sūrah* makes a direct and emotional address to people's consciences, depicting the danger they left at sea as though it were chasing them on land, or engulfing them again when they return to sea. It wants them to feel that safety and security can only be ascertained with God's protection. It cannot be guaranteed at sea or on land, with easy waves and moderate wind, or with a comfortable home or fortified shelter:

> *Can you feel so sure that He will not let a tract of the land cave in beneath you, or let loose against you a deadly stormwind? You will not find then anyone to protect you.*

> *Or can you feel so sure that He will not let you go back to sea again, and then let loose against you a violent tempest to drown you for your ingratitude? You shall not find then anyone to help you against Us.* (Verses 68-69)

Human beings are subject to God's will at every place and time, on land and at sea. How can they feel secure against His will? How can they feel secure that they will not be overwhelmed by an earthquake or volcanic eruption, or by any other natural phenomenon? All such phenomena operate by God's will. He may send a volcanic explosion that overwhelms them with lava, rocks, mud and water. Thus they may be destroyed before they can receive any help from anyone. Or He may let them return to sea and then send a violent tempest or hurricane which overturns ships and destroys vessels. They will thus be drowned as a result of their rejection of the truth. There will be none to seek compensation for their drowning.

How can they feel secure against any such event? Yet people easily overlook the stark facts that look them in the face. They easily reject God and deny Him, and this gives them a false sense of security. Yet when they experience hardship, they turn to Him alone. When He has saved them and removed their hardship, they forget Him, as though it were the last hardship they will ever experience.

A Special Honour for Man

God has honoured mankind, favouring the human race over many of His creatures. He honoured man when He created him in this particular fashion, giving him a nature that combines the characteristics of clay, from which he was made, and the spirit that was breathed into him. Thus he combines elements of heaven and earth in his constitution. God has also honoured man by placing in Op his nature such faculties that make him able to take charge of the earth, able to be active and make changes in it. Thus human beings initiate and produce new things, combine things together and analyse complex matters in order to elevate life to the highest standard attainable.

God has also honoured man by making natural forces on earth subservient to his will and endeavour, and by making other natural forces operating in the universe helpful to him. A further aspect of the honour God has given man is seen in the reception given him when he was first created. It was a reception in which the angels prostrated themselves in a gesture of respect, because God Himself declared that man is to be honoured. Then there comes the additional honour when God states in His book, sent down from on high and which He guaranteed to remain intact for the rest of time, that man is given a position of honour.

> *We have indeed honoured the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea,*

> *and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above many of Our creatures.* (Verse 70)

"*And borne them over land and sea.*" This is accomplished by making natural laws fit with human nature and its abilities. Had these laws been at odds with human nature, life would have been impossible to sustain on earth. Indeed man is weak when his strength is measured against the natural forces that operate on land and sea, but man is given the ability to live on earth and to make use of its resources and treasures. This is all an aspect of God's grace.

"*And provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life.*" (Verse 70) Man tends to forget that whatever sustenance is given to him is indeed granted by God, because its different aspects become familiar to him. He only remembers the different forms of sustenance he is given when he loses access to them. It is then that he realizes the value of what he was given. But man's memory is short. He soon forgets again all God's blessings. He forgets what role the sun, air, and water play in sustaining human life. He forgets how important health is to him, and how he is given mobility, senses and reason, in addition to different types of food and drink. Indeed he is placed in charge of a complete world which includes countless blessings.

"*And favoured them far above many of Our creatures.*" (Verse 70) Indeed God has favoured human beings by giving them mastery of this wide planet. Furthermore, He placed in their nature such abilities that make them unique among God's creatures.

One aspect of God's favour is to make human beings responsible for themselves, accountable for their actions. This is the first quality which distinguishes mankind and makes them worthy of their exalted position on earth: freedom of choice and individual responsibility. It is only fair that people should receive the results of their work and get their reward in the life to come, when everyone's record is considered:

> *One day We shall summon every community by their leaders. Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth.* (Verses 71-72)

This is a scene showing all creatures gathered together. Every group is called by the doctrine it followed in this life, or the messenger in whom it believed, or the leader it followed in this first life. It is called to be handed the record of its actions and the result that determines its reward in the life to come. Whoever is given his record in his right hand will be full of joy, reading through his record and looking carefully at its details. Such people are given their reward in full. Nothing is denied

them, even though it may be no larger than a hair's breadth. On the other hand, a person who chooses in this life to remain blind to all indications of guidance will be also blind to the way of goodness in the life to come. They will be even far more astray. The outcome they will suffer is well known. However, the *sūrah* portrays them in this overcrowded scene as blind, moving aimlessly, lacking a guide to lead them. They are left like this without a final abode mentioned for them. This is because the blindness and strayness in that difficult situation is a destiny to be avoided at all costs.

5
Why People Reject the Divine Message

وَإِن كَادُواْ لَيَفۡتِنُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ لِتَفۡتَرِيَ عَلَيۡنَا غَيۡرَهُۥۖ وَإِذٗا لَّٱتَّخَذُوكَ خَلِيلٗا ٧٣

They endeavour to tempt you away from that which We have revealed to you, hoping that you would invent something else in Our name, in which case they would have made you their trusted friend. (73)

وَلَوۡلَآ أَن ثَبَّتۡنَٰكَ لَقَدۡ كِدتَّ تَرۡكَنُ إِلَيۡهِمۡ شَيۡـٔٗا قَلِيلًا ٧٤

Indeed, had We not given you strength, you might have inclined to them a little. (74)

إِذٗا لَّأَذَقۡنَٰكَ ضِعۡفَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ وَضِعۡفَ ٱلۡمَمَاتِ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُ لَكَ عَلَيۡنَا نَصِيرٗا ٧٥

And in that case We would have made you taste a double punishment in life and a double punishment after death, and you would have none to support you against Us. (75)

وَإِن كَادُواْ لَيَسۡتَفِزُّونَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ لِيُخۡرِجُوكَ مِنۡهَا وَإِذٗا لَّا يَلۡبَثُونَ خِلَٰفَكَ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ٧٦

And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while. (76)

سُنَّةَ مَن قَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا قَبۡلَكَ مِن رُّسُلِنَا

Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change shall you find in Our ways. (77)

وَلَا تَجِدُ لِسُنَّتِنَا تَحۡوِيلاً ﴿٧٧﴾

Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night, and recite the Qur'ān at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur'ān at dawn is indeed witnessed. (78)

أَقِمِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ لِدُلُوكِ ٱلشَّمۡسِ إِلَىٰ غَسَقِ ٱلَّيۡلِ وَقُرۡءَانَ ٱلۡفَجۡرِۖ إِنَّ قُرۡءَانَ ٱلۡفَجۡرِ كَانَ مَشۡهُودًا ﴿٧٨﴾

At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you. Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station. (79)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَتَهَجَّدۡ بِهِۦ نَافِلَةً لَّكَ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَبۡعَثَكَ رَبُّكَ مَقَامًا مَّحۡمُودًا ﴿٧٩﴾

Say, 'My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.' (80)

وَقُل رَّبِّ أَدۡخِلۡنِي مُدۡخَلَ صِدۡقٖ وَأَخۡرِجۡنِي مُخۡرَجَ صِدۡقٖ وَٱجۡعَل لِّي مِن لَّدُنكَ سُلۡطَٰنٗا نَّصِيرٗا ﴿٨٠﴾

And say, 'The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away.' (81)

وَقُلۡ جَآءَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ ٱلۡبَٰطِلُۚ إِنَّ ٱلۡبَٰطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقٗا ﴿٨١﴾

We bestow of the Qur'ān from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers, while it only adds to the ruin of the evildoers. (82)

وَنُنَزِّلُ مِنَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مَا هُوَ شِفَآءٞ وَرَحۡمَةٞ لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَلَا يَزِيدُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ إِلَّا خَسَارٗا ﴿٨٢﴾

Yet when We bestow Our blessings on man, he turns his back and draws arrogantly aside, and when he is afflicted by evil he gives himself up to despair. (83)

وَإِذَآ أَنۡعَمۡنَا عَلَى ٱلۡإِنسَٰنِ أَعۡرَضَ وَنَـَٔا

بِجَانِبِهِۦ ۖ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ كَانَ يَـُٔوسًا ﴿٨٣﴾

Say, 'Everyone acts according to his own disposition. Your Lord is fully aware as to who has chosen the best path.' (84)

قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِۦ فَرَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ سَبِيلًا ﴿٨٤﴾

They question you about the spirit. Say, 'The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.' (85)

وَيَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلرُّوحِ ۖ قُلِ ٱلرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّى وَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٨٥﴾

Had We so willed, We would have taken away that which We have revealed to you. In that case, you would not find anyone to plead with Us on your behalf, (86)

وَلَئِن شِئْنَا لَنَذْهَبَنَّ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُ لَكَ بِهِۦ عَلَيْنَا وَكِيلًا ﴿٨٦﴾

except through the grace of your Lord. His favour towards you has been great indeed. (87)

إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ إِنَّ فَضْلَهُۥ كَانَ عَلَيْكَ كَبِيرًا ﴿٨٧﴾

Say, 'If all mankind and the jinn were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' (88)

قُل لَّئِنِ ٱجْتَمَعَتِ ٱلْإِنسُ وَٱلْجِنُّ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يَأْتُوا۟ بِمِثْلِ هَـٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِۦ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا ﴿٨٨﴾

Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept anything other than unbelief. (89)

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِى هَـٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ مِن

كُلِّ مَثَلٍ فَأَبَىٰٓ أَكۡثَرُ ٱلنَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورٗا ﴿٨٩﴾

They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, (90)

وَقَالُواْ لَن نُّؤۡمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّىٰ تَفۡجُرَ لَنَا مِنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ يَنۢبُوعٗا ﴿٩٠﴾

or you have a garden of date- palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, (91)

أَوۡ تَكُونَ لَكَ جَنَّةٞ مِّن نَّخِيلٖ وَعِنَبٖ فَتُفَجِّرَ ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرَ خِلَٰلَهَا تَفۡجِيرًا ﴿٩١﴾

or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, (92)

أَوۡ تُسۡقِطَ ٱلسَّمَآءَ كَمَا زَعَمۡتَ عَلَيۡنَا كِسَفًا أَوۡ تَأۡتِيَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ قَبِيلًا ﴿٩٢﴾

or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.' (93)

أَوۡ يَكُونَ لَكَ بَيۡتٞ مِّن زُخۡرُفٍ أَوۡ تَرۡقَىٰ فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَلَن نُّؤۡمِنَ لِرُقِيِّكَ حَتَّىٰ تُنَزِّلَ عَلَيۡنَا كِتَٰبٗا نَّقۡرَؤُهُۥۗ قُلۡ سُبۡحَانَ رَبِّي هَلۡ كُنتُ إِلَّا بَشَرٗا رَّسُولٗا ﴿٩٣﴾

Nothing has ever prevented people from believing, whenever guidance came to them except that they would say: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?' (94)

وَمَا مَنَعَ ٱلنَّاسَ أَن يُؤۡمِنُوٓاْ إِذۡ جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡهُدَىٰٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوٓاْ أَبَعَثَ ٱللَّهُ بَشَرٗا رَّسُولٗا ﴿٩٤﴾

Say, 'Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven.' (95)

قُل لَّوۡ كَانَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مَلَٰٓئِكَةٞ يَمۡشُونَ مُطۡمَئِنِّينَ لَنَزَّلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَلَكٗا رَّسُولٗا ٩٥

Say, 'Sufficient is God for a witness between me and you. He is indeed fully aware of His servants, and He sees all things.' (96)

قُلۡ كَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدَۢا بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنَكُمۡۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرَۢا بَصِيرٗا ٩٦

He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided; whereas for those whom He leaves to go astray you cannot find anyone to protect them from Him. On the Day of Resurrection We shall gather them together, prone upon their faces, blind, dumb and deaf. Hell shall be their abode. Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing flame. (97)

وَمَن يَهۡدِ ٱللَّهُ فَهُوَ ٱلۡمُهۡتَدِۖ وَمَن يُضۡلِلۡ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُمۡ أَوۡلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِهِۦۖ وَنَحۡشُرُهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمۡ عُمۡيٗا وَبُكۡمٗا وَصُمّٗاۖ مَّأۡوَىٰهُمۡ جَهَنَّمُۖ كُلَّمَا خَبَتۡ زِدۡنَٰهُمۡ سَعِيرٗا ٩٧

That is their reward for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' (98)

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآؤُهُم بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَقَالُوٓاْ أَءِذَا كُنَّا عِظَٰمٗا وَرُفَٰتًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبۡعُوثُونَ خَلۡقٗا جَدِيدًا ٩٨

Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like? He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection. But the evildoers refuse to accept anything other than disbelief. (99)

۞ أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ قَادِرٌ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يَخۡلُقَ مِثۡلَهُمۡ وَجَعَلَ لَهُمۡ أَجَلٗا لَّا رَيۡبَ فِيهِ فَأَبَى ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ إِلَّا كُفُورٗا ٩٩

Say, 'Had you possessed the treasures of my Lord's mercy, you would have been tight-fisted for fear of spending them. For man has always been niggardly.' (100)

قُل لَّوۡ أَنتُمۡ تَمۡلِكُونَ خَزَآئِنَ رَحۡمَةِ رَبِّيٓ إِذٗا لَّأَمۡسَكۡتُمۡ خَشۡيَةَ ٱلۡإِنفَاقِۚ وَكَانَ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ قَتُورٗا ١٠٠

To Moses We gave nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel [about what happened]. When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched.' (101)

وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَىٰ تِسۡعَ ءَايَٰتِۭ بَيِّنَٰتٖۖ فَسۡـَٔلۡ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ إِذۡ جَآءَهُمۡ فَقَالَ لَهُۥ فِرۡعَوۡنُ إِنِّي لَأَظُنُّكَ يَٰمُوسَىٰ مَسۡحُورٗا ١٠١

[Moses] said, 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye- opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.' (102)

قَالَ لَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتَ مَآ أَنزَلَ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ إِلَّا رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ بَصَآئِرَ وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّكَ يَٰفِرۡعَوۡنُ مَثۡبُورٗا ١٠٢

So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. (103)

فَأَرَادَ أَن يَسۡتَفِزَّهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَأَغۡرَقۡنَٰهُ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥ جَمِيعٗا ١٠٣

Then We said to the Children of Israel, 'Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together.' (104)

وَقُلۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ لِبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱسۡكُنُواْ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ فَإِذَا جَآءَ وَعۡدُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ جِئۡنَا بِكُمۡ لَفِيفٗا ١٠٤

We have bestowed [this Qur'ān] from on high in truth, and in truth has it come down. We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. (105)

وَبِٱلۡحَقِّ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ وَبِٱلۡحَقِّ نَزَلَۗ وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ

We have divided the Qur'ān into parts so that you may recite it to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step. (106)

إِلَّا مُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

Say, 'You may believe in it or you may not.' Those who were given knowledge before it was revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, (107)

وَقُرْءَانًا فَرَقْنَٰهُ لِتَقْرَأَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ مُكْثٍ وَنَزَّلْنَٰهُ تَنزِيلًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

and say, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.' (108)

قُلْ ءَامِنُوا۟ بِهِۦٓ أَوْ لَا تُؤْمِنُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦٓ إِذَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ يَخِرُّونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ سُجَّدًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility. (109)

وَيَقُولُونَ سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّنَآ إِن كَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّنَا لَمَفْعُولًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

Say, 'Call upon God or call upon the Most Merciful. By whichever name you invoke Him, His are the most gracious names.' Do not raise your voice too loud in prayer, nor say it in too low a voice, but follow a middle course in between. (110)

وَيَخِرُّونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ يَبْكُونَ وَيَزِيدُهُمْ خُشُوعًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

قُلِ ٱدْعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ أَوِ ٱدْعُوا۟ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنَ ۖ أَيًّا مَّا تَدْعُوا۟ فَلَهُ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَلَا تَجْهَرْ بِصَلَاتِكَ وَلَا تُخَافِتْ بِهَا وَٱبْتَغِ بَيْنَ ذَٰلِكَ سَبِيلًا ﴿١١٠﴾

And say, 'All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness. (111)

وَقُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى لَمْ يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ

يَكُن لَّهُۥ شَرِيكٌ فِي ٱلۡمُلۡكِ وَلَمۡ يَكُن لَّهُۥ وَلِيٌّ مِّنَ ٱلذُّلِّۖ وَكَبِّرۡهُ تَكۡبِيرَۢا ١١١

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* centres around its main theme, the personality of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the attitude of his community to him after he was given his message. It also speaks about the Qur'ān and its distinctive characteristics. It begins with a reference to the attempts by the unbelievers to turn the Prophet away from some of the revelations God sent down to him. It mentions their effort to banish him from Makkah and the protection he was given by God so that he would not yield to their temptation or respond to their provocation. God guaranteed his protection because He had already decided that the people of Makkah would not be annihilated like earlier communities who rejected His messengers. He chose instead to give them respite and allowed them to have their term in this world. Had they ousted the Prophet from their community and banished him from their city, severe punishment would have been inflicted on them, in accordance with God's law that inflicts immediate punishment on any community that ousts the messenger sent to them.

The Prophet is commanded to stick to his way, offering his prayers to God alone, reciting the Qur'ān revealed to him and supplicating that God may help him to be true and sincere in all situations and events, and give him clear support. He is also commanded to declare that the truth has come to be established and that falsehood is certain to be vanquished. It is this support granted by God that serves as his best equipment. It protects him against all designs and ensures his ultimate victory.

This is followed by a clear statement on the effect of the Qur'ān: it is a cure and an aspect of grace for those who believe in it, and a means of punishment and suffering for those who deny it. They suffer on its account in this life and they suffer punishment in the life to come because of denying its truth.

Within the context of grace and punishment, the *sūrah* describes man's reaction to both. When he is enjoying God's blessings and grace, man is arrogant, turning away from God's guidance. When he is afflicted with suffering, he is in utter despair. This is followed with an implicit threat, requiring every human being to work in accordance with their own nature until they receive their fair reward in the life to come.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that human knowledge is scanty. This comes in connection with the question the unbelievers put about the spirit, all knowledge of which God has chosen to keep to Himself. It is not for any human being to get to know it. Sure knowledge is that which God has given to His Messenger as part of His grace. If God so wills, He is able to withdraw that grace and no one will ever be able to bring it back to mankind. However, He bestows His grace on His Messenger as He is Merciful, Compassionate.

The *sūrah* mentions that the Qur'ān, which is a miraculous book, the like of which cannot be produced by human beings *or jinn,* even though they may mobilize all their resources in a single effort, was not sufficient for the unbelievers in Makkah as evidence of God's message. Although God included in it a whole variety of evidence to the truth of its message and made this suitable for human reason and hearts, with all their different leanings, still the unbelievers saw it as inadequate. They naïvely demanded material evidence of a miraculous nature, such as springs gushing from the earth, or a richly decorated home for the Prophet. Their arrogance went even further, demanding things that are beyond the ability of human beings, such as that God's Messenger should rise up into the sky in front of their eyes and bring them a book to read, or that he should cause some matter to fall from the sky and destroy them. They even demanded that God should come to them in person, accompanied by a delegation of angels!

At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene showing the fate that awaits them in the life to come. This is certain to be their lot as a result of their arrogance and denial of the truth of the Day of Judgement when people will be resurrected after they have become bones and dust.

The *sūrah* ridicules their arrogant demands. Had they been the guardians of God's grace, they would have succumbed to the miserly characteristics of human beings. They would have been in fear lest God's grace should be exhausted, when God's treasures of mercy are indeed inexhaustible. Yet they stop at nothing in their demands.

In connection with their demands for material miracles, the *sūrah* reminds them of the miracles which were given to Moses, yet Pharaoh and his people denied those which God gave them. As a result, God destroyed them according to His law of destroying those who persist in their denial of the truth after clear evidence has been given to them.

The Qur'ān remains as the true miracle that shines for all time. It was revealed in parts and portions, in accordance with the needs of the community it was educating and equipping for its great task. Those who believe in the truth among earlier communities recognize the truth contained in the Qur'ān and submit to it. They

believe in it and submit to its authority.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet (peace be upon him) to worship none but God, and to glorify and praise Him alone. Thus the *sūrah* ends as it began, calling on believers to glorify God, the only deity in the universe.

Vain Endeavours

> *They endeavour to tempt you away from that which We have revealed to you, hoping that you would invent something else in Our name, in which case they would have made you their trusted friend. Indeed, had We not given you strength, you might have inclined to them a little. And in that case We would have made you taste a double punishment in life and a double punishment after death, and you would have none to support you against Us. And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while. Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change you shall find in Our ways.* (Verses 73-77)

The *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' attempts to dissuade the Prophet from fulfilling the task entrusted to him. Firstly, they tried to make him turn his back on what God revealed to him so as to invent some other matter and attribute it falsely to God. They did this even though he was known for his honesty and truthfulness. They also offered to worship God in return for a compromise that ensured that the Prophet would stop denouncing their deities as false. Some of them tried to persuade him to make their land as sacred as the Ka`bah which God had sanctified. Their nobility also tried to get him to allocate a special meeting place, to which no poor person would be admitted.

Reference to these attempts is made in general terms so that it leads to a reminder of the grace God bestowed on His Messenger as He strengthened him in his faith and protected him from the unbelievers' temptations. Without God's support, he might have responded to them, and they would have made of him an intimate friend. But then he would have left himself open to God's severe punishment. Indeed his would be a double punishment in this life and in the life to come, without any to support him against God.

Such efforts are always made by people in power in dealing with the advocates of God's message. They always tempt them into deviation even if just a little, from the clear and solid line of the message, seeking to persuade them to accept compromise in return for seeming substantial gain. Some may fall for such temptation, because they do not realize the seriousness of the matter. After all, they are not being asked to abandon their call altogether, only to make some minor amendments in order to arrive at a compromise. Satan always endeavours to persuade the advocates of God's

message in this way, arguing that it is better for the achievement of their goals to make such compromises so that the rulers are won over to the faith.

However, a small deviation at the beginning leads to a total turning away at the end. An advocate of God's message who agrees to abandon even a small part of it at the outset cannot maintain his ground and refuse to abandon more. Indeed his willingness to retreat further is greater with every backward step he takes, losing more and more ground.

The point at issue here is the principle of faith, and belief in the whole message. A person who gives up even a minute part of it cannot be a true believer in the message itself. To a true believer, every aspect of the message, and every small detail is true like the rest. We cannot judge between its parts, dividing them into essential and optional. There is nothing in God's message that can be left out or suspended. It is a complete and whole entity, which loses all its characteristics when any of its parts are lost, in the same way as a chemical compound loses all its qualities when any of its components is missing.

People in power always try to ensnare advocates of the divine message. Should the latter give up a small part, they lose their dignity and high standing. Their adversaries also realize that more bargaining and a higher price will induce them to give up the whole message.

Indeed seeking a compromise, by making even small concessions, to win over people in power represents a spiritual defeat for advocates of the divine message. This is so because they now rely on rulers and people in power for support when they should rely on God alone. When defeat creeps into people's minds, it can never turn into victory.

Bearing this in mind, we can appreciate the fact that God directs His Messenger to the fact that He has granted him a great favour by strengthening his resolve to stick to what He has revealed to him and protected him from the unbelievers' temptations. God also favoured him with protection against inclining to the unbelievers even in a small way. For had he so inclined, God would have inflicted on him a double punishment both in this life and in the life to come, and would have left him without help and support.

When the unbelievers of the Quraysh found it impossible to persuade the Prophet to compromise, they tried to turn him out of their land, i.e. Makkah. But God directed him to leave of his own accord and migrate to Madinah. God always knew that He would not exterminate the Quraysh. Yet had they driven the Prophet out of their city by force, that would have been their fate: *"And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while."* (Verse 76) This is the way God has set to operate

in this life: "*Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change shall you find in Our ways.*" (Verse 77)

God has made this way a law which does not fail. Driving a messenger of God out of his land is a great offence which incurs severe punishment. God operates certain laws in this universe, which are not altered for individual cases. This universe is not subject to coincidences that influence its existence; it is subject to constant laws. Since God, in His infinite wisdom, chose not to exterminate the Quraysh, as He did with earlier communities, He did not give His Messenger, the Prophet Muĥammad, miraculous proofs, and did not allow that he be driven away. Instead, He inspired him to leave voluntarily. God's laws remained in operation, without alteration or modification.

The Truth Will Triumph

At this point in the *sūrah,* the Prophet is directed to remain in contact with his Lord, seeking His support and following His directives, proclaiming the fact that the truth is certain to triumph, while falsehood will inevitably wither away.

> *Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night, and recite the Qur'ān at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur'ān at dawn is indeed witnessed. At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you. Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station. Say, My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.' And say, The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away. We bestow of the Qur'ān from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers, while it only adds to the ruin of the evildoers.* (Verses 78-82)

This directive applies to the Prophet in particular. It does not relate to the obligatory prayers which have their own timings, outlined in several authentic *aĥādīth* and numerous reports of the Prophet's practical *Sunnah.* Some scholars suggest that the reference here to the sun's decline means its beginning to move down from its zenith, while they take the reference to the 'darkness of the night' to mean the beginning of the night, and the 'recitation at dawn' to mean the obligatory prayer at dawn. They thus suggest that the Qur'ānic statement here groups together the times of all five obligatory prayers, *Żuhr, `Aşr, Maghrib* and `Ishā', [when the sun is on its decline to the darkness of the night], and then *Fajr* at dawn. They consider that only recitation of the Qur'ān in prayer at night is obligatory on the Prophet as a bonus. For our part, we feel that the first view is more accurate, considering all else that these two verses mention as being applicable to the Prophet only. As for the

timing of daily prayers, these are properly outlined in the *Sunnah,* both verbally and practically.

"*Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night.*" (Verse 78) This is an instruction to the Prophet to offer prayer at the time between the sun starting to set and the night creeping in to spread its darkness. He is also ordered to "*recite the Qur'ān at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur'ān at dawn is indeed witnessed.*" (Verse 78) These two periods when the day and night succeed each other in a continuous cycle have their special significance. Both times mark a change as the light dwindles to give way to the enveloping darkness, and then as the darkness is removed to allow the light to spread. Both times have their effect, softening hearts and inviting people to contemplate how the laws of nature operate without fail. Needless to say, the Qur'ān and prayer also have their effects on people's hearts, particularly at dawn with its calm serenity, and approaching light, leading to another lively day.

"*At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you.*" (Verse 79) The instruction here is to the Prophet to rise after having had some sleep in the early part of the night. The Qur'ān is recited in night worship because it is the hard core of prayer and its most important part. "*Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station.*" (Verse 79) This is achieved through a constant link with God, manifested by prayer and recitation of the Qur'ān in night worship. Such a position is only achievable in this way. If God's Messenger (peace be upon him), in his particular status, is instructed to maintain prayer and rise from his sleep at night to worship and recite the Qur'ān, so that he attains the honourable station that is allowed him, certainly other people need to follow suit so that they also may attain the good positions to which they aspire. This is the only way for them to travel. The equipment they need as they go along is thus outlined for them.

"*Say: 'My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.'*" (Verse 80) This is a supplication that God has taught to His Messenger so that his followers learn how to pray to God. It is a supplication for true and sincere entrance and exit. This implies a true and sincere journey, from start to finish and along the way. Truth and sincerity have their own connotations here in reference to the attempts made by the unbelievers to persuade the Prophet to invent something different from the Qur'ān. Moreover, truth and sincerity add an air of steadfastness, reassurance and total dedication. "*And grant me, by Your grace, sustaining power.*" (Verse 80) This is a supplication for strength that would enable the Prophet to look down on all earthly powers and all that the unbelievers could muster. The expression, '*by Your grace,*' implies closeness to God and contact with Him, as well as seeking His help and support.

A true advocate of faith derives strength only from God, and acquires a position commanding respect only through God's power. Such an advocate seeks no shelter or support from a ruler or a person of influence unless he first turns to God for help and protection. The divine message may touch the hearts of people in power, or those occupying positions of influence, and they then become its soldiers and servants. This ensures success for them in this life and in the life to come. But the message itself will not prosper if it ranks itself among the servants and soldiers of rulers. It is God's message and, as such, it commands a position higher than that of any ruler.

"*And say, 'The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away.*" (Verse 81) With irrefutable authority derived from God Himself it is proclaimed that truth has come to be established with its overpowering might, while falsehood is totally defeated. For it is in the nature of truth to triumph and establish itself with vigour, while it is in the nature of falsehood to wither away and be vanquished.

"*For falsehood is always bound to wither away.*" (Verse 81) This is a basic truth that is stated here with emphasis. It may appear sometimes that falsehood is equipped with power and influence, but this is all hollow. Falsehood will always try to assume an air of strength, because it has no real strength at its command. It knows that it has to visually deceive, giving the appearance of large size and physical power. But in reality, it is fragile, easy to destroy. It is no more than the flames of dried straw that float into the air only to subside in no time at all. By contrast, live coal burns slowly and steadily to give sustained warmth and long lasting heat. Falsehood is like the scum that floats at the surface. It soon disappears while the real water stays.

Indeed falsehood ends in utter loss because it does not carry within itself the elements necessary for survival. It derives its life, which, by nature, is of short duration, from external elements and unnatural support. Should such elements and support weaken or become loose, it will collapse. Truth, by contrast, derives its power of survival from within itself. It may have to face determined opposition, particularly by those in ruling positions, but its inherent strength and reassurance guarantee its eventual triumph. How could it be otherwise when truth comes from the Eternal One who has made truth an attribute of His own?

"*For falsehood is always bound to wither away.*" (Verse 81) Falsehood may have all the might of Satan and those tyrannical forces which command power behind it, but God's promise will definitely come true and His power is far superior. Every believer who is firm of faith is certain to experience the truth of this promise. *"Who is more true to his promise than God?"* (9: 111) "*Whose word could be truer than God's?*" (4: 87)

The Qur'ānic Cure

"We bestow of the Qur'ān do from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers." (Verse 82) There is certainly a cure and a blessing for those whose hearts are full of faith. Such hearts brighten up and become ready to receive what the Qur'ān imparts of grace, reassurance and security. There is in the Qur'ān a healing power that cures obsession, anxiety and hesitation. It establishes a bond between the believer's heart and God. This bond imparts inner peace to the believer as he experiences a feeling of security in God's protection. He is happy and satisfied with what he receives from God and contented with his lot in life. Anxiety, hesitation and obsession are all terrible to experience. As the Qur'ān dispels all these, it is indeed a blessing for true believers.

In the Qur'ān we have a cure from carnal desires, greed, envy and evil thoughts. All these cause sickness of the heart and mind, leading to debility and utter ruin. As the Qur'ān cures these, it is a tool of grace bestowed by God on those who truly believe in Him.

The Qur'ān also provides a cure from deviant thoughts and feelings. It protects the mind from going far astray, while allowing it complete freedom within its fruitful pursuits. It stops the mind from wasting its energy over what is devoid of use. It lays down for it a sound approach that ensures good and useful results. The same principle applies to the human body, ensuring that its resources are utilized for what is useful and fruitful, steering human beings away from the suppression of natural desires or indulgence without restraint. Thus it ensures a healthy body. In this again we see that the Qur'ān is a means of God's grace that is bestowed on believers.

There is also in the Qur'ān a cure for social ailments that weaken the structure of society and destroy its peace and security. Under the social system established by the Qur'ān society enjoys perfect justice in peace and security. This is again a further aspect of grace bestowed through the Qur'ān.

However, the Qur'ān *"only adds to the ruin of the evildoers."* (Verse 82) They make no use of the cure it provides or the blessings it brings about. They look with dismay at the believers as they feel proud to be among the followers of the Qur'ān. In their stubborn arrogance, the evildoers persist with their corrupt and unjust methods. Yet in this life, they are defeated by the followers of the Qur'ān, which makes them losers. In the life to come, they suffer for their arrogant disbelief and tyranny, and thus they lose again. Hence the Qur'ān adds to their ruin.

When man is left to his own devices, without the cure and blessing of the Qur'ān, and without consistent restraint of his whims and desires, he moves between two extremes: when he enjoys good fortune, he is arrogant and ungrateful, and when he experiences hardship he is given to despair. *"Yet when We bestow Our blessings on*

man, he turns his back and draws arrogantly aside, and when he is afflicted by evil he gives himself up to despair." (Verse 83)

Blessings and good fortune lead to arrogance unless one remembers where they come from and give thanks to God who bestowed them. On the other hand, when someone is afflicted by difficulty and hardship, he is easily lost in despair unless he trusts to God and hopes to receive His grace. It is when one truly relies on God that one feels that hardship will give way to what is better. This makes it clear that faith ensures God's grace in situations of ease and difficulty alike.

The *sūrah* then states that everyone and every camp acts according to the path it follows. The final verdict on methods and actions is left to God alone: *"Say: Everyone acts according to his own disposition. Your Lord is fully aware as to who has chosen the best path."* (Verse 84) In this statement we have an implicit warning as to the results of approaches and deeds. Hence, everyone needs to heed the warnings and strive to follow the path of divine guidance which is available to all.

Man's Scanty Knowledge

At this point the *sūrah* mentions how some unbelievers questioned the Prophet about the spirit and its nature. The consistent approach of the Qur'ān, which is indeed the best approach, is to answer people when they ask about matters that they need to know about and to give them answers that their faculties can understand and learn. It does not waste the intellectual faculties God has given them in pursuits that are of no use to them. Nor does it carry them over domains which they cannot comprehend. Hence, when they asked about the spirit and its nature, the Prophet was instructed to tell them that such knowledge belonged to God alone. None other than Him has such knowledge. *"They question you about the spirit. Say, 'The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.'"* (Verse 85)

Such an answer does not present a barrier preventing the proper working of the human intellect. It simply directs such intellect to concentrate its efforts within the limits of its power and the domain where it can profitably function. It is worthless to roam endlessly in a maze. Similarly, it is pointless to spend one's mental energies pursuing what we are not equipped to comprehend. The spirit is one such pursuit. It belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. It is a secret God has kept to Himself. He has breathed spirit into man and some other creatures whose nature is unknown to us. Compared to God's absolute knowledge, human knowledge is limited. The secrets of existence are too great to be understood by man's finite reason. It is not man's role to manage all the affairs of the universe, and as such, his powers are not limitless. Instead he has been given such powers as are

sufficient for him to control his own world and to fulfil his mission of building the earth and bringing it to the best standard possible within the limits of his faculties and knowledge.

Man has been able to achieve high standards with his inventive powers. However, he looks helplessly at the spirit, unable to fathom its secrets, or to comprehend its nature. He does not know how the spirit comes to us and how it departs, where it comes from and to where it eventually goes. He knows nothing of the spirit except the information God has given us in the revelations He has bestowed from on high. This information provides knowledge that is certain, beyond doubt. It comes from the One who knows everything. Had it been His will, He would have deprived mankind of such knowledge, taking away what He revealed to His Messenger. But He does not do so as an act of grace: *"Had We so willed, We would have taken away that which We have revealed to you. In that case, you would not find anyone to plead with Us on your behalf except through the grace of your Lord. His favour towards you has been great indeed."* (Verses 86-87)

God reminds His Messenger of this act of grace. It is undeniable grace that God has chosen to bestow revelations on His Messenger, and to keep them intact. This is a great favour granted to mankind, since the Qur'ān gives them guidance and blessings, one generation after another.

Just as the spirit is one of the secrets that God keeps to Himself, the Qur'ān is God's book that human beings cannot emulate. Indeed, neither human beings nor *jinn,* representing the visible and invisible types of creation, can produce anything similar to the Qur'ān, even if they were to muster all their powers in a single effort to achieve this task: *"Say: 'If all mankind and the* jinn *were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.'"* (Verse 88)

The Qur'ān is not mere words and expressions that humans and *jinn* may try to emulate. It is but one of God's works, the like of which no creature can produce. It is just like the spirit whose nature is known only to God. Creatures cannot fathom its complete secret, even though they may understand some of its aspects, features and merits.

The Qur'ān is indeed a complete and perfect way of life. It provides a method that takes into account all the laws of nature that affect the human soul in all its situations, as well as those affecting human communities in all conditions and stages of development. It provides solutions that apply to a single human being, and others for a closely knit community, providing legislation and rules that suit human nature and its complex bonds, feelings and directions. Its solutions are perfectly coherent and fully consistent. They lose sight of nothing that is relevant, or any possible

option. Nor do they ignore any of the conflicting circumstances that may affect the life of the individual or the community. This is only possible because these laws and legislation are made by God who is fully aware of human nature in all its conditions and its complexities.

Man-made systems, on the other hand, betray man's limitations and reflect his circumstances. They cannot allow for all eventualities at the same time. They may treat an individual or social aspect with something that could easily lead to a situation requiring some other treatment. The miracle of the Qur'ān is far greater than its superb construction and infallible meanings. Indeed the inability of all human beings and *jinn* to produce anything similar to it includes also their inability to produce any system that encompasses all the areas it tackles.

Only a Man and a Messenger

> *Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept anything other than disbelief They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'* (Verses 89-93)

Their limited perception has failed to appreciate the inimitability of the Qur'ān. Therefore they started asking for material miracles, enlisting absurd requests that only betrayed their childish thinking. Or they spoke with impudence about God Himself. They did not benefit by the expounding of cases and examples in the Qur'ān, nor were they satisfied with the wide variety of styles and approaches the Qur'ān employed in explaining its concepts, so as to be understood by people of different standards and faculties. Hence, "*most people refuse to accept anything other than unbelief*" (Verse 89) They started to place conditions which they required to be met so that they might believe in the Prophet's message. Such conditions required him to "*cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth.*" (Verse 90)

Alternatively, they told him that they would not believe in him until "*you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it.*" (Verse 91)

Their conditions were so irresponsible that they even demanded that the Prophet inflict on them some punishment from the sky above, mockingly stating that the sky itself should fall upon them in pieces, just as he had warned would happen on the Day of Judgement. A similarly absurd condition was that he should bring God and

the angels before them, so that they could support him and defend his case, like they themselves used to do in tribal arguments. Absurdity knows no limit, for they even asked him to take for himself a house of gold and similarly precious metals. They further suggested to him that he should ascend to heaven as a proof of his special position. But even if he had done so, this too would not have been enough. For he was to bring back a book with him for them to read.

The childish absurdity of all these requests and conditions is clearly apparent. They are all arbitrary suggestions and widely different in scope and nature that they cannot be placed on the same level. How could residence in a luxurious house be considered of similar value to a person's ascension to heaven? And how can the digging up of a water spring he treated as equivalent to bringing God and the angels marching in ranks before them? However, to them these are all miraculous matters, so they can be grouped together. Should Muĥammad accomplish any of these miraculous events, they would consider believing in him and his message.

They overlooked the permanent miracle of the Qur'ān when they were totally unable to produce anything similar to it in style, imagery, meaning and philosophy. Such a miracle is not physical, defying the senses. Hence they demanded to have before them a clearly physical miracle.

But producing a miracle was something that the Prophet could not accomplish. Miracles are only determined by God in His wisdom. It is not appropriate for the Prophet to request such a miracle, unless God wishes to give it to him. The Prophet's understanding and appreciation of God's wisdom prevented him from requesting such a miracle. Hence, he is commanded to say in reply to them: *"Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger."* (Verse 93) He confines himself to the limits of his human status and he works according to the duties outlined for him in his message. He does not suggest to God anything beyond this.

Before the Prophet Muĥammad was sent as God's Messenger and even after he began to preach his message, people wallowed under the misconception that a human being could be God's messenger. Hence they rejected God's messengers and the messages He revealed to them: *"Nothing has ever prevented people from believing, whenever guidance came to them except that they would say: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?"* (Verse 94). In this way they turned away from divine guidance.

This misconception results from people's low rating of their own value and the honourable position God has given them. They thought it totally unlikely that a human being could be chosen by God to be His messenger. This betrayed a lack of understanding of the nature of the universe, the angels, and how, in their angelic form, they are unsuited to life on earth. In order for angels to live on earth, their

nature must be modified which would then make it impossible for human beings to recognize them as angels.

"*Say, Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven.*" (Verse 95) Had God willed that angels should inhabit the earth, He would have made them in the form of human beings, because it is the form that suits the laws of nature affecting the earth. He says in another verse, "*Even if We had appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man.*" (6: 9) God is certainly able to accomplish any purpose He may have. However, He has willed to set in operation laws of nature and He has made His creatures fit for life under the influence of such laws of nature which He, by His own power and choice, has made permanent and unalterable. Through the operation of His laws of nature, His purpose of creation is thus fulfilled. Yet the unbelievers understand nothing of this.

Since this is the pattern God has chosen for His creation, He instructs His Messenger to end all argument with them and leave the dispute between the two parties to God. He calls on God to be his witness, leaving them entirely to God to do with whatever He pleases. He is the One who knows everything about everyone. "*Say: 'Sufficient is God for a witness between me and you. He is indeed fully aware of His servants, and He sees all things.'*" (Verse 96) This statement carries an implicit warning. The results, however, are painted in a frightening scene of what will happen on the Day of Judgement.

Devoid of all faculties

> *He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided; whereas for those whom He leaves to go astray you cannot find anyone to protect them from Him. On the Day of Resurrection We shall gather them together, prone upon their faces, blind, dumb and deaf. Hell shall be their abode. Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing flame. That is their reward for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like? He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection. But the evildoers refuse to accept anything other than unbelief* (Verses 97-99)

God has operated certain laws concerning His guidance and people's choice of error in preference to that guidance. He has allowed people to conduct their lives as they wish, but they remain subject to these laws and they will have to face the outcome. One of these laws is that human beings either follow God's guidance or turn away from it into error. The choice is made by man himself. Whoever deserves, on the basis of his efforts and actions, to receive God's guidance will definitely be

guided aright. He is the one who will be truly guided as a result of his choice.

In the other camp we find those who deserve to be left in error because they turn away from God's revelations and blind themselves to all signs pointing the way to His guidance. Such people will have no one to protect them against God's punishment: "*You cannot find anyone to protect them from Him.*" (Verse 97) On the Day of Judgement they shall suffer humiliation and will be resurrected in a terrible situation, '*prone upon their faces',* lost as they will be '*blind, dumb and deaf*' (Verse 97) They are thus deprived of their senses by which they might have been able to find their way through the great multitude. It is a fitting result, because it was they who chose not to use their senses in life to follow the signs of divine guidance. The final outcome is that "*Hell shall be their abode.*" It will be made to continue to burn fiercely: "*Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing fire.*" (Verse 97)

It is certainly a horrifying end, but they have earned it through their disbelief in God's signs and revelations, and also through their denial of resurrection, the reckoning and reward: "*That is their reward, for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?*" (Verse 98)

The *sūrah* portrays the scene as though it is taking place now. It shows this life as having already come to an end and become a distant past. This follows the usual Qur'ānic method of portraying scenes of the hereafter as if they were taking place now in order to enhance their effect, so that people may take heed.

This is followed by a new argument based on what they see in real life but tend to ignore: "*Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like?*" (Verse 99) Why should the concept of resurrection be difficult to accept when simple logic confirms that God who has created this majestic universe is able to create a similar one? If He is thus able to create, He is also able to bring creatures back to life after they have died. "*He has beyond any doubt seta term for their resurrection.*" (Verse 99) He has allowed them a term of life and set a time for their resurrection. However, "*The evildoers refuse to accept anything other than disbelief*" (Verse 99) Hence their punishment will be fair, as they have had all signs, pointers and evidence to show them the path of guidance, but they refused to follow anything except error and unbelief.

A Threat to Exterminate the Believers

Yet those who made such suggestions and demands as related in the *sūrah* were themselves misers. Had they been in charge of God's grace, they would have held on to it, fearing to expend it. "*Say: Had you possessed the treasures of my Lord's mercy, you would have been tight-fisted for fear of spending them. For man has always been niggardly.*"

(Verse 100) This is an image of utter stinginess, because God's grace encompasses everything. It will never be exhausted or diminished. Yet in their miserly attitude, they would have withheld God's grace from His creation, had they been placed in charge of administering it.

Miracles do not initiate faith in hardened hearts. Moses, for example, was given nine such clear signs, but Pharaoh and his people denied them until they suffered God's punishment. "*To Moses We gave nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel [about what happened]. When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched. '[Moses] said, 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.' So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together.*" (Verses 101-104) This part of the history of Moses and the Children of Israel is mentioned here because it fits with the context of the *sūrah.* It started by mentioning the Aqşā mosque in Jerusalem, and it then related a part of the history of the Israelites with Moses. This is followed by mentioning the hereafter when Pharaoh and his people will be brought forward. This also fits with the scene of the hereafter and the one showing the end of those who deny resurrection, mentioned a little earlier in the *sūrah.*

Moses' nine clear signs to which the *sūrah* refers were his hand turning white, his staff, and the tests to which Pharaoh's people were subjected, such as drought, shortage of fruit, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. "*Ask the Children of Israel*' about what happened. They were witnesses to what took place between Moses and Pharaoh: "*When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him: Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched.*" (Verse 101) Thus the word of truth assigning divinity to God alone, and the call to abandon all injustice and tyranny cannot he uttered, according to the tyrant, except by someone bewitched, unable to realize the meaning of what he says. Indeed tyrants like Pharaoh cannot imagine that anyone in his right senses could ever adopt such an attitude or give expression to such demands.

Moses, on the other hand, realizes that his strength is based in the truth he preaches. His message stands out as a source of light. He is certain of God's support and that He will inevitably punish the tyrants: "*Moses said: 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.*" (Verse 102) Moses makes it clear to Pharaoh that his denial of the truth when he is fully aware that none other than God could have accomplished such clear signs will earn him a terrible punishment. These signs were clear for anyone who cared to look. They show the truth in full light, clear as the bright day. Yet Pharaoh chose to deny them all and deny God. Hence, divine

justice will inflict on him a punishment that leaves him utterly ruined.

At this point, the tyrannical Pharaoh resorts to his own material force, threatening to wipe Moses and his followers off the face of the earth. Such is the method to which all tyrants resort when they are faced with the truth. But God's will is triumphant. His law of punishing the oppressors and supporting the oppressed comes into force: *"So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together.'"* (Verses 103-104)

Thus was the end of those who denied the clear signs which were shown to them as evidence of the truth. God gave the land to the oppressed to rule. When they are in charge, their actions will be the basis of the judgement they have to face. At the beginning of the *sūrah* we were given a clear idea of their end. Here we are only told that both they and their enemies will be gathered together on the Day of Judgement: *"When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verse 104)

Method of Qur'ānic Revelations

Pharaoh's destruction by drowning was one example of material miracles worked out in past generations. The *sūrah* tells us how such miracles were received by people bent on denying the truth and how, as a result, they were doomed to suffer God's punishment. The Qur'ān, God's last message, was revealed with the truth so that it could serve as a permanent sign and basis of guidance. It was bestowed from on high in parts, so that it may be read and reflected upon at length: *"We have bestowed [this Qur'ān] from on high in truth, and in truth has it come down. We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. We have divided the Qur'ān into parts so that you may recite it to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step."* (Verses 105-106)

The Qur'ān was revealed in order to educate a community and establish for it a system and code of life. This community would then carry it to all the corners of the earth in order to educate humanity on the basis of this perfect system. Hence the Qur'ān was revealed one part at a time, according to the practical needs of that community and the circumstances attending its first formative period. Education and the moulding of a nation and a community require time as well as practical experience. Thus the Qur'ān was not revealed as a theoretical doctrine or an abstract vision to be used for academic study and polemical argument. It was revealed part by part instead so that it could be implemented gradually during this formative period. This is indeed the reason for its gradual revelation, one part or passage at a

time, not a whole scripture or code given at the outset.

The first generation of believers received it in this light. They approached it as directives to be implemented in practice, be they prohibitions, recommendations or obligations. They never approached it as something for moral or intellectual debate like poetry and literature, or for amusement like legends and stories. They allowed it to influence their daily lives to the full, bringing their feelings, perceptions and behaviour in line with it, and moulding their way of life in accordance with its teachings. They discarded whatever was in conflict with it of their values, norms and practices.

`Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a learned Companion of the Prophet says: "When any of us learnt ten verses of the Qur'ān, one would not try to learn more until we had fully learnt their meaning and how to put them into practice."

God revealed the Qur'ān based on the truth: *"We have bestowed [this Qur'ān] from on high in truth."* (Verse 105) And its purpose is to establish the truth on earth: *"And in truth has it come down."* (Verse 105) Thus the truth is its fabric and ultimate aim, its substance and whole concern. This is the truth as it is ingrained in the constitution of the universe, and forming the foundation of the existence of the heavens and the earth. The Qur'ān is closely linked to the constitution of the universe, always pointing to it. Indeed the truth is the ultimate goal of the Qur'ān. The Prophet gives warnings and promises of happiness on the basis of the truth which the Qur'ān expounds.

To Believe or Not to Believe

At this point the Prophet is commanded to explain the truth plainly to his people, leaving them free to make their choice to either believe in the Qur'ān or to reject it. They will have to bear the consequences of their choice. He puts in front of their eyes an example of its reception by Jewish and Christian people who were given sound knowledge before its revelation. They may feel that they will do well to follow in the footsteps of such learned people when they themselves have not been granted such knowledge:

> *Say, 'You may believe in it or you may not.' Those who were given knowledge before it was revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, and say, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.' And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility.* (Verses 107-109)

This is an inspiring image showing people endowed with knowledge listening to

the Qur'ān, touched by its truth and falling down on their faces in humble prostration. They cannot restrain themselves. They do not merely prostrate themselves, but fall down on their faces in complete humility. They give expression to what they feel in their hearts of God's greatness and the fulfilment of His promise: *"Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled."* (Verse 108) But then their feelings are further enhanced and they are deeply touched so that words are insufficient to express their feelings. Tears pour down from their eyes telling of their profound emotion: *"And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility."* (Verse 109) It is a scene of profound feelings demonstrated by people receiving the Qur'ān with open hearts, having learnt from their earlier scriptures of the truth it explains.

This inspiring scene is painted after the *sūrah* has given the Arabs the choice of believing in the Qur'ān or rejecting it. It is followed with a statement leaving it up to them to call on God with whatever names they choose. In their days of ignorance they declined to call God as *Raḥmān,* which means, 'Most Merciful'. Hence they are told that they may call on God with whichever one of His names they choose: *"Say: Call upon God or call upon the Most Merciful. By whichever name you invoke Him, His are the most gracious names."* (Verse 110) Their prejudices concerning His names have no basis other than myth that they used to believe in their ignorance. They have no sound basis.

The Prophet is then instructed to recite his prayers in a middle voice. This is because the unbelievers used to ridicule him whenever they saw him praying. It is also true to say that a voice pitched in the middle is the most suited to prayer: *"Do not raise your voice too loud in prayer, nor say it in too low a voice, but follow a middle course in between."* (Verse 110)

The *sūrah* closes in the same way as it opened, praising God and asserting His oneness, and reiterating the facts that He has neither son nor partner and is in need of no help or support from anyone. This is indeed the pivot round which the *sūrah* turns: *"And say: All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness."* (Verse 111)

SŪRAH 18

Al-Kahf

(The Cave)

Prologue

The most important thing to be noted about this *sūrah is* its preponderant narration of events that took place in the past. First we have the story of the sleepers in the cave, followed by that of the man with two gardens, then a reference to Adam and Satan. In the middle of the *sūrah* we see what happened between Moses and the pious man, and at the end there is an account of Dhu'l-Qarnayn. These stories form the major part of the *sūrah,* taking 71 out of its 110 verses. Most of the remaining verses comment on the stories and outline the lessons to be learnt from them. In addition, the *sūrah* also contains some scenes of the Day of Judgement, and others drawn from human life to explain an idea or emphasize a concept. In all these, we see examples of the Qur'ānic method of emphasizing its ideas through vivid imagery.

The central theme in the *sūrah,* to which all its accounts and ideas relate, is to purge faith of all alien concepts. It seeks to establish correct and accurate thought and reasoning, as also establish values that are sound according to the criterion of the Islamic faith.

Purging faith of alien concepts is determined both at the outset and conclusion. The *sūrah* opens with these verses: *"All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward which continues to be theirs forever. Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.'*

No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter." (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* concludes with: *"Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day', let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as partner."* (Verse 110) Thus the *sūrah* begins and ends with declaring God's oneness, rejecting any concept that associates partners with God, accepting revelation as true, and making a clear and absolute distinction between God and other beings.

The *sūrah* touches on this theme several times, in various ways. As it relates the history of the sleepers in the cave, those young believers are quoted as saying: *"Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity!"* (Verse 14) In its commentary on their story, the *sūrah* says: *"No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule."* (Verse 26)

As it relates the story of the man with two gardens, the *sūrah* quotes the argument of the believer as he says to his friend: *"Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall associate with my Lord."* (Verses 37-38) In the final commentary on this story, the *sūrah* includes: *"He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome."* (Verses 43-44)

As it draws one of the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* says: *"One day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them."* (Verse 52) And in comment on another scene the *sūrah* says: *"Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers."* (Verse 102)

The establishment of clear and accurate thought and reasoning is made manifest in the rejection of the claims of all those who associate partners with God, because they assert what they do not know. They have no evidence to prove what they claim. The *sūrah* also directs human beings to make their judgement only on what they know for certain. What they do not know, they should leave to God to determine. Thus at the beginning of the *sūrah* we have the verse stating: *"It warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself son.' No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers."* (Verses 4-5)

The sleepers in the cave are quoted as saying: *"These people of ours have taken for*

worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their belief." (Verse 15) When they wonder how long they have been in that state of sleep, they leave the issue to God who has perfect knowledge of everything: *"They said: Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus."* (Verse 19) The story also includes clear disapproval of those who speak about the number of the sleepers, relying only on guesswork: *"Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.'"* (Verse 22)

In the story of Moses and the pious man, the latter reveals to him at the end the secret behind each of his apparently wild and unreasonable actions to which Moses had objected. He says to Moses that it was all done *"by your Lord's grace. I did not do any of this of my own accord."* (Verse 82) Thus all issues and situations are attributed to God alone.

The main purpose of the *sūrah* is to make faith the basis for the evaluation of concepts, ideas, practices and values. This is shown in various places. All proper and good values are attributed to faith and good action. Any other value which does not have its basis in faith is unworthy, even though it may seem highly attractive. All that appears fascinating and beautiful in this life is meant as a test. It will all come to an end: *"We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust."* (Verses 7-8) To be under God's protection is to be in a wide and comfortable environment, even though one may have to seek refuge in a narrow and barren cave. Those young believers who abandoned their community and went to the cave are clear about their purpose: *"Now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs."* (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, requiring him to persevere and be patient, associating with those who believe, paying no regard to the adornments of this world or to those who overlook their duty towards God: *"Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.'"* (Verses 28-29)

The story of the two gardens and their owner portrays how a believer is proud of

his faith, valuing it as much higher than wealth, position or luxury. A believer states the truth clearly to his arrogant friend and reproaches him for forgetting God: *"Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. If only you said as you entered your garden, "Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power except with God!" Although, as you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you, yet it may well be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that you will never be able to find it.'"* (Verses 37-41)

Once this story has been told, the *sūrah* then depicts this present life and how it is prone to rapid change. Wealth and prosperity are soon replaced by something totally different: *"Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things."* (Verse 45) This is followed by a clear statement showing the difference between transitory values and everlasting ones: *"Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope."* (Verse 46)

Dhu'l-Qarnayn is not mentioned in the *sūrah* for his being an angel, but rather because of his good deeds. When the people he found in between the two mountain passes offered him money to build a barrier to protect them against Gog and Magog, he declined because: *"That with which my Lord has established me is better"* than anything you could give me. And when the barrier has been erected, he acknowledges that it was all done by God's help, not by his own power: *"This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true."* (Verse 98)

At the end of the *sūrah,* the fact is stated that the worst losers among all creatures are those who refuse to believe in God's revelations or in the fact of meeting Him on the Day of Judgement. Such people will have no weight and no position or status, despite the fact that they believe themselves to be doing well: *"Say: Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day."* (Verses 103-105)

Thus we see that the pivot round which the whole *sūrah* turns is that of purging faith of all false concepts, providing sound reasoning and establishing correct values on the basis of faith.

The whole *sūrah* concentrates on these three purposes, round after round. It begins by praising God who has revealed to His servant this book which serves to give happy news to the believers and stern warnings to those who allege that God has betaken to Himself a son. It states clearly that whatever we find on earth is made a sort of adornment only to make it a test for human beings. It will all vanish into nothing. This is followed by the story of the sleepers in the cave, which serves as a good example of making the right choice, giving preference to faith over worldly pleasures and comforts. For the sleepers seek refuge in the cave to keep their faith intact.

The second stage directs the Prophet to content himself with the company of those who appeal to their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. He should abandon those who neglect to remember God. The story of the two gardens and their owner shows clearly how a believer feels his strength in his faith while the values of this world mean nothing to him.

The third stage includes several interlinked scenes of the Day of Judgement, as well as a reference to Adam and Satan. It concludes with an explanation of the rule which results in the destruction of oppressors, while treating sinners with mercy and allowing them respite until their appointed term.

The story of Moses and the pious man forms the fourth stage, while the fifth gives an account of Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Then the *sūrah* finishes as it began: giving happy news to the believers and more warnings to the unbelievers. It reaffirms the fact of revelation and emphasizes anew the truth of God's oneness without any partner.

1
A Distinctive System of Values

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَل لَّهُۥ عِوَجَاۜ ﴿١﴾

All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, (1)

قَيِّمًا لِّيُنذِرَ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِّن لَّدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ﴿٢﴾

unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself, and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward (2)

مَّٰكِثِينَ فِيهِ أَبَدًا ﴿٣﴾

which continues to be theirs forever. (3)

وَيُنذِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُواْ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَدًا ﴿٤﴾

Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' (4)

مَّا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا لِأَبَآئِهِمْۚ كَبُرَتْ كَلِمَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ أَفْوَٰهِهِمْۚ إِن يَقُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا ﴿٥﴾

No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter. (5)

فَلَعَلَّكَ بَـٰخِعٌ نَّفۡسَكَ عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَـٰرِهِمۡ إِن لَّمۡ يُؤۡمِنُواْ بِهَـٰذَا ٱلۡحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا ﴿٦﴾

Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message? (6)

إِنَّا جَعَلۡنَا مَا عَلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ زِينَةً لَّهَا لِنَبۡلُوَهُمۡ أَيُّهُمۡ أَحۡسَنُ عَمَلًا ﴿٧﴾

We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; (7)

وَإِنَّا لَجَـٰعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيۡهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا ﴿٨﴾

and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust. (8)

أَمۡ حَسِبۡتَ أَنَّ أَصۡحَـٰبَ ٱلۡكَهۡفِ وَٱلرَّقِيمِ كَانُواْ مِنۡ ءَايَـٰتِنَا عَجَبًا ﴿٩﴾

Do you think that the People of the Cave and the inscription were a wonder among Our signs? (9)

إِذۡ أَوَى ٱلۡفِتۡيَةُ إِلَى ٱلۡكَهۡفِ فَقَالُواْ رَبَّنَآ ءَاتِنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ رَحۡمَةً وَهَيِّئۡ لَنَا مِنۡ أَمۡرِنَا رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

When those youths took refuge in the cave, they said: 'Our Lord! Bestow on us Your grace, and provide for us right guidance in our affair.' (10)

فَضَرَبۡنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاذَانِهِمۡ فِي ٱلۡكَهۡفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

So We drew a veil over their ears in the cave, for a number of years, (11)

ثُمَّ بَعَثۡنَـٰهُمۡ لِنَعۡلَمَ أَيُّ ٱلۡحِزۡبَيۡنِ أَحۡصَىٰ لِمَا لَبِثُوٓاْ أَمَدًا ﴿١٢﴾

and then We awakened them so that We might mark out which of the two parties managed to calculate the time they had remained in that state. (12)

نَّحۡنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيۡكَ نَبَأَهُم بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ إِنَّهُمۡ فِتۡيَةٌ ءَامَنُواْ بِرَبِّهِمۡ وَزِدۡنَـٰهُمۡ هُدًى ﴿١٣﴾

We shall relate to you their story in all truth. They were young men who believed in their Lord, so We increased them in guidance. (13)

وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا۟ فَقَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا
رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ لَن نَّدْعُوَا۟ مِن
دُونِهِۦٓ إِلَـٰهًا ۖ لَّقَدْ قُلْنَآ إِذًا شَطَطًا ﴿١٤﴾

We put courage in their hearts, so that they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity! (14)

هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمُنَا ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ ءَالِهَةً ۖ
لَّوْلَا يَأْتُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِسُلْطَـٰنٍۭ بَيِّنٍ ۖ فَمَنْ
أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿١٥﴾

These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs. Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God? (15)

وَإِذِ ٱعْتَزَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ
فَأْوُۥٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلْكَهْفِ يَنشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُم مِّن
رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَيُهَيِّئْ لَكُم مِّنْ أَمْرِكُم مِّرْفَقًا
﴿١٦﴾

Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.' (16)

۞ وَتَرَى ٱلشَّمْسَ إِذَا طَلَعَت تَّزَٰوَرُ عَن
كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَت
تَّقْرِضُهُمْ ذَاتَ ٱلشِّمَالِ وَهُمْ فِى فَجْوَةٍ
مِّنْهُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ ءَايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ مَن يَهْدِ ٱللَّهُ
فَهُوَ ٱلْمُهْتَدِ ۖ وَمَن يُضْلِلْ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُۥ

You might have seen the sun, on its rising, incline away from their cave on the right, and, on its setting, turn away from them on the left, while they lay in a space within. That was one of God's signs. He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out

the right way. (17)

وَلِيًّا مُّرْشِدًا ﴿١٧﴾

You would have thought that they were awake, when they were certainly asleep. And We turned them over repeatedly, now to the right, now to the left; and their dog lay at the cave's entrance, with its forepaws outstretched. Had you come upon them, you would have certainly turned away from them in flight, and would surely have been filled with terror of them. (18)

وَتَحْسَبُهُمْ أَيْقَاظًا وَهُمْ رُقُودٌ ۚ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمْ ذَاتَ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ ٱلشِّمَالِ ۖ وَكَلْبُهُم بَٰسِطٌ ذِرَاعَيْهِ بِٱلْوَصِيدِ ۚ لَوِ ٱطَّلَعْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ لَوَلَّيْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِرَارًا وَلَمُلِئْتَ مِنْهُمْ رُعْبًا ﴿١٨﴾

Such being their state, We awakened them; and they began to question one another. One of them asked: 'How long have you remained thus?' They answered: 'We have remained thus a day, or part of a day.' They said: 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it. But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. (19)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ بَعَثْنَٰهُمْ لِيَتَسَآءَلُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ قَالَ قَآئِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ قَالُوا۟ لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ۚ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ فَٱبْعَثُوٓا۟ أَحَدَكُم بِوَرِقِكُمْ هَٰذِهِۦٓ إِلَى ٱلْمَدِينَةِ فَلْيَنظُرْ أَيُّهَآ أَزْكَىٰ طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُم بِرِزْقٍ مِّنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿١٩﴾

For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in which case you would never attain to any good!' (20)

إِنَّهُمْ إِن يَظْهَرُوا۟ عَلَيْكُمْ يَرْجُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِى مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَن تُفْلِحُوٓا۟ إِذًا أَبَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَعْثَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ

وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَأَنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَآ إِذْ يَتَنَٰزَعُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَمْرَهُمْ ۖ فَقَالُواْ ٱبْنُواْ عَلَيْهِم بُنْيَٰنًا ۖ رَّبُّهُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِهِمْ ۚ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ غَلَبُواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَمْرِهِمْ لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيْهِم مَّسْجِدًا ﴿٢١﴾

In this way have We drawn people's attention to their case, so that they might know that God's promise is true and that there can be no doubt as to the Last Hour. The people disputed among themselves as to what happened to them.

Some of them said: 'Erect a building in their memory. God knows their case best.' Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: 'Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.' (21)

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَٰثَةٌ رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًۢا بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۖ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ ۚ قُل رَّبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِم مَّا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ ۬ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَآءً ظَٰهِرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِم مِّنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: 'My Lord knows best how many they were. None but a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.' (22)

وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَاْىْءٍ إِنِّى فَاعِلٌ ذَٰلِكَ غَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾

Never say about anything, 'I shall do this tomorrow,' (23)

إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَٱذْكُر رَّبَّكَ إِذَا نَسِيتَ وَقُلْ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَهْدِيَنِ رَبِّى لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ

without adding, 'if God so wills.' Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind and say, 'I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than

this to what is right.' (24)	هَـٰذَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢٤﴾
So they stayed in their cave three hundred years, and [some] add nine years more. (25)	وَلَبِثُوا۟ فِى كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلَـٰثَ مِا۟ئَةٍ سِنِينَ وَٱزْدَادُوا۟ تِسْعًا ﴿٢٥﴾
Say: 'God knows best how long they remained there. His alone is the knowledge of the secrets of the heavens and earth. How well does He see and hear! No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule.' (26)	قُلِ ٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثُوا۟ ۖ لَهُۥ غَيْبُ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ أَبْصِرْ بِهِۦ وَأَسْمِعْ ۚ مَا لَهُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا يُشْرِكُ فِى حُكْمِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾
Recite whatever has been revealed to you of your Lord's book. There is nothing that could alter His words. You can find no refuge other than with Him. (27)	وَٱتْلُ مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ مِن كِتَابِ رَبِّكَ ۖ لَا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَـٰتِهِۦ وَلَن تَجِدَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مُلْتَحَدًا ﴿٢٧﴾

A Stern Warning for Outright Liars

The *sūrah* states its case very clearly from the outset:

> *All praise is due to God who has bestowed this book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion, unerringly straight, meant to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself, and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward which continues to be theirs forever. Furthermore, it warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself a son.' No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers. Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter. Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message? We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct; and, in time, We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust.* (Verses 1-8)

This opening speaks of a very straightforward and decisive position. It combines this with praising God and expressing gratitude to Him for revealing the book, i.e. the Qur'ān, to 'His servant', Muĥammad, and for making it clear, free of distortion and absolutely straight. There is nothing in it that may be described as evasive or dodgy. Its purpose is '*to warn people of a severe punishment from Himself*' (Verse 2)

The picture is clear right at the outset. There is no ambiguity or equivocation about the Islamic faith. It is God who has bestowed the book from on high, and He is to be praised for so bestowing it. Muĥammad is God's servant, which means that everyone else is also His servant. God has no son or partner. The book itself is free of distortion and '*unerringly straight*'. The concept of the Qur'ān being straight is given first in the form of negating any possibility of distortion, and then reiterated in describing it as '*unerringly straight*'. This makes for very strong emphasis.

Such clarity is maintained as the purpose of revealing the Qur'ān is outlined. Indeed it has a dual purpose: "To *warn people of a severe punishment from Himself and to give the believers who do good works the happy news that they shall have a goodly reward."* (Verse 2) However, the stern warning is more strongly emphasized throughout. It begins in a general way, speaking of a severe punishment that God Himself may inflict. Then the warning is reiterated for a particular group of people: "*It warns those who assert, 'God has taken to Himself son.'"* (Verse 4) In between the two warnings we have the happy news given to *believers who do good works.'* This serves as a condition that ensures that faith should have practical evidence in real life. It is not confined to theoretical principles that may be endlessly discussed without effect in practice.

The *sūrah* then moves to expose their false approach by which they judge the most important issue of all, i.e. faith: *"No knowledge whatever have they of Him, and neither had their forefathers."* (Verse 5) Theirs is a despicable attitude when they utter such an enormity without proper consideration or real knowledge: *"Dreadful indeed is this saying that issues from their mouths. Nothing but falsehood do they utter."* (Verse 5)

The description here makes use of the sound of the words to add to the impression of horror given to the listeners. It begins with the adjective, 'dreadful', to enhance the anticipation of something totally unacceptable. This is further increased by the inversion used in the sentence. The sound and rhythm of the Arabic original is particularly significant in giving a true sense of the enormity those unbelievers utter. This is brought to its climax in the last sentence which utilizes the form of negation and limitation: *"Nothing but falsehood do they utter."* (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet in a way that is akin to disapproval of his being saddened by his people's attitude which denies the truth of the Qur'ān. He was pained by their rejection of God's guidance and their insistence on following the way which he knew would lead them to ruin. In a hint of disapproval, the Prophet is

asked: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death with grief over them if they will not believe in this message?"* (Verse 6) Would your grief at their rejection of the truth cause you to kill yourself? These people do not deserve that you should feel any sorrow on their account. It is better that you should abandon them.

The Prophet is also reminded that God has made all the comforts and pleasures available on earth, and all riches and offspring, a sort of a test for mankind. The test will prove who of them does good in this life so as to earn its benefit as well as a happy destiny in the life to come: *"We have made all that is on earth as an adornment in order to test people as to which of them are best in conduct."* (Verse 7)

God certainly knows the position of every one of His creatures, but he rewards everyone only on the basis of the actions a person takes. It is actual deeds that are rewarded according to their merit. The *sūrah* does not mention here those who do not do good works because the statement is clear with all that it entails.

The eventual outcome of all such adornment that is available on earth is inevitable. The earth will shed it all, and all living things on earth will die. Thus before the Day of Resurrection, the earth will be nothing more than a coarse and lifeless surface: *"In time We shall indeed reduce all that is on it to barren dust."* (Verse 8) There is a clear element of toughness in the expression and in the scene it portrays. We are faced with an earth that has a desert-like surface with no trace of life over it.

Young Men with Clear Insight

After its brief opening, the *sūrah* speaks about the people of the cave, depicting the effect faith has on believers: giving them reassurance and inner peace. Hence, they prefer it to all material riches and pleasures. When they find it hard to live as believers within their community, they seek refuge in a cave where they receive God's care and protection and enjoy His grace.

There are countless reports that speak about the sleepers in the cave, and just as many versions of their story. However, we have no use for any of these; we will confine ourselves to what the Qur'ān tells us about them as it is the only source that provides true information. There may be other reports that have found their way into books of commentary on the Qur'ān, but we will disregard all these as they lack proof of authenticity. In this we rely on good counsel, because the *sūrah* contains an order prohibiting all argument concerning the people of the cave and reference to any source other than the Qur'ān in trying to establish the truth about them.

It is reported that the reason for the revelation of this story and that of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, related later in the *sūrah,* is that the Jews persuaded the people of Makkah to put to the Prophet questions concerning them, and also concerning the spirit. It is

also said that the people of Makkah themselves asked the Jews to prepare some questions for them to test whether Muĥammad was a true Prophet. This may be partially or totally true, especially since the account giving the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn begins with, *"They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: I will give you an account of him.'"* (Verse 83) But no reference is made to any question about the people of the cave. We leave this point aside and proceed to discuss the story as it is related, since it is clearly relevant to the main theme of the *sūrah.*

The structure of the story begins with a short summary before its narration in detail. It is shown in a series of scenes with some gaps left in between. Nevertheless, all omissions are clearly understood.

The story begins as follows:

> *Do you think that the people of the cave and the inscription were a wonder among Our signs? When those youths took refuge in the cave, they said: 'Our Lord! Bestow on us Your grace, and provide for us right guidance in our affair.' So We drew a veil over their ears in the cave, for a number of years, and then We awakened them so that We might mark out which of the two parties managed to calculate the time they had remained in that state. (Verses 9-12)*

This sums up the whole story showing its main lines and features. We learn from it that the people of the cave were youths, whose number is not mentioned, and that they went to the cave to isolate themselves from their community because they believed in God. We also learn that they were made to sleep in the cave for a number of years, which is not stated here, before they were aroused from their long slumber. We are told of two groups arguing about them, so they were awakened to make clear which of the two groups calculated their stay in the cave better. We are clearly told that, strange as their history is, it is not particularly marvellous among the miracles and signs given by God. Indeed there are numerous things that are much more marvellous and miraculous in the universe than the story of the cave people. Those youths are referred to in the *sūrah* as *'the people of the cave and the inscription'*. A cave is a natural chamber in a mountain or under rocky ground, while the inscription refers, most probably, to the record of their names which was, perhaps, the one hung at the entrance of the cave, where they were eventually found.

After this summary which heightens our interest in the story, the *sūrah* begins by stating that the account about to be given is the whole truth concerning their affair:

> *We shall relate to you their story in all truth. They were young men who believed in their Lord, so We increased them in guidance. We put courage in their hearts, so that they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an*

> *enormity! These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs. Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God? Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.'* (Verses 13-16)

This is the first scene. Those believing youths were increased in guidance in order to be able to manage their affairs with their community. Along with this increased guidance, "*We put courage in their hearts,*" to make them solid in their attitude, firm in their belief in the truth, proud of the faith they had chosen.

Then we are informed that "*they stood up,*" which signifies a movement indicating resolve and firmness. "*They stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 14) He is indeed the Creator, Lord and Sustainer of the whole universe. "*Never shall we call upon any deity other than Him.*" (Verse 14) For He is the One without partners of any sort. We make this pledge, because if we were to call upon anyone else, "*we should indeed have uttered an enormity!*" (Verse 14) *We* would have gone beyond all proper limits and be in total error.

They now turn to the prevailing situation among their people and express their rejection of it. They are clear that what their people do has no foundation whatsoever: "*These people of ours have taken for worship deities other than Him, without being able to show any convincing proof of their beliefs.*" (Verse 15) Indeed any faith should be founded on solid evidence of the truth. Only with such evidence can it have its say to turn people's hearts and minds to its argument. Without such proof, it is utter fabrication. What is worse is that such falsehood is asserted in relation to God Himself: "*Who does more wrong than he who invents a lie about God?*" (Verse 15)

Up to this point the attitude of the youths appears to be clear, open and straightforward. They are resolute in their adoption of the faith, betraying no hesitation whatsoever. Indeed they are shown to be very strong physically and mentally, and strong in their faith and in their rejection of the way followed by their community.

Here they are talking about two vastly different ways of life. There can be no meeting point between the two, and there can be no participation by these young believers in the life of their community. They had no choice but to flee in order to protect their faith. They are not prophets able to present to their community the true faith, calling on them to accept it. They are simply a group of young people who have been able to discern the right path out of a bleak, unbelieving environment. Should they have stood up in public to declare their faith, they might well not have been able to withstand the pressure on them to abandon it. Nor could they resort to pretence and avoidance, appearing to concur with their people while worshipping

God in secret. Furthermore, it appears that, most probably, their secret was found out. Hence they had no option but to flee, seeking God's protection and support. They preferred life in the cave to all the attractions that their society offered.

Spreading Grace

That is the conclusion of their consultations and they immediately put it into effect: "*Hence, now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.*" (Verse 16)

The surprise here is great indeed. These young believers who have abandoned their people and families, forsaking all the pleasures of this life and preferring instead to sleep rough in a small dark cave, begin to sense God's grace. They feel it coming, easy, comforting, abundant, limitless. It is spread over them to change the quality of their life in the cave: "*God may well spread His grace over you.*" (Verse 16) Thus, the cave becomes like a wide expanse, where God's grace is bestowed in abundance to change their whole outlook on life and bring about comfort and contentment. The solid, rocky walls of the cave are made to overlook a wide horizon, and loneliness in the cave is totally dispelled, for God has spread His grace over their young hearts and He takes care of them, arranging something for their comfort.

This is an aspect of what faith can do to a person. All appearances undergo a fundamental change. All that people may value and all their concepts with regard to life and happiness do not matter. When a human heart is full of faith, it sees a totally different world, where God's grace imparts reassurance and genuine happiness. Hence whatever turn events may take will be accepted, because the total result is comforting and fitting for one's life in this world and in the life to come: "*God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs.*" (Verse 16)

With these young people proceeding to the cave, the story moves on to the next scene. Now we see them settled in the cave, overtaken by sleep:

> *You might have seen the sun, on its rising, incline away from their cave on the right, and, on its setting, turn away from them on the left, while they lay in a space within. That was one of God's signs. He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out the right way. You would have thought that they were awake, when they were certainly asleep. And We turned them over repeatedly, now to the right, now to the left; and their dog lay at the cave's entrance, with its forepaws outstretched. Had you come upon them, you would have certainly turned away from them in flight, and would surely have been filled with terror of them.* (Verses 17-18)

This is a remarkable scene. Not only do we see how the young men looked and what they were doing, we have a picture full of life, with the sun rising, but deliberately moving away from their cave. The word used here, *'inclining away'*, imparts a sense of deliberate action taken for a particular purpose. Again when it is time for the sun to move in the other direction before it sets, it turns away to the left so that their cave remains unseen. All the while, they lay in a space within.

Before completing its description of the scene, the *sūrah* makes a familiar Qur'ānic comment which draws people's attentions to a particular aspect of faith that is relevant at that particular point: "*That was one of God's signs.*" (Verse 17) It was indeed a great sign, something highly remarkable. They were put in a cave where they could not see the sun, nor its rays. It gave them neither light nor warmth. They remained in their position, alive but motionless.

"*He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided, but for him whom He lets go astray you can never find any protector who would point out the right way.*" (Verse 17) There is a certain divine law that determines which people may receive God's guidance and which are left in error. When a person looks at God's signs and accepts what they indicate, that person finds God's guidance in accordance with His law. Hence, he is *'indeed rightly guided.'* (Verse 17) But whoever turns his back on these signs and refuses to understand the message they impart is bound, according to God's law, to go astray. Hence he is left in error and will have none to guide him.

The *sūrah* goes on to show the young people asleep in their cave. They are turned from one side to another in their very long slumber. Anyone looking at them would think them awake when they were fast asleep. Their dog remains at the entrance to the cave, stretching his forepaws like dogs normally do when they rest. He takes the position normally taken by a guard dog. The whole scene would fill any onlooker with terror so as to put them to flight. He would find people looking as though they were awake but in reality were asleep, unable to wake or move. This was all God's arrangement, protecting them, until the time He chose for their awakening.

The Sleepers Awake

Suddenly things change totally:

> *Such being their state, We awakened them; and they began to question one another. One of them asked: 'How long have you remained thus?' They answered: 'We have remained thus a day, or part of a day.' They said 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it. But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in*

which case you would never attain to any good!' (Verses 19-20)

The element of surprise is always used in Qur'ānic stories in order to enhance the effect. Here the scene portrays the youths as they woke after their long slumber. They do not realize how long they have been asleep. They rub their eyes and begin to ask one another about what had happened. One turns to the others asking how long they were asleep for, just like anyone rising after having slept for many hours. He must have felt that this time his sleep was unduly long. The answer he received from his friends is indefinite: "*We have remained thus a day, or part of a day.*" (Verse 19)

But then they realize that to determine the length of their sleep is of no consequence. They leave that point aside, just like a believer should do in any matter of no specific importance. They turn to something more practical. They are hungry and have some money which they carried on them when they left home. Their discussion takes a different turn: "*They said: 'Your Lord knows best how long you have remained thus. Let, then, one of you go with these silver coins to the town, and let him find out what food is purest there, and bring you some of it.'*" (Verse 19) The most natural reaction in the circumstances! One is to go to the city to bring back the best food available for them.

They are however in an unusual position, and they have to be extra careful. They must not allow their people to find them out or discover their hiding place. For that would bring certain disaster. The people in authority in the city would stone them to death for their apostasy.

These young men worshipped God alone, associating no partners with Him, while their people were pagans. Hence they were sure to kill them or at least to torture them until they renounced their belief in God and turned back to the faith of their community. These are the only options their people would consider. Hence the young believers re-emphasize their advice to their friend who was going to the city to bring the food: "*But let him behave with great care and by no means make anyone aware of you. For, indeed, if they should come to know of you, they might stone you to death or force you back to their faith, in which case you would never attain to any good!*" (Verses 19-20) Indeed no one who turns back to unbelief in God and associates partners with Him could ever attain any good result. How could it be possible when he has incurred the greatest loss through disbelieving in God's oneness?

We are given here a panoramic view of the whole scene. The youths are apprehensive, unaware of how much time had lapsed or how many years they had remained in their cave. Indeed generations had passed by, and the city from which they departed had gone through great changes. The tyrants they feared had been removed from power. Yet the story of the young people who had fled in order to maintain their faith had been reported from one generation to another, with people

differing as to their faith and what they believed in, as well as the exact timing of their escape. The awaking sleepers were totally unaware of all these events.

The *sūrah* however allows the curtain to fall over this scene only to raise it again showing a totally different picture, with a time lapse between the two. We understand that the present population of the city believe in God. They are so thrilled to discover the young believers through the one who was sent to fetch food. The people in the city somehow ascertain that he is one of the young men who had fled from the tyranny of the unbelievers a long time ago.

We need to stretch our imaginations somewhat to realize the magnitude of the young men's surprise as they heard from their friend what had happened during their sleep. He assures them that the city has experienced a great change since their departure. There was now nothing in the new society that they could not accept. Indeed all that they had once known in that city was now totally different. They themselves belonged to a generation that had long since gone. To the present people in the city, they were a marvel. Hence they would not be treated like ordinary human beings. They were totally unrelated to the present generation. Their relatives, friends, ties, concerns, feelings, habits and traditions had either been severed or undergone radical change. They were no more than a living memory, not real people. Therefore, God had spared them all that could result from their joining this new generation and thus caused them to die.

All this is left to our imagination. The *sūrah* portrays the final scene, when they are allowed to die. The people are standing outside the cave, disputing among themselves about their faith, and how to preserve their memory for future generations. It moves directly to outline the moral of this remarkable story: "*In this way have We drawn people's attention to their case, so that they might know that God's promise is true and that there can be no doubt as to the Last Hour. The people disputed among themselves as to what happened to them. Some of them said: 'Erect a building in their memory. God knows their case best.' Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: 'Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.'*" (Verse 21)

The lesson here is clear. The end those young people met shows a real, tangible example of how resurrection takes place. The people in the city felt the full impact of resurrection and realized, as they could never have done otherwise, that God's promise in respect of resurrection after death will come true and that the Last Hour is certain to come. This was all seen in the awakening of those sleepers from their long sojourn in the cave.

Some people suggested that they should commemorate them: "*Erect a building in their memory.*" (Verse 21) The building thus erected would not determine their faith, as the people who discovered them did not know what faith exactly the sleepers

followed: *"God knows their case best."* (Verse 21) It is He alone who knows their faith. But the people who enjoyed authority in the city decided differently. *"Those whose opinion prevailed in the end said: 'Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory.'"* (Verse 21) That was the way followed by Jews and Christians who erected temples over the graves of their saints and divines. Some Muslims today imitate their action in clear defiance of the Prophet's teachings. In condemning this practice, the Prophet once said: "God curses the Jews and the Christians who erect temples at the graves of their prophets and saints." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān]

How Many Were in the Cave?

Again the scene is brought to a close and another is shown with people in debate about the sleepers in the cave. This is only natural as people normally relate reports and news, adding something here and omitting something there. They may invent some details here or there, one generation after another. Thus a simple story is told in different ways as time passes. Hence, dispute about the number of youth in the cave continued for a long time:

> *Some will say, 'They were three, the fourth of them being their dog,' while others will say, 'Five, with their dog being the sixth of them,' idly guessing at the unknown. Yet others will say, 'They were seven, the eighth of them being their dog.' Say: My Lord knows best how many they were. None hut a few have any real knowledge of them. Hence, do not enter into argument about them, except on a matter that is clear, nor ask anyone of these people to enlighten you about them.'* (Verse 22)

All such disputes about their number is useless. It is all the same whether they were three, five, seven or even more. Their case is left to God who knows all their details. They were also known to the few who established the facts about the whole event as it took place, or who heard its true report. There is no need, then, to go into any argument about their number, as the moral of their story may be drawn regardless. The Qur'ān directs the Prophet not to engage in any dispute over the issue and not to question any party over their case. This is consistent with the Islamic approach which spares the human mind of all useless debate. A Muslim should not pursue anything that he cannot establish through true knowledge. This event which took place a very long time ago belongs to God's knowledge which is perfect. Hence, let us leave it there.

On God We Rely

In connection with the prohibition of dispute about unknown events of the past,

an order is given not to pre-judge the future or its events.

It is impossible for man to know what may happen in the future. Hence, he should not give any definite judgement of it:

> *Never say about anything, 'I shall do this tomorrow,' without adding, 'if God so wills.' Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind and say, 'I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than this to what is right.'* (Verses 23-24)

Every action a human being does or omits to do, indeed every breath a human being takes, is subject to God's will. The curtains hiding the future are stretched in full so as to hide everything beyond the present moment. Our eyes cannot discern what is behind that curtain, and our minds are finite, no matter how advanced our knowledge may be. Hence a human being must never say that he is definitely doing something tomorrow unless he attaches his intention to God's will. This is because tomorrow belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. As such, it is known only to God. Hence, we do not make any assertion about it.

This does not mean that man should be fatalistic, giving no thought to the future and making no plans for it. He should not live for the present moment, cutting himself off from his past and future. No, this is not what the directive implies. Rather, what is implied is that every human being must make an allowance for what God may will in his case. He may intend to do whatever he wants, always seeking God's help, feeling that His will is in full control of everything. It may well be however that God may decide something different to what he intends. Should God help him to put into effect what he intends, then all well and good. But if God's will moves in a different direction, he should not despair or be sad. All matters belong to God at the beginning and at the end.

What this means in practice is that every person should think and plan as they wish, but they must always remember to rely on God's help and guidance. They should realize that they only have the faculties of thinking and deliberation God has given them. This should not lead to laziness or disinterestedness. On the contrary, it should give us more strength, confidence, reassurance and resolve. Should events reveal that God's will has moved in a direction different to what we planned, we should accept this with contentedness and reassurance. We submit to God's will, because it is beyond our knowledge until God makes it known.

This is the method Islam instils into the minds of its followers. Hence a Muslim does not feel alone when he plans or thinks of the future. Neither does he show any conceit or arrogance when he succeeds, nor is he overtaken by depression and despair when he fails. In all situations, he remembers God, feeling stronger for relying on Him, expressing gratitude to Him for his success, resigned for whatever

God's will may determine.

"Should you forget, then call your Lord to mind." (Verse 24) This is what a Muslim should do when he forgets to relate his intentions to God's will. He should remember God and renew his reliance on Him. He should also hope to remain always conscious of God, turning to Him in all situations and all future actions, always saying: *"I pray that my Lord will guide me even closer than this to what is right."* (Verse 24) This short prayer indicates that it is not so easy to always turn to God in all affairs. Hence the prayer to try always to maintain it and improve on one's situation.

Long Was Their Sleep

With all that has been said and told, we have still not been informed of the duration of the sleepers' stay in their cave. Now we are told for certain:

> *So they stayed in their cave three hundred years, and [some] add nine years more. Say: 'God knows best how long they remained there. His alone is the knowledge of the secrets of the heavens and earth. How well does He see and hear!'* (Verses 25-26)

This is the truth of the length of their stay in the cave, given to us by the One who knows all secrets in the heavens and the earth. Well indeed He sees and hears. Perfect is His knowledge. His statement puts an end to the matter, leaving no room for dispute.

A final comment is added about the whole story in which we see faith in God's oneness clearly apparent in all its details: *"No guardian have they apart from Him; nor does He allot to anyone a share in His rule."* (Verse 26) A further comment is added in the form of a directive to the Prophet to recite what God has revealed to him, as it represents the final word, and the truth that admits no falsehood whatsoever. He should seek refuge with Him, for no one can provide any shelter other than He. When the young men of the cave sought His protection, He spread His grace over them and provided them with His guidance:

> *Recite whatever has been revealed to you of your Lords book. There is nothing that could alter His words. You shall find no refuge other than with Him.* (Verse 27)

Thus ends the story of the people of the cave. It was preceded and intermingled with directives. Indeed stories are given in the Qur'ān to add emphasis to such directives. The Qur'ān maintains perfect harmony between its directives and the way they are presented in the context of the story.

2
Faith Based on Free Choice

وَٱصۡبِرۡ نَفۡسَكَ مَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدۡعُونَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلۡغَدَوٰةِ وَٱلۡعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجۡهَهُۥۖ وَلَا تَعۡدُ عَيۡنَاكَ عَنۡهُمۡ تُرِيدُ زِينَةَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَلَا تُطِعۡ مَنۡ أَغۡفَلۡنَا قَلۡبَهُۥ عَن ذِكۡرِنَا وَٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ وَكَانَ أَمۡرُهُۥ فُرُطٗا ٢٨

And contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. (28)

وَقُلِ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ فَمَن شَآءَ فَلۡيُؤۡمِن وَمَن شَآءَ فَلۡيَكۡفُرۡۚ إِنَّآ أَعۡتَدۡنَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهِمۡ سُرَادِقُهَاۚ وَإِن يَسۡتَغِيثُواْ يُغَاثُواْ بِمَآءٖ كَٱلۡمُهۡلِ يَشۡوِي ٱلۡوُجُوهَۚ بِئۡسَ ٱلشَّرَابُ وَسَآءَتۡ مُرۡتَفَقٗا ٢٩

Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.' For the wrongdoers We have prepared a fire whose billowing folds will encompass them from all sides. If they beg for water, they will be given water [hot] like molten lead, which will scald their faces. Dreadful is the drink, and evil is the place to seek rest. (29)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجۡرَ مَنۡ أَحۡسَنَ عَمَلًا ٣٠

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds — We, for certain, do not fail to reward any who perseveres in doing good. (30)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهِمُ ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ مِن ذَهَبٍ وَيَلْبَسُونَ ثِيَابًا خُضْرًا مِّن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ فِيهَا عَلَى ٱلْأَرَآئِكِ ۚ نِعْمَ ٱلثَّوَابُ وَحَسُنَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا ﴿٣١﴾

Theirs shall be gardens of perpetual bliss, with rivers rolling at their feet. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of silk and brocade, and they will recline on couches. Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest. (31)

۞ وَٱضْرِبْ لَهُم مَّثَلًا رَّجُلَيْنِ جَعَلْنَا لِأَحَدِهِمَا جَنَّتَيْنِ مِنْ أَعْنَٰبٍ وَحَفَفْنَٰهُمَا بِنَخْلٍ وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمَا زَرْعًا ﴿٣٢﴾

Set forth to them the case of two men, to one of whom We gave two vineyards and surrounded them with date-palms, and placed a field of grain in between. (32)

كِلْتَا ٱلْجَنَّتَيْنِ ءَاتَتْ أُكُلَهَا وَلَمْ تَظْلِم مِّنْهُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ وَفَجَّرْنَا خِلَٰلَهُمَا نَهَرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way. In the midst of them We caused a stream to flow. (33)

وَكَانَ لَهُۥ ثَمَرٌ فَقَالَ لِصَٰحِبِهِۦ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُۥٓ أَنَا۠ أَكْثَرُ مِنكَ مَالًا وَأَعَزُّ نَفَرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

And so [the man] had fruit in abundance. This man said once to his friend, in the course of a discussion between them, 'More wealth have I than you, and more power and followers.' (34)

وَدَخَلَ جَنَّتَهُۥ وَهُوَ ظَالِمٌ لِّنَفْسِهِۦ قَالَ مَآ أَظُنُّ أَن تَبِيدَ هَٰذِهِۦٓ أَبَدًا ﴿٣٥﴾

And having thus wronged his soul, he went into his garden, saying: 'I do not think that this will ever perish! (35)

وَمَآ أَظُنُّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَآئِمَةً وَلَئِن رُّدِدتُّ إِلَىٰ

Nor do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if [it does and] I am brought before my Lord, I should surely find there something better than this in exchange.' (36)

رَبِّي لَأَجِدَنَّ خَيۡرٗا مِّنۡهَا مُنقَلَبٗا ٣٦

His friend replied in the course of their discussion: 'Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? (37)

قَالَ لَهُۥ صَٰحِبُهُۥ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُۥٓ أَكَفَرۡتَ بِٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكَ مِن تُرَابٖ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطۡفَةٖ ثُمَّ سَوَّىٰكَ رَجُلٗا ٣٧

But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. (38)

لَّٰكِنَّا۠ هُوَ ٱللَّهُ رَبِّي وَلَآ أُشۡرِكُ بِرَبِّيٓ أَحَدٗا ٣٨

If only you said as you entered your garden, "Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power except with God!" Although, as you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you, (39)

وَلَوۡلَآ إِذۡ دَخَلۡتَ جَنَّتَكَ قُلۡتَ مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِٱللَّهِۚ إِن تَرَنِ أَنَا۠ أَقَلَّ مِنكَ مَالٗا وَوَلَدٗا ٣٩

yet it may well be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust (40)

فَعَسَىٰ رَبِّيٓ أَن يُؤۡتِيَنِ خَيۡرٗا مِّن جَنَّتِكَ وَيُرۡسِلَ عَلَيۡهَا حُسۡبَانٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَتُصۡبِحَ صَعِيدٗا زَلَقًا ٤٠

or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that you will never be able to find it.' (41)

أَوۡ يُصۡبِحَ مَآؤُهَا غَوۡرٗا فَلَن تَسۡتَطِيعَ لَهُۥ طَلَبٗا ٤١

So his fruitful gardens were encompassed with ruin, and there he was, wringing his hands over all that he had spent on that which now lay waste, with its trellises caved in; and he could only say: 'Would that I had not associated partners with my Lord!' (42)

وَأُحِيطَ بِثَمَرِهِۦ فَأَصۡبَحَ يُقَلِّبُ كَفَّيۡهِ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَنفَقَ فِيهَا وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَىٰ عُرُوشِهَا

وَيَقُولُ يَٰلَيۡتَنِي لَمۡ أُشۡرِكۡ بِرَبِّيٓ أَحَدٗا ٤٢

He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. (43)

وَلَمۡ تَكُن لَّهُۥ فِئَةٞ يَنصُرُونَهُۥ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مُنتَصِرٗا ٤٣

For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome. (44)

هُنَالِكَ ٱلۡوَلَٰيَةُ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡحَقِّۚ هُوَ خَيۡرٞ ثَوَابٗا وَخَيۡرٌ عُقۡبٗا ٤٤

Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things. (45)

وَٱضۡرِبۡ لَهُم مَّثَلَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا كَمَآءٍ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَٱخۡتَلَطَ بِهِۦ نَبَاتُ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَأَصۡبَحَ هَشِيمٗا تَذۡرُوهُ ٱلرِّيَٰحُۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ مُّقۡتَدِرًا ٤٥

Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope. (46)

ٱلۡمَالُ وَٱلۡبَنُونَ زِينَةُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَٱلۡبَٰقِيَٰتُ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتُ خَيۡرٌ عِندَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابٗا وَخَيۡرٌ أَمَلٗا ٤٦

Overview

This second passage of the *sūrah* establishes a proper value system from a faith perspective. No real value is attached to wealth, position, influence or power, nor to indulgences and comforts. All these are transitory. Islam does not prohibit enjoyment of luxuries or comforts that are obtained in a lawful and legitimate way. But these are not the goals of human life. Whoever wants to enjoy these may do so, but he should remember that it is God who provides them. A human being must, therefore, express his gratitude to God through good work, because this is what remains in the end.

The passage starts with a directive to the Prophet to remain steadfast with those who turn to God for guidance and grace. He should abandon those who are oblivious of their Lord. An example is given of the two parties. This is given in a story involving two men, one boasts about his wealth and position, while the other maintains pure faith in God, hoping to receive from Him what is better than all material riches.

This is followed with an analogy showing the whole of life on earth. It appears to us short, fleeting, and having no real substance. It is just like ashes blown by the winds in all directions. The ultimate truth is that *"Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope."* (Verse 46)

The Truth from Your Lord

> *And contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance. Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world. Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds. Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.'* (Verses 28-29)

Some reports suggest that these verses were revealed when some of the noblemen of the Quraysh demanded that the Prophet should expel his poor Companions if he were to hope that the chiefs of the Quraysh tribe would ever come to believe in his message. Thus people like Bilāl, `Ammār, Şuhayb, Khabbāb and `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd would have to be expelled from his companionship. Or at least the Prophet should make special arrangements, whereby he could meet the masters of the Quraysh on their own, in a place where none of the poor and the deprived were admitted. The rich, they argued, would be irritated if they had to sit in the same place with them, because their clothing smelled of perspiration.

It is also reported that the Prophet hoped dearly that these elders of the Quraysh would embrace Islam. He even contemplated making the arrangements they suggested, but before taking any steps in that direction God revealed to him the verse which starts with His command: *"Contain yourself in patience with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance."* (Verse 28) Thus He sets the true values clearly and permanently. These establish a standard that never fails. When this has been accomplished and the true criterion has been put in place, then *"let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it."* (Verse 29) Islam will never seek to bend its values in order to please anyone and gratify his wishes. It does not borrow any value from any society implementing standards of *jāhiliyyah*. It has

its own values and it will continue to implement these only.

The Prophet is thus to remain patient, and not to precipitate matters. He is to content himself with those who *"call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance."* Their aim is to win His pleasure. Hence to Him only should they appeal at all times, and in all situations. They should never change their purpose. Indeed they determinedly seek their goal which is more honourable and far superior in every way to any goal sought by people who are content with this life and seek nothing beyond its confines.

Being content and patient means that the Prophet should have for his true companions those very people the chiefs of the Quraysh wanted expelled. He is to sit with them and instruct them in their faith and its requirements. They are indeed the better set of people. It is their type that supports new messages best. A new faith or message does not rely on those who accept it only when it appears victorious, or when it gives them a position of leadership or other type of material gain. A new message is truly supported and firmly consolidated when it has adherents of sincere heart who turn to God seeking nothing other than to win His pleasure. No position of honour, pursuit of pleasure or achievement of any material gain discolours their sincerity.

"Let not your eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of the life of this world." (Verse 28) Do not let your attention pass them by in order to contemplate the superficial comforts of this world, in which people compete. All this is no more than an outward beauty which remains much inferior to the high horizon to which those who *call on their Lord morning and evening'* aspire to, because they seek only to please Him and win His acceptance.

The Prophet is further instructed: *"Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he had always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds."* (Verse 28) He must not pay any attention to them when they demand that they must be separated from the poor. Had they remembered God, they would have banished from their minds any thoughts of conceit and arrogance. They would have recognized their position in front of God, who looks at all mankind in the same way and places them in the same rank. They would have felt that in faith all people are brothers. But they continue to implement standards of *jāhiliyyah,* allowing fleeting desires to dictate their attitudes. Hence, both they and their views are worth no attention, because they themselves have not paid attention to God and His commandments.

Islam places all human beings on the same level, in front of God. They do not claim a position on the basis of their wealth, lineage or social standing. All these are transient. The real criterion to distinguish people is their standing with their Lord,

which is determined by their sincerity in seeking His pleasure and their dedication to His cause.

"*Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us.*" (Verse 28) We have left his heart alone because he directed all his attention and all his efforts to his selfish pursuits, wealth, family, pleasures and desires. Such preoccupations leave no time and no room for remembrance of God. Indeed when anyone places them at the top of his list, he does not have time for God, and in consequence, God lets him pursue these goals further and become even more removed from His remembrance. His days pass rapidly and he comes to his end in order to face what God has in store for those who wrong themselves.

"*Say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.'*" (Verse 29) This is what the Prophet should proclaim in all clarity and firmness. The truth does not bend for the sake of anyone. It follows its own straight way. It is clear, solid, strong, free of all crookedness and manipulation. It is, then, each individual's own decision whether to take it up or leave it: "*Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.*" Whoever does not like the truth may banish himself from it. Anyone who does not wish to make his desires fall in line with the truth should know that no privileges are given at the expense of faith. A person who does not lower his head to God and His majesty has no place in the service of God's message.

Faith does not belong to anyone who makes concessions in it. It belongs to God who needs no one. Faith does not obtain strength if it is supported by people who do not seek it for its own sake, or who do not accept it as it is. A person who does not wish to sit with people dedicated to God's cause because he feels himself above them will have nothing to contribute to the Muslim community. Such a person is better left out.

No Rescue Available

The *sūrah* then portrays a scene of the hereafter, describing what is prepared for the unbelievers on the one hand and for the believers on the other. The unbelievers will have a fire that has been made ready to receive them: "*For the wrongdoers We have prepared a fire.*" (Verse 29) It is all made, set and brought forward. It does not require any new effort to receive them. No one is needed to kindle that fire, and it does not take any time to light or burn fiercely. God does not need anything to create whatever He wishes other than to actually will it, and it exists. The expression here uses the term, 'prepare', to indicate speed of action. Everything is put in place to take the wrongdoers and the unbelievers straight to the fire that is already prepared to receive them.

It is a fire that has huge folds that surge to encompass its inhabitants. They are securely captured there, with no hope of escape or rescue. Nor is there any chance of having a breath of cooling air, or the chance of a reduction in the suffering. Should they cry for help or to be spared the burning fire, help is given to them in the form of filthy water which is described in words which some commentators believe to mean 'molten lead', while others define it as 'boiling oil'. Should anyone's face get near it, it would certainly scald them. What will it do, then, to throats and stomachs, should the wrongdoers attempt to drink it? "*If they beg for water, they will be given water [hot] like molten lead, which will scald their faces.*" (Verse 29) It is a terrible situation that they find themselves in when they so urgently need a drink, but they only have what the Qur'ān truthfully describes as: "*Dreadful is the drink.*" (Verse 29) Moreover, the fire and its billowing folds are not the place where to seek rest: "*Evil is the place to seek rest.*" (Verse 29) In this description there is an element of bitter irony. They are not in the fire to take rest, but to be burnt in punishment for their wrongdoing. But this description also serves as a contrast with the fate of the believers in heaven. The two ends are opposite extremes.

The opposite picture shows the believers who have done righteous deeds in heaven where they will permanently stay:

> *Theirs shall be gardens of perpetual bliss, with rivers rolling at their feet. There they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of silk and brocade, and they will recline on couches. Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest.* (Verse 31)

These running waters provide all the elements of a cool atmosphere, pleasant scenery, gardens and a fresh breeze. The believers are in these gardens where they actually recline and rest, in full luxurious attire made of different types of fine silk, some of which is light, while the other is thick like velvet. They also wear bracelets of gold and enjoy other luxuries. The comment here is accurate: "*Excellent is the recompense, and comfortable is the place to rest.*" (Verse 31)

These are the two widely different ends. Let everyone choose which one to have. The truth has been made absolutely clear by none other than God Himself, and the choice is open to everyone: "*The truth [has now come] from your Lord. Let him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.*" (Verse 29) We see here a subtle reference to the attitude of the Quraysh unbelievers who demanded that the Prophet should either expel the poor from among his followers, or at least set up a different meeting place for the elders of the Quraysh, because it was beneath them to sit with the poor. They are again given the choice, either to sit with the believers, even though they are poor and smelly or they can have their resting place in the billowing folds of the fire and enjoy molten lead for refreshment. For those smelly clothes contain within them

hearts that are full of faith, and minds that always remember God.

A Gulf Too Wide

This passage is followed by a story of two men and two gardens, given as an example of what is permanently valuable and what is no more than transitory. It paints two examples of human beings: the first seeks pride in the luxuries of this world, while the other is fully content with his relationship with God. Each is seen in practical life. The first who, in the Qur'ānic example, has two gardens delineates a man dazzled with riches. He feels himself powerful with what he has been given, so he forgets the Supreme Power who controls everything in people's lives, and thinks that his wealth is permanent. This gives him a feeling that his power is everlasting.

The other is a believer who derives his position and status through faith. He always remembers his Lord, realizing that the blessings he enjoys are in themselves evidence of the One who grants all such blessings. Hence, he knows that he should always praise his Lord and express his gratitude to Him for what he has been granted:

> *Set forth to them the case of two men, to one of whom We gave two vineyards and surrounded them with date palms, and placed a field of grain in between. Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way. In the midst of them We caused a stream to flow. And so [the man] had fruit in abundance.* (Verses 32-34)

The two gardens are full of fruit, having vineyards which are made even more splendid with a siege of date palms. In between the two gardens is a large field which the man uses to cultivate grains and other plants. A river running in between the two gardens adds much that is pleasant to the whole scene, because the running water reassures the owner of inexhaustible produce that, in turn, bring much wealth.

"Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and never failed to do so in any way." (Verse 33) This is again a picture of continuing prosperity. What is worth noting here is that in the original Arabic text, negating any failure by the two gardens to yield their produce is described as 'doing no wrong or injustice' in that respect. This gives an element of contrast with their owner who does himself great wrong, by being arrogant and ungrateful to God for all the blessings he enjoys. He does not praise his Lord for what He has given him. This is an action full of conceit which means, in effect, that he is unfair to himself.

We actually see the man going into one of his gardens, gratified as he looks at it. He is full of pride, strutting like a peacock, calling for admiration. He speaks

arrogantly to his friend whom he knows to be of limited means: "*This man said once to his friend, in the course of a discussion between them, More wealth have I than you, and more power and followers.*'" (Verse 34)

He then walks into one of the two gardens with his friend. His attitude is that of someone conceited and ungrateful. He has completely forgotten God, thinking that the two gardens will never fail to yield their produce. In the height of this conceit, he denies the Last Hour, when all are resurrected and gathered together before their Lord. Besides, should this Last Hour be true, he is certain to have a position of favour there. He has been favoured here in this life when he has been given his two gardens. So he is sure to have more favours granted to him in the hereafter.

> *And having thus wronged his soul, he went into his garden, saying: 'I do not think that this will ever perish! Nor do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if [it does and] I am brought before my Lord, I should surely find there something better than this in exchange.'* (Verses 35-36)

This is plain arrogance. It makes people who have wealth, position, power and influence think that the values that dictate the way they are treated here in this life will apply in their favour in the life to come. They think they will be treated in the same way in God's Supreme Society. Their line of thinking is that since they enjoy such privileges in this life, they must then have a position of favour with the Lord of heavens.

His poor friend, who does not possess wealth, position, gardens or crops, is more confident as to the results of his nobler and better established values. He feels strong as a result of his faith, and he is certain of the support he receives from God Almighty, to whom all creatures submit. Hence, he confronts his arrogant friend with the truth showing him how conceited he is. He reminds him of how he is created from clay and from a sperm. He also directs him to the sort of attitude he should maintain towards God. He warns him against the result to which his conceit could lead him. He declares that he hopes to receive what is better than, and superior to, his friend's gardens and their fruit:

> *His friend replied in the course of their discussion: Do you deny Him who has created you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end fashioned you into a man? But for my part, I believe that He is God, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. If only you said as you entered your garden, "Whatever God wills [shall come to pass, for] there is no power except with God." Although, as you see, I have less wealth and offspring than you, yet it may well be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden, just as He may let loose a calamity out of heaven upon this [your garden], so that it becomes a heap of barren dust or its water sinks deep into the ground, so that you will never be able to find it.'* (Verses 37-41)

This is an example of how faith makes a believer very powerful. He does not care for wealth, might, or arrogance. He states the truth clearly, without hesitation or cowardice. There is no room for bending the truth in order to please anyone, be that a friend or someone mighty. A believer feels that he is far higher than all power and wealth. What God has for him is far superior to any riches or pleasures this life may bring. God's grace is all that he seeks, and His grace is plentiful and always available. On the other hand, God's punishment is severe and could befall the arrogant at any time.

The story then takes us suddenly from the scene of growth and prosperity to one of destruction and barrenness, from arrogance and conceit to repentance and seeking forgiveness. What the man of faith warned against has come true:

> *So his fruitful gardens were encompassed with ruin, and there he was, wringing his hands over all that he had spent on that which now lay waste, with its trellises caved in; and he could only say: 'Would that I had not associated partners with my Lord!'* (Verse 42)

The whole scene is raised before our eyes, and we see all the fruit of the gardens destroyed, as though the calamity befell it from all sides, leaving nothing untouched. The two gardens are totally destroyed with their trellises caved in. The owner realizes that he can do nothing to save any portion of his gardens or the plantation in between. He wrings his hands in sorrow, bewailing his misfortune which has left all his wealth destroyed and all his labour wasted. He is now repentant for having associated partners with God, acknowledging that He alone is the Lord of the universe. Although the man never previously mentioned the ascribing of divinity to anyone other than God, the fact that he placed a worldly value higher than the values of faith represents such association of partners with God. He now regrets his past attitude and dissociates himself from it. Alas! It is too late.

At this point the *sūrah* declares in all clarity that all protection comes from God: all power belongs to Him; all support comes from Him; His reward is the best reward; and what He stores for us is best and everlasting: *"He had none to support him against God, nor was he able to save himself. For thus it is: all protection comes from God, the True One. He is the best to grant reward and the best to [determine] outcome."* (Verses 43-44)

Thus the curtains fall with the gardens in total destruction, and the owner wringing his hands in regret and sorrow. Beyond that, we realize that God's power and majesty overwhelm all.

Transient Pleasures

Now the *sūrah* draws another scene showing life on earth in its totality, and we realize that it is similar to those destroyed gardens. It is of a fleeting nature, lasting only a very short while and lacking solid substance: *"Set forth to them a simile about the life of this world: [it is] like the water which We send down from the skies, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth. In time they turn into dry stubble which the winds blow freely about. It is God alone who has power over all things."* (Verse 45)

This scene, with all its movement, is depicted rapidly so as to enhance within us the feelings of a transitory life, one which is short and ends in death. Here we see water pouring down from the skies, but it does not run or form watercourses. It is immediately absorbed by plants, but these plants do not grow, nor do they yield ripe fruit. It is all destroyed, becoming nothing more than dry stubble, blown away by the winds. The whole duration of life is thus ended within three short sentences. The original Arabic text uses all forms that indicate rapid transition from one stage to the next: the fall of water, then its absorption by plants, and then its blowing away by the wind. How short is life, and how worthless!

Having shown this scene of the present, transitory life to full effect, the *sūrah* makes a contrast between the values to which people attach great importance in this life and those which have the upper position at all times. All this is stated from the point of view of the divine faith: *"Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world: but the things that endure, good deeds, are of far greater merit in your Lord's sight, and a far better source of hope."* (Verse 46)

Wealth and children are the most important things people covet in this life. Islam does not forbid enjoying these, provided that they are derived through legitimate means. Moreover, it gives them their appropriate value in relation to the everlasting life to come. They are adornments, but not criteria to evaluate people with. It is not right that people's status should be measured according to what they have of these. True value should be given to what endures, and that means all good works, including words, actions and worship.

People's hopes are normally very closely linked to wealth and children. However, the deeds that endure, i.e. good works, bring better reward and fulfil greater hopes. Hence believers should look to these for a more wholesome fulfilment of their hopes. They are bound to receive their result and reward on the Day of Reckoning.

In all this we see a consistent line, starting with the directive to the Prophet to remain patient and content *"with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His countenance."* (Verse 28) We also see the same message imparted in the story of the two gardens and the two friends, as well as in the scene showing the value of the present life. This is all perfected with this last statement explaining the values of this life and those of the life to come. All this serves to put human values

into the proper perspective.

3
Heedless of Divine Warnings

وَيَوْمَ نُسَيِّرُ ٱلْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى ٱلْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً
وَحَشَرْنَٰهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٤٧﴾

One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare. We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them. (47)

وَعُرِضُوا۟ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ صَفًّا لَّقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا
كَمَا خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍۭ ۚ بَلْ زَعَمْتُمْ أَلَّن
نَّجْعَلَ لَكُم مَّوْعِدًا ﴿٤٨﴾

They will be lined up before your Lord, [and He will say]: 'Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!' (48)

وَوُضِعَ ٱلْكِتَٰبُ فَتَرَى ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ
مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَٰوَيْلَتَنَا مَالِ
هَٰذَا ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا
كَبِيرَةً إِلَّآ أَحْصَىٰهَا ۚ وَوَجَدُوا۟ مَا عَمِلُوا۟
حَاضِرًا ۗ وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا ﴿٤٩﴾

The record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains. They will say: 'Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account.' They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them. Your Lord does not wrong anyone. (49)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِءَادَمَ
فَسَجَدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ

When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed

فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِۦٓ ۗ

his Lord's command.

أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُۥ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُۥٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِى وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّۢ ۚ بِئْسَ لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ بَدَلًا ﴿٥٠﴾

Will you, then, take him and his progeny for your masters instead of Me, when they are enemies to you? Vile is the substitute for the wrongdoers! (50)

۞ مَّآ أَشْهَدتُّهُمْ خَلْقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَا خَلْقَ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَمَا كُنتُ مُتَّخِذَ ٱلْمُضِلِّينَ عَضُدًا ﴿٥١﴾

I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation; nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray. (51)

وَيَوْمَ يَقُولُ نَادُوا۟ شُرَكَآءِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ فَدَعَوْهُمْ فَلَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لَهُمْ وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّوْبِقًا ﴿٥٢﴾

Once day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them. (52)

وَرَءَا ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ٱلنَّارَ فَظَنُّوٓا۟ أَنَّهُم مُّوَاقِعُوهَا وَلَمْ يَجِدُوا۟ عَنْهَا مَصْرِفًا ﴿٥٣﴾

And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it. (53)

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا فِى هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ لِلنَّاسِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ وَكَانَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ أَكْثَرَ شَىْءٍ جَدَلًا ﴿٥٤﴾

We have indeed given in this Qur'ān many facets to every kind of lesson for mankind. But man is, above all else, always given to contention. (54)

وَمَا مَنَعَ ٱلنَّاسَ أَن يُؤْمِنُوٓا۟ إِذْ جَآءَهُمُ

What is there to keep people from accepting the faith now that guidance has come to them, and from seeking forgiveness from their Lord, unless it be that they are waiting for the fate of the [sinful] people of ancient times to befall them as well, or

ٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَيَسۡتَغۡفِرُواْ رَبَّهُمۡ إِلَّآ أَن تَأۡتِيَهُمۡ سُنَّةُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ قُبُلٗا ﴿٥٥﴾

for the suffering to be brought before their eyes? (55)

وَمَا نُرۡسِلُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَۚ وَيُجَٰدِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ لِيُدۡحِضُواْ بِهِ ٱلۡحَقَّۖ وَٱتَّخَذُوٓاْ ءَايَٰتِي وَمَآ أُنذِرُواْ هُزُوٗا ﴿٥٦﴾

We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. But with false arguments the unbelievers seek to confute the truth. They make My revelations and warnings a target for their. mockery. (56)

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّن ذُكِّرَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِۦ فَأَعۡرَضَ عَنۡهَا وَنَسِيَ مَا قَدَّمَتۡ يَدَاهُۚ إِنَّا جَعَلۡنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمۡ أَكِنَّةً أَن يَفۡقَهُوهُ وَفِيٓ ءَاذَانِهِمۡ وَقۡرٗاۖ وَإِن تَدۡعُهُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡهُدَىٰ فَلَن يَهۡتَدُوٓاْ إِذًا أَبَدٗا ﴿٥٧﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who, when reminded of his Lord's revelations, turns away from them and forgets what his own hands have done? Over their hearts We have cast veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears, deafness. Even if you call them to the right path, they shall never be guided. (57)

وَرَبُّكَ ٱلۡغَفُورُ ذُو ٱلرَّحۡمَةِۖ لَوۡ يُؤَاخِذُهُم بِمَا كَسَبُواْ لَعَجَّلَ لَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابَۚ بَل لَّهُم مَّوۡعِدٞ لَّن يَجِدُواْ مِن دُونِهِۦ مَوۡئِلٗا ﴿٥٨﴾

Your Lord is Most Forgiving, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them now to task for whatever they do, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment. But they have an appointed time which they cannot evade. (58)

وَتِلۡكَ ٱلۡقُرَىٰٓ أَهۡلَكۡنَٰهُمۡ لَمَّا ظَلَمُواْ

The same applied to other communities which We destroyed when they persisted in wrongdoing. For We had set a time for their destruction. (59)

وَجَعَلْنَا لِمَهْلِكِهِم مَّوْعِدًا ﴿٥٩﴾

Overview

The second passage of the *sūrah* ended on a note concerning the *'things that endure: good works.'* This third passage takes up the thread and talks about the day when such enduring things will have their full weight and significance. This is given against the backdrop of a whole scene from the Day of Judgement. It is followed by mention of Satan's behaviour, when he was commanded to prostrate himself before Adam, but he disobeyed his Lord. This is given by way of wondering at human beings who take Satan or *Iblīs* and his offspring for friends and protectors, when they know that these are indeed their enemies. Their behaviour is bound to end with punishment on the Day of Reckoning. The passage also refers to the partners people associate with God, showing them as totally helpless on that day.

In the Qur'ān God gives numerous examples and parables so that people will take heed and realize what they expose themselves to when they reject the faith. They had better take the necessary steps to spare themselves punishment on that day. These examples focus on the unbelievers of the past who persisted in denying the truth and rejecting the faith. Nevertheless unbelievers continue to demand that punishment should befall them or that they should be destroyed in the same way as past communities. They make false arguments to try to overcome the truth, taking God's revelations and His messengers as a source of mockery. Had it not been for God's grace, He would have hastened their punishment.

This part of the *sūrah* with its scenes of the Day of Judgement, and its reference to the destruction of past communities for their rejection of the truth is closely linked to the main theme of the *sūrah* which aims to establish the true faith, free from all distortion.

A Record to Include All Affairs

> *One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare. We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them. They will be lined up before your Lord, [and He will say]: 'Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!' The record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid*

> *open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains. They will say: 'Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account.' They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them. Your Lord does not wrong anyone.* (Verses 47-49)

These verses portray an image in which nature forms an essential part. Horror is seen in its every detail as well as in people's hearts. Here we see firm mountains disappearing. What then will happen to hearts? The whole earth will appear void and barren, without hills, mountains, slopes or valleys to block anyone's view. The same applies to hearts and consciences: they will be unable to hide anything away. With all this open, level land which hides nothing, all people are brought forward: *"We will gather them all together, leaving out not a single one of them."* (Verse 47)

Indeed not a single soul will be left out. They are all waiting for a great moment: *"They will be lined up before your Lord."* (Verse 48) Every single one, those countless beings who walked on earth ever since the day when human life began and right to the end of this world are all gathered together. They are lined up in an open space where none can hide.

The mode employed thus far is one of description. Now however the *sūrah* takes up the address mode, which adds the feeling that what we see is taking place now before our eyes. We see events unfolding, and we hear what is said. We see those who deny that day experiencing their own humiliation. Shame covers their faces: *"Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance, although you claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]!"* (Verse 48)

This change of expression gives the scene much vividness, bringing it forward to the present so that we see it enacted. To us, the Day of Judgement is no longer something in the distant future. We almost see the shame on people's faces. We hear the majestic voice of the Almighty rebuking those people and reminding them of their position: *"Now you have come to Us as We created you in the first instance."* (Verse 48) They shamelessly persisted in their denial of such a day and their meeting with God once their life on earth had ended: *"You claimed that We would never appoint for you a time [for your resurrection]."* (Verse 48)

Having brought the scene forward to give it an added sense of reality, the *sūrah* resumes its description of what takes place there: *"The record [of everyone's deeds] will be laid open; and you will see the guilty filled with dread at what it contains."* (Verse 49) It is the record of all their deeds placed before their eyes to read and review. They realize that it is a comprehensive and accurate record, and they fear the consequences. They are embarrassed by the fact that the record includes every single thing, no matter how small or trivial. In their frustration, they exclaim: *"Woe to us! What a record is this! It leaves out nothing, small or great, but takes everything into account."* (Verse 49) This is

the cry of one who is worried, fearing the worst after he has been caught red-handed, unable to evade the results or find any justification. This is because he recognizes the accuracy of the record which puts before his eyes all that he has done: "*They will find all that they ever wrought now facing them.*" (Verse 49) They also realize that whatever befalls them will only be fair, because "*Your Lord does not wrong anyone.*" (Verse 49)

Much Too Argumentative

The guilty facing such a difficult situation are certainly aware, in this life, that Satan is their enemy. Nevertheless, they befriended him and he led them to their predicament. How strange that they should take Satan and his progeny for friends and protectors when they know them to be hostile since the first encounter between Adam and *Iblīs*: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so* Iblīs, *who belonged to the* jinn *and he disobeyed his Lord's command. Will you, then, take him and his progeny for your masters instead of Me, when they are enemies to you? Vile is the substitute for the wrongdoers!*" (Verse 50)

This story highlights the singularity of some people's attitude as they take Satan and his progeny for protectors and patrons in preference to God. It represents an outright disobedience of God's commands and the neglect of obligations and duties He has assigned to them.

Why do they befriend these, their enemies, when they possess neither real knowledge nor reliable strength? God has not brought them to witness His creation of the heavens and the earth, or even their own creation. Nor does He seek help or support from them: "*I did not call them to witness at the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor at their own creation; nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray.*" (Verse 51) They are no more than creatures whom God has created. They do not know what God has chosen to keep hidden from them, nor does He need their help.

It is important to reflect a little on the way the last verse ends: "*nor do I seek aid from those who lead people astray.*" Is it appropriate to ask whether God seeks help from people who do not lead others astray? Sublime and great is God. He is in no need of anyone in the universe. He is the Almighty who has the power to accomplish whatever He wills. The phraseology here is intentional. It brings to the fore the myths of the unbelievers only to shoot them down. Those who seek protection from Satan and make him a partner to God only do so because they imagine that Satan has a great wealth of knowledge and overpowering might, when in fact Satan is a seducer who leads people astray. God does not like deviation or those who lead other people astray. Had He, for argument's sake, sought helpers, He would not have taken them from among the seducers who lead people into error and deviation. This is the meaning the verse and its ending aim to emphasize.

Another scene of the Day of Judgement follows, portraying the end that awaits the guilty and those to whom they ascribe a share of divinity:

> *One day He will say, 'Call now on those beings whom you alleged to be My partners!' They will invoke them, but those [beings] will not respond to them; for We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them. And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it.* (Verses 52-53)

They are in a position where no claim has any value unless it is supported by irrefutable proof. The Lord who sits for judgement on that day commands them to bring their partners whom they alleged to enjoy favour with God. He tells them to call them up. Yet such people are lost. They forget that they are already witnessing the Day of Reckoning. So they call on their former partners who do not make any kind of response. They are no more than creatures of God who cannot avail themselves or anyone else of anything. They also have to face the great events that take place on the Day of Judgement. God places between such worshipped deities and those who worshipped them a gulf of doom too wide for either group to cross over. That gulf is the fire of hell: *"For We shall have placed an unbridgeable gulf between them."* (Verse 52)

Those who are guilty will look around and fear will overwhelm them. They expect that at any moment they will fall into the fire. It is extremely hard to expect to be punished, particularly when the punishment is ready and there is no chance of escape: *"And when those who were lost in sin will see the fire, they will realize that they are bound to fall in it, and will find no way to escape from it."* (Verse 53)

Why Reject God's Guidance?

They could certainly have escaped the fire and all punishment, had they only opened their hearts to the Qur'ān and not opposed the truth it lays down. God certainly gave them all sorts of examples, covering all situations and circumstances: *"We have indeed given in this Qur'ān many facets to every kind of lesson for mankind. But man is, above all else, always given to contention."* (Verse 54) The *sūrah* describes man here as 'a thing'. The literal translation of the above sentence reads: "But of all things, man is the most contentious." It chooses such expression in order to encourage man to be less arrogant and to feel that he is one of God's countless creatures, although he is the worst in argument and contention, after God has given solid, irrefutable argument, clearly expounded in the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* then documents the false arguments which the unbelievers, who represent the majority of mankind, have sought to provide:

> *What is there to keep people from accepting the faith now that guidance has come to them, and from seeking forgiveness from their Lord, unless it be that they are waiting for the fate of the [sinful] people of ancient times to befall them as well, or for the suffering to be brought before their eyes?* (Verse 55)

They have received guidance in plenty, which should have been sufficient for them to believe and follow God's orders. But they demanded for themselves the sort of suffering that befell nations of old. They made such a demand thinking that God's punishment would never overtake them, or they did so in mockery. Sometimes they modified their demands, asking for the punishment to be shown directly to them. That, they argued, would prove what the Prophets preached and then they would believe in them.

Answering such demands is not a matter for God's messengers to decide. God's rule that applied to past communities meant that when miracles were given and people continued to disbelieve, they were destroyed. To do this or to cause a scourge to overwhelm people are matters which only God determines. His messengers have a different duty, which is to bring happy news and to warn: *"We send Our messengers only as bearers of good news and as warners. But with false arguments the unbelievers seek to confute the truth. They make My revelations and warnings a target for their mockery."* (Verse 56)

The truth is clear, but the unbelievers resorted to false arguments, trying to disprove the truth. Their attitude was perverted, because even when they demanded miracles or hastened God's punishment, they still did not wish to be convinced. Essentially they were only ridiculing God's revelations and mocking His messengers.

> *Who could be more wicked than one who, when reminded of his Lord's revelations, turns away from them and forgets what his own hands have done? Over their hearts We have cast veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears, deafness. Even if you call them to the right path, they shall never be guided.* (Verse 57)

These people who treat what God has bestowed from on high with mockery and who ridicule His warnings cannot understand the Qur'ān or comprehend its message. Hence, God places over their hearts screens which prevent them from understanding it. In their ears He causes a sort of deafness so that they cannot hear it. He has also willed that, because of their deliberate refusal and wilful turning away from His guidance, they will never be guided. For guidance to penetrate people's hearts, such hearts must be open to receive it in the first place.

"Your Lord is Most Forgiving, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them now to task for whatever they do, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment." (Verse 58)

Rather, He gives them respite and allows them time, because He is Kind and Merciful. He wishes to allow them every chance so that they can see the issues clearly. He does not hasten their punishment as they demand. However, He will not abandon them completely and leave them unpunished: *"But they have an appointed time which they cannot evade."* (Verse 58) They have a term in this life which they will fulfil. During this time a portion of their punishment will be inflicted on them. And they have a time appointed in the hereafter when whatever they have deserved will be given in full.

They have done wrong and they have been unjust. Hence they deserve punishment, or even destruction in the same way as communities of old. However, God in His mercy has determined to give them a chance for the full duration of their term on earth. That is to fulfil a purpose which He, in His wisdom, wishes to be accomplished. Therefore, He treats them differently and allows them respite until the time appointed for them, which they cannot evade:

> *The same applied to other communities which We destroyed when they persisted in wrongdoing. For We had set a time for their destruction.* (Verse 59)

They must not be deluded by the respite they are given. Their time will inevitably come. The rules God has made applicable will never fail, and He does not leave any promise unfulfilled.

4
A Special Lesson for Moses

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِفَتَىٰهُ لَآ أَبْرَحُ حَتَّىٰٓ
أَبْلُغَ مَجْمَعَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ أَوْ أَمْضِىَ حُقُبًا
٦٠

Moses said to his servant: 'I shall journey on until I reach the point where the two seas meet, though I may march for ages.' (60)

فَلَمَّا بَلَغَا مَجْمَعَ بَيْنِهِمَا نَسِيَا حُوتَهُمَا
فَٱتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُۥ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ سَرَبًا ٦١

But when they reached the junction between the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight. (61)

فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَا قَالَ لِفَتَىٰهُ ءَاتِنَا غَدَآءَنَا لَقَدْ
لَقِينَا مِن سَفَرِنَا هَٰذَا نَصَبًا ٦٢

And after they had marched on for some distance, Moses said to his servant: 'Bring us our midday meal; we are indeed worn out by this our journey.' (62)

قَالَ أَرَءَيْتَ إِذْ أَوَيْنَآ إِلَى ٱلصَّخْرَةِ فَإِنِّى
نَسِيتُ ٱلْحُوتَ وَمَآ أَنْسَىٰنِيهُ إِلَّا ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ
أَنْ أَذْكُرَهُۥ ۚ وَٱتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُۥ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ عَجَبًا
٦٣

Said [the servant]: 'Do you recall when we betook ourselves to that rock for rest. There I forgot the fish — and none but Satan made me thus forget it! — and it took its way into the sea. How strange!' (63)

قَالَ ذَٰلِكَ مَا كُنَّا نَبْغِ ۚ فَٱرْتَدَّا عَلَىٰٓ

[Moses] said: 'That is [the place] we are seeking!' So they turned back, retracing their footsteps,

(64)

ءَاثَارِهِمَا قَصَصًا ﴿٦٤﴾

and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Our mercy and whom We had endowed with knowledge of Our own. (65)

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَآ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِندِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَٰهُ مِن لَّدُنَّا عِلْمًا ﴿٦٥﴾

Moses said to him: 'May I follow you, on the understanding that you will teach me something of the wisdom you have been taught?' (66)

قَالَ لَهُۥ مُوسَىٰ هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تُعَلِّمَنِ مِمَّا عُلِّمْتَ رُشْدًا ﴿٦٦﴾

The other answered: 'You will not be able to have patience with me, (67)

قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِىَ صَبْرًا ﴿٦٧﴾

for how can you be patient with something which you cannot fully comprehend?' (68)

وَكَيْفَ تَصْبِرُ عَلَىٰ مَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِۦ خُبْرًا ﴿٦٨﴾

Moses replied: 'You will find me patient, if God so wills; and I shall not disobey you in anything.' (69)

قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِىٓ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ صَابِرًا وَلَآ أَعْصِى لَكَ أَمْرًا ﴿٦٩﴾

The other said: 'Well, then, if you are to follow me, do not question me about anything until I mention it to you myself.' (70)

قَالَ فَإِنِ ٱتَّبَعْتَنِى فَلَا تَسْـَٔلْنِى عَن شَىْءٍ حَتَّىٰٓ أُحْدِثَ لَكَ مِنْهُ ذِكْرًا ﴿٧٠﴾

And so the two went on their way, and when they embarked, [the sage] made a hole in the boat. Moses exclaimed: 'Have you made a hole in it in order to drown the people in it? Strange indeed is that which you have done!' (71)

فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَكِبَا فِى ٱلسَّفِينَةِ خَرَقَهَا ۖ قَالَ أَخَرَقْتَهَا لِتُغْرِقَ أَهْلَهَا لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْـًٔا إِمْرًا ﴿٧١﴾

قَالَ أَلَمۡ أَقُلۡ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسۡتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبۡرٗا ٧٢

He replied: 'Did I not say that you would not be able to have patience with me?' (72)

قَالَ لَا تُؤَاخِذۡنِي بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرۡهِقۡنِي مِنۡ أَمۡرِي عُسۡرٗا ٧٣

Moses said: 'Do not take me to task for my having forgotten, and be not hard on me on account of what I have done.' (73)

فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَٰمٗا فَقَتَلَهُۥ قَالَ أَقَتَلۡتَ نَفۡسَۢا زَكِيَّةَۢ بِغَيۡرِ نَفۡسٖ لَّقَدۡ جِئۡتَ شَيۡـٔٗا نُّكۡرٗا ٧٤

And so the two went on until they met a certain young man. [The sage] slew him, whereupon Moses exclaimed: 'Have you killed an innocent man with no cause of just retribution for murder? Foul indeed is that which you have perpetrated!' (74)

۞ قَالَ أَلَمۡ أَقُل لَّكَ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسۡتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبۡرٗا ٧٥

He replied: 'Did I not make it clear to you that you would not be able to have patience with me?' (75)

قَالَ إِن سَأَلۡتُكَ عَن شَيۡءِۭ بَعۡدَهَا فَلَا تُصَٰحِبۡنِيۖ قَدۡ بَلَغۡتَ مِن لَّدُنِّي عُذۡرٗا ٧٦

Moses said: 'If ever I question you again, do not keep me in your company; for then you would have had enough excuses from me.' (76)

فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَتَيَآ أَهۡلَ قَرۡيَةٍ ٱسۡتَطۡعَمَآ أَهۡلَهَا فَأَبَوۡاْ أَن يُضَيِّفُوهُمَا فَوَجَدَا فِيهَا جِدَارٗا يُرِيدُ أَن يَنقَضَّ فَأَقَامَهُۥۖ قَالَ لَوۡ شِئۡتَ لَتَّخَذۡتَ عَلَيۡهِ أَجۡرٗا ٧٧

And so the two went on until they came to a town, where they asked its people for food, but they refused them all hospitality. There they found a wall on the point of falling down, and [the sage] rebuilt it. Moses said: 'Had you wished, you could have taken payment for what you did.' (77)

قَالَ هَٰذَا فِرَاقُ بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنِكَۚ سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِتَأۡوِيلِ مَا لَمۡ تَسۡطِع عَّلَيۡهِ صَبۡرًا ٧٨

[The sage] replied: 'This is the parting of ways between me and you. Now I shall explain to you the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience. (78)

As for the boat, it belonged to some needy people who toiled upon the sea — and I desired to

أَمَّا ٱلسَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسَٰكِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدتُّ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَآءَهُم مَّلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا ﴿٧٩﴾

slightly damage it because behind them there was a king who was taking every boat by force. (79)

وَأَمَّا ٱلْغُلَٰمُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنَيْنِ فَخَشِينَآ أَن يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَٰنًا وَكُفْرًا ﴿٨٠﴾

And as for the young man, his parents are true believers, and we feared lest he should cause them much grief by his overweening wickedness and unbelief. (80)

فَأَرَدْنَآ أَن يُبْدِلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُ زَكَوٰةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا ﴿٨١﴾

And so we desired that their Lord grant them in his stead [a son] of greater purity than him, and closer in loving tenderness. (81)

وَأَمَّا ٱلْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَٰمَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِى ٱلْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُۥ كَنزٌ لَّهُمَا وَكَانَ أَبُوهُمَا صَٰلِحًا فَأَرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَن يَبْلُغَآ أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنزَهُمَا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُۥ عَنْ أَمْرِى ۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِع عَّلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٨٢﴾

And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys living in the town, and beneath it was buried a treasure belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man. So your Lord has willed it that when they come of age they should dig up their treasure by your Lord's grace. I did not do any of this of my own accord. This is the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience.' (82)

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* begins by relating an episode in the life of the Prophet Moses which is not told or hinted at anywhere else in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* does not give details of where this episode took place other than saying, *'the place where the two seas meet.'* Nor does it define the period in Moses lifetime when the events took place. Thus, we do not know whether the events related took place when Moses was still in Egypt, before he led the Israelites on their way to Palestine, or after they had left it. If the latter, was it before he led them into the Holy Land, or when they stopped, refusing to enter because they did not wish to confront its powerful inhabitants? Was it after they had begun their forty years of wandering in the land, going to and fro, in total loss?

The event involves a goodly servant of God's whom Moses meets and

accompanies for a period of time. But the *sūrah* does not give us any details of the identity of this person. It does not mention his name or status. Was he a prophet, a messenger, a scholar, or a person favoured by God for his strong faith and complete dedication to the service of His cause?

There are many reports attributed to Ibn `Abbās and others concerning the details of this story. One of them is related by al-Bukhārī who quotes Sa`īd ibn Jubayr, a scholar from the generation that followed the Prophet's Companions as saying: "I said to `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās that Nawf al-Bakkālī claims that the person who accompanied al-Khaḍir [that is the name often given to the learned man in this story] was not Moses, God's Messenger to the Children of Israel. He claims that he was a different person also named Moses. Ibn `Abbās replied: 'That is a lie told by this enemy of God. Ubayy ibn Ka`b said to us that he heard God's Messenger saying: Moses was making a speech to the Children of Israel when he was asked which person had been endowed with most knowledge. He replied that he himself was that person. God took issue with him for not having attributed knowledge to Him, so He sent him a message saying that there was at the point where the two seas meet a person who had been given greater knowledge than he had. Moses asked his Lord to tell him how he could meet this man. God told him to take a whole fish with him, keeping it in a container. Wherever he lost his fish, he would find that person.'

There are several reports that add details about this story. However, apart from a note on the probable location of the story, we prefer to limit ourselves to the Qur'ānic text without going into any further detail. This helps us to live 'in the shade of the Qur'ān'. We believe that the way the story is told in the Qur'ān, without defining the time or place and without mentioning names, has a definite purpose. Therefore we will look at the Qur'ānic text and study it without additions.

Where the Two Seas Meet

> *Moses said to his servant: I shall journey on until I reach the point where the two seas meet, though I may march for ages.* (Verse 60)

Most probably, and God knows best, the place described here as the *'point where the two seas meet'* refers to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and their meeting place is the area where the Bitter lakes and the Timsāh lake are found along the Suez Canal. It may also be a reference to the meeting point of the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of `Aqabah at the northern end of the Red Sea. This whole area witnessed the history of the Children of Israel after they left Egypt. Anyway, the Qur'ān only refers to it in passing without defining it further. There are several other reports suggesting where the area was that *'the two seas meet,* but we feel these are all unacceptable.

We understand from the general drift of the story that Moses had a definite purpose behind his journey. He declares that he will travel as far as the meeting point of the two seas, no matter how troublesome the journey may prove, or how long it takes. He expresses his determination by the words quoted in the Qur'ān: "*though I may march for ages.*" There are differences as to the exact meaning of the Arabic word, *ĥuqub,* which is given in the translation as 'ages'. Some scholars state that each such *ĥuqbah,* or age, denotes one year, while others say it denotes eighty years. Whichever meaning it may have, the expression denotes a resolve rather than duration of time.

> *But when they reached the junction between the two seas, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea and disappeared from sight. And after they had marched on for some distance, Moses said to his servant: 'Bring us our mid-clay meal; we are indeed worn out by this our journey' [the servant]: Do you recall when we betook ourselves to that rock for rest. There I forgot the fish — and none but Satan made me thus forget it! — and it took its way into the sea. How strange!* (Verses 61-63)

Most probably, the fish was cooked. Its raising back to life and its moving straight into the sea was a sign given by God to Moses, so that he would know the place where he was to meet the man. This is indicated by the amazement expressed by the servant when he saw the fish swimming in the sea. Had the fish only dropped into the sea and settled at the bottom, there would be nothing strange in the matter. What makes this interpretation more plausible is that the whole trip was full of surprises that go beyond imagination, and this was only one of them.

Moses realized that he had gone beyond the place where he was to meet the man, which was by the rock where he and his servant had stayed for a little rest. Hence he traced his way back to it and there they met the man they sought: "*[Moses] said: 'That is [the place) we are seeking!' So they turned back, retracing their footsteps, and found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Our mercy and whom We had endowed with knowledge of Our own.*" (Verses 64-65)

It also seems that this meeting was to remain Moses' secret, given to him by his Lord. His servant did not know anything about it until they met the man. Hence the following scenes in the story speak only about Moses and the pious man endowed with knowledge.

First Jolting Shock

Moses addresses the pious sage in a most polite manner. It is the sort of politeness that is worthy of a prophet. He puts his request, without making any assumptions, and he makes it clear that he seeks proper knowledge from a good servant of God:

> *Moses said to him: May I follow you, on the understanding that you will teach me something of the wisdom you have been taught?'* (Verse 66)

The man's knowledge however is nothing like human knowledge with its immediate causes and inevitable results. It is a part of divine knowledge that God has granted him, according to a measure He determined and for a purpose He wanted to accomplish. Moses could not be expected to be patient with the man and his actions, even though Moses was a prophet and a messenger from God. Looked at superficially, these actions may appear to have no logical justification whatsoever. They could not be understood without having access to the wisdom dictating them, and that is part of divine wisdom which people cannot begin to comprehend.

The sage understandably fears that Moses may not have the patience required to make of him a comfortable companion. He makes this clear to Moses. "*The other answered: You will not be able to have patience with me, for how can you be patient with something which you cannot fully comprehend?"* (Verses 67-68) But Moses is so eager to learn. Hence he resolves to be very patient and obedient, seeks God's help and places God's will ahead of his own resolve: "*Moses replied: You will find me patient, if God so wills; and I shall not disobey you in anything."* (Verse 69)

The man reiterates the difficulties ahead, stating to Moses a condition for his companionship: that he remain patient and not question the sage about any action he takes until he himself reveals its purpose: "*The other said: Well, then, if you are to follow me, do not question me about anything until I mention it to you myself*" (Verse 70) Moses accepts the condition and the two set out together.

Soon afterwards comes the first scene from the trip: "*And so the two went on their way, and when they embarked, [the sage] made a hole in the boat."* (Verse 71) This is certainly a strange thing to do. The boat carried both men as well as other passengers. They are all in the middle of the sea, and the sage makes a hole in the boat. On the surface, this is an action that exposes the boat and all its passengers to the risk of being drowned. Why would anyone, let alone a learned and devout person, do such an evil thing?

Confronted with such an apparently outrageous action, Moses simply forgets the conversation that he had had with the sage. A human being may accept something when it is discussed in abstract terms, but when he faces it in practice and looks at its consequences, his reaction may be totally different. Practical matters have a totally different effect. Here we see Moses, having already been warned against apparently outrageous actions and having resolved to remain patient, loses all patience when faced with a tough situation.

Moses apparently had an impulsive nature, which we detect throughout his life. Early on we see him giving an Egyptian man quarrelling with an Israelite a punch

and killing him. He then repents and seeks God's forgiveness. Yet the following day he sees the same Israelite quarrelling with another Egyptian and tries to stop the latter. The details of these events are given in *Sūrah* 28.

With such an impulsive nature, Moses could not be patient when he saw his companion making a hole in the boat. He forgot all about his promise. Human nature is shown not to comprehend matters fully except through practical experience. Hence Moses says in objection: *"Have you made a hole in it in order to drown the people in it? Strange indeed is that which you have done!"* (Verse 71)

But the sage tolerates this with patience, and he gently reminds Moses of what he said earlier: *"Did I not say that you would not be able to have patience with* me?" (Verse 72) Moses now regrets his overreaction, saying that he completely forgot. He requests the man to accept his apologies and not to rebuke him. *"Do not take me to task for my having forgotten, and be not hard on me on account of what I have done."* (Verse 73) The man accepts his apologies and the two proceed further.

Patience Stretched to the Edge

There are, however, other strange events awaiting Moses which would exhaust his patience: *"And so the two went on until they met a certain young man. [The sage] slew him."* (Verse 74)

The first action exposed the boat and its passengers to certain risks. Now there is the blatant murder of a young man without provocation or justification. This was too much for Moses to tolerate patiently, despite all the promises he had given not to question anything he saw. Hence, *"Moses exclaimed: 'Have you killed an innocent man with no cause of just retribution for murder? Foul indeed is that which you have perpetrated.'"* (Verse 74)

This suggests that Moses was not unmindful of his promise. He probably remembered it, but felt unable to keep quiet when he witnessed a murder. To him, the young man was innocent. He had not perpetrated anything to justify his killing. He was perhaps even under age, so that he could not be held accountable for any misdeeds.

Once again the sage reminds Moses of the condition he has made and the promises Moses has given, referring also to what he said in the first place: *"Did I not make it clear to you that you would not be able to have patience with me?"* (Verse 75) This time, however, the sage goes further and reminds Moses that he said all this to him personally: *"Did I not make it clear to you..."* So the early warning was addressed to Moses personally, but he was not convinced. He had sought to be the man's companion accepting his conditions.

Again Moses reflects, knowing that he has broken his promises twice, forgetting it despite reminders. His regret makes him too apologetic, depriving himself of any possibility of a lengthy companionship with the sage. He gives himself only one last chance: *"Moses said: If ever I question you again, do not keep me in your company; for then you would have had enough excuses from me."* (Verse 76)

This brings us to the third and last scene: *"And so the two went on until they came to a town, where they asked its people for food, but they refused them all hospitality. There they found a wall on the point of falling down, and [the sage] rebuilt it."* (Verse 77) The two are hungry but find themselves in a town whose population are extremely inhospitable. They receive no guests and give nothing to the poor and hungry. Yet the man finds a wall there about to fall down. The Arabic text, *yurīdu an yanqadda,* is more vivid, making the wall almost like a living creature with a will that makes it want to fall. Yet this stranger occupies himself with rebuilding the wall for nothing.

Moses finds the situation full of irony. Why should such a stranger exert so much effort in rebuilding a wall in a town where they were denied even a little food and all hospitality? He should have at least demanded some money for his labours and then they could have bought some food to eat. He says: *"Had you wished, you could have taken payment for what you did."* (Verse 77)

This signalled the end of this unlikely companionship. Moses no longer had any excuse to offer: *"[The sage] replied: This is the parting of ways between me and you. Now I shall explain to you the real meaning of all [those events] which you were unable to bear with patience."* (Verse 78)

Up to this point Moses, as well as everyone following the story, have been subjected to a series of surprises with no indication as to their meaning or purpose. Our response is the same as that of Moses. We do not even know who the person was who did such singular acts. The Qur'ān does not tell us his name, in order to add to the general air of bafflement surrounding us. But what would his name add? The sage simply represents higher divine wisdom which does not attach results to their immediate causes. It aims to explain that there are objectives of which we may know nothing about. Hence, keeping his name from us fits in well with the abstract concept he represents.

Furthermore, higher forces dictate the development of the story right from the beginning. Moses is so keen to meet this man, he travels until he is totally worn out. But his servant leaves their food at the rock where they stopped to rest. But his forgetfulness is the cause of their return only to find the man at that very spot. Had they travelled on, they would have missed him. The whole atmosphere is shrouded in secrecy, just like the man's name.

All Made Clear and Simple

The secret is then revealed: "*As for the boat, it belonged to some needy people who toiled upon the sea — and I desired to slightly damage it because behind them there was a king who was taking every boat by force.*" (Verse 79) This explains that the small damage the boat suffered was enough to save it for its people. Had it been seaworthy, it would certainly have been confiscated by the tyrannical king. Perpetrating some small damage to the boat saved it from the greater harm and ruinous injustice which was certain to take place without it. Hence, causing such damage was a good and kindly action.

> *And as for the young man, his parents are true believers, and we feared lest he should cause them much grief by his overweening wickedness and unbelief. And so we desired that their Lord grant them in his stead [a son] of greater purity than him, and closer in loving tenderness.* (Verses 80-81)

This young man appeared at the time to be deserving of no punishment, but God revealed his true nature to the sage. We realize now that he harboured all the seeds of wickedness and unbelief which were bound to increase as he grew up. Had he lived, he would have caused his parents, believers as they were, too much trouble. He might have led them, out of love for him, to follow him in his wickedness. Hence, God directed His goodly servant to kill the boy in order to replace him with one who would be better and more dutiful.

Had the matter been left to human knowledge, the sage could not have treated the boy except on the basis of what appeared to him. He would have had no justification in killing him, particularly since the boy appeared to be still under age, having done nothing to deserve capital punishment. It is not up to anyone, other than God Himself or one to whom God imparts knowledge from Him personally, to judge anyone on the basis of his nature. Nor is it permissible to make such knowledge the basis of any action other than that which appearances allow. But God may command what He wills, as He does in this case.

> *And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys living in the town, and beneath it was buried a treasure belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man. So your Lord has willed it that when they come of age they should dig up their treasure by your Lord's grace.* (Verse 82)

This wall which the sage laboured to rebuild, asking no wages for his labours despite the refusal of hospitality from the townspeople, had a treasure underneath. This treasure belonged to two young orphans in the town. Had the wall been left to fall down, the treasure would have become visible and the two boys would not have

been able to claim it, considering their weakness. Since their father was a pious and righteous man, God allowed his children to benefit by his piety while they were weak. He willed to give them the time necessary to grow up and dig up their treasure when they were in a position to keep it.

The sage then disowns any share in this whole matter. It is God's grace that dictated all his actions. It was all by God's command who had imparted to him the necessary knowledge in such cases and others, showing him what to do in each case: *"I did not do any of this of my own accord."* (Verse 82)

Thus the secret is made clear, and all the actions of the sage which seemed preposterous in the first instance appear to be simple and wise. Now that the curtain has been removed and the secret revealed, the man disappears totally from the scene and no further mention is made of him in this *sūrah* nor indeed throughout the rest of the Qur'ān. The story itself represents God's great wisdom, which reveals itself only when and as needed.

Within the context of the whole *sūrah,* this story about Moses and the sage is closely linked to the story of the young sleepers in the cave. Both agree that what lies beyond our human perception should be left totally to God, who will conduct it on the basis of His perfect and absolute knowledge. As for us, we know only what is told to us.

5
Accurate Historical Accounts

وَيَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَن ذِى ٱلْقَرْنَيْنِ ۖ قُلْ سَأَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْكُم مِّنْهُ ذِكْرًا ﴿٨٣﴾

They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: 'I will give you an account of him.' (83)

إِنَّا مَكَّنَّا لَهُۥ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَءَاتَيْنَـٰهُ مِن كُلِّ شَىْءٍ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٤﴾

We established his power on earth, and gave him means to achieve anything. (84)

فَأَتْبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٥﴾

So he followed a certain way (85)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَغْرِبَ ٱلشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَغْرُبُ فِى عَيْنٍ حَمِئَةٍ وَوَجَدَ عِندَهَا قَوْمًا ۗ قُلْنَا يَـٰذَا ٱلْقَرْنَيْنِ إِمَّآ أَن تُعَذِّبَ وَإِمَّآ أَن تَتَّخِذَ فِيهِمْ حُسْنًا ﴿٨٦﴾

and [marched westwards] till, when he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in dark, turbid waters; and nearby he found a certain people. 'Dhu'l-Qarnayn,' We said, 'you may either punish them or treat them with kindness.' (86)

قَالَ أَمَّا مَن ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نُعَذِّبُهُۥ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ فَيُعَذِّبُهُۥ عَذَابًا نُّكْرًا ﴿٨٧﴾

He replied: 'The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him. (87)

وَأَمَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلَهُۥ جَزَآءً ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۖ وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُۥ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا ﴿٨٨﴾

But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.' (88)

ثُمَّ أَتْبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٩﴾

Then he followed another way (89)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَطْلِعَ ٱلشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَطْلُعُ عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ لَّمْ نَجْعَل لَّهُم مِّن دُونِهَا سِتْرًا ﴿٩٠﴾

and [marched eastwards] till, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it. (90)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَقَدْ أَحَطْنَا بِمَا لَدَيْهِ خُبْرًا ﴿٩١﴾

So he did; and We had full knowledge of all the means available to him. (91)

ثُمَّ أَتْبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٩٢﴾

Then he followed yet another way (92)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ بَيْنَ ٱلسَّدَّيْنِ وَجَدَ مِن دُونِهِمَا قَوْمًا لَّا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ قَوْلًا ﴿٩٣﴾

and [marched on] till, when he reached a place between the two mountain-barriers he found beneath them a people who could scarcely understand a word. (93)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰذَا ٱلْقَرْنَيْنِ إِنَّ يَأْجُوجَ وَمَأْجُوجَ مُفْسِدُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَهَلْ نَجْعَلُ لَكَ خَرْجًا عَلَىٰٓ أَن تَجْعَلَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَهُمْ سَدًّا ﴿٩٤﴾

'Dhu'l-Qarnayn,' they said, 'Gog and Magog are ravaging this land. May we pay you a tribute so that you erect a barrier between us and them?' (94)

قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ أَجْعَلْ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا ﴿٩٥﴾

He answered: 'That with which my Lord has established me is better [than any tribute]. Hence, do but help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them! (95)

ءَاتُونِي زُبَرَ ٱلْحَدِيدِ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ ٱلصَّدَفَيْنِ قَالَ ٱنفُخُوا۟ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَعَلَهُۥ نَارًا قَالَ ءَاتُونِيٓ أُفْرِغْ عَلَيْهِ قِطْرًا ﴿٩٦﴾

Bring me blocks of iron!' At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountainsides, he said: 'Ply your bellows!' Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.' (96)

فَمَا ٱسْطَـٰعُوٓا۟ أَن يَظْهَرُوهُ وَمَا ٱسْتَطَـٰعُوا۟ لَهُۥ نَقْبًا ﴿٩٧﴾

And thus their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart], nor could they dig their way through it. (97)

قَالَ هَـٰذَا رَحْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّي ۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي جَعَلَهُۥ دَكَّآءَ ۖ وَكَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّي حَقًّا ﴿٩٨﴾

He said: 'This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true.' (98)

۞ وَتَرَكْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَمُوجُ فِي بَعْضٍ ۖ وَنُفِخَ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَجَمَعْنَـٰهُمْ جَمْعًا ﴿٩٩﴾

On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves dashing against one another. The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together. (99)

وَعَرَضْنَا جَهَنَّمَ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْكَـٰفِرِينَ عَرْضًا ﴿١٠٠﴾

And We shall, on that day, present hell, all spread out, for the unbelievers, (100)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَانَتْ أَعْيُنُهُمْ فِي غِطَآءٍ عَن ذِكْرِي وَكَانُوا۟ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَمْعًا ﴿١٠١﴾

who have turned a blind eye to My admonition and a deaf ear to My warning. (101)

أَفَحَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَن يَتَّخِذُواْ عِبَادِى مِن دُونِىٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۚ إِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ نُزُلًا ﴿١٠٢﴾

Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers. (102)

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُم بِٱلْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَٰلًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

Say: 'Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? (103)

ٱلَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. (104)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ وَلِقَآئِهِۦ فَحَبِطَتْ أَعْمَٰلُهُمْ فَلَا نُقِيمُ لَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وَزْنًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day. (105)

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآؤُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ بِمَا كَفَرُواْ وَٱتَّخَذُوٓاْ ءَايَٰتِى وَرُسُلِى هُزُوًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

That will be their reward, hell, for having rejected the faith, and made My revelations and My messengers a target of their mockery.' (106)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتُ ٱلْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

But those who have faith and do righteous deeds shall have the gardens of paradise as their dwelling place. (107)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يَبْغُونَ عَنْهَا حِوَلًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

Therein they will abide, and never will they desire any change to befall them. (108)

قُل لَّوْ كَانَ ٱلْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِّكَلِمَٰتِ رَبِّى لَنَفِدَ ٱلْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَن تَنفَدَ كَلِمَٰتُ رَبِّى وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِۦ مَدَدًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

Say: 'If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it.' (109)

Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as a partner.' (110)	قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُكُمۡ يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَآ إِلَٰهُكُمۡ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۖ فَمَن كَانَ يَرۡجُواْ لِقَآءَ رَبِّهِۦ فَلۡيَعۡمَلۡ عَمَلٗا صَٰلِحٗا وَلَا يُشۡرِكۡ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِۦٓ أَحَدَۢا ﴿١١٠﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* is mainly concerned with Dhu'l-Qarnayn and his three journeys, to the east, west and the central areas, as well as his erection of a strong barrier to prevent Gog and Magog from getting through. The *sūrah* tells us that after he had erected the barrier, Dhu'l-Qarnayn said: *"This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true."* (Verse 98)

The reference to the 'true promise' is followed with the blowing of the trumpet and a scene of the resurrection before the *sūrah* concludes with three short sections, each of which starts with the command, 'Say'. These three sections sum up all the main topics of the *sūrah* and follow its drift. They serve as the final strong beats of an evenly flowing tune.

The Mysterious Traveller

The story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn begins as follows: *"They will ask you about Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Say: I will give you an account of him.'"* (Verse 83) Speaking about the reasons that led to the revelation of this *sūrah,* Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq mentions a report attributed to Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and Companion. The report mentions that the Quraysh sent al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith and `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ to ask the Jewish rabbis in Madinah about Muĥammad, outlining for them their terms of reference. The Quraysh elders told the two men to describe Muĥammad in detail to the Jewish rabbis and to report to them truthfully what he advocated. "The Jews," said the Quraysh elders, "are the people of early Scriptures and they have a wealth of knowledge about prophets which is not available to us."

In Madinah, the two men from the Quraysh put their questions to the rabbis and solicited their honest opinion about Muĥammad. The rabbis told them to ask Muĥammad three questions. "If he gives you satisfactory answers, then he is a prophet and messenger of God. If he has no answer to give, then he is fabricating whatever he says. You may do what you like with him. Ask him about a group of

young people about whom there was a strange story in ancient times, and let him tell you what happened to them. Ask him also about a man who travelled all over the place and went to the far east and far west. The third question you should ask him is to tell you about the spirit."

Al-Naḍr and `Uqbah travelled back to Makkah and told their tribesmen that they had brought the answer to their problem with Muĥammad. When they told them of the advice of the Jewish rabbis, they went to the Prophet and put the three questions to him. The Prophet told them that he would answer them the following day. Apparently he did not qualify the promise by saying, 'God willing', as he should have done and as Muslims should always do. As a result nothing was revealed to him for fifteen days, nor did the angel Gabriel meet him during this period. The people of Makkah began to spread a fresh propaganda campaign, saying: 'Muĥammad has promised to give us an answer on the morrow, and now it has been fifteen days since we asked him, without him giving us any reply to our questions.'

The Prophet was very sad at this delay in revelation and he was much distressed by what the people of Makkah said about him. Then the angel Gabriel came down revealing this *sūrah,* The Cave, which tells him in its early verses not to grieve too much for his people if they refuse to listen to him. It then proceeds to answer the questions put to him, relating the stories of the young men and the traveller of old times. He also gave the Prophet the answer to the third question about the spirit, which occurs in *Sūrah 17,* The Night Journey.

Another report by Ibn `Abbās tells of the reason for the revelation of the verse giving the reply to the question about the spirit. This mentions that the Jews themselves put the question to the Prophet: "Tell us about the spirit, and how the spirit inside the body can be tortured, when the spirit belongs to God?" As nothing about the spirit had been revealed to him, he could not answer them. Gabriel then came down to him with the verse stating: *"Say: The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You [mankind] have been granted but little knowledge."* (17: 85)

Since there are several reports about the immediate reason behind the revelation of this *sūrah,* we prefer not to go into these, limiting our discussion to the Qur'ānic text, which provides us with true and accurate information. On the basis of this text we realize that a question was asked about Dhu'l-Qarnayn, but we do not know for certain who put the question. Knowing the questioner will not add anything about the import of the story. We will now discuss the text.

The Qur'ānic text does not mention anything about the personality of Dhu'l-Qarnayn or where and when he lived. This is typical of Qur'ānic stories. The intention is not to provide historical accounts, but to learn the lessons that may be

derived from the stories mentioned. In most cases, these lessons can be drawn without the need to define time and place.

Documented history refers to a king called Iskandar, or Alexander Dhu'l-Qarnayn. It is also certain that the person to whom the Qur'ān refers by the name Dhu'l-Qarnayn is not the Greek king, Alexander, for he was a pagan worshipping idols, while the Qur'ān speaks about someone who believed in God's oneness and in resurrection and the life to come.[6] In his book, *Al-Āthār Al-Bāqiyah `an al-Qurūn Al-Khāliyah,* al-Bīrūnī mentions that Dhu'l-Qarnayn, about whom the Qur'ān gives us this account, was a king of Ĥimyar in Yemen. This is based on the fact that his name begins with 'Dhu', which is typical of Ĥimyarī kings. His actual name was Abū Baler ibn Afrīqish. He travelled at the head of his army along the southern Mediterranean coast, passing through Tunisia and Morocco and building the town of Afriqiya. Thus the whole continent was named after him. He was nicknamed Dhu'l-Qarnayn because he reached as far as the two furthest points in relation to the sun.

This view may be correct, but we have no means of verifying it. It is not possible to undertake research based on documented history with the aim of establishing the real personality of Dhu'l-Qarnayn of whose history the Qur'ān gives us a glimpse. The same applies to most historical accounts given in the Qur'ān, such as those concerning the people of the prophets Noah and Hūd, or the Thamūd, etc. History itself is only a recent addition, compared to the length of human life on earth. Great events took place in the periods preceding what history reports, and these remain unknown to historians. Hence, we cannot refer to them for answers.

Had the Torah remained intact, without distortion or addition, it would have been a reliable source of information concerning some of these events. But the Torah has been mixed with legends that have, without doubt, no foundation. It has been infused with reports that have, most certainly, been added to the original text revealed by God. Hence, the Torah cannot be treated as a reliable source for the historical accounts it contains. Thus, the only source left for us is the Qur'ān, since God has guaranteed its preservation in its original form and its protection against any distortion. It is indeed the only source for its historical accounts.

Needless to say, it is wrong to try to evaluate the Qur'ān with reference to history. There are two obvious reasons for this. The first is the fact that history is a recent creation which has missed countless events in mankind's progress. The Qur'ān tells us some of these events which remain totally unknown to history and historians.

[6] It may appear that Sayyid Quṭb is doing what he says he will not do, discussing the identity of the central figure of the story and the locations mentioned, but in fact he is only illustrating why history could not be referred to in search for more details of the Qur'ānic accounts. His discussion of the probable locations remains very close to the Qur'ānic statements. The footnote speaking about the wall near Tirmidh simply mentions a probability without any attempt to evaluate it. — Editor's note.

Secondly, even though history may record some of these events, it remains the product of human beings. Thus, it suffers from the shortcomings of human action, such as imperfection, error, distortion, etc. In our own time, when means of communication and facilities of verification have become available in plenty, we find the same piece of news or the same incident reported in a variety of ways, each looking at it from a particular angle, and giving it a different interpretation. It is out of such heaps of confusion that historical accounts are made, regardless of what may be said about research and verification.

Hence, whatever is said about referring to history in order to evaluate the accounts given in the Qur'ān cannot be admitted on the basis of the scientific rules adopted by people, let alone by Islam which states clearly that the Qur'ān is the final arbiter. Such reference to history cannot he advocated by a believer in the Qur'ān or in scientific research. It is no more than useless polemic.

A Policy of Justice for All

Some people, then, asked God's Messenger about Dhu'l-Qarnayn, and God revealed to him what this *sūrah* contains about his history and actions. We have no source other than the Qur'ān to give us further information. Hence, we will not try to expand or elaborate, because that would not be based on any accurate information. Commentaries on the Qur'ān provide many accounts and plenty of information, but none of these has any reliable basis. Hence, they should be approached very cautiously, particularly because they include Israelite reports and other legends.

Of the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn the Qur'ān mentions three journeys, one to the west, one to the east and the third to a place described as an area 'between two mountains'. Let us now consider this Qur'ānic account.

The story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, as given in this *sūrah,* begins with a brief introduction of the man himself: "*We established his power on earth, and gave him means to achieve anything.*" (Verse 84) God then has established his power on earth, giving him uncontested authority. He has also given him the means of government and victory, the facilities to build civilization, enjoy the blessings God has made available to mankind, and all that make human life on earth steady and prosperous.

So he followed a certain way." (Verse 85) Thus, he went along one way which was made easy for him, aiming westwards: "*When he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in dark, turbid waters; and nearby he found a certain people. Dhu'l-Qarnayn,' We said, you may either punish them or treat them with kindness. 'He replied: 'The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him. But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.'* (Verses 86-88)

Reaching the setting of the sun means the place where a person feels that the sun sets beyond the horizon. This varies according to geographic location. In some places we may feel that the sun sets beyond a mountain, while in others we feel that it goes down into the water, as is the case when we look at the sea or ocean. In other places still, the sun seems to set in the sand, as when we are in a desert with no hills or mountains around.

It appears from the text that Dhu'l-Qarnayn went westwards until he reached a point on the Atlantic coast which people believed to be at the end of dry land. He saw the sun setting in the sea. It is even more likely that this was at a river mouth, where there would be plenty of weeds and the area muddy. Little lakes form in such situations and may look like water springs. He saw the sun setting there, going down in a spring of murky water. But it is impossible for us to define the area, because the *sūrah* does not give us any clue. We have no other reliable source. Hence, every view other than this cannot be considered accurate because it has no reliable basis.

At this lake of turbid and murky waters, Dhu'I-Qarnayn found a community and God gave him a choice: *"Dhu'l-Qarnayn, We said, you may either punish them or treat them with kindness."* (Verse 86) Now, how did God say this to Dhu'l-Qarnayn? Was it revelation, or a mere statement of the situation, resulting from the fact that God had given him power over those people, so that he could determine whatever he wished to do with them. In this case, it would be just as if it was said to him: Here they are at your command: you may choose to punish them or to follow a lenient course of action. Both are possible. There is nothing to stop us understanding the text in either way. What is important to realize is that Dhu'l-Qarnayn declared his policy in the areas that came under his rule and their population became subject to his authority.

> *He replied: 'The one who does wrong we shall punish. Then he will return to his Lord and be sternly punished by Him. But the one who believes and does righteous deeds shall have a goodly reward, and we shall assign to him a task that is easy to fulfil.'*(Verses 87-88)

This is a declaration that those who transgress the bounds of justice will be subject to their own punishment in this life. Then they will return to their Lord who is certain to inflict on them severe punishment that has no parallel in what is known in human life. On the other hand, pious and true believers will receive kindly treatment, generous reward, honour and help in all their affairs.

These are the outlines of just and good government. A true believer should receive from rulers every sort of kindly treatment and generous reward, while transgressors who are unjust to their fellow human beings should be punished severely. When those who do well in the community, pursuing a fair line of action in all their

pursuits, receive a good reward for their actions, and when the unjust and oppressors receive a fair punishment and humiliation, then the whole community is motivated to follow the line of goodness. But when matters go wrong, and the unjust, oppressor and corrupt people are the ones who enjoy favour with the ruler, while those who are good and fair are persecuted, then the ruler's power becomes no more than a tool of corruption and misery for the whole community. Nothing remains fair. The whole society sinks into chaos.

After Dhu'l-Qarnayn's return from his westward journey he took his way eastward. Again we realize that his authority was well established, and that all means were made available to him:

> *Then he followed another way and [marched eastwards] till, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it. So he did; and We had All knowledge of all the means available to him.* (Verses 89-91)

What we said about the setting of the sun is also true of its rising place. What is meant here is the point where it rises in the east as we look up beyond the horizon. Again the Qur'ān does not define the place. It simply describes it and the situation of the people Dhu'l-Qarnayn found there: *"When he came to the rising of the sun, he found that it was rising on a people for whom We had provided no coverings against it."* (Verse 90) This suggests that the land was open, unscreened from the sun by any hills or trees. Thus when the sun rose, the people were directly exposed to it. This description applies to deserts and vast plateaus. It does not specify a particular location. All that we say is that it is likely that this place was in the far east, where the sun rose over its open, flat land. It might have also been on the east coast of Africa.

Another probability is that the description, '*for whom We had provided no covering against it,*' means that those people were always in the nude and did not employ clothing. Hence, they were not screened from the sun.

Since Dhu'l-Qarnayn had announced his policy of government, the *sūrah* does not repeat it here. Nor is any further action mentioned because God is fully aware of his intention and behaviour.

It is important, however, to reflect very briefly here on an artistic touch in the image provided. The scene portrayed for us is open and clear: a blazing sun which is in no way screened from the people.

Similarly, Dhu'l-Qarnayn's conscience and intentions are open, known ' fully to God Almighty. This provides harmony between the natural scene and man's conscience in the inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

A Barrier against Evil Forces

> *Then he followed yet another way and [marched on] till, when he reached a place between the two mountain-barriers he found beneath them a people who could scarcely understand a word. Dhu'l- Qarnayn,' they said, 'Cog and Magog are ravaging this land. May we pay you a tribute so that you erect a barrier between us and them?' He answered: 'That with which my Lord has established me is better [than any tribute]. Hence, do but help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them! Bring me blocks of iron!' At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountain-sides, he said: 'Ply your bellows!' Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.' And thus their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart], nor could they dig their way through it. He said: 'This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true.'* (Verses 92-98)

Now we come to the third of Dhu'l-Qarnayn's journeys which took him to a place *between the two mountain-barriers.'* We cannot make any definite suggestion as to the exact location of this place, nor do we have any information about the nature of these barriers. All that we can understand from the text is that he reached a place lying in between two natural or man-made barriers, separated by a gap or low passage. Down there he found some backward people, whom the Qur'ān describes as *could scarcely understand a word.'*

These people realized that Dhu'l-Qarnayn was both powerful and able. They also discovered that he was pious and God-fearing. Hence, they offered him payment in return for erecting a barrier to stop Gog and Magog, who frequently attacked them from beyond the mountain barriers and used the passage in between, from wreaking havoc in their land. These people had exhausted all the means available to them, yet still they could not repel those evil forces. Hence they were prepared to pay for a solution to their problem utilizing Dhu'l-Qarnayn's power.

Following the policy declared by that pious ruler, which was based on resisting all evil and corruption on earth, he declined to take their money, and offered instead to erect the barrier without charge. He judged that the easiest way to do so was to close the passage between the two mountain-barriers. However, he asked the backward people to help him by employing their physical strength: "*Help me with strength, and I shall erect a rampart between you and them! Bring me blocks of iron!*" (Verses 95-96) They began to gather whatever blocks of iron were available. He put all these blocks in a heap to close the gap between the two barriers, so that the two mountain-sides became like two crusts covering a heap of iron articles in between.

"*At length, when he had filled up the gap between the two mountainsides,*" (Verse 96) and the heap of iron was as high as the top of the two barriers, "*he said: Ply your*

bellows!" (Verse 96) They were to generate air to increase the fire which heated the iron. *"Then, when he made [the iron glow like] fire, he said: 'Bring me molten copper which I will pour over it.'"* (Verse 96) The molten copper thus filled the gaps between the iron blocks, making the new barrier impregnable.

This method has recently been used in strengthening iron by adding a percentage of copper to it, thereby reinforcing it. It is to this fact that God guided Dhu'l-Qarnayn, recording the fact in His book many centuries before it was discovered by human science.

Thus the two natural barriers joined together with the man-made one, and the gap through which Gog and Magog launched their attacks was completely sealed. Hence, *"Their enemies were unable to scale [the rampart]"* by climbing it. *"Nor could they dig their way through it,"* to resume their attacks. For the first time, those vulnerable, backward people felt secure in their land.[7]

Dhu'l-Qarnayn looked at the great work which he accomplished, yet experienced neither pride nor conceit. Nor was he elated by this edifice which testified to both his power and knowledge. Rather, he remembered God and thanked Him, acknowledging that it was He who guided him to what work should be done, and that his own power was granted to him by God, and that future events would take place according to His will. He also declared his belief that all mountains, walls and barriers are certain to be levelled before the Day of Judgement so that the whole earth will be flat. He said: *"This is a mercy from my Lord. Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true."* (Verse 98)

Thus ends this passage which relates part of the history of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, a good example of a pious ruler who is given power and secure position as well as other means and facilities. He goes with his armies east and west, but he does not tyrannize or show conceit. Nor does he consider his conquering of other people's lands a means to exploit individuals, communities and countries in order to ensure a luxurious life for himself or his people. He does not treat the vanquished people as slaves, making them the means for his self-aggrandisement. On the contrary, he spreads justice, assists the weak and backward, ensures that no aggression is launched against them, and charges nothing for his services. He utilizes the power God granted him in building proper and secure communities where everyone gets what rightfully belongs to him. He then attributes every good work he does to the grace of God, claiming no part of it for himself. Even at the height of his power, he

[7] A wall was discovered close to the city of Tirmidh in central Asia, and was mentioned by a German and a Spanish historian who passed by it early in the fifteenth century. They referred to Bāb Al-Ĥadīd, meaning `the iron door', and which can he found between Samarqand and India. This may be the wall built by Dhu'l-Qarnayn.

does not forget God's power and that to Him he certainly shall return.

The Truth about Gog and Magog

Now who were Gog and Magog? Where are they now? What did they do and what will happen to them? Such questions are very difficult to answer with any degree of accuracy. Our knowledge of them is limited to what is mentioned specifically in the Qur'ān and in authentic *aĥādīth.* The Qur'ān includes here a quotation of what Dhu'l-Qarnayn says: *"Yet when the time appointed by my Lord shall come, He will make this [rampart] level with the ground. My Lord's promise always comes true."* (Verse 98) This statement does not specify a time. God's promise to destroy the rampart may already have occurred when the Tatars swept across huge areas, destroying whole kingdoms.

Another mention of them is found in *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, where it is stated: *"When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm down from every corner, when the true promise draws close [to its fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers."* (21: 96-97) Again this statement does not specify a time for the promised appearance of Gog and Magog. That God's promise has come near to fulfilment, in the sense that the Last Hour or the Day of Judgement is soon to come, is an accomplished fact ever since the time of the Prophet. In the Qur'ān we read: *"The Hour has drawn near, and the moon was cleft asunder."* (54: 1) In God's reckoning, time has a totally different perspective from that of human reckoning. The time gap between the moment when the Hour becomes near and its actual occurrence may stretch to millions of years or centuries. Thus human beings may see this as a very long period of time, while, by God's standards, it may signify nothing more than a blink of an eye.

This means that the rampart built by Dhu'l-Qarnayn might have been penetrated in the period that has lapsed between the revelation of the verse stating, *'the Hour has drawn near,'* and our present day. This suggests that the conquests of the Tatars in the eastern provinces might have represented a sort of fulfilment of the warning which tells of Gog and Magog forging ahead and sweeping across the earth. An authentic *ĥadīth* related by Imām Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal on the authority of Zainab bint Jaĥsh, the Prophet's wife, mentions that the Prophet woke up once, red in the face, saying: "Woe to the Arabs! A calamitous event is drawing near. The rampart of Gog and Magog has been breached today by as much as this, [rounding his thumb with his first finger]." I said, "Messenger of God! Would we be destroyed when righteous people are living among us?" He said: "Yes, if evil becomes widespread."

The Prophet's dream occurred more than thirteen and a half centuries ago. The conquests of the Tatars took place subsequently, destroying the `Abbāsid Caliphate. It was Hülegü who destroyed it, ending the reign of al-Musta`şim, the last `Abbāsid

Caliph. This might have been the realization of the Prophet's dream. But true knowledge belongs to God. All that we say in this respect is by way of probability, not certainty.

Deaf and Blind

The *sūrah* follows the reference by Dhu'l-Qarnayn to God's true promise with a scene from the Day of Judgement:

> *On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves dashing against one another. The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together. And We shall, on that day, present hell, all spread out, for the unbelievers, who have turned a blind eye to My admonition and a deaf ear to My warning. (Verses 99-101)*

This is a scene showing the movement of huge masses of people of all colours, races and geographical areas, belonging to all generations and times, after they have been resurrected and brought back to life. They move across in a chaotic way, unaware of what is around them. They push each other like waves in the sea and mix like the surf raised by the waves. Then suddenly a trumpet is blown and they are gathered according to a specific order: *"The trumpet will be blown, and We shall gather them all together."* (Verse 99)

We see also the unbelievers who turned away from remembrance of God as though their eyes were covered and their ears deaf. Now we see them with hell brought before them and they cannot turn away from it as they used to turn away from God's guidance. On that day, the option of turning away is not within their power. The cover over their eyes has been drawn, and they now see clearly the consequence of their deliberate turning away. This is a fair recompense.

The *sūrah* provides symmetry between their turning away and their vision of hell as it is brought before them. The two actions are shown in contrast both in scene and movement.

This contrast is followed by a comment full of derision: *"Do the unbelievers think that they could take My creatures for patrons against Me? We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers."* (Verse 102) Do these unbelievers think that they can choose from among God's creatures which fully submit to Him some who could support them against God? Can these give them help or grant them protection against God's might? If such thoughts are entertained by them, then let them experience the results of such self-delusion: *"We have indeed readied hell as a dwelling place for the unbelievers."* (Verse 102) This is an evil abode already prepared to receive them. There is no need for waiting. It is all ready to receive its unbelieving dwellers.

Deceptive Thoughts of Bad Action

The *sūrah* concludes with a few verses that bring together its many different lines of discussion in harmonious tone and rhythm. We have here three different aspects which, together, sum up the whole theme of the *sūrah.* The first of these revolves around values and standards as they are reflected in deviant societies and as they truly are. These relate to both actions and people.

> *Say: 'Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided, and who nonetheless think that what they do is right. It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works. No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day.'* (Verses 103-105)

"Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do?" (Verse 103) These are the ones whose loss cannot be exceeded by any human being in history. The answer to this question comes very quickly. *"It is they whose labour in this world has been misguided."* (Verse 104) It did not lead them to follow any proper guidance. It did not yield any real fruit, nor did it achieve any objective. But these people *"nonetheless think that what they do is right."* (Verse 104) This tells how misguided these people are. They have no inclination that whatever they do in this world takes them further into error and is thus completely wasted. Hence, they continue spending their whole lives in such vain pursuits.

Now the listeners are asked whether they want to know who these people are. The question heightens their curiosity, holding the attentions of everyone within hearing range. Then when everyone eagerly anticipates the information, the identity of these unrivalled losers is revealed: *"It is they who have chosen to disbelieve in their Lord's revelations and deny the truth that they will meet Him. Vain will be their works."* (Verse 105) The linguistic sense imparted by the Arabic term, *habitat,* describing their actions as 'vain' is derived from a very special case. It is that of an animal feeding on poisonous grass. Its belly is swollen before it dies. The same is the case with the actions of those who are misguided. They grow and seem fair and rewarding, but the fact is that they come to nothing whatsoever.

"No weight shall We assign to them on Resurrection Day." (Verse 105) Thus they are shown to be worthless, having no value in the scale of true standards and principles. This is their condition 'on Resurrection Day'. But they only have the requital they deserve. *"That will be their reward, hell, for having rejected the faith, and made My revelations and My messengers a target of their mockery."* (Verse 106)

Contrast in the scene is given by showing how the believers fare and what their value score is on the true scales used on the Day of Judgement. *"But those who have*

faith and do righteous deeds shall have the gardens of paradise as their dwelling place. Therein they will abide, and never will they desire any change to befall them." (Verses 107-108) This abode in the gardens of paradise is contrasted here with the other abode in hell. The gulf between the two is colossal.

There is also here a fine reference to human nature and its appreciation of pleasure and enjoyment. This is expressed in the sentence, *never will they desire any change to befall them.'* (Verse 108) We need to reflect a little on this statement which assures us that the believers are to dwell in paradise permanently. By nature however human beings are bored with any state that continues *ad infinitum.* When they are satisfied that the blessings they enjoy are permanent, they are no longer keen to preserve them, seeking changes instead.

This is how human nature is made, and for a definite purpose. Moreover, this is more suited to the role assigned to man in this life, placing him in charge of the earth. This role requires developing human life so as to achieve the level of perfection God in His wisdom has determined for it. Hence, He has made man a creature who loves change, discovery and movement from one stage, place or scene to another. This aspiration enables man to move on, to change things in his life, to discover new things as also reinvent his social system. In this way, man's whole life changes and develops. It continues to progress gradually until it achieves its best level of perfection.

At the same time, human nature loves what is familiar and tries to preserve customs and traditions. However, this is kept at a degree that does not obstruct progress or prevent the development of thought or new ideas. The two trends achieve a balance which ensures progress. Every time the balance is disturbed so as to impose stagnation, it is followed by a revolt which gives new momentum in the opposite direction. This may even exceed the limits of moderation. The best periods in human life are those which achieve an equilibrium between the driving force and social controls, and between motivation and restraint. Should stagnation persist, it heralds a retreat in social conditions and a slow death in the life of both individuals and the community.

Such is the nature that is more suitable for human life on earth. In heaven, which is the world of absolute perfection, there is no duty and responsibility commensurate with human nature. Should people retain their nature that fits their life on earth while living in the permanent and self-renewing bliss of heaven, they will, in time, feel exceedingly bored with it. Heaven will become like a prison and its dwellers will seek to leave it for a while, just to have a change, even though this may mean paying a visit to a place of misery. They will need such a departure from heaven to satisfy their innate and strong desire for change.

But the Creator, who knows well the nature of His creation, will change human desire so that when they are in heaven, they will not want to change or to leave. Instead, they will be keen to continue their lives there for as long as time stretches.

Preparing for a Meeting with the Lord

The second concluding element shows the limits of human knowledge when compared with God's infinite knowledge. As our imagination cannot reach the absolute, the Qur'ān gives us a simple analogy which we can easily comprehend, using its method of image drawing: *"Say: If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it."* (Verse 109) The sea is the largest and richest thing known to mankind. People use ink to write down whatever they want to record. This is how they document their knowledge which they imagine to be great. Hence the Qur'ān puts forward the image of the sea with all its vast expanse, but which is now made of ink with which to write down God's words that indicate His knowledge. Even though the whole sea is used, God's words are not finished. At this point another sea of similar magnitude is brought forward, but it too is used in full while God's words are far from finished.

It is with such a clear image and movement that the concept of the infinite is placed before the finite human intellect. A universal and abstract concept remains beyond human conception until it is described in specific terms. No matter how powerful a human being's ability to understand the abstract is, he needs to relate an abstract concept to images and shapes, types and characteristics. This applies to abstract concepts of what is limited or tangible. How then can it fathom what is unlimited and intangible?

Hence, the Qur'ān gives analogies and draws on similarities in order to give people images and scenes that describe the great concepts it wants them to understand. It often uses what is tangible, and what has shape and definite characteristics and recognizable features in the same way as is employed here. In this example, the sea represents human knowledge which people imagine to be great. But huge and rich as the seas and the oceans may be, they remain limited. God's words, on the other hand, represent His infinite knowledge for which people cannot set any limit. Indeed they cannot receive or record it all, let alone comprehend it.

Conceit may creep into the human soul as people are able to make new discoveries about themselves or about the universe. They are elated with these scientific discoveries feeling that they have achieved what there is to achieve, or at least are on the way to it. But when they look at the areas which remain unknown, they realize that they have only taken a few steps into the sea which remains so vast, stretching

beyond the horizon. The fact remains that man's ability to receive and record God's knowledge is very limited indeed, because it represents a relationship of what is finite and what is infinite.

Man may gain as much knowledge as he can, and he may discover much of the secrets of the universe, but he must never arrogantly boast about his knowledge. For the utmost that he can achieve is to transform the seas and oceans into ink, yet all that ink is insufficient to record God's words.

With such a comparison that shows man's knowledge to be extremely limited in relation to God's, the final touch in the *sūrah* paints the highest and noblest degree for man, which is that of recipient of God's final message. This again is something close and finite in relation to the limitless horizon our sight cannot reach:

> *Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Hence, whoever expects to meet his Lord (on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as partner.* (Verse 110)

That is the ultimate horizon of Godhead. How does the horizon of prophethood compare with it, when it is, after all, a human horizon?

"*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me...*" I am a human being who receives something from that highest level. I get my knowledge from that inexhaustible source. Yet I am a human being who does not go beyond the guidance which I receive from my Lord. I am a human being who is taught something, learns it and then teaches it to others. Whoever aspires to a position close to this height must first of all benefit by whatever he or she learns from God's Messenger. They must also utilize the only means that leads there: "*Whoever expects to meet his Lord [on Judgement Day], let him do what is right, and in the worship due to his Lord admit no one as a partner.*" (Verse 110) This is the passport to that splendid meeting.

Thus ends the *sūrah* which began by mentioning revelation and the oneness of God, utilizing themes and tones that gradually grow more and more profound until they reach this final climax. It is a distinguished beat which generates all the tunes in the splendid music of faith.

SŪRAH 19

Maryam

(Mary)

Prologue

The central theme of this *sūrah* focuses on God's oneness, rejecting all concepts and ideas assigning a son or a partner to Him. It also touches on the important issue of resurrection, intertwined as it is with the concept of God's oneness. In this, the *sūrah* follows the same pattern as most, if not all, *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah.

The *sūrah* explores its theme through several stories, beginning with that of Zachariah and his son, John, and follows this with the story of Mary and the birth of Jesus. We then have a part of Abraham's story with his father, followed by brief references to other prophets: Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Ishmael, Idrīs, Adam and Noah. These stories take up nearly two-thirds of the *sūrah,* driving home the truth of God's oneness, resurrection, the non-existence of any children or partners with God. They also clearly outline the attitudes towards the prophets of those who follow guidance and those who go astray.

The *sūrah* also includes some scenes of the Day of Judgement, some arguments against those who deny resurrection, and a reference to the fate of the unbelievers who deny God's message, both in this life and in the life to come. All this fits perfectly with the drift of the stories the *sūrah* relates and reinforces its central theme. The *sūrah* has its distinctive atmosphere which permeates through all its accounts and pervades its themes.

The *sūrah* portrays a full range of reaction and feeling within the human soul as also within the universe around it. This world which we imagine to be senseless is shown to have a soul of its own capable of sense and feeling. This adds to the general

atmosphere of the *sūrah* as we see the heavens, the earth and the mountains in anger, reacting so strongly as to almost be rent asunder or levelled down. All this because *"people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself son."* (Verses 91-92) Reactions within the human soul are shown throughout the *sūrah* from start to finish. Its main stories are full of such reactions, particularly in that of Mary and the birth of Jesus.

The *sūrah* has a distinctive ambience of compassion, contentedness and direct relation with God. It opens with an account of the grace God bestowed on Zachariah, and how he addressed God in a secret appeal: *"This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah: when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart."* (Verses 2-3) The words of grace, compassion and their synonyms are frequently mentioned throughout the *sūrah,* together with God's attributes of beneficence and mercy. The happiness the believers will enjoy in the life to come is described as love: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them."* (Verse 96) Among the favours God bestowed on John is that he was compassionate: *"We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous."* (Verses 12-13) Similarly, Jesus was, by the grace of God, dutiful to his mother, gentle and friendly in his manners: *"He has made me kind to* my *mother, not haughty or bereft of grace."* (Verse 32)

We indeed feel God's abounding grace extending over all human life in the vocabulary and sentence structure of the *sūrah.* We also feel that the whole universe shudders to the sound of the preposterous claims that God has partners. For the universe cannot countenance such absurdity. We recognize that the *sūrah* has a distinctive musical rhythm and tempo. Even the sound of its vocabulary and the words ending its verses impart a clear sense of ease. Where the context requires firmness, such verse-endings have a doubled, voiced sound of either the plosive or fricative variety, to enhance the impression of firmness or power.

The *sūrah* provides good examples of variations in cadence, verse- endings and rhymes according to the subject being discussed and the overall atmosphere. At the start, when the *sūrah* relates its account of the prophets Zachariah and John, the verses rhyme with the syllable, 'ya' giving a medium vowel at the end. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the story of Mary and Jesus as well as the brief accounts of other prophets that follow. When these accounts are concluded, the *sūrah* comments on the truth about Jesus, son of Mary, with the final verdict on his sonship. Here we have a different kind of verse-ending where words with a long 'ee' or 'oo' vowel are followed by a nasal 'm' or 'n' giving the impression of a settled and final matter.

When this is complete, the *sūrah* resumes its accounts of earlier prophets commencing with Abraham and his father. The earlier, easy and gentle rhyme is

picked up again until the *sūrah* begins its discussion of the punishment that awaits those who reject the truth and oppose God's message and messengers. Here the cadence becomes stronger, and the rhyme changes to be a medium vowel 'a' preceded by the voiced, plosive 'd' sound. When the attitude of the unbelievers comes in for criticism and denunciation, the rhythm becomes even more powerful, reflected by a doubled 'd' sound for the rhyme. Thus the *sūrah* provides a perfect example of manipulated rhyme and rhythm such that it is in flawless harmony with the overall meaning and atmosphere. Both contribute to the general ambience of the *sūrah* as it moves with perfect ease from one subject to another.

The whole *sūrah* may be divided into three parts. The first includes the story of Zachariah and his son John, together with the story of Mary and her son Jesus, culminating in a comment that gives the final verdict on Jesus whose birth and nature were the subject of much controversy among both the Jews and Christians.

The second part includes an episode from Abraham's life story, in which he dissociated himself from the beliefs of his idolatrous community. It tells how God compensated him with offspring that brought a whole nation into being. It includes brief references to other prophets, those who followed their guidance and those who erred in succeeding generations, explaining the ultimate destiny of both groups. It ends with a declaration that Lordship in the universe is one and the Lord must be worshipped without association of partners with Him: *"He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?"* (Verse 65)

The final part begins with the arguments advanced about resurrection, portraying some scenes from the Day of Judgement. It provides an image of the rejection of all polytheistic claims by the whole universe. It ends with a highly effective scene of the doom of earlier communities: *"How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them [now], or hear so much as a whisper of them?"* (Verse 98)

1
God's Unbridled Will

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

كٓهيعٓصٓ ﴿١﴾

Kāf. Hā. Yā. `Ayn. Ṣād. (1)

ذِكْرُ رَحْمَتِ رَبِّكَ عَبْدَهُۥ زَكَرِيَّآ ﴿٢﴾

This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah: (2)

إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُۥ نِدَآءً خَفِيًّا ﴿٣﴾

when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, (3)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّى وَهَنَ ٱلْعَظْمُ مِنِّى وَٱشْتَعَلَ ٱلرَّأْسُ شَيْبًا وَلَمْ أَكُنۢ بِدُعَآئِكَ رَبِّ شَقِيًّا ﴿٤﴾

he prayed: 'My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. (4)

وَإِنِّى خِفْتُ ٱلْمَوَٰلِىَ مِن وَرَآءِى وَكَانَتِ ٱمْرَأَتِى عَاقِرًا فَهَبْ لِى مِن لَّدُنكَ وَلِيًّا ﴿٥﴾

Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor (5)

يَرِثُنِى وَيَرِثُ مِنْ ءَالِ يَعْقُوبَ ۖ وَٱجْعَلْهُ

who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.' (6)

رَبِّ رَضِيًّا ﴿٦﴾

'Zachariah! We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son whose name shall be John. Never have We given this name to anyone before him.' (7)

يَٰزَكَرِيَّآ إِنَّا نُبَشِّرُكَ بِغُلَٰمٍ ٱسْمُهُۥ يَحْيَىٰ لَمْ نَجْعَل لَّهُۥ مِن قَبْلُ سَمِيًّا ﴿٧﴾

[Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?' (8)

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِى غُلَٰمٌ وَكَانَتِ ٱمْرَأَتِى عَاقِرًا وَقَدْ بَلَغْتُ مِنَ ٱلْكِبَرِ عِتِيًّا ﴿٨﴾

He said: 'Thus it is. Your Lord says, "This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing."' (9)

قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ قَالَ رَبُّكَ هُوَ عَلَىَّ هَيِّنٌ وَقَدْ خَلَقْتُكَ مِن قَبْلُ وَلَمْ تَكُ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٩﴾

[Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! Give me a sign.' He replied: 'Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people.' (10)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱجْعَل لِّىٓ ءَايَةً ۚ قَالَ ءَايَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ ٱلنَّاسَ ثَلَٰثَ لَيَالٍ سَوِيًّا ﴿١٠﴾

He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night. (11)

فَخَرَجَ عَلَىٰ قَوْمِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلْمِحْرَابِ فَأَوْحَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِمْ أَن سَبِّحُوا۟ بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا ﴿١١﴾

[To his son We said]: 'John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength.' We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, (12)

يَٰيَحْيَىٰ خُذِ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ بِقُوَّةٍ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ ٱلْحُكْمَ صَبِيًّا ﴿١٢﴾

as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous, (13)

وَحَنَانًا مِّن لَّدُنَّا وَزَكَوٰةً ۖ وَكَانَ تَقِيًّا ﴿١٣﴾

and kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. (14)

وَبَرًّا بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ وَلَمْ يَكُن جَبَّارًا عَصِيًّا ﴿١٤﴾

So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again. (15)

وَسَلَٰمٌ عَلَيْهِ يَوْمَ وُلِدَ وَيَوْمَ يَمُوتُ وَيَوْمَ يُبْعَثُ حَيًّا ﴿١٥﴾

Relate in the book [the story of] Mary and how she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, (16)

وَٱذْكُرْ فِى ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مَرْيَمَ إِذِ ٱنتَبَذَتْ مِنْ أَهْلِهَا مَكَانًا شَرْقِيًّا ﴿١٦﴾

where she kept herself in seclusion from them. We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being. (17)

فَٱتَّخَذَتْ مِن دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَآ إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا ﴿١٧﴾

She said: 'May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.' (18)

قَالَتْ إِنِّىٓ أَعُوذُ بِٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ مِنكَ إِن كُنتَ تَقِيًّا ﴿١٨﴾

'I am but an emissary of your Lord,' he said, '[and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity.' (19)

قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ رَسُولُ رَبِّكِ لِأَهَبَ لَكِ غُلَٰمًا زَكِيًّا ﴿١٩﴾

She said: 'How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?' (20)

قَالَتْ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِى غُلَٰمٌ وَلَمْ يَمْسَسْنِى بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكُ بَغِيًّا ﴿٢٠﴾

He answered: 'Thus did your Lord speak: This is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us. It is a

قَالَ كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ هُوَ عَلَيَّ هَيِّنٌ ۖ وَلِنَجْعَلَهُۥٓ ءَايَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَرَحْمَةً مِّنَّا ۚ وَكَانَ أَمْرًا مَّقْضِيًّا ﴿٢١﴾

matter [We have] decreed.' (21)

فَحَمَلَتْهُ فَٱنتَبَذَتْ بِهِۦ مَكَانًا قَصِيًّا ﴿٢٢﴾

So she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place. (22)

فَأَجَآءَهَا ٱلْمَخَاضُ إِلَىٰ جِذْعِ ٱلنَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَٰلَيْتَنِى مِتُّ قَبْلَ هَٰذَا وَكُنتُ نَسْيًا مَّنسِيًّا ﴿٢٣﴾

And the throes of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm- tree. [In her anguish] she cried: 'Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!' (23)

فَنَادَىٰهَا مِن تَحْتِهَآ أَلَّا تَحْزَنِى قَدْ جَعَلَ رَبُّكِ تَحْتَكِ سَرِيًّا ﴿٢٤﴾

But [a voice] from below called out to her: 'Do not give in to grief. Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you. (24)

وَهُزِّىٓ إِلَيْكِ بِجِذْعِ ٱلنَّخْلَةِ تُسَٰقِطْ عَلَيْكِ رُطَبًا جَنِيًّا ﴿٢٥﴾

And if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will drop you fresh ripe dates. (25)

فَكُلِى وَٱشْرَبِى وَقَرِّى عَيْنًا ۖ فَإِمَّا تَرَيِنَّ مِنَ ٱلْبَشَرِ أَحَدًا فَقُولِىٓ إِنِّى نَذَرْتُ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ صَوْمًا فَلَنْ أُكَلِّمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ إِنسِيًّا ﴿٢٦﴾

eat and drink and be happy. Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: "I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being."' (26)

فَأَتَتْ بِهِۦ قَوْمَهَا تَحْمِلُهُۥ ۖ قَالُوا۟ يَٰمَرْيَمُ لَقَدْ جِئْتِ شَيْـًٔا فَرِيًّا ﴿٢٧﴾

At length, she went to her people carrying the child. They said: 'Mary, you have indeed done an amazing thing! (27)

يَٰٓأُخْتَ هَٰرُونَ مَا كَانَ أَبُوكِ ٱمْرَأَ سَوْءٍ

Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!' (28)

But she pointed to the child. They said: 'How can

وَمَا كَانَتۡ أُمُّكِ بَغِيّٗا ٢٨

فَأَشَارَتۡ إِلَيۡهِۖ قَالُواْ كَيۡفَ نُكَلِّمُ مَن كَانَ فِي ٱلۡمَهۡدِ صَبِيّٗا ٢٩

قَالَ إِنِّي عَبۡدُ ٱللَّهِ ءَاتَىٰنِيَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَجَعَلَنِي نَبِيّٗا ٣٠

وَجَعَلَنِي مُبَارَكًا أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُ وَأَوۡصَىٰنِي بِٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَٱلزَّكَوٰةِ مَا دُمۡتُ حَيّٗا ٣١

وَبَرَّۢا بِوَٰلِدَتِي وَلَمۡ يَجۡعَلۡنِي جَبَّارٗا شَقِيّٗا ٣٢

وَٱلسَّلَٰمُ عَلَيَّ يَوۡمَ وُلِدتُّ وَيَوۡمَ أَمُوتُ وَيَوۡمَ أُبۡعَثُ حَيّٗا ٣٣

ذَٰلِكَ عِيسَى ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَۚ قَوۡلَ ٱلۡحَقِّ ٱلَّذِي فِيهِ يَمۡتَرُونَ ٣٤

مَا كَانَ لِلَّهِ أَن يَتَّخِذَ مِن وَلَدٖۖ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥٓۚ إِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمۡرٗا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ٣٥

وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمۡ فَٱعۡبُدُوهُۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٞ مُّسۡتَقِيمٞ ٣٦

we talk to a babe in the cradle?' (29)

Whereupon he said: 'I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet, (30)

and made me blessed wherever I may be. He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. (31)

He has made me kind to my mother, not haughty or bereft of grace. (32)

Peace was on me on the day when I was born, and [will be on me] on the day of my death and on the day when I shall be raised to life again.' (33)

Such was, in the words of truth, Jesus the son of Mary, about whose nature they still dispute. (34)

It is not conceivable that God should beget a son. Limitless is He in His glory! When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. (35)

God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path. (36)

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the unbelievers when a momentous

فَٱخۡتَلَفَ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابُ مِنۢ بَيۡنِهِمۡۖ فَوَيۡلٞ لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِن مَّشۡهَدِ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٍ ٣٧

day arrives. (37)

أَسۡمِعۡ بِهِمۡ وَأَبۡصِرۡ يَوۡمَ يَأۡتُونَنَا لَٰكِنِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ٣٨

How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error. (38)

وَأَنذِرۡهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡحَسۡرَةِ إِذۡ قُضِيَ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ وَهُمۡ فِي غَفۡلَةٖ وَهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٣٩

Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress, when everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief. (39)

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نَرِثُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَمَنۡ عَلَيۡهَا وَإِلَيۡنَا يُرۡجَعُونَ ٤٠

We alone shall remain after the earth and all who live on it have passed away. To Us they shall all return. (40)

A Passionate Prayer Answered

"Kāf. Hā. Yā. `Ayn. Ṣād." (Verse 1) These are separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. A number of *sūrahs* begin with such separate letters which we explain as being some of the letters used in the composition of the Qur'ān. Yet the Qur'ān has its unique, inimitable style, the like of which human beings can never produce, despite the fact that the same letters and words are available to them. They simply cannot devise any construction that even remotely approaches the style employed by the divine power that produced this Qur'ān.

Having mentioned these letters, the *sūrah* immediately begins the first story of Zachariah and John, in which compassion provides both the central idea and the overall atmosphere. Hence grace is mentioned at the outset: *"This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah."* (Verse 2) The story begins with a scene of earnest supplication by Zachariah in total secrecy:

> *When he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, he prayed: My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your, a grace, a successor who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.'* (Verses 3-6)

He is alone, addressing his appeal to God, away from watching eyes and listening ears. He wants to lay his troubled heart open before his Lord, recounting his worries. He addresses Him as if he were speaking to someone who is very close, without even using the Arabic address article, Yd. Needless to say, his Lord hears and sees, without the need to be addressed or called upon. But a person troubled by worries finds comfort in vocalizing his concern. Most Gracious as He is, God knows this to be part of human nature. Hence, He likes that His servants pray to Him, making a clean breast of all that worries them: *"Your Lord says: Pray to Me and I will answer you."* (40: 60) When they do, they find relief from their heavy burden. They are reassured because they have assigned such burdens to the One who is more able and powerful. They feel that they are in contact with the Most Merciful who will not disappoint anyone who appeals to Him and relies on Him.

Zachariah complains to his Lord that his bones have become feeble, and when bones are feeble, the whole body is weak. After all, the bones are the stiffest part of the body. They form the skeleton which the muscles flesh up. He also complains that his head glistens with grey hair. The Qur'ānic expression here, *ishta`ala al-ra'su shaybā,* shows the greyness of hair like a fire being ignited, and the man's head covered with this fire, so as to leave no black hair. Both feeble bones and grey hair signify old age and the weakness associated with it. It is this weakness that is the subject matter of Zachariah's complaint as he presents his case, and his hopes, to his Lord.

He then makes a clear acknowledgement: *"Never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered."* (Verse 4) He is used to having his prayers answered. He was not disappointed when he prayed to Him in his time of strength and vigour. Now in his old age and weakness, the need for his prayers to be answered is even more pressing.

Having presented his case, expressed his fears and hopes, he makes his request. The point is that he fears that those who will succeed him might not be up to looking after his heritage properly. Being one of the major prophets of the Children of Israel, Zachariah's heritage involved serving God's cause as well as looking after the people of his household. One of those was Mary whose upbringing was entrusted to him. She served in the sanctuary which he managed. Again his property, which he managed properly and spent on only good purposes, was among his concerns. His worry was that those who succeeded him might not follow the course he had charted, perhaps because he knew them not to be up to that task. *"Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone."* (Verse 5)

What added to his worries was the fact that he was childless: *"For my wife is barren."* (Verse 5) She had given him no child to bring up and prepare as a successor. This was his concern. As for his hope, he requested that God grant him a successor

who would properly manage and look after the heritage of Jacob's household, i.e. his ancestors: *"Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob."* (Verses 5-6) Zachariah, a God-fearing prophet, does not forget to specify what he hopes this successor would be like: *"And make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased."* (Verse 6) He should not be arrogant, tyrannical, or greedy. He should be one who is content with what God gives him. Such contentedness should furthermore spread a sense of ease and happiness all round.

A Child Is Born Against All Probability

The moment of truth comes: the prayer is answered, bringing with it God's grace and acceptance. It is the Lord Himself that calls out to His servant from His sublime presence: *"Zachariah!"* He immediately gives him the good news: *"We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son."* (Verse 7) He bestows on him further kindness, by choosing for him the name of that son: *"Whose name shall be John."* (Verse 7) This is a special name, not previously given to anyone: *"Never have We given this name to anyone before him."* (Verse 7)

This is but an example of God's grace as it is given in abundance to His servant whose secret supplication was passionate, and which clearly expressed his fears and hopes. Zachariah's prayer was motivated by fear that his heirs would not be able to look after the heritage of the true faith properly. He feared that they would not fulfil the trust in a way that earns God's pleasure. Hence, God bestowed on him what corresponded to his good intention.

Zachariah, who was deeply involved in his supplication, passionately expressing his desire and urging his case, was suddenly alerted by this speedy answer to his prayer. The reality stares him in the face: he is well advanced in years, his bones feeble, his hair completely grey, and his wife barren, having given him no child when he was in his prime. How is he to have a child of his own? He wants to be reassured and to know the means by which God will give him this son: *"My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?"* (Verse 8)

He is facing the reality, as well as God's promise. He certainly trusts that God's promise will be fulfilled. He only wants reassurance and to know how, considering his circumstances, the fulfilment will take place. That would give him much needed reassurance. It is a perfectly normal condition in a situation like that faced by the noble and God-fearing prophet, Zachariah. Needless to say, he was only a human being who cannot ignore the reality. Hence, he would love to know how God will reverse it.

The answer to all his enquiries is straightforward. It is all perfectly easy for God to

accomplish. God reminds him of something that he knows well, namely his own bringing into existence. This is something to be considered by every living creature. It applies to everything in this universe: *"He said: Thus it is. Your Lord says, 'This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing.'"* (Verse 9)

With regard to creation, there is nothing to be classified as easy or difficult in as far as God is concerned. In all cases of creation, whether it is something large or small, trivial or gigantic, the method is the same: it is only a matter of God willing that thing to be and it comes into existence. It is God who makes a barren woman childless, and an old man unable to procreate. He is certainly able to reverse this situation, removing the cause of a woman's barrenness and renewing a man's ability to cause his wife to conceive. By human standards, this is easier than initiating life in the first place. But with God, everything is easy, whether it involves origination or rebirth.

Nevertheless, Zachariah's eagerness to be reassured motivates him to ask for a sign indicating the realization of the happy news he was given. The sign God gave him was most fitting to the general atmosphere of his prayer and how it was answered. This sign gives him a further way to thank, glorify and praise God for giving him a son in his old age. He was to isolate himself from all worldly concerns for three days and live in direct contact with God. His speech would be normal when he glorified God, but he would not be able to utter a word of normal human speech. Yet he would remain in sound health, no illness affecting him. *"He replied: Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people."* (Verse 10)

This was exactly what took place: *"He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night."* (Verse 11) He wanted them to live in the same mental condition he was in, to feel God's grace at its most abounding, and to give thanks for the grace He had bestowed on Zachariah, and on them.

John: A Prophet in His Own Right

The *sūrah* now leaves Zachariah in complete silence dealing with other people and his glorification and praise of God. As that scene closes, the *sūrah* reveals a new one in which we see John, the child given to Zachariah, as fully grown. It is his Lord who calls out to him from on high: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength."* (Verse 12) This follows the Qur'ānic method of highlighting only the most important events, portraying images that are full of life and vigour.

Before we have even a single word about John himself, his account commences with an address from on high. It portrays an awesome scene giving us a good idea of John's position. It also shows us how God responded to Zachariah's prayers when he

requested an heir who would fulfil the trust that he himself had been fulfilling, as it related both to faith and kin. Thus the first scene in which John is involved is the one where he is elected to bear the highest responsibility: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength."* (Verse 12) The book referred to here is the Torah, given to Moses. All the Israelite prophets were charged with its preservation and implementation. They were also given the task of educating people in the Torah, so that they would know what was lawful to them and what was unlawful. John inherited his father Zachariah. He is here told to rise to the task and fulfil his trust with all his resolve and strength. He must never weaken or slacken. He should never abdicate his responsibilities.

The *sūrah* tells us what John was given to equip him for the great tasks he was assigned: *"We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous."* (Verses 12-13) These were indeed the qualifications that suited him for his task. They provided great help in the fulfilment of his duties. Now let us look closer at these qualifications.

God granted him wisdom in his youth, which made him unique in his personality, as he was unique in his birth and name. Wisdom is normally acquired as one grows in years, but in John's case, God granted him this in his early years.

God also granted him compassion as a special gift implanted in his very nature. He did not have to train or persuade himself to be compassionate. Such compassion is necessary for a prophet who takes care of people's hearts and souls, trying always to set them on the course of goodness with ease.

John was further granted purity and cleanliness of heart and practice. Thus, he was able to counter the effects of other people's hard natures and wickedness and so help them grow in purity.

The other quality that served John well was his righteousness. He keenly sensed his close tie with God, and knew that He was not only watching him but with him in all situations, public or private. That completes the qualities that John was given to qualify him for his task. They were given to him when he was still in his youth, so that he could inherit his father, who had appealed to God to give him an heir.

Thus the account of John is brought to its conclusion with two verses highlighting the fact that he was *"kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again."* (Verses 14-15) As we see in this short passage, the line he followed throughout his life was clearly laid out. No further details of the story of Zachariah requesting a son, nor of that son John could have provided anything extra in as much as the lessons we can draw are concerned. Hence it is brought to a close.

Suspending the Law of Procreation

John's birth, remarkable as it is, is not however the most wonderful that the *sūrah* tells us about. It has another story to tell, even more remarkable and wonderful. This is the birth of Jesus. The *sūrah* gives its account of John's birth first, with its remarkable aspect of him being born to a barren mother and a father well advanced in years. Jesus, on the other hand, was born to a virgin mother who had had no intimate contact with any man in her life. This is indeed far more wonderful and remarkable.

If we leave aside for a moment the creation of man in his present form and in the way God tells us of how He created him, the birth of Jesus, son of Mary, should be considered the most remarkable event of human history. It is an event that has no parallel.

Man did not witness his own creation, a remarkable event that heralded human life. That involved the creation of the first man ever to exist, born of no father and no mother. Countless centuries then passed before divine wisdom willed to bring about a second most remarkable event. This was the birth of Jesus without a father. In this, the event does not follow the pattern that subsequently applied after the creation of the first human being. This new birth was witnessed by human beings and remained an event of great importance to which people's attentions were drawn generation after generation. Needless to say, the creation of the first human being could not have been witnessed by people, as it was this creation that first ushered in human life on earth.

Divine wisdom has determined that life continues through procreation, involving the union of a male and a female. This applies to all species without exception. Even in the case of species where there are no fully distinguished males and females, every creature has male and female cells in its body. This law of procreation continued in operation for endless periods of time. People thought it was the only method of creation, forgetting the first event that brought man into existence, because that event was special, and could not be compared with procreation.

It was God's will, then, to give them this example of the creation of Jesus, son of Mary, to remind people of His free-will and unrestrained power which cannot be subject to the laws He sets in operation. Jesus' birth has not been repeated in history, because it is only proper that God's law should come into operation and be seen with all its effects. This single event remains for all time indisputable evidence that God's will is always free, unshackled by any factor whatsoever. Hence God says of Jesus: *"We will make him a sign for mankind."* (Verse 21)

Because the event was so remarkable and unfamiliar, some people could not conceive of how it could happen and could not appreciate the wisdom of publicizing

it in this way. Hence, they attributed to Jesus, son of Mary, qualities of divinity, inventing tales and superstitions about his birth. They thus fell foul of God's purpose, distorting the pure faith based on God's oneness.

In this *sūrah,* the Qur'ān relates how this remarkable event took place, highlighting its great significance and showing such tales and superstitions to he absolutely false. The *sūrah* relates the story in a series of highly emotional scenes, which leave a profound effect on anyone who reads them: it is as though he is witnessing the events as they take place.

The Most Remarkable Birth in History

> *Relate in the book [the story of] Mary and how she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, where she kept herself in seclusion from them. We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being. She said: May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.' 'I am but an emissary of your Lord,' he said, [and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity. 'She said: 'How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?' He answered: 'Thus did your Lord speak: This is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us. It is a matter [We have] decreed.'* (Verses 16-21)

This is the first scene: Mary is a young, virgin woman, a saint whose mother vowed, when she was still an unborn baby, that she would serve in the temple. No one had ever witnessed from her anything other than perfect purity and chastity. In fact people associated her with Aaron, the first of the temple's devout servants. For generations, her family were renowned for being God-fearing and a model of piety.

We see this young woman going off to be alone. The *sūrah* does not specify why she wanted to be alone, but there must have been something to so require her to be by herself, unseen by anyone else. It may have been a very private matter that girls normally experience.

Once she is alone, screened from everyone and assured of complete privacy, she receives a great shock. She finds in front of her a man in his prime: "*We, then, sent to her Our angel, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being.*" (Verse 17) She is both shocked and shaken, which is only the normal reaction of a chaste virgin. Her immediate reaction is to seek God's protection and to appeal to Him for support. She appeals to the man's sense of fearing God. She reminds him of God so that he may be restrained from attempting anything evil. So she says to him: "*May the Most Merciful protect me from you. [Do not come near me] if you fear God.*" (Verse 18) Should he be a God-fearing person, he would respond to the mere mention of God's name and His attribute of mercy. He would then resist any evil motive and restrain his

desire.

We can visualize this young woman, a pure devout virgin, and what she might have gone through in that moment when she was surprised by a young man appearing before her in her place of privacy. This was her first shock.

Yet what answer does she receive? The man tells her something she could never have imagined: "*'I am but an emissary of your Lord,' he said, '[and have come] to give you a son endowed with purity.'*" (Verse 19) We can imagine the panic and shock that must have overwhelmed Mary when that perfect man, whom she did not yet know to be an emissary from her Lord, spoke to her. For all she knew, he might have been an assailant playing a trick on her, exploiting her innocence. Yet what he tells her, in the privacy of that place, well away from others, is that he wants to give her a child. How shocked must Mary have been? We cannot even begin to imagine. That is the second great shock for Mary.

"*She said: How shall I have a child when no man has ever touched me and I have never been a loose woman?*" (Verse 20) Now she speaks frankly and plainly to him. She is all alone with him, and the reason why he surprised her is now clear. She does not know yet how he will give her a child. Nor does it make matters any easier or less worrying for her that he has declared himself to be God's emissary. Nothing that he says about that child, stating that he will be pure and that nothing evil will be attached to his birth or moral conduct, is sufficient to reassure her. It is a situation where modesty is completely out of place. She must have the matter out and clear at once. How, then, could she have a child when she is a virgin, untouched by any man? She is not a loose woman about to agree to a sexual act that could produce a child.

Her questioning in this fashion suggests that up to that moment she could not conceive of any way by which that person could give her a child except the familiar way of sexual contact between a male and a female. This is the natural way, according to human perception.

"*He answered: Thus did your Lord speak. That is easy for Me. We will make him a sign for mankind and an act of grace from Us.*" (Verse 21) This miraculous event that Mary cannot even begin to imagine is easy for God to accomplish. His is the power that says to anything, 'Be,' and it immediately exists. Hence, everything is easy for Him, whether it is accomplished according to natural laws that are familiar to man or in some other fashion. The angel, who is referred to in this instance as 'the Spirit' tells her that it is God who says that it is easy for Him, and that He wants this unique and remarkable event to be a sign for all mankind, making clear to them His power and free, unshackled will. He also wants this child to be a mercy and a blessing to the Israelites in the first place and to all humanity thereafter. It is by showing them this

miraculous event that they know Him, believe in Him and worship Him, seeking to earn His pleasure.

Thus ends the dialogue between the trusted angel and the Virgin Mary. The *sūrah* does not mention what happened after that exchange, leaving a gap in the story, which frequently happens in the Qur'ān. But it does mention that what the angel said to Mary about the birth *of* her son is a matter that has been settled and finalized. *"It is a matter [We have] decreed."* (Verse 21) But how? Nothing is mentioned here by way of explanation.

However, we can refer here to the use of the phrase, Our Spirit, which is mentioned in this instance and in another *sūrah.* Here it occurs in the verse: *"We, then, sent to her Our Spirit, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being."* (Verse 17) In the other context, the phrase occurs as follows: *"And Mary, daughter of `Imrān, who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed of Our Spirit into her."* (66: 12)

Now the question arises as to whether the reference in these two *sūrahs* is to the same thing or not. From our point of view, the references would appear to be different on each occasion. In the present *sūrah,* Mary, it refers to Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, who was God's emissary to Mary. In *Sūrah* 66, The Prohibition, it refers to the spirit that God breathed into Adam when He created him to make of him a human being. He again breathed of it into Mary to bring about her conception. It is this divine breathing of the spirit that gives life with all its human characteristics. These include the qualities and faculties that enable man to be in contact with the Supreme Society, while also giving him his human feelings, intellect, thought, emotions and inspiration. In Mary's case, Gabriel carried this breath of the spirit from God to place it into her. We must also add however that we do not know anything about the nature of the spirit, neither when it refers to Gabriel himself, nor when it has a different connotation. Both belong to the realm which is beyond our perception. We simply try to understand the relevant text in the two *sūrahs* and consider that the usage differs in each case.

The story then continues, and we are shown the outcome of all this. We see this baffled virgin going through something much harder for her: *"So she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place. And the throes of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. [In her anguish] she cried: 'Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!'"* (Verses 22-23) This was the third great shock Mary received.

How Jesus Was Born

The *sūrah* does not mention how she conceived Jesus or the length of her pregnancy. It gives no details about whether it was an ordinary pregnancy, with the breathing of spirit into Mary starting the life process within the egg, which then goes

through the growth process, with the implantation of the conceived egg that becomes a germ-cell then a morsel, to which bones are then added before they are covered with flesh. That would mean that the foetus completed its normal period of nine-months gestation. All this is possible. Equally possible in this special case is that the female egg took a different course so as to reduce the different stages of growth, and ensure the development of the foetus so rapidly that the period of pregnancy was made much shorter. There is nothing in the text of the *sūrah* to indicate either. Hence, there is no point in pursuing this avenue further.

As we read on, we see Mary in a remote place, away from her family and community. She is now in a far more terrible situation. Previously, she was up against all that her upbringing has instilled in her of moral values; but that was an internal struggle with herself. Now she is about to be faced with a public scandal. Besides, she was in great physical pain added to her psychological distress. In the midst of labour and childbirth she is driven to lean against the trunk of a palm tree. She is all alone, a true virgin and suffering the pains of childbirth, not knowing about how to cope with the situation and having none to give her even moral support. In her anguish she cries: *"Would that I had died before this and passed into complete oblivion!"* (Verse 23) We almost see her face, feel her confusion, and sense her agony as she wishes herself into oblivion.

In the midst of all this anguish, she is confronted with the greatest surprise:

> *But [a voice] from below cried out to her: Do not give in to grief. Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you. And if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will drop you fresh ripe dates. So eat and drink and be happy. Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being.'* (Verses 24-26)

O God! What is happening here! A child born this very moment crying out to her, comforting her and reaffirming her bond with her Lord, directing her as to how to obtain food and drink, and providing her with the argument and evidence to use when she sees people.

The first thing the voice says to her is that she must not grieve. *"Your Lord has provided a brook running beneath you."* (Verse 24) God has not forsaken you. Indeed, He has made this brook run at your feet, which most probably started its course at that very moment, either from a spring or from a high point nearby. Besides, the palm tree against which she leant provided food. She only need to shake it and *"it will drop you fresh ripe dates."* (Verse 25) Thus she has essential food and water. Sweet food is good for a mother who has just delivered her baby. Dates are perhaps the best food she could eat. *"So eat and drink and be happy."* (Verse 26) All the necessary

reassurance is given her.

Then she is told how to deal with her predicament when she meets other people. She need only impart to anyone by signal, not words, that she has made a vow not to speak to anyone. She is in full and complete devotion which prevents her from answering any questions: *"Should you see any human being, just convey this to him: I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful and will not speak today to any human being."* (Verse 26)

We imagine that her surprise lingered long, and that she took a while to take stock of her situation and stretch her hand to the trunk of the tree and shake it for her meal of dates. But when she fully realized what was happening, she was reassured that God would not abandon her. Indeed, He had given her all the proof she needed. He gave her a child who spoke from the moment of his birth to explain the miracle that had brought him into being.

As Mary Confronts Her People

Then we glimpse a highly dramatic scene: *"She went to her people carrying the child."* (Verse 27) We can easily imagine the great surprise on their faces. Most probably, these were her immediate family. They had known their daughter, Mary, to be exemplary in her purity. She was indeed a virgin dedicated to worship in the temple; but there she was with a baby in her arms. Hence their exclamation: *"Mary, you have indeed done an amazing thing! Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!"* (Verses 27-28)

They start by reproaching her: *"You have done an amazing thing!" It* is a wicked, most dreadful thing that you have perpetrated. But then their reproach takes a different tone, adding sarcasm and ridicule. They call her: 'Sister of Aaron!' Aaron was a prophet who was in charge of the Temple, passing this duty to his offspring. Mary was often associated with Aaron because of her exemplary devotion in the service of the Temple. How ironic that the girl associated with Aaron's perfect devotion should perpetrate such an enormity: *"Your father was not a wicked man, nor was your mother a loose woman!"* (Verse 28) Such a sin is only committed by loose women and prostitutes.

In her own defence, Mary says nothing other than carrying out what her amazing child has instructed her to say: *"But she pointed to the child."* (Verse 29) Again we are left to imagine their amazement, anger and fury at this young woman, virgin as she was, carrying her child openly in her arms, and then refusing to answer their questions, only pointing to the child and indicating that they should ask him. *"They said: How can we talk to a babe in the cradle?"* (Verse 29) But then a supernatural event occurs again and the baby speaks out:

> *Whereupon he said: I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet, and made me blessed wherever I may be. He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, not haughty or bereft of grace. Peace was on me on the day when I was born, and [will be on me] on the day of my death and on the day when I shall be raised to life again.'* (Verses 30-33)

Thus Jesus declared his status: a servant of God. He is not God's son, as some sects claim; nor was he divine as claimed by others, nor one of a Trinity constituting one God while being three, as claimed by others. He declares that God has made him a prophet, which means that he was neither God's son nor partner. God has blessed him and enjoined him to keep his prayers and be charitable throughout his life.

He is also enjoined to be very kind towards his mother and to show humility to his people. This means that he has a limited life duration, he dies and will be resurrected. God has bestowed on him peace, security and reassurance on the day of his birth, the day of his death and the day of his resurrection. The statement is very clear here in respect of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It admits no argument or different interpretation.

The Qur'ān does not add anything beyond painting this scene. It does not tell us how the people reacted to this miraculous event. Nor does it inform us what happened to Mary and her remarkable son after that. It does not mention anything about the time when he became a prophet. It simply says, quoting Jesus: *"He has vouchsafed to me revelations and made me a prophet."* (Verse 30) The theme here is the birth of Jesus. Hence, when the *sūrah* has given its account of his birth, culminating in that miraculous scene, with Jesus talking to Mary's family, the scene is drawn to a close. This is followed by an emphatic statement of the truth concerning Jesus:

> *Such was, in the words of truth, Jesus the son of Mary, about whose nature they still dispute. It is not conceivable that God should beget a son. Limitless is He in His glory! When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, Be,' and it is. God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path.* (Verses 34-36)

The Full Truth about Jesus

This is the whole truth about Jesus. It has nothing of the claims advanced by those who assign to him a divine nature, or those who make false accusations against his mother. What God states here is the complete truth, giving details of his origin and birth. There is no room for doubt or argument. It is not for God to take for Himself a son. Most sublime is He in His glory. He needs no son, because offspring are only needed by mortals, so that their line of existence is continued. Alternatively,

offspring are needed by the weak so that they have the support of their children against their enemies. But God is immortal, and able to do what He wills, having power over all things. All creatures come into existence when He says to them, 'Be'. This means that He accomplishes any purpose of His merely by willing it to take place, not by having help from a son or partner.

Jesus concludes his words by declaring the truth that God is his Lord and the Lord of all mankind. Hence, they must worship Him alone, assigning to Him no partners: *"God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him alone. That is a straight path."* (Verse 36) With this statement made by Jesus himself, and with this account of his birth there is no room left for legend or myth in the whole affair. This is the full import of his statement and the way it is phrased.

The *sūrah* then refers to the conflicting views and beliefs advanced by various groups concerning Jesus, his birth, nature and status. All are highly objectionable as compared with the clear and simple truth.

"Yet are the sects at variance among themselves." (Verse 37) Constantine, the Roman Emperor, held one of three famous synods, attended by 2,170 bishops. They differed a great deal about Jesus. Each group expressed a certain view. Some said that he was God who descended to earth in person, giving life to whomever He willed and caused others to die, before returning to heaven. Some said that he was God's son, while others claimed that he was one of the three entities forming the Godhead: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A different group claimed that he was one of three deities: God was one, Jesus another and his mother the third. However, another group said that Jesus was God's servant, messenger, spirit and word. Others made yet different claims. All in all, no more than 308 agreed on any one view. The Emperor decided to support that view, expelling all those who did not agree, and persecuting those who opposed it, particularly those who advocated God's oneness.

Since such deviant beliefs were established by synods composed of large numbers of bishops, the *sūrah* warns unbelievers about what happens to those who deviate from the faith based on God's oneness. This warning tells them of a scene that will take place on a great and eventful day witnessed by much larger numbers:

> *Woe, then, to the unbelievers when a momentous day arrives. How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error. Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress, when everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief* (Verses 37-39)

Woe to them when they witness a momentous day, referred to here in an indefinite mode to impart to it a more awesome air. It is a day witnessed by all human beings and *jinn,* as well as the angels. All shall stand in the presence of God

Almighty, to whom the unbelievers ascribe partners.

The *sūrah* then derides them for turning away from all the pointers to the right guidance in this present life. On that day theirs will be the sharpest of hearing and seeing: *"How well they will hear and see on the day they will appear before Us. Truly the wrongdoers are today in evident error."* (Verse 38) Their situation is amazing: they do not hear or see when hearing and seeing are the means to discern guidance and follow it in order to escape doom. Yet they hear and see extremely well when these faculties are used to stress their humiliation. They will be made to hear what they dislike and see what they are wont to avoid.

"Hence, warn them of the Day of Distress." (Verse 39) That is a day when distress will be at its most acute, when distress will be a quality of the day itself. They need to be warned, because such distress is of no use to anyone: *"When everything will have been determined while they remain heedless, persisting in unbelief"* (Verse 39) It is as though the day is directly linked to their unbelief and heedlessness.

God's Messenger is commanded to warn people against that day, which will come, no doubt. For, everything and everyone on earth shall return to God, like inheritance that reverts to the Only Heir: *"We alone shall remain after the earth and all who live on it have passed away. To Us they shall all return."* (Verse 40)

2
A Long Line of Prophets

وَٱذۡكُرۡ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ صِدِّيقٗا نَّبِيًّا ﴿٤١﴾

Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. (41)

إِذۡ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ يَٰٓأَبَتِ لِمَ تَعۡبُدُ مَا لَا يَسۡمَعُ وَلَا يُبۡصِرُ وَلَا يُغۡنِي عَنكَ شَيۡـٔٗا ﴿٤٢﴾

He said to his father: 'My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? (42)

يَٰٓأَبَتِ إِنِّي قَدۡ جَآءَنِي مِنَ ٱلۡعِلۡمِ مَا لَمۡ يَأۡتِكَ فَٱتَّبِعۡنِيٓ أَهۡدِكَ صِرَٰطٗا سَوِيّٗا ﴿٤٣﴾

My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. (43)

يَٰٓأَبَتِ لَا تَعۡبُدِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَۖ إِنَّ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَ كَانَ لِلرَّحۡمَٰنِ عَصِيّٗا ﴿٤٤﴾

My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. (44)

يَٰٓأَبَتِ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ أَن يَمَسَّكَ عَذَابٞ مِّنَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ فَتَكُونَ لِلشَّيۡطَٰنِ وَلِيّٗا ﴿٤٥﴾

My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.' (45)

قَالَ أَرَاغِبٌ أَنتَ عَنۡ ءَالِهَتِي يَٰٓإِبۡرَٰهِيمُۖ لَئِن لَّمۡ تَنتَهِ لَأَرۡجُمَنَّكَۖ وَٱهۡجُرۡنِي مَلِيّٗا

He answered: 'Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!' (46)

٤٦

قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيْكَ ۖ سَأَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكَ رَبِّىٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ بِى حَفِيًّا ﴿٤٧﴾

Abraham replied: 'Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. (47)

وَأَعْتَزِلُكُمْ وَمَا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَدْعُوا۟ رَبِّى عَسَىٰٓ أَلَّآ أَكُونَ بِدُعَآءِ رَبِّى شَقِيًّا ﴿٤٨﴾

But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest.' (48)

فَلَمَّا ٱعْتَزَلَهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَهَبْنَا لَهُۥٓ إِسْحَٰقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۖ وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا نَبِيًّا ﴿٤٩﴾

When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. (49)

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُم مِّن رَّحْمَتِنَا وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ لِسَانَ صِدْقٍ عَلِيًّا ﴿٥٠﴾

We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying] the truth. (50)

وَٱذْكُرْ فِى ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مُوسَىٰٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مُخْلَصًا وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَّبِيًّا ﴿٥١﴾

And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. (51)

وَنَٰدَيْنَٰهُ مِن جَانِبِ ٱلطُّورِ ٱلْأَيْمَنِ وَقَرَّبْنَٰهُ نَجِيًّا ﴿٥٢﴾

We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. (52)

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُۥ مِن رَّحْمَتِنَآ أَخَاهُ هَٰرُونَ نَبِيًّا

We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet. (53)

۝٥٣

وَٱذۡكُرۡ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِسۡمَٰعِيلَۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ صَادِقَ ٱلۡوَعۡدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولٗا نَّبِيّٗا ۝٥٤

And mention in the Book Ishmael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. (54)

وَكَانَ يَأۡمُرُ أَهۡلَهُۥ بِٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَٱلزَّكَوٰةِ وَكَانَ عِندَ رَبِّهِۦ مَرۡضِيّٗا ۝٥٥

He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him. (55)

وَٱذۡكُرۡ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِدۡرِيسَۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ صِدِّيقٗا نَّبِيّٗا ۝٥٦

And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. (56)

وَرَفَعۡنَٰهُ مَكَانًا عَلِيّٗا ۝٥٧

We raised him to a lofty station. (57)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنۡعَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِم مِّنَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ مِن ذُرِّيَّةِ ءَادَمَ وَمِمَّنۡ حَمَلۡنَا مَعَ نُوحٖ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّةِ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ وَمِمَّنۡ هَدَيۡنَا وَٱجۡتَبَيۡنَآۚ إِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ خَرُّواْ سُجَّدٗا وَبُكِيّٗا ۩ ۝٥٨

These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings — of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We had guided and chosen. When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping. (58)

۞ فَخَلَفَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡ خَلۡفٌ أَضَاعُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَٱتَّبَعُواْ ٱلشَّهَوَٰتِۖ فَسَوۡفَ يَلۡقَوۡنَ

They were succeeded by generations who neglected their prayers and followed only their lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.

غَيًّا ﴿٥٩﴾

(59)

إِلَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٦٠﴾

Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, believe and do righteous deeds. These will enter the Garden and will not be wronged in any way: (60)

جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ٱلَّتِى وَعَدَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ عِبَادَهُۥ بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ وَعْدُهُۥ مَأْتِيًّا ﴿٦١﴾

the gardens of Eden which [God] the Most Merciful has promised to His servants, in the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Indeed, His promise is certain of fulfilment. (61)

لَّا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا إِلَّا سَلَٰمًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ رِزْقُهُمْ فِيهَا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا ﴿٦٢﴾

There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace. And their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening. (62)

تِلْكَ ٱلْجَنَّةُ ٱلَّتِى نُورِثُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا مَن كَانَ تَقِيًّا ﴿٦٣﴾

Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit. (63)

وَمَا نَتَنَزَّلُ إِلَّا بِأَمْرِ رَبِّكَ ۖ لَهُۥ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِينَا وَمَا خَلْفَنَا وَمَا بَيْنَ ذَٰلِكَ ۚ وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ نَسِيًّا ﴿٦٤﴾

We descend only by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between. Never does your Lord forget anything. (64)

رَّبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فَٱعْبُدْهُ وَٱصْطَبِرْ لِعِبَٰدَتِهِۦ ۚ هَلْ تَعْلَمُ لَهُۥ سَمِيًّا ﴿٦٥﴾

He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His? (65)

A Son's Passionate Appeal

The account given in this *sūrah* of the birth of Jesus is concluded with a statement showing the fallacy and singularity of the myth making Jesus God's son. This is a fabrication upheld by some Christians in their distorted beliefs. The *sūrah* now gives an account of part of Abraham's story, demonstrating the singularity and fallacy of pagan beliefs. Abraham is the great ancestor from whom the Arabs claim to descend. In fact the pagan Arabs claimed the custodianship of the Ka (bah, built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael.

In this account, Abraham's contented, patient and gentle character is shown in sharp relief. We see these aspects of his character in his approach and language. They are also clearly apparent in his behaviour and how he responds to his father's overbearing attitude. We also feel how God has bestowed His grace on Abraham, compensating him for his father and people, all unbelievers, with goodly offspring that beget a whole nation which has its generous share of prophets and saintly divines. Yet these are followed by generations who neglected prayers and deviated from the path shown them by Abraham to pursue their desires. Those were the unbelievers.

God describes Abraham in the Qur'ān as being 'a man of truth and a prophet'. The Arabic word, *şiddīq,* translated here as 'a man of truth' has a wider sense than merely being truthful. It connotes that he was always truthful and a firm believer in the truth. Both qualities fit well with his character:

> *Mention in the Book Abraham. He certainly was a man of truth and a prophet. He said to his father: My father! Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you? My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path. My father! Do not worship Satan, fir Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.'* (Verses 41-45)

It is with such a passionate appeal that Abraham addresses his father, trying to guide him to the goodness God had taught him and to which He had directed him. His appeal is an endearing one, stressing his position as a loving son. He asks him: *"Why do you worship something that neither hears nor sees and can be of no avail whatever to you?"* (Verse 42) The normal practice is that people address their worship to someone who is more exalted, knowledgeable and stronger than man. Indeed worship is always presented to someone exalted above man's position. How is it, then, that in this case it is presented to something below the level of man, and indeed below the level of animals; something that does not hear or see anything and can cause no benefit or harm. This was the case of Abraham's father and community. They worshipped idols, just like the Arabs of the Quraysh who opposed Islam.

This is the first point in Abraham's appeal to his father. He follows it with a statement that he does not make this claim at his own behest. Rather, he makes it on the basis of true knowledge that has been vouchsafed to him by God to set him on the path of true guidance. He was certainly younger and less experienced than his father, but what had been bestowed on him from on high gave him a clear recognition of the truth. Hence he gives his advice to his father who had not received such knowledge. He wanted his father to follow suit so that he would be on the road of truth: "*My father! There has come to me knowledge which you do not have. Follow me, and I shall guide you along a straight path.*" (Verse 43)

There is nothing wrong with a father following his son when this son has a direct recourse to a higher source able to give true guidance. In this case, the son is the one who follows the right way, leading only to what is good.

Having shown his father the fallacy of idol worship and outlined the source of guidance he received, which is the cornerstone of his appeal to his father, Abraham makes it clear that the way followed by his father is that of Satan. His own aim is to guide his father to the way acceptable to God, the Most Merciful. He fears that his father may incur God's anger and thus become a close friend of Satan:

> *My father! Do not worship Satan, for Satan has indeed rebelled against [God] the Most Merciful. My father! I dread lest a scourge will fall upon you from the Most Merciful, and then you will become one of Satan's friends.* (Verses 44-45)

It is Satan who tempts people to worship idols. This means that whoever worships idols is in the same position as one who worships the devil himself. Satan, it must not be forgotten, is a rebel who disobeys God in every way. Abraham warns his father against incurring God's displeasure. For if he does, he will become Satan's friend and follower and so liable to God's punishment. This shows clearly that when God guides a servant of His to obey Him, that in itself is a blessing, while befriending Satan is a scourge leading to God's punishment and a position of utter ruin on the Day of Judgement.

Insolent Answer to a Compassionate Appeal

Abraham's appeal, made in the most compassionate language, cannot however find its way to his father's hardened heart. The father retorts with rejection and threats:

> *Are you renouncing my gods, Abraham? If you do not desist, I shall most certainly have you stoned. Now begone from me for good!* (Verse 46)

His father's answer was harsh, arrogant and threatening. He considered Abraham's rejection of idols to be impertinent. It was a crime for which Abraham deserved a cruel punishment: i.e. death by stoning. Hence, he advised him to stay away, or else punishment would be forthcoming.

It is with such ignorance and cruelty that the father replies to the son's passionate and polite appeal. No regard is given for the son's care and concern for his father. This is indeed the pattern of response that advocates of faith receive from those who are hardened by disbelief and lack of guidance.

Abraham, however, does not allow anger to dictate his attitude. He does not lose sight of his dutifulness to his father. Hence, he continues to address him with respect and compassion:

> *Abraham replied: Peace be on you. I shall pray to my Lord to forgive you; for He has always been very kind to me. But I shall withdraw from you all and from whatever you invoke instead of God, and I shall pray to my Lord alone. Perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord I shall not be unblest.* (Verses 47-48)

Abraham makes it clear that he will not respond to the threat, nor will he indulge in futile argument. He promises his father to pray to God to forgive him and not to punish him by allowing him to go further astray. He will pray to God to have mercy on his father and guide him to the truth. He tells him that he is used to God's generous favours, as He answers his prayers. Then he adds that if his own presence and appeal irritate his father, then he will withdraw, leave his father and people, abandoning the deities they invoke instead of God. He will only worship God alone, hoping that by doing so he will avoid being unblest. Such is a believer's politeness and humility. Abraham does not feel that he is deserving of favours from God more than being spared misery, unhappiness and withdrawal of blessings.

Thus Abraham left his father, his community and homeland, as well as their idols and worship practices. God, however, blessed him with offspring and gave him what was better than that which he had sacrificed.

> *When he had withdrawn from them and from all that they were worshipping instead of God, We bestowed on him Isaac and Jacob, each of whom We made a prophet. We bestowed on them of Our mercy and We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth.* (Verses 49-50)

Isaac was Abraham's son, born to him by his wife Sarah who, prior to his birth, was childless. Jacob was Isaac's son, but he is mentioned here as though he were Abraham's own son, because he was born during his grandfather's lifetime, growing up under his care. Thus, he was close to his grandfather, just as though he were his

own son. He learnt faith from him directly and he taught it to his own children. Both Isaac and Jacob were prophets.

"We bestowed on them of Our mercy." (Verse 50) This is a reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as to their offspring. They were all recipients of God's mercy, which is mentioned here as the most bounteous gift granted by God in the general ambience of the *sūrah.* Furthermore, it was the quality of God's bounty that compensated Abraham for the loss of his people and homeland, giving him reassurance in his new solitary environment. *"We granted them the high honour of [conveying! the truth."* (Verse 50) They were truthful in their mission, enjoying trust and honour among their people. Their word was listened to and received well.

The *sūrah* moves on, speaking about the same branch of Abraham's seed and reminding us of Moses and Aaron: *"And mention in the Book Moses, who was a chosen one, a messenger of God and a prophet. We called out to him from the right side of Mount Sinai and drew him near [to Us] in mystic communion. We gave him, out of Our grace, his brother Aaron, to be a prophet."* (Verses 51-53)

Moses is described here as one who was chosen for the task of dedication to God's call. He is identified as a prophet who is entrusted with a message that he must deliver to people. A prophet is not given the same task. He is an advocate of faith which he receives from God directly. Among the Children of Israel there were many prophets who were given the task of advocating the message delivered by Moses and judging among people according to the Torah revealed to him by God: *"Indeed, it is We who revealed the Torah, containing guidance and light. By it did the prophets, who had surrendered themselves to God, judge among the Jews, and so did the divines and the rabbis: [they gave judgement] in accordance with what had been entrusted to their care of God's Book and to which they themselves were witnesses."* (5: 44)

The grace granted to Moses is highlighted as he was called out from the right side of Mount Sinai. [That was the right side of Moses as he stood at that moment facing the Mount.] He was drawn so close as to be spoken to in communion. We do not know how this communication took place, or how Moses understood it. Was it a voice heard by Moses through his ears in the normal way, or was it an address received by his whole being. Nor do we know how God prepared Moses to receive His own words. But we believe that all this took place. It is simply very easy for God to accomplish it, bringing His servant into communion with Him while at the same time retaining his humanity. We must not forget that man acquired his status with the breathing in of God's spirit into him.[§]

The *sūrah* mentions how God bestowed His mercy on Moses by giving him the

[§] For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

support of Aaron, his brother, whom God also made a prophet. It was Moses who requested this help and God granted it: *"My brother Aaron is far better in speech than I am. Send him, therefore, as a helper, so that he might bear witness to my speaking the truth; for I fear indeed that they will accuse me of lying."* (28: 34) Indeed, throughout the *sūrah* there is an unmistakeable air of divine mercy.

More Prophets

Now the *sūrah* refers to the other branch of Abraham's seed, bringing in Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, for special mention:

> *And mention in the Book Ishmael who was always true to his promise, and was a messenger of God, a prophet. He used to enjoin on his people prayer and charity, and his Lord was well pleased with him.* (Verses 54-55)

The *sūrah* highlights a special quality of Ishmael's, which was his being true to his promise. This is a characteristic common to all prophets and all God-fearing men and women. The fact that it is highlighted here suggests that in Ishmael's case it must have had very special significance. Moreover, Ishmael is given the status of messenger of God, which means that he preached God's message to the Arabs of old. Indeed he was their highest grandfather. We know that even shortly before the advent of the message of the Prophet Muĥammad, there were some individual Arabs who believed in one God. Most probably they were the last remnants of Ishmael's followers.

The *sūrah* also mentions that the fundamentals of his faith included prayer and *zakāt,* which he ordered his family and his people to observe. Moreover, the *sūrah* leaves us in no doubt that Ishmael earned God's pleasure, which imparts a sense of contentment and satisfaction to anyone. This contentment is another aspect that permeates the whole *sūrah,* in the same way as mercy. In fact the two aspects of mercy and contentment are mutually related.

The last prophet to be mentioned in this *sūrah* is Idrīs: *"And mention in the Book Idrīs, who was a man of truth, a prophet. We raised him to a lofty station."* (Verses 56-57) We have no way of determining during which period of history Idrīs lived. Most probably he was ahead of Abraham. He was not one of the Jewish prophets. There is no mention of him in the Jewish books. The Qur'ān describes him as a man of truth and a prophet. It records the fact that God granted him honour and made him worthy of praise, elevating him to a lofty position.

There is a view we would like to mention here without suggesting whether it is true or false. Some Egyptologists suggest that Idrīs is an Arabicized form of Osiris in

the same way as Yohanna is Arabicized as Yaĥyā, and Eliesha as Al-Yasa`. We know that around Osiris many a legend has been woven. It is said that old Egyptians believed that he was elevated to heaven where he was established on a throne. Whoever, after death, is found to have to his credit more good deeds in this life than bad ones will join Osiris who has become an Egyptian deity. He is also said to have taught the Egyptians all that they knew before he was elevated to heaven.

Be that as it may, we confine ourselves to what the Qur'ān states about Idrīs, without indulging in speculation. We only say that it is more probable that he lived before the time of Abraham.

The *sūrah* mentions all these prophets in order to compare them, a group of God-fearing believers, with later generations of pagan Arabs and unbelieving Israelites. The gulf separating the two is vast. There is nothing to bring the newcomers close to their ancestors.

> *These were some of the prophets upon whom God bestowed His blessings – of the seed of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We had guided and chosen. When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping. They were succeeded by generations who neglected their prayers and followed only their lusts; and these will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.* (Verses 58-59)

In this scene of the role of prophethood in human history, we see only the main features delineated: *of the seed of Adam,'* and *of those whom We carried in the ark with Noah,'* and also *'of the seed of Abraham and Israel.'* Adam's seed includes all, and Noah refers to all who came after him, while Abraham combines the two major branches of prophethood: Jacob as the head of the Israelite tree and Ishmael to whom the Arabs belong and from among whom came the last of all prophets.

Those prophets together with those from among their offspring whom God guided and chose of pious people share a main quality in common: *"When the revelations of [God] the Most Merciful were recited to them they fell down prostrating themselves [before Him] and weeping."* (Verse 58) They are truly God-fearing, very sensitive to what pleases or displeases God. They shudder when His revelations are recited. This sensation is so strong that they cannot express their inner feelings in words. Their eyes are tearful and they fall down prostrating themselves before God and weep.

Yet such highly God-fearing people are succeeded by generations that are distant from God, by people who neglect their prayer and deny it as a duty incumbent on them. Instead, they follow only their lusts and indulge in every loose activity. The

difference is so clear and the contrast complete.

The *sūrah* warns those who turned away from the path followed by their God-fearing forefathers, and shows them that they are bound to lose their way and end in ruin. Indeed, their end looms large: "*These will, in time, meet with utter disillusion.*" (Verse 59) Disillusion will lead them into error, and error will take them to utter destruction.

God's Door Remains Open

The *sūrah* makes it clear that the door remains wide open for all who wish to repent and mend their ways. Through that door comes the scent of God's mercy and the aura of abounding grace:

> *Excepted, however, shall be those who repent, believe and do righteous deeds. These will enter the Garden and will not be wronged in any way: the gardens of Eden which [God] the Most Merciful has promised to His servants, in the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Indeed, His promise is certain of fulfilment. There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace. And their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening. Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit.* (Verses 60-63)

Repentance that initiates a sincere acceptance of the divine faith and good works, thus making its positive significance a clear reality, ensures escape from that ruinous fate. Those who resort to such repentance will not end up in disillusion, but will rather go to heaven, where they are subjected to no wrong. They go there for permanent abode. God has promised entry into this garden to His servants and they believed in it before they could ever see it, because God's promise always comes true.

The *sūrah* then draws an image of heaven and its dwellers: "*There they will hear no idle talk, but only the voice of peace.*" (Verse 62) Their talk is free of idle remarks, loud noise, futile argument. It is a conversation when only one type of voice is heard. It is the type that fits in with this pleasant atmosphere, full of contentment. That is the voice of peace. Provisions are certain to come in this heaven, without the need for hard work, worry or anxiety. They will never be exhausted: "*Their sustenance shall be given them there morning and evening.*" (Verse 62) In such a blissful atmosphere, requests, demands and worries are out of place.

"*Such is the paradise which We shall give the righteous among Our servants to inherit.*" (Verse 63) Anyone who wishes to share in this inheritance is aware of the way to ensure it: repentance, firm belief and good works. Descent and ancestry are of no avail. Certain people descended from those God-fearing prophets and the goodly people who followed divine guidance and whom God selected for honour, but their

descendants neglected their prayers and followed their own wanton desires. Their descent benefited them nothing. They are certain to end in disillusion.

God's Absolute Lordship

This passage of the *sūrah* ends with a declaration of God's total Lordship of the universe. Hence, people are directed to worship Him alone and to bear with patience the hard tasks involved. Furthermore, the possibility of anyone having something in common with God is absolutely negated.

> *We descend only by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between. Never does your Lord forget anything. He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship. Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?* (Verses 64-65)

Reports are unanimous that the angel Gabriel was ordered to say the first statement to the Prophet: "*We descend only by the command of your Lord.*" (Verse 64) This was in reply to the Prophet when he felt that revelation was slow in coming. In fact Gabriel had not come to see him for some time, and he experienced a feeling of loneliness, keenly missing the angel whom he loved. Gabriel was then ordered by God to tell him: "*We descend only by the command of your Lord.*" He conducts all our affairs: "*To Him belongs all that is before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in between.*" (Verse 64) He forgets nothing. Revelations are bestowed when He in His wisdom wills that they be bestowed.

The verse ends with the statement: "*Never does your Lord forget anything.*" (Verse 64) It is fitting that this comment should be followed with the injunction to worship God alone and remain steadfast, declaring at the same time His Lordship over all things: "*He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them.*" (Verse 65) No one else has any share in this Lordship.

"*Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship.*" (Verse 65) Worship Him and persevere in shouldering the responsibilities that such worship entails. These include the responsibility of attaining the high standard that allows one to present oneself before Him and of maintaining this high standard. Worship Him alone and mobilize all your abilities and potential for meeting Him and for learning from that sublime source. This is a hard task, requiring one to free oneself of all restrictions and responsibilities, activities and distractions. Yet this task is coupled with a pleasure that cannot be fully appreciated except by those who have experienced it. Yet the pleasure cannot be gained except by those who rise to the task and fulfil it with the determination it deserves. Dedication is the key word here, and

without dedication, the pleasure will not be forthcoming, nor the results one hopes for.

"Worship Him alone, then, and remain steadfast in His worship," remembering that worship in Islam does not denote merely the rituals of worship. It includes all activities, feelings, intentions and thoughts. It is hard to direct all these towards heaven and make their aim the winning of God's pleasure. As it is hard, it requires perseverance. It requires that one directs every human activity on earth to pleasing God, ensuring that it remains free of all restrictions, temptations and desires.

Thus we see how Islam is truly a comprehensive system for life. When man implements this system, feeling that whatever he does, large or small, is meant as worship of God, he rises to the pure and enlightened level of worship. Such a system requires, for its proper fulfilment, perseverance and endurance at the time of suffering.

The command is given to us all that we must *"worship Him alone."* He is the only One in the universe who deserves to be the recipient of our worship. The passage concludes with the rhetorical question: *"Do you know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His?"* (Verse 65) This question also asks whether we know any equal to God. Supreme is He above all things!

3
Two Interlinked Lives

وَيَقُولُ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ أَءِذَا مَا مِتُّ لَسَوۡفَ أُخۡرَجُ حَيًّا ﴿٦٦﴾

'What!' says man, 'When I am once dead, shall I be raised up alive?' (66)

أَوَلَا يَذۡكُرُ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ أَنَّا خَلَقۡنَٰهُ مِن قَبۡلُ وَلَمۡ يَكُ شَيۡـًٔا ﴿٦٧﴾

Does not man remember that We earlier created him, when he was nothing? (67)

فَوَرَبِّكَ لَنَحۡشُرَنَّهُمۡ وَٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ ثُمَّ لَنُحۡضِرَنَّهُمۡ حَوۡلَ جَهَنَّمَ جِثِيًّا ﴿٦٨﴾

By your Lord, We shall most certainly bring them forth together with the evil ones, and then We shall most certainly gather them, on their knees, around hell; (68)

ثُمَّ لَنَنزِعَنَّ مِن كُلِّ شِيعَةٍ أَيُّهُمۡ أَشَدُّ عَلَى ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ عِتِيًّا ﴿٦٩﴾

and thereupon We shall drag out from every group those who had been most obstinate in their rebellion against the Most Merciful. (69)

ثُمَّ لَنَحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِٱلَّذِينَ هُمۡ أَوۡلَىٰ بِهَا صِلِيًّا ﴿٧٠﴾

For, indeed, We know best who most deserve to be burnt in the fire of hell. (70)

وَإِن مِّنكُمۡ إِلَّا وَارِدُهَاۚ كَانَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ حَتۡمٗا مَّقۡضِيًّا ﴿٧١﴾

There is not one among you who shall not pass over it: this is, for your Lord, a decree that must be fulfilled. (71)

ثُمَّ نُنَجِّي ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَواْ وَّنَذَرُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ فِيهَا جِثِيًّا ﴿٧٢﴾

But We shall save those who are God-fearing, and leave the wrongdoers there, on their knees. (72)

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَـٰتُنَا بَيِّنَـٰتٖ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَيُّ ٱلۡفَرِيقَيۡنِ خَيۡرٞ مَّقَامٗا وَأَحۡسَنُ نَدِيّٗا ٧٣

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?' (73)

وَكَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا قَبۡلَهُم مِّن قَرۡنٍ هُمۡ أَحۡسَنُ أَثَٰثٗا وَرِءۡيٗا ٧٤

How many a generation have We destroyed before their time, who were superior in material riches and in splendour. (74)

قُلۡ مَن كَانَ فِي ٱلضَّلَٰلَةِ فَلۡيَمۡدُدۡ لَهُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ مَدًّاۚ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَأَوۡاْ مَا يُوعَدُونَ إِمَّا ٱلۡعَذَابَ وَإِمَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ فَسَيَعۡلَمُونَ مَنۡ هُوَ شَرّٞ مَّكَانٗا وَأَضۡعَفُ جُندٗا ٧٥

Say: As for those who live in error, may the Most Merciful lengthen their span of life!' But when they see the fulfilment of that of which they have been forewarned, be it suffering or the Last Hour, they will realize who is worst in position and weaker in forces. (75)

وَيَزِيدُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱهۡتَدَوۡاْ هُدٗىۗ وَٱلۡبَٰقِيَٰتُ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتُ خَيۡرٌ عِندَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابٗا وَخَيۡرٞ مَّرَدّٗا ٧٦

God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns. (76)

أَفَرَءَيۡتَ ٱلَّذِي كَفَرَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا وَقَالَ لَأُوتَيَنَّ مَالٗا وَوَلَدًا ٧٧

Have you ever considered [the case of] the one who denies Our signs and boasts: 'I shall surely be given wealth and children!' (77)

أَطَّلَعَ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ أَمِ ٱتَّخَذَ عِندَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ عَهۡدٗا ٧٨

Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception? Or has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful? (78)

كَلَّاۚ سَنَكۡتُبُ مَا يَقُولُ وَنَمُدُّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ مَدّٗا ٧٩

By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering, (79)

وَنَرِثُهُۥ مَا يَقُولُ وَيَأۡتِينَا فَرۡدٗا ٨٠

and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of, and he shall appear before Us all alone. (80)

وَٱتَّخَذُواْ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ءَالِهَةٗ لِّيَكُونُواْ لَهُمۡ عِزّٗا ٨١

They have taken to worshipping deities other than God, hoping that they will give them power and glory. (81)

كَلَّاۚ سَيَكۡفُرُونَ بِعِبَادَتِهِمۡ وَيَكُونُونَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ضِدّٗا ٨٢

By no means! They will renounce their worship and turn against them. (82)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا ٱلشَّيَٰطِينَ عَلَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ تَؤُزُّهُمۡ أَزّٗا ٨٣

Have you not seen how We let loose satanic forces upon the unbelievers to repeatedly incite them to evil? (83)

فَلَا تَعۡجَلۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡۖ إِنَّمَا نَعُدُّ لَهُمۡ عَدّٗا ٨٤

So, be not in haste: We only allow them a fixed number of days. (84)

يَوۡمَ نَحۡشُرُ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ إِلَى ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ وَفۡدٗا ٨٥

The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests, (85)

وَنَسُوقُ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ وِرۡدٗا ٨٦

and drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd. (86)

لَّا يَمۡلِكُونَ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةَ إِلَّا مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ عِندَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ عَهۡدٗا ٨٧

None will have power to intercede for them except one who has received permission from [God] the Most Merciful. (87)

وَقَالُواْ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ وَلَدٗا ٨٨

They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' (88)

لَّقَدۡ جِئۡتُمۡ شَيۡـًٔا إِدّٗا ٨٩

Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, (89)

تَكَادُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ يَتَفَطَّرۡنَ مِنۡهُ وَتَنشَقُّ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَتَخِرُّ ٱلۡجِبَالُ هَدّٗا ٩٠

at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! (90)

أَن دَعَوۡاْ لِلرَّحۡمَٰنِ وَلَدٗا ٩١

That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, (91)

وَمَا يَنۢبَغِي لِلرَّحۡمَٰنِ أَن يَتَّخِذَ وَلَدًا ٩٢

although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son. (92)

إِن كُلُّ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّآ ءَاتِي ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ عَبۡدٗا ٩٣

Not one of all [the beings] that are in the heavens or on earth but shall appear before the Most Merciful as a servant. (93)

لَّقَدۡ أَحۡصَىٰهُمۡ وَعَدَّهُمۡ عَدّٗا ٩٤

Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers, (94)

وَكُلُّهُمۡ ءَاتِيهِ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فَرۡدًا ٩٥

and, on the Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone. (95)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ سَيَجۡعَلُ لَهُمُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ وُدّٗا ٩٦

God will certainly bestow love on those who believe and do righteous deeds. (96)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرۡنَٰهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لِتُبَشِّرَ بِهِ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ وَتُنذِرَ بِهِۦ قَوۡمٗا لُّدّٗا ٩٧

And so have We made [the Qur'ān] easy to understand, in your own tongue, so that you may give good tidings to the God- fearing and give warning to those who are given to futile contention. (97)

وَكَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا قَبۡلَهُم مِّن قَرۡنٍ هَلۡ تُحِسُّ مِنۡهُم مِّنۡ أَحَدٍ أَوۡ تَسۡمَعُ لَهُمۡ رِكۡزَۢا ٩٨

How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them now, or hear so much as a whisper of them? (98)

Overview

So far the *sūrah* has given us accounts of a number of prophets, including Zachariah and the birth of John, his son, Mary and the birth of Jesus, Abraham and his split from his community and their false deities. We have also heard about the generations that followed them, and whether they lived in accordance with the guidance God gave them or they fell into error. The *sūrah* comments on these accounts declaring that Lordship belongs solely to God, who alone deserves to be worshipped, without partners. This is the essential truth that these histories of earlier prophets bring out in full relief.

Now we look at this final passage which discusses the pagan beliefs that ascribe divinity to other beings beside God and deny resurrection. It portrays a number of scenes of the Day of Judgement and people's different destinies. These are drawn very vividly, full of action, incorporating the reactions of the whole universe, whether the heavens, earth, human beings, jinn, believers or unbelievers. The *sūrah* alternates scenes of the Day of Judgement with scenes of this life, so as to establish a real link between the two lives. Thus, our beginnings are shown to take place in this world and we see the results in the life to come, as though the gulf between them is covered in a few short verses, or even a few words. This gives us the sense that the two worlds are interlinked.

The Reality of Resurrection

The passage begins with a scene in which man is shown to be astonished about the reality of resurrection. "'*What!" says man, 'When I am once dead, shall I be raised up alive?'*" (Verse 66) The first point here is that this surprise is attributed to mankind in general. In fact, this same comment was expressed by many peoples during different periods of history. Hence, it is only normal that it should be attributed to the human kind in general. The surprise, or the objection results from man being oblivious of how he came into being. Where and what was he before entering this life? The fact is that he had no existence and then he began to exist. Had man remembered this fact, it would have been easier for him to visualize his return to life after death. Hence, the answer comes in the form of a rhetorical question: "*Does not man remember that We earlier created him, when he was nothing?*" (Verse 67)

This denial of the truth of resurrection is followed by an oath implying a stern warning. God, in His glory, swears by Himself, which makes this the most solemn and serious oath, that they will all be resurrected and gathered together. This is, then, a forgone conclusion: "*By your Lord, We shall most certainly bring them forth.*" (Verse 68) But they will not be alone. They will be driven "*together with the evil ones.*" (Verse 68) This shows them to be one category with the evil ones who always incite them to deny the truth of faith. Thus the two groups are leaders and followers.

At this point, a vivid picture is drawn showing them sitting on their knees around hell, in total misery and humiliation: "*Then We shall most certainly gather them, on their knees, around hell.*" (Verse 68) It is a fearsome scene, with multitudes upon multitudes of people brought together to the vicinity of hell and made to sit on their knees around it, suffering its heat and watching its fierce fire burn. They expect to be thrown into it at any time. They, thus, feel their misery to be compounded with humiliation.

The humiliation is even worse in the case of those who are proud and arrogant in

this life. Hence, this image is followed with one in which we see the most hardened of these evil-doers being pulled and dragged towards it: *"Thereupon We shall drag out from every group those who had been most obstinate in their rebellion against the Most Merciful."* (Verse 69) The sound here is stressed heavily, so that it gives an even more graphic and lifelike picture of how they are dragged out. Although the next image is left to our imagination, we nonetheless see them being thrown into hell.

God certainly knows best which people are more deserving of punishment in hell. No one is taken at random, or by chance from that huge multitude. It is God who has brought them here and He knows them all, one by one. He knows what each and every one of them deserves: *"For, indeed, We know best who most deserve to be burnt in the fire of hell."* (Verse 70) Those, then, are the ones who will be chosen first for the fire.

The believers witness this fearful scene as they too are brought near to it: *"There is not one among you who shall not pass over it: this is, for your Lord, a decree that must be fulfilled."* (Verse 71) They arrive there, look at hell as it burns fiercely, asking for more feed. They also see the tyrants and the hardened sinners as they are made to enter into it. The believers, however, have a different end: *"But We shall save those who are God-fearing, and leave the wrongdoers there, on their knees."* (Verse 72)

What Gives Better Returns

Now the *sūrah* leaves with us this scene of the Day of Judgement to paint an image of this world in which the unbelievers are shown behaving arrogantly towards the believers, branding them as poor and weak, and boasting about their own wealth and petty social values.

"When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?" (Verse 73) These people have their own social clubs demonstrating all the material values which the wealthy and powerful are keen to emphasize in their corrupt world. By contrast, we see humble gatherings where there are no such material riches or adornments. Instead, there are only the values of faith which unite people in these other groups. The two are juxtaposed so as to fully demonstrate their contrast.

The first side stands out with its wide variety of temptations: wealth, beauty, power and influence. It uses all these to serve people's interests, and provide them with all manner of pleasures. The second side appears too humble by comparison, yet it looks with disdain at wealth and beauty and it ridicules power and influence. It calls on people to join its ranks, without offering them any personal gain, material interest or favours that rulers and governments can provide. It simply offers them the faith, pure and simple, without adding to it any adornment. It seeks strength

through being on God's side, nothing else. In fact, it makes clear to mankind that accepting it will involve hardship, effort and struggle. Also clear is the fact that none will be rewarded for anything in this life. The reward to be expected will be in the form of being close to God, enjoying His pleasure in the life to come.

The elders of the Quraysh at the time of the Prophet used to listen to God's revelations being recited to them, but then they would say to the believers who lacked all riches: *"Which of the two sides has a better position and a superior community?"* (Verse 73) Which side: the elders who denied Muĥammad's message, or the humble who responded to him? Al-Naḍr ibn al-Ĥārith, 'Amr ibn Hishām, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and their powerful clique, or Bilāl, `Ammār, Khabbāb and their brothers, poor and deprived as they were? Had the message preached by Muĥammad been any good, would his followers be those who had no power or influence in the Quraysh society? Would they have met in a humble place like al-Arqam's house? Would his opponents be those who enjoyed all the luxuries and social prominence?

Such is worldly logic, advanced by those who have no aspiration to any truly high horizon. It is divine wisdom that keeps faith free of all adornment and superficial attraction, offering no temptation. Thus, only those who take it for its real value, without hope of immediate gain, will accept it. By contrast, those who are after wealth, worldly interests, pleasures and the like will turn away from it.

The *sūrah* comments on the boasts of those arrogant unbelievers, speaking proudly about what they enjoy in this life of pleasures and luxuries. The comment draws their attention to how earlier peoples were destroyed, despite the great riches they enjoyed: *"How many a generation have We destroyed before their time, who were superior in material riches and in splendour."* (Verse 74) They benefited nothing by all their splendour, nor were their material privileges of any avail to them when God visited His punishment upon them.

Human beings always forget! Had they remembered and reflected, they would not have been deceived by appearances. The end suffered by one generation after another of the unbelievers of old should serve as a clear warning but people remain heedless. They continue to ignore the destiny awaiting them, should they follow in the footsteps of those who preceded them. After all, those earlier unbelievers were of greater strength and enjoyed larger followings and more wealth.

The *sūrah* then instructs the Prophet to pray against them in the form of a joint appeal to God to add to the misery to be suffered by the side which persisted in error. This is to continue until God fulfils His promise either in this life or in the life to come:

> *Say: As for those who live in error, may the Most Merciful lengthen their span of life!'*

> *But when they see the fulfilment of that of which they have been forewarned, be it suffering or the Last Hour, they will realize who is worst in position and weaker in forces. God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns.* (Verses 75-76)

They claim that they follow better and superior guidance to that advocated by Muĥammad and his followers, and their evidence is their wealth and luxuries. Be that as it may! Muĥammad will appeal to his Lord to give increase to each side: the one in error and the one following right guidance. Then when what Muĥammad promises comes to pass, which is the triumph of the believers over those in error, or the final punishment they receive on the Day of Judgement, they will realize which of the two sides is worse in position, weaker in forces. On that day, the believers will rejoice and feel their superiority: *"God advances in guidance those who seek His guidance. Good deeds of lasting merit are, in your Lord's sight, worthy of greater recompense, and yield far better returns."* (Verse 76) This is certainly better than all that in which human beings find pleasure and enjoyment.

A Promise Coming True

The *sūrah* then picks up on another type of boast and decries it also:

> *Have you ever considered [the case of] the one who denies Our signs and boasts: 'I shall surely be given wealth and children!' Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception? Or has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful? By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering, and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of and he shall appear before Us all alone.* (Verses 77-80)

The immediate cause of the revelation of these verses is reported by Khabbāb ibn al-Aratt who said: "I was an ironmonger, and I had money due to be paid to me by al-`Āş ibn Wā'il. I went to him to demand payment. He said, 'By God! I am not going to repay you until you reject Muĥammad and his message.' I said, 'I shall not reject Muĥammad until you have died and been resurrected.' He said to me, 'Well! Wait then. For, when I have been resurrected after my death, I will have wealth and children. You can come to me then and I will pay you what I owe you.' God then revealed these verses."

Al-`Āş's words serve merely as an example of the ridicule with which the unbelievers responded to the call of Islam and their derision of the whole concept of resurrection. The Qur'ān highlights the singularity of his claims: *"Has he, perchance, attained to a realm which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception?"* (Verse 78)

That would be a good source of information, giving him knowledge of what may happen in that world. "Or *has he concluded a covenant with the Most Merciful?"* (Verse 78) In such a case, he would be certain that God's covenant will be fulfilled. This is followed by an expression of categorical negation which, in Arabic, adds connotations of a prohibition: "*By no means!"* (Verse 79) He neither attained to any such realm, nor made any covenant with God. He merely rejects the truth and derides its promise.

A stern warning is, then, very apt here to stop such arrogant claims: "*By no means! We shall record what he says, and We shall long extend his suffering."* (Verse 79) We will write down whatever he says, so that it is not forgotten, admitting no dispute on the Day of Judgement. This is again a merely descriptive image, because no dispute or argument is possible as God's knowledge encompasses every little detail. Moreover, the punishment meted out to such sinners will be increased manifold, in time and volume, so as to continue without interruption.

A further image of warning is added: "*and We shall divest him of all that he is now speaking of and he shall appear before Us all alone."* (Verse 80) Thus, everything that he speaks about of his wealth and children will be taken away from him, so that he is left with nothing. The Arabic text here, *narithuhū mā yaqūl,* gives an image of inheritance, in order to make the deprivation total, just as when an heir takes away all that a deceased person has left behind, discarding nothing. "*He shall appear before Us all alone."* (Verse 80) He will have nothing of what gave him his standing in society. Thus, he will have no money, property, relatives, followers or supporters as he appears before God all alone, a powerless individual.

Have you, then, considered this person who denies God's revelation, yet speaks about his fortunes on a day when he has no position or influence? It is a day when he will be deprived of all that gave him power in this life. This is just one type of unbelief, false claims and ridicule of the truth.

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of different aspects of unbelief:

> *They have taken to worshipping deities other than God, hoping that they will give them power and glory. By no means! They will renounce their worship and turn against them. Have you not seen how We let loose satanic forces upon the unbelievers to repeatedly incite them to evil? So, be not in haste: We only allow them a fixed number of days. The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests, and drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd. None will have power to intercede for them except one who has received permission from [God] the Most Merciful.* (Verses 81-87)

Those who deny God's revelations ascribe divinity to beings other than God, and

they will worship such false deities hoping that they will give them power, victory and glory. Some worshipped angels, while others worshipped *jinn.* They called on those whom they worshipped, appealing to them for support against their enemies. But the very angels and *jinn* they worship now denounce their action, disassociate themselves of their worship and condemn their attitude. As the Qur'ān describes their position, those who were worshipped in this present life will on the Day of Judgement "*turn against them,*" and will give a testimony that condemns the unbelievers who worshipped them.

Satanic forces, or devils, will always incite them to commit sinful actions. These forces have been given the chance to tempt and misguide human beings, ever since Satan, or *Iblīs,* requested God to allow him such opportunity. The Prophet is instructed not to precipitate matters: "*So, be not in haste.*" (Verse 84) He should not be over-grieved about them. They are given a chance, with a definite time limit, during which everything they do or say is counted and recorded. The verse here describes the accuracy of the reckoning: "*We only allow them a fixed number of days.*" (Verse 84) Perhaps we should add that this is an inadequate translation of the Arabic statement, *na`ddu lahum `addā.* In the Arabic text, the object of what is being numbered is deleted so as to give us an impression of the meticulous counting and recording of everything. This is an awesome image, because when the recording is made by God, it does not overlook or miss anything out. Someone who feels that his boss is carefully monitoring his actions so as to identify any mistake will inevitably feel uneasy and worried. So how does the person who knows that God Almighty is watching him feel?

The outcome of all this reckoning is shown in yet another image of the Day of Judgement. The believers will come to God in a procession met with honour and hospitality: "*The day [will surely come] when We shall gather the God-fearing before [God] the Most Merciful, as honoured guests.*" (Verse 86) On the other hand, the unbelievers will be driven like cattle until they arrive at their last abode: "*And drive those who are lost in sin to hell as a thirsty herd.*" (Verse 86) There will be no intercession on that day, except for one who has done a good deed in this worldly life. Such a deed will be like a promise from God which He will honour. God has promised those who do good works to give them an abundant reward, and God does not fail to honour His promises.

Monstrous Claims by the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then refers to another monstrous claim often made by different unbelievers. The Arab idolaters of the past used to claim that the angels were God's daughters, while the unbelievers among the Jews claimed that Ezra was the son of

God, and the unbelievers among the Christians made the same claim for Jesus. The whole universe shudders as such false claims are alleged, because monotheism is inherent in the nature of the whole universe.

> *They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself son.* (Verses 88-92)

The very sound of these verses and their rhythm add to the air of anger at this false claim. In fact the whole universe rejects this claim most vehemently. It shudders and quivers with abhorrence as it hears this falsehood against God Almighty. It is a reaction similar to that of a person who feels that his very integrity is attacked, or that the honesty of someone he loves is assailed. The shudder is common to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. In their beat, the words here show the movement of a violent quake.

As soon as the offensive word is uttered, *"They say: The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son,"* the expression of horror immediately follows: *"Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood."* (Verse 89) Everything that is settled and stable is thus shaken. The whole universe is in anger at this false allegation against God, the Creator. The statement is shocking to everything in nature. The universe is created and functions on the basis of the basic principle of God's oneness: *"Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son."* (Verses 89-92)

In the midst of this universal anger, a clear and definitive statement is issued:

> *Not one of all [the beings] that are in the heavens or on earth but shall appear before the Most Merciful as a servant. Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers, and, on the Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone.* (Verses 93-95)

All beings that live anywhere in the heavens and on earth are servants of God, subject to His will, submitting to Him willingly. He has neither son nor partner. All are His creatures and servants.

Fear creeps into our hearts as we contemplate the significance of this statement by God, the Most High: *"Indeed, He has full cognizance of them. He has kept a strict count of their numbers."* (Verse 94) None is forgotten and none will be able to escape. *"On the*

Day of Resurrection, every one of them will appear before Him all alone." (Verse 95) God watches everyone. They will all come to Him on the Day of Resurrection, each on his or her own. None will have the support or encouragement of anyone else. Indeed, all community feeling is gone, for in front of God, everyone speaks for oneself.

In contrast with this loneliness and isolation, the believers are given a comforting, friendly surrounding: *"God will certainly bestow love on those who believe and do righteous deeds."* (Verse 96) The mention of love in this context is bound to comfort and penetrate people's hearts. It is a type of love that spreads in heaven and spills over to fill the earth and comfort people. The whole universe is given a full share of it.

Abū Hurayrah, a companion of the Prophet, reports that God's Messenger said: "When God loves a human being, He calls in Gabriel and says to him: 'Gabriel, I love this person, so you love him too.'

Gabriel then loves that person and calls out to all those living in heaven, saying: 'God loves this person, so you all love him too.' Thus all those who live in heaven start to love that person. He will also be loved on earth. But if God dislikes someone, He also calls in Gabriel and says: 'Gabriel, I dislike this person, so you hate him too.' Gabriel then hates that person and calls out to all those living in heaven, saying: 'God dislikes this person, so you all hate him too.' Thus all those who live in heaven start to hate that person. He will also be hated on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Aĥmad]

This happy news to the believers and this warning to those who deny the truth and argue against it are the message the Qur'ān gives. God has made the Qur'ān easy for the Arabs to read and understand, as He has put it in His Messenger's own language: *"And so have We made [the Qur'ān] easy to understand, in your own tongue, so that you may give good tidings to the God-fearing and give warning to those who are given to futile contention."* (Verse 97)

The *sūrah* concludes with a scene that we contemplate in our minds for a long time, hardly able to shift our gaze:

> *How many a generation have We destroyed before their time! Can you find a single one of them now, or hear so much as a whisper of them?* (Verse 98)

This scene begins with a violent shock before overwhelming us with a total and deep silence. It is as though it takes us to the valley of death to show us how earlier people met their fate. In that great valley which stretches much further than the eyes can see, our minds imagine the life that used to prosper on earth, the people that moved about everywhere, their feelings, hopes and aspirations. But all that is gone.

Complete silence pervades. For death has overtaken all, leaving only a host of rotting cadavers. Not a single one stirs, not a single sound, not even a breath. *"Can you find a single one of them now?"* (Verse 98) Look around and see. *"Or can you hear so much as a whisper of them?"* (Verse 98) Listen as much as you wish. There is nothing but a deadly silence. None remain except the One who never dies. Eternal He is and limitless in His glory.

SŪRAH 20

Ṭā Hā

Prologue

This *sūrah* begins and ends with an address to the Prophet explaining his task and outlining the limits of his duties. It is not a mission of distress that has been imposed on him, nor is it an affliction which he has to endure. It is a mission of advocacy and admonition, giving good news and warning against wrongdoing. The ultimate judgement over people is exercised by God, the One, who has no partners, and who controls the whole universe, with all that appears of it and what remains hidden. God is the One who is fully aware of all hearts' secrets, and to whom all people prostrate. It is to Him that all people, obedient and sinners, refer. Hence, the Prophet should not be bothered by whoever chooses the path of unbelief. He should not be distressed over their denial of the truth.

Between the opening and the close, the *sūrah* relates the history of Moses from the point when he received his first revelations to the adoption by the Israelites of the calf as an object of worship. All is related here in full detail, especially the discourse between God and His servant Moses, the argument between Moses and Pharaoh, and the contest between Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers. Within the story, we see how God takes good care of Moses, whom He brought up the way He wanted. It was to Moses and his brother that He said: *"Have no fear; for I shall be with you: I hear all and I see all."* (Verse 46)

Adam's story is given in a short, quick account, highlighting the grace God bestowed on him after he committed his offence. It speaks of the guidance God gave him as also how He allowed his offspring to make their own free choice, whether to follow divine guidance or fall into error, after they were repeatedly warned.

This story is surrounded by scenes of the hereafter, which makes it sound as

though it is a complement to what happened on high, right at the very beginning of human life. Thus God's obedient servants will return to heaven, while those who disobey Him are destined for the fire, in confirmation of what was said to Adam at the time he descended to earth. Thus the *sūrah* is made of two parts: the first includes the opening address to the Prophet: *"We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing."* (Verses 2-3) This is followed by the story of Moses, which is given as an example of the care God takes of those whom He chooses to convey His message to people. They will not suffer distress on account of their task, as they receive His care.

The second part of the *sūrah* provides some scenes of the Day of Judgement as well as Adam's story. Both fit in well with the opening of the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. The end of the *sūrah* is thus similar to its beginning, providing a consistent and distinctive atmosphere.

The *sūrah,* however, is distinguished by a special, sublime and majestic air which touches our hearts. It generates a sense of reassurance and submission to God Almighty. This air is generated by the scene when God, the Most Merciful, makes His presence felt by His servant Moses in the sacred valley, and the long discourse in the deep silence of the night, when Moses is totally alone, except for his Lord's presence. The whole universe responds to this long discourse. This is further amplified by the scene of God's presence on the Day of Resurrection when all creatures are gathered: *"All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air."* (Verse 108) *"All faces will be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self- Subsisting Lord."* (Verse 111)

The rhythm of the whole *sūrah* employs the same beat, from start to finish, providing a pleasant, relaxing feeling that opens up to the universe. It is further enhanced by the choice of a long 'a sound for verse endings, throughout the entire *sūrah,* excepting a small number of verses.

1
The Purpose of Revelation

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

طه ﴿١﴾

Ṭā Hā, (1)

مَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِتَشْقَىٰٓ ﴿٢﴾

We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, (2)

إِلَّا تَذْكِرَةً لِّمَن يَخْشَىٰ ﴿٣﴾

but only as an admonition to the God-fearing. (3)

تَنزِيلًا مِّمَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلْأَرْضَ وَٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ ٱلْعُلَى ﴿٤﴾

It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, (4)

ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ٱسْتَوَىٰ ﴿٥﴾

the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. (5)

لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَمَا تَحْتَ ٱلثَّرَىٰ ﴿٦﴾

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil. (6)

وَإِن تَجْهَرْ بِٱلْقَوْلِ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَعْلَمُ ٱلسِّرَّ وَأَخْفَى ﴿٧﴾

If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden. (7)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ لَهُ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ﴿٨﴾

[He is] God; there is no deity other than Him. His alone are all the attributes of perfection. (8)

وَهَلْ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَىٰٓ ﴿٩﴾

Have you learnt the story of Moses? (9)

إِذْ رَءَا نَارًا فَقَالَ لِأَهْلِهِ ٱمْكُثُوٓا۟ إِنِّىٓ ءَانَسْتُ نَارًا لَّعَلِّىٓ ءَاتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِقَبَسٍ أَوْ أَجِدُ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ هُدًى ﴿١٠﴾

When he saw a fire, he said to his family: 'Wait here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire.' (10)

فَلَمَّآ أَتَىٰهَا نُودِىَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ ﴿١١﴾

But when he came close to it, a voice called out to him: 'Moses, (11)

إِنِّىٓ أَنَا۠ رَبُّكَ فَٱخْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ بِٱلْوَادِ ٱلْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ﴿١٢﴾ وَأَنَا ٱخْتَرْتُكَ فَٱسْتَمِعْ لِمَا يُوحَىٰٓ ﴿١٣﴾

I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā. (12)

Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed. (13)

إِنَّنِىٓ أَنَا ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّآ أَنَا۠ فَٱعْبُدْنِى وَأَقِمِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ لِذِكْرِىٓ ﴿١٤﴾

Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise. (14)

إِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ ءَاتِيَةٌ أَكَادُ أُخْفِيهَا لِتُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا تَسْعَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove for. (15)

فَلَا يَصُدَّنَّكَ عَنْهَا مَن لَّا يُؤْمِنُ بِهَا وَٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ فَتَرْدَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish. (16)

وَمَا تِلْكَ بِيَمِينِكَ يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

Now, what is this in your right hand, Moses?' (17)

قَالَ هِيَ عَصَايَ أَتَوَكَّؤُا۟ عَلَيْهَا وَأَهُشُّ بِهَا عَلَىٰ غَنَمِي وَلِيَ فِيهَا مَـَٔارِبُ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٨﴾

He answered: 'It is my staff; upon it I lean, and with it I beat down the leaves for my sheep; and other uses have I for it.' (18)

قَالَ أَلْقِهَا يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

Said He: 'Throw it down, Moses.' (19)

فَأَلْقَىٰهَا فَإِذَا هِيَ حَيَّةٌ تَسْعَىٰ ﴿٢٠﴾

So he threw it down, and thereupon it was a snake, moving rapidly. (20)

قَالَ خُذْهَا وَلَا تَخَفْ ۖ سَنُعِيدُهَا سِيرَتَهَا ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

Said He: 'lake it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state. (21)

وَٱضْمُمْ يَدَكَ إِلَىٰ جَنَاحِكَ تَخْرُجْ بَيْضَآءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوٓءٍ ءَايَةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٢٢﴾

Now put your hand under your armpit. It will come out [shining] white, without blemish: another sign. (22)

لِنُرِيَكَ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا ٱلْكُبْرَى ﴿٢٣﴾

We shall show you some of Our most wondrous signs. (23)

ٱذْهَبْ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُۥ طَغَىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

Go to Pharaoh; for he has indeed transgressed all bounds.' (24)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي ﴿٢٥﴾

Said [Moses]: 'My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], (25)

وَيَسِّرْ لِيٓ أَمْرِى ﴿٢٦﴾

and make my mission easy for me, (26)

وَٱحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِّن لِّسَانِى ﴿٢٧﴾

and free my tongue from its impediment, (27)

يَفْقَهُواْ قَوْلِى ﴿٢٨﴾

so that people may understand what I say. (28)

وَٱجْعَل لِّى وَزِيرًا مِّنْ أَهْلِى ﴿٢٩﴾

Appoint for me a helper from among my kinsmen, (29)

هَـٰرُونَ أَخِى ﴿٣٠﴾

Aaron, my brother. (30)

ٱشْدُدْ بِهِۦٓ أَزْرِى ﴿٣١﴾

Grant me strength through him, (31)

وَأَشْرِكْهُ فِىٓ أَمْرِى ﴿٣٢﴾

and let him share my task, (32)

كَىْ نُسَبِّحَكَ كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾ وَنَذْكُرَكَ

so that together we may extol Your limitless glory (33)

كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾ إِنَّكَ

and remember You always. (34)

كُنتَ بِنَا بَصِيرًا ﴿٣٥﴾

You are surely watching over us.'(35)

قَالَ قَدْ أُوتِيتَ سُؤْلَكَ يَـٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

Said He: 'You are granted all that you have asked for, Moses. (36)

وَلَقَدْ مَنَنَّا عَلَيْكَ مَرَّةً أُخْرَىٰٓ ﴿٣٧﴾

And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by, (37)

إِذْ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّكَ مَا يُوحَىٰٓ ﴿٣٨﴾

when We inspired your mother, saying: (38)

أَنِ ٱقْذِفِيهِ فِى ٱلتَّابُوتِ فَٱقْذِفِيهِ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ فَلْيُلْقِهِ ٱلْيَمُّ بِٱلسَّاحِلِ يَأْخُذْهُ عَدُوٌّ لِّى وَعَدُوٌّ لَّهُۥ ۚ وَأَلْقَيْتُ عَلَيْكَ مَحَبَّةً مِّنِّى وَلِتُصْنَعَ عَلَىٰ عَيْنِىٓ ﴿٣٩﴾

"Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore, and one who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up." I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye. (39)

إِذْ تَمْشِىٓ أُخْتُكَ فَتَقُولُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ مَن يَكْفُلُهُۥ ۖ فَرَجَعْنَٰكَ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّكَ كَىْ تَقَرَّ عَيْنُهَا وَلَا تَحْزَنَ ۚ وَقَتَلْتَ نَفْسًا فَنَجَّيْنَٰكَ مِنَ ٱلْغَمِّ وَفَتَنَّٰكَ فُتُونًا ۚ فَلَبِثْتَ سِنِينَ فِىٓ أَهْلِ مَدْيَنَ ثُمَّ جِئْتَ عَلَىٰ قَدَرٍ يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh's people]: "Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?" Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve. And [when you came of age,] you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief, although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; (40)

وَٱصْطَنَعْتُكَ لِنَفْسِى ﴿٤١﴾

for I have chosen you for Myself. (41)

ٱذْهَبْ أَنتَ وَأَخُوكَ بِـَٔايَٰتِى وَلَا تَنِيَا فِى ذِكْرِى ﴿٤٢﴾

Go forth, then, you and your brother, with My signs, and never slacken in remembering Me. (42)

ٱذْهَبَآ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُۥ طَغَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

Go forth, both of you, to Pharaoh; for he has transgressed all bounds of equity! (43)

فَقُولَا لَهُۥ قَوْلًا لَّيِّنًا لَّعَلَّهُۥ يَتَذَكَّرُ أَوْ يَخْشَىٰ ﴿٤٤﴾

But speak to him mildly, so that he may yet take

heed, or may be filled with apprehension.' (44)

قَالَا رَبَّنَآ إِنَّنَا نَخَافُ أَن يَفۡرُطَ عَلَيۡنَآ أَوۡ أَن يَطۡغَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

They said: 'Our Lord! We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us.' (45)

قَالَ لَا تَخَافَآۖ إِنَّنِي مَعَكُمَآ أَسۡمَعُ وَأَرَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

Answered He: 'Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all. (46)

فَأۡتِيَاهُ فَقُولَآ إِنَّا رَسُولَا رَبِّكَ فَأَرۡسِلۡ مَعَنَا بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ وَلَا تُعَذِّبۡهُمۡۖ قَدۡ جِئۡنَٰكَ بِـَٔايَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكَۖ وَٱلسَّلَٰمُ عَلَىٰ مَنِ ٱتَّبَعَ ٱلۡهُدَىٰٓ ﴿٤٧﴾

Go, then, you two to him and say, "We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance. (47)

إِنَّا قَدۡ أُوحِيَ إِلَيۡنَآ أَنَّ ٱلۡعَذَابَ عَلَىٰ مَن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾

It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it." (48)

قَالَ فَمَن رَّبُّكُمَا يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?' (49)

قَالَ رَبُّنَا ٱلَّذِيٓ أَعۡطَىٰ كُلَّ شَيۡءٍ خَلۡقَهُۥ ثُمَّ هَدَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

He replied: 'Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them.' (50)

قَالَ فَمَا بَالُ ٱلۡقُرُونِ ٱلۡأُولَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

قَالَ عِلۡمُهَا عِندَ رَبِّي فِي كِتَٰبٖۖ لَّا يَضِلُّ رَبِّي وَلَا يَنسَى ﴿٥٢﴾

Said [Pharaoh]: 'And what of all the past

generations?' (51)

ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ مَهۡدٗا وَسَلَكَ لَكُمۡ فِيهَا سُبُلٗا وَأَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ فَأَخۡرَجۡنَا بِهِۦٓ أَزۡوَٰجٗا مِّن نَّبَاتٖ شَتَّىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾

[Moses] answered: 'Knowledge of that rests with my Lord alone, recorded in a Book. My Lord does not err, and neither does He forget. (52)

كُلُواْ وَٱرۡعَوۡاْ أَنۡعَٰمَكُمۡۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّأُوْلِي ٱلنُّهَىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾

He it is who has made the earth your cradle, and has traced on it paths for you to walk on, and who sends down waters from the sky with which We bring forth diverse pairs of plants. (53)

۞ مِنۡهَا خَلَقۡنَٰكُمۡ وَفِيهَا نُعِيدُكُمۡ وَمِنۡهَا نُخۡرِجُكُمۡ تَارَةً أُخۡرَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾

Eat, then, and graze your cattle. In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason. (54)

وَلَقَدۡ أَرَيۡنَٰهُ ءَايَٰتِنَا كُلَّهَا فَكَذَّبَ وَأَبَىٰ ﴿٥٦﴾

Out of this [earth] have We created you, and into it shall We return you, and out of it shall We bring you forth once again. (55)

قَالَ أَجِئۡتَنَا لِتُخۡرِجَنَا مِنۡ أَرۡضِنَا بِسِحۡرِكَ يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿٥٧﴾

And, indeed, We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused [to take heed]. (56)

فَلَنَأۡتِيَنَّكَ بِسِحۡرٖ مِّثۡلِهِۦ فَٱجۡعَلۡ بَيۡنَنَا وَبَيۡنَكَ مَوۡعِدٗا لَّا نُخۡلِفُهُۥ نَحۡنُ وَلَآ أَنتَ مَكَانٗا سُوٗى ﴿٥٨﴾

He said: 'Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic? (57)

قَالَ مَوۡعِدُكُمۡ يَوۡمُ ٱلزِّينَةِ وَأَن يُحۡشَرَ

In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it. Set, then, for us an appointment which neither we nor you shall fail to

keep, at a suitable, open place.' (58)

ٱلنَّاسُ ضُحًى ﴿٥٩﴾

Answered Moses: 'Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high.' (59)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فَجَمَعَ كَيْدَهُۥ ثُمَّ أَتَىٰ ﴿٦٠﴾

Thereupon Pharaoh withdrew and put together the artful scheme which he would pursue; and then turned up. (60)

قَالَ لَهُم مُّوسَىٰ وَيْلَكُمْ لَا تَفْتَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا فَيُسْحِتَكُم بِعَذَابٍ ۖ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ ﴿٦١﴾

Moses said to them: 'Woe betide you! Do not invent any falsehood against God, lest He afflict you with most grievous suffering. He who contrives such a lie is sure to come to grief.' (61)

فَتَنَٰزَعُوٓا۟ أَمْرَهُم بَيْنَهُمْ وَأَسَرُّوا۟ ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ ﴿٦٢﴾

So they debated among themselves as to what to do; but they kept their counsel secret. (62)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنْ هَٰذَٰنِ لَسَٰحِرَٰنِ يُرِيدَانِ أَن يُخْرِجَاكُم مِّنْ أَرْضِكُم بِسِحْرِهِمَا وَيَذْهَبَا بِطَرِيقَتِكُمُ ٱلْمُثْلَىٰ ﴿٦٣﴾

They said: 'These two are surely sorcerers intent on driving you away from your land by their sorcery, and on doing away with your exemplary way of life. (63)

فَأَجْمِعُوا۟ كَيْدَكُمْ ثُمَّ ٱئْتُوا۟ صَفًّا ۚ وَقَدْ أَفْلَحَ ٱلْيَوْمَ مَنِ ٱسْتَعْلَىٰ ﴿٦٤﴾

Hence, decide on the scheme you will pursue, and then come forward in one single body. For, indeed, he who prevails today shall ever be successful.' (64)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِمَّآ أَن تُلْقِىَ وَإِمَّآ أَن نَّكُونَ أَوَّلَ مَنْ أَلْقَىٰ ﴿٦٥﴾

Said [the sorcerers]: 'Moses! Either you throw

قَالَ بَلْ أَلْقُوا۟ ۖ فَإِذَا حِبَالُهُمْ وَعِصِيُّهُمْ

[first], or we shall be the first to throw.' (65)

تُخَيَّلُ إِلَيۡهِ مِن سِحۡرِهِمۡ أَنَّهَا تَسۡعَىٰ ٦٦

He answered: 'You throw first!' And by virtue of their sorcery, their ropes and staffs seemed to him to be moving rapidly. (66)

فَأَوۡجَسَ فِي نَفۡسِهِۦ خِيفَةٗ مُّوسَىٰ ٦٧

And in his heart Moses became apprehensive. (67)

قُلۡنَا لَا تَخَفۡ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلۡأَعۡلَىٰ ٦٨

But We said [to him]: 'Have no fear! It is you who shall certainly prevail. (68)

وَأَلۡقِ مَا فِي يَمِينِكَ تَلۡقَفۡ مَا صَنَعُوٓاْۖ إِنَّمَا صَنَعُواْ كَيۡدُ سَٰحِرٖۖ وَلَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلسَّاحِرُ حَيۡثُ أَتَىٰ ٦٩

Now throw that which is in your right hand and it shall swallow up all that they have wrought. For, they have wrought nothing but a sorcerer's deceitful trick; and sorcerers can never come to any good, whatever they may do.' (69)

فَأُلۡقِيَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ سُجَّدٗا قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ هَٰرُونَ وَمُوسَىٰ ٧٠

So down fell the sorcerers, prostrating themselves, and declared: 'We do believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.' (70)

قَالَ ءَامَنتُمۡ لَهُۥ قَبۡلَ أَنۡ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمۡۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكَبِيرُكُمُ ٱلَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ ٱلسِّحۡرَۖ فَلَأُقَطِّعَنَّ أَيۡدِيَكُمۡ وَأَرۡجُلَكُم مِّنۡ خِلَٰفٖ وَلَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمۡ فِي جُذُوعِ ٱلنَّخۡلِ وَلَتَعۡلَمُنَّ أَيُّنَآ أَشَدُّ عَذَابٗا وَأَبۡقَىٰ ٧١

Said [Pharaoh]: 'Do you believe in him before I have given you permission? Surely, he must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm trees. You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a

قَالُواْ لَن نُّؤۡثِرَكَ عَلَىٰ مَا جَآءَنَا مِنَ ٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَٱلَّذِي فَطَرَنَاۖ فَٱقۡضِ مَآ أَنتَ قَاضٍۖ إِنَّمَا تَقۡضِي هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَآ

more severe and longer lasting punishment.' (71)

٧٢

They answered: 'Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being! Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life. (72)

إِنَّآ ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّنَا لِيَغۡفِرَ لَنَا خَطَٰيَٰنَا وَمَآ أَكۡرَهۡتَنَا عَلَيۡهِ مِنَ ٱلسِّحۡرِۗ وَٱللَّهُ خَيۡرٞ وَأَبۡقَىٰٓ ٧٣

As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us. God is certainly the best and He is Everlasting.' (73)

إِنَّهُۥ مَن يَأۡتِ رَبَّهُۥ مُجۡرِمٗا فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ جَهَنَّمَ لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحۡيَىٰ ٧٤

He who shall appear before his Lord [on Judgement Day] laden with sin shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live. (74)

وَمَن يَأۡتِهِۦ مُؤۡمِنٗا قَدۡ عَمِلَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمُ ٱلدَّرَجَٰتُ ٱلۡعُلَىٰ ٧٥

But he who shall appear before Him as a believer, having done righteous deeds, shall be exalted to the highest ranks, (75)

جَنَّٰتُ عَدۡنٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ مَن تَزَكَّىٰ ٧٦

abiding in the gardens of Eden, through which running waters flow. Such shall be the recompense of those who keep themselves pure. (76)

وَلَقَدۡ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنۡ أَسۡرِ بِعِبَادِي فَٱضۡرِبۡ لَهُمۡ طَرِيقٗا فِي ٱلۡبَحۡرِ يَبَسٗا لَّا تَخَٰفُ دَرَكٗا وَلَا تَخۡشَىٰ ٧٧

Then We thus inspired Moses: 'Go forth with My servants by night, and strike out for them a dry path through the sea. Have no fear of being

فَأَتۡبَعَهُمۡ فِرۡعَوۡنُ بِجُنُودِهِۦ فَغَشِيَهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡيَمِّ مَا غَشِيَهُمۡ ٧٨

overtaken, and dread nothing.' (77)

وَأَضَلَّ فِرْعَوْنُ قَوْمَهُۥ وَمَا هَدَىٰ ﴿٧٩﴾

Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. (78)

يَٰبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ قَدْ أَنجَيْنَٰكُم مِّنْ عَدُوِّكُمْ وَوَٰعَدْنَٰكُمْ جَانِبَ ٱلطُّورِ ٱلْأَيْمَنَ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْمَنَّ وَٱلسَّلْوَىٰ ﴿٨٠﴾

For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright. (79)

Children of Israel! We saved you from your enemy, and then We made a covenant with you on the right flank of Mount Sinai. We sent down manna and quails for you. (80)

كُلُوا۟ مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا رَزَقْنَٰكُمْ وَلَا تَطْغَوْا۟ فِيهِ فَيَحِلَّ عَلَيْكُمْ غَضَبِى ۖ وَمَن يَحْلِلْ عَلَيْهِ غَضَبِى فَقَدْ هَوَىٰ ﴿٨١﴾

Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin; (81)

وَإِنِّى لَغَفَّارٌ لِّمَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا ثُمَّ ٱهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٨٢﴾

۞ وَمَآ أَعْجَلَكَ عَن قَوْمِكَ يَٰمُوسَىٰ ﴿٨٣﴾

but I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path. (82)

قَالَ هُمْ أُو۟لَآءِ عَلَىٰٓ أَثَرِى وَعَجِلْتُ إِلَيْكَ رَبِّ لِتَرْضَىٰ ﴿٨٤﴾

[And God said]: 'Now what has caused you, Moses, to leave your people behind in so great a

قَالَ فَإِنَّا قَدْ فَتَنَّا قَوْمَكَ مِنۢ بَعْدِكَ

haste?' (83)

وَأَضَلَّهُمُ ٱلسَّامِرِىُّ ﴿٨٥﴾

He answered: 'They are treading in my footsteps, while I have hastened to You, my Lord, so that You might be well-pleased with me.' (84)

فَرَجَعَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِۦ غَضْبَـٰنَ أَسِفًا ۚ قَالَ يَـٰقَوْمِ أَلَمْ يَعِدْكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ وَعْدًا حَسَنًا ۚ أَفَطَالَ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْعَهْدُ أَمْ أَرَدتُّمْ أَن يَحِلَّ عَلَيْكُمْ غَضَبٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ فَأَخْلَفْتُم مَّوْعِدِى ﴿٨٦﴾

Said He: 'Then [know that] in your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriy has led them astray.' (85)

Thus Moses returned to his people full of wrath and sorrow: 'My people,' he said, 'Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you? Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord's condemnation fall upon you, and so you broke your promise to me?' (86)

قَالُوا۟ مَآ أَخْلَفْنَا مَوْعِدَكَ بِمَلْكِنَا وَلَـٰكِنَّا حُمِّلْنَآ أَوْزَارًا مِّن زِينَةِ ٱلْقَوْمِ فَقَذَفْنَـٰهَا فَكَذَٰلِكَ أَلْقَى ٱلسَّامِرِىُّ ﴿٨٧﴾

فَأَخْرَجَ لَهُمْ عِجْلًا جَسَدًا لَّهُۥ خُوَارٌ فَقَالُوا۟ هَـٰذَآ إِلَـٰهُكُمْ وَإِلَـٰهُ مُوسَىٰ فَنَسِىَ ﴿٨٨﴾

They answered: 'We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will, but we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people's ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire], and likewise this Sāmiriy threw.' (87)

أَفَلَا يَرَوْنَ أَلَّا يَرْجِعُ إِلَيْهِمْ قَوْلًا وَلَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا ﴿٨٩﴾ وَلَقَدْ

Thus he produced for them the effigy of a calf, which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has

قَالَ لَهُمْ هَـٰرُونُ مِن قَبْلُ يَـٰقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا

فُتِنتُم بِهِۦ ۖ وَإِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ فَٱتَّبِعُونِي وَأَطِيعُوٓاْ أَمۡرِي ﴿٩٠﴾

forgotten.' (88)

قَالُواْ لَن نَّبۡرَحَ عَلَيۡهِ عَٰكِفِينَ حَتَّىٰ يَرۡجِعَ إِلَيۡنَا مُوسَىٰ ﴿٩١﴾

Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them? (89)

قَالَ يَٰهَٰرُونُ مَا مَنَعَكَ إِذۡ رَأَيۡتَهُمۡ ضَلُّوٓاْ ﴿٩٢﴾

And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: 'My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you.' (90)

أَلَّا تَتَّبِعَنِۖ أَفَعَصَيۡتَ أَمۡرِي ﴿٩٣﴾

قَالَ يَبۡنَؤُمَّ لَا تَأۡخُذۡ بِلِحۡيَتِي وَلَا بِرَأۡسِيٓۖ إِنِّي خَشِيتُ أَن تَقُولَ فَرَّقۡتَ بَيۡنَ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ وَلَمۡ تَرۡقُبۡ قَوۡلِي ﴿٩٤﴾

But they had replied: 'By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us.' (91)

قَالَ فَمَا خَطۡبُكَ يَٰسَٰمِرِيُّ ﴿٩٥﴾

[Moses] said: Aaron! What has prevented you, when you saw that they had gone astray, (92)

قَالَ بَصُرۡتُ بِمَا لَمۡ يَبۡصُرُواْ بِهِۦ فَقَبَضۡتُ قَبۡضَةٗ مِّنۡ أَثَرِ ٱلرَّسُولِ فَنَبَذۡتُهَا وَكَذَٰلِكَ سَوَّلَتۡ لِي نَفۡسِي ﴿٩٦﴾

from following me? Why have you disobeyed me?' (93)

قَالَ فَٱذۡهَبۡ فَإِنَّ لَكَ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ أَن تَقُولَ لَا مِسَاسَۖ وَإِنَّ لَكَ مَوۡعِدٗا لَّن تُخۡلَفَهُۥۖ وَٱنظُرۡ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِكَ ٱلَّذِي ظَلۡتَ

'Son of my mother,' he replied, 'do not seize me by my beard, or by my head! I was afraid that you might say, "You have caused a split among the Israelites and did not wait for my orders."' (94)

Said [Moses]: 'What is then your case, Sāmiriy?' (95)

He answered: 'I have gained insight into something which they were unable to see; and so I took a handful of dust from the trail of the messenger and flung it away; for thus has my mind prompted me to act.' (96)	عَلَيْهِ عَاكِفًا ۖ لَّنُحَرِّقَنَّهُۥ ثُمَّ لَنَنسِفَنَّهُۥ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ نَسْفًا ﴿٩٧﴾
Said [Moses]: 'Begone, then! It shall be your lot to say throughout your life, "Do not touch me." But you shall be faced with a destiny from which you shall have no escape. Now look at this deity of yours to whose worship you have become so devoted: we shall most certainly burn it, and then scatter it far and wide over the sea.' (97)	إِنَّمَآ إِلَـٰهُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَسِعَ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عِلْمًا ﴿٩٨﴾
Your only deity is God, other than whom there is no deity. His knowledge encompasses all things. (98)	

Knowledge Going Deeper than Secrets

> *Ṭā Hā. We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing. It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil. If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden. [He is] God; there is no deity other than Him. His alone are all the attributes of perfection.* (Verses 1-8)

These opening verses give the *sūrah* a tender start beginning with two letter sounds, Ṭā Ha, to indicate that this *sūrah,* like the entire Qur'ān, is made up of letters from the Arabic alphabet, as we have explained in earlier volumes. The two letters chosen here have the same sound-ending as the verses of the *sūrah.*

We then have a reference to the Qur'ān, in the same way as other *sūrahs* commencing with separate letters, but the reference here is made in the form of an

address to the Prophet [peace be on him] . *"We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress."* (Verse 2) We have not revealed this Qur'ān so that it leads you to a state of distress. We do not want to make things hard for you requiring that you recite it in worship going beyond the limits of human ability. In fact, the Qur'ān is made easy for remembrance, and whatever requirements and duties it imposes are easy for people to fulfil. It only imposes duties that are well within human ability. Reciting it during worship is a blessing, providing us with an opportunity to be in touch with the Supreme Society from whom we derive strength, reassurance, contentment and a feeling of companionship.

Nor did We reveal this Qur'ān so that you would become distressed when people refused to accept it as divine revelation. You are not required to force them to faith, nor to overstretch yourself in trying to convince them of the truth of your message. This Qur'ān is bestowed from on high to you as a reminder and a warning: *"But only as an admonition to the God-fearing."* (Verse 3)

When God's Messenger gives such an admonition, reminding people of God and warning them against disbelief and disobedience of God's orders, his mission is fulfilled. God's Messenger is not required to open sealed hearts, nor is it his task to overpower minds and souls. This can only be done by God, who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high. He is the One who is in full control of the whole universe and who knows every heart's secrets: *"It is a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens, the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil."* (Verses 4-6)

The One who has revealed this Qur'ān is God who created the earth and the high heavens. This shows that the revelation of the Qur'ān is a universal phenomenon, like the creation of the heavens and earth. It is a revelation from on high. The *sūrah* thus links the laws that govern the universe with those that bring revelation. There is thus perfect harmony here between the high heavens, the earth and the Qur'ān, revealed as it is from on high to the earth.

The One who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, and created the earth and the high heavens is God, the 'Most Merciful'. Hence, He has not given it to His servant, Muĥammad, to cause him distress. His attribute of limitless grace is highlighted here to emphasize this. Besides, He is the One in control of the whole universe, God, *"the Most Merciful, established on the throne of His almightiness."* This is an expression indicating complete control and total power. So, the fate of all people is in His hands, while His Messenger's role is only to admonish those who are God-fearing.§

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

But in addition to His control of the universe, He has complete dominion: "*To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth, as well as all that is between them, and underneath the soil.*" (Verse 6) Scenes of the universe are used to highlight the concepts of dominion and knowledge in a way that can be understood by human intellect. Otherwise, the reality is much greater than this. God is the owner of all existence, and this is greater by far than all creatures in the heavens, the earth, and in between them and what is under the soil.

God's knowledge encompasses everything in His dominion: "*If you say anything aloud, then [know that] He knows all that is secret, as well as all that is yet more hidden.*" (Verse 7) Again there is perfect harmony between the inferences from this verse speaking about God's knowledge of secrets and what is more deeply hidden on the one hand and the verse speaking of God's dominion on the other. We note the contrast between what is visible in the universe and what is open of people's words, and also between what is hidden under the soil and that which is hidden in people's thoughts: that is, secret thoughts and things more deeply hidden. A secret is covered in shrouds, and what is 'more hidden' denotes further degrees of covering, as in the case of something buried very deep underground.

This address provides the Prophet with reassurance, comfort and knowledge that God listens to him. He does not leave him alone to feel distressed by his task of delivering the message of the Qur'ān, or facing the unbelievers alone without support. If the Prophet appeals to his Lord aloud, he should know that God knows all secrets and what is buried deeper than secrets. When we realize that God is near to us, knowing our thoughts and secret appeals, we are reassured and content. We no longer feel our isolation in the midst of hostile opponents who reject our faith and entertain different views.

This section concludes with a declaration of God's oneness, after stating His total dominion, control and perfect knowledge: "*He is God; there is no deity other than Him. His alone are all the attributes of perfection.*" (Verse 8) The Arabic term, *husnā,* rendered here as 'perfection' is specially selected to contribute to the rhythm while also adding to the general ambience of grace and care which is characteristic of the whole *sūrah* and of its opening in particular.

More Details about Moses

Now God begins to tell His Messenger, Muĥammad, the story of Moses, as an example of the care He takes of those whom He chooses to hear His message. Accounts of Moses are more frequent in the Qur'ān than those of all other messengers. This history is given in the Qur'ān in episodes, each of which fits perfectly with the general theme of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. So far, we have seen

such episodes in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow; 5, The Repast; 7, The Heights; 10, Jonah; 17, The Night Journey; and 18, The Cave. Other references are also made in later *sūrahs.*

The account given in *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, tells how the Children of Israel stood at a distance from the Holy Land, refusing to enter it because of the powerful residents living there. In *Sūrah* 18, The Cave, also in this volume, we saw Moses' encounter with the pious man and what occurred when the two travelled together. Here, however, we have a long and detailed history covering several episodes, as was the case in *Sūrahs* 2, 7, and 10. The episodes given in each *sūrah* may be totally different, but where there are similarities, these are portrayed from different angles, so that they fit more perfectly with the general line of the *sūrah* in which they occur.

Thus, in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, Moses' story is preceded by that of Adam and how he was honoured in heaven, how he was given charge of the earth and the grace God bestowed on him when He granted him forgiveness. In the same vein, the story of Moses and the Children of Israel provides a reminder of God's grace, God's covenant with them, their salvation from Pharaoh, their prayer for rain and how they were given manna and quails for food. It also mentions Moses' appointment with his Lord and how the Children of Israel took to worshipping the calf in his absence, God's forgiveness and binding covenant under the mountain, their breach of the Sabbath and the story of the cow.

In *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, Moses' story is preceded by warnings and an outline of the fate suffered by earlier communities who denied God's messages after they were given different signs and miracles. Hence, the story in this *sūrah* begins at the point when Moses was given his message. It refers to the various signs given to him, such as his staff and hand, as well as the floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood, and speaks in detail about the encounter with the sorcerers, the fate of Pharaoh and his people. It then mentions how the Israelites worshipped the calf in Moses' absence. It culminates with an announcement of the heritage of God's grace and guidance being passed over to those who follow the last Messenger, the unlettered Prophet.

In *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, Moses' story is preceded by a short account of the destruction of earlier communities for rejecting God's guidance despite the clear evidence provided for them. The account of Moses given in this *sūrah* again begins with his message and his encounter with the sorcerers, followed by a detailed picture of the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. In the present *sūrah,* this comes immediately after the opening verses which speak about the grace God bestows on those whom He selects to convey His message. The story has the same aura of divine grace, starting with the dialogue between Moses and God. It includes examples of the care God took of Moses and the support He gave him. It mentions that such care started long before his message, during his early childhood, when God provided him with protection and love: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My*

watchful eye." (Verse 39)

An Address from On High

> *Have you learnt the story of Moses? When he saw a fire, he said to his family: 'Wait here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire.'" (Verses 9-10)*

The Prophet is asked a rhetorical question about whether or not he had heard of Moses' history and how it reflects God's grace and the guidance He provides for those whom He chooses as His messengers.

Here we see Moses (peace be upon him) on the road between Madyan and Egypt, close to Mount Sinai, returning with his wife after he had completed the term he had agreed with the Prophet Shu`ayb. This agreement meant that Shu`ayb would give him one of his two daughters in marriage in return for eight or ten years during which he would be his assistant. He most probably spent ten years before he felt that he could leave with his wife to return to the country where he grew up. There the Children of Israel, Moses' people, lived in subjugation.[1]

Why is he returning to Egypt having fled there after killing an Egyptian whom he found quarrelling with an Israelite? He had after all found safe refuge with Shu`ayb, his father-in-law. So why would he leave that place of security and return to Egypt? Here we see human homesickness as the tool used by God to bring Moses to the place where he was to play an important role. Thus is life. We are motivated by feelings, passions, aspirations, hopes and memories, but all these are merely the outward causes of the desired result. They are what we see on the surface, but below them is the will that no sight can see. It is God's will, and He is the Almighty who accomplishes everything He wants.

Thus we see Moses on his way back to Egypt, losing his way in the desert, accompanied only by his wife, and perhaps a servant. He loses his way in the darkness of the night in the open desert. We sense this from the way he says to his companions: *"Wait here! I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a lighted torch, or find some guidance at the fire."* (Verse 10) People living in the desert normally lit their fires o high ground so that those travelling at night could see it, find their way or come over to it where they would find a welcome and hospitality, as well as directions to continue their journey.

Moses saw the fire as he was walking through the desert and he was warmed by

[1] An account of the situation the Children of Israel lived under occurs in *Sūrah* 28, The Story, which was revealed earlier than the present *sūrah.*

hope. He moved towards it in order to fetch a firebrand, as night in the desert is normally cold. He also felt he might find some guidance as to which direction to travel in. He went there to bring back a torch, but was in for a great surprise. For he found the fire that warms souls and spirits, and provides guidance for the greatest journey of all:

> *But when he came close to it, a voice called out to him: Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā. Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed. Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise. Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove for. Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish.'* (Verses 11-16)

This is an awe-inspiring scene. We shudder as we imagine Moses alone in the open desert, engulfed in the complete darkness and silence of the night, making his way towards the fire by the side of the mountain. Then suddenly, the whole universe echoes the great address: *"Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā. Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed."* (Verses 12-13)

That small, insignificant particle that is a human being is here faced with that great majesty which no human can envisage. Compared with such majesty, the heavens and earth shrink into insignificance. Nevertheless, that human being received a divine address from on high. How? *We* only say: by God's grace! How else? At that moment, all humanity, represented by Moses (peace be upon him), is elevated.

It is sufficient for a human being to receive this grace for one moment. Humanity as a whole is honoured by simply having the ability to sustain such a communication in some way. Yet how does it occur? We do not know. It is not the function of the human mind to judge. All that we can do is to look on in admiration and believe what we see.

"When he came close to it, a voice called out to him: Moses." (Verse 11) The calling out is expressed in the original Arabic text in the passive voice with no reference to who or what made the address. In English we say, 'a voice called out'. We cannot define the source of this address, its direction, form or nature; nor can we be sure how Moses heard or received it. There was simply an address of a certain nature and it was received accordingly. We accept that this has taken place, without asking how, because that is part of the way in which God accomplishes His business.[§]

[§] For further discussion on the *Kalām* attribute, please refer to section 1.5 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

"Moses, I am your Lord! Take off your sandals, for you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā." (Verse 12) You are in the presence of God Almighty, so take off your shoes. You must not step with your shoes in the valley over which God's presence is made. *"Know that I have chosen you."* (Verse 13) What honour is granted to the man chosen directly by God. Moses is, after all, merely one servant among the great multitude living on a planet that is no more than a small particle in a much larger group. Yet this group is merely a small particle in the great universe. This universe came into existence when God willed it to exist. We can thus imagine the great care God has taken of man.

When this announcement of God's honour, reflected in God's selection of Moses as His messenger is made, he is asked to prepare for what is coming by taking off his sandals. Then he is told to be ready to learn: *"Listen, then, to what is being revealed."* (Verse 13)

This brief revelation sums up three crucial aspects of the divine faith: belief in God's oneness, addressing all worship to Him alone, and belief in the Last Hour. These are the foundation of God's message that remained the same throughout human history: *"Indeed, I alone am God; there is no deity other than Me. So, worship Me alone, and establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise. Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come, so that every soul may be rewarded in accordance with what it strove for. Hence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish."* (Verses 14-16)

God's oneness is the cornerstone of faith. In His address to Moses, God emphasizes it in different forms: first in a statement bearing a strong emphasis, *"Indeed, I alone am God."* (Verse 14) Then Godhead is clearly stated as applicable to no one else: *"There is no deity other than Me."* (Verse 14) When Godhead is thus established, worship follows. Worship means that every activity should aim to please God. Singled out among all human activity is prayer: *"Establish regular prayer to celebrate My praise."* (Verse 14) Prayer is the most complete and perfect of all types of worship celebrating God's praise. In fact its sole purpose is such. It discards everything else. Thus in prayer we are prepared for contact with God.

The Last Hour is the time appointed for administering rewards, in all justice and fairness. People think of this time and make sure that they keep it in mind. They move on in life, looking with watchful eyes, fearing to slip. God makes it clear that this Last Hour is certain to come: *"Although I have chosen to keep it hidden, the Last Hour is bound to come."* (Verse 15) What people know about this Last Hour is limited to the information God has given them. This is all that they need to know, as determined by divine wisdom. That something should remain unknown is essential in human life. For we need to have something unknown to aspire towards. With human nature as it is, if everything were clearly exposed, activity would cease and life would become sterile. In fact, we continuously seek the unknown: we watch carefully, entertain

hopes and aspirations, experiment and learn, and uncover what we can of our own potentials and those of the universe around us. We contemplate God's signs all around us. We invent and produce new things. When we think of the Last Hour, whose timing remains unknown, we do not lose sight of it. Since we do not know its timing, we remain conscious of it, ready for its arrival. Needless to say, this applies only to those of us who preserve our sound human nature. Those who distort it however are bound to fall and fail: *"Let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows only his own desires turn your thoughts from it, lest you perish."* (Verse 16)

Indeed, pursuing one's desire is the cause of denying the Last Hour. Sound human nature believes that humanity cannot attain its super status during this present life, where justice is not seen to be done. There must then be another life where man attains perfection and absolute justice is carried out.

Moses' Mission Defined

This was an address to which the whole universe responded. In it, God gave His chosen messenger the fundamental truth of His oneness. Moses must have forgotten all about himself and the purpose for which he aimed towards the fire. He was now only following this voice coming to him from on high. He was attentive to the divine instructions being given to him. As he is so absorbed, with his mind and soul fully attentive to it, he is asked a question which requires no answer from him: *"Now, what is this in your right hand, Moses?"* (Verse 17)

Of course Moses had his staff in his hand, but where was his mind at that moment? Well, he remembers and gives his reply: *"He answered: It is my staff; upon it I lean, and with it I beat down the leaves for my sheep; and other uses have I for it."* (Verse 18) The question did not ask about the uses he had for his staff, but rather about the object he was holding. Nevertheless, Moses realizes that he was not being asked to name the object in his hand, but to state what he did with it. Hence his answer outlining the purposes for which he used it. He used it for support when walking and beat the leaves of the trees so that they fell and were eaten by his sheep. We know that Moses tended sheep for Shu`ayb, his father-in-law. It is also reported that he had a number of sheep given him as his share. Furthermore, he had other uses for his staff to which he refers in general without going into specifics, because what he has already stated gives a clear indication of them.

The omnipotent power, however, does with his staff what he could have never imagined. This comes as part of his preparation for his task: *"Said He: 'Throw it down, Moses.' So he threw it down, and thereupon it was a snake, moving rapidly. Said He: 'Take it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state.'"* (Verses 19-21)

Thus he saw in front of his eyes the great miracle that occurs every moment while

people remain oblivious to it. That is the miracle of life: the staff became a rapidly moving snake. Millions and millions of lifeless atoms or objects are transformed into living things all the time, but they do not fill man with wonder and amazement like a staff being transformed into a snake. Man lives in a world demarcated by his senses and experiences. He cannot go far beyond what he can perceive. To see a staff made of wood transformed into a snake that moves quickly was bound to shock his senses. He was thus profoundly alert. The hidden aspects of how life first came about and the miraculous nature of life springing up at every moment are too subtle to capture man's mind and imagination. This is particularly the case when something becomes too familiar; it thus goes unnoticed.

The miracle of life took place, and Moses was full of amazement, with fear tearing at his heart. But the command was given: *"Take it up and have no fear. We shall restore it to its former state."* (Verse 21) It will once again be a staff. The *sūrah* does not mention Moses' other reaction, which in another *sūrah* shows him running away. Here we have only a subtle reference to the fear that overwhelmed him. This is because the general atmosphere in this *sūrah* is one of safety and reassurance. It is not to be disturbed by speaking about such overwhelming fear that causes a man to run away.

Thus Moses was reassured, he picked up the snake and it was a staff again, regaining its original shape and form. Thus the other aspect of the miracle took place, with life departing from a living creature.

Another command was issued to Moses from on high: *"Now put your hand under your armpit. It will come out [shining.' white, without blemish: another sign."* (Verse 22) Moses did as he was told. It should be noted that the Qur'ān uses a different expression to denote the position where Moses was to put his hand, his armpit. It is described as his 'wing' which gives an air of freedom of movement and freedom from the earth's gravity. Thus his hand came out shining white, but its whiteness indicates no illness or malignancy. This is indeed another sign to be added to that of his staff. He is thus made to see some of the great miracles God works out: *"We shall show you some of Our most wondrous signs."* (Verse 23) When he has seen these with his own eyes, he will be reassured and able to carry out his great task with greater determination.

"Go to Pharaoh; for he has indeed transgressed all bounds." (Verse 24) Up to this point Moses was unaware that he was chosen for this very hard task. He has first hand knowledge of Pharaoh, since he himself was brought up in Pharaoh's own palace, witnessing his tyranny and how he treated his people with unabating cruelty. Since he is now in audience with his Lord, feeling the great honour God has bestowed on him, he asks for assistance and reassurance to better execute his mission: *"Said [Moses]: My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say. Appoint for*

me a helper from among my kinsmen, Aaron, my brother. Grant me strength through him, and let him share my task, so that together we may extol Your limitless glory and remember You always. You are surely watching over us." (Verses 25-35)

Requests Granted

So, Moses requests his Lord to open up his heart, so that the hard task before him would be a pleasure to undertake. It would also motivate him to carry on with it without impediment. He further prays to God to facilitate his task. When God facilitates a task for anyone, it is certain to succeed. For, what can man accomplish on his own, unless God facilitates matters for him? How can he achieve success when he has only limited ability and deficient knowledge while the road ahead is long, difficult and unknown.

The first thing Moses prayed for was heart reassurance that he would clearly feel, and then that God should facilitate things for him. What can man do without such help, relying on his little ability and limited knowledge? But Moses requests more to help him with his task. He wanted his tongue to be freed so that people could understand him easily when he spoke. It has been reported that he suffered from some sort of speech impediment. Most probably this is what he means here. It is further supported by what he is quoted as saying: *"My brother Aaron is far better in speech than I am."* (28: 34) The prayer Moses said here was made first in general terms. Now he adds details which he feels necessary for the task ahead.

First he asks for a helper from his own family, and that was Aaron. He knew Aaron to be outspoken, courageous and yet someone who could control his feelings. Moses himself was passionate and rather hot-tempered. Therefore, he requested his Lord for support, letting his brother share in the fulfilment of his task. He realized that his task required much glorification of God, constant remembering of Him and contact with Him through prayers. Thus we see Moses requesting God to open up his heart and facilitate his task, to free him of his speech difficulty, and give him a helper from among his family. All this he needed not to carry on the task entrusted to him, but rather so that he and his brother could glorify God and remember Him often as He should be remembered and glorified. Thus, they would be able to receive His guidance, as He is the One who knows their situation best. *"You are surely watching over us."* (Verse 35) You know our limited resources and our need for Your help.

God, benevolent and compassionate as He is, does not let His guest go back empty-handed. Nor does He delay answering his prayer: *"Said He: 'You are granted all that you have asked for, Moses.'"* (Verse 36)

Just a simple word, without the need for detail, sums up the positive and

immediate response. Moses has been granted all that he requested. The way this response is phrased indicates that all that Moses requested became a reality immediately. Then, Moses hears his Lord addressing him by name. What is more honourable than that God in His majesty should mention one of His servants by name?

This is more than anyone can hope for of God's grace and compassion. The meeting took its time and the address was made in full, with a complete and positive response to Moses' prayer. Yet God's grace continues to be bestowed in abundance. There is no check to slow down or prevent God's mercy when He grants it. Therefore, He gives Moses even further reassurance as He reminds him that His grace has been shown to him for a long time. Moreover, every moment longer he stays in his Lord's presence gives him further happiness and greater strength to pursue his mission.

> *And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by, when We inspired your mother, saying: Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore, and one who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up.' I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye. Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh's people]: 'Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?' Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve. And [when you came of age,] you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; for I have chosen you for Myself* (Verses 37-41)

Moses was going to meet the most powerful man on earth, a tyrant who knew no mercy. Against him he was to conduct the battle between faith and unfaith. He would be in the thick of things, facing all sorts of difficulties, against Pharaoh at first, then against his own people whose nature had been corrupted by long subjugation. They did not have the necessary qualities to fulfil the mission entrusted to them after they were liberated from Pharaoh's tyranny. Hence, God tells him that he, Moses, has been fully equipped for the task, as he was reared under God's watchful eye, given the necessary skills for taking on seemingly impossible tasks, right from the time of his infancy. God took care of him in his formative years when he placed him right under Pharaoh's nose, without any other care or support. Yet Pharaoh's hand could not harm him, because it was God who took care of him. He need not worry now about Pharaoh's power, as he still enjoys God's help and care in his adulthood. It is God who has chosen him for His mission.

Reminder of Past Favours

God responded by saying that all Moses' requests were granted. This was an act of grace by the One who is Most Merciful. But with this he is also given a reminder of God's past favours. Such a reminder is certain to reassure Moses that with God's support he can face any power or dictator. *"And indeed We bestowed Our favour upon you in a time gone by."* (Verse 37) The One who granted him all this protection and support will not let him down now. In the past, His favours were continuous, so it is unlikely that they will stop now after Moses has been assigned a mission by God. The favour mentioned first is that given to his mother which any woman in her condition would have needed. Her inspiration then told her: *"Place [your child] in a chest and throw it into the river. The river will cast him ashore."* (Verse 39)

We note here that the text describes rough and violent actions: a child being pushed into a wooden chest, and the chest thrown into the river. Then the river casts the box and the child inside onto the shore. But what then? To whose care will this child be entrusted? The answer is: *"One who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him will pick him up."* (Verse 39) Amidst all this Moses is also told: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye."* (Verse 39)

All this is an aspect of divine providence which transforms love and compassion into a shield to protect the child from all the blows, waves and currents. None of the powers of evil is able to harm the recipient of such love, even though he is no more than an infant of only a few days who cannot indicate his needs or express his feelings.

We have in this image a rare contrast between the great tyrannical forces lying in wait for the tiny infant and the hard circumstances engulfing him on the one hand and, on the other, the flowing compassion guarding him from all fears and protecting him against all dangers. His protection comes about as tender love, without the need for fighting or confrontation: *"I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye."* (Verse 39) Nothing further can be added to explain such gentle, loving tenderness than this most perfect Qur'ānic expression of how Moses was reared under God's watchful eye. How can human expression describe a creature reared under such care? The most that we can do is contemplate the situation and what it meant for Moses' development. It is a great honour for any human being to have direct divine care for just a moment in his life. What honour is then bestowed on one who is reared under such care? Perhaps this is what made Moses able to receive this address direct from God.

Thus Moses is reared under God's protection right under Pharaoh's nose, and Pharaoh is the enemy of both God and Moses. Thus, as a young child, he is always within an arm's reach of Pharaoh, without any human guard or protector.

Nevertheless, Pharaoh's evil hand is restrained by the fact that God has lavished His love on Moses, the child, so that he attracts love by all who see him. Needless to say, with Moses being reared under God's watchful eye, no harm could come to him from Pharaoh or anyone else.

But this is not all. Not only was Moses taken care of, but his mother could not be left at home worrying about her child. The two were soon reunited. *"Then your sister went forth and said [to Pharaoh's people]: 'Shall I direct you to one who might take care of him?' Thus did We restore you to your mother, so that her mind might be set at ease and that she might not grieve."* (Verse 40) That was part of God's design. He prevented the little baby from taking just any woman's breast. No wet nurse would breast-feed him. Pharaoh and his wife, who had adopted the baby cast to them by the river, were searching for a wet nurse, and this became well known. On instructions from her mother, Moses' sister went to them saying that she knew the best woman to take care of the baby. [All this is described in detail in *Sūrah* 28.] She brought them the baby's own mother and he took her breast immediately. Thus, God's design for mother and child was accomplished, for the mother had done as she was told, throwing her baby into a wooden chest in the Nile. This action brought the baby to the enemy who was killing all Israelite children. Thus, the safety of this child was accomplished by giving him to his enemies to remain with them, with no other support or guardianship.

The next favour Moses is reminded of is his escape after having killed a man: *"And you killed a man; but We saved you from all grief although We tested you with various trials. You then stayed for years among the people of Madyan; and now you have come here, Moses, as ordained [by Me]; for I have chosen you for Myself"* (Verses 40-41)

The killing of this man took place some time during Moses' early adult years, having grown up in Pharaoh's palace. He had gone to the market one day and found two people quarrelling, one an Israelite the other an Egyptian. The Israelite appealed to him for help, and Moses pushed the Egyptian, but rather too strongly for the latter fell and was killed. Moses did not intend to kill the man, but simply to push him away. When he saw him dead, he was full of grief. It is good to remember here that Moses was brought up under God's own care, right from his early childhood. Hence, it was only natural that he was filled with remorse, blaming himself for over-reacting. God reminds him here of His favour, as He directed him to seek forgiveness, which alleviated his sorrow.

However, God did not let him simply get away with this without a lesson to learn and benefit from in his future task. Hence, He set him the test of fearing the consequences of his offence and his subsequent attempt to escape punishment. The test took then another form, forcing him to flee the land where he was born and brought up, departing alone without friend or companion. Moreover, having been brought up in the palace of the greatest ruler of the time, enjoying every comfort and

luxury, he now had to earn a living. Thus, he had to serve others, and work as a shepherd.

At the appointed time, when he attained maturity, after passing the tests to which God subjected him, and when circumstances in Egypt were most suited, with the Israelites subjected to much oppression, Moses was brought in from Madyan. He might have thought that he had chosen to travel at that time himself, but the fact of the matter was that stated in the Qur'ānic verse: "*Now you have come here, Moses, as ordained (by Me].*" (Verse 40) So his return was at a time God had determined as most suitable.

"*I have chosen you for Myself*" (Verse 41) Thus, Moses was trained and prepared so as to be completely devoted to God's message and to serving His cause. He was purged of all the temptations of this worldly life, so as to be purely dedicated to the task God appointed for him. All that had passed in his life was part of his training to fulfil the mission that was about to be entrusted to him. Here God tells him that neither himself, nor his family, nor anyone else had any claim on his time or services. He was chosen by God for whatever God wanted him to do.

Moses' Mission Outlined

Having made this very clear to Moses, God gives him his first instructions:

> *Go forth, then, you and your brother, with My signs, and never slacken in remembering Me. Go forth, both of you, to Pharaoh; for he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak to him mildly, so that he may yet take heed, or may be filled with apprehension.* (Verses 42-44)

Moses is told to go with his brother Aaron, equipped with the signs God has given them. He has seen two of these in the transformation affecting his staff and his hand. They are told not to slacken in remembering God, for such remembrance is the best equipment and support they can have. Moses is reminded that God protected him from Pharaoh and his wickedness even when he was a helpless child, thrown in the Nile. Nothing of that hardship caused him any harm. Now that he has completed his training, he can approach his task with ease and reassurance, trusting to God's care.

As Moses is directed to go to Pharaoh, he is told that Pharaoh has transgressed all bounds and resorted to tyranny and oppression. Nevertheless, his instruction is that he and his brother are to "*speak to him mildly.*" (Verse 44) Mild and gentle words which do not trigger a hardening of attitude or insolence and arrogance, which is commonly adopted by tyrants, may yet reawaken Pharaoh's heart and alert him to the consequences of his actions. Thus, Moses and Aaron were to go about their task,

hoping that Pharaoh might take heed, and never despairing of his reform and positive response to God's guidance. An advocate of faith who gives up on people and thinks that they never respond positively to his message cannot deliver it in the way it should be delivered. Nor is he able to hold on to it in the face of rejection and denial.

God certainly knew how Pharaoh would respond, but taking the necessary measures in preaching God's message is prerequisite. God takes people to account after they act, even though He is aware of their actions before they are made. His knowledge of future events is the same as His knowledge of the present and the past.

How to Confront a Tyrant

So far we have discussed what Moses was told when God addressed him directly alone in the desert. The *sūrah* then takes us across time and place, covering an indeterminable period of time and distance, to show us both Moses and Aaron expressing their concerns to their Lord about their forthcoming confrontation with Pharaoh. They feared most that he might be quick to punish and harm them severely when they called on him to believe in God.

> *They said: 'Our Lord! We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us.' Answered He: 'Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all. Go, then, you two to him and say, "We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance. It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it."'* (Verses 45-48)

For certain, Aaron was not with Moses when his Lord first spoke to him, favouring him with a long interactive discourse, clarifying all necessary issues and allowing him to ask questions and giving him the answers he needed. The fact that now both Moses and Aaron make the reply together, saying, *"We fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us"*. This, then, suggests that this statement was made at a later time. This is part of the Qur'ānic method of skipping over time and place, leaving gaps in the scenes and events of a story, which are gathered and understood as one reads on. Thus, the Qur'ān concentrates on events, actions and attitudes which inspire the reader and listener.

So, some time after Moses left the place where he received God's long address, close to Mount Sinai, he met with his brother, Aaron. The latter also received God's revelation commanding him to be with his brother and that together they should address Pharaoh. Hence, the two together express their concerns to their Lord: *"We*

fear lest he hasten with insolence or tyranny against us." (Verse 45) They feared Pharaoh's impulsive reaction, which might be too strong, and they feared his tyranny, which was much more profound than mere physical harm. In his power, Pharaoh could be expected to resort to either of these or to both of them.

At this point they receive God's decisive answer which leaves no room for fear or worry: *"Answered He: Have no fear. I shall be with you. I hear all and see all."* (Verse 46) Thus, God Almighty who has power over all creatures and who creates the universe and all creatures in it, using nothing more than His will to bring them into existence, tells them that He is with them. This should have been sufficient, but God adds to this what increases their certainty of help. This is evidenced by the fact that He hears all and sees all. What could Pharaoh do against the power of the Almighty, whether in a precipitate reaction or a well considered one?

Coupled with this reassurance Moses and Aaron are given guidance on the form of address they should make to Pharaoh and on how to argue their case: *"Go, then, you two to him and say, 'We are the emissaries of your Lord. Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more. We have now come to you with a message from your Lord. Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance. It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it.'"* (Verses 47-48)

Thus they should start by stating the foundation of their message: *"We are the emissaries of your Lord."* (Verse 47) This would give him right from the first moment the understanding that it is God who is his and all people's Lord. He is not the Lord of Moses and Aaron, or the Children of Israel alone. It was a superstition of the days of pagan ignorance that each group of people, or each tribe, had its own deity or deities. Moreover, it was commonly held during some periods of history that Pharaoh was a deity, of godly descent, and as such, he was to be worshipped.

When the basic element of their message was thus outlined, Moses and Aaron explained their immediate concern: *"Let the Children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more."* (Verse 47) This was the limit of their message to Pharaoh, to save the Children of Israel and bring them back to their monotheistic faith. They would then lead them to the blessed land which God had assigned to them for settlement, up to the time when they would sink into corruption and be destroyed in consequence.

They further showed Pharaoh a sign to prove that they were telling the truth when they said that they were messengers from his Lord: *"We have now come to you with a message from your Lord."* (Verse 47) They follow this with an element of encouragement, hoping that he might respond: *"Peace to all who follow [God's] guidance."* (Verse 47) It might be that when he had listened to this that he would respond to the greeting of peace and accept God's guidance.

They then add an element of implicit warning, in order not to stir his arrogance

and hostility: *"It has been revealed to us that the suffering shall befall those who deny the truth and turn away from it."* (Verse 48) It might be that he would decide not to include himself among those who deny the truth and turn away from it.

We see here how God gave Moses and Aaron reassurance and showed them the way to follow. He indeed outlined their course for them so that they would approach their task with peace, reassurance and clear guidance.

At this point the curtains are drawn, only to rise again when we see Moses and Aaron in confrontation with the tyrant.

Calling on a Tyrant to Believe

The *sūrah* does not mention how Moses and Aaron were admitted into Pharaoh's presence, but nonetheless they were. For certain, their Lord was with them hearing and seeing what took place, and no doubt guiding their communication. But what power, and what authority was at the disposal of Moses and Aaron to enable them to communicate to Pharaoh, great as he might have been, what God, their Lord, commanded them to convey to him? The *sūrah* paints a vivid picture of the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh, starting with this question and answer: *"[Pharaoh] said: 'Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?' He replied: 'Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them.'"* (Verses 49-50) It is clear that Pharaoh does not wish to acknowledge God's Lordship, which the two prophets had made clear to him saying they were *'the emissaries of your Lord.'* Pharaoh realized that Moses was the main advocate of the message. Hence, he puts his question to him: *"Who, now, is this Lord of you two, Moses?"* (Verse 49) In whose name are you addressing me to demand the release of the Israelites?

Moses replies emphasizing God's attributes of creation, initiation and providing guidance and balance: *"Our Lord is He who gives everything its distinctive nature and form, and further guides them."* (Verse 50) Thus it is: our Lord is the one who has given everything its existence in the form and the nature it has. He then guides each and everyone to fulfil their respective roles, providing them all with the means for such fulfilment. The Arabic text of this verse uses the conjunctive, *thumma,* or then, separating the creation of everything and imparting guidance to it. This conjunctive is rendered in the translation as 'further' to indicate the true meaning of the verse. There is no lapse of time between creating a creature and giving it guidance. The conjunctive is used to indicate the difference in rank between the mere creation of something and giving it the necessary knowledge to fulfil its role. Providing such guidance is more elevated than leaving creatures to their own devices.

This description of God given by Moses sums up the highest and most perfect attributes of God the Creator who controls everything in the universe. It is He who

gives every creature its form, nature and role. When man casts his eye and contemplates as best he can this endless universe, he sees the results of what the great power of God makes of every existence, great or small, starting with the minute atom up to the largest creature, spanning life between a one-celled creature to the most sophisticated form of life, i.e. man.

The great universe is made up of countless atoms, cells, substances, creatures and living things. Every atom in the universe interacts, every cell has a life, every living being moves, and every creature influences and is influenced by others. But all work, individually and collectively, within the boundaries of the laws God has planted in their natures and constitutions, without conflict, defect, or slackening at any moment. Yet every individual creature is, on its own, a complete world: its cells, organs and systems work in accordance with its nature, within the overall law God operates in the universe, in perfect order and perfect complementarity.

Let us leave aside the great universe and look for a moment at each creature on its own. Human knowledge and endeavour is limited in its ability to study and understand such a creature. We are talking here of studying the characteristics, role, illnesses and treatment of creatures in our world. We are not speaking about creating these creatures or guiding them to fulfil their respective roles. This is something totally beyond man's knowledge or ability. Man himself is one of God's creatures. God has given him existence in the form he has, and assigned to him his role like all other creatures. The One who gives every creature its nature and form and further guides them to perform their roles is God, the only deity in the universe.

Here Pharaoh puts another question: *"And what of all the past generations?"* (Verse 51) Where have all those past generations gone? Who was their Lord? What happened to them since they died unaware of the Lord Moses spoke about?

"[Moses] answered: Knowledge of that rests with my Lord alone, recorded in a Book. My Lord does not err, and neither does He forget." (Verse 52) Thus Moses refers all this unknown matter to his Lord whose knowledge is perfect, encompassing every single detail of every little creature, and who never forgets anything. It is He alone who knows about all those generations, their past and future. The realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception belongs totally to God, who alone determines the eventual outcome of mankind and their life.

Moses continues to draw Pharaoh's attention to some of the results of God's action in the universe and how these results affect human life. He selects results which could be seen close by, and which were well-known in Egypt with its rich soil, abundant water, and plentiful crops and cattle:

He it is who has made the earth your cradle, and has traced on it paths for you to walk

on, and who sends down waters from the sky with which We bring forth diverse pairs of plants. Eat, then, and graze your cattle. In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason. (Verses 53-54)

An Argument Too Powerful

The whole earth is a cradle for mankind at all places and in all times. It is indeed the same as a child's cradle; for human beings are the children of the earth in whose lap they grow up and on whose produce they feed. At the same time, it has been levelled for them so that they can walk on it, pursue their life affairs, cultivate it and benefit by its treasures. God made it so on the day He gave nature and forms to all His creatures. Thus, He gave the earth its structure which enables it to sustain the type of life He assigned to prosper on it. Similarly, He gave human beings their nature and form which make them able to live on the earth He made a cradle for them. The two senses imparted by the verse are closely interlinked.

Both the cradle image and the quality of being level are most clearly seen in Egypt, with its highly fertile valley which requires only the minimum effort from its people to yield its rich produce. The whole valley of Egypt is like a warm cradle nurturing a small child.

The wise Creator who has levelled the earth has also opened up on it paths for people to travel and has sent down waters from the sky. It is from the rain pouring from the sky that rivers form and run to provide irrigation. One of these is, of course, the Nile running close to where Pharaoh had his palace. With such plentiful water, plants are brought forth in a great variety of pairs.

God in His wisdom has willed that, like all living things, plants should grow in pairs. Indeed this duality is a consistent phenomenon that applies to all living creatures. In most cases, plants carry the male and female cells in the same shoot, but there are types where one shoot has only male cells and another female, in the same way as in most animal species. This provides perfect harmony that applies to all living things. Hence, the statement: "*In all this there are signs for those who are endowed with reason.*" (Verse 54) Indeed, no sound mind could reflect on such phenomena without concluding that it is the work of the wise Creator who has given every living thing its nature and form, and guided them all.

The *sūrah* continues the reporting of what Moses said, but uses the form of a direct address by God Himself: "*Out of this [earth] have We created you, and into it shall We return you, and out of it shall We bring you forth once again. And, indeed, We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused [to take heed].*" (Verses 55-56) It is from this earth, made as a cradle for mankind, and which supports the diverse cultivation of plants for food and grazing, that mankind are created, and to it they

shall return and then from it again they are resurrected after death.

Man is certainly created from the same substance as this earth. All the components of his body are largely the same as the components of the earth. Furthermore, he eats of its produce, drinks its waters, breathes its air, and benefits from it as his cradle. Then, he goes back to it a dead corpse, when his remains become part of its soil and atmosphere. From the earth he is resurrected for a second life, just as he was created for the life of this world.

This reminder of the relationship between man and the earth fits well with the exchange between Moses and Pharaoh, the tyrant who arrogantly claims a godly position when he too originated from the earth and to it he will certainly return. He is no more than any object God has created on earth and guided to fulfil its assigned role. "*We showed Pharaoh all Our signs, but he denied them and refused to take heed.*" (Verse 56) God showed him all sorts of signs in the great universe, and Moses pointed these out to him. The two signs of Moses' staff and hand are not specified here since they are included among the general category of God's signs. The signs in the universe are far greater and more permanent. It is implied however that Pharaoh has already been shown Moses' own special signs. His reply to all God's signs is mentioned in detail, and we realize that he is actually referring to these two signs: "*Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic? In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it. Set, then, fir us an appointment which neither we nor you shall fail to keep, at a suitable, open place.*" (Verses 57-58)

Ready to take up the challenge, Moses delivered a straight answer: "*Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high.*" (Verse 59)

How to Avoid a Losing Argument

Pharaoh simply stopped arguing. He realized that Moses had the stronger case, supported by the clearest proof, namely, God's signs seen everywhere in the universe, as well as his own two special signs. Hence, he resorted to an old ploy, often used by tyrants and opponents of God's messages. He pointed an accusing finger at Moses, describing him as a sorcerer, claiming that it was through sorcery that Moses turned the staff into a snake and made his hand look shining white, without blemish. Magic was the thought presenting itself immediately to Pharaoh, because it was widely practised in Egypt. The two signs given to Moses seemed, on the surface, similar to magic, which is no more than the deception of the senses that could sometimes lead to false feelings so as to produce tangible effects. Thus, under the influence of magic, a man may see things that are not present, or he may see them in a form other than their own. At times a person who is under a magical spell may

be physically and psychologically affected, as though the spell has had its effect on him in reality. But Moses' signs were not of this sort. They were signs given to him by God, the Creator of all things, the One who can bring about both temporary and permanent transformations.

"He said: Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic?" (Verse 57) It appears that the persecution of the Israelites was motivated by political reasons, with Pharaoh fearing that their numbers would increase to give them numerical strength. For the sake of retaining power and maintaining their rule or kingdom, tyrants will commit the most ghastly and inhumane crimes, paying no heed to moral or ethical considerations. They are prepared to silence the voice of even their own conscience and honour. Thus, Pharaoh pursued a policy of weakening and humiliating the Israelites, killing their male offspring and sparing the females, while forcing the adults among them into hard labour. Therefore Moses and Aaron demanded their release, saying to him: *"Let the children of Israel go with us, and oppress them no more."* (Verse 47) His reply to their request was indicative of his fears: *"Have you, Moses, come to drive us out of our land with your magic?"* (Verse 57) To Pharaoh, such a release was a step towards ousting him from government.

According to Pharaoh's thinking, Moses made this demand for the release of the Israelites for no other reason, and the only thing he was prepared to put forward in support of his demand was an act of sorcery. It was easy, therefore, to reply to him in kind: *"In that case, we shall most certainly produce for you magic to match it."* (Verse 58) Tyrannical rulers cannot see beyond the obvious. They think that those who advocate a divine faith use it as a cover for worldly aims. They imagine that they want to take over the reins of government. When they realize that such advocates of faith have something miraculous, either of the type given to Moses or something that touches people's hearts and wins them over, they respond with something of an apparently similar nature. Their thoughts run along the following lines: if the advocate of a message resorts to magic, then we will produce similar magic; if he uses fine words, these are also at our command; if he advocates moral values, we will support high moral values; if he does good and benevolent works, we will do the same. Such tyrants do not understand that advocates of a divine message rely on their faith and on God's support. These are the weapons which ensure their triumph.

With such thinking and motivation, Pharaoh asks Moses to set an appointment for his confrontation with the sorcerers. In order to give the appearance of power, Pharaoh leaves it to Moses to choose the time: *"Set, then, for us an appointment."* (Verse 58) In order to give an even stronger impression of his confidence, he re-emphasizes the importance of that appointment *"which neither we nor you shall fail to keep."* (Verse 58) He only asks for the match to be in an open area for the challenge to be seen, *"at a suitable, open place."* (Verse 58)

Moses accepts Pharaoh's challenge and sets the appointment for a festival day when the people are in the mood to celebrate, gathering in the main squares and open areas: "*Answered Moses: Your appointment shall be the day of the Festival; and let the people assemble when the sun is risen high.*" (Verse 59) Thus he sets the best time when everything is at its clearest and people will be out and about in numbers. He does not set a very early time when people would still be at home, nor at midday when the heat could prevent their gathering, nor in the evening when darkness might discourage their attendance or impair their vision.

Thus ends the first scene of confrontation between faith and tyranny. The curtains fall to be raised again and we see the match in full view.

In Confrontation with the Sorcerers

"*Thereupon Pharaoh withdrew and put together the artful scheme which he would pursue; and then turned up.*" (Verse 60) In this short verse the *sūrah* sums up all that Pharaoh said, the advice he was given by the powerful elite among his government, the discussion with the sorcerers and his encouragement and promises of rich reward to them, as well as the schemes he and his advisers finally plotted. Indeed, this short verse, comprising only six words in the Arabic text, shows three successive movements: Pharaoh's withdrawal into his own quarters, mapping out his strategy and turning up for the confrontation.

Before the confrontation began, Moses felt that he should give the sorcerers some honest and sincere advice. Thus, he warned them against attributing false fabrications to God. So doing, he hoped that they would accept God's guidance and abandon sorcery, which is blatant falsehood: "*Moses said to them: Woe betide you! Do not invent any falsehood against God, lest He afflict you with most grievous suffering. He who contrives such a lie is sure to come to grief*" (Verse 61)

A sincere piece of advice can touch the hearts of those it addresses. This might have been the case here, for some of the sorcerers were touched by Moses' words and began to have second thoughts. Those who were keen to go through with the showdown however began to argue with them in whispers, fearing that Moses would overhear them. "*So they debated among themselves as to what to do; but they kept their counsel secret.*" (Verse 62)

The more hardened of them tried to encourage those who were reluctant, and warned them against a gloomy future under Moses and Aaron. They described the two prophets as being driven by a desire for power, hoping to rule Egypt and change the faith of its people. To forestall their schemes, they needed to demonstrate their unity and confront them as one body, without hesitation. It was a day of outright and decisive confrontation, and the winner would take all.

> *They said: These two are surely sorcerers intent on driving you away from your land by their sorcery, and on doing away with your exemplary way of life. Hence, decide on the scheme you will pursue, and then come forward in one single body. For, indeed, he who prevails today shall ever be successful.* (Verses 63-64)

One sincere word motivated by faith falls like a powerful explosive in the camp of falsehood. It shakes unbelievers' hearts and weakens their ranks. They are no longer sure of their own ability, and they entertain doubts about their own beliefs. Hence the doubters needed such encouragement. They were reminded that Moses and Aaron were merely two men, against a much larger group of sorcerers, backed by Pharaoh, his kingdom, wealth and army. They forgot however that Moses and Aaron were supported by God who hears and sees all.

Perhaps this gives us an explanation of the attitude of Pharaoh and his arrogant tyranny, as well as the attitude of the sorcerers who enjoyed his support. To start with, who are those two men, Moses and Aaron, to be given such importance, with Pharaoh himself putting a challenge to them and accepting their own challenge? What is their position which compels him to put together a deceitful strategy, mustering in the process a large force of skilful sorcerers, who were the best in his land, and bringing all the people to witness the confrontation? How come that he himself comes along and sits with his full entourage to see the confrontation? How is it that Pharaoh is prepared to listen to Moses' argument, which denies him all the privileges he claims for himself, when Moses is no more than an Israelite whose people are continually persecuted under his own rule? This was all due to the dignity God has imparted to Moses and Aaron which inspired awe among all those who listened to them. Moreover, God was with them, listening and seeing all that was taking place.

It was also that awe-inspiring dignity that made one word of Moses sufficient to cause much confusion among the sorcerers, requiring them to hold secret council, magnifying the dangers and motivating one another to remain firm, steady and united.

After all this, they came forward, giving Moses the choice: "*Said [the sorcerers]: Moses! Either you throw [first], or we shall be the first to throw.*" (Verse 65) This is a challenge aiming to show a united, powerful front and a commendable degree of fairness. Hence, his answer was to accept the challenge: "*You throw first.*" (Verse 66) He allowed them to start and produce whatever they wanted so that he could have the final say. And what was the result? They apparently produced a magnificent piece of magic, taking the whole multitude by surprise and even affecting Moses.

"*And by virtue of their sorcery, their ropes and staffs seemed to him to be moving rapidly. And in his heart Moses became apprehensive.*" (Verses 66-67) The Qur'ānic expression,

awjasa fī nafsihī khīfatan, suggests a truly mighty magic, which filled the whole arena. Moses felt fear creep into his heart, even though God was with him hearing and seeing everything as it took place. Needless to say, Moses would not have entertained any fear unless the whole thing was so awesome that for a moment he became oblivious to the fact that he was much stronger. Hence, he needed reminding that he relied on a much superior power:

> *But We said [to him]: Have no fear! It is you who shall certainly prevail. Now throw that which is in your right hand and it shall swallow up all that they have wrought. For, they have wrought nothing but a sorcerer's deceitful trick; and sorcerers can never come to any good, whatever they may do.* (Verses 68-69)

You are the one supporting the truth, while they enjoin nothing but falsehood. You have the faith, while they have their tricks and craft. You believe in the truth of your message, while they have nothing but the reward they hope to receive from Pharaoh and the pleasures of this life. You are the one who derives his strength from God Almighty while they serve a human creature who will die despite his tyrannical power.

Thus God reassures Moses telling him to have no fear. He further tells him: "*Now throw that which is in your right hand.*" (Verse 69)

What he has in his hand is not specified so as to give an air of awe. "*And it shall swallow up all that they have wrought.*" (Verse 69) For it is all sorcery and witchcraft. Sorcerers can never achieve ultimate success, no matter what they do, what device they use or which way they follow. They rely on trickery and deception. There is no real substance to what they do. Hence they fare no better than anyone else who confronts the truth with false appearances. They may put up quite a show and may inspire awe and fear, but then the power of the truth, steady, factual, unboastful, will strike. With that blow falsehood will be defeated immediately, left to retreat into oblivion.

Then Moses threw down his staff. The *sūrah* describes the magnitude of the surprise which then occurred by mentioning how it affected the sorcerers who had come full of hope to win the challenge. Only a few moments earlier, their sorcery, which was of the highest standard, had generated fear among all the spectators, including Moses himself. He, a messenger of God, thought that their ropes and staffs turned into snakes, alive and moving rapidly.

Now the surprise Moses produced completely transformed their feelings and thoughts. So much so that words could not express their reaction: "*So down fell the sorcerers, prostrating themselves, and declared: We do believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.*" (Verse 70) That was like a touch on a very raw nerve, and the whole body is

shaken violently. It was like a light being switched on to dispel all darkness. Such power is felt by reawakened hearts, filling them, in a split second, with unshakeable faith.

A Tyrant's Threat

Do tyrants understand this inner reaction? Do they realize how hearts can be transformed? With a long history of tyranny and injustice, during which they see their subordinates bow to their every command, hasten to fulfil their desire at the slightest indication, tyrants forget that it is God who changes hearts and minds. They cannot appreciate that when a heart responds to contact with God, the bond is complete. The believer, then, derives strength and light from Him alone. Thus, no one can subjugate such a believer to his own power. Hence, Pharaoh's reaction: "*Said [Pharaoh]: Do you believe in him before I have given you permission? Surely, he must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm-trees. You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a more severe and longer lasting punishment.*" (Verse 71)

"*Do you believe in him before I have given you permission?*" (Verse 71) Such is the retort of a tyrant who cannot understand how others feel faith touch their hearts such that they cannot turn it away. After all, people's hearts are, as the Prophet says, held between two of God's, the Most Merciful's, fingers and He turns them around as He wills.

"*Surely, he must he your master who has taught you witchcraft!*" (Verse 71) For Pharaoh, this was the only reason for the sorcerer's submission to Moses. He could not perceive of faith touching their hearts. He could not understand that God's hand had lifted the cover blurring their vision and that they could now see things for what they were.

Pharaoh follows this with the normal kind of threat tyrants use when they feel they have no power over others' hearts and souls. They threaten physical torture and punishment on those who do not submit to their tyranny: "*I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm-trees.*" (Verse 71) Arrogant and boastful, he continues with his claims to authority and power. His is a Brutal force, ready to tear human bodies apart. Thus brute force is utilized to counter solid, logical argument: "*You will then come to know for certain which of us can inflict a more severe and longer lasting punishment.*" (Verse 71)

Hearts Touched by Faith

But it was too late for Pharaoh. Faith had touched the hearts of those sorcerers and the small, insignificant person within each of them was now in firm contact with the great source of real power. Hence, they were now very strong, while all earthly powers were weak. Indeed the whole life on earth is too small when compared to the broad, bright horizons to which those believing hearts now looked up. All that pertains to life on earth is of no consequence: "*They answered: Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being! Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life. As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us. God is certainly the best and He is Everlasting.*" (Verses 72-73)

This is the sort of change faith brings about in the hearts of people who, until a moment earlier, were submissive to Pharaoh, considering their highest achievement to be close to him, receiving his favours. Now they are ready to confront him with a determination that puts his power, throne and wealth in proper perspective: "*Never shall we prefer you to all the evidence of the truth that has come to us, nor to Him who has brought us into being!*" (Verse 72) Such evidence is much more precious in our view, and God, our Creator, is far dearer to us than anything else. "*Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree.*" (Verse 72) This is a challenge to Pharaoh to do his worst. He cannot stop them. "*You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life.*" (Verse 72)

This is as far as Pharaoh's power extends. They tell him clearly that he has no authority over them anywhere other than in this worldly life, which is short, momentary and of little value. Whatever punishment he may inflict on them is too trivial to be feared by a heart that has established close contact with God and hopes to receive His reward in the hereafter. "*As for us, we have come to believe in our Lord, hoping that He may forgive us our faults and all that magic to which you have forced us.*" (Verse 73) They tell him that in the past they could not disobey him when he forced them to practise magic. Now that they have faith, they hope to be forgiven by God who, they realize, is the best and the everlasting. His reward is far more plentiful and enjoyed for much longer than any worldly reward.

The sorcerers who came to believe in God were inspired by their faith to adopt an attitude that looked down on Pharaoh and his power:

> *He who shall appear before his Lord [on Judgement Day] laden with sin shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live. But he who shall appear before Him as a believer, having done righteous deeds, shall be exalted to the highest ranks, abiding in the gardens of Eden, through which running waters flow. Such shall be the recompense of those who keep themselves pure.* (Verses 74-76)

Pharaoh had originally threatened them, saying that his punishment was more

severe and longer lasting. Their reply provides an image of one who comes on the Day of Judgement to meet his Lord, being fully laden with sin. The punishment such a person receives is indeed the longer lasting and more painful, because such a person *"shall be consigned to hell, where he shall neither die nor live."* (Verse 74) He does not enjoy the termination of pain that a dead person normally has, nor is he living so as to enjoy life's pleasures. He simply receives a painful punishment that leads to neither life nor death. On the opposite side the highest ranks are shown. These are the gardens of bliss, irrigated by running waters. Such is *"the recompense of those who keep themselves pure,"* purging themselves of all sin.

Thus these new believers take no notice of a despot's threats, and instead stand up to him with the powerful words of faith. They are profoundly confident, issue a warning based on faith and express their hopes based on a newly-found faith.

This confrontation is recorded in the history of mankind as a declaration of man's freedom, after throwing away the shackles of this worldly life, its powers, worries and aspirations. No human heart can adopt such a confrontational attitude unless it believes in God and relies on His support.

The Drowning of Pharaoh and His Army

The curtains are drawn only to lift again on a new scene in Moses' history. Now we see the triumph of faith and truth in practical life, after their victory as an idea and belief. What we have seen so far is the triumph of the sign given to Moses over sorcery, the new faith in the sorcerers' hearts over their hopes of gain and fears of loss as well as over Pharaoh's threats and punishment. Now we see a related victory for truth over falsehood, guidance over error, and faith over tyranny. All this takes place in real life after it has been achieved in people's consciences. In fact advocates of the truth cannot openly demonstrate their high moral ground until they have triumphed within themselves over all temptation.

Truth and faith have a certain reality which, once materialized within one's conscience, finds its way into real life. Should faith remain an outward appearance that does not touch the heart, and truth remain a raised slogan that has not sunk deep into people's hearts and minds, then tyranny and falsehood may be victorious. They can achieve such a victory with the physical power under their command, one which cannot be matched by the mere appearance of faith and slogans of truth. It is only when the latter are truly established in hearts and minds that they become stronger than the physical might which falsehood and tyranny can muster. This is the fact which we clearly see in Moses' attitude towards the sorcerers and their ploys, and later in the sorcerers' attitude towards Pharaoh and his noblemen. This is the prelude to victory as we see in the next scene in the *sūrah.*

> *Then We thus inspired Moses: 'Go forth with My servants by night, and strike out for them a dry path through the sea. Have no fear of being overtaken, and dread nothing. Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright.* (Verses 77-79)

The *sūrah* does not mention here what happened after the confrontation between faith and tyranny, nor what measures Pharaoh took against the sorcerers after they declared their belief in God, defying his power and tyranny, as well as all earthly temptation. It simply paints this scene of total victory so that the triumph in one's own conscience is directly related to triumph in real life. We also see here how God provides total care for His servants. By the same token, the *sūrah* does not dwell on the scene of departure from Egypt, and the standing before the sea, as these are painted in detail in other *sūrahs.* In fact, it shows the victory scene here without preliminaries, because these concerned people's hearts.

All we have here is the inspiration given to Moses to depart from Egypt at night with the Children of Israel, and to strike out for them a dry path across the sea. We see Moses with complete reassurance as he and his followers receive God's care. Thus, he has no fear of his people being overtaken by Pharaoh or of being overwhelmed by the parted sea. God's will which made the sea such a great volume of water with all its characteristics is able to part it for a while to give those believers a dry path through so as to continue their journey.

"*Pharaoh pursued them with his hosts, but they were overwhelmed by the power of the sea. For Pharaoh had led his people astray and had not guided them aright.*" (Verses 78-79) Thus the *sūrah* sums up how Pharaoh and his host were overwhelmed by the sea. It gives no further details. In this way, it retains its total effect. We realize that Pharaoh had led his people into error in their way of life in the same way as he led them into error by pursuing the believers into the sea. In both cases, he led them to utter ruin.

We prefer not to dwell on the details of what happened to Pharaoh and his people, so that we move on with the *sūrah* as it relates the story. We will, however, reflect for a moment on the lessons that we can derive from this scene.

When God Intervenes

It was God who conducted the battle between faith and tyranny. The believers were not required to do anything other than follow the inspiration received by Moses and to move out at night. The believers were no match for the unbelievers in terms of material power. Moses and his men were weak and powerless, while Pharaoh and his army held all the material power. Hence, a battle between the two parties could

not take place. Therefore, God took over, but only after the truth of faith was fully engrained in the hearts of those whose only strength was that which they derived from faith. Thus we see the tyrant delivering his threat and warning the believers of doom: *"I shall most certainly cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you on the trunks of the palm trees."* (Verse 71) To this, the believers, with their hearts full of faith, reply: *"Decree, then, whatever you are going to decree. You can only decree on what pertains to this worldly life."* (Verse 72)

The simple truth of the matter is that when the battle between faith and tyranny reached this level in people's hearts, God himself took up the banner of truth and hoisted it high, leaving the banner of falsehood trampled upon. All this took place without the believers exerting any effort whatsoever.

We also learn from this account that when the Children of Israel accepted the humiliation Pharaoh imposed on them, by virtue of his persecution campaign, killing their men and sparing their women, God did not interfere on their side. They simply accepted their subjugation, fearing Pharaoh and his power. But when faith was paramount in the hearts of those who believed in Moses and his message, and when they were ready to withstand the torture with their heads held high, declaring their rejection of Pharaoh and their belief in God, then God intervened and conducted the battle. Thus, victory was achieved on the battlefield as it was earlier achieved within their hearts and souls.

Such is the lesson driven home in this *sūrah* as it portrays the two scenes in quick succession, without dwelling on further detail. This is what people of faith should understand, so that they know when to expect God's help to achieve their victory.

The Price for God's Intervention

Yet to those who were saved and granted victory a reminder and a warning are given so that they do not forget or abandon their most important weapon:

> *Children of Israel! We saved you from your enemy, and then We made a covenant with you on the right flank of Mount Sinai. We sent down manna and quails for you. Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin; but I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path.* (Verses 80-82)

They have passed the danger zone and have surged on towards Mount Sinai, leaving Pharaoh and his army drowned. Their deliverance was a recent event which they remember well, but it is recorded here as a reminder, so that they may give thanks.

The appointment at the right hand side of Mount Sinai is mentioned here as though it is an accomplished event, when it was a meeting for which Moses had to prepare himself for over a period of forty nights. He would then receive the tablets and the laws recorded therein. This was a law to regulate the lives of the people entrusted with a mission in the Holy Land after their departure from Egypt.

The fact that they were given manna, a sweet type of food that gathers on leaves, and quails, a type of bird that is easy to catch and eat, was another aspect of God's grace, of His taking care of them in the barren desert where they found themselves. God was looking after them, even to the point of providing them with their daily food, and in such a way that required no hard effort.

God reminds them of all these favours and warns them against transgression, in the form of indulgence in physical pleasure and neglect of the duties they left Egypt to fulfil. God is preparing for them an assignment which they must undertake. The Arabic word used here for transgression, *taṭghaw,* is the same word that signifies the tyranny they experienced in their very recent past. Hence, they are warned: "*Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress, lest you should incur My wrath. He that incurs My wrath has indeed thrown himself into utter ruin.*" (Verse 81) Pharaoh had thrown himself into such ruin only recently, falling off his throne and drowning in the sea. To experience such ruin is to fall from high, which contrasts with tyranny that exalts the tyrant and assumes for him a high position of power. The Qur'ān here juxtaposes such contrasting elements in word and meaning to achieve both heightened effect and perfect harmony.

With this warning against indulgence in easy pleasures and neglect of the task assigned for them, the door for repentance is left open for anyone who slips so that he may return to the proper path. "*But I certainly forgive all sins for anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds, and thereafter keeps to the right path.*" (Verse 82)

Repentance is not merely a word we say with our mouths. It is a resolve in one's mind that manifests itself in strong faith and good deeds, as well as practical behaviour. So when faith is settled in a person's heart, faith is purged of all alien traces, and confirmed by good deeds. In this way, man sets himself on the right path, guided by faith and benefiting by the guarantee provided by good action. Achieving guidance is shown here as the result of strong faith and determined action.

Thus ends the scene of victory and the comments the *sūrah* has to make on it. The curtains fall and lift again to show us the second scene of an address made directly to God by the side of Mount Sinai.

Promises Fulfilled or Broken

God has appointed a time for Moses to meet Him at the Mount after forty days, when he would be given the commandments outlining the tasks his people have to fulfil after the victory they were given. Victory carries with it its own responsibilities, as does faith. Hence, it was necessary for Moses to be psychologically prepared and ready to receive God's commandments.

Thus, Moses went up the Mount, leaving his people at the bottom, after asking his brother Aaron to deputize for him. Moses longed dearly for this encounter, when he would stand in front of his Lord and address Him. He had had this experience once before and was keen to experience it again. Hence, he made haste to stand in the presence of his Lord. He was however totally unaware of what his people had perpetrated after he had left.

His Lord tells him the news, pointing out what has taken place. The scene is shown to us and we listen to the conversation:

> *[And God said]: Now what has caused you, Moses, to leave your people behind in so great a haste?' He answered: 'They are treading in my footsteps, while I have hastened to You, my Lord, so that You might be well pleased with me.' Said He: 'Then [know that] in your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriy has led them astray.'* (Verses 83-85)

Thus Moses is faced with a terrible shock. He was in haste to meet his Lord, after forty days of diligent preparation, eager to listen to His directives and commandments which would constitute the basis of the new way of life for the Children of Israel. It was to be a way of life suited for a community that had been freed from the shackles of subjugation so that it would become the bearer of a divine message.

The long period they had spent in subjugation and humiliation under Pharaoh's rule and his idolatrous beliefs had had a damaging effect on the nature of the Israelites. Their ability to withstand the difficulties that attend the fulfilment of a hard task, and to remain true to their promises in the face of hardship, was certainly suspect. Psychologically, they suffered an impairment which made them always keen to have a comfortable life, even if this meant a willingness to be led without troubling to think. No sooner did Moses leave them under Aaron's stewardship than they allowed their faith to collapse at the first hurdle. Hence, they needed repeated tests and trials in a process of psychological rebuilding. The first test to which they were subjected was that of the golden calf which the Sāmiriy had produced. "*In your absence We have put your people to a test, and the Sāmiriy has led them astray.*" (Verse 85) Moses did not know about this test until his appointment with his Lord.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of the direct address between God and Moses very

briefly in order to describe Moses' reaction to what he learnt, his speedy return, his anger and his sorrow. How could his people do this after God had saved them from humiliating subjugation by tyrannical idolatry, and favoured them with easy provisions and care in the desert? He had only very recently reminded them of God's favours, warning them against going astray. Yet now they follow the first one to call them back to paganism and the worship of a call?

The *sūrah* does not tell us any details about how they were led to this situation. It moves on to the scene of Moses hurriedly returning to his people. However, the way this is described tells us something of these details. Moses has returned, angry, sad, remonstrating with his people and scolding his brother. He must have known the magnitude of their ghastly deed:

> *Thus Moses returned to his people full of wrath and sorrow: My people,' he said, Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you? Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord's condemnation fall upon you, and so you broke your promise to me?' They answered: 'We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will, but we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people's ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire], and likewise this Sāmiriy threw.' Thus he produced for them the effigy of a calf which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten. Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them? And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you.' But they had replied: 'By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us.'* (Verses 86-91)

Such was the trial to which the Israelites were put. It is revealed to us as Moses confronts his people. It is not reported in the scene of the meeting between Moses and his Lord. It is left to the scene of inquiry undertaken by Moses upon his return.

Justifying Deliberate Error

Enraged and full of sorrow, Moses asked his people: *"Did not your Lord hold out a goodly promise to you?"* (Verse 86) God had promised them victory and to enter the Holy Land as a community believing in His oneness. Only very recently had they witnessed the initial steps towards the complete fulfilment of this promise. Hence, he remonstrated with them: *"Did, then, [the fulfilment of] this promise seem to you too long in coming? Or are you determined to see your Lord's condemnation fall upon you?"* (Verse 86) Their action was akin to that perpetrated by one who wants to bring God's condemnation on his head, so he wilfully and deliberately does what incurs it. Moses asked them if this was why they broke their promise to him to maintain the path he

had shown them until his return.

They gave him a singular excuse which exposed the effects on their mentality of their long time living in subservience. It is a ludicrous excuse: *"We did not break our promise to you of our own free-will."* (Verse 87) It was beyond our ability and control. *"But we were loaded with the burdens of the [Egyptian] people's ornaments, and so we threw them [into the fire]."* (Verse 87) They had carried with them loads of jewellery borrowed from Egyptian women. Now they say they wanted to get rid of all these because they were taken unlawfully. The Sāmiriy took these gold articles and made of them the golden calf. The Sāmiriy was either a man from Samaria accompanying them or one of them known by this appellation. When he made the calf, he purposely placed some holes in it, so that when the wind blew, it produced a lowing sound, despite the fact that it had no life or soul. It was merely an inanimate object. But no sooner did they see such a golden calf making such a noise than they forgot their true Lord who had saved them from their humiliation. Most stupidly and inexcusably they started to worship the calf, repeating the ludicrous statement that Moses had been misled when he went to the mountain looking for his deity, while the deity was there with them, as they claimed. They said: *"This is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten."* (Verse 88)

Their stupid remarks also detract from the position of their prophet, Moses, who was the one to accomplish their salvation under God's guidance. What they said about the calf alleged that Moses had no guiding relationship with his Lord. Hence, he did not know how to find Him, taking the wrong path and looking for him in the wrong place.

Yet they were fooled by a simple trick, which they should have easily recognized for what it was. *"Why! Did they not see that it could not give them any response, and that it could neither harm nor benefit them?"* (Verse 89) It was not even a living calf that could hear them and respond in the way that cows and calves respond. It could not aspire to the status of an ordinary animal. It could not bring them the least harm or benefit, not even fighting with its horns or drawing water from a stream.

Moreover, Aaron, their other prophet who deputized for his brother Moses, their saviour, had given them honest and sincere advice, pointing out to them that it was all a test: *"And, indeed, Aaron had said to them earlier: My people! You are but being tempted to evil by this calf. Your only Lord is the Most Merciful! Follow me, then, and do as I bid you."* (Verse 90) He assured them that the proper course for them to take was to follow him as they had promised Moses. He told them that Moses was certain to return when his Lord had finished His business with him. Rather than follow his advice, they evaded their responsibility and abandoned their commitment to obey their prophets, saying: *"By no means shall we cease worshipping it until Moses comes back to us."* (Verse 91)

Thus Moses returned, sorrowful and angry. He listened to his people's excuses which revealed the extent of their twisted logic. In his anger, he turned to his brother dragging him by his head and beard, crying in his anger: *"Aaron, what has prevented you, when you saw that they had gone astray, from following me? Why have you disobeyed me?"* (Verses 92-93) He scolded him for allowing them to worship the calf without taking effective action to prevent them. But Aaron was merely obeying his brother's orders when he had told him not to do anything serious until he returned. Did Aaron, then, disobey his brother by doing so?

The *sūrah* has already stated Aaron's attitude. Now he explains to his brother what he did, trying to calm his fury and awaken his compassion. He reminds him of their close relationship: *"'Son of my mother,' he replied, do not seize me by my beard, or by my head! I was afraid that you might say: You have caused a split among the Israelites and did not wait for my orders."* (Verse 94)

Here we find Aaron to be far more in control of his emotions. He touches on a tender point in Moses' feelings, reminding him of their being siblings. He also explains to him that he simply wished to do what his brother had bid him. He feared that should he adopt strong measures the Children of Israel might split into factions, some worshipping the calf, and others following his advice. Since his brother wanted him to take care of them all, keeping them together, he felt that his attitude was simply one of following the orders he had been given.

Temptation of the Golden Calf

Now Moses addresses all his anger to the Sāmiriy, the perpetrator of the whole trouble. He did not speak to him first because the people themselves should have known better than to follow someone who came up with an outrageous idea. Aaron, as their trusted leader, was also responsible for making sure that they did not slip, should they be faced with temptation. The Sāmiriy takes less importance, since he did not use brute force to compel them to follow his lead, nor did he cast a screen over their faculties of thinking. He simply presented a temptation and they fell for it. They could very easily have remained true to the guidance of their first prophet, Moses, and benefited by the counsel of their second prophet, Aaron. Hence, responsibility lay with them in the first place, then with their leader, and finally with the perpetrator of the trouble.

"Said [Moses]: What is then your case, Sāmiriy?" (Verse 95) How come all this has happened because of you? The way the question is phrased is indicative of the seriousness of the whole affair.

He answered: I have gained insight into something which they were unable to see; and

so I took a handful of dust from the trail of the messenger and flung it away; for thus has my mind prompted me to act. (Verse 96)

There are countless reports that try to explain the Sāmiriy's answer: What did he see? Who was the messenger of whose trail he took a handful? What did this have to do with the calf he made and how did throwing this handful affect the calf he made? It is frequently mentioned in these reports that he saw Gabriel the angel in the form he takes when he descends to earth. So he took a handful of dust from underneath his foot or his horse's hoof and threw the dust at the golden calf to produce the lowing sound, or that this was the cause behind making the jewellery into a lowing calf.

The Qur'ān does not tell us here what really happened; it simply quotes what the Sāmiriy said. We are inclined to consider this an excuse the Sāmiriy concocted in order to evade responsibility for what actually happened. We feel that it was he who made the calf out of the jewellery the Israelites threw away, having taken it deceptively and unlawfully from the Egyptian women. As he made it, he deliberately ensured that as the wind went through its hollow inside it produced such a noise. When questioned about it, he sought an excuse, hence his suggestion that he had seen Gabriel and took a handful of his trail.

Be that as it may, Moses punished him by expelling him for life from the Israelite community, leaving his destiny in the hereafter to God Almighty. He further took a strong and effective measure concerning the deity he had made with his own hands, aiming to show his people that it was an inanimate object, unable to protect its maker or to save itself: "*Said [Moses]: Begone, then! It shall be your lot to say throughout your life, Do not touch me.' But you shall be faced with a destiny from which you shall have no escape. Now look at this deity of yours to whose worship you have become so devoted: we shall most certainly burn it, and then scatter it far and wide over the sea.*" (Verse 97)

Thus the Sāmiriy was ostracized: no one could go near him either to harm or benefit him. Nor was he allowed to touch anyone either. This was one of the penalties prescribed in Moses' faith: expelling the offender and ostracizing him to the extent that no one went near him. The other aspect is that of God's punishment at His own time.

Still angry and furious, Moses ordered the calf to be burnt, cast away and its ashes thrown in the sea. Such a strong action seems to be a characteristic of Moses. In this instance, however, his anger is in defence of God's faith. In such a situation, strong action is commendable.

With the false deity being burnt and blown away, Moses declared the basic principle of true faith: "*Your only deity is God, other than whom there is no deity. His knowledge encompasses all things.*" (Verse 98)

With this declaration we come to the end of the story of Moses as related in this *sūrah.* The overriding tone here is that of the grace God bestows on His servants, His care and forgiveness, even when they err. The *sūrah* does not add any other episode of Moses' history, because subsequent events tell of the punishment God metes out to them for their sinful and corrupt ways. The overall atmosphere of this *sūrah* is one of mercy, compassion and grace, and later episodes do not fit with such an atmosphere.

2
Man's Long Drawn Battle

كَذَٰلِكَ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآءِ مَا قَدْ سَبَقَ ۚ وَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَٰكَ مِن لَّدُنَّا ذِكْرًا ﴿٩٩﴾

Thus do We relate to you some of the history of past events; and thus have We given you, out of Our grace, a reminder. (99)

مَّنْ أَعْرَضَ عَنْهُ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَحْمِلُ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وِزْرًا ﴿١٠٠﴾

All who shall turn away from it will certainly bear a heavy burden on the Day of Resurrection. (100)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهِ ۖ وَسَآءَ لَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ حِمْلًا ﴿١٠١﴾

For ever shall they bear it; and grievous for them will be its weight on the Day of Resurrection, (101)

يَوْمَ يُنفَخُ فِى ٱلصُّورِ ۚ وَنَحْشُرُ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ يَوْمَئِذٍ زُرْقًا ﴿١٠٢﴾

the day when the Trumpet is blown. For on that day We shall assemble all the guilty ones, their eyes dimmed [by terror], (102)

يَتَخَٰفَتُونَ بَيْنَهُمْ إِن لَّبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا عَشْرًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

whispering to one another, 'You have spent but ten days on earth.' (103)

نَّحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذْ يَقُولُ أَمْثَلُهُمْ طَرِيقَةً إِن لَّبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا يَوْمًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

We know best what they will be saying when the most perceptive of them shall say: 'You have spent there but one day!' (104)

They ask you about the mountains. Say: 'My Lord will scatter them far and wide, (105)

وَيَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلْجِبَالِ فَقُلْ يَنسِفُهَا رَبِّى نَسْفًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

and leave the earth level and bare, (106)

فَيَذَرُهَا قَاعًا صَفْصَفًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

with no curves or ruggedness to be seen. (107)

لَّا تَرَىٰ فِيهَا عِوَجًا وَلَآ أَمْتًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

On that day, all will follow the summoning voice from which there will be no escape. All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air. (108)

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَتَّبِعُونَ ٱلدَّاعِىَ لَا عِوَجَ لَهُۥ ۖ وَخَشَعَتِ ٱلْأَصْوَاتُ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ فَلَا تَسْمَعُ إِلَّا هَمْسًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

On that day, intercession will be of no avail to any except a person in whose case the Most Merciful will have granted permission, and whose word He will have accepted. (109)

يَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا تَنفَعُ ٱلشَّفَـٰعَةُ إِلَّا مَنْ أَذِنَ لَهُ ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنُ وَرَضِىَ لَهُۥ قَوْلًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them, whereas they cannot have thorough knowledge of Him. (110)

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِهِۦ عِلْمًا ﴿١١٠﴾

All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self- Subsisting Lord; and undone shall be he who is burdened with evildoing; (111)

۞ وَعَنَتِ ٱلْوُجُوهُ لِلْحَىِّ ٱلْقَيُّومِ ۖ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ حَمَلَ ظُلْمًا ﴿١١١﴾

but anyone who will have done righteous deeds, being a believer, need have no fear of being

وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِنَ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَا يَخَافُ ظُلْمًا وَلَا هَضْمًا ﴿١١٢﴾

wronged or deprived. (112)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا وَصَرَّفْنَا فِيهِ مِنَ ٱلْوَعِيدِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ أَوْ يُحْدِثُ لَهُمْ ذِكْرًا ﴿١١٣﴾

And thus have We bestowed from on high the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, and have given in it many facets to all manner of warnings, so that they may be God-fearing or that it may be for them a source of remembrance. (113)

فَتَعَٰلَى ٱللَّهُ ٱلْمَلِكُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۗ وَلَا تَعْجَلْ بِٱلْقُرْءَانِ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يُقْضَىٰٓ إِلَيْكَ وَحْيُهُۥ ۖ وَقُل رَّبِّ زِدْنِى عِلْمًا ﴿١١٤﴾

Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. Be not in haste with the Qur'ān before it has been revealed to you in full, but always say: 'My Lord, increase my knowledge.' (114)

وَلَقَدْ عَهِدْنَآ إِلَىٰٓ ءَادَمَ مِن قَبْلُ فَنَسِىَ وَلَمْ نَجِدْ لَهُۥ عَزْمًا ﴿١١٥﴾

Long ago, We made a covenant with Adam; but he forgot it, and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose. (115)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِءَادَمَ فَسَجَدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ ﴿١١٦﴾

And when We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; except Iblīs, who refused. (116)

فَقُلْنَا يَٰٓـَٔادَمُ إِنَّ هَٰذَا عَدُوٌّ لَّكَ وَلِزَوْجِكَ فَلَا يُخْرِجَنَّكُمَا مِنَ ٱلْجَنَّةِ فَتَشْقَىٰٓ ﴿١١٧﴾

'Adam,' We said, 'this is indeed a foe to you and your wife; so let him not drive the two of you out of the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction. (117)

إِنَّ لَكَ أَلَّا تَجُوعَ فِيهَا وَلَا تَعْرَىٰ ﴿١١٨﴾

It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, (118)

وَأَنَّكَ لَا تَظْمَؤُا۟ فِيهَا وَلَا تَضْحَىٰ ﴿١١٩﴾

and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun.'(119)

فَوَسْوَسَ إِلَيْهِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ قَالَ يَٰٓـَٔادَمُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَىٰ شَجَرَةِ ٱلْخُلْدِ وَمُلْكٍ لَّا يَبْلَىٰ ﴿١٢٠﴾

But Satan whispered to him, saying: 'Adam, shall I lead you to the tree of life eternal, and to a

kingdom that will never decay?' (120)

فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَتْ لَهُمَا سَوْءَٰتُهُمَا
وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِن وَرَقِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ
وَعَصَىٰٓ ءَادَمُ رَبَّهُۥ فَغَوَىٰ ﴿١٢١﴾

They both ate of its fruit; and thereupon their shameful parts became visible to them, and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the Garden. Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and thus did he stray into error. (121)

ثُمَّ ٱجْتَبَٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ وَهَدَىٰ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Then his Lord elected him [for His grace], accepted his repentance, and bestowed His guidance upon him. (122)

قَالَ ٱهْبِطَا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًۢا ۖ بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ
عَدُوٌّ ۖ فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُم مِّنِّى هُدًى فَمَنِ
ٱتَّبَعَ هُدَاىَ فَلَا يَضِلُّ وَلَا يَشْقَىٰ ﴿١٢٣﴾

'Get down, both of you, and be out of it;' He said, 'each of you shall be an enemy to the other. When guidance shall come to you from Me, he who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery; (123)

وَمَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَن ذِكْرِى فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ
مَعِيشَةً ضَنكًا وَنَحْشُرُهُۥ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ
أَعْمَىٰ ﴿١٢٤﴾

but he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection.' (124)

قَالَ رَبِّ لِمَ حَشَرْتَنِىٓ أَعْمَىٰ وَقَدْ كُنتُ
بَصِيرًا ﴿١٢٥﴾

'Lord,' he will say, 'why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?' (125)

قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ أَتَتْكَ ءَايَٰتُنَا فَنَسِيتَهَا ۖ
وَكَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ تُنسَىٰ ﴿١٢٦﴾

He will reply: 'Thus it is: Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion.' (126)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى مَنْ أَسْرَفَ وَلَمْ يُؤْمِنۢ
بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِۦ ۚ وَلَعَذَابُ ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ أَشَدُّ
وَأَبْقَىٰٓ ﴿١٢٧﴾

For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring. (127)

أَفَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُم مِّنَ
ٱلْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِى مَسَٰكِنِهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ

Can they not see how many generations We have destroyed before their time? They walk about in the very places where they dwelt. In this there are

لَأَيَٰتٍ لِّأُو۟لِى ٱلنُّهَىٰ ﴿١٢٨﴾

signs for people of wisdom. (128)

وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَكَانَ لِزَامًا وَأَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى ﴿١٢٩﴾

Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable. (129)

فَٱصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ قَبْلَ طُلُوعِ ٱلشَّمْسِ وَقَبْلَ غُرُوبِهَا ۖ وَمِنْ ءَانَآئِ ٱلَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْ وَأَطْرَافَ ٱلنَّهَارِ لَعَلَّكَ تَرْضَىٰ ﴿١٣٠﴾

Hence, bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment. (130)

وَلَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِۦٓ أَزْوَٰجًا مِّنْهُمْ زَهْرَةَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا لِنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ ۚ وَرِزْقُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ ﴿١٣١﴾

Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy in order that We may test them thereby. Whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting. (131)

وَأْمُرْ أَهْلَكَ بِٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَٱصْطَبِرْ عَلَيْهَا ۖ لَا نَسْـَٔلُكَ رِزْقًا ۖ نَّحْنُ نَرْزُقُكَ ۗ وَٱلْعَٰقِبَةُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ﴿١٣٢﴾

Enjoin prayer on your people, and be diligent in its observance. We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (132)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا يَأْتِينَا بِـَٔايَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦٓ ۚ أَوَلَمْ تَأْتِهِم بَيِّنَةُ مَا فِى ٱلصُّحُفِ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿١٣٣﴾

They say: 'Why does he not bring us a sign from his Lord?' Has there not come to them a clear evidence of the truth in the earlier scriptures? (133)

وَلَوْ أَنَّآ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُم بِعَذَابٍ مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ لَقَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَا لَوْلَآ أَرْسَلْتَ إِلَيْنَا رَسُولًا فَنَتَّبِعَ ءَايَٰتِكَ مِن قَبْلِ أَن نَّذِلَّ وَنَخْزَىٰ ﴿١٣٤﴾

Had We destroyed them with a calamity before his coming, they would have said, 'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger, we would have followed Your revelations rather than be humiliated and disgraced.' (134)

قُلْ كُلٌّ مُّتَرَبِّصٌ فَتَرَبَّصُوا۟ ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلصِّرَٰطِ ٱلسَّوِىِّ وَمَنِ

Say: 'Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided.' (135)	ٱهۡتَدَىٰ ﴿١٣٥﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* started with a discussion on the Qur'ān, making it clear that the purpose of its revelation to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was not that he might be afflicted by it. Part of the Qur'ān covers the story of Moses and how it reflects the care God took of Moses, his brother Aaron and their people. Now that the story has been told, the *sūrah* resumes speaking about the Qur'ān, the role it is intended to play and the fate which is bound to be suffered by those who turn their backs to it. This fate is shown in a scene of the Day of Judgement in which the days of this present life are seen to be infinitesimal, the earth loses its mountains and is seen flat and bare; sounds are hushed before God the Most Merciful; and faces are humbled before God, the Ever-Living. This scene, and the warnings made in the Qur'ān, are intended to arouse feelings of God- consciousness, reminding people of their relationship with God. This passage concludes by giving the Prophet renewed comfort with respect to the Qur'ān which was being revealed to him. He must not hasten to repeat its words during the process of receiving it as he used to do fearing that he might forget some parts of it. He need not entertain any such fear, because God has taken it upon Himself to preserve the Qur'ān and make it easy for recitation and study. In this context, the Prophet is instructed to pray to God to give him more knowledge.

Since the Prophet was keen to repeat the Qur'ānic revelations as they were given to him, for fear of forgetting them, the *sūrah* mentions how Adam forgot God's covenant. This is followed by the declaration of hostility between him and Satan, stating the different ends of the people who remember their covenant with God and those who forget it. These two different ends are shown in one of the scenes of the Day of Resurrection the Qur'ān portrays, as though the Day gives the end of the journey which started in heaven and aims to return there.

The *sūrah* concludes with fine touches aiming to comfort the Prophet so that he is not afflicted by those who deny the truth of his message or those who turn away from it. They have their appointed term. He should not attach any importance to the worldly riches they may have been given, because this is all a test which they have to pass.

Instead, he should be more preoccupied with his worship and with glorifying and praising God so that he can find reassurance and contentment. Generations were destroyed before these and they provided the example and the warning, but God now willed to send them His last Messenger so that they had no excuse for rejecting the truth. Since they turned away from him, he should leave them alone to face their inevitable end: *"Say: Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided."* (Verse 135)

Reasons for Qur'ānic History

> *Thus do We relate to you some of the history of past events; and thus have We given you, out of Our grace, a reminder. All who shall turn away from it will certainly bear a heavy burden on the Day of Resurrection. For ever shall they bear it; and grievous for them will be its weight on the Day of Resurrection, the day when the Trumpet is blown. For on that day We shall assemble all the guilty ones, their eyes dimmed [by terror], whispering to one another, 'You have spent but ten days on earth.' We know best what they will be saying when the most perceptive of them shall say: 'You have spent there but one day!' (Verses 99-104)*

Just as Moses' history is related in the Qur'ān, so do We also relate other past events. The Qur'ān is described here as 'a reminder', because it reminds us of God, His signs and messages, as well as other signs given to people of old.

Those who turn away from this reminder are described here as guilty, and they are shown in a scene from the Day of Judgement. We see them carrying their burdens like a traveller carries his luggage, but theirs are foul, troublesome burdens. When the trumpet is blown to gather all creatures, the guilty come forward with blue faces showing their grief and worry. Terrified, they speak to one another in whispers: they cannot raise their voices. All this describes the fear that overwhelms them at that moment when all the dead are raised. But what is the subject of their whispers? They simply try to guess the duration of their life on earth, for that life has become so short in their view that they imagine it to have lasted only a few days. Some of them say: *"You have spent but ten days on earth."* (Verse 103) However, those with a better judgement and a more accurate view feel life on earth to have been much shorter than that. They tell the others: *"You have spent there but one day."* (Verse 104)

Thus their life on earth, with all its pleasures, comforts, grief and worries, shrinks into insignificance. It lasted only a brief period of time, and was of little value to anyone. For what is the value of ten days, even when they bring all sorts of happiness and enjoyment? And what price may be attached to one night, even though its every minute was one of pleasure and happiness? How could these compare with the endless time which awaits them after the Day of Resurrection?

All Submit to God

This awesome scene is further enhanced by returning to a question they had asked during their life on earth about the mountains and what would happen to them. The answer vividly describes the state of fear in which they find themselves:

> *They ask you about the mountains. Say: 'My Lord will scatter them far and wide, and leave the earth level and bare, with no curves or ruggedness to be seen. On that day, all will follow the summoning voice from which there will be no escape. All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air. On that day, intercession will be of no avail to any except a person in whose case the Most Merciful will have granted permission, and whose word He will have accepted. He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them, whereas they cannot have thorough knowledge of Him. All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord; and undone shall be he who is burdened with evildoing; but anyone who will have done righteous deeds, being a believer, need have no fear of being wronged or deprived.'* (Verses 105-112)

These images come clearly to our eyes, and we see the great mountains, which we have known to be firmly rooted and stable, being blown and scattered. They are raised no more; indeed they are flat, level with no curves or any rugged surface. The whole earth is flat, level, having neither hills nor valleys.

But after the blowing away of the mountains, the storm dies down and the gathered multitudes listen attentively. Every movement and every little sound is hushed. They all listen to the voice that calls them to group together, and they follow its commands submissively, acting promptly, turning neither here nor there. This is a totally different reaction from the one they showed in this life when they were called on to follow divine guidance, but they turned away and refused. We note the perfect harmony of expression when the response to the summoning voice is total, with no escape, while the old mountains are now part of the flat, level earth that has no curve or elevation.

This is followed by a state of perfect silence, with no sound to be heard: "*All sounds will be hushed before the Most Merciful, and you will hear nothing but a faint sough in the air... All faces shall be humbled before the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting Lord.*" (Verses 108 and 111)

The whole scene is majestic, whereas the whole place, vast and infinite, is still, silent, and quiet. Whenever anyone speaks, they only whisper. Questions are raised very quietly, for all feel their humility. God's majesty imparts an air of great reverence. No one can intercede except a person whose words are acceptable to God. All knowledge belongs to God, while creatures cannot have full knowledge of Him. The wrongdoers will be burdened with the wrongs they have perpetrated, which

will lead them to ruin, while the believers are reassured, fearing no injustice or lack of appreciation of their good works. The whole scene is one of great majesty, witnessed by God, the Most-Merciful.

> *And thus have We bestowed from on high the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, and have given in it many facets to all manner of warnings, so that they may be God-fearing or that it may be for them a source of remembrance."* (Verse 113)

It is in the same pattern that the Qur'ān gives a whole variety of warnings, painting scenes of awesome and reverential fear to remind those who reject its message of what they will face in the life to come. Perhaps they will take heed, or realize that they need to act before it is too late. Hence, at the beginning of the *sūrah* God says to His Messenger: "*We did not bestow this Qur'ān on you from on high to cause you distress, but only as an admonition to the God-fearing.*" (Verses 2-3)

At the beginning of his message, the Prophet used to repeat the words of God's revelations before the angel had finished them. He did so because he was very keen that he should not forget a word. This was not easy for him. Hence, his Lord reassures him that he will not forget what is entrusted to him.

"*Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. Be not in haste with the Qur'ān before it has been revealed to you in full, but always say: My Lord, increase my knowledge.'*" (Verse 114) Most sublime is God, the true King of the whole universe. Before Him all heads are hung down, and all perpetrators of injustice are powerless, while believers who have done well are reassured. It is He who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high. Therefore, you, Muĥammad, need not hasten to repeat its words. He has sent it down for a definite purpose, and He will not allow it to be lost. All you need to do is to pray to Him for increased knowledge, reassured that what He has given you will not be taken away. True knowledge is that imparted by God. It is a knowledge that lingers, brings benefit, yields good fruits and is never wasted.

Man's Lack of Purpose

The *sūrah* gives a brief account of Adam's story, when he forgot the commitment he made to God. When he was tempted by the prospect of immortality, he yielded, listening to Satan and his promptings. This was a test which God wanted him to go through before he was placed in charge of the earth. It also provided an example of what Satan can do, so that Adam's offspring would learn the lesson. When the test was completed, God bestowed His mercy on Adam, assigning his role to him, and providing him with guidance.

Every story related in the Qur'ān is made to fit with the context in which it is

given. In this *sūrah,* Adam's story follows soon after the reference to the Prophet's hasty repetition of Qur'ānic revelations, for fear of forgetting them. Hence, Adam's forgetting of his commitment is referred to at the outset. Moreover, the story is given in a *sūrah* which reveals many aspects of God's grace bestowed on those chosen servants whom He places under His care. Therefore, in this story the point is made that God chose Adam, accepted his repentance and provided him with guidance. This is followed by a scene of the Day of Resurrection portraying the two different ends of God's obedient servants on the one hand and, on the other, those who persist in disobedience. This is shown like a journey back from earth to the first abode where everyone is given their rightful reward. Let us now look at the story as it is related in this *sūrah.*

"Long ago, We made a covenant with Adam; but he forgot it, and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose." (Verse 115) God's covenant with Adam was that he could eat of all the fruits in the Garden except for one tree that represented the prohibition necessary to strengthen willpower, assert one's personality and liberate oneself of the oppressive pressure of desire. All this is necessary to give the human soul the freedom to do without its supposed needs, so that it is not enslaved by desire. This is indeed the true measure of human excellence. Whenever man's will weakens under the pressure of desire, he sinks closer to the level of animals.

Hence, God so tested man initially in order to prepare him for his role of building human life on earth. Thus the test is seen to be part of God's grace which He bestows on man in abundance: his power to resist temptation is alerted and enhanced. His eyes are opened to the struggle awaiting him between the pleasures raised before him by Satan and his will to honour his commitment to God. The results of this first test are made public: *"He forgot it [i.e. his commitment], and We found him lacking in firmness of purpose."* (Verse 115) The result is declared before the details of the test have been given.

"And when We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; except Iblīs, who refused." (Verse 116) This first episode of the story is given in very general terms, without the details given in other *sūrahs.* The general context here is one of mercy, care and blessings. Hence, these aspects are brought forth very quickly: *"Adam,' We said, 'this is indeed a foe to you and your wife; so let him not drive the two of you out of the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction. It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun.'"* (Verses 117-119)

We see how God takes care to alert Adam to the wicked designs employed by his enemy, warning him against Satan's treachery, after he disobeyed God's command to prostrate himself before Adam. The warning is very precise, showing the inevitable result of listening to Satan and his promptings: *"Let him not drive the two of you out of*

the Garden, for then you will be plunged into affliction." (Verse 117) Once Adam is thrown out of heaven, all he will have is affliction: hard labour, going astray, worry, indecision, endless waiting, agony, deprivation, etc. As long as he is in Paradise, he is immune to all affliction: "*It is guaranteed that you shall not hunger here or feel naked, and you shall not thirst here or suffer from the blazing sun."* (Verses 118-119) All that man needs is available in plenty in Paradise, which means that man should ensure he stays there. We note here how hunger and nakedness are shown to be parallel to thirst and intense heat. These four represent man's initial concerns as he tries to find food, clothing, drink and shade.

Adam however was without experience. Moreover, he was burdened by weakness, such as his desire for survival and his other desire to feel himself powerful. It was through these weaknesses that Satan was able to tempt him: "*But Satan whispered to him, saying: Adam, shall I lead you to the tree of life eternal, and to a kingdom that will never decay?"* (Verse 120)

We see here how Satan touches Adam's raw nerve. Man's life and power are limited. Hence, he longs for survival and lasting power. These two desires provided Satan with suitable openings. As we have said, Adam had all human weaknesses planted in him for a definite purpose. Hence, he forgot his commitment and transgressed the permitted limits: "*They both ate of its fruit; and thereupon their shameful parts became visible to them, and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the Garden. Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and thus did he stray into error."* (Verse 121)

It appears that what Adam and his wife saw were their genitals, which had thus far been covered. This is the more likely explanation, since they started to cover themselves again, piecing together leaves from the trees in heaven. On the other hand, the expression may mean that their action aroused their sexual desire. Prior to sexual feelings, man does not feel any shame in leaving his private parts exposed. Indeed, he may not be aware of them unless he feels such urges. It is then that he experiences shame and feels too shy to expose himself.

It may be that the tree was forbidden to Adam and his wife because its fruits could awaken their sexual desire. Perhaps it was intended to leave this desire dormant for a time. It could be, on the other hand, that their forgetting of their commitment to God and their disobedience of His orders resulted in a weakening of their willpower and a break of their bond with the Lord Creator, giving way to the emergence of sexual and reproductive desires. It is only in this way that man can extend his life beyond his own term. All these are possible explanations for the association between their eating of the forbidden tree and their becoming aware of their nakedness. The Qur'ān does not say, "their shameful parts became visible"; rather, these parts became visible "to them". This suggests that these parts were screened from them and then

became exposed through their own inner feelings. In another *sūrah* the Qur'ān says: *"Satan whispered to them both, so that he might show them their nakedness, of which they had previously been unaware."* (7: 20) *"[Satan] stripped them of their garment in order to make them aware of their nakedness."* (7: 27) Perhaps the clothing that Satan removed was not physical, but rather, a protective feeling of innocence, purity and closeness to God. These are mere hypotheses which we neither emphasize nor give weight to. We state them only to make the first human experience with temptation clearer.

But God extended His grace to Adam and his wife after he had disobeyed Him. This was only the first experience: *"Then his Lord elected him [for His grace], accepted his repentance, and bestowed His guidance upon him."* (Verse 122) Realizing the enormity of his error, Adam repented and sought God's forgiveness, but this is not mentioned here in order to leave God's grace to be seen most clearly.

Drawing the Lines of Battle

The order was then given to the two combatants to descend to earth, which would be the battleground in this long-lasting war: *"Get down, both of you, and be out of it; each of you shall be an enemy to the other."* (Verse 123) Thus, the enmity was declared the whole world over. This means that there is no excuse for Adam and his progeny. None can claim to have been taken unawares. Everyone knows the score and the unabating hostility. The whole universe is aware of it: *"Each of you shall be an enemy to the other."* (Verse 123)

Along with this declaration which resounded throughout the heavens and the earth, and which was witnessed by all the angels, God has willed, out of His grace, to send His messengers bringing guidance to mankind, before He punishes them for their sins. Thus, at the same time He alerts His servants to this enmity between Adam and Satan, He announces to them that He will provide them with guidance. He will then give them their reward according to whether they follow His guidance or reject it:

> *When guidance shall come to you from Me, he who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery; but he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened lift and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection. 'Lord,' he will say, 'why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?' He will reply: 'Thus it is: Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion. 'For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring.* (Verses 123-127)

This promise of the guidance mankind will receive from God is made immediately

after Adam's story, as though it constitutes a part of it. It is declared there in heaven at the conclusion of the story. It is, then, final, determined long ago, admitting no cancellation or amendment.

"He who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery." (Verse 123) When human beings follow divine guidance, they are immune from going astray and suffering misery. Both eventualities however exist, but God protects those of His servants who follow His guidance from them. Misery is attendant on following error, even though a person has all the pleasures the world can give. Indeed, such pleasures are part of his misery both in this life and in the life to come. For every forbidden pleasure is succeeded by pain and negative consequences. When human beings stray from God's guidance, they sink into worry, confusion and instability. They swing from one extreme to the other. Misery will always be the result of such worry and confusion, even though a person enjoys all the riches life can give. But the ultimate misery is that suffered in the hereafter. However, those who follow God's guidance are protected from error and misery in this earthly life. This compensates them for their lost Paradise until they return to it on the appointed day.

"But he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) When human life severs its links with God, depriving itself of His abundant grace, it becomes straitened, even though it may be materially affluent. It is a type of stress attendant on being isolated from God and the reassurance of His mercy. It is a stress that demonstrates itself in worry, doubt and confusion; holding tight to what one owns and fearing unexpected loss; coveting all manner of comfort and pleasure; nurturing aspirations and ambitions, etc. People do not feel true reassurance except when they place their trust in God, holding tight to their bond with Him. The reassurance generated by faith in God adds much to life's dimensions in length, breadth, depth and expanse. Without such reassurance, life is nothing but a continuous misery and is far harder than what man suffers through poverty and deprivation.

"We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) This is the same type of going astray as that which man went through in the life of this world. It comes by way of recompense for his turning away from God's message in this first life. Hence, he asks: *"Lord, why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?"* (Verse 125) The answer is not long coming: *"Thus it is.. Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion. For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the lift to come shall be most severe and most enduring."* (Verses 126-127)

Anyone who turns his back on God's message certainly transgresses. He walks away from the guidance brought to him by God's Messenger when it is the richest

blessing and the most valuable resource. He transgresses as he turns his sight to objects he was not meant to look at, yet remains oblivious to God's revelations. It is not surprising that he lives a straitened life. Moreover, on the Day of Resurrection he will be raised up blind.

We note here how the wording and the images drawn provide complementary and contrasting scenes: the fall from heaven is followed by misery and going astray. It contrasts with the return to heaven where one is free from all such misery. A life of ease contrasts with a straitened life, and guidance contrasts with blindness. All this comes by way of comment on Adam's story, which is the story of all mankind. It starts and ends in heaven, as we saw earlier in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights. However the scenes here are different. In each case, they fit the general emphasis of the *sūrah* in which they are drawn.

The Lessons of History

The *sūrah* now moves us along to look at how earlier communities met their fate, which is much closer to us than the Day of Judgement. Moreover, we can see their destruction and what is left of them with our own eyes, while we cannot see resurrection.

> *Can they not see how many generations We have destroyed before their time? They walk about in the very places where they dwelt. In this there are signs for men of wisdom. Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable.* (Verses 128-129)

When we look with our eyes and minds at the fate of earlier communities; when we look closely at the lands were they lived and prospered; when we imagine their dwellings and how they became empty with no one living in them; when we stretch our imagination to see them walking through their lands, going here and there, moving along, taking rest, looking to their futures, dealing with their worries, and then open our eyes to see nothing but emptiness, we realize that we are at the edge of a precipice that threatens to engulf us like it did earlier communities. We know that the great power that overwhelmed earlier generations is able to overwhelm the present ones as well. We understand then the meaning of the warning given to us, because the lesson is there for us to see. How come, then, that people do not recognize divine guidance when the fate of earlier generations provides every guiding indication to anyone who has a mind to use: *"In this there are signs for people of wisdom."* (Verse 128)

Divine wisdom has willed that God will not eliminate them by a calamity that befalls them in this present world. This is the reason why they do not meet a similar

fate. This is a situation God has decreed, giving them respite up to a term appointed for them. Otherwise they too would have been punished for their rejection of the truth: *"Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable."* (Verse 129)

The Way to Contentment

We mentioned that the unbelievers had been given respite. They will have their term, but they have definitely not been abandoned. The Prophet is told not to pay much attention to them or to the luxuries and comforts they have been given in this life. All this is a test for them. What God has given him of His blessings is much better and greater. He is to remain patient and steadfast:

> *Hence, bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment. Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy in order that We may test them thereby. Whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting. Enjoin prayer on your people, and be diligent in its observance. We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you. The future belongs to the God-fearing.* (Verses 130-132)

The Prophet is instructed to bear with patience whatever the unbelievers say. He is not to answer their blasphemy, rejection or ridicule. *He* should be neither distressed by what they say, nor grieved at what may await them. He is to turn to his Lord, glorifying Him before sunrise and sunset: early with the fresh breath of dawn as life awakens, and late as everything begins to cool down when the sun is about to set and the whole universe seems to close its eyes, ready to sleep. He is to glorify God and praise Him intermittently through the day and the night, so as to keep his link with Him throughout.

Such glorification is urged on the Prophet, and all his followers, *"so that you may attain a state of contentment."* (Verse 130) When we glorify God, we have a direct link with Him, and the person who maintains such a link is contented, reassured. He is in a state of contentment as everything around him feels content; and he is reassured because he knows that, with God's help, he is safe and secure. Thus, contentedness is the fruit of worship and God's glorification. In itself, it is a reward that is generated within one's heart.

So the Prophet is instructed to turn his face to God offering his worship. He is further instructed: *"Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this*

world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy" (Verse 131) There is plenty of splendour in this life which may appear very tempting. There are luxuries, pleasures, wealth, children, high position and power. But all this is merely a 'flower', to use the exact word of the Qur'ān; and like a flower, all this splendour will fade within a very brief period. Hence, they are given all this splendour to enjoy *"in order that We may test them thereby."* (Verse 131) Thus, their true metal will be known by the way they use what God has favoured them with of the splendour of this life. But then they must realize that at the end of the day, *"whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting."* (Verse 131) This refers to what the believers are given in the life to come. These provisions are for enjoyment, not a test. They have no special lure to turn people away from what is better. They are the better provision and they are everlasting.

We must not understand this verse as encouraging self-denial or disdain for the comforts of this life. It is rather an encouragement to hold on to true and lasting values, to maintain one's ties with God and be contented. This is the best way to resist the temptation of the splendour and attractions of this life. When we maintain such values, we are free to rise above the lure of false temptations, splendid as they may appear.

"Enjoin prayer on your people." (Verse 132) The first duty of a Muslim is to make his home a Muslim home, enjoining his family to attend to their prayers so that they all maintain their ties with God. Thus, they are united in their approach to life. Life in a home where all members turn to God for worship is certainly a happy one.

"And be diligent in its observance." (Verse 132) Be diligent so that you offer your prayers complete and its effect becomes a reality. Prayer restrains man from loathsome deeds and indecency. This is its true effect. To attain the level where prayer provides such restraint requires diligence in its observance. Unless we reach the stage that our prayer yields this fruit, it remains a mere sequence of phrases and movements.

Prayer and worship generally are duties assigned to the Prophet and believers. God does not gain anything by them. He is in need of no one: *"We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you."* (Verse 132) Worship nurtures God-consciousness within the worshipper. Hence, *"the future belongs to the God-fearing."* (Verse 132) It is man who benefits by prayer, both in this life and in the life to come. He offers his worship to God and he enjoys, as a result, a state of contentment. He is comfortable, reassured. Furthermore, he ultimately receives a much greater reward in the hereafter. As for God, He needs nothing from anyone.

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it refers again to those people who, enjoying position and power, reject God's revelations and demand that the Prophet deliver a

miracle. They make such demands even after the Prophet has given them the Qur'ān which explains in all clarity what previous messages from God were like.

"*They say: 'Why does he not bring us a sign from his Lord?' Has there not come to them a clear evidence of the truth in the earlier scriptures?*" (Verse 133) They need no physical miracle. Hence, their demands betray their arrogance. The Qur'ān is more than sufficient as proof. It links the new message with God's previous messages, uniting them all and clarifying what was left in general terms in previous messages.

God has given those who deny the truth everything they need to recognize the truth and believe in it when He sent them His last Messenger: "*Had We destroyed them with a calamity before his coming, they would have said, 'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger, we would have followed Your revelations rather than be humiliated and disgraced.'*" (Verse 134)

At the time when this verse was recited, they had been neither humiliated nor disgraced. The verse describes their inevitable end which will bring them humiliation and disgrace. It may be that they will then say: *'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger.'* Now a Messenger is sent to them and they have no excuse to justify their rejection.

As the *sūrah* describes their end, the Prophet is commanded to leave them alone, without grieving for them. He should announce to them that he will await the end, and let them await it as they wish: "*Say: Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided.*" (Verse 135)

Thus the *sūrah* ends. It started with assuring the Prophet that the Qur'ān was not revealed to him to cause him any distress. It defined the role of the Qur'ān as '*an admonition to the God-fearing.*' (Verse 3) The end is in full harmony with the beginning. It provides a reminder and an admonition for those who may benefit thereby. As the Prophet conveyed his message complete, the only thing that remains is to await the end, which is determined by God.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol XII

Sūrahs 21-25

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **VI**

Al-Anbiyā' **1**

Prologue *1*

1 Clear Solid Evidence *5*
Reckoning Drawing Close 9
The Messengers God Sends 11
The Book Giving Distinction to Arabs 13
Still, Silent and Lifeless 15
Vanquishing Falsehood 16
Proof Is Required 18
Claiming a Son for God 20
Universal Evidence of God's Oneness 21
The Inevitable End of All People 24

2 A Warning Not to be Ignored *26*
Overview 28
Protection to be Sought 28
Unheeded Warnings 31
Accurate Scales Ensuring Absolute Justice 31

3 One Community of Believers *33*
Overview 39
Guidance and Light for Moses 39
Questioning People's Beliefs 40
A Debate to Open People's Eyes 42
When the Fire Was Made Cool 44
Endowed with Knowledge and Wisdom 46
A Special Gift to a Special Man 48
A Test of Hardship for a Prophet 50
Swallowed by the Whale 52
One Community Throughout History 54

4 A Mercy for Mankind *57*
Overview 59
Rules That Never Fail 60
One Destiny for Idol and Worshipper 61
Who Inherits the World 63
A Manifestation of Grace 65
An Appeal for Judgement 67

Al-Hajj **69**

Prologue *69*
A Starting Jolt 70

1 The Pilgrimage *73*
A Fear-Striking Opening 77
The Way Leading to Error 78
The Stages of Man's Creation 78
The Ultimate Truth 82
A Conditional Approach to Faith 84

Judgement Between All Creeds ... 86
Widely Divergent Ends ... 88
Overview ... 93
The First Sanctuary ... 93
Establishing the Sanctuary ... 95
Announcing the Pilgrimage ... 96
The Pilgrimage Conference ... 98
Fall, Snatch and the Deep End ... 100
A Sacrifice of Distinction ... 101
Permission to Fight ... 104
In Defence of the Believers ... 107
Assured Victory ... 108
When Victory is Granted ... 110

3 The Sights, Blind Hearts ... *112*
Overview ... 114
Past Communities Punished ... 115
A Parting of the Ways ... 117
Foiling Satan's Efforts ... 119
Messengers' Great Hopes ... 121
Hasty Hopes ... 124

4 Abraham's Choice of Name ... *126*
Overview ... 129
A Fitting Reward ... 130
Absolute Truth ... 132
Mercy Without Limit ... 133
No Room for Argument ... 135
Powerless Man ... 137
Striving for the Right Cause ... 139

Al-Mu'minūn ... **143**

Prologue ... *143*

1 Man, Faith and the Universe ... *146*
Success Guaranteed by Faith ... 148
Social and Moral Qualities ... 150
Qualities Guaranteeing Admission to Heaven ... 152
The Origins of Man ... 153
Different Stages in the Creation of Man ... 155
Further Aspects of Creation ... 157
Blessings All Around Us ... 158

2 One Message for All Mankind ... *161*
Overview ... 164
The First Messenger ... 165
Drowned in a Great Flood ... 166
Along the Same Way to Ruin ... 168
Facing the Same Rejection ... 170

3 A Book Stating the Truth ... *173*
Overview ... 178
Competing in Good Works ... 178
Will They Not Reflect? ... 180
The Line the Truth Follows ... 182
Inspiring Signs ... 184
Questions with One Answer ... 186
The True Concept of God ... 188

4 Justice and Grace ... *191*
Overview ... 193
As Death Approaches ... 193
The Basic Issue of Faith ... 196

Al-Nūr ... **198**

Prologue ... *198*

1 The Mandatory Punishment for Adultery ... *201*
An Unusual Beginning ... 205
Is Hard Punishment Justified? ... 208
Measures Against False Accusation ... 210
When a Husband Accuses His Wife ... 212
Legislation is Given When Needed ... 214
A False Accusation Against the Prophet's Wife ... 216
As the Prophet Faces False Accusations ... 221
How the False Story Was Circulated ... 224
Two Steps for Proof ... 226
When Falsehood Circulates ... 227
Further Warnings, More Grace ... 229
Attaining the Sublime ... 230

2 Measures to Preserve Decency ... *233*
Overview ... 235
Before Entering a House ... 235
Visiting People When They Are Not Ready ... 236
Good Manners and High Morals ... 239
Proper Control of a Natural Desire ... 239
Prompt Compliance with Divine Orders ... 242
Promoting Easy Marriage ... 245
Financial Help for Marriage ... 246
Fair Treatment for the Least Privileged ... 247

3 The Light of Heaven and Earth ... *250*
Overview ... 252
God's Radiant Light ... 253
An Example Portraying God's Light ... 253
Deeds That Come to Nothing ... 256
All Glorify God ... 257
Snatching Eyesight ... 258

4 Guidance to the Straight Path ... *262*
Overview ... 264
Contrasting Attitudes ... 264
The Road to True Success ... 267
God's True Promise ... 269
Not Included in God's Promise ... 272

5 Perfect Manners ... *274*
Overview ... 276
Good Manners at Home ... 277
Rules Relaxed ... 278
Good Manners with the Prophet ... 280
A Stern Warning to the Disobedient ... 282

Al-Furqān ... **284**

Prologue ... *284*

1 To Distinguish Right from False ... *289*

The Purpose of Qur'ānic Revelations ... 292
Accusations without Basis ... 297
Honouring Mankind ... 299
Denying Resurrection ... 302
Entrusting God's Message to Man ... 304

2 Below Animal Level ... *306*
Overview ... 309
Ominous Prospects for the Unbelievers ... 309
What Use is Regret? ... 313
A Complaint by God's Messenger ... 314
The Time Span of Qur'ānic Revelations ... 316
The Fate of Earlier Unbelievers ... 318
Ridiculing God's Messenger ... 319
When Desire is Worshipped ... 322

3 Raising Support Against God ... *324*
Overview ... 326
Moving Shadows, Still Night ... 327
Jihad by Means of the Qur'ān ... 329
Separating Types of Water ... 332
The Great Miracle of Life ... 333
In League Against God ... 334
In Whom to Trust ... 336
Setting the Universe to Order ... 337

4 God's True Servants ... *339*
Overview ... 341
The Distinctive Features of Faith ... 341
Steering Away from Sin ... 343
Erasing Sin Through Repentance ... 344
Further Qualities of True Believers ... 345
Destined for the Finest Abode ... 346

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	ʻ	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 21

Al-Anbiyā'

(The Prophets)

Prologue

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah,* as with all other parts of the Qur'ān revealed in that period, deals with the issue of faith. It does so under three main headings: namely, God's oneness, His message, and mankind's resurrection.

The flow of the *sūrah* deals with its subject matter, referring to a number of great universal phenomena and linking them with faith. The point of this is that faith is part of the universal structure, and the same phenomena apply to it. It illustrates the truth which is at the heart of the heavens and the earth and their constitution. It reflects the seriousness with which their affairs are conducted. It is neither a matter of play nor a question of falsehood, in the same way as the universe was not created for play, nor was any element of falsehood mixed with its creation: *"We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play."* (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* concentrates people's eyes, hearts and minds on the universe and its great phenomena: the heavens and the earth, mountains and valleys, night and day, sun and moon. It draws their attention to the unity of the laws that govern all these and conduct their affairs, and how this unity provides powerful evidence of the unity of the Creator who owns this vast universe. No partner has He in His kingdom, in the same way as He has no partner in its creation: *"Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin!"* (Verse 22)

The *sūrah* also draws our attention to the unity of the phenomena which govern life on earth and the unity of the source of life: *"We have made out of water every living thing."* (Verse 30) All living things will face the same end: *"Every soul shall taste*

death." (Verse 35) They will then arrive at the same destiny: *"To Us you all must return."* (Verse 35)

Faith is closely linked to these major universal phenomena. It is the same faith, even though many messengers have been sent to convey it to people: *"Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone."* (Verse 25) It is God's will that all messengers were human beings: *"Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired."* (Verse 7)

Just like faith is closely linked to major universal phenomena, the same applies to what the advocates of faith may encounter in this world. The rule that never fails is that the truth will ultimately triumph and falsehood will be wiped out, because the truth is a universal reality and its victory is a divine law: *"We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away."* (Verse 18) By the same token, the wrongdoers who deny the truth are bound to be destroyed, but God will save His messengers and the believers: " *We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds."* (Verse 9) God's devoted servants are the eventual heirs of the earth: *"We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that 'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth."* (Verse 105)

The *sūrah* then presents a quick review of the single community that has followed God's messengers. It pauses long to reflect on the stories of Abraham, David and Solomon, but makes only brief references to Noah, Moses, Aaron, Lot, Ishmael, Idrīs, Dhu'l-Kifl, Jonah, Zachariah, John and Jesus, (peace be upon them all). Some of the issues, already tackled in the *sūrah* as general rules and phenomena, are reflected again in this review in the form of practical events encountered by God's messengers and their followers.

The flow of the *sūrah* also includes some scenes of the Day of Judgement in which we find the same meanings and concepts reflected again as part of the reality of that great day.

We see, then, how varying cadences employed in the *sūrah* serve the same purpose of alerting the human mind so that it recognizes the truth of the faith preached by the last of God's messengers. For people cannot receive the message while indulging in play, turning away and paying little heed to it, as they are described in the opening verses: *"Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; their hearts set on pleasure."* (Verses 1-3)

This message of Islam is both true and serious, in the same way as this universe is true and serious. Therefore, there may be no jest and play in receiving God's

message, as in making demands for miraculous evidence. Evidence of a miraculous nature is available everywhere in the universe and its operative phenomena. It all confirms that God is the only creator who has power over all things, and that the message comes from Him alone.

As for its mode of expression and its rhythm, the *sūrah* employs factual statements which best suit its subject matter and ambience. This is clearly apparent when we compare its style with that employed in the preceding two *sūrahs, Maryam* and *Ṭā Hā.* In both these, the rhythm is soft, and hence more suited to their overall atmosphere. Here the rhythm is stronger, to fit its message. This is even clearer when we look at the way the story of the Prophet Abraham is related in *Maryam* and in this *sūrah.* In the former, the episode is given in the form of an expansive dialogue between Abraham and his father, whereas here we see Abraham's destruction of the idols worshipped by his people, and his subsequently being thrown in the fire. Thus, the subject matter, the style and the cadence achieve complete harmony in both instances.

This *sūrah* flows in four distinctive rounds. The first starts with a powerful opening that creates strong beats to shake people's hearts and alert them to the danger they will shortly face, while they remain oblivious to it: *"Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away."* (Verse 1) This is followed by a scene of the fate suffered by earlier communities for turning their backs on God's messages, leading a life of wrongdoing: *"How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead?"* (Verse 11) Both the message of Islam and the system that governs the universe are based on truth and seriousness, which are here linked to the faith based on God's oneness and to the phenomena operating in the universe. The *sūrah* also links all this with the unity of the Creator who is in control of all things, the unity of the divine message and faith, and the unity of the source of life, its end and destiny.

The second round examines the unbelievers who hurled ridicule at God's Messenger while the matter he spoke to them about was very serious. Everything around them calls for close attention and alertness. They call for their punishment to be hastened, when it is close at hand. At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene of the Day of Judgement, drawing their attention to what befell those before them who ridiculed God's messengers and their messages. It tells them very clearly that they enjoy no protection against God's punishment. It calls on them to reflect on God's power as He shrinks the earth from its edges, reducing its area. Should they so reflect, they may wake up to what awaits them after having long been oblivious to it.

This round concludes with a directive to the Prophet to outline his task: *"Say: I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!" (Verse* 45) He also alerts them to the danger to which they expose themselves by being so oblivious: *"But the deaf cannot*

hear this call, however often they are warned." (Verse 45) The result is that they will continue to pay no attention to what is presented to them until they are called to account on the Day of Judgement.

The third round provides a review of the single community of believers who followed God's prophets. This review reflects the unity of the message and the faith. It also portrays the grace God bestows on His righteous servants and His punishment of those who deny the truth.

In the fourth and final round, everyone's eventual destiny is described in an eventful scene of the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* closes with a strong beat, a clear warning before leaving the unbelievers to their inevitable doom.

1
Clear Solid Evidence

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱقۡتَرَبَ لِلنَّاسِ حِسَابُهُمۡ وَهُمۡ فِي غَفۡلَةٖ مُّعۡرِضُونَ ١

Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. (1)

مَا يَأۡتِيهِم مِّن ذِكۡرٖ مِّن رَّبِّهِم مُّحۡدَثٍ إِلَّا ٱسۡتَمَعُوهُ وَهُمۡ يَلۡعَبُونَ ٢

Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; (2)

لَاهِيَةٗ قُلُوبُهُمۡۗ وَأَسَرُّواْ ٱلنَّجۡوَى ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ هَلۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُكُمۡۖ أَفَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلسِّحۡرَ وَأَنتُمۡ تُبۡصِرُونَ ٣

their hearts set on pleasure. Yet, concealing their inner thoughts, the wrongdoers say to one another: 'Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?' (3)

قَالَ رَبِّي يَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٤

He says: 'My Lord knows whatever is spoken in heaven and earth. He is the One who hears all and knows all.' (4)

بَلۡ قَالُوٓاْ أَضۡغَٰثُ أَحۡلَٰمِۭ بَلِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰهُ بَلۡ هُوَ شَاعِرٞ فَلۡيَأۡتِنَا بِـَٔايَةٖ كَمَآ أُرۡسِلَ ٱلۡأَوَّلُونَ ٥

'Nay,' they say, 'it is but a medley of dreams!' – 'Nay, he has invented it himself!' – 'Nay, he is only a poet!' – 'Let him, then, bring us some sign, as the prophets of old were sent with.' (5)

مَآ ءَامَنَتۡ قَبۡلَهُم مِّن قَرۡيَةٍ أَهۡلَكۡنَٰهَآۖ

Not one of the communities whom We destroyed in bygone days would ever believe. Will these, then, believe? (6)

أَفَهُمۡ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٦

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا قَبۡلَكَ إِلَّا رِجَالٗا نُّوحِيٓ إِلَيۡهِمۡۖ فَسۡـَٔلُوٓاْ أَهۡلَ ٱلذِّكۡرِ إِن كُنتُمۡ لَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ٧

وَمَا جَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ جَسَدٗا لَّا يَأۡكُلُونَ ٱلطَّعَامَ وَمَا كَانُواْ خَٰلِدِينَ ٨

ثُمَّ صَدَقۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡوَعۡدَ فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُمۡ وَمَن نَّشَآءُ وَأَهۡلَكۡنَا ٱلۡمُسۡرِفِينَ ٩

لَقَدۡ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكُمۡ كِتَٰبٗا فِيهِ ذِكۡرُكُمۡۖ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ١٠

وَكَمۡ قَصَمۡنَا مِن قَرۡيَةٖ كَانَتۡ ظَالِمَةٗ وَأَنشَأۡنَا بَعۡدَهَا قَوۡمًا ءَاخَرِينَ ١١

فَلَمَّآ أَحَسُّواْ بَأۡسَنَآ إِذَا هُم مِّنۡهَا يَرۡكُضُونَ ١٢

لَا تَرۡكُضُواْ وَٱرۡجِعُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ مَآ أُتۡرِفۡتُمۡ فِيهِ وَمَسَٰكِنِكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُسۡـَٔلُونَ ١٣

قَالُواْ يَٰوَيۡلَنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ١٤

فَمَا زَالَت تِّلۡكَ دَعۡوَىٰهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ جَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ

Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired. Hence, ask the followers of earlier revelations if you do not know this. (7)

Neither did We give them bodies that did not eat food, nor were they immortal. (8)

In the end, We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds. (9)

We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason? (10)

How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead? (11)

And as soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled. (12)

Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account. (13)

They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' (14)

And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down,

still and silent as ashes. (15)

حَصِيدًا خَٰمِدِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (16)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَآءَ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَٰعِبِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We would indeed have found one near at hand; if ever We were to do so! (17)

لَوْ أَرَدْنَآ أَن نَّتَّخِذَ لَهْوًا لَّٱتَّخَذْنَٰهُ مِن لَّدُنَّآ إِن كُنَّا فَٰعِلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away. But woe to you for all your false claims. (18)

بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِٱلْحَقِّ عَلَى ٱلْبَٰطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُۥ فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ ۚ وَلَكُمُ ٱلْوَيْلُ مِمَّا تَصِفُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

To Him belong all those who are in the heavens and on earth. Those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary of that. (19)

وَلَهُۥ مَن فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَمَنْ عِندَهُۥ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِهِۦ وَلَا يَسْتَحْسِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They extol His limitless glory by night and day, tirelessly. (20)

يُسَبِّحُونَ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ لَا يَفْتُرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Or have they taken for worship some earthly deities who can restore the dead to life? (21)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ ءَالِهَةً مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ هُمْ يُنشِرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin! But limitless in His glory is God, Lord of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that they attribute to Him! (22)

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَآ ءَالِهَةٌ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا ۚ فَسُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He cannot be questioned about whatever He

لَا يُسْـَٔلُ عَمَّا يَفْعَلُ وَهُمْ يُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

does, whereas they shall be questioned. (23)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ ءَالِهَةً ۖ قُلْ هَاتُوا۟ بُرْهَـٰنَكُمْ ۖ هَـٰذَا ذِكْرُ مَن مَّعِىَ وَذِكْرُ مَن قَبْلِى ۗ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ٱلْحَقَّ فَهُم مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: 'Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me.' But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away. (24)

وَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِىٓ إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّآ أَنَا۠ فَٱعْبُدُونِ ﴿٢٥﴾

Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone. (25)

وَقَالُوا۟ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنُ وَلَدًا ۗ سُبْحَـٰنَهُۥ ۚ بَلْ عِبَادٌ مُّكْرَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Limitless is He in His glory! No; they are but His honoured servants. (26)

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُۥ بِٱلْقَوْلِ وَهُم بِأَمْرِهِۦ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

They do not speak until He has spoken, and they act at His behest. (27)

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يَشْفَعُونَ إِلَّا لِمَنِ ٱرْتَضَىٰ وَهُم مِّنْ خَشْيَتِهِۦ مُشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

He knows all that lies before them and all behind them. They do not intercede for any but those whom He has already graced with His goodly acceptance, since they themselves stand in reverent awe of Him. (28)

۞ وَمَن يَقُلْ مِنْهُمْ إِنِّىٓ إِلَـٰهٌ مِّن دُونِهِۦ فَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِيهِ جَهَنَّمَ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

If any of them were to say, 'I am a deity beside Him,' We shall requite him with hell. Thus do We reward the wrongdoers. (29)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ كَانَتَا رَتْقًا فَفَتَقْنَـٰهُمَا ۖ وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلْمَآءِ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ حَىٍّ ۖ أَفَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Are the unbelievers unaware that the heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder? We have made out of water every living thing. Will they not, then, believe? (30)

وَجَعَلْنَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ رَوَٰسِىَ أَن تَمِيدَ بِهِمْ

We have also set firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with them, and We have cut out there broad

paths, so that they might find their way, (31)	وَجَعَلْنَا فِيهَا فِجَاجًا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّهُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣١﴾
and We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy. Yet they stubbornly turn away from all its signs. (32)	وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلسَّمَآءَ سَقْفًا مَّحْفُوظًا ۖ وَهُمْ عَنْ ءَايَٰتِهَا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾
It is He who has created the night and the day and the sun and the moon: each moves swiftly in its own orbit. (33)	وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ وَٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ ۖ كُلٌّ فِى فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾
Never have We granted life everlasting to any man before you. Should you yourself die, do they, perchance, hope to live forever? (34)	وَمَا جَعَلْنَا لِبَشَرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ ٱلْخُلْدَ ۖ أَفَإِين مِّتَّ فَهُمُ ٱلْخَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾
Every soul shall taste death. We test you all with evil and good by way of trial. To Us you all must return. (35)	كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَآئِقَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۗ وَنَبْلُوكُم بِٱلشَّرِّ وَٱلْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً ۖ وَإِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Reckoning Drawing Close

The *sūrah* is distinguished by a very powerful opening that shakes the careless who are preoccupied with the petty concerns of this world while the reckoning draws ever closer to them. Signs and indicators are given to them while they continue to turn their backs on divine guidance. The situation is grave, yet they remain totally unaware of its seriousness. Whenever they receive a new Qur'ānic warning, they respond with ridicule, persisting in their playful negligence. Their hearts can only attend to their own pleasure. It should be pointed out here that in Qur'ānic usage, the term, 'heart', is synonymous with mind as it refers to the faculty of contemplation, reflection and thought. "*Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; their hearts set on pleasure. Yet, concealing their inner thoughts, the wrongdoers say to one another: Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?*'" (Verses 1-3)

This is a picture of hearts that know no seriousness, jesting when the situation is most serious, and trifling with what is sacred. The reminder given to them here originates with 'their Lord', yet they are playful as they listen to it, showing no

respect whatsoever. A soul that knows no seriousness, respect or sacredness ends up in a condition of barren triviality which makes it unsuitable for the fulfilment of any task of merit. Its life seems devoid of respect, cheap. A spirit which cares little or nothing for what is held as sacred is sick. Carelessness is the opposite of endurance. The latter is a serious effort indicating strength, while the former indicates insensitivity.

Such people responded inappropriately to Qur'ānic revelations that are meant to be a constitution regulating human life, and form a code for human dealings. They are hence warned of the imminent reckoning, but still they remain oblivious to it. Such people can be seen at all times. Whenever a person's spirit is devoid of seriousness and respect, it ends up in such a sick state that it makes of life a matter of jest, lacking real purpose.

By contrast, the believers received this *sūrah* with a due seriousness that made them care little for this world. In his biographical notes on `Āmir ibn Rabī`ah, al-Āmidī says that he once received a bedouin guest and was typically very hospitable to him. Some time later, the Bedouin called on him after having acquired a plot of land. He said to him, 'The Prophet has given me a valley in a nearby place of the Arab land. I would like to give you a piece of it to be yours to bequeath to your heirs.' `Āmir said: "I have no need for your gift, because today a sūrah has been revealed which leaves us oblivious to all concerns of this life.

It is the sūrah that starts with, "*Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away.*'" This is the marked difference between a living heart which interacts with what it receives and a dead one which covers its lifelessness in a shroud of jest and play. The latter type does not respond to reminders because it is devoid of the elements of life.

"*Yet, concealing their inner thoughts,*" they plot among themselves and encourage one another in adopting an attitude that denies God's message. In reference to God's Messenger (peace be upon him), "*the wrongdoers say to one another: 'Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?*" (Verse 3)

Dead as their hearts were, they could not but be shaken by the Qur'ān. Hence they try to resist its influence with false excuses. They whisper to one another that Muhammad is a man, and wonder how they could believe a message preached by a human being like themselves. They allege that what he says is plain magic, and ask how they could surrender themselves to sorcery when they have eyes with which to look.

The Prophet is instructed to leave the whole matter between him and the unbelievers to God, making it clear that He knows what they secretly say among

themselves. He also informs him of their scheming by which they tried to divert the effect of the Qur'ān on themselves and on other people.

"He says: My Lord knows whatever is spoken in heaven and earth. He is the One who hears all and knows all." (Verse 4) Whatever people may say in private is known to God, because He knows everything that takes place in heaven and earth. When they conspire and scheme, He is fully aware of their scheming. Nothing escapes His knowledge. They were at a loss as to how they should describe the Qur'ān in order to neutralize its appeal. Hence they variously alleged that it was sorcery, a series of confused dreams related by Muhammad, poetry, or mere fabrication. The Qur'ān reported their claims as they uttered them. They say: *"Nay, it is but a medley of dreams! – Nay, he has invented it himself – Nay, he is only a poet!"* (Verse 5) They could not agree on any one view or description to explain the magnetism the Qur'ān had on people. None of their allegations or justifications had any value. Hence, they roamed from one claim to another, betraying their puzzlement. Feeling themselves at a terrible loss, they decided to get around the whole question by demanding a miracle similar to those given to some early prophets: *"Let him, then, bring us some sign, as the prophets of old were sent with."* (Verse 5)

Miraculous signs and events were given in the past, but the communities to which they were shown did not believe as a result. Hence they were destroyed in accordance with God's law which seals the fate of any community which continues to reject the truth after having been given a miraculous sign of it. *"Not one of the communities whom We destroyed in bygone days would ever believe."* (Verse 6) When stubborn rejection of the truth reaches a point that it continues even after a tangible, physical, miraculous sign is given, then all excuses are invalid. People who continue with such rejection seal their own fate and they are destroyed as a result.

Miracles were given in plenty, but people still rejected the truth, and they were destroyed, one community after another. Is it likely then that those Arabs, similar as they were to earlier communities, would submit to miraculous evidence and accept the truth? *"Will these, then, believe?"* (Verse 6)

The Messengers God Sends

"Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired. Hence, ask the followers of earlier revelations if you do not know this. Neither did We give them bodies that did not eat food, nor were they immortal." (Verses 7-8) In His infinite wisdom, God chose His messengers from among human beings. They received His revelations and called on people to believe in Him on the basis of such revelations. Those noble messengers of God were men with human bodies. God did not make them of a special type, so as not to eat food. Food is a basic necessity for human

survival, and God's messengers, who were human, were not immortal. Such is the law God has set, and if those Arabs were unaware of it, then they should ask the people who received earlier revelations, because they knew earlier prophets.

Moreover, God chose His messengers from among human beings because He wanted them to experience human life. Thus, their own practical lives would demonstrate the practicality of divine law, and their daily actions set the example of what they called for. When words are confirmed by practice, they are far more effective, because people see their effect as they are implemented. Had God's messengers been of a different species, needing no food to eat, no going about in the markets to obtain their needs, and no intimacy with women, and had they had no experience of human emotion, they would have had no empathy with other people, and no understanding of their feelings and motives. In which case, people would not find in them relevant examples to follow.

Any advocate of a cause who does not interact with the people he addresses, neither sharing their feelings, nor letting them share his, remains on the margin of their lives, experiencing no mutual sympathy with them. Regardless of what he says to them, he will not be able to motivate them because of their mutual isolation. Likewise, an advocate whose actions do not endorse his words will not be able to reach people's hearts, no matter how lucid and eloquent he may be. Indeed a simple word that is felt to be genuine and endorsed by action is the one that motivates people to act.

Those who in times past suggested that God's messenger should be an angel, like their successors who today suggest that such a messenger of God should be far above human earthly feelings, indulge in futile argument. Furthermore, they are all oblivious to the fundamental fact that angels do not, by their very nature, experience human life. They an experience neither the physical needs and interactions of the human body, nor human feelings, emotions or concerns. A messenger from God must know all such feelings and motives, experiencing them in his own daily life so that he is able to provide practical guidance to those who respond to his message.

Furthermore, were the messenger to be an angel, people would have no motivation to follow his example in their life's details. They would feel that he belonged to a different race with a totally different nature. They will remain unable to follow his suit in their daily life. Needless to say, God's messengers have always provided their peoples with a good example to follow.

Furthermore, such a suggestion betrays ignorance of the honour God has bestowed on mankind. For He chose His messengers from among them, providing them with contact with the Supreme Society of heaven as they received instructions and revelations from Him.

For all these reasons, God, in His infinite wisdom, selected His messengers from among human beings, subjecting them to all that a human being experiences from the moment of birth to the moment of death, including emotions, reactions, hopes, pains, eating food, marriage, etc. It is God's wisdom that determined that the final and most perfect messenger to deliver His last and everlasting message should be the one who provided the most perfect example of human life on earth; a life full of motivation, experience, action and emotion.

Such has been God's law in selecting His messengers, and His law in saving them with their followers when He destroyed the wrongdoers who rejected the truth embodied in their messages: *"In the end, We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds."* (Verse 9)

This is, then, a law set in operation, like that of sending God's messengers. He promised to save them along with those who truly believed in them and gave credence to their faith by action. He fulfilled His promise to them and destroyed those who were oppressors, transgressing all the bounds He set.

The Book Giving Distinction to Arabs

God reminds the pagan Arabs who oppressed the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), denying his message and persecuting him and his followers, that they are subject to His law for their transgression. He also makes it clear to them that it is an aspect of the grace He bestows on them that He has not sent them any physical miracle, because that would have spelt their doom if they continued to reject the truth as older communities did. Instead, He sent them a book which imparts honour to them, since it is in their own language. This book sets their life on the right footing and makes of them a community entitled to lead mankind and be respected by them. Moreover, this book invites thinking people to reflect on it and elevate themselves by implementing it: *"We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 10)

The miracle of the Qur'ān is open to all generations. Thus, it is unlike the physical miracles given at a particular time and place. For the Arabs, the Qur'ān brought respect, honour and glory as they delivered its message to all people. Prior to the Qur'ān, the Arabs barely received mention in humanity's records. They had nothing to give humanity so as to ensure they were remembered. But as long as they upheld their book, they were honoured by the rest of mankind. Indeed, they assumed the leadership of humanity over many centuries, bringing happiness to themselves and to the rest of mankind. Then when they abandoned it, humanity left them aside, and they lost their position of respect. They were then at the tail end of humanity,

suffering aggression from different quarters, in stark contrast with their glorious past when they enjoyed security while others suffered fear and anxiety.

The Arabs have nothing of value and no sound idea to give to humanity other than this guidance and the ideas it contains. Therefore, when they present their book to the world, they are known by it and they are given the honour they deserve, because humanity knows that they have what is of benefit to it. But when they present themselves as mere Arabs, such questions as – who are Arabs? – are asked. And what is the value of their ancestry when they do not have their book? Mankind has never accorded the Arabs any position of respect except when they showed themselves to be advocates of a faith which they implemented and conducted their affairs by and according to its teachings. By contrast, their being merely Arabs had no value in human history and no entry in the records of civilization. They are known only by being the standard-bearers of Islamic values, ideals and civilization. In history, this certainly has great value.

It is to this fact that the Qur'ān refers when it says to the Arab idolaters who rejected every idea it put to them and denied its truth: *"We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 10)

It was an act of divine grace that God revealed the Qur'ān to them, rather than giving them the miracle they demanded. Had such a miracle been sent to them and had they continued to deny the truth, a calamity like those that destroyed earlier unbelievers would have brought about their doom. At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene of total destruction and annihilation:

> *How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead. And as soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled. Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account. They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes. (Verses 11-15)*

The Arabic term *qaṣamnā,* rendered here as 'dashed into fragments', carries strong connotations of a strike that splits something into pieces. Moreover, its sound adds further connotations of complete destruction. Those communities persisted in their evil and met a sudden fate that left no trace of them. "*And [We] raised another people in their stead.*" We note also that the Arabic text uses the word *qaryah* which means village or town with the verb denoting the breaking into fragments, but it uses *qawm,* or 'people', when it speaks of raising a new community, because it is such people who build a new civilization. In this way, the destruction is rendered more powerful, which is in line with the distinctive characteristics of the Qur'ānic style.

Still, Silent and Lifeless

Indeed, the words the Qur'ān uses here add, by their very sound, strong connotations of an overwhelming strike that leaves everything lifeless. We look and see how those communities ran around frantically as God's power struck their land. They appear like trapped mice jumping here and there before they fall motionless: *"As soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled."* (Verse 12) They run so that they might leave a town which they felt was doomed. They run as though their very running will save them from God's power. It is not that they imagine that they are faster than God's strike; it is a thoughtless movement, like that of trapped mice.

They are then sarcastically told: *"Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account."* (Verse 13) You do not need to run away from your homes. Go back to your luxuries and comforts. You may perchance be asked about all this luxury and how you have used it. But the time for questioning is already over, and the Qur'ān delivers this final cataclysm as bitter sarcasm.

This brings their situation clearly before their eyes, for there is no means of escape. They cannot run away from or flee God's punishment. Hence, they change tactic and admit their faults: *"They said: Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!"* (Verse 14) But the time for all this is over. They can say what they like, but it is all to no avail. They are left to their devices until they are lifeless: *"And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes."* (Verse 15) But it is a field of humans, all of whom are motionless, lifeless; yet only a minute earlier, it was bustling, vibrant, full of life.

At this point the *sūrah* establishes a link between the faith already mentioned, its essential laws under which unbelievers are punished and the fundamental truth and seriousness which form the pivot around which the whole universe turns. If the unbelievers receive every new Qur'ānic revelation with jest and play, oblivious to its seriousness and the truth it outlines, heedless of the fast approaching Day of Reckoning and what awaits them on that day, then they should know that God's laws never fail. *"We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We would indeed have found one near at hand; if ever We were to do so! Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away. But woe to you for all your false claims."* (Verses 16-18)

God has created the universe for a definite purpose, not to indulge in a pastime or idle play. He conducts its affairs in His infinite wisdom, and does not leave it to run aimlessly. One aspect of the seriousness involved in the creation of heaven and earth is that He has sent messengers, revealed books, and outlined for mankind their

duties and obligations. We see, then, how seriousness is inherent in the nature of this universe and its laws, and in the faith God wants people to embrace and implement, as well as in the way He holds people accountable after they die.

Had God wanted to indulge in a pastime, He would have chosen something for Himself alone; it would have nothing to do with His mortal creatures. But this is merely a theoretical assumption: "*Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We would indeed have found one near at hand.*" (Verse 17) The mode of expression here indicates that both parts of the conditional are negated. God has not willed to indulge in a pastime, and none has taken place. Besides, it never will, because God has not willed it in the first place: "*If ever We were to do so!*" (Verse 17)

Vanquishing Falsehood

It is all a theoretical argument given here in order to establish the basic truth that whatever relates to God is, like Him, ever-present and eternal. Hence, if God wants to enjoy some pastime, such pastime would not relate to anything that is created such as the heavens, the earth or anything in between. All these are new, in the sense that they are created at a certain point in time. What relates to God remains with Him, eternally, so as to fit in with His Majesty.

But the law that operates for all time is that there is no such thing as a pastime in respect of God. There are only seriousness and truth.

Thus, intrinsic truth will triumph over incidental falsehood: "*Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away. But woe to you for all your false claims.*" (Verse 18)

The Arabic particle *bal,* rendered here as 'nay', signifies turning away from whatever is at hand. Here it indicates putting aside this point about having a pastime to turn to a more serious point about the real world and the laws operating in it which ensure that falsehood is vanquished and the truth triumphant. The Qur'ānic verse paints this in a vivid picture, showing the truth as a missile hurled by God at falsehood, breaking its head and so utterly destroying it.

Such is the normal state of affairs: the truth is fundamental to the nature of the universe, deeply permeating its structure. Falsehood, on the other hand, is alien to it, lacking roots and power. God brands it as false and hurls the truth at it. When anything receives such a strike by God, it is bound to wither away and disappear.

People may sometimes feel that practical life goes on in a different direction to that stated by God, who knows all. This is particularly so when falsehood appears to be strong and overpowering, while the truth appears of small stature, shrinking in a corner, defeated. But this lasts only for a time, which God may extend as He pleases

to expose people to a trial. Ultimately the law God has set in operation, to allow the heavens and the earth to remain and His message to flourish, is bound to run its course.

Those who believe in God entertain no doubt that His promise will come true, or that the truth enjoys prime position in the structure of the universe and its system. They are also certain that victory will eventually belong to the truth. Hence, if God tests them by allowing falsehood a temporary triumph, they realize that this is merely a test God puts them through so as to eradicate their weakness or give them what they lack. He wants them to be fit to receive the victorious truth, and to make them the tool by which He accomplishes His purpose. Thus, He lets them go through the test, to equip them properly for their role. If they hasten to remedy their weakness and redress their drawbacks, God will shorten their period of test and accomplish through them whatever He wishes. The ultimate result is a foregone conclusion: *"We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away."* (Verse 18) God accomplishes what He wills.

Thus the Qur'ān puts this fundamental fact before the unbelievers who are quick to hurl their false accusations at the Qur'ān and the Prophet (peace be upon him). They describe the Qur'ān as sorcery, poetry or mere fabrication, when it is the truth that smashes their falsehood and causes it to wither away. This is followed by a warning against the eventual outcome of their accusations: *"But woe to you for all your false claims."* (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* goes on to show them a model of obedience to God and worshipping Him, contrasted with their rejection and turning away. The model shows creatures that are closer to God than them, yet they continue to worship Him, obeying His every order without fail: *"To Him belong all those who are in the heavens and on earth. Those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary of that. They extol His limitless glory by night and day, tirelessly."* (Verses 19-20)

'Those who are in the heavens and on earth' are known only to God who knows everything about them. Human knowledge is certain only of human existence, while believers are certain also of the existence of the angels and *the jinn* because both are mentioned in the Qur'ān. But we know of them only what God, their Creator, has told us. There may be other intelligent creatures on other planets, with forms and natures that are suited to those planets. But the knowledge of all this rests only with God.

Therefore when we read in the Qur'ān, *"To Him belong all those who are in the heavens and on earth,"* we know only of these whom we know, and we acknowledge that the Creator of the heavens and earth knows everyone else.

The phrase, *those that are with Him,'* appears initially to refer to the angels, but we

do not wish to attach particular meaning to this phrase, which is very general in its import, referring to the angels and other creatures. The expression here appears to mean those who are closer to God. When it applies to God, the phrase, 'with Him', does not signify a place or a description. The *sūrah* makes it clear that "*those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him*", whilst the unbelievers demonstrate their arrogance by refusing to do so. Nor do they 'grow weary of' offering worship to Him. Indeed their lives are a continuous act of worship, as they ceaselessly glorify God.

Human beings are able to make their whole lives a continuous act of worship, without having to dedicate every minute to worship rituals and the glorification of God's name, as the angels do. Islam considers every move and every breath an act of worship if it is dedicated for God's sake, even when it involves partaking of the pleasures of this world.

Proof Is Required

Thus, the *sūrah* paints a picture of creatures glorifying God and extolling His praises at all times. At the same time, the unbelievers' claims about their multiple deities are strongly criticized. The *sūrah* provides irrefutable evidence of God's oneness by virtue of what we see in the constant system that permeates the universe, testifying that it is all run by the will of God, the One who manages and conducts all affairs. It also provides evidence from earlier scriptures given to other communities.

> *Or have they taken for worship some earthly deities who can restore the dead to life? Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin! But limitless in His glory is God, Lord of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that they attribute to Him! He cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned. Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: 'Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me. ' But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away. Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone. (Verses 21-25)*

The question the *sūrah* poses about the unbelievers' worship of different deities is, in effect, a denunciation of what they do. Yet the description of such deities as ones restoring the dead to life contains a strong note of ridicule. Indeed, one of the first qualities of the true God is that He is able to restore the dead to life. Hence, it is pertinent to ask whether the deities they worship can also do this. The answer is too clear to need to be stated. Indeed, they themselves do not claim that their deities initiate or restore life. As such, they do not have the very first quality of the Divine

Being.

This is an argument based on the facts as we see them in our world. But there is another argument based on universal facts: *"Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin!"* (Verse 22)

The universe and its whole existence are based on a single system that brings all its parts together and ensures harmony between all those components. This system is devised by the single will of the One God. Had there been other entities, they would have had multiple wills and, consequently, multiple systems and laws. It goes without saying that a will is a manifestation of the entity that exercises it, and the system is a manifestation of the active will. Hence, had there been other deities, the unity which provides coherence in the whole machinery of the universe, consistency and direction in its system, would totally disappear. Chaos, corruption and ruin would ensue. There would be no way of maintaining the coherence and harmony acknowledged by even the most hardened of atheists.

As it receives a clear message of the system governing the whole universe, a straight, uncorrupted nature will instinctively testify to the unity of the system and the will that has initiated it. It will acknowledge the oneness of the Creator who conducts all affairs in this consistent and harmonious universe, which suffers from no inherent defect in formation or from any impediment to its progress. *"But limitless in His glory is God, Lord of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that they attribute to Him!"* (Verse 22)

They assign partners to Him when He is in control of all and in need of none. For, He is *"Lord of the Throne"*. A throne is a symbol of kingdom, real authority and exaltation. What they claim is absolutely false, and the universe, its system and freedom from corruptive elements, testifies to this.

"He cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned." (Verse 23) Since when could the One who controls the whole universe be questioned, and who could question Him when He holds sway over all His servants? Indeed, His will is free, unlimited, beyond restraint, even by the system His will has chosen to govern the universe. Questioning and accountability are subject to certain established criteria and defined limits. It is the free will that defines such limits and establishes such criteria, but such free will cannot be subject to these limits and criteria, while creatures are subject to them. Hence, they will undoubtedly be held to account.

Sometimes arrogance takes its hold of people, so that they impudently ask why has God done all this? And, furthermore, what is the wisdom behind it? The way they put these questions suggests that they see no purpose or wisdom in all this. Thus they overstep the limits of proper behaviour towards God Almighty. They also overlook the limits of human understanding dictated by its position in the universe.

Needless to say, man remains ignorant of the reasons, causes, effects and objectives that apply to the universe.

It is the One who knows, manages and controls all that operates His will, conducts all matters and controls all things. It is He who *"cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned."* (Verse 23)

Having provided this irrefutable evidence based on the nature of the universe, the *sūrah* asks them whether they can support their claims about multiple deities with any evidence derived from their scriptures: *"Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me.' But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away."* (Verse 24)

Here is the Qur'ān which incorporates the message given to the Prophet's contemporaries, and there are the scriptures containing the messages delivered by earlier messengers. In none of these is there any mention of partners with God. All divine faiths are based on the true concept of God's oneness. Where, then, did those unbelievers get this false concept of multiple deities when it cannot be supported by logical or religious argument? *"But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away."* (Verse 24)

Claiming a Son for God

The *sūrah* then states the nature of what was revealed to all messengers sent to different communities before the Prophet Muhammad's time: *"Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone."* (Verse 25) God's oneness is indeed the basic essential element in divine faith, ever since God sent His first messenger to mankind. Nothing has changed in that. God, the Creator who must be worshipped is One, without partners. The truth of Godhead and Lordship over the universe is a single issue that cannot be separated. God has no partners, whether in the sphere of Godhead or in that of worship. This fact ranks alongside the basic essential laws of the universe and is classified with them. Like them, its truth is unassailable.

The *sūrah* then picks up the claims of the unbelievers alleging that God has a son. This is one of the absurdities of ignorance:

> *They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Limitless is He in His glory! No; they are but His honoured servants. They do not speak until He has spoken, and they act at His behest. He knows all that lies before them and all behind them. They do not intercede for any but those whom He has already graced with His goodly acceptance, since they themselves stand in reverent awe of Him. If any of them were to*

> *say, I am a deity beside Him,' We shall requite him with hell. Thus do We reward the wrongdoers. (Verses 26-29)*

The claim that God – limitless is He in His glory – has a son took several forms in the different communities that deviated from the path of truth. The pagan Arabs alleged that the angels were God's daughters, while unbeliever groups among the Jews alleged that Ezra was God's son. Similarly, deviant Christians alleged that Jesus Christ was God's son. All these are ignorant claims that deviate from the clear truth.

The *sūrah is* here especially concerned with the Arabs' claim that the angels were God's daughters. This claim is rebuffed by clarifying the nature of angels. They are not God's female offspring, rather, they are only His servants whom He has honoured. The angels do not suggest anything to God, because they know their limits and abide by them. They do what God bids them, without argument. God's knowledge encompasses all their affairs. They do not try to intercede on behalf of anyone other than those to whom He has gracefully granted His acceptance. Only on behalf of these does He accept intercession. By nature, the angels are in awe of God, revering Him, even though they are pure, honoured and obedient to Him. Needless to say, none of them ever makes a claim to Godhead. Had any of them, for argument's sake, made such a claim, they would have suffered the same fate as anyone else who makes such a claim. That fate is hell where goes everyone guilty of the worst type of wrongdoing, which is to make such a claim which runs against all right and is unjust to all creation.

The same applies to the unbelievers' false claims. They are hollow, absurd and irrational. Should anyone make such a claim, the same terrible fate will befall him.

The *sūrah* contrasts its image of the angels in obedience and awe of God with that of the unbelievers who make such absurd and impudent claims.

Universal Evidence of God's Oneness

The *sūrah* has so far given us several types of evidence drawn from the universe, all testifying to God's oneness, and stated a number of arguments denying any possibility of there being more than one God. It has also provided evidence that addresses people's hearts directly. Now the *sūrah* takes the human heart by the hand to contemplate some of the great phenomena in the universe, as it is wisely managed by God. Yet the unbelievers remain heedless of the clear signs revealed all about them. For those who look however, the universe reveals aspects of itself that leave our minds in total amazement when we contemplate them with an open heart and alert senses.

> *Are the unbelievers unaware that the heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder? We have made out of water every living thing. Will they not, then, believe? (Verse 30)*

The statement that the heavens and the earth were split apart after having been a single entity is worth careful consideration. The more advanced theories of astronomy seeking to explain universal phenomena always tend to support this truth stated in the Qur'ān over 1,400 years ago. The theory that wins most acceptance today is that which claims that star constellations, such as our solar system which includes the sun, its planets and moons including our planet earth and its moon, were originally nebula. The nebula was then rent asunder and its parts took their circular shapes. The earth was also a piece of the sun that separated from it and cooled down.

However, this is merely an astronomical theory which may be fashionable today, but could be proven false tomorrow, only to be replaced by yet another assumption to explain universal phenomena. It thus gives birth to a different theory.[1] We, as believers, do not try to interpret a Qur'ānic statement in terms of a theory which is far from certain. We take Qur'ānic statements as they are. Scientific theories are different from true scientific facts which can be tried and tested, such as the fact that metals stretch when heated, or that water evaporates or freezes in severely cold weather.

The Qur'ān is not a book of scientific theories. Its field is not applied science. It is a constitution that regulates man's whole life. Its method is to set the human mind on the right track, so that it can function and be free within the limits set for it. It also sets society on the right lines so that it allows the mind to work and be free, without labouring on purely scientific detail. This area is left for the human mind to work out after it has been set free.

The Qur'ān may refer to some universal facts, like the one stated here: "*The heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder.*" (Verse 30) We accept this as an absolute certainty simply because it is stated in the Qur'ān. We certainly do not know how the heavens and the earth were parted, or ripped one from the other. We accept astronomical theories which are not in conflict with this general fact mentioned in the Qur'ān. What we will not do however is take up the Qur'ānic text and try to fit it to any astronomical theory. We do not seek an endorsement of the Qur'ān through human theories, because the Qur'ān states only

[1] Since the author wrote this new theories about the origins of the earth have been advanced, with one speaking about a Big Bang, and another about string and fusion. Any of these may eventually be proven correct or abandoned in favour of new theories. This confirms the wisdom of the author's approach. — Editor's note.

what is certain. The most we can say is that the astronomical theory accepted today is not in conflict with the general import of this Qur'ānic statement revealed many generations prior to it.

The next sentence of the verse states: *"We have made out of water every living thing."* (Verse 30) This short sentence states a great and crucial fact. Indeed, scientists shower praise on Darwin for having identified that water was the first environment where life began.

It is indeed a fact that should capture all our attentions. That it is mentioned in the Qur'ān neither fills us with wonder nor increases our belief in the truth of the Qur'ān. Our belief in the absolute truth of everything it states is based on our unshakeable belief that it is God's revelation, not on its being confirmed by scientific discoveries or theories. The most that can be said here is that on this particular point, Darwin's evolutionary theory is not in conflict with what the Qur'ān states.

For fourteen centuries, the Qur'ān has drawn the attention of unbelievers to the great marvels God has placed in the universe, wondering how they could deny what they see everywhere: *"Will they not, then, believe?" (Verse* 30) How could they persist in their disbelief when everything around them in this universe inevitably leads to faith in God, the Creator, the Wise who conducts all affairs?

The *sūrah* continues to point out awesome scenes of the universe: "*We have also set firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with them."* (Verse 31) The Qur'ān, then, states that the mountains, firm as they are, maintain the balance of the earth so that it does not sway or shake. This balance may be maintained in various forms, such as setting a balance between the external pressure on the face of the earth and the one inside it, i.e. internally. Or it may be that the height of a mountain in one place is counterbalanced by a deep valley in another. Whatever the case may be, this statement confirms that the mountains have a direct bearing on the balance and stability of the earth. It is the domain of scientific study to identify and prove how this stability and balance are achieved. But it is the Qur'ānic text that invites us to contemplate such facts.

Let us now follow the magnificent aspects of God's creation in the wide universe: *"We have cut out there broad paths, so that they might find their way."* (Verse 31) The pathways made in the mountains in the shape of depressions between its high peaks assist the traveller in finding his way yet there is also another subtle implication here that refers to faith. It may be that travellers will find their way to accepting the faith just as they find their way through the mountains along such paths.

"And We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy." (Verse 32) In Arabic, the sky refers to everything that is above us. We see above us something like a ceiling. The Qur'ān states that the sky is a well-secured canopy. It is secure from any defect or

contamination, since it symbolizes the height from which God's revelations are bestowed. But *"they stubbornly turn away from all its signs."* (Verse 32)

Finally a reference is made to time and place phenomena that are very close to man and his life on earth: *"It is He who has created the night and the day and the sun and the moon: each moves swiftly in its own orbit."* (Verse 33)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the sun and the moon are two great celestial bodies that are closely related to human life on earth. When we contemplate the succession of the day and night and the movement of the sun and the moon, we realize that they are so accurate as to admit no defect, and so consistent as to allow no failure. Such contemplation is sufficient to guide our hearts and minds to the fact that the system that applies to them is one, the will governing them is one and their great Maker is one.

The Inevitable End of All People

This first passage of the *sūrah* concludes with an outline that links the laws relevant to creation, formation and sustenance with those relevant to the nature and destiny of human life:

> *Never have We granted life everlasting to any man before you. Should you yourself die, do they, perchance, hope to live forever? Every soul shall taste death. We test you all with evil and good by way of trial. To Us you all must return. (Verses 34-35)*

No human being has ever been granted immortality. Every creature is bound to die, and whatever has a beginning will certainly have an end. So if God's Messenger [peace be upon him] is also destined to die, why do they think they would be granted life everlasting? Since they cannot hope to live for ever, why do they not behave like ones who will inevitably taste death? Why do they not reflect and contemplate?

"Every soul shall taste death." (Verse 35) This is the law that governs life. It has no exceptions or exemptions. The living, then, must take this into account and prepare themselves for it. This short journey on earth is bound to come to an end, and its end is the death of every living thing. All shall return to God. But whatever happens to us during this trip through life, whether good or bad, is meant as a test: *"We test you all with evil and good by way of trial."* (Verse 35)

When we speak of being tested by something evil or hard, we can all easily understand this notion. It is a test to show the endurance and patience of the one who is being tested. It is the means to determine how unshakeable his trust in God, his Lord, is, and how much trust he places in God's mercy. But a test with good things needs to be explained.

To be tested with good things is more difficult than hardship, even though it may appear easier. For the fact is that many people can endure being tested by evil, but few can endure a test with the good. When the test takes the form of sickness and weakness, many are able to endure and withstand the hardship, but when its form is that of good health, strength and ability, then few are those who pass through successfully.

People may be able to withstand poverty and deprivation, maintaining their dignity in such situations, but few are those who succeed in a test with comfort and affluence. For the latter tempts us to satisfy all our desires.

Equally there are many who cannot be deterred by torture or physical harm. They are not overawed by such threats and actualities. By contrast, however, only a few can resist the temptations posited by wealth, position, comfort and desire.

It is not difficult to tolerate the hardships of struggle and the injuries that one sustains in such a struggle. But it is extremely hard to experience comfort and a carefree life without becoming so keen to maintain it even at the expense of one's dignity. Indeed such an experience could easily lead to accepting humiliation in order not to lose it.

A test with hardship may arouse within us a keen sense of dignity, encouraging us to resist. Thus, all our powers and faculties are directed at the hardship and enable us to pass through successfully. Affluence, on the other hand, has a calming effect which reduces our awareness of the test. Hence, many fail it. This applies to all human beings, except those that God helps and protects. They are the ones described by the Prophet as ending up with what is good in all situations: "Amazing is a believer's situation, because it all ends up in what is good. This applies to no one other than a believer. If he experiences what is good and pleasing, he will express his gratitude to God and this is good for him. On the other hand, if he experiences hardship, he will patiently persevere and this is good for him." [Related by Muslim] Hence to keep on the alert when being tested by affluence and comfort is more important than doing so when we go through a test with hardship. Maintaining a sound relation with God is the best guarantee in all situations.

2
A Warning Not to be Ignored

وَإِذَا رَءَاكَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِن
يَتَّخِذُونَكَ إِلَّا هُزُوًا أَهَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى
يَذْكُرُ ءَالِهَتَكُمْ وَهُم بِذِكْرِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ
هُمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

When the unbelievers see you, they make you the target of their mockery, saying [to one another], 'Is this the one who speaks against your gods?' Yet they are the ones who, at the mention of the Most Merciful, are quick to deny Him. (36)

خُلِقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ مِنْ عَجَلٍ ۚ سَأُوْرِيكُمْ
ءَايَٰتِى فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٣٧﴾

Man is a creature of haste. I shall show you My signs: do not, then, ask Me to hurry them on. (37)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن
كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (38)

لَوْ يَعْلَمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ حِينَ لَا يَكُفُّونَ
عَن وُجُوهِهِمُ ٱلنَّارَ وَلَا عَن ظُهُورِهِمْ
وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

If only the unbelievers knew [that there will come] a time when they will not be able to shield their faces and their backs from the fire; a time when they will find no support. (39)

بَلْ تَأْتِيهِم بَغْتَةً فَتَبْهَتُهُمْ فَلَا
يَسْتَطِيعُونَ رَدَّهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Indeed, it will come upon them of a sudden, and will stupefy them. They will be unable to avert it, nor will they be allowed any respite. (40)

وَلَقَدِ ٱسْتُهْزِئَ بِرُسُلٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَحَاقَ
بِٱلَّذِينَ سَخِرُواْ مِنْهُم مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Other messengers were derided before your time; but those who scoffed at them were [in the end] overwhelmed by the very thing that they derided. (41)

قُلۡ مَن يَكۡلَؤُكُم بِٱلَّيۡلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ مِنَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِۚ بَلۡ هُمۡ عَن ذِكۡرِ رَبِّهِم مُّعۡرِضُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Say: 'Who could protect you, by night or by day, from the Most Merciful?' Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away. (42)

أَمۡ لَهُمۡ ءَالِهَةٞ تَمۡنَعُهُم مِّن دُونِنَاۚ لَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ نَصۡرَ أَنفُسِهِمۡ وَلَا هُم مِّنَّا يُصۡحَبُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Do they have gods other than Us to protect them? Those [alleged deities] are not even able to succour themselves, nor can they be given company by Us. (43)

بَلۡ مَتَّعۡنَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَءَابَآءَهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ طَالَ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡعُمُرُۗ أَفَلَا يَرَوۡنَ أَنَّا نَأۡتِي ٱلۡأَرۡضَ نَنقُصُهَا مِنۡ أَطۡرَافِهَآۚ أَفَهُمُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

We have allowed these, and their fathers, to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time. Can they not see that We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? Is it they, then, who will triumph? (44)

قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أُنذِرُكُم بِٱلۡوَحۡيِۚ وَلَا يَسۡمَعُ ٱلصُّمُّ ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا مَا يُنذَرُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Say: 'I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!' But the deaf cannot hear this call, however often they are warned. (45)

وَلَئِن مَّسَّتۡهُمۡ نَفۡحَةٞ مِّنۡ عَذَابِ رَبِّكَ لَيَقُولُنَّ يَٰوَيۡلَنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Yet, if but a breath of your Lord's punishment touches them, they are sure to cry, 'Oh, woe betide us! We were wrongdoers indeed.' (46)

وَنَضَعُ ٱلۡمَوَٰزِينَ ٱلۡقِسۡطَ لِيَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فَلَا تُظۡلَمُ نَفۡسٞ شَيۡـٔٗاۖ وَإِن كَانَ مِثۡقَالَ حَبَّةٖ مِّنۡ خَرۡدَلٍ أَتَيۡنَا بِهَاۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِنَا حَٰسِبِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no human being shall be wronged in the least. If there be but the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it [to account]. Sufficient are We for reckoning. (47)

Overview

So far the *sūrah* has taken us on a long journey, showing us some of the laws of nature that operate in the universe, the rules that govern groups advocating God's message, people's fate, and the destruction of past communities. Now it picks up the point mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* about the way the unbelievers received God's Messenger and the revelations he was given, the mockery they hurled at him and their persistent disbelief.

The *sūrah* follows this by pointing out that, by nature, man is hasty. One manifestation of this haste is the unbelievers' attempts to hasten God's punishment. Hence, it warns them against such haste and makes it clear to them that they must refrain from mocking the Prophet if they wish to avoid the consequences of such unwarranted behaviour. It paints for them a picture of how those who wield power in this life find their authority dwindling, and in another scene demonstrates some aspects of the suffering in the hereafter meted out to persistent unbelievers.

This new passage concludes by emphasizing the accuracy of the reckoning in the hereafter and the suitability of the reward given on the Day of Judgement. Thus, the reckoning and the reward are linked to the rules operating in the universe, human nature and human life.

Protection to be Sought

> *When the unbelievers see you, they make you the target of their mockery, saying [to one another], Is this the one who speaks against your gods?' Yet they are the ones who, at the mention of the Most Merciful, are quick to deny Him. (Verse 36)*

The unbelievers deny the very existence of God, the Most Merciful, who has created the universe and set the rules that operate in it and sustain its existence. They object to the fact that God's Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him), speaks out against their deities, showing such inanimate idols to be useless. Yet they themselves rudely deny God, the Most Merciful. How singular!

They hurl abuse and mockery at God's Messenger, saying that it is unacceptable that he should criticize their idol worship. They say to one another: *"Is this the one who speaks against your gods?"* (Verse 36) Yet they, creatures of God as they are, find nothing wrong with the arrogance that leads them to deny God's existence and reject the Qur'ān He has revealed to them. The irony of their attitude exposes to the full the far- reaching corruption that affects their nature and impairs their judgement.

What is more, they try to hasten the punishment against which the Prophet warns

them. For, by nature, man is hasty: *"Man is a creature of haste. I shall show you My signs: do not, then, ask Me to hurry them on. They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?'"* (Verses 37-38)

"Man is a creature of haste." Haste is present in man's very nature and constitution. He always stretches his eyes to what lies ahead, beyond the present moment, aiming to grasp it with his own hand. He wants to achieve, the moment it flashes in his mind, all that seems desirable. He wants to see all that is promised to him, even though it may be to his detriment. Such is man's nature, unless he establishes a firm relationship with God which gives him strength and reassurance. He will then trust to God's wisdom, leaving His will to run its course without hastening events. For faith combines trust with patience and reassurance.

Those unbelievers hastened God's punishment, wondering when the promise of punishment in the hereafter, as well as in this life, would be fulfilled. The Qur'ān paints here for them a scene of the suffering in the hereafter, while also warning them against a similar punishment to that which befell earlier communities which rejected the faith: *"If only the unbelievers knew [that there will come] a time when they will not be able to shield their faces and their backs from the fire; a time when they will find no support. Indeed, it will come upon them of a sudden, and will stupefy them. They will be unable to avert it, nor will they be allowed any respite. Other messengers were derided before your time; but those who scoffed at them were [in the end] overwhelmed by the very thing that they derided."* (Verses 39-41)

If the unbelievers only knew what will happen, they would change their attitude completely. They would stop their mockery and hastening of what is bound to come. Let them, then, see what is bound to come. There they are surrounded by the fire on all sides. We visualize their frantic movements, described implicitly in the verse, to protect their faces and their backs against the fire, but their attempt is futile. It is as if the fire engulfs them on all sides. They can neither keep it away from themselves, nor retreat to seek protection. Nor is even a short respite from it possible.

That the punishment comes suddenly is only the response for their hastening it. They used to say time after time: *"When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?"* (Verse 38) The answer is that it comes suddenly, perplexing their minds and paralysing their will. Thus they are unable to think or act, let alone enjoy a period of grace to mend their ways.

This applies to the punishment in the hereafter. As for this world's punishment, it certainly befell communities before them which ridiculed God's messengers. Just like those communities were unable to ward off a punishment that wiped them out altogether, so these unbelievers are unable to avert their defeat and captivity. They are thus warned not to deride God's Messenger, so as to avoid the punishment that befalls those who ridicule prophets. Such fate and punishment is bound to come,

because it is part of God's law which will inevitably take effect, just as the destruction of earlier communities, guilty of the same offence, proves.

Or is it that they have someone other than God who protects them by night and day, ensuring that they will suffer no punishment either in this life or in the life to come? "*Say: 'Who could protect you, by night or by day, from the Most Merciful?' Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away. Do they have gods other than Us to protect them? Those [alleged deities] are not even able to succour themselves, nor can they be given company by Us.*" (Verses 42-43)

It is God who watches over every soul by night and day. He is the Most Merciful. Indeed, infinite mercy is His great attribute. Other than Him there is no one to watch over or protect anyone. Do the unbelievers know anyone else who can protect them? It is a rhetorical question, one which rebukes them for their turning away from God when it is He who watches over them at all times: "*Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away.*" (Verse 42)

The same question is put to them again in a different form: "*Do they have gods other than Us to protect them?*" (Verse 43) Could these gods be the ones who watch over, and protect, them? This cannot be, because such alleged deities "*are not even able to succour themselves,*" let alone support and protect anyone else. "*Nor can they be given company by Us,*" to derive strength from being on God Almighty's side. This is the sort of strength Moses and Aaron derived when their Lord said to them: "*Have no fear. I shall be with you: I hear all and see all.*" (20: 46)

Such false deities do not have power of their own. They do not have access to God's power. As such, they are utterly helpless.

This sarcastic argument exposes the absurdity of the unbelievers' beliefs. Hence, the *sūrah* stops arguing with them, but adds a moving touch which they feel in their hearts. It directs them to reflect on God's might as He folds the earth underneath triumphant armies. Thus the earth shrinks so that they are confined to a limited space, after they have wielded much power and authority. "*We have allowed these, and their fathers, to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time. Can they not see that We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? Is it they, then, who will triumph?*" (Verse 44)

What has corrupted their nature, then, is that long enjoyment of the good things of life. It is luxury which corrupts the heart and stifles the senses. It leads to a weakening in their awareness of God and an inability to contemplate the signs He has placed in the universe, pointing to Him. This is a different kind of test God sets for human beings, making affluence the very means of this test. If a person allows himself to drift away from God, and forgets that He is the source of all the blessings he enjoys, then he is bound to fail this test.

Thus, the *sūrah* works on their hearts as it shows them the imagery of what occurs every day somewhere on earth. States that have had power begin to lose their grip and weaken. Their land soon shrinks as they are split into small states where once they formed great empires. They were once strong and triumphant; now they are weak and defeated. They had great armies and vast resources; now their armies are weak and their resources meagre.

In its inimitable style, the Qur'ān shows God's hand as it folds up the once vast space, making borders cave in, and reducing huge distances, in a splendid scene that combines fine movement and awesome feelings. It then asks rhetorically: *"Is it they, then, who will triumph?"* (Verse 44) Is it that what happens to others does not then apply to them?

Unheeded Warnings

At the height of this awesome scene, which leaves hearts trembling, the Prophet is instructed to deliver the final warning: *"Say: I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!' But the deaf cannot hear this call, however often they are warned."* (Verse 45) Let them, then, beware lest they should be the deaf who do not hear! It is the deaf who will suffer the fate of having the earth shrunk beneath them, and the hand of the Almighty smashing their power, doing away with them and their luxuries.

The *sūrah* continues its discourse making a profound effect on people's hearts. It describes those very unbelievers as they begin to suffer God's punishment: "Yet, *if but breath of your Lord's punishment touches them, they are sure to cry, 'Oh, woe betide us! We were wrongdoers indeed.'"* (Verse 46) In Arabic, the word, *nafĥah,* used in this verse for 'breath' is normally associated with mercy and grace, but here it is used in the context of suffering so as to imply that even the slightest breath of God's punishment is sufficient to make them ready to confess. Alas, confession is of no use now. Earlier in the *sūrah* we were shown past communities smitten by God's might, crying out with the same appeals: *"They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes."* (Verses 14-15)

It is, then, a confession that comes too late. It is far better that they listen to the warnings contained in God's revelations when they still have time to act, before they are touched by such suffering.

Accurate Scales Ensuring Absolute Justice

The present passage concludes with a final scene from the Day of Reckoning: *"We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no soul shall be wronged in the*

least. If there be but the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it [to account]. Sufficient are We for reckoning." (Verse 47) The mustard seed here represents the smallest and lightest thing our eyes can see. Yet not even a mustard seed is overlooked or ignored. The scales that are used are so accurate that a single mustard seed makes a difference.

Let people, then, reflect on what they put forward for that day. Let hearts be attentive to the warnings, and let those who turn their backs or indulge in ridicule be warned. They may be able to evade punishment in this life, but on Judgement Day the reckoning takes every little thing into account. The scales then are so accurate that even a tiny seed can make all the difference.

Thus the accurate scales of the hereafter, the unfailing laws of the universe, the rules applicable to advocates of the faith and the laws of human nature converge in perfect harmony, operated by the hand of the Almighty. This testifies to the truth of God's oneness, the theme that pervades this whole *sūrah.*

3
One Community of Believers

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ وَهَـٰرُونَ ٱلْفُرْقَانَ وَضِيَآءً وَذِكْرًا لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Indeed We vouchsafed to Moses and Aaron the standard by which to distinguish right from wrong, a guiding light and a reminder for the God-conscious (48)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَهُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّاعَةِ مُشْفِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts, and are weary of the Last Hour. (49)

وَهَـٰذَا ذِكْرٌ مُّبَارَكٌ أَنزَلْنَـٰهُ ۚ أَفَأَنتُمْ لَهُۥ مُنكِرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high: will you, then, reject it? (50)

۞ وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَآ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ رُشْدَهُۥ مِن قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا بِهِۦ عَـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

We formerly bestowed on Abraham his consciousness of what is right, and We were aware of him (51)

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِۦ مَا هَـٰذِهِ ٱلتَّمَاثِيلُ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنتُمْ لَهَا عَـٰكِفُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

when he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?' (52)

قَالُوا۟ وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا لَهَا عَـٰبِدِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

They answered: 'We found our forefathers worshipping them.' (53)

قَالَ لَقَدْ كُنتُمْ أَنتُمْ وَءَابَآؤُكُمْ فِى ضَلَـٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Said he: 'Indeed, you and your forefathers have

been in evident error.' (54)

قَالُوٓاْ أَجِئۡتَنَا بِٱلۡحَقِّ أَمۡ أَنتَ مِنَ ٱللَّٰعِبِينَ ٥٥

They asked: 'Is it the truth you are preaching to us? Or are you one who jests?' (55)

قَالَ بَل رَّبُّكُمۡ رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ ٱلَّذِي فَطَرَهُنَّ وَأَنَا۠ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكُم مِّنَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ٥٦

He replied: 'Indeed, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He who has brought them into being. And I am a witness to this [truth]. (56)

وَتَٱللَّهِ لَأَكِيدَنَّ أَصۡنَٰمَكُم بَعۡدَ أَن تُوَلُّواْ مُدۡبِرِينَ ٥٧

'By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols when you have turned your backs and gone away!' (57)

فَجَعَلَهُمۡ جُذَٰذًا إِلَّا كَبِيرًا لَّهُمۡ لَعَلَّهُمۡ إِلَيۡهِ يَرۡجِعُونَ ٥٨

So he broke the idols to pieces, [all] except for the biggest of them, so that they might turn back to him. (58)

قَالُواْ مَن فَعَلَ هَٰذَا بِـَٔالِهَتِنَآ إِنَّهُۥ لَمِنَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٥٩

They said: 'Who has done this to our gods? He is definitely one of the wrongdoers.' (59)

قَالُواْ سَمِعۡنَا فَتٗى يَذۡكُرُهُمۡ يُقَالُ لَهُۥٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمُ ٦٠

They said: 'We heard a youth speak of them; he is called Abraham.' (60)

قَالُواْ فَأۡتُواْ بِهِۦ عَلَىٰٓ أَعۡيُنِ ٱلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَشۡهَدُونَ ٦١

They said: 'Then bring him here in sight of all people, so that they may bear witness.' (61)

قَالُوٓاْ ءَأَنتَ فَعَلۡتَ هَٰذَا بِـَٔالِهَتِنَا يَٰٓإِبۡرَٰهِيمُ ٦٢

They said: 'Abraham, was it you who did this to our gods?' (62)

قَالَ بَلۡ فَعَلَهُۥ كَبِيرُهُمۡ هَٰذَا فَسۡـَٔلُوهُمۡ إِن كَانُواْ يَنطِقُونَ ٦٣

He answered: 'Nay, it was this one, the biggest of

فَرَجَعُوٓاْ إِلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡ فَقَالُوٓاْ إِنَّكُمۡ أَنتُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٦٤

them, who did it. But ask them, if they can speak!' (63)

ثُمَّ نُكِسُواْ عَلَىٰ رُءُوسِهِمۡ لَقَدۡ عَلِمۡتَ مَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ يَنطِقُونَ ٦٥

So they turned to themselves, saying, 'Surely, it is you who are doing wrong.' (64)

قَالَ أَفَتَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنفَعُكُمۡ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يَضُرُّكُمۡ ٦٦

But then they relapsed into their old position and said, 'You know very well that these [idols] cannot speak!' (65)

أُفّٖ لَّكُمۡ وَلِمَا تَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٧

Said [Abraham]: 'Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit or harm you in any way? (66)

قَالُواْ حَرِّقُوهُ وَٱنصُرُوٓاْ ءَالِهَتَكُمۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ فَٰعِلِينَ ٦٨

Fie upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?' (67)

قُلۡنَا يَٰنَارُ كُونِي بَرۡدٗا وَسَلَٰمًا عَلَىٰٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ٦٩

They cried: 'Burn him, and succour your gods, if you are going to do [anything at all]!' (68)

وَأَرَادُواْ بِهِۦ كَيۡدٗا فَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡأَخۡسَرِينَ ٧٠

But We said: 'Fire, be cool to Abraham, and a source of inner peace [for him].' (69)

وَنَجَّيۡنَٰهُ وَلُوطًا إِلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ ٱلَّتِي بَٰرَكۡنَا فِيهَا لِلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٧١

They sought to lay a snare for him, but We caused them to be the absolute losers. (70)

وَوَهَبۡنَا لَهُۥٓ إِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ نَافِلَةٗۖ وَكُلّٗا جَعَلۡنَا صَٰلِحِينَ ٧٢

We delivered him and Lot, [bringing them] to the land which We have blessed for all mankind. (71)

And We gave him Isaac and, as an additional

وَجَعَلْنَٰهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ ٱلْخَيْرَٰتِ وَإِقَامَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَإِيتَآءَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةِ ۖ وَكَانُوا۟ لَنَا عَٰبِدِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

gift, Jacob, and caused all of them to be righteous men, (72)

and We made them leaders to give guidance at Our behest. We inspired them to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to give regular charity. It is Us alone that they worshipped. (73)

وَلُوطًا ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا وَنَجَّيْنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلْقَرْيَةِ ٱلَّتِى كَانَت تَّعْمَلُ ٱلْخَبَٰٓئِثَ ۗ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمَ سَوْءٍ فَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

And to Lot, too, We gave sound judgement and knowledge. We saved him from that community which was given to deeds of abomination. They were people lost in evil, depraved. (74)

وَأَدْخَلْنَٰهُ فِى رَحْمَتِنَآ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous. (75)

وَنُوحًا إِذْ نَادَىٰ مِن قَبْلُ فَٱسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُۥ فَنَجَّيْنَٰهُ وَأَهْلَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلْكَرْبِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٦﴾

And long before that, Noah called out [to Us], and We responded to him and saved him with his household from the great calamity, (76)

وَنَصَرْنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمَ سَوْءٍ فَأَغْرَقْنَٰهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

and helped him against the people who had denied Our revelations. Lost in evil were they, and so We caused them all to drown. (77)

وَدَاوُۥدَ وَسُلَيْمَٰنَ إِذْ يَحْكُمَانِ فِى ٱلْحَرْثِ إِذْ نَفَشَتْ فِيهِ غَنَمُ ٱلْقَوْمِ وَكُنَّا لِحُكْمِهِمْ شَٰهِدِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

And remember David and Solomon, when both gave judgement concerning the field into which some people's sheep had strayed and grazed by

فَفَهَّمْنَٰهَا سُلَيْمَٰنَ ۚ وَكُلًّا ءَاتَيْنَا حُكْمًا
وَعِلْمًا ۚ وَسَخَّرْنَا مَعَ دَاوُۥدَ ٱلْجِبَالَ
يُسَبِّحْنَ وَٱلطَّيْرَ ۚ وَكُنَّا فَٰعِلِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾

وَعَلَّمْنَٰهُ صَنْعَةَ لَبُوسٍ لَّكُمْ لِتُحْصِنَكُم
مِّنۢ بَأْسِكُمْ ۖ فَهَلْ أَنتُمْ شَٰكِرُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَلِسُلَيْمَٰنَ ٱلرِّيحَ عَاصِفَةً تَجْرِى بِأَمْرِهِۦٓ
إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلَّتِى بَٰرَكْنَا فِيهَا ۚ وَكُنَّا بِكُلِّ
شَىْءٍ عَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

وَمِنَ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينِ مَن يَغُوصُونَ لَهُۥ
وَيَعْمَلُونَ عَمَلًا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَكُنَّا
لَهُمْ حَٰفِظِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾

۞ وَأَيُّوبَ إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنِّى مَسَّنِىَ ٱلضُّرُّ
وَأَنتَ أَرْحَمُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

فَٱسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُۥ فَكَشَفْنَا مَا بِهِۦ مِن ضُرٍّ ۖ
وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ أَهْلَهُۥ وَمِثْلَهُم مَّعَهُمْ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ
عِندِنَا وَذِكْرَىٰ لِلْعَٰبِدِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

وَإِسْمَٰعِيلَ وَإِدْرِيسَ وَذَا ٱلْكِفْلِ ۖ كُلٌّ
مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَأَدْخَلْنَٰهُمْ فِى رَحْمَتِنَآ ۖ إِنَّهُم مِّنَ
ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

night. We were witness to their judgement. (78)

We gave Solomon insight into the case. Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them. And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. (79)

And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks? (80)

To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. (81)

And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them. (82)

And remember Job, when he cried out to his Lord: Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the Most Merciful.' (83)

We responded to him and relieved all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them, as an act of grace from Ourself, and as a reminder to all who worship Us. (84)

And remember Ishmael, Idrīs and Dhu'l-Kifl: they all were men of constancy and patience. (85)

وَذَا ٱلنُّونِ إِذ ذَّهَبَ مُغَـٰضِبًا فَظَنَّ أَن لَّن نَّقۡدِرَ عَلَيۡهِ فَنَادَىٰ فِي ٱلظُّلُمَـٰتِ أَن لَّآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّآ أَنتَ سُبۡحَـٰنَكَ إِنِّي كُنتُ مِنَ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous. (86)

And remember Dhu'l-Nūn, when he went away in anger, thinking that We would not force him into a tight situation! But then he cried out in the deep darkness: 'There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!' (87)

فَٱسۡتَجَبۡنَا لَهُۥ وَنَجَّيۡنَـٰهُ مِنَ ٱلۡغَمِّۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُـۡٔجِي ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

So We responded to him and delivered him from his distress. Thus do We deliver those who have faith. (88)

وَزَكَرِيَّآ إِذۡ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُۥ رَبِّ لَا تَذَرۡنِي فَرۡدًا وَأَنتَ خَيۡرُ ٱلۡوَٰرِثِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

And remember Zachariah when he cried out to his Lord: 'My Lord! Do not leave me alone, although You are the best of inheritors.' (89)

فَٱسۡتَجَبۡنَا لَهُۥ وَوَهَبۡنَا لَهُۥ يَحۡيَىٰ وَأَصۡلَحۡنَا لَهُۥ زَوۡجَهُۥٓۚ إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ يُسَـٰرِعُونَ فِي ٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِ وَيَدۡعُونَنَا رَغَبٗا وَرَهَبٗاۖ وَكَانُواْ لَنَا خَـٰشِعِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him. These [three] would vie with one another in doing good works, and would call on Us in yearning and awe. They were always humble before Us. (90)

وَٱلَّتِيٓ أَحۡصَنَتۡ فَرۡجَهَا فَنَفَخۡنَا فِيهَا مِن رُّوحِنَا وَجَعَلۡنَـٰهَا وَٱبۡنَهَآ ءَايَةٗ لِّلۡعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

And remember her who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed into her of Our spirit and caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind. (91)

إِنَّ هَـٰذِهِۦٓ أُمَّتُكُمۡ أُمَّةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗ وَأَنَا۠ رَبُّكُمۡ فَٱعۡبُدُونِ ﴿٩٢﴾

Surely, your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone. (92)

Overview

In this third passage the *sūrah* speaks about the communities that followed God's messengers, but it is not exhaustive in this respect. Some are not mentioned at all. Some are given only a brief mention, while others are referred to in some detail. We see in these references how God takes care of His messengers and bestows His grace on them. We also see the fate of those who continued to accuse their messengers of being liars, even though clear proof was given to them. We are further given an idea of how God tests His messengers, at times with delightful pleasures and at others with much affliction, and how they pass these tests.

The wisdom behind sending human messengers is also clear in this passage. The oneness of the faith and the way to be followed by all messengers, at all times, is also clearly apparent. We feel that they belong to a single community, despite the fact that they lived at different times and in different places. All this testifies to the oneness of the Maker, the will behind all events, and the consistency of the overall law that governs and unites the universe. It directs us all to one end: namely, to serve the One God worthy of worship: "*I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone.*" (Verse 92)

Guidance and Light for Moses

> *Indeed We vouchsafed to Moses and Aaron the standard by which to distinguish right from wrong, a guiding light and a reminder for the God-conscious who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts, and are weary of the Last Hour. And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high: will you, then, reject it? (Verses 48-50)*

We saw earlier in the *sūrah* how the Arab unbelievers used to ridicule God's Messenger (peace be upon him) on account of his being human. They also denied God's revelations, describing them as sorcery, poetry or mere fabrication. Now the *sūrah* shows that sending human messengers is a consistent norm, and it proceeds to give examples of such. Furthermore, the fact that God bestows books on His messengers is not a strange occurrence. For Moses and Aaron were also given a book by Him. Their book is here called *'al-Furqān'*, which is the same description given to the Qur'ān. Thus, unity can be seen even in the names of these revealed books. All such books are revealed by God so as to serve as a standard distinguishing right from wrong, truth from falsehood, guidance from deviation. They also make clear the difference between ways of life. As such, each is a criterion for judgement. This is the quality which applies to both the Torah and the Qur'ān.

The Torah is also described as a '*guiding light*' which dispels all the darkness that

may engulf the human mind, leading to errant beliefs. It also dispels the darkness that leads people astray and the darkness of falsehood. In such types of darkness both reason and conscience may find themselves at a loss. Indeed, the human heart remains in darkness until the light of faith is kindled within it. Faith thus sets it aglow, clearly setting its approach, guiding it to the path that should be followed, so that confusion does not arise from divergent values and concepts.

The Torah is further described as '*a reminder for the God-conscious*', reminding people of their true Lord, ensuring that they gain esteem and that they are always remembered by other people. In this respect, one only needs to ask what the status of the Children of Israel was before the revelation of the Torah! In essence they endured much humiliation under Pharaoh who slaughtered their male offspring, spared their women, and put them to hard labour and torture.

From among these God-conscious people, however, a certain group is singled out. These are the ones '*who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts*'. (Verse 49) This is because those who fear God in their hearts when they have not seen Him, those who '*are weary of the Last Hour*', working hard to prepare themselves for its arrival, are indeed the ones who benefit by the light and follow its guidance. To them, God's book provides an important reminder. Hence, they always remember God, and they are often favourably mentioned by other people.

This is as far as Moses and Aaron are deliberated upon here. A brief reference to the Qur'ān follows: "*And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 50) It is not a new invention. It is nothing to wonder about since reminders were frequently revealed from on high. They are then asked rhetorically: *"Will you, then, reject it?"* (Verse 50) How could you, and on what basis, since earlier messages were vouchsafed to God's messengers in the past?

Having made this very brief reference to the two prophets, Moses and Aaron, as well as the book revealed to them, the *sūrah* now provides a detailed episode from the life of Abraham, the first grandfather of the Arabs. It was Abraham who built the Ka`bah in which the unbelievers now placed their idols and worshipped them. In fact he was the one who destroyed the idols worshipped by his own people. Hence, the *sūrah* portrays him standing up to idolatry and destroying its very symbols.

Questioning People's Beliefs

The episode narrated here is that of Abraham's message, given in a sequence of scenes that leave short gaps in between. It starts by mentioning that Abraham was initially given a sense of what is right, which here means God's oneness. In fact, it is the most important aspect of guidance which is clearly understood here as the referent of the phrase, *'what is right': "We formerly bestowed on Abraham his*

consciousness of what is right, and We were aware of him when he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?" (Verses 51-52) This means that God gave Abraham his sense of what is right, knowing his aptitude to bear the trust given to His messengers.

"*He said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?'"* (Verse 52) The way he put this question is indicative of his sharp sense of what is right. He gave those stones and wooden shapes their true names, 'images'. He did not call them 'deities'. Indeed, he stated his disapproval of their worship of those images by using the word 'devoted', which indicates a permanent action. Needless to say, those people did not devote all their time to worshipping such idols, but they nonetheless attached great respect to them. This is, then, devotion in an abstract sense. The way Abraham put the question, describing them as permanent devotees to such idols, indicates that he considered their action absolutely absurd.

They defended their action by saying: "*We found our forefathers worshipping them."* (Verse 53) Their answer indicates that they were in a stone-like inflexible state of mind that chained them to absurd traditions. They were far removed from freedom of thought, reflection and the proper evaluation of things and situations which belief in God generates as it breaks the chains of imaginary, baseless and traditional sanctities.

"*Said he: Indeed, you and your forefathers have been in evident error."* (Verse 54) That such images were worshipped by their fathers could not impart to such objects any value which they did not have. Nor could it have given them any undeserved sanctity. Nor is real value derived from giving forefathers an elevated status and following in their footsteps. It is rather the result of proper, free and objective judgement.

When Abraham confronted them with such objectivity they asked: "*Is it the truth you are preaching to us? Or are you one who jests?"* (Verse 55) It is the kind of question asked only by someone who is unsure of his own beliefs, because he never questioned them to make sure they were right. Both his thinking and his soul are impaired by the myths and traditions he has thoughtlessly accepted. As such, he is uncertain about anything. Worship conversely must rely only on certainty, not on unsubstantiated myths. This is the state of loss that engulfs those who do not believe in a faith based on the clear truth of God's oneness that brings mind and conscience into perfect harmony.

Abraham, on the other hand, enjoys a state of complete certainty. He knows his Lord. His thoughts are full of the truth of His oneness. Hence, he says with absolute clarity: "*Indeed, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He who has brought them into being. And I am a witness to this [truth]."* (Verse 56) He is the Lord of man, the

heavens and earth: a single Lord who is the Creator of all. Indeed, creation and Lordship are two qualities that go hand in hand. Such is the straight and clear faith. It is totally different from what unbelievers think when they claim that there are several deities, whilst at the same time conceding that none of them creates except God, the only Creator. Yet still they worship such deities knowing they are powerless to create.

Abraham reiterates his certainty like a witness testifying to a situation over which he has no doubt whatsoever: *"I am a witness to this truth."* Abraham did not witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor did he witness his own creation, or that of his people. But the matter is so clear that true believers testify to it with absolute certainty. Everything in the universe confirms the oneness of the Creator who controls all. Moreover, every particle in man's constitution appeals to him to acknowledge this truth, as well as the unity of the law that governs the whole universe and conducts its affairs.

Abraham follows this with a declaration to his people that he is intent on doing something to their deities: *"By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols when you have turned your backs and gone away!" (Verse* 57) But he leaves his intent unclear. The *sūrah* does not mention the reply his people gave, because they relied on their feeling that a man like Abraham could not harm their deities. Hence, they left him and went away.

Abraham, however, went ahead with what he intended: "*So he broke the idols to pieces, [all] except for the biggest of them, so that they might turn back to him."* (Verse 58) Thus, the idols which were the subject of worship were turned into small, broken pieces of stone and wood. But Abraham left the largest one untouched to see his people's reaction when they discovered what had happened. They might, for example, have wanted to ask the idol how all this happened and why it did not rise to their defence. They might even have reconsidered the whole issue and realized the absurdity of their beliefs and so begun to think properly.

A Debate to Open People's Eyes

Abraham's people returned to find the utter destruction of their idols except this largest one. But they did not question that idol or even ask themselves how their deities could suffer such a fate without defending themselves. Nor did they ask why the large idol did not take it upon itself to defend them all. They could not ask such questions, because the myths in which they believed rendered their minds useless, chaining their power of thought. Essentially, they could not consider the matter objectively, and were unable to ask the most logical question. They were only furious with the one who had brought all this upon their idols. "*They said: Who has done this to*

our gods? He is definitely one of the wrongdoers." (Verse 59) Then, those who had heard Abraham both object to his father's and peers' idol worship and threaten to destroy the same found their answer: *"They said: We heard a youth speak of them; he is called Abraham."* (Verse 60)

It appears that Abraham (peace he upon him) was still a young man when God bestowed on him the gift of knowing what is right. Hence, he objected to the worship of idols and destroyed them when the chance presented itself. The question arises, however, as to whether he had already been given his message, or whether he acted on an inspiration that led him to the truth before he had received his message. In this latter case, his denunciation of idol worship and his call upon his father to follow his path were the result of that inspiration. This was most probably the case.

On the other hand, it is possible that Abraham's people's reference to him as 'a youth' was meant merely as a slight. This is supported by their words referring to him in the passive voice, '*he is called Abraham'*.

They implied that he was unknown, and represented no threat. This is possible, but we think the first explanation to be more probable, viz. that he was only a young man at the time.

"They said: Then bring him here in sight of all people, so that they may bear witness." (Verse 61) They wanted to denounce him in public so that people should know of his deeds and their consequences. And when he was brought before them, they said: *"Abraham, was it you who did this to our gods?'"* (Verse 62) They continued to describe their idols as gods even when they had been smashed into pieces and formed little more than a heap of rubble. Abraham derided their thinking, and even though he faced them alone, mocked their stupidity. He was looking at the whole thing with an open mind and a clear heart. Hence, he gave them this mocking answer that fits their lowly level of thinking: *"He answered: Nay, it was this one, the biggest of them, who did it. But ask them, if they can speak!"* (Verse 63)

Derision is very clear in his answer. Hence there is no need to describe it as a lie and to try to find some justification for it, as commentators on the Qur'ān have done. The whole thing is much simpler than that. Abraham simply wanted to say to his people: these figures do not know who smashed them to pieces, nor whether it was me or this large idol which is as motionless as they were. All of them are inanimate and have no faculty of recognition. You are also deprived of your faculties, which accounts for your inability to distinguish between what is possible and what is impossible. You cannot even tell whether it was me who broke them or this big one. Hence, '*ask them, if they can speak!'*

It seems that his sarcasm shook them into some sort of reflection. *"So they turned to themselves, saying, 'Surely, it is you who are doing wrong."* (Verse 64) This was a good

sign: not only were they aware of the absurdity of their stance but also how wrong it was to worship such statues. For once it seemed possible that they would open their eyes and see how untenable their position was.

Sadly, it was just a bright flash followed by utter darkness. Their minds seemed to see the light, but they soon sank back into lifelessness: *"But then they relapsed into their old position and said, 'You know very well that these (idols] cannot speak!"* (Verse 65)

Their first reaction was one of returning to their senses, but their second was a relapse, a tumbling over their heads, as the Qur'ān describes. Initially, something had stirred them to reflect, but soon thereafter they had again lost their senses, lacking clear thought, and logical argument. Had there been any logic, their last statement gives Abraham a forceful argument against them. What more could he argue than the fact that those statues and deities were dumb, unable to speak? Hence, Abraham confronts them with impatience, which incidentally was very uncharacteristic of him. Basically, their absurdity was intolerable even for the most forbearing person: *"Said [Abraham]: Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit or harm you in any way? Fie upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verses 66-67) Here we see Abraham's patience exhausted, as he expresses his amazement at their absurdity.

At this point, they resorted to tyranny which always prevails when tyrants are left speechless, unable to produce a coherent counter- argument. They resorted to brute force, rushing to inflict on him a painful suffering: *"They cried: Burn him, and succour your gods, if you are going to do [anything at all]."* (Verse 68)

Yet what sort of deities are these which need the support of their servants, while they avail themselves of nothing? They are powerless, helpless.

When the Fire Was Made Cool

So, the unbelievers cried, '*burn him!*' A different word, however, was also said at this point to render everything they said meaningless, and to reduce their schemes to nothingness. This was the supreme word that can never be countered: *"But We said: Fire, be cool to Abraham, and a source of inner peace [for him]."* (Verse 69) And thus the fire was cool and a source of inner peace for Abraham to enjoy and relax in.

How is this possible? Yet why do we even ask about this when it is only the word, 'be', that needs to be said for worlds and universes to come into existence and for universal rules to be set in operation: *"When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, 'Be'– and it is."* (36: 82) We do not need to ask how the fire soothed rather than burnt Abraham when it is a well known phenomenon that fire burns all living tissues. For it was the One who said to the fire in the first place, 'burn' who also said to it in this

instance, 'be cool and a source of inner peace'. It is the same word that initiates its object at the moment it is said, whatever that object may be, whether it is familiar to us or not.

Those who compare God's actions to those of human beings are the ones who ask how this could happen. On the other hand, those of us who understand that the two are widely different in both their nature and the means they employ neither ask such questions, nor do we try to find explanations, scientific or otherwise. The question is not one for analyses and explanations by human standards. Any method that tries to explain such miracles except by reference to God's absolute power suffers a basic defect. God's actions cannot be subjected to human standards or explained within the confines of man's limited knowledge.

All we need to do is to believe that this actually took place, because the One who did it is able to make it happen. What He did to the fire to make it cool so that it gave Abraham inner peace, and what He did to Abraham so that the fire did not burn him are points the Qur'ān does not explain because our limited minds fall short of understanding them. On the other hand, we have no source of evidence other than the Qur'ānic text.

Transforming the fire so as to give Abraham coolness and inner peace is only one example of God's infinite ability, even though they may not be totally contrary to what we are familiar with, as this one. There are countless other difficulties and circumstances that beset individuals and communities which, if allowed to run their course, would cause their total ruin. But then God administers just a small touch to bring about life instead of death, happiness instead of misery, and endless goodness instead of unmitigated evil. Thus we see how the command that made the fire cool, bringing peace to Abraham is frequently repeated in the life of individuals, groups and communities, as well as in the life of ideas and beliefs. This command is only a manifestation of the word which renders any scheme, effort or design futile, because it is the final say by the highest power.

"They sought to lay a snare for him, but We caused them to be the absolute losers." (Verse 70) It is reported that the king who was Abraham's contemporary was the Nimrod, the Aramaic king of Iraq. He and his supporters were destroyed by some punishment inflicted by God. The reports we have differ as to the details of this punishment. We have no way of verifying them. However, all that we need to know is that God saved Abraham from the torture prepared for him while his opponents who schemed against him were the ones to suffer utter loss. They are described in the Qur'ān as the '*absolute losers*'.

"We delivered him and Lot, [bringing them] to the land which We have blessed for all mankind." (Verse 71) It was to the land of Palestine that he and his nephew, Lot,

emigrated. This was the land to receive revelations from on high for a very long time and the area where prophets and messengers of Abraham's descent were raised. This area incorporates the holy land where the second house of worship was built. It is a fertile land with rich tillage. All these blessings were added to that of the generations of prophets living there.

> *And We gave him Isaac and, as an additional gift, Jacob, and caused all of them to be righteous men, and We made them leaders to give guidance at Our behest. We inspired them to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to give regular charity. It is Us alone that they worshipped. (Verses 72-73)*

Abraham left his home country where his family and community lived. So God compensated him with this blessed land as a better country to live in. He also gave him his son Isaac and grandson Jacob to be a better family than the one he had earlier. He also gave him a better community than his old one and raised from his offspring leaders to give mankind guidance. He inspired them to do all sorts of good works, to attend to their prayers and to give regular charity, or *zakāt.* They were obedient worshippers of God. All this was Abraham's blessed compensation given by God for his perseverance when he was tested. It was a goodly compensation to fit his endurance in adversity.

Endowed with Knowledge and Wisdom

> *And to Lot, too, We gave sound judgement and knowledge. We saved him from that community which was given to deeds of abomination. They were people lost in evil, depraved. Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous. (Verses 74-75)*

The story of Lot is related in full detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Here we have only a brief reference to it, as he emigrated from Iraq with his uncle, Abraham. Lot stayed in the township of Sodom, where the people resorted to repugnant practices. They were guilty of abominable, perverted sexual indecency, men with men, openly, without any sense of shame or guilt. Hence, God poured His punishment on the township and its people, as "*they were people lost in evil*". (Verse 74) God saved Lot and his household with the exception of his wife. "*Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous.*" (Verse 75) The way this verse is phrased suggests that God's grace is a place of refuge into which God admits whomever He wills so that they find peace, comfort and blessings.

This is followed by a similarly short reference to Noah and his saviour: "*And long before that, Noah called out [to Us], and We responded to him and saved him with his household from the great calamity, and helped him against the people who had denied Our*

revelations. Lost in evil were they, and so We caused them all to drown." (Verses 76-77)

Again the reference here does not provide details. It is simply to confirm God's response to Noah when he appealed to Him. Noah lived at an earlier time than Lot, hence the reference, *long before that'*. In Noah's case as well, he and his household were saved with the exception of his wife. As for his people, they were destroyed by the flood, which is described here as *'the great calamity'. It* is described in detail in *Sūrah 11, Hūd.*

Then follows a fairly detailed account of an episode in the story of David and Solomon:

> *And remember David and Solomon, when both gave judgement concerning the field into which some people's sheep had strayed and grazed by night. We were witness to their judgement. We gave Solomon insight into the case. Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them. And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks? To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them. (Verses 78-82)*

The story of the field over which David and Solomon gave judgement is detailed in some reports as stating that two men came to David. One of them had a field, or a vineyard according to some reports, while the other had a flock of sheep. The field's owner said: 'This man's sheep traversed my field at night, leaving it devastated.' David ruled that the owner of the field should take the sheep in compensation for his wasted crops. The sheep's owner then passed by Solomon and told him of David's judgement. Solomon went to his father and said: "Prophet of God, you should have judged differently." David asked: "How should I judge?" Solomon replied: "Give the sheep to the field's owner to benefit by them and give the field to the sheep's owner to tend until it is returned to its original state. Then each man returns to the other his property. Thus, the field's owner will get his field and the sheep's owner his sheep." David confirmed that that was the right judgement, and he ordered it to be carried out.

Both David and Solomon judged according to their own discretion, but God was observing their judgement. He inspired Solomon to give the verdict that was fairer. David's judgement aimed to compensate the field's owner for the damage done to him, which establishes justice. But Solomon's judgement added to justice a constructive dimension. Thus, justice became a motive to initiate constructive effort.

This is a higher level of justice, one which was given by God's inspiration.

Both David and Solomon were given wisdom and knowledge: *"Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them."* (Verse 79) There was nothing wrong with David's judgement, but that of Solomon's went a step further because it was inspired.

The *sūrah* moves on to show what was given specifically to each of these prophets, starting with the father: *"And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks?"* (Verses 79-80)

A Special Gift to a Special Man

David was famous for his Psalms, which were hymns that he chanted in his melodious voice. They were echoed by his surroundings, including the mountains and birds. When a human being feels his bond with God alive in his heart, he feels that the entire universe responds to him. All impediments and barriers separating different kinds of creatures are thus removed, so that they join together in one great, universal entity. In such moments of clarity, man's soul is united with all about it. It is no longer distinct from its surroundings. Indeed it is one with all that is around it.

As we read these verses we can imagine David chanting his Psalms, oblivious to his own separate entity, letting his soul move freely in the universe, looking at God's animate and inanimate creation. He feels that they echo his chanting and in this way respond to him. The entire universe thus becomes an orchestra singing a marvellous tune of God's praise and glorification. *"The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises."* (17: 44) The one who understands such praises is a person who sheds all barriers and separations. He is one who turns to God.

"We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]." (Verse 79) There is nothing difficult for God when He wills to have it done or put in place, regardless of whether it is familiar or not to mankind.

"And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks?" (Verse 80) That was how God taught him to make shields using interconnected rings. Shields were previously made of long plates. Small, interconnected rings can make a shield that is easier to use and more flexible. It seems that it was David who invented this, as God

instructed him to do. God reminds people of His favour in teaching David this art so as to protect them in wartime: *"So that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear."* The verse ends with a question that encourages them to do the right thing: *"Will you, then, give thanks?"*

Human civilization has moved step by step in its discoveries, because he task that man was given to build life on earth allowed him to move one step at a time, to reorganize his life after each advance. Reorganizing life according to a new system is not easy for the human soul, because it shakes its foundations and alters its habits. A period of readjustment is thus needed until man settles into his new system. God in His wisdom has willed to allow a period of resettlement, long or short as it may be, after each leap forward.

In our own times, however, an important cause of anxiety that is characteristic is the rapidity of scientific and social changes which do not allow humanity a period of resettlement. Man is not given the chance to adapt to new conditions or recognize their merits.

The case of Solomon was even greater: *"To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them."* (Verses 81-82) Reports of all types are given about Solomon, most derived from Israelite sources and interwoven with unfounded myth. We will not go into this maze, but will rather confine our discussion to what is stated in the Qur'ān. Nothing else about Solomon is certain.

The Qur'ānic text here states that winds, in their stormy conditions, were made subservient to Solomon, moving at his bidding to the blessed land, which was most probably Palestine, given it was earlier described as such in Abraham's story. The question asked here though is how all this was done.

There is the story of the magic carpet which is said to have carried Solomon and his courtiers to Palestine and back in a very short period, while camel caravans took a month to cover the same distance. This report relies on what is mentioned in another *sūrah: "To Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course, a month's journey."* (34: 12) The Qur'ān though does not mention anything about a magic carpet, nor do we find it in any authentic report. Thus we cannot say anything further about it.

It is safer to explain this statement about the wind by saying that it was directed, by God's will, to the blessed land in a cycle lasting one month each way. How? As we have said, we cannot ask such a question about the operation of God's will, which is free and unrestrained. It is God's will that creates the laws of nature and sets them

in operation. What we know of the laws operating in the universe is very little. There is nothing to preclude that other laws, about which we know nothing, are in operation, but their effects may surface only when God wills: *"It is We who have knowledge of everything."* (Verse 81) Unlike human knowledge, God's knowledge is complete and perfect.

The same applies to making the *jinn* subservient to Solomon such that they dive into the depths of the sea, or deep into the earth, to bring him some of its hidden riches or to perform other works. The word *jinn* includes in its meaning everything that is concealed, hidden or unknown. Qur'ānic texts mention a type of creature unknown to us, called the Jinn. It was from among these that God assigned some to Solomon to dive in the sea and do his bidding. Furthermore, God kept watch over them so that they did not escape or rebel. It is He who holds sway over all His creatures, putting them to whatever purpose He chooses in any way He likes.

God tested David and Solomon with what pleases people. David was tested in connection with the administration of justice, while Solomon's test involved nobly bred, swift-footed steeds, as is detailed in *Sūrah* 38. So we will leave that for now. Both David and Solomon persevered, sought God's forgiveness and passed their tests. They remained grateful to God for His favours.

A Test of Hardship for a Prophet

The *sūrah* also provides us with the example of Job, the Prophet, (peace be upon him), being tested with hardship:

> *And remember Job, when he cried out to his Lord. Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the most merciful.' We responded to him and removed all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them, as an act of grace from Ourself, and as a reminder to all who worship Us. (Verses 83-84)*

Job's story is one of the finest that centres on a test. Qur'ānic texts mentioning Job only speak in general terms, giving few details. In this particular instance, the *sūrah* mentions Job's supplication and God's response, because the overall atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of grace bestowed from on high on His prophets and the care He takes of them when He tests them. This applies in all test situations, including rejection by their peoples, as with Abraham, Lot and Noah; power and wealth as with David and Solomon; or hardship with Job.

Job's prayer, as mentioned here, does not go beyond describing his condition and emphasizing God's attributes: *"And remember job, when he cried out to his Lord:*

Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the most merciful.'" (Verse 83) He does not appeal for his condition to be changed, because he wants to remain patient in adversity. Nor does he suggest anything to his Lord. His is an attitude of perfect humility before Him. Thus, he is God's model servant: neither panicking in a situation of adversity nor expressing frustration at the hardship he endures. Indeed, his is considered a test of the highest severity.[2] He is reluctant even to pray to God to lift his hardship. Therefore, he leaves the matter entirely to God, knowing that He knows his situation and does not need his prayer.

At the moment Job addressed his Lord with such confidence and humility, his prayer was answered and God's grace was bestowed on him in abundance. His test was over: *"We responded to him and relieved all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them."* (Verse 84) His personal affliction was removed, and his health was restored. This indicates complete recovery, leaving no trace of illness. The affliction which concerned his family was also lifted. God compensated him for the one he had lost by giving him twice as many. It is said that he had lost his children, and God gave him twice their number, or He might have given him new children and grandchildren.

All this was as *"an act of grace from Ourself,"* because every blessing is an act of God's grace. It was also *"a reminder to all who worship Us."* It reminds them of God and the tests He may put us through, and of His grace that will not fail to follow the hardship. The test to which Job was put provides an example for all mankind, and his patient endurance sets a model for all to follow.

The reference to those *"who worship Us"* within the context of hard tests is especially significant. Such worshippers may be subjected to tests and hardship. To endure with patience is a requirement of faith and worship. The whole matter is very serious. Faith is a trust which is given only to those who are able to shoulder its responsibility and endure its hardship. It is not mere words, carelessly uttered by anyone.

The *sūrah* then refers very briefly to three other prophets: *"And remember Ishmael, Idrīs and Dhu'l-Kifl: they all were men of constancy and patience. We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous."* (Verses 85-86) Again with all three the quality of patience in adversity is highlighted. Ishmael showed his patience when he was required to submit himself for sacrifice, and he duly did so, saying to his father, Abraham: *"Father, do as you are bidden. You will find me, if God so wills, among those who*

[2] There are numerous reports about what happened to Job, some of which are clearly exaggerated. Some suggest that he suffered an illness that made people turn away from him, unable to look at him. Thus was he left outside the city. We have no reliable evidence to support this. It is indeed contrary to what a messenger of God is like. What Qur'ānic texts suggest however is that he suffered hardship within himself and within his family. That is more than enough as a test for anyone. — Author's note.

are patient in adversity." (37: 102)

As for Idrīs, as we noted earlier, we know nothing about his time or where he lived. Some people suggest that he was Osiris, whom the Egyptians worshipped after his death and invented some legends concerning him. He is said to have been the first teacher of mankind, from whom farming and industry were learned. But we have no evidence to support this. We need only know that he was patient in some good way that merits a record in God's book.

Dhu'l-Kifl is also unknown: we cannot determine when or where he lived. Perhaps he was one of the Israelite prophets, or among their most pious and God-fearing people. It is also said that before one of their prophets died, he guaranteed that he would take care of the Children of Israel, giving a warrant that he would spend the night in worship, fast during the day and not allow anger to take hold of him when he ruled in a dispute. He honoured all his commitments. It is said that he was called Dhu'l-Kifl because of this, since his name refers to such practices.[3] But none of these details is supported by evidence. The Qur'ānic text here is sufficient to credit him with being patient in adversity, a highly rewarding quality.

"We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous." (Verse 86) This is why they are mentioned in this *sūrah.*

Swallowed by the Whale

We then have a brief outline of Jonah's story to fit with the approach followed in this *sūrah.* It is however given in more detail in *Sūrah* 37, *al-Ṣāffāt*

> *And remember Dhu'l-Nūn, when he went away in anger, thinking that We would not force him into a tight situation! But then he cried out in the deep darkness: 'There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!' So We responded to him and delivered him from his distress. Thus do We deliver those who have faith. (Verses 87-88)*

Jonah is here called Dhu'l-Nūn, which means 'man of the whale' because he was swallowed by the whale and then thrown out. He was sent to a particular city, and he called on its people to believe in God, but they rejected both him and his message. By way of response to their stubbornness, he left in anger. He showed little inclination to persevere with them on account of their rejection. He thought that God would not restrict him to a particular place, given there were many cities and communities, and that he would thus be directed to go somewhere else. This is what is meant by the expression rendered here as *"thinking that We would not force him into*

[3] The name Dhu'l-Kifl means 'the one giving a guarantee'. — Editor's note.

a tight situation!"

Angry and frustrated, he walked away, and found himself sometime later by the sea, where he saw a laden boat. He boarded it. When the boat was in the middle of the sea, it was apparent that its load was too heavy. The shipmaster said that one passenger must be thrown overboard in order to give the rest a chance to survive. They all drew lots and the draw fell to Jonah. The other passengers threw him into the sea, or he might have jumped overboard. It was then that the whale swallowed him and he found himself in a most tight situation. He felt shrouded by several layers of darkness: the darkness of the whale's belly, the darkness of the deep blue sea and the darkness of the night. At this moment, he cried out: *"There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed." (Verse* 87) God answered his prayer and saved him from the distress he was suffering. The whale thus threw him out near the shore. The remainder of his story is taken up in *Sūrah* 37, *al-Ṣāffāt.*

There are in Jonah's story some significant points we need to reflect upon. First, Jonah did not initially show enough patience and willingness to endure the difficulties of delivering God's message. He quickly became fed up, abandoned his people and moved on, angry and frustrated. He felt his situation to be very tight. But God exposed him to a much tighter and harder distress as compared with the opposition of unbelievers. Had Jonah not turned to his Lord in repentance and admitted that he had wronged himself by leaving his position of duty, he would not have been relieved of his distress. It was God's care that saved him.

The advocates of a message must be ready to bear the burden involved in such advocacy, remain patient in the face of rejection and vicious opposition. When a person is certain of the truth of the message he advocates, he finds the opposition of people who accuse him of false inventions and deliberate lying difficult to handle. Yet to remain patient in the face of such adversity is only part of the duties of such advocacy. Those who are entrusted with delivering a message and advocate the truth must remain patient, face the difficulties and persevere with their advocacy. They must continue to present their message to people and call on them to believe in it, time after time.

Such advocates cannot give in to despair. They cannot give up on people, believing that they will never respond to the truth, no matter how much opposition they face, and how often they are rejected and accused of falsehood. If their hundred attempts to touch people's hearts meet with failure, their next attempt may have a positive result. Indeed, such a result may come only after one thousand and one attempts. Hence, if they have already tried a thousand times and failed, they should try once more in the hope that, with God's grace, their next attempt will be more successful.

The way a message must follow in order to touch people's hearts is neither easy nor comfortable. Positive responses may not be forthcoming. A great heap of false beliefs, erring practices, customs, traditions and situations weigh heavily on people's hearts and minds. This heap must be removed, and hearts must be revived in every possible way. A touch on every sensitive receptor must be made to try to find the effective nerve. With determination and diligence the right touch will inevitably be made, and a complete transformation of the addressee is achieved. We are often surprised that a thousand attempts may be made with one particular person, but without success. Then a casual gesture, coming at the right time, touches the right cord, and the person concerned goes through a complete transformation without any difficulty.

A comparison may be made with trying to find a particular radio station. We turn the tuning key to and fro, but we miss it despite taking full care to find it. Then suddenly a casual touch may hit upon it and we enjoy a good reception. The human heart is akin to a radio receiver. Advocates of the divine message must try hard to find the right spot that enables every heart to receive that message. When one thousand attempts have failed, the next one may succeed.

It is easy for an advocate of the divine message to be angry when people turn away from him. To give up and quit is always easy. It may enable us to cool down. But of what service is that to the message itself? It is the message that is most important, not its advocate. If we are angry, we should remain patient. It is infinitely better for us not to lose heart and not to give up.

An advocate is merely a tool in God's hand, and God preserves His message better than us. We must discharge our duty however hard the opposition we may face. We then leave the matter to God, and He gives guidance to whomever He pleases. In the story of Jonah we thus have a good example to reflect upon. His return to his Lord and acknowledgement of his error provide a good lesson. Furthermore, in the grace God showed him, answering the prayer he addressed through the compounded darkness, gives us great hope: "*Thus do We deliver those who have faith.*" (Verse 88)

One Community Throughout History

Along the same lines of its brief accounts of different prophets, the *sūrah* gives a quick reference to Zachariah and his son John, highlighting how God responded to Zachariah and answered his prayers:

> *And remember Zachariah when he cried out to his Lord: My Lord! Do not leave me alone, although You are the best of inheritors.' So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him. They all would vie with one another in doing*

> *good works, and would call on Us in yearning and awe. They were always humble before Us. (Verses 89-90)*

The story of John's birth is given in detail in *Sūrahs* 19 and *3, Maryam* and the *House of `Imrān.* Here it is given very briefly to fit with the rest of the *sūrah.* It begins with Zachariah's prayer, '*My Lord, do not leave me alone,*' without a successor to take care of the temple. Zachariah was in charge of the temple where the Israelites offered their worship, before the birth of Jesus. However, Zachariah does not forget that the ultimate custodian of faith and property is God Himself: "*You are the best of inheritors.*" He only needs a successor who will attend well to the faith and to his family. People are the medium to fulfil God's will on earth.

The answer to this prayer was swift and direct at the same time. "*So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him.*" (Verse 90) She was barren, unable to bear children. The *sūrah* overlooks all details to give us the ultimate result of God's response to Zachariah's prayer. "*They all would vie with one another in doing good works.*" Hence, God gave an immediate response to that prayer. They "*would call on Us in yearning and awe.*" They yearned to earn God's pleasure and were in awe of incurring His displeasure. Their hearts were alive, always hopeful. "*They were always humble before Us,*" showing no arrogance.

It was Zachariah's and his wife's good characteristics that deserved that God should bless them with a goodly son, John. Thus, the whole family was blessed, fully deserving of God's grace.

Finally, Mary is mentioned along with her son: "*And remember her who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed into her of Our spirit and caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind.*" (Verse 91)

We note that Mary is not mentioned here by name, because the main reference in the chain of prophets is to her son, while she is second to him in this account. Reference is made to her main quality that is related to her son.[4] Thus she is the one "*who guarded her chastity,*" keeping herself pure of all sexual contact. Normally, this expression of guarding one's chastity is used to refer to marriage, because it protects against sin. Here it refers to its primary meaning, which is purity of all contact, whether legitimate or not. Thus, Mary is held innocent of all accusations levelled by the Jews against her and against Joseph the carpenter, who was with her in the service of the temple. The Gospels now in circulation claim that he married her but did not consummate the marriage and she remained a virgin.

[4] A number of eminent scholars, notably Ibn Ĥazm, rank Mary among prophets, citing in evidence her mention in this *sūrah,* as well as her listing in *Sūrah* 19, *Maryam,* with a number of prophets and then referring to them all in Verse 58 as prophets. — Editor's note.

So, Mary guarded her chastity, and God breathed into her of His spirit. The breathing is left general here, unlike *Sūrah* 66, The Prohibition, where its location is mentioned. We discussed this in our commentary on *Sūrah* 19, *Maryam.* In order to stick to the general atmosphere generated by the text of this *sūrah,* we prefer not to add any details here, confining ourselves only to what is directly mentioned.

We *"caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind."* (Verse 91) Indeed she was a unique sign, without similar example, whether in the past or in the future, a single such case in the history of mankind. Such a special case is worthy of our contemplation, for by doing so we recognize God's power, unrestricted as it is by anything whatsoever. It is the power that designs natural laws and sets them in operation, but which is not subservient to them. It remains free of all restrictions.

At the end of this fast moving round, referring to different messengers, types of tests, and forms of God's grace and mercy, the *sūrah* gives a final comment: *"Surely, your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone."* (Verse 92)

This is the community of prophets: a single community, sharing the same faith, following the same course, and turning to God alone. Thus we have a single community on earth, and a single Lord in heaven. He has no partners. No one can be worshipped but Him. This whole community follows the same line, acknowledging a single will in heaven and on earth. Thus, this whole round dovetails with the central theme of the *sūrah,* emphasizing the right faith based on the concept of God's oneness, which is confirmed by all universal laws.

4
A Mercy for Mankind

وَتَقَطَّعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَهُم بَيۡنَهُمۡۖ كُلٌّ إِلَيۡنَا رَٰجِعُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

But people have divided themselves into factions. Yet to Us shall they all return. (93)

فَمَن يَعۡمَلۡ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَهُوَ مُؤۡمِنٞ فَلَا كُفۡرَانَ لِسَعۡيِهِۦۖ وَإِنَّا لَهُۥ كَٰتِبُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

Whoever does righteous deeds and is a believer withal, his endeavour shall not be lost: We shall record it in his favour. (94)

وَحَرَٰمٌ عَلَىٰ قَرۡيَةٍ أَهۡلَكۡنَٰهَآ أَنَّهُمۡ لَا يَرۡجِعُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

It is forbidden that any community We have ever destroyed should not return [to Us]. (95)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فُتِحَتۡ يَأۡجُوجُ وَمَأۡجُوجُ وَهُم مِّن كُلِّ حَدَبٖ يَنسِلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm down from every corner, (96)

وَٱقۡتَرَبَ ٱلۡوَعۡدُ ٱلۡحَقُّ فَإِذَا هِيَ شَٰخِصَةٌ أَبۡصَٰرُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يَٰوَيۡلَنَا قَدۡ كُنَّا فِي غَفۡلَةٖ مِّنۡ هَٰذَا بَلۡ كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٩٧﴾

when the true promise draws close [to its fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers, [and they will exclaim:] 'Oh, woe to us! Of this we were indeed heedless. We have assuredly done wrong.' (97)

إِنَّكُمۡ وَمَا تَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ حَصَبُ جَهَنَّمَ أَنتُمۡ لَهَا وَٰرِدُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for. (98)

لَوۡ كَانَ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ءَالِهَةٗ مَّا وَرَدُوهَاۖ

If those [objects of your worship] had truly been divine, they would not have been destined for it. But there all shall abide. (99)

وَكُلٌّ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

There they will be groaning with anguish, and bereft of hearing. (100)

لَهُمۡ فِيهَا زَفِيرٞ وَهُمۡ فِيهَا لَا يَسۡمَعُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell, (101)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ سَبَقَتۡ لَهُم مِّنَّا ٱلۡحُسۡنَىٰٓ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ عَنۡهَا مُبۡعَدُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

hearing none of its hissing sound. They will abide in all that their souls have ever desired. (102)

لَا يَسۡمَعُونَ حَسِيسَهَاۖ وَهُمۡ فِي مَا ٱشۡتَهَتۡ أَنفُسُهُمۡ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

The Supreme Terror will cause them no grief, since the angels will receive them with the greeting, 'This is your day which you were promised.' (103)

لَا يَحۡزُنُهُمُ ٱلۡفَزَعُ ٱلۡأَكۡبَرُ وَتَتَلَقَّىٰهُمُ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُۖ هَٰذَا يَوۡمُكُمُ ٱلَّذِي كُنتُمۡ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

On that day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment. As We brought into being the first creation, so We shall bring it forth anew. That is a promise We willed upon Ourselves. We are indeed able to do all things. (104)

يَوۡمَ نَطۡوِي ٱلسَّمَآءَ كَطَيِّ ٱلسِّجِلِّ لِلۡكُتُبِۚ كَمَا بَدَأۡنَآ أَوَّلَ خَلۡقٖ نُّعِيدُهُۥۚ وَعۡدًا عَلَيۡنَآۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا فَٰعِلِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that 'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.' (105)

وَلَقَدۡ كَتَبۡنَا فِي ٱلزَّبُورِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ٱلذِّكۡرِ أَنَّ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِيَ ٱلصَّٰلِحُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

In this, there is a message for people who worship God. (106)

إِنَّ فِي هَٰذَا لَبَلَٰغٗا لِّقَوۡمٍ عَٰبِدِينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

We have sent you as a [manifestation of Our

grace towards all the worlds. (107)	وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ إِلَّا رَحۡمَةٗ لِّلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٠٧
Say: 'It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God: will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?' (108)	قُلۡ إِنَّمَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَآ إِلَٰهُكُمۡ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۖ فَهَلۡ أَنتُم مُّسۡلِمُونَ ١٠٨
If they turn away, say: 'I have proclaimed this in equity to all of you alike; but I do not know whether that which you are promised is imminent or far off. (109)	فَإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ فَقُلۡ ءَاذَنتُكُمۡ عَلَىٰ سَوَآءٖۖ وَإِنۡ أَدۡرِيٓ أَقَرِيبٌ أَم بَعِيدٞ مَّا تُوعَدُونَ ١٠٩
He certainly knows all that is said openly, just as He knows all that you would conceal. (110)	إِنَّهُۥ يَعۡلَمُ ٱلۡجَهۡرَ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡلِ وَيَعۡلَمُ مَا تَكۡتُمُونَ ١١٠
For all I know, this may be but a trial for you, and a short reprieve.' (111)	وَإِنۡ أَدۡرِي لَعَلَّهُۥ فِتۡنَةٞ لَّكُمۡ وَمَتَٰعٌ إِلَىٰ حِينٖ ١١١
Say: 'My Lord, judge You in truth!' and [say]: 'Our Lord is the Most Merciful whose help is ever to be sought against all [the blasphemies] you utter.' (112)	قَٰلَ رَبِّ ٱحۡكُم بِٱلۡحَقِّۗ وَرَبُّنَا ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ ٱلۡمُسۡتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا تَصِفُونَ ١١٢

Overview

This is the last passage of this *sūrah* which showed us first a number of God's universal laws that testify to the oneness of the Creator. It then showed us God's law in sending messengers to advocate a message testifying to the unity of the community of believers and their single faith. Now the *sūrah* gives us a scene of the Last Hour and its signs. We *see* here the destiny of those who associate partners with God as well as the destiny of those alleged partners. God is seen as the Lord of all who conducts the affairs of the entire universe. Following this, we have two statements: the first establishes the rule that governs who inherits the earth, while the second shows God's grace bestowed on all worlds in the form of sending His final Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

At this point, the Prophet is ordered to leave the unbelievers alone to face their destiny which will be determined by God. The Prophet seeks God's help to face their opposition and ridicule, as well as their indulgence in idle pleasures when the Day of Reckoning is so near.

Rules That Never Fail

The followers of all God's messengers belong to one community, sharing the same faith and the same beliefs. The basis on which this community is built is the belief in God's oneness, which is testified to by universal laws. It is the central, unchanged belief advocated by all messengers, right from the very beginning to the last and final message. As new messages were given, certain details were added to the code of living that should be established on the basis of this central belief. These additions suited the abilities and development of each community and each new generation. They responded to the increased richness of human experience which makes new generations able to fulfil new types of legislation, meeting their increased needs and responding to their social and material advancement.

Despite the fact that the followers of all messengers constitute a single community, and despite the fact that all divine messages share the same basis, those followers divided themselves into factions. Each group took a portion and went away, allowing controversy to stir between them, and thus leading to division and hostility. Indeed this happened among the followers of a single messenger, with some eager to kill others in the name of the faith, which they all shared.

They have divided themselves into factions in this life, but they will all return to God in the life to come: *"Yet to Us shall they all return."* (Verse 93) The end is with Him, when they will face the reckoning and He requites them for what they do in this present life.

"Whoever does righteous deeds and is a believer withal, his endeavour shall not be lost: We shall record it in his favour." (Verse 94) This is the law of action and reward. No one shall suffer any loss of any good deed based on faith. All such deeds are recorded with God who never loses sight of anything.

It is essential that good action should be based on true faith in order to have its true value and to flourish. Moreover, good action is necessary so that faith can yield its fruits and prove its existence.

Faith is the central basis of life, because it provides true and real contact between man and the universe. Indeed faith is the bond that ties the universe and all living creatures to their only Creator. It outlines the single law that operates in the universe by God's will. No structure can be raised without a basis or a foundation. When we

say that good action is the edifice, it has to stand upon a firm foundation, which is faith. Otherwise, it collapses.

Good action is the fruit of faith which proves its active presence in man's conscience. Islam in particular is an active faith: once it establishes its roots in man's conscience, it manifests itself in good action. It is like a ripe fruit pointing to the roots stretching below the surface.

Hence, the Qur'ān always associates faith with good deeds, whenever it mentions deeds and their reward. There is no reward for a belief that remains idle, motivating no good action. Nor is there any reward for action that is cut off from its roots of faith. A good action that is not based on faith is a mere coincidence, because it is not related to a well defined system or a consistent law. It is merely a whim that does not stem from the right motivation. The right motivation is faith in God who is pleased with good action, because it provides the means to build a sound structure in this universe and the means to achieve the excellence that God wants for this present life. Thus, good action is seen to be a movement towards an objective that is linked to the ultimate goal of life. It is never a fleeting whim or an aimless coincidence.

Reward for good action is given in the life to come, even though parts of it may be advanced in this present life. Those cities which suffered total destruction will inevitably return to receive their ultimate requital. It is not possible that they will not be returned: *"It is forbidden that any community We have ever destroyed should not return [to Us]."* (Verse 95)

The *sūrah* mentions these cities in particular, after the statement, *"Yet to Us shall they all return,"* because it may occur to us that their destruction in this life was their final reckoning and punishment. Hence the *sūrah* emphatically asserts that they will return. The assertion is given in a prohibited form whereby non-return is impossible. It is for sure a rather peculiar mode of expression. Therefore, some commentators and translators have interpreted it as a negation of a return of those communities to this present life after they were destroyed, or a negation of their turning back from their erring ways. Neither interpretation is necessary. It is better to take the text as it is, because its meaning is quite clear.

One Destiny for Idol and Worshipper

We are then presented with a scene of the Day of Resurrection, starting with a sign that signals its approach. This sign is the opening of the gates for Gog and Magog:

> *When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm down from every corner, when the true promise draws close [to its fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers, [and they will exclaim:] 'Oh, woe to us! Of this we were indeed heedless.*

We have assuredly done wrong.' (Verses 96-97)

When we discussed the account given in *Sūrah* 18, The Cave, of Dhu'l-Qarnayn and its reference to Gog and Magog, we said that the true promise of the hereafter may have already drawn close to its fulfilment when the Tartars swarmed eastwards to destroy states and empires. Indeed at the time of the Prophet himself, the Qur'ān states clearly: *"The Last Hour has drawn close."* (54: 1) Nevertheless, its drawing close does not specify a particular time when it will actually take place. To God, time is totally different from our own calculation of days, months and years.

What is intended here is to describe what happens on that day when it actually arrives, and to introduce it with a miniature scene of what is familiar to human beings. This is the scene of Gog and Magog being let loose, and their swarming down from every corner in a fast moving image. The Qur'ān often uses notions that are familiar to man and elevates these to draw scenes of the hereafter.

The scene portrayed here stresses the element of surprise that takes the onlookers: Thus, *"staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers."* (Verse 97) They shall not wink because of the great horror that has taken them by surprise. The text uses inversion here to bring forward the actual stirring in order to provide added emphasis.

The *sūrah* does not go on to describe their condition further. Instead, it shows them speaking to give more life to the scene: *"Oh, woe to us! Of this we were indeed heedless. We have assuredly done wrong."* (Verse 97) This is the cry of one in utter distress. He is at a total loss, his eyes are stirring and he invokes a curse upon himself, acknowledging his past errors, and repents when repentance is no longer of any use.

When this confession is made in such shock, the final verdict is announced. It cannot be changed: *"You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for."* (Verse 98)

The style employed here shows them as if they are now facing the ultimate reckoning, being taken to hell together with their worshipped idols. They are practically thrown in it mercilessly, as though they are small pebbles and hell is being stoned with them. At this moment, they are shown the falsity of their claims that these were deities. The proof is seen in that very scene: *"If those [objects of your worship] had truly been divine, they would not have been destined for it."* (Verse 99) This is logical proof taken from a scene showing them, while they are still in this life, something that takes place in the hereafter. The *sūrah* then goes on to show them actually in hell, describing their abode and conditions in it. They are in a state that deprives them of their receptive faculties: *"But there all shall abide. There they will be groaning with anguish, and bereft of hearing."* (Verses 99-100)

Believers, on the other hand, are spared all this hardship, because they have been promised a goodly life in the hereafter: "*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell, hearing none of its hissing sound. They will abide in all that their souls have ever desired.*" (Verses 101-102)

The phrase, 'its hissing sound', or its one word equivalent in Arabic used here, *hasīsahā,* belongs to a number of Qur'ānic terms with sounds that impart meaning. It describes the sound of the fire as it rages and burns. It is an extremely frightening sound. Hence, those given the promise of a good destiny are spared that sound, let alone suffering it. They are saved from the terror that leaves the unbelievers in a state of utter loss. Instead they enjoy whatever they desire, in complete security and bliss. They are warmly received by the angels, who give them comforting company, when the general atmosphere is one of horror: "*The Supreme Terror will cause them no grief since the angels will receive them with the greeting, 'This is your day which you were promised.'*" (Verse 103)

The scene is now drawn to its close, showing the ultimate state of the universe, which contributes to the great terror that overwhelms all on that day: "*On that day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment.*" (Verse 104) Thus, the heavens are folded up since all matters have been settled, the reckoning is over, and the universe known to man has no further function to perform. A new world is born in a new universe: "*As We brought into being the first creation, so We shall bring it forth anew. That is a promise We willed upon Ourselves. We are indeed able to do all things.*" (Verse 104)

Who Inherits the World

Having drawn a strong image showing the end of the universe and all living creatures, the *sūrah* now makes clear the divine law that determines who inherits the earth. In the end it is God's righteous servants who will be the masters of the earth. The two scenes are interlinked: "*We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that 'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.'*" (Verse 105)

As it is given in Arabic, this verse may be read in two ways. The first considers the Psalms as certain scriptures given in particular to the Prophet David (peace be upon him). In this case, the reminder' is a reference to the Torah which was revealed earlier than the Psalms. The other reading makes of the term *zabūr* a description of every revealed book, which is a portion of the original book recorded in the guarded Tablet, which in this case would be what the word 'reminder' refers to. This Tablet, thus, represents the complete version and the final authority to which all divine laws refer.

Be that as it may, the statement, '*We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder,*' is made here to explain the established rule God has put into operation concerning the

succession to the earth. This means that *'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.'* But what does this inheritance entail, and who are the righteous among God's servants?

God gave the earth to Adam so that he could fulfil his charge of building the earth, setting it on its right course so it could develop. This included utilization of its resources and treasures, and the exploitation of its apparent and concealed potentials so as to attain the highest possible standard that could be reached.

God set out a complete code or way of life for mankind to implement in their life on earth. This is based on faith and good action. God's final message includes a detailed account of this way of life, together with laws that ensure its freedom from distortion and which provide balance and harmony in its every step.

This code does not make the development of the earth and the use of its resources and utilization of potentials an aim in itself. It should rather be coupled with taking good care of man's conscience, so that man attains the highest standard he is capable of achieving. It protects man from sinking to the level of animals in the midst of a blooming material civilization. There must be no drop in the human side of man's life while great strides are made in the exploitation of apparent and latent resources.

On the way to achieving such balance and harmony the scales may tilt one way at one time and the other on a different occasion. It may happen that tyranny prevails, or that power may be concentrated in the hands of some unbelievers who are able to materially exploit the resources and wealth of the earth. All these will remain experiences that mankind has to go through at one stage or another, but the ultimate inheritance will fall to God's righteous servants who combine faith with good action. These two elements go hand in hand in their lives.

Whenever faith in the heart combines with the will to work in any community, it inherits the land. But when these two elements separate, then the scales tilt the other way, and tyranny or exploitation ensue. Power may fall to those who are keen to utilize all material resources, if those who claim to be believers neglect their utilization. This happens when believers are devoid of the true and genuine type of faith that provides the motivation to do good and build a proper human life on earth. It should be remembered that it is through such good work that man discharges the task assigned to him by God.

All the believers need do is bring into practice the full meaning of their belief, which is good action and the fulfilment of their duty, in order that God's promise of inheriting the earth is fulfilled. It is active and conscientious workers among believers that are described as God's righteous servants.

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, its rhythm takes on a similar note to that of its opening: *"In this, there is a message for people who worship God. We have sent you as a*

[manifestation of Our] grace towards all the worlds." (Verses 106-107) This Qur'ān, and the laws it reveals of nature, the universe, human destiny both in this present life and in the life to come, and the rules that govern action and reward, provide a clear message. This message is appreciated by those who are ready to receive God's guidance. These are the ones who are described here as *'people who worship God.'* For, a true worshipper is the one who has a soft heart, ready to receive a message, ponder over it and make use of it in his life.

A Manifestation of Grace

God has sent His last Messenger as a manifestation of His grace to all mankind. He takes them by the hand to show them divine guidance. It is only those who are ready to receive such guidance that benefit by it, but God's grace is bestowed on believers and unbelievers alike.

The code of living given to us through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is one that ensures the happiness f all mankind, and which will lead to the highest level of perfection humanity can attain. Muhammad's message was given to mankind at a time when it attained its full mental maturity. Hence, it is a book open to all minds across all generations. It includes the unchangeable fundamentals of human life, and it is ready to meet changing needs that are known only to the One who created man, and who knows His creation well. He is most kind and aware of all things.

This book sets out the principles and the framework of a permanent code for an ever-renewing human life, leaving to human beings the task of deducing detailed rules necessary for organizing their relations as life progresses. It is also up to human beings to determine the methods and the means of implementation, according to their different situations and circumstances, without conflict with the principles of the permanent code.

Having guaranteed the right to freedom of thought and established the society that allows the human mind to think, this book also allows the human mind the freedom to determine what actions need to be taken. Thus, under Islam and within its fundamental principles, man is free to develop and progress towards the highest attainable standard of human life.

All human experience, up to the present moment, confirms that the Islamic system, in general, remains ahead of man's progress, able to provide the environment that ensures steady human progress in all directions. It will always be ahead of human life, providing the lead, and never restraining its march. In meeting human desire for development and progress, Islam never suppresses any human potential whether of individuals or the community. Nor does it deprive them of their

ability to enjoy the fruits of their efforts or the pleasures of life.

The most important aspect of this code of living is that it is both balanced and coherent. It neither advocates physical torment in order to elevate man's spirit, nor does it neglect the spiritual dimension in order to indulge in physical pleasures. It neither imposes restrictions on the individual and his healthy, natural desires in order to serve the interests of the community or the state, nor does it give rein to the individual's deviant desires at the expense of the safety of the community.

It is clear that all the tasks the Islamic code of living assigns to man are within his ability and serve his interests. Moreover, he has been given the means and faculties that help him fulfil these tasks, looking at them as desirable, even though he may at times have to contend with difficulties and hardships in order to achieve them.

The message of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a manifestation of grace to his own people and to humanity at large. The principles he laid down sounded strange at first because humanity was then far removed from a truly sound practical and spiritual life. After the revelation of the message of Islam, humanity drew gradually closer to these principles, which then started to sound familiar, acceptable and easy to implement.

Islam calls for a humanity in which there is no room for ethnic or geographical distinction, united by its single faith and social system. To the human mind and in the prevailing conditions at the time, this sounded very strange. Noble classes then were accustomed to thinking of themselves as having a different make up to that of ordinary human beings. Yet humanity has been trying for nearly fourteen centuries to follow the lead of Islam, but it stumbles along the way because it does not benefit by the full light of Islam. It achieves only limited standards of the Islamic code, at least in what it professes to advocate. Still we find European and American countries holding on to disgraceful racial values which Islam removed at its very outset.

Islam advocated full equality between all people under the law. It did this at a time when all humanity used to divide people into classes with a different law for each class. In fact a master's will was the law in the age of slavery and feudalism. At that time it was very strange for humanity to hear a voice advocating the principle of full and universal equality under the law. Yet gradually humanity continues to try to achieve, at least theoretically, a measure of what Islam put in practice nearly 1,400 years ago.

Numerous other aspects confirm that Muhammad's message was a manifestation of divine grace for all humanity, and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was certainly sent to bring mercy and grace to mankind, including those who did not believe in him. All humanity has been influenced, willingly or unwillingly/, knowingly or unknowingly, by the code of living he outlined. This grace continues to

be available in plenty for anyone who wishes to benefit by it. Its implementation enables humanity to enjoy the lovely breeze of heaven to dispel the burning heat of the earth, especially these days.

Today, humanity most urgently needs a fresh taste of this grace. Yet it persists in confusion as it gropes along in the maze of materialism, in the endless wars, and in the spiritual void in which it finds itself.

An Appeal for Judgement

Having highlighted this aspect of grace, the *sūrah* states an order given by God to His Messenger. He is to confront those who deny the truth and ridicule his efforts. He is to identify the essence of his message as one which brings grace and mercy to all mankind: *"Say: It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God: will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?" (Verse* 108)

This is the most essential element of grace in the message of Islam. It is the belief in God's absolute oneness that saves humanity from the burdens of ignorant myth, senseless idolatry and from the pressures of superstition. It establishes life on a firm basis, bonding it with universal existence, according to clear and consistent laws, leaving no room for whim or fleeting desire. It ensures that every human being is able to stand up with heads held high. Heads bow only to God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.

This is the path of grace: *"will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?"* This is the only question God's Messenger is directed to ask those who deny his message and indulge in ridicule.

"If they turn away, say: 'I have proclaimed this in equity to all of you alike." (Verse 109) I have given you all that I have, and now both you and I have the same knowledge. A proclamation of the sort this verse hints at is one that takes place at a time of war so as to indicate the end of peace. This *sūrah,* however, was revealed in Makkah, before war was made permissible in Islam. This means that the Prophet is commanded to declare to the unbelievers that he has given up on them, leaving them aware of their destiny, and of which he has warned them. Thus, they have no excuse. They will have to taste the bitter fruits of their actions, knowing full well what awaits them.

"But I do not know whether that which you are promised is imminent or far off" (Verse 109) I have made my declaration to you in all equity, and I have no idea when what you are warned will befall you. It is part of what belongs to what God has kept to Himself. He alone knows its timing, and knows when He will inflict His punishment, whether in this life or in the life to come. He further knows what people say in private as well as what they say in public. Nothing is kept outside God's knowledge:

"He certainly knows all that is said openly, just as He knows all that you would conceal." (Verse 110)

Your situation is completely open. If He inflicts punishment on you, He does so on the basis of His perfect knowledge of all your affairs, public and private, overt or covert. On the other hand, when He delays punishment, He does so for a definite purpose. "*For all I know, this may be but a trial for you, and a short reprieve."* (Verse 111) I have no knowledge of what God's intention is behind this delay. He may wish to put you to a certain trial, allowing you some reprieve until a certain date He might have determined. When that time comes, He may inflict on you very severe punishment.

With the issue left shrouded in mystery, the *sūrah* jolts their hearts, and leaves them with the realization that all possibilities remain open. They thus remain apprehensive of the great surprise they may be in for. Their minds are alert, realizing that the pleasures that they have been allowed to indulge in may be a prelude to a trial that brings trouble and hardship. When people expect that punishment may be inflicted at any time, they remain edgy, looking for reassurance while anticipating that the curtains may rise at any time to reveal what has thus far been kept hidden from them.

It is only human to overlook what may come at any time. Comforts and pleasures can be very deceptive, allowing people to forget that their knowledge is limited and that they do not know what God's will may bring about at any time. Hence, this warning is meant to encourage people to keep their hearts and minds alert. They have thus been warned, and they have no excuse if they fail to heed the warning.

Having discharged his trust, delivered his message, made his declaration in all fairness and warned people against forthcoming trials, the Prophet makes an appeal to his Lord. He requests God, the Most Merciful, to judge in fairness and in truth between him and those who ridicule his message. He seeks His help against their scheming, accusations and rejection, for help may be sought only from God: "*Say: My Lord, judge You in truth!' and [say]: 'Our Lord is the Most Merciful whose help is ever to be sought against all that you claim.'"* (112)

The emphasis placed here on God's abundant grace is significant. It is God, the Most Gracious and Merciful, who sent His Messenger and made this an act of His mercy. But he was met with rejection and ridicule by hardened unbelievers. It is He who can bestow His grace on His Messenger and give him support against their blasphemies.

Thus the *sūrah* ends on a powerful note, just as it opened with a powerful statement. The beginning and ending thus provide a profound and effective address.

SŪRAH 22

Al-Hajj

(The Pilgrimage)

Prologue

Parts of this *sūrah* were revealed in Makkah and other parts in Madīnah, as is evident from the topics addressed. We note in particular that verses 38-41, which give the Muslim community permission to fight, and verse 60, which speaks about meting out the same punishment that is inflicted on Muslims by others, were revealed in Madīnah. Muslims were only allowed to fight or to exact similar punishment after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah and the establishment of the Muslim state there. Prior to that, the Prophet stated that he had not received any directives allowing such action. He was replying to an offer made by the people of Madīnah who pledged their support to him. They stated that they were ready to kill all the unbelievers in Minā. In response, he said: "I have not been told to do such a thing." But when Madīnah became the land of the Muslim state, God permitted fighting to repel the unbelievers' aggression and to defend the freedom of belief and worship.

In its subject matter and its general ambiance, the *sūrah* appears closer to the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah. Issues like God's oneness, the warning to be watchful for the Last Hour, evidence for the inevitable resurrection of all mankind, the fallacy of pagan beliefs based on associating partners with God, the scenes of the Day of Judgement, and drawing attention to universal signs pointing to God's existence and power, are all very prominent in the *sūrah.* Yet equally prominent are the many issues normally addressed in *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah. Apart from giving permission to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, the *sūrah* addresses freedom of worship, the promises of God's support to those who fight to

repel aggression, and the order to fight for God's cause.

A Starting Jolt

The impressions the *sūrah* generates in its various scenes and cited examples are those of power, strength, toughness and awe. It delivers clear warnings and alerts our sense of God consciousness, of fearing Him and submitting to His will.

The scene of resurrection at the outset is one of power, striking fear in people's hearts: "*Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursling, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment.*" (Verses 1-2)

The same may be said of the scene describing punishment in the hereafter: "*For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the torment of fire.'*" (Verses 19-22)

A very vivid image is drawn showing the status of one who associates partners with God: "*He who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place.*" (Verse 31) Equally vivid is the description of the one who has lost hope of ever being granted God's support: "*If anyone thinks that God will not succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him.*" (Verse 15)

The scene depicting the townships destroyed on account of their wrongdoing also emits power: "*How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty.*" (Verse 45)

Such images of power and awe are coupled with serious orders and assigned tasks in addition to the justification given for the use of power to repel aggression and the firm promise to grant victory and power. This is re-emphasized in reference to God's might and the weakness of His alleged partners. Belonging to the first group is the following example: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people y means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques - all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's*

cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events." (Verses 39-41)

An example of the second type is: *"Mankind! An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty."* (Verses 73-74)

Beyond all this we discern the repeated call to remain God-fearing and to stand in awe of God. The *sūrah* starts with this call in its first verse, and repeats it time and again: *"Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed."* (Verse 1) *"Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts."* (Verse 32) *"Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned."* (Verses 34-35) *"Never does their meat or their blood reach God; it is your piety that reaches Him."* (Verse 37)

The *sūrah is* also replete with scenes of the universe, the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, cited cases, images, reflections and lessons drawn. All aim to alert our feelings of faith, piety, and surrender to God. This is what characterizes the entire *sūrah* and gives it its distinctive mark.

When we read the *sūrah* in full, we find that it consists of four main parts. It begins with a general address to all mankind, calling on them to be God-fearing. They are warned against the violent convulsion which announces the arrival of the Day of Judgement. We also have a description of the horrific scenes accompanying it and a denunciation of disputing without knowledge about God and following every devil who inevitably leads his followers astray. It then highlights indications of the resurrection based on the stages of life a human embryo goes through, and the development of plant life, making a clear link between all types of life. These stages which follow well established and never failing laws God has set in operation are shown to be closely linked to a number of truisms: namely, that God is the truth; that He brings the dead to life; that He has power over all things; that the Last Hour will inevitably come, and that God will resurrect all those buried in their graves. All these are natural laws and facts closely related to the law that governs the life of the universe.

A second denunciation of ignorant disputes about God follows, since such disputes are devoid of guidance and follow no enlightening book or revelation. As this is made clear, a negative example is given showing the repugnant attitude of those who look at faith from a profit and loss point of view. When misfortune befalls

such people, they are quick to seek help from sources other than God, in effect despairing of His help. This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a definitive statement that guidance and error are achieved by God's will. He will certainly judge, on the Day of Reckoning, between the followers of different faiths. It finally paints a horrific scene of the punishment suffered by unbelievers, contrasted with the perfect bliss enjoyed by believers.

The second part is clearly related to the first as it opens with a comment on the unbelievers who turn people away from God's path and from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Their action is strongly denounced since God has made the Sacred Mosque a place for all mankind, where those who live close by it and those who come from remote parts have the same rights and position. It then relates part of the history of building the Ka`bah, often referred to in the Qur'ān as the House, and the task assigned by God to Abraham to build it on the basis of His oneness, purifying it of all traces of idolatry. It goes on to mention some of the rituals of pilgrimage and how they strengthen people's piety, which is the aim of this great act of worship. This part of the *sūrah* concludes with giving permission to believers to fight in order to protect places and rites of worship against any aggression that seeks to turn them away from their belief in God alone

The third part provides examples of past communities' denials of faith, the destruction of hardened unbelievers, and images of cities destroyed over the heads of wrongdoers. The purpose here is to explain God's law with regard to the messages He sends to mankind, to comfort the Prophet who was facing a determined campaign of rejection and opposition, and to reassure the believers as to their inevitable destiny. This part also includes certain aspects of Satan's scheming against prophets and messengers, and how God reasserts His message, setting His revelations on a solid basis. Thus, believers are reassured and unbelievers, whether weaklings or the arrogant and powerful, turn away, having been misled by Satan.

The final part of the *sūrah* states God's promise of support to anyone who is oppressed as he tries to repel such aggression. This promise is followed by highlighting some aspects of God's infinite power. Next to it we have a miserable image of the helplessness of the deities worshipped by those who associate partners with God. The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the believers to worship their Lord and strive for His cause, and to hold fast to His rope as they fulfil the duties required by their faith which goes back to the time of Abraham (peace be upon him).

1
The Pilgrimage

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ زَلْزَلَةَ ٱلسَّاعَةِ شَىْءٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. (1)

يَوْمَ تَرَوْنَهَا تَذْهَلُ كُلُّ مُرْضِعَةٍ عَمَّآ أَرْضَعَتْ وَتَضَعُ كُلُّ ذَاتِ حَمْلٍ حَمْلَهَا وَتَرَى ٱلنَّاسَ سُكَٰرَىٰ وَمَا هُم بِسُكَٰرَىٰ وَلَٰكِنَّ عَذَابَ ٱللَّهِ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢﴾

On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursling, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment. (2)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يُجَٰدِلُ فِى ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَيَتَّبِعُ كُلَّ شَيْطَٰنٍ مَّرِيدٍ ﴿٣﴾

Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, and follow every rebellious devil. (3)

كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِ أَنَّهُۥ مَن تَوَلَّاهُ فَأَنَّهُۥ يُضِلُّهُۥ وَيَهْدِيهِ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿٤﴾

It is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame. (4)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِن كُنتُمْ فِى رَيْبٍ مِّنَ ٱلْبَعْثِ فَإِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ مِن مُّضْغَةٍ مُّخَلَّقَةٍ وَغَيْرِ مُخَلَّقَةٍ لِّنُبَيِّنَ لَكُمْ ۚ

Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete,[5] then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you.

[5] For an explanation of the translation of this verse, please see the footnote on its commentary, p. 80.

وَنُقِرُّ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡحَامِ مَا نَشَآءُ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ نُخۡرِجُكُمۡ طِفۡلٗا ثُمَّ لِتَبۡلُغُوٓاْ أَشُدَّكُمۡۖ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُتَوَفَّىٰ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰٓ أَرۡذَلِ ٱلۡعُمُرِ لِكَيۡلَا يَعۡلَمَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ عِلۡمٖ شَيۡـٔٗاۚ وَتَرَى ٱلۡأَرۡضَ هَامِدَةٗ فَإِذَآ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهَا ٱلۡمَآءَ ٱهۡتَزَّتۡ وَرَبَتۡ وَأَنۢبَتَتۡ مِن كُلِّ زَوۡجِۭ بَهِيجٖ ۝٥

We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom. (5)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَأَنَّهُۥ يُحۡيِ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ وَأَنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ۝٦

That is because God alone is the Ultimate Truth; and He alone brings the dead to life; and He has the power to will anything. (6)

وَأَنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ ءَاتِيَةٞ لَّا رَيۡبَ فِيهَا وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبۡعَثُ مَن فِي ٱلۡقُبُورِ ۝٧

And that the Last Hour is certain to come, beyond any doubt; and that God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves. (7)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يُجَٰدِلُ فِي ٱللَّهِ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖ وَلَا هُدٗى وَلَا كِتَٰبٖ مُّنِيرٖ ۝٨

Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations. (8)

ثَانِيَ عِطۡفِهِۦ لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۖ لَهُۥ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا خِزۡيٞۖ وَنُذِيقُهُۥ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ عَذَابَ ٱلۡحَرِيقِ ۝٩

They turn away in scorn so as to lead others astray from the path of God. Disgrace is in store for them in this world, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire. (9)

ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمَتۡ يَدَاكَ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَيۡسَ بِظَلَّٰمٖ لِّلۡعَبِيدِ ۝١٠

[They shall be told:] 'This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God

do the least wrong to His creatures.' (10)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَعۡبُدُ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ حَرۡفٖۖ فَإِنۡ أَصَابَهُۥ خَيۡرٌ ٱطۡمَأَنَّ بِهِۦۖ وَإِنۡ أَصَابَتۡهُ فِتۡنَةٌ ٱنقَلَبَ عَلَىٰ وَجۡهِهِۦ خَسِرَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةَۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡخُسۡرَانُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ﴿١١﴾

Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare. (11)

يَدۡعُواْ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَضُرُّهُۥ وَمَا لَا يَنفَعُهُۥۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلضَّلَٰلُ ٱلۡبَعِيدُ ﴿١٢﴾

He invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him. This is the utmost that one can go astray. (12)

يَدۡعُواْ لَمَن ضَرُّهُۥٓ أَقۡرَبُ مِن نَّفۡعِهِۦۚ لَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمَوۡلَىٰ وَلَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡعَشِيرُ ﴿١٣﴾

Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit. Vile indeed is such a patron, and vile the friend. (13)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدۡخِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَفۡعَلُ مَا يُرِيدُ ﴿١٤﴾

God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow. God certainly does whatever He wills. (14)

مَن كَانَ يَظُنُّ أَن لَّن يَنصُرَهُ ٱللَّهُ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ فَلۡيَمۡدُدۡ بِسَبَبٍ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ ثُمَّ لۡيَقۡطَعۡ فَلۡيَنظُرۡ هَلۡ يُذۡهِبَنَّ كَيۡدُهُۥ مَا يَغِيظُ ﴿١٥﴾

If anyone thinks that God will not succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off; and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him. (15)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ ءَايَٰتِۭ بَيِّنَٰتٖ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَهۡدِي مَن يُرِيدُ ﴿١٦﴾

Thus have We bestowed from on high this

[Qur'ān] in clear verses. God guides him who wills [to be guided]. (16)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُواْ وَٱلصَّٰبِـِٔينَ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ وَٱلۡمَجُوسَ وَٱلَّذِينَ أَشۡرَكُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَفۡصِلُ بَيۡنَهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ شَهِيدٌ ١٧

As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who associate partners with God, God will decide between them on the Day of Judgement. God is witness to everything. (17)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَسۡجُدُ لَهُۥ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَٱلشَّمۡسُ وَٱلۡقَمَرُ وَٱلنُّجُومُ وَٱلۡجِبَالُ وَٱلشَّجَرُ وَٱلدَّوَآبُّ وَكَثِيرٞ مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِۖ وَكَثِيرٌ حَقَّ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡعَذَابُۗ وَمَن يُهِنِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن مُّكۡرِمٍۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَفۡعَلُ مَا يَشَآءُ ١٨

Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings? But a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment. He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him. God certainly does what He wills. (18)

۞ هَٰذَانِ خَصۡمَانِ ٱخۡتَصَمُواْ فِي رَبِّهِمۡۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ قُطِّعَتۡ لَهُمۡ ثِيَابٞ مِّن نَّارٖ يُصَبُّ مِن فَوۡقِ رُءُوسِهِمُ ٱلۡحَمِيمُ ١٩

These two adversaries have become engrossed in contention about their Lord. For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, (19)

يُصۡهَرُ بِهِۦ مَا فِي بُطُونِهِمۡ وَٱلۡجُلُودُ ٢٠

melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. (20)

وَلَهُم مَّقَٰمِعُ مِنۡ حَدِيدٖ ٢١

In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. (21)

كُلَّمَآ أَرَادُوٓاْ أَن يَخۡرُجُواْ مِنۡهَا مِنۡ غَمٍّ أُعِيدُواْ فِيهَا وَذُوقُواْ عَذَابَ ٱلۡحَرِيقِ ٢٢

Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the

torment of fire.' (22)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدۡخِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ يُحَلَّوۡنَ فِيهَا مِنۡ أَسَاوِرَ مِن ذَهَبٖ وَلُؤۡلُؤٗاۖ وَلِبَاسُهُمۡ فِيهَا حَرِيرٞ ﴿٢٣﴾

God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where silk will be their raiment. (23)

وَهُدُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱلطَّيِّبِ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡلِ وَهُدُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلۡحَمِيدِ ﴿٢٤﴾

For they were guided to the best of words; and so they were guided to the way that leads to the One to whom all praise is due. (24)

A Fear-Striking Opening

> *Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursling, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment. (Verses 1-2)*

This is how the *sūrah* begins: an awesome opening that makes hearts tremble. It addresses all mankind, calling on them to fear their Lord and warning them against what may happen on the eventful and terrible Day of Judgement. There is a clear element of mystery about it, one that is frightening and cannot be expressed in words. Thus we are told of a 'violent convulsion' which is then described as 'awesome indeed', but we have no clear indication as to its nature or substance.

When the details are given, we find them even more frightening. We have a picture of every suckling mother completely unaware of the child she is nursing: she looks but does not see, moves but only aimlessly. Every pregnant female miscarries because of the great shock that engulfs her. All people look drunk, but they are not. They only seem to be as they look into a void and walk unsteadily in all directions. It is a very busy scene, with a huge moving crowd. We almost see it with our eyes as the verses are recited, and we paint it in our imagination. Yet we hardly get the full view, because of the horror it describes. It is a horror that cannot be measured by volume or extent, but rather by its effect on human beings. Its measure is the

suckling mother oblivious of the child on her breast. No mother can be so oblivious unless the horror she is encountering commands all her senses and faculties. It is also measured by the miscarrying pregnant women, and by the people behaving as if they are drunk yet who have not had a drink. All this is because God's punishment is severe indeed.

The Way Leading to Error

Despite this horror, we are told that some people dispute about God, having no fear of Him: *"Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, and follow every rebellious devil. It is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame."* (Verses 3-4)

Whether the dispute is about God's existence, oneness, power, knowledge or any of His attributes, it sounds extremely singular. How can anyone realize the extent of the horror that awaits us all, and from which the only escape is through piety and earning God's pleasure, yet continue to dispute about God? How can anyone with a mind to think and a heart to feel indulge in anything other than trying to avoid this violent convulsion whose horror threatens us all?

Had it been a dispute based on true knowledge, something might be said for it, but it is a dispute without knowledge. It is immersed in arrogance that seeks no firm evidence, and error that is the result of following Satan's bidding. Such people dispute about God *"and follow every rebellious devil,"* who boasts about turning away from the truth. Hence, *"it is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame."* (Verse 4) It is inevitable that such devils will lead their followers away from the truth in order to land them in hell. The *sūrah* sarcastically calls this 'guidance', which can only be the guidance of one who leads to destruction and doom.

Or is it that people are in doubt about the resurrection, or about the violent convulsion that signals the arrival of the Day of Judgement? If they are doubtful about returning to life, then they should reflect on how life is initiated. They should look at themselves, and at the earth around them. There are numerous indications that tell them that the whole thing is very close to them, but they pay little heed to the significance of the indicators within themselves and on earth, let alone appreciate them.

The Stages of Man's Creation

> *Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an*

> *organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom. (Verse 5)*

Resurrection is a return to a life that has been in existence. Thus, by human standards, it is easier than the origination of life in the first place, although, by God's standards, the notion of easier or more difficult does not arise. To Him, initiating something out of nothing and restoring a life that had ended are the same. Both are the result of His will: *"When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, 'Be'– and it is."* (36: 82) But the Qur'ān addresses people according to their own standards, rational thinking and understanding. It directs their hearts to reflect on what they see happening at every moment in their lives. If only they would reflect on it carefully, they would realize that it is miraculous. But to appreciate it as such, they need to look at it with an open heart and a reflective mind. Alas! They rarely ever do so.

Let them ask themselves: what are these people all around them? What are they made of? Where have they come from? What were they before they took this shape and form? And what stages have they gone through?

"We have created you out of dust." Man is a son of the earth. He originated, took form and lived out of its dust. Not a single element does man have in his constitution but has its parallel in the elements present in mother earth. The only exception is that gentle secret God placed in him when He breathed of His soul into–man, thus bringing about the great difference between man and those elements constituting dust. The fact remains, however, that man is closely related to dust both in his constitution and his food. All tangible elements in man are from the dust of the earth.

Nevertheless, the gap is great between dust and man. The basic atoms that are present in dust are far removed from this highly complex creation that acts on his own behest and responds to others. The human creature is influenced by different factors in his surroundings and similarly influences others. His feet are placed on earth, but his soul and heart can fly to heaven. His mind floats to realms beyond that of the physical world that includes the dust from which he was first created.

It is a great divide separating the first status and the last. It points to the power that can bring about the resurrection, having brought about the initial creation.

> *Then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers) wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring*

you forth as infants...[6] *(Verse 5)*

Again the gulf between the primitive, idle elements found in dust and the gamete, a single living cell, is great indeed. It enfolds the great secret of life about which human beings know only a very little, despite the passage of millions of years in which countless numbers of idle elements have been transformed into living cells in a continuous process that never stops. It is a secret that we can only observe and record, without ever being able to initiate, no matter how ambitious we may be. And then there are other secrets, like that of the transformation of the gamete into a clinging cell mass, and the transformation of this cell mass into an embryo which is then transformed into a human being.

What is this gamete, then? It begins with man's semen, a single drop of which contains many thousands of sperms. Yet only one of these countless sperms, or gametes, is needed to fertilize the woman's egg, which is then implanted in the uterus. In this little fertilized egg, implanted in the uterus, are stored, by God's will and power, all the unique characteristics of the human being yet to be born: his physical appearance including his height, stature, beauty, strength and health status as well as his mental and psychological characteristics, including his tendencies,

---

[6] In rendering the terms used in the Qur'ān to denote the different stages that follow the fertilization of the female egg up to the birth of a child, translators of the Qur'ān have used different terms, as they thought to fit the Arabic ones most appropriately. In most cases, *nuṭfah* is rendered as `sperm, drop of sperm, living germ, a drop of seed, etc.' while *`alaqah* is rendered as `a clot of blood, a leech-like clot, a germ-cell, etc.' On the other hand, *mudghah* is given as `a morsel or lump of flesh, embryonic lump, etc.' All these were the outcome of commendable endeavours to match the original usage. However, nowadays when it is possible to monitor the development of a human embryo from the moment of conception, we need to give the Qur'ānic terms more accurate renderings that match the stages to which reference is made.

Thus 'gamete' is preferred as an equivalent of *nuṭfah* because this Arabic term does not refer only to the male sperm. The Prophet uses it in clear reference to a `man's *nuṭah* and a woman's *nuṭfah*', and the union of both. A *Ĥadīth* related by Imām Ahmad mentions that "a Jew came to the Prophet and said: 'Muhammad! From what is man created?' The Prophet said to him: 'Jewish man! From both he is created: from the man's *nuṭfah* and the woman's *nuṭfāh.*' The Jew said: 'Thus said the one's [i.e. prophets] before you.'" The Oxford Dictionary defines gamete as "A mature haploid germ cell (male or female) which unites with another of the opposite sex in sexual reproduction to form a zygote." As the fertilized egg gets implanted in the wall of the uterus, it clings to it. This is the reason for the use of the term *`alaqah* to denote the next stage. Hence, my rendering of the Arabic word as `clinging cell mass'. Translators who use terms like `clot' used a totally different sense of the Arabic word which also means `leech', but it is clear now that there is no relation between this sense and the context in which the Qur'ānic term occurs. *Muđghah* is the next stage, which is indeed the embryo.

The Qur'ānic verse, however, speaks here of the embryo as having two distinct parts: one having the beginning of different organs while the other has nothing of the sort, *mukhallaqah wa ghayr mukhallaqah.* Again these two parts are rendered by Qur'ānic translators in a variety of ways. My consultation with specialized doctors who are also conversant with the Qur'ānic terms reached the conclusion that the closest rendering is the one used above, 'organized and non-organized embryo', stressing that the reference here is to the organs that start to take shape at this stage, with the 'organized' part referring to the embryo itself and the `non-organized' one referring to the placenta. — Editor's note.

natural likes and dislikes, abilities and talents.

Who can imagine that all this is stored in this little speck clinging to the uterus which, in time, becomes such a complex being? Yet every individual in this race is extremely different from all other individuals, to the extent that no two individuals are ever identical over any period of time.

Then this clinging cell mass is transformed into an embryo which at first is without shape or distinction. Subsequently a transformation overtakes it to give it a form that begins with a skeleton that is later fleshed up. Alternatively, the uterus may reject it if God wills not to let it complete its cycle.[7]

"So that We might make things clear to you." (Verse 5) This clause indicates that there is a pause between the embryonic stage and the child. This clause refers to the numerous signs of God's limitless power, and the reference coincides with the appearance of organs in the embryo.

The verse moves on to refer to the next stage in the development of the foetus: *"We cause to rest in the [mothers] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term."* (Verse 5) Whatever God wills to complete its cycle will rest in its mother's womb until its time of birth. *"Then We bring you forth as infants."* (Verse 5) Again we say, what a wide gulf separating the first stage and this final one!

In terms of time, it is normally nine months, but in terms of the difference between the nature of the gamete and the nature of the child, it is far greater than that. The gamete cannot be seen by the naked eye, while the child is a highly complex and sophisticated creation, with numerous organs and systems, features, qualities, talents, tendencies and desires. An intelligent mind can only appreciate this great divide after it has humbly reflected, time and again, on the great power behind creation.

The *sūrah* continues with a new cycle that starts with the newborn child, after it has left its hiding place where it went through a series of great miracles, away from all beholders. Then it is time for a new phase, so that *"you may grow up and attain your prime."* (Verse 5) You will attain your full growth: physically, mentally and psychologically. The gulf between a newborn child and an adult, in their respective characteristics, is much wider than the time separating one from the other. This gulf, however, is bridged by God's will who has given the little infant all the characteristics of a mature adult. What is more is that He has given this child a great

[7] The author follows earlier commentators in explaining the two descriptions of the embryo, saying that it either takes shape and form or does not do so. In this latter case, it aborts. Our advanced knowledge of the development of the foetus suggests that the verse has a different meaning, referring to the two parts of the embryo: the one which develops the organs and becomes a human being, and the one without organs, which is the placenta. — Editor's note.

variety of talents and potentialities that may rise to the surface at their appropriate times. It is the same divine will that gives the zygote, as it is implanted in the uterus, all the qualities of a human child. Yet that fertilized egg is the product of worthless fluid.

"Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more." (Verse 5) The one who dies young meets at an early stage the end of every living thing. As for the ones who live to old age, they provide an important case for reflection. Although each one was a person of knowledge, maturity and wisdom, now they are again children in their feelings, reactions, awareness, knowledge, dealings and management. Like a child, one little thing may give them great pleasure, and another may cause them to cry. Their memory retains very little and retrieves very little. And like a child, they take events individually, unable to relate them to one another or to look ahead to the conclusion to which they lead. They simply forget the beginning before they reach the end. It is like God says: *"When all that they once knew they know no more."* They lose the knowledge that once was a source of pride to them, leading them even to argue about God, His existence and His attributes. Now all such knowledge disappears from their minds and consciousness.

The verse then moves on to portray other scenes of creation and living creatures on earth and in the world of plants. *"You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom."* (Verse 5) The state of being 'dry and barren', which is expressed in the Arabic text with one word, *ĥāmidah,* is a state in between life and death. This is how the earth is when it is starved of water, the basic ingredient for life and the living. Thus, when rain water is poured over it, *'it stirs and swells.'* This is a remarkable movement which the Qur'ān recorded many centuries before human science. When soil is very dry and then rain falls over it, it makes a movement like shaking or stirring. It absorbs the water and swells. It is then full of life, bringing forth blooming vegetation that radiates pleasure. Is there anything more pleasing to the eye than seeing life bloom in an area that has long remained barren?

Here we see how the Qur'ān speaks of a bond between all living creatures, citing them all as one of God's numerous signs. This is a remarkable reference to the fact that the essence of life is one in all the living, and to the unity of the will that brings life into being on earth, as in plants, animals and man.

The Ultimate Truth

> *That is because God alone is the Ultimate Truth; and He alone brings the dead to life; and He has the power to will anything. And that the Last Hour is certain to come,*

beyond any doubt; and that God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves. (Verses 6-7)

All that has been said about the origins of man and his creation out of dust, the various stages an embryo goes through, and the next cycle of a child and his life, and also about life blooming out of a dry and barren earth are closely related to the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth. All these aspects are constant laws initiated and operated by God, the Truth, whose laws will never fail. The progress of life in such a fashion, moving from one stage to another, is indicative of the great will that determines its moves and stages. The link is clear between the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth and this consistency of an unfailing cycle of life.

"*He alone brings the dead to life.*" (Verse 6) Bringing the dead to life is to re-initiate life in what has been dead. The One who originated life in the first instance is the One who brings it back in the final stage. "*God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves.*" (Verse 7) They will then be given their reward for whatever they did in this first life. Such resurrection is dictated by the purpose of creation.

The cycles both embryo and child go through indicate that the wise will which has set them in motion will inevitably allow man to attain his ultimate perfection in a world of perfection. In this life on earth, perfection is unattainable because man's advancement stops at a certain point before he retreats so far as to reach a stage when '*all that he once knew, he knows no more.*' It is, then, absolutely necessary that a second life should take place to allow man to attain perfection.

Thus, these cycles, with all their stages, give a dual indication of the resurrection. They establish first that the Creator who initiates life is able to bring the dead back to life. They also show that the wise will that has set all this in operation will undoubtedly complete man's perfection in the life to come. Thus, the laws of creation and return, life and resurrection, as well as reckoning and reward, all unite to testify to the power of God, the Creator, who conducts and controls the entire universe. His existence and power admit no doubt whatsoever.

But despite all this evidence some people continue to dispute God's existence: "*Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light giving revelations. They turn away in scorn so as to lead others astray from the path of God. Disgrace is in store for them in this world, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire. [They shall be told]: This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the least wrong to His creatures.*" (Verses 8-10)

Argument about God in the face of all this evidence is singularly stupid. How much more ridiculous is it then when such argument has no basis in knowledge, evidence, fact, or revelation to enlighten the heart and mind and give a clear account

of the truth?

The *sūrah* paints a picture of this type of conceited person who '*turns away in scorn'*. Such a person realizes that his attitude lacks sound knowledge and tries to compensate for it by becoming arrogant. His aim is '*to lead others astray from the path of God.'* He is not satisfied to be astray himself. He wants others to follow his suit.

Such deviant arrogance which leads people astray must be stopped and dealt with severely. Hence, '*disgrace is in store for them in this world.'* Such disgrace befalls them in contrast with their arrogance. God does not ignore such arrogant people who lead others astray but instead He smashes their arrogance and brings them low, even if this is not immediate. God may give them respite for a while so that their disgrace becomes that much more effective and their punishment in the hereafter that much more severe: "*On the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire."* (Verse 9)

And in a brief moment, the threatened punishment becomes a reality we see with our own eyes. This is achieved by the change of style from a statement to an address: *"This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the least wrong to His creatures." (*Verse 10) We almost see them being severely rebuked as well as the punishment of fire that they must endure.

A Conditional Approach to Faith

The *sūrah* then paints a picture of another type of person. Although this type was definitely present in the early days of the Islamic message, it is also present in every generation. It is the type that weighs up faith against what profit or loss he is likely to achieve as a result. Thus, his approach to faith is the same as any business transaction he conducts.

> *Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare. He invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him. This is the utmost that one can go astray. Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit. Vile indeed is such a patron, and vile the friend. (Verses 11-13)*

Faith is the mainstay of a believer's life. The world may be swayed and shaken here or there, but the believer stays his ground supported by this mainstay. Events may pull him in this or that direction, but he remains firm in his resolve. Support may crumble all around him, but he is certain that faith gives him the kind of support that never fails. Such is the value of faith in the life of a believer. Hence, he or she must ensure that they have the right faith, trust to its unfailing support,

entertain no hesitation and wait for no immediate reward. Indeed, faith itself is a reward for believers, because it gives them all the support they need. It is indeed a reward for a heart that opens up to the light of faith and seeks guidance. Because of this, God grants them faith to provide them with all the reassurance they need. A believer realizes that faith is a reward and appreciates its value when he sees people all around him moving aimlessly, pulled here and there, worried, thrown off-course, while he himself is certain of his footsteps, calm, reassured by his strong bond with God.

Contrasted with this is the person who looks at faith as a commercial endeavour: *"If good befalls such a person, he is content."* He would say that faith is beneficial, bringing in material gains, allowing plants to grow, efforts to be fruitful, goods to sell well and transactions to be profitable. But if it turns out otherwise, then he takes a totally different stance: *"If a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come."* (Verse 11) His loss in this life is reflected in the misfortune he cannot tolerate, and the calamity that did not bring him back to complete reliance on God. Hence he also loses the hereafter by turning away from faith, rejecting the guidance that was made available to him.

This is a very vivid picture. For such a person's worship of God is shown to be on the edge, or on the border line. Faith has not penetrated him; his worship is suspect. Hence, he moves unsteadily, liable to fall at the slightest push. Hence, when misfortune does befall him, it causes him to turn away completely. In fact, lack of surety shows him to be all too ready for such a roundabout turn.

A computation of profit and loss may be suitable for commercial dealings, but it is utterly unsuited to faith, because faith represents the truth and it is embraced for nothing other than its truth. It addresses the heart which receives light and guidance and inevitably reacts to them. Moreover, faith brings its own rewards in the form of satisfaction, pleasure and reassurance. It does not seek any reward other than itself.

A good believer worships God in gratitude to Him for having guided him, and for the reassurance he feels in being close to God. Should there be any further reward, it comes by the grace of God, and it is given for one's acceptance of the faith or for one's worship. Moreover, a believer does not put God to the test. On the contrary, he accepts everything that God determines for him, contented with whatever comes his way, be it pleasant or otherwise. There is no question of a market deal here between a buyer and a seller. All that takes place is submission to the Creator who initially gives people existence and who ultimately determines fates.

Undoubtedly, the person who turns away from faith once hardship befalls him exposes himself to utter loss: *"This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare."* (Verse 11) He is deprived of trust, reassurance and contentedness, in addition to his loss of wealth,

children, health or other losses with which God puts His servants to the test. For God requires His servants to demonstrate their trust in Him, to patiently persevere in the face of adversity, as well as to dedicate their lives to His cause and to His will. Moreover, he loses the life to come and all that it promises of bliss, happiness and being close to God. This is indeed a great loss.

So where does the person who worships God on the border line go when he strays from God? In simple terms, *"he invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him."* (Verse 12) He may invoke an idol or a statue in old fashioned ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah,* or he may invoke a person, or some authority, or interest, like the different forms of *jāhiliyyah* that exist at any time or place, whenever human beings abandon belief in God's oneness and turn their backs on His guidance. But what does all this represent? It is all going astray from the only method in which invocation is of use: *"This is the utmost that one can go astray."* (Verse 12) Indeed when anyone resorts to invoking such beings instead of God, he takes himself very far away from the truth and the right way leading to it.

"Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit," be that an idol, Satan, or a human being providing support or protection. None of these can cause the invoker either harm or benefit; indeed, they are more likely to bring him harm than benefit. This harm results, in the spiritual world, from overburdening one's heart with myth and humiliation. As for the material world, its harm is self-evident. And above all, it brings about utter loss in the life to come. Hence, the *sūrah* states: *"Vile indeed is such a patron,"* which is powerless, able to cause neither harm nor benefit. *"And vile the friend,"* who brings on such utter loss. All this applies equally to whether the patron and the friend are idols and statues, or human beings raised to the status of deities or semi-deities.

Judgement Between All Creeds

As for those who truly believe in God's oneness, God prepares for them what is much better than all the material comforts and benefits this life may provide: *"God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow. God certainly does whatever He wills."* (Verse 14) Therefore, anyone who endures adversity or a test should remain steadfast and persevere. He must also continue to place his trust in God and His mercy and support, believing that only He can relieve his adversity and reward him for his perseverance.

A person who loses his trust in God's help, both in this life and in the life to come, and despairs of God's grace when he finds himself under severe pressure or adversity, may do with himself whatever he is able to do. But nothing he does will ever change his lot or relieve him of his problems: *"If anyone thinks that God will not*

succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off; and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him." (Verse 15)

This verse paints a moving scene of the rage such a person feels and the action that results from such rage. It magnifies this state when one is at breaking point. Needless to say, a person in adversity who despairs of God's grace loses every source of light and every comforting thought or hope. His worry increases manifold and his stress weighs heavily on his heart. Thus, his adversity is multiplied. Therefore, the verse tells anyone who thinks that God will not grant him His help, either in this world or in the life to come, to stretch a rope to the sky and to climb up holding to it, or to tie the rope round his neck and then cut the rope so that he falls, or cut his own breath so as to choke. Let him then look to see whether this removes his hardship or not.

The fact remains that the only way to endure hardship is to trust in God's help and hope for His grace. There is simply no way to rise above one's trials except by hard work, seeking God's support. No desperate measure can bring anything other than an increase in stress and adversity. Feelings of pressure and hardship may multiply leading to utter desperation. Therefore, anyone who is en in _such adversity should keep the window of hope and trust in God's help open, as only it brings comfort and mercy.

With such a clear exposition of examples of people who benefit by, and follow, divine guidance as well as those who go astray, God has sent this Qur'ān from on high. Thus, people who open their hearts to it will benefit by it and receive God's guidance: "*Thus have We bestowed from on high this [Qur'ān] in clear verses. God guides him who wills [to be guided].*" (Verse 16)

God has willed that guidance and error are to be granted. Therefore, whoever seeks guidance will have it in fulfilment of God's will and according to His law. The same applies to one who wishes to follow error and to stray from the truth. The *sūrah* here only mentions guidance because this is what fits with the context.

As for the different sects and their divergent beliefs, it is God who judges them all on the Day of Judgement. He is perfectly aware of whatever each of them incorporates of the truth and what falsehood they contain: "*As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who associate partners with God, God will decide between them on the Day of Judgement. God is witness to everything.*" (Verse 17)

Human beings determine the way they follow according to their ideas, tendencies and desires. By nature, the rest of the universe submits to its Creator, prostrating itself before Him:

> *Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings? But a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment. He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him. God certainly does what He wills. (Verse 18)*

When we reflect on this verse we find countless creatures, some of which we know and some we do not; and we glance at an infinite number of worlds, many of which we do not begin to know; as also an endless variety of mountains, trees and beasts that live on earth, man's abode. All these, without exception, join a single procession that prostrates itself in humble submission to God, addressing its worship, in perfect harmony, to Him alone. And out of all these creatures, man alone has a special case, as people diverge: "*a great number of human beings [bow down in worship], but a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment,*" because of their rejection of the truth. Thus, man stands out on his own, unique in that great, harmonious procession.

The verse concludes with a statement making clear that whoever deserves punishment will inevitably be humbled and disgraced: "*He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him.*" (Verse 18) How could such a person be honoured when all honour and respect are granted by God. In other words, anyone who submits to any being other than God Almighty, to whom the entire universe willingly submits, will be disgraced.

Widely Divergent Ends

The next passage draws a scene of the Day of Judgement when the honour bestowed by God on His faithful servants and the humiliation suffered by the others are shown as though they are happening here and now.

> *These two adversaries have become engrossed in contention about their Lord. For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the torment of fire.' God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where silk will be their raiment. (Verses 19-23)*

It is a violent scene with loud noises and bustling movements. The descriptive style imparts a sense of long duration, with ever renewing action raised before our imagination. We see garments being cut out and tailored, and fiercely boiling water

being poured over people's heads. Its temperature is so high that the moment it touches the heads of those at the receiving end, whatever is in their bellies smelted, as does their skin. We also see whips made of red-hot iron to flog those condemned to such punishment. The suffering is intensified and becomes unbearable. The unbelievers make a sudden move to try to escape this torment, but they are fiercely returned into it. They are strongly rebuked and told: *'Taste the torment of fire.'*

Our imagination continues to repeat this scene from its first movement right up to the point where the unbelievers are repelled when they try to escape. It then starts all over again. The only way to turn away from this self-repeating scene is to look at the other destiny portrayed in the *sūrah.* The starting point is that there are two adversaries contending about their Lord. We have just seen the sad end of those who refuse to believe in Him. The believers, on the other hand, are in gardens through which running waters flow. Their clothes are unlike those of the first group: they are made of silk. On top Of these they have adornments and jewellery made of gold and pearls. God also guides them to the best of words and to the way leading to the One worthy of all praise. Thus, they encounter no difficulty either in word or in direction. Such guidance is a great blessing, because it gives them a sense of ease, comfort and reassurance.

Such is the end of contention about God: people are ranked into two groups with two greatly different ends. Anyone who continues to argue about God, without knowledge, guidance or a light-giving divine book, unsatisfied with the clear evidence of the truth God has given us, should reflect before he faces this inevitable end.

2
The Ka`bah and Pilgrimage

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلْنَـٰهُ لِلنَّاسِ سَوَآءً ٱلْعَـٰكِفُ فِيهِ وَٱلْبَادِ ۚ وَمَن يُرِدْ فِيهِ بِإِلْحَادٍۭ بِظُلْمٍ نُّذِقْهُ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come from abroad... Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering. (25)

وَإِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِإِبْرَٰهِيمَ مَكَانَ ٱلْبَيْتِ أَن لَّا تُشْرِكْ بِى شَيْـًٔا وَطَهِّرْ بَيْتِىَ لِلطَّآئِفِينَ وَٱلْقَآئِمِينَ وَٱلرُّكَّعِ ٱلسُّجُودِ ﴿٢٦﴾

When We assigned to Abraham the site of the [Sacred] House, [We said]: 'Do not associate anything as partner with Me. Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. (26)

وَأَذِّن فِى ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا وَعَلَىٰ كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ يَأْتِينَ مِن كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter; (27)

لِّيَشْهَدُواْ مَنَـٰفِعَ لَهُمْ وَيَذْكُرُواْ ٱسْمَ ٱللَّهِ فِىٓ أَيَّامٍ مَّعْلُومَـٰتٍ عَلَىٰ مَا رَزَقَهُم مِّنۢ بَهِيمَةِ ٱلْأَنْعَـٰمِ ۖ فَكُلُواْ مِنْهَا وَأَطْعِمُواْ ٱلْبَآئِسَ ٱلْفَقِيرَ ﴿٢٨﴾

so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor. (28)

ثُمَّ لْيَقْضُواْ تَفَثَهُمْ وَلْيُوفُواْ نُذُورَهُمْ

Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House.' (29)

وَلْيَطَّوَّفُواْ بِٱلْبَيْتِ ٱلْعَتِيقِ ﴿٢٩﴾

ذَٰلِكَ وَمَن يُعَظِّمْ حُرُمَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُۥ عِندَ رَبِّهِۦ ۗ وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمُ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَٱجْتَنِبُواْ ٱلرِّجْسَ مِنَ ٱلْأَوْثَٰنِ وَٱجْتَنِبُواْ قَوْلَ ٱلزُّورِ ﴿٣٠﴾

حُنَفَآءَ لِلَّهِ غَيْرَ مُشْرِكِينَ بِهِۦ ۚ وَمَن يُشْرِكْ بِٱللَّهِ فَكَأَنَّمَا خَرَّ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَتَخْطَفُهُ ٱلطَّيْرُ أَوْ تَهْوِى بِهِ ٱلرِّيحُ فِى مَكَانٍ سَحِيقٍ ﴿٣١﴾

ذَٰلِكَ وَمَن يُعَظِّمْ شَعَٰٓئِرَ ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِن تَقْوَى ٱلْقُلُوبِ ﴿٣٢﴾

لَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَٰفِعُ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ مَحِلُّهَآ إِلَى ٱلْبَيْتِ ٱلْعَتِيقِ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ جَعَلْنَا مَنسَكًا لِّيَذْكُرُواْ ٱسْمَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَىٰ مَا رَزَقَهُم مِّنۢ بَهِيمَةِ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ ۗ فَإِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ فَلَهُۥٓ أَسْلِمُواْ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُخْبِتِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ ٱللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ

All this [is ordained by God]. Whoever honours God's sanctities, it will be better for him with his Lord. All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden]. Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous beliefs and practices; and shun every word that is untrue. (30)

Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him. For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place. (31)

This is [to be borne in mind]. Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts. (32)

You have benefit in them for a term appointed; and in the end their place of sacrifice is near the Ancient House. (33)

For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, (34)

whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and who patiently bear whatever befalls them, attend regularly to their prayer and spend in charity out of what We provide for them. (35)

وَٱلصَّـٰبِرِينَ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَصَابَهُمۡ وَٱلۡمُقِيمِي ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَمِمَّا رَزَقۡنَـٰهُمۡ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

The sacrifice of camels We have ordained for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in which there is much good for you. Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up [for sacrifice]; and after they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their meat, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot, as well as the one who is forced to beg. It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful. (36)

وَٱلۡبُدۡنَ جَعَلۡنَـٰهَا لَكُم مِّن شَعَـٰٓئِرِ ٱللَّهِ لَكُمۡ فِيهَا خَيۡرٌ فَٱذۡكُرُواْ ٱسۡمَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهَا صَوَآفَّ فَإِذَا وَجَبَتۡ جُنُوبُهَا فَكُلُواْ مِنۡهَا وَأَطۡعِمُواْ ٱلۡقَانِعَ وَٱلۡمُعۡتَرَّ كَذَٰلِكَ سَخَّرۡنَـٰهَا لَكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Never does their meat or their blood reach God; it is your piety that reaches Him. It is to this end that He has made them subservient to your needs, so that you might glorify God for all the guidance with which He has graced you. Give good news to those who do good. (37)

لَن يَنَالَ ٱللَّهَ لُحُومُهَا وَلَا دِمَآؤُهَا وَلَـٰكِن يَنَالُهُ ٱلتَّقۡوَىٰ مِنكُمۡ كَذَٰلِكَ سَخَّرَهَا لَكُمۡ لِتُكَبِّرُواْ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَىٰكُمۡ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude. (38)

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدَافِعُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ خَوَّانٍ كَفُورٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. (39)

أُذِنَ لِلَّذِينَ يُقَـٰتَلُونَ بِأَنَّهُمۡ ظُلِمُواْ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ نَصۡرِهِمۡ لَقَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most

ٱلَّذِينَ أُخۡرِجُواْ مِن دِيَـٰرِهِم بِغَيۡرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّآ أَن يَقُولُواْ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ وَلَوۡلَا دَفۡعُ ٱللَّهِ ٱلنَّاسَ بَعۡضَهُم بِبَعۡضٍ لَّهُدِّمَتۡ صَوَٰمِعُ وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَٰتٌ وَمَسَـٰجِدُ يُذۡكَرُ فِيهَا

ٱسۡمُ ٱللَّهِ كَثِيرٗاۗ وَلَيَنصُرَنَّ ٱللَّهُ مَن يَنصُرُهُۥٓۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ٤٠

Powerful, Almighty. (40)

ٱلَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّٰهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَوُاْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَمَرُواْ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَنَهَوۡاْ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِۗ وَلِلَّهِ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ٤١

They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (41)

Overview

The first passage ended with a description of the inevitable destiny of those who engage in futile dispute about God, making it clear that such people will have no escape from the burning of hell. By contrast, the *sūrah* also describes the bliss to be enjoyed by the believers. This new passage is closely linked to the end of the first, as it speaks about the unbelievers who turn people away from God's path and from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. The reference here is to those who opposed the message of Islam when it started in Makkah, and who sought to turn people away from it. They also confronted the Prophet and his Muslim Companions seeking to debar their entry into the Sacred Mosque at the Ka`bah. It then speaks about the basis on which this mosque was founded when God assigned its building to Abraham (peace be upon him) and ordered him to call on all people to visit it for pilgrimage. Abraham's instructions were very clear: that this mosque must be established on the clear basis of God's oneness, so as to prevent any form of associating partners with God from being practised in or near it. It must be kept open to all people, whether they reside nearby or come from afar. None is to be denied entry, and none is to claim its ownership. The *sūrah* then outlines some of the rituals of pilgrimage and how they enhance people's consciousness and constant remembrance of God. It also stresses the need to protect the Sacred Mosque against any aggression by those who try to turn people away from it or change the basis on which it is founded. Those who fulfil their duties of protecting the purity of the faith are promised victory.

The First Sanctuary

> *The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come*

> *from abroad... Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering. (Verse 25)*

Such was the Quraysh's practice: they turned people away from the faith that God had established for mankind, providing a direct way to Him. They fought hard to prevent people from following the code He had chosen for human life. They also stopped Muslims from offering the pilgrimage and *`umrah,* as was the case in the sixth year of the Islamic calendar when the events that started with such prevention led to the signing of a peace agreement at al-Ĥudaybiyyah. God made this mosque an area of peace and safety for all people, where they have no fear of anyone. This applied to everyone living in Makkah, and to all those who travelled from distant areas to visit the mosque. Thus, the Ka`bah and the mosque around it form a House of God where all people are equal. None can claim any right of ownership or any distinction whatsoever: *"The Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come from abroad."* (Verse 25)

This law God established for His Sacred House preceded all attempts by human beings to establish a sanctuary where no arms are allowed, opponents are safe, bloodshed is ended and everyone enjoys peace and security. No one can claim any favour for observing these rules. They are a privilege equally extended to all people at all times.

Scholars have different views on the permissibility of ownership of houses in Makkah which are not used for personal living. Scholars who accept such ownership also differ on whether such houses may be let. Al-Shāfi`ī believes that such houses may be owned, inherited and let out. The basis of his view is the authentic report that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb bought from Ṣafwān ibn Umayyah a house for 4,000 dirhams to make it a prison. Isĥāq ibn Rāhawayh, on the other hand, says that such homes may neither be inherited nor let. He argues: "At the times when God's Messenger, Abū Bakr and `Umar died, dwellings in Makkah were known only as *sawā'ib* [which means 'left vacant']: whoever needed a place could live in any of them, and whoever had what was surplus to his own needs gave it to others." `Abdullāh ibn `Umar is quoted as saying: "It is not permissible to sell or let houses in Makkah." Ibn Jurayj mentions that `Aṭā', an early scholar, "used to warn against letting homes in the Ĥaram area. He further told me that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb used to order the people of Makkah not to have front doors for their homes, so that pilgrims might feel free to stop anywhere. The first person to put up a door to his home was Ṣuhayl ibn `Amr. `Umar sent to him for an explanation and he replied, saying: 'Let me explain: I am engaged in trade and I only wanted to have two doors so that my camels would stay within them.' `Umar accepted his explanation and allowed him these doors."

`Umar is further quoted as addressing the people of Makkah, saying: "Do not put

up front doors to your homes. Let the travelling pilgrims stop wherever they wish." Imām Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal takes a middle line that satisfies all reported statements. Thus, he says that homes in Makkah may be owned and inherited, but may not be let.

We see how Islam was far ahead of the rest of humanity, establishing an area of peace and security for all, as well as a home open to every human being. Indeed, the Qur'ān threatens with painful suffering anyone who tries to cause any deviation from this well-defined system: *"Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering."* (Verse 25) What is, then, the punishment meted out to a person who does not stop at seeking to profane the Sacred Mosque, but goes on to actually do it? The Qur'ānic verse threatens with grievous suffering anyone who either seeks this, or has the intention of doing so. This makes the warning much more powerful and far-reaching.

Another aspect of the fine style of the Qur'ān is the omission of the predicate in the first sentence of the verse. Thus, the sentence states: *"The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque..."* (Verse 25) It does not say what happens to them, or what punishment they will receive. Thus, the verse suggests that their mere mention and description is more than enough to determine their fate.

Establishing the Sanctuary

The *sūrah* now refers to the establishment of this Sacred Mosque which the idolaters had usurped. They worshipped idols there and prevented believers in God's oneness, who had purged themselves from idolatry, from entering it. Yet it was built by Abraham (peace be upon him) on God's own instructions. The *sūrah* also mentions the fundamental basis of God's oneness which served as the basis of the foundation of the Sacred Mosque. It also adds the purpose of its building as a place to worship God alone, a place where the dedicated could walk around it, and stand before it in submission to God:

> *When We assigned to Abraham the site of the [Sacred] House, [We said]: Do not associate anything as partner with Me. Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter, so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor. Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House.' (Verses 26-29)*

It was for celebrating the glory of God alone that this House was built. God showed its place to Abraham, and gave him clear instructions so that he raised it on proper foundations: *"Do not associate anything as partner with Me."* It belongs to God alone, without partners of any sort. Abraham was also required to purify the House for those who come to it to perform the pilgrimage and for those who stand up in prayer there. *"Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer."* (Verse 26) It is for those who worship God alone that this House was built. It has nothing to do with others who associate partners with Him or address their worship to anyone other than Him.

Announcing the Pilgrimage

When Abraham completed building the Ka`bah as instructed, he was ordered to declare the duty of pilgrimage as binding on all people, and to call on them to fulfil this duty. God also promised him that people would respond to his call, and that they would come from all corners of the globe, either on foot, or using every kind of fast mount that becomes thin as a result of a long journey: *"Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter."* (Verse 27)

God's promise to Abraham continues to be fulfilled, even today, and it is certain to continue well into the future. People's hearts aspire to visiting the Ka`bah, passionately longing to see and walk around it. A person of good means will use some form of transport, while a poor person will still come, even though he may have to cover a long distance on foot. Tens of thousands flock to it from far away corners of the earth, every year, in response to Abraham's proclamation of this duty made thousands of years ago.

The *sūrah* then mentions some aspects and objectives of the pilgrimage: *"so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate pool: Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House."* (Verses 28-29)

The benefits that pilgrims receive are manifold. The pilgrimage is a season of trade and worship, and a conference where people get to know each other and establish close cooperation. It is a religious duty in which objectives pertaining to this life converge with those that pertain to the life to come. Near and distant memories of true faith are also grouped together. Business people find pilgrimage to be a high season for their merchandise. Fruits of every type are brought to the sanctified city of

Makkah from all corners. Pilgrims come from every country and area of the world bringing with them their best goods that have different seasons. Thus, in Makkah all these are found in the same season, making of the pilgrimage an all-embracing exhibition and an annual international market place.

It is at the same time a season of worship, when souls feel their purity as they sense that they are close to God in His Sacred House. People's spirits roam around the House, recalling memories that are associated with it, and see near and distant images. The memory of Abraham as he abandons his small child, Ishmael, born to him in old age, yet whom he left alone with his mother. As he turned away to leave, he addressed a prayer to God, one which clearly reflected an issuing from an apprehensive heart: *"Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks."* (14: 37)

We remember Hagar as she tries to find water for herself and her young child in that exceedingly hot place where the Sacred House was yet to be built. We see her dashing to and fro between the two hills of al-Ṣafā and al-Marwah, feel her exceeding thirst, and watch her fear for her child as she's weighed down with the strenuous effort involved. She returns after covering the distance seven times, feeling something approaching despair, only to find water springing up between the blessed child's hands. That water was the Well of Zamzam, a spring of mercy in the middle of a barren desert

We recall the memory of Abraham and his vision: how he had no hesitation in offering his first son as a sacrifice. He carries a believer's submission to its highest standard: *"He said: Dear son! I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you. Consider, then, what would be your view."* (37: 102) And he is answered with equal obedience that demonstrates self-surrender to God in its clearest sense: *"He answered: Father! Do as you are bidden. You will find me, if God so wills, one who is patient in adversity."* (37: 102) But then God's grace is bestowed upon them and the son is released with a sacrifice sent by God: *"We called out to him: Abraham, you have already fulfilled that dream-vision! Thus indeed do We reward those who do good. All this was indeed a trial, clear in itself. And We ransomed him with a tremendous sacrifice." (37:* 104-107)

We also see the image of Abraham and Ishmael, many years later, as they raise the foundations of the House, praying to God with submission and humility: *"Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful."* (2: 127-128)

Such memories follow one upon the other until we see `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the

Prophet's grandfather, pledging that, if God would give him ten sons, he would sacrifice one of them. As lots are drawn, the choice falls on `Abdullāh, his youngest son. We see `Abd al-Muṭṭalib keen to fulfil his pledge, and we see his people objecting, then suggesting a ransom sacrifice. He draws the lots again and again, increasing the ransom every time, but the draw continues to be against `Abdullāh, until the ransom reaches 100 camels, although only 10 were normally required. At this point, his offering is accepted and 100 camels are sacrificed to save `Abdullāh. But his salvation is short-lived. He lives only long enough to give his wife, Āminah, whom he has just wed, the pregnancy that leads to the birth of the most noble person in human history, the one loved most by God. `Abdullāh dies soon afterwards. It is as if God had saved him from being sacrificed only to accomplish the honourable task of being the father of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Further images and memories come thick and fast. We see Muhammad, God's Messenger, in his childhood running near this House, and we see him a man close to maturity, lifting the black stone with his blessed hands to place it in its position, to prevent discord among the various tribes and clans. We see him praying at the Sacred Mosque, performing the *ṭawāf,* i.e., walking around the Ka`bah, delivering a speech or absorbed in his devotion. The steps he takes there are vividly painted before our eyes. Deep in their thoughts, pilgrims almost see these steps as though they were being taken by him now. We also see his Companions as they walk around the House, the Ka`bah, and we almost hear them as they talk.

The Pilgrimage Conference

But the pilgrimage is also a conference at which all Muslims gather. In it they find the beginning of their community, going back ages in time to none other than their first father, Abraham (peace be upon him): *"It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book]."* (Verse 78) There at the pilgrimage, they find the force that brings them all together, their *qiblah* to which they all turn as they stand up in prayer. They also find the banner under which they unite, namely, the banner of faith under which all distinctions of race, colour or nationality are non-existent. They sense their power, of which they may often be oblivious; that is the power of their unity which is capable of sweeping everything before it, when they are united by faith alone.

The pilgrimage is a conference where Muslims have the opportunity to get to know one another, discuss their affairs, coordinate their plans, group their forces, exchange commodities, information, experiences and other benefits. They organize their single well-integrated Muslim world once every year, under God's banner,

close to His House, in the light of devotion to Him alone and the memories outlined, in the best place, time and atmosphere.

It is to this blessing that the verse refers: "*so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them.*" (Verse 28) This applies to every generation according to its prevailing circumstances, needs, experience, and requirements. This is part of what God wants the pilgrimage to be, ever since He made it a duty incumbent upon all Muslims, and ordered Abraham to proclaim this duty to mankind.

The *sūrah* refers to some of the rituals of the pilgrimage and their purpose: "*They might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them.*" (Verse 28) This is a reference to the animal sacrifice that pilgrims offer on the four days of *`Īd.* The Qur'ānic verse refers first to the practice of extolling God's name at the time of the slaughter, highlighting the fact that the whole atmosphere is one of worship, and the purpose of the sacrifice is to get closer to God. Hence, the *sūrah* stresses the mentioning of God's name at the point of sacrifice, as though such mention is the aim of the whole sacrificial ritual.

The sacrifice itself commemorates the sacrifice that was given as a ransom for Ishmael. Thus, it commemorates a sign given by God, and the act of obedience by His two noble servants, Abraham and Ishmael, in addition to the element of charity involved as most of its meat is given to the poor. The 'heads of cattle' mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse refer to camels, cows, sheep and goats that are normally sacrificed. "*Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor.*" (Verse 28) The order to eat of one's sacrifice is one of permissibility and recommendation, while the order to feed the poor is one of duty and obligation. Perhaps the order that one should eat of one's own sacrifice is meant to show the poor that it is wholesome and of a quality that the person offering it does not disdain to eat from.

The sacrifice signals the end of the state of consecration, or *iĥrām,* which means that the pilgrim may now shave his head, or cut his hair. Other *iĥrām* restrictions, such as prohibiting the plucking of armpit hair and nail cutting, are also relaxed. All this is referred to in this Qur'ānic verse: "*Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows...*" (Verse 29) These vows are concerned with whatever people might have pledged to God, other than the sacrifice that is part of the pilgrimage rituals. "*And again walk around the Ancient House.*" (Verse 29) This is a reference to the *ṭawāf* of *ifāđah,* which falls due after attendance at `Arafāt. This *ṭawāf is* also different from the *ṭawāf* of farewell which is offered shortly before departing from Makkah.

The Ancient House refers to the Sacred Mosque which God made immune from the power of all tyrants, and against collapse through the passage of time. It continues to be visited, ever since the time of Abraham, and will continue to be so for

as long as God wills.

Fall, Snatch and the Deep End

This is the story of how the Sacred House in Makkah was built and the basis on which it was founded. It was God who ordered His friend, Abraham (peace be upon him), to raise this House making belief in God's oneness its solid foundation. He further ordered Abraham to purify it of all idolatry, and to proclaim to mankind the duty of offering the pilgrimage to the House, where they mention God's name, not the names of false deities, over what they sacrifice of cattle He provides for them. They are to eat of it and to feed the needy and the poor in praise of God's name, not the name of anyone or anything else. This means that it is a sacred House where God's sanctities are respected. Paramount among these are the belief in God's oneness, the opening of the House to worshippers who walk around it, stand before it in prayer, and bow and prostrate themselves to God, in addition to the prevention of bloodshed, the honouring of covenants and treaties, and the maintenance of peace.

> *All this [is ordained by God]. Whoever honours God's sanctities, it will be better for him with his Lord. All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden]. Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous belief and practices; and shun every word that is untrue. Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him. For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place. (Verses 30-31)*

Honouring God's sanctities instils a keen, watchful sense lest one should violate them. In God's measure, this is better for us. It is better in the realm of conscience and feeling, and better in this life generally. A watchful conscience is one which wants to remain pure, untainted. A community where God's sanctities are inviolable ensures a life of peace where people are secure, fearing no aggression or persecution, reassured of their comfort and safety.

The idolaters in Makkah used to consider as sacred certain animals, such as a slit-ear she-camel, a she-camel let loose for pasture, idol sacrifices for animal twin-births, and stallion-camel freed from work. They falsely attributed sanctity for such animals, while they violated God's clear sanctities. Therefore, the *sūrah* makes clear at this juncture that all cattle are lawful to eat, except for those specified as forbidden, such as carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and any animal at the slaughter of which any name other than God's is invoked: "*All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden].*" (Verse 30) This has been made clear so that none other than God's sanctities are acknowledged, none enacts any legislation

except God, and no one exercises judgement according to any law other than that of God.

While all cattle are made lawful, the *sūrah* gives an order to steer away from the abomination of venerating idols. The idolaters used to slaughter their animals before idols that personified evil. Associating partners with God is also an evil that contaminates people's hearts and consciences in the same way as an impurity contaminates a garment or a place. Since the association of partners with God is an act of fabricating falsehood against Him, the *sūrah* warns against saying anything untrue: *"Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous beliefs and practices; and shun every word that is untrue."* (Verse 30)

The Qur'ānic statement magnifies the offence of fabricating falsehood, putting it on a par with associating partners with God. A *ĥadīth* related by Imām Aĥmad states: "One day, the Prophet offered dawn prayers. When he stood up to leave, he said: 'Perjury is equal to associating partners with God.' He then recited this verse."

What God wants of all people is that they should steer away from all types of associating partners with Him, as also steer away from saying anything untrue. They must maintain in absolute purity their belief in God's oneness: *"Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him."* (Verse 31) The *sūrah* then paints a violent scene of a person who slips away from this pure concept of God's oneness, and who falls into the depths of associating partners with Him. He is totally lost, as though he has never come to life. *"For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place."* (Verse 31)

In this scene we see a person falling from a great height, so as to be *hurling down from the skies.'* In no time, he breaks into pieces, and is *snatched by the birds.'* Alternatively, he may be blown away by the wind or thrown into a bottomless depth. We note here the rapid and violent movement, with scenes shown in quick succession and then disappearing completely.

It is a very true picture and an apt description of one who associates partners with God. He falls from the sublime height of faith to land where he is totally lost, as he deprives himself of the firm basis of belief in God's oneness. He is also deprived of the haven to which he could have returned safely. Hence, he is snatched away by his desires, like one who is snatched by birds of prey. False beliefs and myths throw him off course, just like storms might do. How could he avoid such a fate when he has abandoned the most firm bond and the solid foundation that provides him with a firm link with the world around him?

A Sacrifice of Distinction

Having mentioned those who honour God's sanctities and the need to preserve and protect such sanctities, the *sūrah* now speaks of honouring the symbols set up by God, which, in this instance, refers to the animals sacrificed as part of the pilgrimage rituals. This honour is manifested by choosing the best and most valuable animals for sacrifice:

> *This is [to be borne in mind]. Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts. You have benefit in them for a term appointed; and in the end their place of sacrifice is near the Ancient House. (Verses 32-33)*

A link is established here between the sacrifice offered by pilgrims and the way hearts are made conscious of God. The whole purpose of all pilgrimage rituals is to enhance believers' God-fearing sense. All these rituals are symbols confirming submission to God, the Lord of the Ka`bah, the Sacred House, as also obeying Him in all situations. They may also involve reminders of old events, from the time of Abraham and later generations, but these are reminders of complete submission to God, obeying His rules and looking up to Him for guidance. Such is the mark of the Muslim community ever since its earliest days. Hence, these symbols are to be treated on an equal footing with prayer.

Animals marked for sacrifice on the day when pilgrims are due to release themselves from consecration may be used by their owners. The owner may ride such animals, if they are suitable for such purpose, or he may use their milk, until they reach the place of sacrifice, which is in the vicinity of the Ancient House. They are then sacrificed there, when the owners may partake of their meat, but they must give much of it to the poor.

At the Prophet's time, Muslims used to choose the best animals for sacrifice, paying the best prices for them, as a gesture of honouring the symbols set up by God. Their only motive was their God-fearing sense. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar reports that his father received a superb she-camel as a gift. He was offered 300 dinars for it, (which was a very high price). He reported this to the Prophet and asked whether he should sell it to buy instead several camels for sacrifice. The Prophet said: "No. Make this one your sacrifice."

We note here that `Umar did not wish to sell the camel in order to save part of its price. He simply wanted to buy instead several camels or cows and sacrifice them all, although he was aware that one camel or cow was sufficient to fulfil the sacrificial duty of seven pilgrims. The Prophet, however, advised him to sacrifice the precious animal itself, for the very reason that it was so precious. While the alternative suggested by `Umar could have provided much more meat to go round, the moral

aspect was intended here, because it is a demonstration of honouring the symbols set up by God. This is what the Prophet wished to highlight as he ordered `Umar to sacrifice that particular she-camel.

The Qur'ān mentions that such a sacrifice ritual was known in many communities. It was left to Islam, however, to put it on its right course, offered for God alone:

> *For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and who patiently bear whatever befalls them, attend regularly to their prayer and spend in charity out of what We provide for them. (Verses 34-35)*

Islam purifies feelings and intentions, setting them all for one goal. Thus, intentions, actions, worship and customs all serve a common purpose, setting life on the sound basis of pure faith.

This is the underlying reason for prohibiting eating any meat at the slaughter of which any name other than God's is invoked. Indeed it is essential to invoke God's name at the sacrifice, giving prominence to such invocation, as if the sacrifice is done merely to invoke His name: "*For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them.*" (Verse 34) This is followed by a clear statement of God's oneness: "*Your God is the One and Only God.*" (Verse 34) An order of submission to Him is the logical conclusion: "*Hence, surrender yourselves to Him.*" (Verse 34) Such surrender should be an act of choice, done with complete reassurance and without any compulsion: "*Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned.*" (Verses 34-35) The mere mention of God's name stirs in them a feeling of awe that manifests itself in their actions. "*Who patiently bear whatever befalls them.*" (Verse 35) They do not object to whatever happens to them by God's will. They also "*attend regularly to their prayer,*" showing thus that they worship God as He wishes to be worshipped. Moreover, they do not grudgingly hold on to what they have. Rather, they "*spend in charity out of what We provide for them.*" (Verse 35)

Thus a close link is established between faith and worship rituals. The latter derive from faith and are manifestations of it. Hence, they are described as symbols set up by God. What is important in all this is that life itself derives its colour from faith, ensuring unity between beliefs and actions.

The *sūrah* continues to emphasize the link between faith and worship rituals as it outlines some pilgrimage duties, speaking here of the sacrifice of cows and camels: "*The sacrifice of camels We have ordained for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in*

which there is much good for you." (Verse 36)

Camels are mentioned here in particular because they are the largest and most valuable of sacrificial animals. The *sūrah* states that there is much good for mankind in camels: they serve as good mounts and provide plenty of milk. When they are sacrificed, they provide much meat to eat and give for charity. In return for all these benefits, people should invoke God's name, making their purpose clear and their sacrifice purely for God's sake. This should be clear in their minds as they bring the camels forward for sacrifice: "*Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up."* (Verse 36) Camels are slaughtered standing on three legs, while the fourth is tied. "*After they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their meat, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot, as well as the one who is forced to beg."* (Verse 36) The owners of the slaughtered sacrifice are recommended to partake of its meat, but they are required to give gifts to the poor who are contented and do not ask for charity, as well as those whose poverty makes them beg. It is because all these benefits are provided that people should give thanks to God: "*It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful."* (Verse 36)

As people are commanded to slaughter their sacrifice invoking God's name, it is made clear to them that "*never does their meat or their blood reach God."* (Verse 37) He has no need of them. What reaches Him, however, is people's piety and consciousness of Him. It is the intention behind any action that gives it its worth. Compare this with the practice of the Quraysh idolaters who used to splatter the blood of their sacrifices over their idols. How crude and ugly!

> *It is to this end that He has made them subservient to your needs, so that you might glorify God for all the guidance with which He has graced you. (Verse 37)*

It is He who has guided you to the proper and true faith of submission to Him alone. Thus, you have become aware of the proper relation between man and God and the true meaning of action undertaken purely for God's sake. "*Give good news to those who do good,"* putting their beliefs, worship and life activities on a proper footing.

Thus Muslims turn to God with every move they make, at any time of the day or night, conscious of His majesty, seeking His pleasure. With this attitude, life becomes a series of acts of worship, fulfilling God's purpose of creation. Life on earth is set on its proper basis, with a solid link between this world and the next.

Permission to Fight

It is imperative that such worship rituals be conducted safely away from those

who turn people from God's path. No aggression against the freedom of belief and worship or the sanctity of mosques and places of worship can be tolerated. Believers should have the freedom to implement the divine code of living, based on faith, and aiming to achieve every benefit for man. Therefore, when the early Muslims settled in Madīnah after enduring persecution in Makkah for years, God permitted them to fight the idolaters so as to repel any aggression against themselves and their faith.

Given at a time when such aggression had reached its peak, the permission to fight also aimed to ensure freedom of belief and worship for themselves and for all other people. God promised the believers that they would achieve victory and establish their authority, provided that they fulfilled their duties, required by their faith, as detailed in the following verses:

> *God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude. Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (Verses 38-41)*

Forces of evil are active in this world. The fight between goodness, divine guidance and forces of faith on the one hand and evil, falsehood and tyrannical forces on the other has raged since man's creation. What is more is that evil and falsehood command great firepower. They have no hesitation in using their arsenal and weaponry to achieve their aims. With such power and false temptation, they strive hard to turn people away from the true faith. Hence, it is imperative that faith, goodness and truth should have enough power to repel aggression and to make all wicked schemes futile.

It has not been God's will to leave unarmed the advocates of faith, truth and goodness so that they face the forces of evil and falsehood relying only on the power of their faith, or on the depth of goodness in their hearts. The material power of evil can be very strong, able to shake people and blind their eyes. Besides, people can only endure hardships and trials up to a certain point. God knows all this and the limits of people's ability. Hence, He wanted the believers to endure the hardship only for a short period during which they would acquire the means to resist and to defend themselves. When they achieved this, they were given permission to fight

aggression.

Before stating this permission for self defence, God also tells them that it is He who will defend them: *"God will certainly defend those who believe."* (Verse 38) He also tells them that He dislikes their enemies because of their treachery and ingratitude. *"For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude."* (Verse 38) He has judged their position to be fully justified, because they are the ones who have endured injustice and persecution. They do not resort to aggression against others: *"Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged."* (Verse 39) Because they are the ones at the receiving end of wrongful aggression, they are reassured that God will grant them His support and protection: *"Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory."* (Verse 39)

Furthermore, they have all the justification for going to war. They have been chosen to undertake a great humanitarian task, the benefits of which will not be theirs alone. Indeed these benefits will accrue to all believers. Their fight will ensure that people shall enjoy the freedom of belief and worship. Besides, they are the ones who have been wronged, the ones driven out of their homes without valid justification: *"These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God.'"* (Verse 40)

It is the most truthful word any person can say, and the word everyone should say. Yet, it is because of their saying this that they have been driven out of their homes. Hence why such injustice does not carry any semblance of right action. The Qur'ānic statement makes it clear that these victims of aggression have no personal objective to fight for; instead, they fight only for their faith. They seek no worldly gain. Personal and national interests that give rise to conflicts, alliances and wars are of no appeal to them.

Beyond that, we have the general rule that makes it clear that faith needs to be defended: *"Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed."* (Verse 40)

We note here that the verse mentions monasteries where priests devote all their time to worship, as well as places of public worship for Christians, Jews and Muslims. They are all vulnerable and can be destroyed, despite their sanctity and dedication for worship. Evil will not respect the fact that these places are made for extolling God's name. They are protected only through people's efforts, with the advocates of faith standing up to repel falsehood's aggression. Indeed, falsehood and evil will not stop their aggression unless they realize that the truth has enough power to counter their own. Truth may he valued by people, but such value is not enough to provide it with protection against aggression in man's world. It requires the

appropriate means of self defence.

In Defence of the Believers

We need to reflect a little on these short statements that provide profound insight into human nature. The first thing to note is that the permission to fight back is granted by God to those against whom the idolaters had waged a wrongful aggression. This permission starts with a statement that God defends the believers and dislikes aggressors: *"God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude."* (Verse 38)

This is a guarantee given by God to the believers that He is the one to defend them, and whoever is defended by God will certainly come to no harm at the hands of his enemies. He will certainly be victorious. Why do they, then, need permission to fight? Why are they required to go to war, suffer casualties, endure hardship and make sacrifices of themselves, when the result is a forgone conclusion and God is able to ensure it without any effort on their part?

The answer is that God's wisdom is absolutely perfect. We as human beings may discern certain aspects of it. Thus, on the basis of our experience and perception we may say that part of God's wisdom may be that He does not want the advocates of His cause to be a group of idle and lazy people who sit relaxing, waiting for victory to be granted them without effort. They do not deserve victory merely because they attend to their prayers, recite the Qur'ān and appeal to God for help and support whenever they suffer hardship or aggression.

It is true that believers should always attend to their prayers, read the Qur'ān and turn to God for help in situations of ease and hardship alike. However, such worship, on its own, does not qualify them as advocates and defenders of God's cause. This worship is merely part of the equipment they need in their fight against the forces of evil. It is their unfailing ammunition in their hard battle. They must face evil with weapons like the ones it uses against them, but they need to add the most effective weaponry of faith, a God-fearing sense, and a solid bond with God.

God has willed that His defence of the believers be through them, so that as they go through battle, they achieve maturity. Nothing brings about latent human resources better than danger. It is only when people realize that they are being attacked that they muster all their resources. Thus, every cell comes forward to play its role, joining ranks with all other cells, each doing its utmost to attain the highest level it can achieve in this life. A community entrusted with God's cause needs to have all its cells ready, its resources brought to the fore, and all its forces mobilized so that it attains its full maturity and is able to discharge its great trust.

A speedy victory gratuitously given to people who make little effort will not tap such latent resources and abilities. There is simply no incentive for them to bring such resources into play. Furthermore, victory achieved easily is lost easily. To start with, it comes cheap, requiring no real sacrifice. Moreover, those who achieve it do not have the necessary training to maintain it. Since they did not have to mobilize their resources to win it, they are not mobilized to defend it.

Moreover, when the Muslim community has to go to war and utilize its resources in attack and defence, feeling its weakness at times and strength at others, retreating one day and moving forward the next, it gains valuable experience. It will experience contrasting feelings such as hope and pain, joy and sorrow, anxiety and reassurance, weakness and strength. It will also experience unity in faith, a readiness to sacrifice all, as well as the bringing together of all elements before, during and after the battle. It will learn what points of strength it has so as to enhance them, and what areas of weakness it has and how to redress them. All these are needed for a community entrusted with the divine faith and its advocacy.

For all this and other reasons known to God, He does not make of victory a free gift granted to believers in a package that falls to them from the sky. Indeed, God accomplishes His defence of the believers through their own efforts.[8]

Assured Victory

Yet victory may be slow in coming to those who are driven out of their homes against all right and for no reason other than their declaration of their belief in God as the only Lord in the universe. If it is slow in coming, then there must be a reason for this.

Victory may be slow in coming because the Muslim community has not as yet attained full maturity. It may not have mobilized all its resources or tapped its potentials. Should victory be given to it then, it would not be able to protect it for long, and so would soon lose it. Victory may also be delayed until the community of believers has given its all, sacrificing every cherished thing, demonstrating that it

[8] We need to add here that Islam does not consider fighting an end or an objective in itself. It permits fighting for a goal that is greater than achieving a state of *modus vivendi.* As stated in many other Qur'ānic verses, peace is the goal Islam wants to achieve. But peace must be free of aggression, injustice and oppression. When oppression or injustice is perpetrated against any aspect of human dignity, such as the freedom of belief and worship, justice, fair distribution of benefits, responsibilities, rights and duties, and conscientious observance of divine rules by individuals and the community alike, then Islam adopts a different attitude. Whether such aggression and injustice are perpetrated by an individual, a group or a state, and the victim of such aggression is similarly an individual, a group or a state, Islam will not countenance any peace that sanctions such aggression. Peace, according to Islam, does not mean the absence of war; it means complete justice, according to the code God has chosen for human life.

holds nothing too dear.

It may happen that victory is not granted until the community of believers has tried all its efforts and realized that such efforts, on their own, cannot guarantee victory unless they are supported by God.

Victory is granted by God only when believers have done their best, placing all their trust in Him alone. Likewise, victory may be delayed so that the community of believers strengthens its bonds with God. It will suffer and render sacrifices, realizing that it cannot turn for support to anyone other than God. It is such a bond with God that guarantees that it will continue to follow the right path after victory. This is a crucial objective. The Muslim community must never swerve from the path of truth and justice through which its victory is achieved.

Victory may also be slow in coming if the community of believers does not dedicate all its struggle and sacrifices to God alone. It may be fighting for something it wants to gain, or for national interests, or to demonstrate its bravery. But God wants its struggle to be purely for Him, untinged by any other feeling or objective. The Prophet was once asked about a person fighting to support his community, one fighting out of bravery, and one fighting to be seen in battle: "Which of them is for God's sake?" He replied: "Only he who fights so that God's word becomes supreme fights for God's cause." [Related by al- Bukhārī and Muslim]

Victory may be delayed because the evil the believers are fighting may still be mingled with a residue of goodness. God may determine that such a residue should be finally separated so that the evil becomes pure, without any trace of goodness, when it is finally defeated.

Furthermore, victory may be delayed because the falsehood that the believers fight is not seen in its true reality by all people. If it is defeated at such a juncture, it could still find support by those who continue to be deceived by it, unconvinced that it is absolutely false. In this situation, God may determine that falsehood remains until its reality is seen by all, so that no one feels sorry for it when it ultimately collapses.

Victory may also be slow in coming because the general environment is not yet ready to receive the truth and justice that the community of believers represents. If the believers are granted victory in such circumstances, they will have to face resistance by the environment they work in. Therefore, the struggle continues until such time as the whole area is ready to receive the truth triumphant.

For all these reasons, and others known to God alone, victory may be slow in coming. This means in effect more sacrifices and more suffering by the believers. Nevertheless, God will continue to defend them and grant them victory in the end.

When Victory is Granted

When granted by God, victory brings about new duties and responsibilities:

> *God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (Verses 40-41)*

God's true promise which will never fail is that He supports those who support Him. The question that arises here is who are these people that support God and thus deserve His support which means certain victory? Their qualities are outlined in this verse. They are those who, when given victory by God and are established in a position of authority, "*attend regularly to their prayers.*" They worship God alone, submitting themselves to Him willingly and strengthening their bonds with Him. They "*give in charity*", thus they meet the liability imposed on their property. By so doing, they demonstrate their ability to overcome greed and self interest, and they help their community to provide help to the poor and needy. They thus demonstrate a practical example of the Prophet's description of the Muslim community: "In their mutual love, sympathy and compassion, the believers are like one body: when any organ is in complaint, the rest of the body shares its complaint with symptoms of sleeplessness and fever." The third quality is that they "*enjoin the doing of what is right.*" They advocate every good thing and encourage people to practise it. By contrast, they also "*forbid the doing of what is wrong.*" They resist evil and corruption. In this way, they demonstrate a very important characteristic of the Muslim community which does not tolerate any wrong if it can change it, and does not hesitate to do any right thing if it is within its ability.

These are the people who give succour to God, as they implement the way of life He has chosen for mankind. They rely on God alone, to the exclusion of any other power. It is such people that God promises victory, and His promise is most assured. It will never fail.

Here we see again that the victory granted to the Muslim community relies on the fulfilment of its conditions and the discharge of certain responsibilities. All matters rest with God who determines what course events should take. He may change a defeat into victory or a victory into defeat when the foundation is not solid or responsibilities are ignored: "With *God rests the final outcome of all events.*" (Verse 41)

The victory granted by God is one that leads to the establishment of His code in human life. It is a code that ensures that truth, justice and freedom are fulfilled so that they can bring goodness into human life. No individual self-aggrandizement is

allowed; no personal greed or desire tolerated. Such a victory has well-defined conditions, duties and a price. It is not granted as a personal favour to anyone. Nor does it continue when its objectives and duties are not fulfilled.

3
The Sights, Blind Hearts

وَإِن يُكَذِّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَعَادٌ وَثَمُودُ ﴿٤٢﴾

If they accuse you of falsehood, before their time, the people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, (42)

وَقَوْمُ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَقَوْمُ لُوطٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, (43)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ مَدْيَنَ ۖ وَكُذِّبَ مُوسَىٰ فَأَمْلَيْتُ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿٤٤﴾

and the dwellers of Madyan; and so too was Moses accused of falsehood. [In every case] I gave rein, for a while, to the unbelievers, but then I took them to task. How awesome was the way I rejected them. (44)

فَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَٰهَا وَهِىَ ظَالِمَةٌ فَهِىَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَىٰ عُرُوشِهَا وَبِئْرٍ مُّعَطَّلَةٍ وَقَصْرٍ مَّشِيدٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty. (45)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَآ أَوْ ءَاذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۖ فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى ٱلْأَبْصَٰرُ وَلَٰكِن تَعْمَى ٱلْقُلُوبُ ٱلَّتِى فِى ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٤٦﴾

Have they never journeyed through the lands, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and their ears hear? It is not eyes that go blind; but blind indeed become the hearts that are in people's breasts. (46)

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِٱلْعَذَابِ وَلَن يُخْلِفَ ٱللَّهُ وَعْدَهُۥ ۚ وَإِنَّ يَوْمًا عِندَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

They challenge you to hasten the coming upon them of God's punishment; but God never fails to fulfil His promise. Well, in your Lord's sight a

day is like a thousand years of your reckoning. (47)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ أَمْلَيْتُ لَهَا وَهِىَ ظَالِمَةٌ ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُهَا وَإِلَىَّ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٨﴾

To how many a township that was immersed in evildoing have I given rein for a while! But then I took it to task. With Me is the end of all journeys. (48)

قُلْ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ لَكُمْ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

Say: 'Mankind, I am but a plain warner, sent to you!' (49)

فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall be granted forgiveness of sins and a most excellent sustenance; (50)

وَٱلَّذِينَ سَعَوْا۟ فِىٓ ءَايَـٰتِنَا مُعَـٰجِزِينَ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَـٰبُ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥١﴾

whereas those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, are destined for the blazing fire. (51)

وَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن رَّسُولٍ وَلَا نَبِىٍّ إِلَّآ إِذَا تَمَنَّىٰٓ أَلْقَى ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ فِىٓ أُمْنِيَّتِهِۦ فَيَنسَخُ ٱللَّهُ مَا يُلْقِى ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ ثُمَّ يُحْكِمُ ٱللَّهُ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (52)

لِّيَجْعَلَ مَا يُلْقِى ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ وَٱلْقَاسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ لَفِى شِقَاقٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٣﴾

He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease and all whose hearts are hardened. Indeed, all who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong. (53)

وَلِيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ فَيُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِهِۦ فَتُخْبِتَ لَهُۥ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهَادِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ صِرَ‌ٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

And those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will

surely guide those who believe to a straight path. (54)

وَلَا يَزَالُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى مِرْيَةٍ مِّنْهُ حَتَّىٰ تَأْتِيَهُمُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ عَذَابُ يَوْمٍ عَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

Yet the unbelievers will not cease to be in doubt about Him until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow. (55)

ٱلْمُلْكُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلَّهِ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

On that day, all dominion shall belong to God. He shall judge between them. Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, (56)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥٧﴾

whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store. (57)

Overview

The previous passage finished with permission granted to fight unbelievers in order to protect and preserve faith and worship, coupled with God's promise to grant victory to those who fulfil their responsibilities towards faith and implement the divine law in life. Now that the task entrusted to the community of believers has been clearly spelt out, the *sūrah* reassures the Prophet that God's power will intervene to provide him with the help he needs ensuring the failure of his enemies. The same power intervened in the past to support earlier prophets and messengers, and to punish those who denied and opposed them. The unbelievers are directed to reflect on the doom suffered by earlier communities; even though such reflection benefits only hearts and minds that are open and receptive. It is not only eyes that can be blind, for real blindness is that of the heart.

The Prophet is also reassured on another count, namely that God protects His messengers from Satan's wicked scheming, just like He protects them from their opponents' plots. He renders all Satan's attempts futile, keeps His revelations pure and clear, so that people with sound mind reflect on them. Those that are sick at heart and those who deny the true faith will continue to be in doubt, and their doubts will lead them to the worst destiny anyone can ever have. Thus, this new

passage is a study of how God's power plays a vital role in the fortunes of the advocates of His message.

Past Communities Punished

> *If they accuse you of falsehood, before their time, the people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, and the dwellers of Madyan; and so too was Moses accused of falsehood. [In every case] I gave rein, for a while, to the unbelievers, but then I took them to task. How awesome was the way I rejected them. (Verses 42-44)*

It is the same pattern seen over and over again, in all past messages up to the final one. Messengers are given signs and revelations, and there will always be those who deny the truth. Thus, when the idolaters in Makkah denied the message of the Prophet Muhammad, it was by no means a new trend nor did the Prophet experience an unknown pattern of hostility. However, the outcome is well known, and what happened with earlier communities is bound to happen again: "*The people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, and the dwellers of Madyan.*" (Verses 42-44)

Moses, however, is mentioned on his own as though the reference to him constitutes a special paragraph: "*And so too was Moses accused of falsehood.*" (Verse 44) Unlike other messengers, Moses was not accused of falsehood by his own people. It was Pharaoh and his chiefs that opposed Moses, levelling all sorts of accusations on him. Moreover, Moses was given very clear and numerous signs. Nevertheless, in all these cases, God granted the unbelievers respite for a while, in the same way as He now gave the Quraysh, the Prophet's own people who fiercely opposed him, time to reflect. He then punished all those past communities very severely.

This is followed by a rhetorical question that stresses the frightening effect of God's punishment: "*How awesome was the way I rejected them?*" (Verse 44) The Arabic word, *nakīr,* used here for 'rejection', carries added connotations of violent change. The question needs no answer, as it is well known: it was a rejection demonstrated through great floods, destruction, earthquakes, fearful hurricanes, and the like.

Having made this very quick reference to the fate suffered by those communities, the *sūrah* adds a general reference to past communities which suffered because of their attitude to the divine message: "*How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty.*" (Verse 45) Numerous indeed were those towns and cities which suffered their inevitable doom as a result of their evildoing. Their fate is shown here most effectively: "*Now they lie in desolate ruin.*"

Roofs are caved in as walls are made to collapse, leaving a depressing sight of total, lifeless ruin. The scene invites contemplation, because ruins have a very strong effect on people, causing them to reflect.

Next to these desolate remains of destroyed cities lie abandoned wells, reminding visitors of past days when people gathered around them for fresh water. And next to these are deserted palaces that once stood proudly in the past, but which now lie empty, evoking only images and memories of a glorious past.

As the *sūrah* portrays these scenes, it adds another rhetorical question about their effects on unbelievers:

> *Have they never journeyed through the lands, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and their ears hear? It is not eyes that go blind; but blind indeed become the hearts that are in people's breasts. (Verse 46)*

Emphasis is here placed on the location of hearts in people's bodies, which serves to amplify the blindness of those hearts in particular. Had those hearts been able to reflect on the scenes portrayed, they would have remembered and people's eyes would have been tearful. They would have moved towards faith, at least as a result of fearing an end like the ones that befell other communities.

But the Quraysh unbelievers did not wish to reflect on such scenes demonstrating God's punishment. Instead they tried to hasten their own punishment which God had delayed until a particular point in time known only to Him:

> *They challenge you to hasten the coming upon them of God's punishment; but God never fails to fulfil His promise. Well, in your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning. (Verse 47)*

It is the same story with the unbelievers in all generations. They see with their eyes the ruins of cities destroyed for their wrongdoing, and they hear their histories, but they, nevertheless, follow in their footsteps overlooking their fate. If they are reminded of what happened to earlier communities, they nonetheless consider it unlikely that they will suffer the same fate. But if God grants them respite to test them further, they grow arrogant and heedless. They even ridicule anyone reminding them that they could suffer as people before them suffered. What is more they add to such ridicule a request for their punishment to be hastened. Here they are told that *'God never fails to fulfil His promise.'* Such a promise or warning will inevitably come to pass at the time God, in His infinite wisdom, determines. If people hasten its fulfilment, it will not be made to come before its appointed time, because its delay is for a purpose known to God, and that purpose will not fail so as to grant

human beings their ignorant wishes. Moreover, time is calculated differently by God: *"In your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning."* (Verse 47)

He gave respite to many past communities, but such respite did not save them from punishment when they persisted in their wrongdoing. This is a rule which God has set in operation and it cannot fail: *"To how many a township that was immersed in evildoing have I given rein for a while! But then I took it to task. With Me is the end of all journeys."* (Verse 48) Why would the Arab unbelievers, then, hasten their own punishment and deride God's warning when it is only a temporary respite that God grants such people?

A Parting of the Ways

At this point in the narrative describing the fate of past communities, and outlining the rule concerning those who persist in denying God's messages, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet instructing him to warn people and explain the inevitable outcome:

> *Say: Mankind, I am but a plain warner, sent to you!' Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall be granted forgiveness of sins and a most excellent sustenance; whereas those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, are destined for the blazing fire. (Verses 49-51)*

We note that in this context, the Prophet's task is clearly stated as one of giving people a clear and plain warning, that leaves no room for ambiguity. This fits the immediate situation of stubborn rejection of God's message that makes people hasten their own doom.

The final destiny is clearly stated. Those who believe and put their faith into practice, so as to 'do righteous deeds' will have their reward which consists of forgiveness by their Lord of all sins that they may have committed or duties they may have omitted to do. Such forgiveness is coupled with '*a most excellent sustenance*' that they receive with dignity.

Those who endeavour to stop God's revelations from addressing people's hearts, and God's laws from being implemented in their life, will be the ones to suffer in the blazing fire. The expression the *sūrah* uses makes them the owners of this fire, which is in stark contrast with the excellent sustenance the believers receive.

God always protects His message from the wicked designs of unbelievers who try to prevent its implementation. Similarly, He protects it from Satan's scheming and his attempts to manoeuvre his way into the hopes entertained by God's messengers who are, after all, human. Although God's messengers are given immunity from

Satan, their human nature makes them hope that their efforts in advocating divine faith will be enough to remove all impediments and ensure a speedy victory. Satan tries to exploit these hopes in order to force the message out of its fundamental principles and proper methods. But God renders all Satan's schemes futile, preserves His message, making its principles and values clear, perfects His revelations and removes all doubt that may surround its values and method of action.

> *Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-Knowing, Wise. He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease and all whose hearts are hardened. Indeed, all who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong. And those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will surely guide those who believe to a straight path. (Verses 52-54)*

There are many reports about the events leading to the revelation of these verses, but Ibn Kathīr describes all these reports as lacking in authenticity. The most detailed of these reports is attributed to al-Zuhrī, a leading *Ĥadīth* scholar of the generation that followed the Prophet's Companions. It mentions that *Sūrah* 53, The Star, was revealed at a time when some idolaters said to one another that they would leave Muhammad and his Companions alone if only he would say a good word about the idols they worshipped. The report goes as follows:

They felt that the Prophet did not criticize the Jews and Christians who opposed him in the same way as he denounced the practices of the idolaters. The Prophet was very grieved by their continued denial of his message and the persecution they inflicted on his Companions. He still hoped that they would be able to recognize divine guidance. God then revealed the *sūrah,* The Star, including the following verses: *'Have you ever considered al-Lāt and al- `Uzzā, as well as Manāt, the third and last [of this triad]? Why [would you choose] for yourselves only male offspring, whereas to Him [you assign] females?'* (53: 19-21) At this mention of the Quraysh's worshipped idols, Satan added the words, 'these are the sublime birds, whose intercession is to be hoped for.' These were nothing but the rhyming words of Satan's invention, but they touched the hearts of all idolaters in Makkah who kept repeating them and expressing their delight to one another, claiming that Muhammad had returned to his old religion, practised by his people.

When the Prophet completed the recitation of the *sūrah,* he prostrated himself, and all those present, Muslims and idolaters alike, also prostrated themselves. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, an old man, who took a handful of dust

and placed his forehead over it. Both parties were amazed at this common prostration when the Prophet prostrated himself. Muslims were amazed that the idolaters should prostrate themselves when they did not believe in God, particularly because they were unaware of what Satan made the idolaters hear. The idolaters, on the other hand, were reassured by what Satan had introduced through the Prophet's hopes and implied to them that the Prophet read those words as he recited the *sūrah.* Hence, they prostrated themselves because their idols were praised.

All this was soon widely known, and Satan helped to circulate it. Before long, the news travelled to Abyssinia, where some Muslims had sought refuge, including `Uthmān ibn Maż`ūn. They were told that the people of Makkah had embraced Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also came to know of al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah's gesture of prostration on a handful of dust he raised to his forehead. They felt that Muslims were now safe in Makkah, which prompted some of them to speedily return. But then God nullified Satan's aspersion and made His revelation clear and perfect, preserving it from Satanic fabrication. It was as God said: *Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-Knowing, Wise. He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease and all whose hearts are hardened Indeed, all who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong."* (Verses 52-53) When God made His judgement clear and purged from it the Satanic rhyme, the idolaters of the Quraysh increased their persecution of the Muslims.

Foiling Satan's Efforts

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr says that al-Baghawī includes several versions consolidated from reports by Ibn `Abbās, Muhammad ibn Ka`b and others, giving similar accounts. He then asks: "How could this take place, given that God guaranteed the Prophet's infallibility in conveying His message?" He then quotes answers to this question by different people. One of the most interesting is that Satan could only delude the idolaters into thinking that they heard these words from the Prophet when it was not so in reality. It was all Satan's work, not the words of God's Messenger.

Al-Bukhārī reports Ibn `Abbās's explanation, making the Arabic word, *umniyyatih,* rendered in translation as 'on his wishes', as meaning 'his discourse'. Thus the verse means that when the Prophet spoke, Satan added something into his speech, but God causes Satan's efforts to be futile and makes His own message clear. Mujāhid, on the other hand, explains the reference to any of God's messengers 'hoping for something' as meaning his speech, or his recitation. Al-Baghawī says that most commentators

say that it means his reading of God's revelations. It is in his recitation that Satan may add something. Ibn Jarīr describes this explanation as an exercise in giving special meaning to words.

This is a summary of this story which is known as 'The story of the birds, or *gharānīq*.' From the point of view of its transmission, the story is very flimsy. *Ĥadīth* scholars maintain that it was not reported by anyone who may be graded as an accurate reporter; nor was it ever related with an uninterrupted chain of reliable transmitters. Al-Bazzār says: "We do not know that this ĥadīth was ever reported with a chain of transmitters worth mentioning, and leading to the Prophet. From the viewpoint of its subject matter, it is in conflict with a fundamental principle of faith, which is the infallibility of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the impossibility of Satan being able to introduce anything into the delivery of his message."

Orientalists and opponents of Islam[9] have taken up this report, circulated it and decorated it with much importance. The fact is that it is a false report that cannot hold its own in discussion. Indeed, it is unworthy of even being a subject of debate.

The Qur'ānic text itself contains what refutes the claim, namely that such a single event was the reason for the revelation of these verses, which clarify a rule applicable to all divine messages and all God's messengers: *"Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves."* (Verse 52) This statement refers to a general rule indicating a characteristic common to all messengers who are, after all, human beings. This rule is not, for certain, contrary to the principle of the messengers' infallibility.

When God's messengers are entrusted with delivering His message to mankind, they love nothing better than to see people flock to them and realize that all the goodness they advocate comes from God, so that they accept it. But there are numerous impediments that stand in their way. God's messengers are human beings, with a limited lifespan. They know this fact well. Hence, they hope to persuade people to accept their message without delay. They may wish to give people a period of grace in respect of habits and traditions that are close to their hearts. They may think that if they can attract people to accept divine guidance while giving them this period of grace, they will then be able to wean them off such useless rituals, habits and traditions. They may also wish to compromise with them over a small portion of their desires so as to attract them to the faith, and hope to subsequently eliminate such lingering desires through education.

[9] The most recent opponent of Islam to make a fuss of this absurd story was Salman Rushdie in his infamous work *Satanic Verses.* – Editor's note.

They may entertain other wishes concerning the spread of their message and its gaining supremacy. But God wants His message to follow its own principles and to be guided by its own values. People can choose to believe or not. According to divine standards, which are not subject to human weaknesses and mistakes, the divine message makes its true gains by following its own principles and values, even though it may lose individuals at the start. Strict adherence to principles and values inevitably wins over those people, or others better than them. What is more is that the message remains pure, intact and faultless.

Satan may find in such hopes and wishes, as well as their expressions, a chance to plot against the message and force it out of its tried and tested method. He endeavours to raise doubts in people's minds about its integrity. But God makes all Satan's endeavours come to nothing. He spells out the final ruling on people's words and actions, instructing His messengers to make His verdict clear to people, including what the messengers themselves might have done by mistake. This was the case with regard to some actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which were subject to clear verdicts in the Qur'ān.

Thus does God foil Satan's scheming and make His revelations clear so that the right course to be followed is clearly mapped. *"God is All-Knowing, Wise."* Those with sickness and disbelief in their hearts and minds find in such situations fertile ground for controversy: *"All who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong."* (Verse 53) At the opposite end, people endowed with true knowledge and wisdom are reassured by God's clear verdict: *"And those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will surely guide those who believe to a straight path."* (Verse 54)

Messengers' Great Hopes

We find some examples during the Prophet's life and in Islamic history to confirm this. Thus there is no need for the sort of unsupported interpretation reported by some scholars.

One such example is that of the incident involving Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor and blind Companion of the Prophet. He once went to the Prophet and asked him repeatedly to teach him something of what he had been taught by God. The Prophet was very busy speaking to al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and a number of Quraysh notables, entertaining hopes that they might accept Islam. Ibn Umm Maktūm did not know that the Prophet was busy, but the Prophet was unhappy about his repeated request, and this was clear on his face. This was the subject of a strong reproach of the Prophet by God: *"He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How*

could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal, and with a feeling o f fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind." (80: 1-12)

Thus, God set the message back on its right course, holding on to its proper standard and appropriate values. The Prophet's behaviour in this incident was also corrected. His motive was his desire to see those Quraysh notables become Muslims, because that would have ensured that large numbers of their followers would do likewise. But God explained to the Prophet that maintaining the proper Islamic values in addressing the message to people is far more important than gaining a few notables to the cause. Satan's attempts to divert the advocacy of the message through the Prophet's hopes was thus rendered futile. God made His message clear, and the believers were reassured.

Subsequently, the Prophet treated Ibn Umm Maktūm very kindly, welcomed him whenever he saw him, saying: "Welcome to the man on whose account God reproached me." The Prophet would ask him if he could help him in any way. Furthermore, the Prophet chose Ibn Umm Maktūm to deputize for him in Madīnah more than once when he was away on a journey or expedition.[10]

Another incident is related by Muslim in his collection of authentic *aĥādīth.* "Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş reports: Six of us were with the Prophet when some unbelievers asked him to turn us away so that they could have his full attention. With me was `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a man from the Hudhayl tribe, Bilāl and two other men whose names I have forgotten. The Prophet felt whatever he might have felt, and thoughts occurred to him. But God revealed to him the verse that says: "*Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure."* (6: 52)

Again in this incident, God sets the message back on its proper course, rendering futile Satan's attempts to divert it by agreeing to the wishes of the Quraysh elders. They wanted to retain their position of distinction and not mix with the poor and weak. To maintain proper Islamic values is far more important than those notables, even though they might have accepted Islam, together with thousands others of their followers. God knows best the source of strength for His message. Such strength is derived from maintaining proper values that brook no compromise based on personal preference or social tradition.

A third example may be seen in the case of Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, the Prophet's

[10] This story is explained in detail in the commentary on *Sūrah* 80, with comments on its practical effects on Muslim society: Vol. XVIII, pp. 37-48. — Editor's note.

cousin whom he married to Zayd ibn Ĥārithah. Prior to Islam, Zayd was the Prophet's adopted son. But God wanted to stop adoption altogether, giving Qur'ānic orders that forbade calling someone the son or daughter of anyone other than their own parents: *"He never made your adopted sons truly your sons ... Call them by their real fathers' names: this is more equitable in God's sight."* (33: 4-5) Zayd was very dear to the Prophet. This is why he chose his own cousin to be Zayd's wife, but their life together was not smooth.

Prior to Islam, the Arabs did not approve of a man marrying the divorcee of his adopted son. But God wanted to put an end to this, as He stopped calling a son or daughter after anyone other than their real fathers. He told His Messenger to marry Zaynab after Zayd had divorced her, so that his marriage might be the practical action that put an end to the effects of adoption. But the Prophet concealed this when Zayd complained to him that his life with Zaynab could not go on. He told him to hold on to his wife, thinking of what people would say when he married her after Zayd had divorced her. He continued to keep this whole thing to himself, until Zayd actually divorced his wife. God then revealed in the Qur'ān what thoughts were in the Prophet's mind, making clear the rules He wished to put in place on this whole issue: *"You said to the one to whom God had shown favour and to whom you had shown favour, 'Hold on to your wife, and remain God-fearing!' Thus would you hide within yourself something that God was about to bring to light – for you feared [what] people [might think], whereas it was God alone of whom you should stand in awe! Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for [marrying] the spouses of their adopted children when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. Thus, God's will was done."* (33: 37)

`Ā'ishah was right when she said: "Had Muhammad concealed anything God revealed to him in His book, he would have suppressed the statement: *"Thus would you hide within yourself something that God was about to bring to light – for you feared [what] people [might think], whereas it was God alone of whom you should stand in awe"*[11] (33: 37)

Thus God made His law very clear, exposing the thoughts entertained by His own Messenger, concerning people's dislike of his marriage to the divorcee of his former adopted son. But Satan's attempts to achieve gain in this way were brought to nothing. Yet those with sick or hardened hearts will continue to exploit this event in their attempts to show Islam in a bad light.

Such is the meaning we feel these verses convey. It is God who gives guidance and shows the right way.

---

[11] These verses and the events to which they refer will be discussed more fully in the commentary on *Sūrah* 33, in Vol. XIV. — Editor's note.

Hasty Hopes

Enthusiasm may also be an important factor with advocates of the divine message, in all generations. Their long cherished desire to see the message spread and triumph may encourage them to try to win over certain individuals or influential people, even if this requires them to initially overlook some requirements that they may think to be of no great importance. They may even try to accommodate some of these practices so that people do not adopt a hostile attitude to the divine message.

In their keenness to achieve success for their cause, they may go even further and adopt means and methods that are inconsistent with the strict standards of Islam or with its line of action. They link their haste with what they consider to be the interests of Islam. But these are truly served only by strict adherence to the approach and method of action adopted by Islam. Future results are known only to God. Hence, the advocates of Islam must not concern themselves with such results, as they are not accountable for them. Their duty is to follow the proper Islamic approach and clear line of action. They must leave the results to be determined by God, knowing that they can only be good and serve the interests of His cause.

These Qur'ānic verses provide a warning for the advocates of Islam, making it clear that Satan will try to exploit their hasty hopes to undermine their very cause. God has protected His messengers and prophets, bringing to nothing all Satan's schemes to exploit their natural human keenness. Others, however, who are not similarly infallible, must take extra care so that they leave no room for Satan to exploit their sincere desires to ensure success for God's message, or what they may term 'the interests of the cause'. This phrase must be removed from their lexicon, because it is a trap which Satan sets for them when he is unable to deceive them through their personal interests. Indeed, in some situations, 'the interests of the cause' may become an idol worshipped by its advocates who tend then to forget the proper Islamic method of operation. The advocates of Islam must always follow its own method, regardless of what such adherence brings about of results that may seem to involve risks for them and what they advocate. The only danger they must try hard to avoid is that of deviation from the Islamic method of action, even a minor one, for whatever reason. God knows best what serves the interests of His cause. They are not required to look after such interests. What they are required to ensure is that they do not deviate from the method and line of action shown to them by God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* adds a comment on the fact that God protects His message against Satan's scheming, emphasizing that those who reject it will be vanquished, and that humiliating torture awaits them.

> *Yet the unbelievers will not cease to be in doubt about Him until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow. On that day, all dominion shall belong to God. He shall judge between them. Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store. (Verses 55-57)*

Such is the unbelievers' attitude to the Qur'ān in general. It is mentioned here as it closely relates to their attitude to whatever aspersion Satan may try to cast in the hopes of God's prophets and messengers, i.e., the two situations are inter-linked. They continue to have doubts about the Qur'ān because their hearts have not felt the sort of pleasure and happiness it imparts so that they appreciate the truth it advocates. They continue to be in such state of doubt "*until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow.*" (Verse 55) Such suffering befalls them on the Day of Judgement, which is described in the Qur'ānic text as *`aqīm,* or sterile, in the sense that it is not followed by any other day.

On that day, no one other than God will have any dominion, not even the superficial type that people in this world tend to cherish. Judgement on that day is also exercised by God alone, who gives every party its just deserts: "*Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store.*" (Verses 56-57) Such suffering is the right recompense for their scheming against the divine faith, denying God's clear revelations, and for their wilful refusal to obey Him.

4
Abraham's Choice of Name

وَٱلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُواْ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ قُتِلُوٓاْ أَوۡ مَاتُواْ لَيَرۡزُقَنَّهُمُ ٱللَّهُ رِزۡقًا حَسَنًا ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider. (58)

لَيُدۡخِلَنَّهُم مُّدۡخَلٗا يَرۡضَوۡنَهُۥۗ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلِيمٌ حَلِيمٞ ﴿٥٩﴾

He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased. God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing. (59)

۞ ذَٰلِكَ وَمَنۡ عَاقَبَ بِمِثۡلِ مَا عُوقِبَ بِهِۦ ثُمَّ بُغِيَ عَلَيۡهِ لَيَنصُرَنَّهُ ٱللَّهُۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَعَفُوٌّ غَفُورٞ ﴿٦٠﴾

Thus shall it be. If one retaliates only to the extent of the injury he has received, and then is wronged again, God will certainly succour him. God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving. (60)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي ٱلَّيۡلِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعُۢ بَصِيرٞ ﴿٦١﴾

Thus it is, because God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and because God hears all and sees all. (61)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ هُوَ ٱلۡبَٰطِلُ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡعَلِيُّ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ﴿٦٢﴾

Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood,(62)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ فَتُصۡبِحُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ مُخۡضَرَّةًۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٞ ﴿٦٣﴾

Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes green. God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware. (63)

لَّهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡغَنِيُّ ٱلۡحَمِيدُ ٦٤

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God alone is indeed free of all want, worthy of all praise. (64)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَٱلۡفُلۡكَ تَجۡرِي فِي ٱلۡبَحۡرِ بِأَمۡرِهِۦۚ وَيُمۡسِكُ ٱلسَّمَآءَ أَن تَقَعَ عَلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا بِإِذۡنِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِٱلنَّاسِ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٦٥

Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding? He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind. (65)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَحۡيَاكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُحۡيِيكُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ لَكَفُورٞ ٦٦

It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you back to life. Bereft of all gratitude is man. (66)

لِّكُلِّ أُمَّةٖ جَعَلۡنَا مَنسَكًا هُمۡ نَاسِكُوهُۖ فَلَا يُنَٰزِعُنَّكَ فِي ٱلۡأَمۡرِۘ وَٱدۡعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَۖ إِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٦٧

To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they should observe. Let them not draw you into disputes on this score, but call [them all] to your Lord. You are indeed on the right way. (67)

وَإِن جَٰدَلُوكَ فَقُلِ ٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٦٨

Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.' (68)

ٱللَّهُ يَحۡكُمُ بَيۡنَكُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كُنتُمۡ فِيهِ تَخۡتَلِفُونَ ٦٩

God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute. (69)

أَلَمۡ تَعۡلَمۡ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ فِي كِتَٰبٍۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٞ ٧٠

Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God. (70)

وَيَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَمۡ يُنَزِّلۡ بِهِۦ سُلۡطَٰنٗا وَمَا لَيۡسَ لَهُم بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞۗ وَمَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِن نَّصِيرٖ ٧١

And yet they worship beside God something for which He has never bestowed any warrant from on high, and of which they cannot have any knowledge. The wrongdoers shall have none to help them. (71)

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٖ تَعۡرِفُ فِي وُجُوهِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ ٱلۡمُنكَرَۖ يَكَادُونَ يَسۡطُونَ بِٱلَّذِينَ يَتۡلُونَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتِنَاۗ قُلۡ أَفَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِشَرّٖ مِّن ذَٰلِكُمُۗ ٱلنَّارُ وَعَدَهَا ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْۖ وَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ٧٢

As it is, whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, you can perceive utter repugnance in the faces of unbelievers. They would almost assault those who recite Our revelations to them. Say: 'Shall I tell you of something worse than that? It is the fire which God has promised to those who deny Him. How vile an end!' (72)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ضُرِبَ مَثَلٞ فَٱسۡتَمِعُواْ لَهُۥٓۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَن يَخۡلُقُواْ ذُبَابٗا وَلَوِ ٱجۡتَمَعُواْ لَهُۥۖ وَإِن يَسۡلُبۡهُمُ ٱلذُّبَابُ شَيۡـٔٗا لَّا يَسۡتَنقِذُوهُ مِنۡهُۚ ضَعُفَ ٱلطَّالِبُ وَٱلۡمَطۡلُوبُ ٧٣

Mankind! An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! (73)

مَا قَدَرُواْ ٱللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدۡرِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ٧٤

No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. (74)

ٱللَّهُ يَصۡطَفِي مِنَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ رُسُلٗا وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعُۢ بَصِيرٞ ٧٥

God chooses message bearers from among the angels and from among men. God hears all and sees all. (75)

يَعۡلَمُ مَا بَيۡنَ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَمَا خَلۡفَهُمۡۗ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ٧٦

He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them. To God all things shall

return. (76)

Believers! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord alone, and do good, so that you might be successful. (77)

And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive. It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book], so that the Messenger might bear witness for you, and that you might bear witness for all mankind. Thus, attend regularly to your prayer, and pay out your zakāt, and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support. (78)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱرۡكَعُواْ وَٱسۡجُدُواْ وَٱعۡبُدُواْ رَبَّكُمۡ وَٱفۡعَلُواْ ٱلۡخَيۡرَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُفۡلِحُونَ ٧٧

وَجَٰهِدُواْ فِي ٱللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِۦۚ هُوَ ٱجۡتَبَىٰكُمۡ وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ فِي ٱلدِّينِ مِنۡ حَرَجٖۚ مِّلَّةَ أَبِيكُمۡ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَۚ هُوَ سَمَّىٰكُمُ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ مِن قَبۡلُ وَفِي هَٰذَا لِيَكُونَ ٱلرَّسُولُ شَهِيدًا عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَتَكُونُواْ شُهَدَآءَ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِۚ فَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَٱعۡتَصِمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ هُوَ مَوۡلَىٰكُمۡۖ فَنِعۡمَ ٱلۡمَوۡلَىٰ وَنِعۡمَ ٱلنَّصِيرُ ٧٨

Overview

The previous passage ended with an outline of the opposite destinies of the believers and those who deny God's message. On the day when all dominion belongs to God alone, they end up in contrasting positions. All this is given within the context of God's support of His messengers, protection of His message and the reward He has in store for those who believe and those who refuse to believe.

This passage begins with a reference to those who migrate for God's cause. They have already been permitted to fight in defence of their faith and to defend themselves against injustice. They have been driven out of their homes against all right, for no reason other than their declaration that they believed in God alone. The passage also clarifies that God will compensate them for the property they left behind when they migrated.

A general verdict follows which applies to those who find themselves unjustly attacked and who try to repel aggression, but are then subjected to further tyranny and hostility. They are given a clear and assured promise of support. This firm

promise is followed by listing some indicators of God's power which ensures that His promises will always come true. These indicators are seen in the universe around us. It thus suggests that God's help to those who suffer injustice, despite their attempts to repel aggression, is a certainty in the same vein as other universal laws.

At this point in the passage, the Prophet receives a direct address that each community is shown a course of action, suitable for its own circumstances. Therefore, he should not be preoccupied with arguments with unbelievers. He must not allow them a chance to dispute his method. Should they seek to argue with him, he should leave them to God who judges between them on the Day of Judgement over everything which they differed. He is the One who knows the truth of what they follow, as He knows everything in the heavens and on earth.

The *sūrah* also refers to their worship of deities that have no sanction from God, as well as their worship of beings they do not know. They are criticized for being hard hearted and for their dislike of hearing the truth. In fact they would not shrink from attacking those who recite God's revelations to them. They are threatened with the fire which will be their ultimate abode. This is a promise that will never fail.

This is followed by an announcement to all mankind, making it clear that those whom they worship instead of God are devoid of power. Their weakness is shown in a humble image that carries no exaggeration, but the way it is presented brings their shameful weakness into sharp relief. They are shown as incapable of contending with flies, or of retrieving what a fly takes from them. Yet, unbelievers claim that such beings are deities.

The passage and the *sūrah* end with an address to the community of believers requiring them to fulfil their duties as leaders of humanity. They should prepare themselves for their task with prayer, worship and good action, seeking God's help and protection.

A Fitting Reward

> *As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider. He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased. God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing. (Verses 58-59)*

Migration, or leaving one's home, to serve God's cause represents a desertion of every comfort whether it be family, community and childhood memories, or property and material comforts. When one puts one's faith ahead of all this for no other reason than to earn God's pleasure, one demonstrates that such a prize is more valuable than all material goods. Migration was possible before Makkah fell to Islam

and the Islamic state was established. After that, migration was invalid. The requirement now is to strive in serving God's cause. Whoever strives thus for God's cause and dedicates himself to its service receives a similar reward to that of migration.

"As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision." (Verse 58) This applies whether they die in battle, earning martyrdom, or die normally in their homes. They left their homes and property ready to face any eventuality only to serve Him. They sought martyrdom in any way it might come, sacrificing every worldly comfort. Therefore, God compensates them richly for what they abandoned on His account: *"God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider."* (Verse 58) Such provisions are better than everything they leave behind.

"He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased." (Verse 59) They departed in a way that pleased God, and in return He promises that they will be well pleased with the position into which He will admit them. It is indeed a clear aspect of the honour God grants them when He makes sure of answering their wishes and ensuring that they are pleased with what they receive from Him. *"God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing."* (Verse 59) He is well aware of what they have suffered of injustice and what makes them feel well compensated. He is also forbearing, giving the unbelievers respite in order that they realize that they are in the wrong. He eventually gives fitting reward to those who suffer injustice and fitting punishment to those who inflict injustice.

Those who are targets of human aggression may not be able to tolerate such treatment or bear it with patience. They would rather respond in kind, measure for measure. If aggressors persist, and continue with their oppression, God is certain to support the oppressed and help them against those who are unjust: "Thus *shall it be. If one retaliates only to the extent of the injury he has received, and then is wronged again, God will certainly succour him. God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving."* (Verse 60) The condition that must be fulfilled for God's help to be forthcoming is that the action must be one of retaliation, seeking to repel aggression. Such help is not forthcoming for aggression of any sort. Moreover, retaliation must not be excessive; rather it must be limited in scale, replying, measure for measure, to the original aggression.

The comment made in the verse on the nature of this retaliation is that *"God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving."* It is He who forgives and absolves. Human beings have no say in this. Indeed they may prefer to retaliate and to repel aggression. Given their nature, they are allowed to pursue such retaliatory action. God will help them to achieve victory.

God's promise of help to victims of aggression is linked to universal laws that

testify to His power. These laws operate most accurately, without fail, which, in turn, suggests that God's help to those at the receiving end of aggression is one of the unfailing universal laws He has set in operation. *"Thus it is, because God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and because God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 61)

This refers to a natural phenomenon which people observe morning and evening, day and night, winter and summer. The night passes into the day at sunset, and the day passes into the night at sunrise. And the night takes more of the day as we go into the winter, while the day takes up more of the night as summer approaches. People see both phenomena of the two parts of the daily cycle passing into each other, but long familiarity makes them oblivious to their accuracy and unfailing regularity. Nevertheless, these phenomena are witnesses to God's power which controls the universe and all its events.

The *sūrah* wants people to open their eyes and hearts to these often overlooked phenomena that are indicative of God's superior power that controls the movement and length of both day and night, with absolute accuracy. The same may be said about God's help to those who suffer aggression and try to repel it. It is as accurate and regular as the passing of the day into the night and the passing of the night into the day. God always smites the power of tyrant oppressors and allows justice to triumph. Again, people tend to be oblivious of this phenomenon, just as they overlook signs and pointers indicating God's power and control of the universe.

Absolute Truth

All this relates to the essential fact that God is the ultimate and absolute truth. His is the truth that controls the universe and operates its systems. Everything else is false, irregular, and cannot be maintained: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 62)

This is an adequate explanation and a guarantee that truth and justice will inevitably triumph, while falsehood and aggression are certain to be defeated. It is the same guarantee that the laws of the universe will operate without fail. One of these laws and phenomena is that the truth will be victorious and falsehood will suffer a humiliating defeat. God is certainly far superior to any absolute ruler who seeks to demonstrate his power over the weak. The verse concludes with this comment: *"God alone is Most High, Great."* Hence, He will not allow aggression to swell, or injustice to he everlasting.

Further natural phenomena are shown as permanent indicators of God's power: *"Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes*

green. God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware." (Verse 63) We see this happening all the time: rain pours down from the skies and the earth becomes green within a very short period, but again long familiarity makes us oblivious to this. However, to people with open minds the scene arouses a host of feelings. At times, you look at a green shoot poking out through the black earth and you feel its freshness. It reminds you of young children smiling happily to the world around them, and who almost fly with delight when they see the spreading light.

If we have such feelings, we can properly understand the comment at the end of the verse: *"God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware."* It is as profound a comment as our feelings when we look at this delightful scene and contemplate its nature. It is part of God's unfathomable wisdom to initiate such subtle movements within the depths of the earth, bringing forth a green shoot, fresh but weak and slim. With God's power, it stretches out into the air, moving against the law of gravity. It is God's knowledge that determines the amount of rain that falls from the sky and its timing, so that water mixes with the earth and allows vegetation to grow.

Water falls from God's sky to His earth to initiate life and provide nutrition and wealth. But then God owns both the heavens and earth and all that they contain, yet He needs nothing of them. He gives provisions to all living things, through water and plants. But He is free of all need. *"To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God alone is indeed free of all want, worthy of all praise."* (Verse 64) He is in need of nothing of what lives in the heavens and earth. Indeed all praise is due to Him for the favours He bestows on all His creatures.

Mercy Without Limit

Once more the *sūrah* points out some of the aspects of God's power as seen in nature: *"Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding? He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind."* (Verse 65) This draws people's attention to the earth they live on, which contains a wide variety of powers and wealth which God has made subservient to man. Yet man remains oblivious of God's favours which he enjoys night and day.

God has placed everything on earth at man's disposal, by making the laws of nature affecting the earth compatible with man's nature and abilities. Had these been at variance with the natural laws of the earth, human life would not have been possible on this planet, and man would not have been able to utilize its resources to his benefit. Had he been physically different from the condition which allows him to tolerate the earth's atmosphere, breathe its air, eat its food and drink its water, man could not have survived on earth for even a very brief time. Had the density of the

earth or the human constitution been different, man would not have been able to walk or stand upright on earth; he would either fly in the air or sink into the earth. Had the earth been without an atmosphere, or had the air been heavier or lighter than its present condition, man would have suffocated or been unable to breathe. Thus, it is the compatibility of all these natural elements with human nature that makes man able to live on earth and benefit by its resources. This is only feasible through God's will.

Moreover, God made the earth subservient to man through the powers and abilities He gave man. Without these man would not have been able to tap the resources of the earth to his benefit. As it is, man discovers these resources one by one. Whenever he needs something new for his life, he uncovers new treasures; and whenever he feels that the earth's reserves of an essential material are running short, he finds new ones or alternative materials. Today, although there remain plenty of oil supplies and other minerals, yet the vast potential of nuclear energy has become available.[12] But man is still like a child who plays with fire, and can easily burn himself and those around him. Hence, he needs to abide by the code of living God has laid down so that he can make full use of the earth's resources to build a better human life and fulfil his mission.

"Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding?" (Verse 65) It is God who created the laws that allow ships to sail through the sea, and who gave man the necessary means to discover these laws and utilize them to his benefit. Had the nature of the sea, or the ships, or man's powers of understanding and learning been different, none of this could have happened.

"He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind." (Verse 65) It is He who created the universe and chose its appropriate system. It is He who has made its laws which ensure that celestial bodies remain far apart from each other.

Every theory explaining this universal system is no more than an attempt to understand the laws that ensure the maintenance of the balance that God has placed in the universe. Yet some people overlook this essential fact. They think that if they learn how the universe works, then they are negating God's role and His power which operates it. This is a particularly singular way of thinking. To explain how a certain law of nature works does not negate that it has been devised by the One who set it in operation in the first place, or that He continues to ensure that such a law remains in operation. Besides, all that man has come up with is a host of

[12] Nuclear energy is cited in this case as an example of alternatives CO coal and oil. The important point is that God has placed in man's world different means and resources to support life, growth and development. — Editor's note.

theories that attempt to explain natural phenomena. They may be right, and may equally be wrong.

God Almighty *holds the celestial bodies so that they may not fall upon the earth'* through the system He has devised for the universe. He keeps them from falling *'except by His leave.'* This is a reference to a time when He may decide to stop this system for a purpose He, in His infinite wisdom, wishes to happen.

The *sūrah* completes its reference to aspects of God's power and the perfection of natural laws by speaking of the human soul. It talks of human existence, life and death: "*It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you back to life. Bereft of all gratitude is man.*" (Verse 66) The first life is a miracle renewed with every child born at every moment of the night and day. Its secret continues to fill man's mind with wonder and to leave a vast area for us to contemplate. Death is also a secret that man cannot fathom. It occurs within a brief moment, yet the gulf between the nature of life and that of death is vast indeed, leaving a similarly vast area for contemplation. Life after death is something that lies beyond our faculties of perception, but our present life provides ample evidence for it. This is a further area for contemplation.

Yet man seldom reflects or contemplates, because man is *'bereft of all gratitude.'* The *sūrah* shows all these aspects and draws our attention to them within the context of assuring victims of oppression that they will have God's support as they try to repel such hostility. Such is the Qur'ānic method in using universal scenes to arouse human feelings, and in linking the laws of justice to the laws governing universal existence.

No Room for Argument

At this point the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet (peace be upon him) instructing him to follow his own way, paying no attention to the unbelievers and their futile arguments. He must not allow them to divert him from the method God chose for him, as He assigned him the task of delivering His message to mankind.

> *To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they should observe. Let them not draw you into disputes on this score, but call [them all] to your Lord. You are indeed on the right way. Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.' God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute. Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God. (Verses 67-70)*

Every community has its own way of life, thought, behaviour and beliefs, and these are subject to the consistent and accurate laws God has set to regulate people's nature, thinking, feelings and reactions to outside influences. A community that

opens its hearts to the pointers to divine guidance and responds to relevant pointers in the universe and within the human soul finds its way to God. In this, it will benefit by the numerous signs pointing to His oneness and encouraging compliance with His orders. By contrast, a community that shuts its mind to all this is in the wrong, sinking deeper into error.

Since God has appointed a certain way for each community, then the Prophet need not trouble himself with arguments he may put to the unbelievers when they turn away from the path of divine guidance and persist in following error. God instructs him not to allow the unbelievers any chance to dispute with him over his mission, or the way of life he advocates. He must continue to implement it, paying no heed to anyone who wants to engage in argument and dispute. His is a straightforward way, as God Himself testifies: "*You are indeed on the right way.*" (Verse 67) This gives him all the reassurance he needs to follow divine guidance.

If unbelievers try to dispute with him, he should cut short such arguments. It is no use wasting time and effort: "*Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.'*" (Verse 68) Argument can be useful with people whose hearts and minds are open to receive guidance, seeking knowledge and seriously searching for the right evidence. But argument is futile with those who persist in their erring ways, turning a blind eye to all the indicators and pointers they see in the universe and within themselves. The Prophet is told to leave these people to God who will judge between all creeds and ways of life and their followers: "*God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute.*" (Verse 69) He is the judge to whom no one can object, because on that day all argument is abandoned. Nor can there be any argument about the final judgement.

God makes His judgement on the basis of His perfect knowledge. He does not lose sight of any circumstances, and no motive or feeling is withheld from Him. He knows everything in the heavens and the earth, including people's intentions, motives, actions and reactions: "*Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God.*" (Verse 70)

God's knowledge is not subject to any of the influences that erase things from memory or cause forgetfulness. His record is complete and perfect.

The human mind becomes overwhelmed when it merely contemplates some of what we see in the heavens and the earth, and tries to imagine how God knows all these perfectly, down to the most minute details of people, their thoughts, intentions and actions. But all this is very little compared to God's full knowledge and power. Hence the verse concludes with the statement: "*All this is easy for God.*" (Verse 70) Having made it clear to the Prophet that he must not allow the unbelievers a chance to dispute with him over his right way, the *sūrah* shows how flawed and flimsy the

way followed by the unbelievers is. It betrays total ignorance of the truth. They are deprived of God's help, and as such they have none to help them:

> *And yet they worship beside God something for which He has never bestowed any warrant from on high, and of which they cannot have any knowledge. The wrongdoers shall have none to help them. (Verse 71)*

No situation or system can have any real power except for what is granted by God. What lacks the source of power given by God remains weak and unsupportable. Such unbelievers worship different deities, some of which are idols and statues, and some are human; or they may even worship Satan. All these are devoid of God's power; hence they are weak. Besides, they do not worship these deities on the basis of any solid and convincing evidence. Their basis is myth and superstition. Having been denied God's help, they will not receive any from any other source.

The most singular thing is that while they worship false deities of which they have no knowledge, they refuse to listen to the voice of truth. They are hardened in their attitude, threatening to strike at those who recite God's revelations to them:

> *As it is, whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, you can perceive utter repugnance in the faces of unbelievers. They would almost assault those who recite Our revelations to them. (Verse 72)*

They cannot answer an argument with an equally valid counter argument, or reply to evidence with anything that is similarly powerful. Instead, they resort to heavy-handed tactics, violence and oppression, realizing that they have no leg to stand on. This is always the case with tyrants who think only of suppressing the truth, knowing that they have no other way to answer it.

Hence, the Qur'ān delivers a clear warning, pointing to the inevitable outcome: *"Say: Shall I tell you of something worse than that?"* (Verse 72) What is worse than the evil they harbour within themselves, and the oppression they embark upon? *"It is the fire which God has promised to those who deny Him."* (Verse 72) This is the right reply for the oppression they engage in. And the final comment is: *"How vile an end." (Verse* 72)

Powerless Man

The *sūrah* now makes a powerful, universal declaration that all deities people associate with God, including the ones to which the wrongdoers appeal for help, are weak and powerless. Their weakness is shown in a bustling and captivating scene:

> *Mankind. An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! (Verse 73)*

The address is universal, it includes everyone anywhere in the world, and the declaration is loud and clear: "Mankind!" When people have been gathered to listen, they are told that they are about to be given a statement of a general principle, not a particular case applicable on a certain occasion. "*An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it.*" It is a statement of fact that applies in all situations: "*Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end.*" All false deities, whether they be idols and statues, human beings, traditions and values, to whom you appeal for support and with whom you seek to achieve victory and high esteem, are incapable of creating a fly, even if they muster all their forces, utilize all their knowledge and channel all their resources into one supreme effort. Indeed, the creation of a mere fly, that small and abject creature, defies all the harnessed powers of such false gods.

Creating a fly is just as impossible, for anyone or thing other than God, as creating a camel or an elephant, because the fly also demonstrates the great secret of life. Hence, it is placed on the same level as camels and elephants, with regard to its miraculous creation. The Qur'ānic aphorism, however, cites the case of a little, insignificant fly in order to generate a more profound feeling of powerlessness, without compromising the underlying principle.

The *sūrah* adds another dimension in describing their powerlessness: "*If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him!*" (Verse 73) False deities, be they idols or humans, cannot retrieve anything from a fly when it robs them of it. Flies can rob people of that which is precious indeed. At the same time, a fly carries agents of some very serious diseases, such as tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery and conjunctivitis. It can deprive a person of his eyes or other organs, or indeed deprive him of his life. A weak and contemptible fly can rob a human being of what he can never retrieve.

Here again we note how the Qur'ānic style uses facts in the most effective way. Had the text referred to lions and similar wild animals adding that men cannot rescue anything such animals rob them of, it would have generated an air of strength and force, rather than weakness. Besides, the most powerful animals cannot rob man of anything greater than what a fly can rob him of.

This powerful image stating a clear aphorism concludes with a simple comment: "*Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought!*" (Verse 73) This comment further emphasizes the effects generated by the verse as a whole.

At this moment when we realize how weak and contemptible these false deities are, the *sūrah* denounces the unbelievers for their faulty concept of God, clearly stating God's power: *"No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty."* (Verse 74) How could they understand Him as He really is when they associate with Him such powerless deities that cannot even create a fly? What understanding of God have they, when they see His highly sophisticated creation and yet they consider as equal to Him beings that cannot create even a little fly? They even invoke such powerless creatures which cannot retrieve anything flies take away from them, instead of invoking God. So, how can it be claimed that they have a proper concept of God? This is a damning comment at a point which should arouse feelings of submission to God alone.

The *sūrah* then mentions that God Almighty chooses His angel messengers to deliver His revelations to prophets, and chooses His human messengers to address mankind. All this is done on the basis of immaculate knowledge and total ability:

> *God chooses message bearers from among the angels and from among men. God hears all and sees all. He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them. To God all things shall return. (Verses 75-76)*

The choice of both angel and human messenger is made by the Almighty, and it was from the Almighty that Muhammad received the message of Islam. It was God who chose Muhammad to be His Messenger to mankind. How could he be compared to those who rely on deities that are both weak and contemptible?

"God hears all and sees all," and as such *"He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them."* His knowledge is perfect, immaculate, complete. Nothing present or absent, near or distant escapes God's knowledge.

"To God all things shall return." (Verse 76) He is the ultimate arbiter, who has power over all things.

Striving for the Right Cause

Having exposed the absurdity of the idolaters' beliefs and the ignorance their worship rituals reflect, the *sūrah* makes a final address to the Muslim community, urging it to be true to its beliefs and to stick to the right way of life.

> *Believers! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord alone, and do good, so that you might be successful. And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive. It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book], so that the Messenger might bear witness for you, and that you might bear witness for all mankind. Thus, attend*

> *regularly to your prayer, and pay out your zakāt, and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support. (Verses 77-78)*

Indeed these two verses sum up the code of living God has laid down for the Muslim community and the duties He has assigned to it. They define its role and mark out its course of action, past, present and future, provided that it follows His guidance.

The first instruction given here requires the believers to pray, highlighting two distinctive actions of Islamic prayer, namely bowing down and prostrating before God. Thus, prayer is given a real image and a noteworthy movement so that we see it clearly before our eyes. In this way, the mode of expression is that much more effective.

Next we have a general instruction to worship God. This is far more comprehensive than prayer, because worship includes all duties and adds every action, thought or feeling that is addressed to God alone. Indeed every human activity becomes part of worship when it is intended for God's sake. This even includes pleasure and personal enjoyment which become part of worship earning reward from God. All it needs is that we should remember God who has granted us these pleasures and who intends them as means to strengthen our resolve to follow the way He has chosen for us. Nothing of the nature of such pleasures and enjoyments changes, but their purpose is changed, and thus they become part of worship.

The last instruction in the first of these two verses is that believers must do every good thing, particularly in their dealings with fellow human beings, just as they do good in their relations with God, offering prayer and worship. All these instructions are given to the Muslim community so that it can be successful, because these are the means to success. Worship maintains its relation with God so that life is established on the right footing, and follows the way leading to the ultimate goal. Doing good means that the life of the community is firmly established on the basis of right belief.

When the Muslim community has such a proper relation with God and an appropriate lifestyle, it can discharge its awesome responsibility: "*And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive.*" This is a veracious and comprehensive description, indicating a massive responsibility that requires adequate preparation and the mustering of equipment and resources.

"*And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive.*" (Verse 78) This includes striving against one's enemies, laziness, evil and corruption. All these must be equally resisted. It is God who has assigned to you this massive responsibility and chosen you to fulfil it: "*It is He who has chosen you.*" This choice adds to the seriousness of the responsibility, which means that it cannot be shrugged off or

abandoned. Indeed it is an honour God has bestowed on the Muslim community for which it should be infinitely grateful.

Moreover, the assigned task is entwined with God's grace: He *"has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion."* Indeed, the religion of Islam, with all its duties, worship and laws always observes man's nature and abilities. It aims to satisfy human nature and release man's abilities so that they are used constructively. Human nature must neither be suppressed nor left without control.

Moreover, the Islamic way of life has a long history in human life, linking the past with the present. It is *"the creed of your forefather Abraham."* It is the system that has continued on earth since the time of Abraham, without any long gap that allows the divine faith to be totally distorted, as happened in some periods prior to Abraham's time.

God has given the name 'Muslim' to the community that believes in His oneness, and this name remained the same whether in olden days or in the Qur'ān: *"It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book]."*

Islam means surrendering oneself totally to God, attributing no share of Godhead to anyone else. Thus, the Muslim community has enjoyed the same system across successive generations, and with successive messages and messengers, up to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was then that the divine message was entrusted to the Muslim community. Thus, the past, present and future are interlinked as God wants. Thus, *"the Messenger might bear witness for you and that you might bear witness for all mankind."* The Prophet is, thus, a witness defining the way the Muslim community should follow, pointing out right and wrong, and the Muslim community fulfils the same task with regard to humanity at large. It occupies the position of trustee by virtue of the standards established by its laws, education and concepts relating to life and to the universe. Needless to say, the Muslim community cannot fulfil this role unless it implements God's message fully in life. When the Muslim community abandoned this role and deviated from the divine code of living, God removed it from this leadership, leaving it trailing well behind. It will continue to be in this humiliating position until it resumes its role chosen for it by God.

To ensure such a return, it must be fully prepared for it. Hence the order: *"Attend regularly to your prayer, and pay out your* zakāt, *and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support."* (Verse 78) Prayer provides a link between the weak and mortal individual and the source of power, while *zakāt* provides a strong link between members of the community, ensuring security for all. Holding fast to God is the strong tie that is never severed.

With such resources, the Muslim community can resume the role of human

leadership for which God has chosen it. It will also be able to utilize the material resources people consider to be sources of strength. The Qur'ān does not overlook these; on the contrary, it wants the Muslim community to be equipped with them, alongside the resources that are available only to believers who strive to enrich life with all that is good and right.

The great advantage of the divine way of life is that it takes humanity by the hand along the way that raises it to the highest position of perfection achievable in this life. It is far removed from systems that care only for worldly pleasures and the satisfaction of carnal desires.

Sublime human values aim to satisfy the needs of material life, but do not stop there. This is what Islam wants for humanity, under the wise trusteeship of the community that implements the divine message.

SŪRAH 23

Al-Mu'minūn

(The Believers)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* The Believers, or *al-Mu'minūn, is* defined by its name which makes its subject matter very clear. It begins with an outline of the believers' qualities, and presents an exposition on the indicators of faith in both the human soul and the universe at large. It then moves on to present the essence of faith as expostulated by God's messengers since the time of Noah up to Muhammad, the last of all prophets and messengers, (peace be upon them all). It also discusses the fallacies of those who deny faith, their objections and determined opposition that compel God's messengers to appeal to Him for help. At this point, God punishes the rejecters and saves the believers. The *sūrah* then refers to the fact that, after God's messengers have passed away, people fall into contention about this truth that admits no variation. This provides an opportunity to discuss and denounce the unjustified attitude the Arab idolaters took to God's last messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him). The *sūrah* closes with a scene of the Day of Judgement in which we see the fate suffered by those who reject the truth of faith. They are strongly reproached for their attitude. This scene concludes with a statement re-emphasizing the truth of God's absolute oneness and a prayer for His mercy and forgiveness.

As such, the *sūrah* is what its titles say, The Believers, or the *sūrah* of faith with all its issues, aspects and nature. Faith then provides its central theme.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with a statement that success is assured for the believers: *"Truly, successful shall be the believers."* (Verse 1) It provides a detailed account, of the qualities of those believers who are certain to be successful. Referring to signs that encourage and endorse faith, which are found both

in human beings and in the universe at large, this part mentions the different stages of human life from its early beginnings to its final end. It elaborates much when it mentions the different stages an embryo goes through while providing only a brief outline of other stages. It then follows human life up to the Day of Resurrection before moving on to signs of faith in the wide universe, referring to the creation of the heavens, rain falling from the sky, bringing forth vegetation, plants and fruits. It also mentions animals that are placed at the disposal of human beings, ships traversing the *seas* and man's ability to use such ships and animals for transport.

The second part takes us from the indicators pointing out the reality of faith to a discussion of the truth of faith as advocated by all God's messengers, without exception: *"My people, worship God alone: for you have no deity other than Him."* (Verse 23) This is a statement made by Noah, and by every messenger that followed him, up to Muhammad, God's final Messenger. The unbelievers always made the same objections: *"This man is but a mortal like yourselves,"* and *"had God willed, He would have surely sent down angels."* (Verse 24) Another objection refers to the promise made by God's messengers: *"Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life?"* (Verse 35) The result was always that messengers appealed to God for support. He answered their appeals and destroyed the unbelievers. This part concludes with an address to all messengers: *"Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone."* (Verses 51-52)

The third part speaks about the fact that after God's messengers had gone, people were divided and fell into contention over this essential truth: *"People have divided themselves into factions, each delighting in what they have."* (Verse 53) It further speaks about people being oblivious of the fact that God tests them with the blessings He bestows on them. They are deluded by the riches they enjoy. The believers, on the other hand, remain God-fearing, worship Him alone and associate no partners with Him. At the same time they remain fully alert, with awe in their hearts: *"Their hearts lard filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return."* (Verse 60) At this point, an image is portrayed showing those who were oblivious of the truth of faith being overwhelmed by God's punishment. They cry out for help, but they are strongly reproached: *"Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night."* (Verses 66-67) The *sūrah* denounces their attitude towards God's Messenger whom they knew well to be honest and truthful. Now that he has come to them with the message of the truth, asking for no wages, how can they reject him and the truth he advocates? Although they acknowledge that to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, which are all under His control as He is their only Lord, they reject the very concept of resurrection. They go further in their falsehood,

claiming that God has a son and associating partners with Him. *"Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as partner with Him."* (Verse 92)

The final part turns away from them and their claims in order to address the Prophet, telling him to repel evil with what is better, and to seek refuge with God from the evil of satans. He must not be angered or grieved by what they say. In addition, we have here a scene of the Day of Judgement describing the punishment, suffering and humiliation that await them there. The *sūrah* concludes by stating that God always remains exalted above all that they say about Him: *"Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne."* (Verse 116) It also asserts that the unbelievers will never be successful, whereas the believers' success is confirmed at the beginning of the *sūrah: "He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful."* (Verse 117) Again, an instruction is given to seek God's mercy and forgiveness: *"Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy."* (Verse 118)

The *sūrah* spreads an air of explanation and factual statement, mixed with calm argument, pure logic and inspiration. Its subject matter is faith, and faith gives it its special ambience. At the beginning we see the believers *"who humble themselves in their prayer,"* and in the middle they are described in the following terms: *"They give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return."* (Verse 60) For an example of the inspiration of the *sūrah* we may take: *"It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds: how seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 78). Indeed the entire *sūrah* reflects a gentle air of faith.

1
Man, Faith and the Universe

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾	*Truly, successful shall be the believers,* (1)
ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ فِى صَلَاتِهِمْ خَٰشِعُونَ ﴿٢﴾	*who humble themselves in their prayer,* (2)
وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنِ ٱللَّغْوِ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾	*who turn away from all that is frivolous,* (3)
وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِلزَّكَوٰةِ فَٰعِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾	*who are active in deeds of charity,* (4)
وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٥﴾	*who refrain from sex* (5)
إِلَّا عَلَىٰٓ أَزْوَٰجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ﴿٦﴾	*except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame,* (6)
فَمَنِ ٱبْتَغَىٰ وَرَآءَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْعَادُونَ ﴿٧﴾	*whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors,* (7)
وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمَٰنَٰتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَٰعُونَ	*who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges,* (8)

and who are diligent in their prayers. (9)

These shall be the heirs, (10)

who will inherit paradise; therein shall they abide. (11)

Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, (12)

then We place him, a gamete,13 in a safe place of rest. (13)

Then We create out of the gamete a clinging cell mass, and out of the clinging cell mass We create an embryo. Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We then bring this into being as another creation. Exalted be God, the best of creators. (14)

And then, after all this, you are destined to die ; (15)

and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection. (16)

We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits; and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation. (17)

﴿٨﴾

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمۡ عَلَىٰ صَلَوَٰتِهِمۡ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٩﴾

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡوَٰرِثُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

ٱلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ ٱلۡفِرۡدَوۡسَ هُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَلَقَدۡ خَلَقۡنَا ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ مِن سُلَٰلَةٖ مِّن طِينٖ ﴿١٢﴾

ثُمَّ جَعَلۡنَٰهُ نُطۡفَةٗ فِي قَرَارٖ مَّكِينٖ ﴿١٣﴾

ثُمَّ خَلَقۡنَا ٱلنُّطۡفَةَ عَلَقَةٗ فَخَلَقۡنَا ٱلۡعَلَقَةَ مُضۡغَةٗ فَخَلَقۡنَا ٱلۡمُضۡغَةَ عِظَٰمٗا فَكَسَوۡنَا ٱلۡعِظَٰمَ لَحۡمٗا ثُمَّ أَنشَأۡنَٰهُ خَلۡقًا ءَاخَرَۚ فَتَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ أَحۡسَنُ ٱلۡخَٰلِقِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُم بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ لَمَيِّتُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ تُبۡعَثُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَلَقَدۡ خَلَقۡنَا فَوۡقَكُمۡ سَبۡعَ طَرَآئِقَ وَمَا كُنَّا

---

[13] For an explanation of the translation of the Qur'ānic terms denoting the stages of human development during pregnancy, please refer to the footnote on verse 5 of *Sūrah* 22, in this volume, p. 80. — Editor's note.

عَنِ ٱلۡخَلۡقِ غَٰفِلِينَ ١٧

We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away. (18)

وَأَنزَلۡنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءَۢ بِقَدَرٖ فَأَسۡكَنَّٰهُ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰ ذَهَابِۭ بِهِۦ لَقَٰدِرُونَ ١٨

And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date-palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat, (19)

فَأَنشَأۡنَا لَكُم بِهِۦ جَنَّٰتٖ مِّن نَّخِيلٖ وَأَعۡنَٰبٖ لَّكُمۡ فِيهَا فَوَٰكِهُ كَثِيرَةٞ وَمِنۡهَا تَأۡكُلُونَ ١٩

as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat. (20)

وَشَجَرَةٗ تَخۡرُجُ مِن طُورِ سَيۡنَآءَ تَنۢبُتُ بِٱلدُّهۡنِ وَصِبۡغٖ لِّلۡأٓكِلِينَ ٢٠

In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. (21)

وَإِنَّ لَكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ لَعِبۡرَةٗۖ نُّسۡقِيكُم مِّمَّا فِي بُطُونِهَا وَلَكُمۡ فِيهَا مَنَٰفِعُ كَثِيرَةٞ وَمِنۡهَا تَأۡكُلُونَ ٢١

By them, as by the ships you are carried. (22)

وَعَلَيۡهَا وَعَلَى ٱلۡفُلۡكِ تُحۡمَلُونَ ٢٢

Success Guaranteed by Faith

"Truly, successful shall be the believers." (Verse 1) It is a true promise; nay, it is a firm decision ensuring success for the believers. If we take it as a promise, we know God never fails to honour His promises; and if we say that it is His decision, then no one can ever foil a decision by God. What is promised is success in the life of this world and in the life to come; success for the individual believer and for the community of believers. A believer will feel this success in his heart and will see it coming true in his day to day life. The success God promises includes all that human beings associate with success and what God keeps in store for His faithful servants.

So, who are those faithful servants, the believers who receive this document written by God, containing this promise and a clear declaration of success? Who are the believers promised all goodness, victory, happiness, success and goodly provisions in this life on earth; and further promised to be successful in the hereafter, when they receive God's reward and enjoy His pleasure? They will also have much more that is known only to God, and this will be given in their two lives. Who are these believers who will inherit paradise where they will abide?

Verses 2-9 give us a detailed list of their characteristics. They are the ones *"who humble themselves in their prayer, who turn away from all that is frivolous, who are active in deeds of charity, who refrain from sex except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors, who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges, and who are diligent in their prayers."* (Verses 2-9) So, what do we make of these characteristics?

Together they draw for us the character of a Muslim at its highest level. That is the level of Muhammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the most perfect human being ever to walk on the face of the earth. He was educated and given a refined character by God, and God certified to his noble character and way of life: *"Truly, yours is a sublime nature."* (68: 4) `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, was asked about his character. Her answer was: "His character was the Qur'ān in practice." She then recited verses 1-9 of the present *sūrah,* and commented, "Such was God's Messenger." [Related by al-Nasā'ī]

But we ask again: what value do these characteristics give to the life of the individual, the community and to human life in general?

"Who humble themselves in their prayer." (Verse 2) They feel the reverence associated with prayer, as they stand up to address God, and their hearts are thus filled with awe, which is, in turn, reflected in their features and movements. Their spirits feel God's majesty as they realize that they stand in His presence. Thus, all their preoccupations and distractions disappear. Their thoughts and feelings are all concentrated on their discourse with Him. In His sublime presence, they are heedless of all their surroundings. They see and feel nothing but His majesty. Their minds and hearts are purged of even the slightest alien thought or feeling. In such a situation, a stray atom is reunited with its source, a wandering spirit finds its way, and a heart that has been long in isolation finds its company. Thus, all values, concerns and considerations diminish, except for the ones that are related to God in some way.

"Who turn away from all that is frivolous." (Verse 3) This includes all frivolity, in words, actions, or concerns. A believer's heart has its own preoccupations which steer it away from frivolity. It is full with the remembrance of God and with

reflection on His majesty and His signs that we see everywhere in the universe and within ourselves. Indeed, every scene in the universe fills our minds with wonder and gives a clear message to our hearts. Moreover, the duties required by faith keep a believer preoccupied with maintaining the purity of his or her heart, soul and conscience. Believers' duties include those of behaviour which aim at maintaining the very high standards required by faith. Moreover, the task of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong aims at preventing any deviation in the life of the Muslim community. *Jihād* is also a duty that aims to repel aggression, protect the Muslim community and maintain its position and sovereignty. These duties are always there, and believers do not shirk their responsibilities. These are either individual or collective duties, sufficient to preoccupy people throughout their lives. Man's energy is limited, and it may either be spent in what serves and improves human life, or in frivolity and idle pursuit. By his faith, a believer is required to spend all his energy in what promotes life and sets it on the course of success and prosperity.

This does not preclude relaxation and seeking comfort when it is needed. But this is totally different from indulging in frivolous and idle pursuits.

Social and Moral Qualities

"Who are active in deeds of charity." (Verse 4) Having come forward to declare their submission to God and demonstrate this in their prayer, and having turned away from all that is frivolous, true believers complement this by being active in charity. The term used in Arabic for charity is *zakāt,* but this word is often used in a wider sense that goes far beyond the obligatory financial worship with which it is normally associated. Such charity purifies man's heart and money. It purges hearts of selfishness and greed, and overcomes Satan's whispers of discouragement as he raises before us the spectre of poverty, and demonstrates our trust in God. It also makes our money, or what is left of it, pure and good, free of all obligations and doubts concerning its being lawful. Furthermore, charity protects the Muslim community against the imbalance that results from the extremes of poverty on the one side and affluence on the other. It provides social security for all individuals in the Muslim community, particularly the weaker elements, and it protects the community against disintegration.

"Who refrain from sex..." (Verse 5) This is a pointer to the purity of the human soul, the home and the community, and to the way of protecting oneself, family and society. It is all the result of refraining from indulgence in sin and turning people's hearts only to what is permissible. Thus, the Muslim community is protected from the unrestrained promiscuity that undermines the family and allows dubious

parenthood to increase and become acceptable.

A community with no restraint on desire is wont to find its very social fabric corrupted, because it deprives itself of the sanctity for the family. The family home is the basic unit in the structure of the community. It is the cradle where children grow up. To serve as a healthy cradle, it needs purity and security, both of which give reassurance to the husband and wife so that each has full trust in the other. Thus, they cooperate to safeguard their home and ensure the healthy upbringing of their young ones.

A community where unrestrained desire becomes commonplace is a filthy community that occupies a very lowly position in humanity's esteem. Self control, willpower and the appropriate regulation of natural instincts to ensure their healthy and productive fulfilment are the best way to gauge human advancement. Thus, children feel no shame about the way they start their existence in this world, for they know who their fathers are. This is far removed from what animals are like.

The Qur'ān defines here the clean and healthy way which allows a man to place the seeds of life in the right place: *"Who refrain from sex except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame."* (Verses 5-6) As for married couples, no argument is raised here, because marriage is respected in all human communities. The other form, referring to 'rightfully possessed' women, needs some explanation.

We have spoken about the question of slavery and the Islamic approach to it elsewhere in this book.[14] As we have stated, when Islam was revealed, slavery was a universal system. Captives of war were made slaves, and this was an international institution. It was not possible for Islam at the time, when it was engaged in military battles against its enemies who were trying hard to stop its spread with military force, to abolish slavery unilaterally. This would have meant that Muslim captives would remain enslaved by the enemies of Islam, while Islam would set enemy captives free. Hence, while putting an end to all other sources of slavery, Islam made a provisional exception in the case of captives of war. Abolition of this remaining source was delayed until a new international system to regulate the question of war captives could be put in place.

With this source of slavery remaining, captive women continued to come into Islamic society. To give them equal treatment, on the basis of the system then operating throughout the world, meant that they should be slaves. Their enslavement did not allow them to become wives through normal marriage. Hence, Islam allowed intercourse with them by their masters only, unless they were freed through the many ways Islam provided for the same.

[14] Reference to slavery is made in Vol. I, pp. 279-81, Vol. III, pp. 31-2.

We see also in this permission a way to satisfy the natural needs of the women slaves themselves, so that they did not resort to immorality. We see this happening today, despite the international treaties prohibiting slavery, when women are taken captive in war. Islam, however, does not condone such promiscuity. But Islam did open up several ways for women slaves to gain their freedom: one of which automatically came into operation when the slave woman gave birth to her master's child. In this case, she became free on her master's death. Alternatively, her master may give her freedom, either voluntarily or in atonement for some offence he might have committed. Or, she may choose to buy her own freedom. A different situation applied if her master hit her across the face. He was, then, required to free her by way of compensation. There were further ways to freedom as well.

Anyway, allowing slavery through war was a temporary necessity in order to maintain equal treatment in a world where all war captives became slaves. It was, however, not a part of the Islamic social system *per se.*

"Whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors." (Verse 7) The limit is that of wives and women rightly possessed. There can be no other legitimate way. Whoever tries to go beyond this limit actually breaks the boundaries of permissibility and falls in sin. He becomes an assailant of human honour. There can be no lawful relationship except through marriage or the results of war undertaken for the sake of Islam. When transgression beyond these well defined limits takes place, the individual concerned becomes corrupt, like a sheep grazing out of bounds, and the family is undermined because of the lack of security felt by its members. Indeed the whole community feels endangered because its wolves have been set loose. Islam is keen to avoid all that.

Qualities Guaranteeing Admission to Heaven

"Who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges." (Verse 8) They, individuals and community alike, honour their pledges and discharge their trust. Both the individual and the community have many types of trust to maintain, the first of which is the trust encapsulated in their own nature, i.e. they are created by God in an upright fashion so as to be in harmony with the rest of the universe to which they belong. This testifies to God's oneness by the natural feeling of unity that governs the universe. Believers are faithful to this great trust, and they protect their nature from deviation so that it continues to testify to God's oneness. Other trusts are derived from this basic element.

The first pledge is that God has taken from, and made ingrained in human nature, committing it to believe in His existence and His oneness. All other pledges, covenants and treaties derive from this first one. When a believer commits himself to

something, he makes God his witness. Honouring his commitments is, to a believer, part of being God-fearing, of *taqwā.*

The Muslim community is also responsible for honouring its public trust, and for the fulfilment of its pledges to God and the duties that result from these pledges. The *sūrah* gives its statement in very general terms so as to include every type of trust and pledge. Believers are faithful to all these, at all times. Being faithful is part of their character. No community can hope to have a straightforward life unless pledges and trusts are fulfilled, so that every individual and group are certain of this basic rule of community life. It is the rule that gives everyone a sense of trust and security.

"And who are diligent in their prayers." (Verse 9) They do not neglect their prayers or miss them through laziness. Nor do they fail to attend to them as prayer should be attended to. They offer them on time, attending to obligatory and recommended parts, making them complete, omitting nothing essential. Their prayer is alive, filling their hearts and interacting with their consciences. Prayer maintains a bond between God and human hearts. Therefore, a person who does not attend regularly to his prayer is unlikely to attend diligently and conscientiously to his bonds with other people. The qualities of believers outlined in this *sūrah* start with prayer and finish with prayer, so as to stress its unrivalled importance in the structure of faith. After all, prayer is the most perfect form of worship addressed to God.

These characteristics delineate the character of believers who are certain to be successful. While they are characteristics of individuals, they are decisive in giving the Muslim community its collective character and shaping the type of life it lives. It is an honourable life that befits man, the creature God has honoured and allowed to move up on the way to perfection. It is clear that God does not want man to live like animals, merely eating and indulging in pleasure.

Since life on earth does not achieve the perfection God wants for mankind, He has willed that believers who follow His way should attain their goal in paradise, where they live forever, in complete security, and where they have no fear: *"These shall be the heirs who will inherit paradise; therein shall they abide."* (Verses 10-11) This is the ultimate success God has determined for believers. There is no goal beyond this.

The Origins of Man

Having given a detailed account of the qualities and characteristics of believers, the *sūrah* moves on to point out the indications available within man himself that lead to faith. It speaks of the various stages of development of a human being, starting with the very beginning of human origin, and ending with resurrection on the Day of Judgement, to establish a firm link between this life and the life to come:

> *Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, then We place him, a gamete, in a safe place of rest. Then We create out of the gamete a clinging cell mass, and out of the clinging cell mass We create an embryo. Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We then bring this into being as another creation. Exalted be God, the best of creators. And then, after all this, you are destined to die; and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection. (Verses 12-16)*

The gradual formation of man, following the same sequence, confirms first the truth of the Originator, and also the deliberate planning in the course such formation follows. This cannot be the result of blind coincidence. Nor can it be a random beginning leading to a consistent line that never fails or deviates. The truth is that human beings come into existence in the way they do, rather than any other possible way, because our Creator wants it this way, and He does things according to His own plan and design.

Moreover, by giving this full picture with the different stages shown to follow each other without fail also indicates that belief in the Creator who plans everything and following the course of action believers follow, as indicated in the first eleven verses of the *sūrah,* is the only way to achieve the perfect standard human beings can achieve both in this life and in the hereafter. Thus, the two opening passages of the *sūrah* are interlinked.

"*Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay.*" (Verse 12) This statement implies that there are stages in the creation of human beings, without specifying them. The implication is much clearer in the Arabic' original where the term *sulālah,* given in English as 'essence', also connotes a chain of development. Hence, it means that man goes through different stages, one leading to the other, from the very first beginning of clay to the eventual creation, man. This is a truth we get to know from the Qur'ān. We do not need any confirmation of it from scientific theories concerned with the origins of man or other living things.

The Qur'ān establishes this truth of God's work and design. Thus, we can contemplate the great divide between the clay and man who came from that clay through a succession of stages. The details of this succession are not mentioned because it is unimportant to the wider aims of the Qur'ān. Scientific theories try to find a definite ladder for our origins and evolution. In their attempts, these theories may come up with some true conclusions and they may make mistakes. We cannot, however, confuse the truth established in the Qur'ān, which mentions the succession of stages, with the attempts made by scientists to establish these different stages of succession. These attempts are always open to error, proving today what they may disprove tomorrow in the light of advanced techniques and technologies.

This truth is sometimes expressed very briefly in the Qur'ān, when it says that

man's creation began with clay, giving no reference to the stages which the process of creation then went through. The ultimate reference then is the most detailed Qur'ānic text, which refers to a 'succession of stages'. We should remember that the Qur'ān uses a more general or shorter text, only because it is more suited to the context in which it occurs.

The Qur'ān does not explain how man evolved from the essence of clay, because such explanation is not part of its objectives. The stages of this succession may be exactly as scientific theories suggest, or they may be different. It may happen that man will be able to formulate an accurate idea of such succession. However, the parting point between the Qur'ānic view of man and the way scientific theories look at him is that the Qur'ān honours man, stating that a measure of God's spirit was breathed into him to make of him a man with the qualities and characteristics that distinguish man from animals. In this, the Islamic view is fundamentally different from that of all materialist theories. God certainly tells the truth.

Different Stages in the Creation of Man

This applies to the origin of the human race: it starts from an essence of clay. As for individual human beings, they go through well known stages: *"Then We place him, a gamete, in a safe place of rest."* (Verse 13) The creation formula that brings about new individuals of the human race, and their method of reproduction, follows a line set by God. A drop of fluid is discharged from the man to settle in the woman's uterus. It is not the whole drop; rather, a single cell out of hundreds of thousands forming this drop. It settles in this safe enclosure in the uterus which is supported by the hip bones, protecting it from the shocks and knocks that occur to the body as one moves about.

The Qur'ānic text makes the gamete a stage in the succession of man's creation, coming immediately after man's existence. This is true, but it also deserves contemplation. A human being in his full stature, and with all his features, elements and characteristics, is enclosed within this gamete. It then develops into an embryo when it begins its new existence through a new series of stages.

The gamete stage leads to that of a cell mass after the male sperm fertilizes the female egg, and then the cell mass clings to the wall of the uterus. The cell mass grows and becomes an embryo. This little creation continues in this line that never changes or deviates from its course. It moves along its marked line, using its latent energy according to God's law which combines perfect design with elaborate planning.

The next stage is that of the emergence of bones: *"Then We create within the embryo bones,"* which is followed by another stage in which the bones are clothed with flesh.

We are overwhelmed with amazement here at this fact in the development of the embryo which is stated in the Qur'ān long before it was confirmed by embryology. This is the fact that bones are made of cells that are totally different from those of flesh. It has been confirmed beyond any shadow of doubt that bones are formed first in the embryo. In fact, not a single cell of flesh could be seen before the whole skeleton of the embryo is finally in place. This is what the Qur'ān states: *"Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh."* (Verse 14) Limitless is God in His glory. He is indeed All-Knowing, All-Aware.

"We then bring this into being as another creation." (Verse 14) This is now man with his distinctive features. It is true that the human embryo is similar to animal embryos, but only in its physical stages. For then the human embryo is given a different sort of creation to make up this distinguished creature that we know, with his potential to achieve excellence. The animal embryo, on the other hand, remains within the animal grade, possessing nothing of the distinctive features and qualities of man.

The human embryo is given special qualities that in time lead it along its human way. It is given 'another creation' as it completes its embryonic stages, while the animal embryo stops at that stage because it does not have the same qualities. Hence, no animal can go beyond its animal status, so as to automatically evolve into the same high status as man. The two are totally different, and the difference is caused by the breathing of divine spirit that brings the essence of clay into a human being, which is a different creation. This means that man and animals are similar in their biological make-up, but animals do not go beyond their status, while man is brought into being as a different creation, able to achieve a totally different level of perfection through the distinctive qualities God has willed to give him in order to complete His design of creation.[15]

"Exalted be God, the best of creators." (Verse 14) God is certainly the only One who creates. The superlative form is not used here in a comparative sense; rather, it indicates perfection in God's creation.

"Exalted be God, the best of creators." (Verse 14) It is He who has given human nature the ability to move from one stage to the next, in accordance with the law He has set, which will never change or be modified. It will not fail to continue until man achieves the degree of perfection assigned to him, on the basis of a perfect order.

[15] The theory of evolution seeks to prove the opposite, making man another stage of animal evolution, and giving animals the capability to attain human status. The facts we see disprove the existence of any such relation between man and animal, showing that no animal has the necessary qualities to evolve into human status. It will always remain within animal boundaries. Its animal evolution may be proven according to Darwin's theory or in some other way, but mankind remains a higher type of creation distinguished by certain qualities that make man what he is, and this could never have come about as a result of mechanical development. It is a gift from a higher power.

People look with amazement at what they term as 'scientific miracles' *when* man invents a machine that works automatically, without human interference. But how does this compare with the development of an embryo in all its phases and stages, each of which is hugely different from the preceding one, ushering in total transformations. But people tend to overlook such miraculous events, closing their eyes and minds to them, because long familiarity tends to disguise their miraculous nature. The mere thought that man, very complex as he is, is summed up within a single cell that cannot be seen with the naked eye, yet carries all his qualities, distinctive features and special characteristics fills us with wonder. In fact, all these distinctive qualities, features and characteristics grow and take full shape during the different stages of the development of the embryo, and then appear in full when the embryo is brought back as a different and new creation. Then they are visibly seen in the child, or they make their presence in the newborn child felt. Indeed, every child carries its own genetic features in addition to general human features and qualities. Both types are latent in the original cell but emerge later. When we reflect on this fact, which occurs all the time, our hearts and minds are hound to acknowledge this remarkable design by our Creator.

Further Aspects of Creation

The *sūrah* continues to depict the different stages of life to complete the journey. Human life that began on earth does not however end there, because an element from outside the earth forms an essential part of it, influencing the path it travels. The breathing of God's spirit in it has given human life a goal different from that of the body, and a destination unlike that of the destination of flesh and blood. Hence it achieves its completeness somewhere other than this earth, in a totally different world: "*And then, after all this, you are destined to die; and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection.*" (Verses 15-16)

Thus, death is the end of human life on earth, forming a bridge between the life we know and the life to come. As such, it is a stage in human life, not its end.

Then comes resurrection which heralds the last stage, when the perfect life begins, free of all the failings of earthly life, physical needs, fear and worry, and leading to no other stage because it represents the level of perfection human beings can attain. This, however, applies only to those who follow the way leading to such perfection, outlined in the opening verses of this *sūrah.* It is the way followed by believers. By contrast, those who in this life sink to the level of animals go further down in the life to come so that they are right at the bottom. They are no longer human beings, because they become part of the fuel of hell, fed by stones and men.

The *sūrah* moves on to point out well known, yet often forgotten, aspects in the

universe which should lead people to faith:

> *We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits; and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation. We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away. And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat, as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat. In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried. (Verses 17-22)*

All these indicators are cited here as aspects of God's power and perfect planning. In their constitutions, functions and roles they move in perfect harmony and in the same direction. They are subject to the same law. They function in unison and serve man, the creature God has honoured. Therefore, these aspects of the universe are shown to be interlinked with the stages of human life as outlined in the *sūrah.*

"We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits; and never are We unmindful of [Our] creation." (Verse 17) The Arabic word used here, *ṭarā'iq,* carries different meanings. It may mean seven layers, one above the other, or next to one another. It may also mean seven orbits, (as we chose in our translation), but it could also mean seven celestial systems like our solar system, or seven nebulae, or clusters of stars. Be that as it may, the term signifies seven celestial creatures above us, which means that they are higher than the level of the earth in the universe. God created them all according to His planning and to suit His purpose. He protects and preserves them according to a definite law He has set in operation: "*Never are We unmindful of Our creation.*"

Blessings All Around Us

"We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure, and We cause it to lodge in the earth; and We are most certainly able to take it all away." (Verse 18) Here we have a direct link between those seven orbits or bodies and the earth. Water falls from the sky, and has a direct link with those bodies. In fact, it is the perfect order controlling the universe that allows water to so fall from the sky and settle into the earth.

It is only recently that geologists developed their theory that underground water comes from surface water and rain, which seeps through the earth. Before this theory was advanced, the general perception was that underground water was independent of surface water. Yet the Qur'ān stated this fact more than 1,400 years ago.

"We send down water from the skies in accordance with a set measure." It is all

according to an elaborate plan. It is neither too much so as to cause flooding and devastation, nor too little so as to cause drought and famine. Nor does it come at the wrong time when it would be of little use.

"And We cause it to lodge in the earth." The picture here is akin to that of the fertilized egg that is implanted in the uterus, which is described in the Qur'ān as *'a safe place of rest.'* Both the egg and the water have their settled and safe places of settlement in order to give rise to life. Here we see yet another example of the Qur'ānic method of artistic arrangement of scenes and images.

"We are most certainly able to take it all away." It can sink into the depths of the earth, through a schism in the rocky layer under it, or by some other means. The One who kept it stored in its place is also able to allow it to go beyond man's reach. Keeping it in its place is part of God's grace.

It is from water that life derives: *"And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date palms and vines, yielding abundant fruit, and from which you eat."* (Verse 19) Date trees and vines are only two types of plant life for the emergence of which water is essential. By the same token, the sperm, or fluid man discharges, is essential for the emergence of human life. Both examples are easily understood by those addressed by the Qur'ān. They also point to the numerous other examples that depend on water for life.

Of these other types the olive tree is chosen for particular mention: *"as well as a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat."* (Verse 20) It is one of the most useful trees for man, with its oil, fruit and wood. The closest area to Arabia where it was planted was Mount Sinai, close to the blessed valley mentioned in the Qur'ān. Hence, this particular area is mentioned here. In that area, it is fed by groundwater.

Then the *sūrah* leaves aside all plants to refer to the animal kingdom:

> *In the cattle too there is a lesson for you: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, and you gain many other benefits from them, and you eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried. (Verses 21-22)*

These creatures have been made subservient to man by God's power and design, as also by His distribution of qualities and functions in the entire universe. Anyone who looks at them with open eyes and mind will not fail to recognize the wisdom behind this planning. He will realize that we drink the milk that comes from their bellies, which means that it comes from what these cattle feed on and digest. Their special glands turn it into this tasty and highly beneficial fluid.

"You gain many other benefits from them." These benefits are given first in this

general statement, and then two are chosen for particular emphasis: "*You eat of their flesh. By them, as by the ships you are carried.*" Permission is given to man to eat of these animals, which include camels, oxen, sheep and goats, but man is forbidden to inflict pain on these animals or to torture them. Eating them provides real benefit, while torture and pain are only indicative of a sadistic nature. Causing pain and inflicting torture bring no benefit to man.

The *sūrah* compares man's riding of animals and his being carried on board boats and ships. Both are made possible through the system God has perfected for this universe which organizes the functions of all creatures and establishes coherence and coordination between them all. It is the way God has made water, ships and the atmosphere around them both that allows ships to float on water. If the composition of any of the three alters or changes, it would not be possible for ships to travel the seas. People realized this very early in human life, and they continue to benefit by it.

All these are signs that lead to faith when they are properly understood. They are relevant to both the preceding and the following parts of the *sūrah,* and fit with them in perfect harmony.

2
One Message for All Mankind

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦ فَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرُهُۥٓۖ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ٢٣

We sent forth Noah to his people, and he said: 'My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (23)

فَقَالَ ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِن قَوۡمِهِۦ مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُكُمۡ يُرِيدُ أَن يَتَفَضَّلَ عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَنزَلَ مَلَٰٓئِكَةٗ مَّا سَمِعۡنَا بِهَٰذَا فِيٓ ءَابَآئِنَا ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ٢٤

The unbelieving elders of his people said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you. Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels. We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers. (24)

إِنۡ هُوَ إِلَّا رَجُلُۢ بِهِۦ جِنَّةٞ فَتَرَبَّصُواْ بِهِۦ حَتَّىٰ حِينٖ ٢٥

He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while.' (25)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱنصُرۡنِي بِمَا كَذَّبُونِ ٢٦

He said: 'My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying.' (26)

فَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡهِ أَنِ ٱصۡنَعِ ٱلۡفُلۡكَ بِأَعۡيُنِنَا وَوَحۡيِنَا فَإِذَا جَآءَ أَمۡرُنَا وَفَارَ ٱلتَّنُّورُ فَٱسۡلُكۡ فِيهَا مِن كُلّٖ زَوۡجَيۡنِ ٱثۡنَيۡنِ وَأَهۡلَكَ إِلَّا مَن سَبَقَ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡقَوۡلُ مِنۡهُمۡۖ وَلَا تُخَٰطِبۡنِي فِي ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓاْۖ إِنَّهُم مُّغۡرَقُونَ ٢٧

We revealed to him to 'build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth, place on board this ark one pair of every species, as well as your family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed. Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned. (27)

فَإِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتَ أَنتَ وَمَن مَّعَكَ عَلَى ٱلْفُلْكِ فَقُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى نَجَّىٰنَا مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

When you and those who are with you are settled in the ark, say: All praise is due to God who has saved us from those wrongdoing folk.' (28)

وَقُل رَّبِّ أَنزِلْنِى مُنزَلًا مُّبَارَكًا وَأَنتَ خَيْرُ ٱلْمُنزِلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

And also say: 'My Lord! Let my landing be blessed. You are the best to bring us to safe landing.' (29)

إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ وَإِن كُنَّا لَمُبْتَلِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Surely, in that there are signs. Indeed, We always put [people] to a test. (30)

ثُمَّ أَنشَأْنَا مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ قَرْنًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Then after these people We raised a new generation. (31)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ أَنِ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مَا لَكُم مِّنْ إِلَٰهٍ غَيْرُهُۥٓ ۖ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: 'My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (32)

وَقَالَ ٱلْمَلَأُ مِن قَوْمِهِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِلِقَآءِ ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَأَتْرَفْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يَأْكُلُ مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ مِنْهُ وَيَشْرَبُ مِمَّا تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

The unbelieving elders of his people, who denied the life to come and to whom We granted ease and plenty in this worldly life, said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat and drinking of what you drink. (33)

وَلَئِنْ أَطَعْتُم بَشَرًا مِّثْلَكُمْ إِنَّكُمْ إِذًا لَّخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Indeed, if you pay heed to a mortal like yourselves, you will certainly be the losers. (34)

أَيَعِدُكُمْ أَنَّكُمْ إِذَا مِتُّمْ وَكُنتُمْ تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَنَّكُم مُّخْرَجُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life? (35)

۞ هَيۡهَاتَ هَيۡهَاتَ لِمَا تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Improbable, improbable indeed is what you are promised! (36)

إِنۡ هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا ٱلدُّنۡيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحۡيَا وَمَا نَحۡنُ بِمَبۡعُوثِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

There is no life beyond this, our present life; we die and we live, and we shall never be restored to life. (37)

إِنۡ هُوَ إِلَّا رَجُلٌ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبٗا وَمَا نَحۡنُ لَهُۥ بِمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

He is nothing but a man who attributes his lies to God. Never will we believe in him.' (38)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱنصُرۡنِي بِمَا كَذَّبُونِ ﴿٣٩﴾

He said: 'My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying.' (39)

قَالَ عَمَّا قَلِيلٖ لَّيُصۡبِحُنَّ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Said [God]: 'Before long they shall certainly come to rue it.' (40)

فَأَخَذَتۡهُمُ ٱلصَّيۡحَةُ بِٱلۡحَقِّ فَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ غُثَآءٗۚ فَبُعۡدٗا لِّلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

Then the blast overtook them in all justice, and We caused them to be like dead leaves. And so – away with those wrongdoing folk! (41)

ثُمَّ أَنشَأۡنَا مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِمۡ قُرُونًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Then after them We raised new generations. (42)

مَا تَسۡبِقُ مِنۡ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلَهَا وَمَا يَسۡتَـٔۡخِرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it. (43)

ثُمَّ أَرۡسَلۡنَا رُسُلَنَا تَتۡرَاۖ كُلَّ مَا جَآءَ أُمَّةً رَّسُولُهَا كَذَّبُوهُۚ فَأَتۡبَعۡنَا بَعۡضَهُم بَعۡضٗا وَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ أَحَادِيثَۚ فَبُعۡدٗا لِّقَوۡمٖ لَّا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

And We sent forth Our messengers, one after another. Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying. So, We caused them to follow one another, and let them become mere tales. And so – away with the folk who would not believe. (44)

ثُمَّ أَرۡسَلۡنَا مُوسَىٰ وَأَخَاهُ هَٰرُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَسُلۡطَٰنٖ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

And then We sent forth Moses and his brother Aaron, with Our signs and with clear authority, (45)

إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ وَكَانُواْ قَوۡمًا عَالِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

to Pharaoh and his nobles; but these behaved with arrogance, for they were haughty people. (46)

فَقَالُوٓاْ أَنُؤۡمِنُ لِبَشَرَيۡنِ مِثۡلِنَا وَقَوۡمُهُمَا لَنَا عَٰبِدُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

And so they said: 'Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves, even though their people are our slaves?' (47)

فَكَذَّبُوهُمَا فَكَانُواْ مِنَ ٱلۡمُهۡلَكِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Thus, they gave the lie to them, and earned their place among the doomed. (48)

وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَى ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَهۡتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

We had indeed given Moses the Book, so that they might be guided. (49)

وَجَعَلۡنَا ٱبۡنَ مَرۡيَمَ وَأُمَّهُۥٓ ءَايَةٗ وَءَاوَيۡنَٰهُمَآ إِلَىٰ رَبۡوَةٖ ذَاتِ قَرَارٖ وَمَعِينٖ ﴿٥٠﴾

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol, and provided them with an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and a fresh spring. (50)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلرُّسُلُ كُلُواْ مِنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ وَٱعۡمَلُواْ صَٰلِحًاۖ إِنِّي بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ عَلِيمٞ ﴿٥١﴾

Messengers! Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. (51)

وَإِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦٓ أُمَّتُكُمۡ أُمَّةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗ وَأَنَا۠ رَبُّكُمۡ فَٱتَّقُونِ ﴿٥٢﴾

This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone. (52)

Overview

Having highlighted some of the indicators of the truth of God's oneness that are widely available in the universe and within man himself, the *sūrah* now speaks about the truth of faith preached by all God's messengers. It shows how people received

this same truth that admits no alteration or amendment at any time or with the successive messages given to God's messengers, starting with Noah (peace be upon him). We behold the procession of the community of messengers sent by God to deliver to mankind the same message expressed in one word, with a single import and a single direction. Although this message was given in the numerous languages God's messengers spoke to their communities, it is given in the same wording in Arabic. Thus, Noah's statement expressing this message is repeated in exactly the same wording by every messenger sent later, and mankind always give the same answer using the same words.

The First Messenger

> *We sent forth Noah to his people, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-flaring?' The unbelieving elders of his people said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you. Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels. We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers. He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while.' (Verses 23-25)*

"*My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him.*" (Verse 23) This is the unchanging word of truth. The whole universe is based on this truth and everything in it testifies to it. "*Will you not be God-fearing?*" (Verse 23) Do you not fear the consequences of denying the most fundamental truth that gives rise to all other truths? Do you not appreciate that by denying it you are distorting the bright image of the truth, and this will inevitably cause you to incur God's severe punishment?

However, the noblemen in his community who deny what he advocates are not prepared to discuss his statement or consider the evidence supporting it. They are unable to shed their narrow vision that concentrates on their own status and that of the messenger who calls them to accept the truth. They are not prepared to elevate themselves to the broader level from where they can better appreciate this great truth on its own. They cannot isolate it from personalities. Hence, they disregard this most fundamental truth in the universe, speaking instead about Noah as an individual: "*This man is but a mortal like yourselves who wants to make himself superior to you.*" (Verse 24)

From this very narrow angle the people of Noah looked at the great truth advocated by him. Hence, they could not appreciate its nature or see its truth. Their limited concerns and narrow interests thus blinded them to its essence, preventing their minds and hearts from appreciating it. Thus, to them the whole question was one of a single man from among themselves, who had nothing to distinguish him from the rest of them, wanting to have superiority over them, giving himself status

above their own.

In their haste to prevent Noah from attaining what they imagine he is after, they not only deny Noah's status, but also the status of mankind in general. They refuse to accept that God may honour this human race. They simply do not believe that God would send a human messenger, if He sends messengers at all. "*Had God willed, He would surely have sent down angels.*" (Verse 24)

This is because they do not find in their own souls the sublime quality that links mankind with the Supreme Society. It is the quality that enables those whom God selects to receive the grace embodied in His message and deliver it to their fellow human beings, guiding them to its noble source.

In their futile argument they refer to familiar precedents, rather than to wise logic: "*We have never heard anything like this ever happening to our forefathers.*" (Verse 24) This always happens when blind imitation suppresses free thinking. Thus people do not look at what they have and try to relate it to reality in order to arrive at the right conclusion to questions in hand. They rather look to history for precedents. If they fail to find such a precedent, they are prepared to reject the question in its entirety.

Devoid of thought and imagination, such communities of unbelievers accept that what happened in the past may happen again. By contrast, what did not happen in the past cannot come into existence. What a narrow vision of human life this is, freezing it at a particular point of their forefathers' lives.

They are incapable of understanding that they are imprisoned within their narrow walls, unable to break into the wide universe! They accuse those who advocate freedom of thought of being mad, calling on them to think and reflect. When they are reminded of the pointers to the truth all around them, their reply is full of arrogance, reiterating accusations: "*He is but a madman; so bear with him for a while.*" (Verse 25) Bear with him until he dies when we will be relieved of him, his message and his persistent advocacy of faith.

Drowned in a Great Flood

At this moment Noah could not find any way by which he could soften such stone-hearted people. He could only protect himself against their ridicule by putting his complaint to God and seeking His support: "*He said: My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying.*" (Verse 26)

When the living decide to freeze in this way, while life wants to move forward towards the high standards it can achieve, such people constitute a clear impediment. Hence, they are either broken or life moves on, leaving them where they are. The former is what happened to Noah's people, for God willed that they

should be removed:

> *We revealed to him to build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration. When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth, place on board this ark one pair of every species, as well as your family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed. Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned. (Verse 27)*

It was God's will that the road should be cleared of obstacles so that human life could continue its march along the road assigned to it.

Humanity had become prematurely old by Noah's time. It was like a young tree affected by a pest that stops it from growing. It soon dries up and dies whilst still young. At the time of Noah, humanity was in a similar position. Therefore, the remedy was the great flood that swept away everything, washing off the soil and leaving the land ready for a new crop with healthy seeds and a clean environment.

"We revealed to him to build the ark, under Our eyes, and according to Our inspiration." (Verse 27) The ark was the means of safety at the time of the flood. It also served to preserve the seeds of life so that they could grow again. God had willed that Noah should make the ark with his own hands, because man must take responsible action and utilize all means, doing his utmost so that he deserves God's help. Divine help is not given to those who sit on their laurels waiting for something to happen. Since Noah was chosen by God to be the second father of humanity, God instructed him to take the necessary measures, helping him and teaching him how to build the ark so that His purpose was accomplished and His will was done.

God gave Noah a sign which would announce this total process of purification of the entire planet: *"When Our judgement comes to pass, and water gushes forth over the face of the earth..."* At this point Noah was to move quickly and place on board the ark the new seeds of life: *"Place on board this ark one pair of every species."* These included all types of animal, bird and plant that were known to Noah at the time, and which man could easily handle. He was also to place on board his *"family, except those on whom sentence has already been passed."* This is a reference to the unbelievers who denied the word of God and incurred His displeasure. They thus deserved to endure the working of God's law that engulfed with His punishment those who persistently denied His signs.

Noah was ordered not to argue about anyone or try to save anyone even though they may be very close to him: *"Do not plead with Me for the wrongdoers; for they shall be drowned."* (Verse 27) God's law does not try to appease anyone. It does not change its course for the sake of any friend or relative.

The *sūrah* does not give any details here of what happened to Noah's people after

that. The whole matter is settled with the statement: "*They shall be drowned.*" Noah, however is taught how to show his gratitude to God and praise Him, seeking His guidance:

> *When you and those who are with you are settled in the ark, say: All praise is due to God who has saved us from those wrongdoing folk.' And also say: My Lord! Let my landing be blessed. You are the best to bring us to safe landing.' (Verses 28-29)*

This is the right way to praise God and to turn to Him, giving Him His rightful attributes and acknowledging His signs. All people, including prophets who provide the lead for others to follow should show such humility before God.

The *sūrah* then comments on the whole story and the aspects of God's power and wisdom it demonstrates: "*Surely, in that there are signs. Indeed, We always put [people] to a test.*" (Verse 30) Tests come in different types. Some are designed to demonstrate perseverance, some to show gratitude, some to earn reward, others to give guidance, purge unsound elements, or to rectify people's direction, etc. In the story of Noah there are several tests for him, his people and his future offspring.

Along the Same Way to Ruin

The *sūrah* moves on to portray another scene of unbelievers denying the message that continues to be the same across all generations and communities.

> *Then after these people We raised a new generation. And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing?' (Verses 31-32)*

The stories of earlier prophets referred to in this *sūrah* are not meant to give a full account or to provide details. They are meant to emphasize the unity of the message given to all of them, and to make clear that they received the same response from all their different communities. Hence these accounts commence with Noah to indicate the starting point, and finish with Moses and Jesus to define the last point before the final message. No names are mentioned in between the start and the finish of this long chain. This serves to indicate the similarity of all intervening episodes. However, in every new case the essence of the message and the way it was received are clearly mentioned to serve the purpose of the *sūrah.*

"*Then after these people We raised a new generation.*" (Verse 31) The community in question is not specified, but it is most likely that the reference here is to the `Ād, the Prophet Hūd's people.

> *And We sent forth to them a messenger from among themselves, and he said: My people! Worship God alone, for you have no deity other than Him. Will you not be God-fearing? (Verse 32)*

It is exactly the same message given by Noah to his people. It is expressed here in the very same words, although these communities spoke totally different languages. But what was the answer?

Their answer was almost identical to that given by Noah's people:

> *The unbelieving elders of his people, who denied the life to come and to whom We granted ease and plenty in this worldly life, said: 'This man is but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat and drinking of what you drink. Indeed, if you pay heed to a mortal like yourselves, you will certainly be the losers.' (Verses 33-34)*

This oft repeated objection concentrates on the fact that the messenger sent to them is a human being. Those who raise it are people who enjoy power and wealth and whose hearts no longer feel the spiritual bond between man and his Creator. Affluence corrupts human nature, blunts sensitivities, closes receptive faculties and weakens the heart's ability to feel and respond. Hence Islam combats the accumulation of wealth and establishes a social system that does not allow the very rich to emerge in the Muslim community simply because to do so encourages corruption.

The corrupt rich add in this case a denial of resurrection. They wonder at this messenger who alerts them to such life after death, considering it very strange:

> *Does he promise you that, after you have died and become dust and bones, you shall be brought forth to life? Improbable, improbable indeed is what you are promised! There is no lift beyond this, our present life; we die and we live, and we shall never be restored to life. (Verses 35-37)*

Such people cannot understand the ultimate purpose of life, the elaborate planning of its different stages until it reaches its eventual destination. This purpose will not be achieved in full in this present life on earth. Goodness is not fully rewarded in this life, nor does evil receive its just deserts. All rewards are given in the life to come. Good believers achieve the ultimate form of life that is free of fear, worry and hardship and continues as God wishes. On the other side, those who cling to evil in this life go to the lowest depths of life where their humanity comes to an end and they become as hard as stones.

Such people cannot understand such concepts. They fail to look at the early stages of life which were outlined at the beginning of the *sūrah* in order to realize the nature

of its final stages. They cannot imagine that the Mighty Power that controlled those stages will not cause life to end at the point of death when the body decays. Hence they are full of amazement at the messenger who promises them that they will be resurrected. In their ignorance, they consider this farfetched. They categorically state that there is only one life and one death. Generation succeeds generation, and those who have already died and are reduced to dust and bones cannot come back to life as the prophet promises them.

Yet unbelievers do not stop at this juncture betraying their own ignorance and their inability to reflect on the early stages of human life detailed at the opening of the *sūrah.* They go further than this and accuse God's messenger of lying and fabricating things that he attributes to God. They do not know God except in the context of making false accusations against His messenger: *"He is nothing but a man who attributes his lies to God. Never will we believe in him."* (Verse 38)

Facing the Same Rejection

At this point, the messenger finds no alternative but to seek God's help like Noah did before him. He uses the same wording as Noah: *"He said: My Lord, help me against their accusation of lying."* (Verse 39)

God responded to His messenger when the people refused to take the chance afforded to them. Nothing good could be expected from them after they had persisted in their denial of the truth. The messenger's appeal receives this answer: *"Said [God]: Before long they shall come to rue it."* (Verse 40) But then no regret will be of any avail. There is no turning back: *"Then the blast overtook them in all justice, and We caused them to be like dead leaves."* (Verse 41) The Arabic word, *ghuthā',* describing their status contains even more connotations as it refers to what floods may carry of dead plants and other discarded, worthless items that serve no purpose. Having discarded the qualities with which God has honoured them, overlooked the purpose of their existence in this life and severed their relation with the Supreme Society, they no longer deserve honourable treatment. Hence, they are like the scum that the flood carries. No one pays any regard to it.

To this humiliation is added the fact that they are deprived of God's grace; thus no-one pays any attention to them: *"And so – away with those wrongdoing folk!" (Verse* 41) Far removed are they in real life and from people's memories and consciences.

The *sūrah* goes on to look at other generations and communities:

> *Then after them We raised new generations. No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it. And We sent forth Our messengers, one after another. Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying. So, We caused them*

> *to follow one another, and let them become mere tales. And so – away with the folk who would not believe. (Verses 42-44)*

This gives us a very brief summary of the advocacy of the truth, and establishes the normal trend that God operates in human life, right from the time of Noah and Had at the beginning to Moses and Jesus at the end. Every generation gets its term and departs: *"No community can forestall the end of its term nor delay it."* (Verse 43) Every community denies the truth given to them through God's messenger: *"Every time their messenger came to a community, they accused him of lying."* (Verse 44) And each time they do this, they are punished according to God's law: *"So, We caused them to follow one another."* (Verse 44) The lesson remains there for anyone who wishes to learn: *"We let them become mere tales,"* told by one generation to the next.

This brief summary concludes with an emphatic rejection of such communities. Thus, they are cast away: *"And so – away with the folk who would not believe."* (Verse 44) Moses' story and Pharaoh's denial of his message is then told in a very brief account that fits with the general style of the *sūrah* and purpose.

> *And then We sent forth Moses and his brother Aaron, with Our signs and with clear authority, to Pharaoh and his nobles; but these behaved with arrogance, for they were haughty people. And so they said: Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves, even though their people are our slaves?' Thus, they gave the lie to them, and earned their place among the doomed. (Verses 45-48)*

Again in this account we note that the same objection is given to the fact that the messenger was merely a human being: *"They said: Are we to believe two mortals like ourselves?"* (Verse 47) A specific consideration connected with the Israelites' situation in Egypt is also added: *"Even though their people are our slaves?"* (Verse 47) They are subservient to us and they do our bidding. In this situation, Moses and Aaron deserve, in Pharaoh's and his people's view, to be looked down upon. As for the revelations and the signs they have been given by God, and the clear authority granted to them, these count for nothing according to these people, focused as they are on earthly considerations and false values.

This is followed by a similarly brief reference to Jesus and his mother, highlighting the great miracle in his creation. Again, those who were bent on denying the truth of God and creation rejected this sign clearly pointing to God's power:

> *We had indeed given Moses the Book, so that they might be guided. And We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol, and provided them with an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and a fresh spring. (Verses 49-50)*

There are a number of different reports about the hill described here as a 'lofty place' and its exact location. Was it in Egypt, Damascus or Jerusalem? These were the places where Mary went with her son during his childhood and youth, as mentioned in Christian Scriptures. But knowing the exact location is not of vital importance. It is more important to know that God gave them both a goodly abode where fine plants grew and clear water was plentiful. Thus, they felt that God took care of them both.

At this point in its quick references to earlier messengers the *sūrah* makes its address to the followers of all messengers, as though they were all gathered together. Thus, the separating gulfs of time and place are shown to be meaningless when compared to the true bond of faith that unites them all:

> *Messengers! Eat of that which is wholesome, and do good deeds: I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do. This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone. (Verses 51-52)*

This address to His messengers requires them to live as human beings, which is the very thing that those who opposed them questioned: "*Eat of that which is wholesome.*" Eating is a human need, but choosing only what is wholesome is the aspect that elevates human beings and makes them grow in purity. It enables them to establish a bond with the Supreme Society.

They are also required to "*do good deeds.*" While taking action is common to all human beings, insisting on doing good is the characteristic of goodly people, providing a measure of control and a clear goal for their deeds. Again such people look up to the Supreme Society when they embark on anything.

No messenger of God was ever required to abandon his humanity. Rather, what they were asked to do was to elevate this humanity to the highest standard God has made possible for human beings to achieve. Thus, the Prophets provided the role model and the ideal which other people should try to emulate. It is left to God to judge their actions according to His own fine measure: "*I certainly have full knowledge of all that you do.*" (Verse 51)

Emphasis is placed on the fact that neither time nor place is of any significance when compared with the single truth that all messengers preached. They all shared a very distinctive nature, were given their messages by the One Creator of all, and worked towards the same goal: "*This community of yours is one single community, and I am your only Lord. Therefore, fear Me alone.*" (Verse 52)

3
A Book Stating the Truth

فَتَقَطَّعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَهُم بَيۡنَهُمۡ زُبُرٗاۖ كُلُّ حِزۡبِۭ بِمَا لَدَيۡهِمۡ فَرِحُونَ ٥٣

But people have divided themselves into factions, each delighting in what they have. (53)

فَذَرۡهُمۡ فِي غَمۡرَتِهِمۡ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ٥٤

So, leave them alone, lost in ignorance, till a time appointed. (54)

أَيَحۡسَبُونَ أَنَّمَا نُمِدُّهُم بِهِۦ مِن مَّالٖ وَبَنِينَ ٥٥

Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them (55)

نُسَارِعُ لَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِۚ بَل لَّا يَشۡعُرُونَ ٥٦

We hasten to them all that is good? By no means! But they are devoid of perception. (56)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ هُم مِّنۡ خَشۡيَةِ رَبِّهِم مُّشۡفِقُونَ ٥٧

Truly, those who stand in reverent awe of their Lord, (57)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥٨

and who believe in their Lord's revelations, (58)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِرَبِّهِمۡ لَا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٥٩

and who do not associate any partners with their Lord, (59)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡتُونَ مَآ ءَاتَواْ وَّقُلُوبُهُمۡ وَجِلَةٌ أَنَّهُمۡ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ رَٰجِعُونَ ٦٠

and who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return: (60)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُسَٰرِعُونَ فِي ٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِ وَهُمۡ لَهَا سَٰبِقُونَ ٦١

these vie with one another in doing good works, and they are the ones who are foremost in them. (61)

وَلَا نُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا ۖ وَلَدَيْنَا كِتَٰبٌ يَنطِقُ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. We have a record that speaks the truth. None shall be wronged. (62)

بَلْ قُلُوبُهُمْ فِى غَمْرَةٍ مِّنْ هَٰذَا وَلَهُمْ أَعْمَٰلٌ مِّن دُونِ ذَٰلِكَ هُمْ لَهَا عَٰمِلُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Nay, their hearts are blind to all this. But apart from all that, they have deeds which they will continue to commit. (63)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَخَذْنَا مُتْرَفِيهِم بِٱلْعَذَابِ إِذَا هُمْ يَجْـَٔرُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

Then, when We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication. (64)

لَا تَجْـَٔرُوا۟ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ إِنَّكُم مِّنَّا لَا تُنصَرُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

[But they will he told:] Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help. (65)

قَدْ كَانَتْ ءَايَٰتِى تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَكُنتُمْ عَلَىٰٓ أَعْقَٰبِكُمْ تَنكِصُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, (66)

مُسْتَكْبِرِينَ بِهِۦ سَٰمِرًا تَهْجُرُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night. (67)

أَفَلَمْ يَدَّبَّرُوا۟ ٱلْقَوْلَ أَمْ جَآءَهُم مَّا لَمْ يَأْتِ ءَابَآءَهُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

Have they, then, never tried to understand this word [of God]? Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old? (68)

أَمْ لَمْ يَعْرِفُوا۟ رَسُولَهُمْ فَهُمْ لَهُۥ مُنكِرُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him? (69)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ بِهِۦ جِنَّةٌ ۚ بَلْ جَآءَهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ

Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness? Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest. (70)

وَأَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لِلۡحَقِّ كَٰرِهُونَ ٧٠

وَلَوِ ٱتَّبَعَ ٱلۡحَقُّ أَهۡوَآءَهُمۡ لَفَسَدَتِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ وَٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَمَن فِيهِنَّۚ بَلۡ أَتَيۡنَٰهُم بِذِكۡرِهِمۡ فَهُمۡ عَن ذِكۡرِهِم مُّعۡرِضُونَ ٧١

أَمۡ تَسۡـَٔلُهُمۡ خَرۡجٗا فَخَرَاجُ رَبِّكَ خَيۡرٞۖ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ٧٢

وَإِنَّكَ لَتَدۡعُوهُمۡ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٧٣

وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ عَنِ ٱلصِّرَٰطِ لَنَٰكِبُونَ ٧٤

۞ وَلَوۡ رَحِمۡنَٰهُمۡ وَكَشَفۡنَا مَا بِهِم مِّن ضُرّٖ لَّلَجُّواْ فِي طُغۡيَٰنِهِمۡ يَعۡمَهُونَ ٧٥

وَلَقَدۡ أَخَذۡنَٰهُم بِٱلۡعَذَابِ فَمَا ٱسۡتَكَانُواْ لِرَبِّهِمۡ وَمَا يَتَضَرَّعُونَ ٧٦

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فَتَحۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم بَابٗا ذَا عَذَابٖ شَدِيدٍ إِذَا هُمۡ فِيهِ مُبۡلِسُونَ ٧٧

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنشَأَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرَ وَٱلۡأَفۡـِٔدَةَۚ قَلِيلٗا مَّا تَشۡكُرُونَ ٧٨

Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away. (71)

Or do you ask of them any recompense? But the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers. (72)

Most certainly, you call them to a straight path. (73)

But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path. (74)

Even were We to show them mercy and remove whatever distress might afflict them, they would still persist in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. (75)

Indeed, We took them to task, but they neither humbled themselves before their Lord, nor do they submissively entreat [Him]. (76)

Yet when We open before them a gate of truly severe suffering, they will plunge in despair. (77)

It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds. How seldom are you grateful. (78)

And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered. (79)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى ذَرَأَكُمۡ فِى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُحۡشَرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

And He it is who grants life and causes death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason? (80)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُحۡىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ وَلَهُ ٱخۡتِلَٰفُ ٱلَّيۡلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

But they say like the people of old times used to say. (81)

بَلۡ قَالُواْ مِثۡلَ مَا قَالَ ٱلۡأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

They say: 'What! After we have died and become dust and bones, shall we be raised to life? (82)

قَالُوٓاْ أَءِذَا مِتۡنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبۡعُوثُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (83)

لَقَدۡ وُعِدۡنَا نَحۡنُ وَءَابَآؤُنَا هَٰذَا مِن قَبۡلُ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Say: 'To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know.' (84)

قُل لِّمَنِ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَمَن فِيهَآ إِن كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

They will reply: 'To God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, reflect?' (85)

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِۚ قُلۡ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?' (86)

قُلۡ مَن رَّبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ ٱلسَّبۡعِ وَرَبُّ ٱلۡعَرۡشِ ٱلۡعَظِيمِ ﴿٨٦﴾

They will reply: '[They all belong] to God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' (87)

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِۚ قُلۡ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Say: 'In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me] if you know.' (88)

قُلۡ مَنۢ بِيَدِهِۦ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَهُوَ يُجِيرُ وَلَا يُجَارُ عَلَيۡهِ إِن كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

They will reply: '[They all belong] to God.' Say: 'How, then, can you be so deluded?' (89)

سَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّهِۚ قُلۡ فَأَنَّىٰ تُسۡحَرُونَ

Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying. (90)

﴿٨٩﴾

بَلْ أَتَيْنَـٰهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَـٰذِبُونَ ﴿٩٠﴾

مَا ٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ مِن وَلَدٍ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُۥ مِنْ إِلَـٰهٍ ۚ إِذًا لَّذَهَبَ كُلُّ إِلَـٰهٍۭ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَا بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ۚ سُبْحَـٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

عَـٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَـٰدَةِ فَتَعَـٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

قُل رَّبِّ إِمَّا تُرِيَنِّى مَا يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

رَبِّ فَلَا تَجْعَلْنِى فِى ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾

وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّرِيَكَ مَا نَعِدُهُمْ لَقَـٰدِرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

ٱدْفَعْ بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ ٱلسَّيِّئَةَ ۚ نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

وَقُل رَّبِّ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ هَمَزَٰتِ ٱلشَّيَـٰطِينِ ﴿٩٧﴾

Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him. [Had there been any] each deity would surely have taken away his own creation, and they would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another. Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him. (91)

He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed. Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as a partner with Him. (92)

Say: 'My Lord! If it be Your will to show me that which they are warned against, (93)

then, my Lord, do not let me be one of those wrongdoing folk.' (94)

We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them. (95)

Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say. (96)

And say: 'My Lord! I seek refuge with You from the promptings of the evil ones; (97)

and I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me.' (98)

وَأَعُوذُ بِكَ رَبِّ أَن يَحۡضُرُونِ ﴿٩٨﴾

Overview

This third passage begins by showing the state mankind reached after the generations which witnessed God's messengers. This is the state God's last Messenger found them in. They were in dispute over the single truth preached by all God's messengers.

The *sūrah* shows people oblivious of the truth the final Messenger put before their eyes. In their ignorance, they were totally unaware of the consequences they were bound to face. By contrast, believers worship God alone, do good deeds and remain apprehensive of what lies before them. They are in awe over the fact that they will inevitably be returned to God. The two situations are in perfect contrast: a believer is alert, cautious and heeding the warnings, while an unbeliever is deep in ignorance, unaware of what lies ahead.

The passage addresses them in different ways, at times denouncing their attitude, and at others discussing their doubts and providing clear answers to them. The passage also addresses their finer nature, pointing out what encourages people to believe, whether it be within themselves or in the universe at large. It also picks up some of what they take for granted, using these as argument against them.

As the passage concludes, it leaves them to their inevitable destiny. It tells the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that he should continue his efforts, explaining his message. He should not be distressed at their obstinate rejection. He should repel their evil deeds with good ones, and seek refuge with God against Satan who tries hard to lead mankind along the path of error.

Competing in Good Works

> *But people have divided themselves into factions, each delighting in what they have. So, leave them alone, lost in ignorance, till a time appointed. Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good? By no means! But they are devoid of perception. (Verses 53-56)*

All messengers (peace be upon them all) belonged to a single nation, preaching the

same message, worship and pursuing the same direction. But when the messengers had gone, mankind splintered into different groups which could not agree on what line to follow.

The Qur'ān portrays such divergence as people in conflict, splitting into factions, quarrelling and pulling apart from each other. The picture drawn here is full of effort and movement. In the end each faction is left with only a portion of the whole, delighting at their ability to hold on to this. Hence, no faction thinks of anything other than what it supposedly possesses. Each goes its separate way, shutting up all inlets so that no ray of light or fresh breath of air comes through. All live in their isolated quarters, busy with what they have, ignorant of everything else.

Once this image has been drawn, the *sūrah* addresses God's Messenger: "*So, leave them alone, lost in their ignorance, till a time appointed.*" (Verse 54) Let them take their time, preoccupied with their own affairs, until their appointed time inevitably comes, spelling out their destiny.

The *sūrah* adds a derisive question that highlights their lack of awareness. They think that the time they have been given, and the wealth and offspring they are allowed to enjoy means that they are favoured with blessings. "*Do they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good?*" (Verses 55-56) Little do they realize the truth that it is all but a test which they have to go through: "*By no means! But they are devoid of perception.*" (Verse 56) They simply do not perceive the destiny to which they are heading after having enjoyed what has been given in this life.

By contrast, the believers are always on the alert, taking necessary precautions:

> *Truly, those who stand in reverent awe of their Lord, and who believe in their Lord's revelations, and who do not associate any partners with their Lord, and who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return: these vie with one another in doing good works, and they are the ones who are foremost in them. (Verses 57-61)*

Here we see how faith affects hearts, imparting to them a special kind of refinement, sensitivity and aspiration to attain perfection. They are the ones who consider the consequences of their actions. They are always ready and willing to do their duties.

We see that believers are always in awe of their Lord, God-fearing, believing in His revelations and His signs, attributing no share of Godhead to anyone other than Him, fulfilling the duties He requires of them. Beyond all this, they '*give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return.*' This is a manifestation of their feeling that they actually fall

short of what they should do. It is true that they have done their utmost, but they consider it far from adequate.

`Ā'ishah reports that she asked the Prophet about this verse, saying: "Does the expression *'those who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe...'* refer to people who may steal, commit adultery and drink intoxicants but fear God?" He said: "No. It refers to a person who offers prayers, fasts, gives away to charity and at the same time fears God." [Related by al-Tirmidhī]

A believer senses God's care and feels His favours with his every and heartbeat. Hence, he thinks that whatever he offers of and good action is too little by comparison. At the same time, every grain in a believer feels God's greatness and power. With all his faculties he perceives how God regulates everything around him. Hence, he stands in awe of Him. He dreads meeting God, for fear of having fallen short of fulfilling his duties towards Him, or not having given Him what is due to Him of worship and gratitude.

It is these people who vie with one another in doing what is good. They are the ones who hasten to do good deeds, and are in the lead among those who do good. Their watchful eyes, alert hearts and minds prompt them to do what is required of them. Theirs is a totally different situation from the others who are lost in ignorance, thinking that God's blessings are given to them because they are favoured. They are no better than game animals rushing towards bait. Such people are everywhere: they are overwhelmed with what they are given of life's comforts, distracted from their duties, full of their own importance. But then they only wake up to their fate when it is too late.

Will They Not Reflect?

Islam ensures that its followers' hearts are always alert. This is an alertness generated by faith right from the moment it settles in a person's heart. It neither defies human power, nor is too hard for man to sustain. It is a question of sensitivity enhanced by a believer's bond with God and his watchfulness in all situations, guarding against sin. It is perfectly within people's power when the light of faith shines in their hearts: *"We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. We have a record that speaks the truth. None shall be wronged."* (Verse 62)

God has established people's duties as He knows their inclinations and abilities. He will hold them to account on the basis of what they do within their ability. He neither charges them with what they cannot bear, nor dismisses any little thing they do. All their deeds are documented in a *'record that speaks the truth,'* highlighting it in its full value. Needless to say, God is precise in His reckoning.

People, however, tend to overlook the truth because their hearts are not touched by its invigorating light. Hence, they remain preoccupied with petty concerns, lost in a perpetual maze. They are only awakened when faced with inevitable doom, looking at the suffering that awaits them and enduring a humiliatingly and strong reproach:

> *Nay, their hearts are blind to all this. But apart from all that, they have deeds which they will continue to commit. Then, when We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication. [But they will be told:] Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help. Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night. (Verses 63-67)*

Thus, the reason for their headlong pursuit of worldly affairs is nothing like being burdened with what they cannot bear. It is simply that their hearts are blinded, unable to see the truth as clearly stated in the Qur'ān. They are wont to follow a line different from the course charted by the Qur'ān: *"They have deeds which they will continue to commit."* (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then paints a picture of their being awakened by a sudden calamity: *"When We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication."* (Verse 64) People who live in luxury are indeed the ones who are most preoccupied with life's comforts, totally oblivious to what lies ahead. Now they find themselves suddenly overtaken by suffering, and they cry out for mercy, making a passionate appeal for it to be lifted. It is a picture that contrasts with the life of luxury and arrogance they lead in this world. Hence, they receive a strong reproach: *"Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help."* (Verse 65) The scene is described as though it is taking place now. They are strongly reproached, made certain of having no support, and reminded of what they used to do in life: *"Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night."* (Verses 66-67) It is as though what was being recited was a danger or a calamity you needed to avoid. You were too proud to submit to the truth. Indeed, you compounded your insolence, adding insult to injury, speaking ill of the Prophet and his message, but you, nevertheless, are willing to spend hours in idle chit-chat.

It was common practice for them to use obscene language when they gathered in circles around the Ka`bah, close to the idols they worshipped. Now the Qur'ān paints for them a scene of when they are called to account for their indulgence, showing them raising their voices with cries for help. It is at this point that they are reminded of what they do now in their circles, as though both take place at the same time. This is a familiar method of the Qur'ān, frequently depicting the Day of Judgement as

though it were actually occurring at that precise moment.

In their hostility towards the Prophet and with their disparaging remarks about him and the Qur'ān in their gatherings, the unbelievers represent an ignorant arrogance that is blinded to the truth. With such blind ignorance, the truth becomes the subject of derision and ridicule. Such people are encountered no matter what the time or place. Yet the state of ignorance that prevailed in Arabia at the time when the Islamic message was revealed serves as an example of similar past and future situations where ignorance prevails.

The Line the Truth Follows

Having shown the unbelievers this scene of reproach in the hereafter, the *sūrah* takes them back to this world, questioning them about their attitude: what stops them from accepting what they are told by God's Messenger, whom they know to be a man of trust? What doubts do they have to prevent them from following divine guidance? Why do they turn away from it, ridiculing it when it represents the absolute truth?

> *Have they, then, never tried to understand this word [of God] Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old? Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him? Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness? Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest. Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away. Or do you ask of them any recompense? But the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers. Most certainly, you call them to a straight path. But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path. (Verses 68-74)*

The message Muhammad, God's Messenger, preached could not be rejected by anyone who looks at it carefully, using his reason. It is a model of beauty, perfection, consistency and attraction. It fits with human nature, addresses people's minds and hearts, outlines a course to elevate human life, and lays down a fine constitution to follow and a perfect code of justice. It also includes what answers the needs of human nature and what helps its development and advancement. "*Have they, then, never tried to understand this word (of God]?*" (Verse 68) This is, then, the secret behind their attitude.

"*Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old?*" (Verse 68) If so, it would have been strange for them and for their forefathers that a messenger came to call on them to believe in God's oneness. But the history of divine

messages proves that messengers followed one another, and all of them preached the same message advocated by Muhammad, God's last Messenger.

"Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him?" (Verse 69) Could this have been the reason for their insolent rejection? Yet they knew their Messenger well. They knew his birth and ancestry. They also knew his character, honesty and integrity. Long before he received his message, they nicknamed him *al-amīn,* which means 'the trustworthy'.

"Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness?" (Verse 70) Some of the lowest in their ranks used to say this about him, knowing full well that he was the wisest and most reasonable person among them. They never knew him slip once.

None of such possibilities had any foundation whatsoever. The fact is that most of them hated the truth because it deprived them of their false values and contradicted their desires and preferences: *"Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest."* (Verse 70)

The truth cannot be subservient to personal desires and preferences. For it is on the basis of truth that the universe is sustained, life flourishes and the laws of nature function: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption."* (Verse 71)

The truth is unique and consistent, while desires are numerous and changing. It is on the basis of the unique truth that the whole universe moves along the course that ensures its existence. Thus, its laws are not made to deviate or change in order to accommodate fleeting desires. Had the universe been subject to such changing or sudden desires it would have become corrupted. Indeed, human life, values, standards and systems would also have become corrupted. They would have staggered to and fro, in response to anger, pleasure, hatred, caprice, fear, laziness, activity, reaction and influence. But the physical universe and its progress towards its goal requires consistency and reliability as well as the following of a clearly charted course that is subject to no modification or deviation.

Bearing this in mind, Islam considers legislation for human life to be part of the universal law, formulated by the same hand that conducts the affairs of the universe and establishes coherence between all its parts. Human beings are part of the universe and subject to its law. Hence, it is only fitting that the One who legislates for the entire universe should also legislate for human life. When this is done, human life is no longer subjected to personal desires and preferences. Thus, it is immune to corruption: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption."* (Verse 71)

The community addressed by Islam should be keen to follow its truth, not only because it is the truth, but also because it represents its glory. Without Islam, it

would have had no place in history: "*Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away.*" (Verse 71) The Arabs were ignored throughout history until they were given the message of Islam. Since then, this community continued to be glorious as long as it adhered to Islam. Its position on *the* world stage, however, gradually shrank when it abandoned Islam, until it reached its present low depth. It will not recover its glory until it reverts to its true, guiding light.

The *sūrah* resumes its questioning of their attitude and the doubts that may be the cause for their refusal to believe in the Messenger: "*Or do you ask of them any recompense?*" *(Verse* 72) Had you demanded any wages from them, such a request might be their cause for refusal. The fact is that you seek nothing from them, because "*the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers.*" (Verse 72) What could a prophet seek from human beings, poor and needy as they are, when he has access to God's inexhaustible favours? Indeed, what would a prophet's followers hope to gain of this world's comforts when they seek what may be provided by God who grants everything people have? The fact is that when a human heart is in touch with God, this whole universe, with all that it contains, dwindles into insignificance.

You only seek to guide them to the best method: "*Most certainly, you call them to a straight path*"; a path that brings them into line with the law that governs their nature. It bonds them with the rest of the universe, guiding them straight, without deviation, to God, the Creator of all.

Yet, like everyone else who does not believe in the life to come, these people deviate from the perfect way: "*But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path.*" (Verse 74) Had they been well guided, they would have reflected on the stages of their existence, because such reflection is bound to lead to belief in the hereafter, when perfection and absolute justice are attainable. The life to come is merely a stage in the line God has charted for all existence.

Inspiring Signs

These unbelievers are people who have lost their way and no longer benefit from the tests to which they are exposed, be they tests of plenty and affluence or those of hardship. Hence, when they are tested with favour "*they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them We hasten to them all that is good?*" (Verses 55-56) Even if they are tested with difficulty and hardship, their hearts are not softened, nor are their consciences awakened. They do not turn back to God, appealing to Him to remove their hardship. They remain in such a condition until, on the Day of Judgement, they are visited with an even greater suffering. Then they will be truly desperate and bewildered.

> *Even were We to show them mercy and remove whatever distress might afflict them, they would still persist in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. Indeed, We took them to task, but they neither humbled themselves before their Lord, nor do they submissively entreat [Him]. Yet when We open before them a gate of truly severe suffering, they will plunge in despair. (Verses 75-77)*

These are common features among such people. They are hard hearted, oblivious of their duties to God, and they deny the hereafter. The idolaters who opposed the Prophet when he delivered his message were of the same type.

Showing humility at a time of hardship, and turning to God, entreating Him and recognizing Him as the only refuge and resort are indicative of a change of heart and a returning to faith. A heart which establishes such links with God is bound to soften. Reflection and remembrance then provide protection against further slips and errors. Thus, hardship brings about real benefit. But the person who persists in arrogance is a lost case, without hope. He is left to his destiny when he will be overwhelmed with suffering in the life to come. He will then plunge into despair, finding neither refuge nor support.

The *sūrah* then takes the unbelievers on a further round of reflection, in the hope that their hearts will awaken when they see the pointers to faith within themselves and in the universe at large:

> *It is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds. How seldom are you grateful. And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered. And He it is who grants life and causes death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason? (Verses 78-80)*

Indeed if man would only reflect on his own form and constitution, the multi-faceted potential he has been given, and the faculties of perception with which he has been blessed, he would certainly acknowledge God. His guidance would be all these great faculties within him that testify to God's oneness. No one other than God Almighty could produce such a creation with all these miraculous aspects, large and small. For example, how does our sense of hearing function? How are sounds picked up and distinguished? How does our eyesight function, sorting out shapes and shades of light? And then, what about our mind and how it works? How does it recognize forms and things? How does it understand meanings, concepts, values, feelings and physical forms?

The mere understanding of the nature of these senses and faculties and their ways of functioning is, in itself, a miraculous human discovery. How do we, then, look at their creation and placement in man's body in such a way that is best suited to the nature of man's world. The degree of harmony achieved here reflects an

overwhelming delicacy. Should only one of the many ratios that need to be met, in either man's nature or the nature of the universe, be disturbed, the whole relation no longer functions. Ears are not able to pick out sound, and eyes no longer see light. It is God's perfect design and limitless power that has achieved this perfect balance between human nature and the universe in which man lives. But man does not show gratitude to God for His favours: *"How seldom are you grateful."* (Verse 78) Gratitude begins with a clear acknowledgement of the One who has given us all these favours and blessings, glorifying Him and recognizing His attributes, then addressing all worship to Him alone. His oneness is testified by His creation. Gratitude is further enhanced when we use our faculties and senses to enjoy life in the manner of a firm believer who looks up to God before every action and in every situation.

"And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth." (Verse 79) He has placed you in charge of building human life on earth, after He gave you your hearing, eyesight and mind, as well as all the faculties and potentials that you need to fulfil the task assigned to you. *"And to Him you shall be gathered,"* when you will be accountable for all that you do in your lives on earth. You will be rewarded for all the good you do, and for following divine guidance. By contrast, you will reap the fruits of any evil or corruption of which you are guilty. Your lives on earth are not meant in vain, and you are not carelessly abandoned in your habitat. It is all for a definite purpose God has determined.

"And He it is who grants life and causes death." (Verse 80) Both life and death occur at every moment, but it is God alone who causes them both to occur. Man, the highest of all creatures on earth, cannot give life to a single cell. Similarly, man is totally incapable of depriving any living being of its life in the full sense of the word. People may be the means of ending life, but they are not the ones who truly deprive a living entity of its life. It is God alone who grants life and causes death.

"And to Him is due the alternation of night and day." (Verse 80) He is the One who has set this alternation in operation, just like He grants life and takes it away. Both sets of parallel situations are natural laws: one operates within the human being while the other operates in the world at large. When life is taken away from a particular body, it stops functioning and becomes motionless. Similarly, when light is taken away from the earth it darkens and becomes stagnant. But then life is brought back again and light is allowed to spread as the alternation takes place and the cycle continues uninterrupted, for as long as God wills. *"Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 80) Will you not draw the right conclusion and admit that it is all part of God's perfect design and elaborate planning. It is He alone who is in full control of life and the universe.

Questions with One Answer

The *sūrah* now stops its argument with the unbelievers, and reports their claims about resurrection and reckoning in the life to come. This discussion follows a long list of signs and pointers confirming God's oneness and His being the only Creator who causes life and death.

> *But they say like the people of old times used to say. They say: 'What! After we have died and become dust and bones, shall we be raised to life? This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (Verses 81-83)*

Their claims sound exceptionally singular after the *sūrah* has enumerated many of the signs that testify to God's elaborate planning and His definite purpose of creation. It is He who has granted man his hearing, eyesight and mind, so that he is responsible for his deeds. He will thus earn a generous reward for his good actions or punishment for his bad ones. True reckoning and reward occur in full in the life to come. What we see in this life is that reward, whether good or bad, does not take place on earth. These are left until they fall due in the life to come.

God grants life and causes death. Hence, resurrection is by no means difficult. Life is breathed into beings at every moment, and it is only God who knows where it originates.

The point with these unbelievers is not that they fall short of appreciating God's wisdom and ability to resurrect life. They also ridicule the promises of resurrection and reward, saying that the same promise was given to their forefathers, but nothing of the sort has yet occurred. *"This we have been promised before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients."* (Verse 83) Resurrection will certainly occur at the time and place God has set for it in His elaborate plan. It will be neither brought forward nor put back at anyone's request, or in response to the ridicule of anyone who is unable to see the truth.

The Arab idolaters of old were muddled in their faith. They did not deny God. Nor did they deny that He is the Creator of the heavens and earth or that He is always in full control of everything in the universe. But they, nevertheless, assigned to Him partners and claimed that they worshipped those partners so that they could bring them closer to God. They also claimed that He had daughters. Exalted is God above all such claims. Hence the *sūrah* puts to them the facts that they acknowledge in order to set the record straight and bring them back to the true faith based on God's absolute oneness. This is the logical conclusion to the premises they acknowledge. Indeed, they would have arrived at this conclusion themselves had they not deviated from their uncorrupted nature:

> *Say: To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know.' They will reply: 'To God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, reflect?' Say: 'Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?' They will reply: ' [They all belong.' to God.' Say: 'Will you not, then, fear Him?' Say: 'In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me.' if you know.' They will reply: '[They all belong! to God.' Say: 'How, then, can you be so deluded?' (Verses 84-89)*

This shows the extent of the confusion that lacks sound reasoning. It tells us to what extent the beliefs of the idolaters had degenerated by the time Islam was revealed. The first question asks about the ownership of this earthly world: *"Say: To whom belongs the earth and all that lives therein? [Tell me] if you know."* (Verse 84) They acknowledge that they all belong to God, but they overlook this true fact when they address their worship to deities other than Him. Hence the question the Prophet is told to put to them: *"Say: Will you not, then, reflect?"* (Verse 85)

"Say: Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Supreme Throne?" (Verse 86) This question is about absolute Lordship that controls the whole universe and God's Supreme Throne. The term 'seven heavens' may refer to seven celestial bodies, or solar systems, or seven clusters of stars, or seven galaxies, or any seven astronomical entities. When God's Throne is mentioned, it implies a reference to His might and control of the universe and all existence. Hence when they are asked about the Lordship over all these, they give the right answer, saying that they all belong to God. Yet they do not show any fear of the Lord of the Supreme Throne who controls all seven heavens and what lies beyond them. They associate with Him idols that cannot lift themselves when they are thrown on the ground. Hence, the question: *"Say: Will you not, then, fear Him?"* (Verse 87)

"Say: In whose hand rests the sovereignty of all things, protecting all, while against Him there is no protection? [Tell me] if you know." (Verse 88) This question is about power and dominion, asking them about the One who has power over all things, and who gives protection to all of His creatures so that no one can harm them in any way, other than according to His will. At the same time, no one can protect anyone or anything else against God. If God wants to inflict harm or punishment on any of His creatures, nothing can prevent it. Again they acknowledge that such power belongs to God alone. Hence the question asking them about the cause of their delusion, which leaves them like people bewitched: *"Say: How, then, can you be so deluded?"* (Verse 89)

The True Concept of God

Having refuted all the idolaters' claims about God, taking to Himself a son or

partners, the *sūrah* states in all clarity the true principle of God's oneness as explained by His Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

> *Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying. Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him. Had there been any, each deity would surely have taken away his own creation, and they would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another. Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed. Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as partner with Him. (Verses 90-92)*

Note how this statement employs different methods and styles. First, all argument with the idolaters is closed, and an emphatic assertion of their lying is given: "*Nay, We have revealed to them the truth; and yet, they are certainly lying.*" (Verse 90) Then follow some of the details of their lies: "*Never did God take to Himself any offspring, nor has there ever been any deity alongside Him.*" (Verse 91) Irrefutable proof is then stated rendering all their claims false and showing the absurdity of pagan beliefs based on associating partners with God: "*Had there been any each deity would surely have taken away his own creation.*" (Verse 91) Each deity would stress his independence and conduct the affairs of his creation according to his own law. Thus, every part of the universe, and every group of creatures would have a different basis and laws. There would be no common code applying to them all. Hence, those deities "*would surely have tried to establish superiority over one another.*" (Verse 91) Such superiority could take the form of a more sophisticated law operating in a particular part of the universe. However, the universe as a whole cannot function properly unless it is subject to a single law that applies to all its parts and all creatures living in it.

None of this multiplicity is found in the universe, where consistency of structure proves the oneness of its Creator, and inner harmony testifies to its being run by a single will. Indeed, we clearly see that all parts of the universe function in perfect harmony: "*Limitless in His glory is God, far above all that which they attribute to Him.*" (Verse 91)

"*He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed.*" (Verse 92) None other than God has any authority over any part of His creation, knowing anything that is unknown to God. "*Sublimely exalted is He above anything they associate as a partner with Him.*" (Verse 92)

At this point, the *sūrah* stops addressing or speaking about them. It now turns its attention to God's Messenger, commanding him to appeal to God so that he is not placed with such people, if he ever witnesses the fulfilment of the warnings of suffering they have been given. He is further instructed to seek refuge with His Lord from the evil ones, satans, so as not to be irritated by or become fed up at what the

unbelievers claim:

> *Say: My Lord! If it be Your will to show me that which they are warned against, then, my Lord, do not let me be one of those wrongdoing folk.' We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them. Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say. And say: 'My Lord! I seek refuge with You from the promptings of the evil ones; and I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me.' (Verses 93-98)*

The Prophet is certainly not going to be with the wrongdoers when God inflicts on them a severe punishment in fulfilment of His warnings. But this prayer which he is instructed to repeat serves as a further precaution. It is also meant as a lesson to all believers so that they do not slacken. They should also be on their guard, attending to their duties, seeking refuge with God and praying to Him to bestow His grace on them.

God is certainly able to fulfil what He has warned the wrongdoers of, and to make it all happen during the lifetime of His Messenger: *"We are most certainly able to show you that which We promise them."* (Verse 95) He certainly showed him some of it in the Battle of Badr and then when Makkah surrendered to Islam.

However, at the time of the revelation of this *sūrah,* the Prophet was still in Makkah enduring with his followers much persecution from the idolaters. The policy followed by the Muslim community then, in implementation of God's instructions, was to repel a bad thing with something better. Muslims also had to demonstrate their patience in the face of adversity, leaving their destiny entirely to God: *"Repel evil with that which is best. We are fully aware of all that they say."* (Verse 96)

The Prophet was certainly immune to any promptings or persuasion by evil ones. However, here he is instructed to pray for protection against all this in an urgent appeal for further immunity against their evil. Being the perfect role model for all Muslims in all generations, his appeal provides a lead for them to follow. They should also seek refuge with God against all temptation put in their way by the evil ones. Indeed the Prophet is instructed to appeal to God for protection against such evil people corning near him in any way. *"I seek refuge with You, my Lord, lest they come near me."* (Verse 98)

This may also be interpreted as an appeal lest they come near him at the time of his death. This sense is strengthened by the verse that follows: *"When death approaches any of them, he says: My Lord! Let me return [to life]."* (Verse 99) This follows the Qur'ānic method that ensures an easy flow from one point to another.

4
Justice and Grace

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَ أَحَدَهُمُ ٱلۡمَوۡتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ٱرۡجِعُونِ ﴿٩٩﴾

When death approaches any of them, he says: 'My Lord! Let me return [to life], (99)

لَعَلِّيٓ أَعۡمَلُ صَٰلِحٗا فِيمَا تَرَكۡتُۚ كَلَّآۚ إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَآئِلُهَاۖ وَمِن وَرَآئِهِم بَرۡزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ يُبۡعَثُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

so that I may act righteously in whatever I have failed to do.' By no means! It is but a word he says. Behind them there stands a barrier till the day when all will be raised from the dead. (100)

فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَلَآ أَنسَابَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ يَوۡمَئِذٖ وَلَا يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

Then, when the trumpet is sounded, there will be no ties of kinship between them on that day, nor will they ask about one another. (101)

فَمَن ثَقُلَتۡ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the scales will be successful; (102)

وَمَنۡ خَفَّتۡ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ فِي جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

but those whose weight is light will have lost their souls and will abide in hell. (103)

تَلۡفَحُ وُجُوهَهُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَهُمۡ فِيهَا كَٰلِحُونَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

The fire will scorch their faces, and therein they will look gloomy. (104)

أَلَمۡ تَكُنۡ ءَايَٰتِي تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡكُمۡ فَكُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

'Were not My revelations read out to you, and did you not consider them as lies?' (105)

قَالُواْ رَبَّنَا غَلَبَتۡ عَلَيۡنَا شِقۡوَتُنَا وَكُنَّا قَوۡمٗا ضَآلِّينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

They will reply: 'Our Lord! Our misfortune has overwhelmed us, and so we went astray. (106)

رَبَّنَآ أَخۡرِجۡنَا مِنۡهَا فَإِنۡ عُدۡنَا فَإِنَّا ظَٰلِمُونَ ١٠٧

Our Lord! Bring us out of this [suffering]. If ever We relapse, then we shall be wrongdoers indeed.' (107)

قَالَ ٱخۡسَـُٔواْ فِيهَا وَلَا تُكَلِّمُونِ ١٠٨

He will say: Away with you into this ignominy! And do not plead with Me. (108)

إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡ عِبَادِي يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَآ ءَامَنَّا فَٱغۡفِرۡ لَنَا وَٱرۡحَمۡنَا وَأَنتَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ١٠٩

Among My servants there were those who said: "Our Lord! We believe in You. Forgive us and have mercy on us; for You are the best of those who show mercy." (109)

فَٱتَّخَذۡتُمُوهُمۡ سِخۡرِيًّا حَتَّىٰٓ أَنسَوۡكُمۡ ذِكۡرِي وَكُنتُم مِّنۡهُمۡ تَضۡحَكُونَ ١١٠

But you made them the target of your derision to the point where it made you forget all remembrance of Me; and you went on laughing at them. (110)

إِنِّي جَزَيۡتُهُمُ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ بِمَا صَبَرُوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ هُمُ ٱلۡفَآئِزُونَ ١١١

Today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity. Indeed it is they who have achieved triumph.' (111)

قَٰلَ كَمۡ لَبِثۡتُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ ١١٢

And He will ask: 'How many years have you spent on earth?' (112)

قَالُواْ لَبِثۡنَا يَوۡمًا أَوۡ بَعۡضَ يَوۡمٖ فَسۡـَٔلِ ٱلۡعَآدِّينَ ١١٣

They will answer: 'We have spent there a day, or part of a day; but ask those who keep count.' (113)

قَٰلَ إِن لَّبِثۡتُمۡ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا لَّوۡ أَنَّكُمۡ كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ١١٤

He will say: 'Brief indeed was your sojourn, if you but knew it. (114)

أَفَحَسِبۡتُمۡ أَنَّمَا خَلَقۡنَٰكُمۡ عَبَثٗا وَأَنَّكُمۡ

Did you think that We created you in mere idle play, and that to Us you would not have to

إِلَيۡنَا لَا تُرۡجَعُونَ ١١٥

return?' (115)

فَتَعَٰلَى ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمَلِكُ ٱلۡحَقُّۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلۡعَرۡشِ ٱلۡكَرِيمِ ١١٦

Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne. (116)

وَمَن يَدۡعُ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ لَا بُرۡهَٰنَ لَهُۥ بِهِۦ فَإِنَّمَا حِسَابُهُۥ عِندَ رَبِّهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ ١١٧

He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful. (117)

وَقُل رَّبِّ ٱغۡفِرۡ وَٱرۡحَمۡ وَأَنتَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ١١٨

Say: 'My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy.' (118)

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* continues to discuss the fate of the idolaters, showing it in a complete scene of the Day of Resurrection. It starts with an image of approaching death ending this life, and moves on to show what happens after the Trumpet is blown and the dead are brought back to life. This is followed by an emphatic statement of God's oneness, coupled with a stern warning to those who associate partners with God, putting them on notice of what awaits them if they persist in their erring ways. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive given to the Prophet to seek God's forgiveness, and to pray for His grace. God is certainly the best of all who show mercy.

As Death Approaches

"When death approaches any of them, he says: My Lord! Let me return [to life], so that I may act righteously in whatever I have failed to do." (Verses 99-100) This is the scene of approaching death, when the person is certain that he is about to die. At this moment, he appeals for a return to life so as to have a second chance to do what he should have done in the first place. He wants to set things right with regard to the family and assets he is leaving behind. This is shown as if it is happening at the present moment, witnessed by all. But the appeal is made too late. Hence, the answer

is not given to the person concerned. It is declared for all to understand. *"By no means! It is but a word he says."* (Verse 100)

It is only a word that carries little or no significance. It does not deserve to be considered. Indeed the speaker does not merit any attention. It does not express any sincerity; rather, it is prompted by the dawning awareness of the great difficulty ahead. It expresses the great stress the speaker finds himself under, but it has no basis in conviction.

Thus ends the image of the speaker at the point of death. Suddenly, barriers are raised between him and the rest of the world. The matter is settled, contacts are severed, doors closed and the curtain dropped: *"Behind them there stands a barrier till the day when all will be raised from the dead."* (Verse 100) They neither belong to the people of this life, nor to those of the hereafter. They are in the stage in between, which will continue until all are resurrected.

The *sūrah* now speaks about that day, giving an image of what happens then and raising it for all to see. *"Then, when the Trumpet is sounded, there will be no ties of kinship between them on that day, nor will they ask about one another."* (Verse 101) All bonds come to an end, and all values people observe in this life are no longer of any consequence. '*There will be no ties of kinship*' then. The awesome atmosphere makes them all silent, with no one uttering as much as a word, let alone enquiring about others.

The process of reckoning and weighing up deeds and actions is shown to proceed with speed: *"Those whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the scales will be successful; but those whose weight is light will have lost their souls and will abide in hell. The fire will scorch their faces, and therein they will look gloomy."* (Verses 102-104) This process is shown in a material image, with action and movement taking place, in the standard pattern the Qur'ān employs. Hence we dread the scene of those idolaters being scorched by the fire, their faces changing colour, darkening and looking full of gloom. It is a terrible image that almost transmits pain.

Those with light weight have lost everything, including themselves. When a man loses himself, what else can he own? What is left for him? He has lost the very thing that makes his existence meaningful, or that gives him personality.

At this point the *sūrah* changes style. So far, it has employed a reporting format. Now it makes a direct address, speaking to the people themselves. This makes the physical punishment, terrible as it certainly is, much less painful than the humiliation that is now poured on them. This address is stated as if it were taking place at that very moment, starting a long dialogue: *"Were not My revelations read out to you, and did you not consider them as lies?"* (Verse 105) When they hear this question they imagine that they are allowed to speak and make a plea. They think that perhaps if

they admit their guilt, their plea might be accepted: "*They will reply: Our Lord! Our misfortune has overwhelmed us, and so we went astray. Our Lord. Bring us out of this [suffering]. If ever We relapse, then we shall be wrongdoers indeed.*" (Verses 106-107)

Their admission of guilt tells of the bitter feelings they experience. They are indeed miserable. But they have exceeded the limits they are allowed. To go beyond these is to be impolite when they are addressed by none other than God. They are only permitted to answer the question put to them. Indeed the question is perhaps made only by way of rebuke, and it requires no answer. Hence they are strongly censured: "*He will say: Away with you into this ignominy! And do not plead with Me.*" (Verse 108) They are told to shut up and remain silent as only befits people held in ignominy.

Indeed they deserve all the punishment and the misery they are made to suffer.

> *Among My servants there were those who said: 'Our Lord. We believe in You. Forgive us and have mercy on us; for You are the best of those who show mercy' But you made them the target of your derision to the point where it made you forget all remembrance of Me; and you went on laughing at them. (Verses 109-110)*

The crime they perpetrated was not merely that they disbelieved and made their rejection of the faith a personal matter, which is in itself a grave offence. They went much further by allowing their stupid impudence to go as far as ridiculing the believers who pray to God for mercy and forgiveness. They derided them so often that such derision became their main preoccupation, stopping them from remembering God and glorifying Him, and from reflecting on the numerous signs God has placed in the world pointing them in the direction of faith. They are now called upon to compare their own station with that of the people they ridiculed. "*Today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity. Indeed it is they who have achieved triumph.*" (Verse 111)

A new phase of interrogation follows this stern, humiliating reply and the reasons that led to it: "*And He will ask: How many years have you spent on earth?*" (Verse 112) God certainly knows the answer, but the question is put to them to emphasize the triviality of life on earth and to stress the shortness of its duration. Yet they bartered the eternal life of the hereafter for their portion of life on earth. Now they feel that it was totally insignificant. In their despair they are impatient, and cannot bother about that life or its number of years: "*They will answer: We have spent there a day, or part of a day; but ask those who keep count.*" (Verse 113) Stress, grief and despair ooze from their reply.

They are given an answer that tells them that their life on earth is very short compared to what awaits them. They only need to have the right measure. "*He will say: Brief indeed was your sojourn, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 114) Again they are

strongly rebuked for denying the life to come. This is coupled with an outline of the purpose behind resurrection. This purpose has been clearly stated ever since the first creation: *"Did you think that We created you in mere idle play, and that to Us you would not have to return?"* (Verse 115)

Indeed the purpose, or rather the wisdom behind resurrection is part of the wisdom behind creation. It is all well measured and accurately designed. Resurrection is no more than a stage that brings the cycle of creation to its fullness. Only those who remain blind, unwilling to reflect on God's purpose which is clearly evident everywhere in the universe around us, will not see it.

The Basic Issue of Faith

The final verses of the *sūrah* are dedicated to faith. They state its central tenet; namely, God's oneness. We have an announcement of the great loss suffered by those who associate partners with Him. This contrasts with the success declared at the beginning of the *sūrah* which is guaranteed to the believers. Coupled with this declaration is an instruction to turn to God, requesting His forgiveness and appealing for His mercy. He is certainly the most merciful of all those who are compassionate:

> *Sublimely exalted is God, the Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. There is no deity other than Him, the Lord of the Glorious Throne. He that invokes besides God any other deity – a deity for whose existence he has no evidence – shall be brought to account before his Lord. Most certainly, the unbelievers shall never be successful. Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy. (Verses 116-118)*

Coming as it does after a scene painting events taking place on the Day of Resurrection, and after a host of arguments, proofs and pointers outlined throughout the *sūrah,* the comment included in these final verses provides a logical conclusion to everything contained in the *sūrah.* This statement refutes all that the unbelievers say about God, declaring that He is the true Sovereign who controls the entire universe, and that He is the only deity who is in full command of all. He is indeed 'the Lord of the Glorious Throne'.

Any claim of partnership with God has absolutely no evidence to support it, neither from the universe and how it is run, nor from human logic or nature. Anyone who makes such a claim will have to face the reckoning in front of God, and the result is known in advance: *"Most certainly the unbelievers shall never be successful."* (Verse 117) This is an unfailing rule that is hound to come true. Success, by contrast, is guaranteed for the believers.

All the favours and comforts that we see the unbelievers enjoying in this life, and all the power and resources they may sometimes have at their command does not mean success in reality. It is all given to them as a test, and it will end with their loss in this present life. However, if some of them escape punishment in this world, they will have to face the reckoning in the hereafter. There, in the life to come, is the final stage of this life cycle. It is not something separate or isolated. Indeed, it is an essential stage, clearly seen by those who have real vision.

The last verse in this *sūrah,* The Believers, gives the instruction to turn to God appealing for His mercy and forgiveness: *"Say: My Lord! Forgive and have mercy. You are the best of those who show mercy."* (Verse 118)

Thus the opening of the *sūrah* and its end jointly emphasize success for the believers and utter failure and loss for the unbelievers. Both elements stress the basic qualities of believers. Thus, the beginning states that the believers humble themselves in prayer, while the end instructs them to humbly appeal to God for forgiveness and mercy. Both make the *sūrah* a complete, well designed unit.

SŪRAH 24

Al-Nūr

(Light)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is named *al-Nūr,* meaning The Light, and light is identified as an essential attribute of God: *"God is the light of the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 35) It is also mentioned in respect of its effects on people's hearts and souls. Such effects are reflected in human morality and the manners of individuals, families and communities. They impart a brightness to human life that enlightens hearts and makes consciences transparent.

The *sūrah* begins with an emphatic declaration of the fact that it is bestowed from on high, and that it is decreed with all that it contains of directives, commandments and morality: *"A sūrah which We have bestowed from on high and which We have ordained; and in it have We revealed clear verses, so that you may keep them in mind."* (Verse 1) This opening reflects the importance the Qur'ān attaches to the moral aspect of human life, and to its central position in the Islamic faith.

The central theme of the entire *sūrah* is the education of the Muslim community. At times, the methods employed by the *sūrah* increase in their stiffness so as to culminate in prescribing mandatory punishments. At other times the *sūrah* is softer and more gentle, filling our hearts with God's light and inviting us to reflect on the numerous signs He has placed throughout the entire universe. The aim of such contrasting approaches is one and the same: to cultivate people's consciences, enhance their sensitivity and refine their moral standards to the highest degree. The good manners of the individual, the family, the community and society's leadership are all intertwined as they all stem from the same source, which is belief in God, and shine with the same light received from Him. In essence, these manners combine

light, transparency and brightness. Thus the education the *sūrah* aims to achieve derives all its aspects from the basic source of light in the heavens and earth; that is, God's light that dispels all darkness in the universe, as well as that in people's hearts and souls.

The *sūrah* may be divided into five parts, all tackling its basic theme. At the outset, the first delivers a decisive declaration outlining the status of this *sūrah,* followed by the details of the mandatory punishment for adultery. It denounces this crime in clear terms, making it clear that adulterers have no place in the Muslim community. It also explains the punishment for any false accusation of adultery, and the reasons for the severity of this mandatory punishment. Couples are exempted from this punishment when they take the prescribed oaths that end with their permanent separation. It then comments on the falsehood story. At the end it shows how men and women flock like with like: the good with the good and the evil with the evil.

The second part concerns itself with crime prevention, and the methods to reduce the temptation to sin. It begins with an outline of good manners when approaching others' homes and the need to seek permission before entry. It commands Muslims to lower their gaze and not to reveal women's charms and adornments to anyone other than their very close relatives whom they are not legally entitled to marry. There is also in this part a clear encouragement to facilitate the marriage of young women, and a stern warning against forcing slave girls into prostitution. All these are preventive measures that aim to promote purity and chastity in general. They aim to prevent what stirs up physical desire and to help people to maintain their chastity.

In the middle of this list of good manners as outlined in the *sūrah,* the third part provides a link between all such manners and God's light. Here the *sūrah* speaks of the people whose hearts are brightened with God's light and who always frequent mosques. By contrast, the unbelievers and their deeds are shown as though they are a mirage, or like layers of darkness. In this part we see different aspects of God's light throughout the universe: how all creatures glorify Him; how clouds are sent through the atmosphere; the succession of day and night; the creation of every walking creature out of water and how they acquire their different shapes, forms, types and roles. All these are there for people to look at and contemplate.

In the fourth part the hypocrites are seen to neglect the proper manners people should show when dealing with the Prophet. The most important of these are obedience to the Prophet and the implementation of any judgement he makes in disputes put to him for arbitration. By contrast, the believers are seen to maintain the appropriate standards in speaking to the Prophet and obeying him. In return, they are promised power, that they will establish and implement their faith and attain victory over the unbelievers.

The final part of the *sūrah* again examines the good manners of the Muslim community, highlighting the need to seek admission when visiting relatives and friends, of hospitality to guests, and the fine manners that make the whole Muslim community a single family, led by God's Messenger (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* concludes with a declaration of God's ownership of all that is in the heavens and earth, His knowledge of people and what they harbour in their breasts, and their ultimate return to Him. They will have to face His reckoning on the basis of His knowledge of their deeds. Needless to say, His knowledge encompasses everything.

1
The Mandatory Punishment for Adultery

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

سُورَةٌ أَنزَلْنَٰهَا وَفَرَضْنَٰهَا وَأَنزَلْنَا فِيهَآ ءَايَٰتٍۭ بَيِّنَٰتٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١﴾

[This is] a sūrah which We have bestowed from on high and which We have ordained; and in it have We revealed clear verses, so that you may keep them in mind. (1)

ٱلزَّانِيَةُ وَٱلزَّانِى فَٱجْلِدُوا۟ كُلَّ وَٰحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا مِاْئَةَ جَلْدَةٍ ۖ وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُم بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِى دِينِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ ۖ وَلْيَشْهَدْ عَذَابَهُمَا طَآئِفَةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢﴾

As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment. (2)

ٱلزَّانِى لَا يَنكِحُ إِلَّا زَانِيَةً أَوْ مُشْرِكَةً وَٱلزَّانِيَةُ لَا يَنكِحُهَآ إِلَّا زَانٍ أَوْ مُشْرِكٌ ۚ وَحُرِّمَ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers. (3)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ ٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَأْتُوا۟ بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَآءَ فَٱجْلِدُوهُمْ ثَمَٰنِينَ جَلْدَةً وَلَا تَقْبَلُوا۟ لَهُمْ شَهَٰدَةً أَبَدًا ۚ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٤﴾

As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after; for they are indeed transgressors. (4)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ تَابُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَ وَأَصۡلَحُواْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٥

Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (5)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَرۡمُونَ أَزۡوَٰجَهُمۡ وَلَمۡ يَكُن لَّهُمۡ شُهَدَآءُ إِلَّآ أَنفُسُهُمۡ فَشَهَٰدَةُ أَحَدِهِمۡ أَرۡبَعُ شَهَٰدَٰتِۭ بِٱللَّهِ ۙ إِنَّهُۥ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٦

And as for those who accuse their own wives [of adultery], but have no witnesses except themselves, let each of them call God four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth; (6)

وَٱلۡخَٰمِسَةُ أَنَّ لَعۡنَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهِ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ٧

and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon him if he is telling a lie. (7)

وَيَدۡرَؤُاْ عَنۡهَا ٱلۡعَذَابَ أَن تَشۡهَدَ أَرۡبَعَ شَهَٰدَٰتِۭ بِٱللَّهِ ۙ إِنَّهُۥ لَمِنَ ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ٨

However, punishment is averted from her if she calls God four times to witness that he is indeed telling a lie; (8)

وَٱلۡخَٰمِسَةَ أَنَّ غَضَبَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡهَآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٩

and the fifth time, that God's wrath be upon her if he is telling the truth. (9)

وَلَوۡلَا فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَتُهُۥ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ حَكِيمٌ ١٠

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...! (10)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ جَآءُو بِٱلۡإِفۡكِ عُصۡبَةٞ مِّنكُمۡۚ لَا تَحۡسَبُوهُ شَرّٗا لَّكُمۖ بَلۡ هُوَ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡۚ لِكُلِّ ٱمۡرِيٕٖ مِّنۡهُم مَّا ٱكۡتَسَبَ مِنَ ٱلۡإِثۡمِۚ وَٱلَّذِي تَوَلَّىٰ كِبۡرَهُۥ مِنۡهُمۡ لَهُۥ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ١١

Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you. Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you. Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin; and awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them. (11)

لَّوۡلَآ إِذۡ سَمِعۡتُمُوهُ ظَنَّ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتُ بِأَنفُسِهِمۡ خَيۡرٗا وَقَالُواْ هَٰذَآ

When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: 'This is a blatant falsehood.' (12)

إِفْكٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they are certainly liars. (13)

لَّوْلَا جَآءُو عَلَيْهِ بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَآءَ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ يَأْتُوا۟ بِٱلشُّهَدَآءِ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلْكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in. (14)

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُۥ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَمَسَّكُمْ فِى مَآ أَفَضْتُمْ فِيهِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed. (15)

إِذْ تَلَقَّوْنَهُۥ بِأَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَتَقُولُونَ بِأَفْوَٰهِكُم مَّا لَيْسَ لَكُم بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ وَتَحْسَبُونَهُۥ هَيِّنًا وَهُوَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this! All glory belongs to You. This is a monstrous slander.' (16)

وَلَوْلَآ إِذْ سَمِعْتُمُوهُ قُلْتُم مَّا يَكُونُ لَنَآ أَن نَّتَكَلَّمَ بِهَٰذَا سُبْحَٰنَكَ هَٰذَا بُهْتَٰنٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers. (17)

يَعِظُكُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَن تَعُودُوا۟ لِمِثْلِهِۦٓ أَبَدًا إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

And God makes plain to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (18)

وَيُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know. (19)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحِبُّونَ أَن تَشِيعَ ٱلْفَٰحِشَةُ فِى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنتُمْ لَا

تَعۡلَمُونَ ١٩

وَلَوۡلَا فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَتُهُۥ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ رَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٢٠

۞ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَتَّبِعُواْ خُطُوَٰتِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِۚ وَمَن يَتَّبِعۡ خُطُوَٰتِ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَأۡمُرُ بِٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِ وَٱلۡمُنكَرِۚ وَلَوۡلَا فَضۡلُ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَرَحۡمَتُهُۥ مَا زَكَىٰ مِنكُم مِّنۡ أَحَدٍ أَبَدٗا وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَن يَشَآءُۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٢١

وَلَا يَأۡتَلِ أُوْلُواْ ٱلۡفَضۡلِ مِنكُمۡ وَٱلسَّعَةِ أَن يُؤۡتُوٓاْ أُوْلِي ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينَ وَٱلۡمُهَٰجِرِينَ فِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۖ وَلۡيَعۡفُواْ وَلۡيَصۡفَحُوٓاْۗ أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَن يَغۡفِرَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡۗ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٞ رَّحِيمٌ ٢٢

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَرۡمُونَ ٱلۡمُحۡصَنَٰتِ ٱلۡغَٰفِلَٰتِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ لُعِنُواْ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ٢٣

يَوۡمَ تَشۡهَدُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ أَلۡسِنَتُهُمۡ وَأَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَأَرۡجُلُهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٢٤

يَوۡمَئِذٖ يُوَفِّيهِمُ ٱللَّهُ دِينَهُمُ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَيَعۡلَمُونَ

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful ...! (20)

Believers! Do not follow Satan's footsteps, for he who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity. God is All- Hearing, All-Knowing. (21)

Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (22)

Those who accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but remained true believers, shall be rejected by God in this world as well as in the life to come. They shall endure awesome suffering; (23)

on the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did. (24)

On that day God will pay them in full their just due, and they will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest. (25)

أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ٢٥

ٱلۡخَبِيثَٰتُ لِلۡخَبِيثِينَ وَٱلۡخَبِيثُونَ
لِلۡخَبِيثَٰتِۖ وَٱلطَّيِّبَٰتُ لِلطَّيِّبِينَ وَٱلطَّيِّبُونَ
لِلطَّيِّبَٰتِۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ مُبَرَّءُونَ مِمَّا
يَقُولُونَۖ لَهُم مَّغۡفِرَةٞ وَرِزۡقٞ كَرِيمٞ ٢٦

Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women, just as good women are for good men, and good men for good women. These are innocent of all that people may impute to them. Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them. (26)

An Unusual Beginning

This *sūrah* has a unique opening that is not repeated anywhere else in the Qur'ān. What is special is the use of the clause *'We have ordained'*. We take this to imply an emphatic assertion that people must take everything that the *sūrah* includes in the same way. Social manners and morality are ordained in the same way as mandatory punishments. We need to remember here that such manners and morality are deeply rooted in human nature, but people tend to overlook them because of deviant social pressures and easy temptations. Hence, the divine revelations God has bestowed from on high place them back before people's eyes, explaining the clear logic of undistorted human nature.

This emphatic and clear opening is immediately followed with an explanation of the mandatory punishment for adultery, a ghastly crime that severs the ties between its perpetrator and the Muslim community.

> *As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment. The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers. (Verses 2-3)*

In the early days of Islam, the punishment prescribed for adulterers was that outlined in *Sūrah* 4, Women, which says: "*As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them.*" (4: 15) Thus the punishment for the guilty adulteress was confinement at home and verbal reprimand, while the adulterer was punished by verbal reprimand only. Sometime later, God revealed the new mandatory

punishment specified in this *sūrah.* This is then the 'way' opened by God to which *Sūrah* 4 alluded.

Flogging is the punishment of male and female adulterers who have not been empowered through marriage. This punishment is enforced on any Muslim who is sane, of age and a free person whose guilt is established. As for a person who has had sexual relations within a proper marriage and then commits adultery even though he is sane, of age and free, his punishment is stoning.[16]

Such stoning is confirmed in the *Sunnah,* while flogging is established clearly in the Qur'ān. Since the Qur'ānic statement is phrased in general terms, and the Prophet inflicted stoning on a married man and a married woman who committed adultery, it is clear that the punishment of flogging applies only to adulterers who are unmarried.

There are several juristic differences in this area. For example, combining the two punishments of flogging and stoning for a married adulterer. Most scholars, however, agree that no such combination applies. Other points of difference include sending unmarried adulterers into exile in addition to the flogging, and the punishment for a slave adulterer. These juristic differences are very detailed, but we do not propose to speak about these here. Readers who are interested may refer to books on *Fiqh.* We instead will confine ourselves here to a discussion of the wisdom of this piece of legislation.

The first point to note is the difference in the punishment incurred by adulterers, depending on their marital status. A Muslim who is of age, free and sane and who has already experienced sex within marriage is fully aware of the clean and proper way to satisfy sexual desires. To abandon this and resort to adultery betrays a deviant and corrupt nature. Hence, punishment is increased in this case. A virgin on the other hand may feel the temptation so strongly when he is inexperienced. There is also a difference in the nature of the act itself. A married person is able to enjoy sex in a much better and more refined way than a virgin. Hence, he deserves increased punishment.

As has already been mentioned, the *sūrah* speaks here of the mandatory punishment for the unmarried adulterer only. It emphasizes the requirement to put it into effect, with no compassion shown to the perpetrator: "*As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you*

[16] One difference not mentioned by the author relates to whether stoning is mandatory or discretionary. The traditional view is that it is mandatory, but a number of eminent scholars have questioned this, classifying it as discretionary. A discretionary punishment is left to the judge looking into the case, or the ruler, to determine whether to apply it in full, reduce, or even withhold it. A mandatory punishment is stated by God and it must be applied as stated, when the offence is duly proven in accordance with the provision of Islamic law. — Editor's note.

from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment." (Verse 2) The Muslim community is required to implement this punishment showing no sympathy for the offenders. The punishment should be administered in public with a number of believers present. This makes it harder for the offenders and increases the deterrent effect for the beholders.

The crime is shown to be increasingly heinous. Hence, all ties between the perpetrators and the Muslim community are cut off: "*The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers*." (Verse 3)

This means that those who commit adultery do not do so while they are believers. They only commit it when they are in a state that is far removed from faith and the feelings it generates in people's hearts. A believer is not comfortable to enter into marital relations with someone who has abandoned faith through such a terrible offence. Indeed Imām Aĥmad is of the view that marriage is forbidden between an adulterer and a chaste woman, or between a chaste man and an adulteress. A prerequisite for such a marriage to be valid is for such offenders to genuinely repent. At any rate, the Qur'ānic verse makes it clear that by nature believing men and women feel that to be married to someone who commits adultery is strongly repugnant. Thus, it is very unlikely to happen, and this improbability is described here as a prohibition. Thus, ties between the Muslim community and individuals who commit adultery are non-existent.

A report giving the reason for the revelation of the second of these two verses mentions that Marthad, a man from the *Anşār,* used to go to Makkah to free those who were imprisoned because of their belief in Islam. He would take those whom he managed to free to Madīnah. Before becoming a Muslim, he used to have a friend in Makkah called `Anāq who was a prostitute. On one of his visits, he arranged to smuggle out a prisoner held in Makkah. He said: "I stopped by the outside wall of a garden on a clear night with moonlight. `Anāq soon came and noticed a black shade against the wall. When she drew near, she recognized me and mentioned my name. I confirmed that it was I. She welcomed me and invited me to her place to stay the night. I said: '`Anāq! God has forbidden adultery.' She gave me away, shouting to the people that I was smuggling their prisoners out. As I tried to disappear, eight of them followed me. I went into the garden and walked until I entered a cave. They followed me in and stood by my head, while I remained motionless. Some of them urinated over my head, but God helped me and they did not notice me. When they left, 1 returned to my man and helped him. He was very heavy, but I carried him for a distance, and then I untied him. I carried him on, but he helped me until we safely reached Madīnah. I then went to the Prophet and asked him if it was all right for me

to marry `Anāq. I repeated my question twice, but he did not reply until this verse was revealed stating:

'The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers.' The Prophet said to me: 'Marthad! An adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress. Do not marry her.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī]

This verse, then, implies that a believer is forbidden to marry an adulteress unless she genuinely repents. The same applies to a female believer and an adulterer. This is the view Imām Aĥmad took, but other scholars had a different view. As a point of difference, it may be studied in *Fiqh* books. At any rate, this type of action alienates the perpetrator from the Muslim community, which in itself is a severe social punishment that is no less painful than flogging.

Is Hard Punishment Justified?

When enacting such severe punishments for this abominable offence, Islam does not overlook the natural desire behind it. Islam knows that human beings cannot and should not suppress such a natural desire. Nor does Islam wish that people should fight the physiological functions God has given them as part of their nature and part of the laws of life, ensuring the continuity of mankind. Islam only shuns an animal approach to this desire that treats one body the same as another, and which has no intention of building a home, life partnership or family. Islam wants sexual relations between a man and a woman to be based on fine human feelings that involve their hearts and souls in their physical union, so as to make it a union between two human beings sharing their lives, pains, hopes, and futures. In this way, any children will be reared by both parents building a future together.

This is the reason why Islam ordains such a severe punishment for adultery, considering it a setback that reduces man to an animal. It destroys all these fine feelings and goals. Adultery turns human beings into animal-like creatures that treat all men as males and all women as females, trying to satisfy a physical desire in a casual way. Its momentary ecstasy has neither a constructive aim nor a fine, durable love behind it. It is the continuity aspect that distinguishes such a fine feeling from a momentary and casual charge which many people describe as passion when it is in fact a physical desire momentarily taking the guise of fine feeling.

Islam neither suppresses natural feelings nor considers them dirty. It only regulates, purifies and elevates them above the physical level so that they become central to many psychological and social values. By contrast, adultery, and prostitution in particular, removes from such natural desires all the exquisite

feelings, attractions and values that have been refined over the long history of human life. It leaves such desires naked, dirty and coarser than in animals. In many animal and bird species, couples live together in a regulated life. They do not have the sort of sexual chaos that adultery spreads in some human communities, particularly where prostitution is rife.

In order to spare man this type of setback, Islam prescribes such punishment for adultery. Needless to say, this offence causes numerous social ills that people often mention when they speak about this crime. These include false parenthood, undermining family life and causing hatred and grudges. Each one of these social ills justifies a very hard punishment for the offence causing it. But the primary reason for it is preserving the humanity of man, protecting the moral standards that have come to be associated with clean sex, furthering the aims of marital life that is intended to last. This is, in my view, the reason that serves all others.

Islam, then, prescribes a very heavy penalty for adultery, but it does not legislate such a penalty without first putting in place sufficient legislation to protect people from falling into such sin. It also ensures that the punishment is not enforced except in cases where there is certainty about the offence and its perpetrators. Islam is a complete code of living that is not based on punishment. Its basis is to provide all that promotes a clean and pure life. If some individuals then abandon this clean and easy life in order to deliberately submerge themselves in filth, they incur such heavy penalties.

When a crime takes place in spite of all these measures, Islam prevents the infliction of the penalty wherever possible. The Prophet says: "Spare Muslims the infliction of mandatory punishments wherever possible.

If there is any way out for the accused, let him go unpunished. It is better that the ruler errs on the side of pardon, rather than punishment." [Related by al-Tirmidhī] In the case of adultery, Islam requires four witnesses to testify that they have seen the offence, or else, a clear and confirmed confession.

It may be suggested, then, that the punishment is unreal and unenforceable, which renders it ineffective as a deterrent. As we have said, punishment is not the basis of the Islamic approach; its basis is prevention, education and cultivating people's finer feelings and consciences so that they refrain from even contemplating an offence. It only punishes those who are intent on committing the crime, paying little regard to society, so as to be seen by four witnesses. It also inflicts the punishment on those who wish to purify themselves of the effects of the offence after having committed it. In other words, the punishment is applied to those who confess to their offence. This is what happened to Mā`iz and his Ghāmidī consort when they went to the Prophet requesting him to inflict the punishment so as to purify them of their sin. Both were

insistent, in spite of the Prophet turning away from them time after time. In fact, they confessed four times each, which left the Prophet no option but to inflict the punishment, for at this point the confession was no longer suspect. The Prophet said: "Spare yourselves mandatory punishments; for when I have established that a sin carrying such a punishment has been committed, the punishment must be done." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Thus, when certainty is established and the matter has been put to the ruler, or judge, the mandatory punishment must be applied, with no compassion shown to the offenders. Such compassion is misplaced, because it is in fact cruel to the community and human morality. God is much more compassionate to His creatures and He has chosen what He knows to serve their interests best. When God decides on a particular case, no believer, whether man or woman, can counter that choice. Nor is it right that anyone should speak out against such punishment, describing it as hard or savage. It is indeed much more compassionate than what awaits a community that allows adultery to spread.

Measures Against False Accusation

Prescribing a very hard punishment for adultery is not sufficient, on its own, to protect the Muslim community and ensure the purity of its atmosphere. Therefore, a supplementary order is given to isolate the adulterers from the rest of the Muslim community. Furthermore, heavy punishment is prescribed for those who accuse chaste women of adultery without providing firm evidence in support of their accusation:

> *As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after; for they are indeed transgressors. Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verses 4-5)*

Allowing people to accuse chaste women, whether married or not, without clear proof would mean that people could make such accusations without fear of repercussion. This in turn would stain the Muslim community's reputation. Every individual would feel threatened with false accusations. Every man would suspect his wife, and every wife her husband, and people would begin to doubt their legitimacy. In such an intolerable state of doubt and suspicion, every family would be undermined. Moreover, when such accusations are frequently made, those who steer themselves away from adultery might begin to think that such crime was common in society. They might then begin to see it in a different light, as less ghastly, as a result of such frequent mention. Furthermore, those who would not even have

contemplated it at all might even begin to think of doing so, feeling that since many others do it, there is no harm in it.

Thus, in order to protect people's honour, and to prevent their suffering from suspicion as a result of uncorroborated accusations, the Qur'ān prescribes for false accusation a punishment that almost equals that of adultery. False accusers are to be flogged with 80 stripes each, and their future testimony in any case or situation rejected. Plus they are to be labelled as transgressors. The first part of this punishment is physical, while the second is moral. It is sufficient that the accuser is deprived of the right to testify, and considered an unreliable and unacceptable witness no matter what the case or situation. The third part is religious. The one guilty of false accusation follows a line that deviates from the straight path of faith. The only way out is that the accuser should provide four witnesses who have seen the offence being committed, or three alongside him if he himself has seen it. If the four give such testimony, the accusation is proved and the punishment for adultery is enforced on the perpetrator.

The point at issue here is that the Muslim community does not lose much by suppressing an accusation that cannot be proven. Conversely it loses much more by condoning accusations that cannot be proven. Indeed when such accusations become the subject of casual conversation, they serve to encourage people to do the same, while stopping any discussion of such matters, unless clearly proven, delivers a clear message that adultery, an abominable offence, is rare or even non-existent in society. Moreover, the false accusation of chaste women causes the latter much pain and mental suffering, in addition to its being a means of destroying families and relations.

The punishment meted out to the false accuser continues to hang over his head, even after its administration, unless he genuinely repents: "*Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

Scholars differ in their understanding of this exception: does it apply only to the last punishment, which means that the accuser is no longer considered a transgressor, but continues nevertheless to be unacceptable as a witness in any situation? Or would he be acceptable as a witness once he has declared his repentance? Mālik, Aĥmad and al-Shāfi`ī are of the view that once he has repented, he is no longer a transgressor. He is again acceptable as a witness. On the other hand, Abū Ĥanīfah maintains that repentance only stops him being considered a transgressor, but he remains unacceptable as a witness. Al-Sha`bī and al-Ðahhāk, renowned scholars of the early Islamic period, say that despite his repentance, he is unacceptable as a witness unless he admits that his original accusation was false.

I personally prefer this last view, because it adds to the accuser's repentance a

clear declaration by him that the accused is innocent. In this way, all effects of the accusation are removed. No one can then say that the punishment was inflicted on the accuser because of lack of sufficient supporting evidence. No one who heard the accusation can continue to entertain any thought that its substance was correct, and that it could have been proven if more witnesses were ready to come forward. Thus, the innocent would have their innocence confirmed both socially and legally. This leaves no reason to continue to punish the accuser by refusing his testimony, after he has repented his original action and declared that the accusation he made was false.

When a Husband Accuses His Wife

All the foregoing applies to accusing women of adultery. An exception is made, however, in the case of a husband accusing his wife. To require him to produce four witnesses is unreasonable. In normal situations, a man does not accuse his wife falsely, because the very accusation carries a negative reflection on his own honour and against his own children. Hence, this type of accusation carries a totally different ruling:

> *And as for those who accuse their own wives [of adultery], but have no witnesses except themselves, let each of them call God four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth; and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon him if he is telling a lie. However, punishment is averted from her if calls God four times to witness that he is indeed telling a lie; and the fifth time, that God's wrath be upon her if he is telling the truth. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...! (Verses 6-10)*

This ruling lightens the burden for married people in a way that takes their special circumstances into consideration. A man may find his wife in a compromising position but there be no one else as witness to the deed. In this case, he swears by God four times that he is telling the truth, and adds a fifth incurring God's curse on himself if he is telling a lie. These oaths are called testimonies, because he is the only witness. When he has done so, he pays her any portion of her dowry that may be outstanding, and she is immediately and finally divorced. She is also liable to the punishment for adultery. However, she can avert this punishment by swearing by God four times that her husband is telling lies, and adds a fifth incurring God's curse on herself if he is telling the truth. If she does, then no punishment is administered in this case, but the marriage is irrevocably terminated. If she is pregnant, the child is named after her, not after her husband. No one can attach any blame to the child. If anyone does make an accusation against the child, they are liable to punishment.

The *sūrah* comments on this delicate ruling by saying: *"Were it not- for God's favour*

upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...!" (Verse 10) It does not tell us what would have happened, had God not bestowed His favours and grace on us in this way, and extended His manifest grace by accepting our repentance. Instead, the statement leaves us with an impression that it is something very serious, and that people are much better off, avoiding it through God's grace.

Several reports explain the occasion when these verses were revealed. Imām Aĥmad reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās: "When the verse stating, *As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after,'* was revealed, Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anşār* said: 'Is that how it has been revealed, Messenger of God?' The Prophet said: 'People of the Anşār! Do you hear what your chief is saying?' They said: 'Do not blame him, Messenger of God. He is a man with a keen sense of honour. He never married a woman unless she was a virgin. If he divorced a woman, none of us would dare to marry her, because we realize how he takes that.' Sa`d said: 'Messenger of God! I know it to be true and that it comes from God. I only wondered that if I would find a man on top of my wife, I could not disturb him until I have brought four witnesses. By the time I bring them, he would have finished his business.'

It was not long after that Hilāl ibn Umayyah went to the Prophet. He had been on his farm before going home at night. He found a man with his wife. He saw things with his own eyes, and he heard things with his ears. He did not fight with the man, but the next morning he said to the Prophet: 'Messenger of God! I went home last night and I found my wife with a man. I saw and heard things with my own eyes and ears.' The Prophet was very displeased when he heard this, and found it hard to deal with. The *Anşār* said: 'What Sa`d ibn `Ubādah foretold has come to pass. The Prophet must now subject Hilāl ibn Umayyah to punishment by flogging and declare him unacceptable as a witness.'

Hilāl said to his people: 'By God, I certainly hope that He will provide a way out for me.' Addressing the Prophet, he said: 'Messenger of God! I see that my story has been very difficult for you; but God knows that I am telling the truth.'

The Prophet was about to give orders that punishment should be inflicted on Hilāl when revelations were bestowed on him from on high. Those who were around him recognized this fact by the change in his face. These verses dealing with the situation were revealed. The Prophet's face regained its colour, and he said: 'Hilāl! Rejoice, for God has given you a way out.' Hilāl replied: 'I certainly hoped that God would grant me that.' The Prophet gave orders for the woman to be brought to him. When she came, the Prophet recited these verses to them both, reminding them both that punishment in the hereafter is far more severe than any punishment in this life. Hilāl

said: 'Messenger of God! I have certainly said the truth when I accused her.' She said: 'He is lying.' The Prophet then said: 'Let them both say their oaths.'

Hilāl was first told to swear. He swore by God four times that what he said was the truth. Before saying his fifth oath, people said to him: Hilāl, fear God. This is the one that incurs punishment in the hereafter, while punishment in this world is that much less.' He said: 'By God! He will not punish me for this, just like He did not let me be flogged for it.' He made the fifth oath, invoking God's curse on himself if he were lying. The woman was then offered the chance to refute the charge. She swore by God four times that he was lying. When she was about to make her fifth oath, people said to her: 'Fear God, and remember that punishment in the hereafter is much more severe. This is the oath that incurs God's punishment for you.' She stopped for a while and thought about confessing. She then said: 'I will not bring a scandal on my people's heads.' She made her fifth oath, invoking God's curse on herself if her husband was telling the truth.

The Prophet ordered their marriage irrevocably terminated. He also judged that her child, should she be pregnant, would not be named after a father, and that the child would not be shamed. If anyone was to hurl an accusation at the child, then that person would be punished. His judgement also made it clear that she could not claim shelter in her husband's home, and she could not have any maintenance from him, as the marriage was dissolved without divorce or death. He also said: 'If her child, when born, has slightly reddish hair, a thin bottom and small legs, then he is Hilāl's child. If he is born dark, with strong features and curly hair, of large build, with large legs and a fat bottom, then he belongs to the man she has been accused of associating with.' When the child was born, he was of the second description. The Prophet said: 'If it was not for the oaths, I would have had something to sort out with her.'"

We *see* that this ruling was given to deal with a particular case that was not only hard for the husband concerned, but also the Muslim community and the Prophet. Indeed, the Prophet could not find a way out of it. According to al-Bukhārī's report, the Prophet said to Hilāl: 'You either bring the proof or lay your back for punishment.' Hilāl said to him: 'Messenger of God! If any of us finds a man on top of his wife, should he go and seek witnesses?'

Legislation is Given When Needed

As this case provides for a special situation which is exempted from the general rules of false accusation, it may be asked why God did not reveal this exception to the general rules in the first place? Why did God wait until a situation occurred, one which caused embarrassment and hardship?

God certainly knows all this, but in His infinite wisdom He bestowed from on high the revelation outlining the rules when the need for it was keenly felt. Thus, the rules were received with eagerness, and people immediately recognized the wisdom behind the legislation and the divine grace it ensured. Hence, the verses outlining the procedure conclude with the statement: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...'" (Verse* 10)

Let us pause a little here to reflect on the Islamic method of moulding the new Muslim community and how the Prophet re-educated his Companions by means of the Qur'ān. We should remember here that he was dealing with Arabs who were characteristically and strongly impulsive, particularly in cases of personal honour. They would rarely pause to consider options before rushing into action. Thus, when legislation was established outlining the punishment for accusing chaste women of adultery without providing the required proof, people found it difficult. Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anşār,* went as far as asking: "Is that how it has been revealed, Messenger of God?" He puts forward his question, knowing for certain that the verses were revealed in that way. His question, however, reflected the difficulty he felt in complying with that ruling in a particular situation he imagined. Hence, he explained: "Messenger of God! I know it to be true and that it comes from God. I only wondered that if I found a man on top of my wife, I could not disturb him until I had brought four witnesses. By the time I brought them, he would have finished his business."

Yet the situation that Sa`d found hard to imagine soon took place in reality. A man came forward, having found his wife with a stranger, seeing them with his own eyes, and hearing them with his own ears. Yet the Qur'ānic rules did not permit any measure to be taken against them. Therefore, he had to overcome his own feelings, traditions and the social environment that called for immediate action. Even harder than that, he had to restrain himself and wait for a ruling from God. Such restraint is especially difficult, but Islam re-moulded the Arabs to patiently bear such hardship so that there could be no rule other than God's. Only His rulings apply in all life situations.

How could this happen? Simply, those people felt that God was with them, and that He took care of them, without requiring them to put up with things they could not bear. They realized that God would never abandon them in a situation that went beyond their abilities and would never deal unjustly with them. They felt that they lived under God's care. Hence, they looked for His grace in the same way as children look to their parents' care.

Hilāl ibn Umayyah had come home to find his wife with a man, seeing and hearing them both. As he was alone, he could only complain of this to the Prophet who, in turn, felt that he must apply the ruling concerning an accusation not

supported by four witnesses. Hence, he said to Hilāl: "You either bring the proof or lay your back for punishment." Hilāl, however, believed that God would not let him suffer a punishment when he only stated the truth. He knew that what he said about his wife was right. At this moment, God revealed new verses outlining an exception in the case of husbands accusing their wives. The Prophet gave the good news to Hilāl, who confidently said: "I certainly hoped that God would grant me that." He trusted to God's mercy, justice and care. Furthermore, he trusted that God was looking after that community of believers. It was faith that re-moulded the Arabs and made them submit fully to God's rulings, whatever they happened to be.

A False Accusation Against the Prophet's Wife

Having outlined the rules applicable in cases of accusing women of adultery, the *sūrah* mentions a case of false accusation that reflects the repugnance of this crime. This involved the Prophet's own household with its noble and chaste inhabitants. It reflected on the honour of the Prophet, the most beloved person by God, and the honour of his friend, Abu Bakr, the Prophet's closest Companion. It also involved the honour of a man, Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, who enjoyed the Prophet's own testimony that he never saw anything but good from him. It was a case that preoccupied the entire Muslim community in Madīnah for a whole month.

The Qur'ān refers to this whole episode, calling it The Falsehood, in a ten-verse passage that runs as follows:

> *Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you. Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you. Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin; and awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them. When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: 'This is a blatant falsehood.' Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they are certainly liars. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in. You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed. If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this! All glory belongs to You. This is a monstrous slander' God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers. And God makes plain to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful...! (Verses 11-20)*

This false story caused the purest soul in human history much suffering, and made the Muslim community go through one of the hardest experiences in its long history. It left the hearts of the Prophet, his wife `Ā'ishah, Abū Bakr and his wife, as well as Şafwān, for a whole month subject to doubt, worry and endless pain. Here are the details of the story as told by the pure and chaste lady at the centre of this painful episode.

> Every time the Prophet went abroad he made a toss among his wives to decide which of them should accompany him. At the time of the al-Muşţalaq expedition, the toss favoured me and I travelled with him. At the time, women did not eat much, which meant that they were slim and light. When my transport was prepared for me, I would sit in my howdah which would then be lifted onto the camel's back. When they had secured it, the camel driver would march with it.
>
> When the Prophet had completed his business on that expedition and was on his way back, he encamped one night at a spot not very far from Madīnah. He stayed there only part of the night before the call to march was again made. People started to get ready and in the meantime I went out to relieve myself. I was wearing a necklace, and I did not feel it drop off me before I returned. Back in the camp I felt for my necklace and, realizing that it was gone, I looked for it there, but could not find it. People were just about to move. I therefore went quickly back to that particular spot and searched for my necklace until I found it.
>
> In the meantime, the people who prepared my camel finished their task and took up the howdah, thinking that 1 was inside, and lifted it onto the camel's back and secured it. It did not occur to them that I was not inside. They, therefore, led the camel away. When I came back to where we had encamped, there was no one to be seen. The army had marched. I, therefore, tied my dress round my body and lay down. I realized that when I was missed, someone would come back for me. I soon fell asleep.
>
> Şafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal of the tribe of Sulaym was travelling behind the army. He was apparently delayed by some business and did not spend that night in the camp. When he noticed someone lying down, he came towards me. He recognized me since he used to see me before we were ordered to wear veils. He said: *Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji`ūn,* "We all belong to God and to Him we shall return." I woke up when I heard him. I did not answer him when he asked me why I had been left behind. However, he made his camel sit down and asked me to ride it, which I did. He led the camel seeking to catch up with the army. Nobody missed me before they had stopped to rest. When

> everybody had sat down to relax, Ṣafwān appeared, leading his camel, on which I was riding. This prompted those people to invent the story of falsehood. The whole army was troubled with it, but I heard nothing.

It is worth noting here that when `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy saw `Ā'ishah approaching, he enquired who she was. When he was told that it was `Ā'ishah, he said: "Your Prophet's wife has spent the whole night with a man, and now she turns up with him leading her camel!" This statement gave rise to the falsehood that was spread about `Ā'ishah. `Ā'ishah's narrative continues:

> Shortly after our arrival in Madīnah, I felt very ill. Nobody told me anything about what was going on. The Prophet and my parents heard the story, but they did not mention anything to me. However, I felt that the Prophet was not as kind to me during this illness of mine as he used to be. When he came in, he would ask my mother who was nursing me: "How is that woman of yours?" He said nothing else. I was distressed and requested his permission to be nursed in my parents' home. He agreed. I went there and heard nothing. I was ill for 20-odd nights before I began to get better.
>
> Unlike other people, we, the Arabs, did not have toilets in our homes. To us, they were disgusting. What we used to do was to go out at night, somewhere outside Madinah where we would relieve ourselves. Women went only at night. One night I went out with Umm Misṭah [Abū Bakr's cousin]. While we were walking, she was tripped by her own dress and fell down. As she did so, she said: "Confound Misṭah" to her own son.
>
> I said: "Improper indeed is what you have said about a man of the Muhājirīn who fought at Badr." She asked me: "Have you not heard the story then?" When I asked her what story, she recounted to me what the people of falsehood said about me. I swear I could not relieve myself that night. I went back and cried bitterly until I felt that crying would break me down. I said to my mother: "May God forgive you. People said what they said about me, and you mentioned nothing to me."
>
> My mother said: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives."
>
> I said: "Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!" I cried bitterly throughout that night till morning, without a moment's sleep.
>
> The Prophet called `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Usāmah ibn Zayd to consult them about divorcing me. Usāmah, who felt that I was innocent, said: "Messenger of God, she is your wife and you have experienced nothing bad from her.

This story is a blatant lie."

`Alī said: "Messenger of God, God imposed no restriction on you in matrimonial matters. There are many women besides her. If you would see fit to ask her maid, she would tell you the truth." The Prophet called in my maid, Barīrah, and asked her whether she had seen anything suspicious. Barīrah said: "By Him who sent you with the message of truth, there is nothing I take against her other than, being so young, she would doze off and let the hens eat the dough I had prepared for baking."

The Prophet addressed the Muslims in the mosque when I was still unaware of the whole matter. He said: "I have seen nothing evil from my wife. Those people are also involving a man from whom I have seen no evil. He never entered my wives' rooms except in my presence.

Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the Aws leader, said: "Messenger of God, if these men belong to the Aws, our tribe, we will spare you their trouble. If, on the other hand, they belong to our brethren the Khazraj, you have only to give us your command."

Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the leader of the Khazraj, who enjoyed a good reputation, allowed his tribal feelings to get the better of him this time and said to Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh: "By God, you shall not kill them. You are saying this only because you know that they are of the Khazraj."

Usayd ibn Ĥuđayr, a cousin of Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, said to Sa`d ibn `Ubādah: "You are no more than a hypocrite defending other hypocrites." People who belonged to both tribes were very angry and were about to fight. The Prophet was still on the pulpit and he tried hard to cool them down, until finally he succeeded.

I continued to cry for the rest of the day. I could not sleep. Next morning both my parents were with me – I had spent two nights and a day crying hard. My tears never stopped. Both of them felt that my crying would break my heart. While we were in that condition, a woman from the Anşār came to me and started to cry with me.

Shortly afterwards the Prophet came and sat down. He had not sat in my room ever since the rumour started. For a whole month he received no revelations concerning me. When he sat down, he praised and glorified God before going on to say: `Ā'ishah. People have been talking, as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God's forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her."

When the Prophet finished, my tears dried up completely and I turned to my father and said: "Answer the Prophet." He said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I then said to my mother: "Answer the Prophet." She said: "I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I was still a young girl, and I did not read much of the Qur'ān. However, I said: 'I know that you all have heard this story repeated again and again until you now believe it. If I tell you that I am innocent, and God knows that I am, you will not believe me. If, on the other hand, I admit something when God knows that I am innocent of it, you will believe me. I know no comparable situation to yours except that of Joseph's father [I tried to remember Jacob's name but I could not] when he said: *"Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described."* (12: 18) I then turned round and lay on my bed. I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence. Before the Prophet left us, however, and before anyone left the house, God's revelations started. The Prophet was covered with his own robe, and a pillow was placed under his head. When I saw that, I felt no worry or fear. I was certain of my innocence, and I knew that God, limitless as He is in His glory, would not be unjust to me. As for my parents – well, by Him who holds `Ā'ishah's soul in His hand, while they waited for the Prophet to come back to himself, they could have died for fear that divine revelations might confirm what people said. Then it was all over. The Prophet sat up, with his sweat looking like pearls on a wet day. As he wiped his forehead, he said: "`Ā'ishah, I have good news for you. God has declared your innocence." I said: "Praise be to God."

My mother said to me: 'Rise and go to God's Messenger, (peace be upon him).' I said: 'No. I am not rising, and I am not praising anyone other than God who has declared my innocence.' God revealed the passage starting with, *Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you,'* in ten verses. When God thus declared my innocence, Abū Bakr, who used to support Misṭah ibn Athāthah, considering that he was a poor relation of his, said: 'By God, I will never again give Misṭah any assistance, after what he has said about `Ā'ishah.' But God then revealed the verse that says: '*Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for*

the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (Verse 22) Abū Bakr said: 'Yes, indeed. I do hope that God will forgive me my sins.' He then resumed his support of Misṭah, saying: 'I will never stop my assistance to him.'

`Ā'ishah further mentions that the Prophet had asked another of his wives, Zaynab hint Jaĥsh, about her. She said: 'Messenger of God! I want to protect my hearing and sight. By God, I have seen from her nothing but good.' She was the one among the Prophet's wives who used to vie with me for a favourite position with the Prophet. God has thus protected her through her keen sense of piety. Her sister, Ĥamnah, however, continued to speak, as though to enhance her position. She was thus involved with those who circulated the false story. [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

As the Prophet Faces False Accusations

This account tells us how the Prophet and his household, Abu Bakr and his family, as well as Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, and the entire Muslim community lived in such a suffocating atmosphere, suffering much mental pain because of the false rumours circulating.

It is hard to imagine this particularly difficult period in the Prophet's life when his beloved wife, `Ā'ishah, young and sensitive as she was, endured such profound anguish. `Ā'ishah, pure, kind, innocent and entertaining only clear thoughts and with a clear conscience, faced an accusation about her most valued qualities. She, Abu Bakr's daughter who enjoyed the most noble and moral upbringing, was accused with regard to her honour; the wife of Muhammad ibn `Abdullāh, who belonged to the noble clan of Hāshim, faced an accusation concerning her honesty; the wife enjoying the great love of her husband was charged with being unfaithful; the girl brought up according to Islamic values from a very early age was accused of being false to her faith. And `Ā'ishah was none other than the wife of God's Messenger, (peace be upon him)!

Such accusations were levelled at her when she was innocent, unaware, taking no precaution as she expected no harm. Hence, she had nothing to prove her innocence except hope for help from God Almighty. Her dearest wish was that the Prophet should have a dream revealing her innocence. But revelations slackened for a whole month, and this is for a definite purpose known to God alone. Hence, she continued to suffer.

Can we imagine her, much weakened by illness, when she received the shocking news from Misṭah's mother? She suffered a recurrence of her fever. In her grief, she

said to her mother: 'Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!' A different version of the story quotes her saying to her mother: 'Does my father know of this?' Her mother told her that he did, and she went on: 'And God's Messenger?' Again her mother confirmed this.

Great indeed was her pain when she heard the Prophet in whom she believed saying to her: "People have been talking as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God's forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her." Hearing these words, she realized that he was uncertain of her innocence, and that he could not make a judgement about the accusation levelled at her. God had not yet told him the fact of which she herself was certain but had no means of proving, i.e. that she was absolutely innocent. She was aware that although she enjoyed a favourite position in his great heart, she now stood uncertain.

Consider the position of Abū Bakr, a man endowed with great sensitivity and a noble heart, feeling the painful sting of an accusation levelled at his daughter, married to his most intimate friend who was none other than the Prophet in whom he unhesitatingly believed. Strong and pain-enduring as he was, he let out an expression of the writhing thoughts troubling him: "We were never accused of such a thing in the days of ignorance! Are we to accept such a charge under Islam?" His sick and much tormented daughter said to him: "Answer the Prophet!" Dejected and forlorn, he said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

His wife, Umm Rawmān, tried to put a strong face on in front of her daughter who was rending her heart apart with crying. She said to her: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives." But her fortitude collapsed when her daughter said to her: "Answer the Prophet." Like her husband before her, she said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

And then, Şafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, a good believer who laid down his life to fight for God's cause, was accused of being unfaithful to the Prophet. Thus, the accusation touched his honour, honesty and faith. A God-fearing Companion of the Prophet was falsely accused of being untrue to everything the Prophet's Companions held dear. Yet he was certain of his innocence. When faced with this false accusation, he said: "All praise be to God! By God I have never taken a dress off a female's shoulder." When he heard that Hassān ibn Thābit was one of those who repeated the accusation, he hit him on the head with his sword, almost killing him. He knew that it was forbidden for him to hit a fellow Muslim, but the pain of this false accusation was unbearable.

Far worse, it was Muhammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the man at the pinnacle of the Hāshimite clan, the noblest in Arabia, who found himself subject to an accusation that involved none other than `Ā'ishah, the woman who occupied a special place in his heart as his most beloved wife. This accusation meant that the most private place in his home, which was a source of purity, was not pure. The Prophet, who was very keen to guard every sanctity in his community, was faced with an accusation that violated the sanctity of his own household. God's Messenger, who was protected against all harm, was shown through this accusation to have no protection from God!

With this accusation levelled at `Ā'ishah (may God be pleased with her), the Prophet encountered everything that ran against his personal honour and against everything that was held dear to an Arab, and to a Prophet. Yet the accusation had been made, and was the subject of conversation in Madīnah for a whole month, and he had no means to put an end to it. For a definite purpose of His own, God let this falsehood circulate for a whole month, revealing nothing to set the record straight and put the facts as they were. Meanwhile, Muhammad, the man, suffered all that a human being experiences in such a hard situation. Shame and heart-felt pain were part of what he endured. But he also suffered the absence of the light that always illuminated his way, i.e. revelation. Doubt crept into his heart, despite the numerous indications that confirmed his wife's innocence. Yet he lacked clear certainty as the rumours continued to circulate in Madīnah. His loving heart was tormented by doubt which he could not clear because he was, after all, a human being who experienced all human feelings. He was a man who could not entertain the thought that his bed could be stained. Once the seed of doubt creeps into a man's heart, it is difficult to remove without clear and decisive evidence.

Alone, he found this whole burden too heavy. Therefore, he sent for Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young man who held a position close to his heart [as Usāmah was the son of the man the Prophet had adopted as his own son in pre-Islamic days]. He also sent for `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his trusted cousin. He consulted them both about this very private matter. `Alī, the Prophet's close relative, was keenly aware of the difficulty of the situation and the pain, worry and doubt experienced by the Prophet, his cousin who had brought him up. Hence, he told him that God had not restricted him in matters of marriage. He also advised that the Prophet should ask the maid, so that he could get some reassurance. Usāmah, on the other hand, realized how compassionate the Prophet felt towards his wife, and how troubling to him was the thought of leaving her. He, therefore, stressed what he knew of her certain purity and the fact that those who circulated the rumour were indeed liars.

In his eagerness to establish the truth, and in his continued anxiety, Muhammad, the man, derived some support from Usāmah's statement and the maid's report. He

spoke to the people in the mosque, reproaching those who did not respect his honour, spoke ill of his wife and accused a man who was known to be virtuous and with no blemish on his character. This led to friction between the Aws and the Khazraj, culminating in mutual accusations and verbal abuse. All took place in the Prophet's presence, which gives us a picture of the atmosphere that prevailed in the Muslim community during that very strange period. It was a time when the sanctity of the Muslim leadership was breached. The Prophet was further hurt by the absence of the light which he always expected to illuminate his way. Therefore, he went to `Ā'ishah, telling her of people's talk and asking her for a clear statement that could bring him relief.

At this point when the Prophet's pain was at its most acute, his Lord turned to him with compassion. Revelations were bestowed from on high, making `Ā'ishah's innocence absolutely clear. Thus, the noble household of the Prophet was free of blame. The hypocrites who had circulated this falsehood were exposed. The proper way of dealing with such a serious matter was also outlined for the Muslim community.

Referring to this passage of the Qur'ān that was revealed to deal with her case, `Ā'ishah said: "I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence."

But the question was not merely that of `Ā'ishah and her personal status. It touched on the Prophet, his personality and his role in the Muslim community. It indeed touched on his relation with his Lord and his message. The falsehood story was not aimed at `Ā'ishah as a person. Rather, it aimed to undermine the entire faith of Islam, by casting doubts about the Prophet sent by God to deliver this message. For this reason, a whole passage of the Qur'ān was revealed to provide a final verdict about this invented falsehood. Thus, the Qur'ān directed the Muslim camp in the raging battle, revealing the divine wisdom behind all developments.

How the False Story Was Circulated

"*Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you.*" (Verse 11) It was not merely one or a few individuals that circulated the story. On the contrary, they were a 'band' or a group working for a particular objective. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was not the only one who fabricated the story. Rather, he was the one who took the lead and played the larger part in the affair. He simply represented the band of Jews or hypocrites who felt unable to fight Islam in open engagement. Therefore, they sought

to hide behind the pretence that they were Muslims. They felt that this would enable them to scheme in secret against Islam. This false story was one of their worst schemes which was so successful that some Muslims were deceived and a few of them, like Ĥamnah hint Jaĥsh, Hassān ibn Thābit and Misṭah ibn Athāthah repeated the story. The real culprits, however, were the band headed by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a canny schemer who operated behind the scene, saying nothing in public that might have incriminated him. He simply whispered into the ears of those whom he trusted never to testify against him. The plan was so subtle that the false rumours continued to circulate for a whole month in Madīnah, the purest society on earth at that time.

The Qur'ānic passage opens with stating this fact so as to make clear the enormity of the event and the fact that it was perpetrated by a group of people intent on wicked scheming against Islam. The *sūrah,* however, quickly reassures the Muslim community that the eventual outcome of the event will not harm them: *"Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you."* (Verse 11)

It was indeed good because it exposed those who schemed against Islam, targeting the Prophet and his family. It also showed the Muslim community the importance of prohibiting the accusation of adultery, and prescribing a severe punishment for such false accusations.' The event also clearly showed the dangers that threatened the Muslim community if people were to casually accuse chaste female believers who might behave unwittingly. For once this begins, it never stops. Indeed, it can increase at such a scale that it eventually touches the most noble of leadership. The result is that the Muslim community loses all values that provide protection against such a state of affairs. Moreover, it is good for the Muslim community that God outlines how best to deal with such an affair.

As for the pain suffered by the Prophet, his household and the Muslim community in general, it is all part of the test they had to go through in order to learn through experience.

Those who were involved in circulating and repeating the false story will bear their fair share of sin, according to what they did or said: *"Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin."* (Verse 11) Each will be taken to account by God for what they perpetrated. This is indeed vile because it is a sin that incurs punishment both in this world and in the life to come. Furthermore, *"awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them,"* to suite his role in this ghastly business.

The one 'who took the lead' and masterminded the whole affair was `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites who was consistently the worst schemer against Islam. He knew how to choose his moment which could have had devastating effects, had not God foiled all his schemes. In His grace, God preserved His faith, protected His Messenger and looked after the Muslim community. One

report suggests that when Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, leading `Ā'ishah's howdah, passed by him and a group of his people, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy asked: 'Who was that?' People said: "Ā'ishah.' He said: 'By God! She has not been safe from him, nor was he safe from her.' He further exclaimed: 'Your Prophet's wife has passed the night with a man until the morning, then he comes leading her!'

This was a wicked remark which he repeated in various ways, circulating it through his band of hypocrites. They employed such wicked means that Madīnah was full of this incredible story for a whole month, despite all indications and evidence that confirmed its falsehood. Yet many were the Muslims who spoke about it in a casual manner when it should have been dismissed right away.

Two Steps for Proof

How could all this have happened in that particular community? Even today, we are surprised that such a flimsy fabrication could have circulated in that Muslim community, producing far-reaching effects and causing much pain to the noblest people on earth.

The whole episode was a battle fought by God's Messenger (peace be upon him), the Muslim community and Islam. It perhaps was the greatest battle fought by the Prophet. He emerged from it victorious, having controlled his great anguish, maintained his dignity and endured it all patiently. Not a word did he utter to indicate weakness or impatience. Yet he was experiencing the worst pain he ever endured in his life. He further recognized that the risks to which Islam was exposed as a result of this falsehood were among the worst it had to face at any time.

Yet had the Muslims then searched in their own hearts, they would have found the right answer. Had they applied simple natural logic, they would have been rightly guided. The Qur'ān directs all Muslims to follow this proper approach when they face such difficulties. It is the first step in arriving at the right conclusion: *"When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: This is a blatant falsehood.'"* (Verse 12)

That would have been much better. Muslims should think well of themselves and realize that they are highly unlikely to sink so low. Their Prophet's pure wife and their brother who fought for Islam, laying down his life, belonged to them as a community. Hence, to think well of them was the better course of action. What is unbecoming of all Muslims is unbecoming of the Prophet's wife and of his Companion who was known as a good person. This is indeed what was done by Abū Ayyūb, Khālid ibn Zayd al-Anṣārī and his wife. According to Ibn Isĥāq, Abū Ayyūb was asked by his wife: "Have you heard what people are saying about `Ā'ishah?" He replied: "Yes, I have, and it is all lies. Would you have done that, Umm Ayyūb?" She

said: "No, by God! I would not." He said: "And by God, `Ā'ishah is better than you." A different report is given by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, suggesting that it was Abū Ayyūb who asked his wife: "Have you heard what is being said?" In reply, she asked him: "Had you been in Şafwān's place, would you have thought ill of the Prophet's wife?" He said: "Certainly not." She said: "And if I were in `Ā'ishah's place, I would never be unfaithful to the Prophet. Yet `A'ishah is better than me, and Şafwān is better than you."

Both reports suggest that some Muslims at least searched their own hearts and ruled out the possibility that the false story suggested. They dismissed any notion that `Ā'ishah or the Prophet's Companion could have committed such a grave sin and been unfaithful to the Prophet, and recognized how utterly flimsy the basis of the whole accusation was. This is the first step in the approach the Qur'ān outlines for dealing with such matters; it seeks evidence from within people's consciences. The second step is to produce material evidence: *"Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they were certainly liars."* (Verse 13)

This blatant fabrication targeted the highest position in the Muslim community and the purest people. Hence, it should not have been allowed to circulate casually without supporting evidence. Hence the requirement: *"Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it?"* (Verse 13) They certainly did not produce any witnesses. Hence, they were, in God's judgement, liars. God never alters His verdict or modifies His decision. Thus, this description of those people as liars remains always true of them, and they cannot escape it in any situation.

Thus we have two steps in the Islamic approach: searching in our own hearts and basing our decision on firm and clear evidence. But the Muslim community at the time overlooked both steps, allowing the liars to speak ill of the Prophet and his honour. This was serious indeed and it could have landed the Muslim community in serious trouble, had it not been for God's grace. Hence, God warns the Muslims never to fall into such a trap again: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in."* (Verse 14)

When Falsehood Circulates

God wanted this to be a very hard lesson for the fledgling Muslim community, but in His compassion He did not inflict any punishment on them. The offence itself merited stiff punishment because of the pain it caused the Prophet, his wife, close friend and his other Companion of whom he knew nothing but good. It also merited a punishment equal to the evil that circulated within the Muslim community,

violating all its sacred values, and equal to the hypocrites' wickedness whose scheme aimed to undermine Islam by raising doubts about God, the Prophet and the Muslim community itself. This continued for a whole month which was a time of doubt, worry and confusion. But God's grace was forthcoming, and He bestowed His mercy on those who were in error after having learnt their bitter lesson.

The *sūrah* gives us a picture of the period, when standards and values were placed on the wrong footing, and the community lost sight of its principles: *"You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) The picture painted here is one of recklessness and irresponsibility, showing little care for even the most serious of matters.

"You took it up with your tongues." (Verse 15) One tongue picks it up from another paying little heed to what is being said. There was an utter lack of proper examination of the report, as though people repeated it without ever thinking of its significance. You *"uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge."* (Verse 15) It is just like that: a mouth utterance without thought or consideration. Mere idle talk uttered and circulated even before it is understood. They thought it a light matter, although it was an accusation against God's Messenger's personal honour, causing him, his wife and household great pain. It was an accusation against Abū Bakr's family which suffered no similar trouble even in pre-Islamic days when moral values were of little importance. This false story also accused another Companion of the Prophet who laid his life down for the defence of Islam. It further had negative implications concerning the care God took of His Messenger. Yet, still they circulated the false rumour *"thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) Nothing could be described as grave in God's sight unless it is so serious that it shakes firm mountains and disturbs the heavens and earth.

A matter of such seriousness should have made people shudder just on hearing it. They should have been reluctant even to refer to it, and certainly been unwilling to accept it as a subject of conversation. They should have looked to God to protect His Messenger. Such falsehood should have been cast aside immediately: *"If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this. All glory belongs to You! This is a monstrous slander.'"* (Verse 16)

When the matter has thus been clarified, and those early Muslims were taken aback by the enormity of the affair and their role in it, they were given a very stern warning for the future: *"God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers."* (Verse 17)

The warning comes in the form of an admonition so as to be educative, choosing the time when the Muslim community is at its most receptive. But the admonition

carries at the same time an implicit warning, and attaches their being believers to the heeding of this warning. Believers cannot retain their faith if they revert to the same type of action after they have been shown its enormity and after they have been given such a warning.

"And God makes plain to you His revelations." (Verse 18) He has certainly shown the story to be plainly false, exposing the scheming behind it. He has also made plain the errors involved in this matter. *"God is All-Knowing, Wise."* He knows motives, intentions, objectives, thoughts and feelings. His method of bringing out the best in people and providing proper restrictions and controls to set the community's life right testifies to His wisdom.

Further Warnings, More Grace

The *sūrah* further elaborates its comments on this falsehood and its effects, repeating its warning against anything that may be of a similar nature. It reminds the Muslims of God's grace and mercy, warning those who falsely accuse chaste women of committing indecency that they expose themselves to God's punishment in the life to come. It also purges people's hearts of the remaining effects of this confrontation, frees them of earthly restrictions and restores their purity. This is clearly reflected in Abū Bakr's attitude to Misṭah ibn Athāthah, his relative who was involved in repeating the story.

"Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know." (Verse 19) The ones who accused chaste women of adultery, particularly those who made their accusations against the Prophet's own family, really aimed to undermine the values of goodness, chastity and fidelity, so as to make it easier for people to commit adultery by implying that it was common practice. When people begin to think of it in this light, it will be practised more frequently.

This is the reason for describing the false accusers of chaste women as people who love to spread indecency among the believers. Hence they are warned against a very severe suffering both in this life and in the life to come.

It is an aspect of the Qur'ānic method of educating the Muslim community and a measure of prevention based on perfect knowledge of how people react and formulate their attitudes, feelings and lines of action. Hence, the comment at the end of the verse asserts: *"God knows, but you do not know."* Who knows the human heart better than the One who created it? Who can provide humanity with a better code of living than the One who originated it? Who sees what is concealed as well as what is left in the open, and whose knowledge encompasses all things and situations?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds the believers of the grace God bestows on them: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful. ..!"* (Verse 20)

The mistake committed was grave indeed, and its evil was about to engulf the whole Muslim community, but God's grace, mercy and care prevented this evil. Hence, God reminds them of this, time after time, as He aims this to be an edifying lesson. When they realized the extent of the matter that could have engulfed them all, had it not been for God's grace and mercy, they were told that what they did was indeed following in Satan's footsteps. They must not fall into this trap, since Satan is their avowed enemy, ever since the beginning of human life. Again they are warned against what this may entail in their life: *"Believers! Do not follow Satan's footsteps, for he who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing."* (Verse 21)

Nothing but a terrible fate awaits the believers if they take just one step with Satan. They should steer away from him altogether and follow a different way. The very thought of following Satan is repugnant to believers. Hence, drawing it in this way and holding it in front of them should make them always alert. *"He who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong."* (Verse 21) This false story is a stark and gruesome example of how Satan leads believers to something evil.

Man is weak, susceptible to desires and whims which may leave him stained, unless he benefits by God's grace when he turns to Him and follows His guidance: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity."* (Verse 21) When God's light shines in a believer's heart, it purifies it. It is only through God's favours and grace that people grow in purity. Since God knows all and hears all, He certainly knows the ones who deserve to be purified and who are genuinely good. It is these that He helps to grow in purity.

Attaining the Sublime

Within the context of purity, the *sūrah* calls on believers to forgive one another as they love to be forgiven their sins: *"Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 22)

This verse was revealed in connection with Abū Bakr after the Qur'ān had cleared his daughter, `Ā'ishah the pure, of any misconduct. He realized that Misṭah ibn

Athāthah, his relative whom he supported because of his poverty, was among those involved in circulating the false rumour. Therefore, he vowed that he would never do Misṭah a good turn in the future. This verse, however, reminds Abū Bakr and the believers that they also commit mistakes and hope for God's forgiveness. Hence, they should forgive one another their mistakes. They must not deprive those who need the support of their generosity, even though the latter might have committed a grave error.

Now we see how one of the souls touched by God's light grows in purity attaining a truly sublime standard. Abū Bakr, who was so deeply hurt by the false rumours targeting his daughter and attempting to disgrace his family, responded to the Qur'ānic call on the believers to forgive those who hurt them. He reflected on the inspiring question, *"Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins?"* (Verse 22) And he rose above the pain and injury, and also above the logic that prevailed in his environment. He felt there could only be one answer to that question, and with certainty and contentment he said: "Yes, indeed. I love that God should forgive me." He reinstated the allowance he had been giving Misṭah, and vowed anew that he would never stop it in future. His vow replaced his earlier one that he would not give him anything. With such a sublime standard of generosity, Abū Bakr's heart was cleansed of any hard feeling and retained its purity.

The forgiveness of which God reminds the believers is granted only to those who repent of their errors, accusing chaste women of adultery and spreading corruption in the Muslim community. On the other hand, those who, like Ibn Ubayy, deliberately, and out of malice, make such accusations, will have no pardon or forgiveness. Even though they may escape punishment in this world, because no witnesses will testify against them, they will inevitably endure the punishment in the hereafter when no witnesses will be required.

> *Those who accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but remained true believers, shall be rejected by God in this world as well as in the life to come. They shall endure awesome suffering; on the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did. On that day God will pay them in full their just due, and they will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest. (Verses 23-25)*

The *sūrah* paints their crime in stark colours so as to expose its odious nature. It is an accusation against chaste women believers who go about their lives, totally oblivious to any possibility of accusation. They behave naturally, not thinking that they will be accused of something, simply because they have done nothing wrong. To accuse them of immorality is thus seen to be very serious, betraying the contemptible and mean nature of their accusers. Hence, they are cursed now by God,

and expelled from among those who receive His grace in this present life and in the life to come. The *sūrah* then shows us a fascinating scene: *"On the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did."* (Verse 24) Thus we see them accusing one another, just as they used to accuse chaste believing women. The contrast is very clear, as is always the case in the Qur'ān.

"On that day God will pay them in full their just due." (Verse 25) Their deeds will be accurately reckoned and they will be given all that they really deserve. At that time they will he certain of what they used to be in doubt about. *"They will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest."* (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* concludes its comments on this whole story of falsehood by highlighting God's justice in the way He has given man his nature so as to manifest itself in practice. This is why the corrupt will unite with their like and the good will associate with others of their type. This is how relations are consolidated between husband and wife. Hence, it is absolutely impossible that `Ā'ishah could be like what her accusers said of her, because she was destined to be the wife of the best person that ever lived.

"Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women, just as good women are for good men, and good men for good women. These are innocent of all that people may impute to them. Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them." (Verse 26) The Prophet dearly loved `Ā'ishah. It was inconceivable that God should let His Prophet love her so much unless she was innocent of all guilt, pure and deserving of such a great love.

Good men and women are, by their very nature, *"innocent of all that people may impute to them."* (Verse 26) False accusations cannot stick to them. *"Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them."* (Verse 26) They will be forgiven any mistake they may commit, and they have their reward with God, clearly indicating their high position with Him.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes its comments on this serious trial for the Muslim community because it aimed at undermining their trust that the Prophet's household was absolutely pure and that God would not allow anyone but the most pure to be a member of that household. God wanted this episode to be an edifying lesson for the Muslim community, elevating it to an even more sublime standard.

2
Measures to Preserve Decency

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَدۡخُلُواْ بُيُوتًا غَيۡرَ بُيُوتِكُمۡ حَتَّىٰ تَسۡتَأۡنِسُواْ وَتُسَلِّمُواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهَاۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَذَكَّرُونَ ٢٧

Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. (27)

فَإِن لَّمۡ تَجِدُواْ فِيهَآ أَحَدٗا فَلَا تَدۡخُلُوهَا حَتَّىٰ يُؤۡذَنَ لَكُمۡۖ وَإِن قِيلَ لَكُمُ ٱرۡجِعُواْ فَٱرۡجِعُواْۖ هُوَ أَزۡكَىٰ لَكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ عَلِيمٞ ٢٨

If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. (28)

لَّيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَدۡخُلُواْ بُيُوتًا غَيۡرَ مَسۡكُونَةٖ فِيهَا مَتَٰعٞ لَّكُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ مَا تُبۡدُونَ وَمَا تَكۡتُمُونَ ٢٩

You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal. (29)

قُل لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ يَغُضُّواْ مِنۡ أَبۡصَٰرِهِمۡ وَيَحۡفَظُواْ فُرُوجَهُمۡۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزۡكَىٰ لَهُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ خَبِيرُۢ بِمَا يَصۡنَعُونَ ٣٠

to Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. (30)

وَقُل لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ يَغۡضُضۡنَ مِنۡ أَبۡصَٰرِهِنَّ وَيَحۡفَظۡنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبۡدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنۡهَا

And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof.

وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ ۖ وَلَا
يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ
ءَابَآئِهِنَّ أَوْ ءَابَآءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ
أَبْنَآئِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَآءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ
إِخْوَٰنِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِىٓ إِخْوَٰنِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِىٓ
أَخَوَٰتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَآئِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَٰنُهُنَّ أَوِ ٱلتَّٰبِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُو۟لِى ٱلْإِرْبَةِ
مِنَ ٱلرِّجَالِ أَوِ ٱلطِّفْلِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ
يَظْهَرُوا۟ عَلَىٰ عَوْرَٰتِ ٱلنِّسَآءِ ۖ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ
بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِن زِينَتِهِنَّ ۚ
وَتُوبُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (31)

وَأَنكِحُوا۟ ٱلْأَيَـٰمَىٰ مِنكُمْ وَٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ مِنْ
عِبَادِكُمْ وَإِمَآئِكُمْ ۚ إِن يَكُونُوا۟ فُقَرَآءَ
يُغْنِهِمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ وَٰسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ
﴿٣٢﴾

Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. (32)

وَلْيَسْتَعْفِفِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّىٰ
يُغْنِيَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَبْتَغُونَ
ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ
إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا ۖ وَءَاتُوهُم مِّن مَّالِ
ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۚ وَلَا تُكْرِهُوا۟ فَتَيَٰتِكُمْ
عَلَى ٱلْبِغَآءِ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لِّتَبْتَغُوا۟
عَرَضَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَمَن يُكْرِههُّنَّ فَإِنَّ
ٱللَّهَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ إِكْرَٰهِهِنَّ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty. And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them; and give them something of the wealth God has given you. Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]. (33)

We have bestowed upon you from on high revelations clearly showing the truth, and lessons from [the stories of] those who have passed away before you, and admonition for the God-fearing. (34)	وَلَقَدْ أَنزَلْنَآ إِلَيْكُمْ ءَايَـٰتٍ مُّبَيِّنَـٰتٍ وَمَثَلًا مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَلَوْا۟ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَمَوْعِظَةً لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Overview

We mentioned previously that in the clean and healthy society it establishes, Islam does not rely on punishment; rather its main line of defence is prevention. It does not suppress natural desires. It regulates them within a clean atmosphere that is free of deliberate stimulation. The main element in the Islamic method of educating its followers is

I to reduce the chances of error, eliminate temptation, and remove all impediments that prevent the satisfaction of natural desires in a perfectly natural and clean way.

It is in this light that we should look at the way Islam accords a certain sanctity for homes. When they are at home, people should not be surprised by strangers coming in without first asking leave to enter. Otherwise, people's privacy would be invaded when they least expect it. In addition, Islam requires both men and women to lower their gaze and not expose what may arouse sexual desire.

From the same perspective, Islam facilitates marriage for poor men and women, because marriage is the best guarantee against adultery. It prohibits sending slaves into prostitution, because prostitution encourages people to indulge in prohibited sex. Let us now consider these points in more detail.

Before Entering a House

> *Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal. (Verses 27-29)*

God has made homes places of comfort where people may relax and enjoy privacy and reassurance. At home, they do not feel the need to be cautious or on the alert. Thus, they may relax and take things easy. But homes cannot be so unless their

privacy is strictly respected. No one may enter a home without its occupier's knowledge and permission, at the time they choose, and in the manner they prefer.

Should we be able to go into other people's homes without first seeking permission, we may see them in situations they want to keep private, or we may see what arouses desire and opens the way to error. This could come about through a chance meeting, or a casual glance. When these are repeated, they become deliberate, motivated by the desires aroused by the casual glance in the first place. It may even develop into a sinful relation or cause a suppressed desire leading to a psychological problem.

In pre-Islamic days in Arabia, visitors used to enter a home and then announce themselves. It could be that inside a man may be with his wife in a position they did not want anyone to see; or that the man or woman were undressed. All this used to hurt people, and deprived them of a sense of security at home. Furthermore, when visitors saw charm and beauty, temptation might be strong or even irresistible.

For all such reasons, God laid down the requirement to observe fine manners, making it necessary for a Muslim to announce himself and greet the people inside before entering. This establishes a friendly atmosphere right from the first moment.

"Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates." (Verse 27) Seeking permission is expressed in the Arabic original in an unusual way, *tasta'nisū,* which implies friendliness. Thus we may say that we should not enter other people's houses until we have obtained friendly and cordial permission. This implies that the visitor should be gentle in his approach so as to be welcomed by the people inside. Such refinement is characteristic of Islamic manners.

When permission is sought, it follows that the house is either empty or people are inside. If there is no one in, then the caller cannot enter, because entry follows permission. *"If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave."* (Verse 28) But if there is someone in, seeking permission is not enough for entry. It is merely a request, and if the request is not granted, entry is prohibited. It is better to leave without delay: *"If you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you."* (Verse 28) The person who is told to go back should do so without feeling upset or offended. People have their secrets and they may have good reason for not receiving a visitor at a particular time. It is up to them to determine their own situation.

"God has full knowledge of all that you do." (Verse 28) He knows people's secrets and motives.

Visiting People When They Are Not Ready

Places that are more or less public, like hotels, guest houses and reception halls which are separate from the main house are treated differently. We may enter such places without first seeking permission, because the very reason for seeking permission before entry does not apply to them. Requiring permission first may be inconvenient in such places.

"You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal." (Verse 29) The point here is that of God's knowledge of all our situations and what we do in public or private. The feeling that God watches us in all situations should make people more obedient and willing to observe the refined manners which He has outlined in His book that lays down a code of living for all humanity.

As a complete code for human life, the Qur'ān emphasizes this point of detail in social life because it aims to regulate life in all its aspects, bringing its details in line with its fundamental issues. Thus, seeking permission before entering other people's homes respects the sanctity which makes the home a place of relaxation. It spares its people the embarrassment of being taken by surprise, or being seen in a situation that they prefer not to be seen in. We are not talking here only about the parts of the human body which should be covered. At home people may be in a situation which they simply do not like others to see. It could relate to their personal appearance, the way they dress or lay their furniture, or anything else. It could also relate to feelings and emotions. Who of us would like to be seen in a situation of weakness, crying or angry or in pain or distress?

The Qur'ānic code of manners attends to all these details through the requirement of seeking permission before entering someone else's home. It also seeks to reduce chances of casual meetings or sightings that could arouse desire and develop into unacceptable relations that Satan may stealthily encourage. The first Muslim community to be addressed by the Qur'ān clearly understood such directives and their purpose. The Prophet himself was the first to implement them.

The Prophet visited Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anşār,* at home and sought permission, saying: *"Assalāmu `alaykum wa raĥmatullāh",* meaning, peace and God's mercy be bestowed on you. Sa`d replied in a low voice. His son, Qays, asked him: "Are you not letting God's Messenger in?" Sa`d said: "Let him wish us peace more." Again the Prophet repeated his greeting and Sa`d replied in a low voice twice more. Therefore, the Prophet departed, but Sa`d ran after him and explained what happened, saying: "Messenger of God, I certainly heard your greetings and replied quietly hoping that you would wish us peace more and more." The Prophet went in with him. Sa`d ordered water to be brought for the Prophet to wash. Then he gave him a small blanket dyed with saffron to cover himself. The Prophet then raised his hands, praying: "My Lord, shower Your blessings and grace on Sa`d ibn `Ubādah's

family." [Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī]

The Prophet taught his Companions how to approach someone else's home, saying: "If you come towards a home, do not face the door straight, but stand to the right or to the left, and say: *Assalāmu alaykum! Assalāmu 'alaykum!*" At that time, there were no screens on doors. [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş came to the Prophet and stood facing the door, seeking permission. The Prophet said to him: "Move this way or that way, because permission is sought before a person looks in." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

An authentic *Ĥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "If a person overlooks you without having obtained permission, and you hit him with a small stone, and cause him a severe injury in his eye, you have nothing to answer for." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Rib`ī, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "A man from the `Āmir clan sought permission to enter the Prophet's home, saying: 'Can I enter?' The Prophet said to his servant: 'Go to this man and teach him how to seek permission. Tell him to say: *'Assalāmu `alaykum.* May I come in?' The man overheard the Prophet and said exactly that. The Prophet gave him permission and he entered." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar was walking, troubled by the heat, and he urgently needed to relieve himself. He approached a Qurayshi woman's place, and said: "*Assalāmu `alaykum.* May I come in?" She said: "Enter with peace." He repeated what he said, and she repeated her reply. He was unable to stand still. He told her to say: "Come in", if she wanted to give him permission and she did so. He then entered.

`Aţā' ibn Rabāĥ, a scholar who studied under `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's cousin whose scholarly knowledge was recognized as highly authoritative, reported: "I asked Ibn `Abbās: 'Should I seek permission before entering when only my orphan sisters are at home considering that I look after them and they live with me in the same home?' He said: 'Yes.' I asked him again so that he might give me a concession, but he refused. Instead, he asked me: 'Do you like to see your sister undressed?' I answered in the negative. He said: 'Then seek permission before entry.' I repeated the question once more, but he asked me: 'Do you love to obey God?' I said: 'Yes.' He said: 'Then seek permission.'"

An authentic *Ĥadīth* makes it clear that the Prophet prohibited a man from entering his own home unannounced so surprising his wife. In another version the prohibition is attached to such a surprise being made at night, implying that his family might be doing something unacceptable.

Another *Ĥadīth* mentions that the Prophet arrived with his Companions at Madīnah during the day. So, he encamped at the outskirts, explaining his purpose:

"Wait until the end of the day, so that a woman has a chance to attend to her uncombed hair, or remove unwanted hair on her body."

Good Manners and High Morals

Such refined manners were characteristic of the Prophet and his Companions after God had taught them the Islamic way. Today, however, we find that such fine considerations are largely meaningless despite our being Muslims. A man may just turn up at his brother's door at any time of the day or night, knocking hard and caring little for disturbing the people inside, until the door is opened. The people may have a telephone which provides an excellent way of seeking permission to visit before starting out.[17] He could thus easily find out a time suitable to his hosts. Nevertheless, people simply do not take such steps. A man may arrive at someone's home without a prior appointment or permission. What is worse, our social tradition makes it imperative that a visitor who has come unannounced be received, even though his visit might be extremely inconvenient.

We are certainly Muslims, but we surprise our friends at any moment, even at meal times. If we are not invited to a meal, we may feel aggrieved. We may even surprise them late at night, and if they do not invite us to stay the night, we are offended. We allow our hosts no excuses either way.

All this takes place simply because we neglect Islamic manners. We do not bring our own preferences in line with what has been taught by God's Messenger. We insist on following a mistaken social tradition that has no divine authority.

We look at other, non-Muslim communities and find that their social traditions are closer to the values and manners Islam wants us to adopt. Sometimes we admire these, but at other times we may even ridicule them, without even trying to look into what Islam wants us to do.

Proper Control of a Natural Desire

Having dealt with the proper manners of entering homes after taking permission, the *sūrah* moves on to prevent desire from running loose. It simply prevents looking at what is bound to excite desire, and it prohibits action that encourages sin.

> *Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their*

[17] At the time this was written telephones were largely uncommon in people's houses in Egypt. — Editor's note.

> *charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof. Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (Verses 30-31)*

Islam wants to establish a clean society where desire is not aroused at every moment, and erotic scenes are not displayed everywhere. Continual excitement of the sexual urge leads to an insatiable desire that may become unstoppable. A stealthy look, a seductive move, flagrant make-up and thinly-dressed bodies are meant only to add to such insatiable and uncontrolled excitement. Thus, prudence and self control are heavily taxed. Hence, there remains one of two alternatives: either total permissiveness that disregards all checks and values, or psychological problems and disorders that result from having to suppress a desire that has been strongly aroused. This borders on unmitigated torture.

One way Islam uses for achieving its goal of establishing a clean human society is to prevent such uncontrollable excitement of the sexual urge. It wants the natural sexual urge, of both men and women, to remain healthy, maintaining its natural strength and to satisfy it in the proper, clean manner.

At some point in time, the idea was promoted that easy mixing between the two sexes, playful conversation and revealing physical attractions help to provide a relaxed social atmosphere, with no rigid inhibitions. It was said that this is necessary as a preventive measure against arbitrary suppression of natural desires and psychological complexes and disorders. It reduces the pressure of the sexual urge and prevents an uncontrollable explosion, etc.

Such ideas were promoted as a result of the advancement of theories that aimed to deprive man of his distinctive characteristics that separate the human race from animals, and which put man at the same level as animals. The most important of these theories was Freud's. But all this was no more than theoretical assumptions. I have seen with my own eyes, in a permissive society that abandoned all social, moral and religious restrictions, solid evidence to undermine its very foundation.[18] I have seen in a country that does not place a single restriction on exposing the human body or on sexual relations, in all forms and types, that such freedom in no way refines or controls the sexual urge. On the contrary, it led to an insatiable quest for sexual pleasure. I also saw much of the psychological problems and disorders which were

[18] The author is referring here to his stay in the USA in 1949-1951. — Editor's note.

claimed to be triggered only by deprivation and isolation from the other sex. They were on the increase, as were all types of sexual perversion. And all this was a direct result of free, unrestrained mixing between the two sexes, total permissiveness, exposure of much of the human body in the street, seductive gestures, suggestive glances, etc. This is not the place for recording such scenes in detail, but I only have to say that all this indicates the need to revise those theories, which are contradicted by what prevails in society.

Attraction to the other sex is both natural and profound, because God has made it the means by which human life continues and by which man can fulfil his task on earth. It is a permanent attraction that subsides for a while and then regains strength. To stir it at all times will undoubtedly keep it on the boil. Thus, it requires physical satisfaction. If this does not take place, tension will rise and man finds himself in a sort of permanent torture. Excitement takes place through a look, a move, a smile, a joke and even the tone in one's speech. The best safeguard is to reduce such excitement so that the mutual attraction between man and woman remains within its natural limits, and finds its satisfaction in the proper and natural way. This is the line Islam prefers.

The two verses we are now discussing give us some examples of how Islam helps to reduce the chances of excitement and sin: *"Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do."* (Verse 30)

Lowering their gaze is an act of refining men's manners. It represents an attempt to rise above the desire to look at women's physical charms. As such, it is a practical step to ensure that the first window of temptation is shut. Minding their chastity is the natural result of lowering their gaze. It is indeed the second step that comes after strengthening one's will and rising above the natural urge right at the beginning. Hence, the two are stated in the same verse as a cause and effect, or as two consecutive steps both in personal conscience and in reality.

"This is most conducive to their purity." (Verse 30) It ensures that their feelings remain pure, unaffected by licentious desire and promiscuous action. Thus, feelings retain their noble human standards, and do not sink to animal levels. This protects honour, integrity and sanctities within the community. Besides, it is God who lays down such preventive measures, fully aware as He certainly is of people's psychology, natural instincts thoughts and motives: *"God is certainly aware of all that they do."*

"And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity." (Verse 31) They must not cast hungry or seductive looks at men to arouse their desire. Nor are they permitted any sexual behaviour other than what is lawful and clean. Thus,

children that are born as a result will have nothing to be ashamed of when they have to face society and play their roles in it.

"*And not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof*" (Verse 31) The Arabic term *zīnah,* translated here as 'charms', has wider connotations than natural beauty. It includes adornments women add to look more attractive. Such adornments are lawful for women to use, because they satisfy a natural female tendency that makes women always want to look beautiful and attractive. Such adornments differ from one time to another, but whatever form they take, they are meant to satisfy the same natural motive of appearing more beautiful and displaying charms before men.

Since this is a natural tendency, Islam does not suppress it; it brings it under control so that a woman displays her charms before one man, who is her spouse who sees her as no one else does. In addition, her close relatives who may not be married to her may see some of her charms as well, because their desires are not excited as a result, considering their close relation. However, the charms or adornments that appear on a woman's face and hands are permissible to see. The Prophet said to Asmā' bint Abī Bakr, his sister-in-law: "Asmā'! When a woman attains puberty, nothing should be seen of her except this [and he pointed to face and hands]." [Related by Abū Dāwūd][19]

Prompt Compliance with Divine Orders

A further instruction is given to women with regard to their public appearance: "*Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms.*" (Verse 31) We have a translation problem here because the Qur'ānic verse uses the term *jayb,* which does not mean 'bosom'. *Jayb* instead means the top opening of a dress which is bound to reveal a part of a woman's bosom. Hence, women are ordered to bring their head coverings down so as to cover this opening, thus covering their heads, necks and chests. In this way, they cover their charms so as not to be displayed before hungry eyes, not even in a sudden encounter between man and woman. A God-fearing man will always try not to make such a look last long, or repeat it. Yet, it may have a lasting effect if charms and adornments are seen suddenly. Hence, the instruction to keep them covered. What is important to realize here is that God wants to spare people this type of test.

Despite their natural desire to want to appear beautiful, the Muslim women who received this instruction did not slacken to put it into effect because their hearts were resplendent with God's light. In pre- Islamic ignorant days, women used to go out in

[19] *This ĥadīth is* classified as *mursal,* which means that it is poor in authenticity.

public revealing their bosoms, just like women do today in non-Islamic societies. Yet when the order was revealed requiring women to cover themselves and reveal only what appears naturally of their charms, their response was as `Ā'ishah describes: "May God bestow His grace on the early Muslim women: when God revealed His order, 'Let them draw their head- coverings over their bosoms,' they tore their dresses and used them to cover their heads." [Related by al-Bukhārī]

Şafiyyah bint Shaybah reports: "We were at `Ā'ishah's place when some women spoke about Qurayshi women and their virtues. `Ā'ishah said: There is no doubt that Qurayshi women have their virtues, but I have seen none like the Anşār women in their ardent belief in God's book and undoubted faith in divine revelations. When the verse was revealed in *Sūrah al-Nūr* stating, 'Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms,' their men went home and read to them what God had revealed. A man would read this to his wife, daughter, sister and other relatives. Every single woman of them took out her printed dress and wrapped it over her head, in obedience to what God had revealed in confirmation of its application to them. In the morning they prayed behind God's Messenger, wearing their head coverings as though they were carrying crows on their heads." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Islam has refined the tastes of Islamic society and its sense of beauty for it no longer seeks the lewd and licentious. Exposing bodily charms attracts a man's physical instinct. Modesty, on the other hand, shows a clean type of beauty that refines man's sense. It is the type of beauty worthy of man, because it imparts a sense of purity and chastity.

Today, Islam produces the same effect among women believers, despite the fact that the general taste in society has sunk so low as to encourage the revealing of physical charms and the exposure of other parts of the human body. Nevertheless, women believers voluntarily cover themselves as God requires them to do, while other women around them try to attract men by their physical presence.

Maintaining such modesty in appearance is another preventive measure Islam puts in place to protect both the individual and society. Hence, it is not required in situations where temptation is inconceivable. Thus, close relatives who are barred from inter-marriage are excluded. Normally there is no sexual attraction between such relatives who include fathers, sons, fathers-in-law, stepsons, brothers and nephews. Also excepted are Muslim women, as the verse makes clear: *"or their womenfolk."* Women generally are not included in this exception, because they may describe Muslim women and their charms to their husbands, brothers and other men. An authentic *Ĥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "No woman should describe another woman to her husband as though he is seeing her." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim] Muslim women, on the other hand, are reliable. Their faith prevents them from describing the physical charms of a Muslim woman to their husbands.

Another exception applies to slaves: *"or those whom they rightfully possess."* Some scholars say that this applies to women slaves only, while others include male slaves too because a slave does not look up to his mistress in a carnal way. But the first view is more logical because a slave is a man with all the desire any other man has, even though he is placed in a special or unfavourable situation. Also excepted are *"such male attendants as are free of physical desire,"* who may not be attracted to women for one reason or another, such as being impotent or feeble minded. In this case, a woman's physical beauty causes no temptation. Similarly excepted are *"children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness."* These are children who do not yet feel any sexual desire because they are too young. When they are older and become sexually aware and attracted to women, even though they might not have attained their puberty, nonetheless the original rules apply to them.

All these – with the exception of husbands – may see a woman uncovered, except for the area between her waistline and knees, because the cause that prevents such looks does not apply in their case. A husband, on the other hand, may see his wife without restriction.

Since this is a preventive measure, the Qur'ānic verse goes on to prohibit the movements a woman may make in order to attract attention to her adornments or charms that are not readily visible. Such movements may be exciting even though the adornments themselves may remain invisible.

"Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms." (Verse 31) This order results from profound knowledge of human psychology. Sometimes, the human imagination may be a more powerful trigger for desire. Many are the men who, on seeing a woman's shoes, dress or jewellery, are more excited than by seeing her body. Many are the ones that are sexually excited by the mental image they draw of a woman than by seeing her in person. Psychiatrists have identified such cases which may need treatment. The tinkle of jewellery or the smell of perfume may excite some people and kindle their sexual desire. With some, this could become irresistible. The Qur'ān takes effective and appropriate action against all this, because its message is sent by God the Creator who knows His creation and who is kind to, and fully aware of, them all.

The verse concludes with turning people's hearts to God, opening the door of repentance and forgiveness for all that was done before its revelation. *"Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success."* (Verse 31) Thus, it enhances their feelings that God watches over them, and that He is kind to them, taking care of them. He helps them overcome their weakness in respect of sexual desire. Yet nothing can bring this under proper control more effectively than faith and fearing God.

Promoting Easy Marriage

Up to this point, the measures the Qur'ān speaks about are preventive. Yet sexual attraction is very real and needs practical steps to ensure its proper control. The most important solution is marriage and the taking of positive steps to encourage it, together with making other ways of sexual response far more difficult or even totally unavailable.

> *Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty. And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them; and give them something of the wealth God has given you. Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]. (Verses 32-33)*

Marriage is the proper way to satisfy natural sexual desires. Hence, all impediments that make marriage difficult should be removed so that human life can progress in this natural and simple way. Money is the primary impediment facing those who wish to establish families and protect themselves against sin. Hence, Islam puts in place an integrated system that does not make a requirement without providing its tools or the conditions that are conducive to its fulfilment. As it requires people to maintain their chastity, it makes marriage easy for all people. Hence only the one who deliberately turns away from the clean and pure way indulges in sin. Therefore, Islam requires the Muslim community to provide financial assistance for those who lack the wherewithal to get married: *"Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty."* (Verse 32)

The order includes all those who are single, men and women, although only free people are meant here initially. Those who are in bondage are specifically mentioned later: *"as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous."* They all need money for this purpose, as it is clearly understood from the rest of the verse: *"If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty."*

This order is given to the Muslim community to enable single people to marry. The majority of scholars are of the view that this order is meant as a recommendation because there were single people during the time of the Prophet and they were not made to marry. Had this order been meant as an obligation, the Prophet would have ensured they all married. In our view, this order states an obligation, but it does not mean that a Muslim ruler is required to compel those who are single to get married.

What it means instead is that the Muslim community must help single people who wish to get married, thus enabling them to guard their chastity. Islam considers this to be a practical measure of protection so that the Muslim community remains free of adultery, as it is duty bound to remain so. Providing the means to fulfil an obligation is also obligatory.

We should remember though that Islam is a fully integrated system. Hence, it provides adequate measures to set the economy of the Muslim community on the right footing. Thus, it provides good job opportunities for those who are able to work, so that they do not need assistance from the treasury. However, in exceptional situations, the public treasury is required to provide such assistance. This means that in the Islamic economic system, everyone has an income to meet their needs. The provision of jobs giving adequate income is a duty of the Muslim state and a right owing to individual citizens. Giving financial assistance by the public treasury is the exception, not the rule.

Financial Help for Marriage

When, despite all this, there remain in the community single men and women who are poor, unable to meet the expenses of marriage, the Muslim community must help them marry. The same applies to slaves, of both sexes. However, this duty applies in the first place to their masters, if they can meet such expenses. Poverty should never be an impediment preventing marriage when single men or women are suitable for marriage and are willing. It is God who provides for all. He has made it clear that He will give them enough when they choose the clean and healthy way, guarding their chastity through marriage. "*If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty.*" (Verse 32) The Prophet says: "Three categories of people have the right to help provided by God: a person striving for God's cause, and a slave who has arranged to buy his own freedom and wants to fulfil his commitment, and one who wants to marry in order to guard his own chastity." [Related by al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī]

Until the Muslim community provides the necessary help to enable them to get married, single people are instructed to guard their chastity. "*As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty.*" (Verse 33) This He certainly does, because "*God is Munificent, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 33) He does not stint the means of a person who wants to stick to the way of purity and chastity as He is fully aware of people's intentions.

We see how Islam provides a practical solution to a real problem. Every individual who is fit to marry should be able to do so, even though he or she may lack the necessary financial ability. In most cases, money, or the lack of it, is the most difficult

barrier that prevents people from getting married.

It is recognized that the presence of slaves within the community allows moral standards to fall, encouraging loose moral attitudes because, generally speaking, slaves have a weaker sense of human dignity. At the same time slavery was inevitable at the advent of Islam, considering the need to apply the same rules to captives of war taken by Muslims as Muslim captives received at the hands of their non- Muslim captors. Yet Islam took a unilateral initiative to free slaves whenever possible, until a new world order allowed for the total abolition of slavery. It is in this vein that Islam required that a slave who wished to buy his own freedom should be freed in return for an agreed sum of money which he paid to his master. *"And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them."* (Verse 33)

Scholars have different views on whether this is obligatory, but we believe it to be so because it fits well with the line Islam adopts on freedom and human dignity. When a slave signs a deed of freedom, the money he earns through his own work belongs to him so that he can fulfil his commitment under the deed of freedom. What is more is that he can rightfully claim to be helped from *zakāt* funds: *"And give them something of the wealth God has given you."* (Verse 33) The only condition that applies in such situations is that the master should be aware that the slave is a good person. The goodness that the verse refers to is that the slave should be a Muslim in the first place, and that he or she should be able to earn their living through their work. A freed slave should not become a liability to society, or forced to resort to degrading practices in order to survive. Islam lays down a system of social security which is very practical. It does not raise empty slogans nor does it try to meet them without looking at the realities that follow. It does not merely seek to free slaves without giving that freedom real meaning. Slaves will not achieve a real standard of freedom unless they are able to earn their living so that they neither beg nor resort to some dirty practices to survive. Some such practices are far worse than slavery.

Islam frees slaves in order to cleanse society, and so avoid it becoming more contaminated with vice.

By the grace of God, slavery has been abolished after the signing of international treaties and conventions that prohibit the enslavement of captives of war. Under Islam, slavery was allowed only provisionally, on the basis of measure-for-measure in the treatment of enemy captives of war.

Fair Treatment for the Least Privileged

What is worse than the presence of slaves in the community is that some slaves might be put to prostitution. In pre-Islamic days, a master might make his female

slaves prostitutes, taking some or all of their wages. This form of prostitution continues to be practised today. As Islam wants the Islamic social environment to be pure, it forbids all adultery, particularly this form of prostitution. *"Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]."* (Verse 33) This verse warns those who force their maids into prostitution, and rebukes them for seeking to enrich themselves in this highly immoral way. It also promises those who are forced to it forgiveness and mercy.

Al-Suddī mentions that this verse points directly to `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, the chief hypocrite in Madīnah. He had a slave maid named Mu`ādhah. When he received a guest, he would give him this maid to sleep with, hoping to gain financial reward or some other favour from him. The maid complained of this to Abū Bakr, and Abū Bakr reported it to the Prophet who ordered `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy to refrain from such deeds. `Abdullāh complained: "Who will restore justice to us against Muhammad? He interferes on behalf of our maid!" This verse was then revealed.

The prohibition of compelling girls, who wish to maintain their chastity, into prostitution for financial gain was part of the Qur'ānic method of cleansing the Islamic social environment and of blocking all dirty methods of satisfying sexual desires. When prostitution is condoned in society, it tempts many people because it is so easy. When such avenues are not available, people have to seek the clean way of marriage to satisfy their natural desires.

There is no validity in the argument that prostitution works as a safety device to protect families, or that it is the only way to satisfy a natural need when marriage is difficult, or that unless such an easy way is found, people assault honourable women. This is indeed a twisted argument that confuses causes and results. Sexual desire must remain clean, pure and directed to serve the purpose of procreation, so that new generations can grow up in a clean environment. Communities must reform their economic systems so that everyone can have a reasonable standard of living which enables him or her to marry. Should there remain exceptional cases, these would be properly considered and appropriate treatment found for them. This leaves no need for prostitution, or filthy brothels where those who want to ease the pressure of their natural sexual desire can throw aside their burden, in the same way as garbage is publicly thrown over a dunghill. It is the economic system that should be reformed so as to prevent such filth from existing. The inadequacy of economic systems should never be the basis of an argument for brothels where humanity is exceedingly humiliated.

This is exactly the method Islam adopts, providing an integrated system that maintains purity and helps people preserve their chastity. It is a system that provides

a bridge linking this world with heaven, and elevates humanity to a sublime level that is enlightened with God's guidance.

The whole passage concludes with a verse that provides suitable comments on its subject matter: *"We have bestowed upon you from on high revelations clearly showing the truth, and lessons from [the stories of] those who have passed away before you, and admonition for the God- fearing."* (Verse 34) Its verses are clear. They show the truth, leaving no room for ambiguity or distortion. It portrays the fate of earlier communities that deviated from the divine method and the punishment meted out to them. The Qur'ān also provides an admonition for the God-fearing who realize that God watches all that we do. Thus, they stand in awe of God and they follow the right path. All the rules and the rulings outlined in this passage fit well with this comment which emphasizes the bond between people's hearts with God Almighty who bestowed this Qur'ān from on high.

3
The Light of Heaven and Earth

۞ ٱللَّهُ نُورُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ مَثَلُ
نُورِهِۦ كَمِشۡكَوٰةٖ فِيهَا مِصۡبَاحٌۖ ٱلۡمِصۡبَاحُ
فِي زُجَاجَةٍۖ ٱلزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوۡكَبٞ دُرِّيّٞ
يُوقَدُ مِن شَجَرَةٖ مُّبَٰرَكَةٖ زَيۡتُونَةٖ لَّا
شَرۡقِيَّةٖ وَلَا غَرۡبِيَّةٖ يَكَادُ زَيۡتُهَا يُضِيٓءُ وَلَوۡ
لَمۡ تَمۡسَسۡهُ نَارٞۚ نُّورٌ عَلَىٰ نُورٖۗ يَهۡدِي ٱللَّهُ
لِنُورِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَيَضۡرِبُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡأَمۡثَٰلَ
لِلنَّاسِۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمٞ ﴿٣٥﴾

فِي بُيُوتٍ أَذِنَ ٱللَّهُ أَن تُرۡفَعَ وَيُذۡكَرَ فِيهَا
ٱسۡمُهُۥ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ فِيهَا بِٱلۡغُدُوِّ وَٱلۡأٓصَالِ
﴿٣٦﴾

رِجَالٞ لَّا تُلۡهِيهِمۡ تِجَٰرَةٞ وَلَا بَيۡعٌ عَن ذِكۡرِ
ٱللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَإِيتَآءِ ٱلزَّكَوٰةِۙ يَخَافُونَ
يَوۡمٗا تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ ٱلۡقُلُوبُ وَٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرُ ﴿٣٧﴾

لِيَجۡزِيَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَحۡسَنَ مَا عَمِلُواْ وَيَزِيدَهُم
مِّن فَضۡلِهِۦۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَرۡزُقُ مَن يَشَآءُ بِغَيۡرِ
حِسَابٖ ﴿٣٨﴾

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp; the lamp within a glass, the glass like a radiant star; lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it. Light upon light! God guides to His light him that wills [to be guided]. God propounds parables for all people, since God alone has full knowledge of all things. (35)

In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there are [such as] extol His limitless glory, morning and evening (36)

– people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity; who are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed; (37)

who [only hope] that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them. God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning. (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَعۡمَٰلُهُمۡ كَسَرَابِۭ بِقِيعَةٖ يَحۡسَبُهُ ٱلظَّمۡـَٔانُ مَآءً حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَهُۥ لَمۡ يَجِدۡهُ شَيۡـٔٗا وَوَجَدَ ٱللَّهَ عِندَهُۥ فَوَفَّىٰهُ حِسَابَهُۥۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَرِيعُ ٱلۡحِسَابِ ٣٩

As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing. But he finds that God [has always been present] with him, and that He will pay him his account in full; for God is swift in reckoning. (39)

أَوۡ كَظُلُمَٰتٖ فِي بَحۡرٖ لُّجِّيّٖ يَغۡشَىٰهُ مَوۡجٞ مِّن فَوۡقِهِۦ مَوۡجٞ مِّن فَوۡقِهِۦ سَحَابٞۚ ظُلُمَٰتُۢ بَعۡضُهَا فَوۡقَ بَعۡضٍ إِذَآ أَخۡرَجَ يَدَهُۥ لَمۡ يَكَدۡ يَرَىٰهَاۗ وَمَن لَّمۡ يَجۡعَلِ ٱللَّهُ لَهُۥ نُورٗا فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن نُّورٍ ٤٠

Or else, like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, covered by waves above which are waves, with clouds above it all: depths of darkness, layer upon layer, [so that] when one holds up his hand, he can hardly see it. Indeed the one from whom God withholds light shall find no light at all. (40)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَٱلطَّيۡرُ صَٰٓفَّٰتٖۖ كُلّٞ قَدۡ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُۥ وَتَسۡبِيحَهُۥۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمُۢ بِمَا يَفۡعَلُونَ ٤١

Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all that they do. (41)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ٤٢

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and to God shall all return. (42)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُزۡجِي سَحَابٗا ثُمَّ يُؤَلِّفُ بَيۡنَهُۥ ثُمَّ يَجۡعَلُهُۥ رُكَامٗا فَتَرَى ٱلۡوَدۡقَ يَخۡرُجُ مِنۡ خِلَٰلِهِۦ وَيُنَزِّلُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مِن جِبَالٖ فِيهَا مِنۢ بَرَدٖ فَيُصِيبُ بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَصۡرِفُهُۥ عَن مَّن يَشَآءُۖ يَكَادُ سَنَا بَرۡقِهِۦ يَذۡهَبُ بِٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرِ ٤٣

Are you not aware that it is God who causes the clouds to move onwards, then joins them together; then piles them up in masses, until you can see rain come forth from their midst. He it is who sends down from the skies mountainous masses charged with hail, striking with it whom He wills and averting it from whom He wills. The flash of His lightning well- nigh deprives people of their

sight. (43)

يُقَلِّبُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّيۡلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَعِبۡرَةٗ لِّأُوْلِي ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرِ ٤٤

It is God who causes night and day to alternate. In this too there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see. (44)

وَٱللَّهُ خَلَقَ كُلَّ دَآبَّةٖ مِّن مَّآءٖۖ فَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَمۡشِي عَلَىٰ بَطۡنِهِۦ وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَمۡشِي عَلَىٰ رِجۡلَيۡنِ وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَمۡشِي عَلَىٰٓ أَرۡبَعٖۚ يَخۡلُقُ ٱللَّهُ مَا يَشَآءُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٤٥

God has created every animal from water; and among them are such as creep on their bellies, and such as walk on two legs, and others yet on four. God creates what He wills. Surely God has power over all things. (45)

Overview

So far the *sūrah* has dealt with the most crude aspects of the human constitution in order to purify and refine them. It has dealt with sexual desire, including its different appeals, as well as the inclination to spread rumours and level accusations at people causing anger and distress. It has also dealt with indecency fermenting within people's hearts, finding verbal expression and then spreading into actual life itself. In all these it laid down very stern punishments for adultery and for false accusation of committing it. It portrayed a horrid example of false accusations levelled at chaste women who are unaware of what is being said about them. It also provided prevention measures, such as seeking permission before entering other people's homes, lowering one's gaze when meeting others, and covering personal charms and adornments. It further warned against unnecessary sexual excitement, encouraged marriage and the freedom of slaves and prohibited prostitution. All these measures, varied as they are, help to control the physical impulse and strengthen the motives to maintain one's chastity and aspire to higher standards of purity.

At the conclusion of its comments on the false story about `Ā'ishah the *sūrah* dealt with the lingering effects of that incident: in particular the distress, anger, distortion of values and anxiety. Thus we find the Prophet (peace be upon him) calm and reassured, `Ā'ishah herself well satisfied and happy, her father Abū Bakr kind and forgiving, and Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal pleased with God's declaration of his innocence, and the whole Muslim community turning back to God after realizing how they were lost in confusion. Now they are back on track, recognizing God's favours and grace, and following His guidance.

With such directives, education and refinement the *sūrah* now deals with the human soul, how it suddenly lights up, aspiring to the great light that fills the heavens and earth. Muslims are now ready to receive the enlightenment that they need in a world full of light.

God's Radiant Light

"*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 35) No sooner does this remarkable statement impart its meaning than a bright light spreads over the whole universe and lightens up feelings and emotions, filling hearts and minds. The entire universe swims in a radiant light. Screens and curtains are removed, hearts radiate, spirits fly high, and everything is purified in a sea of light. All shed their burdens and join together in an atmosphere of pure happiness and delight. Indeed, the universe and all it contains break their fetters so as to let the heavens and earth meet, the distant and the near come together, as do the animate and the inanimate. What is hidden joins with what is apparent, as do people's hearts and senses.

"*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" He is the light from which they derive their essence as well as their perfect system. He is the One who gives them their existence and the law that governs such existence. Man has recently been able to discover, through scientific achievements, a part of this great truth when what they used to call 'matter' was transformed, through nuclear fusion, into radiation that has no form or substance other than light. Thus, man discovered that an atom contains electrons that produce radiation. By contrast, the human heart was able to comprehend this great truth many centuries before science made its discoveries. Every time the human heart attained a high level of purity, aspiring to the sublime light, it was able to understand this truth. It was fully comprehended by Muhammad, God's Messenger, as he started his journey back from Ṭā'if, when he gave up on people and sought refuge with his Lord. Appealing to God Almighty, he said: "I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses." His heart shined with this sublime light on his night journey which took him from Makkah to Jerusalem and then to heaven. When later `Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him whether he saw his Lord, he answered: "It is all light. How could I see Him?"

An Example Portraying God's Light

The human heart cannot take such abundant light for long; nor can it aspire to that great horizon for long. Hence, after this statement that opens up this endless scope, the *sūrah* begins to bring it closer so as to make it better understood. The example is at once tangible and practical:

> *His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp; the lamp within a glass, the glass like a radiant star; lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it. Light upon light! (Verse 35)*

This comparison seeks to put the infinite right before a mind that has finite ability. It simply portrays a miniscule picture to present it to man who cannot contemplate its great reality. It seeks to show the nature of light when the human imagination cannot entertain its endless spread.

The verse begins by stating the fact that *"God is the light of the heavens and the earth,"* but then it brings us fast from this great expanse to a niche, a small artificial wall recess in which a lamp is placed so as to focus its light and make it shine. *"His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp."* It adds one element of strength and concentration after another: *"The lamp within a glass,"* which protects it from the wind and purifies its light to make it stronger and more radiant: *"The glass like a radiant star."* We see the glass painted here as bright, transparent, almost shining. At this point the verse links the example and the reality, the likeness and the original, the small glass and the radiant star. Thus we do not concentrate our reflection on the miniscule picture which is presented only to help us understand the great reality.

The *sūrah* immediately reverts to the small example of the lamp, which is *"lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree..."* The purest light known to the first people addressed by the Qur'ān was that of olive oil. But this is not the only reason for choosing this example. It is an example that has connotations of sacredness associated with the blessed tree. These connotations recall the image of the sacred valley, the nearest place to Arabia in which olive trees grow in abundance. The Qur'ān refers to this tree and gives it special significance: *"We bring forth... a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat."* (23: 19-20) It is a tree that lives for ages, and it brings endless benefits to man through its oil, wood, leaves and fruit. Once again the text turns from the little example to remind us of the great reality. This tree is not a particular one, and it does not belong to a particular place or direction. It is merely an example given to make the reality easier to understand. Hence, it is described as *"neither of the east nor of the west."* Moreover, its oil is not the one we see and know. It is different and far more remarkable: *"Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it."* It is so transparent and bright that it almost gives light without burning. The example concludes with another remarkable statement: *"Light upon light."* Thus, we are back with the original light that bears no comparison.

It is God's light that dispels all darkness in the heavens and the earth. It is a light whose nature and scope are beyond our comprehension. The aim here is to make our hearts aspire to see this light: *"God guides to His light him that wills [to be guided]."*

(Verse 35) Those who open their hearts to the light will see it because it spreads far and wide in the heavens and the earth. It is permanent, unending, unscreened, and it never fades. Whenever the human heart looks for it, it is sure to find it. In the midst of his confusion, man can always find it providing guidance and establishing a bond between him and his Lord.

This comparison is given by God so as to make our minds able to comprehend the nature of His light. He alone knows the full extent of our ability: *"God propounds parables for all people, since God alone has full knowledge of all things."* (Verse 35)

This light which spreads in abundance in the heavens and earth is best seen in perfect clarity in the houses of God where people's hearts look up to Him, remember Him, stand in awe of Him and dedicate themselves to Him in preference to all else:

> *In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there are [such as] extol His limitless glory, morning and evening – people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity; who are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed; who [only hope] that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them. God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning. (Verses 36-38)*

There is a close affinity between the scene of the niche in the first verse and the following scene of God's houses. This is perfectly in line with the Qur'ānic method of putting together images that have close parallels. Likewise, there is close affinity between the lamp shining with light in the niche and hearts shining with the light of glorifying God in His houses.

When God sanctions something, it takes place just as He has approved. Since He has sanctioned the raising of these houses, they are there, functioning, purified and respected. The view showing them standing tall is in harmony with God's light that radiates throughout the heavens and the earth. These houses are naturally noble which again fits perfectly with the brilliant light described earlier. Their special, venerated position makes them fit for the remembrance of God's name: *"In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them."* (Verse 36) They are also in harmony with the radiant hearts of the believers who stand up in prayer, glorify God and extol His praises. They are *"people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity."* (Verse 37) Needless to say, trade and commerce aim to make a profit. Yet although these believers are engaged in such enterprises, they are not diverted from their obligation towards God or their fellow human beings. Hence they attend regularly and properly to their prayers and pay their *zakāt* and charity. These people *"are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed."* (Verse 37) On

that day, people's hearts and eyes will be in turmoil, unsteady. It is a day of utter fear and distress. Hence, they fear what may happen to them then. In order to spare themselves, they are never diverted by their immediate concerns of business and profit from attending to their duties towards their Lord.

Yet despite their fear, they have high hopes "*that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them.*" (Verse 38) Their hopes will never be frustrated; for, "*God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning.*" (Verse 38) There are no limits to God's favours and no restrictions on what He may wish to bestow on His devoted servants.

Deeds That Come to Nothing

In contrast to this radiant light that shines throughout the heavens and the earth, focusing on the houses dedicated to God and enlightening the hearts of the faithful, the *sūrah* shows a different situation where no light can penetrate and no one is safe; a situation devoid of all goodness. That is the situation in which the unbelievers find themselves:

> *As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing. But he finds that God [has always been present] with him, and that He will pay him his account in full; for God is swift in reckoning. (Verse 39)*

This is the first of two remarkable scenes the *sūrah* paints of the unbelievers and their destiny. Both are full of life and movement. In this scene their actions are shown like a mirage in an open space. It gives a false shine which attracts the thirsty traveller who moves towards it. He is totally unaware of what he might find there, other than the prospect of quenching his thirst. Suddenly, the whole scene moves swiftly, and we see the thirsty traveller arriving at this place but finding no water to drink. Instead, he is in for a great surprise, one which he could never have imagined. It is awesome, striking fear into his heart and leaving him utterly bewildered. What he finds is the realization that God has always been present with him. He had denied God's existence, turned his back on Him and adopted a hostile attitude to faith. In his state of total oblivion to anything other than the water he needs, should he find there a human adversary, he would be startled and confused. But he finds no human opponent. He finds God Almighty who takes him to account.

And then what happens? "*God will pay him his account in full.*" All this occurs very quickly, in line with the initial and sudden shock. The final comment on this scene is "*God is swift in reckoning.*" Again the comment perfectly suits the rapidity of the scene.

In the second scene layers of darkness gather on top of each other, to contrast with the false brightness of the mirage. Great fear is transmitted by the bottomless ocean engulfed in darkness, and waves upon waves moving in a never-ending motion. Above all this, dark clouds gather. Thus, layers of darkness amass, to the extent that if someone were to hold out their hand, they would fail to see it in the engulfing darkness. Hence it is a darkness that spreads an air of fear and panic.

This is all a description of unbelief, which is shown as darkness totally isolated from the divine light that radiates throughout the universe. It is a deep error which prevents people from seeing even the nearest sign of guidance, a fear that leaves no trace of security. For, *"indeed the one from whom God withholds light shall find no light at all."* (Verse 40) God's light is guidance planted in people's hearts, giving them an informed insight, and a bond between human nature and the laws that operate in the universe at large. It is the only true enlightenment. A person who is cut off from this light remains in a darkness that cannot be removed, in a fear without security, and in error without return. At the end he finds all his actions to be a mirage leading him to ruin. No action is valid unless it is based on faith. There is no guidance without faith, and no light unless it is God's light.

All Glorify God

This is an extraordinary scene of unbelief, error and darkness in human life. Yet it is followed by one of faith, guidance and light in the great universe. This is a scene showing the entire universe with all that lives in it, human and *jinn,* planets and stars, and all beings, whether animate or inanimate, sharing in God's glorification. We feel how awesome the scene is as we hear the glorification echoed everywhere in the heavens and the earth:

> *Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all that they do. (Verse 41)*

Man does not live alone in this universe. All around him, to his right and to his left, above him and beneath him, and in the expanse beyond, whether reached by his imagination or not, there are beings God has created with different natures, forms and shapes. All share in their belief in God, turn to Him and extol His praises. He *"has full knowledge of all that they do."*

The Qur'ān directs man to look around him: all is of God's making and all living things everywhere in the heavens and the earth are His creatures, glorifying Him and singing His praises. The Qur'ān also directs our full attention to something we

see every day without stirring any feeling in us because of its familiarity: it is the scene of birds lifting up their legs and spreading out their wings as they fly. They also glorify God. *"Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him."* (Verse 41) Only man neglects to glorify his Lord when he is the one who should be most aware of the importance of believing in God and glorifying Him.

In this scene, the whole universe appears full of humility as it turns to its Creator, singing His praises, addressing its prayers to Him. This it does by nature. Its obedience to God is represented in its laws which operate by God's will. When man refines his senses, he sees this scene as reality, as though he hears the rhythm of God's glorification echoed throughout the universe. He shares with all creatures their prayers and appeals to God. Such was Muhammad, God's Messenger, (peace be upon him). When he walked, he heard the gravel under his feet singing God's praises. Such was David too for when he chanted his Psalms, the mountains and birds chanted with him.

"To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and to God shall all return." (Verse 42) No one should turn anywhere other than to Him, and no refuge is to be sought except with Him. Meeting Him is inevitable. His punishment, if deserved, cannot be averted except through His grace. To Him all shall return.

Snatching Eyesight

Next the *sūrah* portrays yet another scene which people pass by paying little attention to it. It is very pleasant to the eye, carrying a message to the heart and inviting the mind to reflect on God's creation as well as the pointers to faith available everywhere in the universe. It provides an area to contemplate the only source of real light, right guidance and true faith.

> *Are you not aware that it is God who causes the clouds to move onwards, then joins them together, then piles them up in masses, until you can see rain come forth from their midst. He it is who sends down from the skies mountainous masses charged with hail, striking with it whom He wills and averting it from whom He wills. The flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their sight. (Verse 43)*

The scene is portrayed at leisure, slowly, with its component parts being raised up for reflection before they combine panoramically. All this is done deliberately, so that the very sight of these details touches people's hearts and awakens their minds to reflection on God's perfect design.

It is God's design that drives the clouds from one place to another, before allowing these clouds to come together and pile up into a great mass. When this becomes

heavy, it bears water that begins to ooze out and then pour down in heavy rain. When piled up, the clouds look like great mountains, producing small pieces of hail. No one sees the clouds look like mountains better than a passenger in a plane that flies higher than the clouds, or moves through them. The scene at this elevation shows the clouds just like mountains, their huge sizes, steep cliffs, as well as high and low peaks. It is a scene that shows a reality people could not have seen before they were able to fly.

These mountains are subservient to God's orders, functioning in accordance with His law that governs the universe. It is in accordance with this law that God lets rain drop over any community He wants and diverts it from others as He wills. The scene is completed with this final statement: *"The flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their sight."* (Verse 43) It thus provides an element of harmony with the great light that fills the whole universe.

And yet there is another universal scene, showing the night and day: *"It is God who causes night and day to alternate. In this too there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see."* (Verse 44)

When we reflect on the alternation of the night and day, in a perfect system that never fails or slackens, our senses are sharpened and we can better appreciate the perfection of God's work and His law that governs the universe. The Qur'ān alerts our hearts to such scenes which we normally overlook because of their familiarity. Yet they contain a clear message. Hence the Qur'ān helps our hearts to always Face the universe with sharpened sensitivity and fresh reaction. Many a heart has wondered at the alternation of night and day. Yet it is always the same, losing nothing of its striking beauty. It is only our hearts that have lost their interaction with this great phenomenon. Much indeed do we lose of the beauty of this universe when we look at such phenomena paying little attention to them only because they have become familiar.

The Qur'ān reinvigorates our blunted sensitivity, touches our cold hearts and awakens our tired minds so that we can look at the universe as though we see it for the first time. We thus stop at every phenomenon reflecting on how it works and enquiring about its secrets. We see God's hand doing its work in everything around us, and we reflect on His wisdom and the signs pointing to Him.

Limitless is God in His glory. He wants to give us more of His favours. He wants to gift us the whole universe every time we contemplate one of its phenomena in a way that we appreciate it as though we are seeing it for the first time. Thus, we are alert to the universe and its message a countless number of times. We then enjoy it anew every time we look at it.

This universe is beautiful, awesome and has a nature that is harmonious with our

own nature. Both are derived from the same source, subject to the same law. Thus when we relate to the universe we feel greater reassurance, and we experience the sort of happiness that we feel when we meet someone dear who has been absent for a long time. Besides, in the universe we see God's light, for *"God is the light of the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 35) We experience this light in the great expanse of the universe, as well as within ourselves, at the same moment at which we look at the universe with an open heart that wants to understand the secret of God's elaborate planning.

Therefore, the Qur'ān reawakens us time and again, drawing our hearts and souls to a variety of great universal scenes, so that we do not pass by them with closed eyes and sealed hearts. If we do, we end our life journey with very little gain to show for our efforts.

The *sūrah* continues to portray scenes of the universe arousing our interest in them. It shows how all life, with its rich variety, originates from the same source, and has the same nature: *"God has created every animal from water; and among them are such as creep on their bellies, and such as walk on two legs, and others yet on four. God creates what He wills. Surely God has power over all things."* (Verse 45)

Here the Qur'ān states in a very simple way a great fact that confirms that the origin of all creatures is water. This could mean that water is the basic component of all living species. It could also mean what contemporary scientists have been trying to prove, namely that life started in the sea, making water its first origin. Later, numerous species came into existence.

We, however, do not like to link any fact stated in the Qur'ān with scientific theory, because such theories admit change, modification, or abrogation. Hence, we take this statement at its face value, confirming its truth which makes clear that God has created all living things from water. This means that having the same origin, they present, as we clearly see with our eyes, a wide and rich variety: crawlers creep on their bellies, while man and birds walk on two legs, but most animals use all four limbs when they walk. All this takes place in accordance with the laws of nature God has set in operation. Nothing occurs by chance or coincidence. *"God creates what He wills,"* unrestricted by form or shape. The laws that operate in the universe have been established by God's will: *"Surely God has power over all things."* (Verse 45)

With the great variety that we *see* in all creatures, an almost endless range of shapes, sizes, colours and characteristics is set before us. Yet they all originate from the same source. This suggests that it is all intended as such, reflecting the elaborate planning in the universe at large. It portrays as false the notion that life started by mere coincidence. What coincidence could give birth to such planning or such great variety? It is all the work of God who, in His wisdom, has given every living soul its shape and form and guided it to what suits it best in

this life.

4
Guidance to the Straight Path

لَّقَدۡ أَنزَلۡنَآ ءَايَٰتٖ مُّبَيِّنَٰتٖۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَهۡدِي مَن يَشَآءُ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٖ مُّسۡتَقِيمٖ ٤٦

We have sent down revelations that make things manifest; and God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided]. (46)

وَيَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَبِٱلرَّسُولِ وَأَطَعۡنَا ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّىٰ فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ ذَٰلِكَۚ وَمَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ بِٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٤٧

They say: 'We believe in God and in the Messenger, and we obey.' But then some of them turn away after this [assertion]. Surely these are not believers. (47)

وَإِذَا دُعُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ لِيَحۡكُمَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ إِذَا فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡهُم مُّعۡرِضُونَ ٤٨

Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; (48)

وَإِن يَكُن لَّهُمُ ٱلۡحَقُّ يَأۡتُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهِ مُذۡعِنِينَ ٤٩

but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission. (49)

أَفِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ أَمِ ٱرۡتَابُوٓاْ أَمۡ يَخَافُونَ أَن يَحِيفَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَرَسُولُهُۥۚ بَلۡ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٥٠

Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them? Nay, it is they who are the wrongdoers. (50)

إِنَّمَا كَانَ قَوۡلَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ إِذَا دُعُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ لِيَحۡكُمَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ أَن يَقُولُواْ سَمِعۡنَا وَأَطَعۡنَاۚ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ

The response of believers, whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he may judge between them, is none other than, 'We have heard, and we obey.' It is they that shall be successful. (51)

۝٥١

وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَيَخۡشَ ٱللَّهَ وَيَتَّقۡهِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡفَآئِزُونَ ۝٥٢

۞ وَأَقۡسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ جَهۡدَ أَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡ لَئِنۡ أَمَرۡتَهُمۡ لَيَخۡرُجُنَّۖ قُل لَّا تُقۡسِمُواْۖ طَاعَةٞ مَّعۡرُوفَةٌۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ خَبِيرُۢ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ ۝٥٣

قُلۡ أَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱلرَّسُولَۖ فَإِن تَوَلَّوۡاْ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيۡهِ مَا حُمِّلَ وَعَلَيۡكُم مَّا حُمِّلۡتُمۡۖ وَإِن تُطِيعُوهُ تَهۡتَدُواْۚ وَمَا عَلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ إِلَّا ٱلۡبَلَٰغُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ۝٥٤

وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنكُمۡ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَيَسۡتَخۡلِفَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ كَمَا ٱسۡتَخۡلَفَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمۡ دِينَهُمُ ٱلَّذِي ٱرۡتَضَىٰ لَهُمۡ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ خَوۡفِهِمۡ أَمۡنٗاۚ يَعۡبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشۡرِكُونَ بِي شَيۡـٔٗاۚ وَمَن كَفَرَ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡفَٰسِقُونَ ۝٥٥

وَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱلرَّسُولَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ۝٥٦

لَا تَحۡسَبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مُعۡجِزِينَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَمَأۡوَىٰهُمُ ٱلنَّارُۖ وَلَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ

Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph. (52)

They swear their most solemn oaths by God that if you [God's Messenger] should ever bid them to do so, they would most certainly march forth. Say: 'Do not swear. Your [sort of] obedience is well known. God is certainly well aware of all that you do.' (53)

Say: 'Obey God, and obey the Messenger.' But if you turn away, he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with, and you, for what you have been charged with. If you obey him, you shall be rightly guided. The Messenger is not bound to do more than clearly deliver his message. (54)

God has promised those of you who believe and do good deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, in the same way as He caused those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has chosen for them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security. They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever. Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed wicked. (55)

Attend regularly to your prayers and pay your zakāt, and obey the Messenger, so that you might be graced with God's mercy. (56)

Do not think that the unbelievers can frustrate [God's plan] on earth. The fire is their abode, and vile indeed is such a journey's end. (57)

Overview

Having thus taken us on a broad round of inspiring universal scenes, the *sūrah* brings us back to its main theme, namely good manners and moral values the Qur'ān aims to establish in the Muslim community. Once more we see that the Qur'ān wants hearts to be purified so as to be bright, reflecting the great light God has placed in the heavens and the earth.

Earlier in the *sūrah* mention was made of people who are not distracted by their business or commercial dealings from their duties of remembering God, attending regularly to prayers and paying their *zakāt*. It also highlighted the situation of the unbelievers, their deeds, the layers of darkness in which they live and their eventual destiny. Now the *sūrah* speaks of the hypocrites who benefit nothing by the clear signs God has placed all around them, or by His revelations that set all things most clearly. These turn their backs on divine guidance. Even though they profess to be believers, their attitude is markedly different from that of believers who obey God's Messenger and are happy with his judgement in their affairs and disputes. In marked contrast to their arrogance, the believers' behaviour confirms what they profess. And it is the believers that God has promised to establish in the land where they will be able to practise their faith and conduct their lives in line with His teachings. This is their reward for adopting the right attitude towards God and His Messenger, obeying them in all situations, despite the fact that the unbelievers stand in opposition to them for so doing. The *sūrah* confirms once again that the unbelievers cannot defy God. They will receive their fair punishment in hell, the worst abode for anyone.

Contrasting Attitudes

"We have sent down revelations that make things manifest; and God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided]." (Verse 46) God's revelations provide clarity, allowing God's resplendent light to be seen. They point to the sources of His guidance, making clear what is good and what is evil. They set out the Islamic way of life without ambiguity or equivocation. They define the divine rules which must be implemented in human life on earth. When people implement them in their lives and

resort to them for judgement in their disputes, they implement a code that is clearly set out, providing all guarantees that ensure equity and justice for all, and which allow no confusion between true and false or permissible and forbidden.

"*God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided].*" (Verse 46) The Arabic statement could also be read as "God guides whom He wills onto a straight way." This is indeed the translation adopted by most translators. If we read it in this way then the statement makes clear that God's will is free from all restriction. However, God has established a way to ensure guidance. Any human being who moves towards that way will definitely receive God's light and guidance. By God's will, their path will be made smooth until they reach their destination. Those who turn away from it will lose their guiding light and become hardened in error. Such is God's will with regard to providing guidance to mankind.

The *sūrah* points out that despite the revelations and the signs God had placed in the universe, there is a special type of people who are hypocrites, claiming to be Muslims, but showing no respect for Islamic values:

> *They say: 'We believe in God and in the Messenger, and we obey. 'But then some of them turn away after this [assertion]. Surely these are not believers. Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission. Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them? Nay, it is they who are the wrongdoers. (Verses 47-50)*

When faith is genuinely established in a person's heart, it is reflected in that person's behaviour. Islam is a proactive faith that cannot remain idle. When it is genuinely accepted as a personal belief, it moves on to show its influence in practice. It must be translated into action. The Islamic method of educating its followers always seeks to transform the mental acceptance of faith into a practical approach that soon becomes a habit or a rule. At the same time, it seeks to provide the mental motivation to make belief and action mutually complementary.

The hypocrites used to claim that they believed in God and His Messenger and that they were keen to obey them, but theirs was a hollow, verbal claim that lacked practical credence. They simply turned away, making their actions belie their claims. "*Surely these are not believers,*" because believers confirm with their actions what they claim to be their faith. Faith is not a toy which a person uses for amusement before discarding it. It is something that settles in a person's heart, reshaping his feelings and influencing his actions. Moreover, when it is firmly established in someone's mind and heart, there is no going back on it.

Those who claimed to be believers did not hesitate to contradict that claim when they were summoned to put their disputes to God's Messenger for judgement on the basis of His law: *"Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission."* (Verses 48-49) They were well aware that a judgement made by God and His Messenger could only seek to establish what is right and ensure justice. It would never be influenced by personal likings. But such hypocrites did not care for justice and right. Hence, they were not prepared to seek the Prophet's judgement. Indeed, they refused to put their disputes to him, except when they were sure that justice was on their side. In such a situation, they did not hesitate to go to him, declaring their prior acceptance of his judgement, because they were certain that it would be in their favour. It would be a judgement on the basis of God's law that gave everyone their due.

Such people provide a typical example of hypocrites at all times: they dare not declare their disbelief; so they pretend to be Muslim. Yet they do not submit to God's law. When they are called upon to put their cases to God and His Messenger for judgement they refuse, seeking any excuse. They are described as unbelievers, because a genuine believer will never reject God's judgement. To accept such judgement is the practical evidence of belief. It is the attitude that confirms strong belief and due respect to God and His Messenger. Only a person whose heart has not been enlightened by faith and who has not adopted Islamic manners rejects God's Messenger's judgement.

Hence, their attitude is the subject of questions that confirm the fact that their hearts are diseased and wonders at their doubts: *"Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them?"* (Verse 50)

The first question requires no confirmation, for heart disease is sure to bring about such an effect. No one with a sound human nature could deviate so badly from the truth. It is heart disease, a disease that makes someone imbalanced, unable to appreciate true faith and its moral code.

The second question wonders at them doubting God's judgement when they claim to believe in Him. Do they doubt that it comes from God, or that it is the judgement that administers justice? Whatever the case, their attitude differs from that of believers.

The third question combines wonder with denunciation. Do they fear that God and His Messenger might be unfair to them? It is most singular for anyone to entertain such a fear. God is the Creator of all people: it is inconceivable that He would favour some of His creatures at the expense of others. *"Nay, it is they who are*

the wrongdoers." (Verse 50)

God's judgement is the only judgement that is free of all prejudice, because God is fair to all and does not deal unjustly with anyone. All of His creation are to Him in the same position. Hence, He does not favour any of them at the expense of another. Any judgement other than God's may be susceptible to unfairness. When people legislate, they cannot entirely free themselves of leaning towards what serves their interests. This applies to all human beings; be they individuals, a class or government.

When an individual legislates, he is bound to look for what ensures his own protection and serves his own interests. The same applies when a class, country or a block of countries legislates for another. But when God legislates, no personal security, protection or interest comes into play. His legislation aims to ensure absolute justice which cannot be achieved under any law other than divine law. Hence, those who reject God's judgement, and that of His Messenger, are indeed unjust and wrongdoers. They do not want justice to be administered or right to be supreme. In fact, deep at heart they know that they do not doubt that God's judgement only seeks to ensure justice. The point is that *"it is they who are the wrongdoers."* (Verse 50)

The Road to True Success

True believers have a different attitude that reflects their complete respect for God's judgement. When they are summoned so that God's Messenger can arbitrate in their disputes, their reaction reflects the profound enlightenment of their hearts: *"The response of believers, whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he may judge between them, is none other than, 'We have heard, and we obey.' It is they that shall be successful."* (Verse 51)

This is an attitude of complete obedience. There is no hesitation, argument or dispute, because it is an obedience based on complete trust that God's judgement is right and just, and whatever differs with it is based on personal prejudice. Such obedience testifies to complete submission to God, who gives life and conducts it as He wills. It demonstrates full trust that what God chooses for people is infinitely better than what they choose for themselves. God, the Creator, knows His creation better than they know themselves.

"It is they that shall be successful." (Verse 51) Since God conducts their affairs, organizes their relations and judges between them on the basis of His knowledge and justice, they must be in a far better position than those who rely, in all such matters, on other human beings who are similarly short of knowledge. Besides, the believers are successful because they follow a single straight path that allows no deviation.

They are confident of the soundness of their code of living, follow it without hesitation, which means that their energy, talents and skills work in coherence. They suffer no internal division based on conflicting desires. They follow their own path, charted for them by God.

"Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph." (Verse 52) The previous verse spoke of obedience and submission when judgement is made. This verse speaks of complete obedience in all matters, implementing every order or prohibition. Such obedience must be coupled with God consciousness and standing in awe of Him. The latter is more pervasive because it entails watching God and feeling His presence at every turn. This makes a person very uneasy about committing anything that God has forbidden, for they are ashamed and fear His punishment.

"Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph." (Verse 52) They save themselves in this life and in the life to come. This is what God has promised, and God is always true to His promise. They deserve to triumph, as they have practically taken the necessary measures to ensure such a triumph. Obedience to God and His Messenger requires diligent following of the right way God in His wisdom has defined for mankind. Following this way automatically ensures success in this life and in the life to come. Moreover, standing in awe of God and fearing Him ensure continuity in one's conduct, helping one to ignore all temptations that lure believers away from their straight path.

Obeying God and His Messenger, coupled with fearing God, provide a high standard of propriety that reflects a person's enlightenment and strong bond with God. It also reflects the dignity of believers. Obedience to anyone or any authority means humiliation unless it is based on obeying God and His Messenger. No honourable believer will accept such humiliation, for a true believer will never bow his head before anyone other than God Almighty.

Having so contrasted the attitudes of believers and hypocrites, the *sūrah* now resumes its discussion of the latter's behaviour, making it clear that only one sort of attitude can be adopted by believers. It then moves on to outline God's promise to the believers.

> *They swear their most solemn oaths by God that if you [God's Messenger] should ever bid them to do so, they would most certainly march forth. Say: 'Do not swear. Your [sort of] obedience is well known. God is certainly well aware of all that you do. 'Say: 'Obey God, and obey the Messenger.' But if you turn away, he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with, and you, for what you have been charged with. If you obey him, you shall be rightly guided. The Messenger is not bound to do*

more than clearly deliver his message. (Verses 53-54)

The hypocrites used to solemnly swear in front of the Prophet that he needed only to give them his orders and they would readily join him on any expedition against his enemies. They would not hesitate to fight for Islam under his banner. But God was fully aware that they were lying. Hence, He decries their assertions and looks at their oaths with sarcasm: *"Do not swear. Your obedience is well known."* (Verse 53) This means that there is no need for their oaths, because their obedience is too well known to need any assertion or oath. It is as if we say to a person whom we know to be a habitual liar that he need not assert to us that he is saying the truth, because we know him to be always truthful.

This sarcastic reply is followed by the assertion: *"God is certainly well aware of all that you do."* (Verse 53) He is certainly in no need of their oaths. He knows that they would not obey any order to go to war, and that they would not join the Prophet when he went on such an expedition. Therefore, a fresh order is given to them to show true obedience to God and His Messenger, not the sort they are known to show, because that is false. *"Say: Obey God, and obey the Messenger."* (Verse 54)

"But if you turn away," resorting to your habitual hypocrisy, then *"he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with."* (Verse 54) His only task for which he is answerable is to deliver God's message, as he has surely done. *"And you, for what you have been charged with."* (Verse 54) Your task is to obey him most sincerely. But so far, you have not done so. However, *"if you obey him, you shall be rightly guided."* (Verse 54) You will be following the right path that leads you to success in both this life and the life to come. *"The Messenger is not bound to do more than clearly deliver his message."* (Verse 54) He is not responsible for your acceptance or rejection of the faith. If you turn away, he will not be deemed to have fallen short of fulfilling his task. You are the ones who will have to account for that, and you are the ones who run the risk of being punished for your disobedience of the orders given to you by God and His Messenger.

God's True Promise

Once the attitude of the hypocrites has been discussed and settled, the *sūrah* leaves them aside and speaks about obedient believers. It outlines the reward of sincere obedience and proactive faith. The first instalment of such reward is given in this life, before human beings are held to account on the Day of Resurrection.

God has promised those of you who believe and do good deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, in the same way as He caused those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for

> *them the religion which He has chosen for them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security. They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever. Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed wicked. (Verse 55)*

Such is God's promise to the believers who do good deeds and follow the Prophet Muhammad's guidance. They will be given power and will be established on earth. Their state of fear will be replaced by a state of reassurance and security. God's promise will always come true. It is, then, pertinent to ask about the nature of faith and the practical fulfilment of this promise by God.

True faith, which ensures that God's promise comes true, is great indeed. It influences all human activity and defines its direction. Once faith is well established in a person's heart, it begins to manifest itself in the form of positive and constructive action undertaken for God's sake and addressed to Him. It means full compliance with His orders in all matters, major and minor. It transforms a believer's desires and inclinations so as to make them all in line with the Prophet's guidance, because such guidance has been given to him by God.

It is the sort of faith that fills people's whole entity, their feelings, aspirations, natural inclinations, actions, movements, as well as their behaviour at home, in society and with their Lord. All these must be addressed or dedicated to God alone. This is specifically mentioned in the *sūrah* as justification for giving believers power and establishing them on earth: *"They will thus worship Me alone and associate no partners with Me whatsoever."* (Verse 55) Idolatry can take different shapes and forms, and can creep into a person's mind through a variety of ways and means. The *sūrah* makes it clear however that to address any action or feeling to anyone other than God is a manifestation of idolatry.

Belief in God is a complete way of life. It incorporates all divine orders including the provision of all means, taking all precautions and ensuring all that is necessary to fulfil the great trust of being in charge of the earth and building human life on it. So what does this involve in reality?

It does not just entail being in power and forming a government. Rather it involves all this with the proviso that it is used for promoting sound human life and the implementation of the way of life God has chosen for mankind. It is only through such implementation that humanity can achieve the level of perfection that befits the species God has honoured.

The trust given to man on earth is an ability to build and promote goodness, not to corrupt and destroy. It involves ensuring justice and happiness for all, not injustice or suppression. It leads to the elevation of humanity and human life, and not letting them sink to the level of animals.

It is such power and such trust that God has promised the believers who do good deeds. He promised to give them power on earth, just as He gave it to earlier communities of believers, so that they would put into practice the constitution He chose for mankind, establish justice and enable humanity to attain sublimity. People who spread corruption and injustice, and promote carnal desires are not in the position of trustees. They are subjected to a test or are the means to test others. All this is done to fulfil God's purpose.

To further demonstrate this aspect of giving power to the believers is the fact that this promise is followed in the same verse by a further one: *"of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has chosen for them."* (Verse 55) The firm establishment of His religion means that this will take a firm hold on people's hearts on the one hand, and form the basis on which all life affairs are conducted on the other. God has promised the believers who do righteous deeds to grant them power on earth and to make their faith govern human life. Their faith bids them to do well, establish justice, shun worldly desires, and build a happy human life making good use of all the resources God has placed on earth. It also bids the believers to dedicate all this to God alone.

Furthermore, God's promise to the believers stipulates *"that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security."* The Prophet's Companions were for a long period of time in a state of fear. They could not put down their arms, even after the Prophet and his Companions had migrated to Madīnah, the city that served as the first base for Islam in history.

Al-Rabī ` ibn Anas quotes Abū al-`Āliyah's comments on this verse:

"The Prophet and his Companions remained in Makkah for around ten years calling on people to believe in God and to worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. But they did so in secret, as they were in a state of fear and were prevented from fighting. When they later migrated to Madīnah, God bid them to fight for their cause. This meant that they were again in a state of fear, wearing their body armour day and night. They persevered for as long as God willed. One of his Companions asked the Prophet: Are we to remain in fear for the rest of time? Will there come a time when we can put our armaments aside?' The Prophet said: 'It will not be long before any one of you can sit among a huge crowd without anyone carrying arms.' Soon afterwards, God revealed this verse. The Prophet was able to establish his authority over the whole of Arabia and his followers were in a state of security. They put down their arms. Sometime later, the Prophet passed away, and the Muslims remained in security during the reigns of Abū Bakr, `Umar and `Uthmān. Then friction occurred between them and God allowed fear to creep into their midst. They had to employ guards. When they changed their overall stance, their conditions also changed."

Not Included in God's Promise

"*Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed wicked.*" (Verse 55) They are the ones who do not meet God's conditions, and, therefore, God's promise does not apply to them.

God's promise was fulfilled once, and remained effective for as long as the Muslims continued to meet His conditions: "*They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever.*" (Verse 55) This includes any partners, whether in the form of deities to which worship is addressed or desires and ambitions. They must believe and do righteous deeds. God's promise applies to anyone who meets these conditions, and it remains in force till the end of human life. However, victory, power and security may be slow in coming, but this will only be the result of a failure by the believers to meet some aspects of the conditions outlined, or their failure to attend to a particular duty involved. But when the Muslim community has benefited by the trials they have to endure and passed the test God sets for them; when they have endured fear and sought security; when they yearn for dignity after having suffered humiliation; when they aspire to having power after being weak; God's promise will be fulfilled to them in spite of any opposing power. One proviso applies, however: in their perseverance through tests and trials, and in their aspiration to the fulfilment of God's promise, the believers must always resort to the means God has outlined and fulfil the conditions He has made clear.

Therefore, the promise is followed with an order to attend to Islamic duties, such as prayer, *zakāt* and obeying the Prophet. Moreover, the Prophet and his followers must never give any weight to the power of unbelievers who fight them on account of their faith.

> *Attend regularly to your prayers and pay your zakāt, and obey the Messenger, so that you might be graced with God's mercy. Do not think that the unbelievers can frustrate [God's plan] on earth. The fire is their abode, and vile indeed is such a journey's end. (Verses 56-57)*

Believers must maintain their bond with God, keep their minds and hearts on the right path through prayer, resist stinginess, purify themselves as individuals and as a community through the payment of *zakāt,* obey the Prophet and accept his judgement, implement God's law in all matters, great or small, so as to set human life on the path He has chosen. Believers must do all this so that they "*might be graced with God's mercy.*" (Verse 56) In this life, God's mercy removes corruption, fear, worry and error, and in the hereafter, it removes His punishment.

Addressing them directly, God says to the believers: if you remain steadfast,

following My path, then you need not worry about the might of the unbelievers. They cannot frustrate God's purpose on earth. The power they apparently wield will not stand in your way. You are far stronger when equipped with your faith, implement your system and raise whatever power you can muster. In material power, you may not be a match for them, but believers who strive for the truth can work miracles.

Islam is a great truth which must be carefully examined by anyone who wishes to see the fulfilment of God's promise outlined in the above verses. Such a person must also look at how it came true in human history, understand the true meaning of its conditions before entertaining any doubt about it or worry about the slowness of its fulfilment.

Never did the Muslim community follow God's way, implementing the constitution He has laid down, allowing it to operate in all spheres of life, without reaping the reward of God's promise to grant it power and security. Whenever it abandoned this course, it went to the end of the line, suffered humiliation, lived in fear and misery and saw its faith retreat from guiding human life.

Nevertheless, God's promise remains in force, and His conditions are well defined. Whoever wants to see the promise fulfilled, must do their task and fulfil its conditions. No one is ever more true to his promises than God.

5
Perfect Manners

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لِيَسۡتَـٔۡذِنكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُكُمۡ وَٱلَّذِينَ لَمۡ يَبۡلُغُواْ ٱلۡحُلُمَ مِنكُمۡ ثَلَٰثَ مَرَّٰتٖۚ مِّن قَبۡلِ صَلَوٰةِ ٱلۡفَجۡرِ وَحِينَ تَضَعُونَ ثِيَابَكُم مِّنَ ٱلظَّهِيرَةِ وَمِنۢ بَعۡدِ صَلَوٰةِ ٱلۡعِشَآءِۚ ثَلَٰثُ عَوۡرَٰتٖ لَّكُمۡۚ لَيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ وَلَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ جُنَاحُۢ بَعۡدَهُنَّۚ طَوَّٰفُونَ عَلَيۡكُم بَعۡضُكُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمُ ٱلۡأٓيَٰتِۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٞ ٥٨

Believers! Let those whom you rightfully possess, and those of you who have not yet attained to puberty, ask leave of you at three times of day: before the prayer of daybreak, and whenever you lay aside your garments in the middle of the day, and after the prayer of nightfall. These are three occasions on which you may happen to be undressed. Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (58)

وَإِذَا بَلَغَ ٱلۡأَطۡفَٰلُ مِنكُمُ ٱلۡحُلُمَ فَلۡيَسۡتَـٔۡذِنُواْ كَمَا ٱسۡتَـٔۡذَنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٞ ٥٩

Yet when your children attain to puberty, let them ask leave of you, as do those senior to them [in age]. Thus does God make revelations clear to you. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (59)

وَٱلۡقَوَٰعِدُ مِنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ ٱلَّٰتِي لَا يَرۡجُونَ نِكَاحٗا فَلَيۡسَ عَلَيۡهِنَّ جُنَاحٌ أَن يَضَعۡنَ ثِيَابَهُنَّ غَيۡرَ مُتَبَرِّجَٰتِۭ بِزِينَةٖۖ وَأَن يَسۡتَعۡفِفۡنَ خَيۡرٞ لَّهُنَّۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٞ ٦٠

Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage incur no sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, provided they do not make a showy display of their charms. But it is better for them to be modest. God hears all and knows all. (60)

لَّيْسَ عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَن تَأْكُلُوا۟ مِنۢ بُيُوتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ ءَابَآئِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ إِخْوَٰنِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخَوَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَعْمَٰمِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ عَمَّٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخْوَٰلِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ خَٰلَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكْتُم مَّفَاتِحَهُۥٓ أَوْ صَدِيقِكُمْ ۚ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَأْكُلُوا۟ جَمِيعًا أَوْ أَشْتَاتًا ۚ فَإِذَا دَخَلْتُم بُيُوتًا فَسَلِّمُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ تَحِيَّةً مِّنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ مُبَٰرَكَةً طَيِّبَةً ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick; and neither to yourselves for eating from your houses, or your fathers' houses, or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the houses of your friends. You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately. But when you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God. Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason. (61)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَإِذَا كَانُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ عَلَىٰٓ أَمْرٍ جَامِعٍ لَّمْ يَذْهَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يَسْتَـْٔذِنُوهُ ۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَـْٔذِنُونَكَ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ ۚ فَإِذَا ٱسْتَـْٔذَنُوكَ لِبَعْضِ شَأْنِهِمْ فَأْذَن لِّمَن شِئْتَ مِنْهُمْ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمُ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (62)

لَّا تَجْعَلُوا۟ دُعَآءَ ٱلرَّسُولِ بَيْنَكُمْ كَدُعَآءِ بَعْضِكُم بَعْضًا ۚ قَدْ يَعْلَمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَسَلَّلُونَ مِنكُمْ لِوَاذًا ۚ فَلْيَحْذَرِ ٱلَّذِينَ يُخَالِفُونَ عَنْ أَمْرِهِۦٓ أَن تُصِيبَهُمْ فِتْنَةٌ أَوْ يُصِيبَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٣﴾

Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them. (63)

أَلَآ إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ قَدْ يَعْلَمُ مَآ أَنتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَيَوْمَ يُرْجَعُونَ إِلَيْهِ فَيُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (64)

Overview

Islam is a complete way of life, setting a code that organizes human life in all situations. It lays down values that govern all human relations and social actions. Islam establishes values that are relevant to points of detail in daily situations and behaviour, in the same way as it lays down values and principles that govern serious and momentous matters. It ensures harmony between the two and makes acceptance by God and earning His pleasure the goal of all human activities.

The present *sūrah* provides an example of such harmony. It specifies certain mandatory punishments for serious offences, and it speaks of seeking permission before entering others' homes. Alongside the two it portrays spectacular scenes from the universe. The *sūrah* then speaks of the Muslims' proper attitude as they submit to the rule of God and His Messenger, contrasting this with the hypocrites' insolence. Alongside this comes God's true promise to the believers that they will be established on earth and live in peace and security. In this last passage, the *sūrah* again speaks of proper manners within the home, and when inmates need to seek permission before entering rooms, so as not to intrude on others' privacy. It also makes clear the requirement of seeking permission before leaving the Prophet. It also outlines the proper manner of visiting relatives and friends where one may partake of food. Alongside this, it outlines the proper way of addressing the Prophet. All these form part of the Islamic manners that every Muslim community should adopt, realizing that the Qur'ān provides guidance in all life situations, even though they

may not be of a serious nature.

Good Manners at Home

> *Believers! Let those whom you rightfully possess, and those of you who have not yet attained to puberty, ask leave of you at three times of day: before the prayer of daybreak, and whenever you lay aside your garments in the middle of the day, and after the prayer of nightfall. These are three occasions on which you may happen to be undressed. Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 58)*

Earlier in the *sūrah* the proper manner of seeking permission before entering a house is outlined. Now the *sūrah* speaks of the need to seek permission within the home. Servants, who were slaves, and children who are not so young but have not yet attained puberty enter rooms without knocking to seek permission, except during three times of the day. These are periods of relaxation when adults may be undressed. These three occasions are: 1) shortly before the daybreak prayer, i.e. *fajr,* when people normally still wear their night garments, or they may be putting on their day clothes in readiness to go out; 2) about midday when people take a nap after changing into more comfortable garments for relaxation; and 3) after they have offered their nightfall prayer, i.e. *`ishā'.* At this time, people put on their night clothes for more comfort.

During these three periods, servants and children below the age of puberty must knock before entering rooms in the house so that they do not see their relatives undressed. Many people do not observe such manners at home, thinking little of the psychological and moral effects of their laxity. Or they may think that servants do not stare at their masters' nakedness, or that children below the age of puberty do not take notice. With the progress achieved today in the field of human psychology, experts emphasize that people are often influenced for life by what they see or experience in childhood, and that such experience may cause them psychological problems that are not easy to cure. God, who knows everything, including the finest and most subtle feelings, outlines these manners which He wants the Muslim community to observe, so that it remains a community with sound hearts and minds, free from psychological problems.

These three occasions are specified because it is more likely that people will be undressed. Children and servants are not required to knock before entry all the time, because this would be difficult to observe, considering that these two groups frequently enter their elders' rooms: either because servants are going about their tasks or because children cannot stay away from their parents for long. Hence the

description: "*Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another.*" We see how the divine instruction strikes a balance between the need to ensure that people do not show their nakedness in front of others, even though they may be young or servants, and the practical need for easy access. Hence, the instruction does not order seeking permission to enter on all occasions.

When children attain to puberty, the same rules of entry apply to them as to those who are not related to the family. This means that they must seek permission before entering a room at any time, in accordance with the general rules outlined earlier in the *sūrah:* "*Yet when your children attain to puberty, let them ask leave of you, as do those senior to them [in age]. Thus does God make revelations clear to you. God is All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 59)

We note that the final comment in these verses stresses God's knowledge and wisdom, because the instructions given are based on His knowledge of our inner feelings and the manners that are most likely to refine such feelings. In His wisdom, God lays down the teachings that set minds and hearts on the right course.

Rules Relaxed

Earlier in the *sūrah* orders were given requiring women to cover their charms and adornments so that there is little room for temptation or exciting desire. An exception is made here in the case of older women who no longer have the desire to consort with men, and who no longer excite men's desires:

> *Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage incur no sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, provided they do not make a showy display of their charms. But it is better for them to be modest. God hears all and knows all. (Verse 60)*

Such elder women may, if they choose, put aside their cloaks and outer garments, provided that this does not expose their nakedness, and that they do not make a show, displaying their charms or adornments. It is better for them that they should not do so, continuing to wear their outer, loose garments. In describing such modesty the *sūrah* uses the word *yasta`fifna,* which is derived from the Arabic root *`iffah,* meaning chastity. Thus, this attitude is described as aiming to maintain chastity because of the close link between chastity and covering women's charms, while exposing such charms is closely linked to temptation. This instruction is in line with the general Islamic view that the best method of guarding people's chastity is to reduce the chances for temptation.

"*God hears all and knows all.*" He is aware of all things, including what is uttered

and what is entertained in one's thoughts. The question here is one of intention and conscience.

The *sūrah* then tackles another aspect of relations with friends and relatives:

> *No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick; and neither to yourselves for eating from your houses, or your fathers' houses, or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the houses of your friends. You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately. But when you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God. Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason. (Verse 61)*

Reports suggest that in the early days of Islam, Muslims used to eat in such houses mentioned in this verse without asking the owners' permission. They also took with them poor people who were blind, lame or ill. Then when averse was revealed stating: *"Do not devour one another's property wrongfully,"* (2: 188) they felt very uneasy about eating in relatives' homes. Furthermore, such poor people as were blind, lame or ill felt uneasy about joining them, unless they were specifically invited by the owner. This reflects the keen sensitivity of the early Muslims, and their desire to avoid anything that was even remotely connected with what God prohibited. Hence, this present verse was revealed, making it perfectly permissible for relatives to eat in the homes of such relatives mentioned in the verse, and to bring with them such needy people as the verse describes. All this is understood to be contingent on the clear understanding that the home owner is not averse to this, and their eating in his home does not cause him any harm. Adding such a proviso is based on general rules like those outlined in the following two *ĥadīths:* "There shall be no infliction of harm on oneself or others," and "It is not permissible to take the property of a Muslim except with his consent." [Related by al-Shāfi`ī]

Since this verse lays down certain legislation we note how it is phrased, choosing its wording very carefully so as not to leave any room for doubt or confusion. We also note how relatives are mentioned in a specific order. It starts with a reference to the homes of one's own children and spouses without even mentioning these relatives. The verse includes these in the general reference to "your houses", because the house of one's son, daughter, wife or husband is like one's own. Then other homes are mentioned, starting with those belonging to a father, mother, paternal uncle and aunt, maternal uncle and aunt. Added to these is a person who is entrusted with looking after one's property, having the keys to it. Such a person may eat from that house in accordance with what is reasonable, not taking more than

what he needs for his own food. Also added are friends' homes so as to make the relation with them similar to that with one's own relatives. Indeed, friends may be very happy for friends to eat at their homes without the need for any permission. But all this is conditional on causing no harm to the home owner.

Having mentioned the homes in which one may eat without seeking prior permission, the verse continues to explain the manner in which such eating may take place: "You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately." In pre-Islamic days some Arabs disliked eating alone. If such a person did not find someone to eat with, he would not touch the food. God lifted this restriction, because it causes unnatural complications. He left the matter simple to cater for all situations. Hence people may eat alone or in company.

The verse adds an instruction on manners to be observed when entering such homes where people are allowed to eat: *"When you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God."* (Verse 61) The phraseology of this instruction in the Arabic original employs a fine touch as it says: *sallimū `alā anfusikum* 'greet yourselves' to express the meaning given in translation as 'greet one another'. This is an indication of the strength of the relationship between those mentioned in this verse. A person who greets his relative or friend is actually greeting himself, and the greeting offered is enjoined by God, as though coming from Him. It is thus blessed, full of goodness. As such it establishes a bond between them that is never severed.

These instructions emphasize that the believers feel their bond with God in all matters and appreciate the wisdom behind divine legislation: *"Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason."* (Verse 61)

Good Manners with the Prophet

The *sūrah* then moves on to organizing relations within the larger family of the Muslim community and its leader, the Prophet, and how Muslims should behave in his presence:

> *They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful. Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them. To*

> *God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (Verses 62-64)*

Ibn Isĥāq mentions the occasion when these verses were revealed. He says that when the Quraysh and the confederate tribes marched towards Madinah, pledging to annihilate the Muslims, the Prophet ordered the digging of a moat around the entrance to Madīnah. He himself took part in the digging work so as to encourage those who were also taking part. All Muslims were working hard, except. for a number of hypocrites. They tried to hide their lack of commitment by doing a little work before sneaking away, without the Prophet's knowledge or permission. On the other hand, the true Muslims continued to work hard. If any of them needed to leave for some important business, he mentioned this to the Prophet, requesting permission before so leaving. The Prophet granted him permission, and he returned as soon as he had attended to the business in hand. They all felt that taking part in this work would earn them reward from God. God described those true believers in the verse: "*They only are true believers...*" In reference to the hypocrites who sneaked away without permission, God says: "*Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another...*"

Whatever was the background behind the revelation of these verses, they include important rules for the Muslim community which should be observed between the leader and the members of that community. These rules should be so ingrained as to become part of the traditions, feelings and regulations within the community. Otherwise, the community will fall into total chaos. Thus, "*They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger,*" and not the ones who verbally declare themselves believers but show no practical evidence of their obedience. "*And who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave.*" (Verse 62) This applies to serious matters that require collective action, such as a decision on going to war, or a matter that concerns the whole community. When such a grave matter is being considered or acted upon, believers do not absent themselves without first obtaining their leader's permission. Thus, no room is left for disorder.

People with faith do not seek permission to leave unless they are in real need to do so. Their faith and discipline ensure that they are not away when a serious collective matter is at hand. The Qur'ān, however, gives the Prophet, who is the leader of the Muslim community, the right to grant or withhold such permission: "*When they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose.*" (Verse 62) This means that there is no harm in withholding permission, should the situation require this. The leader of the Muslim community thus exercises his authority in determining whether or not to allow an individual to leave,

depending on how he sees the interests of the community being best served.

Nevertheless, the *sūrah* makes clear that it is better for the individual to try to overcome personal needs, so as to stay with the Prophet. Receiving permission to depart for a while means falling short on fulfilling one's duty. Hence, it needs for the Prophet to pray to God to forgive those who needed to be absent for a time: "*When they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 62) This puts a check on the believer through his own conscience, ensuring that he does not seek a leave of absence in such situations unless he has very compelling reasons.

A Stern Warning to the Disobedient

The *sūrah* then alerts the Muslims to the need to address the Prophet with respect when they seek his permission, and indeed in all situations. They should not call him by his name or nickname, as they call each other. He is to be addressed as the man God has honoured by making him His Messenger: *"Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another."* (Verse 63) Indeed people must be full of respect for him as God's Messenger, so that they pay due heed to every word he says and every directive he gives. Teachers and leaders should be held in high esteem and addressed with respect. The fact that the Prophet was very modest in his approach, and easy to deal with, did not mean that it was appropriate for his Companions to forget that he was their leader who educated them and refined their manners, addressing him as they would address one another. Deep in their hearts, those who are being educated should hold their educator in high regard so that they are ashamed if they happen to overstep the requirements of respect when dealing with him.

The hypocrites who sneaked away, covering for one another, are given a stern warning. If the Prophet could not see them, God was certainly watching them: "*God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously.*" (Verse 6.3) The Arabic wording, *yatasallalūn.. liwādhā,* practically shows their stealthy movements, as they left stealthily, like despicable cowards.

"*So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them.*" (Verse 63) The warning here is very stern. Those who disobey the Prophet's orders, seeking a way different from his, sneaking away in pursuit of personal gain or to avoid potential risk, should beware. They may find themselves in the midst of a situation where values and standards are blurred, where the true and false are not easily distinguished and the community finds itself in disarray. In such a situation no one is sure of his own safety, as people do not abide by the law and

good may not be easily distinguished from evil. Such a situation is miserable for everyone: *"Lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them."* Such grievous suffering could befall people in this life or in the life to come, in retribution for disobeying God's orders and rejecting the way of life He has laid down.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that balances the warning with a statement making it clear to both believers and unbelievers that God sees them all, and knows their actions and the intentions behind each action:

> *To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (Verse 64)*

Thus, the conclusion aims to remind people to remain God-fearing. Being so provides the ultimate guarantee for the fulfilment of His orders, abiding by the rules He has set, observing the manners He has outlined. We have seen many of these clearly stated in this *sūrah,* relating to different aspects of life, but all treated on an equal footing.

SŪRAH 25
Al-Furqān
(The Criterion)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* a Makkan revelation, appears to aim at comforting the Prophet and giving him solace, reassurance and support as he faced the stubborn rejection, maltreatment, haughty argument and open hostility of the Quraysh idolaters. In one aspect, it shows the divine kindness bestowed by God on His Messenger, dispelling his pain, comforting his heart so that it overflowed with reassurance and showing him an abundance of care and compassion. In another aspect, it portrays the fierce battle against arrogant mortals who stubbornly oppose God's Messenger, combining falsehood with arrogance, and hostility with a wilful rebuffal of divine guidance.

It is ordinary people who insult this glorious Qur'ān, with such boasting as: *"This [Qur'ān] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people."* (Verse 4) Or they describe it as: *"Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening."* (Verse 5) Furthermore people are ready with their abuse of the Prophet, saying: *"The man you follow is certainly bewitched."* (Verse 8) Or they may say in ridicule: *"Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?"* (Verse 41) As if all this rejection is not enough, such people are often ready to direct their arrogant remarks at God Himself: *"Yet when they are told, Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious."* (Verse 60) Or they may say: *"Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21)

Ever since Noah's time unbelievers held the same attitude as the Quraysh idolaters towards Muhammad, God's final Messenger. They all objected to the fact

that God's Messenger was mortal, an ordinary man like them, saying: *"What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him?"* (Verse 7) They also objected to his limited wealth, saying: *"Why has not a treasure been granted to him?"* (Verse 8) They further objected to the method of revelation: *"The unbelievers ask: Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?" (Verse* 32) Such voiced objections came on top of their blatant rejection of faith, as also their ridicule and aggression.

The Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him), confronted all this alone, having neither physical power nor wealth. He stood within his appropriate limits, suggesting nothing to his Lord, doing nothing other than turning to his Lord seeking His pleasure, caring for nothing else. He prayed: "My Lord! If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face... To You I submit until I earn Your pleasure."

Here, in this *sūrah,* we see the Prophet enjoying his Lord's compassion, who gives him comfort and solace, and provides him with support against all the difficulties placed in his way, including the ridicule of others. After all, they are often impolite with their Lord who creates them and gives them all that they have. The Prophet then should not be much troubled if he receives a little of such ridicule and ill treatment. "*Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord.*" (Verse 55) "*Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection.*" (Verse 3) "*Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful?'*" (Verse 60)

God redresses the ridicule the Prophet suffers by portraying the very low level into which the unbelievers have sunk: *"Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you, then, be held responsible for him? Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray."* (Verses 43-44) God promises him support in any dispute or argument he may have with them: *"Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation."* (Verse 33)

When the battle is over, God shows His Messenger scenes of the destruction of earlier communities which rejected His messages, such as the people of Noah, the `Ād, Thamūd and the people of al-Rass, as well as others. The way they met their dismal end is shown in a series of images from the Day of Resurrection: "*Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path.*" (Verse 34) "*Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fug and its raging sigh. And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. [But they will be told]: 'Do*

not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!'" (Verses 11-13) *"On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend!" (Verses* 27-28)

God further comforts him by the fact that he faces the same difficulties earlier messengers faced: *"Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market places."* (Verse 20) *"Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support."* (Verse 31)

God also makes clear to him that his task is to remain patient against all adversity, standing up to the unbelievers and striving hard against them using the Qur'ān to make his argument clear, well founded and overpowering. *"Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur'ān."* (Verse 52) The Prophet is clearly told that his best support in his striving for God's cause is to place his trust in God alone: *"Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins."* (Verse 58)

The *sūrah* continues along the same lines: one aspect of it overflows with solace and reassurance given by God to His Messenger, and the other portrays the intransigence of the unbelievers and the difficulties they put up against him. It threatens them with punishment and destruction that will be visited upon them by God Almighty. It thus moves on until it approaches its end when it spreads an air of ease, comfort, peace and reassurance. It portrays a detailed image of 'the servants of God the Most Merciful'. These are the people *"who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: Peace."* (Verse 63) They are seen here as if they are the final product of the *long Jihād,* or tough striving against people who stubbornly refuse to abandon their erroneous ways and follow divine guidance, or the sweet fruit of the human tree, despite its thorny branches. The *sūrah* ends with a picture of how little value humanity has in God's sight, except for those believers who turn to Him and address their prayers to Him alone: *"Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you."* (Verse 77)

Such is the general atmosphere of the *sūrah* and such is its subject matter. It is a single unit that is hard to divide into sections, but we can distinguish four parts in its treatment of themes.

The first part begins with extolling God's limitless glory and praising Him for the revelation of the Qur'ān which serves as a warner to mankind. It emphasizes in clear, unequivocal terms God's oneness and sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. It affirms that He alone controls the universe and conducts its affairs in His absolute

wisdom, making it clear that He has neither offspring nor partner. It then mentions that the unbelievers nevertheless ascribe divinity to alleged deities that can create nothing, but are themselves created. All this is stated before referring to their hurtful statements about God's Messenger, denying his message and alleging that it is fabrication of his own making, or the fables of ancient communities. It also comes before any reference to their objection to Muhammad, God's Messenger, being a human being who eats food and walks in the streets and market places. Also later come their other statements suggesting that he should be supported by an angel, or that he should have a treasure or a garden providing him with all his food. Furthermore, the *sūrah* reports their insults claiming that he is bewitched. It appears that the *sūrah* begins by quoting their denials of their Lord so as to comfort the Prophet as he hears their abusive remarks about him and his message.

The *sūrah* then declares that they have gone far astray as they deny the Last Hour. It warns them against the punishment God has prepared for them in hell, where they are to be thrown in a narrow space, chained one to the other. It contrasts this with an image of the believers in heaven where they abide forever, enjoying whatever they wish. It further shows their fate on the Day of Judgement when they are made to face their alleged deities which will confront them with the falsity of their beliefs. This first line in the *sūrah* ends with further consolation to the Prophet, making it clear to him that all earlier messengers God sent were mortals like him who ate food and walked about the streets and market places.

The second part begins with the arrogant statements of those who deny their inevitable meeting with God. They impudently say: *"Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21) They are then quickly brought face to face with a scene of the day when they will see the angels: *"it will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger.'"*

(Verses 26-27) This is meant to give reassurance to the Prophet as he complains to his Lord about his people's disregard of the Qur'ān. It quotes their objections to the way the Qur'ān is revealed as they ask: *"Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?"* (Verse 32) The answer to this objection is a scene showing them being gathered to hell on their faces on the Day of Judgement, the day they now deny. Further comment is given in an outline of the fate of past communities that similarly rejected the faith, such as the peoples of Noah, Moses, and the `Ād, Thamūd, al-Rass and many other generations in between. It wonders at their attitude as they pass by the destroyed towns of the people of Lot taking no heed. All this is meant to comfort the Prophet as he hears their ridicule when they refer to him saying: *"Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?"* (Verse 41) The *sūrah* comments on their ridicule, putting them in their rightful place: *"They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse*

astray." (Verse 44)

The third part of the *sūrah* is made up of a number of scenes from the universe, starting with a description of the shadow and moving to the scene of the succession of day and night, before showing the wind as a herald of revitalizing rain and the creation of man from water. Despite all this, the unbelievers continue to worship deities that have no power to bring them benefit or cause them harm. They even go further, by aiding one another against their Lord who has created them. When they are called upon to address their worship to the only true Lord of the universe, they revert to arrogance: "*Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful, 'they ask: What is the Most Merciful?"* (Verse 60) The *sūrah* explains that God is "*He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light-giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude."* (Verses 61-62)

The fourth and final part of the *sūrah* paints a detailed picture of the 'servants of the Most Merciful', showing them as they prostrate themselves before Him in total devotion, recording their statements that earn them their noble positions as His servants. It opens the door of repentance to anyone who wishes to join this group, describing their reward for their perseverance and patience in the face of adversity, and their fulfilment of the requirements of faith: "*These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life] with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace."* (Verse 75)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement to the effect that all mankind would have been discarded by God, had it not been for those of His servants who obey Him and do His bidding, recognizing His authority and His right to be obeyed. By putting erring humanity in its place, the Qur'ān also shows that the harassment the Prophet is subjected to should be seen as trivial, for that is what it really is.

1
To Distinguish Right from False

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

تَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِى نَزَّلَ ٱلْفُرْقَانَ عَلَىٰ عَبْدِهِۦ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَٰلَمِينَ نَذِيرًا ﴿١﴾

Blessed is He who from on high bestowed upon His servant the do standard to discern the true from the false, so that it might be a warning to all the worlds: (1)

ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَمْ يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُۥ شَرِيكٌ فِى ٱلْمُلْكِ وَخَلَقَ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ فَقَدَّرَهُۥ تَقْدِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

He to whom belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and who begets no off-spring, and has no partner in His dominion. It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions. (2)

وَٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ ءَالِهَةً لَّا يَخْلُقُونَ شَيْـًٔا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ لِأَنفُسِهِمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ مَوْتًا وَلَا حَيَوٰةً وَلَا نُشُورًا ﴿٣﴾

Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection. (3)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ إِفْكٌ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ وَأَعَانَهُۥ عَلَيْهِ قَوْمٌ ءَاخَرُونَ ۖ فَقَدْ جَآءُو ظُلْمًا وَزُورًا ﴿٤﴾

The unbelievers say: 'This [Qur'ān] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people.' In truth, it is they who have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood. (4)

وَقَالُوٓاْ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ٱكۡتَتَبَهَا فَهِيَ تُمۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِ بُكۡرَةٗ وَأَصِيلٗا ٥

And they say: 'Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.' (5)

قُلۡ أَنزَلَهُ ٱلَّذِي يَعۡلَمُ ٱلسِّرَّ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ٦

Say: 'This [Qur'ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (6)

وَقَالُواْ مَالِ هَٰذَا ٱلرَّسُولِ يَأۡكُلُ ٱلطَّعَامَ وَيَمۡشِي فِي ٱلۡأَسۡوَاقِۙ لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡهِ مَلَكٞ فَيَكُونَ مَعَهُۥ نَذِيرًا ٧

They also say: 'What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market-places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him? (7)

أَوۡ يُلۡقَىٰٓ إِلَيۡهِ كَنزٌ أَوۡ تَكُونُ لَهُۥ جَنَّةٞ يَأۡكُلُ مِنۡهَاۚ وَقَالَ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ إِن تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا رَجُلٗا مَّسۡحُورًا ٨

Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance.' The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' (8)

ٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ ضَرَبُواْ لَكَ ٱلۡأَمۡثَالَ فَضَلُّواْ فَلَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ سَبِيلٗا ٩

See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]. (9)

تَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِيٓ إِن شَآءَ جَعَلَ لَكَ خَيۡرٗا مِّن ذَٰلِكَ جَنَّٰتٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ وَيَجۡعَل لَّكَ قُصُورَۢا ١٠

Blessed is He who, if it be His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too. (10)

بَلۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِٱلسَّاعَةِۖ وَأَعۡتَدۡنَا لِمَن كَذَّبَ بِٱلسَّاعَةِ سَعِيرًا ١١

Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. (11)

إِذَا رَأَتۡهُم مِّن مَّكَانِۭ بَعِيدٖ سَمِعُواْ لَهَا تَغَيُّظٗا وَزَفِيرٗا ١٢

When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh. (12)

وَإِذَآ أُلۡقُواْ مِنۡهَا مَكَانٗا ضَيِّقٗا مُّقَرَّنِينَ دَعَوۡاْ هُنَالِكَ ثُبُورٗا ١٣

And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. (13)

لَّا تَدۡعُواْ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ ثُبُورٗا وَٰحِدٗا وَٱدۡعُواْ ثُبُورٗا كَثِيرٗا ١٤

[But they will be told]: 'Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!' (14)

قُلۡ أَذَٰلِكَ خَيۡرٌ أَمۡ جَنَّةُ ٱلۡخُلۡدِ ٱلَّتِي وُعِدَ ٱلۡمُتَّقُونَۚ كَانَتۡ لَهُمۡ جَزَآءٗ وَمَصِيرٗا ١٥

Say: 'Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God-fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode?' (15)

لَّهُمۡ فِيهَا مَا يَشَآءُونَ خَٰلِدِينَۚ كَانَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ وَعۡدٗا مَّسۡـُٔولٗا ١٦

There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for. (16)

وَيَوۡمَ يَحۡشُرُهُمۡ وَمَا يَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ فَيَقُولُ ءَأَنتُمۡ أَضۡلَلۡتُمۡ عِبَادِي هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ أَمۡ هُمۡ ضَلُّواْ ٱلسَّبِيلَ ١٧

On the day He gathers them with all those they worship instead of God, He will ask: 'Was it you who led these My servants astray, or did they by themselves stray from the right path?' (17)

قَالُواْ سُبۡحَٰنَكَ مَا كَانَ يَنۢبَغِي لَنَآ أَن نَّتَّخِذَ مِن دُونِكَ مِنۡ أَوۡلِيَآءَ وَلَٰكِن مَّتَّعۡتَهُمۡ وَءَابَآءَهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ نَسُواْ ٱلذِّكۡرَ وَكَانُواْ قَوۡمُۢا بُورَۢا ١٨

They will say: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself. But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good.' (18)

فَقَدۡ كَذَّبُوكُم بِمَا تَقُولُونَ فَمَا تَسۡتَطِيعُونَ صَرۡفٗا وَلَا نَصۡرٗاۚ وَمَن يَظۡلِم مِّنكُمۡ نُذِقۡهُ عَذَابٗا كَبِيرٗا ١٩

[Then God will say]: 'Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help. Whoever of you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering.' (19)

Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market-places. We have made some of you a means of testing others. Are you able to endure with patience? Surely your Lord sees all. (20)

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا قَبۡلَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ إِلَّآ إِنَّهُمۡ لَيَأۡكُلُونَ ٱلطَّعَامَ وَيَمۡشُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَسۡوَاقِۗ وَجَعَلۡنَا بَعۡضَكُمۡ لِبَعۡضٖ فِتۡنَةً أَتَصۡبِرُونَۗ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ بَصِيرٗا ٢٠

The Purpose of Qur'ānic Revelations

This opening gives a clear indication of the main themes of the *sūrah,* namely the revelation of the Qur'ān by God, the addressing of its message to all mankind, God's absolute oneness that admits no partner or offspring, and His sovereignty over the whole universe which He, in His wisdom, controls. Yet despite all this, the unbelievers continue to associate partners with Him and the fabricators persevere in their falsehood. Moreover, baseless arguments and arrogant statements are made.

"*Blessed is He who from on high bestowed upon His servant the standard to discern the true from the false, so that it might be a warning to all the worlds.*" (Verse 1) The Arabic word, *tabārak,* translated here as 'blessed' is a derivative of the root word, *barakah,* denoting blessing but adds a further dimension of increase and growth so as to signify the continuous increase of praise and God's blessings. God is not mentioned in the verse by name. Rather, a relative noun is used, "*He who from on high bestowed... the standard.*" This is useful in highlighting His action of sending a message to mankind, because the essential argument of the *sūrah* is the truth of the revelation of the Qur'ān and its message.

The Qur'ān is named here as *'al-Furqān',* which is also the title of the *sūrah.* The name indicates distinction and separation between the truth and falsehood, divine guidance and erroneous beliefs. Furthermore, the Qur'ān makes a clear distinction between two different ways of life and two epochs in human life. It outlines a clear way of life as it is conceived in human conscience and in practice. This way of life is distinct from anything humanity has ever known. It ushers in a new era for humanity, unlike anything it ever witnessed. Thus it is a criterion in this broad sense, separating the stage of human childhood that has just ended from the stage of maturity about to begin. The age of physical miracles is thus ended to start that of rational miracles. Moreover, local and provisional messages come to an end with the revelation of the Qur'ān, God's final and universal message to all mankind: *"so that it might be a warning to all the worlds."* (Verse 1)

Special honour for God's Messenger is shown at this point, describing him as 'God's servant'. The same description is given to him when the Prophet's night journey is highlighted. *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem]."* (17: 1) Also in the context of prayer and supplication, the Prophet is given the same description: *"When His servant stood up praying to Him..."* (72: 19) Another instance of using this description is the opening of *Sūrah* 18 which also speaks of the revelation of the Qur'ān: *"All praise is due to God who has bestowed this Book from on high on His servant, and has ensured that it remains free of distortion."* (18: 1) Describing man as God's servant in these contexts indicates the highest and most honourable status to which any human being can aspire. It also serves as an implicit reminder that when man achieves his highest status, he is no more than God's servant, while the position of majesty belongs to Him alone, with absolutely no hint or suggestion of there being anyone who bears any resemblance to Him or is His partner. It was situations like the Prophet's night journey to Jerusalem and from there to heaven, or direct supplication to God and speaking to Him, or receiving His directives and revelations that tempted some of the followers of earlier messengers to weave legends speaking about a son of God or a relationship other than that of Godhead and servitude to Him. Hence, the Qur'ān emphasizes the status of man's servitude to God as the highest position to which a chosen human being can aspire.

The *sūrah* defines God's purpose of the revelation of the Qur'ān to His servant, *"so that it might be a warning to all the worlds."* (Verse 1) As a Makkan revelation, this Qur'ānic statement is important as it proves the universal character of the Islamic message right from its early days. This is contrary to the claims made by some non-Muslim 'historians' suggesting that the Islamic message initially had only local aspirations, but became more ambitious and outward looking as it secured a number of military victories. The truth is that this message was addressed from the start to all mankind. By its very nature, and the means it employed, it was clearly a universal message aiming to take all mankind into a new era, where a new code and style of life are implemented. It defined its universal nature when the Prophet was still in Makkah, facing determined and unrelenting opposition. It sought to achieve all this through the Qur'ān, the criterion God revealed to His Messenger to serve as a warning to all the worlds.

The One who revealed to His Messenger this standard is *"He to whom belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion. It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (Verse 2)

Once more God is not mentioned here by name, but a relative pronoun is used instead to emphasize certain suitable attributes of His: *"He to whom belongs the*

dominion over the heavens and the earth." He has absolute dominion over the heavens and the earth: a dominion that signifies ownership, control and ability to change and transform.

"Who begets no offspring." Procreation is one of the natural laws God has set in operation to ensure the continuity of life, but God is Eternal and able to accomplish His purpose, whatever that may be.

He *"has no partner in His dominion."* Everything in the heavens and the earth testifies to the unity of design, nature, law and control.

"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions." He determines the size, shape, function, time and place of everything as well as all their interactions and harmonization.

The nature of the universe, its make up and constitution fill us with wonder. It makes nonsense of any suggestion that the universe came into being by chance. It demonstrates the meticulous and detailed proportioning of creation, which human knowledge can hardly manage to fathom even in one area of the vast universe. With every scientific progress made, more aspects of the harmony and balance in the universe and its natural laws are discovered. Consequently, we can better appreciate the meaning of this wonderful statement: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."*

It is useful to mention here some scientific facts that emphasize the fine proportions observed in the creation of our world. A.C. Morrison writes:

> It is at least extraordinary that in this adjustment of nature there should have been such exquisite nicety. For, had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist... If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage. The atmosphere is just thick enough to let in the actinic rays needed for vegetation and to kill bacteria, produce vitamins, and not harm man unless he exposes himself too long. In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence.

The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea, from which have come life, food, rain, temperate climate, plants, animals, and ultimately man himself.[20]

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.[21]

How strange is the system of checks and balances which has prevented any animal, no matter how ferocious, how large, or subtle, from dominating the earth since the age of trilobites and probably not then. Man only has upset this balance of nature by moving plants and animals from place to place, and he has immediately paid a severe penalty in the development of animal, insect, and plant pests.

A striking illustration which will point out specifically the importance of recognizing these checks in connection with the existence of man is the following fact. Many years ago a species of cactus was planted in Australia as a protective fence. The cactus had no insect enemies in Australia and soon began a prodigious growth. The march of the cactus persisted until it had covered an area approximately as great as England, crowded the inhabitants out of towns and villages, and destroyed their farms, making cultivation impossible. No device which the people discovered could stop its spread. Australia was in danger of being overwhelmed by a silent, uncontrollable, advancing army of vegetation. The entomologists scoured the world and finally found an insect which lived exclusively on cactus, would eat nothing else, would breed freely, and which had no enemies in Australia. Here the animal conquered the vegetation and today the cactus pest has retreated, and with it all but a small protective residue of the insects, enough to hold the cactus in check forever.

The checks and balances have been provided, and have been persistently effective. Why has not the malarial mosquito so dominated the earth that our ancestors through the ages have not either died or become immune? The same may be said of the yellow fever mosquito, which lived one season as far north as New York. Mosquitoes are plentiful in the Arctic. Why has not the

[20] A.C. Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* Morrison and Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 27-28.
[21] Ibid., p. 30.

> tsetse fly evolved so that he would live in other than his tropical surroundings and wipe out the human race? One has but to mention the plagues and the deadly germs against which man has had no protection until yesterday, and his total lack of knowledge of sanitation as an animal, to understand how wonderful has been his preservation...

The insects have no lungs such as man possesses, but breathe through tubes. When insects grow large the tubes cannot grow in relation to the increasing size of the body of the insect. Hence there never has been an insect more than inches long and a little longer wing spread. Because of the mechanism of their structure and their method of breathing, there never could be an insect of great size. This limit in their growth held all insects in check and prevented them from dominating the world. If this physical check had not been provided, man could not exist. Imagine a primitive man meeting a hornet as big as a lion or a spider equally large.

Little has been said regarding the many other marvellous adjustments in the physiology of animals, without which no animal, or indeed vegetable, could continue to exist.[22]

Thus, day by day, human knowledge uncovers more and more of the elaborate system that gives every creature their measure, proportion and balance. With such increased knowledge we appreciate even better the significance of the Qur'ānic statement: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (Verse 2)

The unbelievers at the time of the Prophet did not understand any of this. Hence they persisted with their unbelief. *"Yet, some choose to worship, instead of Him, deities that cannot create anything but are themselves created, and have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, life or resurrection."* (Verse 3)

Their false deities are deprived of the most essential characteristics of Godhead. Thus, they *"cannot create anything,"* while God has created everything, and false deities *"are themselves created."* Their servants create them in the sense that they make them, if they are statues or idols, while if they are angels, devils, humans or some other object of God's making, then God creates them, in the sense of bringing them into existence. Furthermore, they *"have it not in their power to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves,"* let alone doing so to others. Someone who might not be able to bring himself benefit may still be able to cause harm, but even this is out of the hands of such false deities. Hence, this is mentioned first as the easiest thing to do, then it is followed by other qualities that only God can have: they *"have no power over death, life*

[22] Ibid., pp. 92-94.

or resurrection." If these deities cannot cause a living thing to die, or bring to life anything dead, or bring someone to life after death, what characteristic of Godhead could they have? How could these idolaters ascribe divinity to such beings?

It is a case of straying so far from the truth that it is not surprising that they make singular claims against the Prophet. Their claims against God are even more singular and more impudent. Could there he anything worse than that a human being should claim that God has partners when it is God who has created him as well as everything else in the universe? The Prophet was asked: "Which is the most cardinal sin?" His reply was: "That you should claim that God has equals, when it is He who has created you." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Accusations without Basis

Having shown how they fabricate such allegations against God, who is limitless in His glory, the *sūrah* refers to their impudent claims against God's Messenger, replying to them in a way that shows how false and absurd it all is.

> *The unbelievers say: 'This [Qur'ān] is nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people.' In truth, it is they who have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood. And they say: Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.' Say: 'This [Qur'ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (Verses 4-6)*

It was a most blatant lie that the unbelievers of the Quraysh said when they knew deep at heart that it had absolutely no basis. Their elders who instructed them to circulate these lies were fully aware that the Qur'ān which Muhammad recited could not have been authored by a human being. They actually knew this given their appreciation of fine poetry. Furthermore, they could not stop themselves from being influenced by the Qur'ān. Moreover, they knew Muhammad long before his prophethood, and they were aware that he was exemplary in his honesty: he never told a lie, broke a promise, or breached a trust. How could he, then, invent a lie against God, attributing to Him words which He did not say?

But they were stubborn, motivated by fear for their social status that relied on religious position. Hence, they resorted to such tactics, making false allegations that could be accepted by ordinary people who might not have similar literary talent. They claimed that the Qur'ān was *"nothing but a lie which he has devised with the help of other people."* (Verse 4) It is said that those other people were three foreign slaves, or even more. This is such an absurd allegation. If a man could, with the help of others, devise this Qur'ān, or invent it, what would stop them from producing, with the help

of others, a similar Qur'ān to refute Muhammad's argument? He repeatedly challenged them to do so and they failed to take up the challenge.

Hence why the *sūrah* does not employ any argument to refute their absurd allegations. Instead, it gives its clear judgement on their statements: "*They have perpetrated an inequity and a falsehood.*" (Verse 4) It is an act of injustice against the truth, Muhammad and themselves. Moreover, it is a blatant falsehood.

The *sūrah* gives other examples of their false accusations against the Prophet and the Qur'ān: "*And they say: Fables of ancient times which he has caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him morning and evening.*" (Verse 5) The Qur'ān gives accounts of the history of past communities for the dual purpose of serving as lessons and admonition for people, and providing guidance for them. The unbelievers, however, label such true accounts of history as *'fables of ancient times'*, alleging that the Prophet sought such fables to be written down so that they could be read out to him, because he was unlettered, unable to read. When they were read to him every morning and evening, he would then recite them to people claiming that they were revealed to him by God. Such unfounded allegations do not stand up to any examination. We need only look at the logical sequence of the historical accounts given in the Qur'ān, the relevance of each story to the context in which it is placed, and the perfect balance and harmony between the objectives of each story and the *sūrah* in which it occurs. All this confirms the deliberate choice and meticulous presentation of Qur'ānic historical accounts. Nothing of this is found in legends and fables that are related for entertainment. They hardly ever serve a basic theme or support a particular idea.

Their allegation that these accounts were fables of ancient communities indicates that they were accounts of events that took place much earlier. This means that Muhammad (peace be upon him) could not have known them without being taught by some of those who circulated such fables, generation after generation. Hence, the *sūrah* replies that the One who revealed them to Muhammad was the One whose knowledge is absolute. It is He who knows all secrets everywhere in the universe. Indeed, no situation, past present or future, is unknown to Him: "*Say: This [Qur'ān] is bestowed from on high by Him who knows the secrets of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 6) How could the knowledge of legend reciters be compared with God's perfect knowledge? How could legends and fables be compared to the secrets of the heavens and the earth, which are perfectly known to God? This is no more than comparing a drop of water to an endless ocean.

When they make such absurd allegations against the Prophet they commit a gross error, which is added to their persistent associating of partners with God, their Creator. Nevertheless, the door to repentance remains open, if they wish to desist from their sinful ways. God, who is fully aware of their fabrications and schemes,

will extend mercy and forgiveness to them: "*He is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* then examines their false accusations against the Prophet, their absurd objections to his being human, and their unreasonable suggestions about his message:

> *They also say: 'What sort of messenger is this, who eats food and goes about in the market places? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him? Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance. 'The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back. Blessed is He who, if it be His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too. (Verses 7-10)*

The first point they make concerns Muhammad's status: they wonder why he eats food and goes about the streets and market places. Why is he an ordinary human being, doing what other humans do? This is an objection all communities made against every messenger God sent. How could such a person, raised by such a family, living with them and behaving like them in all respects,, be a messenger from God, receiving revelations from on high? How could he have contact with another world, receiving knowledge that is unavailable to them when he is just one of them, while they receive no such revelations and know nothing about this other world?

Honouring Mankind

From this angle, the whole idea seems unlikely. However, taken from another angle, it seems perfectly natural. God has breathed of His own spirit in man, and with this breath man has become distinguished among all God's creation, and placed in charge of the earth. Yet human knowledge, experience, and abilities remain limited and inadequate. God would not leave man without support and guidance to show him the way to fulfil his trust. Hence, He gave him the potential to be in contact with Him through the breath of the divine spirit that distinguishes him. It is no wonder that God should choose a human being who has the spiritual potential to receive His message and so impart to him what guides him and humanity along the right way.

This is an aspect of the grace God bestows on man, which appears amazing in one way and perfectly natural in another. But those who do not know the value of this creature and the true nature of the honour God has bestowed on him deny that a human being should be in contact with God through divine revelation. They refuse

to acknowledge that such a person should be chosen by God as His Messenger. They think that angels are better placed to carry out such a role: *"Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give warning alongside him?" (Verse 7*) But God had ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before man as He granted him superior qualities associated with the breathing of His spirit in him.

It is divine wisdom that determines the sending of a human messenger to a human community. Such a messenger shares their feelings, experiences, hopes and sorrows. He knows their aspirations, needs and limitations. Thus, he understands their weaknesses, taps their strengths, and leads them along the way, step by step, knowing their motivations and reactions. After all, he is one of them, guiding them towards God's pleasure, supported by His revelation and guidance.

For their part they find in God's human Messenger an easy example to follow. He is one of them who takes them gradually along the road to a sublime standard. He lives among them implementing the moral standards, the actions and the duties God requires them to observe and fulfil. Thus, he personally serves as the practical implementation of the faith he preaches. Everything in his life and behaviour are presented to them so that they can look at every detail and aspire to follow his example, knowing that it is within man's capability. Had God's Messenger been an angel, they would not think about his actions and behaviour, and would not even attempt to follow his suit. They would feel that since he has a different nature, they could not aspire to his standard or follow his example.

We see how God's infinite wisdom, which ordains all things in due proportion, has determined that His Messenger should be a human being so that he fulfils the role of leading mankind along the way He has laid down for them. To object to this choice is to betray ignorance of such wisdom and the honour God has granted mankind.

Another absurd objection focused on God's Messenger walking about the market-place earning his living. His position as Messenger would have been recognized had he been granted great wealth to save him the trouble of so working for his living: *"Or why has not a treasure been granted to him? Or he should have a garden to provide his sustenance."* (Verse 8)

But God willed that His Messenger should not have treasure or garden, because He wanted him to be a perfect example to be followed by his community. He was to fulfil the great task of delivering his message while he worked, earning a living at the same time. Thus, none of his followers could argue that the Prophet was freed from the responsibility of work, and thus was able to devote all his time to his message. None would take this as an excuse for not fulfilling his duty towards the divine message. We see clearly that the Prophet worked for his living while he also worked

for his message. It is right, then, that everyone of his followers should do the same, so as to fulfil his own task towards the divine faith.

Wealth was later given in abundance to the Prophet so as the first experience should be completed and the example he provided be perfected. He did not allow such wealth to become his preoccupation, preventing him from the fulfilment of his task. Indeed, his generosity was so superior that it was likened by his Companions to unrestrained wind. He provided a perfect example in resisting the lure of wealth so as to enable his followers to look at affluence in the proper perspective. Thus, no one could say that Muhammad was able to fulfil the duties of his message because he was poor, having no preoccupations of wealth, free from the task of looking after it. Instead, he fulfilled his duties in both situations of poverty and affluence.

Besides, what value is wealth, treasures and gardens when compared with contact between man, a weak mortal, and God the Eternal? What significance has this earth and all that it contains, or indeed this whole universe, when compared to contact with God the Creator who grants everyone all that they have? But unbelievers appreciate nothing of this.

The *sūrah* then refers to another false accusation the unbelievers repeated time after time against the Prophet. The Qur'ān mentions this blatant lie here as well as in *Sūrah* 17, The Night Journey. In both *sūrahs* the Qur'ān gives the exact same reply to this accusation quoting it in exactly the same words in both *sūrahs. "The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]."* (Verses 8-9)

Both *sūrahs* deal with more or less the same subject, tackling it in similar fashion. Needless to say, the unbelievers employ such a personal attack against the Prophet aiming to detract from his social standing. They liken him to a man who is bewitched, saying things that normal people do not say. Yet at the same time their accusation implies recognition that what he says is unusual or unfamiliar in the sense that it is above human standards. The reply the *sūrah* gives wonders at their attitude: *"See to what they liken you."* They liken him to bewitched people at one time, accuse him of false fabrication at another, and even compare him at times to those who relate legends. All this is far beyond the truth. They have missed every road that leads to the truth and are left in error: *"They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]."* (Verse 9)

This argument ends on a note that shows the stupidity of their suggestions. They propose that the Prophet should be given some luxuries, thinking that a true messenger of God should have plenty of such worldly comforts as a treasure store or a garden providing him with his food requirements. Had God so willed, he would have given him much more than everything they suggest: *"Blessed is He who, if it be*

His will, shall give you better things than these; gardens through which running waters flow, and shall give you palaces too." (Verse 10) But God has willed to give His Messenger what is much better and more valuable than gardens and palaces. He has given him a direct relation with the One who gives all such luxuries, bestowing on him His care and guidance. He enjoys this relationship which is far superior to any worldly comfort or luxury, great as it may be.

Denying Resurrection

At this point in its discussion of their wrongful statements about God and His Messenger, the *sūrah* reveals another dimension of their disbelief. They deny the Last Hour. Hence, they have no qualms about making baseless accusations or fabrications. They do not fear that they will face God who will hold them to account for their lies' and fabrications. We see them here as they stand on the Day of Judgement when hardened hearts are shaken to their core. They are made to see what awaits them there in comparison with the happiness that is prepared for the believers:

> *Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny. For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire. When it sees them from a far-off place, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh. And when, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then. [But they will be told]: Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!' Say: 'Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God-fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode?' There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for. (Verses 1 1-16)*

They have indeed denied the Last Hour going to great extents in their disbelief. The Qur'ānic expression implies this as it puts aside all that was said earlier in order to magnify the extent: "*Nay! It is the Last Hour that they deny.*" It then paints the destiny that awaits those who are guilty of such a terrible thing. It is a blazing fire made ready to receive them: "*For those who deny the Last Hour We have prepared a blazing fire.*" (Verse 11)

Personification, or the representation of inanimate objects or states as having life of their own, is a special artistic feature the Qur'ān employs to such perfection that it defies imitation. It makes such objects so alive that we take them as such.

Here we are in front of the blazing fire which is now granted life. It looks and sees at a distance those who have denied the Last Hour. It is angry, furious with them, raging to engulf them. As they proceed towards it, it wants to take them all at once. It

is a fearful scene that leaves even the most courageous badly shaken.

Then we see them having arrived there. They are not just left to face such a raging fire, but are thrown in it, their hands and feet chained together. The tightness of the area increases their misery and makes it impossible for them to free themselves from their chains. Then we see them, having despaired of breaking loose, realizing that their stress is endless. Therefore, they pray for their own destruction as a way out of this endless misery: *"When, chained together, they are flung into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then."* (Verse 13) Their own destruction seems to them the best that they can hope for as a way of escaping this unbearable torment. But they soon hear the answer to their prayers. It is a sarcastic response that fills them with bitterness: *"Do not pray today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!"* (Verse 14) To be destroyed and made extinct once is not sufficient to redeem them. Hence, the sarcastic suggestion.

In contrast to such fearful prospects, the *sūrah* portrays what is prepared in the hereafter for the God-fearing who are eager to meet their Lord and who believe in the Last Hour. Again, sarcasm is fully employed to leave its telling effect on the unbelievers:

> *Say: Which is better: that, or the paradise of eternity which the God- fearing have been promised as their reward and their ultimate abode? There they will have all they wish for, abiding there forever. It is a promise given by your Lord, always to be prayed for. (Verses 15-16)*

Which is better: the end of the unbelievers already described in the *sūrah* or the paradise God has promised to the believers. He has indeed given them leave to ask Him about it, requesting the fulfilment of His promise, which is always honoured. They are free to request there whatever they wish for. Can the two be compared? The question is put sarcastically by way of reply to their own sarcasm levelled at the Prophet (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* goes on to portray another scene of the Day of Judgement which is denied by the unbelievers. Now we see them gathered together with their alleged deities, and they all stand before God for interrogation:

> *On the day He gathers them with all those they worship instead of God, He will ask: 'Was it you who led these My servants astray, or did they by themselves stray from the right path?' They will say. 'Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good. '[Then God will say]: 'Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help. Whoever of*

you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering.' (Verses 17-19)

The ones who were worshipped may be idols, angels or *jinn,* and indeed everyone and everything that has ever been worshipped instead of God or alongside Him. God certainly knows all the answers, but the interrogation carried out when all creatures are gathered together, standing there in the open, means reproach and publicity. As such the very interrogation is a means of fearful suffering. The answer comes from those who were worshipped. They declare their own submission to God Almighty, and that He is free of all that the unbelievers allege. They disclaim not merely any aspiration to Godhead, but also any thought on their part of taking for themselves any masters other than Him. They also ridicule the ignorant who associated partners with God and denied the Last Hour: "*They will say: Limitless are You in Your glory! It was never proper for us to take for our masters anyone but Yourself. But You allowed them and their fathers to enjoy [the pleasures of] life, until they forgot the Reminder. For they were people devoid of all good.*" (Verse 18)

The enjoyment that people are allowed for a long time, inheriting it generation after generation, without acknowledgement of the One who gives such blessings or expression of thanks and gratitude to Him, has been their main preoccupation. They forgot to turn to the One who gives us everything we have, and thus their hearts became devoid of all goodness, barren, like a land without fruit, vegetation or life.

At this point, the address is directed to those who worshipped such beings, emphasizing their humiliation: "*Now have they denied all your assertions, and you can neither avert [your punishment] nor obtain help.*" (Verse 19) You cannot do anything for yourselves, neither avoiding your well deserved punishment, nor gaining support from anyone or any quarter.

All this is shown as a scene of the Day of Judgement which is held before our eyes. Suddenly, the address is made to those unbelievers in their present condition here on earth: "*Whoever of you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste grievous suffering.*" (Verse 19) Such is the Qur'ānic method of addressing people's hearts at the moment when they are ready to respond, influenced as they may be by the fearful scene already portrayed.

Entrusting God's Message to Man

Thus they are shown to have witnessed the end of all false fabrication concerning faith and ridicule of God's Messenger. Now the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet consoling and reassuring him, telling him that his was not a special case among God's messengers. They all shared the same essential attributes:

> *Even before you, We never sent messengers other than [men] who indeed ate food and went about in the market places. We have made some of you a means of testing others. Are you able to endure with patience? Surely your Lord sees all. (Verse 20)*

If the unbelievers voice objections, these are not made against the Prophet in person; rather, they are objections to a law God has put in place for a definite purpose: *"We have made some of you a means of testing others."* Thus, those who do not appreciate God's wisdom and plans will object, while those who have full trust in His wisdom and support will persevere and remain reassured. The divine message will continue the struggle using human means and methods, so that those who have faith will demonstrate their patience in adversity: *"Are you able to endure with patience?"*

"Surely your Lord sees all." He sees human nature, and what is in people's inner thoughts. He sees to what end each one is driving. We note here the use of the possessive pronoun, 'your Lord', to give the Prophet a feeling of comfort and reassurance. God knows what best affects people's hearts and feelings.

2
Below Animal Level

۞ وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَرۡجُونَ لِقَآءَنَا لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡنَا ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَوۡ نَرَىٰ رَبَّنَاۗ لَقَدِ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ فِيٓ أَنفُسِهِمۡ وَعَتَوۡ عُتُوّٗا كَبِيرٗا ﴿٢١﴾

Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: 'Why have no angels been sent down to us?' – or, 'Why do we not see our Lord?' Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing. (21)

يَوۡمَ يَرَوۡنَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ لَا بُشۡرَىٰ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ وَيَقُولُونَ حِجۡرٗا مَّحۡجُورٗا ﴿٢٢﴾

On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: 'a forbidding ban!' (22)

وَقَدِمۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مَا عَمِلُواْ مِنۡ عَمَلٖ فَجَعَلۡنَٰهُ هَبَآءٗ مَّنثُورًا ﴿٢٣﴾

We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust. (23)

أَصۡحَٰبُ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ يَوۡمَئِذٍ خَيۡرٞ مُّسۡتَقَرّٗا وَأَحۡسَنُ مَقِيلٗا ﴿٢٤﴾

On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose. (24)

وَيَوۡمَ تَشَقَّقُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ بِٱلۡغَمَٰمِ وَنُزِّلَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ تَنزِيلٗا ﴿٢٥﴾

On the day when the skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. (25)

ٱلۡمُلۡكُ يَوۡمَئِذٍ ٱلۡحَقُّ لِلرَّحۡمَٰنِۚ وَكَانَ يَوۡمًا عَلَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَسِيرٗا ﴿٢٦﴾

On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]. It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. (26)

وَيَوۡمَ يَعَضُّ ٱلظَّالِمُ عَلَىٰ يَدَيۡهِ يَقُولُ يَٰلَيۡتَنِي ٱتَّخَذۡتُ مَعَ ٱلرَّسُولِ سَبِيلٗا ﴿٢٧﴾

On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. (27)

يَـٰوَيْلَتَىٰ لَيْتَنِى لَمْ أَتَّخِذْ فُلَانًا خَلِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend! (28)

لَّقَدْ أَضَلَّنِى عَنِ ٱلذِّكْرِ بَعْدَ إِذْ جَآءَنِى ۗ وَكَانَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ لِلْإِنسَـٰنِ خَذُولًا ﴿٢٩﴾

He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!.' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (29)

وَقَالَ ٱلرَّسُولُ يَـٰرَبِّ إِنَّ قَوْمِى ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ هَـٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ مَهْجُورًا ﴿٣٠﴾

And the Messenger will say: 'My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'ān as something to be discarded!' (30)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَا لِكُلِّ نَبِىٍّ عَدُوًّا مِّنَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِرَبِّكَ هَادِيًا وَنَصِيرًا ﴿٣١﴾

Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support. (31)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ ٱلْقُرْءَانُ جُمْلَةً وَٰحِدَةً ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ بِهِۦ فُؤَادَكَ ۖ وَرَتَّلْنَـٰهُ تَرْتِيلًا ﴿٣٢﴾

The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. (32)

وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَـٰكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation. (33)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُحْشَرُونَ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ شَرٌّ مَّكَانًا وَأَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٣٤﴾

Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path. (34)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَـٰبَ وَجَعَلْنَا مَعَهُۥٓ أَخَاهُ هَـٰرُونَ وَزِيرًا ﴿٣٥﴾

Indeed, We gave the book to Moses, and appointed his brother Aaron to help him to bear his burden. (35)

فَقُلْنَا ٱذْهَبَآ إِلَى ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟
بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا فَدَمَّرْنَـٰهُمْ تَدْمِيرًا ﴿٣٦﴾

And We said: 'Go you both to the people who denied Our signs,' and then We utterly destroyed those people. (36)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ لَّمَّا كَذَّبُوا۟ ٱلرُّسُلَ
أَغْرَقْنَـٰهُمْ وَجَعَلْنَـٰهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ ءَايَةً ۖ
وَأَعْتَدْنَا لِلظَّـٰلِمِينَ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٣٧﴾

When the people of Noah rejected their messengers, We caused them to drown, and made of them an example for mankind. For the wrongdoers We have prepared grievous suffering. (37)

وَعَادًا وَثَمُودَا۟ وَأَصْحَـٰبَ ٱلرَّسِّ وَقُرُونًۢا بَيْنَ
ذَٰلِكَ كَثِيرًا ﴿٣٨﴾

And also the `Ād and Thamūd, and the people of al-Rass, and many generations in between. (38)

وَكُلًّا ضَرَبْنَا لَهُ ٱلْأَمْثَالَ ۖ وَكُلًّا تَبَّرْنَا
تَتْبِيرًا ﴿٣٩﴾

To each of them did We proffer lessons, and each of them did We utterly annihilate. (39)

وَلَقَدْ أَتَوْا۟ عَلَى ٱلْقَرْيَةِ ٱلَّتِىٓ أُمْطِرَتْ مَطَرَ
ٱلسَّوْءِ ۚ أَفَلَمْ يَكُونُوا۟ يَرَوْنَهَا ۚ بَلْ
كَانُوا۟ لَا يَرْجُونَ نُشُورًا ﴿٤٠﴾

They must have surely passed by the town which was rained upon with a shower of evil. Have they, then, never seen it? But nay, they would not believe in resurrection. (40)

وَإِذَا رَأَوْكَ إِن يَتَّخِذُونَكَ إِلَّا هُزُوًا أَهَـٰذَا
ٱلَّذِى بَعَثَ ٱللَّهُ رَسُولًا ﴿٤١﴾

When they see you, they make you a target of their mockery, [saying]: 'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary? (41)

إِن كَادَ لَيُضِلُّنَا عَنْ ءَالِهَتِنَا لَوْلَآ أَن
صَبَرْنَا عَلَيْهَا ۚ وَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ حِينَ
يَرَوْنَ ٱلْعَذَابَ مَنْ أَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

He could almost have led us astray from our deities, had we not been steadfastly attached to them!' But in time, when they see the suffering, they will come to know who it was that went farthest astray. (42)

أَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَـٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ أَفَأَنتَ
تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٤٣﴾

Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you, then, be held

responsible for him? (43)

Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray. (44)

أَمْ تَحْسَبُ أَنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ يَسْمَعُونَ أَوْ يَعْقِلُونَ ۚ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا كَالْأَنْعَامِ ۖ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٤﴾

Overview

This second passage of the *sūrah,* like the first, starts with the allegations, suggestions and objections made by the unbelievers as a prelude to their statements about the Prophet himself. All this is given here with the aim of comforting the Prophet. In this passage, however, we have an early account of the punishment in store for their arrogance, one which is posited in a series of images of the hereafter. All this is given in reply to their question: *"Why have no angels been sent down to us?' – or, 'Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* then quotes their objection to the revelation of the Qur'ān over a long period, and explains the purpose behind this, reassuring the Prophet that God's help is ready at hand whenever the unbelievers challenge him: *"Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation."* (Verse 33)

The *sūrah* describes to the Prophet and the unbelievers the fate suffered by earlier communities which denied God's messages, reminding them in particular of the destruction suffered by Lot's people. This has a greater effect, because they pass by that township, with its remains telling its terrible story. Yet they are hardened to it, and its sight does not inspire them to take steps in order to avoid a similar fate.

All this is given by way of introduction to the unbelievers' ridicule of the Prophet and their offensive remarks about him. The *sūrah* immediately delivers a strong comment on this portraying them in a very contemptible light: "*They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray."* (Verse 44)

Ominous Prospects for the Unbelievers

> *Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: 'Why have no angels been sent down to us?' – or, 'Why do we not see our Lord?' Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing. On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: 'a forbidding ban!' We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust. On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose. On the day when the*

> *skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]. It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers. On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so- and-so for a friend! He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (Verses 21-29)*

The unbelievers do not hope to meet God. This means that they do not expect such a meeting and do not take it into account so as to determine their prior behaviour. In their hearts they do not feel any awe of God. Hence, they are ready to make utterances that no one who expects to meet God would entertain. *"Those who entertain no hope of meeting Us say: Why have no angels been sent down to us? – or, Why do we not see our Lord?"* (Verse 21)

They considered it unreasonable that God's Messenger should be a man. They demanded that angels be sent to them testifying to the truth of the message in order for them to believe in it. An alternative demand they made was that they should see God, so as to believe in Him. Such an overbearing attitude betrays the sort of ignorance associated with denying God and His attributes, having no proper esteem for Him. Who are they to make such overbearing demands? What are they in comparison with God Almighty? In God's dominion, they are no more than a particle floating aimlessly in the air, unless they establish a bond between them and God through believing in Him, deriving their strength from Him. Hence, the reply given them in the same verse shows the source of their overbearing attitude: *"Indeed, they are far too proud of themselves and they have been insolently overbearing."* (Verse 21)

They have given themselves airs and graces, become conceited, proud and haughty. All of which has led them to great transgression. Their pride is their main preoccupation, which means that they no longer give proper estimation to other things and values. They think themselves too great, or masters of the universe who deserve that God should appear before them in person so that they can believe in Him.

A truly sarcastic reply is given to them as they are informed of the terrible eventuality awaiting them when they see the angels, which is the less overbearing of their demands. For they will only see the angels on a very hard and difficult day on which they will be destined to receive unbearable and inescapable suffering. That is the Day of Reckoning when evil deeds are punished. *"On the day when they shall see the angels, the sinners will receive no happy news then, and they will say: 'a forbidding ban!'"* (Verse 22)

This is the day when their suggestion is granted, *"On the day when they shall see the angels"*. No good news is given to the sinners on that day, for their punishment

awaits them. How terrible is the fulfilment of their request! This is when they say, *a forbidding ban!*' This phrase used to be said by the Arabs to avert evil and enemies. It is a sort of appeal which hopes to drive enemies away and avoid any harm that might ensue. They utter it on that day by force of habit, because the whole thing comes as a surprise. But what will their words avail them of on that day?

"We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust." (Verse 23) It all happens in a brief moment. Our imagination follows the motion described in detail, with actions being raised and thrown up in the air. In no time, all good works they did in this present life are left like scattered dust, because they were not based on faith. Faith establishes a bond between people's hearts and God, and makes good works a way of life, chosen on purpose with due reflection, not in response to a fleeting whim or sudden impulse. With believers, good works are never reduced to the sort of single action that does not reflect a well defined method and clear objective.

According to Islam, man's life and action are closely related to the universe and the law that governs its existence and binds it all to God, including man and all his activities in life. When man's life is separated from its central access that relates it to the universe, he finds himself lost, without influence and with no value attached to his work. Indeed his actions become non-existent. It is faith that binds man to his Lord, adding value to his actions and giving them credit in the overall system of the universe.

Hence, the works of the unbelievers are thus made to die, and their death is shown in a highly tangible image: *"We shall turn to whatever deeds they have done, and We shall transform it all into scattered dust."* (Verse 23)

On the other side we find the believers, who dwell in heaven, in a perfectly contrasting image: "*On that day, those destined for paradise will be graced with the best of abodes and the fairest place of repose."* (Verse 24) They are well settled, enjoying their comfort. This feeling of settlement contrasts with the scattered dust in the opposite image, and the reassurance felt by the believers contrasts with the fear of the unbelievers that obliges them to make a worried prayer.

The unbelievers also used to suggest that God and the angels should appear before them on the tops of clouds. Such suggestions perhaps show the influence of Jewish legends speaking of God revealing Himself over a cloud or a column of fire. Therefore, the Qur'ān shows another image of the day when their request to see angels is granted: *"On the day when the skies shall be rent asunder with clouds, and the angels shall be sent down [in ranks]. On that day, true sovereignty belongs to the Most Merciful [alone]."* (Verses 25-26)

This verse, and many others in the Qur'ān, make it clear that that day will witness

far-reaching celestial events indicating a complete collapse of the system that controls all parts of the universe, including all celestial bodies. Such an upheaval indicates the end of this world. This upheaval is not limited to the earth, but includes planets, stars, solar systems and galaxies. It is useful to look at some aspects of this upheaval as described in different *sūrahs: "When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away... when the seas are set alight."* (81: 1-3 and 6) *"When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode, when the graves are hurled about."* (82: 1-4) *"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!"* (84: 1-5) *"When the sky is rent asunder and becomes red like burning oil."* (55: 37) *"When the earth is severely shaken, and when the mountains crumble away, so as to become like scattered dust."* (56: 4-6) *"When the trumpet is blown with a single blast, and the earth and the mountains are lifted up and crushed with a single stroke! Then that which must come to pass will on that day have come to pass; and the sky will be rent asunder – for, frail will it have become on that day."* (69: 13-16) *"On a day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains will be like tufts of wool."* (70: 8-9) *"When the earth is rocked by her [final] earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens."* (99: 1-2) *"The day when people will be like scattered moths, and the mountains like tufts of carded wool."* (101: 4-5) *"Wait, then, for the day when the skies shall bring forth a pall of smoke which will make obvious [the approach of the Last Hour], enveloping all mankind. 'Grievous is this suffering!"* (44: 10-11) *"On the day when the earth and the mountains will be convulsed, and the mountains will become like a sand-dune on the move."* (73: 14) *"On that day, the skies shall be rent asunder."* (73: 18) *"When the earth is systematically levelled down."* (89: 21) *"When every eye is dazzled, and the moon darkens, and the sun and the moon are brought together."* (75: 7-9) *"When the stars are effaced, and when the sky is rent asunder, and when the mountains are scattered like dust."* (77: 8-10) *"They ask you about the mountains. Say: My Lord will scatter them far and wide, and leave the earth level and bare, with no curves or ruggedness to be seen."* (20: 105-107) *"You will see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away."* (27: 88) *"One day We shall cause the mountains to move and you will see the earth void and bare."* (18: 47) *"On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens."* (14: 48) *"On that Day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment."* (21: 104)

All these verses indicate that our world will come to a fearful end characterized by a violent shake-up of the earth, while the mountains will be scattered like dust. The seas will be set alight, or made to explode, either by being overfull as a result of the upheaval taking place or its molecules will explode and turn into fire. The stars will be darkened, the sky rent asunder and the planets scattered. Distances will be confused as the sun and the moon will be brought together.

The sky will look like smoke at one time and alight and red at another. It is a fearful event that leaves nothing in place.

What Use is Regret?

In this *sūrah* God threatens the unbelievers with the sky being rent asunder by clouds. This may be a reference to clouds formed out of the vapours produced by the great explosions. On that day, the angels will go to the unbelievers, as the latter suggested, but their task will not be to confirm the Prophet's message, but rather to administer punishment to the unbelievers as God will have ordered: *"It will be a day of dire distress for the unbelievers."* (Verse 26) So why do they want the angels to go to them when their arrival signals so much distress?

The *sūrah* then portrays an image showing the regret and remorse felt by the unbelievers. It is portrayed at length, in detail, giving the impression that it is unending, where every wrongdoer bites his own hand in a gesture of regret:

> *On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands and say: 'Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger. Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!' Satan is ever treacherous to man. (Verses 27-29)*

Everything around the wrongdoing unbeliever is still, while he sends out expressions of regret, with sorrow marking his voice. The rhythm here is deliberately long to add to the sound effects. As we read or hear these verses, we also seem to participate in the expression of regret. *"On that day the wrongdoer will bite his hands."* (Verse 27) One hand is not enough. He bites both, alternating from one to the other, because his sorrow and regret are so keen. The movement itself is very common, expressing what the person making it feels. Hence, it is shown in full clarity.

The wrongdoer will also say: *"Would that I had followed the path shown to me by the Messenger!"* (Verse 27) Would that I followed his way and had not moved a single step away from it! He says this about God's Messenger despite the fact that he had denied the very possibility that God might have entrusted him with a message.

"Oh, woe is me! Would that I had never taken so-and-so for a friend!" (Verse 28) No name is mentioned here, but the friend is described as 'so and so' to include every bad friend who encouraged him to turn away from the path of God's Messenger and follow the wrong way. *"He surely led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me!"* (Verse 29) He was indeed Satan's aide, or was himself just another Satan. *"Satan is ever treacherous to man,"* leading him into situations of error and letting him down when he most needs help.

We see how the Qur'ān shakes their hearts, painting these fearful scenes of their fate as though this is already happening before their eyes. Yet still they deny God and speak of Him in a way that shows no respect. Indeed they make careless

suggestions when what awaits them is certain to fill them with regret.

Perhaps we should add that some reports mention that these verses were revealed to the Prophet by way of comment on an incident involving `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ, who frequently visited and sat with the Prophet. One day he invited the Prophet for a meal. The Prophet said that he would not eat `Uqbah's food unless `Uqbah uttered the declaration, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God, and that Muhammad is God's Messenger.' `Uqbah did so. His friend, Ubayy ibn Khalaf, however later remonstrated with him, saying: 'You have abandoned your religion.' `Uqbah said: 'No, by God! It was only that he refused to eat my food when he was in my home, and I felt embarrassed, so I granted his wish.' Ubayy said: 'I will not be satisfied unless you go and step over him and spit in his face.' `Uqbah looked for the Prophet until he found him in prostration near Dar al-Nadwah, and he did just that. The Prophet said to him: 'Should I ever meet you outside Makkah, I will hit your head with my sword.' `Uqbah was taken prisoner in the Battle of Badr, and the Prophet ordered `Alī to execute him.

A Complaint by God's Messenger

After these scenes of the Day of Judgement the *sūrah* brings us back to this world with a discussion of the unbelievers' attitude towards the Prophet and their objections to the method of revealing the Qur'ān from on high. This part of the *sūrah* again ends with a scene of what happens to the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement.

> *And the Messenger will say: My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'ān as something to be discarded!' Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support. The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation. Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path. (Verses 30-34)*

They have abandoned the Qur'ān, which God revealed to His Messenger to warn and explain to them what lies ahead for mankind. They refused to listen to it because they feared they would be attracted to its message. Stubbornly, they refused to consider its message which would have guided them to the truth and given them light. Although God revealed it as a constitution for human life, guiding it to all that is best, they shut their minds to it. *"And the Messenger will say: My Lord! My people have regarded this Qur'ān as something to he discarded!"* (Verse 30) His Lord certainly

knew this, but God's Messenger made his complaint, humbly stating that he had exerted his best efforts, but still his people adamantly refused to listen to the Qur'ān and consider its message.

God comforts His Messenger, telling him that the same was the case with all earlier messengers. Every prophet has had enemies who discard divine guidance and deliberately turn people away from faith. But God is certain to guide His messengers to the way that ensures their victory over foul and wicked enemies. *"Thus against every prophet We have set up enemies from among those who are guilty. Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support."* (Verse 31)

Divine wisdom is perfect indeed. The fact that wicked people wage war against prophets and their messages is certain to strengthen these messages, giving them the sort of seriousness that fits their nature. The struggle of advocates of divine faith against those who fight it may be hard, involving much sacrifice, but it is such struggle that eventually distinguishes true and sincere advocates from false ones, strengthening the former and expelling the latter. Thus, only those who are true to their faith, dedicated to its cause, aspiring to no personal or easy gain remain, dedicating their efforts to God alone.

Had advocacy of the divine faith been comfortable and easy, moving along a smooth way adorned with flowers, and without opposition, everyone would have become an advocate. Indeed true causes would have been muddled with false ones, and much confusion would have resulted. When a message or a cause faces determined opposition, the struggle for it becomes inevitable and sacrifice necessary. Only serious believers are ready to endure pain and make sacrifices for their causes, because such believers consider their faith to be more important than this whole world and the comforts it offers. Indeed, to them, faith is more important than life itself. Only the strongest in faith and most enduring among them can carry this fight to its end, because these are the ones who aspire most to what God has in store for them.

It is those who render sacrifices and remain steadfast that are eventually entrusted with the implementation of the divine message, because they are the ones who, having paid the heavy price of victory, are able to shoulder its continued burden. Their experience teaches them how to overcome the many hazards that lie along their way. The hardship they endure sharpens their abilities and talents, increases their strength and knowledge. All these will stand them in good stead as they continue to advocate the divine faith in all situations.

What happens in most cases is that the majority of people stand aside while the struggle between the wicked and advocates of the divine faith rages on. The sacrifices of these advocates will inevitably mount, but their steadfastness, despite

the great pain they have to endure, remains strong and they are not shaken in any way. As a result, the multitude standing by begin to feel that the message these believers advocate is more precious than all their sacrifices. They start to examine it in order to see what makes such a message dearer to its advocates than life. What happens then is that these people, who have long stood by, begin to embrace the faith in large numbers.

For this reason God has willed that every prophet has to face enemies. Such wicked people stand in the face of the divine message, which is the message of truth. Its advocates then resist its enemies and bear whatever sacrifices they are called on to give. The end is predetermined, and those who place their trust in God are certain of it. It is the provision of divine guidance that leads to the ultimate victory: "*Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support.*" (Verse 31)

That the wicked should stand against prophets is only natural. The prophets advocate the message of the truth which is given at the appropriate time to rectify corruption that creeps into community life or into human life in general. This is a corruption that affects hearts, systems and life itself. Such corruption is initiated, promoted and exploited by the wicked. They are the ones whose interests and values are served through the promotion of such corruption. Their opposition to the prophets aims to defend themselves and their interests. They want to retain the corrupt atmosphere in which they thrive. Some insects are stifled by the fine smell of flowers because they can only survive on dump heaps. Some worms survive only in dirty stagnating water, and perish in clean, running water. Such are the wicked. Hence their hostility to the message of truth. They fight it tooth and nail. But it is only natural that it will emerge triumphant, because it promotes life and looks up to the sublime horizon which binds it to God. "*Sufficient is your Lord to provide guidance and support.*" (Verse 31)

The Time Span of Qur'ānic Revelations

The *sūrah* goes on examining the arguments of the wicked who stand in opposition to the Qur'ān:

> *The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not the Qur'ān been revealed to him all at once?' Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation. (Verse 32)*

The purpose of revealing the Qur'ān is to re-educate a community and establish a new social order. Such a task requires time. In a process of proper education it is not enough to understand the words being said, rather one must interact with them as also with the ideas expressed. This interaction should then be brought into the

practical world. Human nature does not go through a total transformation overnight, as a result of reading a book which provides a complete new way of life. It is more likely to be influenced day by day, and by one aspect after another. This gives human nature the chance to gradually, but thoroughly understand it, and to get used to it bit by bit, bearing the responsibilities it requires. Thus, people are not scared off as they might be were it presented in full, surrounded by difficulties. This gradual approach is like serving a fresh nourishing meal every day, from which the recipient becomes stronger and better able to benefit by the next meal, enjoying it even more.

The Qur'ān provides a comprehensive way of life, as well as a system of education that suits human nature. For it is revealed by God, the Creator of human nature who knows it thoroughly. For this reason, it was revealed in parts, to suit the real needs of the Muslim community as it came into existence and began to grow. It is not meant to be a theoretical book which is read for enjoyment or increasing one's knowledge. It is meant to be implemented in full, with every task accomplished and every detailed order carried out. Indeed its verses are 'orders of the day' which Muslims receive and start to implement immediately, just like military personnel receive their daily orders on the battlefield. They must understand these orders properly, interact with, and implement them.

For all this, the Qur'ān was revealed in small parts, explaining things first to the Prophet and strengthening his resolve to fulfil his task. Its revelation progressed, one passage or *sūrah* after another, as suited the different stages along the road the Muslim community travelled. "*Thus [it has been revealed] so that We might strengthen your heart with it, and We have imparted it to you by gradual revelation.*" (Verse 32) The Arabic term *tartīl,* translated here as 'gradual revelation', indicates successive steps according to God's knowledge of what suited the Muslims at the time and their readiness to receive more.

This method accomplished miracles in transforming the community which so received it, interacting with it day after day and absorbing its message part after part. When the Muslims ignored this method, viewing the Qur'ān as a book for theoretical knowledge and recitation in worship only, they no longer benefited by it. They simply abandoned its method which aimed to reshape their way of thinking and their everyday lives.

The *sūrah* continues to reassure the Prophet that he will be given the ultimate argument and the final evidence whenever the unbelievers come up with a new suggestion or objection. "*Whenever they come to you with an argument, We shall reveal to you the truth and the best explanation.*" (Verse 33)

Their argument is false, and God refutes it with the truth. Indeed the Qur'ān aims to establish the truth in full clarity. It does not aim to win an argument or to be

applauded in a debate. It has no time for such pursuits.

God, limitless is He in His glory, promises to help His Messenger in any argument he may have with his people. He follows the truth, and God empowers him with the truth that overcomes all falsehood. How can the unbelievers' argument stand up to God's ultimate proof? How can the falsehood they advocate resist the overpowering truth revealed by God?

This passage ends with an image showing the unbelievers' resurrection and how they are gathered in hell, as a punishment for their rejection of the truth and for their upholding twisted logic and values: *"Those who will be gathered to hell on their faces – they will be worst in station and still farther away from the [right] path."* (Verse 34) This picture of them gathering on their faces in hell is a very humiliating one. It contrasts with their arrogance and turning away from the truth. This image is placed before the Prophet to strengthen him against the opposition he faced from them. It is also placed before them as a warning against what awaits them. The portrait as a whole is meant to undermine their arrogance and show how weak their position is. Yet despite such strong warnings, they stubbornly held on to their rejection of the truth.

The Fate of Earlier Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then makes some quick and brief references to earlier communities who rejected God's message, as given to them through His messengers. First we are told about Moses who was granted the support of his brother Aaron. Aaron was to share the task assigned to Moses. They were ordered to confront the people who *'denied Our signs',* for Pharaoh and his people denied God's signs even before Moses and Aaron were sent to them with God's message. Such signs are available all the time, giving clear evidence. God's messengers simply remind people of their negligence of such signs. Before the second verse speaking about them is completed, a quick picture of their fate is shown: *"We utterly destroyed these people."* (Verse 36)

This is followed by a reference to Noah's people who *'rejected their messengers'* and in consequence, God *'caused them to drown'.* It should be explained here that Noah's people denied only Noah's message and their rejection applied only to him, but we have to remember that Noah only preached the faith advocated by all God's messengers. Hence, when they rejected what he told them, it was as though they rejected all messengers, most of whom lived after their own time. God states that He '*made of them an example for mankind.*' (Verse 37) The great floods could not be forgotten despite the passage of time. Anyone who looks carefully at the result of that flood will understand its lesson, provided he approaches it with an open mind. *"For the wrongdoers We have prepared grievous suffering."* (Verse 37) It is now ready, requiring no further waiting. We note that the wrongdoers are mentioned by their

attribute, rather than by the use of a pronoun, which would have been perfectly correct from the point of view of style, but mentioning this quality explains the reason behind their punishment.

The next verse groups together the `Ād, Thamūd and the people of al-Rass, as well as many generations in between. Al-Rass refers to a ground well which was not properly built. Its people, who lived in a village in Yamāmah, killed the Prophet sent to them. Al-Ṭabarī, however, says that they are the ones mentioned in *Sūrah* 85, The Constellations, as having lit a fire in a great pit to burn all the believers. Whatever the truth of this, the fact remains that all these communities faced the same fate after they were given a clear message, proffering clear lessons. None heeded what they were told and none averted the terrible fate against which they were warned.

All these peoples, as well as Lot's township which suffered a shower of evil rained upon it, followed the same line and shared the same fate: *"To each of them did We proffer lessons"* so that they may take heed. But this was not to be. Hence, the outcome of their stubborn rejection of God's message was that *"each of them did We utterly annihilate."* (Verse 39)

The *sūrah* makes this very quick reference to all these communities, ending by mentioning the fate of Lot's people, whose township, Sodom, the Arabs passed by on their summer trade journey to Syria. Sodom was destroyed with a volcanic rain that brought on them gases and stones, destroying the town completely. The *sūrah* states that they did not take heed because they did not believe in resurrection and did not hope to meet God. Hence, their hearts remained hardened. This gave rise to their objections to, and ridicule of their messengers.

Ridiculing God's Messenger

After this quick reference to earlier communities, the *sūrah* mentions the ridicule faced by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from his people. This follows upon the earlier mention of their arrogance and objection to the method of revelation of the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* also earlier described what will happen to them on the Day of Resurrection, and also the fate suffered by earlier unbelievers. All this is given by way of solace to the Prophet before mentioning the ridicule they direct at him. They are warned that they will he placed in a position lower than that of animals: *"When they see you, they make you a target of their mockery, [saying': 'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?"* (Verse 41)

Prior to his choice as God's Messenger, Muhammad was highly respected among his people, being the descendant of a leading family and tribe. His honesty and morality enhanced his position, as he was nicknamed *al-amīn,* which meant 'the trustworthy'. When the community faced a serious dispute over which tribe should

replace the Black Stone, they accepted him as arbiter. When he gathered them to give them the first news of his mission, he asked them whether they would believe him if he were to tell them that armed people were moving behind the hills, preparing to attack them, they said: "Yes, because you enjoy our full trust."

Yet when he told them of his mission and recited to them this great book of divine revelations, they ridiculed him, saying: *'Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?'* This is cruel ridicule. Yet, were they so convinced that he deserved such ridicule, or that the message he preached also deserved it? Not at all! For it was all a scheme devised by the Quraysh elders to detract from his great personality and to counter the irresistible influence of the Qur'ān. They felt that the new message constituted a threat to their social and economic positions. Hence, they resorted to every conceivable means to counter it.

They convened meetings and conferences to devise plots and strategies, and to agree on what accusations they should level at Muhammad, knowing full well that they were only fabricating blatant lies.

Ibn Isĥāq reports that one year as the pilgrimage season approached, a group of the Quraysh attended al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was a high-ranking elderly figure. He said to them: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend (meaning the Prophet). So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. Someone suggested that they should describe Muhammad as a fortune-teller. Al-Walīd said: "It is clearly recognized that he is not. We have seen fortune-tellers and what he says is nothing like the incomprehensible rhyming phrases they use." Another suggestion was to say that he was a madman, but al-Walīd rejected this too, saying: "We have seen madness and its effect on people. His is nothing like a madman's seizure, convulsion or hallucination." A third suggestion was to say that he was nothing more than a poet, but al-Walīd again told them that it would not do. "We have learnt poetry in all its forms and metres, and what Muhammad says is nothing like poetry." Someone suggested that they should say that Muhammad was a magician. Al-Walīd said: "He is not a magician. We have seen such people and their gestures as they blow and contract. He is totally unlike them."

Giving up, they said: "What shall we say, then?" Al-Walīd said: "What Muhammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as

false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan." They all approved of al-Walīd's suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign. They made sure to meet pilgrims as they arrived in Makkah so as to warn them about the Prophet.

This is but one example of the plots they devised. It also shows how they were at a loss concerning the accusations they could level at the Prophet. Yet it also shows that they were well aware of how truthful he was. Indeed their mockery as they said: *Is this the one whom God has sent as His emissary?'* was merely one of the forms they used in their propaganda against Islam and its advocates. In arriving at such claims, the elders of the Quraysh did not express their true feelings about the truth of Islam. It was simply a device aiming to lower the Prophet's esteem in the public eye. For they were keen that the masses should continue to look up to them in matters of religion, as this would ensure that they continued to enjoy their social and economic privileges. In all this, the Quraysh were no different from other forces that are hostile to the truth and its advocates in all places and generations.

Although they were keen to project an attitude of ridicule towards the Prophet, their words reflected the great anxiety they felt, their knowledge of his strong argument and the powerful message the Qur'ān embodied. They said: "*He could almost have led us astray from our deities, had we not been steadfastly attached to them!*" (Verse 42)

They admitted that they were greatly shaken to the extent that, keen as they were to stick to their religion which gave them numerous privileges, they were about to abandon their deities and idol worship altogether. They maintained this only through a great deal of resistance.

Steadfastness, which they speak about, is only required to resist what is powerfully appealing. They also described the right guidance the Prophet gave as *'leading astray',* which shows how wrong they were in their evaluation of the situation. Despite the appearances they put on of mocking the Prophet, they could not conceal the tremor they felt in their hearts as Muhammad advocated his message, reciting the Qur'ān. Hence, a quick and general warning is given which struck fear in their hearts: "*But in time, when they see the suffering, they will come to know who it was that went farthest astray.*" (Verse 42) They will know then whether Muhammad brought them a message of truth or one of error. But their newly acquired knowledge would then be of little use to them, because suffering would be staring them in the face. This is true whether the suffering is of the type that is inflicted in this present life, like the Quraysh suffered at the Battle of Badr, or in the hereafter.

When Desire is Worshipped

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet consoling and comforting him. He did not fail to deliver his message or to employ strong arguments in advocating it. He certainly deserved nothing of the mockery and ridicule they levelled at him. It is they that are wicked. They make their own desires an idol which they worship. They have no argument for the stand they adopted. How could such a person formulate even the semblance of an argument?

"Have you considered the one who makes his desires his deity? Could you then, be held responsible for him?" (Verse 43) This verse is carefully phrased to paint a picture showing the psychological condition of a person who pays no heed to accepted standards or values. Instead, they only submit to their own desires and worship none but their own pleasure. They apply no standard, recognize no value, acknowledge no logic. Once their desire moves clearly in a particular direction, they follow like slaves submitting to a powerful master.

God, who is limitless in His glory, addresses His servant and Messenger in a kindly and compassionate manner, referring to this type of person. He asks him: *"Have you considered..."* He follows this by drawing a picture of a man who pays no regard to truth, logic or sound argument. He comforts the Prophet so that he does not feel too disappointed at having failed to guide someone who has no propensity to follow guidance. Hence, the Prophet need not concern himself with such people: *"Could you, then, be held responsible for him?"* (Verse 43)

The *sūrah* hurls further ridicule on those who submit to their lust and worship their desire, turning a blind eye to the truth. It puts them on the same level as animals which are devoid of hearing or logic. This is followed by yet more ridicule which shows such people as even inferior to animals: *"Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray."* (Verse 44)

This very clear statement that maintains accuracy applies, as the *sūrah* says, to 'most of them', because only a minority of unbelievers showed any inclination to accept guidance, or reflect on what they heard. The majority, who took their desires as their gods which they blindly obeyed, ignored all the signs they heard and saw, and were indeed like cattle. Indeed man is distinguished from animals by his propensity to reflect and understand, as well as by his ability to mould his life in accordance with the truth he accepts upon consideration and reflection. His great human quality is that he is able to change course on being convinced by sound argument. When man deliberately abandons such qualities, he puts himself in a position worse than that of animals. An animal is guided to what suits it by the abilities and susceptibilities God has placed within it. Thus, it fulfils its role without

deviation. Man, on the other hand, often disregards the qualities God has given him, making little use of them. In this he is worse than an animal who does not neglect any inclination given to it.

"*They are but like cattle. Nay, they are even far worse astray.*" (Verse 44) This comment expels those who ridicule the Prophet from the ranks of mankind. They are to be looked down upon, never to command respect.

3
Raising Support Against God

أَلَمۡ تَرَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَيۡفَ مَدَّ ٱلظِّلَّ وَلَوۡ شَآءَ لَجَعَلَهُۥ سَاكِنًا ثُمَّ جَعَلۡنَا ٱلشَّمۡسَ عَلَيۡهِ دَلِيلًا ﴿٤٥﴾

Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen when, had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still? But then We have made the sun its guide. (45)

ثُمَّ قَبَضۡنَٰهُ إِلَيۡنَا قَبۡضًا يَسِيرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

And then, little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves. (46)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ لِبَاسٗا وَٱلنَّوۡمَ سُبَاتٗا وَجَعَلَ ٱلنَّهَارَ نُشُورٗا ﴿٤٧﴾

He it is who makes the night a garment for you, and sleep a repose. He makes every day a resurrection. (47)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَرۡسَلَ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ بُشۡرَۢا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡ رَحۡمَتِهِۦۚ وَأَنزَلۡنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ طَهُورٗا ﴿٤٨﴾

And He it is who sends forth the winds as heralds of His coming grace. And We cause pure water to descend from the skies, (48)

لِّنُحۡيِيَ بِهِۦ بَلۡدَةٗ مَّيۡتٗا وَنُسۡقِيَهُۥ مِمَّا خَلَقۡنَآ أَنۡعَٰمٗا وَأَنَاسِيَّ كَثِيرٗا ﴿٤٩﴾

so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human. (49)

وَلَقَدۡ صَرَّفۡنَٰهُ بَيۡنَهُمۡ لِيَذَّكَّرُواْ فَأَبَىٰٓ أَكۡثَرُ ٱلنَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورٗا ﴿٥٠﴾

Many times have We explained this [in the] Qur'ān to them, so that they may take it to heart, but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers. (50)

وَلَوۡ شِئۡنَا لَبَعَثۡنَا فِي كُلِّ قَرۡيَةٖ نَّذِيرٗا ﴿٥١﴾

Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city. (51)

فَلَا تُطِعِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ وَجَٰهِدۡهُم بِهِۦ جِهَادٗا كَبِيرٗا ٥٢

Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur'ān. (52)

۞ وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي مَرَجَ ٱلۡبَحۡرَيۡنِ هَٰذَا عَذۡبٞ فُرَاتٞ وَهَٰذَا مِلۡحٌ أُجَاجٞ وَجَعَلَ بَيۡنَهُمَا بَرۡزَخٗا وَحِجۡرٗا مَّحۡجُورٗا ٥٣

He it is who has brought the two bodies of water to meet; the one sweet and thirst-quenching, and the other salty and bitter. Yet between them He has made a barrier and a forbidding ban. (53)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ مِنَ ٱلۡمَآءِ بَشَرٗا فَجَعَلَهُۥ نَسَبٗا وَصِهۡرٗاۗ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ قَدِيرٗا ٥٤

And He it is who has created man from water and established for him bonds of lineage and marriage. All-Powerful is your Lord. (54)

وَيَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنفَعُهُمۡ وَلَا يَضُرُّهُمۡۗ وَكَانَ ٱلۡكَافِرُ عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ ظَهِيرٗا ٥٥

Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord. (55)

وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرٗا وَنَذِيرٗا ٥٦

We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. (56)

قُلۡ مَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍ إِلَّا مَن شَآءَ أَن يَتَّخِذَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلٗا ٥٧

Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. All I ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.' (57)

وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَى ٱلۡحَيِّ ٱلَّذِي لَا يَمُوتُ وَسَبِّحۡ بِحَمۡدِهِۦۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِهِۦ بِذُنُوبِ عِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرًا ٥٨

Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins. (58)

ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٖ ثُمَّ ٱسۡتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلۡعَرۡشِۚ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ فَسۡـَٔلۡ بِهِۦ خَبِيرٗا ٥٩

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and is established on the throne of His Almightiness, the Most Merciful. Ask, then,

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱسۡجُدُواْ لِلرَّحۡمَٰنِ قَالُواْ وَمَا ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ أَنَسۡجُدُ لِمَا تَأۡمُرُنَا وَزَادَهُمۡ نُفُورَۢا ﴿٦٠﴾

about Him, the One who knows everything. (59)

Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious. (60)

تَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ بُرُوجٗا وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا سِرَٰجٗا وَقَمَرٗا مُّنِيرٗا ﴿٦١﴾

Blessed is He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light-giving moon. (61)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ ٱلَّيۡلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ خِلۡفَةٗ لِّمَنۡ أَرَادَ أَن يَذَّكَّرَ أَوۡ أَرَادَ شُكُورٗا ﴿٦٢﴾

And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude. (62)

Overview

This passage concentrates on some of the great wonders in the universe that testify to God's existence and the unique system He has put in place to control and conduct everything that happens. It directs the Prophet to look carefully at these signs and interact with them. Such interaction, particularly when it is done with an open heart and mind, is sufficient to redress any lingering effects of the hardship caused by the unbelievers. He will be looking at the great horizons against which the unbelievers' schemes and hostilities are reduced to insignificance.

The Qur'ān always directs people's hearts and minds to reflect on, and interact with, what they see in the universe. They will then recognize the work of God's hand in all that they see, hear and feel. They will have much to reflect upon which will strengthen their bond with God through His work.

When man lives in the universe with an open heart and mind, and an alert soul, his life rises above the petty concerns of this world. His sense of life is heightened as he feels, at every moment, that the universe around him is much larger and greater than his own world, while all that he sees and feels comes into being through one and the same will, are subject to the same law, and submit to One Creator. He will realize that he is but one of countless creatures that submit to God, and that God's hand is visible in all that he sees, hears and feels.

To fear only God will be mixed in anyone's consciousness with parallel feelings of friendliness and trust. These feelings will fill his soul and his whole world, imparting a mixture of love and reassurance that will accompany him on his life journey and remain with him until he meets God. He cannot fail to experience such feelings when everything around him is made by God, according to His fine and elaborate system of creation.

We see in this passage how the *sūrah* paints a scene of shadows extending then gently contracting, before we move to a picture of a quiet night of deep slumber and a bustling day of tireless activity. We then see the winds as heralds of God's mercy, followed by water pouring down from the skies to quicken barren land. We see the salty sea and the sweet river water, and the barrier between them preventing them from mixing. Then we look at a different type of fluid, the semen that gives rise to human life. We contemplate how the heavens and the earth were created in six days, and look at the star constellations in the sky, with the sun as a lamp lightening the world for us, and the moon doing the same at night. We also contemplate the unfailing succession of night and day.

As it paints these images, the *sūrah* directs our hearts and minds to reflect that they are all of God's creation, reminding us of His power and fine planning. It shows how singular the unbelievers' attitude is when they associate partners with God and worship alongside Him entities that can cause them neither benefit nor harm. The unbelievers are so ignorant that they speak impudently about God and support one another in denying Him. This is very strange, particularly when seen against the multitude of universal signs demonstrating God's creation. It is all a great display that the Creator raises before our eyes for us to contemplate.

Moving Shadows, Still Night

> *Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen when, had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still? But then We have made the sun its guide. And then, little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves. (Verses 45-46)*

This image of shadow and shade imparts to a troubled and tired soul a feeling of comfort, relaxation and security, as if it is a gentle, compassionate hand that wipes away pain and worry, giving comfort and energy. is this God's purpose as He directs the Prophet, who has suffered the unbelievers' ridicule and opposition, to contemplate the shadow? In the tough battle the Prophet went through in Makkah, facing determined opposition and wicked scheming, his soul must have felt the burden too heavy, with only a small number of believers supporting him against the overwhelming majority of unbelievers. Not only so, but he was not then even

allowed to retaliate against physical aggression or repel hostile ridicule. In this troubled atmosphere passages of the Qur'ān were revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) to serve as a healing balsam, a relaxing shade and kind blessing. It provided him with support in the midst of determined denial and opposition. Shade, particularly when considered against a hot desert background, gives an image that is in complete harmony with the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* that is full of compassion and blessings.

The *sūrah* shows the shadow as being gently stretched by God's hand before it then contracts: *"Do you not see how your Lord causes the shadow to lengthen?"* (Verse 45) Some time later, *"little by little, We draw it in towards Ourselves."* (Verse 46) The shadow is a faint darkness made by the sun's rebounding rays. It moves along with the movement of the earth in relation to the sun, changing its position, length and shape. The sun points it with its light and heat, determining its area and length. When we follow how the shadow changes shape and extent, we experience a feeling of comfort and are gently alerted to the fact that it is an aspect of God's work.

When the sun starts its decline, we see the shadows lengthen and further lengthen. Suddenly all shadows disappear as the sun sets. Where have all the shadows gone? God's unseen hand has collected them all as the deep darkness of the night gathers and spreads over our world. This is all the work of God's able hand which humans fail to see, but which continues without fail.

"Had He so willed, He could have indeed made it stand still?" (Verse 45) The way the visible universe and solar system are made makes the shadow move in the gentle way it does. Had the system been even slightly different, this would have had a different effect on the shadow. Had the earth been motionless, the shadow cast over it would have stood still, neither extending nor shrinking. On the other hand, if the earth's movement had been faster or slower, the extension and shrinking of the shadow would have been proportionately slower or faster. It is the way the universe is made, with its operative laws, that gives the shadow its specific features.

The highlighting of this phenomenon, which we see every day without paying much attention to it, is part of the Qur'ānic method of making our consciousness interact with the universe so as to respond to aspects that we tend to ignore because of their familiarity. We only need to contemplate the countless marvels around us for our thoughts to move in the right direction.

Moving on, the *sūrah* highlights an image of the night, its stillness and peaceful slumber, contrasted with the day and its bustling movement. *"He it is who makes the night a garment for you, and sleep a repose. He makes every day a resurrection."* (Verse 47)

The night spreads its cover over animate and inanimate objects so as to make the world appear as though it wears the blackness of the night. Hence, the night is

described as a garment. At night, movement stops and footsteps cease to allow people and most animals, birds and insects to sleep. Sleep is a cessation of sensation, consciousness and feeling, which is why it is described as 'repose'. Then the dawn starts to breathe and movement begins. Life is thus resumed. Hence, the day is a new 'resurrection' after a short mini-death. The two alternate with every daily cycle of the earth. Again this phenomenon is ignored by human beings, but it is indicative of the great design of the universe made by God, who never sleeps or overlooks anything.

The *sūrah* highlights another universal phenomenon that is closely related to life:

> *And He it is who sends forth the winds as heralds of His coming grace. And We cause pure water to descend from the skies, so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human. (Verses 48-49)*

All life on earth depends on rain water, either directly, or through the rivers and other water courses, springs, wells and underground reservoirs it supplies. Only those who directly depend on rain for their living properly appreciate God's grace as He sends rain. They look forward to rain, full of hope, realizing that it brings them life. They look for wind, which they know to drive the clouds. Hence, they realize that the wind is an early indicator, announcing the forthcoming act of God's grace, provided that they believe in God.

It is important to look at the last two verses very carefully: "*We cause pure water to descend from the skies.*" (Verse 48) We note how the concept of purity and purification points to the life brought about by rain: "*so that with it We may bring dead land to life and give drink to a countless number of Our creation, beasts as well as human.*" (Verse 49) Thus, life is given an added aspect of purity, because God wants human life, and indeed all life on earth, to be pure of evil. Thus, He washes the face of the earth with pure water that brings life to an otherwise dead land, and which also serves as a pure drink for all creatures.

Jihad by Means of the Qur'ān

At this point the *sūrah* refers to the Qur'ān which, like pure rain water, descends from on high to purify people's hearts and souls. It wonders how man warms to rain, which is essential for physical life, but does not warm to the Qur'ān which gives life to hearts and souls.

> *Many times have We explained this (in the] Qur'ān to them, so that they may take it to heart, but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers. Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city. Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most*

vigorously against them with this Qur'ān. (Verses 50-52)

We have put it to them in a great variety of forms, styles and presentations, addressing it to their minds, hearts, souls and feelings. We sought to awaken their consciences to its import in numerous ways, employing different means to ensure that they interact with it. All it needs from them is that they should *'take it to heart.'* The point is that the Qur'ān aims to remind people of a truth that is well established in their nature, even though they often forget it. What makes them heedless of it is the fact that they submit to their desires: *"but most people refuse to be anything but unbelievers."* (Verse 50)

This means that the mission entrusted to God's Messenger is a very tough one. He faces the whole of mankind when the great majority of them choose to follow their desires, insisting on unbelief, being ingrate, despite the presence of numerous signs pointing to the truth of faith.

"Had We so willed, We could have sent a warner to every city." (Verse 51) Such a course would have divided the task and made it easier to carry out. God, however, chose one of His servants, the last of His messengers, and required him to address all mankind, so as to give them the same message which remains free from local variations. God also gave His Messenger the Qur'ān, so as to make it the address he drove home to them: *"Do not obey the unbelievers, but strive most vigorously against them with this Qur'ān."* (Verse 52)

This Qur'ān has great power and influence. It is irresistible. When God's Messenger addressed the Arabs with it, it shook their hearts and consciences. They tried hard to counter its effects, employing every means at their disposal, but all their efforts were useless. The Quraysh elders used to say to their people: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but rather talk frivolously about it, so that you might gain the upper hand."* (41: 26) This betrayed their profound fear that the Qur'ān would touch their own hearts and the hearts of their followers and that they would embrace Islam. They were aware that it took only the reading of a couple of verses, or perhaps a *sūrah* or two, by Muhammad, and listeners were so affected they accepted his message. To them, it seemed like the Qur'ān had a magic effect on people.

The elders of the Quraysh were themselves touched by the power of the Qur'ān. It was only because they were keenly aware of this profound effect that they resorted to such tactics, warning their people against listening to it and encouraging them to take it frivolously. Indeed, their statement is indicative of how worried they were about the effect of the Qur'ān.

Ibn Isĥāq reports that three of the Quraysh elders, Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went out one night to listen to the Qur'ān being recited by the

Prophet as he prayed in his home during the night. Each of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about what he did. As the day began to break, they went back. However, the three of them inevitably met. There was no need for them to ask each other what they were doing. Therefore, they remonstrated with one another and concluded that their action was inadvisable: "Should some of your followers see you," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against such 'irresponsible' action. Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they were ashamed of themselves. One of them suggested that they should give each other their word of honour not to listen to the Qur'ān again. They did so before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān at his home. He asked him what he thought about what he heard Muhammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him.

Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocutor: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf (the Prophet's clan) for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."

This is just an example of how strongly attracted they were to the Qur'ān. They felt that it was too powerful for them. Hence, they needed to pledge their word of honour that they would not listen to it again. What they feared most was that some of their subordinates might see them so taken by the Qur'ān that they too would be unable to resist it.

Indeed, the Qur'ān embodies simple and natural facts which link hearts directly to the truth that issues forth with irresistible power. It includes scenes and images of the Day of Judgement, and others derived from the universe around us, historical accounts, scenes of the fate of past communities, and powerful arguments, all of which strike basic cords in our hearts. Indeed, we often find that a single *sūrah* affects us so powerfully as to take hold of our whole being. Indeed, the Qur'ān is often described as more powerful than great armies. It is no wonder, therefore, that God ordered His Messenger not to obey the unbelievers, and not to budge from fulfilling

his task. The divine order also required the Prophet to vigorously strive against unbelievers by means of the Qur'ān. Having been given the Qur'ān, the Prophet was equipped with something much more forceful and compelling than any human logic.

Separating Types of Water

The *sūrah* again portrays images from the world around us. Having spoken about winds heralding rain and its pure water, now it speaks of the great bodies of water, some of which are sweet and some salty, and how they do not mix.

> *He it is who has brought the two bodies of water to meet; the one sweet and thirst-quenching, and the other salty and bitter. Yet between them He has made a barrier and a forbidding ban. (Verse 53)*

It is God who created both types and left them to run their courses, meeting at certain points. Nevertheless, their waters do not mix because they have a natural barrier keeping them apart. In most cases, rivers run at a level higher than the sea, which means that at the meeting point, it is the river with its sweet water that runs into the salty sea. It is very rare that a river runs below sea level. Hence, the sea with its much greater body of water does not overpower the river whose water gives life to plants, animals and man. The fact that this is the natural order in practically all cases where a river meets the sea means that it is certainly not coincidental. It happens by the will of the Creator who made the universe in such a way as to fulfil His purpose and remain subject to His laws of nature.

Indeed the natural laws God has set in operation ensure that the salty waters of sea and ocean do not overrun dry land or overpower rivers. This remains so even during high tides caused by the moon's gravity as it affects the earth's surface water.

It is useful to cite here some scientific observations that stress the facts mentioned in the Qur'ān:

> The moon is 240,000 miles away, and the tides twice a day are usually a gentle reminder of its presence. Tides of the ocean run as high as sixty feet in some places, and even the crust of the earth is twice a day bent outward several inches by the moon's attraction. All seems so regular that we do not grasp to any degree the vast power that lifts the whole area of the sea several feet and bends the crust of the earth, seemingly so solid. Mars has a moon – a little one – only six thousand miles away from it. If our moon was, say, fifty thousand miles away instead of its present respectable distance, our tides would be so enormous that twice a day all the lowland of all the continents would be submerged by a rush of water so enormous that even the

> mountains would soon be eroded away, and probably no continent could have risen from the depths fast enough to exist today. The earth would crack with the turmoil and tides in the air would create daily hurricanes. If the continents were washed away, the average depth of water over the whole earth would be about a mile and a half and life could not exist except perhaps in the abysmal depth of the ocean, where it would feed upon itself till extinct.[1]

But the hand that manages this universe has let the two bodies of water free, placing between them a barrier that prevents either from encroaching on the other. This barrier is erected between them through their very nature and the nature of the universe which demonstrates such balances that testify to the wisdom of its Maker.

As the *sūrah* proceeds, it refers to a fluid that is totally different from the water pouring down from the skies, or moving along in seas and rivers. It mentions the sperm that gives rise to human life: *"And He it is who has created man from water and established for him bonds of lineage and marriage. All-Powerful is your Lord."* (Verse 54) It is from this particular fluid that a fetus takes form and becomes a male child related to its ancestors by lineage, or a female one that enables the marriage relationship to take place.

The human life that comes into existence through this fluid is far greater and more wonderful than life caused by rain. Just one cell, out of a countless number comprised in one drop of man's semen, fertilizes the woman's egg to initiate the formation of the greatly sophisticated creature, man, the most remarkable of all living creatures.

It is from practically identical sperms and female eggs that boys and girls come into existence, in a remarkable process that human knowledge has not yet fathomed. None of the many thousands of sperms shows any clear signs that makes it able to produce a male or a female. Similarly, no female egg shows such signs. Nevertheless, one eventually produces a man, while another produces a woman. *"All powerful is your Lord."* This amazing phenomenon shows just one aspect of His power.

The Great Miracle of Life

If we were to look minutely into this fluid, we would be overawed as we look for a complete set of human characteristics in exceedingly minute components that carry the hereditary aspects of the human race, as also the parents and their immediate families, which are then transferred to the fetus, male or female, in accordance with God's will. Here we quote from the chapter on genes in A.C. Morrison's *Man Does*

[1] A.C. Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* Morrison and Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 22-23.

Not Stand Alone:

> In every cell, male and female, are chromosomes and genes. Chromosomes form the darkened nucleus which contains the genes. The genes are the main deciding factor as to what every living thing or a human being shall be. The cytoplasm is the extraordinary chemical combinations which surround them both. The genes are so infinitesimal that if all of them which are responsible for all the human beings on earth today, with their individuality, psychology, colour, and race, could be collected and put in one place, there would be less than a thimbleful. These ultra-microscopic genes are the absolute keys to all human, animal, and vegetable characteristics. A thimble is a small place in which to put all the individual characteristics of two billions of human beings. However, the facts are beyond question... The embryo recapitulating in its progressive development from protoplasm to racial identity indicates recorded history retained and expressed by atomic arrangement in the genes and cytoplasm...[1]
>
> We have found that genes are recognized to be sub microscopic arrangements of the atoms in the sex cells of all things that have life. They hold the design, ancestral record and characteristics of each living thing. They control in detail root, trunk, leaf, flower and fruit of every plant as exactly as they determine the shape, scales, hair, wings of every animal, including man.[2]

Such a glimpse into the marvels of life is sufficient as a pointer to the wise Creator's great hand: *"All powerful is your Lord."* (Verse 54)

In League Against God

In this atmosphere of careful planning of creation, and in the light of life that is produced by rain water and human sperm, the very thought of worshipping anyone other than God is incompatible with nature, as also singular and absurd. Hence, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' worship and puts it in perspective: "*Yet people worship, instead of God, things that can neither benefit nor harm them. An unbeliever always gives support against his Lord."* (Verse 55)

Every single unbeliever, including the idolaters who opposed Islam in Makkah, joins the fight against their Lord who has created them and given them shape and form. How can this be when the unbeliever is so insignificant as to stand in opposition to God? In fact unbelievers oppose God's faith and the code of living He has laid down for human life. In order to show the enormity of their offence, the

[1] Ibid., pp. 78-79.
[2] Ibid., p. 86.

sūrah describes them as opponents of God, their Lord and Master.

When someone stands in opposition to God's Messenger and his message, he is actually fighting against God. The Prophet need not worry about this person, because his opponent is God, who will certainly ensure that he cannot do the Prophet any harm.

God then reassures His Messenger, lightening his burden. He assures him that once he has discharged his duty, delivering his message, with what it brings to people of good news and warnings, striving hard against the unbelievers through the Qur'ān, then there is no reason for him to be troubled at the unbelievers' stubborn rejection of his message. God will take over the fight against those who oppose him. All he needs to do is to place his trust in God and leave matters to Him.

> *We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. All ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord. Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise. Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins. (Verses 56-58)*

Thus the task of God's Messenger is defined: it is to give happy news and issue a warning. At the time this *sūrah* was revealed, the Prophet was still in Makkah and had not yet received orders to take up arms against the idolaters to ensure the freedom of expression and advocacy of his message. That order was given to him later, after his immigration to Madīnah. There was certainly a definite purpose behind withholding such an order at the time, and this is best known to God Himself. However, we think that at the time the Prophet was still inculcating the new faith in the minds and hearts of his followers. He wanted it to sink deep so as to impart its distinctive character to them and for it to become manifest in their lives and actions. Thus, they would become the nucleus of the Muslim society which moulds itself on the basis of its Islamic faith. Moreover, the order to refrain from fighting during the Makkan period avoided bloody hostilities and vengeance killing which could have shut the door firmly between the Quraysh and Islam. God certainly knew that eventually they would all embrace Islam, with some of them doing so before the Prophet's immigration to Madīnah and the rest after the Muslims' re-entry into Makkah. They would form the solid base of the new faith.

Nevertheless, the core of the Islamic message remained the same in Madīnah: giving happy news and issuing serious warnings. Fighting was permitted only to remove physical barriers erected by the unbelievers to deprive God's message of free expression, and to protect the believers against religious oppression. This means that the Qur'ānic statement was applicable both in Makkah and Madīnah: *"We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner."* (Verse 56)

In Whom to Trust

"*Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. All I ask is that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.'*" (Verse 57) God's Messenger does not entertain any thought of making any worldly gain or profit as a result of people's acceptance of Islam. None will have to pay any fee or make any offering as he embraces the Islamic faith. All that he needs to do is to say certain words verbally, provided that he believes in them with his heart. This is the distinctive feature of Islam which has no room for any priesthood of any kind, which would charge fees for services rendered. There is no 'joining fee', and no price has to be paid to reveal a mystery or bestow a blessing or organize entry. Islam is free of all that may deter anyone from faith. It allows no room for anyone to stand as an intermediary between people and their Lord. God's Messenger receives only one reward for all his troubles in advocating God's faith, and this reward is nothing other than the fact that someone answers the divine call and receives God's guidance: "*that he who so wills may find a way leading to his Lord.*" (Verse 57) Such are his only wages. When the Prophet sees someone accepting divine guidance and seeking to earn God's pleasure, then his compassionate heart finds comfort, and his noble conscience is set at ease.

"*Hence, place your trust in the Living One who does not die, and extol His limitless glory and praise.*" (Verse 58) Everyone other than God is dead, because life comes to an end with death. The only one that remains is God, the Living One who does not die. If we rely on someone whose life comes to an end after a short or long time, then we are only putting our weight against a wall that will eventually collapse, or seeking shade that will inevitably fade away. To be truly assured one must rely only on the One who never dies, and place one's trust solely in Him. "*Extol His limitless glory and praise.*" (Verse 58) The only one worthy of praise is God who grants all favours and blessings. Hence the Prophet is instructed to leave alone those unbelievers who heed no warning and care for no happy news. He should give them up to Him since He knows their sins. Nothing is hidden from Him: "*Sufficient is it that He is well aware of his servants' sins.*" (Verse 58)

Within the same context of God's limitless knowledge and His power to grant reward and inflict punishment, the *sūrah* mentions the facts that He is the One who has created the heavens and the earth, and established Himself on the Throne:

> *He it is who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and is established on the throne of His Almightiness, the Most Merciful. Ask, then, about Him, the One who knows everything. (Verse 59)*

The days in which God created the heavens and the earth are certainly different from our earth days. For our days are only a product of the solar system, measuring

a celestial cycle that came into existence after the creation of the heavens and the earth. Our days are equivalent to the time the earth rotates in its position relevant to the sun. Besides, creation does not require more than God should will something to exist. This is given the verbal symbol 'Be', and whatever is intended comes into existence. Perhaps these six days, whose measure is known only to God, refer to long stages that brought the heavens and the earth to their present status.

That God is '*established on the throne*' refers to His being the Almighty who controls everything in the universe. The Arabic text uses the conjunctive word, *thumma,* which means 'then', after it mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth and before it refers to God being on the throne. However, this does not signify a chronological order. It only indicates the superiority of this lofty status.§

Together with God's greatness, control and might comes His all- encompassing mercy, and with it is joined His absolute knowledge: "*The Most Merciful. Ask, then, about Him, the One who knows everything.*" *(Verse* 59) Thus, when you put your request to God, you are putting it to the One whose knowledge includes everything anywhere in the universe.

Setting the Universe to Order

Yet those impudent, shameless people behave discourteously when they are called upon to believe in God, the Most Merciful, and worship Him:

> *Yet when they are told, 'Prostrate yourselves before the Most Merciful,' they ask, 'What is the Most Merciful? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever you bid us?' And they grow more rebellious. (Verse 60)*

This is a particularly distasteful picture of impudence, mentioned here to comfort the Prophet who was at the receiving end of their insolence and disrespect. These people have no respect for their Lord. They speak in such an impudent way about God Almighty. Is it surprising, then, that they should say whatever they do about His Messenger? They even dislike God's name, and say that they do not know His attribute, the Most Merciful. Hence, they ask the Prophet about Him, using the interrogative word 'what', thus adding insult to injury. Their rudeness was at its worst when they said that the only Raḥmān, which is the Arabic word for the Most Merciful, they knew was the one in Yamāmah, referring to Musaylamah, the liar who claimed that he was a prophet.

Their shameless impertinence is answered by stressing that all glory belongs to

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

God, highlighting His greatness and the great signs He has placed in the universe:

> *Blessed is He who has set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude. (Verses 61-62)*

Most probably the term 'constellations', as mentioned here, refers to the positions of the planets and their great orbits. Their mention contrasts with the mockery sensed in the unbelievers' question: 'What is the Most Merciful?' These constellations, in their real and perceived greatness, are only one aspect of His creation. In these the sun takes its position, and the sun is called here 'a lamp' as it sends light to our planet as well as to other planets. And among them there is a light-giving moon, which spreads a gentle air of calm.

The *sūrah* also refers to the succession of day and night, which are two of God's great signs that people always overlook, although reflection on them is enough for anyone *'who would take heed or would show gratitude.'* Had it not been for the fact that God made the day and night to succeed each other in this fashion, no vegetal, animal or human life could have emerged on this planet. Indeed, life would not be possible if the length of the day and night cycle were changed. Scientists tell us:

> The earth rotates on its axis in twenty-four hours or at the rate of one thousand miles an hour. Suppose it turned at the rate of a hundred miles an hour. Why not? Our days and nights would then be ten times as long as now. The hot sun of summer would then burn up our vegetation each long day and every sprout would freeze in such a night.[1]

Blessed, then, is the One who created the heavens and the earth, and created everything according to a definite measure. Blessed is the One who *"Set up in the skies great constellations, and has placed among them a lamp and a light giving moon. And He it is who causes the night and the day to succeed one another; [a clear sign] for him who would take heed or would show gratitude."* (Verses 61-62)

[1] Ibid., p. 20.

4
God's True Servants

وَعِبَادُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَمۡشُونَ عَلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ هَوۡنٗا وَإِذَا خَاطَبَهُمُ ٱلۡجَٰهِلُونَ قَالُواْ سَلَٰمٗا ﴿٦٣﴾

The true servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: 'Peace'; (63)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَبِيتُونَ لِرَبِّهِمۡ سُجَّدٗا وَقِيَٰمٗا ﴿٦٤﴾

who stay up far into the night in adoration of their Lord, prostrating themselves and standing; (64)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا ٱصۡرِفۡ عَنَّا عَذَابَ جَهَنَّمَۖ إِنَّ عَذَابَهَا كَانَ غَرَامًا ﴿٦٥﴾

who pray: 'Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment; (65)

إِنَّهَا سَآءَتۡ مُسۡتَقَرّٗا وَمُقَامٗا ﴿٦٦﴾

it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station; (66)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَنفَقُواْ لَمۡ يُسۡرِفُواْ وَلَمۡ يَقۡتُرُواْ وَكَانَ بَيۡنَ ذَٰلِكَ قَوَامٗا ﴿٦٧﴾

and who, whenever they put their money to use, are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two; (67)

وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَدۡعُونَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ وَلَا يَقۡتُلُونَ ٱلنَّفۡسَ ٱلَّتِي حَرَّمَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَّا بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَلَا يَزۡنُونَۚ وَمَن يَفۡعَلۡ ذَٰلِكَ يَلۡقَ أَثَامٗا ﴿٦٨﴾

and who never invoke any deity side by side with God, and do not take any human being's life – [the life] which God has willed to be sacred – except for a just cause, and do not commit adultery. Whoever does any of this will face

يُضَٰعَفۡ لَهُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ وَيَخۡلُدۡ فِيهِۦ مُهَانًا ﴿٦٩﴾

punishment, (68)

and on the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy. (69)

إِلَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلٗا صَٰلِحٗا فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ ٱللَّهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمۡ حَسَنَٰتٖۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ﴿٧٠﴾

Excepted, however, shall be they who repent, attain to faith and do righteous deeds, for God will transform their bad deeds into good ones. God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (70)

وَمَن تَابَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا فَإِنَّهُۥ يَتُوبُ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ مَتَابٗا ﴿٧١﴾

Whoever repents and does what is right has truly turned to God by [his act of] repentance. (71)

وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَشۡهَدُونَ ٱلزُّورَ وَإِذَا مَرُّواْ بِٱللَّغۡوِ مَرُّواْ كِرَامٗا ﴿٧٢﴾

[And the true servants of God are] those who never bear witness to what is false, and whenever they pass by [people engaged in] frivolity, pass on with dignity; (72)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِّرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ لَمۡ يَخِرُّواْ عَلَيۡهَا صُمّٗا وَعُمۡيَانٗا ﴿٧٣﴾

and who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, do not fall deaf and blind to them; (73)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبۡ لَنَا مِنۡ أَزۡوَٰجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّٰتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعۡيُنٖ وَٱجۡعَلۡنَا لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا ﴿٧٤﴾

and who pray: 'Our Lord! Grant us spouses and offspring who will be a joy to our eyes, and cause us to be foremost among the God- fearing.' (74)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُجۡزَوۡنَ ٱلۡغُرۡفَةَ بِمَا صَبَرُواْ وَيُلَقَّوۡنَ فِيهَا تَحِيَّةٗ وَسَلَٰمًا ﴿٧٥﴾

These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life] with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace, (75)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۚ حَسُنَتۡ مُسۡتَقَرّٗا وَمُقَامٗا ﴿٧٦﴾

and there they shall abide; how goodly an abode

and how high a station; (76)

Say: 'No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you.' (77)

قُلْ مَا يَعْبَؤُا۟ بِكُمْ رَبِّى لَوْلَا دُعَآؤُكُمْ ۖ فَقَدْ كَذَّبْتُمْ فَسَوْفَ يَكُونُ لِزَامًا ﴿٧٧﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* portrays the distinctive features of the true servants of God, the Most Merciful. They appear to be the highest model of humanity that remains after the end of the long battle between true guidance and error, between those who impertinently deny the truth and God's messengers who bring His guidance for humanity. They seem to be the fruit ripening after such a long struggle. They are the ones who bring comfort to the bearers of divine guidance, after they had been met with denial and rejection.

The previous passage recounted the unbelievers' impertinent remark when they said that they did not know the name *Raḥmān,* or the Most Merciful, as belonging to God. In this passage we have a full description of 'the true servants of the Most Merciful' who know Him well and deserve to be described as belonging to Him. The *sūrah* shows their distinctive features as reflected in their behaviour and the way they conduct their lives. They provide a living example of the Muslim community which Islam aims to build, and the type of person it moulds through the implementation of its perfect system. These are the ones who deserve God's care. Mankind generally are too unimportant for God to care about, except for the presence of God's true servants who always turn to Him, praying for His support.

The Distinctive Features of Faith

> *The true servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the ignorant address them, say: 'Peace.' (Verse 63)*

The true servants' first feature is that they walk gently, with no affectation, pretension, or display of arrogance. Like every movement man makes, walking delivers an expression of one's personality and feelings. A serious, reassured and sound personality demonstrates itself through its gait. A person of this type walks with an air of seriousness and reassurance, reflecting clarity of purpose and strength. To *walk gently on earth'* does not mean that believers hang their heads down, affecting

weakness and lack of support, as understood by some of those who think that by so doing they show themselves to be God-fearing! God's Messenger used to bend forward when he walked. He was the fastest and best walker, with an air of serenity. Abū Hurayrah reports: "I have never seen anyone more handsome than God's Messenger: he looked as if the sun was reflected in his face. And I have never seen anyone who walked faster than God's Messenger. It was as though the earth would shrink for him. [As we walked with him] we would put in our best effort, but he was most relaxed." `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib describes: "When the Prophet walked he bent forward, as though he was walking quickly downhill."

In their serious and dignified approach, and in their attention to serious concerns, God's true servants do not bother themselves with other people's absurdities and stupidities. They do not waste their time or energy in futile arguments with such people. They recognize that engaging in an argument with people who argue for argument's sake is fruitless. Hence, "*whenever the ignorant address them, [they] say: Peace.*" (Verse 63) But this is by no means a sign of weakness or lack of ability. It is simply a dignified approach which does not permit them to waste time and energy over what is unbecoming of the honourable.

Such is their conduct in daytime when they are with other people. At night they reflect their God-fearing nature, as they stand in awe of God and fear His punishment.

> *Who stay up far into the night in adoration of their Lord, prostrating themselves and standing; who pray: 'Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment; it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station. (Verses 64-66)*

The *sūrah* highlights here the two main movements Muslims perform in prayer, namely prostration and standing up. Thus it reflects their action in the depth of the night, when others are fast asleep. Such true servants of God stay up prostrating themselves and standing before their Lord, addressing themselves completely to Him. They are not concerned about not being in bed, because they have something that they enjoy, giving them far more comfort, energy and happiness than sleep can ever give. They are preoccupied with being close to their Lord, addressing Him with all their being. Hence, people go to sleep while they pray standing and prostrating themselves. Other people are concerned with their position on earth while these true servants of God look up to the throne of the Most Merciful.

In their prayers, with all its movements, and all their inner feelings, they are fully conscious of their Lord, fearing to incur His displeasure and so His punishment. Thus they appeal to Him: "*Our Lord, avert from us the suffering of hell, for the suffering it*

causes is indeed a dire torment; it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station." (Verses 65-66) They have not seen hell or its suffering, but they believe in it. They also visualize it according to its descriptions in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's statements. Thus their genuine fear of it is the fruit of true faith.

Humbly and most seriously they pray to their Lord to avert their suffering in hell. They do not feel safe simply because they spend part of the night in worship, prostrating themselves and standing in prayer. Their God-fearing sense makes them think little of what they do, feeling always that they fall short of what is needed. Hence, they pray for God's grace and forgiveness so that He spares them the punishment of hell.

This description implies that hell tries to engulf every human being, with its gates open and hands outstretched trying to grab them. God's true servants who stay up far into the night in their devotion fear it and appeal most sincerely to their Lord to spare them from such punishment. As they address their prayer, they shiver with fear: *"for the suffering it causes is indeed a dire torment."* (Verse 65) It engulfs its victim, not allowing them any room for escape. This is what makes it dire indeed. Moreover, *"it is indeed an evil abode and a terrible station."* (Verse 66) Could there be a worse station than hell as a place of abode and settlement? How can anyone settle within the fire? How can there be an abode in a place of continuous burning?

Steering Away from Sin

God's true servants lead a balanced life that is exemplary in its seriousness and moderation: *"Whenever they put their money to use, they are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two."* (Verse 67) Balance is the distinctive feature that Islam establishes in the life of the individual and the community. Its achievement is what Islam aims for through educating its followers and through its legal system. Its whole structure is based on balance and moderation.

Although Islam approves private ownership, a Muslim is not free to spend his money without restriction, as is the case in the capitalist system and in communities which do not conduct their lives in accordance with divine law. A Muslim is required to strike a balance between extravagance and miserliness. Both attitudes are bad for the individual, society and for money itself. Indeed, a miser not only deprives himself of the benefits of his money, but also deprives the community of the benefits of keeping money in circulation. Indeed money is meant to provide services for the community. Both extremes of overspending and withholding money produce social and economic imbalance, leading to crises, in addition to their unhealthy effect on people's hearts and ethics.

As Islam regulates this aspect of human life, it begins with the individual, making

the adoption of a balanced approach in life a feature of faith. Thus, whenever true servants of God, the Most Merciful, put their money to use, they *"are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but always maintain a just mean between the two."* (Verse 67)

The next important quality of God's true servants is that they *"never invoke any deity side by side with God, and do not take any human being's life – (the life] which God has willed to be sacred – except for a just cause, and do not commit adultery. Whoever does any of this will face punishment, and on the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy."* (Verses 68-69)

To believe in God's oneness is the cornerstone of the Islamic faith. It is the point where clarity, straightforwardness and simplicity of beliefs is separated from ambiguity, confusion and complexity. Needless to say, no proper system of life can be based on the latter.

Similarly, prevention of killing anyone, except for a legitimate reason, is central to the achievement of security in society so that human life is given its rightful value and due respect. Otherwise, life would become like a jungle where no one was safe or able to do constructive work.

Likewise, preventing adultery is basic to the establishment of a clean social life where man rises above naked physical desires, and where he feels that the union of the two sexes has a nobler purpose than the mere satisfaction of desire. Otherwise, life sinks low and men and women become preoccupied with the satisfaction of unrestrained physical desire.

These three qualities distinguish the sound and clean life that is worthy of man from the life of cheap pleasures that reduces man to the rank of an animal. Hence, God mentions these qualities as belonging to His true servants who are the most honourable in His sight. Their outline is followed with a stern warning: *"Whoever does any of this will face punishment."* (Verse 68) This punishment is outlined in the next verse: *"On the Day of Resurrection his suffering will be doubled, and he will abide therein in ignominy."* (Verse 69) Thus, it is not merely a double measure of punishment, but ignominy too, which is even worse.

Erasing Sin Through Repentance

But the door remains open for anyone who wishes to save himself from such a fate. This requires repentance, firm belief and good action: *"Excepted, however, shall be they who repent, attain to faith and do righteous deeds."* (Verse 70) Those who fulfil these three conditions are promised that whatever sin they did prior to their repentance will be changed into good deeds which will be added to their newly earned good actions: *"for God will transform their bad deeds into good ones."* (Verse 70) This is an

aspect of God's bounty that is granted without the person concerned having to do anything to deserve it other than turn away from error and seek refuge with Him: *"God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 70)

The door of repentance is always open to admit anyone whose conscience is reawakened and wants to return to the fold. No one is ever turned away from it, no matter who he might be or what sins he might have committed in the past. A *ĥadīth* related by al-Ṭabarānī mentions that Abū Farwah asked the Prophet: "If a man has done all kinds of sin, leaving out nothing, will his repentance be accepted?" The Prophet asked him: "Are you a Muslim?" When he answered in the affirmative, the Prophet said: "Then do what is good and abandon what is evil, and God will change all your past misdeeds into good ones." The man asked: "And even my worst, treacherous ones?" The Prophet said: "Yes." The man glorified God and continued to do so as he went away.

There is a rule for repentance and a condition for its acceptance, which are clearly spelled out: *"Whoever repents and does what is right has truly turned to God by [his act of] repentance."* (Verse 71) Repentance begins with genuine regret and desisting from bad deeds and is made complete through doing good deeds that prove that it is a serious and genuine repentance. At the same time, good deeds produce a positive sense that favourably compensates for abandoning sin. Sin is an action which, when withdrawn, leaves a vacuum that must be filled with an action in the opposite direction. Otherwise, the feeling of emptiness makes one miss one's old sinful ways. Hence we see here a remarkable feature of the Qur'ānic method of cultivating goodness within the community of believers. It is based on profound knowledge of human nature. Who can know this better than the Creator?

Further Qualities of True Believers

Having completed this interposition of the conditions of repentance, the *sūrah* resumes its outline of the qualities of the true servants of the Most Merciful: *"Those who never bear witness to what is false, and whenever they pass by [people engaged in] frivolity, pass on with dignity."* (Verse 72) This may be taken literally which means that they never give false testimony, since such an action leads to usurping people's rights and helps injustice. It may also be taken to mean that they do not attend any place or stay with any group where falsehood is said or done. They steer away from such places or company so as not to be party to anything that happens there. This is a more powerful meaning. They also steer away from all frivolity and idle talk: *"Whenever they pass by people engaged in frivolity, pass on with dignity."* (Verse 72) They remove themselves from participation in any such practice. A believer has more serious preoccupations that leave no time for frivolous and idle pursuits. His mind is

full with what his faith requires of him so as to ensure that God's message is delivered to mankind. This is sufficient preoccupation for anyone.

Another of their qualities is that they are quick to remember when a reminder is given to them. Their hearts are open to the understanding of God's signs and revelations: "*And who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, do not fall deaf and blind to them.*" (Verse 73) The picture drawn here is critical of the idolaters who approach their deities and false beliefs like the deaf and blind, deprived of guidance and light. It shows them in a state of blind fanaticism, while God's true servants are fully aware of the truth in their faith, and in God's signs and revelations. Hence, they accept the faith with open eyes, hearts and minds. They are free of fanaticism. When they show enthusiasm for their faith, it is an enthusiasm based on true knowledge and profound insight.

Finally, these true servants of God are not content with staying up far into the night offering their voluntary worship, prostrating themselves to God, and allowing their other fine qualities to shine. They want something more. What they hope for is that they should have spouses of their type and children who follow in their footsteps, thus bringing them great joy. Not only so, but in this way, those who are classified as God's servants will multiply. They also pray that God will make of them a good example for those who are God-fearing: "And who pray: "*Our Lord! Grant us spouses and offspring who will be a joy to our eyes, and cause us to be foremost among the God-fearing.*" (Verse 74)

This is a natural feeling based on a profound sense of faith. It expresses a strong desire to increase the numbers of people who follow divine guidance, and that the first in such increased numbers should be their own offspring and spouses who are the closest to them. Indeed, these are a man's first responsibility. Added to this natural feeling is the believers' hope that they will provide examples of goodness to be followed by those who are keen to earn God's pleasure. There is no element of selfishness or arrogance in such a wish, because all the God- fearing are on the way that God defines.

Destined for the Finest Abode

What reward do God's true servants receive? This outline of their qualities concludes with what they earn:

> *These will be rewarded for all their patient endurance [in life" with a high station in heaven, and will be met there with a greeting of welcome and peace, and there they shall abide; how goodly an abode and how high a station. (Verses 75-76)*

The Arabic text uses the term *al-ghurfah,* which is translated here as 'a high station in heaven'. The term may be taken to mean in this context either heaven, or a special place in heaven. Linguistically speaking it means, 'the room', which is a more honourable place than the reception room where Arabs normally received their guests. True servants are received in this high position with a warm welcome, on account of their patient endurance of whatever they had to put up with in order to maintain their sound qualities. What is implied here is recognition of the strong will-power needed to restrain desire and resist temptation. This is not easy to do without a good degree of endurance that can only be shown by someone who is deservedly mentioned by God in His book, the Qur'ān.

In contrast to hell from which they pray to God to save them, God rewards them with heaven where *"they shall abide; how goodly an abode and how high a station."* (Verse 76) There they are in the best state, enjoying God's favours and blessings.

With the picture of God's true servants fully drawn, showing them as the cream of humanity, the *sūrah* concludes by stating that mankind are worth very little in God's sight, except for the fact that some of them turn to Him in prayer. As for those who deny Him and His messages, they will be punished. *"Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]. You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you."* (Verse 77)

It is a fitting final statement which is intended to give comfort and reassurance to the Prophet, consoling him for the stiff resistance and impudent remarks he received from his people who persisted with their opposition in order to maintain their false beliefs. What value would they and humanity have, if it had not been for the small group of believers who prayed and appealed to God, as do His true servants? What significance do they have when the earth on which all mankind live is no more than a tiny particle in the great universal expanse? Moreover, man is no more than one of the numerous species that live on earth. Any nation is but one of many that live on earth, and a single generation of one nation is no more than a single page of a great book the number of whose pages is known only to God Almighty.

Despite all this man continues to give himself airs, thinking himself to be of real value. He is so lost in his arrogance that he speaks impertinently about his Creator. In truth, man is weak, powerless and insignificant, except when he establishes his links with God and derives from Him strength and guidance. Only then does he acquire weight on God's scales, to the extent that this becomes greater than that of angels. This is indeed a blessing God bestows on man whom He has honoured and before whom He ordered His angels to bow. The purpose of all this was that man should know his Lord and worship Him alone, for only then does he maintain his qualities for which the angels bow. Otherwise, he is insignificant and valueless.

"Say: No weight or value would my Lord attach to you were it not for you calling out [to Him]." (Verse *77)* The phraseology here is meant to give support and honour to the Prophet who speaks of his Lord who grants him His protection. What are the unbelievers if they continue to refuse to join God's true servants? They are no more than fuel for hell: *"You have indeed denied [His message], and in time this [sin] will cleave unto you."* (Verse *77)*

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol XIII

Sūrahs 26-32

Contents

Al-Shu`arā' 1

Prologue 1

1 If People Would Only Reflect 3
The Prophet's Unnecessary Concern 4
The Inimitability of the Qur'ānic Style 5

2 A Debate with Pharaoh 8
Overview 13
God's Call to Moses 15
A Sarcastic Exchange with Pharaoh 18
The Challenge Continues 20
Brutal Threats versus Logical Arguments 21
Falsehood Comes to Grief 22
Turning the Scales against Pharaoh 24
Brute Force to Suppress Faith 26
Divine Care for True Believers 27
The Drowning of Pharaoh's Army 30

3 No End to God's Blessings 32
Overview 35
Questioning Popular Beliefs 37
Acknowledging God's Favours 38
Prayer by a Devoted Worshipper 40
A Question That Needs No Answer 41

4 Judgement Belongs to God 44
Overview 45
When Believers are the Lowest in Society 46

5 How the Mighty Fall 50
Power and a Sense of Immortality 51

6 A Blatant Challenge to God 54
Warnings Unheeded 55

7 Perversion Leading to Ruin 59
Arrogant Perverts 60

8 Fair Dealings for All 63
Widespread Corruption 64

9 The Qur'ān: A Definitive Description 67
Overview 70
Facts of Revelation 71
How to Give Warning 74
How to Treat Believers 75
Reality versus Imagination 77
What Makes Poetry Islamic 78

Al-Naml 80

Prologue 80

1 Revelations Bringing Happy News 83
All by the Grace of God 84

2 Nine Miracles for Most 87

Overview ... 88
Moses: A Favoured Messenger ... 88

3 Solomon and the Queen of Sheba ... *92*
Overview ... 96
A Brief Reference and a Detailed Account ... 97
Removing the Barriers of Nature ... 99
A Majestic Procession for Solomon ... 101
The Story Unfolds ... 104
Exchange with a Powerful Queen ... 106
Waiting for the Queen ... 108
A Confrontation of Sorts ... 110

4 Plotting to Kill a Prophet ... *113*
Overview ... 114
Precipitating Evil ... 114

5 Perversion Leading to Ruin ... *119*
Persecuting Purity ... 119

6 Of God's Own Making ... *122*
Overview ... 127
Who Else? ... 128
Who Takes Care of Man? ... 132
Origination and Resurrection ... 134
Blind to the Truth ... 135
After Being Reduced to Ashes ... 138
A Final Word on Israelite Differences ... 140
Guidance and Mercy ... 142
Presages of the Last Hour ... 144
Summing Up Instructions ... 147

Al-Qaşaş ... 149

Prologue ... *149*

1 Security at the Height of Danger ... *153*
Setting the Scene ... 160
Saving Moses ... 163
In Full Vigour ... 166
The Secret is Exposed ... 169
Warning by a Well-Wisher ... 171
Security in a New Home ... 173
A Marriage Proposal ... 175
On the Way Back ... 177
Preparation for a Difficult Mission ... 178
A Call from on High ... 180
The Arrogant are Punished ... 183
The Other End ... 185

2 The Truth Clear for All ... *187*
Overview ... 192
Confirmation of the Message ... 192
Sound Approach to Truth ... 195
Who Receives Guidance ... 199
Absurd Fears ... 200
Where Real Security Lies ... 201
Disclaimers Availing Nothing ... 204
Where Praise Belongs ... 206
A Different Universe ... 207

3 Ungrateful for God's Blessings ... *210*
Overview ... 212
Sound Advice Met with Arrogance ... 212
Dazzling Appearances ... 215
A Fitting End ... 216

4 The Ultimate Return ... *219*
The Prophet and the Qur'ān ... 219

Al-`Ankabūt ... **223**

Prologue ... *223*

1 The Inevitable Test ... *226*
Inevitable Tests ... 228
Who Benefits by Striving ... 231
Conflict with Parents ... 232
Hard Tests and False Temptation ... 233

2 Like a Spider's Web ... *236*
Overview ... 241
Extremely Long Life ... 242
Issues Clarified ... 243
Reflection on God's Creation ... 244
Abandoning Home for God ... 247
Sexual Perversion in Public ... 249
Different Types of Punishment ... 251
The Frailty of the Powerful ... 253
The Clear Path ... 255

3 Confused Concepts ... *257*
Overview ... 260
According to What is Best ... 262
What Need for Miracles? ... 264
Hastening God's Punishment ... 266
Inevitable Death ... 268
Contradictions Galore ... 270

Al-Rūm ... **274**

Prologue ... *274*

1 Signs to Reflect Upon ... *277*
The Natural Bond of Faith ... 281
To Whom Power Belongs ... 283
An Invitation to Reflect ... 286
Two Divergent Ways ... 287
The Cycle of Life and Death ... 289
Man and the Universe ... 291
An Analogy Drawn from Human Life ... 294
Concluding Directive ... 295

2 Bringing Life out of the Dead ... *298*
Overview ... 303
Vacillating Conditions ... 304
Corruption and Pollution ... 307
Aspects of God's Grace ... 309
The Different Stages of Man's Life ... 312
No Change of Position ... 314

Luqmān ... **316**

Prologue ... *316*
Four Presentations of One Issue ... 317

1 A Sage's Admonition ... *322*
A Book of Wisdom ... 325
The Other Party ... 326
Signs of Wisdom ... 328
A Totally New Approach ... 330
Relations with Parents ... 331
The Hereafter and the Reckoning ... 333

2 God's Absolute Knowledge ... *336*
Blessings Galore ... 339
Using the Creation Argument ... 342
God the Truth ... 344
The Lure of Comfortable Living ... 347
Knowledge Absolute ... 348

Al-Sajdah ... 351

Prologue ... *351*

1 The Main Issues of Faith ... *354*
Dispelling All Doubt ... 359
Six Days of Creation ... 361
Perfection of Creation ... 363
Genes and Evolution ... 365
The Making of Man ... 366
Shameful Admission ... 367
Getting Up for Worship ... 369
Lessons of History ... 371
Looking at Life ... 373

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u	
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū	
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw	

SŪRAH 26

Al-Shu`arā'

(The Poets)

Prologue

Faith, the main theme discussed in this *sūrah,* pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah during the early period of Islam. The subject is examined in all its major aspects from God's oneness: *"Do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment."* (Verse 213), to fearing the Day of Judgement: *"Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]."* (Verses 87-89); belief in the revelation bestowed from on high to Muhammad (peace be upon him): *"Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning."* (Verses 192-194), and explaining the risks to which anyone who denies the faith exposes himself including a destructive punishment that may take place in this world, or punishment in the hereafter that awaits the unbelievers: *"They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6) *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227)

The *sūrah* also consoles the Prophet as he faces the determined denials of his message and divine revelation: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?"* (Verse 3) It reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to endure all the hardships they faced, presenting them with examples of earlier believers who remained steadfast when confronted with

similar difficulties.

The main body of the *sūrah* is devoted to historical accounts that take up 180 verses of the *sūrah's* total of 227. Apart from these historical accounts, the *sūrah* includes a short introduction and final comments, but the three elements form a single coherent unit that presents the main theme in different styles, serving a single objective. Hence, only those episodes that are relevant to each historical situation are presented.

An air of warning, for those who reject God's messages, and the subsequent punishment He will inflict prevails throughout. This is only logical since the *sūrah* provides a response to the Quraysh unbelievers who denied the Prophet Muhammad, derided his warnings, turned their backs on God's revelations, hastened the threatened punishment and described revelation and the Qur'ān as either sorcery or poetry inspired by devils.

Although the entire *sūrah* forms one unit, we will divide it into short passages according to the order it follows.

1
If People Would Only Reflect

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

طسٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

لَعَلَّكَ بَٰخِعٌ نَّفْسَكَ أَلَّا يَكُونُوا۟ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? (3)

إِن نَّشَأْ نُنَزِّلْ عَلَيْهِم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ ءَايَةً فَظَلَّتْ أَعْنَٰقُهُمْ لَهَا خَٰضِعِينَ ﴿٤﴾

If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. (4)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن ذِكْرٍ مِّنَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ مُحْدَثٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا۟ عَنْهُ مُعْرِضِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. (5)

فَقَدْ كَذَّبُوا۟ فَسَيَأْتِيهِمْ أَنۢبَٰٓؤُا۟ مَا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٦﴾

They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride. (6)

Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? (7)	أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ إِلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ كَمۡ أَنۢبَتۡنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوۡجٖ كَرِيمٍ ٧
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (8)	إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٨
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (9)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ٩

The Prophet's Unnecessary Concern

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (Verses 1-2)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate Arabic letters, Ṭā *Sīn Mīm,* indicating that the verses of the Qur'ān, the book that sets things in full clarity, including the present *sūrah,* are made out of such letters. These letters are available to those who deny divine revelation, and they cannot produce out of them anything similar to this clear book. The nature of the book is discussed at the beginning and end of the *Sūrah,* just as it is discussed in every *sūrah* which has a similar beginning employing separate letters.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet who is concerned about the idolaters and saddened by their rejection of his message and the Qur'ān. It comforts the Prophet telling him that the whole matter is not worth his concern. God could easily have forced them to believe by showing them a clear sign they would not have been able to resist: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission to it."* (Verses 3-4)

There is here a note of remonstration with the Prophet for showing too much concern for the unbelievers and their attitudes: "*Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?"* (Verse 3) The Prophet is shown to be suffering because of his certainty that their rejection will inevitably incur punishment. Since these people belonged to his own clan and community, he took the matter to heart, feeling heavy at the inevitable prospect. God, however, is too caring to leave him to his grief. The *sūrah* tells him that his responsibility does not

include bringing these people into the fold of believers. Had it been God's will, He would have sent down a miraculous, overpowering sign that would have rendered all their arguments meaningless. They would then have had no option but to declare their belief in God and submit to Him. The verse gives a graphic picture of their submission to such a sign: *"their necks will remain bent in submission."* (Verse 4) This image depicts them with their necks permanently bent, unable ever to look up.

But God Almighty has not chosen to provide such a compelling sign with His last message. Instead, He has made the Qur'ān, a complete and perfect code of living, His miraculous and overpowering sign.

The Inimitability of the Qur'ānic Style

The Qur'ān is miraculous in its construction and artistic presentation, maintaining the same features of excellence throughout. Thus, it is totally unlike human works where we note variations in standard, power and level even by the same author and within the same work. By contrast, the Qur'ān maintains its artistic characteristics at the same level throughout, demonstrating that it is the work of the One who is not influenced by changing situations and temporary circumstances.

The Qur'ān is also unique in its intellectual structure and the mutual complementarity of its parts. Nothing in it occurs by mere coincidence; nothing occurs out of place. All its directives and legislative orders are in full harmony, address human life and regulate all its aspects. There is absolutely no contradiction in it even at the level of minute detail. Not a single aspect or provision in its full volume of legislation is incompatible with human nature. Everything turns around the same pivot, serving the same aim, and maintaining full harmony. This could never have been achieved by human endeavour. It can only be the product of limitless knowledge that is free of the constraints of time and place. It is only such absolute knowledge that can produce such a complete and flawless code.

The Qur'ān is unique in the easy, flowing way it penetrates hearts and souls, opening every lock and touching every point of effect. The way it provides simple and easy solutions to intractable problems is remarkable. On the other hand, its method of educating and moulding people in accordance with its own system, using only the lightest of touches, free of complexity, irregularity or deception, is also extraordinary.

The Islamic message is designed by God to remain open to all communities and all generations. It is not meant for any particular group or location. Hence, its miracle should also remain available to all regardless of their community and generation. Hence God made the Qur'ān His miracle, rather than providing a physical miracle that leaves its onlookers speechless, having no counter argument. Physical miracles

silence only those who see them, but they subsequently become no more than a piece of history. Conversely, the Qur'ān remains today, more than 13 centuries after its revelation, an open book outlining a code for life. People today find in it all that they need to put their lives on the right course, should they but determine to implement it. It leads them to a better world, higher horizons and an infinitely superior destiny. Future generations will find in the Qur'ān much that we have not been able to discover, because the Qur'ān gives every seeker what that seeker needs, while its treasures remain self-renewing, limitless. The unbelievers were unaware of this central issue. Therefore, they continued to turn a deaf ear whenever Qur'ānic revelations were read out to them. "*Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it.*" (Verse 5)

We note that God's attribute mentioned here is 'the Most Merciful' indicating His great act of mercy, namely the revelation of the Qur'ān. Thus, their turning away from it appears in its reality: it is an abhorrent act that rejects God's care and grace. They deprive themselves of such mercy when they are the ones who need it most.

Their rejection of God's mercy merits the incurrence of God's punishment: "*They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride.*" (Verse 6) The threat is expressed in general, unspecified terms, with a touch of sarcasm that suits their derision of God's warnings. A more literal translation of this verse is: *they will in time receive the news of what it was they were wont to deride.'* Needless to say, they will not receive any piece of news; rather, they will endure the punishment they have derided, and they, themselves will provide the news as people relate what happens to them.

They demand a miracle while ignoring the numerous miraculous signs God has placed all around them. These are sufficient for anyone with an open heart and mind. Indeed, in every aspect of this marvellous universe there is a great sign providing people with all the reassurance they need: "*Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe.*" (Verses 7-8)

The growth of plants as they ease their way out of the earth is there to be watched at every moment. Moreover, plants are made as male and female, with the two growing separately in some plant species or mostly growing together in the same shoot. Yet it only needs that people should look in order for them to appreciate.

The Qur'ān establishes a direct relation between the human heart and universal scenes so as to awaken people's minds and perceptions. It demonstrates the great aspects of God's creation all around us so that we look at the living universe with an alert mind and a beating heart. This enables us to recognize God through His marvellous creation, and makes us appeal to Him whenever we see this His creation.

Thus we feel His presence at every moment of the day and night. We also realize that we are only one type of God's creatures, subject to the same natural laws that shape existence. We also recognize that we have a special role in the universe that must be fulfilled on earth, the planet which we have been placed in charge of.

"Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it?" (Verse 7) This nobility is imparted through life that is given by God, who is most noble and most generous. The phraseology of this verse suggests that we should look at God's creation with honour and respect, and not ignore or belittle it: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign."* (Verse 8) The unbelievers had been demanding a sign while in all this there is a great sign, but few are those who take heed of it: *"Yet most of them will not believe."* (Verse 8)

The *sūrah's* introduction ends with a comment that is repeated every time a point is concluded: *"And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verse 9) He is able to provide all signs and to inflict punishment on those who deny the truth. He is also 'the Merciful' who shows His signs to those who are willing to believe.

2
A Debate with Pharaoh

وَإِذۡ نَادَىٰ رَبُّكَ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنِ ٱئۡتِ ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Your Lord called Moses: 'Go to the wrongdoing people, (10)

قَوۡمَ فِرۡعَوۡنَۚ أَلَا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١١﴾

the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?' (11)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ أَن يُكَذِّبُونِ ﴿١٢﴾

He said: 'My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, (12)

وَيَضِيقُ صَدۡرِي وَلَا يَنطَلِقُ لِسَانِي فَأَرۡسِلۡ إِلَىٰ هَٰرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. (13)

وَلَهُمۡ عَلَيَّ ذَنۢبٞ فَأَخَافُ أَن يَقۡتُلُونِ ﴿١٤﴾

Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me.' (14)

قَالَ كَلَّاۖ فَٱذۡهَبَا بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآۖ إِنَّا مَعَكُم مُّسۡتَمِعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Said He: 'By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. (15)

فَأۡتِيَا فِرۡعَوۡنَ فَقُولَآ إِنَّا رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: (16)

أَنۡ أَرۡسِلۡ مَعَنَا بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿١٧﴾

Let the Children of Israel go with us.' (17)

قَالَ أَلَمۡ نُرَبِّكَ فِينَا وَلِيدٗا وَلَبِثۡتَ فِينَا مِنۡ عُمُرِكَ سِنِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: 'Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many

years of your life?* (18)

وَفَعَلْتَ فَعْلَتَكَ ٱلَّتِى فَعَلْتَ وَأَنتَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' (19)

قَالَ فَعَلْتُهَآ إِذًا وَأَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; (20)

فَفَرَرْتُ مِنكُمْ لَمَّا خِفْتُكُمْ فَوَهَبَ لِى رَبِّى حُكْمًا وَجَعَلَنِى مِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. (21)

وَتِلْكَ نِعْمَةٌ تَمُنُّهَا عَلَىَّ أَنْ عَبَّدتَّ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٢٢﴾

And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?' (22)

قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ وَمَا رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Pharaoh said: And what is that "Lord of all the worlds"? (23)

قَالَ رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

[Moses] answered: 'He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure.' (24)

قَالَ لِمَنْ حَوْلَهُۥٓ أَلَا تَسْتَمِعُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

[Pharaoh] said to those around him: 'Do you hear?' (25)

قَالَ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

[Moses] said: 'He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old.' (26)

قَالَ إِنَّ رَسُولَكُمُ ٱلَّذِىٓ أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'For certain, the messenger who has been sent to you is indeed a madman.' (27)

قَالَ رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقِ وَٱلْمَغْرِبِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

[Moses] went on: 'He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason.' (28)

قَالَ لَئِنِ ٱتَّخَذْتَ إِلَٰهًا غَيْرِى لَأَجْعَلَنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلْمَسْجُونِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have

قَالَ أَوَلَوْ جِئْتُكَ بِشَيْءٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

you imprisoned.' (29)

قَالَ فَأْتِ بِهِۦٓ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Said [Moses]: 'Even if I bring before you a clear proof?' (30)

فَأَلْقَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعْبَانٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣٢﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth.' (31)

وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُۥ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيْضَآءُ لِلنَّٰظِرِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. (32)

قَالَ لِلْمَلَإِ حَوْلَهُۥٓ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَٰحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers. (33)

يُرِيدُ أَن يُخْرِجَكُم مِّنْ أَرْضِكُم بِسِحْرِهِۦ فَمَاذَا تَأْمُرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: 'This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge (34)

قَالُوٓاْ أَرْجِهْ وَأَخَاهُ وَٱبْعَثْ فِي ٱلْمَدَآئِنِ حَٰشِرِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?' (35)

يَأْتُوكَ بِكُلِّ سَحَّارٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

They said: 'Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities (36)

فَجُمِعَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ لِمِيقَٰتِ يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill.' (37)

وَقِيلَ لِلنَّاسِ هَلْ أَنتُم مُّجْتَمِعُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, (38)

لَعَلَّنَا نَتَّبِعُ ٱلسَّحَرَةَ إِن كَانُواْ هُمُ ٱلْغَٰلِبِينَ

and the people were asked: 'Are you all present, (39)

so that we may follow the sorcerers if

they emerge triumphant?' (40)

﴿٤٠﴾

When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?' (41)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ قَالُواْ لِفِرۡعَوۡنَ أَئِنَّ لَنَا لَأَجۡرًا إِن كُنَّا نَحۡنُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

Said he: 'Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.' (42)

قَالَ نَعَمۡ وَإِنَّكُمۡ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلۡمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you are going to throw!' (43)

قَالَ لَهُم مُّوسَىٰٓ أَلۡقُواْ مَآ أَنتُم مُّلۡقُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.' (44)

فَأَلۡقَوۡاْ حِبَالَهُمۡ وَعِصِيَّهُمۡ وَقَالُواْ بِعِزَّةِ فِرۡعَوۡنَ إِنَّا لَنَحۡنُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Then Moses threw his staff, and it swallowed up their false devices. (45)

فَأَلۡقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَلۡقَفُ مَا يَأۡفِكُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, (46)

فَأُلۡقِيَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ سَٰجِدِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, (47)

قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

the Lord of Moses and Aaron.' (48)

رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.' (49)

قَالَ ءَامَنتُمۡ لَهُۥ قَبۡلَ أَنۡ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمۡۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكَبِيرُكُمُ ٱلَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ ٱلسِّحۡرَ فَلَسَوۡفَ تَعۡلَمُونَۚ لَأُقَطِّعَنَّ أَيۡدِيَكُمۡ وَأَرۡجُلَكُم مِّنۡ خِلَٰفٖ وَلَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. (50)

قَالُواْ لَا ضَيۡرَۖ إِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first

إِنَّا نَطۡمَعُ أَن يَغۡفِرَ لَنَا رَبُّنَا خَطَٰيَٰنَآ أَن

كُنَّآ أَوَّلَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

who have believed.' (51)

۞ وَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنۡ أَسۡرِ بِعِبَادِيٓ إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' (52)

فَأَرۡسَلَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ فِي ٱلۡمَدَآئِنِ حَٰشِرِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, (53)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَشِرۡذِمَةٞ قَلِيلُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

[saying]: 'These are but a small band, (54)

وَإِنَّهُمۡ لَنَا لَغَآئِظُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and most certainly they have enraged us; (55)

وَإِنَّا لَجَمِيعٌ حَٰذِرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

but we are all united, and well prepared.' (56)

فَأَخۡرَجۡنَٰهُم مِّن جَنَّٰتٖ وَعُيُونٖ ﴿٥٧﴾

Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, (57)

وَكُنُوزٖ وَمَقَامٖ كَرِيمٖ ﴿٥٨﴾

treasures and honourable positions. (58)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَأَوۡرَثۡنَٰهَا بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel. (59)

فَأَتۡبَعُوهُم مُّشۡرِقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. (60)

فَلَمَّا تَرَٰٓءَا ٱلۡجَمۡعَانِ قَالَ أَصۡحَٰبُ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّا لَمُدۡرَكُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' (61)

قَالَ كَلَّآۖ إِنَّ مَعِيَ رَبِّي سَيَهۡدِينِ ﴿٦٢﴾

He replied: 'No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' (62)

فَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنِ ٱضۡرِب بِّعَصَاكَ ٱلۡبَحۡرَۖ فَٱنفَلَقَ فَكَانَ كُلُّ فِرۡقٖ كَٱلطَّوۡدِ

And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff.' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain.

(63)	ٱلۡعَظِيمِ ﴿٦٣﴾
And We caused the others to draw near, (64)	وَأَزۡلَفۡنَا ثَمَّ ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾
and We saved Moses and all who were with him, (65)	وَأَنجَيۡنَا مُوسَىٰ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥٓ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾
while We caused the others to drown. (66)	ثُمَّ أَغۡرَقۡنَا ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (67)	إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (68)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٦٨﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* recounts here a major episode from Moses' history, which fits perfectly with the main theme and the emphasis it places on the fate of those who deny divine messages, accusing God's messengers of fabrication. It also comforts the Prophet as he faces the unbelievers' accusations, reassuring him that God will always take care of His message and those who believe in it and continue to advocate it in the face of determined opposition. Such advocates may be powerless, unable to match the might of the tyrannical forces lined up against them and who subject them to brutal persecution. This incidentally was precisely the case of the Muslims in Makkah at that time. Providing such historical accounts was one of the means of educating the Muslim community employed in the Qur'ān.

Earlier in the Qur'ān, episodes from Moses' story were told in *Sūrahs* 2 The Cow, 5 The Repast, 7 The Heights, 10 Jonah, *17* The Night Journey, 18 The Cave and 20 Ṭā Hā, with some brief references to it in other *sūrahs.* In each case, the presented episode or reference fits perfectly with the theme of the *sūrah* and matches the main drift of its context. The same applies here. The account clearly contributes to the illustration of the theme.

Here, we see how Moses met with opposition from Pharaoh and his people. It ends with their drowning to forestall any attempt to persecute Moses and his

followers. It also mentions the fact that Moses and the Children of Israel were saved. This confirms the truth of God's statement at the end of the *sūrah,* threatening the unbelievers: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227) It also confirms the same threat mentioned at the opening of the *sūrah: "They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6)

This episode is divided into a number of scenes, with gaps in between. These gaps are very brief, allowing the curtains to drop on one scene before they are raised again to reveal another. This is an important aspect of the Qur'ānic approach to storytelling. We have here a total of seven scenes, beginning with one in which we see how Moses receives God's call, is assigned his message and given revelations. It also includes the dialogue that took place between him and his Lord. The second scene consists of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh and his chiefs, in which Moses shows the two signs given to him, namely, his staff and his hand becoming shining white. Pharaoh's scheming as he gathers his sorcerers and assembles all the people for the confrontation provides the third scene. We are then entertained to a scene of the sorcerers gathered in Pharaoh's presence, making sure that they will receive some handsome reward. The fifth scene shows the contest that ends with the total submission of the sorcerers and their declaration of their belief in God, followed by the threats uttered by Pharaoh. Next, we have two images: God's inspiration to Moses to move forth with God's servants by night, and Pharaoh's sending summoners to raise an army to chase the Children of Israel. The final scene is that of the two hosts drawing close by the sea and its dramatic end: the sea is parted, and the believers are saved while the unbelievers are drowned.

These scenes are also painted in *Sūrahs 7,* 10 and 20: The Heights, Jonah and Ṭā Hā respectively. But in each case, they are presented in a different way, suited to the context in which they occur. Thus they serve to highlight what is suitable for each *sūrah.* For example, in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is briefly recounted, and that of the sorcerers and their assembly is shown at a rapid pace, while the picture of Pharaoh's scheming with his chiefs is related at length, giving more detail. It also shows the signs given to Moses during his stay in Egypt following his contest with the sorcerers before showing the scene at the sea with the believers being saved and the unbelievers drowned. It then moves on to provide several images of what happened to the Children of Israel after they crossed the parted sea. Nothing of this is mentioned in this *sūrah,* while we have more detail of the argument that took place between Moses and Pharaoh about God's oneness and the revelations He vouchsafed to His messenger. This was the central point of argument between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the unbelievers in Makkah.

In *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, the first scene of confrontation is briefly shown, making no mention of the two signs given to Moses, namely the staff and his hand. It also provides a brief reference to the contest between Moses and the sorcerers, while both scenes are shown here in more detail.

Sūrah 20, 11 Ha, portrays the first scene of the dialogue between Moses and his Lord at greater length, before painting the scenes of the confrontation with Pharaoh and the contest with the sorcerers in great detail. It also accompanies the Children of Israel for a long part of their journey. In this *sūrah,* however, nothing is mentioned about what happens to them after they were saved.

Hence, we can say that there is no repetition of the story despite the fact that numerous references are made to it in the Qur'ān. The episodes chosen for discussion each time, the scenes painted, and the aspects emphasized in each scene and the way they are portrayed makes each account stand out at its particular position as new, and perfectly suited to the context in which it occurs.

God's Call to Moses

> *Your Lord called Moses: 'Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?' He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me. 'Said He: 'By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.'* (Verses 10-17)

The address here is to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). At the opening of the *sūrah,* God says to him: "*Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verses 3-6) The *sūrah* then gives him accounts of what happened to some of the communities that rejected God's messages and how they suffered His punishment.

"*Your Lord called Moses: Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?"* (Verses 10-11) These two verses paint the first scene which shows Moses being given his message. It begins by exposing the people he must go to, declaring that they are 'wrongdoing'. They do themselves a great wrong by

denying God's message, and they do much wrong to the Children of Israel, killing their men but sparing their women and inflicting much torture on them. Hence, the *sūrah* describes them as wrongdoing before it specifies who they are. It then calls on Moses and all people to wonder at them: *"Will they have no fear of God?"* Will they continue to be heedless of the likely outcome of their wrongdoing? Will they not mend their erring ways? Theirs is certainly a singular situation.

Moses, however, was not unaware of Pharaoh and his regime. Indeed, he was fully aware of his oppressive rule and the injustice he meted out to people. Hence, Moses realizes that the task assigned to him is difficult and that his mission is bound to meet with stiff resistance. Hence, he complains to his Lord of his own weakness. His complaints, however, are not those of one who does not wish to carry out the task. On the contrary, he is determined to fulfil it, but he seeks help from God.

> *He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me.* (Verses 12-14)

What Moses' statement signifies is that he was not worried about being rejected by Pharaoh and his people; rather, what worried him was that this should happen at a time when he felt ill at ease and when his tongue lacked fluent argument. He suffered from a speech impediment, which he mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, as he prayed to God to remove it: *"My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say."* (20: 25-28) Should this difficulty occur while one is speaking, it makes the speaker ill at ease, which in turn makes the impediment worse. Thus, the person suffering from it feels unable to express himself. This becomes a vicious circle and anger inevitably sets in. Hence, Moses feared that he might suffer this problem when he confronted a despotic tyrant like Pharaoh with God's message. Hence, he complains to God of his own weakness, and expresses his fears in respect of delivering his Lord's message. The point of his request is that God include his brother Aaron in carrying out this task. This request does not express any reluctance on Moses' part to carry out God's orders, but reflects his fear of falling short of the task. Aaron is more eloquent, which means that he has an easier temperament. Thus, should Moses suffer a block as he speaks, or should he feel straitened in heart, Aaron could then step in to provide the proper argument. Although Moses prays, as related in *Sūrah* 20, that God remove his speech impediment, he also requests that Aaron be assigned to help him in the delivery of the divine message.

The same may be said of his other statement: *"Moreover, they have a charge of crime*

against me, and I fear that they will kill me." (Verse 14) Again, Moses does not express any fear in confronting Pharaoh with the call to believe in God, nor does he seek to abandon the mission assigned to him; rather, this is all given as an added reason for the need to include Aaron. Should Pharaoh kill Moses, Aaron would be able to carry on the mission and complete the task. Thus, we should read Moses' prayer as a precaution aiming to ensure that the divine message was properly and fully delivered. It is exactly the kind of attitude that can be expected from a messenger like Moses whom God had chosen and reared under His own watchful eye.

Knowing how keen Moses was to fulfil his task and his worry lest his weakness make him fall short of what was expected of him, God grants his requests and gives him reassurance. The *sūrah* gives no specific mention of how his prayers were answered, how Aaron received his assignment, or how they both arrived in Egypt. Instead, it shows the two brothers receiving their detailed instructions together and at the same moment as reassurance is given to Moses and his fears are dismissed in an expression that primarily denotes an order to stop: *'kallā!'* This is translated in the text as *'By no means!'*

> *Said He: By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.'* (Verses 15-17)

By no means! Your breast will not be straitened, your tongue will not be impaired, and they will not kill you. Remove all such thoughts from your mind, and proceed with your brother, equipped with Our signs. Moses had already seen two of these: his staff turning into a serpent and his hand changing colour such that it looked as if it shone a brilliant white. These aspects, however, are not mentioned in this *sūrah* because the emphasis here is on the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses, the contest with the sorcerers and the drowning of Pharaoh and his host while the believers are saved.

Moses and Aaron are told to go forth, and God also tells them: "*We are with you, listening to all."* What power! What care and what security! All this is given to them. Indeed, God is with them and with every human being at every moment, but the companionship highlighted here is that of support at difficult moments. It is shown here in the form of listening, which denotes full attention and ready support.

Moses and Aaron are told to clearly outline to Pharaoh their assigned mission, fearing nothing and hiding nothing: "*Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds.'*" (Verse 16) The Arabic text uses the singular form for 'messenger', *rasūl,* although the task is assigned to both brothers. However, because the assignment given to both is a single one, they are treated as a single

messenger to Pharaoh, the despot who claimed to be God and declared to his people: *"I know of no deity for you other than myself!"* (28: 38) Thus, the mission assigned to them is to declare the truth of God's oneness right at the very outset and without ambiguity or hesitation. There is to be no precaution against any adverse reception. For this is the truth that allows no half measures.

As messengers from the Lord of the universe, they make their demands clear: "*We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds. Let the Children of Israel go with us.*" (Verses 16-17) It is clear from this statement and similar ones in the Qur'ān that Moses was not required to address his message to Pharaoh and his people, or to call on them to believe in his faith or implement the message entrusted to him. He simply required them to set the Children of Israel free so that they could worship their Lord as they pleased. They were aware of their true faith, which they had held since the time of their first father, Israel, or Jacob, (peace be upon him). This faith, however, had weakened in their hearts allowing alien beliefs to creep in. Therefore, God sent Moses to save them from Pharaoh's injustice and to purge their monotheistic faith of all foreign and corrupt elements.

A Sarcastic Exchange with Pharaoh

Up to this point we have watched as the message is entrusted to Moses and Aaron, and how their task is outlined for them. But the curtains fall here. When, a moment later, they are raised again, we are in full view of the confrontation that takes place with Pharaoh. What happens in between is typically deleted.

> *[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?'* (Verses 18-22)

Pharaoh is amazed as Moses makes his unexpected claim to be a messenger from God, the Lord of the universe. He is further amazed as Moses demands that he free the Children of Israel. The last thing he knew of Moses was that he was brought up in his palace after being found as a newborn child floating in a basket on the Nile. As a young man he had killed an Egyptian who was involved in a fight with an Israelite and ran away. It is said that the Egyptian he killed belonged to Pharaoh's entourage. This means that there was a huge gap between Moses' status at that time and his new claims which he puts before Pharaoh just a mere ten years later. Hence, Pharaoh is

sarcastic, asking in an affected air of surprise: *"Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever."* (Verses 18-19) Is this how you repay our kindness as we looked after you when you were a young child? Is it fair that you come today professing a religion other than ours, rebelling against the authority of the king who brought you up in his palace, and calling on people to abandon his worship?

How come that during all those years you stayed with us you did not mention anything of the wild claims you are now making, giving us no prelude to what was to come? Pharaoh then reminds Moses of the incident leading to the killing of the Egyptian, giving it an air of exaggeration: *"Yet you have done that deed of yours..."* It was a ghastly deed that should never be mentioned or described in real terms. Yet you did it *"while being an unbeliever."* You did not believe then in the Lord of all the worlds, about whom you are now telling us.

Thus we see Pharaoh making what he thought was a final argument and against which Moses would have no reply, especially his killing of an Egyptian and the punishment that could be inflicted on him. His words are clearly meant as an implied threat.

Since God answered his prayer and cured his speech impediment, Moses rejoins with a clear reply: *"'I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?'"* (Verses 21-22) I did it when I was ignorant, rushing to defend anyone from among my people. This is different from my present commitment to my faith which is based on sound judgement granted me by my Lord. *"I fled from you because I feared you."* But God has been good to me, bestowing on me the gift of wisdom and making me one of His messengers. I am not a unique phenomenon; rather, one of the chosen group of God's messengers.[1]

Moses then uses a touch of sarcasm in reply to Pharaoh's own sarcastic remarks, but he only states the truth: *"What sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?" The* fact that I was reared in your palace came about only as a result of your enslavement of the Children of Israel, and your killing of their children. This was the reason why my mother put me in a basket to float along the Nile. When your people found me, I was brought up in your palace, not in my parents' home. What favour is this that you press against me?

[1] It should be noted here that Moses refers to himself as one of God's messengers, rather than using the singular form. This serves two purposes: (1) it fits with rhyming verse endings and thus maintains the musical beat running throughout the *sūrah;* and (2) it emphasizes the fact that he was one of many sent to different peoples in different generations to provide divine guidance to mankind.

The Challenge Continues

At this point, Pharaoh stops this line of argument and asks Moses for the central point of his claims, but his questioning carries overtones of ridicule and derision aimed at none other than God Himself. *"Pharaoh said: And what is that 'Lord of all the worlds?'"* (Verse 23) How arrogant and insolent! He is saying: what is this Lord of the worlds about whom you describe yourself as His messenger? Such a question can only mean a denial of the very point it relates to, and a ridicule of the statement and the person making it. He considers the whole situation impossible and unworthy of discussion.

Moses' reply points to God's Lordship over the entire visible universe and all that there is in it: *"[Moses] answered: He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure."* (Verse 24) Thus, his answer refutes Pharaoh's denial, rendering it worthless. He tells him that God is the Lord of the entire universe which neither Pharaoh's power nor his knowledge can ever reach. The utmost that Pharaoh can boast of is that he is a deity over the people of the Nile Valley and its overall lord. But then this is a tiny little particle when compared to the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. We discern in Moses' answer his dismissal of Pharaoh's claims as vain boasts, turning his attention to the vast universe, inviting him to contemplate its size and the One who is Lord over it all. That is certainly the Lord of all the worlds. He concludes his answer with a comment inviting the people to work for the achievement of certainty: *"If you want to be sure."*

Pharaoh turns to those around him, expressing amazement at this response. Or maybe he wanted them not to be influenced by it. This is typical of all tyrants who fear that simple words of truth might influence the hearts and minds of the masses: *"[Pharaoh] said to those around him: Do you hear?"* (Verse 25) Do you hear this singular statement which was never uttered by anyone we know?

Moses replies by stressing another attribute of God, the Lord of all creatures: *"[Moses] said: He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old."* (Verse 26) This answer is directed at Pharaoh, his status and claims even more. He tells him that God, the Lord of all the worlds, is also his Lord, while Pharaoh is nothing more than one of His servants. He is certainly not a deity as he claims. His people are also subject to God, their true Lord, while Pharaoh has no lordship over them. Indeed God is the Lord of their forefathers of old, which means that the hereditary aspect on which Pharaoh's claims rely is false. None other than God has ever been Lord of the worlds.

This hit hard at Pharaoh and he could not remain silent when his elders and nobles were listening. Hence, he derisively states that his adversary is mad: *"[Pharaoh] said: Indeed, the messenger who has been sent to you is, of a certainty, a*

madman." (Verse 27) His derision is directed at the very issue of bearing God's message so as to turn people away from it. He charges Moses with madness in order to nullify the effect of his statement that questions the very basis of Pharaoh's political and religious position, as it aims to remind people of their Lord, the Lord of their forefathers.

Nothing of Pharaoh's derision could weaken Moses and his resolve. Therefore, he continues to state the truth that hits hard at all tyrants: *"[Moses] went on: He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason."* (Verse 28) The Arabic words *mashriq* and *maghrib,* used for east and west, also denote the processes of planets and stars rising and setting. These are two great scenes which we see every day, but our minds seldom reflect on them because of over familiarity. These two processes are great indeed, and neither Pharaoh nor any tyrant can claim to have any control over them. Who does, then, control them, setting them in a perfect order and timing that ensures their continuity without fail or deviation? Moses' answer shakes dormant hearts and awakens sleeping souls. In this way, he calls on people to reflect and contemplate, "*if you would but use your reason."*

Brutal Threats versus Logical Arguments

Tyranny does not fear anything more than the reawakening of people's hearts. It does not hate anyone more than an advocate of clear vision and right thinking. Its main opponent is the one who tries to awaken people's consciences. When Moses touched people's hearts with his description of God Almighty, Pharaoh was extremely angry. He ended the argument with a clear threat of force, which is the ultimate recourse of all tyrants, when they feel that any counter argument is too powerful. *"[Pharaoh] said: If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have you imprisoned."* (Verse 29)

Such is the argument and the evidence supporting it: a clear threat of imprisonment. The prison is available and the measure itself has been taken against others. It is a measure that exposes the weakness of falsehood when it faces the overwhelming power of the truth. Tyrants know no other way.

Nevertheless, Moses did not lose his composure. How could he have when he is God's messenger, enjoying the support God has promised him and his brother? Hence, he keeps the argument going, reopening the book Pharaoh wants to close, and delivering a new piece of evidence: *"Said [Moses]: Even if I bring before you a clear proof?"* (Verse 30) Here, he asks Pharaoh: will you still have me imprisoned if I provide irrefutable proof that all I am saying is true? This put Pharaoh on the spot in front of a large gathering. He realized that if he were to refuse this new proof outright, he would only demonstrate his own weakness in the face of Moses'

powerful argument: this despite his description of Moses as a madman. He felt that his only option was to demand such proof: Hence, *"[Pharaoh] said: Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 31)

"If you area man of truth," may be taken to mean 'if you are truthful in what you claim to be', or 'if you truly have clear proof'. Thus we see Pharaoh continuing to raise doubts about Moses, fearing that his argument may be well received by those present.

At this point Moses produces his two physical miracles, having delayed their display until Pharaoh has thrown down his utmost challenge: *"So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers."* (Verses 32-33) The way these two verses are phrased suggest that the staff was physically transformed into a real, living serpent. His hand, as he drew it out, was really a shining, brilliant white. There was no delusion or fantasy of the sort sorcerers employ when they deceive the senses without altering any element of reality.

The miracle of life starting from where no human being knows occurs at every moment without people paying much attention to it, because of their long familiarity with it, or perhaps because they do not look upon it as a challenge. In Pharaoh's court, in front of his entire entourage, the production of these two miracles had the effect of nothing less than a violent earthquake.

Pharaoh recognized that he was facing a powerful miracle, and he sensed the weakness of his own position. Hence he was quick to provide a damage-limitation exercise, trying to ensure the support of his people, raising their fear of Moses and his community: *"[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?"* (Verses 34-35)

In Pharaoh's statement we note three important elements: (1) his acknowledgement of the powerful miracle, even though he called it sorcery — he describes Moses as a *"sorcerer of great knowledge";* (2) his fear that people might be so influenced by Moses and his argument that he says Moses *"wants to drive you out of your land";* (3) his adoption of a humble attitude with the people whom he wanted to look upon him as their lord. He asks them for advice, although Pharaoh never sought such advice while they prostrated themselves before him.

Falsehood Comes to Grief

This is a typical position to which tyrants resort when they feel their grip on power weakening. They seem to soften up, seeking the help of the people they have

been trampling over. They put up a facade of consultation with them, but this is only temporary until the danger has passed. When they feel they are safe again, they revert to their tyranny, tolerating no opposition whatsoever.

Those around him fell for his ploy because they shared his falsehood and were keen for the *status quo* to continue for it ensured their influential positions in the state hierarchy. They feared that Moses and the Children of Israel would take their land from them should the masses follow him and Aaron. Hence, these noble chiefs were quick to give their advice to Pharaoh, suggesting that he could match one type of sorcery with another, provided there was a period of preparation: *"They said: Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill."* (Verses 36-37) The plan, then, was to gain time while Pharaoh sent word to all Egyptian cities summoning every skilful sorcerer who could match or excel Moses.

The curtains drop here. When they are raised again we see the sorcerers assembled and the people gathering in large numbers to watch the great contest. Their support for the sorcerers is raised to a high pitch, for they enjoyed the backing of those in power. Thus, the stage was ready for the battle between truth and falsehood, divine faith and tyranny: *"So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, and the people were asked: Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers if they emerge triumphant."* (Verses 38-40)

The style used in these verses suggests a deliberate plan to excite the masses and keep people in full expectation: *"Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers?"* Are you all in attendance and ready for the contest to begin? Soon you will see with your own eyes the sorcerers defeat this Israelite called Moses! On such occasions, the masses always flock in, oblivious to the fact that tyrannical rulers manipulate them for their own ends. They bring them to such gatherings and show occasions so as to divert their attentions away from the miserable conditions and oppression they endure.

We then see the sorcerers in an audience with Pharaoh, prior to the match, making sure that they will secure his reward if they win. He is ready with a promise of a very handsome reward, and a position close to his throne: *"When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: 'Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?' Said he: 'Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.'"* (Verses 4 1-42)

Thus the whole thing involves nothing other than a mercenary group ready to use their skills to help Pharaoh, the tyrant, in return for some pecuniary gain. There is no question of faith or an issue of principle. It is all about personal gain and interest. It is such people that are used by tyrants everywhere and throughout all periods of

history. Their eagerness betrays their reward motive, a reward they will receive for their role in deluding the masses. Hence why Pharaoh promises them much more than just pecuniary gain. He promises them a position close to his own.

Turning the Scales against Pharaoh

The *sūrah* then draws before our eyes the whole contest and the great events that follow:

> *Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you are going to throw!' So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.' Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices. The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron. [Pharaoh] said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.' They said:' No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed.'* (Verses 43-51)

It all starts with an ordinary, quiet scene; yet it gives us the sense that Moses was perfectly reassured that he represented the truth. Hence, he cared little for the multitude of sorcerers gathered from all over Egypt, ready to employ their skills to prove Pharaoh's case. His reassurance is reflected in his allowing them to be the first to start: "*Moses said to them: Throw whatever you are going to throw!*" (Verse 43)

His words imply that whatever they could produce was of little interest to him. For their part, the sorcerers mustered their best efforts and skills, starting the match in Pharaoh's name and with his help: "*So they threw their ropes and staffs; and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.'*" (Verse 44) The *sūrah* does not tell us what happened to their ropes and staffs, which is detailed in *Sūrahs* 7 and 20, The Heights and Ṭā Hā respectively. Thus it retains the atmosphere of reassurance and steadfastness in support of the truth. Instead, the *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us of the result of the encounter, since this is its main purpose: "*Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices.*" (Verse 45)

This was a great surprise to the sorcerers who were not expecting anything of the sort. They had mustered all their power, using their best skills in an area in which they were the undisputed masters. What they produced was the best any sorcerer could produce. Besides, they were many, gathered from all over Egypt, while Moses stood alone, with nothing in his hand other than his staff. Yet it immediately

swallowed in one fast movement all they could produce. Besides, they were fully aware that magic relied on delusion, but his staff swallowed their ropes and staffs for real, leaving nothing of them. Had Moses used trickery, their ropes and staffs would have remained there after an imaginary scene suggesting that they were being swallowed. But as they looked around, they could see nothing remaining of their ropes and staffs. Hence, they had no choice but to submit to the clear truth staring them in the face. They were the first to know that it was the truth: *"The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.'"* (Verses 46-48)

Only a moment earlier they were ready to lend their skills for pecuniary gain, looking forward to handsome wages for their skilful manipulation. The question of faith and principle meant little to them. Now, however, as the truth touches their hearts, they undergo a complete transformation. They are shaken to the bottom of their hearts, and all falsehood is removed. Within a brief moment, their hearts are clear, ready to respond to the truth, full of faith. Thus, they voluntarily prostrate themselves and repeat the words declaring their unshakeable faith: *"We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron."* (Verses 47-48)

The human heart is amazing. A single touch on the right spot changes it completely. The Prophet states the truth as he says: "Every human heart is held within two fingers in God's hand: He sets it straight or leaves it to stray, as He pleases." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Thus, the hired sorcerers were transformed into a group of the best believers, in front of the assembled masses as well as Pharaoh and his noble chiefs. They did not think of the consequences that their declaration of conversion to faith would produce. They cared little for Pharaoh's reaction or what he would do to them.

Such a transformation must have dealt a great blow to Pharaoh. The masses were led to believe the great lie reiterated by Pharaoh's men that Moses, the Israelite, was a mere sorcerer who wanted to take over their land by means of his sorcery. If he won, he would give power to his own people. But the sorcerers were sure to overpower him and put him in his place, or so they were told. The masses were witnesses to the great encounter that unfolded, with the sorcerers producing their tricks in Pharaoh's name and under his protection. Yet in no time, they were utterly defeated, acknowledging their defeat, declaring that Moses delivered the message of the truth, and that they themselves now believed in God, the Lord of all the worlds. Their transformation meant that they disowned Pharaoh's worship only a brief moment after they were expecting to receive their wages from him.

The sorcerers' transformation represented a real threat to Pharaoh, as it deflated the legend on which his power relied, namely the legend that he was a deity, or the son of gods. The transformation was declared by the sorcerers at a time when sorcery

was a sacred profession preserved for Egypt's priesthood. It was these very sorcerers that now declared their belief in the Lord of all the worlds, He who had given Moses and Aaron their message. The masses always followed the priests in their beliefs. If these were to abandon Pharaoh, what would be left for him except brute force? Such force cannot, on its own, provide reliable support to protect a regime of government.

Brute Force to Suppress Faith

We can then imagine the panic that affected Pharaoh and his nobles as they heard the sorcerers' declaration and their profound, unshakeable belief in God, before whom they now prostrated themselves.

Enraged, Pharaoh issued a clear warning that he would inflict all sorts of punishment upon the sorcerers. He further accused them of conspiring with Moses against him and the Egyptian people:

> *[Pharaoh] said: You believe in him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.* (Verse 49)

The Qur'ānic text places special emphasis on Pharaoh's first words, "*you believe in him even before I have given you permission,*" so as to highlight the surrender to Moses without first obtaining Pharaoh's permission. Thus, he accuses them of a purposeful conspiracy in which they willingly participated, knowing full well its outcome. He could not appreciate what had touched their hearts. How could a tyrant feel the effect of faith on people's minds and hearts? He then delivered his hasty accusation to explain their transformation: "*Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft!*" (Verse 49) This is a very strange accusation which defies explanation unless one says that some of these priest sorcerers — since the religion that made Pharaoh a deity relied on magic-practising priests — attended to Moses' education given he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, or that he might have attended them in their temples. Hence, Pharaoh manipulates this distant relation, turning it on its head. Thus, instead of saying that Moses was their disciple, he says he was their master; this to make the situation look even more horrendous.

Pharaoh then threatens them with torture, magnifying what punishment he will inflict on those believers: "*In time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.*" (Verse 49) These are the same stupid measures to which every tyrant resorts when he feels his position or life threatened. Furthermore, Pharaoh displays no compunction about

it. He utters his words knowing that in his position of absolute power he can carry out his threats to the letter. What, then, would this small group of believers who have just seen the light of faith say in reply?

What they say is indeed inspiring. Their reply comes from their hearts: they have found true faith and will not exchange it for anything else. They realize that their newly-found relation with God enables them to totally disregard tyrant'. They now aspire to the true life of the hereafter, paying no heed whatsoever to what they may have to face in this life: "*They said: No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed.*" (Verses 50-51)

'You can cause us no harm!' That you may be able to cut our hands and feet off on alternate sides, or that you may crucify us does not mean that you can harm us. Indeed, even if you kill us all, you will not harm us, because we will return to our Lord. Whatever happens on this earth will end here. Our hopes and aspirations are all centred on what will happen in the life to come where we "*certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed.*"

What splendid effect faith has on a believer's mind, and how it brightens his soul, pouring reassurance and contentedness on it. Thus man, who originates from an essence of clay can attain the sublime.

When faith settles in the heart, it enriches it to the extent that all that this world can offer seems trivial and worthless.

Here, the curtains fall to retain both the effect of this splendid scene and its majestic rhythm. It is given here in this way so as to make it a lesson to be fully appreciated by the new Muslims in Makkah as they faced the Quraysh unbelievers' torture and persecution. It remains a lesson to all advocates of faith as they suffer persecution anywhere and in every generation.

Divine Care for True Believers

Thereafter, God looked after his faithful servants, while Pharaoh began raising his army, seeking to put his plans into effect:

> *Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, [saying]: 'These are but a small band, and most certainly they have enraged us; but we are all united, and well prepared.'* (Verses 52-56)

We have here a gap in the story during which certain events are omitted. Moses

and the Israelites lived for a period in Egypt during which the signs mentioned in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, took place. It was later that God instructed Moses to leave Egypt with his people. All these events are omitted here so that the historical account better serves the theme of the *sūrah,* delivering its message most clearly.

What we know is that God instructed His messenger, Moses, to leave with his people, starting their flight by night after making all the necessary preparations and planning their departure well. God also told Moses that Pharaoh and his host would pursue them. He further commanded him to lead his people to the sea, most probably to the point where the Gulf of Suez stretches into the lakes area. Pharaoh soon learnt of the Children of Israel's night flight and he immediately ordered full mobilization of his troops, sending heralds and officials to other cities to enlist recruits, hoping to catch up with Moses and his people and undermine their efforts. Little did he realize that the plan he wanted to foil was God's own!

Pharaoh's agents went at full speed, recruiting and enlisting soldiers as they went. Yet Pharaoh also realized that such mobilization could give the impression of how worried he was, and that he recognized that Moses and his followers represented a serious threat. Otherwise, why would he, a king and a deity, need to initiate a full mobilization to counter their threat? Hence, he felt that he needed to assure his people that there was but little danger: "*These are but a small band!*" (Verse 54) This begs the question: why raise all this fuss, then? 'Why give them so much importance and mobilize such a large force? Hence, he has to further justify his action: "*Most certainly they have enraged us.*" (Verse 55) They have perpetrated certain actions and made some inflammatory statements. However, "*we are all united, and well prepared.*" (Verse 56) We realize how they are plotting against us, and we are in full control of the situation to ensure that they can do us no harm. This is just an example of how falsehood always finds itself at a loss when it encounters faith.

Before portraying the last scene of this encounter, the *sūrah* gives us an account of the ultimate consequences of leading Pharaoh and his people away from their riches and property. It also shows how the previously persecuted Children of Israel were able to enjoy all these things: "*Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, treasures and honourable positions. And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57-59)

The Egyptians set out to pursue Moses and his people, but this was to be their last march. It was indeed an expulsion, driving them away from all the luxuries they had been enjoying, including their gardens, springs and treasures, never to return. This final outcome is mentioned here, ahead of sequence, in order to highlight the punishment meted out to those wrongdoers who perpetrate injustices.

It is not known in history that the Children of Israel returned to Egypt after they had so departed, aiming for the Holy Land. Nor is it known that they inherited the

kingdom of Egypt, Pharaoh's treasures and seat of power. Hence, commentators on the Qur'ān explain this Qur'ānic statement by saying that they inherited something similar, which means that they inherited the type of things enjoyed by Pharaoh and his entourage.

The Drowning of Pharaoh's Army

After this interpolation we are treated to the final, decisive scene:

> *And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' He replied: 'No indeed.' My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain. And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.* (Verses 60-68)

So, Moses marched with his people at night, in accordance with God's plan. In the morning, Pharaoh and his soldiers began their chase. We then see the climax approaching, and the battle about to commence. Moses and his people find themselves close to the sea, without any boats which they could use to cross. They could not cross on foot, and they lacked the means to defend themselves. Pharaoh and his army were approaching, with his soldiers fully equipped, confident of their victory and intent on showing no mercy. All indications suggested a final tragedy for the small group with Moses: there was no escape, for the sea was ahead and the enemy to the rear. Hence they cried out: "*We shall certainly be overtaken.*" (Verse 61)

It was a time of great stress about to reach its pinnacle. To those believers with Moses it looked as if in just a few minutes they would certainly be overtaken. They were certain that Pharaoh would indiscriminately deal death and that there would be no escape. But Moses, who had received God's revelations, does not entertain any such doubt. He has complete trust in God, believing that His help will be forthcoming. He is certain that God will save them, although he does not know how. Nevertheless, it is certain and God will guide him. Hence, his reply: "*No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me.*" (Verse 62)

We note the emphasis in his reply: *No indeed.'* We will not be overtaken and we will not suffer any persecution, because God will guide me and this is certain. At the last moment, a bright ray of hope is clearly seen against the long dark night of stress and despair, as the route ahead opens at a point no one has ever thought of: "*And We revealed to Moses: Strike the sea with your staff.*" (Verse 63) The *sūrah* does not give us further details so as to say that he complied with the order and struck the sea with his staff. All this is clearly understood. The *sūrah* only gives us the result of his action: "*So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain.*" (Verse 63)

So the miracle was there for all to see. What people describe as impossible became a reality before their own eyes. People only think of natural laws according to what is familiar to them, but natural laws are created by God and He is able to make them operate in accordance with His will, at any moment of His choosing.

A miracle was enacted and the Children of Israel looked on. In between the waters of the sea, a passageway of dry land opened for them. The water stood still on both sides of the passage like great mountains, and the Israelites rushed to cross over. Pharaoh and his army stood there, overwhelmed at this miraculous event. After a long while, of watching in utter amazement, Pharaoh ordered his soldiers to chase them along the same route. Thus, God's will was done. As the Israelites were coming out at the other end, Pharaoh and his host were walking in between the two great bodies of water, drawing ever nearer to their deaths: "*And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown.*" (Verses 64-66)

This was a great sign for mankind, one which has remained the subject of much discussion by countless generations. Do many people believe in it? The answer comes from none other than God: "*Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe.*" (Verse 67) Miraculous signs do not necessarily lead to people's acceptance of the truth, even though they may forcibly submit to them. Faith is generated in people's hearts as divine guidance touches them.

"*And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.*" (Verse 68) This is the usual comment in this *sūrah* after mentioning God's signs and people's rejection of His messages.

3
No End to God's Blessings

Relate to them the story of Abraham, (69)	وَٱتۡلُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ نَبَأَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ٦٩
when he said to his father and his people: 'What is that you worship?' (70)	إِذۡ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوۡمِهِۦ مَا تَعۡبُدُونَ ٧٠
They answered: 'We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them.' (71)	قَالُواْ نَعۡبُدُ أَصۡنَامٗا فَنَظَلُّ لَهَا عَٰكِفِينَ ٧١
Said he: 'Do they hear you when you call on them, (72)	قَالَ هَلۡ يَسۡمَعُونَكُمۡ إِذۡ تَدۡعُونَ ٧٢
or benefit you or do you harm?' (73)	أَوۡ يَنفَعُونَكُمۡ أَوۡ يَضُرُّونَ ٧٣
They said: 'But we found our forefathers doing the same.' (74)	قَالُواْ بَلۡ وَجَدۡنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا كَذَٰلِكَ يَفۡعَلُونَ ٧٤
He said: 'Do you see those which you have been worshipping – (75)	قَالَ أَفَرَءَيۡتُم مَّا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡبُدُونَ ٧٥
you and your forefathers of old? (76)	أَنتُمۡ وَءَابَآؤُكُمُ ٱلۡأَقۡدَمُونَ ٧٦
They are my enemies, except for the Lord of all the worlds. (77)	فَإِنَّهُمۡ عَدُوّٞ لِّيٓ إِلَّا رَبَّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٧٧
'It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me. (78)	ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهۡدِينِ ٧٨

وَٱلَّذِى هُوَ يُطۡعِمُنِى وَيَسۡقِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾	*He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink.* (79)
وَإِذَا مَرِضۡتُ فَهُوَ يَشۡفِينِ ﴿٨٠﴾	*When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health,* (80)
وَٱلَّذِى يُمِيتُنِى ثُمَّ يُحۡيِينِ ﴿٨١﴾	*and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life.* (81)
وَٱلَّذِىٓ أَطۡمَعُ أَن يَغۡفِرَ لِى خَطِيٓـَٔتِى يَوۡمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٨٢﴾	*It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.'* (82)
رَبِّ هَبۡ لِى حُكۡمًا وَأَلۡحِقۡنِى بِٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾	*'My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous;* (83)
وَٱجۡعَل لِّى لِسَانَ صِدۡقٍ فِى ٱلۡأَٰخِرِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾	*and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations;* (84)
وَٱجۡعَلۡنِى مِن وَرَثَةِ جَنَّةِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٨٥﴾	*place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss!* (85)
وَٱغۡفِرۡ لِأَبِىٓ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٨٦﴾	*Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray.* (86)
وَلَا تُخۡزِنِى يَوۡمَ يُبۡعَثُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾	*Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead;* (87)
يَوۡمَ لَا يَنفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾	*the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit;* (88)
إِلَّا مَنۡ أَتَى ٱللَّهَ بِقَلۡبٍ سَلِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾	*but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]* (89)
وَأُزۡلِفَتِ ٱلۡجَنَّةُ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾	*Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing;* (90)
وَبُرِّزَتِ ٱلۡجَحِيمُ لِلۡغَاوِينَ ﴿٩١﴾	*whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error.* (91)

وَقِيلَ لَهُمۡ أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship (92)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ هَلۡ يَنصُرُونَكُمۡ أَوۡ يَنتَصِرُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' (93)

فَكُبۡكِبُواْ فِيهَا هُمۡ وَٱلۡغَاوُۥنَ ﴿٩٤﴾

They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, (94)

وَجُنُودُ إِبۡلِيسَ أَجۡمَعُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

and Iblīs' hosts, all together. (95)

قَالُواْ وَهُمۡ فِيهَا يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: (96)

تَٱللَّهِ إِن كُنَّا لَفِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٩٧﴾

'By God, we were obviously in error, (97)

إِذۡ نُسَوِّيكُم بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾

when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. (98)

وَمَآ أَضَلَّنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. (99)

فَمَا لَنَا مِن شَٰفِعِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

And now we have none to intercede for us (100)

وَلَا صَدِيقٍ حَمِيمٖ ﴿١٠١﴾

nor any loving friend. (101)

فَلَوۡ أَنَّ لَنَا كَرَّةٗ فَنَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (102)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (103)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (104)

Overview

The *sūrah* has given us an account of Moses and Pharaoh and the latter's ultimate end. It gives hope to the believers suffering persecution in the world, as were the small group of Muslims in Makkah at the time. The story also portrays the destruction of arrogant tyrants whose attitude was basically similar to that of the idolaters in Makkah.

The *sūrah* now moves on to tell us about Abraham and his people. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is ordered to relate this story to the unbelievers. For they claimed to be the custodians of Abraham's heritage in so far as they followed his old faith, even though they addressed their worship to multiple deities. Indeed, they went even further, placing idols in the Sacred Mosque built by Abraham as a focus for the followers of the pure faith based on God's oneness. The Prophet is required to tell them Abraham's story so that they know whether their claims are right or not.

In this *Sūrah,* historical accounts are not given in their chronological order, because it is only concerned with the lessons to be derived from these accounts. In *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, conversely, the historical line of how power was assumed by different peoples and the succession of God's messengers since Adam were important points to stress. Hence, the accounts of earlier prophets there followed a strict chronological order, starting with man's fall from heaven to begin human life on earth.

The episode in Abraham's story given in this *sūrah* concentrates on the message he delivered to his people, the debate he had with them, his denunciation of their alleged deities, addressing all worship to God alone and his reminder of the Day of Judgement. This is followed by a complete scene from the Day of Judgement when idolaters will deny those very deities they used to worship, and regret their past actions that are certain to land them with a terrible end. It is all shown as if it is already happening now. The lesson the story delivers here is aimed primarily at the idolaters. Hence, the *sūrah* speaks at length on the basics of the monotheistic faith, the fallacy of polytheism, and the destiny of idolaters. All other aspects are only briefly hinted at, while they are nonetheless detailed in other *sūrahs.*

Other episodes in Abraham's life were given in *Sūrahs* 2, 6, 11, 14, 15, 19, 21 and 22. In each, the episode chosen is the one most suited to the main theme of the *sūrah.* In *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, for example, we read the episode of his building the Ka`bah, together with his son, Ishmael. He is shown praying to God to make Makkah, the Sacred City, secure. He is also shown declaring that the Muslims will be the true heirs of the Ka`bah and its builder, as they will be the ones who will follow his faith based on God's oneness. This is not an inheritance based on blood and ancestry. This

fact is given within the context of the Israelites' disobedience and denials and their expulsion by God who gave Abraham's heritage and the House he built to the Muslims.

In the same *sūrah* we have Abraham's debate with the unbeliever king when Abraham stressed God's power telling the king that God alone causes life and death, and that it is He who causes the sun to rise in the East. He challenged the king to make it rise in the West, thus ending all argument. Abraham is also shown in this *sūrah* praying to God to let him see how He brings the dead back to life. God ordered him to slay four birds and to place parts of each on different mountains. God then brought them back to life and they flew back to Abraham. All this is given in a context that concentrates on God's power, the signs He has placed in the universe and His ability to bring the dead back to life.

Sūrah 6, Cattle, describes Abraham searching for his Lord and how he recognized Him and His power after looking carefully at the stars, the moon and the sun, and reflecting on other universal phenomena. The entire *sūrah* concentrates on faith and universal signs pointing to God, the Creator, who has no partner whatsoever.

In *Sūrah 11,* Hūd, Abraham is given the happy news of the birth of his son, Isaac, but this is given as the *Sūrah* relates Lot's story and how the angels sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah visited Abraham on their way. The episode shows the care God takes of His chosen servants and how He deals with arrogant transgressors.

Sūrah 14, named Abraham, shows him praying by the Sacred Mosque, the Ka`bah, for his offspring whom he placed in a barren valley. He praises and thanks God for giving him his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, in his old age, and prays to Him to make him and his descendants people who attend regularly to their prayers. He further appeals to God to answer his supplications, forgive him, his parents and the believers on the Day of Reckoning. The whole context of this *sūrah* then is to show all followers of God's messengers as one community, believing in one message, that of God's oneness. Those who deny God's messengers are also shown to belong to one camp. The divine message is portrayed as a large tree providing shade in an arid climate of disbelief.

Sūrah 15, al-Ĥijr, relates the same episode given in *Sūrah* 11, with more detail, within the context of bestowing mercy on believers and inflicting punishment on unbelievers.

The episode given in *Sūrah* 19, Mary, concentrates on his gentle approach to his father, the latter's stiff reply, Abraham's moving away from his people, and how he was blessed with Ishmael and Isaac. All this comes in a *sūrah* that portrays God's care for His chosen servants, generating a clearly felt ambience of love and compassion.

In *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, we are shown how Abraham called on his father and

his people to believe in God, and how he denounced their idols and physically destroyed them. We are shown how he was thrown onto a fire and how, by God's command, it turned cool and comforting for him, and then how he and his nephew, the Prophet Lot, were saved and taken to the land God blessed for mankind. Again this comes within the context of showing the unity of the nation that follows God's messengers and how God takes care of this community as it addresses all its worship to Him alone.

Sūrah 22, The Pilgrimage, contains a reference to God's order that Abraham should cleanse and purify the Ka`bah for those who worship there.

Questioning Popular Beliefs

"*Relate to them the story of Abraham, when he said to his father and his people: What is that you worship?"* (Verses 69-70) The Prophet is instructed here to relate to them the story of Abraham whom the idolater Arabs considered themselves to be his heirs and the followers of his faith. The Prophet thus recounts how Abraham denounced what his father and people worshipped, which were no more than idols similar to those the unbelievers in Makkah worshipped. He also denounced their erring ways, asking them in a clear tone of disapproval: *What is that you worship?'*

"*They answered: We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them."* (Verse 71) They certainly considered their idols deities, but the fact that they called them idols shows that they could not deny the fact that they were no more than statues made of stone, but to which they nevertheless devoted their worship. This is the ultimate degree of absurdity. Yet when people take up wrong beliefs, they lose sight of the absurdity of their concepts, worship and statements.

Abraham (peace be upon him) begins to awaken their minds and hearts, highlighting the absurdity of their position: "*Said he: Do they hear you when you call on them, or benefit you or do you harm?"* (Verses 72-73) The least that should be true of a deity to whom worship is addressed is that it should have the same faculty of hearing as its worshipper. But these deities cannot hear their worshippers who appeal to them for benefit and the removal of harm and hardship. If they cannot hear, then how can they bring benefit or cause harm? Certainly the idolaters could not claim either quality for their idols. Hence, they did not answer Abraham because they realized that he was being sarcastic. Nevertheless, they could not refute what he said. Hence, when they do speak, they expose themselves as blind followers who do not reflect on their actions: "*They said: But we found our forefathers doing the same."* (Verse 74) True, these idols cannot hear, bring benefit or cause harm, but we found our forefathers worshipping them and we follow in their footsteps.

This is a disgraceful reply, but those idolaters were not ashamed to make it, nor

were the Arabs in Makkah ashamed of doing likewise. It was sufficient that their forefathers did something for them to then accept it as valid without question. Indeed a stumbling block in the way of the Islamic message was that the idolaters were required to abandon their forefathers' religion. This they did not want to do because it would detract from those ancestors' standing and constitute an acknowledgement that they were in error. This would be too disrespectful of their forefathers. Such otiose values are thus allowed to stand in the way of the truth. In times of inflexible obduracy people stick to such values in preference to the truth. Hence, they needed to be shaken violently in order to release their minds and faculties.

Patient and calm as he was, Abraham realized that the only way forward was to give them a real jolt, declaring his enmity to those idols and to the deviant beliefs that allowed such worship: "*He said: Do you see those which you have been worshipping – you and your forefathers of old? They are my enemies, except for the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 75-77)

The fact that his own father and people worshipped such deities did not stop him from parting company with them, making clear his hostility to their errant beliefs. Thus, the Qur'ān teaches believers that on the question of faith, no consideration is given to parents, ancestors or communities. The main bond is that of faith. Whatever else there is, is of secondary importance.

Abraham makes an exception in his hostility to what they and their ancestors worshipped, and this exception applies only to '*the Lord of all the worlds'*. It might be that some of their ancestors worshipped God before deviation crept into their faith. It might also be that some of them worshipped God alongside some other alleged deities. Hence, Abraham employs this precaution in order to make his statement precise, and this is only to be expected of Abraham when he speaks of faith.

Acknowledging God's Favours

Abraham then outlines the attributes of his Lord, the Lord of all the worlds, and the bond that exists between them at all times and in all situations. As we listen to his description we feel the close, inspirational relationship that acknowledges God's hand in everything that happens in life:

> *It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me. He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health, and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life. It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.* (Verses 78-82)

Abraham's description of his Lord and the bond between them imparts a feeling that every part of his constitution feels this bond. Hence, all his aspirations look to God with love and trust. It is as if Abraham actually sees his Lord and feels his grace with all his heart. As the Qur'ān quotes Abraham's description, it gives it a melodious tone, one that imparts a very relaxed atmosphere, spreading its soothing, tranquil air.

"*It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me.*" (Verse 78) He has originated me from where He knows but I know not. This means that He knows everything about me: my constitution, nature, functions, feelings, and ultimate destiny. He is the One to guide me and provide me with the line I should follow in life. It is as if Abraham feels himself like an elastic material which God shapes the way He likes, giving it whatever form He chooses. He submits himself to God with full trust, perfectly assured that he is on the right course.

"*He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health.*" (Verses 79-80) These are aspects of the direct, compassionate and loving care Abraham feels his Lord takes of him in all situations of health and sickness. Abraham demonstrates the utmost standard of politeness with his Lord by not attributing any illness to Him, although he knows well that both sickness and health occur by God's will. He only attributes to Him the blessings he enjoys and the care he receives: his food and drink as well as his health.

Again it is God who "*will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life.*" (Verse 81) This signifies complete faith that it is God who deals death, and that He is certain to bring the dead back to life.

"*It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 82) Abraham, a prophet and a messenger of God, who knows his Lord and feels his presence and care in such a way, acknowledging such a close relationship with Him, expresses his dearest hope that on the Day of Judgement, God will forgive him his faults. He does not entertain any thought that he is without fault. Indeed he acknowledges that he has these, but hopes to receive more of God's grace. He does not feel that his deeds, good as they may be, deserve any credit, but hopes for God's mercy and forgiveness. This is the best to hope for.

This statement combines feelings of God-consciousness, politeness and self-effacement. This is the right combination to truly appreciate the grace God bestows on us, which is great indeed, and the value of our actions, which is definitely petty.

In his description of his Lord, Abraham combines all the elements of true faith: God's oneness, acknowledgement that He conducts all the affairs of human life on earth including every minute detail, resurrection after death, reckoning, God's grace and man's failings.

His people denied these, as do all those who associate partners with God.

Prayer by a Devoted Worshipper

Now Abraham addresses a long, comprehensive and humble prayer to his Lord:

> *My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous; and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations; place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss! Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray. Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy].* (Verses 83-89)

Nothing in Abraham's prayer concerns any aspect of the comforts and pleasures of this world, not even physical health. It looks to higher aspects, motivated by pure feelings. It is a prayer made by a heart which has true knowledge of God and, as a result, attributes little value to everything else. He has known God's grace and prays for more of it, and he entertains hopes and fears in accordance with his experience.

"My Lord! Grant me sound judgement." (Verse 83) Grant me the wisdom by which I recognize the truth and distinguish true from false values so that I will continue to follow the right course. *"And join me with the righteous."* (Verse 83) This is said by Abraham, the noble prophet whose devotion is exemplary. What self-effacing humility! What concern about falling short of what is expected, and what fear of a change of heart! How keen he is to just be among the righteous! He feels that he can only achieve this if God guides him to do the righteous deeds that will bring him into such ranks.

"And grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations." (Verse 84) This is a supplication that hopes for extension in later generations, not through offspring, but through faith. What Abraham prays for is that he should have in later generations a true advocate who calls on people to follow the path of truth, bringing people back to the pure faith which he himself advocated. This may be the same prayer quoted elsewhere in the Qur'ān as it speaks of his building of the Ka`bah with his son Ishmael. They both prayed: *"'Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise."* (2: 127-129) God answered his prayer and gave him that advocate of the truth, sending those

people a Messenger to teach them the true faith and to purify them. Such an answer to Abraham's prayer came several thousand years later, which is a very long time in people's reckoning, but a time that is nonetheless appropriate in God's judgement.

"*Place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss!*" (Verse 85) Having already prayed that he should join the ranks of the righteous, through guidance to do what is good, now Abraham prays to be one of those who will be admitted to the garden of bliss which is inherited only by God's righteous servants.

"*Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray.*" (Verse 86) He prays for his own and God's forgiveness of his father despite all the harsh treatment and serious threats he had received from him. He had promised his father that he would pray for his forgiveness and he certainly fulfilled his promise. Later, the Qur'ān makes clear that it is not permissible for a believer to pray for the forgiveness of anyone who associates partners with God, even though that person might be a close relative. The Qur'ān also clarifies that: "*Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him.*" (9: 114) Abraham then realized that the true relation that should be observed is not that of blood; rather it is one of faith. This is an important aspect of correct Islamic education. The first bond that gives rise to any relation between two people is that of faith: if it is severed, then all relations are of little significance.

"*Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy].*" (Verses 87-89) We appreciate the extent of Abraham's feeling about the hardships of the Day of Resurrection from his prayer not to be then disgraced. We also feel his humility before his Lord and his fear that he might have fallen short of what was expected of him. We also realize how profoundly he felt the nature of that great Day from his description of it: "*the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy].*" (Verses 88-89) He also realizes that the only value recognized on that Day is a sincerity which makes one's heart purely devoted to God, allowing no consideration or personal desire to detract from such devotion. This is the type of sound heart that is worthy of proper value. "*The Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit.*" (Verse 88) Indeed, no other quality, property or consideration is of any benefit, because all are of a temporary nature and will inevitably come to an end. They may be coveted by people who try hard to possess such things in this life, but they are of no value in the ultimate reckoning.

A Question That Needs No Answer

We then have in the present passage a scene of the Day of Judgement, which was feared by Abraham. It is so vivid that he almost sees it with his own eyes as he addresses his humble prayer to God:

> *Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing; whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error. It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together. And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend. Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (Verses 90-102)*

The scene starts with an image of heaven being brought near, so as to be within sight of the God-fearing; those who actually remained apprehensive lest they might be made to suffer God's punishment. The fire of hell is also brought into full view of those who erred; those who strayed away from the right path and denied the Day of Judgement. As they stand within sight of hell, listening to stern rebukes for their bad deeds before they are thrown into hell, they will be first asked about the deities they used to worship. The question that will be put to them is: "*Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God?*" (Verses 9293) Where are they? "*Can they help you or even help themselves?*" (Verse 93) No answer is heard from them. Indeed none is expected. It is only a question given by way of rebuke. Hence: "*They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together.*" (Verses 9495) The very word used here, *kubkibū*, translated as 'hurled into', suggests that they fall into it, one on top of another, with much noise as a result. It is the same as when a landslide occurs, immediately followed by further ones. These people who were lost in error are accompanied in hell with "Iblīs' *hosts, all together.*" Indeed they are all part of Iblīs's hosts.

We are then made to listen to them as they speak in hell, saying to the false deities and the idols they worshipped: "*By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds,*" (Verses 97-98), worshipping you, alongside or instead of God, as if you were equal to Him. They say it now when it is too late. They put the blame on those who led them into error and prevented them from listening to divine guidance. They now wake up to the realization that it is all too late and that apportioning blame will benefit them nothing: "*And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend.*" (Verses 100-101) Neither deity nor friend will be of any avail to us now. But then they think that if there were a possibility of returning to life, they could still mend their erring ways: "*Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that*

we could be believers." (Verse 102) This is nothing more than wishful thinking. There can be no return. They are already present on Judgement Day.

This is followed by the *sūrah's* standard comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 103-104) This comment is repeated in the *sūrah* every time the fate of any community that opposed God's messengers is shown, whether it be the `Ād, the Thamūd or Lot's people, and it also follows every sign given to any group who denied God and His messengers. The scene from the Day of Judgement that we have been discussing is shown here in place of a scene of punishment in this world. It shows the end faced by Abraham's people, and indeed the ultimate end of all idolatry. Hence, it delivers the same lesson in every historical account. We should remember that scenes of the Day of Judgement are shown in the Qur'ān as if they are taking place in front of our eyes so as to touch our hearts and souls in the same way as they are touched when reflecting on the fate of past communities.

4
Judgement Belongs to God

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. (105)

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ نُوحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? (106)

إِنِّى لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٠٧﴾

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (107)

فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٠٨﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (108)

وَمَآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنْ أَجْرِىَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (109)

فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١١٠﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me.' (110)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَنُؤْمِنُ لَكَ وَٱتَّبَعَكَ ٱلْأَرْذَلُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?' (111)

قَالَ وَمَا عِلْمِى بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Said he: 'What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? (112)

إِنْ حِسَابُهُمْ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّى ۖ لَوْ تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. (113)

وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِطَارِدِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

I am not one to drive away the believers. (114)

I am only a plain warner.' (115)

إِنۡ أَنَا۠ إِلَّا نَذِيرٞ مُّبِينٞ ١١٥

Said they: 'Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death.' (116)

قَالُواْ لَئِن لَّمۡ تَنتَهِ يَٰنُوحُ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمَرۡجُومِينَ ١١٦

He prayed: 'My Lord! My people have denied me. (117)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنَّ قَوۡمِي كَذَّبُونِ ١١٧

So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me.' (118)

فَٱفۡتَحۡ بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنَهُمۡ فَتۡحٗا وَنَجِّنِي وَمَن مَّعِيَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١١٨

So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, (119)

فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡفُلۡكِ ٱلۡمَشۡحُونِ ١١٩

and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown. (120)

ثُمَّ أَغۡرَقۡنَا بَعۡدُ ٱلۡبَاقِينَ ١٢٠

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (121)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ١٢١

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (122)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٢٢

Overview

The *sūrah* as we have seen recounts Abraham's story after it had given a more detailed one of Moses, thus going back in history. Now it goes further back to tell us about Noah and his people. The chronological order is not important here because the focus is on the ultimate end of idolatry, on the end of denials of the divine message.

Like the accounts of Moses and Abraham, Noah's story is referred to in several *sūrahs.* It was given, in brief, in *sūrah 7,* The Heights, within the context of a historical account of God's messengers and their messages. There it followed Adam's fall from

heaven, concentrating on Noah's advocacy of God's oneness and his warning to his people that they were risking grievous suffering. They accused him of being deep in error, expressing their amazement that God should send them a human messenger. Their punishment by drowning is mentioned but without going into any detail.

In *Sūrah 10,* Jonah, the story is given in brief, concentrating on the end of his mission when he challenged his people, yet they still denied him. He was saved with those who followed him, while the others were drowned.

Sūrah 11, Hūd, provides many more details about the flood, the ark and what happened after the flood. It mentions, for example, Noah's prayer for his son who was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. In this *sūrah* we are also given an account of the sort of debate his people had with him about God's oneness.

In *Sūrah* 23, The Believers, Noah's account concentrates on his call to people to worship God alone, and their objection to the fact that he is a mere mortal like them. They accuse him of wanting to press his favoured position. They claim that God could have sent angels, and they accuse Noah of madness. He turns to God, appealing for support. Then follows a very brief reference to the ark and the flood.

In many instances, like the present *sūrah,* Noah's story is given together with stories of the `Ād, Thamūd, Lot's people and the Madyan. The prominent features of the account given here are Noah's call on his people to fear God and his declaration that he expects nothing by way of reward. Also important is his refusal to expel the poor who believe in God at the request of those who consider themselves noble. This was also demanded of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the elders of the Quraysh in Makkah. We are also told of Noah's appeal to God to judge between him and his community, and God's response which resulted in the drowning of the unbelievers.

When Believers are the Lowest in Society

"The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers." (Verse 105) This is the end of the story, but it is given at the beginning so as to add extra emphasis, before moving on to give the details of the story.

The fact is that Noah's people denied him only, but they are described here as denying God's messengers, because the message is one, summed up in the call to acknowledge God's oneness and to worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. Therefore, whoever rejects it denies all God's messengers as they advocated one and the same message. The Qur'ān stresses this fact in several places and in different forms, because it is a basic principle of the Islamic faith. It, thus, brings the divine faith throughout human history under one umbrella, dividing mankind

throughout all generations into two groups: believers and unbelievers. A Muslim considers that the community of believers in every divine religion, from the beginning of human life to the advent of the final divine message of Islam, as his own community. A believer accepts all God's messengers, believes in their messages and looks upon them all with the highest respect, because they all preached the same message of God's oneness.

From a Muslim's perspective, mankind are not divided into races, colours and nationalities. They are divided into the people of the truth and the people of falsehood. His own stand is with the people of the truth. This gives Muslims one criterion that applies to all history. His values are much higher than bonds of race, colour, language, country and present or past kinship. His values are embodied into the bond of faith which is the basis of mankind's accountability:

> *The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. So, fear God and pay heed to me.'* (Verses 105-110)

Such was Noah's message which his people denied, despite his being their brother. Such brotherhood should have ensured a peaceful relationship, leading to their belief in him and his message. But his people had no time for this bond of brotherhood, and they did not soften to their brother's call when he said to them: "*Will you have no fear of God?*" (Verse 106) Will you not worry about the end to which your attitudes and actions lead you?

This directive and reminder to fear God is consistent in this *sūrah.* We saw it with Pharaoh and his people as God informed Moses of his assignment. Then every prophet that succeeded Noah said the same thing to his community: "*I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust.*" (Verse 107) He would not cheat, defraud or act dishonestly. He would not add to, or withhold anything from what he was required to deliver to his people: "*So, fear God and pay heed to me.*" (Verse 108) In this case, Noah again reminds his people to fear God, giving it a more express definition this time. He appeals to their consciences to obey him as he calls on them to surrender themselves to God.

He then reassures them that he was neither looking for any worldly gain nor seeking any wage in return for advocating the divine message and guiding them to their Lord. He seeks only God's reward, because it was He who gave him his message. This assurance of seeking no gain or wage seems to have always been necessary for sincere advocacy of faith. It is, thus, distinguished from the familiar

pattern of religion as exploited by clerics and religious orders for personal gain and enrichment.

Now that he has reassured them of having no personal ambition, Noah again tells them to fear God, reminding them that they should obey him: "*So, fear God and pay heed to me.*" (Verse 110) Their response, a singular objection, was the same given to all messengers: "*They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?*" (Verse 111)

What they meant was that it was only the poor who followed him, because the poor are normally the first to accept divine messages and messengers. They are quick to believe in God and submit themselves to Him, because they are not deterred by any hollow status or fear of losing any interest or position as a result. The chiefs and nobles of society often fear for their interests that are based on false considerations, as also myths and legends that are given religious status. Moreover, they are unwilling to accept complete equality with the masses as a result of believing in God's oneness. Under such a belief system only faith and good action are given an appropriately high value, with the net result that some people rise and others fall by the single standard of faith that is complemented by good action.

Noah's reply, therefore, establishes true values, defining the mission of God's messenger and leaves judgement on people to God who knows best their intentions, thoughts and actions:

> *Said he: What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. I am not one to drive away the believers. I am only a plain warner.* (Verses 112-115)

The nobility always speak in a derogative manner about the poor. They say that their habits and values are not acceptable to those who are in the higher echelons of society. They have nothing of their refinements. Noah tells them that he does not ask of people anything other than that they believe in God. Their actions are left to God to evaluate and to determine their appropriate reward. His, God's, is the right evaluation. Noah then defines his own mission: "*I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 115)

With such clear argument and plain logic, Noah's people were silenced. They had no meaningful reply to offer. Hence, they resorted to the same method to which tyranny resorts every time it finds itself cornered; they threatened him with brute force: "*Said they: Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death.*" (Verse 116) Thus tyranny reveals its ghastly and cruel face.

Noah realized that their hardened hearts would not soften. Therefore, he turned to the One source of support that is always available to believers, never failing them:

"He prayed: My Lord! My people have denied me. So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me." (Verses 117-118) His Lord certainly knew that his people had denied him and accused him of lying, but Noah needed to address his complaint to God, appealing to Him for justice. Thus, he puts the matter in His hands: *"Judge decisively between me and them."* (Verse 118) Such decisive judgement will put an end to tyranny and injustice: *"And save me and those of the believers who are with me."* (Verse 118)

God certainly responded to His messenger's plea for help: *"So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown."* (Verses 119-120) Thus, the end of this very early battle in human history between faith and unfaith is described in a very quick sequence of words, which also tell of the outcome of every subsequent battle between the two sides in human history.

We then have the *sūrah's* now familiar comment that follows every one of God Almighty's signs: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 121-122)

5
How the Mighty Fall

The `Ād, too, denied God's messengers. (123)	كَذَّبَت عَادٌ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٢٣﴾
Their brother Hūd said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (124)	إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ هُودٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٢٤﴾
I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (125)	إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٢٥﴾
So, fear God and pay heed to me. (126)	فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٢٦﴾
No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (127)	وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٢٧﴾
'Do you build a landmark on every high place, in a vain endeavour, (128)	أَتَبۡنُونَ بِكُلِّ رِيعٍ ءَايَةً تَعۡبَثُونَ ﴿١٢٨﴾
and make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal? (129)	وَتَتَّخِذُونَ مَصَانِعَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَخۡلُدُونَ ﴿١٢٩﴾
When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants. (130)	وَإِذَا بَطَشۡتُم بَطَشۡتُمۡ جَبَّارِينَ ﴿١٣٠﴾
So, fear God and pay heed to me. (131)	فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٣١﴾
Fear Him who has provided you with all that you know. (132)	وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَمَدَّكُم بِمَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٣٢﴾
He has provided you with cattle and children, (133)	أَمَدَّكُم بِأَنۡعَٰمٖ وَبَنِينَ ﴿١٣٣﴾

and gardens and springs. (134)	وَجَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٣٤﴾
Indeed, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' (135)	إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ﴿١٣٥﴾
They answered: 'It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition. (136)	قَالُواْ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيۡنَآ أَوَعَظۡتَ أَمۡ لَمۡ تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلۡوَٰعِظِينَ ﴿١٣٦﴾
This is none but the practice of the ancients. (137)	إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا خُلُقُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣٧﴾
Never are we going to be punished.' (138)	وَمَا نَحۡنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ ﴿١٣٨﴾
Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (139)	فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَهۡلَكۡنَٰهُمۡۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٣٩﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (140)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٤٠﴾

Power and a Sense of Immortality

The Prophet Hūd's people lived in al-Aĥqāf, an area of extensive sand dunes not far from Ĥadramowt and in the direction of Yemen. They lived sometime after Noah, and were one of the communities that deviated from the right way sometime after the flood that punished Noah's people.

Hūd's story was told in more detail in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, and *Sūrah 11, Hūd.* It is also mentioned in .*Sūrah* 23, The Believers, without mentioning the names of Had or his community. The story here is summed up between Hūd's address to his community that encouraged them to believe in God's oneness and the end they faced as God's punishment befell them.

The story of Had and his people has the same beginning as Noah's story:

> *The `Ād, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Hid said to them: Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 123-127)

It is the same message given by every messenger of God: it is a call to believe in God alone and to fear Him and obey His messenger. This is coupled with a declaration disclaiming any interest in worldly luxuries or position the people may have to offer. This puts things in the right perspective. The messenger seeks nothing from them, but instead he looks to God for his reward.

Had follows this declaration by examining their own particular conditions and behaviour. He criticizes the fact that they build lofty buildings to demonstrate their ability, taking pride in their wealth. He denounces their arrogance which results from their material power and the resources that enable them to use different forces and means, in total disregard of God, oblivious to the fact of their accountability to Him: *"Do you build a landmark on every high place, in a vain endeavour, and make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verses 128-129)

It seems that they used to build on high places so as to make such structures appear from a distance as grand landmarks. They did so to emphasize their superiority and great ability. Hence the Qur'ān describes it as a *vain endeavour'*. Had it been intended as a landmark or a sign to show direction, it would not have been described as such. The Qur'ānic statement, then, implies the need to direct one's resources and abilities to what is of benefit, not merely to show off and demonstrate abilities and wealth. It also appears that the people of `Ād were well advanced in industry, using machinery to carve positions for their palaces which they built on mountains. This is indicated in Hūd's saying to them: *"and [you] make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verse 129) It even occurred to them that such strong structures built with the use of heavy machinery could spare their lives, and protect them from severe atmospheric conditions as also from enemy attack.

They have further practices that are strongly criticized by Had: *"When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants."* (Verse 130) They were mighty, hard, tyrannical and would deal with others using utmost cruelty, like many others who rely on material power.

Had, therefore, reminds them that they must fear God and obey His messenger. This would be sure to redress their cruelty and put a stop to their arrogance: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 131) He further reminds them of God's grace, as it is He who has favoured them with His blessings which they use arrogantly as also to oppress others. They should have remembered God's favours and given thanks for them. They should also bear in mind that the One who has granted them such

favours can easily take them back, or punish them for putting His favours to wrong use: *"Fear Him who has provided you with all that you know. He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs. Indeed, 1 fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day."* (Verses 132-135)

Hūd's reminder mentions first the One who granted them such blessings before enumerating them. He *"has provided you with all that you know."* It is all a gift for you, and you know it well as you benefit by it in your lives. He then gives further details: *"He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs."* (Verses 133-134)

These were the best favours that they could have enjoyed during that period of time. They are indeed a great favour at any time. He then warns them against punishment that may befall them on an awesome day. His warning expresses his fear for their end, because he is one of them, their brother, and he wants to spare them the hardship of that day which is certain to come.

But his reminders and warnings do not touch their hardened hearts. They stubbornly refuse to mend their ways: *"They answered: It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition."* (Verse 136) This is a derogatory way of speaking, one which expresses their carelessness for whatever he might say. They add a clear indication that they are hardened in their ways, relying totally on what they have inherited from previous generations: *"This is none but the practice of the ancients. Never are we going to be punished."* (Verses 137-138) Their only argument in defence of all the practices Hūd has criticized them for is that they are following earlier generations, towing their line. They then deny the possibility of being punished for following in their ancestors' footsteps: *"Never are we going to be punished."* (Verse 138)

The *sūrah* does not mention here any of the arguments that took place between them and Hūd. It proceeds straight to the end: *"Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them."* (Verse 139) These two short sentences, expressed in the original Arabic text by only two words, *fakadhdhabūhu fa'ahlaknāhum,* spell out the end of the mighty people of `Ād and their great symbols of power. Nothing is left of their luxuries, cattle, children, gardens and springs.

How many a community has followed the same practices as the `Ād people, moving further away from God with every new aspect of civilization they have achieved. They always think that man can be independent of God. They try to produce weapons to destroy others while ensuring their own security. Yet it may be only a day or a night and such a community finds itself subjected to God's punishment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 139-140)

6
A Blatant Challenge to God

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿١٤١﴾

The Thamūd, too, denied God's messengers. (141)

إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمْ أَخُوهُمْ صَٰلِحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٤٢﴾

Their brother Ṣāliĥ said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (142)

إِنِّى لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٤٣﴾

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (143)

فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٤٤﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (144)

وَمَآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۖ إِنْ أَجْرِىَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٤٥﴾

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (145)

أَتُتْرَكُونَ فِى مَا هَٰهُنَآ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, (146)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٤٧﴾

among gardens and springs (147)

وَزُرُوعٍ وَنَخْلٍ طَلْعُهَا هَضِيمٌ ﴿١٤٨﴾

and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? (148)

وَتَنْحِتُونَ مِنَ ٱلْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا فَٰرِهِينَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill. (149)

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (150)	فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٥٠﴾
And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses(151)	وَلَا تُطِيعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَ ٱلۡمُسۡرِفِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾
– who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights.' (152)	ٱلَّذِينَ يُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا يُصۡلِحُونَ ﴿١٥٢﴾
They said: 'You are but one who has been bewitched. (153)	قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسَحَّرِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾
You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth.' (154)	مَآ أَنتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُنَا فَأۡتِ بِـَٔايَةٍ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٥٤﴾
He said: 'Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. (155)	قَالَ هَٰذِهِۦ نَاقَةٞ لَّهَا شِرۡبٞ وَلَكُمۡ شِرۡبُ يَوۡمٖ مَّعۡلُومٖ ﴿١٥٥﴾
Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' (156)	وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوٓءٖ فَيَأۡخُذَكُمۡ عَذَابُ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ﴿١٥٦﴾
But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful. (157)	فَعَقَرُوهَا فَأَصۡبَحُواْ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿١٥٧﴾
So the suffering befell them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (158)	فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٥٨﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (159)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Warnings Unheeded

The same call is repeated by every messenger. The *sūrah* deliberately uses the same words as it reports what each messenger said to his people. Thus it stresses the unity of the message in its basis and essence: namely, belief in God's oneness, fearing Him and obeying His messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds what was special in the Thamūd's case. They used to inhabit an area known as al-Ĥijr, in north Arabia, between the Ĥijāz and Syria. The Prophet and his companions passed through this area on their way to Tabūk, seeing the ruined city for themselves. In this account of their history we see their brother, Ṣāliĥ, reminding them of the blessings God has favoured them with and warning them against their being withdrawn from them. He also warns them of the impending reckoning and accountability: *"Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, among gardens and springs and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill."* (Verses 146-149)

They enjoy such luxury as Ṣāliĥ describes here, but they pay no attention to it and how it came about. Nor do they express any gratitude to the One who has blessed them with it. Hence, their brother describes this in full to awaken their hearts so that they will appreciate it and fear its withdrawal. What he says to them alerts slumbering minds: *"Will you be left secure in the midst of what you have here?"* (Verse 146) Do you think that you will be left to enjoy this luxury you have been blessed with? Such luxury is given a further air of splendour as it is left unspecified. Do you, then, feel secure that it can never be terminated or withdrawn? Will you be left in such gardens, springs, plantations and palm trees that give you dates so ripe that are very easy to digest? Will you be left in these homes you skilfully carve out in rocky mountains, giving them an extra air of splendour?

Having touched their hearts with this reminder, Ṣāliĥ calls on them to fear God, remain obedient and separate themselves from those who pay no heed to what is right and indulge instead in corruption: "*So, fear God and pay heed to me. And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses – who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights."* (Verses 150-152)

His words, however, do not touch their hardened hearts, and they pay no attention to him: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched. You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth."* (Verses 153-154) They first describe him as one bewitched and, as such, one who does not know what he is talking about. It is as though only a madman will call on his people to worship God alone.

"*You are only a human being like us."* (Verse 154) Whenever a messenger of God addressed them, people were always troubled by this point. They always had a flawed concept of what a messenger should be like. They could not understand

God's wisdom of choosing ordinary people as His messengers, nor could they appreciate the honour God grants to mankind by choosing His messengers from among themselves, making them the leaders that receive light and guidance from Him. They felt that a messenger of God should be of a different type of creation, since he brings them information from on high, and tells them of the realm that lies beyond their perception. The fact is that humanity is incapable of appreciating that God so honoured such a man, giving him the ability to be in direct contact with the Supreme Society while still on earth. A man like others, going about his life in a normal way: eating, drinking, sleeping, marrying, walking about the streets and market places, and experiencing all the desires and feelings that occur to everyone else.

Across all generations people demanded from each messenger a miracle to prove that he was truly sent by God: "*Bring us a sign if you are a man of truth.*" (Verse 154) Thus, the Thamūd demanded a miracle and God responded to His servant, Ṣāliĥ, giving him a sign in the form of a she-camel. We will not try to give details of its physical appearance, as have some commentators on the Qur'ān, because we have no authentic reliable source giving such a description. Instead, we will only say that she was a miracle, just as the Thamūd had asked for: "*He said: Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.*" (Verses 155-156)

Thus, Ṣāliĥ produced the she-camel making it a condition that the water where they took their cattle to drink should be divided between them, leaving it all for the she-camel one day and taking whatever they wanted from it on the following day. They would not trespass her rights on her day, and she would not come near them on their day. Thus, her days and her drinking were separate from theirs. He warned them against doing her any harm, for that would ensure that a mighty suffering would befall them.

What did this miraculous sign do to the stubborn and arrogant Thamūd? It did nothing to inspire their hardened hearts to accept the true faith. Nor did it give light to their souls living in darkness. The challenge the camel represented was there for them to meet, but they did not care. Nor did they even fulfil their pledges: "*But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful.*" (Verse 157) The ones who actually slew her were those who had spread corruption in the land.

Ṣāliĥ had given them clear warnings, delivering these very seriously, but they feared nothing. Hence, the offence was shared by them all, as also the punishment. They regretted their crime, but such regret was too late. Hence, "*So the suffering befell them.*" (Verse 158) No details are given of the punishment in order to give an impression of the speed of events.

Then the *sūrah* concludes this passage with its usual comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 158-159)

7
Perversion Leading to Ruin

كَذَّبَت قَوۡمُ لُوطٍ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

The people of Lot, too, denied God's messengers. (160)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ لُوطٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٦١﴾

Their brother Lot said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (161)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ﴿١٦٢﴾

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (162)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٦٣﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (163)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦٤﴾

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (164)

أَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلذُّكۡرَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦٥﴾

Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, (165)

وَتَذَرُونَ مَا خَلَقَ لَكُمۡ رَبُّكُم مِّنۡ أَزۡوَٰجِكُمۡۚ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٌ عَادُونَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.'(166)

قَالُواْ لَئِن لَّمۡ تَنتَهِ يَٰلُوطُ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمُخۡرَجِينَ ﴿١٦٧﴾

Said they: 'Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled.' (167)

قَالَ إِنِّي لِعَمَلِكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡقَالِينَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

He said: 'I am one who utterly abhors

your doings. (168)	رَبِّ نَجِّنِي وَأَهۡلِي مِمَّا يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾
My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do.' (169)	فَنَجَّيۡنَٰهُ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿١٧٠﴾
So We saved him and all his family (170)	إِلَّا عَجُوزٗا فِي ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٧١﴾
except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind. (171)	ثُمَّ دَمَّرۡنَا ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ﴿١٧٢﴾
Then We utterly destroyed the others, (172)	وَأَمۡطَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم مَّطَرٗاۖ فَسَآءَ مَطَرُ ٱلۡمُنذَرِينَ ﴿١٧٣﴾
and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]. (173)	إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٧٤﴾
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (174)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٧٥﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (175)	

Arrogant Perverts

The story of the Prophet Lot and his people is mentioned at this juncture, although from a historical point of view it should link up with Abraham's story. But the historical sequence is not of importance in this *sūrah* which concentrates on the unity of the divine message, the method followed by all prophets and the fate of the communities addressed by these messages. Hence, the saving of the believers is highlighted alongside the doom suffered by those who opposed God's messengers, denying their messages.

Lot begins with his people in the same way as Noah, Hūd and Ṣāliĥ, denouncing their carelessness, trying to awaken their consciences, and reminding them that they need to be God-fearing. He calls on them to believe in God and to obey him, assuring them that he will not charge them anything for guiding them to the right path. He

follows this with a clear denunciation of their wicked perversion which made them a community apart in human history:

> *Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.* (Verses 165-166)

Lot's people, who inhabited several villages in the Jordan Valley, were known for their sinful practice of homosexuality, which reflects a wicked perversion of human nature. God has created human males and females, making each sex naturally inclined to the other in order for human life to progress through procreation. This mutual inclination is, then, part of the universal law that ensures balance and harmony among all creatures in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, and makes them cooperate in the fulfilment of God's will that governs the entire universe. When a man has sex with another man, their practice neither fulfils any objective nor serves the nature of the universe and its laws. It is indeed singular that anyone should find pleasure in such a practice. The pleasure a man finds with a woman is indeed the means through which human nature fulfils God's will. Thus, the deviation from natural law is clear in Lot's people's actions. Hence, it was inevitable that they should refrain from their deviation or be destroyed.

Their destruction was due to the fact that they had opted out of the normal way of life and the right line of human nature. They abandoned the very purpose of their existence, which is the preservation of human life through marriage and procreation.

When Lot called on them to abandon their perversion, denouncing their neglect of the spouses God created for them and their aggression against human nature, their response clearly showed that they were not ready to return to the path that ensured the continuity of human life: "*Said they: Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled.*" (Verse 167)

Lot did not belong to them by lineage. He had accompanied his uncle, Abraham, when the latter withdrew from his people and migrated. Abraham, Lot and the small number of people who believed with them crossed the Jordan. He then lived among those people until God chose him as His messenger, requiring him to call on people to return to the right path. Their response was a threat that they would drive him out of their towns unless he abandoned his call.

When things reached this point and the threat became serious, Lot spoke out loud, making it clear that he loathed their disgusting perversion: "*He said: I am one who utterly abhors your doings.*" (Verse 168) He used words that vividly describe his repugnance of their practices, before adding a prayer to God to save him and his family from such evil: "*My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do.*" (Verse 169)

He did not do what they did, but by his upright nature he felt it to be a way of life leading to ruin. Since he was in their midst he prayed that God would save him and his family from what was bound to come about as a result of such action.

God responded to his prayer: *"So We saved him and all his family except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind."* (Verses 170-171) This old woman was his wife as mentioned in other *sūrahs.* She was a terrible woman who helped others in their wickedness.

"Then We utterly destroyed the others, and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]." (Verses 172-173) It is reported that their villages were sunk into the ground and covered with water. One of these was Sodom, the ruins of which are thought to be under the Dead Sea in Jordan. Some geologists confirm that the Dead Sea covers towns that were fully populated at one time. Some archaeologists have discovered the remains of a fort close to the Dead Sea, as well as an alter close to it where offerings were made. However, the Qur'ān gives us Lot's story and whatever the Qur'ān states is the truth telling exactly what happened. Their end is followed by the usual comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 174-175)

8
Fair Dealings for All

كَذَّبَ أَصۡحَٰبُ لۡـَٔيۡكَةِ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan], too, denied God's messengers. (176)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

Their brother Shu`ayb said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? (177)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ﴿١٧٨﴾

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (178)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٧٩﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (179)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (180)

۞ أَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡكَيۡلَ وَلَا تَكُونُواْ مِنَ ٱلۡمُخۡسِرِينَ ﴿١٨١﴾

Give full measure; and be not of those who give others less [than their due]; (181)

وَزِنُواْ بِٱلۡقِسۡطَاسِ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمِ ﴿١٨٢﴾

and weigh with even scales; (182)

وَلَا تَبۡخَسُواْ ٱلنَّاسَ أَشۡيَآءَهُمۡ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption; (183)

وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكُمۡ وَٱلۡجِبِلَّةَ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٨٤﴾

and fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old.' (184)

They said: 'You are but one who has been bewitched. (185)	قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسَحَّرِينَ ١٨٥
You are only a human being like us! And, indeed, we believe that you are lying. (186)	وَمَآ أَنتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُنَا وَإِن نَّظُنُّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ١٨٦
Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth.' (187)	فَأَسۡقِطۡ عَلَيۡنَا كِسَفٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ١٨٧
Answered he: 'My Lord knows fully well all that you do.' (188)	قَالَ رَبِّيٓ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ ١٨٨
But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was truly the suffering of an awesome day. (189)	فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَهُمۡ عَذَابُ يَوۡمِ ٱلظُّلَّةِۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٍ ١٨٩
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (190)	إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ١٩٠
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (191)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٩١

Widespread Corruption

This passage tells the story of the Prophet Shu`ayb which, from a historical point of view, comes before that of Moses, but it is told here for the lessons involved in all the stories given in this *sūrah.* The dwellers of the 'wooded dales' were most probably the people of Madyan. It seems that Madyan was close to this wooded land, thick with trees, as the Qur'ānic description implies. Madyan lies close to the Gulf of `Aqaba, in the area between the Ĥijāz province of Saudi Arabia and Palestine.

Shu`ayb began in the same way as other prophets calling on people, explaining to them the basic essentials of faith, and making it clear that he sought no gain in return for his advocacy. He then spoke to them about the ills that plagued their own society:

"Give full measure, and be not of those who give others less [than their duel; and weigh with even scales; and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption." (Verses 181-183)

As clearly mentioned in *Sūrahs 7* and 11, The Heights and Hūd respectively, they used to give people short measure whenever they weighed things out for them. They also used their power to take more than what was rightly theirs, while they would give people less than what was due to them. They would buy things for less than their fair price, but would sell for higher prices. It appears that they lived close to the caravan trade routes, and this enabled them to dictate their terms. The messenger God sent them counselled them to pursue fairness in all such dealings. He preached the true faith which inevitably requires good treatment of others, and which cannot overlook injustice in dealings and interactions between people.

Shu`ayb then appealed to their sense of the fear of God as he reminded them of the Creator who brought them into existence as He did with all past generations: *"Fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old."* (Verse 184)

Their response was absurd. They accused him of being bewitched, speaking all sorts of nonsense without knowing what he said: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched."* (Verse 185) They also questioned the fact that he was God's messenger, since he was a man of their own kind. To them, a messenger of God should be different. Hence, they accused him of telling lies: *"You are only a human being like us! And, indeed, we believe that you are lying."* (Verse 186) They further challenged him to put his warnings into effect, bringing God's punishment upon them, demanding that he should cause the sky to fall upon them: *"Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 187)

Such a challenge could only be made by careless people who think little of the consequences. It is akin to the challenge the idolaters in Makkah put to the Prophet when he called on them to believe. But Shu`ayb chose not to answer their thoughtless challenge. He limited his reply to simply saying: *"My Lord knows fully well all that you do."* (Verse 188)

The *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us about the end they met, but without adding any detail: *"But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was indeed the suffering of an awesome day."* (Verse 189)

It is reported that they first suffered very hot weather that made breathing difficult and which weighed heavily on their lungs. Then they saw a cloud, which they welcomed and sought the shade it provided, feeling the coolness it initially gave them. But soon a great thunderbolt destroyed them all. This was the 'day of the darkening cloud', as the cloud was its most distinctive mark.

This is followed by the same conclusion given in the *sūrah* after each of the stories

of past communities it mentions: "*Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.*" (Verses 190-191)

9
The Qur'ān: A Definitive Description

Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. (192)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَتَنزِيلُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٩٢﴾

The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down (193)

نَزَلَ بِهِ ٱلرُّوحُ ٱلْأَمِينُ ﴿١٩٣﴾

into your heart – so that you may give warning, (194)

عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُنذِرِينَ ﴿١٩٤﴾

in the clear Arabic tongue. (195)

بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩٥﴾

It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. (196)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَفِى زُبُرِ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٩٦﴾

Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]? (197)

أَوَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُمْ ءَايَةً أَن يَعْلَمَهُۥ عُلَمَٰٓؤُا۟ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿١٩٧﴾

Had We revealed it to any non- Arab, (198)

وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَٰهُ عَلَىٰ بَعْضِ ٱلْأَعْجَمِينَ ﴿١٩٨﴾

and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it. (199)

فَقَرَأَهُۥ عَلَيْهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٩٩﴾

Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: (200)

كَذَٰلِكَ سَلَكْنَٰهُ فِى قُلُوبِ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٠٠﴾

لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦ حَتَّىٰ يَرَوُاْ ٱلۡعَذَابَ ٱلۡأَلِيمَ ٢٠١

فَيَأۡتِيَهُم بَغۡتَةٗ وَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ٢٠٢

فَيَقُولُواْ هَلۡ نَحۡنُ مُنظَرُونَ ٢٠٣

أَفَبِعَذَابِنَا يَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَ ٢٠٤

أَفَرَءَيۡتَ إِن مَّتَّعۡنَٰهُمۡ سِنِينَ ٢٠٥

ثُمَّ جَآءَهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يُوعَدُونَ ٢٠٦

مَآ أَغۡنَىٰ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يُمَتَّعُونَ ٢٠٧

وَمَآ أَهۡلَكۡنَا مِن قَرۡيَةٍ إِلَّا لَهَا مُنذِرُونَ ٢٠٨

ذِكۡرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ٢٠٩

وَمَا تَنَزَّلَتۡ بِهِ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ ٢١٠

وَمَا يَنۢبَغِي لَهُمۡ وَمَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ ٢١١

إِنَّهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلسَّمۡعِ لَمَعۡزُولُونَ ٢١٢

فَلَا تَدۡعُ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُعَذَّبِينَ ٢١٣

they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. (201)

It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it. (202)

And then they will say: 'Could we have a respite?' (203)

Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? (204)

But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, (205)

and then the promised [punishment] befalls them – (206)

of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment? (207)

Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, (208)

and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone. (209)

No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān] (210)

It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. (211)

Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it. (212)

Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself

among those suffering punishment. (213)

وَأَنذِرۡ عَشِيرَتَكَ ٱلۡأَقۡرَبِينَ ٢١٤

And warn your nearest kindred, (214)

وَٱخۡفِضۡ جَنَاحَكَ لِمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٢١٥

and spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you. (215)

فَإِنۡ عَصَوۡكَ فَقُلۡ إِنِّي بَرِيٓءٞ مِّمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٢١٦

But if they disobey you, say: 'I am not accountable for what you do.' (216)

وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَى ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ٢١٧

Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate (217)

ٱلَّذِي يَرَىٰكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ٢١٨

who sees you when you stand, (218)

وَتَقَلُّبَكَ فِي ٱلسَّٰجِدِينَ ٢١٩

and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. (219)

إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٢٢٠

It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (220)

هَلۡ أُنَبِّئُكُمۡ عَلَىٰ مَن تَنَزَّلُ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ ٢٢١

Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the satans descend? (221)

تَنَزَّلُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ أَفَّاكٍ أَثِيمٖ ٢٢٢

They descend upon every lying sinner. (222)

يُلۡقُونَ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَأَكۡثَرُهُمۡ كَٰذِبُونَ ٢٢٣ وَٱلشُّعَرَآءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ ٱلۡغَاوُۥنَ ٢٢٤

They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars. (223)

As for the poets, only those who are lost in error follow them. (224)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّهُمۡ فِي كُلِّ وَادٖ يَهِيمُونَ ٢٢٥

Are you not aware that they roam confusedly through all valleys, (225)

and that they say what they do not do?

(226) *Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged. Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take.* (227)	وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٢٦﴾ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَذَكَرُواْ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَٱنتَصَرُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَا ظُلِمُواْۗ وَسَيَعۡلَمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓاْ أَيَّ مُنقَلَبٖ يَنقَلِبُونَ ﴿٢٢٧﴾

Overview

Thus the stories telling us about God's messengers and the messages they were required to deliver, the denial of the truth by different communities, the challenges they made and the punishments meted out to them come to an end. They had begun after a short introduction at the beginning of the *sūrah* directly addressing the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his people, the Quraysh: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verses 3-6) Then the *sūrah* embarked on telling those stories, each of which gives an example of a community coming to understand the reality of what they used to deride and ridicule.

When the *sūrah* has concluded the stories, it picks up its main theme outlined in the introduction. Hence, its final comments talk about the Qur'ān, confirming its revelation by God, the Lord of all the worlds. While time has wiped away the history of those ancient communities, the Qur'ān, which was revealed by God, brings it all back, telling it in accurate detail. It also mentions that the learned ones among the Children of Israel were well aware of the Qur'ān and the Messenger to whom it was revealed because he is mentioned in earlier revelations. But the Arab idolaters stubbornly rejected it, despite the clear evidence of its truth, alleging that it is nothing but sorcery or poetry. Had a non-Arabic speaking person been its recipient and had he recited it to them in their own language, they still would not have believed in it. It was not the lack of clear evidence that caused them to deny it; rather, it was their stubborn refusal to see it for what it was. Indeed, it was not something given to the Prophet Muhammad by devils, as was information given to fortune tellers. Nor was it anything akin to poetry. Rather, the Qur'ān followed a clear line which it pursued

without deviation, while poets move in every direction in accordance with their feelings, caprices and reactions.

The Qur'ān was and is a reminder to all unbelievers, given by God who warned them that they must believe if they were to avert punishment. Unless they changed their ways, they would be made to see the reality which they now deride: "*Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take.*" (Verse 227)

Facts of Revelation

> *Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue.* (Verses 192-195)

The trustworthy Spirit was the angel Gabriel, or Jibrīl, who brought the Qur'ān from God and imprinted it in the Prophet's heart. He was certainly trustworthy, keeping intact what was given into his trust. Thus, he gave it directly to the Prophet Muhammad, who understood it fully. Thus, the Prophet became a warner giving people admonition in the clear Arabic tongue, which was the language his people spoke. As they were well aware of the utmost that human beings could say, they recognized as the Prophet recited the Qur'ān to them that it was unlike what humans say despite its being in their own tongue. By its very construction, meanings, method and consistency, it clearly demonstrated that it definitely came from no human source.

This evidence came from within the Qur'ān itself. The *sūrah,* however, also provides further evidence, but this time it is external: *"It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]?"* (Verses 196-197) The description of the Messenger who would receive the Qur'ān from on high, and the fundamentals of the faith he would preach were clearly indicated in the scriptures of ancient peoples. Hence, the learned ones among the Children of Israel were expecting this last message and Messenger. They felt that the time for his appearance was fast approaching and they talked about it among themselves, as reported by Salmān and `Abdullāh ibn Sallām.[2] Reports concerning this are absolutely authentic.

[2] Salmān was the son of a Persian priest who was preparing his son to follow in his footsteps, but he left in search of the truth and met several Christian priests who told him of the Prophet Muhammad's imminent advent. He, therefore, went to Madinah to await his message. `Abdullāh ibn Sallām was a learned rabbi who made sure of the Prophet's identity according to detailed descriptions given in Jewish scriptures. Both, father and son, became Muslims and told of their prior knowledge of the

Those idolaters were knowingly stubborn in their opposition. They did not lack the evidence or the proof. Had a non-Arab come to them and recited the Qur'ān in its superb Arabic style, they would still have refused to believe: *"Had We revealed it to any non-Arab, and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it."* (Verses 198-199) This was meant to comfort the Prophet, presenting to him their stubborn refusal despite the clearest form of evidence. The *sūrah* then states that such denial of the truth, despite its clarity and certainty, was second nature to them. They would not depart from this stance until they suffered God's punishment, which would take them by surprise: *"Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* (Verses 200-202)

Thus the *sūrah* provides a physical image of their unbudging denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān, saying that it has been made to pass through their constitution in denial form. Thus it does not reach their minds and hearts except in the form of something that is denied and rejected. It remains so in their hearts *"until they see the grievous suffering."* But such suffering *"will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* Indeed, some maintained such a stubborn denial until they departed from the face of the earth. This, then, heralded their grievous suffering. For it is at the very moment of facing such suffering that realization is achieved: *"And then they will say: Could we have a respite?"* (Verse 203) Can we have another chance to rectify what has passed? That, however, will never be given.

They hastened God's punishment with their careless ridicule, believing that the comforts they enjoyed would last. Hence, they considered it improbable that they could ever move from a position of favour to one of suffering and punishment. This is a common attitude among those who enjoy a life of comfort and blessing. They rarely, if ever, think that it can all be removed. Hence, the *sūrah* wakens them to this reality, raising before them what their position will be when they suffer the punishment they now hasten: *"Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, and then the promised [punishment] befalls them – of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment?"* (Verses 204-207) The *sūrah* puts the image of hastening punishment to one side, and raises the prospect of the fulfilment of the warnings. We see the years of pleasure dwindling, as though they had never been. They benefit them in no way.

An authentic *ĥadīth,* according to Ibn Kathīr, quotes the Prophet as saying: "An unbeliever is brought forward on the Day of Judgement and he is given a quick dip into the fire. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience anything good or any luxury in your life?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did.' And the person who endured the most miserable life on earth is brought forward and he is

---

Prophet and his message. — Editor's note.

given a quick taste of heaven. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience any misfortune or misery?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did."'[3]

The unbelievers are then put on notice that the warning is a prelude to destruction. It is after all an aspect of God's grace that He does not destroy a community without first sending them a messenger pointing to the signs that should encourage them to accept the faith: *"Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone."* (Verses 208-209)

God took a pledge from all mankind that they would worship Him alone. This is the pledge of nature which makes human nature feel the presence of the One God, unless it grows corrupt and deviates.[4] He placed countless indications in the world around us pointing to the right faith. All these confirm the presence of the One Creator. When people forget the pledge of their own nature, and overlook the pointers to faith, God sends them a warner to remind them of what they have forgotten and puts before their eyes what they have overlooked. Thus, the divine message is meant as a reminder and an act of perfect justice and total mercy: *"Never do We wrong anyone."* (Verse 209) This is true even with the destruction of unbelieving communities. Such destruction is fair requital for deviating from proper guidance.

The *sūrah* has more to say about the Qur'ān making the method of its revelation very clear: *"No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān]. It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it."* (Verses 210-212)

The *sūrah* had already given a clear statement of the source of the Qur'ān: *"Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue."* (Verses 192-195) The *sūrah* then goes on to speak about the unbelievers' denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān from on high and their hastening of their punishment by way of challenging the Prophet. Now the *sūrah* refutes their claims that it is no more than the talk of evil spirits, of the sort fortune-tellers display, claiming that some spirits bring them news of the world beyond as they listen to the angels.

This Qur'ān, which calls people to lead a virtuous life and to have faith, providing them with guidance, could not be given by evil spirits which lead people astray and advocate corruption and disbelief. They cannot initiate it even if they try, because they have been debarred from listening to it as it is revealed by God. The one who brings it down to the Prophet, by God's permission, is the trustworthy Spirit. Hence,

---

[3] Ibn Kathīr mentions this *ĥadīth* preceded by the statement: An authentic *ĥadīth* says...'

[4] See the comments on verse 172, *Sūrah* 7, which speaks in detail about the pledge of human nature, Vol. VI, pp. 218-224.

the evil ones cannot even touch it.

How to Give Warning

At this juncture, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, warning him against associating partners with God, even though he was always far from so doing. Yet the warning is given to him so that he could be more careful. The Prophet is assigned the task of warning his closest kinsmen, and ordered to place his trust in God who takes care of him in all situations:

> *Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment. And warn your nearest kindred, and spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you. But if they disobey you, say: 'I' am not accountable for what you do.' Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.* (Verses 213-220)

It is impossible that God's Messenger should ever invoke anyone other than God, but this situation is assumed here to clarify the point. Therefore, when the Prophet is threatened with punishment should he do so, what chance has anyone else? How could anyone be spared such grievous punishment when there is no special treatment granted to anyone?

Having been given this personal warning, the Prophet is instructed to warn his own relatives so that they may become an example for others. The Prophet's relatives are indeed warned that they will endure grievous suffering should they persist in associating partners with God: "*And warn your nearest kindred.*"

Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate that when this verse was revealed, the Prophet went up the hill of al-Ṣafā [which is close to the Sacred Mosque] and called out to his people to gather for he wanted to tell them something important. "People responded to his call, with some coming themselves and others sending someone to find out what was afoot. The Prophet said to them: 'You clans of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Fihr and Lu'ayy! Should I tell you that a host of armed riders are close by the mountain aiming to launch a raid on you, would you believe me?' They answered in the affirmative. He said: 'I am sent to you as a warner of impending grievous suffering.' Abū Lahab said to him: 'Confound you all day long! Have you called us only to tell us this?' God then revealed the *sūrah* that says: *'Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he.'*" (111: 1)

Muslim relates on `Ā'ishah's authority: "When the verse that says, 'Warn your

nearest kindred,' was revealed, the Prophet stood up and called his relatives, saying: 'Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! [i.e. his own daughter], Şafiyyah bint `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his aunt], you the clan of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his own clan], I can benefit you nothing against God. You can ask me whatever you wish from my own money.

Muslim and al-Tirmidhī relate on Abū Hurayrah's authority that "when this verse was revealed the Prophet called the Quraysh, speaking to them in general and to some by name. He said: 'You people of the Quraysh! Save yourselves from the fire. You people of the Ka (b! Save yourselves from the fire. Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! Save yourself from the fire. By God, I can avail you nothing against God. But you are my kinsfolk and I will be all kindness to you."

These *aĥādīth* and many others show how the Prophet received this order and how he carried it out, giving warning to his kinsfolk, making it clear that he had no power to benefit them. He left them to God to determine their fate in the hereafter. He put them on notice that their relation to him would be of no benefit unless their own actions benefitted them. Such is the clear approach of Islam which allows no intermediation between God and His servants, not even by His last Messenger.

How to Treat Believers

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet how to treat the believers who respond to God's message as a result of his efforts: "*And spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you.*" (Verse 215) Thus the Prophet is instructed to treat the believers gently, and to show his humility and kindness. This instruction is given in a physical, tangible image like a bird lowering its wings in flight but seeking to descend. The Prophet adopted this attitude with believers throughout his life. Indeed, his manners were a practical translation of the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* also tells him how he should treat those who are disobedient, dissociating himself completely from them: "*But if they disobey you, say: I am not accountable for what you do.*" (Verse 216) This order was given in Makkah, before the Prophet was given permission to fight unbelievers.

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet to turn to his Lord with whom he has a permanent relationship of care: "*Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 217-220) Leave them to their disobedience of God's orders, dissociate yourself from their actions and turn to your Lord with full trust, seeking His help in all your affairs. The *sūrah* mentions the two divine attributes frequently mentioned earlier: might and compassion. The Prophet is made to feel his closeness to God as his Lord sees him when he stands up for prayer on his own, and also sees him when he prays with a congregation as they prostrate

themselves to God. He sees him in his solitude and when he is attending to the congregation, organizing them and leading them in prayer. He sees all his movements and is fully aware of his thoughts, listening to his supplications: *"It is He alone who hears all and knows all."* (Verse 220) This sort of address comforted the Prophet, reassured him that God was watching over and looking after him.

Once more in this final passage of the *sūrah,* the Qur'ān is brought into focus. The first comment emphasized that it was a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds, brought to Muhammad through the trusted Spirit, Gabriel. Secondly, it made clear that no evil spirit could deliver it. Now the *sūrah* asserts that such evil ones do not come to a person like Muhammad (peace be upon him), who is honest, truthful and advocates a sound system. They go only to a liar, such as a wicked fortune-teller. Such people receive whatever evil spirits give them and circulate their disinformation widely after they themselves have further exaggerated it: *"Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the satans descend? They descend upon every lying sinner. They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars."* (Verses 221-223)

There were among the Arabs some fortune-tellers who claimed that the *jinn* brought them news and information. People used to go to these fortune-tellers seeking advice, and trusting their prophecies, but most were liars. To believe them was to pursue myth and wishful thinking. No such fortune-teller advocated any proper code of living, or urged people to fear God, or counselled them to believe. When the Prophet called on people to accept his message, he actually advocated a complete code of virtuous living.

At times, the Arab unbelievers described the Qur'ān as poetry, claiming that the Prophet was a poet. This was due to their utter helplessness in facing up to the Qur'ān; its powerful discourse was incomparable to anything they knew. They realized that it touched people's hearts, affected their feelings and overcame their resistance. Yet they could not stop it.

In this *sūrah,* the Qur'ān itself explains to them that the way of life Muhammad advocated and the Qur'ān outlined was totally and fundamentally different from that of poets and poetry. This Qur'ān sets a clear method and aims towards a definite objective. The Prophet did not say something one day which he contradicted the next. Nor did he pursue fleeting desires and momentary feelings. Instead, he pursued the establishment of his faith, following a straight system that admits no crookedness. Poets are totally unlike this. They are often hostage to their reactions and momentary feelings, which press for expression as they occur. They describe something as black today and white tomorrow. When they are happy, they say one thing, which they contradict when they are angry. Their moods are never consistent. Besides, they create their own imaginary world. They conjure up actions and results, then imagine these to be hard facts which influence their behaviour. Hence, their

concern for realities is diminished because they create a different, imaginery world in which they live.

Reality versus Imagination

A person with a well-defined message who wants to see it implemented in people's lives has a totally different perspective. He has an objective, method of action and a line to follow. He goes along his line, pursuing his method to achieve his end, keeping his heart and mind open and alert. He will not accept myth, or be satisfied with visions and dreams. He is only satisfied when his message becomes a practised reality in human life.

Thus the methods of God's Messenger and poets are poles apart. The two can never be confused: *"As for the poets, only those who are lost in error follow them. Are you not aware that they roam confusedly through all valleys, and that they say what they do not do?"* (Verses 224-226) Poets follow their own moods, whims and desires, which means that they are followed only by those who similarly roam about confusedly with whims and passions, having no defined objective or clear line. Moreover, poets pursue every feeling, idea or statement according to that which takes hold of them at any particular moment.

Furthermore, poets say what they do not do, because they live in a world made of their own imagination and sentiment. They prefer such an imaginary world to real life which does not particularly impress them. Hence, they exaggerate and claim things that they themselves do not fulfil. Thus, what they say has no reality in practical human life.

Since Islam is a complete life system, devised for implementation in real life, and since it has a strong bearing on people's consciences and on all aspects of life, it is by nature incompatible with the overwhelming majority of poets. A poet creates a dream in his own world and feels content with it. Islam, on the other hand, wants the dream to become a reality and works for its implementation. It transforms all feelings so that they work together to produce in the real world a perfect model of humanity.

Islam wants people to face up to the facts of life, and not to escape to an imaginary dream. If the facts of life are unsatisfactory or inconsistent with the way of life Islam wants people to implement, it urges them to change these aspects so that they can pursue its way of life. Thus, human energy is used for the fulfilment of noble objectives according to Islam's magnificent way of life.

Nevertheless, Islam does not suppress poetry and art altogether, as some people may take the statement to mean. It simply disapproves of the line followed by poetry and art, giving full rein to uncontrolled whims and reactions, as well as fanciful

dreams that absorb the energy of the dreamers so that they cannot fulfil them. When the human soul adopts the Islamic system, and interacts with Islamic values, it produces poetry and art while working at the same time to see its noble feelings realized in practice.

It is perfectly possible for the human soul to achieve an Islamic objective, looking at life from an Islamic viewpoint, and at the same time express all this in poetry and art. In such a situation, Islam approves of poetry and art, indeed encourages poets and artists.

What Makes Poetry Islamic

The Qur'ān directs people's minds and hearts to the great wonders in the universe and within the human soul, both of which are the material of poetry and art. Indeed, the Qur'ān includes passages on the wonders of creation that can never be matched by any poetry in respect of penetration, fascination and presentation.

Therefore, the Qur'ān makes an exception of the above general description of poets: "*Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged.*" (Verse 227) These are not included in the general description, because they have believed and their hearts are, as a result, full of a faith while their lives follow a clear system. They do righteous deeds and their energy is directed towards what is good, beneficial and beautiful. They are not satisfied with dreams and visions. They work hard, putting all their energies into their striving, so that they can support the truth in which they believe, and achieve the victory to which they aspire.

Among the poets who fought with their poetry defending the Islamic faith and its Messenger, at the height of the battle against idolatry and idolaters during the Prophet's lifetime were Ĥassān ibn Thābit, Ka`b ibn Mālik and `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah, all of whom were from among the *Anşār.* Also among them were `Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba`rā and Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ĥārith ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, both of whom used to abuse the Prophet in their poetry in their pre-Islamic days. When they adopted Islam, they did well and composed fine poetry in praise of the Prophet and in support of Islam.

It is authentically reported that the Prophet said to Ĥassān: "Attack them and Gabriel [the angel] will support you." `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Kai) reports that his father, Ka`b ibn Mālik, said to God's Messenger: "God has revealed what you know about poets." The Prophet said to him: "A believer defends Islam with his sword as also with his tongue. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, your words that you throw at them are just like arrows." [Related by Aĥmad.]

This type of Islamic poetry was what was needed at the time. There are other modes, however, by which poetry and art become Islamic. It is sufficient that poetry or art in general issues from an Islamic concept of life, in any field, to gain Islamic acceptance. Poetry can be perfectly Islamic without having to attack the opponents of Islam, defend Islam, glorify its values or history, or contribute directly to its advocacy. A glance at the passage of night, feeling the first breath of dawn, coupled with an expression of a Muslim's sense that relates such phenomena to the Creator, is of the very essence of Islamic poetry. A moment of inner enlightenment, feeling God's presence or action, or relating what one sees in the world around one to its Creator, is bound to produce poetry that is perfectly acceptable to Islam.

The point that distinguishes what Islam rejects from what it approves is that Islam has its own concept of life as a whole, its relations and bonds. Whatever poetry issues from such a concept is fine and acceptable from the Islamic point of view.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a general implicit warning: "*Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take.*" (Verse 227) The *sūrah* has spoken about the unbelievers and their stubborn rejection of Islam, their heedless approach to warnings, the hastening of their punishment, as well as scenes of the destruction of past communities of unbelievers. It now concludes with this strong warning that sums up its theme. The warning serves as a final strong note, one which is felt to violently shake the very foundations of wrongdoing and wrongdoers.

SŪRAH 27

Al-Naml

(The Ants)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah shortly after *Sūrah* 26, The Poets, and it follows the same pattern: an introduction and conclusion which together spell out the subject matter. In between there are several historical accounts that emphasize the main theme, providing further elucidation of it. Theses histories help to draw parallels between the attitudes of the unbelievers in Makkah on the one hand and their predecessors among other communities on the other. Thus, the *sūrah* reveals a pattern which advocates of Islam in any generation need to contemplate.

As in all Makkan *sūrahs,* the main theme is faith: to believe in God and worship Him alone, without partners, and to believe in the resurrection as well as reward and punishment in the hereafter. This also requires believing in God's revelations, and that all matters that are beyond our perception, or *ghayb,* belong to God: they are known only to Him. A further prerequisite of such faith is belief in God's attributes: He alone is the Creator and Provider, and all blessings come from Him alone. Hence, gratitude is due to Him for all that He gives us. Moreover, He is the Almighty who grants us all our faculties, abilities and powers.

The *sūrah's* historical accounts confirm these issues and portray the fate of those who deny them and the happy end of those who believe in them. Immediately after the opening, we have a short account of Moses which describes his sighting of a fire as he travelled at night in the desert, his approach towards it and how he was addressed from on high. This account also documents the message Moses was required to deliver to Pharaoh. The *sūrah* then immediately proceeds to state that

Pharaoh and his people denied the truth of the signs God sent them, even though they knew in their hearts that these were true. In this context we are also told of the fate of those who knowingly deny the truth: *"Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers."* (Verse 14) The Makkan unbelievers' attitude towards the Qur'ān, which they knew to be truly God's revelation was, in essence, no different than these earlier evildoers.

We then have a reference to the blessings God bestowed on David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). This precedes Solomon's story with the ant, the hoopoe and the Queen of Sheba. The story highlights that David and Solomon were truly thankful for the favours God granted them, which included knowledge, a kingdom and prophethood. In addition, He made the *jinn* and the birds subservient to Solomon, willing to do his bidding. Again the story here highlights the basics of faith preached by all God's messengers. The account gives special treatment to how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon's message, contrasting this with the reception the Quraysh gave God's message as preached by the Prophet Muhammad. Basically, the Quraysh denied the message, describing it as false, while the others accepted it. Yet it was God who gave Solomon all the knowledge, wealth and power he possessed. It is God who knows and owns everything. When compared with those of God, Solomon's kingdom and knowledge were no more than a drop in the ocean.

Then follows an account of the Prophet Ṣāliĥ and the Thamūd. Of particular importance here is the conspiracy some of the evildoers among his people concocted against Ṣāliĥ and his household, plotting to kill him. It shows how God foiled their plot, saved Ṣāliĥ and the believers, and destroyed the Thamūd together with the conspirators: *"Their dwellings are now empty."* (Verse 52) The Quraysh also plotted against the Prophet Muhammad, similarly conspiring to kill him at night.

The last historical account in this *sūrah* concerns Lot. It tells how his people planned to drive him and those who believed in him out of their town under the pretext that they *kept themselves pure'*. It tells us of their end after Lot and his group left them to their fate: *"We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned."* (Verse 58) The Quraysh also considered driving the Prophet out of their city, shortly before he migrated to Madinah.

Once these historical aspects are dealt with, the *sūrah* begins its comments with the verse: *"Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?"* (Verse 59) It then takes us on a descriptive round of some great universal scenes, as also some of the deeper aspects of the human soul. In this way, the *sūrah* shows us the work of the great Maker, Planner, Creator and Sustainer who alone knows what lies beyond the reach

of any created being's perception, and to whom we shall all return. It then tells us about one of the aspects that signal the coming of the Last Hour, adding some images of the Day of Judgement and the fate that awaits those who deny it.

The *sūrah* concludes on a note that fits well with its subject matter and ambience: *"I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God], and to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner. And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."* (Verses 91-93)

Throughout the *sūrah,* special emphasis is laid on knowledge, highlighting God's perfect knowledge of what is concealed and what is left public, particularly His knowledge of everything that lies beyond the reach of our perceptions. It also speaks about some of the universal signs which He reveals to us. It refers to the knowledge God granted David and Solomon, and how Solomon was taught the language of the birds, and how he humbly acknowledged such learning. Hence, at the beginning of the *sūrah* the Prophet is told: "*Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) In the comments on the historical accounts the Prophet is instructed to say: "*None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead. Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verses 65-66) *"Indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verses 74-75) In conclusion we are told: "*He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) The story of Solomon begins as follows: "*For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants."* (Verse 15) Knowledge is given special emphasis in such verses, not least where Solomon says: *"We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) And also as the Hoopoe says: "*That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) When Solomon wanted the queen's throne to be brought to him, it was not the skilful *jinn* who brought it in the wink of an eye; the one who did was a person *"who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

Thus knowledge is the main feature that permeates the entire *sūrah,* from beginning to end, so as to highlight its special importance.

1
Revelations Bringing Happy News

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

طسٓ ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْقُرْءَانِ وَكِتَابٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١﴾

Ṭā Sīn. These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book; (1)

هُدًى وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢﴾

a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾

who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come. (3)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ زَيَّنَّا لَهُمْ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ فَهُمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿٤﴾

As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction. (4)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَهُمْ سُوٓءُ ٱلْعَذَابِ وَهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمُ ٱلْأَخْسَرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers. (5)

وَإِنَّكَ لَتُلَقَّى ٱلْقُرْءَانَ مِن لَّدُنْ حَكِيمٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٦﴾

Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing. (6)

All by the Grace of God

The *sūrah* begins with two separate letters, *Ṭā Sīn,* as reference to the basic material of which the *sūrah* and the entire Qur'ān are composed. These letters are available to all Arabic-speaking people, yet they are all unable to compose anything like the Qur'ān: they have been challenged to do so, yet none has ever produced anything that approximates the excellence of the Qur'ān. These two letters are followed by a reference to the Qur'ān itself: *"These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book."* (Verse 1) It should be noted that in the Arabic text the conjunction *wa,* which means 'and', occurs after the word 'Qur'ān', but in this usage it only means 'which is'. Describing the Qur'ān here as 'a book' provides a subtle element of comparison with how the unbelievers in Makkah received the book bestowed on them from on high and how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon's letter, which in this *sūrah* is also called a *kitāb,* meaning 'book'. Yet Solomon is no more than God's servant.

The Qur'ān, or the book, is then described as *"a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers."* (Verse 2) This is more expressive than saying that it contains or provides guidance and joyful tidings. Indeed the way the description is phrased makes the very entity of the Qur'ān the guidance and the happy tiding. For certain, the Qur'ān provides guidance to believers in every way and every sense. It also gives them what brings happiness both in this life and in the life to come.

That the guidance and the happy news are given to the believers only is especially significant. The Qur'ān is not a book of theoretical or applicable science that yields all its benefits to whoever reads and understands it. The Qur'ān addresses hearts in the first instance and gives all its light and fragrance to an open mind which receives it with certainty and contentment. When a person's mind is refreshed with firm belief, it can better appreciate the Qur'ān and understand far more of its meanings than we can imagine. It brings about miraculous changes in this life as one adopts a new way of life and discards his old one. All the systems, legislation and values the Qur'ān promotes are based first and foremost on faith. Hence, a person who does not, deep at heart, believe in God or accept that this Qur'ān is revealed by God or that its contents represent the system God wants implemented in human life, cannot find the desired guidance in the Qur'ān and will not share in the joyful news it brings.

This book, the Qur'ān, contains inexhaustible treasures of guidance, knowledge and sound directives, but faith is the key to opening it all. Without this key, the Qur'ān does not yield its treasures to anyone. Hence those who truly believed in it were able to accomplish miracles. But when the Qur'ān was reduced to no more than chants set to charming tunes that people enjoyed hearing without touching their hearts, it remained an unopened treasure, incapable of achieving anything.

The *sūrah* outlines the qualities of those believers who find guidance and happy news in the Qur'ān. They are ones: *"who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come."* (Verse 3) The first quality is to attend regularly to prayer, offering it as it should be offered, with their hearts and souls conscious of the fact that they are standing in front of God, in all His majesty. Thus they feel themselves in contact with His sublime presence, and their thoughts fully attentive to addressing and glorifying Him. Secondly, they pay their *zakāt,* which is the obligatory charity. When they pay it they purge their hearts of stinginess rising above the lure of wealth. They give their brethren some of what God has granted them, thus fulfilling their social duty towards their community. Finally, they firmly believe in the life to come, which means that their fate in the hereafter remains topmost in their thoughts. It prevents them from giving free rein to their desires and keeps the fear of God alive in their hearts. They dread lest they might be considered disobedient when they come before Him for judgement.

It is only such obedient believers who can hope for God's reward yet still dread His punishment. Only they, with their hearts open to the Qur'ān, can find its guidance and receive its happy news. For them, it is a light illuminating their lives, providing them with strong motivation for action. It is their only reliable guide and one to which they always refer.

Strong emphasis is placed on believing in the hereafter; this in the form of a stern warning to those who refuse to believe, and persist with their erring ways: *"As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction."* (Verse 4)

Believing in the life to come is the motive that keeps whims and desires in check, urging us to lead a life of moderation. When such belief is lacking, a person cannot restrain himself from pursuing wanton desires, thinking that his only chance for indulging in pleasure is that offered in this life. Yet life on earth is scarcely long enough to fulfil a small portion of what people desire or hope for. Besides, when someone has the means to lead a life of indulgence, what can stop him from pursuing his wildest pleasures unless he has to reckon with standing before God, awaiting His judgement, reward or punishment? Indeed, a person lacking belief in the hereafter will inevitably pursue every pleasure within his ability. No sense of shame or check will restrain him. It is in the nature of human beings that they love pleasure unless they are guided by a divine message that tells them of a future, permanent life that follows this short one, and that the latter is but preparation for that future life. If they heed this guidance then they will find much greater pleasure in different types of pursuits.

It is God who has moulded human nature in this fashion, giving it the propensity to follow His guidance when it opens its receptive faculties to this, and the opposite

propensity to remain blind when it shuts such faculties down. His will is always done, in both situations. Hence, the Qur'ān says in reference to those who will not believe in the hereafter: *"We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction."* (Verse 4) They choose not to believe, and thus God's law comes into operation making their deeds seem fair and attractive to them. They cannot see any foul element in what they do and so remain unable to find a clear way leading them aright.

When evil is made to seem fair, the end result is well known: *"These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers."* (Verse 5) Whether suffering is meted out to them in this present life or in the life to come, they will have to face utter ruin in the hereafter. It will be their just recompense for pursuing what is evil.

The *sūrah's* opening is completed with a verse that re-emphasizes the divine source of the Qur'ān: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) The Arabic verb *tulaqqā,* which is rendered here as *'you receive',* gives a sense of the Qur'ān being a sublime gift presented by the One who does everything wisely and plans everything on the basis of perfect knowledge. Indeed, His wisdom and knowledge are clearly seen in the Qur'ān; its mode, the duties it assigns and directives it gives, in the system it follows, in its revelation at the most appropriate time, in the flow of its component parts and in the harmony of its subject matter.

The *sūrah* then begins its historical accounts which provide a panoramic exhibition of aspects of God's wisdom, knowledge, planning and care.

2
Nine Miracles for Most

إِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَهْلِهِۦٓ إِنِّىٓ ءَانَسْتُ نَارًا سَـَٔاتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوْ ءَاتِيكُم بِشِهَابٍ قَبَسٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Moses said to his family: 'I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves.' (7)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهَا نُودِىَ أَنۢ بُورِكَ مَن فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَسُبْحَـٰنَ ٱللَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨﴾

But when he came close to it, he was addressed: 'Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (8)

يَـٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّهُۥٓ أَنَا ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

'Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise! (9)

وَأَلْقِ عَصَاكَ ۚ فَلَمَّا رَءَاهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا جَآنٌّ وَلَّىٰ مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ ۚ يَـٰمُوسَىٰ لَا تَخَفْ إِنِّى لَا يَخَافُ لَدَىَّ ٱلْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Now throw down your staff' But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. 'Moses, have no fear!' [Said God]: 'Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence. (10)

إِلَّا مَن ظَلَمَ ثُمَّ بَدَّلَ حُسْنًۢا بَعْدَ سُوٓءٍ فَإِنِّى غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (11)

وَأَدْخِلْ يَدَكَ فِى جَيْبِكَ تَخْرُجْ بَيْضَآءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوٓءٍ ۖ فِى تِسْعِ ءَايَـٰتٍ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمًا فَـٰسِقِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. [This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people.' (12)

But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' (13)	فَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡهُمۡ ءَايَـٰتُنَا مُبۡصِرَةً قَالُواْ هَـٰذَا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ١٣
Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers. (14)	وَجَحَدُواْ بِهَا وَٱسۡتَيۡقَنَتۡهَآ أَنفُسُهُمۡ ظُلۡمٗا وَعُلُوّٗاۚ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ١٤

Overview

This short and quick episode about Moses occurs immediately after God has assured the Prophet of his divine revelations: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) It is as though the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was being told that receiving such revelations was not a new phenomenon without precedent in history. Here, we see Moses being assigned his mission. He was called from on high to deliver the message to Pharaoh and his people. Similarly, the Prophet was told that the opposition he met with and the accusations levelled at him by his people were nothing new. Moses' people were certain at heart that the signs they were shown were the work of none other than God but, in their wicked arrogance, they nevertheless denied them. The end those evildoers of old met should be reflected upon, for his own people who were also stubborn in their rejection of the truth of the divine message could face a similar end.

Moses: A Favoured Messenger

"Moses said to his family: I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves." (Verse 7) This event, which is mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, took place when Moses was on his way back from Madyan to Egypt, accompanied by his wife, the daughter of Shu`ayb (peace be upon him).[5] He apparently lost his way on a dark cold night. This is suggested by him saying to his wife that he would bring information or a torch to give them some warmth. This occurred close to Mount Sinai, called al-Ṭūr in Arabic.

[5] We do not have any authentic statement confirming that the old man who employed Moses and had two daughters one of whom was married to Moses was in fact Shu`ayb. This is, however, a high probability, one given greater weight by the fact that whenever the Qur'ān mentions the two prophets, Moses' story follows that of Shu'ayb's which suggests that they occurred at the same time, or in quick succession.

Desert dwellers used to light fires on high ground so as to provide guidance to night travellers. When such travellers arrived at the fire, they would be given hospitality and warmth, or at least be guided on their way.

"I perceive a fire." This is what Moses first said on sighting the fire. The Arabic text uses the verb *ānast* for 'perceive' which carries connotations of friendliness. Thus, his words sound like: I can see a welcoming fire which should give us some comfort. We can ask directions which should tell us which way to go, and we could get a brand to warm ourselves. As Moses walked towards the fire, he received the call from on high: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed: Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!'"* (Verses 8-9)

This is an address echoed by the whole universe, bringing together different worlds and cosmoses. All existence humbly submits to this call which shakes consciences and spirits. The heavens and earth perceive the strong bond linking them together, one which makes an insignificant particle of creation respond to the great Creator's call. Thus, a weak mortal is elevated, by God's grace, to a position from where he speaks directly to Him.

"When he came close to it, he was addressed..." (Verse 8) We note here the use of the passive voice, although the address is from a known source. Yet the passive formula is preferable because it implies reverence and glory for the Supreme Being making the address. *"Blessed are those in the fire and those around it!"* (Verse 8) Who were in the fire and who were around it? Most probably, it was unlike any fire we light. It was a fire coming from on high, lit up by angels who are pure, so as to give perfect guidance. It simply looked, at a distance, like a fire. Hence blessing is bestowed on the angels that were in and around it, including Moses who was moving closer towards it. The whole universe records this sublime gift, while the location remains a blessed one because God Almighty revealed His glory and bestowed His blessings there.

The universe also recorded the rest of the address: *"Limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!"* (Verses 8-9) Thus God gives Himself the sublime position of glory due to Him and declares His Lordship over all the worlds. He informs His servant that the One addressing him is God, the Almighty, the Wise. All humanity, represented by Moses, is thus elevated to an extraordinarily high position. Moses found the information he sought at the fire, but it was a great piece of information, and something he never expected. He also received the warming brand, but this was a gift guiding him to the right path. The address was one meant to confirm that Moses was chosen by God, but such choice entails a duty to carry a message to the most wicked of tyrants. Hence, his Lord began to prepare and equip him for his mission.

"*Now throw down your staff*" (Verse 10) In this case the whole thing is given in a nutshell. We have little of the long discourse mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, because the emphasis here is laid on the call to Moses and his assignment. "*But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back.*" (Verse 10) When he did as he was told and threw down his staff, he saw it come alive, writhing at speed like a small but fast-moving snake. His spontaneous nature caught up with him as he was totally taken by surprise. He could never have thought the staff would be so transformed on simply being thrown down. Hence, he ran away, with no thought of going back to take a further look at this serpent. His whole reaction suggests complete and utter surprise.

Yet he was soon reassured when the call from on high resumed. This now told him of the nature of his assignment: "*Moses, have no fear! [Said God]: Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence.*" (Verse 10) He is told that he is entrusted with a message from God, and God's messengers entertain no fear in the presence of their Lord, as He informs them of their duties.

"*If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 11) Only those who do wrong should be afraid. However, those of them who replace wrong with good, abandoning injustice, evil and unbelief, making sure to replace them with justice and faith, and doing righteous deeds will receive God's grace and forgiveness.

Moses is now reassured and calm. Therefore, his Lord gives him his second miracle before even telling him about his mission or its nature: "*Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish.*" (Verse 12) Again, Moses did as he was told, putting his hand through the top opening of his robe, and then bringing it out brilliant white. He had no skin disease. What happened was another miracle. God promised to support him with nine miraculous signs of the type of which he had just seen two. At this point Moses is also told of his assignment, for which he has been given such preparation. "*[This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people.*" (Verse 12)

Here, the *sūrah* does not provide any details of these nine signs, though they are mentioned in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights. These were the years of drought, crop shortages, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. The lack of detail in this instance indicates that the emphasis here is on the miraculous nature of these signs, and the stubborn refusal of Pharaoh's people to acknowledge them and take heed: "*But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers.*" (Verses 13-14)

Thus they were given numerous signs to bring the truth clearly before their eyes.

Indeed these signs are described here as '*light-giving*' which is rather an inadequate rendering of the Arabic adjective, *mubṣirah,* which means 'endowed with insight', as if the signs themselves can see the people and lead them to divine guidance. Yet they described these signs as *'plain sorcery'.* Although deep inside they were convinced that these were true signs confirming the truth of the message, they nevertheless repeated such claims out of '*their wickedness and arrogance.'* Yet *'within their souls they knew them to be true.'* Their attitude was one of stubborn rejection because they did not seek proof. They just did not want to believe, thus doing the truth they recognized profound injustice.

The same was true of the Quraysh elders. They were certain of the truth of the Qur'ān, but they persisted in denying it and rejecting the Prophet's call to believe in God alone. They wanted to continue with their false beliefs because of the privileges and gains they felt would be threatened if they were to abandon their religion. They realized that such gains and privileges depended totally on their false beliefs and that Islam was sure to do away with them. They felt their position to be very shaky, compared with the clear truth of Islam.

Such is the truth. Its rejecters do not deny it out of ignorance. They deny it because they know it to be the truth and realize that it threatens their interests and privileges. Hence, they deliberately reject it.

"*Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers.*" (Verse 14) The end Pharaoh met is well known, and the Qur'ān tells us about it in other *sūrahs.* Here we have only this brief reference to it, as it may cause avowed opponents of the truth to reflect on the lessons of the past. It may, perchance, alert them to take heed before they too suffer a similar fate.

3
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا دَاوُۥدَ وَسُلَيْمَـٰنَ عِلْمًا ۖ وَقَالَا
ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى فَضَّلَنَا عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّنْ
عِبَادِهِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: 'All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants.' (15)

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمَـٰنُ دَاوُۥدَ ۖ وَقَالَ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا
ٱلنَّاسُ عُلِّمْنَا مَنطِقَ ٱلطَّيْرِ وَأُوتِينَا مِن
كُلِّ شَىْءٍ ۖ إِنَّ هَـٰذَا لَهُوَ ٱلْفَضْلُ ٱلْمُبِينُ
﴿١٦﴾

Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].' (16)

وَحُشِرَ لِسُلَيْمَـٰنَ جُنُودُهُۥ مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ
وَٱلْإِنسِ وَٱلطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks. (17)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَتَوْا۟ عَلَىٰ وَادِ ٱلنَّمْلِ قَالَتْ نَمْلَةٌ
يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّمْلُ ٱدْخُلُوا۟ مَسَـٰكِنَكُمْ لَا
يَحْطِمَنَّكُمْ سُلَيْمَـٰنُ وَجُنُودُهُۥ وَهُمْ لَا
يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' (18)

فَتَبَسَّمَ ضَاحِكًا مِّن قَوْلِهَا وَقَالَ رَبِّ
أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ
عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَـٰلِحًا
تَرْضَىٰهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِى بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِى عِبَادِكَ

He smiled joyously at her words, and said: 'My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.' (19)

ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَتَفَقَّدَ ٱلطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِيَ لَآ أَرَى ٱلْهُدْهُدَ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْغَآئِبِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

لَأُعَذِّبَنَّهُۥ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا أَوْ لَأَاْذْبَحَنَّهُۥٓ أَوْ لَيَأْتِيَنِّي بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾

فَمَكَثَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطتُ بِمَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِۦ وَجِئْتُكَ مِن سَبَإٍۭ بِنَبَإٍ يَقِينٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

إِنِّي وَجَدتُّ ٱمْرَأَةً تَمْلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيَتْ مِن كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَلَهَا عَرْشٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

وَجَدتُّهَا وَقَوْمَهَا يَسْجُدُونَ لِلشَّمْسِ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ فَهُمْ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

أَلَّا يَسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى يُخْرِجُ ٱلْخَبْءَ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُخْفُونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلْعَرْشِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ۩ ﴿٢٦﴾

۞ قَالَ سَنَنظُرُ أَصَدَقْتَ أَمْ كُنتَ مِنَ

He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? (20)

I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless he brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence]. (21)

But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. (22)

I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. (23)

I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. (24)

That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal; (25)

God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.' (26)

Said [Solomon]: 'We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. (27)

ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return.' (28)

ٱذۡهَب بِّكِتَٰبِي هَٰذَا فَأَلۡقِهۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّ عَنۡهُمۡ فَٱنظُرۡ مَاذَا يَرۡجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

[The Queen of Sheba] said: 'Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. (29)

قَالَتۡ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ إِنِّيٓ أُلۡقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَٰبٞ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

It is from Solomon, and it reads, "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: (30)

إِنَّهُۥ مِن سُلَيۡمَٰنَ وَإِنَّهُۥ بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God]." (31)

أَلَّا تَعۡلُواْ عَلَيَّ وَأۡتُونِي مُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present.' (32)

قَالَتۡ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ أَفۡتُونِي فِيٓ أَمۡرِي مَا كُنتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمۡرًا حَتَّىٰ تَشۡهَدُونِ ﴿٣٢﴾

They said: 'We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command.' (33)

قَالُواْ نَحۡنُ أُوْلُواْ قُوَّةٖ وَأُوْلُواْ بَأۡسٖ شَدِيدٖ وَٱلۡأَمۡرُ إِلَيۡكِ فَٱنظُرِي مَاذَا تَأۡمُرِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Said she: 'When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. (34)

قَالَتۡ إِنَّ ٱلۡمُلُوكَ إِذَا دَخَلُواْ قَرۡيَةً أَفۡسَدُوهَا وَجَعَلُوٓاْ أَعِزَّةَ أَهۡلِهَآ أَذِلَّةٗۖ وَكَذَٰلِكَ يَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back.' (35)

وَإِنِّي مُرۡسِلَةٌ إِلَيۡهِم بِهَدِيَّةٖ فَنَاظِرَةُۢ بِمَ

يَرۡجِعُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلُونَ ٣٥

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ سُلَيۡمَٰنَ قَالَ أَتُمِدُّونَنِ بِمَالٖ فَمَآ ءَاتَىٰنِۦَ ٱللَّهُ خَيۡرٞ مِّمَّآ ءَاتَىٰكُم بَلۡ أَنتُم بِهَدِيَّتِكُمۡ تَفۡرَحُونَ ٣٦

ٱرۡجِعۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡ فَلَنَأۡتِيَنَّهُم بِجُنُودٖ لَّا قِبَلَ لَهُم بِهَا وَلَنُخۡرِجَنَّهُم مِّنۡهَآ أَذِلَّةٗ وَهُمۡ صَٰغِرُونَ ٣٧

قَالَ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ أَيُّكُمۡ يَأۡتِينِي بِعَرۡشِهَا قَبۡلَ أَن يَأۡتُونِي مُسۡلِمِينَ ٣٨

قَالَ عِفۡرِيتٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡجِنِّ أَنَا۠ ءَاتِيكَ بِهِۦ قَبۡلَ أَن تَقُومَ مِن مَّقَامِكَۖ وَإِنِّي عَلَيۡهِ لَقَوِيٌّ أَمِينٞ ٣٩

قَالَ ٱلَّذِي عِندَهُۥ عِلۡمٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ أَنَا۠ ءَاتِيكَ بِهِۦ قَبۡلَ أَن يَرۡتَدَّ إِلَيۡكَ طَرۡفُكَۚ فَلَمَّا رَءَاهُ مُسۡتَقِرًّا عِندَهُۥ قَالَ هَٰذَا مِن فَضۡلِ رَبِّي لِيَبۡلُوَنِيٓ ءَأَشۡكُرُ أَمۡ أَكۡفُرُۖ وَمَن شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشۡكُرُ لِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٞ ٤٠

قَالَ نَكِّرُواْ لَهَا عَرۡشَهَا نَنظُرۡ أَتَهۡتَدِيٓ أَمۡ

When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: 'Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. (36)

Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.' (37)

Solomon said: 'Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' (38)

Said an efreet of the jinn: 'I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' (39)

But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: 'I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.' When he saw it standing before him, he said: 'This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self-sufficient, most generous.' (40)

He [then] said: 'Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided.' (41)

تَكُونُ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَهۡتَدُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡ قِيلَ أَهَٰكَذَا عَرۡشُكِۖ قَالَتۡ كَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَۚ وَأُوتِينَا ٱلۡعِلۡمَ مِن قَبۡلِهَا وَكُنَّا مُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَصَدَّهَا مَا كَانَت تَّعۡبُدُ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ إِنَّهَا كَانَتۡ مِن قَوۡمٖ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

قِيلَ لَهَا ٱدۡخُلِي ٱلصَّرۡحَۖ فَلَمَّا رَأَتۡهُ حَسِبَتۡهُ لُجَّةٗ وَكَشَفَتۡ عَن سَاقَيۡهَاۚ قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ صَرۡحٞ مُّمَرَّدٞ مِّن قَوَارِيرَۗ قَالَتۡ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمۡتُ نَفۡسِي وَأَسۡلَمۡتُ مَعَ سُلَيۡمَٰنَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: 'It looks as though it were the same.' [Said Solomon]: 'We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves to God. (42)

Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation.' (43)

She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: 'It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!' She said: '0 my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself, with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (44)

Overview

In this passage we have a short reference to David and a more complete account of Solomon, following immediately after the short episode of Moses. All three were prophets sent to the Children of Israel. Yet these stories occur in a *sūrah* that opens with a description of the Qur'ān. Later it says: *"This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree."* (Verse 76)

As related here, Solomon's story provides far more details than anywhere else in the Qur'ān, but it concentrates only on one episode which relates what he did with the hoopoe and with the Queen of Sheba. A preamble to the story quotes Solomon as he declares to all people that God has granted him the ability to talk to birds and understand their speech, and He has further given him of all things. He expresses his thanks to God for such clear favours He has bestowed on him. We then see him inspecting a procession that included humans, *jinn* and birds, before we note a warning given by one ant to its community lest they be stamped upon. Solomon understands the ant's discourse and again he expresses his gratitude to God. He

realizes that such favours constitute a test, and he prays to God that he will be successful in this test.

These stories of Moses, David and Solomon are perhaps the most important in the history of the Children of Israel. They fit well with what the *sūrah* says in its opening about the Qur'ān which, in turn, explains to the Children of Israel most of their disputes. Furthermore, the details given here about Solomon are especially suited to the subject matter of this *sūrah.* This is clearly apparent in several instances. Firstly, the whole *sūrah* lays great emphasis on knowledge. The first words regarding David and Solomon are: *"We granted knowledge to David and Solomon."* (Verse 15) Solomon's address begins with a reference to his knowledge of the language of the birds: "*We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) As the story progresses, the hoopoe excuses itself for its absence: *"I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information."* (Verse 22) Besides, the one who brings the queen's throne to Solomon in no time is "*the one who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* opens with a reference to the Qur'ān, God's clear and elucidating book sent to the unbelievers, yet they refuse to believe and adopt an incredulous attitude. In Solomon's story, reference is made to the epistle he sent the Queen of Sheba. It does not take long before she and her people declare their belief in and submission to God. She did so when she saw the superior powers given to Solomon, making the *jinn,* humans and birds subservient to him. But it was God who placed these and other powers under Solomon's command. God has sway over all His creation, and He is the Lord of the truly magnificent throne.

The *sūrah* also looks at a variety of God's favours granted to people, and a variety of signs He has placed in the universe. It refers to the fact that He has placed man in charge of the earth but most men deny His signs, refusing to believe in Him or show their gratitude. Solomon, however, is an example of a truly grateful servant, who appeals to his Lord to guide him to be truly thankful. Enjoyment of his favours does not corrupt his upright nature, nor does the power at his command lead him to tyranny or transgression.

The passage about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is a very good example of the Qur'ānic art of story telling. The story is full of movement and action, rich in feeling and scenery. Highlighting certain images and separating them with suitable gaps are two more aspects of the unique method of the Qur'ān.

A Brief Reference and a Detailed Account

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All

> *praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants.* (Verse 15)

This is the starting signal that opens the story. It reports on the most important favour God granted to David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). As for David, the details of what knowledge God imparted to him are given in other *sūrahs.* These include his fine and enchanting recitation of Psalms which was echoed by the universe around him. The mountains and the birds sang God's praises with him because of the sweetness of his voice, his profound sincerity and deep feeling as he addressed his Lord. All barriers and impediments between him and the universe were removed. He was skilled in making protective garments which were particularly useful in war. Iron and sharp, tough objects were softened for him so that he was able to use them the way he liked. He was also taught how to judge between people, which was a favour also shared by Solomon.

The *sūrah* also gives us an account of some of the favours God granted Solomon, particularly his knowledge of the speech of birds and other creatures. This is in addition to what is mentioned in other *sūrahs,* such as his ability to judge in intricate disputes, and the fact that the winds were made subject to his command, by God's grace.

The story begins with the reference to knowledge: "*For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon.*" (Verse 15) Before the verse concludes we are told of their thanksgiving to God for this favour. They stress the great value and benefit of knowledge, and declare their praise of God for it. Thus, the value of knowledge is enhanced, and it becomes clear that people with knowledge are favoured highly.

We are not told here of the type or speciality of the knowledge given to these two prophets because the emphasis is on knowledge in its entirety. This gives us the further connotation that all knowledge is a gift from God, and that it behoves every person of knowledge to know the source of such knowledge. This makes all those endowed with knowledge turn to God, praising Him, and motivates them to use their knowledge in ways that please the great Giver. Thus, knowledge, which is an aspect of God's favour, does not turn people away from God. Any knowledge that does so is deviant, moving away from its source and missing its goal. Nor does it bring happiness to the one who possesses it. Instead, it brings only misery, fear, worry and destruction.

Today humanity has achieved a good standard in a particular branch of science, being able to induce nuclear fusion and use nuclear energy. But what has humanity benefited by such knowledge whose possessors neither remember, fear or praise God, nor use their knowledge in His service? What result has humanity reaped other than the horrific tragedy of nuclear bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and

Nagasaki, and the worry and fear of destruction that people in the West and the East experience?[6]

The story then progresses concentrating on Solomon only: "*Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].'*" (Verse 16) David was given kingship alongside prophethood and knowledge, but it is knowledge, rather than kingship, that is mentioned in this context because being a king is too trivial by comparison.

It is clear that the inheritance intended here is that of knowledge, because it is the main blessing which deserves mention. This is confirmed by Solomon's declaration to his people: "*D people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things.*" (Verse 16) He highlights the fact that he has been taught the language of birds, and mentions other favours in a general way, but he attributes both to the same source, which is not David, his father. Indeed, none of this did he inherit from his father.

Removing the Barriers of Nature

"*O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things.*" (Verse 16) Thus Solomon announces to all people that these are aspects of God's favours granted to him. He seeks no special position as a result. Indeed, he describes such favours as they truly are: "*This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].*" (Verse 16) It is a favour that makes its source known to all. No one can teach the language of birds to man other than God, and no one can give anyone a measure of all good things except God.

Birds, animals and insects have their own means of communication, which are in fact their languages. God, the Creator of all these says: "*There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own.*" (6: 38)

[6] After two bombs were dropped on Japan, a member of the industrial authority working on production of the British bomb, and who was a professor at the University of Birmingham, wrote: "I am certain that it will not be long before the production of bombs, with greater explosive power, perhaps by 10,000 tons or more, and then there will be bombs with explosive power reaching one million tons. Nothing will ensure protection against such bombs, six of which will be sufficient to wipe England off the face of the earth." His prediction has been fulfilled, and the great powers have produced bombs so powerful that they make the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem no more than children's toys. Perhaps we should mention here that the Hiroshima bomb immediately killed between 210,000 and 240,000 other than causing burns and disfigurement to scores of thousands of people. * It should be remembered that this was written in 1954, when the arms race was in full swing. The author does not give the source of his quotation, and the name of the professor is written in Arabic letters only, making it very difficult to identify him with any degree of accuracy. — Editor's note.

They cannot form communities unless they have ties and bonds which they maintain, and some means of communication with which to understand each other. This is clearly observed in many species of bird, animal and insect. Biologists who are interested in certain species try hard to understand a little of their languages, but they can only rely on guesswork which does not approach any degree of certainty. What God granted to Solomon was something special, a miracle that goes beyond the laws of nature familiar to man. The knowledge he acquired was not through any attempt he had made to understand these species; it was a gift from God.

It is important to emphasize this point so as to make it clearly understood. Some contemporary commentators on the Qur'ān are too impressed by modern scientific achievements. Hence they try to explain what the Qur'ān says about Solomon as similar to the attempts by biologists to understand the methods of communication used by birds and animals. Thus, they force the miracle God granted to Solomon out of its nature. They also give scientific discoveries a degree of importance far greater than what they deserve. It is perfectly easy for God to teach one of His servants the languages of birds, animals and insects, as a special favour, and without any effort on that person's part. This does not require more than the lifting of some barriers God has placed between different species when He created them all.

Yet this is only one part of the miracle God granted to Solomon, His servant. The other part was that a number of the *jinn* and birds were placed under his command, serving him like human servants would. Moreover, the birds thus placed under him were given special faculties far greater than ordinary birds of the same species. This is clearly apparent in the story of the hoopoe who was able to understand the situation at the Queen of Sheba's court as clearly as a most intelligent and religious person. This is again a miraculous aspect.

It is a fact that the law God has set for His creation allows birds a measure of understanding that may vary, but this measure remains well below what man understands. That birds have their own form is merely part of the overall balance maintained in the universe. It is subject to the general law of creation.

Another fact is that a hoopoe living today is exactly the same as other hoopoes that have lived on earth for a very long time. Its genes are such that they make it, practically, a clone of the first hoopoe. Whatever adaptations the hoopoe has gone through does not enable it to move on to a higher species. This is clearly part of the system and balance God has set for His creation.

The two facts mentioned above cannot preclude the working of a miracle whenever God, the Creator of all species and laws governing them wants it. The miracle itself may be a part of the overall law of creation, which we do not know in full. If it is, then this part occurs at the time appointed for it, which is known only to

God. As it occurs, it transcends the natural laws familiar to man, but it thus complements the divine laws of creation and balance. This explains how Solomon's hoopoe came into existence, and perhaps all the birds that were placed under Solomon's command at that time.

A Majestic Procession for Solomon

"*Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of* jinn, *humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks.*" (Verse 17) This is a big procession in which are marshalled all troops, *jinn,* human and bird. Naturally, men are well known to us, but the *jinn* are creatures about whom we know nothing more than what God has said in the Qur'ān. They were created from flames, and can see us while we cannot see them: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) [The reference in this verse is to *Iblīs,* or Satan, who belongs to the *jinn.]* They are able to prompt people and tempt them to take evil and sinful actions. We do not know how this takes place. We also know that a group of them believed in God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He did not meet or see them, but God informed him of what happened: "*Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened [to the Qur'ān]', and said: 'We have listened to a wonderful discourse that guides to what is right, and so we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate any partners with our Lord.'*" (72: 1-2) We also know that God made some of them serve Solomon, making for him whatever he wished of sanctuaries, statues, and large cauldrons for cooking. They also dived into the sea for him, and did his bidding. Some were in his procession side by side with humans and birds.

We say that God placed under Solomon's command only a section of the *jinn,* birds, and humans. Thus it is clear that not all people on earth were his subjects, because his kingdom stretched over an area that includes today's Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, up to the Euphrates. Similarly, not all *the jinn* or birds were under his command; rather it was a section of each type.

In support of this view about the *jinn* we cite the fact that *Iblīs,* or Satan, and his offspring belong to the *jinn* as the Qur'ān states:

> *When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) *God also says about Iblīs: "who whispers in the hearts of mankind, from among jinn and mankind. (114: 5-6)*

Thus *Iblīs* and his offspring who all belonged to the *jinn* continued to whisper in people's hearts tempting them to sin during Solomon's reign. Had they been placed

under his command, they would not have been able to do so since he was a prophet advocating what is right. Hence, it is clear that only a section of them were loyal to Solomon.

In support of our view concerning the birds, we say that Solomon learnt of the hoopoe's absence when he inspected the birds. Had all birds, including all hoopoes, been placed under him, they would have been marshalled in his procession, and he would never have been able to discover the absence of one hoopoe among millions of hoopoes, and many millions of birds. He would not have wondered: *"Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe?"* (Verse 20) Indeed, this question suggests that it was a particular hoopoe which he identified. It might be that it was the only hoopoe under Solomon's command, or that it was the one in a group of hoopoes whose duty was to take part in that particular procession. What supports this view is that we soon realize that the hoopoe in question was gifted with an understanding that transcends what hoopoes and all birds normally possess. Such gifts must have been granted to those placed under Solomon's command, and not to hoopoes and birds in general. Indeed, the hoopoe in the story appears to have a gift of understanding matched only by intelligent and God- fearing humans.

So, this great procession was ready before Solomon, *"and they were all lined in orderly ranks,"* so that there would be no chance of disorder. They are described as 'troops' in the verse to indicate the orderly nature of the procession.

> *At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' He smiled joyously at her words, and said: My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.'* (Verses 18-19)

So the procession moved forward in an orderly manner, until they reached a valley where ants were in plenty. In fact the *sūrah* describes the place as a valley of ants. At this point, an ant supervisor made an announcement to all other ants in the vicinity. It should be remembered that, like bees, ants live in complex social colonies in which different ants have different functions and duties that are organized according to an elaborate system that we might find too difficult to emulate, despite our superior intelligence. So, the supervisor ant announced in the manner of communication used by ants that they should hasten back to their dwellings, so that Solomon and his troops would not crush them unawares.

Solomon understood what she said and was pleased. His pleasure was two-fold: he smiled at her words like an adult smiles to a child who tries to evade him, fearing

that the adult wants to punish him when he has no such intention. Plus he was gratified that God has given him this gift which opened up for him worlds that are normally closed to mankind. He was also joyful at the fact that ants should have such understanding, with the ability to give orders and carry them out.

When Solomon gathered what the ant said, *he smiled joyously at her words.'* Yet he soon realized what had just happened. He realized that it was all a great gift God had granted him, lifting the barriers that separate different types of creation. He therefore turned to God in acknowledgement of His favours: "*My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents.*" (Verse 19) It is a direct address to his Lord, one that expresses the feeling that He is so close to him. He wants his whole being: organs, feelings and thoughts; heart, mind and tongue; words, actions and directions; talents, abilities and energies to be brought together to offer thanks for all the favours bestowed on him and his parents. Solomon's prayer indicates how profound his appreciation of God's grace was. He felt that God's blessings overwhelmed his whole being as also his parents'. Hence, he wanted to give due thanks with his whole being: "*My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents.*" (Verse 19)

"*And that I may do righteous deeds which will please You.*" (Verse 19) To do good deeds is also a blessing from God to which He directs those who are genuinely grateful for His gifts. Solomon, a truly grateful servant of God who prays for His help so that he would wholeheartedly express his gratitude, also prays to Him to guide him to do what will earn His pleasure.

"*And include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.*" (Verse 19) Solomon knows that to be included among God's righteous servants is an aspect of God's mercy. When it is bestowed on a servant of God, it guides him to do righteous deeds, and thus he is included in this best group of God's servants. We note that Solomon, a prophet at whose disposal God placed large sections of *jinn,* birds and people, does not take anything for granted. He fears lest his deeds or thanksgiving might not be up to the standard expected of him. This is a case of refined sensitivity that enhances Solomon's aspiration to gain God's pleasure and receive His mercy. It is expressed at the moment God's grace is brought into view, as when the ant's warning to other ants focuses attention on God's grace that made Solomon understand her speech.

We see here two miracles, not one. The first is Solomon listening to the ant and understanding her warning to her community. The second is the ant's awareness that the approaching people were Solomon and his troops. We know that the first pertains to what God taught Solomon, a man and a prophet. Comparatively speaking, this is more probable than the second miracle which is clear in the ant's words. An ant may recognize that the approaching procession consists of gigantic

creatures who could easily crush tiny ones like ants if they step on them. Prompted by the survival instinct God has given them, ants may flee such a danger. But for an ant to recognize Solomon and his troops is miraculous indeed.

The Story Unfolds

All this was a prelude to Solomon's story with the Queen of Sheba in which the hoopoe plays an important role. The story is told in six scenes with certain aspects deliberately left out, but which do not impair our understanding. Indeed, these gaps serve to enhance the artistic beauty of the story. Furthermore, some scenes carry a commentary, alerting us to their spiritual significance and enhancing the moral portrayed. These stylistic features combine in such a way as to ensure the perfect harmony of the verses.

Since the reference to Solomon began by mentioning the *jinn,* humans and birds, as well as highlighting the importance of knowledge, the story gives roles to all three aspects of creation, thus showing the value of knowledge. It is as if the opening verses deliberately identify the key actors in the story. This, then, is one of the Qur'ān's finer artistic features in storytelling.

As told in the *sūrah,* the story paints the personal and distinctive features of the main characters: Solomon, the queen, the hoopoe and the queen's courtiers. It portrays the different reactions from these characters in the various situations presented.

The first scene begins with the military parade, after the procession has passed the valley of the ants:

> *He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless He brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence].* (Verses 20-21)

We see Solomon, a prophet and a king, marshalling his troops, and inspecting the birds only to discover the hoopoe's absence. We understand that this is a special hoopoe, with a specific position assigned to it in the procession. It was not just one of thousands or millions of hoopoes on the face of the earth. We note that Solomon was alert enough to miss a mere soldier in the great multitude composed of *jinn,* men and birds. His enquiry is of the type that befits a commander: it is flexible, looking at the different possibilities: *"Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees?"* (Verse 20)

It soon becomes clear to all that the hoopoe is absent without permission. The

matter needed to be dealt with firmly so as to keep matters under control, particularly because its absence was no longer a secret. Hence, Solomon threatens the absent hoopoe: *"I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him."* (Verse 21) But Solomon is not a tyrant; he is a prophet. He does not issue a final judgement on the hoopoe before listening to what it has to say in its defence. Therefore, we immediately see Solomon as a just ruler: *"Unless he brings me a clear warrant,"* to justify his absence.

The curtains are drawn here, or maybe the scene continues as the hoopoe arrives. He carries an important and surprising piece of news for Solomon, as also for us who are observing events as they unfold:

> *But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.'* (Verses 22-26)

The hoopoe is fully aware of the king's firm and serious demeanour. Therefore, he begins his report with a surprise that overshadows the fault of his absence and ensures that the king will listen to him: *'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you."* What king would not listen when one of his subjects tells him that he has learnt something that he could not know? Now that the hoopoe has the king's attention, it proceeds to give the news he brought from Sheba, in Yemen. He mentions first that *"I found there a woman ruling over them,"* and he further adds that *"she has been given of all good things,"* which tells that her kingdom was affluent, powerful and civilized. Furthermore, the queen's *"is a magnificent throne."* (Verse 23) She sits on a magnificent couch which indicates the presence of skilled workers. The hoopoe adds that he found both the queen and her people *"prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God."* (Verse 24) He explains that these people had erred because Satan had deceived them, making their deeds seem fair to them. Thus, they are bereft of guidance, and as such they do not worship God Almighty *"who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 25) *What is hidden'* refers to everything that is concealed, including the rain from the sky and the plants of the earth. It also includes the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He also *"knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) This mirrors what is hidden in the heavens and earth as it

refers to what is hidden within one's own soul.

Until this point the hoopoe remains in the position of someone who has broken the rules and is still awaiting the king's judgement. Hence, it concludes the news it brought with a reference to God Almighty, the Lord of all, and the Lord of the magnificent throne, to which no human throne can be compared: *"God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne."* (Verse 26) This reference is meant as a reminder to the king so as to moderate his attitude as he remembers God's great power. It is, in short, a subtle appeal for compassion.

What we see here is a remarkable, intelligent hoopoe who has faith. He presents what he saw very skilfully, aware of its position, and relying on subtle expression. It understands that the woman is a queen and the people around her are her subjects, and it is fully aware that they prostrate themselves before the sun, instead of God. It also knows that such worship should be offered only to God who is the Lord of all the universe. This is not how hoopoes generally look at matters and understand them. Such understanding by a hoopoe is indeed miraculous.

Exchange with a Powerful Queen

Solomon does not judge the matter hastily. He is not too thrilled with the news brought by the hoopoe. He wants to be sure before taking any action. This is the appropriate course to follow by a fair prophet and a wise king:

> *Said [Solomon]: We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return.* (Verses 27-28)

At this point the contents of the letter are not revealed. They are left until it is delivered when interest is at its highest.

The curtains are drawn here. When they are lifted again, we are in the presence of the Queen of Sheba, after the letter has been delivered to her. She is in consultation with her advisers:

> *[The Queen of Sheba] said: Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God].'*(Verses 29-31)

As she tells them of the letter we gather that most probably she did not know how the letter was delivered or by whom. She uses the passive voice in her report of its

delivery. Had she known that it was a hoopoe who delivered it, as some commentaries on the Qur'ān suggest, she would surely have reported this as a remarkable and extraordinary event. Nevertheless, she describes the letter as "*worthy*', either because of its shape, appearance, the seal it bears or because of its contents which she reports to her advisers: "*It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God].*" (Verses 30-31) She did not worship God, but the whole region knew about Solomon and his status. Besides, the language of the letter was clear, decisive and to the point.

What the letter stated was very clear, simple and powerful. It began with the name of God, the Most Merciful, and made a single demand: that the queen and her people must not take a hostile or belligerent attitude towards its sender; rather, they should go to him declaring their submission to God, in whose name he addressed them.

Having reported on the letter and its contents, the queen requested advice, declaring that she would not make a decision without their consultation and consent: "*Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present.*" (Verse 32) Thus she appears to be a very wise queen. It is clear at the outset that she was greatly impressed by the letter, yet she also appears serious and decisive. She imparted this to her advisers by describing the letter as *'worthy'*. It is clear that she wants neither opposition nor belligerency. She does not say this openly; instead, she prepares the way for it by the line she takes. She then requests their advice.

As is customary with courtiers, they declared their readiness to do whatever was demanded of them, but they left the final decision to the queen: "*They said: We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command.*" (Verse 33)

Now we see the woman, rather than the queen, expressing her feelings. A woman instinctively hates war and the destruction it brings in its wake. Therefore, she decides to seek peace and conciliation rather than resistance and conflict:

> *Said she: When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back.* (Verses 34-35)

The queen is fully aware that when kings occupy a city or a country, they wreak havoc, destroying everything, so as to break all resistance. In particular, they target its chiefs, seeking to humiliate them as they are the ones who put up resistance. This is clearly the habit of all domineering kings. She is also aware that a gift wins hearts and emphasizes friendship. It may also remove the threat of war. Hence, her

approach was certainly worth a try. If Solomon accepted the gift, then he was after something that belonged to this world. She would then know that normal worldly means would be effective. If he refused the gift, then it was all a question of faith which he would pursue with diligence, accepting no compromise.

This scene is concluded at this point. When the curtains are lifted again we see the queen's emissaries delivering her gift to Solomon who takes them to task for thinking that they could buy his peace with money, seeking to divert him from calling on them to believe in God. He announced his final ultimatum, in clear and powerful terms:

> *When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.'* (Verses 36-37)

His answer derides money, scorning its use in a situation that involves advocacy of the faith, where it can be of no use: *"Is it gold that you would give me?"* Are you making me such a trivial offer? *"What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you."* (Verse 36) He has given me things that are far superior to wealth; namely, knowledge, prophethood and the service of the *jinn* and birds. No material thing, rich as it may be, holds any attraction for me: "*Yet you rejoice with your own gift."* (Verse 36) Such worldly luxuries may please the likes of you who have no bond with God and who do not receive His gifts.

He follows this with a new ultimatum, saying to the queen's envoy: *"Go back to them,"* and take your gift with you. Tell them to await their inevitable defeat: *"We shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match."* (Verse 37) Such forces have never been placed under any person's command. The queen and her powerful army are no match for them. "*And we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled."* (Verse 37)

The curtains are drawn, and the envoys are dismissed. The *sūrah* does not add a further word about them. It is as if the whole matter is settled and needs no further comment.

Waiting for the Queen

We now see Solomon fully aware that his answer will settle the matter with the queen, whom he realized had no wish for conflict. Indeed, he felt that she was likely to respond to his call. The *sūrah,* however, does not mention how her envoys

returned, what they said to her, and how she made up her mind. There is a gap here, but we learn from what comes afterwards that she planned to go to Solomon, and that he was aware of her intention. Hence, he discusses with his commanders how to bring him her throne which she had left well guarded in her palace:

> *Solomon said: "Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' Said an afreet of the jinn: I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.'* (Verses 38-40)

What was Solomon's objective behind bringing her throne before she arrived and declared her submission to God? Most probably he wanted to show her some aspect of the superior power placed at his command. This was likely to win her heart and influence her to believe in God.

An afreet from among the *jinn* offered to bring the throne to him before he had finished the session he was attending. It is reported that he sat from morning till noon to judge in disputes that were put to him. Apparently, Solomon felt that this was too long a time to wait. Therefore, a person 'who was deeply versed in the Book' offered to bring it in the twinkling of an eye. The *sūrah* does not mention the name of that person, nor does it say which was the book known to him. We understand, however, that he was a believer who had a strong bond with God, and had some divine secret that allowed him to use something of the great power that transcends barriers and distances. This is something that at times occurs to some people with very strong faith. No explanation is offered for it, because it goes beyond what is familiar to people. This, then, is all that we can say without delving into the realm of legend and superstition.

Some commentators on the Qur'ān add certain details. Some say that the book mentioned in the verse is the Torah; others say that the person knew God's greatest name; and others still have offered yet more suggestions. None of these, however, gives us any explanation that carries any degree of certainty. Yet the matter is much simpler than all such explanations. Countless are the secrets we know nothing about in the universe around us, and numerous also are the powers that we do not use ourselves. Indeed, within the human soul there are many secrets and powers that we cannot fathom. When God wants to inform any of His servants of one of these secrets or powers that person will accomplish something of a miraculous nature that goes beyond what is familiar. It is all accomplished by God's will and design. No one other than a true servant of God will be able to accomplish such feats.

The person in Solomon's story who is described as *deeply versed in the Book'* was

able, by the knowledge imparted to him, to use some secret or power that enabled him to accomplish the miraculous bringing over of the queen's throne to Solomon. His knowledge of the Book established a bond between him and his Lord that made him able to do what was required.

Some commentators suggest that this was Solomon himself, but we think it was more likely that it was a different person. Had it been Solomon, the *sūrah* would have mentioned this given that the whole story is about him. There would have been no need to withhold his name at this remarkable juncture. Some say that his name was Assaf ben Berachia, but we have no evidence to support this.

> *When he saw it standing before him, he said: This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self sufficient, most generous.* (Verse 40)

Solomon was clearly in awe of God's majesty as He fulfilled his requests in such a supernatural way. He also felt that such grace constituted a serious test for him personally. To pass such a test successfully he would need to be very alert, as also need help from God. He also needed to recognize God's favours and to be genuinely grateful for them. Needless to say, God needed no thanks from anyone, but the one who thanks God for His favours does so for his own good, because his thanks ensure that more favours will come his way. In this way, then Solomon would be better able to pass the test. As for those who are ungrateful, they should know that God has no need of them or their gratitude; He is most generous, granting favours and expecting neither return nor gratitude.

A Confrontation of Sorts

Now Solomon continues preparing some surprises for the Queen of Sheba whom he expected would arrive shortly: *"He [then] said: Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided."* (Verse 41) He wanted the distinctive features of her throne to be changed, so as to gauge her intelligence and alertness. Would she be able to recognize it, or would the change confuse her such that she could not see it?

Perhaps Solomon wanted to test her presence of mind and her reaction at the point of surprise as she saw the throne. Therefore, we are presented with a picture of the queen with Solomon: *"So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: "It looks as though it were the same.'"* (Verse 42) This was a shock for the queen. She could have never thought it possible that the throne she was looking at

was her own. She had left it in her own country, where it was well guarded. What could bring it to Jerusalem, Solomon's capital? Who could bring it and how? Yet she could see that it was hers, despite the alterations. Should she deny this on the basis of the realities of the situation, or should she say that it was hers, considering all the similarities? Her answer was thoughtful and clever: *"It looks as though it were the same."* (Verse 42) She neither denied nor confirmed it. In fact her answer is indicative of a sharp intelligence and quick presence of mind.

We have here another gap which suggests that she was informed of the surprise and its secret. In reply she said that she was already prepared to surrender herself to God from the moment she had decided to come to Solomon after he had turned down her gift: *"We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves."* (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* then explains what prevented her from believing in God up to that point and what had turned her away from surrendering herself to God when Solomon's letter was first delivered to her. She had grown up in the midst of an unbelieving people. Her worship of creatures that were far from equal to God, such as the sun, actually prevented her from worshipping Him alone: *"Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation."* (Verse 43)

Solomon had already prepared another surprise for the queen, which thus far remains hidden from us. With the first one, we were told of it before it actually occurred, but here the method is different:

> *She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: "It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!' She said: '0 my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.'* (Verse 44)

This surprise consisted of a palace made of glass, and its floor placed above water so as to appear like a lake. When she was asked to enter the palace, she thought that she was meant to walk through the lake and so lifted her skirts to bare her legs. The surprise was then complete. Now Solomon tells her its secret: *"It is but a court smoothly paved with glass."* (Verse 44) The queen stood agape, perfectly amazed at such wondrous accomplishments that defy human capabilities. She recognized that Solomon had been given superior powers. Therefore, she turned to God acknowledging her past error, declaring that she had wronged herself when she worshipped others, and announcing her submission, not to Solomon, but with him, *"to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 44)

Thus her heart had interacted with divine guidance and benefitted by its light. She

realized that surrendering to God did not mean her submission to anyone of His creatures, not even to Solomon, the prophet and the king who had been given all these miracles. True surrender is to God, the Lord of all the worlds, being in companionship with those who believe in Him and who advocate His message, on the basis of equality.

The *sūrah* highlights this point in order to clarify the nature of belief in God and surrender to Him. It imparts the sort of dignity that raises the vanquished to the ranks of the victors, such that they become brothers in faith. In fact, there are no vanquished or victors. How can there be when they are truly brothers, tied by the bond of faith, feeling their equality in God's sight?

The elders of the Quraysh who opposed the Prophet in Makkah felt it far beneath them that they should be under Muhammad's leadership. Here we see a woman of the past teaching them that Islam places the advocate of the divine message and those who are addressed by that advocate on the same basis. Leader and subordinates are equals, treated in the same way. People simply respond to God's Messenger and submit with him to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

4
Plotting to Kill a Prophet

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَىٰ ثَمُودَ أَخَاهُمۡ صَٰلِحًا أَنِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ فَإِذَا هُمۡ فَرِيقَانِ يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

To the Thamūd We sent their brother, Ṣāliĥ, and he said: "Worship God alone', but they split into two contending factions. (45)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ لِمَ تَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ قَبۡلَ ٱلۡحَسَنَةِۖ لَوۡلَا تَسۡتَغۡفِرُونَ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Said [Ṣāliĥ]: "My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?' (46)

قَالُواْ ٱطَّيَّرۡنَا بِكَ وَبِمَن مَّعَكَۚ قَالَ طَٰٓئِرُكُمۡ عِندَ ٱللَّهِۖ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٞ تُفۡتَنُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

They answered: "We augur evil from you and those that follow you.' Said he: "The evil you augur can come only from God. You are indeed people undergoing a test.' (47)

وَكَانَ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ تِسۡعَةُ رَهۡطٖ يُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا يُصۡلِحُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. (48)

قَالُواْ تَقَاسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ لَنُبَيِّتَنَّهُۥ وَأَهۡلَهُۥ ثُمَّ لَنَقُولَنَّ لِوَلِيِّهِۦ مَا شَهِدۡنَا مَهۡلِكَ أَهۡلِهِۦ وَإِنَّا لَصَٰدِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth." (49)

وَمَكَرُواْ مَكۡرٗا وَمَكَرۡنَا مَكۡرٗا وَهُمۡ لَا

They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not

perceive it. (50)	يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾
Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, (51)	فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ مَكْرِهِمْ أَنَّا دَمَّرْنَٰهُمْ وَقَوْمَهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥١﴾
and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing. In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge. (52)	فَتِلْكَ بُيُوتُهُمْ خَاوِيَةًۢ بِمَا ظَلَمُوٓاْ ۗ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾
And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing. (53)	وَأَنجَيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَكَانُواْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Overview

In the majority of cases when an account of the history of the Prophet Ṣāliĥ and the Thamūd is given, it constitutes part of a series of histories involving the Prophets Noah, Had, Lot and Shu`ayb. Sometimes we also have an account of Abraham. In this *sūrah,* particular emphasis is given to prophets sent to the Children of Israel: Moses, David and Solomon. We have no account of Hūd, Shu`ayb or Abraham.

In the present account of Ṣāliĥ we have no mention of the she- camel which was the miracle given to him. Instead, we are given the episode involving nine wicked people who plotted to assassinate him and his household. They conspired against him when he was totally unaware, but God foiled their scheming, destroyed them and their community, leaving the homes of the wrongdoers empty to serve as a lesson to following generations. He saved those who believed and led God-fearing lives. The idolaters in Makkah often passed by the destroyed dwellings of the Thamūd, yet still they did not take heed.

Precipitating Evil

"To *the Thamūd We sent their brother, Ṣāliĥ, and he said: "Worship God alone', but they split into two contending factions."* (Verse 45) In this verse the whole message Ṣāliĥ conveyed to his people is summed up in one point, "*worship God alone,'* which is the basis of the divine message to mankind throughout all generations, and with all prophets and messengers. Although everything around man in the universe and

within man himself urges belief in this fundamental truth, humanity lived for countless generations denying or deriding this basic and simple fact. It continues to deliberately evade it today, taking divergent routes that lead it away from the right and straight path.

The *sūrah* mentions the attitude of Ṣāliĥ's people after he had endeavoured to persuade them to believe, but they split into two factions: one that responded to him and the other who opposed him. The latter formed the majority, as we are told elsewhere in the Qur'ān.

We then have a gap in the story, which is common in Qur'ānic narration, and we sense that those who denied Ṣāliĥ's message tried to hasten God's punishment against which he had warned them, rather than praying for God's guidance and mercy. In this they were the same as the Quraysh who also precipitated God's punishment. Ṣāliĥ criticized their attitude and tried to direct them to seek God's forgiveness, so that they might receive His mercy: *"Said [Ṣāliĥ]: My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?"* (Verse 46)

The hearts of unbelievers can reach such a level of corruption that they appeal to God, saying: *"God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us."* (8: 32) They say this rather than praying to God to guide them to believe in the truth He has revealed. While this verse refers to what the Quraysh said, Ṣāliĥ's people said something similar, rejecting their prophet's appeals that they should repent, seek God's forgiveness and pray for His mercy. They even justified their irritation with him and his followers by saying that they constituted a bad omen and that they expected evil to befall them as a result of their presence: *"They answered: We augur evil from you and those that follow you."* (Verse 47)

The Arabic text uses the verb *iṭṭyrnā,* rendered here as *'we augur evil'*. It refers to the different superstitious habits of ignorant people who refuse to accept the clarity of faith. In Arabia a person who was about to take a serious decision would scare a bird. If the bird flew towards the right rather than the left, the man felt optimistic about his decision and went ahead with it. If the bird flew to the left, the man would be gloomy, expecting evil. Needless to say, birds know nothing of the world that lies beyond our perception. Their spontaneous flight cannot tell us anything about the unknown. But it is ingrained within human nature that it cannot live without something unknown to which it attributes what lies beyond its knowledge and ability. When it does not attribute this, through faith, to God who knows all that lies beyond the reach of any creature's perception, it attributes it to legend and superstition that know no limit and follow no logic.

Many are those who deny God, and refuse to attribute to Him what lies beyond human perception, describing it as religious fallacy, while claiming for themselves a superior standard of knowledge. At the same time they attach much importance to the number 13, or to a black cat crossing their path, or to lighting two cigarettes with one match, or other such superstitious notions. This is indicative of the way people resist human nature and its need for faith. Indeed human nature cannot dispense with faith in its attempt to explain many universal phenomena which human knowledge has not yet fathomed. Indeed some of these will always remain beyond the reach of human knowledge, because they exceed human ability which is given to man in accordance with what he needs for the fulfilment of his task of building life on earth.

When Ṣāliĥ's people stated their stupid excuse, one which betrayed their superstitious confusion, Ṣāliĥ put the truth clearly before their eyes: "*Said he: The evil you augur can come only from God.*" (Verse 47) Everything that relates to your fortunes, future and destiny lies with God. He has set certain rules, commanded people to comply with His laws, and set clear before them the way to ensure their happiness. Whoever follows divine guidance will have its good results, without any need to scare a bird in order to decide what path to follow. Those who deviate from His guidance will reap evil results, even though their scared birds may reassure them by the direction of their flight.

"*You are indeed people undergoing a test.*" (Verse 47) You are certainly being tested with whatever happens to you, good or bad, and with God's bounty that is given to you. Therefore, to stay alert, study events and recognize that they are part of the trial that will ensure good results which can never be achieved through pursuing omens.

True faith makes people evaluate things properly, motivates them to reflect on what takes place all around them. It makes them realize that it all happens by God's will, while nothing is the result of blind coincidence. Thus, life increases in value and people attain a higher spiritual standard. Man makes his journey through life on this planet without any isolation from the universe around him, or its Creator who conducts its affairs, or the laws of nature operated by God to ensure the continuity of the universe.

This sound approach is, however, accepted only by sound hearts which have not been twisted by irrevocable deviation from the truth.

Among Ṣāliĥ's people there were nine leaders who were irreconcilable in their opposition to his call. Hence, they plotted against him and his family:

> *There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him*

> *and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth."* (Verses 48-49)

These nine people had left no room in their hearts for the truth and its message. They were determined to bring matters to a head after they found Ṣāliĥ's argument overpowering. Hence they devised a plot. Most singularly, they agreed under oath by God to kill Ṣāliĥ and his family under the cover of darkness. All this when he asked nothing other than that they believe in God and worship Him alone. It is also singular that they should not only swear to kill him and his family, but that they were also intent on denying any knowledge of the crime. *"We are indeed telling the truth."* They would kill them in darkness, and as such they would not see the killing and hence would not be witnesses to it.

What a stupid, shallow trick! Yet they used it to reassure themselves and justify their lies. It is certainly singular that such people were so keen to sound truthful given the circumstances. When it is blinded to God's guidance which shows the straight path, human nature betrays countless such twists and deviations.

So they schemed and plotted, but God was watching them, aware of their scheming: *"They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not perceive it."* (Verse 50) The gap between the two schemes, and the two powers behind them is too far to bridge. Yet often are those who have power deceived by their resources, oblivious to the watching eye that never sleeps. They do not reckon with God's power as it takes them suddenly and from where they do not expect: *"Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing."* (Verses 51-52)

It is only a brief moment yet destruction engulfs them, leaving their homes empty with no soul surviving. A moment earlier they had been scheming their evil plot. The *sūrah* deliberately portrays the two scenes in quick succession, in order to highlight the devastating element that takes unawares those plotters who are deceived by their power, thinking their scheme perfectly worked out.

"In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge." (Verse 52) The *sūrah* as a whole and its comments on the stories it relates repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge.

Following this image of surprise punishment, the *sūrah* then mentions that those believers who were conscious of God and feared Him were saved: *"And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing."* (Verse 53) A person who fears God is spared other fears.

It is clearly stated in a sacred *ĥadīth* that "God will not allow two types of fear to afflict a believer.' Thus, a believer who truly fears God will fear no one else.

5
Perversion Leading to Ruin

And Lot said to his people: 'Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? (54)	وَلُوطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِۦٓ أَتَأْتُونَ ٱلْفَـٰحِشَةَ وَأَنتُمْ تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾
Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people.' (55)	أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّن دُونِ ٱلنِّسَآءِ ۚ بَلْ أَنتُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾
His people's only answer was: "Expel Lot's people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure.' (56)	۞ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوٓا۟ أَخْرِجُوٓا۟ ءَالَ لُوطٍ مِّن قَرْيَتِكُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ أُنَاسٌ يَتَطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾
So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. (57)	فَأَنجَيْنَـٰهُ وَأَهْلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱمْرَأَتَهُۥ قَدَّرْنَـٰهَا مِنَ ٱلْغَـٰبِرِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾
And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned. (58)	وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِم مَّطَرًا ۖ فَسَآءَ مَطَرُ ٱلْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Persecuting Purity

What we have here is a summarized version of Lot's history and the decision taken by his people to drive him out of their town because he denounced their perverted sexual practices. By so indulging unashamedly in homosexuality, they perverted human nature which God had installed in all human beings, and indeed in living species generally.

This was a strange phenomenon in the history of human communities. Perversion can occur with individuals, as a result of psychological disorders or temporary circumstances, leading men to have sex with other men. This happens mostly in army barracks where women are not allowed, or in prisons where inmates are held for long periods of time, having to cope with sexual desires without contact with women. But for such practices to be widespread, becoming the norm in a whole town, and despite the presence of women and marriage possibilities, it is most peculiar indeed.

God has made human nature such that the two sexes are attracted to each other, because life in general is based on marriage. He says in the Qur'ān: *"Limitless in His glory is He who has created all the pairs out of whatever the earth produces, and out of people's own selves, and out of that which they have no knowledge."* (36: 36) Thus all living species, plant, animal, human and other creatures unknown to man, are created in pairs. Such duality seems fundamental in the make up of the entire universe, let alone living species. The atom itself, which until now seems to be the basic unit of all creatures, has protons and electrons, which are positive and negative charges.

The reality is that the survival of all living things is based on the mating between two opposites. Even species that do not have males and females combine their male and female cells in the same unit, reproducing by a function that brings both together.

Since mating is basic for reproduction, God has made mutual attraction between the opposite sexes part of the essence of nature, which needs no acquisition or development through education or thought: it is pure instinct. This ensures that life continues naturally, because those who are alive find their pleasure in the fulfilment of their nature. Thus the divine will accomplishes its design through the natural satisfaction of creatures' instinctive desires. God made male and female genitals, and instilled mutual attraction between the two sexes, so that they find their natural pleasure in being together. He made no such possibility in two males coming together. Hence it is most odd that the natural inclinations of a whole community should become so perverted and without any compelling need pushing people to do what is contrary to their natural inclinations, as was the case with Lot's people.

Lot publicly denounced his people's practices stating that these were depraved: *"And Lot said to his people: Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people."* (Verses 54-55)

His first sentence wonders at their abominable practice when they actually saw that life, in all shapes, forms and species, follows its natural course, while they were the ones behaving oddly. In his second sentence he makes clear what type of

abomination they practised. It is enough to state what they did so as to highlight its perversion and conflict with nature. Lot then describes them as grossly ignorant, using the word in both its senses: lacking knowledge and being foolish. A person who does not know what human nature is like is devoid of all knowledge, and one who deliberately departs from human nature is a stupid fool who transgresses against all that is right.

What was Lot's people's reply to his denunciation of their wrongdoing and his urging them to revert to natural practices? In a nutshell, they planned to drive him, and those who followed him, away, for no reason other than that they maintained their purity: "*His people's only answer was: 'Expel Lot's people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure.*" (Verse 56)

Their statement ridiculed anyone who sought to keep himself pure of such abominable practice. It also objected to his disapproval of their practice. They were so deep in their deviation that they could not realize how filthy their practice was. Their reply also indicated their opposition to the very idea of keeping themselves pure, because that would make them refrain from such perversion. Whatever they meant, they had nonetheless made up their minds to remove Lot from the picture. God, however, wanted something different to happen:

> *So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned.* (Verses 57-58)

The *sūrah* does not provide any detail of this destructive rain, as occurs in other *sūrahs.* Hence, we do not need to discuss it here. We will only mention that they were destroyed with a rain, when rain normally brings life. This fits with the fact that they used semen in a way that is contrary to what it is meant for, which is to ensure the continuity of life and growth. God certainly knows better what He means by His words, and what to accomplish by His natural laws.

6
Of God's Own Making

قُلِ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ وَسَلَٰمٌ عَلَىٰ عِبَادِهِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱصۡطَفَىٰٓۗ ءَآللَّهُ خَيۡرٌ أَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him? (59)

أَمَّنۡ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَأَنزَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَنۢبَتۡنَا بِهِۦ حَدَآئِقَ ذَاتَ بَهۡجَةٖ مَّا كَانَ لَكُمۡ أَن تُنۢبِتُواْ شَجَرَهَآۗ أَءِلَٰهٞ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِۚ بَلۡ هُمۡ قَوۡمٞ يَعۡدِلُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice. (60)

أَمَّن جَعَلَ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ قَرَارٗا وَجَعَلَ خِلَٰلَهَآ أَنۡهَٰرٗا وَجَعَلَ لَهَا رَوَٰسِيَ وَجَعَلَ بَيۡنَ ٱلۡبَحۡرَيۡنِ حَاجِزًاۗ أَءِلَٰهٞ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِۚ بَلۡ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there he any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge. (61)

أَمَّن يُجِيبُ ٱلۡمُضۡطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكۡشِفُ ٱلسُّوٓءَ وَيَجۡعَلُكُمۡ خُلَفَآءَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ أَءِلَٰهٞ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِۚ قَلِيلٗا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect! (62)

أَمَّن يَهۡدِيكُمۡ فِي ظُلُمَٰتِ ٱلۡبَرِّ وَٱلۡبَحۡرِ وَمَن يُرۡسِلُ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ بُشۡرَۢا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡ رَحۡمَتِهِۦٓۗ أَءِلَٰهٞ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِۚ تَعَٰلَى ٱللَّهُ عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٦٣

Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him. (63)

أَمَّن يَبۡدَؤُاْ ٱلۡخَلۡقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ وَمَن يَرۡزُقُكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ أَءِلَٰهٞ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِۚ قُلۡ هَاتُواْ بُرۡهَٰنَكُمۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٦٤

Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God?' Say: "Produce your proof, if you are truthful.'(64)

قُل لَّا يَعۡلَمُ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُۚ وَمَا يَشۡعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ يُبۡعَثُونَ ٦٥

Say: "None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' (65)

بَلِ ٱدَّٰرَكَ عِلۡمُهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۚ بَلۡ هُمۡ فِي شَكّٖ مِّنۡهَاۖ بَلۡ هُم مِّنۡهَا عَمُونَ ٦٦

Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. (66)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَءِذَا كُنَّا تُرَٰبًا وَءَابَآؤُنَآ أَئِنَّا لَمُخۡرَجُونَ ٦٧

The unbelievers say: "What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life)? (67)

لَقَدۡ وُعِدۡنَا هَٰذَا نَحۡنُ وَءَابَآؤُنَا مِن قَبۡلُ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ٦٨

We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (68)

قُلۡ سِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ٦٩

Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty.' (69)

وَلَا تَحۡزَنۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ وَلَا تَكُن فِي ضَيۡقٖ مِّمَّا

Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. (70)

يَمْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (71)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

Say: "It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you.' (72)

قُلْ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ رَدِفَ لَكُم بَعْضُ ٱلَّذِى تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. (73)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. (74)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمْ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book. (75)

وَمَا مِنْ غَآئِبَةٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ إِلَّا فِى كِتَٰبٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٧٥﴾

This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. (76)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ يَقُصُّ عَلَىٰ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ أَكْثَرَ ٱلَّذِى هُمْ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. (77)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. (78)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِى بَيْنَهُم بِحُكْمِهِۦ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٧٨﴾

So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. (79)

فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّكَ عَلَى ٱلْحَقِّ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (80)

إِنَّكَ لَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ وَلَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا وَلَّوْا۟ مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (81)

وَمَآ أَنتَ بِهَـٰدِى ٱلْعُمْىِ عَن ضَلَـٰلَتِهِمْ ۖ إِن تُسْمِعُ إِلَّا مَن يُؤْمِنُ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا فَهُم مُّسْلِمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. (82)

۞ وَإِذَا وَقَعَ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ أَخْرَجْنَا لَهُمْ دَآبَّةً مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ تُكَلِّمُهُمْ أَنَّ ٱلنَّاسَ كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا لَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. (83)

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشُرُ مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ فَوْجًا مِّمَّن يُكَذِّبُ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

And when they come forth [God] will say: 'Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' (84)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءُو قَالَ أَكَذَّبْتُم بِـَٔايَـٰتِى وَلَمْ تُحِيطُوا۟ بِهَا عِلْمًا أَمَّاذَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. (85)

وَوَقَعَ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِم بِمَا ظَلَمُوا۟ فَهُمْ لَا يَنطِقُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. (86)

أَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا ٱلَّيْلَ لِيَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ

وَٱلنَّهَارَ مُبۡصِرًاۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٨٦

On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. (87)

وَيَوۡمَ يُنفَخُ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَفَزِعَ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا مَن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُۚ وَكُلٌّ أَتَوۡهُ دَٰخِرِينَ ٨٧

And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. (88)

وَتَرَى ٱلۡجِبَالَ تَحۡسَبُهَا جَامِدَةٗ وَهِيَ تَمُرُّ مَرَّ ٱلسَّحَابِۚ صُنۡعَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَتۡقَنَ كُلَّ شَيۡءٍۚ إِنَّهُۥ خَبِيرُۢ بِمَا تَفۡعَلُونَ ٨٨

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. (89)

مَن جَآءَ بِٱلۡحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُۥ خَيۡرٞ مِّنۡهَا وَهُم مِّن فَزَعٖ يَوۡمَئِذٍ ءَامِنُونَ ٨٩

And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: "Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?' (90)

وَمَن جَآءَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ فَكُبَّتۡ وُجُوهُهُمۡ فِي ٱلنَّارِ هَلۡ تُجۡزَوۡنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٩٠

[Say]: 'I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. (91)

إِنَّمَآ أُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَعۡبُدَ رَبَّ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡبَلۡدَةِ ٱلَّذِي حَرَّمَهَا وَلَهُۥ كُلُّ شَيۡءٖۖ وَأُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ ٩١

And to recite the Qur'ān.' So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner.' (92)

وَأَنۡ أَتۡلُوَاْ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَۖ فَمَنِ ٱهۡتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهۡتَدِي لِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَقُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠

And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is

never heedless of what you do.' (93)	مِنَ ٱلۡمُنذِرِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾ وَقُلِ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ سَيُرِيكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ فَتَعۡرِفُونَهَا ۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

Overview

Following closely after those episodes of the histories of Moses, David, Solomon, Ṣāliĥ and Lot (peace be upon them all), this final passage is closely related to its opening verses. As clearly seen, the stories that occur in between the opening and concluding passages are also closely related to both. Every story serves an aspect of the overall issue that the *sūrah* tackles. This final passage begins with praising God and offers the greeting of peace to His chosen prophets and messengers who include in their ranks many that have not been mentioned in this *sūrah.* Thus, the passage begins a new discussion of faith. This round portrays scenes of the universe and shows aspects of the inner self, and things that are beyond our world. It also refers to the signs that announce the approach of the Last Hour, and shows scenes of the hereafter and the hardship people experience on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, apart from those excepted by God, all creatures in the heavens and the earth dread the arrival of the Last Hour.

In this passage people are made to contemplate what they see in the universe around them, and also what is within themselves. They cannot deny these and cannot explain their existence unless they acknowledge God as the sole Creator who has planned it all and who is able to accomplish His purpose in full. These scenes are shown in succession, with a perfect rhythm, rendering all counter argument futile. Successive questions are put to them: who has created the heavens and the earth? Who brought rain from the skies to bring forth pleasant gardens? Who has stabilized the earth, caused rivers to run through it, placed mountains on it and a barrier between seas? Who responds to a supplicant praying in desperation and removes harm? Who causes human succession on earth? Who guides you in the darkness on land and at sea? Who sends the wind heralding His grace? Who originates and repeats creation? Who provides sustenance for you from the heavens and the earth? Time after time they are hammered with the question: can there be another deity alongside God? They cannot utter such a claim, yet they worship objects claiming for them a share of God's divinity!

The passage then looks at their denial of and confusion about the hereafter. It comments by directing them to reflect on the end met by earlier communities which,

like them, denied the truth. This is followed by a scene of the resurrection and what it involves of fear and hardship. It returns them for a moment to life on earth before resuming its account of the Day of Judgement, as if to shake their hearts and souls.

As the passage approaches its end it acquires an awesome rhythm. Having directed the unbelievers' attentions to scenes of the universe and the horror of the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet abandons them to their fate which they have chosen, defining his own code and method: "*I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this City who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit, and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner.*" (Verses 91-92)

The passage and the round conclude in the same way they started: with praising God, the only One who is worthy of praise. The unbelievers are left to their Lord who is sure to show them His signs, and who is certainly aware of all they do in public and in private: "*And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do.*" (Verse 93)

Who Else?

> *Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?* (Verse 59)

In this verse God orders His Messenger (peace be upon him) to say the most suitable word with which to open and conclude his discourse preaching God's message. All praise be to God who deserves praise for all the blessings He has bestowed on His servants, not least guiding them to believe in Him and follow the system and code of living He has chosen for them. Thereafter, a greeting of peace is offered to His servants whom He has chosen to deliver His message and outline the system He wants implemented.

Following this opening, the *sūrah* highlights its effects on hearts that deny God's signs. It begins with a question that admits only one answer: *"Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?"* (Verse 59) These false deities may be statues and figures, angels *or jinn,* or some other created being. None of them, however, aspires to a position of being similar to God Almighty, let alone to being more worthy than He. No one endowed with a mind to think could ever draw such a comparison. Hence the question appears to ridicule their position, or rebuke them for what they say. It is not a question to be asked in earnest, nor does it require an answer.

Therefore, a different question is put to them, derived from the nature of the universe around them and what they see of it:

> *Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice.* (Verse 60)

The heavens and the earth are undeniable facts, yet no one can claim that other deities have created them, when such deities are nothing but statues, angels, devils, stars or planets. Simple facts are enough to show the fallacy of such a claim. None of the idolaters in Arabia made the absurd claim that the universe came into existence by itself, without a creator, like latter day unbelievers do. Hence, it was sufficient to remind people of the existence of the heavens and earth, and to direct them to reflect on who had created them. This was sufficient to prove the case of faith and show unbelief as something truly absurd. This question, however, does remain valid. The creation of the heavens and earth in the way they are, with deliberate planning clearly evident, could never have come about by blind coincidence. Indeed, the perfect harmony apparent in the heavens and the earth forces any thinking person to acknowledge that it is all the work of the One and only God. Indeed, God's oneness is evident through His work: there is one harmonious design running throughout the universe, with a single nature and direction. Hence, it must have been made by the One originator whose aim is clear in everything He creates and designs.

"Or, who is it that... sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow." (Verse 60) Rain is also a clear undeniable fact. One cannot be explained in any way other than acknowledging the Creator of the heavens and earth. He enables all in accordance with a system that permits the sending down of rain, in set quantities that allow for the emergence of life as it is. None of this could have come about by coincidence or accident. It is because of meeting such special needs that the Qur'ān uses the phrase *"sends down for you..."* The Qur'ān directs people's attentions to the fine effects of sending rain in suitable measure to meet their needs: *"With which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty."* (Verse 60)

Gardens warm hearts with endearing vigour and activity. To look at natural beauty is enough to bring hearts alive. To contemplate all the aspects of creation in gardens is sufficient to make a person glorify the Maker of such inimitable beauty. Indeed, even the best artists fall short of matching the colours of just a single flower. The use of shades of the same colours, the intricate lines and the arrangement of little petals within the same flower appears to be a miracle that defies the ingenuity of all

art. Add all this to the miracle of growth reflected in trees, and you have a secret the human mind cannot fathom: "*You could have never caused such trees to grow.*" (Verse 60) For certain, the secret of life remains unknown to all humanity. Up to this moment in time, no one has been able to say how life started and how it was attached to plants, animals and people. To have a proper answer, we need to refer to some source beyond our visible world.

When the *sūrah* dwells on life growing in delightful gardens, and by means of this heightening interest and causing reflection, it surprises its listeners with the question: *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 60) No one can claim that there is. All have to admit the fact. Hence, their attitude of equating their alleged deities with God and worshipping them on an equal footing appears to be most unjust: *"Nay, they are people who swerve from justice."* (Verse 60)

The Arabic word *ya`dilūn* used in this verse to describe these people carries two meanings. The first means 'to equate', which renders the sentence as "Nay, they are people who equate,' meaning equating others in their worship with God. The other meaning is the one chosen in our translation, which is "*to swerve from justice.*" Thus, by associating others with God in their worship they actually swerve from justice. This because God is the only One worthy of worship: He is the only Creator. Whichever meaning we choose, however, makes their action derisive.

The *sūrah* then highlights another universal truth, placing it to the forefront of their vision:

> *Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge.* (Verse 61)

The preceding verse spoke about the fact of the heavens and earth's creation. This verse refers to how the earth was made. God has made it stable, steady and solid so that it can support growing life. If the earth's position in relation to the sun and moon, or its shape, size, atmosphere, speed of rotation or orbital movement, or the speed of the moon as it circles it in orbit, or any other aspect which could not have come about by coincidence, were different to what it actually is, the earth would not sustain life.

Those unbelievers who were first addressed by the Qur'ān could not understand the meaning of "*who is it that made the earth a stable abode*". But they realized that it was, overall, a very suitable abode for the emergence and continuity of life. They could not claim that any of their alleged deities had a part in the earth's creation. This is sufficient for them. Thereafter, the question remains open for future generations

who, with increased knowledge, would be better able to appreciate its great significance. This is an aspect of the Qur'ānic miracle as it addresses all standards of intellect, generation after generation.

"Or, *who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst."* (Verse 61) In relation to the earth, rivers are the veins that carry the fluid of life. They are everywhere, running north and south, east and west, bringing fertility and growth. Rivers are the result of rain water gathering and running according to local geography. The Creator of the universe is the One who has determined the formation of clouds, rain and rivers. No one can say that anyone other than this single Creator has taken part in forming the universe. Running rivers are a phenomenon seen by the unbelievers themselves. So who has made them? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"*

"And has set upon it firm mountains." (Verse 61) The mountains are placed firmly in their positions. They are often the starting points of rivers, as rain water runs from them at high speed to the valleys below so as to form the riverbeds in which water flows. Thus the firm mountains provide contrast with the running water in this panoramic scene. Contrasting images are often employed in the Qur'ān.

"And has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water?" (Verse 61) These two bodies of water are the salty seas and the rivers carrying sweet water. Both have water as their main material. The barrier between them is a natural one which prevents the sea from overpowering the river and spoiling its water. The level of water in rivers is higher than sea level, and this causes the barrier between them despite the fact that many rivers wind their way to the sea. Nevertheless, the riverbed remains unaffected by the sea. Even when a river's water level drops below sea level, the barrier remains effective, due to the different degrees of viscosity of the two waters. River water is lighter than sea water, which helps to keep them separate. This is one aspect of God's elaborate design in creating the universe.[7]

Who has done all this? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* When we look at the unity of design we cannot but acknowledge the unity of the Creator. *"Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge."* (Verse 61) Knowledge is mentioned here because this universal fact needs knowledge to be properly contemplated and for its meticulous aspects to be made clearly apparent to all. Moreover, knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah,* as we have already explained.

[7] Scientific discovery confirms that when straits connect two contiguous seas their waters are separated by an invisible barrier, each containing different marine life. The Qur'ānic statement also applies to such situations. In the Arabic text, the word used for 'body of water' is *baḥr,* which means sea, but it is used in the dual form to mean a sea and a river, or two seas. — Editor's note.

Who Takes Care of Man?

Next, the *sūrah* tells them about themselves:

> *Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect!* (Verse 62)

As it tells them about their inner thoughts and real position, this verse speaks to peoples' consciences. When a person finds himself in real distress, expecting little help from anywhere, he resorts to none other than God to remove his distress. This is especially so when the distress is too much to cope with; when the help one had been expecting from friends and relatives fails to materialize; when one looks around only to find oneself in a hopeless situation with no means of escape; when no power, not even one's own, is able to do much to relieve one's distress; when whatever one has prepared for hard times proves useless. In such a situation human nature wakes up and appeals to the only power that can provide help and support. Man then appeals to God, even though he had forgotten Him in times of ease and plenty.

It is only God, and none other, who responds to a person in distress and removes ill and hardship. It is God who restores security to such a person and removes all that has been afflicting him.

In times of ease and plenty people are oblivious of this fact. They try to find support and protection with some worldly power, flimsy as such may be. Yet when distress and hardship are too strong, their nature regains insight and they turn back to their Lord, seeking His forgiveness and support.

The Qur'ān directs stubborn opponents of faith to this fact that lies in their nature. It incorporates this with the indisputable facts of the universe, such as the creation of the heavens and earth, rain, plant growth, man's firm abode on earth, the mountains, rivers and the barrier between river and sea water. That a person in distress appeals to God for help is also a fact of life which is no less true than any of these.

The *sūrah* continues to direct their feelings to realities in their life: *"And makes you inherit the earth?" Who* is it that allows people to take charge of the earth? It is God who initially placed mankind in charge of the earth, and then made them succeed one another, generation after generation. It is He who created them in accordance with laws of nature that allow their existence on earth, and granted them talents and abilities that prepare them for their great task of building life on earth. These laws make the earth what it is, providing them with a suitable abode, and produce harmony and complementarity in the whole universe so as to provide and maintain the balance that promotes life and ensures its continuity. Should any of the many

existing conditions be disturbed, life on earth becomes impossible.[8]

Besides, it is God who has determined life and death, to allow one generation to succeed another. Had earlier generations continued to live, the earth would be too small for them and their descendants. Life, civilization and thought would have become stale and slow, as the succession of generations promotes new thinking and experimenting. Had too many generations been allowed to live together, conflict and dispute would have increased exponentially.

All these are facts we find within the human soul, in the same way as the facts mentioned earlier exist in the universe. Who brought about their existence? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 62) They certainly forget or choose to be oblivious. *"Little do they reflect."* (Verse 62) Had man reflected on such facts, he would maintain his bond with God as it was originally. He would not have been oblivious of it, and he would never have associated partners with God.

The *sūrah* then refers to other indisputable facts that represent human life and activity on this planet:

> *Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him.* (Verse 63)

People, including the first community to be addressed by the Qur'ān, move along beaten tracks when they travel on land or by sea, and they try to discover the secrets of land and sea through experimentation. They are guided to their goals, but who guides them? Who has placed in them the powers of understanding and recognition? Who has enabled them to be guided by stars, other devices and landmarks? Who has established a link between their own nature and that of the universe, and between their powers and its secrets? Who has given their ears the ability to catch and recognize sound; and their eyes to receive light; their senses to perceive sensations? Who has given them the intelligent faculty we call "mind' in order to benefit by what it receives, and to gather and build upon experience? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 63)

"And who sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace?" (Verse 63) Whatever may be said about the formation and causes of wind from scientific, atmospheric or geographical points of view, they remain part of the overall design of the universe. It is this design that allows the wind to travel, driving clouds from one place to another, promising rain which symbolizes God's grace as it supports life.

[8] For further explanation, please refer to the commentary on verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25 in Vol. XII.

Who has made the world such that the winds bring tidings of forthcoming grace? *"Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him."* (Verse 63)

Origination and Resurrection

These verses containing such powerful questioning conclude with a question about their own creation, resurrection and the provisions they receive from heaven. This is all coupled with a challenge that cannot be met:

> *Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: Produce your proof, if you are truthful.'* (Verse 64)

To initiate creation is an indisputable fact, and no one can explain it in any way other than saying that it is the work of the One Creator. His existence must be acknowledged because of the existence of the universe. Every attempt to explain the existence of the universe in such an evidently planned and deliberate state without acknowledging God's existence and oneness has proven logically unsustainable. Indeed, His own creation proves His oneness. It tells of one system of creation, planning, absolute balance and harmony, which means that it is all subject to a single will that established a single sophisticated rule of existence.

It is the bringing back of creation that unbelievers have always disputed. Yet the acknowledgement of initial creation in such a planned and elaborate way inevitably leads to belief in a second creation so as to give people what they deserve for their actions which they do in this temporary stage of life. Although some reward for action is given in this life, it is by no means complete. The point is that we have clear balance and harmony in the elaborate creation of the universe. This necessitates its perfection through the achievement of balance and harmony between action and reward, which does not happen in life on earth. Therefore, it must take place in a second life. As to why such balance and reward are not accomplished in this life, we can only say that it is the prerogative of the Creator and His wisdom. We must not put such a question to Him, because He knows His creation best. He has chosen not to reveal the reason to us, keeping it as part of His own knowledge which He reveals to no one.

With the acknowledgement of God as the originator of creation and the One who brings the dead back to life, the *sūrah* asks the same question again: *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 64)

Providing sustenance is closely related to our first and second creation. Sustenance

comes from the earth in a variety of ways, the most evident of which are plants, animals, water and air, all of which enable us to eat, drink and breathe. It also includes minerals that we take from the earth, sea treasures that provide food and adornment, different types of energy such as electricity and magnetism, as well as other powers known only to God. We are able to discover some of these and tap them every now and then.

Sustenance that comes from the heavens is also plentiful. In this life we get light, heat and rain as well as whatever powers and benefits God grants us. In the life to come, we receive the reward God will be pleased to give us. This is implied in the figurative sense of "heaven" connoting elevation, which is often used in the Qur'ān and *ĥadīth.*

The provision of sustenance out of heaven and earth is mentioned after the initiation and resurrection of creation because both types of sustenance are closely related to the two cycles of creation. In the first stage of creation people live on the food and sustenance they get out of the earth. The way they deal with such sustenance in this life is an important factor in determining their reward in the hereafter. The same applies to sustenance provided from heaven: it is to sustain life initially and to provide reward ultimately. Here again we see an example of the accuracy and harmony in the Qur'ānic style.

Creation and resurrection are facts, as is sustenance provided out of the heavens and earth, but unbelievers are often oblivious to these facts. Hence the *sūrah* throws out a forceful challenge to them: *"Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: 'Produce your proof, if are truthful."* (Verse 64)

They will have no proof, and no one who tries to find proof will ever be successful. Such is the Qur'ānic method of argument about faith: it uses scenes from the universe around us and facts that we know within our own constitution, making them a framework for its powerful logic. It thus revives human nature so that it looks at facts in a simple and correct way. It addresses the human conscience through the facts it knows but has overlooked for long. In this simple and logical way, the Qur'ān establishes the profound indisputable truths we know in the universe and within ourselves. It leaves no room for dialectic reasoning that we have inherited from Greek sophistry, and which found its way into what is known in Islamic scholarship as the *Kalām* discipline, or theology.

Blind to the Truth

Having taken us on this round of universal imagery and facts about our lives to establish the truth of God's oneness and the falsehood of polytheism, the *sūrah* begins a new passage citing aspects of what lies beyond the reach of human

perception, known only to God. These verses discuss the life to come, which human nature and logic accept as essential, but the timing of which our knowledge cannot determine:

> *Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. The unbelievers say: 'What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]? We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients. 'Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty. 'Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you.' Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book.* (Verses 65-75)

Belief in resurrection, reckoning and reward is an integral and indispensable element of faith. There must be a future world when reward is completed so as to make it fit the action performed. It is necessary that man's heart and mind are focused on such future life, so as to make his actions in this world look to what awaits him there.

Over countless generations and despite successive divine messages humanity has taken a singularly bizarre attitude towards the question of resurrection and the life to come, despite its being both simple and necessary. It always stood incredulous when a messenger of God said that there would be life after death. The great miracle of initiating life in the first place was not enough to make humanity realize that a second life is easier to accomplish. Hence, people often turned away from every signal warning them of what awaits them in the life to come. They were bent on following their erring ways, disbelieving in God's messages and rejecting His messengers.

The life to come is part of the realm that lies beyond our faculties of perception and which is known only to God. Yet unbelievers always demanded to know the exact timing of this future life, or else they would continue to deny it. They treated it as superstition and legend that has no place in reality. Therefore the *sūrah* makes clear that it is God alone who knows the world beyond, and that human knowledge of the hereafter is very limited: "*Say: 'None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the*

total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it." (Verses 65-66)

Ever since the beginning of human life, man has been unable to see anything of the world beyond his perceptive faculties except what God, who knows all, has chosen to reveal to him. This has always worked for man's benefit. Had God known that revealing such knowledge would be good for man, He would have satisfied his curiosity and revealed it to him.

God has given man a host of abilities, talents, powers and potentials that enable him to fulfil the task assigned to him on earth, but no more. To lift the thick curtains that hide what lies beyond the reach of human perception would not help man in his task. Indeed keeping it unknown increases man's search for knowledge, which then opens up new vistas for him providing him with hidden treasures. Man's quest for knowledge enables him to discover more of the world's secrets and powers which he can then use to improve the quality of life on earth. He can use its materials and products, modify his practices and elevate his life, and by so doing fulfil his role of building human life on earth.

It is not only man who has been denied access to God's knowledge. All creatures that live anywhere in the universe, including the angels and the *jinn,* are assigned missions and tasks that do not require knowledge of what God has kept secret. Therefore: "*Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God."* (Verse 65) This is a definitive statement which leaves no room for anyone to make false claims. Yet this statement speaks about "*hat is hidden*" in general. Therefore, it is followed by a more specific statement concerning the life to come because, next to God's oneness, it represents the second most important issue of contention with the idolaters: "*Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead."* (Verse 65)

This is a negation of any knowledge of the timing of resurrection, even in the most undefined form of knowledge, which is perception. It is not only that they lack any definite knowledge of when resurrection will take place; they cannot perceive it as it approaches. Such knowledge is part of what is hidden, which none in the heavens or earth knows anything about.

This point is then left aside, so as to speak about their attitude to the hereafter and knowledge of it: "*Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verse 66) On this issue they have achieved all that they can aspire to, but remain unable to fathom it. "*Nay, they are in doubt of it."* (Verse 66) They are uncertain whether it will ever come. How can they know its timing and expect its arrival? "*Nay, they are blind to it."* (Verse 66) In as far as the hereafter is concerned, they are totally blind, unable to see or comprehend anything. This last statement depicts them in a worse situation with regard to the hereafter than the two earlier ones.

After Being Reduced to Ashes

"The unbelievers say: What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]?" (Verse 67) This has always been the most difficult point for unbelievers to accept. Could it be true that after life has departed from us, and our bodies have decomposed and been reduced to dust and ashes, which happens to all people within a certain period of their burial apart from some exceptional cases, we will be brought back to life? Is it true that we and our forefathers, who died long before us, will be raised up from the earth when we have become part of its dust?

This physical image acts as a barrier preventing them from accepting the possibility of future life. They forget that they have been brought into this life from nothing. No one knows where the atoms and cells that make up their bodies were initially. They were scattered on the earth, deep in the sea and high in the air. Some came from the soil, some from space and water, and some from the sun. Indeed, some were breathed in by man, plant or animal, and some came from a carcass that had decomposed allowing some of its elements to evaporate. These atoms and cells were then part of some food or drink, or part of the air people breathe, or the rays to which they are exposed. Then this countless multitude, from an unknown number of sources, was assembled in a fertilized egg that clings to the wall of a woman's uterus, and which then grows and acquires human form. After a long journey through life, it becomes no more than a dead body wrapped in sheets, ready for burial. Thus was their first creation. What is so strange about bringing them back in the same form, or in a different one, for their second life? But this was what those unbelievers of old used to say. It continues to be said today by some unbelievers, albeit somewhat differently.

The unbelievers followed this absurdity with ridicule: *"We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients."* (Verse 68) They were fully aware that earlier messengers had warned their forefathers in the past, which indicates that those Arabs were not totally unaware of faith. Rather, they thought that such promises had not been fulfilled. Therefore, they discarded the new promise, describing it as fables circulated among ancient people which Muhammad then revived. They forget that the Day of Judgement arrives at the time appointed for it, and it will neither be put forward because people hasten it, nor delayed to fulfil their hopes.

Its time has been set by God and remains known only to Him. When Gabriel asked the Prophet about its timing, he said: "The one being asked about it knows no more about it than the one putting the question." [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.]

At this point, the *sūrah* directs the unbelievers to turn their minds to the end met

by earlier communities which, like them, denied the warnings given by God's messengers. These are described here as the guilty ones: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty."* (Verse 69) This directive is meant to broaden their view. No human generation stands in isolation. Every generation is subject to the same laws and rules that apply to the rest. What happened to those who were guilty in the past may happen to the guilty in later generations, because divine laws admit no favouritism. Travelling about the land was certain to inform them of past experiences, and these would contain a lesson for them. It would open their minds and hearts to light. The Qur'ān directs people to learn of the operation of divine laws so as to broaden their vision and give wider dimension to their lives.

Having given this directive to unbelievers, the *sūrah* spells out God's order to the Prophet to leave them to their destinies. He was not to feel distressed at what they might be scheming. They would not be able to cause him any harm. Nor was he to grieve for them, because he had already done his duty, delivering God's message and warning them against what fate awaits them: *"Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme."* (Verse 70) This verse tells us of the Prophet's compassion. He grieved over what could happen to his people, because he knew what had happened to earlier communities that rejected God's messages. The verse also tells us how wicked their scheming was against the Prophet, his message and followers.

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers said about resurrection and their refusal to take the warnings of God's impending punishment seriously: *"They ask: When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true."* (Verse 71) They said this whenever they were reminded of what happened to earlier communities, even though they used to pass by where they lived, such as Lot's townships, the Thamūd's dwellings at al-Ĥijr, the `Ād's home at al-Aĥqāf, and the dwelling place of Sheba after it was destroyed by the floods. In ridicule they asked the Prophet when those warnings would come true? If you speak the truth, then let us have it now, or at least give us an exact timing for it.

In a short verse, the *sūrah* gives the impression of the forthcoming horror, imparting a touch of ridicule to their attitude: *"Say: It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you."* (Verse 72) Thus the *sūrah* strikes fear in their hearts and makes them worry about the impending punishment. It could easily be very close, coming from behind, like a rider seeking another in fast pursuit. Yet they cannot perceive it. Thus, they are hastening it when it is already close to overtaking them. What a frightening surprise to fit their ridicule.

But who can tell? What God has kept for Himself will remain hidden behind a curtain that reveals nothing whatsoever. Something very serious, extremely terrible could be moments away. It is wise, then, to be warned and to be ready at all times to

what may lie behind those thick curtains.

"Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful." (Verse 73) Perhaps one of the most important aspects of God's bounty is that He allows people respite when they do wrong or fail to do what is required of them. He does not hasten His punishment, giving them chance after chance to reflect on their positions, repent of their mistakes, and turn back to the right path. Nevertheless, most of them are ungrateful for the grace God bestows on them. Rather, they ridicule the whole idea and hasten their own punishment, or continue in their erring ways, refusing to reflect and take heed. *"And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open."* (Verse 74) He gives them this respite although He is fully aware of the feelings they harbour in their hearts as also what they declare by word and deed. This means that respite is given them in the full knowledge of their actions and feelings. Yet they will inevitably have to face the reckoning of all this.

This round concludes with a statement emphasizing God's perfect knowledge that overlooks nothing anywhere in the universe: *"There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verse 75) Let imagination travel anywhere in the universe, thinking of any hidden thing: a secret, an object, a piece of news or information, force or power: it is all recorded and included in God's knowledge. Nothing is lost or overlooked. God's knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah,* and the reference to it here is just one of many.

A Final Word on Israelite Differences

Having emphasized the point of God's perfect knowledge, the *sūrah* moves on to speak about the Children of Israel's differences on fundamental issues. What the Qur'ān states about these is part of God's knowledge, and it provides the final, indisputable word on them. It is an example of how God judges between people in dispute. This is stated so as to provide some comfort to the Prophet for he is instructed to leave them to God, who will judge between them as He pleases:

> *This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God].* (Verses 76-81)

The Christians have long been in dispute concerning Jesus Christ and Mary, his mother. Some say that the Christ was purely human, while others maintain that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three different forms in which God reveals Himself to mankind. They allege that God is made of these three elements, making Jesus the Son. Thus, God the Father came down in the form of the Holy Spirit and took human form inside Mary and was born in the form of Jesus. Others still say that the Son is not eternal like the Father, but created in this world. As such, he is of a lower status than the Father and subject to Him. A different group deny that the Holy Spirit was one of the three elements. The Council of Nicaea held in 325 AD and the Council of Constantinople held in 381 decided that the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to the Father in divinity. It further decided that the Son was born from the Father in eternity and that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father. Likewise, the Council of Toledo, held in 589, also made the same decision concerning the Holy Spirit. The Eastern and Western Churches split over this point, and continue to differ. The Qur'ān gives the final word to end all such disputes. It describes the Christ as God's *"Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him."* (4: 171) He is certainly a human being, no more: *"He was nothing but a servant of Ours whom We had graced and whom We had made an example for the Children of Israel."* (43: 59)

Christians have held similar differences about the crucifixion. Some say that Jesus was crucified until death, was buried and then rose from the tomb after three days and was taken to heaven. Others say that Judas who betrayed him and pointed him out to his enemies was made to look like Jesus and that it was he who was crucified in his place. Some say that his likeness was thrown over his disciple Simon, and Simon was taken in his place. The Qur'ān gives the final word on all this as it says: *"They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so."* (4: 157) *"God said: Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve."* (3: 55)

In the past the Jews distorted the Torah and altered its divine laws. The Qur'ān confirms the original text God revealed: *"We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds."* (5: 45)

The Qur'ān tells them the truth about their history and their prophets, purging it of countless legends which they report in different ways. It cleanses this history from all the filth they tried to attribute to their prophets. In fact, we can hardly find an Israelite prophet left unstained by such filth. They alleged that Abraham introduced his wife to the King of Palestine and to the Pharaoh of Egypt as his sister, hoping for some favour from them. Jacob, or Israel, played tricks and lied to his father Isaac in order to take his grandfather's blessings, which were due to his brother Esau. They further alleged that the Prophet Lot's two daughters made him drunk on two nights

so that he slept with each one of them in order to beget a child. They did so, it is alleged, because he had no male heir and they feared that his wealth would go to others. It is further claimed that they achieved their purpose. They also alleged that David saw a pretty woman from the roof of his palace. When he knew that she was married to one of his soldiers, he sent this soldier on a mission from which he was sure not to return so that he could have his wife. Solomon is alleged to have worshipped a mule in order to please one of his women with whom he was so infatuated that he could not refuse her any request.

The Qur'ān absolves all these noble and pure prophets of all the filth such Israelite superstitions, which the Jews added to the Torah, tried to attach to them. Likewise it refuted all false claims against Jesus, son of Mary.

Guidance and Mercy

This Qur'ān which supersedes all books revealed before it provides the final word on all disputes between their followers. Still the idolaters in Arabia argued about it. It is as God describes it: *"It is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe."* (Verse 77)

It is *"guidance"* preventing dispute and error. It outlines the way of life to implement, and determines the course to follow. It also provides a bond between the believers and the great laws of nature which never fail. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is *"mercy'* saving them from doubt, worry and confusion between systems and theories that cannot provide a solid basis to build their lives upon. Moreover, it establishes a bond with God that gives them reassurance and peace with themselves and with mankind generally. In this way, it leads them to earn God's pleasure and His magnificent reward.

The Qur'ānic method of remoulding hearts and souls in accordance with pure, undistorted nature is indeed unique. It establishes harmony between human life, the universe and the major laws of nature operating in it. This enables man to live in peace and reassurance because he realizes that he lives in a world whose laws and forces are at peace with him. He knows that the overall law that runs the universe is the same as that which controls his life. With such harmony and peace between man's soul and the great existence around him, peace is generated within the community and among humanity at large. Reassurance and stability become a reality in human life. This is *"mercy"* in its most comprehensive form. This quick reference to God's grace represented in the revelation of the Qur'ān is followed by an assurance to the Prophet that God will judge between him and his community on the basis of His perfect knowledge: *"Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing."* (Verse 78)

God has made the triumph of the truth a natural law similar to that of the creation

of the heavens and the earth and the succession of night and day. It never fails. It may be slow in coming, but this will only be because of a particular purpose known to God which will ensure the fulfilment of certain goals known to Him. Yet still the law remains in operation, and God's promise is certain to be fulfilled. Indeed, no one's faith is complete unless one believes in its certainty. What we need to know is that God's promise will come to pass at the moment appointed for it, and it will neither be hastened nor delayed: *"So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth."* (Verse 79)

The *sūrah* continues to comfort the Prophet so that he bears with patience the stubborn rejection by the unbelievers, despite his strenuous efforts giving them sound advice and addressing them with the Qur'ān. He is told that he has not slackened in his duty, but he can make only those with beating hearts hear. These are the ones who listen attentively, and their hearts are moved so as to respond to the Prophet who gives them honest and sound counsel. By contrast, those whose hearts are dead and who are blind to all the pointers to the truth of faith are a lost case. There is simply no access to their hearts. Therefore, the Prophet should not worry about their persistent error: *"Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verses 80-81)

The Qur'ānic style paints here a lively image of a mental condition that renders hearts, souls and feelings frozen, unresponsive. We see them first as dead, with the Prophet calling on them but they do not hear him. The second image shows them deaf, moving away from the person who is calling them. Thirdly they are shown as blind who cannot see the guide trying to set them on the right course. These three images interact to give us a profound description of their situation.

In contrast to the dead, blind and deaf we see the believers who are alive, with their hearing and seeing faculties finely tuned: *"You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verse 81) These are the ones whose hearts are ready to receive God's revelations. They have life and they warm to it, feeling its presence. They benefit by what they hear and see. Such are the believers and the Prophet's duty is to make them hear, pointing to the signs God has placed all around us. They will then accept what he tells them and submit themselves to God.

Islam is simple, clear and very close to pure human nature. Once the heart gets to know it, it will submit to it. Thus the Qur'ān describes those hearts which are prepared to listen and be guided to the truth. They do not indulge in futile argument. Once God's Messenger calls on them, pointing to God's signs and reciting His revelations, they respond and submit.

Presages of the Last Hour

The *sūrah* then takes us on another round previewing some of the forerunners of the Day of Resurrection. It mentions the appearance of a beast that will speak to those who do not believe in God's signs that are placed in the universe. It paints a scene of the resurrection and the rebuke levelled at those who deny God's signs, while they stand speechless. It then quickly refers to the two signs that are always there to see, namely the night and the day, before taking us back to a horrendous image when the trumpet is blown and the mountains are made to move like clouds. It shows us the good believers safe from all this horror while those who have been errant are thrown on their faces in hell:

> *When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?'* (Verses 82-90)

The first of these verses mentions a beast. The same is mentioned in many *aĥādīth,* some of which are authentic, but these do not give any description of it. There are descriptions of it in other *aĥādīth* which do not aspire to any reasonable degree of authenticity. Hence, they should be discarded. Of the many descriptions of this beast that should be so discarded are that it is 60 yards in length, that it has fluff, feathers, a beard and hoofs, that it has a bull's head, pig's eyes, elephant's ears, a deer's horns, an ostrich's neck, a lion's chest, a tiger's colour, a cat's waist, a ram's tail and a camel's limbs. Nothing of such descriptions is of any significance whatsoever.

It is better by far to limit ourselves to the text of the Qur'ān and the authentic *aĥādīth* which tell us that the appearance of the beast is a presage of the Day of

Resurrection. It is when the time for repentance has expired and judgement is due on those who rejected the faith that God will bring forth this beast to speak to them. Beasts normally do not speak, or rather their languages are not understood by humans. However, at this point people will understand what this beast says, and they will know that it is a miracle that heralds the Last Hour. But they were keen to deny God's signs and the Day of Resurrection.

It is noticeable in this *sūrah* that several scenes depict a dialogue between insects, birds, *jinn* and the Prophet Solomon. Mention of a beast that speaks to people thus fits well with those scenes, as it complements the *sūrah's* overall imagery.

The *sūrah* proceeds from this forerunner of the Day of Judgement to the scene of resurrection and gathering: *"On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks."* (Verse 83) All mankind will be gathered on that day, but the *sūrah* highlights here the position of those denying revelations. It shows them as they are driven in ranks, altogether, having no say or choice in the direction they have to go.

"And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?" (Verse 84) The first question is one of reproach, because it is already known that they denied God's revelations, while the second is sarcastic. This combination is used in spoken language making the second question imply that they took no particularly noticeable action in their lives, apart from their denial of God's revelations. Such a question receives no answer; those to whom it is put stand speechless: *"And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak."* (Verse 85) They deserve such a fate because of the wrongdoing in their lives on earth. They are unable to speak, while the beast has already spoken. What a contrast drawn in the Qur'ānic expression and also in the great signs being described in the Qur'ān.

The presentation in this round follows a special pattern, setting scenes from this life against those from the life to come, moving from one to the other at the moment when it is particularly effective. Here the *sūrah* leaves those who denied God's revelations as they stand speechless on the Day of Resurrection to draw a scene of this world which should have awakened their consciences and invited them to reflect on the universe and its creation. They should have thought of this and realized that God takes care of them, providing them with what enables them to have comfortable lives, making the universe around them suitable for life, not hostile to it: *"Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 86)

The scene of the still night and the alert day should give man a religious conscience that directs him to maintain his bond with God who alternates the night

and day. Both day and night are two universal signs that bear a clear message to anyone who accepts the faith, but unbelievers do not do so. Had there been only night or only day, life would not have been possible on earth. Indeed, had either the day or the night been ten times longer than what they are now, the sun would have burnt out every plant on earth, while at night every surviving plant would have been frozen. Life then would have been impossible. We see that the present state of the night and day is suitable to life, and this carries signs for people who respond to faith.

From this situation in our present life the *sūrah* moves immediately to the day when the trumpet is blown. This heralds great horror for all, except those protected by God's will. In addition the mountains that have been symbols of firmness and stability are made to move. The day ends with giving the good believers their reward in the form of security and goodness, while the others are punished by fear, thrown on their faces into the fire. *"On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?"* (Verses 87-90)

The trumpet is blown for the first time to strike terror in the hearts of all creatures except those whom God wishes to spare. It is said that those who are exempt are the martyrs. With this extraordinary sound emanating from the trumpet all living creatures are struck and become senseless. Then the trumpet is blown a second time bringing them all back to life. It is then blown again to gather them all together: *"All shall come to Him in utter humility."* (Verse 87)

With this great terror, a universal upheaval takes place with everything losing its normal systemic functioning. Thus firm mountains that have been symbols of stability move lightly like clouds. This is an image that shows the terror at its clearest. It is as if the mountains are in fear, moving with those who are struck with terror, confused, unable to determine their direction.

"Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection." (Verse 88) All glory is due to Him. Perfection is clear in everything He does or makes. Nothing happens by chance or coincidence; nothing is flawed; nothing is overlooked or forgotten. When we reflect on God's creation we cannot find even a little detail left out. Indeed everything, large or small, important or not, is taken into consideration. Everything is made according to an elaborate plan that leaves the one who contemplates in utter amazement.

"*He is indeed fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 88) This is now the day of reckoning when all that you have done is reckoned. It is the day set by God who has ordered all things to perfection: it has come at the time set for it, with no hastening or delay. It fulfils its role in God's method of creation and planning. It brings harmony between action and reward in the two closely linked lives. Hence, it is part of "*the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 88)

On this fearsome day, security and reassurance are granted only to those who did well in their first life on earth. This is in addition to their reward which exceeds by far everything they did: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day."* (Verse 89) To be in security when all are in terror is in itself a great reward. What comes after that is granted by God's grace. These believers feared God in their first life, so He willed that they would have no fear on the Day of Judgement.

"*And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire.*" (Verse 90) This is a terrible scene as such people are thrown on their faces into hell. They also suffer further rebuke: "*Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?*" (Verse 90) They had turned their back on God's guidance, which was presented to them as clearly as night and day; so now their faces are the first to face the fire.

Summing Up Instructions

At the end the Prophet is instructed to sum up his call and his method in calling on people to believe. He leaves them to their destiny, which they have chosen for themselves after the issues have been clearly put in front of them. The *sūrah* concludes, as it started, with praising God, leaving it to Him to show them His signs and to hold them to account for their deeds:

> *I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner.' And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do.'* (Verses 91-93)

The Arab idolaters used to believe in the sanctity of Makkah and the Sacred House, i.e. the Ka`bah. Indeed they based their supremacy in Arabia on belief in the sanctity of this House. Yet they did not believe in the oneness of God who made it

sacred and also made it the focus of their lives. Therefore, God's Messenger gives faith its proper value, declaring that he is commanded to worship the Lord of this sacred city, who has no partners. He states the Islamic concept of God's oneness: the Lord of this city is the Lord of everything: *"To Him all things belong."* (Verse 91) He also declares that he is bidden to be one of those who surrender themselves totally to God. No one else has any claim on them. They are a group of their own stretching over countless generations, sharing their belief in God and surrendering themselves to Him.

Such is the essence of his message, while its essential means is the recitation of the Qur'ān: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."* (Verse 92) The Qur'ān is the book of this message, and also its constitution and method. The Prophet has been ordered to strive against the unbelievers by means of the Qur'ān, because it is sufficient as a means to address hearts, minds and souls. It contains what overpowers souls, influences feelings, and violently shakes hearts. Fighting was permitted at a later stage to defend believers, ensure the freedom for God's message to address people with the Qur'ān, and to implement the divine law. As for calling people to faith, the Qur'ān itself is sufficient: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."*

"So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner." (Verse 92) This statement represents personal responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or error. In turn, it reflects the dignity that Islam guarantees man such that none are driven to faith against their will. It is only that we recite the Qur'ān and let it work on people in accordance with its profound and meticulous method. Needless to say, when human nature is left unshackled, it responds to the Qur'ān because its very constitution is in unison with the Qur'ānic method.

"And say: All praise is due to God." (Verse 93) This is by way of introducing what is to come concerning God's own making. *"He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) God certainly says the truth. Every day He shows His servants some of His signs within themselves and in the great expanse of the universe. He reveals to them some of the secrets at work in the universe.

"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do." (Verse 93) This is the final note in the *sūrah,* expressed gently yet imparting an awesome sense. They are then left to do what they want, prompted by the profound note: *"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."*

SŪRAH 28

Al-Qaşaş

(The Story)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, at a time when the Muslims were a small minority without power, while the idolaters were in full control of power, wealth, position and authority. In this context, the *sūrah* establishes the true standard of values and power: it clearly states that there is only one true power in the universe, God's, and only one true value, faith. Whoever enjoys God's support need have no fear, even though he may be bereft of material power, and whomever God opposes can enjoy neither peace nor security even though he may be in possession of all types of material power. A person who enshrines the value of faith enjoys every good thing, whilst the one who lacks it will not reap any benefit whatsoever.

The corpus of the *sūrah* deals with aspects pertaining to Moses and Pharaoh, and concludes with details about Qārūn [or Korah] and his treatment of Moses' people. The first of these two stories tackles power and authority, showing Pharaoh, a ruthless tyrant, alert to any source of danger. Then, there is Moses, a suckling baby with neither power nor shelter. Pharaoh had exalted himself, ruling over and dividing people into sections and classes, persecuting the Children of Israel, slaying their men and sparing their women, watching carefully lest they should do anything that might constitute a usurpation of his control. Yet all his might and precautions were of little avail against a little child who was cared for by the only real power that protects from all evil. Indeed this power challenges Pharaoh openly, throwing the child into his own lap, placing him in Pharaoh's own palace so as to be doted upon by his own wife, while he stands by, unable to do anything against Moses. On the contrary, he does with his own hands what brings about his downfall.

The second story demonstrates the value of wealth, as also the value of knowledge. Wealth occupied everyone's attention as they watched Qārūn strutting about in his various adornments. He possessed such enormous treasures that just to carry the keys of these treasures required a whole group of strong men, who would find the task very tiring. What is more, Qārūn also had knowledge which he thought to have brought him all this wealth. Yet those endowed with true knowledge among his people were not bewitched by such wealth. They looked to God's reward, knowing that this is infinitely better and more lasting. Then God's power intervened sinking him and his household into the earth, showing beholders that neither wealth nor knowledge were of any avail to Qārūn. The intervention here is direct just as it is with Pharaoh when he and his troops were drowned in the sea.

Both Pharaoh and Qārūn exalted themselves, tyrannizing the Children of Israel: one with the brute force of authority, the other with financial might. The end was the same in both instances: one was swallowed by the earth, the other was drowned in the sea. In neither case do we see any opposing force capable of resisting God's direct power that intervened to put an end to tyranny and injustice. The two stories clearly show that when evil and corruption are manifest, while those who are good and righteous appear powerless, God Almighty intervenes directly and openly to put an end to it all.[9]

In between the two stories, the *sūrah* takes the idolaters on a couple of rounds opening their eyes to the significance of these narrations and directs their attention to some of God's signs that are present in the universe, as also the fate of past communities or scenes from the Day of Judgement. All these endorse the moral of the stories and confirm God's unalterable law.

The unbelievers used to say to the Prophet: "*If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.*" (Verse 57) In this way, they justified their rejection of the Prophet's message on the basis that people would tear them away from their land if they changed their old beliefs. In other words, they wanted to

[9] In commenting on *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Ĥā, I said: "We also learn from this account that when the Children of Israel accepted the humiliation Pharoah imposed on them, by virtue of his persecution campaign, killing their men and sparing their women, God did not interfere on their side. They simply accepted their subjugation, fearing Pharaoh and his power. But when faith was paramount in the hearts of those who believed in Moses and his message, and when they were ready to withstand the torture with their heads held high, declaring their rejection of Pharaoh and their belief in God, then God intervened and conducted the battle. Thus, victory was achieved on the battlefield as it was earlier achieved within their hearts and souls." (Vol. XI, p. 343.)
However, what I have just said in this *sūrah* is more accurate and accords with the import of this *sūrah*.. Yet what I said in that comment is acceptable with some change in phraseology. Here, the *sūrah* demonstrates how God's power intervened right from the outset, but the ultimate victory was only achieved when faith was clearly uppermost in the hearts of those who believed, and when they openly declared the word of truth in the face of ruthless tyranny.

ensure that people still held them in awe and reverence as they were the custodians of the Sacred Mosque. God relates here the stories of Moses and Pharaoh showing which people enjoy security and which experience overwhelming fear. It tells them that it is only under God's protection that people can truly feel secure even though their situation may appear otherwise. Fear, however, lacks such protection even though it may seem that security is fully present. Qārūn's story is related to confirm this basic truth in a different way.

The unbelievers' stance is answered as follows: *"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) This is a reminder that it is God who has provided them with security, appointing the Sacred House in their own vicinity. It is He who has extended security to them and it is He who can easily deprive them of it. This is followed by a warning against arrogance and ungratefulness: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

The *sūrah* then makes it clear to them that they have already been warned when a messenger of God has been sent to them. God's law has always been that people are destroyed if they persist in their erring ways once they have been so warned: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59)

This is followed by a scene from the Day of Judgement when they stand alone, having been publicly disowned by those beings whom they alleged to be God's partners. Thus they are made to realize what punishment they will incur on the Day of Judgement, after they have also been punished in this life. It tells them again where security lies and what brings fear.

The *sūrah* concludes with God's promise to His Messenger as he is driven out of Makkah by the idolaters. This promise makes it clear that God, who has assigned to him this Qur'ānic message and defined the duties involved in his assignment, will surely facilitate his return to his home town, giving him support against idolatry and idolaters. God had favoured him with the message to which he had never aspired. He will certainly give him support and return him to the city from which he was driven out. The stories related in this *sūrah* endorse this promise. Moses returned to the very land from which he fled in fear for his life. When he returned it was but for a relatively short time. He once again left, only this time with the Children of Israel. In this way, the Israelites were saved whilst Pharaoh met his humiliating fate.

The final note in the *sūrah* also seals God's promise: *"Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return."* (Verse 88)

Such is, in a nutshell, the *sūrah's* theme and import. This is outlined in four phases: Moses' story, the comments that follow it, Qārūn's story and this final promise.

1
Security at the Height of Danger

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

طسٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

نَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْكَ مِن نَّبَإِ مُوسَىٰ وَفِرْعَوْنَ بِٱلْحَقِّ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾

We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe. (3)

إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ أَهْلَهَا شِيَعًا يَسْتَضْعِفُ طَآئِفَةً مِّنْهُمْ يُذَبِّحُ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْىِۦ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. (4)

وَنُرِيدُ أَن نَّمُنَّ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتُضْعِفُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ ٱلْوَٰرِثِينَ ﴿٥﴾

But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], (5)

وَنُمَكِّنَ لَهُمْ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ وَنُرِيَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَحْذَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions. (6)

وَأَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنْ أَرْضِعِيهِ ۖ فَإِذَا خِفْتِ عَلَيْهِ فَأَلْقِيهِ فِي ٱلْيَمِّ وَلَا تَخَافِي وَلَا تَحْزَنِيٓ ۖ إِنَّا رَآدُّوهُ إِلَيْكِ وَجَاعِلُوهُ مِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٧﴾

We revealed to the mother of Moses: "Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve. We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers.' (7)

فَٱلْتَقَطَهُۥٓ ءَالُ فِرْعَوْنَ لِيَكُونَ لَهُمْ عَدُوًّا وَحَزَنًا ۗ إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا كَانُوا۟ خَٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٨﴾

Pharaoh's household picked him up; and so [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief. Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed. (8)

وَقَالَتِ ٱمْرَأَتُ فِرْعَوْنَ قُرَّتُ عَيْنٍ لِّي وَلَكَ ۖ لَا تَقْتُلُوهُ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَنفَعَنَآ أَوْ نَتَّخِذَهُۥ وَلَدًا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Pharaoh's wife said: A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' They had no inkling [of what was to happen]. (9)

وَأَصْبَحَ فُؤَادُ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ فَٰرِغًا ۖ إِن كَادَتْ لَتُبْدِي بِهِۦ لَوْلَآ أَن رَّبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قَلْبِهَا لِتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses' mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith. (10)

وَقَالَتْ لِأُخْتِهِۦ قُصِّيهِ ۖ فَبَصُرَتْ بِهِۦ عَن جُنُبٍ وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

She said to his sister: 'Follow him.' So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. (11)

۞ وَحَرَّمْنَا عَلَيْهِ ٱلْمَرَاضِعَ مِن قَبْلُ فَقَالَتْ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰٓ أَهْلِ بَيْتٍ يَكْفُلُونَهُۥ لَكُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُۥ نَٰصِحُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: 'Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?' (12)

فَرَدَدْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّهِۦ كَىْ تَقَرَّ عَيْنُهَا وَلَا تَحْزَنَ وَلِتَعْلَمَ أَنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this. (13)

وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَٱسْتَوَىٰٓ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (14)

وَدَخَلَ ٱلْمَدِينَةَ عَلَىٰ حِينِ غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا فَوَجَدَ فِيهَا رَجُلَيْنِ يَقْتَتِلَانِ هَٰذَا مِن شِيعَتِهِۦ وَهَٰذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِۦ ۖ فَٱسْتَغَٰثَهُ ٱلَّذِى مِن شِيعَتِهِۦ عَلَى ٱلَّذِى مِنْ عَدُوِّهِۦ ۖ فَوَكَزَهُۥ مُوسَىٰ فَقَضَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ۖ قَالَ هَٰذَا مِنْ عَمَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ عَدُوٌّ مُّضِلٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: "This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray.' (15)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّى ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِى فَٱغْفِرْ لِى فَغَفَرَ لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٦﴾

He then prayed: 'My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself, so forgive me.' So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (16)

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَآ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ فَلَنْ أَكُونَ ظَهِيرًا لِّلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

He said: "My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I

give help to wrongdoers.' (17)

Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: "Indeed, you are clearly a quarrel-some fellow.' (18)

But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: "Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.' (19)

Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: "Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice.' (20)

So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: "My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk.' (21)

And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: "I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path.' (22)

When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds and flocks], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: 'What is the matter with you two?' They said:

فَأَصۡبَحَ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ خَآئِفٗا يَتَرَقَّبُ فَإِذَا ٱلَّذِي ٱسۡتَنصَرَهُۥ بِٱلۡأَمۡسِ يَسۡتَصۡرِخُهُۥۖ قَالَ لَهُۥ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّكَ لَغَوِيّٞ مُّبِينٞ ١٨

فَلَمَّآ أَنۡ أَرَادَ أَن يَبۡطِشَ بِٱلَّذِي هُوَ عَدُوّٞ لَّهُمَا قَالَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ أَتُرِيدُ أَن تَقۡتُلَنِي كَمَا قَتَلۡتَ نَفۡسَۢا بِٱلۡأَمۡسِۖ إِن تُرِيدُ إِلَّآ أَن تَكُونَ جَبَّارٗا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا تُرِيدُ أَن تَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُصۡلِحِينَ ١٩

وَجَآءَ رَجُلٞ مِّنۡ أَقۡصَا ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ يَسۡعَىٰ قَالَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّ ٱلۡمَلَأَ يَأۡتَمِرُونَ بِكَ لِيَقۡتُلُوكَ فَٱخۡرُجۡ إِنِّي لَكَ مِنَ ٱلنَّٰصِحِينَ ٢٠

فَخَرَجَ مِنۡهَا خَآئِفٗا يَتَرَقَّبُۖ قَالَ رَبِّ نَجِّنِي مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٢١

وَلَمَّا تَوَجَّهَ تِلۡقَآءَ مَدۡيَنَ قَالَ عَسَىٰ رَبِّيٓ أَن يَهۡدِيَنِي سَوَآءَ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ٢٢

وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَآءَ مَدۡيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيۡهِ أُمَّةٗ مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ يَسۡقُونَ وَوَجَدَ مِن دُونِهِمُ ٱمۡرَأَتَيۡنِ تَذُودَانِۖ قَالَ مَا خَطۡبُكُمَاۖ قَالَتَا لَا نَسۡقِي حَتَّىٰ يُصۡدِرَ ٱلرِّعَآءُۖ وَأَبُونَا شَيۡخٞ كَبِيرٞ ٢٣

فَسَقَىٰ لَهُمَا ثُمَّ تَوَلَّىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلظِّلِّ فَقَالَ رَبِّ
إِنِّي لِمَآ أَنزَلْتَ إِلَيَّ مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَقِيرٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

فَجَآءَتْهُ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا تَمْشِي عَلَى ٱسْتِحْيَآءٍ
قَالَتْ إِنَّ أَبِي يَدْعُوكَ لِيَجْزِيَكَ أَجْرَ
مَا سَقَيْتَ لَنَا ۚ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُۥ وَقَصَّ عَلَيْهِ
ٱلْقَصَصَ قَالَ لَا تَخَفْ ۖ نَجَوْتَ مِنَ
ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا يَٰٓأَبَتِ ٱسْتَـْٔجِرْهُ ۖ إِنَّ
خَيْرَ مَنِ ٱسْتَـْٔجَرْتَ ٱلْقَوِيُّ ٱلْأَمِينُ ﴿٢٦﴾

قَالَ إِنِّيٓ أُرِيدُ أَنْ أُنكِحَكَ إِحْدَى ٱبْنَتَيَّ
هَٰتَيْنِ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تَأْجُرَنِي ثَمَٰنِيَ حِجَجٍ ۖ
فَإِنْ أَتْمَمْتَ عَشْرًا فَمِنْ عِندِكَ ۖ وَمَآ
أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَشُقَّ عَلَيْكَ ۚ سَتَجِدُنِيٓ إِن شَآءَ
ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

قَالَ ذَٰلِكَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ ۖ أَيَّمَا ٱلْأَجَلَيْنِ
قَضَيْتُ فَلَا عُدْوَانَ عَلَيَّ ۖ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ مَا
نَقُولُ وَكِيلٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

۞ فَلَمَّا قَضَىٰ مُوسَى ٱلْأَجَلَ وَسَارَ
بِأَهْلِهِۦٓ ءَانَسَ مِن جَانِبِ ٱلطُّورِ نَارًا
قَالَ لِأَهْلِهِ ٱمْكُثُوٓا۟ إِنِّيٓ ءَانَسْتُ نَارًا لَّعَلِّيٓ
ءَاتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوْ جَذْوَةٍ مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

"We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man.' (23)

So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: 'My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me.' (24)

One of the two women then came back to him, walking shyly, and said: "My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us.' And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: 'Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk.' (25)

Said one of the two women: "My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust.' (26)

[The father] said: "I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.' (27)

Answered [Moses]: "This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say.' (28)

When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: 'Wait

فَلَمَّآ أَتَىٰهَا نُودِيَ مِن شَٰطِيِٕ ٱلْوَادِ ٱلْأَيْمَنِ فِي ٱلْبُقْعَةِ ٱلْمُبَٰرَكَةِ مِنَ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ أَن يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّيٓ أَنَا ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَأَنْ أَلْقِ عَصَاكَ ۖ فَلَمَّا رَءَاهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا جَآنٌّ وَلَّىٰ مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ ۚ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ أَقْبِلْ وَلَا تَخَفْ ۖ إِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلْأٰمِنِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

ٱسْلُكْ يَدَكَ فِي جَيْبِكَ تَخْرُجْ بَيْضَآءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوٓءٍ وَٱضْمُمْ إِلَيْكَ جَنَاحَكَ مِنَ ٱلرَّهْبِ ۖ فَذَٰنِكَ بُرْهَٰنَانِ مِن رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمًا فَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي قَتَلْتُ مِنْهُمْ نَفْسًا فَأَخَافُ أَن يَقْتُلُونِ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَأَخِي هَٰرُونُ هُوَ أَفْصَحُ مِنِّي لِسَانًا فَأَرْسِلْهُ مَعِيَ رِدْءًا يُصَدِّقُنِيٓ ۖ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ أَن يُكَذِّبُونِ ﴿٣٤﴾

قَالَ سَنَشُدُّ عَضُدَكَ بِأَخِيكَ وَنَجْعَلُ لَكُمَا سُلْطَٰنًا فَلَا يَصِلُونَ إِلَيْكُمَا ۚ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أَنتُمَا وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكُمَا ٱلْغَٰلِبُونَ

here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.' (29)

But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: 'Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (30)

"Throw down your staff!' But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: "Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. (31)

"Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people.' (32)

He said: 'My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. (33)

And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he will confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.' (34)

Said He: "We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both

of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.' (35)

﴿٣٥﴾

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم مُّوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا بَيِّنَـٰتٍ قَالُوا۟
مَا هَـٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّفْتَرًى وَمَا سَمِعْنَا
بِهَـٰذَا فِىٓ ءَابَآئِنَا ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: 'This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old.' (36)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ رَبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن جَآءَ
بِٱلْهُدَىٰ مِنْ عِندِهِۦ وَمَن تَكُونُ لَهُۥ
عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلدَّارِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفْلِحُ ٱلظَّـٰلِمُونَ

﴿٣٧﴾

Moses replied: "My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.' (37)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمْتُ
لَكُم مِّنْ إِلَـٰهٍ غَيْرِى فَأَوْقِدْ لِى
يَـٰهَـٰمَـٰنُ عَلَى ٱلطِّينِ فَٱجْعَل لِّى صَرْحًا
لَّعَلِّىٓ أَطَّلِعُ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَـٰهِ مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّى لَأَظُنُّهُۥ
مِنَ ٱلْكَـٰذِبِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

"Nobles!' said Pharaoh. 'I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.' (38)

وَٱسْتَكْبَرَ هُوَ وَجُنُودُهُۥ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ
ٱلْحَقِّ وَظَنُّوٓا۟ أَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا يُرْجَعُونَ

﴿٣٩﴾

Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. (39)

فَأَخَذْنَـٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذْنَـٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ ۖ
فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَـٰقِبَةُ
ٱلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (40)

And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. (41)	وَجَعَلْنَٰهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَدْعُونَ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ۖ وَيَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾
We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned. (42)	وَأَتْبَعْنَٰهُمْ فِى هَٰذِهِ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعْنَةً ۖ وَيَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ هُم مِّنَ ٱلْمَقْبُوحِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾
And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect. (43)	وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَآ أَهْلَكْنَا ٱلْقُرُونَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ بَصَآئِرَ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لَّعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Setting the Scene

"Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear." (Verses 1-2) The *sūrah* begins with these three separate letters to make clear that it is from letters like these that the Qur'ān is composed. Its verses are of a greatly superior quality and of much finer import than what is normally composed by people: *"These are verses of the Book that makes things clear."* (Verse 2) Thus, this book is not the work of ordinary people; for no one can produce its like. It is revelation that God relates to His servants, reflecting His incomparable ability, and the truth that is at the heart of everything God makes, large or small: *"We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe."* (Verse 3) It is then to the believers that this book is addressed. It is meant to remould and cultivate them, pointing out their way for them and showing them the code to implement. The stories related in this *sūrah* are meant for those believers, because they are the ones who will benefit from them.

This direct relation from God imparts an air of the special care taken of believers, making them feel worthy and important. How could they fail to realize this, when it is God Almighty that relates His book to His Messenger for their own sake. Being believers, they have the necessary qualities to receive such sublime care: *"for people who will believe."* (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* then relates the story of Moses and Pharaoh, right from its very first moment, when Moses was born. Although Moses' story is related in many other

sūrahs, it is never recounted from the very beginning anywhere else. It is this very beginning, describing the difficult circumstances in which Moses was born, powerless among a people who had long been persecuted and humiliated by Pharaoh, that serves as the main theme of the *sūrah.* It shows the hand of the divine will working openly, without any apparent human medium, striking directly at the root of tyranny and injustice. It thus gives support and empowerment to the oppressed. This is a concept that the small and weak Muslim minority in Makkah needed to fully understand. It was equally important that the powerful majority be made well aware of it too.

In the majority of cases, Moses' story, frequently related in other *sūrahs,* begins with him receiving his message, giving an account of how strong faith stands up to tyrannical power, and eventually leading to the triumph of faith and the defeat of tyranny. But this is not the message this *sūrah* intends to give. Its message is that when evil is at its zenith, it carries the cause of its own destruction, and when aggression is let loose, it does not need people to fight and repel it. God will intervene to support the powerless who are made to suffer at its hands. He will then save the good elements among them, educating them and making them leaders of mankind and the inheritors of the earth.

Such is the purpose of relating this story in this *sūrah.* Hence, it begins with the episode that highlights this aspect. Every story related in the Qur'ān is told in the way that best serves the purpose of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. It is a means to educate people and to emphasize concepts, values and meanings. Hence, it is made to fit smoothly with the context in which it occurs.

The episodes of Moses' story that are told here are those of his birth in exceptionally difficult circumstances and how God took care of him; his youth and the wisdom and knowledge God imparted to him. It also covers the events that occurred; how he killed an Egyptian, fled from Egypt after learning about a plot to kill him, his marriage in the land of Madyan and the time he spent there. It then moves on to his being called by God and given his message; the confrontation with Pharaoh and his people and how they rejected both Moses and Aaron, and finally a quick reference to Pharaoh's ultimate end.

The first two episodes, which are mentioned only in this *sūrah,* are treated at length because they bring to the fore the open challenge to aggressive tyranny. We clearly see how Pharaoh is totally unable to evade God's will despite all his precautions and manoeuvres: "*But it was Our will... to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their [i.e. the oppressed] hands the very things against which they were taking precautions.*" (Verse 6)

Following the Qur'ānic method, the story is actually shown in a series of scenes

with some gaps in between that are left to our imagination. In fact the reader does not miss anything of the events and images that are left out between scenes. On the contrary, we actually enjoy the active participation of our imagination. The first episode is recounted in five scenes, while the second takes up nine scenes, followed by four scenes in the third episode. In between each two episodes there is a wide or narrow gap, as is between scenes, allowing the curtains to drop and be lifted again. Before relating the events of the story, however, the *sūrah* sets the scene against which it all unfolds, thus telling us the story's overall purpose:

> *Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions.* (Verses 4-6)

Thus the stage is set, and the hand that controls events is shown, together with the goal to be achieved. Declaring to whom this hand belongs right at the outset is intentional and fits the drift of the story from beginning to end.

We do not know for certain the identity of the Pharaoh in whose reign these events took place. Defining specific historical periods is not important in Qur'ānic stories, as these do not contribute anything to their morals. It is sufficient that we know that it all took place long after the Prophet Joseph's time. It was Joseph who brought his father, Jacob or Israel, and his brothers to Egypt where they lived for several generations and, thus, becoming a large community.

When the Pharaoh of this story took power, he attributed to himself too much personal power and divided the people of Egypt into castes.

The Children of Israel were the most oppressed group during his reign, because they followed a religion different from the one he and his own people followed. They believed in the faith preached by their first grandfather, Abraham, and his grandson, Jacob. Despite all the distortions that had crept into their faith, they still retained their basic belief in the One God and denied Pharaoh's claims to be a deity. Indeed, they rejected Pharaohnic polytheism altogether.

The tyrant felt that the presence of this community represented a threat to his throne, not least because they could side with hostile neighbours. He could not, however, expel them because of their large numbers, amounting to hundreds of thousands. He, therefore, hit on a devilish plan to forestall the danger he anticipated from such a community that did not recognize him as their deity. His plan involved

putting them to do the hardest and most dangerous of jobs, thereby ensuring their suffering. On top of all this, he slew their male children at birth, but spared their female offspring. This ensured that their women would be much larger in number than their men, and so weaken them. Historical reports also suggest that he appointed birth attendants to inform him of what children were born to the Israelites, in this way enabling the slaying of all the males, showing no compassion for their tender age. It was in such circumstances that Moses was born: *"Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption."* (Verse 4)

God, however, wanted and willed something totally different from what this tyrant wanted. Despotic rulers are often deceived by their own power and the means available to them. They forget God, His power and His planning, thinking that they choose what they wish both for themselves and for their enemies. They believe that nothing can stop them from fulfilling their own agenda.

God declares here what He wishes and challenges Pharaoh, Hāmān[10] and their hosts, telling them that whatever precautions they might take will be of no avail: *"But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions."* (Verses 5-6) Thus God wants to grant the oppressed some of His gifts, which He does not specify, and to change their situation making them leaders after they have been subjected to other people's leadership. He also wanted to give them the Holy Land once they had attained a degree of faith and righteousness which made them worthy of it. God's intent, then was to give the Children of Israel power and security, and at the same time foil Pharaoh's plans.

Thus the *sūrah* paints a clear picture of both the existing situation and the future one. It does this prior to its recounting of events so as to place Pharaoh's boasting power, which to human sensibilities appears enormous, face to face with God's infinite power, against which nothing can stand.

The stage is thus set and the audience's interest so focused that they are now eager to know how this objective can be achieved. This adds life to the story; it is as though it is being acted out now, rather than centuries ago. Such is the general Qur'ānic method of storytelling.

Saving Moses

[10] Hāmān was Pharaoh's assistant. From the Qur'ānic references to him we can assume that he occupied a position which is equivalent to that of a Prime Minister. — Editor's note.

The story begins and we are told how God's hand works directly, and not through anyone else. Moses was born under the sort of difficult circumstances the *sūrah* has described: a newborn baby in great danger. We almost see the knife being taken out to cut his throat. His mother is so worried, fearing that the news of his birth might reach the despotic authorities. She is well aware that if it did she would not be able to protect or hide him. How could she prevent him from crying and so betraying his presence? She knew herself to be helpless and powerless.

At this point God's hand intervenes, making direct contact with the worried mother, and inspiring her with what to do: *"We revealed to the mother of Moses: 'Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve.'"* (Verse 7) What sort of inspiration is this? A caring mother suckling her child is told to cast him into the river should she fear for his life. She is told, however, not to fear or grieve for him: *"have no fear and do not grieve."* He will be under the care of the One who provides all security and dispels all fear. He will be looked after by the hand which makes the fire a cool and relaxing place, and makes the sea a place of shelter and repose. No Pharaoh dare come near anyone this hand protects.

"We shall restore him to you." (Verse 7) You need not fear for his life or worry about his being taken away from you. *"And shall make him one of Our messengers."* (Verse 7) This is a promise for the future, and God's promise is certain to come true.

This is the first scene showing a worried mother as she received a clear, reassuring revelation that promises a bright future. The revelation removes all fear and worry from her heart, giving her peace and reassurance. The *sūrah* does not mention how she reacted or how she carried out the instructions. Instead, the curtains fall only to rise again bringing us the next scene.

"*Pharaoh's household picked him up."* (Verse 8) Is this the security promised her? Does it augur the fulfilment of the happy news she has been given? How, when she feared for her son none other than Pharaoh and his household? It is they that now have him. Nothing could have worried her more than her child falling into their hands. Here, we see the challenge thrown down openly, in full view of all. It is a challenge to Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. They were chasing down every newborn male in Moses' community because of fear for their own positions. Their spies were everywhere, so that no newly born boy could escape their watchful eyes. Now God's hand effortlessly puts into their very own midst such a child. It is indeed the child who will bring about their downfall. He is now in their hands and he is helpless, unable to fend for himself. Indeed, he cannot cry for help, should he be in danger.

The purpose behind delivering the child to Pharaoh is also clearly stated: *"So [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief"* (Verse 8) He will certainly be an open foe, challenging them, and bringing grief and sorrow. *"Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed."* (Verse 8)

Yet how will all this come about when the child is so helpless? The *sūrah* tells us straightaway: *"Pharaoh's wife said. - A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son. 'They had no inkling [of what was to happen]."* (Verse 9) God's hand not only delivers the child into Pharaoh's fortified palace by way of an open challenge, it also takes him right into his wife's heart, thus providing him with loving protection. It thus gives him a thin, transparent cover of love overflowing from a woman's heart. Thus, he needs neither weapons, authority nor money for his protection. Such love defies Pharaoh, his despotism and his fear for his kingdom. Pharaoh is too small and humble in God's measure: the child needs no more than this thin covering of love to enjoy complete protection from him.

"A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you." (Verse 9) This is how she describes the child brought to them, the one who will become their enemy and bring them all, except for the woman herself, much grief. *"Do not kill him,"* yet it is he who will bring about Pharaoh's end. *"He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son,"* when it will be through him that their fate will be sealed. *"They had no inkling [of what was to happen]."* (Verse 9) What irony! Thus ends the second scene and the curtains fall here temporarily.

What about his mother though, who must have been justifiably apprehensive? *"By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses' mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith."* (Verse 10) She did as she was told and threw her child into the river. Where is he now though? Where has the river carried him? She might well have asked herself how she could have done such a thing. How could she even hope that he would find security in the midst of such danger?

The *sūrah* portrays a telling picture of a poor mother's anxious heart. It is *"a void'*, one whereby she is unable to think or act. *"She would indeed have disclosed his identity,"* betraying her own secret. We can imagine her being driven in a moment of despair to give the whole thing away: *"Had We not strengthened her heart,"* giving her added strength to deal with this very difficult situation. *"So that she could continue to have faith."* (Verse 10) She needed to have faith in God's promise, to be patient in the adversity she was faced with and to continue to follow His guidance.

She nevertheless exerted her own efforts so as to know what had happened to the child: *"She said to his sister: 'Follow him.'"* (Verse 11) She asked her daughter to follow

the child in his box floating along the river, so as to know whether he survived or not. The girl did as instructed, seeking to establish what happened to her baby brother. She went into different quarters and markets, and she soon saw him from a distance, carried by some of Pharaoh's servants who were looking for someone to suckle him. At this point things regain an air of calm:

> *So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: "Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?'* (Verses 11-12)

Here we see the working of God's will completing its scheme to thwart Pharaoh. It brings the child to them, they pick him up, and furthermore they are made to love him from the very first moment. Thus, they look for a suckling mother for him, but God made him refuse all breasts to increase their confusion and helplessness. Every time a new breast was offered to him he refused it. Thus they feared for the child's life. They continued in this situation until his sister saw him at a distance and recognized him. She soon realized how eager they were to find someone who could take care of him. She carefully approached them: *"Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?"* (Verse 12) They were delighted with what she said, hoping that it could be true and that the child would be saved.

This fourth scene is over, and the next one starts immediately, showing the child back with his mother, thriving, well protected by Pharaoh and cared for by his wife. While fear was everywhere around him, he enjoyed complete security: *"Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this."* (Verse 13)

In Full Vigour

The *sūrah* does not tell us anything about the many years that separate its first two episodes: namely Moses' birth and rescue and the second showing him as a mature adult in his prime. We do not know what happened after he was restored to his mother for suckling, how he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, what sort of relation he had with his real mother after he was weaned, what position he had in the palace or outside it when he grew up. Nor are we told anything about Moses' faith during these years, when God took care of him, preparing him, in the midst of Pharaoh's worshippers and priest, for the mission which would, in time, be assigned to him.

The *sūrah is* silent on all these points. As it starts its narration of the second episode, we see a fully mature Moses, a man endowed with wisdom and knowledge, and one granted the reward of righteous people: *"When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 14)

This verse identifies a man of full physical growth and mental maturity, a stage of life normally attained when a person is around 30 years of age. Did Moses stay in Pharaoh's palace as his adopted son until he reached such an age? Did he move elsewhere given how uncomfortable he must have felt with the prevailing state of affairs? How could Moses, with his pure and untainted nature, feel otherwise? His mother must have informed him of his true identity, the community to which he belonged, and its faith. He certainly witnessed the injustice and persecution meted out to his people, as also the extensive corruption prevalent in Egyptian society.

We have no evidence pointing to any of this, but the development of events imparts a feeling of how things moved. The granting of wisdom and knowledge to Moses is followed by this comment: *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* This suggests that he did well, and God rewarded him with superior knowledge and wisdom:

> *One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: 'This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray.' He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me. 'So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. He said: My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers.'* (Verses 15-17)

We are told that he '*entered the city*', which we understand as the Egyptian capital. Where had he come from so as to enter the city? Was he in the palace at Ein Shams? Or had he deserted the palace and the capital but came in this time when the people were unaware of his presence? He might have come around noon when people were resting? Anyway, however he arrived, he nonetheless witnessed something not to his liking: *"He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies."* (Verse 15)

One of the two was an Egyptian, said to belong to Pharaoh's staff, with some reports suggesting that he was his cook. The other was an Israelite. The two were

fighting as Moses came into the city, and the Israelite appealed to him for help against their Egyptian enemy. How could this happen? How could an Israelite appeal to Moses, Pharaoh's adopted son against another from Pharaoh's court? This would not have happened if Moses was still residing in the palace, or if he was one of Pharaoh's courtiers. It could only have happened if the Israelite was certain that Moses no longer had any contact with the palace, and that he was in reality an Israelite opposed to Pharaoh and sympathetic to his own people's cause. This last possibility is more in line with Moses' character. For it is unlikely that he would have tolerated life in the corrupt environment of the palace.

"Whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him." (Verse 15) The Arabic word *wakaza,* used for "struck', indicates a punch delivered with the full weight of one's arm. We understand that Moses punched the man only once, and that this caused his death. We thus have an idea of Moses' physical strength, his anger and the strength of his opposition to Pharaoh and those of his court.

However, it appears from the drift of the narrative that Moses did not intend to kill the Egyptian. Indeed, when he saw him lifeless, he regretted what he had done, attributing it to Satan's temptation. His action was the result of anger, and anger is a devil or part of what Satan manipulates: *"He said: This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray."* (Verse 15)

He goes on to show genuine regret for what his anger caused, acknowledging that by so doing, he had wronged himself, had burdened himself with such results. He appealed to God for forgiveness. *"He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me."* (Verse 16) God responded to his prayer, knowing that his repentance was genuine: *"So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."*

It appears that his refined sense indicated to him that God had responded to his appeal and forgiven him. A believer's heart, which has reached such a superior level of sensitivity, feels that his prayer has been answered once it is made. As he felt such acceptance, Moses trembled and made a firm pledge, considering this as part of his gratitude for God's favours: *"He said: My Lord.' For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers."* (Verse 17) This is an absolute pledge and commitment to neither side with nor help wrongdoing people. It is a disavowal of wrongdoing in all shapes and forms, even though the person might feel strongly motivated to give such help by the need to rebel against injustice.

Thus Moses shows both his appreciation of God's favours and his profound sorrow at the injustice he had committed. In all this, we *see* Moses as a passionate, spontaneous person, capable of reacting strongly to events and situations. Indeed, we will see such aspects of his character in several instances, not least in the very next scene:

> *Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: 'Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.' But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: 'Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.'* (Verses 18-19)

Only a day had passed since the first fight ended with the death of an Egyptian, followed by God's acceptance of Moses' repentance and Moses subsequent pledge never to support wrongdoing. Inevitably, he feared his offence be discovered. We see him on his guard, expecting a reaction at any moment. This again reflects his spontaneous character. We are given the impression that as he walked *in the city'*, which is normally a place of security, he experienced real fear.

That Moses should feel such fear suggests that at this stage he did not have any association with Pharaoh's palace. Under tyranny, it is a trifling matter when anyone close to the palace kills a person. Indeed, such a person would not have entertained any fear, let alone expect any harm to befall him. Yet as he walked vigilantly, Moses looked up and there *"he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help."* (Verse 18) The same man is again appealing to Moses for more support, and probably wanting him to do with this one what he did to the other the day before.

The Secret is Exposed

The image of the man falling dead only the day before was still vivid in Moses' mind, as was his regret, repentance, and pledge to God. His fear that he may come to harm as a result was also genuinely felt, which explains Moses' outburst accusing the Israelite of being quarrelsome: "*Moses said to him: "Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow."* (Verse 18) The man appeared to be involved in endless quarrels which inevitably enhanced angry feelings against the Children of Israel at a time when they could not protect themselves or mount a full- scale revolution. Nothing good could come from such animosity.

Yet Moses was nonetheless full of anger against the Egyptian and moved to strike him as he had the other. This again gives us a glimpse of his passionate and spontaneous personality, of how strongly he was affected by the injustice suffered by the Israelites and how keen he was to do whatever he could to repel aggression.

> *But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You*

> *want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.'* (Verse 19)

When injustice is widespread and values are undermined, good people will be greatly distressed to see wrongdoing practically shaping society's laws and traditions, and corrupting people's nature so as to make them accept injustice without a thought of taking action to repel it. Indeed people's nature may suffer such degeneration that they may reproach the victim for resisting injustice. They may even describe as "tyrant in the land' a person who tries to prevent injustice being done to him or to others, as this second Egyptian called Moses. The fact is that the situation where tyranny smites at will, with no one to resist it, has become so familiar that people tend to accept it as the norm that reflects good manners, propriety and sound social structure. Should anyone rise to destroy such foul structure, their outcry would be loud, calling such rebel a killer or a tyrant. He would be the recipient of much of their blame, while the wrongdoer will get away with little criticism, if at all. The victim will be denied any justification, even though people realize that he could not tolerate injustice any longer.

Moses was so upset at the injustices suffered for so long by the Israelites that we see him first taking spontaneous action and then regretting it, then we see him moved to almost repeat the action he had earlier regretted. Therefore, God did not abandon him. On the contrary, He took care of him and responded to his prayer. God knows human nature and that people have a limit for their tolerance. Therefore, when injustice is acute and the way to restore justice is blocked, the oppressed may well go on the attack, risking all. Hence we do not see Moses' action painted in stark colours, as often happens when human nature becomes distorted in communities where injustice persists.

This is what we understand from the way the Qur'ān describes the two events and what follows. It neither provides justification for Moses' action, nor does it exaggerate its significance. Perhaps its description of Moses as wronging himself stems from the fact that his action was motivated by ethnic affiliation when as God's choice as His messenger he should have remained above all this. Or it may be that his action precipitated a fight with individuals who served tyranny, which is of little avail in achieving the ultimate goal of freedom. In this way, then, the whole situation was akin to that in Makkah when God restrained the Muslims from fighting until the appropriate time.

It nonetheless appears that accusing fingers were pointing in a certain way as regards the Egyptian's death the day before. Perhaps Moses was suspected in the light of his outspoken criticism of Pharaoh's tyranny. Or it may be that the Israelite had whispered to some of his own people, such that the secret was out, spreading

beyond the Israelite community. We think this highly probable. For Moses to kill one of Pharaoh's men would have brought joy to the Israelite community. Such a piece of news will easily and speedily circulate, giving comfort and satisfaction. This is easily enhanced if Moses was widely known to hate injustice and to support its victims.

Thus, when Moses seemed about to strike the second Egyptian, the latter confronted him with a clear accusation: *"Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday?"* (Verse 19) He then continued his outburst, *"You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right."* (Verse 19) Moses might well have been seen as a pious and virtuous man who would love to set things on the right course. Thus, the Egyptian reminds him of this, in effect accusing Moses of violating his own principles, being a tyrant rather than a reformer, killing people instead of setting their relations on the right course. The way this is phrased suggests that Moses was not at the time a member of Pharaoh's court. Had he been thus considered, the Egyptian would not have dared to talk to him in such a way. He might have thought it better to take up a totally different line of address.

Some commentators suggest that these sentences were spoken by the Israelite rather than the Egyptian, in response to Moses saying to him, *"Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow."* These commentators say that the Israelite thought Moses was angry with him and wanted to strike him. Hence, he raised his voice revealing the secret he alone knew. They base their argument on the fact that the secret was unknown to the Egyptians. It is more likely, however, that the Egyptian was the one who said it. We have explained how the secret might have been aired, and also suggested that the Egyptians might in any case have divined the circumstances of the situation.

Warning by a Well-Wisher

It appears that when the man reminded him of events the day before Moses did not proceed. The Egyptian was spared, left to run off and tell Pharaoh and his men that Moses was the killer. Here again there is a gap in the story. The next thing we are told of concerns a man hurrying from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses of a plot to do away with him. He further advised Moses that he should flee the city to save his life:

> *Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice.* (Verse 20)

This is clearly the work of God's hand. At the right moment, something intervenes

to carry out His will. The leading personalities of Pharaoh's government were now aware that Moses was responsible for their compatriot's death. They would have seen this as spelling danger, smacking of rebellion by the Children of Israel. Hence, Moses needed to be removed. Had it been an ordinary case of murder, it would have not deserved that Pharaoh and his chiefs be preoccupied with it. Therefore, God's hand selected one of those very people to precipitate events. Most probably he was the one believer in Pharaoh's household who had kept his faith secret and who is mentioned in detail in *Sūrah* 40, The Believer. He was chosen to go at speed from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses before Pharaoh's men could reach him. It was a simple warning: *"Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice."* (Verse 20)

"So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk." (Verse 21) Once more we see Moses' spontaneous and passionate personality, as he reacts to different situations. He is in fear, on guard, directly appealing to God for help and protection. He seeks his security with God, prays for His care: *"My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* follows him as he stealthily leaves the city, keeping on the alert, alone with no support other than what he hopes to receive from God Almighty. *"And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Again we note certain prominent traits in Moses' personality as he moves quickly along a desert road, trying to evade his chasers. He aims for Madyan, which is to the north of Ĥijāz in the Arabian Peninsula and to the south of Syria and Palestine. It is a very long journey, one which he undertakes with little preparedness. At the same time, we note how he is full of faith, surrendering himself to God, seeking His guidance: *"I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Once more we find Moses at the centre of a harrowing situation after having enjoyed not only a life of security but also one characterized by ease and affluence. He is now alone lacking all apparent means of security, chased everywhere by Pharaoh and his troops. The Egyptians want to do to him now what they failed to do when he was a baby. But the hand that provided for him then will now protect him here. Thus, Moses is able to cover the long distance to Madyan where he is safe.

> *When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: "What is the matter with you two?' They said: "We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man.' So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send*

me.' (Verses 23-24)

His long trek had taken him to Madyan, tired and exhausted. Yet the scene before him is one that a person with sound moral sense cannot condone. Moses sees many herdsmen and shepherds bringing their cattle and sheep to drink at the water, but two women stand aside, prevented from watering their flock. Those with a good sense of integrity and morality would have allowed the two women to water their sheep first and then leave before the men took care of their cattle. Despite his exhaustion, Moses, the stranger, could not accept what he saw. He stepped forward to ask the two ladies: *"What is the matter with you two?"* (Verse 23)

They appraised him of their situation: *"They said: We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen and shepherds drive home. Our father is a very old man."* (Verse 23) As women, they could not fend for themselves in the midst of so many men. Furthermore, their father was an old man who could not compete with younger and stronger men. Moses' sense of fairness could not abide this. He stepped forward to put things right. He watered their flock for them before the rest, as honourable people should have done in the first place. He does not stop to consider his own position first, as a runaway in a place where he knows no one and where he has no support. Yet nothing stops him from acting as the honourable man he is.

"So he watered their flock for them." (Verse 24) This testifies to his noble soul, one reared under God's watchful eye. It also speaks of his physical strength, something that makes him feared even when exhausted by his long trek. It might be his mental rather than physical power that made the other shepherds hold him in awe. People are normally more affected by spiritual strength.

"Then he withdrew into the shade." (Verse 24) This suggests that it was the hot season when Moses undertook his long journey. And then he sends a prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) He seeks the physical shade to rest his tired limbs. He seeks the great shade spread by God, whose generosity is unlimited, to comfort his heart and soul. This is the essence of his prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) In my weakness in this lonely, hot place where I am a stranger, I am, my Lord, in dire need of Your kind help and endless favours. This whispered, passionate prayer reflects the warmth of Moses' heart and his confident pursuit of God's kindness. It tells us of the strong bond Moses feels with his Lord.

Security in a New Home

We have barely had time to absorb Moses' passionate prayer when the *sūrah* quickly moves on to the next scene that ushers in an end to his troubles. This begins

with the conjunction *fa,* indicating a quick sequence. It is as if the heavens rush to respond to Moses' prayer:

> *One of the two women then came back to him, walking shyly, and said: My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us."* (Verse 25)

It is a quick rescue granted by God. It comes in the form of an invitation sent by the old man, who wants to extend his hospitality to Moses for his noble action. The invitation is delivered by *"one of the two'* who came *walking shyly,'* as a virtuous young woman should walk, displaying neither adornment nor temptation. She delivers the invitation in a brief and clear manner which the Qur'ān expresses as: *"My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us."* (Verse 25) Shy as she was, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, and delivers her message in full. This is, again, a reflection of a pure and virtuous nature. Her shyness does not overcome her, because she is assured by her purity and virtue.

The *sūrah* ends this brief scene, limiting it to the delivery of the invitation and Moses' acceptance. The next scene shows Moses with the old man whose name is withheld. Some reports say he was called Yathrūn and that he was the Prophet Shu`ayb's nephew.[11] *"And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 25)

Moses was in need of security, as also of something to eat and drink, but his need for the former was stronger. Hence, the account given in the *sūrah* emphasizes this, making the first words the old man says in comment to Moses' story: *"Have no fear."* He wanted him to feel at ease by dispelling his fear. He then explains: *"You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 25) They have no authority over Madyan.

We then hear a feminine voice that reflects honesty and propriety: *"Said one of the two women: My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust."* (Verse 26) Both she and her sister have endured the hard task of tending sheep, fending for themselves in the midst of men. Neither of them is happy

[11] I have already said once in this book that the man was Shu`ayb himself, and I said on another occasion that he might have been Shu`ayb but equally might have been someone else. Now I am more inclined to say that he was not the Prophet Shu`ayb, but rather an old man from Madyan. What makes me say so is that this man is said to have been old, while Shu`ayb witnessed the end of his disbelieving people, and only those who believed in him were saved. Had the man been the Prophet Shu`ayb, living with a small number of believers who had been spared, such people would not have behaved in the way described here. They would not have watered their animals before those belonging to their prophet. Believers do not treat their prophet and his daughters in this way. Moreover, the Qur'ān does not mention anything about the old man teaching Moses, his son-in-law, anything. Had he been the Prophet Shu`ayb, we would have heard the clear voice of prophethood over the ten years he spent with him.

with this. They would prefer to be at home, doing the work of women, and not having to compete with strangers at grazing and watering places. They are, after all, virtuous women. Here, the one who speaks sees a young man, a stranger in their town, but at the same time someone who is strong and trustworthy. She has seen how the other shepherds held him in awe, making way for him when he watered her sheep. But he is in a weak position because he is a stranger. She also recognized him as worthy of trust when she noticed his sense of propriety as she delivered her father's invitation to him. Hence, she advises her father to hire him so that he would spare her and her sister the trouble of doing a shepherd's work. She commends him for his ability to do the work as also his honesty and integrity. As she gives this advice, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, fearing no misunderstanding or unworthy suggestion.

We need not bother ourselves with what commentators exaggerate about Moses' physical strength, saying for example, that he, single- handed, lifted the stone covering the well. Normally, it would have taken 20 or 40 men to lift it. In fact, the well was not covered, but the herdsmen were watering their cattle and flocks, and Moses either moved them away while he watered the two women's sheep, or joined them as they watered their own cattle.

Nor do we need to bother with those reports that speak about his integrity suggesting that he said to the woman that she should walk behind him and direct him as to which way to go. Thus, he would not see her walking in front of him. Other reports suggest that he said this after the wind lifted her skirts and exposed her legs. All this is unnecessary, trying to remove suspicion that does not exist. Both Moses and the girl were naturally prudish, and this reflects in their normal behaviour, without any affectation.

A Marriage Proposal

The old man acted on his daughter's advice. He probably sensed a mutual liking between his daughter and Moses, one which could be the basis for a happy family. It is only natural that a young woman with a healthy, uncorrupted nature be inclined towards a man in whom she discerns strength and honesty. Hence, the old man combined the two purposes, suggesting to Moses that he marries one of his daughters in return for eight years work. Should Moses increase the period to ten years, this would be an added favour, not a commitment to which he would be held:

> *[The father] said: 'I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship*

on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.' (Verse 27)

Frankly and simply the old man offered one of his daughters, without naming her, as a wife for Moses, but he might have felt that the intended girl was known to him as they seemed inclined towards each other. He stated this without any embarrassment, for the offer was one of marriage. There is after all nothing to be embarrassed about when the aim is to build a home and establish a family. It is only when people move away from sound, natural values, to observe unhealthy traditions, that they are unnecessarily restricted. Thus, in our social environment today, we see that no parent or guardian can approach a man of sound faith and integrity to propose that he should marry his daughter, sister or other relative. Such traditions make it imperative that the man or his parents should make the proposal, as it is improper that a proposal should be made by the woman's side. The irony is that under such deviant traditions and in such social environment young men and women meet, talk and play together without any intention to get engaged to be married. Once the idea of marriage is entertained, affected shyness is observed and other barriers are erected to prevent any simple, frank and honest discussion.

During the Prophet's lifetime, fathers used to offer their daughters to men in marriage. Indeed, women offered themselves to the Prophet or to whoever he wished them to marry. This was done in all honesty and propriety, without any embarrassment for anyone. `Umar offered his daughter in marriage to Abū Bakr first, but he did not answer, so he then offered her to `Uthmān but he regretfully declined. Then `Umar told the Prophet who comforted him saying that God may give her a better husband than both. It was the Prophet who then married her. A woman also offered herself to the Prophet but he expressed his regret. She then placed herself under his care so as to marry her to whomever he thought suitable. He married her to a man who had nothing to offer as dowry except his having learnt two *sūrahs,* which he undertook to teach her. This, then, was the dowry she received.

With such an open and simple approach Islamic society used to build its homes. Nothing needed to be done under cover, or with affected or devious means. This is exactly what the old man did with regard to Moses, promising not to impose any hardship on him or to ask of him what was beyond his means. He hoped that, with God's grace, Moses would find him to be an upright man. This is the most appropriate way of talking about oneself. One neither boasts of one's virtues nor emphatically states that one is a good person. One only hopes to be so, leaving the matter to God.

Moses accepted the offer, and the contract was made, clear and precise, with God as a witness: "*Answered [Moses]: This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say.*" (Verse 28)

Contractual agreements must be made in all clarity, leaving no room for ambiguity. Neither parry should allow shyness or embarrassment to interfere with such purpose. Thus, Moses approves the offer and accepts the conditions outlined by the old man. He then repeats the main condition to ensure that there is no misunderstanding: *"Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged."* (Verse 28) Whether I stay eight or ten years I shall not be wronged with regard to the working conditions, or with being forced to stay ten years. Any stay beyond eight years is a matter of my own choice. *"God is the witness to all we say."* (Verse 28) God is the witness who ensures justice between the two parties to any contract.

Moses put this so clearly because he was a straight and frank person who wanted the agreement to be absolutely clear and precise. Yet he also intended to stay the longer term, and did actually do so. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) mentioned that Moses "spent the longer and better of the two terms." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

Thus Moses found a place of security in his father-in-law's home, having no fear of Pharaoh and his designs. This was certainly for a definite purpose God wanted to accomplish. We will now let this episode pass, as the *sūrah* does not state anything further about it.

On the Way Back

The ten years agreed between the two men have passed, bringing us to the story's third episode. We see Moses on the road again, backtracking along the route he had taken alone ten years previously. This time though he is travelling with his family. The atmosphere on this second journey is totally different. He is about to receive, on the way, something that he could never have imagined. His Lord will call him and speak to him. He will assign to him the mission for which He has prepared him. Moses is, thus, to deliver God's message to Pharaoh and his nobles, asking them to release the Children of Israel so that they can worship God alone, associating no partners with Him, and taking possession of the land God has promised them. In this way, Moses would be an enemy and source of grief for Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. In essence, he would bring about their downfall.

> *When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: "Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.' But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds. Throw down your stair' But when*

> *he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proof from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people. 'He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.' Said He: "We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.'* (Verses 29-35)

Before we discuss this episode, we need to reflect a little on what God intended for Moses in those ten years, and the purpose behind his journeys away from and back to Egypt. We note that it was God's hand that planned the way Moses' life should unfold, step by step, right from the time he was a suckling newborn. It ensured that he was cast in the river so that Pharaoh's household should pick him up. It endeared him to Pharaoh's wife so that he was brought up in his enemy's home. It then made him enter the city at a time when its people were unaware of him, only to kill one of its people. It then sent him a believer from among Pharaoh's own household to warn him to leave the city. It then took care of him along the desert road to Madyan, when he travelled suddenly, alone and ill prepared. It took him to the old man where he stayed for ten years before returning to Egypt to receive his mission. We, thus, witness a long line of care, instruction and the gaining of experience before Moses is called and assigned his mission. His experience included being loved and pampered, spontaneous retaliation as a result of prolonged pressure, regret and repentance, being in fear for his life and chased, finding himself a lonely and hungry stranger, serving others as a shepherd after having lived in a palace, along with a multitude of small experiences, varied feelings, thoughts and understanding in addition to what God bestowed on him of knowledge and wisdom on reaching his prime.

Preparation for a Difficult Mission

To be entrusted with a divine message is a hard and multi-faceted task. The one so assigned needs a wealth of experience, understanding, knowledge and refinement in practical matters. They also need God's special favours, His revelations and directives.

Apart from the message of Islam given to Muhammad (peace be upon him), Moses' message is perhaps the hardest assigned to any prophet. He was sent to Pharaoh, the most tyrannical ruler on earth at the time. Pharaoh was also head of the

longest established monarchy, and the most advanced civilization. Furthermore, he was a ruler that demanded to be worshipped by all his subjects.

Moses was sent to rescue a community that had long been humiliated, and who had long accepted humiliation as their lot. Humiliation corrupts human nature, obliterating its good, beautiful aspects and making what is rotten, filthy and decadent appear acceptable. To rescue such a community was a tough assignment.

Moreover, the people to be addressed by his message had deviated from their old faith. Their hearts were neither free to readily accept the new faith, nor could they conform to their original faith. Addressing such people would be difficult, made all the more so by the numerous deviations and innovations they had introduced over several generations.

In short, Moses was given the mission of rebuilding a nation, or, indeed, to build it from scratch. With his message, the Children of Israel became, for the first time, a separate community, with a special way of life, implementing a message.

Perhaps this is why the Qur'ān attaches such importance to this story. For it provides a complete example of building a nation on the basis of faith. We see all the internal and external difficulties, deviations and other impediments that stand in its way.

The ten years Moses spent in Madyan served as a learning period, separating the palace life Moses was used to during his childhood, and the hard life awaiting him as he advocated his message. Palace life has its own atmosphere and traditions. It imbibes influence on the people enjoying its comforts, even though they may be exemplary in their understanding, awareness and knowledge. Delivering a message from God requires that the messenger deal with all people, rich and poor, affluent and deprived, clean and dirty, refined and rough, good-natured and evil, strong and weak, patient in adversity and impulsive, etc. Poor people have their own habits in the food they eat, in their clothing, walking, concept of life, understanding of events, vision of life, talking and in the expression of their emotions. Such habits cannot easily be accepted by those who are accustomed to palatial splendour. The poor may be full of goodness, ready to accept faith and implement it, but the rich and privileged may find it very difficult to deal with the poor because they cannot accept the latter's physical appearance and habits.

A divine message imposes certain standards of dedication coupled with a hard life. The rich may be prepared to sacrifice a life of ease, comfort and plenty, but they are rarely able to withstand hardship and deprivation for long. Therefore, God willed to reduce the standard of plenty Moses was used to, placing him instead in a community of shepherds so as to feel God's grace. In this way, he would know what it was to experience fear and hunger, and what it means to have to work for a living.

Furthermore, he would no longer feel any revulsion towards the poor, with their habits, manners and naivety. Just as he was thrown onto the water's ripples when he was a baby, now he is thrown into the sea of life in order to equip him for his task.

When Moses had completed his training in a foreign land, God's hand directed him anew, returning him to the land of his birth, where his own community lived. It is there that he would start delivering his message. Beforehand, though, he must travel the same route he used during his flight from Egypt. Why should it be the same? His training had included knowledge of desert routes, this because he would be leading his people along the same route in obedience of God's orders.

Thus, he would not need to depend on others, not even a guide. His people needed such a leader to show them which way to go at every turn, after they had lost their ability to think for themselves. Long had been their humiliation and subjugation.

Thus we realize how Moses was reared under God's watchful eye, and how he received his life's education so as to be ready to shoulder the burden of his message.

A Call from on High

> *When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.* (Verse 29)

What could have happened to Moses to make him return to Egypt when the terms of his contract with the old man were fulfilled? He had left it in fear, expecting death for his part in the unwitting murder of an Egyptian. What could have caused him to forget such danger when it was Pharaoh and his chiefs that wanted rid of him? It is the hand that guided his footsteps throughout his life. It might this time have guided him through natural feelings of nostalgia for one's home and people. It might have reduced his sense of danger to a minimum, so that he could now take up the mission for which he was created and prepared.

Anyway, we see Moses on his return journey to Egypt, with his family, in the dark of the night, having lost his way. It was a cold night, which made him pleased at the sight of fire in the distance. He headed in that direction to get some information or a firebrand. This, then, is the first scene in this episode.

The second scene tells us of the great surprise prepared for Moses: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site."* (Verse 30) We see him aiming towards the fire, and on the right bank of

the valley. From here on this site is blessed. The whole universe now echoes the sublime address Moses receives *"out of the tree'*, which might have been the only tree there.

Moses received the direct call: *"Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 30) He received it alone in a solitary valley, in the depths of night, but the whole universe responded, with the heavens and the earth reverberating it. We do not know how, or with which faculty or sense he received it, but he certainly received it with his whole being, as did the entire universe around him. He was able to receive it because he was reared under God's watchful eye until he was ready for this moment. The universe recorded this sublime address, and the site where it took place became blessed as God, in all His majesty, revealed His presence there. The valley became distinguished by this great event, and Moses stood there in the noblest position a human being ever stood.

God then continued to give His instructions: *"Throw down your stag?"* (Verse 31) Moses complied with the order, throwing down his staff. Only now it was no longer his staff but instead a writhing serpent, which was large in size but moving very fast: *"But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back."* (Verse 31) Moses was totally unprepared for this. Taken aback, he turned and set to flight. He did not even think of going back to find out what had happened to his staff, or to better see this preternatural happening. Such is the natural reaction of spontaneous people.

He then listened to his Lord's address: *"Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure."* (Verse 31) Again, we witness Moses experiencing fear and security in quick succession. Such contrasting emotions were indeed the essence of his life. In fact, this continuous interaction was deliberately instilled in him so as to counterbalance the Israelite's inactivity and habitual acceptance of their humble position. His spontaneity was part of what God granted him so that he could fulfil his role.

He is told to come near and to have no fear. Needless to say, a person whose every step is watched over by God will always be safe and secure.

"Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining) white without blemish." (Verse 32) Again Moses did as he was instructed, putting his hand inside his garment's top opening. Drawing it out, he received yet another shock. His hand was now a shining white, though clearly healthy. Its original colour would have been rather dark, weathered by the sun and elements. This change of colour thus symbolized the clear truth: one supported by undeniable, irrefutable evidence.

Again Moses' spontaneous personality caught up with him as he trembled, struck with awe. But God's care was soon forthcoming, giving him another instruction so as to calm him down: *"Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear."* (Verse 32)

In the Arabic text, the word *janāh is* used to denote "side", giving the impression that he draws it over himself like a bird, to reassure himself.

So Moses has now been given clear signs, causing him fear at first before he was reassured. Now it is time he learned of what lay ahead of him: "*These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people.*" (Verse 32) He is given a message to deliver to Pharaoh and his lieutenants, in fulfilment of the promise his mother was given when he was still a newborn baby: "*We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers.*" (Verse 7) Despite the passage of many years, the promise has remained true, given by God who always speaks the truth.

Moses now remembers that he had killed one of Pharaoh's entourage and that he had to flee Egypt in order to save himself. As he was in the presence of his Lord who had honoured him beyond his wildest expectations, even to the point of meeting Him and being given clear signs, he felt the need to take precautions so that his message should not be brought to an abrupt end if he himself was killed: "*He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me.*" (Verse 33)

He does not say this by way of apology, or to find a way out of his commission. He only wanted to ensure that the message of truth would be advocated should his fears be well-founded. This reflects his keen desire to fulfil his task; a desire that is in line with Moses' character as a man of strength, someone worthy of trust. He elaborates on his fears further: "*And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.*" (Verse 34) Aaron is more eloquent and better able to defend the message. He can provide much needed support, and can succeed Moses should he be killed.

Moses is reassured and his request is granted: "*Said He: 'We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.*" (Verse 35) It is not merely that God granted Moses' request, but that He also gave him a greatly reassuring promise, endowing both brothers with power. Thus, they would not face the tyrant Pharaoh relying only on their own devices. They would go equipped with a source of power that cannot be resisted by any earthly force. No tyrant possessed the means to harm them: "They *will not be able to touch you.*" How could they when you enjoy God's protection that creates a fence around you? But the good news Moses is given goes further than this, assuring him and his brother of the eventual outcome; namely, that the truth will be triumphant. They have been given signs from God, and these signs are the means of victory: "*By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.*" (Verse 35)

God's power is thus seen to intervene directly, shaping events, working through no earthly force as a cover. The victory will come about through none of the causes that are familiar to people. Thus a new code of values will be established in people's hearts based on faith and complete trust in God.

The Arrogant are Punished

This awesome scene is closed; time passes and the location changes; Moses and Aaron are now facing Pharaoh, producing God's clear signs, refuting the arguments of falsehood and explaining God's guidance. The end is shown: drowning in this present life, and a curse in the life to come. All is expressed in a series of short, concise verses:

> *When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: 'This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old. 'Moses replied: My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.' 'Nobles!' said Pharaoh. 'I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.' Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned.* (Verses 36-42)

The *sūrah* delivers its final strike very quickly, making no mention of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh's sorcerers: such details can be found in brief or in detail in other *sūrahs.* Here the *sūrah* moves from the denial of the truth by Pharaoh and his people directly to their destruction. It also includes what will happen to them in the hereafter. This quick movement is deliberate, so as to fit with the general drift of the *sūrah* emphasizing God's direct intervention, through no human agent. Once Pharaoh is seen to be adamant in his rejection of God's message, his end is directly shown. No further details are needed.

"When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old." (Verse 36) Pharaoh's words are exactly the same as those employed by the Quraysh idolaters in Makkah when the Prophet Muhammad called on them to believe in God: *"This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old."*

(Verse 36) It is nothing more than futile argument when faced with the overpowering truth. It is the same argument whenever falsehood confronts the truth: an accusation of sorcery, and a rejection based on nothing other than that the whole thing was new, unknown to their forefathers. Indeed, they have no argument, and no basis for their stand. Hence, their vague statement that proves nothing.

Moses (peace be upon him) refers the matter to God, because in such a situation where no proof is being requested, it is better to be brief and let God judge between the two parties: "*Moses replied.. My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.*" (Verse 37)

This is a very polite answer, which makes an implicit, yet very clear statement about the outcome of all confrontations between truth and falsehood. His Lord knows well that he is truthful, following divine guidance. The future certainly belongs to the one who comes with guidance, while the evildoers will never gain the ultimate success. This is God's law that will never change, even though things may appear at times to move in some other way. Moses, like every prophet, puts this very clearly to people.

Pharaoh's response is evasive, boastful and sarcastic: "*Nobles! I know of no deity that you could have other than myself Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.*" (Verse 38) What a blatant lie Pharaoh utters: "*I know of no deity that you could have other than myself*" And his nobles receive such falsehood with humble acceptance. Pharaoh relies on the legends that circulated in Egypt at the time claiming that kings descended from deities. He also relied on brute force that did not allow anyone to think or speak out against him. Whilst others saw him as mortal like themselves, they nevertheless accepted his arrogance without question.

He then affects seriousness about wanting to find out the truth and making sure of Moses' God. Yet, in truth, he is only making fun of the whole issue: "*Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses.*" Moses says his god is in heaven, so I will go up into the sky to look at him. In the same tone of sarcasm he pretends that he has doubts about Moses and his statements, but nevertheless he wants to look and find out for himself: "*even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.*" (Verse 38)

It is at this point in the exchange that the match with the sorcerers takes place, though it is not mentioned here. The *sūrah* instead proceeds straight to how Pharaoh met his end: "*Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us.*" (Verse 39) Given they thought they would never return, they behaved arrogantly, against all right, denying God's signs and

warnings. Hence, God's punishment was quick: "*And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh was seized with force and cast into the sea as though he was a little stone. We note the contrast between Moses being cast into the river when he was a newborn baby and he finds in it a safe shelter, and Pharaoh, the tyrant king, being cast into the sea, only to be destroyed. Safety and security are ensured when one is on God's side, while fear and destruction are attendant with the other side. We note that in the Arabic text, the same word, *yamm,* is used for both river and sea as this signifies a great body of water.

"*Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers.*" (Verse 40) It is an end that is met in full view, so as to serve as a lesson and a warning for all who deny God's messages. It shows how God's power overwhelms tyrants and despots in no time at all, so as to make their end easy to describe in just half a line or even less.

Another glance and this whole world is passed by so as to present a picture of Pharaoh and his hosts on the Day of Judgement calling on people and leading them into hell: "*And We made them leaders who called others to the fire.*" (Verse 41) Evil is the leadership, and evil is the call. "*No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection.*" (Verse 41) It is a defeat in this life and a defeat in the life to come, in fair requital for their aggression and transgression. But they will not only be defeated; they are cursed in this world and spurned in the next: "*We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned.*" (Verse 42)

The Other End

The *sūrah* leaves out the entire history of the Children of Israel's departure from Egypt, and the events that followed, in order to mention Moses' lot after having shown us Pharaoh's:

> *And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect.* (Verse 43)

This is certainly a great favour given to Moses. His is an honourable bequest: a book revealed to him by God in order to give mankind new insight and guidance into what is right. Believers must, however, remember how God's power intervened to save the weak and overcome the powerful. They must reflect on how oppressors are destroyed and the oppressed avenged and given power.

Thus ends the story of Moses and Pharaoh as related in this *sūrah.* It makes clear that safety and security can only be achieved by being on God's side, while fear is always associated with moving away from Him. It also shows how God's hand

intervenes to challenge tyranny and overcome it, when its power seems irresistible. The fledgling Muslim community in Makkah needed to understand this concept and be sure of it, while the arrogant idolaters also needed to reflect on it. Moreover, this concept is needed whenever and wherever believers advocate the truth and tyranny stands in its way.

This is yet another example, then, of how the Qur'ān uses historical accounts as educative material, and also to establish certain facts and principles which need to be reflected upon.

2
The Truth Clear for All

وَمَا كُنتَ بِجَانِبِ ٱلْغَرْبِيِّ إِذْ قَضَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَى ٱلْأَمْرَ وَمَا كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. (44)

وَلَٰكِنَّآ أَنشَأْنَا قُرُونًا فَتَطَاوَلَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْعُمُرُ ۚ وَمَا كُنتَ ثَاوِيًا فِىٓ أَهْلِ مَدْيَنَ تَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا وَلَٰكِنَّا كُنَّا مُرْسِلِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life. Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers. (45)

وَمَا كُنتَ بِجَانِبِ ٱلطُّورِ إِذْ نَادَيْنَا وَلَٰكِن رَّحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّآ أَتَىٰهُم مِّن نَّذِيرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out [to Moses]. Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect. (46)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن تُصِيبَهُم مُّصِيبَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَيَقُولُوا۟ رَبَّنَا لَوْلَآ أَرْسَلْتَ إِلَيْنَا رَسُولًا فَنَتَّبِعَ ءَايَٰتِكَ وَنَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, "Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among

the believers.' (47)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِنۡ عِندِنَا قَالُواْ لَوۡلَآ
أُوتِيَ مِثۡلَ مَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰۚ أَوَلَمۡ
يَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ مِن قَبۡلُۖ قَالُواْ
سِحۡرَانِ تَظَٰهَرَا وَقَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا بِكُلّٖ كَٰفِرُونَ
٤٨

Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given?' But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: "These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other.' And they add: "We reject both of them.' (48)

قُلۡ فَأۡتُواْ بِكِتَٰبٖ مِّنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ هُوَ أَهۡدَىٰ
مِنۡهُمَآ أَتَّبِعۡهُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٤٩

Say: "Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true! (49)

فَإِن لَّمۡ يَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لَكَ فَٱعۡلَمۡ أَنَّمَا
يَتَّبِعُونَ أَهۡوَآءَهُمۡۚ وَمَنۡ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنِ
ٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ بِغَيۡرِ هُدٗى مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ
ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٥٠

But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing. (50)

۞ وَلَقَدۡ وَصَّلۡنَا لَهُمُ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ لَعَلَّهُمۡ
يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ٥١

We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect. (51)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ هُم
بِهِۦ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥٢

Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it. (52)

وَإِذَا يُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦٓ إِنَّهُ
ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ مُسۡلِمِينَ
٥٣

And when it is recited to them, they say: "We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we

submitted ourselves to Him.' (53)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يُؤْتَوْنَ أَجْرَهُم مَّرَّتَيْنِ بِمَا صَبَرُواْ وَيَدْرَءُونَ بِٱلْحَسَنَةِ ٱلسَّيِّئَةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. (54)

وَإِذَا سَمِعُواْ ٱللَّغْوَ أَعْرَضُواْ عَنْهُ وَقَالُواْ لَنَآ أَعْمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَا نَبْتَغِى ٱلْجَٰهِلِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: "To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.' (55)

إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِى مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright. (56)

وَقَالُوٓاْ إِن نَّتَّبِعِ ٱلْهُدَىٰ مَعَكَ نُتَخَطَّفْ مِنْ أَرْضِنَآ ۚ أَوَلَمْ نُمَكِّن لَّهُمْ حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا يُجْبَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِ ثَمَرَٰتُ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ رِّزْقًا مِّن لَّدُنَّا وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

They say: "If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.' Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. (57)

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِن قَرْيَةٍۭ بَطِرَتْ مَعِيشَتَهَا ۖ فَتِلْكَ مَسَٰكِنُهُمْ لَمْ تُسْكَن مِّنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ۖ وَكُنَّا نَحْنُ ٱلْوَٰرِثِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. (58)

وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ مُهْلِكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ يَبْعَثَ فِىٓ أُمِّهَا رَسُولًا يَتْلُواْ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا ۚ وَمَا كُنَّا مُهْلِكِى ٱلْقُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا وَأَهْلُهَا ظَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a

messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. (59)

'Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? (60)

Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us? (61)

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?'(62)

Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.'(63)

They will be told: "Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! (64)

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "What answer did you give to My messengers?' (65)

But to them all information will be

وَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَىۡءٖ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَزِينَتُهَاۚ وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيۡرٞ وَأَبۡقَىٰٓۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٠

أَفَمَن وَعَدۡنَٰهُ وَعۡدًا حَسَنٗا فَهُوَ لَٰقِيهِ كَمَن مَّتَّعۡنَٰهُ مَتَٰعَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا ثُمَّ هُوَ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مِنَ ٱلۡمُحۡضَرِينَ ٦١

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ أَيۡنَ شُرَكَآءِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ٦٢

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡقَوۡلُ رَبَّنَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ أَغۡوَيۡنَآ أَغۡوَيۡنَٰهُمۡ كَمَا غَوَيۡنَاۖ تَبَرَّأۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَۖ مَا كَانُوٓاْ إِيَّانَا يَعۡبُدُونَ ٦٣

وَقِيلَ ٱدۡعُواْ شُرَكَآءَكُمۡ فَدَعَوۡهُمۡ فَلَمۡ يَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لَهُمۡ وَرَأَوُاْ ٱلۡعَذَابَۚ لَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ يَهۡتَدُونَ ٦٤

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَآ أَجَبۡتُمُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ٦٥

فَعَمِيَتۡ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡأَنۢبَآءُ يَوۡمَئِذٖ فَهُمۡ لَا يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ٦٦

فَأَمَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا

blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. (66)

However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful. (67)

Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. (68)

And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. (69)

He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return. (70)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?' (71)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?' (72)

فَعَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحِينَ ٦٧

وَرَبُّكَ يَخۡلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ وَيَخۡتَارُۗ مَا كَانَ لَهُمُ ٱلۡخِيَرَةُۚ سُبۡحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٦٨

وَرَبُّكَ يَعۡلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمۡ وَمَا يُعۡلِنُونَ ٦٩

وَهُوَ ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۖ لَهُ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ فِي ٱلۡأُولَىٰ وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۖ وَلَهُ ٱلۡحُكۡمُ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٧٠

قُلۡ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ إِن جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ سَرۡمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مَنۡ إِلَٰهٌ غَيۡرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأۡتِيكُم بِضِيَآءٍۖ أَفَلَا تَسۡمَعُونَ ٧١

قُلۡ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ إِن جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡكُمُ ٱلنَّهَارَ سَرۡمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مَنۡ إِلَٰهٌ غَيۡرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأۡتِيكُم بِلَيۡلٖ تَسۡكُنُونَ فِيهِۖ أَفَلَا تُبۡصِرُونَ ٧٢

وَمِن رَّحۡمَتِهِۦ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيۡلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ

لِتَسۡكُنُواْ فِيهِ وَلِتَبۡتَغُواْ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ٧٣

It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful. (73)

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ أَيۡنَ شُرَكَآءِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ٧٤

On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' (74)

وَنَزَعۡنَا مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةٖ شَهِيدٗا فَقُلۡنَا هَاتُواْ بُرۡهَٰنَكُمۡ فَعَلِمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱلۡحَقَّ لِلَّهِ وَضَلَّ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ٧٥

We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: "Produce your evidence!' They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them. (75)

Overview

The first passage related Moses' story with telling effects. The current passage begins with some additional comments concerning Moses before it picks up the main theme of the *sūrah* explaining where security lies and who should be in fear. It also portrays a number of scenes from the universe, as also from the Day of Judgement, which it addresses to the unbelievers who denied God's message and made false allegations against the Prophet. It tells them about their own situation after presenting certain aspects that confirm the truth of what God's Messenger tells them. It refers to some of the people of earlier divine religions who received this final message positively, recognizing its truth and believing in it. By contrast, the idolaters continue to deny it when it is meant to bring them God's mercy. They only need a little clear reflection to recognize this and he certain of it.

Confirmation of the Message

The first comment on Moses' story confirms the revelations being given to the Prophet. The Prophet was telling his people about past events in details that could not have been gathered except by an eyewitness. Yet, he was not there at the time. He learnt of these events through revelations bestowed on him from on high. This is only an act of grace meant to spare his people God's punishment for their idolatry.

Should such punishment befall them, they will surely cry out that they would have believed if only a messenger from God had been sent to them.

> *You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life.* (Verses 44-45)

The mountain referred to is Mount Sinai, known as al-Tar, where Moses had his appointment with God after a certain period, given first as 30 nights, but then completed with 10 more, making the total 40 as mentioned in *Sūrah 7*. It was on this occasion that Moses received the full extent of his message as detailed in the tablets: these contain the divine law as delineated for the Children of Israel. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not present at this meeting so as to know all its details as outlined in the Qur'ān. Indeed, several centuries and many human generations separated him from it: "*But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life.*" (Verse 45) This clearly indicates that his knowledge of it was received from God who revealed the Qur'ān to him from on high. He is the One who knows all.

The Qur'ān also speaks of Madyan and Moses' sojourn there. Yet the Prophet was never at Madyan and it is only the Qur'ān that provides him with such detailed information: "*Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers.*" (Verse 45) It is God who chooses His messengers. It is also He who gives them information about past nations and communities.

The Qur'ān also describes in full detail God's address to Moses by the side of Mount Sinai and how he responded to his Lord: "*Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out (to Moses].*" (Verse 46) Again, The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not hear this call and nor could he have recorded the details of this appointment as it took place. The fact that God related all this to him, which testifies to his honesty and the truth of his message, is an aspect of God's mercy extended to his people. He is, thus, able to warn them while earlier messengers were sent to the Children of Israel who lived in an area adjacent to Arabia. The Arabs had not been sent a messenger since the time of their first father, Prophet Ishmael: "*Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect.* (Verse 46)

It is certainly by virtue of an act of grace that God sends a messenger to warn and advise people. At the same time, it seals the argument against them. When they have received God's message, they cannot then argue that they were taken by surprise, or say that they had not received ample warning before receiving their punishment.

Indeed, the way they lived, associating partners with God and committing all manner of sin, deserves punishment. Hence, God wanted to leave them with no room for argument. He wanted to make them stand face to face with the truth, such that nothing could hinder them from accepting it and from becoming good believers:

> *[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, 'Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among the believers.'* (Verse 47)

This is what they would have said had not a messenger been sent to them with sufficient proofs and signs to make them see the truth for what it is. Yet even when the Messenger came to them with the irrefutable truth, they still would not follow him:

> *Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given?' But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other' And they add: 'We reject both of them.'* (Verse 48)

They would not admit the truth. On the contrary, they continued to give false excuses so as to justify their rejection. They also asked why this Messenger was not given the like of what Moses was given, referring to both the physical miracles and the tablets.

Clearly, their objections were dishonest. Hence, the Qur'ān puts the following question to them: "*But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given?*" (Verse 48) There were Jews in Arabia who had the Torah, but the Arabs neither accepted this nor believed in it. They were also aware that the Torah gives a clear description of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They also sought the advice of some followers of earlier religions asking them about Muhammad's message. In turn, those learned ones answered them that it was true, fully consistent with their own revelations. Yet still the idolaters would not accept such assertions. They claimed that both the Torah and the Qur'ān were magic; hence, each confirmed the other: "*Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other:' And they add: 'We reject both of them.'*" (Verse 48) It is all, then, argument for argument's sake. It has nothing to do with the proper pursuit of the truth, nor with proper evidence to confirm it.

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān takes a further step to put the truth before them. It says: If you like neither the Qur'ān nor the Torah, then show me a divine writ which

provides better guidance than these two books and I will follow it: *"Say: 'Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true!"* (Verse 49) Nothing, then, could be fairer. Whoever rejects the truth after this is merely being obstinate, following his own desire with little concern about evidence to support his position:

> *But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing.* (Verse 50)

The truth is clear in this Qur'ān, and the argument Islam presents is clear and powerful. Anyone who knows Islam well but who still rejects it is only doing so because he prefers to pursue his own desires. There are only two ways: either commitment to the truth which breaks the grip of desire, and leads to submission and acceptance of the faith, or evading the truth and pursuing desire, which means rejecting the truth and denying faith. The unbelievers cannot present any argument on the basis of ambiguity, confusion or lack of proof. *"But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims."* (Verse 50) This is a fact that allows no argument as it is clearly stated by God. Those who do not respond positively to this faith pursue their own desire and self-interest. They have no excuse. They offer no sound argument as they turn away from the truth.

"Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God." (Verse 50) In this they are also transgressors and wrongdoers: *"Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing."* (Verse 50)

The Qur'ān leaves no excuse for those who claim that they have not understood its message, or who claim that they do not comprehend Islam. Once this faith is presented and explained to them, all argument ceases and excuses are futile. The Qur'ān is indeed the epitome of clarity. No one denies it except those who are deliberate wrongdoers: they wrong themselves and are unjust to the truth. As such they do not deserve divine guidance: *"God does not guide those who are wrongdoing."* (Verse 50) As the message is given to them, the issues are set out clearly and no excuse can be made for turning away: *"We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect."* (Verse 51)

Sound Approach to Truth

The *sūrah* now begins a new round, presenting the case of those who sincerely look for the truth and abide by it. They have clear minds, sound approach and

sincere intentions. These are a group from the people of earlier revelations who came to know of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān thus tells of how they approached it once they had heard it.

> *Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it, and when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him. These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.'* (Verses 52-55)

Sa`īd ibn Jubayr mentions that these verses speak about 70 priests sent by Negus. When they met the Prophet he recited to them *Sūrah* 36, Yā Sīn, from start to finish. They were in tears as they listened to it and then immediately declared their belief in Islam. These verses confirm what they did.

Muhammad ibn Isĥāq reports in his biography of the Prophet:

> When the Prophet was still in Makkah, some 20 Christians came to him after they had heard about him in Abyssinia. They found him in the Mosque, and they sat with him asking him about his faith. A number of unbelievers from the Quraysh were sitting in their normal gathering places around the Ka`bah. When the Christians finished their questions, the Prophet called on them to believe in Islam and read some of the Qur'ān to them. When they listened to the Qur'ān, they were in tears. They immediately responded to the Prophet's call, declared their belief in God and that Muhammad was truly God's Messenger. They confirmed that he met the description they had of him in their Scriptures. When they rose to leave him, Abū Jahl and a number of the Quraysh unbelievers intercepted them, and reproached them, saying: "How ill advised you are! Your people sent you here to get information about this man; yet you hardly sat with him before you abandoned your faith and accepted his claims. We have never seen a more stupid delegation than yours.' Members of the delegation replied: "We wish you peace, and we will not engage in futile argument with you. We follow what we choose and you follow what you choose. We have not been slow to take advantage of the good that has been offered us.'
>
> It is reported that this Christian delegation was from the people of Najran. God knows best which report is more accurate. It is also stated that it is they that are referred to in the Qur'ānic verses starting with: "*Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it...*" (Verse 52) However, I asked al-Zuhrī

> about these verses and of whom they speak. He said to me: "I have often heard from our scholars that they speak of Negus [may God be pleased with him] and his men, as also the verses in *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, which read: *"You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, "We are Christians." This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: "Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?" And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good; while those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the blazing fire."* (5: 82-86)

Whichever group of people these verses speak about, the Qur'ān is referring the unbelievers to a particular event which they knew about. It, thus, presents to them an example of how people with clear vision receive the Qur'ān. How they respond to it, recognize its truth and how it accords with their own Scriptures. They do not allow any impediment, whether desire or pride, to stand between them and its truth. Furthermore, they are prepared to put up with any difficulty the ignorant put in their way.

"Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it." (Verse 52) This is one of the signs confirming its truth. All divine revelations are consistent. People who have been familiar with earlier revelations recognize the truth of the latest ones and are ready to believe in them, knowing that they all stem from God.

"And when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him.'" (Verse 53) The Qur'ān is so clear that it needs only to be read out and these people who have had some experience of the truth know for certain that it comes from the same source. Thus, they are reassured, knowing that it comes from none other than God: *"It is the truth from our Lord. Indeed, even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him."* Such submission to God is the central issue of every faith.

Those who have already submitted themselves to God, and who believe in the Qur'ān when it is recited to them *"are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity."* (Verse 54) It is their perseverance with self-surrender to God in its fullest sense, which is the meaning of Islam. It requires rising above desire and carnal pleasure, in order to follow the true path. They gain a double reward because of their perseverance in the face of real adversity. The most difficult

adversity is that of contending with desire, lust and deviation. They have shown their patience in all such circumstances, as well as perseverance in the face of the unbelievers' ridicule and hardship.

Good believers, however, do more than that for they also "repel evil with good'. This is indeed harder than perseverance in the face of physical and mental hardship. It means rising above personal pride and the desire to reply to ridicule and avenge physical injury. It also entails rising a step higher and adopting a benevolent attitude so as to answer what is foul with that which is decent. This is a height of greatness only achieved by good believers who feel that they are dealing with God, and who look for His acceptance. Hence, they forbear and persevere without losing their feeling of contentment.

"And having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them." (Verse 54) Here the *sūrah* mentions their being charitable with money after having emphasized their kindness to others. These two types of generosity, the personal and the financial, spring from the same origin, one which makes a believer rise over personal desire so as to treasure what is higher than earthly values. Both are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān.

People who are content with their faith also display another quality: namely, bearing patiently whatever hardship comes their way as a result of their self-surrender to God: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.'"* (Verse 55) Frivolous, idle talk kills time without benefit or knowledge to heart or mind. It is the sort of vulgar language that leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. It is the same whether it is addressed to someone who is present or spoken about when that person is absent.

Believing hearts do not engage in such idle talk, nor do they listen to it. They are preoccupied with the requirements of their faith, revelling in its light and purity: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it."* They are not provoked to reply in kind. They neither join those who are given to frivolous, idle talk nor enter into a slanging match with them. Instead, they leave malcontents alone, maintaining an attitude of decency and peace: *"To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you."* (Verse 55) Thus, they observe the highest standard of propriety, saying a kindly prayer, but making clear that they do not wish to share in such behaviour: "We *will have nothing to do with ignorant folk."* (Verse 55) We do not wish to waste our precious time, match them in their idle talk, or even listen to it.

This is a shining picture of the sort of reassurance faith gives. It shows the believer rising above frivolity, yet still retaining a kind and charitable posture. It draws a clear line to follow for whoever wishes to adopt Islamic manners. There is certainly no

participation with the ignorant. There is only an attitude that overlooks their faults, and wishes them well even though they are out to offend.

Who Receives Guidance

The Prophet did not need to do more than recite a portion of the Qur'ān in his effort to present his faith to followers of earlier revelations and they accepted it. Yet with regard to his own people, the Prophet made every endeavour to help them see the light of faith, yet God did not open their hearts to it because of what He knew of them. The Prophet could not give guidance to everyone he wished. It is certainly God who guides those whom He knows to have the right attitude and mentality making them ready to accept the faith: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56)

It is reported in the two most authentic anthologies of *Ĥadīth* that this verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle who looked after him and gave him much support, extending his protection to him against the Quraysh so that he could deliver his message in peace. Indeed, he put up with much pressure and hardship that involved the Quraysh's boycott of his own clan, the Hashimites, for three years when they were practically besieged in their own quarters. He did all this out of love for his nephew, Muhammad, and upholding the value of supporting one's kindred in the face of adversity. When his death was approaching, the Prophet urged him to believe in God and accept Islam, but God did not facilitate this for Abū Ṭālib because of something God, in His wisdom, knew.

Al-Zuhrī reports on the authority of Al-Musayyib ibn Ĥazn al-Makhzūmī: "When it was clear that Abū Ṭālib was about to die, the Prophet went to see him and found Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh ibn Umayyah ibn al-Mughīrah with him. The Prophet said to him: "Uncle! Say: "There is no deity other than God," and I will be able to give you good support in front of God.' Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh said to him: Abū Ṭālib! Would you abandon the religion of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, your father?' The Prophet continued to press him while the two unbelievers urged him to stick to his father's faith. The last thing he said was: "I follow `Abd al-Muṭṭalib's faith.' He refused to say: "There is no deity other than God.' The Prophet said: 'I will certainly pray for your forgiveness unless I am ordered not to do so.' God later revealed the verse that says: *"It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives."* (9: 113) In reference to Abū Ṭālib, He also revealed the verse that says: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56) [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Muslim also gives another version on the authority of Abū Hurayrah: 'When

death was approaching Abū Ṭālib the Prophet said to him: "Uncle! Say, "There is no deity other than God,' and I will be your witness to it on the Day of Judgement." He said: "If it was not for my fear that the Quraysh will shame me saying that it is only for the fear of death that I said it, I would certainly have pleased you by saying it. I would not do so except to give you that pleasure.' Then the verse was revealed saying: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56) Further reports by Ibn `Abbās, Ibn `Umar, Mujāhid, al-Sha`bī and Qatādah confirm that the verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ṭālib and that the last he said was: "I follow `Abd al-Muṭṭalib's faith.'

It is amazing just how serious and strict this religion of Islam is. Abū Ṭālib was the Prophet's uncle. He had supported and protected him against all who tried to harm him. Yet he was not to be one of the believers. This despite his great love of the Prophet and the Prophet's reciprocation of that love. Nor did the Prophet's desire that his uncle accept Islam make any difference. The point is that Abū Ṭālib gave all that he did to the Prophet out of paternal love and a sense of commitment to his kindred. Faith and its ties did not come into it. God was certainly aware of his motives; so he did not facilitate for him what the Prophet dearly wished. Thus, this aspect of guidance was not part of what the Prophet could have. It belongs to God's will and His evaluation of the situation. The Prophet's task is to deliver his message. Advocates of Islam in subsequent generations can only advise people. As for people's hearts, these belong to God. Whether a person chooses guidance or error depends on what God knows of their feelings and what is in their hearts.

Absurd Fears

The *sūrah* then mentions what they said to the Prophet by way of justifying their negativity to his message. Basically, they would lose their power *vis-a-vis* neighbouring Arab tribes which revered the Ka`bah, honoured its custodians and venerated its idols. Those tribes would collaborate against them, or perhaps other enemies from outside Arabia would drive them away from their land as they could no longer rely on support from neighbouring tribes. The Qur'ān clearly shows them where security lies and what they should fear, citing both their history and their current state of affairs. This follows what was stated earlier in the *sūrah* about Moses and Pharaoh. It takes the unbelievers on a further round showing them the true causes of ruin, not least ingratitude for God's blessings, denying His messengers, and turning a blind eye to His signs. This is followed by further verses that clearly outline true values. Thus, this present life, with all its pleasures, appear infinitesimal when compared to what God has in store for those who truly believe:

> *They say. 'If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.' Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us?* (Verses 57-61)

Theirs is a superficial outlook, evaluating matters by earthly standards. That is why the Quraysh imagined, as many other people do, that following the guidance God has given exposes them to danger and tempts their enemies to attack them. They think it will deprive them of support and bring about their ruin: "*They say: If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.*" (Verse 57) They do not deny that what the Prophet advocated is proper guidance, but they fear their enemies will tear them away from their land. They forget God, the only One who provides support and protection. They overlook the fact that no force on earth can overcome them when they enjoy God's support, and none can give them victory should God withdraw His support from them. Faith has just simply not touched their hearts. Had it done so, they would have had a different measure with which to appraise hostile forces and powers. Indeed, they would have had a completely different outlook, realizing that true security is found in enjoying God's support, and that fear results from lack of His guidance. For certain, following God's guidance is directly linked with real power and dignity. This is neither myth nor something said to comfort and reassure people. It is a profound truth which ensues from following God's guidance. For this brings people into harmony with the laws that govern the universe and all powers operating in it. It enables them to make use of such powers for the benefit of mankind. It is God who has created the universe and set in operation all its laws. Those who follow God's guidance can only derive strength from all this.

Where Real Security Lies

The guidance provided by God lays down a perfect and practical way of life. When it is implemented, it achieves victory on earth, in addition to leading to

happiness in the life to come. Its great distinctive feature is that it allows for no separation between what promotes happiness in this life and what achieves it in the life to come. It does not negate man's interest in this world for the sake of the world beyond. It joins them together to achieve goodness in the heart, society and life as a whole. Thus, this present life is seen as the time for planting while the next life is the time for harvesting. This can only be achieved through following divine guidance and addressing all actions to God, aiming to earn His pleasure.

Every time a community followed God's guidance, He ultimately gave it power, security and sovereignty. This after it completed its preparations to shoulder the trust of being in charge. This is a law that has never failed.

Many are those who fear the consequences of implementing divine law and following God's guidance. They fear the hostility and the scheming of those who are hostile to divine faith, the collaboration of enemy powers and their economic and general sanctions. But all these fears are based on myth, just like those of the Quraysh when they said to the Prophet: *"If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) When those very people eventually embraced God's guidance and implemented its rules, they were able to extend their authority over vast areas to the east and the west in less than a quarter of a century.

At the time, God gave them an answer that demonstrated the fallacy of their excuses. Who had given them security, and placed the Sacred Mosque in their land? Who was it who had made people from all over the world yearn to visit their land? Such visitors brought with them all manner of fruit and goods, presenting them in this sacred land while they were produced in unfamiliar areas and in different seasons.

"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us." (Verse 57) How could they fear being overpowered when they follow divine guidance. Is it not God who established the Sacred Mosque for them by the efforts of their first father, the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him)? Is it logical that the One who gave them security when they disobeyed Him would then leave them to be torn apart when they do what pleases Him? *"But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) They do not know where security lies and where fear comes from. They do not know that everything is determined by God Almighty.

If they really want to be spared aggression and loss of their lands, then they should avoid the causes of ruin: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58) To be ungrateful and show no thanks for God's blessings is the reason that causes people's ruin. The Quraysh had been given this sanctuary where they lived. They should beware of remaining ungrateful. If they

continue so doing, they will leave themselves open to God's punishment. They, thus, run the risk of being destroyed like the dwellers of those cities which they knew, the dwellings of destroyed communities which remain uninhabited: *"The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited."* (Verse 58) Their houses are still standing, telling of what happened to the people who took God's blessings for granted, never giving due thanks for them. They perished, leaving no offspring to inherit them. Thus, *"it is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

Yet God did not destroy those ungrateful communities without first sending a messenger to recite to them His revelations. This is the law to which He has committed Himself as an act of mercy: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59) The purpose behind sending a messenger into the main population centre is that it becomes a focal point from which the divine message is delivered to neighbouring areas and then further a field. Thus, no one will have the excuse of not knowing the divine message. The Prophet was sent to Makkah, the main centre in Arabia, warning its people of the fate that befell earlier communities which denied their messengers after receiving God's warnings. *"Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* Such people continue to deny God's revelations and messages, even though they know them to be true.

Yet all the enjoyments, pleasures, possessions and wealth that is available in this life, as well as the land where God has granted them power, the produce He has given them and all that mankind has ever enjoyed throughout life on earth is all but scanty when measured against what God has in store: *"Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason?"* (Verse 60)

This is the ultimate valuation. It applies not only to what they fear to lose of possessions, land or security, or to what God grants them of power, riches and enjoyment, or to what He gives to different people to enjoy. It is the ultimate valuation of all that this life brings, even when it is in its perfect state and made to last without interruption or consequences. It is all part of *"the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment."* It counts for little when compared with that which God has. For that is by nature *"much better and more enduring."* Hence the question is asked: *"Will you not use your reason?"* Comparing the two necessitates sound reasoning that knows the nature of both types. Hence the verse ends with this question. It alerts its addressees to the need to use their reason.

The round thus concludes with setting the two lives side by side, giving everyone the ability to choose: *"Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this*

world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us?" (Verse 61) On the one side we see those given a good promise by God and they find it on the Day of Judgement to be true. On the other, are those who took all the enjoyment life in this world could give, little and short as it is. They are forcibly brought forth on the Day of Resurrection for their deeds to be accounted for. The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are forced to come forward, afraid, dreading the outcome of the reckoning.

This is indeed the final word in reply to their earlier excuses expressing their fear that they will lose their land if they follow divine guidance.

Even if this were to come about, it would still be better than being forcibly brought before God for reckoning and reward. For, following divine guidance brings security and power on earth and rich reward in the hereafter. It is only those who are totally oblivious of the true nature of power in the universe, who are unaware of where security lies and what causes fear that abandon divine guidance. They are the losers who make a poor choice. They cannot avoid their inevitable ruin.

Disclaimers Availing Nothing

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round in which it portrays certain images of the Day of Judgement. It shows us the inevitable end to which associating partners with God leads:

> *On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.' They will be told: 'Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'What answer did you give to My messengers?' But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful.* (Verses 62-67)

The first question is one of rebuke: *"Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?"* (Verse 62) God certainly knows that such alleged partners are not to be found on that day, and that those who made the claims about their alleged status know nothing about them, they cannot even reach them. The question is asked so as to disgrace them. Therefore, those who are asked will give no answer, because no

answer is needed or expected. They only try to exonerate themselves for having led others astray, preventing them from following divine guidance, as the elders of the Quraysh used to do with their subordinates. They will say: *"Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped."* (Verse 63)

We did not force them into error, nor had we any power over their hearts. They went astray knowingly and by choice, just like we did. *"We now disown them before you,"* having had nothing to do with the crime of leading them astray. *"It is not us that they worshipped."* They worshipped idols, statues and other creatures. As for us, we did not present ourselves to them as deities, nor did they address their worship rituals to us.

This attempt at diverting the questions will not, however, benefit them. They are forced back to the central point, which is the farce of associating partners with God: *"They will be told: Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners."* (Verse 64) *If* those alleged partners can do any good, now is the time to call on them. Hence, they are urged to appeal to them to come to their help. In their misery, they know all too well that calling on them is futile. But they have no choice but to do as they are told: *"They will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them."* (Verse 64) Nothing else was expected and so the unbelievers are humiliated: *"They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]."* (Verse 64) They see it in this dialogue, just as they see it before them. Their inevitable end is one of great suffering.

When the image we see is at its climax, they are shown the guidance they continued to reject. This is the dear wish of anyone in that position on that great day. Guidance is available to them in this life if they will only take it up: *"If only they had been open to guidance!"* (Verse 64)

They are immediately returned to that dreaded scene: *"On that day, He will call to them and ask: What answer did you give to My messengers?"* (Verse 65) God certainly knows how they answered His messengers, but the question is put to them as a form of rebuke. In their state of total loss, they have no answer to give: *"But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions."* (Verse 66) For *"blotted out"* the Arabic text uses the word *`amiyat,* which denotes blindness. Indeed, it imparts an air of non-seeing to the whole scene. It is as if all information has been blinded and cannot reach them, leaving them with nothing. They can neither ask nor answer any questions. They remain silent, totally lost.

"However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful." (Verse 67) This is the opposite image. At the moment the unbelievers are at the height of their distress, the *sūrah* depicts the person who repents of his sins, believes in God and does righteous deeds. This is the person who

hopes to be successful. The choice is open to all and the time is there to make such a choice.

Where Praise Belongs

The *sūrah* makes it clear that everything is subject to God's will and His choice. It is He who creates and knows everything. To Him all matters of this life and the life to come are referred. All praise belongs to Him and His is the judgement on anything in this life. For to Him is the eventual return. They cannot choose for themselves or for anyone else. It is God who creates and chooses what He pleases:

> *Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return.* (Verses 68-70)

These verses are stated by way of comment on those that precede them. Verses wherein the unbelievers state their fear about losing their land should they accept the guidance the Prophet presents, and concluding with their position on the Day of Judgement when they face the reckoning and have to answer for their idolatry and erring ways. These comments clearly state that they do not have a choice between security and fear. They also re-emphasize God's oneness and that all matters are returned to Him.

"*Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases.*" (Verse 68) This is a fact people often forget or overlook. Indeed, God creates what He is pleased to create. No one can suggest anything to Him, whether increase or decrease in His creation. No one can introduce any amendment or modification on what He creates. He is the One who chooses whatever and whomever He pleases for the fulfilment of the functions, actions and duties He determines. No one can suggest to Him any candidate, or course of action to follow. None can propose to Him any statement or move. "*Never can they have such choice,*" whether in what relates to themselves or to anyone else. Everything large or small belongs to God alone.

If only this fact was established in people's minds and hearts, they would never feel frustrated. They would neither be elated with anything they receive nor be distressed by anything they miss out on. The choice is not theirs to make; it is God who chooses.

However, this does not mean that they should stop thinking or acting as they

wish. It simply means that they should accept what happens after they have done their best to consider, reflect, plan and act. They should accept it willingly. All they have to do is their utmost, leaving the results to God.

The unbelievers used to allege that God had partners when God alone is the Creator who chooses everything. He has no partner who has any share in His creation or in what He chooses: "*Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners.*" (Verse 68)

"*And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open.*" (Verse 69) He requites them according to what He knows of their situation, choosing for them what they deserve, be it truth or error.

"*He is God, other than whom there is no deity.*" (Verse 70) No partner does He have either in His creation or His choice. "*To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last.*" (Verse 70) Praise is due to Him for His choices, blessings, wisdom, planning, justice, grace and mercy. He alone deserves all praise. "*With Him rests all judgement.*" (Verse 70) His judgement is passed on all His servants, with none able to change any part of what He judges. "*And to Him you shall all return.*" (Verse 70) He then makes His final judgement on all.

Thus the *sūrah* gives us a feeling that God's overpowering will is supreme throughout the universe. He is fully aware of everyone's situation, whether hidden or open. Nothing is hidden from Him. To Him all shall return. How can they, then, associate partners with Him when they are under His control?

A Different Universe

The *sūrah* then takes the unbelievers on yet another round presenting them with scenes of the universe. In these, they are shown to remain oblivious to what God chooses for them and their life. It alerts them to two great universal signs, the night and the day, and the secrets they involve of what God chooses for His servants:

> *Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?' Say: 'Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?' It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful.* (Verses 71-73)

Because of their long familiarity with the succession of night and day, which are

sometimes called in Arabic, "the two new ones', people forget their ever-renewing status. Rarely do they admire the sunrise or sunset, and only rarely do they reflect thoughtfully on the spreading of the day or the darkening that ushers in the night. They do not reflect on the act of grace that brings their succession with all that it involves of mercy and life renewal. The Qur'ān alerts them from the long familiarity that blunts their senses and invites them to reflect on these great universal scenes. It presents them with the possibility of either the night or the day lasting forever, and the terrible consequences of either eventuality. It is a fact that people seldom appreciate things until they lose them or fear that possibility.

"Say: Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?" (Verse 71) People miss the light of day when the winter nights become a little longer, and cannot wait for the bright sun when it disappears for a few hours behind clouds. What will they do then if they lose its light completely, with the night stretching perpetually over their world? This question supposes that they will remain alive in such an eventuality, when all life is in peril unless daylight is forthcoming.

"Say: Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?"[12] (Verse 72) People look for the shade when the hours of day stretch and become very hot, and they look forward to the coming of the night when the days stretch longer in the summer. They enjoy their repose and rest in the night. All creatures need the night when they can renew the energy they spend during the day. What would happen to them then, should they remain alive, if the day were endlessly perpetuated until the Day of Judgement? Indeed, all life could perish in a day that never ends.

Everything in this universe is determined according to a careful measure, and every little detail is planned. *"It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful."* (Verse 73)

The night is for rest and repose, and the day for work and activity. It is all part of God's grace. Indeed everything people have is by the grace of God, so that *"you may have cause to be grateful,"* for the blessings and kindness He has granted you. One of these blessings is the succession of night and day. So also are all laws of nature which

[12] We should note that the verse speaking of the night being perpetuated forever ended with *'Will you not listen'?,* while the verse speaking of the other possibility of an endless day, concluded with *'Will you not see?'* Both are suitable qualities, because hearing is the important faculty at night, while during the day the primary faculty is sight. This is just an example of how the Qur'ānic style makes extensive use of harmony.

God has chosen to set in operation, reflecting His knowledge and wisdom.

Then follows a quick image of the Day of Judgement presented in a rhetorical question about those beings the unbelievers alleged to be partners with God. The *sūrah,* thus, confronts them with their false claims, showing them to be absolutely without substance:

> *On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: 'Produce your evidence!' They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them.* (Verses 74-75)

This image of the day when they are called and the question about God's alleged partners was drawn earlier. It is now repeated to confirm it once more in connection with the scene that draws a witness from each community. This witness is the prophet sent to each community, and he will state what reception he and his message were given. The Arabic word *naza`nā,* which is rendered as *'We shall draw'* signifies a particularly strong movement. Yet the meaning intended here is that he is called out from among them, standing where he could see and be seen by them all. As they face this witness, they are required to produce their evidence for what they believed in. They have no evidence and cannot on that day persist in their denials. "*They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone.*" (Verse 75) Indeed, all truth in its complete purity belongs to God alone. "*And all the falsehood they invented will forsake them.*" (Verse 75) Whatever falsehood they invented is useless. It cannot find them, nor can they find it at the time when they need it most.

Thus the comments on the story of Moses and Pharaoh are concluded. These comments took us on a long trip looking at hearts, souls, worlds, events and great scenes, moving repeatedly between the life of this world and the world beyond. It went far and wide in the universe, and deep into the soul, and far back in history, looking at the laws that govern life and the universe. Yet it always remained in full harmony with the central theme of the *sūrah,* and with the two main stories it relates: the one about Moses and Pharaoh and the other about Qārūn, or Korah. We have already looked at the first story and we will now look at the second.

3
Ungrateful for God's Blessings

۞ إِنَّ قَٰرُونَ كَانَ مِن قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰ
فَبَغَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلْكُنُوزِ مَآ إِنَّ
مَفَاتِحَهُۥ لَتَنُوٓأُ بِٱلْعُصْبَةِ أُو۟لِى ٱلْقُوَّةِ إِذْ
قَالَ لَهُۥ قَوْمُهُۥ لَا تَفْرَحْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْفَرِحِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: 'Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. (76)

وَٱبْتَغِ فِيمَآ ءَاتَىٰكَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلدَّارَ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ ۖ
وَلَا تَنسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ
وَأَحْسِن كَمَآ أَحْسَنَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَلَا
تَبْغِ ٱلْفَسَادَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' (77)

قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أُوتِيتُهُۥ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عِندِىٓ ۚ أَوَلَمْ
يَعْلَمْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ أَهْلَكَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦ
مِنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ مَنْ هُوَ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُ قُوَّةً
وَأَكْثَرُ جَمْعًا ۚ وَلَا يُسْـَٔلُ عَن ذُنُوبِهِمُ
ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.' Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins. (78)

فَخَرَجَ عَلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦ فِي زِينَتِهِۦۖ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا يَٰلَيۡتَ لَنَا مِثۡلَ مَآ أُوتِيَ قَٰرُونُ إِنَّهُۥ لَذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٖ ٧٩

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡعِلۡمَ وَيۡلَكُمۡ ثَوَابُ ٱللَّهِ خَيۡرٞ لِّمَنۡ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا وَلَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلصَّٰبِرُونَ ٨٠

فَخَسَفۡنَا بِهِۦ وَبِدَارِهِ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ فَمَا كَانَ لَهُۥ مِن فِئَةٖ يَنصُرُونَهُۥ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُنتَصِرِينَ ٨١

وَأَصۡبَحَ ٱلَّذِينَ تَمَنَّوۡاْ مَكَانَهُۥ بِٱلۡأَمۡسِ يَقُولُونَ وَيۡكَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقۡدِرُۖ لَوۡلَآ أَن مَّنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡنَا لَخَسَفَ بِنَاۖ وَيۡكَأَنَّهُۥ لَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ ٨٢

تِلۡكَ ٱلدَّارُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةُ نَجۡعَلُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوّٗا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا فَسَادٗاۚ وَٱلۡعَٰقِبَةُ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ ٨٣

مَن جَآءَ بِٱلۡحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُۥ خَيۡرٞ مِّنۡهَاۖ وَمَن جَآءَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ فَلَا يُجۡزَى ٱلَّذِينَ عَمِلُواْ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ إِلَّا مَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٨٤

And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune!' (79)

But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.' (80)

Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself. (81)

By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: 'Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success.' (82)

We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (83)

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done. (84)

Overview

The *sūrah* opened with the story of Moses and Pharaoh showing the power of government and authority and how, when coupled with injustice, tyranny, disbelief and abandonment of God's guidance, it ended in failure and ruin. Now the *sūrah* tells us about Qārūn, or Korah, portraying the power of wealth and knowledge and how, when coupled with arrogance and ingratitude, this leads to the same end. In essence, the *sūrah* depicts those values that make wealth and luxury practically insignificant when compared with faith and righteousness, as also with moderation in enjoying life's pleasures without arrogance or corruption.

The Qur'ān does not specify the time and place where these events took place. It only tells us that Qārūn belonged to Moses' people and that he was unjust to them. Did this happen in Egypt before the Israelites left? Or was it after their departure but during Moses' lifetime? Or did it take place after Moses' death? There are some reports which suggest that Qārūn was Moses' cousin and that the events related in the *sūrah* took place during Moses' lifetime. Other reports add that he even wronged Moses and was party to a plot that sought to accuse Moses of adultery. Qārūn was to receive a bribe in return. God showed that Moses was innocent and allowed him to punish Qārūn, who was swallowed into the earth.

We do not need any of these reports, nor do we need to know the exact time and place of these events. The story, as told in the Qur'ān, is sufficient to serve its purpose and to establish its own values. If its time, place and circumstances could have benefited its purpose, the Qur'ān would have provided these details. Therefore, we will discuss here only what the *sūrah* imparts, without reference to other reports.

Sound Advice Met with Arrogance

> *Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.'* (Verses 76-78)

This is how the story begins, naming its main character, Qārūn, and his community, "*the people of Moses*", as well as the way he treated his people, which was

unjust. It also tells us right at the very start the reason for such injustice, namely wealth: *"We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men."* (Verse 76) It goes on to explain the events, statements and reactions involved.

Qārūn belonged to Moses' people. God had given him abundant wealth, described in the *sūrah* as "*treasures*", a term that signifies a hoarded surplus of money which is taken out of circulation. Indeed the mere carrying of the keys to these treasures represented a heavy burden even for a band of strong men. It was because of his wealth that Qārūn treated his people unjustly. The *sūrah* does not specify the form of injustice dealt out by Qārūn, leaving it indefinite so as to include all types of injustice. He might have taken their land and property unfairly, as is often done by those who use power and wealth to deprive others of their rights. He might also have deprived them of their fair share in his property. God has given the poor their rightful share in the property of the rich, so that wealth does not circulate exclusively among the rich while all around them the poor are in desperate need. When this happens, corruption becomes manifest. Qārūn might equally have been guilty of other forms of injustice.

However, some in his community tried to stop such injustice, counselling him to maintain the path that earns God's pleasure. Thus, he would be able to enjoy his wealth and partake of the pleasures it provides, but in moderation and within reason. More importantly, this path requires wealthy people to watch God in all their actions, for it is He who granted them all they have. They too will have to account for their deeds on the Day of Judgement: *"His people said to him: Do not exult (in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption."* (Verses 76-77) This outlines the values and features that sum up the divine way of life and distinguish it from all other ways.

"*Do not exult*" in your riches nor be so proud of them as to forget the One who has granted you this blessing. Do not neglect to give due thanks. Do not treat your money as an object of extreme delight so that you become insolent and arrogant in your treatment of other people. *"For God does not love those who are exultant."* (Verse 76) His compatriots remind him of God and the fact that He does not love those who are infatuated with wealth, showing arrogance and using its power to humiliate others.

"*Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world."* (Verse 77) Here we see the right balance that is characteristic of the divine way of life. It makes the wealthy look forward to

the life to come hoping to be among the successful on the Day of Judgement, without depriving him of his share of enjoyment in the present life. In fact, the divine system urges him to do so as a duty, so that he does not discard life's pleasures and look down upon the life of this world.

God has created the pleasures and luxuries of this life so that people may enjoy their share of these, and work towards obtaining them. Thus human life is set on the way to progress and man fulfils the task God has assigned him on earth. The only proviso is that in such enjoyment of pleasures they should seek the reward of the hereafter. Thus, the wealthy neither deviate from the road leading to heaven, nor neglect their duties as a result of their riches. When they seek the hereafter, their enjoyment of pleasure becomes a form of gratitude to God and proper acceptance of His blessings. Thus it is, in turn, a way to earn more reward. The divine way of life achieves harmony and balance in human life. It enables man to progress spiritually without suffering deprivation or wasting natural resources.

"*Do good just as God has done good to you.*" (Verse 77) The money you have is a gift God has granted you out of his kindness. Hence, it should be received with gratitude and used for good purposes, and doing kindness to other people.

"*Do not seek to spread corruption on earth.*" (Verse 77) Corruption takes many forms including injustice, indulgence in pleasure, paying no heed to God's guidance or to the hereafter, doing what causes envy and hatred, spending money wastefully and blocking its proper use. "*For God does not love the ones who spread corruption,*" in the same way as He does not love those who are exultant.

Such was the honest advice given to Qārūn by his people. Yet in one sentence his reply carried every meaning of corruption: "*Answered he: I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.*" (Verse 78) I have got this wealth and amassed it through the knowledge I have; all by my own endeavour. So, why are you trying to tell me how to use what is my private property?

This is the attitude of one who chooses to be oblivious to the source of the blessings he has been given. He has been blinded by his wealth. Such people are common, seen in all societies. Many a rich person believes that his knowledge and effort are the only means by which he has amassed his wealth. Hence, he is not to be questioned about the way he uses his wealth, what he spends or for what purpose, whether it be for good or foul. No thought does he entertain of God or earning His pleasure.

Islam accepts private ownership and appreciates people's efforts in this regard, provided that they remain within the realm of what is permissible. While it does not belittle the importance of private effort, it stipulates a certain method of spending money just like it stipulates rules and methods that must be observed in acquiring it.

Its system combines balance and moderation. It does not deprive anyone of the fruits of their enterprise, but at the same time it does not approve either unrestricted indulgence or miserly hoarding. It gives the community its dues in such wealth, as well as the right to watch and monitor the methods of obtaining, investing, spending and enjoying wealth.

Qārūn, however, did not listen to his people, nor did he appreciate the blessings granted by his Lord. He did not abide by the divine method, but instead turned away arrogantly. Therefore, a warning was issued to him for his insolence and arrogance: *"Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78) If he believed himself to be powerful and rich, God had in the past destroyed communities that were far more powerful and wealthy. He should have known this, because it is such knowledge that saves man from destruction. Let him know, then, that he and all guilty people like him are worth nothing in God's sight. They are not even worth questioning about their sins. They are neither the arbiters nor the witnesses: *"The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78)

Dazzling Appearances

In just this first scene we see arrogance at its height. We also see sound advice ignored in favour of corruption and ingratitude.

The second scene shows Qārūn appearing before his people, decked out in all the splendour his wealth could afford him. Some of them are so dazzled by this that they express their keenest wish to have something similar. Envious, they believe that he has been given a great fortune. Others, however, listen to the voice of faith, rising above the lure of wealth and Qārūn's pomp. Speaking in full confidence, they remind the first group of the facts:

> *And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune! But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you!' God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.'* (Verses 79-80)

Here, we see some people infatuated with the luxuries that the present life can offer, ready to do what they can in order to have their share of it. Others feel that faith is a greater blessing, and hope for God's reward. Thus the value of wealth is set

side by side with the value of faith: "*Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune.'*" (Verse 79)

The luxuries and splendour that life can give have always captivated people so that they neither look beyond these nor seek any higher or nobler value. They do not ask what price the owner has paid for such luxuries, nor by what means he has obtained them. They covet it whether it is wealth, position or honour. They swarm like flies to it. It does not matter to them whether the price is too high, the method too wicked or the means too lowly.

By contrast, those who maintain their bond with God have a different standard of values by which they look at life. Their souls are too noble to let worldly considerations get the better of them. The dignity they feel as a result of their faith prevents them from yielding to the pressures exerted by others. Such people are the ones endowed with real knowledge and the right sense of proportion: "*But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.'*" (Verse 80) God's reward is far better than all this pomp, and what God gives is better by far than all that Qārūn has. To have such insight into things puts people into a nobler category: they are the ones who persevere in adversity and resist temptation. They are the ones who remain patient despite being deprived of what they might wish for. When they prove their patience in the face of adversity and their perseverance in following the way God has laid down, He elevates them to a level that enables them to rise above all that life on earth can offer. Thus do they seek only God's reward, and with confidence and reassurance.

A Fitting End

When the attraction of material splendour and pomp is at its greatest, God intervenes in order to end the test and save the weaker elements of the community from such temptation. Thus arrogance is utterly destroyed in the third, decisive scene of this story:

> *Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself.* (Verse 81)

In such a short sentence a huge event is described: "*We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling.*" Thus Qārūn went into the earth over which his pride had swelled. He is shown to be weak and powerless, incapable of using his wealth or position to any advantage.

With him the severe test that had claimed other people was also brought to an end. The blow he received made them turn back to God, lifting the cover of error that had earlier blinded them. The final scene of the story is thus portrayed:

> *By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success.* (Verse 82)

These very people are shown expressing their gratitude to God for not granting them what they had wished for only the day before. They are full of pleasure that God had not given them what He did Qārūn. They recognized that wealth is not an indication of God's pleasure. He gives in plenty or in small measure to any of His servants for reasons other than being pleased or displeased with them. Had wealth been evidence of God's pleasure, He would not have punished Qārūn so severely. Wealth is merely a test which can bring about a terrible end. They also realized that unbelievers will never be successful. Although Qārūn did not say anything to suggest that he was an unbeliever, nonetheless his arrogance and claims that his knowledge brought him all his wealth made them classify him as one. They saw that his end was one normally met by unbelievers.

The curtains are drawn with a victory for believing hearts achieved through God's direct will. Faith is seen to be far weightier than any worldly consideration. The comments that now follow are, therefore, most apt:

> *We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing.* (Verse 83)

It was to the hereafter that the people endowed with true knowledge referred. They have the right sort of knowledge which gives things their proper value. The hereafter, then, with its high rank in the universal order, and its happy life is granted to "*those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption.*" (Verse 83) No thought of arrogance is ever entertained by them. Nor do they seek to stress their own importance. Indeed such self-consciousness takes a secondary position, well below their consciousness of God and the supreme value they attach to the way of life He has laid down. They look at this earthly life, its concerns, values and standards with little interest. Corruption is far from their minds. Hence, they are given high rank in the hereafter: "*The future belongs to the God-fearing,*" who fear God and seek His pleasure, dreading to incur His wrath.

In the life to come reward for all actions is given in accordance with the rule to which God has committed Himself: a good action will be multiplied manifold and rewarded with that which is much better. Conversely, a bad action is given only its like. This is a gesture of God's grace to mankind: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done."* (Verse 84)

4
The Ultimate Return

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِى فَرَضَ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لَرَآدُّكَ إِلَىٰ مَعَادٍ ۚ قُل رَّبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ مَن جَآءَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَمَنْ هُوَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٨٥﴾

He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return. Say: 'My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error.' (85)

وَمَا كُنتَ تَرْجُوٓاْ أَن يُلْقَىٰٓ إِلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبُ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۖ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ ظَهِيرًا لِّلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

You could never hope that this book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace. Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. (86)

وَلَا يَصُدُّنَّكَ عَنْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بَعْدَ إِذْ أُنزِلَتْ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَٱدْعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ ۖ وَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. (87)

وَلَا تَدْعُ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ ۘ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ كُلُّ شَىْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُۥ ۚ لَهُ ٱلْحُكْمُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return. (88)

The Prophet and the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* has told its stories and given its direct comments on them both. Now it addresses the Prophet and the small band of believers who followed him when he was still in Makkah. This address is made when the Prophet had been driven out of his home town, was being chased by his people who wanted to kill him, and had not yet reached his new base, Madinah. He was at al-Juĥfah, close to Makkah where the

danger was very close. His eyes frequently turned to his home town which he so dearly loved. He only left it for the sake of his message. Otherwise, Makkah was the place where he had spent all his life, the place of his memories, and where his relatives lived.

In this desperate situation he is told: *"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return."* (Verse 85) God, who has given you the Qur'ān and the task of delivering His message will not abandon you, or allow the unbelievers to chase you out of your place and home town. He will not allow them to impose their will on you or to oppress the believers with you. He has made the Qur'ān binding on you so as to give you support through it at the time He judges to be right. If you are driven out today and being chased in all directions, you will certainly return with larger support.

God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to give Muhammad, His servant, this true promise at such a stressful time, so that he could go along his way comforted, confident and reassured by God's promise. He does not entertain the slightest doubt that God's promise will come true.

Indeed, God's promise applies to all those who follow the same way. Anyone who suffers hardship and adversity for God's sake and bears this with patience and perseverance will ultimately be given support against the oppressors. God will take over the battle on their behalf when they have given all that they can in fulfilment of their duty.

"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return." (Verse 85) He had formerly returned Moses to the land from where he fled, and with his return he saved the oppressed community and destroyed Pharaoh and his noblemen. It was the God-fearing who ultimately triumphed. Hence, you also, Muhammad, should go along your way, leaving the question of judgement between you and your people to God Almighty: *"Say: My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error."* (Verse 85) Leave the matter to God and He will requite both those who follow right guidance and those who remain in error.

That He had assigned the Qur'ān to you and made it binding on you was an act of mercy and grace. It could not have occurred to you at any time that you would be the person chosen to receive this trust. It is, indeed, a noble position to which you could not have aspired before it was granted to you: *"You could never hope that this Book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace."* (Verse 86)

This confirms that the Prophet had no aspirations to be entrusted with God's message. He was chosen by God who creates and chooses as He pleases. To be a messenger of God is too high a position for any one to hanker after, unless God chooses that person and gives him the necessary preparations. It is an aspect of grace

given to the Prophet and made available to all humanity which is addressed by this message. It is grace that is granted to the chosen few, not to any aspirant. Many of the Arabs and Jews living nearby were longing for the last promised message to be given before the end of time. But God, who knows best to whom to assign His message, chose for it someone who never aspired to it. He knew that he was well prepared to receive its unfailing goodness.

His Lord bids him then not to lend support to the unbelievers. He warns him of allowing the unbelievers or anyone else to turn him away from God's revelations. He sets the pure faith based on God's absolute oneness against idolatry and idolaters.

> *Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return.* (Verses 86-88)

This is the last word in the *sūrah* separating the way God's Messenger follows from that of the unbelievers. It clearly marks out the way for the Prophet's followers, which remains the true way until the Day of Judgement. It is the final word given at the time the Prophet was immigrating for God's sake, his journey separating two clearly distinct periods of history.

"*Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 86) There can never be any mutual support or cooperation between believers and unbelievers when their two ways and codes are so widely different. One group is God's party and the other Satan's party. On what could they cooperate?

"*Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high.*" (Verse 87) Unbelievers always try to turn the advocates of faith away from their task, using all means and methods. The believers, however, always stick to their way, paying no heed to those who oppose them or try to divert them. They have God's revelations with which they have been entrusted.

"*But continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord.*" (Verse 87) It should always be a direct, clear call that allows for no ambiguity or equivocation. It is a call to God, not to any bond based on national or narrow interests. It does not seek the fulfilment of any desire. Whoever wishes to adopt this message pure and simple should do so. Those who want something else should know that the way to that end is different.

"*And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God.*" (Verse 87-88) This rule is stated twice in succession. The first warns

against associating partners with God. The second warns against adopting any deity alongside God. It is this rule that separates clarity from confusion with regard to faith. It is on this rule that the whole structure of faith is based: its morality, values, duties and legislations. It is the pivot around which every directive and legislative order turns. Hence, it is always stated first.

Such emphasis is then repeated in a rather different way: "*There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return.*" (Verse 88)

"*There is no deity other than Him.*" No submission is made to anyone else. His is the only power and the only refuge. "*Everything is bound to perish except Himself*" Indeed everything else will die and perish: wealth, position, authority, power, life and its comforts, the whole earth, the heavens and all creatures in them, as well as the entire universe we know or do not know about. All will perish and only God, the Everlasting, will remain. "*With Him rests all judgement.*" He judges as He pleases. No one is party to His judgement, and none can impede or abrogate His verdict. Whatever He wills shall be. "*And to Him you all shall return.*" There can be no escape from Him or His judgement.

Thus concludes the *sūrah* that shows God's will taking direct action, protecting the divine message and destroying tyranny. It concludes with restating the basic concept of faith: God's oneness and His transcendent authority. Therefore, the advocates of the divine message should go along their way confident and reassured.

SŪRAH 29

Al-`Ankabūt

(The Spider)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation. Some reports suggest that the first 11 verses were revealed in Madinah, citing the fact that they mention *jihād* and hypocrites. However, we hold the view that it was all revealed in Makkah. It is suggested that the eighth verse was revealed in connection with the adoption of Islam by Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş, as we will explain. There is no doubt that he adopted Islam in Makkah. Yet this verse is one of the 11 said to have been revealed in Madinah. As for mentioning *jihād,* this simply refers to striving against oppression. This is the type *of jihād* needed to ensure that we remain steadfast and do not allow oppression to force us to renounce our faith. This is clear in the context it occurs. As for hypocrisy, the *sūrah* simply describes a particular type of person.

The *sūrah* follows a single line from start to finish. It begins with three separate letters and follows these by speaking of belief and religious oppression. It also refers to the duties required by faith, which tests peoples' true metal. To believe is not a simple word that one says. Rather it means steadfastness in the face of adversity, and the fulfilment of one's duties.

Faith is, then, the *sūrah's* central theme. Shortly after its opening verses, it relates aspects about Noah, Abraham, Lot, Shu`ayb, the `Ād, the Thamūd, Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān, in quick succession, describing some of the impediments and tests that confronted the call to faith over many centuries. The *sūrah* then comments on these stories and the forces that appear through them to be lined up against truth, faith and divine guidance. It shows that all such forces are of little consequence. Indeed, God destroyed them all at the appropriate time: "We *took each one of them to task for their*

sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown." (Verse 40) The *sūrah* draws a comparison that shows the weakness and insignificance of such forces: *"Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41)

The *sūrah* then establishes a clear link between the truth contained in all the divine messages and that which is clearly seen in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It then asserts the unity between all these messages and that of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They were all given by God, and they all call on people in the same way, urging them to believe in God alone. The *sūrah* goes on to speak about the last revelations bestowed from on high and how the unbelievers received it, demanding miracles. They are not satisfied with this book, the Qur'ān, and all it contains of mercy and reminders to believers. Indeed, they hasten the coming of God's punishment, paying little credence to the fact that hell will encompass them. Their logic in all this is contradictory: *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.'"* (Verse 61); *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.'"* (Verse 63), and *"When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone."* (Verse 65) Despite all this, however, they continue to associate partners with God and to persecute the believers.

Within this context, the *sūrah* calls on believers to emigrate to some other place where they will enjoy security. They must not fear death, because: *"Every soul shall taste death."* (Verse 57) Nor should they fear that sustenance will not be available to them: *"How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you."* (Verse 60)

The *sūrah* concludes with praising those who strive for God's cause, reassuring them of support and continued guidance: *"But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good."* (Verse 69) Thus the end and the beginning are joined, both emphasizing the same point. The *sūrah's* consistency demonstrates how all its sections serve the same idea. All is focused around one central theme, faith.

The *sūrah* can be divided into three parts, all of which stress one theme. The first speaks of the basic nature of faith, the test that people have to pass, the different destiny of believers, unbelievers and hypocrites, and the fact of individual responsibility, which means that no one is answerable for anyone else's deeds or any part thereof: *"Most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions."* (Verse 13) The second part includes the stories we have already

mentioned, and the obstacles placed in front of divine messages and their advocates. It portrays them as insignificant when compared with God's might. It speaks about the truth inherent in the messages delivered by all prophets. It is the same truth that is inherent in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It all comes from God. The final part begins with a clear order not to enter into any debate with followers of earlier religions, except in accordance with what is best. It speaks of the unity of the divine faith throughout all generations, and the unity between earlier messages and Islam which is denied by unbelievers. It concludes with encouragement to those who strive for God's cause, reassuring them of God's support: "*God is indeed with those who do good.*" (Verse 69)

From start to finish the *sūrah* strikes several strong notes on the meaning of faith and its nature, shaking people's hearts. In a most serious manner, it puts them face to face with the duties imposed by faith. The choice is either to fulfil these or to abandon them. The alternative is to be a hypocrite, which fact God will certainly unmask. The only way to describe these notes is to refer to the texts in which they occur. We will now discuss them fully at their relevant places in the *sūrah.*

1
The Inevitable Test

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

أَحَسِبَ ٱلنَّاسُ أَن يُتْرَكُوٓاْ أَن يَقُولُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? (2)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۖ فَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ صَدَقُواْ وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ ٱلْكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٣﴾

We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars. (3)

أَمْ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن يَسْبِقُونَا ۚ سَآءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge! (4)

مَن كَانَ يَرْجُواْ لِقَآءَ ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّ أَجَلَ ٱللَّهِ لَءَاتٍ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all. (5)

وَمَن جَٰهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَٰهِدُ لِنَفْسِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَغَنِىٌّ عَنِ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds. (6)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَنُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَحْسَنَ ٱلَّذِى كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did. (7)

وَوَصَّيۡنَا ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيۡهِ حُسۡنًاۖ وَإِن جَٰهَدَاكَ لِتُشۡرِكَ بِي مَا لَيۡسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞ فَلَا تُطِعۡهُمَآۚ إِلَيَّ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٨

We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (8)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَنُدۡخِلَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ٩

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous. (9)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ فَإِذَآ أُوذِيَ فِي ٱللَّهِ جَعَلَ فِتۡنَةَ ٱلنَّاسِ كَعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ وَلَئِن جَآءَ نَصۡرٞ مِّن رَّبِّكَ لَيَقُولُنَّ إِنَّا كُنَّا مَعَكُمۡۚ أَوَلَيۡسَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَعۡلَمَ بِمَا فِي صُدُورِ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٠

Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? (10)

وَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ ١١

Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites. (11)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّبِعُواْ سَبِيلَنَا وَلۡنَحۡمِلۡ خَطَٰيَٰكُمۡ وَمَا هُم بِحَٰمِلِينَ مِنۡ خَطَٰيَٰهُم مِّن شَيۡءٍۖ إِنَّهُمۡ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ١٢

The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. (12)

وَلَيَحۡمِلُنَّ أَثۡقَالَهُمۡ وَأَثۡقَالٗا مَّعَ أَثۡقَالِهِمۡۖ وَلَيُسۡـَٔلُنَّ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ عَمَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ١٣

Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions. (13)

Inevitable Tests

"Alif. Lām. Mīm." These are three of the separate Arabic letters that occur at the beginning of some Qur'ānic *sūrahs*. In our view, they are meant to alert the audience to the fact that such letters are the material from which the divine book given to the Prophet, i.e. the Qur'ān, is made. They are familiar to the Arabs who use them to compose whatever ideas they wish to express. Yet they cannot compose anything like this divine book, because it is of no man's composition; its author is God.

Sūrahs that start with such separate letters always speak about the Qur'ān, either immediately following these letters or later on, as is the case in the present *sūrah.* Hence, we read in its verses: *"Recite what has been revealed to you of the book."* (Verse 45) *"Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you."* (Verse 47) *"Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand."* (Verse 48) *"Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them?"* (Verse 51) The fact that references to the Qur'ān and its inimitable style are invariably made in these *sūrahs* confirms our view concerning these separate letters.

Immediately after the opening, the *sūrah* begins speaking about faith and the hard test believers are subjected to in order to make their belief a reality. It mentions that it is through such testing that true believers are distinguished from liars: *"Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars."* (Verses 2-3)

This is the first strong note made in the *sūrah,* given in the form of a rhetorical question about people's concept of faith. They often imagine that it is merely a word they utter: *"Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone?"*

Belief is not a mere word we say; it is a reality that imposes duties, a trust that carries requirements and a struggle that demands patience and perseverance. It is not enough that people should claim to believe.

When they make this claim they are not left alone. They are subjected to tests so as to prove their sincerity and true metal, just as gold is tested with fire so as to separate it from any cheap elements. The Arabic word used here for test derives from the root *fitnah,* which imparts exactly this sense of being subjected to a test with all that this implies.

Such tests to prove people's belief is a general and long established rule: *"We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars."* (Verse 3) God certainly knows what people harbour in their hearts before any test, but the test reveals, in

practice, what is known to God, yet hidden from human knowledge. He thus makes people accountable for what they actually do, not for what He knows of their reality. This is, in one sense, an act of grace, while in another, it is an act of justice. At the same time, it sets an edifying example for people so that they do not hold anyone accountable for anything other than what is clearly apparent of their deeds and what such deeds entail. They should remember that they cannot know what is in another's heart; only God knows that.

Let us now discuss the general rule that God has set in operation, one whereby believers are subjected to a test so as to distinguish those who are truthful from those who lie. Faith is the trust God has placed in this world of ours. It is borne only by those who are worthy of it, have the strength to bear it and are totally devoted to it. They must prefer it to their own comfort, safety, security, and all temptation. This trust entails being in charge of the earth, leading mankind along the way God has chosen for them, implementing His word in life. Hence, this trust is both noble and heavy. It is part of God's command, and as such, it needs a certain type of person to patiently endure adversity.

As part of the test, a believer is subjected to hardship by others. Believers often realize they have no one to support or defend them and that they lack the power with which to face tyranny. This is the immediate picture our minds see when tests are mentioned, but it is certainly not the hardest type of test. There are many different types of testing, some far more trying and difficult.

There is, for example, the test presented by family and loved ones. A believer may fear that the sacrifices he is called upon to make could put his family in a perilous situation, or that he cannot protect his loved ones. On their part, fearing for his life, his loved ones may call on him to compromise or to give up. They may appeal to him in the name of their close relation not to expose himself to destruction, or burden them with what they cannot bear. The *sūrah* refers to an aspect of such testing with parents, and this is very difficult to pass.

Another form of test is to see those who are deep in error and follow falsehood revelling in success, with the world at their feet, applauded by the masses, and with no obstacles in their way. Glory comes easy to them and everything in life is theirs to enjoy. Contrast this with the believer who finds himself ignored, unnoticed and undefended. Only a few people like him appreciate the value of the truth in which he believes, but none of these has any say in life.

Yet another form is to feel oneself alone in a strange environment. A believer looks around and finds everything and everyone swimming with the sweeping tide that runs contrary to the truth he knows, while he stands alone without support.

We see nowadays a different type of test in the form of communities and states

where vice is widespread, yet they reflect a progressive society and civilized style of life. In such communities, people find good standards of care and protection. Moreover, despite their turning away from God's path, such people are both strong and affluent.

There is, however, one test that is harder than all the rest. This comes from within, where the lure of desire, enjoyment and pleasure becomes very strong, or at least comfort and security appear too tempting. This makes following the line of faith difficult and the difficulty may be compounded by other obstacles which a believer may have to contend with in his community.

If time marches on under such conditions and God's support seems slow in coming, the test becomes even more difficult and harder to endure. Only those strengthened by God will remain steadfast. These are the ones who prove the truth of faith and can be given the great trust that God in heaven wants to place on earth.

What we have to understand is that God has no desire to put believers to such hard tests or cause them much suffering. It is all part of their preparation to take up the trust and fulfil its requirements. They must go through special preparations that can only be achieved through enduring real difficulties, withstanding pain and overcoming desires while being truly certain of God's support or His reward, long as the hardship may continue and severe as the suffering may be.

The human soul is tested with difficulties and hardships. It is thus purged of any vile influence. All its latent powers are thus mobilized and it acquires further strength and solidity. This is the effect of hardship on communities. Only the strongest remain steadfast. These are the ones who maintain the closest relation with God, and remain absolutely confident that the path of faith will inevitably lead them to one of the two goodly eventualities: victory or reward. To these the banner is eventually entrusted, and they are certainly worthy of it.

The trust they receive is very dear to them, particularly because of the high price they have had to give for it, enduring pain and suffering, and sacrificing much in its service. A person who gives much of himself and his comforts, who endures hardship and adversity will definitely hold dear the trust for which he has withstood so much. He will not abandon it easily.

As for the eventual triumph of faith and truth, this is something God has promised. No believer entertains any doubt that what God promises will certainly come true. If it is felt to be slow in coming, this must be for a particular purpose which will most certainly benefit faith and the faithful. No one is keener than God to protect His faith and the people who adopt it sincerely. Those believers who endure hardship should always bear in mind that it is sufficient for them to be the ones God has chosen to be entrusted with the truth. Indeed, God confirms that they have

strong faith, for He has chosen them to be tested. An authentic *ĥadīth* states: "The most severely tested are prophets, then the most pious people, then the ones closest to these, one degree after another. A man will be tested in accordance with his strength of faith. If he proves himself strong, the severity of his test is increased."

Those who subject the believers to hardship and act wickedly will not escape God's punishment, even though they may appear strong and victorious. This is again a true promise made by God: "*Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge!*" (Verse 4) No wicked or evil person should think that he can escape. If he does then his judgement is absolutely erroneous. God, who has made tests a general rule to distinguish true believers from false claimants, is the One who has also made punishment of the perpetrators of evil a general rule that never fails. This is the second strong note at the opening of the *sūrah,* one that balances the first.

Who Benefits by Striving

The third note the *sūrah* strikes is that of reassuring those who hope to meet with God and strengthening their bond with Him: *"Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 5) Those who dearly hope to meet God should rest assured. They should wait confidently for the fulfilment of His promise. They can look forward to it provided they do so with certitude. This is an inspiring image: a person of faith cherishing hopes and looking forward to the fulfilment of God's promise. His aspiration is answered with confirmation of its truth. This is followed by the reassurance that God is fully aware of all their hopes: *"He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 5)

Then the *sūrah* states to those believers who strive to fulfil the duties of faith, enduring all manner of hardship, that they only strive for themselves and for their own good. By doing so they have set their affairs on the right course. As for God, He needs no one: *"Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds."* (Verse 6)

It is true that God has tested the believers and required them to strive hard so that they could endure adversity with patience, but all this is for their own good. It has ensured their benefit both in this world and in the life to come. Striving, or *jihād,* reinforces a person's good elements, expands his horizons, makes him ready to sacrifice his life and possessions, as also enhances his best qualities and abilities. It does all this for the individual who strives, before it brings further benefits to the community of believers, improving its situation, establishing the truth within it, and making goodness overcome evil in its ranks.

"Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good." Let no one, then, stop

midway through this process. Let no one stop to demand a price from God, holding what he did as a favour and feeling that his prize is overdue. God benefits nothing by anyone's striving. He is in no need of people's efforts. After all, human beings are weak, barely significant. *"God is in no need of anything in all the worlds."* (Verse 6) It is God who grants a favour to those who strive, helping them in their efforts and establishing them in a position of power on earth. Furthermore, He will reward them well in the life to come: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did."* (Verse 7)

Believers should remain reassured of their great reward. Let them, then, remain patient in adversity, fulfilling the requirements of their test, and persevering in their *jihād.* A great future and a goodly reward await them. This is sufficient for any believer, even though he may not enjoy justice in this present life.

Conflict with Parents

The *sūrah* then refers to a type of test which we have already mentioned: that of ties and bonds with family and loved ones. It gives clear and decisive guidance in such a difficult situation:

> *We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous.* (Verses 8-9)

Parents are the closest of all relatives. They give much to their children. Hence, to be kind to one's parents is a duty required of everyone. Indeed parents must be treated with love, respect, and care. Yet when it comes to one's duty towards God, they cannot be obeyed in opposition to Him: *"We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* (Verse 8) The paramount bond is that with God. Hence, if one's parents are unbelievers, they should be treated with care and kindness, but must not be obeyed or followed. Once this present life is over, all return to God: *"It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 8)

When judgement is made between believers and unbelievers, the former find themselves to be a closely knit unit even though they may have no blood relationship: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly*

admit them among the righteous." (Verse 9) Thus, those who maintain their bond with God will be together in one community, as they are in reality. The bonds created by blood and marriage relations are no longer valid; they end when this present life comes to an end. Such bonds are accidental and carry no real substance because they are not linked to the strongest and unseverable bond, faith.

In explaining this verse, al-Tirmidhī reports that it was revealed in connection with Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş and his mother Ĥamnah bint Abī Sufyān. Sa`d was a very dutiful son. She asked him: 'What is this religion you have embraced? By God, I will not eat or drink until you revert to your original religion, or else I die. You will then be in disgrace for the rest of time as you will be identified as 'his mother's killer'." She did not eat or drink anything for one whole day. Sa`d came to her and said: "Mother! If you had 100 souls and they die one by one, I will not abandon my religion. So you can eat or refuse to eat, as you please." When she despaired of his response, she resumed eating. God then revealed this verse, ordering Muslims to be kind to their parents and to treat them with respect but not to obey them in disbelief.

Thus faith overcame the test of close relations, but kindness and dutifulness remained intact. A believer may be subjected to such a test at any time. When and if this does occur, God's directive and Sa`d's action provide proper guidance.

Hard Tests and False Temptation

The *sūrah* then gives us an image of people who yield abjectly when they face oppression and injustice. Yet, when the going is easy, they make boastful claims:

> *Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God filly aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites.* (Verses 10-11)

Such people declare their belief when things look bright and the future rosy. They think that accepting God's faith is easy and that it does not constitute more than making the briefest of declarations. Yet, *"when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause,"* on account of the declaration they made when everything seemed easy *"he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment."* Thus, they panic and their standards and values become confused. Their very faith is shaken. They imagine that nothing could be worse than the oppression they are suffering, not even God's punishment in the life to come. They wonder why they should endure such

endless suffering when God's punishment could not be any worse. Thus do they equate hardship caused by man with God's punishment; yet the latter is something which no one can estimate.

Such is the attitude of this type of person to the test when it takes the form of physical suffering. Nevertheless, when the situation alters somewhat in their favour, their fickleness is revealed for all to see: "*should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: We have always been with you!*" They claim to have always been with the believers despite their earlier desertion, cowardly betrayal and wrong judgement. When better prospects arrive, everyone can make such boastful claims. Yet they are only yesterday's cowards speaking about false heroics, saying to those who remained steadfast throughout: *"We have always been with you."*

"Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures?" He certainly knows what everyone harbours in their hearts and their innermost thoughts. He knows who is a true believer and who is a hypocrite. Who can deceive God or project a false image to Him? *"Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites."* (Verse 11) He will certainly expose them. After all, the test aimed to separate true believers from hypocrites.

We need to reflect a little on the accurate Qur'ānic description of the error such people make. It says that: *"he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment."* (Verse 10) Such error is not that they weaken and find themselves unable to endure any more. True believers may indeed weaken at some point, because human endurance has its limits. They do not, however, lose sight of the great gulf that separates what their tormentors can inflict on them and God's grievous punishment. They never confuse this transitory world with that of immortality, not even when the torture and hardship visited upon them exceeds human endurance. A believer never loses the sense that God overpowers everything in the universe, not even when he is under the greatest pressure. This is the point that separates true believers from hypocrites.

The last image of such testing is that of temptation. This is presented alongside the unbelievers' false concept of responsibility and reward. The *sūrah* confirms that both responsibility and reward are personal and individual. This is a fundamental Islamic principle that ensures the best and clearest form of justice for all:

> *The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions.* (Verses 12-13)

The Arab unbelievers at the time of the Qur'ānic revelations used to say this. Furthermore, it accords with their own traditions under which a clan or tribe was held collectively responsible for the payment of blood money in cases of accidental killing, and collective responsibility was an established social value. Hence, they imagined that they could bear the responsibility for other people's disbelief, exempting them from God's punishment. On the other hand, they derided the concept of reward in the hereafter. Thus they said to the believers: *"Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves."* (Verse 12)

The *sūrah,* however, gives a decisive reply, making it clear that all creatures return to their Lord as individuals. Everyone is accountable for their own deeds. No one bears responsibility for anyone else: *"But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins."* (Verse 12) The *sūrah* confronts them with the reality of their claims: *"Liars indeed they are."* (Verse 12)

Furthermore, not only will they be made to bear the burden of their own errors, disbelief and false claims; they will also bear the burden of causing others to go astray. The latter who were thus led astray, however, are not exempt from bearing the burden of their own error that led them into such disbelief: *"Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions."* (Verse 13)

Thus this aspect of the testing is closed as people are made to know that God will not hold them accountable as communities. Instead, He holds everyone to account as an individual. Everyone will be held in pledge for whatever they have earned.

2
Like a Spider's Web

وَلَقَد أَرۡسَلۡنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمۡ أَلۡفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمۡسِينَ عَامٗا فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱلطُّوفَانُ وَهُمۡ ظَٰلِمُونَ ١٤

We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; (14)

فَأَنجَيۡنَٰهُ وَأَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلسَّفِينَةِ وَجَعَلۡنَٰهَآ ءَايَةٗ لِّلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٥

but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people. (15)

وَإِبۡرَٰهِيمَ إِذۡ قَالَ لِقَوۡمِهِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱتَّقُوهُۖ ذَٰلِكُمۡ خَيۡرٞ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُمۡ تَعۡلَمُونَ ١٦

And Abraham said to his people: 'Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! (16)

إِنَّمَا تَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوۡثَٰنٗا وَتَخۡلُقُونَ إِفۡكًاۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَعۡبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَا يَمۡلِكُونَ لَكُمۡ رِزۡقٗا فَٱبۡتَغُواْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرِّزۡقَ وَٱعۡبُدُوهُ وَٱشۡكُرُواْ لَهُۥٓۖ إِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ١٧

You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. (17)

وَإِن تُكَذِّبُواْ فَقَدۡ كَذَّبَ أُمَمٞ مِّن قَبۡلِكُمۡۖ وَمَا عَلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ إِلَّا ٱلۡبَلَٰغُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ١٨

If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message.

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ كَيۡفَ يُبۡدِئُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡخَلۡقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥٓۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٞ ١٩

(18)

Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God. (19)

قُلۡ سِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ بَدَأَ ٱلۡخَلۡقَۚ ثُمَّ ٱللَّهُ يُنشِئُ ٱلنَّشۡأَةَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٢٠

Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. (20)

يُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرۡحَمُ مَن يَشَآءُۖ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُقۡلَبُونَ ٢١

He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. (21)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعۡجِزِينَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِيّٖ وَلَا نَصِيرٖ ٢٢

And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' (22)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِقَآئِهِۦٓ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَئِسُواْ مِن رَّحۡمَتِي وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ٢٣

Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits. (23)

فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُواْ ٱقۡتُلُوهُ أَوۡ حَرِّقُوهُ فَأَنجَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ

[Abraham's] people's only answer was: 'Kill him, or burn him!' But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs

for people who believe. (24)

٢٤

And he said: 'You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.' (25)

وَقَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱتَّخَذْتُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْثَٰنًا مَّوَدَّةَ بَيْنِكُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ ثُمَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ يَكْفُرُ بَعْضُكُم بِبَعْضٍ وَيَلْعَنُ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا وَمَأْوَىٰكُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ٢٥

Lot believed in him. He said: 'I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise.' (26)

۞ فَـَٔامَنَ لَهُۥ لُوطٌ ۘ وَقَالَ إِنِّى مُهَاجِرٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّىٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٢٦

We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous. (27)

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُۥٓ إِسْحَٰقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِى ذُرِّيَّتِهِ ٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ أَجْرَهُۥ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ٢٧

And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. (28)

وَلُوطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِۦٓ إِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ ٱلْفَٰحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُم بِهَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِّنَ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ٢٨

Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' (29)

أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ وَتَقْطَعُونَ ٱلسَّبِيلَ وَتَأْتُونَ فِى نَادِيكُمُ ٱلْمُنكَرَ ۖ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوا۟ ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٢٩

He said: 'My Lord! Support You me

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱنصُرۡنِي عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ٣٠

against these people who spread corruption.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُنَآ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ بِٱلۡبُشۡرَىٰ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا مُهۡلِكُوٓاْ أَهۡلِ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِۖ إِنَّ أَهۡلَهَا كَانُواْ ظَٰلِمِينَ ٣١

When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers.' (31)

قَالَ إِنَّ فِيهَا لُوطٗاۚ قَالُواْ نَحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَن فِيهَاۖ لَنُنَجِّيَنَّهُۥ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَهُۥ كَانَتۡ مِنَ ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ٣٢

He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.' (32)

وَلَمَّآ أَن جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُنَا لُوطٗا سِيٓءَ بِهِمۡ وَضَاقَ بِهِمۡ ذَرۡعٗا وَقَالُواْ لَا تَخَفۡ وَلَا تَحۡزَنۡۖ إِنَّا مُنَجُّوكَ وَأَهۡلَكَ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَكَ كَانَتۡ مِنَ ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ٣٣

Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them; but they said: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind. (33)

إِنَّا مُنزِلُونَ عَلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِ رِجۡزٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡسُقُونَ ٣٤

We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds.' (34)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكۡنَا مِنۡهَآ ءَايَةَۢ بَيِّنَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَعۡقِلُونَ ٣٥

We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason. (35)

وَإِلَىٰ مَدۡيَنَ أَخَاهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٗا فَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱرۡجُواْ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ٣٦

And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' (36)

But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ ٱلرَّجْفَةُ فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ فِى دَارِهِمْ جَٰثِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes. (37)

وَعَادًا وَثَمُودَا۟ وَقَد تَّبَيَّنَ لَكُم مِّن مَّسَٰكِنِهِمْ ۖ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَكَانُوا۟ مُسْتَبْصِرِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

And the `Ād and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth. (38)

وَقَٰرُونَ وَفِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ ۖ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مُّوسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ سَٰبِقِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

And Qārūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape. (39)

فَكُلًّا أَخَذْنَا بِذَنۢبِهِۦ ۖ فَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِ حَاصِبًا وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَخَذَتْهُ ٱلصَّيْحَةُ وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ خَسَفْنَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَغْرَقْنَا ۚ وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَظْلِمَهُمْ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (40)

مَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْلِيَآءَ كَمَثَلِ ٱلْعَنكَبُوتِ ٱتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا ۖ وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ ٱلْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ ٱلْعَنكَبُوتِ ۖ لَوْ كَانُوا۟ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. (41)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مِن شَىْءٍ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (42)

Such are the comparisons We draw for

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ ۖ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَآ إِلَّا ٱلْعَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge. (43)

خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe. (44)

ٱتْلُ مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَأَقِمِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ ٱلْفَحْشَآءِ وَٱلْمُنكَرِ ۗ وَلَذِكْرُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do. (45)

Overview

The first passage concluded with reference to the general rule that those who profess to believe are subjected to a test, the purpose of which is to separate those who truly believe from those who are liars. The passage also referred to different types of testing, such as physical suffering, pressure exerted by relatives and loved ones, and the lure of temptation.

In this passage we have examples of the kind of tests advocates of faith went through, starting with Noah (peace be upon him). Such examples are drawn from what God's messengers endured from the early days of history. Some details are given about Abraham and Lot, but only very brief references are made in all other cases.

In Noah's story we see very great efforts yielding scanty results. He stayed among his people for 950 years but only a few believers accepted his call. Therefore, "*the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing.*" (Verse 14) In the case of Abraham and his people we see a very clear example of foul reward and the tyranny of falsehood. He tried his best to steer his people to follow divine guidance, using sound, logical argument, but "*their only answer was: 'Kill him or burn him'.*" (Verse 24)

In the case of Lot's people we see how lust comes out into the open, with no consideration for decency or moral scruple. Here is the vilest human degeneration and perversion, one which pays little heed to sincere warnings: "*But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks*

the truth." (Verse 29)

With Shu`ayb and the people of Madyan we see blatant corruption and wilful disregard for right and justice, in addition to denial of God's message: *"An earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes."* (Verse 37) The references to the `Ād and Thamūd peoples remind us of unbelievers thinking too arrogantly of their own power and immunity, showing no gratitude for God's favours and blessings. Likewise, the reference to Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān reminds us of the tyranny of wealth, dictatorship, and hypocrisy.

These historical references are followed by a demonstration of the flimsiness of forces standing in the way of the divine message, powerful as they may seem: *"Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41) The passage then concludes with an address to the Prophet directing him to recite God's book, attend regularly to prayers, and to leave matters to Him: *"God knows all that you do."* (Verse 45)

Extremely Long Life

> *We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people.* (Verses 14-15)

The weightier view is that the duration of Noah's message was 950 years, preceded by an undefined period before he received his revelations and followed by an unspecified period after he and the believers were saved from the floods. This is certainly a very long life that seems to us, nowadays, to be unnatural and unknown in humanity. Yet we have this information from the most truthful source, God Almighty. This is more than sufficient for it to be accepted as true. If we want some sort of explanation for it, we could say that the human population of the earth at that time was small. It is possible, therefore, that God gave those early generations longer lives so that life on earth could progress. When human numbers increased, there was no longer any need for such long lives. This reflects a phenomenon applicable to some species. For example, certain types of eagle, vulture and turtle can live for centuries. Contrast this with flies, which breed in their millions, and which have a life span as short as two weeks, or less. All wisdom belongs to God, and everything He does is according to a careful measure. Furthermore, despite the near millennium of Noah's advocacy of the divine message there were still only a small number of believers. The floods swept away the overwhelming majority because of their

continued opposition to the divine message. Only the small number of believers were saved in the ark. This story of the floods and the ark was to become 'a sign for all people', telling us about the end of unbelief and injustice.

Issues Clarified

The *sūrah* moves on several centuries bringing into focus the divine message as preached by Abraham:

> *And Abraham said to his people: 'Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not hound to do more than clearly deliver His message.* (Verses 16-18)

Abraham's call to his people was clear, unambiguous and very well structured. It served as a good model for all advocates of the divine faith. He started by telling them of the true nature of his message: *"Worship God, and fear Him."* (Verse 16) Furthermore, he made this appealing to them, stating that it contained much goodness for them, if they would only know it: *"This is best for you, if you but knew it!"* (Verse 16) In other words, if they were not ignorant, they would choose what was good for them. This is a simple and real truth which needs no fiery speeches to impart its essence.

Then Abraham explains how flawed their religion is, especially their worship of wooden statues. What an absurd substitute for worshipping the Almighty. Secondly, evidence to support their beliefs was completely lacking; they only invented what was false. Furthermore, such statues and idols are of no benefit, as they cannot provide people with anything: *"Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you."* (Verse 17)

Then Abraham directs people to seek their provisions from God. On Him alone should they rely for what is most important in their lives: *"Seek, then, all sustenance from God."* (Verse 17) Provisions and sustenance are people's first preoccupation, particularly those who have not experienced the meaning of faith. Yet to seek sustenance from God alone is the most obvious thing to do.

Finally, Abraham calls on them to address their worship and thanks to God who grants sustenance and bestows blessings on all creatures: *"and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him."* (Verse 17) He also tells them that their return to God is inevitable.

It is better for them, then, that they should turn to Him now as believers and address their worship and gratitude to Him alone: *"Indeed, to Him you shall return."* (Verse 17)

If they continue to disbelieve, however, it is of no consequence. They will not affect God in the least. Nor will His Messenger lose anything. Many were the communities that denied God's message in the past. God's messengers' only task is to deliver His message with the utmost clarity: *"If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message."* (Verse 18)

Thus, Abraham shows them the way to belief one step at a time, addressing their hearts with the utmost precision. It is useful for advocates of the divine message to reflect on and emulate Abraham's method.

Reflection on God's Creation

Thereafter, the *sūrah* takes a brief pause to address all who deny faith, the inevitable return of all mankind to God, and the resurrection and reckoning:

> *Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God. Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits.* (Verses 19-23)

This is addressed to everyone who denies God and their meeting with Him. It uses the universe as evidence confirming its truth. The Qur'ān frequently presents the universe as an open book for hearts and minds to ponder on, searching for God's signs, and finding indications of His oneness and the truth of His promises and warnings. Universal phenomena are always present for people to see and contemplate, but they lose their inspiration as a result of long familiarity. Therefore, the Qur'ān directs people's attention to these magnificent scenes, bringing them alive before their eyes and renewing their effects. It does not resort to argument and cold, lifeless logic. Such logic, is, in any case, alien to Islamic thought. Instead, the Qur'ān gives examples, sets the method and outlines the way.

"Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God." (Verse 19) They see with their own eyes how God

originates creation: they see it in the shooting plant, the egg and the foetus, and in everything that comes into being, having had no prior existence. They see it in everything that humans, individually and collectively, cannot bring about themselves. Indeed the secret of life is unfathomable: it was so in the past and it remains so today. We do not know how life originated and where from, let alone that anyone should claim to have brought it about. Life, thus, cannot have any explanation other than that it is of God's own making. It is He who originates creation at every moment before our very eyes. We all see it and cannot deny it.

Moreover, the One who originates life is certainly able to bring people back after death: *"This is indeed easy for God."* Nothing is difficult for God, but He gives the argument by human standards. For us, doing something for the second time is easier than the first; but to God both are equally easy. It needs nothing more than for God to will something and say, 'Be', and it happens.

The *sūrah* then calls on people to travel in all directions and contemplate God's work and signs that appear in all creation, animate and inanimate alike. When they do, they will realize that the One who originates life can bring it back without difficulty: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things."* (Verse 20)

Travelling opens people's hearts to new and unfamiliar vistas. It awakens their senses and minds. By contrast, the place where one lives very often holds no attraction or excitement because of over-familiarity. Yet to return home after a period away often rekindles passion and enthusiasm for what once seemed dull and unremarkable. This, thus, leads to new interaction and appreciation of one's immediate environs. All glory is to God, who has bestowed the Qur'ān from on high and who has full knowledge of how people's hearts and minds function and interact with their surroundings.

"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance." (Verse 20) In the Arabic text the order to travel is followed with a sentence that uses the simple past tense referring to the start of creation. This is significant, for we see today certain things that are indicative of the beginning of life and how the earth came to be populated with different species. Scientific excavations have formed some idea about how life started, spread and progressed, but they have not arrived at anything definite about the secret of life. They do not know how it came to be on earth, nor when the first living creature was placed on it. The order given by God, then, is to search for the beginning of life and to use acquired knowledge to learn about resurrection and the life to come.

We should also note here that the people first addressed by the Qur'ān were not

qualified to undertake such scientific research; it is a much more recent development in the search for knowledge. Hence, they could not arrive at the relevant facts, if this was really intended. Nor could they use such facts to draw a mental picture of how a second life would begin. Therefore, the verse required them to look at the way life starts in plants, animals and man everywhere on earth. With this in mind, travelling served to alert their minds and feelings as they pondered that which was unfamiliar. They could then reflect on the manifestations of God's power, on how easy it is for Him to initiate life at every moment of the night and day.

More importantly, the Qur'ān gives its directives to suit all generations of human life, with their different levels of progress, circumstances and the means available to them. Every generation will take up this order and benefit by it in accordance with what abilities it commands. The order remains applicable to later generations as life develops and progresses, giving fresh incentive and impetus.

"*Most certainly, God has the power over all things.*" (Verse 20) He initiates life and brings it back. He is not restricted by what people imagine to be feasible or unfeasible, possible or impossible.

Part of God's power over all things is that He punishes whomever He wills and bestows His grace upon whomever He wills. To Him all mankind return; none escapes Him and none can evade His will: "*He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verses 21-22)

Punishment and mercy are subject to God's will in the sense that He has given clear guidance and made the way of error clear for all. He has given man the propensity to follow either. The choice belongs entirely to man. However, when man chooses to believe in God and shows a willingness to follow His guidance, God will help him as He has committed Himself to do so. On the other hand, when he turns away from divine guidance he becomes isolated and lives in error. The two ways then lead to either God's mercy in the first case or to His punishment in the latter.

"*To Him you shall be made to return.*" (Verse 21) In this instance, the *sūrah* uses the word *tuqlabūn,* which carries connotations of violent return, to suit what follows: "*And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies.*" (Verse 22) You have no power to save yourselves from a return to God. Neither your own power that you have on earth nor that of those whom you sometimes worship, such as the angels or *jinn,* thinking that they have power in the skies, have any effect: "*You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verse 22) How can there be any protection or support against God? Who could give it: man, angel, *or jinn? They* are all God's creatures and servants. They cannot cause benefit or harm even to

themselves, let alone anyone else.

"Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits." (Verse 23) Man does not despair of God's mercy except when he totally disbelieves, severing all relations with his Lord. Again man does not disbelieve except when he despairs of establishing a relation between himself and God, abandoning all hope of God's grace. The end then is well known: *"It is for these that grievous suffering awaits."* (Verse 23)

Abandoning Home for God

After this intervening address aimed at everyone who denies faith generally, and at Abraham's people by implication, the *sūrah* reports his people's reply to his call. It is a very strange and singular reply, one which shows the arrogance of disbelief and oppression that relies on force and authority: *"[Abraham's.] people's only answer was: Kill him, or burn him.' But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs for people who believe."* (Verse 24) To kill or burn a man is their only response to a simple, clear and logical call with which he addressed their hearts and minds.

How could Abraham alone and deprived of all power stand up to such arrogant brutality? Therefore, God intervened in a direct and open manner, with a miracle no human could have expected: *"God saved him from the fire."* Indeed his saving in this miraculous way should have been seen as clear evidence confirming his message, but only a person whose heart is ready to embrace faith looks at it in this light. Abraham's people, however, did not believe despite this miracle. This shows, then, that miracles do not give guidance. Instead, it is necessary to have an open mind, one willing to accept the truth and divine guidance: *"In this there are signs for people who believe."* (Verse 24)

The first of these signs was Abraham's saving from the fire. The second was the impotence of tyranny to harm just one man standing alone, when God wanted him saved. The fact that miracles do not ensure acceptance of God's guidance by hardened hearts was the third sign. In confirmation of this fact one only needs to look at the history of divine messages, and reflect on the way people's hearts change, and also on the factors that enable people to accept guidance as well as those that leave them astray.

Thereafter, Abraham despairs of those who saw the great miracle with their own eyes for they will never believe in God's oneness. He tells them, in plain terms, the truth of their situation before abandoning them:

And he said: You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than

> *to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.* (Verse 25)

Abraham tells them that they worshipped idols without actually being convinced that such worship was right. They only did this out of courtesy for one another so that they could be together. Even though they may be aware of the truth, people generally follow what their friends worship only to keep their friendship. Thus friendship is given priority over the truth and true faith. This happens in communities that do not take religion seriously. To them, avoiding disagreement with a friend is more important than religion. They do not realize that it is faith that must be taken very seriously, and that there can be no complacency or compromise in matters of faith.

The *sūrah* then shows them their position in the life to come. They are surprised that such friendships on the Day of Judgement are nothing more than mutual hostility. Where once they thought others important, now they curse each other: "*But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another.*" (Verse 25) On that day masters will disown their servants, friends will denounce friends, mutual accusations will fly about, and every erring person will accuse others of leading him astray. Yet none of all this will be of any avail when the suffering engulfs them all: "*And your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.*" (Verse 25) They wanted to burn Abraham in the fire, but God saved him. Now when they are in the fire of hell, they will find none to save or protect them.

Abraham's advocacy of his message among his own people and the undoubted miracle they saw culminated in the adoption of the faith by just one man other than his wife, and this man was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Lot emigrated with him from their city, Ur of the Chaldees, in Iraq to settle west of the River Jordan: "*Lot believed in him. He said: I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 26)

Note Lot's statement: "*I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord,*" and the purpose of his emigration. He did not emigrate to save his skin, or to do business or earn his living. He simply emigrated for God's sake, seeking His support. He migrated for his faith, and his purpose was to be able to worship God alone, in complete devotion in a new place, away from a land where there was no hope of people ever changing their erring ways.

God compensated Abraham for having to abandon his hometown and people by giving him offspring who would be chosen to deliver His message to mankind, until the end of human life. All prophets and messages that were sent later were through his descendents. This was, indeed, a great compensation:

> *We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous.* (Verse 27)

This is certainly a rich reward and a manifestation of God's pleasure with the man who personified total devotion.

Sexual Perversion in Public

Lot's story is mentioned next, after he had emigrated with Abraham and settled in the Jordan Valley. Lot then lived on his own with a tribe close to the Dead Sea, which was later called Lake Lot. The township where the tribe lived was known as Sodom. Lot married one of their women and lived among them.

A certain type of perversion had spread among those people, and the Qur'ān mentions that this was the first time ever in human history that such homosexuality had occurred. In the natural state of things a man is attracted to a woman so that the two form a natural productive unit which ensures the continuity of life through procreation, which is common to all living species. It is God who has created them all in pairs made of males and females. Thus, Lot's people were the first ever to yield to such perversion:

> *And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption.'* (Verses 28-30)

Although it is clear from Lot's address to his people that other types of corruption had spread among them, their main abomination was that they engaged in sex with other men. When a man goes beyond natural limits with a woman, his action is a gross crime but it remains within the overall framework of natural desire. Homosexual perversion reaches beyond the natural instinct common to all living species, and indicates a psychological and physical malfunction. God has made the pleasure of sexual interaction between married couples move in harmony with the great line of life and its continuity through offspring. Both man and woman are able to enjoy through it psychological and physical pleasure. Homosexual practices, on the other hand, have no such objective and, as such, cannot give natural pleasure. When anyone finds pleasure in such a perverted practice, it means he has totally broken away from all that is natural and progressive in life.

Lot's people assaulted travellers on the highways, looting their property. They also raped men, which is an even worse act than their other perversion. Furthermore, they spread corruption in the land, and committed shameful acts in their meeting places. When a community find it acceptable to boast of what is indecent, its moral degeneration has become grave indeed. Thus, there was no hope that they would reform themselves.

The story is given here in a concise manner. It appears that Lot first counselled them gently, telling them to stop their immoral practices, but they were persistent. He then warned them of God's punishment and spoke clearly about the abomination of what they did.

"But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth." (Verse 29) Their replies to his warnings were boastful and challenging. With such blunt denial of the truth, there was no hope of their mending their ways. Thus, the messenger sent to them gave them all that he could of advice for their welfare, but in the end he could only seek God's support: *"He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption."* (Verse 30)

At this point the curtains fall. When they rise again, the scene depicts God's response. The angels charged with carrying out God's order visited Abraham, giving him the happy news of a child to be born to him by his wife who up to that point had been barren:

> *When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers. 'He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.'* (Verses 31-32)

This exchange between Abraham and the angels is given in summary form in this instance, because it is not the main point here. It has already been mentioned in Abraham's own story that God gave him Isaac and Jacob, and since the birth of Isaac is the subject of the happy news given to him, it is not given in detail here. Instead, the point is to continue with Lot's story. Therefore, it is only briefly stated that the angels dropped in on Abraham to give him the happy news, and then told him about their main mission: *"They said: We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers."* (Verse 31)

Abraham was compassionate and kind hearted. He reminded the angels that Lot lived there, that he was a good man, and not a wrongdoer. The angels reassured him that Lot would not be harmed. They explained that they knew their task well: *"They answered: We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household,*

except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind." (Verse 32) Lot's wife was inclined towards her people, approving of their crimes and perversions, hence she would not be spared.

The *sūrah* moves to a third scene in which we see Lot as he received the angels who took the guise of handsome young men. Aware of his people's perversion, he feared for his guests knowing that he could not be of much help to them. He was distressed at their presence at such a difficult time: *"Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them."* (Verse 33) As told in this *sūrah,* the story does not mention how Lot's people tried to abuse his guests, his remonstrations with them and their paying no heed. It moves straight on to the final outcome with the angels telling him in his overwhelming distress who they were and what their mission was:

> *But they said: Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind. We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds.* (Verses 33-34)

This last verse draws an image of the total destruction which was visited on the town and its population, with the exception of Lot and the believers in his household. This destruction was visited upon by means of rain and stones covered with mud. Most probably this was a volcanic eruption that turned the town upside down, sinking it into the ground. It followed this with a rain that accompanies volcanic eruptions.

The remains of this destruction were left for all to see, telling of God's signs and serving as a reminder to anyone who has reason to think and reflect: *"We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason."* (Verse 35) This was the natural fate of this evil shoot that had rotted and moulded so badly that it could no longer yield any fruit. The only thing to do with it was fell it.

Different Types of Punishment

The *sūrah* then gives brief references to different communities of unbelievers and the ends they suffered, starting with Shu`ayb's people:

> *And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very*

homes. (Verses 36-37)

In this reference to the Prophet Shu`ayb we see the unity of the divine message and the essence of faith: *"Worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day."* (Verse 36) Worshipping God alone is the basic rule of faith. Looking forward to the Day of Judgement would ensure that they stopped their evil ways. For example, they deliberately defrauded people when they measured or weighed for them in business. They also looted from those who passed through their lands, deprived them of what they had, and generally spread corruption, behaving arrogantly.

Furthermore, they took a stand against their prophet, accusing him of lying; therefore, God destroyed them. He brought into force His law of punishing unbelievers who deny their messengers: *"Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes."* (Verse 37) We mentioned previously the earthquake that shook their land after a great blast left them stunned in their homes, unable to stir. Thus they were left lifeless in fitting requital for their repeated terrorization of others.

Next the *sūrah* refers very briefly to the punishment inflicted on the `Ād and Thamūd:

> *And the `Ād and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth.* (Verse 38)

The `Ād lived at al-Aĥqāf in southern Arabia, close to Ĥadramaut, while the Thamūd lived in al-Ĥijr in northern Arabia, close to al-Qurā Valley. The `Ād were destroyed by devastating winds, while the Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast. Their dwellings, however, still stood and the Arabs of Makkah passed by them on their traditional winter and summer trade trips, thus seeing for themselves the destruction heaped upon these formerly powerful communities.

This brief reference to these two communities reveals the same cause of their going astray as indeed that of other communities: *"Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth."* (Verse 38) They had minds and could see the pointers to divine guidance, but Satan tempted them away, making their deeds seem fair to them. Satan frequently plays on such people's arrogance and false self-esteem. The result being that such communities often succumb to delusions of power and wealth. Thus, Satan turns them away from the only path of true guidance that leads to faith. He thus loses them the chance to save themselves, despite their having the

ability to perceive the truth.

Another very brief reference is made to earlier unbelievers: "Qār*ūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape."* (Verse 39) Qārūn as we learned in the previous *sūrah* was one of Moses' people. He behaved wrongfully towards them, using his wealth and knowledge in oppressive ways. He did not listen to the advice of honest and sincere people who counselled him to follow the path of moderation, humility and justice. Pharaoh was a terrible despot who committed ghastly and horrible crimes, enslaving people and sowing discord between them. In brutal defiance of all justice, he killed the male offspring of the Children of Israel but spared their females. Hāmān was his minister who managed his schemes, assisting him in his tyrannical rule. "*Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth."* (Verse 39) Their wealth, power and cunning could not protect them from God's punishment. They could not escape it. It engulfed them all. "*Indeed, they could not escape."* (Verse 39)

Those who possessed power, wealth, the means to overpower others as well as the means to ensure their own survival have all gone. God destroyed them all after they had long oppressed and persecuted others:

> *We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.* (Verse 40)

The `Ād were smitten by a windstorm. This lifted small stones which hit and killed people. The Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast, Qārūn was swallowed by the earth, whilst Pharaoh and Hāmān were drowned. All were punished on account of their wrongdoing: "*It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves."* (Verse 40)

The Frailty of the Powerful

Now that the destruction of despotic, wrongdoing and wicked unbelievers has been outlined, and bearing in mind what was said at the beginning of the *sūrah* about tests and temptation, the relative power of competing forces is described in a clear simile. There is only one true power and this belongs to God. Every other power is frail and flimsy. Whoever seeks support or protection from other than God is like a spider which clings to a frail home woven of silk that lacks strength. Both the spider and its web, or home, are without real support:

> *Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge.* (Verses 41-43)

This is an amazing but true picture of the powers operating in the universe. People sometimes overlook this truth and hence their values fall by the wayside. Indeed their concept of human relations grows corrupt and all their criteria become ill-balanced. They do not know which way to go, what to take up and what to leave. In this situation, the power of government deceives them. They feel it to be too strong, address their wishes and complaints to it, fear it and try to appease it so that they remain safe from its strong-handed measures. Similarly, they are deceived by other powers, such as that of wealth which they imagine to control people's lives. They, thus, try to obtain wealth so that they can exercise power over others. The power of knowledge also deceives them as they consider it a source of strength, wealth and all other elements that give people power. Hence, they approach it with humility, just like a worshipper engaged in devotion. Whether controlled by individuals, communities or states, apparent power deceives them. They are pulled towards it like moths are attracted to light or swarm towards a fire.

People are thus oblivious of the one power which creates all the little powers, owns, gives, directs and uses them as it pleases. They forget that seeking support and protection from these little powers is just like a spider taking refuge in its web. It remains a small powerless insect that has no power within itself or its flimsy web.

The only real support and protection for man is with God. This is the main truth which the Qur'ān takes special care to instil in the minds of believers. It makes their community stronger than all the powers that try to obstruct it. Over the centuries it enabled the community of believers to place the arrogance of tyrants under its feet and to overcome tyranny in its strongest forts and seemingly impregnable lines. This great truth is established in every believer's mind, it has filled every heart and become part of their very being. It is no longer a word we utter, or a subject for debate. It is the main idea in our lives, minds and senses.

All power belongs to God. The only protection to be sought is from God. Everything else is weak, flimsy and powerless, however much it tries to inflict punishment, be tyrannical and overpowering. They are simply spiders, and what power has a spider other than the silk with which it weaves its web?: "*Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it.*" (Verse 41)

Advocates of the divine message who are often subjected to oppression and

hardship, and also to temptation and deceit, should reflect on this great truth and keep it before their eyes. They must not allow themselves to forget this even for a moment as they face different forces, some trying to inflict harm on them or even crush them, and some trying to lure them to their own line, or to buy them out. But all these forces are no more than the threads of a spider's web. This is their real estimation in God's measure. It is also the measure when compared with true faith when people have the right concept of it.

"*God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him.*" (Verse 42) They seek the protection of patrons to whom they ascribe a share of divinity. God knows the reality of these patrons: they are no more than a spider seeking refuge in its frail web. "*He alone is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 42) He alone has power over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of the universe.

"*Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge.*" (Verse 43) Devoid of knowledge and clear reasoning, some unbelievers took such comparisons as material for ridicule. They said that Muhammad's God speaks about spiders and flies. They were uninspired by this remarkable description because they did not use their reason, while their knowledge too remained scanty: "*None will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge.*" (Verse 43)

The Clear Path

This great truth, stated in full clarity, is then linked to the main truth apparent in the design of the universe. This follows the Qur'ānic method of linking all facts to that main truth: "*God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe.*" (Verse 44) In perfect harmony with the rest of the *sūrah,* this verse enhances the real link between different realities and the main truth that lies behind the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is this truth that maintains the universe according to a fine and accurate system which never fails or allows inner conflict.

"*Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe.*" (Verse 44) These are the believers whose hearts respond to the signs God has placed in all aspects of creation. These are clearly seen in the harmony apparent in the universe. All is part of a consistent system despite its seeming diversity. It is only believers who perceive these signs and appreciate them, because their eyes and hearts remain open.

At the end of this passage, the *sūrah* links the book revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him), his advocacy of the divine message, prayers and remembrance of god with the truth reflected in the heavens and the earth, and with the advocacy of the divine message ever since Noah's time:

> *Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do.* (Verse 45)

The Prophet is told to recite the book that has been revealed to him because it is his means of advocating God's message. It is a divine sign, one unseverable from the great truth reflected in the creation of the heavens and the earth. He is also told to attend regularly to prayer, because when it is repeatedly offered in the proper manner it becomes a bond with God. Prayer is an act of purification and dedication which cannot fit with the filth of evil and loathsome deeds. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "Whoever offers a prayer and it does not prevent him from loathsome and evil deeds will only take himself further away from God." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This refers to the person who has not attended properly to his prayer; he has rather offered it mechanically. When prayer is properly attended to, it is a form of remembrance of God: "*To remember God is greater still.*" It is greater than all. Greater than any motivation, inclination, or other form of devotion.

"*God knows all that you do.*" Nothing escapes Him, and nothing blurs His eye. All mankind will return to Him when He will requite all in accordance with their deeds.

3
Confused Concepts

وَلَا تُجَٰدِلُوٓاْ أَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِلَّا بِٱلَّتِي هِيَ أَحۡسَنُ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ وَقُولُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡنَا وَأُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكُمۡ وَإِلَٰهُنَا وَإِلَٰهُكُمۡ وَٰحِدٞ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ مُسۡلِمُونَ ٤٦

Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing; and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.' (46)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَۚ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦۖ وَمِنۡ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِهِۦۚ وَمَا يَجۡحَدُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ ٤٧

Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers. (47)

وَمَا كُنتَ تَتۡلُواْ مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ مِن كِتَٰبٖ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُۥ بِيَمِينِكَۖ إِذٗا لَّٱرۡتَابَ ٱلۡمُبۡطِلُونَ ٤٨

Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt. (48)

بَلۡ هُوَ ءَايَٰتُۢ بَيِّنَٰتٞ فِي صُدُورِ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡعِلۡمَۚ وَمَا يَجۡحَدُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٤٩

Nay, but this [Qur'ān] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers. (49)

وَقَالُواْ لَوۡلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَٰتٞ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦۖ قُلۡ إِنَّمَا ٱلۡأٓيَٰتُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٞ مُّبِينٌ ٥٠

They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.' (50)

أَوَلَمۡ يَكۡفِهِمۡ أَنَّآ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَرَحۡمَةٗ وَذِكۡرَىٰ لِقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥١

Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe. (51)

قُلۡ كَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنَكُمۡ شَهِيدٗاۖ يَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ وَكَفَرُواْ بِٱللَّهِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ٥٢

Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers. (52)

وَيَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَكَ بِٱلۡعَذَابِۚ وَلَوۡلَآ أَجَلٞ مُّسَمّٗى لَّجَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ وَلَيَأۡتِيَنَّهُم بَغۡتَةٗ وَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ٥٣

They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. (53)

يَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَكَ بِٱلۡعَذَابِ وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ لَمُحِيطَةُۢ بِٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٥٤

They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. (54)

يَوۡمَ يَغۡشَىٰهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ مِن فَوۡقِهِمۡ وَمِن تَحۡتِ أَرۡجُلِهِمۡ وَيَقُولُ ذُوقُواْ مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٥٥

[That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.' (55)

يَٰعِبَادِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِنَّ أَرۡضِي وَٰسِعَةٞ فَإِيَّيَ فَٱعۡبُدُونِ ٥٦

You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. (56)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَآئِقَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. (57)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَنُبَوِّئَنَّهُم مِّنَ ٱلْجَنَّةِ غُرَفًا تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ نِعْمَ أَجْرُ ٱلْعَٰمِلِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, (58)

ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا۟ وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. (59)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن دَآبَّةٍ لَّا تَحْمِلُ رِزْقَهَا ٱللَّهُ يَرْزُقُهَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦٠﴾

How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all. (60)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! (61)

ٱللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقْدِرُ لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. (62)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّن نَّزَّلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَوْتِهَا لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۚ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most

of them are without reason. (63)

وَمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَآ إِلَّا لَهْوٌ وَلَعِبٌ ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلدَّارَ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ لَهِىَ ٱلْحَيَوَانُ ۚ لَوْ كَانُوا۟ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. (64)

فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا۟ فِى ٱلْفُلْكِ دَعَوُا۟ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّىٰهُمْ إِلَى ٱلْبَرِّ إِذَا هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, (65)

لِيَكْفُرُوا۟ بِمَآ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمْ وَلِيَتَمَتَّعُوا۟ ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. (66)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا وَيُتَخَطَّفُ ٱلنَّاسُ مِنْ حَوْلِهِمْ ۚ أَفَبِٱلْبَٰطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَةِ ٱللَّهِ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings? (67)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ كَذَّبَ بِٱلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُۥ ۚ أَلَيْسَ فِى جَهَنَّمَ مَثْوًى لِّلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers? (68)

وَٱلَّذِينَ جَٰهَدُوا۟ فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَمَعَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good. (69)

Overview

As we have already explained, the central theme of the *sūrah* is the test and hardship often encountered by people of faith. The purpose is to distinguish believers from hypocrites through a test that can only be endured by those with firm belief. This is coupled with showing the earthly forces that oppose faith and believers and which place all types of difficulty in their way. These are seen to be weak and flimsy. It confirms that God will destroy the wicked and give support to those who show perseverance and steadfastness in the face of adversity. This is consistent with all past messages since Noah's time. It will certainly remain true, as it is linked to the great truth reflected in the nature of the universe and in the unity of the divine message.

The previous passage of the *sūrah* ended with an instruction to the Prophet and the believers to recite the book that was revealed to him. They were further instructed to attend regularly to prayer as a method of God's remembrance and to watch God who knows all that they do.

This final passage continues its discussion of this book, as also its link with books revealed in the past, with an instruction to the believers not to enter into debates with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best. The only exception made here refers to the wrongdoers among them who had altered their scriptures and leaned towards idolatry, which is flagrant wrongdoing. Believers are further instructed to declare their belief in all past messages and divine books, as they are true and confirm what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* then speaks about some of the followers of earlier revelations who believed in this final divine book, while the Arab idolaters who received it through the Prophet sent to them denied it. They were totally heedless of the great blessing God granted them by His choosing a final Messenger from among them. The Prophet speaks to them with God's words while previously he could neither read nor write. This, in itself, should remove any doubt that he was its author.

The unbelievers are warned against hastening God's punishment which could take them by surprise. The *sūrah* describes how close it is to them and how hell will engulf them, from above and from under their feet. It then turns to the believers who were subjected to much oppression in Makkah, urging them to emigrate so that they could live elsewhere and worship God alone. The style employed by the Qur'ān here is remarkable. It addresses every thought that occurs to them and every obstacle that could hamper their progress. Their hearts are within God's grasp at all times. All this is painted in colours that testify to the fact that it is God who has created those hearts. No one other than God could know such inner feelings and awaken them in such a way.

The *sūrah* then wonders at the idolaters and their confused concepts. They admit that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient to His laws and who causes rain to fall so as to quicken the earth after it has been dead. When they travel by sea they call on God alone for help, and then they are sincere in their submission to Him. Yet, after all this, they associate partners with God, deny His book, oppose His Messenger, and persecute those who believe in Him. The *sūrah* also reminds the idolaters of the great favour God has granted them by giving them a secure sanctuary, i.e. the Sacred Mosque, in whose neighbourhood they live, while people all around them live in fear. Yet they fabricate lies against God and associate false deities with Him. He threatens them with punishment, an abode in hell.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a firm promise by God to guide those who strive for His cause. They need to dedicate themselves to Him, overcome the obstacles in their way and persevere in spite of all oppression and hardship.

According to What is Best

> *Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing, and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.'* (Verse 46)

The divine message preached by Noah and subsequent messengers until the last Prophet, Muhammad, (peace be upon them all), is one and the same message. It was given by one God for one purpose, which is to guide mankind, who have gone astray, back to their Lord and to re-educate them in accordance with the way of life He has laid down. Believers in any of these messages are brethren to the believers in all messages. They are all one community worshipping the One God. Mankind, throughout all generations, has been divided into two groups: the believers, who are God's party, and the rejecters, who are Satan's party. This division transcends time and place. Every generation of believers is merely one ring in a long chain stretching over many centuries.

This is the great, noble truth that forms the basis of Islam. It is laid down in this verse which puts human relations at a level much higher than that of blood, race, nationality, or commercial exchange. It gives these relations an additional dimension: that of a link with God based on a single faith that transcends race, colour, nationality, time and place. This leaves only the strongest tie, that of faith.

Thus, Muslims are instructed not to argue with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best: which means explaining the purpose behind

the new message and outlining the links between it and all earlier divine messages. It also stresses the importance of accepting the final form of the divine message which is in full agreement with all previous messages, complementing them in accordance with God's knowledge of what suits people and their needs. There is, however, one exception to be singled out *"those of them who are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 46) These have deviated from the basic belief in God's oneness, associated partners with Him and violated the principles of His way of life. With these no argument is of use. Indeed, there is no need to maintain the same code with them. These are the ones Islam fought when it established its state in Madinah.

Some people fabricate falsehood against the Prophet claiming that he extended good treatment to the people of earlier revelations when he was in Makkah and facing hardship and opposition from the idolaters. Then when he established a state in Madinah he adopted a different policy, waging war against them, and going against everything he had earlier said about them when in Makkah. All such claims are false as is clearly apparent from this Makkan verse. Arguing with the people of earlier revelations in accordance with what is best is limited only to those of them who are not intent on wrongdoing and who have not deviated from the divine faith based on God's absolute oneness.

"And say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves." (Verse 46) There is no need for conflict, argument or dispute, as they all believe in one God, and Muslims believe in what was revealed to the prophets before them. It is all essentially the same. Indeed, the divine way of life follows a smooth way of progress.

> *Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers.* (Verse 47)

This verse begins with *'thus it is'*, indicating that the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) followed the same rule and method of revelation to earlier prophets and messengers. *"Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you."* (Verse 47) In their attitude towards it, people divided into two groups: the first, composed of some of those who followed earlier revelations and some Arabs of the Quraysh, accepted it as true and believed in it; the second rejected it despite the testimony given by people of earlier divine religions that it was true and confirmed their own revelations: *"None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers."* (Verse 47) These new revelations are so clear and straightforward that they will not be denied except by those who deliberately shut their minds and spirits

to them, refusing to reflect on them. The Arabic word *kufr* and its derivative *kāfirūn,* which respectively mean 'unbelief' and 'unbelievers', denote in their original linguistic 'cover, screen, etc.' Hence, the use of the word unbelievers in this instance stresses such connotations.

> *Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt.* (Verse 48)

Thus the Qur'ān replies to even their most naïve and jejune of queries. The Prophet had lived among them all his life and could neither read nor write. Then, he gave them this remarkable book, which was unlike anything produced by even the most talented of literary figures. They might have had a reasonable suspicion, had the Prophet been a man of literary talent. What doubt though could they reasonably entertain when they were fully aware of his past among them? Furthermore, even if the Prophet could read and write they should not have entertained any doubt about it. The Qur'ān is its own best witness that it has no human author. It is far greater than man's ability, knowledge and world. Whenever one reflects on its statements one cannot escape the feelings that it is too powerful and too authoritative to be of human composition.

> *Nay, but this [Qur'ān] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers.* (Verse 49)

It gives clear unambiguous indications to those who have been granted sound knowledge, leaving no room for doubt or suspicion. They feel these signs within their own hearts and they are thus reassured. They do not require any further proof. Knowledge that deserves to be described as true is that which is felt to be certain at heart, illuminating a person's way and leading him to what is best. *"None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers."* (Verse 49) These are the ones who are unfair in their evaluation of things and who stray a long way from the truth and the right path.

What Need for Miracles?

> *They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.'* (Verse 50)

What they want are miracles like those which earlier messengers were given when humanity was still in its infancy. These serve as final evidence only to the generation and community which sees them. This final message, however, provides such evidence to everyone who receives its call until the end of human life. Therefore, its miracle is given in the form of verses of the Qur'ān, a miraculous book which is full of wonders. It opens its treasures to all generations. It is made up of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. As they reflect on its verses they realize that they are in fact miraculous signs and they recognize the source from which they derive their power.

"Say: Signs are in the power of God alone." (Verse 50) He produces them when there is need according to His own plans. It is not for the Prophet or anyone else to make suggestions to God concerning the provision of any sign. The Prophet tells them this, explaining that it is alien to his manners and nature that he should make such a suggestion. *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 50) I explain things, deliver my message and warn people. When I have done that, the task assigned to me has been fulfilled. It is up to God to decide what to do next. Thus the faith is presented purely, free of any confusion and suspicion. The limits of God's Messenger's task are defined so that people do not become confused with God's attributes. No ambiguity is allowed to blur his message. Such ambiguity occurred with earlier messages when the miracles shown to people became confused with myth and legend, leading to deviation from the path of truth.

Those people who demand physical miracles do not truly appreciate the great favour God has granted them with the Qur'ān. He bestowed this from on high so as to guide them:

> *Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe.* (Verse 51)

Their demands reflect an attitude of discontent with God's great favour when, in fact, no amount of thanks and gratitude is adequate. Is it not enough for them that they actually live with this Qur'ān as it is revealed from on high. It tells them about what they feel within themselves, explains what takes place around them and makes them feel that God is watching over them, taking care of them, relating historical accounts that should educate them? What is man but a little creature, lost in God's great universe? Indeed, mankind, the earth they live on and the sun around which it moves are no more than little particles in this great expanse. They are held in place only by God's power. Yet He honours them, bestowing His revelations so that they are recited to them, and they are neither thankful nor satisfied.

"Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe." (Verse 51) It is only believers who feel this grace. They appreciate His blessings as He invites them to come to Him when He is the Most High, the Supreme. Such people benefit by the Qur'ān, because it lives in their hearts, opens its treasures to them and enlightens their souls with true knowledge and supreme light.

Those who do not feel any of this are the ones who demand a physical miracle so that they can accept this Qur'ān as true. These are blind people whose hearts do not open up to light. There is no use trying to argue with such people. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to leave a decision about them to God Almighty:

> *Say: God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers.* (Verse 52)

A witness who knows all that takes place in the heavens and earth gives the best and greatest testimony. It is He who knows that their situation is false: *"They who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers."* (Verse 52) They are the absolute losers; they are the ones who forego everything. They lose both this world and the life to come, as also themselves, divine guidance, righteousness, reassurance, truth and light.

To believe in God is, in itself a great gain, and to be rewarded for it is by God's grace. Belief provides reassurance and a steady footing along the way, steadfastness in the face of adversity, trust in God's help and protection, and confidence as to the eventual outcome. This is indeed a great gain, and it is what the unbelievers lose.

Hastening God's Punishment

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers do. It refers to their precipitation of God's punishment, when hell draws close to them:

> *They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. [That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above them and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.'* (Verses 53-55)

The unbelievers heard the warnings but could not understand God's wisdom in

allowing them time to consider their positions. Hence, they challenged the Prophet to hasten their punishment. God often allows people time so that the wrongdoers continue their wicked and arrogant ways. He also tests the believers so that they grow stronger in faith and perseverance. Moreover, those who cannot remain steadfast when exposed to a test abandon the believers' ranks. He also allows them time so that those of them whom He knows to have goodness in their hearts recognize the truth, mend their ways and accept His guidance; or else, their own offspring may grow up as believers worshipping Him alone even though their fathers were errant and misguided. Or He may leave them a while for some other purpose of His.

The Arab idolaters, however, could not understand God's purpose and wise planning. Hence their challenge hastening their own punishment: "*Had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them.*" (Verse 53) At this point God threatens them with the punishment which will come upon them, at its set time, but when they least expect it. Thus, it will take them by surprise and they will not be able to escape it: "*Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares.*" (Verse 53)

Such punishment overwhelmed them later, at the Battle of Badr, confirming the truth of God's warning. They saw with their own eyes how God's warning and promise took effect. Yet God did not destroy them totally, as He did with earlier communities. Nor did He respond to their demands to see a physical miracle, so that they could avoid the punishment that comes to any community which continues to deny His message, persisting in disbelief, after it has been given a physical miracle. In fact many of them later accepted the faith and some even joined the ranks of the best advocates of Islam. God also produced from among their offspring many who raised the banner of Islam high, over many generations. All of this was part of God's design and purpose, known only to Himself.

The warning of sudden punishment in this life which occurs when least expected is followed by another censure for their continued hastening of punishment: "*They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is encompassing the unbelievers.*" (Verse 54) Following the Qur'ānic method of presenting the future as though it is taking place now, the *sūrah* describes hell as encompassing the unbelievers. To them, this is hidden behind the curtains of the future, but to God, it is a visible reality. Describing its hidden reality fills one with awe and makes their hastening of punishment increasingly singular. How could anyone hasten his own punishment when hell engulfs him while he remains heedless, deluded.

The *sūrah* then draws an image of them as they are engulfed by hell, yet hastening their punishment: "*On the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.'*" (Verse 55)

This is a fearful scene, coupled with a humiliating rebuke and painful censure: "*Taste now [the result of] your own doings.*" (Verse 55). Such is the end of paying no heed to the warnings and of hastening the punishment.

Inevitable Death

The *sūrah* leaves careless unbelievers in this scene of suffering, one which engulfs them from above and from under their feet. It moves on to address the believers who suffer persecution at the hands of the unbelievers, who aim to prevent them from worshipping God. It tells them to try to flee from persecution so that they can truly practise their faith. This is given in the form of a loving address that touches one's heart:

> *You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all.* (Verses 56-60)

The Creator of these hearts who knows all their feelings, fleeting thoughts, perceptions and ideas addresses them with love, inviting them to emigrate for the sake of their faith: "*You servants of mine who have believed.*" These words, right from the outset give them a feeling of their true status, linking them to their Lord: *Servants of Mine!'*

This is the first caring touch, while the second is felt in what comes next: "*Spacious is My earth.*" You are My servants, and this is My earth, which is spacious and can comfortably accommodate you. What keeps you, then, in a hostile place where you are oppressed and persecuted on account of your faith, and where you cannot worship God in freedom? Leave this narrow and restricted place and find somewhere else in My spacious earth, to enjoy freedom of worship: "*Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone.*" (Verse 56)

Sorrow at leaving one's own homeland is the first feeling which stirs in the mind of one who is invited to leave his home. Hence, these words stress closeness to God and the earth's spaciousness. Since it is all God's earth, then the place to be loved most is that where one enjoys freedom to worship God alone.

The *sūrah* continues to address people's thoughts, and hence how we know the fear involved in emigration. The early Muslims in Makkah felt that they ran the risk

of death if they tried to leave. The unbelievers were not averse to stopping them from emigrating because they felt that such emigration represented a threat to their own security. There were also the dangers that they could encounter on the way, should they even manage to leave Makkah. Therefore, the next verse addresses such concerns: "*Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return.*" (Verse 57)

Death is inevitable wherever one happens to be. Therefore, it should not be considered when we do not know its causes. It is to God that everyone will return. They should now emigrate to some place of safety in His spacious earth, for they will inevitably return to Him at the end of their term. They are His servants whom He looks after in this world and in the life to come. Why should any of them entertain any fear or worry now that God speaks to them with such care?

God does not, however, leave it at that. He tells them about what He has prepared for them in their future abode. If they leave their own homeland, there are other places on earth that will welcome them; and if they desert their homes, they will be compensated with much better dwellings in heaven: "*Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide.*" (Verse 58) At this point God urges them to do what is good, remain patient in all situations and place their trust in Him: "*Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust.*" (Verses 58-59) This should give them all the encouragement to remain steadfast when worry and fear are keenly felt and encouragement is badly needed.

When people are forced to leave their homeland another worry they entertain is that of livelihood. After all they are abandoning their homes and property, where they are familiar with what is needed and with the available opportunities. Therefore, the *sūrah* also reassures them on this count: "*How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you.*" (Verse 60) It places before their eyes the realities they see around them. Countless are the living creatures that do not know how to gather, carry, care for their sustenance or know what they need for their own survival. They do not know how to provide or store it. Nevertheless, God provides for them all, preserving them from death by starvation. He provides for people in the same way. They may think that they produce their means of sustenance, but the fact is that God grants them the ways and means to obtain what they need for their living, and this, in itself, is a favour given to them by God. They could not have obtained such ways and means without God's grace. Therefore, they should not worry about their sustenance when they emigrate. They are God's servants, travelling on God's earth, and God will provide for them wherever they are, just as He provides for every living creature.

These caring touches conclude by emphasizing the bond with God. This so that believers are fully aware of the care He takes of them. He listens to them, knows their

situation and does not abandon them: *"He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 60) Thus ends this short round which delivers caring touches to every heart and responds to every thought, replacing every sort of worry, fear and weariness with reassurance, confidence and comfort. Believers now feel that they will never be abandoned by God, the Most Merciful. Only the Creator understands the worries that overwhelm people's minds, and none cures their hearts except the One who knows all that hearts contain.

Contradictions Galore

Having completed a short round with the believers, the *sūrah* then picks up again the clear contradiction in the unbelievers' position and concepts. They acknowledge that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient, causes rain and quickens the earth after it has been dead. They know what all this involves in providing sustenance for them, either in abundance or small measure. They turn to God alone for help when they are in a situation of fear. Yet in spite of all this, they associate partners with God, persecute those who worship Him alone and try to turn them away from their straightforward faith. They are oblivious to God's grace. It is He who has given them a life of security in the neighbourhood of His Sacred Mosque where they themselves are guilty of religious oppression.

> *If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them are without reason. The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings? Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers?* (Verses 61-68)

These verses give us a clear idea of the beliefs of the Arabs at the time the Qur'ān

was revealed. It shows how such belief was originally based on God's oneness, but subsequently suffered distortion. There is no wonder to this, for the Arabs were the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son (peace be upon them both). In fact, the Arabs believed that they followed Abraham's religion, taking pride in it on this basis. They did not care much for Judaism or Christianity, even though both were known and practised in Arabia. They were, in a sense, oblivious to the great confusion that had crept into their faith.

Whenever they were asked about the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who controlled the sun and the moon, and brought rain to give life to the earth, they acknowledged that it was all done by God. Yet at the same time, they worshipped their idols, or *jinn,* or the angels, making these God's partners in the worship they offered, even though such beings had no share in creation. God highlights such ridiculous contradictions as follows: "*How perverted, then, are their minds.*" (Verse 61) How can they turn a blind eye to the truth and accept instead this muddled concept? "*Yet most of them are without reason.*" (Verse 63) Certainly anyone who accepts such contradictions has no reason.

In between these questions about the great universal phenomena, the *sūrah* states that God gives provisions in plenty or in small measure to whomever He wills of His servants. Thus, it links the provision of sustenance with the creation of the universe and all other aspects of God's limitless power. It is all done in accordance with God's knowledge: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 62)

There is an obvious link between people's provision and sustenance on the one hand and the universal cycles of stars and planets, particularly in relation to water, plants and life on the other. To give sustenance in plenty or small measure is something that God controls, in accordance with the phenomena mentioned in the *sūrah.* Sources of sustenance, including rain, rivers, plants, animals, minerals, marine life, game animals and other sources, are all directly subject to the general laws that operate in the universe bringing the sun and the moon into subservience. Should these laws suffer a change, even a slight one, the effect will be clearly apparent in all aspects of life on earth, as also in underground natural resources. Indeed, underground resources are formed and stored in quantities and qualities that differ from one place to another for reasons that are directly related to the earth, its composition and how it is affected by the sun and the moon.[13]

The Qur'ān uses the great open universe as its telling and convincing proof. The universe as a whole provides the setting for the truth it presents. We stand to reflect on the wonders of the universe, feeling that they are brought about by the One

[13] Further discussion of this aspect is made in commenting on the verse that says: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (25: 2) in Vol. XII, pp. 393-295.

Creator. We do not need advanced science or profound knowledge to appreciate such great wonders as the universe exhibits. All we need is an alert mind and a feeling heart. As we see God's wonders we can only praise and glorify Him, feel close to Him.

Against this backdrop of life on earth and our means of sustenance, whether plentiful or stinted, an accurate standard is provided against which to measure all values. Thus, we see that this world, with all that it provides of sustenance, comfort and pleasure, is trivial when compared with the life to come: *"The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it."* (Verse 64) When it is not viewed as a means to ensure happiness in the life to come, but felt to be, of itself, the ultimate objective and its pleasures coveted, this present life, with all that it can give, is no more than trifling play. It is the life to come that is the one that is full of life and fulfilment.

In saying so, the Qur'ān does not advocate a life of austerity that discards comfort and pleasure. This is contrary to what Islam encourages. What it means is that we should look to the hereafter when enjoying life's pleasures, limiting ourselves to what God permits. Moreover, we should look at life's comforts and pleasures as something dispensable, so as not to make of them the goal we seek at any price. What we need is a good sense of proportion so as to give everything its correct value. We must have a true measure showing the value of the present life *vis-a-vis* the hereafter. Thus we will he able to enjoy life's pleasures as we please, knowing how to look at them: this present life is amusement and play, while the hereafter is the true life.

The *sūrah* continues its outline of the unbelievers' contradictions: *"When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him."* (Verse 65) When they are on board a ship, moving across the sea, feeling their boat to be little more than a toy pushed about by the waves, they remember none other than God. It is to Him alone that they turn for support, and only in His power do they feel that their safety can be guaranteed. Thus, their feelings and speech confirm His oneness. They recognize this as coming from the depths of their nature. However, "*as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 65) They forget their nature, and their prayers, reverting to their association of partners with God.

Such deviation means they are ungrateful for the blessings God grants them, and that they ignore the upright nature and clear proofs He has given them. They will, then, enjoy their worldly life for the limited duration of their time on earth, taking little heed of the inevitable result: *"Thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the*

truth]." (Verse 66) This is a subtle warning that what they will come to know will certainly not please them.

The *sūrah* then reminds them of God's favour. It is He who has placed them close to a secure sanctuary where they live in complete security. Yet they neither remember such blessing, nor offer thanks for it by worshipping God alone. On the contrary, they try to scare the believers who live close to it: *"Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings?"* (Verse 67)

Those living in the vicinity of the Ka`bah enjoyed a life of security: they were honoured by other people for the sake of God's House. All around them, Arabian tribes continuously feuded with each other, creating an atmosphere of fear. They only felt secure when they were in the vicinity of the Sacred House. It was amazing, therefore, that they made that very House a place where they put their idols and worshipped other beings. Hence, the rhetorical question: *"Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings?"* (Verse 67)

"Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers?" (Verse 68) They certainly invented lies against God, attributing partners to Him. They also denied the truth they were given, describing it as lies. Hence, hell is the right abode for such unbelievers.

The *sūrah* concludes with an image of the other party who strive hard so that they earn God's pleasure and establish a relation with Him. They endure whatever hardship they are called upon to endure, allowing no feelings of despair to creep into their minds. They withstand every hardship and pass every test, fulfilling their duties and marching along the long, hard road to their well-defined goal. Such people will not be left alone. God will never suffer their belief and struggle to be wasted. He looks at them from on high, and He is pleased with them. He will then provide them with guidance, helping them along the road, and give them ample reward for their perseverance and good works: *"But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good."* (Verse 69)

SŪRAH 30

Al-Rūm

(The Byzantines)

Prologue

The first few verses of this *sūrah* were revealed when Persia overpowered the Byzantine Empire in the Arab areas that were under its rule. This was also a time when arguments in Makkah raged between the early Muslims and Arab idolaters. Since the Byzantines at that time were Christians, and the Persians were Magians, the unbelievers in Makkah exploited the event, drumming up the victory of polytheism over monotheism, and seeing in this Persian victory an omen for their own victory over the believers.

Therefore, the opening of this *sūrah* heralds a victory for the people of the Scriptures, the Byzantines, within a few years. It says that this victory will bring much rejoicing to the believers for they love for believers of any divine religion to gain the upper hand.

The Qur'ān does not, however, stop at making this promise, nor does it confine itself to the event mentioned. In fact, it uses the event to show the believers and their opponents wider horizons; in essence, it establishes a link between them and the universe. It also relates God's rule to support divine faith to the great truth that regulates the heavens, the earth and all that is between them, as well as to the past, present and future of humanity. It then moves on to the life to come and the world beyond this earth. Indeed, the Qur'ān takes us on a great round in which we see the marvels of the universe, the human soul, people's situations and the wonders of nature. We are, thus, able to look at the wider horizons of knowledge, for our lives have been elevated and broadened. Furthermore, we are released from the strict

confines of time, place and event, and are able to look at the universe, its operative rules, history, present and future.

Thus, people's concept of the true nature of the bonds and relations in this great universe is set on a higher platform. They begin to feel the real greatness of the laws that govern the universe and human nature, and appreciate those that regulate human life and its events. In this way, positions of victory and defeat are defined, and fair measures to judge people's actions and activities in this life are set, so as to give them just reward both in the present life and in the life to come.

In the light of this broad concept, the universality of the Islamic message is clearly shown. Its interaction with events and world situations, even when it is still in its infancy and confined to Makkah and the surrounding valley, appears to be very positive. Its scope is broadened beyond this earth so as to link it to the nature of the universe and its major rules, human nature and its profound depths, as well as to the past and present of human life both in this world and in the world beyond.

Thus, a Muslim's heart and mind are linked to these horizons, so as to influence his feelings and the way he looks at life and values generally. He looks up to heaven and the life to come and contemplates the wonders and marvels of the universe. He appreciates his own position, and that of his community, in this great expanse. He realizes his own value and the value of his faith both in people's and God's measures. He thus fulfils his role and does his duties with a clear mind and with confidence and reassurance.

In the method it follows in outlining these links and their significances in the overall system of the universe, as well as their effects on people's hearts, the *sūrah* may be thought of as consisting of two interlinked sections. In the first, it establishes a link between the victory granted to the believers and the truth that provides the firm basis on which the universe is established and with which this life as well as the next are closely associated. It directs people's attention to God's laws as they applied to earlier communities and generations, and in this context makes use of an analogy about resurrection. Here the *sūrah* depicts a scene from the Day of Judgement and what happens then to believers and unbelievers. This is followed with further scenes of the universe and the signs God has placed in it, highlighting the effects these scenes have on people's hearts. The *sūrah* then gives an example drawn from themselves and their relations with their slaves to show the stupidity of the idea of multiple deities, proving that it is based on whims and desires that are devoid of truth and knowledge. This section concludes with a directive to the Prophet to follow the clear path of truth, which is the path of an upright nature that neither alters to suit desires nor divides into sects or divergent groups.

In the second section the *sūrah* depicts the fickleness of people's cares and interests

and how these are unsuitable as a basis for building human life. What people should look to instead is a constant measure that does not bend to suit nefarious interests. It describes such people when they enjoy God's mercy and when they are afflicted by hardship, as well as in situations of affluence and poverty. It moves on to speak of how provisions should be used and increased. It then discusses the question of God's alleged partners from this angle, showing how such alleged deities can never provide sustenance, initiate or terminate life. It links the spread of corruption on land and sea with what people do, and directs them to go about the earth reflecting on the ends met by past communities of unbelievers who associated partners with God. It then directs the Prophet to follow the religion of pure human nature before a day comes when everyone will be rewarded for what they do. Like it did in the first section, the *sūrah* then provides some scenes of the universe, commenting that true guidance is that given by God, while the Prophet's task is only to deliver his message. It is not in his power to make the blind see or the deaf hear. The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round within the human constitution, reminding us of the stages of man's development from beginning to end, starting with utter weakness in childhood, before it mentions death, resurrection and judgement, giving us a new scene of that day. This section and the *sūrah* itself conclude with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity and to bear whatever difficulties he meets. He should always remain confident that God's promise will be fulfilled. Hence, he must not let himself be disturbed by those who lack faith.

Both the ambience of the *sūrah* and its general flow contribute to its main theme, namely the close relation between people's situations and life's events; the past, present and future in human life and universal laws. This shows that every little action, event, growth, consequence, setback and victory are all closely linked, and subject to an accurate law. In all these, the final decision rests with God: *"All power of decision belongs to God before and after."* (Verse 4) This truth is confirmed time after time in the Qur'ān, because it is the basic truth in the Islamic faith which gives rise to all concepts, values and standards.

1
Signs to Reflect Upon

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾	*Alif. Lām. Mīm.* (1)
غُلِبَتِ ٱلرُّومُ ﴿٢﴾ فِيٓ أَدۡنَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ غَلَبِهِمۡ سَيَغۡلِبُونَ ﴿٣﴾	*Defeated have been the Byzantines* (2) *in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory* (3)
فِي بِضۡعِ سِنِينَۗ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ مِن قَبۡلُ وَمِنۢ بَعۡدُۚ وَيَوۡمَئِذٖ يَفۡرَحُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾	*within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice* (4)
بِنَصۡرِ ٱللَّهِۚ يَنصُرُ مَن يَشَآءُۖ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥﴾	*in God's support. He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful.* (5)
وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِۖ لَا يُخۡلِفُ ٱللَّهُ وَعۡدَهُۥ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٦﴾	*This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it.* (6)
يَعۡلَمُونَ ظَٰهِرٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٧﴾	*They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware.* (7)

أَوَلَمۡ يَتَفَكَّرُواْ فِيٓ أَنفُسِهِمۖ مَّا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَأَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّىۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرٗا مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِلِقَآيِٕ رَبِّهِمۡ لَكَٰفِرُونَ ٨

Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord. (8)

أَوَلَمۡ يَسِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَيَنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۚ كَانُوٓاْ أَشَدَّ مِنۡهُمۡ قُوَّةٗ وَأَثَارُواْ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَعَمَرُوهَآ أَكۡثَرَ مِمَّا عَمَرُوهَا وَجَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِۖ فَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَظۡلِمَهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ يَظۡلِمُونَ ٩

Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (9)

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسَٰٓـُٔواْ ٱلسُّوٓأَىٰٓ أَن كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَكَانُواْ بِهَا يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ١٠

But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (10)

ٱللَّهُ يَبۡدَؤُاْ ٱلۡخَلۡقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ ثُمَّ إِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ١١

God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return. (11)

وَيَوۡمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يُبۡلِسُ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ١٢

When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, (12)

وَلَمۡ يَكُن لَّهُم مِّن شُرَكَآئِهِمۡ شُفَعَٰٓؤُاْ وَكَانُواْ بِشُرَكَآئِهِمۡ كَٰفِرِينَ ١٣

for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. (13)

وَيَوۡمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يَوۡمَئِذٖ يَتَفَرَّقُونَ ١٤

And when the Last Hour strikes, they

will all be divided: (14)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَهُمۡ فِي رَوۡضَةٖ يُحۡبَرُونَ ١٥

as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; (15)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَكَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَلِقَآءِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ فِي ٱلۡعَذَابِ مُحۡضَرُونَ ١٦

but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment. (16)

فَسُبۡحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ حِينَ تُمۡسُونَ وَحِينَ تُصۡبِحُونَ ١٧

Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. (17)

وَلَهُ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَعَشِيّٗا وَحِينَ تُظۡهِرُونَ ١٨

To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. (18)

يُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡحَيَّ مِنَ ٱلۡمَيِّتِ وَيُخۡرِجُ ٱلۡمَيِّتَ مِنَ ٱلۡحَيِّ وَيُحۡيِ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ بَعۡدَ مَوۡتِهَاۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ تُخۡرَجُونَ ١٩

He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. (19)

وَمِنۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَنۡ خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٖ ثُمَّ إِذَآ أَنتُم بَشَرٞ تَنتَشِرُونَ ٢٠

One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. (20)

وَمِنۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَنۡ خَلَقَ لَكُم مِّنۡ أَنفُسِكُمۡ أَزۡوَٰجٗا لِّتَسۡكُنُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيۡنَكُم مَّوَدَّةٗ وَرَحۡمَةًۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٢١

And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱخْتِلَـٰفُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَٰنِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَـٰتٍ لِّلْعَـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. (21)

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ مَنَامُكُم بِٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَٱبْتِغَآؤُكُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَـٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. (22)

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ يُرِيكُمُ ٱلْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا وَيُنَزِّلُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَيُحْىِۦ بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَآ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَـٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. (23)

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦٓ أَن تَقُومَ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ بِأَمْرِهِۦ ۚ ثُمَّ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ دَعْوَةً مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ إِذَآ أَنتُمْ تَخْرُجُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

And among His signs is He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. (24)

وَلَهُۥ مَن فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ كُلٌّ لَّهُۥ قَـٰنِتُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. (25)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَبْدَؤُا۟ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ وَهُوَ أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ ۚ وَلَهُ ٱلْمَثَلُ ٱلْأَعْلَىٰ فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٧﴾

To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. (26)

It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the

most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (27)

ضَرَبَ لَكُم مَّثَلًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۖ هَل لَّكُم
مِّن مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَـٰنُكُم مِّن شُرَكَآءَ فِى
مَا رَزَقْنَـٰكُمْ فَأَنتُمْ فِيهِ سَوَآءٌ تَخَافُونَهُمْ
كَخِيفَتِكُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ
ٱلْـَٔايَـٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason. (28)

بَلِ ٱتَّبَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُم بِغَيْرِ
عِلْمٍ ۖ فَمَن يَهْدِى مَنْ أَضَلَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَمَا لَهُم
مِّن نَّـٰصِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them. (29)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ ٱللَّهِ
ٱلَّتِى فَطَرَ ٱلنَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ
ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلدِّينُ ٱلْقَيِّمُ وَلَـٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. (30)

۞ مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَٱتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ
وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, (31)

مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا۟ دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا۟
شِيَعًا ۖ كُلُّ حِزْبٍۭ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold. (32)

The Natural Bond of Faith

> *Alif Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support. He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful. This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware.* (Verses 1-7)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters. In our opinion, that a number of *sūrahs* so commence served to alert people to the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of letters they knew well, being the letters of their own alphabet and the sounds of their own language. Yet they cannot produce anything like the Qur'ān. Indeed, it continues to challenge and defy them, and still they cannot match it.

These letters are followed by a true prophecy that the Byzantines would regain victory against the Persians within a few years. Al-Ṭabarī reports on `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd's authority: "The Persians won victory against the Byzantines. The Arab idolaters liked that the Persians should win, while the Muslims preferred that the Byzantines should be victorious because they were followers of a monotheistic faith, which was closer to their own beliefs. When the opening of this *sūrah* was revealed, some idolaters said to Abū Bakr: 'Your friend says that the Byzantines will score a victory against the Persian Empire within a few years.' He replied: 'He tells the truth.' They said: 'Will you be prepared to bet on that?' He made a bet with them wagering four young camels that this victory would take place within seven years.[14] But seven years passed and nothing took place. The idolaters were delighted and the Muslims felt this hard. They mentioned it to the Prophet and he asked them: 'How do you define the phrase "within a few years" in your language?' They said: 'Less than ten.' He said to Abū Bakr: 'Go and increase the bet and extend the duration by two years.' The two years were not out before travellers brought the news that the Byzantines had scored a great victory against the Persians. The believers were delighted." We do not need to go into other reports that speak about this event, but we will now look at some of the effects of this historical event.

The first thing to note in all this is the mutual support between different groups of unbelievers, in all generations and areas, against the message based on God's oneness. States did not have close contacts in former times as they do now. Nevertheless, those Makkan idolaters felt that a victory achieved by a community of unbelievers like them against the followers of divine Scripture was akin to their own victory. On the other hand, the Muslims felt that there was a bond between them and

[14] This clearly took place before the prohibition of betting as part of gambling. The prohibition was decreed much later, after the Muslim state was established in Madinah.

the followers of the Scriptures. They were grieved that polytheists anywhere should succeed. Muslims felt that their faith and prospects were not isolated from what took place elsewhere in the world. For all events have a bearing on the great issue of faith or unfaith.

Many are those in our time who overlook this fact of which both Muslims and non-Muslims were cognizant 14 centuries ago, during the Prophet's lifetime. Hence such people limit themselves within their own geographical or national boundaries, oblivious of the fact that the true issue is that of faith, and that the real battle is between Satan's party and the believers. Muslims today badly need to form a proper understanding of the nature of that battle so that they are not deceived by the false banners raised by unbelievers. These do not fight against Muslims for anything other than their faith, numerous as the pretexts and causes are that they advance.

We also note the Muslim's absolute confidence in the fulfilment of God's promise, as is clearly apparent in Abū Bakr's unhesitating attitude. The unbelievers try to create doubt in his mind pointing out what the *sūrah* says about the Byzantines' future victory, but he maintains that it is the truth. They ask him whether he is prepared to bet on this and he does so unhesitatingly. Then the promise is fulfilled within the time specified, i.e. 'within a few years'. This absolute confidence was a great asset for the early Muslims, strengthening and supporting them as they faced all manner of obstacles and endured persecution until God's promise to them was fulfilled. Such confidence is indispensable for every advocate of faith embarking on the long struggle for his faith.

It is also noteworthy that the opening verses giving information of future events include an interpolated sentence: *"All power of decision belongs to God before and after."* (Verse 4) This statement refers all matters, in all situations, to God. It is a maxim that applies to all events: victory and defeat, and the rise and fall of states and empires. Indeed all that takes place anywhere in the universe is determined by God, and fulfils His purpose in accordance with His wisdom. Events and changing situations are only aspects of the operation of God's unrestricted will which is not subject to influence by anything or anyone. It is God alone who knows what lies beyond it and how it operates. Hence, the best that we can do is unhesitatingly submit to God's will.

To Whom Power Belongs

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support." (Verses 1-5) God's promise was certainly fulfilled as stated, and the believers rejoiced at the

victory granted by God. *"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful."* (Verse 5) Thus the decision is His while His support is granted to whom He chooses. Nothing opposes His will. Indeed His will, which determines the results, is the same as the will that brings about the elements and the causes that leads to these results. Thus, there is no conflict between the desired results and the prevailing circumstances. The laws that operate the whole universe are devised by the same free will. It is this will that has determined that there should be laws of nature which operate without fail, and systems to ensure stability. Both victory and defeat are the results of certain factors that work in accordance with the laws set in operation.

The Islamic faith is very clear and logical. While it makes clear that all power of decision rests with God, it does not exempt people from taking the measures that are normally necessary to bring about practical results. Whether these results take effect is not part of people's responsibility, because it ultimately belongs to God's overall design. A bedouin left his she-camel untied and went into the mosque to pray. As he entered, he said: 'I fully rely on God.' The Prophet said to him: 'Tie your she-camel and then rely on God.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Thus, Islam makes true reliance on God conditional on taking all the necessary measures in any particular situation, knowing that ultimately all decisions are left to Him.

"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful." (Verse 5) Victory is thus the result of the power that makes it a reality and the mercy that fulfils what is in the best interests of people. In this way, such a victory is an aspect of mercy for both the victors and the vanquished. God says in the Qur'ān: *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted."* (2: 251) That the earth should remain free of corruption is ultimately good for all, including those who are defeated.

"This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verses 67) Such victory has been promised by God, which means that it will certainly come about in real life. For, *"never does God fail to fulfil His promise."* The facts of the matter are that His promise issues from His free-will and absolute wisdom; He is able to fulfil it, as no power can repel His judgement. Indeed, nothing takes place in the universe except as He wills.

Thus, the fulfilment of God's promise is part of the overall universal law that is subject to no alteration. Yet, *"most people do not know it,"* even though they may appear to be great scientists who have a firm grasp and wide scope of knowledge. The fact is that their knowledge is superficial, related to what is apparent in life. It does not extend to basic laws and rules, and cannot comprehend their interrelations: *"They only know the outer surface of this world's life."* They cannot penetrate any deeper than this outer surface or fathom what lies beyond it. This outer surface of the

present life is very limited, even though it may appear to us to be wide and vast. Only a small part of it occupies all their efforts. They cannot learn all that is related to that small part even when they devote their entire lives to it. Still, this world's life is only a small part of the great universe which is run in accordance with laws and rules operating throughout it all.

A person who cannot relate to the depths of the universe and its operative laws will inevitably fail to see even though he looks. He will only see the outer shape and movement, but will fail to recognize the wisdom behind it or interact with it. Most people fall into this category, because it is only true faith that links what appears on life's surface with universal secrets. It is only that which gives knowledge its spirit that can look into these secrets. Believers who have such true faith are few among the worlds' population. Hence, the great majority of people are incapable of acquiring true knowledge.

"Whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verse 7) The hereafter is another stage in the chain of creation; it is one of the many pages of the universe. People who do not understand the wisdom of creation or the law governing the universe remain unaware of the life to come, unable to give it its true measure and value. They do not realize that it is a part of the way of the universe and, as such, will never fail.

To be unaware of the hereafter makes all measures such people use inaccurate, and their values suspect. They cannot correctly appreciate life's events and values. Their knowledge of life remains superficial, incomplete. When anyone takes the hereafter and its life into account, his perspective and the way he looks at all events in this life changes. He realizes that his life on earth is but a short stage in his journey through the universe, and his lot in this present life is but a small portion of his share in the universe. He feels that all events that take place on earth are no more than a brief act in a long play on the universal stage. To base one's judgement on a short stage, a small portion or a brief act is unwise and can only lead to error.

The person who believes in the life to come and takes it into account will not be able to see eye to eye on anything with someone whose cares and interests are only for this present life. So much so that they will not be able to agree in judging a single event or question. They have two different viewpoints and perspectives; they look at things in different lights. One of them sees only the outer surface of this present life and the other looks at the bonds, laws and rules that are behind things, taking into account not only what we see in our world, but what lies beyond our perception, life and death, the present life and the life to come, and the universe stretching into the limitless. It is to such a great horizon that Islam wants humanity to look up. It is this broad perspective that befits man, the creature God has honoured when He placed him in charge of the earth.

An Invitation to Reflect

As both God's promise of victory and the certainty of the life to come are related to the truth upon which the universe is founded, the *sūrah* takes us on a round through the universe and through the depths of our own souls. It wants people to appreciate this fundamental truth which they overlook when they remain unmindful of the life to come:

> *Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord.* (Verse 8)

Their very nature and the nature of the universe around them suggest that this whole existence is based on the truth and its consistent, unchanging laws that do not permit friction or conflict. They follow neither blind coincidence, nor changing desires. The whole universe operates according to the accurate system God has put in place for it.

It is a requirement of this truth that there should be a second life when reward for action is given, with good deeds being granted handsome reward while evil ones are fairly and fully requited. Yet everything takes place at its appointed time, without a moment's hurry or delay. That people do not know the timing of the Last Hour does not mean that it will not come. The fact that its time is unknown, however, tempts those who are deluded by the little they know of the outer surface of this life: "*Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 8)

The *sūrah* then takes us on a different round, looking deep in history so as to reflect on the operation of God's laws that never change:

> *Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (Verses 9-10)*

This is an invitation to carefully consider the fates of past communities. These were ordinary people belonging to God's creation. The ends they met indicate what ends await present and future generations, since God's laws are applicable to all, and they are part of the universal truth that does not favour any particular generation, nor make allowances for changing desires. Far be it from God to do so. This

invitation wants people to understand the truth of life and its bonds, and the true nature of humanity which has the same origin and the same end throughout all generations. Thus, no single generation can look at itself or its life, values and concepts in isolation, heedless of the strong bond between all human generations, the laws that apply to them all and the values that remain valid throughout human life.

Those past generations lived before the Arab unbelievers in Makkah. They were superior in power to those Arabs, *"and they cultivated the earth,"* opened it up and discovered its treasures, *"and built it up even better than these are doing."* They had a higher standard of civilization than the Arabs and were better able to raise life standards. Yet they confined themselves to the outer surface of the life of this world, not delving beyond it. *"To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth,"* but they did not open their eyes and minds to such evidence. They refused to believe and so deprived themselves of the light that illuminates the way. Hence, God's law of dealing with communities that refuse to believe applied to them. Neither their power, nor knowledge, nor civilization were of any avail to them. They had their fair retribution: *"It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves."* (Verse 9) *"But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil."* (Verse 10) Since they entertained evil, evil was their end. This was the right recompense for *"denying God's revelations and deriding them."* (Verse 10)

The Qur'ān invites those who deny God's revelations to travel on earth so that they do not remain confined to their own locality. They must reflect on the ends met by those earlier communities and realize what their own end could be. They should know that God's law applies to all without favouritism. They should open their minds to the fact that humanity is one, the divine message is one and the laws that apply to all generations of humanity are the same. This is the concept Islam is keen to instil in the minds and hearts of all believers. Hence, it is repeatedly stated in the Qur'ān.

Two Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* then speaks about the truth of resurrection, of which they remain heedless, when it is part of the great truth upon which the universe is based: *"God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return."* (Verse 11) This is a clear and simple truth, with the link and harmony between its two parts or stages also abundantly clear. Bringing back creation is the same as its origination: the two are inseparable parts in the chain of creation, while the ultimate return is to the Lord of all the worlds who initially originates then brings them back so as to remunerate them for their actions in the final stage.

As the *sūrah* speaks of resurrection, it portrays a scene of the Day of Judgement,

painting the fates of believers and unbelievers when they are returned to life. It shows the absurdity of associating partners with God and the stupidity of the unbelievers' beliefs:

> *When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. And when the Last Hour strikes, they will all be divided: as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment.* (Verses 12-16)

So the Last Hour, of which some people remain heedless while others deny it, arrives, and the guilty stand in despair, with no hope of salvation. They cannot hope for even a word of intercession by the false deities they claimed to be partners with God. They are without support and without a saviour. At that moment, they deny the false deities they claimed to be God's partners.

Hence we see the parting of the ways between believers and unbelievers: "*As for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight.*" (Verse 15) There they receive what gives them true happiness. However, "*as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment.*" (Verse 16) Thus, we see the end of the journey and the outcome for both the believers and those who do evil.

The *sūrah* then paints other scenes of the universe and life, highlighting some of the wonders of creation, the depths of the human soul, and miraculous events. This round starts with acknowledging God's limitless glory as the night and day succeed each other, and extolling God's praise at night and during the glorious day:

> *Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In*

> *this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 17-27)

These verses represent a great tour far and wide into the universe, showing the human heart the approaching evening, the breaking of dawn, the skies, the earth, the night and the day. It calls on the human mind to reflect on the continuous cycle of life and death, as well as the first origins of man and the inclinations, desires and powers implanted in his nature, as also the bonds between the two sexes. It turns its attention to the great sign God has placed in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the great differences in language and colour according to place and environment. It highlights the different situations of man: sleep, awareness, rest and tiredness; as well as different world phenomena such as lightning, rain and the feeling of awe and hope they generate, and the life they bring to the earth. This great tour leads man's heart in the end to the truth that the skies and the earth stand firm by God's command, while all that lives in the heavens and the earth belong to Him. It concludes by restating the simple truth that now appears in absolute clarity: that it is God who originates and brings back, and that bringing creation back to life is easier for Him.

The Cycle of Life and Death

"Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon." (Verses 17-18) This glorification and praise of God are stated here in comment on the previous section that shows a scene of the Day of Judgement when the believers win the prize of entry into heaven while those who disbelieve are brought to witness their own suffering. They also serve as an introduction to the great tour that immediately follows. They thus provide a smooth link between the previous scene and the forthcoming tour.

The *sūrah* mentions that glorification and praise are made at certain times: evening, morning, night and noon, and also links these to the heavens and the earth. Thus, it encompasses both time and place in their great dimensions, establishing the

bond between the human heart and God in all times and places, making us feel this bond as we move with the great cycle that is the universe. Thus our hearts remain open, alert, appreciating all that is around us of scenes and phenomena. Every change of time and place reminds us to glorify God and extol His praises.

"*He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life.*" (Verse 19) It is a continuous cycle that never stops for a moment of the night or day at any place on earth, in space, or the depths of the sea. At every moment this great miracle occurs, but we remain heedless of it because of our long familiarity with it. Not a moment passes by without a life coming out of a dead thing, or a living being dying: a small bud shoots out of a seed or splits a stone to come into a life; or conversely a branch or a tree withers away. Still in the heap of dying plants and trees a seed or a stone is ready to start the life cycle again, and out of that heap gases spread into the air or provide nourishment to the soil that becomes fertile. At every moment life starts in a foetus, a bird or an animal. A corpse buried in the earth becomes part of the soil and gives it vapours and gases that make new life matter and nourishment for plants, which in turn provide food for man and animal. A similar cycle takes place in the depths of the sea and in limitless space. It is an awesome, fascinating cycle if we would only contemplate it with insight, guided by the light of the Qur'ān.

"*Likewise shall you be raised to life.*" (Verse 19) It is all an ordinary, simple matter, familiar in the universe, occurring at every moment of the night and day and in all places.

"*One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide.*" (Verse 20) Dust, which is the first origin of man, is dead, motionless. Another verse states: "*Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay.*" (23: 12) Clay, then, is the distant origin of man, but in this verse, only a brief reference is made to this before we see people spreading and moving about. The *sūrah* thus provides a sharp contrast between the dead dust and living people. As this immediately follows the verse that includes, "*He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive,*" it enhances harmony in the argument's presentation.

This great miracle is one of the signs of God's power. It gives a strong hint of the close link between the earth and the people living on it, as it is from the earth that they were originally formed. Both they and the earth are subject to the same laws within the universal system. The great leap from the still image of dead dust to the bustling image of the highly sophisticated human being should encourage deep reflection on God's power of creation. It should encourage people to extol God's glory and praise.

The next verse looks at the shared life between the two sexes: "*And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think.*" (Verse 21) People are well aware of their feelings towards the other sex; indeed, they are often preoccupied with this relationship. Very often they are motivated to a certain action but they seldom remember that it is God who created their spouses out of their own kind and gave them emotions and feelings. He it is who has made the relationship between the two a source of physical and emotional comfort, stability, spiritual friendship, and reassurance for both. The gentle Qur'ānic expression of this relationship profoundly inspires our hearts: "*so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you.*" (Verse 21)

"*In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think.*" (Verse 21) When people think and reflect, they appreciate the divine wisdom in creating each of the two sexes in such a way that is complementary to the other, providing fulfilment for natural needs whether psychological, mental or physical. Thus both incline towards each other and find comfort and stability, tenderness and reassurance, love and compassion. This is so because God has made the physical and mental constitution of each naturally inclined to fulfil the needs of the other, while their meeting and union ensures the beginning of a new life for a new generation.

Man and the Universe

"*And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 22) The Qur'ān frequently mentions the great sign of creating the heavens and the earth, but we often pass it by without reflection, although it merits long contemplation.

When the Qur'ān mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth it actually refers to this great expanse of the universe, with its fine and elaborate system, of which we know only very little. It includes countless numbers of planets, stars, orbits, celestial bodies and galaxies, in relation to which our earth seems no more than a weightless particle. This great and limitless expanse is coupled with remarkable harmony between its celestial bodies, orbits and motions, as well as the distances between them, ensuring that no collision occurs haphazardly, and that everything is kept functioning according to a set measure. This, however, relates to size and system. As for the essence of these great creatures, their respective natures, qualities, what occurs in or on them, the major laws that protect and regulate them, and how their affairs are conducted — these are beyond any human being's

knowledge. What we know of all this is very scanty indeed. In fact, our study of the small planet on which we live remains at a very elementary stage.

This is just a cursory look at the great sign that is the creation of the heavens and the earth. Very often though we speak about this carelessly, in passing, yet at the same time we speak at great length, expressing amazement and admiration, about a small machine scientists make. Yet the harmony the latter achieves between its component parts is such that it only works in unison for a short span of time. Still some people who are lost in error claim that this great universe, with its fine and elaborate systems, exists without a Creator. Not only so, but such people find scientists who are prepared to listen to such absurdity!

Together with the great sign of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the *sūrah* mentions the amazing variety of human languages and colours. This must be related to the creation of the universe. Differences in climate and environment that result from the variations of the earth's position in the cosmos have a marked influence in producing such variety in language and colour, despite the single origin of mankind. Scholars and scientists today note the great variety of human languages and colours but they do not relate this to God and His creation of the heavens and the earth. Instead, they undertake an academic study of this phenomenon, but do not pause to glorify the Creator who plans everything, visible or hidden. This is due to the fact that most people are devoid of knowledge: "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (Verse 7) Besides, the wonders of the creation of the universe and the great variety of language and colour are only appreciated by those who have true knowledge: "*In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 22)

"*And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen.*" (Verse 23) This verse mentions certain universal phenomena and their effects on the different situations of mankind, pointing to the harmony within the great universal existence. It combines the two phenomena of night and day with people's sleep and activity in pursuit of their livelihoods, which God grants in abundance. God has ensured that their lives are in harmony with the universe: their need for work and activity is ensured by the light of day, and their need for relaxation and sleep is brought about by the night's darkness. This also applies, in varying measures and degrees, to all living things on earth. They all find the universal system meets their needs and natures, allowing their lives to progress. "*In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen.*" (Verse 23) Sleep and movement are two conditions that are felt through hearing. Thus, the comment at the end of the verse fits well with the universal sign it discusses.

"*And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear*

and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason." (Verse 24) The phenomenon of lightning is part of the universal system. Some explain that it occurs from an electrical discharge between two clouds, or between a cloud and the ground, such as the top of a mountain, producing an air vacuum that gives the thunder that follows the lightning. In most cases, this is accompanied by rain. Whatever the cause, lightning is a natural phenomenon produced by the universal system God has set in operation.

As usual, the Qur'ān does not give much detail about universal phenomena and their causes. It only uses these to establish a link between human hearts, the universe and its Creator. Hence, it states here that one of God's signs is that He displays the lightning *"giving rise to both fear and hope."* Both feelings are naturally experienced when lightning occurs. People fear a thunderbolt that results from lightning, one that could burn things and even people. There is also that obscure feeling of apprehension which lightning causes as people feel the presence of the great power that controls the universe. People also hope for plentiful harvests as a result of the rain that often accompanies thunder and lightning. Hence, it is mentioned in the same verse: *"He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless."* (Verse 24)

When life and death are applied to the earth, it makes the earth appear as a living entity which lives and dies. It is indeed so, as described by the Qur'ān. The universe is a living entity that feels and responds. It obeys its Lord, the Creator of all, and it glorifies Him in complete submission. Man, who lives on earth, is one of God's creatures, all of whom look up to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Moreover, when water falls on earth, it makes it fertile, allowing plants to grow, so as to make its surface come alive first with vegetation, then with animals and man. Water is the means of life; wherever it is available, life prospers. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason."* (Verse 24) There is indeed much scope for people's minds to reflect.

"And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise." (Verse 25) The fact that the skies and the earth stand firm, following an elaborate system and moving according to plan, cannot come about except through God's will. No one can ever claim that either he or anyone else brings this about, or that it happens without a plan. Hence, it is God's great sign that the skies and the earth stand firm and function by His command, obeying Him, without deviation, hesitation or delay.

"Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise."

(Verse 25) No one who sees the great and elaborate system of the universe, how it functions, and the power that controls its potentials and resources, will entertain any doubt that humans, weak as they are, will immediately respond to the great Creator's order to rise from their graves.

The final note that concludes this statement shows that all creatures in the heavens and the earth submit to God in complete obedience: *"To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him."* (Verse 26) Although most people are neither devout nor obedient to God, the Qur'ānic statement here means that all creatures in the universe are subject to His will. All act and function in accordance with His laws that never fail or deviate from their set course. They are subject to these laws even though they may be unbelievers. It is their hearts and minds that disbelieve or disobey, but they are nevertheless governed by God's laws, and He controls them as He does all other creatures. They have no option but to obey and submit.

This great tour concludes by restating the essential question which people remain heedless of, namely resurrection: *"It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) The *sūrah* has already mentioned the initiation of creation and bringing creatures back to life after they had died. Now this is repeated after mentioning a galaxy of God's signs, but there is also an addition here, "*and most easy is this for Him."* (Verse 27) There is indeed nothing that is easier or more difficult for God: "*When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, Be' – and it is."* (36: 82) The Qur'ān addresses people in a way they understand. According to their own standards, initiating creation should be more difficult than bringing it back to life. Why, then, should they deem it difficult for God when by the nature of things it should be easier?

"*His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 27) His attributes are not shared with anyone else. Nothing is similar to Him in any way. "*He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) He does what He wills, having sway over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of all His creation.

An Analogy Drawn from Human Life

When the human heart has seen God's great signs, gone over such horizons and looked at such a great variety of situations, the *sūrah* then changes the tone of its address:

> *He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on*

> *you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason.* (Verse 28)

This comparison is drawn for people who used to associate partners with God. All the more so when such alleged partners are part of His creation, be they *jinn,* angels, idols, trees, etc. People themselves do not accept that their slaves have any share in their property. Indeed, they will not treat their slaves as equal to them in any sense. Thus, this situation is singular indeed. They make some of God's creatures partners with Him when He alone is the Creator and the Provider for all. Furthermore, they refuse to accept their slaves as partners in their property when their property is given to them by God who creates it. The contradiction in their attitude is stark indeed.

This comparison is stated in detail, step by step: "*He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life.*" You do not need to travel or make an effort to contemplate it. "*Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it?*" You do not accept that your slaves have even a small share of your provisions, let alone that they be equal to you. "*And you would fear them just as you might fear one another?*" *You* look at them in the same way as you look at partners who are free men, fearing that they might be unfair to you, or that you be unfair to them. Although none of this happens, you still suggest that it applies to God when His are the most sublime attributes in the heavens and the earth. It is a simple comparison that admits no contradiction or dispute because it is based on simple logic: "*Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason.*" (Verse 28)

The *sūrah* now exposes the basic reason behind this anomaly. Essentially, it is due to following one's own desires without reasonable basis or proper thought: "*Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them.*" (Verse 29) Desire has no control, since it is merely based on people's whims, fleeting passions, fears, hopes and cravings that have no rightful basis and no proper limit. This is a case of error that lacks any correcting guidance: "*Who could guide those whom God has let go astray?*" *They* go astray because they follow their own desires. "*They shall have none to support them.*" (Verse 29)

Concluding Directive

Now the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to remain steady in following the divine faith which is consistent and based on the pure nature God has given to people. It is a single faith that cannot be pulled in different directions, like the unbelievers who

were divided into groups and factions according to their desires.

> *Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold.* (Verses 30-32)

This directive to follow the true faith is given at the right time and the proper place, following the great round of signs drawn from the universe and the human soul. It thus addresses hearts that are ready to receive it, while those that have followed deviant beliefs find all their arguments devoid of substance. They stand alone without support. This is the powerful authority that is the Qur'ān and which no heart or mind can resist.

"*Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false,*" and move straight towards it, for it protects you from the influence of divergent desires that have no right basis and which rely on no true knowledge. They are subject only to whim and passion, lacking control or evidence. When you set your face steadily towards true faith, you turn away from everything else. This is "*in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man.*" (Verse 30) Thus the *sūrah* links human nature with the nature of this faith. Both are made by God, in accordance with the law of existence; both are mutually harmonious in their natures and objectives. It is God who has created man and revealed this religion so that it can regulate human life and conduct its affairs, healing man of ills and deviation. God certainly knows best what He has created. Human nature is set on a firm basis, and so is divine religion. "*Nothing can change God's creation.*" When people deviate from the proper path of nature, only divine religion turns them back to it, since it is in full harmony with both human and universal nature. "*Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it.*" Because they do not know, they follow their desires and deviate from the true path that leads to true happiness.

Although this directive to set his face towards the right faith is given to the Prophet, it is meant for all believers. Therefore, the *sūrah* continues its directives, explaining the meaning of setting one's face towards the right faith: "*Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God- fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold.*" (Verses 31-32) This means turning to God and referring to Him in all matters. This is what it is to be God-fearing, alert to what pleases Him in all that we do, whether in public or in private. It also means

attending regularly to our prayer in full devotion to God. It means, above all, believing firmly in His absolute oneness, which is the characteristic that distinguishes believers from unbelievers.

The *sūrah* describes the unbelievers as *"those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects."* (Verse 32) Unbelief and associating partners with God may take many forms and patterns. Some unbelievers consider the *jinn* to be God's partners, others associate the angels, some their forefathers, while others take kings, rulers, priests, rabbis, trees, stones, planets, stars, the fire, night and day, false values, desires, and the like as partners with God. The forms and patterns are unending, yet *"each group is delighted with what they hold."* (Verse 32) Meanwhile, the true faith is one, unchanging and undivided. It leads its followers towards God alone, at whose command the skies and the earth are set firm, and to whom belong all those who are in the heavens and the earth. All devoutly submit themselves to Him.

2
Bringing Life out of the Dead

وَإِذَا مَسَّ ٱلنَّاسَ ضُرٌّ دَعَوْا۟ رَبَّهُم مُّنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ إِذَآ أَذَاقَهُم مِّنْهُ رَحْمَةً إِذَا فَرِيقٌ مِّنْهُم بِرَبِّهِمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, (33)

لِيَكْفُرُوا۟ بِمَآ ءَاتَيْنَـٰهُمْ ۚ فَتَمَتَّعُوا۟ فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

[as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (34)

أَمْ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَـٰنًا فَهُوَ يَتَكَلَّمُ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? (35)

وَإِذَآ أَذَقْنَا ٱلنَّاسَ رَحْمَةً فَرِحُوا۟ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ إِذَا هُمْ يَقْنَطُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. (36)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَـٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe. (37)

فَـَٔاتِ ذَا ٱلۡقُرۡبَىٰ حَقَّهُۥ وَٱلۡمِسۡكِينَ وَٱبۡنَ ٱلسَّبِيلِۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيۡرٞ لِّلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ وَجۡهَ ٱللَّهِۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ٣٨

Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need. This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful. (38)

وَمَآ ءَاتَيۡتُم مِّن رِّبٗا لِّيَرۡبُوَاْ فِيٓ أَمۡوَٰلِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَلَا يَرۡبُواْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِۖ وَمَآ ءَاتَيۡتُم مِّن زَكَوٰةٖ تُرِيدُونَ وَجۡهَ ٱللَّهِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُضۡعِفُونَ ٣٩

Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase. (39)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكُمۡ ثُمَّ رَزَقَكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمۡ ثُمَّ يُحۡيِيكُمۡۖ هَلۡ مِن شُرَكَآئِكُم مَّن يَفۡعَلُ مِن ذَٰلِكُم مِّن شَيۡءٖۚ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٤٠

It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. (40)

ظَهَرَ ٱلۡفَسَادُ فِي ٱلۡبَرِّ وَٱلۡبَحۡرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتۡ أَيۡدِي ٱلنَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُم بَعۡضَ ٱلَّذِي عَمِلُواْ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَرۡجِعُونَ ٤١

Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. (41)

قُلۡ سِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلُۚ كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّشۡرِكِينَ ٤٢

Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.' (42)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ ٱلْقَيِّمِ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَصَّدَّعُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: (43)

مَن كَفَرَ فَعَلَيْهِ كُفْرُهُۥ ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلِأَنفُسِهِمْ يَمْهَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. (44)

لِيَجْزِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِن فَضْلِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers. (45)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَن يُرْسِلَ ٱلرِّيَاحَ مُبَشِّرَٰتٍ وَلِيُذِيقَكُم مِّن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَلِتَجْرِيَ ٱلْفُلْكُ بِأَمْرِهِۦ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. (46)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ رُسُلًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِمْ فَجَآءُوهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَجْرَمُوا۟ ۖ وَكَانَ حَقًّا عَلَيْنَا نَصْرُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. (47)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى يُرۡسِلُ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ فَتُثِيرُ سَحَابٗا
فَيَبۡسُطُهُۥ فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ كَيۡفَ يَشَآءُ وَيَجۡعَلُهُۥ
كِسَفٗا فَتَرَى ٱلۡوَدۡقَ يَخۡرُجُ مِنۡ خِلَٰلِهِۦۖ
فَإِذَآ أَصَابَ بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦٓ إِذَا
هُمۡ يَسۡتَبۡشِرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, (48)

وَإِن كَانُواْ مِن قَبۡلِ أَن يُنَزَّلَ عَلَيۡهِم مِّن
قَبۡلِهِۦ لَمُبۡلِسِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. (49)

فَٱنظُرۡ إِلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِ رَحۡمَتِ ٱللَّهِ كَيۡفَ يُحۡىِ
ٱلۡأَرۡضَ بَعۡدَ مَوۡتِهَآۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحۡىِ
ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ﴿٥٠﴾

Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.(50)

وَلَئِنۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا رِيحٗا فَرَأَوۡهُ مُصۡفَرّٗا لَّظَلُّواْ مِنۢ
بَعۡدِهِۦ يَكۡفُرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

If We send a [scorching] wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth. (51)

فَإِنَّكَ لَا تُسۡمِعُ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ وَلَا تُسۡمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ
ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا وَلَّوۡاْ مُدۡبِرِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (52)

وَمَآ أَنتَ بِهَٰدِ ٱلۡعُمۡيِ عَن ضَلَٰلَتِهِمۡۖ إِن
تُسۡمِعُ إِلَّا مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَهُم
مُّسۡلِمُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (53)

۞ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن ضَعْفٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ضَعْفٍ قُوَّةً ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ قُوَّةٍ ضَعْفًا وَشَيْبَةً ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ٱلْقَدِيرُ ﴿٥٤﴾

It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. (54)

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يُقْسِمُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ مَا لَبِثُوا۟ غَيْرَ سَاعَةٍ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كَانُوا۟ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. (55)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ وَٱلْإِيمَٰنَ لَقَدْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِى كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْبَعْثِ ۖ فَهَٰذَا يَوْمُ ٱلْبَعْثِ وَلَٰكِنَّكُمْ كُنتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' (56)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يَنفَعُ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (57)

وَلَقَدْ ضَرَبْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِى هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ وَلَئِن جِئْتَهُم بِـَٔايَةٍ لَّيَقُولَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا مُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: 'you are but making false claims.'

(58)

كَذَٰلِكَ يَطۡبَعُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٥٩

Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth]. (59)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞۖ وَلَا يَسۡتَخِفَّنَّكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُوقِنُونَ ٦٠

Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind. (60)

Overview

This section of the *sūrah* follows its main line, looking at the universal expanse to which people's lives and events are related. It is in this great expanse that we see how the laws governing life and the universe operate in harmony with the laws of the true faith, suffering no conflict or contradiction.

This section draws an image of how human desires frequently change while God's rules and laws remain constant. It shows how flimsy idolatrous beliefs are compared with the power of true faith. It describes people's attitudes in times of ease and hardship, when provisions are plentiful and stinted. Unless people rely on God's measure, which never fluctuates, and unless they accept God's will who gives as He pleases, in plenty or in small measure, their values and standards will remain unstable. Since it mentions the provision of sustenance, the *sūrah* directs them to the means that purifies money and makes it grow, which is in line with true faith. In this way, it makes clear to them who the Creator that gives sustenance, initiates life and causes death is. The false deities they allege to be God's partners do nothing of the kind. It alerts them to the corruption that idolatry and false beliefs spread everywhere.

The *sūrah* directs the Prophet and Muslims to remain steadfast in following the true faith before there comes a day when no action is of any use. It is the day when everything people have done is reckoned and when they receive their fair reward for it all. Within the context of what God provides, the *sūrah* directs their attention to certain aspects of such provisions, some of which relate to their existence, such as the rain that comes from the skies, giving life to the earth after it was dead. Likewise,

God's revelations are given to the Prophet to bring life to hearts and souls. Yet they neither listen nor follow guidance. The *sūrah* also takes us on a round in which we look at the stages of creation of humans and their lives until they return to their Lord. At that time, no excuse or justification will benefit the wrongdoers. The *sūrah* then concludes with reassuring the Prophet. It directs him to show more patience until God's promise is fulfilled, as it certainly will be.

Vacillating Conditions

> *When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, [as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe.* (Verses 33-37)

These verses draw a picture of the human soul that does not rely on solid concepts, or follow clear lines. It thus vacillates between sudden reactions, in response to conflicting influences or events. Thus, when harm touches such people, they turn to God, realizing that only He can save them. Yet when the affliction is over, and things are comfortable again, with God bestowing His grace on them, *"some of them associate partners with their Lord."* (Verse 33) These are they who do not follow true faith and who do not benefit from the light it gives to the faithful. Ease and comfort remove the emergency that made them turn to God for support and protection. They forget their earlier hardship. Thus, rather than maintain the path of turning to God and of being grateful to Him, they disbelieve in His guidance and the grace He has bestowed on them.

A warning is given in the first instance to those unbelievers who opposed the Prophet's message, making it clear that they belong to this group: *"Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know."* (Verse 34) It is a serious threat that sends terror into their hearts. People fear threats issued by rulers or presidents. How then will they react to a threat from the Creator of this universe, He who brought it into existence by merely saying to it, 'Be'?

Having delivered this stern warning, the *sūrah* questions them about the basis of their associating partners with God when it is He who bestows His grace upon them: *"Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with*

God?" (Verse 35) No one should ever accept anything about faith from any source other than God. So, have they received any clear, powerful argument to warrant an attitude that is contrary to belief in God's oneness? This is a rhetorical question, one that depicts the fallacy of all types of idolatry. At the same time it serves to state that the only proper and true faith is that revealed by God, with clear sanction from Him. Otherwise, it remains flimsy, devoid of substance.

The *sūrah* then depicts a different situation showing people as they euphorically rejoice at any taste of God's grace. In contrast, they feel frustrated and hopeless when affliction befalls them: *"When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope."* (Verse 36)

This is another image of a soul that either does not follow a clear line in judging situations or which lacks an accurate standard that does not sway with events. These are they who emotionally rejoice at every taste of grace forgetting its source and purpose. They are elated, overjoyed, but do not express their gratitude to the One who has granted them such grace. They do not realize that a situation of grace also poses a test. When it is God's will to requite them for their deeds, making them taste a situation of hardship, they are again blind to God's wisdom in such a test. They lose all hope that God will remove their affliction. Such is the situation of people who do not maintain their bonds with God and, consequently, do not understand His laws or wisdom. These are the ones who only know the outer surface of the life of this world.

This image is followed by another rhetorical question that wonders at their attitude and lack of insight. In both situations of grace and affliction one consistent law applies. Both are the result of God's will. It is He who bestows grace and tests people with hardship, gives in abundance or in a scant measure, in line with His wisdom. This takes place all the time, but they do not see: "*Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills?*" There is no need, then, for elation at the time of grace, or for despair during times of hardship. These are situations that befall people at different times as serves God's purpose. A believer sees in them confirmation that all matters ultimately belong to God. It all indicates the consistency of God's laws in all situations: *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe."* (Verse 37)

Since it is God who grants provisions and sustenance, giving in abundance or in small measure as He pleases, He indicates to people the way in which they can make handsome profit, increasing their wealth. This is different from what they think:

> *Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need. This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful.*

> *Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase.* (Verses 38-39)

Since all wealth belongs to God and it is He who grants it to some of His servants, He, the original owner, has determined that a portion of it should go to certain groups, to be given to them by those who are in actual possession of it. Therefore, He calls it a right due to these groups, of which the *sūrah* mentions here "*the near of kin, the needy and the traveller in need.*" At the time this *sūrah* was revealed, *zakāt* had not yet been determined, nor its beneficiaries. The principle, however, is stated clearly, making all money God's property since it is He who grants it in the first place, and assigning to certain needy groups a right which they should receive from those who are in possession of the money. This is the basic financial principle Islam lays down, from which all aspects of the Islamic economic theory derive. Since all money and wealth belong to God, it is subject to what He, as the original owner, determines with regard to how it is owned, invested or spent. The person who is in control of it does not enjoy absolute authority in this respect.

God Almighty issues this directive to those He has placed as trustees of wealth showing them the best methods for investment, growth and prosperity. This means sharing with one's near kin, the needy and stranded travellers, and spending generally in ways that serve God's cause: "*This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful.*" (Verse 38)

At that time some people tried to increase their money by giving gifts to wealthy individuals, hoping that they would receive better gifts in return. The *sūrah* tells them that this is not the way to achieve true growth: "*Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God.*" This is what some reports mention as the meaning of this statement, but it is a general statement that applies to all methods people use to usuriously increase their wealth.[15] God also makes clear the way that ensures true growth: "*Whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase.*" (Verse 39)

This is the guaranteed way of increasing money: to give it freely, expecting no favours from anyone, but seeking only God's pleasure. Is He not the One who gives sustenance in plenty or in small measure? Is He not the One who bestows or denies favours? He, thus, gives in multiples to those who spend of their money for no reason other than to please Him. He also takes away from the usurers who seek to increase their wealth at other people's expense. One method makes its calculation by

[15] This method is not forbidden like other methods based on usury. However, it is neither a proper nor honourable way to increase wealth.

this world's standards, while the other looks at the standards of the life to come, when rewards are given in multiples. This last method is the one that makes real profits both in this life and in the life to come.

Corruption and Pollution

The *sūrah* then discusses the issue of polytheism from the viewpoint of providing sustenance and earning a living, and how this affects their lives as it affected the lives of generations before them. It also shows the end of earlier communities and the ruins standing witness to such ends:

> *It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.'* (Verses 40-42)

The *sūrah* puts before them the realities of their lives which they cannot dispute to be of God's own making and in which they cannot claim a share for their alleged deities. It tells them that it is God who has brought them into existence, provides them with sustenance, causes them to die, and then brings them back to life. They acknowledge the fact that it is God who creates them. As for sustenance, they cannot claim that their alleged deities provide them with any of it. They have no argument against what the Qur'ān states about causing death. It is the question of resurrection that they dispute. The *sūrah* includes this with other acknowledged realities so that resurrection becomes established in their consciences. The method employed in this Qur'ānic address is uniquely effective. It speaks directly to their nature, sidestepping all deviant thinking. Human nature cannot deny the fact of resurrection.

They are then asked: *"Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things?"* (Verse 40) No answer to this question is expected. Indeed, the verse puts forward the only possible and negative response in the form of a rebuke, thus doing away with the need for a direct answer. This is followed by a glorification of God which denies partnership with Him in any form: *"Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him."* (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* then makes clear that life situations are directly related to people's actions, and that when corruption finds its way into people's hearts, faiths and deeds, both land and sea also become corrupted, to the extent that corruption becomes the order of the day: *"Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought."* (Verse 41) This spreading of pollution across the land and sea does not happen by coincidence. It is a manifestation of the working of God's laws. The reason being: *"so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings."* (Verse 41) They will thus suffer the consequences of the evil they do and the corruption they spread. It is hoped that when they have done so *"they might mend their ways."* (Verse 41) They might resolve to stop corruption and return to faith and its course of action which sanctions the doing of only what is good.

At the end of this round, the *sūrah* warns them against incurring a punishment similar to what was inflicted on communities before them. They were aware of the ends met by many of those, as they used to see their ruins on their travels: *"Say: Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God."* (Verse 42) Their fates are sufficient to discourage anyone from wanting to follow in their footsteps.

Now we have a reference to the other way whose travellers will never be lost. This leads to a different horizon which never brings disappointment:

> *So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers.* (Verses 43-45)

Taking up the true faith is expressed here in an inspiring way, suggesting full and serious commitment: *"So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith."* (Verse 43) This implies full attention and clear aspiration. It looks up to a high horizon and a sublime goal. The same sort of directive was given to the Prophet in this *sūrah* when it spoke about groups and sects with divergent beliefs. It is repeated here as the *sūrah* speaks about God's alleged partners, increase in sustenance, corruption resulting from unbelief, what people suffer as a result of the spread of corruption and pollution, and the fates of those who associate partners with God. Therefore, we have a statement here of the reward expected in the life to come and what both believers and unbelievers then stand to receive. The *sūrah* warns against a day that cannot be averted. On that day, people will be divided into two great groups: *"On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves."*

(Verses 43-44)

The Arabic text uses the word *yamhad* which is given in translation as '*smoothed a way*'. In its original meaning, the word means 'prepare a place of repose, or a comfortable way to follow, a cradle.' All these connotations combine to describe good deeds and their role. A person who does good deeds actually prepares a position of comfort for himself, this at the same time he does such deeds, not later. This is the meaning the verse highlights. "*And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds.*" (Verse 45) Whatever anyone receives as a reward comes out of God's bounty. No one deserves heaven on the basis of his or her actions alone. No matter what we do, we do not thank God enough for a part of what He has given us. Yet His grace continues to be bestowed on the believers. As for the unbelievers, He has no love for them: "*He certainly does not love the unbelievers.*" (Verse 45)

Aspects of God's Grace

The *sūrah* begins a new round showing some of God's signs and how they reflect His grace as He provides them with sustenance and guidance. They recognize only parts of this, denying others. Nevertheless, they do not give thanks or follow His guidance:

> *And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.* (Verses 46-50)

God's signs here include the winds as heralds bearing good news, sending messengers with clear signs, giving support to believers, sending rain to give life to dead land and bringing the dead back to life. This combination is very significant. All these are aspects of God's mercy and grace, and they are all part of the laws God has set in operation. Indeed there are close links between the system of the universe, the

messages of divine guidance preached by God's messengers, and the victory granted to the believers. All these are among God's signs, and aspects of His grace. They are important to human life, and they are closely related to the universal system.

"And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news." (Verse 46) These winds herald rain. From experience, people know the winds that bring rain which raises their hopes. *"So that He might give you a taste of His grace,"* with this prospect of rain, fertility and growth. *"And that ships might sail at His bidding,"* either with the help of rain or by causing rivers to flow and allowing ships to sail on them. Yet the ships are actually run by God's bidding, according to the laws He operates in the universe, giving everything its qualities and functions. An aspect of this is that ships are easily carried by water and they float and move, pushed by the wind, either with or against the current. With Him everything is made to measure. *"So that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty,"* on your business travels, in cultivating the land, and in business exchanges. All this is part of God's bounty, given by the One who has created everything and perfectly proportioned them all so *"that you might have cause to be grateful,"* for His grace in all this. This comment at the end of the verse serves as an indication of how people should behave when they receive God's bounty.

Similar to sending the winds bearing good news is the sending of messengers with veritable signs of the truth: *"We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth."* (Verse 47) Yet people did not receive this aspect of God's grace, which is much greater and further reaching than the wind that brings the prospect of rain. Nor did they benefit by them as they did by rain, even though their messages were far more beneficial and longer lasting. Essentially, they took two different attitudes towards God's messengers. Some of them refused to believe or reflect on God's messages and continued to inflict harm on the messengers and to turn people away from God's path. Others, who believed, recognized God's signs, offered thanks for His grace, and bore with patience the harm inflicted on them by the other group. Furthermore, they were confident that God's promise would come true. The outcome was in accordance with divine justice and in fulfilment of His certain promise: *"Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers."* (Verse 47)

All glory to God Almighty who, by His grace, has committed Himself to support the believers and give them victory, making this their right. He has emphatically confirmed it in clear, unambiguous terms. How could there be any ambiguity when the One making the commitment is God Almighty who has sway over all His creatures? He makes this statement expressing His will that will always be done, and pointing to the working of His law which never fails. He is the All-Knowing, the

Wise.

God's support may appear, in people's reckoning, to be slow in coming, because they have a measure and a perspective that are different from His. He, in His knowledge and wisdom, fulfils His promise at the time He chooses in accordance with His law. People may or may not be able to appreciate the wisdom of His timing. Yet His will brings the best; it is His timing that is the most appropriate, and it is His promise that will most certainly be fulfilled. Believers who reflect the quality of patience in adversity await its fulfilment with unshakeable confidence.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that it is God who sends the winds, brings down the rain, gives life to the earth after it was dead, and also brings the dead back to life: it is all one law, one method and different stages in the chain of the overall universal law.

"*It is God who sends forth the winds,*" in accordance with the law He has set in operation to regulate the universe and its affairs. "*So that they raise clouds,*" by the vapour they carry from the surface of water bodies on earth. "*Whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up,*" allowing its pieces to gather and condense, accumulate in layers, or collide with one another, or send an electrical charge from one layer or piece to another. "*So that you can see the rain issuing from within it,*" when such clouds are heavy with rain. "*As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice.*" (Verse 48) No one knows the extent of such rejoicing better than the people for whom rain means survival. The Arabs were the first people to realize the importance of this statement, because their lives depended on rain. Their poetry and folk stories mention it with hope and endearment.

"*Even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope.*" (Verse 49) This describes their condition before rain. In fact, rain changes their condition completely, from despair to hope and rejoicing. "*Behold, then, the effects of God's grace.*" You see these effects in people's faces as they brighten up after being gloomy with despair, in the quickening earth, and in the liveliness affecting all.

"*Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless!*" (Verse 50) This is a fact that needs no more than that we look and reflect. It is given here as evidence confirming the resurrection when people are brought back to life. This is consistent in the Qur'ānic argument where universal images and facts of life are given as substantial evidence: "*It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.*" (Verse 50) We need only to look at the effects of God's grace on the earth to be certain of the truth of this eventuality and the fulfilment of this promise.

The *sūrah* then describes the feelings of those very people who are happy at seeing the wind carrying water and who rejoice as they see rain bringing God's grace. What

would they feel, however, if they saw the winds as yellowish in colour carrying dust and sand? Such winds destroy fields and livestock, or cause plants to dry and wither: *"If We send a [scorching' wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth."* (Verse 51) Rather than submitting to God's will and praying to Him earnestly to remove their affliction, they deny the truth out of frustration and despair. This is the status of people who do not believe in God or His will, of people who cannot discern God's wisdom in what He decides, and cannot appreciate that it is God's hand that determines everything in the universe, ensuring harmony between all its events and situations.

The Different Stages of Man's Life

Thus the *sūrah* describes the fluctuation of people's desires, their inability to benefit by God's signs that they see in the universe around them, and their failure to recognize God's wisdom behind life's events. It then addresses the Prophet consoling him for not being able to persuade many of them to follow divine guidance. It tells him that this is due to their nature and blindness, which he can never cure.

> *Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God].* (Verses 52-53)

The *sūrah* shows them to be lifeless, deaf and blind, devoid of motion, hearing and sight. They have isolated themselves from the world around them and thus they are unable to understand the universal laws affecting it. Hence, they have no more than an animal life, or even less. An animal is guided by its nature, which rarely lets it down. By contrast, a person who does not respond to God's revelations despite its powerful effect on hearts and minds is deaf even though he may have ears that hear. Similarly, the one who does not see God's signs placed everywhere in the world around him is blind, even though he may have functioning eyes.

"You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves (to God]." (Verse 53) These are the ones who listen to the divine message because they have active minds and hearts, as well as sound understanding. When they listen to the divine message, they realize that it is the truth and they declare their submission to Him. They only need that their nature be alerted, and they respond.

The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round, but this time it is within ourselves looking at the different stages of our life on earth, before it refers to the next life and

the close link between the two:

> *It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends.* (Verses 54-57)

They see the beginnings in their own life, and they see the end brought to them in a vivid image as though it were happening before their very eyes. They only need to have a receptive mind to gather the inspiration behind these verses.

"*It is God who creates you in a state of weakness.*" Literally, this is given in Arabic as "it is God who creates you from weakness," which suggests to the Arabic reader that weakness is the substance from which man is made. The weakness in man's formation meant here has several aspects to it. It includes the physical weakness of the single, tiny cell that makes the foetus which goes through several stages, remaining weak throughout all of them. This weakness continues during childhood, until the person reaches adolescence and the prime of youth. Another weakness is that of the substance from which man is made, which is clay. Had it not been for the breath of God's spirit, man would have remained in the physical image of clay or in an animal image. Both of these are very weak compared to man. There is also the psychological weakness that makes man yield to desire, passion and lust. It is again the breathing of God's spirit into him that gives him the ability and resolve to resist such emotions. Without this spirit man would have been weaker than animals which behave according to their natures.

"*It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you.*" The strength mentioned here covers all those aspects discussed under weakness: strength in physical build, human potential, mental ability and psychological constitution. "*And then after strength he brings about your weakness and old age.*" Again this new weakness applies to the whole human constitution. Old age is a decline into childhood in all aspects. It may be accompanied with psychological decline due to weakness of will. An old person may have an urge similar to that of a child without having the willpower to resist it. The Arabic word *shaybah,* translated here as 'old age' also connotes 'grey hair'. It is specially selected here to give a tangible impression of old age.

No one escapes these stages. They never fail to affect anyone who survives; nor are they ever slow so as to come later than usual. These stages confirm that mankind is subject to a greater will that creates and determines as it pleases. That is the will of God who determines the age, life and stages of every creature in accordance with perfect knowledge and elaborate planning: "*He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power.*" (Verse 54)

This well-regulated creation must certainly have a well-regulated end. Indeed, this is shown in a scene from the Day of Judgement that is full of movement and dialogue to bring it alive before our eyes: "*When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour.*" (Verse 55) Thus, all that has passed before that day shrinks into insignificance so as to make them swear that they had not lived on earth more than one hour. Their oaths may also be taken to mean that they did not stay in their graves for more than an hour, or that this duration of one hour applies to all their time on earth in both their conditions of life and death. "*Thus they used to delude themselves.*" They could not make a proper estimate of their time, until those who have true knowledge tell them the right duration: "*But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.*" (Verse 56)

Most probably the ones described as *'endowed with knowledge'* are the believers who were certain of the coming of the Last Hour, recognizing what lies beyond the apparent aspects of the life of this world. These are the ones who have true knowledge and enlightened faith. In their answer, they refer the matter to God's knowledge: "*You have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection.*" This is the term appointed, and it does not matter whether it was of a long or short duration. The appointed time was met: "*This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.*" (Verse 56)

The scene is completed with a general statement of the overall result, referring to the fate of the wrongdoers who denied the Day of Judgement: "*And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends.*" (Verse 57) No justification will be accepted from them. In fact no acknowledgement of error or apology is sought from them. That is the Day of Judgement and punishment of the guilty, not a day of providing justification for wrong action.

No Change of Position

The *sūrah* then describes how the unbelievers persist in their ways, after having explained the fate of such persistent unbelief:

> *We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims.' Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth].* (Verses 58-59)

There is a wide gap here in time and place, but it sounds in the *sūrah* as if it is ever so near; indeed both time and place have been rolled back. People are again reminded of what the Qur'ān provides by way of illustrations, modes of address, fine touches meant to alert minds and hearts, and inspiring images. They listen to it as it addresses every mind and heart in every social environment and speaks to the human soul in all its moods. Yet they continue to deny every sign. Nor do they stop at this, but rather insult those endowed with true knowledge describing them as making false assertions: "*Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims.*" (Verse 58) The *sūrah* comments on their disbelief, saying: "*Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth].*" (Verse 59) It is in this way and for this reason that God seals their hearts. They are indeed blind, unable to see God's signs, arrogant in their disbelief, unwilling to reflect. Hence, they deserve that God should seal their sight and their hearts.

The final note in the *sūrah* comes in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers: "*Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind.*" (Verse 60)

Perseverance is the best policy for the believers as they go along their hard, long way that at times seems endless. They must remain confident of the fulfilment of God's promise. This will enable them to remain steadfast, free of worry and doubt. Other people may hesitate, or deny the truth, or doubt that God's promise will ever be fulfilled, because they have no true knowledge and lack the means of certainty. Believers, however, must persevere, remain steadfast and confident, even though their path may seem endless, and their goal seem concealed behind thick clouds.

Thus the *sūrah* that started with God's promise to grant victory to the Byzantines within a few years, and give support and victory to the believers, now ends with the directive to persevere until God's promise is fulfilled. Believers are instructed to remain steadfast in the face of all the unbelievers' attempts to weaken their resolve. There is perfect harmony between the opening and the end. As it concludes, the lingering impression is that of a firm resolve and unshaken trust that God's promise will be fulfilled.

SŪRAH 31

Luqmān

Prologue

The Qur'ān addresses human nature with its own logic. It was revealed from on high by the One who created human nature. He knows what suits it and brings the best out of it. He also knows how to address it and what affects its inner thoughts and feelings. The Qur'ān explains to human nature the truth that is deeply ingrained in it, which it knew long before it was addressed by the Qur'ān, because it was initially created with it. This is the truth of acknowledging God as the Creator, the One, the Supreme, and offering worship to Him alone. Similarly, the entire universe glorifies and praises Him at all times. The problem is that certain aspects of life on earth, some physical impulses, desires, whims and cravings may cloud human nature's vision or force its deviation from the right path. Therefore, the Qur'ān addresses our nature with the logic it knows, presenting to it the truth that it has overlooked. In this way, it moulds human nature on the basis of its code for living, leading it to earn the pleasure of God, the Creator who controls everything.

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* provides an example of how the Qur'ān addresses our hearts. It tackles the question of faith among the idolaters who had deviated from the truth. This is indeed the overall issue that all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah tackle, albeit in a variety of ways and from different angles. That the Qur'ān employs such different means is an essential part of its method to keep our hearts on the alert.

The central issue of faith focuses in this *sūrah* on God's oneness. It demonstrates how we should address worship to Him alone, express gratitude for His blessings, establish firm belief in the hereafter and what this involves of careful reckoning and just reward. Believers should also follow what God has revealed and abandon all notions that are at variance with this.

The *sūrah* presents this whole issue in a way that invites reflection on the remarkable approach of the Qur'ān. It addresses our natures and our hearts. All who advocate faith should study this approach carefully.

The issue of faith is presented here against the backdrop of the entire universe: its skies, earth, sun and moon, night and day, seas and atmosphere, waves and rain, plants and trees, etc. This colossal background is frequently employed in the Qur'ān, so as to make the universe a host of clear signs placed all around us, speaking to our hearts and minds, bringing them alive.

Four Presentations of One Issue

Although the issue is one, and the background is the same, it is presented in this *sūrah* four times in four sections. In each the *sūrah* takes us around the great expanse of the universe, picking up new influences and using new styles. Looking carefully at these four presentations, and how each starts and finishes in a remarkable way is especially pleasant and encourages a positive response.

The first begins immediately after the three separate letters that begin the *sūrah.* These indicate that the *sūrah* is composed of such letters, and that it is from these that verses of this book are presented packed with wisdom and divine guidance. Furthermore, it assures those who excel in goodness of receiving God's mercy. These are the ones who *"attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter."* (Verse 4) Thus it confirms the certainty of the hereafter and the duty of offering worship to God. These are coupled with a clear psychological influence: *"Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful."* (Verse 5)

On the other hand there are those who would pay for idle talk in order to divert others from the path of God, ridiculing these verses. These are faced with a fearsome prospect that suits their ridicule: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) It describes the movements of these people thus: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) This is coupled with a psychological touch showing how contemptible such people are: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) Another touch sends fear into their hearts although this is given mockingly: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) The Arabic term, *bashshirhu,* used for 'giving news' is always employed when people are given good and happy news. Its use here, however, denotes a clear sense of mockery.

The *sūrah* again refers to the believers, giving details of their success, which was already mentioned in general terms. It shows what reward awaits them in the hereafter, just as it has shown the requital of arrogant unbelievers: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9) At this point, the *sūrah* portrays a panoramic scene of the great universe as providing the proof that speaks to human

nature from every aspect, and in every language. It clearly presents this great truth, yet most people remain heedless of it: *"He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs."* (Verse 10) As it presents these aspects of universal evidence which overwhelm people's minds, the *sūrah* shakes those erring hearts that associate partners with God despite seeing His great creation: *"This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error."* (Verse 11) As this touch makes its profound universal note, the first presentation concludes.

The second presentation begins with real people, and tackles the same issue with a new approach to produce further effects: *"We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān."* (Verse 12) What is, then, the nature of this wisdom and what is its distinctive feature? It is summed up in a word: *"Be grateful to God."* (Verse 12) This is true wisdom in action. The second step shows Luqmān as he gives counsel to his son. It is the advice of a sage to his young son, which means that it is free of fault. No one can describe such advice as insincere or dishonest: how could they when it is from father to son? This advice states the major issue of faith which was referred to in the first presentation, as well as the issue of the hereafter, but it employs new influences here: *"Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong."* (Verse 13)

Here we see relations with one's parents in a way that overflows with tenderness and compassion: *"We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents."* (Verse 14) The *sūrah* makes clear the first rule concerning faith, which makes its bond the primary one in human life, taking precedence over that of blood and kinship. Strong and appealing as the latter bond is, it is lower on the scale than the bond of faith: *"Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me."* (Verse 15) It adds here the truth of the life to come: *"In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 15) This is then followed with a very strong psychological factor demonstrating the extent, accuracy and comprehensiveness of God's knowledge. This is done in such a way that makes us shudder as we contemplate it against the background of the great universe: *"My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All Aware."* (Verse 16)

Luqmān continues his admonition to his son, outlining the duties imposed by

faith, including the all-important duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and what follows from both of remaining patient in adversity, as difficulties are bound to be encountered by the advocates of faith: *"Endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve."* (Verse 17) This should be coupled with commitment to good manners. No advocate of faith should ever be arrogant, as such action is bound to spoil his advocacy efforts: *"Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass."* (Verses 1819) Not only does the *sūrah* dismiss such proud, haughty and arrogant behaviour, it looks upon it with contempt. This provides a marked psychological effect.

The third presentation begins with a new factor derived from people's attachment to the heavens and the earth, and the blessings God has placed in them for mankind, even though they do not show any gratitude: *"Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations."* (Verse 20) This new factor shows all argument about God to be abhorrent to an upright nature and sound mind. The *sūrah* denounces the unbelievers' stagnant attitude: *"When it is said to them: 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in."* (Verse 21) This is a stupid attitude betraying total ignorance. The comment that follows also carries a strong psychological component: *"Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire."* (Verse 21)

The question of reward and requital on the Day of Judgement is then shown to be closely connected with the question of belief or denying faith: *"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]."* (Verses 22-23) The *sūrah* then refers to God's absolute knowledge: *"God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 23) A strong element of warning is then added: *"We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering."* (Verse 24)

As this third presentation draws to a close people are made to face up to the logic of human nature as it reflects different aspects of the universe and its inevitable acknowledgement of the One Creator: *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand."* (Verse 25) The section then concludes with a scene of the universe, showing God's knowledge as infinite, while His will of creation and origination is unrestricted. These are given as universal evidences in

support of the concept of resurrection and return, as this also proves creation in the first place: *"Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all."* (Verses 27-28)

The fourth presentation begins with a universal scene that produces special effects on people's hearts. It is the scene of the night and the day as each creeps into the other. This scene also shows the sun and the moon as they move in their orbits within certain limits and up to a point in time that is known to no one other than God who created them and who knows them as well as He knows people and their actions: *"Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do?"* (Verse 29) This scene is made to provide human nature with fresh evidence in support of the central issue: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30)

The *sūrah* then touches our hearts with another strongly effective note derived from an aspect of God's grace represented by the ships as they go about the sea: *"Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 31) The comment here shows man's natural attitude as he faces the might of the sea when he is free of the deceptive influence of power and knowledge that keeps him away from his Lord. Such a natural attitude provides evidence for the central theme of God's oneness: *"When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers."* (Verse 32)

While the sea's waves can be fearsome, they provide a reminder of the greatest fear that severs blood relations, a bond which can never be severed in this present life: *"Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you."* (Verse 33) At this point, with man trembling in fear, the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that states the final verdict in all the issues it has treated: *"Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things."* (Verse 34)

These four presentations of the same theme, with their different styles, effects and conclusions constitute an example of how the Qur'ān deals with human hearts. They provide an approach chosen by God who has created these hearts and knows what suits them. In the following pages we will discuss these four presentations in detail, putting two into each of the two following chapters as they manifest stronger interaction in this way.

1
A Sage's Admonition

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, (2)

هُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لِّلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, (3)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. (4)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدٗى مِّن رَّبِّهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful. (5)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَشۡتَرِي لَهۡوَ ٱلۡحَدِيثِ لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖ وَيَتَّخِذَهَا هُزُوًاۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ مُّهِينٞ ﴿٦﴾

Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. (6)

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا وَلَّىٰ مُسۡتَكۡبِرٗا كَأَن لَّمۡ يَسۡمَعۡهَا كَأَنَّ فِيٓ أُذُنَيۡهِ وَقۡرٗاۖ

When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.' (7)

فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ۝٧

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتُ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ۝٨

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقًّا ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ۝٩

خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا ۖ وَأَلْقَىٰ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ رَوَٰسِيَ أَن تَمِيدَ بِكُمْ وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ دَآبَّةٍ ۚ وَأَنزَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍ كَرِيمٍ ۝١٠

هَٰذَا خَلْقُ ٱللَّهِ فَأَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن دُونِهِۦ ۚ بَلِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ فِي ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ۝١١

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا لُقْمَٰنَ ٱلْحِكْمَةَ أَنِ ٱشْكُرْ لِلَّهِ ۚ وَمَن يَشْكُرْ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ۝١٢

وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَٰنُ لِٱبْنِهِۦ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُۥ يَٰبُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّ ٱلشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ ۝١٣

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُۥ وَهْنًا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنِ

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss (8)

in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (9)

He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. (10)

This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error. (11)

We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (12)

Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: 'My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.' (13)

We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. (14)

ٱشۡكُرۡ لِي وَلِوَٰلِدَيۡكَ إِلَيَّ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ١٤

Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (15)

وَإِن جَٰهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تُشۡرِكَ بِي مَا لَيۡسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞ فَلَا تُطِعۡهُمَاۖ وَصَاحِبۡهُمَا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا مَعۡرُوفٗاۖ وَٱتَّبِعۡ سَبِيلَ مَنۡ أَنَابَ إِلَيَّۚ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ١٥

'My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware. (16)

يَٰبُنَيَّ إِنَّهَآ إِن تَكُ مِثۡقَالَ حَبَّةٖ مِّنۡ خَرۡدَلٖ فَتَكُن فِي صَخۡرَةٍ أَوۡ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ أَوۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ يَأۡتِ بِهَا ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٞ ١٦

My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve. (17)

يَٰبُنَيَّ أَقِمِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأۡمُرۡ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَٱنۡهَ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَصَابَكَۖ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ عَزۡمِ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ١٧

Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. (18)

وَلَا تُصَعِّرۡ خَدَّكَ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَمۡشِ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مَرَحًاۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخۡتَالٖ فَخُورٖ ١٨

Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.' (19)

وَٱقۡصِدۡ فِي مَشۡيِكَ وَٱغۡضُضۡ مِن صَوۡتِكَۚ إِنَّ أَنكَرَ ٱلۡأَصۡوَٰتِ لَصَوۡتُ ٱلۡحَمِيرِ ١٩

A Book of Wisdom

> *Alif. Lām. Mīm. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful.* (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters which are then described as *"These are the verses of the divine book, full of wisdom."* (Verse 2) This serves to emphasize that the verses of this book are composed of letters of the same sort. The book is described here as being one of wisdom because wisdom is repeatedly mentioned in this *sūrah.* Hence, it is fitting, in the normal method of the Qur'ān, that this particular aspect of the book is emphasized in this context. Moreover, speaking of the book as one of wisdom gives it connotations of life and will. It is as though the book itself is a living creature which is wise in what it says and the way it directs people to behave. It chooses its objective and serves it. This is indeed true of the book as it has life, spirit, movement and a distinctive personality. Furthermore, it provides friendly companionship, one which is felt by those who live with it and under its shade. They relate to it and have a mutual response with it just like close friends.

This book, which is full of wisdom provides *"guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good."* This is its essential and permanent status: providing guidance so that goodly people can follow the right way. Indeed, travellers who follow its way are never in error. This book also provides people with mercy as they feel reassured and contented by the guidance they are given. They feel God's mercy as they attain success, establish firm bonds and strong mutual commitments among those who follow such guidance, and also between them and the laws of the universe in which they live.

The ones who excel in doing good are those who *"attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter."* (Verse 4) Such people attend regularly to prayers, and offer them in full, on time and in the right manner. This fulfils the purpose of those prayers and enhances their effect on feelings and behaviour. Thus prayer creates a very strong bond with God, one which spreads an air of pleasantness on life as a whole. Giving generously in charity enables the giver to rise above the natural instinct to hold on to things. It helps to establish a social system based on mutual cooperation where both the affluent and the deprived find confidence and reassurance, as well as genuine mutual care. Certainty of the hereafter ensures that believers stay alert, seeking what God will give, and resisting the lure of all worldly comforts and luxuries. Furthermore, it keeps the believer heedful of what God desires, in public and private, in matters small or large. Thus he

aims to achieve excellence in doing good, or *ihsān,* which the Prophet defined as: "To worship God as though you see Him; if you do not see Him, remember that He sees you." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

It is for those who excel in doing good that the divine book is both guidance and mercy. The transparency of their hearts enables them to find comfort and reassurance in this book. They are able to relate to the light that is at the core of its nature and understand its wise objectives. Therefore, they accept it feeling the harmony that it provides with the universe at large and appreciating the clarity of the way they follow. This Qur'ān gives to every heart what suits its openness and sensitivity. Furthermore, it responds to the love, appreciation and high esteem with which hearts approach it. The Qur'ān is indeed alive, reciprocating people's feelings.

Those who attend to prayer, give in charity and are certain of the hereafter *"are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful."* (Verse 5) Whoever accepts divine guidance will be successful. Such a person moves along with enlightenment which leads him to his goal. He is thus free from error in this life and from the consequences of error in the life to come. He has reassurance, comfort, and friendly interaction with all that exists.

The Other Party

On the other side stand a totally different type of people:

> *Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.* (Verses 6-7)

Idle talk is any type of talk that distracts hearts and kills time without yielding any benefit to man or his mission on earth. Let us remind ourselves that man's mission is to build human life on the basis of goodness, justice and righteousness. Islam defines this mission, its nature, limits and means, charting the way it should follow. The Qur'ānic statement here is general describing a type of person that always exists. There are, however, reports that suggest that the Qur'ān is describing a particular incident that took place in the early years of Islam. These reports speak of al-Naḍr ibn al-Ĥārith who used to buy books recording the legends and stories of Persian heroes. He made every effort to get people to listen to his narratives instead of listening to the Prophet reciting the Qur'ān. This statement, however, is more general

and wider in scope than this. It describes a type of person with clear characteristics. This type is seen in every generation just as they were evident in Makkah among the first community addressed by the Qur'ān.

"Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk." (Verse 6) Such people would pay money, time and life to buy such idle talk. How high the price, and cheap the commodity in which such people spend their lives. They buy such talk *"so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule."* (Verse 6) They are truly ignorant. Their action is neither based on sound knowledge, nor aims for a wise objective. They have bad intentions and aims. They want to use such idle talk to lead themselves and others astray from God's path. They are ill-mannered, ridicule God's path, and mock the way God has laid down for people's lives. Hence, the Qur'ān issues a strong warning to such people. It shows them as contemptible, even before it completes their picture: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) The description of their suffering as shameful is deliberate for this replies to their mocking of the divine way of life.

Painting the image of this other party is then resumed: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) The image here is full of movement, showing this person as arrogant, turning away in pride. He is, therefore, decorated with shame and this makes us look at him with contempt: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) It is this heaviness that stops him from listening to God's verses. No person listens to these divine verses and then turns away so arrogantly. This description is completed with further ridicule: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) As explained in the Prologue, the verse uses here the term *bashshir,* which connotes the giving of happy news. Its usage adds further ridicule.

By way of contrast, the *sūrah* speaks of the reward to be given to the good believers who act on the basis of their faith. It also provides some details of their success to which earlier reference was made: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9)

Whenever the Qur'ān mentions reward, it precedes this by mentioning faith and good action. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that it must never remain an idle belief that triggers no action. It must always be a living, active reality. Indeed, Islam hardly settles in a person's heart before it begins to establish itself in action and behaviour. It reflects its nature and what it does to believers' consciences through its clear effects on people's lives.

Those believers who have translated their faith into good action *"shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide."* (Verse 9) Their admission to heaven and their abode there

simply fulfils God's true promise. The grace God bestows on His servants means that He commits Himself to reward them generously for what they do for themselves, not for Him, as He is in no need of anyone. "*He alone is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 9) He is certainly able to fulfil His promise, and He is wise in all that He does, including creation, promise and fulfilment.

Signs of Wisdom

The ultimate proof of God's might, wisdom and all other issues mentioned in the *sūrah* is the great universe, whose creation no human being ever claims for himself or for anyone other than God. The universe is huge and awesome, reflecting harmony and coherence. It has a fine and elaborate system. It captivates our hearts and readily faces human nature in such a way that it cannot turn away from it. Hence, it readily acknowledges the great Creator's oneness and declares anyone who associates partners with Him as erring, as those who transgress the bounds of clear truth:

> *He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error.* (Verses 10-11)

If we take the term 'skies' at its apparent meaning, without going into complex scientific research, we see how awesome, expansive and sublime they are. 'Whether the reference here is to planets, stars, galaxies or other celestial bodies that move in the space whose nature and extent are known only to God, or to this blue dome which we see with our eyes but no one knows what exactly it is, the fact remains that there are huge, majestic bodies that are elevated without supporting pillars. People see them with their eyes, wherever they look during the night or day and wherever they travel on earth. To contemplate the sky with our naked eyes, even though we cannot comprehend its great dimensions, is sufficient to send a shudder through our whole beings. We see a great, endless expanse without limits, but we also see a fine and beautiful system that holds all these creatures in such perfect harmony. Neither our eyes nor our hearts ever tire of contemplating such majesty. Indeed, this beauty is so captivating that all our feelings are absorbed. What does man say when he realizes that each little dot of light moving in this great expanse may be millions of times bigger than the earth he lives on?

This reference to the limitless space, "*He has created the skies without any supports that you can see,*" *is* made quickly and briefly, before we are returned straight to earth which is no more than a tiny particle when compared to the great universal expanse.

Yet man sees the earth as huge indeed: no man can traverse it all, even though he spends his life in continuous travel. Thus, the *sūrah* returns us to earth so we contemplate it with open minds, and without the effects of familiarity that cloud our vision: *"and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you."* (Verse 10)

Geologists say that mountains are undulations of the face of the earth resulting from underground pockets of coolness where gases get frozen and reduce in size. Thus the surface of the earth shrinks and becomes wrinkled allowing elevations and falls to take place in proportion to underground reductions in size. This may or may not be true, but God's book clearly states that these mountains stabilize the earth so that it does not sway. Thus, the rise of a mountain in one place balances shrinkage in another. However, God's word remains supreme. He is indeed the One who always states the truth.

God *"has scattered through it all manner of living creatures."* (Verse 10) This is one of the great wonders of existence. Up to the present day, no one can claim to have fathomed the secret of the presence of life on earth. This applies to life in its simplest, one-cell form. How then can we fathom the greater secret that causes life to become more varied and complex, giving rise to countless species, types and kinds of creatures? Yet most people choose to pass by such great wonders with their eyes and minds closed, just as they pass by something very ordinary that does not deserve a second look. These very people stand amazed as they look at a man-made machine which is very simple when compared to a single living cell and its accurately regulated behaviour. We need not compare such machines to more sophisticated living creatures, let alone to the human body which contains hundreds of chemical laboratories, storehouses, distribution centres, wireless stations that receive and transmit messages, as well as hundreds of other complicated functions, the secrets of which are known only to God.

"We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs." (Verse 10) Sending rain down from the sky is yet another universal wonder which we take for granted, oblivious to what is involved. The water that runs in rivers, fills up lakes, or bursts out in springs comes from the sky according to a carefully planned system that, in turn, is linked to the regulation of the heavens and the earth, their relative distances, natures and formations. The growing of plants after rain has fallen is another wonder that remains infinitely amazing. It reflects several miracles, including those of the springing up of life, its diversity, and the hereditary genes within a small seed allowing replication of all types of flora. To study the colour diversity in one flower of a single plant leads an open heart to reflection on life and its profound secrets, and hence to genuine belief in God, the Originator of life.

The *sūrah* makes clear that God has caused plants to grow in pairs, which is a fascinating fact that scientific research has only recently discovered. All plants have male and female cells which may combine within the same flower, or in two flowers in the same little branch, or in two branches or trees. No fruit can be produced unless pollination takes place between the two types, just as happens in animal and human life.

That these plants and their pairs are described as *'goodly'* imparts a significant feeling, making it suited as God's creation. Hence, it is raised in front of our eyes: *"This is all God's creation."* (Verse 11) And a challenge follows: *"Show me, then, what others might have created."* (Verse 11) Then follows the comment: *"Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error."* (Verse 11) What could be worse than wrongdoing and the error of associating partners with God when looking at God's great and universal creation? With this profound note the first presentation concludes.

A Totally New Approach

The second presentation starts with a new construction, using narration and indirect advice. It takes up the question of gratitude to God alone, believing in His absolute oneness, and the question of the hereafter, reward and requital.

> *We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised.* (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* chooses Luqmān as its spokesman on the questions of God's oneness and the life to come. Reports on Luqmān's identity vary, with some suggesting that he was a prophet, while others say that he was a devout person, but not a prophet. The majority of scholars prefer this second view. It is also suggested that he was an Abyssinian slave, while some reports say that he was from Nubia, the area stretching today from southern Egypt to northern Sudan. It is also said that he was one of the Children of Israel and that he was a judge. Whoever Luqmān truly was, the Qur'ān states that he was a man endowed with wisdom, embodied in gratitude to God: *"We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God.'"* (Verse 12) The verse thus contains an implicit directive to show gratitude to God, emulating this sage who is chosen as an example to be followed. This is coupled with another directive making it clear that being grateful to God is of benefit only to the person expressing such gratitude, while it is of no benefit to God, who is ever praised even though none of His creatures offers any such praise: *"He who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised."* (Verse 12) Thus, the person who abandons wisdom and who does not keep something for his future life

betrays the worst type of stupidity.

The question of God's oneness is then raised in the form of an admonition by Luqmān to his son: "*Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.*" (Verse 13) This is a sincere piece of advice, for no parent wishes anything but good for his child. The sage, Luqmān, warns his son against associating partners with God, explaining that to do so is to be guilty of great wrongdoing. He emphasizes this fact twice: firstly, by explaining the reason, and secondly through the emphatic style employed. This is the truth that Muhammad presented to his people, but they argued and disputed with him, suspecting his motives and fearing that he might want to take power and place himself above them. What would they, then, say when they heard Luqmān, the sage, urging it upon his son? A father's counsel is honest, sincere, free of suspicion. The fact is that God's oneness is the old truth stated by everyone to whom God has imparted knowledge and wisdom. It aims to bring pure goodness and nothing else. This is the psychological effect intended here.

Relations with Parents

Continuing on from this parental advice, the *sūrah* speaks in gentle terms about relations between parents and children, delivering this in an inspiring and tender way. Nevertheless, the bond of faith takes precedence over such close relations:

> *We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life].* (Verses 14-15)

That children are enjoined to be good to parents is mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'ān and by the Prophet. The reverse recommendation enjoining kindness to children occurs only rarely, but mostly in connection with infanticide, a special case with special circumstances. Human nature ensures that a newborn is taken care of by its parents. It is because of their very nature that people look after the new generation in order to ensure the continuity of life, as God wills. In this way, parents normally offer their personal efforts, resources, possessions and lives generally, without complaint or boredom. Indeed they often do not realize how much they give. They do it willingly and with pleasure, as if they were the recipients. Thus, parents do not

need to be urged to take care of their children. It is children who need to be urged to look after the generation that has already given its all and stands at life's departure gate. Children can compensate parents for even a portion of what they have given, even though they may dedicate their entire lives to such ends. Such parental dedication is given an inspiring image: *"His mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years."* (Verse 14) Needless to say, the mother gives the larger share of such sacrifice, with more love and care. "A man was carrying his mother on his back in ṭawāf, [a worship ritual of pilgrimage], when he asked the Prophet: 'Do I thus pay her back for what she did for me?' The Prophet said: 'No; not even for one heaved sigh." [Related by al-Bazzār.] This is how the Prophet compares the two actions. The man could not repay his mother for even one heaved sigh during pregnancy or childbirth, for she carried her child in weakness upon weakness.

With this image of compassion the *sūrah* directs people to the need to express gratitude to God, the first Benefactor, and then to show gratitude to parents who are always ready to give to their children. These duties are given in order of priority: *'Be grateful to Me and to your parents."* (Verse 14) This fact is linked to the reality of the hereafter: *"With Me is the end of all journeys."* (Verse 14) It is then, at the end of the journey, that what has been advanced of good work will be of benefit.

This bond between parent and child, with all its care, love and sacrifice, nevertheless comes second to the bond of faith. Hence, immediately after the statement enjoining man to be dutiful to parents, he is told: "*Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* **(**Verse 15) Should this happen, the duty of obeying one's parents is no longer valid. The bond of faith supersedes all bonds. Hence, no matter how hard parents try to persuade, coerce, pressurize or force their son or daughter to associate with God anyone whose godship is unknown to them — and no being other than God has any godship to be known — they must not be obeyed. This is an order from God whom all creatures must obey.

However, differences of faith and the order not to obey parents against one's faith does not deprive parents of their right to receive kindly and caring treatment and companionship: *"but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness."* (Verse 15) This life is, after all, a short journey that does not affect the truth: "*Follow the path of those who turn towards Me,"* i.e. the believers. "*In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return,"* after this short journey on earth; *'when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 15) Everyone will have the just reward of their deeds.

It is reported that this verse and the two similar to it in *Sūrah* 29, The Spider, and *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, were revealed in connection with Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş and his mother [as reported earlier]. The story is mentioned in Muslim's *Ṣaĥīĥ?*,

which is universally recognized as an authentic *Ĥadīth* anthology. However, its import is general and applies to any similar situation. It draws an order for bonds and relations, and one for duties. Thus, the bond of faith in God ranks top, and with it the requirement to fulfil His orders. The Qur'ān emphasizes this rule on every occasion and in a variety of forms so that it is solidly implanted in a believer's consciousness. There can be no confusion or ambiguity about this.

The Hereafter and the Reckoning

The next paragraph in Luqmān's admonition speaks about the hereafter and its accurate reckoning of people's deeds and its just reward. This reality is not, however, presented as bare facts. It is shown against the panoramic scene of the universe, in an image that makes the human conscience tremble as it reflects on God's detailed and perfect knowledge:

> *My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware.* (Verse 16)

No abstract presentation of God's knowledge and its comprehensiveness, His power, accuracy of reckoning and fairness of weighing can match this clear and vivid image. This is the distinction of the unique Qur'ānic method, beautifully effected, profoundly effective. A grain of mustard seed, without weight or value, misplaced deep in a rock where it cannot be seen or found! Or it could be '*in the skies*', in that vast, endless structure where a huge star appears no more than a little dot or a floating particle! Or it could be '*in the earth*' lost in its sand and dust with nothing to indicate it. Nevertheless, *'God will bring it forth.'* (Verse 16) His knowledge traces it and His power does not let go of it. "*God is Gracious, All-Aware.*" (Verse 16) A fitting comment on the magnificent scene!

Our imagination continues to follow that mustard seed in those deep and vast areas so we reflect on God's knowledge which never loses sight of it. Thus, our hearts are filled with awe and we turn to God appreciating His knowledge of all that is beyond the realm of our perception. Thus, the truth the Qur'ān wants to drive home is established in our minds.

The *sūrah* continues with Luqmān as he goes on admonishing his son. Having established the faith in man's conscience and clarified its main essentials, he now speaks about attending to prayer, advocacy of the faith and perseverance in the face of inevitable difficulties:

> *My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve.* (Verse 17)

Such is the way of faith: declaring God's oneness, knowing that He sees all, aspiration to His reward, trust in His justice and fear of His punishment. This is followed by a call to people to maintain the right path, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. Prior to all this, however, we should ensure that we have the right equipment for the battle against evil: we should worship God alone, address prayers to Him, and remain steadfast despite adversity. Adversity can take many forms from deviation to stubbornness, turning away as well as verbal and physical abuse, loss of property and wealth, as also physical hardship: "*These are matters that require strong resolve.*" Such strong resolve allows no hesitation after a decision has been firmly taken.

Luqmān goes on to speak about the manners that should be characteristic of advocates who call on people to adopt the divine faith. Such advocacy of what is good does not permit behaving arrogantly towards people under the pretext of leading them to what is of benefit. Needless to say, arrogant behaviour that is not accompanied by the advocacy of goodness is even worse and more abominable:

> *Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.* (Verses 18-19)

In drawing this image of arrogance the *sūrah* uses the Arabic term *tuṣa'ir* which is translated here as '*turn your cheek away*'. This term is derived from the disease *ṣa'ar* which affects camels causing them to involuntarily turn their necks sideways. The *sūrah* chooses this term in order to describe the repugnance of turning one's cheek away from people in a gesture similar to what camels affected by this disease do. Walking haughtily is another type of behaviour suggesting carelessness about people and their feelings. This is again a gesture that is disliked by God and man. It is a sign of a sick mind and a self-centred person: "*God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful.*" (Verse 18)

The order not to walk haughtily on earth is coupled with a statement about the proper way of walking: "*Be of modest bearing in your walk.*" (Verse 19) Such modesty is expressed in Arabic with the word *iqṣid,* which connotes economy and definite purpose. The economy aspect referred to here is the need not to waste energy in a boastful, arrogant gait, and the purposeful walk is one which does not waste time;

rather it moves towards its goal easily.

Luqmān's admonition also urges his son to lower his voice, which is a mark of politeness, self-confidence and reliability. Only an impolite person, or one who has self doubt or uncertainty about what he says, resorts to speaking loudly as he tries to disguise such doubts by raising his voice. The *sūrah* shows this behaviour as disgusting, adding to its abhorrence with the comment: *"Lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass."* (Verse 19)

2
God's Absolute Knowledge

أَلَمۡ تَرَوۡاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَأَسۡبَغَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ نِعَمَهُۥ ظَٰهِرَةٗ وَبَاطِنَةٗۗ وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يُجَٰدِلُ فِي ٱللَّهِ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖ وَلَا هُدٗى وَلَا كِتَٰبٖ مُّنِيرٖ ٢٠

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations. (20)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّبِعُواْ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُواْ بَلۡ نَتَّبِعُ مَا وَجَدۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ءَابَآءَنَآۚ أَوَلَوۡ كَانَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ يَدۡعُوهُمۡ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ٢١

When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire. (21)

۞ وَمَن يُسۡلِمۡ وَجۡهَهُۥٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحۡسِنٞ فَقَدِ ٱسۡتَمۡسَكَ بِٱلۡعُرۡوَةِ ٱلۡوُثۡقَىٰۗ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ٢٢

Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (22)

وَمَن كَفَرَ فَلَا يَحۡزُنكَ كُفۡرُهُۥٓۚ إِلَيۡنَا مَرۡجِعُهُمۡ فَنُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا عَمِلُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٢٣

And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (23)

نُمَتِّعُهُمۡ قَلِيلٗا ثُمَّ نَضۡطَرُّهُمۡ إِلَىٰ عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٖ ٢٤

We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering. (24)

وَلَئِن سَأَلۡتَهُم مَّنۡ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُۚ قُلِ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِۚ بَلۡ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٥

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. (25)

لِلَّهِ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡغَنِيُّ ٱلۡحَمِيدُ ٢٦

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self- sufficient, worthy of all praise. (26)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مِن شَجَرَةٍ أَقۡلَٰمٞ وَٱلۡبَحۡرُ يَمُدُّهُۥ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ سَبۡعَةُ أَبۡحُرٖ مَّا نَفِدَتۡ كَلِمَٰتُ ٱللَّهِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٞ ٢٧

Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. (27)

مَّا خَلۡقُكُمۡ وَلَا بَعۡثُكُمۡ إِلَّا كَنَفۡسٖ وَٰحِدَةٍۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعُۢ بَصِيرٌ ٢٨

The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all. (28)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي ٱلَّيۡلِ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمۡسَ وَٱلۡقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجۡرِيٓ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّى وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ خَبِيرٞ ٢٩

Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? (29)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِهِ ٱلۡبَٰطِلُ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلۡعَلِيُّ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ٣٠

Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great. (30)

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱلۡفُلۡكَ تَجۡرِي فِي ٱلۡبَحۡرِ بِنِعۡمَتِ ٱللَّهِ لِيُرِيَكُم مِّنۡ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٖ شَكُورٖ ٣١

Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. (31)

وَإِذَا غَشِيَهُم مَّوۡجٞ كَٱلظُّلَلِ دَعَوُاْ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّىٰهُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡبَرِّ فَمِنۡهُم مُّقۡتَصِدٞۚ وَمَا يَجۡحَدُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا كُلُّ خَتَّارٖ كَفُورٖ ٣٢

When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers. (32)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمۡ وَٱخۡشَوۡاْ يَوۡمًا لَّا يَجۡزِي وَالِدٌ عَن وَلَدِهِۦ وَلَا مَوۡلُودٌ هُوَ جَازٍ عَن وَالِدِهِۦ شَيۡـًٔاۚ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّۖ فَلَا تَغُرَّنَّكُمُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَلَا يَغُرَّنَّكُم بِٱللَّهِ ٱلۡغَرُورُ ﴿٣٣﴾

Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (33)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عِندَهُۥ عِلۡمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَيُنَزِّلُ ٱلۡغَيۡثَ وَيَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡحَامِۖ وَمَا تَدۡرِي نَفۡسٞ مَّاذَا تَكۡسِبُ غَدٗاۖ وَمَا تَدۡرِي نَفۡسُۢ بِأَيِّ أَرۡضٖ تَمُوتُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٞ ﴿٣٤﴾

Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things. (34)

Blessings Galore

The third presentation of this central issue of faith employs a different style, showing us in the first place the universal proof as it relates to human life, interests and livelihood. It speaks of God's blessings, visible and subtle, which people enjoy. Nevertheless, they continue to engage in arguments about God, who gives them all these blessings. The *sūrah* then follows the same pattern in presenting the central theme of faith as already discussed in the first two presentations:

> *Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light giving revelations. When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire.* (Verses 20-21)

This remark occurs repeatedly in the Qur'ān. Conveyed in different ways, it appears new every time, because the universe appears new whenever we contemplate its secrets and reflect on its unending wonders. Indeed, it takes far longer than man's lifetime to review these wonders. Yet every time he looks at them, they appear to have a different colour and a different tone.

The *sūrah* portrays these from the viewpoint of harmony between man's needs in his life on earth and the construction of the universe. This leaves no possibility for such harmony to have been achieved by mere coincidence. It is inevitable, therefore, that we should acknowledge the single will that makes such harmony a reality.

Planet earth is no more than a little particle when compared to the universe. Compared to the size of the earth, man is a tiny and weak creature. Moreover, the earth contains forces as well as animate and inanimate beings in comparison to which man appears no more than a tiny creature in size, weight and strength. By His grace, however, and by breathing into him of His own spirit and honouring him above many of His creatures, God has given man a special position in the universal system. Indeed, He has given him the ability to use many of the forces and resources of this universe. This is what the *sūrah* describes as 'making things subservient' to man within the context of granting him countless blessings that are subtle and apparent, inward and outward. These blessings go beyond making things in the heavens and earth subservient to man. Mere human existence is a blessing, as are man's powers, abilities, talents and skills. Sending human messengers with divine messages is an even bigger and greater blessing. The breathing of God's spirit into man at the time of his creation is also an aspect of blessing. Indeed, every breath man draws, every heart beat, every sigh, sound, feeling and thought is a blessing which he could not have had without God's grace.

God has made what is in the skies available and subservient to man. Thus, he is able to benefit from the sun's rays, the moon's light, the guidance provided by the stars, rain, air and birds that fly. He also enabled him to benefit and use what is on and in the earth. This is even easier to note and reflect upon. Man is placed in charge of this vast kingdom, and given the ability to use all the resources of the earth, some of which are clear and apparent while others are subtle and hidden; some are known fully to man, some he knows only by their effects, and some he benefits from without even knowing what they are. In every moment of the night and day man is given the great abundance of God's blessings, the extent and form of which he does not fully know. Yet in spite of all this, some people are ingrate, do not reflect on the world around them and do not appreciate the blessings they enjoy: "*Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations.*" (Verse 20)

This argument sounds singular in the light of this universal proof. Considering

that God's grace is so great and abundant, man's denial looks both absurd and ugly. Both human nature and conscience find it repugnant. The type of person who argues about the truth of God, and what this means, is deviant, unresponsive to the inspiration the universe shines with, denies God's grace, and unashamedly argues about the One who has granted all these blessings. What is worse is that in their argument, such people do not rely on any true knowledge, have no proper guidance, and refer to no guiding revelation.

"When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.'" (Verse 21) This is their only basis and evidence! It is nothing other than blindly following traditions which lack knowledge and intelligent thinking. Islam wants to free them from such blind imitation, so as to set their minds free. It wants them to be able to think, reflect and benefit by the light, but they adamantly hold on to the chains of their deviant past.

Islam means freedom of conscience, active feelings, aspiration for enlightenment and a new way of life that is free of blind tradition. Yet such people turn their backs on it, rejecting its light and guidance. They argue about God without knowledge or guidance. Hence, the *sūrah* looks upon them with ridicule, making a subtle reference to the end such attitudes lead to: *"Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire."* (Verse 21) Indeed their attitude is nothing less than an invitation by Satan leading them to God's punishment. Will they persist with this despite the end which they will be certain to have? This last remark should at least alert them to the difficulty of their position.

The *sūrah* then refers to the proper attitude that should result from reflecting on the universal evidence and God's countless blessings: *"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) Together with good deeds, what is required is total submission to God. One should feel reassured of God's will, obey His commands, fulfil the duties He requires, have confidence in His mercy, trust His care, and so enjoy total contentment. All this is grouped under the heading of submission to God.

"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support." This support is a bond that is never severed or weakened. It never lets down anyone who holds to it, whether in situations of ease or difficulty. No one who holds to it will ever be lost, even though his road is rough, dark and beset by hardships. This firm support is the close, confident link between the submitting believer and his Lord. Thus, whatever comes through God's will is accepted without qualm. It gives the believer the sort of reassurance that keeps him calm and confident as he faces all events. Furthermore, in this way, he is able to rise above comforts, luxuries, difficulties, surprises and all other impediments.

Man's journey is long, hard and full of danger. The danger posed by luxury and affluence is no less than that arising from misery and deprivation. Hence the need for firm and ever-present support. The firmest support is that which comes about from submitting oneself to God and doing good deeds. *"With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) With Him all journeys end, and to Him we all return. Hence, it is better for man to submit to Him from the start, so that he moves along his journey with confidence, reassurance and guidance.

> *And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering.* (Verses 23-24)

This is, by contrast, the end of the unbeliever who is deceived by life's comforts. In this present life, he is shown to the Prophet and the believers as being of no consequence: *"Whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you."* (Verse 23) He is too small for you to grieve over. As for his end in the life to come, it is again of no insignificance. He cannot escape God's punishment, when God knows all his actions and intentions: *"To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing in life. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 23) The enjoyments that deceive such people are small, short in duration, trifling in value, but the results at the end are terrifying. These they cannot escape: *"We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering."* (Verse 24) The Arabic term, *ghalīẓ,* used here to describe the suffering, has more physical connotations than 'severe' suggests. Thus the verse imparts a more tangible feeling of the suffering into which they are driven, unable to avoid it. How vastly different the two ends are.

Using the Creation Argument

In its contemplation of the universe, the *sūrah* puts the unbelievers face to face with the logic of their own nature. In this way, they cannot deny the truth it emphasizes. Yet still there are those who deviate and remain heedless:

> *If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.* (Verses 25-26)

When man questions his own nature and conscience, he cannot avoid admitting this clear truth. The heavens and the earth stand as they are: with careful planning of

their sizes, movements, dimensions, qualities and characteristics. They are made in deliberate measure and full harmony. Yet they are creatures that no one claims to have created, and no one alleges that any creator other than God has had a share in their making. They cannot have come into existence by themselves. Nor can they follow a system or establish harmony without elaborate planning or a planner. To suggest that they have existed by themselves, or as the result of coincidence, does not merit argument. Moreover, human nature profoundly rejects any such claim.

Those who associated partners with God, and argued very strongly against the Prophet and his message, could not falsify the argument of their own nature when they were confronted with the universal proof of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Hence, they did not hesitate in their reply to the question: 'Who has created the heavens and the earth?' Their answer was clear: 'God.' Therefore, God directs His Messenger to comment on their answer thus: "*Say: All praise is due to God alone.*" (Verse 25) Praise is due to God for keeping the truth of the universe and its creation clear in human nature. The argument is discontinued so as to give a new comment: "*Yet most of them do not understand.*" (Verse 25) It is because they do not understand that they continue to argue, ignoring the logic of human nature and the fact that the whole universe points to its supreme Creator.

The *sūrah* adds a statement of God's ownership of all that is in the heavens and the earth, whether it is made available to man or not. He is in no need of anything in the heavens or the earth. He is praised even though people may not praise Him: "*To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 26)

This presentation concludes with a scene of the universe which symbolizes God's inexhaustible riches, and unlimited knowledge. It further expresses His supreme and ever-renewing ability to create and His unrestricted will:

> *Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all.* (Verses 27-28)

This scene is taken straight from people's limited knowledge and observations, but aims to put before them the meaning of God's ever- renewing will which is neither limited nor restrained. Their minds cannot visualize this concept without such a comparison. People record their knowledge and speeches, and sign their orders, using pens, which used to be made of reed, and ink which hardly filled an inkpot or a bottle. The comparison drawn here shows them that if all the trees on earth were made into pens, and all the seas were made into ink this would still be

insufficient to describe God's inexhaustible might. Furthermore, even if this sea of ink was given supplies with seven more seas, while scribes sat to record God's words that speak of His knowledge and will, it would still be insufficient. All the pens, ink, trees and seas will be used up and exhausted, while God's words will not end. It is a case where what is finite is faced with the infinite. No matter how huge the finite is, it will come to an end, while the infinite remains undiminished. God's words will not finish, not ever, because His knowledge is unlimited and His will unrestricted.

Trees, seas, living creatures, objects, and situations all come to an end. The human heart stands in awe before God's majesty, which is endless, unchanging: *"God is indeed Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 27)

Then comes the final note in this section, using the previous image as evidence confirming the ease with which God creates and the simplicity with which He brings the dead back to life: *"The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28) The will that creates simply by willing the creation to take place does not see any difference between creating one or many. This will does not exert any measurable effort in creating an individual, and such an effort is not repeated with the creation of every individual. Hence, creating one and creating millions are exactly the same. Likewise is their resurrection. It is only the word, or the will: *"When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, 'Be', and it is."* (36: 82) With the knowledge that accompanies creation and resurrection come the reckoning and fair reward: *"God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28)

God the Truth

The fourth presentation tackles the same issue addressed in the previous three, stating that God is the truth while all those they invoke beside Him are false. It speaks of addressing worship purely to God alone and of the Day of Judgement when neither parent nor child can avail the other. Several psychological influences are brought to bear here against a universal background:

> *Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great.* (Verses 29-30)

The scenes of the night passing into the day and the day passing into the night, as well as their shortening and increase in length with the different seasons are indeed

remarkable. However, our long familiarity with them makes most of us oblivious to this wonder that occurs regularly, without fail or disturbance. It follows a regular cycle that never deviates from its set pattern. It is only God who can initiate such a system and maintain it. To appreciate this fact needs no more than observation of this unfailing cycle.

The relation of this cycle to the sun, the moon, their regular movements and their being made subservient is an even greater wonder than the day and night, their shortening and increase in length. No one could do this other than God Almighty. It is He who knows and determines how long they will continue to follow this cycle, until the time He has appointed. Another truism is added to these two universal facts in the same verse: "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 29) Thus, the three are cited together as closely-linked, indisputable facts. This is followed by a comment stating the great truth upon which all facts are based. It is the central theme of this *sūrah,* which is preambled by this evidence: "*Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great.*" (Verse 30)

This accurate, balanced, coherent and unfailing universal system functions by the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth and that whatever else people may invoke is false. This is the great truth upon which is based every other truth, and by which the whole universe fulfils its existence. That God — limitless is He in His glory — is the Ultimate Truth means that it is He who brings the universe into existence, maintains it, conducts its affairs, guarantees its stability and coherence for the length of time He chooses.

"*Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth.*" (Verse 30) Everything else changes and alters, increases and decreases, is subject to strengthening and weakening, flourishing and withering. Everything else comes into existence and goes out of it, but God alone is Eternal, unchanging, subject to no transformation or alteration.

Yet there remains in my mind something I have not expressed about the statement: "*Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth.*" It is something that cannot be communicated in words; something which is not in my power to express; something I feel strongly in my heart, yet human language cannot put into words. The same is true of the last statement in this verse: "*God alone is Most High, Great.*" (Verse 30) Indeed, no one else is high or great. Have I said anything about what works inside me about this Qur'ānic statement? I feel that any human expression of these sublime truths detracts from them. Indeed, the Qur'ānic expression is uniquely inspiring.

The *sūrah* follows this great universal scene and the inspiring statement that

follows it by drawing a familiar image in human life. It paints a picture of ships sailing across the sea by God's grace. It puts the unbelievers face to face with human nature when it encounters the dangers of the sea, when no power or arrogance is of any use:

> *Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them falter [between faith and unbelief'. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers.* (Verses 31-32)

Ships sail through water in accordance with the laws of nature God applies to the sea, wind, the earth and the skies. Since He has created all these and given them their respective qualities, He thus enables the ships to sail through the sea without sinking to the bottom or standing still. Should these qualities be disturbed in any way, the ships will not be able to traverse the waters. If disturbance occurs in the density of seawater, or the substances from which the ships are made, or air pressure at water surface, or the water currents, or the wind, or if the temperature goes beyond the level that keeps water in its present form and maintains the water currents and winds at suitable levels, ships would not be able to so sail the seas. But beyond all this, it is God who keeps ships floating on the surface, protecting them against strong waves, tempests and severe weather conditions. None other than God can keep them afloat. They move by God's grace and blessing, carrying some aspects of God's grace and His blessings. The Qur'ānic statement includes both meanings.

"So that He might show you some of His signs." These are obvious, available for all to see and contemplate. Anyone can see them. There is no ambiguity or confusion about them. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 31) These are two conditions that are frequently experienced in life.

People however are neither patient nor grateful. When harm afflicts them, they raise their voices with prayer. When God lifts harm from them, only a few are truly grateful. *"When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone."* (Verse 32) In the face of such danger, with the waves engulfing them from all sides, and their ships rocking in the angry sea, hearts and souls shed their assumed and delusive power which, in times of ease and comfort, might shield their true nature, severing its links with its Creator. Yet when all masks are torn and human nature emerges from behind its blinding covers, it acknowledges its Lord and

turns to Him in true submission. It abandons all alleged partners, declaring them false. At such moments of danger, people call to God in earnest, with sincere faith in Him and His oneness.

But *"as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude."* (Verse 32) Security and comfort do not drive them back to carelessness. They remain mindful of God's bounty and give thanks for it, but they do not do enough to fulfil their duties towards God in thanksgiving. In other words, they are restrained in their thanks.

There are others who deny God's signs once danger is over and security is again felt. *"Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers."* (Verse 32) Both treachery and unbelief are here described in superlative terms that are nevertheless true of anyone who disbelieves after having seen all the universal indications and listened to the clear arguments about human nature.

The Lure of Comfortable Living

Drawing on the great danger presented by a stormy sea and how it puts things into perspective, the *sūrah* then reminds them of an even greater danger, in comparison with which the danger of the sea appears ever so small. This is the danger of the day when all relations are severed, parents and children are separated and preoccupied with their own positions; when each soul stands on its own, without support, unable to call upon anyone for help:

> *Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you.* (Verse 33)

The horror described here is psychological, measured by its effect on hearts and souls. Nothing severs blood relations and ties between parent and child, and nothing makes everyone preoccupied solely with their own positions unless it be a fear totally unknown to people. The call to fear God, therefore, comes here at the right time, when people are ready to respond. The issue of the hereafter is presented against the background of such great horror so that hearts will listen.

"God's promise is most certainly true." (Verse 33) It will never fail. There can be no avoidance of this very difficult situation. No one can escape the accurate reckoning and the fair reward, when none can avail another of anything.

"*Let not, then, the life of this world delude you.*" (Verse 33) It is full of lure, luxury and comfort, but it is limited in duration, and it is only a test to determine the eventual reward. "*And let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you.*" (Verse 33) Let no comfort, work, or interest delude you. Above all, let no devil tempt you, for there are many devils, such as money, science, life, power, authority, desire, fancy and passion. Each has its own lure and temptation which can be very deluding. Fear of God and remembrance of the Day of Judgement, however, should be enough to protect believers from all such temptations.

Knowledge Absolute

At the end of this fourth presentation, which completes the *sūrah,* a final note is given, one which is both powerful and awesome. It describes God's perfect and comprehensive knowledge contrasting this with our own limited, human knowledge. It states the question discussed throughout the *sūrah,* in its four sections, and presents all this in one of the most wonderful images drawn in the Qur'ān:

> *Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things.* (Verse 34)

God Almighty has chosen to keep the knowledge of the Last Hour to Himself; none knows it other than Him. Thus people will always remain cautious, expecting its arrival at any time, trying to be ready for it. They know that there is no time to lose in preparing for its arrival.

It is God who sends down rain in accordance with His wisdom, and in the measure He chooses. People may know by experience and measurement that rain is due, but they cannot create the conditions that bring rain about. The Qur'ānic statement makes clear that it is God who sends down the rain, as it is He who initiates the universal conditions that form and regulate it. Thus, what is exclusive to God in this respect is the ability to send down the rain, as is made clear in the text. Scholars who have included rain among matters that belong exclusively to God's knowledge are mistaken. Yet God's knowledge is true, complete, comprehensive and permanent in all matters. It is not liable to increase or decrease.

"*He knows what the wombs contain.*" (Verse 34) This is exclusive knowledge similar to that of the Last Hour. It is God alone who knows, with absolute certainty, what wombs contain at every moment and in every stage, how they swell or shrink, what type of foetus, even when it has no shape, form or size. He knows whether it is a

male or a female, even at the moment when no one can have any knowledge of this, at the time when the female egg is fertilized. He further knows the features the foetus will have, its characteristics and future abilities. All this is part of God's exclusive knowledge.

"Whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow." (Verse 34) No one knows what will happen to them tomorrow: good or bad, benefit or harm, ease or hardship, health or sickness, obedience to God or disobedience. 'Earning' is far more general than material gain. It applies to everything that happens to a person tomorrow, which is kept hidden under thick covers. People may try to discover this, but they will always fail, remaining unable to discern anything beyond those covers.

Similarly, *"No one knows in what land they will die."* (Verse 34) Such knowledge is kept behind thick blinds which cannot be penetrated by hearing or seeing.

As human beings we stand before these covers acknowledging our weakness and limited knowledge. Thus, the arrogance of assumed, penetrative knowledge is thus seen for what it is. We realize that, compared with what is withheld from us, our knowledge is indeed limited. Even when human knowledge achieves all that it can, there remains a great deal about which we do not know. We will always remain blind to what happens tomorrow, or even in the next moment. With such realization, humans should reduce their arrogance and submit to God.

The *sūrah* presents these highly effective notes against an expansive backdrop of time and place, the present, the near future, the great realm that lies beyond our perceptions, our thoughts and imaginations. This background includes the Last Hour that seems so distant, rain which originates far away, wombs and their hidden contents, what is earned tomorrow which is close in time yet remains unknown, and our place of death and burial which is driven away in our thoughts. Although the background is expansive, the Qur'ānic style gathers it from its broad perspective so that it comes close and points to God's hidden knowledge. Thus we stand as though we try to look through a peephole, but find it blocked. Should even a tiny opening be made in it, what is behind is in the same position as what is before it. It remains closed to man because it is beyond human ability and knowledge. It continues to belong exclusively to God. None knows anything about it except by His permission and according to the measure He determines. *"God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things."* (Verse 34)

Thus the *sūrah* concludes and we feel that it has taken us on a very long journey to distant worlds and horizons. Our hearts return in a slow move after traversing such great distances. Our minds are heavy with thought and reflection on what we have seen of worlds beyond worlds. Yet it is a *sūrah* made of just 34 verses. All glory belongs to God, the Creator of hearts. He has bestowed this Qur'ān on us which heals

hearts, provides guidance and brings mercy to believers.

SŪRAH 32

Al-Sajdah

(The Prostration)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* a Makkan revelation, presents the great faith which the Qur'ān wants human nature never to overlook. This is the faith based on submission to God, the One, the Creator of life, man and the universe, who conducts all affairs and controls all beings, wherever they are. It also requires belief in Muhammad's message to whom the Qur'ān has been bestowed from on high to guide people to their Lord. Another essential ingredient of this message is belief in resurrection, reckoning, judgement and reward.

Indeed all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah deal with this main issue, but each has its own approach and uses its own special effects. Nonetheless, all converge to address the human heart with the knowledge of the One who knows all, including what hearts and minds may harbour and conceal. He further knows the nature of hearts, what affects them, how they feel and react in all situations.

This *sūrah* deals with this issue of faith in a totally different way to that followed in the preceeding *sūrah,* Luqmān. It presents the whole issue in its opening verses, while the rest of the *sūrah* provides notes and touches that awaken hearts and souls, calling for contemplation and reflection. It also provides evidence and proof derived from what is in the universe, and the origins of man and how he develops. It presents scenes from the Day of Judgement which are full of life, and it refers to the fates of earlier communities whose ruins provide further evidence if only people would contemplate this.

The *sūrah* draws pictures of believers and how they worship and aspire to meet

their Lord, contrasting these with stubborn unbelievers. It shows the end of both groups and their rewards as though this is taking place now before our very eyes.

In this way, the *sūrah* presents the human heart with what it needs to reflect, contemplate, fear the consequences of, aspire to and hope for. It warns, persuades and convinces. At the end, it leaves man to choose his way and await his destiny having been given all the information and guidance it needs to make an enlightened choice.

In its presentation of this great issue, the *sūrah* can be divided into four or five related sections. It begins with the three separate letters, *Alif, Lām, Mīm,* to indicate that the revealed book is composed of letters like these. It removes all doubt about its being revealed by God *'the Lord of all the worlds.'* (Verse 2) It poses a rhetorical question that wonders at the unbelievers' claim that the Qur'ān was invented by the Prophet. It follows this with an assertion that it is the truth revealed to him so that he can warn his people in the hope *"that they may be guided."* (Verse 3) This is the first issue of faith: the issue of revelation and the fact that the Prophet tells the truth as he delivers the message of the Lord of all the worlds.

The *sūrah* then speaks about Godhead and its manifestations in the universe: the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is in between them, control of the universe, how matters in the heavens and the earth are conducted, the reference of all things to Him on the Day of Judgement, as well as the creation of man — his origin, stages of development, and his acquisition of sight, hearing and understanding. Yet rarely do people give thanks. This is the second issue, detailing attributes of the Godhead: creation, control, kindness, benefaction, knowledge, mercy and grace. They are all mentioned in the verses speaking about creation.

The third issue is that of resurrection and destiny. The *sūrah* provides a firm answer to the unbelievers' doubts about being resurrected after having been buried and lost in the earth: *"They say: What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?"* (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* then presents a scene from the Day of Judgement *"when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord."* (Verse 12) At that time they will declare their certainty of the hereafter and their belief in the truth of the Islamic message. They will say the word which, had they said it in this life, would have opened up for them the gates of heaven. However, in their position on that day it is of no use to them. This scene is shown so that, perchance, it will encourage them to say this word now.

In juxtaposition with this miserable image, the *sūrah* shows the believers in this life who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, *"fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never*

arrogant; who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them." (Verses 15-16) This is an inspiring image, followed by another showing what God has prepared for such believers of happiness that exceeds all that people can imagine: *"No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do."* (Verse 17) The *sūrah* then shows briefly the fates of believers and unbelievers, in heaven and hell respectively. It warns the wrongdoers about God's punishment on earth, prior to their more severe punishment in hell.

Then follows a reference to Moses and the unity between his message and that of Muhammad (peace be upon them both). It shows how the believers among his people persevered in advocating the divine faith in the face of adversity. It mentions that God made them leaders because of their perseverance. This reference gives a clear message to the advocates of Islam to remain patient in adversity and to persevere despite all the opposition they face.

The *sūrah* then takes us on a quick round of the fate of earlier communities and how they used to go about their business, oblivious to the truth. It also shows us how dead land is brought to life when rain falls over it. In this way, the two contrasting images of ruin and life are depicted side by side in just a few lines. The *sūrah* then concludes by reporting on their question: *"When will this judgement be."* (Verse 28). This is asked to express doubt about the day when warnings will come true. The answer given warns them of the grievous suffering that this day brings. The Prophet is also directed to leave them to their inevitable and sorry fate.

1
The Main Issues of Faith

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ مِن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢﴾

The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds. (2)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۚ بَلْ هُوَ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّآ أَتَىٰهُم مِّن نَّذِيرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it?' It is indeed the truth from your Lord, so that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided. (3)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِى سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ۖ مَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا شَفِيعٍ ۚ أَفَلَا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤﴾

God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and established Himself on the Throne. You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you. Will you not, then, reflect? (4)

يُدَبِّرُ ٱلْأَمْرَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ يَعْرُجُ إِلَيْهِ فِى يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُۥٓ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ ﴿٥﴾

He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning. (5)

ذَٰلِكَ عَٰلِمُ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ٦

ٱلَّذِيٓ أَحۡسَنَ كُلَّ شَيۡءٍ خَلَقَهُۥۖ وَبَدَأَ خَلۡقَ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنِ مِن طِينٖ ٧

ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسۡلَهُۥ مِن سُلَٰلَةٖ مِّن مَّآءٖ مَّهِينٖ ٨

ثُمَّ سَوَّىٰهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِهِۦۖ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرَ وَٱلۡأَفۡـِٔدَةَۚ قَلِيلٗا مَّا تَشۡكُرُونَ ٩

وَقَالُوٓاْ أَءِذَا ضَلَلۡنَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَءِنَّا لَفِي خَلۡقٖ جَدِيدِۢۚ بَلۡ هُم بِلِقَآئِ رَبِّهِمۡ كَٰفِرُونَ ١٠

۞ قُلۡ يَتَوَفَّىٰكُم مَّلَكُ ٱلۡمَوۡتِ ٱلَّذِي وُكِّلَ بِكُمۡ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمۡ تُرۡجَعُونَ ١١

وَلَوۡ تَرَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ نَاكِسُواْ رُءُوسِهِمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ رَبَّنَآ أَبۡصَرۡنَا وَسَمِعۡنَا فَٱرۡجِعۡنَا نَعۡمَلۡ صَٰلِحًا إِنَّا مُوقِنُونَ ١٢

Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful, (6)

who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay; (7)

then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; (8)

then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you grateful! (9)

They say: 'What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?' Nay, they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord. (10)

Say: 'The angel of death who has been given charge of you will gather you, and then to your Lord you will be brought back.' (11)

If you could but see when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord and say: 'Our Lord! We have now seen and we have heard. Return us [to our earthly life] and we will do good

deeds. We are now firm believers.' (12)

وَلَوۡ شِئۡنَا لَأٓتَيۡنَا كُلَّ نَفۡسٍ هُدَىٰهَا وَلَٰكِنۡ حَقَّ ٱلۡقَوۡلُ مِنِّي لَأَمۡلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ ٱلۡجِنَّةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

Had We so willed, We could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: 'Most certainly will I fill hell with jinn and humans all together.' (13)

فَذُوقُواْ بِمَا نَسِيتُمۡ لِقَآءَ يَوۡمِكُمۡ هَٰذَآ إِنَّا نَسِينَٰكُمۡۖ وَذُوقُواْ عَذَابَ ٱلۡخُلۡدِ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

'Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day. We, too, will forget you; and taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did.' (14)

إِنَّمَا يُؤۡمِنُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِّرُواْ بِهَا خَرُّواْ سُجَّدٗا وَسَبَّحُواْ بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّهِمۡ وَهُمۡ لَا يَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ ۩ ﴿١٥﴾

Only they believe in Our revelations who, whenever they are reminded of them, fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never arrogant; (15)

تَتَجَافَىٰ جُنُوبُهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡمَضَاجِعِ يَدۡعُونَ رَبَّهُمۡ خَوۡفٗا وَطَمَعٗا وَمِمَّا رَزَقۡنَٰهُمۡ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them. (16)

فَلَا تَعۡلَمُ نَفۡسٞ مَّآ أُخۡفِيَ لَهُم مِّن قُرَّةِ أَعۡيُنٖ جَزَآءَۢ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do. (17)

أَفَمَن كَانَ مُؤۡمِنٗا كَمَن كَانَ فَاسِقٗاۚ لَّا يَسۡتَوُۥنَ ﴿١٨﴾

Is, then, the one who is a believer to be compared to one who is wicked? The two

أَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَلَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتُ ٱلۡمَأۡوَىٰ نُزُلَۢا بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٩

are certainly not equal. (18)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose for an abode in recompense for what they used to do; (19)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ فَسَقُواْ فَمَأۡوَىٰهُمُ ٱلنَّارُۖ كُلَّمَآ أَرَادُوٓاْ أَن يَخۡرُجُواْ مِنۡهَآ أُعِيدُواْ فِيهَا وَقِيلَ لَهُمۡ ذُوقُواْ عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ٱلَّذِي كُنتُم بِهِۦ تُكَذِّبُونَ ٢٠

whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode: whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it, and they will be told, 'Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie.' (20)

وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ ٱلۡأَدۡنَىٰ دُونَ ٱلۡعَذَابِ ٱلۡأَكۡبَرِ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَرۡجِعُونَ ٢١

We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering so that they might return [to the right faith]. (21)

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّن ذُكِّرَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِۦ ثُمَّ أَعۡرَضَ عَنۡهَآۚ إِنَّا مِنَ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ مُنتَقِمُونَ ٢٢

Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them? We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers. (22)

وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَى ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ فَلَا تَكُن فِي مِرۡيَةٖ مِّن لِّقَآئِهِۦۖ وَجَعَلۡنَٰهُ هُدٗى لِّبَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ٢٣

We certainly gave the Book to Moses, so be not in doubt about convergence with it. We made of it guidance for the Children of Israel, (23)

وَجَعَلۡنَا مِنۡهُمۡ أَئِمَّةٗ يَهۡدُونَ بِأَمۡرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُواْۖ وَكَانُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ ٢٤

and We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and

had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command. (24)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ يَفۡصِلُ بَيۡنَهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا كَانُواْ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَ ٢٥

Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ. (25)

أَوَلَمۡ يَهۡدِ لَهُمۡ كَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا مِن قَبۡلِهِم مِّنَ ٱلۡقُرُونِ يَمۡشُونَ فِي مَسَٰكِنِهِمۡۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٍۖ أَفَلَا يَسۡمَعُونَ ٢٦

Do they not reflect on how many a generation We have destroyed before their time, in whose dwelling places they now walk about? In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen? (26)

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ أَنَّا نَسُوقُ ٱلۡمَآءَ إِلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ ٱلۡجُرُزِ فَنُخۡرِجُ بِهِۦ زَرۡعٗا تَأۡكُلُ مِنۡهُ أَنۡعَٰمُهُمۡ وَأَنفُسُهُمۡۖ أَفَلَا يُبۡصِرُونَ ٢٧

Are they not aware that it is We who drive water to dry land devoid of herbage, and with it We bring forth crops of which their cattle and they themselves eat? Can they not see? (27)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلۡفَتۡحُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٢٨

They say: 'When will this judgement be, if you are telling the truth?' (28)

قُلۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡفَتۡحِ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِيمَٰنُهُمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يُنظَرُونَ ٢٩

Say: 'On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite.' (29)

فَأَعۡرِضۡ عَنۡهُمۡ وَٱنتَظِرۡ إِنَّهُم مُّنتَظِرُونَ ٣٠

Therefore, leave them alone, and wait.

They are certainly waiting. (30)

Dispelling All Doubt

> *Alif. Lām. Mīm. The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds-. Do they say: 'He has invented it?' It is indeed the truth from your Lord, so that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided.* (Verses 1-3)

The three separate letters the *sūrah* begins with were well known to the Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. They knew what speech they could compose of them and their like. They knew full well the great difference between their composition and this Qur'ān. It is a wide gulf recognized by any speech expert and anyone who practises putting ideas and meanings into words and sentences. Such a person realizes that the Qur'ānic text has an inherent, subtle power that makes it particularly effective as it addresses people's hearts and minds. No human composition can have any similar effect. This is a fact that cannot be denied. A listener to the Qur'ān will definitely recognize it and interact with it, to the exclusion of all other speech, even though he might not know that what he is listening to is the Qur'ān. Numerous are the examples people of all sorts have experienced, confirming this fact.

The difference between the Qur'ān and what people make up, using letters and sounds is unbridgeable. It is the same as the gulf between God's creation and what people make in any particular field. What is of God's making is distinct and remarkable. It cannot be matched by humans, even in the most mundane of things. Look at the colour distribution in a single flower: it appears like a miracle for even the most skilful of painters in all ages. The same applies to the Qur'ān and what people compose when they use the letters and sounds of language.

"*The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 2) This is a fact no one can deny. All doubt is negated in the middle of the sentence, because this is the essence of the question, and the point the verse wants to make. That it is preceded by the separate letters puts the doubters face to face with the indisputable fact. This book is composed of the like of such letters which they know, yet its construction is superior in every way. They do not deny that

superiority in practice, or when they apply any recognized standards of judging speech.

Every verse, and every *sūrah,* radiates with the subtle and powerful element that gives the Qur'ān its unique character. All people are powerfully influenced by it once they open their hearts and minds to receive its message. Indeed, this phenomenon is more clearly felt the greater the user's education and knowledge of the universe and what it contains. Indeed, the Qur'ān does not just impart a vague momentary effect on people's spiritual feelings. It is rather a permanent and lasting impression that the listener and reader receive. Undoubtedly, though, the import, rhythm and concepts of its verses increases the greater the recipient's knowledge and education, provided that his nature is pure, uncorrupted by personal prejudice or desire. This makes it clear that this Qur'ān is of no human being's composition, and that it is revealed by the Lord of all the worlds.

"Do they say: He has invented it?" (Verse 3) They said it in fact as they stubbornly rejected the divine message. Yet the *sūrah* puts their statement in the form of a rhetorical question that indicates amazement that such a claim should ever be uttered. Everything in Muhammad's history in their midst contradicts their false accusation. Besides, the very nature of the Qur'ān shows it to be false, leaving no room for doubt.

"It is indeed the truth from your Lord." (Verse 3) Its very essence is in complete agreement with nature and what it contains of everlasting truth, as also with what the universe contains of truth. Indeed the truth is reflected in the very nature of the universe, its harmony, consistent and comprehensive system, in the absence of contradiction or collision between its component parts, and in the mutual complementarity of all these. It is the truth, as it rightly expresses the natural laws of the universe as though it was their own verbal expression. It is the truth, as it ensures the existence of a strong link between those who accept its way of life and the universe in which they live. It establishes peace, understanding and cooperation between them and all universal forces. Such believers live in an atmosphere of friendliness with the great expanse that is the universe. That it is the truth is beyond doubt, as human nature responds to its address with ease, repose and affability. Because it is the truth, it allows no contradiction or division when it lays down a complete constitution for human life, taking into account all the resources, talents, desires, needs and requirements of human nature, as well as what may affect it of weakness and shortcomings. It is the truth that does not cause injustice to anyone in this life or the life to come. Indeed it does no injustice to any type of personal ability, power, idea, or action so as to prevent it from taking effect or working naturally, as long as it is in harmony with the great universal truth.

"It is indeed the truth from your Lord." (Verse 3) It does not come from you, but from

your Lord who is the Lord of all the worlds. That the verse uses the formula *'your Lord' is* meant as an honour to the Prophet whom the unbelievers accused of inventing the Qur'ān. It makes clear the close relationship he has with the Lord of the universe. This is the best answer to their wicked accusations. Such an honour and closeness confirm the certainty of the source of revelation, its sound reception, honest and correct delivery.

"*So that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided.*" (Verse 3) The Arabs to whom the Prophet Muhammad was sent had not been sent any messenger before him. History does not know of any Arab messenger of God between Ishmael, the first grandfather of the Arabs, and Muhammad (peace be upon them both). God bestowed this book on him so that he could warn them and that *they may be guided.'* It is hoped that contemporary Arabs would be guided with this book which contains the truth that addresses hearts, minds, souls and nature.

Six Days of Creation

Those whom God's Messenger is ordered to warn were polytheists, people who associated partners with God. Therefore, the *sūrah* explains God's attribute by which they know the truth of Godhead. It also distinguishes who deserves to have this great name, God, and who must never be associated with His status:

> *God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and established Himself on the Throne. You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you. Will you not, then, reflect? He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning. Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful, who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay; then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you grateful!* (Verses 4-9)

Such is God, and such are the effects and indications of Godhead. They are seen all over the universe, felt in the realm that lies beyond human perception, and recognized in the origins of man and the stages of his development. God tells them about these in His true book.

"God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days." (Verse 4) The heavens and the earth and what is in between them refer to the great many creatures about which we know very little, while there is much more which we do not know anything about. They constitute this huge kingdom of unlimited dimensions which fascinates us. We stand speechless, overwhelmed at the accurate design and perfect system that run through it all. It combines this greatness with captivating beauty in which neither sight nor any of our senses finds defect. No one is ever tired of contemplating it. Repetition and familiarity do not detract from its self-renewing appeal. This kingdom includes such a great variety of creatures, with countless races and species, endless shapes, sizes, characteristics, qualities, features and tasks. They are all subject to the same law, coherently fulfilling one great activity, looking up to one source from whom they receive their directives and to whom they submit in complete obedience.

It is God who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Hence, He is the One who deserves this name. Their creation was *in six days,'* and these were certainly not the earth days with which we are familiar. Earth days are a measure of time which results from the revolving of the earth around itself while moving in orbit around the sun. When it completes one round, it completes one 24-hour cycle applicable only to our earth, a tiny little planet when compared to the universe. This time measure only came into existence after the sun and the earth were set in their respective positions. It is also the one most suitable for us who live on this planet.

Of what nature are the six days mentioned in the Qur'ān? This is known only to God, while we cannot define or measure them. They belong to God's days which He describes in the verse that says: *"Well, in your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning."* (22: 47) These six days might have been six epochs which the heavens and the earth went through until they reached their present status; or might have been six stages of creation and formation, or six aeons the length of which is known only to God. They are definitely something different from the earth days which we know. We take them as something belonging to the realm beyond the reach of our perception, which means that we cannot know exactly what they were. Mentioning them serves to remind us of the elaborate planning of God's creation, in accordance with His knowledge, wisdom and perfect creation.

"And established Himself on the Throne." (Verse 4) This expression refers to the fact that God is above all creation. We cannot say anything about the throne, except to take it as a name. The word *istawā,* which is translated as *'established Himself'* is different, as it clearly indicates elevation and exaltation. The Arabic text also uses the word *thumma,* which is the conjunction 'then', but it is clear here that it does not indicate any chronological order, because no change of situation applies to God. He,

limitless is He in His glory, is not in a certain situation, nor does He then move to a new one. This does not apply to God. It is only an abstract order. His exaltation means that His is a level high above that of His creation, and this is expressed in the way the verse is composed.§

With this absolute glory of God, the *sūrah* tells them of the fact that applies directly to them: "*You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you.*" (Verse 4) Who could have? 'Where does such protection come from? It is God who controls the throne, the heavens, the earth and all that is between them. It is He who has created the heavens and the earth and all who live in them. Who, then, can protect or intercede for anyone against His will? *"Will you not, then, reflect."* (Verse 4) It is sufficient to remember this fact and reflect on it for people to acknowledge God and to turn to Him alone, abandoning all else.

In addition to all that has been said about creation and elaborate planning, it is now stated that whatever takes place in the heavens, the earth or in between them will be presented to Him on the Day of Judgement when He will determine their fates: "*He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning.*" (Verse 5) The expressions used here provide a great, broad perspective: *'from the celestial space to the earth.'* Thus, human perception is given an impression that it can contemplate. In fact, the domain of what God regulates and governs is far greater than that of the heavens and the earth. For us, however, it is sufficient that we look at this broad expanse and reflect on the fact that God regulates everything in it when we cannot even imagine the figures of its dimensions.

Everything that has been determined and planned, with its results and consequences, is then put to Him, in His exalted presence, on the day He has determined for reviewing the results of actions, words, objects and living creatures. It is "*a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning.*" (Verse 5) Nothing of this is created in vain or abandoned or neglected. All run their course in accordance with God's design to an appointed time. They all "*ascend to Him,*" because everything and every position and stage is below that of God Almighty. Hence they ascend or are raised to Him, by His permission, when He wills.

Perfection of Creation

"*Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful.*" (Verse 6) The Creator who regulates everything is the One who knows everything, whether absent or present. He is in

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

complete control of all creation, and He is able to accomplish what He wills. But He is also Most Merciful in what He wills and plans for His creation.

"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates." (Verse 7) My Lord! This is indeed the truth as we see and feel with our eyes, hearts and minds. This is the truth apparent in the shapes and functions of all things; in their individual natures, and in their harmony, complementarity, forms, different situations and actions, and in all that to which excellence applies.

All glory to Him. Such is His making that we *see* clearly in all creation. It reflects excellence and perfection. Nothing is made in excess and nothing falls short. Instead, complete perfection is maintained throughout, in size, shape, form and function. Nothing goes beyond the limit of perfect harmony, or takes place ahead of, or later than its proper time. Everything, from the tiny particle to the largest things, from the single cell to the most complex of bodies, reflects excellence and perfection. The same applies to actions, stages and events, which are all created by God. They take place in accordance with an elaborate plan, at the time and in the place and space determined for them. It all fits within the overall plan made for this existence from its beginning to its end.

Every creature, everything is brought into existence for a purpose. It is made for that purpose and given all the qualities and characteristics that enable it to fulfil that purpose. Indeed, a single cell is equipped to do its functions; a worm is given many legs, or capillaries, softness and flexibility so that it can move along without difficulty. Look at a fish, a bird, a reptile, an animal, and look at man, planet, star, and celestial bodies. Reflect on their accurate cycles and controlled movements. Look at anything and everything, wherever your eyes can stretch. You will find that everything is made with excellence and perfection.

An open eye, an alert feeling and a receptive heart see beauty and excellence in this existence as a whole and in its every component part. Reflection on God's creation, wherever we look or think, gives us a complete range of beauty where everything is in harmony. When we so appreciate God's great and beautiful creation we are indeed imbued with a sweet happiness. We look at aspects of perfection and excellence in everything we see, hear and encounter. What is more, this relates directly to the beauty of what God makes throughout the universe.

Our hearts and minds cannot appreciate any aspect of such beauty and happiness, however, unless we shed our sense of familiarity and listen to the music the universe produces. We need to look by the light God has given us so that things reveal the beauty inherent in them as a result of His making. We also need to remember God whenever we see any of His beautiful creation, so that we feel the link between the Creator and creation. This enhances our appreciation of beauty, because we see

beyond everything God's own beauty and majesty.

The beauty of the universe is inexhaustible. We can appreciate and enjoy it without restriction, as much as we can or wish. This is indeed what God, the Creator of the universe, wants us to do.

This element of beauty in the universe is deliberate. The excellence of creation is such that the perfect functioning of everything generates immense beauty. Moreover, such perfect make-up is then reflected back in a beautiful image of every individual and every creature. Look at a bee, a flower, a star, the night, the dawn, shadows, clouds, and appreciate the music that plays throughout the universe. Such harmony allows no deviation or crookedness.

The Qur'ān directs our attentions to this incomparable beauty so that we contemplate what we see and thus enjoy it. This is achieved through the statement: *"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates."* (Verse 7) We are thus invited to look for beauty and excellence throughout the universe.

Genes and Evolution

"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay." (Verse 7) One aspect of His excellent creation is the fact that man's creation was begun from clay. The phraseology of this verse allows it to be understood as meaning that the clay was present at the beginning, in the first stage. No mention is made of the number, length or duration of the stages that followed this initial clay stage. Hence, the door is open for any accurate study, particularly when we join this statement to the one in *Sūrah* 23, The Believers, which says: "*Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay.*" (23: 12) This statement allows the understanding that there was some sequence in the stages of human creation going back to the clay one.

This may be a reference to the start of the first living cell on earth, meaning that it started from clay, and which was prior to God breathing life into it. No one has unfathomed this secret yet: what it is or how it happened. It is from the living cell that man originated. The Qur'ān does not mention how this took place, or how long it took to be accomplished, or how many stages it had to go through. Therefore, it is open to investigation. Such investigation, however, is by no means contrary to the accurate Qur'ānic statement that man's first origin was clay. Within these limits we can safely say that we rely on the definitive Qur'ānic statement and accept the result of proper scientific investigation.

It is appropriate to refer here to Darwin's theory of evolution which claims that all species have originated from one-cell organisms and progressed in consecutive stages up to that of man. It also claims that the stages of evolution are continuous,

making man's immediate ancestor a species of animal that is more advanced than the chimpanzee but lower than man. This theory is wrong on this point. The discovery of genes and chromosomes — which Darwin did not know about — makes progress from one species to another impossible. Every cell carries genes that preserve the distinctive characteristics of every species, and make it inevitable that it stays as a separate species, with no movement from one species to another. This means that cats will remain cats forever. The same applies to dogs, cows, horses, apes and man. According to genealogists, all that can happen is progress within the same species, but not to a different one. This invalidates the major part of Darwin's theory which people thought at one stage to be scientifically indisputable. How deluded they were!

The Making of Man

"Then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid." (Verse 8) This is a reference to semen, the fluid that represents the first stage of the foetus, going on to become a clinging cell mass, then an embryo that soon acquires bones and organs before the foetus reaches its complete form. It is a great journey when we consider the extraordinary development that this tiny drop of humble fluid goes through until it becomes a human being with perfect shape and constitution. The gulf between the first and the final stages is great indeed. This is expressed in the Qur'ān in a single verse: *"Then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts."* (Verse 9)

It is indeed a great miracle, but people are often heedless of it. How far removed is that tiny drop of fluid from the creature it develops into. No power could have done this other than God who directs the single cell along its way of growth and development to make such a highly complex creature.

Initially, one cell divides and multiplies. What happens then is a great diversification of cells with different natures and functions. Each multiplies so that each group of cells forms a particular organ with a specified function. This same organ incorporates parts with special functions and different natures, formed by more specialized cells. Once more, how does such division and multiplication happen, within the first single cell, producing such great diversity? Where were the characteristics and qualities that subsequently emerge in every group of specialized cells in relation to the first cell? Where were the distinctive qualities of the human foetus, rather than any other type of foetus? And where were those that distinguish every particular individual among all human foetuses? Where were those qualities that preserve all that appears later in each foetus of potentials, special functions and distinctive features for the rest of its life? Who could ever have thought that this miracle could happen, except for the fact that it did happen, and continues to happen

all the time?

It is God that has made man and breathed of His spirit into him. This is the only explanation for this miraculous event. It is that breath of divine spirit that makes that biological entity a human being with hearing, sight and understanding, and which distinguishes it from all other biological entities: "*Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts.*" (Verse 9) Any other explanation of this miraculous event that fills us with wonder is inadequate. Despite all this, people are often ungrateful: "*Yet seldom are you grateful!*" (Verse 9)

In the light of this first miraculous creation of man and its miraculous progress, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' objections and doubts about resurrection. These now sound extremely singular: "*They say: 'What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?' Nay, they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord.*" (Verse 10)

They cannot imagine that God will create them anew after they have died and become part of the earth. What is strange about this when compared to the first creation? God started man's creation from clay, which means that its origin goes back to the earth in which they claim their bodies will decompose and be lost. Indeed, the second creation is akin to the first one, with nothing strange about it. Yet the fact is that "*they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord.*" (Verse 10) It is such denial that makes them entertain doubts and objections to something true and clear. After all, something akin to it occurs at every moment. Therefore, their objections are answered with a statement making clear that they will die and be resurrected. The practical proof of the first creation is more than enough: "*Say: The angel of death who has been given charge of you will gather you, and then to your Lord you will be brought back.*" (Verse 11) This is given as a confirmed piece of news. Who though is the angel of death? How does he gather people's souls? This is something that belongs to the realm beyond our perception, which is known to God alone. From Him we receive only accurate information. We can add nothing to what we receive from this source.

Shameful Admission

Since they object to the very concept of resurrection, and express doubts about coming back to life, the *sūrah* raises before their eyes a scene of the Day of Judgement which is full of life and movement. Moreover, it reports its dialogue as if it was taking place now:

> *If you could but see when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord and say: 'Our Lord.' We have now seen and we have heard. Return us [to our earthly life] and we will do good deeds. We are now firm believers. Had We so willed, We*

> *could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: Most certainly will I fill hell with j inn and humans all together. 'Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day. We, too, will forget you; and taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did.'* (Verses 12-14)

This is a scene of shame, one wherein they acknowledge their error and admit the truth that they once denied. They now declare their certainty of what they used to doubt, and request a return to the earth to put right what they did wrong. They hang their heads in shame as they stand before their Lord whom they denied they would ever meet. All this happens, however, when it is too late, when no admission or declaration is of any use.

Before the *sūrah* gives the answer to their humble request, it states the facts that apply to the whole situation and which determine people's fates: "*Had We so willed, We could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: Most certainly will I fill hell with* j inn *and humans all together.*" (Verse 13)

Had God so willed, He could have made all mankind follow only the way of His guidance, just like He did with creatures that are guided by an inspiration latent in their natures and who follow one way throughout their lives, such as insects, birds and animals, or like creatures who can only obey God, such as the angels. God has willed, however, that man should have a special nature with the propensity to follow either sound guidance or error. He has equipped man with the ability to choose either course. He can fulfil his role in the universe with this special nature God has given him within the overall system He has devised. Or, he will not. Hence, He has recorded His will to fill hell with *jinn* and humans who choose the path of error.

Those evildoers who stand in front of God, hanging their heads are among those upon whom God's word shall be fulfilled. They will be told: "*Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day.*" (Verse 14) The reference here is to the Day of Judgement, but it is described as this present day, as if we are looking at its scenes now. They are made to taste the suffering because they forgot this day and neglected to prepare for it when they had all the time they needed to do so. Taste it because "*We, too, will forget you.*" (Verse 14) Needless to say, God does not forget anyone, but they are treated like people who have been forgotten. They are humiliated and abandoned.

"*And taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did.*" (Verse 14) The curtains are drawn and the final word has been said. The guilty evildoers are left to their abject fate. The reader feels as he passes these verses *as* if he has left them behind where they are looking fixedly at what awaits them.

Getting Up for Worship

The next scene now imparts a different feeling, aura and fragrance. It is so pleasant that hearts warm to it. It is an image of believers in their devotion, showing their humility before their Lord, praying to Him with awe in their hearts, hoping for His mercy and grace. He has in store for them a reward that they cannot imagine, no matter how they try.

> *Only they believe in Our revelations who, whenever they are reminded of them, fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never arrogant; who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them. No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do.* (Verses 15-17)

This is a pleasant image of believing souls which are so gentle and sensitive. They are sincere in the devotion they address to God alone. No arrogance or pride creeps into their hearts. They receive God's revelation with interest and acceptance, eager to understand and act on them. When these believers are reminded of God's revelations, they *"fall down prostrating themselves in adoration."* (Verse 15) They are keenly influenced by what they are told, glorify God and feel His majesty. Hence, their first reaction is to fall down prostrating themselves. This is the best expression of their feelings, putting their foreheads on the ground in adoration. With this physical gesture, they *"extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise."* They are never arrogant. Their response is genuine, expressing their true feelings of God's glory.

The *sūrah* then describes their physical attitude and inner feelings in a vivid expression that brings the movement and the feeling before our eyes: *"[They] drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope."* (Verse 16) They stand up for night prayer, which is the obligatory *`Ishā'* prayer and the *Witr* that follows it, and they add voluntary night prayer and supplication. This is described here, however, as dragging themselves out of beds. Thus we see the beds and their attraction, inviting people to take rest and sleep. Yet those believers do not respond, and make every effort to resist such attraction, because they have something else that preoccupies them. They want to stand before their Lord, in adoration, with feelings of fear and hope present in their minds. They dread disobeying God and long for His help. They fear God's anger and punishment and hope for His mercy and acceptance. All these feelings are brought together before our eyes as they: *"pray to their Lord in fear and hope."* With such sensitivity and devoted, earnest prayer, they do their duty towards the Muslim community, in obedience to God: *"And who are charitable with what We provide for them."* (Verse 16)

This splendid, glorious image is accompanied by another one showing the marvellous and special reward which reflects the special care, honour and generosity God bestows on them: *"No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do."* (Verse 17) This verse suggests that God Himself welcomes these people, and that He takes it upon Himself to prepare the reward He has in store for them. Furthermore, it is He who will give them a warm reception and an honourable position which will delight them. All this though is known to God alone, no one else has any idea of it. It remains with Him until it is shown to those who will be given it when they meet Him. What a splendid meeting with the Lord of the universe!

What can we say about God's grace which He bestows in abundance on His servants? Let their deeds, worship, obedience and hopes be as they may, who and what are they to deserve that God, in His majesty, should prepare their reward and give them such abundant care and warm reception? It is all part of God's grace that knows no limit.

The two contrasting images of the humiliated unbelievers and the honoured believers are followed with a summing up of the principle of fair reward. This is what differentiates between those who do good and those who do evil, and their status in this world and in the life to come. This principle makes reward commensurate with action on the basis of absolute justice:

> *Is, then, the one who is a believer to be compared to one who is wicked? The two are certainly not equal. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose for an abode in recompense for what they used to do; whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode: whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it, and they will be told, 'Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie.' We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering so that they might return [to the right faith]. Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them? We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers.* (Verses 18-22)

The believers and the wicked cannot be equal in their natures, feelings or actions. Hence, they cannot have the same reward either in this life or in the life to come. The believers are straight in their nature, looking up to God in what they do, following His code of living. The wicked deviate from the truth, spread corruption on earth, and do not follow His guidance and proper code. No wonder, then, that the roads the two groups take in the life to come should be different. Each will have the reward that fits their actions: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose,"* which will be their dwelling place. These gardens are given to them *"for an*

abode," where they settle. This is "*in recompense for what they used to do."* (Verse 19)

"Whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode." This is where they settle. Needless to say, being homeless is much better than such an abode.

Yet, "*whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it."* This is an image showing repeated attempts to escape and to avoid the burning. Yet, "*they will be told, Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie."* (Verse 20) Thus, rebuke adds to the physical suffering.

Such is the fate of the wicked in the life to come. But they are not left alone until then. God warns them that they may incur punishment in this present life before they suffer the punishment of the Day of Judgement: *"We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering."* (Verse 21) Yet this suffering, which is close at hand, carries with it an aspect of grace. God does not like to expose His creatures to suffering unless they incur such punishment by the actions they do or fail to do, and by being persistent in what incurs punishment. Therefore, God warns them that He will make them suffer in this life "*so that they might return [to the right faith]."* This may, perchance, let their nature wake up. The pain may bring them back to the truth. If they do, then they will avoid the fate of the wicked which we saw earlier.

However, if they continue to turn away when they are reminded of God's revelations and signs, and if they fail to return to the truth after their suffering in this present life, then they are confirmed wrongdoers: *"Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them?"* (Verse 22) In such a situation, they deserve strong retribution both in this life and in the life to come: *"We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers."* (Verse 22) What a serious and fearful warning from God Almighty to those who deserve such punishment.

Lessons of History

The section speaking about the believers and unbelievers, the righteous and the wicked, and the fates of both groups is now complete. The *sūrah* then begins a new section that speaks briefly about Moses and the revelations God gave him to serve as guidance to the Children of Israel, just like the Qur'ān was given to Muhammad to provide guidance to those who believe in God. Both recipients of divine revelations share common principles and a common faith. Choosing those who were patient in adversity among Moses' people to be leaders of their community carries strong implications for the believers, urging them to maintain their firm beliefs and to remain steadfast and patient in adversity. These are the qualities that make them leaders in this life and ensure that they will be established on earth.

> *We certainly gave the Book to Moses, so be not in doubt about convergence with it. We made of it guidance for the Children of Israel, and We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command. Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ.* (Verses 23-25)

The clause, "*so be not in doubt about convergence with it,*" is an interpolation which means to assure the Prophet of the truth that has been given to him. It emphasizes that it is the same truth that Moses advocated as revealed in his book. The two prophets and the two books meet in their advocacy of this truth. This is the explanation I prefer for this clause. Some commentators, however, suggest, that the phrase '*about convergence with it*' means 'about meeting with him', implying the meeting between Moses and Muhammad during the latter's night journey and ascension to heaven. Indeed convergence on the basis of truth and a common faith is the more likely as it serves to reassure the Prophet so that he remains steadfast despite all the opposition and persecution he and his followers encounter. It is also in line with what is stated in the next verse: "*We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command.*" (Verse 24) This implies that if the small group of believers living in Makkah at the time persevered and remained patient in adversity, like those leaders of the Israelites, they would be leaders in the Muslim community. It establishes the characteristics that qualify people to be leaders, namely, patience in adversity and unshakeable faith.

As for the subsequent divergence among the Children of Israel, this is left to God to determine: "*Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ.*" (Verse 25)

Now the *sūrah* takes those who deny the divine message on a round that looks at the fates suffered by earlier communities who took a similar stance: "*Do they not reflect on how many a generation We have destroyed before their time, in whose dwelling places they now walk about? In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen?*" (Verse 26)

What happened to past communities clearly indicates the law God has set in operation with regard to those who deny His message. God's law neither fails nor shows any favouritism. With regard to life, prosperity, weakness and ruin, human communities are subject to constant laws. The Qur'ān alerts us to such consistency and uses the fates of past communities and their ruins as telling reminders to all people so that they reflect and consider. They should be wary lest God's punishment befalls them. Moreover, these past examples are shown as evidence of the permanent validity of God's laws, so that people's understanding and values are raised. No

community or generation would then isolate itself within its own time or location, oblivious of the law that remains consistent throughout life. Still, many overlook the lessons until they face the same fate.

The remains of past communities tell a highly effective story that touches sensitive hearts and alert consciences. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān used to travel by the remains of the peoples of the `Ād and Thamūd, and they saw the ruins of the townships where Lot's people lived. The *sūrah* wonders how these were available to them, and how they pass them by, without feeling the need to avoid a similar fate. It tells them what sort of action is needed to avoid God's punishment: *"In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen?"* (Verse 26) It is indeed right that they should listen carefully to the histories of those communities through whose townships they pass, and that they should listen to the warnings before they are overwhelmed by a similar punishment.

Looking at Life

The *sūrah* then touches their hearts with an image of life as it starts, showing them a barren land before it quickens and life springs out of it. This image provides a contrast with the earlier one showing death and ruin devastating a land that was once full of life:

> *Are they not aware that it is We who drive water to dry land devoid of herbage, and with it We bring forth crops of which their cattle and they themselves eat? Can they not see?* (Verse 27)

They see with their own eyes how God sends water to barren land, and how soon it becomes green, rife with plants and crops which provide food for them and their cattle. This image of a dead land rejuvenated by rain opens closed hearts to look at this beautiful life-force given by the One who causes life to blossom. The feeling that this image leaves is one of closeness to God Almighty who makes all this possible. It is He, and only He, who brings life and beauty to this universe.

We see how the Qur'ān takes our hearts through life and growth after ruin and death. In both situations, it aims to shake off the languid effect of over familiarity. Furthermore, it aims to remove those stifling barriers that prevent us from heeding the lessons of history.

The final section refers to their hastening of the punishment against which they have been warned, and their doubts about the warnings they have been given. They are warned once more against the fulfilment of what they are hastening, when no declaration of belief will be of any benefit. Nor will they be given any respite. The

sūrah concludes with a directive telling the Prophet to leave them to their inevitable fate:

> *They say: 'When will this judgement be, if you are telling the truth?' Say: 'On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite.' Therefore, leave them alone, and wait. They are certainly waiting.* (Verses 28-30)

The judgement referred to here means a decision on the dispute between the two parties and the fulfilment of the promise which they thought would never come true. They could not understand God's purpose in delaying it to the time He appointed for it. Their hastening of it will not change its timing, nor can they escape it.

"*Say: On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite.*" (Verse 29) This is true whether this day occurs in this present life when God takes them as unbelievers, giving them no respite as their belief will be of no benefit, or in the life to come when their appeals for respite are refused. This answer sends a tremor of fear into their hearts. This is then followed with the final note in the *sūrah:* "*Therefore, leave them alone, and wait. They are certainly waiting.*" (Verse 30) This is a clear implicit warning of the consequences of waiting. It is made all the more explicit given the Prophet is told to turn away from them and leave them to their inevitable destiny.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

SAYYID QUṬB

Vol XIV
Sūrahs 33-39

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **VI**

Al-Aĥzāb **1**

Prologue *1*

1 False Relations Abolished *7*
Setting the Scene 8
No False Relations 11
Adoption Abolished 12
Ending Brotherhood 14
The Prophet's Authority 16
A Binding Covenant 18

2 Rallying All Hostile Forces *20*
Overview 23
Difficulties in Abundance 24
An Encounter with Allied Forces 25
The Qur'ānic Report 29
A Test Too Hard 30
Where to Escape Death 33
Inner Feelings Laid Bare 34
The Opposite Image 36
Strengthening Faith 37
The Other Enemy 40
Treachery of Great Magnitude 43

3 Unlike All Women *47*
Overview 48
A Choice is Offered 49
All Were Human 51
A Unique Position 52
Values in Islamic Life 59

4 Fearing Social Reaction *62*
Overview 64
Background Cases 64
Establishing a Principle 66
Zaynab's Marriage 68
From Darkness into Light 71
The Prophet's Role 73

5 Detailed Legal Provisions *75*
Overview 78
Divorce Before Consummation 79
The Prophet's Wives 80
Observing Good Manners 82
Further Instructions and a Warning 85

6 Too Heavy for Mountains *88*
Overview 89
The Timing of the Last Hour 90
Baseless Accusations 92
Man's Weakness 93

Saba' **96**

Prologue *96*

1 Infinite and Accurate Knowledge *102*
Where Praise is Due 103
Why a Judgement Day? 106

2 Contrasting Attitudes *110*
Overview 112
Special Favours for David 112
More Favours for Solomon 113
No Gratitude for God's Favours 116

3 Distinct Ways, Different Ends *120*
Overview 121
The Truth Will Out 121
Either One or the Other 122

4 Futile Argument *125*
Overview 127
The Prophet's Responsibility 128
Stubborn to the Hilt 129
An Ever Repeated Story 131
Who Benefits Whom 133

5 Final Warning *135*
Overview 136
A Man Like You 137
A Search for the Truth 138
The Final Scene 141

Fāţir **143**

Prologue *143*

1 Giving All Grace *146*
The Originator 146
Unrestricted Grace 148
A Personal Experience 151
Who Else? 152

2 The Lurking Enemy *153*
Overview 154
The True Promise 154
The Key to Evil 155

3 Fashioning All Creation *158*
Overview 159
The Source of All Power 160
Man's Creation 162
Different Waters 165
Thus is God 167

4 Individual Responsibility *169*
Overview 170
Replaceable Creation 170
Everyone on Their Own 172

5 Reciters of God's Revelations *176*
Overview 178
Colour in All Creation 178
The Revealed Book 180

6 The Fate of Evil Design ... *184*
Overview ... 185
Lessons to Reflect Upon ... 186
Sustaining the Universe ... 188
If Only... ... 189

Yā Sīn ... **192**

Prologue ... *192*

1 Appeal to Reason ... *195*
A Book Full of Wisdom ... 198
A Historical Case ... 201
Welcome Support ... 204
Killing an Innocent Man ... 206

2 Signs Galore ... *207*
Overview ... 211
A Sorrowful Condition ... 212
Only Look Around ... 212
What Opens Sealed Hearts ... 216
Mercy: the Essential Quality ... 218

3 What Prevents Resurrection? ... *222*
Overview ... 224
No Place for Poetry ... 224
Just the One God ... 225
A Second Life for All ... 227

Al-Ṣāffāt ... **230**

Prologue ... *230*

1 Will You Have a Look? ... *233*
A Sky Adorned with Stars ... 238
Receiving the Message with Ridicule ... 241

2 Abraham's Sacrifice ... *247*
Overview ... 253
The Fate of Noah's People ... 253
Abraham and the Idols ... 254
The Great Sacrifice ... 257
Deliverance ... 260
Abraham's Descendants ... 261
Jonah and the Whale ... 263

3 To Whom Victory is Guaranteed ... *265*
Overview ... 267
Superstitious Beliefs ... 268
An Unfailing Promise ... 269

Ṣād ... **273**

Prologue ... *273*

1 Unjustifiable Reaction ... *276*
Arrogance and Hostility ... 277
A Strange Amazement ... 279

2 Tests for Prophets ... *288*
Overview ... 292
David Ruling in a Dispute ... 292

A Reminder to Grasp ... 296
A Test for Solomon ... 297
The Symbol of Patience in Adversity ... 299
Other Prophets ... 301

3 Contrasting Ends ... *303*
A Quarrel in Hell ... 304

4 Man's First Creation ... *307*
Overview ... 309
A Plain Warning ... 309
How it All Started ... 311

Al-Zumar ... 315

Prologue ... *315*

1 The Diversity of God's Creation ... *319*
Maintaining Sincerity in Faith ... 320
Who Deserves Guidance? ... 322
Three Depths of Darkness ... 324

2 As Comfort Replaces Affliction ... *327*
Overview ... 327
Brief Enjoyment ... 328
It's a Wide Earth ... 329

3 The Losers ... *332*
Overview ... 333
The First to Submit to God ... 333

4 The Best of All Discourses ... *337*
Overview ... 338
Rain Bringing Life ... 339
Two Types of Heart ... 340
Unequal Situations ... 342

5 The People of the Truth ... *344*
Widely Different Rewards ... 344

6 Signs to Reflect Upon ... *347*
Overview ... 350
To Do All in One's Power ... 350
What Intercession? ... 353
As Man Suffers Affliction ... 355

7 The Gates of Mercy ... *358*
Overview ... 359
Mercy Available to All ... 359

8 Driven in Throngs ... *362*
Overview ... 364
False Understanding ... 364
A Majestic Scene ... 366
The Ultimate Destination ... 367

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	ʻ	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:		ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u
Long:		ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū
Diphthongs:				ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH 33

Al-Aĥzāb

(The Confederates)

Prologue

This sūrah describes a practical aspect of the first Muslim community's life over a period stretching from shortly after the Battle of Badr in year 2 to shortly before the signing of the al-Ĥudaybiyah Peace Treaty four years later. In this respect it gives a true and direct description of the Muslim community in Madinah. It refers to many of the events that took place during that period and outlines certain regulations which it either initiates or endorses for the fledgling Muslim community.

The comments on events and regulations are relatively few, constituting only a small portion of the *sūrah.* Indeed, these comments serve only to link these events and regulations to the central concept of faith and submission to God. This is how we read the opening verses: "*Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (Verses 1-4) Early on, the *sūrah* comments on some social regulations: "*This is written down in God's decree. We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muĥammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers.* "*(Verses* 6-8) A little further on we are shown the attitude of the weak-hearted when the confederate tribes laid siege to Madinah: "*Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it he His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support.*" (Verses 16-17) A piece of

social legislation that went against the familiar practice in pre-Islamic days is followed by the comment: *"Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter."* (Verse 36) Finally, we have a statement that sets the human mission against a universal background: *"We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish."* (Verse 72)

The *sūrah* depicts a period of time when the Islamic character of both the community and the state had begun to take shape but had not yet developed sufficiently or acquired its full authority. That took place after Makkah fell to Islam and people began to embrace the new faith in large numbers allowing the Muslim state and its new system to establish their roots.

The *sūrah* undertakes an important part of social reorganization imparting the distinctive Islamic features of family and community life, outlining their basis in Islamic teachings. It also modifies or outlaws certain practices and traditions, bringing all these within the framework of the Islamic concept of life and society.

It is within the overall discussion of these situations and regulations that the confrontation with the confederate tribes and the Qurayżah expedition are discussed. We are informed of the attitudes of the unbelievers, the hypocrites and the Jews during these events, their schemes to weaken the Muslim community and how they always tried to undermine Islamic moral standards, even in Muslim homes. It was precisely this sort of derogatory behaviour that aimed at undermining the Muslim community either through direct military action and a corresponding defeatism or through efforts to erode the social and moral fabric of Muslim society. Moreover, these events left clear marks on the Muslim community to the extent that certain social aspects and particular concepts required modification. Thus the *sūrah* appears to be an integrated unit with a common thread running through its subject matter. Moreover, the time frame around which it works also constitutes a unifying factor.

The *sūrah* begins with a directive issued to the Prophet that he must fear God and pay no heed to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. On the contrary, he should obey God and rely on Him alone. This opening relates all that the *sūrah* includes to the central principle that forms the basis of all Islamic teachings, legislation, its social system and morality. It is the principle that formulates the Islamic concept of God and the requirements to submit to Him, implement the code He has outlined and place all our trust in Him.

A decisive word is then given on certain social traditions and practices. This starts with outlining a basic fact: *"Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verse 4) This alludes to the fact that man cannot live in two different universes or follow two

different systems. Should he do so he would stumble and become a hypocrite. Since he has only one heart, he must look up to One God and follow one system to the exclusion of all other things, familiar and well established as these may be.

The *sūrah* immediately moves on to abolish the practice of *żihār,* which involves a man swearing to his wife that she is to him like his mother's back, meaning that she is as unlawful to him to marry as his mother: "*Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers.*" (Verse 4) It makes clear that these are mere words that cannot establish a fact. They do not make a mother out of a wife; the wife remains the man's wife. It follows this with abolishing the practice of child adoption: "*Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons.*" (Verse 4) Thus inheritance within an adopting family is no longer valid. (We will discuss this in detail later on.) In contrast, the *sūrah* establishes the overall authority God assigns to His Messenger over all Muslims, placing his authority above what they may wish for themselves. It further establishes a sense of motherly relation between the Prophet's wives and all believers: "*The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers.*" (Verse 6) The practical effects of the bond of brotherhood established between Muslim individuals shortly after the migration of Makkan Muslims to Madinah are terminated, so as to restrict inheritance and the payment of blood money to real kinsfolk: "*Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated for God's sake].*" (Verse 6) Thus, earlier temporary measures are abrogated in favour of natural and permanent ones.

The following comment makes clear that the new system derives from the Islamic code and from God's ruling. It is written in God's book and established in the covenant made with all prophets, particularly those of them endowed with stronger resolve. In this way the Qur'ān gives Islamic legislation and principles their appropriate place within people's thoughts and consciences.

This then outlines the first part of the *sūrah.* The second part shows God's great favour as He repelled the attacking forces of the confederates who besieged Madinah. It describes the confrontation with confederate forces and the Qurayżah Expedition vividly, painting successive images that show inner feelings, outward action and dialogue between groups and individuals. Within the overall picture of the battle and its events relevant directives are issued at the proper junctures. Furthermore, the reporting of events is followed by comments aimed at establishing sound values for the Muslim community. The Qur'ānic method is to paint the action exactly as it took place, stating both apparent and inner feelings, and bringing these into sharp relief. It then gives believers its verdict about their actions, criticizing any deviation and praising what is sound and correct. It also gives directives to avoid

error and confirm right practice and values. It relates all this to God's will, human nature and universal laws.

Thus, the discussion of the confrontation and the battle starts with the following verse: "*Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 9) In the middle of the discussion, the following facts are highlighted: "*Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support.*" (Verses 16-17) "*In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God.*" (Verse 21) The discussion is finally concluded thus: "*God will surely reward the truthful for having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 24)

Alongside its discussion of events the *sūrah* shows how the true believers looked at the situation as it developed and portrays the contrasting feelings of the hypocrites. This enables us to distinguish sound values from false ones: "*The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions'.*" (Verse 12) "*When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.' This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God.*" (Verse 22) The outcome is then given in decisive terms: "*God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty.*" (Verse 25)

When this second part is concluded we are introduced to the decision that gave the Prophet's wives a choice. They had asked him for a more comfortable standard of living after the Muslim community became more prosperous, having gained much booty as a result of the siege of Qurayżah. They were asked to choose either the fine things of life or relinquish these in preference for pleasing God and His Messenger and earning a better position in the life to come. They all chose to be with God and His Messenger, preferring this to all worldly riches. They were also told that they would have double the reward if they maintained the path of goodness and remained God-fearing, and double the punishment should they commit any gross indecency. The *sūrah* explains that this doubling of reward and punishment was a result of their noble status, their relation with the Prophet and the revelation and recitation of the Qur'ān in their own homes, as well as the wisdom they received from the Prophet. This third part of the *sūrah* concludes with an outline of the reward given to all believers, men and women.

The fourth part makes an indirect reference to the case of Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, a cousin of the Prophet belonging to a noble Qurayshi family and her marriage to Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, a former slave given as a gift to Muĥammad long before his prophethood. The first thing it says about Zayd makes it clear that all believers, men and women, are subject to God's decision in any matter; they do not even have a say in their own personal business. It is God's will that determines everything, and they have to submit to it fully: *"Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error."* (Verse 36)

This marriage soon ends in divorce and the situation provides a practical example for the abolition of the effects of child adoption. God's Messenger himself is chosen to provide this example, because adoption was a deeply rooted tradition in the Arabian environment, and its practical effects were very difficult to break. Hence, God's Messenger was to bear this new burden as part of his mission to shape the new Muslim society: *"Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. God's will must be fulfilled."* (Verse 37) A clear statement of the nature of the relation between the Prophet and the believer then follows: *"Muĥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets."* (Verse 40)

This part concludes with clear directives to the Prophet and the believers: *"Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 48)

The fifth part begins by making a statement on the status of a woman who gets divorced before the consummation of her marriage. It moves on to organize the Prophet's marital life, stating which women are lawful for him to marry and which are not. This is followed by directives defining the relation between Muslims and the Prophet's homes and wives, both during his lifetime and after his death. It requires them not to mix with any men other than their fathers, sons, brothers, paternal and maternal nephews, other women and their slaves. It states that those who sought to disparage the Prophet and his wives would face severe punishment; they would be punished both in this life and the life to come. This gives us an impression that the hypocrites and others frequently resort to such disparagement.

Then follows a directive to the Prophet's wives, daughters and all Muslim women, to draw some of their outer garments over their bodies. *"This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted."* (Verse 59) It warns the hypocrites and others similar to them that they may be made to evacuate Madinah in a similar way as the two Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā` and al-Naḍīr were made to do, or that they might be dealt with in the same way as the Qurayżah Jews. All this implies that these people

resorted to foul methods to harm the Muslim community in Madinah.

The final part of the *sūrah* mentions that people frequently ask about the Last Hour. Such questions are answered simply by saying that its knowledge belongs to God. They only need to know that it could be very close. This is followed by an image of the punishment meted out on the Day of Judgement. "*On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: 'Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.'*" (Verse 66) It also describes how unbelievers then feel towards their leaders for having led them astray: "*And they shall say: 'Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord! Give double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.'*" (Verses 67-68)

The *sūrah* ends on a highly powerful note that leaves a strong and lasting effect: "*We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verses 72-73)

This conclusion illustrates the heavy burden placed on humanity in general and the Muslim community in particular, since it is this community that shoulders this great trust of faith as well as its advocacy and implementation at individual and community levels. This is in perfect harmony with the particular atmosphere of the *sūrah,* and with the nature of the social system Islam lays down.

1
False Relations Abolished

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ ٱتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ وَلَا تُطِعِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ وَٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ١

Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. (1)

وَٱتَّبِعۡ مَا يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيۡكَ مِن رَّبِّكَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ٢

Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. (2)

وَتَوَكَّلۡ عَلَى ٱللَّهِۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلًا ٣

Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (3)

مَّا جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لِرَجُلٖ مِّن قَلۡبَيۡنِ فِي جَوۡفِهِۦۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ أَزۡوَٰجَكُمُ ٱلَّٰٓـِٔي تُظَٰهِرُونَ مِنۡهُنَّ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمۡۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ أَدۡعِيَآءَكُمۡ أَبۡنَآءَكُمۡۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ قَوۡلُكُم بِأَفۡوَٰهِكُمۡۖ وَٱللَّهُ يَقُولُ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَهُوَ يَهۡدِي ٱلسَّبِيلَ ٤

Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers. Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right

path. (4)

ٱدۡعُوهُمۡ لِأٓبَآئِهِمۡ هُوَ أَقۡسَطُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِۚ فَإِن لَّمۡ تَعۡلَمُوٓاْ ءَابَآءَهُمۡ فَإِخۡوَٰنُكُمۡ فِي ٱلدِّينِ وَمَوَٰلِيكُمۡۚ وَلَيۡسَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ جُنَاحٞ فِيمَآ أَخۡطَأۡتُم بِهِۦ وَلَٰكِن مَّا تَعَمَّدَتۡ قُلُوبُكُمۡۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ٥

Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight. If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your protégés. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (5)

ٱلنَّبِيُّ أَوۡلَىٰ بِٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ مِنۡ أَنفُسِهِمۡۖ وَأَزۡوَٰجُهُۥٓ أُمَّهَٰتُهُمۡۗ وَأُوْلُواْ ٱلۡأَرۡحَامِ بَعۡضُهُمۡ أَوۡلَىٰ بِبَعۡضٖ فِي كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَٱلۡمُهَٰجِرِينَ إِلَّآ أَن تَفۡعَلُوٓاْ إِلَىٰٓ أَوۡلِيَآئِكُم مَّعۡرُوفٗاۚ كَانَ ذَٰلِكَ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ مَسۡطُورٗا ٦

The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers. Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated [for God's sake]. None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree. (6)

وَإِذۡ أَخَذۡنَا مِنَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ مِيثَٰقَهُمۡ وَمِنكَ وَمِن نُّوحٖ وَإِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَى ٱبۡنِ مَرۡيَمَۖ وَأَخَذۡنَا مِنۡهُم مِّيثَٰقًا غَلِيظٗا ٧

We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muḥammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. (7)

لِّيَسۡـَٔلَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ عَن صِدۡقِهِمۡۚ وَأَعَدَّ لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ عَذَابًا أَلِيمٗا ٨

God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers. (8)

Setting the Scene

"Prophet! Have fear of God and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites. God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord; for God is well aware of all that you do. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust." (Verses 1-3) Thus begins the *sūrah* which regulates certain aspects of the social and moral life of the newly born Muslim community. It is a beginning that tells us something about the nature of the Islamic system and its underlying principles. Islam is not merely a set of directives and admonitions, or manners and moral values, or a collection of laws and regulations, or traditions and practices. All these are included in Islam, but they do not make up Islam in its totality. Islam means submission to God's will, a willingness to obey its orders, observe its prohibitions, looking up to no other system and adopting no other way. It is essentially an acceptance that mankind are subject to the overall divine code that governs their life and the earth they live on, as well as other planets and stars, and indeed governs the whole universe including the realms we know nothing about. It is also a certainty that as humans the only choice we should make is to do what God orders, refrain from what He forbids, take what He makes available and await the results He brings about. This is the basic rule on which are then established laws, regulations, traditions, manners and moral values. All these represent the practical manifestation of faith and submission to God. Islam is a faith that lays down a code which puts in place a specific social order. In their close interaction, these three make up Islam.

It is in this light that we should understand that the first directive in this *sūrah,* concerned as it is with the regulation of the Islamic social order, is addressed to the Prophet, requiring him to remain God-fearing. To stand in awe of God and remember that He watches over us, makes us alert, urging us to abide by every rule and implement every directive: *"Prophet! Have fear of God."* (Verse 1)

The second directive prohibits yielding to the unbelievers and hypocrites, following their suggestions or adopting their views and methods: *"and do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites."* (Verse 1) This directive is given before the order to follow God's revelation, which suggests that the pressures brought to bear by the hypocrites and the unbelievers in Madinah and its surrounding area were very strong. Nevertheless this directive remains applicable in all situations, warning the believers against following the hypocrites and the unbelievers, particularly in questions of faith, law and social order. This guarantees for the Muslim community that its system remains pure, unadulterated by directives other than God's.

No one should be deceived by the wealth of knowledge and experience the unbelievers and hypocrites appear to possess, as were some Muslims in periods of weakness and deviation from the Islamic system. It is God who has perfect knowledge and infinite wisdom. The Islamic system is His own choice, established by His knowledge and wisdom: *"God is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 1)

However rich human knowledge and experience appear to be, they are only scanty.

The third direct order given at the outset is: *"Follow what is revealed to you by your Lord."* (Verse 2) This defines the authority that issues directives that must be followed. The phrasing of this directive is particularly inspiring: the revelation is made *'to you'* specifically, and its source is '*your Lord'*, both of which add a specially personal element to the need to follow these orders even though they must be obeyed because they are issued by the One commanding obedience. This verse ends with the comment: *"for God is well aware of all that you do."* (Verse 2) His revelation is based on full awareness of you, your deeds and motives.

The last order in these three opening verses states: *"Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 3) There is no need to worry about others or their scheming against you. You should place all your concerns in God's hands and He will look after them in accordance with His knowledge and wisdom. Trusting to God alone is ultimately what gives us complete reassurance. It helps us to know our limitations and leave what lies beyond our ability to the One who controls and conducts everything.

Thus, along with the instruction to disobey the unbelievers and the hypocrites we have three directives: to always remain God-fearing, to follow His revelation and to place our trust in Him alone. It is these three elements that provide the advocates of Islam with all the resources they need. Furthermore, it clearly defines the system of Islamic advocacy: from God, for God's sake, and relying on God: *"for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 3)

These opening directives end on a strong note that refers to practical situations: *"Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verse 4) Since it is only one heart, it needs one system providing one complete and full concept of life. It requires one standard to give consistent values and judge events and actions. Otherwise, it will be pulled apart and will have different motives and considerations. It could easily fall into the trap of hypocrisy.

Man cannot have one source for his manners and morality, another for his laws and legislation, a third for his social and economic values, and a fourth for his art and philosophy. Such a mixture does not produce a man with a sound heart: it only produces a confused medley that lacks solid form or basis. A person with faith cannot truly hold to his faith and abandon its values and requirements in any situation in life, serious or not. He cannot say a word, take an action, formulate a concept, make a decision unless he remains within the limits established by his faith, which must always be a reality in his life. This is because God has not given him more than one heart, one law and one standard of values. A person of faith cannot say of anything he does: 'I am doing this in my personal capacity and I am doing that

in my Islamic capacity', as we frequently hear politicians, businessmen, academics and others say. Since he is one person with one heart, he has one faith and one standard that govern all that he does and says in any and every situation. With this one heart he lives as an individual, a family man, a member of the community, a citizen of the state and the world; he lives in public and private, employer or employee, ruler or ruled, in situations of comfort or distress; having the same values and standards at all times: *"Never has God put two hearts in one man's body."* (Verse 4)

In short, we have a single system outlined by the same revelations and submitting to the One God. A single heart cannot worship two deities, serve two masters and move in two directions.

No False Relations

The *sūrah* now moves on to abolish certain practices in order to make the family the basis of the community: *"Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers. Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right path. Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight. If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 4-5)

In pre-Islamic days a man would say to his wife, 'you are to me like my mother's back', which meant that she was forbidden for him to marry. From that moment sex between them was regarded as incestuous. Yet she remained suspended: she was neither divorced such that she could marry another man, nor married having a lawful relationship with her husband. This was one aspect of the cruelty to which women were subjected in pre-Islamic days. As Islam started to reorganize social relations, making the family the basic social unit where each new generation grows in a sound environment, it attached great importance to removing such injustices against women and to giving family relations a basis of fairness and an easy, relaxed atmosphere. One of its new laws was *"Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers."* (Verse 4) The words a man utters do not change facts. Mothers and wives are totally different, and the nature of a relationship cannot be changed by the uttering of a word. Therefore, a pronouncement like this, or *żihār,* did not make a wife permanently forbidden to her husband as if she were his mother.

Some reports suggest that *żihār* was outlawed by other verses in *Sūrah* 58, The Pleading, when Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit pronounced *żihār* against his wife Khawlah bint Mālik ibn Tha`labah. She complained to the Prophet, saying: "Messenger of God! He

took my money and used me throughout my years of strength, and I have given him children. Now when I have grown old and can no longer bear children, he makes me like his mother!" The Prophet said to her: "I am afraid you are no longer lawful to him." [Related by Ibn Mājah, al-Ĥākim and al-Bayhaqī]. She repeated her complaint several times. God then revealed the following verses:

> *God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. Even if any of you say to their wives, 'You are to me like my mother's bodies,' they are not their mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This you are enjoined to do, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (58: 1-4)*

Thus, *żihār* is treated as a temporary prohibition of marital relations; it is neither permanent nor a divorce. It must be atoned for by the freeing of a slave, or fasting for two consecutive months, or feeding 60 needy people. When such atonement is made full marital relations can be resumed, retaining the practical facts as they are. The statement in the present *sūrah* is very clear: "*Nor does He make your wives whom you declare to be as unlawful to you as your mothers' bodies truly your mothers.*" (Verse 4) The family is thus safeguarded against this unfair practice, something that represented an aspect of the maltreatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabian society.

Adoption Abolished

Similarly, the practice of adopting a child reflected flaws in the foundation of the family and society. Although chastity was highly valued by the Arabs who, as is widely known, took pride in their ancestry, there were other phenomena that moved in the opposite direction. These were generally accepted, but not in the prominent families and clans. Indeed, some individuals could not tell who their fathers were. Furthermore, if a man liked one of these 'off-spring', he could adopt him, calling him his son, and the two would then inherit each other. The same applied to some people whose real fathers were even known. In this respect, they too could be adopted. This was particularly so with captives, when children or adolescents were taken captive in a raid on a clan or during a war. If a man then wished to adopt such a captive, he

would declare such adoption, and the captive would then be known as a son of his adopting father. He would then enjoy the privileges of being a son and was required to fulfil his duties as a son.

One of these was Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, of the Arab tribe of Kalb. He was taken captive when young in pre-Islamic days, then sold to Ĥakīm ibn Ĥizām who gave him as a gift to his aunt Khadījah. When she was married to the Prophet, she gave him Zayd as a gift, but Zayd's father and uncle appealed to him for Zayd's release. The Prophet then decided to give him a choice, and he chose to remain with the Prophet. Therefore, the Prophet set him free and adopted him as his son. He was then called Zayd ibn Muĥammad. When Islam started several years later, he was the first man to accept Islam from among the lower classes in society.

Subsequently, when Islam began to set family relations on their natural basis and strengthen family bonds, purging these of any distortion, it abolished adoption, making the true blood relation the only cause for a son and father to be so called. Therefore, the Qur'ān states: "*Likewise, He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths.*" (Verse 4) Words can neither change reality nor can they establish a substitute relation to that of blood, which allows for hereditary qualities resulting from conception, pregnancy and birth, and which then allows for natural feelings to be engendered. The fact is that a child is seen as a living part of its natural parents.

"*But God says the truth and He alone shows the right path.*" (Verse 4) God says the absolute truth which admits no falsehood whatsoever. It is only right that family relations should be established on facts of marriage and birth, not on mere words. God indeed shows the right path that is in harmony with sound, undistorted human nature and which cannot be substituted by any man-made system. Needless to say, the word of truth stated by God is far stronger and more solid.

"*Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight.*" (Verse 5) It is only fair that a child should be called by its father's name: it is fair to the father from whom the child comes into existence, and fair to the child to take his father's name, inherit and be inherited by him, cooperate with him and provide a continuation of the lineage that relates him to his ancestors. It is also fair to put everything in its proper place and establish every relation on its natural basis, allowing no child or parent to be deprived of any special or distinctive quality. Moreover, it is only fair that no one other than the natural parent should shoulder the parental responsibility or enjoy its benefit, and no one other than a natural child should have the rights and duties of being a son or daughter.

Islam provides a system which ensures balance in family relations and gives the family a strong and real foundation. At the same time, it gives society a solid

foundation that combines reality with nature. Any system that ignores the natural family is bound to fail, because it is weak and based on forgery.

Since there was much confusion in family relations in pre-Islamic Arabian society, and because of the prevalent sexual permissiveness that led to some family relations being unknown, Islam made things easy, providing certain concessions. For example, should the true father of an adopted child be unknown, the child still had its place in the Muslim community; a relation based on brotherhood in faith and patronage: *"If you do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges."* (Verse 5) This is, then, a moral relation that does not create practical commitments, such as inheritance and sharing in the payment of blood money. In pre-Islamic days, these family commitments were extended so as to apply to relations through adoption. The purpose of creating this moral relation is to give the formerly adopted child a bond in society after the abolition of adoption. The reference in the verse to those adopted children whose fathers were unknown gives us a clear picture of the prevalent confusion in family relations and the loose morality that held sway in pre-Islamic Arabia. Islam put an end to all this by establishing a society on the basis of the family unit which, in turn, is based on real marital and blood relations.

When Muslims have carefully endeavoured to call everyone by their fathers' names, they are not to he blamed for cases where they are unable to establish the true facts: *"You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend."* (Verse 5) This benevolent attitude results from the fact that God forgives and bestows mercy on His servants, and He never charges them with more than they can reasonably do: *"God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 5)

The Prophet placed a strong emphasis on the need to establish real parenthood so that the new Islamic system could put an end to the social chaos that prevailed before Islam. Those who suppress true relations are warned that they could be considered as unbelievers. A report by al-Ṭabarī mentions that Abū Bakr once recited this verse and a man called `Abd al-Raĥmān declared: "I am one of those whose fathers are not known. I am your brother in faith." The report quotes `Abd al-Raĥmān's son, `Uyaynah, as saying of his father: "By God! I believe that had he known that his father was an ass, he would have declared himself the son of that ass." The Prophet says: "Whoever knowingly claims to be the son of someone other than his father is not a believer."

Ending Brotherhood

Having abolished adoption, the *sūrah* moves on to put an end to the brotherhood institution, established by Islam following the migration of the Muslims from

Makkah to Madinah. This was a practical measure to address the situation of those immigrants who had abandoned their relations and property in Makkah, and the situation of Muslims in Madinah whose relations with their families were severed as a result of their embracing Islam. At the same time, the Prophet's personal authority over all believers is emphasized and given a higher position than all blood relations, while his wives are to be seen as the spiritual mothers of all believers: "*The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves; and his wives are their mothers. Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated [for God's sake]. Nonetheless, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree.*" (Verse 6)

When the Muhājirīn, i.e. the Muslims from Makkah, left for Madinah, they had to leave everything behind, preferring their faith to their relatives, clans, property, livelihood, friends, and life memories. They abandoned all this for their faith. Their migration in this way, abandoning all that was dear, including their own families, provided an example of how faith grips one's whole being. They provided the practical example of the integrity of the Islamic personality, confirming the Qur'ānic statement: "*Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (Verse 4)

A different situation, however, arose in Madinah as Islam began to infiltrate homes. The result was that some members of a family became Muslims while others did not. Relations between people were often severed; family bonds became shaky; and there was an even greater disruption of social bonds. The Muslim society was still in its infancy and the Muslim state was still more of an idea than a solid regime with lasting roots.

This gave the new faith a strong moral impetus that superseded all emotions, traditions, social institutions and bonds, making faith the only bond that unites hearts. At the same time it united the small units that separated from their natural roots in the family and the clan, thus replacing the ties of blood, family, interest, friendship, race and language. It united these Muslim units into a well-knit and coherent block that showed a high degree of solidarity, cooperation and mutual care. This was not initiated by legislative texts or government orders; instead, it was based on an inner impetus that was stronger than anything that was familiar in ordinary human life. This provided the basis for the rise of the Muslim community, which could not be otherwise established.

The Muhājirīn [i.e. the migrants from Makkah] were welcomed in Madinah by its Muslim residents, the Anşār. They were made so welcome that the Anşār opened their hearts and homes for them and gave them shares in their property. In fact they were so keen to make the Makkan Muslims feel welcome in their new abode that the Anşār drew lots to decide who would take each of the Muhājirīn: this because there

were only a few of the latter as compared with the great many Anşār who were keen to host them. They, in fact, shared with the Muhājirīn everything they had, willingly and with warm hearts that betrayed no trace of avarice or showing off.

The Prophet established a bond of brotherhood between individuals of the Muhājirīn and individuals of the Anşār, naming each two brothers, thereby giving rise to a unique bond in the history of mutual solidarity between believers in the same ideology. Indeed this brotherhood superseded the blood relationship, as it included rights of inheritance and other commitments between relatives. The resulting moral impetus was strong because the Prophet's Companions took to the new bond seriously, in the same way as their attitude towards everything Islam laid down. This impetus was essential to the rise of Islamic society and its protection, providing all, if not more than what could have been provided by a state that enjoyed stability and well established laws. Thus, the bond of Islamic brotherhood was necessary to safeguard and consolidate the new Muslim community in its exceptional and highly complicated circumstances. A similarly strong impetus is essential for the rise of any community facing equally unusual circumstances, until it begins to have a stable state with well defined laws that give it normality.

Although Islam welcomes such a strong impetus, it nonetheless wants Islamic society to have a foundation that relies on the normal resources its people can give in ordinary situations, not on what people are ready to sacrifice in exceptional circumstances. This is essential because once an emergency is over, people should return to their normal and ordinary standards. Therefore, once circumstances in Madinah began to settle after the Battle of Badr when the new Muslim state became more stable, social conditions and means of livelihood improved, and all were able to earn their living, the Qur'ān amended the system of brotherhood. It abrogated the commitments attached to it, which normally arise from family and blood relations, but retained it as a moral bond of brotherhood that can be reactivated in reality whenever needed. Thus, the Muslim community returned to a normal situation in which inheritance and other binding commitments are limited to blood relatives as they have always been in God's original decree and natural law: "*Blood relatives have, according to God's decree, a stronger claim upon one another than other believers [of Madinah] and those who have migrated (for God's sake]. None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends. This is written down in God's decree.*" (Verse 6)

The Prophet's Authority

At the same time, it re-emphasized the Prophet's authority over all Muslims, which gave him a higher claim than that of blood, indeed one that is higher than one's own wishes and desires: "*The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they*

have on their own selves." (Verse 6) Islam also makes the Prophet's wives spiritual mothers to all believers: "*and his wives are their mothers."* (Verse 6)

The Prophet's authority over all Muslims is comprehensive. Inevitably, this includes charting a complete way of life for them. They cannot choose for themselves anything other than what he chooses for them in accordance with what God reveals to him. In an authentic *ĥadīth,* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "No one of you is a true believer until his preferences are subject to my message." This is so pervasive as to include their own feelings whereby the Prophet (peace be upon him) is dearer to them than their own lives. Thus, believers do not prefer their own safety to his, and they do not place anyone ahead of him in their hearts. Authentic *aĥādīth* speaking of this are many, and here we give just two examples: "None of you attains to true faith until I am dearer to him than his own soul, his property, offspring and all mankind." "`Umar said to the Prophet: 'By God! I love you more than I love anyone other than my own self.' The Prophet said: 'No, `Umar! I should be dearer to you than your own self.' Then `Umar rejoined: 'Messenger of God! I love you more than anyone else, including myself.' The Prophet said: 'You have got it now, `Umar.'

This is not some mere utterance of a word. It is a standard, an extremely high one that people cannot attain to without possessing a special touch that opens a sublime horizon before their hearts, purging them of the self love that is deeply rooted in their very natures. Indeed, human beings love themselves far more than they can imagine. We may think that we have managed to bring our self love under control. Yet should anyone say a derogatory word to us, we will react as though we have been bitten by a snake. So much so that we may not be able to rein in our reactions, and even if we do restrain ourselves sufficiently so as not to react visibly, we will still feel the injury keenly. We may be willing to sacrifice our lives for what we believe in, and we may claim that we are free of self interest, but we still find it impossible to accept insults or derogatory criticism. Once more, this is a high standard which is difficult to attain without long training, constant alertness and the seeking of God's help. This is what the Prophet called the greater *Jihād,* or striving for God's cause. We need only to remember that even `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb needed instruction by the Prophet to open his pure heart to it.

The Prophet's authority over the believers also includes their commitments. An authentic *ĥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "I am the patron of every believer, both in this life and in the life to come. Read, if you will, [God's revelation]: *The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves.*' (Verse 6) Therefore, whoever leaves behind any property, his kinsfolk will inherit him, but if he leaves an outstanding debt or neglected children, let them come to me, for I am his guardian." What the *ĥadīth* implies is that the Prophet would repay the debts of any Muslim who died leaving outstanding debts and no repayment facility, and that

he would also look after any young children until they came of age.

Apart from this, life was to run normally, without the need for any special charge or exceptional moral impetus. Yet the close relationship between good friends remained intact after the abrogation of the brotherhood system. A Muslim may make a bequest in favour of a close friend, or give generous gifts during their lifetimes: *"None the less, you are to act with kindness towards your close friends."* (Verse 6)

All these measures relate to the original bond, making it clear that this has always been God's will as recorded in His permanent decree: *"This is written down in Gods decree."* (Verse 6) Thus people are reassured as they rely on an original and natural status to which all laws and systems refer. Life then takes its natural line, moving easily and comfortably, with no need to overcharge oneself as happens during special times of emergency or to meet exceptional needs. After all, such periods are few and of limited duration in human life. Yet should the need arise, the overflow can always be tapped.

A Binding Covenant

Referring to God's decree that He willed it to be the permanent system, the *sūrah* refers to His covenant with prophets in general, and with the Prophet Muĥammad and other messengers of firm resolve in particular. This covenant commits them to deliver God's message containing His code for human life, and to implement and advocate it among the communities to which they were sent. When they have done so, people will then be responsible for their own attitudes towards divine guidance, and for their belief or disbelief. They are now accountable for themselves having no justification whatsoever for not following divine guidance after God's messengers delivered His message to them: *"We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets: from you, [Muĥammad], and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary. From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge. God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]. He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers."* (Verses 7-8)

If It is a single covenant or pledge that remained the same from Noah to Muĥammad, the seal of all prophets (peace be upon them all). It is one covenant, one system and one trust taken up by each and every one of them. The following two verses outline the covenant in general: *"We did accept a solemn pledge from all the prophets."* A specific reference to the Messenger who received the Qur'ān and whose message is addressed to all mankind then follows: *"from you, [Muĥammad',"* and then makes mention of other messengers endowed with strong and firm resolve. These were the ones entrusted with the major divine messages prior to Muĥammad, the last one: *"and from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus son of Mary."* Then the *sūrah* describes the covenant itself: *"From all did We accept a weighty, solemn pledge."* The

description of the covenant here gives it a tangible, solid form. It was indeed a pledge between God and the individuals He chose to receive His revelations, deliver His messages and establish His code, being all the time faithful to what He had entrusted them with.

"God will question the truthful about the truth [entrusted to them]." The truthful are the believers. They are the ones who said the word of truth and believed in the message of truth. All others are liars because they believe in and say what is false. Describing the believers as truthful here is significant as it carries a clear meaning. They will be asked about the truth on the Day of Judgement in the same way as a teacher asks a top student to state the answer which earned him high marks. It is a question asked to honour those being asked. It informs all those present that the truthful deserve to be honoured on the great day when all mankind are assembled.

As for those who believed in what is false and made false claims concerning the most important issue of all, the issue of faith, a totally different result awaits them: *"He has prepared painful suffering for the unbelievers."* (Verse 8)

2
Rallying All Hostile Forces

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَةَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡ إِذۡ جَآءَتۡكُمۡ جُنُودٞ فَأَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ رِيحٗا وَجُنُودٗا لَّمۡ تَرَوۡهَاۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ٩

Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do. (9)

إِذۡ جَآءُوكُم مِّن فَوۡقِكُمۡ وَمِنۡ أَسۡفَلَ مِنكُمۡ وَإِذۡ زَاغَتِ ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرُ وَبَلَغَتِ ٱلۡقُلُوبُ ٱلۡحَنَاجِرَ وَتَظُنُّونَ بِٱللَّهِ ٱلظُّنُونَا ١٠

They came upon you from above and from below you. Your eyes rolled (with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats, and confused thoughts about God passed through your minds. (10)

هُنَالِكَ ٱبۡتُلِيَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ وَزُلۡزِلُواْ زِلۡزَالٗا شَدِيدٗا ١١

That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken. (11)

وَإِذۡ يَقُولُ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقُونَ وَٱلَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٞ مَّا وَعَدَنَا ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥٓ إِلَّا غُرُورٗا ١٢

The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.' (12)

وَإِذۡ قَالَت طَّآئِفَةٞ مِّنۡهُمۡ يَٰٓأَهۡلَ يَثۡرِبَ لَا مُقَامَ لَكُمۡ فَٱرۡجِعُواْۚ وَيَسۡتَـٔۡذِنُ فَرِيقٞ مِّنۡهُمُ ٱلنَّبِيَّ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّ بُيُوتَنَا عَوۡرَةٞ وَمَا هِيَ بِعَوۡرَةٍۖ إِن يُرِيدُونَ إِلَّا فِرَارٗا ١٣

Some of them said: 'People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.' And a group of them asked the Prophet's permission to leave, saying: 'Our houses are exposed,' while they were not exposed. They only

wanted to run away. (13)

وَلَوۡ دُخِلَتۡ عَلَيۡهِم مِّنۡ أَقۡطَارِهَا ثُمَّ سُئِلُواْ ٱلۡفِتۡنَةَ لَأٓتَوۡهَا وَمَا تَلَبَّثُواْ بِهَآ إِلَّا يَسِيرًا ﴿١٤﴾

Had their city been stormed from all sides, and had they been asked to renounce their faith they would have done so without much delay. (14)

وَلَقَدۡ كَانُواْ عَٰهَدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مِن قَبۡلُ لَا يُوَلُّونَ ٱلۡأَدۡبَٰرَۚ وَكَانَ عَهۡدُ ٱللَّهِ مَسۡـُٔولٗا ﴿١٥﴾

They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for. (15)

قُل لَّن يَنفَعَكُمُ ٱلۡفِرَارُ إِن فَرَرۡتُم مِّنَ ٱلۡمَوۡتِ أَوِ ٱلۡقَتۡلِ وَإِذٗا لَّا تُمَتَّعُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ﴿١٦﴾

Say: 'Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain, you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while.' (16)

قُلۡ مَن ذَا ٱلَّذِي يَعۡصِمُكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ إِنۡ أَرَادَ بِكُمۡ سُوٓءًا أَوۡ أَرَادَ بِكُمۡ رَحۡمَةٗۚ وَلَا يَجِدُونَ لَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيّٗا وَلَا نَصِيرٗا ﴿١٧﴾

Say: 'Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy?' Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support. (17)

۞ قَدۡ يَعۡلَمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُعَوِّقِينَ مِنكُمۡ وَٱلۡقَآئِلِينَ لِإِخۡوَٰنِهِمۡ هَلُمَّ إِلَيۡنَاۖ وَلَا يَأۡتُونَ ٱلۡبَأۡسَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٨﴾

God is indeed aware of those of you who hold others back; and those who say to their brethren: 'Come and join us,' while they themselves hardly ever take part in the fighting, (18)

أَشِحَّةً عَلَيۡكُمۡۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ ٱلۡخَوۡفُ رَأَيۡتَهُمۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيۡكَ تَدُورُ أَعۡيُنُهُمۡ كَٱلَّذِي يُغۡشَىٰ عَلَيۡهِ مِنَ ٱلۡمَوۡتِۖ فَإِذَا ذَهَبَ ٱلۡخَوۡفُ سَلَقُوكُم بِأَلۡسِنَةٍ حِدَادٍ أَشِحَّةً عَلَى ٱلۡخَيۡرِۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَمۡ يُؤۡمِنُواْ فَأَحۡبَطَ ٱللَّهُ

begrudging you all help. But then, when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death. Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues, begrudging you all that is good. Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring

أَعۡمَٰلَهُمۡۚ وَكَانَ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ﴿١٩﴾

their deeds to nothing. That is all too easy for God. (19)

يَحۡسَبُونَ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابَ لَمۡ يَذۡهَبُواْۖ وَإِن يَأۡتِ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابُ يَوَدُّواْ لَوۡ أَنَّهُم بَادُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَعۡرَابِ يَسۡـَٔلُونَ عَنۡ أَنۢبَآئِكُمۡۖ وَلَوۡ كَانُواْ فِيكُم مَّا قَٰتَلُوٓاْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ﴿٢٠﴾

They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn. Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you. Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting. (20)

لَّقَدۡ كَانَ لَكُمۡ فِي رَسُولِ ٱللَّهِ أُسۡوَةٌ حَسَنَةٞ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرۡجُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلۡيَوۡمَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَ وَذَكَرَ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرٗا ﴿٢١﴾

In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God. (21)

وَلَمَّا رَءَا ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ٱلۡأَحۡزَابَ قَالُواْ هَٰذَا مَا وَعَدَنَا ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥ وَصَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥۚ وَمَا زَادَهُمۡ إِلَّآ إِيمَٰنٗا وَتَسۡلِيمٗا ﴿٢٢﴾

When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.' This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God. (22)

مِّنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ رِجَالٞ صَدَقُواْ مَا عَٰهَدُواْ ٱللَّهَ عَلَيۡهِۖ فَمِنۡهُم مَّن قَضَىٰ نَحۡبَهُۥ وَمِنۡهُم مَّن يَنتَظِرُۖ وَمَا بَدَّلُواْ تَبۡدِيلٗا ﴿٢٣﴾

Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God. Some have already fulfilled their pledges by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least. (23)

لِّيَجۡزِيَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ بِصِدۡقِهِمۡ وَيُعَذِّبَ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ إِن شَآءَ أَوۡ يَتُوبَ عَلَيۡهِمۡۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ﴿٢٤﴾

God will surely reward the truthful for having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (24)

وَرَدَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِغَيۡظِهِمۡ لَمۡ يَنَالُواْ خَيۡرٗاۚ وَكَفَى ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٱلۡقِتَالَۚ

God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared

the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty. (25)	وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ قَوِيًّا عَزِيزًا ﴿٢٥﴾
He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. (26)	وَأَنزَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَـٰهَرُوهُم مِّنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ مِن صَيَاصِيهِمْ وَقَذَفَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلرُّعْبَ فَرِيقًا تَقْتُلُونَ وَتَأْسِرُونَ فَرِيقًا ﴿٢٦﴾
And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things. (27)	وَأَوْرَثَكُمْ أَرْضَهُمْ وَدِيَـٰرَهُمْ وَأَمْوَٰلَهُمْ وَأَرْضًا لَّمْ تَطَـُٔوهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢٧﴾

Overview

In the early days of Islam, it was in the midst of events that the Muslim personality was moulded. With every new day and every new situation, this personality came closer to maturity, presenting its distinctive features. Furthermore this Muslim community, reflecting the total sum of its members' personalities, also had its own unique qualities and values that distinguished it from all other communities. At times, the predicaments the Muslim community faced presented its members with an acid test that separated the true from the false and which also proved everyone's true mettle.

Qur'ānic revelations were given either before or after a particular test, describing events and throwing light on the difficulties involved. This brought into focus the attitudes taken as the event unfolded, and what intentions and motives were behind these attitudes and feelings. The Qur'ān then addressed people's hearts as they lay open to the light, with no screen to cover them. It touched them at precisely the right spot so as to ensure the right response. This was a continuous educational exercise making use of events and experiences, one after the other, day after day.

The Muslims were not given the Qur'ān in its totality in one go so that they could study it, understand its directives, observe its prohibitions and fulfil its commands. Instead, God put them to a variety of tests because He is fully aware that man does not attain full maturity except through practical experience and it is this that drives lessons home and moulds characters. The Qur'ān then tells people the truth about

what has taken place and its significance. Thus, it issues its directives only when people have gone through the ordeal.

The experiences the Muslims went through during the Prophet's lifetime were truly remarkable. For it was a period of direct contact between heaven and earth, reflected in both events and words. When a Muslim went to bed he was aware that God watched and heard him, and that his every action, word, thought or intention could he exposed and commented upon by the Qur'ān. Similarly, all Muslims felt a direct contact with their Lord: if they faced a problem or a hardship, they hoped that the gates of heaven would open with a ruling that removed their difficulties. It was a period when God, in His majesty, said to one or the other: 'You have done, intended, declared or said this and that; or you must do this or should refrain from that.' It is infinitely awesome that God should address Himself to a particular person when that person and all who live on earth, and indeed the whole earth with all that it contains, do not represent more than a tiny particle in His glorious kingdom. Hard as we may find it to reflect on that period and its events we can hardly imagine how it was in practice. This is indeed beyond imagination.

Yet God did not leave the education of the Muslims and the moulding of their personalities to be accomplished through feelings only. He put them to practical tests necessitating their interaction. He is infinite in His wisdom, and He knows best the creation He has created. We need to reflect long on this wisdom so that we can better understand what we may encounter of tests during our own lives.

Difficulties in Abundance

The present passage analyses one of the great events in the history of the Muslim community, indeed, one of its hardest tests. The event was the attack launched by confederate forces on Madinah, which took place in the fourth or fifth year of the Prophet's migration.[1] A thorough reading of this passage and the way it portrays the events and comments on them, highlighting certain scenes and bringing out certain thoughts and feelings experienced by some Muslims, will enable us to understand how God shaped the personality of the Muslim community through both the events themselves and the Qur'ān. In order to understand this we will explain the Qur'ānic text after we have briefly related the events as given in books on the Prophet's life and history. This will demonstrate the great difference between how God relates historical events and the narrative man gives of them.

[1] Although biographers of the Prophet differ on whether this event was in year 4 or 5, it was most probably in year 5, as a careful reading of the events during the Prophet's lifetime indicates. — Editor's note.

An Encounter with Allied Forces

Muĥammad ibn Isĥāq relates: "The beginning of events leading to the Encounter of the Moat started when a number of Jews, including Sallām ibn Abī Ĥuqayq ibn Akhṭab and Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ĥuqayq, all of the al-Nađīr tribe, and Ĥūwathah ibn Qays and Abū `Ammār of Wā'il, as well as others of both Jewish tribes travelled to Makkah and spoke with the Quraysh. It was these Jews who worked hard to forge the alliance against God's Messenger. When they met the Quraysh elders they called on them to join them in fighting the Prophet. They said to them: 'We will join forces with you until we have exterminated him and his followers.' The Quraysh put the following question to them: 'You, the Jews, are the people who follow the first divine book, and you know the issues over which we differ with Muĥammad: which is better, our religion or his?' Those Jewish elders answered: 'Your religion is better than his, and you are closer to the truth than him.' It is concerning these people that God revealed in the Qur'ān:

> *Are you not aware of those who, having been granted a share of Divine revelations, now believe in falsehood and arrogant deviation [from Divine faith], and they say to the unbelievers that they are better guided than the believers. These are the ones whom God has rejected; anyone whom God rejects shall find none to succour him. Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? If so, they would not give other people so much as [would fill) the groove of a date- stone. Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has given them out of His bounty? We have indeed given revelation and wisdom to the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion. Some of them believe in him and some turn away from him. Sufficient scourge is the fire of Hell.* (4: 51-55)

The Quraysh were very happy with this answer and expressed a readiness to join the Jews in battle against the Prophet.

"Then this Jewish delegation travelled to meet the leaders of the Ghaṭafān, another leading Arabian tribe, and they urged them to fight the Prophet, assuring them that they would be joining them as well as the Quraysh. The Ghaṭafān agreed and they all marshalled their forces. The Quraysh marched under the leadership of Abū Sufyān ibn Ĥarb, while the Ghaṭafān were led by `Uyaynah ibn Ĥiṣn of the Fizārah clan, al-Ĥārith ibn 'Awf of Murrah and Mis`ar ibn Rukhaylah of Ashja`.

"When the Prophet heard of what they had plotted, he ordered the digging of a moat to prevent their entrance into Madinah. The Prophet himself and his Companions worked hard to dig the moat. However, a number of hypocrite men put little effort into the work. They would put up a show of working, but then sneak off, going back home, without asking permission from the Prophet. By contrast, if any good believer needed to leave for some urgent matter, he would mention this to the

Prophet and ask his permission to absent himself for a while. The Prophet gave such people leave. Any of these would then go home, attend to the emergency and return, knowing that he would be rewarded by God for such work. Concerning the believers, God revealed in the Qur'ān: *"They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (24: 62) And He also said about the hypocrites who sneaked away: *"Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them."* (24: 63)

"When the Muslims had completed digging the moat, the Quraysh arrived and encamped at a place called Manna` al-Asyāl near Rawmah. They numbered 10,000 including their slaves and affiliates as well as those who followed them from the people of Kinānah and Tihāmah. The Ghaṭafān and their followers from Najd marched to their camping place near Uĥud. The Prophet marshalled his troops, numbering 3,000, camping at a spot where their backs were to Mount Sala`, with the moat separating them from their attackers. He also ordered that the women and children should stay in sheltered homes.

"Ĥuyay ibn Akhṭab, God's enemy, went up to Ka`b ibn Asad, the Rabbi of the Jewish tribe of Qurayżah, who had signed, on behalf of his tribe, a friendship treaty with the Prophet, pledging support to the Muslims. Ĥuyay wanted him to break his treaty and join the attacking forces. He used all his powers of persuasion and brought much pressure to bear on Ka`b, all of which culminated with a pledge of honour that should the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān withdraw without defeating Muĥammad, he would come and join Ka`b in his fort and share his fate with him. At this point Ka`b ibn Asad decided to join the attacking forces, thereby breaking his treaty with the Prophet.

"This was an extremely testing time for the believers. People were truly in fear of the outcome. The enemy was also preparing for a pincer attack from the front and the rear. Inevitably, the believers started to have all types of thoughts and doubts, while the hypocrites capitalized on the situation by speaking out against the Prophet. One of them, Mut`ib ibn Qushayr, said: 'Muĥammad used to promise us that we would eat of the treasures of the Persian and Byzantine Emperors, while today we feel unsafe to go to the toilet.' Another, Aws ibn Qayżī, said to the Prophet in front of a number of his clansmen: 'Messenger of God! Our homes are vulnerable. So permit us to leave and go home, as our homes are outside Madinah.'

"The Prophet remained steadfast with his Companions, while the idolaters laid siege for nearly a month, without war breaking out between them, except for exchanges of arrows across the moat.

"When things got worse and the Muslims were in real trouble, the Prophet sent a message to `Uyaynah ibn Ĥiṣn and al-Ĥārith ibn 'Awl, the Ghaṭafān leaders offering them one third of Madinah's crops if they withdrew their forces. This was agreed and written down, but neither signed nor witnessed. It was essentially a proposed arrangement. When the Prophet wanted to conclude the agreement, he called in Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the Chief of the Aws tribe, and Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the Chief of the Khazraj tribe, consulting them on his proposal. They asked him: 'God's Messenger! Is this something you like and we would willingly do it, or something God has instructed you to do and we have no choice but to do it, or something you are doing for our sake?' He said: 'I am doing it for you, because I see that the Arabs are united against you, attacking you from all sides. I only want to break the unity of your enemy for the present,' Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh said: 'Messenger of God, when we were, like these people, idolaters, unaware of any religion other than the worship of idols, they did not hope to get a single fruit from Madinah except as a present from us or if we sold it to them. Now that God has honoured us with Islam and guided us to it and has given us the honour and strength of having you in our midst, would we willingly give them our goods? We have no need for this agreement. We will give them nothing but the sword until God makes His judgement between us.' The Prophet replied: 'The matter is entirely up to you.' Then Sa`d took the sheet on which the agreement was written and erased the writing. He said: 'Let them do their worst."

Thereafter, the Prophet and his Companions remained steadfast despite their fear of their enemies and the impending pincer attack they were sure would come.

Then a man from the Ghaṭafān called Nu`aym ibn Mas`ūd came over to the Muslim camp and said to the Prophet: "Messenger of God, I am now a Muslim and my people are not aware of the fact. You may give me whatever orders you wish." Keenly aware of the situation the Muslims were in, the Prophet said to Nu`aym: "If you join us, you increase our number by one. But try, if you can, to dissuade the people from attacking us. War is but a successful trick." [Nu`aym did a splendid job creating mistrust between the three groups forming the confederate forces, the Quraysh, Ghaṭafān and Qurayżah. This is related in detail in books documenting the history of the period. Hence, we confine ourselves to simply referring to the results of his efforts.]

It was through God's grace that the hostile forces' unity of purpose did not last long. Furthermore, God sent them a very strong wind on a severely cold and wet night. Nothing remained stable in their tents.

When the Prophet learnt of the doubts now casting shadows in the minds of his enemy, which meant that God had actually split them and that mutual mistrust had replaced their former unity, he sent one of his Companions, Ĥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, to their camp at night to gather intelligence on what they intended to do.

Ibn Isĥāq relates: "Ĥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, a Companion of the Prophet who belonged to the Anşār, was with a group of people in the city of Kūfah in Iraq many years later when he was asked by someone from that city: 'Did you people really see God's Messenger, and were you truly in his company?' When Ĥudhayfah answered in the affirmative, the man asked: 'How did you serve him?' Ĥudhayfah said: 'We used to try our best.' The man said: 'Had it been our fortune to be his Companions we would not have let him walk. We would have carried him on our shoulders.' Ĥudhayfah said: 'My nephew! We were one night with God's Messenger during the Encounter of the Moat when he stood up praying for a part of the night. He then turned to his Companions and asked: "Who is willing to go and find out what our enemies are doing and return [to return was a condition the Prophet attached to that particular mission]. I shall pray to God to make any volunteer for this mission my Companion in Heaven." No one volunteered because of our great fear and hunger on that very cold night. When no one answered, the Prophet called me forward. I then had no choice but to go. He said to me: 'Ĥudhayfah, go inside their camp and find out what they are doing. Do not do anything on your own initiative until you return.' I went into their quarters to see the wind and God's other soldiers playing havoc in their camp. No pot or pan stood upright, no fire could be maintained and no structure stood up. Abū Sufyān then addressed his people: 'People of the Quraysh, let everyone make sure of the person sitting next to him.'

"I took the man next to me by the hand and asked him who he was. He answered me, mentioning his name and his father's name. Abū Sufyān then said: 'People of the Quraysh, you realize that we cannot stay much longer. We have endured great hardship and the Jews of the Qurayżah have not fulfilled their promises to us. Indeed, we have received highly disturbing reports about their position. You see what these strong winds are doing to us. We cannot stay much longer in these conditions, and my advice to you is to go back home where I am now going." He then mounted his camel, which was tied to a peg. He hit the camel, which jumped on its feet, and released itself as it stood up. Had it not been for the Prophet's clear instructions to me that I must not do anything serious before I returned, I could have killed Abū Sufyān with my arrow."

Ĥudhayfah then returned to the Prophet to deliver his report. He found the Prophet praying, and sat very close to him. Continuing his prayers, the Prophet drew Ĥudhayfah closer to him until he was sitting between his legs and he covered him with his robe. When he finished his prayers, he listened to Ĥudhayfah's report. The

Ghaṭafān decided to follow the Quraysh's decision when they learned that their allies were leaving.

The Qur'ānic Report

In its reporting of the events and its comments on them and the directives it gives to the Muslim community, the *sūrah* neither mentions people by name nor specifies positions; rather it describes types of people and patterns of character. It gives few details but highlights constant values and consequences. It focuses on the elements that remain after the events are over and their actors have departed. In this way, its focus serves to draw lessons for future generations and different communities. The Qur'ānic text also relates events to God's will that controls both the event and those who participate in it. It shows how God's will operates gently and smoothly to bring about the end He wants. The *sūrah* also pauses after each stage in the story to give a directive or to make comments reminding the listeners of the essential truth.

Although the *sūrah* relates the story to the people who took part in it in the first place, it does not only give them more information about it, but also lays before them certain aspects which they were unaware of. In this way, it brings to light people's inner thoughts, feelings, intentions and what was hidden within their hearts.

Added to all this is the fine style, vividness and freshness of the images drawn. Furthermore, the *sūrah* paints the hypocrites' cowardice with acid derision as also describes their twisted nature. This contrasts with the profoundly inspiring picture of faith that is drawn and the qualities it imparts to believers.

The Qur'ānic text is a manual for action, not only by those who witnessed the event but also in every environment and generation. It is a guide for Muslims whenever they face circumstances similar to those faced by the first Muslim community and at any time in the future. It aims to give them the same determination and motivation as the Prophet's Companions possessed.

No one will understand Qur'ānic texts fully unless they face circumstances similar to those faced by the first Muslim community. It is in such circumstances that texts reveal their meanings fully and hearts open up to understand them in depth. When this takes place, the text is no longer words and sentences, but rather a source of power and energy. The events described come alive: inspiring, motivating and urging action both in real life and in the depths of the human heart.

The Qur'ān is not merely a book to be read and understood: it is a motivating force. Its texts are ready for implementation at every point. It only needs a heart that warms to it in circumstances that enable its resources to be fully tapped. We may read a particular Qur'ānic text tens or hundreds of times, then we look at it again

when we are facing a particular situation only to discover that it gives us what it had not given before. It provides a straight answer to our complex problem, shows a way that we overlooked, clears our doubts and replaces these with firm and perfect reassurance. Nothing else, old or new, gives us what the Qur'ān gives.

A Test Too Hard

The *sūrah* begins its discussion of the encounter with the confederate forces by reminding the believers of God's favours when He repelled the armies that were intent on exterminating them. The first verse in the passage sums up the nature of the event, its beginning and end, before giving any details or explaining any attitudes. Thus, God's favour is brought into focus so that the Muslims will always remember it. It also makes it clear that as God commands the believers to follow His revelations, place their trust in Him and not yield to the unbelievers or the hypocrites, it is also He who protects those advocating His message and code for human life against aggression: *"Believers! Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when hosts came down upon you. We let loose against them a windstorm and hosts that you could not see. Yet God sees all that you do."* (Verse 9)

In this short opening verse we have a picture of the beginning and end of the battle, along with the decisive factors that combine to produce its result: the arrival of the enemy forces; God's sending strong winds and other troops unseen by the believers; and His support which is dependent on their attitude and action as God is fully aware of all that they do.

The *sūrah* then gives details of the situation:

> *They came upon you from above and from below you. Your eyes rolled [with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats, and confessed thoughts about God passed through your minds. That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken. The hypocrites and the sick at heart said: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.' Some of them said: 'People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.' And a group of them asked the Prophet's permission to leave, saying: 'Our houses are exposed,' while they were not exposed. They only wanted to run away. (Verses 10-13)*

The verses paint an image of the whole of Madinah in the grip of great alarm and distress, with the idolaters of the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān allied with the Jews of Qurayżah moving in from all sides. These feelings of alarm and distress affected all of the people, but their reactions and responses differed. Needless to say, people's thoughts about God, their behaviour, and their evaluation of causes and results were much at variance. Therefore, the test was extremely difficult and the distinction

between believers and hypocrites was decisive.

We can see today the whole situation: its elements, feelings, actions and reactions as if it were happening before our eyes. We see it though from the outside: *"They came upon you from above and from below you."* (Verse 10) We also see people's reactions to what was unfolding: *"Your eyes rolled [with fear] and your hearts leapt up to your throats."* (Verse 10) This is a picture of profound fear, anxiety and distress, imparted through people's expressions and feelings. *"Confused thoughts about God passed through your minds."* (Verse 10) The *sūrah* does not tell us about these thoughts in detail. In fact the adjective 'confused' is implied rather than stated in the Arabic text. This gives a more vivid picture of the confusion in people's feelings and ideas, leaving minds bewildered and perplexed. Such a state of fear and confusion is then further heightened: *"That was a situation when the believers were sorely tested and severely shaken."* (Verse 11)

A test that left the believers severely shaken must have been truly fearful. Muĥammad ibn Maslamah and others said: "During the Moat Encounter our nights were days. The unbelievers took it in turns to confront us, with Abū Sufyān showing up at the head of his troops one day, Khālid ibn al-Walīd with his forces the next day, `Amr ibn al-`Aş the next, Hubayrah ibn Wahb the next, followed by `Ikrimah ibn Abī Jahl, and lastly by Đirār ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. This was very hard for us, and people were really in fear."

A further description of the state in which the Muslims found themselves is given by al-Maqrīzī in *Imtā` al-Asmā`:* "The idolaters appeared at dawn, and the Prophet mobilized his Companions and the two sides engaged in fighting throughout the day and part of the night. Neither the Prophet nor any Muslim could move out of position. The Prophet could not offer any of the *Żuhr, `Aşr, Maghrib* and *`Ishā'* prayers. His Companions said to him: 'Messenger of God! We have not prayed.' He said: 'Nor have I.' Then the idolaters withdrew and each side went back to their encampments. On another day, Usayd ibn Ĥuđayr stood guard on the edge of the moat, at the head of 200 Muslims. Mounted forces of idolaters, commanded by Khālid ibn al-Walīd tried to take them unawares, but the two sides were engaged in fighting for some time. Waĥshī, who had killed Ĥamzah, the Prophet's uncle, during the Battle of Uĥud, stabbed al-Ṭufayl ibn al-Nu`mān al-Anşārī with a spear and killed him. On that day, the Prophet said: 'The idolaters have kept us from our middle prayer of *`Aşr.* May God fill their bellies and hearts with fire.'"[2]

Two Muslim reconnaissance units went out one night, and they met by accident, each thinking the other to belong to the enemy. They clashed, with some from both

[2] In a *ĥadīth* reported by Jābir, the Prophet was kept from offering *`Aşr* prayer that day. It appears that this took place on more than one occasion, with the Muslims unable once to pray `Aşr, while on another occasion, they could not pray any of the other prayers.

groups being injured or killed. When one of them shouted the Muslim battle slogan: '*Ĥā Mīm.* They will not triumph', they realized their mistake and stopped fighting. The Prophet advised the two parties: 'Whoever of you is wounded should consider it an injury incurred for God's sake, and whoever of your men has been killed is a martyr.'

The worst distress the Muslims faced during the siege was the treachery of the Qurayżah Jews, who were to their rear. They feared that at any time a concerted attack by the idolaters and Jews could be mounted and that they would be heavily outnumbered by the herds intent on exterminating Islam and the Muslims.

On top of all this, the Muslims also faced the schemes concocted by the hypocrites, who, as usual, tried to raise doubts in their minds and so split their ranks: "*The hypocrites and the sick at heart said.' God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions.*" (Verse 12) In this way, the hypocrites saw in the Muslims' distress a chance to speak out without being blamed. They felt they could now undermine the believers' morale, raising doubts about the promises given by God and His Messenger, without accusing fingers being raised against them. The overall situation, or so it seemed, confirmed the doubts they were raising. Moreover, they were consistent with what they felt deep inside. Such testing times, however, removed the thin cover by which the hypocrites tried to hide their reality. They were in such a state of fear themselves that this in itself shattered all their claims to be believers. In short, their truth was out.

In every community there will always be hypocrites and doubters who will, in times of difficulty, adopt the same attitude. Theirs is a state of mind encountered in all communities and across all generations.

"*Some of them said: People of Yathrib! You cannot withstand [the attack] here, so go back.*" (Verse 13) Thus they tried to encourage the people of Madinah to desert and go home, arguing that standing guard behind the moat was meaningless when their homes were exposed to danger. This was a wicked attempt to exploit a natural weakness in people's hearts: their concerns about their women and children at times of great danger. "*And a group of them asked the Prophet's permission to leave, saying: 'Our houses are exposed.'*" (Verse 13) Such people tried to give the appearance of being with the Muslims, whilst all they wanted was leave to go home under the pretext that their homes were vulnerable to attack. The Qur'ān, however, states their true motives, refutes their arguments and confronts them with their lies and tricks: "*while they were not exposed. They only wanted to run away.*" (Verse 13)

One report mentions that the Ĥārithah clan sent one of their people, Aws ibn Qayzī, to the Prophet with a message saying: "Our homes are exposed. There is none among the Anşār whose quarters are as vulnerable as ours. There is nothing to repel

the Ghaṭafān from directing an attack against our quarters. Could you please give us permission to return home so that we can protect our women and children." The Prophet gave them permission. However, Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh said to him: "Messenger of God! Do not give them such permission. Whenever we faced a hardship in the past, they would do the same." Thereafter the Prophet issued an order that they should return to Madinah. It was such people that the Qur'ān put face to face with their inner motives: *"They only wanted to run away."* (Verse 13)

Where to Escape Death

The *sūrah* pauses a little here in order to draw a mental picture for those hypocrites as to how hollow their faith was and how they were always ready to break ranks, even for the slightest reason. They would not even try to cover their weaknesses: *"Had their city been stormed from all sides, and had they been asked to renounce their faith they would have done so without much delay."* (Verse 14) The attitude described in the previous verses was the one they adopted when the enemy were still outside Madinah, unable to storm it. No matter how hard and stressful a situation is, a potential danger is far less than a real one. Should their worst fears come true and Madinah be stormed from all sides, and should they be asked to renounce Islam, they would do so with little hesitation, or a few would hesitate for a while before then reverting to disbelief. In essence, their claimed faith lacked firm roots while their cowardice made them unable to resist.

Thus the Qur'ān exposed their reality and put them naked before the mirror to see themselves as they truly were. It then accused them of breaking their clear pledges which they had earlier given to none other than God. Yet they were heedless of their promises and pledges: *"They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for."* (Verse 15)

Ibn Hishām reports: "This is a reference to the Ĥārithah clan who, together with the Salamah clan, were about to desert the Muslim camp before the Battle of Uĥud. They subsequently vowed before God they would never do so again. Therefore, the *sūrah* reminds them of their earlier undertaking.

At Uĥud, God saved them and spared them from the consequences of desertion. This was one example of the practical lessons of the early days of *Jihād.* Now, with the lapse of time ensuring greater experience, they had to be put face to face against their reality.

At this point the Qur'ān restates an important value, one that corrects their notions about life and death, which had caused them to break their pledges and try to desert:

Say: Flight will benefit you nothing. If you flee from natural death or from being slain,

> *you will only be left to enjoy life for a little while. Say: Who can keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy? Other than God they can find none to protect them or to bring them support. (Verses 16-17)*

It is God's will that determines events and destinies, directing them along a certain way that leads to a definite result. Death, whether in battle or by natural causes, is inevitable and occurs at the appointed moment: it comes neither a second early nor a moment late. Flight from battle will not spare the deserter what God has willed. Should they flee from battle, they are certain to meet their inevitable death soon, at the appointed time. All times in this present life are soon, and all life extensions are short. No one can protect anyone else against God's will; no one can prevent it running its course. Should He will to harm someone or show them mercy, His will shall be done. Hence, the only proper attitude for anyone is to submit to God, obey His orders, and honour the vows given to Him in all situations of comfort and hardship. It is far better to place oneself in God's hand, placing one's trust completely in Him. He will, in any case do what He pleases.

Inner Feelings Laid Bare

The *sūrah* then clearly states that God knows the inner thoughts of those who not only stay behind at times of *Jihād,* but who also try to dissuade others from joining the battle. It draws a very truthful picture of their mentality, yet it provokes laughter and derision at such people who are encountered in all communities. It is a picture of cowardice composed of lines of fright and panic in times of hardship, arrogance and presumptuousness in times of ease, a begrudging nature of every good thing, a reluctance to participate in anything good, yet a state of utter terror and hysteria when danger looms from afar. The Qur'ān paints this picture with some fascinating touches that can neither be substituted nor replaced:

> *God is indeed aware of those of you who hold others back; and those who say to their brethren: 'Come and join us,' while they themselves hardly ever take part in the fighting, begrudging you all help. But then, when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death. Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues, begrudging you all that is good. Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring their deeds to nothing. That is all too easy for God. They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn. Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you. Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting. (Verses 18-20)*

These verses begin with the statement that God is fully aware of those who try to

weaken the Muslim community by persuading others to stay behind. They themselves hardly, if ever, take part in any battle. Their attitude is well known to Him, and their scheming is exposed. The miraculous brush then begins to delineate the main lines that depict this type of people. They 'begrudge you all help.' They are very tight against the Muslims, unwilling to help them with effort or money, or even with sympathy and feeling. Yet *"when danger threatens, you see them looking to you for help, their eyes rolling as though they were overshadowed by death."* (Verse 19) This is a true-to-life, vibrant image of a cowardly people, yet it fills us with laughter when we look at their limbs shaking with fear. Worse still is the shadow they cast when the danger is over and security is assured: *"Yet when the danger has passed, they will assail you [believers] with sharp tongues."* (Verse 19) They come out of their holes, swelling with false pride, unashamedly making all sorts of claims about their bravery, determination, unwavering effort, etc. Not only so, but they *"begrudge you all that is good."* (Verse 19) Despite all their wild claims, they are unwilling to make any effort or donation in order to help with good works.

There will always be people belonging to this type in all generations and communities: boasting, cowardly, miserly and abusive: *"Such people have not experienced faith. God will bring their deeds to nothing."* (Verse 19) This is then the basic reason for their attitude. Their hearts have never experienced faith and they never saw its guiding light, or recognized its guidance. Hence, all their endeavours will end up in ruin. They cannot succeed because the basic element of success is absent from their lives. *"That is all too easy for God."* (Verse 19) Nothing is difficult for God, and His will is certain to be done.

The *sūrah* paints another derogatory picture of their condition on the day when the confederate forces acknowledged their failure and departed: *"They think that the Confederates have not withdrawn."* (Verse 20) They still tremble with fear, refusing to believe that those large forces have gone and all are now safe and secure. *"Should the Confederates return, they would wish they were in the desert, among the Bedouins, asking for news about you."* (Verse 20) How pathetic and laughable! If those forces did return, these hypocrites would wish that they were Bedouins, and that they never lived in Madinah. They would rather not have anything to do with the people of Madinah, not even know anything about them. They only want to enquire of travellers about what happened to them, but this would only be a casual enquiry, as when one stranger asks about another.

They wish all this despite the fact that they have been left behind, away from the battle, unexposed to danger. It is all fear at a distance. Hence, *"Even if they were with you, they would take but little part in the fighting."* (Verse 20) Such was the condition of the hypocrites, the sick at heart, and those who spread lies to weaken the Muslim community.

The Opposite Image

Such severely testing times did not make all people look about in such an ugly way. Indeed, there was a totally different scenario going on, one casting light within all this darkness, one that remained stable despite the hardship, one that trusted to God, accepted His will, was reassured that His help would be forthcoming, and one that remained unshaken despite all the fear and confusion. The Qur'ān begins drawing this delightful image by citing the example given by the Prophet: *"In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God."* (Verse 21)

In the midst of all the worry, stress and fear, the Prophet provided shelter for the Muslims: he was the source of their hope, confidence and reassurance. Studying his attitude during the unfolding events of this period is necessary for leaders of Muslim communities and revivalist organizations today so that they can chart the way ahead. His attitude provides a good example for those who hope to earn God's pleasure on the Day of Judgement, and for those who always remember God. We should perhaps look at some aspects of his attitude, by way of example, though we cannot discuss this at any great length in this commentary.

The Prophet went out to work with the Muslims in digging the moat, using the axe and removing the earth and carrying the dust in a basket. As his Companions worked, they sang some rhymes, which they composed on the spot, deriving the same from whatever was taking place. The Prophet repeated their rhyming words at the end of the lines. For example, one of his Companions was called Ju`ayl, but the Prophet did not like his name as it meant 'a small dung beetle', so he renamed him `Amr. So the people around composed a rhyming couplet about this very thing of giving a man a better name. The Prophet repeated with them the two rhyming words. We can imagine the atmosphere the Prophet's participation gave them and how it could fill them with reassurance and enthusiasm.

Zayd ibn Thābit, a young Muslim, was carrying the dust away, and the Prophet said of him: 'He is certainly a good lad.' At one point Zayd was too tired and he fell asleep. It was very cold, but as he was sleeping another person, `Imārah ibn Ĥazm, took Zayd's sword away. When he woke up, he was upset. The Prophet said to Zayd: 'Father of sleep! You slept and your weapon is gone!' Then the Prophet asked his Companions: 'Who of you knows where the sword belonging to this young man is?' `Imārah said: 'It is with me.' The Prophet told him to return it to Zayd and prohibited anyone from taking the weapon of a sleeping man even in jest.

This little episode shows how the Prophet was aware of all those who were with him, young and old, and that he cared for them all. We see him ready to joke with everyone in a pleasant way: 'Father of sleep! You slept and your weapon is gone!'

This also tells us much about the general atmosphere in which the Muslims lived as the Prophet took care of them, even during the hardest of circumstances.

The Prophet's pure soul looked forward to assured victory, distant as it might have been. He could see it as axes hit hard rocks to produce rays of light. He speaks about this to his Companions giving them reassurance. Ibn Isĥāq reports: "Salmon mentioned that as he was digging in his area, a rock was too hard for him. The Prophet was nearby and when he saw Salmon's difficulty he took the axe from him and struck the rock three times, with each strike producing a flash of light. Salmān asked him: 'Messenger of God! What is this I have just seen: a flash of light from under the axe?' The Prophet said to him: 'Have you seen that? At the first strike, God opened to me the land of Yemen; at the second, He opened Syria and the west for me; and at the third, He opened the land to the east for me.'" In *Imtā` al-Asmā`*, al-Maqrīzī mentions that this happened to `Umar in front of Salmān. We can imagine what effect these words from the Prophet would have had on his Companions' hearts at the time when they felt danger approaching.

We should add to these delightful scenes the report we mentioned earlier when Ĥudhayfah returned from his dangerous night mission, gathering intelligence about the enemy and what they were doing. The night was exceedingly cold, and on his return the Prophet was in prayer. Yet on seeing Ĥudhayfah he realized how he felt, and he drew him to himself so that he was sitting by his side, near his feet, and then the Prophet covered him with his robe to let him warm himself a little while lie continued his prayer. After he had finished his prayer, he sat listening to Ĥudhayfah's report confirming the good news he had anticipated.

As for the Prophet's courage, perseverance and unshaken belief throughout this severely testing time, this is evident at every point in the story. We do not need to give details here, as they can be easily and clearly recognized: *"In God's Messenger you have a good model for everyone who looks with hope to God and the Last Day, and always remembers God."* (Verse 21)

Strengthening Faith

The *sūrah* then depicts an image of firm faith and believers confronting real danger, one which is great enough to make even believers' hearts tremble. Yet the believers transform this trembling into something that gives them hope and reassurance: *"When the believers saw the Confederate forces they said: 'This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger.' This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."* (Verse 22)

The situation the Muslims faced on this occasion was so testing and stressful that it is described as such by none other than God: *"That was a situation when the believers*

were sorely tested and severely shaken." (Verse 11) They were ordinary people, and people have limited ability. God does not charge them with more than they can hear. Despite being assured of God's eventual support and the good news the Prophet gave them, going beyond their immediate problems to tell them of where Islam would soon expand to, spreading into Yemen and Syria and even further east and west, danger was staring them in the eye, giving them almost too much stress to cope with.

Ĥudhayfah's story is perhaps the most accurate in relaying how the Muslims felt. The Prophet sensed this fear and apprehension. Therefore, when he wanted an assignment to be taken up, he made its reward clear. He said: 'Who is willing to go and find out what our enemies are doing and return. I shall pray to God to make any volunteer for this mission my Companion in Heaven.' Yet despite this certain promise of returning safely and being assured of a high place in heaven, there were still no volunteers. When the Prophet called Ĥudhayfah by name, he said: 'I then had no choice but to go.' This could not have happened except in a situation of extreme stress and hardship.

However, side by side with the rolled eyes and shaken hearts there was an unseverable bond with God, a firm awareness of divine rules, and an unshakeable belief that these rules cannot he changed, and that their results are bound to come about once they have been set in motion. Hence, the Muslims felt that their being so severely tested heralded their victory, because they knew that they had been true to their trust: *"Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand."* (2: 214) They felt that they themselves had also been terribly shaken. Hence, God's help must be close at hand. This is what prompted them to say: *"This is what God and His Messenger have promised us! Truly spoke God and His Messenger. This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."* (Verse 22)

"This is what God and His Messenger have promised us." Such trouble and distress is the preamble to the help we have been promised. Therefore, God's help is bound to come: *"Truly spoke God and His Messenger:"* They have spoken the truth in as far as both the indication and the result are concerned. Therefore, they were certain of the outcome: *"This only served to strengthen their faith and their submission to God."*

Those Muslims were ordinary human beings subject to all the qualities and weaknesses that distinguish humans. Nor was it required of them that they surpass the limitations of the human race or shed its characteristics. God had created them such and they were meant to remain such. They were not expected to transform themselves into another race: angels, *jinn,* or animals. Therefore, as humans, it was

inevitable that they would be afflicted by hardship and shaken when facing extreme danger, but they remained nevertheless faithful to their bond with God. This was the bond that stopped them from falling, renewed their hope and prevented their despair. This is what made the generation of the Prophet's Companions unique, having no parallel in history. We need to understand this very clearly and recognize that they attained their summit while retaining all their human strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, they also held tight to their bond with God.

When we see ourselves weaken under stress, shaken by danger or worry at what lies ahead, we must not allow despair to overwhelm us, or feel that we are lost, unfit to achieve any high standard. What we must not do is hold on to our weak feelings thinking that this must be so because it happens o others who are better than ourselves. We must remember our bond with God and hold to this, because it is through this that we can shed our weakness, and regain our confidence and reassurance. We should look at our worry and fear as a signal that help is on its way. Then we will find renewed strength and self belief.

It was such balance that moulded that unique generation in the early days of Islam, which the *sūrah* praises in the following terms: "*Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God. Some have already fulfilled their pledges by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least.*" (Verse 23) This is set against the other type of person who pledged to God that they would never run away, but who were untrue to their vows: "*They had previously vowed before God that they would never turn their backs in flight. A vow made to God must surely be answered for.*" (Verse 15)

One of the young Companions of the Prophet reports: "I was named after my uncle Anas ibn al-Nađr. He did not take part in the Battle of Badr, and he was sad. He thought: 'This was the first major battle the Prophet fights and I was absent. Should I live to fight in another battle with the Prophet, God will see what I will do.' He then felt that this was a serious pledge and he feared to say anything more. He was later in the Muslim army in the Battle of Uĥud. Before the battle, he saw Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh and said to him: 'Abū `Amr! I can smell heaven! I smell it coming from the side of Uĥud.' He fought hard until he was killed. He received 80 odd strikes variously from a sword, spear and arrow. Indeed, he was unrecognisable. His sister, my aunt, al-Rubayyi` bint al-Nađr, said: 'I could only identify my brother by his finger.' When the verse saying, *Among the believers are people who have always been true to what they have vowed before God,'* was revealed, people felt that this referred to him and others who did as he did." [Related by Aĥmad, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī]

The *sūrah* then includes a comment staring the purpose of testing believers and the outcome of honouring a vow or breaking it: "*God will surely reward the truthful for*

having been true to their word, and will punish the hypocrites, if that be His will, or accept their repentance. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful." (Verse 24) Comments like this, which are often found within the description of events, serve to outline the purpose behind what takes place, making it clear that everything is determined by God's will. Nothing occurs by coincidence. Everything is according to plan and for a definite purpose. All events reflect God's grace and confirm that His forgiveness and mercy are always close at hand, "*God is indeed Much-Forgiving Merciful."* (Verse 24)

The *sūrah's* discussion of the Encounter of the Moat concludes by stating its outcome which confirmed the believers' expectations and showed how far in error the unbelievers and hypocrites had gone: *"God turned back the unbelievers in all their rage and fury; they gained no advantage. He spared the believers the need to fight. God is Most Powerful, Almighty."* (Verse 25)

From start to finish, God was in control of the battle, turning it the way He wished. The *sūrah* confirms this in its presentation, attributing to God every event and its outcome, so that we can understand this fact making it part of our overall Islamic concept.

The Other Enemy

It was not only the Quraysh and the Ghaṭafān that suffered a miserable defeat. Their allies, the Jews of Qurayżah also shared the same outcome: "*He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things."* (Verses 26-27) However, before we discuss these verses we need to throw some light on the attitude the Jews in Madinah adopted towards Islam.

When Islam arrived in Madinah, the Jews there maintained peaceful relations with it for only a short period. Shortly after his arrival in Madinah, the Prophet signed a treaty with them with mutual obligations of support against outside enemies and clear conditions that they would never be in breach of their commitments, or aid any enemy, or take any hostile action against the Muslims.

The Jews, however, soon felt that Islam represented a threat to their traditional position as followers of the divine faith. Indeed they enjoyed much respect by the people of Madinah on account of this fact. Moreover, they felt that the new social system Islam established in Madinah under the leadership of the Prophet also constituted a threat to their position. Previously, they had very cleverly exploited the conflict between the two main Arab tribes in Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, to ensure that they themselves had the upper hand. The Prophet united the two tribes

in a new social system which deprived the Jews of the chance to sew discord between them.

Perhaps the last straw that broke the camel's back for them was that the rabbi they considered to be their master and leading scholar, `Abdullāh ibn Sallām, converted to Islam with all his family members. However, he feared that should he announce his conversion to Islam in public, the Jews might level false accusations against him. Therefore, he requested that the Prophet ask them about him and his standing among them before telling them that he had become a Muslim. When the Prophet asked the Jews as `Abdullāh had requested him, they said: 'He is our master as his father was; and he is our rabbi and leading scholar.' It was at this point that `Abdullāh came out to tell them that Islam was God's message to mankind and he asked them to follow his example and become Muslims. They immediately turned against him, speaking ill of him and warning all the other Jews against him. Clearly they felt that Islam represented an imminent threat to their religious and political standing. They were determined to scheme against God's Messenger allowing him no respite. This, then, was the beginning of the war between Islam and the Jews, which has never subsided.

At first, the war started as a cold war, as we say these days. That is to say, it began as propaganda against both Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and Islam. The tactics they employed varied from raising doubts about the message and the new faith, to sowing discord and creating division between the Muslims, as between the Aws and the Khazraj one day and between the Muhājirīn and the Anşār another day. They also spied on the Muslims for their idolater enemies, and befriended a group of hypocrites who pretended to be Muslim manipulating them to create trouble within the Muslim community. Ultimately, they openly urged other groups to unite against the Muslims, as happened in the encounter with the confederate tribes.

The major Jewish groups in Madinah were the tribes of the Qaynuqā`, al-Nađīr and Qurayżah. Each had its own ongoing situation with the Prophet and the Muslim community. The Qaynuqā` tribe, who were the best fighters among the Jews, begrudged the Muslims their victory at Badr. Therefore, they started to exploit little events against the Muslims, so demonstrating that they had little respect for their treaty with the Prophet, fearing that he would soon gather strength and gain mastery over them. Ibn Hishām mentions in his biography of the Prophet: "One aspect of the case of the Qaynuqā` Jews was that the Prophet addressed them in their market place, saying: 'Take warning from what happened to the Quraysh and adopt Islam. You already know that I am a prophet sent by God with a message. You read this in your own scriptures and you are committed to believe in me by God's promise to you.' They replied: 'Muĥammad! Do not take it as something great that you met people who have no knowledge of war and fighting and that you got the upper hand

against them. Should we fight you, you will learn that we are the true fighters.'"

Ibn Hishām also reports on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn Jafar: "Behind the problem of the Qaynuqā` was an Arab woman who had brought some milk and sold it in the Qaynuqā Market. She then sat at a jeweller's shop. People there wanted her to uncover her face, but she refused. The jeweller took the edge of her dress and tied it to her back, without her noticing. When she rose, her bottom was exposed and people laughed at her. She shouted for help. A Muslim attacked the Jewish jeweller, and killed him. The Jews then attacked the Muslim and killed him. His people shouted for other Muslims to come and help. The Muslims were very angry and trouble so erupted between them and the Qaynuqā` clan."

Ibn Isĥāq continues this report of the events: "The Prophet laid siege to them until they agreed to accept his judgement. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy [the chief of the hypocrites who was still accepted as a Muslim] went to the Prophet saying: 'Be good to my allies.' The Qaynuqā were formerly allied to the Khazraj. The Prophet made no reply. `Abdullāh repeated this but the Prophet turned away. `Abdullāh then put his hand inside the Prophet's armour and the Prophet asked him to let him go. `Abdullāh did not listen. The Prophet became angry and said: let me go!' `Abdullāh then said: 'I will not let you go until you are good to my allies. They are 700 fighters who protected me against all my enemies and you come to finish them off in one day. I am a man who fears the turn of fortune.' The Prophet then said to him: They are yours.'

`Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was clearly still held in high esteem by his clan. Furthermore, the Prophet accepted his intercession in favour of the Qaynuqā` Jews, provided they agreed to leave Madinah, taking their property with them, but not their weapons. Thus Madinah was rid of a powerful Jewish section.

As for the al-Nađīr tribe, the Prophet went to their quarters in the fourth year of his migration to Madinah, after the Battle of Uĥud, seeking their help in raising funds to pay the blood money for two people killed accidentally by one of his Companions. According to the provisions of the agreement between them and the Muslim state, they were bound to make such a contribution. When he explained his purpose, they said: 'Yes, we will certainly make a contribution.' He sat with his back to the wall of one of their houses. Then they consulted among themselves, and some suggested: 'You will never again find this man in such a vulnerable state. Who can get to the roof of this house and throw a large rock to rid us of him?'

So they set about carrying out their wicked plot. The Prophet was informed of what they were planning; so he returned to Madinah. Once there, he ordered his community to prepare to fight the Jewish tribe of al-Nađīr. They retreated to their forts. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, the chief of the hypocrites, sent them word to remain

steadfast promising to give them his full support. He added: 'We will never let you down. If war is waged against you, we will fight alongside you; and if you are made to leave, we will go with you.' The hypocrites, however, did not fulfil their promise to the Jews. Instead, God struck fear into the hearts of the al- Nađīr and they surrendered without a fight. They asked the Prophet to spare their lives in return for their departure. He agreed and allowed them a camel load each of their property, provided they surrendered any arms. They thus left Madinah, most settling in Khaybar, whilst others went further north to Syria. Among their leaders were Sallām ibn Abī al-Ĥuqayq, Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ĥuqayq and Ĥuyay ibn Akhṭab, the three who had played a leading role in forging the alliance between the Quraysh and Ghaṭafān and so forming the confederate tribes that sought to exterminate Islam and the Muslims.

Treachery of Great Magnitude

This left only the Qurayżah, the third major Jewish tribe in Madinah. As we now know, they too had sided with the confederate tribes against the Muslims, this at the instigation of the al-Nađīr chiefs, particularly Ĥuyay ibn Akhṭab. This treachery by the Qurayżah, in violation of their treaty with the Prophet, was a much harder test for the Muslims than the external attack they faced from the confederates.

To be absolutely sure of this new situation, the Prophet sent four of his Companions — Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the chief of the Aws, Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the Khazraj, `Abdullah ibn Rawāĥah and Khawāt ibn Jubayr — to the Qurayżah to ascertain their position: "If you find out that the intelligence we have received is true, give me a hint which I will understand. Try to avoid affecting the Muslims' morale. If, on the other hand, you find that the Qurayżah remain faithful to their treaty with us, make the news known to everyone." This shows how seriously he expected the news of treachery to affect the Muslim community as a whole.

The delegation went to the Qurayżah and met the people there, calling on them to maintain their peaceful relations and to confirm their alliance with the Prophet. However, they found that the Qurayżah had adopted a worse position than what they had heard about. Defiantly, they said: "You want us to confirm the alliance now, when we have been weakened by the departure of al-Nađīr. Who is God's Messenger? We do not know him. We have no treaty or agreement with Muĥammad."

The Muslim delegation then left the Qurayżah, returning to the Prophet with the bad news that the Jews no longer recognized their peace treaty with him. On arrival, they found the Prophet with a group of his Companions. Following his advice, they gave him a clear hint of the Qurayżah's treachery rather than deliver the fact

publicly. The Prophet was not perturbed. On the contrary, he said: "God is Supreme. Rejoice, you Muslims, for the end will be a happy one."

In his report of these events, Ibn Isĥāq says: "This test was too hard for the Muslims: fear mounted; the enemy came upon them from the front and the rear; the Muslims' thoughts went in all directions; hypocrisy was now in the open, etc."

When God gave the Prophet His support so as to make his enemies withdraw without gaining any advantage, sparing the believers the need to fight, the Prophet returned to Madinah victorious. People put down their arms. Back in his wife, Umm Salamah's home, the Prophet was washing himself after the long ordeal. Jibrīl, the angel, came to him saying: "The angels have not put down their arms yet. I have just come back from chasing the enemy." He then said to him: "God commands you to march to the Qurayżah." Their quarters were a few miles away from Madinah. This was after the noon *Żuhr* prayer. The Prophet issued an order to all his Companions: "He who obeys God must not pray *'`Aşr* except at the Qurayżah." People started marching. On the way, the *'`Aşr* prayer became due. Some of them stopped to offer it arguing that the Prophet had only wanted them to start marching immediately. Others said they would prefer to delay it until they had arrived, taking the Prophet's order at face value. Neither party blamed the other.

The Prophet marched behind them, having asked Ibn Umm Maktūm, his blind Companion, to deputize for him in Madinah. He also gave the banner to his cousin `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The Prophet laid siege to the Qurayżah quarter for 25 days. When they were in despair, they sent word to the Prophet saying that they would accept the judgement of Sa`d ibn Mu`ādh, the chief of the Aws tribe of the Anşār, as he was their ally in pre-Islamic days. They felt that he was bound to be lenient towards them, just like `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had been lenient towards the Qaynuqā` Jews when he sought their release by the Prophet. They did not know, however, that Sa`d had received an injury to his arm during the earlier siege of Madinah and that the Prophet had the wound cauterized to stop it bleeding. He had also placed him in a tent close by where he was nursed. When he received his injury, Sa`d had prayed: "My Lord! If we are to fight the Quraysh again, spare me now for that fight. If you have willed that this encounter between us be the last, I pray to You, my Lord, to make this wound of mine my way to martyrdom, but spare me until I see our affair with the Qurayżah have a happy ending for Islam.' God answered his prayer, making them choose him as their judge.

When the Qurayżah Jews intimated that they would accept Sa`d's judgement, the Prophet gave instructions for him to be brought in. *He* came riding a donkey that had been saddled for him. On his way, his tribesmen, the Aws, tried to persuade him to be lenient. They said: 'Be kind to your allies. The Prophet has chosen you to judge them in order that you be kind o them.' Sa`d first chose o be silent. When he was

tired of their insistence, he said: 'It is time for Sa`d to disregard all criticism when it comes to something through which he hopes to please God.' His tribesmen realized then that he would not be lenient.

As Sa`d approached the Prophet's tent, the Prophet said o those who were with him: 'Stand up to greet your master.' This was to give Sa`d extra respect in his position as judge and to make his judgement binding. When he sat down, the Prophet said to him that the Qurayżah had agreed to accept his judgement in their case. Sa`d said: "Will my judgement be binding on them?" He was answered in the affirmative. He asked again: "And on all who are present [meaning the Muslims]?" Again he received a positive answer. He then lowered his head in deference to the Prophet, pointing his hand in the direction where the Prophet was sitting, without looking at him, and said: "Does this also apply to those who are on this side?" The Prophet answered: "Yes." Sa`d said: "I hereby rule that all the men of the Qurayżah are o be killed, their properties to be divided and their women and children to be enslaved." The Prophet endorsed the ruling and said to him: "You have given God's own verdict."

At the Prophet's orders, moats were dug in the marketplace and the Qurayżah men were brought there with their hands tied. They were all executed. According o different reports they constituted somewhere between 700-800 people. Ĥuyay ibn Akhṭab was among them, remaining faithful to his promise to stay with them and share their fate. Whoever of their young men was below the age of puberty was spared.

That day not only marked the humiliation of the Jews but also the weakness of hypocrisy. Thereafter, the hypocrites were reluctant to continue with their earlier trickery. Moreover, the idolaters no longer thought of attacking the Muslims in Madinah. In fact it was the Muslims who were now able to go on the offensive. Events thus moved in such a way as to lead to the fall of the two main cities in Arabia, Makkah and "Ṭā'if, to Islam. It may be said that the actions of the Jews, the hypocrites and the idolaters were interlinked, and that the expulsion of the Jews from Madinah put an end to such affiliations. The whole episode thus marked a totally new stage in the history of the Muslim state.

This was the practical development to which God refers in the Qur'ānic verses:

> *He brought down from their strongholds those of the people of earlier revelations who aided them, casting terror in their hearts: some you slew, and some you took captive. And He passed on to you their land, their houses and their goods, as well as a land on which you had never yet set foot. God has power over all things." (Verses 26-27)*

The phrase, 'a land on which you had never yet set foot,' can refer either to a land

that the Qurayżah owned outside their quarters, and which the Muslims took over along with the rest of their property, or it may refer to the fact that the Qurayżah surrendered their land without fighting. In this second sense, the Arabic phrase *taṭa`ū,* meaning, 'to set foot,' indicates fighting, which involves taking land by force.

"God has power over all things." This comment is taken from what takes place in reality. It refers all matters to God. The *sūrah's* presentation of the battle and its commentary on events are altogether consistent with this. It attributes all matters and actions to God, so that this essential truth is firmly rooted in the hearts of all Muslims. We see how God establishes it in people's hearts using first the actual events and then the Qur'ān as it makes a record of these events. Thus it takes its place at the centre of the overall Islamic concept.

In this way, the events become the subject matter of education, and the Qur'ān a manual and guide for life and all that relates to it. Values are well established and hearts reassured, using both the practical test and the Qur'ān as the means.

3
Unlike All Women

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِىُّ قُل لِّأَزْوَٰجِكَ إِن كُنتُنَّ تُرِدْنَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَزِينَتَهَا فَتَعَالَيْنَ أُمَتِّعْكُنَّ وَأُسَرِّحْكُنَّ سَرَاحًا جَمِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Prophet! Say o your wives: If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; (28)

وَإِن كُنتُنَّ تُرِدْنَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَٱلدَّارَ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَعَدَّ لِلْمُحْسِنَـٰتِ مِنكُنَّ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٩﴾

but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.' (29)

يَـٰنِسَآءَ ٱلنَّبِىِّ مَن يَأْتِ مِنكُنَّ بِفَـٰحِشَةٍ مُّبَيِّنَةٍ يُضَـٰعَفْ لَهَا ٱلْعَذَابُ ضِعْفَيْنِ ۚ وَكَانَ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرًا ﴿٣٠﴾

Wives of the Prophet! If any of you were to be guilty of manifestly immoral conduct, her punishment would be doubled. That is easy for God. (30)

۞ وَمَن يَقْنُتْ مِنكُنَّ لِلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَتَعْمَلْ صَـٰلِحًا نُّؤْتِهَآ أَجْرَهَا مَرَّتَيْنِ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لَهَا رِزْقًا كَرِيمًا ﴿٣١﴾

But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward, and We have prepared for her most excellent provisions. (31)

يَـٰنِسَآءَ ٱلنَّبِىِّ لَسْتُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِّنَ ٱلنِّسَآءِ ۚ إِنِ ٱتَّقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَخْضَعْنَ بِٱلْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ ٱلَّذِى فِى قَلْبِهِۦ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا ﴿٣٢﴾

Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women: if you truly fear God, do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire; but speak in an appropriate manner. (32)

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ
ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ۖ وَأَقِمْنَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ
وَءَاتِينَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِعْنَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ ۚ
إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنكُمُ ٱلرِّجْسَ
أَهْلَ ٱلْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

And stay quietly in your homes, and do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance. Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakāt, and pay heed to God and His Messenger. God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully. (33)

وَٱذْكُرْنَ مَا يُتْلَىٰ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ
ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلْحِكْمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ
لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware. (34)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ وَٱلْمُسْلِمَٰتِ
وَٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ وَٱلْقَٰنِتِينَ
وَٱلْقَٰنِتَٰتِ وَٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ وَٱلصَّٰدِقَٰتِ
وَٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ وَٱلصَّٰبِرَٰتِ وَٱلْخَٰشِعِينَ
وَٱلْخَٰشِعَٰتِ وَٱلْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَٱلْمُتَصَدِّقَٰتِ
وَٱلصَّٰٓئِمِينَ وَٱلصَّٰٓئِمَٰتِ وَٱلْحَٰفِظِينَ
فُرُوجَهُمْ وَٱلْحَٰفِظَٰتِ وَٱلذَّٰكِرِينَ
ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَٱلذَّٰكِرَٰتِ أَعَدَّ ٱللَّهُ لَهُم
مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣٥﴾

For all men and women who have submitted themselves to God, all believing men and believing women, all truly devout men and truly devout women, all men and women who are true to their word, all men and women who are patient in adversity, all men and women who humble themselves before God, all men and women who give in charity, all men and women who fast, all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who always remember God — for them all God has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. (35)

Overview

This third passage in the *sūrah* speaks specifically of the Prophet's wives, except for the last verse which tells of the reward for all Muslims, men and women, for their good actions. At the beginning of the *sūrah,* they were called '*mothers of the believers',* and this motherhood establishes certain duties. Their noble position, which earned them this status, also establishes certain duties. Further duties are also made

obligatory on them because of their relationship o the Prophet. The present passage outlines some of these duties and states the values God wants the Prophet's home, with all its purity, to represent and uphold so as to serve as a beacon of light guiding travellers.

A Choice is Offered

> *Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.' (Verses 28-29)*

The Prophet chose for himself and his household a standard of living which was just about enough to meet their essential needs. The reason for so doing was not that he could not afford a better standard of living. Indeed, enormous tracts of land came under his control, yielding great wealth, and availing him of great riches if he so chose. Yet there were times when a month would pass without a fire being lit for cooking in any of his homes. At the same time, the Prophet was extremely generous when it came to giving gifts and charitable donations. Essentially, then, he made this choice so as to rise above material and worldly needs, and to sincerely seek what God keeps for believers. It was a question of preference. Neither his faith nor the law it lays down required that the Prophet lead such a life of austerity. Comfort and luxury are not disdained in Islam. Indeed, the Prophet did not turn his back on them when they were offered normally, without being sought after. Yet, he neither excessively indulged in them nor was he so preoccupied. We do not find any instruction from the Prophet requiring that any of his followers live the sort of life he chose for himself. He left it entirely o them, should they choose to emulate him in freeing themselves from the pressures of seeking life's comforts.

The Prophet's wives were ordinary women who shared all human feelings and desires. Noble, virtuous and close to the Prophet as they all were, their natural desire for life's comforts remained strong. When they felt that circumstances had changed and, by God's grace, prosperity had replaced poverty in the Muslim society, they spoke to the Prophet about their standard of living. He did not welcome this. In fact it was unpleasant to him, because his noble soul preferred to live without any such preoccupation. He appreciated the freedom and sublimity such a life provides. It was not a matter of whether life's comforts were lawful or not: there was no question of prohibition as Islam made it clear that such comforts were not prohibited for Muslims. It was rather a question of being free from material pressures.

The Prophet was so upset at this turn of events that he did not go out to meet his

Companions. That he stayed away was very hard for them. They, therefore, went to see him, but were not admitted. Imām Aĥmad relates on Jābir's authority: "Abū Bakr went to the Prophet when people were sitting near his door, but he was not admitted. `Umar also went, sought permission to enter but no such permission was given. Later on though, he admitted both Abū Bakr and `Umar. As they went in, they saw the Prophet surrounded by his wives but he was silent. `Umar thought that he should say something to make the Prophet laugh. He said: 'Messenger of God! I wish you had seen how last night my wife was asking me for more money and I thrust my fingers into her neck.' The Prophet laughed heartily and said: 'You *see* them surrounding me asking for more money.' Abū Bakr rose to hit his daughter, `Ā'ishah, while `Umar sought to do the same to Ĥafşah, his daughter. Both said to them: Are you asking the Prophet to give you what he has not?' The Prophet told them not to hit their daughters, and both `Ā'ishah and Ĥafşah said: 'By God! We will never again ask the Prophet for anything he does not have.' God then revealed the verses offering them the choice. The Prophet started with `Ā'ishah saying to her: 'I am going to tell you something which I would like you o consider carefully and consult your parents before you decide.' He then read to her the two verses: "*Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.*" She said to him: 'Would I consult my parents about staying with you? I certainly choose God and His Messenger. However, I would request you nor o mention my choice to any of your other wives.' He said to her: 'God has not sent me to adopt a hard attitude, but He has made me a teacher and a facilitator. If any of them asks me about your choice, I will tell her." [This *ĥadīth* is also related by Muslim on the authority of Zakariyyā ibn Isĥāq, and related in a slightly different wording by al-Bukhārī.]

The Qur'ān defines the principal values in the Islamic concept of human life. These values must be practically reflected in the Prophet's home and in his own private life. His home remains a beacon of light for Muslims throughout human life. Hence it should provide the best and most accurate example of Islamic values.

The two verses gave the Prophet's wives a choice: either world luxuries and life comforts or God, His Messenger and the life to come. No single heart can accommodate two different value systems. The Prophet's wives had already said that they would never again ask the Prophet for what he did nor have. The Qur'ānic verses were revealed to define the principle involved. It is not a question of whether the Prophet has such luxuries or not: it is a question of choosing between God, the Prophet and the life to come on the one hand and the luxuries and adornments of the present life on the other. The Prophet's wives were to choose whether they had worldly treasures at their disposal or their homes were without food. When this decisive choice was offered, they all made their preference clearly and absolutely,

choosing God, the Prophet and success in the life to come. They proved themselves fit for the sublime standard their high position as the Prophet's wives required. One report also mentions that the Prophet was delighted with their choice.

All Were Human

We need o pause a little to reflect on some aspects of this event which defines the Islamic concept of values. It leaves our hearts with no room for hesitation between worldly values and those of the life to come; between the world we live in and the world of heaven. It purges our hearts of any influence that hinders us from purely seeking God's pleasure, to the exclusion of everything else.

From another point of view, the event describes to us the nature of the Prophet's lifestyle, as well as those who lived with him and were closely related to him. The most beautiful thing about this lifestyle is the fact that it was chosen by ordinary people who never lost sight of their human feelings, desires and preferences, despite rising to sublime standards of devotion and dedication. Their human feelings and emotions did not die; they only rose to an exalted level and were purged of impurity while retaining their natural human beauty. Thus, they enabled them o attain the highest standard of perfection possible.

We often err when we give the Prophet and his Companions an untrue or incomplete image that does not consider all their human characteristics and emotions. We think that in this way we put them above what we consider to be a weakness. Our mistake renders the Prophet and his Companions opaque, devoid of their essential human features and characteristics. The human relation between us and them is severed, and we begin to see them as ghosts lacking a tangible reality. We begin to think of them as belonging to a different species: angels or a similar type of creature above human feelings and emotions. In this way they are removed from our lives and if we permit this they will no longer provide us with an example to follow or to be influenced by. When we read the history of the Prophet and his Companions we no longer find in this something for us to emulate, but instead we find ourselves looking at their lives with an awe and admiration that produces only vague feelings without practical effect. We also lose our ability to identify with such great personalities, because we no longer see them as ordinary humans who experienced the same emotions, feelings and reactions as we ourselves experience.

We can clearly understand God's wisdom in assigning His messages to ordinary men to deliver. This task was not assigned to angels or to creatures from any other species. This provides a real bond between the lives of the messengers and the lives of their followers. The latter continue o feel that the messengers' feelings and emotions, exalted as they were, were always those of humans. Thus, they love them

and try to emulate them in the same way as children try o emulate adults.

In the question of the choice offered o the Prophet's wives we note their natural desire for comforts and luxuries. We also see an image of the Prophet's home life, with his wives asking their husband for more money. He is upset, but he does not allow Abū Bakr and `Umar to beat `Ā'ishah and Ĥafşah, their daughters for their requests. The whole question is one of feelings and inclinations, which need to be refined, not suppressed. The question remains at this level until God orders the Prophet to give his wives the choice and they make their free choice without pressure or the suppression of any feelings. That his wives opted for the sublime standard he preferred greatly delighted the Prophet.

We also need to reflect for a moment on what we see of sweet emotion in the Prophet's heart. He shows that he loves `Ā'ishah and that he would love it if she rose to the standard of values God wants for him and his household. He therefore offers her the choice. He wants o help her rise to the sublime, so he asks that she does not make a decision until she has consulted her parents. He knows that her parents would never ask their daughter o leave him. `Ā'ishah does not overlook the Prophet's sweet emotion towards her. She is delighted with it, and she mentions this in her report. In this *ĥadīth* we see the Prophet as a man in love with his young wife, and as someone who would be delighted o see her rise to, and maintain the standard he has adopted for his life. We also see her delighted to recognize her place in her husband's heart, reporting his love and desire to keep her, which is manifested by his request that she consult her parents. We also see the woman in her as she requests him not to tell his other wives of her choice. She wants to be the one who makes that choice, ahead of at least some of them. But we also see the Prophet's greatness as he tells her: 'God has not sent me to adopt a hard attitude, but He made me a teacher and facilitator. If any of them asks me about your choice, I will tell her.' He does not want to deprive any of them of what could help them make the right choice. He is not testing them to see who might fail; rather he is helping those who request help, so that they can rise above worldly attractions.

All these are noble human elements which we must never ignore, suppress or undervalue as we read the Prophet's life story. To understand them as they truly are establishes a strong and active bond between us and the Prophet's person, as well as the personalities of his Companions. We can thus interact with them in a way that motivates us into emulation.

A Unique Position

The *sūrah* then outlines some special features for the Prophet's wives, giving them special privileges and responsibilities, which suit their noble status and their relation

to the Prophet:

> *Wives of the Prophet! If any of you were to be guilty of manifestly immoral conduct, her punishment would be doubled. That is easy for God. But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward, and We have prepared for her most excellent provisions. (Verses 30-31)*

This is a responsibility commensurate with their status as wives of the Prophet and mothers of all believers. Both positions impose on them heavy duties and protect them against immorality. If, for argument's sake, any of them is guilty of some manifestly immoral conduct, she would deserve double punishment. This relates to the responsibility associated with their position and status. "*That is easy for God.*" It is in no way more difficult as a result of their status as the Prophet's wives, as some people might think. "*But if any of you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does good deeds, We shall grant her a double reward,*" just as We double her punishment in the opposite situation. "*And We have prepared for her most excellent provisions.*" (Verse 31) It is all ready, waiting for her, by God's grace.

The *sūrah* then explains what distinguishes the Prophet's wives from all other women, outlining their duties in dealing with other people, worshipping God, their conduct at home, and the special care God takes of the Prophet's noble household:

> *Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women: if you truly fear God, do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire; but speak in an appropriate manner. And stay quietly in your homes, and do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance. Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakāt, and pay heed to God and His Messenger. God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully. Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware. (Verses 32-34)*

At the dawn of Islam, Arabian society looked upon women as a means of enjoyment and physical fulfilment. In this, it was like most other societies at the time. From a purely human angle, Arabian society simply looked upon women as inferior. Islam also found in Arabian society much confusion in sexual relations. The family system, moreover, was unsound, as already explained in this *sūrah.* Moreover, sex was looked at in a carnal way that disregarded beauty and purity and endorsed a wild, physical approach. This is clear in pre-Islamic poetry which focused on the woman's body, and expressed carnal thoughts.

Islam began to change the social attitude towards women, emphasizing the human aspect in relations between the two sexes. It is not merely a physical relation

that seeks to satisfy a carnal urge. It is rather the meeting of two people, created from one soul, connected with a tie based on affection and mercy, and bringing both of them comfort and reassurance. Their meeting has a goal related o God's will that brought man into being, gave the earth its population and assigned to man the charge of taking care of the earth.

Islam also paid attention to family ties, making the family the central unit of its social structure. The precursor for this was a caring home where future generations start life and find a healthy atmosphere free from negative influences that contaminate feelings and ideas. Family law constitutes a sizeable portion of Islamic legislation and takes up a considerable number of Qur'ānic verses. In addition to enacting legislation, Islam continually directs its followers to the need to strengthen this societal base, particularly ensuring its spiritual purity, keeping relations between the sexes clean, respectable and free from vulgarity, even in the gratification of sexual urges. In fact, the organization of society and family matters takes up a large part of the present *sūrah.* The passage we are currently discussing now includes an address to the Prophet's wives giving them instructions concerning their relations with other people, their own status and their relations with God. This address also includes a gentle directive expressed in fine style: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33)

What are the means to remove what is loathsome and ensure the purity of those women married to the Prophet, living in his home and who were in any case the purest women in the whole world? Needless to say, other women are in greater need of such means.

Initially, the *sūrah* makes them aware of their high positions and the advantages they have over all other women, making it clear that this is unique to them and cannot be shared by any other women in history. Hence, it is their duty to ensure that they can meet the obligations attendant with their status: *"Wives of the Prophet! You are unlike any other women, if you truly fear God."* (Verse 32) They are told that their unique position is dependent on their being God-fearing. It is not their mere relation to the Prophet that gives them their status. Hence, they have to be up to the task, doing what this entails.

This is the plain truth that forms the basis of this religion of Islam. It is stated in absolute clarity by the Prophet as he addresses his own family, telling them that their close relation to him should not make them oblivious of their duties; he cannot benefit them anything unless they redeem themselves through their own actions: "Fāṭimah bint Muĥammad! Ṣafiyyah bint `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! All you of the `Abd al-Muṭṭalib clan! I can in no way benefit you against God. You can ask me whatever you wish of my own money." [Related by Muslim.] Another version quotes the Prophet as broadening his address so as to include first the entire Quraysh tribe, and

narrowing it gradually o his own small clan and finishing it by addressing his own daughter: "You the Quraysh people! Save yourselves from hell. You the Ka`b people! Save yourselves from hell. You the Hāshim clan! Save yourselves from the fire. You the `Abd al-Muṭṭalib clan! Save yourselves from the fire. Fāṭimah bint Muĥammad! Save yourself from the fire. By God! I can benefit you nothing against God. However, you are my relations and I will honour this relation and foster it." [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

Having outlined their status which they earn through being God- fearing, the *sūrah* outlines the means by which God removes what is loathsome from the members of the Prophet's household: *"do not speak too soft, lest any who is sick at heart should be moved with desire."* (Verse 32) When they speak to strangers, they must not use the sort of softness in their speech which arouses men's desires and make those who are sick at heart feel their urge.

It is pertinent to ask who are those women whom God issues this warning? They are the Prophet's own wives and the mothers of all believers. Our minds cannot imagine that anyone would be tempted to think of them in terms of physical desire. When then is this warning issued? During the Prophet's own lifetime and in the best of human societies. However, God who created men and women knows that when a woman speaks too softly, with yielding tones, she touches upon man's desire and awakens his urge. He also knows that in all societies there are people who are sick at heart, and who think of every woman in carnal terms, even though she may be married to the Prophet and has the status of a mother of all believers. God is perfectly aware that loathsomeness can only be purged when the causes that awaken desire are removed.

How about our own society which deliberately awakens desire and plays on it? Everything around us aims to bring sexual desire into full play, and encourages promiscuity. In modern society, women are encouraged to use speech, appearance, attractions, in order to move men to desire and let loose their urge. How can purity find a place in this polluted atmosphere when people's movements, speech and appearance serve to encourage the very loathsome thing that God wants to remove from His chosen servants?

"But speak in an appropriate manner." (Verse 32) They were first ordered not o speak in a soft way; now they are ordered to confine their talk to what is appropriate. Indeed the subject matter of a conversation may encourage certain thoughts. Therefore, there must not be in the conversation between men and women anything that leads to what is improper. This applies to the tone of voice, jokes and ordinary chatting. We should remember that it is God, the Creator who knows His creation and what affects and influences them, who gives these instructions to the Prophet's wives who were already exemplary in their purity. They were required to observe

these instructions with the people of their own society, which was the best human society ever.

"*And stay quietly in your homes.*" (Verse 33) The Arabic word used here, *qarna,* connotes having weight that facilitates stability. This order does not mean staying permanently at home so as not to go out at all. It only indicates that to be at home is the normal situation, and whatever else is the exception that meets a need. In the home a woman finds herself as fits her nature: sound, undistorted and uncontaminated. She fulfils her role without being overburdened with duties God has not equipped her to fulfil.

> In order to give the family home its proper atmosphere that is suited for the upbringing of young children, God made it a binding duty of the man o support the woman financially. Thus, the mother has the energy, time and freedom to look after her young ones and give the family its congenial and relaxed atmosphere. A mother who has to work in order to earn her living, giving her job her time and energy cannot bring freshness and a pleasant ambience into her family home. She cannot give her children what is due to them of care and attention. The homes of women who go out to work every day are akin o hotels in their atmosphere. They have but little of the pleasant atmosphere of a proper family home. In fact a home can only be established by a woman; its pleasant congeniality can only be ensured by a wife, and its tenderness and care can only be generated by a mother. A wife and mother who spends her time and energy, physical and spiritual, at work cannot bring anything into her home other than her tiredness and boredom.
>
> When a woman goes out to work, that constitutes a disaster for her home, which may be allowed by necessity. That people should resort to it when they have no need for it is a setback affecting souls and minds at a time when many social ills are encountered.[3]

When a woman goes out frequently, for something other than work, such as visiting places of entertainment, clubs and the like, then this represents a setback for humanity. During the Prophet's lifetime, women used to go to the mosque, as there was no directive to prohibit them from so doing. However, that was a time when moral standards were high and most people were God-fearing. Moreover, a woman went out for prayer, and no one could recognize her. She revealed nothing of her charms. Nevertheless, after the Prophet died `Ā'ishah preferred that they did not go to the mosque. An authentic *ĥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim quotes `Ā'ishah as saying: "Muslim women used to attend Fajr, or the dawn prayer with God's

[3] Sayyid Quṭb, *Al-Salām al-`Ālamī wa'l-Islām,* or 'Islam and World Peace', Cairo and Beirut, 6th edition, 1982, pp. 69-70.

Messenger and then go back home wrapped in their outer garments, unrecognizable in the darkness." Another report quotes her as saying: "Had God's Messenger seen what women have introduced into their behaviour, he would have disallowed them in mosques, just as Israelite women were disallowed." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

What could women have introduced into their lives during `Ā'ishah's lifetime to make her think that God's Messenger would have not allowed them in the mosques? How does this compare with what we see in our own time?

"And do not display your charms as they used to display them in the old days of pagan ignorance." (Verse 33) This applies when a woman needs to go out, and it follows the order o stay quietly at home. In pre-Islamic days in Arabia, women used to display their charms, but all reports about such displays appear trifling, or even decent when compared with how women reveal their charms in our present climate. Mujāhid defines it as women walking alongside men and among them, while Qatādah says that they used to walk in a coquettish way. Muqātil ibn Ĥayyān, on the other hand, says that a display of charms meant that a woman would throw her head cover over her head without tightening it to cover her necklace, earrings or neck. Indeed, all this could be seen. Ibn Kathīr mentioned that a woman could walk among men, revealing her chest. She might also reveal her neck, plaits and earrings. Hence, God ordered female believers to cover themselves.

Such were the displays in ignorant Arabia and with which the Qur'ān dealt, purging the Muslim community from their effects and removing the elements that could lead to immoral behaviour. In so doing, the Qur'ān elevated thoughts, manners and feelings and it refined the senses of the Muslim community.

We say, 'senses' because the type of taste which admires the naked human body is vulgar, uncouth and lacks refinement. It is certainly less civilized than one which admires the beauty of modest appearance and what it indicates of beauty of soul, feeling and morality. This is a true measure of civilized human standards. Modesty has its own refined beauty which cannot be appreciated by people with coarse taste who only admire the naked flesh.

The Qur'ānic text speaks of such displays of women's charms as belonging o *'the old days of pagan ignorance,'* using the Arabic term *jāhiliyyah* which, in Islamic usage, refers to pre-Islamic days. Thus, it implies that displaying physical charms belongs to the old days of ignorance. People who have left such ignorance behind and attained a higher standard of ideals and concepts will ignore such vulgarity.

We need to explain here that the term *jāhiliyyah* describes social conditions and a philosophy of life, not a particular period of time. Therefore, *jāhiliyyah* could exist at any time and in any society. Hence we can say that we live today in a period of blind

jāhiliyyah, which reflects vulgar tastes and unrefined concepts, pulling humanity to a humiliating and lowly level of civilization. When society accepts such standards, it cannot enjoy purity or blessings. Only a society that adopts the means of purification which the Prophet and the members of his household were the first to practise will attain such purity and blessings. The Qur'ān directs the Prophet's wives to these means, and then turns their eyes towards the sublime, giving them light and helping them to rise to the high standards their bond with God requires: *"Attend regularly to your prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, i.e. zakāt, and pay heed to God and His Messenger."* (Verse 33)

Worship is not divorced from social and moral behaviour. It is indeed the means by which to attain those high standards. The tie with God is indispensable, because it gives strength, purity of heart and immunity to social pressures. With such a tie, a believer feels that he follows better guidance than his community, and that he can lead others to the light he sees, rather than following their lead to the darkness they live in. In fact, mankind sinks into the ignorance of *jāhiliyyah* whenever they deviate from God's path.

Islam is a fully integrated whole that includes rituals, manners, morality, systems and laws, placing them all within the framework of faith. Each aspect has its role in putting this faith into practice. They work in full harmony. It is such integrated unity and harmony that provides the overall structure of Islam in practice. Hence, the order to attend to prayer, pay *zakāt* and obey God and His Messenger comes as the last of the moral and behavioural directives given to members of the Prophet's household. In fact, none of those directives can work fully in practice without worship and obedience. In fact, all this serves a definite purpose: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33)

The way this statement is phrased imparts gentle and tender feelings. They are described here as *'members of the household',* without defining which household. In the text's translation we added in brackets the word 'Prophet' for explanation. By omitting it, the Qur'ān refers to it as if it is the only household in the world that deserves to be called as such. Once the word 'household', or *bayt* in Arabic, is used, then it has been defined. A similar usage applies to the Ka`bah, God's house. It is often called *al-bayt,* or 'The House'. Hence this reference o the Prophet's household adds an element of special honour.

The *sūrah* says: *"God only wants to remove all that is loathsome from you, you members of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you fully."* (Verse 33) We note the very kindly and gentle approach adopted here. It tells them that God in all His majesty is the One to ensure their purification and the removal of all that is loathsome from them. This is direct care from God shown to the members of this household. We appreciate this

care more fully when we remember that it is said by none other than God Almighty, who said to the universe, 'Be', and it came into existence, and who is in control of everything, the Lord of all majesty and glory. Furthermore, He says this in His book which is recited on high and recited in every place on earth, at all times, by millions in their devotion. Furthermore, these directives are given as a means of purification and removing what is loathsome. These are goals achieved by means which people adopt in their practical lives. This is the method Islam prefers, combining feelings of consciousness of God with action and behaviour. Together they reflect Islamic life and achieve its goals in human society.

These directives to the Prophet's wives are concluded, as they started, with a reminder of their high position and special privileges over other women. This they earn by their relation to God's Messenger and the grace with which God has favoured them when He made their homes the place where revelation is bestowed from on high, providing light, guidance and wisdom: "*Bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's revelations and wisdom; for God is unfathomable in His wisdom, all aware.*" (Verse 34) That is certainly a great privilege which is fully appreciated once it is mentioned. We should remember that this reminder is given at the conclusion of the address that started with offering the Prophet's wives a choice between the luxuries of this life on the one hand and God, His Messenger and the life to come on the other. This helps us o appreciate the great favour God has granted them and to recognize the triviality of the present life with all its attractions and luxuries.

Values in Islamic Life

When it comes o the purification of the Muslim community and establishing its life on the basis of Islamic values, men and women are equal and have the same role. Therefore, the *sūrah* gives these in detail:

> *For all men and women who have submitted themselves to God, all believing men and believing women, all truly devout men and truly devout women, all men and women who are true to their word, all men and women who are patient in adversity, all men and women who humble themselves before God, all men and women who give in charity, all men and women who fast, all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who always remember God – for them all God has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. (Verse 35)*

These qualities grouped together in this one verse work together to form a Muslim's character. These are: self surrender to God, faith, devotion, being true to one's word, patience in adversity, humility before God, being charitable, fasting, being mindful of one's chastity, and remembering God at all times. Each quality has

its own role to play in a Muslim's life.

The first two qualities are expressed in the two Arabic words *islām* and *īmān,* which mean 'submission' and 'belief' respectively. There is a strong interrelation between the two, or we can say that both are two sides of the same coin. Submission is the outcome of belief and true belief gives rise to submission. 'Devotion' means obedience that results from submission and belief, though inner acceptance, not external pressure. 'Truthfulness' is the quality essential for every Muslim. Whoever does not possess this quality cannot be within the ranks of the Muslim community. God says in the Qur'ān: *"It is only those who do not believe in God's revelations that invent falsehood."* (16: 105) Thus, a liar is expelled from the ranks of the community which always remains true to its word, the Muslim community.

The next quality is 'patience in adversity'. In fact a Muslim cannot fulfil the requirements and duties of his faith without this quality. Islam needs patience in adversity at every step. Muslims have to be patient, resisting desire, bearing the harm inflicted by others, overcoming impediments, patiently addressing weaknesses and crookedness in other people, and going through the tests of either an easy life or hardship. Essentially, both are difficult predicaments.

'Humility before God' is an inner quality that reflects how we feel God's majesty deep in our hearts and how truly and willingly we obey and fear Him. 'Being charitable' indicates purification from greed and self indulgence. It also reflects care for others and kindness to them, as well as mutual security within the Muslim community. It is an act of gratitude to God for what He gives us and represents our discharging our duty on wealth.

'Fasting' is considered a quality because of its regular and consistent nature. It reflects an attitude that rises above the essential needs of life, enhancing man's willpower and giving supremacy within man's constitution to human qualities. 'Being mindful of one's chastity' involves not only the element of purity but also the proper control of the most profound and powerful desire in man. In fact, no one can achieve such proper control except one who is a God-fearing believer and who seeks God's help. This quality also regulates relations between people and aims to elevate the meeting between man and woman to a level that is higher than that of the urge of the flesh. It makes this meeting subject to God's law and serves the purpose of creating both sexes to populate the earth and build human life on it.

'Remembering God at all times' provides the link between all human activity and man's faith. It makes man mindful of God at every moment.

He thus constantly retains his strong bond with Him. Moreover, his mind and heart beam with happiness and the light of life. Those who reflect all these qualities, essential as they are for the building of Islamic character, are the ones for whom "*God*

has prepared forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward." (Verse 35)

In conclusion we should note how the *sūrah* gives an account of the qualities of all Muslims, men and women, after it paid special attention at the beginning of this part to the Prophet's wives. Women are mentioned side by side with men, as part of the Islamic effort to give women their rightful position in society and establish society's attitude to women on the right basis. In their bond with God and in the Islamic duties of purification, worship and practical conduct, men and women are seen to be in the same position.

4
Fearing Social Reaction

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا مُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَى ٱللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُۥٓ أَمْرًا أَن يَكُونَ لَهُمُ ٱلْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ ۗ وَمَن يَعْصِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَٰلًا مُّبِينًا ﴿٣٦﴾

Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error. (36)

وَإِذْ تَقُولُ لِلَّذِىٓ أَنْعَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَأَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِ أَمْسِكْ عَلَيْكَ زَوْجَكَ وَٱتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ وَتُخْفِى فِى نَفْسِكَ مَا ٱللَّهُ مُبْدِيهِ وَتَخْشَى ٱلنَّاسَ وَٱللَّهُ أَحَقُّ أَن تَخْشَىٰهُ ۖ فَلَمَّا قَضَىٰ زَيْدٌ مِّنْهَا وَطَرًا زَوَّجْنَٰكَهَا لِكَىْ لَا يَكُونَ عَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ حَرَجٌ فِىٓ أَزْوَٰجِ أَدْعِيَآئِهِمْ إِذَا قَضَوْا۟ مِنْهُنَّ وَطَرًا ۚ وَكَانَ أَمْرُ ٱللَّهِ مَفْعُولًا ﴿٣٧﴾

You did say to the one whom God had shown favour and you had shown favour, 'Hold on o your wife and have fear of God.' And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted o bring o light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe. Then, when Zayd had come o the end of his union with her, We gave her o you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come o the end of their union with them. God's will must be fulfilled. (37)

مَّا كَانَ عَلَى ٱلنَّبِىِّ مِنْ حَرَجٍ فِيمَا فَرَضَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُۥ ۖ سُنَّةَ ٱللَّهِ فِى ٱلَّذِينَ خَلَوْا۟ مِن قَبْلُ ۚ وَكَانَ أَمْرُ ٱللَّهِ قَدَرًا مَّقْدُورًا ﴿٣٨﴾

No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him. Such was God's way with those who went before him. God's will is always destiny absolute. (38)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَلِّغُونَ رِسَٰلَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَيَخْشَوْنَهُۥ وَلَا يَخْشَوْنَ أَحَدًا إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ حَسِيبًا ﴿٣٩﴾

Those are the ones who convey God's messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe. Sufficient is God to reckon all things. (39)

مَّا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَآ أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ وَلَـٰكِن رَّسُولَ ٱللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ ٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٤٠﴾

Muĥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets. God has indeed full knowledge of everything. (40)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱذْكُرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ذِكْرًا كَثِيرًا ﴿٤١﴾

Believers! Remember God always, (41)

وَسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

and glorify Him morning and evening. (42)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُصَلِّى عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَلَـٰٓئِكَتُهُۥ لِيُخْرِجَكُم مِّنَ ٱلظُّلُمَـٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ ۚ وَكَانَ بِٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحِيمًا ﴿٤٣﴾

It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers. (43)

تَحِيَّتُهُمْ يَوْمَ يَلْقَوْنَهُۥ سَلَـٰمٌ ۚ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَرِيمًا ﴿٤٤﴾

On the day when they meet Him, they will be greeted with 'Peace', and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward. (44)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِىُّ إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَـٰكَ شَـٰهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٤٥﴾

Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a hearer of good news and a warner; (45)

وَدَاعِيًا إِلَى ٱللَّهِ بِإِذْنِهِۦ وَسِرَاجًا مُّنِيرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

one who calls people to God by His leave and a light-giving beacon. (46)

وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِأَنَّ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ فَضْلًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٤٧﴾

Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them. (47)

وَلَا تُطِعِ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ وَٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ وَدَعْ أَذَىٰهُمْ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلًا ﴿٤٨﴾

Do not yield o the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (48)

Overview

This passage represents another stage in reorganizing the Muslim community on the basis of Islamic teachings, addressing in particular the adoption system o which reference was made at the beginning of the *sūrah* and annulling its effects. God has willed that His Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), be the one who undertakes in practice the annulment of this tradition. The Arabs used o treat the divorcee of an adopted son in the same way as if he was one's own son, i.e. she was permanently forbidden in marriage to the father. They could not accept that a woman who had previously been married to an adopted son was lawful for them to marry and this situation held until there was a precedent giving practical application to the new rule. Hence, the Prophet was chosen o undertake this new responsibility in addition to his burden of delivering God's message. When we examine this more closely, it is immediately apparent that no one other than the Prophet could have discharged this very heavy responsibility, facing as he did the community with an action that challenged its accepted norms. We also see that the Qur'ānic comment on this situation is long, stressing the believers' bond with God and His Messenger and clarifying the role of the Prophet in their community. All this is stated so as to make things easier for people to accept and make them more willing to implement God's orders outlining this new social system.

Before this specific case is discussed, a rule is put in place giving God and His Messenger all authority over the Muslims' lives. Once God and His Messenger decide a matter, a believer has no choice but to submit to that order and carry it out. This again demonstrates just how difficult it was to take an action that was contrary to tradition.

Background Cases

> *Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error. (Verse 36)*

Reports suggest that this verse was revealed in respect of Zaynab bint Jaĥsh when the Prophet wanted to remove all social considerations dividing people into different social classes. These strata were inherited by the Muslim community from their pre-Islamic days. The Prophet now, however, wanted to emphasize the full equality of all people, making the only factor that distinguishes between them their fear of God and good action. Up until this point, former slaves that had been freed were placed in a class lower than that of their masters. One such former slave was Zayd ibn Ĥārithah

whom the Prophet had adopted.

The Prophet wanted to establish the full equality among people by giving Zayd a wife of noble birth, one from his own Hāshimite clan, and his own cousin, Zaynab bint Jaĥsh. In this way, the Prophet himself would remove class distinction within his own family. He had realized that class distinctions were so deeply entrenched in society that they could only be removed by his own practical example. His action would be the catalyst enabling humanity to follow in his footsteps.

In his discussion of this verse Ibn Kathīr quotes Ibn `Abbās's report: "The Prophet wanted to choose a wife for Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, and he went into Zaynab bint Jaĥsh's home and proposed to her that she married him. She said: I do not wish to marry him.' The Prophet said: 'Do not say that. Marry him.' She said: 'Messenger of God! I will consider it.' As they were engaged in conversation God revealed this verse to His Messenger: *'Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter.'* (Verse 36) She asked the Prophet: 'Messenger of God! Are you happy for me to marry him?' He replied: 'Yes.' She said: 'Then I will not disobey God's Messenger. I will marry him."

Another report by Ibn `Abbās mentions that Zaynab had a sharp element in her character and that when the Prophet proposed to her that she marry Zayd, she replied: 'I belong to a nobler family than his.' Then God revealed this verse in full. Other early scholars, for example, Mujāhid, Qatādah and Muqātil also confirm that this verse was revealed in connection with Zaynab's marriage to Zayd.

Ibn Kathīr includes in his commentary a different report attributed to `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Zayd ibn Aslam: "This verse was revealed in connection with the case of Umm Kulthūm bint `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayţ who was the first woman to migrate to Madinah after the signing of the al-Ĥudaybiyah Peace Treaty. She offered herself to the Prophet as a gift. He said, 'I accept,' then he married her to Zayd ibn Ĥārithah[most probably after he had divorced Zaynab], but she and her brothers were displeased. Her brother said: 'We wanted her to be married to God's Messenger, but he married her to his former slave.' This verse was then revealed: *Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter.'* (Verse 36) This is a specific order, but the *sūrah* includes one which is more general in its import: *'The Prophet has more claim on the believers than they have on their own selves.'* (Verse 6)

Imām Aĥmad mentions a third case reported by Anas: "The Prophet wanted to give Julaybīb, a former slave, a woman from the Anşār as a wife and he proposed this to her father. The man said: 'I will consult her mother.' The Prophet said: 'That is fine.' The man went o his wife and told her what the Prophet proposed. She said: 'How come! The Prophet could not find us anyone better than Julaybīb when we

have refused better men.' The girl was in her room and heard the conversation. As her father was about to go to tell the Prophet, the girl said to her parents: 'Do you want to refuse what the Prophet has suggested to you? If the Prophet is happy with the man, then accept him.' Her words came as a relief to her parents, and they agreed with her. Her father then went to the Prophet and said: 'If you are happy with him, we accept him.' The Prophet replied: 'I am certainly happy with him.' The Prophet then married the girl to Julaybīb. Some time later, Julaybīb joined a military expedition, but was killed in action, though around him were found several unbelievers whom he had killed during the fighting." Anas also reports: "I saw this woman later: she belongs to one of the most charitable families in Madinah."

These reports relate the revelation of the present verse to Zayd's marriage to Zaynab or to Umm Kulthūm bint `Uqbah. We have added the third report about Julaybīb because it explains the sort of social environment Islam wanted to remove by assigning this task o the Prophet. This was part of his responsibility to reorganize the Muslim community on the basis of Islam, its constitution and value system.

Establishing a Principle

However, the import of the verse is much wider than just any one case. This because it also relates o the annulment of the effects of adoption, the permission to marry the divorcees of formerly adopted sons, and the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab after Zayd divorced her. This last situation attracted much talk at the time. In fact, some people who are hostile to Islam still use it to criticize the Prophet (peace be upon him) and to fabricate legends about him. Whether the verse was revealed in connection with the cases mentioned earlier or with the Prophet's own marriage to Zaynab, it nonetheless states a rule which is far more general than any specific case and one which has a profound effect on Muslims' lives.

This principle of the Islamic faith was, as a result, clearly established and deeply rooted in the hearts of the Muslim community, and it moulded their feelings. In essence, this rule is such that Muslims have no control over anything that belongs to them. They and all that they own belong o God, and He chooses for them whatever He pleases. Each and every individual is only a tiny part of the universe which follows the overall law God has set for it. The Creator of the universe who controls it determines their affairs and assigns to them their roles in the drama, stipulating all their actions on this universal stage. They cannot choose the role they play, because they do not know the full extent of the drama. Nor can they choose an action they prefer, because this may not fit in with the overall role assigned to them. They neither wrote the play nor do they own the stage. They are merely commissioned actors who earn their wages for their actions. The end result, however, is not their

concern.

When this element of the Islamic faith had been established in the hearts of the first Muslim community, they surrendered themselves truly and completely to God, leaving nothing for themselves. This gave them harmony with the nature of the universe, and brought their actions into line with its course. Thus, they moved in their own orbits, just like stars and planets in theirs, never trying to move out, accelerate or slow down. They willingly accepted everything God willed for them, realizing deep down that it is God's will that determines every event and every situation. This acceptance gave them comfort and reassurance. Gradually they stopped being surprised or shocked when something happened to them by God's will. They neither felt panic which needs reassurance, nor pain which needs patience. They simply received God's will as something they expected, causing them neither astonishment nor taking them aback.

They no longer wished to hasten the turn of events so as to accomplish something they desired, not even when their desires focused on achieving victory for their faith. They simply accepted that God's will would take them wherever He willed, while they remained content and satisfied. They laid down their lives, strove hard and sacrificed their wealth, willingly, patiently, pressing no favours and feeling no sorrow, firmly believing that they were only doing what God willed them to do and that ultimately what took place was only what God willed, and further that everything occurs at the right time. Thus they submitted themselves completely to God, letting His hand lead them along the way, feeling safe, secure and trusting that whatever the outcome it would be the right one.

In all this, they only did what they could, withholding nothing, wasting neither time nor effort, and not overburdening themselves or trying to go beyond their human abilities. They neither claimed what they did not have nor did they profess what they could not do.

This balance between absolute submission to God's will, exerting all efforts and energies, and not trying to exceed abilities was the distinctive mark of that first Muslim community which enabled it to successfully fulfil the responsibility their faith assigned to them. This was a trust that is too heavy even for mountains to bear. In fact, when this basic element of Islamic faith found its root in the hearts of the first Muslim community, it was able to achieve the miraculous within its own lifespan and in the life of mankind in general. In short, its efforts yielded plentiful and sweet fruit in a very short period of time.

The great transformation that took place within their own souls was indeed the great miracle that no man can ever produce. It only happened by God's direct will. Numerous verses in the Qur'ān refer to this truth. God says: "*Indeed, you cannot guide*

aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills." (28: 56) *"It is not for you to make people follow the right guidance. It is God who guides whom He wills."* (2: 272) *"All true guidance is God's guidance." (3: 73)* This is the meaning of guidance both in its essence and in its broadest sense. It represents man's guidance about his place in this universe, one which gives his action harmony with what takes place elsewhere in the universe. Human efforts will not achieve their full results until people genuinely accept guidance in this sense, reassured that God's will controls everything.

Let us read again the verse that led to this long discussion: *"Whenever God and His Messenger have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or a believing woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter. Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger strays far into error."* (Verse 36) We see now that it has a far broader import than any particular event that might have led to its revelation. It establishes the most fundament al principle in the Islamic code.

Zaynab's Marriage

The *sūrah* then refers to the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaĥsh and the rulings and directives that preceded or followed it:

> *You did say to the one to whom God had shown favour and you had shown favour, 'Hold on to your wife and have fear of God.' And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted to bring to light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe. Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. God's will must be fulfilled. No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him. Such was God's way with those who went before him. God's will is always destiny absolute. Those are the ones who convey God's messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe. Sufficient is God to reckon all things. Muĥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but is God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets. God has indeed fill knowledge of everything. (Verses 37-40)*

Clear orders were given early in the *sūrah* prohibiting adoption and requiring that adopted children be called by their own fathers' names, returning family relations to their normal structure: *"He does not make your adopted sons truly your sons. These are only words you utter with your mouths, but God says the truth and He alone shows the right path. Call them by their fathers' names; that is more just in God's sight. If do not know who their fathers are, then treat them as your brethren in faith and your proteges. You shall not be blamed if you make a mistake, but for what your hearts intend. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verses 4-5) However, adoption had its effects in the practical

life of the Arabian society, and the annulment of these practical effects was not going to be as easy as the prohibition of adoption. Social traditions have a strong hold on people. Hence why practical examples are needed to serve as precedents. Initially too such precedents meet with a hostile reception.

We have already stated that the Prophet married his formerly adopted son, Zayd ibn Ĥārithah, who used to be called Zayd ibn Muĥammad, to Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, whose mother was the Prophet's own paternal aunt. The Prophet wanted to achieve through this marriage the removal of class distinctions as also implementation of the Qur'ānic principle: *"Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing."* (49: 13) He wanted to give this new Islamic value practical endorsement.

God's will then dictated that the Prophet should undertake the annulment of the effects of adoption himself, by marrying Zayd's divorcee. He was to confront society with this action, which no man could undertake despite the earlier prohibition against adoption. Therefore, God informed His Messenger that Zayd would be divorcing Zaynab and that he would marry her, and all to fulfil God's purpose. By this time, relations between Zayd and Zaynab were troubled, the parties themselves aware that their marriage would not last long.

Time after time, Zayd complained to the Prophet that his life with Zaynab was not a happy one, saying that he could not carry on with her. Brave as he was in clearly and unhesitatingly confronting his people in matters of faith, the Prophet felt that the burden of Zaynab's situation was too heavy for him to carry. He was uneasy about confronting people with the practical destruction of their old adoption tradition. Zayd was also very close to the Prophet.[4] Therefore, he said to Zayd: *"Hold on to your wife and have fear of God."* (Verse 37) In so doing, he was delaying this serious challenge to social norms: *"And thus you would hide in your heart that which God wanted to bring to light. You stood in awe of people, whereas it was God alone of whom you should have stood in awe."* (Verse 37) The Prophet knew that God would eventually bring it all to light, just as he knew through God's inspiration that it would take place. It was, thus, not a clear order from God. Had it been so, he would not have hesitated, not delayed for a moment. He would have declared it on the spot no matter what consequences he might have expected. Instead, it was simply an inspiration countered by the outcome he feared would take place. He thus waited until it was God's will for it to happen, for Zayd to divorce Zaynab with neither of them paying any thought o what would happen next. The prevailing tradition considered Zaynab as divorced by Muĥammad's son, and as such she was permanently unlawful for

[4] The verse mentions that Zayd was granted favours by God and His Messenger. God gave him the blessings of being a Muslim, and close to the Prophet who loved him better than any other man. Furthermore, the Prophet did him the favour of setting him free, and of bringing him tip.

Muĥammad to marry. Up to this point, marriage between a man and the divorcee of his former adopted son was still unlawful. Changes to this rule had to wait until the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab, so that it could be practically established, despite people's reluctance.

These facts refute all contrary reports upheld by people hostile to Islam, in the past as well as in the present, and who have fabricated all sorts of legends around the situation.

The whole thing was exactly as God said: *"When Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for marrying the spouses of their adopted sons when the latter have come to the end of their union with them."* (Verse 37) This was, then, one of the heavy burdens the Prophet had o bear in connection with his message. Extremely uneasy, he had to face society with it. Indeed he was reluctant to so confront people, even though he had no hesitation whatsoever in confronting them with the essence of faith based on God's oneness, or with his denunciation of false deities and alleged partners with God, or with criticizing their forefathers.

"God's will must be fulfilled." (Verse 37) It cannot be overturned. It just comes about and nothing can stop it. Therefore, the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab took place after she had completed her waiting period. He then sent Zayd, her former husband and the person he loved most, to carry his proposal o her.

Anas reports: "When Zaynab finished her waiting period, the Prophet said o Zayd ibn Ĥārithah: 'Go and propose to her on my behalf.' He went to her home and saw her making her dough. He said: When I saw her I was in so much awe that I could not look at her, and say that God's Messenger wished to marry her. Therefore, I turned my back on her and, looking away, I said: Zaynab! I have happy news for you. God's Messenger has sent me to propose to you.' She said: 'I will do nothing until I have consulted my Lord.' She then went to pray. The Qur'ānic verse was revealed, and the Prophet came and entered her home without knocking." [Related by Muslim, Aĥmad and al-Nasā'ī.] Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik that "Zaynab used to take pride among the Prophet's other wives, saying to them: 'It was your families that gave you in marriage while it was God Himself who, from over the seventh heaven, gave me in marriage.'"

To be expected, the matter did not pass easily. Rather, it came as a big surprise to the whole Muslim community, while the hypocrites were quick to circulate their allegations that the Prophet had 'married his son's wife'. The question, however, was that of establishing a new principle. Therefore, the Qur'ān emphasized this and removed its strange aspects: *"No blame whatsoever attaches to the Prophet for doing what God has ordained for him."* (Verse 38) It was God who ordained that the Prophet

should marry Zaynab and abolish the Arabian tradition that prohibited marriage to a former wife of an adopted son. Since God ordained this, no blame attaches to the Prophet. He was not the first prophet to find himself in such a position: *"Such was God's way with those who went before him."* (Verse 38) This, then, comes to pass in accordance with God's consistent law which is not subject to people's ideas which in any case lack sound basis. *"God's will is always destiny absolute."* It will always be done, unhindered by anything or anyone. It runs according to God's wisdom to achieve the goal He sets out.

This rule also applied to earlier messengers: *"Those are the ones who convey God's messages and stand in awe of Him, and hold none but God in awe."* (Verse 39) When God commands them to do something, they are not swayed in some other direction by other people: indeed the latter are of no importance. They fear no one other than God who Charged them with the task of delivering His message and putting it into action: *"Sufficient is God to reckon all things."* (Verse 39) It is He who holds them to account. They are accountable to no one else.

"Muĥammad is not the father of any one of your men." (Verse 40) Zaynab was not his son's wife, and Zayd was not his son; he was Ĥārithah's son. Hence, when the matter is looked at from the angle of reality, it carries no blame whatsoever. Muĥammad was in the same relation o all Muslims, including Zayd ibn Ĥārithah: it is a relation between a prophet and his community. He is *"God's Messenger and the seal of all prophets."* (Verse 40) He thus puts in place God's permanent law to be applied by all mankind for the rest of time. *"God has indeed full knowledge of everything."* (Verse 40) He knows what suits humanity and sets its life on the best course. He has ordained that the Prophet act in accordance with His wisdom and knowledge. Furthermore, He has set in motion the laws and regulations that best serve people's interests and bring them happiness.

From Darkness into Light

The *sūrah* goes on to establish this last meaning in the hearts of believers, keeping alive their relation with God who ordained whatever He willed for His Messenger and chose for the Muslim community what brought about their every good, replacing the darkness with light:

> *Believers! Remember God always, and glorify Him morning and evening. It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers. On the day when they meet Him, they will he greeted with 'Peace; and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward. (Verses 41-44)*

Remembering God means that one's heart is alive to God's remembrance, not the mere mention of His name. One should always be careful in whatever one does so as to remain within what God permits. To attend regularly to prayer is part of remembering God. In fact there are many *aĥādīth* and reports that almost equate God's remembrance with attending to prayer. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If a man wakes his wife up at night and they offer two *rak`ahs* of night prayer, they will be considered that night as among those who remember God always." [Related by Abū Dāwūd, Al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.]

God's remembrance though is broader than prayer. It includes every way in which a person is fully conscious of his Lord, whether his tongue moves to mention Him or not. What we are referring to here is a consciousness that motivates to action. A human heart remains lost or perplexed until it establishes its link with God, remembering Him and feeling secure in His care. It then knows the way to follow, the method to implement, and how to go about all this. It is for this reason that the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* repeatedly urge people to remember God. The Qur'ān often links this to different times and situations in which man finds himself, so that these serve as reminders for him not to neglect this duty: *"Believers! Remember God always, and glorify Him morning and evening."* (Verses 41-42)

The early morning and the end of the day have much that urges human hearts to maintain their ties with God, who changes times and situations, without ever changing Himself. Yet everything else changes and disappears.

At the same time, people are reminded of God's grace and the care He takes of His creation and the favours He bestows on them. Yet He is in no need of them while they need His care and blessings: *"It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. He is truly merciful to the believers."* (Verse 43)

All glory to God who bestows great favours and doubles them over and over again. Yet He also remembers His weak servants who have no real power of their own and whose life is only transitory. He remembers them, taking care of them and blessing them together with His angels. When He mentions them in good terms among those on high, the entire universe echoes their mention, as the Prophet states: "God says: Whoever of My servants mentions Me to himself, I mention him to Myself; and whoever mentions Me in the presence of a group, I mention him in the presence of a better group." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] This is indeed profound. One can hardly imagine it, when one knows that the whole earth with all the creatures living on and in it is no more than a tiny particle in relation to the great galaxies of the universe. Yet all these galaxies and what they contain of creatures are no more than a portion of the universe which God has willed to exist, saying to it, 'Be,' and it came into being.

"*It is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels, so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light.*" (Verse 43) God's light is one, comprehensive, continuous. What does not belong to it is darkness, which differs and has several depths. If people stray from God's light, they have only darkness to live in. Nothing can save them or bring them out of this darkness except God's light that enlightens hearts and minds, filling souls and guiding them to what suits their nature. The grace God bestows on them and the angels' blessings and prayers for them are what takes them out of the darkness into the light. This is what happens to them when their hearts open up to faith: "*He is truly merciful to the believers.*" (Verse 43)

Such is their situation in t his life, when they need to work. As for their situation in the life to come, when reward is administered, God's grace continues to be with them. They are received there warmly, given honour and rich reward: "*On the day when they meet Him, they will be greeted with 'Peace; and He will have prepared for them a most generous reward.*" (Verse 44) They have a peace that contrasts with fear, tiring effort and hard work. It is a greeting from God, brought to them by the angels who enter from every door o deliver the message given to them from on high. This comes in addition to the noble reward God has in store for them. Such is their Lord who legislates and chooses what is best for them. Who would not prefer His choice?

The Prophet's Role

The Prophet who delivers to them what God has chosen, and shows them by practical example how to implement the laws God has enacted for them, is here given an outline of his own role. His position in relation o the believers is also explained.

> *Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner; one who calls people to God by His leave and a light-giving beacon. Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them. Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust. (Verses 45-48)*

The Prophet's position among them is that of a witness. They should, then, work o improve the testimony he gives, as it will state the facts, changing nothing and containing nothing that is false. He is also the *'bearer of good news,* explaining what awaits those who work hard and well of God's grace, forgiveness of sins, honour and reward. Moreover, he is *'a warner'* to those who overlook their duties, telling them of what awaits the wrongdoers of punishment and suffering. Thus, they are not taken unawares. Furthermore, he is one who *Calls people to God,* not to worldly glory, national pride, personal gain or position. He only calls to God in a consistent way

that leads to Him *'by His leave'*. He does not invent anything, nor does he say anything of his own volition. He fulfils his task by God's leave, as He has commanded him. He is indeed *'light-giving beacon'*. He dispels darkness, removes doubts and enlightens the way. He is a beacon that gives light to guide people aright, like a lamp that dispels darkness on the road.

Such was Muĥammad, God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), and such was the light he gave. He gave to people a clear and lucid concept of existence, of their relation with God and their position in relation to the universe and its Creator. He gave us a clear value system, one which is essential for the right existence of the universe and man's life therein. He also gave us a clear and decisive explanation of the origin of life and its end, the goal it serves and the course by which it is served. No ambiguity is found in anything he has given. His is a style that addresses human nature directly, using its wider gates and the most effective of ways.

The *sūrah* repeats once more the Prophet's task of giving good news to the believers, expressing this in more detail: *"Give to the believers the good news that a great bounty from God awaits them."* (Verse 47) This gives flesh to something it mentioned in general a little earlier on: *"Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner."* (Verse 45) Thus, the details serve to further explain God's favours bestowed on the believers.

This address o the Prophet concludes with an order to him not o pay any heed to the unbelievers and hypocrites, not to care about their actions or whether these may hurt him or his followers, and to always place his trust in God: *"Do not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and disregard their hurting actions. Place your trust in God; for God alone is worthy of all trust."* (Verse 48) It is the same address given at the outset of the *sūrah,* before it outlines any legislation for social reorganization. The Prophet is further instructed not o care for their hurting actions. He must not try to spare himself such hurt by relenting to them in anything, or relying on them in any way. God is sufficient for him to place his trust in Him alone.

We see how the situation of Zayd and Zaynab and the abrogation of the tradition that prohibited marriage with the divorcee of an adopted son was indeed difficult, requiring confirmation and explanation by God. This is why it was preceded by a long explanation and concluded with a long comment. All this emphasizes God's great care shown to the believers who must receive His orders with total acceptance and a willing submission.

5
Detailed Legal Provisions

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا نَكَحۡتُمُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ ثُمَّ طَلَّقۡتُمُوهُنَّ مِن قَبۡلِ أَن تَمَسُّوهُنَّ فَمَا لَكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِنَّ مِنۡ عِدَّةٖ تَعۡتَدُّونَهَاۖ فَمَتِّعُوهُنَّ وَسَرِّحُوهُنَّ سَرَاحٗا جَمِيلٗا ٤٩

Believers! If you marry believing women and then divorce them before the marriage is consummated, you have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them and release them in a becoming manner. (49)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ إِنَّآ أَحۡلَلۡنَا لَكَ أَزۡوَٰجَكَ ٱلَّٰتِيٓ ءَاتَيۡتَ أُجُورَهُنَّ وَمَا مَلَكَتۡ يَمِينُكَ مِمَّآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡكَ وَبَنَاتِ عَمِّكَ وَبَنَاتِ عَمَّٰتِكَ وَبَنَاتِ خَالِكَ وَبَنَاتِ خَٰلَٰتِكَ ٱلَّٰتِي هَاجَرۡنَ مَعَكَ وَٱمۡرَأَةٗ مُّؤۡمِنَةً إِن وَهَبَتۡ نَفۡسَهَا لِلنَّبِيِّ إِنۡ أَرَادَ ٱلنَّبِيُّ أَن يَسۡتَنكِحَهَا خَالِصَةٗ لَّكَ مِن دُونِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَۖ قَدۡ عَلِمۡنَا مَا فَرَضۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ فِيٓ أَزۡوَٰجِهِمۡ وَمَا مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُهُمۡ لِكَيۡلَا يَكُونَ عَلَيۡكَ حَرَجٞۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورٗا

Prophet! We have made lawful to you the wives whom you have paid their dowries, as well as those whom God has placed in your right hand through war, as also the daughters of your paternal uncles and aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and aunts, who have migrated with you; and any believing woman who offers herself freely to the Prophet and whom the Prophet might be willing to wed: [this latter] applies to you alone and not to other believers. We well know what We have made obligatory to them in respect of their wives and other women their right hands possess; and thus no blame shall attach to you. God is Much- Forgiving, Merciful.

(50)

رَّحِيمًا ﴿٥٠﴾

۞ تُرۡجِي مَن تَشَآءُ مِنۡهُنَّ وَتُـٔۡوِيٓ إِلَيۡكَ مَن
تَشَآءُۖ وَمَنِ ٱبۡتَغَيۡتَ مِمَّنۡ عَزَلۡتَ فَلَا
جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡكَۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدۡنَىٰٓ أَن تَقَرَّ
أَعۡيُنُهُنَّ وَلَا يَحۡزَنَّ وَيَرۡضَيۡنَ بِمَآ
ءَاتَيۡتَهُنَّ كُلُّهُنَّۚ وَٱللَّهُ يَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي
قُلُوبِكُمۡۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَلِيمًا ﴿٥١﴾

You may defer any of them you please, and take to yourself any of them you please. No blame will attach to you if you invite one whose turn you have previously set aside: this makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them. God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All- Knowing, Forbearing. (51)

لَّا يَحِلُّ لَكَ ٱلنِّسَآءُ مِنۢ بَعۡدُ وَلَآ أَن
تَبَدَّلَ بِهِنَّ مِنۡ أَزۡوَٰجٖ وَلَوۡ أَعۡجَبَكَ
حُسۡنُهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتۡ يَمِينُكَۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ رَّقِيبًا ﴿٥٢﴾

You [Muhammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess. God keeps watch over all things. (52)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ لَا تَدۡخُلُواْ بُيُوتَ
ٱلنَّبِيِّ إِلَّآ أَن يُؤۡذَنَ لَكُمۡ إِلَىٰ طَعَامٍ
غَيۡرَ نَٰظِرِينَ إِنَىٰهُ وَلَٰكِنۡ إِذَا دُعِيتُمۡ
فَٱدۡخُلُواْ فَإِذَا طَعِمۡتُمۡ فَٱنتَشِرُواْ وَلَا
مُسۡتَـٔۡنِسِينَ لِحَدِيثٍۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكُمۡ كَانَ
يُؤۡذِي ٱلنَّبِيَّ فَيَسۡتَحۡيِۦ مِنكُمۡۖ وَٱللَّهُ لَا
يَسۡتَحۡيِۦ مِنَ ٱلۡحَقِّۚ وَإِذَا سَأَلۡتُمُوهُنَّ
مَتَٰعٗا فَسۡـَٔلُوهُنَّ مِن وَرَآءِ حِجَابٖۚ
ذَٰلِكُمۡ أَطۡهَرُ لِقُلُوبِكُمۡ وَقُلُوبِهِنَّۚ وَمَا
كَانَ لَكُمۡ أَن تُؤۡذُواْ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَآ

Believers! Do not enter the Prophet's homes, unless you are given leave, for a meal without waiting for its proper time. But when you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without lingering for the sake of mere talk. Such behaviour might give offence to the Prophet, and yet he might feel too shy to bid you go. God does not shy of stating what is right. When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from

أَن تَنكِحُوٓاْ أَزۡوَٰجَهُۥ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦٓ أَبَدًاۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكُمۡ كَانَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ عَظِيمًا ﴿٥٣﴾

behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs. Moreover, it does not behove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not behove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away. That is certainly an enormity in God's sight. (53)

إِن تُبۡدُواْ شَيۡـًٔا أَوۡ تُخۡفُوهُ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيۡءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٥٤﴾

Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has full knowledge of everything. (54)

لَّا جُنَاحَ عَلَيۡهِنَّ فِيٓ ءَابَآئِهِنَّ وَلَآ أَبۡنَآئِهِنَّ وَلَآ إِخۡوَٰنِهِنَّ وَلَآ أَبۡنَآءِ إِخۡوَٰنِهِنَّ وَلَآ أَبۡنَآءِ أَخَوَٰتِهِنَّ وَلَا نِسَآئِهِنَّ وَلَا مَا مَلَكَتۡ أَيۡمَٰنُهُنَّۖ وَٱتَّقِينَ ٱللَّهَۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ شَهِيدًا ﴿٥٥﴾

It is no sin for them [to appear freely] before their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, or such men slaves as their right hands possess. [Wives of the Prophet!] Always remain God-fearing: for God is witness to all things. (55)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ وَمَلَٰٓئِكَتَهُۥ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى ٱلنَّبِيِّۚ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ صَلُّواْ عَلَيۡهِ وَسَلِّمُواْ تَسۡلِيمًا ﴿٥٦﴾

God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace. (56)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡذُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٗا مُّهِينٗا ﴿٥٧﴾

Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering. (57)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤۡذُونَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ بِغَيۡرِ مَا ٱكۡتَسَبُواْ فَقَدِ ٱحۡتَمَلُواْ بُهۡتَٰنٗا وَإِثۡمٗا مُّبِينٗا ﴿٥٨﴾

And those who malign believing men and women for no wrong they might have done shall have burdened themselves with the guilt of calumny and with a blatant injustice. (58)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ قُل لِّأَزۡوَٰجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَآءِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ يُدۡنِينَ عَلَيۡهِنَّ مِن جَلَٰبِيبِهِنَّ

ذَٰلِكَ أَدۡنَىٰٓ أَن يُعۡرَفۡنَ فَلَا يُؤۡذَيۡنَۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورٗا رَّحِيمٗا ٥٩

Prophet! Say to your wives, daughters and all believing women that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments. This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (59)

لَّئِن لَّمۡ يَنتَهِ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقُونَ وَٱلَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٞ وَٱلۡمُرۡجِفُونَ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ لَنُغۡرِيَنَّكَ بِهِمۡ ثُمَّ لَا يُجَاوِرُونَكَ فِيهَآ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ٦٠

If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while: (60)

مَّلۡعُونِينَۖ أَيۡنَمَا ثُقِفُوٓاْ أُخِذُواْ وَقُتِّلُواْ تَقۡتِيلٗا ٦١

bereft of God's grace, they shall be seized wherever they may be found, and will be slain. (61)

سُنَّةَ ٱللَّهِ فِي ٱلَّذِينَ خَلَوۡاْ مِن قَبۡلُۖ وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ ٱللَّهِ تَبۡدِيلٗا ٦٢

Such has been God's way with those who went before. Never will you find any change in God's way. (62)

Overview

This passage begins with a general rule concerning women who are divorced before their marriage has been consummated. This is followed by a number of rules relating to the Prophet's own family life, including the relationship between his wives and men generally, how Muslims should approach the Prophet's home, and the honour God bestows on His Messenger's home and how it is viewed by the angels and those on high. It concludes with a general order that applies to the Prophet's wives, daughters and all Muslim women. They are ordered to draw their outer garments over their bodies when they go out, so that they are recognized as chaste women. Thus, men with bad characters, such as the hypocrites and other wicked people who used to tease and irritate women would not approach them. It concludes with a warning to the hypocrites and circulators of rumours that they would be expelled from Madinah unless they stopped disturbing and irritating the

Muslim women.

These rules and directives form part of the reorganization of the Muslim community on the basis of the Islamic concept of life and society. As for matters that concern the Prophet's own private life, God has willed that life in the Prophet's home should remain a book open to all generations. Therefore, He incorporated these aspects into the Qur'ān, which will remain intact, and read in full, for the rest of time. At the same time, they are a sign of the honour God bestows on the Prophet's home, as He Himself undertakes to regulate its affairs and present it to mankind in His book, the Qur'ān.

Divorce Before Consummation

> *Believers! If you marry believing women and then divorce them before the marriage is consummated, you have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them and release them in a becoming manner. (Verse 49)*

The situation of women divorced before their marriages have been consummated is dealt with in specific provisions outlined in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow: "*You will incur no sin if you divorce women before having touched them or settled a dowry for them. Provide for them, the rich according to his means and the straitened according to his means. Such a provision, in an equitable manner, is an obligation binding on the righteous. If you divorce them before having touched them but after having settled a dowry for them, then give them half of that which you have settled, unless they forgo it or he in whose hand is the marriage tie forgoes it. To forgo what is due to you is closer to being righteous. Do not forget to act benevolently to one another. God sees all that you do.*" (2: 236-237)

This means that if a dowry has been agreed by the two parties in a marriage terminated before consummation, then the divorced woman is entitled to half the dowry. If the dowry has not been stated, then she is entitled to some provisions, in accordance with the means of the divorcing husband. Such a provision is binding on righteous people. The two verses in *Sūrah* 2 do not mention any waiting period for such a divorced woman. We now have here a rule concerning this aspect, making it clear that such a woman has no waiting period to observe.

The waiting period is primarily to establish whether or not there is a pregnancy, so that no child is attributed to anyone other than its father, and no father is deprived of his child who might still be in the early days of conception. If the marriage has not been consummated, then no pregnancy has taken place, and there is no need for a waiting period. "*You have no reason to expect them to observe a waiting period. Hence, provide well for them.*" (Verse 49) This provision is according to what is mentioned in the other verses: half the agreed dowry or, if no dowry is agreed, a provision

commensurate with the man's financial status. The other obligation is to *"release them in a becoming manner."* (Verse 49) There must never be any imposition of hardship. Divorced women should be released so that they can begin a new life with someone else. This rule applies generally to all Muslims, given here in the context of organizing the Muslim community's social life.

The Prophet's Wives

The Prophet is then told which women are lawful for him o marry, and the special dispensation for him after the limit of four wives was imposed in an earlier *sūrah: "You may marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four."* (4: 3) At the time the Prophet had nine wives, each of whom he married for a specific reason. `Ā'ishah and Ĥafşah were the daughters of his two closest Companions, Abū Bakr and `Umar. Umm Ĥabībah bint Abī Sufyān, Umm Salamah, Sawdah bint Zim`ah and Zaynab bint Khuzaymah[5] were women from the Muhājirīn who had lost their husbands and the Prophet wanted to honour them. None of them was young or very pretty. Marrying them was merely an honour the Prophet gave them. As for Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, we have already discussed her marriage to the Prophet in detail. The other two were Juwayriyyah bint al-Ĥārith and Şafiyyah bint Ĥuyay. Both were taken captive in war, but the Prophet freed them from bondage and married them to strengthen relations with their tribes and communities. Moreover, their marriage o the Prophet was an honour. Both accepted Islam after their people suffered the hardship of defeat.

They had all become 'mothers of the believers' and had the honour of being so close to God's Messenger, choosing God, His Messenger and the life to come over the luxuries and comforts of this world, when that choice was offered to them. It would have been very hard for them to be divorced when the maximum number of wives a Muslim may have was fixed at four. God looked at their situation and exempted His Messenger from that rule, permitting him to retain all his wives. Then, the Qur'ān stipulated that he must not add to them or replace any of them. Thus, the Prophet's exemption from the maximum of four wives was given specifically to those whom he had already married, so that they would not be deprived of this honour. The following verses clearly indicate this:

[5] There is a little confusion here. Zaynab bint Khuzaymah lived only a very short period after her marriage to the Prophet. She was not one of the nine wives he had at the time when these rules were outlined. If we omit her name, eight remain. However, the ninth was Maymūnah, the last wife the Prophet married. Moreover, it is not exactly accurate to say that the four the author groups together were neither young nor pretty. While they were not young, they were not without beauty. There is no reason to try to justify the Prophet's marriages in this way. Some of the reasons the author mentions are certainly true, particularly in the cases of the last three he mentions, but the others need no justification. God gave His Messenger a dispensation and he made use of it. — Editor's note.

> *Prophet! We have made lawful to you the wives whom you have paid their dowries, as well as those whom God has placed in your right hand through war, as also the daughters of your paternal uncles and aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and aunts, who have migrated with you; and any believing woman who offers herself to the Prophet and whom the Prophet might be willing to wed: [this latter] applies to you alone and not to other believers. We well know what We have made obligatory to them in respect of their wives and other women their right hands possess; and thus no blame shall attach to you. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. You may defer any of them you please, and take to yourself any of them you please. No blame will attach to you if you invite one whose turn you have previously set aside: this makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them. God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All-Knowing, Forbearing. You [Muĥammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess. God keeps watch over all things. (Verses 50-52)*

These provisions make it lawful for the Prophet to marry any woman from the types mentioned, even though this might take the number of such wives above the maximum of four which applied to all other Muslims. These types included the women whom he had already married and paid their dowries; any slave he came to own; his paternal and maternal cousins who had migrated with him, but not those who had not already migrated and any woman who presented herself as a gift o the Prophet without taking a dowry or having a guardian, if he wished to marry her.[6] God made this a special privilege for the Prophet since he was the guardian of all believers, men and women. All other men are subject to the rules God has imposed concerning their wives and women slaves. Thus the Prophet had no restrictions placed on his actions with regard to retaining the ones he had already married or to responding o the circumstances of his special position.

The Prophet is then given the choice to marry any woman who offered herself to him as a gift, or to so delay the same. If he so delayed, he could go back o her at any time. Moreover he was free o have sex with any of his wives he wished and to delay any: *"This makes it more likely that they will be contented and not distressed, and that all of them will be satisfied with whatever you have to give them."* (Verse 51) It is clear that all these provisions take into account the Prophet's special circumstances and the fact that many were keen to be honoured by being close to him. God knew all this and, as we know, He determines all situations in accordance with His knowledge and compassion: *"God knows what is in your hearts. God is indeed All-Knowing, Forbearing."* (Verse 51)

[6] There are conflicting reports on whether the Prophet married any woman of this type or not. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he gave all women who made themselves gifts to him to other men to marry.

God then made it unlawful for the Prophet to marry anyone other than those to whom he was already married. This did not apply to numbers, but rather to those specific women married to the Prophet.

Nor could he replace any of them. He had, however, not increased the number of his wives before this prohibition was made.

"You [Muĥammad] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange these for other wives, even though you are attracted by their beauty, except for any that your right hand may possess." (Verse 52) This was the only exception, whereby he was allowed to have any number of slave women. *"God keeps watch over all things."* (Verse 52) This is the best guarantee of observing the rules.

`Ā'ishah reports that this restriction prohibiting the Prophet from having any more wives was subsequently abrogated, and the Prophet was given the freedom to marry others as he pleased. He, however, did not marry others, making only these the ones honoured with the title 'mothers of the believers'.

Observing Good Manners

The *sūrah* moves on to delineate the position of Muslims *vis-à-vis* the Prophet's homes and his wives, both during his lifetime and after his death. It addresses the fact that some hypocrites and others with hearts full of sickness used to affront the Prophet by directing their annoying behaviour at his homes and wives. It issues a very strong warning to them, describing the enormity of their action in God's sight and reminding them that God is fully aware of their wickedness:

> *Believers! Do not enter the Prophet's homes, unless you are given leave, for a meal without waiting for its proper time. But when you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without lingering for the sake of mere talk. Such behaviour might give offence to the Prophet, and yet he might feel too shy to bid you go. God does not shy of stating what is right. When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs. Moreover, it does not behove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not behove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away. That is certainly an enormity in God's sight. Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has full knowledge of everything. (Verses 53-54)*

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik: "When the Prophet espoused Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, he served a meal of meat and bread. I was sent to invite people to come over, and they came in groups. They would eat and leave, then another group came in, ate, and left. I invited everyone until I could find none o invite. I said this to the Prophet, and he said to his family: 'Remove your food.' Three

people remained in his home chatting. The Prophet went out to `Ā'ishah's room and said: 'Peace be o you, members of this household, together with God's mercy and blessings.' She replied to his greeting in the same way and asked him: 'How have you found your wife, Messenger of God? May God bless you ,and yours.' He then went to the rooms of every one of his wives, and each one of them said to him the same as `Ā'ishah. Then he went back, and found the three people still there chatting. The Prophet was very shy. He went out again, heading towards `Ā'ishah's room. I am not sure whether it was she or someone else who told him that those people had left. He came back, and when he had one foot inside and one out, the door was closed. Then the Qur'ānic verse mentioning the screen was revealed."

The verse outlines certain manners with regard to entering people's homes that were unknown in pre-Islamic Arabia. People just came into a home without asking permission, as we explained in commenting on the relevant verses in *Sūrah* 24, The Light.[7] Perhaps this was more visible in the case of the Prophet's homes which were the source of knowledge and wisdom. Some people might come in, and if they saw food being prepared, they would wait to have a meal, without being invited. Some might stay on to chat after the meal was over, even though they had not been invited in the first place. They were totally oblivious to the inconvenience their behaviour caused the Prophet and his family. One report suggests that when those three people stayed on to chat on the night of the Prophet's wedding to Zaynab, she sat with her face to the wall. The Prophet was too shy to draw their attention to the inconvenience they caused. He could not say to his visitors something that might make them ashamed of themselves. Therefore, God stated this on his behalf, because: *"God does not shy of stating what is right."* (Verse 53)

It is also reported that `Umar, who was endowed with refined sensitivity, suggested to the Prophet that he should put up a screen so that people would not enter his wives' rooms without leave. He hoped that God would order this and subsequently this verse was revealed endorsing his suggestion. Al-Bukhārī relates on Anas's authority: "`Umar said: 'Messenger of God! All sorts of people come into your home. You may wish to instruct the mothers of the believers to put up a screen.' God then revealed the verse requiring a screen to be put up."

This verse taught people that they must not enter the Prophet's homes without first seeking permission. Should they be invited to have a meal, they may go in. If they were not invited, they must not enter awaiting the food to be cooked. Then, when they had finished eating, they should leave. They should not stay on to chat. Muslims today badly need to stick to this standard of manners, which has been ignored by many. Guests often stay long after a meal, and in many cases they stay long at the table after they have finished eating. Their conversation may drag on,

[7] Volume 12, pp. 234-238.

while the hosts, who hold on to some aspects of Islamic manners, find this terribly inconvenient. Islamic manners address all situations most appropriately. We would do well to revive these manners in our social dealings.

The verse then orders that the Prophet's wives be screened from men: *"When you ask the Prophet's wives fir something, do so from behind a screen."* In emphasizing that this is better for all, the *sūrah* states further: *"This makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs."* (Verse 53) It is not for anyone to say what is contrary to what God says. No one should say that easy mixing and chatting between the two sexes is more conducive to purity of hearts, and relief of suppressed instincts, giving both men and women a better approach to feelings and behaviour. We hear much talk in this vein, by unenlightened people. No one can say anything of this sort when God says: *"When you ask the Prophet's wives for something, do so from behind a screen: this makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs."* (Verse 53) We should remember that He says this while referring o the Prophet's wives, the mothers of the believers, who were all pure women, and to the Prophet's Companions who were exemplary in their morality. When God says something and some people say something different, it is God's statement that is right. Whatever is contrary to God's statements is wrong and can only be stated by one who dares to say that human beings have greater knowledge of man's psychology than his Creator.

The facts of life confirm the truth of what God says and the falsehood of what others say to the contrary. People's experience everywhere in the world confirms this. Countries where mixing has reached extreme limits give ample evidence in support of this.

The Qur'ānic verse has already mentioned that peoples' entry awaiting a meal o be cooked, without being invited, and their staying on for a chat, gave offence to the Prophet, but that he was too shy to hint that they should leave. Now the verse makes it clear that it does not behove any Muslim o give offence to the Prophet; nor does it behove them to marry his wives when he dies, considering that his wives are like mothers to them. Their special position in relation to the Prophet makes their marriage to anyone other than him prohibited. This gave the Prophet's home its special sanctity and unique position. *"It does not behove you to give offence to God's Messenger, just as it would not behove you ever to marry his widows after he has passed away."* (Verse 53)

Some reports mention that one of the hypocrites said that he was waiting o marry `Ā'ishah! *"That is certainly an enormity in God's sight."* (Verse 53) Terrible indeed is that which God describes as an enormity.

The *sūrah* does not, however, stop at this warning but goes on instead to deliver an even sterner one: *"Whether you do anything openly or in secret, [remember that] God has*

full knowledge of everything." (Verse 53)

It is God, then, who will take care of this. He knows what remains on the surface and what is kept secret, and He is fully aware of every thought and plan. He has described such matters as an enormity. Let anyone who wishes try to do anything of the sort. He will soon discover that he is exposing himself to God's mighty punishment.

Having made this warning, the *sūrah* makes the exception of some close relatives with whom the Prophet's wives did not have to be so guarded: *"It is no sin for them [to appear freely] before their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, or such men slaves as their right hands possess. [Wives of the Prophet!] Always remain God-fearing; for God is witness to all things."* (Verse 55)

These are the relatives a woman cannot marry, i.e. her *maĥram.* In fact it is lawful for all Muslim women to appear before these relatives in normal clothes, without covering their heads. I could not establish with any degree of certainty whether this verse addressing the Prophet's wives in particular or verse 31 of *Sūrah* 24, Light, addressing all Muslim women was revealed first. It is more likely, however, that the order was first issued to the Prophet's wives and then made applicable to others.

We should note here the instruction to always be conscious of God, and the reference o His awareness of everything. *"Always remain God- fearing; for God is witness to all things."* (Verse 55) This is indeed the best guarantee that people will pay heed.

Further Instructions and a Warning

The *sūrah* continues to warn those who give offence to the Prophet, either in person or with regard to his family, showing their action as an enormity. It does so in two ways: honouring the Prophet and describing his status with his Lord and on high, and stating that to give offence to the Prophet is to give offence to God Himself. Therefore, it earns the perpetrator expulsion from God's mercy both in the present life and in the life to come. Furthermore, the perpetrators stand to suffer a humiliating punishment:

> *God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace. Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering. (Verses 56-57)*

The Arabic text uses the word *şalāt* and its derivatives for what is rendered in English as 'bless'. *Şalāt* means prayer, but prayer by God for the Prophet means that

God praises him to those on high, while when it refers to the angels it means that they pray to God for him. This gives the Prophet a sublime position: the whole universe echoes God's praise of His Prophet. No honour could be greater than this. How would a prayer and blessing by human beings compare with God's own blessing and honour bestowed on the Prophet, or with those of the angels among the community on high? There is certainly no comparison, but God wishes to bestow honour on the believers by putting their blessing of the Prophet together with His own, thus providing them with a tie with those on high.

When God so honours and praises the Prophet, it is exceedingly grotesque for humans to give offence to him: "*Those who affront God and His Messenger will be rejected by God in this world and in the life to come. He has prepared for them a humiliating suffering.*" (Verse 57) What makes this even more grotesque and ridiculous is that it is an affront to God by His creatures. They can never affront or offend God, but the expression here serves to show great sensitivity to any offence committed against the Prophet, in effect making it an offence against God Himself.

The *sūrah* then speaks of giving offence to believers generally, men and women, and falsely attributing to them what they do not have: "*And those who malign believing men and women for no wrong they might have done shall have burdened themselves with the guilt of calumny and with a blatant injustice.*" (Verse 58) This strong condemnation suggests that there was in Madinah at the time a group of people who schemed in this way against believers: they defamed them, conspired against them and circulated false allegations about them. This takes place in all communities at all times with believers in particular being so maligned. God therefore undertakes to reply o their accusers, describing them as hypocrites guilty of calumny and injustice. He certainly says only what is absolutely true.

God Almighty then instructs His Messenger to issue an order to his wives, daughters and Muslim women generally requiring them, when they leave their homes, to cover their bodies and heads with an outer garment. In this way, they would be recognized and he protected from the machinations of transgressors. Their modest appearance would distinguish them as chaste women, which embarrasses those who follow women o tease and malign them:

> *Prophet! Say to your wives, daughters and all believing women that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments. This will be more conducive to their being recognized and not affronted. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verse 59)*

Commenting on this verse, al-Suddī says: "Some wicked people in Madinah used to go out at nightfall to make indecent remarks to women. Houses in Madinah were small. Therefore, women went out at night to relieve themselves. However, they

were maligned by such wicked remarks. When such people saw a woman wrapped in her outer cover, they refrained from maligning her as they recognized her as free and chaste. A woman who did not have such a cover was subjected to their affronts as they thought her to be a slave."

Mujāhid says: "When they put on their outer cover, they were recognized as free and chaste women. No one maligned them. As for the verse ending, *'God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful,'* it means that He forgave women what happened in the past, as they were not aware of what they should do.

We note the great care taken to purge all wicked behaviour from the Muslim society. These elements had to be pushed into a narrow corner, while new Islamic values and traditions took firm root in the Muslim community.

The passage concludes with a stern warning to the hypocrites and those who were sick at heart as well as those who circulated false rumours requiring that they stop all such wicked action, and refrain from affronting the believers and the Muslim community as a whole. Unless they stopped, God would empower His Messenger to drive them out of Madinah, so that they could be taken and killed wherever they were. This was the law applied, by God's leave, in past generations, and it could easily be revived:

> *If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while: bereft of God's grace, they shall be seized wherever they may be found, and will be slain. Such has been God's way with those who went before. Never will you find any change in God's way. (Verses 60-62)*

This powerful warning gives us a clear impression of the Muslims' strong position in Madinah after the Qurayżah affair. Indeed, the Muslim state was now in full power. The hypocrites could only scheme in secret, unable to demonstrate their reality. Indeed, they remained always in fear.

6
Too Heavy for Mountains

يَسْـَٔلُكَ ٱلنَّاسُ عَنِ ٱلسَّاعَةِۖ قُلْ إِنَّمَا عِلْمُهَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِۚ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ تَكُونُ قَرِيبًا ﴿٦٣﴾

People ask you about the Last Hour. Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with God alone.' Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near. (63)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَعَنَ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ سَعِيرًا ﴿٦٤﴾

God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire, (64)

خَـٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًاۖ لَّا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٦٥﴾

where they will permanently abide. They will find none to protect or support them. (65)

يَوْمَ تُقَلَّبُ وُجُوهُهُمْ فِى ٱلنَّارِ يَقُولُونَ يَـٰلَيْتَنَآ أَطَعْنَا ٱللَّهَ وَأَطَعْنَا ٱلرَّسُولَا۠ ﴿٦٦﴾

On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: 'Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.' (66)

وَقَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ إِنَّآ أَطَعْنَا سَادَتَنَا وَكُبَرَآءَنَا فَأَضَلُّونَا ٱلسَّبِيلَا۠ ﴿٦٧﴾

And they shall say: 'Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. (67)

رَبَّنَآ ءَاتِهِمْ ضِعْفَيْنِ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ وَٱلْعَنْهُمْ لَعْنًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٦٨﴾

Our Lord! Give them double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.' (68)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ ءَاذَوْا۟ مُوسَىٰ فَبَرَّأَهُ ٱللَّهُ مِمَّا قَالُوا۟ۚ وَكَانَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَجِيهًا ﴿٦٩﴾

Believers! Do not be like those who gave offence to Moses. God showed him to be innocent of whatever they alleged against him. Indeed, he was highly honoured in God's sight. (69)

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَقُولُواْ قَوْلاً سَدِيدًا ﴿٧٠﴾

Believers! Have fear of God and say only what is just and true (70)

يُصْلِحْ لَكُمْ أَعْمَـٰلَكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ ۗ وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَقَدْ فَازَ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٧١﴾

for then He will cause your deeds to be good and sound, and He will forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph. (71)

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا ٱلْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱلْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَن يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولاً ﴿٧٢﴾

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid o receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. (72)

لِّيُعَذِّبَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ وَٱلْمُنَـٰفِقَـٰتِ وَٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ وَٱلْمُشْرِكَـٰتِ وَيَتُوبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَـٰتِ ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿٧٣﴾

So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (73)

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* mentions people's questions about the Last Hour, when the Day of Judgement arrives. People have often asked for the Last Hour to be hastened, expressing doubt about it. The answer to this question always leaves its timing o God Almighty, warning people that it is close at hand, and that it could take them unawares at any time. The *sūrah* then portrays an image of the Last Hour that certainly does not please those who hasten it. It is an image of their own faces as they are turned over in the fire, expressing profound regret for not obeying God and His Messenger, and praying that their masters and chiefs be given double punishment. It is a scene of catastrophe that no one likes to consider. The *sūrah* then turns again to the present world, warning the believers against following in the footsteps of those who gave offence to Moses and levelled accusations against him, but God confirmed

his innocence. This appears to be in answer to something that actually took place. It might have been referring to the fact that some of them spoke about the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab, which was contrary to Arab tradition. The believers are invited to say only what is right, refrain from slander, so that God will accept their deeds and forgive them their sins. It makes obeying God and His Messenger more appealing to them, promising them great reward for this.

The final verses refer to the trust which the heavens, the earth and the mountains would not agree to shoulder, fearing that it was too heavy for them. Nevertheless, man undertook to bear it, so that God's purpose is accomplished: reward then is commensurate with action, and man will have to account for his choices.

The Timing of the Last Hour

> *People ask you about the Last Hour. Say: 'Knowledge of it rests with God alone.' Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near. (Verse 63)*

Those people continued to ask the Prophet about the Last Hour, which he has long warned them against, while the Qur'ān gave vivid descriptions of some of its scenes, which they could almost see before their eyes. They ask the Prophet about its timing, and demand that it should he hastened. This implied doubt, rejection or ridicule of the whole question, according to the nature of the person asking and how close or far removed they were from faith.

The Last Hour is part of what lies beyond our perception. God is the only one who knows all about it. It is His will that no one among His creatures should know its timing, not even His messengers and favoured angels. A *ĥadīth* summing up Islamic faith is reported by `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who reports:

> One day as we were sitting with God's Messenger (peace be upon him), there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no sign of travelling was o be seen on him but none of us knew him. He walked up to the Prophet and sat down by him. Resting his knees against the Prophet's knees and placing his hands on his thighs, he said: 'Muĥammad, tell me about Islam.' The Prophet said: 'Islam is to testify that there is no deity other than God and Muĥammad is God's Messenger, to attend regularly to prayer, to pay *zakāt,* to fast in Ramaḍān and o make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to do so.' The man said: 'You have spoken rightly.' We were amazed at him asking the question and then confirming that the answer was right.
>
> He then said: 'Tell me about faith, or *īmān.':* The Prophet said: 'Faith is to

> believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both its good and evil manifestations. He said: 'You have spoken rightly. Then tell me about attaining to perfection, or *iĥsān.*' The Prophet answered: 'It is to worship God as though you are seeing Him, knowing that while you cannot see Him, yet He sees you.' He said: 'Then tell me about the Last Hour.' The Prophet said: 'The one questioned about it knows no better than the questioner.' ... The Prophet then told us: 'The man was Gabriel who came here to teach you your religion.' [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

It is exactly as the Prophet said: the one questioned about the Last The Hour, i.e. the Prophet himself, and the questioner, i.e. the Angel Gabriel, have no knowledge of it. This is because '*Knowledge of it rests with God alone,*' and He imparts that knowledge to none of His creatures.

God has willed this for a purpose, of which we can see a part: people are warned that they should expect it at any time, ready to receive it as it comes all of a sudden. This is the attitude of the believers who remain God-fearing. By contrast, those who are oblivious of the Last Hour, and do not expect its arrival at any time, are the ones who deceive themselves and do not protect themselves against God's punishment. God has warned them, making the Last Hour a secret that could come upon them at any moment of the night or day: '*Yet for all you know the Last Hour may well be near.*' (Verse 63)

> *God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire, where they will permanently abide. They will find none to protect or support them. On the day when their faces shall be tossed about in the fire, they will say: 'Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger.' And they shall say: 'Our Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord/ Give them double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.' (Verses 64-68)*

As they are questioning the Prophet about the Last Hour, they are given a scene from it: "*God has certainly rejected the unbelievers and prepared for them a blazing fire.*" (Verse 64) He has rejected them, expelling They abide there for an extended term, the length of which is known only to God. Its end is known only to Him and is dependent on His them from His grace. And He has prepared for them a raging fire which is kept ready for them: "*where they will permanently abide.*" (Verse 65)

They are deprived of all help and support. They cannot hope to escape: "*They will find none to protect or support them.*" (Verse 65)

In the midst of all this suffering, they appear very miserable: "*On the day when their*

faces shall be tossed about in the fire." The fire surrounds them from every corner. Yet the description here is intended to exaggerate the movement so as to feel that the fire touches every spot on their faces. *"They will say: Would that we had obeyed God and obeyed His Messenger."* (Verse 66) It is a useless wish that can in no way be accepted. It is now too late for anything. They can only express regret and feel remorse.

At this point, they express unreserved anger with their masters and leaders who led them astray: *"And they shall say: 'Our- Lord! We have paid heed to our masters and our leaders, but they have led us astray from the right path. Our Lord! Give double suffering, and banish them utterly from Your grace.'"* (Verses 67-68) Such is the Last Hour: what need is there to ask about its timing? The only way to ensure salvation on that day is o work hard in earning God's pleasure.

Baseless Accusations

It seems that the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaĥsh, which was intended to replace the norms prevailing in pre-Islamic days, did not pass so easily. Many of the hypocrites and the sick at heart began to speak ill of it. So did some of those who had not yet ascertained the Islamic concept of social relations. All such people cast remarks and innuendoes, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes openly: they all expressed monstrous thoughts. The hypocrites and those who spread lies were not going to keep quiet. They sought every opportunity to inject their poison into the new Muslim society, just as we saw them do during the attack by the confederate forces, the story of falsehood, the division of booty, etc. They were always on the look out for something which they could use to cause the Prophet pain.

By this time, when the Qurayżah were expelled, preceded by other Jewish tribes, no one was left in Madinah who was openly an unbeliever. All its inhabitants were now Muslims, even though some of them only put up appearances while in actuality they were hypocrites. It was these hypocrites who circulated rumours and fabricated lies. Some believers unwittingly fell prey o them, repeating some of what they had heard. Now, the *sūrah* warns them against giving offence to the Prophet, in the same way as the Children of Israel gave offence to Moses. It directs them to say only what is right, correct and proper, telling them that only through obedience o God and His Messenger could they hope to achieve the great success:

> *Believers! Do not be like those who gave offence to Moses. God showed him to be innocent of whatever they alleged against him. Indeed, he was highly honoured in God's sight. Believers! Have fear of God and say only what is just and true for then He will cause your deeds to be good and sound, and He will forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph. (Verses 69-71)*

The Qur'ān does not specify the sort of offence the Israelites directed at Moses, but some reports mention it specifically. However, we feel that there is no need to give details of something the Qur'ān alluded to in general terms. The aim here is o warn the believers against everything that could give offence o the Prophet. The Israelites are cited as an example of deviation from the right course on many occasions in the Qur'ān. Therefore, it is sufficient here to refer only to the fact that they gave offence o their prophet, warning the Muslims against following in their footsteps. This makes every believer refrain from doing what would place him among such deviant people.

God established Moses' innocence of whatever his people alleged against him. He was in a position of honour with God: *"He was highly honoured in God's sight."* (Verse 69) God makes it clear that His messengers are innocent of all that is fabricated and falsely alleged against them. Muĥammad, the most noble of God's messengers, has the first claim to be proven innocent by God Himself.

The *sūrah* directs the believers to say only what is just, true and accurate. They should make sure of what they say and its effects, before they accept what the hypocrites and spreaders of lies say, and before they pay attention to any wild accusation or evil fabrication against the Prophet, their leader and guide. It directs them to say right words leading to right action. God takes care of those who make sure of saying what is right, proper and accurate, guiding their footsteps and making their deeds sound, producing good results. God also forgives the sins of those who say what is right and do righteous deeds, for even they are not immune to slips and errors. They are all human, and by nature humans err and need God's forgiveness.

"Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will certainly achieve a great triumph." (Verse 71) To obey God and His Messenger is, in itself, a great triumph, because it means consciously following the way God has marked out. It gives comfort and reassurance. To be sure that one is following the right way gives happiness, even if it does not earn any reward. A person who follows a direct, easy way that is full of light and who finds that all God's creatures respond to him and help him has totally different prospects from one who follows a blocked, rough way that is covered in darkness with all God's creatures emitting hostility towards him. Obedience to God and His Messenger brings its own immediate reward. Moreover, it achieves a great triumph now, before the Day of Judgement and entry into heaven. Enjoying bliss in the life to come is an act of grace which is over and above the reward for such obedience. It is a grace bestowed by God freely, without anything being asked in return.

Man's Weakness

In this act of grace, God considers man's weakness, the great burden he shoulders

and the trust he has been bearing alone when the heavens, the earth and the mountains refused, fearing that they could not cope with its requirements. Yet man is not only weak; he suffers from pressures created by his desires and inclinations, lack of knowledge, short life span as also barriers of time and place. All this makes him lacking in proper knowledge, unable to see what is beyond barriers or to look far ahead:

> *We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid to receive it. Yet man took it up. He has always been prone to be wicked, foolish. (Verse 72)*

The heavens, the earth and the mountains, great and magnificent beings as they are, are chosen for discussion by the Qur'ān. Compared to these, man who lives in or beside them appears small and insignificant. These creatures, however, know their Lord without having o make an effort. They follow His law by their very nature and the system applicable to them, without need for an intermediary, reflection or choice. They run their respective courses without fail, fulfilling their tasks by virtue of their nature and constitution. The sun moves in its orbit in absolute accuracy, sending its rays and thus fulfilling the role God has assigned to it. It unconsciously holds its satellite planets and other celestial bodies in a set measure of gravity, thus fulfilling its role in the universe. The earth also runs its cycle, yielding its plants and feeding its population, burying the dead and sending up its water in springs, all in accordance with God's law, and without having to make a choice. The moon, stars, planets, the wind, the clouds, air and water, mountains and valleys — all fulfil their functions, by their Lord's leave. They know their Lord and are subject o His will without having to make an effort. What is this trust which they all dreaded to receive? It is the trust of responsibility, will power, personal knowledge and choice.

"*Yet man took it up.*" (Verse 72) Man took it up because he is able to know God through his faculties and feelings. He can recognize God's law by reflection and consideration, and apply this law by his endeavour, obeying God willingly and by choice, resisting desires that lead to deviation and disobedience. In every step along this way man is acting by his own will, using his own knowledge, choosing his way fully aware of the end to which it leads.

It is a huge burden that this small creature, with little power and a short life, and with pressurizing desires and inclinations, has undertaken. In so doing, he runs great risks. Hence, man is '*prone to be wicked,*' putting himself in the wrong, and *'foolish,'* not knowing his ability. This is true in relation to the great responsibility he has shouldered. However, when he fulfils this trust, acquires the knowledge leading him o his Lord, knows His law and obeys Him fully, he becomes equipped with the knowledge, the guidance and the obedience which bring him to the level of ease and

perfection enjoyed by creatures like the heavens, earth and mountains, which obey God and follow His law naturally and directly. When man attains this level, while aware, conscious and exercising free choice, he attains a noble standard and is given a unique position among God's creation.

The acquisition of knowledge, the ability to choose and the willingness o be accountable constitute the quality that distinguishes man among God's creatures. This is the quality that earns man his position of honour, declared by God o those on high as He ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. In addition, He announced this honour in His revealed book, the Qur'ān: *"We have indeed honoured the children of Adam."* (17: 70) It behoves man to know why he has been honoured and to live up o *the* trust he has accepted, while stronger creatures refused it dreading the responsibility.

All this has a definite purpose:

> *So it is that God will punish the hypocrites, men and women, as well as the men and women who associate partners with Him; and He will turn in mercy to the believers, both men and women. God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verse 73)*

For man to take the trust upon himself means that he has o accept the consequences of his choice, and to make his reward dependent on action. This means that punishment is earned by the hypocrites and the unbelievers, while the believers are given help, which ensures that God forgives them their errors which they are bound to make, considering their weakness, the pressures on them and the barriers standing in their way. This help comes by an act of divine grace, for God is always Much-Forgiving, Merciful.

On this powerful note ends the *sūrah* that began with a directive to the Prophet to obey God, not yield to the unbelievers and the hypocrites, follow God's revelations and place his trust in God alone. The *sūrah* also included numerous directives and pieces of legislation for the Muslim community. This powerful and final note describes man's huge responsibility and great trust, indicating what makes it so heavy. With this conclusion, the beginning and end of the *sūrah* are in full harmony with its subject matter. This, in itself, is evidence pointing to the Author of the Qur'ān.

SŪRAH 34

Saba'

(Sheba)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* a Makkan revelation, tackles the main themes of faith: belief in God's oneness, the revelation of the Qur'ān and the truth of resurrection. The *sūrah* also provides the correct view of a number of essential values related to these themes. It makes clear that faith and good action, rather than wealth and offspring, form the basis of the ultimate judgement by God. It clearly states that no power can protect anyone against God's punishment and no intercession is of any use unless He approves it.

The main emphasis in the *sūrah* is on the question of resurrection and reward, as well as God's limitless, comprehensive and accurate knowledge. These two closely intertwined topics are raised time after time, in a variety of styles and approaches, and are diffused through the *sūrah* from start to finish. Thus on resurrection we have: *"The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you.'"* (Verse 3) And on reward the *sūrah* makes this early statement: *"He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions."* (Verse 4)

This same theme is raised again a little later on: *"The unbelievers say: Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall he restored to life in a new act of creation? Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?' No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who shall be suffering torment as they have gone far in error"* (Verses 7-8)

The *sūrah* also portrays a number of scenes from the Day of Judgement, showing how unbelievers are rebuked for their rejection of the truth as well as images of the

punishment they used to deny or express strong doubts about: *"If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: 'Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.' The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: 'Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? No. It was you who were guilty' Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: No. It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.' When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did?"* (Verses 3 1-33)

Again such scenes are portrayed at various places in the *sūrah,* including its conclusion: *"If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. They will say: 'We do believe in it,' but how could they attain it from so far away, seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt."* (Verses 51-54)

On the theme of God's knowledge and its extent and fullness, we read at the outset: *He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them."* (Verse 2) And in a comment on those who deny the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* says: *"Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verse 3) This is further confirmed towards the *sūrah's* end where it states: *"Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception."* (Verse 48)

On the theme of God's oneness, the *sūrah* begins with praising God *"to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and to Him will be due all praise in the life to come. He is truly wise, All-Aware."* (Verse 1) The *sūrah* again challenges them with regard to the deities they allege to be God's partners: *"Say: Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them."* (Verse 22)

In one of the scenes it portrays of the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* refers to their worship of angels *and jinn: "On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: 'Was it you that these people worshipped?' They will answer: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them."* (Verses 40-41) It refutes their ideas about intercession by the

angels on their behalf: "*Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.*" (Verse 23) In connection with their worship of the *jinn* mention is made of Solomon and how the *jinn* were placed in his service. It highlights the fact that they were unable to realize that he was dead: *"When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude."* (Verse 14)

On the theme of the revelation of God's message, the *sūrah* reports: "*The unbelievers say: We will never believe in this Qur'ān, nor in any earlier revelations."* (Verse 31) *"When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: 'This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.' They also say: 'This is nothing but an invented falsehood' Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery."* (Verse 43) The *sūrah* issues a decisive reply: "*Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due."* (Verse 6) *"We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand"* (Verse 28)

On the question of the values to be applied, the *sūrah* proffers the following verses: *"Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: 'We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.' They also say: 'Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer.' Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand' It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering."* (Verses 34-38) The *sūrah* gives some historical examples, citing David and his household who demonstrated their gratitude for God's favours and contrasting this with the people of Sheba who were totally ungrateful. What happened to both communities was well known, confirming God's promises and warnings.

All Makkan *sūrahs* tackle these topics, but in each *sūrah* they are portrayed against a special cosmic background. Indeed, this theme is accompanied by diverse influences that we feel to be new each time. The background in the present *sūrah* is the wide space of the heaven and earth, the awesome, unfathomable realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception, the limitless plateau where the gathering takes

place on the Day of Judgement, the inner depths of the human soul, and a number of amazing historical scenes. Each has its clear message for our hearts, ensuring we remain alert. At the very beginning of the *sūrah* we are introduced to this broad universal expanse and God's limitless knowledge: *"He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them... The unbelievers say: Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verses 2-3)

Those who deny resurrection and the hereafter are warned against great celestial catastrophes: *"Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9) On the other hand, those who worship angels or *jinn* are faced with an awesome scene: *"Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.'"* (Verse 23) Alternatively, they are placed face to face with the angel on the Day of Resurrection when no argument or ambiguity is allowed: *"On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: Was it you that these people worshipped?"* (Verse 40)

Those who denied the Prophet Muĥammad, accusing him of fabricating lies or alleging that he was mad are put before their own nature when it is free of alien influences: *"Say: I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muĥammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come."* (Verse 46)

Thus the *sūrah* takes our hearts to such horizons and brings into play some inspiring influences. Finally, it concludes with a powerful scene of the Day of Judgement.

Praise of God forms the beginning of the *sūrah,* identifying some of His attributes, such as having dominion in the heavens and earth, receiving praise in the hereafter, wisdom and full knowledge of all that takes place in the universe. It also mentions the unbelievers' denial of the Last Hour and God's emphatic reply that it will certainly come. Again the *sūrah* states that not an atom's weight in the whole universe escapes God's knowledge, which will ensure that God's requital o all, believers and unbelievers, will be based on accurate and full knowledge of all situations and circumstances. In this early part, the *sūrah* states that those who are endowed with wisdom confirm that what God has revealed to His Messenger is the truth. It states that the unbelievers find the idea of resurrection strange, refuting their

arguments and telling them that they suffer as a result of being far in error. It warns them that they could be swallowed up by the earth or that the skies could fall apart on them. On this note, the first part of the *sūrah* ends.

The second part highlights some aspects of the history of David and his household, who were all very grateful for God's favours. God placed at the command of David and Solomon numerous powers, and they acknowledged God's favours, taking no personal pride in them. One of these powers was the *Jinn* who are worshipped by some idolaters. They often consulted such *Jinn* over questions relating to the realm beyond our perception, but the *Jinn* know nothing of this realm. In Solomon's story, as related in this *sūrah,* the *Jinn* continued to do some hard and menial jobs for him even after his death, of which they continued to be unaware. Contrasted with this gratitude for God's favours, is that of total ingratitude as represented by the people of Sheba. Therefore, "*We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land.*" (Verse 19) They deserved this end because they did Satan's bidding, even though he had no power over them. In other words, they willingly allowed him to lead them astray.

The third part challenges the idolaters to invoke their alleged deities, and tells them that these "*do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them.*" (Verse 22) None of these false deities can intercede with God on anyone's behalf, not even if they were angels, for angels stand in awe of God, do His bidding and do not talk until they are reassured. As instructed, the Prophet asks them who provides their sustenance out of the heavens and the earth, when it is God who has dominion over both? He, and no one else, provides for them and for all other creatures. The Prophet then leaves the matter between himself and them to God for judgement. This part of the *sūrah* ends with a similar challenge to that with which it began: "*Say: Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.*'" (Verse 27)

Together the fourth and fifth parts tackle the question of the revelation of God's message and the unbelievers' attitude towards it. They speak about how the affluent view every call to faith, and how they show pride in their wealth and children. These two parts establish the fact that faith and good actions are the basic criteria for reward. Several scenes are shown here of the different fates of the believers and unbelievers, in which we see the leaders disowning their followers and the angels disassociating themselves from those who worshipped them. In between these scenes, the *sūrah* calls on the unbelievers to resort to their own nature, seeking its answers free from all the fuss they create about God's Messenger. It reminds them that they have no evidence for the accusations they level at him, when he asks them for no reward and tells them no lie. Each of these two parts is concluded with a scene

from the Day of Resurrection. Then, finally, the *sūrah* ends with a run of short verses that are characterized by a powerful, fast rhythm: *"Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception.' Say: 'The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything.' Say: 'Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near' If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby."* (Verses 48-51)

1
Infinite and Accurate Knowledge

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَهُ ٱلْحَمْدُ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٱلْخَبِيرُ ﴿١﴾

All praise is due to God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and to Him will be due all praise in the life to come. He is truly Wise, All-Aware. (1)

يَعْلَمُ مَا يَلِجُ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا يَخْرُجُ مِنْهَا وَمَا يَنزِلُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا يَعْرُجُ فِيهَا ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ٱلْغَفُورُ ﴿٢﴾

He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is the Merciful, the truly Forgiving. (2)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَأْتِينَا ٱلسَّاعَةُ ۖ قُلْ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّى لَتَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ عَٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ ۖ لَا يَعْزُبُ عَنْهُ مِثْقَالُ ذَرَّةٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَلَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَآ أَصْغَرُ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكْبَرُ إِلَّا فِى كِتَٰبٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book, (3)

لِّيَجْزِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions.' (4)

وَٱلَّذِينَ سَعَوۡ فِيٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا مُعَٰجِزِينَ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ مِّن رِّجۡزٍ أَلِيمٞ ٥

As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering. (5)

وَيَرَى ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلۡعِلۡمَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَيَهۡدِيٓ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلۡحَمِيدِ ٦

Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due. (6)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ هَلۡ نَدُلُّكُمۡ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٖ يُنَبِّئُكُمۡ إِذَا مُزِّقۡتُمۡ كُلَّ مُمَزَّقٍ إِنَّكُمۡ لَفِي خَلۡقٖ جَدِيدٍ ٧

The unbelievers say: 'Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to life in a new act of creation? (7)

أَفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَم بِهِۦ جِنَّةُۢۗ بَلِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ فِي ٱلۡعَذَابِ وَٱلضَّلَٰلِ ٱلۡبَعِيدِ ٨

Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?' No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error. (8)

أَفَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ إِلَىٰ مَا بَيۡنَ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَمَا خَلۡفَهُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِن نَّشَأۡ نَخۡسِفۡ بِهِمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ أَوۡ نُسۡقِطۡ عَلَيۡهِمۡ كِسَفٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لِّكُلِّ عَبۡدٖ مُّنِيبٖ ٩

Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance. (9)

Where Praise is Due

This *sūrah,* which speaks at length about the idolaters who associated partners with God, denied His Messenger, doubted the hereafter and dismissed the idea of resurrection, begins with praising God. All praise is due to Him for being God, even though no human being utters a word of praise addressed to Him. He is praised by the universe and all creation, even though some human beings take a different

attitude.

Coupled with this is God's attribute of being the Sovereign of the universe. No one has any portion of heaven or earth: He alone owns all there is. This is the central issue of faith: God's oneness.

"To Him will be due all praise in the life to come." (Verse 1) All the praise offered by all His servants, including those who disbelieved in Him in this life or associated partners with Him as a result of being led astray, will converge in the life to come and be addressed totally and purely to Him. *"He is truly Wise, All-Aware."* (Verse 1) Whatever He does is based on wisdom. Indeed, He conducts the affairs of this life and the Next, and the affairs of the entire universe in perfect wisdom. Moreover, He is aware of everything that takes place, and His knowledge is full, accurate and absolute.

The *sūrah* gives us a notion of God's knowledge, portrayed against the background of heaven and earth: *"He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them."* (Verse 2) This is a vast image drawn in a few simple words, painting an amazing multitude of things, motions, sizes, shapes, forms and meanings that go beyond any imagination. Should all the people on earth spend their entire lives monitoring and recording what takes place in just one moment of the things mentioned in the verse, they would not be able to do so. How many things go into the earth in such a moment? How many leave it? And how many come down from the sky or go up into it?

Consider what goes into the earth: the seeds that are buried in the ground, the worms, insects, crawling creatures, drops of rain, gases, electrical rays... all poured into every corner of this vast earth, yet God's eye watches them all. Then look at what comes out of it: plants shooting out, springs gushing forth, erupting volcanoes, emanating gases, crawlers and insects leaving their underground homes. How many countless things do we see and know about that come out of the earth and how many countless others we do not see or know about?

Reflect also on what comes down from the skies: drops of rain, comets, meteors, rays that burn or give light, divine orders, acts of grace that favour certain creatures while benefiting the whole universe, and also provisions God grants to His servants in plentiful or measured quantities. Then turn over in your mind what goes up into the sky: the breathing of humans, animals and plants, as well as other creatures only known to God, and supplications, uttered aloud or in secret, heard only by God. How many a soul of creatures known or unknown to us is gathered and rises to God; how many an angel ascends to carry out God's order; how many drops of seawater evaporate and rise into the atmosphere; how many molecules of gas emanate from all type of creatures?

How much of all this takes place in one moment? How much can human knowledge record of what happens of all this even should they devote all their lives to monitoring and recording it all? Yet God's knowledge reckons all this up, in all places and at all times, as well as all human thoughts, feelings, actions and movements. But God nevertheless gives us our privacy and forgives us our shortcomings: "*He is the Merciful, the truly Forgiving.*" (Verse 2) Just one Qur'ānic verse like the present one is sufficient to prove that this Qur'ān could not have been written by a human being. By nature, such descriptions do not occur to any person, nor does human nature contemplate matters in this way. That such a comprehensive vision is provided in one simple touch reflects the superiority of God's style.

The *sūrah* then mentions the unbelievers' denial of the inevitability of the Last Hour, even though they are totally unaware what tomorrow will bring. That it will come is certain; it is necessary so that both those who do good and those who do evil should receive their fair reward:

> *The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book, so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions.' As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering. (Verses 3-5)*

The unbelievers deny the life to come because they do not understand God's wisdom. In His infinite wisdom, He does not let people do what they please, whether good or evil, and then leave them at that, without giving reward to the doers of good and requiting those who do otherwise. He has informed us, through His messengers, that He leaves the reward in full or in part to the Day of Judgement. Therefore, all those who understand His wisdom with regard to His creation realize that the life to come is essential for the fulfilment of God's promise. The unbelievers, however, are oblivious of divine wisdom. Hence, they impolitely say: "*Never shall the Last Hour come upon us.*" (Verse 3) Hence the emphatic retort: "*Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you.*" They have no knowledge of what is beyond their world, but they nevertheless are quick to assert something of which they have no knowledge. Yet the one confirming this is the One "*who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 3) What He states is the truth. Furthermore, this truth is simple, complete and based on sound and true knowledge.

Once more God's knowledge is portrayed against a similarly universal background testifying once more to the Originator of the Qur'ān. Such thoughts simply do not occur to human minds: "*Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth*

escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book." (Verse 3) Such images do not occur in ordinary prose or poetry. When people describe knowledge as complete, comprehensive and accurate, they do not paint such a captivating universal image, '*Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor- is there anything smaller or larger...'* I have never seen in human language any attempt to draw such a picture. This is a description by God of His own knowledge, using human language in a way humans do not use it. Thus the Muslims' own concept of God is set on a nobler level. The nearest meaning of the phrase, *recorded in a clear book,'* is that God's knowledge takes note of everything, including the tiniest of atoms and what is even smaller.

It is useful to reflect a little on the point raised by use of the wording: *"Not an atom's weight... nor is there anything smaller."* Until recently, it was universally accepted that the atom is the smallest thing. Now that it has been possible to cause atomic diffusion, man has learnt that the atom is comprised of a number of other elements. All glory to God who teaches His human servants, at a time of His choosing, what He wishes them to learn of His inner attributes and the secrets of His creation.

Why a Judgement Day?

The inevitable arrival of the Last Hour and God's knowledge that does not exclude anything small or large have a definite purpose: *"so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions. As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering."* (Verses 4-5) Everything is based on God's wisdom who has created everything according to a set measure so as to administer the right reward or punishment for the believers or those who exert all efforts to turn people away from the truth. Those who give credence to their faith by good actions earn God's forgiveness of any errors they make or sins they commit. They also have *'generous provisions'* We note that the *sūrah* frequently mentions the provisions and sustenance God grants. Hence, it is fitting that the happiness they are assured to have in the life to come is described here as *'provisions'*, which in fact it is. The others, who strive hard to turn people away from God and His message will receive some of the worst type of punishment which fits their wicked efforts. Thus is God's purpose fulfilled.

Within the overall context of God's knowledge and His purpose the next statement makes clear that those endowed with knowledge realize that what the Prophet Muĥammad receives from God is the truth, providing sound guidance: *"Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you*

by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due." (Verse 6)

Some reports suggest that the phrase, *those who are endowed with knowledge,* refers to the people of earlier revelations who are told in their scriptures about the Qur'ān and its provision of true guidance. However, the Qur'ānic verse has a wider scope. All those endowed with proper knowledge, at all times and wherever they happen to be, will realize this on the basis of their knowledge, if it is truly sound. The Qur'ān is open for all people throughout all generations. It includes enough truth to reveal itself to everyone who has sound knowledge. It also states the truth inherent in the very existence of the universe.

Moreover, the Qur'ān "*guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due."* (Verse 6) The way leading to the Almighty is the system He has placed in the universe and chosen for mankind so that their lives may be in harmony with the universe they live in. It is the law that applies to absolutely everything that takes place in the universe.

The Qur'ān provides such guidance through the concept it gives believers of the universe: its values, relations, man's place and role in it, the cooperation of all its parts in the fulfilment of God's will and purpose and the harmony common to them. It also provides a sound basis for human thinking so as to make it consistent with the interaction between human nature and the universe. This enables man to understand the nature of the universe and its laws so as to use these in a positive way. The Qur'ān also lays down a system of education for humanity, empowering the individual to interact harmoniously with the rest of mankind, and empowering mankind to do the same with the rest of God's creation in the universe, comfortably benefiting by its nature. The legislation it lays down is consistent with man's circumstances as well as with the universal laws that apply to all creation. Thus, man does not become the odd one out among the countless communities of creatures in the universe. It is the Qur'ān that leads to that way: it is the guide provided by the Creator of man and the system that suits him. Consider the traveller who is guided on his journey by the engineer who built the road he is travelling on: how fortunate he would feel for having such expertise! How, then, about a guide provided by the One who originated the way and the person travelling on it?

The *sūrah* again mentions their reception to news of a Day of Judgement, expressing their total amazement at such a subject. They, in fact, suggest that to claim that resurrection takes place on a day when all humanity will be individually judged by God can only be attributed to a madman or someone who invents lies and attributes them to God. "*The unbelievers say: Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to lift in a new act of creation? Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?' No! It is those who do not*

believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error." (Verses 7-8)

Their amazement at the thought of resurrection is such that they invite people to join them in wondering at the condition of the person claiming it, using an especially derisive style: "*Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to life in a new act of creation?"* (Verse 7) Do you want to see such a strange man uttering wild claims of a new creation after you have been long dead and your bodies have decomposed? Such derision then turns to defamation: *"Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?"* According to them, such claims can only be made by a liar, by someone who fabricates ideas and claims that they are God's, or by a madman affected by the *jinn* to such an extent that he says what is incomprehensible.

What justifies their attitude? Is it simply because he says that they will be resurrected? Why is this so amazing when they have already gone through the process of being created? They do not even reflect on this amazing event, which they know to have taken place, i.e. their creation in the first instance. Had they reflected on this, they would not have marvelled at a second creation. They have already gone astray. Hence, the sūrah comments: *"No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error."* (Verse 8)

That they are in torment may refer to their punishment in the life to come. Since it will inevitably overtake them, then it is as if they are already in it, just like they have gone irremediably into error. But the statement may be understood in a different way, which suggests that those who do not believe in the life to come live in torment just as they live in error. This is a profound statement. A person who spends his life without belief in a second life suffers mental torment, as he lives without hope of justice, fair reward or compensation for what happens in his life. Indeed human life is full of situations and trials which man cannot face properly unless he looks up with hope for justice and reward for good action and punishment for those who do evil. There are things that one cannot do or bear without looking up to God, hoping to earn His pleasure in the life to come, when nothing large or small is overlooked. Whoever is deprived of this window of hope, which brings comfort and satisfaction, undoubtedly lives in torment as well as in error. Such a person suffers all this in the present life, before suffering punishment in the hereafter for his misdeeds which brought about his present life's suffering.

Belief in the hereafter brings the grace and blessings God grants to whoever of His servants deserves them through his desire to be guided to the truth and his diligent pursuit of it. My own feeling is that this second meaning is the one the present verse implies, as it describes those who do not believe in the hereafter as suffering torment and as being in deep error.

These people, who disbelieve in the life to come, are jerked from their slumber and presented with a fearful scene which could happen to them, if God so wills. Should they continue to go far into error, they will face terrible consequences: *"Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9) Here we have an image of terrible world events which they could see or perceive. Avalanches and landslides occur, and people see or hear of them, and fragments fall from the sky, such as meteors and thunderbolts. Again they have heard of such falls. The mention of such events here serves as a wake-up call to those who are heedless and those who discount the possibility of the arrival of the Last Hour. God's punishment is closer to them than all this. It only requires that God wills to inflict it upon them in this life, before the Last Hour. It could come to them in the form of the earth or the sky which surrounds them from all directions. Both are around them, unlike the Last Hour which belongs to God's own knowledge. Only the wrongdoers remain oblivious to what God may do.

What they see in the heavens and earth, and what may befall them at any time, should God wish it, present clear signs for anyone who reflects and turns to God with submission: *"there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9)

2
Contrasting Attitudes

۞ وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا دَاوُۥدَ مِنَّا فَضۡلٗاۖ يَٰجِبَالُ أَوِّبِي مَعَهُۥ وَٱلطَّيۡرَۖ وَأَلَنَّا لَهُ ٱلۡحَدِيدَ ١٠

We graced David with Our favour. We said: "You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!" We caused iron to become soft for him, (10)

أَنِ ٱعۡمَلۡ سَٰبِغَٰتٖ وَقَدِّرۡ فِي ٱلسَّرۡدِۖ وَٱعۡمَلُواْ صَٰلِحًاۖ إِنِّي بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ ١١

saying: "Make coats of mail and measure their links with care. Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do." (11)

وَلِسُلَيۡمَٰنَ ٱلرِّيحَ غُدُوُّهَا شَهۡرٞ وَرَوَاحُهَا شَهۡرٞۖ وَأَسَلۡنَا لَهُۥ عَيۡنَ ٱلۡقِطۡرِۖ وَمِنَ ٱلۡجِنِّ مَن يَعۡمَلُ بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِ بِإِذۡنِ رَبِّهِۦۖ وَمَن يَزِغۡ مِنۡهُمۡ عَنۡ أَمۡرِنَا نُذِقۡهُ مِنۡ عَذَابِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ١٢

To Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course a month's journey. We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him, and some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord. Whoever of them deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame. (12)

يَعۡمَلُونَ لَهُۥ مَا يَشَآءُ مِن مَّحَٰرِيبَ وَتَمَٰثِيلَ وَجِفَانٖ كَٱلۡجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٖ رَّاسِيَٰتٍۚ ٱعۡمَلُوٓاْ ءَالَ دَاوُۥدَ شُكۡرٗاۚ وَقَلِيلٞ مِّنۡ عِبَادِيَ ٱلشَّكُورُ ١٣

They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons. We said: 'Work thankfully, family of David, for few of My servants are truly thankful.' (13)

فَلَمَّا قَضَيۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡمَوۡتَ مَا دَلَّهُمۡ عَلَىٰ مَوۡتِهِۦٓ إِلَّا دَآبَّةُ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ تَأۡكُلُ مِنسَأَتَهُۥۖ فَلَمَّا خَرَّ تَبَيَّنَتِ ٱلۡجِنُّ أَن لَّوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٱلۡغَيۡبَ مَا لَبِثُواْ فِي ٱلۡعَذَابِ

When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff. And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude. (14)

ٱلۡمُهِينِ ١٤

لَقَدۡ كَانَ لِسَبَإٖ فِي مَسۡكَنِهِمۡ ءَايَةٞۖ جَنَّتَانِ
عَن يَمِينٖ وَشِمَالٖۖ كُلُواْ مِن رِّزۡقِ رَبِّكُمۡ
وَٱشۡكُرُواْ لَهُۥۚ بَلۡدَةٞ طَيِّبَةٞ وَرَبٌّ غَفُورٞ ١٥

فَأَعۡرَضُواْ فَأَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ سَيۡلَ ٱلۡعَرِمِ
وَبَدَّلۡنَٰهُم بِجَنَّتَيۡهِمۡ جَنَّتَيۡنِ ذَوَاتَيۡ أُكُلٍ
خَمۡطٖ وَأَثۡلٖ وَشَيۡءٖ مِّن سِدۡرٖ قَلِيلٖ ١٦

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَيۡنَٰهُم بِمَا كَفَرُواْۖ وَهَلۡ نُجَٰزِيٓ
إِلَّا ٱلۡكَفُورَ ١٧

وَجَعَلۡنَا بَيۡنَهُمۡ وَبَيۡنَ ٱلۡقُرَى ٱلَّتِي بَٰرَكۡنَا
فِيهَا قُرٗى ظَٰهِرَةٗ وَقَدَّرۡنَا فِيهَا ٱلسَّيۡرَۖ
سِيرُواْ فِيهَا لَيَالِيَ وَأَيَّامًا ءَامِنِينَ ١٨

فَقَالُواْ رَبَّنَا بَٰعِدۡ بَيۡنَ أَسۡفَارِنَا وَظَلَمُوٓاْ
أَنفُسَهُمۡ فَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ أَحَادِيثَ وَمَزَّقۡنَٰهُمۡ
كُلَّ مُمَزَّقٍۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٖ شَكُورٖ ١٩

وَلَقَدۡ صَدَّقَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ إِبۡلِيسُ ظَنَّهُۥ فَٱتَّبَعُوهُ
إِلَّا فَرِيقٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٢٠

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُۥ عَلَيۡهِم مِّن سُلۡطَٰنٍ إِلَّا
لِنَعۡلَمَ مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ مِمَّنۡ هُوَ مِنۡهَا

There was a sign for the people of Sheba in their dwelling place: two gardens, one to the right and one to the left: 'Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him: a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving.' (15)

But they paid no heed, and so We let loose upon them a raging torrent and replaced their two gardens with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lote trees. (16)

Thus We requited them for their ingratitude: would We thus requite any but the totally ungrateful? (17)

We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns within sight of one another so that they could travel in measured stages: 'Travel through them by night and day in safety.' (18)

But they said: 'Our Lord! Make our journeys longer.' They sinned against their souls; so We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land. Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful. (19)

Indeed Iblīs proved that his opinion of them was right: they all followed him, except for a group of believers. (20)

Yet he had no power at all over them; it is only for the end that We might make a clear distinction between those who truly believe in the life to come and those who are in doubt about it. Your Lord watches over all things. (21)

فِي شَكٍّ ۖ وَرَبُّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ حَفِيظٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Overview

This passage contains contrasting images of gratitude and a lack of it, as well as making some powers and creatures subservient, by God's will, to certain people even though they are not normally subordinate to any human being. God's will and power are not limited to what is normal or familiar to humans. Through these images we learn certain things about the *jinn* whom some idolaters worshipped. Others tried to learn through them news from the world beyond perception, but they themselves know nothing about that realm. We also have additional information about how Satan can prevail over man, despite the fact that Satan has no power over man except in as much as man gives him this by his own choice. Other clear elements within the passage concern the means by which God reveals some secret human actions so that they appear before us in real terms. He will then give those responsible for them reward in the life to come. This passage concludes, like the first one, with a reference to the life to come.

Special Favours for David

"We graced David with Our favour. We said: 'You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!' We caused iron to become soft for him, saying: Make coats of mail and measure their links with care. Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do." (Verses 10-11) David was the type of servant described at the end of the first part of the *sūrah:" In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9) The *sūrah* follows this reference by recounting some of his history, preambled by details of the grace God bestowed on him: "*You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!"* (Verse 10) Reports suggest that David had an unusually beautiful voice, and he used to sing his Psalms, which are praises of God mentioned in the Old Testament, but God knows which of them were truly David's. An authentic *ĥadīth* tells us that the Prophet overheard Abū Mūsā al-Ash`arī reciting the Qur'ān deep at night. He stopped to listen to him, and then commented: 'This man has been given one of David's Psalms.'

The Qur'ānic description shows that David (peace be upon him) attained such a sublime standard of devotion and transparency in his praises that barriers between

him and other creatures disappeared. Thus the truth between them became interrelated as they all praise God. Hence the mountains and the birds echoed his praises of God. When all of them had direct links with God, whatever separates species and creatures was removed. They felt that their bond with God overcame all barriers between them. Hence, they echoed one another in praising God, attaining an extraordinary level of transparency which can only be attained through God's grace.

When David raised his voice singing God's praises and glorifying Him, the mountains and the birds echoed him. The universe returned their songs as these were presented to God, the One. This is a remarkably splendid point in time which cannot be appreciated except by one who so experiences it, and even then only momentarily.

"We caused iron to become soft for him." (Verse 10) This is another aspect of the grace God bestowed on David. Within the context wherein it occurs, this seems to be a miracle going beyond what is familiar to us. The *sūrah* is not speaking here of heating iron until it becomes soft and moulding it into the required shape. Rather, it appears that the iron was softened in a different way from what normally occurs, yet God knows best. Although guiding man to the softening of iron by heating is in itself an aspect of God's grace, our assumption here rests on the fact that the overall atmosphere is one of miracles and unfamiliar phenomena.

"Make coats of mail and measure their links with care." (Verse 11) Reports suggest that prior to David's time, armour was plated, each coat being made up of one plate or sheet, which was very heavy for soldiers making them stiff and rigid. God instructed David in how to make armour from fine links which could be easily moulded so as to move in accordance with the body. David was also ordered to make these links narrow so that they could give complete protection against spears, preventing them from penetrating through. This is the reference in the verse to measuring the links with care. All this was taught to David through divine inspiration.

David and his household were told: *"Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do."* (Verse 11) This does not apply to their making coats of mail. Instead it is clear that they must be on their guard in all that they do because God sees all and rewards everyone in accordance with what they deserve. Nothing escapes Him.

More Favours for Solomon

All this grace was given to David. Solomon was also given the ability to perform extraordinary feats, as a manifestation of God's grace: *"To Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course a month's journey. We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him, and some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord. Whoever of them*

deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame. They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons. We said 'Work thankfully, family of David, for few of My servants are truly thankful.'" (Verses 12-13)

There are plenty of reports about the wind being subservient to Solomon, but many appear to have an Israelite origin even though the original Jewish texts do not mention anything about this. It is, therefore, much better to refrain from discussing these reports and to confine ourselves to the Qur'ānic text, going no further than its surface meaning. Thus we can say that God placed the wind at Solomon's command, making it travel forward to a specific place [which according to *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, is the Holy Land] for a month, and then making its return journey over a period of a month. Certain objectives were achieved by these two journeys. These were known to Solomon and he accomplished them by God's command. We prefer not to say any more on this point so as not to indulge in unsubstantiated legends.

"We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him." (Verse 12) The general context of these verses again suggests that this was also a miracle, like the softening of iron for David. This might have taken place in the form of a volcanic fountain pouring forth brass that had been molten underground. Likewise, God might have instructed Solomon on how to get brass to become fluid and mould it into different shapes. Regardless of how all this took place, it was nonetheless an act of God's abundant grace.

"Some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord." (Verse 12) God also gave him *jinn* to work under His command. Linguistically speaking, the *word jinn* refers to anything that people cannot see. There is also a type of creature God gave the name *jinn* to and about whom we know nothing except what God states. He mentions here that He placed a group of them under Solomon's command. Whoever disobeys will be punished by God. *"Whoever of them deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame."* (Verse 12) That this comment occurs here, before completing the aspects of their subservience to Solomon, highlights the fact that the *jinn* are also subject to God, even though some idolaters worshipped them. Like mankind, the *jinn* are liable to God's punishment should they deviate from His orders.

They were placed under Solomon's command: *"They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons."* (Verse 13) All these articles are examples of what the *jinn* used to make, by God's leave, whenever Solomon bid them. Again all these are miraculous things, and we cannot imagine them to be anything but. This is the only interpretation we can give to this statement.

The verse concludes with an address to David's household: *"We said: 'Work thankfully, family of David.'"* (Verse 13) All this was given you by God's grace, through David and Solomon. You must not take false pride in it, but instead give proper thanks. Good action is an important form of thanksgiving.

However, *"few of My servants are truly thankful."* (Verse 13) This comment also serves as a directive. It tells us on the one hand that the grace and favours God bestows on His servants are so great that few of them are able to express due thanks for them, and on the other that people often neglect their thanksgiving duty. In fact, however much people try to express their gratitude, they cannot give due thanks for what God bestows on them. What is their status, then, if they slacken and overlook this duty?

Yet the question is: how can a human being, with limited ability, be sufficiently grateful for God's unlimited favours? God tells us in the Qur'ān: *"Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them."* (14: 34) These blessings are constantly around man no matter where he looks. They are both within him and within his surroundings. Indeed, he himself is one major blessing in this world. For example, at one time we were a group of people chatting about a wide variety of subjects when our little cat came over and started walking around us as if looking for something. It was clear that the cat needed something in particular, but it could not tell us what it was, and we could not understand his purpose. Then it occurred to us that he might be looking for water, and we were right. When we put the water before him we realized that he was very thirsty but could not express himself. We realized then just how much God has favoured us with the gift of communication. We expressed our gratitude to God for this blessing, but what thanks, heartfelt as they may be, can be enough for such a blessing!

On a prolonged occasion we were deprived of sunshine. At times, however, a ray of sunlight as small as a little coin would creep in, and we would take turns to stand in it, moving ourselves so as to let it fall on our faces, hands, chests, backs, abdomens and legs. I cannot forget the time when all this was over and we were allowed out: one of us was beaming with delight as he said: 'Oh God! How lovely to see the sun again! It still rises every day! All praise to God for this blessing!"[8]

How much of this light, which is necessary for life, do we waste every day as we enjoy the sun and its warmth? Indeed we always bathe in this blessing granted to us freely by God. We neither pay for it, nor do we exert any effort to come by it.

When we reflect on God's blessings in this way, we can spend all our lives and

[8] It is clear that both these situations refer to the author's time in prison. Some of us may wonder that cats are in prison, but accounts by different prisoners confirm that stray cats frequently came to them and they found them a source of solace. — Editor's note.

energy covering but a little. Therefore, we only make this brief reference, following the Qur'ānic method of giving a hint or a pointer. It is up to everyone to reflect on it and try to express gratitude to God as they can. Indeed to be thankful to God is itself a blessing enjoyed by those who are sincere in their devotion.

Let us move now to the last scene in the story which shows Solomon's death while *the Jinn* continue to work hard as he had bid them, unaware of the fact of his death, until a worm had gnawed at his staff sufficiently for him to fall down: "*When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.*" (Verse 14)

It is reported that in the position he was in at the moment of his death, he was leaning over his stick and that he remained in that position while the *jinn* continued performing the task he assigned them. Then a worm that eats wood came upon his stick. This type of worm gnaws persistently at wood ruining roofs, doors and buildings foundations. In parts of Upper Egypt, some villages do not use a single piece of wood in their homes for fear of woodworm. When the woodworm had gnawed at Solomon's staff, it could no longer support him, and he fell down. Only then did the *jinn* realize that he was dead: "*the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.*" (Verse 14)

Such, then, are the *jinn* whom some people worship. We see them here subservient to one of God's servants. They are totally unable to fathom something which is hidden from them, yet is very close: how then can they gratify people's appeals to learn the secrets of what is beyond the reach of perception!

No Gratitude for God's Favours

David and his family were full of gratitude to God for all His blessings and used such favours for good purpose. The people of Sheba, however, are to be contrasted with such role models. In *Sūrah* 27, The Ants, we have a report of what took place between their queen and Solomon. Here, the story gives an account of what happened to them after Solomon, which suggests that the events included here date back to a period after the queen's exchanges with Solomon. What makes this more likely is that the story here speaks of Sheba's people becoming ungrateful for God's blessings, which were then withdrawn and the people scattered. Under the queen mentioned in *Sūrah* 27, they enjoyed a plentiful period and were very powerful. The first report received by Solomon about them was from a hoopoe who told him: "*I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is*

a magnificent throne. I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God!, so that they cannot find the right way." (27: 23-24)

This was subsequently followed by the queen's submission to God, as she embraced the divine faith. The story here, then, is certainly of a subsequent period. It tells of what happened to them after they turned away from God and refused to thank Him for His favours.

The story opens with a description of the great blessings they enjoyed and the provisions they were granted, as well as the requirement that they should demonstrate their gratitude as they could: *"There was a sign for the people of Sheba in their dwelling place: two gardens, one to the right and one to the left: 'Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him: a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving.'"* (Verse 15)

Sheba is the name of a community living in southern Yemen, in a fertile land some of which remains so today. They were highly civilized and were able to make good use of their water resources, as they were blessed with much rainfall, occupying territory close to the sea in the south and east. They were thus able to build a natural dam between two mountains, erecting a great wall down the valley, with controlled openings. In this way they were able to retain water in great quantities which they used as they needed. This great darn was known as the Ma'rib Dam.

The gardens to the right and left symbolize the splendid fertility of their land which gave them beauty and affluence. Therefore, they were signs reminding them of God who gives every good thing. They were commanded to make full use of what was granted to them and to thank the Giver: *"Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him."* (Verse 15) They were also reminded of the nature of their blessings: the productive land and the forgiveness of their sins: *"a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving."* (Verse 15) When such priceless blessings are given in plenty, why were they unwilling to give thanks? *"But they paid no heed, and so We let loose upon them a raging torrent and replaced their two gardens with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lore trees."* (Verse 16)

When they failed to show their gratitude to God and use what God favoured them with in a goodly and beneficial way, He took away their source of affluence and let loose raging, stone-carrying torrents which destroyed their dam and its water flooded the whole area. With the dam no longer functioning, the land dried up. Instead of beautiful gardens they now had only a desert in which only a few wild trees were to grow, bearing no good fruit. The verse says that their gardens were *"replaced ...with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lote trees."* (Verse 16) This was the best that their land could subsequently produce and even then it was only in small quantities.

"Thus We requited them for their ingratitude: would We thus requite any but the totally ungrateful." (Verse 17) Until then they had remained in their villages and homes. God stinted their provisions and replaced their riches with austerity, but He had not yet scattered them over a wider area. They had easy contacts with the cities blessed by God: Makkah and Jerusalem. To the north of Sheba, Yemen was well inhabited and its land routes to other areas were safe and comfortable: *"We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns within sight of one another so that they could travel in measured stages: 'Travel through them by night and day in safety."* (Verse 18) It is reported that a traveller would leave one township in the morning and arrive at the next before dark. This meant that journey times were short, making travel easy, safe and comfortable.

Yet Sheba's people paid no heed to the first warning. Nor did the change in their circumstances make them turn to God and appeal to Him to give back their comfortable lives. On the contrary, their prayer betrayed stupidity and ignorance: *"But they said: 'Our Lord! Make our journeys longer."* They wanted long distance travel, which is undertaken only infrequently. In so doing, they demonstrated nothing but arrogance: *They sinned against their souls."* Their prayer was answered, but only as such a prayer should be answered: *"So We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land."* (Verse 19) They became like refugees scattered throughout Arabia. They also became the subject of discussions in others' gatherings. In other words, they were no longer a recognized community, but a tale people told. *"Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful."* (Verse 19) We note that patience and steadfastness are mentioned alongside thanksgiving in times of plenty. The history of Sheba gives signs on both counts.

This is one way of understanding the last two verses. However, they may also be understood in a different way, which would then render the first statement as: *"We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns that have dominance."* As these places had power and dominance, the people of Sheba became poor, living like desert dwellers, and having to travel time after time to find pasture and water. They could not withstand the test that this entailed. Therefore, they prayed to God, and in this case their supplication would be rendered as: *'Our Lord! Lengthen the time between our journeys,'* or make them less frequent, as travel has become too tiring for us. They did not couple this prayer with turning to God with repentance and seeking His forgiveness, so that He would grant them what they prayed for. Since they behaved arrogantly when they had God's blessings, and did not persevere when they faced adversity, God punished them by scattering them and so they disappeared, featuring only in people's tales. This makes the comment at the end of these verses fitting for their lack of gratitude for God's favour and lack of patience in adversity: *"Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful."* (Verse 19) I feel this understanding of the verses to be also acceptable. God,

however, knows His own purpose best.

As the story concludes, the *ninth* mentions the overall divine planning and the rules God operates in life generally. It tells us what lessons we should draw from this and what lies behind it: *"Indeed Iblīs proved that his opinion of them was right: they all followed him, except for a group of believers. Yet he had no power at all over them; it is only for the end that We might make a clear distinction between those who truly believe in the life to come and those who are in doubt about it. Your Lord watches over all things."* (Verses 20-21)

The people of Sheba went the way that leads to a miserable end: *Iblīs* felt that he could lead them astray, and they let him do so. Thus, except for a group of believers, they all followed him. This is what normally happens in all communities. It is rare that a community is totally bereft of believers who will not give in to Satan and his machinations. They thus prove that the truth remains, even in the worst of conditions, available to everyone who seeks it and wants to hold to it. *Iblīs* never had an overpowering authority over them from which they could not be free. He can only approach them in order that they be tested, and everyone who wishes to stick to the truth could do so, while everyone else will go astray. Thus, in life, a type of person emerges who '*truly believe in the life to come*', and thus his beliefs keep him on the right path. This type are distinct from the other *'who are in doubt'* about the life to come. It is the latter who succumb to *Iblīs's* temptations, heedless of the Day of Judgement. God certainly knows what happens before it actually takes place. However, He makes His reward dependent upon the thing actually taking place.

When we look at the story of Sheba's people from a broader angle, we see that its moral can apply to all communities at all times. The story can then be seen as demonstrating what happens when communities follow divine guidance or stray away from it. It also shows the reasons that make people take the direction they do. *"Your Lord watches over all things."* (Verse 21) Nothing is lost or overlooked.

Thus the second passage of the *sūrah* concludes, speaking of the life to come, just as did the first passage. It also emphasizes the limitless nature of God's knowledge and His awareness of all things. Both subjects are given much emphasis in this *sūrah.*

3
Distinct Ways, Different Ends

قُلِ ٱدۡعُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ زَعَمۡتُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ لَا يَمۡلِكُونَ مِثۡقَالَ ذَرَّةٖ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَلَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا لَهُمۡ فِيهِمَا مِن شِرۡكٖ وَمَا لَهُۥ مِنۡهُم مِّن ظَهِيرٖ ٢٢

Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them. (22)

وَلَا تَنفَعُ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةُ عِندَهُۥٓ إِلَّا لِمَنۡ أَذِنَ لَهُۥۚ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فُزِّعَ عَن قُلُوبِهِمۡ قَالُواْ مَاذَا قَالَ رَبُّكُمۡۖ قَالُواْ ٱلۡحَقَّۖ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَلِيُّ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ٢٣

Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.' (23)

۞ قُلۡ مَن يَرۡزُقُكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ قُلِ ٱللَّهُۖ وَإِنَّآ أَوۡ إِيَّاكُمۡ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى أَوۡ فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ٢٤

Say: 'Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?' Say: 'It is God; and either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!' (24)

قُل لَّا تُسۡـَٔلُونَ عَمَّآ أَجۡرَمۡنَا وَلَا نُسۡـَٔلُ عَمَّا تَعۡمَلُونَ ٢٥

Say: 'Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing.' (25)

قُلۡ يَجۡمَعُ بَيۡنَنَا رَبُّنَا ثُمَّ يَفۡتَحُ بَيۡنَنَا بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَهُوَ ٱلۡفَتَّاحُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٢٦

Say: 'Our Lord will bring us all together, and then He will lay open the truth between us, in justice. He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing.' (26)

Say: 'Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.' (27)	قُلۡ أَرُونِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَلۡحَقۡتُم بِهِۦ شُرَكَآءَ كَلَّاۚ بَلۡ هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٢٧

Overview

This short passage tackles the issue of God's oneness in contrast to attributing partners to Him. Yet it takes us on a round of the universe, with both its apparent realm and that which is hidden from us, its present and past, heavens and earth, this life and the life to come. Our hearts shudder with awe at the mere mention of some of these majestic aspects. The passage also refers to man's sustenance, actions and reward. It looks at how people are grouped together and then separated into two distinct parties. All this is delivered in a quick rhythm with strong accompanying beats. The word, *say,'* is repeatedly used for added emphasis. After each such usage, a new proof is given which is both irrefutable and overpowering.

The Truth Will Out

"*Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them.*" (Verse 22) The verse begins with a challenge that applies to the entire universe, without exception: "*Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God.*" Call on them to come and stand before all the world. Let them then say, or you can say yourselves, if they own anything in the heavens or on earth, large or small. "*They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth.*" (Verse 22) They cannot even claim to own anything in the heavens or the earth. An owner of something has full authority over it: he can do or dispense with it as he likes. What, then, do those alleged deities own in this vast universe?

They do not own an atom's weight either as their own private property or as something in which they have a share: "*nor have they any share in either.*" (Verse 22) Moreover, God does not seek their help in anything. He is in no need of help: "*nor does He have any helper from among them.*" (Verse 22)

The verse appears to refer to a particular type of alleged partner with God. These are the angels whom the Arabs claimed to be God's daughters, alleging that they could intercede with God on people's behalf. Perhaps they were among those partners about whom the Arabs said: "*We worship them for no reason other than that*

they would bring us nearer to God." (39: 3) Therefore, in the next verse the *sūrah* denies that they have any means of intercession while drawing a scene that fills hearts with fear: "*Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission."* (Verse 23) Intercession, then, is dependent on God's permission. Needless to say, God will not permit intercession on behalf of people who do not believe in Him and deserve His grace. Those who associate partners with Him do not deserve that He grant permission to angels or anyone else to intercede on their behalf.

The *sūrah* then describes the fearful scene when intercession is needed: *"When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.'"* (Verse 23) The day is exceedingly hard: people stand awaiting developments, and those who can intercede and the ones who hope for intercession in their favour wait for a signal from the Almighty permitting such intercession. The wait continues, faces look down, sounds die out and hearts go quiet as all await a signal from the Lord, full of majesty and glory.

The word of permission is then given and all prospective intercessors and the ones they are interceding for are overwhelmed with awe. They are unable to comprehend. Then, "*when the terror is lifted from their hearts,'* and they recover their senses and faculties, they begin to ask one another: *"What has your Lord ordained?"* They wonder whether they have understood what God said. The answer is given in one word: *The truth.'* It may he that the angels of the highest order are the ones who give this perfect answer. Your Lord has stated the truth, complete and perfect; the truth that comes from Him who is truth absolute. For whatever God says is absolutely true. "*He is the Most High, the Supreme."* (Verse 23) It is a most fitting description.

This short answer, in one word, imparts the awesomeness of the situation when intercession is permitted. It describes how the angels stand before their Lord. Can anyone who looks at it pretend to be a partner with God, interceding in favour of those who attribute partners to Him?

Either One or the Other

That was the first note of this splendid and awe-inspiring scene. The second note refers to the provisions granted to them. Although they are oblivious to the source that gives them their provisions, the fact that they have them proves His oneness and that no one else has any control over what He decides to give or deny. "*Say: 'Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?' Say: it is God; and either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!'*" (Verse 24) Providing sustenance is something people know about as it happens in their lives. It comes from heaven in

the form of rain, heat and light, which were known to the people addressed first by the Qur'ān, but also in other forms and shapes which man discovers at one time or another. Other sustenance comes from the earth in the form of plants, animals, water, oils, metals and treasure. Much of these were known to the people of olden days and much is discovered as time passes on.

The question is: *"Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?" The* answer is not awaited. In fact, the Prophet is told to say: *"It is God."* They cannot argue about this or make any contrary claim. What the Prophet is also instructed to do is to leave matters entirely to God concerning the fates of both parties. One party is inevitably right and the other wrong; one is guided aright and the other is in error. The two cannot be together either on the track of proper guidance or of going astray: *"Either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!" (Verse* 24)

This is the ultimate in fairness and politeness when arguing one's case. For God's Messenger to say to the idolaters that either party could be following right guidance leaves the question open as to who is on which side: this, thus, calls for cool reflection and reasonable deliberation. There is no room for futile argument or an illogical hardening of attitude. The Prophet is given instructions to say this to them as his role is that of a guide and a teacher hoping that they will see the truth of the guidance he brings them. He is not out to score a point or win an argument.

Arguments made in such a polite and inspiring manner are more likely to have a positive effect on those whose position in society prompts them to take a hard line to the message of truth. They may even show a willingness to consider and reflect at ease. It is exactly the approach that should be adopted by advocates of Islam everywhere.

The third note puts everyone before their actions and responsibilities, but again using the most polite and fair approach: *"Say: Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing."* (Verse 25)

This might have been in answer to the repeated accusations of the idolaters branding the Prophet and his Companions as guilty and in the wrong. They had in this respect berated them for renouncing their forefathers' religion. This happens all the time, when the followers of falsehood accuse the followers of truth of being in error. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to tell them in exemplary politeness that everyone is responsible for his or her own deeds: *"Say: Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of, nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing."* (Verse 25) Everyone must reflect and determine whether their attic tide will lead them to success or bring about their ruin. This is the first step towards recognizing the truth before attaining conviction.

The fourth note is given in the verse that says: "*Say: Our Lord will bring us all together, and then He will lay open the truth between us, in justice. He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing.*" (26) At first, God gathers both the followers of truth and those who follow falsehood together, so that both truth and falsehood meet face to face. Then, the advocates of truth will call on others to join them. At this stage, issues become confused, and a battle ensues between truth and falsehood. Doubts may blur evidence, and falsehood may appear to gain the upper hand, but all this will be for a limited duration. Then, God will judge between the two parties in fairness and state the truth clearly, without any ambiguity or confusion. "*He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 26)

This gives reassurance since God is certain to make His judgement clear, laying the truth open before all. He does not allow matters to remain confused except for a limited period. He does not put the advocates of truth together with those who follow falsehood except to give the former a chance to carry on with their advocacy, exerting their best efforts. Then God will issue His verdict on both sides. It is He who knows best when the appropriate time for judgement comes. No one else should decide its timing, or hasten it. It is all left to Him.

The final note in this passage sounds similar to the first one, throwing out a challenge to those who associated partners with him: "*Say: Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (*Verse* 27) The very request is sarcastic: demanding that they reveal the subject of their claims: who are they; what is their status, position and role; how did they merit such a position? All these questions betray an element of derision. This is followed by strong censure: "*Nay!*" They are not, and cannot be, God's partners. "*He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 27) The One who has such attributes has no partners of any sort.

4
Futile Argument

وَمَا أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ إِلَّا كَآفَّةٗ لِّلنَّاسِ بَشِيرٗا وَنَذِيرٗا وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٨

We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand. (28)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلۡوَعۡدُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٢٩

They ask: When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (29)

قُل لَّكُم مِّيعَادُ يَوۡمٖ لَّا تَسۡتَـٔۡخِرُونَ عَنۡهُ سَاعَةٗ وَلَا تَسۡتَقۡدِمُونَ ٣٠

Say: 'There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment.' (30)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَن نُّؤۡمِنَ بِهَٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ وَلَا بِٱلَّذِي بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِۗ وَلَوۡ تَرَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ مَوۡقُوفُونَ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ يَرۡجِعُ بَعۡضُهُمۡ إِلَىٰ بَعۡضٍ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ يَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتُضۡعِفُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ لَوۡلَآ أَنتُمۡ لَكُنَّا مُؤۡمِنِينَ ٣١

The unbelievers say: 'We will never believe in this Qur'ān, nor in any earlier revelations.' If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: 'Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.' (31)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسۡتُضۡعِفُوٓاْ أَنَحۡنُ صَدَدۡنَٰكُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡهُدَىٰ بَعۡدَ إِذۡ جَآءَكُمۖ بَلۡ كُنتُم مُّجۡرِمِينَ ٣٢

The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: 'Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty.' (32)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتُضْعِفُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُواْ بَلْ مَكْرُ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ إِذْ تَأْمُرُونَنَآ أَن نَّكْفُرَ بِٱللَّهِ وَنَجْعَلَ لَهُۥٓ أَندَادًا ۚ وَأَسَرُّواْ ٱلنَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوُاْ ٱلْعَذَابَ وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلْأَغْلَٰلَ فِىٓ أَعْنَاقِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ ۚ هَلْ يُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: 'Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.' When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did? (33)

وَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا فِى قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَآ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.' (34)

وَقَالُواْ نَحْنُ أَكْثَرُ أَمْوَٰلًا وَأَوْلَٰدًا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

They also say: 'Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer.' (35)

قُلْ إِنَّ رَبِّى يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقْدِرُ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Say: 'My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand.' (36)

وَمَآ أَمْوَٰلُكُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَٰدُكُم بِٱلَّتِى تُقَرِّبُكُمْ عِندَنَا زُلْفَىٰٓ إِلَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ جَزَآءُ ٱلضِّعْفِ بِمَا عَمِلُواْ وَهُمْ فِى ٱلْغُرُفَٰتِ ءَامِنُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَسْعَوْنَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا مُعَٰجِزِينَ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ فِى ٱلْعَذَابِ مُحْضَرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering. (38)

قُلۡ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقۡدِرُ لَهُۥۚ وَمَآ أَنفَقۡتُم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَهُوَ يُخۡلِفُهُۥۖ وَهُوَ خَيۡرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Say: 'My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills of His servants; whatever you give for His sake He will replace it for you, for He is the best of providers.' (39)

وَيَوۡمَ يَحۡشُرُهُمۡ جَمِيعٗا ثُمَّ يَقُولُ لِلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ أَهَٰٓؤُلَآءِ إِيَّاكُمۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: 'Was it you that these people worshipped?' (40)

قَالُواْ سُبۡحَٰنَكَ أَنتَ وَلِيُّنَا مِن دُونِهِمۖ بَلۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡبُدُونَ ٱلۡجِنَّۖ أَكۡثَرُهُم بِهِم مُّؤۡمِنُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

They will answer: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.' (41)

فَٱلۡيَوۡمَ لَا يَمۡلِكُ بَعۡضُكُمۡ لِبَعۡضٖ نَّفۡعٗا وَلَا ضَرّٗا وَنَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ ذُوقُواْ عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ٱلَّتِي كُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another. We will say to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.' (42)

Overview

This passage tackles the unbelievers' attitude of the Prophet Muĥammad's message. Indeed their attitude echoes that of the affluent to every divine message. Such people are normally deluded by their riches and their offspring, and the fact that they command much of what this life can offer, thinking that this indicates they are favoured by God, and that such favours will ensure they do not suffer punishment in the hereafter. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their situation in the life to come, as though it is happening now before their very eyes. This so that they will know whether anything of what they have can benefit or protect them on the Day of Judgement. These scenes show clearly that neither the angels nor the *jinn* they worshipped in this life, and from whom they sought help, can give them anything whatsoever in the life to come. As the argument progresses the *sūrah* explains what

carries real weight in God's measure. Thus the false values they have in this world are seen for what they are. It becomes clear that granting wealth in abundance or otherwise in this present life depends on God's will. It should not be taken as evidence of anyone's position with Him. It is all a means of testing people.

The Prophet's Responsibility

> *We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand. They ask: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment.' (Verses 28-30)*

This clarifies what was stated in the previous passage about each individual's accountability to God, and that the role of the advocates of truth does not go beyond delivering God's message and presenting it clearly before the rest of mankind. The current passage starts with explaining the mission assigned to the Prophet. It is clear that they are unaware of its nature. Hence they try to hasten what he promises or threatens them with. It makes clear that this comes at the time God has determined for it, which is unknown to anyone other than Him: *"We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning."* (Verse 28) Such is the remit of the message addressed to all mankind: to bring good news and to give warning. When this is done, the messenger's role has ended. As for the fulfilment of promise and warning, this is all left to God to determine: *"but most people do not understand."* (Verse 28)

"They ask: When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?" (Verse 29) The very question implies that they do not understand the messenger's role or the limits of the message. The Qur'ān wants the question of God's oneness to be absolutely clear: Muĥammad is His Messenger with a clearly defined remit. He fulfils his task but does not go beyond this. All authority belongs to God: it is He who has given him the message to deliver, clearly defining his role. It is not part of his role to decide, or even to know, when the promise and the warning are to be fulfilled. This all belongs to God. The Prophet knows his limits. Therefore, he does not even question anything God has not chosen to inform him of, or has not assigned to him. Here, God instructs him to give them this particular reply: *"Say: There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment."* (Verse 30)

Everything occurs at its particular time which God has determined. It is neither hastened nor delayed for anyone. Nothing occurs by coincidence. On the contrary, everything is created according to a particular plan, in which things are interrelated.

God's will determines events and timings according to His own wisdom, of which we only understand what God chooses to impart to us. When people try to hasten His promise or warning, they betray their ignorance of this fundamental fact. Hence, since most people do not understand, this leads them to questioning and hastening things.

Stubborn to the Hilt

The next verse speaks about a determined attitude to reject all divine guidance: *"The unbelievers say: We will never believe in this Qur'ān, nor in any earlier revelations."* (Verse 31) They make it clear that they will never believe, neither in the Qur'ān nor in any divine book that preceded the Qur'ān, which in fact confirms its truth. They are not prepared to believe in any of this at any time in the future either. They are determined to disbelieve, deliberately refusing even to consider anything that points to faith. It is all, then, a well considered stance. Therefore, the *sūrah* puts before their eyes what happens to them on the Day of Judgement as a result of their stubborn rejection:

> *If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.' The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: 'Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty.' Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.' When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did? (Verses 31-33)*

Their assertion that they will never believe in any revealed book is made in this life. So, what will they say in a totally different situation? If only we could see these wrongdoers when they are 'made to stand', i.e. forced into it against their will or better judgement. They are guilty, made to stand and await a decision by their Lord, in whose words and scriptures they profess they will never believe. Yet now they stand before Him. If you could watch them, you would see how they reproach one another, exchanging accusations and trying to blame each other. So, what is it that they say?

"Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers." (Verse 31) They blame their leaders, accusing them of being responsible for this humiliation and what

will come next of great suffering. They state this now but were totally unable to confront them in this way during their life on earth, prevented as they were by their weakness and submission. They had sold out the freedom and dignity God had granted them, as well as the reasoning He had blessed them with. Now that all false values have been discarded, and they are put face to face with a long-lasting suffering, they can express themselves without fear: *"Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers."* (Verse 31)

Those who used to think much of their power base are fed up with those whom they treated with humiliation. Both face the same punishment, but the weaker elements want them to bear responsibility for leading them astray, which is what has brought them to this suffering. Therefore, their reply is haughty, disowning any responsibility. They also tell them rudely what they think of them: *"The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty."* (Verse 32)

It is not only that they deny responsibility for others, but they acknowledge that the message they received was one of guidance. In their first life, they paid little heed to the weak or their views. In fact, they treated them as if they did not exist, accepting neither argument nor opposition from them. Now that they are facing the punishment of the hereafter, they reproachfully ask them: *"Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you?"* (Verse 32) With this denial comes an accusation: *"It was you who were guilty."* (Verse 32) You refused the guidance that was given you because you yourselves were guilty.

Had this exchange taken place in this life, the weak would have sat quietly, unable to utter a word. But on the Day of Judgement, when false airs are seen for what they are, and when the facts that were hidden are brought into the open, the weak do not accept this accusation. Instead, they speak out telling the others that it was they who consistently schemed to turn them away from God's guidance, it was they who established false beliefs, created confusion around the truth, and who used power and influence to keep people astray: *"Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him."* (Verse 33)

Both groups will then realize that such a depressing dialogue benefits neither. It will not spare either the punishment they deserve. Each party is guilty of their own sins: the ones who claimed power have to account for their own sins, as well as for leading others astray; and similarly the weak are responsible for their own sins and for following tyrants. They cannot he exempt on account of the fact that they were weak. God favoured them with reason and freedom, but they chose not to use their reason and sold their freedom, accepting humiliation and servility. Thus, they all

deserve to be punished. When they see the suffering they have to endure, they are in deep sorrow, regretting all that they have done: *"When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse."* (Verse 33) This is a description of a state of total regret that leaves the person unable to utter a word. Hearts are buried and lips are sealed.

They are then taken to where their punishment, hard and painful, is meted out: *"We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers."* (Verse 32) As they are being so driven, the *sūrah* addresses the onlookers, saying: "*Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did?"* (Verse 33)

The curtains are drawn leaving behind both those who enjoyed power and those who were servile. Both are wrongdoers. One group does wrong by tyrannizing, distorting the truth and exceeding their limits, while the other does wrong by surrendering their human dignity, reason and freedom, and accepting tyranny. Both groups are equally punished; both are requited only for what they did.

The scene shows the wrongdoers what they will face, bringing it alive before their very eyes. They see themselves in the hereafter while they are still in this life. Not only so, but others also see their end. All this is done when there is still time for all to make amends and correct their attitudes.

An Ever Repeated Story

The wealthy Qurayshi people behaved in exactly the same way as others of affluence when they received a divine message: *"Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: 'We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.'"* (Verse 34) Thus, it is the same story repeated again and again throughout the generations. Luxurious life hardens hearts, blunts sensitivity, and corrupts nature so that it no longer sees the pointers divine guidance provides. It thus lures people into arrogance, darkness and falsehood.

People who live in luxury are often deceived by false values and transient affluence. They are deluded by the power and wealth they enjoy, thinking that it will spare them God's punishment or that it is evidence of God's being pleased with them, or that in their position they are above accountability for their deeds: "*They also say: Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer."* (Verse 35)

The Qur'ān puts in front of them the standard of values God wants. It explains to them that whether God grants provisions in plenty or makes them scanty is no indication of God's being pleased or displeased with a person. It has nothing to do with the correct standard of values; it neither prevents punishment nor induces it. It

is totally separate from the question of accountability, reckoning, requital and God's pleasure. It is subject to a totally different divine rule: *"Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand."* (Verse 36)

This question of wealth and property, and how much someone has of the means of luxury and pleasure, is one that makes many people wonder.

They are troubled when they see that the wicked, the corrupt and the perpetrators of evil have whatever they wish for of wealth and power, while those who are virtuous, good and honest are deprived of it all. Some tend to think that God only gives in abundance to someone who enjoys a privileged position with Him. Others may even doubt whether goodness, honesty and virtue have any real value, since they often go hand in hand with poverty and deprivation. Therefore, the Qur'ān separates the riches and luxuries of this world from the values which God approves of. It states that God grants sustenance in abundance or scant measure to whomever He wills, and this has nothing to do with Him being pleased or displeased with anyone. God may indeed give riches in abundance to someone with whom He is displeased as well as to one who has earned His pleasure. Likewise, He may stint the provisions of anyone, good or evil. Most certainly the actions they do will not lead to the same result.

God may give in plenty to the perpetrators of evil, giving them the chance to delve further into evil, compound their corruption and increase their record of sin and crime. He will then punish them for their evil in this life or in the life to come as He, in His infinite wisdom, may determine. On the other hand, He may give them sustenance in a tight and scanty measure, and as a result they may go further on the loose, adding to their crimes and sins, despairing of ever receiving God's grace. Again their record of sin and evil will mount.

By contrast, God may bestow His favours in abundance on good and virtuous people so as to enable them to do many more good things that they would not have been able to do without having plentiful provisions. Thus, they will show their gratitude to Him by feeling, word and action. Their record of good things will then grow in accordance with their actions and with the goodness of their hearts, which is known to God. Alternatively, He may grant them sustenance only in small measure to test their perseverance, trust in their Lord, reassurance and acceptance of whatever lot is assigned to them. Again, if they prove themselves, there will be a manifold increase in their record of goodness.

Whatever the reasons for giving people in plenty or in limited measure are, the whole question is entirely separate from people's respective positions with God. A person's wealth, position or offspring in this life bear no indication of that person's

standing with God. Such standing is determined on the basis of how people behave. If God grants someone wealth and children, and he uses both in a good way, God may give him double reward for this good action in connection with the blessings received from Him. It is their conduct that gives them double reward, not the wealth, power or offspring.

> *It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering. (Verses 37-38)*

The rule concerning people's provisions and whether they are given in abundance or small measure is restated, making it clear that it is subject to God's wisdom. It tells us that whatever of our provision is spent for God's sake is the portion that remains and grows. We need to keep this fact clear in our minds:

> *Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills of His servants; whatever you give for His sake He will replace it for you, for He is the best of providers. (Verse 39)*

Who Benefits Whom

The passage concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement, where we see them gathered, and God confronts them with the angels they used to worship instead of Him. It ends with them suffering the torment they used to hasten, as the *sūrah* has already mentioned:

> *On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: 'Was it you that these people worshipped?' They will answer: Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.' Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another. We will say to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.' (Verses 40-42)*

These are the angels they used to worship, or hope would intercede for them with God: they are brought face to face with them, but the angels glorify God, stating that He is exalted above all that these people allege. They disassociate themselves from such false worship, as though it had not taken place. They are indeed in Satan's service, either worshipping him and appealing to him for help, or obeying him by associating partners with God. In fact, when they worshipped angels, they were

actually worshipping Satan. Indeed worship of the *jinn* was practised by some Arabs. Some of them actually addressed their worship to the *jinn,* while others sought their help. Hence, the *sūrah* says: *"They worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them."* (Verse 41) This explains the relevance of Solomon's story with the *jinn* to the major issues discussed in this *sūrah.*

As this scene concludes, the mode of expression changes from narrative to address. The blame is squarely put on them, and they are severely reproached: *"Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another."* (Verse 42) Neither can the angels benefit people, nor can those unbelievers benefit one another. The fire the wrongdoers used to deny is now in front of them. It is an undoubted reality: *"We will say to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.'* (Verse 42)

Like all previous passages, this one concludes with further emphasis on the question of resurrection, accountability, reckoning and reward.

5
Final Warning

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَـٰتُنَا بَيِّنَـٰتٖ قَالُواْ مَا هَـٰذَآ إِلَّا رَجُلٞ يُرِيدُ أَن يَصُدَّكُمۡ عَمَّا كَانَ يَعۡبُدُ ءَابَآؤُكُمۡ وَقَالُواْ مَا هَـٰذَآ إِلَّآ إِفۡكٞ مُّفۡتَرٗىۚ وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِلۡحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡ إِنۡ هَـٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ٤٣

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: 'This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.' They also say: 'This is nothing but an invented falsehood.' Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery.' (43)

وَمَآ ءَاتَيۡنَـٰهُم مِّن كُتُبٖ يَدۡرُسُونَهَاۖ وَمَآ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡهِمۡ قَبۡلَكَ مِن نَّذِيرٖ ٤٤

Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you. (44)

وَكَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ وَمَا بَلَغُواْ مِعۡشَارَ مَآ ءَاتَيۡنَـٰهُمۡ فَكَذَّبُواْ رُسُلِيۖ فَكَيۡفَ كَانَ نَكِيرِ ٤٥

Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation. (45)

۞ قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَعِظُكُم بِوَٰحِدَةٍۖ أَن تَقُومُواْ لِلَّهِ مَثۡنَىٰ وَفُرَٰدَىٰ ثُمَّ تَتَفَكَّرُواْۚ مَا بِصَاحِبِكُم مِّن جِنَّةٍۚ إِنۡ هُوَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٞ لَّكُم بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡ عَذَابٖ شَدِيدٖ ٤٦

Say: 'I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muḥammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come.' (46)

قُلۡ مَا سَأَلۡتُكُم مِّنۡ أَجۡرٖ فَهُوَ لَكُمۡۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى ٱللَّهِۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ شَهِيدٞ ٤٧

Say: 'If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it. My reward rests with none other than God. He is witness to everything.' (47)

Say: 'My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception.' (48)	قُلۡ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَقۡذِفُ بِٱلۡحَقِّ عَلَّٰمُ ٱلۡغُيُوبِ ﴿٤٨﴾
Say: 'The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything.' (49)	قُلۡ جَآءَ ٱلۡحَقُّ وَمَا يُبۡدِئُ ٱلۡبَٰطِلُ وَمَا يُعِيدُ ﴿٤٩﴾
Say: 'Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself. But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near.' (50)	قُلۡ إِن ضَلَلۡتُ فَإِنَّمَآ أَضِلُّ عَلَىٰ نَفۡسِيۖ وَإِنِ ٱهۡتَدَيۡتُ فَبِمَا يُوحِيٓ إِلَيَّ رَبِّيٓۚ إِنَّهُۥ سَمِيعٌ قَرِيبٞ ﴿٥٠﴾
if you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. (51)	وَلَوۡ تَرَىٰٓ إِذۡ فَزِعُواْ فَلَا فَوۡتَ وَأُخِذُواْ مِن مَّكَانٖ قَرِيبٖ ﴿٥١﴾
They will say: 'We do believe in it,' but how could they attain it from so far away, (52)	وَقَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ وَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمُ ٱلتَّنَاوُشُ مِن مَّكَانِۭ بَعِيدٖ ﴿٥٢﴾
seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. (53)	وَقَدۡ كَفَرُواْ بِهِۦ مِن قَبۡلُۖ وَيَقۡذِفُونَ بِٱلۡغَيۡبِ مِن مَّكَانِۭ بَعِيدٖ ﴿٥٣﴾
A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt. (54)	وَحِيلَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ وَبَيۡنَ مَا يَشۡتَهُونَ كَمَا فُعِلَ بِأَشۡيَاعِهِم مِّن قَبۡلُۚ إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ فِي شَكّٖ مُّرِيبٖ ﴿٥٤﴾

Overview

This last passage in the *sūrah* speaks about the idolaters and what they said against the Prophet and the Qur'ān that was revealed to him. It reminds them of

what happened to others like them who denied God's revelations and how His punishment overwhelmed them even though they were stronger, wealthier and more knowledgeable than the Arab unbelievers.

This is followed by several hard notes, each resounding like a hammer. The first one calls on them to stand before God after shedding all influences that prevent them from objectively assessing the call that is addressed to them. The second note invites them to reflect on the real motives of God's Messenger when he repeatedly calls on them to accept God's message and believe in Him, when he has nothing to gain from this. Since he does not ask them for any wages in return, why should they doubt his sincerity and turn away? Further notes follow, each violently shaking people's hearts.

The *sūrah* concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement that is full of violent movement and which fits perfectly with the preceding strong tones.

A Man Like You

> *When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: 'This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.' They also say: 'This is nothing but an invented falsehood.' Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery' Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you. Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation. (Verses 43-45)*

They met the clear truth the Prophet recited to them with a confused legacy of past traditions that had neither a clear basis nor solid foundation. They realized that the simple, clear and consistent truth that was the Qur'ān represented a serious threat to their confused medley of inherited beliefs and traditions. Hence they claimed: "*This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.*" (Verse 43) They realized, however, that this was not enough. That it contradicted their forefathers' beliefs was not enough to convince everyone. Hence, they also questioned the honesty of the Messenger who delivered God's message: "*They also say: This is nothing but an invented falsehood.*" (Verse 43) Needless to say, what is 'false' must be fabricated, but they wanted to give it stronger emphasis by saying "*This is nothing but an invented falsehood.*" (Verse 43) In other words, they sought to undermine it, raising doubts about its divine source.

Then they moved on to describe the Qur'ān itself: "*When the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery.'*" (Verse 43) They realized that the Qur'ān is powerful and shakes people's hearts.

Hence, it was not enough to say that it was fabricated. They had to explain its power and so alleged that it was 'plain sorcery.'

With such allegations, one following the other, they sought to divert people's attention from the clear and powerful verses of the Qur'ān. They knew they could not back up their claims, and indeed many of those who made such allegations, i.e. tribal chiefs and those who were influential in society, were certain that the Qur'ān was God's revelation as no human being could have produced anything like it. References have been made earlier in this book to what some of the elders of the Quraysh said in private conversations about Muĥammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur'ān, and what they schemed in order to turn people away from listening to the Qur'ān which captivates people's hearts.

The Qur'ān exposes them as it states that they were not given books in the past so as to evaluate new ones and judge revelations. How can they, then, say that what they now received was neither revelation nor a divine book? How can they say that it was not from God, when they did not have any messengers in the past? Their claims are devoid of substance: "*Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you.*" (Verse 44)

The *sūrah* then touches their hearts by reminding them of the destruction of earlier communities. Those Arabs had not been given one tenth of what those earlier people had of knowledge, wealth and power. When they denied God's messengers, punishment overwhelmed them: "*Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation.*" (Verse 45) This condemnation destroyed them all. The Quraysh knew of some of these old communities who suffered God's punishment. Therefore, this brief reminder is sufficient. It comes in the form of a sarcastic question: *'how terrible was My condemnation.'* It is a question put to those who knew the extent of that condemnation.

A Search for the Truth

At this point the Prophet is instructed to call on them in all sincerity to search for the truth, to distinguish between what is false and what is true, and to assess the situation they are in, free of distortion and fabrication:

> *Say: I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muĥammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come. (Verse 46)*

This is an invitation to stand before God, in all sincerity, removing from one's mind all personal prejudices, interests, motivations, desires, environmental and social influences. It is an invitation to look at the facts, plain and simple. This invitation seeks to put before their eyes the plain argument of human nature, away from everything that blurs or obscures what is clear and simple. At the same time, it is a simple means to search for truth, discarding all outside influences and being mindful only of God.

There is only *'one thing',* that ensures that the way is the right one and the method sound. This is to stand before God in all sincerity, looking to satisfy no prejudice, or ensure any personal gain or interest; and to be free of all influences and pressures; and then to think and reflect in complete sincerity. What, then, is this one thing? *"Stand before God, in pairs or singly:" 'in pairs'* so that one can speak frankly to another and argue with him, without being influenced by the masses and their spontaneous reactions, and *'singly'* so that you can face the facts in a cool and reflective way.

"And think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muĥammad]." (Verse 46) You have known him for a long time, and everything you have seen from him points to his wisdom and logic. He does not say anything that could cause anyone to suspect the soundness of his mind. He only says powerful words of wisdom that are plainly stated.

"He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come." (Verse 46) This statement shows the suffering to be close at hand, and the warning precedes it by only by one step, hoping to save anyone who listens. It is like an alarm warning of a fire that threatens lives. It urges immediate action to escape inevitable suffering.

Quoting one of the Prophet's Companions, Imam Aĥmad relates the following *ĥadīth:* "The Prophet came out one day and called us three times, then said: 'Do you realize what my position is in relation to you?' People said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He rejoined: 'My position in relation to you is like that of a community who feared that an enemy might be heading towards them, so they sent one of them to gather intelligence. As he went about his mission, he saw the enemy drawing near, and he moved fast to warn his people. However, he feared that he might be caught by the enemy before he could warn his people. So he waved his robe and shouted: the enemy is nigh; the enemy is nigh.'" In another *ĥadīth,* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message at the approach of the Last Hour: it could have almost been ahead of me."

That was the first note: powerful and inspiring. It is closely followed by another note: *"Say: If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it. My reward rests with none other than God. He is witness to everything."* (Verse 47) At first the *sūrah* called on them to think carefully about the man delivering the message and the fact that he is

of sound mind, without the faintest trace of madness. Now they are asked to think about the reasons that motivate him to warn them against the painful suffering that may befall them: what is his interest in all this? How can he benefit by it? The Qur'ān orders the Prophet to put this to them in a way that fits with their logic and touches their consciences: *"If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it."* Take it all! Whatever I asked you, you keep for yourselves. This combines sarcasm with guidance and instruction: *"My reward rests with none other than God."* (Verse 47) It is He who has charged me with this message and He gives me my reward for it. It is to Him alone that I look for reward. If a person expects to be rewarded by God, all that others can offer is trifling. *"He is witness to everything."* (Verse 47) He sees and knows everything. Nothing is hidden from Him. He is my witness in whatever I intend, say or do.

The third note is stronger and faster: *"Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception."* (Verse 48) What I have given you is the truth, which is powerful in its own right. However, it is God who hurls it forth: who can stand up to His truth? It is like a missile whose trajectory penetrates what otherwise would not be possible to penetrate. The one who hurls it is God, who '*has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception.*' When He hurls it, He is fully aware of what takes place. No goal is hidden from Him and no shield or fortification can stop what He hurls.

The fourth note is just as fast and strong: *"Say: The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything."* (Verse 49) This truth has now come, in one of its forms, in the message embodied in the Qur'ān and its straight path. The Prophet is ordered here to declare the coming of the truth, strong, overpowering, rising high and imposing its authority: *"Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything."* (Verse 49) Falsehood is done for: it has no life of its own and nowhere to function. It is destined for a miserable end. As we listen, we feel as if the end has already been sealed.

This is indeed the case. Ever since the Qur'ān was revealed, the truth has been established on solid foundations. Compared with its clarity and power, falsehood is nothing more than a futile argument which is known to be so. Falsehood may appear to triumph in certain situations, but this is not a victory over the truth, but rather over the people who claim loyalty to it; it's a triumph of people, not principles. Such a victory is temporary, not permanent. The truth remains the same: clear and simple.

The final note says: *"Say: Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself. But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near."* (Verse 50) You will lose nothing if I go astray, because I will be the one accountable for it. If I am following guidance, it is because God has guided me aright when He gave me His revelation. I can produce nothing of that. I only remain subject

to God's will, receiving His bounty.

"*He is All-Hearing, ever-near.*" (Verse 50) This is how those who responded to the Prophet's call and believed in his message felt God's presence. They felt His interaction with them. They felt Him near to them, listening to what they said, taking direct care of their affairs. Their complaints and appeals went directly to Him, and He did not overlook them or give them to someone else to deal with. This made them aware that they lived under God's supervision, close to Him and receiving His care and kindness. This they felt in reality, not as an abstract notion or a representation of an idea. It was real fact: "*He is All-Hearing ever-near.*" (Verse 50)

The Final Scene

The *sūrah* concludes with a fast and powerful scene from the Day of Judgement, full of strong movement that goes to and fro between this life and the life to come, as if both are within the same domain:

> *If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. They will say: 'We do believe in it,' but how could they attain it from so far away, seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt. (Verses 51-54)*

"*If you could but see.*" The scene is there to look at. "*When they are seized by terror*" because of the terrible situation they find themselves in. It appears they may try to find a way out, but there is "*nowhere to escape.*" They have nowhere to turn: "*they will have been seized from a place nearby.*" They could not go far with their miserable attempt.

"*They will say: We do believe in it,*" but it is now too late. For, "*how could they attain it from so far away?*" How can they regain it in their new position when the place to believe is now so far away? It was available to them in their life in this world, but they let the chance go unheeded.

"*They had at first denied it all.*" The matter is over and they cannot try again. "*They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible.*" They did this when the Day of Judgement was beyond their perception. They denied it without a shred of evidence to support their denial. They did so from afar but are now trying to attain faith from a distant place.

"*A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire.*" This is a reference to the faith they wish to have now when it is too late. It cannot spare them the punishment

or save them from the danger they see looming. They are in the same position as earlier communities: *"just as was done with their kind before."* Those earlier communities also tried to escape God's punishment when no escape was possible. "*They were lost in perplexing doubt."* Now they see it for certain after they had been in doubt of it ever happening.

The *sūrah* concludes on this fast, powerful note, with a scene from the Day of Judgement confirming the main issue. This issue is stated at the outset and re-stated here at the end.

SŪRAH 35

Fāṭir

(The Originator)

Prologue

This Makkan *sūrah* possesses a special character both in its subject and style. It perhaps best compares with *Sūrah* 13, Thunder, in the way in which it addresses the human heart, using, from start to finish, a fascinating rhythm employing various beats. It moves us into contemplation of the great universe and the numerous signs to be found in every nook and cranny. Man thus remembers God's blessings and appreciates the grace and favour He bestows on all His creatures. He also visualizes the end suffered by earlier communities and their fate on the Day of Judgement. He thus feels humility as he looks at the countless marvels that constitute God's work. He also recognizes that there is only one truth and one law running through all existence, and that this is controlled by God's hand. The *sūrah* imparts all this in a style and rhythm that leaves a profound and powerful effect on our minds.

The *sūrah* is a complete unit with interlinked rings, making it hard to divide into parts addressing separate subjects. In fact it has only one subject, but it plays its rhythm on the strings of the human heart so as to fill our souls, calling us to believe and submit ourselves to God.

The most distinctive feature of the *sūrah* is that its puts all these strings in God's hand, showing how they work, being pulled or stretched, separated or combined, without restriction or influence. We note this distinctive feature at the outset, and it runs through the *sūrah* to its very end.

The great universe, with its limitless expanse, has been brought into existence by God, according to His design: "*All praise is due to God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who assigns angels to be messengers, endowed with wings, two, or three, or four.*

He adds to His creation what He pleases. Indeed God has power over all things." (Verse 1)

This strong hand of God opens up to send us flowing mercy without restriction, and then clinches to stop it at source. No one can alter this: *"Whatever grace God opens up to man, none can withhold it; and whatever He withholds, none other than Him can release. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 2)

To follow guidance and to be in error are two opposite ends of the mercy spectrum: the first is flowing, the other withheld: *"God lets go astray him that wills Ito go astray!, just as He guides him that wills Ito be guided]."* (Verse 8) *"God can make hear whoever He wills, whereas you cannot make those who are in their graves hear you. You are only a warner."* (Verses 22-23)

It is this very able hand that makes life in the first place, and then brings the dead back to life in the hereafter: *"It is God who sends forth the winds, so that they raise clouds, and We drive them to a dead land and thereby give life to the earth after it had been lifeless. Thus shall resurrection be."* (Verse 9)

Power and glory belong to Him alone. Whoever wants any of this must derive it from Him alone: *"Whoever desires might and glory should know that all might and glory belong to God alone."* (Verse 10)

Creation and giving shape and form to creatures, giving them offspring and determining their life duration are all within God's grasp, never let loose: *"It is God who creates you all out of dust, then out of a gamete. He then makes you into two sexes. No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge. No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [Gods] decree. All this is easy for God."* (Verse 11)

Also in His grasp are all the controls to the heavens, the earth, and other celestial bodies: *"He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for an appointed term. Thus is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion, while those whom you invoke instead of Him do not own even the skin of a date-stone."* (Verse 13)

God's able hand works in this universe according to its own inspiring fashion, adding colour to man, animals, plants and inanimate objects: *"Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, with which We bring forth fruits of different colours? In the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as others jet-black. Similarly, human beings, beasts and cattle have various colours."* (Verses 27-28)

The same hand puts human beings on the move, making one generation succeed another: *"We have given this Book to such of Our servants as We chose."* (Verse 32) *"It is He who made you inherit the earth."* (Verse 39) It holds this universe, protecting it lest it deviate: *"It is God alone who holds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate [from their courses]. If they should ever deviate, no one else could uphold them after Him."* (Verse 41) He holds everything in control, nothing stands in defiance of His will: *"God can*

never be foiled by anything whatever in the heavens and the earth." (Verse 44)

Throughout the *sūrah* God's different attributes are emphasized. He is the One who has power over all things; the Almighty; the Wise; to whom all things return; who knows all that they do; to whom all dominion belongs; who is free of all wants, worthy of all praise; with whom all journeys end; much-forgiving; most appreciative; all-aware; all-seeing; who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and earth; fully aware of what is in people's hearts; ever-forbearing; infinite in His power and who has all His servants in His sight.

These verses and the comments at the end of each create the special ambience of the *sūrah* and the overall effect it has on our hearts. Despite its being a single whole, with continuous beats, we have chosen to divide it into six sections to enable easier discussion.

1
Giving All Grace

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ فَاطِرِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ
جَاعِلِ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ رُسُلًا أُوْلِيٓ أَجۡنِحَةٖ
مَّثۡنَىٰ وَثُلَٰثَ وَرُبَٰعَۚ يَزِيدُ فِي ٱلۡخَلۡقِ مَا
يَشَآءُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ١

All praise is due to God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who assigns angels to be messengers, endowed with wings, two, or three, or four. He adds to His creation what He pleases. Indeed God has power over all things. (1)

مَّا يَفۡتَحِ ٱللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ مِن رَّحۡمَةٖ فَلَا
مُمۡسِكَ لَهَاۖ وَمَا يُمۡسِكۡ فَلَا مُرۡسِلَ لَهُۥ
مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦۚ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٢

Whatever grace God opens up to man, none can withhold it; and whatever He withholds, none other than Him can release. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (2)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱذۡكُرُواْ نِعۡمَتَ ٱللَّهِ عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ
هَلۡ مِنۡ خَٰلِقٍ غَيۡرُ ٱللَّهِ يَرۡزُقُكُم مِّنَ
ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۖ فَأَنَّىٰ
تُؤۡفَكُونَ ٣

People! Remember the blessings God has bestowed upon you. Is there any creator other than God who can give you sustenance from heaven and earth? There is no deity other than Him. How can you turn away? (3)

The Originator

> *All praise is due to God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who assigns angels to be messengers, endowed with wings, two, or three, or four. He adds to His creation what He pleases. Indeed God has power over all things. (Verse 1)*

The *sūrah* begins by offering all praise to God, as its whole purpose is to make our

hearts turn to Him, contemplate His signs, appreciate His mercy, and look at the wonders of His creation. We are made to fully appreciate these wonders so that our hearts overflow with His praise and glorification: "*All praise is due to God.*"

Next comes God's attribute indicating creation and His bringing it into being: "*the Originator of the heavens and the earth.*" It is He who has originated all these great bodies, some of which we see around us. We know only a little about the smallest and nearest to us of all these bodies, i.e. our mother earth. Yet they are all subject to one law of nature that keeps them in harmony, despite the huge distances separating them, which we can only imagine with great difficulty. Despite their great sizes and endless spaces separating their orbits, there exists certain relations between them which, if disturbed even by just a little, could lead to a major catastrophe.

We often pay little attention to Qur'ānic references to the creation of the heavens and the earth, or to its scenic descriptions of the universe. This is because our senses have been blunted by familiarity. Therefore, these scenes do not elevate us to the same level of inspiration that they give a heart that remembers God always, and thus remains sensitive to what His able hand produces. Only such a heart feels the awe these scenes impart.

An alert heart which maintains its bond with God does not need accurate information about the exact positions of stars, their sizes, relations to each other in position or movement, the thickness of the atmosphere around each, or the orbits they follow in order to appreciate the awesomeness of this great, wonderful and beautiful creation. It is enough for such a heart that these scenes play their precisely stringed music. It is enough for it to look at the stars shining across the dark night sky; or the light reflected by a full moon; or the dawn breaking through the darkness giving a feeling of new life; or the sunset heralding the darkness that brings a feeling of farewell; or the earth with its endless vistas; or indeed a single flower with its colour and shape that takes us long to contemplate.

The Qur'ān gives us inspiring directives so that we contemplate these creatures, large and small. Looking at only one of them is enough evidence of the greatness of its Creator and makes us address our glorification, praise and prayer to Him alone.

"*All praise is due to God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, who assigns angels to be messengers, endowed with wings, two, or three, or four.*" (Verse 1) This *sūrah* dwells long on God's messengers, revelation and the truth it contains. The angels are God's messengers to His chosen servants on earth. The message they bring is the greatest thing in life. Hence God follows the reference to His creation of the heavens and the earth by mentioning the role of the angels whereby it is they who make contact between heaven and earth, fulfilling the greatest task of all as they deliver His message. It is a message from the Originator of the heavens and the earth to His

prophets whom He sends as guides to mankind.

For the first time in the Qur'ān we have a physical description of the angels. Previously we were given descriptions of their nature and role, such as "*Those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary of that. They extol His limitless glory by night and day, tirelessly.*" (21: 19-20) "*Those who are near to your Lord are never too proud to worship Him. They extol His limitless glory, and before Him alone prostrate themselves.*" (7: 206) Here, however, we have a reference to their physical appearance. They are '*endowed with wings, two, or three, or four.*' This description does not, however, help us imagine how they look, because we do not know anything about their physique or about the form their wings take. We can do no more than take this description as it is, without adding anything from our imagination, for anything we may imagine could be wrong. We do not have any definite description of how the angels look from a reliable source. What we do have though in the Qur'ān is this description and a reference to the angels in charge of hell: "*Over it are appointed angels who are stern and severe: they do not disobey God in whatever He has commanded them, but always do what they are bidden to do.*" (66: 6) Again this description does not give any physical delineation. It is reported in a *Ĥadīth* that 'the Prophet saw Gabriel in his natural form twice.' One report mentions that Gabriel 'has 600 wings'. [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Again we do not have here a physical description, so we must leave it at the level God has imparted to us, accepting that all knowledge belongs to Him.

Wings are specified as being in twos, threes and fours, but man knows only a two-winged form in all birds. Therefore, the opening verse states that God '*adds to His creation what He pleases,*' thus making it clear that God's will is free, unlimited to any one form of creation. We know and see countless forms of creation, but the ones we do not know about are far more numerous. "*Indeed God has power over all things.*" This comment is broader and more comprehensive than the statement before it. Its import applies to all forms of creation, origination, transformation and alteration.

Unrestricted Grace

> *Whatever grace God opens up to man, none can withhold it; and whatever He withholds, none other than Him can release. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (Verse 2)*

What we have in this second verse of the *sūrah* is an aspect of God's power mentioned at the end of the first verse. When this aspect is instilled in a person's heart and mind, he undergoes a complete transformation in his concepts, feelings, values, standards and life generally. It invalidates any thought of any other power having any control over the heavens and earth, and puts him in touch with God's

own power. It makes him abandon any thought of receiving grace from anyone else and links all to God's grace. It closes before him every door and way in the universe yet opens for him the door and the way leading to God.

God's grace can be reflected in countless aspects. Indeed man cannot even begin to record these. They are within him and the way he is created; the position of honour he is given; the blessings that are all around him from every side and from above and beneath him. It is also to be found in the favours showered on him.

God's grace is reflected in what man has been denied just as much as it is reflected in what he has been granted. When God opens it up to anyone, that person finds it in every situation, thing, condition and place. He even finds it within himself, his feelings, all around him, wherever and however he happens to be, even though he may be deprived of everything people consider to be important. Conversely, should God withhold His grace from anyone, that person will miss it in every thing, situation, place and condition, even though he may have at his disposal everything people associate with wealth and happiness.

Whatever favour a person is granted becomes a hardship if it is associated with the withholding of God's grace; and whatever hardship or trial he undergoes becomes a favour once it is coupled with His grace. A man may lie on a bed of thorns, but, with God's grace, he finds it very comfortable; while silk mattresses and cushions feel like hard nails if that grace is denied him. With divine grace the most difficult problem becomes easy and danger becomes safety, but without it, what is normally easy becomes insoluble and safe roads and ways lead to ruin.

Should you be granted God's grace, you will not feel miserable even though you may be in solitary confinement, enduring torture or facing danger; while misery will be your lot if it is withheld, even though you are in the most luxurious and splendid of surroundings. It is from deep inside that happiness, contentment and reassurance flow by God's grace, and deep inside you feel misery, worry and affliction when it is denied.

If the door of God's grace is open, you will not care if all doors and windows are locked: you will find ease, comfort and happiness; and if it is closed, you will benefit nothing if all other doors and windows are left wide open.

God may give anyone plentiful wealth, and that person will find it a source of enjoyment, comfort and a means to a good position in the life to come, provided that it is coupled with God's grace. If that grace is withheld, his wealth becomes a source of worry, envy and hatred. It may also mean deprivation, if the wealthy person is stingy or ill; and it may bring ruin if he is wasteful and careless.

The same can be said about children, health and high position. With God's grace, any of these can be a source of goodness, enjoyment, delight, happiness and joy, as

also a means to increase one's reward in the life to come. Should God's grace be denied, any of these will bring misery, distress, sleepless nights, or expose their owner to other people's envy, hatred and hostility. Likewise, knowledge, long life and comforts can be associated with either situation of happiness or misery. Yet little knowledge could bring about beneficial effects; a short period of life could enjoy much blessing; and little comfort may mean happiness and delight. In all these respects, communities are like individuals, in all conditions, situations and circumstances.

One aspect of God's grace is to feel it. God's grace abounds for every one of us, but it is your feeling that it is bestowed on you, your expectation, hope and trust that it is coming that is mercy and grace. By contrast, to doubt or despair of it is pure misery, but this is something that a believer will not suffer: *"None but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy."* (12: 87)

God's grace will not be denied anyone who seeks it at any place and in any condition. Abraham found it when he was thrown in the fire; Joseph found it in the well where his brothers threw him and later in prison; Jonah found it in the whale's belly, under three covers of darkness; Moses found it in the river when he was a helpless infant, as also in Pharaoh's palace when Pharaoh sought to kill him. The young men who retreated to a cave, as told in *Sūrah* 18, found it there in the cave when it was not to be found in homes and palaces. They said to *one* another: *"Now that you have withdrawn from them and all that they worship instead of God, take refuge in the cave. God may well spread His grace over you and make fitting arrangements for you in your affairs."* (18: 16) The Prophet Muĥammad and his Companion, Abū Bakr found it in the cave of Mount Thawr, where they hid from their pursuers. Indeed no one who sought it to the exclusion of everything else, aware that only God grants strength, power and mercy, has been left lacking.

It is also important to realize that when God opens the gates of His grace to anyone, nothing can withhold it; and when He withholds it, nothing can release it. Therefore, no one and nothing should be feared, while hope should never be pinned on anyone or anything. We should never fear to miss out on something, and never trust to any means. It all depends on God and what He wills. Whatever He determines will be done. It is He who is Almighty, Wise'. Nothing He determines is without clear purpose.

"Whatever grace God opens up to man, none can withhold it." (Verse 2) All that people need to be assured of God's mercy is to request it from Him directly, without intermediaries: *"And whatever He withholds, none other than Him can release."* (Verse 2)

This single verse paints a totally different picture of life. It gives a new set of values and standards that are unaffected by any consideration or pressure, be it light

or heavy. When this vision is firmly settled in a person's heart, that person can stand firmly in the face of all events, people, situations, powers and considerations. Even if all people on earth as well as the *jinn* were to range themselves against him, he would be able to resist them all knowing that they cannot control God's grace.

It was with verses and images like this that the Qur'ān produced that unique community of believers in the early days of Islam. It was a community moulded under God's own care, and through the Qur'ān, so as to function as a means of God's will and establish on earth the faith, values and systems He wanted to establish. In that first community we have a unique example of human life that seems to us today to belong to the realm of legends and dreams. That community did not deal with the Qur'ān as words, sentences and verses with superb meanings, but dealt with the truth those verses represented. Furthermore, they practised it in real life. Yet, still today, the Qur'ān is able to produce, by means of its verses, individuals and communities that can achieve, by God's leave, whatever God wills them to achieve. All of us can read the Qur'ān seriously, implement it fully and live its meanings as though they are a tangible reality.

A Personal Experience

It behoves me personally to praise God and record here my gratitude to Him for the grace He bestowed on me in relation to this verse of the Qur'ān. This verse was present with me at a time when I was in great, compounded difficulty, experiencing spiritual dryness, psychological hardship and much affliction. It was this verse that came to my support, for God facilitated for me that I should see its truth, which poured into my spirit like a cool drink passing through the limbs of an extremely thirsty person. That was not a meaning I understood; rather, it was a reality I experienced. Thus, it was in itself an act of grace. It presented itself to me as a real interpretation of the verse, opening up to me like flower buds on a spring day. I had read and heard it many times before, but at that moment, it delivered its meaning as a sweet reality, showing me its inner self and saying: 'I am here, a sample of God's grace when He opens it.'

Nothing changed around me, but everything underwent a fundamental change in my appreciation. It is a great blessing that our hearts should open to receive a great truth of existence, such as the one the present verse states. It is a blessing one can experience and appreciate, but can seldom impart to others. I lived that moment and went through the experience. It was perhaps the hardest time of my life. Yet suddenly I found all difficulty disappear, and I was released of all trouble and hardship. I was experiencing a spiritual thrill, while I was still in the same place. That is God's grace which He opens to anyone He chooses and makes it overflow in just

one verse of the Qur'ān. One verse opens up a window of light, lets a spring of divine grace gush through, charts a way to contentment and reassurance and all in a split second. My Lord, You have bestowed this Qur'ān from on high to provide guidance and grace to believers. My Lord, I praise You with my tongue and heart, and my gratitude to You is without limit.[9]

Who Else?

The third verse in this short passage confirms the import of the first two, reminding people of God's blessings, emphasizing that God is the only One who creates and provides sustenance for His creation, and wondering at how people lose sight of this truth when it is so clear and obvious:

> *People! Remember the blessings God has bestowed upon you. Is there any creator other than God who can give you sustenance from heaven and earth? There is no deity other than Him. How can you turn away? (Verse 3)*

Nothing is needed more than the mention of God's blessings for people to see, feel and recognize them. Nevertheless, they do forget them. The earth around them and the skies above them give them abundant blessings and unlimited sustenance, in every step and at every moment. It is God the Creator who gives all this. They are asked here whether there is a different creator who provides them with all the good things in their hands. Obviously, they cannot say this. Indeed, they did not even claim this during their worst period of idolatry, associating all sorts of partners with God. Since there is none other than God to create and provide, why do they not remember and express gratitude? Why do they not address their gratitude to Him alone and express their thanks by praises and prayers? Indeed "*There is no deity other than Him.*" How is it that they turn away from this indisputable truth? "*How can you turn away?*" (Verse 3) It is most singular that anyone should turn away from this clear truth, evidenced by the constant sustenance they are provided with from heaven and earth. Even more singular is for a person to turn away from it all while admitting that all sustenance comes from God alone.

Just these three verses constitute the first section of the *sūrah.* In each we have an image that gives man rebirth. All that is needed is for him to firmly establish God's truth in his heart and conscience.

[9] Although the author does not specify the time and the occasion that he is describing here as the most difficult in his life, he is most probably referring to a specific experience during his second imprisonment (1954-64). I believe what caused him most difficulty was to see a great number of men of all ages being severely tortured, and many dying under torture, for no crime any of them had committed, with no end to their plight in sight. This was bound to weigh heavily on a man with a sensitive and compassionate nature like the author. — Editor's note.

2
The Lurking Enemy

وَإِن يُكَذِّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كُذِّبَتْ رُسُلٌ مِّن قَبْلِكَ ۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ ٱلْأُمُورُ ﴿٤﴾

If they accuse you of lying, other messengers, who had gone before you, were similarly accused. It is to God that all things return. (4)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ ۖ فَلَا تَغُرَّنَّكُمُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَا يَغُرَّنَّكُم بِٱللَّهِ ٱلْغَرُورُ ﴿٥﴾

People! God's promise is true indeed. So do not let the life of the present world delude you, and do not let deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (5)

إِنَّ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنَ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ فَٱتَّخِذُوهُ عَدُوًّا ۚ إِنَّمَا يَدْعُواْ حِزْبَهُۥ لِيَكُونُواْ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿٦﴾

Satan is your enemy, so treat him as an enemy. He only calls on his followers so that they will be among those destined for the blazing fire. (6)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿٧﴾

For the unbelievers there is severe suffering in store; while for those who believe and do righteous deeds there is forgiveness of sins and a great reward. (7)

أَفَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُۥ سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ فَرَءَاهُ حَسَنًا ۖ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُضِلُّ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۖ فَلَا تَذْهَبْ نَفْسُكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَسَرَٰتٍ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٨﴾

How about the one whose evil deeds seem alluring to him so as to regard them as good? God lets go astray him that wills [to go astray], just as He guides him that wills [to be guided]. Therefore, do not waste yourself sorrowing for them. God has

full knowledge of all that they do. (8)

Overview

The first section highlighted three major truths of the Islamic faith: the oneness of God, the Creator of all; the grace that He alone bestows; and that He is the only One who provides sustenance for all His creation. In this second section, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, comforting him because his people's rejection of his message and their false accusations of his lying caused him much pain. It stresses that all matters are in God's hand. It also addresses us all, confirming that God's promise is a true promise and warning us against Satan's schemes which aim to divert us from recognizing the major truths already outlined. What Satan, our avowed enemy, wants is to lead us to hell and its torment. It shows us the types of requital that await the believers and unbelievers in the life to come. Finally it enjoins the Prophet not to worry about what might happen to them. Both belief and rejection are in God's hand, and He knows all that people do.

The True Promise

The first address is aimed at the Prophet: *"If they accuse you of lying, other messengers, who had gone before you, were similarly accused. It is to God that all things return."* (Verse 4) With all these truths easily and clearly recognizable, you need not worry that they accuse you of lying. The same thing happened to earlier messengers. All matters eventually return to God who determines every end the way He pleases.

Then the address is made general, to all people:

> *People! God's promise is true indeed. So do not let the life of the present world delude you, and do not let deceptive thoughts about God delude you. Satan is your enemy, so treat him as an enemy. He only calls on his followers so that they will be among those destined for the blazing fire. (Verses 5-6)*

God's promise is true: there is no doubt that it will come; it is a reality that will not fail; it is the truth. Nothing can cause it to disappear, lose its way or change. Nevertheless this present life can delude people, as can Satan. Therefore, do not let anything get the better of you: *"do not let the life of the present world delude you, and do*

not let deceptive thoughts about God delude you." (Verse 5) Satan has declared his hostility to you and that he will never be anything but an enemy to you. Therefore, *"treat him as an enemy."* (Verse 6) Do not befriend him, listen to his advice, follow in his footsteps, for no rational person would follow in his enemy's footsteps. Moreover, you should realize that he does not call you to anything good, nor does he want you to be safe: *"He only calls on his followers so that they will be among those destined for the blazing fire."* (Verse 6) Can anyone with reason and clear thinking answer a call that would put him in the fire?

This is a sincere, heartfelt address. When man remembers the eternal battle he has to fight against his avowed enemy, Satan, he will muster all his strength, defending himself and ensuring his own safety. He will do his utmost not to fall to any temptation, keep himself on guard, evaluate every thought by the scales God has given him. He is alert to the fact that any seemingly innocent thought may involve clever deception by his old enemy.

This is the sort of sensitivity Islam wants its followers to have. They need to be on the alert so as to reject any temptation Satan presents. This entails the mobilization of all one's responses against evil, both its inner appeal and surface attraction. Thus, one is always on red alert, prepared to engage in this battle which rages persistently throughout this present life.

Such single-mindedness demanded from believers is followed by an outline of the fate of those who responded to Satan's call. To reinforce the contrast, the situation of the believers who reject him and drive him away is reiterated: *"For the unbelievers there is severe suffering in store; while for those who believe and do righteous deeds there is forgiveness of sins and a great reward."* (Verse 7)

The Key to Evil

This is followed by an explanation of what makes people go astray, the nature of Satan's work, the door through which all evil flows. It shows the route that takes people astray and why, when a person goes far along it, he cannot turn back:

> *How about the one whose evil deeds seem alluring to him so as to regard them as good? God lets go astray him that wills [to go astray], just as He guides him that wills [to be guided]. Therefore, do not waste yourself sorrowing for them. God has full knowledge of all that they do. (Verse 8)*

"How about the one whose evil deeds seem alluring to him so as to regard them as good?" This is the key to all evil: Satan makes evil deeds seem fair to people, and they will then admire themselves for what they do. Such a person will not review his work to

identify what is right or where he has gone wrong, because he feels he cannot go wrong. He is so preoccupied with self-admiration that he does not give a thought to self-criticism. Needless to say, he likes accountability to others much less. He does not permit anyone to question him about anything he does, because he feels it is good and, therefore, above criticism. This is the worst curse Satan invokes on man, and can be likened to a yoke he puts around his neck taking him far into error and its inevitable results.

A person who follows God's guidance is one who is careful, wary and alert. He knows that feelings change, that weakness may creep into one's heart, and that a short fall may occur. He is, therefore, always looking at his own work, wary of yielding to Satan's temptation and praying for God's help. This is indeed the point of difference between right and wrong, success and failure. It is a fine psychological point which the Qur'ān describes in a few succinct words: *"How about the one whose evil deeds seem alluring to him so as to regard them as good?"* (Verse 8)

No answer is given in the *sūrah,* so as to allow every answer, such as: His is a hopeless case; How can such a person be on the same level as one who is always taking stock of his actions to ensure that he is on the right track; Can he compared with a humble, God-fearing person. This sort of style is often used in the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ānic verse adds a statement that can be taken as implying a reply: *"God lets go astray him that wills [to go astray], just as He guides him that wills [to be guided]. Therefore, do not waste yourself sorrowing for them."* (Verse 8) It is as if we are told that such a person is doomed to be in error as a result of Satan making his evil deeds seem fair to him. It is in the nature of error and guidance that the former makes an evil action seem fair and that the latter keeps a person on the alert ensuring good work.

Therefore, *"do not waste yourself sorrowing for them. God has full knowledge of all that they do."* (Verse 8) This question of going astray or following guidance does not belong to any human being, not even God's Messenger. It belongs to God alone. It is He who changes hearts as He pleases. As He states this fact, God comforts His Messenger so that his tender heart does not sorrow too much for the unbelievers. The Prophet always grieved when he saw his people's persistence in going astray, knowing where that would lead them. Therefore, God tells him not to let his desire to make them follow guidance and recognize the truth overburden him with sorrow. God wanted him to know that this is none of his concern.

The same desire is felt by advocates of Islam. The more sincere they are in their advocacy, and the more they appreciate the goodness and beauty of their way, the keener they are that other people should see the truth for what it is and follow it. These advocates, however, would be better advised to understand what God says

here to His Messenger and to act on the same. They should do their best to present their message, but they must not grieve for those who remain blind to it.

"God has full knowledge of all that they do." (Verse 8) He sets them on the road to His guidance or lets them go astray according to what He knows of their work. He knows the truth about all their deeds and what they involve even before they do them. He determines their lot in accordance with His absolute knowledge, but he does not hold people to account until they have actually done their deeds.

3
Fashioning All Creation

وَٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرۡسَلَ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ فَتُثِيرُ سَحَابٗا فَسُقۡنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ بَلَدٖ مَّيِّتٖ فَأَحۡيَيۡنَا بِهِ ٱلۡأَرۡضَ بَعۡدَ مَوۡتِهَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ ٱلنُّشُورُ ٩

It is God who sends forth the winds, so that they raise clouds, and We drive them to a dead land and thereby give life to the earth after it had been lifeless. Thus shall resurrection be. (9)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ ٱلۡعِزَّةَ فَلِلَّهِ ٱلۡعِزَّةُ جَمِيعًاۚ إِلَيۡهِ يَصۡعَدُ ٱلۡكَلِمُ ٱلطَّيِّبُ وَٱلۡعَمَلُ ٱلصَّٰلِحُ يَرۡفَعُهُۥۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَمۡكُرُونَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ شَدِيدٞۖ وَمَكۡرُ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُوَ يَبُورُ ١٠

Whoever desires might and glory should know that all might and glory belong to God alone. To Him ascends all good words, and He exalts the good deed. For those who plot evil there is severe suffering in store. All their plotting will come to nothing. (10)

وَٱللَّهُ خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٖ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطۡفَةٖ ثُمَّ جَعَلَكُمۡ أَزۡوَٰجٗاۚ وَمَا تَحۡمِلُ مِنۡ أُنثَىٰ وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا بِعِلۡمِهِۦۚ وَمَا يُعَمَّرُ مِن مُّعَمَّرٖ وَلَا يُنقَصُ مِنۡ عُمُرِهِۦٓ إِلَّا فِي كِتَٰبٍۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٞ ١١

It is God who creates you all out of dust, then out of a gamete. He then makes you into pairs (males and females). No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge. No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [God's] decree. All this is easy for God. (11)

وَمَا يَسۡتَوِي ٱلۡبَحۡرَانِ هَٰذَا عَذۡبٞ فُرَاتٞ سَآئِغٞ شَرَابُهُۥ وَهَٰذَا مِلۡحٌ أُجَاجٞۖ وَمِن كُلّٖ تَأۡكُلُونَ لَحۡمٗا طَرِيّٗا وَتَسۡتَخۡرِجُونَ حِلۡيَةٗ تَلۡبَسُونَهَاۖ وَتَرَى ٱلۡفُلۡكَ فِيهِ مَوَاخِرَ لِتَبۡتَغُواْ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ١٢

The two great bodies of water on earth are not alike: one is palatable, sweet and pleasant to drink, and the other is salty and bitter. Yet from each you eat fresh meat and extract ornaments to wear. You also see there ships that plough their course through them so that you may go in quest

of some of His bounty and be grateful. (12)

يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي ٱلَّيۡلِ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمۡسَ وَٱلۡقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجۡرِي لِأَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّىۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمۡ لَهُ ٱلۡمُلۡكُۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ تَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مَا يَمۡلِكُونَ مِن قِطۡمِيرٍ ١٣

He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for an appointed term. Thus is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion, while those whom you invoke instead of Him do not own even the skin of a date- stone. (13)

إِن تَدۡعُوهُمۡ لَا يَسۡمَعُواْ دُعَآءَكُمۡ وَلَوۡ سَمِعُواْ مَا ٱسۡتَجَابُواْ لَكُمۡۖ وَيَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ يَكۡفُرُونَ بِشِرۡكِكُمۡۚ وَلَا يُنَبِّئُكَ مِثۡلُ خَبِيرٖ ١٤

If you invoke them they cannot hear your call. Even if they could hear, they would not respond to you. On the Day of Resurrection they will utterly disown your having associated them with God. None can give you information like the One who is all-aware. (14)

Overview

This third section takes us on several rounds in the great universe where the Qur'ān depicts a variety of phenomena and imagery which all confirm faith and provide irrefutable proof in support of it. This follows from the earlier discussion about guidance and going astray, and comforting the Prophet so he would not grieve over the unbelievers' constant rejection. Whoever wants to look for the truth, its evidence is available with glorious clarity everywhere in the universe. Anyone who chooses to go astray does so against such irrefutable evidence.

The image of life springing up from a dead land is clear evidence that also serves to confirm resurrection. Similar evidence can be deduced from man's creation from dust and his progression to the highly sophisticated form we know. Every stage of his creation and life goes according to predetermined measures. We see the image of the two great bodies of water, clearly distinct, yet they provide man with endless blessings for which he should show gratitude. The night and day move in a cycle that always brings one into the other, and they get longer or shorter as time moves round. The sun and the moon are also controlled within the same accurate system. All these images provide evidence about the great universal stage. All are created and controlled by God. He owns it all. The false deities that unbelievers worship own

nothing whatsoever. They neither hear nor respond. On the Day of Judgement they even disown the very people who worshipped them.

The Source of All Power

> *It is God who sends forth the winds, so that they raise clouds, and We drive them to a dead land and thereby give life to the earth after it had been lifeless. Thus shall resurrection be. (Verse 9)*

This phenomenon is frequently mentioned within the context of evidence to the truth derived from the universe. It shows the wind raising clouds. In fact hot winds make sea water evaporate, then cold winds in the atmosphere condense the vapour making clouds which are then driven in different directions by winds in the upper strata of the atmosphere. Then they arrive at the destination God has determined for them, which may be a dead land which He wants to quicken by means of the rain carried by these clouds. Indeed, water is the source of all life on this planet. "We *thereby give life to the earth after it was lifeless."* Thus the miracle occurs. It happens at every moment, but people are oblivious to its significance. Yet despite this miracle of life springing up at every moment, they continue to deny resurrection which they see happening in their world all about them. Simply and without argument, the Qur'ān says: "*Thus shall be the resurrection."*

This scene is used frequently in the Qur'ān for two reasons: first it provides tangible, undeniable evidence and secondly it has a strong influence on people's hearts and minds when they contemplate it without hindrance. Moreover, it is a beautiful image, particularly in the desert, which looks barren and lifeless today, and then gushes with life the next. In this way the Qur'ān uses the inspiration of things people *see* all around them. They may ignore them because of familiarity, but when they contemplate them with an alert mind and heart, they appreciate just how miraculous they are.

There is here a sudden jolt as the *sūrah* moves on to speak of might, power and dignity, linking this with good words that are welcome by God and good action that is blessed by Him. The opposite is also shown, whereby wicked scheming leads to ruin:

> *Whoever desires might and glory should know that all might and glory belong to God alone. To Him ascends all good words, and He exalts the good deed. For those who plot evil there is severe suffering in store. All their plotting will come to nothing. (Verse 10)*

Perhaps the link between life starting in what is lifeless and a good word and

action is the fact that there is good life in all. There is certainly a strong relation between life and the universe. Allusion to this relation is stated in *Sarah* 14, Abraham: *"Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position."* (14: 24-26) The relation is almost real in the nature of both the word and the tree: both live and grow.

The idolaters used their idolatry to retain their religious position in Makkah, one which gave them leadership of the Arabian tribes, and which facilitated various privileges. Needless to say, the most important of these were power and glory. Hence they used to say to the Prophet: *"If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (28: 57) Therefore, God tells them: *"Whoever desires might and glory should know that all might and glory belong to God alone."* (Verse 10)

When this fact is well established in people's hearts and minds, it ensures that values, standards, as well as means and methods undergo a complete change. The truth is that might and glory belong totally to God. No one else possesses a shred of either. Therefore, if anyone wants them, and they are incidentally expressed in one Arabic word, *`izzah,* which combines both and adds connotations of dignity, then they should seek them from their only source: God Almighty. They cannot be found with anyone else.

The Quraysh sought to enjoy might and glory among the Arabs through idolatrous beliefs that lacked real substance. They feared to follow divine guidance, even though they acknowledged that it was guidance, because they feared for their own status. Yet those people, the Arabian tribes and clans, were not a source of might and glory. They could not give or deny these to anyone: *"all might and glory belong to God alone."* (Verse 10) If they enjoyed any measure of power and might, it was only because God gave them this. Therefore, anyone who wishes to have these should go to the original source, not to a recipient of that source. Recipients can only give what they have in excess. Besides, recipients are also weak and in need.

This is an essential truth of Islamic faith which establishes values, standards, judgement, behaviour, ways and means. When this truth is firmly rooted in one's heart, one does not hesitate to stand up in dignity and glory to the rest of the world, knowing from whom one derives might and glory. Such a person does not bow before any despot, storm, calamity, state, or worldly force whatsoever. Why would they when all might and glory belong to God alone, and when no one receives any portion of it without His leave?

This is the reason good words and right actions are mentioned here: *"To Him*

ascends all good words, and He exalts the good deed." (Verse 10) This is mentioned here for a purpose: it is a reference to the means by which might and glory are assured for those who seek it from God. Good words and good deeds which are allowed to ascend to God where they are received with honour that reflects on the speaker who says the good word and does the good work.

True *`izzah,* combining all connotations of dignity and glory, is first established in one's heart before it takes any form in the outside world. When it is so established, the person concerned rises above all considerations that cause humiliation and prostration before anyone other than God. He rises first of all above his own fears, desires and ambitions that may be gratified by others. When he has done this, no one will ever be able to humiliate or subjugate him. People are only humbled by their desires, fears and ambitions. Should these be held in check, that person will retain his glory and dignity in all situations and with all people. This is indeed true might, glory and dignity.

True *`izzah* is not stubbornness that seeks strength through falsehood, or tyranny that uses brutal force to silence others, or an overwhelming upsurge motivated by desire, or a blind force that pays no heed to right and justice. It is none of this. It is the ability to rise above one's own desires, rejecting fetters and humiliations, and refusing to submit to any other than God. It also means submitting only to God, fearing Him alone and obeying Him in all situations. It is through submission to God alone that our heads are raised high, and through fearing Him that we can stand up to whatever He disapproves of. Our watching Him also means that we care nothing for anything other than earning His pleasure. This then explains the relation between the good word and deed on the one hand and might, glory and dignity on the other.

The opposite picture is then given: *"For those who plot evil there is severe suffering in store. All their plotting will come to nothing."* (Verse 10) Such people will see that their plots and schemes yield no fruit and end in failure, and that they will endure severe suffering as a result. We note here the contrasting image which brings life to a lifeless land.

These people plot evil because they are after false power and imagined glory. They may appear to have power at their command, but it is the good word and deed that ascend to God and through which we receive *'izzah* in its full sense. Evil schemes and plots cannot achieve this, even though they may occasionally be coupled with physical power. Their assured end, however, is ruin and severe suffering. This is God's promise that never fails.

Man's Creation

Having referred to the fact that all life starts with water, the *sūrah* now refers to the

start of man's own life, beginning with pregnancy and followed by a term in this world, which can be long or short as God determines:

> *It is God who creates you all out of dust, then out of a gamete. He then makes you into a couple. No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge. No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [God's] decree. All this is easy for God. (Verse 11)*

Reference to man's origin as a creature made from dust in the first place is often mentioned in the Qur'ān, as is the first element in producing a pregnancy, namely the gamete. While a gamete is something that carries the potential of life, dust has no trace of life. The first miracle is life' itself, and no one knows where it came from or how it was mixed with the first element. This remains a closed book as far as humanity is concerned. Yet it is a fact we all see and have no option but to accept and recognize. The evidence it provides, pointing to the Creator who gives life, is irrefutable.

The transformation that gives life to what is lifeless represents a bridge over a gap that is far greater than any distance in time and place. Contemplating such transformation will never tire a mind that looks at the great secrets of the universe. Again, the gap separating the stage of one cell, a gamete, from that of a fully formed embryo, when a male is distinguished from a female, is again too wide to imagine. It is to this latter stage that the Qur'ān refers in the sentence, "*He makes you into pairs (males and females),*" whether this is a reference to a couple, male and female, in the embryo stage, or to married couples after they have become adults. How far removed is the one-cell gamete from the greatly complex human constitution which includes numerous systems and functions, and also from a human being with its many characteristics?

Look at the senseless fertilized egg as it divides and multiplies, and then each group of cells it produces joining together to form a particular organ with a specific nature and function. Look how all these organs fit together and group to make a single creature which is remarkably distinct from all other creatures of the human race, including those who are most closely related to him. Thus, no two human beings are exactly and completely identical. Yet all of them come from gametes that carry no distinctive mark of any sort, or at least that we can make out. Then look at these cells and follow their way until they become couples able to restart the cycle once more, with new gametes that follow the same line and the same stages, without deviation. All this is amazing, truly wonderful. This is the reason for the repeated references in the Qur'ān to this miraculous process, or indeed processes, involving unknown secrets. People should listen to these references and set their minds thinking about this process of creation. It may awaken their spirits to its message.

Next comes an image of God's absolute knowledge, which is akin to the images given in the preceding *sūrah,* Sheba: *"No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge."* (Verse 11) The reference here is not merely to women, but to all females, including animals, birds, fish, reptiles, insects and others which we may or may not know about. All of them conceive and give birth, including those which lay eggs. An egg is an embryo which does not fully develop inside its mother's body. It is laid in the form of an egg, and is then incubated, either by its mother or in an incubator, until it completes its development, and breaks its shell to continue its growth. God's knowledge includes every conception, of every form, and every birth throughout the universe.

Describing God's absolute knowledge in this way is not something a human mind normally follows, neither in conception nor expression.

By itself it is proof that the Qur'ān is revelation from God: it confirms its divine source thereby.

The same applies to the reference to age in the same verse: *"No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [God's] decree. All this is easy for God.* (Verse 11) Let our imagination follow every living thing in the universe, including trees, birds, animals, humans and others, with their different shapes, sizes, kinds, races, abodes and times. No one can imagine the total number of all these. Yet imagine that every single one of them may be allowed to attain to old age, or may have its life cut short, and that whatever happens is according to specific knowledge concerning this individual, and indeed concerning every part of every individual. A leaf in a tree may be allowed to remain green, extending its life span, or it may dry up and fall. A bird's feather may remain in its wing or fall and he blown by the wind. A horn may remain in an animal or get broken in a quarrel. A human *eye,* or a hair, may stay or be removed. Yet all this occurs in accordance with specific knowledge which is *'laid down in God's decree'* that is part of His comprehensive knowledge. It neither requires an effort nor constitutes a burden: *"All this is easy for God."* (Verse 11)

If we let our imagination follow t his line and look at what it entails, our amazement is endless. It is a line that human imagination does not normally follow, nor does it normally try to understand or describe facts in this way.

The Arabic verb *nu`ammir,* which is translated as '*attain to old age'*, also connotes blessing someone's life so as to use one's days and years in what is useful and beneficial, as well as filling it with feelings, actions and lasting benefits. Likewise, cutting one's life short may mean giving that person a shorter number of years to live or making his life devoid of blessing so as to spend his days producing nothing of real value. A blessed hour that is full of useful action, ideas and feelings may be equal to a complete lifetime, while a whole year may be spent without recording

anything of value either in human life's measure or in God's scales. Yet everything any human being thinks or does anywhere in the universe is recorded by God.

Nations and communities are the same as individuals: they may live long or have their lives cut short. Hence, the Qur'ānic statement includes them, as indeed it includes inanimate objects, such as rocks, caves and rivers which could have a long or short life span. Likewise, man-made things, such as buildings, machines and appliances, clothes, etc., may all live long or short lives. Every life duration, of every creature and every thing, is recorded in God's book. This belongs to His absolute and infinite knowledge.

When we look at things in this light, we feel we want to contemplate the universe in a new way. Anyone who feels that God's hand and eye controls everything in such a meticulous manner will hardly ever forget or go astray. He will see God's hand, power and care in everything around him. This is the effect the Qur'ān has on people's hearts and minds.

Different Waters

The *sūrah* then focuses on a different phenomenon we all see, which is water and its varieties. One type of water is sweet and palatable while the other is bitter and salty. They go their separate ways, or meet together, by God's will, serving man's needs:

> *The two great bodies of water on earth are not alike: one is palatable, sweet and pleasant to drink, and the other is salty and bitter. Yet from each you eat fresh meat and extract ornaments to wear. You also see there ships that plough their course through them so that you may go in quest of some of His bounty and be grateful. (Verse 12)*

That God wanted water to be of different types is clear. That such variety serves a definite purpose is also something we should be clear about. We know some aspects of the wisdom behind providing sweet, palatable water, since we use it for different purposes. It is indeed essential for life. As for the other type of water, which is bitter and salty, filling seas and oceans, we may quote a few lines from a famous scientist explaining this immaculate design:

> In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence.
>
> The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea, from which have come life, food, rain, temperate climate, plants, animals, and ultimately man

himself. Let him who comprehends this stand in awe before its majesty and gratefully acknowledge his obligations.[10]

This is some of what we have been able to understand of the purpose behind the diversity of creation. It is clear that it is all done for a specific reason aiming to achieve harmony and balance, which allows the overall system of the universe to function. This can only be done by the Creator of the universe and everything that lives in it. Such a meticulously accurate system cannot come about by sheer coincidence. The reference to the difference in the two great bodies of water suggests that, like every other variation, it is done deliberately. Later on, the *sūrah* refers to some aspects of this variety in the realm of feelings, values and standards.

The two different bodies of water are shown as united in being subjected to man: "*Yet from each you eat fresh meat and extract ornaments to wear. You also see there ships that plough their course through them.*" (Verse 12) The fresh meat refers to fish and the great variety of marine animals, while the ornaments refer to pearls and corals. Pearls are found in the body of certain bivalve molluscs. It is a hard smooth round iridescent mass, formed of layers of calcium carbonate deposited around a foreign body in the shell of these molluscs. After a while it solidifies in the form of a pearl, which is valued as a gem for its lustre. Coral is a sort of plant made by marine polyps which can become extensive reefs stretching over an area of several miles. It can also present a hazard to shipping and to any foreign creature that falls within it. It can be cut by special methods and is often used in jewellery and ornamentation.

Ships plough their way through rivers and seas, benefiting by what God has given every creature of characteristics and qualities. The density of the water and the substances used in shipbuilding is a factor in making ships float and move. Another factor is wind. Other forces may be used to achieve this useful condition, such as electric and steam power. All are subjected to man's will by God.

"*So that you may go in quest of some of His bounty and be grateful.*" (Verse 12) Thus you may use both bodies of water to travel and do business, as also find food and nourishment. It behoves you to be grateful to God for all this bounty, which is made available to you.

This part concludes on another universal beat that mentions the alternation of day and night, arid the subjection of the sun and the moon to the divine system until their appointed time: "*He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course in an appointed term.*" (Verse 13) The passing of the day and the night into each other may be a reference to the two spectacular scenes when the night creeps into the

[10] A. Cressy Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* London, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1944, p. 28.

day, with its light gradually diminishing and the darkness increasing until the sun has disappeared followed by the darkness moving in and slowly spreading its wings. The other scene witnesses the start of the day creeping into the night, with the first breath of dawn. The light then begins to gradually spread while the darkness bit by bit disappears. Then the sun rises and the day is resplendent with brightness. Alternatively, the Qur'ānic expression may refer to the night as it takes a bite out of the day, as if it is going into the day, and also the day getting longer as it takes one bite after another off the night. It could also mean both situations at the same time, describing them together. All these scenes have a profound effect on our hearts, spreading a feeling of awe and even fear as we see God's hand pulling one line here and relaxing one there in a fine, accurate and balanced system that does not miss a tick day after day, century after century.

Again making the sun and the moon subservient to God's law and setting them on their courses until the appointed term, known only to God, is another phenomenon that everyone of us sees. They appear and disappear, rise and set before everyone. Their unfailing movements do not require any knowledge or calculation to contemplate. They serve as signs for all generations to contemplate. We may know about them more than what the first people addressed by the Qur'ān knew, but this is not the point. What is important is that these phenomena give us the same inspiration as they gave them. They certainly motivate us to contemplate the work of God's hand in the universe.

Thus is God

Concluding these inspiring scenes, the *sūrah* states the truth of God's Lordship over the universe. It also states the falsehood of every claim of partnership with God, and its ultimate and miserable result on the Day of Judgement:

> *Thus is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion, while those whom you invoke instead of Him do not own even the skin of a date-stone. If you invoke them they cannot hear your call. Even if they could hear, they would not respond to you. On the Day of Resurrection they will utterly disown your having associated them with God. None can give you information like the One who is all- aware. (Verses 13-14)*

The One who sends the wind driving the clouds, makes the dead land quicken, creates you out of dust, makes you in pairs, knows what each female bears and gives birth to, what gets a long life or a short one, has created the two great bodies of water, causes the day and night to pass into each other and makes the sun and the moon subservient to His law: that One is *"your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion, while those whom you invoke instead of Him do not own even the skin of a date-stone."* (Verse 13)

They do not even own such a trifling thing as a date-stone.

The *sūrah* goes further in drawing a true image of them: *"If you invoke them they cannot hear your call."* (Verse 14) They are statues, idols, trees, stars, angels *or jinn;* and none of them actually owns the skin of a date-stone. None of them can respond to those who worship them, but, *"Even if they could hear, they would not respond to you."* (Verse 14) This applies, for example, to the *jinn* and the angels. The *jinn* cannot respond, while the angels do not respond to those who have gone astray. All this is relevant to this present life, but on the Day of Judgement they disassociate themselves from error and those who follow it: *"On the Day of Resurrection they will utterly disown your having associated them with God."* (Verse 14) This is stated by the One who knows everything in this life and beyond it, who overlooks nothing in the universe now or in the life to come: *"None can give you information like the One who is all-aware."* (Verse 14)

So does this passage conclude. It only remains to be said that it gives any human mind enough to last a lifetime. Indeed, it is sufficient for any human heart to listen carefully to a single passage of any *sūrah* if he is seeking proof and searching for guidance.

4
Individual Responsibility

۞ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ أَنتُمُ ٱلۡفُقَرَآءُ إِلَى ٱللَّهِۖ وَٱللَّهُ هُوَ ٱلۡغَنِيُّ ٱلۡحَمِيدُ ﴿١٥﴾

People! It is you who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is free of all wants, worthy of all praise. (15)

إِن يَشَأۡ يُذۡهِبۡكُمۡ وَيَأۡتِ بِخَلۡقٍ جَدِيدٖ ﴿١٦﴾

If He so wishes, He can do away with you and bring in your place a new creation; (16)

وَمَا ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ بِعَزِيزٖ ﴿١٧﴾

this is not difficult for God. (17)

وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٞ وِزۡرَ أُخۡرَىٰۚ وَإِن تَدۡعُ مُثۡقَلَةٌ إِلَىٰ حِمۡلِهَا لَا يُحۡمَلۡ مِنۡهُ شَيۡءٞ وَلَوۡ كَانَ ذَا قُرۡبَىٰٓۗ إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخۡشَوۡنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلۡغَيۡبِ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَۚ وَمَن تَزَكَّىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَتَزَكَّىٰ لِنَفۡسِهِۦۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿١٨﴾

No soul will bear the burden of another. If a heavily laden soul should call upon others for help, nothing of its load shall be carried by anyone, not even by a close relative. Hence, you can truly warn only those who stand in awe of their Lord, even though He is beyond the reach of their perception, and attend regularly to prayers. Whoever purifies himself does so for his own benefit. With God is all journeys' end. (18)

وَمَا يَسۡتَوِي ٱلۡأَعۡمَىٰ وَٱلۡبَصِيرُ ﴿١٩﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; (19)

وَلَا ٱلظُّلُمَٰتُ وَلَا ٱلنُّورُ ﴿٢٠﴾

nor are darkness and light; (20)

وَلَا ٱلظِّلُّ وَلَا ٱلۡحَرُورُ ﴿٢١﴾

nor the [cooling] shade and the scorching heat; (21)

وَمَا يَسۡتَوِي ٱلۡأَحۡيَآءُ وَلَا ٱلۡأَمۡوَٰتُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُسۡمِعُ مَن يَشَآءُۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ بِمُسۡمِعٖ مَّن فِي ٱلۡقُبُورِ ﴿٢٢﴾

and neither are equal the living and the dead. God can make hear whoever He wills, whereas you cannot make those who are in their graves hear you. (22)

You are only a warner. (23)	إِنۡ أَنتَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾
We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of happy news and a warner. There was never a community that has not had a warner. (24)	إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَٰكَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ بَشِيرٗا وَنَذِيرٗاۚ وَإِن مِّنۡ أُمَّةٍ إِلَّا خَلَا فِيهَا نَذِيرٞ ﴿٢٤﴾
If they accuse you of lying, other communities before them made similar accusations when there came to them messengers with all evidence of the truth, and with books of divine wisdom, and with light-giving revelations; (25)	وَإِن يُكَذِّبُوكَ فَقَدۡ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ جَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ وَبِٱلزُّبُرِ وَبِٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُنِيرِ ﴿٢٥﴾
but in the end I took the unbelievers to task: how terrible was My condemnation. (26)	ثُمَّ أَخَذۡتُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْۖ فَكَيۡفَ كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿٢٦﴾

Overview

Once more the *sūrah* urges people to look at their relation with God and at themselves. It also comforts the Prophet, seeking to alleviate his distress at their rejection of his message. This is in fact a continuation of the previous passage, but the *sūrah* adds here a reference to the nature of following divine guidance and the nature of going astray. It makes it clear that the difference between them is as profound as the difference between blindness and sight, light and darkness, coolness and scorching heat, life and death. It asserts that following divine guidance, having eyesight, light, cooling shade and being alive are similar, interlinked. Likewise, blindness, darkness, excessive heat and death are similar, interlinked. The passage ends with a reference to the fate met by earlier communities, serving as a warning.

Replaceable Creation

> *People! It is you who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is free of all wants, worthy of all praise. If He so wishes, He can do away with you and bring in your place a new creation; this is not difficult for God. (Verses 15-17)*

People need to be reminded of this truth within the context of God's message, inviting them to accept and follow it, and urging them to abandon the darkness they

are in to emerge into the light of His guidance. They need to be reminded that they are in need of God, while He has no need of them or of anyone else. When they are invited to believe in God, worship Him and praise Him for His bounty and favours, they must remember that He has no need for such worship and praise, because He is the Praised One. They are not immune to whatever God wishes of them. Should He wish, He can take them away and replace them by a new creation, either of their own type or of a totally different type. It is all so easy for Him.

People need to be reminded of this so that they do not give themselves airs. They need to be reminded that God in His limitless glory takes care of them and sends them messengers who strive hard to bring them out of the darkness into the light. They should not feel themselves too important for God, or that their worship or their following His message will increase His kingdom in any way. God is indeed free of all wants and worthy of all praise. God Almighty bestows such great care and mercy on His servants, and adds to this by sending them His messengers who suffer much hardship from those who reject His divine message. It is all part of His essential attributes to give in abundance and without reckoning. The recipients, mere humans, do not contribute anything to God's kingdom by following His guidance, nor do they decrease it in any way when they turn blindly away from it. They are not irreplaceable.

What man receives of God's grace is amazing, considering how man is so small, ignorant and weak a creature. Man is then but a small creature on earth which, in turn, is a small satellite of the sun, which is one of countless stars. Gigantic as they are, stars are no more than small dots scattered in open space, the limits of which are known only to God. Yet this great space in which the stars are thus scattered is merely a small portion of God's creation. Yet man receives all this care from God: He creates him, puts him in charge of the earth, equips him with all he needs to discharge his task, be these in his own constitution or in the things of the universe available to him. Yet this creature goes astray and becomes arrogant to the extent that he denies his Lord, but God nevertheless sends him one messenger after another, giving each books of guidance as well as miracles. God's favours continue and He sends them His final message, in which He gives them accounts of what happened to earlier communities, and speaks to them about themselves, their abilities and potentials, as well as their frailties and weaknesses. He even speaks to particular individuals, saying to one, 'you did this, and you omitted that,' and saying to another, 'here is the solution to your problem, and this is how you relieve your distress.'

Man should remember his position in the universe and reflect upon the fact that he has been given all this care by God. It is He who created this universe, with all that it contains, by merely willing it to be, and He can replace it all in the same way.

People should consider this so they appreciate the extent of God's care and grace. They will then feel ashamed if they turn away from God and deny Him and His grace. Thus we see that these verses represent a confirmed truth in addition to their inspirational effect. The Qur'ān touches people's hearts with hard facts, because fact and truth have a greater effect. Moreover, the Qur'ān is the word of truth, and it was bestowed from on high to lay down this truth. In short, it states nothing but the truth.

Everyone on Their Own

The *sūrah* then emphasizes individual responsibility, which means that everyone will have what they deserve. No one benefits anyone else in any way. The Prophet has no personal interest in guiding people to the truth. Everyone bears his or her own burden, alone, without help. Therefore a person who seeks to be pure will be the only one to benefit from this endeavour. The matter is ultimately left to God to determine:

> *No soul will bear the burden of another. If a heavily laden soul should call upon others for help, nothing of its load shall be carried by anyone, not even by a close relative... Whoever purifies himself does so for his own benefit. With God is all journeys' end. (Verse 18)*

The fact of individual responsibility and reward has a decisive effect on morality and behaviour. When people are fully aware that they are rewarded according to their own deeds, that none will be responsible for anyone else, and that none can escape responsibility, they realize the need to take stock of their actions before they have to answer for them. At the same time, this is reassuring, because no individual needs to worry about answering for the actions of his community. As long as he has done his duty, giving advice to his community to follow divine guidance, no further responsibility is laid on him. God Almighty does not hold mankind to account for their collective actions. They account to Him individually, each for their own work. It is the duty of the individual to advise others and try hard to bring them into line. Once he has done this, however, he bears no responsibility for their wickedness or corruption. He will he credited for his own good work. Similarly, if he lives in a good community, its goodness will not benefit him if he himself is wicked.

We see, then, an image of a multitude, each person carrying his or her own burden, with none able to help others. Even if someone requests help from the closest of relatives, none will oblige. It is thus a long queue, with people carrying loads and moving towards the check-point where the load will he weighed. Everyone is tired, preoccupied with the heaviness of their load, unable to think of others, even their

own kin.

At this point, the *sūrah's* address is directed to the Prophet: *"Hence, you can truly warn only those who stand in awe of their Lord, even though He is beyond the reach of their perception, and attend regularly to prayers."* (Verse 18) It is such people that can really appreciate the warning: they are the ones who fear God even though they have not seen Him, and who attend to their worship so as to maintain relations with Him. The Prophet is told that these are the ones to benefit by admonition. Others, who have no fear of God, need not worry him.

"Whoever purifies himself does so for his own benefit." No one receives the benefit of purification except the one who does it. Moreover, purification has pleasant and transparent connotations that apply to one's heart, thoughts, feelings, behaviour and attitudes. *"With God is all journeys' end."* (Verse 18) He is the one who reckons people's actions and rewards them accordingly. Nothing good or evil is overlooked.

Needless to say, with God belief and unbelief, good and evil, guidance and error cannot be treated on an equal basis. In the same way, blindness and sight, darkness and light, coolness and heat, life and death are unequal. All have essentially different qualities:

> *The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor are darkness and light; nor the [cooling! shade and the scorching heat; and neither are equal the living and the dead. (Verses 19-22)*

There is a close link between the nature of unbelief and the nature of blindness, darkness, scorching heat and death, just as there is a contrasting link between the nature of belief and that of clear sight, light, cool shade and life.

Faith is a light that penetrates into the heart, the senses and perceptions so as to give a true assessment of things, values, events and how they interact. A believer looks at things in this light, which is God's light, and determines how to approach and deal with them in an assured, confident way. Faith also provides a believer with a quality of sight that gives a clear picture of things that is neither hazy nor blurred. Furthermore, it provides a cooling shade in which a believer can take refuge from the burning heat of anxiety, doubt and worry. Faith is a light that touches hearts, feelings and purposes, and it is constructive action that never stops to build, allowing no waste.

By contrast, unbelief is blindness. It prevents people from seeing the evidence in support of faith and recognizing the true nature of the universe, its relations, values, and events. It is also a darkness: when people move away from the light of faith, they fall into different types of darkness making it difficult for them to see things with any degree of accuracy. Furthermore, unbelief is a hot desert where burning doubts and

worry over one's origin and destiny compound to eventually lead the unbeliever to the fire of hell. Finally, unbelief is death because it separates the unbeliever from the true source of life, making him unable to interact in any way that promotes life. Each type has its distinctive nature, and its special reward. The two cannot be equal in God's sight.

At this point the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, comforting him and outlining his terms of reference. He is to do what has been assigned to him and leave matters to God. It is He who will do whatever He determines.

> *God can make hear whoever He wills, whereas you cannot make those who are in their graves hear you. You are only a warner. We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of happy news and a warner. There was never a community that has not had a warner. If they accuse you of lying, other communities before them made similar accusations when there came to them messengers with all evidence of the truth, and with books of divine wisdom, and with light-giving revelations; but in the end I took the unbelievers to task: how terrible was My condemnation. (Verses 22-26)*

Differences between opposites, whether in the universe or within the human soul, are clear and deeply rooted. Similarly genuine and firm are the differences between people and the way they receive God's message. It all refers to God's will, purpose, wisdom and power. God's Messenger, then, is no more than a warner. His human task is limited to this. He cannot make grave dwellers hear him. Those who live with dead hearts are in the same position: cold and gravelike. It is God alone who can make hear whomever He wills, in the way He chooses. Why should the Prophet, then, worry about who chooses to go astray, about who turns away from divine guidance. All he has to do is to discharge the duties assigned to him to the best of his abilities. Once he has delivered his message, let people choose whether to respond or not.

Earlier in the *sūrah,* God says to the Prophet: "*do not waste yourself sorrowing for them.*" (Verse 8) God sent him, like his brothers the earlier messengers, with the truth. They were many, because: "*There was never a community that has not had a warner.*" (Verse 24) If he is met with rejection and people accuse him of lying, this is all in the nature of things, and earlier messengers met the same type of reception, through no fault of theirs, or lack of supporting evidence: "*If they accuse you of lying, other communities before them made similar accusations when there came to them messengers with all evidence of the truth, and with books of divine wisdom, and with light-giving revelations.*" (Verse 25) Such evidence could be of various types, including the miracles they demanded or were given to God's messengers in support of their messages. The hooks refer to whatever different prophets were given of wisdom, directives and admonition. The *'light-giving revelations'* refer most probably to the Torah. Yet such

communities denied it all.

There was thus nothing new in how the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was received. Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions the fate of earlier communities to warn the new unbelievers: "*But in the end I took the unbelievers to task.*" (Verse 26) This is followed by a question that gives a sense of gravity and intimates the most horrible of ends: "*How terrible was My condemnation.*" (Verse 26) The condemnation was final, one whereby the unbelievers met their total destruction. Those latter day unbelievers should therefore take the warning seriously and make sure that they do not meet the same fate.

5
Reciters of God's Revelations

أَلَمۡ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَخۡرَجۡنَا بِهِۦ ثَمَرَٰتٖ مُّخۡتَلِفًا أَلۡوَٰنُهَاۚ وَمِنَ ٱلۡجِبَالِ جُدَدُۢ بِيضٞ وَحُمۡرٞ مُّخۡتَلِفٌ أَلۡوَٰنُهَا وَغَرَابِيبُ سُودٞ ﴿٢٧﴾

Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, with which We bring forth fruits of different colours? In the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as others jet-black. (27)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ وَٱلدَّوَآبِّ وَٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ مُخۡتَلِفٌ أَلۡوَٰنُهُۥ كَذَٰلِكَۗ إِنَّمَا يَخۡشَى ٱللَّهَ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِ ٱلۡعُلَمَٰٓؤُاْۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Similarly, human beings, beasts and cattle have various colours. It is those who are endowed with knowledge that stand truly in awe of God. Indeed God is Almighty, Much-Forgiving. (28)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَتۡلُونَ كِتَٰبَ ٱللَّهِ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَنفَقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقۡنَٰهُمۡ سِرّٗا وَعَلَانِيَةٗ يَرۡجُونَ تِجَٰرَةٗ لَّن تَبُورَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Those who recite God's book, attend regularly to prayer, and give in charity, secretly and openly, from what We have provided for them, look forward to a bargain that can never fail, (29)

لِيُوَفِّيَهُمۡ أُجُورَهُمۡ وَيَزِيدَهُم مِّن فَضۡلِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُۥ غَفُورٞ شَكُورٞ ﴿٣٠﴾

for He will grant them their just rewards, and give them yet more out of His bounty. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, most thankful. (30)

وَٱلَّذِيٓ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ مِنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ مُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيۡهِۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِعِبَادِهِۦ لَخَبِيرُۢ بَصِيرٞ ﴿٣١﴾

The book that We have revealed to you is the truth confirming previous scriptures. Of His servants God is well-aware, all- seeing. (31)

ثُمَّ أَوۡرَثۡنَا ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱصۡطَفَيۡنَا مِنۡ عِبَادِنَاۖ فَمِنۡهُمۡ ظَالِمٞ لِّنَفۡسِهِۦ وَمِنۡهُم مُّقۡتَصِدٞ وَمِنۡهُمۡ سَابِقُۢ بِٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡفَضۡلُ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ﴿٣٢﴾

We have given this Book to such of Our servants as We choose: among them are some who wrong their own souls, some follow a middle course; and some who, by God's leave, are foremost in deeds of goodness. That is the greatest favour. (32)

ثُمَّ أَوۡرَثۡنَا ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱصۡطَفَيۡنَا مِنۡ عِبَادِنَاۖ فَمِنۡهُمۡ ظَالِمٞ لِّنَفۡسِهِۦ وَمِنۡهُم مُّقۡتَصِدٞ وَمِنۡهُمۡ سَابِقُۢ بِٱلۡخَيۡرَٰتِ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡفَضۡلُ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ٣٢

Gardens of bliss will they enter, where they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where they will be clad in silk garments. (33)

جَنَّٰتُ عَدۡنٖ يَدۡخُلُونَهَا يُحَلَّوۡنَ فِيهَا مِنۡ أَسَاوِرَ مِن ذَهَبٖ وَلُؤۡلُؤٗاۖ وَلِبَاسُهُمۡ فِيهَا حَرِيرٞ ٣٣

They will say: All praise is due to God, who has removed all sorrow from us. Our Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, most appreciative. (34)

وَقَالُواْ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَذۡهَبَ عَنَّا ٱلۡحَزَنَۖ إِنَّ رَبَّنَا لَغَفُورٞ شَكُورٌ ٣٤

it is He who, out of His bounty, has settled us in this abode of permanent life, where we shall endure neither toil nor fatigue.' (35)

ٱلَّذِيٓ أَحَلَّنَا دَارَ ٱلۡمُقَامَةِ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ لَا يَمَسُّنَا فِيهَا نَصَبٞ وَلَا يَمَسُّنَا فِيهَا لُغُوبٞ ٣٥

As for the unbelievers, the fire of hell awaits them. No term shall be determined for them so that they could die, nor shall its suffering be reduced for them. Thus shall We requite all unbelievers. (36)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَهُمۡ نَارُ جَهَنَّمَ لَا يُقۡضَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ فَيَمُوتُواْ وَلَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنۡهُم مِّنۡ عَذَابِهَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي كُلَّ كَفُورٖ ٣٦

There they will cry aloud: 'Our Lord! Let us out and we will do good, not like what we did before.' 'Have We not given you lives long enough for anyone who would be warned to take warning? And a warner had come to you. Taste it, then. Wrongdoers shall have none to support them.' (37)

وَهُمۡ يَصۡطَرِخُونَ فِيهَا رَبَّنَآ أَخۡرِجۡنَا نَعۡمَلۡ صَٰلِحًا غَيۡرَ ٱلَّذِي كُنَّا نَعۡمَلُۚ أَوَلَمۡ نُعَمِّرۡكُمۡ مَّا يَتَذَكَّرُ فِيهِ مَن تَذَكَّرَ وَجَآءَكُمُ ٱلنَّذِيرُۖ فَذُوقُواْ فَمَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِن نَّصِيرٍ ٣٧

God knows all that is hidden in the heavens and earth; He fully knows what is in people's hearts. (38)	إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَٰلِمُ غَيۡبِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٣٨

Overview

This new passage is composed of readings from the book of the universe and the revealed book. We look at the wonderful pages of this book: its great variety of colours, species and kinds; fruits of every colour; mountains with colourful passages, as also people, animals and cattle of different hues. It is a highly effective touch, drawing our attention to the wonderful and natural world of colour that we tend to overlook.

The passage adds readings from God's revealed book, confirming the truth it contains and an endorsement of what had gone before it of revelations. It speaks about how this book has been granted to the Muslim community as its rightful legacy, making it clear that the heirs are of different classes, but that they all expect to receive God's pardon and forgiveness of sins. An image of their enjoyment of God's favours in the life to come is painted to contrast with an image of what awaits the unbelievers of punishment. This round, rich in colour, is concluded by a statement that all takes place in accordance with God's knowledge.

Colour in All Creation

> *Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, with which We bring forth fruits of different colours? In the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as others jet-black. Similarly, human beings, beasts and cattle have various colours. It is those who are endowed with knowledge that stand truly in awe of God. Indeed God is Almighty, Much-Forgiving. (Verses 27-28)*

This is a remarkable touch confirming the source of the Qur'ān. It looks at the entire world with a special focus on colour, pointing out its great variety in fruits, mountains, people, animals and cattle. It only takes a few words to group together animate and inanimate objects throughout the earth, leaving us in full amazement at this wonderful exhibition.

It all begins with water being sent down from the skies, and the fruits that it brings forth with their rich variety of hue. Because the exhibition intended here concentrates on visual imagery, the only quality given to the fruits is their colour:

"We bring forth fruits of different colours." (Verse 27) The colours of these fruits combine a grading that cannot be reproduced, even partially, by any painter. No two types of fruits are of the same colour. In fact, no two pieces of the same type of fruit are identical in colour. Good scrutiny will reveal variation even on such a scale.

The *sūrah* then switches, almost suddenly, to refer to the colours of mountains. A close palette study, however, shows that this is a perfectly natural switch. There is a close similarity between the richness of colour in fruits and its richness in mountain rocks. Some rocks may even resemble fruit both in shape and in size, so that they can sometimes be mistaken for fruit. *"In the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as others jet-black."* (Verse 27) The 'streaks' refer to lines and courses in mountains. The text here refers to a fine point: the white lines contain different shades of whiteness, while the red ones contain different red shades, and both differ in the richness of colour and in the mix of other colours that give them their special appeal. There are other streaks of very black colour.

The switch to this colour diversity in rocks, after having highlighted such diversity in fruits has a profound effect. It alerts in us a refined sense of the aesthetic which sees beauty in a rock just as it appreciates it in a fruit, despite the great difference between the two in nature and function. In this way we are reminded to better appreciate our surroundings, not least their aesthetic beauty.

The *sūrah* also mentions people's colours, which are not limited to the major categories that distinguish different racial groups. Indeed every human being has a distinctive colour separating him or her from the rest of their race. Indeed, it distinguishes each twin from the other. The same applies to animals and cattle. Cattle, which include camels, cows, sheep and goats, are mentioned as a separate category of fauna because they are much closer to man. They also demonstrate a similarly great diversity of colour.

The universe is thus shown as a splendidly colourful book which the Qur'ān opens and looks through. It then says that scholars who read, appreciate and comprehend this book are the ones who have a true God-fearing sense: *"It is those who are endowed with knowledge that stand truly in awe of God."* (Verse 28) The universe is a superb hook of which the *sūrah* has shown but a few pages. It takes a good measure of knowledge to appreciate this wonderful hook and to get to truly know God through His creation and power. People who do so realize the measure of His greatness by appreciating His work. Therefore, they are truly God-fearing, and they worship Him in true submission. This is not the result of a mysterious feeling that we sometimes experience when we look at a splendid natural scene; rather, it is the product of true and direct knowledge. The pages of this universal book that the *sūrah* has shown are only a sample. The great diversity of colour it has mentioned serves only as an indicator of the great variety and meticulous harmony available

everywhere in the universe. It can however only be appreciated by people endowed with knowledge and by those who feel the value of their knowledge deep in their hearts, and who do not leave it in a cold, dry academic corner.

The aesthetic element is intentionally added into the design of the universe. Its beauty, however, is raised to perfection by the fact that different things discharge their functions through that very beauty. The splendid colours of flowers, along with their scents, attract bees and butterflies which, as far as the flower is concerned, are the means of inoculation, so as to ensure fruition. Thus the flower completes its own function through its very beauty. In sex, beauty is the main attraction which leads to the couple fulfilling their task of reproduction. Because beauty is intended, the Qur'ān draws our attentions to it in these various ways.

"*Indeed God is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 28) He is certainly able to create all sorts of fine and beautiful creatures, as also to requite people for their actions. At the same time, He forgives much, overlooking the mistakes of those who fall short of appreciating His beautiful work.

The Revealed Book

Having looked at these pages of the book of the universe, the *sūrah* turns to the revealed book and those who recite it, their hopes and expected rewards:

> *Those who recite God's book, attend regularly to prayer, and give in charity, secretly and openly, from what We have provided for them, look forward to a bargain that can never fail, for He will grant them their just rewards, and give them yet more out of His bounty. He is indeed Much-Forgiving, most thankful (Verses 29-30)*

Reciting God's book means something other than going through its words, vocalizing them or not; it means reading with reflection that leads to understanding, action and behaviour. This also entails attending regularly to prayer, giving secretly and openly in charity, as well as entertaining the hope that what is so offered will never be a failed bargain. Those who do all this know that what God has in store is far more valuable than what they give away. As they give only for God's sake, dealing with Him directly, their bargain is especially .profitable. Ultimately, they will receive their reward in full, coupled with an increase of God's bounty. For, "*He is indeed Much-Forgiving, most thankful.*" (Verse 30) He forgives shortfalls and appreciates good action. His being thankful refers to what is normally associated with gratitude for pleasure and fine reward. Yet the verse inspires us to be grateful to Him who bestows His favours on us. If He appreciates what His servants do and thanks them for it, should they not then show their gratitude for all He gives them?

This is followed by a reference to the nature of God's revealed book and the truth it contains, as a prelude to speaking about those who are the heirs to this hook:

> *The book that We have revealed to you is the truth confirming previous scriptures. Of His servants God is well-aware, all-seeing. (Verse 31)*

The evidence of the truth in this book is clear in its make up. The Qur'ān is an accurate translation of the universe in its true nature, or we can say that it is the spoken page while the universe is the silent page. Moreover, it confirms the books revealed earlier from the same source. The truth is one; it cannot be multiple. The One who revealed it to mankind knows them well, knows what suits them and improves their lot: "*Of His servants God is well-aware, all-seeing.*" (Verse 31)

Such is this book, and God has given it to the Muslim community as its heritage. He has chosen this community to be its heir, as He states in His book: "*We have given this Book to such of Our servants as We choose.*" (Verse 32) The Muslim community should know from these words that it has been given a position of honour by God. It should also realize that the responsibility it shoulders as a result is of great importance. It is a responsibility which assigns duties that have to be fulfilled. Will the Muslim community listen and respond?

God has honoured the Muslim community. He has chosen it to be the heir to His message, and He has graced it with a favourable reward, even for those who do not perform well:

> *We have given this Book to such of Our servants as We choose: among them are some who wrong their own souls, some follow a middle course and some who, by God's leave, are foremost in deeds of goodness. (Verse 32)*

The group mentioned first, probably because it is the majority, are the ones who *wrong their own souls,'* by doing more had things than good, and the second have a balance between the two, following *'a middle course,'* while the third are '*foremost in deeds of goodness,'* having a preponderance of these. However, God's grace is bestowed on all three, leading them all to heaven where they experience the bliss described in the verses that follow. We will not go into any further detail here, preferring to leave the discussion with the idea conveyed by the verse, making it clear that the Muslim community head to this end in its entirety by God's grace:

> *That is the greatest favour. Gardens of bliss will they enter, where they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where they will be clad in silk garments. They will say: All praise is due to God, who has removed all sorrow from us. Our Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, most appreciative. It is He who, out of His bounty, has*

settled us in this abode of permanent life, where we shall endure neither toil nor fatigue. (Verses 32-35)

These verses give us an image of material comfort and psychological bliss. They are '*adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and they will be clad in silk garments,*' which are aspects of the material comfort that satisfies some of what people desire. Coupled with this are feelings of security, reassurance and gratification: "*They will say: All praise is due to God, who has removed all sorrow from us.*" (Verse 34) This present life, with all that it involves of worry about the future and all its struggles, counts as sorrow when it is compared to the enduring bliss in heaven. Moreover, the worry each individual experiences on the Day of Judgement concerning their fate is also a source of great sorrow. "*Our Lord is certainly Much-Forgiving, most appreciative.*" (Verse 34) He has forgiven us our sins and appreciated our work, rewarding us well for it. "*It is He who has settled us in this abode of permanent life,*" where we shall permanently reside. It is all '*out of His bounty*'. We have no right to claim. It is He who gives it all by His grace. "*Where we shall endure neither toil nor fatigue.*" (Verse 35) There we have all we need: comfort, bliss and reassurance.

The ambience generated here is one of ease, comfort and bliss. The words are chosen for their sound so as to enhance such feelings. Heaven is described as the *abode of permanent life*' while toil and fatigue do not come near them. In this way the music of these verses is slow and soft.

On the other side we see the unbelievers wracked with worry, lacking confidence, and unable to see an end to their troubles: "*As for the unbelievers, the fire of hell awaits them. No term shall be determined for them so that they could die, nor shall its suffering be reduced for them.*" (Verse 36) Not even the comfort of death is granted them. "*Thus shall We requite all unbelievers.*" (Verse 36) Then we begin to hear loud, harsh voices. The echoes are mixed, the wailing confused, and it comes from those who have been thrown into hell: "*There they will cry aloud.*" What are these harsh voices saying, then? They say: "*Our Lord! Let us out and we will do good, not like what we did before.*" (Verse 37) This is an expression of regret for what they did in the past, but it is all too late. Hence, the reply carries a strong reproach: "*Have We not given you lives long enough for anyone who would be warned to take warning?*" (Verse 37) You did not benefit from the duration of your lives on earth, which was enough for anyone who wished to heed the warnings. "*And a warner had come to you.*" This was in addition to the warnings. Yet you paid no heed. "*Taste it, then. Wrongdoers shall have none to support them.*" (Verse 37)

These are two contrasting images: one of peace, comfort and security and the other full of worry and insecurity. The melodious sound of gratitude to God and of praying to Him is contrasted with screams and cries for help. The image of care and

honour shown to the believers is the opposite of the neglect and reproach the unbelievers experience. The soft and quiet rhythm contrasts with the violent rhythm. Thus the comparison is complete, and overall harmony is maintained both in detail and in general atmosphere.

We then have a comment on all these scenes and images, as well as what has preceded them of choosing the Muslim community for its task: *"God knows all that is hidden in the heavens and earth; He filly knows what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 38)

It is God who knows everything in the universe and what is in people's hearts. On the basis of His knowledge, He judges all matters.

6
The Fate of Evil Design

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَكُمۡ خَلَٰٓئِفَ فِى ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ فَمَن كَفَرَ فَعَلَيۡهِ كُفۡرُهُۥۖ وَلَا يَزِيدُ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ كُفۡرُهُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ إِلَّا مَقۡتًاۖ وَلَا يَزِيدُ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ كُفۡرُهُمۡ إِلَّا خَسَارًا ﴿٣٩﴾

It is He who made you inherit the earth. Hence, anyone who denies the truth will bear the consequences of his unbelief. In denying Him the unbelievers will have nothing but an increase of their loathsomeness in God's sight; and in denying Him the unbelievers will only add to their loss. (39)

قُلۡ أَرَءَيۡتُمۡ شُرَكَآءَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ تَدۡعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ أَرُونِى مَاذَا خَلَقُواْ مِنَ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَمۡ لَهُمۡ شِرۡكٌ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ أَمۡ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمۡ كِتَٰبًا فَهُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَتٍ مِّنۡهُۚ بَلۡ إِن يَعِدُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ بَعۡضُهُم بَعۡضًا إِلَّا غُرُورًا ﴿٤٠﴾

Say: 'Have you considered those beings whom you claim to be partners with God and whom you call upon beside Him? Show me what it is that they have created on earth! Or do they have a share in the heavens?' Have We ever vouchsafed them a book on which they could rely as evidence? No. What the unbelievers promise one another is nothing but delusion. (40)

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُمۡسِكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ أَن تَزُولَاۚ وَلَئِن زَالَتَآ إِنۡ أَمۡسَكَهُمَا مِنۡ أَحَدٖ مِّنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا ﴿٤١﴾

It is God alone who holds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate {from their courses]. If they should ever deviate, no one else could uphold them after Him. He is indeed Ever- Forbearing, Much-Forgiving. (41)

وَأَقۡسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ جَهۡدَ أَيۡمَٰنِهِمۡ لَئِن جَآءَهُمۡ نَذِيرٞ لَّيَكُونُنَّ أَهۡدَىٰ مِنۡ إِحۡدَى ٱلۡأُمَمِۖ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمۡ نَذِيرٞ مَّا زَادَهُمۡ إِلَّا نُفُورًا ﴿٤٢﴾

They swear by God with their most solemn oaths that if a warner should ever come to them, they would follow his guidance better than some other community, but when a warner did come to them, they turned away with increased aversion, (42)

ٱسۡتِكۡبَارٗا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَكۡرَ ٱلسَّيِّئُۚ وَلَا يَحِيقُ ٱلۡمَكۡرُ ٱلسَّيِّئُ إِلَّا بِأَهۡلِهِۦۚ فَهَلۡ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا سُنَّتَ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَۚ فَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّتِ ٱللَّهِ تَبۡدِيلٗاۖ وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّتِ ٱللَّهِ تَحۡوِيلًا ٤٣

behaving arrogantly in the land and plotting evil. Yet such evil scheming will engulf none but its authors. Can they expect anything but the way of those unbelievers of old times? No change will you ever find in God's ways; no deviation will you ever find there. (43)

أَوَلَمۡ يَسِيرُواْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَيَنظُرُواْ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ وَكَانُوٓاْ أَشَدَّ مِنۡهُمۡ قُوَّةٗۚ وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيُعۡجِزَهُۥ مِن شَيۡءٖ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَلَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَلِيمٗا قَدِيرٗا ٤٤

Have they not travelled in the land and seen what happened in the end to those before them, even though they were much mightier than them? God can never be foiled by anything whatever in the heavens and the earth. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power. (44)

وَلَوۡ يُؤَاخِذُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلنَّاسَ بِمَا كَسَبُواْ مَا تَرَكَ عَلَىٰ ظَهۡرِهَا مِن دَآبَّةٖ وَلَٰكِن يُؤَخِّرُهُمۡ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمّٗىۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهُمۡ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِۦ بَصِيرَۢا ٤٥

If God were to punish people [at once] for the wrongs they do, He would not leave a single living creature on the surface of the earth. However, He grants them respite for a term set [by Him]. When their term comes to an end, [they realize that] God has all His servants in His sight. (45)

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* includes several rounds that go far and wide, inspiring our hearts and minds. One round looks at humanity and how one generation succeeds another. Another takes us across the heavens and earth in search of any trace of those whom the unbelievers allege to he God's partners. Then we go across the heavens and earth again to contemplate God's power as He holds the celestial bodies and the earth keeping them on their respective courses. The unbelievers are then made to face their broken promises and oaths. They swore that should they have a messenger to warn them, they would do better than past communities, but when a messenger came to them, this only increased their

deviation from the truth. A look at the fates of earlier unbelieving communities follows. This is to demonstrate to those who denied the message of Islam that they should know that God's laws are constantly in operation. Although they were aware of what happened to earlier unbelievers, they still did not take on board that the same fate could just as easily befall them. The *sūrah* concludes with a warning that should strike fear in people's hearts. It tells them that if God were to punish people immediately for what they incur, no one would remain on the face of the earth. It behoves us then, to acknowledge God's grace in allowing us time to reflect and consider our position.

Lessons to Reflect Upon

> *It is He who made you inherit the earth. Hence, anyone who denies the truth will bear the consequences of his unbelief. In denying Him the unbelievers will have nothing but an increase of their loathsomeness in God's sight; and in denying Him the unbelievers will only add to their loss. (Verse 39)*

One generation of humanity inherits another; one state disappears to allow another to rise in its place; one flame is extinguished and one is lit: it is all the same continuous, progressive movement. If we contemplate this endless round, lessons clearly present themselves. Indeed, we feel that soon we ourselves will belong to the past and that future generations will look at the traces we leave behind in the same way as we read about those who passed before us. We then realize that age determination belongs to the One who allows the heirs to inherit those that have served their term. Thus everything goes its way and disappears. It is God alone who is everlasting, unaffected by the passage of time.

The person who knows that he stays for a while and goes, like a tourist on holiday, leaving those who succeed him to look at what he has done, should endeavour to make his short stay worthwhile. He should leave behind what earns for him good remembrance and do what benefits him in his ultimate destination for all return to the One who holds everyone accountable for whatever they say and do. Such too is how mankind moves from one generation to another: *"It is He who made you inherit the earth."* (Verse 39)

Then follows a reminder of individual responsibility. None will be made to bear any part of another person's burden; none will protect another in any way. This verse also refers to their persistent denial of the truth and its ultimate results: *"Hence, anyone who denies the truth will bear the consequences of his unbelief In denying Him the unbelievers will have nothing but an increase of their loathsomeness in God's sight; and in denying Him the unbelievers will only add to their loss."* (Verse 39) The Arabic word,

maqt, which is translated here as 'loathsomeness', indicates the highest degree of hate. If a person incurs God's hate, his loss exceeds all that we can imagine.

The second round takes us across the heavens and the earth to look for evidence of those whom they allege to be God's partners. However, neither the heavens nor the earth bare any trace of them:

> *Say: 'Have you considered those beings whom you claim to be partners with God and whom you call upon beside Him? Show me what it is that they have created on earth! Or do they have a share in the heavens?' Have We ever vouchsafed them a book on which they could rely as evidence? No. What the unbelievers promise one another is nothing but delusion. (Verse 40)*

The argument is strong and the evidence is clear. This is the earth, stretched before us in all directions. Which part of it, and which creature on it, can anyone claim to have been created by other than God? Should anyone dare to make such a claim, everything on earth will rebut it loud and clear. Indeed, everything tells the same thing: all have been created by God Almighty. Everything bears the mark of the inimitable work of the Maker.

"Or do they have a share in the heavens?" (Verse 40) This is even more evident. No one claims that such alleged deities have any part in the creation or ownership of the heavens. Not a single one makes such a claim, not even for the *jinn* or the angels. All that they can claim is that they sought the *jinn's* help to bring them news from on high. All they hope for is that the angels will intercede with God on their behalf. Yet at no time did they claim that their alleged deities had a portion of the heavens.

"Have We ever vouchsafed them a book on which they could rely as evidence?" (Verse 40) Their alleged partners cannot even reach this stage of having a book given them by God and of which they are certain to be true. The question, however, admits another possibility whereby it is addressed to the idolaters themselves. Their persistence with false claims that God has partners may suggest that their faith is based on solid proof in the form of a book given to them by God. Again this is untrue, and they cannot claim it. If we take the question in this second sense, it implies that faith can only be based on a book given by God: this is the only reliable source. Again, they can make no such claim.

The Prophet, on the other hand, has a book given him by God which he presents to them. Why, then, are they turning away from it when it is the only source of true faith?

"No. What the unbelievers promise one another is nothing but delusion." (Verse 40) The wrongdoers are quick to promise each other that their methods are the correct ones and that they will eventually prevail. They are indeed deluded. Moreover, they live

in worthless delusion.

Sustaining the Universe

The third round reveals the limitless nature of God's power as He is the One who holds the heavens and the earth and sustains them in place. No one else has any say or role in all this:

> *It is God alone who holds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate [from their courses]. If they should ever deviate, no one else could uphold them after Him. He is indeed Ever-Forbearing, Much-Forgiving. (Verse 41)*

A glance at the heavens and the earth, and the celestial bodies moving in their orbits, without error or deviation, maintaining their speeds without the slightest increase or decrease, should open our minds to the mighty hand that holds them all in position. Should these celestial bodies or the heavens or the earth deviate from their courses and scatter no one would ever be able to hold them back. This is indeed the time frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān as signalling the end of the world: a point when the system holding all celestial bodies in position is broken, and destruction ensues. It is the time God has appointed for reckoning and reward for whatever takes place in this present life. This signals a transfer to the next world which is totally different from the world we currently live in.

Hence the statement that God holds the universe in place ends with the comment: "*He is indeed Ever-Forbearing, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 41) He forbears allowing people time. He does not put an end to their world or hold them to account before the term He has appointed. He gives them chances to repent, begin the good work and prepare for their future lives. Nor does He make people account for everything they do. On the contrary, He forgives much of their wrongdoing when they show any inclination to do well. This statement, then, should make people seize the opportunity provided before it is too late.

The next round speaks about the Arab idolaters and the pledges they made to God, which they then breached, spreading corruption on earth. They are warned that God's laws will always operate, never fail:

> *They swear by God with their most solemn oaths that if a warner should ever come to them, they would follow his guidance better than some other community, but when a warner did come to them, they turned away with increased aversion, behaving arrogantly in the land and plotting evil. Yet such evil scheming will engulf none but its authors. Can they expect anything but the way of those unbelievers of old times? No change will you ever find in God's ways; no deviation will you ever find there.*

(Verses 42-43)

The Arabs had Jewish neighbours in the Arabian Peninsula and they realized how far the Jews had deviated from the right path. They had heard much of their history and how they had killed their prophets, turning away from the truth these prophets advocated. The Arabs used to blame the Jews, and to swear most earnestly that *"if a warner should ever come to them, they would follow his guidance better than some other community."* (Verse 42) They deliberately made their oaths in this way, not mentioning the Jews although clearly referring to them.

Thus were their oaths, which the Qur'ān presents to everyone so as to make them witnesses to what the Arabs used to say in pre-Islamic days. The *sūrah* then reveals what they did when God gave them what they wished for, sending them a messenger to warn them: *"but when a warner did come to them, they turned away with increased aversion, behaving arrogantly in the land and plotting evil."* (Verses 42-43)

Needless to say, only a foul people would swear so strongly and then behave with such arrogance and evil. The *sūrah* exposes them, recording their behaviour, before adding to their disgrace a warning to all who emulate such actions: *"Yet such evil scheming will engulf none but its authors."* (Verse 43) Thus, their evil will harm none but themselves. It will engulf and ruin them.

This being the case, what are they waiting for? They cannot wait for anything other than the fate that engulfed those who rejected the truth in the past. They are well aware of that fate. Hence, they can await for nothing other than the operation of God's law which will never change: *"Can they expect anything but the way of those unbelievers of old times? No change will you ever find in God's ways; no deviation will you ever find there."* (Verse 43)

If Only...

Things never move haphazardly and life does not move aimlessly. There are constant laws that allow no change. The Qur'ān states this truth and wants people to learn it so that they do not look at any event in isolation, overlooking the operation of God's law. It draws their attention to the links and relations in life and the laws of existence, making it clear that these will always remain true. This present round gives an example of how the Qur'ān draws people's attention to this fact, after having confirmed that God's laws remain constant:

> *Have they not travelled in the land and seen what happened in the end to those before them, even though they were much mightier than them? God can never be foiled by anything whatever in the heavens and the earth. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His*

power. (Verse 44)

When we travel with open eyes and alert minds, looking at the fates of earlier communities and how they perished after having commanded strength and power, this should give us clear inspiration and awaken our God-fearing sense. It is for this reason that the Qur'ān often directs people to travel, look around and reflect. Unless people do so, they will remain oblivious of the truth, and they will not draw lessons from the fates of past communities. Nor will they link such events to the universal laws that apply to them. Yet this is the quality that distinguishes man from animals. By contrast, the whole of the human race is one unit *vis-a-vis* the unity of the system and the universal law that applies to all.

While they are made to contemplate the fates of earlier communities, whose greater power availed them of nothing, they are reminded of God's might. It is He who sealed the fate of those communities, for nothing can withstand His power: "*God can never be foiled by anything whatever in the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 44) This is a truism which is supported by clear explanation: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 44) His knowledge encompasses everything in the heavens and on earth. When His power is added to His perfect and absolute knowledge, nothing escapes Him or stands up to Him. Hence, nothing in the universe can foil His purpose. There is no way that anyone can escape His power or hide from His knowledge.

The last verse in the *sūrah* speaks of God's forbearance and compassion, juxtaposing these with His power and knowledge. It emphasizes that people are given a chance, not punished immediately, but that this does not affect the eventual accurate reckoning of their deeds or the fairness of the results at the end. All this is an aspect of His grace:

> *If God were to punish people [at once] for the wrongs they do, He would not leave a single living creature on the surface of the earth. However, He grants them respite for a term set [by Him]. When their term comes to an end, [they realize that] God has all His servants in His sight. (Verse 45)*

People commit all sorts of bad actions, showing ingratitude for God's favours, spreading evil and corruption on earth, committing all manner of injustices and excesses. Were God to mete243out fair punishment to people for their actions, His punishment would have gone beyond them to include every living thing on the face of the earth. The whole planet would then be unsuitable for any type of life, not merely human life.

This highlights the terrible nature of what people perpetrate as a destructive force

that could end life in its entirety. However, God does not take people to task straightaway; He forbears and gives them chances: *"However, He grants them respite for a term set [by Him]."* (Verse 45) He grants respite to individuals until the end of their lives on earth, and gives communities respite to fulfil their responsibility in performing the task He has assigned mankind to build human life on earth, until they hand over to the next generation. He also grants respite to the human race until the end of human life in this world when the Last Hour arrives. He provides us with all these chances so that we mend our ways and improve our actions.

"When their term comes to an end..." when the time for work and earning reward is over; when it is time for reckoning and administering reward; God will not begrudge them anything of their reward. On the contrary, He will be fair to all: *"God has all His servants in His sight."* (Verse 45) The fact that He has them all in His sight ensures that they will be fairly requited for whatever they have done in their lives. Nothing serious or trivial will be discounted for or against them.

Thus ends this *sūrah* which started with praising God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, *"who assigns angels to be messengers, endowed with wings,"* delivering His message, with its warnings and happy news to people on earth.

SŪRAH 36

Yā Sīn

Prologue

This Makkan *sūrah* is characterized by short verses and a fast rhythm. Composed of 83 verses, it is slightly shorter in overall length than the preceding *sūrah* which contained only 45 verses. Such short verses together with the fast rhythm give the *sūrah* a special outlook. Its rhythm sounds successive beats, the effect of which is increased by the numerous images it draws, all leaving a profound impression.

It shares the same main themes of all Makkan *sūrahs,* aiming to lay the foundation of faith. At the very outset it dwells on the nature of revelation and the truth of the message: "*Yā Sīn. By the Qur'ān, full of wisdom, you are indeed one of God's messengers, pursuing a straight way. It is a revelation by the Almighty, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verses 1-5) It relates the story of the people of the township to which messengers were sent, using the story to warn against rejection of the message and denial of the revelation. It shows the end that befell the people of the township to emphasize the message the *sūrah* wants to deliver. Towards the end, the *sūrah* picks up this point again: "*We have not taught the Prophet poetry; nor is it fitting for him to be a poet. This is but a reminder and a Qur'ān making all things clear, to warn everyone who is alive, and that the word of God be proved against the unbelievers.*" (Verses 69-70)

The *sūrah* also discusses the oneness of the Godhead, giving the voice of denunciation of polytheism to the man who came from the farthest end of town. It is he who argues with his people about their denial of God's messengers: *"Why should I not worship the One who has brought me into being? It is to Him that you will all return. Should I worship other deities beside Him? If the Lord of Grace should will that harm befall me, their intercession will avail me nothing, nor will they save me. Indeed, I should clearly be in error."* (Verses 22-24) The same point is emphasized again towards the end of the *sūrah: "Yet they have taken to worship deities other than God, hoping for /their] support.*

They are unable to support them; yet their worshippers stand like warriors to defend them." (Verses 74-75)

The issue that is most strongly emphasized in the *sūrah* is that of resurrection. Mention of this is first made at the very outset: *"It is We who will bring the dead back to life. We record whatever Needs] they send ahead, as well as the traces they leave behind. We keep an account of all things in a clear record."* (Verse 12) Resurrection is further alluded to in the story of the township as it mentions the reward given to the man arguing the case of faith: *"He was told- Enter paradise. He said Would that my people knew how my Lord has forgiven me my sins, and has placed me among the highly honoured!"* (Verses 26-27) In the middle of the *sūrah* resurrection is once again referred to: *"They also ask: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' All they are waiting for is a single blast that will overtake them while they are still disputing. No time will they have to make bequests, nor will they return to their own people."* (Verses 48-50) And at the end of the *sūrah,* it is stated in the form of dialogue: *"He comes up with arguments against Us, forgetting how he himself was created. He asks: 'Who could give life to bones that have crumbled to dust?' Say: He who brought them into being in the first instance will give them life again. He has full knowledge of every act of creation."* (Verses 78-79)

These fundamental issues of faith are repeatedly discussed in Makkan *sūrahs.* Each time though they are tackled from a different angle, brought under new focus, and given effects that fit the overall ambience of the *sūrah,* maintaining harmony with its rhythm, images and impressions.

These effects vary in this *sūrah.* Some derive from the scenes of the Day of Judgement, the scenes in the story and the positions taken in it and the dialogue it includes as also the end suffered by earlier communities. Other effects are derived from the numerous images given of the universe, each of which imparts its own message. The dead land as life begins to emerge in it; the night stripped out of the day to spread total darkness; the sun running its course up to its point of destination; the moon moving from one phase to another until it becomes like an old date stalk; the boats laden with the offspring of old human generations; the cattle made subservient to man; the gamete being transformed into a human being who argues and quarrels; and the green tree made into a fire from which they light their own fires. It is by using all these scenes and images that the *sūrah* emphasizes its message.

Alongside these there are other effects made to touch our hearts and alert our minds. One of these is the image of those who deny the truth when God's judgement befalls them. No longer can they derive any benefit from the signs and the warnings given them: *"Around their necks We have put chains, reaching up to their chins, so that their heads are forced up. And We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We enshrouded them in veils so that they cannot see."* (Verses 8-9) Another is the fact that whatever they harbour inside their hearts and whatever they leave open are

known to God; nothing is hidden from Him. A third effect is the description of the mechanism of creation as involving nothing but one short word: *"When He intends something to be, He only says to it, Be,' and it is."* (Verse 82)

The *sūrah* can he divided into three parts. The first begins with an oath God makes by the expression of two separate letters, *Yā Sīn,* and by the Qur'ān, which is full of wisdom, to emphasize the truth of the Prophet's message and that he follows a straight path. This is followed by describing the miserable end of those who pay no heed to the message and deny its truth. They will never find a way to guidance because this is God's judgement. It explains that the warning only benefits those who follow the revelations given by God and who fear Him despite the fact that their faculties of perception cannot reach Him. Such people open their hearts to receive the evidence of divine guidance and the pointers to the path of faith. In this part, the Prophet is asked to cite the example of the people of the township who denied God's messengers and the end they suffered. It also shows the nature of faith and how it affects the heart of the man arguing its case.

The second part begins with a call of sorrow for those people who continue to deny every messenger God sends them, ridiculing them and their message, paying no heed to what happened to earlier communities who denied the truth, or to the great many signs God has placed all around them. This part includes the universal images we have already mentioned as well as a long and detailed scene from the Day of Judgement.

The third and final part sums up all the themes of the *sūrah,* starting with a denial that what Muĥammad recited was poetry, and emphasizing the fact that the Prophet never had anything to do with poetry. It portrays a number of images confirming God's oneness. It decries the unbelievers' practice of having deities to which they pray to give them victory over their enemies, when in fact they themselves have to protect those alleged deities. It discusses the issue of resurrection, reminding them of their origin and how their creation starts with a gamete. This should enable them to understand that giving life to bones that have crumbled into dust is barely different from their first creation from a gamete. It reminds them of the green trees and how they become fire fuel, although the two concepts seem to be far apart. The creation of the heavens and the earth is also mentioned as a reminder that God is able to create them in both stages of their life. Finally, the last beat that concludes the *sūrah* is: *"When He intends something to be, He only says to it, Be,' and it is. Limitless, then, in His glory is He in whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and to Him you all will be brought back."* (Verses 82-83)

1
Appeal to Reason

Yā Sīn. (1)	يسٓ ﴿١﴾
By the Qur'ān, full of wisdom, (2)	وَٱلْقُرْءَانِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾
you are indeed one of God's messengers, (3)	إِنَّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٣﴾
pursuing a straight way. (4)	عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾
It is a revelation by the Almighty, the Ever Merciful, (5)	تَنزِيلَ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿٥﴾
so that you may warn people whose forefathers had not been warned, and who therefore are unaware [of the truth]. (6)	لِتُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَّآ أُنذِرَ ءَابَآؤُهُمْ فَهُمْ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٦﴾
The verdict has been passed against most of them, for they will not believe. (7)	لَقَدْ حَقَّ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَىٰٓ أَكْثَرِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٧﴾
Around their necks We have put chains, reaching up to their chins, so that their heads are forced up. (8)	إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا فِىٓ أَعْنَٰقِهِمْ أَغْلَٰلًا فَهِىَ إِلَى ٱلْأَذْقَانِ فَهُم مُّقْمَحُونَ ﴿٨﴾
And We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We enshrouded them in veils so that they cannot see. (9)	وَجَعَلْنَا مِنۢ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ سَدًّا وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ سَدًّا فَأَغْشَيْنَٰهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا

يُبۡصِرُونَ ٩

وَسَوَآءٌ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَأَنذَرۡتَهُمۡ أَمۡ لَمۡ تُنذِرۡهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ١٠

إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ مَنِ ٱتَّبَعَ ٱلذِّكۡرَ وَخَشِيَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنَ بِٱلۡغَيۡبِۖ فَبَشِّرۡهُ بِمَغۡفِرَةٖ وَأَجۡرٖ كَرِيمٍ ١١

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نُحۡيِ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ وَنَكۡتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُواْ وَءَاثَٰرَهُمۡۚ وَكُلَّ شَيۡءٍ أَحۡصَيۡنَٰهُ فِيٓ إِمَامٖ مُّبِينٖ ١٢

وَٱضۡرِبۡ لَهُم مَّثَلًا أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِ إِذۡ جَآءَهَا ٱلۡمُرۡسَلُونَ ١٣

إِذۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡهِمُ ٱثۡنَيۡنِ فَكَذَّبُوهُمَا فَعَزَّزۡنَا بِثَالِثٖ فَقَالُوٓاْ إِنَّآ إِلَيۡكُم مُّرۡسَلُونَ ١٤

قَالُواْ مَآ أَنتُمۡ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُنَا وَمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ مِن شَيۡءٍ إِنۡ أَنتُمۡ إِلَّا تَكۡذِبُونَ ١٥

قَالُواْ رَبُّنَا يَعۡلَمُ إِنَّآ إِلَيۡكُمۡ لَمُرۡسَلُونَ ١٦

وَمَا عَلَيۡنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡبَلَٰغُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ١٧

قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا تَطَيَّرۡنَا بِكُمۡۖ لَئِن لَّمۡ تَنتَهُواْ

It is all the same to them whether you warn them or you do not warn them: they will not believe. (10)

You can truly warn only such a one as follows this reminder and who stands in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception. To such, then, give the happy news of God's forthcoming forgiveness and a generous reward. (11)

It is We who will bring the dead back to life. We record whatever [deeds] they send ahead, as well as the traces they leave behind. We keep an account of all things in a clear record. (12)

Cite for them, as a case in point, the people of a township to which messengers came. (13)

We sent them two messengers, but they rejected them; so We reinforced them with a third, and they said: 'We are messengers who have been sent to you.' (14)

They replied: 'You are nothing but mortals like ourselves. Moreover, the Lord of Grace has never revealed anything; you do nothing but lie.' (15)

They said: 'Our Lord knows that we have indeed been sent to you. (16)

Our only duty is to clearly deliver the message [entrusted to us]. (17)

Said [the others]: 'We augur evil from you. Unless you desist, we will surely stone you and inflict on you a painful suffering.' (18)

لَنَرۡجُمَنَّكُمۡ وَلَيَمَسَّنَّكُم مِّنَّا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٞ ١٨

[The messengers] replied: 'The evil you forebode is within yourselves. [Why do you take this as an evil omen] when you are only being reminded of the truth? Truly, you are going too far.' (19)

قَالُواْ طَٰٓئِرُكُم مَّعَكُمۡۚ أَئِن ذُكِّرۡتُمۚ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٞ مُّسۡرِفُونَ ١٩

Then a man came from the farthest end of the city at speed. He said: 'My people! Follow these messengers. (20)

وَجَآءَ مِنۡ أَقۡصَا ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ رَجُلٞ يَسۡعَىٰ قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱتَّبِعُواْ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ٢٠

Follow those who ask you for no reward, and are themselves rightly guided. (21)

ٱتَّبِعُواْ مَن لَّا يَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ أَجۡرٗا وَهُم مُّهۡتَدُونَ ٢١

Why should I not worship the One who has brought me into being? It is to Him that you will all return. (22)

وَمَا لِيَ لَآ أَعۡبُدُ ٱلَّذِي فَطَرَنِي وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٢٢

Should I worship other deities beside Him? If the Lord of Grace should will that harm befall me, their intercession will avail me nothing, nor will they save me. (23)

ءَأَتَّخِذُ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ ءَالِهَةً إِن يُرِدۡنِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ بِضُرّٖ لَّا تُغۡنِ عَنِّي شَفَٰعَتُهُمۡ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يُنقِذُونِ ٢٣

Indeed, I should clearly be in error. (24) *I do believe in the Lord of you all; so listen to me.'* (25)

إِنِّيٓ إِذٗا لَّفِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٍ ٢٤

إِنِّيٓ ءَامَنتُ بِرَبِّكُمۡ فَٱسۡمَعُونِ ٢٥

He was told: 'Enter paradise.' He said: 'Would that my people knew (26)

قِيلَ ٱدۡخُلِ ٱلۡجَنَّةَۖ قَالَ يَٰلَيۡتَ قَوۡمِي يَعۡلَمُونَ ٢٦

how my Lord has forgiven me my sins, and has

بِمَا غَفَرَ لِي رَبِّي وَجَعَلَنِي مِنَ ٱلۡمُكۡرَمِينَ

placed me among the highly honoured!' (27)	﴿٢٧﴾
After that, We did not send an army from heaven against his people; nor do We send any. (28)	۞ وَمَآ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَىٰ قَوۡمِهِۦ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ مِن جُندٖ مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا كُنَّا مُنزِلِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾
Nothing was needed but one single blast, and they fell down lifeless. (29)	إِن كَانَتۡ إِلَّا صَيۡحَةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗ فَإِذَا هُمۡ خَٰمِدُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

A Book Full of Wisdom

"*Yd Sin. By the Qur'ān, All of wisdom.*" (Verses 1-2) God says an oath by these two letters and by the Qur'ān. This combination endorses the view we have expressed elsewhere about the mention of separate letters at the beginning of many *sūrahs,* and the relation between mentioning these letters and the Qur'ān. The proof that God is the source of the Qur'ān is obvious from these letters which are available to all Arabs to use yet they are incapable of producing with them anything like the thoughts and modes of expression contained in the Qur'ān. Yet seldom do they consider such confirmation.

As He swears by the Qur'ān, God Almighty describes it as being full of wisdom. In fact, a literal translation should be 'By the wise Qur'ān.' Wisdom is a quality of rational beings, which suggests that the oath is phrased in this way to impart to the Qur'ān the qualities of life, having a purpose and a will, which are essential for a wise being.

Although this is allegorical, nonetheless it describes a fact, bringing it closer to our minds' eye. This Qur'ān has a soul of its own, giving it qualities similar to those of a living person with whom you have mutual responses and feelings. This takes place when you pay full attention to it and listen to it with your heart and soul. Whenever you open your faculties up to it, the Qur'ān reveals to you more of its secrets. When you have lived for a while in the company of the Qur'ān, you will long for its distinctive features, just as you long for the features of a close friend. God's Messenger used to love to listen to the Qur'ān being recited by other people. He would even stop by people's doors if he overheard someone inside reciting the Qur'ān, just like a lover listens to a conversation about the one he loves.

The Qur'ān is certainly wise. It addresses everyone according to their ability; touching heart strings, speaking in a measured way, and using a wisdom that suits each person. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is full of wisdom. It educates people wisely, according to a straight logical and psychological system that releases all human potential and directs people to what is good and beneficial. It establishes a code of living that allows every human activity within the limits of its wise system.

God Almighty swears by the two letters, *Yā* and *Sīn,* and by the Qur'ān to confirm the truth of revelation and the message delivered by the Prophet: "*You are indeed one of God's messengers, pursuing a straight way.*" (Verses 3-4) Limitless in His glory, God does not need to express an oath, but this oath by the Qur'ān and its letters gives the subject of the oath added greatness. God would not swear by anything unless it were great indeed, worthy of being sworn by.

"*You are indeed one of God's messengers.*" (Verse 3) The way this verse is phrased imparts a feeling that sending messengers is a well recognized fact, with many past cases. This is not what is being proved here. Instead, what is being emphasized is that Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is one of these messengers. The oath is addressed to Muĥammad himself, not to those who deny his message, so as to place the oath, the Messenger and the message above argument or discussion. It is a fact being stated by God about His Messenger.

"*You are indeed one of God's messengers, pursuing a straight way.*" (Verses 3-4) This explains the nature of the message after the truth about the Messenger has been stated. By nature, this message is straightforward. It is as straight as the edge of a sword. It admits no crookedness, deviation, or prejudice. The truth it contains is clear, free of ambiguity, and does not bend to serve any interest or to satisfy any desire. Whoever wants this truth will find it pure, simple and accurate.

Because it is straight, this truth is simple, free of complexity and problems that beset controversial issues. It states the truth in the simplest and most direct way that needs the least amount of explanation and interpretation. It does not give words and sentences any special colour or overtone. As such, it is readily understood by people of all standards of education and civilization: each finds in it what they need for their lives to take an easy course, being also properly organized and well regulated.

Moreover, the Qur'ānic message is consistent with the nature of the universe and its system, as well as the nature of all that is around man. Hence, it neither conflicts with any thing in existence nor requires man to be in conflict. It follows its own way benefiting from, and cooperating with the laws that govern the universe and all creatures living in it.

As such, the Islamic message pursues its straight way to God, sure to reach Him. Its adherents do not fear that they may lose their way to Him, or take a path away

from Him. They know that they are on a straight path leading to His pleasure. The Qur'ān is the guide along this way. As long as man takes up the Qur'ān, he will find a consistent concept of the truth, outlining detailed values, each having a clear and well defined role.

"*It is a revelation by the Almighty, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 5) We note how God identifies Himself in such situations so that people will understand the true nature of what has been revealed to them. God is the Almighty who does what He pleases, yet He is Merciful to His servants. Whatever He does to them is born out of His mercy.

The purpose of this revelation is to warn people and give them God's message: "*so that you may warn people whose forefathers had not been warned, and who therefore are unaware [of the truth].*" (Verse 6) To be unaware is the worst form of corruption. Unawareness makes a heart unable to respond or interact. It sees the pointers to the truth yet is unable to respond, unable to feel their presence. Therefore, a warning is the best thing that can be given to such people who remain unaware, having gone for generations without anyone to alert them to the truth. They were the descendants of Ishmael, and they had had no messenger from God since his time. A strong warning may, then, alert people who have long been unaware.

The *sūrah* then speaks of the fate of these people, and the judgement that is certain to befall them, considering that God knows all there is in their hearts and minds, and all that they did in the past or will do in the future: "*The verdict has been passed against most of them, for they will not believe.*" (Verse 7) Judgement has been passed, as God knows that they will not believe. Hence, this is the fate of the majority of them because they will not see divine guidance for what it is nor will they interact with it.

At this point, the *sūrah* draws an image of their psychological condition, and we see them with chains around their necks, barriers separating them from divine guidance, and with a cover over their eyes depriving them of the ability to see: "*Around their necks We have put chains, reaching up to their chins, so that their heads are forced up. And We have set a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We enshrouded them in veils so that they cannot see.*" (Verses 8-9) Their hands are fastened with chains to their necks, placed under their chins, which has the effect of lifting up their heads such that they cannot see what is in front of them. Moreover, there are walls and barriers both in front of and behind them, which means that even if they were released from these chains, they still could not see through the barriers. Furthermore, the covers placed over their eyes makes it even more impossible for them to see.

Although this image is fierce and sharp, we actually do encounter people of this ilk. When you see them overlooking the plain truth that is in front of them, you feel as if there is a wall separating them from it. Although their hands are not chained

and nor are their heads forced up, you nonetheless feel that their souls and minds are turned away from the truth, unable to see guidance. It is as if there are barriers preventing them from approaching it. Such were the people who turned deaf ears to the Qur'ān and who received it with irrational denial as it put before them its argument and proof. This is when the Qur'ān is itself irrefutable proof.

"*It is all the same to them whether you warn them or you do not warn them: they will not believe.*" (Verse 10) Their case is settled. God knows that faith will not penetrate their hearts. No warning will ever benefit a heart that has steeled itself against divine guidance, and barracked its approach. Warnings do not create hearts; it only alerts a heart that is alive, ready to receive guidance: "*You can truly warn only such a one as follows this reminder and who stands in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception. To such, then, give the happy news of God's forthcoming forgiveness and a generous reward.*" (Verse 11)

Most probably, the '*reminder*' in this instance refers to the Qur'ān. A person who follows the Qur'ān and fears God despite not seeing Him is the one who benefits by the warning. It is as if the warning has been given to such people only and the Prophet directed it to them alone, even though he addressed it to all people. Since the others are prevented from receiving the warning, it looks as if it is given only to those who follow the Qur'ān and fear God. Such people deserve to be given good news. Hence the Prophet is told to give them '*the happy news of Gods forthcoming forgiveness and a generous reward.*' (Verse 11) They need the forgiveness of any sin they commit providing they do not persist in doing it, and they deserve the generous reward for fearing God and following what He has revealed. These two aspects go hand in hand: when a person truly fears God, he or she is certain to follow His guidance and implement the system He has laid down.

At this point, the truth of resurrection is emphasized, together with the reckoning that ignores nothing: "*It is We who will bring the dead back to life. We record whatever (deeds] they send ahead, as well as the traces they leave behind. We keep an account of all things in a clear record.*" (Verse 12) Bringing the dead back to life has always been an issue fraught with argument, of which we will see several types in this *sūrah.* They are warned here that whatever they do and whatever effects their deeds cause are written down, and nothing is forgotten. It is God Almighty who brings the dead back to life, records their actions and reckons everything. All this, then, is done in the perfect way that fits anything done by God. As for the 'clear record' and similar descriptions such as 'the imperishable tablet', these are most probably references to God's perfect knowledge that transcends time and place.

A Historical Case

Having presented the issues of revelation and resurrection in the form of a factual statement, the *sūrah* now presents them again in narrative form so as to touch hearts with a story about the fate of those who persist in denying the truth:

> *Cite for them, as a case in point, the people of a township to which messengers came. We sent them two messengers, but they rejected them; so We reinforced them with a third, and they said: 'We are messengers who have been sent to you.' They replied: You are nothing but mortals like ourselves. Moreover, the Lord of Grace has never revealed anything; you do nothing but lie.' They said: 'Our Lord knows that we have indeed been sent to you. Our only duty is to clearly deliver the message [entrusted to us]. Said [the others]: 'We augur evil from you. Unless you desist, we will surely stone you and inflict on you a painful suffering.' [The messengers] replied: 'The evil you forebode is within yourselves. [Why do you take this as an evil omen] when you are only being reminded of the truth? Truly, you are going too far' (Verses 13-19)*

The Qur'ān does not mention which township this was or who were its people. Different reports suggest different towns and cities, but there is no real benefit in trying to establish its identity. The fact that the Qur'ān neither identifies it nor mentions its location does not detract from the import of the story. It is a city to which God sent two messengers, just as He sent Moses and his brother Aaron to Pharaoh and his nobles. The people of the city rejected their message, accusing them of lying. God supported His two messengers with a third, confirming that they were truly His messengers. All three of them again presented their message, saying to the people: *"We are messengers who have been sent to you."* (Verse 14)

At this point, the people of the city aired the same objections that were given to God's messengers throughout history: *"They replied: You are nothing but mortals like ourselves. Moreover, the Lord of Grace has never revealed anything; you do nothing but lie."* (Verse 15) This oft-repeated objection to the fact that God sends human messengers to human communities betrays a naive understanding and ignorance of the nature of the messenger's role. People expected that both the personality and the life of the messenger should entail some deep secret which could feed their imaginations. In other words, they expected the unusual in such a way as attracted legend. Was he not a messenger sent from the heavens to the earth? How come, then, that he is just a simple ordinary person with no puzzling secrets surrounding him? He is no different from anyone else, no different from the multitude to be found everywhere.

Such thinking is certainly naive. Secrets and enigmas are not essential qualities for prophethood and divine messages; not in this childish way of thinking. There is indeed a great secret involved, but it is epitomized in the plain fact that an ordinary person is given the ability to receive revelations from on high once God has chosen him for that task. This is something of far greater wonder than sending an angel as

God's messenger, as unbelievers suggest.

The divine message is a code of living for a human community. The messenger's life represents a practical example of how this code is implemented. It is given as a model for people to follow. Since they are human, the messenger showing them this example must be human like them so that he sets the sort of example they can emulate.

Therefore, the Prophet's life was held open before his followers. The Qur'ān records the main features of his life in their minute detail, so as to make it clear and available for future generations. These details include aspects of his home and personal life, and even, at times, his thoughts and feelings. In this way, even future generations would recognize the man behind the Prophet's personality.

Yet it was this simple and clear fact that invited people's objections. In this *sūrah,* those who lived in the city said to their three messengers: "*You are nothing but mortals like ourselves,*" which meant that they were not truly messengers from God. They also said: "*The Lord of Grace has never revealed anything,*" of what you claim. They further added: "*You do nothing but lie,*" when you claim to be messengers from God.

Certain that they said nothing but the truth, and knowing the remit of the mission assigned to them, the messengers replied: "*Our Lord knows that we have indeed been sent to you. Our only duty is to clearly deliver the message [entrusted to us].*" (Verses 16-17) It is sufficient that God knows. The task assigned to God's messengers is to deliver their message, and they did just that. People are then free to choose what they wish for themselves, and what burden their choices represent. Once the messengers have delivered their message, the matter is left to God to determine.

However, those who persist in denying the truth do not take matters in such a simple and easy way. They cannot tolerate the advocates of faith's presence. They resort to rough tactics in rejecting sound argument. The point is that falsehood is impatient, aggressive: "*Said [the others]: We augur evil from you. Unless you desist, we will surely stone you and inflict on you a painful suffering.*" (Verse 18) We view your call with gloom, expecting it to bring evil upon us. Unless you stop, we will no longer tolerate you: *'we will surely stone you and inflict on you a painful suffering.'* Thus falsehood declares its intentions, threatening those advocating divine guidance and resorting to heavy handed tactics in answering the quiet word of truth.

However, the task assigned to God's messengers requires them to proceed along their way: "*[The messengers] replied: The evil you forebode is within yourselves.*" (Verse 19) Forebodings of evil as a result of a message being delivered or a face being encountered is nothing but ignorant superstition. The messengers tell them so, and make clear to them that their share of good or evil comes from within themselves. In other words it relates to their actions and intentions. It is up to them to increase their

share of goodness or evil. What God wills for people comes from within themselves and from their own choices and actions. This is the truth based on a firm foundation. To associate bad omens with faces, places or words is superstitious nonsense.

The messengers also said to them: *"[Why do you take this as an evil omen] when you are only being reminded of the truth?"* (Verse 19) Would you stone us and torture us only because we remind you of the truth? Is this how you reward reminders? *"Truly, you are going too far."* (Verse 19) You certainly exceed the limits of judgement if you reward a mere reminder with threats and punishment, and requite advocacy of the truth with stoning and torture.

Welcome Support

Such was the response of hearts that would not open to God's message. It is such people that were mentioned at the outset of the *sūrah.* The other type, who follow the reminder and fear God despite their inability to see Him, also have here a behavioural example to emulate:

> *Then a man came from the farthest end of the city at speed. He said: My people! Follow these messengers. Follow those who ask you for no reward, and are themselves rightly guided. Why should I not worship the One who has brought me into being? It is to Him that you will all return. Should I worship other deities beside Him? If the Lord of Grace should will that harm befall me, their intercession will avail me nothing, nor will they save me. Indeed, I should clearly be in error: I do believe in the Lord of you all; so listen to me.' (Verses 20-25)*

This is the response of sound human nature to the straightforward message of the truth: it reflects sincerity, simplicity, warmth and correct understanding. It shows us a man giving a positive response to the message, once he has recognized the elements of truth and sound logic in it. He points out these elements to his people as he addresses them. When he felt the truth of faith in his heart, he could not stay quiet or sit at home caring nothing while the truth was being rebuffed and falsehood upheld all around him. Instead he actively advocated the truth among his people, among those who were threatening the messengers with severe punishment. He travelled from the furthest end of the city to fulfil his duty, to call on his people to espouse the truth and to stop their opposition to it and aggression against God's messengers.

It is apparent that the man did not command a position of honour, power or influence among his people. He was an ordinary person motivated by faith to travel from one end of the city to the other to make his stand clear. *"He said: My people! Follow these messengers. Follow those who ask you for no reward, and are themselves rightly*

guided." (Verses 20-21) Anyone who advocates such a message, seeking no gain or reward, must be honest and sincere. What else could motivate him to undertake such trouble, enduring such opposition, unless he was required to do so by God? Why would he bear such a burden, confronting people with a faith that is unfamiliar to them, exposing himself in the process to threats, ridicule and persecution when he stood to make no gain nor earn any benefit?

"*Follow those who ask you for no reward, and are themselves rightly guided."* (Verse 21) That they are guided aright is obvious: they advocate belief in the One God, following a clear system, and a faith that is free of ambiguity and superstition. Their way is clearly straight.

The man then speaks about himself, outlining the reasons that motivated him to believe, and appealing to sound human nature: *"Why should I not worship the One who has brought me into being? It is to Him that you will all return. Should I worship other deities beside Him? If the Lord of Grace should will that harm befall me, their intercession will avail me nothing, nor will they save me. Indeed, I should clearly be in error."* (Verses 22-24) The question is posed by sound human nature which feels the presence of its Creator and the source of its existence: *"Why should I not worship the One who has brought me into being?"* Why would I deviate from this natural way which is the first to present itself to human nature? Needless to say, man is by nature attracted to his Creator and only deviates from Him under the pressure of some outside element. To turn to the Creator is the right and appropriate course, requiring no alien element or a pull from outside. The man here strongly feels this and states it clearly and simply.

The man also feels by nature that a created being must in the end return to its Creator, in the same natural law that brings everything horning to its originator: *"It is to Him that you will all return."* He wonders why he should not worship his Creator when he is bound to return to Him, as will we all. It is He who creates, and it is He who should he worshipped.

The man then looks at the opposite way, which is contrary to sound nature, only to find that it is nothing but manifest error: "*Should I worship other deities beside Him? If the Lord of Grace should will that harm befall me, their intercession will avail me nothing, nor will they save me."* (Verse 23) Can anyone be in greater error than the one who abandons the way of sound nature which requires that a created being worship its Creator? Why would anyone choose to worship someone or something else unnecessarily? Indeed, the one who turns his back on the Creator, resorting instead to weak deities that cannot protect him, has gone far into error: "*Indeed, I should clearly be in error."* (Verse 24)

Now that the man has stated his case, speaking for sound human nature that is aware of the truth, he declares his own final decision, confronting his people who

had threatened God's messengers. The voice of sound nature in his heart was clearer and stronger than any threat: *"I do believe in the Lord of you all; so listen to me."* (Verse 25) He wants them to witness his stand on the side of truth, implying that they too should follow his suit and declare themselves believers.

Killing an Innocent Man

The drift of the story suggests that the unbelievers then killed the man. The *sūrah,* however, does not mention this clearly. Instead, it lets the curtain drop to cover this city, its people and their preoccupations. When the curtain rises again we see the martyr who spoke out clearly and loudly for the truth, confronting those in power. We see him in the next world and see the honour granted him by God, as fits a brave believer who does not hesitate to stand up for the truth: *"He was told: Enter paradise. He said: Would that my people knew how* my *Lord has forgiven me my sins, and has placed me among the highly honoured!"* (Verses 26-27)

Thus this present life is connected to the life to come: death is merely a transfer from this transitory world to the one that is everlasting. It is but a step that takes a believer from the narrowness of the earth to the expanse of heavens, from the tyranny of falsehood to the security of the truth, and from the darkness of ignorance to the light of certainty. When the man sees what God has in store for him in heaven, he good- naturedly remembers his people, wishing that they could see the happiness and honour God has granted him so that they would know and accept the truth.

Such is the reward of faith. As for tyranny, it is too weak to require that God should send angels to destroy it: *"After that, We did not send an army from heaven against his people; nor do We send any. Nothing was needed but one single blast, and they fell down lifeless."* (Verses 2829) The *sūrah* does not speak in detail about how these people were destroyed. They are too insignificant to deserve such mention. They needed no more than one blast and no further trace of life was to be seen from them.

2
Signs Galore

يَـٰحَسۡرَةً عَلَى ٱلۡعِبَادِۚ مَا يَأۡتِيهِم مِّن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Alas for mankind! Whenever a messenger comes to them, they level ridicule on him. (30)

أَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ كَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا قَبۡلَهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡقُرُونِ أَنَّهُمۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡ لَا يَرۡجِعُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Are they not aware of how many a generation We have destroyed before them, and that they [who have perished] will never return to them? (31)

وَإِن كُلٌّ لَّمَّا جَمِيعٌ لَّدَيۡنَا مُحۡضَرُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Yet, they all will be brought before Us. (32)

وَءَايَةٌ لَّهُمُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ ٱلۡمَيۡتَةُ أَحۡيَيۡنَـٰهَا وَأَخۡرَجۡنَا مِنۡهَا حَبًّا فَمِنۡهُ يَأۡكُلُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

There is a sign for them in the lifeless earth: We give it life and produce out of it grain for them to eat. (33)

وَجَعَلۡنَا فِيهَا جَنَّـٰتٍ مِّن نَّخِيلٍ وَأَعۡنَـٰبٍ وَفَجَّرۡنَا فِيهَا مِنَ ٱلۡعُيُونِ ﴿٣٤﴾

We place in it gardens of date palms and grapes, and cause springs to gush out of it, (34)

لِيَأۡكُلُواْ مِن ثَمَرِهِۦ وَمَا عَمِلَتۡهُ أَيۡدِيهِمۡۖ أَفَلَا يَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

so that they may eat of its fruit. It was not their own hands that made all this. Will they, then, not give thanks? (35)

سُبۡحَـٰنَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلۡأَزۡوَٰجَ كُلَّهَا مِمَّا تُنۢبِتُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ وَمِنۡ أَنفُسِهِمۡ وَمِمَّا لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Limitless in His glory is He who created all things in pairs: whatever the earth produces, their own human kind and other creatures of which

they have no knowledge. (36)

وَءَايَةٌ لَّهُمُ ٱلَّيۡلُ نَسۡلَخُ مِنۡهُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فَإِذَا هُم مُّظۡلِمُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Another sign for them is the night: We strip the daylight from it, and they are plunged in darkness. (37)

وَٱلشَّمۡسُ تَجۡرِي لِمُسۡتَقَرّٖ لَّهَاۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَقۡدِيرُ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلۡعَلِيمِ ﴿٣٨﴾

The sun also runs its set course: that is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (38)

وَٱلۡقَمَرَ قَدَّرۡنَٰهُ مَنَازِلَ حَتَّىٰ عَادَ كَٱلۡعُرۡجُونِ ٱلۡقَدِيمِ ﴿٣٩﴾

And for the moon We have determined phases until it finally becomes like an old date stalk. (39)

لَا ٱلشَّمۡسُ يَنۢبَغِي لَهَآ أَن تُدۡرِكَ ٱلۡقَمَرَ وَلَا ٱلَّيۡلُ سَابِقُ ٱلنَّهَارِۚ وَكُلّٞ فِي فَلَكٖ يَسۡبَحُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Neither the sun can overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day. Each floats in its own orbit. (40)

وَءَايَةٞ لَّهُمۡ أَنَّا حَمَلۡنَا ذُرِّيَّتَهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡفُلۡكِ ٱلۡمَشۡحُونِ ﴿٤١﴾

And yet another sign for them is that We carry their offspring in laden ships, (41)

وَخَلَقۡنَا لَهُم مِّن مِّثۡلِهِۦ مَا يَرۡكَبُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

and that We create things of similar kind for them to ride in. (42)

وَإِن نَّشَأۡ نُغۡرِقۡهُمۡ فَلَا صَرِيخَ لَهُمۡ وَلَا هُمۡ يُنقَذُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

If such be Our will, We may cause them to drown, with none to respond to their cries for help, and then they cannot be saved, (43)

إِلَّا رَحۡمَةٗ مِّنَّا وَمَتَٰعًا إِلَىٰ حِينٖ ﴿٤٤﴾

unless it be by an act of mercy from Us, leaving them to enjoy life for a while. (44)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّقُواْ مَا بَيۡنَ أَيۡدِيكُمۡ وَمَا خَلۡفَكُمۡ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَمَا تَأۡتِيهِم مِّنۡ ءَايَةٖ مِّنۡ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ إِلَّا كَانُواْ عَنۡهَا مُعۡرِضِينَ ٤٦

When they are told: 'Beware of that which lies before you and behind you, so that you may be graced with His mercy,' [they pay no heed]. (45)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ أَنفِقُواْ مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ أَنُطۡعِمُ مَن لَّوۡ يَشَآءُ ٱللَّهُ أَطۡعَمَهُۥٓ إِنۡ أَنتُمۡ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ٤٧

Every single sign that comes to them from their Lord do they ignore. (46)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلۡوَعۡدُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٤٨

And when they are told: 'Give [in charity] out of what God has provided for you,' the unbelievers say to those who believe: Are we to feed those whom God could have fed, had He so willed? Clearly, you are lost in error.' (47)

مَا يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا صَيۡحَةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗ تَأۡخُذُهُمۡ وَهُمۡ يَخِصِّمُونَ ٤٩

They also ask: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (48)

فَلَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ تَوۡصِيَةٗ وَلَآ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهِمۡ يَرۡجِعُونَ ٥٠

All they are waiting for is a single blast that will overtake them while they are still disputing. (49)

وَنُفِخَ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَإِذَا هُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَجۡدَاثِ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمۡ يَنسِلُونَ ٥١

No time will they have to make bequests, nor will they return to their own people. (50)

قَالُواْ يَٰوَيۡلَنَا مَنۢ بَعَثَنَا مِن مَّرۡقَدِنَاۜ هَٰذَا مَا وَعَدَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ وَصَدَقَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلُونَ ٥٢

The Trumpet will be sounded, and out of their graves they will rise and hasten to their Lord. (51)

إِن كَانَتۡ إِلَّا صَيۡحَةٗ وَٰحِدَةٗ فَإِذَا هُمۡ جَمِيعٞ لَّدَيۡنَا مُحۡضَرُونَ ٥٣

They will say: 'Woe betide us! Who has roused us from our resting place? This is what the Lord of Grace had promised. The messengers told the

truth.' (52)

فَٱلۡيَوۡمَ لَا تُظۡلَمُ نَفۡسٞ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا تُجۡزَوۡنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٥٤

It takes nothing but one single blast, and they will all have been brought before Us. (53)

إِنَّ أَصۡحَٰبَ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ فِي شُغُلٖ فَٰكِهُونَ ٥٥

Today, no one shall be wronged in the least: you will be requited for nothing other than that which you did in life. (54)

هُمۡ وَأَزۡوَٰجُهُمۡ فِي ظِلَٰلٍ عَلَى ٱلۡأَرَآئِكِ مُتَّكِـُٔونَ ٥٦

Those who are destined for paradise are today happily occupied. (55)

لَهُمۡ فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٞ وَلَهُم مَّا يَدَّعُونَ ٥٧

سَلَٰمٞ قَوۡلٗا مِّن رَّبّٖ رَّحِيمٖ ٥٨

Together with their spouses, they will be in shady groves seated on soft couches. (56)

وَٱمۡتَٰزُواْ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ أَيُّهَا ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ٥٩

There they have fruit and whatever they ask for: (57)

۞ أَلَمۡ أَعۡهَدۡ إِلَيۡكُمۡ يَٰبَنِيٓ ءَادَمَ أَن لَّا تَعۡبُدُواْ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنَۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمۡ عَدُوّٞ مُّبِينٞ ٦٠

peace and fulfilment through the word of the Lord of mercy. (58)

But stand aside today, you guilty ones! (59)

وَأَنِ ٱعۡبُدُونِيۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٞ مُّسۡتَقِيمٞ ٦١

Children of Adam! Did I not enjoin on you that you should not worship Satan, as he is your open foe, (60)

وَلَقَدۡ أَضَلَّ مِنكُمۡ جِبِلّٗا كَثِيرًاۖ أَفَلَمۡ تَكُونُواْ تَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٢

and that you should worship Me alone? This is the straight path. (61)

هَٰذِهِۦ جَهَنَّمُ ٱلَّتِي كُنتُمۡ تُوعَدُونَ ٦٣

ٱصۡلَوۡهَا ٱلۡيَوۡمَ بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَكۡفُرُونَ ٦٤

He had already led astray a great many of you. Could you not, then, use your reason? (62)

ٱلۡيَوۡمَ نَخۡتِمُ عَلَىٰٓ أَفۡوَٰهِهِمۡ وَتُكَلِّمُنَآ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ وَتَشۡهَدُ أَرۡجُلُهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ

This, then, is the hell that you were repeatedly

يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَطَمَسْنَا عَلَىٰٓ أَعْيُنِهِمْ فَٱسْتَبَقُوا۟ ٱلصِّرَٰطَ فَأَنَّىٰ يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَمَسَخْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِهِمْ فَمَا ٱسْتَطَٰعُوا۟ مُضِيًّا وَلَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

وَمَن نُّعَمِّرْهُ نُنَكِّسْهُ فِى ٱلْخَلْقِ ۖ أَفَلَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

warned against: (63)

endure it today for your persistent rejection [of the truth].) (64)

On that day We shall set a seal on their mouths, but their hands will speak to Us, and their feet will bear witness to whatever they have done. (65)

Had it been Our will, We could have blotted their eyes. They would have striven to find the way, but how could they have seen it? (66)

And had it been Our will, We could have paralysed them, right in their places, so that they could not move forward or backward. (67)

If We grant long life to a human being, We also cause him to decline in his powers. Will they not use their reason? (68)

Overview

The first passage spoke about the idolaters who opposed the message of Islam and cited the case of the people of the township who rejected their three messengers and how it took no more than one blast for them to fall down lifeless. In the present passage the *sūrah* speaks generally of all people who oppose every divine religion. It shows mankind straying in error across the generations. It calls with sorrow on all people to take heed of what happened to earlier communities who passed before them and who will not return until the Day of Resurrection, when "*they all will be brought before Us.*" (Verse 32)

The *sūrah* then presents a number of universal signs which people see constantly without paying any attention to the message they impart. These signs are within themselves and all around them, while others have passed into history, yet still they pay no heed, and when they are reminded, they choose not to remember: "*Every single sign that comes to them from their Lord do they ignore.*" (Verse 46) Indeed, they hasten their own punishment, believing that it will never happen: "*They also ask:*

When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?" (Verse 48)

The passage also presents a long scene from the Day of Judgement, showing the fate that they hasten. This is done in such a way that it appears to happen before their very eyes.

A Sorrowful Condition

> *Alas for mankind! Whenever a messenger comes to them, they level ridicule on him. Are they not aware of how many a generation We have destroyed before them, and that they [who have perished] will never return to them? Yet, they all will be brought before Us. (Verses 30-32)*

The first phrase expresses reaction to a sorrowful situation. This situation cannot be changed though sorrow and pain about it can be expressed. God Almighty does not experience such a feeling Himself, but He states that the situation these people are in deserves such reaction by others. Theirs is a depressing condition that leads to great misery.

"Alas for mankind!" They are offered a chance to save themselves but they turn away. This even though they see how earlier communities perished, yet they benefit nothing by the lessons they present. God opens wide the doors of His mercy to them, time after time, as He sends them messengers, but they ignore His mercy and behave with insolence and ill manners: *"Whenever a messenger comes to them, they level ridicule on him. Are they not aware of how many a generation We have destroyed before them, and that they [who have perished] will never return to them?"* (Verses 30-31) The fact that earlier communities, over countless generations, perished should provide a clear lesson to anyone who reflects. People, however, do not pay heed, even though they realize that they are going to meet the same end. What could invite greater sorrow? An animal shudders to see its fellow animal perish, and it will inevitably try to avoid the same fate. How come that man sees so many communities suffering and meeting the same end, and yet he continues to follow in their footsteps? Arrogance blinds him to the result which he will inevitably reach.

While those who had already gone will not return to their successors, they will not be ignored or left without reckoning. They will all face that at the proper time: *"Yet, they all will be brought before Us."* (Verse 32)

Only Look Around

> *There is a sign for them in the lifeless earth: We give it life and produce out of it grain for them to eat. We place in it gardens of date palms and grapes, and cause springs to*

> *gush out of it, so that they may eat of its fruit. It was not their own hands that made all this. Will they, then, not give thanks? Limitless in His glory is He who created all things in pairs: whatever the earth produces, their own human kind and other creatures of which they have no knowledge. (Verses 33-36)*

Everything around them in the universe speaks to them about God, giving evidence of His presence. They only need to look at the land in front of them and how they see it dead, lifeless, lacking a drop of water. Then they see it quicken, producing grain and adorned with gardens replete with dates and grapes. Springs of water gush through it; and in no time, it is full of life.

Life is a miracle which no man can produce. It is God's hand that produces miracles, initiating life in what has been dead. The sight of growing plants, flowering gardens and ripening fruit should open people's eyes and hearts to appreciate the wonderful work engendered by God's hand. It splits the earth to allow the shoot to appear, longing for freedom and light, gives vigour to the stem which is eager to enjoy sunlight, loads the branches with leaves and fruit, opens up flowers and gets the fruit ready for picking, "*so that they may eat of its fruit. It was not their own hands that made all this.*" (Verse 35) It was God's dextrous hand that enabled them to achieve all this; it was He who made the plants grow and yield their harvest: *"Will they, then, not give thanks?"* (Verse 35)

Having given them this gentle and inspiring touch, the *sūrah* then turns away from them a little to glorify God who gave them the flourishing gardens, making all plants in pairs, male and female, like men and women and countless other species known only to God: "*Limitless in His glory is He who created all things in pairs: whatever the earth produces, their own human kind and other creatures of which they have no knowledge.*" (Verse 36)

With this glorification of God, voiced at exactly the right place and time, a great fact of the universe is brought to the fore; that is, the oneness of creation, the rule that applies to it and the way it is made. God has created all living things in pairs, and this applies to plants in the same way as it applies to man, and everything else: *'and other creatures of which they have no knowledge.'* This unity points to the fact that the Creator is one. It is He who put in place the oneness of creation, despite the great varieties of shape, size, kind, race, features, etc. in all these creatures which are known only to Him. This rule of creating things in pairs may apply to everything in the universe, including inanimate objects, but this is knowledge that rests with God alone. It has now, for example, been established that the atom, which is the smallest unit of matter we know includes a pair of electric charges, positive and negative. Moreover, thousands of pairs of stars have been observed: each pair of stars move together in the same orbit, as if they are playing the same tune.

That was the sign given by the dead land quickening to produce life. We now look at the sign presented by the skies and the phenomena people see with their own eyes as God's hand produces miracles:

> *Another sign for them is the night: We strip the daylight from it, and they are plunged in darkness. The sun also runs its set course: that is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. And for the moon We have determined phases until it finally becomes like an old date stalk. Neither the sun can overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day. Each floats in its own orbit. (Verses 37-40)*

When the night comes, light disappears and darkness spreads: this is something everyone sees every day in every corner of the world, except for polar areas. Despite its daily occurrence, it is a remarkable sign that deserves contemplation. The Qur'ānic description here is unique as it shows the day intertwined with the night and then God strips the day off the night to let darkness spread. We may perhaps further appreciate the unique way the Qur'ān uses to express this image when we remember how it actually happens. As the earth rotates facing the sun, every spot of it actually comes face to face with the sun when the day spreads over it. When the rotation of the earth changes and that spot no longer faces the sun, the day is stripped off it so as to plunge it into darkness. The same thing happens over every little part of the earth in progression, as if the light of day is pulled away or stripped to allow darkness to replace it. Thus the wording here accurately describes the reality.

"*The sun also runs its set course.*" (Verse 38) It was generally believed that the sun stays in its position but turns around its axis, but it has recently been confirmed that it moves in a single direction in the great universal space, and astronomers have calculated the speed of its movement as being 12 miles per second. God Almighty, who knows its movement and destination, says that it moves along its course to a particular destination which is known only to Him. He alone knows when and what this is.

When we remember that the sun is around a million times bigger than the earth we live on and imagine this great mass running its set course in space, unsupported, we appreciate what power controls and conducts the affairs of the universe and the sort of might and knowledge that power commands: "*that is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 38)

"*And for the moon We have determined phases until it finally becomes like an old date stalk.*" (Verse 39) People see the moon in these phases, as it is born a thin crescent then grows every day until it takes its shape as a full moon before it begins to decrease until it looks like an old date stalk. If you observe the moon night after night, you will appreciate this remarkable way of expression, particularly the use of

the word *'old* In the early and final nights of its cycle, the moon has a crescent shape, but whereas it reflects freshness and vigour in the early days, it rises in the latter part of its cycle as if it is weighed down by a heavy burden and looks worried and pale; the same paleness as an old date stalk. Hence, the inspiring Qur'ānic description.

Observing the moon night after night gives us fresh, rich and profound feelings. Furthermore, we perceive that it is all the work of the able hand that combines beauty with majesty while operating an accurate celestial system. We feel all this whether we know why the moon has such phases or not: it is sufficient to observe the moon for our hearts to overflow with feelings and for our minds to be deep in reflection.

The *sūrah* then makes it clear that the system regulating all these great celestial bodies is most accurate, and that this controls its resulting phenomena: *"Neither the sun can overtake the moon, nor can the night outrun the day. Each floats in its own orbit."* (Verse 40) Indeed every planet and star has its own orbit which it follows accurately. Stars and planets are so far apart that the distances separating them are huge. Our planet earth is approximately 93 million miles away from the sun, while the moon is around 240,000 miles away from us. Hardly imaginable as these distances are, they are nothing compared to the distance between our solar system and the nearest star to us outside it, which is estimated to be four light years. We should remember that light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles per second.

God, the Creator, willed that such distances should separate the orbits of stars and planets, and He planned the universe according to this design in order to prevent any collision, until a time He has set and that is known only to Him. Therefore, the sun will not overtake the moon, and the night cannot outrun the day, because the cycle of day and night never fails.

"Each floats in its own orbit." (Verse 40) The movement of all these great bodies in space is similar to the movement of ships and boats in the sea. Huge as these bodies are, they are no more than little spots floating on the surface of the sea. Compare man to all this, and think of the millions of millions of stars and planets floating in space!

> *And yet another sign for them is that We carry their offspring in laden ships, and that We create things of similar kind for them to ride in. If such be Our will, We may cause them to drown, with none to respond to their cries for help, and then they cannot be saved, unless it be by an act of mercy from Us, leaving them to enjoy life for a while. (Verses 41-44)*

There is a clear analogy between the stars and planets floating in their orbits and ships floating on water carrying human passengers. The two types are not dissimilar

in appearance or movement. Moreover, it is only through God's will and design that these two types of floating take place while He controls the entire universe ensuring the safety of all. At the same time, both are signs that we see but hardly ever contemplate. The floating of laden ships is closer to us and easier to reflect upon, if only we would open our hearts.

In the original Arabic text, the term '*laden ships*' could be read to mean 'the laden ark', which makes it a reference to Noah's ark in which Adam's offspring was carried. God then enabled mankind to make ships. In both cases, the floating was made possible by God's will, power and the laws He has set in operation and the nature of boats, water, wind, steam, and other types of energy, which combine to allow ships to float on water. All these are parts of God's creation.

"If such be Our will, We may cause them to drown, with none to respond to their cries for help, and then they cannot be saved, unless it be by an act of mercy from Us, leaving them to enjoy life for a while." (Verses 43-44) Large, heavy and carefully built as it may be, a ship in water is like a feather in the air: it can disappear and perish in a moment, unless it is protected by God's grace. People who have crossed oceans, whether in a boat with sails or in a large vessel, appreciate the danger represented by the sea and the little protection there is, should a storm ensue. They recognize that only God's grace provides protection in the midst of storms and currents that run over the sea, which is after all a creature controlled only by God's caring hand. But all this applies '*for a while,*' only until the time God has set arrives.

What Opens Sealed Hearts

Clear and inspiring as these signs are, people continue to pay little heed. Their hearts remain closed and they persist in ridicule and denial, hastening the end against which God's messengers have warned them:

> *When they are told: 'Beware of that which lies before you and behind you, so that you may be graced with His mercy,' [they pay no heed]. Every single sign that comes to them from their Lord do they ignore. And when they are told: 'Give [in charity] out of what God has provided for you,' the unbelievers say to those who believe: Are we to feed those whom God could have fed, had He so willed? Clearly, you are lost in error.' They also ask: 'When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (Verses 45-48)*

Although all these signs are enough to cause an open heart to shudder and bring it in line with the universe, the unbelievers will not see them for what they are, and even if they do see them, they still do not reflect on them. Because His grace is endless, God does not leave them to themselves. He sends them messengers to warn

them and to call them to their Lord, the Creator of the universe. The messengers' role is to alert people's hearts so that they can see why they should be God- fearing, and to warn them against incurring God's displeasure, pointing out its causes and teaching them how to avoid it. Signs are constantly given them in their lives, time after time, in addition to the signs that are available in the universe around them, but they choose to remain blind: *"When they are told: Beware of that which lies before you and behind you, so that you may be graced with His mercy, [they pay no heed]. Every single sign that comes to them from their Lord do they ignore."* (Verses 45-46) If they are urged to be charitable and to give to the poor a portion of what God has provided for them, they say in ridicule: *"Are we to feed those whom God could have fed, had He so willed?"* (Verse 47) They would even be impolite in their reply to those calling on them to be charitable, saying: *"Clearly, you are lost in error."* (Verse 47)

Viewing the matter in such a mechanical way betrays their ignorance of the law God has set for human life. It is God who feeds and provides for All the provisions that people receive on earth are created by Him. They cannot create any of that; indeed, they cannot create anything whatsoever. It is God's will that people should have needs which they cannot attain to without hard work, such as planting the earth, extracting its raw material to manufacture things, transporting its produce from place to place, offering such produce in return for other products or for money, etc. It is also His will that people differ in their talents and abilities to ensure that everything needed to fulfil man's task of building human life on earth is available. The accomplishment of this task not only needs talents and abilities that earn money and produce wealth; it also requires others that can meet different human needs, without earning money. This makes for a complex human society, in which people have different lots in a bustling world, and across generations. However, the resulting differences of the means available to different people does not lead to the ruination of life and society. In fact it is a by-product of life's movement.

Therefore, Islam addresses the individual, requiring those who have plenty to relinquish a portion of their money, which is given to the poor to provide for their food and other needs. By doing so, Islam reforms a great many people, rich and poor alike. This portion is *zakāt,* which, by definition, implies purification. Islam makes it one of its acts of worship, and uses it to establish cordial and caring relations between the rich and the poor in the unique society it establishes.

Therefore, when those people, unable to see God's wisdom, say, "*are we to feed those whom God could have fed, had He so willed?"* and when they speak arrogantly to those who ask them to be charitable, saying, "*clearly, you are lost in error,"* they betray their own ignorance. They are blind to the nature of God's law, life's movement and the reasons why God gave different talents and abilities to different people, with the result that they have different means.

Islam puts in place a system that ensures fair opportunities for everyone. It then allows varied human activities, which are necessary for the fulfilment of man's role on earth, to run their course. Furthermore, it deals with any negative side effects.

Finally the *sūrah* mentions their expressed doubts about God's promise and their ridicule of the warnings given them: "*They also ask: When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?*" (Verse 48) God's promise is not brought forward or delayed because of people's pleas. With God everything has its definite measure; everything takes place at its appointed time and place, in accordance with His infinite wisdom. It is He who conducts the universe and all that happens in it according to a perfect system. The answer to this rude question is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Judgement, showing them what happens then, but not its timing.

Mercy: the Essential Quality

> *All they are waiting for is a single blast that will overtake them while they are still disputing. No time will they have to make bequests, nor will they return to their own people. The Trumpet will be sounded, and out of their graves they will rise and hasten to their Lord. They will say: 'Woe betide us! Who has roused us from our resting place? This is what the Lord of Grace had promised. The messengers told the truth.' It takes nothing but one single blast, and they will all have been brought before Us. (Verses 49-53)*

Here we see the answer to the question about the time of resurrection: it comes in the form of a quick image, a single blast that ends all life. "*All they are waiting for is a single blast that will overtake them while they are still disputing. No time will they have to make bequests, nor will they return to their own people.*" (Verses 4950) It takes them suddenly, in a moment, as they argue and dispute going about their day-to-day lives, expecting nothing of the sort. Then it is all over. All perish in the situation and the condition they are in. They have no chance to make a will or to arrange something for loved ones who may stay behind. No one can return to his family to say a word to them. In fact every single person faces the same end, with all life finished.

The Trumpet is then sounded and they all rise from their graves, moving hurriedly, shocked, in fear. The question on everyone's lips is: "*Who has roused us from our resting place?*" (Verse 52) As the shock begins to wear off, it is replaced by a growing realization: "*This is what the Lord of Grace had promised. The messengers told the truth.*" (Verse 52) Then comes the final blast and all those bewildered individuals, moving hurriedly and aimlessly, take their positions: "*It takes nothing but one single blast, and they will all have been brought before Us.*" (Verse 53) Only a short moment and all are stationed in place, ranged in rows as if they were in a parade. The supreme decree explaining the nature of the moment as well as the forthcoming reckoning

and reward is announced to all: "*Today, no one shall be wronged in the least: you will be requited for nothing other than that which you did in life.*" (Verse 54) The quick succession of these three images forms a complete and coherent answer to those who have been voicing doubts about the Day of Resurrection.

The *sūrah* does not dwell on how the believers face the reckoning. Instead, it moves quickly on to show their happy end:

> *Those who are destined for paradise are today happily occupied. Together with their spouses, they will be in shady groves seated on soft couches. There they have fruit and whatever they ask for: peace and fulfilment through the word of the Lord of mercy. (Verses 55-58)*

They are occupied with the comforts available to them, happy, relaxed, enjoying the fruits served to them and the shady groves providing a cool breeze. They are joined by their spouses in perfect enjoyment. Whatever they need is immediately made available to them. Above all this, they are honoured with a greeting of peace from none other than their merciful Lord.

By contrast the *sūrah* dwells on the scene of reckoning faced by the others. It is shown with all that it involves of reproach and blame:

> *But stand aside today, you guilty ones! Children of Adam! Did I not enjoin on you that you should not worship Satan, as he is your open foe, and that you should worship Me alone? This is the straight path. He had already led astray a great many of you. Could you not, then, use your reason? This, then, is the hell that you were repeatedly warned against: endure it today for your persistent rejection [of the truth]. (Verses 59-64)*

Contempt marks the treatment they receive. They are first told to stand aside, away from the believers. They are then addressed as '*Children of Adam,*' which is an address implying reproach: "*Children of Adam! Did 1 not enjoin on you that you should not worship Satan, as he is your open foe.*" (Verse 60) It was Satan who caused the expulsion of their father, Adam, from heaven. He has declared his permanent hostility to them, yet they continue to worship him.

They were also enjoined to do something that was certain to set them on a straight path, leading to God's pleasure and a happy end in the life to come: "*You should worship Me alone. This is the straight path.*" (Verse 61) They are reminded that this enemy led astray many generations. Hence the rhetorical question: "*Could you not, then, use your reason?*" (Verse 62) At the end of this very hard and humiliating position, the dreaded sentence is passed, given in overtones of reproach and derision: "*This, then, is the hell that you were repeatedly warned against: endure it today for*

your persistent rejection [of the truth]." (Verses 63-64)

However, the scene does not end here. It moves on to provide a most singular image: "*On that day We shall set a seal on their mouths, but their hands will speak to Us, and their feet will bear witness to whatever they have done.*" (Verse 65) Thus, they let each other down; their own bodies give witness against them; their personalities are torn apart with each part claiming that the other is lying. Each organ in their bodies returns to their Lord separately, in full submission to Him. This is a terrible scene, one that we can hardly contemplate.

The scene ends with the unbelievers in that state of tied tongues, speaking hands and legs giving witness. This is totally different from what they knew of their nature, and different from what they were expecting. Had God willed, He could have put them in a totally different situation, making them endure whatever hardship He wished to impose on them. The *sūrah* gives us here two examples of such hardships, making it clear that God could impose the same on anyone:

> *Had it been Our will, We could have blotted their eyes. They would have striven to find the way, but how could they have seen it? And had it been Our will, We could have paralysed them, right in their places, so that they could not move forward or backward. (Verses 66-67)*

These two examples combine ridicule with contempt: the former answers those who used to pour ridicule on the believers and the divine message, and the latter answers those who were contemptuous when addressed by the message. It was they who used to ask about the time when the promise of the hereafter would be fulfilled, implying that they did not believe it would ever come about. In the first example we see them blind, yet despite their blindness, they rush to find a way, pushing one another aside and in their haste many of them fall down. How could they see? In the second example, they are frozen like statues unable to move an inch. In both examples they appear like toys, inviting ridicule after they were the ones to pour ridicule on the believers and their faith.

All this takes place when the promise they used to hasten becomes due. Should they be left to live long on earth, they will end up in a miserable situation, when they will prefer for the promise to be hastened. They attain to old age with all its weaknesses, and they suffer dementia and retardation in feeling and thought. "*If We grant long life to a human being, We also cause him to decline in his powers. Will they not use their reason?*" (Verse 68)

Old age is a second childhood, but without a child's sweet innocence. An aged person moves backward, forgetting what he has learnt, losing physical and mental powers, unable to endure much, until he is no more than a child. However, a child is

always met with a smile when it does something silly. An aged person receives no support, unless it comes from a sense of pity and duty. He is also ridiculed whenever he betrays an element of childishness or stupidity.

Both fates await those who persist in rejecting the truth. They are the ones that deprive themselves of the blessings of faith.

3
What Prevents Resurrection?

وَمَا عَلَّمْنَٰهُ ٱلشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنۢبَغِى لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْءَانٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٩﴾

We have not taught the Prophet poetry; nor is it fitting for him [to be a poet]. This is but a reminder and a Qur'ān making all things clear, (69)

لِّيُنذِرَ مَن كَانَ حَيًّا وَيَحِقَّ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَى ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٧٠﴾

to warn everyone who is alive, and that the word of God be proved against the unbelievers. (70)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا خَلَقْنَا لَهُم مِّمَّا عَمِلَتْ أَيْدِينَآ أَنْعَٰمًا فَهُمْ لَهَا مَٰلِكُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

Are they not aware that, among all the things Our hands have made, We have created for them cattle which they control? (71)

وَذَلَّلْنَٰهَا لَهُمْ فَمِنْهَا رَكُوبُهُمْ وَمِنْهَا يَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We have subjected these to them, so that some of them they use for riding and of some they may eat, (72)

وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مَنَٰفِعُ وَمَشَارِبُ ۖ أَفَلَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

and they have other benefits from them, and [milk] to drink. Will they not give thanks? (73)

وَٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ءَالِهَةً لَّعَلَّهُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

Yet they have taken to worship deities other than God, hoping for [their) support. (74)

لَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ نَصۡرَهُمۡ وَهُمۡ لَهُمۡ جُندٞ مُّحۡضَرُونَ ٧٥

They are unable to support them; yet their worshippers stand like warriors to defend them. (75)

فَلَا يَحۡزُنكَ قَوۡلُهُمۡۘ إِنَّا نَعۡلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعۡلِنُونَ ٧٦

Let not their words grieve you. We know all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. (76)

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ أَنَّا خَلَقۡنَٰهُ مِن نُّطۡفَةٖ فَإِذَا هُوَ خَصِيمٞ مُّبِينٞ ٧٧

Is man, then, not aware that it is We who create him out of a gamete; and then he becomes flagrantly contentious? (77)

وَضَرَبَ لَنَا مَثَلٗا وَنَسِيَ خَلۡقَهُۥۖ قَالَ مَن يُحۡيِ ٱلۡعِظَٰمَ وَهِيَ رَمِيمٞ ٧٨

He comes up with arguments against Us, forgetting how he himself was created. He asks: 'Who could give life to bones that have crumbled to dust?' (78)

قُلۡ يُحۡيِيهَا ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنشَأَهَآ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٖۖ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ خَلۡقٍ عَلِيمٌ ٧٩

Say: 'He who brought them into being in the first instance will give them life again. He has full knowledge of every act of creation; (79)

ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلشَّجَرِ ٱلۡأَخۡضَرِ نَارٗا فَإِذَآ أَنتُم مِّنۡهُ تُوقِدُونَ ٨٠

He who produces for you fire out of the green tree, and from this you kindle your fires.' (80)

أَوَلَيۡسَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ بِقَٰدِرٍ عَلَىٰٓ أَن يَخۡلُقَ مِثۡلَهُمۚ بَلَىٰ وَهُوَ ٱلۡخَلَّٰقُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ٨١

Is, then, He who has created the heavens and the earth unable to create their like? Of course He can. He alone is the supreme Creator, the All-Knowing. (81)

إِنَّمَآ أَمۡرُهُۥٓ إِذَآ أَرَادَ شَيۡـًٔا أَن يَقُولَ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ٨٢

When He intends something to be, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. (82)

فَسُبۡحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِي بِيَدِهِۦ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَإِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٨٣

Limitless, then, in His glory is He in whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and to Him you all will be brought back. (83)

Overview

In this final part, the *sūrah* reviews all the issues it tackled earlier: the nature of revelation; Godhead and its oneness, and resurrection. These are reviewed in separate sections and shown with strong effects coupled with a clear rhythm. The overall aim is to show how God's hand controls everything in the universe. This concept is summed up in the last verse of the *sūrah: "Limitless, then, in His glory is He in whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and to Him you all will be brought back."* (Verse 83) His hand, strong and innovative, has created cattle and subjected them to man, and created man from a mere gamete. The same hand can also give life to bones that had broken into dust, just like it originated them in the first instance. It was this hand that produced fire from the green tree and brought the heavens and the earth into being. In the end, it has control of everything in the universe. This, then, is the gist of this final part of the *sūrah.*

No Place for Poetry

> *We have not taught the Prophet poetry; nor is it fitting for him [to be a poet). This is but a reminder and a Qur'ān making all things clear, to warn everyone who is alive, and that the word of God be proved against the unbelievers. (Verses 69-70)*

Right at the outset, the *sūrah* spoke about the question of revelation: *"Yā Sīn. By the Qur'ān, full of wisdom, you are indeed one of God's messengers, pursuing a straight way. It is a revelation by the Almighty, the Ever Merciful, so that you may warn people whose forefathers had not been warned, and who therefore are unaware [of the truth]."* (Verses 1-6) Now it is presented in this particular form to refute the allegation that the Prophet was a poet, and that the Qur'ān was mere poetry. The elders of the Quraysh were fully aware that all this was absolutely false, and that the Qur'ān Muĥammad recited was something unknown in their language. They were not so dull as to be unable to distinguish the Qur'ān from poetry. These allegations were simply part of the propaganda they launched against the new faith and the Messenger preaching it. They simply referred to the fine, inspiring style of the Qur'ān to try to make the masses confuse it with poetry.

At this point, God in all His limitless glory denies that He taught His Messenger the art of poetry. Since God did not teach him this, he will not learn it. No one will ever get to know anything other than what God teaches them.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that poetry is not suitable for God's Messenger: *"nor is it fitting for him [to be a poet]."* Poetry takes a different line from that of prophethood. Poetry is an interaction which may change from time to time.

Prophethood, on the other hand, means revelations bestowed from on high, outlining a firm system and a clear code that should be implemented as it conforms to God's law, which operates throughout the universe. Unlike poetry, it does not change to suit moods and desires.

Moreover, prophethood means constant contact with God, learning directly from what He reveals and an untiring attempt to mould human life in a way that pleases Him. In its highest standards, poetry expresses a human longing for what is perfect and beautiful, but it remains a human effort confined within man's capabilities and limitations. At lesser levels, poetry is an expression of reactions and desires that may be strongly carnal. Indeed, prophethood and poetry are far apart: one is at best a longing that issues from the earth while the other is true guidance from on high.

"*This is but a reminder and a Qur'ān making all things clear.*" (Verse 69) Both descriptions apply to the same thing: the role of revelation is to be a reminder as it works on the mind keeping it alert, and the Qur'ān is to be recited. It has been revealed to perform a particular task: "*to warn everyone who is alive, and that the word of God be proved against the unbelievers.*" (Verse 70) Here the Qur'ānic expression contrasts unbelief with life, making unbelief equal to death and propensity to faith equal to life. Thus, the Qur'ān has been revealed to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) so as to warn those who are alive and can benefit from the warning. The unbelievers, on the other hand, are dead and cannot hear the warning. Therefore, the function of the Qur'ān, in as far as they are concerned, is to record their situation which makes them deserve punishment. God will not inflict punishment on anyone who has not received His message. Punishment is for those who did receive His message and who were determined to disbelieve in it, thereby writing their own ruin.

Just the One God

The second section of this final part of the *sūrah* addresses the question of God's oneness providing a framework for it from what people see around them and the blessings God grants them:

> *Are they not aware that, among all the things Our hands have made, We have created for them cattle which they control. We have subjected these to them, so that some of them they use for riding and of some they may eat, and they have other benefits from them, and [milk] to drink. Will they not give thanks? Yet they have taken to worship deities other than God, hoping for [their] support. They are unable to support them; yet their worshippers stand like warriors to defend them. Let not their words grieve you. We know all that they keep secret as well as all that they bring into the open. (Verses 71-76)*

These verses begin with the question, *'Are they not aware...',* which could have been literally translated as 'Do they not see how...' The sign to which their attentions are drawn here is present before them. They do not have to look far for it. It is before their very eyes, requiring little contemplation. It is the cattle God has created and made subject to their control. Thus, they are able to ride them, use them for food, milk and draw various other benefits from them. All this is by God's law and the qualities He has given man and cattle. People could never have achieved any of this on their own. In fact, they cannot create a fly, even though they might muster all their resources for this purpose. They cannot control a fly unless God gave it the quality of being controlled by man. Hence the question: *"Will they not give thanks?"*

When we look at the matter in this Qur'ānic light we are bound to feel that God's blessings overflow from every corner around us. Thus, every time we ride an animal, eat a piece of meat, have a drink of milk, taste a piece of cheese or use fat for cooking, or wear a garment made of hide, wool or animal hair, we in our hearts feel God's endless blessings and infinite grace. This, then, applies to all things around us and everything we use, whether animate or inanimate. All our lives, then, become a continuous act of glorifying God and giving thanks to Him.

Yet people do not give thanks. Some of them would even attribute divinity to beings other than God. "*Yet they have taken to worship deities other than God, hoping for [their] support. They are unable to support them; yet their worshippers stand like warriors to defend them.*" (Verses 74-75) In the past, such deities were statues, stones, trees, stars, angels *or jinn.* Such idolatry persists today in some areas of the world. Yet people today who do not worship such deities do not necessarily believe in God's oneness. They may associate partners with Him, in the form of believing in some alleged powers other than His, or relying on other things. What we need to understand here is that polytheism can take different forms at different times and places.

The unbelievers used to worship these deities seeking their help to win victory, yet it was they who protected those deities against assault from others: "*yet their worshippers stand like warriors to defend them.*" (Verse 75) This was absurdity of the lowest order. However, in essence, most people have not gone far above this level of absurdity; only in form. Today, people who give tyrants the status of deities are not dissimilar to those who worshipped idols and statues. They are the warriors defending the tyrants and their tyranny, yet at the same time, they humbly bow before them. Idolatry is the same, whatever form it takes. Whenever the monotheistic faith suffers any deviation, idolatry and *jāhiliyyah* creep in. The only thing that protects humanity is belief in God's absolute oneness. He is the One God, to whom all worship must be addressed. He is the One to be obeyed and on whom all must rely.

"*Let not their words grieve you. We know all that they keep secret as well as all that they*

bring into the open." (Verse 76) This is an address to the Prophet as he confronted those worshipping deities other than God. He should not be concerned about them. God knows all about them and what they scheme. They represent no danger to any believer who places his trust in God.

A Second Life for All

The third section of this final passage raises the question of resurrection and reckoning:

> *Is man, then, not aware that it is We who create him out of a gamete; and then he becomes flagrantly contentious. He comes up with arguments against Us, forgetting how he himself was created. He asks: 'Who could give life to bones that have crumbled to dust?' Say: 'He who brought them into being in the first instance will give them life again. He has full knowledge of every act of creation; He who produces for you fire out of the green tree, and from this you kindle your fires.' Is, then, He who has created the heavens and the earth unable to create their like? Of course He can. He alone is the supreme Creator, the All-Knowing. When He intends something to he, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. (Verses 77-82)*

This section looks first at man's own position, describing his origins and ends, putting it all before him so that he looks at it as a reality taking place all the time. Yet man neither appreciates its significance nor takes it as evidence confirming the realization of God's promise to resurrect all humanity. *"Is man, then, not aware that it is We who create him out of a gamete; and then he becomes flagrantly contentious."* (Verse 77) Man does not doubt that his immediate origin is a gamete. It is no more than a tiny drop of worthless fluid; a drop containing countless thousands of cells, one of which then becomes an embryo, which later grows into a contentious person, arguing with his Lord and demanding proof and evidence from Him.

It is the creative power of God that transforms that gamete into this quarrelsome, contentious person. What a gulf between origin and end! Yet man finds it difficult to believe that this power can bring him back to life after death. *"He comes up with arguments against Us, forgetting how he himself was created. He asks: 'Who could give life to bones that have crumbled to dust?' Say: Be who brought them into being in the first instance will give them life again. He has full knowledge of every act of creation."* (Verses 78-79) How simple, using the logic of nature and obvious reality!

Does a gamete have greater life, power or value than a crumbled bone? Is not man originated from a gamete? Is the One who made an argumentative man out of a gamete unable to produce a new creation out of a crumbled bone? This is too easy and obvious to merit any lengthy discussion: *"He who brought them into being in the*

first instance will give them life again. He has All knowledge of every act of creation." (Verse 79) They are then given further clarification of God's creative power. Again the clarification uses something they always see with their own eyes: "*He who produces for you fire out of the green tree, and from this you kindle your fires."* (Verse 80)

A casual look at this remarkable phenomena, to which they are often oblivious, is sufficient as convincing proof. Green trees laden with water often produce fire through friction, and then become fuel to this same fire. However, scientific understanding of the nature of the heat green trees receive as they absorb solar energy and retain it while they are full of water can only enhance the significance of this phenomena. It is God who has given trees their characteristics, and who created all things. However, we seldom look at things with such awareness. As a result, they do not reveal to us their amazing secrets nor do they point us to the Creator of the universe. We only need to open our hearts to them and they will tell us their secrets. We will then live with them in a permanent state of worship and glorification of God.

The *sūrah* then further examines the question of man's initial creation and his subsequent resurrection: "*Is, then, He who has created the heavens and the earth unable to create their like? Of course He can. He alone is the supreme Creator, the All-Knowing."* (Verse 81)

The heavens and the earth are great and wonderful creations. This earth where we live with millions of other species, and compared to which we are very little in size, and about which our knowledge remains scanty, is no more than a small satellite of the sun. Our earth depends totally on the light and heat it receives from the sun. However, the sun is only one out of a hundred million suns in this galaxy which forms our neighbouring world. The universe includes numerous other galaxies. Using their best, but limited observatories, astronomers estimate that there are one hundred million galaxies, but they could discover more if they used more powerful telescopes. The distance between our galaxy and the next is estimated at 750,000 light years. In addition, there are also vast nebula containing distant clusters of stars. But this is as far as our limited knowledge can reach.

Most of these countless stars have planets like our own star, and each planet and star has its own orbit in which it moves according to an accurate system which allows no stoppage or deviation. Otherwise, collisions would occur in outer space. We simply cannot try to describe what this great expanse contains: it is simply beyond our imagination. However, the question remains: "*Is, then, He who has created the heavens and the earth unable to create their like?"* How do people compare with such great, unimaginable creation? "*Of course He can. He alone is the supreme Creator, the All-Knowing."* (Verse 81)

The truth is that God creates this and that, as well as other types of creation,

effortlessly. It is all the same to Him whether the creature He wants to bring into life is large or small: *"When He intends something to be, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is."* (Verse 82) This '*something*' could be a galaxy, an earth, an ant or a mosquito. It is all the same, requiring no more than a simple word, '*Be*', and it is there. Nothing is easier or more difficult, near or far. Once God's will intends something, it exists whatever it may be. However, God tells us of this fact in a way we understand. This is why He expresses it in this way: saying, '*Be',* to His intended creation.

At this point, the *sūrah* gives its final beat, describing the relation between the universe and its Creator: *"Limitless, then, in His glory is He in whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things, and to Him you all will be brought back."* (Verse 83) The term *'mighty dominion'* describes this relation in its majestic reality of absolute ownership and complete authority over everything in the universe. Then to Him all will return.

SŪRAH 37

Al-Ṣāffāt

(Ranged in Ranks)

Prologue

This Makkan *sūrah,* like the one before it, is composed of short verses and is characterized by fast beats, successive scenes and a myriad of images. Indeed, the effect it produces is at times very intense. Like all Makkan revelations, its aim is to establish the Islamic faith firmly in people's hearts, purging it of any traces of idolatry and polytheism. In this respect, however, it addresses a particular form of polytheism which prevailed in Arabian society at the time, pausing long to expose its falsehood. All this is summed up in the allegation that God married the *jinn,* who subsequently gave Him the angels as His daughters.

The *sūrah* attacks this superstition heavily, exposing its stupidity and lack of substance. Furthermore, because this topic is given prominence, the *sūrah* begins by mentioning some types of angels: "*By the [angels] ranged in ranks, who rebuke reproachfully, and recite God's word.*" (Verses 1-3) This is followed by mention of the devils and how they are targeted by piercing flames to prevent them from eavesdropping on those on high. Had they been in the position given them in ignorant superstitions, they would not have been chased in this way. The fruit of the tree growing in the midst of hell is likened to devils' heads. At the end, this superstition is strongly and decisively refuted: "*Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? Do you not reflect? Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! They claim that He has kinship with the jinn; yet the jinn themselves know that they will be*

brought [before God] for judgement. Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him." (Verses 149-159)

In addition to dealing with this particular form of idolatry, the *sūrah* tackles the same issues of faith discussed in other Makkan *sūrahs.* It confirms God's oneness, citing evidence from the universe: *"Most certainly your God is One, Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise."* (Verses 4-5) As it draws a scene of the Day of Judgement, it specifies that idolatry is the reason why those punished in the hereafter receive their punishment: *"On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. Whenever they were told, 'there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, and would say: Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?' For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. You will indeed taste grievous suffering, being requited only for what you used to do."* (Verses 33-39)

The *sūrah* also speaks about resurrection, reckoning and reward. Referring to the idolaters' reaction when they are told that they will be brought back to life, it states that they say: *"This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?"* (Verses 1517) It follows this with a detailed scene of the Day of Judgement, full of images, movements, reactions and surprises.

Reference is also made to the question of revelation and the message, quoting the unbelievers as saying: *"Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?" (Verse* 36) It states the true nature of prophethood: *"For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers."* (Verse 37)

As the *sūrah* describes the attitude of the idolaters, how far astray they go, as well as their rejection of the truth, it mentions a series of earlier messengers: Noah, Abraham and his sons, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah. These accounts show clearly how God grants His grace to His messengers, how He supports them against their enemies and how He inflicts punishment on those who deny the truth: *"Most of the people of old went astray before them; although We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 71-74) The story of Abraham and his son Ishmael, the sacrifice and the ransom, is given special prominence as it paints obedience and submission to God in their most profound form. Indeed, such submission equates with attaining the summit that can only be reached through pure faith, one which elevates people to a splendid horizon.

A wide range of effects accompany the presentation of different issues in the *sūrah.* To mention but a few, we see the skies, stars, planets and piercing flames: *"We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily*

snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame." (Verses 6-10)

Special effects are also provided in the scenes that portray the Day of Judgement, its surprises and the strong reactions that ensue. These scenes are rather unique and this aspect will be highlighted later when we discuss those verses in detail.

Further effects are provided by the stories the *sūrah* relates, most particularly that of Abraham and his son Ishmael as they proceed to give the sacrifice. Here, the effects are at their highest, strongly shaking our hearts.

The *sūrah* is also characterized by its distinctive rhythm which is most suited to the images and scenes it portrays as also to the style it adopts and the meanings it wants to emphasize.

The *sūrah* can be divided into three parts. The first includes the opening describing the three types of angels who glorify God, the Lord of all points of sunrise, who adorned the skies with stars. It then mentions the *jinn* and how they try to eavesdrop on those on high and who are then targeted by piercing flames. A question is then put to them: are they more difficult to create than the other beings God created, including angels, the skies, the *jinn,* planets and flames? This leads to a refutation of what they used to say about resurrection, showing its absurdity, and confirming what they used to find difficult to believe. This is followed by a long and unique image of resurrection, reckoning, reward and punishment.

The second part mentions how those who were erroneous only followed in the footsteps of the unbelievers of old who received warnings, but paid no heed. It gives accounts of the people's of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah, showing the ends met by the two parties in each respect.

In the last part, the superstition concerning the *jinn* and the angels is brought into focus. It states clearly God's promise of victory to His messengers: *"Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious."* (Verses 171-173) The *sūrah* closes on a special note glorifying God, denying all false claims about Him, greeting His messengers and praising Him as the Supreme Lord: *"Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of almightiness, above all what people attribute to Him. And peace be upon all His messengers. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 180-182)

1
Will You Have a Look?

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلصَّٰٓفَّٰتِ صَفًّا ﴿١﴾	*By the [angels] ranged in ranks,* (1)
فَٱلزَّٰجِرَٰتِ زَجْرًا ﴿٢﴾	*who rebuke reproachfully* (2)
فَٱلتَّٰلِيَٰتِ ذِكْرًا ﴿٣﴾	*and recite God's word* (3)
إِنَّ إِلَٰهَكُمْ لَوَٰحِدٌ ﴿٤﴾	*most certainly your God is One,* (4)
رَّبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَرَبُّ ٱلْمَشَٰرِقِ ﴿٥﴾	*Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise.* (5)
إِنَّا زَيَّنَّا ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةٍ ٱلْكَوَاكِبِ ﴿٦﴾	*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars,* (6)
وَحِفْظًا مِّن كُلِّ شَيْطَٰنٍ مَّارِدٍ ﴿٧﴾	*and have made them secure against every rebellious devil.* (7)
لَّا يَسَّمَّعُونَ إِلَى ٱلْمَلَإِ ٱلْأَعْلَىٰ وَيُقْذَفُونَ مِن كُلِّ جَانِبٍ ﴿٨﴾	*Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides,* (8)
دُحُورًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ وَاصِبٌ ﴿٩﴾	*driven away, with lasting suffering in store for*

them. (9)

If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame. (10)

Now ask those [unbelievers]: Are they more difficult to create, or the other beings We have created? Them have We created out of a sticky clay. (11)

Whereas you marvel, they scoff; (12)

and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; (13)

and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule; (14)

and say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery. (15)

What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? (16)

And perhaps our forefathers?' (17)

Say: 'Yes, indeed! And you shall be utterly humbled.' (18)

There will be just one single cry, and they will all begin to see, (19)

and will say: 'Woe betide us! This is the Day of Judgement!' (20)

إِلَّا مَنْ خَطِفَ ٱلْخَطْفَةَ فَأَتْبَعَهُۥ شِهَابٌ ثَاقِبٌ ﴿١٠﴾

فَٱسْتَفْتِهِمْ أَهُمْ أَشَدُّ خَلْقًا أَم مَّنْ خَلَقْنَآ ۚ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰهُم مِّن طِينٍ لَّازِبٍ ﴿١١﴾

بَلْ عَجِبْتَ وَيَسْخَرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَإِذَا ذُكِّرُوا۟ لَا يَذْكُرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَوْا۟ ءَايَةً يَسْتَسْخِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

وَقَالُوٓا۟ إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

أَوَءَابَآؤُنَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

قُلْ نَعَمْ وَأَنتُمْ دَٰخِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

فَإِنَّمَا هِىَ زَجْرَةٌ وَٰحِدَةٌ فَإِذَا هُمْ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰوَيْلَنَا هَٰذَا يَوْمُ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٢٠﴾

هَٰذَا يَوْمُ ٱلْفَصْلِ ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

۞ ٱحۡشُرُواْ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ وَأَزۡوَٰجَهُمۡ وَمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡبُدُونَ ٢٢

This is indeed the Day of Decision which you used to call a lie! (21)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ فَٱهۡدُوهُمۡ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ٢٣

Gather together all those who were bent on wrongdoing, their ilk, and all that they used to worship (22)

وَقِفُوهُمۡۖ إِنَّهُم مَّسۡـُٔولُونَ ٢٤

instead of God, and guide them all to the path of hell, (23)

مَا لَكُمۡ لَا تَنَاصَرُونَ ٢٥

but halt them a while, for they shall be asked: (24)

بَلۡ هُمُ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ مُسۡتَسۡلِمُونَ ٢٦

'How is it that you do not help one another?' (25)

وَأَقۡبَلَ بَعۡضُهُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ٢٧

Indeed, on that day they will be in complete submission. (26)

قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّكُمۡ كُنتُمۡ تَأۡتُونَنَا عَنِ ٱلۡيَمِينِ ٢٨

They will turn upon one another accusingly. (27)

قَالُواْ بَل لَّمۡ تَكُونُواْ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ٢٩

Some [of them] will say: 'You used to [whisper to us] approaching us from the right!' (28)

وَمَا كَانَ لَنَا عَلَيۡكُم مِّن سُلۡطَٰنٖۖ بَلۡ كُنتُمۡ قَوۡمٗا طَٰغِينَ ٣٠

The others will reply: 'No! It was you who would not believe. (29)

فَحَقَّ عَلَيۡنَا قَوۡلُ رَبِّنَآۖ إِنَّا لَذَآئِقُونَ ٣١

We had no power over you; but you were willing to exceed all limits. (30)

فَأَغۡوَيۡنَٰكُمۡ إِنَّا كُنَّا غَٰوِينَ ٣٢

Now our Lord's word has come true against us, and we are bound to taste [the punishment]; (31)

If we led you astray, we ourselves were astray.'

فَإِنَّهُمۡ يَوۡمَئِذٖ فِي ٱلۡعَذَابِ مُشۡتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

(32)

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَفۡعَلُ بِٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. (33)

إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُوٓاْ إِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمۡ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ يَسۡتَكۡبِرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. (34)

وَيَقُولُونَ أَئِنَّا لَتَارِكُوٓاْ ءَالِهَتِنَا لِشَاعِرٖ مَّجۡنُونِۭ ﴿٣٦﴾

Whenever they were told, 'there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, (35)

بَلۡ جَآءَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَصَدَّقَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

and would say: 'Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?' (36)

إِنَّكُمۡ لَذَآئِقُواْ ٱلۡعَذَابِ ٱلۡأَلِيمِ ﴿٣٨﴾

For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. (37)

وَمَا تُجۡزَوۡنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

You will indeed taste grievous suffering, (38)

إِلَّا عِبَادَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

being requited only for what you used to do. (39)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ رِزۡقٞ مَّعۡلُومٞ ﴿٤١﴾

Not so God's true servants. (40)

فَوَٰكِهُ ۖ وَهُم مُّكۡرَمُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Theirs shall be a predetermined sustenance: (41)

فِي جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٤٣﴾

fruits; and they will be honoured (42)

عَلَىٰ سُرُرٖ مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

in gardens of bliss, (43)

يُطَافُ عَلَيۡهِم بِكَأۡسٖ مِّن مَّعِينِۭ ﴿٤٥﴾

seated on soft couches, facing one another. (44)

بَيْضَآءَ لَذَّةٍ لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: (45)

لَا فِيهَا غَوْلٌ وَلَا هُمْ عَنْهَا يُنزَفُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

clear, delicious to those who drink it, (46)

وَعِندَهُمْ قَٰصِرَٰتُ ٱلطَّرْفِ عِينٌ ﴿٤٨﴾ كَأَنَّهُنَّ

causing no headiness or intoxication. (47)

بَيْضٌ مَّكْنُونٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye, (48)

فَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

as if they were hidden eggs. (49)

قَالَ قَآئِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ إِنِّى كَانَ لِى قَرِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

And they will turn to one another with questions. (50)

يَقُولُ أَءِنَّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلْمُصَدِّقِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

One of them will say: I had a close companion on earth (51)

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَدِينُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

who used to ask me: 'Do you really believe (52)

قَالَ هَلْ أَنتُم مُّطَّلِعُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

that after we have died and become mere dust and bones we shall be brought for judgement?' (53)

فَٱطَّلَعَ فَرَءَاهُ فِى سَوَآءِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

He adds: 'Would you like to look down?' (54)

قَالَ تَٱللَّهِ إِن كِدتَّ لَتُرْدِينِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Then he looks and sees him in the midst of the fire. (55)

وَلَوْلَا نِعْمَةُ رَبِّى لَكُنتُ مِنَ ٱلْمُحْضَرِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

He will then say: 'By God! You almost brought me to ruin! (56)

أَفَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَيِّتِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

But for the grace of God I should have also been

brought there.' (57)

إِلَّا مَوْتَتَنَا ٱلْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

'But then is it truly so, that we are not to die (58)

إِنَّ هَـٰذَا لَهُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٦٠﴾

except for our first death, and that we are not to suffer? (59)

لِمِثْلِ هَـٰذَا فَلْيَعْمَلِ ٱلْعَـٰمِلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

This is indeed the supreme triumph.' (60)

أَذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ نُّزُلًا أَمْ شَجَرَةُ ٱلزَّقُّومِ ﴿٦٢﴾

Everyone should strive to attain this goal. (61)

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَـٰهَا فِتْنَةً لِّلظَّـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Is this the better welcome, or the Zaqqūm tree? (62)

إِنَّهَا شَجَرَةٌ تَخْرُجُ فِىٓ أَصْلِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٦٤﴾

We have made it a test for the wrongdoers. (63)

طَلْعُهَا كَأَنَّهُۥ رُءُوسُ ٱلشَّيَـٰطِينِ ﴿٦٥﴾

It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. (64)

فَإِنَّهُمْ لَأٓكِلُونَ مِنْهَا فَمَالِـُٔونَ مِنْهَا ٱلْبُطُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Its fruit is like devils' heads. (65)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ لَهُمْ عَلَيْهَا لَشَوْبًا مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٦٧﴾

They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies. (66)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ مَرْجِعَهُمْ لَإِلَى ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٦٨﴾

Then on top of it, they will be given polluted, scalding water to drink. (67)

Then again, their ultimate goal is hell. (68)

A Sky Adorned with Stars

By the [angels] ranged in ranks, who rebuke reproachfully and recite God's word most certainly your God is One, Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise. (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* begins by mentioning three groups of people, identifying what they do. The first description may mean that they range themselves in rows as they pray, or range their wings, awaiting God's commands. The second group rebukes whoever deserves rebuke, perhaps at the time when the angels gather their souls when they die, or at the time of resurrection, or when they are driven into hell, or in any position or situation. The third group recite God's word, which may be the Qur'ān or other scriptures or they may recite glorifications of God. They are mentioned in the form of an oath made by God confirming His oneness: "*Your God is One.*" (Verse 4) As we have already stated, the occasion here is the mention of the superstition circulated in ignorant Arabia alleging that the angels were God's daughters, and as such, they too were deities.

God then mentions to His servants something about Himself that is suited to the truth of His oneness: He is the "*Lord of the heavens and the earth and everything between them, Lord of all the points of sunrise.*" (Verse 5) The heavens and the earth stand before us, speaking to us about the Creator who controls everything in this universe. No one else claims the ability to create and control the universe, and no one can deny that the One who created the universe is the true Lord who has absolute power. He also created and controls "*everything between them,*" including the air, clouds, light, as well as tiny little creatures which man comes to know from time to time, but much more remains unknown to man. It is impossible to look with an alert mind at the heavens and the earth and what is between them without being profoundly affected by the greatness, accuracy, variety, beauty, harmony and coherence between all these creatures. Only a dead heart can look at them without genuine interaction.

"*Lord of all points of sunrise.*" (Verse 5) The translation of this verse is far from adequate, as the verse not only refers to the rising of the sun, but of every star and planet. Each has its time and point of rising. Therefore, the number of such points in all the corners of the universe is beyond imagination. At the same time, the phrase refers to the fact that as the earth turns round the sun, every point of it has its own sunrise, and its point of sunset. Whenever a point of earth is facing the sun, it has its sunrise, and the opposite point on the surface of the earth has its sunset. People did not know this at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, but God told them about it. This precise system that makes such successive sunrises over the earth, and the splendid beauty that so permeates our planet beckons us to reflect on the superb beauty of God's creation and to believe in His oneness. How could such beauty, accuracy and consistency have been achieved unless the Maker is One?

This is the reason why this particular attribute of God's is mentioned on this occasion. We will see that there will be another occasion in the *sūrah* which recalls the mention of the heavens and sunrises, as it refers to planets, flames, devils and their destruction.

> *We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame. (Verses 6-10)*

At the outset, the *sūrah* touches on the part of the superstition that relates to angels. Now it touches on the part that relates to the *jinn.* In pre-Islamic days, some Arabs alleged that the *jinn* were related to God. Indeed, some of them worshipped *the jinn* for this reason, and because they attributed to them knowledge of the world beyond human perception.

"*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars.*" (Verse 6) One look at the sky is sufficient to realize that the element of beauty is purposely incorporated into the making of the universe: its very make up is beautiful, well proportioned and harmonious. In fact, beauty is an essential part of its nature. Its design gives equal importance to beautiful appearance and perfect functioning. Therefore, everything in it is made according to an accurate measure, performing its role to perfection and adding to its overall beauty.

The sky and its stars is the most beautiful scene around us. We never tire of it. Every star and planet sends its flickering light, like a damsel's eye looking shyly at you. When you look straight at her, she turns her eye away; but when you take your glance away, her eyes brighten. To look at these stars and planets as they change position night after night gives endless pleasure.

Another function of the stars and their satellites is also mentioned in the *sūrah,* demonstrating how some of them are shooting stars and piercing flames that target *the jinn,* preventing them from getting close to those on high: We "*have made them secure against every rebellious devil. Thus, they cannot eavesdrop on the ones on high, but shall be repelled from all sides, driven away, with lasting suffering in store for them. If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame.*" (Verses 7-10) This means that some of the shooting stars we see guard the skies against rebellious devils to prevent them from eavesdropping on those on high. Such devils on the Day of Judgement will be punished further. However, a rebellious devil might stealthily snatch something of what goes on among the angels on high, but as this devil descends, a piercing flame pursues and burns him.

We have no idea how the rebellious devil tries to eavesdrop, how he snatches a fragment, or how he is pursued by the piercing flame. All these are beyond the limits of our human nature and its power of imagination. The only way open to us is to believe what we are told by God and accept it as it is stated. We should remember that our knowledge of the universe is only superficial. What is important to

understand here is that those devils who are prevented from eavesdropping on what takes place on high are the ones whom the idolaters alleged to be related to God. Had anything of the sort been true, the whole story would have been totally different. Such alleged relatives would not have suffered the burning fate that pursues them.

Receiving the Message with Ridicule

The Prophet is then instructed to question them about whether they considered their own creation to be more difficult or the creation of the heavens, earth and all creation in the universe? If they agree that man's creation is less difficult, why should they then disbelieve in resurrection, meeting it with derision and considering it impossible, when it is nothing compared to creating the universe?

> *Now ask those [unbelievers]: Are they more difficult to create, or the other beings We have created? Them have We created out of a sticky clay. Whereas you marvel, they scoff and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule; and say: 'This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?' (Verses 11-17)*

The other created beings in this respect include the angels, heavens, the earth and all between them, *the jinn,* stars, planets and piercing flames. They acknowledge that these are created by God. No answer, however, is expected to the question. This is simply a rhetorical device inviting amazement at their lack of understanding of what is around them. It derides the way they look at things. Leaving the question unanswered, the *sūrah* shows them the substance from which they were created in the first place: it is soft, sticky clay made of material from this earth, which is itself one of God's creatures: "*Them have We created out of a sticky clay.*" (Verse 11) It is abundantly clear then that they are not the more difficult to create. Hence, their making fun of God's signs and His promise to bring them back to life is nothing less than absurd.

Their attitude makes the Prophet wonder: "*Whereas you marvel, they scoff and when they are reminded of the truth, they pay no heed; and when they see a sign, they resort to ridicule.*" (Verses 12-14) It is only right that the Prophet should wonder at them. A believer who recognizes God with all his faculties as Muĥammad (peace be upon him) did, and who sees in full clarity the numerous signs in the universe pointing to Him, is bound to wonder and marvel at how people can remain oblivious to them. In short, how can they adopt such an attitude?

As the Prophet looked at them with amazement, they continued ridiculing the

truth he presented to them, speaking of God's oneness and their own resurrection. They preferred to remain blind, with their hearts sealed. Hence they scoffed at God's revelations and signs, wondered at the Prophet who presented these to them and made that the material for further ridicule. Part of this was how they described the Qur'ān: *"This is nothing but plain sorcery. What! After we have died and become mere dust and bones, shall we be raised back to life? And perhaps our forefathers?"* (Verses 15-17) They are oblivious to everything around them that reminds them of God's power and ability, claiming that He would not return them to life after they and their forefathers had died and perished. Yet such return is nothing to marvel at, if we would only look at the universe around us and see what God has created.

Since they would not reflect quietly and calmly on what they saw, they are strongly jolted such that they see their own agitated state in the life to come: *"Say: Yes, indeed! And you shall be utterly humbled."* (Verse 18) Yes, indeed, you and your forefathers will be resurrected and utterly humiliated, unable to put up any opposition. It is not merely that God emphatically confirms their resurrection, but He shows them how it is done. This is depicted in a long scene describing resurrection in different ways, presenting lively images and successive movements. The whole account employs the narrative style first, then changes to dialogue, and in between they see events and actions and hear comments on these. Thus, the whole scene comes alive.

"There will be just one single cry, and they will all begin to see." (Verse 19) It is all just a glimpse, taking no more than a single cry, which is described in Arabic as *zajrah,* to indicate that it is exceedingly strong and coming from a superior source. This single cry is made *"and they will all begin to see,"* suddenly, without any preparation. Surprised so violently, they cry out: *"Woe betide us! This is the Day of Judgement!"* (Verse 20) In the midst of their shock, a voice will unexpectedly make it clear that whatever happens to them is through their own making: *"This is indeed the Day of Decision which you used to call a lie"* (Verse 21) Here we see how the *sūrah* changes its style from the narrative to directly address those who used to deny that there would ever be such a day when all mankind would be resurrected and their fate determined.

It takes only one decisive sentence of blame before the orders are issued to those whose task it is to carry them out: *"Gather together all those who were bent on wrongdoing, their ilk, and all that they used to worship instead of God, and guide them all to the path of hell, but halt them a while, for they shall be asked."* (Verses 22-24) So the wrongdoers and their like are to be gathered together. Although the order is clear and decisive, it also carries much sarcasm in the expression, '*guide them all to the path of hell.*' This is certainly a strange type of guidance, worse than going astray. Yet it is the perfect retort to their straying from the path of divine guidance. Since they did

not benefit in this present world from guidance to the straight path, guidance will be given to them in the life to come, but this time to the path of hell.

Having been given such guidance, we then see them halted for questioning. Again the address turns to them with blame, even though it is delivered through a simple and innocent question: *"How is it that you do not help one another?"* (Verse 25) Why do you not support one another when you are all here and in need of any help you can get? You also have here with you the deities you used to worship. Needless to say, none of them ventures an answer.' What follows this rhetorical questioning is a comment describing their condition: *"Indeed, on that day they will be in complete submission."* (Verse 26) Both the worshippers and the worshipped are in a state of complete submission to God.

Once more, the *sūrah* picks up the narrative style, portraying them as they argue with one another: *"They will turn upon one another accusingly. Some [of them] will say: You used to [whisper to us] approaching us from the right!" (Verses* 27-28) This describes the normal condition of whispering, coming from the right. Thus, they blame the whisperers, saying they are responsible for their present ordeal. Those accused will immediately deny responsibility, putting it squarely on their accusers: *"The others will reply: No! It was you who would not believe."* (Verse 29) It was not our whisper that took you from faith into disbelief.

You were not following guidance and we led you astray by whispering. Indeed, *"We had no power over you."* (Verse 30) We could not impose our views on you, forcing you to follow us against your will: *"but you were willing to exceed all limits."* (Verse 30) You would not abide by any limit. *"Now our Lord's word has come true against us, and we are bound to taste [the punishment]."* (Verse 31) Both you and us are in the same position, deserving of God's punishment for not heeding the warnings. You joined us because of your propensity to follow error. We did nothing to you, instead you followed us in our error: *"If we led you astray, we ourselves were astray."* (Verse 32)

At this point, another comment is made, but this time it sounds like a sentence announced before all, making its grounds clear and revealing what they did in this world to bring about their condemnation in the next: *"On that day, they all will share in the common suffering. Thus shall We deal with all the guilty ones. Whenever they were told, there is no deity other than God,' they would turn away in arrogance, and would say: Are we to forsake our deities for the sake of a mad poet?"* (Verses 33-36) A further comment carries clear censure of those who say such monstrous words: *"For certain, he has brought the truth, and confirmed the earlier messengers. You will indeed taste grievous suffering, being requited only for what you used to do. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 37-40)

Since God's true servants are mentioned here, making it clear that they will not

suffer, their condition on the Day of Judgement is also shown. Once more this comes in narrative style, describing the happiness and bliss they will enjoy to the full and contrasting it with the suffering the other party endures:

> *Theirs shall be a predetermined sustenance: fruits; and they will be honoured in gardens of bliss, seated on soft couches, facing one another. A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: clear, delicious to those who drink it, causing no headiness or intoxication. With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye, as if they were hidden eggs. (Verses 41-49)*

This is happiness pure and perfect, combining all that is enjoyable, physically and spiritually. Everyone finds in it whatever they want of happiness. To start with, the people enjoying this happiness are God's true servants, a description that signifies they are held in high regard. They are also '*honoured*' among those on high, and this is the highest honour. They have '*fruit*' and they sit '*on soft couches facing one another.*' They will be served so that they need not exert any effort for anything. What they drink is also described in detail: "*A cup will be passed round among them with a drink from a flowing spring: clear, delicious to those who drink it, causing no headiness or intoxication.*" (Verses 45-47) These are the best qualities in any drink, giving the pleasure without negative consequences. Thus they do not fear that it will he used up, and it gives them no unpleasant side effects. They have companions who are described as follows: "*With them will be mates of modest gaze, most beautiful of eye.*" (Verse 48) Their modesty means that they do not look up to anyone other than their mates, despite being very pretty. They are chaste and gentle, "*as if they were hidden eggs,*" untouched by anyone.

As the story unfolds we see these true servants of God engaged in pleasant conversation, recalling things from their past lives and looking at what they now enjoy. This image contrasts with the contentious arguments the others have in their place of suffering. One of the believers then relates to his brethren something that he recalls from his first life: "*One of them will say: I had a close companion on earth who used to ask me: Do you really believe that after we have died and become mere dust and bones we shall he brought for judgement?*" (Verses 51-53) His friend did not believe in the Day of Judgement, and he asked him in amazement whether he truly believed in resurrection after death. As he is speaking about his friend, this believer wishes to know what happened to him. He looks for him and calls on his brothers to look as well: "*He adds: 'Would you like to look down?' Then he looks and sees him in the midst of the fire,*" (Verses 54-55)

When he sees him in his suffering, he turns to him and says: You could have led me astray and ruined me by what you whispered in my ear. It was only through God's favour that I did not listen to you: "*He will then say: By God! You almost brought*

me to ruin! But for the grace of God I should have also been brought there." (Verses 56-57) I could have ended up in the same position and been driven with the herd to the same position you now are in.

His awareness of what happened to his friend makes him feel more acutely the great blessing he and his fellow believers are experiencing. Therefore, he wants to assert it and be reassured that it will last: *"But then is it truly so, that we are not to die except for our first death, and that we are not to suffer? This is indeed the supreme triumph."* (Verses 58-60)

A short comment is made here, alerting hearts to the need to work hard in order to achieve such a goal. *"Everyone should strive to attain this goal."* (Verse 61) The goal is a pure and everlasting happiness that cannot be ended by death or prevented by torture. It is the type of goal that deserves hard effort. Compared to this, other goals people strive for seem worthless.

In order to highlight the great gulf between this everlasting, pure happiness and the other destiny awaiting the unbelievers, the *sūrah* explains what awaits the latter after they have been held to account:

> *Is this the better welcome, or the Zaqqūm tree? We have made it a test for the wrongdoers. It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. Its fruit is like devils' heads. They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies. Then on top of it, they will be given polluted scalding water to drink. Then again, their ultimate goal is hell. (Verses 62-68)*

Rhetorically they are asked whether the pure endless bliss is a better position and place or the Zaqqūm tree. What is this tree, then? The answer is simple: *"It is a tree that grows in the very heart of the blazing fire of hell. Its fruit is like devils' heads."* (Verses 64-65) Needless to say, people do not know how devils' heads look. Nevertheless, it is a frightening image. It is sufficient only to think of these heads to be scared. How, then, would they countenance the prospect of these very heads becoming the food with which they fill their bellies?

God made this tree a test for the wrongdoers. When they heard its name, they made fun of it, saying: 'How could a tree grow in hell without being burnt?' One of them, Abū Jahl, said in sarcasm: "People of the Quraysh! Do you know what the Zaqqūm tree is that Muĥammad holds up to scare you with? It is the dates of Madinah cooked with butter. Should we get it, we will swallow it without hesitation."

The fact is, however, that the Zaqqūm tree was something different from the food they knew: *"They will indeed eat of it, filling their bellies."* (Verse 66) When it stings their throats and burns their bellies — as it grows in the fire it is of the same substance —

they will look for a cool drink to stop the burning. However, they will only drink contaminated, boiling water: *"Then on top of it, they will be given polluted, scalding water to drink."* (Verse 67)

After this meal, they leave the table to return to their permanent abode, which is far from welcoming: *"Then again, their ultimate goal is hell."* (Verse 68)

2
Abraham's Sacrifice

إِنَّهُمْ أَلْفَوْا۟ ءَابَآءَهُمْ ضَآلِّينَ ﴿٦٩﴾	*They found their forefathers astray,* (69)
فَهُمْ عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَـٰرِهِمْ يُهْرَعُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾	*and rushed to follow in their footsteps.* (70)
وَلَقَدْ ضَلَّ قَبْلَهُمْ أَكْثَرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٧١﴾	*Most of the people of old went astray before them;* (71)
وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا فِيهِم مُّنذِرِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾	*although We had sent them warners.* (72)
فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾	*Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned.* (73)
إِلَّا عِبَادَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾	*Not so God's true servants.* (74)
وَلَقَدْ نَادَىٰنَا نُوحٌ فَلَنِعْمَ ٱلْمُجِيبُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾	*Noah cried to Us, and We are the best to answer prayer:* (75)
وَنَجَّيْنَـٰهُ وَأَهْلَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلْكَرْبِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٦﴾	*We saved him and his household from great distress;* (76)
وَجَعَلْنَا ذُرِّيَّتَهُۥ هُمُ ٱلْبَاقِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾	*and caused his offspring to be the survivors.* (77)
وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِى ٱلْـَٔاخِرِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾	*We caused him to be praised by later generations:* (78)
سَلَـٰمٌ عَلَىٰ نُوحٍ فِى ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾	*Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds!* (79)

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Thus do We reward those who do good. (80)

إِنَّهُۥ مِنۡ عِبَادِنَا ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

He was truly one of Our believing servants. (81)

ثُمَّ أَغۡرَقۡنَا ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Then We caused the others to drown. (82)

۞ وَإِنَّ مِن شِيعَتِهِۦ لَإِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Among those who followed his way was Abraham. (83)

إِذۡ جَآءَ رَبَّهُۥ بِقَلۡبٖ سَلِيمٍ ﴿٨٤﴾

He turned to his Lord with a sound heart. (84)

إِذۡ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوۡمِهِۦ مَاذَا تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

He said to his father and his people: 'What is this that you worship? (85)

أَئِفۡكًا ءَالِهَةٗ دُونَ ٱللَّهِ تُرِيدُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Do you choose false deities instead of God? (86)

فَمَا ظَنُّكُم بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?' (87)

فَنَظَرَ نَظۡرَةٗ فِي ٱلنُّجُومِ ﴿٨٨﴾

Then he cast a glance at the stars, (88)

فَقَالَ إِنِّي سَقِيمٞ ﴿٨٩﴾

and said: 'Indeed I am sick.' (89)

فَتَوَلَّوۡاْ عَنۡهُ مُدۡبِرِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

So his people turned away from him and left. (90)

فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰٓ ءَالِهَتِهِمۡ فَقَالَ أَلَا تَأۡكُلُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

He then approached their deities stealthily and said: 'Will you not eat [your offerings]? (91)

مَا لَكُمۡ لَا تَنطِقُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

What is the matter with you that you do not speak?' (92)

فَرَاغَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ضَرۡبَۢا بِٱلۡيَمِينِ ﴿٩٣﴾

And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand. (93)

فَأَقۡبَلُوٓاْ إِلَيۡهِ يَزِفُّونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

قَالَ أَتَعۡبُدُونَ مَا تَنۡحِتُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

His people came to him hurriedly, (94)

وَٱللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمۡ وَمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

but he said: 'Do you worship something that you yourselves have carved, (95)

قَالُواْ ٱبۡنُواْ لَهُۥ بُنۡيَٰنٗا فَأَلۡقُوهُ فِي ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ﴿٩٧﴾

while it is God who has created you and all your handiwork?' (96)

فَأَرَادُواْ بِهِۦ كَيۡدٗا فَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡأَسۡفَلِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾

They said: 'Build him a pyre and throw him into the blazing fire.' (97)

وَقَالَ إِنِّي ذَاهِبٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّي سَيَهۡدِينِ ﴿٩٩﴾

They schemed to harm him, but We caused them to be humiliated. (98)

رَبِّ هَبۡ لِي مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

And Abraham said: 'I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me. (99)

فَبَشَّرۡنَٰهُ بِغُلَٰمٍ حَلِيمٖ ﴿١٠١﴾

Lord! Grant me a righteous son.' (100)

فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ ٱلسَّعۡيَ قَالَ يَٰبُنَيَّ إِنِّيٓ أَرَىٰ فِي ٱلۡمَنَامِ أَنِّيٓ أَذۡبَحُكَ فَٱنظُرۡ مَاذَا تَرَىٰۚ قَالَ يَٰٓأَبَتِ ٱفۡعَلۡ مَا تُؤۡمَرُۖ سَتَجِدُنِيٓ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

We gave him the happy news that he will have a forbearing son. (101)

فَلَمَّآ أَسۡلَمَا وَتَلَّهُۥ لِلۡجَبِينِ ﴿١٠٣﴾

When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said: 'My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.' [Ishmael] said: 'My father! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.' (102)

وَنَٰدَيۡنَٰهُ أَن يَٰٓإِبۡرَٰهِيمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

When the two of them had surrendered themselves to the will of God, and Abraham laid him prostrate on his forehead, (103)

قَدۡ صَدَّقۡتَ ٱلرُّءۡيَآۚ إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

We called to him: 'Abraham! (104)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَهُوَ ٱلْبَلَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿١٠٦﴾

You have already fulfilled the dream.' Thus do We reward those who do good. (105)

وَفَدَيْنَٰهُ بِذِبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٠٧﴾

All this was indeed a momentous trial. (106)

وَتَرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

We ransomed [Ishmael] with a noble sacrifice, (107)

سَلَٰمٌ عَلَىٰٓ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

We caused him to be praised by later generations: (108)

كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١١٠﴾

Peace be upon Abraham! (109)

إِنَّهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١١١﴾

Thus do we reward those who do good. (110)

وَبَشَّرْنَٰهُ بِإِسْحَٰقَ نَبِيًّا مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿١١٢﴾

He was truly one of our believing servants. (111)

وَبَٰرَكْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَعَلَىٰٓ إِسْحَٰقَ ۚ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا مُحْسِنٌ وَظَالِمٌ لِّنَفْسِهِۦ مُبِينٌ ﴿١١٣﴾

We gave Abraham the happy news of Isaac, a prophet and a righteous man; (112)

and We blessed him and Isaac; but among their offspring there were those who do good and others who would glaringly sin against their souls. (113)

وَلَقَدْ مَنَنَّا عَلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ﴿١١٤﴾

We also bestowed Our favour on Moses and Aaron; (114)

وَنَجَّيْنَٰهُمَا وَقَوْمَهُمَا مِنَ ٱلْكَرْبِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿١١٥﴾

We saved them and their people from great distress; (115)

وَنَصَرْنَٰهُمْ فَكَانُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلْغَٰلِبِينَ ﴿١١٦﴾

We gave them support, so that it was they who

achieved victory. (116)

وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمَا ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ ٱلۡمُسۡتَبِينَ ١١٧

We gave them the Scripture which made things clear; (117)

وَهَدَيۡنَٰهُمَا ٱلصِّرَٰطَ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمَ ١١٨

We guided them to the right path; (118)

وَتَرَكۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمَا فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرِينَ ١١٩

We caused them to be praised by later generations: (119)

سَلَٰمٌ عَلَىٰ مُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ١٢٠

Peace be upon Moses and Aaron! (120)

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ١٢١

Thus do We reward those who do good. (121)

إِنَّهُمَا مِنۡ عِبَادِنَا ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١٢٢

Both were among Our believing servants. (122)

وَإِنَّ إِلۡيَاسَ لَمِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٢٣

Elijah too was one of Our messengers. (123)

إِذۡ قَالَ لِقَوۡمِهِۦٓ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ١٢٤

He said to his people: 'Have you no fear of God? (124)

أَتَدۡعُونَ بَعۡلٗا وَتَذَرُونَ أَحۡسَنَ ٱلۡخَٰلِقِينَ ١٢٥

How can you invoke Baal and forsake the best of creators, (125)

ٱللَّهَ رَبَّكُمۡ وَرَبَّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ١٢٦

God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers?' (126)

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَإِنَّهُمۡ لَمُحۡضَرُونَ ١٢٧

But they accused him of lying. Therefore, they will certainly be brought [for punishment). (127)

إِلَّا عِبَادَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ١٢٨

Not so God's true servants. (128)

وَتَرَكۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرِينَ ١٢٩

We caused him to be praised by later generations:

سَلَٰمٌ عَلَىٰٓ إِلۡ يَاسِينَ ١٣٠

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ١٣١

إِنَّهُۥ مِنۡ عِبَادِنَا ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ١٣٢

وَإِنَّ لُوطٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٣٣

إِذۡ نَجَّيۡنَٰهُ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ أَجۡمَعِينَ ١٣٤

إِلَّا عَجُوزٗا فِي ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ١٣٥

ثُمَّ دَمَّرۡنَا ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ١٣٦

وَإِنَّكُمۡ لَتَمُرُّونَ عَلَيۡهِم مُّصۡبِحِينَ ١٣٧

وَبِٱلَّيۡلِۗ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ١٣٨

وَإِنَّ يُونُسَ لَمِنَ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٣٩

إِذۡ أَبَقَ إِلَى ٱلۡفُلۡكِ ٱلۡمَشۡحُونِ ١٤٠

فَسَاهَمَ فَكَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُدۡحَضِينَ ١٤١

فَٱلۡتَقَمَهُ ٱلۡحُوتُ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٞ ١٤٢

فَلَوۡلَآ أَنَّهُۥ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسَبِّحِينَ ١٤٣

(129)

Peace be upon Elijah! (130)

Thus do We reward those who do good. (131)

He was truly one of Our believing servants. (132)

Lot was also one of Our messengers. (133)

We saved him and all his household, (134)

except for an old woman who stayed behind. (135)

Then We utterly destroyed the others. (136)

Surely you pass by their ruins at morning-time, (137)

as also by night. Will you not, then, use your reason? (138)

Jonah too was one of Our messengers. (139)

He deserted, going on the laden ship. (140)

They cast lots, and he was the one who lost. (141)

The whale swallowed him, for he was to blame. (142)

Had he not been of those who truly glorified God, (143)

he would have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day. (144)	لَلَبِثَ فِي بَطْنِهِۦٓ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿١٤٤﴾
We caused him to be cast out, sick, on a barren shore, (145)	۞ فَنَبَذْنَٰهُ بِٱلْعَرَآءِ وَهُوَ سَقِيمٌ ﴿١٤٥﴾
and caused a gourd tree to grow over him. (146)	وَأَنۢبَتْنَا عَلَيْهِ شَجَرَةً مِّن يَقْطِينٍ ﴿١٤٦﴾
Then We sent him to [a community of] one hundred thousand or more. (147)	وَأَرْسَلْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ مِاْئَةِ أَلْفٍ أَوْ يَزِيدُونَ ﴿١٤٧﴾
They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while. (148)	فَـَٔامَنُواْ فَمَتَّعْنَٰهُمْ إِلَىٰ حِينٍ ﴿١٤٨﴾

Overview

In this second part, the *sūrah* picks up the lessons of history as it mentions communities going back to the early days of humanity and their attitudes towards divine guidance. We find the story frequently repeating itself. Indeed, the people who persisted in disbelief in Makkah, taking a hostile attitude to the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him), appear to be an offshoot of those earlier communities that went astray. The fates of those earlier communities are mentioned, putting before the Arab unbelievers certain historical events for them to reflect upon as also to reassure the believers that divine care, which never deserted the believers of old, would also not fail them.

The *sūrah* gives brief accounts of Noah, Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah. It dwells more on Abraham's and Ishmael's story as it puts before us an example of supreme faith and sacrifice showing us the nature of true surrender to God's will. This particular episode is not mentioned anywhere else in the *Qur'ān*. Together, these stories make up the entire passage.

The Fate of Noah's People

> *They found their forefathers astray, and rushed to follow in their footsteps. Most of the people of old went astray before them; although We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants. (Verses 69-74)*

These people are hardened in following error, but at the same time they are simply following the footsteps of others, without thinking or reflection. They rush to follow their fathers' lead taking no opportunity to question or examine: *"They found their forefathers astray, and rushed to follow in their footsteps."* (Verses 69-70) Both they and their fathers are examples of going astray, which was also the case of the majority of earlier communities: *"Most of the people of old went astray before them."* (Verse 71) Yet they did receive warnings, but paid no heed: *"although We had sent them warners."* (Verse 72) What did this lead to in the end? What was the outcome of the unbelievers' attitude, as compared with the outcome of heeding the warnings and accepting the faith? This is shown in the stories that follow. The verses that ensue serve as a mere announcement of what is to come: *"Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 73-74)

The first story is Noah's, but the account here dwells only briefly on the outcome, highlighting the care God took of His true servants:

> *Noah cried to Us, and We are the best to answer prayer: We saved him and his household from great distress; and caused his offspring to be the survivors. We caused him to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds! Thus do we reward those who do good. He was truly one of Our believing servants. Then We caused the others to drown. (Verses 75-82)*

This reference to Noah includes his appeal to God and the full answer to his prayer by the best to give such an answer. It also tells of the fact that he and his household were saved from the great floods that drowned all except those whom God willed to be saved. It speaks of God's will to make of his offspring communities which build the earth and establish its heritage, while he himself, would he remembered by future generations until the end of time. *"We caused him to be praised by later generations."* (Verse 78) It declares to all the worlds God's greeting to Noah, as he was one who fulfilled well the assignment given him: *"Peace be upon Noah in all the worlds! Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verses 79-80) What reward could anyone wish for when he has received God's own greetings and is to be remembered for the rest of time? The mark of Noah's doing well that so ensured his great reward was his unshakeable faith: *"He was truly one of Our believing servants."* (Verse 81) This outcome is brought about by faith. The unbelievers among Noah's people met their own ruin: *"Then We caused the others to drown."* (Verse 82) This has set the rule ever since the dawn of history. It is the pattern given in general terms immediately before these stories: *"We had sent them warners. Behold what happened in the end to those that had been warned. Not so God's true servants."* (Verses 72-74)

Abraham and the Idols

The *sūrah* then depicts two of the main episodes from Abraham's story. The first shows him advocating faith among his people and destroying their idols, followed by their attempt to kill him and God saving him. This episode is also described in other *sūrahs.* The second episode however, is only mentioned here. It speaks of Abraham's dream, his sacrifice and how God released his son. This story is given in detail, speaking of stages and attitudes in a remarkably fine and effective style. It shows the most sublime example of obedience to God, sacrifice and self surrender:

> *Among those who followed his way was Abraham. He turned to his Lord with a sound heart. He said to his father and his people: What is this that you worship? Do you choose false deities instead of God? What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds? (Verses 83-87)*

Thus the story opens, moving from Noah to Abraham and making it clear that they were related in faith and its advocacy. Thus Abraham is said to belong to Noah's community despite the long time gap between them. Nonetheless they shared the same divine constitution and message.

Abraham's quality highlighted here is his sound heart, which makes him a man of true faith and clear conscience: "*He turned to his Lord with a sound heart.*" (Verse 84) This is an image of complete submission as represented in Abraham's turning to his Lord. Use of the adjective 'sound' gives clear impressions, and at the same time it is easy and clear, giving strong connotations of purity, sincerity and straightforward behaviour.

Because he had a sound heart, Abraham took exception to the practices of his people. This was motivated by his sound sense which recoiled from any idea or behaviour that conflicted with essential human nature: "*He said to his father and his people: What is this that you worship? Do you choose false deities instead of God? What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?*" (Verses 85-87) As he saw them worshipping statues and idols, he disapprovingly asked: '*What is this that you worship?*' This thing that you worship is not worthy of what you do. In fact, there is no trace of truth in such worship: it is sheer falsehood: "*Do you choose false deities instead of God?*" (Verse 86) What concept do you have of God? Is it so low that human nature looks with abhorrence at its first sight? "*What, then, do you think of the Lord of all the worlds?*" (Verse 87)

The *sūrah* does not report their answer or their argument with him. Instead, it moves straight to the second scene, showing what he determined to do to confront this flagrant falsehood:

> *Then he cast a glance at the stars, and said: 'Indeed I am sick.' So his people turned*

> *away from him and left. He then approached their deities stealthily and said: 'Will you not eat [your offerings]? What is the matter with you that you do not speak?' And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand. (Verses 88-93)*

It is said that Abraham's people were in the midst of a special festive occasion, which might have been their new year's day, when they went out to spend the day in gardens and parks. They started, however, by placing fruit in front of their deities for blessing. When they returned, having had their fun, they took their blessed food. Abraham, who had despaired of ever receiving a reasonable response from them, realized that they had gone too far astray, and had made up his mind with regard to his next move. Indeed, he waited until the day when they were sure to be away from their temples. He was so fed up with their error that it pained his heart. Therefore, when he was invited to join them, he looked at the sky and said: 'I am sick, I cannot join in your festivity. If I come with you, I may spoil your occasion.'

He was simply expressing his distress at their practices, so that they would leave him alone. What he said was true; it was no lie. Distress can leave real feelings of illness. Since the people were busy preparing for their celebration, they did not stop to examine his claims. Rather. they left him alone and went away. This was the chance Abraham had waited for.

He went straight to their false deities and saw splendid varieties of food and fruit placed in front of them. He said sarcastically: *"Will you not eat?"* (Verse 91) Needless to say, the statues and idols made no reply. He continued with his sarcasm, while also expressing irritation: *"What is the matter with you that you do not speak?"* (Verse 92) This is a common psychological situation: a man addressing his words to something he knows will not hear or answer him. It was, however, merely an expression of what Abraham felt towards his people as they engaged in absurd falsehood. Once more, the idols gave him no answer. At this point he moved swiftly to pour out all his frustration in action, not just in mere words: "*And then he fell upon them, smiting them with his right hand.*" (Verse 93) Thus he cleared his illness and distress by solid action.

With this scene over, the *sūrah* paints a new one. The people return from their festivities and *see* their deities destroyed. Here we do not have the details given in *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, about their asking as to what had happened and determining who was the perpetrator. Instead, the *sūrah* moves straight to their confrontation with Abraham.

"*His people came to him hurriedly.*" (Verse 94) The news circulated quickly among them, and they unflinchingly sought to confront him. They were angry, agitated and numerous, while he was alone. Yet he had his faith: he knew its simple details, recognizing its soundness within himself and seeing its evidence in the universe

around him. This made him stronger than this agitated, angry multitude with its confused beliefs and stupid concepts. Therefore, he put his argument straight, caring little for their number and anger: *"He said: Do you worship something that you yourselves have carved, while it is God who has created you and all your handiwork?"* (Verses 95-96)

It is the logic of a simple and sound nature putting the case starkly and clearly to others: how come you worship what you carve with your own hands, when worship should be addressed to the Maker, not to what is made: *"It is God who has created you and all your handiwork."* (Verse 96) He is the Maker of all, and He is the One to be worshipped.

Although Abraham's argument was clear and logical, in their blind anger, the people did not listen. When did falsehood ever listen to simple truth? Therefore, their leaders retaliated by exercising a crude tyranny: *"They said: Build him a pyre and throw him into the blazing fire."* (Verse 97) This is the only logic tyranny knows. It cares little for argument and proof. Tyrants know that they cannot face the word of truth, with its overpowering appeal.

The *sūrah* gives no details of what happened after they issued their orders. It simply shows the outcome with the fulfilment of God's promise to His true servants and His warnings to the unbelievers: *"They schemed to harm him, but We caused them to be humiliated."* (Verse 98) What chance has such scheming when God wants it to be foiled? What can frail and powerless tyrants who cling to power do when God takes care of His true servants?

The Great Sacrifice

The *sūrah* moves on to the second episode it relates of Abraham's history. After he was saved from the fire, he closed that chapter of his life to begin a new phase: *"And Abraham said I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me."* (Verse 99) His words indicate that he was migrating, this in both a mental and physical sense. He was abandoning everything: his father, family, home, people and land, leaving them all behind and going to his Lord, free of all concerns. He thus surrendered himself to his Lord, assured that He would give him guidance and care, setting him on the right path. It is a migration from one state to another, abandoning all ties and bonds in favour of one bond that remains pure and strong. His words express complete faith and unqualified surrender.

Until that moment, Abraham was without children. He had left behind his relations, friends and all that was familiar to him. Needless to say, his relations with those who threw him in the fire suffered a final breakdown. Therefore, he went to his Lord, praying to Him to grant him believing offspring: *"Lord! Grant me a righteous son."* (Verse 100) And God answered his true servant's prayer: *"We gave him the happy*

news that he will have a forbearing son." (Verse 101) The son was most probably Ishmael, as clearly inferred from his life story and from the *sūrah* itself. Indeed, we can see the mark of his forbearance in his youth. We can also imagine the delight experienced by Abraham in his new abode, where he was a stranger, at the birth of this son described by God as a '*forbearing son.'*

It is time for us now to look at the glorious attitude that Abraham's life story represents, drawing from it an inspiring lesson as presented by God Almighty to the Muslim community.

> *When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said: My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.' [ashmael] said My father.! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.' (Verse 102)*

What effect will faith not produce? We see here Abraham in his old age, cut off in a foreign land, having deserted his homeland and his people, being given a child. The child turns out to be a model son, with his forbearance confirmed by God Himself. Hardly had Abraham enjoyed his son's company and seen his youth blooming so as to become his companion and assistant, when he sees in his dream that he should slaughter him. He understands that it is a sign from God requiring sacrifice. What is his attitude now? He does not hesitate for a moment. The thought of disobedience does not even occur to him. He thinks only of submission. It is true that the dream was only a signal, not a clear and direct order issued through revelation. It was a signal by his Lord though, and that was enough for Abraham to comply, not to delay, and not even to ask why.

Moreover, his compliance did not betray any feeling of distress, horror or panic; it was marked by calm acceptance and reassurance, reflected in his words as he put this most grave matter to his son: "*My son! I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. Tell me, then, what you think.*" (Verse 102) These are the words of a man in full control of himself and his feelings, knowing that he is only doing his duty and trusting that it behoves him to comply. We do not see any element of panic driving a person to do even what he feels to be repugnant, in order to get it done and finished with.

That it was hard for Abraham is beyond doubt. He was not required to send his only son to war, nor to put him to a task that would end in his death. Nothing of the sort. Instead he was required to undertake the task himself, by his own hand. And what task was that? It was to slaughter his own son by way of sacrifice. This was the order he received calmly, the one that he put to his son and asked him to consider carefully. He did not take his son by surprise and do what was bidden. Rather, he

puts the question to him as if it were both normal and familiar. To Abraham, the question was one of obedience. Since his Lord wanted something, so be it, without hesitation. His son should also know and accept it willingly, with submission so that he too would earn the reward of obeying God and experience the pleasure of submission to Him. He himself had known that pleasure and now wants his son to feel it as the pure goodness that surpasses all else that life can offer.

What does the son say as his father proposes to slaughter him in fulfilment of what he saw in a dream? The son also rises to the sublime standard his father had earlier attained: "*He said: My father! Do as you are bidden, and, God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.*" (Verse 102) This is not a response of mere obedience and resignation. It is a response marked with acceptance and certainty. His reply begins with, '*My father!*' The prospect of his death does not cause him to panic or to forget his manners and love of his father. "*Do as you are bidden.*" He also feels the same as his father, taking the dream as a signal, which means an order. This is sufficient to make him willing to carry it out without hesitation.

Furthermore, we see in Ishmael's response proper manners with his Lord, and recognition of the limits of his ability in the face of hardship. Therefore, he seeks his Lord's help to overcome his weakness. He attributes to God the grace of helping him to obey and make the sacrifice: "*God willing, you will find me to be patient in adversity.*" (Verse 102) He does not press the matter as a heroic act on his part. Nor does he describe it as facing the danger and caring little for the consequences. He does not give himself any credit in the matter; he simply attributes it all to God who has helped him in carrying out His orders with patience in adversity. This is an example of perfect humility before God, trust in Him, combined with complete obedience and submission to His will.

The scene moves further to show us the order being carried out: "*When the two of them had surrendered themselves to the will of God, and Abraham laid him prostrate on his forehead.*" (Verse 103) Once more, obedience, faith and acceptance of God's will rise to a far nobler standard than anything known to humanity. The father puts his son prostrate before him and the son submits and shows no resistance. All this takes place in reality. Such is self surrender, which is the essence of Islam: complete trust, obedience, certainty, acceptance, submission and action. Both father and son experience nothing other than pure faith.

The point here is not one of bravery, courage, enthusiasm or heroic action which a warrior might feel in battle. A committed fighter may undertake a task knowing that his chance of survival is negligible. However, this is totally different from what Abraham and Ishmael were doing: for them, there is no boiling situation, no rush of enthusiasm prompting hasty action before weakness or hesitation can creep in. Theirs is a rational self surrender, with full knowledge of what they want, and

complete reassurance about what will take place. More than that, they coolly appreciate the pleasure of obeying God's orders.

At this stage, Abraham and Ishmael have done all that is required of them. They have submitted themselves and carried out the order. All that remained was the actual shedding of Ishmael's blood and his death, which, in God's scales, counted for little, compared with the energy, feelings and determination both father and son put into what was bidden of them. By this time, the test had reached its climax, its results were known and its objectives fulfilled. What remained was physical pain and a dead body, but God does not want His servants to endure suffering. He does not require them to torment or kill themselves. Once they have submitted themselves and shown their true willingness to do what He bids, then they have fulfilled what is required and passed the test successfully.

Deliverance

God witnessed the sincerity shown by both Abraham and Ishmael, and He considered them to have fulfilled all that was required of them:

> *We called to him: Abraham! You have already fulfilled the dream.' Thus do We reward those who do good. All this was indeed a momentous trial. We ransomed [Ishmael] with a noble sacrifice. (Verses 104-107)*

You have indeed fulfilled all you needed to fulfil. God wants nothing from His servants other than that they submit themselves to Him totally, so that they have nothing which they consider too dear or too precious to give up, not even an only son, or their own lives. You, Abraham, have done this, offering everything dear, with certainty and acceptance. What was left was flesh and blood, which could be substituted by any type of flesh and blood. Thus, God ransomed this young man who had submitted himself to His will by a great and noble sacrifice. It is reported that the sacrifice was a ram which Abraham found ready by God's will and that he sacrificed this ram in place of Ishmael.

Abraham was then told: "*Thus do We reward those who do good.*" (Verse 105) We reward them by choosing them for such a test, directing their minds and hearts to rise to the necessary level, helping them in such fulfilment and then giving them the reward they deserve.

It is to commemorate this great event which serves as a symbol of true faith and submission to God that Muslims celebrate the *`Īd* of Sacrifice, or *al-Adĥā.* This event serves as a reference point for the Muslim community to know their first father, Abraham, whose faith it follows and to whom it traces its ancestry. It thus

understands the nature of its faith, based on submission to God's will with perfect acceptance and reassurance. It will never need to ask God why. It will never hesitate to do His bidding, once it realizes what He wants of it. It gives its all, withholding nothing, and choosing no particular way or form of offering. It simply does what He bids it to do. The Muslim community also knows that God does not wish to overburden it with the test, nor put it to hardship. All He needs is that Muslims should be ready to give whatever they are required to give, in full obedience and commitment, without hesitation. Once they prove such complete dedication, He will remove the need for their sacrifice and pain. He will consider that they have fulfilled their duty and reward them for that, replacing their sacrifice and honouring them as He honoured their father, Abraham.

"We *caused him to be praised by later generations."* (Verse 108) He is remembered by one generation after another. He is the father of all prophets, and the founding father of the Muslim community which inherits his faith. God has assigned to the Muslim community the task of leading humanity on the basis of Abraham's faith. In so doing, God has made the Muslim community Abraham's descendants for the rest of human life.

"Peace be upon Abraham." (Verse 109) It is a greeting of peace by his Lord, recorded in His hook and engraved in the book of the universe. *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 110) We reward them after testing them, and We fulfil Our promise to them and honour them. *"He was truly one of our believing servants."* (Verse 111) Such is the reward of faith, and such is its nature as revealed by the momentous test.

God's grace is bestowed once more on Abraham, as He gave him Isaac in his old age. He further blesses him and his son, making Isaac a prophet: *"We gave Abraham the happy news of Isaac, a prophet and a righteous man; and We blessed him and Isaac."* (Verses 112-113) Their offspring goes on through generations, but its main criterion is not the relation of blood, but the relation of faith and a code of living: whoever follows in their footsteps does-good, and whoever deviates wrongs himself and cannot benefit from this blood relation: *"Among their offspring there were those who do good and others who would glaringly sin against their souls."* (Verse 113)

Abraham's Descendants

The descendants of Abraham and Isaac included Moses and Aaron:

> *We also bestowed Our favour on Moses and Aaron; We saved them and their people from great distress; We gave them support, so that it was they who achieved victory. We gave them the Scripture which made things clear; We guided them to the right path; We caused them to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Moses and*

> *Aaron! Thus do We reward those who do good. Both were among Our believing servants. (Verses 114-122)*

Here we only have a glimpse of the story of Moses and Aaron, highlighting God's favours bestowed on them first in being chosen to deliver His message, then in saving them and their people from great distress, which is recounted in detail in other *sūrahs*. God's favours on them also included their victory over their enemies, Pharaoh and his people, as also giving them the Scriptures and guiding them to the right path. It should be clear that God guides to this right path only those who believe in Him. He further ensured that they would be praised by future generations. This glimpse concludes with a greeting and blessing of peace from God to Moses and Aaron. Again the type of reward given to those who do good and the great value of faith, for which believers are held in honour, is repeated here.

A similar glimpse of the story of Elijah, a prophet mentioned in the Old Testament, is given here. Elijah was a messenger to people in Syria who worshipped a statue called Baal. The ruins of the city of Baalbek in Lebanon retain traces of such worship:

> *Elijah too was one of Our messengers. He said to his people: 'Have you no fear of God? How can you invoke Baal and forsake the best of creators, God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers?' But they accused him of lying. Therefore, they will certainly be brought [for punishment]. Not so God's true servants. We caused him to be praised by later generations: Peace be upon Elijah! Thus do We reward those who do good. He was truly one of Our believing servants. (Verses 123-132)*

Elijah called on his people to believe in God's oneness, denouncing their practice of worshipping Baal in preference to God, the best of creators. Thus, he followed the same line as Abraham when he denounced his people's idolatrous worship. The same stance was taken by every messenger when they encountered idol worship. The wrongdoers' response was to accuse Elijah of lying and to reject his message. God confirms here that they too will be brought before Him for punishment, except for those of them who believed in the message of the truth. This snippet ends in the same way as other historical accounts in this *sūrah* by emphasizing the honour God grants to His messengers: this by giving them the greeting and blessing of peace, outlining the reward of people who do good and the great value of faith. This is the only occasion that an account of Elijah is given in the *Qur'ān.*

Then we take a brief look at Lot, whose story occurs after Abraham's story in other *sūrahs:*

> *Lot was also one of Our messengers. We saved him and all his household, except for an*

> *old woman who stayed behind. Then We utterly destroyed the others. Surely you pass by their ruins at morning-time, as also by night. Will you not, then, use your reason? (Verses 133-138)*

The depiction here is similar to that given of Noah. It refers to the fact that Lot was God's messenger, and that he was saved with his family, except his wife, while the hardened unbelievers were destroyed. This is followed by a reminder to the Arabs who used to pass by the area where Lot's people lived without heeding the lesson their ruins told, and without fearing that they would be destroyed in similar fashion.

Jonah and the Whale

The last of these glimpses from the history of earlier messengers concerns Jonah:

> *Jonah too was one of Our messengers. He deserted, going on the laden ship. They cast lots, and he was the one who lost. The whale swallowed him, for he was to blame. Had he not been of those who truly glorified God, he would have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day. We caused him to be cast out, sick, on a barren shore, and caused a gourd tree to grow over him. Then We sent him to la community of] one hundred thousand or more. They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while. (Verses 139-148)*

The *Qur'ān* does not mention where Jonah's people lived, but it is understood that they were not far from the sea. Reports tell us that Jonah was frustrated by his people's continued denial of his message and the truth it made clear. He warned them against God's impending punishment, and then abandoned them in anger. His anger led him to the sea-shore, where he boarded a laden ship. When the ship was in the middle of the sea, it was hit by a raging storm. It was widely believed at that time that such a disaster signalled that among the passengers there must be someone who had incurred God's anger. For the ship to withstand the storm that person had to be thrown overboard. They, thus, drew lots and Jonah was the one who lost. Although they knew him to be a virtuous and God-fearing man, the drawing of his lot was confirmed. Therefore, they threw him into the sea, or he might have jumped himself. Nonetheless, he was swallowed by the whale, deserving of blame, because he had abandoned the assignment God had given him, leaving his people in anger before seeking God's permission. When he felt acute distress inside the whale's belly, he glorified God and prayed for His forgiveness, stating that he had wronged himself. He said in his prayer: "*There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!*" (21: 87) God answered his prayer, and the whale cast him out.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that "*had he not been of those who truly glorified God, he would*

have remained in the whale's belly till Resurrection Day." (Verses 143-144) When he was cast out, he was both sick and naked. Therefore God "*caused a gourd tree to grow over him,"* its broad leaves covering him. It also protected him against flies, which are said not to come near this plant. This was part of the favour God bestowed on him. When he had recovered, God returned him to the people whom he had left in anger. In turn, they feared that his warnings would come true, and they believed, praying for God's forgiveness. God thus accepted them, sparing them the punishment He inflicts on people who deny His message: "*They believed, so We let them enjoy life for a while."* (Verse 148) They numbered a hundred thousand or more, and all of them became believers.[11]

This brief account of Jonah's story explains the fate of those who believe, so contrasting the fate of the unbelievers in the other stories. Let the Arabs, who received Muĥammad's message, choose which fate they prefer.

[11] Other references to Jonah's story are discussed in Vol. 9, pp. 117-118, and Vol. 12, pp. 52-54. — Editor's note.

3
To Whom Victory is Guaranteed

فَٱسْتَفْتِهِمْ أَلِرَبِّكَ ٱلْبَنَاتُ وَلَهُمُ ٱلْبَنُونَ ﴿١٤٩﴾

Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? (149)

أَمْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ إِنَٰثًا وَهُمْ شَٰهِدُونَ ﴿١٥٠﴾

Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? (150)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُم مِّنْ إِفْكِهِمْ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿١٥١﴾

Out of their falsehood they say: (151)

وَلَدَ ٱللَّهُ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. (152)

أَصْطَفَى ٱلْبَنَاتِ عَلَى ٱلْبَنِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? (153)

مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? (154)

أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

Do you not reflect? (155)

أَمْ لَكُمْ سُلْطَٰنٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥٦﴾

Or do you perhaps, have a clear authority? (156)

فَأْتُوا۟ بِكِتَٰبِكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! (157)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ بَيْنَهُۥ وَبَيْنَ ٱلْجِنَّةِ نَسَبًا ۚ وَلَقَدْ عَلِمَتِ ٱلْجِنَّةُ إِنَّهُمْ لَمُحْضَرُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

They claim that He has kinship with the jinn; yet the jinn themselves know that they will be brought [before God] for judgement. (158)

سُبۡحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him. (159)

إِلَّا عِبَادَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

Not so God's true servants. (160)

فَإِنَّكُمۡ وَمَا تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿١٦١﴾

Neither you nor what you worship (161)

مَآ أَنتُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ بِفَٰتِنِينَ ﴿١٦٢﴾

can lure away from God any (162)

إِلَّا مَنۡ هُوَ صَالِ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ﴿١٦٣﴾

except one who is destined for hell. (163)

وَمَا مِنَّآ إِلَّا لَهُۥ مَقَامٞ مَّعۡلُومٞ ﴿١٦٤﴾

Every single one of us has his appointed place: (164)

وَإِنَّا لَنَحۡنُ ٱلصَّآفُّونَ ﴿١٦٥﴾

we are ranged in ranks, (165)

وَإِنَّا لَنَحۡنُ ٱلۡمُسَبِّحُونَ ﴿١٦٦﴾

and we too extol His limitless glory. (166)

وَإِن كَانُواْ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿١٦٧﴾

They have long been saying: (167)

لَوۡ أَنَّ عِندَنَا ذِكۡرٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٦٨﴾

'If only we had before us a tradition from those of old, (168)

لَكُنَّا عِبَادَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

we would certainly be true servants of God.' (169)

فَكَفَرُواْ بِهِۦۖ فَسَوۡفَ يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿١٧٠﴾

Yet they reject it. In time, they will come to know. (170)

وَلَقَدۡ سَبَقَتۡ كَلِمَتُنَا لِعِبَادِنَا ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٧١﴾

Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: (171)

إِنَّهُمۡ لَهُمُ ٱلۡمَنصُورُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

وَإِنَّ جُندَنَا لَهُمُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ ﴿١٧٣﴾

it is they who will be helped, (172)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنۡهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ حِينٖ ﴿١٧٤﴾

and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious. (173)

وَأَبۡصِرۡهُمۡ فَسَوۡفَ يُبۡصِرُونَ ﴿١٧٥﴾

So, turn away from them for a while, (174)

أَفَبِعَذَابِنَا يَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَ ﴿١٧٦﴾

and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. (175)

فَإِذَا نَزَلَ بِسَاحَتِهِمۡ فَسَآءَ صَبَاحُ ٱلۡمُنذَرِينَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

Do they really wish to hasten Our punishment? (176)

وَتَوَلَّ عَنۡهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ حِينٖ ﴿١٧٨﴾

When it strikes in their midst, terrible will be the morning of those who were already warned. (177)

وَأَبۡصِرۡ فَسَوۡفَ يُبۡصِرُونَ ﴿١٧٩﴾

And again, turn away from them for a while, (178)

سُبۡحَٰنَ رَبِّكَ رَبِّ ٱلۡعِزَّةِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿١٨٠﴾

and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. (179)

وَسَلَٰمٌ عَلَى ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٨١﴾

Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of almightiness, above all what people attribute to Him. (180)

وَٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٨٢﴾

And peace be upon all His messengers. (181)

All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (182)

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* builds on the main themes already discussed, particularly the historical accounts given in the second part which explain the true nature of the relation between God and His servants to refute the superstitions

circulated among the Arabs. In one such superstition the Arabs claimed that the angels were God's daughters, and in another they alleged that a marriage relation existed between God and the *jinn.* The *sūrah* now puts before them what they said before God's message was delivered to them. This was when they expressed dear hopes that God would send them a messenger and when they emphasized that they would follow the guidance such a messenger provided. Yet when God sent them the Messenger they asked for they resorted to disbelief. The *sūrah* concludes by stating God's promise to His messengers that they will end victorious, disassociating God from all the unbelievers' claims, and praising God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Superstitious Beliefs

> *Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons? Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence? Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed. Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons? What is the matter with you? How do you make your judgement? Do you not reflect? Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth! (Verses 149-157)*

The *sūrah* uses every means to refute the unbelievers' claims; it shows their false superstition for what it is, draws its argument on the basis of their own logic and how it works in their own environment. They used to prefer boys to girls, considering the birth of a girl something of a tragedy. Yet they allege at the same time that the angels were female and that they were God's daughters. Therefore, the *sūrah* takes up the argument, using their own standards to show how stupid their claims were: "*Now ask the unbelievers if it be true that your Lord has daughters, while they would have sons?*" If females are of a lesser rank, how could they assign daughters to their Lord and keep sons for themselves? Or was it that He chose for Himself daughters and gave them sons? Neither possibility stands to reason. The Prophet is instructed to question them about this worthless claim. He is also to ask them about the source of the superstition and how it came about. In other words, where did they get the idea that the angels were females? Did they witness their creation in order to know their sex? "*Or is it that We have created the angels female in their presence?*" (Verse 150)

The *sūrah* gives the exact wording of their fabricated lies about God: "*Out of their falsehood they say: 'God has begotten children.' They are lying indeed.*" (Verses 151-152) They are liars even according to their own tradition which prefers sons to daughters. How could it be, then, that God would choose daughters for Himself? "*Would He then choose daughters in preference to sons?*" (Verse 153) It wonders at their judgement which ignores their own logic: "*What is the matter with you? How do you make your*

judgement? Do you not reflect?" (Verses 154-155) Where do you get the evidence on which you base your judgement? *"Or do you, perhaps, have a clear authority? Bring your scriptures, if you are speaking the truth!"* (Verses 156-157)

The *sūrah* moves on to refute the other superstition which alleged that some relationship existed between God and the *jinn: "They claim that He has kinship with the jinn; yet the jinn themselves know that they will be brought [before God] for judgement."* (Verse 158) The allegation being that the angels were God's daughters born to Him by the *jinn!* The unbelievers claimed that this is how the relation started. The *jinn,* however, know for certain that they are created by God, like all other creation, and they also know that they will be brought before Him for judgement. Had they been related to Him, they would be due different treatment.

God places Himself far above this worthless fabrication: *"Limitless is God in His glory, above all what people attribute to Him."* (Verse 159) He also makes clear that the believers among the *jinn* would not be driven to suffer their punishment. *"Not so God's true servants."* (Verse 160)

The *sūrah* then quotes an address made to the idolaters, their alleged deities and their deviant beliefs. Apparently, the address is made by the angels:

> *Neither you nor what you worship can lure away from God any except one who is destined for hell. Every single one of us has his appointed place: we are ranged in ranks, and we too extol His limitless glory. (Verses 161-166)*

What this address means is that neither the unbelievers, nor the deities they worship could turn anyone away from God's path except one who is considered to belong to the people of hell and destined for it. They cannot lead astray a believer who is God's obedient servant. Hell has its own people who are of a known type. These respond to temptations and listen to those who try to lead them astray.

The angels also refute this superstition, making it clear that each one of them has his own position which he does not exceed. They are a type of God's creation who worship Him alone. They are assigned certain tasks and they fulfil them, ranging themselves in rows for prayer and extolling God's glory.

An Unfailing Promise

The *sūrah* then speaks about the idolaters who circulate such superstitions, mentioning the promises they made when they envied the people of earlier revelations for receiving such messages. They used to say that had they had some sort of traditional beliefs inherited from Abraham or later prophets, they would have had a degree of faith that would have enhanced their position with God: *"They have*

long been saying: If only we had before us a tradition from those of old, we would certainly he true servants of God." (Verses 167-169) Yet when they received the best revelations ever bestowed from on high, they turned away and forgot their promises: *"Yet they reject it. In time, they will come to know."* (Verse 170) The verse carries an implicit threat, which is suitable for those who persist in disbelief, going back on expressed wishes and promises: *"They will come to know."*

At this point the *sūrah* states God's promise to His messengers of His assured help. In this way victory is assured them: *"Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious."* (Verses 171-173)

The promise is a true promise, and God's word is fulfilled. The roots of true faith have been firmly established on earth and its structure is raised despite the unbelievers' rejection, the persecution to which believers are subjected as well as many other obstacles and barriers. The beliefs of idolaters and unbelievers have disappeared, their power has dwindled while the faith preached by God's messengers appeals to people's minds and hearts. In fact, its appeal remains strong in spite of all the opposing factors. All the attempts to suppress divine faith in favour of any other philosophy or ideology have failed, even in those areas where these started. God's promise to His messengers has come true. This is a universal phenomenon that has remained true throughout the world and in all generations.

It is also true for every movement that aims to revive the divine message, provided that its advocates are sincere and dedicated. It will be triumphant no matter what obstacles are put in its way. Falsehood may mobilize all its powers of persecution, torture, open warfare as well as propaganda that relies on fabricated lies, but all to no avail. The removal of such calumny may entail fighting a few battles, perhaps with different results, but eventually God's promise to His messengers will be fulfilled. This is a promise of ultimate victory that will see them established on earth and having power. This promise will be fulfilled even though all the powers on earth are ranged to stop it.

This promise is one of God's universal laws which operates just like the stars and planets follow their cycles, the night and day alternate, and like a dead land coming to life when rain falls on it. However, this law follows God's will and works according to His planning. It may appear slow in relation to people's limited life spans, but it will never fail. In fact it may be fulfilled in a way that people do not appreciate, because they always look for the form of victory they know. Indeed, they may not readily appreciate that victory comes in a new form and they may need time to appreciate this.

People may want to see a particular form of victory for the advocates of the divine

faith who follow His messengers, but God wishes to accomplish a different form which is greater and longer lasting. What takes place, then, is what God wants, even if this means that these advocates will have to endure greater troubles, exert more effort and strive for much longer than they expected. Before the Battle of Badr, the Prophet's Companions hoped to take the Quraysh's trade caravan, but God wanted that they miss it and instead engage their enemy, with its superior forces, in battle. What God wanted ensured a much better outcome for them and for Islam. That was the victory God wanted to give His Messenger, a victory for His message with lasting effects.

The advocates of God's faith may lose a battle, and may even suffer very hard times, but this is because God is preparing them to achieve victory in a greater battle. He thus brings about circumstances that make their victory yield fruit on a wider scale and for a longer period.

God's word has gone forth, and His promise has been given by His will. His law will take effect without fail: "*Our word has already been given to Our servants the messengers: it is they who will be helped, and it is Our forces who will surely be victorious.*" (Verses 171-173)

When this true promise has been declared, God orders His Messenger to turn away from unbelievers, leaving them to God's word and *promise* to take effect. He should, however, watch them as the word proves true, for they will see with their own eyes how this comes about:

> *So, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. Do they really wish to hasten Our punishment? When it strikes in their midst, terrible will be the morning of those who were already warned. And again, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see. (Verses 174-179)*

The Prophet is told to leave them alone and not care for them. He is further told to wait for the day when he and they will see what God's promise means for him and them. If they hasten His punishment, they will suffer greatly when it falls upon them. Should this strike a community, they will have got what is certain to grieve them. Again, the Prophet is told to abandon them to their fate. This order implies further warning to them, and again the *sūrah* advises that the outcome will be terrible: "*And again, turn away from them for a while, and watch them; in time, they too will come to see.*" (Verses 178-179) What will happen is left unspecified, implying great terror.

The *sūrah* concludes with extolling God's glory, stating that all might belongs to Him alone. It adds the blessing and greeting of peace to God's messengers, and declares that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all, who has no partners

whatsoever:

> *Limitless in His glory is your Lord, the Lord of almightiness, above all what people attribute to Him. And peace be upon all His messengers. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (Verses 180-182)*

It is indeed a fitting ending that sums up the main issues discussed in the *sūrah* as a whole.

SŪRAH 38

Ṣād

Prologue

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* addresses three issues: God's oneness, revelation, and the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. These three issues are discussed in its first part comprising 16 verses. Here the Makkan elders' amazement at the Prophet's call on them to believe in God's oneness and that he was chosen by God to be His Messenger is described. *"They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?'"* (Verses 4-8) In these verses we are also told how they met God's warnings of punishment in the life to come: *"They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning."* (Verse 16)

Basically, they found it impossible to believe that God would choose one of their own number to deliver His message and moreover that this person should be Muĥammad ibn Abdullah who had not held a position of authority among them. Therefore, in reply to their question about His choice, God too questions them: *"Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace, the Almighty, the Munificent? Or do they have control over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them? Let them, then, try to ascend by all conceivable means."* (Verses 9-10) This tells them that when God wishes to open the gates of His mercy to anyone, nothing can withhold it. They are further told that human beings own nothing in the heavens and earth; it is a matter of God's sustenance and mercy, which He bestows on whomever He wishes. It is He who chooses those He knows to deserve His bounty and bestows on them whatever He will, without limit or restriction.

Within this context the *sūrah* gives an account of David and Solomon and the favours God blessed them with, including prophethood, kingdom, and the fact that the mountains, birds, *jinn* and wind were subjected to them. Yet they were ordinary human beings afflicted by the same type of human weakness as anyone else. They too then needed God's mercy and care to overcome such weaknesses. In this respect, their repentance is accepted and they are set on the way to God's pleasure.

By means of both stories the Prophet is instructed to persevere in the face of all the opposition the unbelievers put up against him. He should look to God's grace and care as demonstrated to David and Solomon: *"Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us."* (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* also gives a brief account of the Prophet Job, describing how God may test His true servants with hardship and affliction. The patience Job showed in adversity provides a splendid example of how to remain steadfast. The account also describes the good end Job experienced as God bestowed His mercy on him, dispelling all his pain. The Muslims in Makkah are thus shown how to find solace amidst the constant hardship the unbelievers try to inflict on them. They are reminded that such hardship invariably opens the way to God's mercy, which is inexhaustible.

These stories form the second and major part of the *sūrah.* It also includes a reply to the unbelievers' hastening of God's punishment, presenting a scene from the Day of Judgement, describing the happiness that awaits the God-fearing and the blazing fire that awaits those who reject the truth. The values of truth are well established in the life to come, providing the criterion for judgement. The arrogant Makkan chiefs will realize this when they see their fate and compare it with that of the weak elements on whom they poured their derision, claiming that God's mercy would never he shown to those so weak. The scene so described provides contrasting images: *"The God-fearing will certainly have a good place to return to: gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open to them. They will he comfortably seated there, and they will call for abundant fruit and drink, having beside them well-matched mates of modest gaze."* (Verses 49-52) On the other hand, *"those who transgress the bounds of what is right will have the most evil place to return to: hell will they have to endure; and how evil a resting place. Let them, then, taste this: a scalding fluid and a dark, disgusting food, and coupled with it, further [suffering! of a similar nature."* (Verses 55-58) They will argue, quarrel and curse one another in hell, and they will remember how they used to ridicule the believers: *"They will say: How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?"* (Verses 62-63) They cannot find such people in hell, because they are the ones who belong to heaven. This then is the answer to both their hastening of God's

punishment and their ridicule of the believers. This scene forms the third part of the *sūrah.*

In reply to their disbelieving reaction to what the Prophet had told them of the revelations he received from on high, he tells them about Adam and what happened on high. The Prophet was not present when this took place; he was only told about it by God. Indeed no human being, other than Adam, was present. From this account we learn about *Iblīs'* condemnation and that it was his envy at God's preference for Adam that brought about his expulsion from heaven. Since the unbelievers thought it was too big a favour for God to choose Muĥammad from among them, their attitude is not dissimilar to that of *Iblīs.* This last part of the *sūrah* concludes with a clear statement from the Prophet: *"Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, and in time you will certainly come to know its truth."* (Verses 86-88)

The *sūrah,* in all its four parts, depicts the destruction of earlier communities when they resorted to arrogance, accusing God's messengers of lying and holding the believers in contempt. In short, they themselves sealed their own defeat and humiliation: *"Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised will suffer defeat. Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's people, the Ad, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the wooded dales: these were different groupings; yet each one of them accused God's messengers of lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due."* (Verses 11-14) The *sūrah* contrasts this with the favours God bestows on His chosen servants, giving them power and taking good care of them. This is made abundantly clear in the stories about David, Solomon and Job.

The *sūrah* also takes us on a round in which we see what lies in store beyond the Day of Judgement, giving us images of happiness and bliss on the one hand, and torment on the other. The last round in the *sūrah* gives the story of the first human being and the hostility shown by his first enemy, the one who deliberately leads people astray, and who they follow unaware of his designs.

The *sūrah* also includes a special touch that is meant to alert hearts to the truth reflected in the creation of the heavens and earth. This is the truth that God wants to establish on earth through the messengers He sends. The two are interrelated: *"We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose."* (Verse 27)

1
Unjustifiable Reaction

صٓ ۚ وَٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ ذِي ٱلذِّكۡرِ ١

Ṣād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition. (1)

بَلِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فِي عِزَّةٖ وَشِقَاقٖ ٢

But the unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and hostility. (2)

كَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا مِن قَبۡلِهِم مِّن قَرۡنٖ فَنَادَواْ وَّلَاتَ حِينَ مَنَاصٖ ٣

How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy], but it was too late to escape. (3)

وَعَجِبُوٓاْ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٞ مِّنۡهُمۡۖ وَقَالَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا سَٰحِرٞ كَذَّابٌ ٤

They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. (4)

أَجَعَلَ ٱلۡأٓلِهَةَ إِلَٰهٗا وَٰحِدًاۖ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَشَيۡءٌ عُجَابٞ ٥

Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' (5)

وَٱنطَلَقَ ٱلۡمَلَأُ مِنۡهُمۡ أَنِ ٱمۡشُواْ وَٱصۡبِرُواْ عَلَىٰٓ ءَالِهَتِكُمۡۖ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَشَيۡءٞ يُرَادُ ٦

Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is an intended design. (6)

مَا سَمِعۡنَا بِهَٰذَا فِي ٱلۡمِلَّةِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا ٱخۡتِلَٰقٌ ٧

Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. (7)

أَءُنزِلَ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلذِّكۡرُ مِنۢ بَيۡنِنَاۖ بَلۡ هُمۡ فِي شَكّٖ مِّن ذِكۡرِيۖ بَل لَّمَّا يَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِ ٨

Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?' In fact they are in doubt concerning My reminder; they have not yet tasted My punishment. (8)

أَمْ عِندَهُمْ خَزَآئِنُ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْوَهَّابِ ﴿٩﴾

Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace, the Almighty, the Munificent? (9)

أَمْ لَهُم مُّلْكُ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَلْيَرْتَقُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَسْبَـٰبِ ﴿١٠﴾

Or do they have dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them? Let them, then, try to ascend by all conceivable means. (10)

جُندٌ مَّا هُنَالِكَ مَهْزُومٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَحْزَابِ ﴿١١﴾

Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised will suffer defeat. (11)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ ذُو ٱلْأَوْتَادِ ﴿١٢﴾

Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's people, the `Ād, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, (12)

وَثَمُودُ وَقَوْمُ لُوطٍ وَأَصْحَـٰبُ لْـَٔيْكَةِ ۖ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ ٱلْأَحْزَابُ ﴿١٣﴾

the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the wooded dales: these were different groupings; (13)

إِن كُلٌّ إِلَّا كَذَّبَ ٱلرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ عِقَابِ ﴿١٤﴾

yet each one of them accused God's messengers of lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due. (14)

وَمَا يَنظُرُ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ إِلَّا صَيْحَةً وَٰحِدَةً مَّا لَهَا مِن فَوَاقٍ ﴿١٥﴾

These, too, have but to wait for one single blast; and it shall not be delayed. (15)

وَقَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَا عَجِّل لَّنَا قِطَّنَا قَبْلَ يَوْمِ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٦﴾

They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning.' (16)

Arrogance and Hostility

Ṣād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition. The unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and

hostility. How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy], but it was too late to escape. (Verses 1-3)

God states an oath by an Arabic letter of the alphabet, *Ṣād,*[12] as well as by the Qur'ān, which He describes here as *lull of admonition.'* This letter is made by God, who created it as a sound when it is spoken by people. It is also one letter of the alphabet that makes up the Qur'ānic style and address. The complete alphabet has always been available to people, but the Qur'ān has never been within their ability to produce, because it is God's book, which He made. Humans are incapable of producing anything like that which God makes, be that with regard to the Qur'ān or to anything else. The sound symbolized by the letter *Sād* is vocalized by people without effort, but it is also by God's will. For it is He who made the larynx tract and all the sounds it voices. If people only contemplated this one small but miraculous aspect of their own creation they would realize there is nothing unusual in God choosing one of their own number to receive His revelations. To reveal a message from on high is no more amazing than giving them such miracles as are contained within themselves.

"*Sād. By the Qur'ān, full of admonition.*" The Qur'ān includes admonition as well as other things, such as legal provisions, stories, and instruction on how to refine manners. Admonition as well as reminding people of their need to turn to God and seek His favours are the primary purposes of the Qur'ān. Indeed, the stories and legal provisions are part of the admonition and the remembrance of God. It should be said that the Arabic text uses the word *dhikr,* which is rendered in the translation as *'full of admonition'*. However, the word also means 'to be well known'. The verse could then be rendered as "*Sād By the Qur'ān, a widely known divine Book.*" This is also a true description of the Qur'ān.

"*But the unbelievers are steeped in arrogance and hostility.*" (Verse 2) The verse begins with the word, '*but'*, which suggests that there is a move away from the initial subject matter: the oath by the letter *Ṣād* and the Qur'ān. The oath sounds incomplete because what it intends to affirm is not mentioned. The *sūrah* simply states the oath and talks about the idolaters and their profound hostility. Yet this very departure from the initial issue heightens our interest in the next. The very fact that an oath by the letter *Sād* and the Qur'ān is made indicates the intention to discuss something of great importance, one that merits an oath by God Almighty. Yet next to this, the *sūrah* mentions the idolaters' arrogance and hostility to the Qur'ān, indicating that the issue remains the same both before and after the conjunction, '*but'*. This departure in the mode of address focuses our attention on the great gulf that lies

[12] This letter is pronounced as a velarized variation of 's', sharing its other features of friction and voicelessness, and having the same place of articulation. — Editor's note.

between the immense status God attaches to the Qur'ān and the idolaters' arrogance and hostility to it.

Mention of the fate of those before them who held a similar attitude then follows. It shows such people appealing for help, but none was forthcoming. Their cries mark a radical change in their attitude, but it is all too late to be of any significance: "*How many a generation have We destroyed before their time? They all cried out [for mercy, but it was too late to escape.*" (Verse 3) Their end is shown to the new unbelievers so that they may change their attitude of hostility and arrogance while there is still time for them to do so. Otherwise, they will end up in the same position: appealing for mercy, but none will be shown.

A Strange Amazement

This initial shock is intended to awaken their hearts. Details of their arrogance then follow:

> *They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them. The unbelievers say: 'This is a sorcerer telling lies. Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!' Their leaders go about saying: 'Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention. Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?" (Verses 4-8)*

Such is the arrogance: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?*" And such is the hostility: "*Does he make all the gods into one God?... Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days!... This is a sorcerer telling lies. .. It is all an invention.*" Amazement that God's messenger should be human is an oft-repeated story. Since the beginning of divine messages every community took the same stance. Every new messenger was human, yet their fellow men continued to express amazement at this.

"*They deem it strange that one from among them has come to warn them.*" (Verse 4) Yet the most natural and logical thing is that the messenger who warns them should be human who thinks and feels like them: a man who appreciates what thoughts they may harbour, their weaknesses, desires, abilities and what obstacles they may encounter or influences they may fall under. When a man is given the message to warn them, he lives among them, setting a practical example for them to follow. They know that he is one of them and that they are required to follow the life system he endorses. It is not difficult for them to do so, since a man like them has set the example. Moreover, he is of their own generation, speaking their language, knowing their traditions and the way they go about their affairs. Mutual response is easily established between them. There is no thought of him being alien to them or to their

lives.

Yet this most natural and logical situation was always the cause of amazement and the basis for levelling accusations at God's messengers. The unbelievers simply did not appreciate the purpose behind such a choice, nor did they understand the nature of the divine message. To them, it should not provide practical leadership on the way to God; rather, it should be mysterious, full of secret, an enigma. They wanted it to be engulfed in obscurity, removed from practical life. Then they could treat it as just another legend or superstition that formed the basis of their unsound beliefs.

God, however, wanted something different for humanity, especially in the case of His last message, Islam. He wanted it to be the norm for human society: for it to provide a clean, pure and sublime way of life that is practical, free of mystery as also one that is easy to implement.

"The unbelievers say: This is a sorcerer telling lies." They said this, discounting the possibility that God might have sent His revelations to one of them. In saying so, they hoped to turn ordinary people away from the Prophet, to cause confusion and mar the clear truth that was being stated by the man who was known for his honesty, integrity and truthfulness.

The plain fact is that the Quraysh elders did not for an instant believe that Muĥammad, whom they knew very well, was a sorcerer or a liar, as they alleged. Their allegations were simply propaganda tools aimed at misleading people. The Quraysh elders recognized that the truth Muĥammad preached would do away with all their privileges; privileges that relied on deception and false values. On one occasion the Quraysh elders held a conference on how to counter the effects of what the Prophet said to people, and how to turn pilgrims from other tribes away from him. It is useful to quote this again here. Al-Walid ibn al-Mughirah, a distinguished figure among the Quraysh chaired that conference:

In his opening address, al-Walīd said: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend [meaning the Prophet]. So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. What concerned al-Walid most was that the opinion they would come out with should take account of the fact that Muĥammad was asking people to listen to the Qur'ān, God's message, expressed in beautiful language and a powerful style. The description they would attach to Muĥammad should also account for his persuasive, eloquent argument.

Descriptions like 'fortune-teller', 'madman', 'poet' and 'magician' were proposed. None was considered convincing by al-Walid, who pointed out weaknesses in each, one after the other. He told his people that what Muĥammad said was nothing like what was said by such men. When nobody could suggest anything more plausible, they asked al-Walid if he had a better suggestion.

He said: "What Muĥammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to he recognized as false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan." They all approved of al-Walid's suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign to make the pilgrims wary of Muĥammad and unwilling to meet him.[13]

Such was the scheming of the Quraysh elders and such was their agreed strategy whereby they would accuse the Prophet of sorcery and lying. They said this deliberately even though they knew it was all a lie. They were fully aware that Muĥammad, (peace be upon him), was neither a sorcerer nor a liar.

They were also amazed at him calling on them to worship God alone, which is the most truthful statement anyone can make: *"Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange! Their leaders go about saying: Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is the only thing to do. Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention."* (Verses 5-7)

The Qur'ān describes their great surprise at this basic truth: *"Does he make all the gods into one God?"* (Verse 5) The question is asked in such a way that makes it sound as if no one could have ever thought it possible. *"This is indeed most strange!"* (Verse 5) In Arabic, the *sūrah* uses the word *'ujāb,* which is an unusual derivative of *ajib,* meaning strange, to emphasize the peculiarity of the claim. The *sūrah* also describes the method they employed to neutralize the effects of the divine message among their people seeking to ensure that they would stick to their traditional beliefs. They implied that the new message contained something highly suspicious, and that in their high positions, they knew this and were intent on countering it: *"Their leaders go about saying: Walk away, and hold steadfastly to your deities: this is an intended design."* (Verse 6) This is not a question of religion and faith, although there is something different about it. Hence, ordinary people should attend to their business, maintain their traditions and let the leaders uncover this new plot, because it is only they who can establish what is concealed behind outward appearances. Basically, then, they sought to reassure people that they would look after their interests.

[13] The translated text differs slightly from the one quoted by the author as I preferred to quote it from my own rendering of the report of this misrepresentation conference. See my book, *Muĥammad: Man and Prophet,* Leicester, 2002, pp. 119-120. — Editor's Note.

This is a well known device that those in power use to divert peoples' interest in public affairs or their searching for the truth. To allow the public to search for the truth by themselves would represent a serious threat to authority, as ultimately it leads to the exposure of false leadership.

The Quraysh elders also tried to deceive people by pointing to the faiths of the people of earlier revelations who had allowed superstitions to creep into their faith, diverting it from the pure concept of God's oneness: *"Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days! It is all an invention."* (Verse 7) By that time, the concept of trinity had spread among the Christians while the legend of Ezra being God's son had infiltrated Judaism. Hence the elders specifically referred to these, saying: *"Never did we hear of a claim like this in any faith of latter days!"* They claimed to have never before heard anyone advocate God's absolute oneness as did Muĥammad. Hence, it could only be fabrication.

Islam has always sought to purge the monotheistic faith from all traces of legend, alien elements and the deviation that affected earlier religions, because monotheism is the fundamental truth that forms the basis of all existence. Indeed, the whole universe confirms this truth, providing evidence in support of it. Moreover, unless human life is based on monotheism it cannot be sound either in its fundamentals or its details. As we consider the resistance of the Quraysh, as well as earlier communities of unbelievers, to the monotheistic principle, it is fitting that we should briefly outline its importance.

The unity of the general laws that operate in this universe which we behold is clear, testifying to the fact that the will that set these laws in operation must by necessity be a single will. Wherever we look around us in this universe we find this fact staring us in the face. Everything in the universe is in constant and regular movement. The atom, which is the basic unit of everything in the universe, animate or inanimate, is in motion, as it consists of electrons that move around the nucleus composed of protons just as the planets move in orbit around the sun in our own solar system, and like the galaxy composed of numerous solar systems and celestial mass rotate. All planets, the sun, and the larger galaxy move in one anticlockwise direction, from west to east. The elements which make up the earth, other planets and the stars are the same, and they are all made of atoms composed of electrons, protons and neutrons. Indeed, these are the bricks that make up all these planets and stars.

> While all matter is made of three bricks, scientists believe that all powers: light, heat, x-rays, wireless waves, gamma rays and all types of radiation are in fact different forms of electromagnetic power. They all travel at the same speed, but the difference between them is the difference in wavelength.

> Matter, then, is made of three bricks, and power is in essence waves. In his special relativity theory, Einstein equates matter with energy. Experiments endorsed his claims. In recent times, an experiment endorsed it in the loudest sound ever heard in this world, produced by nuclear fission in an atom bomb.[14]

Such is the unity in the make-up of the universe, as man has come to learn through physical experiment. We also know how this unity is reflected in the law of continuous motion common to all things in a coherent and balanced way so that no object interferes or collides with another. The clearest example is the countless number of planets, stars and galaxies floating in space. *"Each floats in its own orbit."* (36: 40) They all testify to the truth that they are set in their respective positions in space and given their movements, dimensions and coordinates by One who is fully aware of their nature, determining all this in His overall design of this wonderful universe.

This brief word here about the overall unity of the universe is sufficient for it testifies that human life can only be set right on this basis. When this fact is clearly understood, people formulate a sound concept of the universe around them, their position in it, their interrelation with other beings, as also their relation with the One God and with everything else in the universe. This is exceedingly important in shaping people's emotions and understanding of all that life entails.

A person who believes in God's oneness and understands the meaning of His oneness, sets his relation with his Lord on this basis, and puts his relations with everyone and everything other than God in their respective positions. Thus, his energy and feelings are not manipulated by a host of other different deities nor are other people able to impose themselves on him.

A believer who knows that God, the One, is the originator of this universe deals with the universe and all that exists in it on the basis of cooperation and friendship. This gives life a taste and vitality that are totally different from that which is felt by those who do not believe in any of this.

Anyone who believes in the unity of the system God has set for the universe will receive His orders and legislation in a special way, knowing that the implementation of God's law in human life will provide harmony between all that exists. This truth necessarily sets human conscience on a sound footing, giving it consistency and enlightenment. It also clarifies the bonds between man and his Creator on the one hand and between man and the universe on the other. This then has clear effects on the practical, moral, social and behavioural aspects of human life.

---

[14] Ahmad Zaki, *Ma`a Allāh fī al-Samā'*, Cairo, 1965

The Qur'ān places much emphasis on the concept of God's oneness, and persistently clarifies this and what it entails. This is particularly true in Makkan *sūrahs,* but it is also true in *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, although the way it is presented in the latter changes so as to fit the subject matter of these *sūrahs.*

Yet this is the truth the unbelievers were most amazed at, endlessly debating this with the Prophet, and wondering at his insistence on it. They also called on people to express amazement at it, doing their utmost to turn them away from it. Indeed, they went even further, expressing amazement that the Prophet was chosen to be entrusted with God's message to mankind: *"Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?"* (Verse 8) This is nothing but plain envy, a trait that motivated their hostility to his message despite their awareness that this was the truth.

> The Qur'ān had its attraction even to the most outspoken enemies of Islam. They realized that Muĥammad spent some time every night in worship reading the Qur'ān in prayer. Therefore, protected by the cover of darkness, some of them sat just outside his house, listening to the Qur'ān being recited inside. Every one of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about his action. One can only assume that the motivation was either to try to judge the message of Muĥammad objectively, or to learn the truth about it, or to listen to the superb literary style of the Qur'ān. As the day began to break, each one of them went back so that no one could find out about his action. Soon, the three of them: Abū Jahl himself, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Shariq met. There was no need to ask each other what they were doing. There was only one reason for their presence there at that particular time. Therefore, they counselled each other against such action: "Should some of your followers *see* you," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."
>
> The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against their 'irresponsible' action. Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they felt ashamed of themselves. One of them suggested that they should give each other their word of honour not to come again. They did so before going home.
>
> Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān in his home. He asked him what he thought about what he heard Muĥammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him.

> Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocuter: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."[15]

We see clearly that nothing stopped Abū Jahl from admitting the truth with which he wrestled on three consecutive nights, being beaten every time, except his envy. He was envious that Muĥammad should have attained a position to which no one else can aspire. This was indeed the secret motivation behind those who said: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?*" (Verse 8) They were the ones who repeatedly said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān bestowed from on high on some great man of the two cities?*" (43: 31) The two cities were Makkah and Ṭā'if where the Arab elders and noblemen lived. Whenever they heard about a new prophet, such people sought to gain power through religion. They were thus extremely shocked and envious when God chose Muĥammad (peace be upon him), bestowing on him of His grace what He knew Muĥammad alone deserved.

The answer the *sūrah* gives to their question is laden with sarcasm and warning: "*In fact they are in doubt concerning My reminder; they have not yet tasted My punishment.*" (Verse 8) They had asked: "*Was the message given to him alone out of all of us.*" This when they doubted the very message itself and were unable to accept that it was from God, even though they realized no human being could have produced anything like it.

The *sūrah* sets aside what they said about the Qur'ān to issue them with a warning: "*they have not yet tasted My punishment.*" (Verse 8) It is as if the *sūrah* is stating that they say whatever they say because they are still safe, not having tasted anything of God's punishment. When they do experience this, they will say nothing of it because then they will know.

The *sūrah* then comments on their wonder at God's choice of Muĥammad to be His Messenger. It asks them whether they control God's mercy: "*Or do they own the treasures of your Lord's grace, the Almighty, the Munificent?*" (Verse 9) Do they seek to interfere with what belongs to God to decide? It is God who gives whatever He wishes to any of His servants and who withholds it from anyone He wishes. He is the Almighty whose will applies to all and cannot be resisted, and whose grace is

[15] This report is quoted as in Adil Salahi, *Muĥammad: Man and Prophet,* Leicester, 2002, pp. 173-174. — Editor's note.

limitless. If they find it hard to accept that God has chosen Muĥammad (peace be upon him) for his role, by what right and in what capacity can they decide how God's favours be granted when they do not own the treasures of His grace?

"Or do they have dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them?" (Verse 10) This is something that they do not dare to claim. It is the One who owns and controls the heavens and the earth who decides who should receive what and who should he assigned to what role. If they do not have dominion over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, how come they interfere with the decisions of the One who has this dominion? A sarcastic and reproachful comment then follows: *"Let them, then, try to ascend by all conceivable means."* (Verse 10) If that is the case, let them take control of the universe and administer the treasures of God's grace. Let them decide who should receive such favours and who should be deprived.

This sarcastic remark is followed by a statement of fact describing their real status: *"Whatever hosts, of any affiliation, may be raised will suffer defeat."* (Verse 11) They are no more than the remnants of a defeated army left aside. They have no ability to change or object to God's will. The phraseology of this verse makes it hard to capture its *sense* in translation. The subject, *'whatever hosts'*, refers to something insignificant that no identity can be assigned to. The verbal phrase, '*will suffer defeat*', is expressed in the Arabic original in one adjectival word, *mahzūm*, which suggests that defeat is an essential characteristic of such hosts and that they cannot get rid of it. This is *a* very true description. God's enemies can never be in any position other than the one indicated by this Qur'ānic expression which connotes powerlessness and absolute lack of control, no matter how mighty they may appear or when they appear.

The *sūrah* gives examples of former communities who treaded the same course, and we discover that they all faced utter defeat: *"Before their time, the truth was rejected by Noah's people, the Ad, Pharaoh of the tent-pegs, the Thamūd, Lot's people and the dwellers of the wooded dales: these were different groupings, yet each one of them accused God's messengers of lying. Therefore, My retribution fell due."* (Verses 12-14) These communities were the Quraysh's predecessors. All of them, including Pharaoh who built the pyramids that stand firm like tent pegs, and Shu 'ayb's people who dwelled in the wooded dales, rejected God's messages. What eventually happened to these tyrannical peoples?

God's retribution fell due and they were all decimated. There is nothing left of them except the ruins that tell of their defeat.

Such was the fate of past communities of unbelievers. As for the present ones, they are, generally, left until a blast brings about the end of life on earth just before the Day of Judgement: *"These, too, have but to wait for one single blast; and it shall not be*

delayed." (Verse 15) Once this blast falls due, it will not be delayed even for a short moment. It occurs at its appointed time. God has willed that this community of the last message will be given its time, and that He will not destroy it as He did past communities. This is an act of grace, but they do not appreciate this or thank God for it. On the contrary, they hasten their own punishment, asking God to give them their lot now, before the day He has appointed: *"They say: Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning."* (Verse 16)

At this point the *sūrah* ends its reference to the unbelievers and turns instead to the Prophet. He is comforted and directed to remember what happened to earlier messengers, the hard tests they went through and the grace God bestowed on them when they proved themselves.

2
Tests for Prophets

ٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَٱذۡكُرۡ عَبۡدَنَا دَاوُۥدَ ذَا ٱلۡأَيۡدِۖ إِنَّهُۥٓ أَوَّابٌ ﴿١٧﴾

Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us. (17)

إِنَّا سَخَّرۡنَا ٱلۡجِبَالَ مَعَهُۥ يُسَبِّحۡنَ بِٱلۡعَشِيِّ وَٱلۡإِشۡرَاقِ ﴿١٨﴾

We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, (18)

وَٱلطَّيۡرَ مَحۡشُورَةًۖ كُلٌّ لَّهُۥٓ أَوَّابٌ ﴿١٩﴾

and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise. (19)

وَشَدَدۡنَا مُلۡكَهُۥ وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُ ٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ وَفَصۡلَ ٱلۡخِطَابِ ﴿٢٠﴾

We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement. (20)

۞ وَهَلۡ أَتَىٰكَ نَبَؤُاْ ٱلۡخَصۡمِ إِذۡ تَسَوَّرُواْ ٱلۡمِحۡرَابَ ﴿٢١﴾

Have you heard the story of the litigants who surmounted the walls of the sanctuary? (21)

إِذۡ دَخَلُواْ عَلَىٰ دَاوُۥدَ فَفَزِعَ مِنۡهُمۡۖ قَالُواْ لَا تَخَفۡۖ خَصۡمَانِ بَغَىٰ بَعۡضُنَا عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٖ فَٱحۡكُم بَيۡنَنَا بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَلَا تُشۡطِطۡ وَٱهۡدِنَآ إِلَىٰ سَوَآءِ ٱلصِّرَٰطِ ﴿٢٢﴾

When they went in to David, he was alarmed. They said: 'Have no fear. We are but two litigants: one of us has wronged the other; so judge between us with justice, and do not be unfair. Show us the way to rectitude. (22)

إِنَّ هَٰذَآ أَخِي لَهُۥ تِسۡعٞ وَتِسۡعُونَ نَعۡجَةٗ وَلِيَ نَعۡجَةٞ وَٰحِدَةٞ فَقَالَ أَكۡفِلۡنِيهَا وَعَزَّنِي فِي ٱلۡخِطَابِ ﴿٢٣﴾

This is my brother: he has ninety-nine ewes and I have only one ewe. Yet he said: "Let me take charge of her," and has been hard on me in his speech.' (23)

قَالَ لَقَدۡ ظَلَمَكَ بِسُؤَالِ نَعۡجَتِكَ إِلَىٰ نِعَاجِهِۦۖ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡخُلَطَآءِ لَيَبۡغِي بَعۡضُهُمۡ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضٍ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَقَلِيلٞ مَّا هُمۡۗ وَظَنَّ دَاوُۥدُ أَنَّمَا فَتَنَّٰهُ فَٱسۡتَغۡفَرَ رَبَّهُۥ وَخَرَّ رَاكِعٗا وَأَنَابَ۩ ٢٤

Said [David]: 'He has certainly wronged you by demanding that your ewe be added to his ewes! Thus do many partners wrong one another, except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, but how few are they!' Then David realized that We were only testing him. He prayed for his Lord's forgiveness, fell down in prostration and turned to God in repentance. (24)

فَغَفَرۡنَا لَهُۥ ذَٰلِكَۖ وَإِنَّ لَهُۥ عِندَنَا لَزُلۡفَىٰ وَحُسۡنَ مَـَٔابٖ ٢٥

We forgave him that, and in the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received. (25)

يَٰدَاوُۥدُ إِنَّا جَعَلۡنَٰكَ خَلِيفَةٗ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَٱحۡكُم بَيۡنَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعِ ٱلۡهَوَىٰ فَيُضِلَّكَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَضِلُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ شَدِيدُۢ بِمَا نَسُواْ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡحِسَابِ ٢٦

David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between people with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it leads you astray from the path of God. Those who go astray from the path of God will have a severe punishment for having ignored the Day of Reckoning. (26)

وَمَا خَلَقۡنَا ٱلسَّمَآءَ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَا بَٰطِلٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ ظَنُّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْۚ فَوَيۡلٞ لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِ ٢٧

We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose. That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire. (27)

أَمۡ نَجۡعَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ كَٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ أَمۡ نَجۡعَلُ ٱلۡمُتَّقِينَ كَٱلۡفُجَّارِ ٢٨

Are We to equate those who believe and do righteous deeds with those who spread corruption in the land? Are We to equate the God-fearing with the wicked? (28)

كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ إِلَيۡكَ مُبَٰرَكٞ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوٓاْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُوْلُواْ ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِ ٢٩

This is a blessed book which We have revealed to you so that people may ponder over its message, and that those endowed with insight may take it

to heart. (29)

وَوَهَبْنَا لِدَاوُۥدَ سُلَيْمَـٰنَ ۚ نِعْمَ ٱلْعَبْدُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥٓ أَوَّابٌ ﴿٣٠﴾

To David We gave Solomon: how excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (30)

إِذْ عُرِضَ عَلَيْهِ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ ٱلصَّـٰفِنَـٰتُ ٱلْجِيَادُ ﴿٣١﴾

When, one evening, nobly-bred, swift-footed steeds were brought before him, (31)

فَقَالَ إِنِّىٓ أَحْبَبْتُ حُبَّ ٱلْخَيْرِ عَن ذِكْرِ رَبِّى حَتَّىٰ تَوَارَتْ بِٱلْحِجَابِ ﴿٣٢﴾

he kept saying: 'My love of good things is part of my remembering my Lord!' until they disappeared from sight. (32)

رُدُّوهَا عَلَىَّ ۖ فَطَفِقَ مَسْحًۢا بِٱلسُّوقِ وَٱلْأَعْنَاقِ ﴿٣٣﴾

'Bring them back to me!' He then stroked their legs and their necks. (33)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا سُلَيْمَـٰنَ وَأَلْقَيْنَا عَلَىٰ كُرْسِيِّهِۦ جَسَدًا ثُمَّ أَنَابَ ﴿٣٤﴾

We had tried Solomon, and placed a body on his throne. He then turned to Us, (34)

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱغْفِرْ لِى وَهَبْ لِى مُلْكًا لَّا يَنۢبَغِى لِأَحَدٍ مِّنۢ بَعْدِىٓ ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْوَهَّابُ ﴿٣٥﴾

and prayed: 'My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver.' (35)

فَسَخَّرْنَا لَهُ ٱلرِّيحَ تَجْرِى بِأَمْرِهِۦ رُخَآءً حَيْثُ أَصَابَ ﴿٣٦﴾

We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, (36)

وَٱلشَّيَـٰطِينَ كُلَّ بَنَّآءٍ وَغَوَّاصٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, (37)

وَءَاخَرِينَ مُقَرَّنِينَ فِى ٱلْأَصْفَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

and others bound together in fetters. (38)

هَـٰذَا عَطَآؤُنَا فَٱمْنُنْ أَوْ أَمْسِكْ بِغَيْرِ

حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٩﴾

This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account. (39)

وَإِنَّ لَهُۥ عِندَنَا لَزُلْفَىٰ وَحُسْنَ مَـَٔابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received. (40)

وَٱذْكُرْ عَبْدَنَآ أَيُّوبَ إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنِّى مَسَّنِىَ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ بِنُصْبٍ وَعَذَابٍ ﴿٤١﴾

Remember Our servant Job who cried out to his Lord: 'Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!' (41)

ٱرْكُضْ بِرِجْلِكَ ۖ هَـٰذَا مُغْتَسَلٌۢ بَارِدٌ وَشَرَابٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

'Strike [the ground] with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.' (42)

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُۥٓ أَهْلَهُۥ وَمِثْلَهُم مَّعَهُمْ رَحْمَةً مِّنَّا وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَـٰبِ ﴿٤٣﴾

We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight. (43)

وَخُذْ بِيَدِكَ ضِغْثًا فَٱضْرِب بِّهِۦ وَلَا تَحْنَثْ ۗ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَـٰهُ صَابِرًا ۚ نِّعْمَ ٱلْعَبْدُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥٓ أَوَّابٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

'Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath.' We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (44)

وَٱذْكُرْ عِبَـٰدَنَآ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَإِسْحَـٰقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ أُو۟لِى ٱلْأَيْدِى وَٱلْأَبْصَـٰرِ ﴿٤٥﴾

Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: all men of strength and vision. (45)

إِنَّآ أَخْلَصْنَـٰهُم بِخَالِصَةٍ ذِكْرَى ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٤٦﴾

We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come. (46)

وَإِنَّهُمْ عِندَنَا لَمِنَ ٱلْمُصْطَفَيْنَ ٱلْأَخْيَارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good. (47)

And remember Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu'l-Kifl: each belonged to the truly good. (48)

Overview

This long passage is devoted to aspects of the histories of earlier messengers so that the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him) would remember them and disregard all the rejections, accusations, amazement and fabrications the unbelievers levelled at him. All this was certain to weigh hard on anyone, but the Prophet is told to bear it all and remain patient in adversity.

At the same time, the stories present the effects of God's grace as it was bestowed on earlier messengers. It shows how God granted them favours of all sorts, including power, authority, care and blessings. This contrasts with the amazement expressed by the Quraysh at God's favouring the Prophet (peace be upon him) with His message. He was not a unique case among God's messengers. To some of them God granted a kingdom, in addition to their being His messengers. Among them one was favoured with the mountains and birds echoing his glorification and praise of God, and to another the wind and *jinn* were made subservient. Such were David and Solomon. What is strange, then, for God to have chosen from among all the Quraysh, Muĥammad, the man of truth, upon whom to bestow His revelations?

These stories describe the care God always took of His messengers and how He instructed them so that they became worthy of their mission. Like Muĥammad, they were ordinary human beings, experiencing the weaknesses all people do. God took care of them so that their weaknesses did not get the better of them. He explained things to them and gave them directives. He also tested them so that He would forgive them their errors and grant them favours. This was bound to reassure the Prophet that God would take care of him at every step.

David Ruling in a Dispute

> *Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us. We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise. We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement. (Verses 17-20)*

'Bear with patience...' This is a reference to the road taken by all God's messengers. It groups them together. Everyone of them took it: everyone suffered, was tested and remained patient in adversity; each at his own step in the lofty ladder of prophethood. The life of each one of them was a series of tests, each bearing much pain. Even when things were pleasant and comfortable, this represented a different form of test so as to ensure that they remained patient when life was easy in the same

way as they were patient in adversity. Both situations require endurance. When we contemplate the lives of all God's messengers, as told to us in the Qur'ān, we realize that patience was the most prominent element. In essence, their lives were a long series of trials and tests.

The lives of God's messengers were in fact an open book for all humanity to read, with every page speaking about trials, afflictions and patience. The records show how the human soul triumphs over pain and necessity. How it rises above all that to which the present world attaches value, and how it discards desires and temptations, so as to achieve full dedication to God, and in so doing passes the test He has set. It shows the meaning of choosing Him over everything else so as to say to mankind: 'This is the way to rise; it is the only way leading to God's acceptance.'

"Bear with patience whatever they say." (Verse 17) They said much, such as: *"This is a sorcerer telling lies."* (Verse 4) *"Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange."* (Verse 5) *"Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?"* (Verse 8) Indeed they said much more. God directs the Prophet to bear their statements with patience, and tells him that in his mind and heart he should live with a different type of people: the select few, God's messengers with whom he has a strong affinity and close relationship. Indeed, he used to refer to them as though they were his immediate relatives, saying: 'May God have mercy on my brother Joseph,' and 'I have a stronger bond with my brother Moses,' etc.

"Bear with patience whatever they say, and remember Our servant David who was endowed with strength. He always turned to Us." (Verse 17) David is referred to here as a strong person who turned to God. The *sūrah* earlier mentioned (Verses 12-13) the peoples of Noah, the `Ād, Thamūd, Pharaoh, Lot's people and the community that lived in the wooded dale near Madyan. All of these were tyrannical, and it was such tyranny that gave them the impression of power. David, on the other hand, was a man of strength, but he always turned to God, repenting of his sins, glorifying God and worshipping Him. He did so when he was truly powerful, with a kingdom to rule.

In *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, we have an account of David in his youth, when he was a soldier in Saul's army. At the time, which was long after Moses. The Israelites asked one of their prophets to assign one of them as king and they promised that they would fight for God's cause under his leadership. God appointed Saul as their king and he marshalled them to face Goliath's mighty army. It was David who killed Goliath. From that day, his standing was enhanced, such that, in turn, he became king. Yet having a throne did not lead him astray. He continued to turn to God in repentance, glorifying and worshipping Him.

Apart from prophethood and a kingdom, God also blessed David with an alert

heart and a melodious voice, which he used to good effect as he sang his psalms and hymns. He would be so absorbed in his devotion that barriers between him and the universe would disappear and the mountains would echo his glorification, while birds gathered around him, all glorifying the Lord Creator. *"We caused the mountains to join him in extolling Our limitless glory in the evening and at sunrise, and likewise the birds in flocks: they all would echo his praise."* (Verses 18-19) People may be speechless when they hear that the mountains, inanimate entities, should join David in his constant glorification of God as he chants his songs of praise. Not only that but the birds also flock to him, listen and join in with the chorus to his hymns. Their surprise results from the fact that it runs counter to everything they have been used to. They only know that man, birds and mountains belong to totally separate realms.

Yet, why should anyone be surprised? All these creatures, different as their races, shapes, forms and characteristics are, share in one fundamental fact: they turn to the Lord who created the whole universe with all its animate and inanimate objects. When man's relation with his Lord attains sublime purity, barriers between different elements are removed. The whole matter is simple: God gave His servant David this unique characteristic, and caused the mountains to join him in extolling His glory morning and evening, and gathered the birds around him to echo his praises. This was simply an additional gift by virtue of God's grace.

"We strengthened his kingdom; We endowed him with wisdom and decisive judgement." (Verse 20) Thus, his kingdom was strong and well established. He administered his government with wisdom and clear, decisive vision. The phrase '*decisive judgement*' means that his views were clear, not subject to hesitation. When this is coupled with wisdom, it makes for perfect government within man's world. However, this did not spare David from being subjected to tests and trials. Nevertheless, God continued to take care of him and guided his footsteps:

> *Have you heard the story of the litigants who surmounted the walls of the sanctuary? When they went in to David, he was alarmed. They said: Have no fear. We are but two litigants: one of us has wronged the other; so judge between us with justice, and do not be unfair. Show us the way to rectitude. This is my brother: he has ninety-nine ewes and I have only one ewe. Yet he said: "Let me take charge of her," and has been hard on me in his speech.' Said [David]: Re has certainly wronged you by demanding that your ewe be added to his ewes! Thus do many partners wrong one another, except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, but how few are they!' Then David realized that We were only testing him. He prayed for his Lord's forgiveness, fill down in prostration and turned to God in repentance. (Verses 21-24)*

These verses tell of a test to which David was subjected. David used to devote some of his time to conducting the affairs of his kingdom and to judge in people's disputes. The rest of his time he devoted to his worship, preferring seclusion when

he sang his psalms. When he went into the sanctuary, no one was allowed in.

One day, David was surprised when he saw two people climbing over the wall into the sanctuary. He was alarmed. No good believer or trustworthy person would enter in this way. Therefore, they immediately tried to reassure him, saying that they were in dispute and wanted him to judge between them in fairness, showing them the way to justice. One of them immediately started putting his case forward, saying that the other man, his brother, had 99 ewes while he only had one. Yet he insisted on taking charge of his single ewe, placing it with his 99.

As stated by one of the disputants, the case is one of gross injustice that cannot be condoned. Hence, David immediately started to give his judgement without speaking to the other man or asking him to give his side of the story. Instead, he told the first man that the other had been unfair in his demands, and that many people behave in this way, except those who are good believers and do righteous deeds. These, however, are few in number.

It seems that at this stage the two men disappeared. In fact, they were two angels who had come to test David, the prophet God had placed in a position of authority to judge between people in fairness, making sure who is right before passing judgement. They had put the case to him in a very sentimental way, one that invited immediate sympathy. However, a judge must not allow sentiment to take charge. He must not be hasty. Above all, he must not rely on the statement of one party, without allowing the other party to present his case and submit his evidence. Some aspects of the case, if not all of it, may then be seen in a different light. In other words, appearances can often be deceptive or incomplete.

At this point David realized that this was a test: *"Then David realized that We were only testing him."* (Verse 24) His good nature surfaced again, because he was a man always ready to accept what is right: *"He prayed for his Lord's forgiveness, fell down in prostration and turned to God in repentance."* (Verse 24)

God's response was to accept his repentance: *"We forgave him that, and in the life to come he is to he close to Us and will be well received."* (Verse 25) Some commentators on the Qur'ān picked up some Israelite reports and made much of these which cannot he acceptable because they are incompatible and irreconcilable with the nature of prophethood. Even the reports that tried to moderate these legends accept certain parts of them. The fact is that these legends do not merit consideration, because they cannot fit with God's assertion in reference to David: *"He is to be close to Us and will he well received."* (Verse 25)

The Qur'ānic comments given after the story explain the nature of the test and specify the line God wants His servant to whom He assigned judgement between people to take:

> *David! We have made you a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between people with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it leads you astray from the path of God. Those who go astray from the path of God will have a severe punishment for having ignored the Day of Reckoning. (Verse 26)*

It is then a case of David being given the position of vicegerent on earth, one whereby he is required to judge between people in all fairness. He is told not to follow vain desires, which means in the case of a prophet, not to be hasty in one's first reaction. For this can easily lead to going astray from God's path. Rather, he must make sure of all the facts before passing judgement. The concluding sentence in the verse gives a general rule that applies to all cases of going astray from God's path. It exposes the person concerned to severe punishment on the Day of Reckoning.

One aspect of the care God took of His servant David is that He drew his attention at the first hurdle, and put him back on the right track at the first rash move, warning him of the ultimate result, when he had not even made one step towards it. Such is God's favour that He bestows on His chosen servants. Since they are human, they may slip when they travel an uneven patch of the road, but God takes them by the hand putting them back on course and teaching them how to repent. Then He forgives them and bestows even greater favours on them.

A Reminder to Grasp

Having stated the main principle in conducting the position of vicegerent on earth and in judging people's disputes, the context of the truth on which the whole system that sustains the universe is based is then stated. Broader as it is than man's whole world and role, this basic truth deals with the very existence of the universe and with the life to come. Furthermore, the last divine message to mankind is based on this truth. Indeed, the Qur'ān is the book that explains this great truth:

> *We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without a purpose. That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire. Are We to equate those who believe and do righteous deeds with those who spread corruption in the land? Are We to equate the God-fearing with the wicked? This is a blessed book which We have revealed to you so that people may ponder over its message, and that those endowed with insight may take it to heart. (Verses 27-29)*

These three verses set this great truth, one that is profound and accurate. For certain, the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them was not without purpose. Their creation is based on the truth and for a definite intent. It is from this great truth that all else stems whether it be man's vicegerency on earth,

the right to judge between people, or setting feelings and actions on the right course so that those who do good deeds are not equated with those who spread corruption on earth, and that the God-fearing are not grouped together with the wicked. The truth embodied in God's blessed book is given to people with insight and understanding so that they can study its verses and reflect on the essential facts of existence. Such truth and facts cannot even be imagined by unbelievers, because they do not relate to the great truth on which the universe is based. Hence, they entertain ill thoughts about their Lord and will not understand the truth: *"That is what the unbelievers assume. Woe betide the unbelievers when they are cast in the fire."* (Verse 27)

The law God has laid down for human life is part of His law for the universe. His revealed book, the Qur'ān, explains the truth on which His universal law is based. The justice required of those who are in authority, i.e. vicegerents, and those who judge between people are part of the total truth. People's lives cannot be properly established unless this part is in harmony with the rest of the parts. This means that deviation from the divine law, the truth in discharging the responsibilities of man's vicegerency on earth and from fairness when judging disputes is in effect a deviation from the universal law that sustains the universe. It is, therefore, a very serious and grave matter, one that leads to a collision with the immense universal forces. Anyone heading for such a collision will end in ruin. No wrongdoing tyrant can withstand such crushing forces. This must always be remembered and reflected upon by people endowed with insight.

A Test for Solomon

The *sūrah* picks up the thread of the story to show us the favour God granted David as He gave him Solomon for a son. It also speaks of the great favours He bestowed on Solomon, the test he was subjected to, the care God took of him and the blessings showered on him when the test was over:

> *To David We gave Solomon: how excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. When, one evening, nobly-bred, swift- footed steeds were brought before him, he kept saying: My love of good things is part of my remembering my Lord!' until they disappeared from sight. 'Bring them back to me!' He then stroked their legs and their necks. We had tried Solomon, and placed a body on his throne. He then turned to Us, and prayed: My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver' We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, and others bound together in fetters. This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account. In the life to come he is to he close to Us and will be well received. (Verses 30-40)*

The references in the story to nobly-bred steeds and the body placed on his throne have been interpreted in a variety of ways. However, I do not feel comfortable with any such interpretation considering them either unfounded reports from Israelite sources or else lacking any supporting evidence. I cannot visualize the two incidents in any satisfactory way so as to explain them to my reader. Nor can I find any authentic report to rely upon in interpreting them. The only authentic *ĥadīth* I have found may or may not relate to either event. This *ĥadīth,* related by al-Bukhari on Abi Hurayrah's authority, says: "Solomon said: 'I will consort tonight with 70 women, so that each one of them will give birth to a warrior who fights for God's cause,' but he did not add, 'God willing.' He consorted with them, but only one of them became pregnant, and then she gave birth to half a person. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, had he said, 'God willing,' they would have been warriors fighting for God's cause." It is possible that this was the test which Solomon had to go through and to which these verses refer. It is also possible that the body placed on his throne was this half person. This, however, is only a possibility. As for the story about the horses, it is said that Solomon reviewed some of his horses towards the end of the day. This caused him to miss an evening prayer which he used to offer before sunset. Upset, he asked for the horses to be brought back. When they were, he hit their necks and legs as punishment for diverting his attention from worship. In a different report, it is suggested that he rubbed their necks and legs because they were kept for fighting for God's cause. Neither version, however, has much to support it, and it is thus impossible to ascertain the truth of either one.

Thus anyone who is careful about what he says cannot give any details of these two incidents with any degree of certainty. All he can say is that Solomon underwent some test concerning the way he conducted his kingdom's affairs, just as God tests prophets to guide them and keep them from error. We also learn that Solomon turned to his Lord in submission and sought His forgiveness.

He then prayed with hope and dedication: *"My Lord! Forgive me my sins, and bestow upon me such power as shall belong to no one after me. You are indeed the bountiful giver."* (Verse 35) The proper interpretation of Solomon's request is that he did not ask for something to show that he was the most favoured person, but that he asked instead for a special thing, to distinguish him from any future king and master. It was to be of a special nature, not repeated for others. It should also be something not normally possessed by kings.

God answered his prayer: *"We made the wind subservient to him, so that it gently sped at his command wherever he wished, and the jinn, including every kind of builder and diver, and others bound together in fetters."* (Verses 36-38) That God made the wind subservient to one of His servants, is nothing extraordinary because the wind is undoubtedly subservient to His will: it runs by His command in accordance with His

laws. If at any time God facilitates one of His servants to express His will, in this case allowing the wind to run with ease wherever Solomon wished, it is nothing strange for God Almighty. Similar things occur in a variety of ways. God also said to the Prophet Muĥammad in the Qur'ān: *"If the hypocrites, those who are sick at heart and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We will rouse you against them, and then they will not be your neighbours in this city except for a little while."* (33: 60) What does this mean? It means that unless they change their ways, Our will is going to give you power over them so as to drive them out of Madinah. This will take the form of making you desirous to fight and drive them out. Thus, our will concerning them will be made to take effect through you. This is one way of making God's will and the Prophet's will identical, but it is through God's will that it is done. We, however, see it through what the Prophet wishes and does. In this way we can also understand how the wind was made subservient to Solomon as this was identical with God's command.

God also made the *jinn* subservient to him. They built whatever he wished them to build, and they also dived into the earth and the sea to bring him whatever he wished. He further gave him the authority to punish anyone who disobeyed him or who caused corruption and to chain them by their hands and feet, or every two or more together, as he deemed fit or needed.

Solomon was then told that he had full authority over whatever favours God granted him. He could give to anyone or withhold from anyone as he wished: *"This is Our gift; so give or withhold as you please, without account."* (Verse 39) This was a further honour granted him by God. Added to all of this, Solomon is told that he has been given closeness to God in this present life and that he will be granted a warm welcome in the life to come: *"In the life to come he is to be close to Us and will be well received."* (Verse 40) Thus did God grant Solomon a very high standard of care, blessing and favour.

The Symbol of Patience in Adversity

We are then given more of the story of tests, patience in adversity, followed by favours bestowed from on high. This time, the prophet who is tested is Job:

> *Remember Our servant Job who cried out to his Lord: 'Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!' 'Strike [the ground! with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.' We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight. 'Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath.' We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us. (Verses 41-44)*

The story of Job and his steadfastness in face of a severe test is well known, and often cited as an example of patience in adversity. However, it is also coloured with Israelite distortions. The part that sounds correct in the story is that Job was God's good servant who always turned to Him in humility and submission. God tested him and he remained patient. It seems that the test he endured entailed the loss of his wealth, family and health. Nevertheless, he maintained his bond with God, trusting to Him, and was satisfied with what God had given him.

He had a few well-wishers who remained faithful to him, including his wife, but Satan tried to convince these that had God loved Job, He would not have subjected him to such a-severe situation. When they told him this, it was harder for him than the test itself. His wife spoke to him repeating some such whispers, and Job was very upset. He swore that should God restore his health, he would beat her up, specifying the number of times he would hit her, which is said to be one hundred.

At this point Job complained to God about the trouble Satan's schemes and whispers were causing him: "*Satan has afflicted me with weariness and suffering!*" (Verse 41) When he had proved his sincerity beyond any doubt, and when he had rejected all Satan's attempts to weaken him, complaining that these were hard for him, God bestowed His grace on him, ending his test, and restoring his health. He ordered him to hit the ground with his leg, and a cool spring would gush forth. He was to wash himself with its water and drink from it. This was enough for him to recover his health: "*Strike (the ground] with your foot! Here is cool water for you to wash with and to drink.*" (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* states: "*We restored his family to him, and doubled their number as an act of grace from Us, and as a reminder to those who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 43) Some reports suggest that God brought back to life his sons who had died earlier or that He gave him a similar number of sons. However, there is nothing in the Qur'ānic text to suggest that He brought anyone back to life. It may actually be that the Qur'ānic statement means that when his health was restored, he regained his family that had almost been lost to him. He also gave him more as additional favours. This serves as a reminder to those who have insight and understanding.

What is important in the stories related in this *sūrah* is that they show how God bestows favours and grace on His servants. Although He subjects them to tests they remain patient in adversity, bearing their hardship with assured resignation, knowing that whatever God decides is ultimately good.

God also bestowed His grace on Job and his wife with regard to the oath he had made about beating her. She had looked after him during his days of hardship and was also patient during their adversity. Therefore, God ordered Job to take in his hand a bunch of dried sticks, in the number he had stated in his oath, and hit her

with the bunch once only. In this way, he would fulfil his oath: *"Take in your hand a bunch of grass and strike with it, and you will not then break your oath."* (Verse 44) Such care and blessings were in return for what God knew of Job's patience in adversity, his being a model of obedience, always turning to Him for support: *"We found him patient in adversity. How excellent a servant of Ours; he would always turn to Us."* (Verse 44)

Other Prophets

Having related these three stories in some detail, to remind the Prophet that he too should remain steadfast in the face of opposition, the *sūrah* makes a very brief reference to other prophets. They too endured tests and remained patient; they also received God's favours as a result. Some of these lived earlier than David, Solomon and Job, and we know the periods they lived in, while we do not know the others' time of life, because the Qur'ān and other sources available to us have not specified it.

> *Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: all men of strength and vision. We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come. In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good. And remember Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu'l-Kifl: each belonged to the truly good. (Verses 45-48)*

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, as well as Ishmael, undoubtedly lived earlier than David and Solomon, but we do not know in what time relation they were to Job. Elisha and Dhu'l-Kifl are mentioned only very briefly in the Qur'ān. The Arabic name given to the first of these two is Alyasa`, which is closer to the Hebrew version of Elisha. Most probably they refer to the same person. As for Dhu'l-Kifl, we know nothing of him apart from how he is described here: he '*belonged to the truly good.*'

God, limitless is He in His glory, describes Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *'men of strength and vision'*, which refers to their good actions, whether physical, done by hand, or mental, relying on sound vision and good judgement. This implies that a person who does not do good deeds is without a hand, and the one who does nor think well is without a mind or a vision.

Another of their good characteristics is that God gave them a distinctive quality to remember the life to come. This they did with complete disregard for everything else: *"We gave them a specially distinctive quality: the remembrance of the life to come."* (Verse 46) This is the quality that gave them their distinction and choice position: *"In Our sight, they were indeed among the elect, the truly good."* (Verse 47)

Similarly, God states that Ishmael, Elisha and Dhu'l-Kifl were truly good. He

instructs His last messenger to remember them and to contemplate their patience in adversity and the grace He bestowed on them. He too should remain patient in the face of denial and rejection. Steadfastness and patience is the proper course for all advocates of the divine message, particularly God's messengers. God will not abandon such servants. Instead, He will reward them for their patience. What He has for them is certainly better than anything else. When compared with God's grace and care, the schemings and rejections of the unbelievers are of little significance.

3
Contrasting Ends

وَٱذۡكُرۡ إِسۡمَٰعِيلَ وَٱلۡيَسَعَ وَذَا ٱلۡكِفۡلِۖ وَكُلّٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡأَخۡيَارِ ﴿٤٨﴾

Let all this be a reminder. The God-fearing will certainly have a good place to return to: (49)

هَٰذَا ذِكۡرٞۚ وَإِنَّ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ لَحُسۡنَ مَـَٔابٖ ﴿٤٩﴾

gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open to them. (50)

جَنَّٰتِ عَدۡنٖ مُّفَتَّحَةٗ لَّهُمُ ٱلۡأَبۡوَٰبُ ﴿٥٠﴾

They will be comfortably seated there, and they will call for abundant fruit and drink, (51)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ فِيهَا يَدۡعُونَ فِيهَا بِفَٰكِهَةٖ كَثِيرَةٖ وَشَرَابٖ ﴿٥١﴾

having beside them well-matched mates of modest gaze. (52)

وَعِندَهُمۡ قَٰصِرَٰتُ ٱلطَّرۡفِ أَتۡرَابٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

This is what you are promised for the Day of Reckoning: (53)

هَٰذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِيَوۡمِ ٱلۡحِسَابِ ﴿٥٣﴾

this, Our provision for you will never end. (54)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَرِزۡقُنَا مَا لَهُۥ مِن نَّفَادٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

This is so! Indeed those who transgress the bounds of what is right will have the most evil place to return to: (55)

هَٰذَاۚ وَإِنَّ لِلطَّٰغِينَ لَشَرَّ مَـَٔابٖ ﴿٥٥﴾

hell will they have to endure; and

جَهَنَّمَ يَصۡلَوۡنَهَا فَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡمِهَادُ ﴿٥٦﴾

how evil a resting place. (56)

هَٰذَا فَلۡيَذُوقُوهُ حَمِيمٞ وَغَسَّاقٞ ﴿٥٧﴾

Let them, then, taste this: a scalding fluid and a dark, disgusting food, (57)

وَءَاخَرُ مِن شَكۡلِهِۦٓ أَزۡوَٰجٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

and coupled with it, further [suffering] of a similar nature. (58)

هَٰذَا فَوۡجٞ مُّقۡتَحِمٞ مَّعَكُمۡۖ لَا مَرۡحَبَۢا بِهِمۡۚ إِنَّهُمۡ صَالُواْ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٥٩﴾

Here is another crowd of people rushing headlong to join you. No welcome to them! They too shall burn in the fire. (59)

قَالُواْ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ لَا مَرۡحَبَۢا بِكُمۡۖ أَنتُمۡ قَدَّمۡتُمُوهُ لَنَاۖ فَبِئۡسَ ٱلۡقَرَارُ ﴿٦٠﴾

These others will say: 'No, but it is you! No welcome to you either! It is you who brought this on us! How vile a place to be in!' (60)

قَالُواْ رَبَّنَا مَن قَدَّمَ لَنَا هَٰذَا فَزِدۡهُ عَذَابٗا ضِعۡفٗا فِي ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٦١﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Give double punishment in the fire to whomever has brought this on us.' (61)

وَقَالُواْ مَا لَنَا لَا نَرَىٰ رِجَالٗا كُنَّا نَعُدُّهُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَشۡرَارِ ﴿٦٢﴾

They will say: 'How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, (62)

أَتَّخَذۡنَٰهُمۡ سِخۡرِيًّا أَمۡ زَاغَتۡ عَنۡهُمُ ٱلۡأَبۡصَٰرُ ﴿٦٣﴾

and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?' (63)

إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَحَقّٞ تَخَاصُمُ أَهۡلِ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٦٤﴾

This is in truth how it will be: the people of the fire will quarrel among themselves. (64)

A Quarrel in Hell

The previous passage presented a taste of the life of some of God's chosen people, as they were tested and endured hardship with patience and resignation. They were then granted God's favours and grace. In this way some of the most noble lives in this present world were depicted. Now the *sūrah* continues its discourse, speaking about God- fearing people in contrast to those who are tyrannical and commit excesses. It shows them however in the next world, where life is everlasting. Thus it paints a scene of the Day of Judgement.

First, a picture is drawn of two completely contrasting images, both in their general outlook and detail. Thus, the God-fearing will have *'a good place to return to,'*

while the transgressors will have *'the most evil place to return to.'* The former will be in gardens of perpetual bliss, with gates wide open, where every comfort is available and they are well seated, enjoying all the food and drink they desire, as also female companions of the same age. Although they are still young women, they are '*of modest gaze,'* which means that they are not looking around for anything or coveting what others have. This is all part of what God will provide them with, and whatever He provides will never be exhausted.

As for the others, they have a place where they will be stationed, but there is no rest there, for it is hell, which is described as *'how evil a resting place.'* They have scalding hot drinks, and food that fills them with disgust. It is what flows and seeps through those who occupy hell. Or they have something else of the same type, which is described here as ensuring similar suffering.

The scene is completed with a third image that comes alive with the dialogue it reports. A group of transgressors who used to have close ties in this world are shown to be exchanging accusations and insults. Some used to tempt others into further error, while others behaved arrogantly towards believers, ridiculing their faith and their belief in heaven. Indeed they were no different to those among the Quraysh who used to refer to the Prophet and wonder: *"Was the message given to him alone out of all of us?"* (Verse 8)

Now they are depicted as going straight to hell, one lot after another, with some referring to others and saying: *"Here is another crowd of people rushing headlong to join you."* (Verse 59) What answer do they receive? It is an angry and rash one: *"No welcome to them! They too shall burn in the fire."* (Verse 59) Would those who heard this insult take it in silence? Not they! Their response comes quickly: *"No, but it is your No welcome to you either! It is you who brought this on us! How vile a place to be in!"* (Verse 60) This is a direct accusation, blaming them for bringing about such a fate. They follow this accusation with a prayer that reveals how angry they are, wishing to wreak revenge on the others: *"They will say: Our Lord! Give double punishment in the fire to whomever has brought this on us."* (Verse 61)

What happens next? They look around searching for the believers whom they treated with arrogance in their first life, thinking ill of them and ridiculing their claims. They do not see them rushing into the fire alongside them. Hence, they ask: Where are they? Where have they gone? Or could it he that they are here but our vision is impaired so we do not see them: *"They will say: How is it that we do not see here men whom we considered to be wicked, and whom we made the target of our derision? Or is it that our eyes have missed them?"* (Verses 62-63) Yet those who are missed by the dwellers of hell are enjoying their abode in heaven.

The scene concludes with a statement about the actual situation of the people of

hell: *"This is in truth how it will be: the people of the fire will quarrel among themselves."* (Verse 64) There is a wide gulf between their fate and that of the believers whom they ridiculed and refused to believe would be God's chosen ones. How miserable is their own lot which they were once keen to hasten: *"Our Lord! Hasten to us our share of punishment even before the Day of Reckoning."* (Verse 16)

4
Man's First Creation

Say: 'I am but a warner; and there is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all, (65)	قُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ مُنذِرٞۖ وَمَا مِنۡ إِلَٰهٍ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡوَٰحِدُ ٱلۡقَهَّارُ ٦٥
the Lord of the heaven and the earth and all that is between, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving!' (66)	رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَا ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡغَفَّارُ ٦٦
Say: 'This is a great message; (67)	قُلۡ هُوَ نَبَؤٌاْ عَظِيمٌ ٦٧
yet you turn away from it. (68)	أَنتُمۡ عَنۡهُ مُعۡرِضُونَ ٦٨
No knowledge would I have of what those on high argue. (69)	مَا كَانَ لِيَ مِنۡ عِلۡمِۭ بِٱلۡمَلَإِ ٱلۡأَعۡلَىٰٓ إِذۡ يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ٦٩
It is only revealed to me that I am here to give clear warning.' (70)	إِن يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ إِلَّآ أَنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٞ مُّبِينٌ ٧٠
Your Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to create a human being out of clay; (71)	إِذۡ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ إِنِّي خَٰلِقُۢ بَشَرٗا مِّن طِينٖ ٧١
when I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down before him in prostration.' (72)	فَإِذَا سَوَّيۡتُهُۥ وَنَفَخۡتُ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِي فَقَعُواْ لَهُۥ سَٰجِدِينَ ٧٢
The angels prostrated themselves, all of them	فَسَجَدَ ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ كُلُّهُمۡ أَجۡمَعُونَ ٧٣

together. (73)

Not so Iblīs. He gloried in his arrogance and was one of those who reject the truth. (74)

Said [God]: 'Mils! What prevents you from bowing down to one whom I have created with My hands? Are you too proud, or do you deem yourself superior?' (75)

Answered [Iblīs]: 'I am better than he: You have created me out of fire, but created him from clay.' (76)

Said He: 'Then get out from it: you are accursed; (77)

My rejection shall follow you until the Day of Judgement.' (78)

Said [Iblīs]: 'My Lord! Grant me a respite till Resurrection Day.' (79)

Said He: 'You are one of those granted respite (80)

till the day of the appointed time.' (81)

[Iblīs] then said: 'I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all (82)

except Your true servants.' (83)

[And God] said: 'This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state: (84)

I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of

إِلَّآ إِبۡلِيسَ ٱسۡتَكۡبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٧٤

قَالَ يَٰٓإِبۡلِيسُ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَن تَسۡجُدَ لِمَا خَلَقۡتُ بِيَدَيَّۖ أَسۡتَكۡبَرۡتَ أَمۡ كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡعَالِينَ ٧٥

قَالَ أَنَا۠ خَيۡرٞ مِّنۡهُۖ خَلَقۡتَنِي مِن نَّارٖ وَخَلَقۡتَهُۥ مِن طِينٖ ٧٦

قَالَ فَٱخۡرُجۡ مِنۡهَا فَإِنَّكَ رَجِيمٞ ٧٧

وَإِنَّ عَلَيۡكَ لَعۡنَتِيٓ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلدِّينِ ٧٨

قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنظِرۡنِيٓ إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ يُبۡعَثُونَ ٧٩

قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُنظَرِينَ ٨٠

إِلَىٰ يَوۡمِ ٱلۡوَقۡتِ ٱلۡمَعۡلُومِ ٨١

قَالَ فَبِعِزَّتِكَ لَأُغۡوِيَنَّهُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ٨٢

إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنۡهُمُ ٱلۡمُخۡلَصِينَ ٨٣

قَالَ فَٱلۡحَقُّ وَٱلۡحَقَّ أَقُولُ ٨٤

لَأَمۡلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنكَ وَمِمَّن تَبِعَكَ مِنۡهُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ٨٥

them as shall follow you.' (85)	قُلۡ مَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٖ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلۡمُتَكَلِّفِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾
Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. (86)	إِنۡ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكۡرٞ لِّلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾
This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, (87)	وَلَتَعۡلَمُنَّ نَبَأَهُۥ بَعۡدَ حِينِۭ ﴿٨٨﴾
and in time you will certainly come to know its truth.' (88)	

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* reaffirms the issues presented at its outset: God's oneness, revelations and requital in the life to come. It mentions Adam's story as evidence of the truth of revelation, citing in support what took place on high and what was determined then of accountability for man's actions on the Day of Reckoning. The story shows an aspect of Satan's envy which caused his ruin and expulsion from God's mercy. This was when he envied Adam what God had bestowed on him of His favours. The passage also depicts the ever- raging battle between Satan and mankind. His aim is to tempt and seduce the largest number of people possible so that they will join him in hell; this to avenge himself on Adam whom he blamed for his expulsion. It is a battle with well defined objectives. Yet still people surrender to their old enemy.

The *sūrah* concludes by reconfirming the fact of revelation, and the great issue behind it. Needless to say, the unbelievers remain oblivious to these facts.

A Plain Warning

> *Say: I am but a warner; and there is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all the Lord of the heaven and the earth and all that is between, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving! (Verses 65-66)*

The Prophet is given instructions as to what to say to the idolaters who were surprised and amazed at what he preached, wondering: *"Does he make all the gods into one God? This is indeed most strange!"* (Verse 5) He is to say to them that this is the plain truth: *"There is no deity other than God, the One who conquers all."* He is to further inform them that he himself has no say in all this, apart from giving warnings and

leaving people to their Lord to judge. He is *"the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between."* He has no partners. No one can find shelter against His will whether it be in the heavens and the earth, or in between them. For He is *"the Almighty, the All-Forgiving."* He has all power and He forgives anyone seeking forgiveness and who turns back to Him in repentance.

The Prophet's instructions make it clear that what he has brought people is far greater than what they think, and that it is a prelude to something they choose to remain oblivious of: *"Say: This is a great message; yet you turn away from it."* (Verses 67-68) It is indeed far greater than it appears at first sight. It is part of God's will that applies to the entire universe and its system. It cannot be separated from the creation of the heavens and the earth, or from the distant past and the far away future.

This message is addressed to people far beyond the Quraysh in Makkah, the Arabs in their Peninsula and the generation that witnessed its revelation. It transcends the boundaries of place and time to address humanity across all generations, shaping its destiny, from the time of its revelation until God inherits the earth and all those living on it. It came at its appropriate time to fulfil its mission in the time set for it by God.

Mankind's course has been changed with This great message: it is now set on a path demarcated by God. This is true both with regard to those who accept it or reject it, fight for or against it, and in its then current generation or subsequent ones. Nothing and no event in the history of mankind has had greater influence on man than this message. It laid down concepts, rules and systems and set values that apply to the whole earth, for all times. The Arabs could not have imagined anything like this to be possible, not even in their dreams. How could they have imagined that this message, initially addressed to them, would change the face of the earth and the course of history. How could they have thought that it would influence the conscience and life of humanity, accomplish God's will with regard to human destiny and link all these to universal existence and to the truth inherent in the creation of the heavens and the earth. Nor could they have thought for one moment that it was a message that would remain valid for all time, fulfilling its role in directing people's lives.

Today, Muslims adopt the same attitude towards this message as the Arabs of old: they do not understand its nature or its link with the whole universe. They do not recognize the truth inherent in it as part of the truth inherent in the universe. Nor do they look at its influence on human history in a realistic, objective way that is not borrowed from the enemies of this faith who always try to belittle Islam and its effects. This makes Muslims today totally unaware of their true role in the past, present or future, or that they are required to play this role to the end of time.

The Arabs of old thought that the matter concerned them and Muĥammad, not least the fact that it was he who was chosen to receive revelations. All their worry focused on this question. Therefore, the Qur'ān tells them that the matter is far greater than this issue. It is greater than them and Muĥammad who is no more than a messenger delivering what was entrusted to him. He did not invent it, and he could not have learnt what lies beyond it until God had taught him. He was not present with those on high when it all began. It was God who told him of it: *"No knowledge would I have of what those on high argue. It is only revealed to me that I am here to give clear warning."* (Verses 69-70)

How it All Started

At this point, the *sūrah* tells us how the human story first began and what happened on high. This defines its course as well as its fate and destination. Muĥammad was sent at the end of time to warn people of all this:

> *Your Lord said to the angels: I am about to create a human being out of clay; when I have fashioned him and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down before him in prostration. (Verses 71-72)*

We do not know how God said this to the angels or how He speaks to them. Nor do we know how the angels receive what God imparts to them. We do not know anything of the angels' nature except what God has told us about them in His revealed hook. Therefore, it is useless to try to delve further into this. We should instead consider the significance of the story as told in the Qur'ān.

God created man out of clay, just like the rest of living things on earth. All the elements in their constitutions are derived from clay, with the exception of the secret of life, about which we do not know how or where it came from. Apart from this secret and the breathing of a soul into man, all the constituents of his body stem from mother earth. He will be transformed again into these constituents when the unknown secret departs from his body together with the effects of the sublime breath of soul which defined his course in life.

Again we do not know the nature of the sublime breathing of a soul into man, but we know its effects which distinguished man from the rest of creation on earth. It distinguished him with the quality of aspiring to the sublime, with mind and spirit, which allowed him to look at past experiences and make future plans, and facilitated his spirit to go beyond what is received by his senses and understood by his mind to reach to what neither the senses nor the mind can comprehend. This quality of aspiring to the sublime is unique to man, shared by no other living creature on earth. It never happened in the long history of the earth that any species, or any individual

from any species, made this leap even when we accept that physical evolution occurs.

God breathed of His soul into man because His will wished to place him in charge of the earth, managing its affairs within the limits He set, so that he would build human life on it. God gave man the ability to gain higher knowledge. Ever since, man has risen higher whenever he is in contact with the source of his soul, deriving his values from there and maintaining a straight course. When he deviates from this source, the knowledge within him will be in discordance, unable to follow a coherent, progressive, and forward movement. In fact, these discordant trends will threaten his course and may lead to a setback in his human quality, pulling him down, even though his scientific knowledge and experience in some areas at least are well advanced.

This creature of small stature, limited ability, short life duration and basic knowledge could not have attained such honour except for this aspect of divine grace bestowed on him. Otherwise, what is man? He is this small, weak creature living on earth alongside millions of other species. The earth is only a small satellite of a mere star of which there are millions and millions in the great space whose boundaries are known only to God. Who is this creature, man, before whom the angels are required to prostrate? It is because of this subtle, yet great secret that man deserves his position of honour. When this is discarded, man goes back to his origin, the clay of the earth.

The angels acted on God's orders, as they naturally do: *"The angels prostrated themselves, all of them together."* (Verse 73) How, when and where? All this is part of God's knowledge. To know does not add significance to the story. Instead, the significance is seen in the position and value given to man, a creature made of clay, when he rose above his origin through this breath of God's soul. The angels prostrated themselves in compliance with God's order, knowing that His wisdom is infinite.

"Not so Iblīs. He gloried in his arrogance and was one of those who reject the truth." (Verse 74) Was *Iblīs* one of the angels? Most probably not, because if he were an angel, he would not have disobeyed God. Angels do not disobey any order issued to them by God, and they always do what they are bidden. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān that he was created of fire, while it is known that the angels were created from light. Yet he was with the angels and the order to prostrate before Adam included him. He is not specifically mentioned in connection with the order so as to belittle his position. Yet we know that the order applied to him because of the reproach he received as a result of his disobedience.

"Said [God]: Iblīs! What prevents you from bowing down to one whom I have created with

My hands? Are you too proud, or do you deem yourself superior?" (Verse 75) God is the Creator of all. Therefore, the mention that He has created man is particularly significant because it refers to the special care given to this creature who has been given a breath of His soul.§ Are you too proud to obey My orders? Or do you deem yourself superior like all others who refuse to submit?

"Answered [Iblīs]: I am better than he: You have created me out of fire, but created him from clay." (Verse 76) The answer overflows with envy. It also ignores the noble element that Adam has in addition to his creation from clay. Thus, it is a rude retort stemming from a nature that had abandoned all goodness.

At this point, the divine order was issued expelling this rebellious creature: *"Said He: Then get out from it: you are accursed; My rejection shall follow you until the Day of Judgement."* (Verses *77-78)* We cannot define the referent of the pronoun 'it'. It could refer either to heaven, or to God's grace. Both interpretations are possible. There need be no argument over this. In both cases the meaning is clear: *Iblīs* was expelled and cursed as he incurred God's displeasure by rebelling against His orders.

However, *Iblīs's* envy turned into a grudge and determination to avenge himself on Adam and his progeny: *"Said [Iblīs]: My Lord! Grant me a respite till Resurrection Day."* (Verse 79) For some purpose, God granted *'Iblīs* his request, allowing him the chance he wanted: *"Said He: You are one of those granted respite till the day of the appointed time."* (Verse 81) Satan then revealed his -goal which summed up his grudge: *"[Iblīs] then said I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants."* (Verses 82-83) Thus *Iblīs* defined his plan of action. He swore by the Lord of power that he would tempt all human beings, except those over whom he had no power. This was not a gesture of nobility on his part; but rather an acknowledgement of the uselessness of his efforts. Thus he told us about the barrier between him and those who are safe from, and immune to his temptation. It is their worship of God that makes them safe. This is in accordance with God's design and will. God declares His will, defining the way ahead: *"[And God] said: This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state: I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verses 84-85)

God always states the truth. The Qur'ān repeatedly states this fact and re-emphasizes it in a variety of ways. In this *sūrah* there are several references to different aspects of the truth, such as the demand of the disputants who climbed the walls of David's sanctuary that he should judge between them in fairness. The Arabic text adds clear connotations that the judgement should be made on the basis of truth. Similarly, the comments on David's story refer to the creation of the heavens and the

§ For further discussion on the *Yad* attribute, please refer to section 1.6 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

earth on the basis of the truth. Now, God Almighty reaffirms the truth, saying: *"This, then, is the truth! And the truth do I state."* (Verse 84) Thus, these references emphasize different aspects of the truth, but its nature is always the same. It includes this true promise: *"I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verse 85)

It is, then, a battle between Satan and Adam's children: they go into it with full knowledge, aware of the consequences which are made clear in this true promise. They bear responsibility for their choices. Yet in His mercy, God has decided not to leave them without enlightenment. Therefore, he sent them His messengers to warn them.

At the end of the *sūrah,* the Prophet is instructed to say his final word:

> *Say: No reward do I ask of you for this, and I am not one to claim what I am not. This is no less than a reminder to all the worlds, and in time you will certainly come to know its truth. (Verses 86-88)*

It is a sincere call to them to save themselves when the warning has been given and the fate has been shown. The caller, advocating the truth, plain and simple, makes no false claims or pretensions, demanding no reward from anyone. He orders nothing except what sound human nature readily endorses. He simply delivers a reminder to all the worlds, since people may forget or choose to be oblivious. They may ignore the great message that has been delivered to them, but they will eventually come to know its truth. Indeed within a few years of receiving this address, the Arabs knew the truth of this message, and they will come to know it on Judgement Day, when God's promise will be fulfilled: *"I will most certainly fill hell with you and such of them as shall follow you."* (Verse 85)

Thus, the ending of the *sūrah* is in full harmony with its beginning as also with the themes and issues it has tackled. It is given in a powerful note suggesting that what is to come is grave indeed: *"in time you will certainly come to know its truth."* (Verse 88)

SŪRAH 39

Al-Zumar

(The Throngs)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals almost exclusively with the issue of God's oneness. It varies its address to the human heart, striking the full range of tones on its instrument so as to produce a sustained and profound effect. This it does to firmly establish the roots of the principle of God's oneness, purging the heart of anything that could mar its image. Thus, from start to finish, the *sūrah* variously deals with just one subject.

From the very outset, this issue is given immediate prominence: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It is We who have bestowed on you this revelation from on high, stating the truth. Therefore, worship God alone, sincere in your faith in Him. True devotion is due to God alone.*" (Verses 1-3) It comes again with regular frequency, either expressly stated or as a concept to contemplate. Examples of the first type are: "*Say: lam commanded to worship God, sincere in my faith in Him alone; and I am commanded to be the first to submit myself to Him.' Say: 'Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day.' Say: 'God alone do I worship, sincere in my faith in Him alone. You can worship whatever you please instead of Him.'*" (Verses 11-15) "*Say: 'You ignorant people! Would you bid me worship anyone other than God?' It has been revealed to you, and to those before you, that if you ever associate partners with God, all your works shall certainly come to nothing, and you shall certainly be among the lost. You shall worship God alone, and be one of those who give thanks Ito Him].*" (Verses 64-66) Two examples now follow of the second type: "*God cites the case of a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other, and a man belonging wholly to one person? Can they be deemed equal? All praise is due to God alone, but most of them do not understand*" (Verse 29) "*Is not God sufficient for His servant. Yet they would try to frighten you with those [they worship] other than Him. He whom God lets go astray can never find*

any guide; whereas he whom God guides aright can never be led astray. Is God not mighty, capable of inflicting retribution?" (Verses 36-37)

Alongside stating the truth of God's oneness the *sūrah* provides numerous guidelines and inspiring touches to alert our hearts. This serves to fine tune our responses so that we can make the right response to the divine address. For example: *"There is good news for those who shun the worship of false deities and turn to God, so give good news to My servants, who listen carefully to what is said and follow the best of it. These are the ones whom God has graced with His guidance, and these are the ones endowed with insight."* (Verses 17-18) *"God has bestowed from on high the best of all teachings: a book that is consistent within itself repeating its statements [of the truth] in manifold forms. It causes the skins of those who stand in awe of their Lord to shiver, but then their skins and hearts soften at the mention of God. Such is God's guidance.. He guides with it him that wills, whereas the one whom God lets go astray can never find any guide."* (Verse 23) *"When man suffers affliction, he cries out to his Lord, turning to Him for help; but once He bestows upon him a favour by His grace, he forgets what he cried and prayed for earlier, and claims that others are equal to God, thus leading others astray from His path. Say [to him]: 'Enjoy yourself for a while in your disbelief for you are one of those destined to the fire."* (Verse 8)

A prominent feature of the whole *sūrah* is the way in which the air of the life to come spreads over it. Every short passage takes us there. Indeed, the hereafter is its stage. Again, a few examples suffice by way of illustration: *"How about one who devoutly worships God during the hours of the night prostrating himself or standing in prayer, ever mindful of the life to come, and hoping for his Lord's mercy?'* (Verse 9) *"Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day." (Verse 13) "How about one on whom God's sentence of punishment has been passed? Can you rescue those who are already in the fire?"* (Verse 19) *"How about one who shall have nothing but his bare face to protect him from the awful suffering on Resurrection Day."* (Verse 24) *"Yet much greater will be the suffering of the life to come, if they but knew it."* (Verse 26) *"Is not there in hell a proper abode for the unbelievers?"* (Verse 32) *"If the wrongdoers possessed all that is on earth, and twice as much, they would surely offer it all as ransom from the awful suffering on the Day of Resurrection. For God will have made obvious to them something they have never reckoned with."* (Verse 47) *"Turn towards your Lord and submit to Him before the suffering comes upon you, for then you cannot be helped. Follow the best that has been revealed to you by your Lord before the suffering comes upon you of a sudden, without your being aware of it, lest anyone should say: 'Woe is me for having neglected what is due to God, and for having been one of those who scoffed [at the truth]'; or lest he should say: If God had but guided me, I would surely have been among the God-fearing; or lest he should say, when faced by the suffering [that awaits him]: If only I could have a second chance in life, I will be among those who do good.'"* (Verses 54-58) Moreover, a large part of the *sūrah* draws complete scenes of the hereafter, thereby adding to its overall ambience.

Scenes of the universe which are varied and frequent in Makkan *sūrahs* are few

here. We have one at the opening: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. He causes the night to flow into the day, and the day to flow into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]: each running its course for a set term. He is indeed the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 5) One more such scene is given in the middle of the *sūrah*: "*Have you not considered how God sends down water from the skies, and then causes it to travel through the earth to form springs? He then brings with it vegetation of different colours; and then it withers and you can see it turning yellow. In the end He causes it to crumble to dust. In all this there is indeed a reminder for those endowed with insight.*" (Verse 21) Apart from these expressions we have a number of other quick references to the creation of the heavens and the earth.

The *sūrah* also includes references to practical life and human nature. Thus, early in the *sūrah* there is a reference to the origins of humanity: "*He has created you all from a single soul, and from it He fashioned its mate; and He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs; and He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness. Such is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion. There is no deity other than Him. How, then, can you lose sight of the truth?*" (Verse 6) On the nature of human reactions in situations of both adversity and pleasant ease there are the following two examples: "*When man suffers affliction, he cries out to his Lord, turning to Him for help; but once He bestows upon him a favour by His grace, he forgets what he cried and prayed for earlier.*" (Verse 8) "*When man suffers affliction, he cries out to Us; but once We bestow upon him a favour by Our grace, he says: I have been given all this by virtue of my knowledge.' By no means! It is but a test.*" (Verse 49) The fact that people's souls are always in God's grasp is also highlighted: "*God takes away people's souls upon their death, and the souls of the living during their sleep. He keeps with. Him the souls of those whose death He has ordained and sends back the others until their appointed time. In all this there are signs for people who reflect.*" (Verse 42)

However, the ambience of the *sūrah* is derived from its discourse on the Day of Judgement and the life to come. This permeates the *sūrah* until its conclusion with a scene of devoted worship giving us a clear impression of the atmosphere on that day: "*You will see the angels surrounding the Throne, extolling their Lord's glory and praise. Judgement will have been passed on all in justice, and it will be said: All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 75)

This impression fits perfectly with the ambience of the *sūrah* and the effect it has on our hearts. It emphasizes feelings of awe, fear of God and apprehension over one's fate in the hereafter. Hence, the images it presents to us are those of a trembling, anxious and apprehensive heart. Take for example the image in verse 9 painting a devout worshipper spending hours at night in prayer with his mind fixed on his destiny in the life to come, hoping for God's mercy. Or take the image in verse 23 depicting good believers listening to the Qur'ān, yet they are shivering, though it is not long before their hearts and skins soften at the mention of God. The *sūrah* is full

of directives drawing people's attentions to the need to fear God and to be fully aware of what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection: "*You servants of Mine who believe! Fear your Lord!*" (Verse 10) "*Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day.*" (Verse 13) "*Above them there shall he layers of fire, and layers of fire shall he beneath them. In this way God puts fear into His servants' hearts: My servants! Fear Me!*'" (Verse 16) Additionally there are scenes of the Day of Judgement which emphasize our feelings of awe and apprehension.

The *sūrah* deals with its main theme in quick, short rounds, each one of which concludes with an image of the Day of Resurrection. We will discuss these separately, as they are presented in the *sūrah,* because it is difficult to break this down into main passages. Indeed every few verses can he treated as a distinct entity for all address one major truism, God's oneness.

1
The Diversity of God's Creation

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

تَنزِيلُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلۡحَكِيمِ ﴿١﴾

This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

إِنَّآ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ فَٱعۡبُدِ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصٗا لَّهُ ٱلدِّينَ ﴿٢﴾

It is We who have bestowed on you this revelation from on high, stating the truth. Therefore, worship God alone, sincere in your faith in Him. (2)

أَلَا لِلَّهِ ٱلدِّينُ ٱلۡخَالِصُۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُواْ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوۡلِيَآءَ مَا نَعۡبُدُهُمۡ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ زُلۡفَىٰٓ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَحۡكُمُ بَيۡنَهُمۡ فِي مَا هُمۡ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي مَنۡ هُوَ كَٰذِبٞ كَفَّارٞ ﴿٣﴾

True devotion is due to God alone. Those who take others besides Him as their protectors say: 'We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.' God will judge between them concerning all matters on which they differ. God will not grace with guidance anyone who is an ungrateful liar. (3)

لَّوۡ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ أَن يَتَّخِذَ وَلَدٗا لَّٱصۡطَفَىٰ مِمَّا يَخۡلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُۚ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥۖ هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡوَٰحِدُ ٱلۡقَهَّارُ ﴿٤﴾

Had God wished to take to Himself a son, He could have chosen anyone He wanted from whatever He creates. Limitless is He in His glory: the One God who conquers all. (4)

خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۖ يُكَوِّرُ ٱلَّيۡلَ عَلَى ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُكَوِّرُ ٱلنَّهَارَ عَلَى ٱلَّيۡلِۖ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمۡسَ وَٱلۡقَمَرَۖ كُلٌّ يَجۡرِي لِأَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّىۗ أَلَا هُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡغَفَّٰرُ ٥

He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. He causes the night to flow into the day, and the day to flow into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]: each running its course for a set term. He is indeed the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (5)

خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفۡسٖ وَٰحِدَةٖ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنۡهَا زَوۡجَهَا وَأَنزَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ ثَمَٰنِيَةَ أَزۡوَٰجٖۚ يَخۡلُقُكُمۡ فِي بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمۡ خَلۡقٗا مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ خَلۡقٖ فِي ظُلُمَٰتٖ ثَلَٰثٖۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمۡ لَهُ ٱلۡمُلۡكُۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُصۡرَفُونَ ٦

He has created you all from a single soul, and from it He fashioned its mate; and He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs; and He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness. Such is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion. There is no deity other than Him. How, then, can you lose sight of the truth? (6)

إِن تَكۡفُرُواْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ عَنكُمۡۖ وَلَا يَرۡضَىٰ لِعِبَادِهِ ٱلۡكُفۡرَۖ وَإِن تَشۡكُرُواْ يَرۡضَهُ لَكُمۡۗ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٞ وِزۡرَ أُخۡرَىٰۗ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُم مَّرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٧

If you disbelieve, God has no need of you; nor is He pleased with disbelief by His servants. If you give thanks, He is pleased with you. No soul will bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return, and then He will tell you the truth of all you did. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (7)

Maintaining Sincerity in Faith

The *sūrah* begins with a clear, emphatic statement: *"This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 1) As He is Almighty, He is able to bestow it from on high, and as He is wise, He knows the purpose of bestowing it, ensuring that it is all done in accordance with wise and elaborate planning.

The *sūrah,* however, does not dwell on this fact. It is only a prelude to its main

theme, which this book has been revealed to establish, namely, God's oneness, addressing all worship to Him alone, ensuring sincerity in faith, eliminating all traces of any alleged partnership with God and establishing direct contact with Him without any intermediary or need for intercession.

"*It is We who have bestowed on you this revelation from on high, stating the truth.*" (Verse 2) The essence of the truth with which the book has been revealed is the absolute oneness of God, which forms the foundation of all existence. In verse 5 the *sūrah* states: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth.*" It is all the same truth that makes up the foundation of the universe and provides the purpose for revealing the Qur'ān. It is a single, consistent truth confirmed by the unity of the system that controls the heavens and the earth, and expressed in human language through this hook. It is the truth that puts the seal on everything made by the only Creator.

"*Therefore, worship God alone, sincere in your faith in Him.*" (Verse 2) The address here is to the Prophet, the recipient of the book as it is bestowed from on high. It embodies the constitution which he advocates, calling on all mankind to adopt it: to worship God alone, sincere in our devotion, and to conduct human life, in all spheres, on this basis. These are not mere statements. It is a complete system, starting with a firm belief that is translated into an all-embracing way of life for both the individual and the community.

A believer in God's oneness submits only to God, bowing his head to none other, and asking nothing from others. For him only God is powerful and holds sway. Indeed, all other creatures are weak, unable to do him, or themselves, either harm or good. It is God alone who gives, bestows favours or withholds them. What is the use, then, of turning to anyone other than God for help when all are weak and God alone holds all power?

A true believer recognizes the unity of the system that conducts all affairs in the universe, realizes that the code of living God has chosen for mankind is part of that system, specially moulded to achieve harmony between human life and the universe. Hence, a believer does not choose any system or legal code other than that which God has laid down. A believer in God's oneness also feels that there is a bond between him and all that God has created in this universe, and that all creatures are friendly towards him. He feels that all around him have been put in place by God's hand. Hence, he warms to everything that comes his way of God's creation. He does not hurt, destroy or waste anyone or anything, or use it in any way other than what God has sanctioned.

Similarly, the effects of believing in God's oneness are apparent in believers' concepts and feelings just as they are reflected in their actions and behaviour. Thus,

belief in God's oneness is not merely a verbal utterance. Hence why it is given such emphasis in God's book, and hence why it is repeated and explained in a great variety of ways. Each and everyone of us needs to study and reflect upon God's oneness so that this truth is perfectly ingrained in our own essence.

"True devotion is due to God alone." (Verse 3) In Arabic this statement has added emphasis provided by certain characteristics of the sentence structure, which is peculiar to Arabic and difficult to capture in translation. It gives the statement the sense of a declaration producing a loud but clear echo. Thus sound, structure and meaning combine to strongly emphasize this basic truth upon which all life, throughout the universe, is based.

Who Deserves Guidance?

Then a refutation of the complex superstition the idolaters presented in opposition to belief in God's oneness follows: *"Those who take others besides Him as their protectors say: We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.' God will judge between them concerning all matters on which they differ. God will not grace with guidance anyone who is an ungrateful liar."* (Verse 3)

Although they declared that God created them and the heavens and earth, they would not carry this belief to its natural and logical consequence which required that they devote all their worship and submission to Him alone. Instead they invented the superstition that the angels were God's daughters and even carved statues representing angels so that they could worship these. They then claimed that their worship of these statues, such as al-Lāt, al-`Uzzā and Manāt, was not in essence devotion to them. It was merely a gesture to bring them closer to God, in the hope that these statues or what they represented would eventually intercede with God on their behalf.

Thus, deviation from simple, natural logic landed them in such a medley of falsehood: for the angels are not God's daughters, nor do the idols represent angels. God does not accept such deviation. He neither accepts intercession on people's behalf nor allows them to draw closer to Him in this way. Humanity deviates from the logic of its own nature whenever it moves away from the simple faith of God's oneness, which is the essence of Islam, as it was the essence of divine religion, preached by every messenger of God. Nowadays, we see in different parts of the world worship of saints, which is similar in essence to the practice of the Arabs of old who worshipped angels, or statues representing angels, to draw closer to God. God, in His limitless glory, defines the way that brings people close to Him: this is belief in God's oneness without intermediaries or intercessors of any sort.

"God will not grace with guidance anyone who is an ungrateful liar." (Verse 3) They lie

to God when they allege that the angels are His daughters. They also lie to Him when they claim that such worship of the angels will plead with Him on their behalf. In fact this worship makes them unbelievers, disobedient of God's express orders. Needless to say, God does not give His guidance to one who lies to Him, let alone disbelieves in Him. Guidance is granted as a reward for turning to Him, sincerity in worship, and diligently seeking the right way.

The *sūrah* then shows their belief to be erroneous, indeed otiose: "*Had God wished to take to Himself a son, He could have chosen anyone He wanted from whatever He creates. Limitless is He in His glory: the One God who conquers all.*" (Verse 4) This is a supposition made for the sake of argument and to correct concepts. Had God wished for a son, He could have chosen any of His creatures. His will is free, unrestricted. However, He, in His limitless glory, has made Himself free of any such need. Hence, no one can attribute to Him a son. Such is His will and determination: "*Limitless is He in His glory: the One God who conquers all.*" (Verse 4)

Why would He need a son when He is the Creator and Originator of all who controls everything. Indeed everything in the universe belongs it to Him and He can do with it all whatever He wants: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. He causes the night ht to flow into the day, and the day to flow into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws] each running its course for a set term. He is indeed the Almighty; the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 5) This reference to the great universe and the phenomena of night and day, and the subjecting of the sun and moon to God's law, puts the truth of the One God clearer before human nature. The One who creates all this from nothing does not need a son or a partner.

Clear evidence of God's oneness is seen in the way the heavens and the earth are created, and in the law controlling the universe. Indeed, to merely look at the skies and the earth gives us a clear sense of the oneness of the will that has created all and controls all. It has now become clear that the entire world known to man is composed of atoms made of the same matter, consisting of rays that have the same nature. It is also known that all atoms and the bodies composed of such atoms, including the earth in which we live and all planets and stars, are in perpetual motion dictated by a consistent law that operates without fail in the tiny atom as well as in the huge star. Furthermore, it has now been clearly established that this perpetual motion is in accordance with another constant law that further stresses the unity of creation and the unity of control. Every day, man discovers something new testifying to the unity of design throughout the universe.

"*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth.*" (Verse 5) Likewise, He bestowed His book from on high to state the truth. It is the same truth in the universe and in this book, the Qur'ān. Both originate from the same source, and both are evidence of the oneness of their Maker, the Almighty, the Wise.

"*He causes the night to flow into the day, and the day to flow into the night.*" (Verse 5) This is indeed an amazing statement that forces anyone who carefully looks at it to consider what has now been established of the earth's nature and its circular shape. Throughout this commentary on the Qur'ān, I have been keen not to look at its verses and statements from the angle of any theory science advances, because such theories may be right or they may be wrong. They may be proven today to be true but something may be discovered tomorrow to render them false. By contrast, the Qur'ān is the word of truth, and it carries its own proof. It needs no supporting evidence from what human beings may or may not discover. Yet the statement included in this verse forces me to relate it to the fact that the earth is circular, because it describes a fact we all notice. As the earth rotates, the part of it facing the sun receives its light and this is daytime. However, this part is not stationary because the earth continues to rotate. As it does, the night begins to spread over the part that had had the day. This part is in a rounded shape, and the day spreads over it in a flowing movement, followed by the night also in a flowing movement.

After a while the day begins to flow again over the night from the other side, in never-ceasing motion: "*He causes the night to flow into the day, and the day to flow into the night.*" (Verse 5) The statement draws the design, defines the position and specifies the nature of the earth and its movement. Its circular shape and rotation give this statement its most accurate interpretation.

"*He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]: each running its course for a set term.*" (Verse 5) The sun and the moon run in their respective orbits. They are under God's control. No one claims to set them in motion. By natural logic, they cannot run without someone setting them to do so, controlling them by a system that does not deviate by a hair's breadth across countless centuries. Yet both the sun and the moon continue to run their courses '*for a set term,*' which is known only to God.

"*He is indeed the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 5) His might and power are coupled with His forgiveness of anyone who turns to Him. Thus, those who lie to Him, disbelieve in His oneness, attribute partners to Him or allege that He has a son are made aware that the way is open to them to return to the right way and to believe in the One who is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.

Three Depths of Darkness

The *sūrah* then seeks to touch people's hearts. It refers them to the evidence of life close by them, and in fact derived from their own creation and from the animals made subservient to them:

> *He has created you all from a single soul, and from it He fashioned its mate; and He*

> *has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs; and He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness. Such is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion. There is no deity other than Him. How, then, can you lose sight of the truth? (Verse 6)*

Let man look at his own self. He has not created himself, nor does he know who created the human entity except for what God has told him. Yet we all originate from one soul, with one nature and the same characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. Moreover, every human individual shares in these characteristics, because the human soul is one in the countless millions of humans across all generations and all communities. Moreover, its mate or spouse is also made from the same essence. Thus, despite all differences of detail between men and women, they share all these characteristics. This again confirms the unity of the original design for mankind, male and female, and the unity of the Will that created this single soul with its two manifestations.

The reference to the fact of human spouses is coupled by a reference to the same phenomenon in cattle, which in turn suggests that it applies to all living creatures: *"He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs."* The Arabic phrase states 'eight '*zawj,*' but this word means both 'couple' and 'spouse'. Hence, the way it is rendered in translation. The eight are made up of a male and a female of sheep, goats, bovine and camels. The verse mentions that they have been bestowed by God, which means that it is God who has made them subservient to man. It is their subservience that is bestowed from on high and effected in man's world. Thus, man is given God's permission to use cattle for the benefit of human life.

The verse continues its discussion of man's creation, referring to various growth stages of the embryo: *"He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another."* These stages of creation begin with the gamete, then a clinging cell mass, then an embryo, then the bones, and then to a creation that indicates its human status. *"in threefold depths of darkness."* (Verse 6) There is the darkness of the placenta in which the embryo grows, the darkness of the uterus, and the darkness inside the mother's body. It is God's hand that takes the single cell through these stages of creation, one after another, looking after it and giving it the ability to grow and develop until it is formed in a complete human being as God has determined.

Anyone who looks carefully at this journey, which covers a huge gulf traversed in a short period of time, and who reflects on these stages of development, and on how this simple cell is guided along its remarkable journey in these depths of darkness, beyond man's knowledge, will inevitably recognize the Creator and His handiwork. How, then, is man turned away from the true faith: *"Such is God, your Lord: to Him belongs all dominion. There is no deity other than Him. How, then, can you lose sight of the truth?"* (Verse 6)

Having outlined this clear vision of the signs testifying to God's absolute oneness and all encompassing power, the *sūrah* shows people's positions at the parting of the ways between belief and disbelief. It makes it clear that responsibility rests with each individual. It tells them about the end of their lives' journey and the reckoning that awaits them. It will be administered by the One who created them under three depths of darkness and who knows their innermost thoughts and feelings:

> *If you disbelieve, God has no need of you; nor is He pleased with disbelief by His servants. If you give thanks, He is pleased with you. No soul will bear the burden of another. In time, to your Lord you all must return, and then He will tell you the truth of all you did. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (Verse 7)*

The journey inside the mother's belly is merely one stage of a long journey. The second stage is life in this world and the final stage is that of reckoning and reward. All this takes place according to God's design who knows all. He does not need any of His servants. They are essentially weak and powerless, but He bestows on them an abundance of His grace.

"*If you disbelieve, God has no need of you.*" (Verse *7)* If you believe, you will not increase His kingdom in any way. If you disbelieve, this too will not affect His kingdom in any adverse way. He, however, does not like people to disbelieve: "*nor is He pleased with disbelief by His servants.*" (Verse 7) By contrast, "*lf you give thanks, He is pleased with you.*" He will accept this from you and reward you generously for it. Everyone is accountable for their own deeds, and none will be held responsible for another, nor will he be allowed to take upon himself part of another's burden: "*No soul will bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 7) The ultimate end of the journey is to God. There can be neither escape from Him nor refuge with anyone else: "*In time, to your Lord you all must return, and then He will tell you the truth of all you did.*" (Verse 7) You can hide nothing from Him: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 7)

2
As Comfort Replaces Affliction

۞ وَإِذَا مَسَّ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ ضُرٌّ دَعَا رَبَّهُۥ مُنِيبًا
إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ إِذَا خَوَّلَهُۥ نِعْمَةً مِّنْهُ نَسِىَ مَا
كَانَ يَدْعُوٓاْ إِلَيْهِ مِن قَبْلُ وَجَعَلَ لِلَّهِ
أَندَادًا لِّيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ ۚ قُلْ تَمَتَّعْ
بِكُفْرِكَ قَلِيلًا ۖ إِنَّكَ مِنْ أَصْحَـٰبِ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٨﴾

When man suffers affliction, he cries out to his Lord, turning to Him for help; but once He bestows upon him a favour by His grace, he forgets what he cried and prayed for earlier, and claims that others are equal to God, thus leading others astray from His path. Say [to him]: 'Enjoy yourself for a while in your disbelief, for you are one of those destined to the fire.' (8)

أَمَّنْ هُوَ قَـٰنِتٌ ءَانَآءَ ٱلَّيْلِ سَاجِدًا وَقَآئِمًا
يَحْذَرُ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةَ وَيَرْجُواْ رَحْمَةَ رَبِّهِۦ ۗ قُلْ
هَلْ يَسْتَوِى ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا
يَعْلَمُونَ ۗ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُوْلُواْ ٱلْأَلْبَـٰبِ ﴿٩﴾

How about one who devoutly worships God during the hours of the night prostrating himself or standing in prayer, ever mindful of the life to come, and hoping for his Lord's mercy? Say: 'Can those who know and those who do not know be deemed equal?' Only those who are endowed with insight will take heed. (9)

قُلْ يَـٰعِبَادِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمْ ۚ
لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُواْ فِى هَـٰذِهِ ٱلدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةٌ ۗ
وَأَرْضُ ٱللَّهِ وَٰسِعَةٌ ۗ إِنَّمَا يُوَفَّى ٱلصَّـٰبِرُونَ
أَجْرَهُم بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Say: '[Thus speaks God:] You servants of Mine who believe! Fear your Lord! Those who do good in this world will have a good reward. Wide is God's earth. Those who are patient in adversity will be given their reward in full, beyond reckoning.' (10)

Overview

The first passage touched people's hearts by telling them about their existence,

how they are all created from a single soul and how its mate was also created from it. It told them about the creation of animals in pairs, and how man is created in three depths of darkness inside the mother's belly. It touched on how God's hand gave them their human characteristics and their ability to grow and develop.

Now the *sūrah* touches their hearts again as it shows them their conditions in times of hardship and times of ease. It shows them how they boast and how, in their weakness, they swing from one condition to another. They are consistent only when they maintain their bond with God and humble themselves before Him. They will then know the truth and know their way. They will also then be able to benefit from their human characteristics.

Brief Enjoyment

> *When man suffers affliction, he cries out to his Lord, turning to Him for help; but once He bestows upon him a favour by His grace, he forgets what he cried and prayed for earlier, and claims that others are equal to God, thus leading others astray from His path. Say [to him]: Enjoy yourself a while in your disbelief; for you are one of those destined to the fire.' (Verse 8)*

Human nature appears naked when man suffers affliction. Masks are torn off, covers are removed and disillusionment disappears. At this point, human nature turns to its Lord alone knowing that only He can remove affliction. It realizes that all its claims about God having partners are false.

When affliction is gone and man finds himself enjoying an abundance of God's favours, he again burdens his nature with heaps of false influences. He forgets his earnest pleas to God during the time of his affliction, choosing now to overlook his acknowledgement of God's oneness and that it is He alone who can relieve his hardship. He forgets all this and begins to claim that others are equal to God. These alleged equals may be deities man worships just like in the early days of *jāhiliyyah,* or they may be in the shape of values, persons, or situations to which he gives in his consciousness a share of what belongs exclusively to God. We see this in many of the *jāhiliyyah* situations we encounter everywhere. Thus man may worship his desires, inclinations, hopes, fears, wealth, children, rulers and chiefs in the same way as he worships God or even in greater devotion. In fact, he may love them more than he loves God. Polytheism can take different forms, some of which are subtle. People may not think of these as polytheism because they do not take the familiar form of acknowledging multiple deities; yet they are essentially polytheistic.

The result is to go astray, moving away from God's way which has one form, namely, acknowledging His oneness and addressing worship and love to Him alone.

Believing in God does nor admit any partnership in man's heart, be that a partnership of wealth, children, home country, land, friend or relative. Should such a partnership be found in man's heart, it means acknowledging some beings as equal to God. Thus it allows a brief enjoyment in this life and ends in the fire of hell: *"Say Ito him]: Enjoy yourself for a while in your disbelief for you are one of those destined to the fire."* (Verse 8) Every enjoyment in this life is small no matter how long it endures. Furthermore, anyone's span of life is brief no matter to what old age he attains. Indeed, the life of the entire human race on this earth is merely a brief enjoyment when compared to God's days.

Juxtaposed with this depressing picture of man is another showing him standing in awe, remembering God in all situations, pleasant or distressing. He goes through his life on earth without ever losing consciousness of the Day of Judgement. He always looks up to his Lord, hoping for His grace. It is from such a bond with God that true knowledge emerges, providing full awareness of the truth:

> *How about one who devoutly worships God during the hours of the night prostrating himself or standing in prayer, ever mindful of the life to come, and hoping for his Lord's mercy? Say: 'Can those who know and those who do not know be deemed equal?' Only those who are endowed with insight will take heed. (Verse 9)*

All the elements provided here, sincere devotion, the dread of what may happen in the life to come, the hope for God's grace, the purity of heart that opens the locks that prevent understanding, giving our hearts the blessing of clear perception all draw a bright picture which is the opposite of the one drawn in the previous verse. Hence, it is necessary to draw the comparison: *"Can those who know and those who do not know he deemed equal?"* (Verse 9) True knowledge is that which understands the truth and opens one's mind to the need to be in touch with the fundamental truths in the universe. True knowledge is not a host of pieces of information that clutter the mind without leading to any understanding of the fundamentals of existence.

The way to true knowledge and enlightened information then is devout worship, a sensitive heart, being mindful of the life to come, entertaining strong hopes of benefiting from God's mercy and of being conscious of God. Those who limit themselves to individual experiences and superficial vision are no more than collectors of information. They will never attain the rank of people with knowledge. *"Only those who are endowed with insight will take heed."* (Verse 9)

It's a Wide Earth

The *sūrah* then addresses the believers, requiring them to remain God-fearing and to ensure that they always do good. They should use their life on earth, short as it is,

as a means to earn everlasting reward in the life to come:

> *Say: [Thus speaks God] You servants of Mine who believe! Fear your Lord! Those who do good in this world will have a good reward. Wide is God's earth. Those who are patient in adversity will be given their reward in full, beyond reckoning.* (10)

It is important to note here how the Arabic text is phrased. The words between brackets, '*thus speaks God*', are not in the text. They are added to remove confusion. The text should originally read: "Say to My servants," but the Prophet is made to address them, because an address alerts the addressees and makes them more aware of what is to come. When the Prophet addresses them, he does not call them as his servants, because they are God's servants, not his. This means that he is addressing them in God's name, making the address from God directly to them. The Prophet is merely the means by which the address is given.

"*Say: [Thus speaks God:] You servants of Mine who believe! Fear your Lord*" (Verse 10) To fear God means to have a sensitive heart and to look up to Him cautiously and with apprehension, hope, wary lest one should incur His displeasure and keen to earn His pleasure. It is seen in the bright picture drawn in the previous verse of a devout worshipper, full of humility.

"*Those who do good in this world will have a good reward.*" (Verse 10) What a great reward: a good deed in this present life, which is short and flimsy, is repaid with something good in the life to come, which is everlasting. This is certainly an act of God's grace. He knows man's weakness and small effort, so He repays him generously and takes care of him.

"*Wide is God's earth.*" (Verse 10) Your love of your land where you have relatives and friends should not prevent you from seeking a different abode if your own area is hostile to your faith and you cannot do well there. To stick to your place of habitat in such a case could present an opening for Satan. It could become a form of attributing equals to God, even though it might not be felt in this way. This is a fine point indicating that polytheism can subtly creep into our hearts. It is given within the context of belief in God's oneness and fearing Him. It should he seen as evidence of the source of the Qur'ān. No one can deal in this way with the human heart except the One who created it and knows what has an effect on it and how.

God, the Creator of mankind, knows that leaving one's land is hard. It involves abandoning one's relatives and the people with whom one has close ties, leaving the place where one can easily find work and earn a living, to go to a new place where one is a stranger. This is not an easy thing for anyone. Hence, the *sūrah* refers here to patience in adversity and how it is generously rewarded by God: "*Those who are patient in adversity will be given their reward in full, beyond reckoning.*" (Verse 10) Thus,

God's servants feel His care and are touched as they see that when they have to undertake something hard God turns to them with care and grace. He opens for them what compensates for land, country, family and relatives, giving them a reward without count.

All praise is due to God who knows all that affects a human heart and is fully aware of every thought that finds its way into his mind.

3
The Losers

قُلۡ إِنِّيٓ أُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَعۡبُدَ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصٗا لَّهُ ٱلدِّينَ ﴿١١﴾

Say: 'I am commanded to worship God, sincere in my faith in Him alone; (11)

وَأُمِرۡتُ لِأَنۡ أَكُونَ أَوَّلَ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

and I am commanded to be the first to submit myself to Him.' (12)

قُلۡ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ إِنۡ عَصَيۡتُ رَبِّي عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ﴿١٣﴾

Say: 'Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day.' (13)

قُلِ ٱللَّهَ أَعۡبُدُ مُخۡلِصٗا لَّهُۥ دِينِي ﴿١٤﴾

Say: 'God alone do I worship, sincere in my faith in Him alone. (14)

فَٱعۡبُدُواْ مَا شِئۡتُم مِّن دُونِهِۦۗ قُلۡ إِنَّ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓاْ أَنفُسَهُمۡ وَأَهۡلِيهِمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۗ أَلَا ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلۡخُسۡرَانُ ٱلۡمُبِينُ ﴿١٥﴾

You can worship whatever you please instead of Him.' Say: 'True losers indeed are those who shall have lost their own selves and their families on Resurrection Day. Such is the ultimate loss.'(15)

لَهُم مِّن فَوۡقِهِمۡ ظُلَلٞ مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ وَمِن تَحۡتِهِمۡ ظُلَلٞۚ ذَٰلِكَ يُخَوِّفُ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦ عِبَادَهُۥۚ يَٰعِبَادِ فَٱتَّقُونِ ﴿١٦﴾

Above them there shall be layers of fire, and layers of fire shall be beneath them. In this way God puts fear into His servants' hearts: 'My servants! Fear Me!' (16)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱجۡتَنَبُواْ ٱلطَّٰغُوتَ أَن يَعۡبُدُوهَا وَأَنَابُوٓاْ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ لَهُمُ ٱلۡبُشۡرَىٰۚ فَبَشِّرۡ عِبَادِ ﴿١٧﴾

There is good news for those who shun the worship of false deities and turn to God, so give

good news to My servants, (17)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَسۡتَمِعُونَ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحۡسَنَهُۥۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ هَدَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمۡ أُوْلُواْ ٱلۡأَلۡبَٰبِ ﴿١٨﴾

who listen carefully to what is said and follow the best of it. These are the ones whom God has graced with His guidance, and these are the ones endowed with insight. (18)

أَفَمَنۡ حَقَّ عَلَيۡهِ كَلِمَةُ ٱلۡعَذَابِ أَفَأَنتَ تُنقِذُ مَن فِي ٱلنَّارِ ﴿١٩﴾

How about one on whom God's sentence of punishment has been passed? Can you rescue those who are already in the fire? (19)

لَٰكِنِ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوۡاْ رَبَّهُمۡ لَهُمۡ غُرَفٞ مِّن فَوۡقِهَا غُرَفٞ مَّبۡنِيَّةٞ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۖ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِۖ لَا يُخۡلِفُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡمِيعَادَ ﴿٢٠﴾

As against this, those who are God-fearing will have lofty mansions raised upon mansions high, beneath which running waters flow. This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise. (20)

Overview

This passage has the air of the hereafter stamped on it from start to finish: it highlights the fear of its punishment and the hope for its reward. It begins by a directive to the Prophet to declare God's oneness fully and without a trace of ambiguity. He further declares that he, a Prophet and a Messenger of God, dreads the consequences of any deviation from it. He unequivocally states his determination to follow his course, leaving the unbelievers to choose whatever method they want to follow, outlining the results to which each of the two ways leads.

The First to Submit to God

> *Say: I am commanded to worship God, sincere in my faith in Him alone; and I am commanded to be the first to submit myself to Him. Say: Indeed I would dread, were I to disobey my Lord, the suffering of an awesome day. (Verses 11-13)*

This declaration by the Prophet outlining what he is commanded to do with regard to worship, devotion and submission is very important in keeping the belief in God's oneness pure, as Islam wants it to be. In this respect, the Prophet is one of God's servants. He does not exceed that position. In their servitude to God, all people

stand in one rank, while God has His sublime position over all creation.

Thus the two concepts of Godhead and servitude are well established and clearly distinguished. There can be no confusion between the two. Oneness is clearly seen as an attribute of God alone, in which no one else has any share. When Muĥammad (peace be upon him) stands in the position of God's servant making this clear declaration, fearing to commit any disobedience of God, there can be no room for any claim of intercession by idols or angels granted through addressing worship to them instead of God.

The declaration is made once more, with the Prophet's announcement that he will stick to his way, leaving the idolaters to their way and the painful end to which that leads:

> *Say: God alone do I worship, sincere in my faith in Him alone. You can worship whatever you please instead of Him. Say: True losers indeed are those who shall have lost their own selves and their families on Resurrection Day. Such is the ultimate loss. (Verses 14-15)*

Once more the Prophet announces: I am unwavering in following my way, addressing all worship to God and submitting myself to Him alone. As for you, you can follow any way you want, worship whomever you wish, but this will lead you to the worst imaginable loss: a loss of oneself as one goes to hell, and the loss of family and kin, be they believers or unbelievers. If those relatives are believers, the idolaters will have lost them as each group goes their separate ways, and if they are unbelievers, the loss is the same as they all will have lost themselves in hell: "*Such is the ultimate loss.*" (Verse 15)

We then have a picture showing the extent of the loss: "*Above them there shall be layers of fire, and layers of fire shall be beneath them. In this way God puts fear into His servants' hearts: My servants! Fear Me!*'" (Verse 16) It is a scene that strikes real fear in people's hearts, showing the fire in layers that engulfs people from above and below. They are seen within these layers as they close in on them from all sides. Yet these layers are fire. God shows this picture to His servants while they are on earth and still have the chance to change their ways: "*In this way God puts fear into His servants' hearts.*" (Verse 16) He calls on them warning them so that they may choose the way to safety: "*My servants! Fear Me*" (Verse 16)

On the other side stand those who are safe, having feared this fate and done what is necessary to avoid it:

> *There is good news for those who shun the worship of false deities and turn to God, so give good news to My servants, who listen carefully to what is said and follow the best*

> *of it. These are the ones whom God has graced with His guidance, and these are the ones endowed with insight. (Verses 17-18)*

'*False deities*' are referred to here by the word *ṭāghut,* which implies an exaggerated sense of exceeding the bounds. Those who shun the worship of *ṭāghut* are the ones who reject the worship of anyone other than God in any form whatsoever. They are the ones who turn to God, stand in front of Him and worship Him alone. These have good news issued to them directly from on high. The Prophet is giving them this good news by God's order: *"So give good news to My servants."* The fact that this news comes from on high and is delivered by the noble Messenger is in itself a great blessing.

One quality of such people is that they listen to whatever is being said, but their hearts and minds pick up only the best of it and discard the rest. Thus, the only words that they actually receive are the best words that improve and purify people's hearts and souls. A good soul is always ready to receive good words and respond to them, while the one which is foul receives only what is foul. *"These are the ones whom God has graced with His guidance."* (Verse 18) He knows that they are genuinely good in their hearts and souls and He, therefore, guided them to listen and respond to the best of what is said. Guidance comes only from God.

"And these are the ones endowed with insight." (Verse 18) It is a sound mind that leads a person to self-purification and safety. Anyone who does not follow the way that ensures such safety appears to be deprived of a sound mind and insight, which are blessings given by God.

Before showing us the blessings these people enjoy in the life to come, the *sūrah* states that those who worshipped false deities have already reached hell. Who can save them from its fire, then? *"How about one on whom God's sentence of punishment has been passed? Can you rescue those who are already in the fire?"* (Verse 19) This address is made to the Prophet (peace be upon him). If he cannot save them from the fire, who else can?

They are pictured here as if they are already in the fire, since the sentence of punishment has been passed on them. Juxtaposed with this is the image of those who truly feared God:

> *As against this, those who are God-fearing will have lofty mansions raised upon mansions high, beneath which running waters flow. This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise. (Verse 20)*

The scene depicts mansions raised upon high mansions, with streams flowing below. All this contrasts with the image of layers of fire engulfing the other group

from above and below. Drawing such contrasts is a characteristic of the Qur'ānic style. Such is God's promise, which will always come true.

Those Muslims who were the first to receive the Qur'ān interacted with these scenes in their practical lives. To them, they were not mere promises or threats issued from afar, speaking about a distant future; they were a reality they saw and felt. Hence, they were truly influenced by them. Their lives on earth reflected the reality of the Hereafter which they felt and almost experienced while still extant in this life. It is in this way that a Muslim should receive God's promise.

4
The Best of All Discourses

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ أَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَسَلَكَهُۥ يَنَٰبِيعَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُ بِهِۦ زَرْعًا مُّخْتَلِفًا أَلْوَٰنُهُۥ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَىٰهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَجْعَلُهُۥ حُطَٰمًا ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٢١﴾

Have you not considered how God sends down water from the skies, and then causes it to travel through the earth to form springs? He then brings with it vegetation of different colours; and then it withers and you can see it turning yellow. In the end He causes it to crumble to dust. In all this there is indeed a reminder for those endowed with insight. (21)

أَفَمَن شَرَحَ ٱللَّهُ صَدْرَهُۥ لِلْإِسْلَٰمِ فَهُوَ عَلَىٰ نُورٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ ۚ فَوَيْلٌ لِّلْقَٰسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُم مِّن ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

How about one whose heart God has opened to Islam, and thus receives light from his Lord? Woe, then, betide those whose hearts harden at the mention of God. These are most obviously in error. (22)

ٱللَّهُ نَزَّلَ أَحْسَنَ ٱلْحَدِيثِ كِتَٰبًا مُّتَشَٰبِهًا مَّثَانِىَ تَقْشَعِرُّ مِنْهُ جُلُودُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمْ وَقُلُوبُهُمْ إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ يَهْدِى بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

God has bestowed from on high the best of all teachings: a book that is consistent within itself, repeating its statements [of the truth] in manifold forms. It causes the skins of those who stand in awe of their Lord to shiver, but then their skins and hearts soften at the mention of God. Such is God's guidance: He guides with it him that wills, whereas the one whom God lets go astray can never find any guide. (23)

أَفَمَن يَتَّقِى بِوَجْهِهِۦ سُوٓءَ ٱلْعَذَابِ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ وَقِيلَ لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ ذُوقُوا۟ مَا كُنتُمْ تَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

How about one who shall have nothing but his bare face to protect him from the awful suffering on Resurrection Day? It will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now what you have earned.' (24)

كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ فَأَتَىٰهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ مِنۡ حَيۡثُ لَا يَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Those who lived before them also disbelieved, and so suffering befell them from where they could not perceive. (25)

فَأَذَاقَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡخِزۡيَ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَلَعَذَابُ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ أَكۡبَرُۚ لَوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

God gave them a taste of humiliation in this world. Yet much greater will be the suffering of the life to come, if they but knew it! (26)

وَلَقَدۡ ضَرَبۡنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٖ لَّعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations, so that they may reflect. (27)

قُرۡءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيۡرَ ذِي عِوَجٖ لَّعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

It is an Arabic Qur'ān, free from distortion, so that people may become conscious of God. (28)

ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلٗا رَّجُلٗا فِيهِ شُرَكَآءُ مُتَشَٰكِسُونَ وَرَجُلٗا سَلَمٗا لِّرَجُلٍ هَلۡ يَسۡتَوِيَانِ مَثَلٗاۚ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِۚ بَلۡ أَكۡثَرُهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

God cites the case of a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other, and a man belonging wholly to one person. Can they be deemed equal? All praise is due to God alone, but most of them do not understand. (29)

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* draws attention to the life of plants after rainfall, and then how the water courses to its end. The Qur'ān often draws a comparison between the life of plants and this present life of ours, highlighting the fact that it is of short duration. It urges people with insight to reflect on this comparison. In connection with the water being poured from the skies, the *sūrah* also refers to the Qur'ān, the book sent down from heaven to breathe life into people's hearts and souls. It gives an inspiring description of the response of those whose hearts are open to it, and how they experience a mixture of awe, fear, comfort and reassurance. It then describes the respective fates of those who respond to God's message and those whose hearts are hardened. At the end of the passage, the *sūrah* cites examples of one who worships

the One God, and the one who worships multiple deities. The two cannot be equal and cannot hold the same position, in the same way as two slaves one serving one master and the other having several masters, who are in dispute with one another cannot be considered the same.

Rain Bringing Life

> *Have you not considered how God sends down water from the skies, and then causes it to travel through the earth to form springs? He then brings with it vegetation of different colours; and then it withers and you can see it turning yellow. In the end He causes it to crumble to dust. In all this there is indeed a reminder for those endowed with insight. (Verse 21)*

The Qur'ān draws attention to a phenomenon that takes place everywhere on earth. Its familiarity, however, tends to make people overlook it. Yet it is remarkable in every step. The Qur'ān directs us to look at how God's hand directs it step by step to produce its desired effects. The water that comes down from the sky: what is it, and how does it descend? This is a remarkable phenomenon, but we tend not to reflect on it because it is so familiar. The very creation of water is indeed a miracle. We know that it comes into existence when two hydrogen atoms combine with one oxygen atom under certain conditions. Our knowledge, however, should alert us to the fact that it is God's hand that made the universe, allowing the hydrogen and the oxygen to be available and to provide the conditions that allow them to combine and produce water, which is essential for life to emerge. In fact, without water, no life could have emerged. Thus we see how a series of measures culminated in the existence of water and the emergence of life. All this is of God's own making. Moreover, the very fall of rain, after the creation of water, is in itself a miraculous phenomenon, brought about by the system that operates the universe and the earth, allowing the formation of water and its fall by God's will.

That which follows such rainfall is described thus: God "*causes it to travel through the earth to form springs.*" (Verse 21) This applies to the rivers running on the surface of the earth as well as the rivers that run underneath its surface when water seeps underground. It then forms springs or wells. It is God's hand that prevents it from going too far into the earth making it impossible to bring up again.

"*He then brings with it vegetation of different colours.*" (Verse 21) The emergence of vegetation after rain is again a miraculous phenomenon that man can never emulate, no matter how hard he tries. Look at the young shoot as it splits the earth and removes the heavy layers above it, seeking space, light and fresh air, and growing slowly and gradually. Looking at it invites contemplation and fills our hearts with feelings of the greatness of God who "*gives everything its distinctive nature and form,*

and further guides them." (20: 50) Plants vary in colour at the same spot, on the same plant, and indeed in just one such flower there is a great exhibition of marvellous creation. Man stands in front of this with great awe, aware that he cannot produce anything like it.

This growing, fresh plant that is full of life attains its full growth and completes its life cycle, *"then it withers and you can see it turning yellow."* (Verse 21) It has completed its life as ordained in the system of the universe. It is now ripe for harvest. *"In the end He causes it to crumble to dust."* (Verse 21) Its role in life is now completed as it was determined by the Giver of life. *"In all this there is indeed a reminder for those endowed with insight."* (Verse 21) These are the ones who reflect, making use of the insight God has granted them.

Two Types of Heart

> *How about one whose heart God has opened to Islam, and thus receives light from his Lord? Woe, then, betide those whose hearts harden at the mention of God. These are most obviously in error. God has bestowed from on high the best of all teachings: a book that is consistent within itself repeating its statements [of the truth] in manifold forms. It causes the skins of those who stand in awe of their Lord to shiver, but then their skins and hearts soften at the mention of God. Such is God's guidance: He guides with it him that wills, whereas the one whom God lets go astray can never find any guide. (Verses 22-23)*

Just like He sends water from the skies to cause vegetation of various colours and forms to grow, God bestows from on high a reminder which is received by hearts that are alive, and that open up and react to such life. By contrast, hardened hearts receive it like a rock that cannot embrace life. God opens to Islam those hearts that He knows to be good. These hearts receive the light of Islam and they shine and radiate. The gulf between these hearts and the ones that are hardened is wide indeed: *"Woe, then, betide those whose hearts harden at the mention of God. These are most obviously in error."* (Verse 22)

This verse depicts the nature of the hearts that receive Islam and warm to it, becoming full of life-. It describes how they blossom, becoming fresh and radiant. It also describes the other type of hearts which are hard, dark and lifeless. Needless to say, the hearts that open up to Islam, receive and reflect its light are totally different from those which are hardened at the mention of God's name. The gap between the two is enormous.

The next verse describes how the believers receive the Qur'ān, a book that is fully coherent in nature, direction, message and characteristics. Thus, it is *'consistent within itself'* and it *'repeats its statements of the truth in manifold forms,'* giving consistent

directives and varying the ways it presents its images and stories without causing any contradiction. They are repeated at different places for a purpose that can be best served through such repetition. Such repetition does not detract from the harmony and consistency of the basic truth stated throughout the Qur'ān.

Those who stand in awe of God maintain an attitude that mixes fear of God with hope of His mercy. They are the ones who are very strongly influenced when they receive God's word to the extent that their skins shiver. They later soften and their hearts find reassurance as they listen to God's words. This is a very vivid image giving in words a description that is full of movement and action.

"Such is God's guidance: He guides with it him that wills." (Verse 23) Hearts do not shiver in this way unless God's guidance prompts them to respond. God knows the true feelings of these hearts and rewards them with either His guidance or by letting them go astray: *"whereas the one whom God lets go astray can never find any guide."* (Verse 23) He allows such people to go astray because He knows that they have gone so far into error that they will never respond to guidance.

The *sūrah* then shows what awaits those who chose to go astray on the Day of Judgement. It paints a very depressing picture at the time when results are given:

> *How about one who shall have nothing but his hare face to protect him from the awful suffering on Resurrection Day? It will be said to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now what you have earned.' (Verse 24)*

Normally a person uses his hands and body to protect his face from fire or harmful objects. In this case, however, he cannot use his hands or legs to save himself from the fire; instead, he uses his face for protection, which describes a case of great confusion and hardship. In the midst of all this difficulty and suffering they are faced with strong censure and given the results of their lives' actions. What a terrible result they have to face: *"It will be said to the wrongdoers: Taste now what you have earned."* (Verse 24)

The *sūrah* then speaks about the unbelievers who stood in opposition to the Prophet, showing them what happened to the unbelievers of earlier communities, so that they may save themselves from a similar fate:

> *Those who lived before them also disbelieved, and so suffering befell them from where they could not perceive. God gave them a taste of humiliation in this world. Yet much greater will be the suffering of the life to come, if they but knew it! (Verses 25-26)*

Such is the outcome faced by the unbelievers in both lives, in this world and the next. In this life, God made them taste humiliation, and in the life to come they will

face a greater suffering. God's law will continue to operate, the fates of past generations remain witnesses to the truth, God's warnings concerning the Day of Judgement remain in force, their chance to save themselves continues, and this Qur'ān remains available to those who will heed the warnings.

Unequal Situations

> *We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations, so that they may reflect. It is an Arabic Qur'ān, free from distortion, so that people may become conscious of God. God cites the case of a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other, and a man belonging wholly to one person. Can they be deemed equal? All praise is due to God alone, but most of them do not understand. (Verses 27-29)*

God draws an analogy citing the examples of two of His servants: one believes in His Oneness and one ascribes divinity to others beside God. He compares them to two slaves: one is owned by several people who are at odds with each other about who owns him; he is caught between them, while each of them requires him to do certain things. He is at a loss, not knowing which way to turn and cannot manage to satisfy them all because of their contradictory orders. The other is owned by one master, and he knows what his master wants and is clear about his desires and requirements.

"Can they be deemed equal?" (Verse 29) They are definitely unequal. The one who has one master enjoys consistency and knows what is expected of him. His energy is spent in a consistent way and the road ahead of him is clear. The other, who has several masters, is always suffering anxiety and worry. He does not feel settled. He is unable to satisfy even one of his masters, let alone them all.

This comparison accurately describes the nature of believing in God's oneness as opposed to the nature of idolatry. The one who believes in God's oneness goes along his earth's journey equipped with clear guidance, because his eyes are looking up to one guiding star in the sky. Thus his way is straight. He knows one source for life, strength and sustenance; harm and benefit; grace and deprivation. He sets on his straight way to this source, strengthening his ties with it. He is assured of his single goal and does not lose sight of it. Thus, his energy is streamlined, assured of his work's objective. His feet are set firm on the ground while his gaze looks to God in heaven.

This telling analogy is followed by a comment praising God who has chosen for His servants what gives them comfort, safety, security and contentment. Yet they deviate from the truth, and most of them do not even know it.

This is but one of the numerous examples the Qur'ān gives people so that they

may reflect. It is a clear Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue. It addresses human nature with simple logic. In it there is no ambiguity, equivocation or deviation.

5
The People of the Truth

إِنَّكَ مَيِّتٌ وَإِنَّهُم مَّيِّتُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Indeed you are bound to die, and they too are bound to die; (30)

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ عِندَ رَبِّكُمْ تَخْتَصِمُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

and then on the Day of Resurrection you all will dispute with one another in the presence of your Lord. (31)

۞ فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّن كَذَبَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ وَكَذَّبَ بِٱلصِّدْقِ إِذْ جَآءَهُۥٓ ۚ أَلَيْسَ فِى جَهَنَّمَ مَثْوًى لِّلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Who could be more wrong than one who invents a lie about God and rejects the truth when it comes to him? Is not there in hell a proper abode for the unbelievers? (32)

وَٱلَّذِى جَآءَ بِٱلصِّدْقِ وَصَدَّقَ بِهِۦٓ ۙ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

It is the one who brings the truth and the one who accepts it as true that are God-fearing. (33)

لَهُم مَّا يَشَآءُونَ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

They will have all that they wish for with their Lord: such is the reward of those who do good. (34)

لِيُكَفِّرَ ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ أَسْوَأَ ٱلَّذِى عَمِلُوا۟ وَيَجْزِيَهُمْ أَجْرَهُم بِأَحْسَنِ ٱلَّذِى كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

God will expunge the worst of their deeds and will give them their reward in accordance with the best that they did. (35)

Widely Different Rewards

Commenting on the preceding passage, the *sūrah* stares that the dispute between

the Prophet and his opponents is left to God for judgement, which will occur after they have all died. He will requite the liars as they deserve and give generous reward to the people of the truth.

> *Indeed you are bound to die, and they too are bound to die; and then on the Day of Resurrection you all will dispute with one another in the presence of your Lord. (Verses 30-31)*

Death is the end of every living thing. Only God remains. In death all people share the same end, including Muĥammad, God's last Messenger. Mention of this fact here comes within the framework of the great truth the *sūrah* emphasizes, namely, God's absolute oneness. This is followed by stating what comes after death, because death is not the final end: it is a link in the chain of life that has been so ordained that no part of it passes in vain. On the Day of Judgement people will stand in front of God disputing with one another over what they used to claim, and how they reacted to the guidance God sent them.

> *Who could be more wrong than one who invents a lie about God and rejects the truth when it comes to him? Is not there in hell a proper abode for the unbelievers? (Verse 32)*

These are facts stated in the form of questions. None is more wrong than the person who makes false claims about God, alleging that He has daughters and partners, and who then rejects the truth preached by God's Messenger, refusing to believe in God's oneness. This is unbelief, and in hell there is a proper abode for all unbelievers. The interrogative form given to these two statements makes them clearer and more emphatic.

This is one party to the dispute. The other party is the one who brings the message of truth given him by God, believes in it and delivers it fully convinced of its truth. That is God's Messenger. Sharing with him in this description are all earlier messengers of God, as well as everyone who advocates this message, fully convinced that it is true. These are indeed God-fearing.

The *sūrah* speaks further about these people and the reward God has in store for them: *"They will have all that they wish for with their Lord: such is the reward of those who do good."* (Verse 34) This is an all-embracing statement that includes all the desires that a believing soul may entertain. The verse states that this is theirs, ready for them with their Lord. This means that they have a rightful claim to it which will not be lost or denied: *"Such is the reward of those who do good."* (Verse 34)

Thus God gives them all that He wishes to give them of honour and blessing,

which is in excess of their fair reward. Thus, He bestows on them an abundance of His grace: *"God will expunge the worst of their deeds and will give them their reward in accordance with the best that they did."* (Verse 35) Fairness requires that good deeds are set against bad ones and reward is determined on that basis. God's grace, however, is that which God grants to His servants who feared Him: He writes off the worst of their deeds, so that they are not taken into account when their deeds are reckoned, and then He rewards them on the basis of the best they ever did. Thus their good deeds are made to grow and become preponderant.

Such is God's grace which He bestows on whomever He wills. He has committed Himself to do this, giving a promise to this effect. Thus, it is a fact of which the God-fearing are certain.

6
Signs to Reflect Upon

أَلَيْسَ ٱللَّهُ بِكَافٍ عَبْدَهُۥ ۖ وَيُخَوِّفُونَكَ بِٱلَّذِينَ مِن دُونِهِۦ ۚ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

Is not God sufficient for His servant? Yet they would try to frighten you with those who are inferior to Him. He whom God lets go astray can never find any guide; (36)

وَمَن يَهْدِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن مُّضِلٍّ ۗ أَلَيْسَ ٱللَّهُ بِعَزِيزٍ ذِى ٱنتِقَامٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

whereas he whom God guides aright can never be led astray. Is God not mighty, capable of inflicting retribution? (37)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلْ أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ إِنْ أَرَادَنِىَ ٱللَّهُ بِضُرٍّ هَلْ هُنَّ كَٰشِفَٰتُ ضُرِّهِۦٓ أَوْ أَرَادَنِى بِرَحْمَةٍ هَلْ هُنَّ مُمْسِكَٰتُ رَحْمَتِهِۦ ۚ قُلْ حَسْبِىَ ٱللَّهُ ۖ عَلَيْهِ يَتَوَكَّلُ ٱلْمُتَوَكِّلُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

If you ask them who created the heavens and the earth, they will answer: 'God.' Say: 'Consider these beings you invoke beside Him: if God wills harm to befall me, could they remove the harm He has inflicted? Or, if He wills that mercy should be bestowed on me, could they withhold His mercy?' Say: 'God is enough for me: In Him place their trust those who have a trust to place.' (38)

قُلْ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱعْمَلُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمْ إِنِّى عَٰمِلٌ ۖ فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Say: 'My people! Do all that may be in your power, and I will do what I can. You shall come to know (39)

مَن يَأْتِيهِ عَذَابٌ يُخْزِيهِ وَيَحِلُّ عَلَيْهِ عَذَابٌ مُّقِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

who will be visited with humiliating suffering and who shall be smitten by long-lasting suffering.

(40)

إِنَّآ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ لِلنَّاسِ بِٱلۡحَقِّۖ فَمَنِ ٱهۡتَدَىٰ فَلِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيۡهَاۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡهِم بِوَكِيلٖ ٤١

We have bestowed on you this book from on high, setting out the truth for mankind. Whoever follows its guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray shall do so at his own peril. You are not responsible for them.' (41)

ٱللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى ٱلۡأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوۡتِهَا وَٱلَّتِي لَمۡ تَمُتۡ فِي مَنَامِهَاۖ فَيُمۡسِكُ ٱلَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيۡهَا ٱلۡمَوۡتَ وَيُرۡسِلُ ٱلۡأُخۡرَىٰٓ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٖ مُّسَمًّىۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٤٢

God takes away people's souls upon their death, and the souls of the living during their sleep. He keeps with Him the souls of those whose death He has ordained and sends back the others until their appointed time. In all this there are signs for people who reflect. (42)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذُواْ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ شُفَعَآءَۚ قُلۡ أَوَلَوۡ كَانُواْ لَا يَمۡلِكُونَ شَيۡـٔٗا وَلَا يَعۡقِلُونَ ٤٣

Have they chosen others besides God to intercede for them? Say: 'Why, even though they have no power over anything and no understanding?' (43)

قُل لِّلَّهِ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةُ جَمِيعٗاۖ لَّهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيۡهِ تُرۡجَعُونَ ٤٤

Say: All intercession belongs to God alone. His alone is the dominion over the heavens and the earth; and to Him you will all in the end return.' (44)

وَإِذَا ذُكِرَ ٱللَّهُ وَحۡدَهُ ٱشۡمَأَزَّتۡ قُلُوبُ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِۖ وَإِذَا ذُكِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ إِذَا هُمۡ يَسۡتَبۡشِرُونَ ٤٥

Whenever God alone is mentioned, the hearts of those who will not believe in the life to come shrink with aversion; but when others are mentioned side by side with Him, they rejoice. (45)

قُلِ ٱللَّهُمَّ فَاطِرَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ عَٰلِمَ ٱلۡغَيۡبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ أَنتَ تَحۡكُمُ بَيۡنَ عِبَادِكَ فِي مَا كَانُواْ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَ ٤٦

Say: 'God! Originator of the heavens and the earth! You have knowledge of all that is

imperceptible and all that is present. It is You who will judge between Your servants concerning all that over which they differ.' (46)

وَلَوۡ أَنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ جَمِيعٗا وَمِثۡلَهُۥ مَعَهُۥ لَٱفۡتَدَوۡاْ بِهِۦ مِن سُوٓءِ ٱلۡعَذَابِ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِۚ وَبَدَا لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَمۡ يَكُونُواْ يَحۡتَسِبُونَ ٤٧

If the wrongdoers possessed all that is on earth, and twice as much, they would surely offer it all as ransom from the awful suffering on the Day of Resurrection. For God will have made obvious to them something they have never reckoned with. (47)

وَبَدَا لَهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتُ مَا كَسَبُواْ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ٤٨

Obvious to them will have become the evil of what they had - done; and they will be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride. (48)

فَإِذَا مَسَّ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ ضُرّٞ دَعَانَا ثُمَّ إِذَا خَوَّلۡنَٰهُ نِعۡمَةٗ مِّنَّا قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أُوتِيتُهُۥ عَلَىٰ عِلۡمِۚ بَلۡ هِيَ فِتۡنَةٞ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَهُمۡ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٤٩

When man suffers affliction, he cries out to Us; but once We bestow upon him a favour by Our grace, he says: have been given all this by virtue of my knowledge.' By no means! It is but a test, yet most of them do not understand. (49)

قَدۡ قَالَهَا ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡ فَمَآ أَغۡنَىٰ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَكۡسِبُونَ ٥٠

Those who lived before their time said the same, but of no avail to them was all that they had ever done: (50)

فَأَصَابَهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتُ مَا كَسَبُواْۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنۡ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ سَيُصِيبُهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتُ مَا كَسَبُواْ وَمَا هُم بِمُعۡجِزِينَ ٥١

for the very evil of their deeds recoiled upon them. Similarly, the wrongdoers among these present people will have the evil of their deeds recoil upon them. They will never be able to frustrate [God's purpose]. (51)

أَوَلَمۡ يَعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقۡدِرُۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥٢

Are they not aware that it is God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it sparingly, to whomever He wills? In this there are signs to

those who believe. (52)

Overview

This is the longest passage in the *sūrah.* It tackles the issue of God's oneness from several angles, starting with a statement about the attitude a believer adopts towards all earthly powers, relying only on the one true power, caring little for anything else. Therefore, he disregards all such imaginary forces, trusting to God's judgement between him and those who dispute with him. He goes along his way firm and reassured about his destiny.

This is followed by a clear statement about the role and responsibility of God's Messenger, making it clear that he is not responsible for others, whether they choose to follow divine guidance or go astray. It is God who has power over them in all situations. They have no one to intercede with Him, for it is to God alone that all intercession belongs. His is the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and with Him all journeys end.

The *sūrah* then describes how the idolaters feel depressed when God's oneness is mentioned, while they delight when idolatry is discussed. This is followed by an invitation to the Prophet to declare God's oneness in the clearest of terms, leaving the idolaters to God. It describes how they will gladly give all that the earth contains, and twice as much, if only it will he accepted from them. This is how they feel once they realize how God may deal with them.

Such is the case, yet they still appeal to God alone when they are in a situation of distress. Should God grant them a favour, they make all sorts of wild claims. Any of them could say about God's favours: "I have been given this through my knowledge." This echoes what was said by others in former times, but God Almighty took them to task, and He is able to deal with these present unbelievers in the same way. They cannot defy God. Whether God gives provisions in abundance or in stinted measure in accordance with His wisdom and will: *"In this there are signs to those who believe."* (Verse 52)

To Do All in One's Power

Is not God sufficient for His servant? Yet they would try to frighten you with those

> *who are inferior to Him. He whom God lets go astray can never find any guide; whereas he whom God guides aright can never be led astray. Is God not mighty, capable of inflicting retribution? If you ask them who created the heavens and the earth, they will answer: 'God.' Say: 'Consider these beings you invoke beside Him: if God wills harm to befall me, could they remove the harm He has inflicted? Or, if He wills that mercy should be bestowed on me, could they withhold His mercy?' Say: 'God is enough for me: In Him place their trust those who have a trust to place.' Say: My people! Do all that may be in your power, and I will do what I can. You shall come to know who will be visited with humiliating suffering and who shall be smitten by long-lasting suffering.' (Verses 36-40)*

These five verses epitomize the logic of faith: simple, clear, forceful and profound. Thus it was in the Prophet's heart, and thus it should be in every heart that advocates a cause. These verses represent the line that such a believer should follow. They provide his light as he goes along his clear and straight way.

It is reported that these verses were revealed as a result of the unbelievers trying to scare the Prophet, claiming that their deities, which he described in disrespectful terms, would be sure to harm him. They warned him that unless he desisted, their gods would cause him much trouble. However, the significance of these verses is far broader than this. They describe the true nature of the battle between an advocate of the truth and all the forces that line up against him. They show the confidence and reassurance a believer feels as he gives these forces their true measure.

"Is not God sufficient for His servant?" (Verse 36) Yes, indeed. So, what can scare him when God is with him? What can generate any feeling of fear in him after he has taken the position of a servant of God and fulfilled the responsibilities that such a position confers? Who can doubt God's sufficiency for His servants when He is the Almighty who holds sway over all His creation?

"Yet they would try to frighten you with those who are inferior to Him." (Verse 36) How could he be frightened when those inferiors do not frighten one who is protected by God? Is there anyone on earth who is not inferior to God? It is a very simple issue. It requires no argument or hard thinking. It is God opposed by some who are inferior to Him. This leaves no room for doubt concerning the outcome.

God's will is the one that is done. He determines everything for His servants, including what takes place within them, their inner thoughts and feelings: *"He whom God lets go astray can never find any guide; whereas he whom God guides aright can never be led astray."* (Verses 36-37) He knows who deserves to go astray and who deserves to be guided. He lets them have what they deserve. When He has made His judgement, no one can alter it.

"Is God not mighty, capable of inflicting retribution?" (Verse 37) Yes, indeed, He is. He

requites everyone as they deserve, inflicting retribution on those who deserve it. When anyone fulfils the duties incumbent on God's servants, He extends His protection to them. How can such a person, then, fear anyone?

The same truth is then re-emphasized in a different way, using their own logic and what they, by their very nature, acknowledge of God's attributes: "*If you ask them who created the heavens and the earth, they will answer: 'God.' Say: 'Consider these beings you invoke beside Him: if God wills harm to befall me, could they remove the harm He has inflicted? Or, if He wills that mercy should be bestowed on me, could they withhold His mercy?' Say: 'God is enough for me: In Him place their trust those who have a trust to place.'*" (Verse 38)

Whenever they were asked, they would readily state that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. No human nature could say anything else. No rational being could explain the existence of the heavens and the earth except through a supreme will. Therefore, the *sūrah* uses this natural acceptance to ask every reasonable human being: since God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, can anyone anywhere in the heavens and the earth remove harm from anyone if God wills that harm afflict that person? By the same token, can anyone withhold mercy from anyone if God wishes it to be bestowed on that person? The clear and decisive answer to these questions is in the negative. So, why should an advocate of God's cause fear anything?

What can he fear, and what can he hope for, when no one can remove harm from him or withhold grace?

When this notion is firmly planted in a believer's heart, the matter is settled. There is no more argument. The only fear or hope such a believer may have is centred on what comes from God. It is He who is sufficient for His servants, and in Him all trust is placed: "*Say: God is enough for me: In Him place their trust those who have a trust to place.*" (Verse 38)

This gives believers all they need of trust and reassurance, leaving no room for worry or fear of anything. They go along their way in full confidence as to the end they will meet: "*Say: My people! Do all that may be in your power, and I will do what I can. You shall come to know who will be visited with humiliating suffering and who shall be smitten by long-lasting suffering.*" (Verses 39-40) Do what you can, the way you wish. I am going my way entertaining no desire to change or deviate even slightly from it, free from worry or anxiety. You will come to know who will suffer humiliation in this life and everlasting punishment in the life to come.

Once this simple truth testified by both human nature and the universe at large has been presented, confirming that God is the Creator of the heavens and earth, and that the message advocated by prophets and their followers comes from Him, who in

the whole universe can affect anything? Who can protect others from harm or withhold mercy from them? Since no one has any power to do so, what would they fear, and what would they hope for?

What Intercession?

Such is the reality of the situation between God's messengers and all earthly forces opposing them. The question then is what is their message, and how should they react towards those who deny them?

> *We have bestowed on you this book from on high, setting out the truth for mankind. Whoever follows its guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray shall do so at his own peril. You are not responsible for them. God takes away people's souls upon their death, and the souls of the living during their sleep. He keeps with Him the souls of those whose death He has ordained and sends back the others until their appointed time. In all this there are signs for people who reflect. Have they chosen others besides God to intercede for them? Say: 'Why, even though they have no power over anything and no understanding?' Say: All intercession belongs to God alone. His alone is the dominion over the heavens and the earth; and to Him you will all in the end return.' (Verses 41-44)*

"We have bestowed on you this book from on high, setting out the truth for mankind." (Verse 41) The truth is the nature of this book: it is clear in the law it sets out and in its system: it is on the basis of this truth that the universe is sustained; the truth that links the code of human life outlined in this book to the system of the universe. This truth has now been bestowed on mankind giving them guidance on how to live by its provisions. You, Prophet, are only the means to deliver it to them. It is up to them to choose what they wish for and how to deal with it. Each one of them can choose either guidance or error, and each will define his or her own fate. No responsibility attaches to you for what they choose: *"Whoever follows its guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray shall do so at his own peril. You are not responsible for them."* (Verse 41)

It is God who has power over them. They are in His hands when they are asleep or awake, or indeed in all situations and conditions. He determines what to do with them: *"God takes away people's souls upon their death, and the souls of the living during their sleep. He keeps with Him the souls of those whose death He has ordained and sends back the others until their appointed time."* (Verse 42) God gathers the souls of those who die, and He also takes away people's souls when they are asleep, even though they are not dead. During sleep, these souls are temporarily removed. If the term of some is over, God will retain their souls and they cannot wake up. Those whose term of life continues will have their souls returned and they will wake up. Thus, people's souls

are in God's hands whether they are asleep or awake: *"In all this there are signs for people who reflect."* (Verse 42)

Such being the case, with the Prophet having no responsibility for others, it is up to each of them individually: if they follow divine guidance, they benefit themselves; and if they choose error, they bear the responsibility for their choice. They will have to face the reckoning, for they will not be left unaccountable. What hope, then, do they have for salvation? *"Have they chosen others besides God to intercede for them? Say: Why, even though they have no power over anything and no understanding? Say: All intercession belongs to God alone. His alone is the dominion over the heavens and the earth; and to Him you will all in the end return."* (Verses 43-44) The question here is sarcastic, referring to their claims that they worship the statues of angels in order that these bring them closer to God. They are asked: *"Why, even though they have no power over anything and no understanding?"* The question is followed by an emphatic statement that all intercession belongs to God: it is He who permits whomever He wishes to intercede. Do they think that attributing partners to God is the way to achieve intercession?

"His alone is the dominion over the heavens and the earth." (Verse 44) No one can defy His will in His kingdom, where all dominion belongs to Him alone. *"And to Him you will all in the end return."* (Verse 44) There is no escape, simple.

The *sūrah* then describes how strongly they dislike any statement about God's oneness, while they delight in the attribution of partners with Him, when everything around them in the universe rejects such polytheism:

> *Whenever God alone is mentioned, the hearts of those who will not believe in the life to come shrink with aversion; but when others are mentioned side by side with Him, they rejoice. (Verse 45)*

The verse describes a real situation during the Prophet's time, when the unbelievers delighted at the mention of their false deities, but showed clear dislike when God's oneness was asserted. Yet the verse also describes a state of affairs that takes place in all environments. Some people do express dislike when they are asked to believe in God alone and to implement His law and code of living. When other systems and laws are mentioned, they demonstrate happiness and delight. Only then are they ready to discuss and argue. It is these very people that God is describing in this verse: they are the ones, in all communities and generations, who trample over sound human nature, choose deviation, go and lead others astray.

The reply to all such deviation is taught by God to His Messenger whereby the latter says:

> *Say: God! Originator of the heavens and the earth! You have knowledge of all that is imperceptible and all that is present. It is You who will judge between Your servants concerning all that over which they differ. (Verse 46)*

It is a simple prayer that comes from sound human nature looking at the heavens and the earth, that cannot find anyone other than God who could have created them, that acknowledges His creation, and addresses Him by the quality that fits the Originator of the universe, i.e. His knowledge of the imperceptible and all that anyone witnesses. It is He who is fully aware of what is present and what is absent, what is hidden and what is manifest. "*It is You who will judge between Your servants concerning all that over which they differ.*" (Verse 46) He is the only judge and arbiter when they all return to Him, as return they must.

As Man Suffers Affliction

The *sūrah* then shows their miserable state when they return for judgement:

> *If the wrongdoers possessed all that is on earth, and twice as much, they would surely offer it all as ransom from the awful suffering on the Day of Resurrection. For God will have made obvious to them something they have never reckoned with. Obvious to them will have become the evil of what they had done; and they will be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride. (Verses 47-48)*

The verse makes an implicit threat within a statement that strikes fear into the hearts of those described as *'wrongdoers',* which refers to everyone who associates partners, of any type, with God. If those people had in their possession *'all that is on earth,'* including everything to which they attach high value and fear to lose should they accept Islam, indeed, if they had *'twice as much'*, they would willingly offer it all just to be spared the awful suffering they will see with their own eyes on the Day of Resurrection. Added to this is another implicit threat that is equally fearful: "*For God will have made obvious to them something they have never reckoned with.*" (Verse 47) The *sūrah* does not specify what will become obvious to them, but it is clearly understood that it is terrible, to be feared. It comes from God, and He shows them what they could never have expected.

"*Obvious to them will have become the evil of what they had done; and they will be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride.*" (Verse 48) Again this aggravates their position, because they will see for themselves how evil their deeds were, and they will find themselves engulfed with the warnings that they used to deride and ridicule.

Then follows a description of an ironic situation: they are outspoken in denying

God's oneness, yet when they suffer affliction they turn to none but Him, praying earnestly for His help. When He bestows His grace on them and removes their affliction they revert to their boastful claims and deny His favours:

> *When man suffers affliction, he cries out to Us; but once We bestow upon him a favour by Our grace, he says: I have been given all this by virtue of my knowledge.' By no means! It is but a test, yet most of them do not understand. (Verse 49)*

This verse describes man if he does not accept the truth and turn back to his true Lord, following the path leading to Him and remaining on that path in all situations of strength or weakness. Affliction purges human nature of the desires and ambitions that blur its vision. It removes from it all alien influences that place a barrier between it and the truth. Therefore, when afflicted, it can easily recognize God and turn to Him alone. Yet when the testing times are over, and human nature again finds itself in easy and comfortable circumstances, man forgets what he said only a short while earlier. His nature is again turned away from the truth under the influence of his desires, and he looks at God's favours and provisions only to say: *"I have been given all this by virtue of my knowledge."* (Verse 49) This was said by Qārūn, or Korah, in former times, and it is said by everyone who admires what he is able to obtain of wealth or position through some sort of ability or knowledge, forgetting who grants him these, namely the One who has made causes produce their effects and who grants everyone their provisions.

"By no means! It is but a test, yet most of them do not understand." (Verse 49) It is all just a test. Man either proves himself, shows that he is grateful to God and sets himself on the right way or he denies God's favours, takes the wrong way and goes astray.

By an act of God's grace, the Qur'ān reveals this secret to us. It alerts us to the source of danger, warns us against failure in the test, and thus leaves us no excuse or argument. It reminds us of the fates of those who lived long before us, which were the result of something like the words spoken by many an unbeliever in the past: *"I have been given all this by virtue of my knowledge."* (Verse 49)

> *Those who lived before their time said the same, but of no avail to them was all that they had ever done: for the very evil of their deeds recoiled upon them. Similarly, the wrongdoers among these present people will have the evil of their deeds recoil upon them. They will never be able to frustrate [Gods purpose]. (Verses 50-51)*

They are the same deviant words spoken by earlier peoples and which led them to ruin. Nothing of their knowledge, wealth or positions were of benefit to them. The same rule will apply to the present unbelievers, because God's law will never

change. "*They will never be able to frustrate God's purpose.*" (Verse 51) Indeed, God cannot be defied by His creation who remain weak, despite any appearance of power they may enjoy. As for what God has granted them of His favours and provisions, it is all subject to His will. He gives all His creation whatever He may determine for them, according to His wisdom, making it all a test for them which ensures that His will is done: "*Are they not aware that it is God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it sparingly, to whomever He wills? In this there are signs to those who believe.*" (Verse 52) God's signs are given to people so that they will benefit by the guidance they provide and will be led to faith. They must not turn them into causes of unbelief and rejection of the truth.

7
The Gates of Mercy

۞ قُلْ يَـٰعِبَادِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا۟ مِن رَّحْمَةِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ ٱلذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥٣﴾

Say: '[Thus speaks God]: You servants of Mine who have transgressed against their own souls! Do not despair of God's mercy: God forgives all sins; He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (53)

وَأَنِيبُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَأَسْلِمُوا۟ لَهُۥ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَكُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Turn towards your Lord and submit to Him before the suffering comes upon you, for then you cannot be helped. (54)

وَٱتَّبِعُوٓا۟ أَحْسَنَ مَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُم مِّن رَّبِّكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَكُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ بَغْتَةً وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

Follow the best that has been revealed to you by your Lord before the suffering comes upon you of a sudden, without your being aware of it, (55)

أَن تَقُولَ نَفْسٌ يَـٰحَسْرَتَىٰ عَلَىٰ مَا فَرَّطتُ فِى جَنۢبِ ٱللَّهِ وَإِن كُنتُ لَمِنَ ٱلسَّـٰخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

lest anyone should say: 'Woe is me for having neglected what is due to God, and for having been one of those who scoffed [at the truth]; (56)

أَوْ تَقُولَ لَوْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هَدَىٰنِى لَكُنتُ مِنَ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

or lest he should say: 'If God had but guided me, I would surely have been among the God-fearing;' (57)

أَوْ تَقُولَ حِينَ تَرَى ٱلْعَذَابَ لَوْ أَنَّ لِى

or lest he should say, when faced by the suffering [that awaits him]: 'If only I could have a second chance in life, I will be among those who do good.' (58)

كَرَّةً فَأَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

[God will say]: 'Yes, indeed! My revelations did come to you, but you rejected them. You were filled with false pride and had no faith at all.' (59)

بَلَىٰ قَدْ جَآءَتْكَ ءَايَـٰتِى فَكَذَّبْتَ بِهَا وَٱسْتَكْبَرْتَ وَكُنتَ مِنَ ٱلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

On the Day of Resurrection you will see those who invented lies about God with their faces darkened. Is not there in hell a proper abode for the arrogant? (60)

وَيَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ تَرَى ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا۟ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ وُجُوهُهُم مُّسْوَدَّةٌ ۚ أَلَيْسَ فِى جَهَنَّمَ مَثْوًى لِّلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

But God will deliver those who are God-fearing to their place of safety: no harm shall afflict them, nor shall they grieve. (61)

وَيُنَجِّى ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوْا۟ بِمَفَازَتِهِمْ لَا يَمَسُّهُمُ ٱلسُّوٓءُ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Overview

The previous passage included a description of the terrible situations in which the wrongdoers find themselves on the Day of Judgement: *"If the wrongdoers possessed all that is on earth, and twice as much, they would surely offer it all as ransom from the awful suffering on the Day of Resurrection. For God will have made obvious to them something they have never reckoned with. Obvious to them will have become the evil of what they had done; and they will be overwhelmed by that which they used to deride."* (Verses 47-48) Now the *sūrah* shows the way back leaving the gates of God's mercy wide open, requiring nothing for admittance except sincere repentance. At this point, God shows the prospect of His forgiveness and mercy available to all those who have transgressed no matter how great the sins they have committed are. He invites them all to turn back to Him with repentance, entertaining no feeling of despair. This invitation to benefit by God's grace is coupled with an image of what awaits them of suffering if they do not take this opportunity to repent before it is too late.

Mercy Available to All

> *Say: [Thus speaks God]: You servants of Mine who have transgressed against their own souls! Do not despair of God's mercy: God forgives all sins; He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verse 53)*

It is divine mercy that will erase every transgression, whatever it happens to be. It is an invitation to all those who have gone far into error and led a life that has taken them far astray, telling them hope still remains available and God's mercy and forgiveness are not far from them. God is most merciful to His servants. He knows their weaknesses and the factors that work on them, whether these are within themselves or in society. He is aware that Satan sets traps for them at every corner, using a great variety of forces, never tiring of his attempt to seduce them. Moreover, God knows that man can easily fall when he lets his bond to the truth weaken, and that his desires and aspirations can easily disturb his equilibrium, pulling him this way or that, leading him into error.

As God knows all this about man, He provides him with ample help, opening the gates of His mercy. He does not take him to task for his sin until He has facilitated for him all the ways and means to rectify his error and mend his ways. Nevertheless, when man goes deep into sin, thinking that he is totally rejected by God and that all is lost, he hears at this point of utter despair a fine address expressing the unlimited mercy available to him: *"Say: [Thus speaks God]: You servants of Mine who have transgressed against their own souls! Do not despair of God's mercy: God forgives all sins; He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 53)

This means that despite his repeated sins, going far into disobedience of God, all he needs to receive God's grace that revives all that is good in him is to repent. All he needs to do is turn back to God through the gate that is left wide open, without a guard, and with no need for any special permission:

> *Turn towards your Lord and submit to Him before the suffering comes upon you, for then you cannot be helped. Follow the best that has been revealed to you by your Lord before the suffering comes upon you of a sudden, without your being aware of it. (Verses 54-55)*

To turn to God in true submission and to surrender oneself once more to Him is all that is needed. No rituals, no barriers, no intermediaries, no intercessors. It is a direct link between servant and Master, creature and Creator: whoever wishes to return, stop rebellion and approach in full submission may do so. What he will receive is acceptance, a warm welcome and grace beyond measure.

Come on all of you, then! Come on *"before re the suffering comes upon you, for then you cannot be helped."* (Verse 54) Should the chance be missed, there can be no help. The chance is open now, but its duration cannot be guaranteed. In fact, it can terminate at any moment of the night and day. Therefore, come on and *"Follow the best that has been revealed to you by your Lord,"* which is this Qur'ān that you now have at your fingertips, *"before the suffering comes upon you of a sudden, without your being*

aware of it." (Verse 55) Come on now before it is too late. Otherwise you will regret missing the chance and ridiculing God's promise: *"lest anyone should say: Woe is me for having neglected what is due to God, and for having been one of those who scoffed [at the truth]."* (Verse 56) Alternatively, someone may say that God condemned him to be in error: had He decreed that he would follow divine guidance, he would have been a God-fearing person: *"or lest he should say: If God had but guided me, I would surely have been among the God-fearing."* (Verse 57) This is a baseless excuse: the chance is offered to everyone, the means are available to all, and the gates are wide open. Yet people deliberately miss out: "*Or lest he should say, when faced by the suffering [that awaits him]: If only I could have a second chance in life, I will be among those who do good."* (Verse 58) This is something that will never be given. Once this life is over, no return is allowed. All people are now at the stage when they can do what they want. If they miss this chance, all is lost. They will be held to account, and they will be rebuked: "*Yes, indeed.' My revelations did come to you, but you rejected them. You were filled with false pride and had no faith at all."* (Verse 59)

At this point, when the *sūrah* has brought our feelings and hearts to the Day of Judgement, it shows us the two contrasting images of the unbelievers and the God-fearing on that momentous day:

> *On the Day of Resurrection you will see those who invented lies about God with their faces darkened. Is not there in hell a proper abode for the arrogant? But God will deliver those who are God- fearing to their place of safety: no harm shall afflict them, nor shall they grieve. (Verses 60-61)*

This is the final end: one group have faces darkened by humiliation, sorrow and the scorches of hell. These are the arrogant who, during their lives in this world, were called to turn to God and believe in Him, and the chance was kept open for them even after they went far into sin, but they refused to pay heed. Now, on the Day of judgement, they are left in utter humiliation that shows in their faces. The other group are the winners who will not be touched by grief or affliction. These are the God-fearing who, during their lives on earth, paid heed to God's warnings and hoped for His mercy. They are the ones who will be safe: "*no harm shall afflict them, nor shall they grieve."* (Verse 61)

With all issues made abundantly clear, let everyone choose what they want. They can either respond to the call and enjoy God's grace they are certain to find just behind the open gate of repentance, or they can persist in disobedience until the suffering takes them unawares.

8
Driven in Throngs

ٱللَّهُ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَكِيلٞ ٦٢

God is the Creator of everything, and of all things He is the Guardian. (62)

لَّهُۥ مَقَالِيدُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ٦٣

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. Those who deny God's revelations will surely be the losers. (63)

قُلۡ أَفَغَيۡرَ ٱللَّهِ تَأۡمُرُوٓنِّيٓ أَعۡبُدُ أَيُّهَا ٱلۡجَٰهِلُونَ ٦٤

Say: 'You ignorant people Would you bid me worship anyone other than God?' (64)

وَلَقَدۡ أُوحِيَ إِلَيۡكَ وَإِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِكَ لَئِنۡ أَشۡرَكۡتَ لَيَحۡبَطَنَّ عَمَلُكَ وَلَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلۡخَٰسِرِينَ ٦٥

It has been revealed to you, and to those before you, that if you ever associate partners with God, all your works shall certainly come to nothing, and you shall certainly be among the lost. (65)

بَلِ ٱللَّهَ فَٱعۡبُدۡ وَكُن مِّنَ ٱلشَّٰكِرِينَ ٦٦

You shall worship God alone, and be one of those who give thanks [to Him]. (66)

وَمَا قَدَرُواْ ٱللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدۡرِهِۦ وَٱلۡأَرۡضُ جَمِيعٗا قَبۡضَتُهُۥ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ وَٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ مَطۡوِيَّٰتُۢ بِيَمِينِهِۦۚ سُبۡحَٰنَهُۥ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشۡرِكُونَ ٦٧

No true understanding of God have they: on the Day of Resurrection, the whole earth will be a mere handful to Him, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand. Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which they associate as partner with Him. (67)

وَنُفِخَ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَصَعِقَ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا مَن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُۖ ثُمَّ نُفِخَ فِيهِ أُخۡرَىٰ فَإِذَا هُمۡ قِيَامٞ يَنظُرُونَ ٦٨

The trumpet will be sounded, and all creatures that are in the heavens and the earth will fall down senseless, except those God wills to be spared. It will then be sounded a second time, and they will rise and look around them. (68)

وَأَشۡرَقَتِ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ بِنُورِ رَبِّهَا وَوُضِعَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبُ وَجِاْيٓءَ بِٱلنَّبِيِّـۧنَ وَٱلشُّهَدَآءِ وَقُضِيَ بَيۡنَهُم بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَهُمۡ لَا يُظۡلَمُونَ ٦٩

The earth will shine bright with the light of its Lord; the Record of Deeds will be laid open; all the prophets and the witnesses will be brought in. Judgement will be passed on them all in justice, and they will not be wronged; (69)

وَوُفِّيَتۡ كُلُّ نَفۡسٖ مَّا عَمِلَتۡ وَهُوَ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يَفۡعَلُونَ ٧٠

for every human being will be repaid in full for whatever they have done. He is fully aware of all that they do. (70)

وَسِيقَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ زُمَرًاۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءُوهَا فُتِحَتۡ أَبۡوَٰبُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمۡ خَزَنَتُهَآ أَلَمۡ يَأۡتِكُمۡ رُسُلٞ مِّنكُمۡ يَتۡلُونَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّكُمۡ وَيُنذِرُونَكُمۡ لِقَآءَ يَوۡمِكُمۡ هَٰذَاۚ قَالُواْ بَلَىٰ وَلَٰكِنۡ حَقَّتۡ كَلِمَةُ ٱلۡعَذَابِ عَلَى ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٧١

The unbelievers will be led to hell in throngs. When they reach it, its gates will be opened, and its keepers will ask them: 'Did there not come to you messengers from among yourselves, who recited to you your Lord's revelations and forewarned you of this day?' They will answer: 'Yes, indeed.' But the sentence of suffering will have already been passed against the unbelievers. (71)

قِيلَ ٱدۡخُلُوٓاْ أَبۡوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۖ فَبِئۡسَ مَثۡوَى ٱلۡمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ٧٢

They will be told: 'Enter the gates of hell; there you will abide.' How vile an abode for the arrogant! (72)

وَسِيقَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوۡاْ رَبَّهُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡجَنَّةِ زُمَرًاۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءُوهَا وَفُتِحَتۡ أَبۡوَٰبُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمۡ خَزَنَتُهَا سَلَٰمٌ عَلَيۡكُمۡ طِبۡتُمۡ

And the believers will be led to paradise in throngs. When they reach it, they shall find its gates wide open; and its keepers will say to them: 'Peace be to you! Well have you done. Come in: you are here to stay.' (73)

فَٱدۡخُلُوهَا خَٰلِدِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

وَقَالُواْ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِي صَدَقَنَا وَعۡدَهُۥ وَأَوۡرَثَنَا ٱلۡأَرۡضَ نَتَبَوَّأُ مِنَ ٱلۡجَنَّةِ حَيۡثُ نَشَآءُۖ فَنِعۡمَ أَجۡرُ ٱلۡعَٰمِلِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَتَرَى ٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ حَآفِّينَ مِنۡ حَوۡلِ ٱلۡعَرۡشِ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّهِمۡۚ وَقُضِيَ بَيۡنَهُم بِٱلۡحَقِّ وَقِيلَ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

They will say: All praise is due to God who has made His promise to us come true and given us this land as our own. Now we may dwell in paradise as we please.' How excellent is the reward of those who worked hard. (74)

You will see the angels surrounding the Throne, extolling their Lord's glory and praise. Judgement will have been passed on all in justice, and it will be said: All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (75)

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* presents its main theme, God's oneness, from the angle of the oneness of the Creator who created and controls everything. This serves to show how singular the unbelievers' offer to the Prophet was that he should join them in worshipping their idols in return for them joining him in worshipping God. Since God is the Creator and Controller of all, how could anyone be worshipped alongside Him? "*No true understanding of God have they,*" when they associate partners with Him when He has sway over all and everything, subjecting them all to His will: "*on the Day of Resurrection, the whole earth will be a mere handful to Him, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand.*" (Verse 67) As this image of the Day of Judgement is shown here, the *sūrah* presents a unique scene of that day, culminating with the angels surrounding God's throne, extolling their Lord's glory and praise. The entire universe joins them in their praises: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 75) This is, then, the decisive word on the issue of God's oneness.

False Understanding

> *God is the Creator of everything, and of all things He is the Guardian. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. Those who deny God's revelations will surely be the losers. (Verses 62-63)*

This is the truth that everything in the universe confirms. No one can ever claim to

create anything. No rational being can claim that this universe came into existence without a creator, when everything in it testifies to elaborate planning and a clear purpose behind creation. Nothing in it, from the very small to the very large, is left to chance: *"Of all things He is the Guardian."* (Verse 62) Into His control the heavens and the earth are placed. He conducts their affairs the way He chooses. They operate in accordance with the system He put in place for them. No will other than His interferes with anything. This is acknowledged by human nature, confirmed by practical fact and endorsed by reason and conscience.

"Those who deny God's revelations will surely be the losers." (Verse 63) They have lost the understanding that makes their lives on earth consistent and harmonious with the life of the universe. They have lost the comfort of divine guidance, the beauty of faith, the reassurance of belief and the sweetness of certainty. On the Day of Judgement they will lose their own souls and their families. Hence, the term 'losers' applies to them in all its shades and connotations.

In the light of this truth, testified to by the heavens, the earth and every creature in the universe, the Prophet is instructed in how to reply to the idolaters' offer of both parties joining together in the worship of their idols and God Almighty at the same time. It is as if the whole question is a bargain to be struck by compromise: *"Say: You ignorant people! Would you bid me worship anyone other than God?"* (Verse 64) This is the natural reaction to such a stupid offer that betrays nothing but ignorance.

This is followed with a clear warning against associating partners with God, beginning with the prophets and God's messengers who would never entertain even the slightest thought of such association. This, however, serves to alert all others to the truth that in the question of who is to be worshipped, God stands alone without partners, while in the question of offering worship, all mankind, including the prophets and God's messengers, are in the same position as God's servants: *"It has been revealed to you, and to those before you, that if you ever associate partners with God, all your works shall certainly come to nothing, and you shall certainly be among the lost."* (Verse 65)

This warning against associating partners with God concludes with an order to worship God alone. We are to show gratitude to Him for providing us with guidance to the path to certainty. We should also thank Him for all His countless favours which He bestows on us and which we all enjoy at every moment of our lives: *"You shall worship God alone, and be one of those who give thanks."* (Verse 66)

"No true understanding of God have they." (Verse 67) Indeed, they have no clear or true understanding of Him when they associate with Him some of His creatures. Nor do they worship Him as He should be worshipped. They do not appreciate His oneness, greatness, majesty and power. Therefore, the *sūrah* reveals to us an aspect of

God's great power in the normal Qur'ānic way of drawing images that place before our eyes a fundamental truth: *"On the Day of Resurrection, the whole earth will be a mere handful to Him, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand. Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which they associate as partner with Him."* (Verse 67)

All that we read in the Qur'ān or in *Ĥadīth* of such images and scenes are given in order to present fundamental truths that we would otherwise not comprehend. In other words we need images we can visualize. Here we have an example of this method, portraying for us an aspect of God's absolute power that cannot be limited to one form, placed within one area or confined within certain boundaries.[§]

A Majestic Scene

We now have a scene of the Day of Judgement that begins with the first blowing of the trumpet and ends when the judgement is passed and people are being led to their respective places, either heaven or hell. God Almighty stands in His greatness while the entire universe repeats His glorification and praise. It is a unique scene which is, as it starts, full of life and movement, but one which then slows down until every movement ceases and all stand still. Thus, complete stillness covers the place where all are brought for judgement, standing humbly before God Almighty.

The first blow on the trumpet is made, and all creatures who until that moment remained alive on earth and in the heavens fall senseless, except those God spares. We do not know how much time elapses before the second blow is sounded on the trumpet: *"The trumpet will be sounded, and all creatures that are in the heavens and the earth will fall down senseless, except those God wills to be spared. It will then be sounded a second time, and they will rise and look around them."* (Verse 68) The third blow of gathering them all is not mentioned here. Nor is there mention of the bustling and the crowding, because the scene here is a quiet one, where all move very gradually.

"The earth will shine bright with the light of its Lord." (Verse 69) This is the earth where all action will take place. Needless to say, there is no light other than the light of its Lord Almighty. *"The Record of Deeds will be laid open."* It is the book in which all deeds by all creatures are entered. *"All the prophets and the witnesses will be brought in."* They will testify stating the truth they know. No argument or dispute is mentioned here so as to maintain the atmosphere of majesty and humility before God that permeates the entire scene. *"Judgement will be passed on them all in justice, and they will not be wronged; for every human being will be repaid in full for whatever they have done. He is filly aware of all that they do."* (Verses 69-70) There is no need for a word to be said or

[§] For further discussion on the *Yad* attribute, please refer to section 1.6 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.'*

a voice to be raised. The whole picture of reckoning, questions asked and answers given, is folded without mention because it does not fit with the ambience of majesty expressed.

The Ultimate Destination

"*The unbelievers will be led to hell in throngs. When they reach it, its gates will be opened.*" (Verse 71) The angels keeping guard will receive them there with a statement that they deserve their lot, reminding them of the reasons why they have ended up there: "*its keepers will ask them: 'Did there not come to you messengers from among yourselves, who recited to you your Lord's revelations and forewarned you of this day? They will answer: 'Yes, indeed.' But the sentence of suffering will have already been passed against the unbelievers.*" (Verse 71) The position is one of submission, without any argument or dispute. They accept their lot and submit to their fate: "*They will be told: 'Enter the gates of hell; there you will abide.' How vile an abode for the arrogant!*" (Verse 72)

Such is the fate of the arrogant party, destined for hell. How about the other party, the God-fearing who are destined for heaven?

> *And the believers will be led to paradise in throngs. When they reach it, they shall find its gates wide open; and its keepers will say to them: Peace be to you! Well have you done. Come in: you are here to stay. (Verse 73)*

It is a warm welcome, coupled with pleasant praise of the recipients and an outline of the reasons for which they deserved their reward: *Well have you done.*" You purified yourselves of sin, lived a pure life and came here with such purity. None but the pure enter heaven. Therefore, you are to remain here forever.

At this point, the voices of the people of heaven are raised high in glorifying and praising God: "*They will say: All praise is due to God who has made His promise to us come true and given us this land as our own.*" (Verse 74) This is the land worth inheriting. They live in it wherever they wish, taking from it whatever they want. "*How excellent is the reward of those who worked hard.*" (Verse 74)

The scene is given a finale that fills our hearts with awe and majesty. It too is in complete harmony with the ambience of the whole *sūrah* devoted to the theme of God's oneness. The entire universe is in complete submission to God Almighty, and praises of God are uttered by every living soul and all existence:

> *You will see the angels surrounding the Throne, extolling their Lord's glory and praise. Judgement will have been passed on all in justice, and it will be said: All praise*

is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (Verse 75)

SŪRAH 40

Ghāfir

(The Forgiver)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals with the major issues of truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, the message and those who reject it, as well as unjustifiable tyranny and how God smites tyrants who seek to impose their will on others. It also refers to the position of believers who follow Divine guidance and obey God's commandments. It mentions how the angels pray that they may be forgiven their sins, and how God answers their prayers. It also speaks about the reward awaiting them in the life to come.

Such being its subject matter, the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of a battle, the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and tyranny. This is interspersed with an air of grace and mercy whenever the believers are mentioned. The general atmosphere is generated through a description of how earlier communities were destroyed as a result of their opposition to Divine faith, as well as several images of the Day of Judgement. All in all, these awesome images suit the sombre air of the *sūrah*.

Fittingly, the opening of the *sūrah* uses shôrt phrases that carry a distinctive beat: '*who forgives sins; accepts repentance; is severe in retribution; limitless in bounty; there is no deity other than Him; to Him is the ultimate return.*' (Verse 3) These phrases sound like hammers

striking in unison, with harmony between meaning and rhythm. Note also that words like 'might' and 'power' are frequently used in the *sūrah*.

As a whole, the *sūrah* has a powerful effect on us, portraying as it does scenes of the Day of Judgement and images of the fate of earlier communities. At times, it softens its rhythm so as to gently touch our hearts, showing us images of the angels who carry God's throne, as well as those around it, praying to God to bestow His grace on His devoted servants. The same may be said regarding the verses that refer to universal scenes or to the finer elements of the human soul, as both provide evidence in support of the truth of faith. Here, then, are some examples of the verses that generate these feelings:

1. In reference to earlier communities and their fate: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) "*Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is powerful, stern in retribution.*" (Verses 21–22)
2. In reference to the Day of Resurrection: "*Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded.*" (Verse 18) "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 69–72)

3. A softer touch is provided in the scene of those who carry God's throne, devoted as they are in humble prayer: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*'" (Verses 7–9)
4. Inspirational touches are achieved in the portrayals of miraculous phenomena in the universe and within the human soul: "*It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verses 67–68) "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verses 61–62) "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64)

In all these images there is evident harmony and consistency, the whole ambience perfectly fitting the *sūrah*'s subject matter.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with two separate letters: "Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verses 1–2) This is followed by the short

phrases with their distinctive beat, to which we referred earlier. The *sūrah* then states that the whole universe submits to God and obeys Him. Only the unbelievers dispute God's revelations, thus they separate themselves from the rest of the universe. Therefore, the Prophet should pay no attention to them, no matter how affluent and well pleased they appear to be. They will inevitably face the same fate suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers. God smote them with a stern punishment. Nevertheless, more suffering awaits them in the life to come. By contrast, the angels carrying God's throne, as well as those surrounding it, declare their belief in their Lord, address their worship to Him alone, and pray for the forgiveness of the believers among the dwellers of the earth, as well as for their success and prosperity.

At the same time, the *sūrah* gives an image of the unbelievers when the entire universe, which believes in God, calls out to them on the Day of Resurrection, saying: *"Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it."* (Verse 10) In their position of humiliation, which contrasts with their arrogance in this present life, they admit their faults and acknowledge their Lord, but such realization is now of no use to them. They are only reminded of what they used to do when they associated partners with God and arrogantly turned from His guidance.

This image of the hereafter is followed by one presenting people's situation in this present life: "*He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) They are so reminded in order that they may turn to their Lord and declare their belief in Him as the only God: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then adds a strong warning of that fearful day, and follows this with an image of how they stand on that day: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) Those who are arrogant, tyrannical or disputant will all disappear into insignificance: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16) The *sūrah* goes on to give further images of that day when judgement over all belongs to God alone. All those worshipped instead or alongside Him are nowhere to be seen.

The second part begins with a reference to the fate suffered by some past communities. This serves as a prelude to the narration about certain events from Moses' life history and specifically his encounter with Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah or Qārūn. These events, representing tyrants' attitude to the message of truth, are only told in this *sūrah*. There is no reference to them anywhere else in the Qur'ān. They tell us of a believer from Pharaoh's own household, who concealed the fact that he believed in Moses' message. He tries first to protect Moses against Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. He states the word of truth, putting it cautiously at first, then ultimately declaring it openly and clearly. In his argument with Pharaoh, this believer presents strong and clear evidence for the truth, warns Pharaoh and his people of the Day of Judgement, describes some images of the day in an inspirational way and reminds them of their attitude and that of generations before them to Joseph and his message. The story is developed in such a way as to link it, eventually, to the life to come, and we see them all there, disputing among themselves as they suffer in hell. The dialogue occurs between the weak elements of society and their arrogant leaders, on the one side, and another takes place between them all and the angels in charge of hell, trying to find a way out when there is none. In the light of this last scene, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet Muḥammad to remain patient in adversity, to have full trust that God's promise will come true, and to glorify and praise Him.

The third part starts with a statement that those who dispute God's revelations without providing any sound argument in support of what they say are only motivated by a quest for greatness. Yet they are too insignificant to attain this. The *sūrah* then directs people's hearts to reflect on the great universe God has created, which is far greater than all mankind. This reminder may perhaps make those who are arrogant better appreciate the greatness of God's creation, rather than remaining blind to it: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) It reminds them of the approach of the Last Hour and directs them to pray to God, for He responds to those who pray to Him.

Those who choose to remain arrogant will inevitably enter hell in complete humiliation. Here the *sūrah* portrays some of the universal signs that they ignore. We see the night portrayed as a time for rest and

the day is given eyes, while the earth is shown as a resting place and the sky a canopy. In relation to themselves, the *sūrah* also reminds them to reflect on the pleasing shape and form God has given them. It directs them to submit to God with sincerity. It instructs the Prophet to distance himself from what they worship, declare God's order to him to reject their deities and to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. It seeks to make their hearts more responsive by mentioning that God, the Creator of the universe, is the One who originated them from dust first, then from a gamete. It is He who gives life and deals death. Again the *sūrah* makes the Prophet wonder at those who argue about God, warning them against punishment in the hereafter, and portrays a very powerful image of such punishment: "*They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 70–72) Indeed, those whom they worshipped will disown their worship, while they themselves deny having ever worshipped anyone. Ultimately, they end up in hell, as they are told: "*Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verse 76) Again, in the light of this scene the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity, and to trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether he remains alive to see some of what this promise involves or he is made to die before its fulfilment. The promise will come true at the time appointed for it.

The *sūrah*'s fourth and final part is closely linked with its third. As the Prophet is directed to wait patiently, he is told that God sent many messengers before him: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Still, there are many signs in the universe, and there are also plenty of signs that people ignore. Who, for example made cattle subservient to man? Furthermore, the ships that carry them on the sea are a sign they see with their eyes. The fate of past communities should also serve as an admonition to them. The *sūrah* then concludes with a powerful image coupled with strong rhythm, showing a community of unbelievers faced with God's might. They declared their belief, but it was too late: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) This is a fitting ending, one that depicts the fate of those who are arrogant.

I

A Prayer by Angels

Ghāfir (The Forgiver)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return. (3)

غَافِرِ ٱلذَّنۢبِ وَقَابِلِ ٱلتَّوْبِ شَدِيدِ ٱلْعِقَابِ ذِى ٱلطَّوْلِ ۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ إِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. (4)

مَا يُجَٰدِلُ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَلَا يَغْرُرْكَ تَقَلُّبُهُمْ فِى ٱلْبِلَٰدِ ﴿٤﴾

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ
وَٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ وَهَمَّتْ
كُلُّ أُمَّةٍۭ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ ۖ
وَجَٰدَلُوا۟ بِٱلْبَٰطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا۟
بِهِ ٱلْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ
عِقَابِ ﴿٥﴾

Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! (5)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَنَّهُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٦﴾

Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (6)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ ٱلْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُۥ
يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِۦ
وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ رَبَّنَا
وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ رَّحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا
فَٱغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعُوا۟ سَبِيلَكَ
وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٧﴾

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. (7)

رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ٱلَّتِى
وَعَدتَّهُمْ وَمَن صَلَحَ مِنْ
ءَابَآئِهِمْ وَأَزْوَٰجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمْ ۚ
إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

'And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. (8)

وَقِهِمُ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ۚ وَمَن تَقِ
ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتَهُۥ ۚ
وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

'Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يُنَادَوْنَ
لَمَقْتُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ مِن مَّقْتِكُمْ
أَنفُسَكُمْ إِذْ تُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَتَكْفُرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' (10)

قَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَمَتَّنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ
فَٱعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ
مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿١١﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' (11)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّهُۥٓ إِذَا دُعِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَحْدَهُۥ
كَفَرْتُمْ ۖ وَإِن يُشْرَكْ بِهِۦ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ ۚ
فَٱلْحُكْمُ لِلَّهِ ٱلْعَلِىِّ ٱلْكَبِيرِ ﴿١٢﴾

[They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (12)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُرِيكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقًا ۚ وَمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ إِلَّا مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. (13)

فَٱدْعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (14)

رَفِيعُ ٱلدَّرَجَٰتِ ذُو ٱلْعَرْشِ يُلْقِى ٱلرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ لِيُنذِرَ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّلَاقِ ﴿١٥﴾

High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; (15)

يَوْمَ هُم بَٰرِزُونَ ۖ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَىْءٌ ۚ لِّمَنِ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ لِلَّهِ ٱلْوَٰحِدِ ٱلْقَهَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. (16)

ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ۚ لَا ظُلْمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٧﴾

This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (17)

وَأَنذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْآزِفَةِ إِذِ ٱلْقُلُوبُ لَدَى
ٱلْحَنَاجِرِ كَٰظِمِينَ ۚ مَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنْ
حَمِيمٍ وَلَا شَفِيعٍ يُطَاعُ ﴿١٨﴾

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. (18)

يَعْلَمُ خَآئِنَةَ ٱلْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِى
ٱلصُّدُورُ ﴿١٩﴾

God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. (19)

وَٱللَّهُ يَقْضِى بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ
مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَقْضُونَ بِشَىْءٍ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٢٠﴾

God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (20)

Clear Outline

> Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.* (Verses 1–3)

This is the first of seven *sūrahs* that all begin with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*. In one of these seven *sūrahs* three other separate letters, *'Ayn Sīn Qāf*, are added after the initial two. We have already discussed why some *sūrahs* start with these separate letters, thereby indicating that the Qur'ān, which defies imitation, is composed of such letters which the Arabs used every day, orally and in writing, in their language.

This is followed by a statement of a fact that is frequently used in Makkan *sūrahs* given these seek to establish faith: the fact of revelation: "*The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 2) A number of God's attributes are then stated. These are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses:

"*the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.*" (Verses 2–3) In fact all the issues the *sūrah* raises relate to these attributes of God, powerfully stated at the outset to give an impression that they are well and firmly established.

Limitless in His glory, God outlines to His servants these of His attributes that have a profound effect on their lives. Thus, He raises their hopes and fears, making them feel that they are within His grasp and can never elude what He wills. The attributes highlighted here are:

The Almighty: He is overpowering. No one can get the better of Him, while He has power over all things. When He decides something, nothing can stop this from occurring.

The All-Knowing: He conducts all affairs on the basis of perfect knowledge. Nothing is hidden from Him.

He forgives sins: He grants His forgiveness on the basis of His knowledge about those servants who deserve to be forgiven.

He accepts repentance: When sinners repent, He accepts their repentance and bestows His grace on them, opening the door for them to address Him directly.

He is severe in retribution: He punishes the arrogant who are hardened in sin, unwilling to show regret or seek forgiveness.

Limitless in bounty: He bestows His limitless grace, multiplies the reward for good deeds and gives without reckoning.

There is no deity other than Him: He alone is the Godhead who has no partners or equals.

To Him is the ultimate return: None can evade meeting Him or escape accountability.

These attributes provide a clear outline of the interrelation between Him and His servants. They should be clear in their feelings, thoughts and understanding of how to deal with Him. Then, they will have no ambiguity about what pleases Him or incurs His anger.

In the past, those who held beliefs based on legends were at a loss in knowing how to deal with their deities, because they had no clear idea of what pleased or angered them. They pictured them as impulsive, having no clear aim or purpose, demonstrating violent reactions and causing people much worry and confusion. They resorted to charms and sacrifices in their attempts to please such deities, but could only guess about whether they were satisfied or not. By contrast, Islam provides a very clear concept, establishing a relationship between people and their true Lord, outlining His attributes, defining His will, and instructing them on how to draw closer to Him, fear His punishment and pray for His mercy, always following a straight and clear path.

The Same Old Battle

> *None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell.* (Verses 4–6)

Having established the truth of God's oneness and His Divine attributes, the *sūrah* makes clear that this truth is accepted by all creatures. It is, in fact, firmly rooted in their nature and directly related to the nature of the universe. All creation is entirely convinced by the signs testifying to God's oneness. Only the unbelievers dispute these signs and argue about God's revelations. Thus they are a class apart, choosing to be at odds with the universe and all other creatures within it.

"*None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations.*" (Verse 4) Throughout the entire expanse of the universe, only the unbelievers stand apart, deviating from the true path. In relation to the whole universe, they are weaker and less significant than an ant in relation to planet earth. When they stand on their own disputing God's revelations and denying His signs, the rest of the universe declares its acceptance of Him and recognizes His oneness, deriving its strength from Him. With their odd attitude, the unbelievers' fate is sealed, no matter how powerful, affluent and mighty they may appear to be: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) They may be able to move about, gather wealth, enjoy their power and revel in easy living. However, they are ultimately doomed. The battle, if there could ever be a battle between them and the Creator of the universe, will lead to its inevitable end.

There were in former times communities that followed the same path. Their fate should make clear to the unbelievers what happens in the end to anyone who tries to stand against the power of the Almighty: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) It is the same old story, beginning with the Prophet Noah. In other words, the battle remains the same throughout all generations. This verse provides an overall picture: a message from God received with rejection and tyranny, which leads to the inevitable end. Every messenger is met by those in power in his community who do not try to justify their stance with sound argument. On the contrary, they resort to tyranny and try to do away with God's messenger. They also resort to trickery in order to deceive the masses and claim victory for themselves. Therefore, God's power intervenes and smashes them in the most amazing way: "*How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) The punishments meted out were indeed severe, leaving in their wake ruins that testify to the same. Furthermore, all this is recorded in human history.

The battle, however, is not over yet. There is a further episode in the life to come: "*Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the*

unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell." (Verse 6) When God's word applies to someone, it always comes true. There can be no argument about this.

Thus does the Qur'ān describe the true nature of the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood, those who advocate God's oneness and those who, against all right, behave arrogantly on earth. We then realize that this is an old and on-going battle that started at the dawn of human life. The battlefield is wider than the whole earth because the universe and all that exists in it believe in God and submit to Him. The only exceptions are those who dispute God's revelations. The two sides are far from equal: on the side of truth stand an endless line, while on the side of falsehood only a small band stands, weak and powerless even though it may appear to be able to do as it likes on earth and to possess power and authority.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the battle so that advocates of the truth, in all generations, are reassured. They should never be deceived by the apparent might enjoyed by the forces of falsehood at any particular time, or by the outcome of a single round in the battle. Such instances after all do not reflect the complete truth. The truth is that which is described in God's book, in His own words. He is the most truthful of all speakers, and He is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

A Universal Bond

A relevant point is that even the angels carrying God's throne and those surrounding it, who rank among the forces of faith in the universe, remember the believers among human beings, mention them in God's presence and pray for their forgiveness. They also pray to Him for the fulfilment of His promise to those believers with whom the angels share their bond of faith:

> *Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the*

suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (Verses 7–9)

We do not know what this throne is: we have no image of it. Nor do we know how those assigned to carry it do so or how the others are present around it. It is futile to try to determine something which is beyond the reach of human understanding or perception. No purpose can be served by arguing about something over which God has not provided information. All that can be said concerning this fact is that there are some creatures who are close to God, and these '*extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him.*' Although the fact that they are believers can be taken for granted, this is specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān to emphasize the bond between them and human believers. Having extolled God's limitless glory, these servants of God pray for the believers among humanity, requesting the best that one believer can ask for another.

They begin their supplication in a very polite way, in the process teaching us how to couch our own prayers. They say: "*Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge.*" (Verse 7) As they address God, they make clear their request that God bestows His grace on people, that they are relying on the fact that His grace embraces all, and that His knowledge encompasses everything. Thus, they do not make any assumptions; they simply refer to God's grace and knowledge. "*Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) This reference to God's forgiveness and people's repentance corresponds to the opening of the *sūrah* where God is described as the One who forgives sins and accepts repentance. Likewise, the reference to the '*suffering in the blazing fire*' corresponds to the earlier description of His retribution as being severe.

These servants of God continue with their supplications, praying now for the admission of believers among human beings into heaven,

in fulfilment of His promise to His good servants: "*Our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 8) Admission into heaven is a great triumph and means a life of bliss. When there is added to this the company of righteous ancestors, spouses and offspring, another dimension of bliss is thus granted. Moreover, this is an aspect of the unity of all believers. It is in the bond of faith that fathers, spouses and offspring are united. Without it, all their ties are severed. This part of their supplication highlights God's attributes of power and wisdom. It is this combination that determines how people are judged.

The supplication continues: "*Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 9) Having prayed for their admission to heaven, this prayer refers to the most important point in the whole difficult process. It is evil deeds that ruin people and lead them to their doom. When God shields a believer from evil, He actually shields that believer from the consequences of such evil. This is the great mercy on the Day of Judgement, and it is only the first step to bliss and happiness. This shielding from evil is indeed the great triumph.

Hating Oneself

As the carriers of the throne and those surrounding it address their prayer to God appealing for His grace to be bestowed on believers, their brethren in faith, the unbelievers find themselves in a totally different capacity. Everyone is looking for support, but none is to be found. In fact all bonds with all beings and things in the universe are severed. They are called out so that they can listen to the rebuke coming from all directions. The arrogance they demonstrated in this life is turned now into humiliation. They want to place their hopes in someone, but none is available to encourage their hopes:

> *The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice*

have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' [They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (Verses 10–12)

The Arabic text uses the strongest word for hate. We see them addressed from all corners and told that God's loathing of them when they were called upon to believe and still rejected the faith is far stronger than their feelings of hate towards themselves as they realize to what end they have brought themselves. They realize how different their fate could have been, had they responded to the call to faith before it was too late. This reminder is exceptionally painful for them in their newly difficult situation.

Now that all delusion is gone, they realize that the only One to turn to is God Himself; and so they do: "*They will say: Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?*" (Verse 11) Their words betray their misery and despair. They call out: '*Our Lord!*' Yet they had once denied Him and rejected His message. You gave us life the first time when You breathed of Your spirit into what was dead and thus You gave it life and we became alive. Again You have given us life after we died. We are now turning to You because You are the only One who can save us from the misery we are in. We acknowledge our faults and admit our sins. Is there, then, a way out of this misery?

Their appeal betrays the direness of their situation. They are in bitter despair. They are made to see the reason for their plight: "*This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12) This is what has brought you to your present position of humiliation. You denied God's oneness and attributed partners to Him. All judgement, then, rests with Him, the Exalted, the Supreme. Both attributes fit well with the position of judgement. He is Exalted above all things and Superior to all beings.

No Injustice

The *sūrah* now dwells on one of God's attributes that fits with His exalted position. The believers are instructed to address their prayers to Him, associating no partners with Him and to be sincere in their devotion to Him alone. The *sūrah* also refers to the fact of revelation so as to give a warning about the day when all mankind will be brought together for judgement, reward and punishment. On that day, all dominion and sovereignty belong to God alone:

> *He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.* (Verses 13–17)

"*He it is who shows you His signs.*" (Verse 13) God's signs are seen in everything in the universe: in the great bodies such as the sun and the planets, and also in the great phenomena such as the day and night, rain, thunder and lightning. Likewise, they are seen in minute things such as the atom, cell, leaf or flower. In each of these there is a miraculous sign which appears clearly when man tries to imitate it, let alone initiate it. Never can man fully imitate even the simplest little thing God has created.

And He it is who "*sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) Of all the sustenance God sends down people know best the rain, which is the origin of life on earth and the source of food and drink. Yet there is so much more than rain that God sends down and people learn about this gradually. Part of it consists of the rays that are necessary for life on earth. Such sustenance may also include the Divine messages

that have provided guidance for mankind ever since the early stages of human life on earth. They showed man the right way and provided sound codes for living.

"*Yet only those who turn to God will take heed.*" (Verse 13) It is the one who turns to God that remembers His grace as well as His signs and revelations which the unbelievers, with hardened hearts, prefer to ignore. In connection with turning to God, the believers are instructed to pray to God alone and to be sincere in their faith, paying little heed to what the unbelievers feel or say: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The unbelievers will never accept that the believers should hold on sincerely to their faith in God alone and their worship of none but Him. There is no way they will accept this, no matter how much the believers try to appease them. Therefore, the believers should stay their course, praying to God alone, completely sincere and devoted. They should pay no heed to whether the unbelievers are happy with them or not, because they will never be satisfied.

The *sūrah* adds at this point the following attributes of God: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants.*" (Verse 15) It is God alone who is exalted in His position, high above all orders of being, the Lord of the Throne who controls everything. It is He who gives His orders, which give life to hearts and souls, to those whom He chooses from among His servants. This expression refers to the revelation of the Divine message, and it highlights here the fact that God's revelations bring life to humanity. It further states that revelation is bestowed from on high to those chosen elite among God's servants. All these facts are in harmony with God's attributes mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, stating that He is "*the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12)

The main task undertaken by a servant of God chosen to receive such a message is to deliver a warning: "*so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him.*" (Verse 15) That is the day when people will meet together, and they will also stand face to face with the deeds they did during their lives on earth, and they will meet other creatures such as the *jinn*, the angels and other types of God's creation. All of them will

meet their Lord at the time of reckoning. Hence the day is described as 'the day of the meeting'. Furthermore, it is the day when they all stand without any cover to screen their reality. Hence, no one can put up a false image: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) In fact, nothing about them is concealed from God at any time. However, at all times other than that day, they may imagine that they are covered or screened by something or other, or that what they do or say may remain secret. On that day, however, they will be truly exposed, unable to enjoy even an imaginary cover.

Therefore, on that day the arrogant and the mighty are made to face their humble reality. The whole universe stands in awe, and all creatures demonstrate their submission. Sovereignty belongs completely to God, the One who overpowers all. In fact this is true at all times. However, on that day, this fact becomes clear to all and sundry. Every tyrant of old and every conceited person will come to know and feel it. Then every sound dies down and every movement stops. A majestic voice asks a question and replies to it, as there is no one else to ask or reply: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today?*"... "*With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16)

"*This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 17) An air of awe, heightened by silence spreads. All creatures listen and realize; everything is settled, the reckoning is over. This is in harmony with what the *sūrah* said at the outset about those who dispute God's revelations: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) This is the end of unjustified arrogance, tyranny and injustice, as well as of wealth and affluence.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to warn his people about this day. The instruction is given against a backdrop of an image of the Day of Resurrection when God sits alone for judgement. Up till now the *sūrah* has not addressed people directly; instead it used a reporting style:

> *Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. God is*

well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (Verses 18–20)

The *sūrah* describes the Day of Judgement as ever drawing near, and we perceive it to be hastening towards us. Souls are in distress, pressing against people's throats. They try to suppress their worries and fears, and the effort is difficult. Nevertheless, they can find no one to support or protect them. No one can put up a word of intercession that finds response from anyone.

They stand in full view; nothing can conceal their reality. Even a stealthy glance and a heart's secret is brought into the open: "*God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal.*" (Verse 19) An eye looking stealthily will try hard to conceal its stealthy gaze, but God is well aware of it. A secret may be hidden safely in one's soul, but it is not hidden from God who knows it all.

On that day, it is God only who passes judgement in fairness. Their alleged deities have nothing to do with such judgement: "*God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all.*" (Verse 20) His judgement is based on perfect knowledge and full awareness. He will not entertain any injustice for anyone, and He forgets nothing: "*God alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 20)

2

A Believer in Pharaoh's House

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً
وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ
بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن
وَاقٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. (21)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَكَفَرُوا۟ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
قَوِىٌّ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٢﴾

That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution. (22)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
وَسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority (23)

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَقَٰرُونَ
فَقَالُوا۟ سَٰحِرٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: 'A sorcerer, a teller of lies.' (24)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ مِنْ عِندِنَا قَالُوا۟
ٱقْتُلُوٓا۟ أَبْنَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ
وَٱسْتَحْيُوا۟ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.' Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong. (25)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ ذَرُونِىٓ أَقْتُلْ
مُوسَىٰ وَلْيَدْعُ رَبَّهُۥٓ ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ أَن
يُبَدِّلَ دِينَكُمْ أَوْ أَن يُظْهِرَ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلْفَسَادَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.' (26)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّى عُذْتُ بِرَبِّى
وَرَبِّكُم مِّن كُلِّ مُتَكَبِّرٍ
لَّا يُؤْمِنُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٧﴾

Moses said: 'I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.' (27)

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُّؤْمِنٌ مِّنْ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ
يَكْتُمُ إِيمَٰنَهُۥٓ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَن
يَقُولَ رَبِّىَ ٱللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَآءَكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
كَٰذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُۥ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
صَادِقًا يُصِبْكُم بَعْضُ ٱلَّذِى
يَعِدُكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى مَنْ هُوَ
مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: 'Would you kill a man because he says, "God is my Lord," when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. (28)

يَٰقَوْمِ لَكُمُ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ظَٰهِرِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَن يَنصُرُنَا مِنۢ بَأْسِ ٱللَّهِ إِن جَآءَنَا ۚ قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ مَآ أُرِيكُمْ إِلَّا مَآ أَرَىٰ وَمَآ أَهْدِيكُمْ إِلَّا سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٢٩﴾

'My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?' Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.' (29)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُم مِّثْلَ يَوْمِ ٱلْأَحْزَابِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Then said the man who believed: 'My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; (30)

مِثْلَ دَأْبِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۚ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ﴿٣١﴾

the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. (31)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّنَادِ ﴿٣٢﴾

'And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; (32)

يَوْمَ تُوَلُّونَ مُدْبِرِينَ مَا لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِنْ عَاصِمٍ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. (33)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ يُوسُفُ مِن قَبْلُ
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا زِلْتُمْ فِى شَكٍّ مِّمَّا جَآءَكُم
بِهِۦ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا هَلَكَ قُلْتُمْ لَن يَبْعَثَ
ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ رَسُولًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ
ٱللَّهُ مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ مُّرْتَابٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

'Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: "God will never send any messenger after him." In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. (34)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ
سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ ۖ كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
وَعِندَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ قَلْبِ مُتَكَبِّرٍ جَبَّارٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

'Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.' (35)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَٰهَٰمَٰنُ ٱبْنِ لِى صَرْحًا
لَّعَلِّىٓ أَبْلُغُ ٱلْأَسْبَٰبَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; (36)

أَسْبَٰبَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ فَأَطَّلِعَ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِ
مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّى لَأَظُنُّهُۥ كَٰذِبًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ
زُيِّنَ لِفِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَصُدَّ عَنِ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ فِرْعَوْنَ
إِلَّا فِى تَبَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (37)

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. (38)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱتَّبِعُونِ
أَهْدِكُمْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

'My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. (39)

يَٰقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا مَتَٰعٌ
وَإِنَّ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ هِىَ دَارُ ٱلْقَرَارِ ﴿٣٩﴾

'Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. (40)

مَنْ عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَىٰٓ
إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا
مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ
فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ
فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

'My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? (41)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ مَا لِىٓ أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى ٱلنَّجَوٰةِ
وَتَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤١﴾

'You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (42)

تَدْعُونَنِى لِأَكْفُرَ بِٱللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ
بِهِۦ مَا لَيْسَ لِى بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا۠ أَدْعُوكُمْ
إِلَى ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْغَفَّٰرِ ﴿٤٢﴾

'There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. (43)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّمَا تَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُۥ
دَعْوَةٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَلَا فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ
وَأَنَّ مَرَدَّنَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ
هُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

فَسَتَذْكُرُونَ مَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَأُفَوِّضُ أَمْرِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٤﴾

'You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.' (44)

فَوَقَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا۟ وَحَاقَ بِـَٔالِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٥﴾

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: (45)

ٱلنَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوٓا۟ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ أَشَدَّ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' (46)

وَإِذْ يَتَحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ فَيَقُولُ ٱلضُّعَفَٰٓؤُا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنتُم مُّغْنُونَ عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' (47)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُلٌّ فِيهَآ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ حَكَمَ بَيْنَ ٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٨﴾

The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' (48)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ لِخَزَنَةِ جَهَنَّمَ ٱدْعُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ يُخَفِّفْ عَنَّا يَوْمًا مِّنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' (49)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَوَلَمْ تَكُ تَأْتِيكُمْ رُسُلُكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ ۚ قَالُوا۟ فَٱدْعُوا۟ ۗ
وَمَا دُعَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى
ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (50)

إِنَّا لَنَنصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ
يَقُومُ ٱلْأَشْهَٰدُ ﴿٥١﴾

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. (51)

يَوْمَ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ ۖ وَلَهُمُ
ٱللَّعْنَةُ وَلَهُمْ سُوٓءُ ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٥٢﴾

On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. (52)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ وَأَوْرَثْنَا
بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ﴿٥٣﴾

And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel (53)

هُدًى وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٥٤﴾

as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. (54)

فَٱصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ
لِذَنۢبِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ
وَٱلْإِبْكَٰرِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (55)

Overview

We outlined in the Prologue the theme discussed in this part of the *sūrah*. Before we discuss it in detail, we should observe that this episode from Moses' life story is closely intertwined with the main theme of the *sūrah*, and uses the same style even to the extent of employing the same phrases and expressions. The man from Pharaoh's household who concealed the fact that he was a believer following the true faith presents a number of ideas that have already been mentioned in the *sūrah*. He reminds Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah that they were enjoying a life of comfort and authority, warning them against a fate similar to that which befell earlier communities and couples this with a warning against what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection. He also refers to those who dispute God's revelations and how God loathes them, as do the believers; a fact also already mentioned in the *sūrah*'s first part. The *sūrah* then portrays their condition in hell, where they are humiliated, praying hard but without any response. A similar image was also given earlier. All this suggests that the logic of faith is the same across all generations, and all believers in all communities use the same arguments. This is only to be expected because the logic and the arguments are derived from the same truth. The *sūrah*, thus, carries the same ambience throughout, giving it its consistent and unique personality. Such uniqueness applies to each and every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān.

Citing an Historical Example

> *Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.* (Verses 21–22)

These two verses provide a bridge between what has already been discussed in the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. It serves as a reminder to

the Arabs, highlighting the lessons of history and directing them to go about in the land and reflect on the fate of those communities which in former times adopted the same attitude the Arabs showed towards the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. It states that those communities commanded superior strength and left their mark on the land. Yet their weakness was all too clear when they faced God's might. Their sins isolated them from the source of true strength and rallied against them the forces of faith, supported by God's power: "*God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God.*" (Verse 21) There is, in fact, no protection for anyone other than what is provided by faith and good action. To deny the Divine message and reject God's messengers and the clear evidence of the truth they provide will inevitably lead to ruin: "*That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.*" (Verse 22)

This general reference to earlier communities of unbelievers is followed by an example of such people whom God smote as a result of their sins. The example is provided by Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, together with other arrogant and tyrannical forces.

This episode from Moses' life story may be divided into sections variously outlining attitudes and depicting scenes. It begins by presenting the message to Pharaoh and his notables, but finishes in the hereafter, when they argue as they suffer the punishment of hell. It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* highlights certain scenes from it to drive home the idea.

"*We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verses 23–24) This is the attitude adopted in the first encounter: Moses, equipped with the signs given to him by God, is held in awe by all around him due to the fact that he spoke the word of truth. On the other side, however, stood Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah with their falsehood and apparent might, guarding their positions which they felt to be threatened by this power of truth. Therefore, they resort to false argument, seeking thus to defeat the truth: "*They said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verse 24)

The Argument of Brute Force

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened after this first encounter, omitting the match with the sorcerers when Moses' staff swallowed their trickery and forced them to declare their acceptance of triumphant truth. Instead, it goes on to the situation that prevailed after these initial events: "*When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.'*" (Verse 25) A comment on this attitude is given straight away, before the verse is even finished: "*Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong.*" (Verse 25)

Whenever tyranny is faced with a clear argument it cannot refute, it resorts to such tactics. It dreads that truth should prevail with its clear and strong arguments that appeal directly to sound human nature. Pharaoh witnessed how his sorcerers, whom he marshalled in the hope that they would defeat Moses, were the first to respond to the truth, immediately declaring themselves as believers. By contrast, Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah said: "*Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.*" (Verse 25)

At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had issued a similar decree. What we now need to consider is whether the Pharaoh who issued that decree had died and been succeeded by his son or crown prince. Furthermore, whether under this new Pharaoh, the original decree had been stopped, until Moses came back and confronted him with his message. Moses was after all known to this Pharaoh when he was a crown prince, and was aware that Moses had been brought up in the palace. He was also aware of the original decree to slay the male children of the Israelites and to spare their females. Now, his courtiers refer to this decree, advising Pharaoh to apply it in particular to those who believed with Moses, be they the sorcerers or the minority of Israelites who accepted Moses' message despite fearing Pharaoh and his forces. It is also possible that the original Pharaoh who adopted Moses was still in power, but the implementation of his decree had slackened with time or had even been suspended altogether. Now his courtiers advise him to revive it, applying it only to those who followed Moses, so that it would scare people away from Moses, the prophet.

Pharaoh himself seems to take a different point of view, or to have an additional measure which he mentioned during consultations on what tactics he would employ against Moses and his message. Essentially, he wanted to do away with Moses and rid himself of the whole problem:

> *Pharaoh said: Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.* (Verse 26)

His words, '*leave it to me to kill Moses,*' suggest that his view was not immediately accepted. Reservations might have been expressed, such as someone suggesting that killing Moses would not end the problem. On the contrary, it might inspire the masses to consider him a hero or a martyr, which could in turn generate enthusiasm towards him and his new faith, particularly after the sorcerers, who were supposed to expose his myth, declared their acceptance of his faith. One or other of Pharaoh's advisers might also have feared that Moses' God might avenge his killing and inflict punishment on his killers. This was a distinct possibility since idolaters believed in multiple deities and could imagine that Moses had a God who would punish his killers. This possibility explains Pharaoh's statement, '*let him invoke his Lord!*' Pharaoh might have meant this as a rejoinder to the objection. On the other hand, his wild remark might have merely been to show that he did not care about the consequences. His carelessness was suitably punished in the end, as we shall presently learn.

It is useful to reflect a little on Pharaoh's argument in support of his declared intention to kill Moses: "*I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.*" (Verse 26) Could there be anything more laughable than Pharaoh, the idolater, saying this of Moses, God's messenger? Yet, is it not the same statement every tyrant repeats about everyone who advocates the truth and seeks to reform people's beliefs? Is it not the word of ugly falsehood about splendid truth? What trickery seeking to shake people's faith! It is indeed the same logic repeated whenever falsehood is confronted by the truth, tyranny by justice and unfaith by faith, anywhere in the world.

For his part, Moses resorted to the secure shelter that is always extended to advocates of the truth: "*Moses said: I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.*" (Verse 27) As he said this, Moses felt reassured. He submitted himself to the One who overpowers every arrogant despot and is able to protect those who seek His shelter against arrogant enemies. He referred to God's oneness, stating it clearly, fearing nothing of the threats he received. He also referred to the rejection of the true promise that a day will inevitably come when people will have to account for their deeds. No one can resort to arrogance if they believe in the Day of Reckoning. How can they if they realize that they will stand in front of their Lord, humble, deprived of all power, without friend or intercessor?

In Defence of Moses

At this point, a man from Pharaoh's own household who had accepted the truth but kept his faith secret begins his argument in defence of Moses. In his address to Pharaoh and his courtiers, the man tries to touch their hearts with his advice and makes very convincing arguments that combine facts with the prospect of dreadful consequences.

> *A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord,' when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us? Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.'*
>
> *Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who*

came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant. (Verses 28–35)

This is a long, powerful argument advanced by a believer against the conspirators in Pharaoh's court. His argument relies on the sound logic of uncorrupted human nature. It is a skilful argument that combines caution with power. He begins first by describing the enormity of what they propose to do: "*Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord'*?" (Verse 28) Do such innocent words that imply personal conviction deserve killing the person who says them? Can such words be answered by murder? Shown in this way, your action appears to be gruesome, horrid and repugnant.

He then takes a step forward, saying that this person, Moses, supports his own statement with solid and clear evidence: "*he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord.*" (Verse 28) Here, he is referring to the signs Moses had shown them. They certainly saw these signs, and when they were together, away from the masses, they could not argue about such signs nor their import.

The believer then puts to them the worst possible situation, taking an objective attitude to allow them to reflect on such a scenario: "*If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him.*" (Verse 28) If he is lying, he will bear the consequences of his lie and suffer his punishment. However, this does not justify killing him. There is, however, the other possibility that what he says is true. It is, then, prudent to be careful and not to expose oneself to its consequences: "*but if he is speaking the truth,*

something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you." (Verse 28) Again this is the least that can be expected in this case. The man did not ask them to consider anything beyond this. His purpose was to make an objective stand, one that provided the most convincing argument.

He then delivers an implicit warning: one that applies to them and to Moses alike: "*God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor.*" (Verse 28) If this applies to Moses, God will not allow him to escape unscathed. Leave him to God, then, to receive his due punishment. However, you must be careful lest you be the ones who are lying transgressors, because this will mean your inescapable doom.

The believer then gives them a strong warning against incurring God's punishment, reminding them that should it befall them, no power can avert it. Their kingdom and power will then be of little use. They should remember this and be grateful to God for having given them what they enjoyed: "*My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29)

At heart, the man feels what a true believer should feel: God's punishment is closest to those who are in power. Therefore, they are the ones who should be most careful and should try their best to avoid it. It could come upon them at any moment of the night or day, so they must dread such a possibility. The man reminds them of the power and authority they enjoyed, and includes himself among them as he reminds them of God's punishment: "*Who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29) He, thus, shows them that what happens to them is a matter of great concern to him; he is one of them, awaiting the same destiny. Hence, his kind and caring advice. He hopes that they will take this to heart, realizing that it is meant most sincerely, and that they stand no chance against God's punishment should it befall them.

At this point Pharaoh demonstrates the feeling that possesses any tyrant receiving honest advice. He turns in arrogance, perceiving detraction from his authority and encroachment on his dominion: "*Pharaoh said: I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am*

guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude." (Verse 29) I am only telling you what I know to be true and useful. It is indeed the proper path to follow. Has anyone ever heard of a tyrant who did not feel that what he said was right and full of wisdom? Would any tyrant allow for someone to imagine that he be wrong? Do tyrants allow anyone to uphold a view other than theirs? How else do they become tyrants?

The believer, however, feels that it is his duty to warn and give sound advice, and to express his view lucidly. It is also his duty to stand by the truth, regardless of what tyrants say. He then tries another argument, in the hope that their hearts will soften to it and that they will begin to see the light of the truth. He refers to the fates of earlier communities of unbelievers. They testify to how powerfully God smites arrogant tyrants: "*Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures.*" (Verses 30–31) Each community had its day, but the believer combines them together, making it the day when God's retribution strikes. The nature of these days is the same; hence, they are made to appear as just one day. God wills no injustice on anyone. He only punishes them for their sins, so that those who are close to them and those who come after them may take heed and follow the right course.

The man touches their hearts again, reminding them of another day, the Day of Resurrection, when everyone is calling out: "*And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verses 32–33)

On that day, the angels responsible for gathering people will be calling out to them; the people standing on the heights will call out, speaking to the people destined for heaven and to the people of hell; the people of heaven and hell will call out addressing each other. Thus, calling out takes place in different ways. Describing it as the 'day of calling out' imparts a feeling of loud clamouring emanating from everywhere, as also a day of overcrowding and dispute. The general air fits well with the believer's words: "*the Day when you shall turn back*

and flee, with no one to defend you against God." They may try to flee when they see hell, but there is no escape. Yet the image of fright and attempting to flee is the first to be shown here of those who considered themselves mighty and who behaved arrogantly, revelling in their earthly power.

"*He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verse 33) Do we see here an implicit reply to Pharaoh's earlier statement when he said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This also implies that true guidance comes only from God. Whoever God lets go astray will have no one to guide him. God knows people's conditions and who of them deserves to be guided and who deserves to be left astray.

Finally, the believer reminds them of their attitude to the Prophet Joseph, Moses' ancestor. They also doubted him and his message despite the clear evidence he showed them. They must not adopt the same attitude towards Moses who is confirming what Joseph had brought them earlier. In fact, Moses' message disproves their assertions that God would not send a messenger after Joseph. For, Moses has been sent to prove them wrong: "*Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verses 34–35)

This is the only reference in the Qur'ān to Joseph's message addressed to the people of Egypt. In the *sūrah* carrying his name we learn that he was placed in charge of Egypt's storehouses. He also carried the title of 'Azīz, which probably meant the chief minister. There is an indication in the *sūrah* that he sat on Egypt's throne, but this is not confirmed. This may be understood from the verse that says: "*And he raised his parents to the throne, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true.*" (12: 100)

The 'throne' to which Joseph raised his parents might have been something other than Egypt's throne. Be that as it may, Joseph attained a position of power and authority. In light of all this, we can imagine the situation to which the believer in Pharaoh's household was referring: they doubted Joseph's message, but dared not deny it outright when he was the man in power. Then they said: *'God will never send any messenger after him.'* They were practically relieved when he died. Expressing their relief in this way suggests that they did not accept his message based on God's complete oneness. They asserted that God would not send another messenger after him, yet this expressed nothing but their own desire. It is often the case that people desire something and then believe it to be true.

At this juncture, the believer takes a strong stance against such hardened denials of the truth: "*In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt.*" (Verse 34) He warns them that God will abandon those who continue to doubt His message after seeing clear evidence of its truth, letting them go astray. He then tells them plainly that those who continue to dispute God's revelation, without justification or evidence, will be loathed by God and the believers. Pharaoh and his people did this in a very deplorable way. He also condemns arrogance and warns against God's punishment to those who continue to behave arrogantly and resort to high-handedness. "*Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verse 35) These words, from a believer among Pharaoh's household, are almost identical to those at the outset of the *sūrah* speaking of how God dislikes those who dispute His revelations without any proof in support of what they say. The result is that God lets them go astray until there is no room in their hearts for the light of guidance.

Pharaoh's Manoeuvre

Despite such solid arguments from the believer, Pharaoh persisted in his erring ways, adamant in his rejection of the truth. However, he

sought to pretend that he wanted to find out whether what Moses said was true. It appears then that the believer's argument was so convincing and hard-hitting that Pharaoh and his courtiers could not totally ignore it. Therefore, Pharaoh tried to find a way out:

> *Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.* (Verses 36–37)

Thus, Pharaoh instructed Hāmān, his minister, to build him a very high tower so that he might climb and look into the heavens searching for Moses' God. He also added: '*I am convinced he is lying.*' Pharaoh resorted to this manoeuvring so that he did not have to face the truth which would compel him to acknowledge God's oneness. Such acknowledgement would lose him his throne and dispel the legends upon which his kingdom was based. It is improbable that such was Pharaoh's understanding, or that he seriously wanted to look for Moses' God in this stupid, physical way. In fact, Pharaoh would have attained a high standard of education and knowledge. Therefore, his words really betray his ridicule on the one hand and trickery on the other. He wanted to deceive people into thinking that he was fair-minded, willing to test Moses' claims. Or perhaps this manoeuvre was meant as a retreat in the face of the strong logic advanced by the believer. Whatever is the truth behind his actions, all these possibilities indicate that he persisted in his erring ways, arrogantly denying the truth. "*Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path.*" (Verse 37) He deserved to be so barred, having chosen to persist with falsehood and deviancy. The *sūrah*'s comment makes clear that such scheming can only lead to failure and utter loss. "*Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.*" (Verse 37)

Faced with such thoughtless and devious manoeuvring, the believer makes his final say clear, free of ambiguity. He calls on his people to

follow him in pursuing the right course leading to God. He emphasizes to them that this present life is worthless, while the life to come provides pure bliss. He warns them against the punishment of the hereafter, exposing the hollow and false nature of idolatrous beliefs:

> *The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.* (Verses 38–44)

These are the same facts established at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The believer restates them here as he confronts Pharaoh and his noblemen. He calls on them: "*My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 38) Only a few moments earlier, it was Pharaoh who said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This means that the believer was making a clear challenge, stating the word of truth, fearing nothing that the tyrant Pharaoh, or his two ministers, Hāmān and Korah, could do to him. He tells them of the nature of this present life: "*My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment.*" (Verse 39) It cannot continue. It will soon disappear; "*whereas the life to come is the lasting home.*" (Verse 39) It is the one to be preferred.

He states for them the rule that governs reward and punishment in the life to come: "*Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does*

righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning." (Verse 40) It is out of God's grace that good deeds will be rewarded in multiples, while bad ones are requited with no more than what they actually are. God is fully aware of people's weaknesses, the temptations to which they are exposed and the impediments they have to face when they try to adhere to His guidance. Therefore, He multiplies their good deeds and makes them a means to erase their bad ones. If, after the reckoning, they attain admittance into heaven, God grants them there blessings beyond all ken.

The believer expresses his amazement that he should call them to what saves them from punishment, while they call him to what will lead him to the fire: "*My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire?*" (Verse 41) Needless to say, they did not call on him to throw himself into a fire, but they called on him to associate partners with God. The two are synonymous. Therefore, he states the other call in the next verse: "*You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 42)

The difference between his and their calls cannot be wider. His call is clear, straight, requiring them to believe in God, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. He calls them to believe in the One God, whose work in the universe testifies to His oneness, limitless ability and infinite power. They should believe in Him so that He will forgive them, as He is the One who forgives all. How does this contrast with what they call him to do? They call him to disbelieve in God, to associate with Him beings of whom he has no knowledge: idols, myths, legends and paradoxes.

The believer then states in all clarity that those alleged partners have no say on any matter in this present world or in the life to come. All shall return to God Almighty when those who transgress the bounds will be the dwellers of fire: "*There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire.*" (Verse 43)

Thus the basic facts of the true faith are laid down, clear, free of all ambiguity. This believer unhesitatingly states them in front of Pharaoh

and his noblemen, although until then he had kept secret the fact that he believed in God. Now he declares his faith openly. What is left for him, then? Nothing other than to surrender himself to God. He has stated the truth as he knew it in the depths of his heart. He warns them that they are certain to remember his words when remembrance will avail them nothing. All matters are referred to God: "*You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.*" (Verse 44)

The argument is now over, for the believer from among Pharaoh's household has declared the word of truth, which remains clear and valid for the rest of time.

Who Bears the Blame?

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened between Moses, Pharaoh and the Children of Israel after this, up to the point of Pharaoh's drowning while Moses and his people were saved. Instead, it affords some glimpses of what happened thereafter, indeed, after life itself:

> *God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.* (Verses 45–50)

This present world is over, and we see the first event that succeeds it. We see the believer who stated the truth being saved from Pharaoh

and his aides' scheming. They could not cause him any harm in this world, nor after it. By contrast, Pharaoh's folk were engulfed by suffering: "*Before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*" (Verse 46)

The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are brought before the fire during the time between their death and the Day of Judgement. This may be a reference to the torment suffered in the grave. The statement that follows reads: '*and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*' This means that this suffering precedes the Day of Judgement. It is a terrible punishment involving exposure to the fire morning and evening, either to make them expect its burning and pain, which is a terrible suffering, or to experience it, which is even worse. Then, on the Day of Judgement, they will be cast into the worst suffering.

The verse that follows tells us of something that happens after resurrection. The unbelievers are shown arguing in hell: "*The weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?'*" (Verse 47) This means that the weak are together with the arrogant in the fire of hell. The weak have not been spared on account of their weakness, or their being driven like cattle, having no say or choice. God granted them a position of honour, which equipped them to exercise free choice and to be responsible for what they choose. They relinquished all this and followed their arrogant leaders instead. They did not object to anything the leaders said. In fact, it did not occur to them that they could object. They did not think about what their arrogant leaders said to them, or the errors they landed them in: "*We have been your followers.*" The fact of their relinquishing responsibility and what God granted them could never serve as extenuating circumstances in God's sight. Therefore, they will be in hell, driven there by their leaders, just as they used to drive them like sheep in the life of this world. We see them asking their leaders: "*Can you relieve us of some share of the fire?*" (Verse 47) This question is a reminder of what such leaders used to assert, pledging to protect their followers against evil and harm.

Such arrogant leaders, however, are soon fed up with their weak followers requests. Their answer betrays their boredom, but nonetheless they acknowledge what has happened: "*We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.*" (Verse 48)

"*We are all in it together.*" We are all weak, lacking all support and help. We are all alike. So why do you put such a question to us when you realize that the noble and the weaker elements are all the same? "*God has judged between His creatures.*" There can be no review or change to His judgement. The matter is settled. No creature can reduce or amend God's judgement.

When all realize that no refuge can be sought from God's punishment except with Him, they all humbly appeal to the guards of hell, in a way that makes them all equal: "*Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.*" (Verse 49) They want the guards of hell to intercede on their behalf, hoping that their terrible ordeal can be lifted a little. They ask them to pray to God to reduce their punishment for one day, just to breathe and have a bit of rest. Even a day's reduction is worth such appeals.

The guards of hell, however, do not respond to this humble and passionate appeal. They know their limits, and they are aware of God's law and that the time is long passed. Therefore, they increase the suffering of the dwellers of hell by rebuking them and reminding them of the reasons for their suffering: "*They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.'* (Verse 50) The question and its answer suffice. There is no need for any more argument. The guards of hell leave them to their fate, allowing them to sink into despair. "*[The keepers of hell] will say: Pray, then!*" (Verse 50) If any praying will change your situation even a bit, why do you not offer such prayers yourselves? The verse concludes with a comment on such prayers: "*But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.*" (Verse 50) Such prayer is ignored, remains unanswered. Those who say it are forgotten, be they the leaders or their followers.

God's Unfailing Support

The *sūrah* then adds a comment on the whole episode and what preceded it of reference to the different communities which suffered God's punishment after taking a negative attitude towards His message.

> *We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.* (Verses 51–55)

This definitive comment suits the decisive situation. We have been given an example of the end of truth and falsehood, both in this world and in the life to come. We have seen what fate befell Pharaoh and his noblemen in this life, and we have seen them disputing in hell, utterly humiliated. Such is the end of these communities, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

As for the life to come, perhaps no believer in life after death will argue about this. They do not find any reason to argue. As for victory in this present world, this may need some explanation.

God's promise is clear and definitive: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and...*" (Verse 51) Yet we see that some messengers were killed, and some had to abandon their homes after being rejected and driven out. Some believers have also been exposed to grievous suffering; some were thrown into the fire pit; some fell martyrs; some live in exceedingly difficult

circumstances. What happens, then, to God's promise of support being given to them in this present life? Satan tries hard to exploit this situation, working hard to shake people's faith.

People, however, use superficial measures when evaluating things, and they overlook many values and facts. They look at a brief period of time and a small area or space. These are limited human measures. A comprehensive look shows the situation to occur in a broad span of time and place. It does not erect limits between one era or place and another. If we look at the question of faith from such a broad perspective, we will see it triumphant, no doubt. Its triumph is the victory of its upholders. They have no existence separate from its existence. The first thing faith requires of them is to dedicate themselves to it completely, so that it is almost as if they disappear while it stays in full vision.

Moreover, people often limit the meaning of victory to a specific outcome they know and can easily recognize. But victory can take different forms, some of which might superficially at least appear akin to defeat. When the Prophet Abraham was thrown in the fire and remained resolute in his determination to stick to his faith and advocate it, was he in a position of victory or defeat? From a faith perspective, he was undoubtedly at the highest point of victory as he was being cast into the fire. He again triumphed when he was saved from the fire. These are two different images that appear to be poles apart, but they are in fact very close to each other. Al-Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, met his martyrdom in a way that is tragic from one angle and splendid from another: so was he victorious or vanquished? On the surface, and judging by immediate considerations, it was a defeat. In reality and from a wider perspective, though, it was a true victory. No other martyr excites sympathy and feelings of support, among both Sunnīs and Shī'ah, like al-Ḥusayn. Indeed, such feelings also apply to many non-Muslims.

Many are the martyrs who achieved for their faith through martyrdom what they could never have achieved in life had they lived a thousand years. They could not impress great meanings on people's minds or motivate them to action like they did with their final sermon,

written with their own blood. Their martyrdom provided motivation for their children and grandchildren, and at times they provided the motivation to change history over several generations.[1]

What constitutes victory? What is meant by defeat? We need to review our concepts and our sense of values before we ask about whether God's promise to His messengers and to believers comes true in this present life?

Yet there are many situations where victory takes its familiar form, particularly when such form is linked to a permanent one. The Prophet Muḥammad achieved victory in his lifetime because his victory was necessary for the establishment of the faith in its full reality in human life. This faith of ours can only be brought to its fullness when it governs the life of its community. It can, thus, conduct all affairs, from those of a single heart and soul to those of state and government. It was God's will that the messenger preaching this faith should triumph during his own lifetime, so that he could establish the full form of the Islamic faith, leaving a real example for future generations. Thus, the familiar form of victory was linked in his case to a much wider one, and the two were united by God's will and according to His planning.

Another point to consider is that God's promise is given to His messengers and to believers. Thus, a prerequisite for victory is the presence of true faith in people's hearts so as to make the promise applicable to them. Yet people often overlook the significance of the truth of faith which comes into existence only when people remove all forms of idolatry. There are some very subtle forms of idolatry which can only be purged when a person is totally devoted to God, relies on Him alone and submits totally to His will in all affairs. He then feels that God guides His footsteps and that He chooses nothing other than what God has chosen for him. Thus, he accepts God's will with contentment. When a person attains this state, he does not suggest to God any particular form of victory. He

1. These words apply to the author himself and his martyrdom. He rejected all tempting offers that sought to make him change his course. His standing in the history of Islamic advocacy was greatly enhanced after his death. Indeed, his books have achieved far wider circulation after his death and have been translated into many languages. – Editor's note.

leaves the matter to God to determine. He accepts whatever befalls him as good. This is one of the meanings of victory. It is victory over one's pleasures and desires. It is an internal victory, one that is prerequisite for achieving the external victory: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

We have seen in the previous image drawn how the excuses advanced by the wrongdoers were of little use to them, and how they were rejected and made to dwell in the worst of homes. Moses' story shows yet another form of victory: "*And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding.*" (Verses 53–54) Providing guidance and passing the book down to them was a form of victory that clearly reflects the breadth of its scope.

The final note in this part of the *sūrah* is given in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers facing much hardship in Makkah, and to all future generations of believers who face such hardship: "*Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) Remain patient in adversity, whether this adversity takes the form of rejection of the message, denying its truth, or the infliction of physical harm. Remain patient when you are unable to check falsehood that appears to enjoy wealth and power for a period of time. Bear with patience what you have to face of people's rough attitudes and behaviour. Check your own desire to achieve a quick victory. Remain patient as you may have to face many difficulties caused by friends, if not by enemies.

"*Remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true.*" (Verse 55) It may appear slow coming; matters may become complicated; prospects may become gloomy; yet it is the promise of the One who can fulfil it, and whose will it has been to make the promise. As you go along your way, take the necessary equipment: "*Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) This is what is of most benefit

along the hard way of patience; seeking forgiveness of one's sins and extolling God's praise and glory. While this serves to refine our hearts and feelings, it also ensures a positive response. Indeed, it is through such seeking of forgiveness and extolling of God's praise and glory that victory is achieved within our selves, to be followed by victory in life.

The evening and morning are specified either as a reference to all time, since these are the two ends of the day, or because these are times when hearts are calm and reflective. They can, thus, appreciate God's greatness better.

Such is the way, then, that God has chosen to provide the necessary equipment for achieving victory.

3

Always Responding to Prayers

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ إِن فِى
صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرٌ مَّا هُم
بِبَٰلِغِيهِ ۚ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٥٦﴾

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. (56)

لَخَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ خَلْقِ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. (57)

وَمَا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ وَٱلْبَصِيرُ
وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
وَلَا ٱلْمُسِىٓءُ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. (58)

إِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَءَاتِيَةٌ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. (59)

Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (60)

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمُ ٱدْعُونِىٓ أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِى
سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. (61)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ
لِتَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ وَٱلنَّهَارَ
مُبْصِرًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ
عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? (62)

ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. (63)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُؤْفَكُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (64)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ
قَرَارًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَصَوَّرَكُمْ
فَأَحْسَنَ صُوَرَكُمْ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ
ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ ۖ
فَتَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

هُوَ ٱلْحَىُّ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱدْعُوهُ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ ۗ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (65)

قُلْ إِنِّى نُهِيتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ ٱلَّذِينَ
تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَمَّا جَآءَنِىَ
ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ مِن رَّبِّى وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ
أُسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Say: 'Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.' (66)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن
نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا
ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَشُدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لِتَكُونُوا۟
شُيُوخًا ۚ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُتَوَفَّىٰ مِن قَبْلُ
وَلِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَجَلًا مُّسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. (67)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَإِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمْرًا
فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٦٨﴾

It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (68)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ أَنَّىٰ يُصْرَفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? (69)

Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know (70)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَبِمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِۦ رُسُلَنَا ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged (71)

إِذِ ٱلْأَغْلَٰلُ فِىٓ أَعْنَٰقِهِمْ وَٱلسَّلَٰسِلُ يُسْحَبُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. (72)

فِى ٱلْحَمِيمِ ثُمَّ فِى ٱلنَّارِ يُسْجَرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity (73)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. (74)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنَّا بَل لَّمْ نَكُن نَّدْعُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. (75)

ذَٰلِكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ تَمْرَحُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

'Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (76)

ٱدْخُلُوٓا۟ أَبْوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (77)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞۖ فَإِمَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعۡضَ ٱلَّذِي نَعِدُهُمۡ أَوۡ نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِلَيۡنَا يُرۡجَعُونَ ٧٧

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* is closely linked to the previous one. It is, in fact, a continuation of the last point in that passage. It further directs the Prophet to remain patient as he faced adversity in the shape of rejection and physical harm. It also directs him to remain patient when the unbelievers used every means to prevent others from accepting the truth and even boasted about falsehood. Having made this directive, the *sūrah* explains the real reason for disputing God's revelations without any sound basis. In short, it is nothing but arrogance and conceit that prevent people from acknowledging the truth. Yet they cannot even attain the status to which, in their arrogance, they aspire.

The *sūrah*, therefore, emphasizes the greatness of the universe created by God, and the smallness of all mankind, compared to the heavens and the earth. In this part, the *sūrah* highlights some of the universal signs and how God, by His grace, has made them subservient to man even though man is much smaller and weaker than them. The *sūrah* also refers to aspects of God's grace within man himself. In all, these aspects confirm the oneness of the Creator.

The Prophet is then directed to proclaim God's oneness and to turn his back on what the unbelievers worshipped beside God. This part then adds a powerful scene of the Day of Resurrection, when the idolaters are rebuked for associating partners with God. The conclusion in this part is the same as in the previous one: a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity, whether God keeps him alive until he has witnessed the realization of some of what He has promised or gathers him to Himself before that. This is something that God determines. All will ultimately return to Him.

Small Fry but Arrogant

> *As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.'* (Verses 56–60)

Man often forgets the fact that he is a small, weak creature and that whatever strength he may have does not emanate from within himself, but from his bond with God, the source of all strength and power. He may sever this bond and begin to swell and take on airs. Arrogance, thus, begins to establish itself within him. Satan, who doomed himself as a result of his arrogance, works on man to increase his arrogance knowing that through it he can bring man to ruin.

The unbeliever disputes God's revelations even when they are clear, addressing human nature with the sort of argument that appeals to it. He also claims to himself and others that he is only raising questions because he is not as yet convinced. However, God who knows the inner feelings and secret thoughts of all His creatures makes clear that all this is the result of man's arrogance. It is such arrogance which prompts man to argue and dispute God's revelations over which there can be no dispute. Such arrogance also drives man to aspire to what is beyond his status and what his nature cannot attain. Yet he has no solid basis for such argument for it is rooted deeply in nothing but his own arrogance: "*As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain.*" (Verse 56)

If only man would understand the truth about himself and the universe, recognizing his role and not trying to exceed it, appreciating

that he is one of countless creatures each doing their role by God's will and according to His design which He alone knows, he would certainly feel relaxed, humble, living in peace with himself and with the world around him. If he did this, he would easily and readily submit himself to God. He would also do this without any hesitation.

"*Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 56) Seeking refuge with God against arrogance is indicative of how gruesome it is. We seek God's refuge in order to escape what is ghastly, horrible and evil. Arrogance combines all these. Moreover, it is hard for the arrogant person and for those around him. It causes harm to the heart in which it stirs and to other people's hearts. It is an evil we should seek refuge with God from. God hears all and sees all. Arrogance is normally manifested in visible action and audible words. Therefore, it is left to God to decide upon it as He pleases.

Man is then told of his true position in this great universe: how small he is in comparison to some of God's creatures, the great magnitude of which is readily visible and better appreciated on careful examination: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) The heavens and the earth are there for man to see and to measure himself in relation to them. When he knows the reality of the proportions of distance, dimension, size and power, he reduces his pride, feels his smallness and almost disappears. He can only hold his own when he remembers the superior element God has granted him, and for which He has honoured him. It is this element alone that allows man to stand on his feet in front of the greatness that is the universe.

A quick glance at the universe is sufficient to appreciate all this. The earth on which we live is merely a small satellite of the sun: its mass compared to the mass of the sun is no more than three to a million, while its size is one-millionth of the size of the sun. Yet the sun is only one of around one hundred million suns our galaxy includes. Man now knows that there are around one hundred million such galaxies dispersed in the great expanse of the universe. Still, what we have discovered of the universe is merely a small part; it is so great that we become dazed when we even try to imagine it. The distance between

us and the sun is about 93 million miles. The sun is the head of the family of our planet earth, and most probably the sun is the mother of the earth. Therefore the earth remains close to its mother, standing merely 93 million miles away from it!

The diameter of our galaxy is measured at one hundred billion light years, with one light year measuring 5.8 billion miles, because light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. The closest galaxy to our own is around 750,000 light years away.

We may say again that these distances and dimensions are the best man's little knowledge has determined. Scientists acknowledge that all their discoveries cover only a small part of this great universe.

God says to us: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) When we speak of God's power and ability, the concepts of greater or smaller, harder or easier do not apply. He creates everything by a single word, 'Be!' The reference here is to how things appear in themselves and how people see and measure them. How does man compare to this great expanse of the universe? How high can his arrogance take him in God's great creation?

"*The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal.*" (Verse 58) The one who is able to see learns and understands, recognizing his station. He does not give himself airs, nor does he allow conceit to distort his judgement. By contrast, a blind person cannot recognize his position in relation to his surroundings. Therefore, he misjudges his position and what is around him. The same applies to those believers who do good works and those who do evil. The first group see things for what they are and form accurate ideas, while the other group misjudges all due to their blind ignorance. They harm themselves and others, and above all they assign to themselves an erroneous position in relation to their environment. They are blind, for true blindness is that of the mind: "*How seldom you reflect.*" (Verse 58) Had we reflected, we would have known. The whole thing is clear, needing only some reflection before it becomes totally apparent.

If only we would remember the hereafter, be certain of its coming, reflect on our position then and recall how we will then stand ... "*The*

Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe." (Verse 59) Because they do not believe, they argue and give themselves airs; they do not submit to the truth and do not limit themselves to their rightful position.

Addressing our worship to God, praying and appealing to Him, are all means to cure hearts of arrogance, which is the evil that leads people to dispute His revelations and signs without any clear evidence. God opens the door for us to address and pray to Him. He tells us that He has committed Himself to respond to those who pray to Him, warning those who are too proud that they will be made to suffer total humiliation: "*Your Lord says: Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.*" (Verse 60)

Supplication and prayer must observe certain manners. Hearts must be totally dedicated to God, reassured that He will answer our prayer. We must not suggest a particular form or time or circumstance for answering it. To make such a suggestion is improper when appealing to God. We should be clear in our minds that it is a blessing that we address our prayers to God, and that His response is another blessing. 'Umar used to say: "I am not worried about my prayer being answered. I am worried about addressing my prayer. Once I am inspired to pray to God, prayer will be answered." These are the words of someone who has insight, knowing that when God wills to respond to someone's prayer, He also wills that person to pray to Him. The two are concurrent.

Those who are too proud to pray to God and appeal to Him deserve their just reward, which leads them to enter hell in total humiliation. Such is the fitting end of the arrogance that fills some hearts in this small planet and short life, forgetting the greatness of God's creation, let alone His own greatness. It is suitable requital for forgetting the Last Hour, which will inevitably come.

Blessings of All Sorts

The *sūrah* now speaks about certain aspects of God's blessings which testify to His greatness, yet the unbelievers do not offer thanks to

Him for such blessings. On the contrary, they are too proud to address their worship to Him:

> *It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 61–65)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the earth and the heavens are creatures in the universe. They are all mentioned alongside God's creation of man, who has been given a comely shape, been provided with wholesome sustenance. All these are mentioned within the context of God's oneness and being sincere in our faith in Him. This indicates that all these phenomena, creatures and concepts are interlinked. They should be looked at within their broad environment, noting their mutual interrelations.

The fact that the universe is built on the solid basis God has given it, and its following the course God has assigned to it, allowed life to emerge, evolve and progress on earth. It also allowed human life to take the shape and form familiar to us. It fits with man's needs dictated by his nature and make-up. It has made the night a time for his rest and recuperation, while the day, with its light, a time for movement and action. It has made the earth stable as a field of activity, while the skies are raised like a canopy that does not fall apart. All the necessary proportions are maintained; otherwise, man's existence on earth would have been endangered or impossible. It has allowed wholesome provisions to grow on earth or come down from the sky for man's enjoyment. Moreover, it is God's will that gave man his comely shape and a wealth

of abilities that are in harmony with what is in the universe. All these matters are interlinked, which is the reason for referring to them together in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān makes this interrelation between them evidence of the Creator's oneness. It directs our hearts to call on God, sincere in our devotion, declaring that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. It states that the One who creates all these and establishes such harmony between them is the only one to deserve to be a deity. He is indeed God Almighty, the Lord and Creator of all. How can people be turned away from this truth?

It is perhaps useful here to mention some aspects of the harmony and interrelation evident within the universe and their bearing on man's life.

> If the earth did not rotate facing the sun, there would be no succession of night and day. Had the rotation of the earth been at a higher speed than it actually is, houses would have shattered, and indeed the earth itself would have fallen apart and scattered in space. Had its rotation been slower, mankind would have perished from hot or cold weather. Indeed the current speed of its rotation is the one most suitable for the continuity of plant, animal and human life in its broadest sense. If the earth stopped rotating, all seas and oceans would be without water.[2]

What would happen if the earth's axis became straight and the earth orbited the sun in a circle where the sun would be at the centre? The seasons would be lost and people would not know summer from winter, spring from autumn.[3]

Had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist...

2. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. The author gives no other details about this quotation. I managed to locate a copy of this book, only to discover that this quotation is taken from different pages, with practically every sentence from a different page. The copy I have seen is published by Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, but it is not dated. Perhaps the author referred to an earlier edition. – Editor's note.

3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage.[4]

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen [there] were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.[5]

There are thousands of fine balances in the design of the universe that are necessary for human life. If any of them is disturbed only slightly, human life as we know it would not be possible.

As for man, one of the elements of his perfect shape is his unique form among all living things. His constitution enables his systems to fulfil their functions easily and meticulously. Moreover, the harmony between him and his surroundings is perfect, allowing him to live and act within his environment. All this may be added to his most fundamental and unique quality that enables him to be in charge of planet earth. He is equipped with the tools necessary for the fulfilment of his task, having been given a mind and spiritual contact with what is beyond the physical.

If we were to study the great accuracy of the human constitution and the harmony between the different parts and systems of man's body, relating it to the Qur'ānic statement: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape*", (Verse 64) we would need to reflect at length on every small organ, and indeed on every single cell in this marvellous creature. Take for example man's jaw and how teeth are placed in it:

4. Morrison, A. Cressy, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey, 1962, pp. 27–28.
5. Ibid., p. 30.

the jaw is so finely shaped that if the gum or the tongue were to protrude by one tenth of a millimetre this would be enough to make the gum or the tongue unfit within the mouth. A protrusion of similar thickness in a tooth or a molar will bring it into friction with the opposite tooth or molar. Take, for example, something as thin as a cigarette paper which when pressed between the upper and lower jaws is left with marks on it. As the two jaws close they press against any object between them even if its thickness is no more than that of the finest paper.

Man's constitution is equipped to live on this planet. His eyes are made to receive the light frequency which he needs to see. His ears pick up the sound frequencies he needs to hear. Every single organ in his constitution is designed for the environment in which he lives, with a limited ability to adapt to changing conditions. Man is created to live in this particular environment and to have a mutual impact on it. There is a close relationship between him and his environment, i.e. with the earth and the skies. Therefore, the Qur'ān mentions man's shape in the same verse in which it mentions the earth and sky. How fitting!

Let us now briefly discuss the text itself: "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) Rest at night is necessary for every living thing. A period of darkness is needed so that living cells can rest before resuming their activity during the day. Sleeping is not enough to afford the needed rest; darkness is also necessary. A living cell that is exposed to light continuously reaches a degree of fatigue that ruins its structure.

"*And the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) A literal translation would render this phrase as, 'and the day able to see.' The expression brings the day alive as if it is a living entity that can look at and see things. In fact, it is people that can see during the day, but this quality is given to the day itself because it is almost universal.

The succession of the day and the night in this way is a blessing that involves further blessings. Had one or the other of them stretched permanently, or if it were merely several times as long, life would come to an end. It is fitting, then, that the succession of day and night is often mentioned within the context of God's blessings for which most

people do not give thanks: "*God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks.*" (Verse 61)

These two phenomena are brought into existence by the One who alone deserves to be named God: "*Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verse 62) People do recognize God's hand in everything, and they know for certain that He is the Creator of all. Such knowledge, in fact, forces itself on our minds by the very existence of things. No one can claim to have created these, and it is impossible that they could have come into existence of their own accord. It is most amazing then that people should turn away from believing in God: "*How deluded can you be?*" Yet, this does happen: people turn away from the clear truth, in the same way as some of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān turned away. This takes place throughout all generations, without reason or evidence: "*Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations.*" (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then mentions the universal design that gives the earth and the sky their respective functions: "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy.*" (Verse 64) The earth is a place suited for man's life, considering the many balances operating in it, some of which we have briefly discussed. The sky is a structure with careful proportions, dimensions and cycles to ensure stability and the continuity of human life. Indeed human life is taken into consideration in the design of the universe itself.

Furthermore, the *sūrah* specifies a link between the structure of the heavens and earth on the one hand and man's constitution and the wholesome provisions made for him on the other: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things.*" (Verse 64) These blessings and provisions are followed by a comment similar to the earlier one: "*Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64) He is the One who creates, measures and designs, giving you a specified place in His kingdom. He is your Lord, so glorify Him. His bounty encompasses all worlds.

"*He is the Ever-Living.*" (Verse 65) His life is from Himself, neither gained nor created, without a beginning or an end. It does not alter,

change or finish. Nothing else has such qualities to its life. All glory to Him; unique is His life.

Again He alone is the Godhead. The One who has a unique life is God: "*There is no deity other than Him.*" Therefore, "*call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him.*" And when you pray to Him, give Him due praise: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 65)

Definitive Declaration

The Prophet is given clear instructions to declare to his people that he has been forbidden to worship what they invoke other than God. He has also been commanded to submit himself to the Lord of all the worlds:

> *Say: Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verse 66)

He is to declare to those who turn away from God's revelations and deny His blessings that he has been ordered not to worship the ones they invoke instead of God. He is to tell them that he has acted on this prohibition '*since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord.*' He has the evidence, and he believes in it. It is right that he should then declare the word of truth. The prohibition to worship anyone other than God denotes a negative action, while submission to God Almighty is a positive one. It is from these two opposite parts that faith is brought to its fullness.

Having highlighted certain signs of God in the wide universe, the *sūrah* now highlights a sign from within man himself. It is the miracle of human life and its marvellous stages. This is given here by way of a prelude to stating the true nature of life granted by God:

> *It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your*

> *appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.* (Verses 67–68)

This beginning of human life includes facts that man's knowledge could not know because they took place before his existence, and others which man sees and monitors. Yet such monitoring started only recently, centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān.

That man was created out of dust refers to a fact taking place before his existence. Dust is the origin of all life on earth, including human life. Only God knows how this miracle was accomplished, and how this great event took shape. As for subsequent procreation, this takes place when a male's sperm fertilizes a female's egg. Conception takes place and a cell mass clings to the uterus. At the end, a baby is born after having gone through a number of major development stages. When carefully considered in comparison to what happens after birth, these stages appear to be longer and greater than the stages we go through from birth till death. The *sūrah* mentions some of these latter stages: childhood, full adulthood at around 30, and old age. These stages represent maximum vigour in between two ends characterized by weakness. "*Some of you die earlier,*" before attaining to some of these stages. God ordains all this "*so that you may reach your appointed term*", when you die at the specified time, unable to delay it or indeed hasten it. "*And you may use your reason.*" To follow the journey travelled by the foetus and then by a baby and to reflect on what they indicate of elaborate planning requires good use of our reason.

The embryonic journey is truly fascinating. We have come to know much about it with the many recent advancements in medicine and embryology. The Qur'ānic reference to it, so accurate and precise, fourteen centuries earlier, is exceptionally interesting. Any reasonable person is bound to reflect on this fact.

These two journeys, of the embryo and the baby, directly affect our hearts, regardless of our social environment or standard of education. Every generation feels this effect in its own way and according to the information available to it. The Qur'ān addresses these facts to all

generations, and they receive the message contained in them, and then determine their response or lack of it.

This is followed by mentioning the facts of giving life and taking it away, creation and origination: "*It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verse 68) The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to life and death as they are signs that have a strong effect on man's heart. Indeed both phenomena affect everything in man's world. Both have wider scope than initially thought. There are different forms and aspects of both life and death. We need only to think of a dead, barren land, and then we see it quicken, becoming full of life. We see a tree with dry leaves and stripped branches in one season, and we see it later with life bursting through every part of it. It soon blossoms with leaves, flowers and fruit. We can look at an egg, a chic, a seed, a plant, etc. These are all aspects of the journey from death to life. There is also the opposite journey, from life to death. Both can strongly affect us as we contemplate them.

Added to these two phenomena there is the origination. It is sufficient that God's will is directed to the creation of anything through the word, 'Be,' and the subject matter of this comes into existence. Blessed be God, the best of all creators.

A Singular Argument

Against the backdrop of the emergence of human life, the cycle of life and death, the truth of initiation and origination, disputing the truth of God's revelations or the import of His signs sounds singular. Equally odd is any denial of God's messengers. Hence, a fearful warning is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Resurrection:

> *Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have*

forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. 'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (Verses 69–76)

These verses first wonder at those disputing God's revelations when they see the great signs He has placed in the universe. This serves as a prelude to outlining the fate that awaits them in the life to come. "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers.*" (Verses 69–70) They have rejected one book and one messenger, but, in fact, they reject everything all God's messengers said. Theirs is the same faith, put in its most perfect form in the final message. This means that they actually denied every single message and rejected every single messenger. Everyone who opposed the Divine faith, at any time in history including the present, did this when he or she opposed the truth advocated by the messenger addressing him personally.

"*They will certainly come to know.*" (Verse 70) This statement adds humiliation to painful punishment. "*When, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged.*" (Verse 71) They are dragged like animals and beasts to add further humiliation to their predicament. Why should they be given honourable treatment when they have discarded every single cause of honour? Their humiliation and dragging eventually leads them "*into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 72) There they are tied up after the place is filled with a burning fire and scalding water.

Such is the end they face. It is then that they are further rebuked and painfully embarrassed: "*Then they will be asked: Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?*" (Verses 73–74) Their reply is that of someone who is in total sorrow after he realizes that he has been badly deceived: "*They will answer: They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.*" (Verse 74) We have lost them and we have no way of finding them. Nor can they find us. In fact we did not ascribe divinity to anyone. These were all myths and

false presumptions. After this sorrowful answer, the *sūrah* adds a general comment: "*Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray.*" (Verse 74)

A further and final reproach is then added: "*This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verses 75–76) God save us! What, then, was all that dragging, the chains, the scalding waters and fire? It appears that these were a prelude before entering hell where they would abide. It was because of their arrogance that they were so humiliated.

Again, the *sūrah* urges the Prophet to remain patient in the face of the many levelled adversity he was encountering, represented in the arrogance shown by the unbelievers and their persistent disputing of God's revelations. He is told to have complete trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether God keeps him alive to see with his own eyes some aspects of what He warned the unbelievers against or He gathers him to Himself first. The whole question is determined by God. God's messenger's task is to deliver his message. Ultimately, all will return to God:

> *Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return.* (Verse 77)

There is something that deserves careful attention here. The Prophet Muḥammad, God's messenger, who faced a determined onslaught of rejection, persecution and arrogant hostility is being told in short: 'Fulfil your duty and do not be concerned with anything else. The outcome is none of your concern.' He was not even to entertain wishes that God might act in fulfilment of some aspects of the punishment promised to the arrogant unbelievers. He is simply required to fulfil his responsibility. The whole dispute is not his; it is God's and He determines how He will settle it.

This is a very high standard of discipline which God requires from the advocates of His message, starting with His noble messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). What is required of them is very

hard indeed. It requires them to keep their strong feelings and wishes in check. Is it for this reason that the command to remain patient is given at this point in the *sūrah*? In this sense, it is not a repeat of the earlier order to be patient. Rather, it points to a different type of patience, which can be harder than handling arrogance and physical harm with patience.

Here we see that ordinary human beings, advocating God's message, are required to purge themselves of the desire to see how God punishes His and their enemies who continue to fight against them. This is extremely difficult. Yet it is part of the cultivation of the ideals of those who serve God's cause. They are to shed everything that they desire for themselves, even though this may be no more than to see the enemies of their faith defeated and punished.

When the advocates of God's faith attain this level, they equip themselves with what saves them from drowning in the ocean of desire. Desires may seem pure and justified to start with, but Satan tries hard to manipulate them for his own ends.

4

When it is Too Late to Believe

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (78)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ
مِنْهُم مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ
وَمِنْهُم مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ
وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَن يَأْتِيَ بِآيَةٍ
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ
قُضِيَ بِالْحَقِّ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ
الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. (79)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْعَامَ لِتَرْكَبُوا
مِنْهَا وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. (80)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا عَلَيْهَا
حَاجَةً فِي صُدُورِكُمْ وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى
الْفُلْكِ تُحْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny? (81)

وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَأَيَّ آيَاتِ
اللَّهِ تُنكِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوٓا۟ أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ
قُوَّةً وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَآ أَغْنَىٰ
عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. (82)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ
فَرِحُوا۟ بِمَا عِندَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ
وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. (83)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ
وَحْدَهُۥ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِۦ
مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him.' (84)

فَلَمْ يَكُ يَنفَعُهُمْ إِيمَٰنُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا ۖ
سُنَّتَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ فِى عِبَادِهِۦ ۖ
وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (85)

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* elaborates on the comments given at the end of the previous part. It again directs the Prophet and the believers to remain patient in adversity, until God wills to bring about what He has promised the believers and what He has warned the unbelievers against. This may take place during the Prophet's lifetime or may be

delayed until a later time. The question here is that of faith, the believers and the rejecters who dispute its truth. The arbiter in all this is God. It is He who determines the course of His message as He pleases.

In this part the *sūrah* outlines some additional aspects of this point. The Divine message has a long history. It did not start with the Prophet Muḥammad and the Islamic message embodied in the Qur'ān. Before him there were many messengers, some of whom God mentioned to the Prophet and some He did not. They all faced rejection and arrogance. They were all required to demonstrate miracles. Everyone of them dearly wished that God would give him a miracle which would force the rejecters to submit to the truth. However, showing such a sign or a miracle is a matter that God determines at His own time. The message is His and He conducts its affairs.

Nevertheless, there are numerous signs in the universe, which can be seen by all at all times. Of these, the *sūrah* mentions here cattle and ships, and refers in general to other signs which no one can deny.

The *sūrah* concludes with a strong reminder of the destruction of earlier communities all of whom displayed similar arrogance. Their power and civilization were of little use to them when God's law was applied: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) On this powerful note the *sūrah* concludes. It is a *sūrah* that focuses its attention on the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice.

Past Messengers

> *We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.* (Verse 78)

This whole question of the message has had many precedents, some of which are told by God to His messenger in this book, the Qur'ān. Others, He chose not to tell him about. The accounts that have been

given clearly show the long, clearly marked way that advocacy of the Divine message should take. They also outline the rules that cannot be altered, since God has set them into operation. Furthermore, these accounts of past messengers make clear the nature of the message, the role of the messengers and the limits they have to observe.

The present verse strongly emphasizes a fact that needs to be fully understood: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Every believer, even though he may be a messenger of God, would love to see the Divine message victorious. They dearly wish that those who stubbornly reject it will soon succumb to its truth. Therefore, they would love to see a miracle that would break the stubbornness of hardened unbelievers. However, God wants His chosen servants to remain absolutely patient in the face of all adversity. He, therefore, makes it clear to them that they have no say in the matter; their task is completed when they have delivered their message. Miracles occur at the time of His choice. Thus, they should be reassured, satisfied with whatever is accomplished through them, leaving the final outcome to God, who determines it as He pleases.

God also wants people to understand the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. He wants them to realize that God's messengers are mortals like them: He has chosen them and assigned them their missions. Not only can they not exceed that mission, they would not try to do so. Moreover, people should know that miracles are delayed out of God's mercy. It is God's will that should people continue to reject His faith after they have been given a miracle, He will destroy them soon after that. Thus, they are given time and a period of grace: "*When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.*" (Verse 78) There will be no time left for any further action, nor for repentance or mending of ways.

Signs Everywhere

Those who demand miracles are directed to reflect on God's signs that are present everywhere in the world around them. Because of the long familiarity of these, they are often forgotten. Reflection on them, however, is sufficient to give them all the evidence they want. They

testify to the fact that God is the Creator of everything in the universe. No one can claim that these have been created by anyone other than God; nor can there be any claim that they existed without being created by God who has planned everything:

> *It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?* (Verses 79–81)

The creation of livestock is a miracle in the first place, just like the creation of man. To shape and fashion them and to give them life are all miracles which human beings do not even claim. Another miracle is making such livestock subservient to man, when some of them are larger and stronger than man. Yet, "*It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food.*" (Verse 79) To say that such livestock merely exist and we need not concern ourselves with how or why they do is unacceptable. To claim that they are not a clear miracle in relation to man and his ability, or that they do not point to the Creator who originated them and gave them their characteristics, as He did with man, is to make arbitrary claims that run against logic and reason.

The *sūrah* reminds them of the favours God has granted them through these creatures: "*some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verses 79–80) The things that they used to desire and accomplish through travelling on such mounts were great at the time; this before the invention of modern means of travel and transport. There are still certain things that continue to be done by using such livestock. Even today, certain mountainous areas can only be reached by using animals, despite the fact that cars, trains, planes and other vehicles are available to us. Access to them is through narrow passages that can only be traversed by animals.

"*On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verse 80) This is also a sign from God; indeed, a great blessing from Him. The fact that ships sail on the sea is based on a number of natural laws and balances that are of the essence of the universe's design. They involve the earth, sky, dry

land, sea and river, as well as the nature of the elements and components of the universe. These are essential whether a boat uses sail, steam, combustion engine, nuclear power, or some other power God has placed on our planet and the use of which He has facilitated for man. Hence, ships are mentioned here as an aspect of God's signs on the one hand and the blessings He bestows on man on the other.

God's signs throughout the universe are countless. They cannot be denied by any serious minded person: "*And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?*" (Verse 81) Yes, indeed! Some people do deny and dispute God's revelations and signs, using false arguments to try to undermine the truth. Such people, however, are motivated only by ulterior motives, arrogance, twisted concepts or some purpose other than establishing the truth. A tyrant like Pharaoh, who feared for his throne because he knew that the truth of God's oneness would disprove the legends on which his kingship was based, disputed God's signs and His message. Some people believe in certain creeds that are incompatible with the principle of God's oneness such as communism. Communists wanted people to confine themselves to the earth, concentrating all their cares on their bellies and sexual desires. They wanted people to worship nothing other than the creed or the leader. Others suffered under the yoke of the clergy, as happened during the Middle Ages in Europe when the Church held excessive powers, and people wanted to get rid of such tyranny. Therefore, they rejected God in whose name the Church exercized its tyranny.

There are other motives that make people dispute the truth of faith. However, human nature finds such disputes repugnant and acknowledges the truth testified by everything in the universe.

Lessons of History

The *sūrah* concludes on a very powerful note:

> *Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled*

in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (Verses 82–85)

Many communities were destroyed during human history. What happened to some of these communities can be seen in their ruins; others are recorded in history, written or transmitted by word of mouth. The Qur'ān often directs our attention to these histories because they are indicative of human life and its course of history. They also have a powerful effect on our minds and hearts. The Qur'ān addresses human nature by what God, who revealed the Qur'ān, knows of human nature: what influences it and what opens its receptors. Some of these receptors need only a light tap, while others require strong hammering because of the thick veils that have covered them over time.

At this point the *sūrah* questions them, encouraging them to travel across the land with open eyes, alert feelings and an objective approach. They should look at what took place on earth before their time, and consider whether they too might be exposed to the same: "*Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them?*" (Verse 82) Before specifying what end they met, the *sūrah* describes the conditions of those past communities so that the addressees can consider how it could affect them and also enable them to draw the right lessons: "*They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth.*" (Verse 82) Thus, they enjoyed power and civilization. Some of these belonged to generations that preceded the Arabs, the history of some is given to the Prophet, while others were known to the Arabs who passed by their ruins: "*Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them.*" (Verse 82)

Neither material power nor numerical strength was of any avail to them. Indeed their advancement was the cause of their tragedy: "*When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had.*" (Verse 83) Without faith, knowledge becomes a test that may cause blindness and excess. Such superficial

knowledge can lead to conceit and arrogance. Given such knowledge, a person may think that he can control immense powers and immeasurable resources and this leads him to transgress beyond his limits. He tends to forget the great many things he does not know. These are present in the universe, but he has no power over them. Indeed, he is not fully aware of them. He only knows their ends that are close to him. Yet he boasts falsely, emphasizing his knowledge and overlooking his ignorance. If he would only compare what he knows to what he does not, and what he is able to do to with what he cannot even begin to understand, he would certainly moderate his excitement about his knowledge.

Those people, however, revelled in what little knowledge they had and ridiculed whoever reminded them of what is beyond their knowledge: "*And so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked.*" (Verse 83) Therefore, when they see God's might, they begin to realize the truth of their arrogance and acknowledge what they used to deny. They declare their belief in God's oneness and disown those deities which they alleged to be God's partners. All this, however, comes when it is too late: "*And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all.*" (Verses 84–85) It is a rule God has established that repentance after demonstrating God's might is not acceptable, because it is motivated by fear, not by faith. "*This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures.*" (Verse 85) God's way remains operative at all times. It never changes, deviates or fails: "*There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85)

This is a very powerful conclusion to the *sūrah*, with God's might overwhelming the rejecters when they are raising their voices with appeals motivated by fear. Thus, the end fits well with overall ambience and main subject matter of the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* tackles those issues of faith that feature prominently in Makkan revelations, such as God's oneness, resurrection and revelation. These, however, are not the main themes of the *sūrah*. Its main theme is the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice. Indeed, the development of this battle gives the *sūrah* its distinctive features.

SŪRAH 41

Fuṣṣilat

(Clearly Expounded)

Prologue

The question of faith and its essential principles is the major theme of this *sūrah*: God's oneness, the life to come, the revealed message as well as advocacy of the message and the manners an advocate of the Divine message should adopt. All that the *sūrah* includes serves to explain these fundamental principles and provide evidence supporting them. The *sūrah* presents some of God's signs that are available in man and in the expanse of the universe, warns against denying such signs, and reminds people of the fates suffered by earlier generations that denied the truth and shows what happens to such unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection. It explains that only such unbelievers among men and *jinn* refuse to acknowledge these truths or to submit themselves to God. By contrast, the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon and the angels submit themselves and humbly prostrate themselves before God.

Concerning the truth of God's oneness, we read at the beginning of the *sūrah* verses such as: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6) "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you*

claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 9) Speaking of the people of ʿĀd and Thamūd, the *sūrah* tells us that the messengers sent to them explained the same truth to them: "*Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) In the middle of the *sūrah* we have the commandment: "*Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God.*" (Verse 37) Speaking about the same basic truth, the *sūrah* says towards its end: "*on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47)

On the question of the life to come the *sūrah* issues a stern warning to those who do not believe in it: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) It concludes with this verse: "*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) The truth of the Day of Judgement is also mentioned in the images the *sūrah* portrays of what happens on that day, which confirms, with even greater certainty, the fact of its undoubted coming.

As for the question of revelation, there is much about it in this *sūrah*, almost to the point of revelation being its main theme. In fact, the *sūrah* opens with a detailed discussion of this issue: "Ḥā. Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that...*" (Verses 1–6) The middle part of the *sūrah* mentions how the idolaters received the Qur'ān: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Then we are given a more detailed account of how the Qur'ān was received and a response to what the unbelievers used to assert about it: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a*

sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you that was not said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away." (Verses 41–44)

In its discussion of the method of advocating the Divine message and the manners adopted by such advocates, the *sūrah* says: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verses 33–36)

These issues are presented against a backdrop of images that have a profound effect on the listener. The *sūrah* draws these images from a universe replete with signs and from the human soul with its remarkable constitution. It also shows images of the fates suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers and intense scenes from the Day of Resurrection.

One of these scenes of the universe is a very detailed image of the original creation of the heavens and the earth: "*Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said:*

'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verses 9–12)

We also have images of the creation of the night and day, the sun and moon, the worship offered by the angels and the earth as it humbly worships God and how it springs into life: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verses 37–39)

The human soul is laid bare before our eyes such that we see it as it really is: "*Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer.*" (Verses 49–51)

Regarding the fates of earlier communities, the *sūrah* presents what happened to the ʿĀd and Thamūd: "*As for the ʿĀd, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*

Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing." (Verses 15–18)

Several scenes are presented from the Day of Resurrection. One intensely effective and detailed image shows the unbelievers speaking to their own senses: "*On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.*" (Verses 19–21) Another image shows, in full clarity, the anger felt by those who were deceived in this life against those who deluded them: "*The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.*" (Verse 29)

This great variety of imagery, forming the background against which the main issues of faith are presented, constitutes the overall ambience of the *sūrah*. Right from the very outset until the end we find ourselves before the most striking and powerful of influences.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each consisting of closely interlinked sections. The first part begins with verses speaking about the Qur'ān, its nature and revelation, as well as the unbelievers' attitude to it. This is followed by an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth and the stories of the ʿĀd and Thamūd. Then, comes a scene of the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement and how they face the testimony of their own senses. It then speaks about those unbelievers in this present life and how they have gone so astray. It states that they had cronies who made evil things seem fair to them. As a result they used to urge one another not to listen to the Qur'ān, but instead to try to silence it so that they might win. This is followed by an image depicting how angry they feel on the Day of Judgement with those cronies who deluded them. A contrasting image shows us those who believed in God's oneness and followed the straight path. These receive angels who reassure them and give them news of their great prospects.

The angels tell them that they will be their friends and guardians in both this present life and in the life to come. This part concludes with a reference to the message and those who advocate it.

The second part begins by speaking about the signs God placed in the universe: the night, day, sun, moon, angels in devotion, the desolate earth and how it quickens and becomes full of life. This is followed by a reference to those who dispute God's signs and His revelations, leading to a reference to God's book and its main qualities before a brief reference is made to Moses' book and the disputes that arose among his people concerning it. The *sūrah* leaves judgement concerning all these disputes to God, at the time appointed by Him. At this point the *sūrah* adds a reference to the Last Hour and that knowledge of it belongs to God alone. He also knows the fruit that will eventually develop from flowers and what offspring will be born to pregnant females. It also shows an image of the unbelievers and how they ask about those deities whom they alleged to be God's partners. Following this the *sūrah* presents the human soul as it is, shedding all its coverings. Although man is keen to protect himself he takes no precautions to spare himself the results of denying God and His messages.

The *sūrah* concludes with a promise by God that He will make His signs within man and in the universe available to people so that they have a chance to review their attitude and be assured of their faith: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verses 53–54)

I

Testimony of One's Own Senses

Fuṣṣilat (Clearly Expounded)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: (2)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّنَ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. (3)

كِتَٰبٌ فُصِّلَتْ ءَايَٰتُهُۥ قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. (4)

بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا فَأَعْرَضَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٤﴾

They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' (5)

وَقَالُوا۟ قُلُوبُنَا فِىٓ أَكِنَّةٍ مِّمَّا تَدْعُونَآ إِلَيْهِ وَفِىٓ ءَاذَانِنَا وَقْرٌ وَمِنۢ بَيْنِنَا وَبَيْنِكَ حِجَابٌ فَٱعْمَلْ إِنَّنَا عَٰمِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَآ
إِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ فَٱسْتَقِيمُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِ
وَٱسْتَغْفِرُوهُ ۗ وَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness.' Woe to those who associate partners with Him, (6)

ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم
بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٧﴾

and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come. (7)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٨﴾

Those who believe and do good deeds shall have an unfailing reward. (8)

قُلْ أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَكْفُرُونَ بِٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ
ٱلْأَرْضَ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ وَتَجْعَلُونَ لَهُۥٓ
أَندَادًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. (9)

وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ مِن فَوْقِهَا وَبَٰرَكَ فِيهَا
وَقَدَّرَ فِيهَآ أَقْوَٰتَهَا فِىٓ أَرْبَعَةِ أَيَّامٍ سَوَآءً
لِّلسَّآئِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. (10)

ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَهِىَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا
وَلِلْأَرْضِ ٱئْتِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ كَرْهًا قَالَتَآ أَتَيْنَا
طَآئِعِينَ ﴿١١﴾

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' (11)

فَقَضَىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَاتٍ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ
وَأَوْحَىٰ فِى كُلِّ سَمَآءٍ أَمْرَهَا ۚ وَزَيَّنَّا
ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ وَحِفْظًا ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (12)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَقُلْ أَنذَرْتُكُمْ صَٰعِقَةً مِّثْلَ
صَٰعِقَةِ عَادٍ وَثَمُودَ ﴿١٣﴾

If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' (13)

إِذْ جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلرُّسُلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ
وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ ۖ
قَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ رَبُّنَا لَأَنزَلَ مَلَٰٓئِكَةً فَإِنَّا
بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' (14)

فَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَقَالُوا۟ مَنْ أَشَدُّ مِنَّا قُوَّةً ۖ
أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُمْ هُوَ
أَشَدُّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً ۖ وَكَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. (15)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِي أَيَّامٍ
نَّحِسَاتٍ لِّنُذِيقَهُمْ عَذَابَ الْخِزْيِ فِي
الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَخْزَىٰ ۖ
وَهُمْ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. (16)

وَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَهَدَيْنَاهُمْ فَاسْتَحَبُّوا الْعَمَىٰ
عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ فَأَخَذَتْهُمْ صَاعِقَةُ الْعَذَابِ
الْهُونِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. (17)

وَنَجَّيْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing. (18)

وَيَوْمَ يُحْشَرُ أَعْدَاءُ اللَّهِ إِلَى النَّارِ
فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards (19)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاءُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ
سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَارُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُم
بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. (20)

They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. (21)

وَقَالُوا لِجُلُودِهِمْ لِمَ شَهِدتُّمْ عَلَيْنَا ۖ قَالُوا أَنطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

'You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. (22)

وَمَا كُنتُمْ تَسْتَتِرُونَ أَن يَشْهَدَ عَلَيْكُمْ سَمْعُكُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَارُكُمْ وَلَا جُلُودُكُمْ وَلَٰكِن ظَنَنتُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَعْلَمُ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

'And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' (23)

وَذَٰلِكُمْ ظَنُّكُمُ الَّذِي ظَنَنتُم بِرَبِّكُمْ أَرْدَاكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُم مِّنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (24)

فَإِن يَصْبِرُوا فَالنَّارُ مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَسْتَعْتِبُوا فَمَا هُم مِّنَ الْمُعْتَبِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of *jinn* and humans. They will indeed be lost. (25)

وَقَيَّضْنَا لَهُمْ قُرَنَاءَ فَزَيَّنُوا لَهُم مَّا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَحَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَسْمَعُوا۟ لِهَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ
وَٱلْغَوْا۟ فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَغْلِبُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.' (26)

فَلَنُذِيقَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَذَابًا
شَدِيدًا وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَسْوَأَ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. (27)

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ أَعْدَآءِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلنَّارُ ۖ لَهُمْ فِيهَا دَارُ
ٱلْخُلْدِ ۖ جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations. (28)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَرِنَا
ٱلَّذَيْنِ أَضَلَّانَا مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ
نَجْعَلْهُمَا تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِنَا لِيَكُونَا
مِنَ ٱلْأَسْفَلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those *jinn* and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.' (29)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ
ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا۟
وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا۟ وَأَبْشِرُوا۟ بِٱلْجَنَّةِ
ٱلَّتِى كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. (30)

'We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, (31)

نَحْنُ أَوْلِيَآؤُكُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَفِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۖ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهِىٓ أَنفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

as a ready welcome from Him who is much-forgiving, ever-merciful.' (32)

نُزُلًا مِّنْ غَفُورٍ رَّحِيمٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? (33)

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِّمَّن دَعَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا وَقَالَ إِنَّنِى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. (34)

وَلَا تَسْتَوِى ٱلْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا ٱلسَّيِّئَةُ ۚ ٱدْفَعْ بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا ٱلَّذِى بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُۥ عَدَٰوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُۥ وَلِىٌّ حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. (35)

وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا۟ وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (36)

وَإِمَّا يَنزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ نَزْغٌ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٦﴾

The Source of Divine Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with the two separate letters, *Ḥā. Mīm.* We have explained elsewhere the reason why many *sūrahs* start with separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. That this is often stated fits in with the Qur'ānic method of repeating references to the facts it wants our hearts to internalize. By nature, the human heart needs such repetition because it tends to forget with the passage of time. In order to instil a fact in one's conscience one needs to have it repeated in a variety of ways. The Qur'ān addresses the human heart with all the qualities instilled in its nature in accordance with its Creator's knowledge.

It is as if the two letters with which the *sūrah* starts, *Ḥā, Mīm*, are a name given to the *sūrah* or to the Qur'ān. The two letters constitute the subject of the first sentence while the predicate forms the next verse: "Ḥā, Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verses 1–2) Choosing to identify the Divine attributes of grace and mercy in connection with the revelation of the Qur'ān highlights the quality that is most characteristic of this revelation, namely Divine mercy. There is no doubt that the revelation of the Qur'ān is an act of mercy for all mankind. It is a mercy for those who believe in it and implement it as also for other creatures, not merely humans. The Qur'ān defines a code of living that brings good results for all. It has had a profound impact on the life of humanity, its concepts, values and course of action. Its impact is universal and consistent, ever since it was revealed. Those who study human history with true objectivity, following its course in its wider perspective, which includes all facets of human activity, are able to recognize this truth. Many of them have also recorded this in clear terms.

"*A book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge.*" (Verse 3) Spelling out the verses, clearly and distinctly, according to purpose, people's nature and mentality, generations, communities, psychologies and needs is a major characteristic of the Qur'ān. Its verses are indeed clearly expounded for people who are ready to learn and receive knowledge. In this way the Qur'ān gives good news to believers who put their faith in practice, and delivers warnings to those who reject its message and entertain

evil. It also explains why such good news and warnings have been given in a fine Arabic style to Arabic-speaking people. Most of them, however, refused its message, receiving it cooly: "*Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (Verse 4)

This is indeed what they did, turning away so as not to hear or be exposed to the powerful logic of the Qur'ān. As the *sūrah* later informs us, they tried hard to persuade others not to listen to the Qur'ān. Of those that did listen their attitude was the same as those who did not: they all resisted the influence of the Qur'ān on their hearts. Thus they were like the deaf, deprived of their hearing faculty.

"*They say: Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.*" (Verse 5) Such was their stubbornness. They hoped that the Prophet would despair of them ever responding to him and that he would, therefore, stop calling on them to believe. They did so because of the powerful effect of what he said when they deliberately wanted not to believe. Thus, they said to the Prophet: our hearts are covered over so as not to allow your words any penetration, and the deafness in our ears prevents us from hearing you, and the barrier between you and us allows you no interaction with us. Therefore, leave us alone and do what you will. We will go our own separate way. Equally, they might carelessly have said: we will neither listen to what you say nor heed your warnings. You may do what you please. We will continue to follow our own ways, caring nothing for what you do or say.

This is just one example of what the first advocate of the message of Islam had to face. Yet, still he continued to call on people to accept his message, allowing no element of despair to creep into or disrupt his work. He never hastened the fulfilment of God's promise to him or the infliction of punishment on those who denied him. He acted instead upon instruction, declaring to people that putting the warnings into action was not up to him. He was no more than a human being receiving revelations and delivering a message. His task was to call on people to believe in God's oneness and to adhere to His message. He was also mandated to warn the idolaters. Once he had done this, matters

were left to God while he himself had no say in what was bound to happen: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6)

What perseverance! What endurance and what dedication! Only a person who has experienced at first hand something of this condition can appreciate the power and resilience required to persevere against such odds. Yet this perseverance is coupled with the realization that one has no say in what turn developments take. Yet the Prophet faced such unrelenting opposition, arrogance and carelessness, without ever requesting a miracle to silence his opponents.

In order to be able to face such situations, God's prophets and messengers were often directed to remain patient in adversity. Advocacy of the Divine message can only take the road of long patience and perseverance. The first thing that requires such patience is the advocate's keen desire to see the Divine message triumph, but then realize that such triumph is slow coming. Indeed, no sign of it may appear for a long time, yet those who undertake such advocacy must accept this willingly and without hesitation.

The maximum the Prophet could do in the face of such arrogant rejection and ridicule of his message was to say: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) The fact that *zakāt*, or the obligatory charity, is specified here must have been in response to a certain situation, which we cannot now determine. This verse was revealed in Makkah, while *zakāt* was only imposed as a duty in the second year after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. The overall requirement of *zakāt* was known about during the Makkan period, but only as a general requirement whereby people paid as they wished. Later, in Madīnah, this was modified to make it a specific duty with defined rates on different types of property. To disbelieve in the life to come is the essence of rejection of the Divine message, and it should be met with stern warnings. Some scholars argue that in this particular instance, *zakāt* means purity of faith. The general tone of the *sūrah* and the circumstances prevailing at the time admit this possibility.

Creation of the Earth

Continuing to advocate the Divine message, the Prophet puts before them the enormity of the offence they commit by associating partners with God and rejecting His message. He points first to the universe, in relation to which they are tiny and flimsy creatures. He shows them God's power as reflected in the nature of this universe of which they constitute only a small part. He wants to draw them out of the narrow angle through which they look at the Divine message. From that angle, they see themselves as large, occupying important positions. Preoccupied with their own selves, positions and interests, and the fact that Muḥammad was chosen by God in preference to them, they overlook the great truth expounded in the Qur'ān and set before them by Muḥammad. This great truth relates to the universe, to all generations of humanity, and carries absolutism that transcends time, place and people:

> *Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 9–12)

When you declare disbelief, you are being nothing other than careless, gross and vulgar. You are denying the One who created the earth and placed firm structures over it, blessing it and assigning its varied provisions. He has indeed operated the systems of the universe, adorned the nearest sky with secure lights. Everything in the heavens and the earth willingly submit themselves to Him, while you, a mere single inhabitant on earth, arrogantly refuses to accept the truth. The

presentation of these facts in the *sūrah* typically shakes every heart: "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions].*" (Verses 9–10)

The *sūrah* begins here by mentioning the fact of creating the earth in two days and comments on this first stage of creation before telling us the rest of the story. The comment says: "*It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds,*" and yet you claim others to be His equals when it is He who created the earth you live on. How absurd and ghastly!

Then, what are these days: the two in which God created the earth and the two in which He placed the mountains above it, measured its provisions and showered His blessings? These are days of God, the length of which is known to Him alone. They are not the earthly days we know, because earth days are a time-measuring unit that came into existence after the creation of the earth. Just like the earth has its day, which is the length of time it takes to complete one full rotation of the sun, other planets have their days, some of which are longer and some shorter than an earth day. This means that those four days of the earth's creation and its provisions are measured by some other unit unknown to us. The closest we can surmise given our limited knowledge, is that they refer to the different stages the earth went through, divided into several eras, until its crust solidified and it settled into its present shape able to support the type of life we know. According to scientific theory, such stages took around two billion earth years.

These are only scientific estimates based on geological studies and soil and rock analyses. When we study the Qur'ān, we do not take such estimates as proven facts, for they are not. They are simply postulations open to amendment and change. Therefore, we do not interpret the Qur'ān on their basis. We conclude that they may be true if they are in agreement with the Qur'ānic text and serve to explain it without coercion. We say that a theory or a set of assumptions is closer to the truth because it is closer to the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

Scientists now say that most probably the earth was originally a gas-like mass of flame just like the sun, and most probably it was once part of the sun before splitting away from it for some reason. It took long periods until its crust cooled down and solidified. Its centre remains in melting form because of the intense heat that melts even the hardest of rocks. In the early period when the crust solidified, it was composed of many layers of rock strata. Then at some other early stage, the oceans came into existence with water forming by the combination of two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen.

> The air and the water on this planet of ours worked together to break the rocky surface, carry it and deposit it in different places so as to make a soil that allows plants to grow. The two of them thus managed to carve out portions of hills and mountains, and to fill valleys. Wherever you turn your eyes on earth, you will see the effects of a continuous process of construction and destruction.[1]
>
> The earth's crust is in a process of constant change. The sea shakes its waves to bring its effect on the land. Sea water evaporates by the heat of the sun and it goes up into the sky where it forms clouds which produce rain of fresh water, falling down in torrents to form rivers. As the rivers run, they affect the surface of the earth, carrying some of its rocks, changing them and depositing them elsewhere. Over centuries counted in hundreds and thousands, the surface of the earth changes completely. Snow that has solidified into ice brings another effect on the surface of the earth. Likewise, its surface is affected by the wind as also by the sun, with the heat and the light it sends to the earth. The creatures living on earth cause further changes, as do the volcanoes that bring lava to the surface.
>
> Should you ask a geologist about the rocks forming the earth's crust, he will give you a long list, but he will highlight three major

1. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, (n.d.) I could not locate this quotation in the book. – Editor's note.

types. He will tell you first about the igneous rocks which came out from the lower reaches of the earth to its surface in melted form, and then cooled down and solidified. He may cite as examples granite and basalt. He may show you a sample, indicating its crystalline composition, with white, red and black crystals, saying that each one of these contains a different chemical compound. Thus, he points out that these rocks are in fact a solid mix. The geologist may further draw your attention to the fact that it was out of such igneous rocks that the surface of the earth was originally made in the early stages of its formation. Then different factors came into play: water falling from the sky or running in rivers or lying in the form of ice, air, wind and sun. They all worked hard changing the nature and the chemistry of the earth's surface, bringing into existence totally different rocks that have no similarity to the original ones.

The geologist will then speak to you about depository rocks, which make the second and largest type of rock. These are the ones which have been carved by natural factors or by man out of rocks that are firmer and more solid. They are called depository because they are no longer in their original places. They have been lifted and carried by water or wind and then settled somewhere else on earth. The geologist will cite limestone as an example of such depository rocks. Limestone forms mountains, such as al-Muqaṭṭam which provides the building material for all buildings in Cairo. He will tell you that limestone is made of a chemical compound known as calcium carbonates, produced by biological or chemical factors. Sand, clay and argillaceous earth are other examples of depository rocks and they are all formed from different origins.

When you enquire about these origins you are told that all depository rocks come from igneous ones. When the crust of the earth formed in the distant past, there was nothing on its solidified surface except igneous rocks. Then rain and sea water interacted with it. The air then came into play in the form of chemical gases, winds and gales, heat and light from the sun and all these elements began to interact according to their different natures. They thus

changed the useless, hard igneous rock into rocks that can be used to build houses and rocks from which minerals can be extracted. More importantly, it changed the hard solid rock to make depository soil that can support life.

Granite does not make the sort of earth surface fit for plants or irrigation. Such surface is provided by soil which ultimately came out of granite and similar rocks. When such soil was in place, plants grew allowing animals to exist. Then the earth became a fit abode for the head of all these creatures on earth, man.[2]

This journey long as it may be thought of by modern scientists, can help us to understand the meaning of the days in which the earth was created, firm mountains placed on it, then its blessing and the measuring of its different provisions in four days. We do not know the length of these four days, but we know that they are undoubtedly different from earth days.

A Blessed Planet

We need to dwell for a moment on every phrase of this Qur'ānic text before we turn our attention to the mention of the heavens in the next verse.

"*He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it.*" (Verse 10) Mountains are often described in the Qur'ān as 'firm', and in some instances the purpose of their positioning is that they 'prevent' the earth from shaking or swaying. This means that the mountains are firm in themselves and stabilize the earth, ensuring that it remains well balanced. In times gone by, people used to think that the earth was based on firm foundations. They are told today that the earth is nothing more than a small ball that floats in a great expanse, without support. They may be scared when they listen to such words for the first time, and some of them may begin to look warily askance, worried that the earth might shake or fall in deep space. Let such people be reassured. God's hand holds the heavens and the earth, preventing their

2. Ibid., pp. 96–98.

disappearance. Should they vanish, no one else would hold them in place. Such people should banish worrying thoughts, because the laws that govern the universe are set in operation by the Almighty who holds sway over all things.

The same scientist says:

> Every event that takes place on earth, whether on its surface or below it, causing one substance to be transferred from one place to another, has a bearing on the speed of the earth as it moves in its orbit. This is not affected only by the cycle of the tide. Even when rivers carry water from one place of the earth to another, this affects the speed of its movement. The blowing wind and whatever falls into the sea or protrudes on the surface has an effect on the earth's speed as it moves in orbit. Another thing that affects such speed is any expansion or retraction of its size, even though it increases or decreases by no more than a few feet.[3]

With the earth being so sensitive, it is no wonder that firm mountains are positioned over it to ensure its stability and that it does not 'sway with you', as expressed in verse 15 of *Sūrah* 16.

And He "*bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions.*" (Verse 10) When our predecessors read this statement, they used to think of the vegetation that grows on earth and the useful minerals God has placed in it, such as gold, silver, iron and the like. Now that we have learnt more of the great blessings God has bestowed on this planet and of the provisions He has placed in it over long periods of time, this statement gives us a much broader meaning.

We have mentioned how some elements in the air combine to produce water, while the combination of others produce the soil that supports vegetation, and another process gives us rain, the source of all fresh water in rivers, wells and springs. All this reflects the blessing God bestowed on the earth and its measured provisions.

Then, there is also the air we breathe:

3. Ibid., p. 82.

> The earth is a circle covered with a rocky crust, and the greater part of this crust is covered by a layer of water, while above both the crust and water there is air, a thick gas layer similar to the sea, with different depths. All living creatures, man, animal and plant, live in this layer enjoying what it gives us.
>
> As we breathe we obtain the oxygen necessary for us, while plants grow their structure using carbon, or rather carbon dioxide. We eat plants, and also eat animals which in turn eat plants, and in doing so ensure our physical growth. The nitrogen in the air is needed to reduce its content of oxygen. If we were to inhale oxygen on its own, we would be burnt by breathing. There remains in the air the evaporated water which gives it its freshness, and the hydrogen, as well as small quantities of other gases, such as helium and neon. Most probably these were part of the original composition of the earth and remained in the air.[4]

The provisions we need for survival are wider in scope than the food we eat. Yet all our food is composed of the basic elements that are present in the earth or in the air. Sugar, for example, is a compound of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, while water is made of oxygen and hydrogen. The same applies to everything we eat, drink, wear or use as a tool. They are all made of the earth's elements.

All this refers in some way to the blessing bestowed on the earth and the measured provisions placed in it, over a period of four of God's days, the length of which is known only to Him.

A Design for the Sky

> *Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each*

4. Ibid., p. 100.

> *heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 11–12)

What is meant here by the application of God's design is that it was His will to do so. The word, 'then', may not signify a chronological order; rather, it may mean turning to something higher. In our sense, the sky is higher. "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) Scientists believe that before the existence of stars there was what they call the nebula, a cloud of gas, or rather, smoke.

> The nebulas, bright or dark, contain gas and dust, which is nothing other than what is left after the creation of the stars. The theory says that the galaxy was first formed of gas and dust, from which all stars were formed by a process of deposition and sedimentation. Yet some of the gas and dust remained, and from the remainder, the nebulas formed. Yet in this great galaxy remains a large quantity, equal to that which went into the formation of the stars. The stars continue to pull some of it by gravity, which means that the stars are dusting the sky to remove what is left, yet these dusters are too few in relation to the amount that needs to be dusted away and the space that needs to be cleaned.[5]

This may be true because it is close to the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) It is also closer to the fact that the creation of the skies was completed over a very long period of time, taking two of God's days.

A Willing Submission

The verse then adds a statement expressing an awesome truth: "*and said to it and to the earth: Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They both said: We do come willingly.*" (Verse 11) This is a remarkable

5. Ibid., pp. 191–192.

reference to the fact of the universe being under God's control. It submits to its Creator and willingly does His bidding. This leaves only man who, in most cases, submits to God's law unwillingly. The law inevitably applies to him and he cannot take himself out of its domain. Man is no more than a little gear in the great machinery of the universe. All universal laws apply to him, whether he likes them or not. Yet he is the only creature who does not make the same submission as the earth and the sky. He always tries to deviate from an easy and smooth path, and, thus, he collides with the laws of nature, which will inevitably overpower him. He will then submit, albeit unwillingly. Exceptions to this are God's servants who, in their hearts, concepts, desires and actions, are not in conflict with the overall Divine law. These people submit willingly and find their way easy and smooth. They move in line with the movement of the universe, turning to God and living in harmony with all that exists. They are able to achieve wonders and produce miracles. They have no conflict with any force in the universe; on the contrary, they derive from its powers.

We, humans, submit to God's law unwillingly. How much better it would be for us to submit willingly, as do the earth and the skies. We would then enjoy the happiness that results from being consistent with the rest of the universe. At times, we also come up with what is absurd! The wheel of God's will turns in the way, direction and speed set for it, turning the universe with it according to well defined laws of nature. Yet we, out of all creation in the universe, try to force the wheel to run faster or slower, responding to what may motivate us of worry, selfishness, greed, fear or desire. We may move to this side or that, while the rest of creation moves along a well defined way. This inevitably means that we run into a collision here or there, endure pain or suffer a fatal crash. Thus, all our efforts and power go to waste. We should know, however, that when we truly believe, submit to God and relate to the rest of the universe, we will clearly understand our role, coordinate our movements with those of the universe, and move at the right time and speed, within the right space. Thus our movements will benefit by the power God has placed in the universe to produce truly great results. We will experience no arrogance or conceit because we know

the source of the power that enabled us to accomplish our great deeds. We will be certain that we do not achieve such results by our own efforts working in isolation. Instead, we achieve them when only we derive all that we do from the greatest power.

When we do this on our short journey spent on planet earth that submits willingly to God, we feel happy, comfortable and reassured. Indeed, the whole planet joins us on its own journey to its Lord. Moreover, we will enjoy the great peace that pours into our spirits as we live in a friendly universe submitting to its Lord. We will join the universe in willing submission to Him and, as a result, we will have no conflict with the universe, because we are part of it and we move with it in the same direction.

"*They both said: We do come willingly. So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task.*" (Verses 11–12) These two days may be the same as those in which the stars were formed from the nebulas, or during which the creation was completed as God only knows how. The assignment of tasks to each heaven refers to the operation of the natural laws in them, in accordance with God's directives. What, then, does the term 'heaven' mean? We have no definite answer. The word may refer to a measure of distance. On the other hand, each galaxy may be called a heaven, or several galaxies with varying distances may be called heavens. The word also admits several other possibilities.

"*We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure.*" (Verse 12) Again the sky nearest to the earth can have several meanings. It could be the nearest galaxy to us, known as the Milky Way, which has a diameter of about 150,000 light years. It could mean something else that comprises stars and planets that shine for us like lights. These skies are 'made secure' from devilment, as can be understood from other references in the Qur'ān. Quite what this entails is beyond our grasp and hence our knowledge is limited to what the Qur'ān tells us.

"*Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 12) Can anyone other than Him design all this? Can anyone other than the Almighty who knows all control the whole universe and conduct its affairs?

What Punishment for Turning Away?

Given this is the state of the entire universe, what position should be assigned to those who reject God's oneness and attribute partners to Him? How should their reckless arrogance be requited?

> *If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.* (Verses 13–18)

A warning against the type of thunderbolts that struck the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd strikes fear in their hearts. It suits the terrible offence they commit. It answers the idolaters' arrogance referred to at the beginning of the *sūrah* showing them to be the only ones in the universe who reject the truth.

What sort of effect did this warning have on the unbelievers in Makkah? Ibn Isḥāq, an early biographer of the Prophet, gives us the following story:

> One day, as 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one of the Quraysh chiefs, was sitting with a group of Quraysh notables, he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may

have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."

Another report by Jābir suggests that when the Prophet recited these verses, 'Utbah listened. When the Prophet read verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd,*" 'Utbah put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and appealed to him by the ties of kinship to his people to do nothing of the sort. Then 'Utbah left him, went home and stayed in doors. His people talked to him later about this and he explained his position: "When Muḥammad spoke this warning, I appealed to him not to do so. You know that when Muḥammad says something, he does not lie. I feared that such punishment be inflicted on you."

The Warning and Its Effect

This is, then, one image of the effect of the warning as stated by God's messenger to a person who did not believe in his message. Before we move on, we need to reflect a little on the image of the Prophet as he listened to 'Utbah making his petty proposals, his refined manners and his focus on the great issue in question. Although the proposals 'Utbah made sounded worthless, the Prophet listened attentively, without interrupting his interlocutor. He remained calm and friendly. When 'Utbah stopped speaking, the Prophet then graciously asked him: "Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you have to say?" Then when 'Utbah confirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: "Then listen to me." He waited until 'Utbah said, "I will do," before he read to him God's own words. Throughout he was friendly, calm, confident and reassured. This is typical of how the Prophet always captured his audience's attention, even though they might at the beginning jeer him and take a hostile stand. His was always a most admirable attitude. It is certainly as God says: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

What does this warning signify: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*"

(Verse 13) Essentially, it begins a fresh round showing us images of the fates met by earlier communities who rejected God's message. The reckless arrogance of the present unbelievers is thus made all the more apparent through this reminder of what happened to similarly reckless and arrogant peoples: "*There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) This is the single issue as presented by all God's messengers; it states the central point in every Divine religion.

"*They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.*" (Verse 14) Similarly, this represents the same point of doubt faced by every messenger. Yet a messenger addressing human beings could not be other than human. This so that he would know the people he addressed and they would know him. In essence, a messenger should provide a practical example and share his people's problems. Yet the 'Ād and Thamūd declared themselves unbelievers simply because the messengers sent to them were human like themselves. They were not angels as they wanted them to be.

Up to this point, the *sūrah* speaks of the fates of both peoples as if they are one: both were struck by thunderbolts. Now, the *sūrah* gives us some specific details about both peoples: "*As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: Who is mightier than us?*" (Verse 15) The right attitude is that all creatures should submit to God and that people should not behave arrogantly. Who, then, are the 'Ād in comparison to God's great creation? All arrogant behaviour, by whatever creature, is against all right. Yet these people thought themselves powerful. They asked: "*Who is mightier than us?*" This is the false sense exhibited by all tyrants when they feel that they have silenced all opposition and that none can stand against their power. They forget the truth: "*Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them?*" This is a basic truth: the One who originated them is more powerful than they. He was the One who enabled them to exercise their power in the first place, albeit in the limited measure He allowed them. Yet tyrants always overlook facts: "*They continued to reject Our revelations.*" (Verse 15)

We see them here boasting of their power, thinking themselves mighty. The image portrayed in the next verse shows us the fate their despicable arrogance deserved: "*Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering.*" (Verse 16) It was a freezing gale lasting several days that brought them great misfortune. What was more was their humiliation in this life: a fitting response to their arrogance towards God's servants. Yet all this was a first instalment, a punishment in the life of this world. They will not escape further punishment in the life to come: "*Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them.*" (Verse 16)

"*As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*" (Verse 17) This appears to be a reference to their initial acceptance of God's message after they had seen the miracle of the she-camel which drank as much as all their other camels and cattle. However, they reverted to disbelief shortly after this, preferring to remain blind, straying from the path of truth. This is the worst type of blindness. "*Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought.*" (Verse 17) Humiliation is the most fitting outcome for such an attitude. It is not merely a punishment of destruction; it adds the suffering of humiliation.

"*And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.*" (Verse 18) The round is thus concluded. They should realize by now that nothing can withstand God's power. No one can give or seek protection against Him.

Unusual Witnesses

They have been told of God's power over the universe and mankind. Now the *sūrah* tells them of His power over their own selves. They have no authority over themselves, and no part of them is beyond the reach of His power. Even their ears, eyes and skins obey Him. They too disobey them so as to be witnesses against them on the Day of Judgement.

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (Verses 19–24)

There is a great surprise in this very difficult situation in which they see their own senses and faculties obeying God and doing as they are bid. In this situation they are branded as 'enemies of God'! What fate will God's enemies suffer? They are herded together, from all generations, like a flock of sheep, and driven to the fire. When they stand close to it and the reckoning begins, they find themselves facing witnesses whom they did not reckon with. Their tongues, long used to lie, fabricate falsehood and engage in ridicule are now tied, while their ears, eyes and skins rebel against them obeying their Lord. They report on what they used to consider secret. They used to hide themselves, thinking that God would not see them conceal their intentions and crimes. But they did not try to hide themselves from their own ears, eyes or skins. How could they, when these faculties are part of them? Now, these publicize what the unbelievers thought to be concealed from all creatures and from God Almighty as well.

As God so commands their own organs, they are overwhelmed and respond in complete obedience: "*They will ask their skins: Why did you bear witness against us?*" (Verse 21) They will put the facts clearly before them, attempting to hide nothing: "*To which they will reply: God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak.*" (Verse 21) It is He who made tongues the organs of speech. He can easily give speech to

other organs. He gave speech to all things, making them speak and explain things as they are. "*It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.*" (Verse 21) From Him all originate, and to Him all shall return. There is no escape from His authority, neither at the beginning, nor at the end. Their minds used to deny this; now their skins state it to them in an undeniable way.

The remainder of the comments may be a continuation of what their own organs say to them, or equally it may be a comment on this amazing situation: "*You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you.*" (Verse 22) It never occurred to you that these, your organs, could rebel against you. In fact, you could not have hidden yourselves from your organs even if you had tried. "*Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing.*" (Verse 22) Your foolish and ignorant thoughts deceived you, leading you to hell: "*And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.*" (Verse 23)

We then have the final comment: "*If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home.*" (Verse 24) What an absurd situation. Patience now entails enduring the fire. It is no longer the patience that withstands adversity in order to achieve a cherished goal and earn reward from God. It is a sort of patience that incurs the penalty of hell where they abide: "*And if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so.*" (Verse 24)

There is no way back, no remonstration or acknowledgement of error will suffice. It is customary for admissions of error to be coupled with a request for forgiveness, after removing the causes of strained relations. Now, no admission of error is allowed, let alone forgiveness and improved relations.

Control Over Human Souls

The *sūrah* also shows them how God's power extends over their hearts and minds, even when they are still on earth refusing to believe in Him. Since He is fully aware that their hearts have become corrupt, He lets some evil entities, from among both humans and *jinn*, befriend

them and make what is evil seem fair and goodly. Thus, they lead them astray until they join those who ruin themselves and become liable to punishment:

> *We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of* jinn *and humans. They will indeed be lost.* (Verse 25)

They are too proud to worship God when they are subject to His power. Their own hearts lead them to ruin and ultimately to God's punishment. God allocates them wicked companions who whisper in their ears, assuring them that all the evil they see around them is good, and who present their own bad deeds to them in a fair appearance so that they do not see how foul these are. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to man is that he loses his balanced judgement and can no longer see how foul or deviant his actions are. In this way, he perceives everything he does as good and fair. Inevitably, though, this leads him to ruin. When the unbelievers reach this stage, they find themselves among the lost herd of past communities that suffered God's punishment: "*They will indeed be lost.*" (Verse 25)

One aspect of what such wicked companions persuaded them to do was to fight the Qur'ān when they realized how powerful was its argument: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) The elders of the Quraysh in Makkah used to counsel each other to do just this, and they also persuaded the masses to do the same. They realized that they were no match for the Qur'ān, its beauty, power and eloquence: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān.*" (Verse 26) They claimed that it cast a magical spell over their minds and ruined their lives, causing division between a man and his children or a man and his wife. It is true that the Qur'ān causes such division, but only through God's criterion that separates faith from unfaith, and guidance from going astray. The Qur'ān wins people's hearts so that they no longer value any other bond as they do their bond of faith. Thus, it was known as *al-Furqān*, meaning 'The Criterion'.

"*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Such frivolity is totally unbecoming, yet it was the result of their knowing that they could not combat the Qur'ān with logic or consistent argument. Those who persist in such disbelief can basically do nothing other than drown out the voice of the Qur'ān with their own frivolities. They used to do this in a variety of ways: Mālik ibn al-Naḍr, for example, used to sit and relate accounts of Rustum and other Persian kings in order to impress people so that they would not listen to the Qur'ān, while others used to shout and make noises or recited poetry and rhymes. All this, however, came to nothing while the Qur'ān retained its power because it is the word of the truth, and the truth is overpowering.

In response to their singular remark they are given a stern warning: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations.*" (Verses 27–28) We soon see them suffering in hell and see how the deluded are so angry with the ones who led them astray. They realize now that it was they who led them to their fate when they persuaded them that their foul deeds were fair and goodly. "*The unbelievers say: Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.*" (Verse 29) They are not merely angry with them; they want to exact revenge: "*We shall trample them under our feet.*" What a contrast with their close friendly ties in this present world.

A different type of bond is that which the believers have. These are the ones who take the right path of endeavour to do only what is good. God assigns to them angels to give them reassurance, bring them the good news of their prospects in heaven and to be their guardians, both in the life of this world and the world to come:

> *As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of*

this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, as a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. (Verses 30–32)

To remain steadfast in pursuing what is entailed by the declaration, '*Our Lord is God*,' means to keep it alive in one's conscience, to give proof to it in one's life and to discharge the responsibilities it imposes. This is serious, important and hard work. Therefore, it deserves the abundant grace God grants them: a friendly relation with angels who, as God tells us, reassure the believers with sweet words: "*Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come.*" (Verses 30–31) They also describe heaven to them, knowing that they will have there all that they desire and is pleasing to them. They make it even more inviting and pleasing by saying that it is "*a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 32) It is a gift from God and a place assigned to them through His forgiveness and endless mercy.

What Image for the Advocate of Islam

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by painting an image of the advocate of the Divine faith, describing his personality, discourse and fine manners. God's messenger, and indeed every advocate of God's way, are called on to adopt such ways. The *sūrah* began by describing the hostile attitude of those called upon to accept the faith and how they met this call with arrogance. Now, the advocates of Divine faith are being told what course to follow, regardless of how their advocacy is met and how their efforts are received:

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If

a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (Verses 33–36)

An advocate of the Divine faith must put his addressees face to face with reality. He has to confront people's deviation, ignorance, inflated appreciation of their own deeds, as also their instinctive abhorrence of being told that they are wrong. He is opposed by people's determination to serve their own interests and maintain positions that might be threatened by the principle of equality of all people, which is basic to Divine faith. To face all this as part of the task of advocating Divine faith is indeed very hard. Yet it is something truly great: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'?*" (Verse 33)

Taking all this into account, a word of advocacy, calling on people to believe in God's oneness, is the best word that may be said on earth. It is at the forefront of good words that are raised to God in heaven, provided it is endorsed by good action and confirmed with self surrender to Him. Thus, such advocacy becomes pure and sincere, free of self interest. The advocate's aim is merely to discharge his duty by presenting the Divine message. Once he has discharged his duty, he should not care whether his words are rejected or whether people are rude or boastful in their denials. He is merely presenting what is good, which puts him in the higher position. Anyone who opposes him entertains evil, and, as such, is far below an advocate of God: "*Good and evil cannot be equal.*" (Verse 34) Advocates of the Divine message cannot return evil with its like. A good deed cannot be equal in its impact or value to a bad one. Patient perseverance, forbearance and rising above the desire to return evil with its like eventually brings people back to their senses. Their earlier hardness softens and they become friendly: "*Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend.*" (Verse 34)

This rule proves true in the overwhelming majority of cases: a stormy attitude will be replaced by calmness, fury by cordiality and arrogance by humility. All this may result from a good word, a soft tone and a smile to meet the fury of one whose anger gets the better of him. Had

such a person been met with a similarly furious approach, he would only be more quarrelsome and completely lose his self control.

Such a forbearing attitude requires a great heart, one that can forgive when it might otherwise return evil with its like. Such ability is necessary for forbearance to be effective. Otherwise, forbearance may be thought a mark of weakness. If the party resorting to evil feels that a kindly attitude results from weakness, he will not respect it. Indeed, kindness will not have any effect on the matter. Moreover, such kindness and forbearance are limited to personal insults and injuries. When the attack is levelled at believers' faith, trying to turn them away from it, then every form of resistance should be employed, or else, we remain patient in adversity until God makes His judgement in the matter.

Such forbearance, which requires us to repel an evil deed with a good one, rising above feelings of anger, is a sublime grade which cannot be attained by everyone. It does not merely require patience in the face of adversity; it is also a blessing which God bestows on His servants who try hard to achieve it: "*Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune.*" (Verse 35) We say that it is a sublime grade; in fact it is so sublime that Muḥammad, God's messenger, who never showed anger for anything personal, yet nothing could stand to his anger when it was for God's sake, is told, as indeed every advocate of the Divine message is told: "*If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 36) Anger may open the way to Satan's prompting who will then try to persuade us to be impatient and unforgiving when others resort to evil. In such a situation, we will do well to seek refuge with God against Satan. This is the best shelter against Satan's efforts to exploit our anger.

God, man's Creator, knows the keys to each and every heart, as well as its abilities and qualities. He knows where and how Satan can penetrate his machinations. Therefore, He protects the advocates of His message from stirred up anger as we face what excites the fury of even the most forbearing of us. Yet this too is a difficult road to follow, requiring that we submit here, as in every situation, to Divine directives, to the exclusion of all else.

2

No Concealment from God

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِ ٱلَّيْلُ وَٱلنَّهَارُ وَٱلشَّمْسُ
وَٱلْقَمَرُ ۚ لَا تَسْجُدُوا۟ لِلشَّمْسِ وَلَا لِلْقَمَرِ
وَٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُنَّ إِن
كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. (37)

فَإِنِ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فَٱلَّذِينَ عِندَ
رَبِّكَ يُسَبِّحُونَ لَهُۥ بِٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ
وَهُمْ لَا يَسْـَٔمُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. (38)

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦٓ أَنَّكَ تَرَى ٱلْأَرْضَ خَـٰشِعَةً
فَإِذَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا ٱلْمَآءَ ٱهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَحْيَاهَا لَمُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things. (39)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا لَا يَخْفَوْنَ
عَلَيْنَآ ۗ أَفَمَن يُلْقَىٰ فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَيْرٌ أَم مَّن يَأْتِىٓ
ءَامِنًا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ ٱعْمَلُوا۟ مَا شِئْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do. (40)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِٱلذِّكْرِ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ ۖ
وَإِنَّهُۥ لَكِتَٰبٌ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤١﴾

Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; (41)

لَّا يَأْتِيهِ ٱلْبَٰطِلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦ ۖ تَنزِيلٌ مِّنْ حَكِيمٍ حَمِيدٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. (42)

مَّا يُقَالُ لَكَ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ قِيلَ لِلرُّسُلِ
مِن قَبْلِكَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو مَغْفِرَةٍ وَذُو
عِقَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. (43)

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَٰهُ قُرْءَانًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَّقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا
فُصِّلَتْ ءَايَٰتُهُۥٓ ۖ ءَا۬عْجَمِىٌّ وَعَرَبِىٌّ ۗ قُلْ
هُوَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ هُدًى وَشِفَآءٌ ۖ
وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ

Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in

their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away. (44)

وَقْرٌ وَهُوَ عَلَيْهِمْ عَمًى ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ يُنَادَوْنَ مِن مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (45)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَاخْتُلِفَ فِيهِ ۗ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures. (46)

مَّنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۗ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٤٦﴾

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (47)

إِلَيْهِ يُرَدُّ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ ۚ وَمَا تَخْرُجُ مِن ثَمَرَاتٍ مِّنْ أَكْمَامِهَا وَمَا تَحْمِلُ مِنْ أُنثَىٰ وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا بِعِلْمِهِ ۚ وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ أَيْنَ شُرَكَائِي قَالُوا آذَنَّاكَ مَا مِنَّا مِن شَهِيدٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them. (48)

وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا يَدْعُونَ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَظَنُّوا مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

لَّا يَسْـَٔمُ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ مِن دُعَآءِ ٱلْخَيْرِ وَإِن
مَّسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ فَيَـُٔوسٌ قَنُوطٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. (49)

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَـٰهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ
ضَرَّآءَ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ هَـٰذَا لِى
وَمَآ أَظُنُّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَآئِمَةً وَلَئِن
رُّجِعْتُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّىٓ إِنَّ لِى عِندَهُۥ
لَلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ فَلَنُنَبِّئَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُم مِّنْ
عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. (50)

وَإِذَآ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى ٱلْإِنسَـٰنِ أَعْرَضَ
وَنَـَٔا بِجَانِبِهِۦ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ
فَذُو دُعَآءٍ عَرِيضٍ ﴿٥١﴾

When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (51)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ
ثُمَّ كَفَرْتُم بِهِۦ مَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ
فِى شِقَاقٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?' (52)

سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا فِى ٱلْءَافَاقِ وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? (53)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ فِى مِرْيَةٍ مِّن لِّقَآءِ رَبِّهِمْ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ مُّحِيطٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything. (54)

Overview

This new part of the *sūrah* addresses human hearts. It starts with a round highlighting some of God's signs in the universe, such as the night and day, sun and moon. Some of the idolaters used to prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon alongside God, when they too are no more than His creatures. They are told that if they are too proud to worship God, there are others who worship Him and are closer to Him than they. Indeed the whole earth stands in a position of worship as it receives its life from God, just as they do but who nevertheless do not use this opportunity to move closer to God. On the contrary, they deny God's universal signs as they dispute His Qur'ānic revelations, when the Qur'ān is expressed in clear Arabic, free of any non-Arabic influence. This round then presents before them a scene from the Day of Resurrection and shows them their own reality with all its weakness, changing moods and forgetfulness, eagerness to grab good things, and panicking when it is touched by harm. Nevertheless, they do not try to protect themselves from the harm that God may inflict on them. The *sūrah* ends with a promise from God that He will reveal to them His signs in the universe and within themselves

until they realize that He is the truth, removing all that remains of doubt in their hearts.

Clear Universal Signs

> *Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship.* (Verse 37)

These signs are there for all to see, and they have a direct effect on the human heart, even though we may not have any scientific information about them. Their relation with man is more profound than scientific knowledge because it is based on the fact that we share with them a common origin, nature and make-up. They belong to us and we belong to them: our constituting elements, nature, law and our Maker who created us all. Therefore, we warm to them and understand the message they impart to us. Therefore, the Qur'ān often directs our attention to them, without delving any deeper. It only wants us not to overlook them as a result of either long familiarity with them or other barriers. The Qur'ān removes these so as to make us alert to and interact with the messages given by this friendly universe.

The verse also points to a particular aspect of deviation. Some people exaggerated the importance of the sun and the moon, and thus deviated from the truth. They worshipped them in the hope of drawing nearer to God through worshipping the most beautiful of His creatures. The Qur'ān puts them back on track, removing their confusion and saying to them that if they want to worship God they must not prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, they must prostrate themselves before God who created them. It is the Creator alone whom they, and all creatures, should worship.

If they persist in their arrogance, it will make no difference. Others offer worship to God in all humility: "*If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that.*" (Verse 38) The first creatures we think of as being referred to by the expression, '*those who are with your Lord,*' are the angels.

However, there may be other creatures close to God and about whom we know only very little.

Those creatures who are with your Lord are more noble and honourable than humans for they do not show any arrogance like those earth dwellers who have gone astray. Nor do they allow the fact that they are close to God to go to their heads. They do not stop glorifying Him day and night. They never grow weary of this. What is the significance, then, when some people living on earth take a different stand from the rest of all creatures, and refuse to submit themselves to God?

The earth, their mother from which they originate and to which they return, stands humble before God as it receives life from His hand. On the surface of the earth they are no more like ants; and from the earth they derive all their food and drink. This earth, however, presents a different attitude from theirs: "*Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39)

We need to reflect a little on the precision of the expression used here. In the Arabic original, the word *khāshi'ah*, translated here as 'lying desolate', is used. The term connotes a humble and attentive attitude, but it means here that it is motionless before rain falls on it. When rain is sent upon it, it stirs and swells. It is as if this is a movement expressing gratitude for giving it the means to support life. The context in which this verse occurs is one of attentive worship and humble glorification of God. The earth is mentioned here as one of the figures in the scene, expressing a suitable feeling and making a suitable movement.

We should refer here to one aspect of the Qur'ānic style, comparing word usage:

> The image of how the earth looks before rainfall and the appearance of shoots is used twice in the Qur'ān. In the first instance, the earth is described as *hāmidah* which means 'dry and barren', while in this instance it is described as *khāshi'ah* which means 'lying desolate'. Some people may think that this is mere

variation which writers normally use. It is far more than this. Let us look at the context in which each description is used.

The first description, *hāmidah*, occurs in the following verse: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth* ***dry and barren****; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom.*" (22: 5)

Khāshi'ah, has a totally different context: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth* ***lying desolate****, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life].*" (Verses 37–39)

A quick reflection is enough to show how each of these two adjectives fits perfectly in its context. In the first instance, the long verse speaks about creation and resurrection. It is most fitting that the earth should be shown as dry and barren before it stirs and swells, putting forth each blooming and radiant plant. In the second instance, the whole ambiance is one of worship and prostration before God. Hence the description of the earth as desolate, and then when water falls it stirs and swells. We also note that the image of sprouting different plants is not added in the second case because it does not fit in the context of worship. The stirring and swelling in the second case has a different purpose from that in the first case. Here, they merely give an image of the earth's movement after it has lain desolate. Everything in the scene described here is making the movement involved in worship.

> Hence, it does not fit that the earth should remain motionless. It stirs and swells, sharing in the movement of other worshippers. Thus, not a single detail in the scene remains fixed while all others are in motion. This sort of harmony is superior to anything we know of literary expression.[6]

The comment at the end of the verse refers to bringing the dead back to life, citing the earth as an example: "*He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39) This image is frequently used in the Qur'ān as an example of how the dead are resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the reviving of the earth points to the facts of resurrection and God's limitless power. The image of the earth stirring with life is close to our hearts, touching them before it addresses our minds. Moreover, when life springs in what is dead it gives a subtle feeling of the power behind it. The Qur'ān addresses human nature in its own language, using the shortest way.

How to Describe Unfaith

Against this backdrop of universal signs, the *sūrah* condemns and warns those who deny God's signs and dispute His revelations:

> *Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do.* (Verse 40)

The warning begins in an implicit but fearful way, stating that such people "*are not hidden from Us.*" God is fully aware of them. They will have to account for what they perpetrate, no matter how they try to distort meanings or resort to deception. They may think that they can escape God's punishment in the same way as their deception spared them accountability before human authority. However, the warning is then

6. Quṭb, Sayyid, *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fi al-Qur'ān*, fourth edition, Cairo, (n.d.), pp. 89–100.

stated clearly: "*Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day?*" (Verse 40) This puts before them the prospect that lies ahead. It is they who will be cast in the fire, in contrast with the believers who will be safe on the Day of Resurrection. The verse concludes with another implicit warning: "*Do what you will; He sees all that you do.*" (Verse 40) Terrible indeed is the fate of the one who is given the freedom to do what he wills and who distorts the meaning of God's revelations when God sees all that he does.

The *sūrah* then speaks about those who specifically deny the Qur'ānic revelations, describing the Qur'ān as a sublime book, admitting no falsehood:

> *Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.* (Verses 41–44)

The *sūrah* refers to those who reject the Qur'ān when it comes to them, but does not mention their status or what will happen to them. The sentence is left without a predicate: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ...*" It is a case of saying that such people do something so horrible that it cannot be properly described. The *sūrah* simply mentions them and moves on to describe the reminder which they reject; thus showing their action in its true and ghastly colours: "*It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 41–42)

How could falsehood touch or creep into this book when it comes from God who is the truth absolute? It is a book which clearly presents the word of truth, one that is permanently linked to the truth that ensures the proper conduct of the affairs of the universe. How could falsehood come into it when it is a sublime book, given protection by God who undertakes to keep it intact: "*It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact.*" (15: 9)

Anyone who looks carefully at the Qur'ān will find in it the truth it has come to establish. We find this truth in its spirit and its text: it is simple, natural, reassuring, and addresses human nature in its totality with profound effect. Moreover, "*it is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 42) Wisdom is clearly apparent in its structure, directives, the way it was revealed, and in its direct address to the human heart. God who revealed the Qur'ān is worthy of praise. There is in the Qur'ān much that makes our hearts eager to express its praise of God.

The *sūrah* then establishes a bond between the Qur'ān and earlier revelations, and between the Prophet Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), and all messengers sent before his time. Thus, all prophets belong to one family which receives the same discourse from God. Their hearts and souls look up to Him as they pursue their course advocating His message. Thus, the last in this family, the Prophet of Islam, feels that he is a branch of a great tree with deep roots, a member of a great family that goes back to the beginnings of history.

"*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) It is all one message and one faith. Likewise, it is received in the same way: the same rejection and the same objections. Yet it establishes one bond, making one family which endures the same experience and feels the same pain. Ultimately, it follows the same way, leading to the same goal.

How comforting this fact is to advocates of the Divine message. It strengthens their resolve to continue along the same way that was traversed before them by God's noble messengers, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and the others, (peace be upon them all). How honoured and confident the advocates of God's message feel

knowing that they follow in the footsteps of such a select group. Such a feeling motivates them to go along, caring little for the difficulties and hardships they meet on the way.

It is certainly true: "*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time.*" (Verse 43) The impact this fact can have when it becomes firmly established in the minds of believers is truly profound.

Included in what was said to God's messengers, and to Muḥammad (peace be upon him), the last among them, was: "*Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) Thus balance is emphasized. A believer then hopes for God's grace and forgiveness, never despairing that these will be bestowed on him by God's will, but always fearing to incur God's punishment. Striking the right balance is an essential characteristic of Islam.

The *sūrah* then reminds the Arabs of God's blessing by making Arabic the language of the Qur'ān. At the same time, it refers to their contentious disputes and rejection. "*Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?'*" (Verse 44) They do not listen to it in its Arabic form. In fact, they feared it because it addressed their Arab nature in their own language. Hence, they urged each other to adopt this strategy: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Had God expressed His message in a different tongue, they would still have objected to it, calling for it to be put clearly in Arabic. They would object even if part of it were in Arabic and the other part in a different language. Their notion, therefore, was to argue in all cases and all situations.

The truth that emerges from this argument about the form given to the message is that this book provides guidance and healing to believers. Believers' hearts appreciate its nature and truth, receive its guidance and benefit from its healing. Those who do not believe remain in confusion, and their hearts do not feel the cheerfulness of its message. Hence, it becomes like deafness to their ears and blindness in their eyes. They recognize nothing, because they are far removed from the

nature of this book and its address: "*Say: This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it. They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.*" (Verse 44)

We feel the truth of this statement in every community and generation. Some people are profoundly affected by the Qur'ān. It transforms them, giving them a different type of life, and enables them to achieve miracles within themselves and in their environment. Others feel this Qur'ān too heavy for their hearts and ears. When they listen to it, they only grow more deaf and blind. The Qur'ān never changes; it is hearts that are different.

A reference follows to Moses and his book, and how his people differed in their attitude to the Qur'ān. God has deferred His judgement on their disputes. He has decreed that judgement on all this will be given on the Day of Judgement: "*We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 45) Likewise, He has decreed that judgement on the question of His final message will be similarly deferred. He thus lets people do as they like, and they will ultimately receive what their action merits: "*Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*" (Verse 46)

This message proclaims that mankind have attained maturity. This makes man responsible for his choices. Such responsibility is based on individual accountability. Therefore, each one is free to choose, knowing that "*your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*"

Man's Vacillating Attitude

As judgement is deferred to the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* makes clear that knowledge of its timing belongs to God alone. God's knowledge is described by highlighting some of its aspects in an inspiring way. This serves as a prelude to a scene from the Day of Judgement when unbelievers are questioned, and their answers are reported:

> *Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'* (Verse 47)

The timing of the Last Hour signalling the Day of Judgement is beyond anyone's ken; the fruit in its calyx is something that cannot be seen; and what a pregnant female is bearing is similarly concealed. Yet they are all within God's knowledge. Our mind looks far and wide, trying to think of the fruits when they are still in calyxes and embryos in their wombs. Who can think of their count, let alone what they actually are. An image is thus drawn of the extent of God's knowledge, to the extent our mental capacity allows. Yet His knowledge extends far beyond this, as it is without limit.

Our mind then imagines those who have gone astray, as they stand before God, realizing that His knowledge encompasses everything, no matter how well concealed it is. They face the questioning: "*On the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?'*" On that day, no argument is of any use. No one can utter anything but the truth. What will they say then: "*They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47) They will declare that none of them will then claim any partners to God.

"*Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 48) They will know nothing of their previous claims. They will realize that there is no escape from their fate. They will forget their past and think only of their present situation.

Such is the day about which they take no precautions despite the fact that man is eager to achieve every good thing and fears what brings him harm. At this point, the *sūrah* shows them their naked reality, without cover or disguise:

> *Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has*

befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (Verses 49–51)

Man is so insistent in his requests, urging and repeating, appealing for what he feels to be good for him. Indeed, he never tires of this. Yet should misfortune befall him, even in the slightest way, he loses hope and sinks into despair. He feels his burden too heavy, thinks that God's grace has abandoned him. All this comes about because his relationship with God is not strong enough in his heart.

Yet should God grant him something of His grace after he has suffered some harm, he will be so elated that he will forget how this grace was given to him, and he will not give due thanks. On the contrary, he will consider that he has deserved this grace and that he should have it forever. He will even dismiss the Day of Judgement thinking that it will never come: "*I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come.*" (Verse 50) He will boast of his own position, thinking that he deserves favouritism with God. He will even go further than this, denying the Day of Judgement and, thus, disbelieving in God. Nevertheless, he thinks that should he be returned to God, he will have a secure position with Him: "*Even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.*" (Verse 50) This betrays no small degree of arrogance. Here the *sūrah* issues a suitable warning to those who are so arrogant: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering.*" (Verse 50)

Man is always moving to extremes. If God bestows His grace on him, he blows his own trumpet and behaves with arrogance. When harm or misfortune befalls him, he sinks low and collapses. He will pray insistently, prolonging his prayer. How accurate this description of man's inner thoughts is! No wonder; it is a description by God who

created man and knows the subtle workings of his mind. He knows that man will continue to follow round and circular ways, unless he is guided to the right path.

Now that they face their own naked reality, the question is put to them about what they would do if it is proven that the message they deny is actually God's own message? Are they really prepared to expose themselves to the consequences of such rejection: "*Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?'*" (Verse 52) It is a possibility to be reckoned with. Have they taken any steps to deal with this should it come true?

Signs Galore

They are left to think and consider. The *sūrah* now turns to the open universe, revealing some of the signs placed in it, as well as some of what is within their own selves:

> *We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.* (Verses 53–54)

This is the final note in the *sūrah*, and it is a profound one. It is a promise by God to mankind to put before them some of the secrets in the universe and some of the secrets working within themselves. These are His signs. They will thus be able to realize that this faith, this book and its discourse are the truth. Indeed it is, for it is all from God, and whose word is truer than God's? And God's promise has certainly come true. Over the fourteen centuries that followed this promise He has made many of His signs in the universe and within man known to us, and He continues to show us more of these every day.

When we look around us we see that man has discovered much since then. Wide horizons have opened before us, as well as much of

what was unknown about man. If people would only reflect on how they came to know these and show gratitude for this, they would have ensured great benefit. They now know that the earth, which people used to imagine as the centre of the universe, is no more than a small satellite of the sun, and that the sun is merely a small circle of which the universe contains millions and millions. They also know the nature of their earth and sun, as well as the nature of the universe, if their modern information is true.

People now know much about the matter of which the universe is made, if it is true that it is made of matter. They know that the atom is the basic unit of which the universe is made, and that the atom can be transformed into radiation. They thus know that the whole universe is made of radiation that takes many different forms, making a great variety of shapes and sizes. We have also come to know much about our planet, learning that it is round in shape, like a circle or close to a circle, and that it rotates on its axis and moves in orbit around the sun. We have learnt about all its continents, oceans and rivers, and discovered what was previously unknown to us of what is below its surface. Moreover, we now know much of the provisions placed inside it and in its atmosphere.

Man has also learnt much about the laws that link his planet with the great universe and which operate within the universe as a whole conducting its affairs. Some people have gone further, moving from knowledge of these laws to knowledge of the One who created them. Others have remained stationary, looking at what has become known without moving forward. Although scientific advancement led mankind first to go astray, it has begun now to return, through scientific advancement, realizing that God is the truth absolute.

New knowledge about man is in no way less spectacular than that about the universe. We have learnt much about the human body: its characteristics, make-up, physiology, the food it needs and what it makes of it, the illnesses affecting it, how the body works and the functions of its different organs. These discoveries put before us real miracles that can only be the work of God. We have also learnt something about the human soul. Our new knowledge does not compare with what we learnt about the human body, because our study

and research have concentrated far more on the physical rather than the mental and spiritual in man's life. Yet what we have learnt so far heralds great discoveries in this field as well.[7]

Yet man has not reached the end of the road. God's promise remains true and valid: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.*" (Verse 53) Early signs of the fulfilment of the last part of this promise have come to be noticed since the early years of the twentieth century. People are flocking from different parts of the world to join the camp of faith. Many are coming forward through material science. Numerous others are coming from far away, despite the great tide of atheism that almost drowned the earth in the past. This tide of atheism is now on the retreat, although to all appearances it seems still to be rising. By the close of this twentieth century it may almost have disappeared, by God's will.[8] For, God's promise will certainly come true: "*Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything?*" (Verse 53) It is He who has made this promise, and it is He who knows the truth and is witness to it.

"*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 54) It is because of their doubt that they will meet their Lord that people continue to perpetrate what they do. Yet the promise is true, no doubt. "*Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) How can they escape meeting Him when He encompasses all?

7. The author wrote this nearly 50 years ago, and his prediction has come true. Research in mental health has made great advancements, but scientists in this field assure us that we are still at the beginning and there are bound to be more spectacular discoveries. – Editor's note.

8. The author here was over optimistic, but it is such optimism and trust in the fulfilment of God's promise that continues to motivate advocates of the Divine faith despite the great obstacles in their way. – Editor's note.

SŪRAH 42

Al-Shūrā

(Consultation)

Prologue

Like all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* deals with the issue of faith, but it especially focuses on the question of revelation and the Divine message. It can truly be said that this question provides the central theme of the *sūrah* and that all points discussed in it serve this purpose.

Yet the *sūrah* also expands on the truth of God's oneness, presenting it from different angles. It also speaks of the truth of resurrection and the need to believe in it. The life to come is mentioned in several places with different images of it presented. The *sūrah* also outlines some of the believers' qualities and the good manners characterizing their behaviour. It also mentions man's provisions and how they are given in plenty or in scant measure. Furthermore, it speaks about man and his two states when he enjoys happiness or suffers hardship.

Nevertheless, the question of revelation and the Divine message provides the basic truth the *sūrah* expounds upon, giving it its general ambiance. It is as if all the points and ideas discussed in the *sūrah* are meant to emphasize this truth and drive it home.

The line the *sūrah* takes in presenting this truth and its associated topics requires further discussion. It is presented in different ways, each separated from the other with a few verses that speak about God's

oneness through showing that the Creator, or the Provider, or who controls hearts, or determines all creatures' fates is the One God. As the *sūrah* tackles its main theme of revelation and message, it emphasizes that the source of all revelation is one, as also are the message, the faith, the code of living and the line to be followed. Similarly, the leadership of humanity under the banner of faith is one. Thus the theme of oneness, with all its meanings and connotations, is brought into sharp relief throughout the *sūrah*, whatever topic it may be discussing. We will now briefly refer to some such examples:

The *sūrah* begins with five separate letters: "*Ḥā. Mīm. ʿAyn. Sīn. Qāf.*" These are immediately followed by the statement: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It, thus, begins by stating that all revelations, throughout all generations, come from the same source. Further attributes of God are added in the next verse: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) These attributes highlight the fact that the heavens and the earth belong to one owner, and that He is the Supreme One.

The *sūrah* then takes another line, describing how the universe stands with regard to the question of belief in the One Owner, and to the deviation leading some people to associate partners with Him: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verses 5–6) We thus see the whole universe preoccupied with the question of faith and unbelief to the extent that the heavens are about to be rent asunder because of the deviation by some earth dwellers. For their part, the angels pray for the forgiveness of all those on earth specifically because of the grave offence perpetrated by some of them.

The *sūrah* then returns to its main theme: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall*

be in paradise and some in the blazing fire." (Verse 7) It moves on with the two groups and their different abodes to state that God could have made them all one community. However, His will has decreed on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that some are admitted to His grace, "*whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) It further states that God is the Protector of all, and that "*He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Again the *sūrah* returns to the central theme of the truth of revelation and message, stating that judgement on all matters that are subject to dispute between people belongs to God who has revealed the Qur'ān to which people must refer in all situations: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) It then proceeds from God's Lordship to His being the One Creator who alone administers everything in the universe, determines provisions and knows all: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 11–12)

Having made these points, the *sūrah* immediately returns to its central theme: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been*

commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high..." (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* follows this pattern in presenting the truth of revelation and message, maintaining this ambiance while turning to address other issues of faith which, in turn, endorse that truth. This pattern is abundantly clear in the first part of the *sūrah*, up to and including verse 24, in which the theme of revelation and message is encountered time after time.

The second part, taking up the rest of the *sūrah*, begins with a discussion of God's signs that are seen in the way He gives some people abundant provision while others receive small measure, how He sends rainfall, the creation of the heavens and the earth with all creatures therein, and ships that traverse the sea. It then moves on to outline the basic quality that distinguishes believers and their community. This is followed by an image of the Day of Judgement showing the wrongdoers as they face their punishment: "*you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45) By contrast, the believers will be in a dignified position, stating the fate that the wrongdoers face: "*The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering.*" (Verse 45) Against this backdrop, the *sūrah* calls on people to spare themselves such an end before it is too late: "*Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins.*" (Verse 47) Then the *sūrah* reverts to its central theme, the truth of revelation and message, highlighting one of its many aspects: "*If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you].*" (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* continues to refer to its central theme, directly and indirectly, up to its end and moves after each reference to address other ideas relating to it. Its conclusion provides the following statement regarding revelation and message: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our*

servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return." (Verses 52–53)

One of the clear objectives of the *sūrah* emerges from the way it tackles its central theme and how it proceeds, time after time, to refer to related issues. This objective is nothing less than to appoint a new leadership for the advocates of Divine faith. This new leadership is in fact this final message, the messenger delivering it and the Muslim community that follows the straight course defined by God. The first reference to this objective is made at the outset: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It thus makes it clear that it is God who reveals all messages to all messengers. This final message is a clear progression of something that has long been established.

The second reference follows shortly after that to establish the centre of the new leadership to which reference will be later made: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The third reference states the unity of the message whereas the first reference identified the unity of its source: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) In this third reference, the *sūrah* clearly states that division occurred because people disobeyed God's injunction. This did not come about as a result of any ignorance on the part of the followers of those noble messengers; they had the knowledge to spare them such division. It simply occurred as a result of injustice and envy: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then moves on to describe the conditions of those who came after the generations that differed: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

At this point it becomes abundantly clear that humanity had sunk into a state of confusion and doubt. It no longer had a wise leadership following a well-defined code. The Divine message that assumes the

leadership of humanity suffered from the division that took place between its followers, while succeeding generations viewed it with profound suspicion, thereby precluding the emergence of wise leadership. The *sūrah* therefore declares that this final message and the messenger delivering it are to assume the role of leadership: "*Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15) Thus the detailed description of the Muslim community, which occurs in the second part of the *sūrah*, comes as a natural progression, because it is this community that will assume the leadership of humanity.

I

A Message Revealed by God

Al-Shūrā (Consultation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ﴿١﴾

ʿAyn. Sīn. Qāf. (2)

عٓسٓقٓ ﴿٢﴾

Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you. (3)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُوحِيٓ إِلَيْكَ وَإِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One. (4)

لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَلِىُّ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٤﴾

The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory

تَكَادُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِن فَوْقِهِنَّ ۚ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يُسَبِّحُونَ

and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (5)

بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَن
فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them. (6)

وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ
اللَّهُ حَفِيظٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَا أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم
بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿٦﴾

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (7)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا
لِّتُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا
وَتُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ فَرِيقٌ
فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ ﴿٧﴾

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (8)

وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَهُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن
يُدْخِلُ مَن يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۚ وَالظَّالِمُونَ
مَا لَهُم مِّن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٨﴾

Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (9)

أَمِ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ ۖ فَاللَّهُ هُوَ
الْوَلِيُّ وَهُوَ يُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

وَمَا ٱخْتَلَفْتُمْ فِيهِ مِن شَىْءٍ فَحُكْمُهُۥٓ
إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبِّى عَلَيْهِ
تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ ﴿١٠﴾

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. (10)

فَاطِرُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم
مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا وَمِنَ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ
أَزْوَٰجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِۦ
شَىْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. (11)

لَهُۥ مَقَالِيدُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ
يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ
إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (12)

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِۦ نُوحًا
وَٱلَّذِىٓ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِۦٓ
إِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰٓ ۖ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلدِّينَ
وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا۟ فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ
مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ ٱللَّهُ يَجْتَبِىٓ إِلَيْهِ مَن
يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِىٓ إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. (13)

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ
بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن
رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى لَّقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ
وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُورِثُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِهِمْ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿١٤﴾

They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (14)

فَلِذَٰلِكَ فَٱدْعُ ۖ وَٱسْتَقِمْ كَمَآ
أُمِرْتَ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ۖ وَقُلْ ءَامَنتُ
بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن كِتَٰبٍ ۖ وَأُمِرْتُ
لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ ۖ لَنَآ
أَعْمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ ۖ لَا حُجَّةَ
بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ
ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.' (15)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا ٱسْتُجِيبَ لَهُۥ حُجَّتُهُمْ دَاحِضَةٌ
عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ وَلَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿١٦﴾

As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them. (16)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنزَلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ
وَالْمِيزَانَ ۗ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ
السَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ ﴿١٧﴾

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. (17)

يَسْتَعْجِلُ بِهَا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِهَا ۖ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مُشْفِقُونَ
مِنْهَا وَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهَا الْحَقُّ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ
الَّذِينَ يُمَارُونَ فِي السَّاعَةِ لَفِي
ضَلَالٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. (18)

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَاءُ ۖ
وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ ﴿١٩﴾

God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. (19)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الْآخِرَةِ نَزِدْ
لَهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ ۖ وَمَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ
الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِن نَّصِيبٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (20)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَاءُ شَرَعُوا لَهُم مِّنَ
الدِّينِ مَا لَمْ يَأْذَن بِهِ اللَّهُ ۚ وَلَوْلَا
كَلِمَةُ الْفَصْلِ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ
الظَّالِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. (21)

تَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ
مِمَّا كَسَبُوا۟ وَهُوَ وَاقِعٌۢ
بِهِمْ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فِى رَوْضَاتِ
ٱلْجَنَّٰتِ ۖ لَهُم مَّا يَشَآءُونَ
عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَضْلُ
ٱلْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٢﴾

You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. (22)

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلَّذِى يُبَشِّرُ ٱللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ ۗ قُل لَّآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ
أَجْرًا إِلَّا ٱلْمَوَدَّةَ فِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ ۗ وَمَن يَقْتَرِفْ
حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُۥ فِيهَا حُسْنًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ
شَكُورٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (23)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا ۖ فَإِن يَشَإِ
ٱللَّهُ يَخْتِمْ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ ۗ وَيَمْحُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْبَٰطِلَ
وَيُحِقُّ ٱلْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ
ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (24)

Angels Praying for Mankind

We talked previously about the separate letters that begin several *sūrahs*. Here we have five of these, followed by the verse saying: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Thus, in this way and following this pattern, God sent down His revelations to you and to messengers before you. It is made of words and phrases composed of those letters known to man. People know these words and phrases and grasp their meanings, but they cannot compose anything like it out of the letters they know so well.

At the same time, the unity of revelation is established. This comes from the same source as it is revealed by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Those who receive it are the messengers He sent across different generations. The message revealed is essentially the same, despite the fact that it was given to different recipients at different times. Thus we see the Divine message as a story beginning far back in ancient times, having numerous intertwined episodes, and following the same principles, like a mature tree graced with a large number of branches and firm, deep roots.

When this fact is well established in believers' hearts, they feel that their faith is well-founded, stable and authoritative. They are, thus, strongly attracted to the source of this revelation, who is 'God, the Almighty, the Wise.' They also value the bond between them and the believers who followed such revelations throughout all generations, since the family of believers goes far back in history, and they all turn ultimately to God. How can they abandon the straight path of the Divine message to take other, divergent ways that have unclear beginnings and lead nowhere?

The *sūrah* then adds other attributes belonging to God: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) People are often deluded, thinking that they own something of what they have in their hands; it appears to be at their disposal and they use it for their own benefit. Theirs, however, is not true ownership. The true owner is God who creates, brings to life and deals death. He alone can give people whatever He wishes, withhold,

take away or replace what He chooses. He is the One who determines the nature of everything and conducts this in accordance with the law He has chosen. Everything, then, complies with this law and behaves according to it. Every single thing in the universe, thus, belongs to God, who is the sole owner, without partners. He is the '*Most High, the Supreme One.*' His ownership is marked by His supremacy, making everything else appear lowly and inferior.

When this truth is well established in our minds, we know to whom we should turn to request what we wish for good things, provisions and earnings. Since He is the owner of the heavens and the earth, it is He who can decide what to give. Moreover, being '*the Most High, the Supreme*', He does not degrade or demean those who stretch out their hands requesting what they want from Him, as they would feel if they made their requests to other creatures. The *sūrah* then gives us an aspect of the significance of God's sole ownership of the universe and His supremacy. We see this in the heavens that are almost rent asunder, overawed as they are by God's greatness, when they realize that some earth dwellers deviate from the right way. We also see this in the angels' action as they glorify their Lord and pray to Him to forgive those who live on earth: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

The 'heavens' are those creatures which we see above us wherever we are on earth and of which we know very little. We now know that these heavens include at least one hundred million galaxies, every one of which includes one hundred million stars like our sun which is larger than our earth by at least a million times. These galaxies, which humans have managed to establish with their telescopes, are scattered in space, with large distances between them, amounting to hundreds of thousands of light years. Yet these very heavens are almost rent asunder from above, fearing God, the Supreme, because some people on earth overlook His supremacy which the rest of the universe feels with a clear sense of awe.

"*The angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth.*" (Verse 5) The angels are creatures

whose obedience to God is absolute. Hence, they should be the most reassured of all creatures. Yet they never cease to extol God's praise because they feel His total supremacy and fear that they may fall short in extolling His glory. By contrast, humans, the earth dwellers, reject and deviate. Hence, the angels fear that God's anger may, thus, be incurred and they begin to pray to Him to forgive the people of earth for the sins they perpetrate. The verse may also refer to the angels praying for the forgiveness of believers, as stated in *Sūrah* 40, the Forgiving One: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers.*" (40: 7) We see here how the angels dread that any act of disobedience is committed on earth, even by believers. They pray to God for forgiveness, knowing that He is surely '*Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*' (Verse 5)

This opening of the *sūrah* ends with a reference to those who take for themselves protectors other than God, when it has become clear that no one else in the universe can give any protection. In this way, He makes it clear to His messenger that he is not responsible for them. It is God who watches over them and He will deal with them as He likes: "*As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verse 6)

Those miserable people who seek protection with beings other than God, are like those who clutch nothing but thin air. They hold nothing in their hands. Little as they and their alleged protectors are, they appear to us weak and insignificant as they are subject to God's power. The Prophet, and the believers with him, need not think or worry about them. God will make His own decision about them.

This truth must be well established in the hearts of all believers so that they are reassured, and this whether the unbelievers appear to wield power on earth or not. No matter how arrogant and tyrannical the ones wielding power are, they remain insignificant as long as they do not derive their power from God, and as long as God watches over them and encompasses them with His might. The whole universe around them believes in God and they alone are the ones who deviate, just like an odd beat in a beautiful symphony. From another point of view, the believers are reassured as they learn that they are not held in

any way responsible for anyone who turns away and deviates. Their only task is to give sincere and sound counsel. It is God who ultimately holds people's hearts in His hand. With such reassurance, the believers can continue along their way, caring nothing for the unbelievers and their deviation.

The Mother City

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.* (Verses 7–9)

Here we are back with the truth stated at the beginning, with this new aspect of the truth of revelation now closely intertwined. There is a clear link between the separate letters the *sūrah* begins with and the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic. These letters constitute part of the Arabic alphabet, and the Qur'ān delivers its message in Arabic, for a particular purpose: "*in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The Mother City is Makkah, which is honoured by the presence of God's Sacred House, the first ever built for worship. God has chosen that this Mother City and its surroundings should be the place where His final message is revealed, expressing the Qur'ān in its Arabic tongue, for His particular purpose: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

When we look today, with hindsight, reviewing events and circumstances, studying the line the message has followed to produce its results, we can partly understand God's wisdom behind the choice of this particular spot on earth, at that particular time, to be the base

of the final message addressed to all mankind. Its universal nature was made clear from its early days.

At the advent of this final Divine message, the earth was more or less divided between four empires: the Byzantine Empire, which stretched from Europe over some parts of Asia and Africa; the Persian Empire, which ruled large parts of Asia and some African areas; and also the Indian and Chinese Empires. The latter two were confined to their areas, each having its own faith and limited political relations outside of their territories. This isolation made the first two the real superpowers, which enjoyed far reaching influence over human life and its development. The two Divine religions, Judaism and Christianity, were in one way or another under the influence of these two empires, and were effectively controlled by the then political authorities controlling them. Hence, both religions suffered distortion.

Judaism in particular suffered persecution under the Byzantines at one stage and under the Persians at another. It had practically no power on earth. Several factors contributed to its becoming confined to the Children of Israel, with neither ambition nor desire to attract other communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, was born within the Byzantine Empire which ruled Palestine, Syria and Egypt where Christianity spread secretly. The Byzantine authorities launched a wicked persecution campaign against the Christian faith leading to massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. When this decimation ended with the conversion of a Byzantine emperor to Christianity, he brought with him pagan Byzantine legends and Greek philosophy, which was also pagan in nature. These imparted an alien colour to Christianity, turning it into something totally different from its original Divine revelation. Moreover, political power in Byzantium continued to wield the real authority, allowing religion only a minor influence. In addition, the different Christian schools were at loggerheads with one another, thereby weakening the Church and threatening to engulf the whole empire in acrimony. In turn, this also led to further persecution of those who dissented from the official doctrine. Yet both parties, those who toed the official line and those who dissented from it, deviated from true Christianity.

The Arabian Environment

At this juncture, Islam was revealed. It was a message that aimed to save humanity from the corruption, persecution, immorality and blind ignorance that had spread into all populated areas. It aimed to lead humanity on a way to God, providing light and guidance. Hence, it was necessary that Islam should have power and authority in order to accomplish the great transformation in human life that was required. It was imperative, therefore, that Islam start its operation in a free land, over which none of those empires had any control, so as not to let any power that was alien to its nature influence it. On the contrary, it was necessary that Islam have the power to shape its own domain and to influence its own surroundings. The Arabian Peninsula, especially the Mother City and its neighbouring areas, provided the best place on earth for the emergence of Islam and from where it would start its global march.

There was no established government with laws, legislation, an army, a police force or complete authority in Arabia, ensuring proper control over its population as was the case in the empires we have described. Moreover, Arabia did not have a clear and well-defined religion. Indeed, the opposite was true: in Arabia there was a medley of pagan beliefs. People worshipped a great variety of deities, including angels, *jinn*, stars and idols. Although the Ka'bah and the Quraysh enjoyed some overall religious hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula, this did not constitute a real authority that could mount firm opposition to the new faith. Had it not been for their economic interests and special position, the Quraysh chiefs would not have opposed Islam as solidly as they actually did. They realized how hollow and confused their beliefs were. In this way, then, the loose and weak political and religious systems in Arabia provided the best environment for the emergence of the new Islamic faith, one where it could not be influenced by any real authority alien to its nature.

Moreover, Arabia's unique social make-up provided a measure of protection for this new message. The Arabian system was tribal, where each clan had its weight and position. When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) started preaching Islam, his Hāshimite clan provided him with protection, and the general tribal balance provided him with a

good opportunity to go about his task. Other clans did not wish to fight against the Hāshimite clan realizing that the majority of its people did not follow Muḥammad's faith. Indeed, the clans were very reluctant to assault any individual Muslim who had real clan affiliation. They left the task of punishing such individuals to their own families. Indeed, those weaker elements and slaves who embraced the faith were tortured by their own masters. Therefore, Abū Bakr used to buy such slaves and free them, thus making them immune to such persecution. Needless to say, this situation provided the new faith with a particularly suitable environment to establish itself. Furthermore, the qualities of the Arabs, including their bravery, warm-heartedness, pride and sense of honour stood them in good stead and qualified them to be the bearers of this new message.

At the time, the Arabian Peninsula benefited from a suitably fertile soil to support a general renaissance. It had people with various abilities and potentials ready to serve such a development as and when it started. Experience had been accumulated as a result of trips to the nearest areas within the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The most notable of these trips were the winter one to the south and the summer one to the north. These are mentioned in the Qur'ān: "*For the tradition of the Quraysh, their tradition of travelling in winter and summer. Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear.*" (106: 4) Many other circumstances helped to build a great wealth of experience which was coupled with a natural readiness to receive the great task assigned to Arabia, making it the birthplace of God's final message to mankind. When Islam began to be revealed, it made use of this wealth of experience and utilized all latent potential. It was thus able to tap the readily available Arabian resources to serve its message. Perhaps this explains the presence of a large number of great men among the Prophet's Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, Ḥamzah, al-'Abbās, Abū 'Ubaydah, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khālid ibn al-Walīd, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and many others who warmed to Islam and embraced it. No doubt all these people were able to rise to a far higher standard under Islam, but they had the potential to so rise in the first place.

The Division of Mankind

Thus the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to warn the Mother City and its surrounding area. When the Arabian Peninsula moved out of ignorance into Islam and became totally Muslim, it carried the banner of Islam, moving with it to the East and to the West. These Muslims presented Islam and the human system based on it to the world, since, by nature, this message is addressed to all humanity. They were the best and most suitable people to advocate it, stemming as it did from the most suitable place for its birth and growth.

It was by God's design that the Prophet lived until Arabia, with all its population, embraced Islam. The land chosen to be the cradle of Islam now permanently adopted the full colours of the new faith. Likewise, the language to express it and deliver it to the world was clearly chosen. Arabic had by that time achieved full maturity so as to be most suitable for delivering God's message to all corners of the world. Had Arabic been a deficient or immature language, it would not have been able to embody the message in the first place, or to deliver it to people outside Arabia. In short, the language, the people and the environment were all the best suited for this great universal event. Thus, wherever we look in our attempt to understand God's purpose, wisdom and choice, we find a long list of positive factors converging together to provide the new message with the conditions most suited for its welcome. This confirms God's statement: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.* (Verse 7)

The hardest, most fundamental and often repeated warning in the Qur'ān is that concerning the Day of Gathering, when God will gather together all creatures from all generations and places, prior to dividing them into two groups according to what they did during their life on earth, the place where people choose what to do: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7)

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (Verse 8)

God could, if He wished, create people in a different form so as to make their behaviour and actions uniform. Had He done so, their end would have been the same and they would all go either to heaven or to hell. However, in His limitless glory, God created man for a purpose, assigning to him the task of building human life on earth. In order for this task to be accomplished He made it necessary for man to have special qualities distinguishing him from both angels and devils, as also from all types of creation with a nature of singular direction. In this respect, then, He gave man qualities and abilities which make some people lean towards guidance, light and good action, while others lean towards error, darkness and evil action. Each group follows one of these two susceptibilities inherent in human nature, leading them to the end determined for the type of action they choose: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) Thus God will "*admit to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) His decisions are based on His knowledge of the conditions of both parties and whether they follow guidance and thus deserve His grace or go astray and thus deserve His punishment.

It has already been mentioned that some people take protectors for themselves other than God. Now, the *sūrah* makes it clear that "*the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) The fact is that their alleged protectors do not exist.

Again, the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Have they chosen protectors other than Him?*" (Verse 9) It follows this rhetorical question with a statement making it clear that God is the only protector who is able to do everything. His power is clearly seen in the fact that He brings the dead back to life. This is indeed the action which shows His unique power at its most splendid: "*God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead.*" (Verse 9) His power is then stated to be total and to extend over all beings, with no limits whatsoever: "*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Who Judges in Disputes?

The *sūrah* returns to the central issue, identifying the ultimate point of reference in judging any dispute. It is this new revelation from God, containing His judgement. This ensures that changeable personal preferences and fleeting desires cannot influence life under the Divine code that admits no prejudice:

> *Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.* (Verses 10–12)

These verses express a number of facts, but the way these are stated and their sequence and juxtaposition in this short passage is truly remarkable, requiring proper reflection. Upon such reflection, the interlinking between their inner and outer aspects is both subtle and precise. Everything over which dispute arises between people should be judged by God: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God.*" (Verse 10) God has made His judgement clear in this Qur'ān, stating His final word concerning this life and the life to come. He also established the code of living which people should follow in their personal and community lives, in their dealings among themselves, their system of government and their moral values and manners. He has made all this abundantly clear, making the Qur'ān a comprehensive constitution for human life, with a scope that is broader than their own constitutions. Therefore, should dispute arise between them, the right judgement is ready for them, outlined in His revelation delivered to them by His messenger.

When this truth has been established, the verse quotes the Prophet's statement whereby he clearly submits himself and all his affairs to God,

turning to Him in all situations: "*Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the Prophet's statement that he turns to God, places all his trust in Him and relies on Him in all situations, occurs at the most suitable point, serving as it does as a comment on the preceding rule. When God's messenger who receives guidance from God declares his attitude in these terms, how can other people refer their disputes to anyone else or place their trust in other beings? Knowing that God is his Lord who provides everything for him and guides him to what is best, the Prophet makes his choice, turning to Him alone. How can others make a different choice?

When this is established in a believer's heart, he sees his way ahead, clearly defined and well enlightened. He does not look for any other way. He is confident, reassured, knowing where to go. He entertains no doubt because he knows that God takes care of him and protects him. Moreover, he attaches a high value to his system which he derives from God's revelations, clear in his mind that no system can be superior to God's word.

A further comment is then made to consolidate this truth: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) The One who revealed the Qur'ān to provide final judgement on all people's disputes is "*the Originator of the heavens and the earth,*" who controls them. The law that governs the heavens and the earth is His final judgement on all that concerns them. Human life is only a part of what takes place in the heavens and the earth. Therefore, His judgement on human matters ensures harmony between human life and the life of the great universe.

God, to whose judgement they should refer all their disputes, is the One who created them and moulded their souls: "*He made mates for you from among yourselves.*" (Verse 11) Thus He designed your life giving it its very foundation. He knows what is best for you and what suits your life, putting it in harmony with the rest of His creation: "*just as He made mates for animals.*" (Verse 11) This unity in biological

form confirms the unity of will and design. Hence, people and animals multiply and procreate in the same natural process. By contrast, He is alone in the way He is, with no comparability to anything or anyone: "*Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him.*" (Verse 11) Human nature accepts this without hesitation. The Creator of all cannot be compared to anything He creates. Therefore, His creatures refer to Him when they differ. They cannot refer to anyone else alongside Him because nothing is comparable to Him.

Although God, in His limitless glory, is beyond comparability with anyone or anything, contact between Him and His creation is not severed. On the contrary, "*He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) His judgement is that of the One who knows, hears and sees.

Given that He makes His judgement final in all people's disputes, this can only mean that this rule is based on the fact that having originated the heavens and the earth and set their laws in operation, He continues to hold their keys: "*His are the keys of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 12) Since mankind are only part of what lives in the heavens and earth, the same fact applies to them, which means that the keys and treasures of the universe belong to God. Moreover, it is He who provides them with sustenance, determining its measure in the same way as He conducts all affairs: "*He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 12) It is He who gives them the food they eat and the water they drink, providing everything they need in their lives. Can they, then, refer to anyone else for judgement in their affairs? It is the most natural procedure for people to turn to the One who controls all this according to His perfect knowledge: "*He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 12) Needless to say, the One who knows everything is the One who can make a final judgement in all fairness.

This is just one example of how the meanings of the component parts of the *sūrah*'s verses converge in complete harmony and perfect subtlety to work on the human heart. It is akin to the harmonious tones that combine to make a superb melody.

The Same Faith of Old

Once more the *sūrah* addresses its central theme:

> *In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* began with a general reference to the unity of the source of all Divine faiths: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Now it gives more details of this fact, pointing out that the legislation God has enacted for Muslims is, in essence, the same as He legislated for Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, requiring them all to establish the Divine faith and not to split into factions over it. This requires that they, in turn, steadfastly pursue the Divine code of living, paying no heed to the desires of those who fall into dispute. This Divine faith is thus meant to govern human life, while those who argue about God have no leg to stand on. They are the ones who are warned of the painful punishment they might incur.

This passage enjoys the same level of perfect harmony as the preceding one: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had*

enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.'" (Verse 13) Thus the *sūrah* confirms the truth we explained at its very outset: God is the source of all Divine religions, starting far back in history. A little touch is added here which has a pleasant, subtle effect on every believer. He or she looks out to see who were their predecessors on this long line only to find that they were those noble elite: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be on them all). Every believer then realizes that he has joined their procession, travelling the same way they travelled. He will then enjoy his journey along that way, no matter how much trouble, persecution or deprivation he suffers. Who would not put up with trouble, knowing that it is only transient, when he is assured of the company of such an elite nobility?

Moreover, there is a profound sense of peace between believers in the one Divine faith who implement His law. No conflict or dispute arises between them. They feel their strong bond urging them to collaborate and understand each other so that they can maintain the link between present and past.

Since the religion God ordained for the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad is the same as He enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, why do the followers of Moses and Jesus fight against each other? Indeed, what causes fighting between the followers of different Christian sects? Why do the followers of Moses and Jesus go to war against the followers of Muḥammad? And why do those idolaters who claim to follow Abraham's faith wage a war against Muslims? Should not all these group together under the one banner hoisted by God's last messenger? The same order was issued to them all: "*Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) Only when they unite under this banner do they uphold the faith, fulfil its duties, maintain its path and work under the same banner hoisted high in succession by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus until it was eventually carried by Muḥammad, who received the final testament.

The idolater Arabs in the Mother City and its surrounding area, who claimed to follow Abraham's faith, adopted a different stance towards the new faith: "*Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on*

them to accept." (Verse 13) They found it hard that revelation should be vouchsafed to Muḥammad, when they wanted it to be given to a person of high position and authority among them. Muḥammad's personal qualities of unblemished honesty and perfect reliability, which they readily acknowledged, and his lineage descending from the noblest family among them, did not match, in their view, the status of a tribal chief who exercised power in his tribe. In short, it was far too difficult for them to accept that their own religious authority, founded on paganism and its legends, had come to an end. They realized that its ending threatened the economic and personal interests that such authority had given them. Hence they held on to their pagan beliefs, refusing to accept the message of God's oneness advocated by His noble messenger. Similarly difficult for them was that they were told that their idolatrous ancestors were in error. Therefore, they maintained their folly choosing to cast themselves in hell rather than acknowledge the truth.

The *sūrah* comments on their attitude stating that God chooses whom He wills and guides everyone who wishes to follow His guidance: "*God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him.*" (Verse 13) He drew Muḥammad to Himself and chose him to deliver His message. He always leaves the way wide open for anyone who turns to Him and seeks His guidance.

Division in Religion

Again the *sūrah* speaks of the followers of earlier messengers who divided into sects and groups although the messengers preached the same faith: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14) Their divisions did not come about as a result of ignorance, or because they did not know the single source that grouped their messengers and faiths together. They divided after knowledge was given to them. This division was caused by selfish rivalry and mutual envy. Thus, they were not only unjust to the truth but also to themselves. There was no

single reason based on the true faith for their division. Had they been true to their faith, they would have remained united.

They deserved to be immediately taken to task in requital for their division and deviation, but God, in His wisdom, had already ordained to allow them time, up to a specified point only He knows: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 14) Thus, the truth is established and falsehood is seen in its true guise. Matters are settled in this present life, but judgement is deferred until the Day of Resurrection. The generations that came after the division that split the followers of every one of God's messengers received the faith and the Divine book uncertain of its truth. Division, then, had allowed doubt and confusion to creep in, making people unable to determine which of the numerous doctrines and groups was right: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

Faith cannot be taken in this way. Faith is the solid rock on which a believer stands ensuring that he remains steadfast in his beliefs, even when the whole world around him is shaking hard. Faith is his guiding star that assures him of his way when different forces try to pull him in opposite directions. When faith itself becomes subject to such strong doubts, nothing remains certain in man's mind. He cannot be sure which way to take and which course to follow. Reassurance is no longer available to him. God revealed the Divine faith so that those who follow it would know the way that leads them to Him and ensures His pleasure. In turn, they too would be able to lead other people along the right way, unaffected by doubt or uncertainty. When they themselves become immersed in doubt, however, they cannot lead anyone anywhere.

Such was the state the followers of earlier prophets were in at the time Islam was revealed. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, an eminent Indian scholar, writes:

> Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased clergymen who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that, if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they would not have recognized them.

As a result of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere became entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for personal conduct, nor any abiding and rational principle for running a state.[1]

Additionally, J.H. Denison, a European author, writes:

In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...

It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...

It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

1. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, p. 2.

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently the author used an Arabic translation which was an abridged one, with some difference of emphasis in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the author's flow. – Editor's note.

It is because of such divisions among the followers of earlier messengers and the doubts engulfing their subsequent generations, and because the leadership of mankind was in desperate need of someone who was certain of the way to God, that the last messenger, Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was sent to all mankind. God commanded him to deliver His message, holding firm to it, paying no heed to the conflicting creeds around him. He was to announce the rebirth of the Divine faith embodied in the one message that God gave to all prophets:

> *Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verse 15)

This is a new leadership for all mankind; a strong leadership, sure of its way and firm in its beliefs. It advocates its message equipped with true insight, and follows God's orders without deviation, steering away from all conflicting forces. This new leadership of mankind declares that the Divine message is one and the way to which it guides people is the same. Thus, all Divine faith comes from one source and mankind must turn to that source only: "*Say: I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 15) Its constitution and policy is based on truth and justice: "*I am commanded to ensure justice between you.*" (Verse 15) This new leadership has definite authority enabling it to declare justice among all mankind even at the time when it was confined to the narrow valleys of Makkah, where its followers suffered unrelenting persecution. Yet its authority was clear to all. It clearly announces that: (1) the Lord of the universe is the One Lord: "*God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15); (2) everyone is responsible for their own actions: "*To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds.*" (Verse 15); (3) all argument is ended as God's final word is given: "*Let there be no argument between us and you.*" (Verse 15); and

(4) all affairs are left to God for His final judgement: "*God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.*" (Verse 15)

This single verse with short, clear and decisive statements describes the nature of this last message in all its clarity. It is a message that means to follow its own way, unaffected by people's desires. It aims to extend its authority so as to ensure justice between all people. Its objective is to show the one way leading to God since it is the only way defined by all messages.

As the issues have thus been clarified and the community of believers have assuredly responded to God's message, the argument of those still disputing about God appears to be both singular and trivial, lacking basis and weight. A final word is stated about them making clear that they will have to face the punishment they have been warned against: "*As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 16) Whoever posits an argument that is null and void in God's sight has nothing to offer. Not only are his arguments proven false in this life, but in the life to come he will incur God's anger and face severe punishment for persisting with such falsehood.

Hastening the Last Hour

Yet another round is started to drive the central theme of the *sūrah* home to us:

> *It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.* (Verses 17–20)

It is God who revealed His book to set forth the truth, and it is He who ordained justice, making His book the criterion to judge in all disputes among the followers of earlier religions, as also in all disputes that arise between people. He based all His laws on true and accurate justice, which is comparable to a balance that weighs values, rights and actions. The same verse also mentions the Last Hour, which is a frequent Qur'ānic reference to the Day of Judgement. Its mention is appropriate because it is the time set for the final judgement based on absolute justice. The Last Hour belongs to the realm that is beyond the reach of human perception. Hence, no one can be sure of when it is due: "*For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near.*" (Verse 17) People prefer to ignore it when it is close to them. It will inevitably bring them to the fair reckoning which takes every little detail into account, overlooking nothing.

The *sūrah* describes the different attitudes of people concerning the Last Hour: "*Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth.*" (Verse 18) The ones who do not believe in it neither feel its seriousness nor understand what awaits them when it comes. Hence, it is no wonder that they take a frivolous attitude asking for it to be hastened. In contrast, the believers are certain of it and, as a result, they shudder as they think about it, dreading its outcome. They know what it is like when it finally comes. They also know it to be the truth, for they have always had their bond with the truth. Whereas, "*those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray.*" (Verse 18) Having gone far astray, it is difficult for them to turn back.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the sustenance God, out of His grace, provides for all people. "*God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty.*" (Verse 19) The link between this verse and the previous one speaking about the Last Hour and the different attitudes people take towards it seems unclear. However, it becomes very apparent when we read the next verse: "*To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.*" (Verse 20)

God provides for all His servants, the good and the bad, the believer and the unbeliever. People are too weak to be able to provide for themselves. God has brought them into life and given them what meets their basic needs. Had He chosen not to provide for the unbelievers and the wrongdoers, they would not have had anything and would have died of thirst and hunger. Had this been the scenario, God's purpose of giving them life and allowing them a chance to do what may be counted for or against them would not have been fulfilled. Therefore, He attached the question of provisions to different factors related to life situations and personal abilities. He made it part of the test people undergo in this life and the result of which is known only in the life to come. Thus, it has nothing to do with belief or unbelief, goodness of character or personality.

Furthermore, God has made both this life and the life to come as a harvest for people, and they choose the type of harvest they want. A person who wants to have the harvest of the life to come will work to achieve this. God will help such people because of what they intend and bless their work. They will not only have their harvest in the life to come, but will also have whatever God has apportioned to them of provisions in this life. They will lose nothing of it. On the contrary, their provisions in this world may be, in as far as they are concerned, the means to achieve their harvest in the life to come. Such people use what God provides for them, investing, enjoying and spending it only in ways that are acceptable to, and please Him. By contrast, those who desire only a harvest in this life will have the provisions God has allocated for them, denying them nothing of this, but they will have nothing in the life to come. They do not work for such a harvest, and as a result, they receive nothing.

A glance at each group is sufficient to expose the folly of the one who desires only their harvest in this life. God grants both groups the provisions they will have in this life as He has determined. No one will miss out on any of it. What is achieved in the life to come is that which people actually desire and work for.

Among those who work only for the harvest of this life we find some who are rich and some who are poor, according to their means of earning a livelihood. Such means are interlinked with general

situations, local circumstances and personal abilities. The same applies in equal measure to those who desire a harvest in the life to come. There is absolutely no difference between the two groups in this present life concerning their livelihood. The difference, however, will be obvious in the life to come. So what folly makes anyone abandon the harvest of the life to come, when this will not change his lot in this life even by a small measure?

Ultimately, the matter is determined by the truth and the balance established by the book God has revealed. Truth and justice are evidently seen in providing sustenance for all people, and all living things, as also in increasing the harvest of the life to come or denying the same to those who desire only this present life.

Fearing One's Deeds

The basic truth providing the central theme of the *sūrah* again comes in for further discussion:

> *Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.* (Verses 21–23)

The *sūrah* earlier stated that what God has legislated for the Muslim community is the same as He had enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In other words, all this is embodied in what God revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). At this point, the *sūrah* employs a rhetorical question addressing the unbelievers' beliefs and practices:

essentially, these are contrary to what God has ordained in His messages, so who ordained the same for the unbelievers, without God's sanction?

"*Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned?*" (Verse 21) None of God's creatures may legislate anything that is at variance with what He legislates. It is God alone who legislates for all His creation. It is He who has created the universe and conducts its affairs through natural laws He has set in operation. Human life is merely a small gear in the great cog of the universe. Therefore, its law should be consistent with the laws governing the universe and its operation. This can only be achieved when the law of human life is enacted by the One who has full knowledge of universal law. No one other than God has such knowledge. Hence, no one can be entrusted with the task of legislating for human life.

Although the logic of this fact is abundantly clear, still there are many who dispute it or who are not convinced of its truth. They dare to enact laws and legislation that are at variance with God's law, claiming that they are only choosing what is good for their peoples, ensuring that their laws fit their specific circumstances. In doing so they suggest that they know better than God and are wiser than Him. The only other justification they put forward is that they believe in some beings whom they allege to be God's partners, and that it is these who enact laws for them that are not sanctioned by God. There can be no greater folly than such impudence.

God has enacted for mankind laws that He knows to be in harmony with their nature on the one hand and with the nature of the universe they live in on the other. Thus, His law ensures the maximum cooperation and harmony among mankind as also with universal powers. In all this, He has put in place basic principles. He has left it for people to enact legislation concerning the details that suit their needs according to their level of development, provided that such legislation remains within the framework of the principles He has laid down. Should people differ over something in this regard, they should refer the matter to God and the balance He has established through these principles. People must make sure that every detailed law they enact fits with this balance. In this way, the source of legislation remains one and the ultimate word remains God's. He is indeed the best of all judges. Anything that differs with this constitutes deviation from God's

law and the religion He ordained for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all).

"*Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 21) God has made His decree to defer judgement to the final day. Had he not decreed such deferment, He would have made His judgement now, punishing those who deviate from His law. However, He postpones this to the Day of Judgement when "*painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 21) Such suffering is in requital for their wrongdoing. Can there be anything more erroneous than choosing man-made laws in preference to God's law?

Those wrongdoers are shown as they will be on the Day of Judgement, afraid of what will happen to them. During their lives on earth, however, they entertained no such fear. On the contrary, they ridiculed the reckoning and asked for it to be hastened: "*You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them.*" (Verse 22) In the Arabic original they are described as 'full of fear for what they have done', as if their deeds are some fearful beast. Yet they performed these deeds with their own hands, enjoying their actions. Still, when they face these same deeds they are full of fear, realizing that they are '*bound to fall back on them,*' as though the deeds themselves are transformed into a punishment they cannot avoid.

Conversely, we see the believers who used to be in awe of what would happen on that day now feeling safe, reassured, enjoying what God grants them: "*And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds.*" (Verses 22–23) The whole image is one of bliss and happiness. Those believers are '*in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise*', where they will have '*whatever they wish from their Lord.*' There is no limit to His bounty, which is indeed supreme. This is, then, the good news that God gives to His righteous servants. It is good news that is shown to be ready, immediate, confirming the earlier promise of good things to come.

With such a pleasant image imparting an air of relaxed enjoyment, the Prophet is instructed to say to them that he seeks no reward from

them for the guidance he gives them, leading them to such lasting bliss and sparing them the painful suffering. He only gives them such guidance because he loves them; they are his kinsfolk. This is enough reward for him: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin. Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

The Prophet enjoyed relations with every single clan of the Quraysh tribe. Hence, he was keen that they should take up the guidance he was giving because it would bring them endless benefit. His motivation in all this was the affection he had for them as his kindred. He considered this as sufficient reward for his efforts.

This, then, is the meaning that sparked in my mind whenever I read this Qur'ānic expression about the Prophet's reward being merely an act of affection he does to his kinsfolk. There is, however, a different interpretation of it which I will state here because it is included in the authentic *Ḥadīth* anthology of Imām al-Bukhārī. Ṭāwūs, a scholar from the *Tābi'īn* generation, asking 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās about this phrase. Another scholar, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, answered first saying: 'It refers to the relatives of the Prophet.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'You have been too quick! The Prophet had relations among every clan of the Quraysh. Hence he said to them that all he asked for was that they should be kind to his own kinsfolk.'" According to this interpretation, the verse should be translated as: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this other than the affection due to kin.*" This means that they should stop causing him harm, which is something due one's relatives, and that they should listen to the guidance he gave them. This would be his reward from them. This interpretation by Ibn 'Abbās is closer to the verse's meaning than that of Sa'īd ibn Jubayr. However, I still feel that the interpretation I suggested is closer to the point. God knows best the meanings of His words.

Thus, within the context of the gardens of paradise and the good news he gives them, the Prophet reminds them that he asks no reward for anything he gives them. People normally demand hefty fees for advice that is well below what the Prophet gave his people. This is all part of God's grace. He does not deal with people according to principles of commerce, nor according to justice; instead He deals with them in accordance with the principles of grace and bounty: "*Whoever*

does good, We shall increase it for him." (Verse 23) It is not merely that the Prophet seeks no reward whatsoever from people; they are further promised increase in their reward for good deeds. In addition, they shall have forgiveness and their deeds will be appreciated: "*God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

God's Word of Truth

Once more the *sūrah* refers to the basic fact behind its central theme:

> *Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verse 24)

This verse tackles the last excuse the unbelievers offer to justify their attitude to revelation: "*Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?'*" (Verse 24) Is this why they do not believe the Prophet, claiming that God has not revealed anything to him? Such a claim is invalid. God would not allow anyone to fabricate lies about Him, claiming to receive revelations from Him when he does not, without taking that person to task. He is easily able to seal such a person's heart rendering him incapable of saying anything like the Qur'ān. He is also able to expose the falsehood such a person says and establish the truth: "*If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words.*" (Verse 24) All Muḥammad's thoughts are known to God, even before Muḥammad (peace be upon him) expresses them: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 24)

This last excuse is, thus, seen to be hollow and unfounded. Moreover, it is contrary to what is well established of God's knowledge of everyone's inner thoughts, His ability to accomplish what He wills and His law that remains in operation, establishing the truth and blotting out all falsehood. Thus, the revelation of the Qur'ān is truly from God, and what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says is the truth. Claiming anything different from this is no more than a false allegation, one that is immersed in error.

2

God's Signs in the Created World

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَقْبَلُ ٱلتَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَنِ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and who pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. (25)

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَيَزِيدُهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦ ۚ
وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. (26)

وَلَوْ بَسَطَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِعِبَادِهِۦ لَبَغَوْا۟ فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن يُنَزِّلُ بِقَدَرٍ مَّا يَشَآءُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (27)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُنَزِّلُ ٱلْغَيْثَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا قَنَطُوا۟ وَيَنشُرُ رَحْمَتَهُۥ ۚ وَهُوَ
ٱلْوَلِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٨﴾

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (28)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَثَّ فِيهِمَا مِن دَآبَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ
إِذَا يَشَآءُ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. (29)

وَمَآ أَصَٰبَكُم مِّن مُّصِيبَةٍ
فَبِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. (30)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٣١﴾

Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (31)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِ ٱلْجَوَارِ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ كَٱلْأَعْلَٰمِ ﴿٣٢﴾

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (32)

إِن يَشَأْ يُسْكِنِ ٱلرِّيحَ فَيَظْلَلْنَ رَوَاكِدَ
عَلَىٰ ظَهْرِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; (33)

أَوْ يُوبِقْهُنَّ بِمَا كَسَبُوا۟ وَيَعْفُ
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. (34)

Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (35)

وَيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا
مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; (36)

فَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَىْءٍ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ
وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
وَإِذَا مَا غَضِبُوا۟ هُمْ يَغْفِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَجَابُوا۟ لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا۟
ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. (39)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَصَابَهُمُ ٱلْبَغْىُ هُمْ يَنتَصِرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. (40)

وَجَزَٰٓؤُا۟ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا ۖ فَمَنْ
عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُۥ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَمَنِ ٱنتَصَرَ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِۦ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
مَا عَلَيْهِم مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤١﴾

However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41)

إِنَّمَا ٱلسَّبِيلُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ
وَيَبْغُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)

وَلَمَن صَبَرَ وَغَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمِنْ
عَزْمِ ٱلْأُمُورِ ﴿٤٣﴾

As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (43)

وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن وَلِىٍّ مِّنۢ
بَعْدِهِۦ ۗ وَتَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا۟
ٱلْعَذَابَ يَقُولُونَ هَلْ إِلَىٰ مَرَدٍّ
مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' (44)

وَتَرَىٰهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا خَٰشِعِينَ
مِنَ ٱلذُّلِّ يَنظُرُونَ مِن طَرْفٍ خَفِىٍّ ۗ
وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ
ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ
ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ فِى عَذَابٍ
مُّقِيمٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. (45)

No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (46)

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنْ أَوْلِيَآءَ يَنصُرُونَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. (47)

ٱسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لِرَبِّكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِىَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ مَا لَكُم مِّن مَّلْجَإٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّكِيرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (48)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَٰكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ إِنْ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ۗ وَإِنَّآ إِذَآ أَذَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً فَرِحَ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ كَفُورٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; (49)

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ ۚ يَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ إِنَٰثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ ٱلذُّكُورَ ﴿٤٩﴾

أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا ۖ وَيَجْعَلُ مَن
يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is all-knowing, infinite in His power. (50)

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَن يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا
أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا
فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيٌّ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted, Wise. (51)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا ۚ
مَا كُنتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ
وَلَٰكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَن نَّشَاءُ
مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, (52)

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ
الْأُمُورُ ﴿٥٣﴾

the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (53)

Overview

In this second part of the *sūrah*, the discussion continues to point to signs confirming the truth of faith within people's own selves and in the wide horizons. Further discussion is added about God's power and its evidence in people's surroundings and what affects their livelihood. The distinctive qualities of believers also come in for discussion. Towards the end of the *sūrah* we have further discussions on what the first part focused on, namely, revelation, its nature and how it is delivered. The two parts are closely linked, as both address the human heart and put the way to faith before us.

Affluence and People's Behaviour

> *It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.* (Verses 25–27)

These verses follow immediately after the verses that show the wrongdoers dreading having to face what they have done given it will inevitably fall back on them. Those verses also painted an image of the believers as they revel in their rewards, secure in the flowering meadows of paradise. Moreover, those earlier verses confirmed what the Prophet delivered to them of God's message and stated that God is fully aware of what their hearts may harbour.

As this second part opens, it calls on people to turn to God and abandon their erroneous ways before a final judgement is passed on them. The door to repentance is left wide open. God Almighty accepts repentance and pardons bad deeds. Hence, there is no need to despair, go further into disobedience, or panic because of the sins they have committed. God knows what they do, and He certainly knows sincere

repentance and accepts it, just as He knows their past sins and pardons them for these.

Again the *sūrah* refers to what believers and unbelievers will receive in reward or punishment. Those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who respond to their Lord's call. He, therefore, gives them an increase of His bounty. By contrast, "*As for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 26) Yet the door to repentance, which will spare the repentant all suffering, is open to all at all times. Any unbeliever who repents will qualify for God's bounty which is, in the life to come, plentiful, unlimited. In this life, however, it is given according to a set criterion. God knows that in their lives on earth, human beings cannot cope with God's bounty should it be given to them without measure: "*If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.*" (Verse 27)

Compared to the limitless bounty granted in the hereafter, the provisions people have in this life, no matter how abundant they may seem, are very small indeed. God knows that His human creatures can only cope with a small measure of richness. If He were to grant them abundance, of the sort He grants them in the life to come, they would behave with much insolence. They are too small to maintain their balance; too weak to cope with their burdens when these exceed a certain limit. God is fully aware of their limitations. Therefore, He keeps His bounty to them in this present life within the limits they can cope with. He keeps His unlimited bounty till later, and gives it only to those who pass the test of this life, reaching the life to come in safety. They will then receive His limitless bounty.

> *It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.* (Verse 28)

Again, we are reminded of some aspects of God's grace as He bestows it on people living on earth. We see them here when they have gone without rain for some time. They feel their powerlessness as water, life's

necessity, is denied them. They are in total despair. At this point, the skies open and God's grace is spread far and wide. The land is alive again, green shoots spring up, the seeds that have been planted promise a good yield, the weather moderates, smiles are back on people's faces and hope is regained. What separates the old despair from the new hope is no more than a few minutes during which the gates of God's grace are open and rain pours down: "*He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 28) His help is available at all times. He is not only worthy of praise in Himself but also for all His attributes.

The Arabic text uses the term *ghayth* to refer to rain. The term connotes providing emergency help for those who are in desperate need. The effects are given as God '*spreads His grace*', which enhances feelings of hope and happiness that we actually experience as we look at the emerging vegetation. Nothing has a greater comforting and calming effect on people than rain pouring down after a period of drought. Nothing helps to remove tension and worry better than seeing the land blooming after it has been barren and desolate.

What Causes Misfortune

> *Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.* (Verses 29–31)

These verses refer to a universal sign that is there for all to see, endorsing the truth the revelation testifies to, even though they continue to doubt it. The sign they see in the heavens and the earth is very clear, admitting no doubt. It addresses human nature in the language it understands. No one seriously argues about it. It states the fact that neither man nor any other of God's creation was the originator of the heavens and the earth. Admitting that they have a Creator, therefore, is inescapable. The heavens and the earth are huge, yet they demonstrate a meticulous harmony and function endlessly according to consistent

laws. This cannot be logically explained except by acknowledging that they have been created by God who conducts their affairs. Human nature directly receives this logic imparted by the universe, understands and accepts it before it hears any word that may be said about it by any external source.

This universal sign incorporates another, for God did not only create the heavens and the earth. He also created "*all the living creatures which He placed in them.*" (Verse 29) Life on our planet alone is another sign, so how should we conceive of other types of life unknown to us existing elsewhere in the universe. Life on this planet is a secret no one has yet managed to fathom, let alone aspire to initiate. It is a secret engulfed with mystery. We do not know how or from where it comes; nor do we know how it entwines with other creatures. All attempts to identify its source or nature have failed to open these closed doors. All research is necessarily confined to the development of living creatures, after they have life, and their variety and functions. Even in this limited scope, there are conflicting views and theories. Behind the curtain, however, there remains the great secret that no mental understanding can explore. It belongs to God alone.

All living creatures, everywhere, on earth and within it, in the deep sea and at high altitude, not to think of the rest of creatures beyond our world, are largely unknown to us. Indeed man only knows about a small number of them. All these creatures that God has placed in the heavens and the earth can be gathered by God whenever He wills. Not a single one of them will go astray or absent itself.

People cannot gather together a flock of domestic birds should they flee their cages, or bees that escape their hive. Everywhere on earth there are collections of different types of birds, bees, ants, insects, bacteria, cattle, beasts, fish, sea mammals, as well as human communities. There are also in the heavens other creatures that may be greater in number and that live in habitats about which we know nothing. Yet God can gather all these together if He so pleases. The time it takes between their placement in their different habitats and their gathering together is no more than the uttering of one word. The verse, here, therefore, contrasts the placement of all these creatures everywhere in the universe with their gathering: it is all done in just a

moment. In true Qur'ānic style, these two great scenes are juxtaposed in one short verse that takes only a few seconds to read.

The *sūrah* then tells them of what happens to the unbelievers in this life, as a result of what they perpetrate. Yet God does not take them to task for all this; He overlooks a great many of their actions. It describes their powerlessness as they occupy only a small corner of the living world: "*Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verses 30–31)

In the first of these two verses we see in action both God's justice and His grace as He bestows it on man. Every misfortune or calamity that befalls man is a direct result of what man does, but God does not hold him to account for all his deeds. He knows man's weakness and the desires inherent in his nature which often tempt and overpower him. Therefore, God pardons much of what man does. In the second verse we see man as he truly is: weak, powerless and without support. From whom, then, can he seek protection other than from the One who protects all?

Control of Natural Laws

> *And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.* (Verses 32–35)

Ships that traverse the sea are yet another of God's signs, just like mountains. It is a sign seen by all. They represent a phenomenon that is based on several factors each of which is a great sign put in place by God Almighty. Who created the sea? Can any human or any other creature claim that they made the sea? Who gave the sea its different characteristics: the density of its water, its depth and vast area allowing

it to carry such large craft? Then what about the wind that moves the ships that were known to those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān; and what about other forces that man was subsequently able to use such as steam and nuclear power, and other forces God may place at man's disposal in future? Who has given these forces their qualities that make them able to move such huge ships in the sea, so that they look like mountains on its surface?

"*If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea.*" (Verse 33) The wind may die down at times and ships will lie motionless, as though life has departed from them. "*In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God.*" (Verse 33) The signs are both in making the ships sail across the sea and in leaving them motionless. Such signs are appreciated by everyone who is patient in adversity, thankful for blessings. Patience and gratitude are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān, as they are interrelated qualities of believers in conditions of hardship and happiness.

"*Or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought.*" (Verse 34) He may cause the ships to be destroyed or drowned as a result of people's sins or deviation from the faith that all creatures acknowledge, with the exception of the unbelievers. "*And yet He forgives much.*" (Verse 34) He certainly does not punish people for every sinful action they do. Instead, He pardons and forgives much.

"*Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 35) Should God want to smite them, destroy their ships or visit them with some other punishment, they simply have no means of escape. Thus they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

A Community Moulded by Faith

The *sūrah* takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and

placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given:

> *Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.* (Verses 36–43)

Earlier in the *sūrah*, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'ān, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve

are the same. With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madīnah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madīnah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory.*" (22: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan *sūrah*, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs

through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and inalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36)

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36) It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the *sūrah* outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into

harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

> Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed...

> Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.[3]

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

> During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs. Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love...

3. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41–42.
– Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. – Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once intense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace [and Perfection], the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God [High is He] above the partners they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*" (59: 23–24)

He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to '*Lā ilāha illallāh*'[4] experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lit up with the sublime radiance of God-consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism

4. This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muḥammad is God's messenger.' – Editor's note.

and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure.[5]

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control.[6]

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur.[7]

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the *sūrah* refers. To place one's complete trust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'ān gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does

5. Nadwī, ibid., pp. 42–44.
6. Ibid., p. 46.
7. Ibid., pp. 49–50.

anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his trust in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. It enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

"*Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies.*" (Verse 37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

"*And who, when angered, will forgive.*" (Verse 37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. It highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. It does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. It recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of

the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain to, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"*Who respond to their Lord.*" (Verse 38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooth and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers "*attend regularly to their prayer.*" (Verse 38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. It comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muḥammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of *zakāt* which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers "*conduct their affairs by mutual consultation.*" (Verse 38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been established. In fact, the state is only a natural by-product of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"*And give generously out of what We have provided for them.*" (Verse 38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of *zakāt*, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madīnah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what

serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madīnah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent *zakāt* system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan *sūrah* is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: "*All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God].*" (63: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying *zakāt*. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the

persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Makkan period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: "*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: "*An evil deed is requited by an evil like it.*" (Verse 40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it.

Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: "*But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God.*" (Verse 40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.

"*He does not love wrongdoers.*" (Verse 40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: "*However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store.*" (Verses 41–42) A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting

justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others. Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The *sūrah* again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "*As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.*" (Verse 43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

What Price for a Second Chance?

Having outlined the qualities of believers who have ample and more lasting reward from God, the *sūrah* paints the opposite picture of those who go astray and inflict injustice. They will inevitably suffer humiliation:

> *He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.* (Verses 44–46)

What God wills is certain to take place. No one can change a course God has determined. Hence, "*He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him.*" (Verse 44) When God knows, on the basis of a person's true attitude and actions that he deserves to be left astray, His word that this person be left to follow his own devices will be done. He will then have no one to save him from error or its ultimate results, or to assist in its retraction: "*When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45)

In this present world, the wrongdoers are normally arrogant, despotic and transgressors. Hence, their highlighted aspect on the Day of Judgement is that of humiliation. They see the suffering awaiting them and their pride crumbles. Subdued, they will meekly ask: "*Is there any way of return?*" It is a question that combines eagerness and despair of any chance to save themselves. They are made to see the fire and they look at it in disgrace and utter humiliation. They cannot lift their eyes; therefore, they cast only a furtive glance.

It will be clear then that the believers are the ones who state the truth: "*The believers will then say: The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.*" (Verse 45) They are the ones who have lost everything, standing there humbly asking for a second chance that will not be given. The final comment on this image explains the outcome for those brought before the fire: "*Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.*" (Verses 45–46) No support will be forthcoming as the final word has been said and all ways are sealed.

When Response is Slow Coming

Now the *sūrah* addresses those who stubbornly opposed the Prophet's message with an order to respond to their Lord before such a fate comes upon them, all of a sudden, when they will be without support. A directive to the Prophet is added instructing him to turn away from

them if they persist in their rejection. His task though is only to deliver his message; he is not responsible for anyone:

> *Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.* (Verses 47–48)

Having made the warning and the directive abundantly clear, these verses portray the nature of the one who opposes the Divine message and stubbornly refuses to submit to its truth. He is fickle, wildly rejoicing when he is granted something of God's grace and panicking in the face of adversity. In such a situation, man often transgresses all bounds and shows no gratitude for what he is given: "*When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.*" (Verse 48)

By way of comment on this, the *sūrah* makes absolutely clear that whatever happiness or misfortune, affluence or scarcity befalls man is determined by God. It is very strange therefore for someone, who reacts in this way to blessings and misfortune, to turn away from God when He holds all the strings affecting his life:

> *To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.* (Verses 49–50)

Offspring is an aspect of what man is given or denied. It is something very dear to man. Since human nature is very sensitive to procreation, looking at it from this angle is more effective. The *sūrah* spoke earlier of man's provisions and how they are given in plentiful or scant measure.

Offspring is a different aspect of what God provides man with. It is no different from money, however, in the way it is granted.

These verses begin by stating that everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God alone. This introduction fits with every detail that follows this statement of general ownership. The same is true of the succeeding sentence: "*He creates what He will.*" (Verse 49) This emphasizes the effect the verse aims to generate, directing man, who loves every good thing, to turn to God who creates everything that man loves and dislikes.

Further details are given of what God may grant or withhold. He may grant female offspring to anyone. The Arabs addressed for the first time by the Qur'ān used to dislike females. He also grants male children to anyone He chooses. Alternatively, He may give offspring of both kinds to anyone. The fourth situation is that He may deny offspring altogether, making people barren. What is important to remember is that all these situations are determined by God's will. None interferes in His decision which is based on His perfect knowledge and executed by His power: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 50)

Methods of Revelation

As it draws to its conclusion, the *sūrah* picks up its main theme again, which is the truth of revelation and message. It now speaks of the nature of this contact between God and His chosen servants and how it is done. It asserts that such contact has actually taken place with the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). This last contact has a definite objective God wishes to accomplish, namely, providing guidance along a straight path to whoever chooses to be guided:

> *It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted, wise. Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a*

light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (Verses 51–53)

The first of these verses makes it abundantly clear that no man is ever spoken to by God face to face. 'Ā'ishah is quoted as saying: "Whoever claims that Muḥammad has seen his Lord is delivering a very grave falsehood." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] God speaks to people in one of three ways. First, by 'revelation', which is given directly and the recipient knows that it comes from God. Secondly, 'from behind a veil', as God spoke to Moses whose request to see God was denied. In fact, he was unable to stand firm when God's glory was revealed to the mountain. The relevant Qur'ānic report states: "*When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.' Said [God]: 'You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me.' When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: 'Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You.'*" (7: 143)

The third form of address is that God sends a messenger, who is an angel, '*to reveal by His command what He will.*' This takes different forms, which the Prophet explained as follows:

1. The angel would impart to him something he recognized within himself, without seeing the angel. The Prophet said: 'The Holy Spirit has imparted to me that no soul will ever die until it has had whatever provisions assigned to it. Therefore, remain God-fearing and moderate your requests.'
2. The angel would come to the Prophet in the form of a man who spoke to him and made sure that he understood what was being said to him.
3. The angel would give him the revelation in a way that sounded like a bell ringing in his ear. This was the hardest form for the

Prophet. He would be perspiring even on a very cold day. If he was riding a camel, his camel would fall to the ground. Once he received revelation in this way when he was seated, with his thigh next to that of Zayd ibn Thābit who felt then that his bone was almost broken.

4. The Prophet would see the angel in the angel's own form, giving him whatever God bid him give. This happened to him twice as mentioned in verses 7 and 13 of *Sūrah* 53, The Star.[8]

Such were the different forms of contact and revelation. "*He is Exalted, Wise.*" (Verse 51) He bestows His revelation from on high, to whomever He chooses, according to His wisdom.

The Nature of Revelation

At this point I have to say that whenever I read a Qur'ānic verse or a statement by the Prophet that mentions revelation, I feel a shudder as I try to think how it happened. How does such contact take place between the One who is eternal, having no defined space in time or place, who encompasses everything and has nothing that bears any resemblance to Him, and an ordinary mortal? And how is such contact then represented in words, sentences and meanings? How can a mortal receive God's eternal word which is totally unlike what we know? How this, and how that? I then say to myself: why should I ask when I cannot imagine things beyond my limited space within the world of mortals? The truth is that this took place and was given a form which I can now recognize within my immediate world.

Yet the shudder remains. Prophethood is something great indeed. Similarly, the moment when an ordinary man receives revelation from on high is indeed very great. My reader, can you feel it with me? Are you, like me, trying to imagine it; imagine this revelation coming from 'there'? Am I saying, there? No! there is no such thing as 'there'. Revelation comes from no place, time, space, direction or situation. It

8. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 78–80.

comes from the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal, from God Almighty. It is addressed to a mortal: it is true that the recipient is a Prophet and a messenger, but he remains confined to the limited world of mortals. It is such a wonderful and miraculous contact which can only be made a reality by God who alone knows how it becomes reality. My reader, do you appreciate the feelings I am trying to portray in such disjointed sentences? Indeed, I do not know what I am saying about what I experience in the depths of my heart as I try to contemplate this great event, which is miraculous in both nature and form. It took place on numerous occasions during the lifetime of God's messenger. Several people saw some aspects of it with their own eyes.

'Ā'ishah witnessed some of these remarkable moments in the history of mankind. She says about one of them: "The Prophet said to me, ''Ā'ishah! Here is Gabriel presenting his greeting to you.' I said, 'Peace be to him, together with God's mercy.' The Prophet was seeing what we could not see." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Zayd ibn Thābit also witnessed such a great moment as stated earlier. Other companions of the Prophet saw it on many occasions, recognizing the fact as they looked at the Prophet. They left him alone to receive whatever he received. When it was over, he was with them just as he was before.

Then, what sort of special nature distinguishes the human soul that makes this contact with the sublime? What is the element within the human soul that enables it to be the recipient of revelation from on high? This is yet another issue. In what way did the Prophet's soul, which is a human soul, feel this contact and how did it open its receptive faculties to revelation? How did it feel the universe in those moments when God opened His glory to it, with His words resounding in its every corner?

What care, what grace, what honour are bestowed on man, such a small creature, when God in His glory confers on him what enlightens his way ahead and keeps him on the right track? Such honour appears great indeed when we remember that, compared to God's kingdom, man looks more insignificant than a mosquito compared to man.

Revelation is indeed a reality, but a sublime one. It appears to rise to a high and distant horizon which our faculties can hardly perceive.

The Guiding Light

> *Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.* (Verses 52–53)

It was by means of such contact that revelation was given to the Prophet: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command.*" (Verse 52) The process was the same as revelation granted to earlier messengers, bringing to the Prophet a '*spirit*' that gives life to souls, motivating them to act and implement the Divine message. "*You knew neither revelation nor faith.*" (Verse 52) The Qur'ān describes the Prophet's soul prior to revelation in this way. The Prophet had heard of revelation and faith before, because the Arabs were aware of other communities that had scriptures and believed in a well-defined faith. It is not the mere knowledge of such matters that this statement refers to. The reference here is to how revelation affected the Prophet's heart and conscience and how he interacted with it. He certainly experienced nothing of this before this spirit was revealed to him by God's command.

"*But We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*" (Verse 52) This is the total nature of the message given through this revelation. It is a light that imparts happiness to those hearts that are guided by it. "*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God.*" (Verses 52–53) Special emphasis is placed here on relating guidance to God's will, making it clear that He alone grants it only to whom He will on the basis of His own knowledge, shared with no one else. The Prophet is only the means chosen to fulfil God's will. He does not initiate guidance in people's hearts. He only delivers God's message which opens the way to the fulfilment of God's will.

"*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verses 52–53) Guidance shows us the path of God, at which point all ways converge, because it leads to the Sovereign who alone has dominion over the

heavens and the earth. Whoever is guided to His path is certain to know the laws that God has set in operation in the universe, bringing their forces into play and providing sustenance to all. Hence, the whole universe turns to its Supreme Owner to whom all shall return: "*Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.*" (Verse 53) He will then judge them all. Such is the light God has given so that people will go along the way He has chosen for them; they will return to Him having obeyed His command and benefited by His guidance.

Thus the *sūrah* is brought to its conclusion. It began with a discussion of revelation, which provided its main theme. It stated that revelation started with the early prophets, making it clear that Divine religion is one, outlining the same code and showing the same way. It gives humanity its new leadership represented by the person of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and in the community that believes in his message. This community is entrusted with the task of guiding people to the straight path leading to God. The *sūrah* also outlines the characteristics of this community which qualify it to provide sound leadership. It is this community that shoulders the trust bestowed from on high by the sublime process of revelation.

SŪRAH 43

Al-Zukhruf

(Gold)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents a detailed picture of what the Islamic message faced of problems, arguments and objections. It also shows how the Qur'ān dealt with these and their effects on people, establishing at the same time its own truth in place of old, false, ignorant superstitions and values that had taken hold of people's minds at the time. In fact, some people, everywhere, continue to hold elements of these as valid.

Followers of pagan beliefs used to claim that the cattle God has created for the benefit of mankind are divided between God and their own alleged deities: "*Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]'. Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners.*" (6: 136) In fact, they believed in many legends and superstitions concerning cattle, and these were all the result of deviant practices. In this way, they claimed that they were forbidden to ride some animals, while others were considered unlawful to eat: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him.*" (6: 138)

This *sūrah* discusses such deviant beliefs putting forward the original truth and demonstrating that cattle are God's creatures, representing an aspect of life that is closely related to the creation of the heavens and the earth. God has made cattle subservient to man so that people can express their gratitude and give thanks to Him for such a blessing. They must neither attribute false partners to Him nor enact for themselves legislation that is at variance with what pleases God, when they recognize Him as the Creator. How absurd that they discard the natural result of this truth, which they acknowledge, allowing superstition to get the better of them: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 9–14)

Ignorant paganism used to claim that angels were God's daughters. Although they hated daughters being born to themselves, they nonetheless attributed daughters to God and worshipped these instead of Him. They alleged that they worshipped them by God's will. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have worshipped them. Again, this was nothing but a legend arising from deviant beliefs.

The *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic as well as the logic of sound human nature to refute this baseless legend: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the*

Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (Verses 15–22)

When they were told that they were only worshipping statues, idols and trees, and that everyone who worships anything other than God will be thrown into hell together with the object of their worship, they twisted this clear statement making it a subject of dispute. They referred to Jesus, pointing out that his followers worshipped him. So would he be thrown into hell? They also argued that the idols represented angels who were God's daughters. Therefore, they postulated, "we are better worshipping them than the Christians who worship Jesus, a mere human being." The *sūrah* exposes such twisted logic, absolving Jesus of what the Christians perpetrated after his time, since he did not sanction anything of the sort: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57–59)

They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith and, as such, were best guided, yet all the while they were immersed in pagan ignorance. The *sūrah* outlines the true nature of Abraham's faith, based on God's absolute oneness. This principle continued and will continue among Abraham's descendants. Muḥammad, God's messenger, came to them with the same principle, but they received him with other than what Abraham's offspring should give: "*Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verses 26–30)

They could not understand God's wisdom in choosing His messenger. Their earthly values, the basis of the status they assigned to people, contributed to their unwillingness to accept him. The *sūrah*

reports what they said in this respect, presenting the true values that should be upheld in comparison to their trivial ones: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verses 31–35)

The *sūrah* then recounts an episode from Moses' life history, one that reflects Pharaoh's similarly false values. This account demonstrates how both these values and Pharaoh himself were unworthy. It tells us of the fate that awaits him and all those with similar attitudes: "*We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 46–56)

I

Ignorance Based on Superstition

Al-Zukhruf (Gold)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (3)

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It originates in the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom. (4)

وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيٌّ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds? (5)

أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنكُمُ الذِّكْرَ صَفْحًا أَن كُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّسْرِفِينَ ﴿٥﴾

وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن نَّبِيٍّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; (6)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٧﴾

but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. (7)

فَأَهْلَكْنَا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا وَمَضَىٰ مَثَلُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history. (8)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ خَلَقَهُنَّ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' (9)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. (10)

وَالَّذِي نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ فَأَنشَرْنَا بِهِ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. (11)

وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, (12)

لِتَسْتَوُۥا۟ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِۦ ثُمَّ تَذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَةَ
رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا۟
سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَٰذَا وَمَا
كُنَّا لَهُۥ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. (13)

وَإِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا لَمُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

To our Lord we shall most certainly return.' (14)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ لَهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ جُزْءًا ۚ إِنَّ
ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. (15)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذَ مِمَّا يَخْلُقُ بَنَاتٍ
وَأَصْفَىٰكُم بِٱلْبَنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? (16)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِمَا ضَرَبَ
لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ مَثَلًا ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُۥ مُسْوَدًّا
وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (17)

أَوَمَن يُنَشَّؤُا۟ فِى ٱلْحِلْيَةِ وَهُوَ فِى
ٱلْخِصَامِ غَيْرُ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? (18)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ
عِبَٰدُ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ إِنَٰثًا ۚ أَشَهِدُوا۟
خَلْقَهُمْ ۚ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَٰدَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. (19)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ مَا عَبَدْنَٰهُم ۗ
مَّا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ
إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. (20)

أَمْ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمْ كِتَٰبًا مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ فَهُم
بِهِۦ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? (21)

بَلْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ
وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (22)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِى
قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَآ
إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا
عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' (23)

قَٰلَ أَوَلَوْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِأَهْدَىٰ مِمَّا وَجَدتُّمْ عَلَيْهِ ءَابَآءَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' (24)

فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ ۖ فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (25)

An Address to the Mind

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā* and *Mīm* which are then followed by an oath by the book that makes things clear. Both the letters and the book are of the same nature: in its spoken form, the book is of the same type as the letters. Just like all letters in human language, the two letters, or sounds, are of God's signs: it is He who created people and gave them the sounds of their languages. When such letters are mentioned, they carry more than a single meaning with reference to the Qur'ān.

God states this oath by the two letters and the clear book so as to confirm the purpose of making this Qur'ān in the form it was made when revealed to the Arabs: "*We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand.*" (Verse 3) The purpose, then, is that they should understand it as it is composed in their own tongue. The Qur'ān is God's revelation which He has made, in its spoken form, Arabic as He chose the Arabs to be the bearers of His message. We explained this purpose partly in commenting on the previous *sūrah*. Moreover, God made His choice on the basis of His knowledge that the Arabs were suitable message-bearers and that their language could best express it. God knows whom to entrust with His message.

He then defines what position He has assigned for the Qur'ān with Him and its value in His overall plan for the universe: "*It originates in*

the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom." (Verse 4) We will only in passing refer to the literal meaning of the phrase *Umm al-Kitāb*, translated here as 'the source of revelation'. Does it refer to the 'imperishable tablet'[1] mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, or to God's eternal knowledge? Both are the same in the sense that they do not have a specific meaning within our sphere of knowledge. Yet the verse transmits a definite impression that the Qur'ān has an especially high value in God's overall knowledge and planning. This is enough for us. The Qur'ān is '*sublime*', and '*full of wisdom*'. These two qualities give it a specific rationality, and indeed it is so! It is as if the Qur'ān has a soul of its own, with special features and qualities, that respond to the souls of those who interact with it. With its sublime position and wisdom, it provides guidance to humanity, leading it according to its own nature and qualities, imparting to its rational understanding and to its life values, concepts and facts that are also sublime and bear wisdom.

When this fact has been established it makes the people who speak the language in which the Qur'ān has been revealed appreciate the great gift and blessing God has given them. It shows them the extent of their transgression when they turn away from it in disdain. It is they who deserve to be treated with contempt. Therefore, they are told that they may well be ignored because of their transgression: "*Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds?*" (Verse 5)

It is indeed most remarkable that God, in His glory and sublimity, should care for such people, revealing to them a book in their own tongue, telling them about what they feel, explaining the inner aspects of their lives, showing them the path delineated by His guidance, relating to them accounts of earlier communities and reminding them of God's law that was in effect during ancient times. Yet they continue to ignore His guidance, turning away from it. For God to say that they will be deprived of His care and be ignored for their transgression sounds dreadful.

1. Verse 22 of *Sūrah* 85.

In addition to this threat, they are reminded of God's law that applied to earlier communities that denied the prophets sent to them: "*Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history.*" (Verses 6–8) What can they expect when God has already destroyed people that were much mightier than they because of their derision of the messengers sent to them?

The Almighty Creator

Amazingly, although the Arabs recognized that God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, they did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, declaring His oneness and address all worship to Him. On the contrary, they attributed partners to Him, assigning to these some of the cattle He has created. They also alleged that the angels were God's daughters whom they worshipped in the form of idols. The Qur'ān reports their acknowledgement of God's creation, puts before them the logic of human nature which they discard, and outlines the behaviour they should adopt in response to His blessings, particularly ships and cattle. It then describes what they claim about the angels:

> *Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.* (Verses 9–14)

The Arabs had a faith, which we can imagine as consisting of remnants of the original pure faith of Abraham, that had lost its original shining colours, intermingled with legends. What remained was something that human nature could not deny, namely that the universe has a Creator who is God: the universe could not have existed without a Creator and the Creator could only be God. Yet, the Arabs did not take this natural truth to its logical conclusion; they simply stopped at the bare fact: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.'*" (Verse 9)

It is obvious that they did not verbalize God's two attributes: the Almighty and the All-Knowing. They acknowledged that it was God who created the universe, but they did not know God according to His attributes detailed in the Islamic faith. These are positive attributes that produce a clear effect on people's lives and the life of the universe. They admitted that God created them and the universe, but they also alleged that He had partners because they did not know God's attributes that would have made the very concept of partnership with Him appear absurd. The Qur'ān tells them now that the Creator they acknowledge is the One who is Almighty and who knows all.

The *sūrah* takes them another step forward in outlining God's attributes and the favours He has given them: "*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Smoothing out the earth is a fact understood, in one way or another, by everyone. The people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān would have seen the earth smooth under their feet when they walked, ready for plants to grow. It is smoothed out generally for life to grow. However, we realize this today in a more profound way, taking into account what we have learnt about the nature of the earth and its history. Future generations will understand this fact in an even greater way; human knowledge will continue to expand and discover new facts that have so far remained unknown.

Today, we understand that smoothing out the earth so as to enable the human race to survive on it and find ways and paths to ensure life progresses is a complex multi-faceted process. In fact, this planet has gone through a number of different stages that have allowed its surface

to change from a hard rocky one to plant-supporting soil. Water has been formed from oxygen and hydrogen. Its rotation speed has slowed down to ensure that it has moderate temperatures throughout its day and so as to allow objects to remain stable on its surface. Moreover, a proper measure of gravity has been placed on it to ensure that its atmosphere remains sufficiently stable to support life. Without such an atmosphere life cannot be sustained, as is the case on other planets with a gravity too weak to ensure stability. Moreover, the earth's gravity has been made equal to movement and this equilibrium has protected objects and living things from being blown away, while at the same time allowing man and other living things to move on the surface of the earth. Had gravity increased above this sustainable level, all objects and living creatures would have been stuck to the earth and their movements would have become very hard or even impossible. Furthermore, air pressure would have increased so as to bind them firmly to the earth or crush them against it, just as we sometimes crush flies and mosquitoes with a strike that does not bring our hands into contact with them but rather increases the air pressure around them. By contrast, should air pressure decrease, our veins and breasts may burst.

The smoothing of the earth to make it life supporting also refers to the fact that the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator has brought about numerous balances which together facilitate human life on earth. Had any of these been disturbed, life would have become very difficult, even impossible. We have already mentioned some of these. We may, however, refer to the fact that the great amount of water that covers much of the earth's surface purges its atmosphere of much of the poisonous gases that result from the infinite number of interactions that take place all the time. Thus, its atmosphere remains life supporting. Plants also ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the oxygen living creatures breathe in and the oxygen breathed out during the process of assimilation plants perform. Unless this balance is maintained, all living things would have suffocated in a very short period of time.

Indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic statement, '*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you*,' grows

wider every day. Every new addition to its significance testifies to both God's might and knowledge. We see God's able hand wherever we look and however far our imagination roams. It tells man that his life is not the result of blind coincidence nor has he been abandoned. Indeed, God's hand defines man's every step before, during and after his life on earth.

"*So that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Reflection on what the universe contains and its natural laws inevitably leads the human mind to recognition of its Creator who established such accurate and perfectly harmonious systems.

Blessings of Every Type

The *sūrah* then looks a step further at the process of life and the emergence of living creatures: "*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) Water comes down from the skies, as every person sees and knows, but most people are not moved by this remarkable phenomenon because of over familiarity. Muḥammad, God's messenger, (peace be upon him), however, held a different attitude. He looked at the drops of rain with love and welcoming delight, knowing that they came from God; in other words, his heart recognized God's handiwork in these drops. Every heart that is aware of its bond with God and the laws of nature He has set in operation should adopt this attitude. Every raindrop is the result of these laws of nature which operate under God's eye and control. That rain originates from the vapour that rises from the earth and cools down in the atmosphere in no way diminishes the implication of these facts. Who has brought the earth into being, placed water on it, subjected it to heat, made water naturally evaporate and vapour rise and condense? Who has given the universe its other characteristics which give the condensing vapour an electrical charge so that when clouds gather, their electric charges cause rain to fall? Besides, what is electricity? What are these other characteristics that produce the combined effect of rain falling down? As we learn more about nature, however, our knowledge casts a heavy weight over our understanding. We no longer

appreciate the messages given by universal phenomena; we no longer allow these messages to refine our feelings and responses.

"*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure.*" (Verse 11) It is given in the right quantity, neither too much so as to flood large areas of land, nor too little to leave the land barren. Man has come to recognize the importance of maintaining this fine balance for the continuity of life. "*With it We raise dead land to life.*" Life on earth flourishes where water is plentiful. It is from water that every living thing originates. "*And thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) The One who originated life in the first place will bring it back again. It is He who started life in a land that was dead, and He will raise all back to life on the Day of Resurrection. Nothing is difficult for Him.

We learn from this *sūrah* that the Arab unbelievers used to assign a portion of their cattle to God and another portion to other beings. God, however, created cattle as one of the favours He bestows on man: people ride cattle as they ride on ships and they should appreciate His blessings and give thanks: "*And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 12–14)

Making things in pairs is a rule of life, as indicated in this verse. All living things are created in pairs; even the first living cell carries masculine and feminine characteristics. In fact, this rule perhaps applies to the universe in its entirety, if we consider its basic unit to be the atom which consists of a negative electron and a positive proton, as all research in physics has so far indicated. Be that as it may, this duality is apparent throughout life. It is God who has created all pairs, human and non-human.

Moreover, it is He who has "*provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride.*" (Verse 12) This is to remind man that God has placed him in charge of the earth, putting at his disposal its considerable and varied power and potential. It also invites man to show gratitude for God's choice and blessings, reminds him of the One who grants

blessings every time such a blessing is enjoyed. Such expressions of gratitude for God's blessings is sure to keep our hearts alive to their bond with God at every turn in life: "*So that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves.*" (Verse 13) We certainly cannot match His blessings. All that we can do is to be truly grateful and give due thanks for all that He has favoured us with. We should realize that we will eventually return to God after our term in charge of the earth comes to its end. He will then requite us for what we have done in life when we enjoyed His favours and what He placed at our service: "*To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verse 14) Such are the refined manners people should adopt towards God who has granted us countless favours and blessings. Yet we tend to forget Him even when we are enjoying His favours. Hence, this gentle reminder.

These Islamic manners closely relate to the cultivation of the human conscience and people's education. This is not a mere ritual or empty phrase we say when mounting cattle or riding on ships and other means of transport. It is a deliberate action that aims to alert our feelings so that we are fully aware of the bond between God and His creatures. Furthermore, His blessings are granted to us freely; we cannot repay God in any way for any of His countless blessings. Hence, we should always remain in awe of Him, thinking of the day when we will meet Him and submit our account of what we did in life. Thus we should always remain conscious of God, aware that He is watching over us.

An Absurd Superstition

The *sūrah* then refers to the absurd legend that makes deities of angels, alleging that they are God's daughters when they are no more than a different type of creature:

> *Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily*

attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (Verses 15–25)

The *sūrah* addresses every aspect of this superstition, leaving no loophole unclosed. Throughout, the *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic and draws on their own life situations. It places before them the fate of earlier communities that adopted a similar stand to theirs, making almost identical allegations. It begins by highlighting the absurdity of this superstition and what it means of blatant rejection of the truth: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15) The angels are God's servants. To allege that they are God's offspring means that they are not His servants, but instead have a special relationship with Him. Since they are God's servants, to give them any special relation to their Creator is meaningless. All God's creatures are His servants. Such a claim, thus, brands man as a clear unbeliever: "*Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15)

Using their own logic and standards, the *sūrah* ridicules their allegation that the angels are female and then their claim that they are

God's offspring: "*Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons?*" (Verse 16) If God were to take offspring for Himself, why would He choose females and give the males to them? This is nothing less than absurd and especially when they are so distressed when a daughter is born to them. "*If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 17)

What sort of manners are these that make them attribute to God what would fill them with gloom? Indeed, they would be so distressed about parenting a daughter that they could not even face speaking about it. In their environment, it was only brave men who could fight hard in battle that were looked upon with esteem. How come, then, that they assign to God offspring of the type which only cares about jewellery and fine things, unable to refute an argument or fight a case? "*[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument?*" (Verse 18) Here we see how the *sūrah* uses their own logic, making them ashamed of attributing to God what they themselves hate to father. Should they not, if at all, have attributed to Him what scores highly in their own estimation?

The *sūrah* then refutes another of their absurd superstitions. They alleged that the angels were female. On what basis do they make such a claim? "*They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19) Were they present when the angels were created so as to know that they were female? Had they seen their creation, they would have had reliable evidence. They certainly cannot claim to have been present at the time, yet still they make this ridiculous assertion. Therefore, they will be made responsible for claiming what they have no evidence to prove: "*Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19)

The unbelievers provide further argument to justify their absurdities, but once again the *sūrah* exposes how flawed their statements are: "*They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly*

lying." (Verse 20) When they are faced with irrefutable argument based on solid evidence, they justify their action by claiming that it is God's will. They allege that God accepts their worship of angels. Had He not been pleased with this, He would have prevented them from such worship! How devious! It is true that everything in the universe occurs by God's will. Yet it is also God's will that man has been given the ability to choose for himself which way to follow: true guidance or error. God has also required man to choose His guidance and follow it, telling man that this is the choice He will be pleased with. He is not pleased when man chooses error and disbelief, even though He has enabled him to do so.

When they attribute their own choice to God's will, this is nothing less than wild conjecture. They cannot be certain that God wants them to worship the angels. How can they achieve such certainty? "*Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying.*" (Verse 20) They simply indulge in guesswork and delusion. "*Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast?*" (Verse 21) Do they have such a book as a basis for their claims, giving them clear evidence in support of their worship?

Thus we see how the *sūrah* closes in on them, refuting every argument they make, and clearly indicating that faith cannot be based on guesswork or unsupported claims. Faith can only be based on a revealed book to which people should adhere.

At this point, the *sūrah* exposes the reality on which they rely when holding to their absurd superstition that makes them offer false worship: "*No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.'*" (Verse 22) This is a ludicrous and baseless argument. It shows them to be content to follow their ancestors without thinking about or looking into the basis of their actions. Thus, they are no more than a herd of cattle driven to where it does not know. They are totally unaware of their destination or whether they are following the road leading to it.

Being a message that seeks to free the human mind of all shackles, Islam rejects such abject following in the footsteps of ancestors. Every action should be determined on the basis of deliberate thinking and conscious choice.

At the end of this passage, the unbelievers are shown the fates of earlier communities that argued in the same vein and blindly followed their forefathers' footsteps, rejecting the truth clearly presented to them by God's messengers: "*And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end.*" (Verses 23–25)

Thus we see that those who turn away from Divine guidance are of a similar nature and use the same arguments. They are blind to everything other than following in their forefathers' footsteps. They close their minds to any new evidence, rejecting any new way even though it may be better, rely on solid argument and bring better results. Such a persistently deviant nature, which will not open its eyes or mind to the truth, deserves nothing but destruction. Such is the fate put before the unbelievers so that, perchance, they will take heed.

2

Blindness Out of Choice

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, (26)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ
إِنَّنِى بَرَآءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' (27)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِى فَطَرَنِى فَإِنَّهُۥ سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. (28)

وَجَعَلَهَا كَلِمَةًۢ بَاقِيَةً فِى عَقِبِهِۦ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. (29)

بَلْ مَتَّعْتُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَءَابَآءَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ
جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ وَرَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ
وَإِنَّا بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنَ ٱلْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' (31)

أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ ۚ نَحْنُ قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَٰتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا سُخْرِيًّا ۗ وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا يَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. (32)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن يَكُونَ ٱلنَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً لَّجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, (33)

وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَٰبًا وَسُرُرًا عَلَيْهَا يَتَّكِـُٔونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

gates, couches on which to recline, (34)

وَزُخْرُفًا ۚ وَإِن كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَٱلْـَٔاخِرَةُ عِندَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (35)

وَمَن يَعْشُ عَن ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. (36)

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَصُدُّونَهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. (37)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَنَا قَالَ يَا لَيْتَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ بُعْدَ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَبِئْسَ الْقَرِينُ ﴿٣٨﴾

When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! (38)

وَلَن يَنفَعَكُمُ الْيَوْمَ إِذ ظَّلَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (39)

أَفَأَنتَ تُسْمِعُ الصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِي الْعُمْيَ وَمَن كَانَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? (40)

فَإِمَّا نَذْهَبَنَّ بِكَ فَإِنَّا مِنْهُم مُّنتَقِمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; (41)

أَوْ نُرِيَنَّكَ الَّذِي وَعَدْنَاهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِم مُّقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. (42)

فَٱسْتَمْسِكْ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path; (43)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ ۖ
وَسَوْفَ تُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. (44)

وَسْـَٔلْ مَنْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن
رُّسُلِنَآ أَجَعَلْنَا مِن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ
ءَالِهَةً يُعْبَدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (45)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَقَالَ إِنِّى
رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' (46)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِذَا هُم مِّنْهَا
يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, (47)

وَمَا نُرِيهِم مِّنْ ءَايَةٍ إِلَّا هِىَ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ أُخْتِهَا ۖ وَأَخَذْنَٰهُم بِٱلْعَذَابِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. (48)

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَ ٱلسَّاحِرُ ٱدْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا
عَهِدَ عِندَكَ إِنَّنَا لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' (49)

Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (50)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ الْعَذَابَ إِذَا هُمْ يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? (51)

وَنَادَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فِي قَوْمِهِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ أَلَيْسَ لِي مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَٰذِهِ الْأَنْهَارُ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِي ۖ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? (52)

أَمْ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَٰذَا الَّذِي هُوَ مَهِينٌ وَلَا يَكَادُ يُبِينُ ﴿٥٢﴾

Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' (53)

فَلَوْلَا أُلْقِيَ عَلَيْهِ أَسْوِرَةٌ مِّن ذَهَبٍ أَوْ جَاءَ مَعَهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ مُقْتَرِنِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. (54)

فَاسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَأَطَاعُوهُ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; (55)

فَلَمَّا آسَفُونَا انتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations. (56)

فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ سَلَفًا وَمَثَلًا لِّلْآخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

Overview

The Quraysh, the major Arabian tribe living in Makkah at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, used to say that they were Abraham's descendants, which was true. They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith, which was untrue. Abraham espoused monotheism, clear and undistorted. It was for his belief in the One God that he abandoned his father and his people, after he was subjected to execution by burning. His religion is based on this basic belief. He urged his children and descendants to remain true to it. Thus, no trace of polytheism is ever found in his faith.

In this section of the *sūrah* the Arabs are made to see this historical fact so that they might check their claims against it. The *sūrah* also reports their objections to the Prophet Muḥammad's message: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (Verse 31) It shows the basic flaw in this argument: not only does it disregard the true values on which God wants human life to be based but it also espouses false values which turn them away from true guidance. Once the truth is outlined, the *sūrah* tells them of the fate of those who prefer to remain blind to God's remembrance. It also explains why such a choice was made which boils down to nothing less than following what Satan whispers. At the end of this section, the *sūrah* consoles God's messenger, who is grieved by their choice. He is told that he cannot make the blind see nor the deaf hear. They will have their due requital, whether he lives to see how God punishes them or God chooses to delay such punishment. He is directed, therefore, to hold fast to what is revealed to him as it represents the truth preached by all former messengers: "*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?*" (Verse 45)

In this section we are also given an episode from Moses' story, which reflects the Arabs' attitude to God's messenger. It seems that the same objections are repeated again: Pharaoh and his people adhered to the same false values upheld by the pagan Arabs.

The Principle Abraham Urged

> *Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].* (Verses 26–28)

The precept of monotheism rejected by the Quraysh was nothing but the belief advocated by Abraham, from whom they descended. It was this great principle that Abraham declared to his own father and people, thus rejecting their false creed, disowning their traditional worship. He did not adopt falsehood simply because his father and people practised it. In fact, he did not pay them any courtesy when he declared his rejection of it in a clear and emphatic statement quoted in the Qur'ān: "*I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.*" (Verses 26–27)

It appears from Abraham's statement that although his people did not deny God's existence, they nonetheless assigned partners to Him and worshipped others beside Him. Therefore, Abraham disowned all those they worshipped other than God. He described God by His attribute that makes Him the One to be worshipped, which is the fact that He initiates and originates. It is He who deserves to be worshipped because He is the One who creates. He also stated his firm belief that God would give him guidance. He created him and He knew how to grant him guidance.

Abraham clearly stated this precept of God's oneness to which the whole universe testifies. He said it and made it "*an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].*" (Verse 28) It fell to Abraham to have the largest share in establishing this precept in life, delivering it to future generations through his seed. A number of his descendants were prophets and messengers, among whom three belong to the very select group of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. These three are Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). Today, scores of centuries after Abraham, more

than a billion people who follow the three Divine religions are indebted to Abraham for their belief in the fundamental principle of God's oneness. It was he who made it an abiding precept among his descendants. Many of them may abandon it, but it remains firm, clear and undistorted. Thus, people will always have a chance to return to God, their Creator, and worship Him. This represents a return to the truth, understanding it and holding firm to it.

Mankind knew the principle of God's oneness before Abraham, through many prophets such as Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and perhaps Idrīs, as also through other messengers who did not have a continuous line of descendants who could revive and advocate the principle. It was, therefore, with Abraham that this principle took firm root on earth. It continued to be advocated by his descendants, with a continuous line of prophethood, up to the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who descended from Abraham through his son, Ishmael, and who bore the greatest similarity to him.[2] Muḥammad stated the principle of God's oneness in its final and most comprehensive form, a form that influences every human activity and life concept.

How did those Arabs, descending from Abraham, receive this principle? They had after all been far removed from it for generations. Indeed, they had forgotten Abraham's faith to the extent that the principle of God's oneness was alien to them, viewed as exceedingly singular. They gave the Prophet preaching it a very bad reception, judging the Divine message by earthly standards. Hence, their criteria were flawed:

> *I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities.' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to*

2. Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "I have been shown earlier prophets. I found Moses (peace be upon him) to be a tall, slim type of man, as though he belonged to the men of Shanū'ah [One of the tribes of Yemen]. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) and the person I know who has the closest similarity to him is 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd. I saw Abraham (peace be upon him) and the one who bears closest similarity to him is your man, [meaning himself]."– al-Bukhārī

them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (Verses 29–35)

The *sūrah* turns to speak of those people present at the time of revelation: "*I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear.*" (Verse 29) It is as though the *sūrah* is saying: 'Let us not talk about Abraham, for these people have no relation to him. We will discuss their situation specifically, which has no relevance to Abraham and what he advocated. God says that He allowed these people and their ancestors to enjoy life, providing them with much, and allowing them a long life, until the truth came to them in the shape of the Qur'ān, and there came to them a messenger who stated things clearly. Nevertheless, "*Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verse 30)

The truth, which is always clearly manifest, cannot be confused with sorcery. What they said was conjecture and they were the first to know that it was false. The elders of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the message of the Qur'ān, yet they aimed to deceive the masses: first by alleging that it was sorcery and secondly by reaffirming their rejection of it: "*This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.*" (Verse 30) In this way, they sought to impress the masses by showing themselves to be confident of what they said. Like all who are deluded, the masses would then follow them. What the Quraysh elders feared most was that they might lose their influence over people. Should the people see the truth of the principle of God's oneness, no leader would have any influence except within the framework of worshipping God alone.

Whom to Entrust with God's Message

The Qur'ān describes their confused values and standards as they objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as the one to bring them light and the message of the truth: "*They also say: Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) The two cities they referred to were Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Prophet belonged to the most distinguished family in the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe, which were the elite among Arabs. He was also known to be a man of high principles and fine manners, even before he was chosen as God's messenger. However, he was not a tribal chief, while his environment placed much store on such considerations. Hence their objection: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31)

God certainly knows best whom to entrust with His message. He chose the man whom He knew to be best suited to the task. Limitless is God in His glory! He chose a man whose paramount qualities were his morality and dedication, both of which are part of the nature and essence of the Islamic message. For the delivery of His message, He chose neither a tribal chief nor a man of wealth or social influence. This because He did not wish any earthly value to cast a shadow over the message bestowed from on high. It should neither be adorned with an earthly jewel nor be influenced by any alien effect. Thus, no one would embrace it to achieve ambition, and no one would seek it for unfair gain.

With their narrow view of worldly pleasures and lack of awareness of the nature of the Divine message, the Arabs objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as God's messenger, suggesting that a recognized leader of either of the two cities would have been preferable. The *sūrah* denounces their objections and reminds them of how God bestows His grace on whomever He chooses of His servants. It shows the flaw inherent in their concepts which confuse worldly values with Divine ones. It also makes clear to them how their values score in God's accurate measure: "*Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may*

take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass." (Verse 32)

How singular! What business do they have in apportioning God's grace when they cannot even determine their own provisions? Whatever comes their way of earthly provisions is determined by God, according to His wisdom and how He wants life on earth to progress: "*It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32)

People's livelihood and provisions in this present life are influenced by their individual talents, life circumstances and social relations. The way they are shared out among individuals and communities is subject to all these factors. Its sharing, however, differs from one generation and society to another, according to the systems, relations and general circumstances of each. The one essential feature which has never been absent, even under the most government-controlled system, is that people's shares are different. It has never happened that people receive equal shares, not even under artificial social orders claiming to enshrine absolute equality.

The result is that some people are raised in rank above others; a situation that occurs in all societies and generations. The purpose for such difference is that "*some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32) When the wheel of life turns, some people will inevitably be made to serve others. What is meant here is not that one class or one person should behave arrogantly towards another. This is a naïve understanding that is unsuited to the Divine pronouncement. The significance of the statement is longer lasting than any change or development in human society. All mankind serve one another as the wheel of life turns with them all. The one whose provisions are stinted serves the one who is affluent, but the reverse is true as well. Those who have plenty accumulate wealth, using it for their living and employ others who will then receive their provisions by virtue of their work. Each one thus serves another, and it is the difference in their livelihoods and their provisions that enable them to use one another in the course of life. Thus, a worker is in the service of the engineer and the employer,

while the engineer is in the service of the employer and the worker, and the employer, in turn, serves both engineer and worker in like manner. All contribute to man's assignment on earth through their differences in abilities, talents, livelihoods and incomes.

I know that many advocates of government-controlled systems cite this verse in their criticism of Islam and its social and economic systems. I also think that some Muslims feel uneasy about this statement. They feel that they need to defend Islam against the charge of establishing distinction between people in their provisions so that some of them can take others into service. It is time, however, that the advocates of Islam should stand firm, feeling absolutely proud of their faith. They need not defend it against a trivial accusation that will always remain unsubstantiated. Islam states permanent facts that remain part of the nature of the universe for as long as life continues.

It is part of the nature of human life that it relies on differences between individual human beings with respect to their abilities and talents, as well as to the type of work each one can do and the degree of excellence a man or a woman can achieve. These differences are necessary to ensure the fulfilment of a wide range of roles needed to discharge man's mission on earth. Had all human beings been copies of the same model, life on earth could not have survived. Numerous types of work would not have had corresponding abilities. They would have remained undone because there would not have been people who could do them. The One who created life and willed that it should steadily progress also created people with different talents and abilities to correspond to the different tasks that needed fulfilling. It is through such differences in roles that differences of livelihood and provisions occur. Such is the rule.

Greater than Life's Riches

So much for people's livelihood in this present life. Beyond it, however, is something far greater: "*Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass.*" (Verse 32) God bestows His grace on those whom He selects, knowing that they deserve it. There is, however, no

connection whatsoever between God's grace and what people have in this present life. Nor is there any connection between it and the values of this world. Such lots are worthless according to God's measure. Hence, they are given to good and bad people, while God's grace is preserved for those whom He chooses.

Earthly values are so petty and insignificant that had God so willed, He would have given them in plenty to those who disbelieve in Him. The only reason behind not doing so is that such plenty would then become a source of delusion, preventing many people from accepting the Divine faith:

> *Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.* (Verses 33–35)

It is God who knows man's weaknesses best and what effect wealth and affluence have on him. Had it not been for the fact that people would be lured by such luxuries, God would have given to those who disbelieve in the Lord of Grace abundance in this world. He would have given them homes with roofs of silver and staircases made of gold. He would also have given them houses with many doors, indeed palaces with many couches to recline upon and gold ornaments as decor. Giving such luxuries in plenty to disbelievers clearly shows how worthless these items are on God's scales. "*Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world.*" (Verse 35) It is all no more than a fleeting enjoyment that lasts no more than this present life. Moreover, it is all no more than a trifling suited to this lower life.

"*It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 35) These are the ones who are honoured by God because they are God-fearing. He stores for them what is better, greater in value and more lasting. He grants them what is special. They are

thus distinguished over those who deny God, the Lord of Grace, for these are only given the trifling enjoyments of this worldly life, which animals also share.

Worldly luxuries, examples of which are given in these verses, dazzle large numbers of people, particularly when they see unbelievers enjoying such commodities while believers are deprived of them. They may see good believers suffering hardship while unbelievers enjoy power, wealth and high position. God knows the effects of such situations on the majority of people. Therefore, He explains to them how worthless these luxuries are in His unerring scales and how truly worthy what He has in store for believers is. A believing heart is reassured that God chooses only what is right and suitable for each group. The Makkan unbelievers who objected to God's choice of a man who had not been given much wealth rated people according to what they have of money and position. These verses make clear how trifling these are in God's sight, so much so that He gives them to the worst of His creatures, the people whom He dislikes most. Hence, affluence and its like does not indicate a person's position with God.

Thus the Qur'ān puts matters in their right perspective, showing the basis on which provisions are given in both this life and the life to come and stating those values that are true and consistent. In doing so, it lays down the basic principles that are unaffected by life's circumstances, developments, different creeds, social systems or environments. Life has its consistent, unchanging rules that govern its development. People who look only at changing appearances and do not reflect on the permanent rules tend to overlook this God-made law. They think that change applies to the essence of things as well as their form and appearance. Hence, they allege that the ever continuing march of life precludes the existence of permanent rules and values. The only law that they believe to be unchanging is that whereby everything undergoes continuous change. We, who believe in Islam, see in what is around us the truth of what God has stated: consistency and change are present, side by side, in every corner and aspect of the universe. The most obvious example before us is the difference in livelihood and provisions between people, and their varied causes and rates.

Which Type of Comrade

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the fate of those who are given plenty of the luxuries of this world but who remain unmindful of their duty of obedience to God and glorifying Him so as to deserve the great prize He grants on the Day of Judgement to those who fear Him:

> *We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.* (Verses 36–39)

The Arabic text uses the term *'ashā* as the choice of unbelievers. This term signifies a tiredness of the eyes that prevents them from seeing things. It mostly occurs when facing a glaring light which the human eye cannot look into, or in the evening as darkness begins to descend when a weak eye cannot see things clearly. It may also be the result of illness. Its usage here, signifies blindness and a wilful turning away from God, the Lord of Grace.

"*We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade.*" (Verse 36) It has been God's will that when man chooses to neglect His remembrance, Satan finds his way to him and becomes his comrade, whispering to him and making evil things seem goodly and attractive. In the Arabic text, this verse is stated in the conditional form to express a consistent rule that makes the result inevitable when the cause occurs. Thus the evil comrade will certainly turn his comrade away from the right path, even though such a person may continue to think that he is on the right track: "*These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided.*" (Verse 37) This is the worst thing that one comrade can do for another: turning him away from the right path and not allowing him to wake up or reflect on what he is doing. Instead, he keeps him deluded, thinking that he is

doing well, until he comes face to face with his inevitable end. Note, too, that the verse uses the present tense, implying that this is going on now before the eyes of onlookers, though those who are blind do not see it.

The end comes all of a sudden while they are still deluded: "*When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.*" (Verse 38) In an instant we move from this present world to the next. Those who chose to be blind unexpectedly arrive at their destination and wake up like a drunken person regains his consciousness. They open their weak eyes and each one of them looks at his evil comrade who led him to ruin while assuring him of safety. He is so enraged with him that he says to him: "*Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West. Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38) I wish I had never met you and that a great gulf had existed between us. The *sūrah* then makes this comment on the exchange between the two comrades: "*Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38)

As the curtain drops on them both, we hear a word that crushes all hope for them: "*Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.*" (Verse 39) The suffering of each is given in full measure. It is not something to share out among them so as to reduce its effect.

Making the Deaf Hear

The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet with a word of consolation so that he does not grieve about those who turned away from him, disbelieving in his message. It encourages him to hold on to the truth revealed to him from on high, as it is the same word of truth given to every messenger of God:

> *Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a*

straight path; and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (Verses 40–45)

This point is repeated several times in the Qur'ān to comfort the Prophet and to explain the nature of guidance and error, attributing them both to God's will. They are part of the task assigned to God's messengers, (peace be upon them all). Here the *sūrah* puts clear lines between man's limited power, even at its strongest level given to prophets, and God's free and unrestricted power. It emphasizes God's oneness in one of the most inspiring images in the Qur'ān.

"*Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error?*" (Verse 40) They are neither deaf nor blind, but akin to both in so far as they have chosen to turn away from Divine guidance and follow error. The task assigned to the Prophet is to put the facts before the ones who hear and to guide those who see. When people shut down their receptive faculties and refuse to listen to the discourse addressing their hearts and souls, the Prophet can do nothing for them. There is no way, then, that he can guide them to the truth. He should not grieve over their error, after having fulfilled his task to the best of his ability.

When the Prophet has done his duty, God will now determine matters: "*If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them.*" (Verses 41–42) The case is resolved either way. Should the Prophet die first, God will determine the punishment of those who rejected his message. If, on the other hand, he remains alive until the fulfilment of what they were warned against, God is certainly able to mete out what His warnings contain. They cannot escape. What He determines will take place. In either case, the matter is subject to His will. The message is His, while the Prophet is only His messenger.

"*Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path.*" (Verse 43) Hold on to what you have been given and go along your way, reassured, caring little for them and what

they do. For, "*you certainly are on a straight path.*" It will neither bend nor deviate. This faith is closely related to the essential truth of the universe. It is consistent with the basic law that governs the universe. It leads its follower to the Lord Creator, safe from all error and deviation. God reassures His messenger, re-emphasizing this truth. The advocates of Islam in subsequent generations should find in it reassurance and comfort, even though they may suffer a great deal at the hands of those who have gone astray.

"*And it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) This verse may be understood in two ways: this Qur'ān is a reminder to you and your people, and you will be questioned about it on the Day of Judgement. Now that you have been given this reminder, you are left with no argument if you fail to follow it. Alternatively, it means that the Qur'ān is an honour that raises the standing of the Prophet and his people. This is what has taken place in reality. As for the Prophet, hundreds of millions of people pray to God at all times of the day and night to bless him and grant him peace; this for more than fourteen centuries. Hundreds of millions of hearts will continue to love him and bless him until the end of time. As for his people, they were very much on the margin of life until the Qur'ān was revealed, giving them the leading role in human history. When they carried its message to the world, they had its leadership, but only for as long as they held on to the Qur'ān. When they abandoned it, they were reduced to the lowest level among humanity. They were left at the tail end after once having been distinguished leaders. Those people whom God has chosen to carry His message and to assume mankind's leadership will face a great responsibility should they abandon their trust: "*you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) Of the two interpretations, I prefer this second meaning as it is broader in scope.

"*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?'*" (Verse 45) God's oneness is the central point of Divine religion ever since the first of His messengers. On what basis, then, do those who worship other beings rely? The Qur'ān states this truth here in a unique image that shows the Prophet asking the messengers before him whether God has

appointed deities to be worshipped other than Himself. The very question implies its definitive and categorical answer, given by each and every one of God's messengers. It is a very pleasing image, one that employs a strong, inspiring and effective style.

Needless to say, there are gulfs of time and place between the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the messengers who went before him. There is also the gulf between life and death, which is far greater than the gulfs of time and place. Yet all these gulfs totally disappear before the essential truth of the unity of the Divine message based on God's oneness. It is this truth that remains solidly present while considerations of time, place, life and death, as also of all changing phenomena, disappear. The dead and the living all testify to it at all times. Such are the connotations of this remarkable Qur'ānic statement.

However, in relation to the Prophet and his brothers, the messengers of God sent before him, and their bond with their Lord, nothing is considered far or near. At any Divine moment, all barriers are removed, and the essential, fundamental truth appears in full colour. It is the truth of all existence that transcends all barriers of time, place, shape and image. At this moment, the Prophet asks and receives the answer, as happened to him on his night journey when he led all earlier prophets in prayer.

When we look at such a statement, it is better for us not to think of limitations in our life. What is familiar to us in life is by no means the total law governing the entire universe. We should remember that we only know some of the phenomena operating in the universe and see some of their effects when we recognize an aspect of its laws. There are barriers in our constitutional make-up and in our senses that limit our perception to what is familiar to us. Beyond that, there is a realm that we cannot fathom.

The Same Old Argument

The *sūrah* continues to console the Prophet in the face of the objections raised about God's choice of him as the messenger by the chiefs of his people, people who upheld the false values of the present world. In this context, the *sūrah* relates an episode from Moses' history

depicting how Pharaoh and his people also upheld the same values. The Quraysh elders said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) In former times, Pharaoh took pride in his power and kingdom, arrogantly asking: "*Is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see?*" (Verse 51) Proud and arrogant, he pointed to Moses, God's prophet and messenger, who had no great worldly wealth or position, and said: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) Pharaoh also made a suggestion similar to the unbelieving Quraysh: "*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) It sounds like a musical recording, played over and over again.

The *sūrah* shows how the deluded masses responded, despite the miracles shown by Moses and the tests to which they were subjected. Every time a hardship befell them, they would cry out to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift their affliction. The *sūrah* also explains the fate they suffered after they failed to heed the warning: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56) Yet these later unbelievers still do not take heed.

Throughout this episode, the unity of the Divine message is clearly apparent. Similarly, the nature of the tyrannical elders and their reception of the message of the truth is the same. They all cling to the trivial values of this world. We also see the nature of the masses who are easily led astray by their leaders.

> *We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.* (Verses 46–47)

The episode starts with a very brief reference to the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, as a prelude to the main point intended here, which is to portray the similarity of the objections made by Pharaoh and the pagan Arabs, as also their similar values. It sums up the nature of Moses' message in these words: "*I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 46) It is the same truth stated by every

messenger: that he is 'a messenger' sent by 'the Lord of all the worlds'. The *sūrah* then provides a very quick reference to the signs given to Moses, adding how the people received these: "*When he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.*" (Verse 47) The arrogant and the ignorant always behave this way.

This is followed by a reference to the testing hardships God inflicted on Pharaoh and his people, which are detailed in other *sūrahs*:

> *Yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.* (Verses 48–50)

The signs shown by Moses did not provide enough motivation for people to believe, yet each was greater than the one before it. This confirms what God says in several places that such signs do not provide guidance to a heart if it is not ready to listen, and that God's messengers cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. What is most singular in what God describes of Pharaoh's and his people's attitude is that when they spoke to Moses, they said: "*Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.*" (Verse 49) They appeal to him to do his best to lift their hardship, yet they address him as '*sorcerer*'. They also say, '*Pray to your Lord*' while he tells them that he is '*a messenger from the Lord of all the worlds,*' not his own special Lord to whom only he and a few followers submit. Neither miracles nor God's messenger's words touched their hearts, despite their promise: "*We shall now follow the right way.*" Such promises are often forgotten: "*Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.*" (Verse 50)

The masses may be influenced by miracles, and the truth may find its way to their hearts that have long been deceived. To forestall this, Pharaoh appeared before them in his full regalia, adorned in splendour. He tried to deceive them with a superficial argument, one that unfortunately appeals to those who have long endured tyranny:

> *Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?'* (Verses 51–53)

The kingdom of Egypt and the rivers flowing at Pharaoh's feet are there, before their very eyes. The masses are deluded by such apparent power and splendour. By contrast, the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and all that is between them, compared to which Egypt is no more than a little particle, requires believing hearts to perceive. Only such believers can draw the right comparison. Under the yoke of tyranny that has long subjugated them, the masses are dazzled by the glitter they see before them. They do not stretch their minds to reflect on the kingdom of the universe and to whom it belongs.

Pharaoh knew how to manipulate his people's hearts and delude them with his riches: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) What he meant by referring to '*this contemptible wretch*' was that Moses was not a king, a prince, or a man of power or wealth. Or perhaps he meant that Moses belonged to the Israelites, a wretched and enslaved community in Egypt. His other description of Moses as one '*who can hardly make his meaning clear*' refers to his speech impediment. By the time of this encounter with Pharaoh, however, Moses was cured of this by God in answer to his prayer: "*My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say.*" (20: 25–28) Nothing now prevented him from making his meaning clear. In the eyes of the masses, Pharaoh, with his terrestrial kingdom, was better than Moses, even though he had the word of truth, was a prophet, and advocated the faith that ensured safety from hell.

"*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him?*" (Verse 53) Is such a petty thing as a gold bracelet needed to confirm a Divine message? Is a mere trifling to be valued as greater than the miracles God gave to His messenger? Or, perhaps, Pharaoh meant that Moses should have

been crowned as king to give him power as well as the message. "*Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) This is yet another deceptive objection, one that is often levelled at God's messengers.

"*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54) That tyrants make fools of their people is a familiar story. First of all, they isolate their people from all sources of knowledge, withholding the facts until they are forgotten and no longer sought after. They use all types of influences until their minds are fully convinced of them. Thereafter, it is easy to make fools of them and lead them wherever they want them to go. Yet no tyrant can do this to his people unless they are transgressors, turning away from God's straight path after having abandoned the standards of His faith. Conversely, it is extremely difficult to try to delude believers or make fools of them. Hence, the Qur'ān gives the reason for the response Pharaoh received from his people: "*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54)

The time of tests, warnings and education was over. God was fully aware that these people would not believe. The masses willingly obeyed Pharaoh, an arrogant tyrant, turning a blind eye to God's light and His clear signs. Therefore, the warning had to be fulfilled and God's word was issued: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56)

Here, God is speaking about Himself in the context of retribution inflicted on people whom He destroyed. This is meant to highlight His limitless power. What the *sūrah* describes is a situation where these people were guilty of a great crime incurring God's anger. Therefore, "*We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all*", meaning Pharaoh, the notables among his people and his army. In this way did they meet their end when they tried to pursue Moses and his people. God made of them the ancestors of every erring generation. He also set them as "*an example for later generations*". (Verse 56) Hence, later communities should learn their story and benefit from the lessons it delivers.

Thus, this episode of Moses' story reflects similar attitudes to those of the pagan Arabs as they confronted God's last messenger. It is mentioned here so as to comfort and support the Prophet and those who believed with him. It warns the unbelievers against a fate similar to that of earlier people. This is one example of how the Qur'ān uses a historical account as an edifying narrative. The *sūrah* then gives us an episode from Jesus' story against the backdrop of the Arabs' argument in defence of their worship of angels and the comparison they cite, as some Christians worship Jesus. This is given in the last passage of the *sūrah*.

3

When Friends Turn Enemies

وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ
مِنْهُ يَصِدُّونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, (57)

وَقَالُوٓاْ ءَأَٰلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ ۚ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ
لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًۢا ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. (58)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ
مَثَلًا لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. (59)

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنكُم مَّلَٰٓئِكَةً فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ يَخْلُفُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. (60)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَعِلْمٌ لِّلسَّاعَةِ فَلَا تَمْتَرُنَّ بِهَا
وَٱتَّبِعُونِ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦١﴾

He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. (61)

وَلَا يَصُدَّنَّكُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ
عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. (62)

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. (63)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ عِيسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالَ قَدْ جِئْتُكُم بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَلِأُبَيِّنَ لَكُم بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى تَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٦٣﴾

God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path.' (64)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ رَبِّى وَرَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (65)

فَٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَيْنِهِمْ ۖ فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٦٥﴾

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? (66)

هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing. (67)

ٱلْأَخِلَّآءُ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ إِلَّا ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

You, servants of Mine, no fear need you have today, nor shall you grieve. (68)

يَٰعِبَادِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ وَلَآ أَنتُمْ تَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

You, who have believed in Our revelations and surrendered yourselves to Us, (69)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُوا۟ مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

enter paradise, you and your spouses, in pure happiness. (70)

ٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ أَنتُمۡ وَأَزۡوَٰجُكُمۡ تُحۡبَرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in. There you shall abide. (71)

يُطَافُ عَلَيۡهِم بِصِحَافٍ مِّن ذَهَبٍ وَأَكۡوَابٍۖ وَفِيهَا مَا تَشۡتَهِيهِ ٱلۡأَنفُسُ وَتَلَذُّ ٱلۡأَعۡيُنُۖ وَأَنتُمۡ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. (72)

وَتِلۡكَ ٱلۡجَنَّةُ ٱلَّتِيٓ أُورِثۡتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat. (73)

لَكُمۡ فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٞ كَثِيرَةٞ مِّنۡهَا تَأۡكُلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell. (74)

إِنَّ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ فِي عَذَابِ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair. (75)

لَا يُفَتَّرُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَهُمۡ فِيهِ مُبۡلِسُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves. (76)

وَمَا ظَلَمۡنَٰهُمۡ وَلَٰكِن كَانُواْ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!' He will answer: 'You are here to stay.' (77)

وَنَادَوۡاْ يَٰمَٰلِكُ لِيَقۡضِ عَلَيۡنَا رَبُّكَۖ قَالَ إِنَّكُم مَّٰكِثُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

لَقَدْ جِئْنَٰكُم بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَكُمْ
لِلْحَقِّ كَٰرِهُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. (78)

أَمْ أَبْرَمُوٓا۟ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّا مُبْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. (79)

أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَىٰهُم ۚ
بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (80)

قُلْ إِن كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ وَلَدٌ ۖ فَأَنَا۠ أَوَّلُ
ٱلْعَٰبِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' (81)

سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. (82)

فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟
يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (83)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِلَٰهٌ وَفِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
إِلَٰهٌ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٤﴾

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. (84)

وَتَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. (85)

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةَ إِلَّا مَن شَهِدَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (86)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَهُمْ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God.' How is it, then, that they are so misled? (87)

وَقِيلِهِۦ يَٰرَبِّ إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.' (88)

فَٱصْفَحْ عَنْهُمْ وَقُلْ سَلَٰمٌ ۚ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know. (89)

Overview

In this final passage, the *sūrah* picks up the legends the pagan Arabs weaved around their worship of angels. It refers to one of the arguments they used to defend their absurd beliefs. It was a futile argument that reflected no attempt to arrive at the truth; it was more an exercise in polemics. They had been told that both they and what they worshipped were bound for hell. The reference here being to their idols that were

first intended as representations of angels, but which were later worshipped as deities. They were told that whoever worshipped anything other than God will be in hell together with the thing worshipped. In response, some of them cited the example of Jesus, who was worshipped by some of those who deviated from true Christianity. They asked whether Jesus would also be in hell? This was nothing but idle argument. They also claimed that they were better guided than the Christians who worshipped Jesus, a human being, while they worshipped the angels, God's daughters. All this was no more than compounded falsehood. In connection with this, the *sūrah* gives an account of Jesus, explaining the truth about him and his message, and the differences that gripped his people both before and after him.

Addressing all those who deviate from the true faith, the *sūrah* warns them against the sudden coming of the Last Hour. It moves on to portray a long scene of the Day of Judgement, giving an image of lasting happiness for the God-fearing and one of painful suffering for the guilty. Furthermore, the *sūrah* negates their legends concerning the angels, makes it clear that God is free of all that they allege concerning Him and outlines some of His attributes, including His complete ownership of both this life and the life to come. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to be forbearing and to turn away from the unbelievers. They will come to know what is there to be known. This is an implicit warning to those who continue to argue after things have been made very clear.

Arguing About Jesus

> *Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom,*

and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 57–65)

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq gives the following report:

> The Prophet sat with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah in the Sacred Mosque, and they were joined by al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. There were a few other men from the Quraysh. The Prophet spoke to them, but al-Naḍr interrupted him. The Prophet argued with him until he silenced him. He then read to them a passage of the Qur'ān that included the verse that says: "*You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for.*" (21: 98) The Prophet then left.
>
> Then came 'Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba'rī of the Tamīm tribe who sat with them. Al-Walīd said to him: 'Al-Naḍr was no match for Muḥammad. Indeed Muḥammad said that both we and the deities we worship will be the fuel of hell.' Ibn al-Ziba'rī said: 'Had I been the one who argued with him I would have won. Ask Muḥammad whether everyone worshipped other than God will be in hell together with those worshipping him. Well, we worship the angels, and the Jews worship Ezra, while the Christians worship Jesus, son of Mary.' Al-Walīd and those who were in the Mosque admired what Ibn al-Ziba'rī had said and felt that he put forward a winning argument. When this was mentioned to the Prophet, he said: 'Anyone who likes to be worshipped in place of God will be joined to those who worship him. These people only worship Satan and whoever Satan orders them to worship.' God then revealed the verse that says: "*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell.*" (21: 101) This means that Jesus, Ezra and other rabbis and priests who were sincere in their faith, but were then worshipped as deities by later people will be safe from hell.

> Furthermore, concerning the argument about Jesus being worshipped and the admiration of the argument by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and others, God revealed the verse that says: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry.*" (Verse 57)

In *al-Kashshāf*, a commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī gives a broadly similar report, without mentioning its source. Both reports show clearly how argumentative the pagan Arabs were. They were exactly as the Qur'ān describes them: "*They are contentious people*". (Verse 58) They were certainly skilful in dispute. They realized what the Qur'ān and the Prophet meant, but they tried hard to twist its meaning, indulged in polemics, exploiting the fact that the Qur'ānic statement was general in its implication. This is characteristic of everyone who is devoid of sincerity, seeking to manipulate words and phrases in order to twist what was a clear meaning. Therefore, the Prophet strictly prohibited contentious arguments. Abū Umāmah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "The Prophet came out once only to find some people involved in argument concerning the Qur'ān. He was so angry that he looked as though vinegar had been poured over his face. He then said to them: 'Do not argue about God's book citing parts of it against other parts. No community strays into error unless they are given to contentious argument.' He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse that says: '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people.*' (Verse 58)

Another possible interpretation of the statement, "*Who is better: our deities or he?*" is supported by the general drift of the verses referring to their legend about the angels. What they meant is that their worship of the angels is better than the Christians' worship of Jesus, because the angels are closer to God in their nature and descent. Exalted is God above all that they allege. Thus, the statement, '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people*', serves as a reply to Ibn al-Ziba'rī as suggested earlier. Moreover, it means that their citing of what the Christians worship is invalid, because it deviates from the truth of God's oneness. It is not right to compare one deviation from the truth with another; they are all false. This interpretation is reasonable.

Hence, the *sūrah* makes the following comment: "*He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verse 59) He was no deity to be worshipped, even though some Christians deviated from the true path and did worship him. He was only a favoured servant of God, and no blame attaches to him for the fact that people worshipped him. God granted him favours so that he would be an example for the Children of Israel to follow. However, they forgot the lesson and went astray.

The *sūrah* discusses the Arabs' legend about the angels, making it clear that they are part of God's creation. Had God willed, He would have made the angels succeed them on earth, or He would have transformed some people into angels to succeed them: "*Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth.*" (Verse 60) All questions of creation are determined by God; whatever He wills to create will surely come into existence. None of His creation has any relation to Him other than that of a created being with its Creator, a servant with its Master.

Another statement about Jesus reminds them of the Last Hour which they denied: "*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verses 61–62) A number of the Prophet's statements speak of Jesus' second coming, a short time before the Last Hour. This is perhaps what is indicated in the statement: '*He is a portent of the Last Hour.*' It means that he informs of its approach. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, the son of Mary is about to come back among you, serving as a just arbiter. He will break the cross, kill the pig and abolish tribute money. Wealth will be so abundant that no one will accept money. Indeed one prostration before God will be better than this whole world and all that it contains." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd.] Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "A group of my community will ever continue to fight, holding on to the truth, until the Day of Judgement. Jesus, son of Mary, will then come down and their commander will say to him: 'Come and lead us in prayer.' He will reply: 'No. Some of you lead others.' This is just an aspect of honour God has granted to this community." [Related by Muslim.]

All this belongs to the realm beyond our perception. We are informed of it by the Prophet who tells the truth and references to it are given in the Qur'ān. No human being has any say in this other than what has been stated in these two sources.

"*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path.*" (Verse 61) They had strong doubts about the coming of the Last Hour, but the Qur'ān calls on them to be certain of it. Likewise, they steered away from guidance and the Qur'ān urges them, through God's messenger, to follow him along the straight path which ensures that its travellers will not go astray. It makes it clear to them that their deviation is only the result of their following Satan when they would be better advised to follow God's messenger: "*Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verse 62) The Qur'ān always reminds people of the on-going battle between them and Satan that has been raging since the time of Adam, their first father, and the first encounter in heaven. No one can be more heedless than one who knows that a watchful, sworn enemy is deliberately waiting for a chance to attack him and yet does not take care to protect himself. On the contrary, he moves closer to the determined enemy and even follows his lead.

Islam places man in the midst of this ever-raging battle with Satan. It assigns to him gains that are beyond anyone's imagination, should he be victorious. Likewise, his loss, should he be defeated, is beyond anyone's reckoning. Thus, Islam steers man's fighting ability to this on-going battle which asserts the humanity of man, giving him his special position among the rest of creatures. Thus, the highest aim for man on earth is to achieve victory against his enemy, Satan. Once he does, he overcomes evil and wickedness and establishes firm roots of goodness and purity.

The *sūrah* now speaks about Jesus, stating the truth about him and what he preached, and how his people differed about him, both before and after his time:

> *When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord:*

so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 63–65)

Thus, Jesus came to his people with clear signs, whether miracles God granted him or teachings that lead along the right way. He said to his people: '*I have come to you with wisdom*'. Whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted much of what is good, and he is safe and assured of his way. Jesus' mission also clarified for them some of the questions over which they differed. Indeed, they differed on many aspects of the law of Moses, allowing their variances to split them into hostile factions. Jesus also invited them to maintain their fear of God and to obey him in the Divine message he delivered to them. He declared the principle of God's oneness in full clarity, admitting no compromise in it: "*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone.*" (Verse 64) He never said that he was God, nor that he was God's son. He never made any reference to any relationship between him and God other than that of his being God's servant. Furthermore, he stated that his message demarcated a straight path without bend or error. Yet those who came after him disputed much, splitting into factions like those who preceded him. In this they were wrongdoers, relying on no sure information. Hence, the warning: "*Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65)

Jesus' message was addressed to the Children of Israel. They were awaiting his coming to save them from their humiliating bondage to the Romans. Yet when he came, they denied and opposed him. Indeed, they even plotted to get him crucified. Jesus found them divided into numerous sects, the most important of which were as follows:

1. The Sadducees, named after Zadok, whose family retained custody of the Temple since the time of David and Solomon. According to their law, he must have been a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. For, custody of the Temple belonged to Aaron's descendants. Holding such an office, they were very strict on detailed worship rituals, denouncing any deviation. Nevertheless,

in personal matters, they were lax, enjoying life's pleasures. They denied the Day of Resurrection.

2. The Pharisees. They were in dispute with the Sadducees, objecting to their strict observation of worship rituals while denying the Day of Resurrection. Their most common characteristic was their disregard of worldly pleasures, even though some of them took pride in their knowledge. Jesus denounced such an attitude.
3. The Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jews and Assyrians. They believed only in the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They denied the later books accepted by other Jews as part of their scripture.
4. The Essenes, or Essenians. These were influenced by some philosophical doctrines, living in isolation of other Jewish sects. Theirs was an ascetic, strictly organized sect.

In addition, there were numerous other sects that gave rise to much confusion in Jewish beliefs and traditions. The Jews at the time tolerated humiliation under the Romans, and awaited their deliverance at the hands of the Messiah. When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them declaring that '*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone*', and preaching a law of tolerance and spiritualism, he was opposed by the professional clerics who gave paramount importance to rituals. He is reported to have said about them: "They make loads that are hard to carry and lay them on the shoulders of the people. However, they are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They do everything to attract people's attention. They make their headbands large and the tassels on their shawls long. They love the place of honour at dinners and the front seats in synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have people call them Rabbi." (Matthew 23: 4–7) He is also quoted as addressing them thus: "You, blind guides! You strain gnats out of your wine, but you swallow camels. How horrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outsides of cups and dishes. But inside they are full of greed and uncontrolled desires. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cups and dishes so that the outside may also be clean. How horrible it will be for you, scribes

and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed graves that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity."[3] (Matthew 23: 24–27)

When we read today these words of Jesus (peace be upon him) and similar texts, we realize how applicable they are to professional clerics of all religions. They are all of the same type.

Jesus' term on earth came to its end and he went to his Lord. Later, his followers split into groups and factions: some made him a deity; some made him the son of God; others make God a trinity of three one of whom is Jesus. The pure concept of God's oneness preached by Jesus has, thus, been lost, as also his call on people to worship God alone, pure in their submission to Him.[4]

"*Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65) Then the pagan Arabs disputed with the Prophet concerning Jesus, basing their argument on what these different factions fabricated and weaved of legends about him.

Waiting for the Last Hour

When the *sūrah* refers to wrongdoers, it includes those factions that disputed about Jesus together with the pagan Arabs who argued with the Prophet on the basis of what those factions perpetrated. It draws a long, spectacular scene showing what happens to them on the Day of Judgement and adds an image of what happens to the God-fearing who receive His favours in heaven:

> *What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing.*

3. The information given here about Jewish sects and the subsequent quotations are based on Al-Aqqād, 'Abbās Maḥmūd, *'Abqariyyat al-Masīḥ*, Cairo, (n.d.).

4. A more detailed discussion of this is given in *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, pp. 178–180.

desire. However, what comes over and above desire satisfaction is that it is all pleasant to the eye, adding beauty to gratification: "*They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in.*" (Verse 71) Yet there is more to this blessed enjoyment: there is something greater and far more honourable. They are honoured by an address from on high: "*There you shall abide. This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat.*" (Verses 71–73)

What fate awaits the evildoers whom we left a little while ago in dispute, blaming one another? "*The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell.*" (Verse 74) It is a permanent, hard and severe suffering that allows no reduction or respite. No ray of hope will ever appear nor any chance of deliverance. They endure it, lost in despair: "*It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair.*" (Verse 75) This is all their own doing. No one has wronged them: "*We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves.*" (Verse 76)

An outcry is heard from afar. It is an outcry of utter distress, born in despair: "*They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" (Verse 77) It comes from down below, from behind the closed doors of hell. The evildoers are not appealing for help or salvation; they have already despaired of that. All they are asking for is that they should be allowed to perish, their misery end. That is all that they can hope for. When all that one can hope for is to perish, one must be in extreme distress. This cry certainly comes from long-suffering souls and bodies whose endurance has gone beyond all limits. Hence they cry out: "*Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!*" The answer they are given adds to their despair, caring little for what they feel: "*He will answer: 'You are here to stay.'*" (Verse 77) No deliverance, no hope, no death, no end; they are there to stay.

This distressing image is followed by an address to those who hate the truth and turn away from guidance. It portrays to all how singular their attitude is:

> *We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our*

own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (Verses 78–80)

It is their abhorrence of the truth that prevented them from following it. It is not that they did not realize that it is the truth. Nor did they doubt the honesty and sincerity of the Prophet; they had long known him, acknowledging that he never told a lie. How could he, then, lie to God saying about Him what was false? In most cases, those who oppose the truth are not unaware that it is the truth; they simply hate it because it conflicts with their desires. They are too weak to resist their desires, but they can always attempt to suppress the truth and persecute its advocates. It is from this, their weakness, that they derive the audacity to stand against the truth.

Therefore, the Almighty who knows all their secrets and scheming warns them: "*If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.*" (Verses 79–80) Their persistent support of falsehood against the truth is countered by God's clear will to establish and strengthen the truth; and their wicked scheming under the cover of darkness is countered by God's knowledge of all secret whispering. When weak creatures stand against the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In Heaven and on Earth

Now the Qur'ān directs the Prophet to say something to them and to leave them to face the destiny which has already been described to them:

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (Verses 81–83)

They alleged that the angels whom they worshipped were God's daughters. Had God had any offspring, the first one to know this and act on the basis of this knowledge was God's Prophet and messenger. He was close to Him and was quick to comply with His orders. He would have been the first to offer his respects to His offspring, had He had any as they alleged. He, however, worships none but God. This in itself is evidence confirming that their allegation has no basis. All glory belongs to God who is totally unlike what they allege. "*Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions.*" (Verse 82)

When we contemplate the heavens and the earth, looking at their systems and harmony, we feel the greatness and sublimity of the One who controls all this, referred to as, '*the Lord of the Throne*,' and we realize the absurdity of any such claim. By our nature we know that the Maker of the universe can have no similarity to creatures who procreate. Therefore, attributing sons and daughters to Him appears to be no more than idle talk and play, which deserve no answer. It only merits a stern warning of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, an image of which has already been given: "*Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised.*" (Verse 83)

The *sūrah* continues its glorification of God, the Creator, attributing to Him what is worthy of His Lordship of the heavens and the earth as well as the mighty throne:

> *It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it.* (Verses 84–86)

This statement confirms the unity of Godhead throughout the universe, making it clear that no one shares this with God Almighty who does everything according to His infinite wisdom and perfect

knowledge. The Arabic word *tabārak*, translated here as 'blessed', carries connotations of greatness and exaltedness above all their perceptions. It is He who is '*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all in between*'. He alone knows the timing of the Last Hour and to Him all creation returns. On that day, when all return to Him, none of those whom they allege as His offspring or partners will have the power of intercession for anyone. None can intercede with Him other than one who knows the truth and bears witness to it. A person who testifies to the truth will not intercede on behalf of any who ever stood in opposition to it.

The *sūrah* then confronts them with something that is ingrained in their nature and concerning which they have no doubt. That is, their Creator is God. How, then, can they associate partners with Him in their worship, and how can they expect that anyone will intercede on behalf of anyone who associated partners with Him: "*Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God'. How is it, then, that they are so misled?*" (Verse 87) How can they ignore the truth testified to by their own nature? How can they allow their behaviour to be in conflict with its inevitable result?

As the *sūrah* comes to its close, it highlights the fact that the Prophet turns to his Lord complaining of their rejection of the truth and their disbelief: "*And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.'*" (Verse 88) This is given in a special form that implies how keenly the Prophet felt this and how well God received it. The answer from on high is a directive to the Prophet to bear with them and not to care for their rejection. On the contrary, he should forbear and feel his heart content. To this is added an implicit warning to those determined opponents of the truth: "*Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know.*" (Verse 89) The time will come when everything is exposed and they will then know the dreadful fate that awaits them.

SŪRAH 44

Al-Dukhān

(Smoke)

Prologue

Characterized by its short and rhyming verses, violent images and inspirational shades of meaning, this *sūrah* strikes like a hammer, its beat directed at making every human heart tremble. The entire *sūrah* appears to be a single whole, with one central theme to which all its elements are tied: the story the scene from the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, its depiction of the universe and the direct discussion of God's oneness, people's resurrection and God's message.

The *sūrah* begins with a reference to the Qur'ān and its revelation on a blessed night when every matter of wisdom is made clear. Its revelation is an act of mercy for mankind, as well as a warning to them. Moreover, it tells people about their Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all between them, confirming His oneness. He is the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of everyone who lived and everyone who will come to life.

The *sūrah* abandons this thread in order to speak about the people addressed by the Qur'ān: "*Yet they remain in doubt, playing about.*" (Verse 9) It issues a swift but stern warning against such doubt and play: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous*

is this suffering!" (Verses 10–11) On the day when this suffering befalls them, they will pray for it to be lifted, but once it comes it will not be removed. They are reminded that such suffering has not as yet been inflicted. They should, therefore, seize the opportunity now before they are returned to their Lord when this fearful suffering falls due: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* tells them about Pharaoh and the end he and his people met when a noble messenger from God came and appealed to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God.*" (Verses 18–19) However, they refused to take heed until God's messenger despaired of their ever responding. They were destroyed after having behaved with insolence: "*How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verses 25–29)

Against this backdrop the *sūrah* reverts to their denial of the life to come. They said: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verses 35–36) They are reminded of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba' and are told that they are no better than they were. Therefore, they will not be spared a similar fate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that there is a link between resurrection and God's wisdom manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand.*" (Verses 38–39) It then tells them about the Day of Decision, which is the time appointed for all of them. It adds here a violent scene depicting the suffering of the guilty who are made to eat of the Zaqqūm tree. It shows them how a sinful person is dragged into the midst of the blazing fire, where scalding water is poured over his head in recompense for his sins: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verses 49–50)

Side by side with this scene is an image of the blessings enjoyed in heaven by the God-fearing. This is a profound image, one that contrasts with the great suffering endured by the other group, and fits with the strong beat of the *sūrah*. This then ends with another reference to the Qur'ān, coupled with a strong and implicit warning: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

From start to finish the *sūrah* uses a continuous and fast beat, and puts before the human mind a succession of images and impressions that are characteristically powerful. It takes us on a long journey that includes the heavens and the earth, the present world and the next, heaven and hell, the past and the present, life and death, the laws of creation and those of the universe, of worlds that are perceptible as well as those that are imperceptible. Relatively short as it is, the *sūrah* provides a grand tour of the world around us and of that which lies beyond our perceptive faculties.

I

Smoke That Ushers Clarity

Al-Dukhān (Smoke)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. (3)

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُنذِرِينَ ﴿٣﴾

On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear (4)

فِيهَا يُفْرَقُ كُلُّ أَمْرٍ حَكِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] (5)

أَمْرًا مِّنْ عِندِنَا ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُرْسِلِينَ ﴿٥﴾

as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; (6)

رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. (7)

رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٧﴾

There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (8)

لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. (9)

بَلْ هُمْ فِى شَكٍّ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. (10)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ يَوْمَ تَأْتِى ٱلسَّمَآءُ بِدُخَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! (11)

يَغْشَى ٱلنَّاسَ ۖ هَٰذَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' (12)

رَبَّنَا ٱكْشِفْ عَنَّا ٱلْعَذَابَ إِنَّا مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; (13)

أَنَّىٰ لَهُمُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ وَقَدْ جَآءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَّجْنُونٌ ﴿١٤﴾

but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' (14)

إِنَّا كَاشِفُوا الْعَذَابِ قَلِيلًا إِنَّكُمْ عَائِدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. (15)

يَوْمَ نَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ إِنَّا مُنتَقِمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (16)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, (17)

أَنْ أَدُّوا إِلَيَّ عِبَادَ اللَّهِ إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! (18)

وَأَن لَّا تَعْلُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنِّي آتِيكُم بِسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. (19)

وَإِنِّي عُذْتُ بِرَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمْ أَن تَرْجُمُونِ ﴿٢٠﴾

I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. (20)

وَإِن لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا لِي فَاعْتَزِلُونِ ﴿٢١﴾

If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' (21)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' (22)

فَأَسْرِ بِعِبَادِى لَيْلًا إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; (23)

وَٱتْرُكِ ٱلْبَحْرَ رَهْوًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ جُندٌ مُّغْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' (24)

كَمْ تَرَكُوا۟ مِن جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, (25)

وَزُرُوعٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, (26)

وَنَعْمَةٍ كَانُوا۟ فِيهَا فَٰكِهِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

and good things in which they used to delight! (27)

كَذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَأَوْرَثْنَٰهَا قَوْمًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. (28)

فَمَا بَكَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (29)

وَلَقَدْ نَجَّيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْمُهِينِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, (30)

مِن فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَالِيًا مِّنَ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. (31)

وَلَقَدِ ٱخْتَرْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

We chose them knowingly above all other people. (32)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ مَا فِيهِ بَلَٰٓؤٌا۟ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (33)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Now these people assert: (34)

إِنْ هِىَ إِلَّا مَوْتَتُنَا ٱلْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُنشَرِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. (35)

فَأْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (36)

أَهُمْ خَيْرٌ أَمْ قَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? (37)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَٰعِبِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (38)

مَا خَلَقْنَٰهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. (39)

إِنَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَصْلِ مِيقَٰتُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. (40)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلًى عَن مَّوْلًى شَيْـًٔا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support (41)

إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (42)

إِنَّ شَجَرَتَ ٱلزَّقُّومِ ﴿٤٣﴾

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree (43)

طَعَامُ ٱلْأَثِيمِ ﴿٤٤﴾

will be the food of the sinful; (44)

كَٱلْمُهْلِ يَغْلِى فِى ٱلْبُطُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

like molten lead will it boil in the belly, (45)

كَغَلْىِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

like the boiling of scalding water. (46)

خُذُوهُ فَٱعْتِلُوهُ إِلَىٰ سَوَآءِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٤٧﴾

'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; (47)

ثُمَّ صُبُّوا۟ فَوْقَ رَأْسِهِۦ مِنْ عَذَابِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٨﴾

then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! (48)

ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْكَرِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾

Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! (49)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

This is the very thing you surely doubted.' (50)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى مَقَامٍ أَمِينٍ ﴿٥١﴾

The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, (51)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

amid gardens and fountains, (52)

يَلْبَسُونَ مِن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. (53)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَزَوَّجْنَٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. (54)

يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِكُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. (55)

لَا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا ٱلْمَوْتَ إِلَّا ٱلْمَوْتَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ۖ وَوَقَىٰهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, (56)

فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٧﴾

an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (57)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَٰهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. (58)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ إِنَّهُم مُّرْتَقِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Wait, then; they too are waiting. (59)

The Blessed Night

> Ḥā. Mīm. *By the book that makes things clear! We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.* (Verses 1–8)

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*, making an oath by them and by the book composed of letters like them, making things clear. We have spoken elsewhere about these separate letters occurring at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The point to add here is that making them the subject of an oath is just like taking an oath on the book. Every single letter, representing a sound, is a true miracle, or one of God's signs manifested in man's make-up, giving him the ability to speak. They also identify the order in which alphabetical sounds occur along the vocal tract, the symbol representing the letter and its sound, as also man's ability to gather information through them. All these are significant facts that grow in our minds when we seriously reflect on them.

What the oath asserts is the revelation of the book on a blessed night: "*We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 3–6) The reference to the night on which the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high most probably means – although God knows best – the night when its revelation first started. It was a night during the month of Ramaḍān, which is described in the following words: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed.*" (2: 185) The Qur'ān was not revealed in full on that night, nor was all the Qur'ān revealed during Ramaḍān. It had only

started to make contact with the earth, and that night was the first time such contact was made.

Blessed indeed is the night which brought such great goodness to mankind, allowing the Divine system to be implemented in human life, and providing people with a chance to be in touch with the major laws that govern the universe. These are given in easy translation in the Qur'ān, enabling human nature to respond to them and implement them with ease and comfort. It then enables a human community to be established, one based on the rules and responses of the nature God placed in man, living in harmony with the universe around it. It establishes a system that is naturally clean and honourable, free of unnecessary restrictions, under which man lives on earth but by which he maintains his contact with heaven.

Those who were the first to receive the Qur'ān lived during a remarkable period of history when they were in direct contact with God. He told them what they felt in different situations, making them feel, time after time, that He was looking after them. For their part, they took all this into account, in every move and action they performed, and every thought they entertained. They appealed to Him at every turn, trusting that He would always respond to them.

When that generation passed away, the Qur'ān remained an open book that directly addresses human hearts. When people open themselves to it, its effect surpasses magic. It transforms their feelings in a way that is heard of only in great legends. The Qur'ān has remained ever since a complete and clear system that can establish a model human community in any environment and at any time. What it creates is a type of human life that lives within its local environment and time and adopts the unique Islamic system with all its special qualities. This is the distinctive mark of the Divine system, and it applies to everything that God makes. Human beings make what suits them at a particular period of time and in a particular situation. God's work, on the other hand, is perfect, fulfilling all needs, suited to all times and situations, combining permanent truths with variable forms, all in perfect harmony.

God bestowed the Qur'ān from on high on that remarkable night to warn people in the first place: "*We have always sent warnings.*" (Verse 3)

The very fact that the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high on that blessed night makes this a deciding point: "*On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear.*" (Verse 4) The Qur'ān certainly set things apart, distinguishing the permanent truth from powerless falsehood. Limits were established and the road along which man should travel through life was charted. This is the road man should follow for the rest of life. Thus, none of the fundamental issues of human life are left ambiguous. Everything is made clear in the Divine message. All this has been accomplished by God's command and by His will to send messengers to clarify matters for all mankind: "*By Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance].*" (Verse 5)

All this has been done as an act of mercy bestowed on mankind for all future generations up to the Day of Judgement: "*As a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) Nothing manifests God's mercy like the revelation of the Qur'ān. With consummate ease, it appeals directly to people's hearts as easily as the blood flowing through their veins. In this way, it transforms man into a noble creature. With Qur'ānic guidance, human society becomes more like a dream world, yet it is there for eyes to see. The faith the Qur'ān outlines profoundly engages hearts and minds so as to be loved passionately. The question here is not one of meticulous perfection, goodness and suitability. It is much more than that. It is a scenario in which every one of these qualities is further enhanced until their perfection attains a beauty that permeates all details and combines and harmonizes them while at the same time maintaining their close links to the main body.

"*As a mercy from your Lord.*" this is how the Qur'ān was revealed on that blessed night. "*He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) He hears and He knows. He reveals what He reveals to people on the basis of His knowledge of what they say and do, as well as what is suitable and beneficial for them of laws, regulations and directives. He is the One who is in control of the universe, taking care of all who live on it. He is "*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers.*" (Verse 7) The revelations He bestows from on high to mould people's lives is part of His Lordship of the universe and of His laws that operate in the universe.

The reference in this verse to firm belief implies an allusion to the unbelievers' confused beliefs. They recognized God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth but they, nevertheless, associated partners with Him. This means that the central principle of God's oneness was blurred in their minds, and this precluded them from having firm and reassured beliefs.

God is also the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of all generations of creation: "*There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.*" (Verse 8) Both the initiation of life and its deathly end are witnessed by all and are recognized as being beyond the power of any creature. This is clear at first sight and with simple consideration. The scene of death, like the scene of new life, touches the human heart and leaves a very strong influence on it, making it ready to respond. Hence, they are often mentioned in the Qur'ān to attract people's attention to them.

Clarifying Smoke

At this point, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' own situation, which was the opposite of the seriousness with which they should have dealt with God's revelations:

> *Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! [They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.* (Verses 9–16)

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet that they are playing about when the situation requires seriousness, and that they continue to be in doubt about God's confirmed revelations. He is, therefore, instructed to

leave them until they face a day of great hardship: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering.*" (Verses 10–11)

Scholars during the early period of Islam differed in their views about what the smoke mentioned in this verse means. Some of them maintained that it will occur on the Day of Judgement, which makes the warning implied here similar to other warnings in the Qur'ān about that day. They said that this will surely take place and that the Prophet awaited it. Others said that it actually did take place just as the Qur'ān states. It was then lifted after the Prophet prayed God to so remove it.[1]

We, though, are more in agreement with the view expressed by Ibn 'Abbās and explained by Ibn Kathīr making it clear that the smoke will appear on the Day of Judgement. Similar warnings also occur elsewhere in the Qur'ān. What it means here is that these people doubt and play. Leave them, then, in anticipation of that terrible day when the skies shall bring smoke that makes things clear. As it envelops people, their suffering will be particularly painful. Their appeals for help is described thus: "*[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.*" (Verse 12) They are told that a positive response to their appeal is impossible. It is now too late: "*How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!'*" (Verses 13–14) They claimed that a non-Arab person or people taught the Prophet the Qur'ān, and they further alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a madman.

Having given them this image of a time when they appeal in vain, they are told that they still have a chance, which they should not lose. While they are still in this life, their punishment is delayed. If they believe now, as they will later promise they would if returned, they

1. The author adds here lengthy quotations from *Ḥadīth* anthologies and from commentaries on the Qur'ān in support of both views. To include these in full would perhaps be tedious for an English reader. They are no more than endorsements of each of the two views, showing the evidence on which each relies. Therefore, these quotations have been omitted in this edition. – Editor's note.

will have acted whilst they have the time to prove their sincerity. Nothing is lost yet, so they better act now before they are returned to God. When they are returned to Him: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught,*" when the smoke envelops people. "*We will indeed exact retribution,*" for the play you indulge in and the falsehood you level at the Prophet describing him as *'taught by others, a madman',* when he is God's trusted messenger.

Drowning Pharaoh

A very brief account of the history of Moses and Pharaoh is then added. It concludes with a mighty strike in this present life, corresponding to the mighty onslaught that will strike them on the day when the skies will bring forth their smoke:

> *We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.* (Verses 17–33)

This round starts with a strong note alerting people to the fact that when God sends a messenger to a certain community, this may represent

a special test for them. Likewise, allowing those who oppose the messenger and reject his message a period of time during which they may persist in their arrogance, persecuting the messenger and those who believe in him, may also be a special sort of test. When a community exhausts the patience of God's messenger, leaving him despairing of their ever being positive towards the Divine message, their action may incur a stern punishment: "*We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people.*" (Verse 17) We tested them with prosperity and power in the land, as well as all means of affluence and power. "*There came to them a noble messenger.*" (Verse 17) This was a part of their test, showing how they responded to God's messenger who asked nothing for himself in return. He only called on them to believe in God and demonstrate their readiness to give everything to God, leaving nothing for themselves when it comes to sacrifice for His sake. Thus, the messenger said to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.*" (Verses 18–21)

These are clear words, in short sentences, outlining what Moses asks of his people. He is advising them to make a complete response and submit totally to God. It does not behove God's servants to exalt themselves against Him. As Moses gives them God's message, together with clear and irrefutable proof that he is God's messenger, he seeks God's help and protection should they attack him. If they persist in their erring ways, unwilling to believe in God, he asks them to leave him alone, move away from him. This is extremely fair behaviour. Tyranny, however, is rarely willing to deal in fairness. It fears should the truth remain free, approaching people peacefully. It, therefore, resorts to strong, hard tactics in its efforts to impose its absolute authority. It cannot afford for the truth to make any in-roads and thus win minds and hearts over to its side. Hence, tyranny and falsehood strike hard. They stone any advocate of the truth, seeking to persecute them in every possible way.

The *sūrah* leaves out several episodes of this story to pick up its thread as it approaches its end. Moses realizes that people will not

respond to him positively. Nor will they adopt either of the two options he offered them: accepting his status or moving away from him. He is certain that they are genuinely guilty, with no hope of their ever changing their ways. Therefore, he makes his ultimate appeal to his Lord: "*He then called out to his Lord, saying: These people are lost in sin.*" (Verse 22) What means a messenger of God has other than to submit the outcome of his efforts to his Lord? Moses presents his account and leaves matters to God to deal with as He pleases.

Moses received an endorsement from God with regard to his evaluation of his peoples' status: they were truly guilty: "*Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verses 23–24) That their flight was to occur at night comes in for stronger emphasis in the Arabic text: the verb *asri*, translated as 'set forth', implies that the march must be under cover of darkness, then the verse adds the word *laylan*, meaning 'by night'. Thus they set forth stealthily, at night, unseen by Pharaoh and his watchmen. Furthermore, they were instructed not to make any disturbance in the parted sea as they crossed through it. Thus, Pharaoh and his host would be tempted to pursue them and God's will would then be as He had determined: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) Thus, God's will is done through apparent causes, but these causes are part and parcel of His will and how it is accomplished.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of this mass drowning in words that express God's will, which inevitably comes to pass: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) This is followed with a comment highlighting Pharaoh's humiliation as also of those who supported his arrogant tyranny. They are utterly humiliated in a world where they behaved with all arrogance. How fitting! Those very people bowed their heads before Pharaoh, bewitched by his power, yet he is of no significance in this world. When his power is withdrawn, there is nothing he can do to regain it. No one mourns his loss.

> *How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit*

it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Verses 25–29)

The scene begins with an image of the splendid comfort in which they dwelled: gardens, fountains, plants, high position, honour and blessings in which they revelled. Yet all this is taken away from them, or they are removed from it, so as to give it to others. In another *sūrah*, the Qur'ān says: "*We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (26: 59) Whilst the Children of Israel did not inherit Pharaoh's kingdom *per se*, they were nonetheless given a similar kingdom in another land. What is meant, then, is that the same kind of kingdom and blessings that were taken away from Pharaoh and his people were given to the Children of Israel.

What happened next? Those same tyrants, who had gloried in their power and who were held in awe by people, were removed altogether. None grieved for them. Neither earth nor heaven felt their loss. Nor were they given any reprieve: "*Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verse 29) The statement carries connotations of humiliation and total disregard. No one on earth or in heaven was sorry about how these tyrants met their end. They were crushed like ants under foot. The whole universe hated them because they had split themselves away from it. This is a universe that believes in its Lord while they denied Him. Theirs were evil souls, untouchable by the universe in which they lived. Had these tyrants felt what these words imply, they would have foreseen their own humiliation and known that the universe looks upon them as creatures apart.

This is then contrasted with an image of those who are saved and blessed with honour:

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 30–33)

It was from '*humiliating suffering*' that the Children of Israel were saved. This contrasts with the humiliation that the Egyptian tyrants

and transgressors found themselves in. They were saved "*from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then mentions the fact that God chose the Children of Israel, knowing all about them, with both their positive and negative qualities. Yet He chose them in preference to all other people in their own time. God knew that they were, at the time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qur'ān about their deviation and slow response. Perhaps God made His choice on the basis that whilst they did not then attain the high standard of faith He required, they would nonetheless be the best under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight.

"*And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.*" (Verse 33) Thus, in turn, the Children of Israel were tested by means of these signs. When the test was over and their time in charge came to its end, God punished them for their deviation and evil. It was as a result of this test that God abandoned them; indeed, they were smashed by those who left them in their Diaspora. They were to suffer humiliation and were warned that God will re-punish them whenever they transgress and behave with arrogance. This warning remains true as long as human life continues.

Doubting Resurrection

Once more the *sūrah* takes up the unbelievers' doubts and denial of resurrection and accountability. Here, too, resurrection is linked to the fact that the structure of the universe is raised on a foundation of truth and seriousness that requires accountability and requital after resurrection:

> *Now these people assert: 'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day*

when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (Verses 34–42)

The Arab idolaters used to say that people die once only and that is the end; no resurrection and no further life. They called this the first death, meaning that it precedes what they were promised of a second life after resurrection. To them, the proof of this assertion was contained in the fact that none of their forefathers who died had ever returned; none had been resurrected. They demanded that their forefathers should be brought back to life before their eyes if resurrection were indeed true. They thus betrayed their ignorance of the purpose of resurrection. They did not understand that it is a further stage of human life, with a definite purpose and a clear goal, which is the administration of requital for what was done in the first stage. Thus, God's obedient servants reach their noble destination, which they have earned through acting well in their first lives, while hardened sinners arrive at the miserable and filthy end they deserve. This means that resurrection will come about after the entire first stage of life has ended, i.e. man's time on earth has concluded. It precludes that resurrection should be the result of a human wish expressed by an individual or a community, so that they can believe in it. Indeed, faith is not complete unless one believes in resurrection, which God's messengers have confirmed, and which is apparent to anyone who reflects on the nature of life and God's wisdom in creating it in this way. Such reflection is sufficient on its own to believe in the Day of Judgement.

Before the *sūrah* invites them to reflect on the design of the universe, it shakes their hearts strongly, reminding them of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba',[2] in South Arabia. This story must have been well known to the Arabs, as the *sūrah* makes only a brief reference to it, warning them against a similarly terrible fate: "*Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because*

2. Tubba' was the title given to the kings of Ḥimyar, a major tribe that lived in southern Arabia. – Editor's note.

they were lost in sin?" (Verse 37) As this reminder makes them shudder, they are called upon to reflect on the perfect design of the heavens and earth, and how the universe is finely balanced and well planned, indicating that it is deliberately made in this way for a particular purpose: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 38–42) There is a fine and delicate relation between the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in between them on the one hand and the question of resurrection and accountability on the other. Human nature can easily understand this when attention is drawn to it in the way described here.

Such reflection should take into account the creation of the universe, what it points to of elaborate planning, wise purpose, perfect balance and harmony, the creation of everything in accurate measure and quantity placing it thus in harmony with everything around it. Such reflection undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that everything is created on purpose. No coincidence or carelessness is allowed in any aspect, major or trivial, of the design of the huge celestial bodies or the small, fine creatures living on them. Thus, we realize that the universe is created for a purpose, which means that nothing of it is the result of idle play; and that it is based on the truth, which means that no falsehood is allowed to infiltrate it. We further realize that it must have an end, which does not occur at the point of death after a short journey on earth. Logically speaking, a second life, when reward and punishment are administered, is inevitable, so that good and evil come to their natural ends. Man has been so created as to be susceptible to both tendencies of good and evil. It is through his will and effort that he chooses one or the other, making himself liable to ultimately receive its reward or punishment, as the case may be.

That man is so created, with both tendencies, and that God's action cannot be mere idle play, means that man will have a specific fate

which he meets after his journey on earth is over. This is the essence of the hereafter. Hence, it is mentioned after attentions have been drawn to the wise purpose that lies beyond the creation of the universe: "*The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 40–42)

This statement comes naturally at this point, closely related as it is to what went before it. It is absolute wisdom that requires that creatures should have a day when judgement is made between those who follow true guidance and those who go astray; when goodness is rewarded and evil humiliated; when people have no support, bond or relation. They will return to their Creator as individuals, just like He created them, to be requited for what they did in life. No one will support them or offer a gesture of mercy, except for those on whom God bestows His grace. It is from God's hand that they came out to work in life, and to His hand they will return to receive what their actions deserve. In between, they have a chance to act, just as they are being tested.

Two Different Fates

The final scene in the *sūrah* depicts the two different ends of the believers and the unbelievers. Again, the scene and its images are violent, in keeping with the *sūrah*'s general ambiance:

> *The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree will be the food of the sinful; like molten lead will it boil in the belly, like the boiling of scalding water. 'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.'*
>
> *The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, amid gardens and fountains, wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. There they can call for every*

kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (Verses 43–57)

The scene begins with an image of the Zaqqūm tree, which is stated to provide the food of sinners. It is a powerful image that strikes fear and panic in the audience's hearts. The closest thing we know to this food is the lees, the sediment that remains when oil has been long boiled. This lees continues to boil in their bellies like molten lead. The sinful person who behaved towards his Lord and His trusted messenger with arrogance will be standing there. An order is issued to the guards of hell to take him away in a brutal manner that suits his 'honourable' position: "*Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water.*" (Verses 47–48) Drag him away so as to make him feel his humiliation, for there is no honour for such sinners! When he gets there, pour scalding water over his head so as to burn his skin. Then, added to all this punishment is a strong rebuke: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man!*" (Verse 49) This is indeed the fate best suited to the one who boasted of his power and honour. Now he has none of this, because his boasting was an affront to God and His messengers. "*This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verse 50) When you were warned against this fate, you received the warning with mockery, doubting that it would ever happen.

Our eyes stretch to the other side to see the God-fearing who took the warning seriously and feared what may happen on this day of decision. We see them '*in a safe position*', where there is nothing to fear and no harsh treatment. They revel in their splendour '*amid gardens and fountains*'. Their garments are made of silk and brocade. They take their positions facing one another talking about whatever is of concern to them. In addition, they are given pure companions with beautiful eyes to make their bliss perfect. There, in heaven, they are the 'owners' of the place. They can ask for whatever they want and it will be given: "*There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security.*" (Verse 55) They expect no end to this happiness, as death

does not occur here. They have already died once and they will not be made to taste death again. This contrasts with what the unbelievers used to say in this present world: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again.*" (Verse 35) In the unbelievers' case, the one death is followed by suffering in hell. The believers, who are in heaven, "*shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 56) This is yet another aspect of God's favour which He bestows on believers. No one is saved from suffering on the Day of Judgement unless the Lord grants this favour. It is all through "*an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 57)

The *sūrah* concludes with a reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending His message to warn us against the consequences of disbelief: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

It is a fitting conclusion that sums up the message of the *sūrah*, reflects its ambiance, and fits with its beginning and line of discussion. It started with a reference to the book God revealed as a reminder for people so that they may take heed. It warned against what may happen on the Day of Judgement, with God saying: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16) The two short verses at the end remind them of the favour God granted them by giving them the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, which they understand. They are finally given an implicit but nonetheless fearful warning: "*Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verse 59)

SŪRAH 45

Al-Jāthiyah

(Kneeling Down)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, describes some aspects of the reception Islam received from the idolaters. It reports their facile answers to its arguments and signs, states their stubborn rejection of the truth and shows how they unashamedly pursued desire. The Qur'ān also portrays their minds as sealed to Divine guidance, straying in whatever direction their fancies led them. Yet the Qur'ān continued to confront them with God's signs, reminded them of God's punishment and described His reward and His laws that operate in the universe.

As the *sūrah* describes those who opposed the message in Makkah, we see a group of people who insisted on going astray, who stubbornly rejected the truth and who were rude in their description of God and His revelations. Such people are described in the *sūrah* in the terms they deserve. They are also warned against God's grievous and humiliating punishment: "*Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever*

to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them." (Verses 7–10)

We also see a group of people, perhaps belonging to those who received earlier revelations but who were given to ill thoughts and misjudgement. They paid little attention to the truth of faith and saw little difference between those who did evil and those who did good works. The *sūrah* makes it abundantly clear to them that there is a huge difference between these two types on God's scales. It describes them as ill-judging and makes it clear that God judges all on the basis of absolute justice, which has been ingrained within the core of the universe since the beginning of creation: "*Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verses 21–22)

We also see the person who has no criterion other than his own desire for judging anything. For this type, desire is the deity he worships and obeys. The *sūrah* wonders at such people and publicizes the fact that they are blind to the truth: "*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) Such people deny the life to come altogether, express grave doubts about the issue of resurrection and accountability and they stubbornly reject the truth asking for proofs that cannot be given in this life. The Qur'ān directs such people to consider the signs and proofs already in place. They, however, remain oblivious to these: "*They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'*" (Verses 24–26)

It is possible to read all these descriptions as pointing to a single type of people. It is equally possible that they are different groups, all of which were opposed to the Islamic message during its period in Makkah. They would, thus, include some people to whom revelations were given in former times, but these would have been very small in number in Makkah at that time. Yet this reference to people of earlier revelations need not point to a particular group in Makkah; it may just be a pointer to a type of people that others should be made aware of.

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān confronts these people, highlighting as it does their qualities and behavioural patterns. It describes for them God's signs all over the universe and within themselves, warning them that they will have to face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. It also cites what happened to communities before them when they abandoned Divine faith.

In the first instance, God's signs are put before them in a profound, effective and simple way: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verses 3–6)

The *sūrah* then refers to other signs, showing them as blessings and favours granted by God, but the rejecters are oblivious to the message these impart: "*It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verses 12–13)

The *sūrah* also shows the unbelievers what they will be like on the Day of Resurrection, which is something they deny altogether: "*When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be*

summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends." (Verses 27–35)

The *sūrah* leaves absolutely no doubt about the fairness of the requital or each person's individual responsibility. This fundamental principle is shown to be central in the way the universe came into existence and in the way it is maintained: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) This is further clarified as the *sūrah* responds to those who do evil yet consider that they will be on an equal footing with those who believe in God and do good deeds: "*God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22)

In the way it addresses its subject matter, the *sūrah* is one single whole, but we have divided it into two parts for easier study. It begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā, Mīm*, adding a reference to the Qur'ān: "*This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) It concludes by addressing all praise to God, the absolute Lord of all the universe. This glorification of Him contrasts with the attitude of those who remain oblivious to His signs and

who ridicule His revelations: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verses 36–37)

The *sūrah* is characterized by its easy flow and a soft beat that contrasts with the strong rhythm of the preceding *sūrah*, Smoke. God, the Creator of people's hearts and the One who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high, sometimes addresses people in a strong and hard way, at other times with gentle touches, and then again sometimes with a soft and quiet beat. He takes into account their different conditions, circumstances, attitudes and responses. His knowledge is absolute and His wisdom infinite.

I

A Clear Way of Religion

Al-Jāthiyah (Kneeling Down)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ الْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. (3)

إِنَّ فِي السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. (4)

وَفِي خَلْقِكُمْ وَمَا يَبُثُّ مِن دَآبَّةٍ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مِن رِّزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ ٱلرِّيَٰحِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. (5)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتْلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ فَبِأَىِّ حَدِيثٍۭ بَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَايَٰتِهِۦ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations? (6)

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ أَفَّاكٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿٧﴾

Woe betide every lying, sinful person (7)

يَسْمَعُ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ثُمَّ يُصِرُّ مُسْتَكْبِرًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا ۖ فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٨﴾

who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. (8)

وَإِذَا عَلِمَ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا شَيْـًٔا ٱتَّخَذَهَا هُزُوًا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. (9)

مِن وَرَآئِهِمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَلَا يُغْنِى عَنْهُم
مَّا كَسَبُوا۟ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا مَا ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن
دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (10)

هَٰذَا هُدًى ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ
لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مِّن رِّجْزٍ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment. (11)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَكُمُ ٱلْبَحْرَ لِتَجْرِىَ ٱلْفُلْكُ
فِيهِ بِأَمْرِهِۦ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. (12)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think. (13)

قُل لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ يَغْفِرُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ
لَا يَرْجُونَ أَيَّامَ ٱللَّهِ لِيَجْزِىَ قَوْمًۢا
بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. (14)

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ
أَسَآءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return. (15)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ
وَٱلْحُكْمَ وَٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ
وَفَضَّلْنَٰهُمْ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. (16)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم بَيِّنَٰتٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ ۖ فَمَا
ٱخْتَلَفُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ
ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ
يَقْضِى بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا
كَانُوا۟ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. (17)

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَٰكَ عَلَىٰ شَرِيعَةٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ
فَٱتَّبِعْهَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ
لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. (18)

إِنَّهُمْ لَن يُغْنُوا۟ عَنكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ
وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍ ۖ
وَٱللَّهُ وَلِىُّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. (19)

هَٰذَا بَصَٰٓئِرُ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith. (20)

أَمْ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱجْتَرَحُوا۟ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن نَّجْعَلَهُمْ كَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ سَوَآءً مَّحْيَاهُمْ وَمَمَاتُهُمْ ۚ سَآءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. (21)

وَخَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلِتُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged. (22)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِۦ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِۦ غِشَٰوَةً فَمَن يَهْدِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed? (23)

Signs Everywhere

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* mentions the revelation of this book, the Qur'ān, by God, the Almighty, the Wise after having introduced the two separate Arabic letters *Ḥā, Mīm*, to point to this book's source. In speaking about the separate letters introduced at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs*, we have mentioned elsewhere that they highlight the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of the letters forming the Arab's own language, yet they cannot produce even a very small portion like it. This, then, constitutes permanent evidence that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty who can do whatever He wishes, the Wise who creates everything according to a certain measure and to serve a particular purpose. This is an apt comment that fits the ambience of the *sūrah* and its discussion of different types of people.

Before speaking about the unbelievers and their attitude towards the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* refers to signs pointing to the Creator that are available everywhere in the world around them. Alone, these signs should have been enough to direct them to believe in God. Now, the *sūrah* turns their minds to such signs so that they may open their hearts to them and realize that it is God who has bestowed this book from on high and that it is He who has created this great universe: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3) The signs scattered everywhere in the heavens and the earth are not limited to any area or situation. Wherever we look around us we find signs. Is there anything in this wonderful universe that is not a sign pointing to its great Maker?

Look at the skies and the great celestial bodies that are scattered like small particles in space; it is such an awesome expanse, yet so pleasant to the eye. Consider these celestial bodies as they move in their respective orbits with unfailing accuracy and harmony. We are never tired of contemplating this perfect harmony which is conspicuous everywhere around us. Then look at the earth: how big it is in comparison to the humans who dwell on it, yet it is no more than a tiny particle compared to the huge stars or to the expanse in which it floats. It would have been lost in that expanse, had it not been for the hand of God placing it in its appointed position within the overall universal system. Nothing is lost sight of. Consider also how God gave this earth the necessary conditions that allow the emergence of life on it. This has required that many fine elements have been brought together in absolute accuracy of measure and quality. Should any of these qualities be in the wrong measure or be inaccurate in their function, life on earth would not have been possible nor would it have lasted.[1]

Everything on earth and every living thing, indeed every part of every living thing, large or small, is a sign. This applies to fine, little things in the same way as it applies to the large and huge: a small leaf in a great high tree or a frail plant is a sign when we contemplate its shape, size, colour and feel. A hair on the body of man or animal and a bird's feather are equally signs whether in terms of quality, length, material or function. Wherever man stretches his eyes to look at the skies or the earth, he will find a great multitude of signs that stand clear before him. Yet, who looks at these signs and understands their message? To whom are they addressed? In short, these are "*signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3)

It is faith that opens people's hearts to receive the messages that emanate from the numerous great signs disseminated throughout the heavens and the earth. When faith touches hearts, they soften and become far more receptive. The message everything around us gives is to indicate the distinctive nature of whatever God's hand has made of objects, whether these be animate or inanimate. Indeed, everything

1. For further discussion of this point, please refer to the commentary on Verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–383.

God has created is miraculous in nature. No one else can create anything similar to it.

The *sūrah* then points out that God's signs can also be seen within people themselves. They feel these close at hand: "*And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 4) Man's wonderful constitution, unique qualities, varied and fine functions are all miraculous indeed, but we tend to forget this because of long familiarity. Indeed the physical make-up of any human organ fills us with wonder. In its most simple and primitive form, in the amoeba and even smaller forms, life is a miracle. If this is apparent in man's highly complex constitution how much more complex then is his psychological and emotional constitution?

Around man, countless creatures walk on earth: different kinds with a great variety of shape, size and form. Only God knows them all. The smallest is the same as the largest: they are all miraculous in their creation and in the way they fit with the overall pattern of life. No species increases beyond certain limits to the extinction of other species. Only the mighty hand of God controls them all, increasing or decreasing them according to a perfect measure, giving them the qualities and functions that ensure proper balance.

Eagles are birds of prey that enjoy longevity, but who lay only a small number of eggs and so procreate on a small scale, as compared with swallows and other small birds. What would the world of birds be like had eagles procreated at the same rate as swallows and swifts? Needless to say, all other types of birds would have vanished. The same applies to lions who are ferocious hunters. What would animal life be like, had they procreated at the same rates as sheep and deer? No other animal species would have survived in any jungle or forest. Again, the hand of God controls the number of lions to ensure continuity, and increases the numbers of sheep and deer for an easily recognized purpose. A fly lays hundreds of thousands of eggs during its life cycle, yet flies live for only around two weeks. What would happen if flies were left to live for months or years?

Thus we see that in the very act of creation and its management, the qualities of different creatures of all kinds and types, there are endless

signs that deliver the same message, but only to those who make the effort to see and contemplate these signs. These are "*signs for people of sure faith.*" Certainty of faith is the condition that makes hearts receptive and interacting. It gives them reassurance so that they can look at the facts the universe presents with ease, confidence and calm. This enables our minds to draw great conclusions from simple facts.

The *sūrah* then highlights a number of natural phenomena and their effects on human life and on the lives of other creatures: "*And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) The alternation of day and night is a phenomenon that has lost its significance in the minds of most people because of its regular frequency. Yet, what wonder would fill the heart of anyone who sees the approach of night or the creeping of the day for the first time? An alert mind and an open heart will always see this great wonder and marvel at it as they see in it God's hand that controls the universe.

As human knowledge of some natural phenomena increased, man came to know that the night and day result from the earth revolving in its position opposite the sun once every 24 hours. Yet the wonder is in no way diminished. Indeed, similarly wonderful is the fact that the earth revolves with such regular speed while floating in space, with nothing to hold it in place other than God's hand that has set the laws of nature in place, thus allowing life to emerge on this planet. Human knowledge broadens and people begin to recognize the great importance of the alternation of night and day for life on our planet. They understand that dividing time into night and day is essential for the emergence of life and its continuity. Without such alternation, everything on earth would be different, particularly human life. Thus the more we know, the better we feel the remarkable wonder that is this great phenomenon.

"*And in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless.*" (Verse 5) The '*means of subsistence*' may refer to rain pouring down, as people understood in the past. Yet the term may refer to other things that

come from the skies and have similarly important roles to play in sustaining life on earth. The rays that come from the skies provide an example. These rays are actually essential for rain, because it is the heat of the sun that causes sea water to evaporate. It then gathers in clouds that produce the rain in a process of condensation. Rain water then forms reservoirs that allows rivers to flow and springs to gush forth. Thus, after being lifeless, the earth is revived through water, heat and light.

"*And in the shifting of the winds.*" The winds blow east or west, north or south, straight or at an angle, hot and cold, but always in accordance with the accurate, synchronized system that operates in the universe, where everything is meticulously calculated leaving nothing to coincidence. The blowing of the wind has a definite relation to the movement of the earth, the alternation of day and night as also to the means of subsistence sent down from the skies. They all cooperate to fulfil God's will and how it operates in the universe. All these are signs we see in the universe, but who understands their message? It is understood only by "*those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) Man's mind, thus, has a role, one that it should fulfil.

Those Deaf to the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, revealed by God, highlights these universal signs in a way that inspires believers who have certainty of faith and who use their reason. In this way, it touches hearts and minds and addresses people's natures. The profound link between human nature and the universe means that it only requires some inspiring words, such as the verses of the Qur'ān, for senses to be alerted and made responsive. Anyone who does not believe as a result of contemplating these signs is totally unlikely to believe in some other way; and the one who is not fully alerted by the inspiring verses of the Qur'ān will not be alerted by loud outcries from any other source: "*Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

No words will be as effective as the Qur'ān, God's word. Nor will any creation be equal to God's creation in the universe. Likewise, no

truth will be as clear and confirmed as the truth of God: "*In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

The only requital fit to be given to an unbeliever is severe punishment:

> *Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them.* (Verses 7–10)

These verses describe, in part, the unbelievers' reception of the Islamic message in Makkah, their stubborn refusal to listen to the clear word of truth and their insistence on falsehood. They take a hostile attitude to the truth, as if it has never even been presented to them. These verses also mention the unbelievers' rudeness and impudence as they speak of God and His word. The Qur'ān severely rebukes them for this, putting before them the grievous and humiliating suffering they are certain to endure.

"*Woe betide every lying, sinful person.*" (Verse 7) This verse threatens every habitual liar who frequently indulges in sin. The threat is issued by God Almighty who is able to bring about the total destruction of any community, and whose promises and warnings always come true. This makes the warning all the more serious and frightening.

The mark of such a lying, sinful person is that he persistently holds on to what is false, looks with disdain on the truth, feels too proud to respond to God's revelations and behaves with insolence towards God. He thus: "*hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them.*" (Verse 8) Although this hateful type of person could be found among the idolaters in Makkah, the same type is seen in every *jāhiliyyah* society, immersed in ignorance, whether in the past, present or future. Many

are those all over the world, including some who are described as Muslims, who behave with disdain when they hear God's revelations being recited and who persist in their erring ways as though they have never heard such revelations. They do so because what God has revealed is contrary to their desire and will not approve the evil and false practices in which they indulge.

"*So, give him the news of painful suffering.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes the punishment such a person will receive, but the Arabic text uses the word *bashshir* for 'giving news', even though the word is only used for giving good news. As used in this verse to bring news of painful suffering, it thus carries connotations of ridicule. If this person does not listen to the warning, let him receive the news of his suffering in a voice that signals good news. What mockery!

"*When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it,*" after learning their source. This is a far more serious and grave response. Yet it describes an oft found situation in every community that lives in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. How many are those, including some described as Muslims, who ridicule God's revelations, mocking them and those who believe in them. "*For such people there is humiliating suffering in store.*" (Verse 9) Humiliation is the fitting requital for everyone who ridicules God's revelations.

This suffering is ready and close at hand. It may not be time for it yet, but it is nevertheless present: "*Hell lurks behind them*". (Verse 10) The phrase, '*behind them*,' has connotations that are specifically intended. Since the suffering is 'behind' them, they do not see it and remain oblivious to it. Therefore, they do not try to avoid it. Yet it will surely engulf them. "*All that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God.*" (Verse 10) Nothing that they might have done or gained is of any use to them. Even if some of their deeds are good, they cannot benefit from them because they have been scattered by the wind like dust. Their deeds were not founded on a solid basis of faith. Likewise, their possessions will be of no use to them. Nor can their deities, friends, supporters or soldiers offer them help or protection. Nor can they intercede on their behalf. "*Grievous suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 10) Their punishment is not only humiliating, as

fits their offence for mocking God's revelations, it is also grievous to suit the magnitude of that offence.

This section concludes with a word that describes, in general terms, the true nature of God's revelations and the punishment to be meted out to those who disbelieve them: "*This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment.*" (Verse 11) It is a fact that this Qur'ān is true and pure guidance that admits no error whatsoever. Therefore, anyone who denies its truth deserves such grievous suffering. The nature of the pain is described here as abominable, which serves to emphasize its description in the previous verses.

Will They Reflect?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds them of the great favours and blessings God has given them in this world, so that their hearts may soften and reflect:

> *It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.* (Verses 12–13)

Man, an insignificant creature in this great universe, receives a large share of God's care, which allows him to make use of greater creatures in the universe, benefiting by them in a variety of ways when he understands a part of the secret, Divine law that controls all. Had man remained ignorant of this part of God's law, he could not, weak as he is, have benefited by such great forces. He would not even be able to live with them, considering his small stature and strength compared with theirs.

The sea is one such huge force which God has subjected to man by revealing to him a portion of its secret make-up and qualities. Thus, man has been able to make ships sail through the huge oceans without fear of its strong waves: "*so that ships sail through it by His command.*" (Verse 12) It is God who has given the sea and the material from which ships are made their qualities and made atmospheric pressure, the speed

of winds, earth's gravity and other universal features in the way they are. Thus, they combine to allow ships to sail through the sea. God further guided man to understand all this and make use of it for his own benefit, whether it be by fishing, trade, gaining knowledge, or sports and pleasure: "*And that you may seek of His bounty.*" It behoves man, then, to turn to God in gratitude for all these favours: "*and that you give thanks.*" (Verse 12) The Qur'ān directs man to attend to this duty and to understand the close relationship between him and the universe. Everything has been originated by God and everything will ultimately return to Him.

Having specified the sea, the *sūrah* makes a general reference to God's favours. He has made all the forces, potentials and blessings in the universe that have a bearing on man's task on earth subservient to him: "*And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth.*" (Verse 13) Everything in the universe is created by God. He controls it and determines its operation. Man, a small creature in the universe, is given the ability to understand a part of the laws of nature that operate, by God's will, in this universe. This enables him to make use of powers and forces that are immeasurably greater than his own. Without God's grace, he would not have been able to do so. In all this, there are signs to reflect upon: "*In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verse 13)

Forgiveness of Offenders

Now the *sūrah* calls on believers to show magnanimity and forbearance to those who are weak because their hearts do not open to the great source of power. They are urged to show kindness to those who are blind to the great truths, and as a result, do not look forward to God's great days when some aspects of His majesty are clearly shown:

> *Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.* (Verses 14–15)

This directive is issued to the believers, requiring them to be forbearing towards those who do not look forward to God's days. Theirs should be an attitude of forgiveness that combines generosity with power and dignity. The truth is that such people deserve pity and sympathy because they are deprived of the benefit of believing in God, which is a rich treasure of grace, strength, wealth, reassurance and kindness. It provides true protection in moments of stress and weakness. They are also deprived of true knowledge that understands the nature of universal laws and what they can bring of power and riches for man's benefit. Those who enjoy the wealth of grace and benefits that come with faith are the ones who should be forbearing. They should forgive the slips and errors of the ones who are deprived of them.

On the other hand, the believers should leave the matter to God and He will requite all as they deserve. He will then credit them with their forbearing attitude and reward them for it as a deed of goodness. Such forgiveness naturally applies to what does not spread corruption on earth and does not constitute a transgression of the bounds set by God: "*It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned.*" (Verse 14) This is followed by an assertion about every person's individual responsibility and about fair judgement for all. It further confirms that all will return to God: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) When this is made clear, a believer is able to be forbearing and to overlook personal offences, but this forbearance is not out of weakness. Instead, he is the one who is strong and magnanimous. He holds the torch of guidance to enable the ones deprived of light to see. He comes forward with the cure for those who are ill. He will be rewarded according to his deeds, unharmed by those who do evil. All matters are ultimately judged by God, to whom all shall return.

The Leaders of Humanity

The *sūrah* then speaks of the leadership of humanity and how it has ultimately been assigned to believers in the Islamic message. It refers to the divisions that split the Children of Israel after God had given

them scriptures, wisdom and prophethood. The mantle of leadership has now been given to the messenger advocating God's final message. This was clearly stated when the Prophet was still in Makkah, suffering with his followers from persecution by the unbelievers. Yet this tells us something about the nature of the Islamic message, right from its very beginning, and the mission it is expected to fulfil:

> *To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.* (Verses 16–20)

Before the advent of Islam, the leadership of mankind was assigned to the Children of Israel. They were the community entrusted with the Divine faith God laid down for a certain period of time. Mankind needs a leadership enlightened with Divine guidance. When human leadership is based on earthly considerations alone, with no reference to Divine guidance, it is pulled in different directions whether by desire, ignorance or commonplace failings. God alone, the Creator of mankind, is the One who gives people a law that is free from the pressures of desire, ignorance or failing. He is the One who knows best what suits His creation.

"*To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood.*" (Verse 16) They were given the Torah, containing God's law, and they had a state where they were required to implement this law. They were also given prophethood after Moses so as to ensure the

continued and right implementation of this Divine law. Prophets were sent to them in succession over a relatively long period of history. "*We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations.*" (Verse 16) Their kingdom was in the holy land, which yielded rich harvests of all types, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

"*We granted them clear indications in matters of faith.*" (Verse 17) What they were given of the Divine law was clear and decisive, free of ambiguity, confusion and contradiction. There was absolutely no reason for them to differ over this clear law. There was no obscurity over any question of their faith or its laws, and they were certainly aware of the right judgement on all matters of importance. Nevertheless, "*it was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves.*" (Verse 17) Such disputes were motivated by mutual envy, malice and injustice, despite their knowing the truth. Therefore, their leadership of mankind was terminated, and their case is left to God, who will judge them on the Day of Resurrection: "*Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed.*" (Verse 17)

God then assigned a new leadership, imparted a new message to a different messenger, put His Divine law back on its right course and gave back to Divine faith its absolute clarity. This new leadership is thus guided by God's law, not by any human desire: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth].*" (Verse 18) Thus matters are defined in absolute clarity: it is either God's law or people's changing desires that are devoid of knowledge. There can be no third alternative and no middle way. No one abandons Divine law unless they choose to pursue human desires. Everything that differs with God's law is the expression of desire that pleases those who lack knowledge. God warns His messenger against following the desires of those who have no knowledge of the truth, as they will be of no avail to him. They only try to protect one another. Thus, they cannot harm him in any way as God will support and protect him: "*They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verse 19)

This verse and the one before it charts the way for the advocates of the Divine message, leaving no need for any comment or further detail: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verses 18–19) There is only one law that fits this description; everything else is the result of desire and ignorance. Every advocate of the Divine faith must follow only that. Those who espouse desire cannot help a believer: they only help one another and will not abandon their course. Yet they are too weak to be able to cause a believer any harm, since God is the One who protects the God-fearing. How can humans who, in their ignorance and weakness, have only one another for support be compared to one who advocates God's law and is protected by Him?

Commenting on this decisive clarification, the *sūrah* mentions the certainty of faith and what the Qur'ān provides of insight, guidance and Divine grace: "*This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 20) Describing the Qur'ān as a means of insight emphasizes its role of providing enlightenment. The Qur'ān provides insight, and insight makes matters clear. Moreover, the Qur'ān itself is guidance and mercy, but all this is dependent on certainty of faith which admits no doubt or worry. With such certainty, we know the way as it appears before us clear, straight, leading to a well defined goal. We go along this way sure of step and without hesitation. The Qur'ān is our source of light and guidance. It is indeed the embodiment of God's grace.

Totally Unequal

The *sūrah* clearly distinguishes between those who commit evil and those who do good as a result of being believers. There is no way that they can be judged in the same way. They are different in God's sight. Furthermore, God has established His universal law on the basis of truth and justice:

> *Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.* (Verses 21–22)

The first of these verses may be understood to refer to those among the people of earlier revelations who deviated from their scriptures and indulged in sin, but who nonetheless continued to think of themselves as believers. They might have thought themselves to be on the same level as Muslims who do good deeds. They might also have considered that the two groups are equal in God's sight, both in this life and in the life after death when people are given their reward or punishment. These verses may also be taken as a general discourse defining how people are judged on God's scales. It shows that believers who do good deeds are definitely in a higher position. It says that putting the evildoers and the righteous on the same level, either in this life or in the next, conflicts with the basic and permanent rule upon which the universe is founded, namely, the truth. Thus the truth is fundamental to both the universe and the Divine law. Consequently, both the universe and human life are set to progress by means of this truth. This manifests itself in the distinction between evildoers and those who do good in all respects, and in the individual judging of people on the basis of what each has earned through life. Justice is, thus, administered to all: "*None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22) This is the constant truth, the foundational stone of the entire universe.

The *sūrah* then refers to desire, which is by nature changing and fleeting. Yet some people make of desire a deity and thus they are unable to recognize true guidance:

> *Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?* (Verse 23)

The inimitable Qur'ānic style draws here an extraordinary image of the human soul when it abandons the basic and permanent rule of truth in order to follow fleeting desires, making of them a deity from which concepts, rules, feelings and actions are derived. In this way does man submit to desire and obey its dictates. This extraordinary situation is painted in a tone that invites strong censure.

"*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity!*" Such an example should be carefully considered. A person of this ilk deserves to be abandoned by God so that he goes even further astray: no light of guidance will be given to him by Divine mercy. After all, he has left no room in his heart for such guidance when he worships his own desires: "*And whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth].*" The Arabic phrase, *'alā 'ilm*, may be translated as, 'in full knowledge', in which case it refers to God's knowledge that such a person deserves to be left astray. Alternatively, it can be translated as we have rendered here as '*despite his knowledge*'. In other words, his knowledge of the truth does not deter him from pursuing his desires. Such a person deserves to be left straying in blindness: "*sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes.*" His receptive faculties are sealed, allowing no light or guidance to seep through. His judgement is, thus, fundamentally impaired.

"*Who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]?*" (Verse 23) All guidance comes from God. No one can provide anyone with guidance or error, not even His chosen messengers. It is all determined by God alone. "*Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) When a person takes heed, he will break the chains of desire and return to the straight path of truth. No one who treads this path will ever go astray.

2

To Whom Supremacy Belongs

وَقَالُوا۟ مَا هِىَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا ٱلدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا
وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَآ إِلَّا ٱلدَّهْرُ ۚ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ
عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. (24)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ مَّا كَانَ
حُجَّتَهُمْ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوا۟ ٱئْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (25)

قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يَجْمَعُكُمْ
إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.' (26)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ
ٱلسَّاعَةُ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَخْسَرُ ٱلْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. (27)

You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. (28)

وَتَرَىٰ كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَاثِيَةً ۚ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰٓ إِلَىٰ كِتَٰبِهَا
ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' (29)

هَٰذَا كِتَٰبُنَا يَنطِقُ عَلَيْكُم بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا
نَسْتَنسِخُ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. (30)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
فَيُدْخِلُهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ
ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿٣٠﴾

And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? (31)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَفَلَمْ تَكُنْ ءَايَٰتِى تُتْلَىٰ
عَلَيْكُمْ فَٱسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' (32)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَٱلسَّاعَةُ لَا رَيْبَ
فِيهَا قُلْتُم مَّا نَدْرِى مَا ٱلسَّاعَةُ إِن نَّظُنُّ
إِلَّا ظَنًّا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُسْتَيْقِنِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَبَدَا لَهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا عَمِلُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِم
مَّا كَانُوا بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (33)

وَقِيلَ ٱلْيَوْمَ نَنسَىٰكُمْ كَمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَآءَ
يَوْمِكُمْ هَٰذَا وَمَأْوَىٰكُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. (34)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّكُمُ ٱتَّخَذْتُمْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ هُزُوًا
وَغَرَّتْكُمُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ فَٱلْيَوْمَ لَا يُخْرَجُونَ
مِنْهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends. (35)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْحَمْدُ رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَرَبِّ ٱلْأَرْضِ
رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. (36)

وَلَهُ ٱلْكِبْرِيَآءُ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ
وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (37)

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* presents what the idolaters used to say about the hereafter, resurrection and accountability on the Day of Judgement. It refutes their arguments, citing irrefutable evidence drawn from their own particular situation. It then portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement which they see as closing in upon them, even though it is not as yet due. This is because the Qur'ānic style presents it as if it is there before their very eyes.

The *sūrah* then concludes with praises of God, the only Lord of the heavens and the earth and all those who live within them. His glory is extolled and no one can aspire to His position of absolute power.

A Narrow View of Life

> *They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'* (Verses 24–26)

So short-sighted were they that they considered life to be nothing beyond what they saw before their very eyes: one generation dies and another replaces it in life. Apparently, no hand deals death; it is all a question of days that pass and time that elapses bringing death to all. It is time, then, that ends their lives, making them die. This is a superficial outlook that does not go beyond appearances to discover subtle reasons and causes. They do not ask what brings them life; or, when it is there, what takes it away? They see that death does not occur according to a defined system or after a certain number of days and years. Instead, they think that only the passage of time deprives them of life. Death comes to all: children and the elderly, the healthy and the ill, the strong and the weak. Therefore, when we carefully

consider the reason behind all this, time is an inadequate explanation. Therefore, God says of them: "*Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess.*" (Verse 24) Their guesses are wild, lack proper reflection, sound knowledge and an understanding of cause and effect. They do not look carefully at the two phenomena of life and death to realize that they are the result of a will other than that of man and a reason other than the passage of time.

"*Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.'*" (Verse 25) This is a similarly superficial outlook devoid of any understanding of the laws of creation, God's wisdom or the secret that lies beyond life and death. People live on this planet so that they have a chance to work towards their ultimate destiny. Thus, God tests them by means of what He places at their disposal in this life. They then die and await the time of reckoning determined by Him. They will account for what they did in this life. Therefore, when they die, they do not return to this world. No purpose is served by such a return before the appointed time. They will not return merely because a group of human beings suggest they should. The major laws God has set in operation in the universe are not changed as a result of human suggestion. There is no question whatsoever of their naïvety in answer to God's revelations being taken up: "*Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verse 25)

Why should God bring back their forefathers before the time He, in His infinite wisdom, has determined? To convince them that God is able to bring the dead back to life? How amazing! Do they not see that God initiates life at every moment before their very eyes, in accordance with the law He has set for life? "*Say: It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt.*" (Verse 26) The very miracle they want to see done to their fathers occurs before their very eyes. It is God who grants life and causes death. There is nothing surprising, then, that He will bring the dead back to life, gathering them all on Resurrection Day. Why should they entertain any doubt about this, when they see it occurring before them: "*Though most people do not understand.*" (Verse 26)

The Qur'ān's comment on this visible fact cites the origin of all: "*To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 27) He is the One who makes and controls everything in the universe, and He is the One able to originate and reinstate everything and everyone.

The Record of All Deeds

They are now presented with a scene from the day that they doubt will ever come:

> *When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.'* (Verses 27–29)

In the first of these verses they are told of the fate of those who follow falsehood. They are the ones who end up in utter loss. Then we are given a panoramic view, with all the generations that have dwelled on the surface of this planet throughout the ages gathered together. They all sit on their knees, each community distinguished from the next, but all awaiting their dreaded accountability. The atmosphere is one of awe and fear. How can it be otherwise, when the assembly brings together everyone from all generations, and they are all on their knees? Greater fear is inspired by what lies ahead of people having to account for their deeds. What generates most fear, however, is that they have to face God Almighty, the Most Gracious, whose blessings were not met with gratitude, on earth, by most of those gathered before Him.

All those waiting on their knees look anxiously, breathless and with dry mouths. They are told: "*Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.*" (Verses 28–29) All of them, belonging to different communities, races and generations, are split into two groups – believers and unbelievers – for there is no other banner to raise on that occasion. One is God's party and the other is Satan's.

"*Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph.*" (Verse 30) They are the ones who are given comfort to dispel all worry and anxiety. The outcome of their situation is given straightaway, easily and without delay, so as to spread over them a pleasant air. But what do we find as we stretch our eyes through the words of the text to look at the other party? We hear a long and shameful rebuke one that reminds them of their worst sayings and deeds:

> *And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, 'God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour,' you would answer, 'We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced.'"* (Verses 31–32)

How do you view your situation now? Are you convinced? Then the *sūrah* turns away for a moment to give us a glimpse of what happens to them: "*The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride.*" (Verse 33) Further reproach is heaped upon their heads, and they are told that their lot will be nothing other than total disregard, humiliation as well as painful doom:

> *It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.'* (Verses 34–35)

As their ultimate fate is announced, the curtains are drawn leaving them in hell from which they cannot hope to leave and where they are not asked for excuses or justification: "*Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends.*" (Verse 35) As we listen, we almost hear the doors of

hell as they are finally closed. The scene is completed; nothing of it will change.

The *sūrah* concludes with voices praising and glorifying God:

> *All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 36–37)

The praising voice declares God's Lordship over the universe: earth and heaven, mankind and *jinn*, birds and beasts, as well as everyone and everything. They are all under the care of one Lord who is totally in control. Praised is He for the care He takes of them all. The glorifying voice declares that all supremacy in the universe belongs to God alone. To Him bows every exalted tyrant, and to His power submits every rebellious nature. Furthermore, to Him belongs the supreme power and absolute wisdom. Praise and glory to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

SŪRAH 46

Al-Aḥqāf

(Sand Dunes)

Prologue

The present *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, addresses the question of faith: belief in God's oneness and His absolute Lordship of the universe. As in other Makkan *sūrahs*, faith here also includes belief in the revelation of the Divine message to Muḥammad, God's messenger, who was preceded by other messengers, and to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high, confirming earlier scriptures. It also includes belief in the resurrection and accountability for all that is done in this present life, whether good or evil.

These are the fundamental principles upon which Islam builds its whole structure. Hence, the Qur'ān elaborates on these principles in all the Makkan *sūrahs*. It also touches upon these aspects in the *sūrahs* revealed later in Madīnah, and specifically whenever it lays down legislation or addresses a directive to the Muslim community. Part of the nature of the Islamic faith is that it considers belief in God's oneness, Muḥammad's message and accountability in the life to come the pivot upon which all its principles, systems, laws and morality turn. All are closely related to this belief. Therefore, they remain proactive.

The *sūrah* treats this question of faith in every possible way, presenting it against different backdrops and adding universal, psychological and historical effects. It makes faith a question for all

existence, not merely the human race. It gives us a glimpse of how some of the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, and refers to the attitude of some of the Children of Israel to it, presenting one testimony from uncorrupted human nature and another from some Israelites. It takes us on a journey so that we can look at the expanse of the heavens and the earth, and it also presents images from the Day of Judgement. It further shows us the fate of the people of Hūd, and touches on the fates of some of the townships around Makkah. According to the *sūrah*, both the universe itself and the Qur'ān are books stating the same truth.

The *sūrah* consists of four inter-related parts that can be seen as a single whole. The first part begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā Mīm*, that also began the six *sūrahs* preceding this one. These two letters are immediately followed by a reference to the book of the Qur'ān and its being a revelation from God: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) The *sūrah* follows this with a reference to the book of the universe, which is established on the basis of His truth and created according to elaborate planning. "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, the recited book of the Qur'ān and the book of the universe we behold confirm the truth as well as the elaborate planning: "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3)

After this powerful and comprehensive opening, the *sūrah* begins to present the question of faith, starting with a denunciation of polytheism, upheld by the pagan Arabs, demonstrating that it lacks all basis in the universe, and that it further lacks true pronouncement and inherited knowledge: "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4) It shows the error of the one who worships instead of God someone or thing who cannot hear or respond to its worshipper and who disputes with him on the Day of Judgement dissociating itself from all such worship.

It then speaks of the appalling reception they gave to the truth as presented by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), describing it as plain sorcery. (Verse 7) They even had the temerity to go further than this and alleged that the Prophet had fabricated it all. The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to give them a reply that suits his position as a messenger of God, one that reflects his fear of God and accepts His judgement both in this world and the next: "*Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verses 8–9) It also cites the attitude of some of the Children of Israel who accepted the Qur'ān as true guidance when they found in it what confirmed the scriptures given to Moses (peace be upon him). Such a person "*has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance.*" (Verse 10) They are, thus, denounced for their wrongdoing, for their disbelief, despite the testimony of those endowed with greater knowledge: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* also mentions the unbelievers' flimsy justification of their attitude as they said in reference to the believers: "*If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.*" (Verse 11) This explains their true stance: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* also refers to the book of Moses and the fact that the Qur'ān confirms it, highlighting its role: "*to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12) This part concludes with details of the good news given to those who believe in God and follow the right course: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verses 13–14)

The second part of the *sūrah* portrays two patterns of human nature, one upright and the other deviant, highlighting their different attitudes to the question of faith. It depicts both natures as they commence their lives, reared by their parents. It describes their respective attitudes

when they come of age and are able to make their own choices. The first recognizes God's blessings, is dutiful towards his parents, eager to give thanks, and seeking forgiveness for slips and mistakes: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) The other is disobedient of both his parents and God, denies the Day of Resurrection, and creates tremendous distress for his parents: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a swift scene of the Day of Judgement portraying the fate of this second type of person: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20)

In the third part, the *sūrah* speaks of the destruction of the ʿĀd after they had rejected all warnings. It highlights the great wind which they had expected to give them rain and growth. Instead, it brought them ruin and the punishment they had hastened. "*When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do we requite guilty people.*" (Verses 24–25) In this way, the *sūrah* aims to heighten the unbelievers' feelings by showing them the fate of the ʿĀd, who they are reminded were stronger and wealthier than they. "*We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.*" (Verse 26) As this part comes to an end, the *sūrah* also reminds them of the fate suffered by the townships around them and how their alleged

deities could not provide any support. Thus, their fabrications were clear for everyone to see.

The fourth and final part gives us the story of a group of *jinn* who were directed by God to listen to a recitation of the Qur'ān. They were highly moved by it, immediately declaring that it speaks the truth and confirms "*what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) They went straight back to their people warning them and calling on them to believe: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.*" (Verses 31–32) The *jinn* also refer to the open book of the universe which testifies to God's power of initiation and resurrection: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33) At this point the *sūrah* adds a touching scene, showing the unbelievers as they are brought before the fire. They will then admit what they used to deny, but it is all too late.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient and not to hasten the unbelievers' punishment. They are only given respite for a short while, and God's punishment will inevitably catch up with them: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35)

I

One Universe, One Creator

Al-Aḥqāf (Sand Dunes)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ﴿١﴾

This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given. (3)

مَا خَلَقْنَا ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَمَّآ أُنذِرُوا۟ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Say: 'Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَرُونِى مَاذَا خَلَقُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ شِرْكٌ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ ۖ ٱئْتُونِى بِكِتَٰبٍ

مِن قَبْلِ هَٰذَآ أَوْ أَثَٰرَةٍ مِّنْ عِلْمٍ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.' (4)

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّن يَدْعُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَن
لَّا يَسْتَجِيبُ لَهُۥٓ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وَهُمْ عَن
دُعَآئِهِمْ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? (5)

وَإِذَا حُشِرَ ٱلنَّاسُ كَانُوا۟ لَهُمْ أَعْدَآءً وَكَانُوا۟
بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٦﴾

When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (6)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ قَالَ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ هَٰذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' (7)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۖ قُلْ إِنِ ٱفْتَرَيْتُهُۥ
فَلَا تَمْلِكُونَ لِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ
هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تُفِيضُونَ فِيهِ ۖ كَفَىٰ
بِهِۦ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ
ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' (8)

قُلْ مَا كُنتُ بِدْعًا مِّنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي
مَا يُفْعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ ۖ إِنْ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ
إِلَيَّ وَمَا أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.' (9)

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ
وَكَفَرْتُم بِهِ وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ
بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ عَلَىٰ مِثْلِهِ فَآمَنَ
وَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي
الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' (10)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَّا سَبَقُونَا إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَإِذْ لَمْ
يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا
إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' (11)

وَمِن قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً ۚ وَهَٰذَا كِتَابٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ
لِّسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا
وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (12)

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God', and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (13)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do. (14)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

In Line with the Truth

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.* (Verses 1–3)

As the *sūrah* opens it touches on the link between the letters of the Arabic language they speak and the Qur'ān, a book composed of the same letters but unlike anything people say or write. This, in itself, is sufficient evidence to testify to the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It also touches on the relationship between God's recited book and the book of the universe we behold and which He made. Both books are made with the truth and according to careful planning. The fact that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by the Almighty testifies to His power and absolute wisdom. Likewise, the creation of the universe is an act of truth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth.*" (Verse 3) It is subject to elaborate planning: "*and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, God's purpose behind creation is fulfilled and all that He has willed through the process of creation is accomplished.

Both books are open, available to ears and eyes to contemplate. Each testifies to God's power and wisdom, indicating His planning. Indeed the book of the universe affirms the truth of the revealed book and its

promises and warnings. "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3) This is indeed most singular.

The revealed book states that the Godhead is One and that He is the Lord of everything, since He is the Creator who controls and determines all. The book of the universe also affirms this same truth: its system, balance and harmony confirm that the Maker is the One who makes everything on the basis of comprehensive and unerring knowledge. Indeed, everything bears the same mark of the One Maker. How can anyone then claim that there are deities other than Him? What have such alleged deities created? What share do they have in the universe? "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4)

Thus, God instructs His messenger to put before people the testimony of the book of the universe, as it admits no dispute and addresses human nature according to its own logic. "*Show me what part of the earth they have created.*" No one will ever say that such worshipped deities, be they statues made of stone, trees, *jinn*, angels or any other, ever created any part of the earth or anything that lives on earth. Human nature flies in the face of anyone making such a suggestion. "*Or which share of the heavens they own?*" (Verse 4) Nor will any human being claim that any worshipped deity has ever had any share in the creation of the heavens, or that they own any share in them. A glance at the sky is sufficient to fill our hearts with a clear sense of the Creator's greatness and oneness, and to discard all deviant beliefs and absurdities. God, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, knows the effect of contemplating the universe on people's minds and hearts. Therefore, He directs us to look at the book of the universe and listen to its message.

Some people, however, make assertions that rely on neither proof nor evidence. The Qur'ān does not allow them much leeway in this respect. Instead it requires that they provide evidence and proof in support of their claims and teaches them the method of proof putting before them a complete system of consideration, reflection and conclusion drawing: "*Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other*

vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true." (Verse 4) Thus, they have to rely either on a true book revealed by God, or a proved piece of evidence that has survived over time. All books revealed before the Qur'ān emphatically assert the oneness of God, the Creator. None of them assigns even a shred of validity to the legends that speak of multiple deities, or suggests that they have any share in the creation of the earth or the ownership of the heavens. Nor is there any vestige of knowledge to support such absurd claims.

Thus the Qur'ān puts before them the testimony of the universe, which is clear and decisive, discounts any claim that has no supporting evidence and teaches them the method of proof; all this in one verse using a small number of words, but with strong rhythm and sound argument.

The Qur'ān also invites them to take an objective look at those beings alleged to be deities. It points to the obvious error behind such claims when these entities can neither respond to them nor show any awareness of them in this present life. Furthermore, they will stand against the unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, denying all their claims:

> *Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship.* (Verses 5–6)

Some of the unbelievers considered their idols to be deities, either in themselves or as statues representing the angels. Others worshipped trees while still others worshipped the angels directly or even Satan. Yet none of these so-called deities respond to those invoking them, or at least make a useful response. Statues and trees give no response whatsoever, angels do not respond to anyone who associates partners with God, while the devils' response is only one of whispering and leading people astray. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, when all are gathered before their Lord, all alleged deities disown their errant worshippers. Even Satan disowns them, as clearly stated in another *sūrah*: "*And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say:*

'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store." (14: 22)

Thus, after having explained to them the universal truth that rejects their claims, the Qur'ān puts their own claims before their eyes, showing them what effect these claims have in this world and in the life to come. In both, the truth of God's oneness is clearly seen as the book of the universe proves it. The idolaters should espouse this if they care about what happens to them in this life and in the life to come.

This strong denunciation of idolatry referred, at the time of Qur'ānic revelation, to the deities worshipped by different communities during different periods of history. However, the Qur'ānic statements in this case have a broader significance and farther application than the historical situation then pertaining. What error is greater than one creature invoking another instead of God, at any time and place? Every creature thus invoked, regardless of its identity and status, will not and cannot make any response to those who invoke it. It is God alone who does what He wants. Polytheism is not limited to the naïve form practised by the idolaters of old. Many are those who associate with God partners from among people who have power, influence, wealth or position; they appeal to them for help. Yet these are also too weak to make any significant response to their appealers. None has any power to cause benefit or harm even to themselves. Appealing to them, placing hope in them and fearing them are all forms of subtle idolatry, which is unfortunately practised by many even though they do not recognize it as such.

A Wild Claim

The *sūrah* now discusses their attitude towards the Prophet and his true message, establishing the truth of revelation as it has already established the truth of God's oneness:

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner. Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (Verses 7–12)

The *sūrah* first rebukes them for the reception they gave to God's revelations when it is given 'in all clarity', free of ambiguity, leaving no room for doubt. Besides, it presents the indisputable truth. Yet they describe this revelation as '*plain sorcery*'. As we all know, truth is vastly different from sorcery; the two cannot be confused or viewed in the same way. Thus the *sūrah* begins its discussion by refuting their ridiculous claims.

It then picks up on their other claim alleging that the Prophet had '*invented*' it. It states this in the form of a question, not a report, giving the impression that such a thing cannot be made or at least is unlikely to be made: "*Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'?*" (Verse 8) What a shameless claim! The Prophet is instructed to reply to them in all the politeness that fits his position as a prophet of God, reflecting his understanding of his Lord and his mission, as well as his knowledge of the true power and values in the universe: "*Say: If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of*

what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 8)

Essentially, the Prophet is instructed to ask them: how, for whose interest and for what objective would I invent it? Would I invent it so that you can believe in and follow me? If this is the case, you cannot help me in the least against God. He will surely hold me to account. What use would it be to me if you follow me, when you cannot give me the slightest support or protection when God punishes me for such invention?

This is a fit response from a Prophet who is instructed by God, and who recognizes no power in the universe other than His. Besides, it is a logical response which, when objectively considered, appears to the addressees to be truly valid. The Prophet makes this response and leaves them to God for judgement: "*He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it.*" (Verse 8) He is a witness to all that they say and do, and this is enough to ensure a fair judgement: "*Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you.*" Yet, "*He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 8) He may treat you with compassion, bestow His grace on you and guide you, forgiving you your earlier error. It is a response, then, that combines warning with persuasion. It gently touches hearts and makes people realize that the matter is far too serious to be left to their absurdities.

Yet another argument is provided, this time drawing on realities. Why do they reject the idea of a Divine message being given through revelation? Why are they so quick to denounce it as sorcery or as an invention, when there is nothing strange or unusual about it? "*Say: I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not a totally new phenomenon: he was one in a line of God's messengers. His situation was the same as all messengers who preceded him. He was an ordinary human being whom God knew to be suited to deliver His message. Therefore, He gave him His revelations and the Prophet carried out God's orders. This is what a Divine message is like. When a messenger of God feels this bond, he does not ask God for proof, nor does he

request anything special for himself; he simply moves on to deliver God's message as it is revealed to him. "*I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me.*" He gets on with the task of delivering his message, not because of any knowledge he has of the realm that lies beyond human perception, nor because of any information given to him about what will happen to him, his people or his message. He simply follows instructions, trusting his Lord, submitting himself to Him. The future is unknown to him; its secrets are with his Lord and he does not seek to know them. He has all the reassurance he needs, and he realizes that the proper attitude for him is not to look beyond the limits of the mission he has been assigned: "*I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

Those advocates of Islam endowed with profound insight into its message follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and find the same reassurance. They carry on with their advocacy of the Divine message seeking neither personal gain nor self interest. They do not know what the future holds for it or for them. They do not ask their Lord for evidence; they have all the evidence they need in their hearts. Nor do they pray for any special favour; it is sufficient favour for them that they follow this line. They discharge their duty, and this is enough for them. They do not overstep the fine line God has demarcated for them.

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers a witness who is close at hand and whose testimony is particularly relevant because he belongs to an earlier Divine religion whose followers are aware of the nature of revelation:

> *Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.'* (Verse 10)

This verse may refer to one or more of the Jews who, knowing the nature of the Torah, recognized that the Qur'ān had the same nature as earlier revealed books and, therefore, declared themselves believers in Islam. There are reports that it refers specifically to 'Abdullāh ibn

Sallām. However, this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, and 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām only adopted Islam when the Prophet later migrated to Madīnah. Other reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madīnah, thus confirming that it refers to this particular individual. Still other reports suggest that the verse was revealed in Makkah and hence would not refer to him. It may also be that the verse refers to a different situation that took place when the Prophet was still advocating his message in Makkah, when a small number of followers of earlier Divine religions adopted Islam. This would have been particularly significant for the idolater Arabs. Hence, the Qur'ān refers to it more than once, delivering a strong counter argument to those idolaters who rejected the Divine message without any basis.

The *sūrah* uses a special style in presenting its argument to them: "*Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it?...*" (Verse 10) It aims to shake their stubborn rejection and raise a fear within them concerning the eventual result. Since there is a possibility that the Qur'ān may really be from God, as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says, should they not take precautions lest their rejection of it brings them to a terrible end? Could all the warnings it provides come true? Would they not be better advised to reflect on the whole matter lest they leave themselves open to all that it warns them against? Taking such precautions is all the wiser, considering that one or more of the people of Divine faiths confirmed that the Qur'ān is of the same nature as earlier revealed scriptures, and followed this by declaring their belief in it. By contrast, they, whose language the Qur'ān speaks, persist with their rejection. This is indeed blatant wrongdoing as it suppresses the truth. It deserves God's punishment: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* continues to report what the pagan Arabs said about the Qur'ān and Islam. It specifically mentions their arrogance as they try to show themselves as superior to the believers:

> *The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'* (Verse 11)

Among the earliest Muslims were those who were poor and weak in Makkan society. To the arrogant elders of the Quraysh, this was a point of weakness. They boasted: 'had Islam been good, we would have been the first to recognize its goodness. Those others could not have preceded us in following it. Given our positions, knowledge and understanding, we are better equipped to determine what is good.'

Yet this was not so. What stopped them from accepting Islam was not any doubt that they had about it or that they did not recognize how good and sound it was, but rather the fact that they were too proud to follow Muḥammad's lead. They especially feared any loss of their social position or their economic privileges. Moreover they were proud of their ancestors and what they believed in. By contrast, those who were quick to respond to the call of Islam paid little attention to such considerations. Pride always prevents the arrogant from listening to the voice of sound nature; it precludes them from accepting the truth. Pride and arrogance always make people stubborn, urging them to seek hollow excuses and make false claims about the truth and its advocates. They will never acknowledge that they are wrong. Indeed, they put themselves at the centre of life, as if they were the pivot around which life itself turns: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) Since they have not acknowledged the truth, then there must be something wrong with it. They could not make a mistake. They try to impress on the masses what they feel of their own infallibility!

The case for revelation concludes with a reference to Moses' scriptures:

> *Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.* (Verse 12)

The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to its bond with earlier Divine books, particularly the one given to Moses, considering that the one given to Jesus was a complement to the Torah, which contains the basic faith and legislation. Hence, Moses' book is defined as '*a guide*', or *imām* in Arabic, and described as '*grace*'. Indeed, all Divine messages are signs of His grace bestowed on earth and its inhabitants, in every sense of

the word. It is grace and mercy extended throughout this life and in the life to come. This present book, the Qur'ān, "*confirms it in the Arabic tongue.*" It confirms the original source that forms the basis of all Divine religions and also the Divine code of life advocated by all religions. It confirms the true direction shown to humanity to ensure that it remains in contact with its Lord. The reference to its being in Arabic serves to remind the Arabs of God's favour in choosing them to be the bearers of His message to humanity and choosing their language for the Qur'ān. The verse also speaks of the nature and function of the message: "*To warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12)

What Reward for Believers?

At the end of this first part, the *sūrah* describes the reward of those who do good, explaining the good news the Qur'ān gives them, making clear its necessary condition, which is acknowledgement of God's Lordship and its implementation in human life:

> *Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.* (Verses 13–14)

What is required of them is that they say: '*Our Lord is God.*' These are not idle words; indeed, they represent more than belief. They embody a complete system that applies to every step, action and feeling in life. They set up a criterion to judge every thought, event, action, relation, bond and person. Our Lord is God: to Him do we address our worship, it is Him that we seek and it is on Him alone that we rely. Our Lord is God: no one else matters; all our hopes look up to Him, and we fear none but He. Our Lord is God: in every thought, judgement and action we seek His pleasure. Our Lord is God: His is the law we implement, and from Him alone we receive guidance. Our Lord is God: all our bonds with anyone or thing in the whole world are subject to our relation with Him.

"*And follow the straight path.*" (Verse 13) This is the next step that defines a straight line that we should follow with reassurance and steady feelings, entertaining neither doubts nor fears. Thus, actions and behaviour will always be in line with God's code, avoiding pitfalls and resisting all temptations.

So, the statement, '*Our Lord is God,*' outlines a system, and following this system after having consciously chosen it is a higher grade still. Those whom God guides to have both are indeed the best people. Hence, they "*shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 13) Why would they fear anything or grieve over anything when they have a system that leads to God and following it is the best assurance to be with Him?

"*They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verse 14) The phrase '*for what they do*' explains the meaning of the statement, '*our Lord is God*' and diligent following of the system it outlines. It tells us that there is a type of action that earns the reward of abiding in heaven. It is the type of action that results from this particular system and its conscientious implementation. Thus we realize that the words and phrases of faith in Islam are not mere statements to be made verbally. The basic statement, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', denotes a complete system. If it remains no more than a statement, it cannot be the cornerstone of Islam, as it always should be.

Millions of people repeat this declaration today, but it remains no more than words they utter. It produces no effect on their lives. They continue to lead a life based on a system that is akin to paganism while they repeat a declaration that for them remains hollow. To say, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', or 'our Lord is God', is to denote a system of life. This must be clear in our minds so that we can identify this system and follow it.

2

Two Types of Offspring

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ إِحْسَٰنًا ۖ
حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُۥ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ كُرْهًا ۖ
وَحَمْلُهُۥ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ ثَلَٰثُونَ شَهْرًا ۚ
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ
سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ
نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ
وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَٰلِحًا تَرْضَىٰهُ
وَأَصْلِحْ لِى فِى ذُرِّيَّتِىٓ ۖ إِنِّى تُبْتُ
إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months. And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (15)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ نَتَقَبَّلُ عَنْهُمْ أَحْسَنَ
مَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَنَتَجَاوَزُ عَن سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۖ وَعْدَ ٱلصِّدْقِ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (16)

وَٱلَّذِى قَالَ لِوَٰلِدَيْهِ أُفٍّ لَّكُمَآ
أَتَعِدَانِنِىٓ أَنْ أُخْرَجَ وَقَدْ خَلَتِ
ٱلْقُرُونُ مِن قَبْلِى وَهُمَا يَسْتَغِيثَانِ
ٱللَّهَ وَيْلَكَ ءَامِنْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ
حَقٌّ فَيَقُولُ مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ
ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' (17)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقَوْلُ فِىٓ
أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ ۖ
إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ خَٰسِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of *jinn* and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (18)

وَلِكُلٍّ دَرَجَٰتٌ مِّمَّا عَمِلُوا۟ ۖ وَلِيُوَفِّيَهُمْ
أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged. (19)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ أَذْهَبْتُمْ
طَيِّبَٰتِكُمْ فِى حَيَاتِكُمُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱسْتَمْتَعْتُم
بِهَا ۖ فَٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ ٱلْهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.' (20)

Overview

In this part the *sūrah* speaks of human nature when it sticks to the right track and when it deviates, and at what end it arrives in either case. It begins by urging man to remain dutiful to his parents. This instruction often comes in the Qur'ān after it speaks about faith or in conjunction with such discourses. The reason for this is that the bond between children and parents is the strongest and most important after the bond of faith. It is the one that deserves to be honoured. Furthermore, grouping the two bonds together in this way in the Qur'ān makes it clear that the bond of faith takes precedence in human life. It is followed though by the family bond in its closest form.

This part of the *sūrah* gives us a scene portraying two types of human nature. In the first, the two bonds of faith and the one between parent and offspring work together in the same direction, seeking God's acceptance. In the second, the two bonds separate and have no meeting point. In the first case, the children concerned are given the good news of being admitted into heaven, while in the second, they are destined to suffer in hell. An image of the punishment meted out in hell is given, describing the end suffered by the arrogant who are guilty of transgression.

Dutiful to Parents

"*We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents.*" (Verse 15) This is an order given to all mankind, based on the very fact of their being human with no need for any further qualification. They are all enjoined to show kindness in its absolute, unrestricted sense. Mere parenthood requires such absolute kindness. This order comes from the Creator of man, and it appears to apply to the human race in particular. It is unknown among birds, animals or insects for the young to take care of the old. What is clearly observed among these creatures is that by nature the old take care of the young. Nevertheless, this applies only to some species. Hence, the Divine order seems to apply only to man.

This instruction to be kind to one's parents is repeated several times in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's pronouncements. By contrast,

kindness by parents to children occurs only rarely, addressing particular situations. Human nature itself ensures that parents take good care of their children, without the need for any other motivation. Parents often show a remarkable readiness to sacrifice whatever they have for their children, to the point of being willing to die for them. They show no hesitation in all this, seek no recompense, press no favour and expect no thanks. The new generation, however, rarely turns back to take care of the older one who had made such great sacrifices. Indeed, the younger generation moves forward to bring up another new generation and take care of it, making similar sacrifices in the process.

Islam considers the family the basic unit in its social structure. It is the nest where the young are reared, receiving their share of love, and learning the value of mutual cooperation and care. A child who does not have a family to look after it often suffers deprivation in some aspects of its life, even though all sorts of comfort remain available in its environment. The first thing such a child lacks as it grows up in an environment other than that of a family is love. It has been proven that by nature a child loves to have its mother's complete attention during its first two years of life. This cannot be provided in a non-family environment where one carer has to look after several children. In this situation, jealousy is bound to surface, and a grudging seed replaces that of love. Similarly, a child needs to be under one supervisory authority during a certain period of its life; this so that its character remains stable. Again, this cannot be provided anywhere other than the family environment. In a children's home, such an authority is lacking because supervisors work in shifts. Therefore, their charges can only but lack stability. Hence, we can see the wisdom behind making the family the basic unit of the Islamic social structure that meets all the needs of sound human nature.

The Qur'ān describes the mother's willing sacrifice, which cannot be compensated for by her children no matter how well they fulfil God's order to be kind to parents: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months.*" (Verse 15) Here the very words and their rhythm

gives us a clear sense of the difficulty and hard times the mother has to go through: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth.*" In Arabic this sounds akin to a great sigh, made by someone bearing a heavy burden and breathing with difficulty. It, thus reflects the latter stages of pregnancy, as also of labour and birth.

As embryology advances, it reveals to us more and more of the great sacrifice the mother makes during pregnancy. When the egg is fertilized, it clings to the uterus. As it needs to feed, it begins to tear the tissues around it and feed on it. Blood runs to it so that the egg begins now to swim in a pool of the mother's blood, which is rich in nutrients. The egg needs more and more of this blood to grow and develop, and thus it continues to feed on the mother. This means that the mother eats food, digests it and as it enters her blood stream, this, with all its nutrients, feeds the developing embryo. When the embryo begins to develop its bones, it increasingly absorbs calcium from its mother who may suffer a shortage of the same. All this is merely a fraction of what the mother gives to the embryo.

Childbirth is another very difficult process, but its great pain dwindles before natural instinct. The mother is delighted with the fruit it yields, which means giving life to a new shoot of an old tree: a child that starts life as its mother moves on.

Now that the child is born, it needs to be breast-fed and taken much care of. By her milk, the mother gives of her own constitution, and as she takes care of her child, she gives much of her heart and feelings. Yet in giving all of this, she is nothing less than delighted. She is never fed up with all the trouble her child gives her. The best reward she aspires to is to see her child grow in good health. How can anyone compensate a mother for all her sacrifice? "One of the Prophet's Companions was carrying his mother as they did the *ṭawāf*, walking around the Ka'bah, [a ritual of pilgrimage]. He asked the Prophet: 'Have I discharged my duty to her?' The Prophet said: 'No, not even for one sigh she made.'" [Related by al-Bazzār.]

Having given this example of what parents, particularly the mother, do for their children, the *sūrah* now paints an image of a child that has attained maturity, nurturing sound nature and following right guidance:

> *And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.'* (Verse 15)

Here, the Arabic text uses the term *ashudd*, translated here as full manhood, which is between 30 and 40. Indeed at 40, man attains full maturity, when all talents and potentials are at their best and man tends to think and reflect in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, sound human nature begins to reflect on life and what comes after life, thinking of the eventual destiny.

The Qur'ān describes the thoughts and feelings of a person with sound nature as he stands at the end of one half of life and the beginning of another half with an almost apparent end. He, therefore, turns to God with this prayer: "*My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents.*" (Verse 15) It is a prayer from a heart that appreciates the great grace God has bestowed on him, feeling that it is far more than he deserves. He recognizes that such grace was also bestowed in abundance on his parents. He feels that all his efforts are insufficient expression of gratitude for such grace. Therefore, he prays that God will enable him to perform his duty of thanksgiving and not allow his efforts to be wasted on distractions.

In this same prayer, the person who enjoys sound nature prays that God will enable him to "*do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance.*" What he wishes for is to be able to do some work that is so good as to meet with God's pleasure and acceptance. His utmost aim is to earn his Lord's acceptance, for it is in Him that he places all his hopes.

He goes on with his prayer: "*Grant me good descendants.*" This prayer issues from a believer's heart who hopes that his good work will continue with his children and their children and so on. He would love to be sure that his offspring will continue to worship God alone and seek His pleasure. Such goodly descendants are more precious to a believer than the greatest of material treasures. Such a prayer expresses a hope

that children take over from parents in obeying God across many generations.

What he presents in support of his sincere prayer is a request for repentance of any sins and errors and a statement of his full submission to God's will: "*To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.*"

Thus is the attitude of a good servant of God, one equipped with sound, uncorrupted nature. The Qur'ān tells us of how God looks upon such people:

> *It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.* (Verse 16)

The reward is granted on the basis of the best of one's deeds, while bad ones are overlooked. The destination to which such people go is heaven where they join its rightful dwellers. All this is in fulfilment of the true promise they were given in this present life. God's promise is always fulfilled.

To the Other Place

The converse of all this is error and transgression:

> *But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.* (Verses 17–18)

The parents are believers, but the child is disobedient. His first characteristic is that of being undutiful to them, addressing them with arrogance and insolence, hurting their feelings: "*Fie on you both.*" He

then denies the resurrection, citing the hollow argument that no one from past generations has ever come back to life: "*Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?*" (Verse 17) The time of resurrection is determined by God, when all will be resurrected at the same time after this present world has completed its term. No one has ever said that resurrection will take place in instalments, with one generation resurrected during the lifetime of a later one. It is not a game; rather, it is a submitting of final accounts once the journey has come to its final destination.

The parents are shocked by their son's words that mark him out to be a clear disbeliever. They fear the outcome of what he says to God and to them. Therefore, they appeal to him and pray to God for help: "*they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true.'*" (Verse 17) These words give us a clear impression of their dread at the outcome of all this. The child, for his part, however, persists with disbelief and denial, saying: "*All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.*" (Verse 17) His inevitable end overwhelms him: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) The verdict passed on this person and others like him is the punishment incurred by unbelievers. There are large numbers of these across many generations of humans and *jinn*. God's promise which always comes true states that these '*will be utterly lost*'. What greater loss is there than the loss of faith in this life and the loss of God's pleasure in the life to come! Such a loss means inevitable suffering for such unbelievers.

Having given a general idea of the outcome that awaits the two groups, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the accurate accountability of every individual: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19) Every single one has their own grade, according to their deeds.

These two types of people are very common. Indeed, the description almost identifies two particular people to heighten the effect and make each mirror a life situation. There are reports suggesting that each example does refer to a particular case, but none of these carries any

degree of authenticity. It is better, therefore, to consider that they refer to two types rather than two individuals. This is endorsed by the way the *sūrah* comments on their situations. After describing the first type, the *sūrah* says: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) It refers to the second type with a similarly telling comment: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) It finally comments on both types together: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19)

Submitting the Final Account

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers their own fate as they face the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection which they were wont to deny:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.'* (Verse 20)

This is a fast moving scene, yet it has a profound, telling effect. The scene brings them before the fire, but just before they are driven into it, they are told the reasons which determined their fate in this way: "*You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure.*" They had their fair share of good things, but they used them all up in the life of this world, keeping nothing back for their future life. In fact, they did not reckon that there would even be a future life. Therefore, they enjoyed these good things to the full, showing no gratitude for them and expressing no thanks to God for

granting them. They did not refrain from committing what is forbidden in order to enjoy such pleasures. Therefore, they had their full share of good things in this world, leaving themselves nothing in the life to come. They exchanged the endless life of the hereafter for the short span of life on earth. Therefore, "*today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20) Everyone who behaves with arrogance on earth does so without any right. All pride belongs to God; none belongs to any creature, no matter what position he holds. To suffer humiliation is, therefore, a just reward for arrogance and deviation from the path God has charted.

3

When Prophets Are Challenged

وَٱذْكُرْ أَخَا عَادٍ إِذْ أَنذَرَ قَوْمَهُۥ بِٱلْأَحْقَافِ
وَقَدْ خَلَتِ ٱلنُّذُرُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦٓ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (21)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَجِئْتَنَا لِتَأْفِكَنَا عَنْ ءَالِهَتِنَا فَأْتِنَا
بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.' (22)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَأُبَلِّغُكُم مَّآ أُرْسِلْتُ
بِهِۦ وَلَٰكِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰكُمْ قَوْمًا تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.' (23)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ عَارِضًا مُّسْتَقْبِلَ أَوْدِيَتِهِمْ قَالُوا۟
هَٰذَا عَارِضٌ مُّمْطِرُنَا ۖ بَلْ هُوَ مَا ٱسْتَعْجَلْتُم
بِهِۦ ۖ رِيحٌ فِيهَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering (24)

تُدَمِّرُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍۭ بِأَمْرِ رَبِّهَا فَأَصْبَحُوا۟
لَا يُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا مَسَٰكِنُهُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (25)

وَلَقَدْ مَكَّنَّٰهُمْ فِيمَآ إِن مَّكَّنَّٰكُمْ فِيهِ
وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ سَمْعًا وَأَبْصَٰرًا وَأَفْـِٔدَةً فَمَآ
أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَلَآ أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ وَلَآ
أَفْـِٔدَتُهُم مِّن شَىْءٍ إِذْ كَانُوا۟ يَجْحَدُونَ
بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (26)

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا مَا حَوْلَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ
وَصَرَّفْنَا ٱلْـَٔايَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. (27)

فَلَوْلَا نَصَرَهُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ
قُرْبَانًا ءَالِهَةً ۖ بَلْ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ
إِفْكُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (28)

Overview

This third part of the *sūrah* addresses its central question in a different way to that of its earlier parts. It speaks of the fate of the ʿĀd and other townships around Makkah. Towards Hūd, their brother, whom God sent as His messenger, they adopted a similar attitude to that of the idolaters in Makkah towards Muḥammad, their brother and God's messenger. Both raised the same objections. Hūd answered them in the splendid manner of prophets, but within the limits of his human ability and the mission assigned to him. When they paid no heed to his warnings, they were smitten by God's punishment that left them utterly destroyed. Although they were more powerful, wealthy and intelligent than the Makkan unbelievers, none of this was of any avail to them. Nor did their alleged deities, which they claimed would bring them closer to God, avail them of anything.

The Makkan unbelievers are also reminded of the fate their own ancestors met, given they too had adopted the same attitude. They are told in no uncertain terms that they will suffer the same fate. The *sūrah* also shows them the line the Divine message follows: it is consistent and unchanging. Likewise, God's law applies to all and does not change. We see the tree of faith with firm roots, its branches stretched wide across the generations. It is the same faith for all times and communities.

At the Sand Dunes

> *Remember that brother of the ʿĀd who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.'* (Verse 21)

The brother of the ʿĀd is the Prophet Hūd (peace be upon him) who is mentioned here by his position as a brother to his people. This highlights the relation of mutual love and care that existed between him and his people, which should have made them more responsive to his call and motivated them to think well of him and what he taught. The same bond existed between Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his people who similarly opposed him.

The 'Ād used to build their homes on the high sand dunes in a valley in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, said to be near Ḥadramawt.[1] God in His glory directs His messenger to remember Hūd and how he warned his people at the Valley of the Sand Dunes. This to give him encouragement as he realizes that Hūd was similarly rejected by his people. Such remembrance also serves to remind the Makkan unbelievers of the fate of those earlier communities that rejected God's messages.

Hūd warned his people, but he was not the first messenger to warn his community. Other messengers did the same before him: "*Other warners have come and gone both before and after him.*" Those messengers came close to him in time and place as also far from him. The chain of God's messages is a continuous one, and the warnings are given at all times. This whole issue is familiar to all. Hūd gave them the same warnings given by all messengers to their communities: "*Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.*" (Verse 21) Worshipping God means faith at heart and a code of living. To discard all this inevitably leads to terrible suffering in this present life, or in the life to come, or in both. When reference is made to a day, as it is made here, it means the Day of Judgement when the suffering is far greater and more terrible.

What response did Hūd's people give him for his caring instructions and warnings? "*They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 22) Their response betrays mistrust, lack of understanding, rejection of the warning, hastening the punishment he warned them against, arrogance and a persistent adherence to false beliefs.

For his part, Hūd receives all this with patience, showing the manners that behove a prophet. He makes no personal claims as he outlines his attitude and makes his limits clear to them: "*He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.'*" (Verse 23) I am giving you this

1. Recent reports based on satellite pictures suggest that a whole city is buried at a place close to Oman in the Empty Quarter, which means that it is to the west of Ḥadramout, a large province in Yemen. From the description given, this city might well be where the 'Ād lived. – Editor's note.

warning as I was commanded to do, but I do not know when such punishment falls, or what form it will take. All this is known to God alone. I am only delivering a message entrusted to me, making no further claim. "*But I see that you are insolent people.*" (Verse 23) What could be more foolish and insolent than to give such a hostile reception to a brother who is only offering sincere and honest advice?

The *sūrah* gives no further details of the long argument that took place between Hūd and his people, moving straight to report on the fate they suffered. This is intended here as a reply to their challenge and hastening of punishment:

> *When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people.* (Verses 24–25)

Reports suggest that the ʿĀd suffered a period of intense heat, coupled with absence of rain. They endured this unbearable climate for some time. Then God sent them clouds, and they were delighted. They went into the surrounding valleys hoping that rain would quickly ensue. Yet the truth of what the clouds brought signified their ultimate demise: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, this stormwind is described as "*furiously raging.*" (69: 6) Another description of it states that it "*spared nothing of what it came upon, but caused it all to become like bones dead and decayed.*" (51: 42)

The Qur'ānic text depicts the wind as if it was alive, aware of what it was doing, fulfilling its orders to destroy everything in its wake: "*which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" This is a universal fact which the Qur'ān is wont to impress on people. This universe is alive, and every force in it is aware of what God wants of it, proceeding to fulfil it. Man is one of these forces. When he is a true believer, his heart becomes open to greater knowledge and he becomes

able to understand more of the universal forces around him and respond to them. This opens the way to a mutual response that differs from what people generally know of life and understanding. Everything around us has life, but we do not appreciate this because shapes and forms limit our understanding. The universe around us is full of secrets which are appreciated by faculties of understanding, even though they cannot be seen by our eyes.

The stormwind fulfilled the task assigned to it, destroying everything. Thus, "*when the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings.*" (Verse 25) No trace of the ʿĀd was left behind, not even their animals or belongings. Everything disappeared. All that was left were desolate dwellings, empty, lacking all signs of life: "*Thus do We requite guilty people.*" (Verse 25) This rule applies to all guilty people.

Useless Power

With this image of death and destruction, the *sūrah* addresses the present generation who follow in the ʿĀd's footsteps, giving them a telling reminder:

> *We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26)

Those very people who were destroyed by the stormwind had once been established in the land in a way that had not been granted to the Arabs of Makkah. This is a general reference to what they had been given of power, wealth, knowledge and life's luxuries. They were also endowed with sharp faculties of hearing and sight, as well as hearts. The Qur'ān uses different ways of referring to the faculty of understanding, citing it alternatively as heart, mind or brain, when all refer to the same ability. Yet none of these faculties was of any use as the ʿĀd rendered them useless when "*they persisted in denying God's*

revelations." (Verse 26) Denying God's revelations suppresses senses and faculties and screens them from His source of light and understanding, blunting them altogether. "*They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26) This refers to the punishment they were warned about and which they derided.

The lesson to be drawn here is that no one should ever be too proud of his power, wealth or knowledge, thinking that these can afford him absolute protection. We see in what happened to the ʿĀd a natural power being used against people, destroying them and all that they enjoyed. Nothing was left of them except their empty and desolate dwellings.

Winds are a universal power operating all the time in accordance with the system God has placed in the universe. He may use them to destroy certain places as part of His overall scheme of things. There is no need, then, within this context, to upset or disrupt the universal system, as some people mistakenly suggest. The One who has put the system in place is the One who has determined the fates of individuals and communities. Every single thing, event, movement and person are taken into account within the overall system and the operation of His law. Like all other universal powers, winds are controlled by God, fulfilling the role He has assigned to them and to the universe. The same applies to humans at whose disposal God has placed certain universal powers. When people undertake something, they are in fact fulfilling the role assigned to them by God, for His purpose. Their freedom of action and choice is part of the overall law that ensures universal harmony. Indeed everything is set according to a fine measure, with nothing falling short or causing disruption.

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by drawing people's attention to the lessons learnt from the fates suffered by the communities in the areas not far from around Makkah:

> *We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verses 27–28)

God destroyed the communities who rejected the messengers sent to them, such as the ʿĀd in the Valley of the Sand Dunes in the south of Arabia, the Thamūd at Ḥijr in the north, the people of Sheba in Yemen, the Madyan whose former homes the Makkans passed on their way to Syria and the people of Lot whose dwellings were along the route the Arabs took on their summer journey to the north. God gave His message to these people in different ways so as to give such erring communities a chance to repent and change their ways. They, however, persisted with their errors and so incurred God's punishment, which was inflicted on them in various ways. What happened to them was so serious that it became part of the history one generation reports to the next. The idolaters in Makkah were aware of this, given they passed by these areas on their travels.

Their attentions are thus drawn to the real facts. God destroyed the unbelievers before them while their deities, whom they claimed drew them nearer to God, were utterly unable to save them: "*Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help?*" (Verse 28) They could not furnish them with any support. "*Indeed, they utterly failed them.*" They left them to their fate. Indeed, they did not know how to reach them, let alone spare them God's punishment. "*Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verse 28) All their claims about so-called deities are lies and fabrications. These too will inevitably be destroyed. What end, then, did those Arabs who took false deities for themselves expect?

4

Jinn Listening to the Qur'ān

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَآ إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ
ٱلْقُرْءَانَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنصِتُوا۟ ۖ فَلَمَّا
قُضِىَ وَلَّوْا۟ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِم مُّنذِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

We sent to you a group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. (29)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰقَوْمَنَآ إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَٰبًا
أُنزِلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ
يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِىٓ إِلَى ٱلْحَقِّ وَإِلَىٰ طَرِيقٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. (30)

يَٰقَوْمَنَآ أَجِيبُوا۟ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُم
مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

'Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. (31)

وَمَن لَّا يُجِبْ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَيْسَ لَهُۥ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.' (32)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْىَ بِخَلْقِهِنَّ بِقَٰدِرٍ عَلَىٰٓ
أَن يُحْۦِىَ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ بَلَىٰٓ إِنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ
قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (33)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ أَلَيْسَ
هَٰذَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا ۚ قَالَ فَذُوقُوا۟
ٱلْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (34)

فَٱصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْعَزْمِ مِنَ
ٱلرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِل لَّهُمْ ۚ كَأَنَّهُمْ
يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبَثُوٓا۟
إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّن نَّهَارٍ ۚ بَلَٰغٌ ۚ فَهَلْ يُهْلَكُ
إِلَّا ٱلْقَوْمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (35)

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* presents a different way of tackling the basic question of faith. It tells us the story of a group of *jinn* who heard the Qur'ān being recited and who listened to it. They felt, at heart, that it was the word of truth and believed in it instantly. They then rushed to their own people calling on them to believe, giving

them the good news of earning forgiveness for their past sins and warning them against turning away and persisting in error. The effect of the Qur'ān on this group of *jinn* is clearly indicated in their advice to each other to hearken to its recitation, as well as the report they gave to their people about it, urging them to believe too. Reporting the story in this way should touch the hearts of human beings to whom the message of the Qur'ān is firstly addressed. It should have a telling and profound effect on them. At the same time, a reference to the link between the book given to Moses and the Qur'ān is mentioned by the *jinn*. This is a fact ignored by humans but highlighted by the *jinn*. Again this has a profound effect which is consistent with the message of the *sūrah*.

The *jinn*'s discourse also refers to the open book of the universe, testifying to God's great power manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and His ability to bring the dead back to life. Needless to say, people argue endlessly about this, often denying it altogether.

In the context of resurrection, the *sūrah* portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement speaking of the time when the unbelievers are brought before the fire of hell. Finally, the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity and not to hasten their punishment. Rather, he should leave them to live their lives until the appointed time, which is bound to come soon, in no more than an hour of a day, during which the message is given.

The *Jinn* Listening to the Qur'ān

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error. Are they not aware that*

God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (Verses 29–33)

Those *jinn* who listened to the Qur'ān in silence made a comment that embraced faith in its entirety: belief in God's revelation; the unity of the message given in the Torah and the Qur'ān; acknowledging the truth to which the Qur'ān guides; belief in the Day of Resurrection and which actions earn forgiveness and which incur punishment; acknowledging God's power of creation and His overall authority over all creatures, and recognizing the link between creation in the first place and bringing the dead back to life. These are the principles the *sūrah* discusses from start to finish. They are presented here by the *jinn*, in a voice that comes from beyond man's world.

The fact that the Qur'ān mentions how a number of *jinn* were sent to listen to the Qur'ān as the Prophet recited it, and reports what they did and said afterwards, is sufficient to confirm the existence of the *jinn* and the event related. It further confirms that they were able to listen to the Qur'ān in its Arabic wording as pronounced by the Prophet. It also makes clear that the *jinn* are able to accept faith or deny it, that they have the choice to follow guidance or continue in error. There is no need for any further confirmation. No person can add anything to the reliability of a fact stated by God in the Qur'ān. We, however, merely try to clarify it in our human perception.

The universe around us is full of secrets, as well as powers and creatures of which we know nothing: neither their nature, nor their shape, form or effect. We live in the midst of all these powers and secrets and every day discover some of these getting to know some of such creatures or their qualities and how they make their effect on the world around us. We are still, however, at the beginning of the road, leading to knowledge of the universe. We should bear in mind that all past generations of mankind, the present one and all future generations dwell on no more than a small particle in the vast universe, which is planet earth. When compared to human knowledge five centuries ago, what we now know when we are still just at the beginning of the road is considered stranger by far than the remarkable creatures known as

the *jinn*. Had someone told people five centuries ago anything about atomic energy, they would have considered him crazy, or at least considered his views far stranger than the *jinn*.

The secrets we discover and the knowledge we acquire remain within the limits of our human power, which is granted to us so that we can discharge our task of building life on earth, in accordance with the terms of reference set for us by God. Moreover, what we learn remains within what God has made available or subservient to us for use in fulfilment of our task. No matter how long human life on earth extends, human knowledge and discoveries will remain within this framework; i.e. the framework of what we need for the mission assigned to us when we were placed in charge of the earth, according to God's purpose and wisdom. We will discover and learn much more of the wonderful secrets and powers in the universe, compared to which the secrets of the atom may appear like child's play, but we will remain within the limited area of knowledge assigned to man. We will remain within the limits of the Qur'ānic statement: "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (17: 85) It remains little compared to what the universe contains of secrets and facts known only to its Creator who controls all. We need to contrast this against God's representation of His limitless knowledge: "*Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted.*" (31: 27)

Therefore, we cannot say that something belonging to the realm that lies beyond our perception, or some secret or power in the universe, certainly exists or not, or is possible or impossible, merely because it is beyond our familiar world or our human experience. We have not yet discovered all the secrets of our own physical constitution, its systems and potentials, let alone the secrets of our minds and spirits.

There may be secrets that are beyond what is meant to be revealed to us, and secrets that we are not meant to understand, even though we get to learn about their qualities or effects, or even only their existence. What is withheld from us will not, should we learn about it, benefit us in the fulfilment of our assignment on earth. Therefore, when God tells us in His words, not through our experience and acquired knowledge, about these secrets and powers, we should accept

His gift with gratitude and take it as He gives it to us, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Such knowledge comes to us directly from God, and He has chosen to give it to us in a particular measure. There is simply no other source to give us more.

On the basis of the account given in this *sūrah* and that given in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, (which most probably speaks of the same event), and from other references to the *jinn* in the Qur'ān as well as authentic *aḥādīth* referring to this event, we can understand certain facts about the *jinn*. We will add nothing further.

To sum up these facts we say that there is a type of God's creation named the *jinn*, which is created out of fire. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic reports of *Iblīs*'s statement in reference to Adam: "*I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay.*" (7: 12) *Iblīs*, or Satan, belongs to the *jinn*, as God says: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so* Iblīs, *who belonged to the* jinn *and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) This type of creation has different qualities to those of humans. One of these is that it is created out of fire, and another is that the *jinn* can see humans while humans cannot see them. In reference to *Iblīs*, who belongs to the *jinn*, God says: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This last statement also tells us that the *jinn* have their own groupings and communities, which are similar to human communities.

The *jinn* can live on earth, although we do not know where. When He turned them out of heaven, God said to both Adam and *Iblīs*: "*Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.*" (2: 36) The *jinn* who were made subservient to Solomon performed for him certain works on land which, by necessity, meant that they had whatever was necessary for them to live on earth. Likewise, they can live and survive away from this planet. The Qur'ān reports a statement made by some of the *jinn* which says: "*We ascended to high heaven and found it filled with mighty guards and flames. We used to sit eavesdropping, but now eavesdroppers find flames lying in wait for them.*" (72: 8–9)

The *jinn* can also influence the understanding of humans, and they are given leave to lead such humans as go astray, but not those who are

God's true servants. In the Qur'ānic account of the exchange between God and *Iblīs*, the latter said: "*I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants.*" (38: 82–83) Other texts also confirm this, but we do not know how the *jinn* whisper to humans and influence them, nor what tools they use in the process. They can hear man and understand his language. This is clearly the case when this group of *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, understood it and were influenced by it. Like humans, the *jinn* can follow Divine guidance or go astray. As reported in *Sūrah* 72, this group of *jinn* said: "*Some of us surrender themselves to God and some are wrongdoers. Those that surrender themselves have attained to consciousness of what is right; whereas the wrongdoers are indeed the fuel of hell.*" (72: 14–15) Moreover, those of them who listened to the Qur'ān went straight to their people and called on them to accept the message of Islam, having themselves accepted it and learnt what their people had not yet learnt.

This is all that we can say with certainty about the *jinn*. We should not add to it anything that lacks supporting evidence. The event to which the present verses of the *sūrah* refer, as does, in all probability, *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, is confirmed by several reports. Here, we will quote the most authentic of these.

"Ibn 'Abbās said: The Prophet neither recited anything to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. The Prophet went with a number of his Companions aiming for the 'Ukāẓ Market. By that time, the *jinn* were blocked from eavesdropping in the skies and flames were set against them. When they went to their people, they told them of the situation. Some of them said: 'You have been stopped from eavesdropping for something that must have taken place. Travel, therefore, throughout the earth and try to find out what has happened to cause this.' Groups of them travelled in every direction, searching for the cause that blocked them from eavesdropping. The company that went to Tihāmah drew close to the Prophet as he was at the Nakhlah Valley, aiming for 'Ukāẓ Market. He was leading the dawn prayer, with his Companions in the congregation. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. Then they said to one another: 'This is indeed what blocked you from eavesdropping in the skies.' They then went to their people and said to them: '*We have heard a*

wondrous discourse, guiding towards consciousness of what is right, and so we have come to believe in it.' (72: 1–2) God subsequently revealed this *sūrah* to the Prophet which included what the *jinn* said." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.]

Ibn Mas'ūd was asked whether any of the Prophet's Companions was with him on the night when the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān. He replied: "None of us accompanied him. We were with him one night when we missed him. We looked for him in the nearby valleys and paths. When we did not find him we thought that he might have been carried away or assassinated. Ours was an extremely terrible night then. In the morning we saw him coming towards us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said to him: 'messenger of God! We missed you and searched for you. When we could not find you we had a terrible night.' He said: 'Someone came to me with a call from the *jinn*, and I went with him and read the Qur'ān to them.' He then took us to show us their traces and where they had their fires. They asked him for food and he said to them: 'You may have the bones of all animals at the slaughter of which God's name is invoked. When you hold a bone in your hand, it will be to you as though it has all the meat it can carry. Every dropping serves as fodder for your cattle.' The Prophet said to us: 'Do not, then, use these to clean yourself when you go to do stools.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq narrates the *jinn* story after the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if where he went to visit the Thaqīf tribe, seeking their support to deliver his message. By that time, Abū Ṭālib, his uncle who had provided him with protection against attack had died and the Prophet was now subjected to much harm and hostility. The Thaqīf, however, answered him very rudely and set their young lads and servants against him. In this way, the Prophet was stoned to the extent that both his feet bled. At this point, he prayed to God, making the following passionate appeal:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a

distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?

If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.[2]

After his account of the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if, Ibn Isḥāq adds: "When the Prophet gave up hope of any positive response from the Thaqīf, he returned to Makkah. When he was at the valley of Nakhlah, he rose up in the middle of the night to pray. It was then that the group of *jinn* God mentioned in the Qur'ān came to him. They were, as I was told, seven in number and came from among the *jinn* of Nuṣaybīn. They listened to his recitation. When he finished his prayer, they went straight to their people to warn them, having believed in Islam and the Qur'ān. God then related what happened to the Prophet in verses 29–32 of *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, and also in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*."

Ibn Kathīr comments on this last report by Ibn Isḥāq, saying: "This is correct, but the time at which Ibn Isḥāq says it occurred is questionable. The *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān in the early days of its revelation, as indicated by the *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn 'Abbās, while the Prophet went on his journey to Ṭā'if after his uncle's death, which means only one or two years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, as indicated by Ibn Isḥāq himself and others. However, God knows best."

There are many other reports concerning this event. From all these, we rely on the first by Ibn 'Abbās, mentioned above, because it is the one that fits most perfectly with the Qur'ānic texts speaking about the event. Moreover, it clearly states that the Prophet learnt of what took place through what was revealed to him and that he neither saw nor

2. The story is given in detail in: Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 178–182. – Editor's note.

felt the presence of the *jinn*. Moreover, this *ḥadīth* is the most authentic of all these reports, having the most reliable chain of transmission. As to the point that the Prophet learnt of the event through the Qur'ān, Ibn Isḥāq's version agrees with this. It is further supported by what the Qur'ān mentions about the *jinn* being able to see us but not the reverse: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27)

A Telling Warning

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.* (Verse 29)

It was, then, a purposeful act of God's that He sent this group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān; in other words, it was not mere coincidence. God wanted the *jinn* to know about His final message, just as they had earlier learnt about Moses' message. According to His design, some of them will then believe and spare themselves punishment in hell, which is the abode of unbelievers whether *jinn* or humans.

The *sūrah* draws before our eyes an image of this group, between three and ten *jinn*, as they listened to the Qur'ān. It paints for us their feelings as it was being recited: an overwhelming awe leading to submission and action. "*When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!'*" This short sentence gives a clear impression of their attitude as they hearkened to the Qur'ānic recitation. Then, "*When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (Verse 29) This sentence confirms the effect the Qur'ān had on them. They listened in complete silence, attentions focused throughout the recitation. When it was over, they returned at speed to their own people. They felt that what they had heard must be immediately told and passed on. Their people needed to know so that they could be warned. It is a situation where one is highly influenced by something which motivates him to immediate action that seeks to spread the benefit and to get others to adopt the same serious attitude: "*Our people, they said, we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after*

Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path." (Verse 30)

The first thing they said to their people was that the revelation they had heard had been bestowed from on high after the book of Moses and that it confirmed the scriptures before it. Thus, they knew about Moses' book and recognized, once they heard the Qur'ān, that it was closely related to the Torah. What they heard of the Qur'ān might not have mentioned Moses or his book, but its very nature suggested that it came from the same source. This acknowledgement by the *jinn*, who are relatively unaffected by factors that operate in human life, has a clear and profound import.

They give expression to their feelings as they listened to the Qur'ān: "*It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) The truth and the guidance provided by the Qur'ān have a profound effect on people. Only a sealed heart and an arrogant, stubborn soul, motivated by selfish interests, will resist it. Hence, it had an immediate and telling effect on the hearts of those *jinn*, prompting them to give this testimony of its truth. They proceeded with their warning to their people, full of enthusiasm and expressing their firm conviction of the truth they had learnt. In other words, this recitation of the Qur'ān placed a duty on them to inform and warn others: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) They considered the revelation of the Qur'ān a call on everyone who learned of it, whether human or *jinn*, to believe. They also considered Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), to be the one who called them to believe in God merely by reciting the Qur'ān. Hence their appeal to their people: "*Respond to God's call and have faith in Him.*" (Verse 31) They also believed in the Day of Judgement and learnt that belief and positive response to the Divine call ensured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from punishment. So they imparted this news to their people.

Ibn Isḥāq considers that this concludes what the *jinn* said to their people, but the context suggests that the next two verses were also stated by them. We think that this is more likely, particularly the next verse: "*He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 32) This is a logical complement to the warning given by the *jinn* to their people whom they advised to believe in the new message. It is also likely that they explained that a negative response leads to dire consequences. No one who rejects the Divine call can escape God: He is always able to inflict punishment. The unbeliever will find none to support him against God or protect him from His punishment. He is, therefore, indeed in manifest error.

Likewise, the next verse most probably reports more of what the *jinn* said, as they wondered at those who reject God's call, thinking that they are immune from punishment or that there will be neither reckoning nor requital: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33)

This is a reference to the book of the universe mentioned at the *sūrah*'s outset. The Qur'ān often provides such a close connection between a direct statement and a similar one occurring within a story or historical account, ensuring the confirmation of the same fact from two sources. The book of the universe testifies to His great might. It imparts to us the feeling that bringing the dead back to life is easy. This is what is intended here. That this point is made here in the form of a question and a reply makes it more emphatic. This is followed by the general comment that God has power over all things. Thus, bringing the dead back to life is included within His limitless power.

As Resurrection Takes Place

Having referred to bringing the dead back to life, the *sūrah* paints a picture of reckoning and accountability as though we see all this before our eyes:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'* (Verse 34)

The scene here begins with a narrative, or an introduction to a narrative: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire...*" The audience are waiting for the narrative describing what will happen, but instead of a description, the scene is present before our eyes, with a dialogue taking place: "*Is this not the truth?*" What a question! It falls like a hammer on the heads of those who used to reject the truth, ridicule the message and hasten the punishment they were warned against. Now they are face to face with the truth they used to deny. They arrive at an answer, in fear and humility: "*Yes, by our Lord.*" Now they swear '*by our Lord*', the very Lord whose messenger they rejected and whose Lordship they denied. Now they swear by Him affirming the truth they once denied.

At this point, the matter reaches maximum rebuke. The dialogue is over and the issue is settled: "*He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'*" (Verse 34) It is just an answer to a simple question: the crime is seen in full clarity and the criminal admits his guilt. The outcome is settled.

This scene is portrayed very speedily. This is deliberate because the confrontation is decisive. There is no room for argument. They used to deny the truth; now they acknowledge it and are made to suffer the consequences.

Following this scene that decisively spells out the fate of the unbelievers, and the one that touches the hearts of a group from a different world, the *sūrah* makes its final statement. It instructs the Prophet to remain patient with them and not to hasten their punishment. He has seen what awaits them, which is close at hand:

> *Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?* (Verse 35)

Every word in this verse is charged with meaning; every phrase draws a whole world of images and impressions and refers to great issues and

values. "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This is a directive given to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who had shown more patience than anyone can tolerate while suffering persecution at the hands of his people. He grew up an orphan in their midst, then lost his guardian as well as every human support, one by one, losing his father, mother, grandfather, uncle as well as the wife who was the symbol of loving care. Thus he was free of all preoccupations, dedicating himself totally to his message. Yet he received at the hands of his unbelieving relatives more trouble than at the hands of others unrelated to him. He had to approach tribe after tribe, as well as individuals, seeking support in delivering his message but only meeting with rejection time after time. Some even set their henchmen against him and he was stoned and injured. His response was nothing more than a passionate appeal to his Lord, as quoted earlier.

Yet after all this, the Prophet is given this directive by his Lord: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This shows just how hard and difficult the call to Islam is. A man like Muḥammad, the symbol of dedication, unshakeable belief and purity of heart, still needs this Divine directive to remain patient and not to hasten God's punishment of the adversaries of his message. The hardships he met along this road required that he be comforted and counselled to remain patient. He also needed a sweet dose of Divine compassion, followed by reassurance: "*On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day.*" (Verse 35) It is all a short duration, an hour of a day. This whole life is so short and trivial that all the effects it has on hearts and souls is no more than the effect of an hour in a day. Then they will meet their inevitable fate and abide endlessly.

This hour of a life serves only to make things clear before the fate is sealed: "*This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35) Certainly not. God wishes no injustice for anyone. Every advocate of the Divine message must remain patient in adversity. Last as much as it may, the adversity will be no longer than an hour of a day, and then everything is settled.

SŪRAH 47

Muḥammad

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Muḥammad, was revealed in Madīnah. It also goes by another name, *al-Qitāl*, meaning 'Fighting'. This secondary title is very apt because fighting is the *sūrah*'s subject matter providing most of its images and giving it its distinctive beat. It begins with an explanation of the true nature of both the unbelievers and the believers which takes the form of a moral attack on the former and a monologue of praise of the latter. The clear implication is that God is the enemy of the unbelievers and the protector of those who have faith. Furthermore, this is a true fact in God's sight. Thus, the opening of the *sūrah* serves as a declaration of war by God against His enemies who are hostile to His faith: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verses 1–3)

Once this declaration of war against the unbelievers is made, an express, resounding order is given to the believers to join this war against

them. This order is followed by an outline of the rules that apply to captives of war once the bloody battle is over: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) Added to this order is an explanation about the purpose of fighting and encouragement to the believers to join with it and do well, and a promise of honour for those who fall as martyrs. A further promise of help is given to those who join the fighting in support of God's cause, with an added rejoinder making clear that the unbelievers will be destroyed and their deeds will come to nothing: "*Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.*" (Verses 4–9)

A strong warning is issued to the unbelievers, coupled with a declaration from God about His protection of the believers. The unbelievers will, thus, lose all; they will remain weak and lack support from any quarter: "*Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verses 10–11) A further warning singles out the city which drove the Prophet out: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13)

Having opened with such a strong attack on the unbelievers, the *sūrah* adds a varied discourse on faith and unbelief, describing the states of the believers and the unbelievers both in this world and in the life to come. It distinguishes between a believer's enjoyment of

goodly things and the way unbelievers enjoy the pleasures of this world in a way that does not differ from that of cattle: "*God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.*" (Verse 12) It describes what the believers will drink in heaven, variously pure water, milk with unaltered taste, delightful wine and pure, clarified honey. These drinks are so plentiful that they flow like rivers. Moreover, they have plenty of every type of fruit, together with God's forgiveness and His being pleased with them. A rhetorical question is then added: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*" (Verse 15)

This first round in the ever-raging battle between the believers and the unbelievers over, the *sūrah* starts another round with the hypocrites who, together with the Jews in Madīnah, represented a danger to the Muslim community. The problem they posed was no less serious than that of the idolaters who were waging open war on Islam from Makkah and its surrounding areas. The events to which the *sūrah* refers suggest that it talks about the period that followed the Battle of Badr but prior to the Encounter of the Moat.[1] The latter heralded a crushing defeat for the Jews and a serious setback for the hypocrites, as explained in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV.

References to the hypocrites are made in the same confrontational and fighting manner as the rest of the *sūrah*. This is noticeable right from their first mention, which describes how they are absent minded when they sit with the Prophet and its comment that describes them as being far astray, following their desires: "*Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16) They are warned that the Last Hour will inevitably come,

1. The Battle of Badr took place during Ramaḍān, year 2 of the Islamic calendar, while the Encounter of the Moat occured towards the end of year 5, (623 and 626 CE respectively) – Editor's note.

and, then, they will not even be able to take heed: "*Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* then describes their panic when they are confronted with an express Qur'ānic order to fight. They have pretended to be believers, and here we see how the *sūrah* makes abundantly clear the difference between them and true believers: "*The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) While they are urged to obey God and His messenger and to be truthful and firm, the *sūrah* condemns their behaviour and declares war against them. They are expelled from God's mercy: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind.*" (Verses 20–23)

The hypocrites' schemes are exposed: they listen to Satan and befriend the Jews and conspire with them against the believers. Therefore, they are warned about torture that would be inflicted on them at the point of death. They are also warned about exposure within the Muslim community to which they pretend to belong when they are not really part of it. On the contrary, they scheme against it: "*Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put*

you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions." (Verses 25–31)

The *sūrah*'s third and final round again takes up the attack against the unbelievers from among the Quraysh and the Jews: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32) It warns the believers against falling into the same traps as their enemies: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verses 33–34) They are encouraged to remain firm during the fight: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35)

The life of this world is shown to be trivial. Believers are urged to spend some of their money to support God's cause. They are not meant to give away all they have; God knows their human nature and that they would find it too difficult to make such a sacrifice should it be asked of them: "*The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.*" (Verses 36–37) The *sūrah* concludes with a note of warning to the Muslims, should they be niggardly, unwilling to spend some of their money for God's cause: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

The air of battle colours the *sūrah* from start to finish; it is characteristic of its every section. The ending of its verses sound like heavy bombardments. When such endings are given a softer tone, they seem like swords branded in the air. The images the *sūrah* draws are as hard as the words expressing them. When referring to actual fighting,

the *sūrah* says: "*when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" (Verse 4) The actual killing and the taking of prisoners is described graphically: "*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The condemnation of the unbelievers is expressed in equally powerful words: "*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) The fate of earlier communities is also documented in a highly resounding way, both in words and connotations: "*God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) As they are made to suffer in hell the unbelievers are shown as being "*given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels*" (Verse 15) Likewise, the state of panic that overtakes the hypocrites is drawn intensely: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) Even the gentle warning to the believers against turning away is given in the form of a decisive threat: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Thus we see perfect harmony permeating the *sūrah*: its subject matter, images, connotations and rhythm.

I

Captives of War

Muḥammad

سُورَةُ مُحَمَّدٍ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, (1)

الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
أَضَلَّ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿١﴾

whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. (2)

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَآمَنُوا
بِمَا نُزِّلَ عَلَىٰ مُحَمَّدٍ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ كَفَّرَ
عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَأَصْلَحَ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٢﴾

This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْبَاطِلَ وَأَنَّ
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّبَعُوا الْحَقَّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ
يَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ لِلنَّاسِ أَمْثَالَهُمْ ﴿٣﴾

فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَضَرْبَ ٱلرِّقَابِ
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَثْخَنتُمُوهُمْ فَشُدُّوا۟ ٱلْوَثَاقَ فَإِمَّا
مَنًّۢا بَعْدُ وَإِمَّا فِدَآءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ ٱلْحَرْبُ
أَوْزَارَهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَوْ يَشَآءُ ٱللَّهُ لَٱنتَصَرَ
مِنْهُمْ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَا۟ بَعْضَكُم بِبَعْضٍ ۗ
وَٱلَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَلَن يُضِلَّ
أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٤﴾

Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden. Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. (4)

سَيَهْدِيهِمْ وَيُصْلِحُ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٥﴾

He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, (5)

وَيُدْخِلُهُمُ ٱلْجَنَّةَ عَرَّفَهَا لَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾

and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (6)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن تَنصُرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
يَنصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ ﴿٧﴾

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; (7)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَتَعْسًا لَّهُمْ وَأَضَلَّ
أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. (8)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا۟ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ
فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (9)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۖ دَمَّرَ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَلِلْكَٰفِرِينَ أَمْثَٰلُهَا ﴿١٠﴾

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (10)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَوْلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَأَنَّ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them. (11)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا
ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يَتَمَتَّعُونَ
وَيَأْكُلُونَ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمُ وَٱلنَّارُ
مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ﴿١٢﴾

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (12)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ هِىَ أَشَدُّ قُوَّةً مِّن
قَرْيَتِكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَخْرَجَتْكَ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ
فَلَا نَاصِرَ لَهُمْ ﴿١٣﴾

How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them. (13)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ كَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُۥ
سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُم ﴿١٤﴾

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (14)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (15)

مَّثَلُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِى وُعِدَ ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ ۖ فِيهَآ أَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن مَّآءٍ غَيْرِ ءَاسِنٍ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن لَّبَنٍ لَّمْ يَتَغَيَّرْ طَعْمُهُۥ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ خَمْرٍ لَّذَّةٍ لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ عَسَلٍ مُّصَفًّى ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ كَمَنْ هُوَ خَٰلِدٌ فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَسُقُوا۟ مَآءً حَمِيمًا فَقَطَّعَ أَمْعَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٥﴾

Belief in Muḥammad's Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with a straightforward attack against the unbelievers, without any introduction or preparatory remarks. These unbelievers, who debar others from God's path, are faced with the prospect of their deeds going astray and ending up with nothing. This applies to all unbelievers whether they are those who debar others on their own initiative, or they themselves are debarred and then debar others from God's path. At the outset, the *sūrah* gives us a sense of deeds being animated, physically on the move, but their movements are erroneous, far astray, and without any defining goal. The result brings utter loss and destruction. Such animation is employed to provide an image of a battle in which the deeds separate themselves from the people who perform them: the result is that both go further astray from each other, and all ends in ruin.

These deeds that are brought to nothing may refer, in particular, to the ones that the unbelievers hoped would bring them good results; in other words, they appeared to them as good deeds. However, a good deed that is not based on faith loses its value; its goodness is superficial. What is important is the motive that gives rise to the deed, not the form

of the deed. Even if the motive is good, unless it relies on faith it may be only temporary or the result of sudden impulse. Faith, on the other hand, links all man's actions and feelings to a solid base. This gives deeds their meaning and aim, bringing them consistency and ensuring that their effects are in line with the Divine system that links all parts of the universe together. Thus, every action is seen to contribute to the overall progress of the universe, fulfilling a role and serving an end.

On the other side stand "*those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 2) These people are described as having faith, which certainly includes believing in Muḥammad's revelations, but this aspect of belief is specifically highlighted in order to give it prominence since "*it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" Faith that is established in one's heart and conscience must be accompanied by action that is clearly seen in life. Such action is the fruit of faith that indicates its presence. Such people have a special status: "*He will forgive them their bad deeds.*" (Verse 2) This contrasts with what happens to the deeds of the unbelievers: they go astray, even though they may initially seem to be good. Thus, while even good deeds done by unbelievers end up in nothing, the bad deeds of the believers are forgiven. The contrast here is perfect and absolute, emphasizing the value of faith in God's sight and in real life. Yet their reward goes further than this as God will "*bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 2) This is a great blessing which is second to faith in importance and effect. The verse gives here connotations of perfect comfort, assurance, peace and happiness. When a person is in such a happy state, his thoughts are sound, his heart is reassured, his feelings are at ease, and his soul enjoys a sense of peace and security. What other blessing would anyone want?

Why do things go in these two opposite directions? There is no question of favouritism or coincidence in all this. Instead, it all relies on the fundamental law upon which the universe was established when God created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, making the truth its basic foundation: "*This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 3) Falsehood cannot put down deep roots in the universe. Therefore, it ends up in nothing, as does everything founded upon it.

Since the unbelievers follow falsehood, their deeds go astray and are brought to nothing. By contrast, the truth is the foundation on which the structure of the universe is built. Therefore, everything related to it stays on. Since the believers follow the truth from their Lord, He will forgive them their sins and bring them to a happy state. It is all clear, based on solid principles. "*Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verse 3) The believers are clear about these rules, they know the basis around which they should make their choices.

An Order to Fight

The principle stated in the first verse of the *sūrah* is made the basis of the directive to the believers to fight the unbelievers. The believers are the ones who follow the truth that must be established in human life on earth. It, truth, should be given the power to conduct life's affairs. Thus, human life becomes based on the truth and refers everything to it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, follow falsehood. This should be removed with all its effects on human life: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This verse refers specifically to meeting in battle, not any other meeting between believers and unbelievers. Up to the revelation of this *sūrah*, idolaters lived in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were at war with the believers and some bound by peace treaties. *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, had not as then been revealed giving notice that treaties specifying dates of expiry would not be renewed. On the other hand, treaties without a specific term were given a four-month notice of termination. Thereafter, idolaters were to be killed if they were found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The aim of these rules was to make the Peninsula the permanent base of Islam.[2]

The verse tells the believers specifically to smite the unbelievers' necks, but this only occurs after Islam is explained to them and they reject the call to accept it. The order is given in a way that describes the

2. This rule does not apply to idolaters outside the Arabian Peninsula; they could continue to live in the Muslim state but only in accordance with Islamic rules.

actual killing and the action it requires, so as to fit with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

"*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic verb '*athkhana*', translated here as 'subdue', also connotes strong fighting involving killing of opponents. The situation the verse envisages as a result of fighting is the total collapse of the enemy's power so as to leave the enemy incapable of putting up any defence, let alone launching a counterattack. At this point only, captives are taken. While the enemy still has substantial force, the fight goes on to remove the danger it presents.

Thus, like most commentators on the Qur'ān, we see no conflict between this verse and the one in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, which remonstrates with the Prophet and the Muslims for taking many captives of war during the Battle of Badr. At the time, continuing the battle to kill more of the unbelievers was a better option. The relevant verses state: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.*"[3] (8: 67–68) This means that killing the enemy and breaking its power comes first. When this has been accomplished, captives may be taken. The wisdom in all this is clearly apparent. To remove aggression by forces hostile to Islam must be the first objective of fighting, particularly when the numerical strength of the Muslim community is well below that of the unbelievers. In such circumstances as prevailed at the time of the Battle of Badr, killing an enemy fighter was far more important in the balance of power between the two sides. However, this ruling remains valid in general, and it should be applied in any armed conflict with the aim of making the enemy powerless.

The Ruling on Captives of War

The verse then sets the ruling concerning those who are taken captive in war. This is the only Qur'ānic text stating a ruling on such captives:

3. These verses are explained in Vol. VII, pp. 198–202.

"*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4) This means that captives of war are to be set free gratis, without any compensation. No specified ransom or exchange of prisoners is required. The Qur'ānic verse does not mention any third option, such as putting idolater captives to death or binding them into slavery. Nevertheless, what happened in practice was that the Prophet and the caliphs succeeding him put some war captives into slavery, and killed specifically named individuals. We will quote what Imām Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law, says about this verse in his book *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, making some comments as necessary. We will then conclude by stating our view of the relevant rulings:

> God says in this verse: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" On the surface, the statement makes it clear that killing the unbelievers is the only option until they have been thoroughly subdued. This is consistent with what God says in the other verse: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land.*" (8: 67) Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that this last statement applied to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were a small minority. When their numbers increased and they became more powerful, God established the ruling: "*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Thus, God allowed the Prophet and the believers all options: to kill their prisoners, enslave them or set them free. However, the transmitter of this *ḥadīth* doubts whether Ibn 'Abbās mentioned enslaving prisoners.

Since the reporter was uncertain that Ibn 'Abbās mentioned slavery in this context, we discard that option altogether. As for killing such prisoners of war, we see no basis for this in the verse under discussion. The verse mentions only freeing them either as an act of grace or against ransom.[4]

4. The author makes several comments on this lengthy quotation. We have included his comments in separate paragraphs so as to distinguish them from the quoted text. – Editor's note.

> Al-Suddī is reported to have commented on the ruling, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" saying that it has been abrogated by the subsequent verse in *Sūrah* 9, stating: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) However, we say that the Qur'ānic statements: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks,*" and "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land,*" and "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them,*" are most probably outlining valid rulings, none of which has been abrogated. God commanded His messenger to kill the unbelievers and not to take captives from among them until they had been thoroughly subdued. This was the case when the Muslims were small in number, compared with their enemy. In that situation, only when the unbelievers were subdued after being killed in numbers and were made an example of to those who followed them, was it then permissible to take some of them captive, keeping them alive. This should be a permanent rule, applicable at any time when the Muslims are in a similar situation to that which prevailed in the early days of Islam.

In comment, we say that the order to kill the idolaters wherever they were found applied specifically to the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. The verse in the present *sūrah* is general in its import. When the enemy is thoroughly subdued and its power is smashed, it is permissible to take prisoners. This was the practice followed by the caliphs after the Prophet. Prisoners were killed only in particular cases which we will explain presently.

> The statement, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" provides for one of two alternatives: freeing the prisoners either by an act of grace or against ransom, which suggests that killing them was prohibited. However, early scholars differ on this point. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have objected to killing prisoners of war, saying that they should be freed against ransom or indeed without it. 'Aṭā' is also reported to have held this view.

When asked what to do with prisoners, al-Ḥasan answered: 'Do with them what the Prophet did with the prisoners taken in the Battle of Badr: they were freed by an act of grace or against ransom.' Ibn 'Umar was given a prisoner, a man of high position from the city of Iṣṭakhr, so that he could kill him, but he refused to do so citing the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Likewise, Mujāhid and Ibn Sīrīn are reported to have spoken against killing prisoners of war. We have already mentioned al-Suddī's view that this ruling was abrogated by the other Qur'ānic instruction: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) Likewise, Ibn Jurayj is of this view. He cited the case of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ whom the Prophet ordered to be killed after he was taken prisoner during the Battle of Badr.

Scholars from all provinces are unanimous that a prisoner of war may be killed, and we do not know of any taking a different view. Reports are numerous that the Prophet sanctioned such killing. He ordered the execution of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ and al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith after the Battle of Badr, and Abū 'Azzah, the poet, after the Battle of Uḥud. He also put the Qurayẓah prisoners to death when they accepted Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh's judgement to the effect that their men must be executed and their offspring be enslaved. From among them, he set al-Zubayr ibn Bāṭā free by an act of grace. When he conquered Khaybar, partly by war and partly by peaceful agreement, he stipulated a clear condition on Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but when his treachery was exposed, he ordered his execution. When he later entered Makkah, he ordered the killing of a number of people, stating that they should be killed, 'even if found clinging to the robes of the Ka'bah.' However, he freed the people of Makkah and took nothing of their property.

Abū Bakr is quoted to have said: "I wish I had not ordered al-Fujā'ah to be burnt when he was brought to me. I wish I had ordered his execution normally or set him free." Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī mentions that he executed the chief priest of al-Sūs, after he had given him a guarantee of safety for a number of people

whom the priest named. However, he forgot to include himself, and therefore, the guarantee of safety did not apply to him. So, Abū Mūsā ordered his execution.

All these reports and *aḥādīth* confirm, without any doubt, that the Prophet and his Companions approved the execution of prisoners of war or setting them free. This is the consensus of scholars in all regions.

The permissibility of executing prisoners of war cannot, however, just be based on the Qur'ānic statement. It should instead be viewed against the actions of the Prophet and some of his Companions. When we carefully consider all the cases where prisoners were killed, we find that they were all special; in other words, there were additional militating factors other than merely fighting against Muslims and subsequent captivity. The men killed after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, namely, 'Uqbah, al-Naḍr and Abū 'Azzah, respectively, were all hostile opponents who were determined to harm the Prophet. The case of the Qurayẓah Jews was also special, given they had agreed, in advance, for judgement to be passed on them by Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh. In all these cases we find special reasons placing them outside the general rule on prisoners of war stated in this verse: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4)

Scholars differed on setting prisoners free against ransom. Those of our school, the Ḥanafī, maintain that a prisoner cannot be set free against financial ransom, and cannot be sold to the enemy so as to join them again in fighting. Abū Ḥanīfah also states that a prisoner of war cannot be set free in exchange for Muslim prisoners. In no way should he ever be returned to join an enemy army. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan differ with Abū Ḥanīfah on this point, allowing the exchange of prisoners of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This last view is subscribed to by major scholars like al-Thawrī and al-Awzā'ī. Al-Awzā'ī adds that it is permissible to sell prisoners of war to the enemy, but the men among them may not be sold except in an exchange of prisoners. On the other hand, al-Muznī quotes al-Shāfi'ī as saying

that a Muslim ruler may set male prisoners of war free by an act of grace or against ransom after their defeat.

Those who approve of exchange of prisoners and setting enemy prisoners free against financial ransom cite in support of their view the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" This apparently permits setting them free against ransom and in exchange for Muslim prisoners. They also cite the fact that the Prophet set Quraysh prisoners from the Battle of Badr free against financial ransom. As for the permissibility of an exchange of prisoners, they cite in support a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn: "The Thaqīf tribe took two Companions of the Prophet prisoner, and the Muslims took a man from the tribe of 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'ah prisoner. The Prophet passed by this prisoner when he was tied up, and the man called him. The Prophet went to him. He asked: 'Why am I taken prisoner?' The Prophet said: 'Because of your allies' offence.' The man said: 'But I am a Muslim.' The Prophet replied: 'Had you said this when you were free, you would have greatly prospered.' The Prophet moved away, but the man called him again. When the Prophet went to him, he said: 'Feed me, for I am hungry.' The Prophet said: 'This is what you need.' The Prophet then exchanged him for the two men taken captive by the Thaqīf."

In our view, the evidence in support of those who say that prisoners of war may be set free against ransom is weightier and more valid than that stated in support of the view of al-Jaṣṣāṣ's school. This is true even though they differ concerning the form of ransom and whether it is financial or in exchange with Muslim prisoners of war. Imām al-Jaṣṣāṣ concludes his discussion by endorsing the view of his Ḥanafī school of Islamic law:

As for the mention in this verse of freeing prisoners as an act of grace or against ransom, along with what is reported of the action concerning the prisoners during the Battle of Badr, all this is

abrogated by the Qur'ānic verse that says: "*Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way.*" (9: 5) We have mentioned that this is the view of al-Suddī and Ibn Jurayj. Further confirmation of the abrogation is seen in the verse that says: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (9: 29) Both verses speak of the duty to fight against the unbelievers until they accept Islam or pay tribute, or *jizyah*. To free them against ransom runs contrary to this. All commentators on the Qur'ān and scholars of *ḥadīth* agree that *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed later than *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which means that the rulings it states abrogate the earlier ones including that of freeing them against ransom.

We have already stated that this ruling to kill idolaters unless they adopt Islam is specific to idolaters living in the Arabian Peninsula. Others living outside it can live in the Muslim state and pay a tribute, just like the payment of tribute is accepted from followers of earlier religions. That the tribute is accepted from them when they submit to the rule of the Muslim state does not preclude that some of them may fall prisoner before such submission. What ruling applies to such prisoners, then? We say that a Muslim ruler may free them by an act of grace if he determines that this serves the interests of the Muslim community. He may also free them against financial ransom or in exchange for Muslim prisoners, when their people continue to have a fighting force and remain hostile. When the enemy renounces hostility by agreeing to pay tribute to the Muslim state, a different situation applies with clearly specified rulings. This means that the ruling concerning prisoners of war continues to be valid in cases that are not settled by the payment of tribute.

What We Say

To sum up, this is the only Qur'ānic text providing a ruling on prisoners of war. All other texts relate to situations other than that of taking prisoners. Therefore, this represents the permanent basis for dealing with this question. In those cases where the practice differed, this was the result of specific and temporary situations. Putting some prisoners to death applied only in individual cases, which could be similar to future ones. Those individuals were executed for actions they committed before being taken prisoner. They were not killed merely for fighting the Muslims. A spy, for example, may be taken prisoner and tried. In this case, he is tried for spying, not for being an enemy soldier taken prisoner in open battle. His captivity merely brought him under the authority of the Muslim state.

A word needs to be said about placing prisoners of war in slavery. We have already stated on more than one occasion that this was in response to prevalent universal situations and common practices in war. These situations made it impossible for Islam to implement in all circumstances the general statement "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" when enemy camps used to put any Muslim taken prisoner into slavery. Therefore, this ruling was applied by the Prophet in certain situations: he set free some prisoners in acts of grace, while in other cases he exchanged prisoners and in still other cases, he accepted financial ransom. In some cases prisoners were made slaves in order to deal with situations that could not be otherwise dealt with.

Should all camps agree not to treat prisoners of war as slaves, Islam reverts to its single positive ruling in the matter: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Putting prisoners into slavery is not an Islamic rule; it is a procedure dealing with special circumstances. This is the view that we derive from this clear Qur'ānic statement and from carefully studying different cases, events and situations.

I should perhaps make it clear that I support this view because the Qur'ānic statements and the study of events and cases support it. It does not occur to me that I should defend Islam against the accusation that it puts prisoners into slavery. Such a thought I never entertain. Had Islam adopted this practice, it would have been the right and

better one. No human being with any degree of good manners would ever say that his view is better than God's ruling. I only look at the Qur'ānic text, its wording and spirit. It is on this basis that I have formulated my view.

All this, i.e fighting, smiting the necks of unbelievers, binding them firmly and dealing with the captives according to this rule, continues "*until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This means until war is over between Islam and its opponents. It remains the permanent Islamic rule. According to a *ḥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd on Anas's authority, the Prophet says: "*Jihād* shall continue until the Day of Judgement." Its purpose is to ensure that God's word remains supreme.

The Purpose of *Jihād*

God does not require believers to fight and go on *jihād* because He needs their help against the unbelievers. Far be it from Him to need help. He is able, should He wish, to destroy those unbelievers utterly. It is all a test for mankind which determines everyone's position:

> *Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6)

Those unbelievers who debar people from God's path, and their ilk throughout the earth, at all times, and those despots who exercise power unjustly and appear to command force and authority, behaving in all arrogance, are no more than a handful of creatures living on earth. The earth is nothing but a tiny little planet floating in the midst of countless other planets, stars, celestial systems and galaxies whose sizes and numbers are known only to God. In the universal expanse, worlds and galaxies appear merely as scattered points, and as though they float aimlessly. None other than God controls them all and ensures harmony between them.

Despots, their entourages and followers, indeed all people on earth, are no more than small ants when compared with God's power. No indeed, they are not even like tiny particles blown everywhere by a light breeze. They are just nothing. When God commands believers to smite the necks of unbelievers and to bind them firmly after they have been utterly subdued, He only makes of them a tool of His power. Had He so willed, He would have dealt with them directly, as He did with those whom he destroyed by floods, a stunning blast or wind. He can indeed punish them Himself, without using any of these forces. God, however, wants the best for the believers. Therefore, He tests them and cultivates what is good in them, making it easier for them to do the best of good works.

God wants to test the believers, bringing out the best potential in man. The highest level a human being attains is when the truth he believes in becomes so dear to him that he will fight for it, exposing himself to death, but also being willing to kill his opponents. He simply will not compromise on this truth he believes in, and cannot live or love life unless it be under such truth. God wants to cultivate the believers, so that every desire and aspiration pertaining to this transitory life on earth, dear as it may be normally to man, is progressively weakened. He wants to purge them of their weaknesses and compensate them for their shortcomings until all their desires respond to the call to *jihād* and the earning of His pleasure. God will thus know that those people have successfully passed the test and have been properly cultivated. They do not make their choices on impulse, but on the basis of careful consideration.

God also wants to elevate the believers. When they go through the hardships of *jihād*, exposing themselves to the danger of death at every turn, they learn to care little for this danger. For most people, however, this is so frightening that they shed much of their moral values and dignity to avoid it. Yet it is of little consequence to those who are used to exposing themselves to it, whether they eventually avoid it or not. To turn to God alone at every moment of danger produces an effect which is best compared to an electric shock. It is like remoulding people's hearts and souls in full clarity and purity.

Moreover, such a test provides the means to put the affairs of the whole community on the right basis, placing its leadership in the hands of those who strive so strenuously for God's cause ready to sacrifice themselves for it. Such people care little for worldly riches and luxuries. When they are the ones who have the leadership of human society, the whole world will be set on the right footing. Furthermore, it facilitates the way for people to earn God's pleasure and His reward without having to face the reckoning. By contrast, those in the opposite camp find it easy to do what incurs God's displeasure and exposes them to His punishment. Everyone will have his way made easy for him to follow, according to God's knowledge of the true nature of all.

Thus, God tells us about those who are killed, fighting for His cause: "*And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6) The first thing to note here is the contrast between what happens to the deeds of martyrs and what happens to those of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers, the *sūrah* started with the statement that "*their deeds [are] brought to nothing*," by God. Here the verse says of martyrs: "*never will He let their deeds go to waste.*" Theirs are good deeds, done in accordance with Divine guidance, linked to the solid truth by which they are motivated and in defence of which they are undertaken. They will remain because the truth is permanent and will never be lost.

We then face the great truth of the continuing life of martyrs killed in God's cause. This is a fact already stated in the Qur'ān: "*Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that.*" (2: 154) This great truth is presented here in a new light. We see the life of the martyr extending and growing in the way it followed before it left this world, the way of obedience to God and sacrifice for His cause: "*He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 5) It was for the cause of God that they were slain and so He will continue to guide them after their martyrdom, promising them that they will attain to a happy state, as their souls will be purged of any traces of earthly life's burdens. They will grow in purity so as to be suited to the absolute purity of the ones

on high to which they are raised. This means that theirs is a continuing, uninterrupted life except in an earthly sense. God takes care of their lives, increases them in guidance, purity and shining. Ultimately, He fulfils His promise to them, for He "*will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verse 6)

A *ḥadīth* related by Aḥmad quotes the Prophet as saying: "A martyr is given six special privileges: with the first drop of his blood, he is forgiven every sin he has ever committed; he sees his position in heaven; and he is given his maiden companions, security from the greatest fear, torment in the grave and his adornment of true faith." Another *ḥadīth* related by al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah specifically states that a martyr is made to see his position in heaven. This is how God makes heaven known to martyrs, and such is the end of continuing guidance and the happy state they are brought into after departing life on earth.

Purely for God's Sake

The *sūrah* then urges the believers to dedicate themselves to God and the implementation of His code in human life. It promises them His support in battle as well as defeat and hardship for His and their enemies:

> *Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.* (Verses 7–9)

How do believers support God so as to fulfil the condition and receive what He has promised them of His support and steadying their step? What God requires of them is that they should be fully dedicated to Him, associating no partners with Him whatsoever, whether in a subtle or open way. They must love God more than they love themselves or their desires. They must refer to His rulings on everything they desire or wish for, as well as on their public and private actions, their thoughts and feelings. Such is the way to support God within ourselves.

Moreover, we know that God has laid down a complete code for life, based on certain rules and values; in short, a complete concept of life and the universe. In practical life, our supporting God is fulfilled when we make this code the arbiter of everything we do, when we implement His way of life in all aspects.

We need to reflect for a moment on the two phrases: "*those who are slain in God's cause*," and "*If you support God.*" In both cases of being slain and giving support, the basic condition is that the action should be dedicated to God and serve His cause. Although this goes without saying, it is often blurred when faith suffers from deviation in one generation or another. In such cases we notice that words like martyrdom and *jihād* are twisted to serve cheap causes. It should be clear that there is no such thing as *jihād*, martyrdom or admission into heaven unless such *jihād* is for God's cause only, death for His sake alone, and the support we give within ourselves and in society is to Him alone. The objective must be that His word should be supreme; that His law and code of living should rule over people's consciences, morality, behaviour, laws and systems. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī reports: "The Prophet was asked about a person who fights to prove his bravery, support his people or to show off: which of these could be fighting in God's cause? He answered: 'Only the one who fights so that God's word remains supreme fights for God's cause.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.] There can be no other banner or goal under or for which people can fight and fall martyrs to be included in God's promise of admission to heaven other than His banner and His cause. This is true no matter what banner is raised and no matter what goals are defined under deviant systems and governments.

Advocates of Divine faith are best advised to understand this truth and keep it in their minds pure of any deviant concept. They must never allow thoughts that are alien to the Islamic faith to creep into their minds. If people strive for any purpose other than making God's word supreme, then their striving is not for Him, and when they are killed they do not earn martyr status. They cannot expect God's help and cannot hope to be in heaven. Advocates of Divine faith must make their vision clear. If they find this hard, the least they can do is to free

their thoughts and feelings from the concepts of their environment which are in conflict with the essence of God's conditional statement: "*Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" (Verse 7)

Such is the condition God requires to be fulfilled by believers. What He gives them in return is His support, ensuring victory and making their steps firm. This is God's promise which never fails. If it is delayed at some point, its delay serves another purpose which is accomplished when God's support, victory and firmness of step are fulfilled.[5]

We need to reflect a little on the way God's promise is stated: "*He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" The Arabic word, *yanṣurkum*, translated here as '*support you*', also means '*gives you victory*'. We tend to think first that firmness of step is necessary before victory can be achieved; in fact, it is an important element in gaining victory. This is so true. That it occurs second in this text indicates a different meaning. What is intended here is that believers remain firm when victory has been achieved so that they can shoulder the responsibilities that come with victory. Victory is not the end of the battle between faith and unfaith, the truth and falsehood. Victory imposes certain duties within the minds of the victorious and in life generally. Those who achieve victory must not allow conceit to creep into their minds, nor should they grow complacent. Many people may remain steadfast when the going is tough and the hardships are plenty, but few are those who do not weaken after victory or when life is easy and comfortable. To remain steadfast, upholding the truth after victory, is an even higher grade than gaining victory. Perhaps this is the meaning intended in this verse, but God knows best.

"*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) This is the opposite of granting help and firmness of step. This is an invocation of ill fortune which means that they will inevitably have ill fortune, humiliation and lack of support. Furthermore, their deeds will come to nothing, which means utter loss. The reason for all this is stated: "*This is because they hate what*

5. For further clarification of this point, see Vol. XII, pp. 134–142.

God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verse 9)

This describes what they entertain of hatred to what God has revealed: the Qur'ān containing His law and the code He lays down for human life. This is what prompts them to stubbornly reject the faith and entertain futile argument about it. Many are those with corrupt minds who hate the sound Divine code and find themselves, by nature, in conflict with it. We often meet such people and we sense their deep hatred of Islam and everything related to it. They are scared by the mere mention of it. In fact, such hatred is easily noticed these days.

Because of their hatred of God's revelations, He let their deeds go to waste. Again the Qur'ān uses its preferred method of drawing images. The Arabic word, *aḥbaṭa*, translated here as *'cause to go to waste'*, normally describes cattle with swollen bellies as a result of feeding on poisoned grass. This ends in certain death. In the same way, those people who hate God's revelations find their deeds swollen and apparently growing, only to end in waste and utter loss. It is a vivid image that shows motion, and an end corresponding to that of the ones who hate God's revelations and admire their own works that appear to them great. Yet they are only swollen in the same way as the bellies of cattle grazing on poisonous grass.

Superficial Enjoyment

The unbelievers' attention is forcibly drawn to the fates of earlier ignorant communities:

> *Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.* (Verse 10)

This is a strong and forceful statement accompanied by loud noises and an image of the earlier communities witnessing the destruction of everything around them. All their possessions are amassed in heaps while they themselves are buried under the debris; it is an image of

total destruction. They are told that such a fate awaits all unbelievers; they will reap nothing but devastation and ruin: "*A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) This fearful prospect contrasts with that of the believers who will receive support and victory: "*This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The constant rule being that when God is his protector, man need not worry about anything. Whatever happens to him should be seen as a test that heralds something good. It is never a sign of being abandoned by God, nor can it be seen as failure by God to fulfil His promise to support His servants. The one who is not so protected by God, however, will have no protection, even if all of mankind and the *jinn* are his patrons and supporters. Ultimately, he will be lost even though all means of protection and all sources of power known to mankind are at his disposal.

Having explained the lots of both believers and unbelievers when conflict and war erupt between them, the *sūrah* outlines their shares of enjoyment, making clear the distinction between the two:

> *God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.* (Verse 12)

Believers who do good may sometimes be given luxuries and comforts of the best type to enjoy, but the comparison here is drawn between the believers' truly great share in heaven on the one hand and the total lot of the unbelievers on the other. The believers receive their share from God's hand in the heavens through which running waters flow. It is God who admits them there. Hence, it is a great, noble share given to them in reward for their faith and good deeds. By contrast, the share of the unbelievers is merely some enjoyment and the partaking of food '*as cattle eat*'. This is a miserable image unfit for man. It is an image of vulgar enjoyment and an animal-like approach to food, lacking both taste and manners. It is an enjoyment that is subject to no control; man has neither will, choice nor conscience in all this. Furthermore, it is unchecked by any sense of fear of God.

Regardless of their beliefs, people may have very fine culinary tastes and may be very selective in what they enjoy. This is certainly true of most people who grow up in wealthy families. This is not, however, what is referred to here. Rather, what the verse points to is that when man is in control of his will and has his values in place, he will choose only what is good in God's sight. He makes his choice using his will, free of the pressure of desire and cheap enjoyment. With such a will, he does not look at life as if it is a sumptuous feast of food and drink, or as though it is a chance for uncontrolled pleasure, paying little or no attention to what is lawful or unlawful.

The essential difference between man and animals is that man is equipped with free will and has a concept of life based on values stated by God, the Creator of all life. When man loses this, he sheds the most important qualities that distinguish him from other creatures and for which God has granted him special honour.

This series of comparisons between believers and unbelievers is interrupted by a reference to the city that drove the Prophet out, comparing it with other cities and communities that perished even though they were far more powerful: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13) This verse is reported to have been revealed when the Prophet was on his way from Makkah to Madīnah, having been driven out by the unbelievers. It was revealed by way of consolation to him, reminding him that those unbelievers who had opposed his message so determinedly, until he and his followers had to abandon their land and property and migrate for the sake of their faith, are truly powerless. In the end, they are subject to God's power.

The Reward: a Physical Image

The comparison between the two groups continues. This by virtue of an explanation outlining why the believers are admitted into gardens of bliss in the life to come after they have been given support and honour in this present life. It also explains why the unbelievers who lived a life of animal enjoyment in this world, are subjected to punishment in the next life:

> *Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires?* (Verse 14)

There is a fundamental difference between the conditions, codes of life and behaviour of the two groups. The believers are equipped with clear evidence from their Lord. They recognize the truth and are certain of its source. They receive their directives and instructions from God and are sure of what they receive. No deception or error exists in their way of life. The unbelievers, by contrast, are deceived, thinking their deeds to be good when they are essentially bad. They do not make certain of what they receive nor whether it is true or good. They only '*follow their own desires*' with no standard of control to refer to and with no light to help them distinguish what is true and what is false. Are these two groups alike? The answer can only be in the negative for they are fundamentally different in their conditions and practices. Hence, they cannot be the same in their rewards and destinies.

Then follows an image of the differences between the two in the ends to which they are heading:

> *Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15)

Such physical descriptions of reward and punishment in the hereafter occur in several places in the Qur'ān. They may be accompanied with other mental images or given on their own. Likewise, mental images are often given on their own in the Qur'ān. It is God who has created mankind, and He knows best what affects and influences them and what is conducive to cultivating the better elements in their nature. He also knows what enjoyment or suffering is best in bringing out the best in them. People possess different qualities and characteristics that

are all combined within human nature but differ in their manifestation in each individual. Hence, God has given us detailed accounts of the types of comfort and suffering, pleasure and pain, according to His absolute knowledge of His creatures.

Some people are best motivated to good action and most contented with their reward when they are told that they shall have rivers of pure water, healthy milk, pure, clarified honey and delightful wine, as well as fruits of all kinds, together with forgiveness that ensures their admission to heaven. These people are given what is suitable to cultivate the best in them and ensure that they receive their fitting reward. There are others who worship God because they want to thank Him for the countless blessings He has given them, or because they love Him and try to draw closer to Him through their worship, just as lovers lean towards each other, or because they are too ashamed to be seen in any condition that does not please God. In their worship, they do not look up to heaven and hell, bliss or suffering. These are best motivated when they read God's words: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.*" (19: 96) They feel their greatest bliss when they learn that they will be "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55)

It is reported that the Prophet used to stand up in night worship until his feet swelled. ʿĀ'ishah, his wife, asked him why he did so when God had assured him of total forgiveness for all his sins, past and future. He replied: "ʿĀ'ishah! Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.] Rābiʿah al-ʿAdawiyyah wondered: "Would it be true that without heaven and hell, no one would have worshipped or feared God?" When Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the *Tābiʿīn* generation, asked her about the nature of her faith in God, she said to him: "I do not worship God for fear of hell or craving for heaven. I would then be no better than a miserable hired servant. I worship Him because I yearn to meet Him."

In between these two types there is a wide range of different natures and mentalities. They all find in what God describes of bliss and suffering, reward and punishment, what ensures the cultivation of what is best in them in this present life and what is fitting as a reward in the life to come. It should be noted that the images of happiness and

suffering grow in sophistication as the listeners become more refined by greater exposure to the Qur'ān, and according to the types of situations being addressed. This is true of all generations and communities.

The requital is of two types: the first includes all these rivers together with plentiful and varied fruit as well as God's forgiveness. The other is thus outlined: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15) Again, this is a physical image of fierce torture that fits the ambience of the *sūrah*. It also fits the crude nature of the unbelievers, for they are the ones who approach their enjoyments and their food like animals. It is a crude atmosphere. Hence, they are requited with boiling water that tears at their bowels and bellies. The two groups are totally different in their nature and code of life. Most certainly their requital will not be the same.

2

What Fate for Sealed Hearts

وَمِنْهُم مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا خَرَجُوا۟ مِنْ عِندِكَ قَالُوا۟ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ مَاذَا قَالَ ءَانِفًا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (16)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱهْتَدَوْا۟ زَادَهُمْ هُدًى وَءَاتَىٰهُمْ تَقْوَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٧﴾

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing. (17)

فَهَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً ۖ فَقَدْ جَآءَ أَشْرَاطُهَا ۚ فَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمْ إِذَا جَآءَتْهُمْ ذِكْرَىٰهُمْ ﴿١٨﴾

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (18)

فَٱعْلَمْ أَنَّهُۥ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنۢبِكَ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مُتَقَلَّبَكُمْ وَمَثْوَىٰكُمْ ﴿١٩﴾

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (19)

The believers say: 'Would that a *sūrah* had been revealed.' Yet when a *sūrah* of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be (20)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَتْ سُورَةٌ ۖ
فَإِذَآ أُنزِلَتْ سُورَةٌ مُّحْكَمَةٌ وَذُكِرَ فِيهَا
ٱلْقِتَالُ ۙ رَأَيْتَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ
يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ نَظَرَ ٱلْمَغْشِىِّ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ
ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ فَأَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٠﴾

obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. (21)

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ ۚ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ ٱلْأَمْرُ
فَلَوْ صَدَقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ﴿٢١﴾

If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? (22)

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَن تُفْسِدُوا۟
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوٓا۟ أَرْحَامَكُمْ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. (23)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فَأَصَمَّهُمْ
وَأَعْمَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts? (24)

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ
قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَآ ﴿٢٤﴾

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. (25)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱرْتَدُّوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَدْبَٰرِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَى ۙ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ سَوَّلَ
لَهُمْ وَأَمْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ كَرِهُوا مَا
نَزَّلَ اللَّهُ سَنُطِيعُكُمْ فِي بَعْضِ
الْأَمْرِ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِسْرَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (26)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ
وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٧﴾

How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? (27)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ اتَّبَعُوا مَا أَسْخَطَ
اللَّهَ وَكَرِهُوا رِضْوَانَهُ فَأَحْبَطَ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٢٨﴾

That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (28)

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ أَن
لَّن يُخْرِجَ اللَّهُ أَضْغَانَهُمْ ﴿٢٩﴾

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? (29)

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَأَرَيْنَاكَهُمْ فَلَعَرَفْتَهُم
بِسِيمَاهُمْ ۚ وَلَتَعْرِفَنَّهُمْ فِي لَحْنِ
الْقَوْلِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٠﴾

Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. (30)

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ مِنكُمْ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَنَبْلُوَ أَخْبَارَكُمْ ﴿٣١﴾

Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (31)

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites. In the first instance it depicts their attitude towards the Prophet and the Qur'ān, then their attitude to fighting which God requires Muslims to undertake in the service of His cause. Finally, it reveals their attitude towards the Jews and their conspiring with them against Islam and the Muslim community.

It should be remembered that hypocrisy first started in Madīnah. It did not exist in Makkah, as the situation there made it totally unnecessary. In Makkah, the Muslims suffered persecution and no one needed to appease them. When God facilitated support for Islam with its acceptance by the two tribes of Madīnah, the Aws and the Khazraj, the new faith spread into all clans and families. There were Muslims in every home in Madīnah. Some, however, hated to see the Prophet and Islam gaining power but dared not make their hostility public. Therefore, they pretended to be Muslim when in reality they were full of hatred for Islam. They were also keen for ill fortune to befall the Prophet and his Companions. Their chief was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl.

A Jewish community also lived in Madīnah. The Jews had a military and economic presence as well as organizational strength at the time the Prophet settled in Madīnah. They also hated the Prophet, his faith and his followers. The presence of such Jews offered encouragement to the hypocrites: essentially, the two groups were united in their hatred of Islam and the Muslims. As a result, they conspired and exploited every opportunity to undermine the Muslim community. When the Muslim community experienced difficult circumstances, their opponents made their hostility all the more apparent; and when the Muslims enjoyed good times, they resorted to covert action and wicked conspiracy. Up to the middle of the Prophet's stay in Madīnah, these two groups represented a real danger to Islam and the Muslim community.

Repeated mention of the hypocrites and their schemes occur in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, and in which they come in for clear denunciation. Their contacts with the Jews and cooperation with them

is also referred to in such revelations. In the present passage, we have such references to both the hypocrites and the Jews.

How Divine Guidance Works

> *Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.* (Verse 16)

The phrase, '*some of them*', may refer to the unbelievers who were the subject of discussion in the first passage of the *sūrah*. In this case, the hypocrites are considered as a group of unbelievers, although they conceal their reality. In this sense, the *sūrah* is referring to their true status. On the other hand, the phrase may refer to the Muslims, considering that the hypocrites were integrated with them, pretending to belong to their community. They were indeed treated as Muslims, as Islam requires us to deal with people on the basis of what they profess to be. In either case, however, they are hypocrites as their description in the *sūrah* and their deeds indicate.

The hypocrites' question, after they had listened to the Prophet, shows how they only pretended to pay attention to what he was saying when their minds were inattentive, preoccupied with other things, or rather were sealed altogether. It also suggests an implicit ridicule. Since they address their question to people endowed with knowledge asking about the meaning of what they heard, they imply that what Muḥammad said was incomprehensible. Despite having paid attention to it, they still could not understand its meaning. It further implies ridicule of those knowledgeable people who attended carefully to everything the Prophet said, making an effort to understand it fully and memorize it, as the Prophet's Companions used to do. In this way, using blatant or subtle mockery, these hypocrites asked them to repeat the Prophet's words. In all these possibilities we see wickedness, deep resentment and hatred: "*Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16)

Such is the condition of the hypocrites. Those who follow Divine guidance, however, are totally different:

> *As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.* (Verse 17)

The order of reporting events in this verse calls for reflection. The believers start by accepting guidance, and God rewards them by increasing this guidance so that they do not err. He further gives them an even more profound reward, as He "*causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.*" This quality makes a person's heart always apprehensive, feeling that God is watching him, fearing that he might incur God's displeasure whilst hoping to earn His pleasure, and ashamed that God may see him in a situation of which He disapproves. Such a keen sensitivity is the essence of being God-fearing. It is a great prize which God grants to whomever He chooses of His servants when they accept His guidance and strive to earn His pleasure. Guidance, sensitivity and being God-fearing describe a condition that is the opposite of the hypocrisy described in the previous verse.

The *sūrah* picks up its description of the hypocrites who leave the Prophet's presence having understood nothing of his teachings, which aim to enhance people's fear of God, and remind them of what is certain to come of reckoning and requital:

> *Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?* (Verse 18)

What do these people who sit with the Prophet and later leave, having understood or learnt nothing, wait for? Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them all of a sudden while they are preoccupied with worldly matters? Well, the portents of the Last Hour have already come, as have its signs. The revelation of the last Divine message is the clearest of all these portents. It announces that it is the last warning before the appointed time for the Last Hour. The Prophet

is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message, nothing separates me from the Last Hour more than what separates my two fingers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] If time appears to have extended long since the Prophet's time, we should remember that God's days are different from our days. According to God's reckoning, its first signs have already come. No reasonable person should allow it to come upon him all of a sudden, when he can no longer attend to a duty: "*Once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" This serves as a strong reminder to those who are oblivious.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet and the well-guided people who follow him telling them to follow a different course based on true knowledge, remembrance of God and seeking His forgiveness and feeling that He watches over them and knows everything about them. They will then be on their guard as they await the Last Hour:

> *Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.* (Verse 19)

This directive points first of all to the need to always remember the first truth which the Prophet and those who follow him uphold: "*Know, then, that there is no deity other than God.*" Once this truth is firmly established in man's conscience, other directives are given: "*And pray to Him to forgive you your sins.*" This is said to the Prophet whom God has already forgiven his past and future sins, because it is the duty of every believer who is aware that his efforts fall short of fulfilling his duty, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, every believer feels that his prayer for forgiveness serves as an aspect of glorifying God and thanking Him for His forgiveness. Moreover, it is a lesson to the Prophet's Companions and followers who know his high position with his Lord, yet see that he is instructed to remember God and to pray to Him for forgiveness for himself and all believers, men and women. They know that God always answers the Prophet's prayers. They then feel that God has bestowed on them a great blessing by sending them this noble Prophet and instructing

him to pray to Him to forgive them. Thus, they are sure that He will forgive them their sins.

The final point in this directive is that "*God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.*" (Verse 19) Thus a believer feels both reassurance and fear at the same time. He is reassured that he is under God's care wherever he is, and he is in fear because God knows every feeling and thought he may have, and is aware of his every secret. This is all part of education that keeps a believer always on the look out, keen to remain always on the right track.

The Hypocrites and *Jihād*

The *sūrah* describes the attitude of the hypocrites to fighting for God's cause and their utter cowardice when it is made obligatory upon Muslims. It exposes their true feelings about the whole idea of fighting, and explains what awaits them if they persist with hypocrisy. It warns them that they have to purge their hearts of hypocrisy, be true in their response to God and join the Muslim ranks with sincerity of purpose:

> *The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?* (Verses 20–24)

The believers express their wishes for a new *sūrah* to be revealed because they love the Qur'ān and find in every part of it something that appeals to them and warms their hearts. Alternatively, this expression may be indicative of their desire to have certain aspects of *jihād* and fighting outlined to them. Therefore they say: "*Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.*" (Verse 20)

We are then told that a *sūrah* with clear import that admits no divergence of opinion has been bestowed from on high. "*Fighting is mentioned in it*," which means that this *sūrah* gives an order to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, or outlines a ruling concerning those who disobey such an order. This is seen as a calamity by the hypocrites: they lose control of their feelings and their pretence is exposed. They appear weak, cowardly and spineless. Their pathetic condition is described in full colours: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) This is a unique way of describing extreme fear, one that shows them shaking with fear, too weak to stand up. This inimitable image applies to everyone deprived of faith, true courage and a sense of shame when they face the possibility of death in war. This is the true nature of the hypocrites who are sick at heart.

When all false appearances are shed and the reality of cowardice is exposed, the hand of faith is stretched out to offer them what strengthens their resolve and gives them power if they would only take it with sincerity: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God.*" (Verses 20–21) Undoubtedly, this is better for them than a scandal that exposes them as trembling, spineless cowards. It is better for them to be obedient to God's order, reassured that it is for their benefit and the benefit of their community, and to say a good, appropriate word expressing sincerity and purity of heart. When matters are resolved and fighting is decided upon, it is even better for them to be true to what they claim of commitment to His cause, manifesting this commitment with unwavering resolve and determined action. He will then give them added power and clear support that removes hardship, lightens the danger and ensures that they enjoy one of two noble prospects: either victory and safety on the one hand or martyrdom and admittance to heaven on the other. Such is the gift of faith that replaces fear with reassurance and weakness with courage and resolve.

The *sūrah* then addresses them directly, threatening them with dire consequences should their cowardice persist to the point where they abandon Islam altogether and revert to outright unbelief: "*If you turn*

away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship?" (Verse 22) The interrogative form, '*is it to be expected of you*', suggests that this is likely and gives a warning that this will lead them back into the ignorance that prevailed in their community before it was reformed by Islam. This is a state that makes people spread corruption and sever their ties of kinship.

Having made this direct address, the *sūrah* then speaks about them, rather than to them, showing what happens should matters reach the point they have been warned against: "*It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verses 23–24) '*It is such as these*' who persist with hypocrisy until they finally discard all pretence of belief in Islam who are the ones whom God rejects. He leaves them deprived of guidance, '*deaf and blind.*' They have not lost their hearing or their eyesight, but they have put these faculties to no use. Alternatively, they have deliberately stopped themselves from understanding what they hear and see. Thus, their faculties no longer function.

A rhetorical question is then asked: "*Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān?*" (Verse 24) When people try to understand the Qur'ān, they see things in full clarity. They see the light. Their hearts and feelings enjoy new vigour and their souls are full of life. "*Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verse 24) When hearts are thus locked they are deprived of the light the Qur'ān spreads; they are in complete darkness.

Evil Conspiracy

The *sūrah* then shows the reason that made the hypocrites turn away from faith after having come close to it. We learn that this was because they conspired with the Jews of Madīnah and promised them help and support:

> *Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because*

they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (Verses 25–26)

The first of these two verses gives a physical image ofthe hypocrites abandoning Divine guidance after they came to know it. It is an image which shows them turning their backs and going away. It tells of what lies behind all this: it is Satan whispering to them and delivering all manner of temptations. Thus we see their movement for what it is in reality and appearance. The *sūrah* then tells us why Satan has such power over them, making them turn their backs on the truth after they knew it: "*That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters'.*" (Verse 26)

The Jews of Madīnah were the first to hate what God revealed. They expected that God's final message would be given to them, with the last messenger chosen from among their own kind. They used to tell the pagan Arabs about this expected message and that its time was close to hand, saying that the new prophet would lead them and ensure that they would have power and that they would regain their kingdom. God, however, chose His last messenger from a different branch of Abraham's seed. This made them hate his message all the more. When the Prophet migrated to Madīnah, they hated his arrival there because they felt it threatened their own position. Therefore, they were hostile towards him from his very first day in Madīnah. When they realized that they were no match for the Muslims in open warfare, they resorted to wicked scheming and conspiracies. They were joined in this by all those bearing a grudge against Islam and every hypocrite. This war between them and the Prophet continued, going to and fro, until the Prophet removed them from Madīnah and then ensured that the Arabian Peninsula would remain totally for Islam.

Those hypocrites who turned their backs on Divine guidance said to the Jews: "*We will obey you in some matters.*" Most probably this refers to their wicked schemes and conspiracies against Islam and the Prophet. "*But God knows all their secret schemes.*" (Verse 26) This is a comment that implies a stern warning. What harm can their schemes produce when they are all known to God and exposed to His might?

This is followed by an open threat, one that puts them in the hands of God's own troops as they approach the ends of their lives: "*How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs?*" (Verse 27) Here, we have another image of the utter humiliation suffered by the hypocrites. They are at the point when they depart from this life. Weak and powerless, they are about to start their second life, but this commences with their faces and backs being smitten. This happens to them at the point of death, when they are in utter distress. They are indeed completely forsaken: "*That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They brought themselves to this end. It is they who have been hypocrites, disobeying God and conspiring with His enemies and the enemies of His messenger. It is they who hated what pleases God and adopted what incurs His displeasure. "*Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They used to admire their own deeds, thinking themselves clever as they schemed against the believers. Now they see how these deeds swell and grow only to be lost and to come to nothing.

The Threat of Exposure

At the end of this passage, they are warned that God may decide to expose them to the Prophet and the Muslims. They will then be known to all for what they really are: hypocrites living among Muslims, pretending to belong to them but conspiring against them:

> *Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.* (Verses 29–31)

The hypocrites thought that they were adept in hiding their reality, making the Muslims think they were like them, true believers. The

sūrah shows how naïve their thinking is and threatens them with an exposure that makes all their grudges known to the Muslims. God says to His messenger: "*Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks.*" (Verse 30) This means that if God so wishes, He could point them out to the Prophet by name and position so he can recognize them from their features. This verse was revealed before God actually made some of them known to him by name. Nevertheless, the way they speak and their twisting of words and meanings, and the manner in which they address you tells you of their hypocrisy: "*but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech.*" (Verse 30) A comment is then added emphasizing God's knowledge of every deed and its motives: "*God knows all that you people do.*" (Verse 30) Nothing escapes His perfect knowledge.

Then follows God's promise to test the Muslim community as a whole so as to distinguish those who strive for His cause and remain steadfast through all difficulties. These people will then be known to all, with everything about them made clear. No confusion will persist, and the whole issue of hypocrisy and the hypocrites will be sorted out: "*Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.*" (Verse 31)

God is fully aware of everyone's true nature, as well as of their thoughts and inner feelings. He knows all this just as He knows what happens and what will happen. What need is there, then, for such a test? Who needs to know what the test will prove?

In His infinite wisdom, God deals with human beings on the basis of their nature, ability and potential. They do not know what He knows of inner facts. These must come into the open before they can know and understand them, and then make use of them. Testing people with what is good or bad, affluence and poverty, comfort and hardship certainly proves everyone's metal. Through such tests people may even come to know certain things about themselves of which they were otherwise unaware. As for God's knowledge of what the test reveals of people's nature, this refers only to His knowledge of their reality as it is exposed to people and they too are able to see it. It is when people

see this in a form they can comprehend that they are influenced by it. It shapes their feelings and charts the direction in which their lives move according to the means available to them. In this way God's purpose of testing people produces its results.

Nevertheless, believers always hope that they will not be put to God's tests and also hope that they will be spared such difficulties. Yet, should they be tested with hardship, they remain patient in adversity, aware that there is a good purpose behind this test. They submit to God's will, assured of His wisdom, and looking forward to His grace that follows the test. One devoted person, named al-Fuḍayl, was said to be in tears whenever he read this verse. He would appeal to God, saying: "My Lord, do not test us, because if You do, the truth about us will be known and the curtains we put up will be drawn apart. We will then be in trouble."

3

An Invitation to Sacrifice

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ وَشَآقُّوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔا
وَسَيُحْبِطُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (32)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟
ٱلرَّسُولَ وَلَا تُبْطِلُوٓا۟ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. (33)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ مَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ
لَهُمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God. (34)

فَلَا تَهِنُوا۟ وَتَدْعُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّلْمِ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْأَعْلَوْنَ
وَٱللَّهُ مَعَكُمْ وَلَن يَتِرَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٥﴾

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (35)

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (36)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ ۚ وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمْ أُجُورَكُمْ وَلَا يَسْـَٔلْكُمْ أَمْوَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٦﴾

If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (37)

إِن يَسْـَٔلْكُمُوهَا فَيُحْفِكُمْ تَبْخَلُوا۟ وَيُخْرِجْ أَضْغَٰنَكُمْ ﴿٣٧﴾

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (38)

هَٰٓأَنتُمْ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ تُدْعَوْنَ لِتُنفِقُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَمِنكُم مَّن يَبْخَلُ ۖ وَمَن يَبْخَلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَبْخَلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ٱلْغَنِىُّ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْفُقَرَآءُ ۚ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوٓا۟ أَمْثَٰلَكُم ﴿٣٨﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* speaks first about the unbelievers who debar others from God's way and are hostile to the Prophet despite being aware of the truth of his message. Most probably this refers to the idolaters the *sūrah* spoke about earlier. They are the ones who fit the description of bearing arrogant hostility towards the Islamic message. However, this new discourse may refer to all those who adopt such a hostile attitude including the Jews and the hypocrites in Madīnah. In this light, the present verses may be seen as a warning to them, should they adopt such an attitude, in public or private. The first possibility is perhaps more likely.

This part then devotes its final verses to an address to the believers, inviting them to carry on with their *jihād*, being ready to sacrifice their lives and their property, never slackening or giving in to calls for a truce in the fight against unbelieving aggressors. They must not be influenced by any consideration of their apparent weakness, or immediate interest. Nor can they be niggardly when they are asked for financial sacrifice. After all, God who knows man's natural instinct to hold tight to what he owns wants them to contribute only what they can easily afford. Should they fail to prove themselves worthy of advocating His message, God will deprive them of this honour and put in their place some other people who will shoulder the responsibility and fulfil the task. This is a strong warning that fits the general ambience of the *sūrah*. It also suggests that it was needed to deal with certain cases within the Muslim community, among true Muslims, not hypocrites. There could have been those who found it hard to make financial contributions side by side with those who gave great examples of courage, dedication and preparedness to sacrifice their all for the cause of Islam. Both types existed, and the Qur'ān aimed to motivate the lower group to rise and try to join the other in its sublime standards.

They Cannot Harm God

> *Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.* (Verse 32)

This verse states a true promise by God in relation to those who disbelieve and oppose the truth, trying to prevent it from being delivered to people, using their power, money and other means for the purpose. Such people are hostile to the Prophet, waging war against him and physically opposing him during his lifetime or suppressing his faith and code of life and persecuting the advocates of his message after his death. Yet such people have seen the light of guidance and recognized the truth embodied in the Islamic message, but they

stubbornly choose to remain blind to it and feel that their immediate interests are served by such an attitude.

God's true promise is that such people "*can in no way harm God.*" They are far too small and weak to be mentioned in the context of adversely affecting God. This is certainly not what is intended here. What the verse means is that they cannot harm God's faith, the code He laid down for human life, or those who advocate His message. Powerful as such people may become, they cannot affect or disturb the laws of nature He has set in operation. They may be able to harm some of the Muslims for a period of time, but this is merely a test that takes place for a purpose God wants to be fulfilled. It constitutes no real harm to God's laws or to His servants who advocate His faith and system. Moreover, the ultimate result of all the efforts of such hostile unbelievers is clearly set in advance: "*He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32)

At the same time, the believers are warned against doing anything that could lead them to a similar fate. They are urged to remain obedient to God and His messenger: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 33) This directive suggests that within the Muslim community there were some who might not have been fully obedient, or who might have found it hard to fulfil some of the duties and sacrifices that combating the different powerful groups opposing Islam required. Some might have been tied by bonds of kinship or common interests with others on the opposing side and found it hard to sever such ties.

This directive had a profound effect on true believers. They were shaken by the implied threat that they might do something that would do away with their good deeds and bring them to nothing. Several reports speak of the way this verse was received. One of them mentions that "the Prophet's Companions used to think that when a person truly believed in God's oneness, then no sin he committed would harm him, in the same way as no good deed is of any use when done by a person who associates partners with God. However, when this verse was revealed, they feared that sins might ruin their good deeds: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*"

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar is quoted as saying: "We, the Prophet's Companions, used to think that every good deed would inevitably be accepted by God until this verse was revealed. We wondered what thing could render our deeds worthless. We thought that it must be cardinal and grave sins. However, God revealed this verse: "*For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.*" (4: 116) We stopped speaking about this issue. We only feared for those who committed cardinal sins and hoped for good reward for those who avoided them."

Such reports clearly show how true Muslims used to receive Qur'ānic verses. They were profoundly affected by them, fearing every warning, careful lest it applied to them and keen to do what the Qur'ān required of them. With such sensitivity, they achieved superb standards.

The next verse explains what fate awaits those who are hostile to the Prophet. These are they who are determined not to obey him and who continue in their rejection of the truth until death overtakes them: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verse 34) The chance to ensure forgiveness of sins is available only in this present life. The gates of repentance, which ensure forgiveness, are open for both unbelievers and sinners up to the moment of death. When the spirit is at the point of departing the body, then the chance to repent and earn forgiveness is lost and can never be regained.

Verses like this one address both believers and unbelievers. It warns the latter to take the right action before it is too late, to repent and turn back to God before the chance is lost and doors are closed. It tells the former to take care so as to avoid all causes that bring them nearer to such ill-fated ways. This is clearly understood from the fact that what the believers are cautioned against in the next verse are seen as reasons leading to the same fate of the unbelievers mentioned in the preceding verse:

> *Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.* (Verse 35)

Such are the things believers are cautioned against. They are presented with the fate of the unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, so that they take care not to do anything that brings them nearer to such an outcome. This warning suggests that there might have been some individuals among the Muslims who felt the burden and strain of *jihād* to be too heavy. They might have weakened and advocated making some sort of a peace deal in order to avoid fighting. Some of them might have looked to their relatives in the ranks of the unbelievers, or had some financial interests with them. All such reasons may make a person prefer peaceful arrangements. Human beings are always the same and Islam deals with such weaknesses and natural tendencies in its own way, which has proven to be remarkably successful. This, however, does not preclude that there remained, particularly in that early period in Madīnah, some traces of such tendencies and weaknesses.

The present verse aims to deal with such elements. Let us look carefully at how the Qur'ān progresses with its method of educating people and raising them to its standards: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35) You are the ones who are superior in faith and concept of life, because of your close link with the One who is the Most High. You have higher standards in your way of life, goals, objectives, feelings, morality, manners and behaviour. Therefore, you must not lose heart or sue for peace because you have the upper hand in strength, position and support. The Supreme Power grants you support: "*God is with you.*" You are not alone. God Almighty, with all His power, defends you and gives you help. How insignificant do your enemies appear when God is the One who helps you? Moreover, every effort you exert, everything you spend and every sacrifice you make is credited to you. Nothing is lost: "*He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" The reward for every iota of good work you do will certainly be yours. Why would anyone assured by God to have the upper hand, to be supported by Him and to have every effort rewarded lose heart? Why would he weaken when God tells him that he is honoured, victorious and rewarded?

The life of this world is of little importance. Believers may have to make some sacrifices during their lives on earth, but they will have

their reward in full in the life to come. Moreover, they are not asked to pay heavily in order to ensure such rewards:

> *The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions.* (Verse 36)

When life has no noble goal to achieve, and when people go through it heedless of the Divine code, it is no more than play and amusement. It is the code laid down by God that makes this life a prelude to a better and longer lasting life, makes of this life a period of action that yields its results in the life to come. Success in the life to come is, therefore, conditional upon good works in this present life. This is the message emphasized in the second sentence in the verse: "*If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward.*" (Verse 36) Belief in God during this life and action based on fearing Him are the qualities that gives this present life an air of seriousness elevating it from being a time of play, amusement and material enjoyment to a standard fulfilling the assignment God has given man and for which He has provided proper and complete guidance. When man attends to his assignment in this way, he is a God-fearing believer. What he spends of worldly possessions to serve this cause will not be lost to him. In fact, it produces a far greater reward in the everlasting second life.

Even then, God does not require people to sacrifice all their property. He knows that by nature, man is tight-fisted with what he owns. He does not require him to do what is too hard for him. In fact, He does not charge anyone with more than what that person can reasonably attend to. He is too kind to ask people to sacrifice all they possess. If He were to ask them this, they would be troubled and their ill feelings would become apparent.

> *He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.* (Verses 36–37)

We see here how kind God is to man and how, in His infinite wisdom, He only requires people to do what they can, taking human

nature, with all its facets, into consideration. Islam is a Divine faith which aims to establish a human system on a Divine basis. It is God who lays down its foundation and fundamental principles, but it is human abilities and needs that should be considered in determining its responsibilities. It is God who created man and He knows best what He has created. He is the One who knows all.

Niggardly Man

The final step in this approach deals with the believers' prevailing conditions when they are called upon to make financial sacrifices for God's cause. Their niggardly attitude is dealt with in the same way that the Qur'ān dealt with the reluctance to make personal sacrifices when people are called upon to fight for His cause:

> *You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.* (Verse 38)

This verse provides an accurate description of the Muslim community at the time and how people in all communities react when they are called upon to make sacrifices. It says that some people will be niggardly. This means that others are not niggardly at all; they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have. This was certainly true as is authentically reported by several of the Prophet's Companions. In fact, the Qur'ān describes several such instances in different *sūrahs*. In this respect, Islam produced miraculous examples of people coming forward, with apparent joy, and making really exemplary sacrifices. However, this does not mean that there were not individuals who found it hard to make sacrifices. Indeed, some people may find it easier to put their lives at risk than to make financial sacrifices.

The present verse deals with this natural tendency: "*Whoever is niggardly is niggardly towards himself.*" Whatever contribution people

make is credited to them, and they need it on the Day when they are resurrected. Then, they will have nothing of whatever they owned in this life. All that is left for them is what is credited to their account. Therefore, when they are niggardly, they keep their balance low, depriving themselves of the great reward that financial sacrifice for God's cause surely earns. Thus, they are niggardly towards themselves.

This is absolutely true. God does not require them to make financial contributions for any reason other than the fact that He wants what is best for them. He benefits nothing by anything they spend on His cause. He is not in need of anything: "*God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need.*" (Verse 38) It is He who gave you your money and possessions. He is also the One who saves for you whatever contributions you make. He does not need what He has given you in this life or the reward credited to you in the life to come. You are the ones who are in need of Him in both situations. You have nothing unless He grants it to you. Indeed, you will need all the reward He grants you in the hereafter. You cannot pay back to Him anything of what He has bestowed on you in this life, let alone have anything left in the hereafter. It is all given to you out of His grace. How can you be so niggardly?

The last word is decisive. That God has chosen you to be the advocates of His message is an honour and a great favour He bestows on you. You have to prove yourselves worthy of this honour. Unless you so prove yourselves by fulfilling the trust assigned to you, appreciating its value by discarding anything that is contrary to it, God will take back what He has favoured you with, granting this honour to some other people: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Anyone who has experienced the great favour of faith, feeling the honour it represents and appreciating the great position he has in the universe as a result of being entrusted with this Divine mission recognizes this last statement in the *sūrah* as a very serious warning. As he walks on earth, such a person feels God's power and experiences His light filling his soul. He bears the emblem of faith. Should such a believer be deprived of true faith, be expelled from Divine care, and find God's door slammed in his face, he will not bear to live. Indeed, life would

become like hell for anyone who has experienced contact with his Lord and then been cut off.

Faith is a great favour and honour, unequalled by anything in the universe. Life becomes so cheap and money so trivial when faith is put on the scales against anything else. Therefore, the warning this last statement in the *sūrah* embodies is the most serious one a believer can receive from God Almighty.

SŪRAH 48

Al-Fatḥ

(Victory)

Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the Madīnan period, revealed as it was shortly after the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah in year 6 of the Islamic calendar. It comments on the events leading to the momentous signing of this treaty as also describes the situation in which the Muslim community found itself at that time. Between the revelation of this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which precedes it in the Qur'ānic order, there was a lapse of three years which witnessed developments that had far-reaching effects on the life of the Muslim community in Madīnah. These involved changes in the attitudes of both the Muslim community and its opponents, and even greater changes in the Muslim community's psychological and mental framework. In this respect, it became far more mature in its understanding and implementing of faith.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* and its message, however, we need to review the major event that was the signing of the peace treaty so as to understand the circumstances then prevailing as the Muslim community received this new revelation.

The Prophet saw himself in a dream entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah together with his Companions, some of them having shaven their heads and some with their hair cut short. The unbelievers in Makkah had prevented them entry into Makkah since their migration

to Madīnah. They did not even allow them entry during the four sacred months that all Arabs honoured in the pre-Islamic period, laying down their arms and regarding fighting during these times as a great enormity. Entry into Makkah during these four months was free for all, in perfect safety. Even people involved in vengeance killings would meet in peace at this time. A man would come across the killer of his father or brother without raising a finger against him, or trying to prevent his entry into the Sacred Mosque. Nevertheless, the idolaters in Makkah violated their well-established traditions, preventing the Prophet and the Muslims from entering Makkah throughout the six years that followed their migration to Madīnah. In year 6, the Prophet had this dream and reported it to his Companions who were delighted with it, realizing that a dream by a prophet would certainly come true.

For further information about these events we will mainly rely on the report given by Ibn Hishām as this is more detailed than most and also provides a fuller picture. It is also generally in agreement with reports in the two *Ḥadīth* anthologies of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Aḥmad, as well as the summary given by Ibn Ḥazm in his book *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah*, and with reports by other scholars.[1]

> The Prophet announced to his Companions and to the Arabian tribes around Madīnah that he intended to visit Makkah to honour the Ka'bah and to worship there. He invited them all to join him. Most of the Arabian tribes which had not yet accepted Islam were highly reluctant to join this peaceful expedition because they feared that the Quraysh were bound to resist the Muslims and prevent them from entering Makkah. If the Quraysh were determined to stop the Muslims, an armed conflict might erupt. Hence, those Arabian tribes wanted to stay out of it. The Muslims, however, were very glad to join the Prophet, who marched at the head of some 1,400 of his followers.[2]

1. I am quoting here my own version of the events. It is faithful to the report by Ibn Hishām, omitting only a few details that a reader who is unfamiliar with historical Arabic reports written more than 1,000 years ago would find difficult, and adding a few explanatory sentences. I do not, however, divert from the narrative as given by the author. – Editor's note.

2. Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, p. 497.

The Prophet, however, marched on until he arrived at a place called Ghadīr al-Ashṭāṭ where Bishr ibn Sufyān gave him his report that the Quraysh were mobilizing and seeking the help of others to fight him and prevent him from entering Makkah.[3]

The Prophet was distressed at this report. He said: "How ill-advised is the Quraysh! What would they lose if they were to leave me alone addressing my message to the rest of Arabia? If those Arabs were to kill me, the Quraysh would have what they wish. If I am to be the victorious, they must either accept Islam without having suffered any losses, or fight me with their forces intact. What do they think? By God, I will continue to strive for the message God has given me until it is triumphant or I die."

Reflecting on the new situation after he had learnt that the Quraysh were preparing for armed conflict, the Prophet decided to try to avoid such an eventuality. Hence, he asked whether anyone in his camp was able to lead them through a route which took them away from the Quraysh, so that they could avoid an armed conflict with their advance force. A man from the tribe of Aslam came forward and led them through a very rough route which was very hard for the Muslims. Eventually, they found themselves in an open area which was easy to cross. The Prophet commanded them to take the right-hand route until they finally arrived at the plain of al-Ḥudaybiyah, to the south of Makkah, which was only a day's walk from the Holy City.

A Declaration of Peace

Suddenly, the Prophet's she-camel sat down. People shouted at her to make her rise again, but she would not move. Some people suggested that she refused to go forward. The Prophet told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. He said: "She is held back for the same reason which held back the elephant." This was a reference to an incident which took place nearly 60 years earlier

3. Ibid., p. 499.

when Abrahah, the ruler of the Yemen, was riding an elephant at the head of a large force, whose aim was to destroy the Ka'bah. Shortly before arriving in Makkah, the elephant sat still and would not move forward; it was ready to go back. Shortly afterwards, Abrahah's army was attacked by birds which threw stones at the army and destroyed it. The story is mentioned in a short *sūrah* of the Qur'ān entitled, The Elephant, and which may be translated as follows: "*In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with people of the Elephant? Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, and send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves.*" (105: 1–5)

The Prophet then declared: "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today which helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." He then ordered his Companions to encamp.

The place was almost dry, with only one well with very little water. The Companions of the Prophet economized on water as much as they could, but the well soon dried up. When they were very thirsty, they complained to the Prophet. He came to the well, sat next to it and asked for a pail to be brought to him with whatever quantity of water they could find. He took some water in his hand, rinsed his mouth and prayed to God. He then asked his Companions to pour the water back into the well and told them to leave the well for a while. Some reports also suggest that the Prophet took an arrow from his bag and asked his Companions to throw it into the well. Soon the well was full of water and provided all the water the Muslims needed to drink, perform ablutions and give to their camels and other animals. They suffered no shortage of water until they departed.

Successive Emissaries

When the Quraysh realized that the Prophet had managed to evade their advance forces and that he was encamped at al-Ḥudaybiyah,

they decided to send a messenger to him. They were also aware that should they succeed in stopping Muḥammad from entering Makkah, when he had come with no purpose other than to visit the Sacred Mosque, their action would not go unquestioned by the other Arabs. Their prestige was derived from the fact that they were custodians of the Sacred House and that they prevented no one from worshipping there. The first emissary they sent was Budayl ibn Waraqā' of the tribe of Khuzā'ah, who went with a group of his fellow tribesmen. The tribe of Khuzā'ah was always sympathetic towards the Prophet. Some of its men had embraced Islam, but even those who had not were far from hostile to the message of Islam. Budayl spoke to the Prophet and told him that the Quraysh were determined to prevent him from entering Makkah. The Prophet assured him that he had no intention of fighting anyone. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah and to demonstrate the Muslims' recognition of its sanctity. The Prophet's comment on the Quraysh's attitude was given in these words: "The Quraysh are now in such a state that they can think only of war. I am prepared to agree a truce with them, if they so desire. I ask them only to leave me alone to speak to people. If I am successful and other people follow me, then the choice is theirs to do likewise. If they refuse, they will have preserved their strength. If they are determined to stop me, I swear by God that I will fight them over this cause of mine until I die, and even then they cannot prevent what God wills."

Budayl went back to the Quraysh and said to them: "We have come to you after seeing this man and hearing what he says. Would you like to hear what he told us?" Some of them shouted: "We do not wish to hear anything he says." Some wiser people requested him to report what he had heard. When he finished his report, he pleaded with them, saying that they were rash in their attitude because Muḥammad did not intend to fight them. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah.

The Quraysh leaders were not persuaded to moderate their attitude. They said: "Even if he does not want to fight, he will never be allowed to enter Makkah against our will. No one shall say that we allowed that to happen."

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafs to speak to the Prophet, and he came back with the same message as Budayl. The third envoy the Quraysh sent was al-Ḥulays ibn ʿAlqamah, the leader of the Ḥabshī tribe. When the Prophet saw him coming from a distance, he said to his Companions: "This is a man who belongs to a religious community. Drive the sacrificial animals towards him so that he may see them." When al-Ḥulays saw the sacrificial animals, he returned to the Quraysh without speaking to the Prophet, because he realized that there should have been no cause for contention. He advised the Quraysh to leave Muḥammad alone and allow him to worship at the Kaʿbah. They spoke harshly to him and told him to leave them alone. Al-Ḥulays was angered by the Quraysh's attitude, but they were not to be persuaded by any argument.

The Fourth Envoy

Having rejected the advice of all three envoys to allow Muḥammad to enter Makkah and worship at the Kaʿbah, the Quraysh decided to send a fourth emissary. None of the existing reports throws any light on the reasons which made the Quraysh feel that sending another envoy to speak to the Prophet would bring about any change in the situation. It is not known what the Quraysh hoped to achieve by sending these envoys when it was not prepared to listen to their advice. Perhaps it was all a mark of the Quraysh's confusion. On the other hand, it may have been an exercise in self-justification. The Quraysh might have wanted to be able to say that they tried all they could to reach accommodation with Muḥammad. Be that as it may, the man the Quraysh chose this time was ʿUrwah ibn Masʿūd, a leader of the tribe of Thaqīf, which lived in the town of Ṭāʾif. ʿUrwah, however, wanted first to make sure that on his return he would not receive the same harsh treatment as the other envoys the Quraysh sent, should he come back with advice the Quraysh might not like. He, therefore, addressed the people of the Quraysh: "I have noted what sort of abuse you have poured on the heads of those you have sent to Muḥammad. You know that to me you are

parents and that I am your son. When I heard of your trouble, I gathered those of my people who obeyed my orders and have come to give you support." The Quraysh answered: "This is certainly true, and we have no doubts about you." When he sat down to speak to the Prophet, he said:

> Muḥammad, I have left your people mobilizing their forces. They are swearing that they will never let you reach the Sacred House until you have overwhelmed them. Should there be a fight between you and them, you are faced with one of two eventualities: either you conquer your own people – and we have never heard of any man who has conquered his own people or your soldiers will let you down. Have you gathered this mob to smash your own people? It is the Quraysh you are fighting, and the Quraysh have mobilized even their women and children, and are now in a very determined mood, pledging to God that you will never enter their city. My feeling is that you will be in a very difficult situation tomorrow, when this mob let you down. I certainly recognize no one among them and cannot see that any one of them comes from a respectable background.

At this moment Abū Bakr interrupted him and told him to be more respectful.

As he talked to the Prophet, 'Urwah kept trying to hold the Prophet's beard, following the Arabian habit which indicated a sincere desire to maintain good relations. Al-Mughīrah ibn Shu'bah, a Muslim nephew of 'Urwah, was standing behind the Prophet, holding his sword in his hand and wearing his shield. Every time 'Urwah raised his hand to touch the Prophet's beard, al-Mughīrah hit him with the bottom of his sword on his hand and said: "Keep your hand off the Prophet's face before it is chopped off." 'Urwah did not recognize him, but when he persisted, 'Urwah said: "Confound you – how ill-mannered you are." The Prophet smiled at this demonstration of his Companion's love and respect for him.

'Urwah tried his best to weaken the Prophet's determination to enter Makkah, raising before him the prospect of defeat and counselling him against causing a military conflict. The Prophet assured him that he wanted nothing more than to pay a visit to the Ka'bah in the same way as anyone else could visit it to worship, and was not prevented from so doing. After all, the Ka'bah did not belong to the Quraysh; they were only its custodians and as such they had no right to prevent anyone from worshipping there.

'Urwah did not fail to notice the Muslims' respect for the Prophet. When he went back to the Quraysh he advised them:

> People of the Quraysh, I have seen the Khosroe, the Persian Emperor, and the Caesar of the Byzantine Empire and Negus of Abyssinia, in their respective kingdoms. I swear that I have never seen a king enjoying among his people a similar position to that of Muḥammad among his Companions. They do not fix their eyes when they look at him; they do not raise their voices when they speak to him. He does not need to give more than a signal to any one of them for that man to do what he is bid. I have looked at those people and I have seen that they do not care what may happen to them if they are able to protect their master. Make up your minds. He has made a proposal to you and I counsel you to conclude a peace agreement with him, and to accept his offer. I am giving you my sincere advice and I certainly fear that you will not be able to overcome him.

The Quraysh, however did not like 'Urwah's opinion and were not willing to consider the idea of peace. 'Urwah, therefore, left them with his people and returned to Ṭā'if.

Thus, every envoy the Quraysh sent returned and counselled them to moderate their attitude and allow the Muslims to offer their worship at the Ka'bah. None, however, was able to persuade the Quraysh that its hard-line did not serve its own interest. Motivated by pride and anger, the Quraysh was determined not to give in, whatever the cost.

The Muslims, on the other hand, did not wish to overrun Makkah. That course would result in more bloodshed and a fight against their own people. They stayed calm, hoping that some solution to the problem could still be found.

One report suggests that the Quraysh sent a small force of 40 or 50 men, giving them orders to go around the Muslims' camp and try to take one of the Prophet's Companions prisoner. As it turned out, they were taken prisoner themselves and were brought before the Prophet. He, however, pardoned them and set them free. God mentions in the Qur'ān that He has bestowed calmness on His Messenger and the believers and caused them to abide by the rules of faith and piety. That is the attitude which best becomes them.

The Prophet's Envoy

Considering the situation and the fact that he had received four emissaries from the Quraysh without any sign that the Quraysh were mellowing their opposition to the Muslims' entry to Makkah, the Prophet thought it might be useful to bring some pressure to bear on the Quraysh. He therefore decided to send them an envoy to assure them that his objective was only to worship at the Ka'bah, not to pick a fight with anyone. The envoy was Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah of the tribe of Khuza'ah. As soon as Kharrāsh arrived in Makkah, however, his camel was wounded by the Quraysh people, who also wanted to kill him. He was saved by the Ḥabshī tribe, whose chief al-Ḥulays was one of the Quraysh's envoys to the Prophet. The treatment Kharrāsh received was against the age-honoured traditions of diplomacy, which gave immunity to messengers and envoys. The Prophet, however, did not wish to allow this incident to be an obstacle in his attempt to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. He therefore overlooked the matter and concentrated on maintaining contact with the Quraysh. He thought that sending a more prominent figure from among his Companions might be more useful.

The Prophet first thought of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as a suitable messenger. 'Umar, however, pointed out that his own clan, Banī

'Adīy, no longer had any influence in Makkah. No one would protect him should he come to any harm. He suggested that 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh was better placed to act as the Prophet's ambassador.

Despite the fact that 'Uthmān's clan was very influential in Makkah, he had to go under the protection of his own cousin, Abān ibn Sa'īd ibn al-'Āṣ. Enjoying that protection, he was able to deliver his message, speak to the Quraysh elders and explain to them that the Muslims had come for the purpose of worship only and had no other intention. It was better for the Quraysh, 'Uthmān argued, that they should be seen by the Arabs as faithful to their charge as custodians of the Sacred House. The Quraysh, however, were adamant in their hard-line attitude. The only concession 'Uthmān could get from the Quraysh was that they allowed him to do the *ṭawāf* should he so desire. He made it clear to them that under the circumstances, he would not do so until the Prophet had done his own *ṭawāf*.

'Uthmān's discussions with the Quraysh leaders were prolonged and he was in Makkah for three days. Moreover, he was apparently able to contact some people from among the Quraysh who had adopted Islam and remained in Makkah, keeping the fact of their conversion to Islam a secret. Apparently there were quite a few of these people, who yearned for the day when they would be able to declare their stand and enjoy freedom of faith. 'Uthmān carried a message from the Prophet to them telling them that victory would be coming soon. They were greatly encouraged by that message and requested 'Uthmān to give the Prophet their respects and to tell him, on their behalf, that they believed that God, Who had enabled him to encamp at al-Ḥudaybiyah, was able to open the gates of Makkah for him.

Some reports suggest that 'Uthmān was arrested by the Quraysh when it discovered that he had made these contacts with the Qurayshi Muslims. Indeed, a rumour began to spread that 'Uthmān was killed. It did not take long before this rumour was heard in the Muslim camp. 'Uthmān's prolonged absence could only lend credence to that rumour. Receiving no indication to the contrary,

the Prophet concluded that the report of 'Uthmān's death was correct. The treatment which was meted out to his first envoy, Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah, served as supporting evidence. He felt that the situation had reached a stage where tolerance could only be counter-productive.

A Pledge to Fight and Die

Deeply hurt and very sad, the Prophet felt that by killing 'Uthmān, his Companion and envoy, the Quraysh had closed the door on all efforts which aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement. The other alternative was the one which he had tried hard to avoid: namely, war. He called on his Companions to give him a pledge to fight the Quraysh to the bitter end. He was standing underneath a tree when he requested that pledge, and his Companions rushed to give him what he asked of them. Every one of them pledged that he would fight and never flee from battle even if that meant his own death. The Prophet was pleased with his Companions' responses. He also made a pledge on behalf of 'Uthmān: "'Uthmān is on a mission given him by God and His Messenger. I, therefore, make a pledge on his behalf." He clasped his hands together and said: "This is for 'Uthmān." In comment on this pledge, the Qur'ān says: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.*" (48: 18–19)

That pledge is known in Islamic history books as Bay'at al-Riḍwān, or 'the pledge earning God's pleasure', in view of the clear statement that God was pleased with those who took part in it. Indeed, the pledge warmed the Prophet's heart, since it was yet another demonstration that his Companions were always prepared to render whatever sacrifice they were called upon to make in defence of the cause of Islam. Those Companions of the Prophet realized that numerically the Quraysh were far superior to them. Besides, when they started their journey, they did not bring their

war equipment with them. War was completely absent from their minds. None of them wore body armour or carried it with him. They carried only the minimum armament which was absolutely necessary for travelling in the desert of Arabia: their swords in their sheaths. Their pledge meant, in effect, that they were determined to face the far superior strength of the Quraysh, on the Quraysh's own ground with swords only, leaving no room for withdrawal or escape. They were fully aware of what they had pledged to do. When they were subsequently asked about the terms of their pledge and what it entailed, their answer was: 'Death'. Such a pledge, readily given and sincerely meant, would definitely earn God's pleasure, as those people had definitely earned it. Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet who took part in that pledge, said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) told us on the day of al-Ḥudaybiyah: You are the best people on earth."

We should stress here a small but significant point about that tree beneath which the pledge was given. The tree was subsequently cut down and the place where it used to stand was forgotten. This is certainly good for Islam. Had it survived, people who are quick to give exaggerated significance to places and to things associated with historical events might have raised a monument in its place or built a mosque or some other building on that site and made it a shrine to visit. Islam does not recognize the sanctity of any such place or object. Had it been allowed to survive, the tree might have acquired, with the passage of time, more significance than the event which took place beneath it. The tree, however, is immaterial, while the pledge itself remains a lesson for every Muslim.

Shortly after the pledge was made, 'Uthmān arrived to give the Prophet an account of his mission. His arrival took the heat off the situation. The Prophet was very pleased to see him alive but was not happy to learn of the Quraysh's adamant attitude. He reflected on the situation, trying to assess the choices open to him.

The Quraysh, on the other hand, heard of the pledge given by the Muslims to the Prophet. Their chiefs were engaged in high level consultations. They realized that the Muslims' pledge meant that their determination to achieve their purpose was not

in doubt. Past experience suggested that should the two sides be engaged in a military conflict, the outcome might very well be a victory for the Muslims, despite their relatively small numbers and poor equipment. That the Muslims could always be relied upon to fight hard and well and not to weaken in the face of adversity was something not to be doubted. Now that they had given the Prophet such a clear commitment to fight to the bitter end, the Muslims would not just go away. Moreover, the Quraysh might not have been fully convinced that they acted within their rights when they tried to prevent the Muslims from worshipping at the Ka'bah. Their motives were nothing more than pride of position and conceit. Hence, the Quraysh realized that they must think seriously of the consequences, especially if the military conflict went against them.

A Delegation for Peace

Some wiser men among the Quraysh must have suggested that achieving a peaceful settlement might preserve the Quraysh's dignity better than war, even if the war ended in its favour. The views of its earlier envoys – particularly those of al-Ḥulays of the Ḥabshī tribe and 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd of the Thaqīf – began to appear highly valid. Moreover, should the Quraysh push matters to the point of flare-up, their action might mean a fight near the Sacred House and in the sacred month. This would, in effect, be setting a precedent which was certain to do more harm than good to the Quraysh. Hence the arguments for moderation suddenly began to appear much weightier. A delegation headed by Suhayl ibn 'Amr was, therefore, dispatched to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement with the Prophet.

The Prophet received Suhayl ibn 'Amr and his delegation well. He instructed his Companions to show their sacrificial animals and to raise their voices with phrases expressing the fact that they had come only in response to God's call to honour the Sacred House.

The talks between the two sides were not easy. Despite the fact that the Prophet was keen to achieve a peace settlement, the

negotiations had to deal with several issues of substance. The topics included: the Prophet's visit to the Sacred House; the Quraysh's determination not to seem to have given in to force; the possibility of agreeing a long term truce between the two sides, putting an end to their frequent military clashes; the sort of relations which should exist between the two sides; and the freedom of each side to make political moves on the wider horizon of the whole of Arabia.

There was, however, no reason to prolong the discussions. The Prophet accepted all the Quraysh's conditions readily. It was Suhayl ibn 'Amr who took a long time in his presentation of each of those conditions and what each of them entailed. Indeed, the Quraysh side were surprised that all their conditions were accepted by the Prophet without too much trouble. It was necessary, however, to write the agreement down and to have it signed by representatives of both sides.

Unease in the Muslim Camp

The Prophet's attitude caused a stir in the Muslim camp. They were not used to seeing the Prophet taking such a very soft attitude. It was also surprising for the Quraysh negotiators themselves. Not only did the Prophet accept all the terms the Quraysh stipulated, he did not consult his Companions in the matter, contrary to his normal practice. Moreover, the terms of the peace agreement were extremely surprising to the Muslims, because they tended to cast the Muslim side as much weaker than the Quraysh. To the Muslims, accepting such terms was neither useful nor necessary. Some of them could not hide their dissatisfaction. This is epitomized by the attitude of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When the terms of the peace agreement were finalized and were about to be written down, 'Umar came to Abū Bakr and said: "Abū Bakr, is he not God's Messenger?" Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative. 'Umar again asked: "Are we not the Muslims?" When Abū Bakr gave the same answer, 'Umar went on: "Are they not the idolaters?" Abū Bakr again answered: "Yes." 'Umar then asked him: "Why then should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" Abū Bakr

answered with a piece of advice, saying to his questioner: "Follow him whatever he does, 'Umar. I believe that he is God's Messenger." But 'Umar was still perturbed and said: "And I too believe that he is God's Messenger."

'Umar's argument was that since what separated the two sides was really a single issue – right against wrong, faith against lack of faith – those who were on the side of right and truth must not give in to those who championed the cause of wrong and falsehood. The believers must never accept any sort of humiliation when it came to matters relating to faith. Indeed, they should always show pride in their religion. Hence, 'Umar was not to be deterred. He went to the Prophet and put to him the same questions: "Are you not God's Messenger? Are we not the Muslims? Are they not the idolaters?" To all these questions, the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The final question 'Umar put was again the same: "Why, then, should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?"

The Prophet's answer provided the clue to his attitude: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." The Prophet was indeed following Divine orders which he must have received at that time.

The Prophet then called in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to write down the peace agreement so that it might be signed by both sides. Again, Suhayl ibn 'Amr showed maximum rigidity, while the Prophet showed complete flexibility.

The Prophet told 'Alī to write: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent." Suhayl interrupted: "I do not know this. Write down: 'In your name, Our Lord'." The Prophet told 'Alī to write the phrase Suhayl proposed. He continued with his dictation: "These are the terms of the peace agreement negotiated between Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn 'Amr." Again, Suhayl interrupted: "Had I accepted that you are God's Messenger, I would not have fought you. You have to write down your name and your father's name." The Prophet accepted Suhayl's point and revised his dictation, telling 'Alī to write:

These are the terms of the peace agreed by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdullāh and Suhayl ibn ʿAmr.

- Both have agreed to a complete truce for a period of ten years, during which all people will enjoy peace and security and will not attack one another.
- Moreover, if anyone from the Quraysh joins Muḥammad without permission from his guardian or chief, he shall be returned to the Quraysh.
- If anyone from those in the camp of Muḥammad joins the Quraysh, they are not required to return him.
- Both sides agree that they harbour good intentions towards each other.
- No theft or treachery shall be condoned.
- Whoever wishes to enter into an alliance with Muḥammad may do so, and whoever wants to enter into an alliance with the Quraysh may do so.
- It is further agreed that you, Muḥammad, shall return home this year without entering Makkah. At the end of one year, we shall evacuate Makkah for you so that you may enter it with your followers to stay for three days only. You shall carry only the armament necessary for a traveller – namely, your swords in their sheaths. You shall not carry any other arms.

A Hard Test of Muslim Intentions

These were the terms of the peace agreement. When they were written down, witnesses from both sides were asked to sign the document. At that moment, something happened to test the patience of the believers and to give them another opportunity to prove the strength of their faith. A man from Makkah arrived in handcuffs and with his legs in chains. He was being kept prisoner there because he was a Muslim. This man was none other than Suhayl's own son, Abū Jandal. It was his father who imprisoned

him and fastened his shackles. Nevertheless, he had been able to escape and to take an unfamiliar route through the mountains surrounding Makkah until he arrived at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When the Muslims saw him, they were very glad that he had escaped and gave him a fine reception.

While the peace agreement was being written down, Suhayl was too busy to notice anything. When it was finished, Suhayl looked up and saw his son among the Muslims. He went up to him, hit him in the face and took him by the collar. Abū Jandal cried aloud: "My fellow Muslims, am I to be returned to the unbelievers to try to turn me away from my faith?" Those words were very painful to the Muslims, some of whom started to cry.

Suhayl ibn 'Amr, however, was unmoved. He said to God's Messenger: "This is the first person whose case I take up. You must return him to me." The Prophet referred to the fact that Abū Jandal arrived before the agreement was completed: "We have not finished drawing up the document yet." Suhayl said: "Then I have not agreed any terms with you whatsoever." The Prophet pleaded: "Then allow me him."

Suhayl said that he would not. Mikraz, another member of the Quraysh delegation, said that they should allow Muḥammad to have Abū Jandal. The father was adamant and refused all appeals to let his son join the Muslims. He went even further and began to hit his son with a thorny branch of a tree. The Prophet again pleaded with him to let his son go, or at least not to torture him. But Suhayl would accept nothing. Some of Suhayl's friends, however, extended their protection to Abū Jandal and his father stopped hitting him. The Prophet explained to Abū Jandal his inability to help him, speaking to him in a loud voice so that he could hear: "Abū Jandal, be patient and endure your situation for God's sake. He will certainly provide for you and those who are suffering with you a way out of your hardship. We have made a peace agreement with those people, giving them a pledge by God that we will be faithful to the terms of our agreement. We shall not violate our pledges."

Kill Your Father

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was again outraged by the situation. He could not understand why the Muslims should accept such humiliating terms or stand idle when a brother of theirs was subjected to harsh treatment for no reason other than the fact that he believed in God and His Messenger. As Abū Jandal was being led away, 'Umar went up to him and walked by his side. He spoke to him: "Be patient, Abū Jandal. These people are unbelievers. They are worthless. The blood of anyone of them is no more precious than the blood of a dog."

As he was walking by Abū Jandal's side and talking to him, he continued to move the handle of his sword towards Abū Jandal, hoping that Abū Jandal would take 'Umar's sword and kill his father. Abū Jandal either did not wish to kill his father or did not understand or notice 'Umar's gesture. He submitted to his fortune until God would help him get his release. He was led away in his shackles and chains. As the Muslims looked at him, their hearts were full of agony because they were unable to help him.

When the document detailing the peace terms was written down, the Prophet asked a number of his Companions to witness the agreement, in addition to witnesses from the Quraysh side. The Muslim witnesses were Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Maḥmūd ibn Maslamah and 'Abdullāh ibn Suhayl, another son of the chief Quraysh negotiator himself. Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ and Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā were the Quraysh witnesses. When the witnessing was finally done, the Quraysh delegation went home.

This peace was supposed to last for ten years. Very few Muslims were able to bring themselves to accept it without experiencing a feeling of unease. What added to their bitterness was the fact that the terms of the agreement meant that they had to go back home without being able to fulfil their purpose of worshipping at the Ka'bah. It should be remembered that the Prophet and his Companions were in *iḥrām*, the state of consecration, having left Madīnah in order to perform the *'Umrah*. They were first prevented

from entering Makkah by the declared intention of the Quraysh to use force to stop them. Now they were prevented by the terms of the agreement which they signed with the Quraysh. They were, in effect, in the position of a *muḥṣar*, a person who sets out from home to do his pilgrimage or *'Umrah* but is unable to reach his destination owing to some reason beyond his control. God declares in the Qur'ān that such a person can release himself from *iḥrām* by slaughtering a sheep or some other sacrificial animal at the point where he cannot continue his journey.

Cancellation of Intended Worship

The Prophet said to his Companions: "Slaughter your animals and shave and release yourselves from *iḥrām*." No one showed any sign of willingness to comply with this order. The Prophet repeated his command three times and still no one was willing to do as he was told. The Prophet was very angry indeed. He went into his tent where Umm Salamah, his wife who accompanied him on this expedition, was waiting. She immediately noticed how angry he was. She asked him the reason why and he answered: "The Muslims are ruining themselves. I have given them a command and they have not obeyed." He explained to her how his Companions received his orders with indifference and how not one of them was willing to obey. She tried to pacify him: "Messenger of God, do not blame them. They have been under great pressure because of all the trouble you have taken to achieve this peace settlement and because they now realize that they have to take the long way home without achieving their purpose." She then gave him a very sound piece of advice: she told him to go out and slaughter his own sacrificial animals and shave, without speaking to any one of them. The Prophet acted on his wife's advice and went out and slaughtered his camels. He then called someone to shave his head. When his Companions witnessed what he did, they rushed to do likewise. Some of them helped others to shave and they were extremely unhappy with themselves for not responding to the Prophet's orders in the first place.

> Not all of the Muslims at al-Ḥudaybiyah shaved their heads: some of them just cut their hair. The Prophet said: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." Some of his Companions said: "Messenger of God, what about those who have cut their hair?" He answered by repeating the same prayer: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." The same question about those who had cut their hair was put to him, but he answered by repeating the same prayer a third time. Once more, he was asked about the other group and the Prophet included them in his prayers, saying: "And those who have cut their hair." When he was asked the reason for repeating his prayers for mercy to the shavers three times before he included the other group, he answered: "They have entertained no doubt."[4]

Al-Zuhrī reports: "The Prophet then began his journey home. On the way back to Madīnah, the Prophet received new revelations – the *sūrah* entitled *al-Fatḥ*, or Victory. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Mujammi' ibn Hārithah, an Anṣārī who had learnt the Qur'ān: "We were with the Prophet at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When we were on the way back, we noticed that people were agitating their camels. People began to ask what was going on. They learnt that the Prophet received a new revelation. We approached him feeling very apprehensive. We saw the Prophet on his camel at Kirā' al-Ghamīm. When people assembled, he read to them the *Sūrah al-Fatḥ*, starting with, '*We have granted you a glorious victory.*' One of his Companions asked him: 'Is it a victory, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Yes indeed. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, it is a grand victory.'"

Imām Aḥmad relates a report by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "We were with God's Messenger on an expedition. I asked him about something three times, but he did not reply to me. I thought that I had done badly. I mounted my camel and went ahead, apprehensive that something might be revealed to the Prophet concerning me. Soon someone called me by name. I went back to the Prophet fearing what might have been revealed. The Prophet said to me: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me

4. Ibid., pp. 500–516.

last night, and it is much dearer to me than the whole world and all it contains: '*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future.*'" (Also related by al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī quoting Imām Mālik.)

The General Atmosphere

Such was the atmosphere in the Muslim community prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*. The Prophet was certain of what God had inspired him. Therefore, he allowed himself no say in the drift of events other than what such divine inspiration pointed to. He referred to this inspiration at every point and before taking any step. Neither the unbelievers nor pressure by his Companions, who were infuriated by the unbelievers' hostility, would make him change his course. Eventually, God put tranquillity in the Muslims' hearts and they were reassured, accepting without hesitation what the Prophet told them, just like their brethren who never entertained any doubt in the first place. The prime example of these was Abū Bakr whose reassurance was never in doubt, not even for a brief moment.

Hence the opening of the *sūrah* gives the Prophet happy news that greatly delights his heart: "*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.*" (Verses 1–3) The opening also refers to the tranquillity granted to the believers, acknowledging that they were true believers and promising them forgiveness of sins, reward and support from on high: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verses 4–5) By contrast, their enemies, hypocrites and idolaters alike, incur God's displeasure and suffering in the life to come: "*God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and*

they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination." (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* also notes the pledge the believers gave to the Prophet, considering it a pledge to God. Thus, it establishes a direct relation between the believers and their Lord, the Eternal: "*We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment, but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verses 8–10)

Before completing the discussion of the believers' attitude at al-Ḥudaybiyah, the *sūrah* refers, within the context of unkept pledges, to the desert Arabs who stayed behind and did not join the Prophet on this expedition. It shows their excuses to be unfounded and exposes their ill thoughts about God and their expectation that the Prophet and his Companions would encounter disaster. It directs the Prophet as to the attitude he should adopt towards them in future. The style here emphasizes the believers' strength and the weakness of those who stayed behind. It makes it clear that the Muslims would soon be able to make rich war gains, all of which would be coveted by those who were too slow to join the Prophet on this expedition: "*The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with*

you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

Within the same context, the *sūrah* tells us about those who have genuine excuses, justifying their staying behind. These are they who have some disability or illness that prevents their participation in war: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* turns again to the believers, their thoughts and attitudes. It refers to them in a way that is full of honour and acceptance, delighting them with good news of what was soon to happen, praising their firm belief and readiness to sacrifice themselves for God's cause. We see here that God puts this select group of people under His direct care, bestowing on them His goodly acceptance and strengthening them in their noble attitude. He tells them in person that He in His glory was a witness with them as they offered their pledges at a particular spot, under the tree. He was certainly aware of their inner thoughts and feelings, was pleased with them and ensured that they would soon achieve victory that would yield great gains, relating this to God's law that operates throughout the universe. This is indeed a great and remarkable event witnessed by the whole universe: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. Were the unbelievers to fight you,*

they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way." (Verses 18–23)

The *sūrah* reminds the believers of God's grace as He stopped their enemies who were intent upon fighting them, denouncing those same enemies who prevented their entry into the Sacred Mosque, and refusing to allow their sacrificial animals to reach their place of slaughter. It reveals to them God's wisdom as He stopped conflict that year, and His grace in making what happened acceptable to them, bestowing tranquillity on them. All this was for a purpose unknown to them but known to God. It was the much better and greater prospect of bringing Makkah into the Islamic fold and making Islam prevail over all religions. All this was according to God's design and by His will: "*It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verses 24–28)

The *sūrah* concludes with an outline highlighting the special characteristics of this select group of humanity, the Prophet's Companions. It refers to their description in the Torah and the Gospel and emphasizes God's promise to them of forgiveness of their sins and

granting them rich reward: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 29)

Thus the *sūrah* gives a full image of the situation that led to its revelation. It does not relate the events in their chronological order, but highlights the lessons that must be learnt, linking individual events to their permanent rules, and special attitudes to the overall universal system. As always in the Qur'ān, it is hearts and minds that are addressed in a highly inspiring way.

A Community Attains Maturity

Looking at the *sūrah* as a whole and comparing it to the one that precedes it in the Qur'ānic order reveals the profound change in the general attitude of the Muslim community over the three years we believe to have separated the revelation of these two *sūrahs*. We realize the effects the Qur'ān had on that community and how it benefited by the careful education the Prophet imparted to it, enabling it to assume its unique position and play its unparalleled role in human history.

It is clear from the general ambience of this *sūrah* and the feelings it generates that the Muslim community had attained maturity, achieved a coherently high standard of faith, become reassured about its duties and no longer needed strong incentives in order to discharge such duties that required sacrificing life and property. It now needed a restraining influence so that it could look at things calmly and accept the decision of the Highest Leadership of the Islamic message to observe a temporary truce in its confrontation with the enemy.

No longer does the Muslim community need a directive of the type: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (47: 35)

or an admonition like: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (47: 38) Nor was there any more need to provide incentives to fight for God's cause by speaking about the nobility of martyrdom and the great honour God grants to martyrs. We do not have here any exposition of the purpose of putting the Muslim community to the test by imposing a duty to fight for God's cause, as we have in the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad: "*Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.*" (47: 4–6)

By contrast, the discourse in the present *sūrah* highlights the tranquillity God placed in the believers' hearts, or bestowed on them, to restrain them from being over zealous. It also reassures them that what took place was by God's command, referring to the Prophet's wisdom as he opted for a lenient and conciliatory approach. It speaks of God's pleasure with those who offered their pledges to the Prophet under the tree, and paints at the end a bright picture of the Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership.

The *sūrah* certainly speaks of the need to fulfil the pledges given to the Prophet and threatens those who go back on their pledges: "*Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) Clearly the reference here is one of honour to those giving their pledges to the Prophet, emphasizing the seriousness of the pledge. Reference to breaking such pledges occurs in respect of the desert Arabs who stayed behind. The same consideration applies to the hypocrites, men and women. This reference in the *sūrah* is made in passing, indicating the weakness of this group as compared with the entire Muslim community which had purged its ranks and attained maturity. This reference is very quick, unlike what we have in

the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad, where the discussion of the hypocrites and their Jewish allies occupies a large part of it. This is yet another development in the external attitude of the Muslim community, one that is in harmony with the developments taking place within it.

There is also in the *sūrah* clear evidence of the strength of the Muslim community in relation to the strength of the unbelievers. This is evident in the *sūrah* as a whole and in specific verses. Other verses point out that further victories were to be achieved, making those who stayed behind eager to join the Muslims in order to share the promised war gains. The reference to the fact that Islam would prevail over all other religions is also indicative of the increasing strength of the Muslim community in the period separating the revelation of these two *sūrahs* that occur consecutively in the Qur'ānic order.

There was, then, a clear change in people's hearts, the overall condition of the Muslim community and the situation it was facing. This change can easily be recognized when we follow the events during the Prophet's lifetime as discussed in the Qur'ān. The change reflects the effects of the Qur'ānic approach to the type of education the Muslim community should undergo and the method the Prophet followed in effecting that education. That happy community of the Prophet's Companions was unique in history. However, the change has a telling lesson for those who are in the position of leadership of human communities. They must never become fed up with human weakness, or with what may linger on of past habits, influences of social environment, worldly desire and lack of motivation. All these may have strong effects at first, but persistence, patience and a wise approach ensure steady progress. Moreover, tests and experience are bound to produce their effects when they are utilized to reinforce educational efforts. Gradually, weaknesses dwindle and disappear and believers begin to aspire to higher horizons. They are able to see the superb light emanating from on High. In God's Messenger we have a great shining example to follow. In the Qur'ān we have guidance about the right path to take.

I

A Victory in the Making

Al-Fatḥ (Victory)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

We have granted you a glorious victory, (1)

إِنَّا فَتَحْنَا لَكَ فَتْحًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١﴾

so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. (2)

لِّيَغْفِرَ لَكَ اللَّهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِن ذَنۢبِكَ وَمَا تَأَخَّرَ وَيُتِمَّ نِعْمَتَهُۥ عَلَيْكَ وَيَهْدِيَكَ صِرَٰطًا مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢﴾

God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (3)

وَيَنصُرَكَ اللَّهُ نَصْرًا عَزِيزًا ﴿٣﴾

It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (4)

هُوَ الَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ السَّكِينَةَ فِى قُلُوبِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِيَزْدَادُوٓا۟ إِيمَٰنًا مَّعَ إِيمَٰنِهِمْ ۗ وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٤﴾

He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (5)

لِّيُدْخِلَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا
وَيُكَفِّرَ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ذَٰلِكَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥﴾

God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. (6)

وَيُعَذِّبَ ٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقَٰتِ
وَٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ وَٱلْمُشْرِكَٰتِ ٱلظَّآنِّينَ
بِٱللَّهِ ظَنَّ ٱلسَّوْءِ ۚ عَلَيْهِمْ دَآئِرَةُ ٱلسَّوْءِ ۖ
وَغَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ
لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ وَسَآءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (7)

وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner (8)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَٰكَ شَٰهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. (9)

لِّتُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَتُعَزِّرُوهُ
وَتُوَقِّرُوهُ وَتُسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً
وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ يَدُ ٱللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۚ فَمَن نَّكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَٰهَدَ عَلَيْهُ ٱللَّهَ فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (10)

سَيَقُولُ لَكَ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ شَغَلَتْنَآ أَمْوَٰلُنَا وَأَهْلُونَا فَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ۚ يَقُولُونَ بِأَلْسِنَتِهِم مَّا لَيْسَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ ۚ قُلْ فَمَن يَمْلِكُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا إِنْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ نَفْعًا ۚ بَلْ كَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' (11)

بَلْ ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَنقَلِبَ ٱلرَّسُولُ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِيهِمْ أَبَدًا وَزُيِّنَ ذَٰلِكَ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَظَنَنتُمْ ظَنَّ ٱلسَّوْءِ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًۢا بُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. (12)

وَمَن لَّمْ يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ فَإِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ سَعِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. (13)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَغْفِرُ
لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٤﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (14)

سَيَقُولُ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ إِذَا ٱنطَلَقْتُمْ
إِلَىٰ مَغَانِمَ لِتَأْخُذُوهَا ذَرُونَا نَتَّبِعْكُمْ ۖ
يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُبَدِّلُوا۟ كَلَٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُل لَّن
تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَٰلِكُمْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ مِن
قَبْلُ ۖ فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا ۚ بَلْ كَانُوا۟
لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾

When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. (15)

قُل لِّلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ سَتُدْعَوْنَ
إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُو۟لِى بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ تُقَٰتِلُونَهُمْ أَوْ
يُسْلِمُونَ ۖ فَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَجْرًا
حَسَنًا ۖ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُم مِّن
قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (16)

لَّيْسَ عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى
ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ ۗ
وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ
يُعَذِّبْهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish. (17)

A Different Concept of Victory

> *We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.* (Verses 1–3)

The *sūrah* opens with a statement about the great favours bestowed by God on His Messenger, comprising glorious victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessing and assured guidance. Together, these favours are granted as a reward for complete, unshakeable trust in God's inspiration and directive, as well as a willing submission to His guidance. The Prophet demonstrated absolute trust, leaving no room whatsoever for his own judgement. He had a dream and proceeded to take action on its basis. His she-camel refused to move and people cried out that she had refused to go forward. He told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. "She is held back for the same reason as the elephant was held back. I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today that helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." 'Umar asked him: "Why should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" His answer was simple, emphasizing his unwavering trust in God's wisdom: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." By contrast, when it is rumoured that 'Uthmān was killed, he showed complete resolve and determination: "We shall not depart until we have fought these people." He called on people to pledge their loyalty. In turn, they gave him their pledges that brought lasting benefits to all who did so.

Such was the victory. Beside it too there was another victory embodied in the peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyah, to be followed by numerous other victories taking different forms.

It was a victory in advocating God's message. Al-Zuhrī[5] says: "This victory was the greatest achieved so far in the history of Islam. Battles were fought when armies met in the battlefield. With this peace

5. A prominent scholar of the second generation after the Prophet's Companions. He was the first to work on a *Ḥadīth* anthology, instructed to do so by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. He died in 124 AH, 743 CE. – Editor's note.

agreement, war was at an end and people were able to talk to each other in safety. They met and discussed all issues. People with any degree of understanding who were approached about Islam soon declared themselves Muslims. In those two years, i.e. between the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty and the fall of Makkah, the number of Muslims doubled or became even greater."

Ibn Hishām says: "The evidence in support of the above statement by al-Zuhrī is found in the fact that the Prophet's Companions at al-Ḥudaybiyah were 1,400, but when he marched to Makkah two years later,[6] he was at the head of an army of 10,000." Among those who became Muslim were Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.

It was also a great victory on the ground. The Muslim community no longer faced danger from the Quraysh. Therefore, the Prophet was now free to address the problem represented by the Jews in Arabia. After the removal of the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā', al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah from Madīnah, following their repeated violations of their friendship agreement with the Muslim community, the Jewish threat came from Khaybar and its fortresses. From there, the Jews could easily make the road to Syria unsafe. Khaybar and all its fortresses fell to the Muslims a short while later, and the Muslims were able to take great war gains which the Prophet divided exclusively among those who accompanied him at al-Ḥudaybiyah.[7]

Al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was a decisive victory in the confrontation between the Muslims in Madīnah and the Quraysh in Makkah, supported by all the unbelievers in Arabia. In his biography of the Prophet, Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah rightly says:

> Undoubtedly, this peace agreement described in the Qur'ān as a 'glorious victory' amply deserves this description. Indeed it is one of the most decisive and greatest events during the Prophet's lifetime and in Islamic history generally, consolidating the Muslim

6. The Prophet marched to Makkah when the Quraysh flagrantly breached the peace treaty. Makkah fell to Islam with very little fighting. – Editor's note.

7. The only exception was that the Prophet included with them those who came back from Abyssinia and joined him at Khaybar when the battle was over. He considered these to have been on an expedition advocating the Islamic message throughout their 15 years stay in Abyssinia. – Editor's note.

state. For the first time the Quraysh recognized the Prophet and the Muslim state, treating them on an equal footing. It was keen to avoid military confrontation, preferring to peacefully turn them away from their purpose of entering Makkah. Twice before, the Quraysh tried to invade Madīnah, and the second of these attempts took place only one year earlier. At the time, the Quraysh and other confederate tribes raised a great force avowing to exterminate Islam and the Muslims. When the Quraysh launched this attack, the Muslims in Madīnah went through an extremely hard time as, numerically, they were no match for the attacking forces. The new development leading to the signing of the peace treaty had a marked effect on the Arabs; up until then they had looked upon the Quraysh as the master in Arabia and were strongly influenced by its opposition to Islam. Indeed, when the Prophet embarked on his trip to Makkah, the desert Arabs believed that he would not return safely. The hypocrites in Madīnah were of similar views. Taking all this into consideration, we realize the great importance of this victory.

Subsequent events confirmed the wisdom of the Prophet's action, which was endorsed by the Qur'ān. These events highlighted the great material, moral, political, military and religious benefits that accrued to the Muslim community as a result of this peace agreement. They were now looked upon as the most important power in Arabia; the desert Arabs who stayed away from Islam came forward apologizing for their earlier stance, while the hypocrites could hardly raise a voice. Arab delegations came to Madīnah from distant parts pledging loyalty to the Prophet. Subsequently too, the Prophet was able to smash the strength of the Jews in Khaybar and their other villages on the road to Syria. He was able to send delegations to distant parts, such as Najd, Yemen and al-Balqā'. Only two years later, he was able to conquer Makkah peacefully, putting an end to the long drawn out conflict with the Quraysh. It was then that Islam achieved its final victory in Arabia, and people flocked to Islam in large numbers.[8]

8. Darwazah, Muḥammad 'Izzat, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–293.

Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah was a great victory in a different sense: it was a conquest of hearts and minds, epitomized by the pledge given by the Prophet's Companions that earned them God's pleasure as specifically mentioned in the *sūrah*. It is this conquest that made them worthy of the image drawn of them in the last verse of the *sūrah*. In the history of the divine message, this was a great victory that must be given its true value as we look at how it influenced the turn of events in subsequent years.

The Prophet was delighted with the revelation of this *sūrah*. He was overjoyed with the great favours God bestowed on him and his Companions: the victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessings, guidance on a straight way and God's acceptance of the believers and His beautiful description of them in the *sūrah*. He said: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me tonight, and it is much dearer to me than all that the sun overlooks put together." In another version, he is reported to have said: "A *sūrah* was revealed to me last night which is dearer to me than the whole world and all that it contains." He was keen to express his gratitude to God, and his thanksgiving took the form of long, voluntary prayers, described by his wife, 'Ā'ishah, as follows: "When the Prophet prayed, he would stand up until his feet swelled." She said to him: "Messenger of God! Will you continue to do this when God has forgiven you all your sins, past and future?" He replied: "Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.]

A Medley of Emotions

The first three verses of the *sūrah* were specifically addressed to the Prophet. The *sūrah* goes on to describe the great favours God bestowed on the Muslim community as He gave them such a victory, adding tranquillity to their hearts, and promising further favours in the life to come:

> *It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which*

running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (Verses 4–5)

Tranquillity, or *sakīnah* in Arabic, is a word with pleasant connotations. When a heart is blessed with it, it generates reassurance, trust, comfort, dignity and a ready acceptance of God's will.

The believers experienced conflicting emotions during this encounter. They were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Prophet's dream of entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, realizing that a prophet's dream always came true. They had then to endure a stand-off with the Quraysh, followed by the Prophet's acceptance to return without visiting the Sacred Mosque that year, even though they had entered into the state of consecration required for that Mosque's entry and had marked their animals for sacrifice following the completion of their worship at the Sacred Mosque. All of this was, therefore, very hard for them to swallow. In addition to what we have already quoted in recording the developments at al-Ḥudaybiyah, 'Umar is also reported to have gone to Abū Bakr and said in reference to the Prophet: "Did he not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" Abū Bakr, whose heart echoed the Prophet's own heartbeats, replied: "Did he say that you would do so this year?" 'Umar answered in the negative. Abū Bakr said: "Then you will visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." 'Umar left Abū Bakr and went straight to the Prophet asking: "Did you not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" The Prophet said: "I certainly did; but did I say that you would be doing that this year?" 'Umar again answered in the negative. The Prophet then said: "You will most certainly visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." This gives us a picture of the feelings the Muslims experienced during the stand-off with the Quraysh.

The believers found other conditions imposed by the Quraysh to be totally unfair. Specifically, they found unacceptable the condition that the Prophet should return to the Quraysh anyone from among them who came to him, declaring himself a Muslim, without being given the prior permission of his father or guardian. They were also totally displeased when the Quraysh delegation objected to the mention of God's name, *al-Raḥmān*, or the Lord of Grace, and with their objection to the Prophet's position as God's Messenger being included in the document.

It is reported that 'Alī, who was writing the document, refused to erase this reference, as requested by the Quraysh representative, Suhayl ibn 'Amr. In fact, the Prophet himself rubbed it out, saying: "My Lord! You know that I am Your Messenger."

The Muslims' dedication and enthusiasm to fight the unbelievers were total, as evidenced by the fact that they all pledged themselves to it. Yet the confrontation ended peacefully, requiring them to turn back and go home. Understandably, this was not easy for them to accept. We sense this in their reluctance to slaughter their sacrifices and shave their heads, indicating the end of their rituals. Indeed, the Prophet had to issue his command to them three times, and this to those who were always quick to put his every order into effect. Furthermore, 'Urwah, the fourth emissary of the Quraysh, reported on this to the Quraysh when he returned to give them his advice. As we have noted already, so great was the feeling among the Muslims that they did not slaughter their sacrifices, nor shave their heads until they saw the Prophet doing so himself. Only his action spurred them to follow suit; such was the state of their bewilderment.

The Muslims had travelled from Madīnah intending to perform *'Umrah*. The thought of fighting was not in their minds. Neither mentally nor practically were they prepared for war. They were surprised to see the Quraysh taking such an adamant stance against them, and they were greatly upset when they heard the news that 'Uthmān had been killed. To the Muslims, it was totally unexpected for the Quraysh to send some of its men to aim arrows and stone missiles at their camp. Therefore, when the Prophet, upon hearing of 'Uthmān's assassination, decided to fight the Quraysh and asked his Companions to give him their pledges in support, every single one of them did so. This did not, however, diminish their surprise to find themselves in a situation totally different from what they hoped to do. Such feelings were only a part of what they experienced. Moreover, they were heavily outnumbered, amounting to 1,400 pilgrims, while the Quraysh were in their own city, supported by desert Arabs and other idolaters.

When we consider all these aspects, we better understand the meaning and the effect of the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers.*" (Verse 4) We can imagine

the situation as though we are present there, and feel the comfort of this tranquillity and the peace it generated in the believers' hearts. God was fully aware that the feelings they experienced were motivated by faith. They were keen to defend their faith and fight for it. They did not look for any personal glory. Therefore, He bestowed His blessings on them, giving them such tranquillity, "*so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) Reassurance is of a higher rank than passion and enthusiasm. It carries with it a combination of trust, conviction and absence of worry.

The *sūrah* also indicates that military victory was in no way difficult. On the contrary, it was easy, had God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to gratify the believers' wishes. At His command there are countless forces that cannot be overcome. They would have ensured victory for the Muslims at His bidding, whenever He wished: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 4) Indeed everything moves as determined by God in His wisdom. It was through His knowledge and wisdom that He "*sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) He will thus bring about what He has decided to give them: victory and blessings: "*He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verse 5)

If in God's sight this is a great triumph, then it is indeed a great one. It was so for those who achieved it, giving it its right measure. The believers were delighted with what God granted them. Having listened to the opening of the *sūrah*, learning about the favours God bestowed on His Messenger, they were looking forward to their own share, asking about it. When they were told of it, they were delighted and reassured.

The *sūrah* then tells them of another aspect of God's wisdom in letting events develop in the way they did; namely, requiting the unbelievers and the hypocrites for their actions:

> *God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. To God belongs all*

the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (Verses 6–7)

These verses group together the hypocrites and the idolaters, men and women, highlighting their common characteristic of harbouring evil thoughts about God, having no trust in His forthcoming help to the believers. The *sūrah* makes clear that they are all encompassed by evil and cannot depart from its circle. They incur God's anger and, therefore, they are expelled from His mercy. Evil will be their end. In fact, hypocrisy is in no way less than idolatry; indeed it is more contemptible. The harm the hypocrites do to the Muslim community is no less than what the idolaters do, although the two types are different in nature and physical aspects.

The *sūrah* makes harbouring evil thoughts about God the distinctive feature of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. A believer always thinks well of God, expecting what is good in all situations, good and bad. He believes that God will bring him good in both conditions. The fact is that a believer's heart always looks up to God, whose grace and favours never cease. When we establish the bond of faith with God, we realize this fact and appreciate it. The hypocrites and the unbelievers, by contrast, have no bond with God. They have no feeling of this concept, which, in turn, leads them to entertain evil thoughts about Him, casting only a superficial look at things and judging situations by appearances. Thus, they expect only evil to befall them and to befall the believers whenever appearances so suggest. They have no idea of God's power, control of things and events, or His subtle and elaborate planning.

The verse groups together all types of enemies of Islam, describing their position with God and what He has prepared for them, adding a comment pointing to God's power and wisdom: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of their situation escapes God, and nothing is too hard for Him.

The Promise and the Reward

Again the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, pointing out his role and its objective. It tells the believers about their duty towards God after having

received His message. It makes clear to them that the pledges they gave to the Prophet were indeed pledges given to God. Solemn indeed is a pledge made to God. Furthermore, this imparts to the pledge given to the Prophet even greater honour:

> *We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.* (Verses 8–10)

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), is a witness who will testify that he has delivered the message entrusted to him to mankind, and he will speak of the reception people gave him. He will state that some people believed and accepted the faith while others rejected it denying its truth, and others still were hypocrites. Some did well and others did badly. He will give his testimony just as he delivered his message. He bears the good news of forgiveness and acceptance by God, as well as a good reward from Him to the believers. He also warns against the ill fate that awaits the unbelievers, hypocrites and evildoers, as they all incur God's anger.

Such is the Prophet's role. Addressing the believers, the *sūrah* makes clear to them the purpose of God's message: it is to believe in God and His Messenger, and to fulfil the tasks and duties of faith. Thus, they support God by implementing His law, and they honour Him in their hearts as they feel His majesty. They also extol His glory and praise Him at both ends of the day, which means in effect the whole day. What is meant here is that in their hearts and minds they feel their bond with God at all times. This is the result of faith which the believers will receive because God sent His Messenger and assigned to him his role outlined in the verse: "*a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner*". (Verse 8)

The Prophet came to them to establish their bond with God, and to solemnize a pledge they give to Him that continues even though the Prophet is no longer with them. When he stretches his hand out to accept their pledges, he is doing so on God's behalf: "*Those who pledge*

their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands." (Verse 10) This is an awesome description. When any of them put his hand in the Prophet's to give his pledge, he realized that God was there present, accepting the pledge, and that His hand also embraced their hands. How awesome and majestic.

This image puts an end to any thought anyone might have had about retracting their pledge. Should the Prophet disappear in person, God Himself will never disappear. It is He who accepts this pledge, watches its fulfilment and gives its reward. "*He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment.*" (Verse 10) Whatever pledge is made between God and any of His servants is richly profitable to God's servant. It is he who will profit by God's favours, while God is in no need of anyone. Therefore, when anyone breaks his pledge with God, he is the loser. Furthermore, he exposes himself to God's anger and punishment, because God loves those who are true to their promises and dislikes those who deliberately break them. "*But to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) No details are given here of the reward; it is merely described as rich, or great, as is the literal meaning of the Arabic adjective *'aẓīm* used here. This reward is rich by God's measure and value which we who dwell in this limited space of the earth can never imagine.

The Ones Left Behind

Having established the true nature of the pledge and referred to thoughts of breaking or honouring it, the *sūrah* now speaks of the desert Arabs who were left behind. They refused to accompany the Prophet on this expedition, entertaining no good thoughts about God, expecting defeat for the believers who were going to the Quraysh's own land, when it was the Quraysh that had attacked Madīnah twice over a short period of time.[9] The *sūrah* tells the Prophet of what excuses the desert Arabs would employ when they see him returning safely together with his Companions. They would realize that the treaty he

9. The original text says that the two attacks occurred in two successive years, i.e. within one year or a little more of each other. The fact is that the first, the Battle of Uḥud, took place in Shawwal, the 10th month of year 3, while the second, the Encounter of the Moat, occurred towards the end of year 5, which means that two full years separated them. – Editor's note.

had concluded with the Quraysh signified that the latter had climbed down. No matter how harsh its conditions may appear, the Quraysh now treated Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his followers as its equal, with whom it sought peace rather than confrontation. The *sūrah* also details the true reasons why these desert Arabs stayed behind, exposing their reality to the Prophet and the believers. It tells the Prophet of the rich war gains the Muslims would shortly achieve, and that these same Arabs would try to accompany them on their next encounter in order to receive a share of those. The *sūrah* tells the Prophet what he should say to them when this takes place. He must not allow them to be part of that expedition, which was certain to end in his favour. Only those present at al-Ḥudaybiyah would be permitted to accompany him. He was also to tell those Arabs left behind that they would be called upon to join the Muslims when they needed to fight other people known for their great war prowess. If they truly wanted to join the Muslim camp, they should join the Muslim army on that day, whatever outcome God may give them. If they obeyed, they would receive rich reward. If they turned away, as they did once before, they would be made to endure a painful suffering:

> *The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to*

the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

The Qur'ān does not merely reply to the excuses of those who stayed behind; it uses the occasion to treat minds and souls, identifying the points of weakness and deviation in order to treat them effectively. It then states those values that are true and permanent, as well as the proper basis on which to base attitudes and behaviour.

Those Arabs who stayed behind belonged to the tribes of Ghifār, Muzaynah, Ashja', Aslam and others who lived in the area close to Madīnah. They tried to excuse themselves, saying: "*Our property and our families kept us busy.*" (Verse 11) This is no excuse. People will always have families and property. If having these is a good excuse to exempt anyone from their duties towards their faith, no one would ever fulfil such duties. They also asked the Prophet: "*do then ask God to forgive us.*" (Verse 11) Even when they say this, they are not serious: "*Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) The reply given them stresses the truth of God's will that cannot be stopped or prevented by bravery in war or its avoidance. They are all subject to God's power, and He is fully aware of all things. His will controls everything as He determines: "*Say: Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 11)

The question implies the instruction to submit to God's will and to obey His orders without hesitation. No hesitation will ever prevent harm or delay benefit. Excuses are no use, because nothing escapes God's knowledge and nothing affects the requital He decides on the basis of His perfect knowledge. This is a fitting directive, using the appropriate moment in order to heighten its effect.

"*No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness.*" (Verse 12) Thus they are shown the truth of their attitude. Their true thoughts and intentions, which they thought were concealed,

are placed before their very eyes. They thought that the Prophet and his Companions were going to their death, and that they would never return to their families in Madīnah. They said of the Prophet: 'Is he going to fight those who attacked him in his home city and killed his Companions?' They allowed no room for the care God takes of those of His servants who are dedicated to His cause. Moreover, since they lacked motivation based on faith, they could not feel the importance of duty and that a duty must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost. Nor did they realize that obedience to the Prophet must not be based on any thought of gain or loss. It must be fulfilled as a duty, regardless of the outcome.

The thoughts they had seemed pleasing to their hearts. They could not see any other possibility. Their ill thoughts about God derived from the fact that their hearts had always been devoid of goodness. The *sūrah* uses a single Arabic word, *būr*, for the phrase 'devoid of goodness'. This word is normally used to describe a dead land where no plant can grow. The same applies to these Arab's hearts, as also to them generally. Their hearts are lifeless, yield nothing good. How else would a human heart be when it harbours no good thought of God, having severed its bond with Him? It must be *būr*, lifeless, heading for nothing good.

The True Balance

Such do people think of the Muslim community. However, it is only people like those desert Arabs who have severed their bond with God, their hearts devoid of goodness, who view the Muslim community as being on the verge of eradication, heavily outnumbered by the forces of evil and deviation. They look at the limited numbers of the advocates of Islam, or their poor artillery, or their low position in society and conclude that they will inevitably be defeated. Like the desert Arabs of old, such people avoid every association with the believers, looking only for their own safety. God, however, will ensure that such ill thoughts inevitably end in failure, and will change positions as only He knows how, to set the true balance. It is He who holds this balance in His mighty hand, lowering some people and raising others above them. The hypocrites who harbour evil thoughts about God, throughout all places and generations, can never understand how this is done.

The true balance is that of faith. Therefore, those Arabs are referred to it. The *sūrah* outlines the general rule of rewarding people in accordance with this balance, highlighting the possibility of receiving God's grace. They are thus encouraged to take the opportunity available to them now in order to benefit by God's forgiveness and to enjoy His grace: "*As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verses 13–14)

They used to cite their families and property as the reasons why they stayed behind. Of what benefit will their families and property be to them when they are thrown in the blazing fire, which has been prepared for them if they continue to deny God and His Messenger? These verses show such people the two options available to them and they are invited to choose one. Then it is God who issues the promise and the warning to them. To Him belongs the heavens and the earth and all in between them. It is He who can extend forgiveness and inflict punishment, as He chooses.

God rewards people according to their deeds, but His will is free, unrestricted by anything. This truth is established here so that it is accepted by all. There is no conflict between it and the fact that people's reward is based on their actions, because this is the basis that God has willed to choose.

Nevertheless, God's forgiveness and mercy is close at hand. Let anyone who so wishes benefit by it, before the suffering befalls those who refuse to believe in God and His Messenger in accordance with His will.

Fine Prospects

The *sūrah* then shows a glimpse of the prospects God has in store for the believers, contrary to all the unbelievers' thoughts. This is done in such a way that suggests that it is all going to happen soon: "*When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: 'Let us come with you.' They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: 'You shall not come with us. God has already said so.' They will then say: 'You begrudge us [our share].' How little they understand.*" (Verse 15)

Most commentators on the Qur'ān take this verse to refer to the conquest of Khaybar. This may be so, but the statement also gives clear impressions that do not necessarily relate to Khaybar. It suggests that the Muslims would soon achieve an easy victory. Those who previously stayed behind would realize that it would be so and hence they ask to join the Muslims. Perhaps what makes Qur'ānic commentators specify Khaybar is that this occurred soon after al-Ḥudaybiyah. Indeed, it took place in the first month of year 7, less than two months after the signing of the treaty, and it brought the Muslims rich war gains. Khaybar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula. It was here that some of the Jews of al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah had sought refuge after they were ordered out of Madīnah.

Commentators are almost unanimous that God promised those who give the Prophet their pledges at al-Ḥudaybiyah would have the war gains achieved at Khaybar, all for themselves, with no share for anyone else. I have not found any text to support this view, which may though be based on what actually happened. When the Prophet marched on Khaybar, he did not allow anyone to join him other than those who had taken part at al-Ḥudaybiyah.

Be that as it may, God instructed the Prophet to refuse permission to those who had previously stayed behind, assuming that they even offered to join the Muslim army. Specifically, he was to say that their participation would be contrary to God's orders. He also told the Prophet that when they were refused such permission, they would say: "*You begrudge us*", and want to deprive us of our legitimate share of any war gains. What they say thus betrays their lack of understanding of God's purpose. It is fitting that those who are eager to share in the booty be deprived of it, while those who are dedicated to God's cause, obeying His orders, should enjoy His grace and be the ones to enjoy the war gains He grants the Muslim community. They were the ones who had obeyed when they expected nothing other than a hard fight.

God further instructed the Prophet to tell them that they would be called upon to fight against people known for their war prowess, and that the fight would continue until this enemy had been subdued. Should those who formerly stayed behind pass this test, they will still receive their reward, but if they continue to disobey they will have failed what is their final test: "*Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: 'You will*

be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering.'" (Verse 16)

Reports differ as to the identity of this military might, and to whether this would occur during the Prophet's lifetime or after he passed away. It is most likely, however that it happened during his lifetime so as to further test the Arabs in the surrounding areas of Madīnah. What is important here is to note the Qur'ānic method of education, and how hearts and souls are treated by Qur'ānic directives and practical tests. We see this clearly in the way the inner thoughts of those who stayed behind were exposed before their very own eyes to the believers. We also see it in the way true values and the principles of proper behaviour are pointed out to them.

Since the test makes it a duty binding on everyone to join the Muslim army, God identifies those with real excuses who are exempt from so joining, without their being subject to any punishment: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17) A person who is blind or lame has a permanent disability exempting him from military engagement. A person who is sick has a temporary excuse, one that extends until he has recovered full health.

Ultimately, it is all a question of obedience or disobedience. It is a mental attitude, not a technical situation. Those who obey God and His Messenger will be rewarded by admittance into heaven. Those who turn away will receive painful suffering. Anyone can put the hardship of striving for God's cause in the balance against the comfort of staying behind and what it entails. He may then make his own choice.

2

People's Pledges and God's Promises

God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, (18)

لَّقَدْ رَضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
إِذْ يُبَايِعُونَكَ تَحْتَ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ فَعَلِمَ
مَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَنزَلَ ٱلسَّكِينَةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَثَٰبَهُمْ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿١٨﴾

and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (19)

وَمَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً يَأْخُذُونَهَا ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ
عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. (20)

وَعَدَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً
تَأْخُذُونَهَا فَعَجَّلَ لَكُمْ هَٰذِهِ وَكَفَّ
أَيْدِيَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَنكُمْ وَلِتَكُونَ ءَايَةً
لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَٰطًا
مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢٠﴾

There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (21)

وَأُخْرَىٰ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا۟ عَلَيْهَا قَدْ أَحَاطَ
ٱللَّهُ بِهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. (22)

وَلَوْ قَٰتَلَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَوَلَّوُا۟ ٱلْأَدْبَٰرَ ثُمَّ
لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (23)

سُنَّةَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ
وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ ٱللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (24)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى كَفَّ أَيْدِيَهُمْ عَنكُمْ
وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ عَنْهُم بِبَطْنِ مَكَّةَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِ أَنْ أَظْفَرَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt.

هُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ
ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ وَٱلْهَدْىَ مَعْكُوفًا أَن
يَبْلُغَ مَحِلَّهُۥ ۚ وَلَوْلَا رِجَالٌ مُّؤْمِنُونَ
وَنِسَآءٌ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٌ لَّمْ تَعْلَمُوهُمْ أَن
تَطَـُٔوهُمْ فَتُصِيبَكُم مِّنْهُم مَّعَرَّةٌۢ بِغَيْرِ

عِلْمٍ ۚ لِّيُدْخِلَ ٱللَّهُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ مَن
يَشَآءُ ۚ لَوْ تَزَيَّلُوا۟ لَعَذَّبْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
مِنْهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. (25)

إِذْ جَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ
ٱلْحَمِيَّةَ حَمِيَّةَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ فَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ
سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَأَلْزَمَهُمْ كَلِمَةَ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ وَكَانُوٓا۟
أَحَقَّ بِهَا وَأَهْلَهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ
شَىْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. (26)

لَّقَدْ صَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ رَسُولَهُ ٱلرُّءْيَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ
لَتَدْخُلُنَّ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ ٱلْحَرَامَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ
ءَامِنِينَ مُحَلِّقِينَ رُءُوسَكُمْ وَمُقَصِّرِينَ
لَا تَخَافُونَ ۖ فَعَلِمَ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا۟ فَجَعَلَ
مِن دُونِ ذَٰلِكَ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿٢٧﴾

God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. (27)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ
وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ ۚ
وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness. (28)

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (29)

مُّحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥٓ أَشِدَّآءُ
عَلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَآءُ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ تَرَىٰهُمْ رُكَّعًا
سُجَّدًا يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنًا ۖ
سِيمَاهُمْ فِى وُجُوهِهِم مِّنْ أَثَرِ ٱلسُّجُودِ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِى ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ ۚ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِى
ٱلْإِنجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْـَٔهُۥ فَـَٔازَرَهُۥ
فَٱسْتَغْلَظَ فَٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَىٰ سُوقِهِۦ
يُعْجِبُ ٱلزُّرَّاعَ لِيَغِيظَ بِهِمُ ٱلْكُفَّارَ ۗ
وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِنْهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا
عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* speaks only about and with the believers, with that unique and happy group of them who gave their pledges and commitments to the Prophet under the tree, in the presence of God, the witness who solemnized that pledge placing His hand over theirs. That elite group heard God's words revealed to His Messenger: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) They also listened to the Prophet as he said to them: "You are today the best people on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh.]

What we have here is a discourse about this select group as God speaks to His Messenger. We also have God's words to this select group, giving them the happy news of forthcoming war gains and conquests. God also speaks about the care He took of them, protecting them from their enemies, during this trip and what He will do for them in future, assuring them of victory by means of the laws He has set in operation, which never fail. He strongly condemns the enemies of the Muslim community, explains the wisdom behind choosing peace this time, confirming the truth of the Prophet's dream about visiting the Sacred Mosque. He assures the Muslims that they will enter it in safety, fearing nothing, and that His faith will prevail over all religions on earth.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse describing this community of believers, the Prophet's Companions, adding their descriptions to be found in the Torah and the Gospels, as well as His promise of forgiveness of their sins and granting them a great reward.

A Unique Event

> *God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 18–19)

Today, fourteen hundred years after the event, I am trying to visualize the great moment when the universe witnessed the divine announcement from on high addressed by God Almighty to His trusted Messenger concerning the Muslim community. I want to see the whole universe at that great moment and its conscience as it responds to this most generous announcement, speaking of a group of people at a particular spot in this universe. I want to feel how those extremely happy people felt when they heard, with their own ears, that God was speaking about them, telling them that He was well pleased with them, defining the place where they were and what they had done in order to earn His pleasure: "*when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree.*" (Verse

18) They heard it all from the Prophet who never said anything but the truth, delivering it as a special message from God Almighty.

O my God! How did they – those happy people – receive that divine communication at that ecstatic moment? It is a communication that points to every single one of them and says, "to you in person God is saying that He was well pleased with you as you pledged your allegiance under the tree. He was aware of your inner feelings and He bestowed tranquillity on you."

When we read or hear God's statement: "*God is the Patron of the believers,*" (2: 257) or, "*God is with those who are patient,*" (2: 153) we may feel happy and reassured, hoping that we may be included among such. Those people, however, heard that God was speaking about them personally and individually, telling each of them that He was well pleased with them, knowing what was in their hearts. That is great indeed!

"*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) He knew that the passion they felt in their hearts was for their faith, not for their ego or for personal glory. He knew that their pledges were sincere, and that they were seriously restraining themselves so that they would stand behind the Prophet in all sincerity, obeying his orders, accepting any adversity with patience. Therefore, "*He sent down tranquillity upon them.*" We almost see this tranquillity being lowered calmly and with dignity, pouring an air of peace and reassurance on those hearts that were full of enthusiasm for direct action.

God also "*rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) This peace treaty, coupled with the circumstances leading to it, was indeed a victory, heralding many more. The conquest of Khaybar, which most commentators cite as the one promised here, may indeed have been one of these. "*And with many war gains for them to take.*" (Verse 19) If the victory meant here is that of Khaybar, then the war gains would be with the victory itself. However, if the victory mentioned refers to the peace treaty itself, then the promised war gains would come later. Indeed, the peace treaty left the Muslims free to achieve victory on several fronts.

"*God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 19) This comment fits well with the preceding verses. God's pleasure, the victory and the promise of war

gains are all indicative of God's might, control, elaborate planning and wisdom.

As God Speaks

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers themselves, speaking to them of the peace treaty, or victory, to which they resigned themselves:

> *God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.* (Verses 20–21)

This is an announcement of happy things to happen, given by God to the believers who accept it as certain. They realize that God has prepared for them numerous gains and they lived afterwards to see this true promise fulfilled in the best way. God says to them here that He has hastened this one, which may be a reference to al-Ḥudaybiyah, as stated by Ibn 'Abbās, to emphasize its being a victory, as indeed it was, or it may be a reference to Khaybar, as Mujāhid says, since Khaybar produced the first war gains after al-Ḥudaybiyah. The first view is perhaps much weightier.

God also granted them a favour when He restrained the hands of hostile forces. He indeed held back the hands of the Quraysh, as well as other hostile groups who were waiting for a chance to attack the Muslims. Their opponents outnumbered them by far, but the believers were true to their pledges, fulfilling their duties. Therefore, God rewarded them by restraining and holding back their enemies' hands.

"*So that this may become a sign for the believers.*" (Verse 20) This encounter, which they disliked at first, feeling it to be too much of a demand, is described by God as a great sign, which will enable them to see the results of what He has planned for them and how they will be rewarded for obeying the Prophet and submitting to His will. Thus, they will come to realize that it is great, bringing them much benefit, and they will be doubly reassured.

"*He will guide you on a straight way.*" (Verse 20) This is again a reward for your obedience and true allegiance. Thus, they will have a combination of war gains and guidance on a straight way, giving them all that is good. All this comes about as a result of something they initially disliked. God, thus, teaches them that what He chooses for them is the best thing. This also trains them to show absolute obedience.

God also tells them of other favours He will grant them. There will be more war gains: these they are unable to secure by virtue of their own forces, but which God will let them have by cause of His power and planning: "*There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21)

Again, reports differ as to what these gains refer to: is it to the conquest of Makkah? Or to Khaybar? Or is it the victories secured against the Byzantine and Persian Empires? Or does it refer to all other conquests achieved by the Muslim community after al-Ḥudaybiyah? Most probably, the *sūrah* refers here to the conquest of Makkah, which followed the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah and resulted from it. The peace treaty lasted only two years. Thereafter the unbelievers violated it, and God facilitated Makkah's conquest for the Muslims, with hardly any fighting. It was Makkah that had continued to present great difficulties for the Muslim community in Madīnah. It had attacked them twice, and was able to turn them away from the Sacred Mosque when they tried to visit it prior to signing the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah. God, however, overwhelmed Makkah with His power, handing it over to the Muslims without fighting: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21) This was, then, an implicit piece of happy news. It was left undefined because at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, it still belonged to the future, which is part of the realm that lies beyond human perception. Hence, God gives them this hint to reassure them and help them to look forward to what may be coming their way.

In line with the reference to the present war gains and the future ones they await, the *sūrah* clearly tells the Muslims that they will be victorious. The signing of the peace treaty was in no way due to their weakness, or because the unbelievers were too strong for them. Instead, it was meant to happen for a definite purpose God wanted to achieve. Had

the unbelievers fought them, they would have been crushed. Such is the rule whenever the believers and unbelievers meet in a decisive battle:

> *Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way.* (Verses 22–23)

Thus, victory for the believers and defeat of their enemies are part of the universal law God has set in operation. It is unchangeable. This is bound to give the believers immense confidence and reassurance. They know that God's law will never fail to operate. It may be delayed for some time, for reasons that are closely related to the adherence of the believers to the way God wants them to adhere, or for reasons that bring about the conditions that lead to victory for the believers against the unbelievers. There may be other reasons known to God for such delay, but God's law will continue to operate, without fail: "*Never will you find any change in God's way.*" (Verse 23)

God also reminds them of His favour when he stayed the unbelievers' hands from the Muslims, and stayed the Muslims' hands after they had gained victory over their attackers. This refers to an incident when about 40 of the unbelievers tried to launch an offensive. They were taken prisoner, but the Prophet pardoned them:

> *It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 24)

This was an event the addressees witnessed, but God mentions it in this way to refer every move and every happening to His direct planning. They, thus, feel how God's hand directs everything for them, guides their footsteps and their feelings. They will then unhesitatingly surrender themselves to Him. They will be absolutely certain that everything is in God's hand, and that His choice is the best. They move according to His will in everything they choose or refuse. He wants only what is best for them. When they surrender to Him, every good thing comes their way easily and without delay. He sees them and knows the ins and outs

of their situation. What He chooses for them is based on His perfect knowledge. He will not let anything they deserve escape them: "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 24)

Exposing the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then tells the believers about their opponents' position in God's sight. It explains how God considers the unbelievers' actions as they turn the believers away from His Sacred House, and how He looks at the believers in a totally different way from these others:

> *They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things.* (Verses 25–26)

According to God's measure, they are truly unbelievers, deserving this repugnant description: "*They were the ones who disbelieved.*" (Verse 25) This is recorded against them as if they are the only ones in this class, confirmed in disbelief. Hence, they deserve to be disliked by God who hates unbelief and unbelievers. Their other obnoxious deed of turning the believers away from the Sacred Mosque and forbidding the sacrificial animals from reaching their destination is also recorded: "*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice.*" (Verse 25)

This amounted to gross misconduct according to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions; it was gross according to all religions known in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of Abraham, their great ancestor.

Restraining the believers from fighting them was not, then, out of compassion or because their fault was small. It was for a different purpose which God explains to the believers: "*Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt...*" (Verse 25) There were a number of Muslims in Makkah who could not migrate to Madīnah because of their weak position, and did not declare their acceptance of Islam for fear of persecution by the unbelievers. Had the Muslims attacked Makkah and a fight taken place, the Muslims might have killed some of these since they did not know who they were. This would have meant Muslims killing Muslims; a situation that must be avoided. Moreover, the Muslims would have had to pay blood money to their families when it became known that they were Muslim.

Besides, God knew that among the unbelievers who prevented the Muslims' entry into the Sacred Mosque were some who would be good believers, and who would earn God's mercy. Had these two groups been separated from the rest of the unbelievers, God would have allowed the Muslims to attack and He would have punished the unbelievers severely: "*God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then provides a further description of the unbelievers, showing their inner feelings after it has given an account of their apparent deeds: "*The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance.*" (Verse 26) This was not a passion for a particular faith or code of living, but rather a fury of arrogance and rigidity. This same fury led them to oppose the entry of the Prophet and his Companions to the Sacred Mosque, as also prevented the sacrificial animals from reaching their place of sacrifice. They were thus in breach of every tradition and religion. That they were prepared to commit such a breach had everything to do with their standing among all the Arab tribes so that it could not be said that Muḥammad entered Makkah in spite of them. Because of such ignorant passion, they perpetrated this gross offence against all tradition and all religion. They were prepared to violate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque, which gave them their own

special position in Arabia, as well as the sanctity of the sacred months, which was observed under Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Their fury and ignorance was clearly apparent in their harsh response to everyone who suggested that they pursue a line of compromise, criticizing their plan to prevent Muḥammad and his Companions from entering the Mosque. This fury again manifested itself in the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn Amr's objection to include in the treaty God's attributes, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, or the Prophet's status as God's Messenger. Such a hardened attitude could only have been the result of fury, ignorance and arrogance.

God left them to their fury and ignorance because He knew their adamant refusal to submit to the truth. At the same time, He protected the believers from entertaining such passion, giving them instead feelings of tranquillity and piety: "*Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well.*" (Verse 26) Calm tranquillity and piety are fine qualities suited to a believing heart which feels its bond with God, reassured by it. A person with such qualities always places his trust in God, and watches God in everything he says or does. Such a person does not behave arrogantly, nor do they let personal anger get the better of them. Instead, they are only motivated to anger in support of their faith and for God's sake. Therefore, if they are ordered to calm down, they willingly obey.

Therefore, the believers were most worthy and deserving of the word of piety. This is yet another point on which they are commended by God, who favoured them with the tranquillity He bestowed on them. This is all an honour given to them by the One who knows them well: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 26)

The Prophet's True Vision

We have already learnt that some of the Prophet's Companions on this trip, who were delighted with his dream knowing that prophets' dreams always come true, found it hard that his dream should not be fulfilled that year, and that they would be prevented entry to the Sacred Mosque. God assured them, however, that the Prophet's dream was true

Muḥammad ibn Maslamah went ahead with horses and arms until he arrived at Marr al-Ẓahrān, about one day's travel, by camel, from Makkah. There he found a few men from the Quraysh who were greatly worried at what they saw. They thought that he was about to attack Makkah in violation of the peace treaty, which stipulated that there would be no war between the two sides for ten years. When the Prophet encamped at Marr al-Ẓahrān where he could see the idols placed in the Sacred Mosque, he sent all the Muslims' arms, including bows, arrows and spears to a place called Baṭn Ya'juj. He then marched towards Makkah with his Companions having only their swords in their sheaths, as he had promised the people of Makkah.

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ at the head of a delegation to the Prophet. They said to him: "Muḥammad, we have never known you to break a promise ever since you were a young child." He asked why they were saying this. They replied: "You are trying to enter the city carrying all your arms; spears, bows and arrows." The Prophet said: "I am not going to carry arms into the city. We have sent them to Baṭn Ya'juj." Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ then replied: "This is more like what we know of your faithfulness."

Many of the Quraysh nobility left Makkah and went into the surrounding mountains; this because they did not wish to look at the Muslims as they arrived at the city for worship. Indeed, the very sight infuriated them. The rest of the Makkans were either out in the streets or on rooftops looking at the Prophet and his Companions as they entered repeating their phrases that declared their submission to God. The Prophet was riding his she-camel, al-Qaṣwā', which he rode the previous year. His Companion, 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, held the she-camel's rein and guided its march.

Thus the Prophet's dream came true and God's promise was fulfilled. The following year witnessed the fall of Makkah to Islam, and the divine faith came to reign in Makkah, then throughout the rest of Arabia. Then God's other promise and the other piece of good news were fulfilled: "*It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28) The religion of truth prevailed, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. Within half a century it prevailed across much of

the inhabited parts of the earth. It subdued the entire Persian Empire and took over much of the Byzantine Empire. It marched as far as India and China before moving into Malaysia, southern Asia and Indonesia. In the sixth and seventh centuries, these areas constituted most of the then known world.

This true religion continues to prevail over all religions, even after its political retreat from much of the areas it moved into, particularly in Europe and the major islands in the Mediterranean. It prevails even though the power of its people is very weak compared to the new powers that have recently emerged in the East and the West. Indeed, as a religion, Islam prevails over all else. It carries within itself and in its nature the elements of its strength. It moves forward, supported by neither sword nor gun drawn by its people. Its advance is due only to its inherent harmony with human nature and the natural laws of the universe, and to the fact that it satisfies, with perfect ease, the requirements of mind and soul, progress and civilization, regardless of whether people live in tents or in skyscrapers.

Any religious person who looks objectively at Islam is bound to recognise the soundness and inherent strength of this religion. Nor can they help but recognise its ability to lead humanity with wisdom and to answer its progressive needs in an easy and straightforward way: "*Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28)

We see, then, that God's promise was fulfilled in the immediate, political form, before one century had elapsed after the Prophet's mission. God's promise continues to be fulfilled in its substantive form, as Islam prevails over all other religions. In fact, it is the only religion that continues to act and lead in all situations. Perhaps only the Muslims do not understand this truth. Other people know it and take it into account as they draw up their policies and programmes.

The Muslim Community

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that paints a superb picture of the community of the Prophet's Companions, adding God's commendation of that unique and happy group of people who earned His pleasure and who were also informed of that fact:

> *Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.* (Verse 29)

This is a remarkable picture drawn by the superior style of the Qur'ān. It includes several snapshots depicting the group's main conditions, both subtle and clearly apparent. One shot portrays their attitude to the unbelievers and to one another. Thus, they are "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" Another shows them as they are in worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" Yet a third image reveals what preoccupies their minds and characterizes their feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" A fourth shot focuses on the apparent effect worship has on their faces as they dedicate all to God: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah.*" A number of additional quick images tell us how they are described in the Gospels: "*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot; strengthens it; grows thick; stands firm on its stem; delights the sowers; through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*"

The verse begins by confirming the Prophet's status, denied by the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn ʿAmr, and the unbelievers he represented at the time: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger.*" The verse then goes on to paint its beautiful picture in the unique Qur'ānic style.

Needless to say, the believers go through different conditions and situations during their lifetimes. However, the images shown in the verse concentrate on their permanent features, highlighting these so that they serve as the main lines in the overall picture. The selection of these particular images clearly shows that God wants to bestow honour on this happy community. This is reflected right from the very first image

that depicts them as: "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" They take such a firm and unyielding attitude towards the unbelievers, despite the fact that those unbelievers included their parents, siblings, kinsfolk and friends. However, they severed all these relations with the unbelievers. They are at the same time full of mercy towards one another, when their only bond is brotherhood in faith. This means that in both conditions of unyielding firmness and flowing mercy the determining factor is faith. There is absolutely no personal consideration. Their feelings, emotions, behaviour and bonds are based on faith alone, making them hostile to its opponents, compassionate towards their fellow believers. They discard all selfish thoughts and make their bond with God the only one to which they attach any value.

Again God's wish to honour this community is clearly apparent in making prominent their condition as they worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" The way this is portrayed suggests that this is their permanent condition, one that we see whenever we look at them. In fact, bowing and prostration represent the condition of worship, which is the core feature of their personality. Therefore, it is expressed in a way that makes it permanent during their time, as if they spent their whole lives bowing and prostrating.

The same applies to the third image, which concentrates on their inner thoughts and feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" Such are their permanent feelings and what always preoccupies them. All they aspire for is God's favour and earning His pleasure.

The fourth image focuses on how apparent worship and inner feelings are reflected in their appearances: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations.*" Their faces shine with transparent clarity and the warmth that worship imparts. This is not a reference to the dark mark associated with prayer that appears on the foreheads of some people, as people may wrongly think when they hear the words, '*the marks of their prostration.*' What this expression refers to is the mark of worship, which is symbolized here by prostration as it expresses submission to God in the clearest form. The mark of this submission is seen on their faces; in other words there is no trace of pride, arrogance or selfishness. Instead, what is reflected is noble humility, purity and a serenity that adds to the shine on a believer's face.

This bright overall picture contains nothing new. It is also painted in the Torah as God gave the world the news of the emergence of this community of the Prophet's Companions.

The Gospels give another picture of Muḥammad and his community, describing them as "*And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot.*" It is a fertile seed that sends forth its shoot which does not weaken the stalk. On the contrary, it "*strengthens it*", or the shoot may be strengthened by the stalk. Thus the plant "*grows thick*", and its stem acquires strength and structure. The plant now "*stands firm on its stem*", upright, neither bending nor crooked. This is how the plant looks, but what feeling does it give to farmers who can immediately distinguish a fine plant that is bound to yield fruit? It gives them a feeling of pleasure: "*delighting the sowers*". A variant reading of this phrase puts the delighted onlookers in the singular, '*delighting the sower*,' which in this case refers to the Prophet, as he was the one that looked after the seeds until they harvested a noble and delightful community that was unique in history. The unbelievers experience a different feeling as they look on: "*Through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*" Sending such a feeling of rage into the unbelievers' hearts is clearly intended. It suggests that the planting was by God or by His Messenger, so as to yield a harvest that accomplishes God's purpose in enraging His enemies.

Again this picture is nothing new. It was painted before Muḥammad and his Companions began to walk the earth, in the Gospels as they herald the happy event of God sending Muḥammad with His final message.

Thus does God record in His book the qualities of this select group of the Prophet's Companions, so that it will be recognized by all creation. It remains the ideal and the role model for future generations, as the standard of faith they should emulate.

In addition to all this honour, God gives them a promise of forgiveness for their sins and a supreme reward: "*To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" The promise is given in such general terms after highlighting their special features so as to make them the first to whom the general description applies. The honour granted them is more than enough for anyone, but God's favours and bounty are limitless, unending. Therefore, they are granted forgiveness and a rich reward.

Once more I try today, fourteen centuries after the event, to visualize the beaming faces and rejoicing hearts of those people as they received this great honour and promise bestowed on them by God. I try to see them as they look at their own picture painted by God in His book. I look at them as they are on their way back from al-Ḥudaybiyah, when this *sūrah* was revealed and relayed to them; how they reflected on it, and how it touched their hearts and souls. I see them looking at one another, with each one seeing in his brother the mark of the grace he himself feels. I try again and again to live with them a moment of this splendid festival they experienced, but how can one who was not present there share all that, except from afar? It can only be by a special favour of God's grace, bringing close that which is indeed far. Lord! You know that I aspire to a special gift of this unique favour.

SŪRAH 49

Al-Ḥujurāt
(Compartments)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, composed of no more than 18 verses, is majestic, indeed superior. It includes a number of basic facts of faith, Islamic law and human existence. It opens up before our hearts and minds wide horizons and gives rise to a host of important thoughts. It refers to systems of formation and organization, principles of education and upbringing, fundamentals of legislation and essential directives which could take a hundred times its length. It puts before our eyes two great issues for reflection and deliberation.

The first thing that appears to us when we read this *sūrah* is that it lays down, almost independently, a complete sketch of a noble world, free of anything that may be described as unbecoming. It outlines the principles, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of this world, ensuring first that it comes into being, and then its continuity. This world derives its *raison d'etre* from God, looks up to God and is fit to be attributed to God. It is a world that combines purity of intention and feeling with a keen sense of propriety in what it says, feels and thinks. It maintains a high standard of morality and good manners in its dealings with God, His Messenger, its own affairs and interaction with others. This sense of morality penetrates into its deepest thoughts and manifests itself in its actions.

At the same time it has laws and regulations that ensure its continuity. These laws and regulations are based on its morality, emanate from it and fit with it. Thus this world benefits from such consistency of deep reality and surface appearance, the compatibility of its laws and feelings, the equilibrium between motives and checks, and the harmony between feelings and actions as it turns to God, appealing to Him. Hence, the existence and continuity of this noble and pure world are not left either to fine feelings and a sensitive conscience or to law and legislation. Nor are the establishment and maintenance of this world left to either the feelings and efforts of the individual or to the measures and systems of the state. Indeed, both individual and state have to work side by side, so that their efforts and duties complement each other in perfect harmony.

This world observes a certain code of behaviour with God and His Messenger, one that requires that everyone realizes his or her limits in relation to their Lord, and in relation to the Messenger who conveys His message: "*Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 1) Thus a servant of God does not precipitate His orders or prohibitions; nor does he or she suggest to Him any judgement or ruling. They neither exceed the limits of what God orders or prohibits, nor show that they have a will or an opinion independent from those of their Creator. This code is motivated by an attitude that combines fearing God with being modest and observing appropriate values in dealing with Him. Believers also observe special values when they address God's Messenger [peace be upon him]: "*Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verses 2–5)

This noble world sets a well-defined approach for verifying what people may say or do, determining their accuracy before making any

judgement. This approach relies on fearing God and putting all matters to God's Messenger, without precipitating his judgement or suggesting to him what he has neither ordered nor recommended: "*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 6–8)

This noble world has its own rules and practical measures in sorting out any differences, conflicts and excesses that may occur within it, realizing that unless these are properly dealt with, they may undermine its very structure. Hence, it sets out certain procedures for dealing with them based on three main criteria: (1) that all believers are brethren; (2) that justice and peace must be maintained, and (3) that all believers are God-fearing and their goal is to earn God's pleasure and mercy. "*If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verses 9–10)

Moreover, certain moral values apply in shaping the feelings of people in this world towards one another and in their behaviour towards each other. "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you deface one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 11)

It is a world with healthy feelings, guaranteed rights, where people's integrity is valued in both their presence and absence. No one is

condemned on suspicion. None seeks to publicize another's shortcomings. People's safety, security, integrity and freedom are fully respected by all. "*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.*" (Verse 12)

In this noble world a complete concept of mankind's unity, despite its divergent races and communities, prevails. A single standard of evaluation, free of prejudice and error, applies to all people. "*Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13)

Having presented these fundamental concepts that ensures this noble world maintains a high standard of purity, the *sūrah* embarks on drawing an outline of the faith by which believers are called upon to establish this world. Indeed, it is by their quality of faith that they are required to rise to the task and see to its fulfilment. This is the quality that distinguishes them from others and motivates them to respond and submit. They are addressed by their quality of having faith, '*Believers*!' Anyone who is so addressed by God will be so embarrassed not to give the right response. It is an address that makes any duty, hard and demanding as it may be, easy to fulfil. Indeed hearts will be all too eager to listen and respond: "*The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 14–16)

Before it closes, the *sūrah* shows how great the favour God has bestowed on humanity is. It is the gift of faith with which God favours

people according to what He knows of what they deserve. "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verses 17–18)

The second very important thing that appears clearly to us when we read the *sūrah* and review the actual events leading to its revelation is the great and unwavering effort, represented by Qur'ānic verses and the Prophet's directives, to establish and educate the first Muslim community. Indeed it is the community that represents that noble world, providing a practical model of it. Thus, it is no longer a mere ideal that lingers in people's dreams and imaginations.

This community, which existed during a certain period of history, did not come into existence suddenly or by chance. It did not owe its existence to a sudden change in the nature of all things. Instead, it went through a process of natural and slow growth, like a great tree that stretches its roots deep into the earth and spreads its branches wide into the air. It took the necessary time to complete its growth and benefited from steady and consistent effort to ensure that growth. Patient care, penetrating insight, careful motivation, steady encouragement and far-sighted strengthening were also provided. Moreover, it needed to go through hard and testing experiences and to learn important lessons from such experiences. In all this we see the kind of care God took of that community. He in His wisdom chose to fulfil a great trust, thus bringing His will to pass. Yet that community had its own virtues and potentials that only needed to be brought into full play. All this worked together to bring about such remarkable light in human history and to start, in reality, a situation that seems closer to an imaginary world.

Al-Ḥujurāt (Compartments)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىِ ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. (2)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا تَرْفَعُوٓا۟ أَصْوَٰتَكُمْ فَوْقَ صَوْتِ ٱلنَّبِىِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا۟ لَهُۥ بِٱلْقَوْلِ كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَن تَحْبَطَ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. (3)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَغُضُّونَ أَصْوَٰتَهُمْ عِندَ رَسُولِ ٱللَّهِ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱمْتَحَنَ ٱللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. (4)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُنَادُونَكَ مِن وَرَآءِ ٱلْحُجُرَٰتِ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (5)

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ صَبَرُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ تَخْرُجَ إِلَيْهِمْ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. (6)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن جَآءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌۢ بِنَبَإٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓا۟ أَن تُصِيبُوا۟ قَوْمًۢا بِجَهَٰلَةٍ فَتُصْبِحُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. (7)

وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ لَوْ يُطِيعُكُمْ فِى كَثِيرٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ لَعَنِتُّمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَبَّبَ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَزَيَّنَهُۥ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْكُفْرَ وَٱلْفُسُوقَ وَٱلْعِصْيَانَ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلرَّٰشِدُونَ ﴿٧﴾

[All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise. (8)

فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَنِعْمَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾

If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. (9)

وَإِن طَآئِفَتَانِ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱقْتَتَلُوا۟ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَإِنۢ بَغَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا عَلَى ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلَّتِى تَبْغِى حَتَّىٰ تَفِىٓءَ إِلَىٰٓ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن فَآءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا بِٱلْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٩﴾

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَ
أَخَوَيْكُمْ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا يَسْخَرْ قَوْمٌ مِّن قَوْمٍ
عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونُوا۟ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَآءٌ مِّن
نِّسَآءٍ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ ۖ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا۟ بِٱلْأَلْقَٰبِ ۖ بِئْسَ
ٱلِٱسْمُ ٱلْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ
يَتُبْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱجْتَنِبُوا۟ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّنِّ
إِنَّ بَعْضَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ۖ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا۟ وَلَا
يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ
أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ۚ
وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful. (12)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ
وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ
لِتَعَارَفُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

قَالَتِ ٱلْأَعْرَابُ ءَامَنَّا ۖ قُل لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا۟
وَلَٰكِن قُولُوٓا۟ أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ
ٱلْإِيمَٰنُ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ ۖ وَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ لَا يَلِتْكُم مِّنْ أَعْمَٰلِكُمْ
شَيْـًٔا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

The Bedouin say: "We have attained to faith." Say [to them]: "Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful." (14)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ
وَرَسُولِهِۦ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟
بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصَّٰدِقُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. (15)

قُلْ أَتُعَلِّمُونَ ٱللَّهَ بِدِينِكُمْ وَٱللَّهُ
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

Say: "Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything." (16)

يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا ۖ قُلْ لَا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُمْ ۖ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: "Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth." (17)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (18)

Refining Rough Manners

> *Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* starts with this first loving address that aims to alert hearts: "*Believers!*" It is an address by God to those who believe in Him, touching their hearts by highlighting the bond they have with Him, making them aware that they belong to Him, carry His mark, do His bidding and are His soldiers. They realize that they are in this world for a purpose He wants to accomplish. If He has made faith appealing to them and seem beautiful in their eyes, as part of His favour, it behoves them to stand

where He wants them to be, awaiting His orders and judgement. They should be glad to do His bidding in full submission to Him: *"Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 1)

Believers, do not make any suggestion to God or His Messenger, concerning any of your affairs or of life in general. Do not presume to have a say in any matter before God has stated, through His Messenger, what He wants concerning it. Do not attempt to judge any matter unless you first refer to what God and His Messenger say.

Qatādah says: "It has been reported that some people used to say: 'If there was some revelation concerning such and such,' or, 'If it could thus be true.' God disliked such suggestions." Al-'Awfī says: "They were told not to start speaking in his presence." Mujāhid says: "The verse orders believers not to precipitate what the Prophet might say. They must wait until God made His judgement clear through His Messenger." Al-Dhaḥḥāk says: "Do not make a judgement on any question relating to your faith without waiting for the judgement of God and His Messenger." Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said: "Do not say anything that is not in line with the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*."

Thus, we see that it is all a question of a psychological attitude defining the standards to be observed in relation to God and His Messenger, and the process by which instructions are received and carried out. This is an essential part of how Islamic law is enacted and implemented. It is all based on an essential God-fearing quality and its reinforcement. This quality stems from the awareness that God hears all and knows all. Furthermore, this all-embracing truth is incorporated into one single, short verse.

The believers applied this standard to their relationship with their Lord and His Messenger. None of them would ever presume to suggest anything to God or His Messenger. None would voice an opinion unless God's Messenger asked him to do so. None would make a judgement concerning any matter without first referring to what God and His Messenger said about it.

Imām Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate that the Prophet asked Mu'ādh when he appointed him Governor of Yemen: "How will you judge?" Mu'ādh said: "According to God's book." The

Prophet asked: "What if you do not find in it what you need?" Mu'ādh answered: "Then according to the Sunnah of God's Messenger." Again the Prophet asked: "And if you do not find something relevant in that?" Mu'ādh replied: "In this case, I will exercise my judgement as best as I can." The Prophet put his hand on Mu'ādh's chest and said: "Praise be to God for guiding the messenger of God's Messenger to what pleases His Messenger." After the revelation of this verse, the Prophet might ask his Companions about their day and the places they had been to, but even then, they would hesitate to give an answer other than: "God and His Messenger know best." They feared that a direct answer might be treated as presumption in the presence of God and His Messenger.

When Speaking to the Prophet

In a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Bakarah Nafī' ibn al-Ḥārith mentions that during his pilgrimage, the Prophet asked his Companions: "'Which month is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He was silent until we thought that he would give it a different name. But he said: 'Is it not Dhū'l-Ḥijjah?' We said: 'Yes.' He then asked: 'Which city is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Again, he was silent until we thought that he would call it by a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the sanctified city?' We said: 'Yes, indeed.' So he went on and asked: 'What day is today?' We replied: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Once more he remained silent until we thought that he would give it a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the day of sacrifice?' We answered in the affirmative..." This is, then, an example of the standard the Prophet's Companions achieved in their God-fearing manners when they heard this instruction coupled with the order to maintain their fear of God, who hears all and knows all.

The second aspect of good manners concerned the Prophet's Companions' own discourse with him and the respect they should feel and show. This was to be observed in how they spoke to him and in the level of their voices. This was how they should manifest their respect for the Prophet as they sat with him. As God drew their attention to this requirement, He addressed them by that quality they loved to have and warned them that violation of His orders might bring grievous

consequences in its wake: *"Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it."* (Verse 2)

This kindly address coupled with its awesome warning had their profound effect on the Prophet's Companions. Al-Bukhārī reports that Abū Mulaykah said: "The two goodly ones, Abū Bakr and 'Umar [may God be pleased with them], were in a perilous situation, as they raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet. When the delegation of the Tamīm tribe arrived [in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar] one of them suggested al-Aqra' ibn Ḥābis [to be appointed as their chief], while the other suggested another man. [One reporter says that he does not remember the name of this second man, while another reporter mentions that he was al-Qa'qā' ibn Ma'bad.] Abū Bakr said to 'Umar: 'You merely want to oppose me.' The other replied: 'I do not wish to oppose you.' They were soon speaking loudly. The verse was revealed saying: *'Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it.'* (Verse 2) Ibn al-Zubayr says that after its revelation 'Umar would hardly use an audible voice when he spoke to the Prophet until the Prophet asked him to speak up. It is also reported that when this verse was revealed, Abū Bakr said to the Prophet: 'God's Messenger, I will only speak to you in a whisper.'

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik that when this verse was revealed, Thābit ibn Qays, a man with a high-pitched voice thought: "I was the one who raised his voice in the presence of God's Messenger. I am destined to hell, because my deeds have come to waste." He stayed at home depressed. The Prophet noticed his absence and asked about him. Some people went to him and told him that the Prophet had asked about his absence. He said to them: "I am the one who raised his voice above the voice of the Prophet and spoke loudly to him. All my deeds are wasted. I am destined to hell." They went to the Prophet informing him of what Thābit had said. The Prophet said: "No. He certainly belongs to heaven." Anas says: "We subsequently saw him walking among us, knowing that he was certain to go to heaven."

Thus they felt a tremor in their hearts as they listened to this endearing address and its stern warning. Hence, they observed a high standard of fine manners in the Prophet's presence for fear that their deeds would come to nothing.

God praises their piety and lowered voices when they are with the Prophet in an unusual expression: *"Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them."* (Verse 3) Piety that manifests itself in a God-fearing attitude is a great gift God grants to certain hearts He chooses after initially testing them. It is thus implanted only in hearts that are suited to it, having first proven their merit. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are they who have proven themselves in a test of hearts. They are the ones who fear God, a quality that earns them forgiveness and a rich reward from God.

Here, then, is a tempting invitation that follows a stern warning. Both are part of how God educated and prepared his chosen servants for the great task that first generation of Muslims undertook.

It is reported that 'Umar heard two people speaking loudly in the Prophet's Mosque. He went to them and said: "Do you realize where you are? Where do you come from?" They said to him: "We come from Ṭā'if." He said: "Had you been from Madīnah, I would have had you soundly beaten."

Islamic scholars, having realized the extent of this injunction, state that it is reprehensible to raise one's voice near the Prophet's grave in the same way as it was reprehensible to do so in his presence. In this way, Muslims demonstrate their respect for the Prophet in all situations.

The ninth year of the Islamic calendar is called 'The year of delegations' because delegations from all over Arabia arrived in Madīnah to embrace Islam and pledge their loyalty to the Prophet. The *sūrah* refers to an incident that took place that year when the delegation of Tamīm arrived. These were unrefined Bedouins. They shouted to the Prophet from outside his wives' apartments that were situated next to the mosque: "Muḥammad, come out and speak to us!" The Prophet disliked their uncivilized manner. Hence, the next verse of the *sūrah* was revealed: *"Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience*

to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful." (Verses 4–5)

Thus does God describe most of them as being without reason. He censures their calling out to the Prophet in a way that is contrary to the sort of respect that should be shown to God's Messenger, the leader and educator of the community of believers. He explains to them that it better behoved them to wait patiently until the Prophet came out to them of his own accord. Furthermore, the *sūrah* highlights to them the value of repentance, making it clear that they should seek God's forgiveness and pray to Him to bestow His mercy on them.

Muslims have shown their awareness of this high standard of refinement, extending it to every teacher and scholar. They would not disturb their teachers or impose themselves on them until they came out or called them in. Abū 'Ubayd, a pious and reliable scholar of *Ḥadīth*, says: "I never knocked at the door of any scholar, but waited patiently until he came out in his own good time."

Making Sure Before Taking Action

> *Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.* (Verses 6–8)

The first address in the *sūrah* defines the leadership and the source from which to receive orders. The second establishes the standards of manners and respect to be maintained in dealing with this leadership. Both serve as the basis for all legislations and directives that follow in the *sūrah*. It is imperative for the source and the leadership to be well defined so that directives and instructions be given their true value and

so that they are properly obeyed. Hence, the third address explains to the believers how to receive news and reports and the need to verify their reliability. *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."* (Verse 6)

The verse specifically mentions the evildoer because he is more likely to lie. It is important that suspicion should not be widely spread in the Muslim community. If every report is doubted, the system of gathering intelligence and information becomes paralyzed. In a Muslim community, individuals are normally treated as trustworthy, and the information they bring is considered reliable. An evildoer is treated differently: his information is not accepted until it is verified. Thus, the community steers a middle way between accepting and rejecting the information relayed to it. The community does not rush into action on the basis of a report given by someone whose behaviour leaves much to be desired. Such rash action might lead to committing a wrong against other people, and subsequent regret. Furthermore, such rash action may incur God's displeasure and put the community in a position of committing an injustice.

A number of commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse specifically referred to al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah ibn Abū Mu'ayṭ when the Prophet sent him to collect *zakāt* from the tribe of al-Muṣṭalaq. Ibn Kathīr quotes a report by Mujāhid and Qatādah, stating: "God's Messenger sent al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah to al-Muṣṭalaq tribe to collect their *zakāt* and they paid it to him. When he returned he reported to the Prophet that the tribe was raising a force to attack the Muslims. [In his report, Qatādah also states that al-Walīd added that the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe had renounced the Islamic faith.] The Prophet then sent Khālid ibn al-Walīd to them, ordering him to make sure of the information before taking any action. Khālid so went out to them arriving at night and sending out a number of soldiers to gather information. When they returned, they reported to him that the tribe were adhering to their Islamic faith and that they heard the call to prayer and saw people praying. In the morning, Khālid made his appearance at the tribe's quarters and saw what pleased him. He then returned to the Prophet and reported all this to him. Thereafter, this verse was then revealed."

Qatādah says that the Prophet used to say afterwards: "Verification complies with God's orders, while haste comes from Satan."

The import of this verse is general, making it clear that checking the accuracy of reports given by suspect people is necessary. On the other hand, a report by a God-fearing person is taken as correct, because this is the normal state of affairs in the Muslim community. A report by an evildoer is the exception, not the norm. Indeed, accepting reports by God-fearing people is part of proper verification and checking. To make doubt the norm, applicable to all sources and reports, is contrary to the principle of trust that is basic to the Muslim community. Furthermore, it could easily cause disruption in its life. Islam allows life to run its normal course while putting in place certain controls that guarantee its protection. Here we see how this operates in practice.

Making Life Too Hard

It appears that some Muslims wanted to take immediate action when they heard the first news reported by al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah. They advised the Prophet to immediately punish the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe. In doing so, they were motivated by a keen desire to ensure the status of Islam and to act against those who refused to pay *zakāt*. The next verse reminds them of the great blessing they had, namely the Prophet's presence in their midst. They should appreciate this blessing and be always mindful of its importance: "*And know that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7)

This is a reality that we can very easily imagine because it actually happened. However, when we reflect on it, we see that it is superior, beyond imagination. Is it easy to imagine a continuous, dynamic contact between heaven and earth, witnessed by all, whereby heaven speaks to people on earth about their public and private affairs, correcting their errors one by one, and giving them advice about their most intimate affairs? Any one of them might do or say something, or even entertain a thought, and yet heaven is aware of it all. What happens next is that God informs His Messenger of what has taken place and directs him to do or say whatever is necessary about it. This is something so great that it might not be fully appreciated by some of those present at the time. Hence, they are reminded of it in this particular way: "*And know*

that God's Messenger is among you." (Verse 7) In other words, be aware of this fact and give it its due importance.

One outcome of this new-found knowledge is that they must not act presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. The Qur'ān, however, puts this even more lucidly and forcefully, telling the Muslims that what God's Messenger decides on any matter, on the basis of God's revelation or inspiration, is good for them as it combines ease and mercy. Had God's Messenger obeyed all their thoughts, they would have found matters far more difficult. God is more aware than them of what is of benefit to them. His Messenger represents mercy in everything he chooses for them: "*Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm.*" (Verse 7) This implies that they should leave all their affairs in the hands of God and His Messenger. They should submit fully, surrendering themselves to God's will, implementing His orders as they receive them, and suggesting nothing to God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* then draws their attention to the grace of faith He guided them to, making their hearts warm to it as He revealed its beauty and benefit such that they would love it dearly. He has also made unbelief, wrongdoing and sin hateful to them. All this is part of God's grace which He bestows on them: "*But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 7–8)

That God should select certain individuals from among His servants and grant them all this represents His immeasurable bounty and grace. Indeed, all other types of grace and bounty, including that which brings people into existence and gives them life, seem to dwindle by comparison to what faith represents. Later in the *sūrah* we will look in detail at God's words: "*It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17)

What is particularly significant here is that they are reminded that it is God who has willed that they should have all this bounty. It is He who has rid their hearts of all the evil of unbelief, wrongdoing and sin. It is He who willed that they should follow the right course, bestowing

on them His favours and bounty. All this He does in His wisdom and full knowledge of the truth. Again stating this truth implies that they should submit themselves to God's direction and planning, trusting that it is always for their own good. They should stop making suggestions and rushing hastily into what they consider to be good, before God has made His choice for them. God's Messenger takes them by the hand to gain all this goodness.

Man is hasty, but he is unaware of the likely consequences of his precipitate action. Man may also make suggestions concerning his own or other people's affairs, without knowing whether his suggestions will bring benefit or cause harm: "*Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty.*" (17: 11) If man would only submit himself to God, accepting what God chooses for him, knowing that God's choice is better, more compassionate and beneficial for him than what he may choose for himself, he would be much more comfortable. He would complete this short journey on this planet with ease and contentment. But this is also an aspect of God's grace which He grants to whomever He wills.

Fighting Between Muslim Believers

> *If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.* (Verses 9–10)

This is a practical rule to protect the community of believers from strife resulting from excesses and hard feelings. This rule is given immediately after the requirement to verify the reports given by evildoers, making sure that the believers do not rush into action that may be counterproductive. Whether this verse was revealed in consequence

of a particular case, as some reports suggest, or whether it was merely initiating a piece of legislation to outline what the Muslim community should do in such cases, it nonetheless provides a general and highly effective rule that stamps out strife and ensures solidarity within the Muslim community. It also establishes justice, rightness and fairness. All this is based on believers being God-fearing and their hope that He will bestow His grace on a community that deals with justice and works for reconciliation.

The Qur'ān either supposes or confronts the possibility of two groups of believers taking up arms against each other, yet it accepts that both are believers, even though one of them, or indeed both of them, may be in the wrong. It requires the Muslim community, other than the two fighting groups, to work for reconciliation between the two. But if one of them acts wrongfully, refusing to give up what it has no right to claim, or indeed if both act wrongfully, refusing reconciliation or refusing to abide by God's law over that which they dispute, then the believers must fight those who act wrongfully until they revert to God's commandment. The commandment at issue here is the ending of strife and conflict between believers and accepting God's judgement over anything contentious. Should those acting wrongfully revert to God's commandment, then the believers should establish reconciliation based on strict justice and equity, in obedience of God and seeking His pleasure: "*God loves those who act equitably.*" (Verse 9)

This judgement is followed by a touch that aims to bring out genuine feelings of brotherhood among believers. It is the bond that unites them after they have fallen out. They are also reminded of the need to always be God-fearing, suggesting that this is the only way to earn His grace. "*All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verse 10)

The correlation of this is that love, peace, cooperation and unity are the essential characteristics of a Muslim community. Conflict and fighting are exceptions that must be dealt with as soon as they occur in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. For this end, it is permissible for other Muslims to fight those of their brethren who act

wrongfully towards others; this so as to bring them back into the fold and restore the proper situation. This is certainly a tough and decisive measure.

This rule also provides that no wounded man in such battles may be finished off, and no captive may be killed. Those who lay down their arms and flee the battlefield cannot be pursued. Furthermore, the property of the group in the wrong may not be looted. The purpose of fighting them is not to finish them off, but rather to bring them back into line with the rest of the Muslim community.

In the right order of things, all Muslims of the world should have one leader. Once a pledge of loyalty is given to a leader to rule over the Muslim community as a whole, and another person claims such leadership for himself, this claimant should be killed. He and his supporters are considered rebels whom believers should fight alongside their leader. It was on this basis that Imām ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib fought those who rebelled in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. Many of the Prophet's distinguished Companions fought alongside him. However, a small number including Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Muḥammad ibn Maslamah, Usāmah ibn Zayd and ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿUmar chose not to engage in the battle, either because they could not determine which side was right or because, as al-Jaṣṣāṣ says, they felt that Imām ʿAlī had clear superiority and hence their absence would not affect the result. The first probability is clearly the stronger, especially as this is borne out by some of their reported statements. Ibn ʿUmar, for example, is reported to have expressed regret for not fighting alongside ʿAlī.

This proper state of affairs, whereby the Muslims have only one leader, should be the norm in all situations, including those exceptional situations when two or more political rulers are in power in different and separate Muslim areas. It is the duty of Muslims to fight on the side of the single ruler against the group acting wrongfully, if they rebel against his authority, or if one group acts wrongfully towards another group without rebelling against the Muslim ruler *per se*. It is also the duty of Muslims to fight such rebels if they affiliate themselves to a political ruler in a situation where more than one Muslim ruler is in power. All Muslims must close ranks and stand against those acting wrongfully

until they revert to God's commandment. In this way, this text remains operational in all situations.

It is clear that this system, based on arbitration and fighting the group in the wrong until they revert to God's commandment, precedes all human attempts in this regard. Moreover, it is free of all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in defective human endeavours. Moreover, it incorporates qualities of purity, honesty and absolute justice. The arbitration that it calls for is based on operating God's orders, which are equitable, free of any prejudice and defect. Alas for mankind! They look on, but go away limping and stumbling when the clear, paved and straight way beckons to them.

No Ridicule, Defamation or Insult

> *Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verse 11)

The human society Islam establishes in the light of Qur'ānic guidance operates a high standard of manners. Every individual in this society has his or her integrity, which may not be compromised. Indeed, it is part of the integrity of the whole community. To slander anyone is to slander oneself, because the whole community is a single entity and its integrity is one.

In this verse, the Qur'ān again addresses the believers by their most beloved description, "*Believers*". It forbids that one group should deride another, be they men deriding other men, or women deriding other women. For how can they know whether or not the ones they deride enjoy a better status with God?

The way this order is expressed suggests that the apparent values that men or women may consider important may not be those that

give people their real status. There are other values, which people may not know about. These are known to God who operates them in fairness. A rich man may deride a poor one. Similarly, those who are strong, enjoying good health, intelligence, children and support, may deride those who are less fortunate than themselves, such as those who are weak, handicapped, simple-minded, childless or orphans without support. A woman who sees herself as pretty, young, perfectly shaped, or rich may deride another for being ugly, old, misshaped, or poor. But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. In God's sight, people are raised in rank on the basis of totally different values.

The Qur'ān, however, does not stop at implying this. It works on the sentiment of brotherhood in faith, reminding the believers that they descend from a single soul. Whoever defames anyone actually defames all. Hence, the Qur'ān says: *"Neither shall you defame yourselves."* (Verse 11) It should be mentioned that the word the Qur'ān uses for defaming, *talmizū*, has a particular resonance that imparts a feeling that also has a physical effect.

Part of derision and defamation is to call others names that they dislike, or feel to be meant as ridicule. It is the right of a believer not to be called by a name that he or she dislikes, or feels to suggest disrespect. Moreover, Islamic standards require a believer not to call a brother or a sister by such a name that gives them pain. The Prophet changed the names or nicknames of some of his Companions because he felt, with his refined sense and compassionate heart, that they could bring ridicule or pain to the people concerned.

Having outlined the true values in God's measure, and appealed to feelings of brotherhood and of belonging to one soul, the *sūrah* now reaches out to the believers' sense of faith, warning them that they will lose this noble quality if they indulge in derision and ridicule: *"Nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed."* (Verse 11) To indulge in this is akin to renouncing faith after one has believed. The *sūrah* goes even further than this by threatening to consider this an act of wrongdoing, something that is often expressed in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God. *"Those who do*

not repent are indeed wrongdoers." (Verse 11) Thus, the *sūrah* establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community.

No Suspicion or Backbiting

> *Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.* (Verse 12)

This verse establishes yet another fence in this noble society, protecting the integrity and freedom of individuals, while at the same time teaching people how to cleanse their feelings and consciences. Following the pattern of the *sūrah*, it begins with the endearing address, "*Believers*". It follows this by issuing an order to avoid most suspicion, so that they do not leave themselves open to thoughts of doubt about others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Since the prohibition applies to most suspicion and the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, then the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided, because no one knows which part of his or her doubts are sinful.

Thus the Qur'ān purges a Muslim's inner conscience so that it is not contaminated with evil suspicion and consequently incurs sin. It leaves it clean, free of doubt, entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts towards one's brethren. In this way it steers society away from suspicion so that the community enjoys reassurance and is not marred by worry and apprehension. Life in a community where ill thoughts have no place is both serene and comfortable.

Islam does not, however, stop at this point in educating people's hearts and souls. The verse we are looking at establishes a principle that applies to people's dealings with each other. It protects the rights of those who live in its pure society so that they are not punished or tried on the basis of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion does not even form a proper basis for interrogating people or investigating their affairs. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If you have doubts, do not investigate." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.] What this means is that people remain innocent, enjoying

all their rights, freedom and status until it is absolutely clear that they have committed some offence. It is not sufficient just to suspect them of having committed something so they are then pursued with the aim of establishing whether they are guilty or not.

This verse shows us the limit to which Islam goes in protecting people's freedom, integrity, rights and status. How does this compare with what even the best democratic countries boast of with regard to protecting human rights? This standard, which the Qur'ān sets for believers, is far superior indeed. Moreover, Islam achieves this in real life, after it establishes it in people's hearts and consciences.

The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: "*And do not spy on one another.*" (Verse 12) Spying may be an action that follows immediately on entertaining suspicion. On the other hand, it may be an independent action that seeks to look at other people's faults and errors. The Qur'ān opposes spying because it is morally base. It aims to purge people's hearts from sinking into this vile pursuit in order to keep up its high moral standards.

Yet the order goes beyond this. It states an essential principle of the Islamic social system and its legislative measures. People are entitled to have their freedom and integrity respected. These should not be violated or encroached upon in any way.

In an Islamic society people enjoy a high standard of values. They enjoy security in their lives, homes and personal affairs. Nothing whatsoever justifies any violation of these. Indeed, the investigation of a crime does not provide, in the Islamic system, justification for spying on people. We take people by their appearances, and no one is entitled to delve into others' affairs. Indeed, people may not be taken to task except for what is evident of their offences. No one may suspect, anticipate or even know that others are secretly committing some violation and resort to spying on them so as to establish this as a fact or to catch them red-handed. All that may be done against such people is that they be put to trial when they actually commit a crime.

Some people said to 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet: "We saw this man with his beard dripping wine." He said: "We have been forbidden to spy. If we see something

evident, we act on it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] Mujāhid says: "Do not spy on one another. Take people on the basis of what is apparent and do not look into what God has left concealed."

Imām Aḥmad quotes Dujayn, a clerk employed by 'Uqbah, saying: "I said to 'Uqbah that we have neighbours who drink and I want to call the police to take them to account." He said to me: "Do not do that. What you should do is to advise and warn them." Dujayn did this but his neighbours persisted in their prohibited ways. So he said to 'Uqbah again: "I have warned them, but they will not desist. I am calling the police." 'Uqbah said to him: "Do not do that. I heard the Prophet say: 'Whoever keeps to himself a fault of another believer is like one who rescues a girl buried alive.'" [Also related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

Abū Dāwūd quotes Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān as saying: "I heard the Prophet saying: 'If you pursue people's faults you corrupt them, or almost corrupt them'." Abū al-Dardā', a learned Companion of the Prophet, said: "This is a word Mu'āwiyah has heard from the Prophet, and God has enabled him to benefit by it."

Thus was the divine order implemented in practical life. It did not stop at being a form of practical education to purge hearts and consciences. It became like a fence protecting people's rights, freedom and sanctity, so that they could not be touched under any pretext. Far superior is this level to any achieved today, 1,400 years later, even by those societies which respect human rights and freedom most.

Next comes the order that forbids backbiting. This is given in such a way that it provides a graphic description of the disgusting nature of this action: *"Nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it."* (Verse 12) The order tells Muslims that they must not backbite. It then paints a scene that fills even the most insensitive of people with disgust, showing someone eating his dead brother's flesh. It immediately declares that they have, of course, a very strong and natural aversion to such behaviour. Hence, they also have a strong aversion against backbiting.

Following all these prohibitions against suspicion, spying and backbiting, the *sūrah* awakens believers' God-fearing instinct, inviting

anyone who has committed any of these unlawful acts to hasten and repent in the hope of God's mercy: *"And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

Once again we say that this text is meant in practice to be like a high boundary protecting people's sanctity and integrity. It provides Muslims with a profound sense of morality. The Prophet follows the Qur'ān's example in making backbiting appear so disgusting. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet was asked to define backbiting. He said: "To say about your brother something he dislikes." Someone asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother." The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of wilful defamation." [Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic.]

'Ā'ishah reports that she said to the Prophet: "It is enough that Ṣafiyyah [another wife of the Prophet] is so and so [referring to the fact that she is short]." The Prophet said to her: "You have said a word that would contaminate the entire volume of seawater." She added that she imitated someone to him, but he said: "I would rather not imitate anyone, even if I would get so and so for it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Anas ibn Mālik quotes the Prophet as saying: "When I was taken on my ascension to heaven, I passed by people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. I said: 'Gabriel, who are these?' He said: 'These are the ones who eat the flesh of others and detract from their honour.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Mā'iz and the Ghāmidī woman confessed to the Prophet that they had committed adultery, insisting that the Prophet should administer the mandatory punishment to cleanse them. Hence he ordered that they be stoned. The Prophet subsequently heard one man say to another: "Have you seen this man whose offence God has concealed? Yet he insisted on being punished until he was stoned like a dog." The Prophet marched on with his Companions and soon passed by a dead donkey. He asked for the two men, and when they came forward, he said to them: "Get down and eat of this." Shocked, the two men said: "May God forgive you, Messenger of God! Is this something to be eaten?" He said: "What you said about your brother a short while ago is even more disgusting

than eating of this. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, he is now in heaven being bathed in its waters." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.]

With such consistent treatment the Muslim community was purged and attained its high standard. It became like a dream that came true, a model to be followed and relished.

The Brotherhood of Mankind

Having addressed the believers in such a way as to elevate them to a superior level of refined manners and morality, the *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, of all races, colours and communities, reminding them that they all share one origin. One standard applies to them all: it is the same one that elevates the Muslim community to its superior level of unparalleled purity.

> *Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.* (Verse 13)

All of you people, who present such different races and colours, communities and tribes, come from one origin. Hence, you should not divide into groups or fall out with each other and so waste your energy.

Mankind! You are being called by the One who created you out of a male and a female to inform you of the purpose of making you into nations and tribes. It is not so that you stir up conflict and enmity. It is rather for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together. Differences of language, colour, temperament, manners, talents and abilities do not lead to conflict and strife. In fact, they make for cooperation so that all tasks are fulfilled and all needs met. Colour, race, language, homeland and similar factors are of no importance in God's sight. There is only one criterion to determine people's worth: "*The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is*

most genuinely God-fearing." (Verse 13) Noble indeed is the one who is noble in God's sight. He gives you your value on the basis of His perfect knowledge and His awareness of values and measures: "*God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13) Thus all dividing factors and values are discounted leaving only one measure and one value by which all mankind are tested.

Thus all reasons for conflict and quarrel on earth disappear, all considerations coveted by human beings lose their value. In their place, an important and distinctly clear reason for friendship and cooperation looms large: that is, God's Lordship of all and the fact that He has created all mankind from the same origin. A single banner is raised so that all compete to line up under it. That is the banner of fearing God alone. This is the banner raised by Islam in order to save humanity from the evil consequences of fanatic bonds of race, homeland, tribe, clan, family, etc. All these belong to the world of ignorance, or *Jāhiliyyah*, although they may take up different names, colours and fashions. In essence, though, they are ties of ignorance that have nothing to do with Islam.

Islam has fought ignorant fanaticism in all its forms and shapes so as to establish its world system under God's banner alone. In Islam, banners of nationality and race have neither place nor value. The Prophet said: "All of you descend from Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. Those people who seek pride in their ancestry should desist, or else God will bring them as low as beetles, or even lower." [Related by al-Bazzār on the authority of Hudhayfah.] Referring to the bonds valued in pre-Islamic days, the Prophet said: "Leave these altogether, because they stink." [Related by Muslim.]

This is the foundation of Islamic society: a human and global society. Humanity may stretch all its imagination and exert its best efforts to achieve even one aspect of it, but it fails because it does not follow the clear and straight road leading to it, as defined by God, and because it does not raise God's banner which unites us all.

The Meaning of True Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it fittingly explains the truth of faith in reply to those Bedouins who claimed to be believers when they did not

even understand the nature of faith. This also serves as a reply to those who tried to press their acceptance of Islam as a favour they thought they did for the Prophet. In essence, they do not appreciate that it is only through God's favour that people believe.

> *The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: 'Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.' They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verses 14–18)

The first of these verses is said to have been revealed in relation to the Bedouins of the Asad tribe who, as soon as they accepted Islam, boasted saying, 'We have attained to faith.' They even counted this as a favour they performed for the Prophet. They said to him: "Messenger of God! We have become Muslims. Other Arabs have fought you, but we have not." God wanted to show them the truth of what was in their hearts when they said this, stating that they only embraced Islam in submission while the truth of faith had not touched their hearts or souls. "*Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts.*'" (Verse 14)

Nevertheless, God's grace has dictated that they will be rewarded for every good action they do, letting nothing go to waste. Even the outward manifestation of Islam, which has not yet penetrated into people's hearts to become genuine faith, is sufficient to make their

good deeds count and be recorded. Thus, their deeds are not wasted like those of unbelievers. No part of their reward is wasted as long as they continue to obey: "*If you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 14) This is because God is quick to grant forgiveness and bestow His mercy. He accepts from His servant the first step and rewards him for submission and obedience while waiting until faith settles in his heart: "*God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.*" (Verse 14)

God then explains to them the nature of genuine belief: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15)

True faith, then, means that deep in one's heart one believes in God and His Messenger, admitting no doubt or faltering. It is a solid, unshaken belief that allows no hesitation or oscillation. Moreover, it is a belief that motivates people to strive hard for God's cause, sacrificing their possessions and their lives. When a person's heart experiences the beauty of this belief and has the reassurance bred by such experience, he or she will take the necessary action to establish its meaning beyond their own hearts and souls, i.e. in real human life. They want to bring about union and harmony between the truth of faith they feel in their hearts and what takes place in the world around them. They simply will not tolerate any discordance between faith and practice, because such discordance jars at every moment. Hence, striving for God's cause, laying down one's life and possessions in order to achieve its goals. It is, then, a self-motivated action that aims to transfer the bright and enlightened image one sees in one's heart into practical human life. The rift between a believer and the worldly life around him based on *jāhiliyyah* is an inherent rift caused by the fact that a believer cannot lead a life of double standards, one based on faith and the other on people's practices. Similarly, he cannot give up his sound and beautiful concept of faith in favour of a practical model that is deficient, ugly and deviant. Hence, a confrontation with ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is inevitable, until it gives up and adopts the light of faith.

"*Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15) They are true in their faith, and true to their claims that they are believers. Unless those feelings in a believer's heart are a reality, bringing tangible effects into practical life, faith remains theoretical.

We need to reflect a little on the precautionary note in this verse: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt.*" (Verse 15) This point about never entertaining doubt is not a merely additional clause. It points to a real experience and provides treatment for a condition that may arise even after one has truly believed. The way this is phrased is significant, *'and never then entertained any doubt.'* A similar precautionary note is seen in the verse that says: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way...*" (41: 30) The need to entertain no doubt and the need for the steadfast pursuit of the right way points to what a believing soul may experience under severe pressure and testing hardship. Doubt or hesitation may creep in. A believer may have to deal with severely testing times and calamities that shake the very foundation of his world. Hence, the one who remains steadfast, entertaining no doubt and pursuing the right way in all situations is the one who deserves high rank with God.

Putting the fact in this way alerts believers' hearts to the slips and risks in their way. This enables them to take precautions, prepare themselves to withstand any hardship that comes their way, and maintain their course even in the face of the most adverse circumstances.

The *sūrah* continues its address to the Bedouins, telling them that God knows what is in their hearts. Furthermore, He can tell them what they harbour in their minds, without waiting for them to tell Him:

> *Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 16)

Man may profess to have knowledge, yet he neither knows nor understands himself or his feelings. The human mind does not know how it works because it cannot monitor its own working. When the mind monitors itself, it stops working naturally, and thus it has nothing

to monitor. When it performs its natural work, the human mind cannot at the same time do any monitoring. Hence it is unable to know its own nature or how it functions. Yet it is his mind that man boasts of, giving it a superior status.

"*God knows all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verse 16) His is a perfect knowledge that comprehends the very nature of everything in the heavens and the earth. His knowledge is not based on appearances and effects, but on a perfect knowledge of the nature of things that is independent of time and free of any limitation. Moreover, "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 16) This encompasses the entire universe and everything in it.

God's Real Favour

Having explained the true nature of faith, the *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, referring to those Bedouins and how they asserted that they had done the Prophet a favour by accepting Islam. This very action is clear evidence that the nature of faith had not yet penetrated their hearts. They had not yet experienced the beauty of faith:

> *They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.'* (Verse 17)

This answer clearly tells them that they cannot hold this as a favour and that if they truly believe, then they owe a great favour to God who has guided them to it.

We should reflect on this answer, because it highlights a very important fact, one that most people, including some believers, overlook. Faith is the supreme favour God grants to anyone of His servants on earth. It is indeed greater than man's very existence, which is a favour God grants to man in the first place. It is also superior to what relates to existence, such as the provision of sustenance, health and adornment. It is the favour that gives human existence a distinctive entity, and assigns to man a great role in the system of the universe.

The first thing that faith gives man, when it settles firmly in his heart, is a broader vision of the universe, how it relates to him, and his role in it; an accurate criterion with which to know the essence of values, people and events; genuine reassurance as he embarks on his journey through this planet up to the time when he meets his Lord; a friendly relation with everything around him in the universe; a warm, interactive relationship with God who has created him and the universe; a feeling that he is honoured and that he is fulfilling an important role to please God and to bring goodness to this universe and to all who live in it. A manifestation of this broad vision is that man breaks out of the narrow confinements of his own small and weak entity to function on the stage of the universe, with all its inherent forces and secrets.

In relation to his own kind, man is an individual of a humanity that goes back to a single origin, which, in the first place, acquired its distinction from God's spirit which was breathed into this creature made of clay so as to bring him into contact with the divine light. This is a light that is not confined to a heaven or earth, has neither a beginning nor an end, and knows no limit of time or place. It is this free factor that has made man what he is. It is enough that this concept is properly appreciated by man in order that he begins to have a better appreciation of his position of honour and to feel this light, even as he walks on earth. His heart will then certainly have wings of light to carry him to the original source of light that gives his life its distinctive character.

In as far as his affiliation is concerned, he, as an individual, belongs to the single community of believers that stretches over the centuries, forming a noble procession led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and their brethren prophets [peace be upon them all]. When this fact is fully appreciated by anyone, they feel themselves to be a branch of a great tree with deep roots and widely stretching boughs. This feeling gives believers a different taste of life, one that imparts to it a sense of nobility.

Man's vision thus becomes even broader so as to transcend his own entity, his community and the human race as a whole. He begins to see this whole existence as it originates with God, from the breathing of whose spirit he has become a man. His faith then tells him that this universe is a living entity, composed of countless other living entities.

Everything in this universe, including the universe itself, has a spirit. Like his own spirit, all these spirits turn to their Creator with prayer, glorification, praise, submission and obedience. Thus, in this universe, a believer feels himself to be an inseparable part of a complete whole. He belongs to his Creator, his soul turns to Him and he eventually returns to Him. Thus, he feels himself to be bigger and greater than his own limited world. He is bigger in relation to his vision of this great universe. He thus feels befriended by all the spirits around him, and beyond that befriended by God who looks after him. He then feels himself able to have a bond with this universe and to grow in stature in relation to it. He can do many things, initiate great events, influence and be influenced by all around him, and can derive strength from the Supreme Power that initiated him as well as all forces and powers in the universe. That is the Power that never weakens, shrinks or disappears.

All For a Definite Purpose

From this broad vision a believer derives new standards and criteria to evaluate things, events, people, concerns, values and goals. He recognizes his true role in the universe and his task in this life. He looks at himself as a manifestation of God's will who sets him on his course to bring about whatever end He has determined. Thus, a believer continues his life on earth with clear vision, steady step and easy conscience. This knowledge gives believers what they feel of serenity, reassurance and delight with what takes place around them, including what happens to them. They have true answers to their questions: Where have they come from, and why? Where are they going, and what will they find there? They know that they are in this life for a particular purpose, and that whatever happens to them serves to bring about that purpose. They know that this life is the testing ground for the life to come; that they will be requited for every action they do, major or minor, and that they have not been created in vain, will not be abandoned or left to travel alone.

When we have such knowledge, all worries, doubts and feelings of insecurity disappear. After all, they are due to ignorance, on the part of those expressing or experiencing them, of our origin and destiny,

unawareness of what lies ahead in our way, and lack of trust in the purpose behind our existence and life journey. We will have no more feelings like those described by 'Umar al-Khayyām who says:

> Into this universe and *why* not knowing
> Nor, *whence*, like willy-nilly flowing;
> And out of it as wind along the waste,
> I know not *wither*, willy-nilly blowing.

Believers know that they wear the garment of life by God's will, and that God runs the universe, conducting all its affairs, with wisdom and knowledge. They also know that the hand that made them wear this garment is much wiser and more compassionate than they. Hence, there is no need to consult others, because they could not give a sound opinion like that which belongs to the Owner of that hand who knows all and sees all. They know that they are given this garment of life to wear in order to fulfil a certain role in the universe, being influenced by, and leaving their own influence on all things in it. This role is harmonious with all the other roles assigned to all other creatures from the beginning of life to its end.

Thus believers know why they have come to this life and to where they are heading. They do not experience any loss as they try to understand. They complete their journey, fulfilling their role, with trust and reassurance. They may even attain a higher degree of faith that enables them to carry on with their journey and the fulfilment of their role, with delight and happiness, feeling the great bounty God has given them. This is the bounty of life, or its garment, given to them by God, the most generous, the compassionate. This is the bounty of their role, which they fulfil regardless of what they may encounter of hardship, until they return to their Lord.

Similarly, feelings like those I myself experienced during a period of loss and worry also disappear. That was before I began to live 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān', when God took me by the hand and placed me under His blessed care. These were feelings that my tired soul imparted at the time to the entire universe and I expressed those feelings in poetry saying:

The universe stood there, not knowing which way it should go;
And why, and where, if at all, it should go;
It is all a waste, a child's play, and an aimless effort;
And it ends up in a masked destiny that gives no satisfaction.

Today, however, I know that, by God's grace, there is no aimless effort or wasted action, because every action and every effort will have its fruits and gain its reward. That same destiny will also give great satisfaction, because it is left to the One who is most just, most merciful. I also feel today, by the grace of God, that the universe never stands in that miserable position, because the soul of the universe believes in its Lord, turns to Him in glorification and praise. The universe operates in accordance with the law God has set for it, obedient, contented and submissive.

This is a great gain in the realm of feeling and thought, in the physical world of body and mind, as well as in the practical world of action and mutual influence.

Besides, faith is a great motivating force. When it is settled in a person's heart, it begins to work, fulfil itself and bring about perfect harmony between its inner image and its appearance. It takes control over all human motivations and harnesses them along the way. This is the secret of the strength of faith in the human soul and the power one gains through faith. It is the secret underlying the miracles faith has achieved in this world, and continues to achieve every day: miracles that change the whole appearance of life from one day to another. It is faith that motivates both the individual and the community to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to gain success in the greater and everlasting life to come. Furthermore, it is faith that gives an ordinary individual, with little or no support, the means to stand up to oppressive forces and to both temptation and persecution. All these forces are easily vanquished when they face the motivating power of faith in the heart of a single believer. It is not the individual that achieves success over all these forces; it is the great power that derives from the spirit of faith which is akin to a powerfully flowing and inexhaustible spring.

The miracles achieved through faith in the life of the individual and the community do not rely on mysterious myth, vision or superstition.

Instead, they are the result of well-defined causes and well-established rules. Faith is holistic: it is the force that establishes the relationship between man and the apparent and subtle forces in the universe, giving his soul trust and reassurance. It also gives the believer the ability to confront worldly powers and situations with the strength of one who is certain of victory, trusting to God's help. It makes it clear to the individual believer his relations with other people, events and situations, outlining for him his direction, way and goal. It harnesses all his strengths and potentials to direct them all to a clear goal, so that he moves towards it with force, confidence and reassurance.

What makes faith doubly powerful is that it operates along the same line that the universe follows in its deep and surface parts. Indeed, all the powers that work in the universe follow a direction set by faith. Thus, as they move along their way, believers meet these powers in their great march to give the truth its victory over falsehood, no matter how powerful the latter may appear.

God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17) Indeed faith is the supreme favour that can only be granted by God the Bounteous to whomever He knows to be deserving of it.

God certainly tells the truth! Does anyone who has had the privilege of knowing all these facts, meanings and feelings, experienced them to the full and lived through them in this present world ever feel that he has missed out on anything? Conversely, what does the one who misses out on all these gain, even though he may live in comfort and luxury? He may eat as he pleases, but animals also eat, although animals are better off because by their nature they submit to their Lord and turn towards their Creator.

> *God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verse 18)

The One who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth also knows what is hidden in people's innermost souls. He knows people's

feelings and sees what they do. He does not derive His knowledge from the words they say, but from the feelings they harbour in their hearts and the actions that confirm their feelings.

Thus we come to the conclusion of this *sūrah*, comprising 18 verses, but delineating the features of a noble and pure world, outlining great truths and establishing them in people's inner consciences.

SŪRAH 50

Qāf

Prologue

The Prophet used to read this *sūrah* when he delivered a sermon on ʿĪd occasions and before Friday prayers, making it the theme and the content of his speech for large audiences. It is certainly a momentous *sūrah*, outlining fundamental facts, using a strong rhythm, powerful expressions, clearly-delineated images, highlighted connotations and emphatic verse endings. It addresses our hearts and minds from all angles putting before us the truth that we are always under God's watchful eye, from birth to death, and then to the time of resurrection, gathering and reckoning. This is an ever-present watch of man at all times, losing nothing and overlooking nothing. Every breath, fleeting thought and feeling is known; every uttered word is recorded; every move is monitored. This complete watch accounts for thoughts and actions alike; nothing escapes it, and nothing is hidden from it. It monitors secret whispers in the same way as it records what is done in broad daylight.

All these are well-known facts. However, the *sūrah* outlines them here in a way that shows them to be totally new, with surprising effects that combine apprehension with wonder. It shakes us powerfully alerting us to a momentous event, about which we have thus far been oblivious. It uses images of life, death, decay and subsequent resurrection. It touches

on our expectations of life after death. It refers to a host of universal truths in the heavens and earth, water and plants, fruits ripening individually and in clusters. It all "*serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8)

It is very difficult to give a summary of this *sūrah*, as also list its main points, or outline the ideas discussed and the images portrayed in any manner of speech other than their original Qur'ānic style and expression. Therefore, we will proceed straightaway to our discussion of the *sūrah*, praying for God's help.

Qāf

سُورَةُ ق

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Qāf. By the glorious Qur'ān. (1)

قٓ ۚ وَٱلْقُرْءَانِ ٱلْمَجِيدِ ﴿١﴾

But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! (2)

بَلْ عَجِبُوٓا۟ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَقَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ﴿٢﴾

When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.' (3)

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ۖ ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌۢ بَعِيدٌ ﴿٣﴾

We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record. (4)

قَدْ عَلِمْنَا مَا تَنقُصُ ٱلْأَرْضُ مِنْهُمْ ۖ وَعِندَنَا كِتَٰبٌ حَفِيظٌۢ ﴿٤﴾

Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion. (5)

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ فَهُمْ فِىٓ أَمْرٍ مَّرِيجٍ ﴿٥﴾

Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it. (6)

أَفَلَمْ يَنظُرُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ بَنَيْنَٰهَا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِن فُرُوجٍ ﴿٦﴾

وَٱلْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَٰهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ
وَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍۭ بَهِيجٍ ﴿٧﴾

We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it, (7)

تَبْصِرَةً وَذِكْرَىٰ لِكُلِّ عَبْدٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٨﴾

so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God. (8)

وَنَزَّلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً مُّبَٰرَكًا فَأَنۢبَتْنَا
بِهِۦ جَنَّٰتٍ وَحَبَّ ٱلْحَصِيدِ ﴿٩﴾

We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, (9)

وَٱلنَّخْلَ بَاسِقَٰتٍ لَّهَا طَلْعٌ نَّضِيدٌ ﴿١٠﴾

and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, (10)

رِّزْقًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ۖ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِۦ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ
كَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْخُرُوجُ ﴿١١﴾

providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead. (11)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَٰبُ
ٱلرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ﴿١٢﴾

Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, (12)

وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ وَإِخْوَٰنُ لُوطٍ ﴿١٣﴾

'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, (13)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْأَيْكَةِ وَقَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ ۚ كُلٌّ كَذَّبَ
ٱلرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ وَعِيدِ ﴿١٤﴾

the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. (14)

أَفَعَيِينَا بِٱلْخَلْقِ ٱلْأَوَّلِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ فِى
لَبْسٍ مِّنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿١٥﴾

Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation. (15)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِۦ
نَفْسُهُۥ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ ٱلْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٦﴾

It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; (16)

إِذْ يَتَلَقَّى ٱلْمُتَلَقِّيَانِ عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ
قَعِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, (17)

مَّا يَلْفِظُ مِن قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (18)

وَجَآءَتْ سَكْرَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ
مَا كُنتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ﴿١٩﴾

The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: 'This is what you tried to escape.' (19)

وَنُفِخَ فِى ٱلصُّورِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٠﴾

The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' (20)

وَجَآءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَآئِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. (21)

لَّقَدْ كُنتَ فِى غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَٰذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنكَ
غِطَآءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' (22)

وَقَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ هَٰذَا مَا لَدَيَّ عَتِيدٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' (23)

أَلْقِيَا فِي جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّ كَفَّارٍ عَنِيدٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, (24)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ مُّرِيبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, (25)

ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَأَلْقِيَاهُ فِي ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلشَّدِيدِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' (26)

قَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ رَبَّنَا مَآ أَطْغَيْتُهُۥ وَلَٰكِن كَانَ فِي ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' (27)

قَالَ لَا تَخْتَصِمُوا۟ لَدَيَّ وَقَدْ قَدَّمْتُ إِلَيْكُم بِٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٨﴾

God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. (28)

مَا يُبَدَّلُ ٱلْقَوْلُ لَدَيَّ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِظَلَّٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٢٩﴾

My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.' (29)

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ ٱمْتَلَأْتِ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِن مَّزِيدٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?' (30)

وَأُزْلِفَتِ ٱلْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣١﴾

And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: (31)

هَٰذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيظٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, (32)

مَّنْ خَشِيَ الرَّحْمَٰنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَجَاءَ بِقَلْبٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. (33)

ادْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَامٍ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ الْخُلُودِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' (34)

لَهُم مَّا يَشَاءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them. (35)

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُم مِّن قَرْنٍ هُمْ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا فَنَقَّبُوا فِي الْبِلَادِ هَلْ مِن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. (36)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِمَن كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ أَوْ أَلْقَى السَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٣٧﴾

In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. (37)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا مِن لُّغُوبٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. (38)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحۡ
بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّكَ قَبۡلَ طُلُوعِ ٱلشَّمۡسِ
وَقَبۡلَ ٱلۡغُرُوبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; (39)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَسَبِّحۡهُ وَأَدۡبَٰرَ ٱلسُّجُودِ ﴿٤٠﴾

and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. (40)

وَٱسۡتَمِعۡ يَوۡمَ يُنَادِ ٱلۡمُنَادِ مِن مَّكَانٖ
قَرِيبٖ ﴿٤١﴾

And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, (41)

يَوۡمَ يَسۡمَعُونَ ٱلصَّيۡحَةَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ ذَٰلِكَ
يَوۡمُ ٱلۡخُرُوجِ ﴿٤٢﴾

the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. (42)

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نُحۡيِۦ وَنُمِيتُ وَإِلَيۡنَا ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٣﴾

It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. (43)

يَوۡمَ تَشَقَّقُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ عَنۡهُمۡ سِرَاعٗاۚ
ذَٰلِكَ حَشۡرٌ عَلَيۡنَا يَسِيرٞ ﴿٤٤﴾

On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. (44)

نَّحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡهِم بِجَبَّارٖۖ
فَذَكِّرۡ بِٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ﴿٤٥﴾

We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (45)

Truth and Denial

In its initial section, comprising the first 15 verses, the *sūrah* speaks about resurrection and its denial by the unbelievers who wonder that it should even be mentioned, let alone asserted. The Qur'ān, however, not only addresses their denial of the truth of resurrection, it also aims to put their deviant minds back on the right track. It tries first to awaken their hearts, alerting them to contemplation of the great truths that are clearly manifest in the universe. It does not engage them in any intellectual argument about resurrection; instead, it tries to bring life into their hearts and minds so that they can reflect. It puts before them the truth that is clearly evident in everything around them so that they will respond. This method is especially effective and is one that should be carefully studied by advocates of the divine message.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by the letter *Qāf* and by the glorious Qur'ān, which is composed of letters like *Qāf*. In fact, this is the first letter of the word 'Qur'ān'. The *sūrah* does not mention the subject matter of the oath, leaving it as a way to open the door to whatever the *sūrah* wants to say. Thus, the oath serves to alert us to the fact that what comes afterwards is momentous. This is indeed what is intended, as the *sūrah* immediately moves away from the oath using the conjunction *bal,* which has no English equivalent.[1] It now begins to discuss their amazement at what God's Messenger and the Qur'ān say about the dead being brought back to life: "*But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*'" (Verses 2–3)

They think it strange that someone from among themselves should warn them when this is indeed the very thing that human nature easily accepts. It is most natural that God should have chosen one of them to deliver His message for he was someone who could readily share their feelings, speak their language, take part in their activities, be amongst them through their lives, appreciate their motives as also recognize their

1. Some translators use the word nay to render the Arabic conjunction *bal*, but this is rather unsatisfactory in most cases as nay has connotations of negation. Here we have used the term 'but', though admittedly this too is inadequate. – Editor's note.

abilities and limits. Such a person is the best one to warn them against what may happen should they persist in their erring ways, to teach them how to change course, and to outline the duties that they have to fulfil. He would be the first to discharge these duties.

They felt it strange, however, to have such a message delivered in the first place, and were particularly amazed that this Messenger should speak to them about their being raised from the dead. Resurrection is central to the Islamic faith; indeed, it is the foundation on which all requirements of Islam are based. Every Muslim is required to support the truth against falsehood and uphold goodness against evil. A Muslim needs to make everything he does in life an act of worship, by ensuring that whatever he does aims to win God's acceptance and serve His cause. All action must be rewarded, and reward might not be forthcoming during our life's journey on earth. It is thus deferred until the final reckoning is done. This means that another world is needed. Hence resurrection, so as to face the reckoning in the next world. Should this fundamental principle of a second life disappear from a person's mindset, that person cannot form a clear concept of Islam and so cannot follow it.

Those people in Makkah, however, did not look at the question in this light at all. They were too naïve to understand the true nature of life and death, or to visualize God's power. Hence they said: "*When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*" (Verse 3) Thus, to them, it was a question of improbability of life after death when people's bodies have decomposed and turned to dust. Yet, since life takes place in the first place, why is it improbable for it to occur again. Moreover, this miracle of life occurs before their very eyes at every moment. It is there around them throughout the universe. It is to this that the Qur'ān draws their attention in this *sūrah*.

Before we continue with what the *sūrah* says about the universe and the images of life it portrays we need to reflect a little on the fact that people perish. This is pointed out by the unbelievers as they say: "*When we have died and become dust...?*" So people die and perish. Whoever reads what those unbelievers say will look at himself and people living in his vicinity and imagine how death occurs. In fact, he will begin to feel how he will turn to nothing when he is still alive, walking on earth.

Nothing shakes a person's heart like death, and nothing fills him with dread like perishing. The *sūrah*'s comment strengthens this effect as it describes the earth eating them little by little: "*We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record.*" (Verse 4) The phraseology of this comment shows the earth as a living thing that swallows, little by little, their buried bodies in a steady progressive action asserting that God knows what the earth swallows and that it is all recorded. Nothing is lost even though they may die and perish. As for putting life back into this dust that remains from their bodies, this is merely a repeat of what had happened before and what continues to happen in endless processes of bringing forth life anew.

We see how the *sūrah* makes successive touches to soften hearts, readying them to receive what follows before addressing the main issue.

The *sūrah* then describes the state of mind that gives rise to their flimsy objections. They have denied the truth, which made the earth under their feet move. In this way they are completely unstable: "*Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion.*" (Verse 5) This is a telling image. The truth is the solid point where a believer stands, giving him a firm step as he walks on solid ground. Everything around him that is contrary to the truth is unstable, confused and lacking substance. Whoever steps outside the truth is bound to slip into such confusion and so lose stability. He is without reassurance, ever in a state of confusion. When someone moves away from the truth, he is pulled in all directions by different desires and motives, afflicted by doubt, hesitant, moving once to the right and once to the left. He has no solid basis, no safe refuge.

As the *sūrah* prepares to discuss their objections to resurrection, it touches on further aspects of this fundamental truth as it appears in the structure of the universe. It invites them to look at the heavens, the earth, mountains, rain, palm trees, gardens and plants. The style employed here is in full harmony with the magnificence of the solid truth: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it.*" (Verse 6)

The sky represents a page in the book of the universe, testifying to the truth they had abandoned. Do they not see its lofty and firm

structure, its adorned beauty and flawless freedom? Needless to say, stability, beauty and perfection are clear features common to both the sky and the truth. Hence they come in for special emphasis here, as do the facts that the sky is well built, adorned and is without holes and cracks in its structure.

Likewise, the earth is a page from the same book of the universe: "*We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verse 7) The wide spread of the earth, the firm mountains placed on it and the delectable plants that grow on it also project the same features of firmness, stability and beauty already associated with the sky.

Now that this universal image has been drawn, the *sūrah* touches their hearts directing them to reflect on the purpose of creation: "*so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Thus curtains are removed, insight is sharpened and hearts and souls are alerted to reflect on the origination, wisdom and harmony apparent in the universe. Such a reminder is especially useful to those who wish to turn to God.

This link between the human heart and the inspiration of the endless, beautiful universe is indeed what gives opening the book of the universe and contemplating it the effect it has on our hearts and the value it attaches to our lives. The Qur'ān establishes this link between knowledge and the man who has it. Yet this link is precisely that which is ignored by contemporary research methods that are often called 'scientific'. This also inevitably leads to a severance of the bond between people and the world they live in. Mankind is a part of the universe, and its life can only flourish when their hearts beat to the tune of the universe. Every new piece of knowledge about a star, a planet, a special characteristic or feature of a plant or an animal, or a feature of the universe as a whole and what it contains of animate or inanimate objects should be transformed into a message to the human heart that increases man's pleasant familiarity with the world around him. Thus are the bonds of friendship between human beings and other creatures strengthened, and the sense of unity that applies to all confirmed. This, in turn, stresses the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe and all it contains. Any knowledge, research

or scientific discipline that does not lead to this objective is incomplete, false or useless.

This universe is the open book of the truth, readable in all languages and by all methods. A simple person living in a hut or a tent can browse through it as easily as can a highly educated palace dweller, each according to their abilities, and each discovering that they have access to the truth through it. The book of the universe is open at all times: "*So that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Modern science, however, blocks this reminder, severs this link between the human heart and the universe. Why? Because it is controlled by people who have been blinded by the falsehood called the 'scientific method', a method that does not acknowledge a link between the universe and all the creatures living in it.

The approach based on faith does not take away anything of the results of the 'scientific method' in understanding individual facts. Indeed, it adds a link connecting these individual facts and relating them to the great truths. It is faith that establishes a bond between the human heart and the laws and facts of the universe, allowing them to play an inspiring tune to man's feelings and life. They are no longer cold facts that open up nothing of their beautiful secrets. It is the approach based on faith therefore that should direct studies and research.

The *sūrah* continues to present the pages of truth in the book of the universe, in preparation for tackling the question of resurrection: "*We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verses 9–11)

The water sent down from the sky is a great sign, sending life into hearts before it quickens dead land. It imparts a special feeling to all. It is not only children that rainfall delights; sensitive adults also experience a similar feeling of awe. The rain is described here as *'rich in blessings'*, and a means by which to produce fruits and fields of grain, as well as palm trees of great beauty: "*And tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates.*" The description of the fruits these trees bear is intended to highlight this beautiful aspect, emphasizing harmony with the overpowering and

beautiful truth the universe presents. A touch on human feelings is added within the context of the rain and what it brings about of plant life: "*providing sustenance suitable for people.*" It is God who gives this sustenance, from the time it sends forth its shoots until it gives its yield. He is the Master and they, the servants, remain oblivious of their duty to appreciate and show gratitude.

At this point, the final goal is identified. "*Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verse 11) It is a continuing process, one that is familiar to them. However, they overlook it and this before they have even arrived at their objections. Yet resurrection is as simple as the shoot springing out of dead land after it has been quickened with rain. This is stated now, after a host of inspiring notes played for the human heart. Thus hearts are addressed by the Creator of hearts.

A Glance at History

The *sūrah* now opens some pages of the book of human history, speaking of the fate of past communities who argued about resurrection in the same way as did the Arab unbelievers, and who similarly denied God's messages. As a result, they incurred God's inevitable punishment:

> *Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.* (Verses 12–15)

Al-Rass signifies a well over which there is no built wall, and the dales signifies an area thick with trees. The people of the wooded dales most probably refer to Shu'ayb's people. We have no information about the people of al-Rass other than this reference here and a similar one in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, (25: 38) The same applies to the people of Tubba', a title used by the Yemeni kings of the Ḥimyar dynasty. The other peoples mentioned in this short passage are known to anyone who reads the Qur'ān.

The purpose of this quick reference to these peoples is certainly not to give any detailed information about them. It is only a reminder of the fate of earlier disbelieving communities. What is worth noting is that the verse mentions that each denied 'God's messengers', in the plural. This emphasizes the unity of the divine message as all messengers preached the same faith. Thus, whoever denies anyone of God's messengers actually denies them all, because he rejects the same message delivered by them all. Gods' messengers are brothers forming one community. They are like a tree with roots stretching far back into time. Each branch of that tree projects all its essential qualities, giving an image of the whole. Therefore, whoever cuts a branch actually cuts the tree and all its branches. Therefore, God's warnings came true and those communities suffered the fates known to listeners.

Having stated the fates of all these communities, the *sūrah* again picks up the question of resurrection, asking: "*Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*" (Verse 15) The first creation is there before their eyes; therefore, the question needs no answer. However, because they do not look at the evidence presented by this first creation, they are in doubt about the second. What can be said about one who denies the truth when such irrefutable evidence is placed before his very own eyes?

A Journey Through Life

The second part of the *sūrah* continues with the theme of resurrection. It seeks to treat those hearts that deny resurrection from a new angle, but makes some frightening statements. It speaks about the accurate monitoring to which reference has been made in the Prologue. It presents clear images of this monitoring, followed by images of man in the throes of death, then we see the opening of records and the reckoning before we are shown hell opening to receive those destined for it. Whenever a new group of them are thrown into it, it asks whether it can have some more. This is contrasted by the scene of heaven and the honour and favours bestowed on its dwellers.

It is a single journey that begins with birth, goes through death and ends with resurrection and deed reckoning. It is a continuous, uninterrupted

journey, charting the only way we must travel. Throughout the journey we are in God's hands and under His careful watch. We cannot escape. When we realize this, our hearts are filled with awe and apprehension. How else should we feel realizing that we are in the hands of the Almighty who knows our innermost thoughts and who overlooks nothing?

When any of us thinks that the authorities, with all their intelligence and reporters, are after us, following our footsteps, we are perturbed and agitated. We lose our patience and our balance. No matter how widespread and far-reaching the intelligence apparatus is, any of us, however, can escape its attention once we close our door or our mouths. By contrast, God's watchful eye is with us wherever we may be. He monitors what is in our minds and knows all our secrets. What then should we feel, when we realize that we are under such watch, subject to the Almighty's power?

Every Little Secret

> *It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.* (Verses 16–18)

The first clause in these verses, '*it is We who have created man*', indicates its message. A person who makes a machine is the one who best knows how it is put together and how it functions. Its maker did not create it, because he is not the one who originated the material used in its making; he is only the one who designed and manufactured it. How does this compare with the Creator who originates all things? Man is made by God's hand, and God knows every little detail about him. Hence He says: "*We know what his soul whispers to him.*" (Verse 16) Thus man realizes that his inner thoughts are laid open. Nothing is hidden. Even the whispers of his soul, secret as these may be, are known to God, in preparation for the Day of Reckoning, which people often deny.

"*We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*" (Verse 16) Closer than the vein that transports his blood! This expression clearly describes the

hand in control and the direct watch. When man imagines this fact, he is bound to experience a shiver down his spine. If man really understood the import of this statement, he would not dare say a single word that does not please God. He would not even allow a fleeting thought that is contrary to what is acceptable to God. This statement is sufficient to make man careful, always alert.

The *sūrah* makes the control even stricter, showing man throughout his life as being under the ever-present watch of two angels, on his right and left, who record every move he makes, every word he says and every thought he entertains: "*with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.*" (Verses 17–18) We do not know how these two angels record what they monitor. We need not in any case indulge in conjecture. Our attitude towards information that relates to the world beyond our perception is to accept it as it stands, believing in its import without seeking to know more. Such knowledge, were we to gain it, would not be of any use to us. In fact, it remains outside human experience.

In our own world, we have come to know some means of recording that could have never been thought possible by our forefathers. Magnetic and video tapes record movement and voice and reproduce them for radio, cinema and television.[2] All this happens within our own human environment. Hence, there is no need to try to assign to the angels a method of recording based on our own human experience, which may be totally irrelevant to their realm of which we know only what God has told us.

It is enough that we should appreciate this fact, expressed here in a vivid picture, and feel when we are about to make any movement or utter a word that, to our right and left, there are two watchguards taking note of whatever we do or say, entering it in our record which will be presented to God who overlooks nothing. This is a fact, even though we may not understand how it is done. There is no doubt that it takes place, in some form. God has told us about it so that we take it

2. The author wrote this in the late 1950s, when CDs and DVDs were still beyond people's imagination. – Editor's note.

into account, but also so we do not waste time and effort in trying to determine how it is done.

Such was the method adopted by people who benefited by the Qur'ān and by the Prophet's directives concerning the facts it speaks of. They took to heart what it said and acted on its basis. In a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Alqamah on the authority of Bilāl ibn al-Ḥārith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "A man may say a word that is pleasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will credit him with His pleasure for it until the Day when he meets Him. Another man may say a word that is displeasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will record against him His displeasure for it until the Day when he meets Him." 'Alqamah commented: "Many are the words I refrained from saying on account of this hadith." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] It is reported that when Imām Aḥmad was in the throes of death, he moaned in pain. It was said to him that even moans are recorded. He then stopped moaning until he died. In this way, such people practically lived the facts the Qur'ān tells us about.

As Life Draws to an End

That was the page of life, which is followed in man's book by the page of approaching death: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: This is what you tried to escape.*" (Verse 19) There is nothing man tries to escape more than death. He even tries to banish the thought of death from his mind. Yet how can he do so when death is a seeker that never stops. It continues its steady march, and never misses its appointed time. The mere mention of '*the stupor of death*' sends a shiver into brave hearts. Yet as the scene is shown, it is said to him: "*This is what you tried to escape.*" The mere sound makes him shudder when he is still full of life. How about if it is said when he is in the throes of death? It is authentically reported that when death was approaching the Prophet, he wiped sweat off his face and said: "All glory be to God! Death has its stupor!" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He said this, even though he had chosen to be in God's company, longing to see Him. So how about ordinary mortals?

It is noteworthy that truth itself is mentioned here: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth.*" (Verse 19) This suggests that a human being sees the whole truth as he is about to die. The truth appears to him fully exposed. He sees what he did not know, and what he used to deny. It is, now too late for anything that may benefit him. It is too late for repentance, belief or the mending of ways. The unbelievers denied this very truth and their denial caused them confusion. Now that they realize all this, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the shock of resurrection and the fearsome reckoning:

> *The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. 'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' 'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.'* (Verses 20–29)

It is sufficient to put this scene before our eyes, for thereafter we will spend the rest of our lives in awe and anticipation. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "'How can I feel happy when I know that the one assigned to blow the Trumpet has lifted it to his mouth, lowering his forehead and awaiting permission.' The people listening asked him: 'What should we say, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Say: We seek none other than God; He is the best protector.' They all said it." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

"*Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness.*" (Verse 21) It is the soul, every single one, that is held to account, and it is the one who receives the outcome. It comes with two assigned to it: one driving it on and the other to bear witness. These may be the ones who recorded everything a person does throughout life, which is more probable, but they may also be different entities. The

scene is akin to that of taking someone to trial, but this trial is before the Almighty.

In this extremely difficult situation, the person is told: "*Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.*" (Verse 22) There is nothing to blur your eyesight now. You can see clearly. This is the appointed time you ignored, the position you have not reckoned with, the end you did not expect. You can look all around you for your sight is now sharp indeed. At this point, his companion, which is most probably a reference to the witness who recorded all his actions, comes forward and says: "*Here is what I have recorded.*" (Verse 23)

The *sūrah* says nothing about examining the record. Instead, it states the divine verdict as it is given to the two angels: the one leading the person and the witness. They are told: "*Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.*" (Verses 24–26) These descriptions make the situation even more critical, for they show that the Almighty is displeased. They are all negative descriptions that deserve increased punishment. They are followed by His repeating the order, which needs no emphasis anyway: "*Cast him into severe suffering,*" indicating the unbeliever's position in hell.

This scares his companion who, thinking that his long association with the condemned person may reflect on him, hastens to dissociate himself from his doings: "*His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.'*" (Verse 27) The reference here may be to a different companion who submitted the records. This may be the devil who, throughout his life, tried to tempt him away from the truth. Now he tries to shirk his responsibility, asserting that the man was already far astray and, as such, accepted the tempting offer to go even further astray. There are other instances in the Qur'ān that tell us that the evil companion disowns the human one. Yet the first possibility we mentioned is also probable. The companion referred to in this verse could be the same angel who kept the record, but the hardship of the situation on the Day of Judgement makes him hasten to state his own

innocence even when he is truly innocent. He simply wants to prove that despite his long association with this miserable creature, he had no influence on his deeds. When an innocent person hastens to prove his truth-telling, this reveals much about the difficulty of the situation.

A final order is now issued to stop all argument: "*God will say: Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.*" (Verses 28–29) The occasion is not one for contention. Warnings were issued earlier, stating the nature of requital for every action. Everything has been recorded, and it is on the basis of this record that requital and reward are determined. No one is unjustly dealt with, for the one who looks into people's cases and determines their fate is the faultless arbiter.

Thus the fearsome scene of reckoning, with all its hardship, is thus ended, but the overall scene continues, with the *sūrah* revealing a more fearful aspect of it: "*On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?'*" (Verse 30) The whole scene is one of dialogue. Therefore, hell is portrayed here in the same way, with a question put to it and an answer given. This reveals something that is both amazing and awesome. We see every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, who was a sinful aggressor, a fomenter of doubt being thrown into hell where they pile up in great numbers. Then hell is asked whether it has had its full. Its reply is that of an unsatiated glutton: "*Are there no more?*" How frightening!

A contrasting image is drawn on the other side: it is pleasant, calm and friendly. Heaven is shown drawing near to the righteous such that they can see it for themselves. An honourable welcome awaits them:

> *And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: 'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.* (Verses 31–35)

Honour is shown with every word and move. Paradise is brought near so that they do not trouble themselves about going to it. The bliss of being accepted by God is extended to them there: "*This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion.*" It is those who are on high that state their qualities. Thus they realize that this is how they appear in God's records. Then they are admitted to heaven, in peace, a place from which they will not be turned out: "*Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.*" An announcement is made on high, noting their position and making it clear that their share with God is unlimited: "*There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.*" Whatever they may wish for will remain less than what is prepared for them. Since '*more*' is given by their Lord, it must be limitless.

An Easy Resurrection

The final part of the *sūrah* sounds like the final beat of a tune, as it repeats its strongest notes to an even faster time. It includes a glimpse of history and the fate of earlier unbelievers, an image from the open book of the universe and a new scene from the Day of Judgement, all coupled with a serious and inspiring directive:

> *How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is*

We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (Verses 36–45)

Although all these points have come under discussion earlier in the *sūrah*, they are repeated in conclusion with a new rhythm and added effect. They are noted here with more emphasis and greater speed. Thus they carry here a different effect from that produced by their more detailed discussion earlier. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The *sūrah* stated earlier: "*Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, ʿĀd, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubbaʿ: They all disbelieved their messengers, and therefore My warnings came true.*" (Verses 12–14) Here at the end the *sūrah* says: "*How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? they wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge.*" (Verse 36) It is a reference to the same fact, but in its new image it looks different. Then the *sūrah* adds the turn of time as generations followed generations, wandering through the lands. However, they remain within God's grasp from which no one can escape. A further comment is added to give it a more serious effect: "*In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees.*" (Verse 37)

There is indeed a reminder in the fate suffered by earlier communities for anyone with a heart to consider. A person who is not reminded by this is one whose heart is dead, or who has always been without a feeling heart. Indeed, in order to have due admonition, it is sufficient that a person should listen attentively. The story will undoubtedly have its telling effect. This is certain, because the human soul is very sensitive to the fate suffered by earlier peoples. Even the slightest degree of sensitivity is enough to bring back memories and inspiring images of such situations.

Earlier, the *sūrah* opened pages from the book of the universe, stating: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned*

it, leaving no flaws in it. We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it." (Verses 6–7) Now at the end of the *sūrah*, it says: "*We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us.*" (Verse 38) Thus it adds here a further touch, making it clear that the creation of everything in the universe, including the heavens and the earth, presented no difficulty for God. Compared with this, bringing the dead back to life is only a small matter.

A comment is then added, providing further shades and inspiration: "*Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer.*" (Verses 39–40) The rising and setting of the sun, and the spreading of the night after sunset, are all phenomena closely interlinked with the heavens and the earth. The *sūrah* delineates the bond between them, the glorification and praising of God and the prostrating of ourselves before Him. Within the same context, the *sūrah* also gives the instruction to bear patiently with whatever the unbelievers deny about resurrection and their refusal to believe in God's ability to bring creatures back to life. Thus a new aura of God's glorification, worship and patience is given to the same points repeated here. As this is all linked to aspects of the universe, these feelings are enhanced within a believer's heart whenever he looks at the skies or the earth, at every sunrise and approach of night, and whenever he prostrates himself before God.

A further touch is added to this portrait of the universe. The Prophet is instructed to have patience and to perform all this glorification and worship while remaining on the alert, expecting the great event that may come at any moment of the night or day. Only those who are totally oblivious of the truth will pay no attention to it. It is the event that provides the central theme of the *sūrah*: "*And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verses 41–44)

What we have here is a new scene depicting that most difficult day. When the first reference to it is made in the *sūrah*, it is shown differently: "*The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness...*" (Verses 20–21) Here the blowing of the trumpet is referred to as a '*mighty blast*'. It gives us a picture of how they will rush out as the earth is rent asunder all around them. This includes all those countless creatures of all generations, arising from graves they may have been buried in for a very long time. They are all ripped open, bringing up what remains of bones, dust, and lost cells in the earth. None except God knows their whereabouts. This, then, is an amazing image, one that the human mind can barely imagine.

Having drawn this bustling and inspirational scene, the *sūrah* states the truth which they deny and argue about: "*It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return.*" (Verse 43) "*That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verse 44) This is the most suitable time to state this truth.

The *sūrah* finally reassures the Prophet so that he is not troubled by the unbelievers' denials of this truth and the arguments they make in disputing it: "*We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45)

It is sufficient for you to reassure yourselves that "*We are fully aware of what they say.*" This is indeed an implicit warning of the consequences of this knowledge, which are bound to be terrible for them. "*You are not one to use coercion with them.*" You cannot force them to believe in God. You have no power over them. That power belongs to God alone. "*Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45) The Qur'ān shakes people's hearts. No heart that is alert and sensitive will ever reject the truths presented in the Qur'ān in its unique, remarkable style.

When a *sūrah* like this is presented, the matter does not require any mighty being to force people into submission to faith. The Qur'ān has far greater power than all tyrants could possess. A *sūrah* like this can easily produce on people's hearts an effect far more powerful than their whips. Whatever God says is the absolute truth.

SŪRAH 51

Al-Dhāriyāt

(The Scattering Winds)

Prologue

This *sūrah* has a special character. It begins by mentioning four forces that work by God's command, using ambiguous terms which give us an initial impression that we are being introduced to things wrapped in secrecy. God Almighty makes an oath by these four forces to emphasize a certain matter: "*By those that scatter far and wide; by those that are heavily laden; by those that speed along with gentle ease; by those that distribute by command; that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 1–6)

The words used in this opening for those four forces mentioned in the oath, i.e. *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt*, are not usually used to refer to immediately recognized objects. They invite questions and requests for explanation. Indeed, their very sounds impart this feeling of ambiguity, which is perhaps intended so as to give the *sūrah* its particular aura.

The first oath is hardly stated when it is followed by a second. God states this oath "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say.*" (Verses 7–8) What you say is inconsistent, based on conjecture, not fact.

With this particular opening and by its general drift, the *sūrah* sets itself a particular objective, which is the establishment of a bond between

the human heart and the sky, or rather what lies beyond the reach of human perception and known only to God. The human heart will thus become free of the constraints of this world, unchained by anything that prevents it from being dedicated to God's service. It will then be ready to move unhindered towards Him: "*Flee, then, to God.*" (Verse 50) This would fulfil God's purpose of creation: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind for any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56)

Since preoccupation with one's livelihood and what the future may bring with regard to it is one of the hardest of these hindrances, the *sūrah* takes particular care to free man of it, and to reassure him so that his heart turns to God, free of earthly chains. References to this point are found in several places in the *sūrah*. For example, explicit references include: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22) and "*God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verse 58) Other references are implicit, as in the verse describing the attitude of the righteous towards money. They "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) Likewise, the *sūrah* describes Abraham's hospitality and the welcome he gave to his guests, or rather the angels he thought to be his guests. When they greeted him, he went straight to his household and brought a fat calf, yet prior to their arrival at his doorstep, they were total strangers to him.

It is all, then, about freeing one's mind from the shackles of life on earth and earning one's living, so that one looks up to heaven, yearning for its bliss, eager to earn God's pleasure and seeking His acceptance. This is the focus of all the issues the *sūrah* raises. This explains the reason for its rather ambiguous start followed by an oath by the sky and the subsequent references made to it.

Thus we see in the picture the *sūrah* draws early on the main characteristics of those who are God-fearing: dedication to God, worship at night, sacrifice of money, assigning a portion of it to the poor and the deprived: "*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 15–19)

To achieve the same purpose, the *sūrah* directs our attentions to God's signs on earth and within ourselves, while also emphasizing that provisions are given by heaven. We must not, therefore, give undue importance to its immediate means on earth: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verses 20–22)

The same may be said about the reference to the building of the skies with ample space, while the earth has been made easy for people to traverse, and to the fact that all creatures are created in pairs. All this leads to the all-important advice that we should all turn to God paying full heed to the warnings given by His Messenger: "*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 47–50)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement reiterating the same message, making clear the purpose of creating humans and *jinn*, and their major roles in life: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 56–58)

Thus the *sūrah* plays on the same theme throughout, using different tunes but maintaining the same beat, directing man's heart to look to the sky.

The *sūrah* includes quick references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the ʿĀd, the Thamūd and Noah's people. In its account of Abraham, the *sūrah* makes a quick reference to money, as well as the realm beyond our perception when he is given the happy news of the birth of a son to be endowed with knowledge. He and his wife are given this child when they could have never expected it. In the other stories, the reference is mainly to the fact that God's promise always comes true, just as it is emphatically stated at the beginning: "*That which you are promised is true indeed.*" (Verse 5) Another reference to this is made at the conclusion, where the unbelievers are issued with a clear warning: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it.*" (Verse 59) This comes after the statement that

implies that generations of unbelievers seem to have recommended to each other that they reject God's messengers: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds.*" (Verses 52–53)

Thus the historical accounts in the *sūrah* are closely related to its main theme, namely, pure and complete heart devotion to God, freeing it from all hindrances, strengthening its bond with heaven, first by faith and then by removing obstacles that prevent man from flying to that open horizon.

Al-Dhāriyāt
(The Scattering Winds)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the winds that scatter far and wide; (1)

وَالذَّارِيَاتِ ذَرْوًا ﴿١﴾

by those [clouds] that are heavily laden; (2)

فَالْحَامِلَاتِ وِقْرًا ﴿٢﴾

by those that speed along with gentle ease; (3)

فَالْجَارِيَاتِ يُسْرًا ﴿٣﴾

by those that distribute by command; (4)

فَالْمُقَسِّمَاتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٤﴾

that which you are promised is true indeed, (5)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَصَادِقٌ ﴿٥﴾

and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (6)

وَإِنَّ الدِّينَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٦﴾

By the sky and its starry pathways (7)

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْحُبُكِ ﴿٧﴾

you people are at variance in what you say, (8)

إِنَّكُمْ لَفِي قَوْلٍ مُخْتَلِفٍ ﴿٨﴾

abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away. (9)

يُؤْفَكُ عَنْهُ مَنْ أُفِكَ ﴿٩﴾

Perish the ones given to blind guessing (10)

قُتِلَ ٱلْخَرَّٰصُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. (11)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ فِى غَمْرَةٍ سَاهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' (12)

يَسْـَٔلُونَ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿١٢﴾

That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. (13)

يَوْمَ هُمْ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten. (14)

ذُوقُوا۟ فِتْنَتَكُمْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. (15)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٥﴾

They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. (16)

ءَاخِذِينَ مَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They would sleep but little at night, (17)

كَانُوا۟ قَلِيلًا مِّنَ ٱلَّيْلِ مَا يَهْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, (18)

وَبِٱلْأَسْحَارِ هُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (19)

وَفِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِّلسَّآئِلِ وَٱلْمَحْرُومِ ﴿١٩﴾

On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, (20)

وَفِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّلْمُوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and in yourselves too: can you not see? (21)

وَفِيٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. (22)

وَفِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech. (23)

فَوَرَبِّ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُۥ لَحَقٌّ مِّثْلَ مَآ أَنَّكُمْ تَنطِقُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? (24)

هَلْ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ٱلْمُكْرَمِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added to himself] 'These are strangers.' (25)

إِذْ دَخَلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُوا۟ سَلَٰمًا ۖ قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. (26)

فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ فَجَآءَ بِعِجْلٍ سَمِينٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' (27)

فَقَرَّبَهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِمْ قَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ ۖ وَبَشَّرُوهُ بِغُلَامٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. (28)

فَأَقْبَلَتِ امْرَأَتُهُ فِي صَرَّةٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' (29)

قَالُوا كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ ۖ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٠﴾

Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' (30)

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' (31)

قَالُوا إِنَّا أُرْسِلْنَا إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, (32)

لِنُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ حِجَارَةً مِنْ طِينٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

to bring down on them stones of clay, (33)

مُسَوَّمَةً عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. (34)

فَأَخْرَجْنَا مَنْ كَانَ فِيهَا مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

We brought out such believers as were there; (35)

فَمَا وَجَدْنَا فِيهَا غَيْرَ بَيْتٍ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. (36)

We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (37)

وَتَرَكْنَا فِيهَآ ءَايَةً لِّلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٣٧﴾

In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; (38)

وَفِى مُوسَىٰٓ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (39)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ بِرُكْنِهِۦ وَقَالَ سَٰحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (40)

فَأَخَذْنَٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind (41)

وَفِى عَادٍ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلرِّيحَ ٱلْعَقِيمَ ﴿٤١﴾

which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (42)

مَا تَذَرُ مِن شَىْءٍ أَتَتْ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَعَلَتْهُ كَٱلرَّمِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' (43)

وَفِى ثَمُودَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَمَتَّعُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. (44)

فَعَتَوْا عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّاعِقَةُ وَهُمْ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves. (45)

فَمَا اسْتَطَاعُوا مِن قِيَامٍ وَمَا كَانُوا مُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil. (46)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; (47)

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! (48)

وَالْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَاهَا فَنِعْمَ الْمَاهِدُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. (49)

وَمِن كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; (50)

فَفِرُّوا إِلَى اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning! (51)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا آخَرَ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَتَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّن
رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا قَالُوا۟ سَاحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (52)

أَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِهِۦ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. (53)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِمَلُومٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; (54)

وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ تَنفَعُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (55)

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ ٱلْجِنَّ وَٱلْإِنسَ
إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

I have not created the *jinn* and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. (56)

مَآ أُرِيدُ مِنْهُم مِّن رِّزْقٍ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَن
يُطْعِمُونِ ﴿٥٧﴾

No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. (57)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلرَّزَّاقُ ذُو ٱلْقُوَّةِ ٱلْمَتِينُ ﴿٥٨﴾

God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (58)

فَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ذَنُوبًا مِّثْلَ ذَنُوبِ
أَصْحَٰبِهِمْ فَلَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٥٩﴾

The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. (59)

Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised. (60)	فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِن يَوْمِهِمُ الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

A True Promise

> *By those that scatter far and wide; By those that are heavily laden; By those that speed along with gentle ease; By those that distribute by command; That which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.* (Verses 1–6)

The *sūrah* begins with a quick beat, using ambiguous phrases to imply that it is talking about a serious matter that deserves our full attention. Inevitably though, the four ambiguous words used in the first four verses – *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt* – have made people ask questions, even in the very early days of Islam, as they sought further explanation. In this respect, Ibn Kathīr reports:

> 'Alī was on the pulpit in Kufah one day when he said: 'If you have any query about a verse in the Qur'ān or a ḥadīth by the Prophet, I will give you an answer.' Ibn al-Kawwā' asked him the meaning of *al-dhāriyāt*, [those that scatter], and he answered, 'the winds'. Then he said: 'What about *al-ḥāmilāt* [those heavily laden]?' 'Alī answered, 'the clouds'. The man then asked about *al-jāriyāt* [those that speed along], and 'Alī's answer was, 'the ships'. The man asked: 'What about *al-muqassimāt* [those that distribute]?' 'Alī said, 'the angels'.[1]

Ṣabīgh ibn 'Isl al-Tamīmī asked 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb about these words and his reply was the same as above. 'Umar felt, however, that al-Tamīmī was asking only for argument's sake, thereby hinting at the ambiguity. By way of reprimand for his behaviour, 'Umar banned him from future social gatherings. Subsequently, Ṣabīgh al-Tamīmī repented

1. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār el-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 248.

and swore most seriously that he no longer entertained any of his earlier doubts. This report suggests that the ambiguity contained in these words encouraged those who tried to raise doubts about the Qur'ān, making such words the point of their questioning. The same explanation of these words was given by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, al-Ḥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī and many others.

God states an oath by the winds that move and scatter things such as dust, grain, pollen, clouds and other material known or unknown to us; by the clouds carrying water and driven by God Almighty to wherever He pleases; by the ships that easily float on water making use of the characteristics God has given to water, shipping and the whole universe, and by the angels carrying God's commands and delivering them as He pleases, giving details as to what matters they are concerned with.

The winds, the clouds, the ships and the angels are all God's creatures which He uses as a means to implement His will with regard to the universe and His servants. By using them in His oath, He draws attention to them and what they signify. In this way we are able to reflect on how God initiates these creatures, sets them in operation and uses them to fulfil what He wishes to be fulfilled. Mentioning them in this way invites our minds to think about the secrets they embody so that we look to their Creator. They may also, in some way, relate to the issue of sustenance, preoccupation with which the *sūrah* wants to free us from. The winds, the clouds and the ships have a definite connection with sustenance. Moreover, sustenance is one of the things that the angels distribute by God's command. Thus, we clearly see the relation between this opening and one of the main topics of the *sūrah*.

God states an oath by these four types of creation, confirming that "*that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 5–6) God has promised mankind that He will reward their good actions with what is better, and that He will requite their bad deeds with what is bad. If He delays holding them to account during their lives on earth, He will not ignore doing so in the life to come, where all reckoning and accounting will inevitably take place: "*For certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verse 6) The promise is undoubtedly true, and will be fulfilled in either life. He has also

promised people that their sustenance, in plenty or limited measure, is guaranteed. Again His promise in this matter is true.

God's promise to mankind is sure to be realized in the way and at the time He chooses. This needs no oath from Him. However, He makes this oath by these four types of His creation to draw attention to them, as they clearly point to His power and planning. When we contemplate these entities we have a clearer impression of the truth of God's promise and, therefore, our accountability for our deeds will inevitably take place. By their very nature, these entities suggest that life is not the result of idle play, accident or blind coincidence. Indeed, the oath leads us to view them as proofs of the divine message.

Differences and Blind Guessing

The same may be said about the second oath: "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say, abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away.*" (Verses 7–9) This oath is by the sky that is perfectly built, with pathways that are carefully interconnected, like the links of a chain. This may be one form clouds take as they gather in the sky, looking like a watery or sandy surface during or after a windy period. On the other hand, this description may be true of the permanent order of orbits that are perfectly coordinated and probably interconnected.

This oath, by the perfectly arranged sky, confirms that the unbelievers are at variance in what they say and believe. Their stand is shaky, lacking roots and foundations. People may abandon belief at will, or stick to it if they wish. There is no general agreement or coordination as to its validity. The situation is one of perpetual confusion and worry. Such is falsehood: shifting grounds and a maze without markings or light. It is always shifting like a desert sand, lacking firm basis and accurate measure. When people agree on some aspect of faith, they soon diverge and find themselves in dispute. Their confusion is seen even more clearly when it is shown against the background of the sky, which is perfectly ordered and coordinated.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that the unbelievers are deluded about the major question of the life to come. Their opinions are without a firm or true basis. They argue and dispute about a clear question of truth.

It then goes on to portray the Day of Judgement in such a way as they can actually see it:

> *Perish the ones given to blind guessing who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.* (Verses 10–14)

Such people indulge in blind guessing. It is God who invokes their killing. How terrible! Needless to say, such an invocation is a firm sentence, one that is certain to be enforced. "*Perish the ones given to blind guessing.*" (Verse (10) Further clarification of their identity is added: "*who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth.*" (Verse 11) They are so steeped in delusion and falsehood that they are unable to wake themselves up. The *sūrah* shows them to be totally unaware of anything around them, as if they are excessively drunk. They cannot see for themselves something that is very clear to anyone with a sound mind. "*They ask: When will this Day of Judgement come?*" (Verse 12) It is not a question that seeks information; rather, it is an expression of doubt and denial. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their position on that day which they claim to be highly improbable: "*That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire.*" (Verse 13) They will burn in the fire just as some metals are exposed to fire to determine their make up. This burning is coupled with strong remonstration: "*Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.*" (Verse 14) A quick scene showing their miserable end is the most fitting answer to their question that sought no information. This powerful scene of their end contrasts with the state of confusion that plagues their lives. Moreover, it confirms that God's invocation of their deaths is fulfilled in a most terrible way.

At the Opposite End

Next, a contrasting image is drawn. This depicts a different group, reassured in their certainty, eager to do what is good without boasting about it, fully awake at night when they volunteer their night worship:

> *The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.* (Verses 15–19)

This group are fully alert, sensitive to the fact that God watches them and, therefore, they carefully watch their own behaviour. These will be placed "*amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them.*" (Verses 15–16) God grants them blessings in abundance as a reward for what they do in this their first life, worshipping Him as if they see Him and realizing that He sees them: "*for they were keen to do good.*" (Verse 16) Their desire to excel is portrayed in a splendid image: "*They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn,*" (Verses 17–18) They are the ones who stay up at night when others are fast asleep. They turn to their Lord, appealing to Him to forgive them their sins. They sleep but little during the night, preferring to address their Lord and enjoy the pleasure of being in close contact with Him, when no one else is aware of that contact.

Al-Ḥasan says in commenting on the verse, "*They would sleep but little at night*": "They offered voluntary night worship, sleeping only a little and extending their worship until the late hours, shortly before dawn, when they would pray for forgiveness." Qatādah quotes al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment after reading this verse: "They slept only for a short while at night. I am not one to which this verse applies." Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī cites al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment: "I tried to compare my work to that of the people of heaven and I discovered that those people are ahead of us by a long way. We cannot aspire to what they achieved, sleeping but little at night. I then tried to compare my work to that of the people of hell and I found out that those are devoid of goodness, denying God's revelations and His messengers, refusing to believe in resurrection after death. I concluded that the best among us are those who mix good deeds with bad ones."

A man said to Zayd ibn Aslam that he felt that this quality of spending much of the night in voluntary worship does not apply to their

generation who only spend a little of the night time in such worship. Zayd said to him: "Blessed is the one who sleeps when he is sleepy and remains God-fearing when awake."

This is a standard to which a number of the *Tābi'īn* generation that immediately followed the Prophet's Companions, known for their firm belief and piety, aspired to. They felt that they were well below it. It is the standard only achieved by the elite God has chosen and who have been shown the way to achieve it.

This is their situation with regard to their relations with God. As for their relations with people and their attitude to money, these people are of the type that is keen to do good: they "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) They not only give a share of what they have to those who ask for help and the one who is too shy to ask and thus remains deprived of help, but they make that a rightful share, committing themselves to it as though they are duty bound to do so even though it is voluntary.

This point fits well with the treatment of the issue of possessions and earnings in the *sūrah*, as it helps to free the believer's heart of the shackles of personal greed and their preoccupation with livelihood. It also serves to prepare us for the next section of the *sūrah*.

Signs Galore

> *On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.* (Verses 20–23)

These verses turn our attentions to the countless signs testifying to God's oneness, both on earth and within ourselves. They also guide us to look to heaven for our means of sustenance, as it is all measured. They finish with a great oath by God Himself, the Lord of the heavens and earth, confirming that the message given to them from Him is absolutely true.

"On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see?" (Verses 20–21) The earth on which we live is a great exhibition of God's signs and marvels. Until now, mankind has only been able to see a little of these marvels, even though we discover each day something new and remarkable. Likewise, there is a similarly breathtaking exhibition that takes place within us, within the human soul with its marvellous secrets that mirror those of the universe. These two short verses refer to these two great exhibitions, opening their gates wide for anyone who wishes to look and have faith. Such a person will, as a result, fill his life with pleasure and enjoyment, profound lessons and a wealth of true knowledge.

Qur'ānic texts are phrased in such a way as to make them relevant for all times, environments and situations. They can give every person, every mind and every understanding a wealth of knowledge that each is perfectly able to handle. As man's knowledge increases, his faculties of understanding develop, his experience broadens, and as he becomes more aware of the secrets of the universe and of his own self, he receives more of the import of the Qur'ānic texts. As the Prophet declares: "the Qur'ān is a book of endless marvels. It remains new no matter how repeatedly it is read." The Prophet who said this was the man on whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high and who understood its secrets and lived them fully. His description was based on the most direct and personal of experiences.

Those who were the first to listen to the Qur'ān saw of God's signs on earth and in themselves their share, according to their knowledge, experience and inspiration. Every succeeding generation also received their shares according to whatever further knowledge and experience they had accumulated. We, in our turn, have our own share in line with our increased knowledge in different fields, and with what we have been able to discover of the secrets of the universe. Those who come after us will also find a share kept for them of secrets yet unknown to man, in both the earth and within the human soul. These two exhibitions will remain, to the end of time, majestic, full of new wonders.

This planet earth was made ready to support life in a way that is almost unique in what we know of this great universe, with its unlimited number of planets and stars. What we know of these, which is only a

fraction of what we do not know, includes millions of galaxies, each of which contains hundreds of millions of stars, as well as planets, which are satellites of these stars. Yet out of such countless numbers, the earth uniquely seems to be the only one suited for this type of life. Should any of the many special characteristics of the earth change or be disturbed, life as we know it will become impossible on earth. If the earth's size changes so that it becomes larger or smaller, or if a change affects the position of the earth in relation to the sun, or the sun's size or level of heat, or the angle of the earth's axis, or its rotation in place, or the speed of its movement in its orbit, or the size of the moon, or its distance from it, or the proportion of sea to dry land, etc. no life on earth would be possible. Is this not a great sign, or a multitude of signs, for us to contemplate?

Consider also the endless variety of foods stored in the earth for all creatures that live on it, fly in its atmosphere, swim its waters, hide in its caves, and who disappear underground. Some types of food are simple, others are complex and sophisticated. They are available in all types and shapes to meet the endless needs of endless numbers and types of creatures. Such a great variety of food, including what may be inside the earth, or in its atmosphere, or growing on its surface, or may come from the sun or other worlds beyond, is given in due measure and proportion in accordance with the divine will that created the earth and made it a cradle for this type of life, equipping it with all that is needed.

Consider further the scenes of what the earth presents, wherever you look or move. There are no end of wonderful scenes: flat grounds and lowlands, hills and valleys, lakes and seas, rivers and streams, vineyards and fields of grains and date-palms of different varieties, etc. Every one of these scenes undergoes change by the creative hand whose inventiveness never stops. We pass by any of these in the dry season and capture a certain essence of it, and then we pass by again in the rainy season to find a totally different essence. It presents a third image at the time of growth and yet another totally different one at harvest time. Yet it is all in the same spot, unable to move an inch.

Then consider the creatures that live on earth: plants, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. We need not mention mankind because the *sūrah* gives it special focus. We cannot give a figure for the number of

kinds and species of these creatures, let alone give accurate figures of their individual populations. Every kind is a community of its own; each individual is a great wonder: every animal, bird, reptile, worm and shoot. Indeed, the wonder extends further to every petal of a flower and every stalk in a leaf. Each presents a great exhibition with endless marvels. In this way, the *sūrah* alerts human minds to reflect and contemplate so that they appreciate and enjoy these wonders throughout their lives' journey.

Yet none truly appreciates these wonders and enjoys these pleasures except one whose heart carries the certainty of faith: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith.*" (Verse 20) It is only such certainty that brings the heart alive so that it sees, understands and appreciates the creating power behind them. Without such certainty, all remains cold and hollow, speechless and lifeless, while the heart remains unresponsive. Many are those who pass through this great open exhibition with closed eyes and hearts. They neither feel its life force nor understand its language, and all because they are devoid of that certainty of faith. Some may be reputable scientists, but "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (30: 7) The truth beyond the outer surface remains closed to them, because hearts can only open to receive the truth of existence by the key of faith and can only see it in the light of certainty.

Man: A World of Wonders

The other wonder that walks on earth is mentioned in the next verse: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) Man is indeed the greatest wonder, or miracle on earth, although he is often oblivious to his own real status and to the secret wonders in his own constitution. He is a great wonder in his outer and inner self; his body and soul. When man begins to think about himself, he always finds some great wonder to contemplate: the way his organs are made, their distribution in his body, their functions and the way they perform those functions; how food is digested and assimilated; the process of breathing; blood circulation; the neurological system; the glands and what they produce to ensure physical growth and keep the body functioning, as also the perfect coordination,

harmony and cooperation between all these systems. Every wonderful aspect encompasses many other wonders. Indeed, in every organ and part of an organ there is an amazing wonder.

Then there are the secrets of man's soul and its known and unknown abilities: how he understands, retains and retrieves information. Where are information and images stored and how? How and where are such images, scenes and visions printed, and how are they retrieved? In all this, we are speaking about abilities known to us. What is unknown is even greater. We see occasional glimpses of these during moments of great inspiration, pointing to what is beyond our current reach.

Consider also the bewildering nature of human procreation: one cell carries the entire treasure of characteristics of the human race, as well as the special characteristics of both parents and nearer grandparents. Where are all these characteristics stored within the single microscopic cell? How does it recognize, by itself, its long history and represent it so accurately, eventually culminating in reproducing this amazing creature called man?

A short pause at the moment when a newborn starts its life on earth, separating from its mother and starting its own independent life, allowing its heart and lungs to function and begin life is enough to leave us speechless. It is enough to give us an overwhelming feeling of faith. A similar pause for reflection on the moment when a newborn begins to use its tongue to utter its first sounds, syllables, words and then phrases, indeed reflection on the mechanics of speech, the vocalization through the tongue and the larynx, gives us the feeling that we are looking at a great miracle, one that we tend to take for granted because of its familiarity. Yet on reflection we can appreciate the truth that this great wonder could only have come from God. Indeed every small aspect of the creature that is man is a miracle that leaves us absolutely amazed: *"And in yourselves too: can you not see?"* (Verse 21)

Every individual human being is a world of its own; a mirror reflecting the whole universe in a special and unique image that is not repeated at any moment in history. There is no parallel for any one person in the entire human race, whether in shape, features, mind, faculties, spirit, feelings or even in the way the universe is reflected in that person's mind.

In this divine museum that includes millions of millions of individuals, each one is a unique sample that can never be repeated in the same way as fingerprints are unrepeated throughout human history.

Many of the wonders of the human race are open for all to see: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) What we see of these wonders point to that which we cannot see. These wonders cannot be listed in a book. Indeed, what we know of them will take volumes to explain and what is unknown to us is much greater than what we know. The Qur'ān does not attempt to enumerate them. It simply uses this touch to alert our hearts to this great divine show, which is presented before our very eyes and minds. Thus we go through our journey on earth reflecting and contemplating, deriving immense pleasure from looking carefully at this wonderful creature that lies within ourselves.

Furthermore, we gain much pleasure from looking carefully at people's faces, features, movements and habits, provided that such a look is cast through the eyes of one who acknowledges his position as a servant of God, taking a round in an exhibition of the greatest Creator's work. How about one who spends a lifetime in such pleasant exercise? With a pointer like this, the Qur'ān creates man anew, giving him a new faculty of perception, a new pleasant life and an enjoyment that is unparalleled by anything else on earth.

It is this level of reflection and contemplation that the Qur'ān wants us to achieve. Faith is what gives our hearts such a treasure and opens for us this superior enjoyment while we are still here on earth.

An Oath to Confirm the Truth

After the two exhibitions of the earth and man, the *sūrah* presents a third from the world above, where our perceptions cannot reach. It is there that our shares of provisions and livelihood are determined: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22)

This is a remarkable touch. The means of livelihood and provisions are all on earth. Man works hard and expects to receive his share as a result of his work. The Qur'ān, however, turns man's attention to the sky, to heaven, to God. It is there that shares are determined. The earth itself, and all its means of provisions, are signs for those who have certainty

of faith, pointing to God so that we ask Him for His bounty. Thus do we get rid of worldly burdens, personal greed and the immediate means of income so that these do not become a barrier preventing us from looking up to God who has created all such means.

Every believer understands this statement properly, realizing that it does not mean that one should abandon one's livelihood. He knows that God has assigned to man the task of building life on earth. He understands that it means that man must not make it the focus of his attention. He should work on earth whilst looking up to heaven. He should use the means of his livelihood, realizing that they are not what brings him his provisions. These provisions are assigned to him in heaven, and what God has promised is certain to be fulfilled. Thus his heart breaks the shackles of the immediate concerns about his livelihood, finding in them signs pointing to their Creator. Man thus revives his bond with heaven while standing firmly on the earth. This is what God wants for man, whom He created from clay, then breathed in him of His own spirit, to make him nobler than most of His creation. Faith is the means that puts man in the best situation, because it returns him to that state of pure nature God gave him, before it was affected by deviation and corruption.

Having touched on these three great signs: the earth, man and heaven, God states an oath by Himself, in His glory, that all this discourse is absolutely true: "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" (Verse 23) That humans speak is a fact they acknowledge. They entertain no doubt whatsoever about it. Likewise, this discourse is absolutely true. God tells only the absolute truth.

Al-Aṣma'ī, a famous literary figure who lived in the later part of the second century of the Islamic calendar, reports the following anecdote which is quoted by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*. We quote it here as it is interesting and relevant to our discussion.

> I came out of the main mosque in Basrah and I saw a Bedouin riding a young camel. He asked me to which tribe I belonged, and I told him that I was from Asma'. He asked where I had come from

and I said, 'From a place where the words of the Lord of Grace are recited.' He said: 'Then recite to me.' I began reading the *sūrah* entitled 'The Scattering Winds'. When I read the verse saying, "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised,*" he said, 'This is enough.' He immediately slaughtered his she-camel and distributed its meat to all the people around, then he broke his sword and bow, and left. When I subsequently went on pilgrimage with Caliph al-Rashīd and as I was doing *ṭawāf* around the Ka'bah, I heard someone with a sharp voice calling me. I looked around and I saw the Bedouin having grown thinner and paler. He greeted me and asked me to recite to him the same *sūrah* again. When I reached the same verse, he said, 'We have found God's promise to be true.' Then he asked me what came after that verse. I read the next verse, "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" He cried aloud, 'Limitless is God in His glory! Who has angered the Almighty to make Him swear? They would not believe His words so that He would say an oath!' He repeated this three times and then passed away.[2]

This may or may not be a true story, but it reminds us that this oath by God is awesome. It is an oath by God Himself and by His main attribute, 'the Lord of the heavens and earth', which adds to the certainty of the truth that is the subject of this oath. It is true, and it does not need an oath to make it so.

Abraham and the Angels

So far we have looked at the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part includes brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād Prophet Hud's people, the Thamūd Prophet Ṣāliḥ's people, and Noah's people. This part closely relates to what preceded it in the *sūrah* and to what follows.

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added

2. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Dār al-Fikr, (n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 17.

to himself] 'These are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, to bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. We brought out such believers as were there; but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (Verses 24–37)

These verses speak of a sign or signs in the history of the divine message, just like those signs in the earth and in man to which the *sūrah* referred. It also refers to a promise or promises that are fulfilled, just like the promises the *sūrah* mentioned earlier.

It begins its reference to Abraham by the question: "*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests?*" (Verse 24) This style is used to prepare our minds for what comes next. It describes Abraham's guests as '*honoured*', either because they are so in God's sight, or because of how Abraham paid honour to them as we soon learn. Abraham's hospitality appears very clearly from the first moment his guests arrived. Once they greeted him and received his reply, and despite the fact that they are total strangers, he immediately goes to his wife telling her to prepare food. He provides a large quantity of food, sufficient for scores of people: "*He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf.*" (Verse 26) According to some reports, there were only three guests, which means that a shoulder of that calf would have been sufficient to give them a good meal.

"*He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?'*" (Verse 27) He asked this question after he saw that their hands did not touch the food and it looked as if they would not eat the meal that had been provided.

"*He then became apprehensive of them,*" either because a stranger who refuses to eat his host's food appears treacherous and causes an element of apprehension, or because he noticed something odd about them. Therefore, they revealed their identity, reassuring him and giving him the good news they had brought him: "*They said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 28) This was the happy news of Isaac's birth.

"*His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'*" (Verse 29) She overheard the good news, was stunned and surprised. She could not stop herself from crying out in amazement. In the habitual reaction of women, she slapped herself on both cheeks and said: '*A barren old woman!*' This was a further expression of her surprise given she was elderly, and had been barren throughout her life. Stunned by this totally unexpected piece of news, she forgot that those bringing the good news were angels. Therefore, the angels reminded her of the basic truth that there is no limit to God's power, and that He determines everything on the basis of perfect wisdom and absolute knowledge: "*Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 30)

Everything will come into existence once the command, 'Be', is given. God said it, so what can prevent His order from being fulfilled? Familiar habits limit our imagination and understanding. Therefore, we are surprised when we see something running counter to what is familiar. Yet God's will is free, unrestricted by anything that may be familiar to man in his small world. It creates whatever He wills, without limitation.

When Abraham realized who his guests were, he asked them about the mission they had been sent to accomplish: "*Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin.*" (Verses 31–32) These were Lot's people as explained in other *sūrahs*. Those angels would "*bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds.*" (Verses 33–34)

These stones of clay, marked or made ready by God for those who transgress the bounds, like Lot's people who transgressed the bounds of human nature, truth and religion, may well be stones from a volcanic eruption brought out from deep inside the earth. In this respect, they

are '*from your Lord,*' aimed, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, against any transgressors He has marked. Thus, they are determined in time and place according to His absolute knowledge and His will. There is nothing to prevent their being aimed, within the framework of His will and laws, by angels. Do we know the exact nature of God's angels? Do we know the nature of their relation to the universe and its inhabitants? Do we truly know the nature of the universal powers to which we give names according to what we may see of their characteristics? Why should we question the news given to us by God, saying that He sent some of these forces at a certain point of time, to aim some powers in a particular form, against certain people, at a certain place? How can we question such news when all our knowledge consists of some theories and supposed interpretations concerning what appears to us of these powers and forces? Their reality remains far removed from us. Let these stones be volcanic resulting from an eruption nearby, or some other such stones. What difference does it make? Both are the same in His hand, as He has made both and the secret is known to Him. He may reveal that secret when and if He so wishes.

"*We brought out such believers as were there,*" to protect and save them. "*But We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house.*" (Verse 36) Those were Lot's family, as reported in other *sūrahs*, and they were all saved except his wife who perished with her people. "*We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering.*" (Verse 37) Those who fear are the ones who see the sign, understand it and benefit from it. The others are blind, unable to see God's signs on earth, within themselves or in the events of history.

Moses and Earlier Communities

Another sign is cited from the history of Moses. A brief reference to this is made within the context of the signs from the history of God's messengers:

> *In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and*

said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (Verses 38–40)

The clear authority God gave to Moses was his powerful argument and irrefutable proof, as well as that people were in awe of his presence. Yet Pharaoh turned away, proud of his power, and rejected the clear truth and the decisive proof. When Moses showed him the miraculous signs God had given him, Pharaoh said that Moses was '*a sorcerer or a madman*'. This confirms that miracles will not guide a heart that is not prepared to believe. They cannot silence a voice that insists on repeating fabrications.

The *sūrah* does not give details of Moses' story. It proceeds straight to its conclusion: "*We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh certainly deserved all blame because of his transgression and rejection of God's message. The phraseology here clearly indicates God's direct action in seizing Pharaoh and his army and casting them into the sea. This is deliberately highlighted as it fits with the exhibition of God's signs on earth, in man and throughout history.

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (Verses 41–42)

The wind is described in Arabic as *'aqīm*, which literally means 'sterile'. It is given this description because, unlike what they expected, it did not bring them water and life. Rather, it destroyed life and brought about death and total destruction. It left everything it came upon like a dead thing, reduced to dust.

Wind is one of the forces God has set in the universe, and one of God's troops which are known only to Him. He sends it, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, in a particular form, at an appointed time, bringing either destruction or life to whomever He wills. In such a situation there is no room for the naïve objection

voiced by some people who say that the wind blows according to a universal system and travels here or there as other natural forces and factors determine. The One who makes it blow and travel according to a certain system, forces and factors is the One who sends it against whom He wills at the time He chooses. He is able to send it as He wills within the system and factors He has put in place. No doubt or objection can be voiced.

> *And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves.* (Verses 43–45)

The statement referring to what was said to them, "*You can enjoy your life for a while*," may be a reference to their being given a period of three days after they killed the she-camel, which was a sign given to them by God. This is mentioned in another *sūrah*, when their prophet, Ṣālih, said to them: "*You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes.*" (11: 65) It could also refer to the fact that they had their time of life and enjoyed it from the time the divine message was given to them to the time when they slew the she-camel. They clearly disobeyed God and deserved His punishment.

What was said about the stones aimed at Lot's people and the wind sent against the ʿĀd is also applicable to the thunderbolt that struck the Thamūd. All of these are universal forces that work in accordance with God's will and His laws. He sends them against whomever He decides within these laws and they fulfil the role assigned to them by God like any of His other troops.

"*And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 46) This is just a quick reference, with no details or explanations. It is added as if to say, 'remember Noah's people.' This reference is followed by one to the skies and how they are built. Both are among God's signs, one from the universe and one from history. The *sūrah* puts them together, so joining its second and third parts.

Creatures in Pairs

> *We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!* (Verses 47–51)

These verses take us back to the great universal exhibition the *sūrah* presented in its opening, providing here yet another image the Qur'ān puts before our eyes and minds. Further references are added to God's signs, linking that provided by Noah and his people with that of the heavens, the earth and other creatures. This culminates with a call to mankind to flee to their Lord, submitting themselves to Him and associating no partners with Him.

"*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse.*" (Verse 47) Power is the clearest element in the solid, firm and well-coordinated structure of the '*skies*', whatever we take the term to mean: the orbits of the different stars and planets, any of the star clusters we normally call a galaxy which includes many millions of stars, a stratum of the huge space in which planets and stars are scattered, or any other of its many meanings. Vastness is another clearly recognizable element. These millions of huge stars are no more than small particles floating in the great expanse that is the universe.

This reference to the skies may also imply a pointer to the stores of sustenance, which were stated earlier in the *sūrah* to be in the sky. However, in the earlier reference it is merely a symbol indicating what is with God. Yet the Qur'ānic expression gives deliberate connotations so as to leave a clear impression on people's minds.

The same applies to the reference to the earth and its being spread out: "*And We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it!*" (Verse 48) As we explained before, God has made this earth to be a cradle for human life. That the earth has been spread out indicates that it serves as a cradle equipped with all that is necessary to support and enable life to flourish.

"*All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought.*" (Verse 49) This is a fascinating truth that reveals the basic rule common to all creation on earth, and possibly in the universe. As it stands, the statement does not limit the '*in pairs*' rule to the earth. It is clearly seen among living creatures, but the phrase, '*all things*', also includes inanimate objects. Hence, the statement means that both animate and inanimate things are created in pairs.

This statement was presented to people 14 centuries ago, when even the thought that living things, let alone inanimate objects, are all made in pairs was totally unknown. When we remember this we find the statement itself becomes amazing, as it presents such a universal fact to people at such an early time. Moreover, this statement confirms that recent scientific research is heading towards confirmation of this truth. Indeed, it has almost established that the whole universe is made of atoms, which contain a dual electric charge, positive and negative.[3]

These verses referring to the great universe, the width of the earth and the system of creation all culminate in a call on people to flee to God, the Creator of all, shedding all that shackles their souls, acknowledging His absolute unity: "*Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!*" (Verses 50–51) Use of the word *flee*, here is very significant. It points to the burdens, shackles and handcuffs that restrain people, pulling them towards the earth and its material life, preventing free movement and ensuring they are always restrained. Most cogent among these are the restraints of earning one's livelihood, maintaining one's income and preoccupation with improving one's lot. Therefore, the call to shed all these and flee to God, alone, without partners, is very powerful. It reminds people, twice in succession, that they have no excuse for not doing so: "*I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 50–51)

It is as if the mention of the signs seen everywhere in the heavens, earth and among creatures is a continuation of the signs given to God's

3. The author wrote this in the late 1950s. Recent scientific research has moved further, looking at sub-atomic particles, the string theory, etc. These again confirm what is stated here that every thing is created in pairs. God certainly tells the truth. – Editor's note.

messengers. Next we have a comment on the references to earlier messengers mentioned in the *sūrah*:

> *Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.* (Verses 52–55)

It is the same nature common to all unbelievers. They all give the same response to the divine message: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.'*" (Verse 52) This is exactly what the Arab unbelievers said. It is as if one generation of unbelievers handed down such a legacy to the next in a continuing process. Needless to say, there was no such handing down. It is all in the nature of transgression and unbelief whereby present unbelievers and their predecessors are brought together.

The natural result of this repeated stand is that the Prophet should not pay any attention to what the unbelievers say. He is not responsible for them as they choose to remain in error. He has spared no effort in trying to get them to follow divine guidance: "*Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame.*" (Verse 54) His only task is to remind people and to continue to give them reminders, no matter how persistent they are in their rejection of the truth: "*And go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.*" (Verse 55) Such reminders will not benefit hardened unbelievers. Yet the task assigned to God's messengers is to give such reminders. It is not within their ability to ensure that people follow proper guidance. That is outside their remit. It is God alone who gives guidance.

The Purpose of Creation

The last note in the *sūrah* explains the meaning of fleeing to God and shedding all burdens and encumbrances in order to fulfil the mission for which He created people:

> *I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.* (Verses 56–58)

This short statement embodies one of the greatest universal truths. Indeed, to fully understand this truth it is necessary for human life on earth to be set on the right track. This applies in equal measure to the life of the individual, the community and all humanity throughout history. Understanding this truth opens up a whole host of concepts and meanings. The first point in this truth is that there is a clear objective for the existence of humans and *jinn* on earth. This objective is represented in a task: whoever fulfils it achieves the objective of his existence, and whoever neglects it leads a life without purpose or objective. He who neglects it thus breaks away from the law that applied to him when he came into existence, and he ends in utter loss. This task which binds humans and *jinn* to the law of the universe is worship or servitude to God. Thus, there will be a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Man's life is thus set aright on this basis.

We then begin to see the other side of this great truth, realizing that the concept of worship must be much broader and more comprehensive than attending to worship rituals. Neither humans nor *jinn* spend their lives in worship rituals. Indeed, God does not require them to do so. On the contrary, He requires them to fulfil other tasks which take up most of their time. We do not know anything about the sort of duties God requires of the *jinn*, but we know the extent of what God requires of man. This is clearly stated in the Qur'ān, as God says: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.'*" (2: 30) Being in charge of the earth is then the main function of human beings. This requires the exercise of different activities and the use of different talents in order to build human life on earth, after getting to know its resources and potentials. In doing so, man puts in effect God's will to use and develop the earth so as to ensure steady progress. Man's vicegerency also involves the implementation of God's law so that human society can be set on the proper foundation, one that is in harmony with the law governing the universe.

All this makes it absolutely clear that worship, which is the objective of human existence, or rather man's first duty, has a much broader sense than the mere observance of rituals. Indeed the entire concept of vicegerency is incorporated into the idea of worship, which must be reflected in two major ways. The first is that the concept of man's servitude to God should be well established in our hearts. This so that we fully realize that there is only a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Beyond this there is nothing: it is just the One Lord and all others are His servants, to whom they offer their worship. The second is that every thought, every action and every life affair must be addressed purely to God, seeking His acceptance. Every feeling other than that of submission to God and worshipping Him should be discarded.

When these two concepts are fully absorbed, the meaning of worship is fully realized. Thus, ordinary actions in man's life become like worship rituals; rituals like building human life on earth, striving for God's cause, ensuring patience in adversity and accepting God's will are all aspects of worship, fulfilling the main objective for which humans and *jinn* have been created. They are all a translation of submission to the overall law that governs the universe, which is submission and servitude to God, and to no one else.

Thus man will live on earth feeling that he is there to fulfil a task assigned to him by God, for a period of time. This task is to obey God and worship Him, without having any interest or objective in all this other than obedience of God. The reward for such obedience man finds within himself in the form of pleasant reassurance and satisfaction with his lot, as well as deep gratification from earning God's acceptance. He will then find greater reward in the life to come where he will receive honour and far-reaching blessings.

He will then have truly fled to God, discarding all worldly burdens, attractions and distractions and claimed his full freedom. He will have established his position in the general system of the universe as a servant of God who created him for His worship. He will have fulfilled the purpose of his existence. As we have said: an essential requirement of worship, in its proper and full sense, is that man should fulfil the duties of his position that places him in charge of the earth. He should achieve the best results he can in discharging his duties, while at the same

time look for no personal benefit. No worldly attraction should tempt him to change course. What he must realize is that when he fulfils his mission of building human life on earth, to the best standard he can, he is not doing so for himself or his position; he is doing it in order to put into effect the concept of worship and to flee to God from all worldly burdens and attractions.

A correlative of this is that man should evaluate deeds and actions on the basis of their motives, not their results. Let the outcome be as it may, man should not concern himself with it. He is only concerned with fulfilling his duty of worship when he does anything. His reward is not based on the outcome of his actions, but on the worship he fulfils in performing them.

This means that man's attitude to duties, responsibilities and actions will totally change. He will look only to the worship aspect involved in them all. When he fulfils this aspect, his objective is met, let the outcome be what it may. The outcome is not part of his responsibility. It is determined by God's will. Man himself, his efforts, intentions and actions are part of God's will.

When man offloads any concern about the outcome of his efforts and feels that his reward is guaranteed, as long as his motive for action fulfils the concept of worship, his heart will be free of the sort of aspirations that make people compete and quarrel over life's prizes. On the one side, he exerts his best efforts to fulfil his mission and discharge his duties on earth, and, on the other, he looks for no gain as a result of his efforts. What he achieves is solely to fulfil the concept of worship, not to make any personal gain.

The Qur'ān strengthens this feeling, letting man overcome his concerns about his livelihood and his selfish desires. Everybody's livelihood is guaranteed by God. Needless to say, He needs neither sustenance nor food from them when He asks them to spend some of their money on those who are in need: "*No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 57–58) What this means in effect is that a believer's incentive to work and exert his best efforts in discharging his duties of building human life on earth is not to earn a livelihood; his incentive is to fulfil the meaning of worship,

which requires him to exert his best efforts. Thus his mind is focused on the fulfilment of the worship concept in doing whatever he is doing. He is free of concerns about the results of this effort. These are, then, noble feelings, which can only exist within such a noble concept.

It is true that humanity does not understand or appreciate these feelings. This is because humanity has not lived with the guidance of the Qur'ān, as the first generation of Muslims did, nor has it derived its life value from the Islamic constitution.

When man rises to this sublime level of worship, or servitude to God, and maintains it, he will disdain any resort to foul means in order to achieve a noble end, even when this end is none other than to achieve victory for God's message. Foul means will, for one thing, destroy the noble meaning of worship. For another, a believer is not concerned with achieving goals. He is only concerned with the fulfilment of his duty. Goals and ends are left to God to determine in accordance with His will.

Moreover, a servant of God who attends to his worship in this way will enjoy ease of conscience, reassurance and a happy state in all situations, whether he sees the outcome of his efforts or not, and whether they bring the results he hoped for or not. He has done his duty and made sure of his reward once he has fulfilled the concept of worship in his work. The outcome is outside his remit. He knows that he is a servant of God. Therefore, in his feelings and appeals, he does not exceed the limits of a servant. He knows that God is the Lord. Therefore, he does not encroach on what belongs to the Lord. He thus earns God's acceptance and He is happy with what God gives him.

Thus do we understand some aspects of this great truth stated in a single short verse: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56) This truth is great indeed; it can change how people live when it takes hold of their hearts.

In the light of this great truth, the *sūrah* concludes with a warning to the wrongdoers who hasten the fulfilment of God's warnings: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised.*" (Verses 59–60)

SŪRAH 52

Al-Ṭūr

(Mount Sinai)

Prologue

This *sūrah* constitutes a profound and effective address to the human heart. It aims to eradicate doubts, misrepresentations and false assumptions that may linger in some corners of the human mind. It refutes every argument or excuse to justify deviation from the path of faith. It seeks to do this with an irresistible onslaught, one that inevitably forces submission. In order to achieve this, the *sūrah* employs all aspects of the Qur'ānic discourse including choice vocabulary, connotations, images, musical notes and beats. From start to finish, its verses flow like missiles fired in quick succession, its beats like thunderbolts and its images like a running, captivating film that does not stop for even a moment.

The *sūrah* begins with God's oath by some sacred things in the heavens and earth, some of which are well known and others that belong to the realm that lies beyond human perception: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea.*" (Verses 1–6) This oath confirms something really awesome and it fills its listeners with terror. It is expressed in words that most suit its feared outcome, painting an image that leaves the heart shuddering: "*your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 7–10) As we visualize this

scene, we see and hear the horror that causes violent shaking, coupled with a well-deserved rebuke: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verses 11–16)

This represents the first part of the *sūrah*. It is immediately followed by a change of tone and colour. The *sūrah* now aims to hold before the very hearts and minds that saw the foregoing horror the prospect of safety and bliss. It depicts a scene of those who are God-fearing and the reward prepared for them. This is shown at ease, dwelling on pleasant details. It thus takes us from an air of punishment and suffering to one of happiness and enjoyment: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'*" (Verses 17–28)

In its third part the *sūrah* seeks to refute all doubts, misconceptions, excuses and false arguments. It presents the truth as simple, clear and powerful, and speaks with an irrefutable logic that allows no room for evasion. It holds out the truth forcing people to its acknowledgement and acceptance. This part begins by telling the Prophet to continue with his reminders to people, despite their ill treatment of him and his Companions. He should confront them with his overpowering logic:

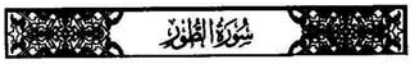
"*So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verses 29–43)

This list of questions comes in quick succession, like thundering missiles that blow falsehood into smithereens, and silence every stubborn argument that tries to defy the truth. The *sūrah* portrays the unbelievers' stubbornness showing how they defy the truth in the face of every tangible reality: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) Needless to say, there is a huge difference between a portion of sky falling and clouds moving *en masse*. Yet still they try to justify themselves. Hence, the *sūrah* aims its final missile at them, threatening them with the prospect of hell that is promised at the beginning: "*Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support.*" (Verses 45–46) It then threatens them with a punishment that overtakes them before that promised day: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* concludes on a happy note addressed to the Prophet whom they used to describe as a poet whose death they would await, or as a soothsayer or a madman. This happy ending is given so as to comfort and assure him of his position of honour. Indeed, this happy note has no parallel in the Qur'ān, and it was never previously addressed to any

other prophet or messenger: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) This is a note of kindness that ensures that all the troubles the Prophet met with would not have the least effect on him.

Al-Ṭūr (Mount Sinai)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

By Mount Sinai; (1)

وَٱلطُّورِ ﴿١﴾

by a scripture inscribed (2)

وَكِتَٰبٍ مَّسْطُورٍ ﴿٢﴾

on unrolled parchment; (3)

فِى رَقٍّ مَّنشُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

by the much-visited House; (4)

وَٱلْبَيْتِ ٱلْمَعْمُورِ ﴿٤﴾

by the vault raised high; (5)

وَٱلسَّقْفِ ٱلْمَرْفُوعِ ﴿٥﴾

by the swelling sea; (6)

وَٱلْبَحْرِ ٱلْمَسْجُورِ ﴿٦﴾

your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ لَوَٰقِعٌ ﴿٧﴾

Nothing can stop it. (8)

مَّا لَهُۥ مِن دَافِعٍ ﴿٨﴾

On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9)

يَوْمَ تَمُورُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ مَوْرًا ﴿٩﴾

and the mountains will move away. (10)

وَتَسِيرُ ٱلْجِبَالُ سَيْرًا ﴿١٠﴾

Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11)

فَوَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١١﴾

who idly play with vain trifles. (12)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي خَوْضٍ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13)

يَوْمَ يُدَعُّونَ إِلَىٰ نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعًّا ﴿١٣﴾

[and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14)

هَٰذِهِ النَّارُ الَّتِي كُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15)

أَفَسِحْرٌ هَٰذَا أَمْ أَنتُمْ لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

اصْلَوْهَا فَاصْبِرُوا أَوْ لَا تَصْبِرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, (17)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَعِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. (18)

فَاكِهِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ وَوَقَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٨﴾

'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' (19)

كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا هَنِيئًا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّصْفُوفَةٍ ۖ وَزَوَّجْنَـٰهُم
بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. (20)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعَتْهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتُهُم
بِإِيمَـٰنٍ أَلْحَقْنَا بِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَمَآ أَلَتْنَـٰهُم
مِّنْ عَمَلِهِم مِّن شَىْءٍ ۚ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَ
رَهِينٌ ﴿٢١﴾

As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. (21)

وَأَمْدَدْنَـٰهُم بِفَـٰكِهَةٍ وَلَحْمٍ مِّمَّا
يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. (22)

يَتَنَـٰزَعُونَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا لَّا لَغْوٌ فِيهَا
وَلَا تَأْثِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. (23)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غِلْمَانٌ لَّهُمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ
لُؤْلُؤٌ مَّكْنُونٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. (24)

وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They will turn to one another, asking each other. (25)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا قَبْلُ فِىٓ أَهْلِنَا مُشْفِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, (26)

فَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا وَوَقَىٰنَا عَذَابَ
ٱلسَّمُومِ ﴿٢٧﴾

and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. (27)

إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبْلُ نَدْعُوهُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
هُوَ ٱلْبَرُّ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾

We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (28)

فَذَكِّرْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِنِعْمَتِ رَبِّكَ
بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. (29)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِۦ رَيْبَ
ٱلْمَنُونِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' (30)

قُلْ تَرَبَّصُوا۟ فَإِنِّى مَعَكُم مِّنَ
ٱلْمُتَرَبِّصِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' (31)

أَمْ تَأْمُرُهُمْ أَحْلَٰمُهُم بِهَٰذَآ ۚ أَمْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ
طَاغُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? (32)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ تَقَوَّلَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. (33)

فَلْيَأْتُوا۟ بِحَدِيثٍ مِّثْلِهِۦٓ إِن كَانُوا۟
صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. (34)

أَمْ خُلِقُوا۟ مِنْ غَيْرِ شَىْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? (35)

أَمْ خَلَقُوا۟ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ ۚ بَل لَّا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. (36)

أَمْ عِندَهُمْ خَزَآئِنُ رَبِّكَ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُصَيْطِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? (37)

أَمْ لَهُمْ سُلَّمٌ يَسْتَمِعُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَلْيَأْتِ مُسْتَمِعُهُم بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. (38)

أَمْ لَهُ ٱلْبَنَٰتُ وَلَكُمُ ٱلْبَنُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Is He to have only daughters and you sons? (39)

أَمْ تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُم مِّن مَّغْرَمٍ مُّثْقَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? (40)

أَمْ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (41)

أَمْ يُرِيدُونَ كَيْدًا ۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلْمَكِيدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. (42)

أَمْ لَهُمْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. (43)

Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (44)

وَإِن يَرَوْا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ سَاقِطًا يَقُولُوا
سَحَابٌ مَّرْكُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; (45)

فَذَرْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي
فِيهِ يُصْعَقُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. (46)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا
وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. (47)

وَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا عَذَابًا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ
وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, (48)

وَاصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ فَإِنَّكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا ۖ وَسَبِّحْ
بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٤٨﴾

and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (49)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَإِدْبَارَ النُّجُومِ ﴿٤٩﴾

No Way Out

By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will

move away. Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done. (Verses 1–16)

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as *Waṭ-Ṭūr*, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*. The Arabic word, *Ṭūr*, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'ān, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the *much-visited House* and the *vault raised high*. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The *much-visited House* may refer to the Ka'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic *ḥadīth* giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do..." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The Prophet's statement means that the angels perform *ṭawāf* around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the *vault raised high* refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyān quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The *swelling sea* means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective *masjūr*, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another *sūrah* we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81: 6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous: "*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it.*" (Verses 7–8) It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this *sūrah* in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.' He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this *sūrah*, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 9–10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the

sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the *sūrah* hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles.*" (Verses 11–12) Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'ān describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'ān. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence

of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'ān presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'ānic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole. The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'ān puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'ānic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'ān addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'ān. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over? The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give

man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The *sūrah* issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles "*on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell.*" (Verse 13) This is a violent image. The *sūrah* uses the Arabic word *da'an*, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: "*This is the fire you used to deny.*" (Verse 14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: "*So is this sorcery, or do you not see?*" (Verse 15) They used to label the Qur'ān as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'ān?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: "*Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verse 16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.

For Believers and Offspring

The second section of the *sūrah* is one of excitement, spreading comfort and happiness, particularly after the preceding scenes of outright distress:

> *The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'* (Verses 17–28)

This scene is close to material comfort. It is of the type that addresses feelings in the early period, tempting the human soul with physical pleasures in their refined form. It contrasts with the scene of crude painful suffering that those who are oblivious to the truth have to face: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire.*" (Verses 17–18) Just mere protection from the suffering of the fire which has already been described is a great blessing. How is it to be viewed then when it is coupled with admission into gardens and bliss? Moreover, these believers enjoy what God provides them with. It is all comfort and luxury plus hospitality and honour: "*Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.*" (Verse 19) This in itself is a great blessing.

As they are so addressed from on high, they are told that they deserve whatever reward they are given. Furthermore, they will "*recline on couches arranged in rows,*" giving them the pleasure of their brethren's company in such blissful surroundings. Yet, "*We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes.*" (Verse 20) This represents man's best enjoyment.

Further honour is granted as their offspring, who are also believers, join them in their place of bliss. This is added care. Even if their offspring do not attain the standards of the God-fearing, as long as they are believers, they join their parents without detracting anything from their parents' reward. In no way, however, does this detract from personal responsibility and individual accountability. Rather, it is a favour that God bestows on them all: "*As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward of their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds.*" (Verse 21)

More is added to the scene as we are introduced to other aspects of enjoyment in an atmosphere of perfect happiness. These dwellers of heaven are given varieties of fruits and meat, and they pass around a cup containing a drink that is totally different from the wines of this present world which loosen tongues with foul and dirty speech and tempt people into physical and mental sin. It is a pure drink causing no wrong: "*They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin.*" (Verse 23) They are gathered together as they pass it around, enjoying each other's company. At the same time they are served by youths who reflect pure innocence and a shining friendliness: "*They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells.*" (Verse 24)

This warm and happy scene is carried further as we are shown how these people in heaven converse, recalling memories of their worldly lives and outlining the reasons that ensured their happy end, with all its security, luxury, gratification and bliss. Thus the secret is given out and the way leading to this blissful ending is marked for all travellers: "*They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching*

wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'" (Verses 25–28)

Thus, the secret is that they were always apprehensive about their outcome on the Day of Judgement. They feared what would happen when their records would be laid open and they would be called to account for their deeds. They entertained such apprehensions when they were with their families, enjoying seeming security, deceptive safety and dealing with worldly preoccupations. Yet they were neither deceived nor distracted. Therefore, God bestowed His grace on them and spared them the sort of suffering that seeps through the blood system like scorching poison. They realize that they are spared such suffering only by God's grace, which is bestowed in response to their fearing what the Day of Judgement might bring them. They certainly know that on its own, good action is not enough to admit the person doing it into heaven unless God bestows His grace on the person doing it. All that good action achieves is to testify that its doer has done his best, choosing what pleases God and earning His grace.

With all this fear and apprehension, the believers used to pray in earnest: "*We used to pray to Him.*" They were fully aware of those attributes of God that ensure goodly reward for His servants: "*He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28)

A Reminder of God's Blessings

The *sūrah* now begins a series of rhetorical questions fashioned to a fast beat, presenting clear facts and addressing any remaining doubts the human soul might have. This round is full of strong challenges which no human heart can withstand:

> *So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created*

out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (Verses 29–44)

The address here is to the Prophet: "*So, remind people.*" (Verse 29) He should continue to remind people, undeterred by their rude and impolite behaviour or their false accusations. They used to say of him that he was a soothsayer, or a madman. These two descriptions are linked by the common notion that soothsayers received their information from the *jinn*, and that the *jinn* possessed those who were mad. Thus, the devil was the common element in both descriptions. What made them use either adjective – poet or sorcerer – to describe the Prophet was the fact that they were overwhelmed by the Qur'ān. Its address was so unfamiliar to them even though, by nature, they were highly eloquent. Since they could not even think of admitting that it was God's word, they felt that they needed to provide some plausible explanation for its superiority over anything they or others could say. Hence they claimed that it was imparted by the *jinn*, or that the *jinn* helped in its composition. They alleged that the man reciting it, i.e. Muḥammad, was either a soothsayer receiving information from the jinn, or a sorcerer relying on the *jinn*'s help, or a poet who had a *jinnee* friend, or a madman possessed by a *jinnee* who gave him such wonderful speech.

This is a wicked accusation. Therefore, God consoles His Messenger showing it to be of no importance and reassuring him that he continues to enjoy His favours which allow no element of soothsaying or madness to affect him: "*By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman.*" (Verse 29) This is followed by a denunciation of their

assertion that he was a poet: "*Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.'*" (Verse 30) They indeed said that. Some of them counselled others to "bear with him, stick to our ways and soon enough he will die and we will be rid of him." Hence the Prophet is instructed to give them an implicit threat in his reply: "*Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.'*" (Verse 31) Soon enough, you will know who will end up in a better position.

Some of the Quraysh elders were accorded a position of respect on account of their perceived wisdom in conducting affairs. These are referred to here with a clear note of sarcasm, as their attitude to Islam is the antithesis of wisdom and logic. The *sūrah* sarcastically wonders whether the descriptions they attach to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) are what their wise elders have arrived at? Or is it that they are arrogant, unjust people who do not listen to what the wise elders counsel: "*Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people?*" (Verse 32) The first question is loaded with sharp sarcasm; the second carries an accusation that should put them to shame. One or the other is indeed true when they adopt such an absurd attitude.

They were always rude in what they said about the Prophet. They even accused him of fabricating what he said to them. The *sūrah* disapprovingly wonders whether they have made such a claim of fabrication against the Prophet, implying that such an allegation could never have been made: "*Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?'*" (Verse 33) It immediately explains what lies behind such a singular allegation: "*They certainly do not believe.*" (Verse 33) The fact that in their hearts they did not really believe is the reason why they made such a statement. They simply cannot appreciate the true nature of the Qur'ān. Had they appreciated it they would have known that no human being could have authored it, and that it could only have been delivered by a man of truth.

Since their hearts cannot appreciate the truth of this revelation, the *sūrah* challenges them to provide irrefutable proof: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34) This challenge occurs several times in the Qur'ān, yet those who deny the truth of the Qur'ān could not take up the challenge. Furthermore, this

challenge remains valid for the rest of time, and no one will ever be able to produce anything like the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān has a special secret which is felt by everyone who begins to look at its text, before even attempting to identify its many miraculous aspects. He feels that the very words themselves speak with special authority. He senses that there is something extra, beyond the meanings the words impart to us; something that is felt by the heart as soon as one listens to the Qur'ān. Some people feel this very clearly, while others sense it even though they cannot identify it. Nonetheless it is there. It cannot be traced back to anything in particular: the phraseology, the meaning, the images and connotations, the special music that is so different from the rhythm of any other speech. Or is it produced by a combination of all these elements, or by these and something else beyond them that we cannot identify? This is something that is present in every Qur'ānic text, and it is felt initially by everyone who handles a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Beyond this, there are phenomena that we can recognize and understand when we study the Qur'ān and contemplate its meanings and construction.

These phenomena are recognized in the clear, comprehensive and true concept the Qur'ān presents to our hearts and minds of the truth of human existence, of existence as a whole, and the essential truth of God Almighty. They are seen in the Qur'ānic method that seeks to implant this concept in man's mind as it addresses his nature in a way that is totally unfamiliar in human address. The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind with all its many facets, reflecting profound knowledge of man's every angle. We see the superiority of the Qur'ān in the comprehensiveness, balance and coherence of its directives that are all placed on the same level. This phenomenon is unknown in the works of human beings that cannot maintain the same situation or the same standard, and cannot address all aspects at the same time. Nothing that man produces can reflect absolute balance that admits neither increase nor decrease, and suffers neither shortage nor extravagance. No human work achieves absolute coherence that admits no discord or conflict either in essence or detail.

These and similar phenomena, as well as the subtle and the undeniably secret, combine to give the Qur'ān its quality of an absolute miracle that

remains valid for all time. No self respecting person can argue about this. He will readily admit the truth that stares him clearly in the face whenever he looks at the Qur'ān with an open mind: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34)

The next question wonders at their own existence, a truth staring them in the face which they cannot explain in any way other than what the Qur'ān states: God, the Creator of all that exists has brought them into existence: "*Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators?*" (Verse 35) The thought that they just existed out of nothing is against the logic of nature. It merits no argument. On the other hand, neither they nor any other creature can claim that they created themselves. As neither case can be logically entertained, there only remains the true case stated in the Qur'ān, confirming that they are all creatures of God, the only Creator and Originator. Since no one can claim any share of His attributes of creation and origination, then Lordship and Godhead belong solely to Him. This is clear and true logic.

The *sūrah* then directs their attention to the heavens and the earth: are they the ones who created these? Needless to say, the heavens and the earth did not create themselves, in the same way as humans do not do so: "*Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith.*" (Verse 36) Neither they, nor anyone listening to the logic of nature, claim that the heavens and the earth created themselves or came into existence without being created. Nor do those people claim that they created them. Yet they stand in front of people like a question requiring an answer. When those very unbelievers were asked who created the heavens and the earth, they said that God created them. Yet this truth did not acquire such clarity as to produce its normal effects in their hearts and minds, leading them to formulate true and clear conviction: "*They have no faith.*" (Verse 36)

The *sūrah* then takes them a step lower than that of the creation of either themselves or the world around them. It asks them whether they own God's treasures or have control of these so as to be able to cause benefit and harm: "*Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control?*" (Verse 37) If they make no such claim, then who owns these treasures and controls all things? The Qur'ān says that God is the One who gives in plenty or in small measure, and who determines

all affairs in the universe. This is the only explanation of what happens in the universe.

A further step down is then taken, and the *sūrah* asks whether they have any means to listen to the source of revelation: "*Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof.*" (Verse 38) Muḥammad (peace be upon him) tells them that he is a Messenger of God and that he receives revelations from on high. They reject this, claiming it as false. The *sūrah* asks whether they have the means to climb up and listen to what He says, gaining information that supports their claims that he receives no such revelations, and asserts that the truth is contrary to what he says. This requires that they provide compelling evidence in support of their claims. This is an allusion to the great authority the Qur'ān speaks with, yet they reject its clear and powerful message.

The *sūrah* then brings into focus one of their absurd claims, alleging that the angels are God's daughters. It addresses them directly, adding an element of further reproach: "*Is He to have only daughters and you sons?*" (Verse 39) They considered girls to be inferior to boys, and anyone of them would be full of gloom and frustration when they were told that they had begot girls. Yet they unashamedly attribute female offspring to God Almighty. Thus the *sūrah* uses their own traditions and values to shame them.

They disliked receiving the Prophet's address. They disliked his message of guidance, feeling that it was a burden, even though it was given to them clear and pure. He asked no wages or payment for his trouble. The least that such a free presentation deserves is an appreciative response and a gentle refusal if they did not want to accept what he offered. Hence, the *sūrah* denounces their unjustified attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 40) Since they are not asked to pay anything for it, their attitude appears to be totally indefensible and unwarranted. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Again, the *sūrah* puts before them their true position in this universe. They are creatures with certain limitations. They are given access to a certain portion of this world, beyond which they cannot penetrate. It all belongs to the Creator. What lies beyond their reach is God's own

preserve and they have no knowledge of it: "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 41) They are well aware that they have no knowledge of what lies beyond their perception even though it is a reality. They have no means of accessing it. It is God who writes in its record whatever He determines for His creatures, while they cannot write a thing in it.

The One who is in control of that hidden reality and whatever occurs in that hidden realm is indeed the One who can determine and scheme. How come, then, that in their position of inability to record anything they try to scheme against you, aiming to entrap you? Why do they imagine that they can determine any future event, saying of the Prophet that he is a poet who would soon die? "*Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped.*" (Verse 42) It is they who are subject to whatever is determined by the Creator and Controller of the hidden reality. His schemes will certainly apply to them and take their effect. He is the best of all schemers.

"*Have they, then, any deity other than God?*" (Verse 43) Does such a deity, if they have one, protect them against what God determines for them? "*Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verse 43) How absurd is their false concept of God!

With this exaltation of God and its clear statement of His oneness this series of rhetorical questions, characterized by a powerful beat, is concluded. All their arguments have been refuted, and all doubts removed. They are presented with the clear truth and left without any excuse to justify their hostility to it. At this point their stubbornness in rejecting the clear truth is put clearly before their eyes: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) This means that even if God decides to punish them by making a part of the sky fall down upon them, destroying their world, and they see it falling on their heads, they would still claim that it is but a mass of clouds, bringing rain and prosperity. It is just like the one who denies the truth of what he sees, even with a sword piercing his neck, as it were. This may be a reference to what the people of ʿĀd said when they saw the clouds heralding their own destruction. They claimed: "*This cloud will bring us rain.*" (46: 24) The truth was then told to them: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a*

stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord." (46: 24–25)

Perfect Contrast

At this point, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to leave them alone. They will certainly face the day mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* and the severe punishment it will bring them. He is to remain steadfast in the face of whatever is determined by his Lord who bestows His care on him. He is to glorify his Lord when he wakes up early in the morning, in the depths of the night and at the time when the stars disappear:

> *Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.* (Verses 45–49)

This final passage begins with a clear warning against what will happen on that frightening day when the trumpet is first blown and they are all totally stunned. This takes place shortly before the resurrection, when nothing will be of benefit and no help can be expected from any quarter. If, in this life, they are able to scheme and take action, nothing can stave off what will happen on that day. However, they will also endure another type of suffering before that. This is left unspecified, but it is certain to happen: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

Thus this long and determined attack is concluded, bringing the unbelievers face to face with the severe punishments that await them, one close at hand and the other to occur later. The *sūrah* then speaks to the Prophet who was the target of their false accusations. He is instructed to face such adversity with patience. He is to remain steadfast, continuing his efforts to advocate God's message, and to leave the decision to God

who determines whatever He will: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement.*" (Verse 48)

Yet this directive is coupled with a confirmation of God's kindly care. Such loving care is certain to remove all hardship that the Prophet may have to face. Thus, perseverance in the face of adversity becomes acceptable, and even welcome, since it is the means to such compassionate care: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This expression is unique, describing a position that has never been attained by any human being. Nowhere else in the Qur'ān is this expression used, even though some similar expressions of overflowing care are used.

Moses, for example, is told: "*Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed.*" (20: 13) "*I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye.*" (20: 39) "*I have chosen you for Myself.*" (20: 41) All these expressions speak of highly exalted positions, but Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is given an even higher distinction with this unique expression: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This statement implies a unique aspect of friendliness and care. It imparts unparalleled connotations that no human expression can adequately describe. Therefore, we will not attempt any more than this reference to the fact.

Finally, the way to maintain this close contact is outlined: "*Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) Thus, throughout the day, as one wakes up, during the night, at the time when stars begin to disappear at dawn, there is a clear chance to enjoy such friendly care. Glorifying God imparts strength, friendliness and the chance of a heartfelt address to God Almighty. All this stems from a dearly loving heart!

SŪRAH 53

Al-Najm

(The Star)

Prologue

As a whole, this *sūrah* comes across as a superb symphony. From start to finish, a fine tune runs through its verbal structure, as well as its rhyming verse endings. This is especially apparent and deliberate at certain points, where a word is added or preferred to maintain the beat or the rhyme, in addition to how it enhances the meaning. One example is found in the two verses saying: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Had the second verse said, 'and Manāt, the third', the metre would have been broken and the beat would not have been maintained. On the other hand, had it said, 'and Manāt, the other one,' the rhyme would not have been maintained. Each of the words used contributes to the meaning, but maintaining the metre and the rhyme is also deliberate. The same may be said where the word then is used in the verses: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This word *idhan*, or then, is necessary to maintain the metre and the beat, but it also serves an artistic purpose.[1]

1. Needless to say, we are speaking here of the original Arabic text. The translation cannot maintain any metre or rhyme. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the *sūrah*, apart from the last six verses when it varies. – Editor's note.

The beat in this *sūrah* is of a special musical type in which we note an easy variation and flow, particularly in the first and the last sections. Such variation and flow are in harmony with the images, lively shades and connotations we note in the opening section, as also with the meanings and superb touches in the closing section.

The opening provides images from the world on high where the events to which the *sūrah* refers take place. Further connotations are added by reference to the free movement of the trustworthy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, as he appeared before the Prophet. All these images, scenes, connotations, movements and spiritual atmosphere interact with the tune and the beat in perfect harmony, mutually strengthening their effects. This imparts a special atmosphere to the whole *sūrah*, leaving a marked effect on its succeeding sections, until it concludes on a profoundly powerful note, one that is felt by every part of our souls and every cell in our bodies.

The theme the *sūrah* tackles is the one that pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah: faith and its major concepts consisting of revelation, God's oneness and the hereafter. The *sūrah* tackles this from a particular angle emphasizing the truth of revelation and the solid foundation of faith as compared with the fallacy of idolatry, which lacks foundation.

The first section illustrates the truth and nature of revelation. It describes two scenes that confirm its actual process. This documents the fact that the Prophet received revelation from Gabriel, the angel, whom he saw, as also from the greatest signs of his Lord.

In the second section, the *sūrah* speaks of the unbelievers' alleged deities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt. It also discusses their superstitions about the angels being God's daughters. It states that the unbelievers rely on nothing but conjecture, which is devoid of truth. By contrast, the Prophet calls on them to believe in his message, which is certain to be true, with solid evidence.

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet in its third section that he should ignore those who turn away from God's message, those who preoccupy themselves with this present world, knowing nothing beyond it. It also refers to the hereafter and what it provides of requital for people's actions. It mentions that God knows all beings, ever since He originated them from the earth and when they were still in their mothers' wombs. Indeed,

He knows them better than they know their own selves. Their requital will be based on this certain knowledge; it defines their destiny.

The fourth and final section speaks about the main themes of faith, which have remained the same since the earliest of the divine messages: namely, individual responsibility, accurate reckoning, just reward, and the return of all creatures to their Lord who determines what happens to them as He wills. Added to this is a quick reference to the fate suffered by earlier communities that denied the divine message. The *sūrah* then concludes with a strong beat commanding all mankind to prostrate themselves before God and worship Him alone. Thus, the opening and the end provide a harmony of images, connotations, effects and musical tones.

Al-Najm (The Star)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the star as it sets. (1)

وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ ﴿١﴾

This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. (2)

مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ ﴿٢﴾

He does not speak out of his own fancy. (3)

وَمَا يَنطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ﴿٣﴾

That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, (4)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ﴿٤﴾

something that a very mighty one has taught him, (5)

عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ﴿٥﴾

[an angel] of surpassing power, who stood (6)

ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ ﴿٦﴾

on the highest horizon, (7)

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ ﴿٧﴾

and then drew near, and came close, (8)

ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ ﴿٨﴾

until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, (9)

فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ ﴿٩﴾

and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. (10)

فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ ﴿١٠﴾

[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. (11)

مَا كَذَبَ ٱلْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰٓ ﴿١١﴾

Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? (12)

أَفَتُمَٰرُونَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, he saw him a second time (13)

وَلَقَدْ رَءَاهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾

by the lote tree of the farthest limit, (14)

عِندَ سِدْرَةِ ٱلْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾

near to the garden of abode, (15)

عِندَهَا جَنَّةُ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰٓ ﴿١٥﴾

when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. (16)

إِذْ يَغْشَى ٱلسِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; (17)

مَا زَاغَ ٱلْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (18)

لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِ ٱلْكُبْرَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, (19)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱللَّٰتَ وَٱلْعُزَّىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

and Manāt, the third other? (20)

وَمَنَوٰةَ ٱلثَّالِثَةَ ٱلْأُخْرَىٰٓ ﴿٢٠﴾

Are you to have the male and He the female? (21)

أَلَكُمُ ٱلذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

That would then be an unfair division. (22)

تِلْكَ إِذًا قِسْمَةٌ ضِيزَىٰٓ ﴿٢٢﴾

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّآ أَسْمَآءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمْ
وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلْطَٰنٍ ۚ
إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى
ٱلْأَنفُسُ ۖ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مِّن رَّبِّهِمُ
ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ﴿٢٣﴾

These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. (23)

أَمْ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ مَا تَمَنَّىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

Is man to have all that he may wish for, (24)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْءَاخِرَةُ وَٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢٥﴾

when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? (25)

وَكَم مِّن مَّلَكٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ لَا تُغْنِى
شَفَٰعَتُهُمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَن يَأْذَنَ
ٱللَّهُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرْضَىٰٓ ﴿٢٦﴾

Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. (26)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَيُسَمُّونَ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ تَسْمِيَةَ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢٧﴾

Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. (27)

وَمَا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ ۖ
وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٢٨﴾

Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (28)

فَأَعْرِضْ عَن مَّن تَوَلَّىٰ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ
إِلَّا ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ﴿٢٩﴾

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. (29)

ذَٰلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ
أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنِ ٱهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٣٠﴾

Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. (30)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
لِيَجْزِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسَٰٓـُٔوا۟ بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَيَجْزِىَ
ٱلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا۟ بِٱلْحُسْنَى ﴿٣١﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. (31)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
إِلَّا ٱللَّمَمَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَٰسِعُ ٱلْمَغْفِرَةِ ۚ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنتُمْ
أَجِنَّةٌ فِى بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تُزَكُّوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ ۖ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰٓ ﴿٣٢﴾

As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing. (32)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾

Consider the one who turns away: (33)

وَأَعْطَىٰ قَلِيلًا وَأَكْدَىٰٓ ﴿٣٤﴾

he gives little at first then hardens and stops. (34)

أَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ فَهُوَ يَرَىٰٓ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? (35)

أَمْ لَمْ يُنَبَّأْ بِمَا فِي صُحُفِ مُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, (36)

وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ الَّذِي وَفَّىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

and to Abraham who was true to his trust: (37)

أَلَّا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

that no soul shall bear the burden of another; (38)

وَأَن لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

that man will only have what he strives for; (39)

وَأَنَّ سَعْيَهُ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

that his labour will be seen (40)

ثُمَّ يُجْزَاهُ الْجَزَاءَ الْأَوْفَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

and he will be given the fullest reward for it; (41)

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٢﴾

that with your Lord is the ultimate end; (42)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَضْحَكَ وَأَبْكَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; (43)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَمَاتَ وَأَحْيَا ﴿٤٤﴾

and it is He who deals death and gives life; (44)

وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, (45)

مِن نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

from a seed as it is lodged in place; (46)

وَأَنَّ عَلَيْهِ النَّشْأَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ ﴿٤٧﴾

that it is He who brings about a second life; (47)

that it is He who gives riches and possessions; (48)	وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَغْنَىٰ وَأَقْنَىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾
that He is the Lord of Sirius; (49)	وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلشِّعْرَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾
that it is He who destroyed the ancient ʿĀd; (50)	وَأَنَّهُۥٓ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾
and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; (51)	وَثَمُودَا۟ فَمَآ أَبْقَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾
as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; (52)	وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْغَىٰ ﴿٥٢﴾
that it is He who brought down the ruined cities (53)	وَٱلْمُؤْتَفِكَةَ أَهْوَىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾
enveloping them with whatever came over them. (54)	فَغَشَّىٰهَا مَا غَشَّىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾
Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (55)	فَبِأَىِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾
This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. (56)	هَٰذَا نَذِيرٌ مِّنَ ٱلنُّذُرِ ٱلْأُولَىٰٓ ﴿٥٦﴾
The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. (57)	أَزِفَتِ ٱلْآزِفَةُ ﴿٥٧﴾
None but God can remove it. (58)	لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

Do you find this discourse strange? (59)	أَفَمِنْ هَٰذَا الْحَدِيثِ تَعْجَبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾
Do you laugh instead of weeping, (60)	وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَبْكُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾
and pay no heed? (61)	وَأَنتُمْ سَامِدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾
Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone. (62)	فَاسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ وَاعْبُدُوا ﴿٦٢﴾

As the Prophet Receives Revelation

> *By the star when it sets. This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, something that a very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 1–18)

As we recite this opening, we live for a few moments on the sublime expanse experienced by the Prophet's heart. We rise over wings of light to join the company on high. We listen to the smooth beat echoed in the words, their meanings and the message they impart. We live with the Prophet's heart as it looks on, with all curtains and covers removed. He receives revelation from on high, listens and looks, and he commits to memory what was revealed to him. These moments were a special experience given only to his purified heart, but God favours His servants

by giving them an inspiring description that imparts to them a feeling of the message, its echoes and meanings. He describes to them the journey that took his blessed heart to the heavens above, step by step, scene by scene and stage after stage, as if they too are witnessing it all.

This inspiring description starts with an oath made by God: "*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) The brilliant shining of stars before they set on the horizon is similar to the image drawn of Gabriel, the object of the oath. He is first "*on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed.*" (Verses 7–10) Thus starts the harmony between the scene, the movement, the connotations and the rhythm.

"*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) Reports differ as to the star referred to in this oath. The closest that comes to mind is that of Sirius, which was worshipped by some people in the past. It is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, as it says of God: "*He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) People in olden times paid special attention to this star. Ancient Egyptians used to link the flooding of the Nile to Sirius as it crossed the highest orbit. They watched it carefully to monitor the level of water in the Nile. It also has a special position in Persian and Arabian legends. It is probable, therefore, that the oath by the star at the beginning of the *sūrah* refers to it. That the image chosen here is that of the star's falling and setting is significant, as it suggests that no matter how great a star is in size and position, it falls down and changes place. It does not, then, deserve to be worshipped. What is worshipped should always be high and permanent.

The main object of the oath is the Prophet and the revelation given to him:

> *This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him.* (Verses 2–4)

This friend of yours is on the right course, well guided, sincere, gives you good advice, delivering the truth, free of error, illusions, fabrications and fancy. It is all a revelation bestowed on him from on high, and he delivers what is revealed to him in all honesty. The one who brings

him this revelation is well known, following a well-charted course. The Prophet saw him with his own eyes and mind:

> *A very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?* (Verses 5–12)

This mighty angel of surpassing power is Gabriel. It is he who has taught your friend, Muḥammad. His journey is detailed here. It began on the highest horizon where the Prophet saw him at the start of revelation. He saw Gabriel as God created him, covering the horizon with his enormous body. He then drew near and came closer towards the Prophet until he was very near to him, or, as the *sūrah* says, '*two bow-lengths away, or even closer*', which indicates very close proximity. He then revealed to him whatever he revealed, leaving the subject matter vague to indicate that it is momentous.

Thus, it is a case of seeing someone very close up after he had initially appeared at a distance, and then there is revelation, teaching, looking closely and being certain. In such conditions there can be no lie in what is reported. This truth does not allow for argument or dispute: "*[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?*" (Verses 11–12) A heart's vision is more certain because it precludes any deception that might cloud a person's eyesight. He saw and made sure. His heart was then certain that he saw the angel bearing divine revelations. The angel is a messenger God sends to teach the Prophet and assign to him the task of delivering to mankind what he has learnt. There can be no more dispute or argument.

This was not the only time the Prophet saw the Angel Gabriel in his original form. The *sūrah* itself identifies there was another time:

> *Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 13–18)

This was, according to weightier reports, when the Prophet went on his night journey and ascended to heaven. Gabriel came close to the Prophet in the shape and form God gave him, and this was '*by the lote tree of the farthest limit.*' The farthest limit may mean the point where everything ends, as it is close to the garden of abode. It may also mean the point at which the Prophet's journey taking him to heaven ended. Alternatively, it could mean where Gabriel's company ended, as he stood there when the Prophet ascended a further step taking him closer to his Lord's Throne. All this is known only to God, and He gave this knowledge to His chosen Messenger. This is the only information we have of it, and it is beyond our power to fathom. No human being can understand this except by God's will, the Creator of man and angel, who knows the capabilities of each.

The *sūrah* mentions what affected the scene at the lote tree of the farthest end to further emphasize that it was all real: "*when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it.*" (Verse 16) We are given no details because the matter is too serious to think about anything further. All this was absolutely certain: "*The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold.*" (Verse 17) Nothing affected his eyesight so as to blur his vision. It was indeed a clear, well-defined vision that admitted no doubt. He saw on that trip some of the greatest signs of his Lord, looking directly at these essential truths as they appeared before him free of any make up.

Hence, the question of revelation is one based on clear vision, a well-defined scene, absolute certainty, direct contact, accurate knowledge, real company and an actual journey with its details outlined. It is on the basis of such certainty that your friend's mission is based, even though you continue to reject what he says, casting doubt about his claims. Yet you have known this friend for a very long time, testing his truthfulness and confirming it. His Lord confirms what he says and swears to its truth. He reports to you how he was given revelation and in what circumstances this was imparted. He tells you the circumstances when the revelation is given to him, and by whom: how he saw him and where.

Claiming Divinity for Idols

Such is the irrefutable truth in which Muḥammad (peace be upon him) called them to believe. What basis, then, do they have for their worship and superstitions of alleged deities? How can they justify their worship of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt? How can they prove their dubious claims that these were angels, and that the angels were God's daughters, or that they can intercede with God on people's behalf? Do they have anything to support these claims?

> *Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. Is man to have all that he may wish for, when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.* (Verses 19–28)

Al-Lāt was a carved white rock, enclosed within a building covered with curtains, and with attendants serving it. Surrounding the building was a courtyard that the tribe of Thaqīf living in Ṭā'if, as well as tribes in the surrounding area, venerated. They were considered exceptionally honoured among Arab tribes, not however surpassing the Quraysh, for having it in their hometown. Needless to say, the Quraysh had the greater honour of having the Ka'bah, built by Abraham, in their city. It is thought that the name al-Lāt was considered as being the feminine form of God's Arabic name, Allah.

Al-'Uzzā was a tree around which a building was built and with curtains raised. It was at Nakhlah, between Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Quraysh in particular used to venerate al-'Uzzā. After the Battle of

Uḥud, the Quraysh leader stood boasting, 'We have al-'Uzzā, but you have no 'Uzzā', but the Prophet instructed his Companions to reply by saying: "God is our protecting Master, but you have no master to protect you." It is thought that the name al-'Uzzā was the feminine form of God's name, *al-'Azīz*, meaning the Almighty.

Manāt was stationed at a place called al-Mushallal in Qadīd, between Makkah and Madīnah. The tribes of Khuzā'ah, al-Aws and al-Khazraj used to venerate it in their pre-Islamic days, and used to start their pilgrimage from there.

There were many other idols venerated by different tribes, but these three were the major ones. It is thought that these idols were symbols representing angels whom the Arabs considered to be female and who they also claimed to be God's daughters. Hence, why they were originally worshipped. What happens in such cases is that the original idea is lost and the symbol becomes, for the majority of people, the thing to be worshipped. Only a handful of knowledgeable people continue to remember the original legend.

God mentions these three worshipped objects, implying in the very question He asks that to worship such things is indeed singular: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Such singularity is clearly highlighted in His starting the question with, '*have you considered*', and in describing Manāt as '*the third other*'. After this initial question, He then adds that their other claim that He had daughters while they had sons was even more singular: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This suggests that these worshipped objects related to the legend that the angels were females, begotten by God – far more exalted is God above all such false claims. This confirms what we have said about those Arabs: they hated that they should beget females, but were not ashamed to make the angels, about whom they knew nothing, females and to allege that they were God's offspring. God questions them here on the basis of their own concepts, ridiculing these and whoever upholds them: "*Are you to have the male and He the female?*" Such a division you make between yourselves and God is most unfair!

The whole thing is based on illusion. It has no basis in human knowledge or in reality. No evidence or argument can be given in

support of such claims: "*These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) These names, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, Manāt, and all others like them, which are called deities, angels, female and God's daughters, are false and cannot be substantiated. God has given you no evidence in support of such claims. What God does not sanction is certainly false and insupportable. It carries no weight.

This address to the unbelievers ends in the middle of the verse. The *sūrah* turns away from them as if they were not even there. Indeed, it speaks of them in the third person: "*They follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls.*" (Verse 23) They lack argument, fact and certainty. They base their beliefs on surmise, and turn to their whims for evidence. Faith, however, cannot be based on either surmise or whim. True faith must be based on certainty and irrefutable evidence, without reference to whim or desire. The unbelievers had no excuse to justify their following whim and surmise: "*Even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) When the deciding factor is one's own whim and desire, nothing can be right, and no guidance is of any use. The problem is not the absence of truth or evidence supporting it; the problem is a powerful desire that wants certain things, seeking justification for what it wants. This is the worst situation man can find himself in, because then no guidance is of any benefit and no proof is convincing.

Hence the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Is man to have all that he may wish for?*" (Verse 24) Will everything man wishes come true, have reality? Things are not like that. Truth and reality are different from wishful thinking, which cannot change facts. The fact is that man errs when he follows his own desires. He is too weak to change the nature of things. Everything in this life and the next belongs to God who accomplishes whatever He wills in both worlds: "*Both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone.*" (Verse 25)

We note here that the life to come is mentioned first, ahead of the present life, in order to maintain the rhyme. However, this gives an intended connotation, signifying that the life to come is more

important. This is normal in the Qur'ān, where the meaning fits well with the beat and the rhyme, allowing neither aspect to overshadow the other. This applies to everything of God's making throughout the universe, where beauty is maintained in harmony with the fulfilment of the function.

Since everything belongs to God in both this world and the life to come, there can be no basis for the unbelievers' conjectures that their false deities can intercede with God on their behalf. They used to say: "*We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.*" (39: 3) Such conjecture is baseless. None of the angels in heaven can intercede with God except when God grants them permission to do so: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26)

Having been proved in the previous verses to be false, their claims now fall apart. All fallacy and doubt is now removed from faith. Everything in this world and the following one belongs to God. Whims and desires cannot change reality. Intercession can only be accepted by God's leave. The final judgement is His alone.

At the end of this section, a final discussion is given of the unbelievers' false concepts about the angels, showing them to be baseless: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) This final comment implicitly refers to the link between al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā and Manāt and the legend that makes angels female and that further alleges that they belong to God. This whole legend lacks all foundation. The unbelievers had no means whatsoever to learn anything true about the nature of the angels. As for the angels being God's offspring, this is a fallacy, ingrained in their false surmise, which can never be a substitute for the truth.

The Attitude to Take

At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet. It directs him to ignore such people and turn away from them, leaving their fate to God. He knows the ones who do well and those who do badly, and it is He who

requites both those who follow His guidance and those who remain in error. He is the One who controls the universe, this life and the life to come. He is the One who deals in absolute justice, wronging no one, forgiving sins that are not persisted with. He knows everyone's intentions and inner thoughts, as He is the Creator of mankind who knows everyone's reality at every stage and at every moment:

> *So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.* (Verses 29–32)

This order to ignore those who turn away from God's message and remain preoccupied with this present life is directed in the first place to the Prophet. He should not concern himself with those unbelievers whose legends and attitudes have already been discussed in the *sūrah*. It is also directed at every Muslim who must adopt a similar attitude towards anyone who refuses to believe in God, focuses all his attention on this life, disbelieves in the life to come, considers the life of this world to be the ultimate goal and adopts a way of life based on this concept. Such people sever any relation between their consciences and belief in God, for it is He who holds them to account for their deeds after the end of their time on earth. Those who are nearest to this description in our time are those who advocate materialistic creeds.

Someone who believes in God and in the life to come cannot afford to give much thought to, let alone interact with, anyone who turns away from God's message and who discards the life to come altogether. Their ways of life are so different that they cannot meet over a single point. All their standards, values and goals in life are in disagreement.

Therefore, the two cannot cooperate or collaborate in any activity. With such being the case, why should a believer concern himself with the one who turns away from God and His message? To do so is to waste effort and energy.

Moreover, to ignore them is to put them low. No matter what sort of people they are, the ones who do not believe in God and have no preoccupation other than this present life cannot see the truth or understand it. They stand behind the walls of this present life. It represents the total sum of their knowledge. It is a scanty little sum even though it may appear substantial; narrow even if it appears vast; leading into error even though it seems enlightened. A person whose feelings, heart and mind are confined to this earth, despite the fact that we see with our eyes a huge world beyond, cannot know anything of value. This huge world we see has not created itself, and the possibility of its just coming into existence must automatically be rejected by human logic. Since it has a Creator, it could not have existed as a pastime. To say that this present life is the be all and end all of this huge universe is to indulge in triviality. When we understand the true nature of this universe, whatever angle we look at it from, we will inevitably believe in the Creator, and also in the life to come. The supreme Creator who originated this huge universe does not engage in trivialities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we should ignore those who turn away from God's message and limit themselves to the confines of this present life. For one thing, ignoring them will ensure that we care only for those who deserve to be cared for. Moreover, it puts in the right place those whose knowledge does not go beyond the present life. We are commanded to do so, and God's command must be obeyed.

"*Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance.*" (Verse 30) He knew that those people were in error. Therefore, He did not wish for his Messenger and those who follow His guidance to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of those in error, nor to befriend and associate with them. They must not be deceived by appearances that show their scanty and erroneous knowledge as great, for all such knowledge is confined to this world and prevents man from appreciating the truth that leads to believing in God and the life to come.

Errant and deviant people may acquire knowledge that appears to be great in the eyes of the masses. They may think such knowledge to have far-reaching effects in this present life. Yet possessing such knowledge does not alter the fact that they are in error, ignorant and have impaired understanding. The bond between the universe and its Creator and the link between man's action and reward are two aspects of truth that are necessary for anyone with true knowledge. Without these two truths any knowledge remains superficial. It has neither a real effect on human life, nor does it help its progress. The value of knowledge is measured by its effect on the human soul and people's moral relations. Otherwise, such knowledge produces nothing other than progress in machines and retrogression in human values. And knowledge that promotes machines at the expense of humans is miserable indeed.

A man who feels that his Creator created the universe according to a single, coherent law will inevitably find his attitude to life and all he sees around him influenced by this. He, thus, realizes that his existence has a higher objective than his own immediate life, because it is interlinked with the existence of the universe. He begins to look at himself in a different light. He will see himself as bigger than his own self with his limited lifespan. He will see himself as greater than his family with its few individuals, then of his community, country and class. He is at a higher level than all these formations.

To realize that he must submit an account to his Creator on the Day of Judgement when God will requite him for his deeds is bound to alter man's concepts, methods of evaluation, motives and goals. It will also provide a clear link between his moral sense and his destiny, for he will recognize that his salvation is dependent on how his moral values influence his actions. This is bound to strengthen and enhance his moral sense, making him stronger and better able to control his actions. He has now a watchful inner guard, keeping an eye on the final reckoning in the hereafter. Besides, he is reassured that goodness will eventually triumph, even if it appears to lose some rounds in the battle that takes place on earth. It is his duty to always support what is good and strive for its triumph, even though he himself may suffer defeat. The final outcome is not in this life on earth; it is there, with the final reckoning, in that most certain life to come.

This question of belief in God and in the Day of Judgement is of immense importance. As a human need, it is more important than food, drink and clothing. With it, man's humanity is assured, but without it, man is just another animal.

When standards, goals and life concepts are so different between believers and unbelievers, there can be no partnership, friendship, interaction or serious dealings. There can be nothing between one who believes in God and another whose preoccupation with this present life makes him turn away from God's message. To say anything different is to indulge in futile argument and to disobey God's clear order: "*Ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world.*" (Verse 29)

What Requital for Man

> *Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.* (Verse 31)

This statement, emphasizing God's full ownership of the heavens and earth, gives the question of the hereafter added strength and greater influence. The One who determines the life to come and its timing is the One to whom the heavens and earth belong. Only He is able to administer reward, and to ensure that it is administered with full justice for all: "*He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then defines the ones who do good, earning a reward according to what is best. They are the ones "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence.*" (Verse 32) Grave sins are cardinal, and shameful deeds are those sins that represent serious transgression. Scholars differ as to the meaning of the Arabic word *lamam*, translated here as casual indulgence.

Ibn Kathīr says that the exception indicated by the phrase, *apart from*, is unrelated, meaning that what follows it does not relate to what comes before it, because to him *lamam* means trivial sin. Imām Aḥmad quotes Ibn ʿAbbās as saying: "Nothing defines *lamam* better than the hadith

quoting the Prophet as saying, 'Everyone will inevitably have his share of fornication: the eye fornicates with glances, the tongue with words, and the mind with thoughts and desire; and ultimately one confirms all this going the whole way or discards it.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "The eye fornicates with glances, the lips with kissing, the hands with the use of force and the legs with walking. Ultimately one confirms all this with action going the whole way or not. If one goes the whole way, it is adultery, and if not then it is *lamam*." Similar views are expressed by Masrūq and al-Sha'bī, who were prominent early scholars. Likewise, Abū Hurayrah is quoted as explaining *lamam* as "a kiss, a glance, a gesture and minor action. Should genitals meet, then that is adultery requiring a full bath."

All these views are similar, defining *lamam* as trivial sin. Other scholars, however, express different views. A report by Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd ibn Aslam defines it as, 'what was done in the past'. Mujāhid says that "*lamam* means a person committing a serious sin and then desisting from it". Al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās a report saying that *lamam* means "a man indulges in a grave sin then repents". He refers to a *ḥadīth* quoting the Prophet as saying: "If You forgive me, My Lord, then You will forgive much. Who of Your servants has not dipped into *lamam*." Abū Hurayrah is also reported to have said in reference to this Qur'ānic statement, "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence*". (Verse 32): "This means a one-off indulgence in adultery then repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in stealing before repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in drinking then repentance with no repeat. Such is *lamam*." A similar view is attributed to al-Ḥasan, an early prominent scholar.

On balance, I feel that this second view is more appropriate, as it fits better with the statement that follows in the same verse: "*Your Lord is abounding in forgiveness.*" (Verse 32) Describing God's forgiveness as abounding fits well with the view that *lamam* is a casual indulgence in such grave sins and shameful conduct, followed by sincere and genuine repentance. This means that the definition the *sūrah* gives of those '*who do good*' means that they are the ones who '*avoid grave sins and shameful deeds,*' unless they slip, but repent soon after and refrain from repeating such sins. In another *sūrah*, God speaks of the 'God-fearing',

defining them as "*Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God can forgive sins? – and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done.*" (3: 135) He promises to reward them with forgiveness and admittance into a "*paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*" (3: 133) This is indeed more in line with the concept of God's mercy being ever present and far extending, and of His forgiveness being abounding.

The verse concludes by the statement that God's requital of people's deeds is based on His knowledge of their inner thoughts throughout all stages of their lives: "*He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs.*" (Verse 32) His knowledge, then, precedes their own actions, as it is the knowledge of their true nature which they themselves do not even know. It is known only to God, their Creator. This knowledge was present when God originated them from the earth before they were brought into existence, and when they were still in their mothers' wombs, before they were brought into the light. It is the knowledge of their truth before it takes physical shape, and of their nature before it translates into action.

When we think of God's knowledge in this way, we realize that it is pointless, and indeed impudent for a man to tell Him about himself, trying to press his good points: "*Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.*" (Verse 32) He does not need for you to tell Him about yourselves, or to suggest how your deeds measure up. His knowledge is perfect, His measure accurate, His reward just, His judgement final, and to Him all creatures return.

On Their Own

The *sūrah* moves now to its final part which maintains the same rhythm as the first part. It states the basic concept of divine faith, as it has been ever since the time of Abraham, who delivered the first full code for living. It makes their Lord known to mankind. It shows them how His will influences their lives, portraying its effects one after another in a way that strongly shakes the human conscience. It builds its effect up

to the final beats, which are very powerful and are received with softened hearts and responsive minds.

> *Consider the one who turns away: he gives little at first then hardens and stops. Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that man will only have what he strives for; that his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it; that with your Lord is the ultimate end; that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; and it is He who deals death and gives life; that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place; that it is He who brings about a second life; that it is He who gives riches and possessions; that He is the Lord of Sirius; that it is He who destroyed the ancient ʿĀd; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*
>
> *This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it. Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed? Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.* (Verses 33–62)

This passage begins with a reference to the one who turns away, giving little at first before stopping altogether. His attitude is strange and the *sūrah* wonders at him. Some reports suggest that these two short verses refer to a particular man who began by making a small donation for God's cause before stopping for fear of becoming poor. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī names this person as ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, reporting a story which has no solid basis and will be dismissed as totally unreliable by anyone who knows even a little about ʿUthmān and his history of very generous donations for Islam and the Muslim community. Such donations never stopped

at any time during his life. He was a most devoted servant of Islam, with a strong and sound faith, and with good knowledge of the Islamic principles, particularly with regard to individual responsibility.[2]

It may be that this Qur'ānic statement refers to a particular case, but it is equally possible that it is speaking about a type, rather than an individual. Anyone who abandons this line, weakening after having come forward with effort and money in support of God's cause, invites amazement. The Qur'ān uses this example to present and clarify certain basic principles of the Islamic faith.

"*Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see?*" (Verse 35) Knowledge of what lies beyond our perception belongs to God and can only be seen by Him. No man can fathom it. No one can be sure what turn events will take and what effect such a turn will have on him. Therefore, one must work tirelessly, doing one's best throughout one's life. It is wrong to stop doing what is good, because nothing guarantees a good turn in the future life better than good action now, in this present life, coupled with a hope to earn God's forgiveness and pleasure.

"*Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust.*" (Verses 36–37) This religion goes far back in history, and its latest version is closely related to its oldest one, with both having the same fundamental principles and values. Its different parts are mutually complementary, despite the fact that there have been many messages and messengers, with wide gulfs separating them in time and place. It is embodied in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham before him. Abraham is singled out here as having been true to his trust. He fulfilled every assignment given to him. This quality of Abraham's is highlighted here to provide contrast with that of doing a little good first, then stopping altogether.

2. The story mentions that 'Uthmān used to donate for good causes. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, his brother through breast-feeding, i.e. one woman breast-fed them both when they were young, said to him: "If you continue at this rate, you will soon be without money." 'Uthmān said: "I committed sins, and I hope that what I am doing will earn me forgiveness by God." 'Abdullāh said: "Give me your she-camel, with its present load, and I will bear all your sins." He gave him that and called witnesses to solemnize the deal. He then stopped his donations. Therefore, these verses were revealed. This is the story, and it is clearly false. 'Uthmān could never have behaved in this way.

What do their revelations contain? The answer is clearly stated: "*That no soul shall bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 38) No one shall bear another's burden, making it heavier or lighter. Voluntary help is not acceptable in this respect.

"*That man will only have what he strives for.*" (Verse 39) Such is the rule. No one is to be credited with anything other than his own deeds. No man or woman will be given anything extra that someone else might have done; nor will anything be taken away so as to be credited to someone else. This present life is the chance given to all to work as they please. Once a person dies, the chance has gone. No further action can be credited, except as explained by the Prophet: "When a human being dies, his deeds come to a final end except in one of three ways: a continuing act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge, and a dutiful child who prays for him." [Related by Muslim.] These three ways are, in essence, part of a person's own deeds:

> On this Qur'ānic verse, al-Shāfi'ī and other scholars base their view that reading the Qur'ān and requesting God to credit the reward for its recitation to the dead is not valid. They say that the reward for such a recitation will not be credited to a deceased person, because it is not his own deed. Therefore, the Prophet did not recommend it in any explicit or implicit way. Nor was this practised by any of the Prophet's Companions. Had it been valid, they would have done it before us. When we speak about virtuous actions earning reward, we must confine ourselves to what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth*. We cannot rely on analogy or scholarly views. As for praying for the deceased and donating to charity on their behalf, these are unanimously agreed upon by scholars to be credited to them since they are expressly stated in authentic religious texts.[3]

"*That his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it.*" (Verses 40–41) Nothing of a person's deeds will ever be lost, as nothing will be overlooked by Him. Every action, no matter how small,

3. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 276.

will be valued by God's fine and accurate measure so as to give everyone their full reward. No one will suffer even the slightest loss or injustice.

Thus, the principle of individual responsibility goes hand in hand with that of absolute justice for all. Man is thus given his full humanity based on his being a rational and responsible creature who can be trusted to look after himself. He is in a position of honour, given a chance to work for his future life and then submits his work for reckoning and reward. He is reassured that absolute justice will be done, as the reckoning is fair, unaffected by preferential treatment or oversight.

"*That with your Lord is the ultimate end.*" (Verse 42) The only road to follow is the one leading to Him. There is no refuge other than with Him, and no abode other than what He defines, in a place of bliss or one of suffering. This truth is extremely significant in shaping man's feelings and ideas. When man realizes that everything and everyone will ultimately end with God, he knows the inevitable outcome right from the beginning, and will try to determine his own actions in accordance with this truth. His heart and mind will remain, throughout his life journey, focused on the end he knows to be inevitable.

Life's Journey

Having given us a glimpse of the ultimate end, the *sūrah* takes us back to this life, showing us some aspects of the work of the divine will at every stage and in every situation: "*That it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep.*" (Verse 43) These few words embody a number of facts and generate many inspiring images. It is God who gave man the two inner qualities of laughter and weeping. No one knows quite how they work in man's complex constitution, in which the psychology is as complex as the anatomy. Indeed, we realize that both psychological and physical factors closely interact to produce laughter or weeping.

It is God who causes man to laugh or weep, by creating what makes man laugh or weep. He makes man laugh in certain situations and weep in others according to the interplay of certain secret elements within him. Man may laugh tomorrow at what causes him to weep today, or may weep now because of something that made him laugh a short time

earlier. Yet this is due to no madness or absent-mindedness. It is merely the result of changing psychological conditions as influenced by a host of factors that affect our feelings and reactions.

God also makes different people laugh or weep at the same time, each according to different influences. Some may laugh at the very thing that makes others weep. Although the situation is the same, its circumstances and outcome give it widely different effects on people. Moreover, God causes the same person to laugh and weep at the same thing. He may react to something with laughter until its outcome becomes known to him when he cries. Then he wishes that he had not laughed or reacted in the way he had. Many are those who laugh in this present life only to find themselves weeping in the life to come when regret is of no use.

All these images, connotations, feelings and situations spring to mind as we read this short verse. More are generated as we gain further experience in life, and as causes of laughter and weeping come into play. This is one more aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.

"*And it is He who deals death and gives life.*" (Verse 44) Likewise, this short verse gives rise to endless images. It is God who initiates life and death. In another *sūrah*, we read that God "*has created death and life.*" (67: 2) Both are well known to man as they always occur, but both are deeply hidden when man tries to fathom their nature. What is death; what is life? What answers do we get when we try to understand them further than the two words and the two apparent conditions imply? How does life start in a living thing? Where does it come from; and how does it go into something to make it alive? How does it progress, taking this living thing with it on its way? What is death; how does it happen before the start of life, and after its departure from living things? It is all a deep secret hidden beyond thick curtains that God's hand has drawn.

It is God who deals death and gives life. As we listen, there appear before us millions of images of life and death, in all living worlds, all at the same moment. Consider how many millions upon millions of living things have died at this moment in time! Consider also how many millions upon millions have started their life's journeys, with life springing into them from where neither they nor anyone else, apart from God, knows! How many deaths have occurred at this moment, yet they themselves give rise to life? Now let us stretch our minds to

past generations: how many have lived and died across endless centuries before human life started on this planet? We will not say anything about other types of life and death elsewhere in the universe. No human mind can ever imagine these.

These few words give rise to endless images that shake man to the core. Inevitably, he is profoundly influenced by their rhythm and widely ranging echoes.

A Sperm and Two Sexes

"*That it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place.*" (Verses 45–46) This is a fact of momentous significance, even though man is oblivious to it because he sees it taking place all the time. It is indeed greater than the most amazing thing human imagination can ever produce. A seed is discharged. It is merely one of many types of discharge the human body makes, such as sweat, tears, mucous, etc. Then after a certain period determined by God, this discharge becomes something different. It becomes a human being, either male or female. How does this miracle happen? Had we not seen it happen, it would not have even entered our imaginations or crossed our minds. Where was this human being, with its very sophisticated and complex constitution? Where was it lodged in that little drop of semen, or indeed in one of the millions of its sperms? Look at the bones, flesh, skin, veins, hair, nails, distinctive features, characteristics, potentials and moods of a human being, and think: where was all that hidden in a single microscopic cell floating, like millions similar to it, in a drop of liquid that a man discharges? Where in particular are lodged the characteristics of male and female in that single cell?

What human mind can contemplate this great fact and continue to arrogantly argue that it all just happens in this way, or that it just learnt to move in this line? Indeed, some people try to posit a seemingly enlightened argument, saying that the sperm acts in this way because, like all living things, it has the ability of reproduction. This is a circular argument, one that gives an explanation but needs an explanation itself. Who gave the sperm this potential? Who placed into it the latent desire to preserve its kind through reproduction? Weak and tiny as the sperm

is, who made it able to reproduce its kind? Who charted its journey so as to make it proceed with its task in such a well-defined way as to fulfil its desire of reproduction? Indeed, who gave it all the characteristics of its kind so as to reproduce them all? Moreover, why should it wish to reproduce its kind, and what interest is there for this sperm to reproduce all the characteristics of its kind? Can there be any other answer to all these questions other than a wise will that has a certain design for a certain objective, and that this will is able to fulfil its design and achieve its objective?

Having stated this first initiation of man, which is a continuously repeated event that no one denies, the *sūrah* moves directly to the second: "*That it is He who brings about a second life.*" (Verse 47) This second life belongs to the realm that is beyond our perception, but the first initiation provides ample evidence of its possibility. The One who created the two sexes from a single seed can easily bring life back to bones and other remains. Such bones and dust are no way less than an ejaculated seed as production material. Moreover, the first initiation provides evidence of the wisdom behind a second life. The subtle, yet elaborate planning that leads the tiny living cell along its arduous way until it becomes a male or a female must have a goal beyond this journey on earth in which nothing is complete and where people do not receive full reward or requital for their good or evil actions. This elaborate planning has made it thus because it includes a second life, which brings everything to its fullness. We see that the first initiation gives double evidence of the second life. Hence, it is mentioned first.

In both lives, God bestows riches on whomever He wills of His servants: "*That it is He who gives riches and possessions.*" (Verse 48) Many and diverse are the types of riches God grants to His servants in this world: wealth, health, offspring, contentedness, happiness, feeling, thought as well as the unique feeling of richness generated by feeling one's bond with God. He also bestows riches of the life to come on whomever He wills. Furthermore, He gives those He chooses possessions in plenty both in this life and the next. Human beings are poor, penniless. They cannot become rich and own things unless God grants them whatever He is pleased to grant them out of His treasures. They all know this and look up to Him for more, realizing that He is

the only source. They know that His treasures are the ones that are full and endless, while everything else is empty.

"*That He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) Sirius is a star that is 20 times heavier than the sun, gives 50 times the light the sun gives, and is a million times further away from us than the sun. Some people used to worship Sirius, and some used to watch it in particular, feeling that it had special importance. Therefore, stating that God is the Lord of Sirius is most fitting in this *sūrah*, which starts with an oath by the star as it sets, and speaks about the journey to the high heavens, focusing in all this on God's oneness and showing the fallacy of associating partners with Him.

The Communities of Old

> *That it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?* (Verses 50–55)

This is a quick round, with a short pause placed where the fate of each of those old communities is mentioned, coupled with a sharp touch with which we are certain to interact. The 'Ād, Thamūd and people of Noah are well known to the reader of the Qur'ān, as they are mentioned several times in this divine book. The ruined cities are those of Lot's people who were immersed in sin and went far astray. Their cities were turned upside down, but their fate is left vague here, '*enveloping them with whatever came over them,*' to add a feeling of suspense through which we see images of ruins upon ruins, leaving nothing clear or identifiable.

"*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*" (Verse 55) The calamities that befell those communities were blessings then. Did they not lead to the destruction of evil? Were they not events that hurled the truth over falsehood to make it disappear? Did they not leave signs for everyone to reflect upon? These are certainly blessings. Hence why should people still doubt them? The address here is to every heart and

mind which reflect on what God does and which see the blessing even when the event is one of calamity.

The *sūrah* now delivers its final beat, one that is profound and powerful. It is an outcry alerting us to the great, looming danger: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) This Messenger whom you doubt and who you argue about with the warnings he gives you is just like those warnings of old. When they were taken lightly, they were followed with well-known events. The imminent Hour is now close, it will sweep everything before it. It is the one that will envelop and strike all that this Messenger has been warning you about. Alternatively, the warning mentioned in the verse refers to the subject of the warning, or rather the suffering that may be inflicted. Its nature and timing are known only to God. When it takes place none but God can lift it: "*None but God can remove it.*"

The danger is now very close to you, and the compassionate warner is calling on you to save yourselves, but you are deeply indulged, paying no attention, oblivious of what is about to engulf you: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) This discourse is great and serious, defining heavy responsibilities for people while also providing them with a complete code for living. Why should they find it strange? Why should they laugh when it is given in all seriousness? The responsibilities it outlines and the fact that people will have to give full accounts of what they do in life put them in a situation that should invite weeping rather than laughter.

Now the *sūrah* ends with a loud command that strikes both their ears and hearts, telling them what they should do to save themselves from the abyss at the edge of which they perilously stand: "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.*" (Verse 62) Coming after such a discourse creating immense influences, this command struck awe in their hearts and they prostrated themselves as commanded. These idolaters, who endlessly argued about the Qur'ān and revelation, and about God and His message, prostrated themselves at this point. All the people listening to the Prophet reciting this *sūrah* felt its strong beat like a blacksmith's hammer. All of them, Muslims and unbelievers alike, saw the Prophet prostrating himself at its end and they did likewise.

They could not resist the power of the Qur'ān or question its authority. When they came to, they were stunned as they realized what they had just done.

There are numerous reports describing this event. While they are all unanimous about its details, they differ in explaining what appears to be a strange happening. In fact, though, it is not strange at all. It is an example of the effect the Qur'ān produces and how hearts interact with it.

A Fabricated Story

To me, this event of unbelievers prostrating themselves before God, alongside the Muslims, needed an explanation. However, an experience I went through clarified for me its true reasons.

I used to read the false reports of what is known as the 'story of the birds' concerning this event. These are given by Ibn Sa'd in his *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his book on history, and by some commentators on the Qur'ān as they speak in detail about the verse that says: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (22: 52) Ibn Kathīr gives the following comment on these reports: "They are all lacking in authenticity. I did not find any of them to have a sound chain of transmission."

The most detailed of these reports and the least in fabrication is the one given by Ibn Abī Ḥātim:

> Prior to the revelation of *Sūrah* 53, The Star, the unbelievers used to say: 'If only this man [meaning the Prophet] would speak in a good way about our deities, we would approve of him and his followers. Unfortunately, he speaks of our deities in a more derogatory way than he speaks of others who differ with him, such as the Jews and the Christians. The Prophet was deeply hurt by what the unbelievers inflicted on him and his Companions, causing them much harm and accusing him of lying. He was saddened by their stubborn rejection of his message, and was eager that they should

follow divine guidance. When God revealed to him *Sūrah* 53, The Star, and he read the verses saying, '*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*' Satan threw some words at the mention of these idols, adding after their names the following couplet: 'These are exalted birds, whose intercession is desirable.' This rhyming couplet was of Satan's doing. Yet it went into the heart of every unbeliever in Makkah and they repeated it to one another, claiming that Muḥammad had reverted to his people's religion. However the Prophet continued to recite the *sūrah* to the end, when he prostrated himself, as did all those present, believers and unbelievers. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was an old man. He took a handful of dust from the earth in his hand and put his forehead on it in a gesture of prostration.

Both parties were amazed at the fact that the unbelievers prostrated themselves when the Prophet did so. The Muslims, who did not hear Satan's words to the unbelievers, wondered how the unbelievers would prostrate themselves when they did not believe. The unbelievers were happy at the words Satan added, making them feel that the Prophet read them, and considered that their prostration was in acknowledgement of the praise given to their deities. This quickly circulated among people and Satan helped to spread it further until it reached Abyssinia where a large number of the early Muslims had migrated. On hearing of what happened, these Muslims in Abyssinia thought that the people of Makkah had all accepted Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also heard that al-Walīd prostrated himself on his own palm. They felt that Makkah was now a safe place for Islam and its followers. Therefore some of them began to return.

God, however, rendered the aspersion cast by Satan as null and void, making His message clear in itself and by itself, and preserving His Messenger from the fabricated lie. He also revealed the verse saying: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes...*" (22: 52) When God confirmed His word, the unbelievers reverted to their practices of determined hostility, increasing their pressure on the believers.

Other reports go even further in fabricating lies, attributing those words about 'exalted birds' to the Prophet himself, justifying this by his desire to come to some arrangement with the Quraysh. Far be it for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to try to appease unbelievers.

Right from the outset, I rejected all these reports. For one thing, they go against the facts of the Prophet's infallibility and the preservation of the Qur'ān by God, keeping it immune from any distortion. The very flow of the *sūrah* makes such an addition absolutely impossible. In its entirety, the *sūrah* shows the fallacy of the idolaters' belief in those deities and the legends they weave around them. How can such a couplet of praise for them be inserted into such refutation? Even if we consider the argument of some who say that the couplet was heard only by the unbelievers, but not by the believers, it still remains unacceptable. Those unbelievers were Arabs who had a fine sense of their own language. How would they have felt had they heard this false couplet, followed by the verses stating: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority.*" (Verses 21–23) Shortly afterwards they would have heard the verses: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) And these are even preceded by the verse: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26) Had those Arabs, endowed as they were with a fine sense of language, heard this sequence after a supposed couplet praising their idols and confirming that they can intercede with God, they would not have prostrated themselves, because the whole context would have been flawed and crooked. Those Arabs were not as stupid as the fabricators of these reports, to which Orientalists tried to give credence, either out of ignorance or to serve a purpose of their own.

The prostration by the unbelievers had, then, a reason other than this fabricated story. Likewise the return of some immigrants from Abyssinia was for a different reason. This is not the occasion to establish the reason for their return. Instead, we will only concentrate here on the question of the unbelievers' prostration.

A Personal Experience

I spent some time trying to discover the reason for this prostration. I even considered the possibility that it did not take place, and that it was rather a report explaining the return of the immigrants from Abyssinia. It was during this time, however, that I had the experience to which I referred earlier and will now recount.

We were a group of friends passing an evening together when we heard a recitation of the Qur'ān nearby. The reciter, who had an inspiring voice and a fine recitation, was reading this *sūrah*, The Star. Conversation between us ceased as we listened to the Qur'ān. Gradually, I began to feel what the reciter was reading deeply in my heart. I lived with him and felt how the Prophet went on this journey to join the community on high. I lived with him as he saw Gabriel in his angelic form God had created. That was a most remarkable event to contemplate. I reflected on his journey to the world beyond, to the tree at the farthest limit, and to the garden of abode in heaven. I lived all this, as far as my imagination could stretch, and my feelings bear. I followed him as the legends weaved by the idolaters about the angels, and how they worshipped them alleging that they were God's daughters, were shattered at the first touch of reality. I reflected on how a human being is brought into being out of the earth and how it becomes an embryo in its mother's womb, and how each of us is watched by God throughout our life's journey.

I felt a shiver as the reciter began the last part of the *sūrah*, referring to the world beyond the reach of our perception and known only to God; the actions recorded in full and accurate detail so that nothing is lost at the time of reckoning; the fact that all journeys end with God; the multitudes that laugh and the multitudes that cry; the dead and the living in countless numbers; the human seed as it finds its way in the dark before it begins to show its secrets revealing whether it is a male or a female; the second creation; the fate of past communities and the ruined cities of Lot's people as they were enveloped with whatever covered them.

I listened attentively to the last warning before the impending calamity: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) I then heard the last cry and felt all my body and soul

trembling: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) When the reciter read the final verse, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone*," the trembling was no longer only in my heart; it had spread to my whole body and took physical shape, which I could not resist. All my body was quivering and I could neither stop the quivering nor prevent my tears from pouring.

I realized then that the prostration by all those who were listening to the Prophet as he recited this *sūrah* was correct, and that its explanation is easy. Its secret is contained in the powerful effect the Qur'ān has on people and in particular the powerful rhythm this *sūrah* carries. It was not the first time I had read or listened to this *sūrah*, but on that particular occasion it had this effect on me, causing such a response. This is one of the secrets of the Qur'ān: there are special moments, which cannot be anticipated, when a verse or a *sūrah* touches special cords within us to establish direct contact with our hearts. The result is that we are profoundly affected by what we read or listen to.

One such moment touched the hearts of all present as the Prophet recited this *sūrah*, putting all his heart feelings into its recitation, living again all its images which he had already seen with his eyes. All the power in this *sūrah* poured forth from his recitation to touch the hearts of the audience, and they trembled and quivered. When they heard, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone*," Muḥammad and the Muslims present prostrated themselves. The unbelievers could only follow suit, and so prostrated themselves.

Someone may say to me that I am basing my argument on a personal experience at a certain moment. Furthermore, I am a Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān and feels its special effect, while those others were idolaters, rejecting God's message and denying the Qur'ān. In reply I point out two considerations. The first is that the reciter in their case was Muḥammad, the Prophet, (peace be upon him). He had received the Qur'ān directly from its source and took heart from it, living every moment of his life with it. He loved the Qur'ān so much that when he heard a person reading it in his home, he would walk slowly and listen attentively at the door until the reciter had finished. As this particular *sūrah* was read, he was re-living an experience he had gone through

on high, and with the Holy Spirit as he saw him in his original form. I was listening to a fellow man reciting it, and the difference between the two cases is vast.

The second consideration is that those idolaters were not immune to trembling when they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It was their affected stubbornness that prevented them from acknowledging the truth. The following two cases provide enough evidence of their shaking and trembling when they listened to the Qur'ān.

In his biographical note on 'Utbah ibn Abī Lahab, Ibn 'Asākir reports on the authority of Hannād ibn al-Aswad:

> Both Abū Lahab and his son 'Utbah were preparing to travel to Syria, and I also was preparing to go with them. 'Utbah said: "I will go to Muḥammad and say some harsh words about his God." He went to Muḥammad and said to him that he would never believe in the one who '*drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer.*' The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Set on him one of your dogs.' 'Utbah then left him and returned to his father who asked him what Muḥammad's reaction was and 'Utbah reported the Prophet's prayer. Abū Lahab said: 'Son, I really fear for you the effect of his prayer.' Then we set on our way until we stopped at Abrāh where we went into a monk's hermitage. The monk asked us: 'What makes you stop at this place where lions are as plentiful as cats?' Then Abū Lahab said to us: 'You know that I am your eldest and I have certain rights. You also know that this man prayed against my son and I fear what may happen to him as a result. Therefore, bring all your things into the hermitage and put it in the middle, laying my son's blanket on top of it. Then spread your blankets all around it.' We did as he asked us. During the night, a lion came in and smelled all our faces. When he did not find what he wanted, he pulled himself together and leapt landing on top of our things. He smelled 'Utbah's face before hitting him and breaking his head. Abū Lahab said: 'I knew that Muḥammad's prayer was certain to catch up with him.'

The first case documented above mentions Abū Lahab, one of the Prophet's most vehement opponents who used to set people against

him. He is the one the Qur'ān specifically condemns: "*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he. His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing. He shall have to endure a flaming fire, and his wife, the carrier of firewood, shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.*" (111: 1–5) We see in this report his true feeling about Muḥammad and what he said. We see his profound fear that Muḥammad's prayer against his son would inevitably come true.

The second case refers to 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one the Quraysh chiefs and its representative who tried to negotiate a deal with the Prophet. He suggested that the Prophet should stop his advocacy that led to division among the people and stop criticizing their beliefs. In return they would give him whatever he asked for in money, position and women. When he stated his offer, the Prophet said to him: 'Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you want to say?' When he affirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: 'Then listen to this that I want to read to you.' The Prophet then started to recite from the beginning of *Sūrah* 41: "*A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (41: 1–4) He continued his recitation until he read Verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.'*" At this point, 'Utbah sprang to his feet, put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and was full of terror as he said to the Prophet: "I appeal to you by all ties of kinship not to do so." He then went back to his people, reported on his mission and concluded by saying: "You, the Quraysh people, know that Muḥammad never lies. I feared that a terrible fate might befall you."

Such was the reaction of someone who never accepted Islam. Yet he clearly trembled even though his stubbornness got the better of him, preventing him from acting on what he knew to be true. When people like these listen to this *sūrah*, The Star, being recited by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), then they are very likely to experience a moment of total response which they cannot control. They will submit to the power of the Qur'ān and prostrate themselves with the believers. So let all fabricated stories, like that of the interceding birds, be dumped firmly in the rubbish bin.

SŪRAH 54

Al-Qamar
(The Moon)

Prologue

From start to finish, this *sūrah* represents an awesome onslaught against those who deny the warnings, but gives at the same time confident reassurance to the believers. It is divided into a series of scenes, each showing a different type of suffering inflicted on a community of unbelievers who denied God's messages. Each culminates with a violent shaking of the human heart, as it asks: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings!*" It then lets go, saying: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*"

The themes tackled in this *sūrah* are discussed in many *sūrahs* of Makkan revelation. It begins with a scene from the Day of Judgement and ends with a similar scene. In between, the *sūrah* dwells briefly on the fates of Noah's people, the ʿĀd, Thamūd, Lot's people and Pharaoh and his followers. All these are tackled in different ways in other *sūrahs*. Yet all these issues are presented here in a special way, making them appear totally new. Here we see each episode as violent, tempestuous, spreading fear, engendering collapse and a sweeping destruction.

The *sūrah*'s main characteristic is that each scene paints a fast episode of punishment presented to those who deny the divine faith. They feel that they personally are involved in it, witnessing the punishment and enduring its pain. When one scene is over and listeners begin to breathe

again, a new and more awesome scene of punishment is presented to them. When seven such episodes in this suffocating and fearful atmosphere are completed, the last image is presented, providing us with a totally different aura, delivering pleasant shades of security, serenity and reassurance. It shows us the righteous and their destiny: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) How different is this from the condition of the unbelievers who are also told of their fate: "*On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verse 48)

Al-Qamar (The Moon)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. (1)

اقْتَرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ ﴿١﴾

Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' (2)

وَإِن يَرَوْا آيَةً يُعْرِضُوا وَيَقُولُوا سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ ﴿٢﴾

They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. (3)

وَكَذَّبُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ۚ وَكُلُّ أَمْرٍ مُّسْتَقِرٌّ ﴿٣﴾

There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], (4)

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُم مِّنَ الْأَنبَاءِ مَا فِيهِ مُزْدَجَرٌ ﴿٤﴾

far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. (5)

حِكْمَةٌ بَالِغَةٌ ۖ فَمَا تُغْنِ النُّذُرُ ﴿٥﴾

So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, (6)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ ۘ يَوْمَ يَدْعُ الدَّاعِ إِلَىٰ شَيْءٍ نُّكُرٍ ﴿٦﴾

with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts (7)

خُشَّعًا أَبْصَارُهُمْ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ كَأَنَّهُمْ جَرَادٌ مُّنتَشِرٌ ﴿٧﴾

rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (8)

مُّهْطِعِينَ إِلَى الدَّاعِ ۖ يَقُولُ الْكَافِرُونَ هَٰذَا يَوْمٌ عَسِرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. (9)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ فَكَذَّبُوا عَبْدَنَا وَقَالُوا مَجْنُونٌ وَازْدُجِرَ ﴿٩﴾

Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' (10)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَانتَصِرْ ﴿١٠﴾

So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, (11)

فَفَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ مُّنْهَمِرٍ ﴿١١﴾

and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. (12)

وَفَجَّرْنَا الْأَرْضَ عُيُونًا فَالْتَقَى الْمَاءُ عَلَىٰ أَمْرٍ قَدْ قُدِرَ ﴿١٢﴾

We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails (13)

وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ أَلْوَاحٍ وَدُسُرٍ ﴿١٣﴾

which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. (14)

تَجْرِي بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَاءً لِّمَن كَانَ كُفِرَ ﴿١٤﴾

We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? (15)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكْنَاهَا آيَةً فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٥﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (16)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٦﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (17)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٧﴾

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (18)

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٨﴾

We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: (19)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِى يَوْمِ نَحْسٍ مُّسْتَمِرٍّ ﴿١٩﴾

it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. (20)

تَنزِعُ ٱلنَّاسَ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ مُّنقَعِرٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (21)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٢١﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (22)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. (23)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٢٣﴾

They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. (24)

فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرًا مِّنَّا وَٰحِدًا نَّتَّبِعُهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِذًا لَّفِى ضَلَٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

أَءُلْقِيَ ٱلذِّكْرُ عَلَيْهِ مِنۢ بَيْنِنَا بَلْ هُوَ كَذَّابٌ أَشِرٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' (25)

سَيَعْلَمُونَ غَدًا مَّنِ ٱلْكَذَّابُ ٱلْأَشِرُ ﴿٢٦﴾

Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. (26)

إِنَّا مُرْسِلُوا۟ ٱلنَّاقَةِ فِتْنَةً لَّهُمْ فَٱرْتَقِبْهُمْ وَٱصْطَبِرْ ﴿٢٧﴾

We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. (27)

وَنَبِّئْهُمْ أَنَّ ٱلْمَآءَ قِسْمَةٌۢ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ كُلُّ شِرْبٍ مُّحْتَضَرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. (28)

فَنَادَوْا۟ صَاحِبَهُمْ فَتَعَاطَىٰ فَعَقَرَ ﴿٢٩﴾

They called their friend, who took something and slew her. (29)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٠﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (30)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَٰحِدَةً فَكَانُوا۟ كَهَشِيمِ ٱلْمُحْتَظِرِ ﴿٣١﴾

We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. (31)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (32)

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍۭ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٣٣﴾

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. (33)

We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, (34)

إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ حَاصِبًا إِلَّآ ءَالَ لُوطٖۖ نَّجَّيۡنَٰهُم بِسَحَرٖ ٣٤

as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. (35)

نِّعۡمَةٗ مِّنۡ عِندِنَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي مَن شَكَرَ ٣٥

He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. (36)

وَلَقَدۡ أَنذَرَهُم بَطۡشَتَنَا فَتَمَارَوۡاْ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ٣٦

They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (37)

وَلَقَدۡ رَٰوَدُوهُ عَن ضَيۡفِهِۦ فَطَمَسۡنَآ أَعۡيُنَهُمۡ فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٧

At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. (38)

وَلَقَدۡ صَبَّحَهُم بُكۡرَةً عَذَابٞ مُّسۡتَقِرّٞ ٣٨

'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (39)

فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٩

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (40)

وَلَقَدۡ يَسَّرۡنَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ لِلذِّكۡرِ فَهَلۡ مِن مُّدَّكِرٖ ٤٠

Pharaoh's people also received warnings. (41)

وَلَقَدۡ جَآءَ ءَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنَ ٱلنُّذُرُ ٤١

كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَـٰهُمْ أَخْذَ عَزِيزٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task. (42)

أَكُفَّارُكُمْ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكُمْ أَمْ لَكُمْ بَرَآءَةٌ فِى ٱلزُّبُرِ ﴿٤٣﴾

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? (43)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَحْنُ جَمِيعٌ مُّنتَصِرٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? (44)

سَيُهْزَمُ ٱلْجَمْعُ وَيُوَلُّونَ ٱلدُّبُرَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. (45)

بَلِ ٱلسَّاعَةُ مَوْعِدُهُمْ وَٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْهَىٰ وَأَمَرُّ ﴿٤٦﴾

But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. (46)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ فِى ضَلَـٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

The evildoers are indeed in error and in raging flames of fire. (47)

يَوْمَ يُسْحَبُونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ ذُوقُوا۟ مَسَّ سَقَرَ ﴿٤٨﴾

On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' (48)

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقْنَـٰهُ بِقَدَرٍ ﴿٤٩﴾

We have created everything in due measure. (49)

وَمَآ أَمْرُنَآ إِلَّا وَٰحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍۭ بِٱلْبَصَرِ ﴿٥٠﴾

Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. (50)

We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? (51)	وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَآ أَشْيَاعَكُمْ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Everything they do is noted in their records. (52)	وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ فَعَلُوهُ فِي الزُّبُرِ ﴿٥٢﴾
Every single thing, small or great, is recorded. (53)	وَكُلُّ صَغِيرٍ وَكَبِيرٍ مُّسْتَطَرٌ ﴿٥٣﴾
The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, (54)	إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَهَرٍ ﴿٥٤﴾
in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign. (55)	فِي مَقْعَدِ صِدْقٍ عِندَ مَلِيكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

The Splitting of the Moon

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (Verses 1–8)

This is a highly inspiring opening, speaking of a momentous event in the wide universe that heralds an immeasurably greater event: "*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*" (Verse 1) What a piece

of news! They saw the first event with their own eyes, and they can only anticipate the greater one. The splitting of the moon, witnessed by the Arabs, is confirmed in numerous reports; all agree that this took place, though they differ in their general and detailed descriptions of how it occurred. Here, we will give a few of these reports:

Anas ibn Mālik reports: "The people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, and the moon was split in Makkah twice. He read: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*' [Related by Mālik.] The same report by Anas is given in another version stating the people's request for a miracle, then saying: "He showed them the moon split in two halves, and they could see Mount Ḥirā' in between." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Jubayr ibn Muṭ'im reports: "The moon was split during the Prophet's lifetime and it was seen in two halves, one over each mountain. People said: 'Muḥammad has cast a magic spell on us.' Then they said: 'If he could cast a spell on us, he cannot do that to all people.'" [Related by Aḥmad, and also by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī with different chains of transmission.]

Ibn 'Abbās is quoted by various transmitters as having said: "The moon was once split during the Prophet's lifetime." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other versions add: "This took place before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. They could see its two halves." Yet another version related by al-Ṭabaranī with a different chain of transmitters quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "The moon was eclipsed during the Prophet's time. The unbelievers said, 'A spell is cast on the moon'. A Qur'ānic revelation was bestowed from on high stating: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder*'.

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar said: "The moon was split in two halves during the Prophet's time in Makkah, with one half seen at the near side of the mountain and the other at the far side. The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Be my witness.'" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports: "During the Prophet's time, the moon was split in two and people could see it. The Prophet said: 'Look at it and be witnesses.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Bukhārī adds another version of this report with a different chain of transmitters quoting Ibn Mas'ūd: "When the moon was split, the Quraysh said: 'This

is a magic spell cast by Ibn Abī Kabshah [a derogatory nickname they gave to the Prophet]. Wait until some travellers arrive, for Muḥammad cannot cast his spell on all people.' When travellers came they confirmed the splitting of the moon."

The Qur'ān clearly stated this event to the unbelievers at the time, but there is no report to suggest that they ever denied it. It must, then, have happened in a way that makes denial practically impossible. Had there been a way to deny it, they would have done so, if only for the sake of meaningless argument. All that has been reported of their reactions are their statements that the Prophet had cast a magic spell on them. Yet they too directly witnessed the event and so knew for themselves that this was no magic. Had the Prophet been able to cast a spell on them, he could not have done the same to the travellers in the desert. Such travellers, let us recall, confirmed that they had witnessed this extraordinary event.

A Miracle in Support?

We need to add here a word about the report that the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle and in response the moon was split in two showing them what they had asked for. This report is in conflict with a clear Qur'ānic statement that stipulates that the Prophet was not supported by any miracle of the type given to earlier messengers. The reason is explained in the following verse: "*Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false.*" (17: 59) This statement makes clear that, in His infinite wisdom, God decided not to show unbelievers miraculous signs in support of His message, because earlier communities had rejected them as false.

On every occasion the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle, his reply was that this was outside his remit: he was no more than a human messenger. He always referred them to the Qur'ān, declaring that it was the only sign to confirm the veracity of his message. "*Say, 'If all mankind and the* jinn *were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept*

anything other than unbelief. They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'" (17: 88–93)

Therefore, the claim that this splitting of the moon was in response to the unbelievers' demand for a miracle is contrary to clear Qur'ānic texts. It is also contrary to the strategy adopted by this final divine message in addressing the human mind only by the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. It is the Qur'ān that directs people's minds to reflect on the signs available in the universe and in their own constitutions, as well as in historical events. The actual miracles that were given to the Prophet and confirmed by many authentic reports were merely aspects of God's grace which He extended to His Messenger. They did not constitute proofs of His message.

We, therefore, confirm that the splitting of the moon was indeed a reality, as stated in the Qur'ān and in many authentic reports indicating its place, time and appearance. We do not, however, endorse the causes stated in some of these reports, but we will highlight the combination of the Qur'ānic confirmation of its happening with the reference to the Last Hour drawing near. This is intended to awaken the human mind so that it responds to the divine message.

The splitting of the moon, then, was a clear sign to which the Qur'ān draws people's attention, just like it draws attention to other signs available in the universe around us. It wonders at the unbeliever's attitude to all these signs, including the splitting of the moon.

Physical miracles may appear amazing to the human mind prior to its maturity; that is prior to its ability to contemplate the permanent signs already available in the universe and being influenced by what these signs clearly prove. All the physical miracles that messengers were given before mankind had attained maturity were not as great as others already available in the world around us. Yet these do not excite man's instinctive reactions like those unfamiliar miracles.

Even if we consider the splitting of the moon on this occasion to be a physical miracle, the fact remains that the moon itself is a greater miracle. Its size, position, shape, nature, ever-changing stages, cycle, bearing on life on earth and how it stays in space without support make the moon a great miracle that people can see with their eyes and contemplate with their minds. It testifies to man's heart and mind as a witness to God's creation. It cannot be denied except by one who is a stubborn unbeliever.

The Qur'ān puts the human mind face to face with the universe and what it contains of God's signs. This is far better than providing an unfamiliar sign lasting only for a brief period and seen by only one generation of people in one particular place. The entire universe then is a great sign; here everything small or large is a sign of God's immeasurable ability. The human mind is invited at every moment to look at these permanent signs and to listen to their testimony, which is always lucid and decisive. It is also invited to enjoy all the marvellous aspects of creation, which combine beauty with perfection and excite a feeling of amazement to strengthen conviction. The present *sūrah* opens with a reference to the fact that the Last Hour is drawing near and to the splitting of the moon. It thus delivers a shock to the human mind, which then anticipates the Last Hour that is soon to happen, made all the more apparent by virtue of the great event that has just taken place. It can now stretch imagination to the events that will accompany the Last Hour.

How close is the Last Hour? The Prophet is quoted as saying: "I have been given my message as close to the Last Hour as these two", pointing with his index and middle finger. [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Reactions to Great Signs

Yet close as the dreaded Hour is, and despite the exciting and great event they have just witnessed and the numerous signs around them, the unbelievers continued to stubbornly reject the message, insisting on their erring ways. Not only did they ignore the warnings, they also did not properly reflect on the pointers to the great truth that should have

brought them to faith: "*Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verses 2–5)

They indeed turned away and when they saw the moon split in two, they said that it was a magical spell cast over their eyes. They said the same thing about the Qur'ān, which is itself a great sign. They alleged that it too was another act of sorcery. Since signs to the truth are given all the time, they argue that such sorcery is continuous and never ending. They turn away from every sign, unwilling to reflect on their nature or understand their message. Prompted by arbitrary feelings that lack all evidence, they deny these signs and what messages they deliver, refusing to reflect on the fundamental truth confirmed by everything around them in the universe.

"*Yet everything is ultimately settled.*" (Verse 3) Everything in the universe is in its proper place, well settled, and not subject to any upheaval. The whole universe is well fixed, unaffected by fleeting desires, changing whims or blind coincidences. Everything occurs at its appropriate time, in its right place. This is clearly seen in everything around them: universal cycles, the laws of life, the stages of growth of plants and animals, the apparent characteristics of all materials, and indeed in the physiology of people's own bodies and organs which they cannot control. With everything around them settled in perfect order, as they clearly see, they are the only ones who act on the promptings of transitory whims and desires.

"*There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance].*" (Verse 4) They received the truth about the universal signs highlighted in the Qur'ān, news of what happened to earlier communities when they denied God's messages, news of the life to come vividly depicted in the Qur'ān. All these should have been enough to stop anyone who wants to indulge in excess. Such news and tidings carried enough wisdom to direct people's minds to God's elaborate and wise planning. Twisted minds, however, do not open to acknowledge great signs, benefit by news or heed warnings: "*far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verse 5) It is only a mind that is ready

to receive faith that benefits by all this and enjoys the great blessings of faith.

Having given a full picture of their stubborn rejection, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to turn away from them, leaving them to face their fate on the day to the approach of which they pay little heed, despite seeing a sign like the splitting of the moon heralding it: "*So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 6–8) These verses paint a scene of that day which is fierce and grim, consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*. They also warn of the closeness of the Last Hour, highlighted by the splitting of the moon in two. All of this fits perfectly with the rhythm maintained throughout the *sūrah*.

It is a scene full of quick movement, yet it is also prominent, with clear lines and features: multitudes of people are rising from their graves, like swarming locusts, yet their eyes are downcast, humble, fearful. They rush towards the one who calls them forward, but they do not know what they are called to, and they cannot be reassured. As this gathering continues to take place, and amidst all this humility, the unbelievers say in a tone of distress that reflects their dawning awareness of the hardship ahead of them: "*Hard indeed is this day.*" (Verse 8)

Such, then, is the day which draws near; still they continue to deny it. Therefore, the Prophet is to turn away from them when that day arrives. He is to leave them to face their miserable destiny.

Far Back in History

After this powerful opening, the *sūrah* begins to portray scenes of the punishment meted out to earlier communities of unbelievers, who traversed the same way as the Arabs who denied the Prophet Muḥammad's message:

> *Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' So We opened the*

> *gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 9–17)

"*Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth.*" (Verse 9) They rejected the divine message and the signs given to them. "*They rejected Our servant,*" Noah, and said, "*He is mad!*" just like the Quraysh unjustly said of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to stone him, but still ridiculing him and demanding that he desist. "*And he was harshly rebuffed.*" (Verse 9) They though should have been the ones who took heed and desisted.

Having suffered all this rejection, Noah referred to his Lord who had entrusted him with His message requiring him to deliver it to his people. He submitted his report on how things stood between him and his people and the results of his efforts. He wanted the decision to be made by God after he himself had exerted every effort: "*Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!'*" (Verse 10) I have done my best and I am now powerless. I can do no more. You are the One to grant help and support to Your message. All power belongs to You and the decision is Yours.

Hardly is the word uttered and the matter handed over to the Almighty when God's mighty hand points to the great universe and its crushing wheel starts to roll: "*So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose.*" (Verses 11–12) This is a huge and overwhelming universal action described in well-chosen words and phrases. It begins by attributing the action directly to God: "*We opened*", so that we see that it is the hand of the Almighty that opened "*the gates of heaven,*" in the plural, "*with water pouring down in torrents,*" one wave after another. By the same token and movement, We "*caused the earth to burst forth with springs*". We see through the words water bursting forth everywhere, as though the whole earth has become an

immense and gushing spring. Thus the water pouring from the skies and the water gushing from the earth "*met for a preordained purpose*". These waters met in implementation of what God had preordained, obeying His divine command and bringing it to fulfilment.

When it was a huge flood, covering the face of the land, washing off the dirt that had lingered for long until the messenger despaired of ever being able to remove it, the Mighty and Compassionate hand was extended to that messenger ensuring his safety and giving him the honour he deserved: "*We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected.* (Verses 13–14) It is clear in the phraseology of these verses that it is intended to impart an air of grandeur to the vessel, which is described as having planks and nails. It is only described, rather than named, to add to its importance. It floats under God's own eyes and care. This is all "*a reward for him who had been rejected*", and threatened. It is a reward that replaces people's rejection by divine care and ridicule by honour. It describes the great power at the disposal of one who is defeated after having done his best. This is what is available to those who exert their maximum efforts in advocating His cause, and also then put the matter to Him praying for His help. All powers in the universe are mobilized to support such people, and all, with God's permission and under His guidance.

This scene of truth's complete victory and the total eradication of advocates of unbelief is followed by an address to those who look at it as if it were happening before their very eyes: "*We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 15) This great event, with its well-known circumstances and results, is left as a sign and a reminder for future generations. Will any take heed? Then another gesture is added to awaken people's hearts telling them that the warnings given to them are all correct and the punishment that might be inflicted is severe indeed: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 16)

It all took place as the Qur'ān describes. The Qur'ān remains present, available to all, easy to understand, attractive by its sincerity and straightforwardness, consistent with nature, full of wonders and always retaining its power. Never is it weakened by familiarity. But rather

whenever it is contemplated, it gives more of its treasures. The more it is read, the better we are comforted by it: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 17)

This last verse provides the comment that occurs after each scene. The *sūrah* uses it by way of a pause inviting hearts to reflect after they have been shown one of the calamities that befell earlier deniers of the truth.

The ʿĀd and the Stormwind

> *The people of ʿĀd also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 18–22)

This is the second scene of powerful punishment that befell a whole community of unbelievers. It begins by reporting that the ʿĀd rejected the truth, but before any details are given, the *sūrah* adds the question intended to magnify the severity of the punishment meted out: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 18) The answer is immediately given by the *sūrah*: "*We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks.*" (Verses 19–20) The Arabic description of the wind, *ṣarṣar*, gives by its very sound a feeling of that wind which carries unceasing misfortune. Probably no misfortune could be worse than that which happened to the ʿĀd. The wind lifted the people and smashed them, leaving them like uprooted palm trunks.

The scene is violent and fearful; the stormwind sent against the ʿĀd was one of God's forces. It is a natural phenomenon God has placed in the universe. It operates according to the universal system He has chosen. He sends it against whomever He wishes. It continues to operate within natural laws, where there is no conflict between its normal operation in the planned order of things and its fulfilment of God's orders whatever they happen to be. It is He who set this natural law and issued the

command. "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 21) This statement is now repeated after the scene has been shown providing the answer. The episode concludes with the other comment repeated throughout the *sūrah* according to its own flow: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 22)

Aggressors Against God's Sign

> *The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. They called their friend, who took something and slew her. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 23–32)

The Thamūd was the tribe that succeeded the ʿĀd as the major power in Arabia. The ʿĀd lived in the south, while the Thamūd were based in the north of the Peninsula. Despite the fact that the ʿĀd's fate was well documented in the whole of Arabia, the Thamūd took no heed and rejected God's warnings just like the ʿĀd before them.

"*They said: Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verses 24–25) This reiterates the same old argument that troubled unbelievers one generation after another. Could this man have been chosen from among us all to receive a divine message? Again, their attitude smacks of a hollow arrogance that does not consider the message itself, but rather looks at the person advocating it: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves?*" (Verse 24)

Yet, why should it seem strange that God, who knows best to whom to entrust His message, should choose one particular person and give him revelations embodying reminders and directives? Why should it trouble them that God makes a choice when it is He, the Creator of all, who knows the one whose abilities and qualities make him the right choice. After all, it is God who gives the message. Their argument is baseless, and can only be entertained by deviant minds that do not look at the message itself to realize how true it is. They only look at the man advocating it, feeling too proud to follow one of their own number. They do not want to grant him position and status. Hence they say: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24)

The most peculiar thing is that they describe themselves to be in error if they were to follow divine guidance, and to be lost in folly if they accept faith. Hence, they point their fingers at the messenger God has chosen to lead them along the way of truth, accusing him of lying and of being greedy: "*No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verse 25) The accusation of lying means that he did not receive a message from God, and the accusation of insolence means that he was after a position of honour for himself. The same accusations have been levelled at all advocates of divine faith. They are often accused of using the divine message as a cover to seek position and personal interest. Such false accusations are the product of twisted minds that cannot discern what motivates people.

As the *sūrah* reports the story in narrative form, it suddenly changes course and continues as though it is happening at this very instance. It now speaks about what is going to happen, stating it in the form of a threat: "*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) This is one of the tools employed in Qur'ānic narratives to give an air of actuality, transforming them from a mere tale to events taking place before spectators who are full of anticipation about their development.

"*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) They will see the truth for themselves. They will not be immune to the consequences of this truth which heralds destruction for insolent liars: "*We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient.*

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn." (Verses 27–28) We stand watching with expectation to see what will happen when God sends them the she-camel as a test to prove their reality. Their messenger is also looking with expectation, carrying out the divine order that he should wait patiently until the test is completed. He has to deliver the instructions: the water the tribe has is to be shared equally, assigning one share to all the cattle and one to this she-camel alone. This must have been a she-camel with very special qualities, making her a miraculous sign. She takes the water one day, but does not disturb the other cattle on their day. She alternates with them in fairness.

The *sūrah* then reverts to the narrative style, reporting what happened afterwards: "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) This friend belonged to a group of evildoers in their city. The group itself is described in the Qur'ān thus: "*There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good.*" (27: 48) This one in particular is given an even apter description: "*their most hapless wretch.*" (91: 12) It is reported that this man got himself so drunk that he did not hesitate to undertake the miserable deed of killing the she-camel God had sent them as a sign. Their messenger had warned them against harming her, as this would render them liable to God's punishment. "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) Thus the test ended and the punishment was incurred: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 30) It is a question meant to emphasize the seriousness of what happened before mentioning the punishment inflicted when the warnings were not heeded.

"*We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder.*" (Verse 31) The Qur'ān does not give us any details here about this blast. However, it is described in *Sūrah* 41 as a thunderbolt: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*" (41: 13) The thunderbolt may only be a description of the blast making it a 'thunderbolt blast', or it may be a true description of its nature making the blast and the thunderbolt one and the same thing. Alternatively, the blast may be the sound produced by the thunderbolt, or the thunderbolt may merely

be an effect of the blast about which we know very little. Be that as it may, one blast was sent against those people, causing great havoc and leaving them like the *dry twigs* of one who needs such material to build a sheepfold, or used by a farmer as food for his cattle kept in a sheepfold. That blast reduced the people of Thamūd to a state of *dry twigs*. It is a fearful image raised against their earlier arrogance. All that remains of them is utter humiliation.

Now the *sūrah* draws its addressees' attention to the Qur'ān so that they may reflect. The Qur'ān provides an easy reminder: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 32) The curtains are drawn, leaving a glimpse of dry twigs that irritate one's eyes and shudder one's mind, while the Qur'ān steadfastly calls upon people to reflect and take heed.

Lot's People

When the curtains are raised again, we have another episode taking place close to Arabia:

> *Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 33–40)

The story of Lot's people is given in detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Its mention here is not intended to provide details, but rather to draw a lesson from what happens when people deny the truth and to remind them of the severe punishment that they may suffer. Hence, it starts with reporting their rejection of God's warning, followed by mentioning the punishment they suffered in consequence: "*Lot's people also rejected*

[My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful." (Verses 33–35) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān their punishment is described in the form of "*stones of clay*," (51: 33) Here, the description adds that it was a wind that bears the sound of hurling stones. This description fits well with the fierce atmosphere that characterizes the whole *sūrah*. Only Lot's family, except his wife, were saved in an act of God's grace and as a reward for their faith in and gratitude to Him: "*Thus do We reward the thankful.*" They are to be blessed even in the midst of a great calamity.

The story is thus told from both ends: the unbelievers' initial rejection of the truth and their ultimate punishment. Then the *sūrah* provides us with some further details. Again, this is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses in its narratives to emphasize certain ideas.

The details given here are: "*He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verses 36–38) Lot took much pain in warning his people against the perverted indecency they used to practise, but they doubted all his warnings, circulating their doubts among themselves. They argued with him, disputing what he said. Their reckless audacity went beyond limits, to the extent that they even tried to persuade him to hand over his angel guests. They thought them to be handsome young men, and their dirty and perverted lust was uncontrollable. They shamelessly wanted to assault his guests. They cared little for the sanctity of their prophet's home, despite his repeated warnings against their perverted practices.

At this point, God's mighty hand took action. The angels began to do what they were assigned to do: "*So We sealed their eyes.*" The unbelievers could no longer see anything or anyone. They could not persuade Lot or catch his guests. The reference to sealing their eyes occurs so clearly only in this instance. In another *sūrah* the angels say to Lot: "*We are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you.*" (11: 81) Here, what made the unbelievers unable to do what they wanted is specified as sealing their eyes.

As the *sūrah* tells its narrative, it suddenly shows the event as if it is happening now. The address is made to those who deserve punishment: "*Taste, then, My punishment and the fulfilment of [My] warnings.*" You have been warned against incurring this punishment, but you disputed those very warnings.

The sealing of their eyes took place in the evening, but it was in the morning that God determined to inflict punishment on them all: "*At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verse 38) This refers to the punishment already mentioned, which was the stone-bearing wind that purged the earth of their perversions.

Once more the mode of address changes so that we see the event as if it is taking place now. The punished are addressed as they suffer: "*Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.*" (Verse 39) This is followed by the familiar comment mentioned after the scene of turmoil: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 40)

These historical accounts are concluded with a brief reference to the fate of a famous community of unbelievers, outside Arabia: "*Pharaoh's people also received warnings. They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task.*" (Verses 41–42) Thus the whole story of Pharaoh and his entourage is summed up by mentioning its beginning and end: their receiving warnings, their rejection of all the signs and miracles that the messenger sent to them showed them, and their subsequent punishment by the Almighty. The reference here to God's might and ability to carry out His will indicate that their end was violent and calamitous. It implies an allusion to the hollowness of Pharaoh's power and his ability to inflict injustice. All his might is shown to be worthless. He could avail himself of nothing. God inflicted such a punishment on him and his host that can only be carried out by the Almighty. This is most fitting because of the injustice and tyranny they practised for so long.

A New and Powerful Warning

Now that the curtains have fallen after all these scenes of punishment and suffering, the *sūrah* addresses those who rejected the final message.

They have been reminded of the fates of those earlier peoples, and those images are still present in their minds. Now, they are given their own warning so that they avoid a similar fate. Indeed, they are warned against an even more terrible fate:

> *Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' We have created everything in due measure. Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.* (Verses 43–53)

It is a warning of punishment in this life and further suffering in the life to come. It removes any doubt about the veracity of this warning, sealing any loophole of hope to escape it, and any possibility of false accounting to evade it.

All those communities met their respective fates: what prevents a similar fate happening to you? "*Are your unbelievers better than those others?*" (Verse 43) What distinguishes you from earlier unbelievers? "*Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books?*" (Verse 43) Such immunity recorded in sacred books might have had some effect. However, neither situation applies: you are no better than them and you have no immunity. Therefore, the only fate awaiting you is one similar to theirs, in the form God determines.

The *sūrah* then makes a general address, wondering at their attitude, particularly when they inspect their forces and feel themselves very powerful. They claim that they cannot be defeated: "*Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'?*" (Verse 44) At this point, a clear and decisive statement is loudly echoed: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" (Verse 45) Neither large forces

nor powerful hosts will be of any avail. The One who announces this to them is none other than God Almighty. It came true at the time and it will always be true.

Al-Bukhārī reports on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet was standing under a canopy and praying: "Lord! I appeal to You to fulfil Your promise. Lord! If You so wish, You may not be worshipped on earth again." Abū Bakr held his hand and said: "Messenger of God! This is enough. You have appealed hard to your Lord." He came out rushing, and saying: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" In another report attributed to 'Ikrimah: "When this verse was revealed, 'Umar said: 'What host will be defeated and routed?' He later said: 'When on the day of the Battle of Badr I saw God's Messenger coming out and reading, "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee,*" I knew its fulfilment."

Such was the defeat in this present life, but it is neither the final nor the most crushing and bitter one. Therefore, the *sūrah* leaves it aside to speak about the one that is to follow: "*But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter.*" (Verse 46) It is far more bitter and terrible than any suffering they could ever experience in this life on earth. It is more calamitous than any scene of punishment drawn for their understanding: worse than the floods, the howling, cold wind, the blast, the stone-bearing wind and Pharaoh and his host's drowning.

Details are given to indicate how it is more calamitous and bitter. In this way, a powerful image of the Day of Judgement is drawn: "*The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verses 47–48) They are in an error that torments minds and souls, and in a raging fire that burns skin and bodies. This is because they and their like used to say in this world: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24) They will come to realize where error lies and what folly leads to. They will be dragged on their faces into the raging fire. Such humiliation contrasts with the pride they used to take in their might. Their suffering is increased even further by mental

pain, and all this is painted as though it were taking place now: "*Taste now the touch of hell-fire.*" (Verse 48)

Most Accurate Measure

The *sūrah* now makes a clear statement addressed to all mankind, but specifically to those Arabs, to drive home to them the fact that everything is subject to God's will, wisdom and planning. The punishment administered in this life and the one inflicted in the life to come, the messages and warnings given before them, the revelations given to God's messengers, and everything surrounding all this in terms of creation, events and planning are all subject to God's plan and will. All these and everything large or small are created in accordance with an accurate measure and are wisely planned. Nothing occurs haphazardly or by coincidence: "*We have created everything in due measure.*" (Verse 49) This applies to all creatures, silent or endowed with speech, moving or motionless, past and present, known or unknown: their creation is subject to an accurate measure. It is this measure that determines the nature, qualities, quantities, time and place of everything, as well as their links with others around them and the effect they produce.

This short Qur'ānic statement refers to a major and momentous truth that is confirmed by the universe. It is acknowledged by the mind as it looks at the world around it and responds to it. The human mind is bound to feel that the universe is finely coordinated. Everything in it is according to a measure that achieves absolute balance and coordination.

Observation, research and experience will understand this truth in as far as these methods can achieve and the human mind can fathom. Yet there remains beyond it what is greater and more perfect. Human nature appreciates the harmonious influence the universe leaves on it, since it is indeed part of this same coordinated and harmonious universe, in which everything is created in due measure.

Modern science has managed to reach some aspects of this truth, using what is available of tools and practises. It knows now the relative distances between planets and stars, their sizes and gravity to the extent that scientists are able to determine the positions of some planets before

they can actually see them. They make their assumptions on the basis that overall coordination requires that such planets be in the positions they have defined. Only the existence of such planets in their positions explains certain aspects of the movement of the planets they have monitored. Later on, their assumptions are proved true, which means that all celestial bodies are placed in space according to accurate relations that admit no error.

Scientists now realize that balance and coordination in the position of our planet earth are absolutely necessary to ensure the continuity of the type of life God has willed to place on it. They say that should this balance be disturbed in any aspect, all life on earth will be destroyed or would not have been possible in the first place. The size of the earth, its mass, distance from the sun, the mass of the sun, its temperature, the angle of its axis, its speed as it rotates and moves in orbit, the position of the moon in relation to the earth, its size and mass, the relation between sea and dry land on earth, and scores of other aspects and relations are all made according to an accurate measure. Should any of these be disturbed, everything would change resulting in the end of life on earth.

Our understanding of the balance and coordination between a large number of factors that are necessary to keep life on earth under control and establish the proper interrelations between living creatures and the conditions in which they live, and between different species of creatures, is such that we can now appreciate the profound truth the Qur'ānic verse refers to. The factors of life and survival on the one hand and those of death and extinction on the other in the environment and the nature of living creatures are always kept in such a fine balance as to ensure the continuity of life and its progress without allowing it to increase to the extent that there would not come a time when there is not enough of what is necessary for sustenance and survival.

We spoke at length on the harmony and balance in the universe and on earth in an earlier volume,[1] and it is fitting that we discuss here the balance in the interrelation between different species:

1. Volume XII, pp. 370–382.

Birds of prey are small in numbers because they lay few eggs. They also live in a special environment. On the other hand, they live longer than other birds. Had they been able to procreate at a higher rate and to live as long as they do in all environments, they would have ensured the extinction of smaller and more numerous birds or greatly reduced their numbers. These smaller birds are needed in such large numbers because they are part of the food chain and they fulfil an important role in the continuity of life on earth.

A fly lays millions of eggs, but its life span is two weeks. Had flies lived for a few years laying eggs at the same rate, the face of the earth would have been entirely covered with flies. Human life, as well as the life of many other species, would have become impossible. However, the balance established by the Almighty determines the relation between life span and the rate of procreation to ensure the continuity of life.

Among all living things, microbes are the largest in number and fastest in multiplication and devastation; but at the same time they have the weakest resistance and the shortest life span. They die in their millions as a result of many factors, such as cold, heat, light, acids, plasma, etc. They overpower only a limited number of animals and humans. Had they had stronger resistance or a longer life span, they would have destroyed life altogether.

Every living species is equipped with a weapon to protect itself against its natural enemies and to ensure its own survival. Such weapons vary from moving in numbers to ferocity of attack. In between there is a great variety of weapons and methods of self defence. Small snakes have their poison and move at speed to evade their enemies, while large ones rely on the strength of their muscles. Hence, the poisonous ones are fewer among large snakes. Beetles, which have little in the way of self defence, can discharge on whatever touches them a foul-smelling caustic substance to protect themselves. Deers can jump and run at a fast speed, while lions are extremely powerful. Such are all living creatures, large and small.

Likewise, man, animals, birds and all other creatures, including the lowest species, are equipped with the means to obtain their

food and to benefit by what they feed upon. The fertilized egg which clings to the uterus needs nourishment. It causes a tear in the wall of the uterus, making a pool of blood which it can feed upon, and thus it grows. An embryo feeds through the umbilical cord that links it to its mother. Had the cord been too long, the food would have become fermented before it reached the embryo, and had it been too short, the food would have gushed through it, and harmed the embryo.[2]

When birth takes place a white, slightly yellowish liquid is produced from the mother's breasts. One of the wonders of God's creation is that this liquid consists of dissolved chemicals to protect the newborn from illness. One day after the child's birth milk begins to flow. God's elaborate planning ensures that the quantity of the mother's milk is increased day after day, amounting to one and a half litres a day by the time the child is one year old, while it weighs only a few ounces in the early days. It is not merely the quantity of the milk that increases to satisfy the child's needs, but also its ingredients change in kind and concentration. In the early days it is more like water containing a small amount of carbohydrates, but as time goes on the concentration of sugar, carbohydrates and proteins increases day after day, to ensure the child's healthy growth.[3]

When we study the different systems in man's body, their functions, physiology and role in ensuring man's health and survival, we are amazed at the elaborate planning. We see God's hand taking care of every individual, and indeed every organ and cell. We cannot discuss here this world of wonders. Therefore, we will only refer to the fine tuning of endocrine glands:

> These are small chemical factories providing the body with the chemicals it needs. They are so powerful that a fraction of one billionth of them will seriously affect the body. They function in such an order that the secretion of each gland complements the secretion of another. All that we know about these secretions is that

2. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 46–47.
3. Ibid., pp. 47–48.

> they are surprisingly complex. Should their secretion be disturbed, this will cause general harm in the body, which could be very serious if it continues even for a short while.[4]

Animals have different systems according to their different natures, as well as the environments and circumstances in which they live.

> Lions, tigers, wolves, hyenas, and other predators that need to hunt and kill their prey, have sharp teeth and firm molars. They also have strong leg muscles, as well as sharp claws. Their stomachs secrete the necessary acids and enzymes to digest raw meat and bones.[5]

Ruminant animals that graze in meadows have been equipped with different tools:

> Their digestive systems have been designed in a way that suits their environments. Their mouths are relatively wide, without canine teeth or molars. Instead they have sharp front teeth that help them to eat grass and plants quickly, swallowing them in gulps so as to be able to provide their natural service for man. Divine care has given these animals a most peculiar digestive system. The food they eat goes first to the rumen, which serves as a storage place. When the animal has finished its day's work and sits for rest, the food it has eaten goes to another part called the reticulum, and then it is sent back to the mouth where it will now be chewed well before it is sent to a third compartment of the stomach called the omasum. The final stage is a fourth compartment called the abomasum. This very long process also serves to protect these animals which are often attacked in their grazing places by predators. Therefore, they often need to swallow their food fast and hide. Scientists say that this process of digestion is necessary, indeed vital. Grass is hard to digest because of the cellulose it contains, which means that the animal needs a long time for digesting its food. Had it not had a rumen to store the food, these animals would have had to spend

4. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
5. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

a long time, may be a whole day, in grazing without even giving them enough nourishment. The very process of cutting the grass and eating it would have been tiring to the animal. As it is, taking the food in gulps and storing it in the rumen where it is softened and fermented somewhat, then bringing it back to the mouth for further chewing, enables these animals to fulfil all functions: doing their work, eating and proper digestion. All glory belongs to God who created everything in an elaborate design.[6]

Birds of prey such as the owl and the kite are given sharp, curved, hook-like beaks to be able to tear flesh. Geese and ducks are, by contrast, given wide, flat and spoon-like beaks suitable for catching food in mud and water. They even have on both sides of their beaks little lumps which serve as teeth to cut grass. Domestic fowls and pigeons which pick up seeds from the ground have short and pointed beaks. The swan has a conspicuously long beak at the bottom of which there is a sack that serves like a fisherman's net because swans feed mainly on fish. The hoopoe has a long and pointed beak that serves to look for insects and worms that are often below the surface of the ground. Scientists often say that a glance at a bird's beak is enough to tell us what it feeds on. The rest of the digestive system of birds is wonderfully peculiar. Since birds do not have teeth, they are given a crop and a gizzard for digestion. Birds also pick some hard objects and stones to help the gizzard in its digestive function.[7]

If we were to look at all the different species in the same way, it would take far too long in this exercise and would deviate from the method we have followed in this work. Therefore, we will now just look at the amoeba, the single-celled creature, to see how God has set its role in life and how He takes care of it.

The amoeba is a microscopic organism that lives in ponds or stagnant water, or on stones settled at the bottom of such waters. Its body is jellylike, changing shape as needed. When it moves, it

6. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
7. Ibid., pp. 73–74.

> pushes forwards parts of its body to use like feet. When it finds food, it picks it up with similar protrusions. It secretes a digestive fluid so as to digest what is useful to it and ejects the remainder. It breathes with all its body, taking oxygen from water. Imagine this little creature which can never be seen with the naked eye performing all life functions, including taking nourishment, breathing, discharging unwanted stuff and moving around. When it has completed its growth, it divides into two, with each forming a separate amoeba...

The wonders of the plant world are no less amazing than those of human, animal and bird life. Elaborate planning is equally observed in plants: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*"[8] (25: 2)

A Far Greater Perspective

Yet the question of elaborate planning is far greater than this. Indeed everything that takes place in the universe: all events in all directions, large and small, take place according to a plan and in a set measure. This applies to every occurrence in history, every feeling experienced by every individual, every breath, etc. Each breath takes place in due measure with regard to time, place and other factors and circumstances. It is related to the universal system and taken into account in the overall universal balance, just like major events. A wild, little plant that sends out its shoot in the open desert is placed there according to an accurate measure. It fulfils a function that is related to the existence of the universe. The same applies to a single ant moving to its destination, a particle in the air, an organism floating on water, just as it applies to the huge celestial bodies in this vast universe. All are there in due measure with regard to time, place, quantity, shape and form, maintaining due balance in all situations.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Jacob's marriage to a second wife who gave him his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, was not

8. Ibid., pp. 101–102.

a personal affair, but rather an intended event serving an overall plan? It was planned that Joseph's half brothers should feel very jealous of him, take him and throw him in the well, after they had thought of killing him, so that a travelling caravan would pick him up and sell him in Egypt where he would find a home in the palace of the Chief Minister. There, he would then be subjected to the Minister's wife's advances, but he resisted all temptation and as a result was thrown into prison. Why? There he would meet two of Pharaoh's servants and interpret their dreams. Why? Until that moment, there is absolutely no answer. People wonder why Joseph should go through all this suffering? Why should his father, who is a prophet, suffer until he loses his eyesight? The first answer comes after a quarter of a century of suffering. Divine will has been preparing him to supervise the affairs of Egypt, its people and the populations of the surrounding areas during seven years of drought. And then what? He brings his parents and brothers to Egypt where their offspring constitute the Children of Israel who were later persecuted by Pharaoh. Then Moses is born and his life is also carefully planned. Beyond that, various issues, events and trends arise, having a bearing on human life throughout the world until today.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Abraham's marriage to Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a personal affair, but rather, along with the events preceding it in Abraham's life, part of a careful plan. It involved all the events leading to his forsaking his home town in Iraq, going to Egypt where he married Hagar and she gave him his first son, Ishmael. Then he took Ishmael and his mother, leaving them in the neighbourhood of the yet to be built Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), would then be born out of Abraham's seed in Arabia, the most suitable place on earth for the Islamic message. This series of events then culminated in the most important one in the history of mankind.

God's will remains behind the far end of every thread, every event: birth, point, step, change and ultimate result. All occur in accordance with His will which is profound, all comprehensive and inevitable. People sometimes see only the near end of the thread, but not its far end. There could be an extended, long span of time between the beginning and end in their own lives, which makes them unable to see the wisdom

behind what takes place. They will then try to hasten things, and may also offer suggestions. They may even go beyond this, demonstrating anger and impudence. God teaches them in the Qur'ān that everything occurs in due measure and appropriate proportion. Therefore, they should leave things to the One who controls all. This will give them comfort and reassurance, and they will then be sure of the balance and coordination brought about by God's will.

Operating the Divine Will

Along with the elaborate planning and the assigning of due measures goes God's power, which accomplishes the greatest of events by the simplest means: "*Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye.*" (Verse 50) It takes just a signal or one word and everything, great or tiny, is done. In fact there is nothing to distinguish great from tiny; it is all part of how human beings see things. Nor is there a question of time, not even the twinkling of an eye; it is merely a metaphor to help people understand. Time is no more than a human conception that arises from the position of the earth and its rotation. As far as God and His plans are concerned, it has no significance.

The command is given just once and this entire universe comes into existence. Similarly, any change in it can be accomplished. Just one command and it will all go away as God wishes. In everything, the command is given once only: bringing anyone into life, taking it here or there, causing it to die, bringing it back in some shape or form, resurrecting all creatures from all generations to gather them for the reckoning and reward. It is a once only command that requires no effort or time, because it comes from the Almighty in due measure and with perfect ease.

It was always a once-only command to bring about the terrible fate of communities that rejected the truth of God's message. The *sūrah* reminds its addressees of the fates suffered by communities who, like them, rejected the truth: "*We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.*" (Verses 51–53) Those fates are mentioned in the *sūrah*, but people need to take heed and think of the likely outcome

of the position they take towards God's message. Yet the story is not over for those communities that suffered such calamities; they have to face further reckoning that takes account of every little thing: "*Everything they do is noted in their records,*" which will be submitted on the Day of Reckoning. "*Every single thing, small or great, is recorded,*" so that nothing is forgotten.

Now the *sūrah* shows a different image of trust and safety. It is the destiny enjoyed by the righteous: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) They enjoy all this while the evildoers are in error, in raging flames where they are dragged with their faces down and rebuked.

This image describes the bliss which the God-fearing enjoy in its two components, the physical and the spiritual. The physical aspect, granted for the senses, is summed up in an all-embracing phrase, '*in gardens and running waters*'. The very sound of these words adds connotations of ease, comfort and enjoyment. The spiritual component touches the heart and mind; it is the bliss of being close to God: "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" It is a steady, firm seat, giving pleasure and reassurance because it is close to where all eyes are focused. This is all because these righteous people fear God and are apprehensive of what may become of them. God will not allow double fear to overwhelm anyone: fearing Him in this present life and fear in the life to come. Whoever truly fears Him in this world will be safe and reassured in the next. As good believers enjoy security at the time and place of greatest fear, they are granted a pleasant environment and honour.

With this soft rhythm and pleasant outcome, the *sūrah* that portrayed a series of distressing and fearful images comes to an end. This gives its conclusion a more profound effect. It is a perfect way of educating by the One who knows how to influence hearts and souls. This is yet another aspect of operating the accurate measure by the One who has created everything in due measure. All glory to the One who knows all.

SŪRAH 55

Al-Raḥmān

(The Lord of Grace)

Prologue

The composition of this Makkan *sūrah* has a special and prominent pattern. Essentially, it provides a general announcement, made in the open space of the universe, highlighting the blessings God bestows from on high. These are easily discernible in the beauty of everything He has created, in the great favours He grants to all, in the way He controls all existence, and in the fact that all creatures look up to see His face, etc. It is an invitation to all the universe to be witnesses against the two worlds of *jinn* and humans. Both are addressed in this *sūrah* on an equal basis, in the presence of all creatures in this vast universe. Both are challenged to deny, if they can, any of God's blessings. The challenge is repeated after every single blessing mentioned, each with their detailed aspects. The great universe, then, is the stage where all these blessings are exhibited.

The distinctive ring of the announcement is apparent in the *sūrah*'s structure as also in the endings of its verses, with a final rising note in each, coupled with a long vowel pointing far. It is also apparent in the opening of the *sūrah*, which gives an air of expectation of what will follow. It begins with a single word, *al-Raḥmān*, as a subject without a predicate. This word, which is a name and an attribute of God that we

translate as *the Lord of Grace*, stresses mercy and adds emphasis to the announcement. Beyond that, the *sūrah* is a great exhibition of God's grace and blessings.

The first blessing put forward in this great exhibition is the teaching of the Qur'ān, the greatest favour God has bestowed on man. This is mentioned ahead of man's own creation as also his faculty of speech, his most important and distinctive quality. The *sūrah* then opens up pages of the universe that show God's blessings: the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the skies, the balance, the earth and what it contains of fruit, dates, grains and aromatic plants, the *jinn*, mankind, the two risings and the two settings, the two great bodies of water and the barrier between them, what is taken out from them and what goes through them. When these great pages have been shown in full, the *sūrah* then adds an image showing them all as perished, where no creature is left alive yet God's face remains full of majesty. To Him all creatures turn awaiting His decision regarding them.

Against the background of these two extremes of absolute extinction and absolute presence, a fearsome warning is issued to both man and *jinn*: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without [God's] authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 31–36)

This is followed by a scene of the end, i.e. the Day of Judgement, against a backdrop of the universe in which we see the sky flowing with the colour of a red rose, and the suffering endured by evildoers. A long and detailed scene of the reward given to the God-fearing then follows. This great exhibition of God's blessings aptly concludes with a verse that says: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)

Al-Raḥmān
(The Lord of Grace)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

[It is] the Lord of Grace (1)

ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ﴿١﴾

who has taught the Qur'ān. (2)

عَلَّمَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ ﴿٢﴾

He created man (3)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ ﴿٣﴾

and taught him to articulate thought and speech. (4)

عَلَّمَهُ ٱلْبَيَانَ ﴿٤﴾

The sun and the moon function in due measure. (5)

ٱلشَّمْسُ وَٱلْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ﴿٥﴾

The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. (6)

وَٱلنَّجْمُ وَٱلشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ﴿٦﴾

He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, (7)

وَٱلسَّمَآءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ ٱلْمِيزَانَ ﴿٧﴾

so that you may not exceed the balance. (8)

أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا۟ فِى ٱلْمِيزَانِ ﴿٨﴾

Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. (9)

وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلْوَزْنَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ وَلَا تُخْسِرُوا۟ ٱلْمِيزَانَ ﴿٩﴾

He has laid the earth for His creatures, (10)

وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ ﴿١٠﴾

فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٌ وَٱلنَّخْلُ ذَاتُ ٱلْأَكْمَامِ ﴿١١﴾

with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, (11)

وَٱلْحَبُّ ذُو ٱلْعَصْفِ وَٱلرَّيْحَانُ ﴿١٢﴾

its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. (12)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (13)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِن صَلْصَٰلٍ كَٱلْفَخَّارِ ﴿١٤﴾

He created man from dried clay, like pottery, (14)

وَخَلَقَ ٱلْجَآنَّ مِن مَّارِجٍ مِّن نَّارٍ ﴿١٥﴾

and created the *jinn* from raging flames of fire. (15)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (16)

رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقَيْنِ وَرَبُّ ٱلْمَغْرِبَيْنِ ﴿١٧﴾

He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. (17)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (18)

مَرَجَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ يَلْتَقِيَانِ ﴿١٩﴾

He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; (19)

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَّا يَبْغِيَانِ ﴿٢٠﴾

yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. (20)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (21)

يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُمَا اللُّؤْلُؤُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٢٢﴾

Pearls and corals come from both. (22)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (23)

وَلَهُ الْجَوَارِ الْمُنشَئَاتُ فِي الْبَحْرِ كَالْأَعْلَامِ ﴿٢٤﴾

His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (24)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (25)

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

All that lives on it perishes; (26)

وَيَبْقَىٰ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٢٧﴾

but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (27)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (28)

يَسْئَلُهُ مَن فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. (29)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (30)

سَنَفْرُغُ لَكُمْ أَيُّهَ الثَّقَلَانِ ﴿٣١﴾

We shall attend to you two huge communities [of *jinn* and mankind]. (31)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (32)

يَٰمَعْشَرَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ إِنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَن تَنفُذُوا۟ مِنْ أَقْطَارِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنفُذُوا۟ ۚ لَا تَنفُذُونَ إِلَّا بِسُلْطَٰنٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. (33)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (34)

يُرْسَلُ عَلَيْكُمَا شُوَاظٌ مِّن نَّارٍ وَنُحَاسٌ فَلَا تَنتَصِرَانِ ﴿٣٥﴾

A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. (35)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (36)

فَإِذَا ٱنشَقَّتِ ٱلسَّمَآءُ فَكَانَتْ وَرْدَةً كَٱلدِّهَانِ ﴿٣٧﴾

When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil. (37)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (38)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يُسْـَٔلُ عَن ذَنۢبِهِۦٓ إِنسٌ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٣٩﴾

On that day neither mankind nor *jinn* will be asked about their sins. (39)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (40)

يُعْرَفُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَٰهُمْ فَيُؤْخَذُ بِٱلنَّوَٰصِى وَٱلْأَقْدَامِ ﴿٤١﴾

The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet. (41)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (42)

هَٰذِهِۦ جَهَنَّمُ ٱلَّتِى يُكَذِّبُ بِهَا ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

This is the hell which the guilty deny. (43)

يَطُوفُونَ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ حَمِيمٍ ءَانٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

They will go round between its flames and scalding water. (44)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (45)

وَلِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِۦ جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٤٦﴾

For those who stand in fear of their Lord's presence there shall be two gardens. (46)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (47)

ذَوَاتَآ أَفْنَانٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

With shading branches. (48)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (49)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ تَجْرِيَانِ ﴿٥٠﴾

With a pair of flowing springs. (50)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (51)

فِيهِمَا مِن كُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ ﴿٥٢﴾

With every kind of fruit in pairs. (52)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (53)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ فُرُشٍۭ بَطَآئِنُهَا مِنْ إِسْتَبْرَقٍ ۚ وَجَنَى ٱلْجَنَّتَيْنِ دَانٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade; and the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach. (54)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (55)

فِيهِنَّ قَٰصِرَٰتُ ٱلطَّرْفِ لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٥٦﴾

In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor *jinn* will have touched before. (56)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (57)

كَأَنَّهُنَّ ٱلْيَاقُوتُ وَٱلْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٥٨﴾

[These mates look] like rubies and corals. (58)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (59)

هَلْ جَزَآءُ ٱلْإِحْسَٰنِ إِلَّا ٱلْإِحْسَٰنُ ﴿٦٠﴾

Shall the reward of good be anything but good? (60)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (61)

وَمِن دُونِهِمَا جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٦٢﴾

Besides these two there are two other gardens. (62)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (63)

مُدْهَآمَّتَانِ ﴿٦٤﴾

Both of the deepest green. (64)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (65)

With two gushing springs. (66)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ نَضَّاخَتَانِ ﴿٦٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (67)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٧﴾

With fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees. (68)

فِيهِمَا فَٰكِهَةٌ وَنَخْلٌ وَرُمَّانٌ ﴿٦٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (69)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٩﴾

There will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful. (70)

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَاتٌ حِسَانٌ ﴿٧٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (71)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧١﴾

[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions. (72)

حُورٌ مَّقْصُورَاتٌ فِي ٱلْخِيَامِ ﴿٧٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (73)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٣﴾

Neither man nor *jinn* will have touched them before. (74)

لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٧٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (75)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٥﴾

They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets. (76)	مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ رَفْرَفٍ خُضْرٍ وَعَبْقَرِيٍّ حِسَانٍ ﴿٧٦﴾
Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (77)	فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٧﴾
Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (78)	تَبَارَكَ ٱسْمُ رَبِّكَ ذِى ٱلْجَلَـٰلِ وَٱلْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٧٨﴾

Man's Creation and Education

In total, the *sūrah* is a general announcement issued from on high and echoed throughout the universe. Furthermore, it is understood by all who dwell in the universe.

It begins with a verse consisting of one word, *al-Raḥmān*, which we translate as '*the Lord of Grace*'. This opening is intended in meaning, pronunciation and cadence. *Al-Raḥmān:* the word has a ring which is echoed everywhere far and loud. *Al-Raḥmān:* its rising intonation resonates throughout the universe, speaking to every creature. It fills the skies and the earth, and reaches every ear and every heart.

Al-Raḥmān. Just the one word, and the verse is finished. The whole universe hearkens, awaiting the great news that follows this great opening. It comes immediately:

> *[It is] the Lord of Grace who has taught the Qur'ān. He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech. The sun and the moon function in due measure. The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 1–13)

This is the first section detailing some of the blessings bestowed by the Lord of Grace. It gives the first news after the announcement He "*has taught the Qur'ān.*" This is indeed the highest possible favour that most splendidly reflects God's grace as it is bestowed on man. The Qur'ān is the complete and accurate translation of the laws of the universe and the code of living chosen by heaven for people on earth. It establishes a clear relation between such laws and code, building faith, concepts, values, standards, systems and affairs on the same solid foundation of the universe. It thus gives man comfort, reassurance, understanding and a mutual response with the universe.

The Qur'ān opens up man's senses and feelings to this beautiful universe, just as if it were being seen for the first time. It thus renews people's feelings about their own existence and the existence of the universe around them. It also goes even further than this, giving everything around them life such that it interrelates with humans. Thus wherever man travels or stays, throughout his journey on earth, he finds himself among caring and loving friends.

The Qur'ān instils in people's minds that they are placed in charge of the earth, honoured by God, given the great trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains were reluctant to undertake. It thus enables them to feel their own value, derived from the fulfilment of their higher human quality that can only be acquired through faith. It is faith that awakens the breath of God's spirit in people's souls and brings alive the highest favour God bestows on man.

The Faculty of Speech

Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions teaching the Qur'ān ahead of man's creation: "*He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech.*" (Verses 3–4) We will leave aside for now the point of man's creation, as the *sūrah* will presently mention this again. What is specifically intended here is man's teaching so that he is able to express what is in his mind.

We see man speaking and articulating his thoughts, explaining his ideas, and responding to others, but we do not give much thought to this great favour God has granted. It is indeed a great miracle to which

the Qur'ān often alerts us. What is man? How does he begin? And how does he learn to articulate himself?

It is one cell that begins its life journey in the uterus, infinitely small, hardly visible under the microscope, and cannot reveal anything by itself. Yet soon enough this single cell becomes an embryo made up of millions of cells of a great variety: some are bone, some cartilage, flesh, nerve, skin, etc. They make up the different organs with their fascinating functions, such as hearing, sight, taste, smell, touch, and even the most important and greatest of these priceless favours: mental perception, verbal articulation, sensing and inspiration. All this from that microscopic cell: how? With what power? It is all from the Lord of Grace, and by His making.

Let us consider how such articulation occurs, remembering the facts mentioned in the following Qur'ānic verse: "*God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful.*" (16: 78)

The system of speech is an infinitely amazing wonder: the lips, tongue, jaws, teeth, larynx, trachea, bronchi and lungs, all participate in the vocalization process and form a ring in the chain of speech articulation. Greatly amazing as this is, it represents only the mechanical aspect of this highly complex process, which is also related to the brain, hearing and nerves. More significant is the fact that it relates to the mind, which we only know by name. We know nothing about its nature or formation, or even about how it functions.

How does a speaker articulate one word? It is a highly complex process, with numerous steps and stages, involving several organs and systems. In some stages it remains unknown to us. It begins with a feeling of a need to utter this word for a specific purpose. This feeling is transmitted in some unknown way from the faculty of perception, or the mind, or the soul to the action centre, i.e. the brain, which in turn issues a command through the nervous system to utter this word. The word itself is part of what God has taught man, as He gave him its meaning. When the command is made, the lungs expel a measure of air that passes from the bronchi, to the trachea, to the larynx where it goes through the vocal cords. These are incomparably superior to the strings of any man-made musical instrument, and indeed to all musical instruments

with their greatly varied sounds. At the larynx, the air movement makes the sound desired by the brain: high or low, fast or slow, coarse or soft, gentle or sharp, etc. This sound now passes through the mouth where certain pressures are applied at different points. The tongue is so agile at this point that it ensures the production of different sounds through pressures at different points of articulation. All this is needed to utter one word, let alone an expression, a sentence, an idea, past and present feelings, etc. Each one of these is an amazing world, initiated by man, the most extraordinary of creatures. It all comes by the grace of God, the Lord of Grace.

The Sun and the Moon

The *sūrah* moves on highlighting God's favours: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5) The accuracy of each such measure and coordinated movement fills us with wonder as we try to appreciate the facts to which this statement refers. The sun is certainly not the largest celestial body. In open space, to which we can offer no definition of boundaries, there are millions upon millions of celestial bodies, many of which are larger and hotter, and produce more light than the sun. Sirius, for example, is 20 times heavier than the sun, and gives off 50 times more light. Arcturus is 80 times bigger in size than the sun and emanates 8,000 times more light. Other celestial bodies are even greater in size, weight and light. Yet for us, the inhabitants of this little planet earth that rely on the sun for light and heat, the sun is the most important of all of these.

The moon is a small satellite of the earth, but has a great influence on its life. It is indeed the most important element in the tidal movements of the sea.

The sizes of both the sun and the moon, their respective temperatures, distances from us and movement in their orbits are most accurately calculated so as to produce their desirable effects on life on earth. Furthermore, they are placed in their proper respective positions in relation to other celestial bodies.

We will now point out some of the accurate measures regarding life on earth. The sun is 92.5 million miles away from the earth. Had it been

nearer, the earth would have been burnt, or melted or evaporated. Had it been further away, all living creatures on earth would have been frozen. The amount of heat that reaches the earth from the sun represents no more than one of two-million parts of the heat emanating from that body. It is this little fraction only that best suits our life here. Had Sirius, in its present size and heat, been placed in the position of the sun, the earth would have evaporated and been lost in space, long ago.

The same applies to the moon. Had it been larger in size, or nearer in position, the tides it effects in the seas would have drowned everything on earth.

The gravity of both the sun and the moon is also an important factor on the earth's stability, position and movement in space. Our solar system moves in space at a speed of 20,000 miles an hour, heading in one direction. Yet it never collides with any other celestial body.

In this great expanse, not a single star or planet moves even a hairbreadth out of orbit. Absolute balance of size and movement is maintained for all celestial bodies. It is just as God Almighty says: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5)

Submissive Universe

"*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) The last reference was to the accurate measure observed in the structure of the great universe. Now the reference is to what direction the universe follows. This brief statement contains a highly inspiring reference to an enlightening and fundamental truth.

There is a bond of worship and submission between this universe and its Creator and Originator, God Almighty. The stars and the trees are two examples of creatures that live in the universe. They give a clear idea of the direction the universe follows. Commentators have different views about the meaning of the word *najm*, or star, which occurs in this verse, with some saying that it refers to the stars in the sky, while others claim that it refers to plants that do not stand erect like trees. Whichever interpretation we take the point this verse stresses is the same, identifying the bond between the universe and its Creator. The universe is a living

creature with a soul that differs in degree and nature from one creature to another, but its essence remains the same.

Long ago, the human heart realized this fact about the universe and its soul. This realization is based on the sensitive quality God gave it. This fact, however, became blurred every time man tried to capture it with his mind, in the light of his own experience. Man, however, has recently been able to recognize the unity of the structure of the universe, but he remains far from understanding the nature of the universe's living soul. Scientists tend to believe that the atom is the unit of the universe, and that the atom is essentially radiation. They also believe that movement is the characteristic common to everything in the universe. It is pertinent to ask, then, what goal does the universe try to achieve?

The Qur'ān says that every apparent step of the universe, which is in essence an expression of its spirit, looks up to its Originator. This is stated in numerous verses of the Qur'ān, such as the one we are discussing: "*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) Two other such verses expressing the same idea are as follows: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) To contemplate this truth and observe the universe as it worships and glorifies its Lord gives our hearts a special type of comfort and pleasure. We feel a mutual sympathy with everything around us as all looks up to the Lord, the Creator of all. We feel that we are in a friendly universe where everything and all creatures have the same aim. This is a feeling with far reaching and profound effects.

"*He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance.*" (Verses 7–9) The reference to the skies is intended, like all other references in the Qur'ān to the two immediate aspects of the universe, to awaken minds and hearts that have become oblivious to the wonders around them, because of long familiarity. These minds and hearts should look at the universe, appreciate its wonderful beauty, harmony and coordination, and glorify the One who initiated all.

Whatever is meant by the skies, the reference to them lifts our sight to the great space above us, which appears without boundaries, and in which float trillions of huge celestial bodies, yet no collision occurs between them, either individually or in clusters. A cluster may include as many as a billion stars, as in the galaxy which includes our own solar system. Our sun has a diameter of 2.3 million kilometres, yet within our galaxy there are many smaller stars and many that are larger by thousands of times. All these stars and clusters of stars and planets move in space at frightening speeds, but in the great space above they are no more than particles floating far apart from each other.

Along with raising the sky high, God has '*set the balance*' of truth. This is well established so as to define the values of things, events and people. Thus, values are measured by the balance of truth, not according to different, ignorant desires or personal preferences. Moreover, this balance is set within human nature and in the divine message advocated by all God's messengers and defined in the Qur'ān. He has set the balance, "*so that you may not exceed the balance*," going too high or too low. "*Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance*," so as to ensure justice to all in all situations.

Thus, the truth on earth and in human life relates to the universe and its structure. It relates to the sky in its abstract significance that points to the source of revelation, and in its physical significance as a manifestation of God's infinite power. The two meanings converge to add further inspiration.

"*He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants.*" (Verses 10–12) Because we have lived on earth for so long, and we are well familiar with all that is on it, we do not feel the significance of its being '*laid*' for God's creatures, and to enable us to function so comfortably. Therefore, we do not feel the great significance of the stability of the earth and how much grace God has bestowed on us by such stability unless a volcano erupts or an earthquake occurs, filling us with fear. Only at such times do we fully appreciate God's grace in making the earth stable.

Yet people should remember this truth at every moment. They should remember that this planet where they feel so secure is no more than

to suit. Therefore, when God reminds humans and *jinn* of His favour of having created them, He is referring to a blessing that is beyond comprehension.

God – all glory belongs to Him – then states the substances used for creating humans and *jinn*. These are also created by God. Man is created from clay that has dried and gives a sound when beaten with a stick or the human hand. The verse may refer to a stage in the process of creation from dust or clay, or it may simply be a reference to the fact that man and the earth are made of the same material.

> Modern science has proven that the human body contains the same elements as the earth, including carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, nitrogen, calcium, potassium, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, iodine, fluorine, cobalt, zinc, silicon and aluminium. These are the same elements that form dust. Their proportions differ from one person to another. Needless to say, they differ in man from dust. Yet they are the same elements.[1]

What science has proven should not be taken as the ultimate interpretation of the Qur'ānic text. The fact to which the Qur'ān refers may mean what has been scientifically proven, or it may mean something totally different. It may refer to another of the numerous aspects that endorse the meaning of man's creation out of dust, or wet or dry clay.

We stress, most emphatically, that we must not limit the meaning of a Qur'ānic text to a scientific discovery that admits the possibility of error, or the possibility of change with human progress. Some scholars with sincere intentions try to highlight that Qur'ānic statements give identical import to scientific discoveries, proven or still under observation. They cite this as a proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān. What we say is that the Qur'ān is miraculous, whether its statements are confirmed by scientific discoveries or not. What the Qur'ān says is broader in scope than what science says at any one time. Scientific discoveries are always subject to amendment and change, and sometimes they are proven erroneous. We can certainly use science to broaden our understanding

1. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 180.

of Qur'ānic texts, whenever it explains some aspects of the wonders pertaining to man and the universe. We must not, however, say that a certain Qur'ānic text refers only to a particular scientific discovery. All that we can say is that the scientific discovery may be part of what the Qur'ānic text refers to.

As for the creation of the *jinn* from raging flames of fire, this is something beyond human knowledge. The only source on this is the Qur'ān, given by God who knows what He has created. The fire is described here as *mārij*, which means lit and moving like flames in a windy place. The *jinn* have been given the ability to live on this earth, together with man. However, we do not know how the *jinn* live. What is certain, though, is that they are also addressed by the Qur'ān; it is as much a message to them as it is to man. We explained this in Volume XV, when discussing the verse that says: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (46: 29) This is also confirmed in this *sūrah*.

The address here is to both *jinn* and humans, reminding both of God's blessing in their creation out of their respective origins. This is the central blessing, which brings with it all other blessings. Therefore, it is followed by the comment that signifies putting their testimony on record: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 16) Needless to say, denial is pointless.

"*He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 17–18) This reference fills our hearts with great feelings of God's presence, wherever we turn or move, and wherever we look on the wide horizon. Wherever something rises or sets, there is God, the Lord of all, the Sovereign who extends His light and guidance to all. The two risings and two settings may refer to the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, considering that both have already been mentioned in the *sūrah* as part of God's blessings. The verse may also be understood as a reference to the two different positions of sunrise and sunset in summer and winter respectively.

Be that as it may, the import of this reference is more worthy of attention. It points to the fact that God's hand controls stars, planets

and everything else in the universe. His Lordship is seen more clearly on the horizon. When we contemplate universal phenomena and look at the stars rising and setting, our hearts, minds and souls are filled with greater reassurance.

God's Lordship of the two risings and the two settings reflects some of His blessings. Hence, the comment familiar in this *sūrah* is repeated: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 18) The two risings and settings are not only signs pointing to God, but are also part of His blessings granted to humans and *jinn*. They bring much good to all inhabitants of the earth. We see how life begins with the sun rising. It certainly also needs the sunset. Should either one of them, or both, suffer some dysfunction, life itself would be disrupted.

Blessings in Seas and Rivers

We now turn back to the earth and its waters, which God has made in exact measure that determines quantity, type, how it runs and how it is used:

> *He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Pearls and corals come from both. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 19–25)

The two bodies of water, expressed in the Arabic text as '*the two seas*', are in fact the salty bodies of water including seas and oceans and the unsalty ones or rivers. God left them free to run and to meet, but did not allow them to exceed their limits. Each will fulfil its own function. In between them there is a barrier of the same nature, which God has put in place. The quantities of water on earth are not the result of any coincidence; they are determined by exact measure. Salty waters cover three-quarters of the earth's surface and they are mostly connected, while dry land represents only about one quarter of the earth. This very large quantity of salty water is the amount needed to keep the earth's atmosphere clean and suitable for supporting life.

> In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence. The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea.[2]

From this great mass of water evaporation takes place because of the heat of the sun, and what evaporates comes back in the form of rain which is the source of sweet water in all its forms, the most important of which finds its way into rivers. The careful proportion of the vastness of the sea, the heat of the sun, the cold temperatures in the upper atmosphere and other climatic conditions produce rain that provides unsalty waters, which is the mainstay of life for plants, animals and man.

Almost all rivers end in the sea, transporting various salts and compounds from land to sea. Thus, rivers do not change the nature of sea water. Normally rivers run at a higher elevation than sea level. Thus, the sea does not encroach on a river's course, flooding it with salty water. Had that been the case, the nature of rivers would have altered and their function ceased. In between the two there is always this barrier which God has put in place, ensuring that these two water bodies continue to fulfil their respective natural functions. It is no wonder that all this is mentioned here as being among God's great blessings: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* also adds here some of the blessings God has placed in these two bodies of water, some of which can easily be seen: "*Pearls and corals come from both.*" (Verse 22) The pearl is originally formed by a mollusc animal.

> Perhaps the pearl is one of the most marvellous wonders of the sea. The mollusc goes to the bottom of the sea inside its hard shell which keeps it safe from danger. It is different from other animals in form and life pattern. It has a fine, wonderful net, similar to that of a fisherman, which allows air, water and food to enter, but

2. Morrison, A.C., *Man Does not Stand Alone*, The World's Work, Surrey, p. 28.

stops sand, stone and similarly unwanted objects. Below it are the mouths of the animal, each with four lips. Should a grain of sand or a small stone or a harmful organism get through the net, the mollusc immediately covers it with a sticky discharge which then solidifies to form a pearl. The size of the pearl differs according to the size of the foreign object that finds its way inside.[3]

Coral is among God's amazing creation. It is found in the sea at depths ranging from 5 to 300 metres. It fixes its lower edge to a rock or weeds, keeping its mouth at the top. Around its mouth it has several protrusions used to capture food. Should a little creature touch any of these protrusions, it is immediately paralysed and sticks to the protrusion, which then shrinks and bends towards the coral mouth where the paralysed prey is pushed through a small passage similar to man's oesophagus.

Coral reproduces itself by discharging reproductive cells which fertilize the eggs, and the baby coral will then stick itself to a stone or a weed, starting an independent life like its mother.

Another sign of God's wonderful creation is that corals reproduce in another way, producing extensions that remain stuck to the main body. Thus the coral tree is formed with a wide trunk and narrower branches that may become very fine. The coral tree can reach 30 centimetres in length. Coral concentrations differ in colour: some are orange, some are of red carnation colour, some emerald blue, and others pale and dusty in colour. Red coral is the solid stem that remains after the living part has died. Coral stone-like concentrations can form large colonies. One of these is a chain of coral rocks known as the Great Barrier Reef, to the north east of Australia. The reef is 1,350 miles long and 50 miles wide.[4]

Man makes precious jewellery from both pearls and corals. God mentions both as part of His blessings and the *sūrah* adds here the usual comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 23)

3. Nawfal, op. cit., p. 105.
4. Nawfal, ibid., pp. 106–107.

The *sūrah* then mentions the ships that sail through the sea, some of which are very large, looking like mountains: "*His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas.*" (Verse 24) The *sūrah* refers to these floating ships as belonging to God. They indeed sail by God's will. Nothing keeps them afloat in the sea, through its waves and currents except God's care. Hence, they belong to Him. They remain among the great favours with which He blesses human life. They provide a means of livelihood, transportation and comfort that people cannot deny. Hence, the comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 25)

The Eternal

Having taken us on this round in the great universe, referring to different types of creatures that will inevitably die, the *sūrah* now mentions the only One who is eternal, and to whom all glory and majesty belong. As we see death overtaking all creatures, we are conscious of the truth of God, the Eternal:

> *All that lives on it perishes; but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 26–28)

All sounds become hushed, breathing faint, and limbs stop moving. The air of death spreads over all living creatures, stopping every move throughout the heavens and earth. Only the majesty of the Eternal face overshadows all creatures, time, place and the entire universe. Human expression cannot depict the scene. It cannot add to the Qur'ānic text which gives us a feeling of humble tranquillity, complete silence and total majesty. It paints a scene of total emptiness that leaves the whole universe motionless after it had been bustling with life. Yet it instils in us an image which we cannot understand from our experience but can comprehend. The same comment is added, as the *sūrah* considers the full understanding of this fact to be one of the blessings humans and *jinn* are reminded of: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verse 28)

It is indeed a blessing; nay, it is the source of all blessings. It is this Eternal Existence that creates all and gives them their special characteristics, systems, forms and laws. It is what determines their fate and destiny. God the Eternal is the One who creates, originates, protects and looks after His creation, holds them to account and gives them their reward. It is then the truth of His being the Eternal that gives all blessings. Indeed this world and all its affairs are put in place as a result of the truth of God's eternity while all else comes to an end.

Appeals from All

The truth of God's eternity gives rise to another truth: all creatures are bound to perish and, therefore, they all address everything related to their existence to the One who is without equal, eternal and in control of everything in the universe:

> *Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 29–30)

They all address their entreaties and appeals to Him alone because He is the only One to receive such requests. All else will perish, so they cannot be addressed with such appeals. He is the only One to answer requests, and none who appeals to Him alone will ever end in failure. Anyone who entreats or appeals to someone other than God is utterly in error. What can a creature that will inevitably perish do to another who will also perish? What can one in need give to another also in need?

All glory to Him, He manifests Himself every day in a different way. This universe, the limits of which are unknown to us, is in its entirety subject to His will, functioning under His control. Such control applies generally to the universe as a whole, and applies at the same time to every individual creature on its own, and to every organ, cell and molecule in every individual. He gives everything its due, assigns to it its function and watches how it fulfils that function. Such controls monitor every shoot that comes out of the earth, every leaf that falls, every grain in the earth's deep darkness, every fresh or dry thing, every fish at sea, worm in

the ground, every insect, beast or bird in their hiding places, every egg, chick, feather and cell in everything that lives. The One who controls all is never preoccupied with something so as to turn aside from some other thing. Nothing hidden or manifest ever escapes His knowledge. Part of what He controls is the affairs of His creatures on earth, humans and *jinn*. Hence He records this blessing as He addresses them: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 30)

A Frightening Threat

Having stated this fundamental truth of God's eternity while everything else perishes and its correlate making clear that He controls all the affairs of all His creatures, the *sūrah* begins a new section that starts with a threat that sends fear into all hearts. This is a prelude to the discussion of the Day of Judgement that follows later in the *sūrah*:

> *We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 31–36)

"*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31) What a frightening threat that neither man nor *jinn* can face. Indeed firm mountains, stars and galaxies tremble to hear it. God Almighty, in all His power and majesty, says that He will attend to the reckoning of these two humble creatures, man and *jinn*, giving His statement an air of warning! It is unimaginably terrible!

A more literal translation of the threat would say: "We shall be free to attend to you two..." God – limitless is He in His glory – is not preoccupied with something so as to need to free Himself of what preoccupies Him. This is merely an expression intended to make it easier for us to understand, and to deliver the warning in a stunning and crushing way. This entire universe was originated and put in place with

a single word, 'Be', and once the word was uttered the whole universe came into existence. Likewise, its total disappearance needs nothing more than the command to be issued once, in less than the twinkling of an eye. What can happen, then, to these two communities of creatures, man and *jinn*, when God attends fully to them alone, administering their punishment? Under the shadow of this fearful threat, they are both asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 32)

The *sūrah* continues with this frightening tone, challenging both man and *jinn* to pass beyond their own world: "Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so.*" (Verse 33) How, and where to? "*You cannot pass beyond them without authority.*" (Verse 33) No authority can be given except by the One who has it. Once more, they are faced with the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 34) Do they have, within themselves, anything that amounts to a lie to say, or even a word to utter? Nonetheless the onslaught continues to the end, adding further threats and revealing their miserable end: "*A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 35–36) The horror painted in this image is beyond the scope of human imagination, or any creature's imagination for that matter. It is a unique image. Although there are a few images akin to it in the Qur'ān, none are exactly similar to this one: "*Leave Me alone with those who deny the truth and enjoy life's blessings.*" (73: 11) "*Leave Me alone [to deal] with him whom I have created alone.*" (74: 11) The fact remains that this present verse, and the warning it implies, is far more frightful: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31)

The Last Day

The *sūrah* devotes its remaining part to images and scenes of the Last Day, starting with a universal upheaval, followed by images of reckoning, requital and reward. This commences with an image of the universe that fits with the opening of the *sūrah*: "*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) We are introduced to a picture of the sky turning rose-red or looking like a red rose and

flowing like oil. The sum of the verses describing the universe on the Day of Judgement confirm the total destruction of all celestial bodies, after they break loose of the system which controls their operation and coordinates their orbits and movements. One of these verses is the one we are now discussing. Others may be cited, such as: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (56: 4–6) "*When eyes are dazzled, and the moon eclipsed, and the sun and the moon are brought together.*" (75: 7–9) "*When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight.*" (81: 1–6) "*When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode...*" (82: 1–3) "*When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!*" (84: 1–5) All these verses, and many others, refer to this great event that will overcome the entire universe, the nature of which is known only to God.

"*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) The same question is again asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 38) No denial can then be either contemplated or uttered.

"*On that day neither mankind nor* jinn *will be asked about their sins.*" (Verse 39) This applies to a particular situation on that day when all will be present. It is a day with different situations: in some people will be questioned and in some others no question will be put to them. In some, every soul will argue its own case, trying to put the blame on its associates, and in others no word of argument or dispute will be allowed. It is a long, extended day, with many positions and situations, each of which is awesome, and each is witnessed by multitudes of creatures. This verse speaks of a particular situation when no human or *jinn* will be asked about their sins. Everything is already well known, and the deeds of all are out in the open. Signs of misery appear as black on some faces, and signs of triumph appear white on others. Every face tells of what is going to happen. Can there by any denial on that day?

Hence, the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 40)

"*The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.*" (Verse 41) This is a scene that combines force with humiliation: forelocks and feet are tied together and the guilty are so cast into hell. Can there be any denial then? As this is going on, the *sūrah* addresses its audience, as if they are witnessing this continuing process of casting the guilty, with their forelocks and feet combined, into hell: "*This is the hell which the guilty deny.*" (Verse 43) It is present here, as you are now seeing it. "*They will go round between its flames and scalding water.*" (Verse 44) It is exceedingly hot; they have nowhere to go other than round and between the flames and scorching fluids. Look at them as they go round now: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 45)

This is all that is said about those enduring this most painful suffering. The *sūrah* then turns its attention to those enjoying honour and bliss.

The Four Gardens

For the first time in the Qur'ān so far two gardens are mentioned, and there are probably more within the great garden of heaven. Their mention here, in particular, may be to stress their importance. In the next *sūrah*, The Inevitable Event, we learn that the dwellers of heaven form two large groups: the ones to the fore who will be brought nearest to God, and the people to the right. Each will experience great bliss. Here also we feel that these two gardens are designated for a group with a high position. It may be the group described in the next *sūrah* as being closest to God. We see another two gardens which are less refined than the first two and we feel that they belong to a group that comes next to the ones already mentioned. This group may be the people to the right. Whatever the case may be, let us look at this first grouping of two gardens, feeling their bliss. They are "*With shading branches.*" (Verse 48) The Arabic word used for branches, *afnān*, conveys in particular newly springing branches that spread an air of freshness. These gardens have "*a pair of flowing springs.*" (Verse 50) Thus, they are never short of water.

Moreover, they are "*With every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Their fruits are plentiful and varied. How will the dwellers of these gardens live? "*They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade.*" (Verse 54) Such is the lining of their couches: the top is left to our imagination. And then "*the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach.*" (Verse 54) It is near and easy to reach.

This, however, does not complete the aspects of luxury that await these people. There is still more to consider: "*In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor* jinn *will have touched before.*" (Verse 56) Their modest gaze reflects their chastity. They do not look to anyone other than their spouses. Besides, they instil a sense of luxury and brightness, appearing "*like rubies and corals.*" (Verse 58)

All this comes as the reward for a person who stands in this life in fear of his Lord's presence and worships Him as if he sees Him. He feels that God sees him and he works to attain the superior grade of excellence that the Prophet described as "to worship God as if you see Him. If you do not, then know that He sees you." As such they deserve more from the Lord of Grace for their excellence: "*Shall the reward of good be anything but good?*" (Verse 60)

In this presentation of these two lofty gardens and what they contain, every aspect of blessing and comfort is followed by the familiar comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 61)

The *sūrah* then describes what the other group, also with two gardens, will have: "*Besides these two there are two other gardens.*" (Verse 62) The description shows them to be in some way less than the first two: "*Both of the deepest green.*" (Verse 64) Their green colour is very dark, almost black. They have "*two gushing springs.*" (Verse 66) Their water gushes forth, which is again different from, or less than, the flowing water of the springs in the first two gardens. Here we have "*fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees,* (Verse 68) while we had there "*every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Moreover, "*there will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful.*" (Verse 70) Further aspects are added in the next verse: "*[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions.*" (Verse 72) The pavilions, or decorated tents, add connotations of bedouin luxury, gratifying those used to desert life. The mates they have here are '*sheltered*', while the ones in the other two gardens are '*of*

modest gaze'. However both groups of mates share in the same qualities of chastity and faithful devotion: "*Neither man nor* jinn *will have touched them before.*" (Verse 74)

We see the dwellers of these two gardens enjoying their luxuries: "*They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets.*" (Verse 76) The fine quality of the carpets in these gardens is given a special description in Arabic, *'abqarī*, which is an adjective used of the 'Abqar Valley; in olden times the Arabs believed this to be the dwelling place of the *jinn*. Hence they attributed every marvellous thing to this valley, describing it as *'abqarī*, as the carpets are here described. When compared with what the first two gardens contain, these are clearly more modest. Yet the familiar comment is added after every aspect of blessing mentioned here: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 77)

The *sūrah* concludes with a final note of glorification of the Lord whose face, full of majesty, will remain after all creation has perished. This is the most apt conclusion to a *sūrah* that bears the name of the Lord of Grace: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)

SŪRAH 56

Al-Wāqi ʿah

(The Inevitable Event)

Prologue

Al-Wāqiʿah, The Inevitable Event, is the name given to this Makkan *sūrah* explaining its subject matter. The main issue discussed is resurrection. The *sūrah* specifically refutes the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur'ān and associating partners with God. They always wonder: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) Therefore, the *sūrah* begins by describing resurrection, giving it a name, *al-wāqiʿah*, that makes its happening absolutely clear, leaving no room for doubt: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verses 1–2) It highlights the events that distinguish that day from all others: people's positions are totally changed, as is the earth's appearance. These fearful events produce a different earth and entirely new values: "*abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust, you shall be divided into three classes.*" (Verses 3–7)

The *sūrah* then describes the fates of these three classes, the ones to the fore, those to the right and those to the left. It gives us a very detailed description of what they receive of favours and blessings, or misery and suffering. This makes us feel that it will all undoubtedly happen, and

especially as every detail is set before our eyes. The unbelievers are made to see their fate and that of the believers and hear what is said about them after detailing their misery: "*In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?'*" (Verses 45–48) The description gives the impression that the punishment is being meted out now and that life on earth is long gone, mentioned only to show how hideous and repugnant some people's way of life was.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part discusses the question of faith in its entirety, placing particular emphasis on the main topic, i.e. resurrection. The *sūrah* then makes a number of highly effective touches, pinpointing matters that all people know and see, whatever their environment and level of experience. It cites the beginning of each person's life journey with the discharge of semen, and shows their death only to be replaced by a new generation. This is cited as evidence of the second life, which is just as easy and simple as the first one, which they all know. The *sūrah* then cites the evidence provided by plants and agriculture, which is an initiation of a certain form of life by God's will. Had He willed, it would not have come about and would not have yielded its fruit. Next, water is cited; this commodity is necessary for all life. Its availability is totally dependent on God's will since it is He who sends it down from the clouds. Had He willed, He would have made it salty, unsuitable for bringing about or sustaining life. Finally, fire is cited together with its basic material, the trees. At this point, a warning is given reminding them of the fire of hell which they doubt. All these images are familiar to them, and they are only asked to reflect on how they come about by God's will.

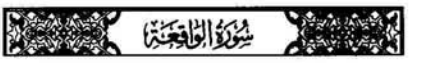
This part also speaks about the Qur'ān, which tells them about the inevitable event yet still they doubt its warnings. A very serious oath follows, emphasizing that these revelations constitute a noble reading preserved in a well-guarded record, touched only by purified angels.

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, it paints a very powerful scene of man's situation at the point of death, when his soul is in his throat. All those around him stand helpless, unable to assist. They know nothing about what is happening inside or to this person. As he is about to depart this

life, none other than God can do aught to him. He sees his path ahead, but he cannot say anything about what he sees.

The *sūrah* concludes by re-emphasizing the true news, adding further glorification of God, the Supreme: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) It thus ensures that the beginning and the end form a perfect harmony.

Al-Wāqi'ah
(The Inevitable Event)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass (1)

إِذَا وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ﴿١﴾

no one will then deny its having come to pass, (2)

لَيْسَ لِوَقْعَتِهَا كَاذِبَةٌ ﴿٢﴾

abasing [some], exalting [others]. (3)

خَافِضَةٌ رَّافِعَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

When the earth is violently shaken (4)

إِذَا رُجَّتِ الْأَرْضُ رَجًّا ﴿٤﴾

and the mountains crumble away (5)

وَبُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًّا ﴿٥﴾

and scatter abroad into fine dust, (6)

فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً مُّنْبَثًّا ﴿٦﴾

you shall be divided into three classes: (7)

وَكُنتُمْ أَزْوَاجًا ثَلَاثَةً ﴿٧﴾

There are the people of the right side: what people are they? (8)

فَأَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ ﴿٨﴾

And the people of the left side: what people are they? (9)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ ﴿٩﴾

وَٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost. (10)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

These will be brought nearest to God, (11)

فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

in gardens of bliss. (12)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (13)

وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

and a few from later generations. (14)

عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّوْضُونَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾

On gold-encrusted couches (15)

مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

they will recline facing each other. (16)

يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَٰنٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Immortal youths shall wait upon them (17)

بِأَكْوَابٍ وَأَبَارِيقَ وَكَأْسٍ مِّن مَّعِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. (18)

لَّا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُنزِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. (19)

وَفَٰكِهَةٍ مِّمَّا يَتَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

And with fruit of any kind they may choose, (20)

وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. (21)

There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes (22)

وَحُورٌ عِينٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

like hidden pearls: (23)

كَأَمْثَالِ اللُّؤْلُؤِ الْمَكْنُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾

a reward for what they used to do. (24)

جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, (25)

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْثِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'. (26)

إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَامًا سَلَامًا ﴿٢٦﴾

As for those on the right, what people are they? (27)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

They will dwell amid thornless lote trees (28)

فِي سِدْرٍ مَخْضُودٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

and flower-clad acacias (29)

وَطَلْحٍ مَنْضُودٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

with extended shade, (30)

وَظِلٍّ مَمْدُودٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

constantly flowing water, (31)

وَمَاءٍ مَسْكُوبٍ ﴿٣١﴾

abundant fruits, (32)

وَفَاكِهَةٍ كَثِيرَةٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

unfailing, never out of reach, (33)

لَا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

[reclining on] couches raised high. (34)

وَفُرُشٍ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation, (35)

إِنَّآ أَنشَأْنَٰهُنَّ إِنشَآءً ﴿٣٥﴾

making them virgins, (36)

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُنَّ أَبْكَارًا ﴿٣٦﴾

full of love, of matching age, (37)

عُرُبًا أَتْرَابًا ﴿٣٧﴾

for those on the right. (38)

لِّأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٨﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (39)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

and a good many from later generations. (40)

وَثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And those on the left, what people are they? (41)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ مَآ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ ﴿٤١﴾

They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water (42)

فِى سَمُومٍ وَحَمِيمٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

in the shadows of black smoke, (43)

وَظِلٍّ مِّن يَحْمُومٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither cool nor refreshing. (44)

لَّا بَارِدٍ وَلَا كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury (45)

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُتْرَفِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَكَانُوا۟ يُصِرُّونَ عَلَى ٱلْحِنثِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

and persisted in heinous sin, (46)

وَكَانُوا۟ يَقُولُونَ أَئِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? (47)

أَوَءَابَآؤُنَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

And our forefathers, too? (48)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ وَٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations (49)

لَمَجْمُوعُونَ إِلَىٰ مِيقَٰتِ يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. (50)

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth (51)

لَءَاكِلُونَ مِن شَجَرٍ مِّن زَقُّومٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, (52)

فَمَالِـُٔونَ مِنْهَا ٱلْبُطُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

filling your bellies with it, (53)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٥٤﴾

and will drink scalding water; (54)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ شُرْبَ ٱلْهِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' (55)

هَٰذَا نُزُلُهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (56)

نَحْنُ خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ فَلَوْلَا تُصَدِّقُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? (57)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تُمْنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Consider the semen you discharge: (58)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَخْلُقُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

do you create it, or are We the Creator? (59)

نَحْنُ قَدَّرْنَا بَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us (60)

عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ أَمْثَٰلَكُمْ وَنُنشِئَكُمْ فِى مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. (61)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ فَلَوْلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (62)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَحْرُثُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: (63)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلزَّٰرِعُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

is it you who makes them grow, or We? (64)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَٰهُ حُطَٰمًا فَظَلْتُمْ تَفَكَّهُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, (65)

إِنَّا لَمُغْرَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

'We are burdened with debt; (66)

we have been deprived.' (67)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Consider the water you drink: (68)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلْمَآءَ ٱلَّذِى تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? (69)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنزَلْتُمُوهُ مِنَ ٱلْمُزْنِ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنزِلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks? (70)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ جَعَلْنَٰهُ أُجَاجًا فَلَوْلَا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Consider the fire you kindle: (71)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى تُورُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

is it you who grows its tree, or We? (72)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنشَأْتُمْ شَجَرَتَهَآ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنشِـُٔونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers. (73)

نَحْنُ جَعَلْنَٰهَا تَذْكِرَةً وَمَتَٰعًا لِّلْمُقْوِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (74)

فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

I do swear by the positions of the stars (75)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَٰقِعِ ٱلنُّجُومِ ﴿٧٥﴾

– a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – (76)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَقَسَمٌ لَّوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّهُۥ لَقُرْءَانٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٧٧﴾

that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, (77)

فِى كِتَٰبٍ مَّكْنُونٍ ﴿٧٨﴾

in a well-guarded record (78)

لَّا يَمَسُّهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱلْمُطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

that only the purified can touch: (79)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (80)

أَفَبِهَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ أَنتُم مُّدْهِنُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Would you look on this discourse with disdain? (81)

وَتَجْعَلُونَ رِزْقَكُمْ أَنَّكُمْ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? (82)

فَلَوْلَآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلْحُلْقُومَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat (83)

وَأَنتُمْ حِينَئِذٍ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

while you are helplessly looking on (84)

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنكُمْ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. (85)

فَلَوْلَآ إِن كُنتُمْ غَيْرَ مَدِينِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Why, if you think you are not to be judged, (86)

تَرْجِعُونَهَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true? (87)

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, (88)	فَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾
he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. (89)	فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّتُ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾
If he is one of those on the right, (90)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٠﴾
a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. (91)	فَسَلَٰمٌ لَّكَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩١﴾
But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, (92)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٩٢﴾
he will be welcomed with scalding water, (93)	فَنُزُلٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٩٣﴾
and the heat of a blazing fire. (94)	وَتَصْلِيَةُ جَحِيمٍ ﴿٩٤﴾
This is surely the indubitable truth. (95)	إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَهُوَ حَقُّ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٩٥﴾
Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (96)	فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

Unfinished Conditional

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust. (Verses 1–6)

This opening is clearly intended to add suspense to its presentation of this awesome but inevitable event. It employs a special style that clearly indicates this. Twice, it begins a conditional sentence, employing the word 'when', without finishing what the result or the outcome will be. It first says: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others].*" (Verses 1–3) But it does not say what will take place when this inevitable event comes to pass. It simply says there can be no denying that it will happen. Without saying what comes next, the *sūrah* commences a new beginning with another conditional sentence: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (Verses 4–6) Again, the *sūrah* does not tell us what happens after this exceedingly alarming event. Thus we are left with the impression that all this is merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.

This special style particularly suits the extremely frightening image the *sūrah* opens with. The *sūrah* denotes the event of resurrection by the term *al-wāqi'ah*, which primarily refers to something that falls hard. The very sound of the word gives the impression of a heavy object dropping from a high position and then settling where it cannot be moved or removed: "*No one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verse 2) As this heavy object falls, we expect it to produce some turmoil or shaking up. This expectation is fulfilled as the event is described as "*abasing [some] exalting [others].*" (Verse 3) It will certainly put down people who were looked up to during their lives on earth, and it will elevate others who were thought of as commanding little respect. Standards and values will be set straight in God's scale, after they have been out of balance in this world.

The frightening event then begins to take shape in the very structure of the earth, which people always think to be firm and stable. The event shows it being violently shaken, a reality that fits well with the sound of the fall. Firm and solid mountains are transformed into heaps of dust that the wind blows away: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" How ignorant and feeble-minded those people are who face this fearful prospect in full denial of the Day of Judgement, refusing to believe in God's oneness when it produces such an effect on the earth and its mountains.

Three Groups

As this strongly shaking scene concludes, we are then introduced to the effects of this inevitable event as some people are elevated while others are abased. This takes place when everyone faces their different fate:

> *You shall be divided into three classes: There are the people of the right side: what people are they? And the people of the left side: what people are they? And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, people are divided into three groups, unlike in most other Qur'ānic statements where they are shown to be in two groups. The *sūrah* first mentions the people of the right side, but does not give us any details about them. Instead, a question is asked about them, enhancing the feeling of expectation: "*There are the people of the right side: what people are they?*" (Verse 8) The same method is used for the opposite group: "*And the people of the left side: what people are they?*" (Verse 9) The third group is then mentioned, and these are the ones to the fore. They are described by the same quality of being ahead of all: "*there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.*" (Verse 10) It is as if the *sūrah* says these are the ones, and this is enough. No further description is necessary, it would add nothing.

The *sūrah* then mentions their position with their Lord and describes in detail what blessings He has prepared for them. This is all described in a way that the addressees can understand, in light of their own knowledge and experience:

> *These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss. A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations. On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other. Immortal youths shall wait upon them with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.* (Verses 11–26)

The *sūrah* begins this detailed account by mentioning the greatest aspect of their elevated position, the bliss of being close to their Lord: "*These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss.*" (Verses 11–12) The gardens of bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favour of being nearest to God.

The *sūrah* takes a short pause here to say who achieves this grade. Thus, we are told: "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations.*" (Verses 13–14) They are, then, the chosen ones, constituting a limited number. Most of them belong to earlier generations, but a minority come from later ones. Views differ as to which are the earlier generations and which are the later ones. The first view suggests that the earlier generations refer to those who attained to a high degree of faith from among the communities that lived prior to the advent of Islam, while the few from the later generations refers to the ones who were the first to accept Islam and strive hard for its cause. The second view says that both the majority and the minority belong to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), with the ones of '*earlier times*' belonging to its first generations, and the others to later ones.

This second view is the one preferred by Ibn Kathīr, who cites in support quotations from al-Ḥasan and Ibn Sīrīn. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Those to the fore are gone, but we pray to God to include us among the people of the right side." Then he explained the meaning of "*A good many of them are from earlier times*," saying that these are "from the earlier generations of the Muslim community." Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Scholars used to say, or to hope, that they all belong to the Muslim community."

Now the *sūrah* begins to enumerate the types of luxuries they will enjoy in heaven. These are of course of the types they can imagine and visualize. Beyond these there are other luxuries and aspects of happiness and bliss, which they will recognize when they are ready to appreciate them in their future lives. These are things 'no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard of and no mind has ever imagined.'

"*On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other.*" (Verses 15–16) They are comfortable, free of all worries and preoccupations,

reassured as to the continuity of their happiness, knowing that it will never end. Hence, they come together, in an atmosphere of mutual love. "*Immortal youths shall wait upon them.*" (Verse 17) These youths are unaffected by the passage of time; they retain their youthful looks. They go round carrying "*goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs.*" (Verse 18) Their drink is made of pure wine that causes no intoxication. "*From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply.*" (Verse 19) They are not turned away from it, nor will it ever be used up. Everything here is always plentiful; nothing is ever out of stock. "*And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire.*" (Verses 20–21) Nothing is unavailable, while everything is given in the way those happy ones may desire. "*There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls.*" (Verses 22–23) Hidden pearls are those that are carefully treasured. No hand has ever put a needle through them, and no eye has ever cast a piercing look at them. A host of gentle connotations, both mental and physical, are implied in this description of these companions with their large beautiful eyes. All this is "*a reward for what they used to do.*" (Verse 24) It is a reward for what is done during that stage of life where action is required. In that life, nothing people do attains perfection, but here in this life, in heaven, the reward is absolutely perfect.

Moreover, they are greeted gently in a way that disdains all idle talk: "*There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.*" (Verses 25–26) Their lives are peaceful; peace that spreads all around them. They are saluted by the angels with a greeting of peace, and they exchange the same greeting with one another, and an even better greeting of peace is extended to them from the Lord of Grace. It is all then a life of peace.

The Other Groups

The *sūrah* follows this account of the superior group with a similarly detailed one of the second group, to which a quick reference was made in the opening of the *sūrah*. The details of their situation in the life to come are now provided at the right point, beginning with a repetition

of the same question posed at the outset that gives a sense of seriousness and awe: "*As for those on the right, what people are they?*" (Verse 27).

This group are also enjoying a luxurious and happy life, but its description gives a sense of nomadic roughness. It answers all the needs of a nomadic people as they can best imagine a life of comfort and bliss. Thus, "*They will dwell amid thornless lote trees.*" (Verse 28). The lote tree is known for its thorns, but here it is thornless. "*And flower-clad acacias.*" (Verse 29) The acacia is a thorny type of leguminous tree well known in the Hijaz region of Arabia. However, the acacia trees in heaven are without thorns, have abundant fruit and are so situated as to enable real comfort. "*With extended shade, constantly flowing water.*" (Verses 30–31) These are all types of comfort dreamt of by the bedouin. "*Abundant fruits, unfailing, never out of reach.*" (Verses 32–33) These are left undetailed here, after having already outlined those types well-known by name to the bedouins. "*[Reclining on] couches raised high.*" (Verse 34) These couches are not described as gold-encrusted, nor as having fine embroidery. They are merely 'raised high'. Raising high contains a double meaning, physical and mental, both of which complement each other. As they are raised high, both meanings converge. In position, they are far removed from all types of impurity, kept clean. Mental elevation, on the other hand, is also far removed from all that stains. Therefore, the next aspect of their blessing describes the companions they have in heaven: "*We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation.*" (Verse 35) These mates are either new ones, referring to the mates God assigns them from among the creatures that originally dwell in heaven, or they are their wives in this world, after they have been resurrected as virgins in the prime of youth, "*making them virgins.*" (Verse 36) They are "*full of love, of matching age.*" (Verse 37) And they are specially assigned and devoted "*for those on the right.*" (Verse 38)

These people on the right consist of "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a good many from later generations.*" (Verses 39–40) This means that they are greater in number than the first group of people to the fore, taking into account the two views we explained in reference to earlier and later generations.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the third group, the people on the left, to whom a general reference was made earlier on:

And those on the left, what people are they? They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too? Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, filling your bellies with it, and will drink scalding water; yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (Verses 41–56)

While the people on the right enjoy extended shade and constantly flowing water, these on the left "*dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.*" (Verses 42–44) The whole atmosphere is of a scorching heat that penetrates and burns the skin. The water they have to drink is also scalding, giving no refreshment. They also have shade, but it is no more than the shadows of black smoke. It is a shade painted in irony, for such shade is devoid of coolness, inviting no rest, and giving no sensation other than that produced by suffocating heat. Such hardship is a fitting requital, for "*in times gone by, they overindulged in luxury.*" (Verse 45) The absence of comfort for those who are used to indulging and excessing in luxury is hard indeed. They also "*persisted in heinous sin*", associating partners with God. The Arabic word used here for sin is *ḥinth*, which means 'breach, violation'. It implies, thus, a reference to the pledge given by human nature to maintain faith in God's oneness and not to associate partners with Him. They are certainly in breach of that pledge. They used to say: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) The *sūrah* clearly uses the past tense in these last two points, saying that they persisted in sin and denied the resurrection, thus treating this present life of the addressees as though it has already ended. In other words, this scene of suffering is made to appear as though it is presently occurring.

After all, this whole life is no more than a twinkling of the eye, whilst the life to come is ultimate and permanent.

The *sūrah* seizes this appropriate moment to answer their question, which they unfold in an exaggerated sense of incredulity: "*Say: All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day.*" (Verses 49–50) The specific day is the one that has just been painted. It has been shown as though they are enduring it right now.

The *sūrah* resumes the description of the suffering that awaits those who deny the truth of God's oneness: "*Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree.*" (Verses 51–52) No one knows anything about the Zaqqūm tree other than the description God gives us in another *sūrah*, stating that "*its fruit is like devils' heads.*" (37: 65) Again no one has ever seen devils' heads, but the very phrase gives us a clear sense. Besides, the very name, Zaqqūm, implies a hard, rough surface with thorns that pierce hands and throats. This is in contrast to the thornless lote trees and flower-clad acacias that the people on the right enjoy. Although the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree looks like devils' heads, these people will eat it "*filling your bellies with it.*" (Verse 53) Hunger is overpowering. Hard and thorny food will inevitably require a drink to ease its swallowing and refresh the stomach. They, however, "*will drink scalding water.*" (Verse 54) Such a drink can never refresh or satisfy a thirsty person. Yet these people "*will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.*" (Verse 55) These camels have a well known illness making them always thirsty. "*Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 56) A dwelling place is one that is supposed to give comfort and a sense of permanent settlement, but this dwelling for those on the left gives neither. This is how they are welcomed and this is the place assigned to them on the Day of Judgement, which they held in doubt, always rejecting what the Qur'ān told them about it. They also associated partners with God, disbelieving His warnings of what they may suffer on that day.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah* which has given us a detailed account of people's fates on the day when the inevitable takes place.

Stating the Case

The second part of the *sūrah* aims to establish the Islamic faith in full, but the issue of resurrection and future life receives the main focus. This provides an example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature, utilizing indicators that encourage faith. It makes a gentle address to people's hearts as it presents great issues in an easy to understand way.

The Qur'ān presents phenomena that are very familiar to us and often repeated in our lives as great facts setting clear universal laws. It, thus, moulds this into a profound and comprehensive faith giving a complete concept of existence. It also uses such phenomena as a method for reflection, alerting minds and souls and awakening feelings. Thus people are able to clearly understand universal phenomena that they may often be oblivious to, despite the fact that they are always before their eyes. They can also be better aware of wonders that take place within their own selves.

The Qur'ān does not rely on a few individual miracles in its address to mankind. It does not require people to look for miracles and signs that are far removed from them, their lives and immediate natural phenomena. It does not lead them through sophisticated philosophical theories, or complex mental tasks, or through scientific experiments that no one can undertake in order to present them with the faith it advocates.

They themselves are of God's own making, and the natural phenomena in their immediate world are all His creation. There is a miracle in everything He makes. This Qur'ān is His own book. The One who takes them by the hand to such miracles within themselves and in the world around them is simply highlighting to them what is familiar and happening before their own eyes, yet they do not appreciate this because of long familiarity with them. He opens their eyes to these so that they can appreciate their great secret, the secret of His creative power and His absolute oneness. It is the secret of the eternal law that works within their own constitution and throughout the universe around them. It is the law that embodies the proofs of divine faith, alerting their nature to these proofs.

This is the line the *sūrah* follows in its second part. It shows them signs of God's limitless power in their own creation, in the plants they cultivate with their own hands, in the water they drink and the fire they light. These are among the simplest things they see all the time. It describes the approaching end of their lives on earth and the beginning of the next life in the world beyond. This is the inevitable moment everyone will have to face. At this moment, all are powerless. All creatures stand face to face before God's limitless power, as He executes His will. At this moment, all excuses are false. Only the truth prevails.

The method of the Qur'ān in addressing human nature is itself proof of its own source. It is the same source that gave rise to the universe. The same method of structure applies to the Qur'ān as it does to the universe, whereby elementary materials are used to produce gigantic and complex entities. Scientists think that the atom is the material from which the universe is built, and the cell is the unit used to build life. Yet infinitely small as they are, the atom and the cell are miracles in their own right. Here, the Qur'ān uses some simple scenes that have long been familiar to man to build the most profound religious faith and the broadest concept of existence. These scenes or observations are part of every human being's experience: newborns, plants, water, fire and death. Which human being, indeed which cave dweller has not witnessed the birth of a child, a new plant shoot, water falling, fire being lit, or a moment of death? The Qur'ān uses such scenes to present its faith, because it addresses every human being in every social environment. Yet these very simple scenes, as well as the reference to the positions of stars, are among the most important universal truths and divine secrets. In their profound simplicity, they address the nature of every human being; and in their essence they have been, and will always remain, the subject of study by the greatest scientists.

The positions of stars refer to the way the universe is designed. The origin of human life is the secret of all secrets, and the origin of plants is, like the origin of animal life, the mother of all miracles. Water is the essence of life, and fire is the miracle behind human civilization. This method of building the case for faith is not one man uses. When human beings address such issues, they do not pay attention to such elementary

materials. Should they even do so, they still do not present them in such a gentle and easy way. On the contrary, they employ an abstract, complex logic, that may only be grasped by the intellectual elite.

God's method is the one we see in this *sūrah*: using basic materials to build faith in total ease and simplicity. He does the same with the universe, building it with basic materials. The same method appears in both, and the Creator's stamp is clearly evident in both.

The Beginning and End

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator? We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (Verses 57–62)

This whole issue of faith is the same as the first instance of creation and the end, the giving of life and inevitable death. It is familiar, seen at all times. How come, then, that people do not believe that it is God who creates them? The weight of this truth on human nature is too heavy for anyone to challenge: "*It is We who have created you: will you not believe?*" (Verse 57)

"*Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator?*" (Verses 58–59) Man's role in the process of creation is no more than the man depositing his seed in the woman's body. Their respective roles are finished at that. From then on, the hand of God takes over. It works on its own, giving the embryo growth and development, building its skeleton and dressing it up, then breathing spirit into it. Right from the first moment, and at every subsequent moment, a miracle occurs that remains totally unknown to man. Indeed, man does not know how it occurs, let alone plays a role in it.

This measure of reflection on creation is understood by all people. It is enough to appreciate the miracle that takes place and reflect on its message. In fact, the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all

imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.

This single cell begins to multiply, and within a short period of time the number of cells reaches many millions, divided into groups with different characteristics. Each group is assigned its own task, to produce a particular aspect of the human being: one group produces bones, another muscles, a third nerves, and a different one produces the skin, while others produce nerves, etc. Another group of cells make an eye, another a tongue and a third an ear. A more specialized group will produce glands. Each group knows its position of work. The cells which make an eye will never miss its position so as to produce the eye, say, in the abdomen or the foot. Had these cells been transplanted so as to be based in the abdomen, they would make an eye there. However, each cell is guided to its proper place, and we never find a case where the eye's cells produce an eye in the abdomen, or the ear's cells produce an ear in the foot. All function properly to produce a human being, who is given the best shape and form, under God's care. Humans have no role in all this.

Such is the beginning; but the end is in no way less miraculous or amazing, even though it is so familiar a sight: "*We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us.*" (Verse 60) What is death, the inevitable end of every living thing? What is it? How does it occur? How come it overpowers all? It is nothing less than God's decree. Hence, no one can escape it. No one can spring ahead of it so as to miss it. It is a stage in the chain of existence that must be completed: "*Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves,*" to be in charge of the earth after you have gone. God who has decreed death has also decreed life. He has decreed that people shall die, and that He will replace them with others like them, until the time span decreed for this stage of life comes to its end. Once it is over, then the second life begins: "*or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you.*" (Verse 61) This is in the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception. It is a great realm about which humans know nothing other than what God is pleased to tell them. At that point, the journey comes to its end.

Such is how people are brought into being a second time: "*You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do*

you not reflect?" (Verse 62) The two are not dissimilar in nature. There is nothing strange about it.

In such a simple approach, and with such ease the Qur'ān portrays the two great events of bringing humans into being. With such ease and simplicity, it makes human nature face the logic it knows well. It cannot dispute this logic because it is based on its own basic facts and on what people see in their own lives. It is an approach that is free of complication, abstraction and sophistication. It is the approach of God, the Creator of man and the universe who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

Plant, Water and Fire

Once more the Qur'ān, in perfect ease and simplicity, puts before people something which is well known to them and which they repeatedly see. It shows how God's hand works to bring it about, showing them the miracle they overlook when it is always happening in front of their very own eyes:

> *Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: is it you who makes them grow, or We? Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.'* (Verses 63–67)

What role do humans play in plant growth that culminates in fruition? They certainly till the earth and plant the seeds made by God, but that is about it. Their role is then finished, leaving the matter entirely to God's hand. It is He who completes this miraculous work.

The seed or the grain begins its journey to reproduce its kind, moving on like one who knows the way, stage after stage, one who will never commit the like of a human error, who will never change course or deviate from the path. It is the hand of God that guides it throughout this remarkable journey. No one could have ever believed this miracle, and no mind could have imagined it; yet it happens all the time and everyone of us sees it in one form or another. How else could anyone have believed that a wheat grain incorporates a stalk and leaves, as well

as an ear holding together a large number of grains? Who could have imagined that a date stone can produce such a large palm tree, with all that it contains?

What mind could have gone so far as to imagine this amazing wonder, had it not been for the fact that it happens before our very eyes? Can any person claim any role in producing this miracle other than planting the seeds and grains which are of God's own making?

Yet people say: "We have planted" when they have not gone beyond laying the seeds. As for the miracle that shoots out and grows, it is all of God's making. Had He willed, it would not have started its journey, or would not have completed it. Had He willed, He would have turned it into chaff even before it yielded its crop. It is by God's will that the seed and grain progress along the way to the end of their respective journeys. Had any of this not taken place, people would say: "*We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.*" (Verses 66–67) It is God who, in His grace, grants them the fruits of their plants, allowing the plant to complete its cycle of life, which is similar to that which a human seed goes through from the moment it is discharged. Both are pictures of life as God makes it.

Such is the first time life comes into being. Why should a second time be thought strange?

> *Consider the water you drink: is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks?* (Verses 68–70)

Water is the source of life, its most essential component. God has so willed that without water no life is possible. What role does man play with water? Is it anything beyond the fact that he drinks it? The One who made water out of the elements that produce it, and who caused it to fall from the clouds bearing it, is none other than God – limitless is He in His glory. It is He who has made water sweet. Had He willed otherwise, He could have made it '*salty and bitter*', undrinkable, and unable to produce life. Is it not right then that they should express their gratitude to God for having willed it so?

Those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān realized that the very water that falls from the clouds was essential for their lives. They were always delighted to see it falling. Indeed, talking about it gave them pleasure; they even sang its praises in their poetry. Human progress and civilization has in no way reduced the importance of water; on the contrary, it has almost doubled. Scientists who try to understand how water first came about realize its importance to a higher degree. Thus we see that water is the focus of attention for a bedouin in the desert as well as for a scientist in his laboratory.

> *Consider the fire you kindle: is it you who grows its tree, or We? We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers* (Verses 71–73)

The discovery of fire was a greatly important event in mankind's life. It was perhaps its most important event as it signalled the beginning of civilization. Fire, however, has become so familiar that it stirs no interest. Man certainly kindles fire, but who grows the tree that becomes its fuel? The *sūrah* has already mentioned plants, and trees are a type of plant. Yet another point is mentioned by the reference to '*its tree*' The Arabs used to ignite fire by rubbing a branch of one tree against another from a different tree, in the way still used in some primitive social environments. This, thus makes this description a close parallel of their own experience. As for the miracle of fire and its secret which scientists study, these are areas that deserve more attention. The mention of fire here is also used as a reminder of the fire of hell: "*We made it a reminder for man,*" reminding man of the life to come. God has also made fire "*a comfort for desert travellers.*" (Verse 73) This last point was particularly relevant to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān, as it referred to their own life experience.

The *sūrah* now points to the ultimate truth that all these facts lead to: God's Lordship of the universe and His ultimate power that now manifests itself, in all its glory, to human nature. It instructs the Prophet to recognize this truth, give it its due, and bring it to the forefront so that it exercises its profound influence on people's hearts: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 74)

A Great Oath

Now the *sūrah* directs its address to those who denied the truth of the Qur'ān in another way, providing a relationship between it and the universe in a great oath by God, the Lord of all the worlds:

> *I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 75–80)

Those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelation knew no more about the positions of the stars than what they could see with the naked eye. Therefore, the *sūrah* tells them that the oath already made was a mighty one, even though they did not know it at the time. Today, we appreciate the greatness of this oath far more than they did, but we too know only very little about the greatness of the positions of the stars. The little we have discovered with our seemingly advanced observatories and allegedly powerful telescopes tells us that one of the countless clusters in open space, the one that constitutes the galaxy that contains our solar system, includes one billion stars.[1]

> Astronomers say that some of these stars and planets, which number many billions, can be seen with the naked eye, while others can only be seen with powerful telescopes. Others still can only be sensed by such very powerful telescopes. All these run in their respective orbits in space. The possibility of a magnetic field of one of these stars coming close to another, or of a planet crashing into another, is as remote as that of a boat in the Mediterranean crashing into one travelling in the Indian Ocean, when both are travelling in the same direction at the same speed. The chances of such a crash ever taking place are so remote that it is certainly impossible.[2]

1. In its shorter version, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that "The Milky Way system contains hundreds of billions of stars and large amounts of interstellar gas and dust." It is well known that the earth's solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. The author's mention that it includes one billion stars was perhaps the estimate at the time he wrote. – Editor's note.
2. Nawfal, A.R., *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 33.

Every star in its position, which is so distant from its sister stars, is placed there in accordance with God's wisdom and careful measure. Each interacts with other stars and planets to produce a measured equilibrium between all these entities floating in space. All this is part of the greatness of the positions of the stars. It goes far beyond the knowledge of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. At the same time, it is immeasurably less than the total truth of the greatness of stars and their positions.

"*I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it!*" (Verses 75–76) These verses make an oath which is correctly rendered in the translation here. However, the *sūrah* employs a special mode of expression, often used in the Qur'ān which would say, if literally translated, "I do not swear by..." This stylistic feature mentions an oath, then appears to turn away from it. It is as if God is saying: "I do not need to make this oath by..." Yet this does not convey exactly the same meaning. The Arabic original is far more powerful in its deliverance of what is intended. Hence, the emphasis on the oath in the way it is rendered in English. The point is that this great truth does not need an oath to establish it, as it is already clear and well confirmed: "*This is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 77–80)

The Qur'ān is indeed a most honourable discourse. It is unlike anything the unbelievers allege about it, claiming that it is the work of a monk or a madman or that it is fabricated, or a host of ancient legends, or that it is delivered by devils, or whatever. It is most honourable by its source, by itself and by the message and teachings it imparts.

Further description of the Qur'ān is added in the next two verses, the second of which provides an explanation of the first: "*In a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch.*" (Verses 78–79) The unbelievers alleged that the Qur'ān was given to the Prophet by devils. This verse refutes this. No devil can touch this record, which is well-guarded, kept safe under God's care. It is purified by angels that bring it down to the Prophet. This is the better explanation of the verse that says that only the purified can touch the Qur'ān. The negation here is a statement, not a command. In this life on earth anyone can handle the Qur'ān: someone who is purified or someone who is contaminated, a believer or

an unbeliever. To take the negation as applying to the book containing the Qur'ān would be erroneous. It can only be true when we take it as refuting the unbelievers' allegations. The divine record containing the Qur'ān in heaven is untouchable by anyone other than purified angels. This is further confirmed by the statement that follows, confirming that the Qur'ān is "*a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 80)

Two *ḥadīth* reports state a different meaning, implying that only a person who has purified himself by ablution can touch the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, however, makes clear that neither of these reports has been authentically transmitted.

At the Moment of Death

The final passage in the *sūrah* speaks of the moment of death, which sends a shudder of fear into everyone. This is the moment when all argument stops, when a person stands at the end of one road and the beginning of another. It is a point of no return:

> *Would you look on this discourse with disdain? Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?* (Verses 81–87)

Are you in doubt about what you are told concerning a second life, denying the truth of the Qur'ān and what it tells you about the Day of Judgement, or the principles of faith it lays down for you? "*Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it?*" (Verse 82) Your denial is all that you earn and save in this life for your second life. How miserable a livelihood! What will you do when your soul is in your throat, standing on a road that leads you to the unknown?

The *sūrah* paints this situation in an inspiring way, drawing all its aspects in quick touches: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verses 83–85) We almost hear a rattling

sound in the throat, see the features decline and sense the distress: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat.*" We almost see the despair on the faces of those attending the dying person: "*while you are helplessly looking on.*"

At this point, when the soul is no longer concerned with anything in this world; when it has put the whole earthly world behind it; when it is about to see a world totally unknown and for which it has no provisions other than its deeds in this life; when it sees a new world and cannot say anything about it; when it has separated from all around it who only see a dying body but who stand helpless, then human power and knowledge are at their end. At this point, people realize that they are absolutely helpless: they see nothing, know nothing and can do nothing. All power and knowledge belong to God alone, with no one able to cast any doubt about this truth: "*We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verse 85)

At this point God's majesty is clearly felt, and people experience a sense of awe resulting from His presence. He is no doubt present at all times, but the Qur'ānic statement reawakens the feeling of this truth which people often overlook. Hence, the scene of death is overshadowed by feelings of God's majesty and awe, in addition to people's own helplessness.

The *sūrah* now puts forward a challenge that ends all argument: "*Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?*" (Verses 86–87) If it is true that there will be no reckoning of deeds and no requital for them and you are free, with no accounting to make, then try, if you can, to restore this soul that has come up to the throat and put it back in place. Try, if you can, to prevent its march towards that reckoning while you helplessly look on.

Thus all excuses, arguments and disputes end. This truth is felt to be so weighty that no man can stand up to it, except through stubborn and baseless denial.

The Final Destination

The *sūrah* now explains the fate of the soul that has turned its back on this world to begin its new and permanent life:

> *If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. If he is one of those on the right, a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.* (Verses 88–94)

In the early part of the *sūrah* we saw images of the blessings granted to those who are close to God. The soul of such a person will now see what awaits it: '*repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss.*' The very sound of these words overflows with comfort, ease and happiness.

"*If he is one of those on the right.*" This person is now directly addressed with a greeting sent to him by his brethren who are on the right. It is a gentle and delightful greeting, giving him reassurance. He begins to look forward to his forthcoming life with the people on the right.

"*But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.*" (Verses 92–94) How miserable a welcome! How terrible is the suffering of scalding water and blazing fire! It all appears before such a person and he knows that he will have to experience it.

Now that this climax has been reached, the conclusion is profound and serious in its tone: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) The great weight assigned to this absolute truth in God's scales thus combines with the inevitable event mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The final feeling reflects the effect of this firm belief with glorification of God, the Supreme.

SŪRAH 57

Al-Ḥadīd
(Iron)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, in its totality, is an address to the Muslim community, calling upon it to fulfil faith within its own society. The community should become an embodiment of the truth of faith, enabling hearts to become so dedicated that they are ready to sacrifice all, life and property, feelings and emotions, for it. With this truth, human souls are elevated to a divine level while they still live on earth. Thus, their standards are those that God has established, and their values are those that are given weight on God's scales. This truth enables hearts to feel the presence of God, to humble themselves when He is mentioned and to discard everything that may hinder them from turning to Him in complete dedication.

On the basis of this truth of faith, the *sūrah* calls upon the Muslim community to sacrifice life and property for God's cause: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely*

in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do." (Verses 7–10)

The Muslim community is also called upon to humble themselves at the remembrance of God and the truth He has bestowed. This so that their sacrifices are the result of this humble acceptance of the truth of faith: "*Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors!*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* puts the values of this world against those of the next world in the balance of the truth. It invites the Muslim community to choose the clearly preponderant scale and to uphold the true value: "*Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verses 20–21)

It is clear from the *sūrah*'s drift that it addresses a real situation within the Muslim community, one that existed at the time of its revelation. This situation existed in Madīnah during the period stretching from the fourth year after the Prophet's immigration up to the time after Makkah had fallen to Islam. In Madīnah at that time were the early Muslims, the Muhājirīn who had migrated from Makkah, and the Anṣār who had welcomed them into their city. Both groups set the highest example ever in human history in translating the truth of faith into practical reality. They hastened to sacrifice life and property in total dedication to their

cause, undeterred by any worldly consideration, personal desire or temptation. Yet besides these there was within the Muslim community a second group that did not attain the same high level of faith, particularly after Makkah had fallen to Islam. By then Islam was clearly triumphant and people flocked to it in large groups. Many of these new converts did not yet fully understand the basic truth of faith, nor did they dedicate their lives to it as the first group did.

People belonging to this second group found it difficult to make sacrifices of self and property for God's cause. Such duties seemed too hard, while the comforts of this worldly life were too appealing and impossible to resist. It is to those in particular that the *sūrah* makes its inspiring address so that their souls eradicate such temptations and elevate them to the level required by the great truth of faith.

There was also in Madīnah at this time a third group consisting of hypocrites. These were unseparated from the body of the Muslim community, especially so once Islam's power became clearly apparent. These hypocrites were forced to hide themselves, pretending to be Muslims when deep in their hearts there was doubt. They also looked for opportunities to create problems for the Muslim community and contributed to any cause of strife. The *sūrah* describes their situation when they are called out and separated from the Muslim community: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verses 12–15)

There were, in addition, a number of Jews and Christians who still lived in Arabia. The *sūrah* refers to their situation and some of their past and present attitudes. We have already quoted the verse that requires the believers "*not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time.*" (Verse 16) This reference was most probably to the Jews. A reference to the Christians is given towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.*" (Verse 27)

In establishing the great truth of faith in people's hearts the *sūrah* follows an inspiring course, akin to Makkan *sūrahs* in aligning a host of influences that captivate hearts and feelings. Its opening in particular strikes a combination of highly inspiring notes, presenting a number of God's attributes that emphasize the Islamic concept of Him. This includes a subtle but captivating invitation to dedicate oneself totally to God as a result of understanding the true meaning of His oneness, His total control of the universe, the fact that everything eventually returns to Him, His knowledge of what people harbour in their hearts and the fact that all beings submit to Him and extol His glory: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verses 1–6)

This very opening is enough to strongly shake people's hearts, inspiring them with awe and strengthening their desire to dedicate themselves to God. They should turn to God after discarding all that constitutes a hindrance to sacrifice for His cause. The rest of the *sūrah*, however, includes a number of elements that reaffirm this call to sacrifice, such as the bright picture it paints of believing men and women, who are seen "*with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12) Another image shows this life and its value as trifling, compared with those of the life to come.

The *sūrah* also portrays how God's will is in complete control of the whole world: "*No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 22–24) These verses give our hearts and souls all the necessary reassurance, no matter what befalls us of good or evil as we proceed along the way seeking His acceptance. We will neither despair nor be mad with joy when either eventuality happens to us; nor will we attribute whatever happens to any cause, event or circumstance. All takes place by God's will, in accordance with what He has planned. All ultimately return to Him.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two closely interrelated parts, each of which we will now deal with separately.

I

Who Gives God a Loan?

Al-Ḥadīd (Iron)

سُورَةُ الحَدِيدِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. (2)

لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ ۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢﴾

He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. (3)

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ ۖ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ ۚ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَلِجُ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا يَخْرُجُ مِنْهَا وَمَا يَنْزِلُ

from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. (4)

مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا يَعۡرُجُ فِيهَاۖ وَهُوَ مَعَكُمۡ أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٞ ٤

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. (5)

لَهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ٥

He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (6)

يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي ٱلَّيۡلِۚ وَهُوَ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ٦

Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. (7)

ءَامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَأَنفِقُواْ مِمَّا جَعَلَكُم مُّسۡتَخۡلَفِينَ فِيهِۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنكُمۡ وَأَنفَقُواْ لَهُمۡ أَجۡرٞ كَبِيرٞ ٧

Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? (8)

وَمَا لَكُمۡ لَا تُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولُ يَدۡعُوكُمۡ لِتُؤۡمِنُواْ بِرَبِّكُمۡ وَقَدۡ أَخَذَ مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ٨

It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. (9)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي يُنَزِّلُ عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِهِۦٓ ءَايَٰتِۭ بَيِّنَٰتٖ لِّيُخۡرِجَكُم مِّنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُمۡ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ٩

وَمَا لَكُمْ أَلَّا تُنفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِلَّهِ
مِيرَاثُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ لَا يَسْتَوِي
مِنكُم مَّنْ أَنفَقَ مِن قَبْلِ الْفَتْحِ وَقَاتَلَ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ أَعْظَمُ دَرَجَةً مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أَنفَقُوا
مِن بَعْدُ وَقَاتَلُوا ۚ وَكُلًّا وَعَدَ اللَّهُ
الْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do. (10)

مَّن ذَا الَّذِي يُقْرِضُ اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا
فَيُضَاعِفَهُ لَهُ وَلَهُ أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? (11)

يَوْمَ تَرَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَسْعَىٰ
نُورُهُم بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِم بُشْرَاكُمُ الْيَوْمَ
جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' (12)

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ
آمَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِن نُّورِكُمْ قِيلَ
ارْجِعُوا وَرَاءَكُمْ فَالْتَمِسُوا نُورًا فَضُرِبَ
بَيْنَهُم بِسُورٍ لَّهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ
وَظَاهِرُهُ مِن قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ ﴿١٣﴾

On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. (13)

[Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (14)

يُنَادُونَهُمْ أَلَمْ نَكُن مَّعَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ
وَلَٰكِنَّكُمْ فَتَنتُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَتَرَبَّصْتُمْ
وَارْتَبْتُمْ وَغَرَّتْكُمُ الْأَمَانِيُّ حَتَّىٰ جَاءَ
أَمْرُ اللَّهِ وَغَرَّكُم بِاللَّهِ الْغَرُورُ ﴿١٤﴾

Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!' (15)

فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنكُمْ فِدْيَةٌ وَلَا مِنَ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ۚ مَأْوَاكُمُ النَّارُ ۖ هِيَ
مَوْلَاكُمْ ۖ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

All Glorify God

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in every heart. (Verses 1–6)

This opening brings together a number of the attributes of Godhead as they manifest themselves in action. We see clearly that it is God who originates all, encompasses all, controls all and knows all. We see the hand of God as it works throughout the heavens and earth, tackles

innermost feelings, brings out deeply-buried secrets and looks from above on the universe and all who abide there. This powerful opening strongly shakes our hearts as it takes us on a round through the universe where we find, see and hear none other than God. We realize that we cannot escape His will, hide from His knowledge, seek refuge with, or appeal to anyone other than Him.

"*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) Thus the *sūrah* begins and the entire universe echoes God's glorifications. Everything in the universe joins in so that every open heart, no longer shielded by preoccupations with the transitory life of this world, hears this glorification. We do not need to dig for any further meaning to the text other than the apparent significance of its words. We do not know anything about the nature of the universe that is truer and more accurate than what God tells us. Therefore, when God says that everything in the universe '*extols God's limitless glory,*' then this is exactly what this sentence means. No other words highlight this meaning better or closer. We may understand from this that everything in the heavens and earth has a soul that turns to God and glorifies Him. This is the verse's closest meaning, confirmed by a number of authentic *aḥādīth*. It is also the experience of some people, who at moments when their hearts and souls were at a high point of clarity, related to the truth inherent in everything and who could see beyond apparent shapes and forms.

In the Qur'ān, we read about the Prophet David: "*We said: You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!*" (34: 10) And that is what happened: the mountains and the birds sang God's praises with David who himself had a pleasant and melodious voice. In his anthology of authentic *aḥādīth*, Muslim relates, on the authority of Jābir ibn Samurah: "The Prophet said: 'There is in Makkah a rock that used to greet me during the early days of my mission. I can identify it now'." 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib reports: "I was with the Prophet in Makkah when we went out in a certain direction. Every tree or mountain he faced said to him: 'Peace be to you, Messenger of God'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Mālik ibn Anas: "The Prophet used to give his sermons leaning on the branch of a tree. When the pulpit was made for him to stand on and he stood there delivering

his sermon, the branch yearned like a she-camel. The Prophet went down and rubbed it with his hand and it stopped."

There are many Qur'ānic verses that clearly express this universal fact, such as: "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) "*Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings?*" (22: 18) "*Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) There is no need to try to explain these clear texts in a way that suits our own preconceptions of the nature of things when these are not based on the Qur'ān. Whatever ideas or thoughts we entertain about the universe should rely, first and foremost, on what is stated by God, the Creator and Originator of the universe, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

"*He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) His glorification by everything in the heavens and earth is a result of His surpassing power and wisdom. He is the One who has power over everything and who controls everything according to His flawless wisdom.

Absolute Dominion

We hardly catch our breath after this first verse has portrayed this great universal festival of God's glorification. The *sūrah* immediately takes us on another round in the universe: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) We have learnt that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, as He is the sole owner of the universe who has no partner in His dominion. It is, thus, a case of glorifying the Owner by His property. It is He who creates life and death, granting life to every living thing and then determining its death. Nothing happens other than what He wills.

Life continues to be a secret in its nature and source. No one can tell where it came from or how. Indeed, no one knows what life truly is. The Qur'ān says that it is God who grants life to every living entity. No

one can deny this or prove anything contrary to it. Likewise, death is a deeply hidden secret whose nature is unknown to all. No one can cause it because none can take life away other than the One who granted it in the first place. Both life and death are aspects of His absolute dominion over the heavens and the earth.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) His power is absolute, unrestricted by anything. God's will operates without any restriction whatsoever. Any limitation, of any type, form or colour, our minds try to apply to God's will, according to our own logic, is false as it is conceived by man's finite mind. The fact that God's will determines and operates the laws that operate in the universe is part of the overall picture of His free, unrestricted will. The choice is made without restriction, and the operation of these laws does not impose any limitation on God's will to make it operate within these laws. God's choice remains free and unrestricted.

The Qur'ān lays much emphasis on this fact, reiterating it on every occasion in a way that accentuates that God's will is absolutely free, unrestricted even by the results of its own actions. Thus, this fact remains clear, uncoloured by any alien conception. For example, God has promised the people of heaven that they will abide there forever, and the same promise is given to the people of hell. This promise is issued by His will, but His will is kept free beyond the very promise He has chosen to give. Therefore, He says about both groups that they will "*abide [there] as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise.*" (11: 107 and 108) This is repeated on every occasion so as to make it clear that no exception can be made. Human logic has no say on this other than what is stated in the Qur'ān.

In this way, we can appreciate the significance of this verse that states God's absolute power in His dominion in which He has no partner, where everything rightly extols His praises.

The One and Only

We are then introduced to another truth that may be greater and more profound than the previous ones: it is the truth that the only true entity is God – limitless is He in His glory. Therefore, He encompasses

everything and knows everything: "*He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) He is the First, which means that nothing was before Him; and He is the Last, which means that nothing remains after Him. He is the Outer, which means that nothing is above Him; and He is the Inner, which means that nothing is beyond Him. The first two attributes encompass the nature of time, and the other two the nature of place. The human mind may look everywhere, but it will find that nothing has any entity except God. Indeed all qualities of existence apply to Him alone. The very existence of the human mind materializes only through God's existence, which is the only true existence. Everything else receives its existence from Him. This is the basic truth that gives everything its nature. Nothing has an independent existence beyond this truth.

"*He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) His is the knowledge of the truth absolute. Since every existence is derived from God, it is included in His absolute knowledge, which belongs to Him alone. No one shares in God's knowledge, much as people may get to know some aspects of the nature of their own world. Still, they will only know about what appears to them.

If this great truth is well established in a person's heart, why should he give any consideration to anything in the universe other than God? Nothing, including that very heart, has any true existence other than what it derives from that great truth. Everything else is a transitory delusion. Only God remains, as He is the only One who is eternal. Until this great truth is firmly established in our hearts, we should look at this Qur'ānic verse, contemplate and truly appreciate its message.

Sufis upheld this truth and went far and wide with it. Some of them said they could see God in everything in the universe, while others said they saw God beyond everything, and others still said that as they saw God, they could see no one else in the universe. These statements, inadequate as they are, simply point to the truth. What the Sufis are generally criticized for is that their concept led them to neglect life. Islam though is a balanced way of life. It wants the human heart to appreciate this truth, live with it and for it, while at the same time discharging all incumbent duties as vicegerents of this earth. Each person should work hard to implement the divine code of life on earth. Such implementation

is the result of a balanced appreciation of this great truth, consistent with the nature of man and the nature of the universe as created by God.

Creation, Knowledge and Dominion

Now the *sūrah* tells us how other truths branched out from that great one:

> *It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verses 4–6)

These verses mention several truths: God's creation of the heavens and the earth; His establishing Himself on the throne; His knowledge of particular matters about His creation; His presence with everyone wherever they happen to be; the return of everything to Him; His conduct of the affairs of this world; and His knowledge of what is in people's hearts. All these spring out of the first great truth, but their presentation against this universal background gives them special effect. The heavens and the earth strike awe in our hearts by their expanse, beauty, harmony, accuracy of position and movement and in the consistency of their phenomena. Like the human heart, they are God's creatures. Thus, they too relate to man's heart. They strike some heavenly tunes on it when man looks and reflects on their creation. They say to man that they are all created by God, and that they extol His praises. Man should do the same. Like them, he should derive the truth of his existence from God's existence.

The six days in which God created the heavens and earth are known only to God. Our own days are accidental results of the earth's rotation in relation to the sun. This earth day came into existence after the creation of the earth and the sun. Therefore, we cannot apply this earth day to the

creation of the universe. We, therefore, leave such knowledge to God. He gives us such information in due course, if He so pleases.

The same applies to the throne. We believe in it as God has mentioned it, but we do not know its nature. As for God 'establishing' Himself on the throne, we can say that it is an expression that stresses God's control of all His creation. This is based on what the Qur'ān says and, as a result, we know for certain that God does not change situation or position. He is not unestablished on the throne in one situation and then in another established. To say, as some scholars do, that we believe in God's establishing Himself on the throne without knowing how does not give us an adequate explanation of the phrase "*and established Himself on the throne.*" It is preferable to say that this refers to God's absolute control of all creation. To so explain this does not depart from our method of abstaining from personal views about the meaning of things that do not belong to our world. Instead, we are relying on what the Qur'ān states and the impression it gives of God and His attributes.

Added to creation and control is absolute and careful knowledge. The Qur'ān describes the extent of this knowledge in a marvellous way, one that captures our minds as we try to follow it against the great expanse of the universe in a never-ceasing movement. This is far more than mere knowledge. It is an inspiring image that captures imaginations: "*He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them.*" (Verse 4)

At every moment, countless numbers of creatures and things enter the earth, and countless others go out from it. Likewise, at every moment, unimaginable numbers of raindrops, rays, meteors, comets, angels, secret objects, etc. come down from the skies and similar numbers of visible and invisible creatures ascend to them. This short Qur'ānic statement refers to this ever-continuous multi-way movement and to great events that are beyond count. It leaves our minds looking everywhere, watching what goes into the earth or out of it, and what comes down from the skies or goes up into them. In this way we can have a glimpse of God's perfect knowledge as He is aware of everything that takes place everywhere. Our minds can thus roam in God's universe while we are still placed on earth. We travel on with alert senses, shuddering at the majesty of what we experience.

As our minds continue looking at the great expanse of the universe, the Qur'ān brings us back to ourselves and touches our inner feelings. We learn that God is with us, looking at us and seeing our actions. He is so close: "*He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 4) This is a factual statement, not a figurative one. God is with everyone and everything, at all times and in all places. He sees everything every creature does. This is a great truth. When we fully understand it, we experience a sense of awe together with a sense of joy as we learn that He is with us. This true statement is enough, when fully understood, to elevate us above earthly considerations, while keeping us all the time on our guard, wary of indulgence in what is unbecoming.

Once more the *sūrah* mentions God's dominion, putting it in a different context: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) This was mentioned the first time in the context of granting life, causing death and absolute power. Here, it is mentioned in the context of the return of everything to God. Such return closely relates to dominion over the universe. Appreciating this truth ensures that our hearts and minds never turn to anyone other than God in any situation or for any matter, at any time. Whatever we ask, we ask of God, and whatever we do will be done only to please God. Thus we are sure to follow the right way in public and private, in action and rest, in feelings and leanings, always knowing that none other than God can provide any help or protection against any adverse eventuality.

This opening concludes with a reference to a gentle aspect of God's power we see around us in the universe, and within us in our inner feelings: "*He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 6) The passing of the night into the day and the day into the night is a continuous and gentle movement. This may mean that the night extends taking part of the day at one stage and the day extends at another stage taking part of the night. Or it may mean the actual penetration of the night into the day at the time of sunset and the penetration of the day into night at the time of sunrise. A similarly gentle action is the knowledge of what is in people's hearts, which means their guarded

secrets that are told to no one. The feeling of God's hand pushing the night into the day and the day into the night, in a very subtle and gentle way, makes our minds sensitive and reflective. The same can be said about feeling that God is fully aware of inner thoughts and feelings.

Degrees of Believers

Having softened our hearts with this opening, the *sūrah* calls on all people to believe and be ready to sacrifice money and property. The opening has made us ready to listen and pay full attention. Yet the address also brings its own inspiring touches and encouraging tones:

> *Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, God is addressing the hearts He has created. He knows them, knows what influences them, as well as what feelings they harbour. He knows that for faith to be pure and well established in our hearts so that it gives results in practical life is very hard. He knows how hard and long the struggle is for hearts to be ready to sacrifice purely for His sake. Therefore, the *sūrah* brings in such a host of factors and puts before us a number of universal truths. Their combined effect makes us measure things with the accurate measure of the great truth. The Qur'ān deals with these hearts time and again, step after step. It is not satisfied with a single address or influence presenting the case. Hence advocates of

the divine faith are well advised to reflect on the way the Qur'ān treats people's hearts, so that they can follow its guidance.

The beat at the *sūrah*'s opening is so powerful and profound that it shakes and softens hardened hearts, making them sensitive. The Qur'ān, however, does not use only those influences as it calls on people to believe and to be charitable: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees.*" (Verse 7) The addressees now are Muslims, yet they are called upon to believe in God and His Messenger. This means that they are called upon to ensure that the truth of faith, in its full meaning, takes hold of their hearts. This is a fine touch. They are also called upon to spend in charity, and this call is also coupled with an inspiring touch. They do not spend out of their own property, but rather out of the portion of God's kingdom that He has given them on trust. It is He who has the '*dominion over the heavens and the earth*,' which means that it is He who made the human race generally trustees over a part of His property. It is He who '*grants life and causes death*.' In this way He passes the trust from one generation to another.

Thus, this instruction is linked to what the opening of the *sūrah* said of universal facts, before it makes people ashamed of their behaviour before God. It is He who has given them all they have. What then will they say when He asks them to give in charity some of what He has given them? It is God who gives everything, and what He has will never end. What, then, stops them giving in charity when what they have depends on what God granted them. The *sūrah* does not merely give them this reminder, with all its connotations of shame, kindness and hope. Instead, it also gives them another incentive, making them aspire to more of what God bestows: "*Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward.*" (Verse 7) How can anyone abstain from belief and giving in charity when they are shown such limitless kindness and generosity?

The *sūrah* goes further presenting more incentives to believe and accept the divine message. This time it highlights facts from people's own lives and what takes place in their very midst: "*Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord,*

and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful." (Verses 8–9) The *sūrah* asks: what stops them from being truly believers when the Prophet calls on them to believe, and when they have already given him pledges of allegiance? What stops them from higher degrees of faith in God when it is He who bestows on His servant clear revelations that are sure to replace their error, doubt and anxiety with the light of faith and certainty? These are indeed aspects of God's compassion and mercy that He bestows on all.

The fact that the Prophet was among those people, calling on them to believe, addressing them with God's own words, establishing a link between them and God which they felt within their own souls was a great blessing, one that we now find difficult to imagine. That period of revelation when the Prophet was living among the Muslims was indeed remarkable. It was a time when God – limitless is He in His glory – addressed man, whom He created, through His servant, (peace be upon him), in a kindly and compassionate way. He said to them: 'Take this and leave that. This is My way, so follow it. You have slipped here, so pick up this rope leading to Me. You have erred and sinned, so repent; My door remains open, so come forward and never let despair creep into you, for My grace will erase all. You man! You said this and that which is wrong; or intended such and such which is a sin; or committed that, which is an act of disobedience. Therefore, come now before Me, declare your repentance, purging yourself of all that and return to My fold. And you man! Here is the solution to the problem you have been struggling with; or this is the answer to the question that has been troubling you; or this is the value of the deed you have committed.'

It is God who says this to people. They live under His care, feeling that He is truly and actually with them, listening to their complaints in the middle of the night and providing their solutions, guiding their every step.

This is something too great to imagine by a person who did not live during that period. The people these verses address actually lived through it, and yet they needed this treatment and these compassionate touches and reminders. This is another aspect of God's grace added to the first

aspect. Both can be appreciated by us who did not have the blessing of living during that remarkable period. "The Prophet said once to his Companions: 'Which believers do you think most remarkable?' They said: 'The angels.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when they are with their Lord?' They rejoined: 'The prophets, then.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when revelations were given to them from on high?' Said they: 'Then we ourselves.' He said: 'Why would you not believe when I am in your midst? The most remarkable of believers are people who come after you, look at scriptures and believe in what is in them'." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

It is true what the Prophet says. It is true that the gulf is indeed wide. The pointers and incentives to faith in their case were great and remarkable. Hence the *sūrah* asks: 'Why would you not believe?' Then, it requires them to translate their faith into reality, if they are truly believers.

Classes of Actions

The *sūrah* then adds the incentive to spend in charity, putting this in an emphatic way: "*Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth?*" (Verse 10) This reference takes us back to the fact already mentioned in the opening verses: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) The heavens and the earth are His own property and they revert back to Him. What has been assigned to people on trust will also go back to Him as part of this inheritance. Why should they, then, not be charitable when He is asking them to spend in charity? When this is put into perspective, there can be no justification for stinginess.

The elite community of the early believers, the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, came forward with what they could of sacrifice, in life and property, during a very hard time, before the great triumph was achieved. The victory mentioned here may refer to either the fall of Makkah to Islam, or to the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah. Both were events that greatly consolidated the position of Islam at a time when it was still besieged by enemies on all fronts. These people offered their

sacrifices to God, entertaining no thought of worldly gain or currying favour with a powerful Muslim state, for there was none. Their sacrifice was the result of a choice they made for God's sake. It was in support of a faith they wholeheartedly accepted and loved, valuing it dearer than their lives and properties. Yet what they sacrificed was, in quantity, much less than what those who flocked to Islam after its victory were able to sacrifice. Some of these offered sacrifices, stopping at the amount they heard the early Muslims gave. Therefore, the Qur'ān gives these offerings their true values, making it clear that it is not the quantity that determines the value; rather, it is the motive pointing to the truth of faith: "*Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards.*" (Verse 10)

A person who makes financial sacrifices and fights when the faith he believes in is struggling against great odds, able to call on the support of only a few, and when there is little hope of personal gain is totally different from the one who makes such sacrifices and fights at the time of security, when supporters are plentiful and victory is assured. The first is totally dedicated to his faith, placing his complete trust in God, with no quick gains to be hoped for. Nothing but faith urges him to make such sacrifices. The other always finds those who encourage him to do good deeds, even when his intention is right and he is totally dedicated to faith. Anas reports: "Some verbal disagreement occurred between Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf. Khālid said to 'Abd al-Raḥmān: 'You take pride against us because of the period you had ahead of us.'[1] We heard that this was mentioned to the Prophet. He said: 'Leave my Companions alone. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud, [or he might have said, 'the weight of mountains'] in gold, he would not achieve the like of their deeds'." [Related by Aḥmad.] The Prophet is also authentically quoted as saying: "Do not curse my Companions. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud

1. Khālid, who believed in Islam shortly before the conquest of Makkah but after the peace treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah, meant that 'Abd al-Raḥmān's position in the Muslim community was only due to his being among the early Muslims. In fact, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf was one of the first ten people to accept Islam. – Editor's note.

in gold, he would not achieve the measure of any one of them, not even half that measure."[2]

Having established the true measure of both groups in God's sight, the *sūrah* now states that they will all reside in heaven: "*Although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them.*" (Verse 10) Despite their difference in degree, they have all done well. This difference in rank and the promise of the great reward to all are due to God's knowledge of their respective situations, intentions, determination and actions: "*God is well aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 10) This is a reference to real intentions beyond apparent actions. It is after all the intention that determines the value of any action.

A Breathtaking Scene

The *sūrah* goes a stage further in motivating addressees to be true believers and to make financial sacrifices. It provides further incentives and inspiration:

> *Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God*

2. These *aḥādīth*, and similar ones, provide a definite meaning to the group that formed the Prophet's Companions. They are those who accepted Islam in its early days. The Prophet used to say to the Muslims around him, who ranked among his Companions: 'Leave my Companions alone...' This indicates that he was referring to a special companionship. Referring to Abū Bakr, he once said: 'Leave my Companion alone.'

delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!' (Verses 11–15)

This address is not merely inspiring; it is captivating. It says to those who are always in need of help, '*Who will offer God a generous loan?*' The mere thought that he, a poor, little human being, can offer a loan to God should make a Muslim rush to do so. People normally compete to lend to someone who is rich – when they, including the rich, are all poor – because they know that repayment is certain. They are proud to lend money to such a wealthy person. So how would they feel when they make a loan to the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise?

The *sūrah*, however, does not leave it at this, but instead promises to repay such a goodly loan, given purely to Him without any thought of pleasing anyone else, in double or multiples. In addition, it promises a very generous reward: "*Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him?*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* then presents a brilliant image of this generous reward in a scene of the day when this is granted: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12)

The scene presented here is unique both in framework and detail. It is a scene brought to life by a dialogue that enhances the clearly delineated image. As we read, a lustrous image is drawn before us in which we see believing men and women and a gently shining light radiating through them and flowing to their right. These human bodies are beaming with a light that spreads from them so that it can be seen both before them and to their right. It is the light into which God brought them out of darkness; the light that beamed into their souls to overshadow their original nature. Or is it, perhaps, that the light from which God created this universe and all who live in it,[3] now appears in this group of people who have been true to their nature?

3. It is now believed that the original substance from which the universe was created is light, and that it is composed of atoms, and that the atom is, in essence, radiation. This theory may be the closest to the truth because it appears to be in line with the Qur'ān.

We then listen to the address made to believers, men and women, combining honour with good news: "*The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 12)

The scene does not end with this pleasant image. We have a contrasting one in which we see the hypocrites, men and women, lost in error, abandoned and humiliated. They try to cling to the believers: "*On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!'*" (Verse 13) Wherever the believers look, their gentle, transparent light spreads before them. How can hypocrites, who have spent all their lives in darkness, enjoy even a ray of that light? A voice coming from where they do not know tells them: "*Turn back and seek some other light.*" (Verse 13) This seems to be said in a sarcastic way, reminding them of what they used to do in their first lives when they engaged in hypocrisy, conspiring in the dark. They are told to go back to this world where light is sought through good action. On this Last Day, no light can be sought.

Immediately a barrier is erected to separate the believers from the hypocrites. These two groups were mixed in their first lives, but now they are sorted out: "*A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering.*" (Verse 13) It appears that they cannot see through this wall, but it does not stop the people on both sides talking to and hearing each other. Now the hypocrites call out to the believers asking them: "*Were we not with you?*" (Verse 14) Were we not living with you at the same place, and were we not resurrected with you on the same plane? The believers confirm this, but their ways were different: "*They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation.*" Thus you turned yourselves away from divine guidance. "*You wavered.*" You did not make the right choice. "*You doubted.*" You could not bring yourselves to have certainty of faith and make the right choice. "*And you were deceived by false hopes.*" You were always deluding yourselves thinking that by holding the stick in the middle would ensure your safety in all situations. "*Until God's command came to pass,*" and all was lost. "*Indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you.*" (Verse 14) These thoughts were whispered by Satan who deceived you by raising false hopes before your eyes.

The believers go on with this reminder and statement, as if they are the ones assigned to make the judgement: "*Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verse 15) Or perhaps this is said by angels, or maybe by God Almighty.

From an artistic point of view, the image of light in this particular instance is most appropriate. The *sūrah* is speaking about hypocrites, men and women, who conceal their feelings and intentions, giving false appearances. They live in darkness, engage in hypocrisy and conspiracy and cause trouble. Light will expose what has been carefully hidden. Moreover, it provides a bright image that contrasts with the grimly dark one of hypocrisy. It is the best image to radiate the whole scene, and to flow before the believers and to their right while the hypocrites remain lost in what amounts to double darkness.

What heart would not aspire to have that sort of light on that day? What heart would not respond to the call to donate in plenty when listening to such an inspiring discourse? Thus, the Qur'ān deals with human hearts in a steady, consistent way, basing its address on perfect knowledge of their nature, how they are influenced and how they respond.

The second part of the *sūrah* continues this same line of address and inspiration.

2

A Race to Forgiveness

Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! (16)

أَلَمْ يَأْنِ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَن تَخْشَعَ
قُلُوبُهُمْ لِذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا نَزَلَ مِنَ
ٱلْحَقِّ وَلَا يَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟
ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبْلُ فَطَالَ عَلَيْهِمُ
ٱلْأَمَدُ فَقَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ
فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason. (17)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحْىِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ۚ قَدْ
بَيَّنَّا لَكُمُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. (18)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُصَّدِّقِينَ وَٱلْمُصَّدِّقَٰتِ وَأَقْرَضُوا۟
ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا يُضَٰعَفُ لَهُمْ وَلَهُمْ
أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٨﴾

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصِّدِّيقُونَ ۖ وَٱلشُّهَدَآءُ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ وَنُورُهُمْ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٩﴾

Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire. (19)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ وَزِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌۢ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِى ٱلْأَمْوَٰلِ وَٱلْأَوْلَٰدِ ۖ كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ ٱلْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُۥ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَىٰهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَٰمًا ۖ وَفِى ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنٌ ۚ وَمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَآ إِلَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْغُرُورِ ﴿٢٠﴾

Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. (20)

سَابِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا كَعَرْضِ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أُعِدَّتْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢١﴾

Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed. (21)

مَآ أَصَابَ مِن مُّصِيبَةٍ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
وَلَا فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِى كِتَٰبٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن نَّبْرَأَهَآ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى
ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – (22)

لِّكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ
وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا۟ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ
لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; (23)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَبْخَلُونَ وَيَأْمُرُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ
بِٱلْبُخْلِ ۗ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ
ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٤﴾

[nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise. (24)

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَأَنزَلْنَا
مَعَهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ
ٱلنَّاسُ بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۖ وَأَنزَلْنَا ٱلْحَدِيدَ فِيهِ
بَأْسٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَنَٰفِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ
ٱللَّهُ مَن يَنصُرُهُۥ وَرُسُلَهُۥ بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. (25)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا وَإِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِى
ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا ٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَٱلْكِتَٰبَ ۖ فَمِنْهُم
مُّهْتَدٍ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. (26)

ثُمَّ قَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِرُسُلِنَا
وَقَفَّيْنَا بِعِيسَى ٱبْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ
ٱلْإِنجِيلَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِى قُلُوبِ
ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُ رَأْفَةً وَرَحْمَةً وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً
ٱبْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَٰهَا عَلَيْهِمْ
إِلَّا ٱبْتِغَآءَ رِضْوَٰنِ ٱللَّهِ فَمَا رَعَوْهَا
حَقَّ رِعَايَتِهَا ۖ فَـَٔاتَيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ
فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors. (27)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِرَسُولِهِۦ يُؤْتِكُمْ كِفْلَيْنِ
مِن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ نُورًا
تَمْشُونَ بِهِۦ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ
غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (28)

The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless. (29

لِّئَلَّا يَعْلَمَ أَهْلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ أَلَّا يَقْدِرُونَ
عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ مِّن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْفَضْلَ بِيَدِ
ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ
ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part continues with the main theme of the *sūrah*: fulfilment of the true meaning of faith in people's hearts so that they come forward with financial sacrifice purely for God's sake. It includes inspiring touches similar to those found in the first part. It begins with a note of remonstration addressed to the believers who had not at that time attained the standard God wanted them to attain. It puts before them the situation of communities from among the people of earlier revelations whose hearts had hardened as time went by and, as a result, transgressed. The believers are warned against ending up in the same position, but a pleasant prospect is also put before them, telling them that God gives hearts a fresh life in the same way as He restores life to the earth after it has been lifeless.

Then we take a look at the next world. This is coupled with a repeat call to offer a generous loan to God, one that promises multiple repayment and a generous reward. This, thus, mirrors what was stated in the first part of the *sūrah*.

All values of this present life are then put on God's scales and weighed against the values of the life to come. The first seem like small and light playthings while the others appear serious, capturing our attention. Believers are, therefore, invited to hasten to those real values so that they can enjoy their results in a heaven that is immeasurably vast. Furthermore, this heaven has been made ready to receive those who believe in God and His messengers.

The believers are then brought back to their present condition in this life and its events. They realize that whatever happens, good or bad, is by God's will. Thus, financial sacrifice becomes easy for them and the

luxuries of this world are of no consequence. Instead, all their thoughts and feelings aspire to heaven.

The *sūrah* then presents an aspect of the history of the divine message, reflecting its unity of approach and direction. Those who deviate from this line, no matter what generation they belong to, are transgressors. Again, an image of what people who were given scriptures in the past did is shown to the believers. This concludes with a final address to them to remain God-fearing and to truly believe in Him and His Messenger so that He will then give them a double share of His grace, provide them with light in their lives and forgive them their slips. God's bounty is not limited to the people of earlier revelations, as such people allege. It is limitless and remains in God's hands, who grants it to whom He wills.

We thus see that from start to finish the *sūrah* is closely knit. It follows a consistent line playing varying and similar notes and using repetition to the extent that is needed. All to make a strong impression on our hearts.

A Higher Degree of Faith

> *Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason.* (Verses 16–17)

This profoundly touching remonstration by God, the Ever Merciful, urges a complete response from hearts that have been slow to bask in His grace after He has sent them His Messenger calling on them to believe. He granted him revelations that are sure to take them out of darkness into light. He has also shown them enlightening signs in the universe around them and in all His creation. This note of remonstration overflows with tenderness as it arouses in them feelings of His majesty so that they humble themselves when He is mentioned. In this way can they receive the truth bestowed from on high with what it deserves of

obedience, submission and obedience to God. This is coupled with a touch of criticism for their slow response: *"Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high."* (Verse 16)

To this note of urging and encouragement is added a warning against slackening and negligence. It tells them how hearts harden when time passes without refreshment provided by remembrance of God and His truth: *"And not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors."* (Verse 16) When hearts harden, all they produce is sin and disobedience. The human heart is subject to quick changes, it easily forgets. When it brightens up it is like a ray of light spreading life. Should it stay long without reminders, it becomes blunted, hardened and loses its light. Therefore, it requires constant reminders so that it remains soft and enlightened. It must always be alert so as not to harden.

If a heart does become hardened, this must not, however, lead to despair. It can be brought back to life and revived with divine light. God restores the earth to life. After it has been lifeless for long, it quickens and produces plants, flowers, fruits and rich varieties in plenty. The same applies to hearts, by God's will: *"Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless."* (Verse 17) This Qur'ān has plenty of what brings hearts back to life, supplying them with proper nourishment, just like lifeless earth is restored to life: *"We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason."* (Verse 17)

In the Highest Position

A new incentive to sacrifice now follows:

> *Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.* (Verses 18–19)

Those who give generously in charity do not couple their action by pressing for favours from the recipients of that charity. In all this, they do not deal with people. They deal directly with God, offering Him a loan. What better incentive for charity! Can there be a more profound feeling for a charitable believer than that he is giving a loan to God who has no need of anyone and who repays good deeds in multiples. Can he hope for anything better than dealing with the One who has dominion over the entire universe, and that whatever he spends in charity will be given back in multiples together with a generous reward?

Those who uphold the truth enjoy a very high status, as indicated by several statements made by the Prophet. Yet this high status is, by the grace of God, easy to achieve. It is not reserved for any individual or group. Whoever truly believes in God and His messengers can aspire to this height. God's grace is without limit: "*Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth.*" (Verse 19) This is the distinctive characteristic of this religion. It is a way open to all people, a lofty standard to which all can aspire. There is no privileged position for anyone in particular. Only good action elevates people to the highest level. There is no class system in this religion.

Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī that the Prophet said: "The people of heaven look up to those in lofty mansions above them as you would try to locate a bright star moving away in the far horizon to the east or the west." People asked him whether these are mansions reserved for prophets and whether none other than a prophet achieves them. He said: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, others achieve them: people who believe in God and in his messengers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This speaks about belief, which is followed by a reference to sacrificing one's life, speaking about those who '*bear witness*', which is a reference to martyrs. In Arabic, the term '*shahīd*' carries both meanings: "*And who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light.*" (Verse 19) The high position given to martyrs is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, and in numerous statements made by the Prophet. This religion cannot be properly established in human life without having a guarding force, and without a hard struggle. The struggle aims to secure the faith, protect its followers when they face

testing times, and preserve its code from corruption. Therefore, martyrs for God's cause, who are the only ones to deserve this name and to bear witness, have their special status and position close to their Lord.

In an authentic *ḥadīth* the Prophet says: "The spirits of martyrs are in the craws of green birds which fly in heaven unrestricted. They ultimately home back to these lanterns. God looks at them and asks what they wish for. They say: 'We would love to go back to the world so that we can fight again for your cause and be killed like we were the first time.' He will say to them: 'I have already decreed that people will never return there'." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Anas quotes the Prophet as saying: "None of the people of heaven would ever like to return to this world even though he would have all that the earth contains, except for martyrs who wish to return and be killed ten times fighting for God's cause. This is because of the honour that is given to them." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Thus life seemed too trivial for those who listened to all this and realized what position God grants to martyrs. Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd: "God's Messenger encouraged people to fight for God's cause and he mentioned the garden of heaven. A man from the Anṣār who was eating a few dates as he listened said: 'If I continue sitting here and eating these dates, I am certainly of those who are eager to stay in this life.' He then threw his dates away and pushed forward in the fighting until he was killed."

Having mentioned the positions of those who uphold the truth and those who bear witness to it, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers who deny God's revelations: "*Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.*" (Verse 19) Who would wish to abandon a position of honour in order to be among the dwellers of hell?

A Life of Trivialities

The next touch comments on this call to a high standard of faith and the sacrifice of life and property. It shows the life of this world to be too trivial to have any value for people who aspire to heaven.

> *Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more*

> *riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.* (Verse 20)

When evaluated by its own measures and standards, this world appears great indeed. However, when it is looked at against the life to come and its standards, it appears trivial. In the picture drawn in this verse, it looks like children's toys compared to the seriousness of the life to come where people's fates are decided. A play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, mutual boasting, and a quest for riches; this is the truth behind all our apparent hard work and preoccupation. An animated picture gives an example of what this life is like: "*It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers.*" (Verse 20) The word used in this verse for '*sowers*' is '*kuffār*' which primarily means 'unbelievers'. The choice is deliberate as it provides a clear hint to the fact that unbelievers are delighted by the riches of this world. "*Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow.*" (Verse 20) It is ready for harvest. It is all temporary, lasting but for a short while. It attains its fullness "*and in the end it crumbles into dust.*" Thus the film of life, shown in a host of lively and familiar images, comes to an end as it all crumbles into dust.

The life to come has a totally different appearance. People should not only take this into account but also prepare themselves for it: "*In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 20) It does not end in a moment, like this present world. It does not crumble into nothing like those withered plants. It involves reckoning, accountability, and continuity. "*The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.*" (Verse 20) Its pleasure has no real substance. Its attraction is based on illusions that make people overlook reality.

When we think carefully about all this, it immediately appears true. As the Qur'ān states this truth, it does not want us to ignore the life of this world altogether, or to forget the duty requiring us to build human

life on earth.[4] Rather, it aims to rectify our standards and values so that we rise above the temptation of worldly pleasures, for these are transitory in nature. Rising above such temptations was needed by those addressed by the *sūrah* in order that they make faith their reality. It is also needed by anyone with faith if he wants his faith to become reality. This is not an easy task; it may also ultimately require sacrifice of one's life for it.

A Great Prize to Compete for

The *sūrah* calls the believers to compete in the proper field for the one and only worthwhile prize that will define their permanent status in the everlasting world:

> *Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.* (Verse 21)

Competing in play, pastimes and delightful pursuits, and seeking more riches and offspring are not worthy of adults who have outgrown childish play. The real race aims to win the greatest of all prizes, '*a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*' In the past, before the facts about the vastness of this universe were discovered, people might have thought this verse and similar statements made by the Prophet to be figurative. Today, with observatories indicating the great, endless dimensions of the universe, the reference to the widths of heaven and the lofty mansions seen over the horizon sound factual and need not be treated as figurative. The distance between the earth and the sun, for example, seems insignificant when set against other distances in the universe.

This great prize in the garden of heaven is there for anyone to achieve. All are invited to strive for it. The only requirement to taking part is to believe in God and His Messenger: "*Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verse 21) God's bounty is not restricted in any way. It is available to all. This is

4. This is discussed in detail in the commentary on verse 51 of *Sūrah* 56 in this volume.

the prize to compete for. A believer must deal with this great existence, not limiting himself or restricting his concerns and feelings to life in this little earthly world. He needs to do this if he is to fulfil the role worthy of a person who has faith, the role that is in conflict with the petty greed of ordinary people, and with erring thoughts, deviant ideas and twisted minds. He will face stiff resistance by falsehood and its exponents, all of whom will defend their positions aggressively. No one can withstand this except a believer who looks at an existence that is greater than this life, bigger than the earth and everlasting.

Earthly standards and values do not represent truth that should be established in a believer's consciousness. In relation to the truth, earthly standards and values are as small as the earth in relation to the universe, and as short as the earth's lifespan to immortality. The difference is simply immeasurable by any earthly standard.

Thus a believer who looks up to the great horizon of the truth rises above the trifling reality of this earth, no matter how large or extensive it appears. Instead, he deals with this great immortal truth, one that belongs to the life to come, and he upholds the values of faith that cannot be swayed by any thing. Such is the role of faith in the life of its advocates.

The Will That Will Be Done

The *sūrah* now adds a profound note about God's will, which will always be done:

> *No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.* (Verses 22–24)

This universe is so perfectly designed that nothing happens in it unless it has been preordained and pre-planned. Nothing occurs as a

result of coincidence or blind accident. Prior to the creation of the earth and those who live and have lived on it, God's perfect and accurate knowledge encompassed every happening seen at its appropriate time. As far as God's knowledge is concerned, there is no past, present or future. Such time demarcations serve a purpose for us, who are mortal, so as to put things within suitable frameworks. We cannot comprehend and distinguish things without limits. In particular, humans need time and place limits. We cannot go beyond these to touch the absolute except in certain flashes when our spirit receives such contact in some way other than that which we normally use to comprehend what is around us. God Almighty is the absolute truth who looks at life and existence in its totality, without boundaries, limits or restraints. This universe, its events and the stages it goes through from its beginning to its end exists in God's knowledge as one complete whole, with no limits or separations of time and place. Every event has its place in an overall design known only to God. Every incident, good or bad, occurring in any part of the earth or to people generally or those addressed at the time of the *sūrah*'s revelation in particular, is entered in that eternal record prior to the earth's creation or people in the form they have been created in: "*That is easy for God.*" (Verse 22)

When our minds contemplate the great truth of existence, we realize that this is the inevitable fact resulting from it. Hence, it gives us peace and reassurance about whatever may happen, good or bad. Thus, we are not overwhelmed with grief when suffering terrible misfortune, nor are we too overjoyed with life's pleasantries: "*So you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain.*" (Verse 23) When we look with a broad perspective, remember eternity, and see events in their respective positions as defined in the design of the universe and determined by God's knowledge, this gives us a steadier outlook on passing events. Man panics when he separates himself from the universe and looks at events as though they are accidents that collide with his own small existence. Conversely, when he realizes fully that he and the events that occur to him or to anyone else or to the whole earth are merely molecules in a great body, which is the universe, and that these molecules are all in their right positions in this perfect design, and that they are all mutually complementary, he feels reassured and comfortable. He does not grieve

for what he has missed, nor is he overly joyed with what he gains. He accepts God's will with comfort, realizing that what takes place is what actually should take place.

This is a level to which only the elite few can rise. Other believers are only required not to let their feelings of grief at misfortune or joy at good fortune take them away from their duty to remember God in both situations, attributing everything to Him. They must moderate their feelings in either case. 'Ikrimah says: "Everyone experiences joy and sorrow. Therefore, make your joy an occasion for thanksgiving and your sorrow one for showing patience." Such is the balanced attitude Islam encourages.

"*God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly.*" (Verses 23–24) The link between what we have been discussing and arrogance and boastfulness on the one hand, and being niggardly and encouraging niggardliness on the other, is that a person who truly feels that whatever befalls him, good or bad, comes from God will not show any of these feelings. It is the one who does not feel this that thinks that the wealth, position or honour he has is of his own making and, therefore, he boasts and behaves arrogantly. He is the one who then becomes niggardly, unwilling to give away any of what he has. He also encourages others to be similarly niggardly in a demonstration that his is the right approach.

"*Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 24) When a person spends money in charity, he does so to his own good; when he responds to God's call, he serves his own interest. God needs none of His creatures. He is worthy of all praise, but in need of none.

Far Back in History

The third part of the *sūrah* briefly outlines the history of the divine message, starting with Noah and Abraham. It states its aims and objectives in people's lives, referring briefly to the conditions of the people of earlier revelations, particularly those who followed Jesus (peace be upon him).

We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors. (Verses 25–27)

In essence, the divine message is the same. All messengers preached it, equipped with clear evidence of the truth it teaches. Most of them were also given miracles of a preternatural kind. Some were given books of scripture. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says, '*through them We bestowed the book from on high*,' making them all one unit in the same way as all divine revelations are one. This confirms the unity of the divine message. The divine message also sets '*the balance*,' because all divine messages were given to establish a proper balance in human life to which people should refer in their evaluation of actions, events, people, indeed in everything. It is this balance that keeps human life safe from conflicting desires and interests that pull in different directions. The balance does not give special favour to anyone because it works for all on the basis of divine truth. It does no injustice to anyone because God is the Lord of all.

This balance or standard bestowed by God is the only guarantee of safety for humanity in the midst of tempests, earthquakes and other turmoil that overwhelms it as it finds itself in the middle of an ocean of conflicting desires and sentiments, competition and selfishness. Hence it is imperative that people should have an accurately balanced and

steady standard that points them to the truth, justice and fairness with no favouritism whatsoever. The purpose of this balance, then, is "*that people could uphold justice.*" (Verse 25) This accurate balance that is an essential part of divine law is indispensable. Without it, people would not be able to recognize justice. Even if they recognized it, it would not remain steady and consistent in their hands.

"*We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) The phrase, '*We have also sent down iron,*' is similar to the statement, '*He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs.*' (39: 6) Both refer to God's will and planning as He creates things and events. Thus, they are all sent down, or bestowed from on high, by God's will and wisdom. Use here of the expression '*sent down*' in reference to iron ensures harmony within the verse which speaks of sending down, or bestowing from on high, the book setting the balance. Likewise, everything God creates is according to His accurate planning.

So, God has sent down iron which gives strength in war and peace. In addition to its '*mighty strength*', iron provides '*diverse uses for mankind.*' Indeed the present human civilization is based primarily on iron and its uses. "*Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) This is a reference to using arms in *Jihād*, or striving for God's cause. This is the appropriate place to refer to such striving in the *sūrah* that speaks of sacrifice of life and property for God's cause. The comment at the end of the verse explains the meaning of people 'standing up' for Him and His messengers. It means standing up for and advocating His message. God Himself is in no need of support from any quarter: "*God is indeed powerful, almighty.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then speaks of the unity of the divine message in the men who advocated it, i.e. His messengers. They are all descendants of Noah and Abraham. "*And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants.*" (Verse 26) They form a single tree, with interlinked branches stretching wide, bearing prophethood and receiving divine revelations, stretching from the dawn of humanity at the time of Noah. When it reached the time of Abraham, it branched

out further. Thus all prophethood belonged to that main branch that has become a root in its own right.

The offspring to whom prophets and messengers were sent were not of the same type: "*Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors.*" (Verse 26) Towards the end of the line, Jesus was sent with his message: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary.*" (Verse 27) He followed in the footsteps of earlier messengers from among the descendants of Noah and Abraham, making the divine message a continuous chain, with one coming after another, up to Jesus' own time.

At this point, the *sūrah* mentions a prominent characteristic of those who followed Jesus: "*We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him.*" (Verse 27) These are the natural fruits of his message that emphasizes spiritual purity. Indeed such compassion and mercy are clearly noticed among those who truly believe in Jesus' message and who properly follow him. Other verses in the Qur'ān refer to these qualities. History has given us some images of these, with reports about Negus, the ruler of Abyssinia, and the Christian delegation from Najran who came to the city of Islam willing to accept it, motivated by the truth established in their hearts, since they truly followed Jesus, son of Mary.

The *sūrah* mentions another phenomenon that prevailed among the followers of Jesus: "*As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 27) The weightier explanation of this statement is that monastic asceticism, well known in Christian history, was a personal choice, an invention made by some of Jesus' followers who sought to win God's acceptance. Through it, they sought to steer themselves away from the burdens of this life and its many attractions. It was not something that God imposed on them in the first place. Yet when they made this choice, binding themselves to it, they were committed before God to observe its requirements such as purity, contentment, chastity, worship and piety; this so as to dedicate themselves to God's cause. However, such asceticism lost its grip on reality, and ended up as mere rituals devoid of spirituality. Many are those who make a show of it, without real substance. The fact is that only the very few are capable of rigorously

fulfilling its requirements: "*Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.* (Verse 27) God does not value people by appearances and rituals; He assigns their value on the basis of their actions and intentions. He holds them to account on the basis of what they truly feel and how they actually conduct themselves. He alone knows the reality of what they harbour in their hearts.

Twice the Mercy

Now, the *sūrah* makes its final address to the believers in Islam. They are the last chain of believers in the divine message in its long history. They will continue to be the custodians of the heritage of this divine message until the Day of Judgement:

> *Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless.* (Verses 28–29)

Addressing them as '*believers*' touches their hearts tenderly. It arouses in them their sense of belief and reminds them of their duty to give their faith its due. It brings alive their bond with their Lord who addresses them by this quality that is so dear to them. It is on the basis of this bond that they are called upon to be God-fearing and to believe in His Messenger. Thus, such belief possesses a special meaning, one that reflects true faith and all its practical manifestations.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy.*" (Verse 28) This is an unusual expression speaking of a double measure of God's mercy, which is indivisible. It is enough that God's mercy should touch a person for that person to receive it in full. The wording here gives a feeling of extended mercy and kindness.

"*And will provide you with a light to walk in.*" (Verse 28) This is a reference to a divine gift which God bestows on hearts that are truly conscious of Him, fear Him, and truly believe in His Messenger. This gift makes those hearts beam with light so as to see the truth, see beyond appearances shedding the covers and barriers that try to screen it. Thus, they are not prone to confusion, nor do they follow divergent ways. They have the '*light to walk in.*' "*And will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28) No matter how much light a person has, he remains human: he may slip despite knowing the way. Hence, he needs God's forgiveness and mercy.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger,*" so that you may receive a double measure of His mercy, be granted light to walk in, and benefit by God's mercy when you slip or fail in your duty. "*The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 29) Peoples of earlier revelations claim that they are God's chosen people, or that they are God's sons and beloved ones. "*They say, 'Follow the Jewish faith – or, follow the Christian faith – and you shall be rightly guided.'*" (2: 135) "*They declare, 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.'*" (2: 111) God, therefore, calls on believers to act so that they become well deserving of His mercy, forgiveness and admittance to His heaven. In this way, those people of earlier religions will realize that they cannot monopolize God's bounty or even a measure of it. It is all in His hands, and He grants it to whomever He wills. His bounty is not reserved for any community or group, nor is it limited or scanty. Indeed, "*God's bounty is limitless.*" (Verse 29)

The *sūrah* concludes with this address to the believers that is full of encouragement to compete for the great prize of God's mercy and heaven. It is a fitting conclusion to a *sūrah* that repeatedly calls on believers to fulfil the requirements of their faith, humble themselves before God and make the necessary sacrifices of self and property, in complete dedication to Him.

In conclusion, we say that this *sūrah* is a clear example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human hearts in a profound and effective way. In its opening, flow and conclusion, in its music, images and connotations, in its handling of its subject matter and how it develops it stage after

stage, the *sūrah* provides a highly effective lesson to advocates of the divine message. It teaches them how to address people and how to bring human nature and hearts alive. It is a lesson taught by the Maker of hearts, the author of the Qur'ān, and the Creator of everything in due measure. It is from this school that successful advocates of God's message graduate.

SŪRAH 58

Al-Mujādalah

(The Pleading)

Prologue

In this *sūrah*, as in several that follow, we are invited to witness some of the events that the first Islamic society experienced as it began to take shape in Madīnah. In this way, we see how it was moulded and prepared to undertake its role in the world. It was a huge undertaking, starting with the development of a new, complete and comprehensive concept of life that continues to serve as the basis for how the Muslim community conducts its practical affairs. That first Muslim community, however, was to present this concept to the world; it was its responsibility to establish a new foundation for life based on this concept.

That first Muslim community, which was being prepared for this great role, consisted of ordinary human beings. Its elite were the Muhājirīn and Anṣār whose concept of their new faith had matured and who now dedicated themselves to it completely. They understood the truth of their existence as part of the existence of the universe. Thus, they realized that they were part of God's will manifested in the universe. They neither deviated from it nor lagged behind in their march with it. They were, in fact, as they are described in the last verse of the *sūrah*: "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose*

hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful." (Verse 22)

This elite group formed a minority in the ever-increasing numbers that swelled the Muslim community's ranks, particularly after it came to be held in awe, and this before Makkah had fallen to Islam. People flocked to the Muslim community but without having received enough Islamic education or having lived long enough in an Islamic environment. Moreover, hypocrites found their way into the Muslim community, trying to serve their own interests or avoid personal trouble. These vacillated between the Muslim community and its still powerful opponents, whether idolaters or Jews.

To educate this community in preparation for its great and important role in the world at large required strenuous effort, patience and slow but sure treatment in small and serious matters alike. All in all, it was a major social engineering project that Islam and the Prophet undertook. It sought to build individuals who could establish an Islamic society and an Islamic state based on the divine constitution. Each person had to understand this code of living, implement it and carry it to the world at large in the form of a vibrant society. It was not therefore a mere theory devoid of substance.

In this *sūrah*, and several *sūrahs* that follow, we are shown some practical examples of this great endeavour as well as some aspects of the Qur'ānic method of building the Islamic character and dealing with events, personal whims and habits. We also see some aspects of the long conflict between Islam and its opponents: Jews, idolaters and hypocrites.

This *sūrah* in particular gives us an inspiring image of the care God took of this fledgling Muslim community as He provided it with a sound education and purged its unwanted streaks, developing His presence within its consciousness. He showed the Muslim community that He was with them looking after even their most private affairs and minor events, protecting it from its enemies' schemes, whether subtle or apparent. God had placed it fully under His care and, therefore, He moulded

its morality, manners, habits and traditions. Those Muslims formed His party in human society and they carried His banner, identifying themselves as His people on earth.

Thus the *sūrah* draws right at the start a picture from that unique period of human history, characterized by direct contact between heaven and earth, and with heaven's direct involvement in the daily life of this particular group of people: "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) What we see here is the involvement of heaven, providing judgment, in the ordinary affair of a small, poor family. God listened to the woman's argument as she pleaded with the Prophet, yet 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife who was nearby, could hardly hear her. This picture fills us with the pleasure of feeling God to be near us, taking care of our concerns.

The *sūrah* then confirms that those who contend with God and His Messenger, i.e. enemies of the Muslim community, are destined to be the losers on earth and to endure humiliating suffering in the life to come. They will be punished for their evil deeds which God reckons but they forget, even though these are their own deeds: "*God is witness to all things.*" (Verse 6)

This is followed by a reminder that God is present when any group of people, three or more, engage in secret discussion, thinking that they are totally unobserved. God is with them wherever they happen to be: "*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Our feelings of God's presence are here enhanced by the realization that He is fully aware of all that takes place.

This reminder of God's presence serves as preparation for the warning issued to those who in their secret conversations conspire to harm the Muslims and cause them grief. They are warned that God sees all their scheming and records all their conspiring. He knows what they intend of sin, aggression and disobedience of God's Messenger. They are told that God will take them to account for all this. He will punish them as they deserve to be punished. The Muslims are also issued with a command not to speak in secret about anything that is in conflict with righteousness and God-consciousness.

The *sūrah* continues with its purpose of educating the Muslim community, urging the believers to adopt good and friendly manners, showing their obedience, when they attend the Prophet's circle or any circle of study or worship. It lays down some rules for discussion with the Prophet, highlighting the seriousness of such discussion.

The remainder of the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites who befriend the Jews and conspire with them, and who then try to conceal this with false swearing before the Prophet and the Muslim community. It depicts an image of them in the life to come when they are also quick to repeat their false oaths, trying thus to avoid God's punishment. They think that since their swearing in this world spared them the anger of the Prophet and his followers, it may spare them God's anger on the Day of Resurrection. The *sūrah* re-emphasizes that those who contend with God and His Messenger are the ones to suffer humiliation; they are the losers. This is something that God has decreed, just as He decreed that He and His messengers will prevail. This is stated in order to show the weakness of any hostile position. Yet at the time, some Muslims thought such people to be too strong and tried to maintain good relations with them. They did not realize the importance of the Muslim community having an independent stand under God's banner, and feeling safe under His care.

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it paints a bright picture of God's party, represented at that time by the elite community of Muhājirīn and Anṣār. This is the situation that the Qur'ān wants the Muslim community to end up with.

Al-Mujādalah (The Pleading)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. (1)

قَدْ سَمِعَ ٱللَّهُ قَوْلَ ٱلَّتِى تُجَٰدِلُكَ فِى زَوْجِهَا
وَتَشْتَكِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَٱللَّهُ يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَكُمَآ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. (2)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُظَٰهِرُونَ مِنكُم مِّن نِّسَآئِهِم
مَّا هُنَّ أُمَّهَٰتِهِمْ ۖ إِنْ أُمَّهَٰتُهُمْ إِلَّا ٱلَّٰٓـِٔى
وَلَدْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُولُونَ مُنكَرًا
مِّنَ ٱلْقَوْلِ وَزُورًا ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَعَفُوٌّ
غَفُورٌ ﴿٢﴾

Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. (3)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُظَٰهِرُونَ مِن نِّسَآئِهِمْ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا۟ فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَآسَّا ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ
تُوعَظُونَ بِهِۦ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
خَبِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

فَمَن لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ شَهْرَيْنِ مُتَتَابِعَيْنِ
مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۚ فَمَن لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ
فَإِطْعَامُ سِتِّينَ مِسْكِينًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِتُؤْمِنُوا
بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ ۗ
وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحَادُّونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ كُبِتُوا
كَمَا كُبِتَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ وَقَدْ أَنزَلْنَا
آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ ۚ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ
مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers (5)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۚ أَحْصَاهُ اللَّهُ وَنَسُوهُ ۚ
وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٦﴾

on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things. (6)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۖ مَا يَكُونُ مِن نَّجْوَىٰ
ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ

Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is

سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَآ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكْثَرَ
إِلَّا هُوَ مَعَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كَانُوا ۖ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything. (7)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ نُهُوا۟ عَنِ ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا نُهُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَيَتَنَٰجَوْنَ
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ
ٱلرَّسُولِ وَإِذَا جَآءُوكَ حَيَّوْكَ بِمَا لَمْ
يُحَيِّكَ بِهِ ٱللَّهُ وَيَقُولُونَ فِىٓ
أَنفُسِهِمْ لَوْلَا يُعَذِّبُنَا ٱللَّهُ بِمَا نَقُولُ ۚ
حَسْبُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ يَصْلَوْنَهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ
ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٨﴾

Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end! (8)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا تَنَٰجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَٰجَوْا۟
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ ٱلرَّسُولِ
وَتَنَٰجَوْا۟ بِٱلْبِرِّ وَٱلتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِىٓ
إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. (9)

إِنَّمَا ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ لِيَحْزُنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَلَيْسَ بِضَآرِّهِمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

[All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا۟ فِى ٱلْمَجَٰلِسِ فَٱفْسَحُوا۟ يَفْسَحِ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِذَا قِيلَ ٱنشُزُوا۟ فَٱنشُزُوا۟ يَرْفَعِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ دَرَجَٰتٍ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١١﴾

Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نَٰجَيْتُمُ ٱلرَّسُولَ فَقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَةً ۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (12)

ءَأَشْفَقْتُمْ أَن تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَٰتٍ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَتَابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your *zakāt* [i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions. (13)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا۟ قَوْمًا غَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مَّا هُم مِّنكُمْ وَلَا مِنْهُمْ وَيَحْلِفُونَ عَلَى ٱلْكَذِبِ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. (14)

أَعَدَّ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ سَآءَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. (15)

ٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ أَيْمَٰنَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿١٦﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. (16)

لَن تُغْنِىَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَٰلُهُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَٰدُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (17)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيَحْلِفُونَ لَهُۥ كَمَا يَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. (18)

ٱسْتَحْوَذَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ ذِكْرَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (19)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآدُّونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
فِى ٱلْأَذَلِّينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. (20)

كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَغْلِبَنَّ أَنَا۠ وَرُسُلِىٓ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢١﴾

God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty. (21)

لَّا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ
ٱلْءَاخِرِ يُوَآدُّونَ مَنْ حَآدَّ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَوْ كَانُوٓا۟ ءَابَآءَهُمْ
أَوْ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَٰنَهُمْ أَوْ
عَشِيرَتَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ كَتَبَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَأَيَّدَهُم
بِرُوحٍ مِّنْهُ ۖ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ
فِيهَا ۚ رَضِىَ ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ
ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful. (22)

A Personal Case in Dispute

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers;

their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (Verses 1–4)

In pre-Islamic days, a man who became angry with his wife might say to her, "You are to me like the back of my mother", and thereafter she was forbidden to him. She was not divorced however, but rather in a state of suspense. She could neither have normal marital relations with her husband nor be free to find some other arrangement for herself. This was yet another aspect of the unfair treatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabia.

These verses speak of one such event that took place before the ruling on this problem, known as *ẓihār*,[1] had been laid down. The details of the case are related in the following *ḥadīth* quoting the woman at the centre of the case, Khuwaylah bint Tha'labah:

> It was concerning me and Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit that God revealed the opening verses of the *sūrah*, The Pleading. I was married to him and he had grown old, with a quick temper. He came in one day and I questioned something he had said. He was angry as a result and said to me, 'You are to me like my mother's back'. He then went out and sat with his people for some time. He came back later and he indicated that he wanted to have sex. I said: "In no way! By Him who holds Khuwaylah's soul in His hand, you cannot approach me

1. The word *ẓihār* is derived from *ẓahr*, which means 'back', in reference to the formula used in these cases when a man would tell his wife that she was to him as unlawful as his mother's back. – Editor's note.

when you have said what you said until God and His Messenger have ruled in our case. He tried to force me, but I overpowered him in the way a woman can overpower a weak old man. I left him and went to one of my neighbours to borrow a dress from her.

I went to the Prophet and sat in front of him. I told him what had happened and complained strongly about my husband's bad manners. The Prophet said to me: "Khuwaylah! Your cousin is an old man; so be kind and God-fearing in your treatment of him." Before I left, revelations were bestowed from on high concerning me. The Prophet experienced what he usually experienced when revelations were given to him. Then he came to and said: "Khuwylah! God has revealed Qur'ānic verses concerning you and your mate." He then read to me the verses starting with "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all,*" up to "*grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe.*"

The Prophet then said to me: "Tell him to free a slave." I said: "Messenger of God! He does not have the means to do so." He said: "Then let him fast two consecutive months." I said: "He is certainly an old man who cannot fast." He said: "He should then feed sixty poor people with a *wisq*[2] of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! By God, he cannot afford that." The Prophet then said: "We will help him, then, with a sack of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! I, too, will help him with another sack." The Prophet said: "That is good and kind of you. Go and give this to charity on his behalf, and take good care of your cousin." I did as the Prophet told me. [Related by Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd.]

This, then, is the case of the woman whose argument with the Prophet God in His majesty heard and listened to. It is on the basis of this case that God pronounced His ruling from on high, giving this woman her right so that she and her husband could be free of worry. He thus showed the Muslims what to do if such a family problem occurred.

2. A *wisq* is a measure of volume estimated to weigh about 130 kilogrammes of wheat. – Editor's note.

This is the personal situation that opens a *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, God's book, whose words are echoed by the universe as they are bestowed from on high. It opens with the statement, '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*' We see here that God is present in this private case of a woman who is a mere individual in the community at large. God is not so preoccupied with conducting the affairs of the universe as not to listen to an individual's case and give His ruling on it.

It was indeed a serious matter that such an event should take place and that a community of people should feel that God was present with them as they went about their daily business. He, in His majesty, the Supreme, the Overpowering, to whom belong the heavens and the earth, responds to such ordinary problems; how compassionately overwhelming!

'Ā'ishah says: "All praise is due to God who hears all sounds. The pleading woman, Khawlah, came to the Prophet and spoke to him in a corner of my home. I could not hear what she said. Then God revealed that '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and al-Nasā'ī.]

As given by Khawlah – or Khuwaylah, which is a form of endearment – this report and how she went to the Prophet and argued with him, then the verdict given in the Qur'ān gives us a picture of the life of this unique community during that amazing period of history. People in that community felt their direct bond with heaven and awaited directives from on high regarding its ordinary affairs. The response was soon forthcoming, often given as people were waiting. Thus the whole community felt that they were God's dependents: He took care of them and they looked for His care just as young children expect to be cared for by their parents.

Education Through Practice

When we look at the Qur'ānic report of this case, we cannot miss that elements of education and guidance are given side by side with the verdict and the comment on it. This is the usual method of the Qur'ān, providing all that is necessary.

"*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) This is an amazing opening that says, you have not been alone; God was present, listening to you. He heard what the woman said, pleading with you and complaining to Him. He already knew the whole story and was fully aware of what discussion had taken place. He hears all and sees all. In this highly inspiring way the Qur'ān presents all that occurred but without the involvement of a third party.

The *sūrah* then states the principle that governs such cases: "*Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives.*" (Verse 2) This deals with the case in its entirety. *Ẓihār* does not rely on any solid basis. A wife is not a mother so as to become forbidden like one. Somebody's mother is the woman that gave birth to that person. A wife cannot become a mother at the utterance of a word or a few words. Such a statement lacks all substance, it is utter nonsense. In life, all relations should be based on what is true, clear and solid so as to prevent any muddle or confusion. "*Yet God pardons and forgives*" what has passed of such incidents.

Having laid down the principle so clearly, the verdict is stated in detail: "*Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) God has made freeing a slave a way of atonement for various offences. This is one way Islam freed those who had fallen into slavery in consequence of the system prevalent at the time, which allowed for the enslavement of prisoners of war. Various views have been stated with regard to the phrase, "*then go back on what they have said.*" We choose the view that says that they resume marital relations which they had earlier forbidden themselves by *ẓihār*. The freeing of a slave should occur before it becomes permissible for them to so go back. A comment is added here: "*This is an admonition to you.*" (Verse 3) The atonement required is an admonition and a warning against reverting

to this totally unacceptable practice. "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He knows its nature, how it happens and your intention in doing it.

This comment is given before the verdict is completed. It serves to keep hearts alert and to strengthen discipline, reminding people of God's authority and His knowledge of whatever is apparent or concealed. The *sūrah* then states: "*However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people.*" (Verse 4) This is followed by a comment and a directive: "*This, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 4) These people were indeed believers. However, this clarification and these penalties provide a direct link between their affairs and God's order. This makes belief operative in ordinary life, giving faith real authority in society. "*Such are the bounds set by God.*" (Verse 4) He has set these bounds so that people will not transgress them. He is also angry with those who do not observe these bounds. "*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*" because of their transgression, lack of faith and going beyond the limits He has defined.

In Contention Against God

The last sentence in the verse, '*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*' is certainly a fitting ending as it completes the discussion of the woman's situation, while also providing a bridge to the theme of the next verse that speaks about those who contend against God and His Messenger. This is characteristic of the superb Qur'ānic method as it smoothly moves from one theme to another:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6)

The opening passage of the *sūrah* provided an aspect of the care shown to the Muslim community, while this second passage provides an aspect of antagonism to the opposite group who contend against God and His Messenger. The Arabic term, *yuḥāddūn*, translated here as 'contend' is derived from the same root as the word used earlier, *ḥudūd*, which means 'boundaries'. Thus, this group are defined as taking a stand at the other boundary, confronting God and His Messenger. This gives an image of two parties in contention and confrontation. As such, it serves to show their action in a very bad light. How miserable for a creature to be in open hostility to his Creator when it is He who provides him with sustenance.

These people who are in contention "*shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low.*" The way this sentence is phrased in Arabic may be understood as a prayer against them. A prayer by God is a sentence of judgement that makes it inevitable since it is He who pronounces this sentence, and His will is always done. The phrase, '*those who lived before them*,' refers either to earlier communities who were punished by God, or to the then unbelievers who suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Muslims prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*, as happened, for example, at the Battle of Badr.

"*We have bestowed from on high clear revelations.*" This sentence separates the two fates suffered by the unbelievers in this life and in the life to come, in order to point out that both fates are clearly stated in these verses. It also tells us that these unbelievers do not face these fates as a result of ignorance or any ambiguity in the truth. Indeed, the truth has been put to them clearly and lucidly in these revelations, which they too have been given.

As the *sūrah* refers to their fate in the hereafter, it adds an inspiring comment that serves an educational purpose: "*Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6) They are made to suffer shame in punishment for their arrogance. This shameful suffering will take place on the day when all will be resurrected. Thus, it will be seen by all. Besides, the suffering is determined on the basis of a true account of their deeds. If they have

forgotten these, God has recorded them all, as nothing escapes His knowledge: "*God is witness to all things.*"

The opposite cases of care and antagonism take place in God's presence and with His knowledge. He witnesses the help and care granted to the believers as well as the hostility shown to the other group. The believers should be reassured by His presence, while the unbelievers should take heed.

Whispers and Conspiracies

The *sūrah* then portrays God's presence in an inspiring image that leaves a telling effect on our hearts:

> *Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 7)

The verse begins by stating God's knowledge that takes in everything in the heavens and earth. Our imagination is left to roam across the wide horizons and the remote corners of the earth, drawing a picture of this knowledge that leaves out nothing large or small, apparent or hidden, in this vast universe. It then draws gradually closer touching its addressees' hearts, presenting an image of God's knowledge that shakes them strongly: "*Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be.*" (Verse 7)

This is a true statement, but it is expressed in a profoundly effective way. It leaves our hearts with two contrasting feelings, trembling with awe on the one hand and reassured on the other as we amazedly feel the friendly presence of the Almighty. Thus, wherever three people meet in secret they feel that God is their fourth, and if they are five, they

realize that He is their sixth. Indeed, wherever two people whisper in secret, God is with them as He is with any larger group. Whenever we contemplate this image we are overwhelmed with awe. It is true that God's presence gives us a feeling of friendly reassurance, but it is at the same time very awesome. It is the Almighty who is present "*wherever they may be.*"

"*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do.*" (Verse 7) This statement sends a shudder of fear into people's hearts. The mere presence of God and His hearing of all conversations is ominous. Now they look at the consequences of this presence in the form of punishment. What happens when that which people say in secret is publicized in the presence of all on the Day of Resurrection, when all mankind of all generations are witnesses!

The verse ends in the same way as it started, giving a general image: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Thus the notion of God's full and comprehensive knowledge, which is stated in various ways in this verse, is driven home to everyone. This inevitably leaves a profound effect on our hearts and minds.

This awesome picture of God's knowledge serves as an introduction to a warning issued to the hypocrites who held secret conversations, conspiring against the Prophet and the Muslim community in Madīnah:

> *Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!* (Verse 8)

The verse suggests that the Prophet's initial policy in dealing with the hypocrites was to advise them to be clear and sincere in their attitude, and to stop conspiring with the Jews against Islam. Yet still they persisted in their deviant ways, scheming against the Muslim community, trying in every way possible to disobey the Prophet and cause disruption.

The verse also suggests that some of them used to offer their greeting to the Prophet in a twisted way, giving it a bad meaning: "*When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you.*" (Verse 8) They might have used the same means as the Jews did when they pronounced the greeting *assalām 'alaikum*, which means 'peace be to you', as, *assām 'alaikum*, which means 'death to you'. They might have used some other way that appeared innocent but which nonetheless concealed an ill wish. They even thought that had Muḥammad been truly a prophet, then God would have punished them for what they said by way of greeting or in their whispers and secret conversations.

It is clear from the way the *sūrah* opens then unfolds that God had told the Prophet of what they said and schemed. The *sūrah* began with the announcement that God heard the woman pleading with the Prophet, and then it stated that God is witness with any group, large or small. All this suggests that He informed the Prophet of the hypocrites' schemes and the thoughts they harboured.

An answer is given to their ill-conceived thoughts: "*Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!*" (Verse 8)

What to Say in Secret

The *sūrah* then addresses the believers by their very quality of having accepted the faith. It tells them that they must not indulge in the sort of secret whispers the hypocrites resorted to, encouraging each other to commit sin, aggression and disobedience of the Prophet. It reminds them to remain God-fearing and tells them that such whispers as the hypocrites engage in is inspired by Satan who aims to cause grief to the believers. Hence, it is totally unbecoming of those who have faith:

> *Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. [All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it*

be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 9–10)

It seems that some in the Muslim community had not fully absorbed the sense of Islamic discipline. Such people met when times were hard to consult among themselves, and this was unknown to their leadership. This is something contrary to the nature of the Muslim community and the spirit of Islamic discipline, which together require that every view or suggestion first be presented to the leadership, not to fringe groups. It also appears that some of these fringe groups might have stirred up trouble that could have had negative effects on the Muslim community. These people may also not have had any intention of causing harm or difficulty for the Muslim community, but by raising certain subjects and discussing them without having a full picture of the matter this could cause such harm.

The *sūrah* addresses them as believers, using their quality that establishes their bond with God. This makes the address especially effective. It tells them that should they converse in private, then their conversation must not involve anything that connotes sin, aggressive conduct or disobedience of the Prophet. The only subjects that are fitting for believers are those that '*promote righteousness and God-consciousness,*' with the aim of facilitating them and bringing about their results, which are always good. The *sūrah* reminds them that they should remain God-fearing, for they will certainly be gathered to Him and He will hold them to account for their deeds; these He knows no matter how hard they try to conceal them.

A man stopped 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar as he was walking with a friend and asked him: "'What did you hear the Prophet say about secret conversations on the Day of Judgement?' He answered: 'I heard the Prophet when he said that God will bring a believer close to Him and shield him with His cover, so that he will not be seen by others. He will ask him about his sins, naming them one after one. When the man has acknowledged all his sins and feels that he will be doomed, God will say to him: 'I have kept these sins secret for you during your life on earth; now I forgive you them.' He will then be given the record of his good deeds. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, the witnesses

will point to them and say: 'These are the ones who have lied about their Lord. God's curse befalls the wrongdoers.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

In this way, such people are put off secret conversations and side whispers unknown to the Muslim community to which they belong and whose interests are the same as their own. In other words, they must not think themselves separate from the Muslim community in any way. The *sūrah* tells them that when other Muslims see such side whispering and secret conversations, they are hurt by them. They feel apprehensive, concerned that a lack of trust has crept into the community. Satan always tries to tempt whisperers to go further in order to cause worry and grief to others. However, the *sūrah* reassures the believers that Satan will not achieve his purpose: "*Secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.* (Verse 10) Believers place their trust in God and in no one else.

The Prophet repeatedly advised against secret conversations whenever such talk caused doubt, anxiety and apprehension. He is quoted by Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "When there are only three of you, let there be no discussion between two of them to the exclusion of the third, for this is bound to grieve him." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This is an aspect of fine manners, and a wise precaution against what causes suspicion. Sometimes, however, there is need for a private discussion in order to keep a secret, or to avoid a scandal. This is acceptable and it normally takes place among community leaders. It must never, however, be through a side group with the rest of the community unaware of what is going on. Such a practice is divisive and leads to friction and grief, which is Satan's aim. God's promise is definitive. Satan will not achieve his purpose by such means, because God will protect the Muslim community. He is fully aware of every secret conversation, every conspiracy against the Muslim community. Satan can never harm the believers "*unless it be by God's leave.*" (Verse 10) This exception is added to emphasize that God's will is absolute and free of restriction in any situation to which His promise applies.

"*In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 10) He is the Guardian who protects the believers. He is the Almighty who knows all,

the Witness to all things. Nothing in the universe escapes His knowledge. Nothing occurs unless it be by His will. He has promised to protect the believers. Could there by anything more reassuring?

Refined Manners

The believers are encouraged to maintain another aspect of good behaviour and fine manners:

> *Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verse 11)

Reports speaking about the revelation of this verse suggest that it actually related to the hypocrites, which makes it more relevant to the flow of the *sūrah*. Qatādah mentions that this verse speaks about gatherings for voluntary worship. When those who were already sitting with the Prophet saw someone coming to join them, they were obviously keen to retain their own positions close to the Prophet. Here, God orders them to make room for each other.

Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān reports:

> This verse was revealed on a Friday, when the Prophet was at al-Ṣuffah where the place was rather narrow. He used to honour those who attended the Battle of Badr from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. Some people who fought at Badr came to join him but the place was already taken up. They stood facing the Prophet and greeted him. He replied to their greeting. Then they greeted the people sitting with the Prophet and those replied. They continued to stand, hoping that those present would make room for them. The Prophet realized why they remained standing and that nobody had made room for them. He was displeased. Therefore, he said to some of those from the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār who did not take part in Badr to stand up, choosing them by name. He asked to stand up as many as there were standing. Those who were thus asked to

> stand felt this to be hard. The Prophet noticed that they looked upset. Some hypocrites exploited this, saying to the believers: 'Do you not say that your man is fair to all people? We certainly saw him being unfair to these. Here were some people who had already sat in their places, eager to be close to their Prophet, yet he asked them to stand up, giving their places to ones who came late...' The Prophet is reported to have said a prayer: 'May God have mercy on one who makes room for his brother.' After that, people used to quickly rise in order to make room for their brothers.

If this report is authentic, it should be understood as not being in conflict with other *aḥādīth* that forbid someone to ask his brother to stand up so as to sit in his place, such as that which says: "Let no man make another rise from his position so as to sit in his place. Rather, move closer and make room for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other instructions by the Prophet make it clear that a person who is joining a sitting group should sit at the end. He must not walk over people's shoulders so as to be in front. The Qur'ānic verse urges those who are sitting to make room for those joining them. It also urges obedience, requiring the one who is seated to rise if he is asked to do so. This order, however, is given by the leader responsible for organizing the group, not by the newcomer.

The purpose behind all this is to instil into people the feeling of welcome towards the newcomer before actually making room for him to sit. When that feeling is genuine, people are pleased to see others joining them, and those seated receive the newcomers warmly, willingly making room for them. However, if the person in charge thinks that a particular place should be given to a newcomer for a special reason, his instructions should be readily and happily complied with, observing at the same time the overall rules of not walking over people's shoulders or making one person stand to let another sit in his place. It should all be done with mutual tolerance.

Again we note the Qur'ānic method of making people willing to comply with every instruction. The *sūrah* promises those who make room for others that God will make good room for them: "*Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then*

do so, and God will make room for you." (Verse 11) It also promises those who were instructed to leave their place so as to give it to others that they will enjoy an elevated position with God: "*If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.*" (Verse 11) This, in recompense for their obedience and accommodating attitude.

The occasion was one of being close to the Prophet in order to learn from him. The *sūrah* teaches believers that good faith, which makes people accommodating and obedient, and knowledge, which refines hearts and manners, will ensure a higher position with God. This as a reward for willingly vacating a position close to the Prophet, obeying his order given for a particular purpose he had in mind: "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) He rewards people according to what He knows of their feelings and intentions.

This is yet another example of the Qur'ānic method of educating Muslims, teaching them to be kindly, accommodating and helpful by bringing out their better feelings. Religion does not work by giving firm instructions that must be literally obeyed; rather, it relies on changing people's feelings and sensitivities.

The Qur'ān also teaches them to refine their manners when dealing with the Prophet. It appears that people were eager to talk to the Prophet privately, each seeking his advice concerning his own private matter, or merely to have the pleasure of being alone with him. People did not seem to appreciate the demands on the Prophet's time, with all his social and public responsibilities, or they did not realize that a matter for which they wanted a private conference with the Prophet must be a serious one. Therefore, God wanted them to understand that it was necessary to impose a tax, for the benefit of the community, to be paid by the person who wanted the Prophet to attend to his personal problem because he was taking up some of the Prophet's time which was devoted to the community. This tax took the form of a charity which should be paid before attending the Prophet:

> *Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 12)

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the one who acted on the instructions given in this verse. According to reports, he set aside a number of dirhams, i.e. the silver currency of the time. Whenever he wanted to speak alone to the Prophet he gave one dirham in charity. This requirement was nonetheless difficult for the Muslims, as they were generally poor. The instruction, however, fulfilled its purpose, making them aware of the value of a private conference with the Prophet. God lightened their burden, revealing the next verse which abrogated the requirement of paying to charity before such a conference took place. The verse also directed the Muslims to attend better to their various aspects of worship:

> *Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions.* (Verse 13)

These two verses and the reports we have about the occasions in which they were revealed provide an aspect of the educational efforts that aimed to cultivate the manners and social approach of the Muslim community, even in matters of detail that were not particularly serious.

False Swearing

The *sūrah* speaks anew about the hypocrites who befriended the Jews in Madīnah, describing their true position and attitude. It threatens to expose their hypocrisy and to inflict a terrible end upon them. It makes clear that Islam will be triumphant, despite all their schemes and conspiracies:

> *Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined*

for the fire, where they will abide. On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (Verses 14–19)

This strong denunciation of the hypocrites who befriended those who had incurred God's anger, i.e. the Jews, suggests that these hypocrites were very active in scheming against the Muslim community, conspiring with its avowed enemies. It also suggests that the authority of Islam had now been consolidated so as to strike fear into the hypocrites' hearts. Thus, when the Prophet and the believers confronted them with what God might have exposed of their scheming, they resorted to swearing falsely, denying what was attributed to them, knowing, however, that they lied as they swore. They hoped that by thus forswearing they would spare themselves any punishment for scheming against the Muslim community: "*They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God.*" (Verse 16)

Repeated warnings are issued to them in this passage: "*God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 15) "*Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide.*" (Verses 16–17) The *sūrah* describes their abject and miserable position on the Day of Judgement when they will swear to God as they used to swear to people: "*On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you.*" This description suggests that hypocrisy had become so entrenched in their hearts that it would remain with them on the Day of Judgement, in the presence of God who knows people's deepest secrets and innermost thoughts: "*Thinking that they have something to stand upon,*" when they actually stand on nothing, not even thin air.

The *sūrah* brands them as confirmed liars: "*It is they who are indeed liars.*" (Verse 18) It then explains the cause of their condition: "*Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the*

remembrance of God." (Verse 19) A heart that forgets to remember God becomes corrupt and given to evil: "*They are the party of Satan.*" (Verse 19) They stand under his banner, act in his name, obey his instructions, work for his objectives. This situation of unmitigated evil ends in total loss: "*It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.*" (Verse 19)

Such a strong denunciation certainly fits the evil and the harm those hypocrites intended towards the Muslim community. It also reassures the Muslims that God is with them, exposing their hidden enemies.

Such hypocrites were intimate with the Jews, thinking that they were a power to be reckoned with. Hence they always sought their help and advice. Therefore, God makes it clear to them that His enemies will always suffer defeat and humiliation, while His cause and His messengers will be victorious:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty.* (Verses 20–21)

This is indeed a true promise made by God: it came true in the past and will always come true, despite appearances that may suggest that it will not be so fulfilled. What actually happened was that the message of God's oneness overpowered unbelief and idolatry. The Islamic faith was well established on earth and humanity accepted its supremacy after a long struggle against unbelief, polytheism and atheism that ended in the total defeat of these evil forces. There were periods in which atheism or polytheism managed to gain power in certain areas, as happens today with some states that are openly atheist or polytheistic, yet belief in God generally remains dominant in the world. Besides, atheism and polytheism will always be short lived, because they are not fit to survive.[3] Humanity discovers every day new evidence guiding it to believe in God and to the consolidation of faith and belief in His oneness.

A believer treats a promise by God as a confirmed and undoubted fact. Should what be on the ground at any time or place be contrary to this, then that which is on the ground is false and transitory. It occurs on

3. Future events, viz. the collapse of Communism, confirmed the author's view. He wrote this in the early 1960s when Communism was in its heyday. – Editor's note.

earth for a limited period and for a purpose only God knows. It may be there to awaken faith in people's hearts, so that it takes over and God's promise is fulfilled at its appointed time.

When we look today at the determined onslaught against the people of faith, in its numerous forms of suppression, pressure and scheming, we remember God's true promise. The onslaught has been so ferocious that large numbers of believers have been killed, tortured, left destitute and deprived of their livelihoods. Yet faith remained firm in believers' hearts, protecting them from yielding and protecting their communities from loss of identity and annihilation by attacking forces. It has also saved these communities from submitting to tyranny except for short periods during which they rallied their forces to defeat such oppression. When we look at this across the generations we realize that God's promise will undoubtedly come true. We find this now in the present situation without need to wait for long.

Anyhow, a believer will never entertain any doubt that God's promise is the truth and that this will certainly take place. Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be the most abject of people, for God and His messengers will triumph. A believer is absolutely certain that all this is inevitable, that it will be done, regardless of appearances to the contrary.

The Measure of Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it outlines the constant rule that believers apply, or the accurate measure of faith as it settles in people's hearts:

> *You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.* (Verse 22)

This provides complete comparison between God's party and the party of Satan. It is a question of taking one's final and unhesitating position with the party of distinction, after discarding all burdens and temptations, so as to uphold the one and only tie. "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 22) Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Never can anyone harbour two loves in his heart: one love for God and His Messenger and one for their enemies. It is all a question of faith or unfaith; the two can never meet.

"*Even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred.*" (Verse 22) All bonds of kinship and blood relations are severed when they come into conflict with faith. These bonds may however be maintained and respected if there is no contention or dispute between the two camps. The Qur'ān instructs believers to maintain good relations with parents if they are unbelievers, provided that there is no war going on between God's party and Satan's party. Should there be contention, war and conflict, these bonds are to be totally severed. Abū 'Ubaydah killed his father during the Battle of Badr; Abū Bakr wanted to kill his son 'Abd al-Raḥmān; Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr killed his brother 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr; and 'Umar, Ḥamzah, 'Alī and 'Ubaydah ibn al-Ḥārith all killed their relatives. All discarded ties of blood and kinship, opting for the bond of faith. This was the best implementation of the standard of bonds and values as classified in God's measure.

"*These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith.*" (Verse 22) Faith is confirmed in their hearts by God's hand, written in their breasts by His right hand. It cannot be erased or be subject to ambiguity or confusion. "*And whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own.*" (Verse 22) They cannot achieve such resolve without the support of a spirit of His own making. Their hearts cannot beam so brightly without the light that emanates from this spirit, gives them strength and binds them to the only true source of strength and light.

"*He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide.*" (Verse 22) This is their reward for abandoning every tie and bond, and discarding all desire for worldly temptation. "*Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him.*" (Verse 22) This is a pleasant picture that radiates contentment and reassurance. It shows

us the situation of these believers in their lofty position and pleasant surroundings. They bask in their feeling of mutual pleasure with their Lord. They maintain their links with Him and discard all others. He then accepts them, admits them to His presence and makes it clear to them that He is pleased with them. They are gratified by this closeness to Him.

"*They are the party of God.*" They rank under His banner, move under His leadership, follow His guidance, implement His code of living, and do on earth what He has willed, as they are part of His will. "*It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.*" (Verse 22) Who will be successful if God's partisans are not?

Thus humanity is split into two groups: God's party and Satan's party, raising two banners: the banner of the truth and the banner of falsehood. Every person must choose to either belong to God's party and support the truth or to side with Satan, standing under the banner of falsehood. The two parties are clearly separated. They can neither meet nor mix.

There is no room for ties of kinship, marriage, clan, community, country, race or nation. The only admissible tie is that of faith. Whoever chooses it will find that all those who stand under its banner maintain a tie of brotherhood. They might belong to different races, colours, countries, tribes and families, but they all share in the tie that forms God's party. Thus all differences between them disappear. Anyone who stands under the banner of falsehood will not enjoy a tie or bond with any among God's party. The main tie, to which all other ties are secondary, has been severed, so all ties are severed.

This verse suggests that there were some people within the Muslim community who still felt the strength of ties of blood, kindred and friendship. It thus seeks to put things very clearly. It also shows that others in the ranks of the Muslim community had managed to achieve the required standard, discarding all bonds other than that of faith.

This picture provides the finest possible ending to this *sūrah*. It started by portraying the care God takes of His community of believers, outlining the case of a poor woman who pleaded with the Prophet about her husband, stating that God listened to her concerns. With such care granted by God, placing the tie with Him above all else is the natural response. Opting for God's party is the only course acceptable from the community God has chosen to fulfil the role He has assigned to it.

SŪRAH 59

Al-Ḥashr
(The Gathering)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed shortly after the Muslims' encounter with the Jewish tribe of al-Naḍīr, which took place early in the fourth year following the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. It describes how the event occurred and why, and what regulations were put in place in the Muslim community once it was over. All this is reported in the unique style of the Qur'ān. Comments are added so as to educate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes, and the events themselves are used to highlight certain aspects and to give directives.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* in detail, we will look at some of the reports concerning the encounter that provided the occasion for its revelation. This will enable us to appreciate how the Qur'ān presents the story, firstly summing up its details and then looking far beyond these particular events to a much broader purpose.

These events took place after the Battle of Uḥud but before the Battle of the Moat. The Prophet along with ten leading figures from among his Companions, including Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Alī, had gone to the al-Naḍīr's quarters to request them to contribute to the blood money the Muslims had to pay for the accidental killing of two innocent men by 'Amr ibn Umayyah, one of the Prophet's Companions. The Prophet asked for their help on the basis of the covenant signed between the

Muslim community and the Jews of Madīnah soon after the Prophet's settlement there. The elders of al-Naḍīr received the Prophet well and asked him to wait while they raised the money. In actual fact, it occurred to them that this was their opportunity to assassinate the Prophet as he sat against the wall of one of their homes. Some of them said: "You will never find the man as easy prey as he is now. Let a strong person go onto the roof of the house next to which Muḥammad is sitting and drop a large stone or rock over his head and rid us of him." One of them, 'Amr ibn Jiḥāsh ibn Ka'b, volunteered to commit this treacherous crime, and went on to the roof of the house to throw such a stone on the Prophet's head. The Prophet, however, had been informed by God of the al-Naḍīr's design and so he had left his Companions where they were, giving the impression that he would shortly return. Instead, he had gone straight back to Madīnah. When the Prophet's Companions who were with him felt that he had been absent for too long, they started to worry and went looking for him. Soon they met a man on his way from Madīnah who told them that he had seen the Prophet entering the city.

In Madīnah, the Prophet had ordered his Companions to ready themselves to fight the al-Naḍīr because of their treachery, breaching the treaty between the two parties. Prior to that, one of their leading figures, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, had gone too far in abusing the Prophet and raising enemies against the Muslims. It had been reported to the Prophet that Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and others from al-Naḍīr were in contact with the Quraysh aiming to forge an alliance with them so as to undermine the Muslim community; this despite the treaty they had with the Prophet. Hence why the Prophet gave Muḥammad ibn Maslamah permission to assassinate Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, which he did.

As the Jews of al-Naḍīr tribe took treacherous steps against the Prophet and the Muslim community, it was necessary to revoke the treaty with them, in accordance with the Islamic rule that says: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58)

When the Prophet and his Companions were ready, they laid siege to the al-Naḍīr in their quarters, giving them three days' notice to vacate and leave their homes. Some reports suggest that the notice gave them ten days. They were allowed to take all their possessions with them

and to appoint agents to manage their fields and farms on their behalf. However, the hypocrites in Madīnah, led by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, sent word to them encouraging them to resist and pledging their support. They assured them that they would fight alongside them, and should they be made to leave, they promised to leave with them. It is in reference to these assurances that the *sūrah* says: "*Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verses 11–13)

The al-Naḍīr withdrew to their forts. The Prophet ordered that their palm trees should be cut and burnt. They called out to him, saying: 'Muḥammad! You have always criticized those who destroy places and lay land to waste. How come that you are now felling palm trees and burning them?' In reply, the *sūrah* states: "*Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.*" (Verse 5)

After 26 nights of siege, the al-Naḍīr despaired that the promises of their hypocrite friends would ever come true. God had cast terror in their hearts. They sent to the Prophet requesting him to allow them to leave on the same terms as the Qaynuqā' Jews who had earlier been evacuated.[1] This would afford them safe conduct and they would be allowed to take what their camels could carry of their possessions, except their arms. The Prophet accepted this. Thus, they loaded their camels with their possessions. They also destroyed their own homes so that these would not be taken over by Muslims. During the siege, the Muslims had destroyed some of the walls of their fortifications. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says: "*It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people*

1. The details of that evacuation are given in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV, pp. 52–54.

of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution." (Verses 2–4)

Some of the al-Naḍīr went to Khaybar, others headed for Syria. Among their leading figures who headed for Khaybar were Sallām ibn Mishkam ibn Abū al-Ḥuqayq, his cousin Kinānah ibn al-Rabī' ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab to whom reference is made in *Sūrah* 33; these managed to raise an alliance against the Muslim community, leading to the Battle of the Moat. Some of them are also referred to in *Sūrah* 48, in connection with the Battle of Khaybar.

The property left behind by the al-Naḍīr tribe was a free gain for the Prophet. The Muslims had not had to spur a horse or a camel in order to achieve that gain. Therefore, it belonged purely to God and His Messenger. The Prophet divided it among the Muhājirīn, his Companions who had migrated from Makkah, and two from among the Anṣār, Sahl ibn Ḥanīf and Abū Dujānah ibn Simāk, both of whom were poor. The Muhājirīn had no property in Madīnah, having had to abandon everything they had in Makkah. The Anṣār welcomed them and accommodated them in their own homes, showing a very high degree of generosity and hospitality. As this occasion presented itself, the Prophet wanted to set things right within the Muslim community, so that the poor would have their own property. Thus, wealth would not circulate only among the rich in society.

Some people – most probably hypocrites – spoke out, criticizing the Prophet's action. God states in this *sūrah*: "*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) The Prophet said to the Anṣār: "If you wish, you may give a share of your property

and your homes to your brethren, the Muhājirīn, and then you will share with them this gain. On the other hand, if you prefer, you keep your property and your homes for yourselves but you will have no share of this gain." True to their generous character, the Anṣār said: "We will give them a share of our property and homes and we will leave this gain to them, taking no share of it."

Commenting on this, the *sūrah* says: "*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in their homes and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verses 8–9)

Such were the events that led to the revelation of this *sūrah*, and to which its statements and rules refer, including the verses close to its end which address the believers who witnessed these events. This is in line with the Qur'ānic method of educating believers and refining their Islamic sense as it comments on events and demonstrates the link between them and fundamental truths. The last note in the *sūrah* mentions a number of God's attributes that have a direct bearing on the universe and its affairs. When these are fully understood, belief in God becomes enlightened, based on full awareness of the truth.

The *sūrah* begins and ends with glorification of God, to whom the heavens and the earth belong, the Almighty, the Wise. Thus, the beginning and end are in perfect harmony with the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the call to the believers to remain God-fearing and to reflect on God's planning.

Al-Ḥashr (The Gathering)

سُورَةُ الحَشْرِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. (2)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مِن دِيَارِهِمْ لِأَوَّلِ الْحَشْرِ ۚ مَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن يَخْرُجُوا ۖ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُم مَّانِعَتُهُمْ حُصُونُهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ فَأَتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَمْ يَحْتَسِبُوا ۖ وَقَذَفَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الرُّعْبَ ۚ يُخْرِبُونَ بُيُوتَهُم بِأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَيْدِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَاعْتَبِرُوا يَا أُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٢﴾

Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire (3)

وَلَوْلَا أَن كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْجَلَاءَ لَعَذَّبَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٣﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ شَآقُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۖ وَمَن يُشَآقِّ ٱللَّهَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٤﴾

because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution. (4)

مَا قَطَعْتُم مِّن لِّينَةٍ أَوْ تَرَكْتُمُوهَا قَآئِمَةً عَلَىٰٓ أُصُولِهَا فَبِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيُخْزِىَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors. (5)

وَمَآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَوْجَفْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ خَيْلٍ وَلَا رِكَابٍ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُسَلِّطُ رُسُلَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦﴾

Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. (6)

مَّآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْقُرَىٰ فَلِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ وَٱلْيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلْمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱبْنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ كَىْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةًۢ بَيْنَ ٱلْأَغْنِيَآءِ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمُ ٱلرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَىٰكُمْ عَنْهُ فَٱنتَهُوا۟ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٧﴾

Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. (7)

لِلْفُقَرَاءِ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِن
دِيَارِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ
اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا وَيَنصُرُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ ﴿٨﴾

[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. (8)

وَالَّذِينَ تَبَوَّءُو الدَّارَ وَالْإِيمَانَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ يُحِبُّونَ مَنْ هَاجَرَ إِلَيْهِمْ
وَلَا يَجِدُونَ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ حَاجَةً
مِّمَّا أُوتُوا وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ
وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ ۚ وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ
نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٩﴾

And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. (9)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُو مِن بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ
سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا
غِلًّا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَءُوفٌ
رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.' (10)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا يَقُولُونَ
لِإِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ
الْكِتَابِ لَئِنْ أُخْرِجْتُمْ لَنَخْرُجَنَّ

Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall

مَعَكُمْ وَلَا نُطِيعُ فِيكُمْ أَحَدًا أَبَدًا وَإِن
قُوتِلْتُمْ لَنَنصُرَنَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ
لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. (11)

لَئِنْ أُخْرِجُوا لَا يَخْرُجُونَ مَعَهُمْ وَلَئِن
قُوتِلُوا لَا يَنصُرُونَهُمْ وَلَئِن نَّصَرُوهُمْ
لَيُوَلُّنَّ الْأَدْبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. (12)

لَأَنتُمْ أَشَدُّ رَهْبَةً فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنَ
اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. (13)

لَا يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ جَمِيعًا إِلَّا فِي قُرًى
مُّحَصَّنَةٍ أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ جُدُرٍ ۚ بَأْسُهُم بَيْنَهُمْ
شَدِيدٌ ۚ تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. (14)

كَمَثَلِ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ قَرِيبًا ذَاقُوا
وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. (15)

كَمَثَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ إِذْ قَالَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ ٱكْفُرْ
فَلَمَّا كَفَرَ قَالَ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّنكَ إِنِّىٓ
أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (16)

فَكَانَ عَٰقِبَتَهُمَآ أَنَّهُمَا فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدَيْنِ
فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers. (17)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَلْتَنظُرْ
نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. (18)

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ نَسُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ
أَنفُسَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. (19)

لَا يَسْتَوِىٓ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ
أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ هُمُ ٱلْفَآئِزُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph. (20)

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُۥ
خَٰشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect. (21)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ۖ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٢﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. (22)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْمَلِكُ ٱلْقُدُّوسُ ٱلسَّلَٰمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُ ٱلْمُهَيْمِنُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْجَبَّارُ ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. (23)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُ ٱلْبَارِئُ ٱلْمُصَوِّرُ ۖ لَهُ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٤﴾

He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (24)

God's Direct Action

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verse 1)

This opening verse states a truth that takes place in the universe, where everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory and praises Him alone. This is how the *sūrah* that relates the events leading to the evacuation of the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations and

giving their land as a free gain to the believers who extol His glory and praise Him with His attributes begins. It is He who is the Almighty, able to give victory to those who believe in Him and destroy His enemies, the Wise who plans everything in accordance with a definite purpose.

The *sūrah* then gives us an account of the events leading to its revelation:

> *It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.* (Verses 2–4)

From these verses we learn that it was God who drove those unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes, which is described here as the first gathering. God is indeed the doer of whatever takes place, but the way the statement is phrased lays direct emphasis on this fact, implying that God undertook to drive them out, without putting it under the cover of human action. It was He who drove them to the land from where they will be gathered, which means that they could not return to the land from which they were evacuated.

God's direct action is further emphasized in the following sentences in the verse: "*You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God.*" (Verse 2) You did not expect them to leave, and they could not have imagined that this would happen to them. Within their fortifications, so they believed, they were just too strong to be driven out. They felt themselves secure, forgetting God's power that cannot be stopped by mere fortifications.

"*God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts.*" (Verse 2) He came upon them from within themselves,

not from within their fortifications. He struck fear in their hearts, and so they opened the gates to their fortifications with their own hands. He showed them that they were not in possession of their own souls, and could not control their hearts. They could not defy God with their willpower, let alone with buildings and forts. They reckoned with every possibility except that they would be attacked from within themselves. Thus is the case when God wills something to happen. He approaches it as He knows best and from where He can; He certainly knows everything and is able to accomplish what He wants. There is no need, then, for the means people resort to. Instead, the means for Him are always there, ready to use. All means and causes are of His own making; none is difficult for Him to employ. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.

Those unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations sought to shield themselves from attack by staying within their fortifications, but God came upon them from where they least expected, scaring them to the bone. They thought they had protection within their homes, but God made them destroy their own homes themselves and He allowed the believers to partake in this destruction: "*Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers.*" (Verse 2) Thus the account of what happened to those people is complete, portrayed in a telling image.

Here the *sūrah* adds the first comment: "*Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 2) This instruction comes at the right moment, when minds are ready to receive a lesson and learn from it.

The next verse establishes that since God willed to take them to task for their treachery, they could not escape some form of punishment in this life, in addition to what awaits them in the life to come: "*Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire.*" (Verse 3) That they would be made to suffer in this life, in some form or another, was a foregone conclusion. Had God not chosen their evacuation, He would have punished them in some other way, and whatever punishment they would have suffered in this life was in addition to what they will receive in the hereafter.

They merited both, "*because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic word, *shāqqū*, translated here as 'defied', means to take a side other than God's. As He explains why they merited such punishment, God made His Messenger's side His own. Therefore, in the second half of the verse He mentions their being in defiance of Him only, as this automatically includes defying the Prophet. When defiant people take a side opposite to God's, they behave insolently. Rather stupidly, such small, powerless creatures expose themselves to God's anger and incur His severe retribution.

Thus, as we look at what happened to those unbelievers of the people of earlier religions, we understand the fate that is bound to overtake those who defy God at any time and place. We should not fail to notice that the *sūrah* repeatedly refers to them as '*unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations*'. This is certainly true because they disbelieved in the divine faith in its final and complete form revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Those Jews were expecting his message. Moreover, referring to them in this way explains why they were punished. It also reassures the believers of the correctness of what they did to them.

The *sūrah* then reassures the believers that all that they did to those who defied God and His Messenger, such as cutting and burning their palm trees, was right. It thus gives God's verdict on it, particularly because some Muslims were rather unsure about their actions:

> *Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.* (Verse 5)

Prior to this event and subsequently, the Muslims were and are not permitted to cause such destruction. This case, then, provided an exception, and it needed explanation and reassurance. It is thus explained in this verse that both what they did or did not do in respect of the palm trees was by God's permission. It is He who handled this encounter, putting His will into effect. All that happened was by His leave, for the purpose of bringing disgrace upon the transgressors. Cutting their trees

caused the al-Naḍīr grief, while leaving some standing similarly grieved them because they had to leave these behind.

Thus the believers were reassured that they were only the tool for God's will to be fulfilled.

Gains Achieved Without a War

The second part of the *sūrah* lays down the rules concerning gains that were granted by God to the Muslim community in this encounter and in similar ones, where the Muslims achieved victory without having to fight. These rules apply to any conflict where God's hand works directly, without human cover:

> *Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. [Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.* (Verses 6–10)

These verses include a description of the conditions prevailing for the Muslim community at that time. They also state the nature and

distinctive features of the Muslim community that make its strong bonds survive from one generation, race and individual to another, across the centuries and throughout the world. This is a great truth that we should reflect upon.

"*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) This verse mentions that these gains left over by the al-Naḍīr Jews were taken by the Muslims without them having to ride a horse or a camel, let alone fight in order to lay their hands upon them. Hence, it is not to be treated like war booty. Only one fifth of what the Muslims gain in war is reserved for God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. The rest, i.e. four-fifths, is distributed among those who take part in the war itself. This rule concerning war gains was laid down in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, revealed shortly after the Battle of Badr. Here, however, the present *sūrah* rules that these new gains, made without a fight, belong only to God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. It is God's Messenger who undertakes the spending of these gains in this way and for these purposes.

The Prophet's own kinsfolk are singled out here as beneficiaries of such gains because the poor among them are not allowed to take *zakāt* money or charity. Moreover, the Prophet was not to be inherited by his relatives. Whatever he left behind was to be given to charity, charity in which his relatives had no share.[2] Since there were poor people among his relatives, God gave them a share of any war gains as well as gains made without war. They were included among the beneficiaries of enemy gains that God had assigned to His Messenger: one fifth of war gains and all gains without war. The other beneficiaries of these gains are well known.

This ruling is clearly stated in the *sūrah*. However, it does not stop at stating the immediate reason for this ruling, but rather opens our eyes

2. Scholars differ as to whether only the poor among the Prophet's relatives received this share, or whether it was given to all of them, even those who were not poor. The weightier view is that they all received a share.

to an important truth: "*God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills.*" (Verse 6) It is all by God's will, and His messengers are part of that will, giving them power over anyone or any community He chooses: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6)

Thus the role of God's messengers is seen to be closely linked to God's direct will. Although they are ordinary human beings, they have a special link with God's will, giving them a particular role in how God brings about what He wants to happen on earth. They do not act at their own behest; nor do they take or leave anything for their own interest. When they go to war, face anyone in conflict, or make peace with any one, they only do so to fulfil an aspect of God's will that has been made dependent on their own actions. It is God who is the actor behind all this. It is He who has power over all things.

Money Circulation

"*Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This verse gives the details of the ruling before stating a major rule of the Muslim community's economic and social system: thus, money "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) This is followed by a major constitutional rule: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) Although these two rules are stated in connection with the gains made in this encounter and how they were to be distributed, both rules go beyond the immediate event to state fundamental principles for the Islamic social system.

The first of these two rules defines a major aspect of the Islamic economic system which approves private ownership but makes it subject to this rule that excludes the possibility of wealth being circulated only among the rich in society. Whatever situation leads to the poor being outside the general circulation of wealth, keeping it only in the hands of

the rich, is contrary to the Islamic economic system and works against one of its major social organization objectives. All transactions in the Muslim community must be so organized so as not to allow such a situation to develop, and to dismantle it if it does exist.

The Islamic system is actually based on this rule. Thus, it makes *zakāt* an essential duty. Its revenue consists of 2.5% of money including financial assets, 5% or 10% of all agricultural produce, a similar percentage of cattle and one-fifth of mineral resources.[3] These are substantial shares. In addition, Islam gives 80% of war gains to those who so fight, whether they are rich or poor, but gains made without war are paid totally to those in need. The system Islam approves of for renting agricultural land is based on sharing the produce between the owner and the renter. Moreover, the Islamic system allows the Islamic government, in periods of hardship, to take all surplus the rich have to distribute to the poor. If it happens that the state treasury runs out of funds, such surplus may be invested for the public interest. Islam strictly forbids monopoly and usury, which are the two main tools that lead to money being circulated purely among the rich. This shows that the whole economic system Islam lays down is geared to implementing this most important rule. Furthermore, whilst this constitutes a major check on private ownership, Islam also places other checks on it as well.[4]

Thus, we see that the Islamic system allows for private ownership, but it is not a capitalist system. Nor is capitalism borrowed from the Islamic economic system. No capitalist system can function without monopoly or usury. The Islamic system is unique, laid down by the One who is Wise, All-Aware. It started on its own, developed on its own and remains unique, well balanced between rights and duties. It maintains the same balance as the rest of the universe, because it is made by the Creator of the universe.

---

3. The author mentions that the *zakāt* revenue from mineral resources is taxed at the same percentage as money. This is either a mistake or based on a certain scholar's view. The consensus is rather that one-fifth of mineral resources is paid to *zakāt*. – Editor's note.

4. This is explained in detail in a chapter on 'monetary policy' in our book *Social Justice in Islam*, which is available in Engish.

The Only Source of Legislation

The second rule laid down in the verse defines the only source of legislation: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) This rule sums up the Islamic constitution. The authority of the law in the Islamic system is based on the fact that legislation is given to us by the Prophet in the form of the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah*. The entire community, including the ruler and government machinery, cannot enact any law that is contrary to what is given to us by the Prophet. Should it enact such a law, that law is devoid of authority, because it lacks the very basis of authority. This system is contrary to all man-made theories, including those which make the community, or the nation, the source of all authorities, giving the nation the right to enact whatever legislations it chooses. Under Islam, authority belongs to God's legislation as stated and explained by His Messenger. The Muslim community's role is to keep Islamic law intact and to implement it. The ruler and the government undertake this task on behalf of the community. These are the limits of the Muslim community, and it cannot act contrary to what the Prophet has stated in any aspect of the law.

In any area where no legislation is stated, the community may enact what it deems to be suitable, provided that it is not contrary to any principle stated by the Prophet. This is part of the Islamic system. Any legislation to be enacted must follow what the Prophet taught, if there is a statement about it, and must not be in conflict with any Islamic principle if no such statement is available. The authority of the Muslim community, and its government, remains within these limits. This is a unique system, unlike any man-made system. It ensures harmony between the legislation for human society, which is from God, and the law that governs the universe, which is set by God. Should there be conflict between human law and universal law, man would be in utter misery.

The Qur'ānic verse inspires believers' hearts to see the link between these two major rules and their original source, i.e. God, calling on them to remain conscious of Him: "*Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This is the best guarantee that cannot

be evaded. Believers realize that God knows their inner thoughts and feelings, is aware of all actions, and that to Him all will return. They also know that His punishment is severe indeed. They are aware that God wants them to ensure that wealth does not circulate only among the rich in the community. They further know that it is their duty to accept willingly and obediently whatever the Prophet gives them and to discard whatever he forbids them.

The distribution of the gains made from the al-Naḍīr among the Muhājirīn only and two people from the Anṣār was a special measure that applied only in this case, to achieve the purpose of the main rule that states that wealth "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) The general rule is that it should be divided among the poor generally, from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, and also those of later generations. This is stated in the verses that follow. However, the Qur'ān does not state its rulings in abstracts. It puts them in a context that interacts with people. Hence, it gives each one of the three groups qualities that mirror its true nature.

Three Groups of Distinction

"*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) This is a true picture highlighting the main features of the Muhājirīn. They were certainly forced to flee their home town, Makkah, under much pressure and persecution by their own kinsfolk and tribesmen. They committed no offence other than believing in God alone. They abandoned their homes and possessions "*seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 8) They realized that they had no helper or protector other than Him. Although they were few in number, chased everywhere, they "*help God and His Messenger,*" with their hearts and swords, even at the hardest and most critical of times. Hence, they have earned the good description given to them in the Qur'ān: "*These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) They said the word indicating their belief and confirmed it with their actions. They were true to their claim that they had chosen Him above all else, and true to their pledge to God's

Messenger that they would follow him. They were true to the truth, making of themselves a living version of it.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) This is again a bright, true picture showing the Anṣār's main distinctive features. These were a unique group of people. They achieved, in practice, standards which most people would think too idealistic to be true and rose to levels that were too high even for our imaginations.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith.*" (Verse 9) The Home means the town, Yathrib, to which the Prophet and his followers in Makkah migrated. Thereafter, it has been known as Madīnah, meaning The City, or the Prophet's own city. The Anṣār were firmly settled there, long before the arrival of the Muhājirīn. They were also firmly established in faith, as if faith had become a part of their own dwelling place. The image here has clear connotations, yet it is the closest description of the Anṣār's attitude towards faith. It became their place of living where their hearts and souls settled in peace. They flocked to it like homing pigeons.

The Anṣār "*love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) We do not find in human history an event similar to the reception given by the Anṣār to the Muhājirīn: it reflected genuine love and unparalleled generosity. The Anṣār happily shared their possessions with their immigrant brethren, competing with each other in offering them their homes and shouldering the burden of hospitality. It is reported that in every case, lots were drawn to decide where each one of the Muhājirīn would settle, because the numbers of the Anṣār offering their homes were more than the numbers of the Muhājirīn needing to be settled. They "*harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) The Muhājirīn are, at times, given an exceptionally high position, but the Anṣār harbour no feeling of envy as a result. They may be given special treatment, as in the case of the gains made in this encounter. Again the Anṣār accept this willingly.

We note that the verse does not say that they 'harbour no grudge', but rather it uses the word 'desire', which adds to the impression we have of the Anṣār's pure hearts.

"*They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want.*" (Verse 9) To give preference to others when one is in need oneself is a high summit to reach, one which the Anṣār scaled in a way unknown anywhere else in human history. This was their true description in every case. They always exceeded what is normal in people's lives.

"*Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) It is personal greed that hinders every good thing. Goodness means giving in one way or another: one gives away money, love, emotions, effort and indeed one gives one's life when necessary. A person with greed cannot do what is good, because he always wants to take and not give. Therefore, a person saved from his own greed is spared the need to overcome this obstacle. He moves on to give generously with a feeling of gratification. This is true success.

"*Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.'*" (Verse 10) This is the third bright picture that brings into sharp relief the features of the generation that was to follow, as well as the features of the Muslim community at all places and times.

When this *sūrah* was revealed, this group that was to follow on the heels of the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār had not yet come into existence. They were there in God's knowledge, which is free of restrictions of time and place. The main feature of this group is that they would appeal to God for forgiveness, not only for themselves but also for those believers who went ahead of them. They would also appeal to be free of all grudges against all believers, with whom they share the bond of faith. They recognized that God is most compassionate and merciful, so they would appeal to Him by these two qualities: "*Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.*" (Verse 10)

The true nature and wonder of the Muslim community is clearly depicted in these verses. We recognize the strong bond that unites all generations of believers generating feelings of love and compassion between them, as well as a feeling of closeness that transcends time, place,

race and family. It is a bond that takes precedence over all else, stirring pleasant feelings across generations. A believer remembers another who lived many centuries earlier, just like he remembers one who lives next door, and warms to him with love and honour. The present generation of believers takes into account the needs of future generations, and the ones still to come will follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. They all constitute one rank, in the same brigade, across generations, despite belonging to countries and times that may be very wide apart. They all march steadily, under God's banner, trying to achieve the high standards expected of them, looking up to their Lord, the Compassionate, the Ever Merciful.

It is a wonderful, amazing picture, yet it represents a reality as well as the best ideal cherished by noble hearts. The beauty and nobility of this picture of humanity can be best appreciated when compared to the image of malice and rancour that Communism glorifies in Marx's gospel.[5] That malice continues to perpetuate itself in an increasing grudge against social classes, past generations of humanity, contemporary communities that reject such social grudges, and against religion and believers of all faiths and communities.

The two situations are wide apart: they share no feature, colour or shade. One of them elevates humanity to the highest standards it can achieve, and the other takes it down to its lowest possible level. The first represents generations of humanity transcending barriers of time, place, race, country, tribe and family and promoting a bond of love and compassion, with pure hearts that are free of all grudges or selfishness, seeking only God's pleasure. The other shows humanity in conflict, with people always in strife, harbouring wicked feelings towards each other and resorting to deception, cheating and evil. It shows people doing so even when they are praying in their temples, because it looks at prayer as a trick and considers religion to be nothing but a trap set by capitalists for their workers.

"*Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You*

5. The author wrote this in the heyday of Communism when it was making long strides in the Third World generally, and in Egypt specifically where he was imprisoned and Communists were on the ascendancy. – Editor's note.

are compassionate, ever merciful." (Verse 10) Such is the prayer of the believers marching in the procession of faith. It is a noble prayer for a noble procession.

False Promises

The *sūrah* now turns back to discuss the event itself, painting a picture of another group that played a role in it, the hypocrites:

> *Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 11–17)

The *sūrah* reports on what the hypocrites said to the al-Naḍīr Jews, promising them support, but then letting them down and showing that they cared nothing for their own promises. Every sentence in these verses states a fact, touches hearts, stirs up feelings and establishes a principle of education, knowledge and unshakeable faith.

The first of these establishes a bond of kinship between the hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations: "*Are*

you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations..." (Verse 11) The ones to whom the *sūrah* refers as people of earlier revelations are unbelievers, and the hypocrites are their brethren, despite the fact that they claim to be Muslims. Then the *sūrah* gives a full and vivid picture of the hypocrites' promises and assurances to their brethren: "*If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'?*" (Verse 11) God, who knows what they truly are, states and confirms otherwise: "*God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help.*" (Verses 11–12) Events confirmed that what God stated was true and what they promised their brethren was false.

The *sūrah* then states a fact explaining what those people, hypocrites and unbelievers from among the people of earlier religions, truly felt: "*You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13) They feared the believers more than they feared God. Had they truly feared God, they would not have feared anyone else. Only one type of fear can exist in a person's heart; fear of God can never exist side by side with fear of anyone else. All might belongs to God alone. All powers in the universe are subject to His will: "*There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock.*" (11: 56) Why, then, would a God-fearing person feel afraid of anyone else? However, the people who do not understand this truth fear God's creatures more than they fear Him. This, "*because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13)

Thus the *sūrah* exposes the truth about those people, and adds another general truth. Now, the *sūrah* goes on to describe a condition particular to the two parties, the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. This condition arises from the fact that they fear the believers more than they fear God: "*They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact*

their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason." (Verse 14)

Time continues to reveal the absolute accuracy of this delineation of the true character of the hypocrites and the people of earlier revelations whenever and wherever they meet the believers in battle. Recent clashes in the Holy Land between volunteer believers and the Jews have confirmed the accuracy of this description. They would not fight the believers except in their own fortified settlements in Palestine.[6] Whenever they were exposed, they scuttled away like rats. It is almost as if this verse was referring to what happened recently. All glory belongs to God, the All-Knowing, the All-Aware.

The verse adds other features of their mentality: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14) This picture contrasts with that of the believers who are united by the bond of faith across all generations and whose brotherhood transcends barriers of time, place, race, country and tribe. The hypocrites and unbelievers conversely are in disarray "*because they are people who will not use their reason.*" (Verse 14)

Appearances may at times be deceptive so as to give us an impression that the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations stand in solid alliance, supporting one another. We may also see the hypocrites closing ranks in one group. However, we are told their true condition by God Himself who says that they are not truly so; it is all deception. This cover is lifted at times to reveal the truth of God's description, exposing conflicts within the same alliance, because those allies have different interests, preferences and directions. Never have the believers been true to their faith without seeing the opposite party revealing such differences and conflicts. The believers need only be determined, show perseverance in adversity, and they will inevitably see that the bonds uniting those followers of falsehood disappear to show their acute differences; this then leads them to scheme against each other.

6. The author is referring here to the battles that took place in 1948, when groups of Islamic volunteers took part in the war, trying to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jewish fighters did not fear the Arab armies as much as they feared those volunteers. – Editor's note.

The hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations are able to gain the upper hand against the Muslims when the Muslims are disunited. In this way, the Muslims no longer reflect the true conditions of believers as outlined earlier in the *sūrah*. Otherwise, the hypocrites and unbelievers are too weak to be able to gain mastery over believers. Besides, they have different leanings and interests: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14)

The Qur'ān wants this fact to be firmly settled in believers' minds so that they know the truth about their enemies and do not stand in awe of them. It thus seeks to influence their feelings and morale on the basis of established fact. When Muslims take the Qur'ān seriously, they think little of their enemies, who are God's own enemies. They stand united, in one line. When they do so, no worldly power can match them.

Those who believe in God must know the truth about themselves and their enemies. This is half the battle. The Qur'ān puts this truth to them in the context of an event that has already taken place, enlightening them about the true factors that were at play and explaining what it signified and the facts to which it pointed. This explanation was useful to those who witnessed that event as it unfolded. It should provide great enlightenment to future generations who should reflect on it and learn the truth from the One who knows all truth.

In Satan's Footsteps

This evacuation of the al-Naḍīr from Madīnah was not the first of its kind. It was preceded by the evacuation of the Qaynuqā' tribe, to which the following verse most probably refers:

> *Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them.* (Verse 15)

The encounter with the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā' took place after the Battle of Badr, but before the Battle of Uḥud. The Qaynuqā' were bound by a treaty with the Prophet and the Muslims. When the Muslims won a great victory against the unbelievers in Badr, the Jews

were upset and harboured a grudge against the Muslims. They feared that their position in Madīnah would be weakened while the position of the Muslims would be strengthened. The Prophet got wind of what they were whispering to one another and learnt of their ill intentions. He reminded them of the treaty he had signed with them and warned them that their attitude might augur ill. They replied rudely to him, saying: "Muḥammad! Do not think too highly of your power. You have only encountered a group who knew little about fighting a war and you managed to score a victory against them. Should you engage us in battle, you will certainly know that we are true fighters."

They followed this with repeated provocations against the Muslims. Reports mention that a Muslim woman took some merchandise to sell at the Qaynuqā' market place, and sat close to a jeweller's shop. People there tried to get her to lift her head covering, but she refused. The jeweller held the edge of her dress and fixed it behind her back while she was unaware. When she rose, the lower part of her body was exposed. The Jews around laughed at her, while she cried out in shame. A Muslim was near by and he immediately attacked the jeweller and killed him. The Jews rushed to the Muslim and killed him. The family of the Muslim who was killed appealed to other Muslims for help, and the Muslim community was in anger. Tension rose and there was a confrontation between the Muslim community and the Jewish Qaynuqā' tribe.

The Prophet laid siege to the Qaynuqā' Jews until they gave up and declared that they would accept the Prophet's ruling. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites, argued with the Prophet on their behalf, citing the fact that for long they were allies of the al-Khazraj Anṣārī tribe. His true motive, however, was the strong bond between the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. The Prophet accepted his pleas and allowed them to leave Madīnah, taking with them all their property, except for arms. They left for Syria.

It is to this encounter that the *sūrah* refers. It cites it as a comparable case to that of the al-Naḍīr and the true facts behind the attitude they took towards the Muslim community and the reality of their collaboration with the hypocrites.

The *sūrah* also refers to how the hypocrites tried hard to persuade their brethren unbelievers, the Jews of al-Naḍīr, to put up stiff resistance, and

thus led them to their miserable fate. It compares this to a permanent situation in which Satan always lets down anyone who responds to his persuasion and disbelieves in God. Thus both end up in the worst of all situations:

> *Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 16–17)

Satan's role with any human being who responds to his promptings, as described in these verses, is in line with his nature and the aim he defined for himself. It is most singular for any human being to listen to him when he is out to trick them and lead them to their ruin. Yet this is the permanent truth which the *sūrah* states as its discussion of the event progresses further. It thus links the individual event with this permanent truth, setting it in real context. The Qur'ān does not state abstract theories, true as these may be, because a truth stated in an abstract setting does not influence hearts, feelings and minds. This is the difference between the Qur'ānic method that seeks to involve people's hearts and the methods followed by philosophers and those engaged in research.

Thus the *sūrah* completes its discussion of the al-Naḍīr, having put into it a large number of images, facts and directives, linking its local events to great and permanent facts. The *sūrah* thus represents a journey taking us far into the real world and into the world of human conscience. It goes far beyond the event itself. Its reporting in God's book is so different from the way it is reported in books written by human beings. The difference is as immeasurable as the difference between anything of man's making and what God makes.

Two Unequal Groups

The *sūrah* now addresses the believers, calling them by the quality they love best, distinguishing them from all others and making it easy for them to be positive. They are called upon to remain God-fearing, to

take stock of what they prepare for their life to come, to be always alert and make sure that they do not follow in the footsteps of those earlier people who forgot God. The believers have already seen the fate that befell some of these who are destined for the fire of hell:

> *Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.* (Verses 18–20)

Such fear of God is a mental state that words cannot fully describe. It is a condition that makes the human heart alert, feeling God's presence at every moment. It keeps man always on the watch, fearing that God may see him in a condition that displeases Him. A believer knows that God's eye watches everyone and every heart at every moment. How and when can man be in a situation that God does not see?

"*Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow.*" (Verse 18) Again, this is a statement that means far more than the total sum of its words. The mere thought of it places before a man's heart the record of all actions he did throughout his life. He looks carefully at every line, adding up his total sum after looking at every detail. When he has done so, he knows what he has sent ahead of him for his future life. This alerts him to his weaknesses and shortcomings, even though he has done much good. How would he feel if his net balance shows little in the way of good actions? This is bound to keep the human heart always awake, looking always for ways and means to improve its record of good deeds.

This verse, which excites all these feelings among believers, adds further notes to increase their sensitivity and strengthen their feelings of awe as they look at their position with God: "*Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 18)

The next verse warns them against a totally different situation: "*Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls.*"

(Verse 19) This is a very strange situation, but a true one. Anyone who forgets God will remain in this present life without a bond that pulls him towards a higher horizon. He lives without a goal that gives his life a meaning higher than that of grazing cattle. In such a situation man becomes oblivious of his own humanity. This fact leads to another whereby such a person forgets his own soul. He makes no preparation for his next life, which is long-lasting, permanent. He does not take account of it when he looks at the balance of his deeds. "*They are the transgressors.*" (Verse 19)

The following verse states that such people are the dwellers of the fire. It advises the believers to take a route different from theirs. After all, the believers are the ones going to heaven and their route is bound to be different: "*Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20)

The two groups are different in nature, condition, way of life, direction and destiny. They are set on two different courses, which cannot meet in line, feature, plan, strategy or method of action. They cannot be in the same camp, neither in this present life nor in the future one. "*Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20) Thus their fate is clearly stated, but that of the ones destined for the fire of hell is not even mentioned. It is too well known to deserve mention.

The Influence of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* now adds a powerful note that shakes hearts to the core. It portrays what effect the Qur'ān would have had on solid rocks had it been so sent down:

> *Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect.* (Verse 21)

This image reflects the truth. This Qur'ān has such weight, power and shaking influence that is absolutely irresistible when we receive it

as it truly is. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had such an experience when he overheard a reciter reading the opening of *Sūrah* 52: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it...*" (52: 1–8) As he listened, he leaned on a wall nearby. He then went back home and felt ill. People kept visiting him for a month, enquiring after his health.

The moments when a person is fully receptive of some truth contained in the Qur'ān will see him shake and shudder. He will experience such changes that are best represented in the physical world by the effects of magnetism and electricity or even stronger. God, the Creator of the mountains who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, says: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (Verse 21) Anyone who has had some experience of the Qur'ān touching their inner souls will appreciate this truth in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed. "*We put such images before people so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 21) Such an image should keep hearts thinking and reflecting.

God's Attributes

The rest of the *sūrah* is devoted to a long glorification of God, citing a number of His names and attributes. This serves as an aspect of the influence of the Qur'ān on the universe. It is as if we see the universe as a person expressing this glorification with his mouth, and a vast kingdom echoing it in every corner. These attributes of God have clear effects on the very nature of the universe, its phenomena and interactions. As it offers this glorification, it testifies to the truth of these attributes and their effects:

> *He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless*

> *glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 22–24)

It is an expansive glorification that puts together a number of God's glorious attributes. It consists of three parts, with each beginning with God's oneness in the form of either, "*He is God: there is no deity other than Him*," or, "*He is God*," on its own. Each one of these most gracious names or attributes has its clear bearing on the universe and a felt influence on human life. Thus they bring home to the human heart their effect on life and the living. They are not negative attributes. Nor are they isolated from the universe, its situations, phenomena and events.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" This imprints on our consciousness the truth of God's oneness in belief, worship, action and life conduct from the beginning of creation to its final end. On the basis of this oneness a whole code of living is based, regulating our way of thinking, feeling, behaviour, relations with the universe and its living creatures, as well as relations with people.

"*It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed.*" (Verse 22) This divine attribute makes us clearly conscious of God's knowledge of everything, apparent or hidden. This awakes in our consciences the need to watch out, keeping God always in our thoughts, public and private. Thus, man will go about his life feeling that he is being watched by God and that he himself is on the watch for God's sake, realizing that he does not live alone, not even when he is in seclusion or locked alone with one other in private conversation. His actions will be coloured by this feeling that keeps him always on guard.

"*He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 22) Now a feeling of reassurance spreads within man's conscience as he feels the air of God's mercy spread over him. Feelings of awe and hope, fear and reassurance are well balanced within him. In the believer's concept, God does not chase His creatures, but watches them; He does not wish them harm, but loves that they should adhere to His guidance; He does not abandon them to struggle against evil without providing help for them.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" (Verse 23) This is repeated at the beginning of the second part of this expansive glorification of God, because it provides the basis for all divine attributes.

"*The Sovereign.*" (Verse 23) This attribute imprints on our hearts the truth that there is no sovereignty or dominion to anyone other than God who has no partners. When there is one sovereign, those who are subject to that sovereignty will have only one master to serve. No one can serve two masters at the same time: "*Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (33: 4)

"*The Holy.*" (Verse 23) This attribute radiates absolute holiness and purity. It strikes our hearts with purity, keeps them cleansed, suited to receive the grace of the Holy Sovereign, and all to extol His limitless glory.

"*The Source of Peace.*" (Verse 23) Again, this attribute radiates peace, security and reassurance throughout the universe and in man's own soul. Man feels that he is safe, under God's care and protection, in peace with the world around him and all its dwellers. As man reflects on this attribute, he is reassured, regaining a feeling of peace and extending peace to all.

"*The Giver of Faith.*" (Verse 23) The very pronunciation of this attribute, *al-Mu'min*, gives a believer a clear sense of the value of faith. Here, a believer meets with God and draws on one of His attributes, rising by virtue of his faith to join the community on high.

"*The Guardian over all.*" (Verse 23) This begins a new set of attributes that contribute to our concept of Him. The previous attributes related to Him only. These new ones relate to His action as He conducts life, the universe and all affairs. These attributes imply His absolute control and watchfulness.

The same applies to the other three attributes stated in this verse, "*The Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs.*" (Verse 23) They all emphasize power, authority and superiority. None is more powerful or has greater authority than Him, just as no one can be in any way superior to Him. These attributes belong to God alone; none share them with Him in any way. Hence the verse ends with the statement: "*Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him.*" (Verse 23)

The last verse of the *sūrah* begins the third section of this expansive glorification of God, and again it begins with a statement of His oneness: "*He is God.*" (Verse 24) Whoever else is not God. He is "*the Creator, the Maker.*" The Creator stresses design and proportion, while the Maker stresses the process of bringing things into reality. The two attributes are intertwined, and the difference between them is subtle. "*Who gives shape and form to all.*" (Verse 24) This attribute is also closely related to the two before it. It means that God is the One who gives every creature its distinctive features and specific qualities that make up its personality.

The succession of these interlinked qualities, with their subtle differences, prompts us to follow the process of creation and initiation, stage by stage, as we humans conceive of it. In actual fact, there are no stages or steps. What we know of these attributes is not their absolute reality, because this is known only to God. We only know some of the effects they produce, as this is the limit of our understanding.

"*His are the most gracious names.*" (Verse 24) His names are, in themselves, most gracious. They need not be praised or admired by creatures. The Arabic adjective *al-ḥusnā*, translated here as '*the most gracious*', also means 'beautiful, attractive, etc.' They are the attributes a believer reflects upon in order to mould himself and his life in accordance with their meaning. He knows that God loves that he should try to live up to them so that he can elevate himself as He seeks God's acceptance.

This long and expansive glorification of God, citing many of His most gracious attributes, with all their inspiring effects, is brought to a close with the image that God's glorification is echoed throughout the universe, with every creature joining in: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 24) This is the most suitable and expected of images after the mentioning of all God's attributes. Thus the human heart joins in with all creatures and living things in a glorification that brings the opening of the *sūrah* and its ending into perfect harmony.

SŪRAH 60

Al-Mumtaḥanah

(Women Tested)

Prologue

The present *sūrah* provides yet another episode in the cultivation of the Muslim community, its social organization and state building during the Madīnah period. It thus forms a link in the chain that is the divine system, a system laid down for the community chosen to implement it in society. With such a well-defined and distinctive system humanity would be able to strive to achieve its goals, but there would be times when its efforts would fall short of what is required. Nonetheless, humanity would always look up to it, aiming to mirror that ideal form when the first Muslim community put it into practice.

This objective required, as we have stated on more than one occasion, long preparations each involving different stages. The events that happened within or around the Muslim community provided some of the material necessary for such preparations. While the events themselves were determined according to God's knowledge, they also provided the context for their explanation and interpretation, as also for comments and directives.

In the midst of all these events, the process of building the characters of the people who undertook the task of implementing the Islamic system was completed. Thus, in its formative stage, the Muslim community separated itself from the rest of society insofar as it needed

to remain pure, free of any alien aspect. Furthermore, it should also be acknowledged that this distinctive concept of faith, Islam, represented something new, unknown anywhere else in the world, and especially not in Arabia. All this, however, did not mean that Islam isolated itself from events occurring in the larger society. Indeed the Muslims were part of these events, interacting with them as they took place. This process of interaction also meant that they might be repeatedly influenced, and in different ways, by the same event. God, who created those people, knew that they do not all respond in the same way to the first touch, and that they might need more than one such touch for a certain effect to settle in. He also knew that remnants of the past, natural attractions and tendencies, human weaknesses, practical considerations, as well as old habits and traditions might represent obstacles that could hinder the process of cultivation. To overcome such difficulties necessitated repeated reminders. Events took place in succession, as determined by God's will, providing the required admonition and the basis for issuing warnings and directives.

Sharp, alert and blessed with keen insight, the Prophet used such events and occasions wisely, at every turn, to help this process of character cultivation. He was supported in this process by revelations that directed and endorsed what he did to mould that first Muslim community.

The Process of Cultivation

This *sūrah* represents a stage in that long process of cultivation aiming to establish within the conscience of every Muslim a pure world, with faith as the pivot around which it turns. In this world, Muslims congregate around this axis of faith, having only one unseverable bond. They purge their hearts of all ties of nationality, race, country, clan or family, replacing them all with the single bond of belief in God and being members of God's party.

The world Islam wants to build is both divine and human: it is divine in the sense that it derives all its principles and values from God's directives and wisdom, and addresses all its actions to God hoping to earn His pleasure. It is human in the sense that it encompasses all humanity within the broad scope of faith. Hence, in such a world the barriers of

race, country, language, family and all that separates one person from another are removed to leave only the tie of faith. Such is the noble world that is worthy of man, a creature God has honoured, breathing of His spirit into him.

Obstacles hindering the building of such a world were numerous in the Arabian environment, as also in our world today. Attachments to family, clan, race and land accounted for some of these obstacles. Others included personal leanings and desires, such as selfishness, pride, greed, psychological preferences and prejudices, as well as many other elements that work on man's mind. Islam needed to deal with all this in the community that had been chosen to implement the divine system and provide a practical example of it. This *sūrah*, then, is a step in that long process.

Some of the Muslims who migrated to Madīnah, leaving their possessions, homes and families behind for the sake of their faith continued to feel some attachment to those they had left behind in Makkah, specifically, for example, their spouses and offspring. Furthermore, despite all the persecution they had suffered at the hands of the Makkans, some Muslims still wished for a reconciliation that would see an end to fighting against relatives and family members.

On the other hand, God wanted to purge their hearts of all these bonds, so that they dedicated themselves to His faith and the system He wanted implemented. God knew the heavy pressures of natural tendencies and old practices on people. Indeed, the Arabs valued the ties of family, clan and tribe more strongly than any other community. Therefore, the Qur'ān continued to administer its effective treatment through events and comments on those events. Thus, the treatment would be administered on the stage of reality, just at the appropriate moment.

Treasonable Action

Reports mention a particular incident that led to the revelation of the first part of the present *sūrah*. This may be so, with the incident providing the immediate reason for such revelation, but Qur'ānic texts always go much further than particular events.

Ḥāṭib ibn Abū Balta'ah was one of the Muhājirīn who migrated with the Prophet from Makkah to Madīnah and was one of those who took part in the Battle of Badr. He had children and property he had left behind in Makkah. He did not belong to the Quraysh, but was an ally of 'Uthmān. When the Prophet decided to march to Makkah after its people were in breach of the peace treaty he had concluded with them two years earlier, he ordered his Companions to get ready. He prayed to God that the Quraysh would remain unaware of his intentions. He did, however, tell some of his Companions what he was planning to do; Ḥāṭib was among those. Ḥāṭib then wrote a letter to the Quraysh warning them that the Prophet intended to mount an attack against them. He gave it to a woman who concealed it and managed to leave Madīnah without being detected by any of the guards appointed by the Prophet on all exits and entrances. By so doing, Ḥāṭib hoped the Quraysh would consider his action as a favour and so not harm his family. The Prophet was informed by God of Ḥāṭib's action. He therefore sent chasers to retrieve the letter from that woman.

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: "God's Messenger sent me and al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, on horseback, telling us to go as far as a place called Rawḍat Khākh, where we would find a woman unbeliever carrying a letter written by Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta'ah to the unbelievers, which we were to retrieve. We caught up with her as she was riding her camel. We asked her to give us the letter, but she denied having any such thing. We sat her camel down and tried to find the letter but we could see none. We said to her: 'We swear by God, the Prophet has not lied. You will either do as we tell you and give us the letter or we will undress you.' She realized that we were serious and that she had no option but to comply. She undid her hair, which was covered and took the letter out. She gave it to us and we went straight back to Madīnah to hand it to the Prophet."

The Prophet called Ḥāṭib in and questioned him about what he had done. Ḥāṭib appealed to the Prophet not to jump to any conclusions. He said: "I am certainly a believer in God and His Messenger. I have not changed at all. It is not that I have any doubts in matters of faith. I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family. All your Companions who have families

or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection."

The Prophet recognized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. He said to those around him: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." The Prophet said to him: "Was he not one of the people who fought the Battle of Badr? How would you know, 'Umar, that God has not looked at the soldiers of Badr and said to them: I have forgiven you whatever you will do?" Tears sprang to 'Umar's eyes as he said: "God and His Messenger know better."

Al-Bukhārī adds in another version of this story that the present *sūrah* was revealed in connection with this event. In a third version he says that the Prophet sent three men, the other being al-Miqdād, to retrieve the letter.

Lessons Derived

To reflect a little on this event and its consequences does not go beyond our purpose of looking at how the Qur'ān uses events to cultivate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes through both the Prophet and Qur'ānic instructions and commentaries.

The first thing to look at is the deed itself done by Ḥāṭib, an early Muslim who belonged to the elite of the Muhājirīn and one of the few who were informed by the Prophet of the objective behind his intended campaign. The event shows us how the human soul may experience moments of weakness, no matter how strong it may be in its faith. Only God can protect us from such moments.

Then we see the Prophet's great attitude through it all, waiting to establish the facts before coming to any conclusion. He patiently questioned Ḥāṭib about his motives. We see the sympathy for his Companion in his moment of weakness, realizing that he told the truth. Therefore, he stopped his Companions from having a go at him, telling them: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." Thus he helped him to rise after he had slipped. He did not allow anyone to taunt him. By contrast, we see

'Umar's seriousness in such a matter as he said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." 'Umar looked at the deed itself and his reaction reflects his uncompromising attitude. The Prophet, on the other hand, looked at it from a broader perspective, with his thorough understanding of human nature. His sympathy was that of a caring educator, with profound and comprehensive knowledge, looking at all circumstances.

We also need to reflect a little on Ḥāṭib's own words explaining his momentary weakness, even though his concept of God's will and the factors at play in worldly matters was perfectly sound. He said to the Prophet: "I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family..." Thus, he knew that it is God who protects, not the favour he wanted to do the Quraysh. This is confirmed in the remainder of his explanation: "All your Companions who have families or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection." We see how he maintained that it is God who protects, not relatives or clans. They are merely the tools by which God's purpose may be done.

Perhaps the Prophet's reaction took this right concept into account. Perhaps he realized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. Hence, what he said to his Companions required them only to say good words to Ḥāṭib.

Another point of reflection looks at God's will as this event unfolds. Ḥāṭib was one of the few people who knew from the Prophet the true goal behind this campaign, yet here we see a moment of weakness affect one of these select few. Then, God's will ensured that this moment of weakness had no adverse consequences for the Muslims. It is as if the whole purpose was to unravel this weakness and treat it. None of the Prophet's other Companions who had not been informed of the Prophet's secret objective tried to exploit this moment, pressing their own claims of being more worthy of trust. This reflected the Muslims' attitude towards their leadership, and their own humility, as well as their desire to learn the lesson of what had happened to their brother.

The event itself is related in confirmed and authentic *aḥādīth*. As for its being the direct cause of the revelation of these verses, this is mentioned in one of the versions related by al-Bukhārī. We do not exclude the possibility that this report is accurate. However, the significance of

the Qur'ānic texts goes much further than this individual case. These Qur'ānic verses deal with a psychological situation that could affect anyone. They follow the Qur'ānic method of using a particular event to press home certain instructions and directives.

The Qur'ān deals here with the question of close relations, narrow affiliations, as well as adherence to what is familiar and what one generation inherits from another. It wants to instil new bonds, values and standards into believers as well as a new outlook on the universe, life, man, their role as believers and the purpose for human existence. It was, in effect, bringing together these new plants, the believers, under God's care so that He could teach and enlighten them about their existence and role. It wanted to open their eyes to the hostilities around them and to the schemes of their enemies. God wanted them to feel that they belonged to Him, making up His party, and that He wanted them to bring about something He willed to happen. They were to be marked out as His, known among all communities as His own, both in this life and in the life to come. Let them, then, dedicate themselves to His cause, maintaining no ties other than His.

The *sūrah* in its entirety moves in this direction. Even the legislative verses at the end, which speak about how believing women who migrate to join the Muslim community should be treated, the pledge of loyalty given by women who accept Islam, separating women believers from their husbands who are not Muslim, and relations between male believers and their wives who reject the faith, all lay down regulations in line with that general direction.

The *sūrah* concludes in the same way as it started, ordering the believers not to make God's enemies, whether idolaters or Jews, their intimate friends. This ensures that the separation between believers and unbelievers is complete, and that all ties except that of faith, are abandoned.

Al-Mumtaḥanah
(Women Tested)

سُورَةُ الْمُمْتَحَنَةِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا عَدُوِّي وَعَدُوَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَاءَ تُلْقُونَ إِلَيْهِم بِالْمَوَدَّةِ وَقَدْ كَفَرُوا بِمَا جَاءَكُم مِّنَ الْحَقِّ يُخْرِجُونَ الرَّسُولَ وَإِيَّاكُمْ أَن تُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ رَبِّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ خَرَجْتُمْ جِهَادًا فِي سَبِيلِي وَابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِي تُسِرُّونَ إِلَيْهِم بِالْمَوَدَّةِ وَأَنَا أَعْلَمُ بِمَا أَخْفَيْتُمْ وَمَا أَعْلَنتُمْ وَمَن يَفْعَلْهُ مِنكُمْ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ سَوَاءَ السَّبِيلِ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. (1)

إِن يَثْقَفُوكُمْ يَكُونُوا لَكُمْ أَعْدَاءً وَيَبْسُطُوا إِلَيْكُمْ أَيْدِيَهُمْ وَأَلْسِنَتَهُم بِالسُّوءِ وَوَدُّوا لَوْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers. (2)

لَن تَنفَعَكُمْ أَرْحَامُكُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do. (3)

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَٰهِيمَ
وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥٓ إِذْ قَالُوا۟ لِقَوْمِهِمْ إِنَّا بُرَءَٰٓؤُا۟
مِنكُمْ وَمِمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَفَرْنَا
بِكُمْ وَبَدَا بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْعَدَٰوَةُ
وَٱلْبَغْضَآءُ أَبَدًا حَتَّىٰ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَحْدَهُۥٓ
إِلَّا قَوْلَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ لِأَبِيهِ لَأَسْتَغْفِرَنَّ لَكَ
وَمَآ أَمْلِكُ لَكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن شَىْءٍ ۖ رَّبَّنَا عَلَيْكَ
تَوَكَّلْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ أَنَبْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤﴾

You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. (4)

رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَٱغْفِرْ
لَنَا رَبَّنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' (5)

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِيهِمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ
يَرْجُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلْيَوْمَ ٱلْءَاخِرَ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ
ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٦﴾

In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (6)

عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَجْعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَ
ٱلَّذِينَ عَادَيْتُم مِّنْهُم مَّوَدَّةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ قَدِيرٌ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. (7)

لَّا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَٰتِلُوكُمْ
فِى ٱلدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ أَن
تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٨﴾

God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. (8)

إِنَّمَا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ قَٰتَلُوكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ
وَأَخْرَجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ وَظَٰهَرُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ
إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَن تَوَلَّوْهُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا جَآءَكُمُ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتُ مُهَٰجِرَٰتٍ فَٱمْتَحِنُوهُنَّ ۖ
ٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِإِيمَٰنِهِنَّ ۖ فَإِنْ عَلِمْتُمُوهُنَّ
مُؤْمِنَٰتٍ فَلَا تَرْجِعُوهُنَّ إِلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ ۖ
لَا هُنَّ حِلٌّ لَّهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحِلُّونَ لَهُنَّ ۖ
وَءَاتُوهُم مَّآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ
أَن تَنكِحُوهُنَّ إِذَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ ۚ
وَلَا تُمْسِكُوا۟ بِعِصَمِ ٱلْكَوَافِرِ وَسْـَٔلُوا۟
مَآ أَنفَقْتُمْ وَلْيَسْـَٔلُوا۟ مَآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ
حُكْمُ ٱللَّهِ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. (10)

وَإِن فَاتَكُمْ شَيْءٌ مِّنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ إِلَى الْكُفَّارِ
فَعَاقَبْتُمْ فَآتُوا الَّذِينَ ذَهَبَتْ أَزْوَاجُهُم
مِّثْلَ مَا أَنفَقُوا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي أَنتُم بِهِ
مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe. (11)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ
يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَىٰ أَن لَّا يُشْرِكْنَ بِاللَّهِ
شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ
أَوْلَادَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ
بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ
فِي مَعْرُوفٍ ۙ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ
اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful. (12)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَوَلَّوْا قَوْمًا
غَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ قَدْ يَئِسُوا مِنَ
الْآخِرَةِ كَمَا يَئِسَ الْكُفَّارُ مِنْ
أَصْحَابِ الْقُبُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves. (13)

What Friends?

> *Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.* (Verses 1–2)

The *sūrah* begins with this friendly and inspiring address, calling on '*believers*'. It is an address by their Lord in whom they believe, who calls on them in the name of faith that establishes their bond with Him, to carefully consider their position. He also warns them against their enemies' schemes and reminds them of the task they have been assigned. In a kindly and friendly way, God makes their enemies His enemies: "*Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection.*" (Verse 1) Thus, He makes the believers feel that they belong to Him. Whoever is hostile to them is actually hostile to Him. They are the people who bear His insignia on earth and the ones He loves. Therefore, it is inconceivable that they should show affection to those who are His and their enemies.

God reminds them of the crimes, aggression and injustice committed by those people against them, their faith and His Messenger: "*They have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord.*" (Verse 1) Having committed all such injustices, what basis could there be for friendship and affection? They rejected the truth and drove the Prophet and his followers out of their homes for no other reason than that they believed in God. He reminds the believers of all this, stating in effect that it was for their faith that the unbelievers fought them, not for any other reason. The real issue of contention, i.e. faith, is brought to the fore. They were driven out of their homes for no reason other than faith.

Having thus stated the true issue of conflict, the *sūrah* reminds the believers that there is no room for intimacy between them and the unbelievers, if they have truly left their homes for God's sake, and in quest of His pleasure: "*If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure.*" (Verse 1) It is not possible for someone to migrate seeking God's pleasure and His cause to combine this with friendship with those who drove him out because of it. Such people are the enemies of God and His Messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds an implicit warning against what they conceal in their hearts of friendly feelings towards their enemies, God's enemies. He is fully aware of what hearts may secretly harbour and what they leave in the open: "*Do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal.*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a fearsome warning that strikes fear in believers' hearts: "*Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path.*" (Verse 1) A believer fears nothing worse than going astray after he has known and followed guidance.

The threat and the warning come right in the middle of an explanation of the unbelievers' true character and their evil intentions. Further explanation follows: "*If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) Whenever they have the chance to take advantage of the Muslims, they will act as open enemies, causing them whatever harm they can, verbal and physical, using every means available.

What is even worse is that "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) To a believer, this is worse than any verbal or physical harm that can be done to him. To wish him to lose his most valuable treasure of faith and revert to disbelief is to be his worst enemy. A person who has tasted the sweetness of faith after being an unbeliever, who has seen its light after the darkness of unbelief, and who has experienced the reassurance and happiness generated by holding the concepts and feelings of a believer will hate to revert to disbelief, just as much as he would hate being thrown into a fire. It is only an enemy of God who wishes to see him return to the hell of unbelief after he has experienced the happiness of living in the heaven of faith. How could he tolerate

the emptiness of unbelief after he has enjoyed life in the active world of belief? The Qur'ān gradually builds up the believers' reaction against their enemies until it culminates in a true description of their dearest wish: "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2)

The second round makes only one comment about the strong bond of blood relations, a tie that is deeply rooted in people's hearts. It is a bond that often forces its presence in the form of warm friendliness:

> *Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 3)

A believer works for the life to come, on which he focuses his hopes. Whatever he does in this life is merely the planting of the seeds. The harvest he awaits is in the life to come. This verse touches his heart with what happens there when all ties of blood are severed, and if the bond of faith is non-existent. This should make it easier for him to abandon such ties in the short life of this world, preferring the permanent bond that remains strong in both this life and the life to come. Hence, the *sūrah* says to the believers: "*Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you.*" (Verse 3) These ties which you cherish, and the preservation of which forces you to befriend your's and God's enemies happened to Ḥāṭib in his eagerness to preserve his bond with his family, and as happened to others who left their relatives and children. All these ties will be of no benefit to you, because "*on the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you.*" (Verse 3) You will be separated from them, because the tie that binds people together is already severed. Belief is the only tie that counts in God's sight. "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He is aware of the action itself and the intention behind it.

A Long Historical Relation

The third round establishes a clear link between all Muslims and the first generation of believers in God's oneness. They all join the same procession that moves across countless generations, distinguished by faith and shedding all ties except faith. They are all the same community,

starting with Abraham, who preached the first version of the pure faith. He provided an example to be followed, not only in faith but also in practice. He struggled with the bonds of kinship before he, and those with him, managed to purge their feelings of any bond other than that of faith:

> *You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.* (Verses 4–6)

When a Muslim reflects on these verses, he discovers that he has a great, well-established ancestry, a long history, and an example to follow set long ago. He goes back to Abraham, not only in his faith but also in his personal experience. Thus, his experience goes beyond his own personal one and that of his generation. People in this great procession of the faithful have gone through a similar experience to what he is now facing, and they came to a certain conclusion, taking a firm decision. The question is far from new, and the requirement does not constitute a very heavy burden. Besides, should ties with relatives who are hostile to his faith be severed, he still belongs to a great community, cherishing the bond of faith with all its members. He is only a branch of a great tree with firm roots and many branches that spreads its shade wide. This tree was planted by Abraham, the first to surrender himself to God.

So, Abraham and his followers went through the same experience as the Muhājirīn, and they provide a good example: "*They said to their people: We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you.*

The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone." (Verse 4) Abraham and his followers made their stand clear: they dissociated themselves from their people, the deities they worshipped and their beliefs. They rejected them altogether and believed in God alone. The only feelings they had towards them were ones of enmity and hate until those people also came to believe in God alone. It was a total break that left no ties or bonds after the one of faith had been severed. This is the absolute verdict in such a situation. The example set by Abraham and his followers is good enough for every believer until the end of time.

Some Muslims, however, found a loophole enabling them to continue to maintain warm feelings towards idolatrous blood relatives. This loophole was Abraham insofar as he prayed to God to forgive his father who was an idolater. The Qur'ān explains Abraham's attitude when he promised his father that he would seek God's forgiveness for him: "*The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you'.*" (Verse 4) Abraham said this before he was certain that his father still held stubbornly to his idolatrous beliefs. Abraham was hoping and expecting that his father would see the truth and accept the faith. In another *sūrah* we are told: "*Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him.*" (9: 114)

When Abraham assessed the situation properly, he placed the matter in God's hands, turning to Him for guidance, placing his trust completely in Him in all situations: "*Although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God. Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination.*" (Verse 4) This total self-surrender to God is the essential feature of Abraham's faith placed under special focus so that his Muslim offspring properly appreciate it. Here again we see the Qur'ānic method of cultivating the Muslim community with directives based on stories and the lessons derived from them.

Therefore, the remainder of Abraham's supplication is also stated: "*Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 5) This prayer is an appeal to God not to give the unbelievers mastery over the believers, which would strengthen the former's rejection of true faith.

They would think that had faith provided any protection to its followers, they themselves would not have been able to subdue them. This is a confusing point, one that often surfaces when falsehood manages to gain the upper hand for a time and purpose known only to God. In such periods, tyranny is able to treat believers very badly. Good believers endure this test with patience, but this should not prevent them from praying to God to spare them such hardship that makes of them a test to others and a basis for creeping doubt.

Abraham and his group continue their supplication: "*Forgive us.*" This is said by Abraham, God's own friend, realizing that the standard of worship which is worthy of God is beyond his reach. As a human being, he cannot attain the level of worship which gives due thanks for God's favours and which sufficiently glorifies Him. Therefore, he appeals for forgiveness, setting an example for his own group and all later believers.

Concluding his prayer, Abraham addresses his Lord by His attributes that are the most suitable here: "*Lord! You are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 5)

Concluding its account of Abraham and his followers' attitude, of those who surrendered themselves to God, the *sūrah* repeats the fact that they provided a good example for all believers: "*In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6) The example is there for those who look forward with hope to God and the Last Day. These are the ones who truly appreciate the experience that Abraham and his followers went through, and treat it as the example to follow. This, then, encourages the present generation of believers to strengthen their resolve. Anyone who abandons this way, leaving the noble procession of believers and disowns the bond with those great ancestors may do so. God needs no one: "*Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6)

In this round, the believers have been taken back to the early period of their long history, remembering their first origins on earth. They have learnt from the experience of those earlier generations and reviewed the conclusion to which such experience led. The way to follow is

not difficult, especially since they are not the first to tread it. The Qur'ān repeats this conclusion so as to make the procession of faith uninterrupted. No one who follows the same way should feel lonely, even if he finds himself the only one in his generation following that way! He will not find it difficult to discharge his duty because previous travellers discharged it before him.

Whom to Boycott

God knows how eager the early Muslims were to see the hostility and conflict with their own people come to an end. Therefore, the *sūrah* raises before them the hope that those enemies might yet join the Muslims and accept the Islamic faith. In this way, hostility between the two camps would be replaced by firmly-based affection. Again, the *sūrah* lightens their burden, stating the main rule on which international relations between the Muslim community and other powers are based. Thus, boycott and enmity are applied only in cases of aggression and hostility by unbelievers. When there is no aggression against Muslims and hostilities are absent, then Muslims should treat others kindly, as they deserve, always maintaining fairness and justice:

> *It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verses 7–9)

Islam is a religion of peace, a faith based on love. It wants only for others to benefit from and implement its sound way of life. It wants all people to come together, under God's banner, as a fraternity based on love. Nothing prevents this other than aggression by Islam's enemies. Should those enemies wish to live in peace with Islam and Muslims,

Islam will not be the one to start enmity. Even if enmity and hostility exists, Islam preserves the seeds of friendship by extending justice and good treatment to its enemies, hoping that they will one day be convinced that their own advantage lies in adopting its noble beliefs. Islam never despairs of this possibility.

The first verse of this section refers to this hope that is never extinguished by despair. It seeks to lighten the burden of some of the Muhājirīn who were troubled by conflict with their own people: "*It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies.*" (Verse 7) As this prospect of hope is raised by God, it was certain to become a reality. When the Muslims heard it, they were certain that it would be fulfilled. Indeed, it was not long after, when Makkah fell to Islam, that the people of the Quraysh became Muslims, and all joined together under the same banner. All enmity between them disappeared and all were united as brethren.

"*God is all powerful.*" (Verse 7) He accomplishes what He wills, and no one can raise an objection, let alone try to stop Him. "*God is much forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 7) He will forgive past sins and hostility.

Until God's promise is fulfilled, expressed here in the form of a hope, God gives them permission to be friendly with those who did not fight them or drive them out of their homes on account of their faith. No blame would attach to them if they maintained friendly relations with such people, treating them fairly, giving them all their due. On the other hand, there is a strict prohibition against friendship with those who fought them, drove them out of their land, or even helped in driving them out. Those who violate this prohibition are judged as wrongdoers. Wrongdoing is equated with unbelief, as God says in the Qur'ān: "*To associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.*" (31: 13) This is, then, a very serious warning that strikes awe in a believer's heart.

This rule about how to treat non-Muslims is most fair and fits with the nature of Islam and its outlook on human life and on the universe as a whole. It represents the basis of its international law, which considers the state of peace to be the permanent state with all peoples and groupings. This state of peace is revoked only when military aggression against Islam and its people takes place, for it is imperative that such aggression be

repelled; or when treason is feared after a treaty with others has been signed, for this represents a threat of aggression; or when freedom of belief and advocating Islam is forcibly suppressed, which again represents aggression. In all other cases, Islam extends the hand of peace, affection and justice to all people.

This rule fits perfectly with the overall Islamic concept, which makes the only bone of contention between them and their opponents that of faith. The only value a Muslim will not compromise, even if this forces him to fight, is faith. Nothing puts Muslims in conflict and hostility with other communities except the question of the freedom to present their faith to people, the freedom of belief, the freedom to implement the divine code in human life.

This directive fits with the drift of the *sūrah* which aims to give prominence to faith, making it the only banner Muslims raise. Whoever stands under it belongs to them, and whoever fights them on account of it is their enemy. Anyone who maintains peace with them, leaving them to their faith, preventing no one from listening to it and adopting it, and putting no pressure on those who believe in it is a person at peace. Islam allows kindly treatment to be extended to such people.

A Muslim lives for his faith, making it his sole purpose within himself and with all people. He does not enter into conflict for gain, nor does he fight for ties of race, land, tribe or family. His only struggle is to ensure that God's word reigns supreme, and that His faith is the code to be followed.

Sometime later *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed, starting with the verse that gave notice to communities that held peace treaties with the Muslim state. It gave a four-month notice of termination of any treaty that did not specify a term of expiry. Treaties that ran for a specified notice remained valid until the end of their terms. This measure was taken after practical experience showed that the idolaters in Arabia only observed their treaties with the Muslim community until they had a chance of victory should they violate such treaties. This brought into operation the other rule concerning such treaties: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58) To give notice of termination in a fair way was necessary to secure the Islamic base, which at the time

included the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, against its enemies living alongside them. These were the idolaters and people of earlier religions who were repeatedly in breach of their treaties, trying to take the Muslim community unawares. This was essentially a permanent situation of aggression. Another reason for this measure was the fact that the two superpowers at the time, the Byzantine and Persian Empires, began to feel that Islam could become a source of danger to them and this they wanted to pre-empt. Therefore, they started to encourage Arab tribes living close to them to take a hostile attitude towards the Muslim state. All this necessitated that the Islamic base be made solid and secure from any internal enemy before any clash with outside powers could take place.

Women Migrants

The *sūrah* issues a ruling concerning women believers who might join the Muslim community:

> *Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe.* (Verses 10–11)

The Prophet concluded the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty with the Quraysh in Makkah and this specified a condition whereby the Prophet and the Muslim community would return to them anyone who went over to the

Muslims, even though that person might be a Muslim. Reports mention that when the Prophet was about to leave al-Ḥudaybiyah, a few women came over to him seeking to join the Muslim community in Madīnah. The Quraysh asked for their extradition in accordance with the terms of the treaty. It appears that those terms were not conclusive in the case of women. These two verses were revealed to block returning women believers to the unbelievers, for fear that they would be persecuted on account of their faith.[1]

This was a situation requiring rules of international law. These rules outlined here regulate such cases on the basis of absolute fairness, without allowing the behaviour of the other party, unfair as it may be, to influence the Islamic stand. Furthermore, Islam's stance is that it ensures justice in all internal and external dealings.

The first step required by these rules was to test migrating women in order to determine their reasons for migration. In other words, they must not be trying to escape from a marriage that had gone wrong, or be pursuing some other material benefit, or hoping to marry men they were in love with in the Muslim community. Ibn 'Abbās reports that the Prophet tested any such woman, asking her: "By God, have you fled to us because you hate your husband? By God, have you come to us merely to migrate to a new land? By God, are you coming to us in pursuit of some material gain? By God, have you come to us only because you love God and His Messenger?"

'Ikrimah explains that the test was a form of questioning so as to establish whether the woman was migrating only because she loved God and His Messenger or for some other purpose. The test was also to establish whether or not she was in love with a man from the Muslim community, and whether or not she was fleeing from her husband.

1. It should be mentioned here that the Prophet and the Muslims abided by this treaty, right from the first moment after its signing. Hardly had the treaty been so signed when Suhayl ibn 'Amr, the Quraysh negotiator, saw his son coming to the Muslim camp seeking refuge. He was a Muslim but his father had imprisoned him and tried to force him to revert to idolatry. Suhayl demanded that his son be handed back to him, and the Prophet granted his request. He explained that Muslims are always true to their pledges. The events leading to the signing of this peace treaty are dealt with in detail in the commentary on *Sūrah* 48 in this volume. – Editor's note.

Such, then, was the test. It relied on statements made under oath. Whether such a woman had any different motive, God only knew. People simply cannot establish this with any measure of certainty: "*God knows best their faith.*" (Verse 10) When they have made their statements under oath, confirming that they are believers, then the Muslim community cannot "*send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them.*" (Verse 10) When the most important bond of faith has been severed, nothing can repair the relationship. Marriage is a union of permanent settlement and it cannot be properly established when the primary bond of faith is absent. Faith is the basic and vital emotion that keeps a heart alive; it cannot be replaced by any other. A believer's heart cannot warm to another that is devoid of faith. There can be no true feeling of mutual inclination or security between two hearts when only one of them has faith. Marriage survives on mutual affection, compassion, inclination and security.

After the Prophet's migration to Madīnah this issue had been left open, with no rule stated about it in the Qur'ān. Therefore, no couple were separated even if only one accepted Islam while the other did not. This was due to the fact that the Muslim society had not yet by then established firm roots. When al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was concluded, it was time that such a separation be made. Muslims, men and women, should understand that the bond that overrides all other bonds is faith, and they should put this rule into practice.

The provision for separating such couples was accompanied by a provision for compensation. Thus, an unbeliever whose wife left him because she was Muslim was entitled to receive back whatever he had paid to her in dowry at the time of their marriage. The same applied in reverse, should the man be a believer and his wife not.

When this had been done, the Muslims could marry such migrant women, provided that they paid them dowries. Scholars differ as to whether such women should observe a waiting period; as also over the length of the waiting period. Some scholars say that it is the same as that observed by a divorced woman, i.e. until she has gone through three menstrual periods, while others maintain that it lasts only until she has completed one period, to make sure that she is not pregnant. It

is agreed that if any such woman is pregnant, her waiting period lasts until she has given birth.

"*None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries.*" (Verse 10) All these rules are then tied to the strongest guarantee a believer has, which is that of watching God and fearing Him: "*Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise.*" (Verse 10) Indeed, this is the only inviolable guarantee. God's judgement is that of the One who knows what is in people's hearts, the Almighty who has power over all creatures. It is enough that a Muslim should realize the source of this judgement in order to implement it fully, because he knows that he will ultimately return to God.

Should a believer lose what he had paid in dowry, because his unbeliever wife or her family refuses to refund her Muslim husband, as happened in some cases, the Muslim ruler would compensate him for this, taking this from any money due to the unbelievers whose Muslim wives had migrated to join the Muslim community, or from any war gains made by the Muslim community: "*Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid.*" (Verse 11) Again this ruling is tied to the same guarantee that ensures the implementation of every Islamic rule: "*Fear God, in whom you believe.*" (Verse 11) This is a profound and touching instruction for believers.

We see how these rulings concerning the separation of married couples provide an example of the practical implementation of the Islamic concept of life values and ties. They reflect the unity of the Muslim community and its being distinct from any other. It is a community where all life is based on faith, where all distinctions of race, colour, language, family and land are insignificant. There is only one sign that distinguishes between people – the sign of the party to which they belong. There are only two parties: the party of God and the party of Satan.

Women's Pledge of Allegiance

The Prophet is then instructed on how women should pledge their allegiance, and what the terms of their pledge should be:

> *Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.* (Verse 12)

These terms outline the major elements of faith, and provide the framework of the new social system established by Islam. They comprise associating no partners with God in any way whatsoever. They confirm that offences with prescribed penalties, such as theft and adultery, should never be committed. Women should also pledge never to kill their children. This is a reference to the pre-Islamic practice of burying girls alive, and includes killing embryos for any reason. Women are placed in trust of their pregnancies. Another term of the pledge women give is that they should never "*lie about who fathered their children.*"[2] Ibn 'Abbās says: "This means that they must not attribute to their husbands any child that does not belong to them. The same view is stated by Muqātil. Perhaps this term, coming as it does after that of refraining from adultery altogether, was to address some practices of pre-Islamic days, when a woman might sleep with several men and when she gave birth to a child, she would choose its father from among them on the basis of looks, or perhaps on some other basis when she knew who its true father was. However, the text includes this and any other case of falsehood in this regard. Perhaps Ibn 'Abbās and Muqātil referred to this particular situation because of a case at the time.

The last term in women's pledge of allegiance is that they must not "*disobey you in anything reasonable.*" This means a commitment to obey

2. A more literal translation of this term of the pledge is "nor perpetrate any falsehood of their invention with regard to what is between their hands and legs." The chosen translation is based on the views of most leading scholars, as indicated in the commentary above. – Editor's note.

the Prophet in everything he says, because he never ordered anything other than what is reasonable and good. However, this term is also one of the main elements of the Islamic constitution. It makes clear that obedience of the Muslim ruler remains valid only within what is reasonable, i.e. what is in line with Islam and its laws. It does not give blanket cover, requiring obedience in every situation whatsoever. This rule ensures that the force of any legislation is derived from its being based on God's law, not the will of the ruler or the nation should they differ with God's law. Both ruler and nation are subject to God's law and derive their authority from it.

When women give such a comprehensive pledge of allegiance, their pledges are accepted. The Prophet is asked to pray to God to forgive them what they might have done in the past: "*Then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 12) It is God who forgives and pardons.

The *sūrah* concludes with a general directive:

> *Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves.* (Verse 13)

This is addressed to believers in their capacity of faith, a faith that distinguishes them from all other communities. Some reports suggest that the description of '*people with whom God is angry*' refers to the Jews, since they have been branded as such elsewhere in the Qur'ān. However, we have here a general text that applies to the Jews, the polytheists and all other enemies of God. All these groups have incurred God's anger. All of them despair of the life to come. They never take it seriously, and never give it a thought. Their despair of it is the same as that of unbelievers who think that those who died will never return and be resurrected.

This final address sums up the theme of the *sūrah*, giving it a conclusion akin to its opening. Its message is thus very clearly stated.

SŪRAH 61

Al-Ṣaff
(The Ranks)

Prologue

This *sūrah* seeks to establish two major themes which permeate its entire text. It also includes a number of secondary references which relate to those major themes.

The first aim of the *sūrah* is to establish in the conscience of every Muslim the fact that his religion is the final version of the divine system God has laid down for mankind. There were earlier versions, each suited for a particular period of human history. There were also experiences in the lives of earlier messengers and past communities that afforded much to reflect upon. All these have paved the way for this final version of the one divine faith. It incorporates God's final message for mankind, which He has willed to prevail over all other religions.

Hence, the *sūrah* mentions Moses' message, making it clear that his people caused him much grief and deviated from his message. They had gone astray and were no longer to be trustees of the divine faith: "*Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then mentions Jesus' message to establish that Jesus was sent to carry on Moses' earlier message, confirming what was revealed before him of the Torah. He was also given the task of paving the way for the final message, giving news of the Messenger who was to carry it, and serving as a link between the first and the last divine religions. *"And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad."* (Verse 6) Hence, his task was to carry the trust of the divine faith after Moses and then to give it to the Messenger whose coming he announced.

It was always confirmed, according to God's knowledge and by His will, that these steps would eventually lead to a final and permanent version to establish God's faith in human life, and this by the final Messenger: *"It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters."* (Verse 9)

This first clear purpose of the *sūrah* gives rise to its second purpose. When a Muslim is fully aware of this fact, knows the history of the divine faith and is aware of his share of it, he realizes the duties that this trust involves. Hence, he has a clear and sincere motive for striving to ensure that this faith prevails over all other religions, just as God wants it to do. There is no longer any vacillation in practically carrying out what one verbally has proposed to do. It is inappropriate for a believer to declare his intention to strive for God's cause but then to refrain from doing so. According to some reports, it appears that there were some cases of this sort. Hence, the *sūrah* starts with a proclamation that the entire universe and all that is in it unceasingly glorify God. *"Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building."* (Verses 2–4)

In the middle of the *sūrah*, the believers are called upon to take part in the most profitable transaction that they could have in this life and in the life to come: *"Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger,*

and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers." (Verses 10–13)

The *sūrah* ends with an appeal to the believers to be the helpers in furthering God's cause, just like Jesus' disciples who supported him when the Israelites continued to deny his message and were hostile towards him: "*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14)

These two purposes are very clear throughout the *sūrah*, taking up nearly all of its text. There only remains a denunciation of those who reject the final message, which is clearly linked to the two main themes. We see this clearly stated after Jesus gave the news of the impending appearance of the final Messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him): "*But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*"(Verses 6–8)

Thus, every Muslim is clear in his mind that his faith is the final version of the religion God wants to be established on earth. He realizes that the trust of this divine faith is given to him, and he knows that he is required to strive for God's cause as God wants. His line is clear, leaving no room for ambiguity, hesitation or faltering. The goal is well defined and the way to achieve it is made clear.

With this goal-defining directive we also have clear pointers to the nature of the moral code a Muslim must follow. A Muslim must

demonstrate consistency between his conscience and his action. He cannot say one thing and then do another. His appearance must not fundamentally differ from what he conceals within himself. He must be consistent in all situations, dedicated in his service to God's cause, clear in both his intention and action, moving with steady steps, collaborating with his brothers so that the Muslim community is seen to be solid and firm like a building with strong foundations.

Al-Ṣaff (The Ranks)

سُورَةُ الصَّفِّ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? (2)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! (3)

كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ اللَّهِ أَن تَقُولُوا مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. (4)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُم بُنْيَانٌ مَّرْصُوصٌ ﴿٤﴾

Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: "My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?" So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. (5)

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يَا قَوْمِ لِمَ تُؤْذُونَنِي وَقَد تَّعْلَمُونَ أَنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَلَمَّا زَاغُوا أَزَاغَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَٰبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ إِنِّى
رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ إِلَيْكُم مُّصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَىَّ مِنَ
ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَمُبَشِّرًۢا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِى مِنۢ بَعْدِى ٱسْمُهُۥٓ
أَحْمَدُ ۖ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ
مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦﴾

And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: "This is plain sorcery." (6)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ٱلْكَذِبَ
وَهُوَ يُدْعَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلْإِسْلَٰمِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. (7)

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِـُٔوا۟ نُورَ ٱللَّهِ بِأَفْوَٰهِهِمْ وَٱللَّهُ مُتِمُّ
نُورِهِۦ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (8)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ
ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ ۙ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ
ٱلْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩﴾

It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ تِجَٰرَةٍ
تُنجِيكُم مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? (10)

تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَتُجَٰهِدُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِأَمْوَٰلِكُمْ وَأَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. (11)

يَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَيُدْخِلْكُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ وَمَسَٰكِنَ طَيِّبَةً فِى جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! (12)

وَأُخْرَىٰ تُحِبُّونَهَا ۖ نَصْرٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَفَتْحٌ قَرِيبٌ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers. (13)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ كُونُوٓا۟ أَنصَارَ ٱللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ لِلْحَوَارِيِّۧنَ مَنْ أَنصَارِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالَ ٱلْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنصَارُ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَـَٔامَنَت طَّآئِفَةٌ مِّنۢ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ وَكَفَرَت طَّآئِفَةٌ ۖ فَأَيَّدْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ عَلَىٰ عَدُوِّهِمْ فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ ظَٰهِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail. (14)

Words and Actions

> *All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise.* (Verse 1)

The whole universe participates in this glorification of God Almighty whose might is combined with His infinite wisdom. This glorification begins this *sūrah*, which declares to Muslims that their religion is the last and final version of the divine faith. They are placed in a position of trustees of this faith based on God's oneness, denouncing all deviation perpetrated by unbelievers and idolaters. Muslims are also called upon to strive in support of this faith, which God has willed to prevail over all other religions, hateful as this may be to unbelievers. This opening, thus, implies that the trust given to Muslims belongs to the entire universe; the faith they strive for is the faith of all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Hence, this religion's prevalence is a universal phenomenon, one that is in line with the whole universe as it turns to God Almighty.

A group of believers are strongly reproached for something they did that was particularly hateful to God. This was inappropriate behaviour for believers:

> *Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.* (Verses 2–4)

Ibn 'Abbās reports that prior to making *Jihād* obligatory, some believers used to say: "We wish that God would tell us what action is most loved by Him, so that we could do it." God instructed His Messenger to say that what God loves most is a belief in Him that allows no room for doubt, and striving against deviant people who reject the faith. However, when *Jihād* was made obligatory, a number of believers found it difficult, and they disliked itdistasteful. Hence the revelation of the verses saying: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 2–3) Al-Ṭabarī also confirmed this in his commentary on the *sūrah*.

On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary that the majority of scholars agree that these verses were revealed when some Muslims turned away from *Jihād* when it was declared a duty. He adds that this is the same as other verses in the Qur'ān: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!' Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high.'*" (4: 77–78)

Qatādah and al-Ḍaḥḥāq say that this verse reproaches those who used to boast about their exploits, claiming that they had fought and killed the enemy, when they had not done so.

Looking at these verses, their context and the mention of fighting, we feel that the occasion inviting their revelation was the one mentioned by the majority of scholars and by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. However, Qur'ānic texts always take dimensions that go beyond the individual events which they address. They also comment on many other events in addition to the immediate occasion. Therefore, we look at these verses according to their general import, without forgetting the immediate events for which they were revealed.

The *sūrah* starts then with a reproach for behaviour in one or more actual events: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do?*" (Verse 2) It then denounces this action and its lack of morality in a doubly powerful way: "*Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 3) What is viewed by God as most loathsome must certainly be very hateful and repugnant. This statement is sufficient then to make believers view this in the vilest of terms, particularly as they are addressed by God as people who have accepted His religion and who believe in Him.

The next verse refers to that particular matter when they did something different to what they used to profess, namely *Jihād*. It defines what God

likes in this question and what earns His pleasure: "*God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is not mere fighting, but fighting for God's cause, in collaboration with the Muslim community, within its ranks, and with resolve and steadfastness, so that believers remain "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*"

Moral Values in Practice

We have said on several occasions that as it was being revealed, the Qur'ān was carrying on with a process of nation building. Its aim was to build a community that carried the trust of the divine message, implemented its approach and established its system in human life. It was necessary for this purpose that the Qur'ān should undertake the reform of its individuals, establish its bonds as a community, and build it as a living nation in practice. All of this was to be accomplished at the same time. A Muslim is not a Muslim unless he functions within a community. It is inconceivable for Islam to be put into practice unless it functions in a community with well-defined bonds, a system and goal. Its ultimate goal applies to the community as a whole, but it also applies at the same time to each individual. This goal consists of establishing the divine system in people's consciences and practices on earth. To achieve the latter, Islam must live in an actual community that implements it fully.

Islam places much emphasis on the individual's conscience and responsibility, but it is certainly not a religion of individuals who dedicate themselves to worship in their respective little corners. This does not establish Islam within the individual's own conscience, let alone in his whole life. Islam was not revealed in such isolation. Rather, it was revealed to establish its criteria and standards in human life. It aims to put its mark on every individual and collective activity in every direction. Mankind do not live as individuals, but as groups, communities and nations. And Islam wants to provide people with its controls as they conduct their lives. Hence, it is so structured as to cater for people as they live. Its morality, manners, rules and systems are all formulated on this basis. When Islam directs its attention to the conscience of the

individual, it moulds this conscience on the basis that the individual lives in a community. Both the individual and the community turn to God and seek His pleasure. Therefore, a Muslim works within his community to fulfil the religious trust on earth and to establish the Islamic system in life.

Right from the very first day of the Islamic message, a Muslim community was established under the leadership of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Its individuals had their commitments towards their community, which also had its special entity distinguishing it from all other communities. It had its values that related to the human conscience but which looked at the same time to the life and welfare of the community. All this took place before the Islamic state was established in Madīnah. Indeed, the formation of this community was the means by which the Islamic state was later established.

When we look at these three verses we find that the morality of the individual is intertwined with the needs of the community, under the authority of religious faith. By its very nature, this faith can function fully in human life only in the form of a system that is properly served and protected.

The first two of the three verses under discussion refer to God's punishment and a strong censure if believers say something that is belied by their deeds. Thus, these two verses delineate the hugely important qualities of truthfulness and consistency in a Muslim's personality. A Muslim must reflect the same image in his inner self and in his appearance. His actions must be consistent with his words. This applies in all situations and goes far beyond the call to *Jihād* to which the third verse refers.

The Qur'ān places great emphasis on this Islamic characteristic, which is also repeatedly emphasized in the *sunnah*. Denouncing the Jews, God says: "*How can you bid others to piety and forget yourselves even while you are reciting the Book? Do you not understand?*" (2: 44) "*They say: 'We do obey you,' but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate.*" (4: 81) "*There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says, and he cites God as witness to what is in his heart, whereas he is the most antagonistic of adversaries. Yet, no sooner does he turn away than he strives to spread corruption in*

the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption." (2: 204–205) The Prophet says: "The three distinctive marks of a hypocrite are: he lies when he speaks, and breaks his promises, and he is untrue to his trust." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.] There are numerous *aḥādīth* that emphasize the same concept. Perhaps the *ḥadīth* we will quote now includes one of the most subtle and refined directives by the Prophet to reiterate this moral aspect of Islam. Imām Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd relate this report by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Āmir ibn Rabī'ah: "God's Messenger came to us when I was a young boy. I wanted to go out to play, but my mother said to me, ''Abdullāh, come and I will give you something.' The Prophet said to her, 'What do you want to give him?' She replied, 'Dates.' He said, 'If you would not give him anything, it would have been recorded against you as a lie'."

Perhaps Imām Aḥmad was guided by this *ḥadīth* when he travelled a long distance to meet someone whom he wanted to ask about another *ḥadīth*. However, when he arrived at the man's place, he saw him raising his robe in a way that suggested to his mule that it contained food, but there was nothing in the robe. Imām Aḥmad then felt that he should not report the *ḥadīth* reported by this man simply because he had lied to his mule.

A Muslim's conscience is reared to such a fine moral standard so as to build the character that can be entrusted with the establishment of the divine system in human life. This is what we see in this *sūrah*, which provides an important aspect of education for the Muslim community and its preparation to shoulder its great trust.

The *Jihād* Duty

Let us now consider the issue of *Jihād* which these verses addressed at the time of their revelation. We find here several points that need to be appreciated.

We see firstly that human beings may experience moments of weakness and this is when they need God's help to combat such shortcomings. They need repeated reminders and regular education. These verses refer to a group of Muslims who, according to some reports, belonged to the Muhājirīn, the early Muslims who migrated with the Prophet from

Makkah to Madīnah. Whilst in Makkah, they wished, in all enthusiasm, that God would allow them to fight, but they were told to hold back and attend to their worship duties instead. However, when later in Madīnah they were told to fight, at the time that was considered appropriate, they held a different attitude: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!'*" (4: 77) Other reports suggest that they were a group of the Madīnan Muslims who asked about the action God loves most so that they could perform it. However, when they were ordered to fight for God's cause, they disliked this.

As we reflect on this, we realize that regular and repeated encouragement, directives and strengthening are all necessary for the human soul as it faces difficult tasks and responsibilities. Only with such repeated encouragement can the human soul maintain its path and overcome its weaknesses, setting its sight on higher objectives. Moreover, we realize that we must not ask to be given great goals when we face neither pressure nor difficulty. This because we may not be able to fulfil what we ask God to assign to us. Here, we see some early Muslims weakening to the extent that they say one thing and do another. Hence they faced this strong reproach from God.

Secondly, we need to reflect on the phraseology of the verse that speaks of God's love for those who fight for His cause in closed ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. This represents profound encouragement to fight for God's cause. This statement was first made to deal with a case of reluctance and turning away from fighting, but this immediate cause does not change the fact that the encouragement is meant for all times and all peoples. Hence, there is a definite and constant purpose behind it.

Islam neither likes nor encourages fighting, but it makes it a duty on Muslims because life necessitates it, and because the purpose behind it is very important. Islam presents the final version of the divine system to humanity. Although this system meets all the needs of an upright

human nature, it requires that people exert themselves to rise to its standard and maintain it. On the other hand, there are numerous forces on earth that dislike this system and try to undermine it, because it deprives those forces of many privileges that are based on values Islam considers false and which it aims to eradicate from human life. These evil forces try to exploit people's weaknesses and their slackening after they have attained the high standard to which Islam elevates them. They also exploit people's ignorance and inherited values to oppose Islam and prevent the establishment of its system. Evil can muster great forces and falsehood is wont to boast of its power; Satan is indeed wicked and cunning. Hence, the advocates of faith who try to establish the Islamic system and protect it must be strong in order to overcome the agents of evil and Satan's supporters. They must be strong in their moral values, and tough in their fighting against evil. They must resort to combat when it is the only way to guarantee the freedom of action that promotes the Islamic system, and the freedom to believe in it and implement it in human life.

They fight for God's cause, not for their own glory or for any bonds of race, nationality, tribe or clan. The aim of their fight is that God's word reigns supreme, for the Prophet says: "Whoever fights to make God's word supreme fights for God's cause." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

God's word in this context is an expression of His will. What appears to us human beings, of God's will is that which conforms to the system that operates the universe, which in its entirety glorifies God and praises Him. The final version of God's divine faith, Islam, is the one that fits perfectly with the universal system. It makes the whole universe, including human beings, implement God's law, to the exclusion of all other laws.

It was inevitable that this faith should be opposed by individuals, classes and states. It was also inevitable that Islam should proceed along its way despite such opposition. Hence, it was necessary that *Jihād* should become obligatory on Muslims in support of this faith and for the purpose of making God's word supreme on earth. Hence, God loves those who fight for His cause with complete unity of hearts and unwavering dedication.

Finally, we need to reflect a little on the description of the state fighters should be in when they undertake *Jihād* for God's cause. They should be "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is an individual's obligation discharged in a collective form, i.e. in a community with a clear system. This is because those who stand against Islam marshal their forces and try to raise great coalitions against it. Hence, the soldiers of Islam must face its enemies standing in solid and straight ranks. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that when it triumphs it moves to establish a solid community. Hence, the image of an individual believer, worshipping God on his own, striving and living alone is far removed from the nature of this faith and its duties. This is true both at the time of *Jihād* and fighting, and at a time when victory has been secured and the Islamic community established.

This condition, which God loves for believers, portrays the nature of their faith and explains for them the landmarks on their way. It illustrates the nature of the close cooperation between them as portrayed by this creative Qur'ānic image: solid ranks like a firm and compact building. It is a building in which every brick is firmly placed in position, fulfilling its specific function. The whole edifice may collapse if one of its bricks moves out of place, whether forward or backward, so as not to firmly link with the one next to it in the higher or lower row or on either of its two sides. This is an expression that shows the reality, not merely gives a simile. It raises before us the nature of the Muslim community, the relations between individuals in this community, their feelings and united action within the overall system and towards a well-defined goal.

Denounced Attitude

The *sūrah* moves on to speak about the history of this divine system and the stages it went through with the messages revealed before Islam:

> *Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before*

me, and to give news of a Messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad.' (Verses 5–6)

Moses was the one who saved the Children of Israel from Pharaoh and his tyranny. He was God's messenger to them, their leader and teacher. Yet the grief that they caused him was of the extended type, taking many colours and forms. His struggle to put them on the right course was hard, tiring and trying. In the accounts the Qur'ān gives of Moses and his people we read about the different aspects of the grief they caused him and how hard he had to struggle to reform their belief system.

For example, they discouraged Moses' efforts to persuade Pharaoh to let them go free. So whilst he exposed himself to Pharaoh's wrath, they were safe having accepted their lot and humiliation. They even blamed Moses for worsening their plight: "*We have been oppressed before you came to us, and since you have come to us.*" (7: 129) The suggestion being that they did not see much good coming their way as a result of his message, or that they blamed him for this latest round of oppression.

No sooner did Moses, guided by God, deliver them from Pharaoh's humiliation – He caused Pharaoh and his people to drown before their very eyes – than they inclined themselves to a type of worship akin to Pharaoh's people: *We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said the Children of Israel: "Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have.*" (7: 138) Again, Moses had not been gone long for the appointment with his Lord to receive the tablets when the Sāmirī led them astray as he "*produced for them the effigy of a calf, which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten.'*" (20: 88)

They were also dissatisfied with their desert food, which was manna and quails. Thus they complained to their prophet: "*Moses! We can no longer put up with one kind of food. Pray to your Lord, then, to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of green herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions.*" (2: 61) Mention should also be made here of the cow they were required to slaughter, yet they continued to demand explanations, seeking excuses and behaving impolitely to their prophet and to their

Lord. Time after time they said to Moses: "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.*" (2: 68) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.*" (2: 69) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike.*" (2: 70) When finally they ran out of excuses, "*They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.*" (2: 71)

They requested that a day be assigned to them when they would not work. But when the Sabbath was ordained for them, they violated its rules. Later, when they were close to the Holy Land, which God told them they would enter, they stalled, not daring to go forward, while at the same time they spoke insolently to Moses: "*Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter.*" (5: 22) He kept encouraging them, assuring them of the great success awaiting them, if they would only do what God had bidden them to do. Nonetheless, their insolence and disbelief reached new heights: "*They said, Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here.*" (5: 24)

They gave Moses much more grief, putting questions to him, making suggestions, and even starting a rebellion. Furthermore, as related in *aḥādīth*, they also falsely accused him. The *sūrah* mentions here how Moses remonstrated with them in a friendly way: "*My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?*" (Verse 5) They knew for certain that he was God's messenger, but he did not put this fact across in a strong and assertive way. Rather, he simply gave them a remonstrating reminder. The result was that they swerved from the right way after being given every possible means of sticking to it. Hence, God let them go further astray and their hearts were no longer fit to receive guidance. "*God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5) Thus their trusteeship of the divine faith was over. They were no longer fit to carry God's message after they had gone so far astray.

Then Jesus came, saying: "*Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you.*" (Verse 6) He did not say to them that he was God or the son of God or a manifestation of God. He was simply a messenger sent "*to*

confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." (Verse 6)

Thus we see how the divine faith moved from one stage to the next, with all the stages interrelated, moving in the same direction, stretching from heaven to the earth: a long chain moving from link to link. This is the proper image, one worthy of God's design and constitution. It is basically the same approach, taking slightly different forms, according to what suits the needs, experience, knowledge and potential of humanity at each particular stage, until it reaches full maturity. Only then does the last stage arrive and the final form of divine faith be given: perfect, complete, addressing a mature mind that has benefited from all past experience. It opens the way so that the human mind works to its full potential within the method set for man and his abilities.

That Jesus gave the news of the impending arrival of Aḥmad, (another name of the Prophet Muḥammad), is absolutely confirmed by this verse, whether the Gospels mention this or not. Note also that the circumstances surrounding the writing of these Gospels and the way they were written make them totally unreliable on this issue.

The Qur'ān was read to the Jews and Christians in the Arabian Peninsula, including the verse that speaks of the Prophet Muḥammad as "*the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel.*" (7: 157) Some of their genuine scholars who embraced Islam, such as 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām, acknowledged this fact, but they counselled each other to suppress.

Several reports also confirm that the Jews were awaiting the arrival of a new messenger; this was considered imminent. The same was stated by a number of Christian priests in Arabia who were unitarians, living in isolation. But the Jews wanted this messenger to be one of their own. When God so willed that he should belong to the other branch of Abraham's seed, the Jews disliked and opposed this. Needless to say, the Qur'ānic statement is the ultimate verdict on such matters. It is the final say.

Trying to Extinguish God's Light

It seems that the verses that follow are mostly concerned with the way the Jews and the Christians received the Prophet mentioned in their

scriptures. They are denounced for the reception they gave Muḥammad and for their designs to undermine the new and final message God willed to prevail over all other religions:

> *But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.* (Verses 6–8)

The Jews' attitude to this new faith was a combination of hostility, evil scheming and misrepresentation. They waged a determined fight against Islam, using all means and resources, and this has continued to the present day. They levelled charges against it: "*when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: This is plain sorcery.*" (Verse 6) This echoes the allegations of idolaters who had no scriptures and had no advance news of the new faith. The Jews also sought to create discord within the Muslim community. In particular, they tried to create division between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār in Madīnah, and between the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. They conspired with the hypocrites at times and with the idolaters at others. They also joined with the idolaters' attack on Madīnah, as happened in the Battle of the Moat. Their designs against the new faith also included spreading false rumours, as happened in what is known as the story of falsehood in which the main culprit was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl. Later, they used the same tactics in the events masterminded by 'Abdullāh ibn Saba', which led to the assassination of 'Uthmān, the third Caliph. Thereafter, they tried further to undermine Islam with the fabrications and false stories they managed to infiltrate into *ḥadīth*, the reports of the history of the Prophet and the books of commentary on the Qur'ān. All this after they found themselves totally incapable of implanting any falsehood into the Qur'ān itself.

This war has continued unabated until the present day. Zionism and Christian imperialism have continued to scheme against Islam, launching or supporting aggression against Islam in every generation.

They launched the Crusades against the Muslim east, and they fought against the Muslims in Andalus in the west. They also fought against Islam in its central area launching one attack after another against the last Caliphate, i.e. the Ottoman Caliphate, which they called 'the sick man of Europe', until they managed to destroy it and divide its provinces. They needed to create false heroes in the land of Islam to carry out their schemes against it. When they needed to destroy the Caliphate as the last symbol of Islamic rule, they created in Turkey a national 'hero' and groomed his image. Thus, the Allied forces, which were in control of the Ottoman capital, retreated before his army in order to make him a great hero. In this way was he able to abolish the Caliphate regime and the Arabic language, and to separate Turkey from the rest of the Muslim world making of it a secular state. The Jews and Christians continue to create such false heroes whenever they feel the need to smash an Islamic movement in any Muslim country and replace Islamic ties with other bonds.

"*They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) This verse expresses a fact and paints a pathetic image of those enemies of Islam. It is true that they used to say about the Prophet and his message, '*This is plain sorcery*'. It is also true that they continued to scheme against Islam, trying to undermine it. It is a pathetic picture we see of them as they try to extinguish God's light with a blow from their mouths. How naïve and weak they are!

"*But God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) There is no doubt that God's promise will always come true. He brought His light to fullness during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), when the Muslim community came into being as a living and practical representation of the system He had chosen for mankind. It was a well-defined religion with clearly delineated features so that future generations could follow in its footsteps. It was a fact of history, not a theory explained in books. He also brought His light to fullness when he perfected the favour He bestowed on Muslims, choosing Islam as their religion and making it complete. Thus, they loved their religion and were keen to fight for its cause. Anyone of them would prefer to be thrown in a fire rather than

revert to disbelief. Thus the truth of the faith lived in people's hearts and in their world. This truth continues to spring up time after time, showing that it continues to live in spite of all the sustained aggression, repeated scheming and unabated persecution campaigns waged against Islam and its followers. The fact is that God's light cannot be extinguished by people's mouths, nor can it be stifled by fire and iron-fisted tactics to which some small people resort. It may appear to tyrants, stooges made up as heroes and to Zionists that they can achieve this goal and put out God's light, but all their efforts will come to nothing.

It is God's will that this religion should prevail. Hence, it is inevitable that it will:

> *It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters.* (Verse 9)

That God testifies that this religion of Islam is '*guidance and the religion of truth*' is the final word. God's will has been fulfilled, and this religion has prevailed over all other religions. It has prevailed by its very nature as a religion. No other religion compares with it in its nature. Pagan and idolatrous religions cannot stand up to it for a moment. Divine religions, on the other hand, find it as their final and complete version. So, in essence, Islam is the perfect and complete version of these faiths, and it will preserve its pure form for the rest of time.

Earlier divine religions were distorted by omissions and additions. Thus, they became unfit to lead human life in any direction. Even if they had remained free of distortion, they are no more than earlier versions of the divine faith which did not cater for ever-increasing life requirements, because they were intended by God to serve for a limited time only.

This shows that God's promise has come true from the viewpoint of the nature of faith. As for real life, God's promise was fulfilled at one time when Islam gained power and established its own system of government. Within one century, most of the populated world came under its rule. Then it moved peacefully into Asia and Africa to win, through advocacy efforts, more than five times the numbers who embraced it during the early *Jihād* efforts. It continues to spread without having a single state implementing it fully, after Zionism and Christian imperialism

destroyed the last Caliphate in Turkey at the hands of the 'hero' they manufactured for this purpose. It continues to spread by God's grace, despite all the schemes devised to stop its march and undermine it, and the persecution of Islamic revivalist movements everywhere at the hands of other 'heroes' Zionism and imperialism create.

This religion will continue to have other roles to fulfil in the life of humanity. It will prevail in fulfilment of God's promise. Human efforts cannot stop God's will, no matter how powerful they may be or how wicked their schemes of misrepresentation are.

These verses served as motivation to the believers to carry the trust for which God has chosen them, after it was abandoned by the Jews and Christians who were not true to it. These verses reassure the believers that they are simply the means of fulfilling God's will. They continue to provide such motivation and reassurance to new believers who are certain that God's promise will always come true. They will give new generations the same motives and reassurance until God's promise comes to be fulfilled in people's real life once more, God willing.

A Most Profitable Bargain

When the history of faith has thus been outlined and the inevitable triumph the final version of the divine faith has been promised, the Qur'ān addresses the believers – those living at the time and those of later generations – offering them the bargain of their lives. This is a transaction in which the merchandise is faith and the means to achieve it is *Jihād*:

> *Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.* (Verses 10–13)

The style employed here uses a variety of forms, such as splitting sentences and reconnecting them, putting forward a question and providing the answer, inversion and transposition all aiming to drive a certain message home. The address starts in the name of faith, "*Believers!*" It is followed by an inspiring question. It is God who puts the question and holds their expectation of an answer: "*Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering?*"

Who would not wish to know what this bargain is and what its terms are! Yet here the verse ends, providing a break between two sentences to add to the expectation. The answer is given when interest in it has been heightened: "*You are to believe in God and His Messenger.*" Since they were truly believers in God and His Messenger, they are happy that this part of the answer is already met by them. "*And to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives.*" This is the main theme of the *sūrah*, and it is given here in this particular fashion to reiterate a message that has already been clarified. God knows that human beings need such repetition and variety of modes and styles in order to rise to the occasion. Realizing this, they will exert their maximum efforts to establish and preserve the divine system.

The *sūrah* goes further, presenting the bargain in an even more attractive way: "*This is for your own good, if you but knew it.*" Knowledge of the truth will encourage the person who knows it to try to obtain this beneficial matter. But the thing that is referred to as being good for us is given in more detail in the next verse. This again heightens the effect even further; providing the details after a general statement drives the point home and makes it even more desirable. "*He will forgive you your sins.*" On its own, this is more than enough. Who would need any further reward when he is assured of God's forgiveness? Who would begrudge anything if he is certain to obtain God's forgiveness? But God's grace has no limit, for the reward also includes something for the life to come. God "*will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden.*" This is the most profitable bargain of all, because all that is needed for this deal to be concluded is that a believer should fight for God's cause during his short life on earth. Even if this means him losing his life in this fight, he will be compensated for it with heaven and these goodly mansions where he lives in permanent bliss. "*That is the supreme triumph!*"

The account of this transaction appears to conclude here. It is indeed a highly profitable bargain which the believer makes, bartering the life of this world for that of the hereafter. A person who receives a profit ten times his capital will be the envy of everyone in the marketplace. What about one who puts up a few days of life on earth and its limited and narrow comforts to earn an eternal life with God in pure happiness and enjoyment that knows no end?

The deal was concluded between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah on the night when the Anṣār (the Prophet's Companions from Madīnah) pledged their support to him. 'Abdullāh said to the Prophet: "Make whatever conditions you wish, for yourself and for your Lord." He said: "My condition for my Lord is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And my condition for myself is that you pledge you will protect me as you protect your own womenfolk and children." 'Abdullāh said: "What will our reward be if we honour our commitments?" The Prophet said: "Paradise." They said: "It is a profitable bargain. We will never seek release from our commitments, nor do we accept any cancellation."

God's grace is limitless. He knows that human beings always look for something close, in this world, which fits human nature. Therefore, He gives them the happy news of what He has determined of making this religion of Islam prevail in this world, and making its system and code triumph in the life of that same generation: "*And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.*" (Verse 13)

At this point, the bargain attains the point of supreme returns which only God, whose stores are endless, and whose grace is interminable, can give. What He gives in return, then, are forgiveness, heaven, goodly dwelling and eternal bliss, but in addition to all such profits He gives a soon-to-happen victory. Who would hold back, hesitate when God tells him of this bargain?

With all this temptation and goodly prospects, a thought may well occur to us. A believer who knows the Islamic concept of life and the universe, and appreciates the great horizons this concept opens up before us, and then looks at life without faith, with its narrow concerns and lowly levels, cannot tolerate life without faith even for a moment. He

will not hesitate for a second in joining the struggle for God's cause in order to establish the great concept of faith in real life, so that he may live with the rest of mankind in its superior reality. It may be that he would not need to have any reward other than such a life, because the struggle for God's cause is, in itself, a reward, giving us contentment and happiness in this life. Moreover, such a believer cannot live in a world devoid of faith, and cannot sit idle, not striving to establish a world governed by faith. Thus, he is strongly motivated to struggle, no matter what happens to him as a result.

Echoing Jesus' Appeal

God, however, knows that people may slacken, and that enthusiasm may dampen, efforts may wane and love of safety may lead people to accept the *status quo*, even though its level is too low. Hence, the Qur'ān administers this treatment, providing motivation and images to enhance feelings and enthusiasm, making use of every occasion and possible means to appeal to human hearts and souls. It does not rely merely on faith or on one mode of address in the name of this faith. Hence, the *sūrah* ends with a new and distinctive address, and one that carries new appeal:

> *Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.' And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.* (Verse 14)

The disciples were Jesus Christ's pupils. It is said that they were 12 men who were close to him and who dedicated themselves to learning from him. They continued to spread his message and commandments after his term was over. This verse does not give us a detailed story: it simply outlines an attitude. Hence, we look at it in the context it is given and for the purpose it serves.

"*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God.*" (Verse 14) Place yourselves in this noble position to which He elevates you. Is there a position that

is higher and more noble than that of being a supporter of God and His cause? This bargain bestows an honour that is greater than heaven and its happiness: be helpers of God, "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" (Verse 14) They were chosen for this task and earned this honour. Jesus came to give the news of the last Prophet and the last religion. It is only fitting that Muḥammad's followers should be chosen for this permanent task, just as Christ's disciples were chosen for it during their period of time. This is clearly apparent in the way the dialogue is presented in this verse.

But what was the result then? "*Some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14) This statement may be interpreted in one of two ways: either the believers in Christ's message are all Christians, whether they remained faithful to its original form or they are those whose faith was subject to distortion. God supported them over the Jews who did not believe in Him at all, as known from history. Or the believers were only those who continued to believe in God's oneness in defiance of those who gave Jesus divine status, those who believed in the Trinity, or those who deviated in some other way. The believers prevailed in argument, giving irrefutable evidence. Alternatively, we may understand the verse as meaning that those who continued to believe in God's oneness were supported by the last religion that endorsed their beliefs. God has made the final victory assured to this religion, as happened in history. This last sense is perhaps the most probable.

The aim of this last address is to strengthen the resolve of the believers in the last religion, the heirs of the divine message. They are the ones charged with a great task, namely the implementation of God's system on earth. They are encouraged to come forward to support God's cause: "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" Eventual victory is assured for believers who support God's cause.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that fits the general context and drift of the *sūrah*, yet has a special colour and effect. It enriches an already rich variety of colours and effects.

SŪRAH 62

Al-Jumu ʿah
(The Congregation)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed after *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks, and whilst both deal with the same theme, the current chapter nonetheless takes a different approach, using a different style and different effects. It aims to drive home to the Muslim community in Madīnah that it has been chosen to undertake responsibility for the divine faith. It wants the Muslim community to understand that to be in such a position of trust is a great favour God has bestowed on it. It also wants them to understand that by God choosing His last Messenger from among the Arabs is yet another great favour, one that merits a proper expression of gratitude to God. In this context, the *sūrah* provides certain duties that must be fulfilled by the people who responded to God's Messenger and who accepted the trust. Both the community and the trust are to continue across generations, without fail, because God has determined that the seed planted by the Prophet will continue to grow. The Muslim community has taken over the trust abandoned and neglected by the Children of Israel. They severed their relation with heaven so as to carry the Torah in the same way as an ass would carry books.

The *sūrah* drives this fundamental truth home to Muslims in general, starting in particular with the first Muslim community in Madīnah, which was responsible for implementing a practical model of the Islamic

system. It also applies to all future Muslim generations, as the *sūrah* clearly indicates.

At the same time, the *sūrah* addresses certain situations relevant to that first Muslim community, during its long and elaborate transformation process in accordance with Islamic requirements. This process involved the elimination of a host of hindrances, such as a keenness to make quick material gains and other temptations relating to money. These were to be replaced by proper awareness of the great trust assigned to the Muslim community. The *sūrah* also refers to a particular incident when the Prophet was once delivering his Friday sermon. A trade caravan had arrived at the same time, and the moment people learned of this, they left the mosque to take part in the music and entertainment that traditionally accompanied a caravan's arrival. According to some reports, only 12 of the Prophet's Companions, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar, remained listening to his sermon. Whilst these reports may not be very accurate as regards the numbers they mention, nonetheless the departure of some people from the mosque was certain. Hence, it merited this mention in the Qur'ān.

This incident demonstrates the great effort exerted in the cultivation of that first Muslim community's fine manners and behaviour, this until it achieved a lofty standard, making it a unique example in the history of Islam and mankind generally. In this way, the *sūrah* teaches us to always remain patient when we try to build the Islamic character in any community.

The *sūrah* also includes an invitation to the Jews to a mutual prayer wishing death for those who advocate falsehood. This comes in reply to their claims that they were God's only friends and His chosen people and that God's Messenger must be one of them. The *sūrah* confirms their unwillingness to accept such an invitation because they felt that the Muslims' claims were unfounded. The *sūrah* comments that death, from which such people try to escape, will inevitably catch up with them. They will be returned to God who knows all, and He will tell them the truth of their doings. This statement does not, however, only apply to the Jews. Rather, the *sūrah* facilitates its appreciation by believers as well. They too must realize this fact in order to be able to discharge the duties assigned to them as advocates of God's message.

I

The Day of Congregation

Al-Jumu'ah
(The Congregation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ
الْمَلِكِ الْقُدُّوسِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿١﴾

It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, (2)

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ
يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي
ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿٢﴾

to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise. (3)

وَآخَرِينَ مِنْهُمْ لَمَّا يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ ۚ
وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤﴾

Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours. (4)

مَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا۟ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ ٱلْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًۢا ۚ بِئْسَ مَثَلُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers. (5)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُوٓا۟ إِن زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ لِلَّهِ مِن دُونِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوُا۟ ٱلْمَوْتَ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' (6)

وَلَا يَتَمَنَّوْنَهُۥٓ أَبَدًۢا بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. (7)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْمَوْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَفِرُّونَ مِنْهُ فَإِنَّهُۥ مُلَٰقِيكُمْ ثُمَّ تُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.' (8)

Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نُودِىَ لِلصَّلَوٰةِ مِن يَوْمِ ٱلْجُمُعَةِ فَٱسْعَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ وَذَرُوا۟ ٱلْبَيْعَ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. (10)

فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةُ فَٱنتَشِرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱذْكُرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.' (11)

وَإِذَا رَأَوْا۟ تِجَٰرَةً أَوْ لَهْوًا ٱنفَضُّوٓا۟ إِلَيْهَا وَتَرَكُوكَ قَآئِمًا ۚ قُلْ مَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهْوِ وَمِنَ ٱلتِّجَٰرَةِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَيْرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ﴿١١﴾

A Universal Glorification

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* starts with a statement confirming the fact that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, adding a number of His attributes that have a subtle bearing on the theme of the *sūrah*. The *sūrah* is given the name *al-Jumu'ah*, meaning Friday, and it gives instructions about the special congregational prayer on that day, identifying that its time should be dedicated to remembrance of God. All distractions and business should be abandoned in pursuit of what is with God, which is better than everything else. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions God's attribute, the Sovereign, who owns everything. This is relevant to business, since

all trade normally seeks profit. The *sūrah* also states that God is Holy; He who is revered and glorified by all creatures in the universe. This attribute of God's contrasts with the entertainment mortals seek, distracting them from His remembrance. This opening verse also mentions that God is Almighty, which is relevant to the invitation made to the Jews for mutual prayer, and also to the death that is bound to happen to all. The last of God's attributes mentioned in this opening is His wisdom. Such divine wisdom determined the choice of the unlettered people from among whom God's last Messenger was selected to declare to them God's revelations, purify them and teach them the scriptures and wisdom.

The Messenger's Terms of Reference

Having started with this sublime glorification of God's limitless glory, the *sūrah* goes straight to its main theme:

> *It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 2–3)

It is said that the Arabs were called *ummiyyūn*, or 'unlettered', because the great majority of them could neither read nor write. It is reported that the Prophet once defined how many days there are in a month, joining his two hands and pointing with his ten fingers three times, and saying: "We are an unlettered community: we neither reckon figures nor write." It is also said that a person who does not write is called *ummī*, meaning he is the same as when his mother, or *umm*, gave birth to him. Writing is something that is only learnt when a child grows up.

Alternatively, the Arabs might have been called Goyim, a Hebrew form by which the Jews called all non-Jews, and meaning Gentiles. Thus the word *ummiyyūn* becomes a form of *umamiyyūn*, which means 'belonging to other communities or nations'. Thus they distinguished themselves as God's chosen people, while the rest of mankind are Gentiles. Perhaps this suggestion is closer to the theme of the *sūrah*.

The Jews were awaiting a final Messenger from God who would arise from among themselves, uniting them after they had been divided into divergent groups, giving them power and leading them to victory. They used to tell the Arabs that he was soon to come. In His infinite wisdom, God chose an Arab as His last Messenger, i.e. a Gentile, because He knew that the Jews no longer had the qualities necessary to provide mankind's new leadership. Indeed, they had long deviated and were deep in error, as stated in *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks. Hence, they were no longer capable of being entrusted with God's message.

Moreover, in earlier times Abraham and his son Ishmael had said a prayer as they worked on building the Ka'bah: "*Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.*" (2: 127–129) Addressed centuries earlier, this prayer remained with God to be answered at the appropriate time, according to God's wisdom. Only then would it fulfil its role within the overall plan God has set in place for the universe. In this plan nothing occurs earlier or later than its appropriate time.

This prayer was answered in its exact wording, which is repeated here in this *sūrah*, reminding us of Abraham's own words: "*A Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" (Verse 2). Even God's attributes mentioned in Abraham's prayer are used at the end of these verses to remind the Muslim community of God's favours: "*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3)

When the Prophet was asked about himself, his answer was: "I am the answer to Abraham's, my father's, prayer, and the good news given by Jesus. When my mother was pregnant, she saw a light coming out of her, lighting before her the palaces of Buṣrā in Syria."

"*It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 2) The favour God has granted to these unlettered people is evident: He chose them to hold the trust embodied in His final message and sent them a Messenger from among themselves to elevate them to a noble position. He took them out of their state of ignorance, highlighted in their being unlettered, giving them instructions in God's book and in wisdom. Thus, their situation changed completely, clearly making them distinguished among all other people on earth.

"*To purify them.*" What the Prophet gave them was far-reaching purification. He purified their feelings and consciences, their actions and behaviour, their marital and family lives as also their social lives. Their purification meant that they rose from the depths of idolatrous beliefs to believing in God's oneness, from erroneous concepts and enigmatic legends to the true and clear faith, from disgraceful immorality to the clean moral values propounded by Islam, from the filthy gains of usury and fraud to clean and legitimate earnings. It was a total purification of the individual and the community, of inner feelings and outward life. Such purification elevates man and his concepts, his role and existence to the high horizon of maintaining his bond with God and with the community on high.

"*To instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" When they are thus instructed, they become the holders of a divine book. They thus learn how to evaluate matters properly. They can also make accurate judgements and define their course in life in the light of such wisdom.

"*Yet before that they were indeed in manifest error.*" (Verse 2) During their pre-Islamic days, they were certainly in manifest error. Their situation is best described by Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib when he was questioned about Islam by Negus, the King of Abyssinia. A number of Muslims had migrated there when the Prophet wanted to establish a new base for Islam. The Quraysh, in turn, had also sent a delegation led by 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ to request their extradition. 'Amr tried to paint a distorted picture of the Muslim immigrants to the king, but the Negus wanted to listen to their version. In this context, Ja'far said to him:

> In our recent past we were ignorant people: we worshipped idols, ate carrion, committed all sorts of sins, attached little value to maintaining good relations with our kinsfolk and behaved badly

to our neighbours. Our overruling maxim was that might was right. This continued to be our situation until God sent us, from among ourselves, a Messenger whose good name, honesty, sincerity and integrity were well known to us. He called on us to believe in God, the one and only God, and to stop worshipping all idols which we and our forefathers used to worship alongside Him. He commanded us always to speak the truth and be honest, to be good to our relatives and neighbours, to preserve life and shed no blood, to refrain from sin, perjury, robbing the property of orphans entrusted to our care, and making false accusations against honourable women. He also commanded us to devote our worship to God alone, ascribing to Him no partners of any sort. He further commanded us to pray regularly, to give away certain purifying alms and to fast, etc.[1]

Worthy of Trust

Despite all their negative qualities during their pre-Islamic days, God knew that the Arabs were the ones to be entrusted with the new faith and that they would be true to their trust. He was also aware of their great potential once they were put on the right way. They could use all this potential for their new faith, whereas the Israelites no longer had it. The latter had endured humiliation for a long time in Egypt under Pharaonic rule. As a result they portrayed many aspects of deviation and ill feeling. Indeed, they were unable to rid themselves of these negative effects, whether during Moses' lifetime, or later. Hence, they incurred God's anger and deserved to be expelled from His grace. He, therefore, removed the trust of His faith from them for the rest of human life.

In His perfect and absolute knowledge, God knew that the Arabian Peninsula was the best cradle for His new faith. This was a faith that aimed to liberate the whole world from the erroneous ways of ignorance and rid it of the decadence that had eaten deep into the great civilizations,

1. Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicestershire, 2002, p. 129.

leaving them hollow. At that time, the state of the world was very low, as described by J.H. Denison, a European writer:

> In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...
>
> It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...
>
> It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

This is the view of an European author, but from the Islamic perspective, conditions looked far darker and gloomier. God chose a Bedouin nation in a largely desert peninsula to be entrusted with His faith, knowing that once put on the right course, their mentality

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently, the author relied on a quoted text in a book by an Indian author which was translated into Arabic. It may be that the original quotation was an abridged one, and it may be that when it was translated, some variation of emphasis occurred in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the flow of the author's meaning. – Editor's note.

and qualities would enable them to shoulder this great responsibility. Moreover, they had the potential to willingly deliver great sacrifices for their faith. Therefore, He raised His last Messenger among them, to recite His revelations to them, purify them and instruct them in His book and in wisdom, thus ridding them of all traces of their old, greatly erroneous ways.

"*To them and to others yet to join them.*" (Verse 3) We have several reports explaining who these others are. Al-Bukhārī relates on Abū Hurayrah's authority: "We were sitting with the Prophet when *Sūrah al-Jumu'ah*, or The Congregation, was revealed to him, including the statement, '*to them and to others yet to join them*'. People asked who were these, but the Prophet did not answer until they had repeated their question three times. Salmān the Persian was among us. The Prophet put his hand on Salmān and said: 'Were faith to be at the top of the sky, some people or a man from among his community would attain it'." This authentic *ḥadīth* makes clear that this Qur'ānic statement includes the Persians. Hence, in his commentary on this verse, Mujāhid says: "This is a reference to all non-Arabs who believe in the Prophet."

Another *ḥadīth* is reported by Sahl ibn Sa'd who quotes the Prophet as saying: "Among the seed of the seed of the seed of men and women in my community there are some who will be admitted into heaven without having to face any reckoning of their deeds. He then quoted the verse that says: '*to them and to others yet to join them*'." This means that these belong to much later generations of Muslims.

Both these interpretations are valid. The Qur'ānic statement refers to people other than the Arabs, and to ones other than the generation that witnessed the revelation of the Qur'ān. It indicates that the Muslim community transcends both geographical area and generational context. It continues to be true to its great trust, faithful to the full form of the divine faith.

"*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3) He is able to choose as He pleases, and in His wisdom He is fully aware of the most appropriate choices. His choice, of both the earlier and the later generations, means a great honour to those thus chosen: "*Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours.*" (Verse 4)

God's choice of a community or an individual to be responsible for the great truth, to receive the light that emanates from Him, to be the link between the earth and heaven, is a favour of unparalleled proportions. It exceeds by far any sacrifices such an individual or community may give, in wealth, effort and life. It outweighs all the trouble they may undertake, the opposition they have to encounter and the hard struggle they have to endure. God thus reminds the Muslim community in Madīnah, as well as those who will come after it, of the great favour He has granted them when He chose them for this task, sending them a Messenger to purify them and instruct them in the divine book and in wisdom. God's Messenger also left a great wealth of wisdom for future generations, whereby they learn from the practical example of that first Muslim community.

One Role Ended

The *sūrah* then adds a statement that implies that the Israelites' role as trustees of God's message has ended. Their hearts are no longer alert, dedicated and active enough to enable them to live up to the trust they were once given:

> *Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.* (Verse 5)

The Israelites were entrusted with the Torah, and charged with being true to the faith and the divine law, but they '*failed to do so*'. The initial duty of this trust is to formulate a thorough and correct understanding of the divine message, and then to implement it both within one's own life and in human life at large. Yet the history of the Israelites, as it was in the true picture painted in the Qur'ān, indicates that they did not appreciate the trust given to them. They neither understood its nature nor were they true to it. As such, they were like the example given in the *sūrah*: "*Like an ass that carries a load of books*". The ass benefits nothing by the books it carries. It only feels their heavy load. This is a miserable picture, but

it represents a true situation: "*Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 5)

Likewise are all those who were given the trust of divine faith but who failed to live up to it. Muslims across many generations, as well as those living today, who have Muslim names but who fail to live up to what Islam requires, and particularly those who read the Qur'ān and Islamic books but fall short of what is required of them, are indeed like the ass carrying a load of heavy books. Unfortunately, these are numerous. The question is not that of books being carried: it is a question of understanding the books and putting into practice the teachings they impart.

The Israelites used always to allege that they were God's chosen people and His beloved race, while all others are Goyim or Gentiles. They claimed that in their position they were not required to observe the laws of their own religion in their dealings with the rest of mankind: "*For they say: "We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles." Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie.*" (3: 75) They made many other false allegations, providing no evidence in support of them. Therefore, the *sūrah* invites them to make a mutual prayer. This invitation was also made on other occasions to Christian and pagan groups:

> *Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'* (Verses 6–8)

What this invitation entails is that the two groups stand together face to face and they all pray to God to inflict punishment on the group upholding falsehood. All groups the Prophet invited to such mutual prayer feared to do so; essentially, they refused to take up the challenge. This indicates that deep inside they realized that what the Prophet said was the truth and that his faith was true. "Ibn 'Abbās reports that Abū

Jahl once said: 'If I see Muḥammad praying at the Ka'bah, I will go to him and put my foot on his neck.' When the Prophet heard this, he said: 'Had he tried to do so, the angels would have taken him away in broad daylight. Had the Jews wished for death, they would have died and seen their places in hell.' Also true is that had those invited to mutual prayer stood against the Prophet in such prayer, they would have returned home to find their families and properties perished." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.]

These verses may only represent a challenge to them, rather than an invitation to mutual prayer. Since they alleged that they were God's only friends among all mankind, why would they fear death, and reveal themselves to be so cowardly? If their claims were true, they would be in a position of favour with God after they die. So why does the prospect of death fill them with fear? This challenge is followed by a statement making it clear that their claims were untrue. They were aware that they had not done enough good deeds to ensure a good position with God or to hope for His reward. On the contrary, they often indulged in sin, and such indulgences made them fear death and what comes after it. A person who has not prepared for his journey will always be in fear of what may happen along the road: "*But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 7)

A statement follows that establishes the nature of death and what comes after it. It shows them that their attempts to escape from death are of little use. It will inevitably overtake them. After death, all will return to God where they will have their deeds reckoned and where they will face the consequences of the same: "*Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'*" (Verses 8)

This Qur'ānic statement makes clear to the addressees and to everyone else the truth that people often overlook and prefer not to think about, despite facing it all the time: namely, this life is bound to end. To stay away from God during one's lifetime will not avert a person from returning to Him, for there is no refuge from God except by returning to Him. The reckoning of everyone's deeds will inevitably follow this

return. There is simply no escape. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "A person who tries to run away from death is like a fox who owes a debt to the earth. He went out roaming until he was exhausted and bleeding. When he went into his hole, the earth said to him: 'Fox! Repay the debt you owe me.' He went out again wounded. He continued to bleed and his neck was cut. He then died." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This *ḥadīth* so delivers a highly moving and effective picture.

The Congregation on Friday

The last section of the *sūrah* provides certain teachings concerning Friday and its congregational prayer. It refers to an event that might have been repeated; given the way it is described suggests such repetition:

> *Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.'* (Verses 9–11)

Friday Prayer is a weekly prayer that must be offered in congregation. It cannot be offered by anyone on his own. Muslims meet in Friday Prayer and listen to a sermon that reminds them of their duties towards God. We can say that it is an organizational prayer, following the Islamic method of preparing for this life and the life to come together by the same measures and the same acts of worship. Friday Prayer gives a clear and specific impression of the nature of the Islamic faith and the Muslim community, which we explained in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, The Ranks.

There are many *aḥādīth* that speak of the value, importance and special position of this prayer, encouraging its observation after preparing for it by undertaking specific cleanliness and purification rituals. Ibn 'Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "When any of you wishes to attend Friday

Prayer, he should take a bath." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Aws ibn Aws quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever washes himself and takes a bath on Friday, going out early, walking to the mosque rather than riding, draws close to the imam, listens and refrains from idle talk, will be rewarded for each step the equivalent of fasting and observing night prayer for a whole year." [Related by al-Nasā'ī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.] Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī that he heard the Prophet saying: "Whoever takes a bath on Friday, wears a touch of perfume if he has it, puts on some of his best clothes, goes out to the mosque where he offers voluntary prayers if he so wishes, doing no harm to anyone, listens to the imam when he delivers his sermon and then joins the prayer, all his sins between that prayer and the Friday before it will be forgiven."

The first verse in this section orders Muslims to leave off all business once they hear the call to prayer: "*Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading.*" (Verse 9) It provides encouragement for so abandoning anything related to the life of this world and its concerns: "*This is best for you, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 9) This suggests that leaving off trade and business was not easy; it required such encouragement. Moreover, it provides good and repeated education. Every now and then, people need a period of time when they free themselves from their preoccupation with earning a living and the attractions of worldly life. They need such periods when they can be in close contact with their Lord, glorifying Him and experiencing the happiness resulting from dedication to His service. They need to fill their hearts and lungs with the pure, clean and refreshing air that comes with such dedication.

When they have done so, they can then return to their business, continuing to remember God: "*When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful.*" (Verse 10) The Islamic system provides a perfect balance between the needs of life on earth, with all that it requires of work and effort, and the need to be away from all this for a short while to attend to worship. Time spent away from the preoccupations of this life is necessary to keep the heart alive. Without it, it cannot live up to the great trust God has given us and nor can it fulfil its duties. It is

important to remember God while we are busy earning our living, for such remembrance transforms our work activities into acts of worship. Nevertheless, we need such short periods of complete dedication to worship, as clearly implied in the last two verses.

'Irāk ibn Mālik, a Companion of the Prophet, used to stand near the door of the mosque after Friday Prayer and say: "My Lord! I have responded to Your call, offered the prayer You made obligatory, and I am dispersing as You have commanded me. Give me of Your bounty, for You are the best of providers." [Related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim.] These words show us how such a person treated the matter seriously but also in a very simple way. The verses give orders and these orders are carried out to the letter. Such a clear, simple and yet serious understanding is perhaps the secret behind the first Muslim community's rise to the high level it achieved, despite all the distractions it had to deal with, as described in the last verse: "*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.*" (Verse 11)

Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh reports: "We were attending the prayer with the Prophet when a caravan carrying food arrived. People flocked to it, and only 12 men remained with the Prophet, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar. God then revealed the verse that says: '*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there*'." The verse makes clear that what is with God is better than trade and entertainment. It reminds them that all that they have is provided by God who is the best of providers.

This event shows the great effort that was needed in order to mould the community that rose to the highest level achieved by any community of believers in human history. It also encourages those who advocate God's message in all generations to remain patient. They are bound to encounter weaknesses, for human beings often yield and fall prey to temptation. Yet they must remember that man is also able to rise to sublime standards of purity and dedication. What is needed to help such a rise is patience, proper understanding, perseverance and entertaining no thoughts of quitting midway.

SŪRAH 63

Al-Munāfiqūn

(The Hypocrites)

Prologue

Although the title *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, indicates this *sūrah*'s subject matter, it is nonetheless not the only one that mentions hypocrisy and that describes the hypocrites' wicked scheming. Indeed, hardly any of the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah is without an express or implied reference to hypocrisy. However, the present *sūrah* is dedicated, almost entirely, to speaking about the hypocrites, referring to particular events and statements they made. The *sūrah* launches a strong attack against the hypocrites: their manners, lies, intrigue and wicked plots. It exposes their true feelings of hatred towards the Muslims, as also their cowardice and evil nature.

A warning is given at the end to the believers not to allow any of the characteristics of hypocrisy to creep near them. The first element of hypocrisy is not to be totally dedicated to God's cause, and to be instead preoccupied with money, property and children. Hypocrisy also entails slackening when invited to contribute financially to God's cause until a day comes when no such donation will be of any use.

The unbelievers' hypocrisy accelerated when Islam moved to Madīnah and continued to so grow until virtually the end of the Prophet's blessed life. Although evidence of such traits was almost uninterrupted, hypocrisy nonetheless acquired different aspects and

variously resorted to different tactics. Inevitably, such behaviour had a strong bearing on the events of the period, taking up much of the Muslim community's efforts, time and energy. Indeed, hypocrisy is frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*, thereby indicating how prevalent it had become.

In his biography of the Prophet, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah, devotes a fine chapter to this issue. The following paragraphs are especially revealing:

> There were obvious reasons for the phenomenon of hypocrisy to appear in Madīnah. The early Muslims in Makkah were neither strong enough nor influential enough to make a group of people fear them or try to appease them. Indeed, the people of Makkah, and its leaders and notables in particular, opposed the Prophet in a very open manner, inflicting much harm on the Muslims, and resorted to any measure within their means to check the new religion's advance In fact, they commanded much power. Because of this persecution the Muslims were subjected to some had to migrate to Abyssinia, and thereafter to Madīnah. In fact, some of them were subjected to such unbearable pressure that they had to renounce their faith: this as a result of either torture or the lure of temptation. So extreme did this become that a few even died under torture.
>
> In Madīnah, the situation was markedly different. Prior to his migration there, the Prophet was able to recruit a number of strong and influential followers from the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. He migrated only after having made sure of the favourable situation there. Indeed, there was hardly an Arab house in Madīnah without its followers of Islam in the family. There were no doubt many who rejected Islam, either because they chose not to listen to its message or because they were full of hostility realizing that the Prophet's arrival in Madīnah threatened their position of leadership and influence. They realized, however, that they could not take an openly hostile attitude to the Prophet and his Muhājirīn and Anṣār followers. Moreover, tribal affiliation was an important factor preventing such open hostility. Indeed, the

broad majority of their own tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, were now Muslim, giving sincere and devoted support to the Prophet. They were good Muslims who looked at the Prophet as their own supreme commander, and the guide they had to follow. Therefore, the ones who still entertained thoughts of idolatry and harboured rancour in their hearts, prompting them to seek to undermine Islam, felt that their only option was to pretend to be Muslim, appearing to fulfil their Islamic duties, declaring their continued loyalty to their tribes, while at the same time resorting to plots and intrigue. At times, however, their opposition did smack of hypocrisy, this usually when the Muslims faced some tough crisis, and here the 'pretenders' counselled caution, claiming that it was the only option that served Muslim interests. Needless to say, they did not acknowledge that they were in fact unbelievers. Nonetheless, their true attitude of hypocrisy did not go unnoticed by the Prophet and his Companions. Moreover, their stand at times of crises, counselling a policy of weakness, hardened them further in their hypocrisy and unbelief. Qur'ānic revelations time after time exposed and denounced their schemes, alerting the Prophet and the believers to the need to be very cautious in dealing with them.

The hypocrites' attitude and schemes had, according to the import of Qur'ānic revelations, a far-reaching effect. We feel that there was a determined struggle, reminiscent of that between the Prophet and the Makkan elders, but with a reversal in its outcome. Within a short period, the Prophet strengthened his position in Madīnah and his influence increased. Islam was spreading and consolidating its power base. The hypocrites were neither a solid group nor a clearly identified entity. As Islam was on the ascendancy, they grew weaker and thus their influence diminished.

To appreciate the threat posed by the hypocrites, particularly in the early period of Islam in Madīnah, we need to remember however that they could still call on tribal loyalties, which remained strong among the Arabs. Besides, they had not at this juncture exposed themselves. Nor had Islam as yet consolidated its influence on its new followers. Moreover, the Prophet was

surrounded by idolaters on all fronts. The people of Makkah continued to enjoy a position of great influence among the Arabs, and they were on the lookout for any chance to level a crushing defeat on the still fledgling Muslim State. The Jews in Madīnah were also not long in taking a hostile stance towards the Prophet and Islam. Indeed, they were quick to cement a natural alliance with the hypocrites, defining common objectives in opposition to the Muslim community. In fact, the hypocrites could not have caused so much harm to the Prophet and his followers had they not had the support of the Jews and the sort of alliance that the two groups forged. Nonetheless, their influence gradually weakened and the danger they represented subsided only after God foiled their schemes and enabled the Prophet to achieve victory over them.

Al-Munāfiqūn
(The Hypocrites)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. (1)

إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُنَافِقُونَ قَالُوا نَشْهَدُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُ اللَّهِ ۘ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do. (2)

اتَّخَذُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ سَاءَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ آمَنُوا ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا فَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٣﴾

When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! (4)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ تُعْجِبُكَ أَجْسَامُهُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَقُولُوا تَسْمَعْ لِقَوْلِهِمْ ۖ كَأَنَّهُمْ خُشُبٌ مُّسَنَّدَةٌ ۖ يَحْسَبُونَ كُلَّ صَيْحَةٍ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ هُمُ الْعَدُوُّ فَاحْذَرْهُمْ ۚ قَاتَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ ۖ أَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا يَسْتَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ
رَسُولُ اللَّهِ لَوَّوْا رُءُوسَهُمْ وَرَأَيْتَهُمْ
يَصُدُّونَ وَهُم مُّسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. (5)

سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَسْتَغْفَرْتَ لَهُمْ أَمْ
لَمْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ لَن يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. (6)

هُمُ الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ لَا تُنفِقُوا عَلَىٰ مَنْ
عِندَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ حَتَّىٰ يَنفَضُّوا ۗ وَلِلَّهِ
خَزَائِنُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِنَّ
الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٧﴾

They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. (7)

يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ
لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ ۚ وَلِلَّهِ
الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَلَٰكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨﴾

They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know. (8)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُلْهِكُمْ أَمْوَالُكُمْ
وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ عَن ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۚ
وَمَن يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. (9)

Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' (10)

وَأَنفِقُوا۟ مِن مَّا رَزَقْنَٰكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن
يَأْتِىَ أَحَدَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولَ رَبِّ
لَوْلَآ أَخَّرْتَنِىٓ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ فَأَصَّدَّقَ
وَأَكُن مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

وَلَن يُؤَخِّرَ ٱللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِذَا جَآءَ أَجَلُهَا ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Ugly Hypocrisy

The *sūrah* begins with a description of the hypocrites' attempt to disguise the truth of their unbelief. They declare themselves Muslim and testify that the Prophet is God's Messenger. They swear by God so as to convince the Muslims, while they themselves know that they are lying. Their oaths are merely a shield behind which they hope to hide their true reality and deceive the Muslims:

> *When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do.* (Verses 1–2)

They would go to the Prophet and state that they bore witness that he was God's Messenger, but theirs was only a verbal testimony lacking all conviction. They were merely engaging in deception, hoping to hide their truth from the Muslim community and so protect themselves. Therefore, God states that they were lying while making clear the truth of His message to the Prophet Muḥammad: "*God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars.*" (Verse 1)

The phraseology here is both precise and precautionary. We note how the verse begins by confirming the truth of the Prophet's message before it states that the hypocrites' oaths were false. Without taking such care in its wording, the verse could suggest that denunciation of the hypocrites as liars applies to the subject matter of their statement, namely the Prophet's message. The verse intends no such thing. What it aims to do is to state the truth, making it clear that they did not really believe that the Prophet's message was true. In other words, they are not sincere in their statement.

"*They use their oaths as a cover.*" (Verse 2) This short statement suggests that they used to swear an oath every time they feared exposure, or whenever one of their schemes was uncovered, or some of what they said about Muslims was reported. They hoped that such oaths would protect them from the consequences of their exposure. Thus they used their false faith as a shield to hide their reality and allow them a chance to go on with their plots and schemes against the Muslim community. Thus, "*they turn people away from the path of God.*" They kept themselves and others away from God's path, using their false oaths for that end. "*Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 2) Could there be anything worse than lying to mislead and deceive others?

The *sūrah* explains the reasons behind their behaviour, making it clear that they knowingly reverted to disbelief after having accepted Islam: "*That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3) Thus, whilst they have known what it means to accept faith, they nonetheless chose to revert to disbelief. No heart that has a sound understanding or appreciation of things, or indeed has life, would experience life under faith and then choose to return to disbelief. How can anyone who understands, appreciates and experiences the concept of life that faith promotes, with its view of the universe, and also breathes the fresh air of faith and lets the light of faith shine over his world wish to revert to the miserable and suffocating darkness of unfaith? None will make such a choice except he who is filled with grudges that blind his sight and blunt his senses. Hence, such people are in the miserable condition the verse describes: "*So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* draws a unique picture of such people inviting ridicule and describing them as aimless, leading a futile existence, and nursing grudges. It presents an image of them that serves as an object of ridicule:

> *When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are!* (Verse 4)

Thus, they are merely an outward appearance, not real human beings who respond and interact. They may look pleasant to the eye as long as they remain silent, but when they speak they show themselves to be devoid of sense and feeling. They are like timbers, but not just any kind of wood: they are propped up against a wall, unable to move. This stone-cold picture shows the reaction of their souls, that is if they have souls at all. This is then complemented with a state of constant apprehension, perpetual fear and uncertainty: "*They think that every shout is directed against them.*" (Verse 4) They know themselves to be hypocrites, covered by a thin veil of pretence, false oaths and attempts to appease. Hence, they live under the constant dread that their reality will be exposed. The *sūrah* shows them always turning around, dreading every move and every shout. They imagine that every cry is setting a chase after them. Thus, spiritually, they are like propped up pieces of wood, but when it is a question of fear for one's life or property, they look like a trembling reed in a storm. In both cases, they are the main enemy of the Prophet and the Muslim community: "*They are the real enemy; so beware of them.*" They are the enemy within, hiding within Muslim ranks. Hence, they represent a greater danger than the external enemy. Therefore, the Prophet is instructed to beware of them. He is not, however, instructed here to kill them. Instead, he was to pursue a different course of action, one that reflected much wisdom and confidence that their schemes would come to nothing.

"*May God destroy them! How perverse they are!*" (Verse 4) God will indeed be their enemy wherever they turn. Such a prayer by God

Almighty means a verdict that is certain to take place. It is their inevitable outcome, as history has clearly shown.

Stirring Up Trouble

The *sūrah* continues to describe their actions, revealing the rancour in their hearts. It shows how they schemed against the Prophet, yet were quick with their lies when exposed. These were their known qualities:

> *When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.* (Verses 5–8)

Several early scholars confirm that these verses relate to an incident in which 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy featured prominently. Ibn Isḥāq gives a detailed account of it in his report on the expedition to forestall a planned attack by the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe:

> The Muslims were still encamping at the spring which provided the stage for their battle. Servants were taking horses to the water to drink. Among them was Jahjāh, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's servant. Apparently, there was some scrambling at the water among the servants. Jahjāh clashed with an 'ally' of the Khazraj, named Sinān ibn Wabr. Neither man seemed to be endowed with much wisdom: punches were exchanged and each appealed to his 'group' for help. Jahjāh called on the Muhājirīn to defend him, while Sinān called on the Anṣār. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy felt very angry when he heard of

this. He was attended by a group of his people, including a young man called Zayd ibn Arqam. He said to them: "I have never known such humiliation as has befallen us today. They [the Muhājirīn] are now standing up to us in our own home town. They are ungrateful to us for our favours. Our case with the refugees of the Quraysh is an apt example of the proverb: 'Fatten your dog and he will eat you.' When we go back to Madīnah the honourable among the two of us will certainly chase the humble out of it. You have only yourselves to blame for all this. You have taken them into your own homes and given them your own money until they have become rich. I swear that if you stop helping them with what you have, they will leave you and go elsewhere."

Zayd ibn Arqam recounted all this to the Prophet who was attended by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. 'Umar suggested that the Prophet should command 'Abbād ibn Bishr to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. The Prophet said: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions? Indeed, I shall not do that. However, give orders to depart now." Thus, these orders were given at a time when the Prophet never used to depart.

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy learnt that the Prophet had been told what he had said. He therefore hastened to him and denied any knowledge of what had been attributed to him. He swore by God that he did not say anything of the sort. Those of the Prophet's Companions who were present tried to pacify matters. They were still keen that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be given his chance to accept Islam. After all, he had been well respected among his people before the advent of Islam. They suggested to the Prophet that Zayd ibn Arqam might have misquoted or misheard 'Abdullāh.

When the orders were given to march, Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, a prominent figure among the Anṣār, came to the Prophet, greeted him with the respect due to him as Messenger of God and said: "Prophet, I see that you are marching at a time of day when you used not to march." The Prophet said to him: "Have you not heard what your friend said?" When Usayd asked for details, the Prophet told him that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said that "the

honourable among the two of us will chase the humble out of Madīnah." Usayd said: "Yes indeed, Messenger of God. You can turn him out of Madīnah if you like. You are the honourable and he is the humble." Usayd then pleaded clemency and told the Prophet: "God has sent you to us when his people were preparing to crown him king. He may think that you have robbed him of his kingdom."

The Prophet marched at the head of the Muslims for the rest of the day and throughout the night, and continued marching until mid-morning, when it was burning hot. He then allowed his Companions to stop. Hardly had they sat down when they all fell asleep. This the Prophet did in order that people would not be preoccupied with what 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said.

Shortly afterwards, the *sūrah* entitled *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, was revealed. It describes the hypocrites and their feelings towards the Muslims and it also states the very words said by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and conveyed to the Prophet by Zayd ibn Arqam. There was no longer any doubt as to the accuracy of Zayd's report. The Prophet held Zayd's ear in his hand and said: "This is the one who made good use of his ear for the sake of God."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had a son whose name was also 'Abdullāh. Unlike his father, 'Abdullāh was a good believer who entertained no doubt about the truthfulness of Muḥammad's message. Indeed, the Prophet was so certain of 'Abdullāh's strong faith that he appointed him to deputize for him in his absence when the Prophet headed the Muslim army on their final expedition to Badr. Moreover, 'Abdullāh was a dutiful son to his father. It was a cause of distress to him that his father acted against the Prophet. He would have done anything to bring his father within the Muslim fold. When he heard that his father uttered those wicked comments against the Prophet and the Muhājirīn he realized that this crime was a capital one. He also learnt that some of the Companions of the Prophet had counselled him to get rid of 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. 'Abdullāh, the son, went to the Prophet and spoke to him: "Messenger of God, I have heard that you intend to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy for what was reported to you as his words. If you must kill him,

then you have only to command me and I will bring you his head. The tribe of al-Khazraj [his own tribe] is fully aware that I am its most dutiful son to his father. However, I fear that if you order someone else to kill him, I may not be able to look at my father's killer walking in the street. I may be moved to kill him. If I do so, I would be killing a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. Hell would then be my doom." The Prophet smiled and calmed him down. He said to 'Abdullāh: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy remained in Madīnah and he never lost an opportunity to speak ill of Islam and the Prophet. His credibility, however, was eroded. Whenever he said or did something, his own people were the first to take issue with him and remonstrate with him, trying to make him see his error. When this was apparent, the Prophet said to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the first to suggest that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be killed: "Now do you see, 'Umar? Had I killed him when you suggested that to me, some people would have been very angry, while they themselves would be prepared to kill him now if I would only order them to do so." 'Umar replied: "I certainly know that God's Messenger knows better than I do and his actions are more blessed than mine."[1]

It is reported by 'Ikrimah, Ibn Zayd and others that when the people went back to Madīnah, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's son stood at the entrance to Madīnah with his sword in his hand. People passed by, then his father arrived. The son said to him: 'Stand back.' He said: 'What is the matter with you?' He said: 'By God! You shall not pass this point until God's Messenger gives you permission. He is the honourable and you are the humble.' When the Prophet arrived, for he used to walk at the rear of the army to look after anyone who may be in need of help, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy complained to him about his son. The son said: 'By God, he will not enter until you, Messenger of God, so permit him.' The Prophet

1. For a fuller treatment of this event, see, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 407–411. – Editor's note.

permitted him to go in, at which juncture the son said: 'Now that God's Messenger has given you permission, you may walk in.'

Dealing with Hypocrisy

When we consider the events and look at the people involved, as also the Qur'ānic comments, we see the divine method of cultivating the first Muslim community and we marvel at how God conducts matters and events.

Thus, we see the first Muslim community infiltrated by hypocrites who live within its ranks for almost ten years, during the Prophet's lifetime, and he does not expel them. In fact, God does not make them known to him by name or person until shortly before his own death. He would know such a one only by the tone of his speech, the way he twisted words and tried to hide things. He also knew them by their reactions to things and events. God had willed this so that people were not allowed to judge others' intentions and hearts. Judgement on these is for God alone. He alone knows what people harbour in their hearts and He alone requires people to account for them. As for us, we judge people by what we see before our eyes. Thus, no one is judged on the basis of suspicion. Even when God identified for His Messenger those who remained hypocrites until shortly before his death, the Prophet did not expel them from the Muslim community when they continued to put up a show that they were Muslims and fulfilled Islamic obligations. Instead, he kept such knowledge to himself, informing only one of his Companions, Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, of their identity. Neither of them publicized the information. Indeed, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb wanted to be sure even of himself. Hence he went to Ḥudhayfah to ask him whether the Prophet had mentioned him as being among the hypocrites. Ḥudhayfah would only reply that he was not one of them, adding no further information. The Prophet was also ordered not to pray for any of them who might have died. His Companions would thus know by his absence from the *janāzah* prayer [i.e. the prayer for a dead person] that the deceased was among the hypocrites. After the Prophet's own death, Ḥudhayfah also refrained from attending the *janāzah* prayer of any hypocrite mentioned to him by the Prophet. 'Umar too would not

offer the *janāzah* prayer for a dead person until he had made sure that their faith had remained untainted. If he saw Ḥudhayfah attending the prayer, he too would offer it. If not, he would not offer it either, but also would say nothing about this.

Thus events moved, as God had willed, fulfilling their intended purposes. They served to provide lessons and to cultivate the minds, manners and morals of the Muslim community. Furthermore, the event which led to the revelation of these verses serves to point out a number of values.

We see first 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy: a man living among the Muslim community, close to the Prophet. Events take place in succession and signs of different sorts are seen, all confirming the truth of the Islamic faith and the message preached by the Prophet. Yet 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's heart is not responsive to faith. Apparently, God has not granted him the blessing of accepting faith. Something stands between him and this great flow of light: it is the grudge he harbours for not being made king of the Aws and Khazraj. He had been all but proclaimed king when the people of Madīnah began to accept Islam, following the Prophet's arrival there. This was enough for him to turn away from Islam and its divine guidance, regardless of how it was confirmed by evidence and signs aplenty. Indeed, he lived in the midst of the Muslim community, witnessing the radical change Islam brings into people's lives.

We also see his son, also named 'Abdullāh, a superior example of a dedicated Muslim. He is so miserable because of his father's attitude and so ashamed of him. Yet, he feels for him the love a dutiful son has for his father. He hears that God's Messenger wants his father dead, and he experiences greatly different emotions. He faces these with all frankness and seriousness. He is committed to Islam, loves God's Messenger and is keen to fulfil his orders, even when these are against his own father. Yet he cannot condone the thought that anyone should kill his father or that such a person would walk freely after having done that. He fears that he might weaken and that he will not overcome the desire to take revenge. Therefore, he goes to his leader, the Prophet, requesting his help in how best to deal with the conflicting emotions that so troubled him. He requests that if the Prophet wants his father killed, then he should

let him be the one to carry this out. He would so obey the Prophet and do as he was told. Otherwise, if someone else killed his father, he might kill that person in revenge, thus taking the life of a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. He would then face tremendous difficulties in the life to come.

What we see here is truly awesome. It is the greatness of faith deeply enshrined in a believer's heart. The man offers the Prophet the opportunity to assign to him one of the hardest ever actions a human being can face: to kill his own father. He is sincere in his offer, and his purpose is to avoid something that has worse and graver consequences: to kill a believer in revenge for an unbeliever, thus incurring a sin that could land him in hell. We are amazed at his absolute sincerity and by the way in which he faces his human weakness towards his father. He says to the Prophet: "By God, all my tribe, the Khazraj, are fully aware that they have no son who is more dutiful towards his father than I am." He does not want the Prophet to change any orders he gives concerning his father. He knows that whatever the Prophet orders must be obeyed. All he wants is that he should be the one to carry out those orders, so as not to succumb to human weakness later on.

Impressed by such feelings of a man with profound faith, the Prophet kindly and compassionately removes all difficulty from him, saying that as far as his father is concerned: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us." Prior to this, the Prophet had also stopped 'Umar who had advocated that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy be killed by one of his tribesmen, saying: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions?"

We also note with admiration how the Prophet reacted as a wise, inspired leader to quell the event. He ordered the Muslims' immediate departure, and continued marching with his army to the point of fatigue. His aim was to distract people from any thought of blind tribal loyalty, which the cries of the two fighting men might have stirred. He wanted to quell the sort of strife instigated by the hypocrite 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy who aimed to destroy the feelings of love and brotherhood that existed between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. These feelings were of a unique type, previously unknown in human history. We similarly note the Prophet's remarks to Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, which sought to mobilize

his Companions spiritually against discord and strife. He wanted the man who aimed to sow discord to be stopped by his own people as he still enjoyed a high position among them.

Finally, the last scene is amazing: 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a firm believer, holds his sword at the entrance gate to Madīnah to prevent his father's entry. He wanted his father's own words to come true. It was he who said: "When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible." He wanted him to know that God's Messenger was the more honourable and that he himself was the contemptible one. He forced him to stand there until the Prophet arrived and gave him permission to enter, showing him in practical measures to whom true honour belonged.

It is to such a high summit that those people attained through faith. Yet they remained ordinary humans, experiencing all human feelings and frailties. This is the most beautiful characteristic of this faith when people understand it as it should be understood. They then become its practical image, in the form of humans who eat food and walk the streets.

Arrogance and Deprivation

We will now discuss the Qur'ānic verses that refer to those events: "*When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance.*" (Verse 5) They perform their actions, say whatever they may say, and then if they realize that the Prophet heard of their behaviour they resort to cowardly ways. They swear an oath in an attempt to protect themselves. If, when feeling secure that they do not have to face the Prophet, someone says to them, '*Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,*' they turn away in arrogance. Both characteristics of cowardice and arrogance go hand in hand among hypocrites. However, such behaviour normally belongs to those who hold position and influence among people, yet feel themselves too weak for direct confrontation. They resort to arrogant behaviour as long as they do not have to confront the truth. Yet when they are confronted with it, cowardice and false oaths are their mark.

Therefore, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, telling him what God has determined in the hypocrites' case, and since God's judgement has been passed, there is no longer any use in praying for their forgiveness: "*As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk.*" (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* goes on to relate some aspects of their transgression that were the cause of God's judgement: "*They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him'.*" What they say betrays their wickedness and spitefulness. Their plan to starve the Prophet's Companions is the same strategy employed by all opponents of truth and faith in all generations and communities. In their perverted view, they think that all people are like them in giving paramount importance to food and survival. This was the plan the Quraysh followed when they imposed a total boycott on the Hāshimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, so that they would abandon him and hand him over to them. As we are told in this verse, it was also the plan upheld by the hypocrites. They hoped that it would ensure that, once hunger had bitten hard among the believers, they would abandon the Prophet. The communists did the same when they denied the religious among their people the right to their rations. They wanted them to starve to death, or at least until they abandoned their faith in God and stopped praying. Today, the same plan is adopted by other forces hostile to Islamic revival in the Muslim world. They place believers under siege, starving them and closing down all avenues of earning a living.[2]

Thus, we see the opponents of faith, old and new, resorting to this obnoxious and dreadful method, forgetting the simple truth of which the Qur'ān reminds them in the same verse: "*To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand.*" (Verse 7) It is indeed from these treasures of the heavens and the earth, which all

2. More recent examples may be given to confirm what the author says. The latest of these is seen in the boycott imposed by Israel and its allies on the Palestinians, causing extreme hardship and starvation so as to force them to abandon their right to their land and homes. – Editor's note.

belong to God Almighty, that these enemies of the truth receive their livelihoods; yet they try to control the means of such livelihood available to believers. Yet they cannot even create their own sustenance. How stupid and dull-minded they are when they think they can stop others from receiving their sustenance!

God thus reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to face up to such vile and odious plans. He tells them that God's treasures in the heavens and the earth are open to all. He who gives out of these treasures to His enemies will never forget the ones who believe in Him. In His grace, He does not impose mass starvation even on His enemies. He knows that if He were to deny them their provisions they would have nothing. Yet He is too merciful to abandon His servants, even the ones hostile to Him, to what is beyond their means of control. Mass starvation is a method adopted only by the most vile, obnoxious and wicked of people.

The *sūrah* also quotes the hypocrites' other words: "*They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.*" (Verse 8) We have seen how 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's words were made to come true at the hands of his own son, ensuring that the contemptible one could only enter Madīnah by the permission of the most honourable one. "*All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) God includes with Himself His Messenger and the believers, bestowing His own honour on them. This is a gesture of honouring that only God can bestow. What is more honourable than God's hand placing the Prophet and the believers next to Himself and saying: 'Here We are, standing under the banner of honour, and this is the rank of the honourable.'

God certainly tells the truth as He intertwines honour with faith in a believer's heart. Such is the honour that derives from God's own honour. It never shrinks, gives way or abandons a believer, not even in the most difficult of times, unless his faith weakens. When faith is solidly established in a person's heart, honour and dignity remain solid within him. "*But the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) How are they to know when they do not appreciate this sort of honour and dignity and are cut off from their eternal source?

Time to Be Charitable

The last address in the *sūrah* is made to the believers whom God placed, together with His Messenger, in His own rank, making them share in His honour and dignity. He wants them to climb to this high summit, ridding themselves of any characteristic that is akin to those of the hypocrites. They should prefer such superior elevation to everything else, including their property and offspring. Nothing must be allowed to divert their attention from aspiring to such lofty heights:

> *Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verses 9–11)

Money and children can preoccupy a person making him oblivious to everything else, that is, unless his heart alerts him to the aim of his existence, making him feel that he has a superior goal. This goal must be one that is worthy of the creature in whom God has blown of His own spirit, giving him the aspiration to achieve a few divine characteristics, albeit within his own human limitations. God has given him riches and offspring so as to fulfil his task of building human life on earth, but not so that he is so fully preoccupied with them that they distract him from remembering God and from being in contact with the source of his humanity. Those that are so distracted "*will surely be the losers.*" (Verse 9) The first thing they lose is their human identity, which is dependent on maintaining the bond with the source of man's humanity. Whoever loses himself has lost everything, regardless of the size of his wealth and the number of his offspring.

With respect to charitable donations, the *sūrah* here touches their hearts in several ways: "*Give, then, out of what We have provided for you.*" (Verse 10) This reminds us of the source of all that we have. It is all from God in whom we believe and who instructs us to be generous

and charitable. Such giving should be done "*before death comes to any of you...*" It should be a result of the person's own action before death overtakes him and he leaves everything behind for others to enjoy. If he does not do so then he will look around only to discover that he has put nothing forward for his own salvation. This is the worst stupidity and the greatest loss.

He will then feel pangs of regret and wish he could have more time to be charitable and join with those people who are righteous. Such wishes benefit him nothing, for "*God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come.*" (Verse 11) How can he now put forward anything when the chance is gone? "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) Several touches within a short space are thus made at the right place, immediately after depicting the hypocrites' characteristics and their scheming against the believers. When the believers stand firm in God's own rank, they will be protected against the hypocrites. It serves them well, then, to fulfil the duties that their faith requires of them. They must never abandon their remembrance of God, as this is the source of their ultimate safety. Thus does God use the Qur'ān to educate and cultivate believers' minds and hearts.

SŪRAH 64

Al-Taghābun

(Mutual Loss and Gain)

Prologue

In subject matter, images and import, this *sūrah* is very similar to those revealed in Makkah, particularly in its opening section. Indeed, the overall atmosphere that characterizes the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah begins to appear only in its concluding section.

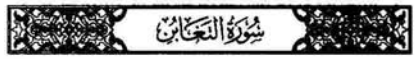
The verses from the beginning up to the direct address to the believers in verse 14 aim to establish the foundations of faith and to instil the Islamic concept. Employing the style of Makkan *sūrahs*, it addresses the unbelievers directly, presenting its theme to them. It uses the same universal and psychological effects and portrays images of the destruction of earlier communities that denied God's messages. It also presents images of the Day of Judgement, emphatically confirming resurrection. This indicates that the addressees denied it altogether.

The last verses, from 14 to 18, address the believers in a manner similar to that used in *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, urging them to spend their money in the service of God's cause, and warning them against failure in the test that their riches and children represent. Similar addresses can be found in many *sūrahs* of the Madīnah period, and this because of the problems faced by the fledgling Muslim community there. This address also includes a comforting aspect to help the Muslims bear with patience any reversals, calamities or burdens; all these are attributed to

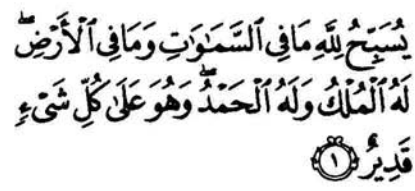
God's will. This is the concept these *sūrahs* seek to confirm, particularly after the command given to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause and what this involves of sacrifice.

Several reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, but other reports, given more weight, state that it was in fact a Madīnan revelation. I almost leaned to the view that it was Makkan, because of the style of its earlier sections and its general ambience. Eventually, however, I decided to stick to the more preponderant view that its revelation was Madīnan. There is nothing to preclude those earlier sections from addressing the unbelievers after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, whether those unbelievers were the people of Makkah or others living closer to Madīnah. Likewise, there is nothing to exclude the possibility that Madīnan *sūrahs* should at times clarify the fundamentals of faith and the Islamic concept of life, using the same style that we find in what was revealed in Makkah.

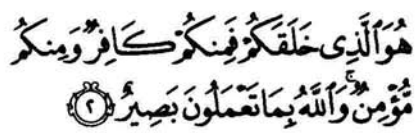
Al-Taghābūn
(Mutual Loss and Gain)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful



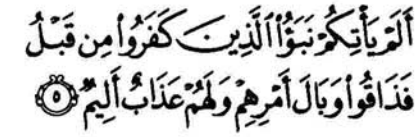
All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him. He has power over all things. (1)



It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe. God sees all that you do. (2)

He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return. (3)

He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts. (4)



Have you not heard of those who disbelieved in earlier times? They tasted the evil consequences of their own doings. Painful suffering still awaits them. (5)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُۥ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرٌ يَهْدُونَنَا فَكَفَرُوا۟ وَتَوَلَّوا۟ ۚ وَّٱسْتَغْنَى ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ غَنِىٌّ حَمِيدٌ ﴿٦﴾

That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?' So, they denied the truth and turned away. God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (6)

زَعَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَن لَّن يُبْعَثُوا۟ ۚ قُلْ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّى لَتُبْعَثُنَّ ثُمَّ لَتُنَبَّؤُنَّ بِمَا عَمِلْتُمْ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٧﴾

The unbelievers allege that they will not be raised from the dead. Say, 'Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done. This is easy for God.' (7)

فَـَٔامِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَٱلنُّورِ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلْنَا ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high. God is fully aware of what you do. (8)

يَوْمَ يَجْمَعُكُمْ لِيَوْمِ ٱلْجَمْعِ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلتَّغَابُنِ ۗ وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا يُكَفِّرْ عَنْهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِۦ وَيُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

[Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain. For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. (9)

But those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end! (10)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٠﴾

No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things. (11)

مَآ أَصَابَ مِن مُّصِيبَةٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ يَهْدِ قَلْبَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity. (12)

وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ ۚ فَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَإِنَّمَا عَلَىٰ رَسُولِنَا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿١٢﴾

God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (13)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Believers, some of your spouses and children are enemies to you; so beware of them. Yet if you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (14)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ مِنْ أَزْوَٰجِكُمْ وَأَوْلَٰدِكُمْ عَدُوًّا لَّكُمْ فَٱحْذَرُوهُمْ ۚ وَإِن تَعْفُوا۟ وَتَصْفَحُوا۟ وَتَغْفِرُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation, whereas with God there is a great reward. (15)

إِنَّمَآ أَمْوَٰلُكُمْ وَأَوْلَٰدُكُمْ فِتْنَةٌ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عِندَهُۥٓ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable. That will be best for you. Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success. (16)

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ وَاسْمَعُوا وَأَطِيعُوا وَأَنفِقُوا خَيْرًا لِّأَنفُسِكُمْ ۗ وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing. (17)

إِن تُقْرِضُوا اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا يُضَاعِفْهُ لَكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ شَكُورٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise. (18)

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١٨﴾

The Creator and His Creation

The first section of the *sūrah* aims to establish the proper concept of the universe based on faith, present the true bond between the Creator and the universe He has created, and mention some of God's names and attributes as well as their effect on the universe and on human life:

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him. He has power over all things. It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe. God sees all that you do. He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return. He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts.* (Verses 1–4)

This concept is one hundred per cent accurate: it depicts what believers have always known and followed. All divine messages have preached the concept of God's oneness and His creation of everything in the universe. They all make it clear that God takes care of everyone and everything in the universe. We have no doubt about this, since the Qur'ān confirms the same about all God's messengers and the messages they advocated. Hence, we pay little attention to what we find today in distorted scriptures or to what is written on comparative religion by people who do not believe in the Qur'ān, in whole or in part. Deviation from the true divine faith is the result of what has been introduced by some followers of these messages, giving the appearance that they did not preach the pure concept of God's oneness, or that God is not in full control and direct contact with every creature. All this is deviation and does not belong to the original form of any divine religion, which remains the same from the first to the last of God's messages. It is impossible that God should have sent down a religion that is in conflict with these essential principles, as alleged by scriptures that have been distorted.

This pure concept allows the human mind to understand, as best as it can, the true nature of Godhead, feel the power of the Almighty, and recognize it in everything we see in the universe. We can thus see the work of this supreme power within ourselves, live within its scope, and appreciate its effects that cannot be removed from our senses or our minds. We see it encompassing everything, conducting all affairs, controlling all events, taking care of all. Nothing escapes it, small or large, trivial or important. This means that the human heart will always be highly sensitive, truly alert, entertaining feelings of apprehension and expectation, fear and hope. Thus man goes about life, looking up to God with every move and every action, feeling His power and realizing that He sees all, watches all and controls all. Yet He is also ever merciful to all and bestows His grace on everyone and in all situations.

Moreover, this concept enables us to feel that the entire universe turns to its Lord. So, we turn with the universe and join it in extolling God's limitless glory. We realize that the whole universe is controlled by God's will, subject to His wisdom, and so we submit to His law. This is why we describe it as a universal concept of faith. Its universality is

emphasized in a variety of ways throughout the Qur'ān. A clear example can be found in the concluding verses of *Sūrah* 59, The Gathering, discussed in Volume XVI.

God's Limitless Power

"*All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God; all sovereignty belongs to Him and all praise is due to Him.*" (Verse 1) Everything in the heavens and the earth turns towards their Lord, extolling His limitless glory and praising Him. The heart of this universe is a believing heart, and the soul of everything that exists is a believer. God owns all, and they all know this truth. God is praised in Himself, glorified by all His creation. When man alone stands in the midst of this great universe rebelling against the truth, cold-hearted, spiritless, turning away from his Lord and Master, refusing to glorify Him, he is at odds with all, discarded by all.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) His is absolute, limitless and unrestricted power. The Qur'ān impresses this truth on every believer's heart. As the believer recognizes its significance, he knows that placing his trust in God alone means that he relies on the power that can do and achieve everything, without limit or restriction. This understanding of God's power and His glorification and praise by all that exists is part of the universal concept of faith Islam formulates.

The second point penetrates deep into the human heart. It is man alone who stands in the midst of the universe in two states of belief and unbelief, while all the universe believes in its Creator, and extols His limitless glory and praise: "*It is He who has created you, yet some of you are unbelievers and some do believe.*" (Verse 2) It is by God's will and through His power that man was originated. He gave him the ability to turn to or away from faith. Thus man is distinguished among God's creation by this dual ability. Hence, he is assigned the great trust and momentous responsibility of faith. Therefore, God has honoured this creature by giving him the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood; furthermore, the choice is up to him. He has also given him the standard by which he can evaluate his own actions and determine his way. This standard is the religion God revealed to human messengers. In this way,

God has helped man to shoulder the trust assigned to him, depriving him of nothing that he needs. "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 2) He watches man's actions, knows his true intentions and the direction he takes. Let man, then, go about life alert to the fact that he is watched by the One who sees all. This concept of man's nature is part of the clear and straightforward Islamic concept of man's position in the universe, as well as his abilities and responsibilities towards the Creator of the universe.

The third point emphasizes the truth that is inherent in the nature of the universe and which ensures the proper functioning of the heavens and the earth. It also highlights the fine beauty of God's creation as seen in the creation of man himself. It also makes it clear that all creatures will ultimately return to Him: "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, and fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance. To Him all shall return.*" (Verse 3)

The first sentence in this verse, "*He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth,*" implants in a believer's mind that the truth is firmly established in the very foundation of this universe. It is neither transitory nor incidental. The very structure of the universe is founded on this basis. This is stated by none other than God who created the heavens and the earth and knows what foundation He has given them. When this fact is firmly settled in our consciousness, it gives us total reassurance about the basis of our faith: it is the same truth that serves as the foundation of the universe. This means that this faith must inevitably triumph, and must remain pure and well established. Whatever else is false and will certainly be swept away.

Another fact is stated in the same verse, "*and [He] fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance.*" This gives man the feeling that he has special privilege with God who has bestowed on him the blessing of a comely appearance, both physically and spiritually. Man is the most perfected creature on earth in respect of his physical constitution and his spiritual qualities, which also entails marvellous secrets. Hence, he has been placed in charge of the earth, which is a vast area by human standards. A careful glance at man's general physical constitution, or at any of his physical systems, is sufficient to portray this fact most clearly: God "*fashioned you, giving you a comely appearance.*" It is an

appearance that combines beauty and perfection. The beauty varies between one physical form and another, but the design itself is so beautiful and so well executed, that it enables all functions and qualities that distinguish man above all other living creatures to work together perfectly.

"*To Him all shall return.*" Every thing, situation and creature will return to Him. The ultimate destiny of the universe and with it the ultimate destiny of man is with Him. It is from His will that they originated and to Him they will return. He is the First and the Last who holds every thing from its both ends, the beginning and the end. He, in His limitless glory, is not restricted by anything.

The fourth point in the opening section of the *sūrah* describes God's perfect knowledge that includes all and every thing. He is fully aware of what man declares and what he conceals, and knows what is even more deeply hidden than the deepest and closest of secrets. He knows what people entertain deep in their hearts: "*He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God has full knowledge of the secrets of all hearts.*" (Verse 4) When this fact is firmly established in man's mind it gives him a better knowledge of his Lord, contributing to his concept of the universe. It influences his feelings. He leads his life fully aware that God knows all there is to know about him, including his most secret thoughts and unexpressed feelings.

The three verses that follow the first are enough to enable man to live with the full awareness of the truth of his existence and that of the universe around him. He will also be aware of the bond he has with his Lord, how he should behave towards Him and how to fear Him in every situation in which he finds himself.

The Unbelievers' Objections

The second section reminds us of the fate of earlier communities that denied God's messages and the signs He gave them. They objected to the fact that God assigned His messages to human messengers, in the same way as the idolaters in Makkah objected to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and denied all the clear proof he put before them:

Have you not heard of those who disbelieved in earlier times? They tasted the evil consequences of their own doings. Painful suffering still awaits them. That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?' So, they denied the truth and turned away. God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (Verses 5–6)

The addressees here are, most probably, the unbelievers. They are reminded of the fates suffered by earlier communities who denied the truth, and warned against a similar fate. The interrogative form is adopted either as a denunciation of their stubbornness after they have been given such information or it is used to draw their attention to this same history that relates to them. They were fully aware of what happened to some of these communities, such as the 'Ād, Thamūd and the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, they passed by them in their trips to the north and south of Arabia.

The Qur'ān mentions their fate in this life and states what awaits them in the life to come: "*Painful suffering still awaits them.*" (Verse 5) It then explains why they deserved what happened to them and what they are still to face: "*That is because their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they said, 'Shall mere mortals be our guides?'*" (Verse 6) It is the same objection voiced by the Makkan idolaters to the Prophet. It is an arrogant objection that betrays a total ignorance of the nature of the divine message and its being a code to be implemented in human life. Hence, it must be practically represented in a human being, in the Messenger who lives according to it and presents a model of its implementation. Thus, others will then be able to mould their own lives in the same way, and to the best of their abilities. Were the Messenger to belong to any other than the human race, people would not have had a practical example against which to mould their feelings and lives. Moreover, this objection betrays ignorance of the true nature of man and his elevated status, which enables him to receive and deliver a divine message instead of God assigning it to an angel, as the unbelievers frequently suggested. Man carries the spirit of God breathed into him when God first created Adam. This prepares him to receive God's message and to deliver it complete as he receives it from

on high. This is an honour bestowed on the human race, rejected only by those who are ignorant of the high status God gives to man when, within his own personal world, he gives full effect to this breath of God's spirit in him. Furthermore, the objection reflects the arrogance and false pride of those who refuse to follow a human messenger, as if such following would detract from the status of those ignorant, arrogant unbelievers. To them, it is acceptable to follow a messenger who belongs to a different kind of creature, but to follow one from their own ranks is too unbecoming.

Therefore, they disbelieved in God's messengers and turned away from them, rejecting the clear proofs and signs that they brought them. Their pride, combined with their ignorance of human nature, stood as a barrier preventing them from accepting the truth. Thus, they chose to turn away from God's guidance and to disbelieve in Him. "*So, they denied the truth and turned away.*" (Verse 6)

"*God is free of all need. God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6) He does not need that they should accept His guidance, nor does He need their worship. Indeed, He needs nothing from them or from anyone else. He is free of all need.

Such is the story of those who in earlier times denied God's messages and were made to taste the fruits of their unbelief. It also explains the reasons behind what happened to them and what awaits them in the life to come. How can present generations follow in their footsteps and deny the truth now? How can they risk a similar fate?

The Truth of Resurrection

The third section carries the theme of the previous one further, stating the situation of those unbelievers who deny the resurrection. It is clearly apparent that these were the idolaters whom the Prophet addressed, calling on them to believe in his message. This section instructs the Prophet to confirm, most emphatically, to them that the resurrection will certainly take place. Indeed, it adds a scene from the Day of Judgement that depicts the fates of the two groups who either deny or accept it. It calls on them to believe, obey and attribute everything that happens in the world to God Almighty:

The unbelievers allege that they will not be raised from the dead. Say, 'Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done. This is easy for God.' Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high. God is fully aware of what you do. [Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain. For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. But those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end! No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things. So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity. God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 7–13)

Right from the start the *sūrah* describes the unbelievers' argument as an 'allegation', thereby branding it as a lie. It follows this with a directive to the Prophet to assert his message of resurrection most emphatically, swearing by his Lord to its truth. Nothing can be more emphatic than an oath the Prophet makes by his Lord. "*Say: Yes indeed! By my Lord, you will certainly be raised from the dead, and then you will certainly be told of all that you have done.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of it will suffer neglect. God knows their deeds better than they do, so He will tell them all about it on the Day of Resurrection. "*This is easy for God.*" He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth, open and secret, as well as what is in people's hearts, expressed or otherwise. He also has power over all things, as stated earlier in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* then calls on them to believe in God and His Messenger, and in the light He has given His Messenger, which is the Qur'ān and the faith embodied in the Qur'ān. It is indeed light, since it comes from God, and "*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" (24: 35) The Qur'ān enlightens the heart to make it shine, able to see the truth

inherent within it: "*Believe then in God and His Messenger, and in the light which We have bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 8) This call on them to believe is followed by a comment that makes them realize that their situation is fully observed by God: "*God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 8)

The next verse continues to draw the scene of the Day of Resurrection: "*[Think of] the time when He will gather you all together for the Day of the Gathering, the day of mutual loss and gain.*" (Verse 9) It is called the Day of the Gathering because all creatures from all generations are gathered together on that day, which is also attended by the angels. Only God knows the numbers of the angels, but we may have a sense of it when we reflect on the following *ḥadīth* in which Abū Dharr quotes the Prophet as saying: "I see and hear what you do not. The heavens is noisily bustling, and rightly so: there is not a four-finger width in it but occupied by an angel with his forehead placed low in prostration before God. Were you to know what I know, you would have laughed but a little and wept much, and you would not have enjoyed being in bed with women. You would have gone up the hills and mountains earnestly appealing to God. I wish I were a tree to be felled." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] The heaven in which there is an angel in every little space of four fingers is this great expanse for which we know no limit, and in which a sun like ours appears to be no more than a fine particle floating in the air. Does this then give us an approximation for the number of angels in it? Furthermore, all these angels will form part of the assembled mass of creatures on the Day of Gathering.

It will be in front of this great assembly that the loss and gain will take place: the believers will take all happiness purely for themselves while the unbelievers will be totally deprived of it before being sent to hell. These are two greatly different lots. The sense we receive is that of a competition where the winners take all. Hence, each side wants to deprive its competitors. The believers end up winners and the unbelievers losers. This is what is meant by 'mutual loss and gain', as explained in the same verse and that which follows: "*For anyone who shall have believed in God and done what is right, He will efface his bad deeds and will admit him into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. But those who disbelieve*

and deny Our revelations are destined for the fire where they will abide. How miserable an end!" (Verses 9–10)

Before completing the call to them to believe, the *sūrah* states one of the main elements of the Islamic faith, which is to believe in God's will and the effect of belief in God on the human heart: "*No calamity can ever befall anyone except by God's leave. He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him. God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 11)

Perhaps this fact is stated here only to put it clearly within the context of the faith they are called upon to adopt. It is a belief that attributes everything to God, and whatever good or evil takes place occurs only by God's will. This is an essential fact without which faith is incomplete. It is indeed the basis of all feelings a believer may have when facing life events and situations, good and happy or bad and miserable. On the other hand, this fact is stated here in response to something that took place and was clear in people's minds at the time of the revelation of this *sūrah* or this verse. Regardless of the exact situation, this fact represents an important aspect of the concept Islam implants in a believer's consciousness. He thus feels God's hand behind every event and every move. He receives with a calm heart whatever happens to him, whether it brings him happiness or adversity. He expresses his gratitude in the first case and demonstrates patience in the second. Alternatively, he may rise to a higher level, expressing his thanks to God in both cases of happiness and adversity, feeling that both bring him God's blessings. He then sees adversity as a reminder for him or an occasion that may bring him forgiveness of past sins or an increase in his reward. In an authentic *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Amazing is the believer's situation: whatever God determines is good for him. Should he meet with adversity, he resorts to patience and this is good for him, while if he meets with what is pleasant, he expresses his gratitude to God, and this is good for him. This situation applies to no one other than a believer." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

"*He will guide the heart of anyone who believes in Him.*" (Verse 11) Some commentators explain this as meaning belief in God's will and being resigned to it in the event of facing a calamity. Ibn 'Abbās, however, takes this statement as indicating complete guidance granted to believing hearts, making them recognize the absolute truth. Thus

they attribute all things and all events to God, their source and goal. This provides them with reassurance and comfort. With such a complete and comprehensive vision, they are not encumbered by a partial view that may be deficient or erroneous. Hence, the comment at the end of the verse: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 11) It is, then, guidance to a share of God's knowledge. God grants this guidance to a person who truly believes, thus earning the prize of knowing something of what lies beyond this limited human life.

The *sūrah* continues with its call on people to believe, calling them now to obey God and His Messenger: "*So obey God, and obey the Messenger. If you turn away, know that Our Messenger's only duty is to deliver his message in full clarity.*" (Verse 12) The *sūrah* has already shown them the end suffered by earlier communities who turned away. Now it tells them that the role of God's Messenger is only to deliver His message. When he has done this, he has fulfilled the trust assigned to him and put the proof before them. What remains is the fate merited by those who are stubborn in disobedience and rejection. They have already been reminded of this.

This section concludes by restating the truth of God's oneness, which they persistently deny. It also states the believers' attitude in dealing with God: "*God: there is no deity other than Him. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 13) The truth of God's oneness is the essence of faith. Its practical import is to place one's total trust in God and to rely on Him alone. This verse provides a bridge between these sections of the *sūrah* and its final one which comes as an address to the believers.

Spouses and Children as Enemies

In the final section the *sūrah* addresses the believers, warning them against failure in the test represented in the temptation spouses, children and riches offer. They are required to remain God-fearing, be obedient to Him and give willingly for His cause. They are warned against being stingy. They are further promised the doubling of their provisions, forgiveness of their sins and success. They are finally reminded of God's all-encompassing knowledge, power and wisdom:

Believers, some of your spouses and children are enemies to you; so beware of them. Yet if you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation, whereas with God there is a great reward. Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable. That will be best for you. Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success. If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing. He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise. (Verses 14–18)

A man asked Ibn ʿAbbās about the first verse in this section and it is reported that he told him that there were some people in Makkah who accepted Islam and wanted to join the Prophet in Madīnah, but their spouses and children prevented them. When they ultimately joined him, they realized that those who were already with the Prophet had acquired insight in their religion. Therefore, they wanted to punish their spouses and children for having kept them away. God then revealed this verse telling them: "*If you overlook their faults, pardon and forgive, God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 14) This *ḥadīth* is related by al-Tirmidhī who describes it as authentic. The same opinion is expressed by ʿIkrimah, Ibn ʿAbbās's disciple.

The Qur'ānic statement is wider in scope and import than this particular situation represents. For this warning is the same as that in the following verse: "*Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation.*" (Verse 15) Both caution against the temptation that wives, children and wealth present. The warning that some spouses and children may be one's enemies refers to a true fact in human life. In this way, the verses touch upon some intricate and complex ties in man's emotions and how they are influenced by life's circumstances. Spouses and children may divert a person's attention from God's remembrance. They may also make a man fall short of discharging the responsibilities required of his faith; this in order to spare himself the troubles that he may face as a result of fulfilling such responsibilities. A person who strives for God's cause may be exposed to much loss and may have to sacrifice a

great deal. He and his family may have to withstand much hardship. He may be willing to face such hardship himself, but cannot bear that such hardship be suffered by his wife and children. As a result, he may be tight-fisted and cowardly in order to ensure that they are safe, free of trouble and financially secure. Thus, they become his enemies as they turn him away from doing what is good and stop him from fulfilling the ultimate objective of his existence. Indeed, they may even stand in his way, stopping him from fulfilling his duty. In doing so, they may wish to spare themselves what may happen as a result, or they may not share his belief. In this way, man finds himself unable to separate himself from them and dedicate himself to God's cause. This is also a form of enmity that may vary in degrees. Furthermore, such situations are faced by believers at all times.

This very complex situation merits such a caution from God as to alert believers' hearts so that they do not allow such feelings and pressures to creep into their minds. The caution is stated again, this time as a warning against the temptation presented by wealth and children. The Arabic word used here is *fitnah*, which conveys two meanings. The first is 'trial', which makes the verse mean that God puts you to trial by giving you riches and children. He tests you in this way, so always be on the alert in order to pass your test and dedicate yourself to God. The second meaning is 'temptation', and in this sense the verse means that riches and children present temptations for you to indulge in sin. Beware then and do not allow such temptations to distract you from the way that leads to God's acceptance. Both meanings are acceptable.

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Buraydah, a Companion of the Prophet: "The Prophet was delivering a sermon when al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn came wearing two red shirts and tripping as they walked. The Prophet got down from the pulpit and took them up, placing them next to him. He then said: 'God and His Messenger speak the truth: *Your wealth and children are only a trial and a temptation.* I saw these two young boys tripping as they walked, and I could not wait. I had to interrupt my speech to lift them up." Thus did the Prophet do with his two grandchildren. It is, then, a very serious matter. Therefore alerting people to it and making them aware of what it may lead to is necessary, as God, who created people and gave them their natural

feelings, knows. They can then restrain themselves so as not to allow such feelings to dictate their behaviour, knowing that such loving bonds could end up causing them what an enemy tries to cause. Therefore, when the warning is given and the encouragement is made to pass the test and to overcome the temptation, they are reminded of what God has in store for them: "*whereas with God there is a great reward.*" (Verse 15)

The believers are admonished to do their best to remain God-fearing and to obey God's orders: "*Therefore, remain God-fearing as best as you can, listen, obey and be charitable.*" (Verse 16) Here we see an aspect of God's care as He restricts what is expected of the believers to that which remains within their power and ability. He knows the limit of what they can do in obedience of Him. The Prophet says: "When I give you an order, do it as best you can, and when I prohibit something, refrain from it completely." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Limits cannot be set on obeying an order to do something. Therefore, what is within one's ability and power is sufficient. On the other hand, prohibition cannot be divided. It is required in full.

They are also called upon to be generous in what they donate: "*And be charitable. That will be best for you.*" (Verse 16) Normally, they spend their money on their own needs. God instructs them to spend in charity what is good for themselves. Thus, when they are charitable, they are actually spending their money on what is good for themselves. The *sūrah* also depicts meanness as a plague, one they must try to get rid of. He is happy who manages to achieve this: "*Those that are preserved from their own meanness are the ones who will achieve success.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* goes on encouraging them to be charitable, making it desirable for them. It describes such charity as a loan given to God. Who would want to lose the opportunity to give his Master a loan? God accepts the loan, repays it many times over, forgives the lender his sins, thanks the lender and forbears with him when he falls short of thanking Him: "*If you make a goodly loan to God, He will repay you in multiples, and will forgive you your sins. God is ever thankful, forbearing.*" (Verse 17) Blessed be God's name: how generous and great He is! It is He who creates man, His servant, and then gives him all his provisions. He then asks him to give him as a loan some of what is surplus to his needs. He

repays this loan in multiples and thanks His servant and forbears when His servant is not as grateful to Him as he should be.

God thus teaches us how to rise above our weaknesses and shortcomings and how to aspire to the sublime, trying to be like Him, albeit within our limited abilities. God has breathed of His spirit into man, so that man will always aspire to achieve this ideal, within the scope of his nature and ability. Therefore, the sublime remains open for man always to aspire to. He can try to rise step after step so that he can meet God presenting what He likes him to present and what earns him His pleasure.

The section then concludes with a statement of God's knowledge and wisdom: "*He knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception and all that is witnessed; the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 18) Everything is within His knowledge, subject to His power, conducted according to His wisdom. As they go through life, people should realize that they remain under God's watchful eye, are subject to His power, and that everything takes place by His will. When this truth is appreciated by people, they will remain God-fearing and respond to Him only as they should.

SŪRAH 65

Al-Ṭalāq
(Divorce)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Divorce, is an outline by God of the rules governing divorce, discussing in detail those cases that were not discussed in the other *sūrah* that tackles this important issue, *Sūrah* 2, The Cow. The *sūrah* also deals with a number of other family issues that result from divorce. It specifies the time when divorce may take place if it is to gain God's approval and to follow His law: "*Prophet! When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period.*" (Verse 1) It states the divorced woman's right and duty to stay in her family home, i.e. her divorcing husband's home, during her waiting period. She cannot be turned out and should not leave of her own accord except in situations where a woman has committed an act of gross indecency: "*Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency.*" (Verse 1) It also specifies the woman's right to leave home after the end of her waiting period and her freedom to do what she likes, unless her husband has reinstated the marriage within the waiting period. Should this occur, it should only be to resume normal married life between them. It cannot be done to cause the woman any harm or to deprive her of the chance to marry a different man: "*When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner.*" (Verse 2) Whichever

option is followed, retaining the marriage or allowing the break up to be complete, it should be in the presence of witnesses: "*Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves.*" (Verse 2)

In *Sūrah* 2, the waiting period of a woman who has not yet reached the menopause is specified as three cycles, counting either the time of menstruation or the time of cleanliness. The scholarly difference here is based on the linguistic meaning of the term used in the *sūrah*, *qur'*, which applies to either period. In this *sūrah*, the waiting period of a divorced woman who has passed the menopause or who is too young to have a period is specified: "*As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months.*" (Verse 4) Likewise, the waiting period of a pregnant divorcee is specified: "*As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden.*" (Verse 4)

The *sūrah* also includes rulings on the home where a divorced woman lives during her waiting period and, if she is pregnant, her right to maintenance until she has delivered the baby: "*Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden.*" (Verse 6) The *sūrah* then goes on to give detailed rules about the breast-feeding of a divorcee's child and her right to financial compensation if she so breast-feeds the child, if the two parents agree this is in the child's best interests, as also provisions for the child's breast-feeding by another woman if the two cannot agree: "*If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it. Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child.*" (Verse 6) The *sūrah* then adds further details on maintenance and compensation in all cases, making it commensurate with the financial means of the divorcing husband: "*Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them.*" (Verse 7)

Thus, the *sūrah* takes up all divorce situations. providing detailed legislation for each context. It caters for every problem that results

from the collapse of the family, providing a comfortable solution that combines clarity with care, ease and attention to detail.

Taking Divorce Seriously

This *sūrah* is remarkable in the way it tackles divorce and the situations that may result from it. It brings together many aspects of encouragement and warning, and gives comments on every order and ruling. It links the question of divorce to God's will as it works in the heavens and the earth, and to God's law that brings destruction to those who stubbornly disobey Him. By the same token, it also provides comfort and increased provisions to those who remain God-fearing. It repeats its directive to treat the other party with kindness, forbearance and mutual consideration, always preferring to do a good turn. It holds out the prospect of people receiving better results, reminding them of God's will and how it applies to creation, the provision of sustenance, and in cases of ease and affliction.

We can only look with amazement at the numerous universal truths brought together in a *sūrah* that primarily deals with divorce. The theme is taken so seriously that the *sūrah* begins making its address to the Prophet personally, although it is intended as a general address to all believers. The *sūrah* is also remarkable in the way it deals with each situation in great detail, requiring that its provisions and rulings be implemented while maintaining a fear of God. We also note that the comments given are numerous, coupled with promises of reward and warning against punishment. These comments, long and frequent as they are, give the impression that this question is the total sum of Islam. It is the question determined by God who watches how His instructions are put into effect. Those who implement them with a genuine God-fearing sense need fear no harm, while those who procrastinate, evade or try to harm others are threatened with the sternest punishment. It raises the hope of good prospects to the community that deals with such situations in a fair, reasonable and kind manner.

We read in this *sūrah* statements like: "*Be conscious of God, your Lord... These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some*

new situation." (Verse 1) "*Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything.*" (Verses 2–3) "*For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a richl reward.*" (Verses 4–5) "*After hardship, God will grant ease.*" (Verse 7)

We also read the following stern, long and detailed warning: "*Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verses 8–10) We note how it is followed with a strong caution against doing what leads to such a fate, and a reminder of the great blessing of sending God's Messenger with the light that he brings and with the promise of great reward: "*So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. [He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision.*" (Verses 10–11) We then read how it is all concluded with a note that opens up the whole universe before us: "*It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge.*" (Verse 12)

All this is contained in a comment on the rulings regarding divorce. We also note that a whole *sūrah* of the Qur'ān is devoted to regulating this situation and the consequences that result from it. In this way, we see how divorce is linked to the most fundamental and essential facts of faith, both at the level of the universe and the level of the human soul,

even though divorce is a situation of ruin, not building, a severance, not initiation, and its subject matter is a family, not a state. Yet the *sūrah* gives us the impression that it is more serious than establishing a state.

What does all this signify? Its significance is varied, but in its totality it points to the sublime nature of this religion, its seriousness and its divine origin. This is clear even though nothing else points to it other than this *sūrah*. Hence, we see how the Islamic system approaches the family question with much seriousness. Islam is a system based on the family. The family home is a shelter that gives comfort. People live there nurturing ties of love, affection, mutual sympathy and care while observing values that maintain purity and the absence of lewdness. Within the family home children are reared and looked after.

> Relations within the family are shown in an atmosphere of clarity that radiates with mutual sympathy and genuine care: "*And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you.*" (30: 21) "*They are as a garment for you, as you are for them.*" (2: 187) Marriage, then, is a bond between two souls, based on mutual inclination, love and tenderness. It establishes a unit within which relations reflect mutual care and kindness. The very words the Qur'ān uses in reference to the family generate an air of ease and tenderness as they express the type of bond Islam wants to see within this unit, recognizing its noble objectives of helping life to continue through procreation. Therefore, these objectives are shown to be clean, pure and serious. It describes them very aptly in the following way: "*Your wives are your tilth.*" (2: 223) This description also implies fertility and increase in numbers.
>
> In keeping with its total approach to all aspects, Islam provides this homely unit with all its care and warrantees. It does not limit itself to spiritual inspiration, but also adds legal provisions and guarantees.[1]

1. Sayyid Quṭb (1982), *Al-Salām al-'Ālamī wal-Islam*, (Islam and World Peace), Beirut and Cairo, pp. 67–68.

When we look at Islamic family legislation in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* regarding all situations, and consider the directives accompanying the legal provisions, as well as the different influences brought to bear, and the fact that the whole question is given a direct link to God at every step, as is the case in this *sūrah* and in others, we then realize how important an institution the family is in the Islamic system. We appreciate the value God assigns to the question of the family when we remember that in the opening verse of *Sūrah* 4, Women, God states in the same sentence the requirement of fearing Him and being mindful of family ties: "*Mankind, fear your Lord, who has created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two of them spread abroad so many men and women. Fear God, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your ties of kinship. Indeed, God is ever watching over you.*" (4: 1) He also combines worshipping God alone with kindness to parents: "*Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him, and that you must be kind to your parents.*" (17: 23) In another *sūrah*, gratitude to God is coupled with gratitude to one's parents: "*Be grateful to Me and to your parents.*" (31: 14)

That we should take such great care is consistent with God's will that has established human life on the basis of the family. He willed that the first unit in human existence was a family made of Adam and his wife. All mankind is the progeny of this first family unit. God could have created millions of human individuals at the same time, but He chose to let all humanity begin with a single unit because He wished to give the family a momentous role in human life. Family life meets the requirements of human nature and allows human abilities and character to develop. It also nurtures the child's talents and strengthens his potential. The most profound influences on man are seen within the family. Therefore, the Islamic system, which represents the final and complete divine code for human life, fits perfectly with God's will that brought man into existence. Such harmony is observed in everything that comes from God.

The second message that the *sūrah*'s serious approach to marital and family matters delivers is how the Islamic system wishes to elevate these human ties to a sacred level that sees them linked to God. In essence,

they are made a means for spiritual purification. This contrasts with the way they have been viewed in idolatrous beliefs and in distorted religion that has moved far away from dealing with human nature.

> Islam neither suppresses natural feelings nor considers them dirty. It only regulates, purifies and elevates them above the physical level so that they become central to many psychological and social values. By contrast, adultery, and prostitution in particular, removes from such natural desires all the exquisite feelings, attractions and values that have been refined over the long history of human life. It leaves such desires naked, dirty and coarser than in animals. In many animal and bird species, couples live together in a regulated life. They do not have the sort of sexual chaos that adultery spreads in some human communities, particularly where prostitution is rife.[2]

Islam considers marriage a means to maintain one's purity. It calls on the Muslim community to facilitate the marriage of men and women, should money become an obstacle to marriage: "*Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty.*" (24: 32–33) It calls marriage *iḥṣān*, which means protection. Thus, believers develop the concept that staying without protection, even for a short period, does not earn God's favour. ʿAlī explained the reason for his marriage shortly after the death of his first wife, Fāṭimah, the Prophet's daughter thus: "I feared to meet God when I was without a wife." Marriage is, then, one of the acts of obedience to God, and by which a believer hopes to improve his position with God. The marital tie becomes to him a sacred one since it is part of obeying God.

2. Sayyid Qutb (2006), *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, Vol. XII, p. 269.

A Realistic Approach to Marriage

This *sūrah* and similar ones like it indicate the realistic nature of the Islamic approach to life and to human nature. It accepts human nature as it is and works upon its potentials and circumstances. Therefore, it does not stop at either providing detailed legislation on a matter that is left to people's consciences or issuing directives. Instead, it uses both in its approach to the human soul and to practical life.

To start with, the marriage bond is meant to be permanent and well established. Islam adds a host of guarantees to ensure that it remains so, raising it to the level of fulfilling God's orders. It enables state funds to be used to help poor men and women marry. It legislates for the observance of values that prevent exposing physical charms so as to tempt the other sex, this so that desires are settled within a proper and legitimate framework. It prescribes punishments for adultery and false accusations of adultery. It protects the sanctity of homes by requiring people to ask permission before entering, and defines that people inside the home should ask permission before entering other rooms. Islam also regulates marital ties with specific rules and laws. It establishes the family system on the basis that one of the two partners is responsible for taking full care of the family, the man, as he is better suited for this responsibility. In this way, Islam prevents conflict and disorder within the family. Further safeguards are put in place to work together with directives utilizing people's emotions. It adds to all this the fact that this bond and its preservation are an essential aspect of being God-fearing.

Yet practical human life shows that there are situations that end in ruin, despite all the guarantees and safeguards. These must be faced in a practical way. Denial is of no use when the continuity of marital life becomes almost impossible. To hold on to marriage in such cases serves no purpose.

> Islam does not rush to enforce a break-up of the marriage once conflict erupts. On the contrary, it tries hard to hold on to it, allowing it to break only when there is no other way.
>
> Islam addresses men: "*Consort with them in a goodly manner. Even if you are averse to them, it may well be that you are averse to something*

in which God has placed much good." (4: 19) Thus it encourages them to take things easy and to persevere, even when they are averse to their wives. It opens up a window for them as regards something they may not know: "*It may well be that you are averse to something in which God has placed much good.*" These women to whom they are averse may bring them much good, which they are unaware of. If God has this good in store for them, they must not let it go to waste. Nothing is more effective in working on emotions so as to control feelings of hate and moderate them.

Should the matter go beyond feelings of like or dislike and reach a point of incompatibility and irreconcilability, Islam does not rush to recommend divorce. Rather, it recommends an attempt by well-wishers to achieve reconciliation: "*If you have reason to fear that a breach may occur between a (married) couple, appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people. If they both want to set things aright, God will bring about their reconciliation. God is indeed All-Knowing, aware of all things.*" (4: 35) "*If a woman has reason to fear ill-treament or desertion by her husband, it shall not be wrong for the two of them if they should try to set things peacefully to rights between them; for peace is best.*" (4: 128)

If all such intermediation fails, and there appear to be things that prevent a tolerably peaceful life, then the split is serious. To retain the marriage in such circumstances would inevitably lead to failure. The pressures involved would compound the already adverse effects on the people involved. Hence, it is wise to accept the facts and put an end to the marriage. Islam in no way likes this, but views it as necessary. We should always remember that of all lawful things, God dislikes divorce most.[3]

Even if the man wants to divorce his wife, this is not instantaneously possible. The proper thing is for divorce to take place when the woman is not in her monthly period, and provided that no sexual intercourse had taken place between the couple. This means that a delay takes

3. Sayyid Quṭb (1982), *Al-Salām al-ʿĀlamī wal-Islam*, (Islam and World Peace), Beirut and Cairo, pp. 84–85.

place, which could overcome the anger and provide an opportunity for the couple to review their situation. In this way, they may reflect and be more inclined to make peace. Divorce may then not take place as a result of this initial delay.

Moreover, there is the waiting period: three monthly cycles, or three months in the case of a divorced woman who has passed the menopause or until childbirth if the woman is pregnant. During this waiting period, the reinstatement of the marriage is possible if a change of heart takes place and the couple want to resume their married life.

Yet all these attempts do not negate the fact that a total split may occur and that there are situations that need to be practically regulated. Islam addresses these situations putting in place legislation to take care of all the aspects involved. Hence, we have the detailed provisions included in this *sūrah*, which show the practical Islamic approach to life's problems in a way that ensures progress and maintains purity.

Eradicating Traces of *Jāhiliyyah*

This *sūrah* with all that it includes of encouragement, warnings, emphasis, detailed provisions and telling comments clearly indicates that it was addressing certain situations that continued to carry traces of the days of ignorance, marked by the ill-treatment of women and gross injustice towards them. Hence, strong influences are brought to bear on people's minds together with detailed provisions to close any loopholes that may allow evasion of the rules and a return to the old ignorant concepts that led to unhealthy marital relations.

This did not apply to Arabia only. It was common throughout the world. Women were treated in the same way as slaves, or worse than slaves, in almost all parts of the world. In some communities, sex was viewed as filthy and women were thought of as evil, tempting men to indulge in such filth. It was from such depths of global ignorance that Islam raised women and marital relations to their high and pure levels, giving women their rightful positions of honour and putting in place safeguards to protect their rights. No little girl would now be the victim of infanticide. Furthermore, when she reached a marriageable age, she could no longer be forced into marriage against her will. Whether virgin

or mature, a woman must give her consent before she can be married. As a wife, a woman has full and protected rights, and she further enjoys the safeguards provided by Islamic law. If divorced, a woman has the rights detailed in this *sūrah* and in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, as also revealed elsewhere in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*.

At its own initiative, Islam put all these legislative provisions in place. It was not a response to a feeling among women in Arabia or anywhere else in the world that their situation was unsatisfactory, or to a twinge of conscience among men that required fairness to women. There was no association of women in Arabia or anywhere else for that matter demanding reforms; nor were there any female members of any consultative or legislative assembly. Indeed, not a single voice demanded an improvement in women's status. These legal provisions were part of the code made in heaven for implementation on earth, to ensure fairness to all its people. It was God's will to raise human life from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk, purge marital relations from their shameful status and to give to man and woman, created originally from a single soul, all their human rights that preserve their honour and dignity.

Islam is a noble religion. Only a perverted ignorant will stand in opposition to it. For, no one abandons God's law in preference for human law except through the pressures of desire and a clinging to worldly pleasures.

Having reviewed the subject matter of the *sūrah* in general terms, we will now discuss the provisions it puts in place. When we look at them within the context of the *sūrah*, we find that they reflect life and movement and that they are full of inspiration. This is the difference between looking at such provisions within their Qur'ānic context and studying them in books of Islamic law.

Al-Ṭalāq (Divorce)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Prophet! When you[4] divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period, and reckon the period accurately. Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation. (1)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ إِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ ٱلنِّسَآءَ فَطَلِّقُوهُنَّ لِعِدَّتِهِنَّ وَأَحْصُوا۟ ٱلْعِدَّةَ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّكُمْ ۖ لَا تُخْرِجُوهُنَّ مِنۢ بُيُوتِهِنَّ وَلَا يَخْرُجْنَ إِلَّآ أَن يَأْتِينَ بِفَٰحِشَةٍ مُّبَيِّنَةٍ ۚ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَمَن يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ ٱللَّهِ فَقَدْ ظَلَمَ نَفْسَهُۥ ۚ لَا تَدْرِى لَعَلَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحْدِثُ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ أَمْرًا ﴿١﴾

When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner. Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, (2)

فَإِذَا بَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ فَارِقُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ وَأَشْهِدُوا۟ ذَوَىْ عَدْلٍ مِّنكُمْ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلشَّهَٰدَةَ لِلَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ يُوعَظُ بِهِۦ مَن كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ يَجْعَل لَّهُۥ مَخْرَجًا ﴿٢﴾

4. The plural form is used here indicating that the address is to the Muslim community as a whole.

وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَكَّلْ
عَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَٰلِغُ أَمْرِهِۦ ۚ
قَدْ جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدْرًا ﴿٣﴾

and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything. (3)

وَٱلَّٰٓـِٔى يَئِسْنَ مِنَ ٱلْمَحِيضِ مِن نِّسَآئِكُمْ
إِنِ ٱرْتَبْتُمْ فَعِدَّتُهُنَّ ثَلَٰثَةُ أَشْهُرٍ
وَٱلَّٰٓـِٔى لَمْ يَحِضْنَ ۚ وَأُو۟لَٰتُ ٱلْأَحْمَالِ
أَجَلُهُنَّ أَن يَضَعْنَ حَمْلَهُنَّ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّقِ
ٱللَّهَ يَجْعَل لَّهُۥ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ يُسْرًا ﴿٤﴾

As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months. As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden. For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. (4)

ذَٰلِكَ أَمْرُ ٱللَّهِ أَنزَلَهُۥٓ إِلَيْكُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَتَّقِ ٱللَّهَ
يُكَفِّرْ عَنْهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِۦ وَيُعْظِمْ لَهُۥٓ أَجْرًا ﴿٥﴾

Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward. (5)

أَسْكِنُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ سَكَنتُم مِّن وُجْدِكُمْ
وَلَا تُضَآرُّوهُنَّ لِتُضَيِّقُوا۟ عَلَيْهِنَّ ۚ وَإِن كُنَّ
أُو۟لَٰتِ حَمْلٍ فَأَنفِقُوا۟ عَلَيْهِنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَضَعْنَ
حَمْلَهُنَّ ۚ فَإِنْ أَرْضَعْنَ لَكُمْ فَـَٔاتُوهُنَّ

Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden. If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it.

أُجُورَهُنَّ وَأْتَمِرُوا بَيْنَكُم بِمَعْرُوفٍ ۖ وَإِن
تَعَاسَرْتُمْ فَسَتُرْضِعُ لَهُ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٦﴾

Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child. (6)

لِيُنفِقْ ذُو سَعَةٍ مِّن سَعَتِهِ ۖ وَمَن
قُدِرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقُهُ فَلْيُنفِقْ مِمَّا آتَاهُ
اللَّهُ ۚ لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا مَا آتَاهَا ۚ
سَيَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ بَعْدَ عُسْرٍ يُسْرًا ﴿٧﴾

Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them. After hardship, God will grant ease. (7)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ عَتَتْ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهَا
وَرُسُلِهِ فَحَاسَبْنَاهَا حِسَابًا شَدِيدًا
وَعَذَّبْنَاهَا عَذَابًا نُّكْرًا ﴿٨﴾

Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. (8)

فَذَاقَتْ وَبَالَ أَمْرِهَا وَكَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
أَمْرِهَا خُسْرًا ﴿٩﴾

Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. (9)

أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ
يَا أُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ۚ قَدْ أَنزَلَ
اللَّهُ إِلَيْكُمْ ذِكْرًا ﴿١٠﴾

God has prepared a severe punishment for them. So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. (10)

رَّسُولًا يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَٰتٍ
لِّيُخْرِجَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
مِنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ ۚ وَمَن يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ
وَيَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن
تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ۖ قَدْ
أَحْسَنَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُۥ رِزْقًا ﴿١١﴾

[He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision. (11)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ وَمِنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ
مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ ٱلْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ
ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ۙ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ
أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عِلْمًا ﴿١٢﴾

It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge. (12)

The Process of Divorce

> *Prophet! When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period, and reckon the period accurately. Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul. You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation.* (Verse 1)

This is the first stage and the first rule. It is addressed in the first instance to the Prophet, but it is soon realized that it is a general rule

applicable to every Muslim, not to the Prophet in isolation. In the sentence starting with, '*when you divorce women*', the pronoun 'you' is used in the plural form throughout. This stylistic form is employed to alert attention and imply the seriousness of the matter under discussion. God addresses it to the Prophet in person, giving him His instructions and directives, so that he will, in turn, deliver it to those who follow him. The psychological impact achieved in this way is both strong and clear.

"*When you divorce women, divorce them with a view to their prescribed waiting period.*" (Verse 1) An authentic *ḥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī explains this directive: "'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar divorced his wife when she was in the midst of her menstrual period. 'Umar mentioned this to the Prophet who was clearly angry. He said to 'Umar: 'Tell him to take her back and keep her until she has finished her period, then through her cleanliness cycle and her next menstrual period. When she is clean again if he still wants to divorce her, he should do so before he has intercourse with her. This is when the waiting period which God has ordained starts." Muslim also relates this *ḥadīth* but the last sentence in his version runs as follows: "This is the start of the waiting period which God ordered that women should be divorced with a view to."

It is clear, then, that there is a time when the divorce process can rightly start. A man cannot divorce his wife at any time; he can only do so when his wife is in a period of cleanliness from menstruation during which they have had no sexual intercourse. Other statements indicate that there is another time when the divorce process can be started, which is if the woman is clearly pregnant. The purpose behind limiting the time to these two situations is to delay the divorce for a while after the man has decided to so separate from his wife. During this time, tension may subside if it is of a transitory type and the couple may resume a normal life together. On the other hand, it also ensures that the woman is not pregnant before they embark on divorce. After all, a man may be inclined not to divorce his wife when he learns that she is pregnant. If he still resorts to divorce when he has become aware of her pregnancy, this means that his mind is made up. To sum up, the condition that the wife should be in cleanliness from menstruation without any intervening sexual intercourse is so as to ensure that she is

not pregnant, and the condition that the pregnancy should be clearly determined is to ensure that the man is aware of it. This, then, is the first attempt to deal with cracks in the family structure, and to stop the axe that seeks to destroy it.[5]

Yet this does not mean that divorce does not occur except in these two periods; it occurs whenever it is pronounced,[6] but it will be frowned upon by God, and it will incur the anger of God's Messenger. This is sufficient for a good believer to hold on and not to pronounce the word of divorce until the appropriate time, leaving the matter to God to determine its outcome as He pleases.

"*And reckon the period accurately.*" This is important, so that the waiting period is not made too long as to harm the divorcee, preventing her from remarriage after her waiting period is over. On the other hand, the first purpose of making sure that she is not pregnant will not be properly fulfilled if the waiting period is cut short. Moreover, this directive implies the seriousness of the matter and that God watches us and requires those involved to be careful at every step.

"*Be conscious of God, your Lord. Do not drive them out of their homes, nor shall they themselves leave, unless they commit a flagrant indecency.*" (Verse 1) This is the first caution that follows the address. It is given by God to emphasize the need to maintain fear of Him in all situations. This caution is stated before the order not to turn divorced women out of their homes. Although these are their husbands' homes, they are called here 'their homes' so as to emphasize the woman's right to stay there during the waiting period. Women must not be driven out of these homes; nor should they leave of their own accord, except in a situation where a divorcing woman commits a flagrant indecency. Reports suggest that such an indecency might entail adultery and the need for the woman

5. Some readers may wonder about the woman's right to initiate a termination of the marriage. Islam legislates separately for this situation. Verse 229 of *Sūrah* 2 includes a provision for it, and the *Sunnah* provides more details. Such termination at the wife's request is called *khul'* in Islamic law. Hence, the provisions related to divorce are related to the husband, because he is the one required to take care of all complications resulting from divorce. – Editor's note.

6. This is the view of the majority of scholars, but a minority hold that it does not occur unless it takes place in one of these two periods only.

to receive her punishment, or it might entail her causing harm to her husband's family, or rebellion against her husband and doing what harms him, even though he is a divorcing husband. The purpose of the woman staying in her husband's home is to allow every chance for reconciliation and the reawakening of tender feelings and memories of shared things between the couple. This situation means that the couple will be apart because of the divorce that has been set in process, yet they are close physically. Should she sink so low that she commits adultery, or should she cause harm to her husband's family or rebel against him, this leaves no room for the reawakening of compassionate feelings. Nor is there any need for her to stay with her husband any longer. In fact, their proximity would only deepen the break, rather than heal it.

"*These are the bounds set by God. Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul.*" (Verse 1) This is the second warning. It is God who watches the implementation of this rule. Would any believer deliberately contravene the bounds God sets in place? To do so would be to bring ruin to those involved. "*Whoever transgresses God's bounds wrongs his own soul.*" He exposes himself to God's anger. He wrongs himself by wronging his wife, when the two are created from a single soul. Thus any wrong that befalls her rebounds on him also. Besides, "*you never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation.*" (Verse 1) This is an inspiring statement. Who knows how God's order to divorced woman to observe a waiting period during which she stays in her husband's home will work to fulfil His will? This order gives a little hope and kindles a faint light that may yet bring about an immeasurably good result. Things may change, and conflict may give way to reconciliation and contentment. God's will is always active, changing things and creating new situations. To submit to His will and observe His orders is for the better. Being conscious of Him and always on our guard lest we do what is sinful ensures an abundance of goodness.

People tend to think only of the present moment and the situation they are in with all its circumstances and difficulties. They may not look up to the future, remaining imprisoned within the present moment feeling that it will continue for ever. They feel that what they are going through now will be their permanent lot. This sort of psychological imprisonment can be terribly detrimental. Yet the truth is different,

because God's will always changes things and brings about what people have never thought possible. It opens up hope, bringing ease after hardship. God initiates at any moment situations that might never have been dreamt of.

God wants this truth to be clearly understood by us so that we will continue to look up with hope to what He puts before us. We must always be optimistic, thinking of what He may grant us and what prospects He opens before us. We should always remember that the next moment can bring something beyond our wildest dreams: "*You never know; after that, God may bring about some new situation.*" (Verse 1)

Fairness in All Situations

> *When they have completed their appointed term, either retain them in fair manner or part with them in fair manner. Call to witness two persons of known probity from among yourselves; and do yourselves bear witness before God. Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day. For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect. God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose. God has set a measure for everything.* (Verses 2–3)

These two verses deal with the next stage, stating its rulings. Completing the term means the end of the waiting period. While the divorced woman is in her waiting period, whatever its length be, her husband may take her back in marriage and she regains her status as his wife. This is what is referred to in the verse as 'retain them'. Likewise, he may allow the waiting period to reach its specified end when his divorced wife will part with him and she cannot be lawful to him again unless they go through a fresh marriage contract, just as if he had taken a new wife. In either situation, the divorcing husband is commanded to behave in fairness. He is prohibited from retaining her so as to harm her. A man may retain his divorced wife shortly before the end of her waiting period then divorce her a second and a third time to prevent her from marrying someone else. He may also retain her to leave her, as it were, in a state of suspense, and so put further pressure on her causing her to offer to forgo

her rights in order to gain her divorce. Both situations were common practice at the time this *sūrah* was revealed. They continue to take place when people deviate from the path of fearing God, which is the most important guarantee of the implementation of His rules governing cases of family relations and break ups. Husbands are also forbidden to harm their divorcees by verbal abuse of any sort. The marriage bond is set in place on the basis of fairness and must end, when it is terminated, in a fair manner, so that the couple retain good feelings towards each other. They may, for all they know, resume life together in the future, and they will not then want to have any painful memory of verbal abuse that may cast a shadow on their new relation. Besides, this is the sort of good manners that Islam wants all its followers to abide by.

In either case of complete parting or reinstatement of the marriage, two witnesses of known probity are required, so that no doubt about the marriage status should remain. People may learn of the divorce, but the reinstatement of the marriage may escape their attention, which may lead to doubts and gossip. Islam wants all marital matters to remain clean and clear, in reality, in people's feelings and in their conversations. According to some scholars, but not others, the reinstatement of the marriage, as well as the full divorce, are completed without witnesses, but some make it a condition for the reinstatement of the marriage only. It is agreed, however, that witnesses are needed after or at the time of complete parting or the reinstatement of the marriage. Both views are expressed.

Having established the ruling, comments and directives follow in succession: "*Do yourselves bear witness before God.*" (Verse 2) The issue is one in which God is concerned, and the witnesses are called in for His sake. It is He who has ruled that witnesses are needed, and He watches how this is done and gives rewards for it. The witnesses are dealing with Him directly, not with either of the divorcing couple or with the general public. "*Thus is admonished everyone who believes in God and the Last Day.*" (Verse 2) These rulings are addressed to people who believe in the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* tells them this admonition applies to them in particular. If they truly believe in God and the Last Day, they will be admonished. This is the test of their faith. It proves whether their claims to be believers are true or not.

"*For everyone who fears God, He will grant a way out, and will provide for him whence he does not expect.*" (Verses 2–3) He will grant God-fearing people a way out of any tight situation in this present life and in the life to come. He will also give them their provisions from where they neither know nor expect. This is a general statement describing a permanent situation. However, stating it here in the context of the rulings concerning divorce suggests that this is particularly true when people remain God-fearing in dealing with this particular situation. This is when the most important means of control come from within oneself and from one's own conscience. There is much scope for misuse of resources and for the appropriation of what does not rightfully belong to oneself. Only fear of God and a sensitive conscience provide effective restraint.

"*God will be sufficient for everyone who puts his trust in Him. God always attains His purpose.*" (Verse 3) Again, wicked scheming has wide scope and can take different routes in this relationship. Indeed, trying to avoid wicked scheming by one party may make the other resort to wicked scheming of their own. This statement impresses on people that they should not attempt anything of the sort. Rather, they should place their trust in God; this is sufficient for anyone. God always accomplishes what He wants. Whatever He has willed has already taken place. Therefore, to rely on Him is to rely on the One who is able, powerful and always brings about the results He seeks. It should be noted that this Qur'ānic statement is general and aims to instil into people the right concept with regard to God's will and power. Including it here with the rulings on divorce suggests that it has important significance and effect in this very crucial social matter.

"*God has set a measure for everything.*" (Verse 3) Everything is given its due measure, accomplished at the place, time and with the circumstances set for it. Hence, it is the result of its particular causes and produces its own results. Nothing is the result of blind coincidence, either within man and his life or in the universe at large. This is an important aspect of the Islamic concept.[7] Yet mentioning it here relates it to the rulings God has given concerning divorce, its timing, waiting period and witnesses.

7. We spoke in detail about this truth in our commentary on verse 2, *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–382, and also in commenting on verse 49, *Sūrah* 54, in Vol. XVI.

All these rulings are thus given an extra aspect of being part of God's overall law and give us the feeling that the serious view Islam takes of divorce is part of the seriousness of the system God has established for the universe.

More on the Waiting Period

> *As for those of your women who are beyond the age of monthly courses, as well as for those who do not have any courses, their waiting period, if you have any doubt, is three months. As for those who are with child, their waiting term shall end when they deliver their burden. For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy. Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you. God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward.* (Verses 4–5)

These verses specify the length of the waiting period for women who do not have a monthly cycle and for pregnant women. It includes women who are past the menopause and those who do not as yet have a menstrual cycle because they have not attained puberty or because of a malfunction in their system. The length of the waiting period for women generally is determined in verse 228, *Sūrah* 2, as three menstrual periods or three periods of cleanliness from menses. Hence, there remained the question of how long a woman who does not have a monthly cycle should wait. This verse removes all doubt, setting the waiting period for such women at three months. Pregnant women wait until they have delivered their child, regardless of whether this provides a short or a long waiting period. Once a woman has given birth, it is absolutely certain that she is not pregnant. Hence, there is no need for her to have any extended waiting period. If such a woman is divorced, her divorce is complete once she has given birth. The process of her divorce is completed and the marriage cannot be reinstated without a fresh marriage contract. God has set a measure for everything, and every ruling of His has its wise purpose.

This ruling is followed by inspiring comments: "*For everyone who is God-fearing, God makes things easy.*" (Verse 4) Ease is the ultimate

blessing that anyone hopes for. When God bestows this great favour on His servants, making things easy for them so that they encounter neither difficulty nor hardship, they will approach matters gently, achieve what they desire easily through their endeavours and happily accept the outcome. Thus they live in ease and comfort until they are due to meet their Lord. Do we see here a temptation for people to approach divorce with ease and in return their life will generally become easy?

"*Such is God's commandment which He has revealed to you.*" (Verse 5) This is a totally different touch, alerting us to the source of the order. It is given by God to those who believe in Him. To obey the order is to make the belief and the bond with God a practical reality. Then we have further emphasis on the need to remain always God-fearing, particularly in connection with what people may do in cases of divorce: "*God will pardon the bad deeds of everyone who is God-fearing and will grant him a rich reward.*" (Verse 5) The first reward is to make things easy for us, and the second is to forgive us our sins and to increase our reward for good deeds. It is a very generous and exciting offer, yet it is made in the form of a general statement and a promise that applies to all. However, it imparts a particular colour to the question of divorce and gives us a reminder of God's great bounty. Why would anyone, then, make things hard and complicated when God promises such a great reward for making things easy?

Maintenance and Breast-Feeding

> *Let them dwell wherever you dwell, according to your means, and do not harass them so as to make their lives a misery. If they are with child, maintain them until they have delivered their burden. If, after that, they suckle your infants, pay them for it. Take counsel with one another in a fair manner. If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child. Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions are restricted spend according to what God has given him. God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them. After hardship, God will grant ease.* (Verses 6–7)

These verses state the final provisions concerning the issue of a divorcee staying in her home, which is the home she has shared with her husband, and her maintenance during the waiting period, whatever its length be. Husbands are commanded to provide them with a dwelling of the standard they can afford. They cannot give them an inferior home to their own or to what they can afford. They must not intentionally try to harass them by giving them a sub-standard dwelling place or by ill-treating them. Pregnant women are given special mention with regard to maintenance – which is due by right to every divorced woman – because the extra length of her waiting period may lead some people to think that maintenance is due for only a part of the waiting period, or that it may go further than the waiting period should it be very short. Hence, clarification is needed, requiring the maintenance to be paid until the end of the waiting period.

Breast-feeding of the child is also discussed in detail. It is not made a duty of the mother that gives her no return. As long as she continues to breast-feed the child, which belongs to them both, she is entitled to receive some wages to help her with life's necessities and to ensure that her milk continues to flow for the benefit of the child. We see how Islamic law takes care of every aspect of the mother's needs. At the same time, both parents are commanded to consult with each other in a fair manner concerning their child, ensuring what is best for it. The child is a trust given to both of them. Their failure to maintain their relation as sound and healthy should not be made to rebound on their child.

Such is the easy approach that God calls on them both to pursue. Should they take a hardened attitude and be unwilling or unable to agree on the child's breast-feeding and the compensation due for it, the child's rights are guaranteed: "*If some of you make things difficult, let another woman suckle the child.*" (Verse 6) The mother must not object to such an arrangement in a way that jeopardizes the child's right to breast-feeding. This arrangement is resorted to only because she and the child's father take a hard attitude and cannot agree on suitable arrangements.

Further details are then given concerning the level of maintenance, which should ensure ease, fairness and cooperation. The man must be fair and the woman must not be unreasonable: "*Let the one who has ample means spend in accordance with his means; and let the one whose provisions*

are restricted spend according to what God has given him." (Verse 7) The person to whom God has given in plenty should be generous in what he gives to his divorced wife in respect of her housing, maintenance and compensation for breast-feeding their child. The one who has limited provisions is not to be blamed for giving according to his means. God does not require anyone to spend above their means. It is He who gives us what we have. No one can have anything other than what God has given him, because there is no other source from which people may take anything. His is the only treasure on which all creatures depend: "*God does not burden anyone with more than He has given them.*" (Verse 7)

Then follows a gentle touch that is bound to please and open a window of hope for both parties: "*After hardship, God will grant ease.*" (Verse 7) It is through God alone that hardship is followed by ease and generous provisions are given after means have been restricted. It behoves both parties then to pin their hopes on Him alone, watching Him in their dealings with each other and maintaining an attitude based on fearing Him in all their affairs. It is to Him that they look up with hope, and it is He who provides comfort and ease after difficulty and hardship.

A Holistic Approach to Divorce

By this point, the *sūrah* has completed its discussion of all rulings concerning divorce and its effect on the family. It has dealt with all consequences, providing a clear provision for each. The split in the family home thus leaves neither ruins nor dust that settles over hearts and souls. No problem is left unsolved. The split family is not left in lingering turmoil.

Thus the *sūrah* deals with all thoughts and fears that may occur. The husband is assured that he will not suffer poverty or loss of fortune if he provides his divorcee with a good home and proper maintenance, or gives generous compensation for the breast-feeding of his child. The same fears are removed from the woman's mind so that she is not worried about a life of poverty. Likewise, she must not entertain thoughts of receiving an unfair share of her ex-husband's money. Both are assured that a God-fearing approach will see them in ease after hardship, comfort after difficulty and provisions that come from where they do not expect.

What is more is that God will grant such God-fearing people ample reward in the life to come. It is a promise that will see their sins wiped out and their reward multiplied.

The *sūrah* also deals with the after-effects of the dispute that has led to the divorce. There may be lingering feelings of resentment, anger and bitterness. All these are cleared with a gentle, comforting touch and replaced with hope in God's mercy. The *sūrah* here taps feelings of fairness and compassion, relying on the God-fearing value it implants in people's hearts and the desire to win His pleasure.

This holistic approach and its inspiring touches, together with confirmed and repeated assurances, provide the only guarantees to implement these legal provisions Islam puts in place. The only control is that brought about by a sensitive conscience and a God-fearing heart. Each of the divorcing couple can cause the other no end of heartache and problems if they have nothing to limit their area of manoeuvre other than the limits of the law. Some of the Qur'ānic commandments given in the *sūrah* are so flexible as to address all aspects of this whole area. Take, for example, the order: "*Do not harass them.*" (Verse 6) This prohibits all aspects of harassment which no legal provision, however wide in scope, can incorporate. Its implementation is attached to conscience which is profoundly influenced by the approach the *sūrah* takes and to the enhanced God-fearing sense it instils in both parties. They realize that God is aware even of their innermost thoughts. His knowledge encompasses all. Besides, they will hope to receive the compensation He grants to His God-fearing servants in both this life and in the life to come, particularly in relation to provisions and livelihood. This message is repeated in different ways in the *sūrah* because it has a telling effect in easing the hardship that divorce generates and softens the attitudes of both parties.

When they bear all these rulings and directives in mind, a divorcing couple retain on parting some seeds of their old mutual affection and cordial feeling which may yet send up new shoots. In all these rulings and provisions we see the high moral standard that Islam wants to impart to the life of the Muslim community.

The Fate of the Disobedient

When the *sūrah* has completed all this, it provides the ultimate lesson referring to the fates of those communities that defied God's commandments and disobeyed His messengers. They neither listened to admonition, nor responded to calls given them by their prophets. The lessons derived from their fates are thus placed before us, reminding all of the miserable fate that awaits those who do not fear God and who disobey Him. It also reminds people of the grace God bestows on believers, to whom the legislation is addressed:

> *Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering. Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin. God has prepared a severe punishment for them. So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high. [He has sent you] a Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear, so that He may lead those who believe and do righteous deeds out of the depths of darkness into the light. God will admit everyone who believes in Him and does righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide for ever. God will have granted them a most excellent provision.* (Verses 8–11)

This is a long warning incorporating detailed scenes and images. It is also a profound reminder of God's grace, represented by faith and the light He grants through it. A further reminder is given of His reward in the life to come, which is the best and most generous of all provisions.

To start with, the punishment God metes out to those who defy His orders and do not respond to His messengers is a law He has set in operation: "*Many a community that insolently defied the commandment of their Lord and His messengers We have brought to account in a severe manner and inflicted on them terrible suffering.*" (Verse 8) The verse mentions more details about the way in which they were brought to

account, highlighting its severity and the terrible suffering inflicted on them. This is followed by the final outcome of their actions: "*Thus they tasted the outcome of their own conduct. Yet the end of their conduct was ruin.*" (Verse 9) The image given of this outcome is delayed to the next verse: "*God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verse 10) All this serves to make the scene longer and provide details of its steps and stages. This is one of the ways the Qur'ān employs to enhance the effects of the message it wants to give.

We need to reflect a little on this warning. We realize that God brought different communities to account, one at a time, whenever they defied His commandments and disobeyed His messengers. We note that this warning is given here in the context of outlining the rulings on divorce. Thus, a link between divorce and this divine law is established. This suggests that the divorce issue is not merely one of couples and families; it is an issue for the entire Muslim community, which is responsible for implementing God's law. To disobey God in this question, or indeed in other aspects of the divine law, or rather the code of living God has given, is an act of defiance which merits punishment, not only for the individuals who commit such disobedience, but also for the community or the country where such defiance takes place. Such defiance means setting up a life system that differs from what God has legislated. The religion of Islam has been bestowed from on high so that it will be obeyed and implemented in a way that regulates life as a whole. Therefore, defying it, even in the area of an individual's personal affairs, exposes the defiant to what earlier communities suffered of God's punishment.

Those communities tasted the results of their own conduct, and the end to which their actions led was utter ruin, which they suffered in this life, before the final reckoning on the Day of Judgement. Cities, peoples and nations tasted such outcomes when they defied God and refused to adopt the code of living He revealed to them. Today, we witness, as did our predecessors, such an outcome being suffered in the form of corruption, loose morality, poverty, drought, injustice and a life of fear that is devoid of peace and security. We see with our own eyes the truth of this warning.

On top of this, there will be grievous suffering that awaits those who defy God's orders and discard the way of life He has laid down. He,

the most truthful of all, says: "*God has prepared a severe punishment for them.*" (Verse 10)

In Volume XVI, we explained in our discussion of *Sūrah* 61, the Ranks, that Islam aims to create a Muslim community distinguished by its special system. It is, therefore, a collective system that conducts all the life affairs of its community. Hence, the community as a whole is responsible for putting it into practice and enforcing its laws. When the community discards the laws and rulings Islam puts in place, it leaves itself exposed to a fate which it is warned about here, just like it befell earlier defiant communities.

The *sūrah* follows the long warning and its detailed images with an address to believers endowed with insight. They are called upon to remain God-fearing: "*So, you who are endowed with insight, you who have faith, fear God. God has bestowed on you a reminder from on high.*" (Verse 10) The *sūrah* gives life to this reminder embodying it in the Prophet (peace be upon him). Thus, God's Messenger in person is the reminder: "*A Messenger who recites to you God's revelations that make things clear.*" (Verse 11)

Here we have a superb example of the Qur'ānic style giving us a profound and true image and that imparts more than one meaning. It first indicates that this reminder, which has been issued to them by God, has been given to them through the person of God's Messenger. It is as if the reminder was given directly to them. Nothing of it was screened by the Prophet. It also means that God's Messenger, in person, is a reminder. His personality has become an embodiment of this reminder, and his actions are a true translation of the Qur'ān. Thus, indeed, was the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). 'Ā'ishah, his wife, describes him in these words: "His morals and manners were the Qur'ān." The Qur'ān was always in his mind as he faced life, and he himself was the Qur'ān addressing life.

In addition to the blessings of the reminder, and the light and guidance given by God, we also have a promise of admission to heaven where believers will enjoy its everlasting bliss. There is a reminder here making clear that this is the best of all provisions, and that whatever people are given in this present life cannot be compared to it: "*God will have granted them a most excellent provision.*" (Verse 11) It is God who

grants all provisions in the life of this world and in the life to come, but some provisions are better than others. His choice of what is best is the right choice. We see how the point of good provisions is mentioned here again so as to impress on people that the provisions in heaven are immeasurably better than what is provided here. Yet this is in addition to the true promise made earlier of giving good provisions to those who remain God-fearing.

The Creator of All

The *sūrah*'s concluding note refers to the great universe, thus linking the theme of the *sūrah*, its legislation and directives to God's will, power and knowledge that encompass the entire universe:

> *It is God who has created seven heavens and likewise of the earth. His command descends through them all, so that you may learn that God has power over all things, and that God encompasses all things with His knowledge.* (Verse 12)

We do not know to what the term 'seven heavens' really refers, nor are we aware of their sizes and dimensions. Likewise, we do not know what the seven earths are. This earth of ours may be one of them and the others are known to God alone. Yet the term *mithluhunn*, translated here as 'likewise' may not be a reference to number, but to the fact that the earth is made of the same material or qualities as the heavens. Whichever is the case, it is unnecessary to try to apply our own knowledge to Qur'ānic statements of this type. Our knowledge does not extend to everything in the universe so as to enable us to learn what exactly the Qur'ān refers to. To claim such precise knowledge is possible only when man acquires absolutely certain knowledge of the entire universe. While this is impossible, we can still benefit by the Qur'ānic reference to this fact and its psychological effect and its bearing on our understanding of the proper Islamic concept of the universe.

This reference to the creation of the vast universe, "*seven heavens and likewise of the earth*," is awe inspiring. It presents us with a great image of the Creator's limitless power, the vastness of His kingdom. When

compared to the universe, the entire earth seems a tiny little place. How do we see those living on it, and how do we estimate an event that takes place on it? What value should we give to a little sum of money a man gives his divorced wife in maintenance, or that a woman forgos?

God's command descends in between, or through, these seven heavens and the earth or the seven earths. A part of His command is the sum of these rulings concerning the subject matter of this *sūrah*, i.e. divorce. It is, then, a great issue, even by human standards and our concept of time and place. To defy it is to be in defiance of a command that resounds throughout the heavens and the earths. It is a command that those on high hear of, as do other creatures in the heavens and the earths. Defying it, then, becomes a ghastly offence that no wise believer would even contemplate, and particularly when God's messenger has recited to him God's precise revelations, enlightening him on this matter so as to take him from darkness into light.

This command descends through the heavens and the earth so that it implants in believers' hearts the belief that God has the power to do what He wills. Nothing is beyond Him. He also knows everything throughout His great kingdom. Nothing escapes His knowledge, not even the best guarded secrets of the heart.

This truth is relevant here in two ways: the first is that these rulings on divorce are given by God who knows everything. He has issued them knowing all their situations, circumstances, interests and abilities. Hence, they are better to be followed with diligence, for they are better suited for human life. Secondly, the implementation of these rulings in particular is left to people's consciences. Therefore, realizing the extent of God's knowledge and His awareness of everything, including people's feelings and intentions, ensures that such consciences remain sensitive in an area where nothing is more important than fearing God Almighty.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes on this awe-striking note, which also makes people's minds ready to listen and obey. All praise is due to the Creator of these hearts who knows how to inspire and influence them.

SŪRAH 66

Al-Taḥrīm

(Prohibition)

Prologue

God has willed that Islam should be His final message, and the code of living it outlines should be the one suitable for the rest of human life. Furthermore, the life of those who believe in Islam should be consistent with the law that governs the universe, and Islam should be the faith to guide human life and shape all its activities. Therefore, He made this code of living comprehensive and perfect, catering for all human abilities and potentials. At the same time, this code elevates such abilities and potentials to the level suited for the creature God has placed in charge of the earth, honouring him above many of His other creatures, and blowing into him of His own spirit. Consistent with this will of His, God has made Islam naturally forward-looking. It enables life to grow while at the same time elevating it to the highest standard of purity. It does not stop any creative aspect or suppress a useful potential. On the contrary, it awakens and enhances these while ensuring a proper balance between forward movement and rising to a higher horizon. It is this which prepares the human spirit in this life for the superior happiness and bliss of the life to come, and the human mortal for a life everlasting.

God has also willed that the Messenger who delivers this final message should be a man who reflects the faith, with all its distinctive

characteristics and its special nature. Thus, as he goes through life, the Prophet becomes a true and practical translation of this faith, its nature and direction. He is an ordinary human being whose human abilities have attained a high standard: physically strong, with perfect constitution, sound senses, alert, able to perfectly feel all there is to feel. At the same time, he is full of emotion, naturally alert and sensitive, appreciates beauty, and is receptive and responsive. Moreover, he is of great intelligence, broad-minded, strong-willed, and he controls his feelings and reactions. Above all this, he is the Prophet whose soul reflects pure light, able to undertake the night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascendance to heaven. He is the one who is addressed from on high, sees the light of his Lord, and whose nature is in touch with the nature of everything in the universe: small and large stones greet him, the branches of trees yearn for contact with him, and Uḥud, the mountain, shakes at his presence. All these powers and potentials are balanced within his personality in such a way as to reflect the balance of the faith he has been chosen to present to humanity.

God has made the Prophet's life, its private and public aspects, an open book for the benefit of his followers and humanity at large. They can read in it all aspects of the Islamic faith and its practical implementation. Hence, there is nothing in it that is secret or limited to a closed circle. Indeed, many of its aspects are stated in the Qur'ān, revealing things that for an ordinary person are normally kept private. Indeed, even those aspects of human weakness, which are beyond our control, are left open for all to see. We almost see the wisdom behind so revealing such aspects of the Prophet's life to mankind. Nothing in his person or in his life belongs exclusively to him. He and all aspects of his life belong to his message. Why should, then, any aspect of his life be hidden? His life is the Islamic faith, something that is both close to us and easy to implement. The Prophet is assigned the task of presenting it in practice in his own life, just as he presents it by word and directive. This is the role assigned to him.

His Companions – may God be pleased with them and reward them well – conveyed to us all the details of his life. Nothing, whether of little or great importance in his daily life, is left unrecorded. It was part of God's will to have such a detailed record of His Messenger's life, or

rather to have a detailed record of Islam as lived by the Prophet. What his Companions reported is added to what the Qur'ān records of the Prophet's life and both form an everlasting record of this noble life, which benefits all humanity.

The Prophet's Wives

In its opening section, this *sūrah* presents an episode of life in the Prophet's home, showing some of the reactions and responses between some of his wives, and between them and himself. It also shows how these reactions and responses were reflected in the life of the Muslim community as a whole. This is followed by directives given to the community on the basis of what took place in the Prophet's homes, between his wives.

The time when these events took place is not precise, but reference to the various reports detailing them confirm that they definitely occurred after the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh.

It may also be useful to give here a summary of the Prophet's marriages and his home life at that time. This will enable us to visualize the events referred to in the *sūrah*. This brief outline is based on *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah* by Ibn Ḥazm and the Prophet's biography by Ibn Hishām. We will also add some brief comments as appropriate.

The Prophet's first wife was Khadījah bint Khuwaylid. He was 25, or perhaps 23,[1] when he married her. She was 40 or even older.[2] She died three years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. He did not marry another wife during her lifetime, and by then he was over 50 years of age.

After Khadījah's death, the Prophet married Sawdah bint Zima'h. There are no reports to suggest that she was either pretty or young. She was a widow of al-Sakrān ibn 'Amr ibn 'Abd Shams. Her husband

1. Other figures of the Prophet's age are mentioned in different reports: the lowest year of age is 21 and the highest is 30. – Editor's note.

2. Khadījah is commonly thought to have been 40 at the time of her marriage to the Prophet. This is highly unlikely as she gave the Prophet six children over a period of ten years. Other reports suggest that she was 25, 28, 30, 35 and even 45 years of age. One of the lower figures is more likely. – Editor's note.

was one of the early Muslims, and he was among the first migrants to Abyssinia. When he died, the Prophet married her.

He then married ʿĀ'ishah bint Abū Bakr. She apparently was young, and he did not hold his wedding with her until he had settled in Madīnah. She was the only virgin he married, and she was the one he loved most. It is said that she was only nine years of age at the time of her marriage.[3] By the time he passed away, she had been with him nine years and five months.

The Prophet then married Ḥafṣah bint ʿUmar, just over two years after settling in Madīnah. She had been married before. Her father had offered her in marriage to Abū Bakr and to ʿUthmān, but they both declined. The Prophet had promised her father something better for her so he married her himself.

He then married Zaynab bint Khuzaymah. Her first husband, ʿUbaydah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, was killed at the Battle of Badr. Zaynab died during the Prophet's lifetime. It is also reported that her first husband was ʿAbdullāh ibn Jaḥsh who fell a martyr at the Battle of Uḥud. Perhaps this report is more accurate.

The Prophet also married Umm Salamah. Her first husband, Abū Salamah, was wounded at the Battle of Uḥud, and his wound did not heal until he died. The Prophet then married her, looking after her children by her first husband.

Zaynab bint Jaḥsh was his next wife. He himself had given her in marriage to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, his former servant whom he had adopted as a son, but marital life between her and Zayd was fraught with difficulties. So, he divorced her. We related their story when discussing verses 36–40 of *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, in Volume XIV.[4] She was pretty. Indeed, she was the one ʿĀ'ishah felt most able to compete with because she was the Prophet's cousin, born to his paternal aunt, and because of her beauty.

3. This is again highly unlikely. She is mentioned among the early Muslims, which suggests that she was old enough to accept the new faith nine years before her marriage. Different reports of her reaction to events and statements suggest that she was perhaps twice this age at the time of her marriage. – Editor's note.

4. Sayyid Quṭb (2006), *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIV, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, pp. 82–91.

Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith was the next wife to be taken by the Prophet. This was in the middle of the sixth year of the Islamic calendar. Ibn Isḥāq attributes the following report to 'Ā'ishah: "When the Prophet distributed the women taken slaves after the Expedition of al-Muṣṭalaq, Juwayriyyah fell to Thābit ibn Qays ibn Shammās or his cousin. She made an agreement with him to buy her own freedom. She was very pretty. Anyone who saw her felt very attracted. She went to the Prophet seeking his help in paying what she owed for her freedom. When I saw her at my doorstep, I hated her, realizing that the Prophet would see of her beauty what I saw. She entered his room and said to him: 'Messenger of God. I am Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith. My father is the chief of his tribe. You are not unaware of the trouble that has befallen me. I am here to seek your help in paying for my freedom after I had made an agreement to so buy myself.' He said to her: 'What about something better?' She asked him: 'What is that, Messenger of God?' He said: 'I will pay for your freedom and marry you.' She said: 'I accept.' He said: 'It is a deal.'"

The Prophet married Umm Ḥabībah bint Abū Sufyān after the al-Ḥudaybiyah Peace Treaty. She had migrated to Abyssinia, but her husband, 'Ubaydullāh ibn Jaḥsh, converted to Christianity there and left her. The Prophet proposed marriage to her. It was King Negus who officiated at the marriage and paid her dowry on behalf of the Prophet.[5] She then returned to Madīnah.

Following the Battle of Khaybar, the Prophet married Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab. Her father was the chief of the Jewish tribe, al-Naḍīr. She had been married to Kinānah ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, a Jewish leader. Ibn Isḥāq reports that "she was brought to him with another woman who had fallen prisoner. Bilāl walked them through the battlefield passing a number of Jews who had been slain. The other woman cried out loud as they passed by, throwing dust over her own head. The Prophet said: 'Take this devil woman away from me.' He

5. The Prophet sent a messenger to Negus to arrange this marriage on his behalf, when he heard of Umm Ḥabībah's plight after she had lost her husband. This was some time before al-Ḥudaybiyah's peace treaty. However, she only arrived in Madīnah after that event. – Editor's note.

ordered that Ṣafiyyah be kept behind him, throwing his robe over her. His Companions thereby realized that he would take her himself. The Prophet is reported to have said to Bilāl: 'Are you devoid of compassion? How can you walk two women through the grounds where their menfolk have been killed?'"

Maymūnah bint al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥazn was the last of the Prophet's wives. She was the maternal aunt of Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās. Before marrying the Prophet she was married to Abū Ruḥm ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā, or perhaps Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā.

Thus, we see the special reasons that made it necessary for the Prophet to marry each of his wives. Apart from Zaynab bint Jaḥsh and Juwayriyyah bint al-Ḥārith, none were young or particularly attractive to men.[6] 'Ā'ishah was the one he loved most. Even in the case of those wives who were young and beautiful, there were psychological and humanitarian factors involved in their marriages. These increased their attraction. I do not deny or disregard the physical attraction, or beauty 'Ā'ishah felt the moment she saw Juwayriyyah, while Zaynab's beauty was also known to all. There is no need to deny that such human elements were a part of the Prophet's life. These cannot, however, form the basis for accusations levelled by the Prophet's enemies and which were denied by his followers. He was chosen as a human being, but with superior qualities and characteristics. Different as they were, his motives for whatever he did in his life, including his marriages, matched his superior qualities. In his home, he lived with his wives as a human being entrusted with the delivery of God's message. Indeed, God commanded him to declare the fact: "*Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.*'" (17: 93)

He enjoyed life with his wives, as so did they. 'Ā'ishah states: "When the Prophet was alone with his wives, he was the most lenient and generous of people, always smiling and laughing." [Related by al-Suyūṭī and Ibn 'Asākir.] Yet this applied to what he himself could offer out of his character, compassion, manners and behaviour. As for their material life, it was mostly a life of poverty, even after the Muslim community

6. We should perhaps add Ṣafiyyah bint Ḥuyayy as well, who was also young at the time the Prophet married her. – Editor's note.

achieved several victories and made plentiful gains. In commenting on *Sūrah* 33, The Confederates, we discussed the crisis that took place in the Prophet's home when his wives asked for more housekeeping money.[7] The problem ended with a choice put to them in the following terms: "*Prophet! Say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its charms, I shall provide for you and release you in a becoming manner; but if you desire God and His Messenger and the life of the hereafter, know that God has readied great rewards for those of you who do good.*'" (33: 28–29) They all chose God, His Messenger and the life of the hereafter.

Nevertheless, life in the Prophet's home was not such as to stifle normal human feelings and jealousies in his wives' minds. Sometimes they had their disagreements, just like those that may occur among women in similar circumstances. We have seen how the moment 'Ā'ishah saw Juwayriyyah, she hoped that the Prophet would not see her because she was certain he would appreciate her beauty. She was right. 'Ā'ishah herself mentions a situation involving her and Ṣafiyyah: "I said to the Prophet: 'It is enough that Ṣafiyyah is so and so,' [meaning, she was short]. He said to me: 'You have said a word which could colour an entire sea.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] She also reports that when the verses giving the Prophet's wives the choice referred to above, she was the first to be asked, and she chose to stay with the Prophet. She also requested that he not tell his other wives of her choice should any of them so ask. He said to her: "God has not sent me to make things hard for people. He sent me as a teacher who makes things easier. I will tell anyone of them about your choice should any care to ask." [Related by Muslim.]

These reports given by 'Ā'ishah about herself, reflecting her truthfulness and her shining Islamic education, are only examples of many others reflecting the normal way ordinary people behave in such a situation. They also show how the Prophet delivered his message through good example, cultivating the better characteristics of his household members, just as he delivered it by good example within his community.

7. This discussion is included in Volume XIV, pp. 61–66.

Al-Taḥrīm (Prohibition)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ لِمَ تُحَرِّمُ مَا أَحَلَّ اللَّهُ لَكَ ۖ تَبْتَغِي مَرْضَاتَ أَزْوَاجِكَ ۚ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (1)

قَدْ فَرَضَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ تَحِلَّةَ أَيْمَانِكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ مَوْلَاكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢﴾

God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. (2)

وَإِذْ أَسَرَّ النَّبِيُّ إِلَىٰ بَعْضِ أَزْوَاجِهِ حَدِيثًا فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَتْ بِهِ وَأَظْهَرَهُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ عَرَّفَ بَعْضَهُ وَأَعْرَضَ عَن بَعْضٍ ۖ فَلَمَّا نَبَّأَهَا بِهِ قَالَتْ مَنْ أَنبَأَكَ هَٰذَا ۖ قَالَ نَبَّأَنِيَ الْعَلِيمُ الْخَبِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' (3)

إِن تَتُوبَا إِلَى اللَّهِ فَقَدْ صَغَتْ قُلُوبُكُمَا ۖ وَإِن تَظَاهَرَا عَلَيْهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ مَوْلَاهُ وَجِبْرِيلُ وَصَالِحُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۖ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ ظَهِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾

Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. (4)

عَسَىٰ رَبُّهُۥٓ إِن طَلَّقَكُنَّ أَن يُبْدِلَهُۥٓ
أَزْوَٰجًا خَيْرًا مِّنكُنَّ مُسْلِمَٰتٍ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٍ
قَٰنِتَٰتٍ تَٰٓئِبَٰتٍ عَٰبِدَٰتٍ سَٰٓئِحَٰتٍ
ثَيِّبَٰتٍ وَأَبْكَارًا ﴿٥﴾

Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins. (5)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَكُمْ
وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلْحِجَارَةُ
عَلَيْهَا مَلَٰٓئِكَةٌ غِلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَّا يَعْصُونَ
ٱللَّهَ مَآ أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. (6)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَعْتَذِرُوا۟ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ
إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do. (7)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ تُوبُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ تَوْبَةً
نَّصُوحًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُكَفِّرَ عَنكُمْ
سَيِّـَٔاتِكُمْ وَيُدْخِلَكُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى
مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ يَوْمَ لَا يُخْزِى ٱللَّهُ
ٱلنَّبِىَّ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ ۖ نُورُهُمْ
يَسْعَىٰ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَٰنِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَآ أَتْمِمْ لَنَا نُورَنَا وَٱغْفِرْ لَنَآ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' (8)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ جَٰهِدِ ٱلْكُفَّارَ وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٩﴾

Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (9)

ضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ ٱمْرَأَتَ نُوحٍ وَٱمْرَأَتَ لُوطٍ ۖ كَانَتَا تَحْتَ عَبْدَيْنِ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا صَٰلِحَيْنِ فَخَانَتَاهُمَا فَلَمْ يُغْنِيَا عَنْهُمَا مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا وَقِيلَ ٱدْخُلَا ٱلنَّارَ مَعَ ٱلدَّٰخِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' (10)

وَضَرَبَ ٱللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱمْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ٱبْنِ لِى عِندَكَ بَيْتًا فِى ٱلْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِى مِن فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِۦ وَنَجِّنِى مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١١﴾

God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' (11)

وَمَرْيَمَ ٱبْنَتَ عِمْرَٰنَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَٰتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتُبِهِۦ وَكَانَتْ مِنَ ٱلْقَٰنِتِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout. (12)

The Event

The opening section of the *sūrah* speaks of an event in the lives of the Prophet and his wives. Although there are a number of reports giving different versions of what actually took place, we will leave these for now and return to them a little later. Based on this incident and the directives issued in connection with it, particularly the request that the two conspirators among the Prophet's wives repent, the *sūrah* also calls on believers to repent of their sins and requires that heads of families ensure their families are well brought up. They are specifically urged to protect themselves and their families from hell. A direct image of hell is also included here. The *sūrah* then concludes by citing various examples. Noah's and Lot's wives are shown as examples of unfaith in a house emanating belief, while Pharaoh's wife is depicted as someone holding to right faith while living in a house full of unbelievers. Mary is also shown as a pure woman who received a breath of God's spirit and believed in God's words and scriptures.

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise. The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives. When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.' Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him. Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins.* (Verses 1–5)

The Reports

There are several reports about the event in question, one of which is related by al-Bukhārī, which means that it is authentic. On 'Ā'ishah's authority, al-Bukhārī relates: "The Prophet used to have a honey drink at Zaynab bint Jaḥsh's home and then stay for some time with her. Ḥafṣah and I secretly agreed that when he came to either of us we would say to him: 'You have eaten *Maghāfīr*[8]; I can smell it.' When this occurred, he said: 'No. I only had a honey drink at Zaynab's. I will not do it again, and I have made an oath to this effect. Do not tell anyone of this.' This is what he prohibited himself, even though it was permissible for him to have."

It seems that either 'Ā'ishah or Ḥafṣah told her co-conspirator of the Prophet's decision to no longer take this honey drink. God then informed him of the same. He went back to her and mentioned some of what went on between the two of them, but without recounting it all in order not to embarrass her. He only touched upon the subject so that she realized that he was aware of it all. Surprised, she asked him: 'Who told you all this?' It might have occurred to her that his other wife was the one to tell him. He, however, said to her: '*The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.*' (Verse 3) His information, then, was given by the One who knows it all, which, in turn, implies that the Prophet was also aware of it *in toto*, not merely what he mentioned to her.

This incident angered the Prophet, exposing as it did that intrigue was going on in his home. He, therefore, swore that he would not touch any of his wives for a full month. People in the Muslim community also heard that the Prophet was thinking of divorcing his wives. This *sūrah* was then revealed and the Prophet's anger subsided. Subsequently, he resumed his life with his wives. We will presently mention how this happened, but we will first give a different version of the incident.

This second version is related by al-Nasā'ī on Anas's authority: "The Prophet had a bondswoman with whom he had sex. His wives, 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah, put pressure to bear on him until he prohibited himself from doing so. God revealed the verses starting with *"Prophet, why do you*

8. *Maghāfīr* is a glue-like type of food with a sweet taste and bad smell.

prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives?" (Verse 1) Another report given by Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Isḥāq mentions that the Prophet had sex with Maria, the mother of his son Ibrahīm, in Ḥafṣah's home. Ḥafṣah was very angry, considering this to be an insult against her person. The Prophet promised her he would banish Maria from him, swearing to this, and he asked Ḥafṣah to keep this a secret, but she told ʿĀ'ishah.

Either one of these two incidents may have taken place. However, the second report involving Maria may be closer to what we can understand from the text of the *sūrah* and the consequences that led to the Prophet being so angry that he even considered divorcing his wives. Taken together, this suggests that the matter was very sensitive and involved. The first report concerning the Prophet's favourite honey drink is more authentic with regard to its transmission. While it is not as serious as the second incidence implies, it might have led to such serious consequences if we take into account the high moral standards prevailing in the Prophet's home. Regardless though of what actually did happen, we should place our trust in God for He knows the truth of it all.

The Outcome

What, then, were the effects of this incident and the Prophet's decision to stay away from his wives for a month? This is best described in a *ḥadīth* related by Imām Aḥmad in *Al-Musnad,* which quotes ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAbbās:

> I was keen to ask ʿUmar about the Prophet's two wives in reference to whom God says in the Qur'ān: '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved.*' When ʿUmar went on pilgrimage, I went with him. As we were travelling, he moved from the rest and I went with him, carrying a water container. He relieved himself and came back to me. I poured water for him to do his ablution. I then asked him: 'Which two of the Prophet's wives are referred to in God's statement, '*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved*'?' He said: 'I wonder at you, Ibn ʿAbbās!' [Al-Zuhrī comments here that ʿUmar disliked

being asked about this, but he did not withhold the information.] 'Umar said: 'They were 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah.' He then told me the story.

We, the Quraysh, used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I, therefore, went straight to Ḥafṣah[9] and asked her: 'Do you sometimes object to what the Prophet says?' She confirmed that she did. I asked: 'Would any of you refrain from speaking to him throughout the day, until nightfall?' She again answered in the affirmative. I said: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry, and then you end in ruin? Do not object to God's Messenger in anything he says, and do not ask anything from him. Take from me instead whatever you want. Do not be deluded by the fact that your friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] is more pretty and is loved best by the Prophet.'

I had a neighbour from the Anṣār, with whom I took turns in going down to see the Prophet. He would go one day and I the next day. Each of us would inform the other of any new Qur'ānic revelations and of any events or developments. At the time, we were aware that the Ghassān[10] were preparing to invade us. My neighbour went to the Prophet one day and then came to me in the evening, knocking on my door. He called out and I went to see him. He said: 'A very serious matter took place.' I asked whether the Ghassān army was approaching. He said: 'No, something more serious than

9. Ḥafṣah was 'Umar's daughter, married to the Prophet. – Editor's note.

10. The Ghassān was a major Arab tribe living in southern Syria and Palestine, as part of the Byzantine Empire. – Editor's note.

that. The Prophet has divorced his wives.' I said: 'Ill-advised and lost is Ḥafṣah! I thought that this might happen.'

In the morning, after I had prayed *Fajr*, I put on my clothes and went to Ḥafṣah. I found her crying. I asked her whether the Prophet had divorced his wives. She said: 'I do not know. He has shut himself in this room close by.' I went there and found a black servant. I said to him: 'Seek permission for 'Umar to enter.' He went in and came back, and said: 'I mentioned you to him but he did not reply.' I went away, and I found close to the pulpit in the mosque a few men sitting down, some of whom were in tears. I sat there for a short while and I was then overcome by my own grief. I went back to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to enter. He again went in and told me as he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet remained silent. Once more I went to sit near the pulpit until I was overcome by my feelings. I went a third time to the servant and told him to seek permission for me to see the Prophet. Yet he again told me when he came out that he mentioned my name but the Prophet did not reply. I went away, but soon the servant called me. He said: 'You can go in. He has given you permission.' As I went in, I greeted the Prophet. I found him sitting on a straw mat which had left its mark on his side. I asked him whether he had divorced his wives. He lifted his head and said: 'No.' I said: 'God is Supreme.'

I then said: 'Messenger of God. If you could but see us, the Quraysh, when we used to have complete authority over our wives. When we settled in Madīnah, however, we found its people more submissive to their wives. Our women started to learn from their women. I used to live in Umayyah ibn Zayd's home in the highlands. One day, I was angry with my wife, as she objected to something I said. I disliked the fact that she should object to me'. She said: 'Why are you so surprised that I should object? God's Messenger's own wives may object to something he says, and any of them may not speak to him the whole day, until night time.' I then said to Ḥafṣah: 'Ill-advised and a loser indeed is any of you who does that! Do you not consider that any of you might incur God's anger as a result of His Messenger being angry with you, and

so end in ruin?' The Prophet smiled as I said this. I then told him that I said to my daughter that she should not to be deluded by the fact that her friend [meaning 'Ā'ishah] was prettier and loved the best by the Prophet. The Prophet smiled again. I asked whether I could sit down with him and he invited me to so sit.

As I lifted my head, looking around his home, I found absolutely nothing of note, apart from his dignified presence. I said: 'Messenger of God. Pray to God to give your community abundance of things. He has given abundance to the Persians and the Byzantines while they do not worship God.' He sat up and said to me: 'Are you in doubt, Ibn al-Khattab? These are people who have been given their good shares in this present life.' I said: 'Please pray to God to forgive me.' The Prophet had vowed not to come near his wives for a month, because he was so aggrieved by them. Because of this, God took issue with him. [This report is related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī on al-Zuhrī's authority, with different chains of transmission.]

The Qur'ānic Discussion

Such is the reporting of the incident in historical sources. We will now look at its treatment in the Qur'ān. The *sūrah* begins with a mild reproach by God to His Messenger:

> *Prophet, why do you prohibit yourself something that God has made lawful to you in your desire to please your wives? God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. God has already ordained for you [believers] a way to release you from such oaths. God is your Lord Supreme. He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.* (Verses 1–2)

The reproach is mild but effective. It is not proper for a believer to prohibit himself something that God has made lawful. The Prophet had not imposed a legal prohibition on himself with regard to the honey drink he liked or to Maria. He only decided to refrain from enjoying either. This gentle reproach makes it clear that it is not right to deliberately deprive oneself of what God has made lawful in order to

appease someone else. The comment at the end of the verse is: '*God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*' This suggests that such deliberate action would require questioning unless it was overlooked by an act of God's forgiveness and grace.

As for the oath that the Qur'ānic text suggests the Prophet made, God stated a way for him to release himself from it. This means that an oath that establishes a situation other than what is best should be atoned for so as to release oneself from it and then take up the better option. "*God is your Lord Supreme.*" (Verse 2) He helps you to overcome your weaknesses and to cope with what may be hard for you. Hence, he has ordained for you a way out of your oaths so as to ensure that you do not incur unnecessary hardship. "*He alone is the All-Knowing, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) He legislates for you on the basis of His absolute knowledge and perfect wisdom. He only commands you to do what is within your power and what is best suited for you. Therefore, do not prohibit yourselves anything other than what He has forbidden, and continue to make lawful only what He has made lawful. It is clear that the comment here fits perfectly with the directive already stated.

The *sūrah* then refers to what the Prophet said to one of his wives, but mentions neither its subject matter nor its details. None of this is important. What is important, however, is what it signified and the knock-on effects it generated: "*The Prophet told something in confidence to one of his wives.*" (Verse 3) What we are looking at here is something unique in human history. We are looking at a period when there was direct contact between heaven and ordinary people. Here is a direct, public and detailed intervention by heaven in human affairs. God informs the Prophet of a conversation between two of his wives concerning something he had told one of them in confidence. When the Prophet mentioned this to the wife who had divulged it, he only hinted at a certain aspect of it, rather than giving her a detailed account. At the same time, he also informed her of the source of his information: it was the One solid source that could not be mistaken: "*When she divulged it, and God made this known to him, he spoke of a part of it and passed over a part. When he thus let her know of that, she asked, 'Who has told you this?' He said: 'The All-Knowing, the All-Aware told me.'*" (Verse 3)

The choice of God's attributes of perfect knowledge and complete awareness of everything particularly suit the conspiratory situation under discussion. Thus, the one who asked the question is reminded of that which she might have forgotten or overlooked. We are all so reminded whenever we read the Qur'ān.

A change of style then follows. The *sūrah* is no longer reporting an incident; it is now addressing the two women involved, as if the matter is taking place at this very moment: "*Would that you two turn to God in repentance, for your hearts have swerved! But if you support each other against him, know that God is his protector, and that, therefore, Gabriel, all righteous believers and the angels will stand behind him.*" (Verse 4) They are, thus, invited to turn to God in repentance after their hearts had swerved from rightful action.

We so realize that the incident had such a profound effect on the Prophet as to require the statement that he is given full protection by God. Furthermore, Gabriel, the believers and all angels stand ready to give him their full support. The Prophet is thus reassured and comforted after this serious breach of confidence. Indeed, the whole situation must have been considered as very serious, implying far-reaching consequences for it to have necessitated such assurances. We can appreciate this for ourselves from the reports mentioned earlier, particularly the answer given by the Anṣārī man when 'Umar asked him about whether the Ghassān army was approaching. In fact his answer states that the matter was even more serious than that threat. Ghassān was an autonomous region in the tutelage of the Byzantine Empire, bordering the Arabian Peninsula. An attack by Ghassān on the Muslim community would have been very serious, yet the other matter was felt by Muslims to be even far more serious and far-reaching. They felt that the Prophet's own comfort and the maintenance of serenity and peace in his noble home were more important than anything else. This, then, gives us a clear indication of how the Muslim community viewed these developments, a view in line with how heaven treated it. It is, then, a correct view.

The next verse provides similar import. It details the qualities of the women whom God may give to His Messenger, should he divorce his current wives. This is addressed to all his wives by way of an implicit threat: "*Were he to divorce you, his Lord may well give him in your stead*

spouses better than you: women who surrender themselves to God, true believers, devout, penitent, who worship in humility and reflect thoughtfully, be they women previously married or virgins." (Verse 5) They are, thus, indirectly called upon to adopt these qualities. The first quality is full submission to God and the fulfilment of all religious obligations. Next, is complete faith that leads to surrendering oneself to God, which is the literal meaning of the Arabic word *islam*. Devotion, the third quality, means conscious obedience of God. The Prophet's wives should also be penitent, which means that they should regret any slip into sin and follow this by turning to do God's bidding. To worship in humility is another quality they should possess. It is the means by which to communicate with God and express our submission to Him. Thoughtful reflection is how we have translated the quality the *sūrah* refers to by the Arabic word *sā'iḥāt,* which literally means 'wandering, contemplating'. What it means here is that they always reflect on God's creation and contemplate the great universe He has created. Having all these qualities, these new wives would be either virgins or previously married, in the same way as the Prophet married those wives already with him.

This warning was apparently necessary because of the telling effect their conspiracy had on the Prophet, incurring his anger. He was never given to anger, but the matter was clearly serious. The Prophet felt comforted and reassured when these verses were revealed, addressing him personally as also members of his household. Thereafter, the atmosphere in his blessed home regained its serenity as a direct result of God's statements. This was an honour given to the Prophet and his household, given their important role in the solid implementation of God's code for human life.

We have thus seen a picture of the home life of the man who was entrusted with establishing a nation and a state on hitherto unknown lines. This nation was to be entrusted with the fulfilment of divine faith in its final form. It was to be the practical establishment of a devout society that sets the example for future generations. We see also a picture of a man of exceptional greatness and nobility. Yet, he lived his humanity just as he fulfilled the tasks of his prophethood; the two were intertwined. It was God's will that he should be a human Messenger delivering His last message to mankind, outlining a perfect code for all humanity.

It is a perfect message delivered by a perfect Messenger. One aspect of its perfection is that its every adherent remains a human being: none of his abilities or talents are suppressed or prevented from developing and flourishing. At the same time, it cultivates and educates him so as to attain the highest standard within his power.

Thus has been the method of Islam with those who understood it well and who have moulded their lives on the basis of its teachings. They became living examples of Islam. The Prophet's practical life, with all that it involved of human experience, endeavours, strengths and weaknesses, was intertwined with the divine message. As we see in the case of those who were closest to him and his own family, his life was the practical example of how to live Islam. It set the model for those who wish to learn an easy and practical way of implementing God's message. It also steered away from theoretical assumptions that have no practical effect.

God's purpose was thus fulfilled: the final message to mankind was revealed in full, the Messenger who could receive it and give it its practical form was chosen, and his life was left as an open book for all, studied and reviewed by one generation after another.

A Believer's Responsibility

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers enjoining them to fulfil their family duties, providing good education, admonition and reminders so that they protect themselves and their families from hell. It provides an image of the fire and how the unbelievers stand before it. In line with the call to those involved in the earlier event to turn to God in repentance, the same call is made to the believers, adding an image of heaven which awaits those who repent of their sins. This second section of the *sūrah* concludes with a call on the Prophet to strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites:

> *Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones, over which are appointed angels, stern and mighty, who never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do. Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You*

will only be requited for what you used to do. Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.' Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end. (Verses 6–9)

A believer's responsibility with regard to himself and his family is heavy and awesome. He and his family are liable to punishment in the fire of hell and it is his responsibility to protect himself and his family from such a dreadful fate. It is a terrible fire, "*fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6) People there are treated in the same way as stones: cheap, abject and thrown away with a total disregard as to what may happen to them. A fire fuelled by stones must blaze fiercely, and a torment that combines its scourge with humiliation compounds the suffering. Everything about it is absolutely terrible: "*over [it] are appointed angels, stern and mighty,*" so that they suit the punishment they are required to administer. They "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (Verse 6) By nature they always obey every command God gives them, and are well able to carry out any such assignment. Possessing such qualities, they are chosen to guard the fire of hell, while every believer is responsible for protecting himself and his family from it. He has to attend to his responsibility now, in this life, before it is too late. When the chance is gone, no excuse is acceptable. The unbelievers will try to present excuses, but they are confronted with the facts that leave them in utter despair: "*Unbelievers! Make no excuses today. You will only be requited for what you used to do.*" (Verse 7) That day is not a time for presenting excuses. It is the day when reward and punishment are given. The unbelievers will only take what their own actions incur.

How are the believers to protect themselves and their families from the fire of hell? The way is mapped out for them, and they are further equipped with great hope: "*Believers! Turn to God in sincere repentance. It may well be that your Lord will efface your bad deeds and admit you into*

gardens through which running waters flow, on a day when God will not disgrace the Prophet or those who believed with him. Their light will spread out before them, and on their right. They will say: 'Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.'" (Verse 8) The way, then, begins with sincere repentance setting the heart on an honest course that allows no deception. This means genuine regret for past sins and a commitment to do what is good and required. Such repentance is certain to rid a person's heart of any residue sin may leave behind and encourages only what is good. Both qualities are necessary to make the repentance sincere and effective.

When repentance is sincere, it brings with it a hope that God will forgive the repentant their sins and admit them into heaven on the day when the unbelievers are given their humiliating punishment. No disgrace will on that day attach to the Prophet or those who followed him and accepted his message. This prospect is very tempting as it brings about great honour, with the believers being joined to the Prophet as one group treated with dignity when others are shamed. Furthermore, they are given light that "*spreads out before them and on their right.*" Thus they are identified among the great multitude, and they can find their way to their ultimate goal, which is heaven.

In that fearful position when everyone is in the grip of worried anticipation, they are inspired with a humble prayer: "*Our Lord! Perfect our light for us and forgive us. You certainly have power over all things.*" (Verse 8) The fact that they say such a prayer when the situation makes everyone speechless is a sign that their prayer will be answered. God inspires believers to offer such a prayer only when He will be pleased to answer it. This means that their very prayer is a blessing God bestows on them in addition to the honour and the light already given to them.

How different all this is from the fire fuelled by people and stones! However, both reward and punishment highlight the responsibility of every believer to protect himself and his family from the fire and to place them in a position where they deserve to receive the reward of heaven. In the light of the event that took place in the Prophet's home, we can appreciate the message given in these verses. A believer is responsible for setting his household on the right way, just as he is responsible for ensuring that he purges his heart of sin and follows divine guidance.

As we said in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, Divorce, Islam is a faith that takes care of the family. Therefore, it sets certain duties and responsibilities a believer must fulfil with regard to his home and family. The home is the nucleus of the Muslim community. Muslim families are the cells that make up the Muslim society. Every single home is a fortress of faith that must have no flaw in its internal structure. Everyone inside guards their positions so that no external enemy can infiltrate them. Otherwise, the whole society would be penetrated from within, and so would fall apart should any external attack occur. It is the first duty of a believer to attend to his home and family so that it is internally solid and well guarded. Before he tries to present his message to others, he must close any loophole within.

In this set up, a Muslim mother has an essential role to play; a Muslim father cannot on his own ensure the security of the fortress. Together, the two must cooperate fully in the upbringing of their sons and daughters. A group of men on their own can never succeed in establishing a Muslim society. Indeed, it is women who have a more important role to play in taking care of the new generation and safeguarding the future of the Muslim community. Hence, the Qur'ān addressed both men and women. It set out a system for the Muslim home, placing on believers a clear responsibility for their families, in the same way as they are responsible for themselves: "*Believers! Guard yourselves and your families against a fire fuelled by people and stones.*" (Verse 6)

Advocates of Islam must be fully aware of this and ensure that they put it into practice. Their first efforts must be addressed to their homes: to their wives and mothers first, and to their children and the rest of their families. Great importance should be attached to the education of the Muslim woman, so that she can make her family home a Muslim home. Anyone who wants his home to be Islamic must start by choosing a Muslim wife. Otherwise, the formation of a Muslim community will take far too long and its structure will remain weak and flawed.

Our Own Hard Task

The situation with the first Muslim community was easier than it is in our present day. A Muslim society was already established in

Madīnah, where Islam, its vision of a clean, virtuous human life and its laws based on this vision were the driving force. Men and women looked up to God and His Messenger for judgement. When judgement was given, it was accepted as final. In such a society, it was easy for women to mould themselves as Islam wanted them to be. Likewise, it was easy for husbands to advise their wives and bring up their children in line with the Islamic system.

We are now in a totally different situation, as we have sunk back into a state of *jāhiliyyah* that influences our society, its laws, morality, traditions, systems, manners and culture. Women find themselves in the midst of this society and feel its crushing pressures as they try to bring their lives in line with Islam, whether on their own initiative or guided by their fathers, husbands or brothers.

In that first Muslim community, the man, the woman and society all had the same perspective and looked to the same source for judgement. In our own time, the man is looking up to a theoretical abstract while the woman writhes under the heavy pressure of a society that is extremely hostile to her perspective. There is no doubt that the pressures society brings to bear on women are many times greater than its pressure on men. Hence, a believing man has a double duty: he must not only protect himself from the fire but also protect his family that is exposed to such pressures.

A Muslim man must realize the size of his responsibility in order to address it properly. This requires that he exert much greater efforts than a Muslim man in the first Muslim community. This is why it is essential for anyone who wants to establish a Muslim home to look first of all for a partner who can guard his fort. She must be a woman who derives her perspective from the same source, Islam. He will have to sacrifice certain things. He must sacrifice superficial attractions that society presents, looking instead for a woman of firm belief who will help him in building a Muslim family. Muslim fathers who want to be part of the Islamic revival must also realize that the new cells in this revival are a trust they must safeguard. It is their task to educate, cultivate and bring them up on Islamic lines before they address their message to anyone else. Only in this way can they fulfil God's orders as He bids them to protect themselves and their families from the fire.

Once more we refer to the nature of Islam that requires the establishment of a community that runs its affairs according to Islam and gives it a practical presence. Islam is based on the need to establish a community that believes in it and adopts it as a way of life and a code of law. It is from Islam, the complete and perfect system, that this community derives all its concepts and perspectives. Such a community is the fertile soil where Islam finds its practical model. Within this community, people look at this model and feel free of the pressures of an un-Islamic society. Moreover, the Muslim community ensures that its members are not subjected to any persecution.

We, thus, see the importance of establishing a Muslim community where Muslim girls and women live, protected from the crushing pressures of the un-Islamic society around them. In such a community they are no longer torn apart by their own Islamic perspective and traditions that are un-Islamic. A young Muslim man will find in that community a woman who will share life with him in a family nest, or a fortress, which is the first and primary unit of the Islamic camp.

It is essential rather than merely desirable for an Islamic community to be established along Islamic lines, adopting Islamic ideas, morality, manners and life concepts and implementing them within its own ranks. Only such a community can safeguard its concepts and values, advocating them in a practical way, seen by all. Thus individuals in an un-Islamic society, who are addressed by the advocates of Islam, will look at Islamic life and be motivated to come out of the darkness in which they live and replace it with the light Islam provides. Eventually, when God wills that Islam should triumph, new generations will be raised under its care, protected from the *jāhiliyyah* that has long prevailed.

It was to protect the first Muslim community that the command was issued to the Prophet to strive hard against those who take a hostile stand towards it: "*Prophet, strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and press hard on them. Their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9) This is particularly significant in light of the earlier command to the believers to protect themselves and their families against the fire of hell. It is also significant in respect of the invitation given to them to sincerely repent of their sins so that their bad deeds are erased and they are admitted into heaven. It highlights the importance

of safeguarding the environment where protection from the fire takes place. Thus, oppressive and wicked elements are not allowed to attack the Muslim community whether from outside, as the unbelievers used to do, or from within as the hypocrites did.

In its order to strive hard against the enemies of Islam, the Qur'ānic statement groups together both the unbelievers and the hypocrites because they shared the same mission – the destruction of the Muslim community, or at least its disintegration. To strive against them is, then, the sort of effort that protects from the fire, and to be hard against them is the proper response required of the Prophet and the believers in this present life. As for the life to come, "*their ultimate abode is hell, and how vile a journey's end.*" (Verse 9)

We note that the harmonious tune this second section of the *sūrah* sings of its message is also in perfect harmony with the first section that dealt with a particular event in the Prophet's own home.

Contrasting Examples

The third and final section of the *sūrah* sounds as if it is a direct continuation of its first section. It speaks of unbelieving women married to prophets and women believers in the midst of unbelievers:

> *God has given examples of unbelievers: Noah's wife and Lot's wife. They were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.' God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said: 'My Lord! Build me a mansion in heaven near You, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from the wrongdoing folk.' And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed of Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.* (Verses 10–12)

Reports speaking of the betrayal of Noah and Lot by their wives suggest that it was a betrayal of their messages, rather than their being unfaithful to their marriage bonds. Noah's wife used to join the

unbelievers in his community in making fun of him, while Lot's wife used to inform his people when he received guests, knowing what they tried to do with such visitors.

Similarly, reports concerning Pharaoh's wife make it clear that she lived in his palace as a believer in God Almighty, and suggest that she was of Asian origin following a divine religion that was revealed before Moses' time. Historical reports mention that the mother of Eminhuteb IV, the Pharaoh who advocated belief in one god, making the sun a symbol of the divine being, calling himself Ekhnaton, was Asian and believed in a religion other than that known in Egypt. God only knows if she is the one referred to in this *sūrah*, or whether the reference is made to the Pharaoh challenged by Moses and his wife. Moses' Pharaoh is definitely different from Eminhuteb IV. We need not, however, be particularly concerned about the exact identity of Pharaoh's wife. What is important is that the Qur'ānic statement confirms a permanent fact in which individual people are only examples.

Having made an order to believers to protect themselves and their families from incurring punishment in hell, the *sūrah* now highlights the principle of individual responsibility. The Prophet's wives, and indeed wives of all believers, are told here that ultimately they are personally accountable for what they do and the decisions they make. Their individual responsibility cannot be waived merely because they are married to a prophet or to a devout believer. Both Noah's and Lot's wives "*were married to two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them. Their husbands could be of no avail to them against God. They were told: 'Enter both of you the fire with all those who will enter it.'*" (Verse 10) When the question is one of belief or unbelief, or one of betrayal of faith, there can be no special privilege for anyone, not even for prophets' wives.

Pharaoh's wife gives the perfect contrast. She was living in the midst of sweeping unbelief, but that did not deter her from seeking her own personal safety. She disowned all connection with Pharaoh's palace, praying to God to grant her a home in heaven. She disavowed any relation with Pharaoh, praying that God grant her safety from him. Realizing that as Pharaoh's wife she was the closest person to him and his actions, she feared that some blame might attach to her. She, therefore, made it clear that she had nothing to do with all this, further praying

to God that He keep her away from it: "*And save me from Pharaoh and his doings.*" (Verse 11) She disowned Pharaoh's people while at the same time living in their midst: "*And save me from the wrongdoing folk.*" (Verse 11)

Pharaoh's wife's prayer and her overall position is a shining example of rejecting all temptation that the life of this world can offer, even at its most splendid. Pharaoh was the most powerful king on earth, and his palace offered the best that a woman could desire. Yet his wife chose faith in preference to all this. She did not merely treat it with contempt; she considered it evil and sought refuge with God from yielding to it, praying to be saved from it and its consequences. Yet Pharaoh's wife was a woman standing on her own in the midst of a great kingdom, which makes her all the more admirable and gives her an even greater position. As we have stated earlier, women are more sensitive and responsive to social pressures. However, this woman, on her own, resisted the pressures exerted by society, the palace, the throne, the courtiers and her own royal position, lifting her head to heaven seeking its light. She certainly provides a great example of submission to God, resisting all temptations and overcoming all impediments. Hence she deserved her special mention in God's book, the words of which are echoed throughout the universe as they are revealed from on high.

"*And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān,*" provides another example of total dedication. Her story is given from its early beginnings elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Her distinctive quality mentioned here is her purity, "*who guarded her chastity.*" (Verse 12) Thus, her innocence is made absolutely clear, refuting the vile accusations the Jews levelled at her. "*And We breathed of Our spirit into her.*" (Verse 12) It was from this breathing of God's spirit into her that Jesus, her son, was born, as detailed in *Sūrah* 19, Maryam. We will not go into the details of his birth here, limiting ourselves only to the discussion of the present text which highlights Mary's purity, complete faith and total obedience of God: "*She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and His revealed books. She was truly devout.*" (Verse 12)

The fact that Pharaoh's wife is the one chosen to be mentioned here together with Mary is indicative of her own sublime status; a status enhanced by the special circumstances of her own life. Both ladies are

splendid examples of women who combined firm faith with purity of behaviour and total devotion. God sets these two examples for the Prophet's own wives in the context of the event reported in the first section of the *sūrah*. They are also examples set before believing women in all generations.

This *sūrah* gives us a glimpse of the Prophet's own life, drawn in the inspiring style of the Qur'ān. No human report speaking of the period can give us a similar picture. This because Qur'ānic expressions are more inspiring and far-reaching. In this way, a single event is cited to state the truth that remains valid for the rest of time.

SŪRAH 67

Al-Mulk

(Dominion)

Prologue

Whereas the revelation of the previous ten *sūrahs* (57–66) took place in Madīnah, this *sūrah* and all nine that follow in this volume were revealed in Makkah. Each type has its own features and leaves its special impressions on the reader. Makkan revelation generally deals with belief in God, revelation and the Day of Judgement, as well as establishing concepts about life, the universe and its relation with its Creator based on such beliefs. It speaks about God, the Creator, in such a way that makes our hearts feel His presence and outlines the sort of emotions and manners that are appropriate for a human being who addresses his Lord and looks up to Him. It clearly sets the standards and values a Muslim adopts in judging events, situations and people. As we discuss the remaining *sūrahs* in this volume, we will see examples of such treatment, to be added to what we have already seen in other Makkan *sūrahs*.

Revelations given in Madīnah address the implementation of such beliefs, concepts, standards and values in practical life. They urge people to live up to their faith, which is the trust assigned to them. They must fulfil their obligations both within themselves and in their public lives.

The present *sūrah* seeks to formulate a new concept of the universe and its relation with its Creator. It is a broad, comprehensive concept that transcends the world we live in and our limited lifespans to include the universe at large and the life to come. It speaks of creatures living on earth alongside man, such as the *jinn* and the birds, or belonging to the hereafter, such as hell and its guards. Furthermore, it refers to worlds beyond the reach of our human perception bringing these closer to our feelings so that we do not focus solely on our present life on earth. It invites us to reflect on what we see in our lives and within ourselves but which we tend to take for granted.

It awakens within man all images and impressions that have long been stagnant as a result of holding on to *jāhiliyyah* concepts. It removes the dust that has gathered over our feelings, opens windows and releases minds, and frees senses and perceptions so that they can look at the wide horizon, the vast space, the deep oceans, the inner soul and the world beyond, reflecting on God's marvellous creation. It invites us to look at how the universe moves on by God's will. We thus realize that the whole thing is far greater and its scope much wider than we could possibly have imagined. Then, we no longer focus on our earth, but instead look up to heaven; we move from what we see to the truth beyond and we are able to see how God's will both brings life and controls it.

Life and death are two familiar phenomena. Yet the *sūrah* invites us to look at what lies beyond these two phenomena of God's will, wisdom, and the way He sets tests and conducts all affairs. It is God: "*who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 2) The skies above are creatures people see with their eyes. Yet they do not look beyond them to see God's hand that brought them into existence, nor the perfection they manifest. The *sūrah*, however, initiates action so that we contemplate such beauty and perfection as well as the ultimate objective of creation: "*He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verses 3–5)

To those who live in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, the life of this world appears to be the ultimate objective. The *sūrah*, however, presents another world to devils and unbelievers, a world that is full of movement and expectation. It stands in waiting: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verses 5–11)

In a world of *jāhiliyyah*, people hardly ever look beyond their immediate life or think of a world beyond what they can perceive. They are, as it were, locked within the cage of their current life on earth. The *sūrah*, therefore, directs their minds and sights to look to what is beyond, to the heavens and the divine will which, though unseen by any human eye, can do whatever it wills, whenever and wherever it chooses. Thus, the earth, stable as it appears before their eyes, is strongly shaken: "*Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verses 13–17)

They look at birds, an aspect of creation they see frequently but which they rarely contemplate its marvellous creation. The *sūrah* again fixes their eyes on this and lets their minds appreciate God's power as He shapes and fashions His creation: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.*" (Verse 19)

They feel safe and secure on earth, but this is only the false sense of one who is oblivious to what God's will and power may bring about. Having shaken the earth under their feet, including all that forms their environment, the *sūrah* then shakes them even harder so that they realize that nothing can ever withstand God's power, which they hardly ever even take into account: "*What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" (Verse 20)

They feel that the provisions they have are close at hand, and that they can compete for them as they please. The *sūrah*, however, directs their attentions to look far beyond the elements they think to be involved in securing their provisions: "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21)

As they pursue their erring ways, thinking they are well guided, the *sūrah* paints them a vivid, inspiring image showing their own condition and that of those who truly follow correct guidance: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22)

They do not benefit by what God has placed in their make-up of talents, faculties and perceptions. They do not go beyond what they perceive so as to look at what lies beyond their immediate world. The *sūrah* reminds them of God's grace as He has given them these abilities, and directs them to use these in a way that tries to divine the future and determine the ultimate objective: "*Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verses 23–24)

Even in their persistent denial of the resurrection, they still constantly ask about its timing. The *sūrah* depicts this as a true and imminent event, one that will approach them all of a sudden. Hence, they have nothing but distaste for it: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verses 25–27)

They hope that the Prophet and those who follow him will perish, as this will silence this voice that has for long irritated them by the warnings it delivers. They would rather revert to their foolish slumber. The *sūrah* reminds them that whether this group of believers perish or flourish, it cannot affect their own destiny that is determined by a persistent rejection of faith. Hence, they are better advised to look at their own situation and to make amends before it is too late: "*Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.'*" (Verses 28–29)

Finally, the *sūrah* warns them that water, which is essential for life, may be taken away by God, whom the unbelievers deny: "*Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?*" (Verse 30)

The key to the whole *sūrah* and the axis of the movement it sets in our hearts, minds, senses and feelings are found in its inspiring opening: "*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) It is from the truth of God's dominion and power that all images presented in the *sūrah*, as well as all hidden and apparent movements to which it alludes, branch out. Thus, the creation of life and death, testing people through them, the creation of the heavens and their adornment with lamps that serve as missiles pelting devils, the preparation of hell as it is described, the knowledge of what is secret and public, making the earth easy for humans to live upon, the destruction of early communities who rejected divine guidance, holding birds in the sky, God's overwhelming power and His exaltation, providing sustenance to all as He pleases, His creation of people and granting them hearing, eyesight and hearts, causing them to multiply on earth and then gathering them all, His full knowledge of the hereafter which is His own preserve, the meting out of punishment to the unbelievers, the provision of water, which is essential to life, and the ability to take it away whenever He wishes all emanate from the fact that to God belongs all dominion in the universe. He has power over all things.

The *sūrah* states a long sequence of truths that flow uninterruptedly with successive impressions and ideas to explain its concise, yet comprehensive, opening. It is, therefore, difficult to divide into passages. Let us, then, look at it as it develops its theme from start to finish.

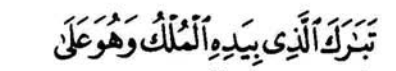
I

The Sovereign of the Universe

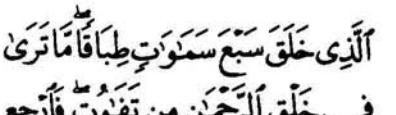
Al-Mulk (Dominion)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

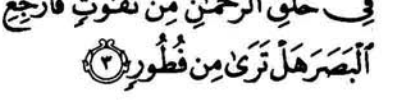
Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things; (1)



who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving. (2)



He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? (3)



Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. (4)

وَلَقَدْ زَيَّنَّا ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ
وَجَعَلْنَٰهَا رُجُومًا لِّلشَّيَٰطِينِ ۖ وَأَعْتَدْنَا
لَهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿٥﴾

We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. (5)

وَلِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِرَبِّهِمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ
وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٦﴾

Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. (6)

إِذَآ أُلْقُوا۟ فِيهَا سَمِعُوا۟ لَهَا شَهِيقًا وَهِىَ
تَفُورُ ﴿٧﴾

When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, (7)

تَكَادُ تَمَيَّزُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيْظِ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أُلْقِىَ فِيهَا فَوْجٌ
سَأَلَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَآ أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ نَذِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' (8)

قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ قَدْ جَآءَنَا نَذِيرٌ فَكَذَّبْنَا وَقُلْنَا
مَا نَزَّلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن شَىْءٍ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا فِى
ضَلَٰلٍ كَبِيرٍ ﴿٩﴾

'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' (9)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ كُنَّا نَسْمَعُ أَوْ نَعْقِلُ مَا كُنَّا فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١٠﴾

They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' (10)

فَٱعْتَرَفُوا۟ بِذَنۢبِهِمْ ۖ فَسُحْقًا لِّأَصْحَٰبِ
ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١١﴾

Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy]. (11)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلْغَيْبِ لَهُم
مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward. (12)

وَأَسِرُّوا۟ قَوْلَكُمْ أَوِ ٱجْهَرُوا۟ بِهِۦٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. (13)

أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ ٱللَّطِيفُ ٱلْخَبِيرُ ﴿١٤﴾

How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. (14)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ ذَلُولًا
فَٱمْشُوا۟ فِى مَنَاكِبِهَا وَكُلُوا۟ مِن رِّزْقِهِۦ ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ
ٱلنُّشُورُ ﴿١٥﴾

He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. (15)

ءَأَمِنتُم مَّن فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يَخْسِفَ بِكُمُ
ٱلْأَرْضَ فَإِذَا هِىَ تَمُورُ ﴿١٦﴾

Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? (16)

أَمْ أَمِنتُم مَّن فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ
حَاصِبًا ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ كَيْفَ نَذِيرِ ﴿١٧﴾

Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. (17)

وَلَقَدْ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ فَكَيْفَ
كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them? (18)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ إِلَى ٱلطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَٰٓفَّٰتٍ وَيَقْبِضْنَ ۚ مَا يُمْسِكُهُنَّ إِلَّا ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍۭ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١٩﴾

Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything. (19)

أَمَّنْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى هُوَ جُندٌ لَّكُمْ يَنصُرُكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ۚ إِنِ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ إِلَّا فِى غُرُورٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion. (20)

أَمَّنْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى يَرْزُقُكُمْ إِنْ أَمْسَكَ رِزْقَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّجُّوا۟ فِى عُتُوٍّ وَنُفُورٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion. (21)

أَفَمَن يَمْشِى مُكِبًّا عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِۦٓ أَهْدَىٰٓ أَمَّن يَمْشِى سَوِيًّا عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path? (22)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۖ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. (23)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِى ذَرَأَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.' (24)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (25)

Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' (26)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.' (27)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ زُلْفَةً سِيٓـَٔتْ وُجُوهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَقِيلَ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' (28)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَهْلَكَنِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَمَن مَّعِىَ أَوْ رَحِمَنَا فَمَن يُجِيرُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.' (29)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ وَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ هُوَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Say: 'Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?' (30)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَصْبَحَ مَآؤُكُمْ غَوْرًا فَمَن يَأْتِيكُم بِمَآءٍ مَّعِينٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

God's Power of Creation

Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things. (Verse 1)

Coming as it does at the outset of the *sūrah*, this glorification imparts a feeling of the multiplication of God's blessings and their continued outflowing. The fact that dominion is mentioned alongside it suggests

that this blessing flows over God's kingdom. Hence, it is glorified throughout the universe, as it is glorified with God Himself. It sounds like a hymn echoed throughout the universe and within every creature's heart. It begins with the divine word in God's glorious book, the Qur'ān, inscribed in a well-guarded record, and which spreads throughout the universe.

"*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests.*" (Verse 1) He is the Sovereign who has full control over the universe; He conducts its affairs. When this truth is established in the human heart, its direction and destination become well defined. It no longer turns to anyone or relies on anyone other than the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs. It feels free from submission to anyone else. It, thus, addresses its worship to none other than Him.

"*Who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) Nothing escapes Him, and no one diverts or limits His will. He creates and does what He wants. He has full power over everything. His will is subject to neither limitation nor restriction. As this truth becomes well established, the human mind is free to perceive God's will and action that are free of any restriction our senses, perception of reality or what lies beyond it, or indeed our imagination can visualize. God's power extends far beyond anything that a human mind can entertain. After all, human imagination is restricted in its expectation of change by what is familiar to it. Appreciation of the truth of God's limitless power removes this restriction. Hence, a believer expects God's power to accomplish anything, without limit or restriction.

> *Who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.* (Verse 2)

One of the results of His complete dominion of the universe and absolute power over all things is that He created death and life. The term 'death' in this context includes the death that precedes life and the one that follows its end, whereas 'life' includes this first life and the life to come. All these are of God's creation as stated in this verse. In this way, it establishes this truth in the human mind, alerting it to the test it aims

to set. Nothing, then, comes by blind coincidence or without purpose. The test aims to establish, in reality, what God knows in advance of people's behaviour on earth and the reward they merit for their actions: "*so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Thus, man should always be on the alert, considering every thought and every action. He should not be oblivious to anything. This also means that he is unable to rest. Hence, the verse ends with the comment, "*He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" It thus gives reassurance to every God-fearing servant. God is certainly Almighty, but He is at the same time Much-Forgiving. When a person's heart is alert, aware that this life is a test, and tries to keep on the right track, he is reassured of God's forgiveness and grace. This gives man all the rest and comfort he needs.

The truth Islam establishes in people's hearts does not depict God as chasing humans to afflict or punish them. He only wants them to be aware of the purpose behind their existence and of their true nature. He wants them to rise to the level worthy of His honour when He blew of His own spirit into them, elevating them above many of His other creations. When they have absorbed this truth and hold to it, they will find that His grace, mercy and forgiveness are always available to them.

In the Wide Universe

This great truth is then anchored to the universe at its broadest and highest. At the same time, the universe is shown to be related to the truth of reward and requital in the life to come:

> *He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one*

come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy]. (Verses 3–11)

Everything this passage mentions is a result of the first verse and is an aspect of the complete sovereignty God exercises over His dominion and of His free, unrestricted power. Everything it contains confirms what the second verse states of the creation of death and life to test people and then their reward according to what their test proves.

"*He created seven heavens in layers.*" (Verse 3) We cannot, on the basis of astronomical theories, exactly ascertain the meaning of the expression '*seven heavens in layers*'. These theories are subject to amendment and correction with every new generation of telescopes and other machines and tools. It is not right, therefore, to attach the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement to discoveries that remain subject to amendment and correction. It is sufficient for us to know that there are seven heavens, and that they are placed in layers of different dimensions.

Whilst the Qur'ān always turns our attentions to God's creation generally, it also specifically directs us to the heavens above. The perfection of His creation is enough to make our eyes turn back in absolute amazement: "*No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates.*" (Verse 3) No flaw, no defect, no imbalance is ever seen in God's creation. "*Turn up your eyes,*" and look again. "*Can you see any flaw?*" (Verse 3) Can you detect anything out of place? "*Then look again, and again.*" (Verse 4) You might have overlooked something in your first perusal, so make sure by looking again and again. "*Your vision will come back to you dull and weary.*" (Verse 4)

Posing such a challenge heightens the importance of what people are being directed towards. In this way, they are made to look seriously at the heavens and at God's creation in general. It is precisely such a contemplating, examining look that the Qur'ān wants people to cast. Familiarity breeds contempt, and our long presence in this world takes much away from its fascinating perfection and meticulous cohesion.

Yet a careful look will not tire of examining the beauty of the world around us; our hearts will want more of its inspiration, and our minds will reflect endlessly on the universe's perfect balance. When we cast such a reflective and examining look at the universe we see it as an overwhelmingly amazing festival of wonders. Every time we so look our eyes and minds see something new.

Anyone who knows even a little about the nature of the universe and its system, some aspects of which have been uncovered by modern science, is bound to be absolutely fascinated. Yet appreciation of the universe's miraculous beauty does not need such scientific discoveries. One aspect of God's blessings is that He has given man the ability to interact with the universe by merely looking at it and contemplating its many different facets. Our hearts directly receive the tune of this awesomely beautiful universe and can respond to it as living creatures respond to each other.

Therefore, the Qur'ān invites people to look at the universe and reflect on its wonders. The Qur'ān addresses all people, across all generations: it addresses those who live in the jungle or the desert, as well as city dwellers and sea travellers. It presents its truth to the person who cannot read or write just as it does to astronomers, physicists and scientists. Everyone of these find in the Qur'ān what invites him to establish contact with the universe. It is that that alerts his heart to reflect on and enjoy what he sees.

Like perfection, beauty is also deliberately placed in the universe. Indeed, the two stem from the same truth. When perfection is attained, beauty is a part of it. Hence, having drawn our attention to the perfection in the creation of the heavens, the Qur'ān now mentions their beauty: "*We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps.*" (Verse 5) What is the lowest heaven? Perhaps it is the one nearest to the earth and its people to whom the Qur'ān is addressed. The lamps mentioned here may refer to the stars and planets that we see with the naked eye as we look up to the sky. This fits with the invitation to look at the sky at a time when they had nothing other than their eyes and what they saw of shining stars.

Undoubtedly, the sight of stars in the sky is immensely beautiful. Such beauty is always renewed, emanating different aspects at different times, morning or evening, sunrise or sunset, a moonlit night or a moonless

one, clear skies or overcast ones. Indeed, its beauty differs from one hour to the next, from one observatory or angle to another. Yet the sky is always awesome in its beauty. Look at that single star flickering at a distance, as though it is a beautiful eye, shining with the appeal of love. Those two other stars appear removed from the rest, as though they are two lovers whispering to each other, away from the crowd. Look around and you see clusters joining together here and there, as if they are a group enjoying a night out in the great and vast open space. They seem to come together or go their separate ways like those attending a night performance in the open air. The moon appears in full splendour one night, dreamy on another, feeling low and dispirited on a third, and looking like a newborn starting life one night and like an elderly expecting the end on another. Look also at this vast space that stretches way beyond what our eyes can see. It is all part of the beauty of this universe; a beauty we can only look at and enjoy, but about which we do not have the words and expressions to describe.

The Qur'ān directs our hearts to reflect on the beauty of the skies and the universe as a whole, because appreciating such beauty is the closest way to comprehend their Creator's own beauty. It is this comprehension that elevates man to the highest level he can attain. When he reaches this, he is ready for an eternal life in a splendid world that is free from the shackles of earthly life. The happiest moments for a human heart are those in which it appreciates the beauty of God's creation in the universe. These are the moments that make it possible for him to feel and appreciate divine beauty.

Pelting Lamps

The *sūrah* states that the lamps which adorn the lowest heaven also have another function: "*And made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verse 5) We have established a rule in this commentary that we do not try to add any explanation to any matter relating to the world beyond our faculties of perception. We limit ourselves only to whatever God tells us about them, leaving the Qur'ānic text as it is. This is certainly enough to state whatever is needed for our comprehension. We certainly believe that a different type of creation is the devils. Some description of them

is given in the Qur'ān, and we have referred to these in our commentary wherever they occur. We have though added nothing to what the Qur'ān states. We, therefore, believe that these lamps, which God placed as adornments of the lowest heaven, are also used as missiles to pelt devils with. This may be in the form of shooting stars, as mentioned in another *sūrah*: "*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil... If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame.*" (37: 6–7 and 10) How? In what form and of what size? God has told us nothing of this and we have no other source to refer to in such matters. Therefore, we have all we need to know and we should believe in this as it is. This is all there is to it. Had God known that further details or explanations would have benefited us, He would have given us these. Why, then, should we try to reach to what God knows to be of no use to us in such a matter as the pelting or shooting of devils?

The *sūrah* speaks further about what God has in store for such devils, other than these pelting missiles: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 5) This means that they will be pelted with missiles in this present life and that they will suffer the blazing fire in the life to come. Perhaps this comes as a follow up to what the *sūrah* says about the heavens and prior to what it says about the unbelievers. The relation between devils and unbelievers is obvious. Thus, having mentioned the heavens and their lamps, the *sūrah* refers to these lamps' other function, as missiles for pelting devils. Then, as it speaks of what is prepared for these devils in the life to come, the *sūrah* mentions what is made ready for the unbelievers who follow those devils: "*Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination.*" (Verse 6) It then carries on to give us an image of hell, full of rage and anger, as it receives the unbelievers: "*When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

Praised by All Creatures

Hell seems here to be a living creature, one suppressing its fury, but as a result of which draws its breath and boils over. Its anger is so immense that it almost bursts with hate for the unbelievers. Although

this may appear to some as an allegorical description of hell, to my mind, it describes a reality. Every creature of God is a living creature, with a life suited to its kind. Every creature knows its Lord and addresses Him with glorifications and praises. They are amazed at man when he denies his Creator and feel anger as a result. This is mentioned in several places in the Qur'ān, suggesting that it is an established reality in the universe.

For example, the following clear statement occurs in the Qur'ān: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.*" (17: 44) The Qur'ān also says: "*We graced David with Our favour. We said: 'You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!'*" (34: 10) These statements are so clear that they admit no interpretation other than what they literally say. Another Qur'ānic statement says: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.'*" (41: 11) This last statement may be said to be an allegory of how the skies and earth submit to God's law, but there is no need to make such an interpretation. It is further removed than the direct and clear meaning intended.

We have the present description of hell, but a similar statement describes the surprise and anger expressed by different creatures at the thought of attributing to God a son: "*They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son.*" (19: 88–92)

All these statements refer to the truth that the universe believes in its Creator, and that everything extols His glory and praise. They also confirm that all creatures shudder at the thought that man departs from this norm, disbelieving in his Lord. All these creatures feel anger when someone close and dear to them is badly hurt. It is no different from the anger a person is ready to vent at the one who committed such behaviour. He is almost bursting with fury, just like hell is described here: "*It boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

The same is expressed by the angels who guard hell: "*Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?'*" (Verse 8) It is clear that the question is meant as a rebuke. They share hell's anger and they participate in meting out punishment. Nothing hurts a person in distress more than a rebuke. The answer is given in humility, acknowledging their own lack of judgement and utter stupidity when they denied God's oneness, relying on no evidence whatsoever. Furthermore, they make a wild accusation against God's messengers, who have always stated the truth, clear and simple: "*We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error.*'" (Verse 9)

"*Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verse 11) This is a prayer made by God against them. This after they have acknowledged their guilt, at a time and place they denied would ever occur. Prayer by God denotes a judgement. Thus, they are far removed from God's mercy. They cannot hope for forgiveness or exemption from punishment. They dwell in the blazing fire. What a fate!

Such torment in the blazing fire that draws its breath as it boils is truly fearsome. God does not treat anyone unfairly. We think – but God knows best – that a person who denies his Lord, when God has instilled the truth of faith and its evidence in his very nature, is one that is devoid of all goodness. Such a person deprives himself of every quality that gives him a position in this universe. He is like the stones that are the fuel of hell. He ends up in the middle of the fire, with no hope of reprieve.

The one who denies God during his life on earth sinks further every day into the darkness of disbelief, until he ends up in an ugly shape, derived from hell. It is so ugly an image that it is unlike anything else in this universe. Everything in the universe has a believing soul that extols God's praises. In everything and every creature there is this element of goodness and this tie which pulls it towards the centre of existence, with the exception of those unbelievers who run loose, severing their ties with the rest of the universe, rebelling against all standards and values. Where will they end up in this universe when they have no bond with anything in it? They can only end up in hell, which rages in fury against

them. They have deprived themselves of all right, meaning and dignity. Hence, in hell they receive none.

It is customary in the Qur'ān to portray images of the Day of Judgement in two contrasting scenes. Hence, we now have a scene showing the believers as compared with the unbelievers. In this way, we have the full meaning of the statement at the *sūrah*'s outset: "*He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Having mentioned the test, the *sūrah* completes its account by speaking of the reward: "*Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 12)

The phrase '*beyond the reach of human perception*' expresses the meaning of the Qur'ānic word *ghayb*. In its use in this verse it includes their fear of God whom they have never seen, as well as their fear of Him when they are alone, unseen by any human eye. Both are fine qualities, reflecting a pure feeling and a profound understanding which together qualify a person to receive what the *sūrah* expresses in general terms as "*forgiveness and a rich reward.*"

To watch God when one is alone, unseen by any other human being is the gauge of a heart's sensitivity and the quality that keeps conscience alive. Anas ibn Mālik reports that some of the Prophet's Companions said to him: "Messenger of God! When we are with you we are at a certain standard, but when we depart we are at a different one." He asked: "How do you feel with regard to your Lord?" They answered: "God is our Lord in secret and open situations." He said: "Yours is not a case of hypocrisy." The bond of God is, then, the essential criterion. Once it is firm in one's heart, one is a true believer.

All in the Open

This last verse provides a bridge linking what precedes it with what comes after. It emphasizes God's knowledge of everything, whether it is said in public or private. He, thus, challenges mankind. It is He who created them and He who knows their inner souls:

> *Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has*

created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. (Verses 13–14)

They are told they can say what they like, in whatever way they like; it is all equally known to God, for He knows what is concealed deeper even than secrets. "*He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts.*" (Verse 13) Even those thoughts that are kept deep within one's breast, unexpressed, are also known to Him. It is He who created these thoughts, just as He created the breasts that keep them. "*How could it be that He who has created should not know all?*" (Verse 14) The One who has created them must surely know all about them. "*He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware.*" (Verse 14) His knowledge encompasses every little detail and every hidden feeling and thought.

Yet people try to hide themselves from God, by making a move here, keeping a secret there or by hiding their intentions. How ludicrous! Their minds in which they try to hide their intentions, are created by God, and He knows all their pathways and hidden corners. Indeed, the intentions they seek to hide are also God's creation; He knows how they are formulated and where they are lodged. So, what can people hide, and where will they turn to?

The Qur'ān makes sure of instilling this truth in people's minds because this gives them the correct understanding. Additionally, it keeps people alert and conscious of God, able to fulfil the trust believers are assigned in this world. This is the trust of faith, maintaining justice and dedication to God in both action and intention. Such understanding cannot be achieved until we clearly realize that we, our hearts and minds, our secrets and intentions, are all of God's creation; it is all fully known to Him. When a believer attains such realization, he purges his heart of bad intentions and fleeting thoughts just as he keeps his open behaviour and expressed statements on the right track. He deals with God in all situations, public or private, open or secret.

Mankind's Abode

The *sūrah* now refers to the earth, which God has created for man to live on. He smoothed it and provided in it all the means that enable it to support human life:

He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. (Verse 15)

Man has lived long on earth finding it easy to settle upon, walk along and utilize its potentials – including its soil, water, air, minerals and all other natural resources. Hence, people forget God's blessing as He made the earth easy for them to live on and to benefit by what it contains. The *sūrah* reminds them of this great blessing, putting it before their eyes, in a fine expression that everyone, regardless of when do they live, can understand according to their knowledge of the earth and its potentials.

The description of the earth as easy to live upon meant for those generations of old the surface of the earth and its being smoothed out so that people and animals could walk upon it, and boats could sail through its seas. It also meant for them that it has been made suitable for cultivation and harvest, and given the sorts of atmosphere, water and soil to make life possible. These, however, are general notions. Scientific discoveries, up to the present day, provide further details that give a much broader sense to this Qur'ānic statement.

The Arabic term used in the *sūrah* to describe the earth as 'easy to live upon' is *dhalūl*, which is normally used to describe an animal that is 'broken' so that man can use it as a mount. Science tells us that use of this term is apt, because the earth which we see as stable and motionless is nonetheless certainly moving. What is more is that it is running at a fast pace, without stopping. Nevertheless, it is broken so as not to throw off its rider and not to trample him as it goes along. It does not shake him as it moves, but rather gives him an easy ride. Moreover, it is just like a mount that produces milk, yielding much.

The earth, this mount man rides, revolves at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour, and, at the same time, moves in its orbit around the sun at a speed of approximately 65,000 miles per hour. Furthermore, the earth, the sun and the solar system travel in space at a speed of around 20,000 miles per hour. Despite such speedy movements, man stays in perfect comfort and stability on the earth's surface. Nothing tears him apart, nor

are his belongings thrown in the air. Indeed, he suffers neither dizziness nor concussion. Instead, he remains firmly on his mount.

These three movements have a definite purpose. We know the effect of two of these movements on human life, and on life on earth in general. As the earth revolves, the day and night alternate. Had night been the permanent condition, all life on earth would have been frozen out. By contrast, a permanent day condition would result in everything being burnt. The earth's orbiting of the sun causes the four seasons we enjoy each year. Had any of these seasons been permanent, life would not have been possible in the form God has willed. We have not as yet discovered the purpose of the third movement in the solar system, but it must relate to the overall harmony clearly noticeable in the universe.

Despite these three exceedingly fast movements, this broken mount, the earth, maintains the same position defined by the position of its axis at an angle of 23.5 degrees. This position of the earth's axis is instrumental in producing, along with the earth's orbit, the four seasons. A change in the axis angle would disrupt the cycle of the four seasons. Yet maintaining this cycle is essential for the life of plants, and indeed for all life on earth.

God has made the earth easy for man to live upon by giving it a gravity which keeps people steady and in balance, while it makes its three speedy movements. He also determined the degree of its atmospheric pressure to make man's overall movement easy. Had this pressure been heavier, man would have found moving about much harder, or even impossible, depending on the level of such pressure. For certain, heavy atmospheric pressure would either hinder man's movement or crush him completely. Had it been lighter, man's movement would have lacked stability. Indeed, he would have suffered implosions within his body, because his body pressure would be high in relation to the atmospheric pressure: this does indeed sometimes happen to those who climb to high altitudes.

Furthermore, God has stretched the surface of the earth, giving it its soft soil. Had its surface been made of hard rock, as scientific theories suppose should have been the case following the earth's cooling and hardening, walking on its surface would have been very difficult,

and it would not have produced any plant life. Rain, wind and other atmospheric elements managed to crush this solid surface so as to form, by God's will, this fertile soil, allowing plant life to flourish for the benefit of man and animal alike. God also made the air above the earth's surface, putting in it the elements necessary for life in all their accurate proportions. Had these proportions been different, life would have been disturbed, even been impossible. Oxygen constitutes 21% of the element air, while nitrogen forms 78% of it. The remainder is made up of carbon monoxide at a rate of 3 portions out of 10,000, as well as other elements. These are the exact proportions vital for supporting life on earth. In addition, thousands of other correlations have been established by God so as to make life on earth possible. These include the sizes of the earth, the sun and the moon, the distance between these three, the level of the sun's temperature, the thickness of the earth's crust, its speed, the angle of its axis, the proportion of sea water to dry land, the density of air covering it, and so forth. Maintaining all these together is what 'breaks' the earth, making it ready to support life, allowing it to produce sustenance and enabling life in general, and human life in particular, to flourish.

The *sūrah* refers to these facts so that they are understood and appreciated by every individual and every generation as they are able to do so, and as their levels of knowledge and observation put before them. Thus, they realize that God's hand, in which all dominion rests, takes care of them and of all around them, makes the earth easy for them to live upon, keeping them and the earth safe and secure. Should this divine care be withheld for just one moment, the whole universe would reel out of control, leading to its destruction along with all those living on it.

When man's heart is alert to this great fact, God, the Creator, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, allows him to go about wherever he wishes, and to eat of His provisions: "*He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15) Permission to go about the highlands incorporates walking along its plains and valleys. When the more difficult enterprise is allowed, the easier one goes without saying. The provisions available on earth

are all of God's creation and belong to Him. What God has provided is much wider in its significance than what we understand from the term 'provision', even when it is used in the plural form. It does not refer to the money one has in hand to pay for one's needs and enjoyments. Rather, it refers to everything God has placed on the earth that man can use to earn something that contributes to his livelihood. Essentially, these are part of the earth's composition of the elements that are present in their relative proportions, as also the ability God gave to plant, animal and man to use these elements and benefit by them:

> As is well known, all vegetable life is dependent upon the almost infinitesimal quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which, so to speak, it breathes. To express this complicated photosynthetic chemical reaction in the simplest possible way, the leaves of the trees are lungs and they have the power when in the sunlight to separate this obstinate carbon dioxide into carbon and oxygen. In other words, the oxygen is given off and the carbon retained and combined with the hydrogen of the water brought up by the plant from its roots. By magical chemistry, out of these elements nature makes sugar, cellulose, and numerous other chemicals, fruits and flowers. The plant feeds itself and produces enough more to feed every animal on earth. At the same time, the plant releases the oxygen we breathe and without which life would end in five minutes... So, all the plants, the forests, the grasses, every bit of moss, and all else of vegetable life, build their structure principally out of carbon and water. Animals give off carbon dioxide and plants give off oxygen. If this interchange did not take place, either the animal or the vegetable life would ultimately use up practically all the oxygen or all of the carbon dioxide, and the balance, being completely upset, one would wilt or die and the other would quickly follow. It has recently been discovered that carbon dioxide in small quantities is also essential to most animal life, just as plants use some oxygen.
>
> Hydrogen must be included, although we do not breathe it. Without hydrogen water would not exist, and the water content

> of animal and vegetable matter is surprisingly great and absolutely essential.[1]

Nitrogen also plays an important part in the provisions the earth yields:

> Without nitrogen in some form not a food plant could grow. One way in which nitrogen can get into the soil is through the activities of certain bacteria which inhabit the roots of leguminous plants, such as clover, peas, beans, and many others. These bacteria take atmospheric nitrogen and turn it into combined nitrogen, and when the plant dies some of this combined nitrogen is left in the soil. Another way in which nitrogen gets into the soil is through thunderstorms. Whenever a flash of lightening rushes through the atmosphere, it combines a very small quantity of the oxygen with the nitrogen and the rain brings it to the earth as combined nitrogen.[2]

Thus nitrogen is brought down in the form plant life can absorb. Plants cannot absorb pure nitrogen as it exists in the air.

Solid and liquid metals buried inside the earth are other types of provisions resulting from the way the earth was formed and the conditions it went through. We need not go into any details here. All we say is that the Arabic term *rizq*, or provisions, appears, in the light of our brief discussion, to be wider in scope and significance than what people normally associate with this word. It is more significantly related to the way the earth is made and to the design of the universe as a whole. When God has permitted mankind to eat of it, He has granted them the facility to make use and partake of it and of the earth as a whole: "*Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15)

This is, however, all limited to a period of time known only to God as He set the time allowed for testing people through life and death. It

1. Morrison, A. Cressy (1959), *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work (1913) Ltd., pp. 31–33.
2. Ibid., p. 35.

is further confined to all that God makes available for man in this life. When the time of the test is over, death occurs, ushering in what comes after it: "*To Him you will be resurrected.*" (Verse 15) To Him, certainly. It is He who has the dominion over the universe, and with Him all refuge lies. He is able to accomplish anything. If not to Him, to whom would resurrection be?

When the Earth is Shaken

At this moment, as they are safe on the face of the earth that has been made easy to live upon, and as they enjoy all this ease that flows by God's leave, this stable earth is shaken violently from under their feet. They feel it quake. The atmosphere surrounding them is suddenly disturbed and a whirlwind engulfs them, hitting their faces and breasts. All this takes place so that they wake up, look up to heaven, try to discern what is in the realm beyond, and be watchful of what God's will may bring about:

> *Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?* (Verses 16–18)

The people who live on earth enjoying the way it has been smoothed out for their living and who take out of its wealth of resources what they need, realize that it may at times become rebellious, hard for man's living. This takes place when God permits a small disturbance of its system, and things on its surface are severely shaken or destroyed. Whatever happens to be on the surface quakes and can no longer hold its place. We see this when earthquakes occur or volcanoes erupt, revealing an unwieldy beast within the broken mount. Yet God reins it in so that its violent rebellion is brought swiftly under control. It rebels merely for a few seconds, but this is enough to bring about destruction to the structures man has built on its surface; or it may open its mouth to swallow a whole portion of its surface. When it quakes, people are simply helpless, unable to do anything to stop it. In the face of earthquakes, volcanoes

and earth subsidence, people run about aimlessly, like terrified mice in a cage. Yet only seconds before, they were enjoying themselves, oblivious to the Supreme Power that holds everything in place.

People have also experienced whirlwinds, tornadoes and hurricanes that cause much destruction and fire. They can do little to protect themselves against these. When such a storm blows fiercely, hitting faces and breasts with the sand it carries, carrying away with it whatever is in its way, man is clearly powerless, helpless, unless God reins it in.

The Qur'ān reminds people who have long felt secure in their life on earth that such events can always come about and that they can do nothing to stop or control them. Therefore, a telling warning is issued to them: "*You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verse 17) Examples are cited for them from the history of ancient, unbelieving communities: "*Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) God rejected that those people of old should disbelieve. He now asks the present unbelievers: "*How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) They were fully aware of how terrible it was. The ruins and other traces of destruction were vivid evidence of how terrible His scourge was.

Moreover, the sense of security that God objects to is that which makes people oblivious of Him, His will and power. This is not the same as the sense of reassurance that believers have about His care and compassion being granted. The two are totally different. A believer always has trust in his Lord, praying for His grace and bounty, but this does not lead him to forgetfulness or to thoughtless indulgence of the earth's pleasures. On the contrary, it makes him always alert, wary that he may incur God's displeasure, keen to avoid any adversity that His will may bring about. Yet, at the same time, he willingly submits himself to God, reassured of His mercy.

'Ā'ishah reports: "I never saw God's Messenger laughing heartily so as to be able to see the inside of his mouth. He only smiled. When God's Messenger saw clouds gathering or felt a wind, he would look worried. I said to him: 'Messenger of God! When people see clouds, they are pleased, hoping that they bring them rain; yet I see you worried when you see clouds gathering.' He said: 'What would assure me, 'Ā'ishah, that it would not bring suffering? People in the past were punished by

means of storms. Others saw the suffering about to overtake them, yet they thought that it was clouds bringing rain'." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Such is the alertness to what God's will may bring, and the lesson to be learnt from the stories mentioned in the Qur'ān. This does not, however, contradict the feeling of reassurance that God's grace and bounty can always be bestowed.

Besides, this is all part of attributing all apparent causes to the main one. The decision in all matters belongs to the One in whose hand rests all dominion. He has power over all things. Avalanches, sandy whirlwinds, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes and other natural forces and phenomena are in no way subject to man; they are totally controlled by God. All that people say about these are merely attempts to explain how they occur. They cannot intervene in bringing them about or in preventing their occurrence. All that they can build on the earth's surface may be wiped out in just a moment, like a house of cards, whether by an earthquake or a hurricane. Hence, they better turn to the Creator of the universe, who has set its laws in operation and who placed in it the forces that occasionally manifest in such events. They should look up to the heavens, the symbol of exaltation, and remember the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs.

Man's power extends to the limit God has given him. By the same token, knowledge extends by the measure God has assigned man. The controls of this great universe are in the hand of its Creator who has set its laws and powers. These powers operate in accordance with His laws and according to His will. What happens to man as a result of these and what he knows of them are set according to a particular measure. Universal events may at times put man in a position of helplessness towards these great powers. Then, he can do nothing more than remember the Creator and Controller of all these forces and powers, looking up to Him for help, and praying to Him to enable him to use what he can of them.

When man forgets this truth, deluded by what God has granted him of knowledge and ability to use some of these natural forces and powers, he becomes a small creature, isolated from true knowledge that elevates his soul to its sublime origin. He is then attached to the earth, alienated from the rest of the universe. By contrast, a scientist who believes in God

submits with the universe to the Almighty Creator, enjoying a sense of happiness that no one experiences except by God's will.

However, the great forces of nature bring man forcibly into a position of helplessness when he can do nothing other than submit to God, whether he is allowed to enjoy such a sense of happiness or be deprived of it. Man may make discoveries, produce inventions, and acquire much power, yet when he faces the great power of nature, he stands helpless. He may be able to protect himself from a hurricane, but the hurricane will take its course and man cannot stop it. All that his knowledge and planning can achieve is sometimes to enable him to move away from its course. Yet, at times, the hurricane will kill him even though he hides within strong walls. At sea, when a hurricane gathers force, man's largest and best built ships are no more than a doll facing a whirlwind. Earthquakes and volcanoes, on the other hand, remain the same as they have always been. It is only blindness that make some miserable individuals assert that man stands alone in the universe, or that he is the master of the universe.

It is by God's will that man has been assigned trusteeship over the earth, and given the power, ability and knowledge he needs for this task. It is God who takes care of him, and gives him his provisions. Should God abandon him, he would be crushed by even the smallest forces placed at his disposal. Flies, and even smaller creatures, would eat him. It is only by God's care that he is protected and honoured. He should know from where he derives his honour and who bestows on him such great bounty.

An Invitation to Reflect

This strong warning now gives way to a call to reflect on something that man often sees but rarely considers and contemplates. It is yet another aspect of God's great design of creation and of His limitless power:

> *Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.* (Verse 19)

This is a miracle that takes place at every moment, yet because of its familiarity we tend to overlook its testimony of God's great power. Yet, look at the birds: how they spread their wings and then draw them in, but in both situations remain airborne, floating easily and smoothly. Moreover, at times, they make certain movements that appear to be for show, adding beauty to their flight, rising high or diving down at speed. Neither eye nor heart tires of looking at this scene and following each type of bird perform their characteristic movements. It is certainly an enjoyment that invites contemplation of God's beautiful creation. We see here how beauty and perfection go hand in hand.

The *sūrah* first suggests that people should look at this beautiful sight: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in?*" (Verse 19) It follows this with a clear indication of God's perfect design: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" God holds them up by the laws of nature He has set in operation, maintaining a high standard of harmony that is apparent in all creatures, large and small. To achieve such harmony, every little cell or particle is taken into account. These laws of nature ensure that aspects of balance are set in place, in their thousands, on the earth's surface, in the air and in the shape of birds. Thus, this miracle is achieved and it continues to replicate itself with perfect regularity.

God, the Lord of Grace, holds them up in position with His infinite power that admits no weakening and with His care that never loses sight of His creation. It is His will that keeps the laws of nature working regularly, accurately and harmoniously. Thus, they never slow down even for a wink unless God wills otherwise: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" The way this statement is phrased suggests that God's hand holds every bird and every wing in the air, whether the bird is spreading its wings out or drawing them in.

"*He sees everything.*" (Verse 19) He sees them all, knows every minute detail about them, coordinates matters and takes care of every little thing, at every moment. Holding the birds in the air is the same as holding the creatures that walk on earth as it moves in its orbit. It is the same method by which God holds all celestial bodies in place. Who could hold them in position other than God? The *sūrah*, however, presents for us a scene

that we see at all times, allowing its message to touch our hearts. If we look carefully, we realize that everything God makes is miraculous and truly inspirational. Every heart and every generation can feel and see of this miraculous truth what they can understand.

Who Else?

The next verse, however, returns unbelievers to fear. Thus they alternate between feelings of fear and admiration of God's creation:

> *What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.* (Verse 20)

They have been warned lest they be swallowed up by the earth or be overwhelmed by a sandy whirlwind, and they have been reminded of the fate of earlier communities whom God rejected for their disbelief. Now the *sūrah* asks them: who other than He can give them protection against Him? Who can ward off His might other than the Lord of Grace Himself? "*The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" Such self-delusion gives them the false feeling of safety and security. They rely on this false sense of security at the very moment they are exposed to His might. They have neither faith nor good action to put forward in support of any plea for mercy from the Lord of Grace.

Next, the *sūrah* mentions the provisions they enjoy but the source of which they overlook. They do not fear that this might be withheld, but instead continue to behave arrogantly:

> *Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.* (Verse 21)

As we have already said, all people's provisions come, first and foremost, by God's will and the way He designed the universe and made the earth and the atmosphere as they are. All these factors are absolutely beyond mankind's control and cannot be influenced in any way by them. They predate man's creation. They are more powerful than man, and are better able to erase all traces of life as and when God

so wills. Who, then, will provide for mankind, should God withdraw water, or withhold air from them, or indeed any of the elements that are essential for life?

Included under this broad and profound sense of provisions are all the meanings that readily spring to mind when the term is used, and which man tends to treat as of his own making, such as work, invention and production. All these are closely linked to primary causes on the one hand and are dependent on what God grants to individuals and communities on the other. Every breath a worker draws and every movement he makes is part of God's provisions. Is He not the One who originated him, gave him all his abilities and powers, created for him the breath he draws in and the substance that is consumed by his body enabling movement? Every mental endeavour man makes is part of God's provision. Is He not the Creator who gave man the ability to think and invent? Besides, what can anyone produce unless he uses a substance initially made by God, and utilizes natural and human factors provided by Him? "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision?*" (Verse 21)

"*Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21) Having established the nature of the provisions people have and made it clear that mankind are totally dependent on God for all this, the *sūrah* paints a picture of people bearing themselves in total arrogance. All arrogance is ugly, but its ugliest form is that demonstrated by those who are dependent on the One who gives them their food, clothing and all that they have. Indeed, they have nothing other than what He bestows on them; yet they persist in their haughty arrogance.

This is indeed a very true picture of those who turn away from the divine message in arrogant rebellion, forgetting that God is their Maker and that they can only survive by His grace. They control nothing whatsoever of their lives or their provisions.

What Guidance?

On top of all this, they described the Prophet and those who followed him as having gone astray, claiming that they were better guided than them. The same is levelled at the advocates of faith by unbelievers in

every community. Therefore, the *sūrah* paints a true to life image of the status of both parties: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22) The one who grovels on his face is either someone who actually walks on his face instead of the right way using his feet and legs, or is someone who trips as he walks, falling on his face. He then lifts himself up only to trip again. Both are miserable conditions, beset with affliction and hardship. Neither leads to proper guidance or goodness. How far removed such conditions are from that of one who walks upright, steady along a way that is free of pitfalls and crookedness, fully aware of the goal towards which he moves.

The first is the situation of a miserable person who has deviated from God's way and, as such, become deprived of His guidance. He is on a collision course with God's laws and creatures, taking up a way different from theirs. Therefore, he is always falling and tripping, tired and lost. The second situation is that of a happy person, benefiting by God's guidance and enjoying travelling along the way charted by believers who always glorify and praise Him. Thus, he joins the procession of the entire universe and of all living and inanimate creatures.

The life of faith is that of ease, straightforwardness and clear objectives. By contrast, the life of disbelief is marked by hardship and error. Which, then, is better guided? Does the question require an answer? It is a rhetorical question, designed to drive its message home.

Both question and answer fade away, giving way to a moving image in which we see two groups of people. The first either grovel or fall on their faces, lacking a goal or charted line. The second group walk with their heads held high. They are steady of step, following a straight path that takes them to a set destination.

In connection with following guidance or error, the *sūrah* reminds people of the means God has provided for them and the faculties of understanding He has equipped them with, yet still they do not put these to good use:

> *Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful.* (Verse 23)

The truth that man was originated by God presses hard on the human mind. It affirms itself in a way that is hard to refute. Man exists in a world in which he is the highest and noblest species known to him. Among all creatures, mankind are equipped with the highest knowledge and the most extensive abilities. Man has not created himself. There must be, then, someone higher, nobler, more able and more knowledgeable than him who brought him into existence. Man must inevitably acknowledge this truth: his very existence puts it before his eyes. To continue trying to deny it is both unworthy and futile.

The *sūrah* mentions this truth here in order to add a reminder about the means of learning, which God has equipped man with: "*Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts.*" How does man receive such great favours and blessings: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23)

Hearing and sight are two great miracles about which we have learnt some remarkable aspects. 'Heart' is often used in the Qur'ān in reference to the faculty of knowledge acquisition and understanding. This is an even greater and more remarkable miracle about which we only know very little. It is one of God's secrets in man's creation. Science has made significant attempts to understand the nature of hearing and sight, and here it is perhaps useful to mention briefly some of its findings:

> The hearing system begins with the outer ear, but only God knows where it ends. Science says that sound vibration is carried through the air which directs its entry through the auditory canal to the eardrum, which then transmits it to the labyrinth inside the ear. The labyrinth includes the cochlea and semicircular canals. In the cochlea part there are four thousand minute arches connected to the auditory nerve. Can we imagine the length and size of these arches, and how each of these thousands of arches is fitted in place? What space do they occupy? Yet in this hardly visible labyrinth there are some tiny bones. The ear contains 100,000 hearing cells. The hair cells trigger nerve impulses. Such microscopic accuracy in organization is most amazing.[3]

3. Nawfal, Abd al-Razzaq, (n.d.), *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, p. 57.

> The central part of the visual system is the eye, which includes 130 million light receptors... The eye consists of the sclera, the cornea, the choroid and the retina and a large number of tiny nerves and canals.[4]
>
> The retina is composed of nine separate layers, all of which together are no thicker than thin paper. The inmost layer is made up of rods and cones, which are said to number thirty million rods and three million cones. These are all arranged in perfect relation to each other and to the lens, but, strangely enough, they turn their backs upon the lens and look inward, not outward... The lens of our eye varies in density so that all rays are brought into focus. Man finds this unattainable in any homogeneous substance, such as glass.[5]

'Heart', which is often used in the Qur'ān interchangeably with 'mind', is the quality that makes man what he is. It denotes the faculty of understanding, distinction and knowledge which qualifies man to take charge of the earth and to shoulder the great trust. This is the trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains feared to bear. It is to believe by choice and to discern guidance by self motivation. It signifies the diligent observance, by will and choice, of the code God has laid down. No one knows the nature of this faculty, or its centre, or whether it is inside or outside the human body. It is a secret God has not given anyone.

Yet despite having all such grace and gifts to fulfil his momentous trust, man is ungrateful to God: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23) Man should feel ashamed of himself when he is thus reminded. He does not thank God for all the blessings He has favoured him with. Had man devoted all his life to expressing gratitude to God, it still would not thank Him enough.

4. Ibid., p. 58.
5. Morrison, op. cit., p. 60.

The Promise Fulfilment

A reminder follows making it clear that God has not created mankind and given them all their distinctive qualities haphazardly, without a definite purpose: it is all for the purpose of initiating life that incorporates a test and then the administering of reward and requital at the end: "*And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verse 24)

The Arabic term *dhar'*, used in the verse to denote multiplication also signifies 'spreading far and wide', which provides a contrast in both image and meaning with the second action of gathering. The *sūrah* gives both images in a short verse so as to present these vividly before our eyes. Thus, people who have spread all over the earth will realize that they are moving towards an end that brings them all together for an ultimate purpose: one that brings the test of life and death to its final goal.

The *sūrah* then mentions their doubts concerning this promised gathering: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?'*" (Verse 25) Such a question is put only by one who is in serious doubt or one who is in stubborn denial. Knowing the exact time of the fulfilment of the promise adds nothing to its truth. It has nothing to do with the fact that it is the time appointed for requital after the test has been completed. It is the same to them whether it takes place tomorrow or after millions of years. What is certain is that it is going to happen. Then they will be gathered to receive what they deserve for what they have done in their lives.

God has not imparted knowledge of the Day of Judgement to anyone of His creatures, because such knowledge serves none of their interests. Indeed, imparting such information is against the very nature of this day and has no bearing on the duties people are asked to fulfil in preparation for it. On the contrary, withholding such information from all creatures and keeping it with God Almighty is an act of wisdom that serves human interests. Hence the answer: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 26)

This answer clearly reflects the great difference between the Creator and His creation. God is seen in His absolute oneness: no one bears any similarity to Him and He has no partner. All knowledge belongs to

Him alone. All creatures, including prophets and angels, stand before Him in complete humility: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" I have a mission and a task, to warn and to make things plain. Knowledge belongs solely to the All-Knowing.

We see them here putting forward questions that imply doubts and being given firm and decisive answers. The *sūrah* then presents an image depicting the subject of their questioning, this day has now arrived. The promise they have seriously doubted is fulfilled and they face it here and now: "*When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verse 27) Here is this day that you have always claimed will never take place; it is staring you in the face.

The Qur'ān often uses this method of painting in the present what is to happen in future. The purpose is to counter the state of doubt with an element of surprise. The doubter is shown a scene of something happening which he has denied will ever happen. But it is a true image. This day is present in God's knowledge. The time gap separating it from us is true in relation to us. This is a relative matter that does not represent the plain truth of this day as it is in God's sight. If God wills, they will see it now as it is in His knowledge. Thus, what the *sūrah* does, moving suddenly from this present life to that of the hereafter, and from the attitude of doubt to suddenly facing the truth represents a reality that, had God so willed, they would see now. The *sūrah* paints this reality in a clear and effective way.

Awaiting the Prophet's Death

The unbelievers hoped that the Prophet and the small group that followed him would soon perish, thereby ridding them of a problem that caused much anxiety. They counselled each other to persist until he so died, when they would be able to patch things up and resume their life as before. Sometimes they voiced the claim that God would take Muḥammad and his followers away because they were in error, fabricating lies against God! Hence, as the *sūrah* puts before them the scene of gathering and requital on the Day of Judgement, it alerts them to the fact that even if their wish were fulfilled, they would not be

immune from facing the consequences of their disbelief. Therefore, it is far better for them to be well prepared for this appointed day, shown to them as though it were taking place there and then:

> *Say: Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?* (Verse 28)

They will be well advised to think of their own situation and their own future. What benefit would accrue to them if the Prophet and his followers died? Likewise, should God bestow His mercy on the Prophet and his followers, this would not by itself protect the unbelievers from their inevitable fate. God, who let them multiply on earth and who will eventually gather them, is eternal. He never dies. Yet the *sūrah* does not say to them, 'who will protect you from suffering?' It does not specify that they are unbelievers. It simply tells them of the painful suffering that awaits unbelievers. This is a wise approach, instilling fear in their hearts on the one hand, and on the other giving them the chance to review their situation. Had the *sūrah* described them as unbelievers and that they would be certain to suffer painful punishment, they might have retorted with outright rejection and stubborn insolence. It is often the case that dropping a hint is far more effective than making a blunt statement.

The *sūrah* then outlines the believers' attitude, one based on faith, and how they place their full trust in God, relying on Him. They are very confident, assured that they are on the right course, well guided, and that the unbelievers are in manifest error:

> *Say: He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.* (Verse 29)

That God is mentioned here by His great attribute, the Lord of Grace, refers to His profound and infinite mercy which He grants to His Messenger and the believers who follow him. He will not destroy them as the unbelievers wish He would.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to highlight the bonds they have with their Lord, the Lord of Grace. The first is the bond of faith, "*in*

Him we believe," and this is followed by one of total reliance, "*and in Him we place our trust.*" The phraseology of this verse suggests a close relation between them and God who favours His Messenger and the believers with the permission to announce this close relationship. Indeed, God instructs the Prophet to announce it, as if He is saying to him: 'Do not be afraid of what the unbelievers say. You and those with you are attached to Me, and you are permitted by Me to declare that you are the recipient of this honour, so announce it to them.' What a great gesture of honour!

This is followed by an implicit warning: "*You will come to know who is in manifest error.*" (Verse 29) This is phrased in such a way that should make them ashamed of their stubborn rejection of the divine faith. It also invites them to review their positions, lest they be the ones who are in complete error. If they are, this inevitably makes them subject to painful suffering, as clearly stated in the previous verse: "*who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?*" (Verse 28) At the same time, the *sūrah* does not outrightly brand them as being in error, so as not to harden their attitude. This method of advocacy is one that works well with some people.

The Final Note

The *sūrah* ends with a note that mentions punishment in this present life in the form of depriving the unbelievers of the most essential thing of life, namely, water:

> *Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?* (Verse 30)

This is something so close and necessary for people's lives. They should therefore consider this move carefully if they cannot think of the Day of Judgement as certain. All dominion rests in God's hand and He is able to accomplish anything. What will their position be should He will that they be deprived of this most essential life element? They are left to contemplate this unthinkable eventuality, should God will it to happen.

Thus, this *sūrah* concludes, having taken us on a grand tour reaching up to great horizons and profound depths. Almost every verse provides a distinct beat. It can be seen as a journey into the unknown, or indeed into a close, visible world that is often overlooked. It is a grand *sūrah*, much greater than its length or the number of its verses. It is like arrows pointing far into the distance, with each aiming at a separate world.

The *sūrah* addresses a number of very important Islamic concepts. It establishes the truth of God's absolute power and His absolute sovereignty; the trial of death and life as a prelude to resurrection and requital; the beauty and perfection of God's design; His absolute knowledge of secrets and inner thoughts: of God being the source of all provisions; of His guardianship of all His creatures; of His presence with every creature, as well as a number of other truths that are part of a believer's concept of God, the universe and life. It is from this concept that a believer derives his code of living and his attitude towards God, himself, the rest of mankind, living creatures and the universe. It is this concept that shapes a believer's conscience, feelings, personality, values and standards.

SŪRAH 68

Al-Qalam
(The Pen)

Prologue

Time of Revelation

It is practically impossible to date the revelation of this *sūrah*, and this applies to its opening as well as to the *sūrah* as a whole. Nor is it possible to say for certain that its opening was revealed first and the rest after the lapse of some time. We cannot even say that this was more probable, because the opening and the ending of the *sūrah* tackle the same point, namely, the unbelievers' rude claims about the Prophet, denouncing him as a madman.

There are many reports that suggest that this was the second *sūrah* to be revealed after *Sūrah* 96. Where different editions of the Qur'ān mention an order of revelation, they all suggest that this is the second *sūrah*. Yet the style of the *sūrah*, the way it tackles its subject matter and its drift point to something else. In fact, these aspects almost confirm that it was revealed sometime after the call to Islam went public. It is well known that for three years the Prophet addressed his message to people privately, on an individual basis. In other words, this *sūrah* was most probably revealed during that time, when the Quraysh was determinedly opposed to the new message of Islam, resorting to all means to prevent it, including levelling defamatory allegations against the Prophet.

By way of response, the Qur'ān began to denounce such tactics, repelling unfounded allegations and issuing threats and warnings of the type this *sūrah* includes.

As we have said, it has been suggested that only the opening of the *sūrah* was revealed early on, soon after the first revelation of *Sūrah* 96. It is further suggested that the negation of any madness attributed to the Prophet, which occurs in the opening, "*you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman*," was in order to calm his own fears about whether such revelations were signs of madness. This is again unlikely, because the reports mentioning any such fears the Prophet may have had are exceedingly lacking in authenticity. Moreover, the way the *sūrah* is built as a single whole makes it clear that this negation is meant to refute the allegation mentioned at its conclusion: "*The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) It is this allegation that is negated at the *sūrah*'s very outset. This is clearly understood when we read all the *sūrah* and appreciate how closely interlinked it is throughout.

Some reports also suggest that certain passages, specifically verses 17–23 and 42–52, were revealed in Madīnah. The first of these passages mentions the test endured by the owners of the garden, and the second refers to the Prophet Jonah. Again, we believe this not to be the case. Instead, we suggest that the whole *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, because its style is very much Makkan. Indeed, this is more likely, considering the style, the features and the overall unity of the *sūrah*.

Our own stance, therefore, is that the *sūrah* was not the second to be revealed, but rather that its revelation took place after the lapse of some considerable time after the start of the Prophet's mission. It was certainly after the divine instruction was given to the Prophet to "*warn your nearest kindred*," (26: 214), and after the revelation of a substantial portion of the Qur'ān speaking about earlier communities. Such reports have been described by some unbelievers as 'fables of the ancients'. It was clearly revealed then at a time when the Quraysh had already been called upon to accept Islam and whence it started its resistance to the call. Indeed, so determined had it become in its opposition at this point that it did not hesitate to level false allegations against the

Prophet and his mission. It is such opposition that necessitated the very strong denunciation the *sūrah* makes of the unbelievers and the strong warnings it issues both early on and towards its end. Such timing of its revelation is also confirmed by the last image it portrays: "*The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) This is an image of a public address calling on large groups of people to accept the message. Such gatherings most certainly did not take place during the early years of the Islamic message. Indeed, the first such public address was only made three years after the Prophet began to receive Qur'ānic revelations.

The *sūrah* refers to some of the offers the unbelievers made to the Prophet, suggesting a compromise over the central issue in dispute, namely that of faith. It says: "*They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.*" (Verse 9) Needless to say, such an offer would not have been made at a time when the message was only advocated in private, presented to a few individuals. In such circumstances, it would not have been felt to represent any danger. It is more likely that such offers would only have been made later, when the message advocated itself in public and when the unbelievers realized its far-reaching significance.

We see how several indications confirm that the *sūrah* was not revealed in the very early days of the Islamic message, and that at least three years had passed before its revelation. It is highly unlikely that no Qur'ānic revelations were made during these three years. On the contrary, it is much more likely that many *sūrahs* and passages were revealed in the intervening period, presenting the Islamic faith without strongly denouncing the unbelievers in the way we find in this *sūrah*. Having said all this, however, one can still not say that this *sūrah*, as well as *Sūrahs* 73 and 74, were revealed late into the Islamic period.

A Wide Gulf

The tree of the Islamic faith, in its real, clean and pure form, was being planted on earth. It was totally unfamiliar to the prevailing state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, not only in the Arabian Peninsula but throughout the globe. Indeed there was a great gulf between it and the

deviant and colourless form of the Abrahamic faith, mixed with local superstitions, which the Arab idolaters upheld. What Muḥammad (peace be upon him) advocated was a clear, straightforward, simple, yet comprehensive and profound faith that was fully in line with the original pure faith preached by Abraham, but to a standard of perfection that fits its being the last message to mankind, addressing them in their stage of maturity and remaining intact to the end of time. Take, for example, the notion of multiple deities that assigns partners to God: in this respect, the Arabs worshipped angels, statues, the *jinn* and spirits. Their beliefs were a medley of corrupt and hollow notions. Compare these with the noble picture the Qur'ān paints of God and His majestic power that takes care of every creature. The gulf between the two is immense.

Similarly wide is the gulf between the class system that prevailed in Arabia, the clerical nature of its religion and the monopoly of privileges, such as custodianship of the Ka'bah, on the one hand and the equality of all people preached by Islam and every individual's direct relation with God as explained in the Qur'ān on the other. Likewise, the morality advocated by the Prophet Muḥammad was a world apart from the values that prevailed in Arabia's *jāhiliyyah* society.

This great gulf between the new faith and the Quraysh's beliefs, values and practices was sufficient to bring about direct conflict between the two camps. There were, however, other factors which perhaps were, to the Quraysh, more serious than the issue of faith. There were, for example, social factors, some of which prompted them to suggest what is reported in the Qur'ān: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (43: 31) The two cities mentioned here are Makkah and Ṭā'if. Despite the fact that the Prophet was a descendent of the noblest family in the Quraysh, the very fact that he was not the chief of his clan made it very difficult for their chiefs to accept his leadership. In that social environment, position in one's clan was of paramount importance.

Family factors also played their part. We see such significance in the fact that 'Amr ibn Hishām, better known as Abū Jahl, stubbornly refused to accept the truth of the Islamic message, despite his being certain of it, because the Prophet preaching it belonged to the 'Abd Manāf clan. This is recounted in the story of Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn

Sharīq who each went out individually, on three consecutive nights, to listen to the Qur'ān being recited by the Prophet. Every morning, they met on their way back home and started blaming each other, pledging that they would never do this again, lest their actions encourage others to listen to the Qur'ān. When al-Akhnas asked Abū Jahl what he thought of what he heard Muḥammad reciting, the latter answered: "We have competed with the clan of 'Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."[1]

There were also other interests and psychological factors determined to uproot this new tree before it could firmly establish its roots and stretch forth its branches. Such efforts were particularly heightened once the new message had moved on from private and individual advocacy to the open, public stage, outlining the essential features of the new faith, Islam. The Qur'ān spoke in clear terms, showing the absurdity of polytheism and its deviant concepts and traditions.

His position as a Prophet receiving revelations from on high notwithstanding, Muḥammad was a man who experienced normal human feelings. He was at the receiving end of such determined opposition that culminated in an all out fight against him, his message and the small band of his followers. He and his Companions could not help but hear the false allegations the unbelievers levelled at him. "*They say, 'He is surely mad.'*" (Verse 51) This was but one of the many types of ridicule they levelled on him, as is reported in the Qur'ān. Such ridicule, added to the abuse and persecution many of his followers suffered at the hands of their own relatives and clansmen, pained Muḥammad, God's Messenger, greatly.

We see in Makkan *sūrahs* how God bestows His abundant care on His Messenger and this small group of followers, consoling and commending him and those who accepted his message. In this respect, God gives

1. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, Dar al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, pp. 337–338. Also, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, pp. 172–173.

prominence to the moral aspect embodied in the Islamic message and its bearer, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). He refutes what the unbelievers alleged about him. He reassures the persecuted believers that He is on their side, so they do not have to think about their enemies, powerful and wealthy as they may seem.

We find in this *sūrah* many examples of how God comforts and reassures the Prophet: "*Nūn. By the pen, by all they write, you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verses 1–4) He also says of the believers: "*For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord. Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge?*" (Verses 34–36) Of one of the Prophet's more prominent enemies, God says: "*Pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verses 10–16) The Almighty then speaks about the war against those who deny the truth generally: "*Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verses 44–45) This is different from the punishment of the hereafter when the arrogant will be humiliated: "*On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verses 42–43)

The *sūrah* cites the example of those people who had a garden, but were too greedy. This serves as a warning directed against the elders of the Quraysh who, feeling powerful on account of their wealth and families, schemed against the new message, trying to bring it down. At the end, the *sūrah* enjoins the Prophet to remain steadfast in adversity: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale...*" (Verse 48)

Through such comforting, praise and reassurance, coupled with fearsome warnings and an uncompromising attack on the unbelievers,

God Himself takes up the fight. We can discern the features of that period when the believers were few, weak, suffering persecution and hardship and facing a determined effort to uproot the tree of their new faith. In the *sūrah*'s style, the words it uses and in its themes we identify certain features of the environment in which the new message functioned. Essentially, it was characterized by naïve concepts, petty concerns, and the lack of any profound thinking.

Such naïvety is seen in the unbelievers' crude methods to counter the Prophet's message. They describe him as a madman, but this is an allegation that lacks even elementary tact. It is crude abuse levelled by uncouth, unrefined and ill-mannered people.

Their naïvety is brought into focus by the way God refutes their false allegations. First of all, the line it takes is the most suited to their own conditions: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. Most certainly, yours is a sublime character. You shall before long see, as they will see, which of you is the one afflicted.*" (Verses 2–6) Secondly, the *sūrah* adds a clear warning: "*So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.*" (Verses 8–9) Thirdly, the refutation turns their abusive words against one of their own number: "*Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil.*" (Verses 10–13) Fourthly, the focus increases as the *sūrah* tells the story of those owners of a garden who lacked all refinement despite their wealth. In their arrogance, they whisper to each other that they will make sure that no poor people will be allowed into their garden to disrupt their harvest.

Furthermore, the unbelievers' naïvety is clearly shown in the argument put to them: "*Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? Ask them which of them will vouch for this.*" (Verses 37–40)

We see all these features through the expressions used in the *sūrah*. They are of benefit in our study of the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime and as we follow the progress of the Islamic message.

They explain how the Qur'ān elevated that social environment and the Muslim community towards the end of the Prophet's mission, and how far removed from such crudeness and naïvety the Muslim community became. To appreciate the wide gulf between the two situations we only need to study the mode of address the Qur'ān adopts in speaking to the Muslim community at the time. We need also to look at the changes in the situation of that Muslim community, its concerns, feelings and attitudes brought about within no more than 20 years, a period that is no more than a glance in the life of nations. Such a change in the social fabric of the community was both profound and firmly established, yet accomplished in such a short time. It enabled that community to assume mankind's leadership, attaining at the same time a sublime standard of morality that no other human leadership has ever attained. It was a unique standard in the very nature of the faith it preached, its practical effects on human life, its broad outlook that views all mankind with love and compassion, and its meeting all the community's needs: emotional, intellectual and social.

All in all, the progress so achieved was miraculous, elevating the community from such naïvety to a high standard of refinement and broadness of vision. It was such an enormous transformation that entailed much more than a minority becoming the majority, or the weak becoming strong. Building character and imparting depth to a people's way of thinking are far more difficult than just increasing numbers and marshalling armies.

Al-Qalam (The Pen)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Nūn. By the pen, by all they write, (1)

نٓ ۚ وَالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ ﴿١﴾

you are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman. (2)

مَا أَنتَ بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ بِمَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢﴾

And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward. (3)

وَإِنَّ لَكَ لَأَجْرًا غَيْرَ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٣﴾

Most certainly, yours is a sublime character. (4)

وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

You shall before long see, as they will see, (5)

فَسَتُبْصِرُ وَيُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

which of you is the one afflicted. (6)

بِأَيِّيكُمُ الْمَفْتُونُ ﴿٦﴾

Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided. (7)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِ ۖ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٧﴾

So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. (8)

فَلَا تُطِعِ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٨﴾

وَدُّوا۟ لَوْ تُدْهِنُ فَيُدْهِنُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise. (9)

وَلَا تُطِعْ كُلَّ حَلَّافٍ مَّهِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, (10)

هَمَّازٍ مَّشَّآءٍۭ بِنَمِيمٍ ﴿١١﴾

slanderer, going about with defaming tales, (11)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿١٢﴾

hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, (12)

عُتُلٍّۭ بَعْدَ ذَٰلِكَ زَنِيمٍ ﴿١٣﴾

cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. (13)

أَن كَانَ ذَا مَالٍ وَبَنِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Just because he has wealth and children, (14)

إِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا قَالَ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' (15)

سَنَسِمُهُۥ عَلَى ٱلْخُرْطُومِ ﴿١٦﴾

We shall brand him on the snout. (16)

إِنَّا بَلَوْنَٰهُمْ كَمَا بَلَوْنَآ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلْجَنَّةِ إِذْ أَقْسَمُوا۟ لَيَصْرِمُنَّهَا مُصْبِحِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, (17)

وَلَا يَسْتَثْنُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and made no allowance. (18)

فَطَافَ عَلَيْهَا طَآئِفٌ مِّن رَّبِّكَ وَهُمْ نَآئِمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, (19)

فَأَصْبَحَتْ كَالصَّرِيمِ ﴿٢٠﴾

so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate. (20)

فَتَنَادَوْا مُصْبِحِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

At daybreak they called out to one another: (21)

أَنِ اغْدُوا عَلَىٰ حَرْثِكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰرِمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.' (22)

فَٱنطَلَقُوا وَهُمْ يَتَخَٰفَتُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

So they went off, whispering to one another, (23)

أَن لَّا يَدْخُلَنَّهَا ٱلْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكُم مِّسْكِينٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.' (24)

وَغَدَوْا عَلَىٰ حَرْدٍ قَٰدِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose. (25)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهَا قَالُوٓا إِنَّا لَضَآلُّونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way! (26)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

No! We are utterly ruined.' (27)

قَالَ أَوْسَطُهُمْ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ لَوْلَا تُسَبِّحُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

The wisest among them said, 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless glory?"' (28)

قَالُوا سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.' (29)

فَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَلَاوَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach. (30)

قَالُوا يَا وَيْلَنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا طَاغِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. (31)

عَسَىٰ رَبُّنَا أَن يُبْدِلَنَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهَا إِنَّا إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا رَاغِبُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.' (32)

كَذَٰلِكَ الْعَذَابُ ۖ وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ ۚ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it. (33)

إِنَّ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٣٤﴾

For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord. (34)

أَفَنَجْعَلُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ كَالْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? (35)

مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge? (36)

أَمْ لَكُمْ كِتَابٌ فِيهِ تَدْرُسُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Or have you a divine book which you study, (37)

إِنَّ لَكُمْ فِيهِ لَمَا تَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? (38)

أَمْ لَكُمْ أَيْمَٰنٌ عَلَيْنَا بَٰلِغَةٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ
إِنَّ لَكُمْ لَمَا تَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? (39)

سَلْهُمْ أَيُّهُم بِذَٰلِكَ زَعِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Ask them which of them will vouch for this. (40)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَآءُ فَلْيَأْتُوا۟ بِشُرَكَآئِهِمْ إِن
كَانُوا۟ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true. (41)

يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَن سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
ٱلسُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. (42)

خَٰشِعَةً أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ تَرْهَقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ۖ وَقَدْ كَانُوا۟
يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى ٱلسُّجُودِ وَهُمْ سَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe. (43)

فَذَرْنِى وَمَن يُكَذِّبُ بِهَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ ۖ
سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُم مِّنْ حَيْثُ
لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. (44)

وَأُمْلِى لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ كَيْدِى مَتِينٌ ﴿٤٥﴾

I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm. (45)

أَمْ تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُم مِّن مَّغْرَمٍ
مُّثْقَلُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt? (46)

أَمْ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (47)

فَٱصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تَكُن كَصَاحِبِ
ٱلْحُوتِ إِذْ نَادَىٰ وَهُوَ مَكْظُومٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale who called out in distress. (48)

لَّوْلَآ أَن تَدَارَكَهُۥ نِعْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ لَنُبِذَ
بِٱلْعَرَآءِ وَهُوَ مَذْمُومٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

Had not grace from his Lord reached him, he would have been left upon that barren shore in a state of disgrace. (49)

فَٱجْتَبَىٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ فَجَعَلَهُۥ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾

His Lord, however, chose him and made him one of the righteous. (50)

وَإِن يَكَادُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَيُزْلِقُونَكَ بِأَبْصَٰرِهِمْ لَمَّا
سَمِعُوا۟ ٱلذِّكْرَ وَيَقُولُونَ إِنَّهُۥ لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥١﴾

The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.' (51)

وَمَا هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Yet it is but a reminder to all mankind. (52)

Issues Spelled Out

"*Nūn. By the pen, by all they write.*" (Verse 1) The *sūrah* begins with an oath by God Almighty. The oath is by the letter *nūn*, the pen and writing. The relationship between this letter of the alphabet and the other two, i.e. the pen and writing, is clear. As God swears by these He gives them due importance, highlighting this and presenting it to a community where learning through this approach was not valued. In fact, writing was very rare and primitive in that community while the role it was destined to play required that such ability develop and become widespread. This was the only way through which it could advocate its faith and the systems it laid down for human life. It would then be required to provide wise leadership for humanity. Writing is no doubt a basic element in fulfilling such tasks.

This point is endorsed by the fact that Islamic revelations started with the order to read: "*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell. Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, Who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*" (96: 1–5) This instruction was given to the unlettered Prophet, whom God in His infinite wisdom willed to be unable to read and write. Yet the revelations vouchsafed to him began with such emphasis on learning through reading and writing with the pen. This importance is reiterated here by the oath using the letter *nūn*, the pen and the writing. All this should be seen as part of the divine system of cultivating the Muslim community and preparing it for the universal role God assigned to it.

God Almighty states this oath by *nūn*, the pen and writing to refute the unbelievers' false allegation. He shows how improbable it is, since it is He who bestowed His grace on His Messenger: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman.*" (Verse 2) This short verse also identifies God's grace bestowed on the Prophet in an expression that confirms his closeness to Him. At the same time, the verse refutes the alleged condition, one that cannot combine with God's grace bestowed on His chosen servant.

Anyone who studies the Prophet's relations with his people will be utterly astonished that any should level such a description at him. They

knew him to be very wise. Several years before his prophethood, they accepted his arbitration in a dispute over which of their clans should be honoured with placing the Black Stone in its position in the Ka'bah. It was they who nicknamed him *al-Amīn*, meaning the trustworthy. They also continued to deposit their valuables with him for safekeeping, and this despite their fierce enmity towards him and his message, throughout his time in Makkah. Indeed, so trustworthy was the Prophet that he entrusted his cousin, 'Alī, with the task of returning such deposits to them when he migrated to Madīnah. The unbelievers also confirmed that he never told a lie even before the start of his prophethood. Heracules, the Byzantine Emperor, asked Abū Sufyān, the Quraysh leader, whether they ever accused Muḥammad of lying before he became a prophet. Abū Sufyān, who was his sworn enemy at the time, said that they did not. Heracules then said: "He would not refrain from lying to people and then start lying to God."

It is absolutely astounding that the hatred felt by the Quraysh unbelievers was of such a magnitude that they should make allegations of this sort against a noble man distinguished among them by his wisdom and high standards of morality. Yet grudges can blind people to the truth. The perpetrator of such falsehood is the first to know that he is a wicked liar.

This spiteful lie by the unbelievers is countered with a gesture of compassionate honour: "*You are not, by your Lord's grace, a madman.*" (Verse 2) Moreover, "*And indeed you shall have a never-ending reward.*" (Verse 3) This never-ending reward is granted by your Lord who has bestowed on you the honour of prophethood. This gives solace and abundant compensation for any type of isolation or allegation the unbelievers may hurl at him. What loss could be incurred by the one whose Lord kindly and benevolently assures him of a continuing reward, one that never ends?

A Testimony by God

This is followed by a great testimony and abundant honour: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4) The whole universe echoes this unique praise of the Prophet. No writer can describe the value of this

great testimony by the Creator of the universe; no imagination can give it its worth. It is a testimony by God, according to His own measure, given to His servant, in His own words: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" A sublime character has, according to God's measure, its own unique value which no other creature can imagine.

This testimony confirms Muḥammad's greatness in several ways. First of all, by the fact that it is God's own testimony, given in His majesty, and appreciated by the whole universe and echoed by everyone on high. Secondly, his greatness is seen by virtue of the fact that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was able to receive God's testimony, live with it and know who was saying it. It was God Almighty, in His absolute power and knowledge, that stated it. The Prophet knew his own position in relation to such absolutely great power. He could appreciate this position as no one else could. The fact that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) held his position firmly as he received this word, from its sublime source, without being crushed by the pressure it brought on him, and that he remained calm and stable is the best evidence of his own greatness.

There are many reports about the Prophet's greatness given by his Companions. Indeed, his practical conduct is better evidence than anything reported about him. However, this testimony, given by God Almighty, is greater still than any reported evidence. God knows best whom to entrust with His final message. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), in his sublime character, was indeed the one to deliver this message, which is the noblest in history. He was a match for it, and a living example of its greatness. The message of Islam is so perfect, beautiful, comprehensive and truthful that it could only be delivered by a man who deserved such testimony from God, and by one who would receive such divine testimony with confidence. At the same time, however, God remonstrated with the Prophet for some of his actions but all the while imbibing the same confidence and reassurance. He declared both aspects to all people, hiding nothing. In both situations, he was a noble Prophet, an obedient servant and a trusted deliverer of the divine message.

The greatness of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) mirrors the greatness of the Islamic message: both go further in scope than the most powerful telescope can reach. The most that anyone who wants to monitor this dual greatness can do is to look at it without assigning

limits to it, and point to its field in the universe, without setting parameters on it.

Once more I feel the need to stress the broad significance of the fact that the Prophet received this testimony from his Lord and that he remained firm, confident and reassured. He himself, a human being, would praise one of his Companions and that person, as well as those close to him, would feel so excited and overwhelmed with joy. Yet all involved, the one making the statement of praise, the praised person and the ones who heard of it knew that the Prophet was human. It is true that he was a Prophet, yet he remained within the human circle, with its well-known limitations. In his case, the praise came from God Almighty, and he knew of God what no one else could know. Yet he remained firm and continued his mission. How this must have felt is beyond imagination.

It was Muḥammad alone who could attain such a sublime level of greatness and human perfection that matched the spirit God breathed into man. Muḥammad alone matched this ultimate divine message to mankind so that it is reflected in him alive, taking the form of a man. Muḥammad alone was the one God knew to be worthy of this position and further knew that his character was sublime. It was God who declared here His testimony that he had a sublime character, as also declared elsewhere in the Qur'ān that He, the Lord of all the worlds, showered His blessings on him: "*God and His angels bless the Prophet. Believers! Bless him and give him greetings of peace.*" (33: 56) Only God can grant one of His own servants such a great and unique favour.

Emphasis on Morality

We also note here that the moral element is given considerable weight in God's measure. It is a fundamental element in the Islamic message, just as it is fundamental in the Prophet's own character. Indeed, we note its prominence in both. In fact, both legislative and educational aspects of the Islamic message rely on moral values. The strongest emphasis in what it advocates is laid on purity, cleanliness, honesty, truth, justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, fulfilment of promises and commitments, actions matching words and both consistent with

intentions and thoughts. It forbids injustice, dishonesty, cheating, taking other people's property unlawfully, violating other people's rights and honour and spreading immorality in any way or form. Its laws are geared to protecting these principles and safeguarding the moral element in people's consciences and behaviour, as well as in personal, social and international dealings.

The Prophet says: "I have been given the message that perfects noble morality." He thus sums up the objective of his message. His teachings are highly consistent in emphasizing the importance of morality and good manners. His own behaviour provides a shining picture as well as a practical noble example that merits a record in God's eternal book: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4) Thus God praises His Messenger as well as the morality aspect of His message. With such praise God sets out a strong bond pulling the earth towards heaven. He makes this aspect the one to which believers' hearts, those who look up to His reward, are strongly attached. He thus identifies for them which values He would like them to possess.

This is the unique aspect of Islamic morality. It does not stem from the local environment, or indeed from any earthly consideration. Nor does it draw on any tradition, interest or bond that was at play in that generation. Instead, it comes from heaven and relies on it. It responds to the call coming from heaven so that those on earth look up to a high horizon. It derives from God's own absolute attributes, which people are asked to emulate. This so that ordinary human beings can achieve their utmost level of humanity and be worthy of God's honour, bestowed on them as they are placed in charge of the earth. It is in this way only that they will merit a more sublime life, "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55) This means that Islamic morality is not restricted by any earthly limitation. It rather aspires to the highest level that people can achieve.

Moreover, Islamic morality is not a set of individual values, such as truthfulness, honesty, justice, mercy, kindness, etc. Rather, it is a complete system in which personal education collaborates with the legal code; a system that deals with life as a whole and defines its direction. It ultimately seeks God's pleasure, and nothing else. This morality, in its perfection, beauty, balance, consistency, straightforwardness and unity

was reflected in the person of Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), as he deservedly earned the praise granted by none other than God Almighty: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4)

Reassurance About the Future

God then reassures His Messenger about the immediate future and how things will develop with those unbelievers who hurled such lies at him. He warns them that their true situation will be publicized and their falsehood be made public:

> *You shall before long see, as they will see, which of you is the one afflicted. Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided.* (Verses 5–7)

The afflicted person whom God assures the Prophet will be identified to all is the one that has gone astray, or the one subjected to a test that reveals his true condition. The two meanings are not much apart. This promise reassures the Prophet and the believers in his message and at the same time it warns those who oppose and abuse him, regardless of whatever type of madness they attribute to him. Most probably they did not mean that he was insane, because they realized that this could not be the case. They probably meant that he had associates from among the *jinn*, who perhaps inspired him with the fine words he recited. They used to say that every poet had someone from the *jinn* assisting their efforts. This was, however, far from the case with the Prophet. Nor does it fit with the nature of his revelations that are both consistent and truthful.

This promise by God confirms that the future will make clear the true nature of the Prophet and those who denied his message. The future will prove which party was afflicted or had gone astray. God reassured him that his Lord "*knows best who has strayed from His path, as He knows the ones who are rightly guided.*" (Verse 7) It is his Lord who gave him his revelations. He indeed knows that he and his followers are rightly guided. This is enough to reassure the Prophet and set his enemies worrying about what the future will bring.

God then tells the Prophet of their true feelings as they continued to argue with him about the truth he preached and the abuse they levelled at him. They may appear determined to uphold their ignorant beliefs, but the truth is that they are fundamentally uncertain about them. They are ready to shed most of these if only the Prophet would abandon some of what he called on them to accept. They are prepared to compromise everything, retaining only some appearances in return for a gesture of compromise from him. They do not have a faith that they consider to embody the truth; they are only keen to retain some appearances:

> *So pay no heed to those who deny the truth. They would love that you compromise with them, so that they will also compromise.* (Verses 8–9)

It is all subject to negotiation, then, with the aim of agreeing a meeting point somewhere in the middle, just like commercial transactions. Yet the difference between beliefs and commercial activities is vast. A person with faith will not abandon any of its beliefs or values, because its minor points are the same as its major ones. Indeed, in faith there is nothing minor and nothing major: both are the same. A faith is a single unity with parts complementing each other. Its advocate will never discard any part of it in order to please someone else.

Islam and *jāhiliyyah* can never meet halfway, or indeed in any way. This is true of Islam everywhere and across all generations. All states of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, are the same: past, present or future. The gulf that separates the two states is unbridgeable and admits no compromise. The two are diametrically opposed.

Several reports speak of what the unbelievers in Makkah tried to achieve by way of compromise with the Prophet so that he would stop criticizing their worship methods. They hoped that he would give them something that would save their faces if they were to follow him. In this, they were no different from any negotiator seeking a compromise. The Prophet, however, maintained a decisive firmness, refusing to give up even a small part of his faith. Additionally, he was extremely well mannered, kind and benevolent towards his tribesmen, eager to make things easy for them. With regard to faith, he was committed,

obedient of God's instructions: "*So pay no heed to those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 8)

The Prophet did not compromise an iota of his faith even during the direst period of his life in Makkah, where he and his few followers were under siege, suffering immense persecution. He never withheld a word that needed to be uttered in the face of such tyrants. He never sought to soften their stance or to avoid their persecution by such compromise. Nor did he ever hesitate to clarify any point that was closely or remotely relevant to his faith.

Ibn Hishām reports in his biography of the Prophet:

> It should be said in fairness that the chiefs of Makkah did not take any action worth noting against the Prophet in the early stages. When he started to criticize their pagan faith and ridicule their idols, however, they began to think that the matter was much too serious to ignore. Yet, they could not do much about it because Abū Ṭālib protected his nephew against all threats. To ignore such protection by the Makkan chiefs would contravene one of the basic conventions of their social set-up. Therefore, a small delegation, composed of a number of the most influential people in Makkah, went to Abū Ṭālib complaining about his nephew's behaviour. The delegation included the two brothers 'Utbah and Shaybah, sons of Rabī'ah from the clan of 'Abd Shams; Abū Sufyān Sakhr ibn Ḥarb from Ummayah; Abū al-Bakhtarī al-'Āṣ ibn Hishām and al-Aswad ibn al-Muṭṭalib from Asad, Abū Jahl 'Amr ibn Hishām and al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah from Makhzūm; the two brothers Nabīh and Munnabih sons of al-Hajjāj from Sahm and Al-'Āṣ ibn Wā'il, also from Sahm. They made their complaint clear to Abū Ṭālib and they offered him the choice of either telling Muḥammad not to criticize their ways and ridicule their idols or allowing them to take such effective measures as they might deem necessary to end the trouble. Abū Ṭālib, who continued to follow the religion of his people, spoke to them gently and calmed them down. He did not promise them much.
>
> The Prophet continued to preach his message regardless. The crisis with his people increased in intensity. Feelings of hostility

spread. So the delegation went again to Abū Ṭālib and said to him: "Abū Ṭālib, you enjoy a position of honour and respect among us. We have requested you to stop your nephew, but you have not taken any action. We certainly cannot just sit and do nothing when he continues to speak ill of our forefathers and to ridicule us and our gods. You have to stop him or we will fight him and you over this question until one of the two parties is destroyed."

Abū Ṭālib was in a dilemma. He did not like to quarrel with his people, yet he could not bear to let his nephew down. So he called Muḥammad and explained to him what had taken place between him and his visitors. He then said to him: "You see the difficulty of my situation. Do not put my life and your life at risk, and do not burden me with what I cannot bear."

The Prophet felt that his uncle might be contemplating withdrawing his protection so he stated his own position with the greatest emphasis he could muster: "Uncle, should they give me the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in return for abandoning my call, I would not do anything of the sort until God has brought this message to triumph or until I have perished." The Prophet was under the pressure of such strong emotions that tears sprang to his eyes. He started to walk away, but his uncle called him back, saying reassuringly: "My nephew, you may go and say whatever you like. I will never withdraw my protection from you, and never will I let you down."[2]

This is an image of the Prophet's commitment to his message at the precise moment when his uncle and protector, who was his last resort on earth, seemed on the verge of letting him down. It is a powerful image in its very nature, connotations and implications, as well as in its words and expressions. It is as new and powerful as this faith is. It is a reflection of the truth of God's description of the Prophet: "*Most certainly, yours is a sublime character.*" (Verse 4)

Another image also reported by Ibn Hishām, through Ibn Isḥāq relates a direct attempt at compromise offered by the unbelievers. This

2. Ibn Hishām, ibid., pp. 282–285. Also, Adil Salahi, ibid., pp. 95–96.

they did when they realized that the Prophet continued to be as firm as ever, despite their persecution of his Companions and their attempts to force them to renounce Islam.

'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one of the leading figures in Makkah, was one day sitting with a group of the Quraysh notables when he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may accept one or the other. If he does we will give him that and put an end to our problem with him."

This idea was greeted with unanimous approval. As 'Utbah sat with the Prophet he addressed him: "My nephew, you know you command a position of high esteem and noble birth among us. You have brought into the life of your community something very serious indeed. You have thus caused disunity to creep into their ranks; you have belittled their ideals, ridiculed their gods and their religion and spoken ill of their forefathers. Now listen to me. I am making you some offers which I would like you to consider. You may, perhaps, find some of them acceptable."

The Prophet asked him to make his proposals, and listened attentively. 'Utbah said: "My nephew, if you have started this affair hoping to make money out of it, we are all willing to give you some of our own wealth so that you would be the richest among us. If it is honour and position you want, we will make you our master and seek your advice in all matters. If it is a throne you are after, we will make you our king. If, on the other hand, you are possessed and are unable to resist what overwhelms you, we will spare no expense in seeking a medical cure for you."

When 'Utbah stopped, the Prophet asked him whether he had finished. As 'Utbah affirmed that he had, the Prophet asked him to listen to what he had to say. The Prophet then recited the first 38 verses of *Sūrah* 41 of the Qur'ān. 'Utbah listened attentively. When the Prophet finished his recitation, he prostrated himself in humble devotion to God, before saying to 'Utbah: "You have heard what I have to say and you can make up your own mind."

> 'Utbah left quietly and went to his people, who realized as they saw him approaching that a change had come over him. They looked up at him curiously, listening to his words: "I have heard something the like of which I have never heard in my life. It is neither poetry nor sorcery. Take up the suggestion I am making to you, and lay the blame for the outcome at my door. Leave this man alone. What I have heard from him will certainly bring about great events. Should the rest of the Arabs kill him, you would have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."[3]

A different report suggests that when 'Utbah listened to the Prophet's recitation, he stopped him when the Prophet read the verse saying: "*If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*'" (41: 13) He was terrified and put his hand on the Prophet's mouth, and said to him: "I appeal to you, Muḥammad, by God and our kinship not to do that." He feared that the warning may come true. He then left him and went to his people suggesting that they leave Muḥammad alone.

Be that as it may, this was another way of trying to achieve compromise. Yet it also portrays an image of the Prophet's sublime character. We see him listening to 'Utbah's hollow offers, without stopping him, even though whatever 'Utbah had to offer did not deserve a moment's thought from Muḥammad (peace be upon him), considering his own vision of the universe and its values, and his understanding of the truth and what life on earth is worth. Yet his manners would not allow him to interrupt his interlocutor or to display any sign of annoyance with his worthless offers. Instead, he listened to him with full attention until he had finished. Then he asked him whether he had finished what he had to say. His attitude throughout was that of one who is certain of the truth, reassured and at the same time very polite.

A third form of the Quraysh's attempts to reach a compromise is seen in the following report by Ibn Isḥāq:

3. Ibn Hishām, ibid., pp. 313–314, Also, Adil Salahi, ibid., pp. 113–114.

> One day as the Prophet was doing the *ṭawāf* at the Ka'bah, he was stopped by a group of the Quraysh elders including al-Aswad ibn al-Muṭṭalib, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, Umayyah ibn Khalaf and al-'Āṣ ibn Wā'il. They said to him: 'Muḥammad! Let us worship the God you worship, and you worship the deities we worship. Thus, we will be together at the same level. If your God is better than ours, we will have benefited by that, and if our deities are the better ones, you will have made the benefit.' He answered as God instructed him: "*Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine.'*"[4] (109: 1–6)

God thus put an end to this absurd offer, and the Prophet replied to them as God so instructed him.

What Sort of Nobility

The importance of the moral element is again stressed when the Prophet is ordered not to obey one particular unbeliever. We have a full list of the terrible and shameful qualities of this person, who is then threatened with humiliation:

> *Furthermore, pay no heed to any contemptible swearer, slanderer, going about with defaming tales, hinderer of good, aggressor, sinful, cruel and, on top of all that, given to evil. Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the ancients!' We shall brand him on the snout.* (Verses 10–16)

It is said that this person was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, to whom the following passage in *Sūrah* 74 also refers: "*Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him*

4. Ibn Sayyid al-Nas (1996), *'Uyūn al-Athar*, Dar al-Turath, Madīnah, p. 197.

to endure a painful uphill climb! He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I will cast him into the scorching fire." (74: 11–26) There are many reports that speak of al-Walīd's repeated scheming against the Prophet and his opposition to the message of Islam, trying to turn people away from it. It is also reported that the verses in the present *sūrah* refer to al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq, another of the Prophet's determined opponents. The present denunciation of the man, whether he was al-Walīd or al-Akhnas, and the stern warnings given in the other *sūrah*, suffice as evidence of this person's wicked role in the fight against the Prophet and the Islamic message. They also indicate his evil intentions and that he was devoid of all goodness.

The Qur'ān lists here nine of his bad characteristics. He is a 'swearer', which suggests that he always does so. Only a liar swears much because he feels that people do not believe him. Therefore, he resorts to swearing to persuade people to accept what he says. Moreover, he is 'contemptible', someone who does not even respect himself. Nor do people trust his word. This is proven by the fact that he feels the need to swear all the time to overcome people's mistrust. Despite the fact that he has wealth, sons and position, he remains contemptible. It is often the case that a tyrant remains contemptible even though he holds power and authority. Likewise, dignity is a personal trait which remains distinctive of its possessor even though he has nothing of the material luxuries of this world.

He is a 'slanderer' who disrespects people and tries to insult them by word and gesture, in their presence or absence. This is a characteristic that Islam brands as most hateful because it is contrary to gallantry, self-respect and propriety of conduct towards others in so far as respecting their dignity, regardless of their social position. The Qur'ān denounces this characteristic in several places: "*Woe to every taunting, slandering backbiter.*" (104: 1) "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves,*

nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets." (49: 11) All the actions mentioned in this verse are types of slander.

Another characteristic of this person is that he 'goes about with defaming tales'. He goes around, telling people what will spoil their relations, create rancour in their hearts and destroy their ties. This is an evil and contemptible quality that no one who respects himself and wants to be respected will entertain. People realize that the one who tells tales about others is unworthy of respect. Even those who listen to him will not respect him, because they know he is evil.

The Prophet instructed his Companions not to tell him anything that would cause him to change his attitude towards any of them. He said: "Let no one tell me any negative thing about any of my Companions. I love to come out to you with no ill-feeling in my heart." [Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.] In an authentic *ḥadīth*, 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports that "the Prophet passed by two graves. He said that the two buried in them are suffering punishment for no cardinal sin. One of them used not to cover himself when urinating, and the other used to go about with defaming tales." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Hudhayfah quotes the Prophet as saying: "No one who goes about with defaming tales will be admitted into heaven." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.] Yazīd ibn al-Sakan reports that "the Prophet said to his Companions: 'Shall I tell you who are the best among you?' They said: 'Please do.' He said: 'They are the ones who, when seen, the name of God is glorified.' He then said: 'Shall I tell you who are the worst among you? They are the ones who go about with defaming tales, who spoil relations between friends and try to get innocent people defamed.'" [Related by Aḥmad.]

Islam naturally denounces this despicable and shameful characteristic in strong terms. It spoils people's hearts and destroys friendships. It degrades the one who does it before it spoils relations between others. It undermines the person's own character even before undermining society. It creates mistrust between people and often lands the innocent in trouble.

Moreover, this person is a 'hinderer of good', preventing it from reaching him and others. He used to prevent people from accepting the divine faith, even though it is the sum of all goodness. Furthermore,

whenever he noticed that any of his children or clansmen leaned towards the Prophet, he would say to them: 'If any of you were to follow Muḥammad's religion, I would never give him an iota.' Thus he tried his utmost to prevent them from accepting Islam. Hence, the Qur'ān records this as one of his characteristics.

He is also an 'aggressor', stepping over the limits of right and justice. His aggression is levelled against the Prophet and the Muslims on the one hand, and against his own family and clan on the other, given he prevented them from accepting Islam. Aggression is an evil quality which the Qur'ān and the Prophet denounce in clear terms. Islam forbids it in any form, even in one's approach to food and drink: "*Eat of the wholesome things which We have provided for you and do not transgress.*" (20: 81) Both justice and moderation are essential qualities of the Islamic code.

What is more is that he is 'sinful', committing all sorts of sins so as to earn this description, without specifying what it is he does. Thus, committing sin becomes his essential characteristic.

The next characteristic is stated in translation as 'cruel', but in the Arabic original this is *'utull*, which by its very sound connotes a host of features that no group of words can adequately describe. The one who is *'utull* is cruel, unfriendly, gluttonous, heavy handed, mean, given to treating others badly. Abū al-Dardā', a Companion of the Prophet, defined an *'utull* person as 'the one who is covetous, ill-mannered, gluttonous, greedy for money, tight-fisted.' The word *'utull* thus reveals a hateful character.

On top of all these evil qualities, this enemy of Islam is also described as 'given to evil'. The Arabic word used here is *zanīm*, which has more than one meaning. One of these denotes someone who is attached to a group of people, but he is of suspect descent. None of them knows his parentage. Another meaning denotes a person who lacks morality and who is known by his many evil deeds. This second meaning is perhaps more true of al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, but the use of this word here makes him contemptible even though he was also proud and arrogant.

These personal qualities are followed with a denunciation of this person's attitude to divine revelations: "*Just because he has wealth and children, when Our revelations are recited to him, he says, 'Fables of the*

ancients!'" (Verses 14–15) How ungrateful! How can anyone enjoy God's favours of children and wealth and then deride His revelations, ridicule His Messenger and denounce His message? By itself, this is equal to all the evil qualities already mentioned.

Hence a warning is issued to him by the Almighty. The warning hits at the very position of pride on account of his wealth and children, in the same way as the earlier mention of his personal characteristics hit at his pride in his position among his people. He hears now a threat that will inevitably be fulfilled: "*We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verse 16)

The Arabic word *khurṭūm*, translated here as snout, means, among other things, the nose of a wild pig. Perhaps this is the meaning intended here, denoting his nose. In Arabic, the nose connotes dignity. People refer to an honourable person as one of high nose, while a humiliated one is described as having his nose in the dust. Hence, the threat of branding him on his nose connotes double humiliation: being branded like slaves used to be, and his nose being referred to as a snout or pig's nose.

Undoubtedly, these verses fell like a fatal blow for al-Walīd. He belonged to a community which attached much importance to avoiding abuse by a poet, even though the abuse was no more than false allegations. How about such a truthful description by the Creator of the universe, in such an inimitable style, and in the Qur'ān which is echoed throughout the universe for the rest of time! It was a fatal blow that this enemy of Islam and its noble Prophet deserved.

The People of the Garden

A reminder of the outcome of the greed and denial of other people's rights then follows. This in a reference to a group of people who owned a garden. It seems that the story was well known to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān. The reminder makes it clear that what people have of wealth and children is only a means to test them, in the same way as the people of the garden were put to trial. The result of all such tests will inevitably be revealed:

We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, and made no allowance. A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate. At daybreak they called out to one another: 'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.' So they went off, whispering to one another, 'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.' Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose. When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way! No! We are utterly ruined.' The wisest among them said, 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless glory?"' They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.' Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach. They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.' Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it. (Verses 17–33)

This story may well have been well known, but its narration in the Qur'ān reveals what lies behind its episodes of God's power, the tests He sets for some of His servants and their requital at the end. This is, then, what is new in its presentation in the Qur'ān. As it unfolds, we see a group of naïve people who appear to us in their thoughts and actions like simple rural people. Perhaps this type of person was closer to the addressees who were stubborn in their rejection of the faith, but who were not particularly sophisticated characters. Rather, they tended to be simple folk.

From an artistic point of view, the narrative represents one of the methods of story-telling in the Qur'ān. It includes an element of surprise that captures the listener's interest. It shows the ludicrous nature of human scheming as compared with God's planning. Moreover, the events are brought alive as if we see them unfolding.

We see the owners of a garden agreeing to a plan. According to reports, the previous owner of the garden was a good man who had allocated a portion of its harvest to the poor. His heirs, however, wanted to keep all its fruits and yield for themselves, depriving the poor of their customary share.

The story now unfolds: "*We try them as We tried the owners of a certain garden, who vowed that they would harvest its fruits on the morrow, and made no allowance.*" (Verses 17–18) They made up their minds to harvest its fruits very early in the morning, taking all for themselves and making no allowance for the poor. They swore to this and even went to bed with this evil intention. We leave them in their slumber to look at what takes place during the night when they are totally unaware. God certainly does not sleep. His scheme is different from theirs: "*A visitation from your Lord came upon that garden while they were asleep, so that by morning it was stripped bare and looked desolate.*" (Verses 19–20) We then leave the garden to look at the plotters and what they are now doing.

They wake up very early, calling each other to get ready: "*At daybreak they called out to one another: 'Go early to your tilth if you wish to gather all its fruits.'*" (Verses 21–22) Thus they remind and counsel one another. The *sūrah* carries its ridicule further, showing them on their way, speaking in whispers to ensure that no one learns of their plot to deprive the poor of their legitimate share: "*So they went off, whispering to one another, 'Make sure that no needy person enters the garden today.'*" (Verses 23–24) We, the reader and listener, know something unknown to the owners of the garden. We have seen the subtle hand making away with all its fruits, leaving it stripped bare. We, therefore, hold our breath to look at what these plotters do.

The *sūrah* adds more ridicule: "*Early they went, strongly bent on their purpose.*" (Verse 25) They certainly felt able to deprive others, or at least to deprive themselves. Now for the surprise: "*When they saw it, they exclaimed: 'Surely we have lost our way!'*" (Verse 26) This is certainly not our garden. We seem to have lost our way. However, they soon make sure: "*No! We are utterly ruined.*" (Verse 27) This is the truth of the matter.

Now that they are facing the results of their scheme that aimed to deprive the needy, the middle one among them, who was their best and wisest, reminds them of his earlier counsel. He apparently had a different point of view, but when he could not persuade them to accept it, he went along with them instead of holding on to the truth. Hence, he suffered the same fate as they. Hence, too, his reminder: "*The wisest among them said: 'Did I not tell you, "Will you not extol God's limitless*

glory?'"" (Verse 28) Now, when it is too late, they listen to sound counsel: "*They said, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly, we were doing wrong.*'" (Verse 29)

As happens in every situation when results turn bad, everyone tries to shift the blame away from himself: "*Then they turned upon each other with mutual reproach.*" (Verse 30) Then, they finally stop blaming each other and acknowledge their common fault, hoping that God will forgive them and replace their lost harvest: "*They said: 'Woe betide us! We have done great wrong. It may be that our Lord will grant us something better instead. To our Lord we truly turn in hope.*'" (Verses 31–32)

Before the curtains are drawn on the last scene we have the *sūrah*'s parting comment: "*Such is the suffering [in this life], but greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*" (Verse 33) This, then, is a test of affluence. The people of Makkah should learn this lesson for they are being tested in the same way as the owners of the garden were tested. They should consider what their own test will bring in its wake. They should take heed and avoid what is certainly greater than any test and suffering endured in this present world: "*Greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*"

The *sūrah* cites this well-known story, given it deals with their own environment. In this way it establishes a clear link between the application of God's law to communities of olden times and to the generation being addressed. It touches their hearts with what is close to their own lives. At the same time it tells the believers that the wealth they see the unbelievers enjoying is nothing but a test God sets for them. It has its own consequences. It is part of God's law that He tests people either with luxuries and comforts or with hardship. Those who behave with arrogance, deprive others of their share, and feel that what they are given is theirs by right may always face a result of the type suffered by those owners of the garden. Yet, "*greater indeed is the suffering in the life to come, if they but knew it.*" (Verse 33) Believers who watch God in all their actions enjoy a different outcome: "*For the God-fearing there shall be gardens of bliss with their Lord.*" (Verse 34) The contrast between the two ends echoes the contrast between their behaviour and reality. Two opposite lines of action lead to two contrasting ends.

Can They Be Equal?

At this point, the *sūrah* puts a simple, uncomplicated argument to them, challenging them, putting to them one question after another, on matters that can have only one answer. It warns them, showing them a fearsome scene of the life to come, and threatens them that, in this present life, they could face a war against God Almighty:

> *Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty? What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge? Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose? Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide? Ask them which of them will vouch for this. Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true. On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe. Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation. We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm. Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?* (Verses 35–47)

The warning against punishment in the life to come and a war in this present life is made within the argument and challenge this passage delineates. This has the effect of heightening the argument and increasing the pressure the challenge represents. The passage starts with a rhetorical question: "*Should We treat those who submit themselves to Us as We treat the guilty?*" (Verse 35) This question refers to the outcome of the two parties that has already been stated. This is a question that admits only one answer. No, it cannot be! Those who submit to God can never be treated on the same footing as those who are knowingly guilty. No logic and no standard of justice allows that the guilty and those who submit

to God should face the same result. Hence, the *sūrah* puts a second rhetorical question to them: "*What is the matter with you? On what basis do you judge?*" (Verse 36) How do you judge matters so as to make the two equal? This certainly cannot be.

The *sūrah* moves on to add an element of sarcasm: "*Or have you a divine book which you study, and in which you find that you shall have all that you choose?*" (Verses 37–38) It is a sarcastic question that asks whether or not they have a book and if their studies lead them to make a judgement that no logic or fair standard would accept. A book that tells them that those who submit to God and the guilty are treated in the same way is indeed a funny sort of book that seeks to please them and fan their desires. It provides them with whatever rulings they like. Needless to say, such a book has nothing to do with truth, reason, justice or human tradition.

"*Or have you received solemn oaths, binding on Us till the Day of Resurrection, that you will get whatever you yourselves decide?*" (Verse 39) If they do not have a book to rely on in their judgement, then they must have the alternative spelled out in this verse: a binding pledge by God that remains in force until the Day of Judgement, one to the effect that they will have whatever they decide. They may choose as they please. But this is not the case: they have no such oaths or pledges. How can they, then, assert their claims? On what basis do they make such claims?

"*Ask them which of them will vouch for this.*" (Verse 40) Who of them can pledge his word of honour that they have such an agreement with God, or that the pledges He has made them will remain in force until the Day of Judgement? This is again a sarcastic question that should place them in endless embarrassment.

"*Or have they partners? Let them produce their partners, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 41) They used to associate partners with God, but the *sūrah* makes these their own partners, not God's. It challenges them to invoke these partners if they believe that what they say is true. The question here is when will they invoke such partners? "*On the day when matters become so dire, they will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will not be able to do so. Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verses 42–43) The *sūrah* puts this scene before them as if

it is taking place at the moment of address. Thus, they are challenged to bring in their alleged partners, when this day appears as a reality, unattached in God's knowledge to a particular time. To put it before the addressees in this way gives it a very strong and profound effect. So, on the Day of Judgement, when matters are so dire and people are in great distress, these arrogant people will be asked to prostrate themselves, but they will be unable to do so, either because the time for this has lapsed, or because their bodies are so tense they will not respond. Be that as it may, the image here is one of extreme distress.

The *sūrah* continues painting their sorry picture: "*Their eyes will be downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them.*" (Verse 43) Such arrogant, tyrannical people with downcast eyes and overwhelming ignominy are shown in perfect contrast to the attitude they displayed in this life when they were extremely arrogant. This reminds us of the threat mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*: "*We shall brand him on the snout.*" (Verse 16) The impression of humiliation and ignominy is clear and deliberate. Yet in their humble position, enduring much humiliation, they are reminded of the arrogance that brought about this suffering: "*They were invited to prostrate themselves when they were safe.*" (Verse 43) When they were able to do it willingly, they arrogantly refused to prostrate themselves before God. Now, in the hereafter, when the life of this world is behind them, they wish they could respond to the invitation, but they cannot so prostrate themselves.

In their utterly dire situation, they face a stern warning: "*Therefore, leave to Me those who deny this revelation.*" (Verse 44) The warning shakes their very foundations. It is God Almighty who says to His Messenger that he should leave to Him those who deny His revelations. He will settle the matter with them. Who denies God's revelations other than such a weak, small creature devoid of all strength? Indeed, he is no more than a little ant, or a tiny particle. Nay, he is much less when he has to face the might of God, the All-Powerful. The Prophet is told to leave God alone with such a person and to go and rest with his fellow believers. That person's fight is not with the Prophet and the believers, but with God. He is God's enemy and God will deal with him. How terrifying! Who, then, would want to be an unbeliever! At the same time, how reassuring for the Prophet and the believers!

The Almighty then discloses the fighting plan against this little, weak creature: "*We shall bring them low, step by step, in ways beyond their knowledge. I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verses 44–45) These unbelievers and all dwellers on earth are too small and weak to warrant God making such a plan for them. God is only warning them so that they may save themselves before it is too late. They should realize that their apparent security is the trap they fall into. If God allows them time when they indulge in aggression and injustice and persist in error, this is merely to lead them on to their miserable end. They will thus carry their full burdens. They will come on that day burdened with sin, deserving all humiliation and ignominy.

Nothing is fairer or more merciful than a timely warning that places the outcome before them. God in His limitless glory offers His justice and mercy to His enemies and the enemies of His faith and Messenger. They are offered this warning when they still have the perfect chance to choose for themselves. All matters are laid bare. It is up to them.

God – limitless is He in His glory – gives chances, but He does not ignore anything. He allows an unjust tyrant respite, but then when He takes him, He does not let go. Here God speaks of the plan He in His wisdom has chosen. He tells His Messenger to leave those who deny His revelations to Him. They are the ones who take pride in their wealth, power, children and position. God will allow them respite, making all these favours their lure. He thus reassures His Messenger and warns His enemies. They are then left to consider their position.

The scene of the Day of Judgement, with all that it involves of stress and hardship, and the strong warning are followed with a continuation of the argument that wonders at their singular attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them [and so they fear] that they would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 46) Is it that you, Prophet, demand a hefty fee for providing guidance to them, and is it this fee that causes them to turn away and deny the divine faith, preferring to face such a miserable end? Could it be this or, "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 47) Are they so certain of what is in store for them and, as a result, have no worry about it? Have they already written it down, or was it written according to what they wish? No answer is needed here. How, then, can they adopt such an attitude?

What Type of Fight?

A remarkable statement, "*Leave to Me those who deny this revelation,*" carries with it a terrible threat. It is then followed by an outline of the battle between God and His enemies. Together, the two statements make it clear that the Prophet and the believers have no part in the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood. This is indeed true, even though the Prophet and the believers may think that they have a genuine role to play in this battle. Whatever role they do play, when God so facilitates it for them, is only a part of God's will in His battle against His enemies. They are merely a tool, which God may or may not use. In either case, He does what He wants to do. In both cases, it is He who conducts the battle according to His laws ascertained as He chooses.

This statement was revealed when the Prophet and his followers were still in Makkah, a small minority unable to do much. Hence, it served as reassurance to those weak elements suffering persecution, and it struck fear in the hearts of those who thought they were powerful, having much at their disposal. In Madīnah, the situation completely changed. God willed then that the believers should play a prominent role in the battle. Yet at the same time, He also reiterated what He had said earlier, when they were in Makkah, weak and helpless. When they achieved their resounding victory at Badr, He said to them: "*It was not you who slew them, but it was God who slew them. When you threw [a handful of dust], it was not your act, but God's, so that He might put the believers through a fair test of His own making. Indeed, God hears all and knows all.*" (8: 17)

God wants this truth of the battle being His battle to be firmly understood by the believers. It is His issue and He settles it. When He assigns a role in it to the believers, it is only because He wants to put them to a fair test, for which they earn a good reward. As for the war itself, it is He who fights it, and it is He who assigns its victory. He is able to conduct this war without them. When they participate in it, they are one of the tools He uses, not the only tool. There are many Qur'ānic texts that assert this truth in all situations. It also fits well with the Islamic concept of God's will, rules and laws, as well as the nature

of human efforts made to accomplish God's will. These efforts are no more than a tool in God's hand.

This truth gives believers great reassurance in their two conditions of weakness and strength, provided they are sincere in their efforts, placing their trust in God when they fight for His cause. It is not their own power that ensures victory in the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith. It is God who ensures their victory. Their weakness does not lead to defeat because God's power supports them. God, however, may give respite to the unbelievers and lead them step by step. He determines events according to His will, wisdom, justice and mercy.

At the same time, this truth is bound to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy, whether the believers they are confronting are in a state of weakness or in a state of strength. Those believers are not the actual opponent. It is God who is conducting this war, with His own might. It is God who says to the Prophet to leave such miserable enemies to Him. It is He who leads them on step by step so that they fall into the fearful trap. Even if this enemy is equipped with all its strength, the same applies, because His power is indeed what sets the trap: "*I will allow them more time: My scheme is truly firm.*" (Verse 45) As for the timing of when all this will happen, this is something only God knows. Hence, no one should be deluded by a false sense of security. Only a transgressor allows such a false feeling to take hold of him.

The Value of Patience

Now the Prophet is directed to remain patient in adversity. He should persevere in his efforts to deliver his message, and face all obstacles including people's twisted minds, the harm they cause him and their denial of the truth. He must remain patient facing all this adversity until God judges as He pleases at the time of His choice. The Prophet is here reminded of the experience of a brother of his who lived in former times. That prophet was impatient and felt fed up with all the opposition. Had he not been granted God's grace, he would have been left in a state of disgrace:

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; and do not be like the man in the whale who called out in distress. Had not grace from his Lord reached him, he would have been left upon that barren shore in a state of disgrace. His Lord, however, chose him and made him one of the righteous. (Verses 48–50)

The man in the whale was the Prophet Jonah, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 37. God reminds the Prophet Muḥammad, the last of all prophets, of Jonah's experience so that he can benefit by it. All prophets preceded Muḥammad and he, the one charged with delivering God's final message to all mankind, should benefit from all their experiences. His task is not to address a particular tribe, town or nation, but to put God's message to all communities and all generations. His example should provide guidance for them all. Thus he should set a code of living that remains suitable for all mankind's needs, in all situations and all conditions, despite the fact that every day brings something new.

The gist of Jonah's experience is that God sent him to the people of a town said to be Nineveh, near Mousil in today's Iraq. When they were slow in responding to his call, he was terribly upset. He left them in anger, thinking that God would not leave him to bear all the opposition those people presented. God would be kind to him and send him to others who would be less stubborn. In his distress, he went towards the coast where he took a boat. When they were far out at sea, the boat became shaky and seemed about to sink. It thus became necessary to throw someone overboard so as to reduce the load. They drew lots to choose that person. Jonah was the one, and they threw him overboard. Subsequently, a whale swallowed him. Finding himself in such terrible distress, in layers of darkness, inside the whale in the depths of the sea, Jonah appealed to God, saying: "*There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed.*" (21: 87) God bestowed His grace on him and the whale threw him out, leaving him skinless on the shore. His skin had melted inside the whale. God preserved his life by His will, which is unrestricted by any law that is familiar or unfamiliar to man.

Here, in this *sūrah*, God says that had it not been for the grace He bestowed on him, Jonah would have been abandoned, disgraced by

God because of his lack of patience. He had acted on his own initiative, without waiting for God's permission. He was though only spared by God's grace. God accepted Jonah's repentance just as he demonstrated what deserves acceptance. Hence, God chose him and made him one of His righteous servants.

God reminds the Prophet Muḥammad of Jonah's experience in the whale so as to reassure him at a time he was facing stubborn rejection. This reminder comes after He has told him to leave the battle to Him, to conduct as He determines in the way He wishes. What the Prophet is required to do, is to remain patient in adversity and to await God's judgement as and when it comes.

The true hardship the advocates of the divine message face is that of remaining patient in adversity until God makes His judgement at the right time, as His wisdom dictates. Along the way they face many types of adversity such as accusations of lying, physical persecution, stubborn rejection, the apparent power of falsehood as it seems to be victorious, and the need to remain steadfast in the face of all this, reassured that God's promise will be fulfilled. They must not hesitate to travel along their charted way, no matter what hardship they have to face. This requires great effort, determination and patience, as well as support from God. As for the battle itself, God has determined its nature and willed to conduct it Himself. It is He who has decided to give the unbelievers time and to lead them step by step, for a purpose of His own. Thus did He promise His Messenger, and He fulfilled the promise in good time.

To All Mankind

The *sūrah* concludes with an image of the unbelievers as they received the Prophet's call. They are full of hatred and grudges shown in the way they look at him as though they want to do away with him. The Qur'ān gives the best description of their looks:

> *The unbelievers well-nigh trip you up with their eyes when they hear this reminder. They say, 'He is surely mad.'* (Verse 51)

Their looks almost affect the Prophet's feet so as to make him lose his balance and trip. It is a superb image describing the hatred embedded in these looks that boil with anger. Added to these hateful looks is their false allegation: "*They say: He is surely mad.*" (Verse 51) The image is taken from a scene of public address when the message is openly presented to people and they are called upon to accept it. It cannot be anywhere other than a public place where some of the most determined opponents are present, reacting with such looks that reflect a deep-seated hatred.

The final comment in the *sūrah* says: "*Yet it is but a reminder to all mankind.*" (Verse 52) Such a reminder cannot be presented by a madman. God tells the truth, while falsehood emanates from lying fabricators.

We conclude our commentary with highlighting the phrase '*to all mankind*', used at the end of the *sūrah*. We should remember that this revelation was Makkan, occurring in the early days of Islam, when the message was met with hard denial and the Prophet received such spiteful looks, when the unbelievers were fighting it with all their might. At this low ebb in its fortunes, the message of Islam declares its universal nature. Thus, its address to all mankind was in no way something it acquired later in Madīnah, when it achieved several victories, as some present-day fabricators allege. Right from its early days in Makkah, Islam declared its universal nature because this is part of its essence, right from its very first day. Thus did God will it to be and thus did He determine its direction from its early days. Thus will it remain until the end of time. God has willed it to be so, and He is its sponsor who protects and defends it. It is He who fights its battle against its opponents. As for its advocates, they only have to remain steadfast, patient in adversity until God, the best of judges, makes His judgement.

SŪRAH 69

Al-Ḥāqqah
(The Inevitable Truth)

Prologue

This is an awesome *sūrah*, one that strikes terror in our hearts, shaking us up. From start to finish it focuses on something that is very serious, showing one awesome image after another. Some of these are frightening, some are majestic and others depict suffering, yet they are all characterized by strong movements. As a whole, the *sūrah* enhances the feeling that faith and religion are very serious; they admit no frivolity. The profundity of such questions is serious here in this life as also in the life to come. Furthermore, it is no less serious in God's own measure. Indeed, it is so serious that it permits no distraction. For, to turn away from faith and religion is to incur God's displeasure and all that is attendant with that, even though the one who turns away may happen to be God's Messenger. It is larger than God's Messenger, indeed all mankind, because it is the question of the truth absolute, laid down by the Lord of all the worlds.

This impression is heightened by the very name given in this *sūrah* to the Day of Judgement and which gives it its title, *al-Ḥāqqah*. The very sound of the word imparts a feeling of decisiveness, seriousness and a grounding stability. It sounds like a heavy object being lifted some considerable distance before being placed firmly into position. The strongly aspirated '*ḥ*' sound appears to be lifted by the elongated

'*ā*' before it is firmly placed at the doubled '*q*' and then finally stabilized with the final '*h*' sound.

We see such great seriousness in the fates of those who denied the truth of faith and the Day of Judgement. One community after another suffered such severe punishment that each were utterly destroyed: "*The people of Thamūd and 'Ād denied the Striker. The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, while the 'Ād were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now? Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip. When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.*" (Verses 4–12) Thus, all those who turned away from faith suffered such grave and sudden punishments, as befit their approach to this decisive and serious requirement. It is important to realize then that this question of faith and religion admits no frivolity of approach and allows no distraction.

Such seriousness is also seen in the picture the *sūrah* draws of the resurrection, the terrible end of the universe, and the even more majestic scene of the angels carrying the Throne: "*When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (Verses 13–17)

Such awesomeness and majesty impart added seriousness to the scene of accounting for the all-important question of faith. Both help to deepen its effect on us, as do the beats of the *sūrah* and the statements of those who are granted reward and those who are doomed to suffer: "*He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your hearts' content as a reward*

for what you have done in days gone by.' But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.'" (Verses 19–29) This long lamentation gives us a strong impression of the terrible end suffered.

God's own words, spelling out His sentence in the middle of that solemn scene on that great day, add to the seriousness of the whole affair: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verses 30–32) Each clause in this command sounds as if it carries the whole weight of the heavens and earth to strike the offender in what is a terrifying image. This sentence is then followed with an explanation of its justifying causes: "*He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verses 33–37)

A hint of a great oath is followed in God's own statement outlining the truth of this final religion: "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see: this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 38–43)

Further seriousness is provided by the *sūrah*'s last beat as it issues a decisive warning of a very severe punishment to be meted out to anyone who tries to introduce any alteration into this faith. This applies even to Muḥammad, God's Messenger: "*Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.*" (Verses 44–47)

The *sūrah* concludes with another decisive statement making the question of the final divine message as it is embodied in the Qur'ān absolutely clear: "*This [Qur'ān] is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. It is indeed truth absolute. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 48–52) It is a finale that leaves no room for anything further to be added.

The Style

The *sūrah* has a central theme, which it aims to make absolutely clear. The style and beat it employs and the images and scenes it draws work in unison to drive this home to us in a highly inspiring way. Thus, the *sūrah* gives us a great host of images indeed it surrounds us with them from all sides. We cannot fail to see them brought alive as if they are taking place in front of our very eyes. Here, we see the fates of the Thamūd, the ʿĀd, Pharaoh, Sodom and Gomorrah and feel engulfed by their terrible effects. The scene of the great floods and the few human survivors carried in the Ark is painted in two short verses. Read, if you will, how the ʿĀd suffered their terrible fate: "*The ʿĀd were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now?*" (Verses 6–8) Can you fail to see in your mind's eye how this raging storm continued to vent its furious havoc for eight days and seven nights leaving the ʿĀd utterly destroyed and resembling hollow, uprooted tree trunks? It is such a vivid scene that we cannot help but see it with our eyes and paint it with our minds. The same applies to all images of the terrible fates suffered by unbelievers of old.

Then again the images of the terrible end of the universe are brought before us; we hear the noise accompanying them and we are filled with terror and distress. Listen to this verse: "*The earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened.*" (Verse 14) Do you not hear that mighty crash after having seen the lifting up and then the fall? Listen again: "*The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (Verse 16) Does this sad end, with a beautiful sky torn apart, present itself clearly before you? Keep listening: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord. On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.*" (Verses 17–18) The majesty of this awesome scene can only but fill your imagination.

Then look at the image of the person receiving his record in his right hand. The whole world is too small for his joy. He cheerfully calls on all creatures to come and read his record: "*Come you all! Read this my record.*

I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account." (Verses 19–20) Contrast this with the image of the one whose record is given to him in his left hand: his words, tone and expression reflect his heart-felt grief: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 25–29)

Who of us will fail to shudder when we listen to the judgement in the case of the latter person: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verses 30–32) We almost see those receiving the command rushing to carry it out, and we visualize his situation there as we read: "*So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verses 35–37) Finally, who of us will not experience fear when our minds receive this stern warning: "*Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.*" (Verses 44–47) Combined, all these images and scenes are so powerful, clear and effective as to require our pressing attention.

The *sūrah*'s verse endings and their variation contribute to its clearly profound effect. At the very beginning, we have a very long '*a*' followed by a doubled plosive '*q*' sound and a fricative '*h*'. Then we have a long stretch in which all the verses end with a clear '*yah*' final syllable. This passage takes us through the scenes of ruin in this world and in the life to come, as well as those of joy and lamentation when personal records are given. Then the ending changes to '*ooh*' when the judgement is pronounced. When the basis of the judgement is outlined in all seriousness, the ending again changes to give us a firm and final sound formed of a long '*e*' followed by either '*m*' or '*n*'. This change of the last consonant and the vowel preceding it, as well as the beat, is a clear phenomenon that parallels the change of scene, image and aura. It fits perfectly with the subject matter and the images drawn. It contributes to the powerful effect the *sūrah* has generally. Having said all this, I would like to conclude by saying that the *sūrah* itself is far more powerful than can be shown by any analysis or comment anyone can make.

Al-Ḥāqqah
(The Inevitable Truth)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Inevitable Truth! (1)

الْحَاقَّةُ ﴿١﴾

What is the Inevitable Truth? (2)

مَا الْحَاقَّةُ ﴿٢﴾

Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is! (3)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْحَاقَّةُ ﴿٣﴾

The people of Thamūd and ʿĀd denied the Striker. (4)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ وَعَادٌ بِالْقَارِعَةِ ﴿٤﴾

The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, (5)

فَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَأُهْلِكُوا بِالطَّاغِيَةِ ﴿٥﴾

while the ʿĀd were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, (6)

وَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَأُهْلِكُوا بِرِيحٍ صَرْصَرٍ عَاتِيَةٍ ﴿٦﴾

which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. (7)

سَخَّرَهَا عَلَيْهِمْ سَبْعَ لَيَالٍ وَثَمَانِيَةَ أَيَّامٍ حُسُومًا فَتَرَى الْقَوْمَ فِيهَا صَرْعَىٰ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ خَاوِيَةٍ ﴿٧﴾

Can you see any trace of them now? (8)

فَهَلْ تَرَىٰ لَهُم مِّن بَاقِيَةٍ ﴿٨﴾

Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, (9)

وَجَاءَ فِرْعَوْنُ وَمَن قَبْلَهُ وَالْمُؤْتَفِكَاتُ بِالْخَاطِئَةِ ﴿٩﴾

فَعَصَوْا۟ رَسُولَ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَهُمْ أَخْذَةً رَّابِيَةً ﴿١٠﴾

and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip. (10)

إِنَّا لَمَّا طَغَا ٱلْمَآءُ حَمَلْنَٰكُمْ فِى ٱلْجَارِيَةِ ﴿١١﴾

When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, (11)

لِنَجْعَلَهَا لَكُمْ تَذْكِرَةً وَتَعِيَهَآ أُذُنٌ وَٰعِيَةٌ ﴿١٢﴾

making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed. (12)

فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِى ٱلصُّورِ نَفْخَةٌ وَٰحِدَةٌ ﴿١٣﴾

When the trumpet is sounded a single time, (13)

وَحُمِلَتِ ٱلْأَرْضُ وَٱلْجِبَالُ فَدُكَّتَا دَكَّةً وَٰحِدَةً ﴿١٤﴾

and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, (14)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ وَقَعَتِ ٱلْوَاقِعَةُ ﴿١٥﴾

that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. (15)

وَٱنشَقَّتِ ٱلسَّمَآءُ فَهِىَ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَاهِيَةٌ ﴿١٦﴾

The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. (16)

وَٱلْمَلَكُ عَلَىٰٓ أَرْجَآئِهَا ۚ وَيَحْمِلُ عَرْشَ رَبِّكَ فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ ثَمَٰنِيَةٌ ﴿١٧﴾

The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord. (17)

يَوْمَئِذٍ تُعْرَضُونَ لَا تَخْفَىٰ مِنكُمْ خَافِيَةٌ ﴿١٨﴾

On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden. (18)

He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. (19)

فَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِيَمِينِهِۦ فَيَقُولُ هَآؤُمُ ٱقْرَءُوا۟ كِتَٰبِيَهْ ﴿١٩﴾

I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' (20)

إِنِّى ظَنَنتُ أَنِّى مُلَٰقٍ حِسَابِيَهْ ﴿٢٠﴾

He will be in a happy state of life, (21)

فَهُوَ فِى عِيشَةٍ رَّاضِيَةٍ ﴿٢١﴾

in a lofty garden, (22)

فِى جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

with its fruits within easy reach. (23)

قُطُوفُهَا دَانِيَةٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

'Eat and drink to your heart's content as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.' (24)

كُلُوا۟ وَٱشْرَبُوا۟ هَنِيٓـًٔۢا بِمَآ أَسْلَفْتُمْ فِى ٱلْأَيَّامِ ٱلْخَالِيَةِ ﴿٢٤﴾

But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record (25)

وَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِشِمَالِهِۦ فَيَقُولُ يَٰلَيْتَنِى لَمْ أُوتَ كِتَٰبِيَهْ ﴿٢٥﴾

and knew nothing of my account! (26)

وَلَمْ أَدْرِ مَا حِسَابِيَهْ ﴿٢٦﴾

Would that death had been the end of me! (27)

يَٰلَيْتَهَا كَانَتِ ٱلْقَاضِيَةَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Nothing has my wealth availed me. (28)

مَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنِّى مَالِيَهْ ﴿٢٨﴾

I am now bereft of all my power.' (29)

هَلَكَ عَنِّي سُلْطَانِيَهْ ﴿٢٩﴾

'Lay hold of him and shackle him, (30)

خُذُوهُ فَغُلُّوهُ ﴿٣٠﴾

and burn him in the fire of hell, (31)

ثُمَّ الْجَحِيمَ صَلُّوهُ ﴿٣١﴾

and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.' (32)

ثُمَّ فِي سِلْسِلَةٍ ذَرْعُهَا سَبْعُونَ ذِرَاعًا فَاسْلُكُوهُ ﴿٣٢﴾

He did not believe in God Almighty, (33)

إِنَّهُ كَانَ لَا يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٣٣﴾

and he never encouraged feeding the needy. (34)

وَلَا يَحُضُّ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ الْمِسْكِينِ ﴿٣٤﴾

So, no friend has he here today, (35)

فَلَيْسَ لَهُ الْيَوْمَ هَاهُنَا حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

nor any food except the filth (36)

وَلَا طَعَامٌ إِلَّا مِنْ غِسْلِينٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

that none other than the sinners eat. (37)

لَّا يَأْكُلُهُ إِلَّا الْخَاطِئُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

I need not swear by what you can see (38)

فَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِمَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and what you cannot see: (39)

وَمَا لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, (40)

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَمَا هُوَ بِقَوْلِ شَاعِرٍ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

not the word of a poet – how little you believe! (41)

وَلَا بِقَوْلِ كَاهِنٍ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! (42)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (43)

وَلَوْ تَقَوَّلَ عَلَيْنَا بَعْضَ الْأَقَاوِيلِ ﴿٤٤﴾

Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, (44)

لَأَخَذْنَا مِنْهُ بِالْيَمِينِ ﴿٤٥﴾

We would indeed have seized him by the right hand (45)

ثُمَّ لَقَطَعْنَا مِنْهُ الْوَتِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

and cut off his life-vein, (46)

فَمَا مِنكُم مِّنْ أَحَدٍ عَنْهُ حَاجِزِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and none of you could have saved him. (47)

وَإِنَّهُ لَتَذْكِرَةٌ لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

This [Qur'ān] is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. (48)

وَإِنَّا لَنَعْلَمُ أَنَّ مِنكُم مُّكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. (49)

وَإِنَّهُ لَحَسْرَةٌ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. (50)

وَإِنَّهُ لَحَقُّ الْيَقِينِ ﴿٥١﴾

It is indeed truth absolute. (51)

فَسَبِّحْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الْعَظِيمِ ﴿٥٢﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (52)

True and Inevitable

> *The Inevitable Truth! What is the Inevitable Truth? Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is!* (Verses 1–3)

Most of this *sūrah* is taken up with scenes, images and events of the resurrection. Indeed, the *sūrah*'s very title *al-Ḥāqqah*, or the Inevitable Truth resounds with the same. It is a name chosen for both its meaning and the sounds it delivers. *Al-Ḥāqqah* is something that falls due and then takes place, or it becomes inevitable and puts forward its judgement, or it manifests the truth. All these meanings are clear and decisive, fitting with the subject matter and drift of the *sūrah*. As we have already stated, the name chosen provides a powerful beat, one that is in harmony with the *sūrah*'s meaning and which contributes to the intended atmosphere. It prepares us for what is about to befall the unbelievers in this world and in the life to come.

The ambience throughout the *sūrah* is one of seriousness, firmness, awe and fear. In addition to what we have said in the Prologue, it imparts to us a feeling of God's absolute power on the one hand and man's powerlessness on the other. It mentions how God's power can firmly take man to task, in this world and in the next, should he deviate from the code of living God wants man to implement. It is the code God's messengers outlined for people. This code is not laid down so that it can be ignored or abandoned; it is there to be respected and put into practice. Otherwise, God's painful punishment may be meted out at any time.

The words used here, their very sound, meaning and construction contribute to this ambience. The *sūrah* starts with one Arabic word, *al-Ḥāqqah*, translated here as 'the Inevitable Truth'. It is mentioned on its own as a subject that has no predicate. This is followed by a question that emphasizes the fact that the event referred to is extremely grave. This question is followed by the spreading of an air of mystery, so as to take the subject matter out of the area of man's knowledge, "*Would that you knew what the Inevitable Truth is!*" (Verse 3) The *sūrah*, however, does not answer the question. Instead, it leaves us stirring at this awesome event about which we know nothing. Indeed, we cannot know anything about it because it is beyond our knowledge.

Unbelievers' Fates

The *sūrah* begins with an account of the terrible fates met by different communities of unbelievers. They were all dealt with in a decisive and swift manner because the issue in question is very serious and does not allow denial. Those who persist with such denial cannot escape punishment:

> *The people of Thamūd and 'Ād denied the Striker. The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event, while the 'Ād were destroyed by a furiously howling wind, which He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days. You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees. Can you see any trace of them now?* (Verses 4–8)

Al-Qāri'ah, or The Striker, is another name for Resurrection Day, complementing as it does *al-Ḥāqqah,* the Inevitable Truth. This means that in addition to its being true and inevitable, it also strikes like two solid objects hammering against each other. The Striker inflicts hearts with terror and delivers a crushing blow upon the universe. By its very sound, it strikes loudly, crushing everything and everyone around. Both the Thamūd and the 'Ād denied it, saying that it was untrue. Let us see then what the result of such denial was:

"*The Thamūd were destroyed by an overwhelming event.*" (Verse 5) As mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, the people of Thamūd used to live in the area of al-Ḥijr to the north of Ḥijāz, close to today's Palestine. They were destroyed by an event named elsewhere as a '*stunning blast*'. Here, the *sūrah* does not mention this blast but rather describes it as an '*overwhelming event*', as this fits better with the atmosphere of catastrophe that characterizes the *sūrah.* Moreover, the note the Arabic word *ṭāghiyah* strikes is consistent with the verse endings in the present passage. This short single verse is enough to completely engulf the Thamūd, leaving no trace of them.

The Thamūd's fate was swift and sudden, a single blast overwhelming them all. By contrast, the *sūrah* gives us a detailed account of the 'Ād's fate, which was accomplished over seven nights and eight decisive days.

The 'Ād were destroyed by a howling, extremely cold wind described here as *ṣarṣar*. Whilst this carries strong connotations of such '*howling*', this is still not enough. Its howling is clearly described as furious, and fits with the fact that the 'Ād were arrogant and tyrannical in their dealings with others. They used to live at al-Aḥqāf in southern Arabia, in the area between Yemen and Ḥadramawt. This howling wind, furious as it was, "*He caused to rage upon them for seven nights and eight decisive days.*" (Verse 7) The *sūrah* gives the exact duration of this hurricane that hit for so long so as to draw an image of the scene after it was all over: "*You could see their people lying dead, like uprooted trunks of hollow palm trees.*" (Verse 7) The image is detailed, pressed on our minds so that we can see its every detail. The people of the 'Ād are '*lying dead*' everywhere, and they look '*like uprooted tree trunks*', but these trunks are '*hollow*', eaten from inside and no longer able to stand upright. They are thrown on the ground, lifeless. The sad silence of death now reigns after the furiously howling hurricane. So, what is left of them? The answer is expressed in a question for which no one bothers to hear an answer: "*Can you see any trace of them now?*" (Verse 8)

Such was the fates of the 'Ād and Thamūd. Other communities that denied the divine faith also suffered similar fates. In two short verses, the *sūrah* sums up several of these:

> *Pharaoh, too, and those before him, and the ruined cities – all indulged in sin, and disobeyed their Lord's messenger; and so He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip.* (Verses 9–10)

Pharaoh, in Egypt, was the one who opposed the Prophet Moses, but the *sūrah* gives no details of '*those before him*'. The '*ruined cities*' were those of Sodom and Gomorrah. The *sūrah* sums up the deeds of all these communities in a short phrase saying that they '*all indulged in sin*'. It explains that they all '*disobeyed their Lord's messenger.*' The fact is that these communities had several messengers whom they disobeyed, yet these messengers advocated the same truth, and their messages were essentially the same. Hence, they are like one messenger, representing a single truth. This is one of the most inspiring touches of the Qur'ānic style. Again the *sūrah* sums up their fates in a way that combines

swiftness with strong and decisive action: "*He took them to task with an ever-tightening grip.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* then gives us an image of the great floods and the floating Ark on the surface, in reference to the fate suffered by the people of Noah when they rejected God's message. Here the *sūrah* reminds people of God's favour as He saved their forefathers. Yet they do not take heed or give thanks:

> *When the waters rose high, We carried you in the floating Ark, making it all a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.* (Verses 11–12)

The images of the floods and the floating Ark fit well with the other scenes portrayed in the *sūrah*, and share the same verse endings so as to rhyme with other verses describing these fates. The fact is that the *sūrah* gives all this as "*a lasting reminder for you, so that attentive ears may take heed.*" This should inspire the hearts and ears of people who continue to deny the truth after all that happened before them and the warnings that were given to earlier communities. Indeed signs and lessons, as well as favours and blessings, have been given in abundance, but people need to wake up and take heed.

Greater Horrors

All such devastation and catastrophe seems, however, to be exceedingly small when compared to the horrors of the Striker, the Inevitable Truth, which those unbelievers deny, even though they have seen what befell earlier communities that denied it. These fates, terrible catastrophes in their own right, are of a limited nature compared to the absolute calamity that the Striker brings about on the day to be witnessed by all. Having thus introduced this horror in general terms, the *sūrah* now portrays its details:

> *When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The*

sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day. The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord. (Verses 13–17)

We believe that there will be a single sounding of the trumpet and that this will be followed by these events. We do not know any details, however, because these events belong to a world about which we have no information except these texts. We have no other source to refer to. Moreover, no further details can add to the significance of these statements. To try to learn such details is a useless exercise which we are instructed not to resort to. When the trumpet is sounded once, a huge movement will take place: "*the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened.*" (Verse 14) The image of the earth and the mountains being lifted high and thrown so that they are crushed and levelled is absolutely terrifying. We walk over the earth in peace and reassurance, feeling that it is firm in its position. We look at the mountains and feel how stable and firmly placed they are. Yet both are lifted and sent crashing, as if they were a ball in a child's hand. How small man must feel, and how small is his world, compared with such great power.

What happens when all this takes place? It is the very thing the *sūrah* is speaking about: "*that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass.*" (Verse 15) What is certain is the Day of Resurrection, which is called by many names such as *al-Ḥāqqah*, or the Inevitable Truth, *al-Qāri'ah*, or the Striker, *al-Wāqi'ah*, or the Happening, as if the certainty of its happening is part of its very nature. Using this last name here is deliberate, intended to give a particular impression countering all doubt and denial. Yet this is not all. The skies will also be seriously affected: "*The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (Verse 16) We do not know for certain to what the term '*the sky*' refers to here, but this statement and similar ones referring to celestial events on that great day speak of a collapse of the order that keeps the universe functioning according to an accurate and fascinating plan. Once this perfect order collapses, all its different parts will be in chaos.

It is mere coincidence that astronomers are now predicting that something of this nature will take place bringing about an end to the

world. Their predictions are based on scientific observations and the little they have come to know of the nature of the universe. We, for our part, almost witness these scenes as they unfold before us through the Qur'ānic texts informing us of things that are absolutely certain because they come from God, the Creator who knows what He has created. We almost see the earth being lifted high, with its mountains that are massive by our measure, but infinitely small when compared to the universe. We see them all sent crashing, being levelled. We see the sky torn apart, frail, while the planets are scattered everywhere. We see all this through the Qur'ān as it draws its images and plants them before our eyes.

An air of majesty then spreads over the entire stage. All the sounds of the trumpet, the crashing, the rending asunder and the scattering of stars then dies down, and we have an image of the Almighty's Throne: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (Verse 17) The angels are on all sides of the sky that has been torn and rent asunder, and the throne is there above them carried by eight of their number. Are they eight angels, or eight rows of angels, or eight classes, or some other eight known only to God? We do not know who or what they are, just as we do not know what the throne is like, or how it is carried. Knowledge of all these details has not been imparted to us, and God wants us to know of them only what He tells us. Therefore, we leave aside all details of these unknown matters and concentrate instead on the majestic aura they impart to the whole scene. This is what we are meant to feel as the events of that awesome day are reported.

> *On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.* (Verse 18)

All are exposed: bodies, souls, consciences, actions and destinies. All curtains that used to hide secrets are lifted, and souls are laid bare just like bodies. What used to be concealed is now in full view. Man is without any of his precautions, schemings and plannings. What he was keen to conceal, even from himself, is there to be seen by all. Such disgrace and in front of everyone! As for God, He has always been fully

aware of every little thing, even that which is most deeply hidden, but man, accustomed to all sorts of concealment on earth, does not fully appreciate this. Now, on the Day of Judgement, when everything is laid bare throughout the universe, he realizes this. The earth is flattened and has no corner or protrusion to conceal anything; the sky is rent asunder showing what once was behind it; all bodies are without cover, and souls are left bare concealing no secret. The situation is very difficult indeed; harder to accept than the flattening of the earth and the mountains or the tearing of the sky apart. It leaves man bare in body, soul, history, and action. Not just this but he is also exposed in front of all these huge numbers of creatures – humans, *jinn* and angels – in front of the Almighty and under His majestic throne.

Man has a very complex nature. There are within his soul many corners and pathways where he hides his feelings, whims, yearnings, thoughts, secrets and private matters. Imagine how a snail quickly withdraws into its shell when it feels danger, hiding itself completely. Should man realize that an eye manages to see what he is keen to conceal, or that a glance exposes something he wants to remain hidden, he does much more than a snail sensing danger. He is deeply hurt when someone looks into his inner secrets. So how will man feel when he stands truly naked in body, heart, feeling and soul; when he has nothing to cover himself with, when he is under the throne of the Almighty and before this great assembly of creatures? This is the most painful of all situations.

Overwhelmed with Joy

The *sūrah* now presents two images, one of the winners and one of the losers. This is again done as though it is happening at this very instant:

> *He who is given his record in his right hand will say, 'Come you all! Read this my record. I certainly knew that one day I would have to face my account.' He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your heart's content as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.'* (Verses 19–24)

Taking one's record with one's right or left hand, or behind one's back may be a statement expressing a material fact, or it may be an idiomatic expression, following standard rules of Arabic as it refers to the good direction as the right and the evil one as the left or the back. Whichever may be the case, the meaning remains the same. It merits no argument as any such argument spoils the effect of what takes place on this awesome day. What we see here is a person who is given his record and realizes that he has won. The hardship of the day is gone, and he moves along, overjoyed, among the great multitude. His happiness overflows and he calls to all people, saying: "*Come you all! Read this my record.*" (Verse 19) In his overwhelming delight, he says that he never thought that he would be spared. He expected to have to account for his deeds, and that means suffering. As one *ḥadīth* states, 'Ā'ishah quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever is held to account will be tormented." She then asked the Prophet: "How come, when God says: '*He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning and return rejoicing to his people.*'" (84: 7–9) He said: "This merely speaks of presentation. Whoever is questioned about his deeds on the Day of Judgement will indeed be in ruin." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

Another report on the authority of Abū 'Uthmān states: "A believer is given his record in his right hand where God gives him shelter. He reads first his bad deeds. Every time he reads such a negative item, his colour changes, then he begins to read his good deeds and his face regains its colour. He looks around and finds that his bad deeds have been replaced by good ones. It is at this point that such a person calls out to all people to come and read his record."

It is reported on the authority of 'Abdullāh ibn Ḥanẓalah, a Companion of the Prophet who was a martyr in the Battle of Uḥud: "God stops His servant on the Day of Judgement and shows him his evil deeds written on the back of his record. He asks him: 'Have you done this?' He confirms that he did. God says to him: 'I did not make it public during your life, and today I am forgiving you these.' He is then given his record of good deeds in his right hand. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, it is concerning these that "*witnesses shall say: 'These are they who lied against their Lord.' God's curse is on the wrongdoers.*"

(11: 18) The details of blessings made ready for such people are then announced before all. The account given here of these blessings includes some aspects of material comfort. This suited the state of those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time. They were still newcomers to Islam; it had not yet given its distinctive hue to their feelings, nor had they had the chance to appreciate luxuries higher than any material comfort: "*He will be in a happy state of life, in a lofty garden, with its fruits within easy reach. 'Eat and drink to your heart's ontent as a reward for what you have done in days gone by.'*" (Verses 21–24)

Such blessings and comforts are coupled with a special honour that is felt in the fact that the *sūrah* makes its address directly to those deserving of it, saying to them to eat and drink as they please. This type of blessing is the one those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān could appreciate in the early stages of their new bond with God. Their feelings had not yet attained the sublime level that finds in being close to God what is much higher than any material comfort or luxury. Yet this type can satisfy the needs of many people across many generations.

At the Opposite End

> *But he who is given his record in his left hand will say, 'Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.' 'Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.' He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat.* (Verses 25–37)

"*But he who is given his record in his left hand,*" and knows that his bad deeds are reckoned against him realizes that his fate is one of suffering. He stands among this great multitude full of sorrow, broken. He will say: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me! Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 25–29)

Long is his lamentation, miserable his tone and desperate his words. The *sūrah* presents his reaction at length and the listener almost feels his endless lamentation. This is another aspect of the Qur'ānic style: some situations are described at length while others are given a quick and short presentation, depending on the effect the Qur'ān wants to impart. In this case, the *sūrah* wants to bring this image of lamentation alive before us, so that we feel it thoroughly. Therefore, it harps long on its details. We see this miserable person wishing he had never witnessed this gathering, never been given his record, and knowing nothing of his account. He would have loved for the Striker to have spelt his absolute end, removing him from all existence. He bemoans that nothing of what he used to rate highly or treasure appears to be of any use or value: "*Nothing has my wealth availed me. I am now bereft of all my power.*" (Verses 28–29) The ending of these very short verses, with a strongly aspirated '*h*' preceded by a '*ya*' sound that comes after a long '*a*', adds to the tone of sorrow and grief. It is all part of the very clear ambience the *sūrah* generates.

This long, sorrowful lamentation is only interrupted by a decisive order given from on high:

> *Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.* (Verses 30–32)

A command is given by God Almighty, and everyone in the universe moves against this miserable creature. Those to whom the command is issued will move swiftly from all corners. A *ḥadīth* related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim states: "When God says, '*lay hold of him,*' seventy thousand angels swiftly take him. Each one of these angels can, in one gesture, cast seventy thousand creatures into hell."

"*And shackle him.*" The first angel to so hold him will immediately put the shackles around him. "*And burn him in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 31) We almost hear the sound of the fire as it burns such people. "*And then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (Verse 32) One cubit of this chain is enough, but the impression intended here is one of elongation and the mention of '*seventy cubits*' gives us this sense of perpetuity.

Now that the command has been given, its justification is announced for all to know:

He did not believe in God Almighty, and he never encouraged feeding the needy. (Verses 33–34)

This is a person whose heart is devoid of faith and compassion. Thus, the only place fit for him is the fire. With a heart that has no trace of faith, he is ruined, like a barren land engulfed in darkness. He is below the level of animals, and indeed below the level of inanimate objects. Everything in the universe believes in God and glorifies Him, and as such they maintain their bond with their source of existence. This person, on the other hand, severed his ties with God, and therefore has no tie with the universe.

Likewise, his heart is devoid of compassion. A needy person is one who desperately needs compassion, but this one does not feel for his fellow humans in need. He does not encourage feeding them, which is a step further than simply providing the needy with food. It is a step that suggests a social duty that requires believers to encourage one another to undertake. It is closely related to faith, mentioned here after faith and given its value in God's measure:

So, no friend has he here today, nor any food except the filth that none other than the sinners eat. (Verses 35–37)

This complements the announcement from on high concerning the fate of such a miserable person. Since he had no faith in God and did not encourage the feeding of the needy, he has no friends, and he is deprived of all favours. His food is the filth that pours out of the people of hell. Such is the food that serves well those hardened hearts that are devoid of all compassion. It is a type of food that "*none other than the sinners eat.*" (Verse 37) He is essentially one of the sinners.

Such are the characteristics of the person that deserves the divine punishment of being cast into hell, tied with a chain seventy cubits long. This is the worst punishment meted out in hell. What will happen, then, to those who actually prevent giving food to the needy and who make women, children and the elderly people starve, hitting hard at those who give them something to eat or a piece of clothing to wear in

the cold winter months? Such people do exist from time to time.[1] So how will God requite them?

Perhaps this terrifying scene was drawn because the Arabian environment was hard and cruel. It needed to have such shocking images to awaken its better feelings. Such environments do occur throughout history. Furthermore, these may exist side by side with softer and more responsive ones. The earth is wide, and on it a great variety of people, depicting a similarly great variety of psychologies, exist. The Qur'ān addresses every level and every soul in a way that finds its effect. Today, the population of the earth includes some very hardened, cruel hearts. These can only be influenced when addressed with words of fire, such as the ones used in this *sūrah*.

The Qur'ānic Revelations

The *sūrah* now makes a categorical statement defining the nature of the Qur'ān recited by God's noble Messenger, but received by the Arabs with derision and ridicule:

> *I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see: this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! Nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 38–43)

The statement is very clear, definite and certain. Hence, it requires no oath to prove it or to confirm its source. It comes from the truth. It requires no further confirmation. "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" (Verses 38–39) This is an expression that imparts a sense of greatness to both the visible world and the world beyond. Needless to say, the universe is far greater than what people can say, and indeed what they can imagine. Indeed, all that humans

1. During Nasser's reign in Egypt, anyone who donated something to alleviate the plight of families of imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood was liable to five years imprisonment. – Editor's note.

can see and imagine is what they need to fulfil their role of building the earth, as God has willed placing them in charge of it. Within the great universe, their planet, the earth, is no more than a barely visible particle. Humans cannot go beyond what they are allowed to see and comprehend of this vast universe, its laws and secrets.

"*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" Such a statement tells us that beyond the reach of our faculties of perception there are worlds and secrets of which we know nothing. It thus broadens our vision of the universe and the truth. The universe is not confined to what we can see or comprehend with our limited faculties. After all, our task on earth is to build human life on it, and we have only been given what we need to fulfil this task. Yet when we appreciate this truth of our limited ability, and that there is a greater world beyond what we see, we can elevate ourselves above our needs and reach out to that source of perfect knowledge.

Those who confine themselves within what their senses can reach, using only their available tools, are wretched. They are imprisoned within a world that remains narrow despite its vastness. It is especially narrow when compared to the great universe. During different periods of history, some people, few or great in number, have been willing to imprison themselves, by their own hands, within the limits of their senses and what they see in the present world. They closed the windows of true light and knowledge that come from being in touch with the essential truth through faith. Some have gone even further and have sought to close these windows to all people. They did so in the name of *jāhiliyyah* at one time, and in the name of secularism at another. Both are types of imprisonment that bring endless misery, because they both involve isolation from the great sources of light and knowledge.

During the present century,[2] science has begun to rid itself of the fetters with which it shackled itself over the previous two centuries. It has started, through its own experiments, to regain its light. It had previously been on the loose, aiming to break from the confinement imposed on it by the Church. Now it knows its limits; it knows that its limited tools lead to what is beyond limit in this great universe. Now we

2. The author is referring here to the twentieth century. – Editor's note.

see a new call to faith made by scientists who have found their humility. All this appears to herald a new era of open-mindedness to end that of confinement in the narrow cell of materialism.

Alexis Carrel, a French surgeon and biologist who pioneered research in different areas and was the Nobel Prize winner for medicine in 1912, said: "This vast universe is full of active minds other than ours. If the human mind depends solely on its own guidance, it will be lost in the maze that surrounds it. Prayer is one method of communication with the minds around us and with the eternal mind that controls the destinies of all worlds, whether these are apparent to us or concealed from us."

"A feeling of holiness, together with other spiritual activities, have a special role in life because these bring us in contact with the spiritual world and its great mystery."[3]

Another French scientist who contributed to research in anatomy and physics, and who worked with the Curies, wrote:

> Many intelligent and good intentioned people think that they cannot believe in God because they cannot imagine His nature. Yet an honest person who has the scientific drive does not need to imagine God's nature any more than a physicist needs to understand the nature of electricity. In both cases, our imagination remains deficient and invalid. It is impossible to imagine electricity in material terms, yet its effects are more concrete than a piece of wood.[4]

Sir Arthur Thomson, a famous Scottish naturalist and biologist, wrote: "We live at a time when the hard earth crust is becoming transparent, and the atmosphere is losing its material structure. Hence, our time is least suited to taking a too materialistic view." He also wrote:

> A religious mind should not be sorry that a physicist does not move on from the study of nature to the Creator of nature, because this

3. This quotation is taken from an Arabic translation quoted by Al-'Aqqād, A.M., *'Aqā'id al-Mufakkirīn fi al-Qarn al-'Ishrīn*. Unfortunately, Sayyid Quṭb does not give further details of the title.

4. Ibid.

> is not the line a physicist follows. The conclusion may be much bigger than the premise if scientists would draw on their study of physics to make conclusions on metaphysics. We should, however, be glad because physicists have enabled the religious tendency to breathe in a scientific environment. This was most difficult in our parents' and grandparents' time... If physicists have no business discussing God, as mistakenly advocated by Mr Langdon Davies in his book on man and his world, we say that the best service science has done is to lead man to formulate a more noble and sublime concept of God. We say literally that science has given man a new sky and a new earth, motivating him to exert his maximum mental effort. As a result, man often finds that he can only be at peace when he moves beyond the realm of understanding into the realm of certainty and reliance on God.[5]

A. Cressy Morrison, a former Head of the New York Academy of Sciences, wrote:

> We do approach the vast abyss of the unknowable when we realize that all matter has scientifically become one by the acceptance of the theory that it is but a manifestation of a universal unit essentially electrical. But certainly chance has little place in the formation of the cosmos, for the mighty universe is governed by law.
>
> The rise of man the animal to a self-conscious reasoning being is too great a step to be taken by the process of material evolution or without creative purpose.
>
> If the reality of purpose is accepted, man as such may be a mechanism. But what operates this mechanism? For without operation it is useless. Science does not account for the operator, nor does Science say that it is material.
>
> Progress has now been sufficient for us to see that God seems to be giving man a spark of His own intelligence.[6]

---

5. Ibid.
6. Morrison, A. Cressy (1962), *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work (1913) Ltd., pp. 113–114.

Thus, using its own tools, science has started to break through the prison walls of materialism to breathe the fresh air to which the Qur'ān refers in statements like, "*I need not swear by what you can see and what you cannot see.*" (Verses 38–39) Yet in our own midst there are some who continue to try to close the windows with both their hands, to prevent the light from coming through, preferring to live in darkness. They do so in the name of science, without realizing that intellectually they lag behind science, and spiritually they lag behind religion. Moreover, they are backward, unable to move freely in pursuit of the truth. All this backwardness puts them in a position unworthy of man, the creature God has honoured.

God says that there is no need for an oath to prove the truth that "*this [Qur'ān] is the word of a noble Messenger, not the word of a poet – how little you believe! nor the word of a soothsayer – how little you reflect! This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 40–43) One of the false allegations the unbelievers in Makkah fabricated against the Qur'ān and the Prophet alleged that Muḥammad was a poet or soothsayer. They based this on their recognition that the Qur'ān was superior to anything human beings could say or compose. They used to imagine that every poet had a friend from among the *jinn* who brought him his fine poetry, and that a soothsayer similarly had contacts with the *jinn*, giving him knowledge and information unavailable to humans. Yet a quick glance at the nature of the Qur'ān, and the nature of poetry and soothsaying is sufficient to show how hollow such claims are.

Poetry has its musical beat and it may be full of fine and beautiful images, but it can never be confused with the Qur'ān. There is a fundamental difference between the two. The Qur'ān establishes a complete concept of life based on truth, a holistic approach and clear notions of God's existence, the universe and life. Poetry, on the other hand, is an expression of a series of charged reactions that rarely reflects a consistent vision of life and this in situations of pleasure and anger, freedom and restriction, love and hate, as well as other changing influences.

Furthermore, this consistent concept the Qur'ān lays down is initiated in whole and in part by the Qur'ān itself, and attributed to its divine source. Every aspect of this concept suggests that it is not of man's

making. It is not in the nature of human beings that they should come up with a complete concept of the universe. They have never done so in the past, nor will they ever be able to do so. We have a complete record of what human intelligence has come up with concerning the universe and the power that controls its system. It is all recorded in philosophical and intellectual works, as well as in poetry. When these are set side by side with the Qur'ānic concept, it is clearly apparent that the latter is not the work of a human mind. It is of a unique status, one that distinguishes it from all that the human intellect can produce.

The same applies to soothsaying. Never in human history, up to the present moment, has a soothsayer produced a complete code of living like the one delineated in the Qur'ān. All that soothsayers produce is limited to rhyming sentences containing some aspects of wisdom or ambiguous references.

Moreover, there are some Qur'ānic touches that are beyond man's ability to make. We discussed some of these when we commented on the relevant verses. For example, no one has ever portrayed comprehensive and accurate knowledge in images like those that follow: "*With Him are the keys to what lies beyond the reach of human perception: none knows them but He. He knows all that the land and sea contain; not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the earth's deep darkness, nor anything fresh or dry but is recorded in a clear book.*" (6: 59) "*He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do.*" (57: 4) "*No female conceives or gives birth without His knowledge. No one attains to old age or has his life cut short unless it be thus laid down in [God's] decree. All this is easy for God.*" (35: 11)

No human being has ever, before or after the revelation of the Qur'ān, drawn an image of the power that holds the universe and conducts its affairs like this Qur'ānic verse: "*It is God alone who holds the celestial bodies and the earth, lest they deviate [from their courses]. If they should ever deviate, no one else could uphold them after Him.*" (35: 41) Nor has anyone ever attempted a description of the emergence of life in the universe and the deliberate balances that ensure its continuity in the universe similar to this Qur'ānic account: "*It is God who splits the grain and the*

fruit-stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead and the dead out of that which is alive. Such is God. How, then, are you deluded away from the truth? He is the One who causes the day to break. He has made the night to be [a source of stillness], and the sun and the moon for reckoning. All this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. It is He that has set up for you the stars, so that you may be guided by them in the deep darkness of land and sea. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people who have knowledge. He it is who has brought you all into being from a single soul and has given you a dwelling and a place of sojourn. We have made Our revelations plain indeed to people of understanding. And He it is who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth plants of every type and out of these We bring forth verdure from which We bring forth grain piled tight, packed on one another; and out of the spathe of the palm tree, dates in thick clusters; and gardens of vines; and the olive tree, and the pomegranate: all so alike, and yet so different. Behold their fruit when they come to fruition and ripen. Surely in these there are clear signs for people who truly believe." (6: 95–99)

Such universal touches are found in plenty in the Qur'ān. They have no parallel in the way people tend to express similar thoughts and meanings. This is evidence enough to determine the source of this book, regardless of any other evidence that may be drawn from what the book says or the circumstances of its revelation. Indeed, the whole idea of the Qur'ān being like poetry or soothsaying is flimsy. Even when the Qur'ān was still in its early stages of revelation, having provided only a small number of *sūrahs* and verses with this distinctive divine colour, this idea did not cut any grounds. The elders of the Quraysh used to reflect on it from time to time, rejecting this notion, but they were blinded to the truth because of their own personal interests. It is just like the Qur'ān says: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (46: 11)

Authoritative biographical works about the Prophet report several events when the elders of the Quraysh privately rejected this whole idea. Ibn Isḥāq reports a meeting attended by a large number of Makkans and chaired, as it were, by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was one of the more respected Quraysh elders. This was held shortly before the pilgrimage season and the idea was to agree an appropriate strategy:

In his opening address, al-Walīd said: "Now that the pilgrimage season is approaching, people will start arriving from all over the place. They must have heard about your friend [meaning the Prophet]. So you had better agree what to say when you are asked about him. We must guard against having too many opinions, particularly if they are mutually contradictory."

When his audience asked his advice as to what they should say, he preferred to listen to their suggestions first. What concerned al-Walīd most was that the opinion they would come out with should take account of the fact that Muḥammad was asking people to listen to the Qur'ān, God's message, expressed in beautiful language and powerful style. The description they would attach to Muḥammad should also account for his persuasive, eloquent argument.

Descriptions like 'fortune-teller', 'madman', 'poet' and 'magician' were proposed. None was considered convincing by al-Walīd, who pointed out weaknesses in each, one after the other. He told his people that what Muḥammad said was nothing like what was said by such men. When nobody could suggest anything more plausible, they asked al-Walīd if he had a better suggestion.

He said: "What Muḥammad says is certainly beautiful. It is like a date tree with solid roots and rich fruit. Every one of these suggestions you have made is bound to be recognized as false. The least disputable one is to claim that he is a magician who repeats magic words which make a man fall out with his father, mother, wife and clan." They all approved of al-Walīd's suggestion and set about preparing their propaganda campaign to make the pilgrims wary of Muḥammad and unwilling to meet him.[7]

Another prominent Quraysh figure to speak out about the Qur'ān was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith, when the Quraysh felt at a loss after having failed to win any compromise from the Prophet. He outlined their predicament in the following way:

7. Salahi, Adil (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 119–120.

> People of Quraysh, you are confronted with a problem for which you have not been able to find a solution. When Muḥammad was still a young man living among you, he won general admiration because he always spoke the truth and his honesty could not be faulted. When he had grown grey, and started to preach whatever he is preaching to you, you began to allege that he was a sorcerer. By God, he is no sorcerer. We have seen magicians and their tricks in the past. You also accused him of being a fortune teller. By God, he is not one, for we have seen fortune tellers and how they repeat their rhyming phrases. You also claimed that he was a poet. Again I say that, by God, he is not a poet, for we have seen poets and listened to all types of poetry. You claimed that he was also a madman, but he is far from being so. We have seen what madness has done to people, and how it causes them to say incoherent things. I say, people of Quraysh, you have to look at this question very carefully, for you have a big problem on your hands.[8]

The similarity between what the two prominent Quraysh figures state is almost complete. This is not surprising, considering their unresolved dilemma of how to deal with the Qur'ān. We also mentioned in our discussion of the previous *sūrah*, The Pen, how 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah reacted to the Qur'ān, when he tried to make some offers to the Prophet in the hope that he would stop advocating his message. When they alleged that Muḥammad was a sorcerer or a soothsayer, that was nothing but a stratagem, crude at times and cunning at others. It only needed a little reflection to realize that it was all wrong. Hence, there was no need for an oath of any sort to confirm that the Qur'ān was the word of a noble Messenger and a revelation from on high.

The statement that the Qur'ān "*is the word of a noble Messenger,*" does not mean that it is of his own composition. It rather means that it is a different type of word, one not uttered by a poet or a soothsayer. It can only be said by a Messenger from God, carrying it from the One who sent him. What confirms this meaning is the word '*Messenger*' being sent with it. He is neither a poet nor a soothsayer composing his own

8. Ibid., pp. 161–162.

words alone or with the assistance of a *jinnee*. This is further confirmed by the categorical statement that follows: "*This [Qur'ān] is a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 43)

In its negation of the Qur'ān being the word of a poet or a soothsayer, the *sūrah* uses the following two expressions: "*how little you believe!... how little you reflect!*" Thus, it completely negates their having any faith or resorting to any reflection. In a *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is described as 'little indulging in frivolous talk', which means that he did not say such things at all. Thus, the *sūrah* is describing those unbelievers as devoid of faith and reflection. No believer would say of the Prophet that he was a poet, and no man who reflects would say that he was a soothsayer.

A Very Serious Threat

As the *sūrah* draws to its conclusion, it issues a terrifying threat to anyone who fabricates something about the very serious matter of faith. The threat is issued so as to affirm the only possible scenario of the Prophet being very truthful and honest in delivering the message entrusted to him. The proof is that God has not punished him severely as He would have done so had the Prophet been anything other than that:

> *Had he attributed some fabrications to Us, We would indeed have seized him by the right hand and cut off his life-vein, and none of you could have saved him.* (Verses 44–47)

The import of these verses is confirmation that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) only told them the truth. Had he invented something other than what was revealed to him from on high, God would have killed him in the way the verses describe. Since this did not take place, the inevitable conclusion is that he was truthful.

Yet this confirmation is given in a scene that goes much further than the actual statement, adding some fearsome connotations, action and life. We see here the violent, scary action of someone being seized by the right hand and his life-vein being cut. It makes a clear impression of God's limitless power and mankind's utter weakness in comparison.

It adds a suggestion that this question of faith is so serious that it allows no complacency or leniency towards anyone, not even Muḥammad in his close relation with God. Furthermore, these verses carry a strong beat, spreading an air of fear and submission to God.

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement of the true nature of the Qur'ān:

> *This [Qur'ān] is indeed a reminder to the God-fearing. We well know that among you are some who deny its truth. Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers. It is indeed truth absolute.* (Verses 48–51)

This Qur'ān reminds God-fearing hearts and they remember. The truth the Qur'ān states is ingrained in people's hearts, but the reminder brings it to the fore in the minds of those who are God-fearing. Others continue to be preoccupied, unaware, and as such they benefit nothing by the reminder that this book, the Qur'ān, provides. It is a fact that the God-fearing find in the Qur'ān life, light, knowledge and remembrance, but none of these is experienced by other people.

"*We well know that among you are some who deny its truth.*" (Verse 49) Yet this is of no consequence, and it alters nothing of the reality. Those who reject the truth are of no importance whatsoever. "*Yet it will be a cause of bitter regret for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 50) It elevates the status of the believers and brings down the unbelievers. It establishes the truth and undermines the falsehood to which the unbelievers cling. Moreover, it provides the argument against them when they face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. They will lament their fate to which their rejection of the truth of the Qur'ān has led them. Thus, it is a source of bitter regret for all unbelievers in this life and in the life to come.

In the face of all denials and rejection by the unbelievers, the Qur'ān is "*indeed truth absolute.*" (Verse 51) It is not merely the truth, but the truth absolute, reconfirmed in absolute terms. In fact, every word in the Qur'ān is profoundly true; every verse carries enough evidence that it originates with God, who Himself is the Truth.

At this point, an instruction is given from on high to the noble Messenger. It comes at the right time and during the right situation: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 52)

This is the most suitable action as it reflects acknowledgement of God's glory and man's position as God's servant. To glorify God is the feeling that a believer experiences after the last statement explaining the nature of the Qur'ān is given and after the long discussion of God Almighty's greatness.

SŪRAH 70

Al-Ma ʿārij

(Ways of Ascent)

Prologue

This *sūrah* may be described as being part of the long, slow, yet accurate and profound treatment of the traces of *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance, within the human soul. This was most evident as the Qur'ān was being revealed in Makkah but is true wherever *jāhiliyyah* reigns. There may be differences in different situations, but these are superficial affecting only appearances. Alternatively, we may say that this *sūrah* represents a round in the long, hard battle the Qur'ān fights within the human soul, going deep inside it to eradicate all lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah*. This battle is greater and longer lasting than the wars the Muslims later had to fight against their many enemies. Moreover, these traces are more persistent and harder in their resistance than the great forces that were marshalled against the Islamic message, or those which continue to be raised against it by different *jāhiliyyah* societies.

The major issue the *sūrah* focuses on is that of the hereafter and peoples requital for what they do during their lives on earth, particularly the punishment suffered by the unbelievers. In order to establish the truth of the hereafter, the *sūrah* speaks of how the human soul reacts to situations of hardship and comfort. Such reactions differ greatly between a believer and one who is devoid of faith. The *sūrah* also provides an outline of the believers' main features, their feelings and

behaviour, and it states how they deserve to be honoured. It also shows that the unbelievers are held in disregard by God, and gives a picture of the humiliation prepared for them. It is a humiliation the arrogant thoroughly deserve. Furthermore, the *sūrah* establishes the fact that values, standards and scales applied by God are different from those which human beings uphold.

The Qur'ān administered its long treatment and fought its hard battle within the human soul equipped with nothing other than its own powerful argument. It achieved its great victory within its followers even before it had a sword with which to defend those believers, let alone force its enemies into submission.

Whoever reads the Qur'ān bearing in mind the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime will not fail to appreciate the overpowering effect the Qur'ān had on those people in Makkah until they willingly accepted its lead. We see the wide range of styles the Qur'ān employs. It may face the human soul with a great flood of inspiring proofs and powerful effects; or it may use a powerful tool that leaves nothing of the traces of ignorance without completely crushing it, or it may confront the human soul with something akin to a hard whip that kindles sensation so that the pain it inflicts is very hard to bear. It alternates its approaches between a calm friendly appeal that wins hearts, a loud terrifying outcry that warns of an impending and great danger, a clear presentation of powerful and irrefutable argument, and a raising of hopes with the prospect of an appealing outcome. At times the Qur'ān moves physically through the human soul, going along its alleyways and round its corners, shedding light on each of these. It, thus, puts these before man so that he looks at them, making him dislike certain aspects, feel ashamed at others, and alert to his own reactions, which he normally overlooked. The Qur'ān uses hundreds of such touches, appeals and influences in conducting its long battle and administrating its slow treatment. We can follow these as we read the Qur'ān and learn how it achieved its great victory against the stiff resistance the human soul put up from within. The present *sūrah* is one instalment of this Qur'ānic endeavour to establish the truth of the hereafter and other related truths.

The preceding *sūrah*, The Inevitable Truth, aimed to establish the same truth of the hereafter, but the methods employed in both *sūrahs*

are widely different. The line followed in the preceding *sūrah* aimed to show the great universal upheaval taking place on the Day of Judgement through terror-striking images such as: "*When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (69: 13–16) It also depicts the awesome nature of that day in a majestic scene: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (69: 17) It leaves us shaken as it describes how everything is laid bare: "*On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.*" (69: 18) The images so drawn of punishment add to the terrifying effect of the *sūrah*. This starts with the way judgement is announced: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (69: 30–32) Such feelings of terror are vividly reflected in the outcries of lamentation voiced by those receiving such judgement: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me!*" (69: 25–27)

In the present *sūrah*, awesomeness is felt in the features, thoughts and movements of the human soul, rather than the universe and its great scenery. Even in the scenes of the universe presented in this *sūrah*, the fear appears to be almost psychological. It is certainly not the most prominent aspect. Indeed, such fear takes hold of the human soul, and its extent is reflected in the panic it produces: "*On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.*" (Verses 8–14)

In this *sūrah*, hell itself has a soul, feelings and consciousness of its own. Like living creatures, it plays a part in producing the fright effect: "*It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.*" (Verses 15–18) Even the punishment and suffering is more psychological than physical: "*the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if*

rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised." (Verses 43–44)

The images, scenes and impressions in this *sūrah* are different from those of the preceding one because of the difference in their general outlooks, despite the fact that they address the same central theme. The *sūrah* also provides images of human psychology in positive and adverse situations, and in cases of embracing faith or otherwise. This fits perfectly with its special psychological emphasis. It describes man in the following terms: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray.*" (Verses 19–22) The *sūrah* goes on to provide a picture of believers and their apparent and inner characteristics. This is in line with the general style of the *sūrah*: "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verses 22–34)

The main drift in the preceding *sūrah* was to establish absolute seriousness in the question of faith. Hence the truth of the hereafter was one of several in the *sūrah*, alongside that of meting out swift punishment in this world to those who reject faith, and showing no leniency in the punishment of those who alter the principles of faith. By contrast, the drift in this *sūrah* is to establish the truth of the hereafter and the requital of all, as well as outlining the standards of such requital. This means that the hereafter is the main truth the *sūrah* speaks about. Hence, other truths mentioned here directly relate to the hereafter. An example of this is the difference in the way the *sūrah* mentions God's days and the reckoning of human days, and how God sees the Day of Judgement and how people see it: "*All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all*

adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand." (Verses 4–7) Another example is the difference affecting human psychology in the two cases of hardship and comfort when these are combined with faith or unfaith. Both are determinants of the type of requital received on the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* also speaks of the unbelievers' arrogance as they entertain hopes of being admitted to gardens of bliss when they are of no importance in God's measure. They cannot evade His punishment. Thus we see that the *sūrah* is almost entirely devoted to the truth of the hereafter, which it aims to firmly establish in people's minds.

Another aspect of this *sūrah* is its particular musical rhythm that echoes its line of expression. The varied beat of the preceding *sūrah* responded to the change of the rhyme from one section to another, and the ambience of each. Here, the changes are wider in scope, because they incorporate the varied musical structure of the *sūrah*, not merely its varying rhyme. Here, every musical section is more complex and profound. This is particularly true of its first part where we have three melodies that differ in length and tune, but which share the same final beat. The first takes up verses 1–5, ending with a long '*a*' sound. This is repeated on two further occasions in the two short verses that follow. A second melody takes up three more verses, with the first two having different endings, but the third echoing the long '*a*' sound at the end. A third melody is composed of five verses, maintaining an '*eeh*' ending in the first four, but ending the fifth with another long '*a*'. Then we have six short verses, all ending with a long '*a*', but the rhyme in the first three is different from that of the other three. The remainder of the *sūrah* maintains an '*m*' or '*n*' ending preceded by a long '*e*' or '*o*'. The rhythm in the first section is both complex and profound. A sensitive ear will not fail to appreciate its sophistication, which is unfamiliar to those used to Arabic rhythm. However, the Qur'ānic style makes it easy to appreciate, moulding it in such a way as to overcome its unfamiliarity and so making it perfectly acceptable.

Al-Ma'ārij
(Ways of Ascent)

سُورَةُ المَعَارِجِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall (1)

سَأَلَ سَائِلٌ بِعَذَابٍ وَاقِعٍ ﴿١﴾

the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, (2)

لِّلْكَافِرِينَ لَيْسَ لَهُ دَافِعٌ ﴿٢﴾

as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent. (3)

مِّنَ اللَّهِ ذِي الْمَعَارِجِ ﴿٣﴾

All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. (4)

تَعْرُجُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ ﴿٤﴾

Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. (5)

فَاصْبِرْ صَبْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

People think it to be far away, (6)

إِنَّهُمْ يَرَوْنَهُ بَعِيدًا ﴿٦﴾

but We see it near at hand. (7)

وَنَرَاهُ قَرِيبًا ﴿٧﴾

On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, (8)

يَوْمَ تَكُونُ السَّمَاءُ كَالْمُهْلِ ﴿٨﴾

and the mountains like tufts of wool, (9)

وَتَكُونُ الْجِبَالُ كَالْعِهْنِ ﴿٩﴾

وَلَا يَسْـَٔلُ حَمِيمٌ حَمِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

when no friend will ask about his friend, (10)

يُبَصَّرُونَهُمْ ۚ يَوَدُّ ٱلْمُجْرِمُ لَوْ يَفْتَدِى مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِئِذٍۭ بِبَنِيهِ ﴿١١﴾

though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, (11)

وَصَٰحِبَتِهِۦ وَأَخِيهِ ﴿١٢﴾

his wife, his brother, (12)

وَفَصِيلَتِهِ ٱلَّتِى تُـْٔوِيهِ ﴿١٣﴾

the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, (13)

وَمَن فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يُنجِيهِ ﴿١٤﴾

and all those on earth, if it could save him. (14)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهَا لَظَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

But no! It is the raging fire (15)

نَزَّاعَةً لِّلشَّوَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

that tears the skin away. (16)

تَدْعُوا۟ مَنْ أَدْبَرَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, (17)

وَجَمَعَ فَأَوْعَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

amass riches and hoard them. (18)

إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾

Man is born with a restless disposition: (19)

when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; (20)

إِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾

and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. (21)

وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾

Not so those who pray, (22)

إِلَّا ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

and always attend to their prayers; (23)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ دَآئِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

who give a due share of their possessions (24)

وَٱلَّذِينَ فِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; (25)

لِّلسَّآئِلِ وَٱلْمَحْرُومِ ﴿٢٥﴾

who believe in the Day of Judgement; (26)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُصَدِّقُونَ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, (27)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم مِّنْ عَذَابِ رَبِّهِم مُّشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; (28)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّهِمْ غَيْرُ مَأْمُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

who guard their chastity (29)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, (30)

إِلَّا عَلَىٰٓ أَزْوَٰجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; (31)

فَمَنِ ٱبْتَغَىٰ وَرَآءَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْعَادُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; (32)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمَٰنَٰتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَٰعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; (33)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِشَهَٰدَٰتِهِمْ قَآئِمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

and who attend to their prayers without fail. (34)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise. (35)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, (36)

فَمَالِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ قِبَلَكَ مُهْطِعِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

from the right and the left, in crowds? (37)

عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ عِزِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss? (38)

أَيَطْمَعُ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُدْخَلَ جَنَّةَ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

No! We have created them from the substance they know. (39)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰهُم مِّمَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power (40)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِرَبِّ ٱلْمَشَٰرِقِ وَٱلْمَغَٰرِبِ إِنَّا لَقَٰدِرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so. (41)	عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾
Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, (42)	فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟ يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾
the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, (43)	يَوْمَ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَجْدَاثِ سِرَاعًا كَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَىٰ نُصُبٍ يُوفِضُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾
with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised. (44)	خَٰشِعَةً أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ تَرْهَقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمُ ٱلَّذِى كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

The Truth of the Hereafter

An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent. (Verses 1–3)

The very concept of the hereafter was very difficult for the Arab polytheists to understand. They strongly resisted it. In fact they received it with so much amazement that they denied it outright. They further challenged the Prophet, in various ways, to bring it about or to define its timing. A report attributed to Ibn 'Abbās mentions that the man who asked the question quoted in the first verse of the *sūrah* was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. Another report quotes him as saying that the reference is to "the unbelievers' question about God's punishment, which is certain to engulf them."

Regardless of who the specific individual was the *sūrah* reports that someone asked about this punishment, indeed, sought to hasten it, and further confirms that it is inevitable because it has been determined by God and that it will soon come. It states that no one can prevent its happening or ward it off. Therefore, to question or hasten it is ill-advised. Moreover, this punishment is to befall the unbelievers, in total, which means that those who question it are included like every other unbeliever. It is administered by God, '*the Lord of the Ways of Ascent*'. This is an expression of highness, which is one of God's attributes mentioned in different ways in the Qur'ān, such as: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne.*" (40: 15)

Having absolutely confirmed the inevitability of such punishment, the *sūrah* describes the day when it will take place, affirming that it will soon arrive. However, God's measure is different from mankind's:

> *All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.* (Verses 4–7)

Most probably the day to which these verses refer is the Day of Resurrection, as the *sūrah* almost defines it as so. On that day, the angels and the Spirit will ascend to God. The Spirit refers, in all probability, to the Angel Gabriel, since he is given this name elsewhere in the Qur'ān. He is specifically mentioned here, after the reference to all angels, because of his special status. Likewise, the angels' ascension on that day is highlighted so as to give it special importance; they will do so to fulfil what is assigned to them on that day. We do not know, nor are we required to know, the nature of their assignments, or how the angels ascend, or to where. All these are details that belong to the realm beyond the reach of our perception. To know them does not add to the statement's import. We have nothing to point to such information. Therefore, we do not attempt any further explanation. It is enough for us to reflect on the image to appreciate the great importance of that day when the angels and the Spirit are busy conducting their assigned tasks.

The statement that the length of that day is *fifty thousand years* may be an expression of very long duration as is customary in Arabic idiom, or it may express a true fact meaning that the day in question is equal to fifty thousand of our years despite its being just a single day. We can easily imagine this considering that our earth days represent the length of time the earth takes to revolve once in position. There are stars, however, which take thousands of our days to revolve once. This is not to say that this is what is meant here; we only state this to make it clear that the length of days can differ greatly.

If one of God's days is equal to fifty thousand of our years, then the punishment of the Day of Judgement is certainly close, according to God's measure, even though people may think it far away. Therefore, God tells His Messenger to be patient with them: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7) The order to remain patient is part of the divine message's essence; it is required of every messenger and every believer. This is fundamentally necessary because the burden is heavy and the task hard. It is vitally important to keep the believers united and content, looking to their ultimate goal.

Goodly or 'beautiful' patience, to use a literal translation of the Qur'ānic term, is that type of patience coupled with a feeling of contentment and reassurance. It is undisturbed by displeasure, worry or doubt in the true promise. It is the type of patience shown by one who is certain of the outcome, content with God's will, appreciating His wisdom in the trying times he goes through, looking to Him in all situations. It is this type of goodly patience that is worthy of one who advocates the divine message. It is after all God's message calling on people to believe in Him. Its advocates have no personal interest in it; they seek no gain out of it. Whatever they suffer as a result is for God's sake, and whatever happens to it is by His will. Goodly patience, therefore, is the only attitude that fits properly with this truth.

God, who has bestowed this message from on high and has made this promise which the unbelievers hasten, determines events and their timings as He pleases, according to His overall plan for the universe. Human beings remain unaware of His will and plan; therefore, they hasten things. When time goes by without fulfilment of the promise, they begin to doubt. Worry may also be experienced by advocates of

the divine message themselves. They too may entertain thoughts and desires that the promise be fulfilled soon. Therefore, they are given the following instruction so that they may remain firm: "*Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience.*" (Verse 5) The address here is delivered to the Prophet so as to give him reassurance in the face of the opposition and rejection he faced. It also adds another truth here, highlighting the fact that God sees matters in a different way. He does not measure things by means of our small measures: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7)

Celestial Events

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool.* (Verses 8–9)

The Qur'ān mentions in several places that great celestial events will take place on that promised day, and as a result change will affect different celestial bodies in their positions and characteristics, as well as their inter-relations. One of these events changes the sky making it like molten lead, or molten metals generally as signified by the Arabic word used here, *al-muhl*. These statements should be reflected upon by physicists and astronomers. They suggest that most probably celestial bodies are composed of metals that have melted and taken gas form, which is a stage far beyond that of melting by excessive heat. It is possible that they will lose their heat on the Day of Judgement and cool down to a fluid stage, changing their present status. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have the following statement as a mark of the Day of Judgement: "*When the stars fall and disperse.*" (81: 2)

At any rate, this is only one possible explanation, which may or may not be worth further study by scientific researchers. As for us, we read the text and look at the awesome image painted, with the sky becoming like molten metal and the mountains like tufts of wool. We also contemplate what is beyond this image of frightening events that leave their marks on people in an unusual way which the Qur'ān accurately describes:

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though*

> *they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.* (Verses 8–14)

People will be totally preoccupied in a way that does not allow anyone to look at anything other than his own situation. No thought will they give to anyone but themselves: "*When no friend will ask about his friend.*" The frightening event severs all bonds, locking everyone within their own problems. Yet they are made to see one another: "*though they may be within sight of one another,*" as if deliberately brought so. However, each will be totally absorbed with their own impending fate so that none will even think of enquiring about a friend or even asking a friend for help.

What about the guilty one? The terror he feels is so overwhelming that he wishes he could offer anything as a ransom so as to be spared the punishment awaiting him. He is ready to sacrifice his nearest and dearest, the very ones whom he so cared for that he would render any sacrifice for their sake. He is willing to sacrifice his own children, wife, brothers and all his kinsfolk who used to afford him shelter and protection. Indeed his eagerness to escape the approaching torment is so strong that he loses all feeling for anyone else. Indeed he would sacrifice everyone on earth if only he could be spared. What a frightening image of distress and panic!

In the midst of this situation, the guilty hears something that closes the door to any fleeting hope. Indeed, all will listen to what makes the situation abundantly clear:

> *But no! It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.* (Verses 15–18)

There is absolutely no place for such impossible notions of escape, even though one would offer one's children, spouse, brothers, kinsfolk and everyone else in ransom. "*But no! It is the raging fire.*" (Verse 15) It rages on ready to burn, but it also "*tears the skin away.*" (Verse 16) It tears

the skin off both the face and head. Here, the fire is described as if it has a will of its own, deliberately taking part in inflicting punishment on the guilty. "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (Verse 17) Those people who turned away when they were called upon to follow the truth embodied in the divine message are now called again. This time the caller is the raging fire, and this time they cannot turn away. In the past, they were busy amassing riches and hoarding them. Now their attentions cannot be diverted from responding to this call by the raging fire. Nor can they divert it from themselves, no matter what they offer in ransom.

Special emphasis is placed in this *sūrah*, as in the previous two *sūrahs*, on hindering good actions, discouraging the feeding of the needy and hoarding amassed riches. All these are placed side by side with disbelief and denying the divine message. Such repeated emphasis suggests that there were in that early period in Makkah people who combined greed and stinginess with disbelief and rejection. Everyone is warned against this and told of its consequences as a primary cause of punishment, second to disbelief in God and associating partners with Him.

The *sūrah* includes other references confirming this and showing some features of the prevailing environment Islam faced in Makkah. The whole social set up concentrated on amassing wealth through trade and usury. The Quraysh elders were the ones so engaged in such trade. They used to organize trade caravans in winter and summer. Their preoccupation with wealth meant that many were poor and deprived. Hence, the need for such repeated reminders and warnings. The Qur'ān continued to address these social ills, fighting greed and stinginess within people's souls, both before and after the conquest of Makkah. Anyone who follows the Qur'ānic verses addressing such social ills will appreciate this. These verses give clear warnings against usury, the wrongful taking of other people's money, devouring the wealth of orphans when they are still young, the oppression of orphan girls and forcibly marrying them to obtain their money, the ill-treatment of beggars, orphans and the needy generally. In all this, the Qur'ān launches a strong campaign against unfair practices, giving us at the same time a fair idea of the prevailing social environment. Moreover, these verses provide directives on how to rid the human soul, in all situations, of its gripping obsession with amassing wealth.

Between Good and Evil

The *sūrah* now depicts how man faces good and evil, in both situations of faith and unfaith. It also outlines the qualities of the believers and states their ultimate end in contrast to the fate of those who are guilty:

> *Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail. They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.* (Verses 19–35)

The picture the Qur'ān draws of a man devoid of faith is remarkably accurate and expressive. Only faith can elevate him above such qualities. It is faith that gives him the bond of reassurance so that he does not panic when confronted with evil and is not stingy when his fortunes turn good: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted.*" (Verses 19–21)

Like the brushstrokes of a talented painter, every word in these verses draws a line delineating a human feature. Yet we have here only three very short verses, and these composed of only a small number of words. However, by the time they are finished, the picture drawn comes alive and man, with his distinctive and permanent features, is revealed. He has a restless disposition. He is fretful, feeling the pain of misfortune when it occurs. He panics, lest this should be permanent. He thinks the present moment will last forever. His worry soon imprisons him behind

the bars of the present moment and its misfortune so that he despairs of any change. Fear and worry tear him apart. How can he be otherwise when he does not have the steadying influence of faith and the hope it generates? When his fortunes turn good, he is stingy. He thinks that what he receives has been hard earned by his own efforts. Hence, he does not want others to take anything of it. He wants it all for himself. He becomes the prisoner of his own wealth. The truth is that he does not understand his actual role in getting whatever he earns. He does not look to receive from God what is better than all he has. How can he when his heart is devoid of faith? Thus, he is restless and worried in both situations. This is a very miserable picture of man when faith has no place in his heart.

Thus we see that faith is a very serious issue in man's life. It is not merely a word we utter, or worship rituals we offer. It is a state of mind and a code of living based on a complete value system with which to judge events and situations. Should a person lack such a steadying influence, he is likely to sway with the trend; he is in a permanent state of worry whatever fortune befalls him. By contrast, when his heart is enlightened by faith, he is content and reassured because he feels his bond with the One who conducts events and changes situations. He trusts to His will, feels His mercy, accepts His test, always looks to the relief of his hardship, ready to do good and be charitable knowing that whatever he gives away comes from Him, and whatever is spent for His sake will be rewarded both in this life and in the life to come. Faith is indeed a real gain, which believers receive in this present life before they are rewarded for it in the life to come. This gain is reflected in their state of comfort and reassurance throughout their life on earth.

The Exceptions

The *sūrah* now gives a detailed account of the believers who do not share the common human feature of restlessness and worry. "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers.*" (Verses 22–23) It is true that prayer is an essential Islamic duty providing the mark of faith. Yet it is much more than this: it is rather the means of contact with God Almighty and the sign of true servitude to Him. In prayer, the relative

positions of God and servant are clearly and specifically outlined. The *sūrah* adds here that believers attend to their prayers all the time and in all situations. It thus gives an image of permanence and stability. Their prayer is disrupted through negligence or laziness. It is a permanent bond. When the Prophet performed voluntary worship, he used to do so regularly. He also said: "The actions that please God most are the ones offered regularly, even though they may be small." [Related in all six anthologies of authentic *aḥādīth*.]

"*Who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 24–25) This due share is *zakāt* in particular and other charitable donations of specified amounts. These are due, by right, from all believers. Perhaps this statement has a broader meaning too, signifying that believers assign a share of their wealth considering it to be due for such needy people. To do so is to rid oneself of stinginess and to rise above the desire to amass wealth. It also implies a recognition by the one who is well off within the community of believers of his duty towards the one who is deprived. When a believer accepts that the needy and the deprived have a rightful claim to a portion of his wealth, he acknowledges the grace God has bestowed on him and the bond he has with fellow human beings. It signifies freedom from greed and stinginess. Moreover, it guarantees mutual cooperation and care within the Muslim community. Thus, *zakāt* appears a duty with far-reaching significance on several levels, within oneself and in the life of the community.

"*Who believe in the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 26) Drawing an essential but general outline of a believer's character, this quality is directly related to the *sūrah*'s main theme. To believe in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, having as it does a marked influence on one's life, with respect to both emotions and actions. The standard by which a believer in the Day of Judgement weighs up things, events, actions and life altogether is different from that of one who does not believe. Such a believer approaches matters and takes action looking up to heaven and thinking of the hereafter. He treats all events, good or bad, as preludes, while the results come later, in the life to come. Therefore, he looks at these with their expected results and evaluates

them on that basis. By contrast, the one who does not believe in the Day of Judgement looks at everything in the light of what he stands to gain from it in this present, short and limited life. Whatever action he takes is considered within the scope of life on earth. Hence, he weighs things, events and actions differently, arriving at very different conclusions. He is always worried and miserable because what he goes through in this his first life may not be reassuring, comfortable, fair or reasonable unless he adds to it what happens in the next stage, which is longer and broader. Hence, the one who does not take the hereafter into account will be unhappy or will cause unhappiness to those who are close to him. He cannot conceive of a higher level of life bringing him its clear rewards. Hence, believing in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, and it is on this belief that the Islamic code of living is based.

"*Who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verses 27–28) This takes us a step further than the mere belief in the Day of Judgement. It adds clear sensitivity and alertness, as well as a feeling that despite one's worship one is falling short in the fulfilment of one's duty towards God. One fears to slip at any time and, as a result, deserve punishment. Therefore, one looks for God's help and protection. In his position as a Messenger of God, the Prophet was always on the alert, and in fear of God's punishment. He was convinced that his actions would not ensure his admittance into heaven unless God bestowed His grace on him. He said to his Companions in this respect: 'No one's actions will be enough to ensure their admittance into heaven.' They asked: 'Not even you, Messenger of God?' He said: 'Not even me, unless God bestows His grace on me.' [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Nasā'ī.]

"*None may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verse 28) This statement suggests permanent awareness of God's punishment, because what incurs such punishment may occur at any moment. God does not require anything more than such awareness from people. Should they slip or succumb to weaknesses, His forgiveness and mercy are always available, and the door to repentance is always open. This is the middle course Islam charts between a total lack of awareness on the

one hand and excessive worry on the other. A believer's heart counters worry with hope, reassured of God's grace in all situations.

"*Who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verses 29–31) This ensures purity for oneself and the community. Islam builds a community based on purity but with a clear and open approach. It ensures that all important functions are fulfilled and all natural desires are met but without chaos or perversion. A legitimate family, living openly in its home is the unit of Islamic society where every child knows his father and none is ashamed of its birth. In this way, sexual relations are based on a proper, clean, legitimate and long-lasting bond with clear objectives. They seek to fulfil human and social duties other than the satisfaction of a mere physical urge. Hence, the Qur'ān states this quality of believers here, making it clear that sex is permitted only with spouses or with women who are rightfully possessed.

A word needs to be said here concerning this second category, which refers to slave women, if they happen to lawfully exist in a Muslim society. The only lawful reason for their existence is their having been taken prisoner during a war fought for God's cause, which is the only legitimate war from an Islamic point of view. Islam lays down a ruling concerning prisoners of war, which is outlined in a verse of *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (47: 4) Thus, the final ruling on prisoners of war is to set them free, either by an act of grace or against ransom. However, in some situations there may remain prisoners of war who are not set free. When such women slaves exist, sexual relations with them is permitted but only with their master. All the while, however, different ways of regaining their freedom are available to them. In fact, Islam provides many ways to ensure that slavery is abolished altogether. In all this, Islam is open, ensuring clean sexual relations in society. It does not leave such women prisoners of war to be the victims of

rape and filthy and exploitative relations, as often happens elsewhere in war situations. Nor does it put a false tag on the situation, calling such women free when they are in fact slaves.

"*Those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verse 31) Thus Islam closes the door on all dirty sexual relations, keeping only these two open forms as legitimate. According to Islam, sex is a legitimate and clean function to which dirt may attach when it is practised in an illegitimate or deviant way.[1]

"*Who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges.*" (Verse 32) This is one of the basic moral qualities on which Islamic society is founded. The honouring of trust and pledges begins, according to Islam, with honouring the great trust that God offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains but they refused to accept it, fearing that they would not be able to fulfil its commitments. Man however accepted it. This is the trust of faith and the fulfilment of its requirements out of choice but without compulsion. It also involves honouring the first pledge taken from man's nature, before birth, when this nature testifies to the truth of God's oneness. Faithfulness to all trusts and pledges in worldly transactions is founded on honouring this first trust and this first pledge. Islam repeatedly emphasizes the importance of such faithfulness, to trust, confirming its role in building its society on solid foundations. It considers such faithfulness a distinctive feature of a believer, whereas the opposite quality distinguishes unbelievers. This is often repeated in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*, leaving no room for doubt as to the importance Islam attaches to faithfulness.

"*Who stand up for the truth when they bear witness.*" (Verse 33) To bear witness and give testimony is, according to Islam, the basis of the fulfilment of many rights. Indeed, preventing any transgression of the bounds set by God can only be ensured on such a basis. Hence, God has rightly placed strong emphasis on bearing witness, without hesitation, and testifying when a dispute needs to be adjudged. When bearing witness, the truth must be stated without distortion or twisting. Indeed, God has

1. For further treatment please refer to comments on *Sūrah* 23, in Volume XII, pp. 193–195, and on *Sūrah* 47, in Volume XV, pp. 393–401

made bearing witness an act done for Him so as to link it to obedience of Him. He gives us the instruction: "*Bear witness before God.*" (65: 2) Here, it is made a feature of believers. It is indeed one of the trusts that need to be fulfilled. It is given special mention in order to further emphasize its importance.

This list of believers' qualities started with attendance to prayers, and it now concludes with that same quality: "*And who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verse 34) The earlier reference to prayer mentioned that it is always attended to. Now, the point at issue is that it is done '*without fail*'. The two points are not the same. Here, the emphasis is on offering prayers on time, performing the obligatory part and adding the voluntary one, adhering to its form and spirit. Believers are neither negligent of this, nor are they careless. Needless to say, mentioning prayer as the first and the last of believers' distinctive qualities confirms the importance attached to it.

At this point, the fate of this group is stated: "*They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.*" (Verse 35) This short verse combines an aspect of material enjoyment with a spiritual one. They are in gardens of paradise, but they are also honoured there. Thus, when they enjoy what is provided for them in paradise, they also enjoy being honoured for maintaining heir high moral standard.

The Unbelievers' Attitude

The *sūrah* then depicts a Makkan scene in which we see the unbelievers going hurriedly to where the Prophet was reading the Qur'ān. Once there, they would split into groups around him. The *sūrah* criticizes their hurrying and grouping when they had no intention of listening to or of heeding his advice:

> *What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?* (Verses 36–37)

There is implied sarcasm in the question. It describes their confused movement, with the Arabic expression adding a connotation of their

being led. The question wonders at their confusion: they move hurriedly, but without any intention of receiving guidance. They only want to learn what the Prophet says before splitting into small groups discussing how to resist what they have heard. What is wrong with them, then? "*Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss?*" (Verse 38) How can they entertain such hopes when their behaviour leads only to hell, and not to heaven and its gardens of bliss? Do they think that they have a high position with God to ensure that they will enter heaven despite the fact that they disbelieve in Him, oppose the Prophet, scheme against Islam? They must imagine that they command very high value with God to achieve such elevation.

The answer is swift and decisive: "*No!*" It is delivered in the negative, implying contempt. "*We have created them from the substance they know.*" (Verse 39) They are aware that they have been created from a humble fluid they know well enough. There is an implicit, yet profound touch here, destroying all their pride and arrogance without using a single objectionable word. Yet the verse is so expressed that it depicts a state of utter humiliation and ignominy. How can they hope to be in heaven when they disbelieve and commit evil deeds, knowing from what substance they are created? In God's measure, they are too lowly to hold favour with Him. Why would He waive His law of administering justice to all according to their deeds just for them?

Confirming their unimportance and lowly status, the *sūrah* states that God is able to replace them with better creatures. Furthermore, they cannot escape the punishment their actions deserve:

> *By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so.* (Verses 40–41)

The point at issue needs no oath, but the mention of risings and settings reflects God's greatness. These movements may refer to the rise risings and settings of the millions upon millions of stars in the universe. On the other hand, this may be a reference to sunrise and sunset over every point on our planet. At every moment, there is a

sunrise and a sunset, as the earth continues to revolve. Whichever the meaning intended, the mention of these risings and settings gives us a feeling of the greatness of the universe and the Almightiness of God who created the universe. Do those people, created from humble fluid, need an oath by the Lord of all star risings and settings to realize that He is able to create better people? Do they need an oath confirming that they cannot escape from Him?

The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the Prophet telling him to leave them to face their fate on that promised day. It shows their status then when they utterly distressed:

> *Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised.* (Verses 42–44)

This address implies a definite warning that should fill them with worry and anticipation. Indeed, the image describing them and their movements on that day should add intense fear. Moreover, it carries a clear element of sarcasm to parallel their pride and conceit. We see them coming out of their graves, hurrying on like people rallying to a flag or to a statue they worship. This is consistent with what they do in this life when they rally to flags and statues on festive days. Now they do the same, but there is no festivity on that day. Their description is completed by the statement, '*with ignominy overwhelming them.*' We can almost see their faces clearly through these words. We see them humiliated, overwhelmed by ignominy. They used to play and indulge in idle talk, but now they are exhausted, broken: "*Such is the day they have been promised.*" (Verse 44) That is the day they doubted would ever happen. Yet in their denial, they tried to hasten its arrival.

Thus the *sūrah* ends, with perfect harmony between its opening and end. It represents an episode in the long discussion of the major issue of resurrection, reckoning and requital, setting the Islamic concept of life in contrast with un-Islamic concepts.

SŪRAH 71

Nūḥ
(Noah)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, devoted to the story of Noah and his people, describes an important experience of advocacy of the divine message on earth. It represents a cycle in the consistent and permanent treatment of mankind, and of the ever-raging battle between good and evil, guidance and error, truth and falsehood. This episode depicts a humanity that is stubborn, hard, established in its ways, toeing the line drawn by arrogant leadership, unwilling to consider the guidance provided or to look at the pointers to faith. These are available everywhere in the universe and within people's own selves, recorded in the open book of the universe and in man's inner soul. At the same time, the *sūrah* shows an aspect of divine mercy represented in the fact that God sent messengers to rescue mankind from their stubborn rejection of guidance, and their blind following of arrogant and erroneous leadership.

The *sūrah* also paints a picture of the tireless efforts of God's messengers to provide erring humanity with guidance. They showed unparalleled patience despite all the adversity they had to contend with and when they had no personal interest in the matter: they did not expect any reward from those who benefited by their guidance, nor did they hope for any personal favour from those who attained faith as a result of their

efforts. They received nothing like the fees charged by universities and educational institutes for the services they provide.

In this *sūrah*, Noah presents to God the final outcome of the 950 years he spent exerting such tireless efforts in advocating the divine faith among his people. Essentially, they had continued to arrogantly and stubbornly follow their leaders who, in turn, possessed wealth and power. His report, as outlined in the *sūrah* states: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 5–20) Having thus outlined the efforts he made and the varied methods he employed in advocating the divine message among his people, Noah says: "*My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr. They have led many astray.*" (Verses 21–24)

The result is very negative. Yet a messenger's task remains the same: to advocate God's message.

This extremely difficult experience is shown to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who inherited the trust of advocating the divine message throughout the earth until the end of time and who shouldered the heaviest burden assigned to any prophet. He is shown how a former brother of his sought to establish the truth of faith on earth. He is, thus, able to see just how stubborn man can be in resisting the message

of truth, and how corrupt deviant leadership can be and how it can overpower guided leadership. He learns of God's will to send messenger after messenger to provide mankind with guidance, and this despite all the stubborn and continuous rejection from as early as the days of Noah (peace be upon him).

This experience is shown to the Muslim community in Makkah, and to the Muslim community generally, because it is the heir to God's message to mankind. It is charged with implementing the code of life based on the divine message, even in the midst of the *jāhiliyyah* prevalent at the time, and in the midst of every subsequent *jāhiliyyah*. The Muslim community thus sees the picture of firm resolve represented by Noah, the second father of mankind, who struggled over such a long period of time, to present God's message. It sees the care God took of the small number of believers who accepted Noah's message and who were saved from the total destruction that engulfed their unbelieving fellows.

Noah's experience is also presented to the Makkan unbelievers, showing them the fate suffered by their unbelieving predecessors. They may thus realize that God has bestowed a great favour on them, sending them a kind Messenger who cares greatly for them. This Messenger does not appeal to God to destroy them as Noah did. It is God's grace that has determined that they will be given respite. Noah prayed to God to take away all unbelievers after he had exhausted all means, efforts and methods in calling on them to follow divine guidance. It was only at that juncture that he made his heartfelt appeal: "*And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If you spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verses 26–27)

In presenting this episode in the advocacy of God's message, the *sūrah* clearly shows the unity of the divine faith and its firm, unchanging roots, as well as its close link with the universe, God's will and life's events as they take place according to what God has determined. We see all this through what Noah says to his people by way of warning and instruction: "*He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed*

term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it." (Verses 2–4) We also see it as the *sūrah* quotes Noah saying to his people: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 13–20)

Establishing this truth about the unity of God's message in the hearts of the Muslim community is particularly important. It helps Muslims to understand the truth of their message and that they descend from a long line of believers starting from the very early days of humanity. It also tells them of their role in advocating this message, which embodies the code God has laid down for human life.

Why the Effort?

When we look at the great efforts exerted by God's messengers (peace be upon them all) in presenting guidance to a stubbornly erroneous humanity, and consider that it has been God's will to send them, one after another, for this purpose, we should be nothing less than overwhelmed.

One may well ask whether the results have justified such long efforts and noble sacrifices, from Noah's early time through to Muḥammad's own time, as well as the intervening and subsequent efforts and sacrifices made by believers in God's message. Nonetheless such efforts and sacrifices have continuously been made and this in the face of ridicule and abuse. Indeed some messengers faced burning in the fire or were cut in halves with a saw, or had to flee their homeland and abandon their families. When the final message was given, the Prophet Muḥammad and those who followed him made strenuous efforts to establish it. Further efforts and sacrifices have been made by believers ever since. The question is, then whether the results justify such efforts and sacrifices? Should this struggle be maintained? Does humanity deserve such divine care? Does this insignificant creature called man, so arrogant and stubborn

that he still resists the truth, deserve such care from God manifested in sending messenger after messenger?

The answer based on much thought and reflection is unarguably 'Yes, indeed.' To establish the truth of faith on earth merits all these efforts, struggles and sacrifices made by God's messengers and their followers throughout every generation. Perhaps the establishment of this truth is greater than man's existence, and greater than the earth and all who live on it. It is indeed greater than the universe in which the earth is no more than a little, hardly visible particle.

God has willed to create man with special qualities that make the establishment of this truth in his conscience and way of life dependent on his own human effort, with God's help and guidance. We do not know why God created man such, why He let his acquisition of faith be dependent on his own efforts, or why He made him neither a naturally obedient believer like the angels nor a completely evil, disobedient creature like Satan. We believe, however, that creating man with such a nature and qualities serves a divine purpose related to the creation of the universe and its operative system.

This means that human efforts are needed to establish the truth of faith in man's world. God has chosen some of the best of His servants to make such efforts. These are the prophets and the messengers, as well as select groups of true followers. These are the ones assigned the task of establishing this truth on earth; it deserves such strenuous efforts and great sacrifices. When this truth is firmly rooted in a human heart, then that heart enjoys a ray of God's light. It harbours one of His secrets and becomes a means for the fulfilment of His will, a will that will inevitably be done. All this is fact, not just a figure of speech. It is a truth that is greater than man and his world, and even the whole universe.

Moreover, the establishment of this truth in the life of humanity, or a section of it, provides a link between this earthly life of ours and eternal life. Thus, human life is elevated to maintain the link between what ends in death and what is eternal, between the part and the whole, between the defective and the absolutely perfect. Such a result is greater than all efforts and sacrifices, even though it may last for a day or part of one day during human life on earth. When this truth is thus established, it

provides all generations of humanity with a lantern of true light. This lantern then takes practical form which it will strive to maintain.

History has repeatedly shown that humanity only attained the heights it is able to reach when the truth of God was established. No other means enabled mankind to reach such summits. Those periods in history when truth was so established, and its advocates were in leadership, were indeed the highest summits reached in human life. This was greater than man's ultimate dreams, yet it was a living reality. It is simply not possible for humanity to rise with the help of any philosophy, science, art, creed or system to the level it attained and can always attain through the establishment of faith in people's hearts, lives, morality, values and standards. This truth of faith provides the basis of a complete way of life, whether it is given in a general form as in the early messages, or in a very detailed one as is the case in its final version.

When humanity lost the leadership of true believers, it suffered depression, intellectual confusion and nervous ailments, despite its progress in all spheres of civilization. It might have had abundance of the means of physical comfort, intellectual enjoyment and material affluence, but it could not achieve true happiness.

Without doubt, then, the effort is worth it. We should strive with whatever we have and make what sacrifices are necessary to establish this truth of faith on earth. Mankind, however, will continue to turn away, as they did when they were addressed by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and others of God's noble messengers. They will continue to follow those who lead them far astray. Their leadership will continue to persecute the advocates of faith, inflicting on them whatever brutal treatment they can. Yet despite all this, the divine message will continue along its way, as God wants it to be, because the outcome deserves it all, even though it is no more than a single heart receiving God's light.

The fact that messengers continued to be sent by God, from the time of Noah to the time of Muḥammad, (peace be upon both of them), confirms that it is God's will that advocacy of the divine faith should continue so that it produces its extraordinary results. The minimum result is that the truth of faith becomes well settled in the hearts of its advocates so that they hold firmly to it even though they may be exposed

to death or what is worse than death. In this way, they will rise above all the lure of this life, and this by itself is a great gain for those advocates in person and for humanity as a whole. Indeed, humanity gains in honour through the presence of such people. It becomes worthy of the honour God gave it when He commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, the creature who corrupts the earth and sheds blood but who can, nevertheless, through his own efforts and sacrifices, become worthy of receiving a ray of God's light.

Nūḥ (Noah)

سُورَةُ نُوحٍ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

We sent Noah to his people: 'Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.' (1)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ أَنْ أَنذِرْ قَوْمَكَ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. (2)

قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ إِنِّي لَكُمْ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢﴾

Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. (3)

أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٣﴾

He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.' (4)

يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُؤَخِّرْكُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ أَجَلَ اللَّهِ إِذَا جَاءَ لَا يُؤَخَّرُ ۖ لَوْ كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

He said: 'My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, (5)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي دَعَوْتُ قَوْمِي لَيْلًا وَنَهَارًا ﴿٥﴾

but the more I call them, the further they run away. (6)

فَلَمْ يَزِدْهُمْ دُعَائِي إِلَّا فِرَارًا ﴿٦﴾

Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. (7)

وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوْتُهُمْ لِتَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ جَعَلُوا أَصَابِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ وَاسْتَغْشَوْا ثِيَابَهُمْ وَأَصَرُّوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا اسْتِكْبَارًا ﴿٧﴾

I have called them openly; (8)

ثُمَّ إِنِّي دَعَوْتُهُمْ جِهَارًا ﴿٨﴾

I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. (9)

ثُمَّ إِنِّي أَعْلَنتُ لَهُمْ وَأَسْرَرْتُ لَهُمْ إِسْرَارًا ﴿٩﴾

I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. (10)

فَقُلْتُ اسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفَّارًا ﴿١٠﴾

He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, (11)

يُرْسِلِ السَّمَاءَ عَلَيْكُم مِّدْرَارًا ﴿١١﴾

and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. (12)

وَيُمْدِدْكُم بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ أَنْهَارًا ﴿١٢﴾

What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, (13)

مَّا لَكُمْ لَا تَرْجُونَ لِلَّهِ وَقَارًا ﴿١٣﴾

when it is He who has created you in successive stages? (14)

وَقَدْ خَلَقَكُمْ أَطْوَارًا ﴿١٤﴾

Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, (15)

أَلَمْ تَرَوْا كَيْفَ خَلَقَ اللَّهُ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ﴿١٥﴾

placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? (16)

وَجَعَلَ الْقَمَرَ فِيهِنَّ نُورًا وَجَعَلَ الشَّمْسَ سِرَاجًا ﴿١٦﴾

God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, (17)

وَاللَّهُ أَنبَتَكُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ نَبَاتًا ﴿١٧﴾

ثُمَّ يُعِيدُكُمْ فِيهَا وَيُخْرِجُكُمْ إِخْرَاجًا ﴿١٨﴾

and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. (18)

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ بِسَاطًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, (19)

لِتَسْلُكُوا مِنْهَا سُبُلًا فِجَاجًا ﴿٢٠﴾

so that you may walk along its spacious paths."' (20)

قَالَ نُوحٌ رَبِّ إِنَّهُمْ عَصَوْنِي وَاتَّبَعُوا مَنْ لَمْ يَزِدْهُ مَالُهُ وَوَلَدُهُ إِلَّا خَسَارًا ﴿٢١﴾

Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. (21)

وَمَكَرُوا مَكْرًا كُبَّارًا ﴿٢٢﴾

They have devised a mighty plot, (22)

وَقَالُوا لَا تَذَرُنَّ آلِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنَّ وَدًّا وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا ﴿٢٣﴾

and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." (23)

وَقَدْ أَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا ضَلَالًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.' (24)

مِمَّا خَطِيئَاتِهِمْ أُغْرِقُوا فَأُدْخِلُوا نَارًا فَلَمْ يَجِدُوا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ أَنْصَارًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them. (25)

وَقَالَ نُوحٌ رَبِّ لَا تَذَرْ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ دَيَّارًا ﴿٢٦﴾

And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. (26)

If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. (27)

إِنَّكَ إِن تَذَرْهُمْ يُضِلُّوا عِبَادَكَ
وَلَا يَلِدُوا إِلَّا فَاجِرًا كَفَّارًا ﴿٢٧﴾

My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.' (28)

رَّبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيَّ وَلِمَن دَخَلَ
بَيْتِيَ مُؤْمِنًا وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ
وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا تَبَارًا ﴿٢٨﴾

The Message in Brief

The *sūrah* begins with a statement defining the source of this message of divine faith: "*We sent Noah to his people.*" (Verse 1) This is the source that assigns tasks to God's messengers and from whom they learn the truth of faith. It is the source of all existence and all life. It is He who created mankind, giving their nature the ability to know and worship Him. When they deviated from this straight path, He sent them messengers to bring them back to Him. Noah was the first of these messengers after Adam. The Qur'ān does not mention a message given to Adam after his fall to earth and life thereon. Perhaps he was a teacher who taught his children and grandchildren. With the passage of time, they went astray and adopted idols as deities. These were at first symbols of certain forces they considered holy. Then, they forgot what the symbols signified and worshipped the idols themselves. The most important of those idols were the five mentioned in this *sūrah*. God sent them Noah to bring them back to believing in His oneness and give them the right concept of God, life and existence. Earlier scriptures mention Idrīs as a messenger of God prior to Noah. However, what such scriptures mention is not part of the Islamic faith, because they were subject to distortion, addition and omission.

When we read the stories of earlier prophets given in the Qur'ān, we tend to believe that Noah lived when humanity was still in its

dawn period. He spent 950 years of his life advocating God's message to his people who must have lived a similarly long life. This suggests that humans were still few in number. In saying this we draw on the observation that species that are small in number live long, and that the reverse is true. Perhaps this is a rule of balance. This is merely a personal point of view, but God knows best.

Having established the source of the message, the *sūrah* sums it up in a few words, and we learn that Noah was instructed to deliver a warning: "*Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.*" (Verse 1) The report Noah presents to his Lord, as stated in the *sūrah*, shows that the state in which he found his people, heedless and arrogant, makes warning the sum of his message. In fact, the first thing he does by means of advocacy is to warn them of severe punishment, in either this world or the next, or in both.

The *sūrah* moves straight from assigning the task to its fulfilment, in which the delivery of the warning is prominent. However, this is coupled with a note that raises the hope of the forgiveness of past sins and the deferment of reckoning until the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, the *sūrah* gives a brief outline of the message Noah delivered to his people:

> *He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.* (Verses 2–4)

"*My people, I am here to warn you plainly.*" (Verse 2) He immediately states his role as a warner, clearly explaining his argument. He does not hesitate or wrap his words in a false cover. He leaves no one in confusion as to what he has to say, or what those who reject his message can expect. What he calls for is plain and simple: "*Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me.*" (Verse 3) All worship must be addressed to God alone, without partners. Fearing God should be the quality that is clearly reflected in feeling and behaviour. Obeying the messenger God sends to a people is the attitude that makes His orders the basis on which they build their way of life and how they determine their rules of behaviour.

These are the broad lines of divine faith in general, but messages may differ in points of detail as also in the concepts they outline, their relative scopes and how profound and comprehensive these are. To worship God alone provides a complete system of life that includes how man visualizes the nature of the Godhead and the nature of servitude to Him, the bond between the Creator and His creatures, as well as the nature of forces and values that operate in the universe and affect human life. Hence, a system for human life is developed on the basis of this concept, giving a special code of living. This code is based on the bond between God and His servants, and on the values He assigns to all things.

To be God-fearing is the true guarantee that people will follow this code of living, abide by it and never try to circumvent it or slacken in its implementation. Moreover, it is the quality that ensures sound moral behaviour that seeks no reward other than being acceptable to God. Moreover, obeying God's messenger is the means that ensures remaining consistent, receiving guidance from its original source. It maintains the link with heaven through the messenger who receives instructions from on high.

These were the broad lines that constituted what Noah called on his people to believe in. They remain the essence of the divine faith for every generation. God promised them in reward what He promises those who turn to Him in repentance: "*He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.*" (Verse 4) This verse states the reward promised for those who respond to the call to worship God alone, fear Him and obey His messenger. The reward is forgiveness of past sins, a respite lasting until the time appointed for reckoning, which means until the Day of Judgement, so that they will not be punished in this life like other communities that were totally destroyed. Later in the *sūrah*, we see that Noah promised his people certain other things to be granted in this life.

Noah also confirms that this appointed time is inevitable: it comes at the moment determined for it. It will not be postponed like the delayed punishment in this world: "*When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 4) This statement may be understood to apply to every time appointed by God, so as to make this fact clear in their minds. It occurs at the appropriate place here, within

the context of the promise that the reckoning will be deferred to the Day of Judgement if they heeded Noah's advice.

Untiring Efforts

Noah began his noble efforts to present guidance to his people. He had no personal interest in the matter, and stood to make no gain to compensate for all the arrogance and ridicule he had to put up with. He continued to do this for a thousand years minus fifty, with the number of those who responded positively hardly increasing. On the other hand, however, the level of rejection and insistence on following old erring ways did increase. At the end, Noah presented his account to God, who had assigned him this arduous task. He described his efforts even though he knew that God was fully aware of all that he had done. He is, therefore, simply making his heart-felt complaint to God, the only One to whom prophets, messengers and true believers ever complain:

> *My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: 'Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.'* (Verses 5–20)

Thus, Noah describes his untiring efforts at the end of his long, long journey: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day.*"

(Verse 5) He never slackened or showed any sign of boredom or despair in the face of determined and increasing opposition: "*but the more I call them, the further they run away.*" (Verse 6) They ran away from the messenger who called on them to believe in God, the Giver of life, the Provider of everything they had and the Source of every light and guidance. Yet this messenger from whom they ran away never asked for anything in return for what he presented or taught them. He only called on them to believe so that they might be forgiven their sins.

When they could not physically run away, because he addressed them face to face, taking every opportunity to make his address heard, they loathed listening to him or even looking at him. They turned away in arrogance, intent on following their erring ways. "*Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent.*" (Verse 7) In this scene the advocate of the divine faith is seen using every opportunity to deliver his message, while they remain adamant, unwilling to hear. We see humanity here in its early stages, stubborn like a headstrong child, putting its fingers in its ears so that it does not hear, and covering its head and face. It is an image of childish resistance. The *sūrah* says they '*thrust their fingers into their ears*', yet people can only put the tips of their fingers into their ears. The statement, thus, imparts an impression of violent reaction, as if they wanted to put their whole fingers into their ears to ensure that nothing of Noah's words could be heard. How childish!

Provisions in Abundance

In his strenuous efforts to fulfil his mission, Noah used every method, addressing them openly at times, and speaking to them in private on others: "*I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private.*" (Verses 8–9) In all this, he put before them immeasurable gains both in this life and in the life to come. The first prospect he put before them was forgiveness of their sins: "*I said: Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving.*" (Verse 10) He also put before them the prospect of abundant provisions to be granted through rain pouring down in plenty, so that plants can grow and rivers

run. He also added other types of God's grace, ones they loved dearly: children and wealth: "*He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers.*" (Verses 11–12)

Noah linked granting such provisions to seeking God's forgiveness of sins and misdeeds. This correlation between following God's guidance and attaining purity of heart on the one hand and a life of plenty and prosperity on the other is stated in several places in the Qur'ān: "*had the people of those cities believed and been God-fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing.*" (7: 96) "*If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God-fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath.*" (5: 65–66) "*Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit.*" (11: 2–3)

This is, then, a true rule repeatedly stated in the Qur'ān. It is based on certain conditions involving a promise by God and the rules He set for human life. History confirms its fulfilment during different generations. The rule applies to communities and nations, not to individuals. Every community that implemented God's law, truly looking up to Him, doing good and beneficial deeds and seeking His forgiveness in a way that reflected fearing Him, benefited by this promise. Every community that worshipped God and feared Him, implementing His law and establishing justice and security for all people, was given provisions in plenty and a life of strength and affluence.

Having said this, we realize that some communities are left to enjoy a life of power and prosperity, despite the fact that they are far from being God-fearing or following His guidance. This is merely a test: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Moreover, such prosperity is often accompanied by different ills such as the lack of social cohesion, loose morality, injustice, disregard for human dignity, etc. We

see today two superpowers,[1] seemingly enjoying power and plentiful provisions: one of them is capitalist while the other communist. In the first, morality has sunk to the lowest level. The prevailing vision of life has become so low that all life has become materialistic, measured by the dollar. In the other, the value of man has gone below the level of slavery. Intelligence agencies have become too powerful and people live in constant fear, threatened in their own homes. Several massacres have taken place, and no one is assured that by the morning his head will remain in place. A false allegation can easily find it chopped off. Neither condition can be described as a truly prosperous human life.

We continue with Noah and his untiring efforts. We see him trying to turn people's attentions to the signs pointing to God, be these from within themselves or in the world around them. He wonders at their carelessness and rudeness: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages?*" (Verses 13–14)

These stages of creation to which Noah refers must have been something which people either knew about or could understand at that time. He is obviously reminding them of something they know and hopes will have the desired effect of leading them to a positive response. Most commentators on the Qur'ān say that the expression refers to the different stages the embryo goes through, starting with a gamete, then becoming a clinging cell mass, before it becomes a human embryo, and acquires a skeleton and is subsequently given its full shape and form. Noah's people could understand this because pregnant women suffered abortions at different stages of pregnancy, thus giving man a clear idea of how the human grows. This is one interpretation of the statement. It could also be a reference to what embryology says about the creation of man. It starts like a one-celled creature, then becomes like a multi-celled creature before acquiring the form of a water animal, then it becomes like a mammal, before it acquires human shape. This was however far from comprehensible to Noah's people, being only a very recent discovery. This interpretation may be the meaning of another Qur'ānic statement that mentions the stages of the embryo before saying: "*We then bring this*

1. This is a reference to the USA and the Soviet Union. – Editor's note.

into being as another creation." (23: 14) Both statements, however, may mean something else that remains beyond our present knowledge. Be that as it may, Noah draws the attention of his people to look at their creation and how it is done in stages. He reproaches them for knowing this and yet remaining insolent in their attitude towards their Lord. This is all very singular.

Signs in Plenty

Noah directs his people's attention to the open book of the universe: "*Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern?*" (Verses 15–16) We cannot specify a meaning for the '*seven heavens*' on the basis of scientific theories about the universe, for these are only theories. Noah simply draws their attention to the skies. He tells them, as God taught him, that there are seven heavens in layers, and that they include the sun and the moon, which they could obviously see, just as they saw what they called the sky, which is that familiar blue coloured space. To know what it is exactly is not necessary. Nor has it been properly proven even today. The invitation to look though is enough to reflect on the supreme power that has brought such great creatures into existence. This is what Noah wanted his people to do. He then invites them to look at their own creation, starting from dust and returning to it after death, and emphasizing the truth of resurrection: "*God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again.*" (Verses 17–18)

The reference to man originating from the earth like a plant is both amazing and inspiring. It is repeated in the Qur'ān in various forms: "*Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave, but from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth.*" (7: 58) This verse refers to the similarity of the origin of both man and vegetation. Both are referred to in the same verse stressing the truth of resurrection: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever*

We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom." (22: 5) In the following *sūrah*,[2] the stages of the embryo are outlined in similar terms to the verse above. It is then followed by this statement: "*And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date-palms and vines.*" (23: 19)

This is certainly worth studying. It suggests that the origins of life on earth are the same, and that the making of man is the same as the making of plants. Man is made of the earth's simple elements and feeds on such elements to grow. Thus, he is a plant like the rest of earth's plants. He is given a form of life different from that of plants, but both originate from mother earth, which suckles them both. We see how faith gives a believer a complete and true concept of his relation to the earth and to other living things. This concept combines scientific accuracy with warm feelings, which is the distinctive mark of true Qur'ānic knowledge.

Those people who came out of the earth will go back into it, because God determines so, just like He brought them into being out of it. Their ashes become mixed with its dust and they become part of it again, just as they were before. Then again, God will bring them out like He did the first time. It is a simple matter that does not require a moment's hesitation if we only look at it from this Qur'ānic angle. Noah points out this truth to his people so that they feel how God's hand lets them grow out of the earth like plants do, and then returns them there. Once they do this, they can easily expect the second life and take it into account. It is so simple and easy, needing no further argument.

Finally, Noah directs his people's hearts to reflect on God's blessing as He enabled them to live easily on earth, conducting their various activities with ease and comfort: "*God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 19–20) This reality is so close to them and they see it all the time in full view. They cannot escape it like they tried to escape from Noah and his warnings.

2. In verse 14 of *Sūrah* 23, The Believers.

In relation to them, the earth is stretched out like a vast expanse. Even in its mountains, God placed paths that are easy for them to traverse. They walk and travel even more easily on the plains. They can thus move about seeking God's bounty, and exchanging goods and benefits. They did not need scientific studies that sought to understand the natural laws that govern and facilitate their life on earth in order to appreciate all this. Indeed, the greater human knowledge gets the more evident the truth of this statement is.

Varied Methods

We see how Noah tried to address his people in various ways, employing a wide range of methods. We also see his patience, perseverance and conscientiousness. He continued to exert these efforts over 950 years before giving this report to his Lord, complaining of the response he had had to contend with. From his succinct and accurate account we see a splendid image of the great efforts he made. Yet all this is merely one ring in the chain of divine messages to mankind. So, what happens next?

> *Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.'* (Verses 21–24)

It is a heart-felt complaint. After all Noah's endeavours, guidance and sound advice and the promise of an easy, plentiful life, they chose to disobey and follow the lead of those who had gone far astray, only because the latter enjoyed wealth, children and power. Yet such leaders benefit nothing by all these blessings. Indeed, their "*wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin.*" (Verse 21) What they possessed of wealth and children tempted them to go further astray, a scenario that could only end in misery and ruin. Yet these leaders did not stop at just going astray. Instead: "*They have devised a mighty plot.*" (Verse 22)

Their plot was on a grand scale, and its aim was to foil Noah's efforts, to suppress his message and to prevent it from addressing people's hearts. They schemed to give their disbelief and ignorance an attractive colour. Therefore, they urged people to adhere to their false beliefs and to continue to worship those idols whom they called gods. They "*said to each other: 'Do not ever renounce your gods!'*" They sought to arouse people's personal emotions, making them feel that these idols were 'their own' gods. They mentioned the names of the most important ones, so as to stir people's false pride in them: "*Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr.*" (Verse 23) These were indeed the largest and the most important of their idols. Indeed, they continued to be worshipped in other ignorant communities until the time of the Islamic message.

This remains the practice of erring leaderships. They create idols that may differ in name and form, according to the going trends in different *jāhiliyyah* societies. They seek to rally the masses around such idols and stir their emotions to defend them so that they can lead them wherever they want to, ensuring that they remain in error. This is how they manage to lead people astray: "*They have led many astray.*" (Verse 24) Indeed every type of erring leadership tries to rally the people around idols, which may be in the form of statues, or humans or ideas. They are all the same, manipulated to turn people away from the divine message, creating a schism between them and its advocates. It is all part of a grand scheme, a mighty plot with a selfish end.

Noah's Prayer

A passionate prayer is then voiced by Noah against the oppressors, the wrongdoers who lead people astray through plots and schemes of their own devising: "*Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.*" (Verse 24) It is the prayer of one who has tried for a long time, making every effort and using every method. Eventually, however, he came to the conclusion that those erring, wrongdoing hearts were altogether devoid of goodness, undeserving of divine guidance.

Before completing Noah's prayer, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the end suffered by those wrongdoers in this life and in the life to come.

Both situations are present in God's knowledge. They are events that admit no change:

> *Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them.* (Verse 25)

It is because of their sins and disobedience that they were made to drown and enter the fire. The two events are intentionally joined in succession, because their entry into the fire is connected to their drowning. The time gap between the two is so short that it is almost non-existent; according to God's measures it is negligible. The sequence is there: they were drowned in this life and they are made to enter the fire in the life to come. What is in between is perhaps the torment in the grave during the short gap between the two lives. "*They found none besides God to support them.*" (Verse 25) None whatsoever! No children, no wealth, no power and no patron from among their alleged deities.

In a single short verse, these mighty ones are swept away and no mention is left of them in human memory. No details are given here of their drowning or the floods that swept them away. This because the *sūrah* wants to leave us with the impression of swift punishment. Indeed, it covers the gap between their drowning and their entry into hell with the conjunction *fa*, rendered in translation as 'and'. This is a common feature of the inimitable Qur'ānic style. Therefore, we do not go into any further details of this event here.

The *sūrah* then gives the remainder of Noah's passionate prayer:

> *And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.'* (Verses 26–28)

In his heart of hearts, Noah felt that the earth needed to have a complete change, a change that would eradicate the evil that had become so deeply entrenched among his people. Sometimes, only such

eradication of the wrongdoers from the face of the earth will suffice. Their continued presence may put the divine message under siege, preventing it from touching people's hearts. This is exactly the scenario Noah states in his appeal to God to destroy these tyrannical oppressors, leaving none of them to walk the earth. He says: "*If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray.*" (Verse 27) Describing those people forced to go astray as '*Your servants*' suggests that they are the believers. This is a reference to how such wrongdoers will always use brute force to turn people away from divine faith. He may also mean that they lead others astray when people see them enjoying power and authority, without being punished for their wrongdoing.

Moreover, they create an environment in which unbelievers are born and reared. This whole environment of unbelief and its determined rejection of God's message leaves no way for the young to see the light. It overwhelms them with its erroneous beliefs and practices. It is to this fact that Noah, God's noble messenger, refers when he says that these wrongdoers will, "*beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verse 27) They create within the community an atmosphere based on falsehood and establish systems, traditions and situations that only help to lead the young into sin and disbelief. Thus, the new generation will always be composed of '*sinners and hardened unbelievers*', as Noah said.

It is for this reason that Noah made his sweeping appeal to God, and God answered his prayer, washing that evil off the face of the earth. Noah ended his appeal against the unbelievers by a request to God to increase their ruin: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

Noah also made a different sort of passionate and humble appeal to God: "*My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women.*" (Verse 28) His prayer that God forgives him his sins is an aspect of the good manners all prophets maintain when addressing God. Noah knows that he is only a human being appealing to God. He knows that no matter how diligent he is in his obedience and worship, he makes mistakes and remains short of the high standard believers should try to attain. He also realizes the truth the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) later expressed

when he said that no human being, not even a prophet, is admitted into heaven on the basis of his actions only, unless God bestows His grace on him. This appeal for forgiveness is exactly what he called upon his people to do, but they were too arrogant to take heed. Yet Noah, God's noble messenger who has untiringly sought to advocate God's message, seeks God's forgiveness at the moment he presents his account.

His prayer for his parents is an aspect of dutifulness towards parents who are believers. This is what we understand from the fact that he prayed for them. Had they been unbelievers, he would have been told not to pray for their forgiveness, as he was told that his son, an unbeliever, met his merited fate when he was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. This is clearly mentioned in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd.

His special prayer for everyone who entered his home as a believer marks the mutual love between believers. Everyone loves for others to receive the same grace as he receives. This special mention of those who enter his home refers to the fact that they were the ones to be saved from the floods; they were the ones on the Ark with him.

Noah's final prayer is for the forgiveness of all believing men and women throughout all generations and localities. It emphasizes the close bond that unites them all, different as their communities and times may be. This is a remarkable quality of the divine faith, establishing this strong bond of genuine love between all believers across the centuries. It tells of the hidden secret God has incorporated into the divine faith and placed in believers' hearts.

Contrasted with this love among believers is the genuine aversion expressed towards unbelievers: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

In this way does the *sūrah* conclude after having given us a bright picture of Noah's struggle, as contrasted with the unbelievers' stubborn rejection. It leaves us with feelings of love towards this great prophet, and admiration for his hard struggle. It strengthens our resolve to follow the same route no matter what hardship we have to endure and no matter what sacrifices we are called upon to make. It is the only route that ensures mankind attains the highest standard possible in their life on earth.

SŪRAH 72

Al-Jinn

(The Jinn)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents us with something very clear even before we look at any of the specific ideas it tackles. It is a symphony ringing out clear, strong beats coupled with an air of calm sadness and reflective sorrow. Consistent with this phenomenon are the images and scenes the *sūrah* portrays and the inspiring statements it includes, particularly in its last passage after the *jinn* concluded their discourse. In this last part, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet in a way that fills the listener with much sympathy. He is commanded to declare that he looks for nothing in respect of his message other than delivering it, and that he is closely watched by God as he goes about this task: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to*

a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (Verses 20–28)

In addition, the *sūrah* delivers a special and psychological effect in its lucid presentation of what the *jinn* said and the truth included in their account. This truth is of great significance, inviting much reflection and contemplation. It also suits the sad overtone evident in the *sūrah*'s rhythm. It only needs to be read rather slowly to impart the feeling we have just outlined.

Support from Another World

The *sūrah* presents a testimony to the truth of many aspects of the divine faith from a different world, a world beyond that of man. These aspects were the subject of much argument by the unbelievers who either denied them or who arrived at assumptions lacking any supporting evidence. The unbelievers in Makkah sometimes alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was in contact with the *jinn* who taught him what to say about faith. Now, a group of the *jinn* give their testimony, stating that they did not know anything about the Qur'ān until they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) reciting it, and that they were then overwhelmed by its powerful truth. In fact, its effect on them was so profound that they could not remain silent. They had to speak in detail about what they had heard and felt. Their discourse reflects their total amazement at this great event with its lasting effects on the heavens, the earth, humans, *jinn*, angels and stars. Indeed, its effects cover the entire universe. Their testimony undoubtedly has a strong effect on man too.

Moreover, the *jinn*'s statement corrects many aspects of superstition upheld by those addressed by the *sūrah* for the first time, and by many other people across successive generations. It presents clear facts about this type of God's creatures, without any exaggeration. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān believed that the *jinn* exercised much power on earth. When an Arab found himself at night in a valley or an open plain, he would seek shelter with the *jinnee* of that

place, saying: "I seek shelter with the master of this valley against the designs of the wicked elements among his people." When he had said so, he could then sleep in peace. They also believed that the *jinn* had knowledge of *ghayb*, or what lies beyond the reach of human perception. They would give information to soothsayers who would then make predictions. Some Arabs worshipped the *jinn*, alleging that they were related to God. Some suggested that God had a wife from among the *jinn* and that she gave birth to angels.

Belief in the *jinn* on lines similar to these is widespread in all *jāhiliyyah* societies. Indeed, some legends and superstitions about them continue to be spread in different environments, even in the present day.

While such superstitions used to circulate widely, giving people different ideas and concepts about them, there were also other people who denied their existence altogether. They described any talk about the *jinn* as superstitious. Therefore, Islam sets the record straight. It confirms their existence and corrects wrong ideas about them, freeing people from the shackles of fear about the *jinn* and submission to their alleged authority.

The *jinn* do exist. They describe themselves in this *sūrah* in the following words: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) Some go astray and lead people astray, while others are naïve and can easily be deceived: "*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) They are susceptible to divine guidance, able to listen to the Qur'ān, understand it and be affected by it: "*Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verses 1–2) By their nature, they can be punished, and the results of belief and unbelief can affect them: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 13–15) When humans appeal to them, they cannot benefit them; on the contrary,

they increase their affliction: "*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) They have no knowledge of the realm beyond their perception, and they no longer have any contact with heaven: "*We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verses 8–10) They have no relation to God Almighty: "*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) They have no power to resist God's will: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12)

We learn all this about the *jinn* from what is mentioned in this *sūrah*. Some of their other characteristics are mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān. For example, there is the reference to those of them who were made subservient to the Prophet Solomon. They did not know of his death until sometime after it occurred, which confirms that they have no knowledge of what is beyond their faculties of perception: "*When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff. And when he fell to the ground, the* jinn *saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.*" (34: 14) The Qur'ān also refers to a quality of *Iblīs* and his folk. *Iblīs*, or Satan, belonged to the *jinn*, but he is devoted totally to evil, corruption and tempting others to do evil: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This implies that the *jinn* have a form that humans cannot see, while they can see us. In addition, *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, states from which substances the *jinn* and human beings are created: "*He created man from dried clay, like pottery, and created the* jinn *from raging flames of fire.*" (55: 14–15) All this gives us a clear picture of this species that is concealed from us. It confirms its existence and gives us many of its characteristics. At the same time, it shows as false many of the ideas and superstitions people held about these creatures. It gives us a clear and accurate picture of them, one that is free of wild conjecture.

The *sūrah* corrects what the Arab unbelievers and other people used to say about the *jinn*, believing that they had exceptional powers and a large role to play in the universe. Others who have denied the existence of these creatures outright, mocking anyone who so believes, do not tell us the basis of their denial. Do they claim that they know every type of creature in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No scientist has ever made such a claim. The earth contains many species of creation which are discovered from time to time. No one claims that there will ever be an end to the discovery of new species.

Do they believe that they know all the powers at play in the universe and cannot find the *jinn* among them? No one can make such a claim. Every day, new powers are discovered, after having previously been unknown to man. Scientists try hard to know more of the powers and forces in the universe. They declare, in an attitude of humility, which their scientific discoveries have taught them, that they still stand at the edge of the unknown in the universe, and that they have hardly scraped the surface of it all.

Have they seen all the powers man utilizes and yet still cannot see the *jinn* among these? Not so. Since they managed to produce nuclear fission, scientists speak of the electron as scientific truth, yet none of them has seen an electron. They do not have in their laboratories a machine that can isolate an electron!

Why, then, are they so insistent on negating the very existence of this species of creature when man's information about the universe, its forces and dwellers is so scanty? Is it because so many superstitions have been weaved around the *jinn*? If so, the proper course of action is to show how such superstitions are false, just as the Qur'ān does. It is certainly not right to counteract it by denying their existence without having any proper evidence to support such a claim. Since this belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of our own perceptive faculties, we should refer to the only source from which we have accurate and confirmed information. This source cannot be contradicted by preconceived ideas. What this source tells us is final.

The *Jinn*'s Account

This *sūrah* contributes significantly to the formulation of the Islamic concept of the truth of the Godhead and servitude to Him, as well as the truth of the universe, the creatures living in it and their interrelations.

In the *jinn*'s account we have confirmation of God's oneness, a negation of His having a spouse or a son, affirmation of reckoning and requital in the life to come, and the fact that no creature can ever escape God anywhere in the universe. All will receive their fair dues. Some of the facts clearly stated by the *jinn* are then repeated in the part of the *sūrah* that addresses the Prophet: "*Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.'*" (Verse 20) "*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him.*" (Verse 22)

The *jinn*'s account asserts that Godhead belongs only to God, and that servitude to Him is the highest status people can attain: "*Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* confirms this truth in its address to the Prophet: "*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The world beyond our perception belongs totally to God alone, and the *jinn* know nothing about it: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) It is also unknown to God's messengers, apart from what God, in His infinite wisdom, chooses to inform them of: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verses 25–27)

We learn from this *sūrah* that some interaction may take place between different types of creatures even though they may have totally different natures and constitutions. An example of such interaction is what happens between man and the *jinn*, as mentioned in this *sūrah* as elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Even in his abode on earth, man is not isolated from other creation. He may have some interaction with them. The isolation man

feels, as a species or a community or an individual, does not apply to the nature of the universe. This idea should broaden man's feelings towards the universe and the creatures, forces and secrets it contains. Man may not be aware of these, but they exist in the world around him. He is not the only dweller in the universe as he sometimes imagines.

Moreover, there is a definite causal relation between people's following the right way and the operation of some forces in the universe, according to God's will and its effect on His creatures: "*Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verses 16–17) This is a truth that forms part of the Islamic concept of the interrelation between man, the universe and God's will.

As we see, the *sūrah* stretches with its inspiration over great areas and wide horizons, even though it consists of no more than 28 verses. Furthermore, it was revealed on a particular occasion to report on a certain event.

Reports of the Event

There are a number of different reports about the *jinn* listening to the Qur'ān. One quotes 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās as saying: "God's Messenger did not read the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. What took place was that the Prophet and a group of his Companions once went to the 'Ukāẓ market place. The *jinn* had previously been barred from trying to reach heaven to eavesdrop and were struck by shooting stars. They went back to their people and told them what happened. They said: 'Something must have happened to prevent you from learning anything from heaven. Go in pursuit of information throughout the earth to find out what has happened. They went in groups, travelling east and west throughout the earth. The group that went to Tihamah drew close to the Prophet when he was in the Nakhlah Valley, going to 'Ukāẓ. He was leading his Companions in the *Fajr*, or Dawn, Prayer. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān. When he finished his recitation, they said to each other: 'This is indeed what happened to cause you to be barred from learning news from on high.' They went back to their people and

told them: '*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*' God then revealed the *sūrah*, The *Jinn*, to the Prophet speaking of this event." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Another report mentions that 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd gave the following answer to the question about whether any of the Prophet's Companions were present with him when he met the *jinn*: "None of us were present. However, we were with him one night when he went missing. We looked for him everywhere, in valleys and on the paths, but could not find him. Some of us thought that he might have been taken or even killed. That was our worst night. In the morning, we saw him coming to us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said: 'Messenger of God! We missed you and looked for you everywhere but could not find you. We had such a bad night.' He said: 'A caller from the *jinn* came to me and so I went and read the Qur'ān to them.' He took us to the place and showed us their traces and the remains of the fires they lit. They asked him for food. He said: 'Every bone of an animal slaughtered under God's name will be in your hands full of meat; and all animal droppings will be wholesome feed for your animals.' The Prophet then said to us: 'Do not use these to wipe off your personal dirt, because they are food for your brethren'." [Related by Muslim.]

There is a third report also attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, but the chain of transmission of the one we have quoted makes it more reliable. We will, therefore, leave this and similar reports aside. The two authentic reports we have quoted seem to be mutually contradictory. Ibn 'Abbās says that the Prophet did not know of the *jinn*'s presence when they listened to him reading the Qur'ān, while Ibn Mas'ūd says that they called upon the Prophet and he went with them. Al-Bayhaqī resolves this apparent contradiction by saying that the two reports speak of two different occasions, not just one.

A different report is given by Ibn Isḥāq in his biography of the Prophet. He says that after the death of Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's uncle, the Quraysh were able to inflict more harm on him than they could ever do during his uncle's lifetime. Therefore, the Prophet went to Taif, seeking support from the Thaqīf, the major tribe living there. He went there alone, hoping to gain a positive response:

Once at Ṭā'if, the Prophet approached its leading personalities, explaining his message... For ten days the Prophet spoke to one of their chiefs after another. None gave him a word of encouragement. The worst response came from three brothers, the sons of 'Amr ibn 'Umayr. These three brothers, 'Abd Yalīl, Mas'ūd and Ḥabīb, were the recognized leaders of Ṭā'if. One of them was married to a Qurayshi woman and the Prophet hoped that this relationship would work in his favour. In the event the three men were extremely rude in their rejection of the Prophet's approach.

The first one said: "I would tear the robes off the Ka'bah if it was true that God has chosen you as His Messenger." The second said: "Has God found no one other than you to be His Messenger?" The third said: "By God, I will never speak to you. If it is true that you are God's Messenger, you are too great for me to speak to you. If, on the other hand, you are lying, you are not worth answering."

Fearing that the news of their rejection would serve to intensify the Quraysh's hostility to Islam, the Prophet requested the Thaqīf notables not to publicize his mission. They refused him even that. Instead they set on him a crowd of their teenagers and servants, who chased and stoned him. His feet were soon bleeding and he was in a very sorry state. Zayd tried hard to defend him and protect him from the stones. The Prophet then sought refuge in an orchard which belonged to two brothers from Makkah. They were in their orchard, and they saw Muḥammad when he entered. At first they watched him quietly, but he did not see them.

As the Prophet sat down, he said this highly emotional and touching prayer:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?
>
> If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

> I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.

The owners of the orchard were none other than 'Utbah and Shaybah, the two sons of Rabī'ah, who commanded positions of high esteem in the Quraysh. Although the two brothers were opposed to Islam and to Muḥammad, they felt sorry for him in his unenviable plight. Therefore, they called a servant of theirs, named 'Addās, and told him to take a bunch of grapes on a plate to Muḥammad. 'Addās, who was a Christian from the Iraqi town of Nineveh, complied.

As the Prophet took the grapes he said, as Muslims do before eating: 'In the name of God.' Surprised, 'Addās said: 'This is something no one in these areas says.' When 'Addās answered the Prophet's question about his religion and place of origin, the Prophet commented: 'Then you come from the same place as the noble, divine Jonah.' Even more surprised, 'Addās asked: 'How did you know about Jonah? When I left Nineveh, not even ten people knew anything about him.' The Prophet said: 'He was my brother. Like me, he was a prophet.' 'Addās then kissed the Prophet's head, hands and feet in a gesture of genuine love and respect. As they watched, one of the two owners of the orchard said to his brother: 'That man has certainly spoilt your slave.'

When 'Addās joined them they asked him the reason for his very respectful attitude to Muḥammad. He said: 'There can be no one on earth better than him. He has indeed told me something which no one but a Prophet would know.' They said: 'You should be careful, 'Addās. He may try to convert you while your religion is better than his.'[1]

1. Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, Vol. II, pp. 60–63. Also, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *'Uyūn al-Athar*, pp. 231–233. Also, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 179–180.

Continuing this report, Ibn Isḥāq says: "When the Prophet despaired of receiving any good response in Ṭā'if, he returned to Makkah. When he was at Nakhlah, he stood up praying in the middle of the night. It was at this time that a group of the *jinn* – seven in number from the town of Naṣībīn [in northern Syria] as I was told – passed by and listened to him reading the Qur'ān. When he finished his prayer, they left hurriedly to warn their people. They believed in Islam and God told the Prophet of what happened: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (46: 29–31) He also revealed *Sūrah* 72, The Jinn."

Ibn Kathīr has the following comment to make on this last report: "The event itself is true, but to say that it took place on that night is questionable. The *jinn*'s listening to the Qur'ān occurred during the early days of prophethood, as clearly indicated in the above-quoted *ḥadīth* of Ibn 'Abbās. On the other hand, the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if occurred after his uncle's death, one or two years before his migration to Madīnah, as confirmed by Ibn Isḥāq and others."

If Ibn Isḥāq's report is true and this incident took place when the Prophet was on his way back from Ṭā'if, hurt by the arrogant response of the Thaqīf elders, and after he had expressed his passionate prayer appealing to God, his Lord and Protector, then it is most remarkable that God should have sent him those *jinn* and told him about what they said to their people. Moreover, it gives fine impressions of God's care.

At whichever time and place this event took place, it is certainly very significant in itself and in what the *jinn* had to say about the Qur'ān and Islam. We will now discuss its presentation in the *sūrah*.

Al-Jinn (The Jinn)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the *jinn* listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, (1)

قُلْ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ أَنَّهُ اسْتَمَعَ نَفَرٌ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ فَقَالُوا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا قُرْآنًا عَجَبًا ﴿١﴾

giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. (2)

يَهْدِي إِلَى الرُّشْدِ فَآمَنَّا بِهِ ۖ وَلَن نُّشْرِكَ بِرَبِّنَا أَحَدًا ﴿٢﴾

Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. (3)

وَأَنَّهُ تَعَالَىٰ جَدُّ رَبِّنَا مَا اتَّخَذَ صَاحِبَةً وَلَا وَلَدًا ﴿٣﴾

Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. (4)

وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ يَقُولُ سَفِيهُنَا عَلَى اللَّهِ شَطَطًا ﴿٤﴾

Yet we had thought that no man or *jinn* would ever utter a lie about God. (5)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّا أَن لَّن تَقُولَ الْإِنسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿٥﴾

True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the *jinn*, but they caused them further trouble. (6)

وَأَنَّهُ كَانَ رِجَالٌ مِّنَ الْإِنسِ يَعُوذُونَ بِرِجَالٍ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ فَزَادُوهُمْ رَهَقًا ﴿٦﴾

They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone. (7)

وَأَنَّهُمْ ظَنُّوا كَمَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَبْعَثَ
اللَّهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٧﴾

We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. (8)

وَأَنَّا لَمَسْنَا السَّمَاءَ فَوَجَدْنَاهَا مُلِئَتْ
حَرَسًا شَدِيدًا وَشُهُبًا ﴿٨﴾

We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. (9)

وَأَنَّا كُنَّا نَقْعُدُ مِنْهَا مَقَاعِدَ لِلسَّمْعِ ۖ فَمَن
يَسْتَمِعِ الْآنَ يَجِدْ لَهُ شِهَابًا رَّصَدًا ﴿٩﴾

We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right. (10)

وَأَنَّا لَا نَدْرِي أَشَرٌّ أُرِيدَ بِمَن فِي الْأَرْضِ
أَمْ أَرَادَ بِهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. (11)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا الصَّالِحُونَ وَمِنَّا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ ۖ
كُنَّا طَرَائِقَ قِدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. (12)

وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّا أَن لَّن نُّعْجِزَ اللَّهَ فِي الْأَرْضِ
وَلَن نُّعْجِزَهُ هَرَبًا ﴿١٢﴾

When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. (13)

وَأَنَّا لَمَّا سَمِعْنَا الْهُدَىٰ آمَنَّا بِهِ ۖ
فَمَن يُؤْمِن بِرَبِّهِ فَلَا يَخَافُ بَخْسًا
وَلَا رَهَقًا ﴿١٣﴾

Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. (14)

وَأَنَّا مِنَّا الْمُسْلِمُونَ وَمِنَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ ۖ
فَمَنْ أَسْلَمَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا رَشَدًا ﴿١٤﴾

But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire. (15)

وَأَمَّا ٱلْقَٰسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا۟ لِجَهَنَّمَ حَطَبًا ﴿١٥﴾

Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, (16)

وَأَلَّوِ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلطَّرِيقَةِ لَأَسْقَيْنَٰهُم مَّآءً غَدَقًا ﴿١٦﴾

so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering. (17)

لِّنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَن يُعْرِضْ عَن ذِكْرِ رَبِّهِۦ يَسْلُكْهُ عَذَابًا صَعَدًا ﴿١٧﴾

Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God. (18)

وَأَنَّ ٱلْمَسَٰجِدَ لِلَّهِ فَلَا تَدْعُوا۟ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ أَحَدًا ﴿١٨﴾

Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude. (19)

وَأَنَّهُۥ لَمَّا قَامَ عَبْدُ ٱللَّهِ يَدْعُوهُ كَادُوا۟ يَكُونُونَ عَلَيْهِ لِبَدًا ﴿١٩﴾

Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' (20)

قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَدْعُوا۟ رَبِّى وَلَآ أُشْرِكُ بِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' (21)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَآ أَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢١﴾

Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. (22)

قُلْ إِنِّى لَن يُجِيرَنِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ أَحَدٌ وَلَنْ أَجِدَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مُلْتَحَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾

My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. (23)

إِلَّا بَلَٰغًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِسَٰلَٰتِهِۦ ۚ وَمَن يَعْصِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ نَارَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾

When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. (24)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَأَوْا۟ مَا يُوعَدُونَ فَسَيَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ أَضْعَفُ نَاصِرًا وَأَقَلُّ عَدَدًا ﴿٢٤﴾

Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. (25)

قُلْ إِنْ أَدْرِىٓ أَقَرِيبٌ مَّا تُوعَدُونَ أَمْ يَجْعَلُ لَهُۥ رَبِّىٓ أَمَدًا ﴿٢٥﴾

He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone (26)

عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِۦٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, (27)

إِلَّا مَنِ ٱرْتَضَىٰ مِن رَّسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُۥ يَسْلُكُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِۦ رَصَدًا ﴿٢٧﴾

to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.' (28)

لِّيَعْلَمَ أَن قَدْ أَبْلَغُوا۟ رِسَٰلَٰتِ رَبِّهِمْ وَأَحَاطَ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ وَأَحْصَىٰ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عَدَدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

A Surprise for the *Jinn*

> *Say: It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened in and then said: 'We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son. Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God. True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble. They thus came to think, just like you thought, that God will not raise anyone.'* (Verses 1–7)

The Arabic word *nafar*, used in the opening verse and translated here as 'a group', signifies a group of people between three and nine in number. Some reports suggest that they were seven.

This opening suggests that the Prophet learnt of the *jinn*'s listening to his recitation and what they did afterwards through revelation from on high. It is God who told him about that of which he had no knowledge. This might have been the first time, and there might have been one or more other occasions when the Prophet read out the Qur'ān to the *jinn*, as reported by Jābir in a *ḥadīth* that says: "God's Messenger read out *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, in full to his Companions. When he finished, they were silent. He said: 'I read this *sūrah* to the *jinn* and they gave a better response than you. Every time I read the repeated verse, '*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*' they said: 'None of Your blessings, our Lord, do we deny. All thanks are due to You'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] This report confirms the one by Ibn Mas'ūd mentioned in the Prologue.

The event mentioned in the present *sūrah* must be the same referred to in *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, which says: "*We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. 'Our people! Respond to God's call and have*

faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.'" (Verses 29–32) These verses speak, as does the present *sūrah*, of the great surprise felt by the *jinn* when they first listened to the Qur'ān. It had such a great effect on their minds, hearts and feelings. They were filled with emotion, resulting in their travel in great haste to tell their people. Their report expresses such overflowing emotions. Indeed, it is stated in an exceptionally fluent, warm, charged and very happy style. The surprise for them was great and their reaction was only natural.

"*We have heard a wondrous discourse.*" (Verse 1) The first thing they realize about the Qur'ānic discourse is that it is unfamiliar, and that it makes the listener wonder. This is how the Qur'ān is received by anyone who listens with an open and positive mind. He will find that the Qur'ān contains intrinsic power, strong appeal and beautiful music that touch hearts and feelings. It is '*wondrous*' indeed, which tells us that the group of *jinn* listening to it had refined literary tastes.

"*Giving guidance to what is sagacious.*" (Verse 2) This is the second prominent feature of the Qur'ān which the *jinn* immediately felt within their hearts. That they use the word 'sagacious' to describe it is particularly significant. It is true that the Qur'ān guides to what is right and sensible, but the term 'sagacious' also connotes maturity and wisdom that distinguishes right from wrong. It adds an element of awareness that naturally guides to the truth and to what is right and good. It establishes a bond with the source of light and guidance, as well as harmony with major universal laws. In doing so, the Qur'ān guides to what is sagacious, as indeed it does by providing a code of living the like of which has never been experienced by any other human community. Yet this system enabled individuals and communities to attain sublime standards in personal morality and values as well as in social relations and interactions.

"*And we have come to believe in it.*" (Verse 2) This is the natural and sound reaction to listening to the Qur'ān and understanding its nature. The *sūrah* puts this response to the unbelievers in Makkah who used to listen to the Qur'ān but who would not believe in it. They even attributed it to the *jinn*, alleging that the Prophet was a soothsayer, a poet or a

madman, influenced by the *jinn*. Here, we see the *jinn* wondering at the Qur'ān, profoundly influenced by its discourse, unable to resist it. We see them able to discern the truth and submit to it: "*We have come to believe in it.*" They could not turn away from the truth they clearly felt.

"*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) Theirs, then, is a case of complete faith, untainted by delusions, superstitions or any element of polytheism. It is faith based on understanding the truth presented by the Qur'ān, i.e. the truth of God's absolute oneness.

"*Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verse 3) The *sūrah* uses here the Arabic word *jadd*, attributing it to God. This word connotes share, position, authority and greatness. All these connotations are meant here. Hence the translation of the first sentence in the verse. What is intended here is to impart a clear feeling of God's greatness and His being far above taking a wife or child for Himself. The Arabs used to allege that the angels were God's daughters through a marriage to the *jinn*. Now the *jinn* deny such a superstition in a most expressive way. They glorify God and deny that such a notion could ever have happened. The *jinn* would have proudly proclaimed such a connection had there been any possibility of it ever having taken place. Their denial delivers a massive blow at the unbelievers' baseless claims, and indeed at every similar claim alleging that God has taken a son to Himself in any way, shape or form.

"*Some foolish ones among us have been saying some outrageous things about God. Yet we had thought that no man or* jinn *would ever utter a lie about God.*" (Verses 4–5) This is a critical examination of what the *jinn* used to hear some of the foolish among them say. Those are the ones who did not believe in God's oneness and who alleged that He had a wife, a son and partners. Now that they have heard the Qur'ān, they realize this is all absolutely false. Those who promote such ideas are, therefore, foolish, lacking sound mind. They explain their own earlier belief of what those foolish ones said by the fact that they could not imagine that any creature, human or *jinn*, would ever perpetrate a lie about God. To them, that was an absolute enormity. Therefore, when those foolish people told them that God had a wife, a son and partners, they believed them because they could not conceive of how anyone would knowingly utter an untruth about God. Indeed, their

perception of the enormity of lying about God is what qualified this group of *jinn* to immediately declare their belief when they listened to the Qur'ān. It shows that their hearts and minds were free of deviation. They had only fallen into error as a result of the trust they assumed in other people. When they heard the truth, they immediately realized it. They recognized it and submitted to it. They made their declaration definitive: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate partners with our Lord. Sublimely exalted is the glory of our Lord! He has taken to Himself neither consort nor son.*" (Verses 1–3)

This immediate and instinctive reaction to the truth should have been enough to awaken many of those who were deluded by the Quraysh elders and their claims that God had partners, or a wife and son. It should have made them more cautious about what they heard and alerted them to the need to examine what the Prophet Muḥammad said in a meaningful attempt to arrive at the truth. This should have been enough to shake the blind trust they placed in what those foolish Quraysh elders said to the contrary. This is what the *sūrah* intends by virtue of its effects. It is all intended as part of its long treatment of the lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah* in people's minds and thoughts, many of whom were simple but deluded by false claims and superstitions.

Between Humans and *Jinn*

"*True, in the past some among mankind sought refuge with some of the* jinn, *but they caused them further trouble.*" (Verse 6) Here, the *jinn* refer to what was widely accepted in pre-Islamic days in Arabian society, and which remains accepted in many other communities, claiming that the *jinn,* exercized power on the earth and against humans. Indeed, it was thought that they were able to bring about benefit and cause harm to people, and that they were in full control of certain areas of land, sea and air. Satan is given access to people's minds and hearts. Only those who seek protection with God are saved from him. Whoever listens to him is listening to his own worst enemy who will not bring him any benefit. On the contrary, he will increase his problems. This group of *jinn* report on what used to happen: "*True, in the past some among mankind*

to following guidance or error.[3] Hence, it is an aspect of God's grace that He has willed to help mankind by sending them messengers to promote goodness in their natures and to enhance their tendency to follow guidance. There are no grounds, then, for thinking that God would not be sending any messengers.

This is true when we take the verse to refer to sending God's messengers. If we take the reference to mean resurrection on the Day of Judgement, we say again that it is necessary for humans, since they do not finish their life's account in this present world. This is to fulfil a certain purpose of God's. It relates to the design He has chosen for the universe, yet we know nothing about this design. He has decreed that all will be resurrected to receive their accounts and resume life along the path their first life qualifies them for. Again, this leaves no room to suggest that God will not resurrect anyone. Such a suggestion is contrary to believing in God's wisdom and perfection.

This group of *jinn* presents the right belief directly to their people. Furthermore, the Qur'ān reports it to show the falsehood in the unbelievers' way of thinking.

Shooting Stars

Continuing to report on what they learnt about the last divine message and its echoes throughout the universe, the *jinn* disclaim any knowledge of the realm that lies beyond the reach of theirs and human perception. They disclaim having any role in it:

> *We tried to reach heaven, but found it full of mighty guards and shooting stars. We used to take up positions there to listen, but whoever tries to listen now will find a shooting star in wait for him. We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.* (Verses 8–10)

3. We also learn from this *sūrah* that the *jinn* also have a dual nature, except for *Iblīs* or Satan who belonged to them but dedicated himself totally to evil. He was expelled from God's mercy and became totally evil with no room for goodness in him.

This suggests that in the period that preceded the revelation of God's final message, perhaps in between it and Jesus' message, the *jinn* used to try to reach up to heaven to eavesdrop on the angels and their discussion of their assignments with respect to the affairs of God's creatures on earth. They would impart such information to their human friends, the soothsayers and astrologers, to enable them to delude people. In accordance with Satan's plot, these soothsayers and astrologers would then use a small portion of the truth they so received and mix it with much falsehood, circulating it among people. This might have been the case when there was no messenger preaching the divine message on earth, in the intervening period between Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them both). What form this took we do not know, because the Qur'ān has not given us any information about it. In any case, there is no need to explore it further because we accept it as the sum of this fact.

This group of *jinn* say that such eavesdropping, to which they refer by '*reaching up to heaven*', was no longer possible. When they tried it, they found the way blocked by mighty guards and shooting stars aimed at them, indeed killing them. They declare that they know nothing about the prospect determined for mankind: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) They, thus, clearly declare that they have no access to such information because it is part of God's own knowledge. When the very source the soothsayers claim to receive their very special information from declares that it has no such knowledge, then nothing more can be said. All soothsaying and astrology are thus shown to be false. The world beyond belongs to God who alone knows it all. No one can dare claim any special knowledge of it or predict it. The Qur'ān declares that the human mind must remain free of any such delusion. It rids mankind of all such superstitions.

Who or what are those mighty guards? Where do they stand? How do they aim the shooting stars at the devils trying to eavesdrop? Neither the Qur'ān nor the *Ḥadīth* tells us anything of these questions. We do not have any other source to rely on. Had it been useful for us to learn any details of this, God would have given us them. Since He has chosen not to do so, it is futile for us to try anything in this regard. It does not add anything to our lives or to our useful knowledge.

Nor is there any use objecting to this information, or arguing that shooting stars function according to a particular celestial order that remained in operation before and after the Prophet's message, or by adding that astronomers are still trying to explain how this system works. Whatever theories astronomers and scientists come up with, and whether these are correct or not, are outside our discussion here. The system does not preclude that these shooting stars aim at devils as they try to eavesdrop, or that they move in accordance with God's will that gave them their operational system, whether they are meant to hit anyone or not.

Others view all this discussion as figurative, giving us an abstraction of how God preserves His message from being mixed up with falsehood. They maintain that such statements should not be taken at face value. The reason they take this line is that they approach the Qur'ān with preconceived ideas that they acquire from other sources and try to give the Qur'ān an interpretation that fits such preconceptions. Thus, they view the angels as a symbol of goodness and obedience to God, Satan and his group as a symbol of evil and disobedience, and the shooting stars as a symbol of the power of preservation and protection. This is because their notions, which they conceive before they look at the Qur'ān, tell them that neither the angels, devils nor *jinn* could have any physical existence, or take any tangible action, or leave any practical effect. Where do they get all this from? How do they arrive at such preconceptions to which they subject Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* statements?

The proper approach to understanding the Qur'ān is to abandon all preconceptions, whether emotional, intellectual or logical, and to formulate our concepts on the basis of the Qur'ān's presentation of the truth about the universe. In other words, the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth* must be taken only in light of the Qur'ān. We must not try to negate or interpret anything stated in the Qur'ān, or to prove anything the Qur'ān negates or considers invalid. On anything else the Qur'ān neither proves nor negates, we may judge according to logic and experience.

We naturally say this to people who believe in the Qur'ān, yet try to interpret its statements according to their own preconceived ideas of

how things in the universe must be.[4] Those, on the other hand, who do not believe in the Qur'ān, yet arbitrarily try to negate certain facts because science has not proven them, make laughable claims. Science has not yet fathomed the secrets of things that are available to scientists who use them in their research. This lack of knowledge does not negate their existence. Moreover, large numbers of scientists began to believe in the unknown on the same lines as the advocates of religion, or at least these scientists do not deny what they do not know. Pursuing their scientific work, they have found themselves facing some unknowns, when they had thought these to be totally known to man. Hence, they have become humble, unprepared to make wild claims about that which they do not know. They do not disregard the unknown as some of those who deny religion altogether do, claiming that they monopolize scientific thinking.

To Tread the Unknown

The universe around us is full of secrets, spirits and forces. This *sūrah*, like many others, gives us a glimpse of some truths in the universe to help us formulate a proper concept of it and what it contains of forces and lives that carry on around us as also interact with us and with human life in general. This is the concept that distinguishes us, Muslims, putting us in the right position, leaning neither to delusion and superstition, nor to arrogance and insupportable claims. It is a concept based on the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*. It is to these two that a Muslim refers all theories and interpretations.

The human mind is given a certain area where man can explore the unknown; indeed Islam directs man to do so, pressurizing him into such action. However, beyond this scope lies a wide area that the human mind cannot access, and to which it does not need such access. It is of

4. I do not absolve myself of falling into this trap in my previous works and in the early volumes of this work. I hope to rectify this in the second edition of this book. What I am stating here is what I believe to be the truth in the light of God's guidance.

Needless to say, the author is here referring to the first Arabic edition of these volumes, which was much shorter and less detailed than the second. This English translation is based on the second edition. – Editor's note.

no use to us in the fulfilment of the task assigned to us, namely, building human life on earth. Hence, man has not been given such access; it is outside of his remit. Whatever he needs to know of this unknown realm in order to understand his own position in relation to the universe and what is around him has been explained to him by God, in terms that he can understand. Aspects of this area that we have been given information about include the angels, the devils, the spirit, our origin and our ultimate destination.

Those who follow divine guidance accept what God has revealed to them of these aspects in His book and through His messengers. They benefit by this feeling of God's majesty and His wisdom with regard to creation. They also learn man's position in relation to such forces and spirits. They dedicate themselves to making whatever scientific discoveries they can manage within the area of the universe made available to man. They utilize their discoveries in the all important task assigned to them, which is building sound human life on the basis of divine guidance, seeking God's acceptance and endeavouring to rise to the sublime level man can achieve.

Others who turn their backs on divine guidance are split into two large groups. One continues to strive, with their own finite minds, to understand the infinite, and to learn the hidden truth from sources other than God's revelations. Among these have been some philosophers who tried to explain the universe and the mutual bonds between its different parts. They made fatal errors, just like children who try to climb a very high mountain with no known summit. They are trying to solve the essential secret of the universe when they have not yet learnt the alphabet! Prominent philosophers among them even arrived at ludicrous concepts. When these are compared to the consistent and lucid concept Islam presents, they appear absurd, full of errors and ironies. They are too naïve to explain the universe, great as it certainly is. I make no exception here in respect of the great Greek philosophers of old, or the Muslim philosophers who toed their line, or of contemporary philosophers.

The other large group recognizes the futility of such attempts and limits itself and its efforts to experimental and applied scientific research. It makes no attempt to penetrate into the unknown, where it knows it cannot go. Scientists in this group refuse to accept God's guidance

on this because they do not recognize God. This group was at its most extreme during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but began in the early years of the twentieth century to wake up and reconsider its extremism. What produced its wake-up call was the transformation of matter in the hands of scientists to radiation, which is of 'unknown nature' and subject to almost unknown law.

By contrast, Islam remained at its vantage point of certainty, giving mankind a measure of the unknown that is good and beneficial for them, allowing them to dedicate themselves to work for the elevation of human life. It gives them the scope in which their minds can work in safety and security. It guides them to what is best in respect of what is known and what remains unknown.

The *Jinn* Community

The *jinn* then describe their own situation and their attitude towards divine guidance. We understand from this that they have a similar nature to mankind, with the dual propensity to either believe or go astray. This group who believed now speak of their faith and what fate awaits the follower of either course:

> *Some among us are righteous and others less so: we follow widely divergent paths. We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight. When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it. Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice. Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.* (Verses 11–15)

The statement that some of them are righteous and some less so, that some submit to God and others refuse to do so, clearly indicates their dual capacity, except that is for those of them who were determined to be unfair permanently, i.e. Satan and his group. This is a very important statement as it corrects our general perception of these creatures. Many of us, including scholars, tend to think that the *jinn* represent evil, that

their nature is decidedly bad, while man is the only creature capable of good or evil. It is time we corrected this ill-founded idea.

This group of *jinn* says: "*Some among us are righteous and others less so.*" (Verse 11) They describe their general situation: "*We follow widely divergent paths.*" (Verse 11) This means that each group takes a totally different course from the other, and the two paths do not meet. They go on to explain their own beliefs after they have accepted the divine faith: "*We know that we can never elude God on earth, and we can never elude Him by flight.*" (Verse 12) They know God's power. They know they can never escape from Him or what He wills for them. They cannot elude Him on earth nor can they elude Him by running away from earth. They thus acknowledge their weakness before the Creator. They know that everything in the universe is subject to His absolute power.

It is these very creatures, the *jinn*, to whom some humans appeal for support and protection, and who they call upon for help. They are the ones whom the unbelievers claimed to have a marriage relation with God. Yet here they acknowledge their own weakness and God's might. They, thus, correct their own people's and the unbelievers' notion about the only power to which no other can stand.

Although they had already stated their belief, they repeat this here in the context of the *jinn*'s differing attitudes to divine guidance: "*When we heard the guidance, we came to believe in it.*" (Verse 13) This is what everyone who hears divine guidance should do. What they heard was the Qur'ān, but here they call it '*the guidance*', confirming its nature and outcome. They follow this by a statement confirming their absolute trust in God: "*Whoever believes in his Lord need never fear loss or injustice.*" (Verse 13) They have complete trust in God's justice and power. They know the nature of faith. God is fair and He will never fail to give a believer his fair reward. He never burdens him with what he cannot bear. He will protect believers against loss and injustice. Who can inflict loss on a believer or overburden him when he is under God's care, enjoying His protection? Some believers may be deprived of some of life's riches, but this is not what is meant by '*loss*'. Such losses are easily compensated for to ensure fairness. A believer may also suffer harm caused him by some earthly forces, but this is not the '*injustice*' the Qur'ānic verse refers to. God will always give the believer an increase of energy to be able

to tolerate the pain and channel it in a positive way so as to strengthen him. His ties with his Lord will ease the hardship, turning it to what is good for him both in this life and in the life to come.

A believer is thus reassured that he will suffer neither loss nor injustice. This reassurance gives him great confidence throughout times of ease. He is free of worry and fear. When things change and he suffers adversity, he neither panics nor feels overwhelmed. He considers such hardship and misfortune to be a trial God wants him to go through. He bears such adversity with patience. Indeed, he is rewarded for his patience. Furthermore, he hopes that God will relieve this adversity and that again he will be rewarded. Hence, whether the situation be one of ease or adversity, he does not fear or experience either loss or unfairness. This group of *jinn* give a true description of this truth.

The *jinn* now refer to their views about guidance and error and the requital for each: "*Some of us submit to Him and others are unfair. Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right. But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verses 14–15) The *jinn* thus contrast those who are unfair with those who submit themselves to God, or are Muslims. This is a fine touch. A Muslim who submits himself to God is always fair and righteous.

"*Those who submit to God are the ones who have endeavoured to attain what is right.*" (Verse 14) The way this sentence is phrased suggests that to be guided to Islam a person needs to be very careful and meticulous in seeking proper guidance. It also implies a conscious choice of what is right, based on careful study and clear vision. This does not, however, come about by coincidence, or by following the crowd, as it were! It means that these people arrived at what is right when they chose Islam and submitted themselves to God. "*But those who are unfair will be the fuel of hellfire.*" (Verse 15) Their fate is settled. They will become the fuel of hell, and it will rage even more fiercely when they are cast into it.

This confirms that the *jinn* are also punished in hell. It similarly implies that the good among them are destined for heaven. The Qur'ānic text also bears this out and it is from the Qur'ān that we derive our beliefs. No one, then, can say anything that is not based on the Qur'ān, particularly about the nature of the *jinn*, hell and heaven. Whatever else is said in this regard is futile.

What applies to the *jinn*, as they explained it to their people, also applies to humans. They have been informed of this through revelation recited to them by the Prophet.

Different Types of Trial

Up to this point, the *sūrah* has quoted what the *jinn* said about themselves. Now, it summarizes what they said about what God does with those who follow the right course, obeying His commands. In doing so, the Qur'ān reports their ideas without actually quoting their precise words:

> *Had they established themselves on the right way, We would have given them abundant water to drink, so as to test them by this means. Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.* (Verses 16–17)

God Almighty confirms what the *jinn* said to the effect that had people maintained following the right way, or had those who were unfair followed the right way, He would have given them water in plenty, which would have ensured their prosperity. All this would be "*so as to test them by this means.*" (Verse 17) Such a trial establishes whether they are grateful or not.

This change of style, from quoting direct speech to reporting it, enhances the effect because it attributes the message and the promise it gives to God Almighty. Such changes are frequent in the Qur'ān. It reinforces the meaning and draws attention to it.

These two verses include several facts related to Islamic beliefs, how we look at events and how they interrelate. The first of these is the direct relation between following the straight path leading to God, by nations and communities, and their enjoying prosperity and provisions in plenty. The most essential requirement of such prosperity is abundant water. All life depends on water. This is true even in our own times when industry has acquired much greater importance, and agriculture is no longer the only source of plentiful provisions and prosperity. Water still remains as important as ever for a flourishing civilization.

That prosperity and security depend on following the right way and maintaining it with resolve is certainly true. The Arabs were desert people living in total poverty. When they followed the right way with strong resolve, the world opened up to them providing plentiful water and provisions. Then they deviated from that way, and all the good things in life were taken away from them. They will continue to live a life of stress and poverty until they regain the right way and follow it.[5] Only then will God's promise be fulfilled to them.

There are certainly communities that turn away from the line God wants people to follow in this life, yet they enjoy affluence. However, when we look at the life they lead we find that they suffer from other ills that detract from their humanity, security or man's dignity and freedom. Thus their riches do not provide them with real prosperity. On the contrary, life in such societies becomes a curse for man depriving him of dignity, security and proper morality.

The second fact that the verses above establish is that prosperity is a means of trial God sets for His creatures: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Indeed, maintaining the right way in times of plenty and prosperity, giving due thanks for God's favours and using them for good purposes is, contrary to what appears at first sight, more difficult than patience in adversity. Many are those who show courage and perseverance when things go against them. They rally and put in sustained efforts to overcome such adversity. They more readily remember God, pray to Him and seek His help, realizing that only He can bring them through their troubles. When people are prosperous, enjoying a life of plenty, however, they tend to forget God and be distracted. The element of resistance is no longer needed. There is every opportunity for arrogance, treating God's blessings as merited dues. This then opens the way for Satan and his machinations.

A trial with prosperity requires constant alertness to resist such temptation, because the blessings of affluence often lead to transgression,

5. It may be suggested that oil has given Arabs, or many of them at least, wealth and comfortable living. Oil provides only temporary means of affluence. Besides, it brought the Arabs much stress and misery, with the mighty powers of the world imposing a state of almost total powerlessness on Arab countries. Today, for the Arabs to regain control of their own destiny seems an extremely remote possibility for most educated Arabs. – Editor's note.

ingratitude, arrogance, injustice, depriving other people of their rights and also disrespecting sanctities. God may favour some people with beauty, but this blessing often leads to arrogance and sin. He may give them intelligence, yet again this blessing may lead to conceit, disrespect of others and disregard for values and standards. Almost every blessing and favour God grants us involves some temptation that takes the person away from the right path. Only those who always remember God and, who as a result, enjoy His protection are excepted.

When a trial of prosperity leads to moving away from God's path, this makes God's punishment inevitable. The Qur'ānic verse mentions a particular quality of such punishment: "*Anyone who turns away from his Lord's revelation will be made to endure uphill suffering.*" (Verse 17) This gives a sense of increased difficulty, because whoever goes uphill finds the going harder as he climbs higher. The Qur'ān often refers to such hardship as going uphill. Other examples include: "*Whomever God wills to guide, He makes his bosom open wide with willingness towards self-surrender (to Him); and whomever He wills to let go astray, He causes his bosom to be tight and constricted, as if he were climbing up into the skies.*" (6: 125) "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (74: 17) This is a well-known fact. The contrast between a trial of affluence and hard punishment in requital is, thus, abundantly clear.

None Other Than God

The next verse may represent another quotation from the *jinn*, or it may be a direct statement made by God:

> *Places of worship are for God alone; therefore, do not invoke anyone other than God.* (Verse 18)

In both cases it makes clear that worship, and places of worship, which is expressed in the Arabic text in the form of prostration, must be devoted to God alone. That is where God's oneness is strictly observed, leaving no room whatsoever for anyone else, be that a person, a value or an idea. The whole atmosphere must be dedicated to the pure worship of God alone. Invoking someone other than God may take the form of

worshipping that someone, appealing to him, or even directing one's thoughts and feelings towards him instead of God.

If we take the verse to be a statement made by the *jinn*, it serves as a reconfirmation of their earlier pledge: "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord.*" (Verse 2) This is repeated at the mention of places of worship and prostration before God. If we take it as a statement by God, it serves as a directive that fits with what the *jinn* said about their belief in God's oneness. The same applies to the verse that follows:

> *Yet when God's servant stood up to pray to Him, they pressed in on him in multitude.* (Verse 19)

The verse describes how the unbelievers pressed upon this servant of God when he stood to invoke and pray to Him. If we treat this verse as quoting the *jinn*'s statement, then they are telling us about what the Arab unbelievers did when they gathered in groups around the Prophet as he stood up to pray or as he recited the Qur'ān. This is referred to in an earlier *sūrah* in this volume: "*What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?*" (70: 36–37) They listen with amazement, yet they do not respond. Alternatively, the expression, '*they pressed on him in multitude,*' means that they tried to inflict harm on him but God protected him, as repeatedly happened. In this case, the *jinn* are reporting this event to their people, describing how singular the Arab unbelievers' attitude was.

If we take the verse as a statement made by God, then it tells us about this group of *jinn*'s reaction when they listened to the Qur'ān. They were totally amazed, pressing on the Prophet, close to each other. This is perhaps more probable as it fits with the feelings of surprise, amazement and alarm that are clearly apparent in the *jinn*'s account.

Both *Jinn* and Human

Having completed its account of what the *jinn* said about the Qur'ān, and their total amazement at its discourse, the *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet in a decisive tone, requiring him to deliver his message and to make it clear that once he has done so, he has no say in what happens

afterwards. He is to make clear that he has no knowledge whatsoever of the world beyond, or of how people fare. This address carries an overtone of sorrow and sadness that particularly suits its seriousness and decisive manner:

> *Say: 'I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.' Say: 'It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.' Say: 'No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.' Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number. Say: 'I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything.'* (Verses 20–28)

You, Muḥammad! Say it to all people: "*I invoke my Lord alone, and I associate no partners with Him.*" (Verse 20) Coming after the *jinn*'s statement, "*We shall never associate partners with our Lord,*" this declaration acquires special effect. It is the same words, declared by *jinn* and humans. These unbelievers who do not share in it break away from all worlds.

No Help from Anyone

"*Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to set you on the right course.*" (Verse 21) The Prophet is commanded to disclaim any of God's qualities and attributes. It is God alone who must be worshipped, without partners, and He alone who can cause harm and bring benefit. The verse contrasts harm with being '*on the right course,*' which means following divine guidance. This was clearly expressed by the *jinn* earlier:

"*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the two statements have the same drift and are almost identical in their wording. This is deliberate. It is also a frequently used structure in the Qur'ān where we always see such complementarity between a story and the Qur'ānic comments on events.

Thus the *jinn*, who are often thought to be able to cause harm and bring about benefit, and the Prophet disclaim any such ability. It all belongs to God alone. The divine faith makes this absolutely clear, with no possibility for confusion.

"*Say: No one can ever protect me from God, nor can I ever find a place to hide from Him. My task is only to deliver what I receive from God and His messages.*" (Verses 22–23) This is indeed frightening. It fills our hearts with the seriousness of advocating the divine message. The Prophet is commanded to declare this great truth stating that he himself has neither protection nor hiding place unless he discharges his task, fulfils his trust and delivers his message. This is his only safe resort. The message itself does not belong to him; his only task is to deliver it, which he must fulfil. It is required of him by God Himself, and unless he meets this requirement, he will have nowhere to go and no help from anyone.

How serious! How frightening! Advocating God's message is not something one volunteers to do; it is a serious assignment that must be fulfilled, because it is given by God Almighty. Its motive is not the pleasure one finds in presenting guidance and goodness to people; it is a command given from on high which cannot be shirked. Nor can one show any hesitation in the matter.

"*Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger will have the fire of hell, where they will abide for ever. When they see what they have been promised, they will realize who has the lesser help and is smaller in number.*" (Verses 23–24) There is a warning here, both implicit and explicit, given to everyone who receives this order and disobeys it. If the unbelievers are content with their power and numbers, comparing their strength to that of Muḥammad and his few followers, they will come to know when they see what they have been promised, either in this life or in the life to come, which of the two parties is weaker and will end up the loser. Again, we note how this comment echoes the earlier one made by the

jinn: "*We do not know if this bodes evil for those who live on earth, or if their Lord intends to guide them to what is right.*" (Verse 10)

Limited Knowledge

The Prophet is also commanded to disclaim any knowledge of the world beyond human perception: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term.*" (Verse 25)

In summary, then, this message does not belong to the Prophet; he has no say in it other than to deliver it as he is commanded. Only this will bring him safety. Likewise, the punishment the unbelievers are threatened with also belongs to God and the Prophet has no say in it, nor does he know when it will take place. It may be close at hand or it may be deferred by God to a time of His own choosing. This applies to punishment both in this life and in the life to come. All this is known only to God. The Prophet has no say here whatsoever, not even knowing its timing. It is to God that such knowledge of the world beyond belongs: "*He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verse 26) The Prophet has neither title nor position, other than that of being God's servant. This is his title and his highest position. The Islamic concept is thus stated in all clarity, free of any confusion. The Prophet is given the order to state his position and he does so without hesitation: "*Say: I do not know whether that which you have been promised is imminent, or whether my Lord has set for it a distant term. He alone knows that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and He does not disclose His secrets to anyone.*" (Verses 25–26)

There is only one exception. God may inform His messengers of something that belongs to this world beyond, within the limits that help them to deliver His message to people. Indeed, all that He reveals to them is part of His knowledge which He imparts to them at a certain point in time and within certain limits. He observes them and looks after them as they deliver His messages. The Prophet is commanded here to declare this exception in a very serious way: "*except to a messenger whom He has been pleased to choose. He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him, to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages. He*

has full knowledge of all they have. He takes count of everything." (Verses 27–28) Those messengers whom God chooses to deliver His message are given some information that belongs to the world beyond human perception. They are, for example, given revelation, its subject matter, method, the angels imparting it, its source and its preservation in the guarded tablet, as well as all that is related to what their messages contain. Prior to giving them such information, it was all there, in the realm that lies beyond human perception.

At the same time, these messengers are surrounded by watchers and guards to protect them. They protect them from Satan's whispers and attempts to derail their efforts, from personal promptings and aspirations, from human weaknesses, forgetfulness, deviation and all other shortcomings that may affect a messenger and disrupt his work. The notion is also a frightening one, "*He then sends watchers to walk before and behind him.*" (Verse 27) This describes the careful, complete and permanent monitoring of the messenger as he goes about his great task, delivering his message. This monitoring has a purpose: "*to know that they have delivered their Lord's messages.*" (Verse 28) God certainly knows this. What is meant here is that the messengers fulfil their assignments and that this brings about their fulfilment in the practical world.

"*He has full knowledge of all they have.*" (Verse 28) Everything in their hearts and lives, everything around them is known to Him; nothing escapes. "*He takes count of everything.*" (Verse 28) This is not though limited to just the messengers; it applies to all things: they are all counted up, which signifies the most accurate type of knowledge.

Just imagine this situation: God's Messenger is surrounded by guards and watchers, with God's knowledge already having counted all he has and all that is around him. He receives the command as a soldier who has no option but to comply. He goes about his task but he is not left to himself, to suffer from his own weaknesses or desires. What he likes or dislikes is not allowed to affect him. The whole matter is one of complete seriousness and careful monitoring. He knows all this and moves along his way, turning neither here nor there, because he knows that he is constantly watched by the most alert of guards. It is a situation that draws much sympathy for God's Messenger. It also fills us with awe when we consider the seriousness of it all.

This very awesome note brings the *sūrah* to its conclusion. It began with a feeling of awe and amazement that is clearly noticeable in the long discourse about the *jinn*. In no more than 28 verses, the *sūrah* outlines a large number of truths that are part of the Islamic faith. They are essential in the formulation of the clear and balanced vision a Muslim must have, leaning towards no extreme. It keeps all doors to knowledge open, leaving no room for delusion or superstition.

Especially true is the statement delivered by the group of *jinn* that listened to the Qur'ān: "*We have heard a wondrous discourse, giving guidance to what is sagacious, and we have come to believe in it.*" (Verses 1–2)

SŪRAH 73

Al-Muzzammil

(The Enfolded One)

Prologue

A report in connection with the revelation of this *sūrah* suggests that the Quraysh elders held a meeting in Dār al-Nadwah, a place where they normally gathered, in order to discuss any momentous event. This time they were discussing their strategy as regards the Prophet and the message he advocated. When the Prophet heard of this meeting, he was distressed. He wrapped himself in his clothes, covered himself and went to sleep. The Angel Gabriel then brought him the first passage of this *sūrah*, comprising 19 verses, with the command to stay up in worship at night. Its final part, consisting of Verse 20, was delayed for a full year, during which the Prophet and some of his Companions attended to their night worship until their legs were swollen from the effort. Only then was the *sūrah*'s second part revealed reducing their burden.

Another report also tells of the occasion of this *sūrah*'s revelation, but it also applies to the revelation of the next *sūrah*, Wrapped in Cloak, as we will mention in our discussion there, God willing. In summary, this report mentions that three years before the start of his message, the Prophet used to go to a cave in Mount Ḥirā', about two miles from Makkah, where he spent the month of Ramaḍān in worship. In this way, his family were not far from him, enabling him to stay in the cave for the whole month. Here, he would feed any poor person who happened

to pass by, and spend the rest of his time in worship and contemplation. His thoughts would go to the universe and its amazing scenes, suggesting that it is the creation of a great power. He was unhappy with the flimsy beliefs of his people who were idolaters. Yet he had no clear vision or thoughts. No consistent line presented itself to him.

This seclusion was an aspect of how God guided him, indeed, prepared him, for the great task which was later to be assigned him. He was alone, away from the hassle of life and its preoccupations. He just wanted to broaden his scope, feel the beauty of the universe and try to understand what message it imparts to a clear mind. Whoever is chosen to carry out the task of influencing and changing the direction of humanity needs such seclusion where he is free from life's minor concerns and preoccupations. He certainly needs a period of contemplation when he can look at the open universe and try to understand the truth it signifies. When a person is attending to life's concerns, he finds himself in a familiar environment, which he will complacently accept. He does not think of changing it. It is only moving away from the immediate environment and its concerns that gives the soul its ability to discern what is not readily apparent. Seclusion provides the training ground to appreciate the world around us, without reference to prevailing concepts.

This is, then, what God designed for Muḥammad as He prepared him to shoulder the greatest trust. It would be his task to change the direction of human life and thus the world. For three years before the start of his mission, God sent the Prophet into seclusion for one month every year.

When God willed to bestow this great aspect of His grace on the dwellers of the earth, the Angel Gabriel went to the Prophet Muḥammad in the cave at Ḥirā'. The Prophet gives this report about what then took place:

> The Prophet said: "While I was asleep he came to me carrying a case of a very rich material in which there was a book. He said: 'Read.' I replied: 'I am not a reader.' He pressed me so hard that I felt that I was about to die. Then he released me and said, 'Read.' I asked: 'What shall I read?' (I said this only out of fear that he

might repeat what he had done to me before.) He said: 'Read: in the name of Your Lord Who created. It is He Who created man from a clinging cell mass . Read! Your Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who has taught the use of the pen. He has taught man what he did not know.' (96: 1–5) I read it. He stopped. Then he left me and went away. I woke up feeling that it was actually written in my heart."

The Prophet went on to say: "When I was halfway up the mountain, I heard a voice coming from the heavens saying: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I raised my head up to the sky and I saw Gabriel in the image of a man with his feet next to one another up on the horizon. He said again: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I stood in my place looking up at him; this distracted me from my intention. I was standing there unable to move. I tried to turn my face away from him and to look up at the sky, but wherever I looked I saw him in front of me. I stood still, moving neither forward nor backward. Khadījah sent her messengers looking for me and I remained standing in my place all the while until they went back to her. He then left me and I went back to my family. When I reached home I sat next to Khadījah, leaning on her. She said: 'Where have you been? I sent people after you and they went to the outskirts of Makkah looking for you.' I told her of what happened, and she said: 'Rejoice! By God, I was certain that God would bring you only what is good. I certainly hope that you are the Prophet of this nation.'[1]

The revelation stopped for a while, and then when the Prophet went again to the mountain, he looked up and saw the Angel Gabriel. He was overwhelmed with such a shudder that he fell to the ground. He then hurriedly went home, saying to his family: 'Cover me! Wrap me.' They did so. He continued to shiver, so great was his fear. Then Gabriel called him: "*You enfolded one!*" (Verse 1) It is also reported that Gabriel

1. Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, pp. 67–72.

called him: "*You wrapped in your cloak.*" (74: 1) God knows best which of these statements was expressed.

Regardless of whether the first or the second report about this *sūrah*'s revelation is correct, the Prophet learnt that from now on he would only have a little sleep. He had a heavy duty to shoulder, requiring a long struggle. He was always to be on the alert, ready to work hard with little or no rest. The Prophet was told to stay up, and he did, for more than 20 years. He never slackened, but devoted himself completely to his message, attending to its requirements. He shouldered his very heavy burden without complaint. It was the burden of the greatest trust of all, the divine faith and the hard struggle it required.

His first area of struggle was the human mind burdened as it was with a great heap of erroneous concepts, wrong ideas and shackled with personal desires and earthly attractions. When he had purged the minds of some of his Companions of this heavy burden, another battle in a different field beckoned. In fact, this was to culminate in a series of battles against the enemies of the divine message, who marshalled their forces to crush the new message and supplant its tree before it could establish roots and send out its branches. He had hardly finished with these battles in the Arabian Peninsula when the Byzantine Empire began to prepare itself to deal a heavy defeat against this fledgling Islamic state in Arabia.

Yet throughout this long struggle, the first battle for the human mind was not over. This is a permanent battle against Satan who does not stop even for a moment in his attempts to lure people. Regardless, the Prophet continued to nurture God's message, living in poverty when great riches were available to him, putting in strenuous efforts whilst his Companions enjoyed comfort and security. His was a continuous and hard struggle, one that required patience, perseverance, night worship, recitation of the Qur'ān and the permanent pursuit of God's pleasure. It was a full implementation of divine orders: "*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly*

to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity." (Verses 1–10) Thus did Muḥammad stand in prayer, and thus did he continue to fight a raging battle for over 20 years. He let nothing distract him from this. From the moment he heard the divine call assigning his duty to him he remained focused on his task. May God reward him with His best reward.

The first half of the *sūrah* maintains the same rhythm, and almost the same rhyme, with an 'l' followed by a long 'a', throughout. It gives the *sūrah* a relaxed but courtly beat, one that suits its majestic command, the seriousness of the duty and the successive and momentous images the *sūrah* portrays. These include the weighty message and the frightening warning: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 11–13) There are also the awesome images drawn from the great universe and from the depths of the human soul: "*on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verses 17–18)

The long verse that comes at the end of the *sūrah* was revealed a whole year later, during which time the Prophet and some of those who followed him maintained night worship for much of the night, every night. This was an aspect of their preparation for the role God wanted them to play. When this year had passed, the order of night worship was relaxed, but this relaxation was coupled with the reassurance that it was God's choice for them, according to His knowledge and wisdom, taking into account the duties He had assigned to them. This verse runs in a different style: it is long, with a varied, calm and steady lilt. The ending, with its 'm' preceded by a long 'e', perfectly suits this steady calmness.

In its two parts, the *sūrah* portrays a stage of the Islamic message, beginning with the address from on high outlining the heavy assignment. It describes the preparation for this heavy duty by night worship, constant prayer, recitation of the Qur'ān, and glorifying God, relying

on Him alone, enduring hardship with forbearance, withdrawing with dignity from the unbelievers and leaving them to God Almighty, to whom the message belongs and who conducts the battle. The *sūrah* ends with a kindly touch, relieving some of the burden and lightening the duty, with a directive to attend to voluntary tasks that earn His reward. Finally, it holds out the prospect of God granting forgiveness and bestowing grace: "*God is Much Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20) The *sūrah* as a whole represents a stage in the noble efforts made by that chosen community to return erring humanity to its Lord, enduring all the hardship involved and looking for no gain in this life.

Al-Muzzammil
(The Enfolded One)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

You enfolded one! (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُزَّمِّلُ ﴿١﴾

Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, (2)

قُمِ اللَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٢﴾

half of it, or a little less, (3)

نِّصْفَهُ أَوِ انقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا ﴿٣﴾

or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. (4)

أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا ﴿٤﴾

We shall bestow on you a weighty message. (5)

إِنَّا سَنُلْقِي عَلَيْكَ قَوْلًا ثَقِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. (6)

إِنَّ نَاشِئَةَ اللَّيْلِ هِيَ أَشَدُّ وَطْئًا وَأَقْوَمُ قِيلًا ﴿٦﴾

During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. (7)

إِنَّ لَكَ فِي النَّهَارِ سَبْحًا طَوِيلًا ﴿٧﴾

Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. (8)

وَاذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا ﴿٨﴾

He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. (9)

رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقِ وَٱلْمَغْرِبِ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱتَّخِذْهُ وَكِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. (10)

وَٱصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَٱهْجُرْهُمْ هَجْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿١٠﴾

Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. (11)

وَذَرْنِى وَٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ أُو۟لِى ٱلنَّعْمَةِ وَمَهِّلْهُمْ قَلِيلًا ﴿١١﴾

We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, (12)

إِنَّ لَدَيْنَآ أَنكَالًا وَجَحِيمًا ﴿١٢﴾

food that chokes and painful suffering (13)

وَطَعَامًا ذَا غُصَّةٍ وَعَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٣﴾

on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. (14)

يَوْمَ تَرْجُفُ ٱلْأَرْضُ وَٱلْجِبَالُ وَكَانَتِ ٱلْجِبَالُ كَثِيبًا مَّهِيلًا ﴿١٤﴾

We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. (15)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَآ إِلَيْكُمْ رَسُولًا شَٰهِدًا عَلَيْكُمْ كَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَآ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ رَسُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. (16)

فَعَصَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ ٱلرَّسُولَ فَأَخَذْنَٰهُ أَخْذًا وَبِيلًا ﴿١٦﴾

فَكَيْفَ تَتَّقُونَ إِن كَفَرْتُمْ يَوْمًا يَجْعَلُ
ٱلْوِلْدَٰنَ شِيبًا ﴿١٧﴾

How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? (17)

ٱلسَّمَآءُ مُنفَطِرٌۢ بِهِۦ ۚ كَانَ وَعْدُهُۥ
مَفْعُولًا ﴿١٨﴾

That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled. (18)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذْكِرَةٌ ۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ
إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٩﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (19)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ تَقُومُ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ثُلُثَىِ ٱلَّيْلِ
وَنِصْفَهُۥ وَثُلُثَهُۥ وَطَآئِفَةٌ مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مَعَكَ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ يُقَدِّرُ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن لَّن
تُحْصُوهُ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنَ ٱلْقُرْءَانِ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن سَيَكُونُ مِنكُم
مَّرْضَىٰ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ يَضْرِبُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
يَبْتَغُونَ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ
يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنْهُ ۚ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ
وَأَقْرِضُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا ۚ وَمَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟

Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity [i.e. *zakāt*], and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good

you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (20)

لِأَنفُسِكُم مِّنْ خَيْرٍ تَجِدُوهُ عِندَ اللَّهِ هُوَ خَيْرًا
وَأَعْظَمَ أَجْرًا ۚ وَاسْتَغْفِرُوا اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ
رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

The One Enfolded

> *You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.* (Verses 1–9)

"*You enfolded one! Stand...*" This is a call from on high, given by God Almighty. Stand, for you have a great mission and a heavy burden. Stand, for you need to put in sustained efforts. Stand, for the time of sleep and comfort is over. You need to prepare for the task ahead of you.

This is an awesome command requiring the Prophet to pull himself out from the warmth of his bed in a comfortable home and with a happy family life so as to place himself in the midst of a hard struggle, with different forces pulling him here and there. A man who lives for himself may find comfort and ease, but he lives small and dies small. The noble soul who shoulders such a heavy burden has a different perspective: what has he got to do with sleep, comfort, a warm bed and an easy life? The Prophet realized and accepted this. When his wife, Khadījah, once told him to go to bed and relax, he said to her: "The time for sleep has passed." Yes, indeed. He had nothing more than long nights and a long struggle ahead of him.

"*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and*

distinctly." (Verses 1–4) Such is the preparation for the great task. It uses divine methods, which are guaranteed to succeed. The method is night worship, which on the higher level of remembrance of God takes up more than half the night but less than two-thirds, and on the lower level, but still in complete remembrance of Him, takes one-third of the night. This long time should be spent in prayer and recitation of the Qur'ān, aloud but with calmness and without singing. It is authentically reported that the Prophet prayed his *Witr* in no more than 11 *rak'ahs*, but these took up nearly two-thirds of the night, and he read at length from the Qur'ān.

"Sa'īd ibn Hishām reports that he asked Ibn 'Abbās how the Prophet prayed *Witr*. He said: 'Shall I tell you who of all people knows this best?' He said: 'Yes.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'Go and ask 'Ā'ishah and then come back and tell me her answer'." Sa'īd continues: "I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me what was the Prophet like in his manners?' She said: 'Do you not read the Qur'ān?' I said I did. She said: 'His manners were as the Qur'ān says.' I was about to leave, but then I thought of the Prophet's night worship, so I said: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered his night worship.' She said: 'Do you not read the *sūrah* starting with, *You enfolded one!*' I said I did. She said: 'God made night worship obligatory at the opening of the *sūrah*, and the Prophet and his Companions offered night worship until their feet were swollen. God retained the end of that *sūrah* with Himself for 12 months, then the relaxation was given. Thus, night worship became voluntary after it had been obligatory.' I was about to rise, but then I remembered *Witr*, and I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered *Witr*.' She said: 'We used to prepare for him his tooth stick and the water for his ablutions. He would rise at night, as God wished, and he would use his tooth stick to brush his teeth, then would perform his ablution. He would offer eight *rak'ahs* without sitting in between until he had completed the eighth *rak'ah*. He would then sit down and glorify God and supplicate, then he would stand before ending his prayer, to offer his ninth *rak'ah*. He would sit glorifying God alone, then supplicating. He would then finish his prayer with *Salām*. He said it aloud so that we would hear it. He then prayed two *rak'ahs* sitting down. Thus he would complete 11 *rak'ahs*. When he was older and put on some weight, he

would pray *Witr* in seven *rak'ahs* and do two *rak'ahs* seated to complete nine. When the Prophet offered some voluntary prayers he liked to keep this up. If something distracted him from night worship, such as sleep or illness, he would offer 12 *rak'ahs* during the day. I know that the Prophet never read the whole of the Qur'ān in one night up to the morning, and I know that he never fasted a complete month other than Ramaḍān'." [Related by Aḥmad and Muslim.][2]

A Heavy Weight to Carry

All these preparations were made so that the Prophet could receive the weighty discourse: "*We shall bestow on you a weighty message.*" (Verse 5) This is a reference to the Qur'ān and the assignment it gives the Prophet. The Qur'ān is not weighty in its phraseology; on the contrary, it is both easy to bear in mind and recite. However, it is weighty in the scales of truth, and profound in its effect on people's hearts: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (59: 21) Instead, God sent down the Qur'ān to a man's heart, which received it and was steadier than a mountain.

Receiving such an overflow of light and knowledge and understanding it is certainly a weighty task. Dealing with great universal truths as they are is weighty indeed. Likewise, to be in contact with those on high and with the spirits of animate and inanimate creatures in the manner the Prophet was is also weighty. Moreover, to undertake this mission without hesitation and not to turn away here or there in response to temptation is mightily weighty. All this certainly requires long preparation.

Standing up in night worship when others are asleep, leaving aside the distractions of daily life, being in contact with God, receiving His light and bounty, seeking the pleasure of being alone with Him, reciting the Qur'ān in the deep silence of the night as if it is being bestowed now from on high so as to be echoed by the whole universe, and receiving

2. There are many *aḥādīth* and reports describing the Prophet's night prayer and his *Witr*, which show that the Prophet varied these prayers. For a full discussion, refer to *Zād al-Ma'ād* by Ibn al-Qayyim, in which a chapter is devoted to describing the Prophet's night worship.

inspiration from the Qur'ān and its melody in the quiet of the night... is all part of the preparation. It provides the necessary preparedness to shoulder the weighty task and undertake the sustained and strenuous efforts required of the Prophet and anyone who advocates the message of Islam. It enlightens advocates' hearts along their hard way, protecting them from Satan's whispering and temptations, and guiding their footsteps so that they do not fall into the dark maze that stands adjacent to this shining road.

"*The night hours that are strongest of tread and most upright of speech.*" (Verse 6) The night hours referred to here are those that follow the *Isha* Prayer. This verse describes these hours as '*strongest of tread*', which means more physically exhausting, and '*most upright of speech*', which means better rewarding, [according to Mujāhid]. To overcome the appeal of bed after a long day is exhausting, but it declares the triumph of the spirit in response to God's instructions. Since the person spending these hours in worship prefers to be in contact with God, these hours are most upright of speech, because they give a special taste to God's glorification. They make prayer more enlightening, and supplication more transparent. They fill the heart with light and happiness that may not be felt in day prayers. God, who created man and his heart, knows how it responds, what it takes in, how it opens to callers, and at which times it is more responsive and better prepared.

When God wanted to prepare His servant and Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), for his weighty message, He chose for him night worship because the night hours are the ones that are strongest of tread, producing the most profound impression, and most upright of speech. God knows that during the day he had to attend to different tasks that took up much of his energy. "*During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to.*" (Verse 7) Let him, then, do whatever he needs to do during the day, putting in whatever effort was necessary. When the night comes, however, he should devote himself to his Lord, offering prayer and glorifying Him: "*Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him.*" (Verse 8)

Remembering God's name does not mean repeating His honoured name verbally, counting with a bead of one hundred or a thousand pieces. Rather, this is a heart-felt remembrance along with verbal mention, or

it means prayer and reading the Qur'ān while praying. Wholehearted devotion means concentrating all one's attention on God, addressing one's worship to Him, discarding all thoughts and feelings other than the bond with Him.

The *sūrah* follows this instruction by making it clear that there is none other than God to turn to: "*He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.*" (Verse 9) He is the Lord of all, the One God other than whom there is no deity. To devote oneself to Him is to be with the only truth in the universe, and to place one's trust in Him is to place it in the only power in the universe. Such reliance on Him is the natural result of believing in His oneness and His control of the east and the west, or in other words, His control of the entire universe. The Prophet, who is told to stand in order to carry his heavy burden, needs to devote himself wholeheartedly to God and to rely on Him only. It is from this that he derives the strength necessary to carry his heavy burden along his long way.

Flattened Mountains

God then directs His Messenger to remain content and patient in the face of all opposition and false accusation, telling him to leave those people who so behave to Him to deal with:

> *Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.* (Verses 10–18)

If the first report concerning the revelation of this *sūrah*'s opening is correct and that it took place during the early days of the Islamic message, this means that this second passage was revealed later, after the call to Islam went public and began to encounter opposition from those who denied it. Some of these were arrogant in their opposition, speaking ill of the Prophet and the believers. If, on the other hand, the second report is more accurate, then the first part of the *sūrah* was revealed in full when the Prophet was at the receiving end of the unbelievers' determined opposition to his message. Be that as it may, we see that the directive to remain patient comes after the one to attend to night worship and engage in glorifying God. These two instructions are often given together with the aim of reinforcing the advocates of the divine message with the help they need along their long journey. These advocates contend with difficulties both from within themselves and from outside by the opponents of Islam. Both types of difficulty are extremely hard to deal with. Hence, the first directive is to remain patient: "*Endure with patience what people may say*", which may be infuriating. Next comes a similarly magnanimous directive: "*And leave their company with noble dignity.*" (Verse 10) No need for any remonstration, showing anger, friction or hostility. Such was the policy of the Islamic message in Makkah, particularly in the early days. It was only an address to hearts and minds, putting the truth before people in a calm and dignified way.

This policy of leaving the company of arrogant opponents with noble dignity is not easy; it requires patience in addition to remembrance and glorification of God. Patience was enjoined by God on every one of His messengers, time after time, and enjoined on His servants who believed in His messengers. No one can dedicate himself to God's message unless he makes patience his main resort, equipment and armament. Advocacy of the divine message is a hard struggle. It requires striving against one's own weaknesses, distractions, desires, haste and despair, and striving against the opponents of the message, their schemes, plots as well as the harm they may directly seek to inflict on the message and its supporters. It also involves striving against general trends to abandon the divine message and its duties, and to disregard its values while paying lip-service to it. Facing such a struggle, an advocate of Islam can resort to nothing

other than patience. Turning to God and glorifying Him goes hand in hand with patience in almost every situation.

So, the Prophet is instructed to endure with patience whatever is said against his message and to leave with noble dignity the company of those who are so hostile to it, leaving them to God to deal with: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) This is said by none other than the Almighty, who has control of all forces. It is He who says: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth.*" They are only ordinary people while this threat is issued by the One who originated them and created this vast universe needing for the purpose nothing more than to say, '*Be*'. God is saying here that the message is His own, so those who deny it should be left to Him, while the Prophet should carry on with his task of delivering the message. If they want to persist in their denial, then let them do so, but leave their company with noble dignity. It is God who will take care of them and foil their designs. The Prophet need not think further about them.

The warning is terrifying and stunning. It implies that the Almighty will deal with such petty people. They "*may enjoy the comforts of this life*", but they remain powerless in front of Him, no matter how despotic they may be in this world.

"*Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) If he were to bear with them for the length of life on earth, this would still only represent '*a little while*', because this life is in God's measure only a day or a part of a day. Indeed, it will seem thus to them when it is over. On the Day of Judgement, they will feel that it was no more than an hour of a day. So, it remains '*a little while*' no matter how long this may be; even if they depart this life in safety, without being punished in this world.

"*We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 12–13) All these are fitting requitals for those who enjoy a life of comfort in this world but who continue to deny the divine message. They do not appreciate what they are given; nor do they give due thanks for the comforts they enjoy. Therefore, you, Muḥammad, bear with patience what they say and do, and leave them to Me. We have what they deserve: heavy fetters, a blazing fire, food that is so hard to swallow and a painful suffering on a day that fills everyone with fear.

An image of that day and the fear it spreads is then drawn: "*On the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) The feeling of fear transcends all people to spread over the whole earth: it thus shudders and crashes, with the great mountains crumbling into heaps of sand. How, then, will humans react?

Having given this scary image, the *sūrah* addresses those unbelievers who enjoy a life of luxury reminding them of a great tyrant, Pharaoh, and how God swept him away: "*We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment.*" (Verses 15–16) The terrible end suffered by Pharaoh is given in such a brief word that it strikes even more fear into their hearts, and this after the scene depicting the earth shaking and the mountains flattened.

These are two images of punishment, one in this life and one in the hereafter. How do those unbelievers think they will be saved from such punishment? "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder.*" (Verses 17–18) This is an image of a fearful event that leaves the sky rent asunder, after the earth and the mountains have crumbled into sand. It turns children's hair grey. The images of this terrifying event are drawn from a silent landscape as well as a living humanity. The *sūrah* portrays these images before the addressees as if they are taking place now. It then confirms this most emphatically: "*God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verse 18) It is happening, no doubt. Whatever God wills is certain to be done.

Now the *sūrah* gives their hearts a gentle touch so that they may remember and choose the road to safety: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 19) The way to God is safer and easier to traverse. It spares people such a terrible outcome.

The verses carrying these warnings strike the unbelievers hard. They shake them violently, leaving them in great fear. At the same time, they provide strengthening reassurance to the Prophet and his small group of followers. They feel that God is with them, punishing their enemies. It is only but a short while and the appointed time will arrive. The matter will then be settled. God will take His enemies, who are their

enemies, and put them to the fate they deserve. God does not abandon the believers to His enemies, even though He may give His enemies respite for a while.

A Hard Duty is Relaxed

Then comes the second part of the *sūrah*, consisting of a single, long verse that was revealed one year after the first part, according to the more authentic reports:

> *Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt], *and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relief after much fatigue. It is a relaxation by God granted to the Prophet and the believers, when they have proved themselves to be dedicated totally to His divine message. They were exhausted after having stood up for long hours at night offering prayers in which very long passages of the Qur'ān were recited. God never wanted to afflict His Prophet with the Qur'ān, putting him to such hardship. Rather, He was only preparing him for the hard task that he was to undertake for the rest of his life. The believers who followed him would also have to share in this heavy burden.

The verse starts with friendly reassurance: "*Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers.*" (Verse 20) He has seen you doing it, and what you and your Companions offered of night worship has

been accepted and entered in God's records. He knows that you have abandoned your beds, warm as they are on a cold night, preferring to listen to His directives. He is Compassionate towards you and those who are with you. "*It is God who determines the measure of night and day.*" (Verse 20) He causes the one to be longer and the other to be shorter. Thus, the night may get longer or shorter, but you are all carrying on with the duty required of you, staying up close to two-thirds of the night, or half of it, or even a third. He is aware of your weakness. He does not want to afflict you or put you to unbearable hardship; all He wants is that you should have the necessary training. Now that you have been trained, you can relax and take things easier: "*Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you,*" during your night worship, without putting yourselves to much difficulty. God knows that things will happen to you and drain your energy, making standing long into the night worshipping too hard: "*He knows that some of you will be sick,*" and these cannot offer night worship. "*Others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty.*" (Verse 20) These need to attend to their work and earn their living. This is essential. God does not want people to abandon their life's needs and lead the life of a monk who is totally devoted to worship. "*And others will be fighting for God's cause.*" (Verse 20) God will permit you to stand up and fight against those who wage aggression against you. He will permit you to fight so that Islam will have its safe and sovereign place. You may, then, relax and approach your duty in a comfortable way: "*Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease.*" (Verse 20) Let there be no exhaustion or hardship. However, you must attend to all obligatory worship: "*Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt]." (Verse 20) When you have done this you may wish to add voluntary charity, which will increase your reward: "*And give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward.*" (Verse 20) Turn to God, appealing for forgiveness of your shortcomings. Man remains short of what is needed, no matter how diligent he tries to be. "*Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relaxation and reassurance after a whole year of night worship. God relaxed this duty for Muslims,

making night worship voluntary, rather than an obligatory duty. The Prophet, however, continued on the same lines, offering night worship for no less than one-third of the night. He would appeal to his Lord in the depths of the night, and receive from Him what he needed for his struggle in life. Although his eyes might sleep, his heart would not. His heart was always busy with God's remembrance. It had no desire for anything else in this life.

SŪRAH 74

Al-Muddaththir

(Wrapped in Cloak)

Prologue

The information we expressed in the previous *sūrah*, The Enfolded One, about the occasion and timing of its revelation, also applies to this *sūrah*. Some reports suggest that it was the first to be revealed after *Sūrah* 96, The Germ Cell, while other reports suggest that it was revealed after the Islamic message went public, when the unbelievers began their persecution campaign against the believers in earnest.

Al-Bukhārī mentions a report by Yaḥyā ibn Abī Kathīr who says that he asked Abū Salamah ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān about the first Qur'ānic revelation. He answered that it was *Sūrah Al-Muddaththir*. "I told him that people said that it was *Sūrah* 96, beginning with '*Read in the name of your Lord.*' Abū Salamah said that he asked Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh about this and when Jābir replied that it was *al-Muddaththir*, he said to him what you had just said. Jābir replied that he only gave me what the Prophet himself said to his Companions: 'I went in seclusion at Ḥirā', and when I finished my time there, I came down. I heard a call, and I looked to my right and left but could see nothing. I came to Khadījah, saying: "Wrap me in a cloak and pour some cold water on me." They did so. I then received the revelation: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness.*"

Jābir reports that he heard the Prophet speaking about early revelations. He said: "While I was walking, I heard a voice coming from the sky. I lifted my eyes to the sky and I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā' sitting on a chair in between the sky and the earth. I fell to the ground. Then I came hurriedly to my people, saying: 'Wrap me. Cover me.' I then received the revelation: '*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth.*' Then more revelations came in succession.

Commenting on this *ḥadīth*, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "This is the accepted report. It means that revelations started before this, because of the Prophet saying, 'I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā'.' That angel was obviously Gabriel who visited the Prophet saying: '*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a clinging cell mass.*[1] *Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*' (96: 1–5) A lull in revelation then took place, and thereafter the angel again came to him. To reconcile the different reports we say that the first revelation the Prophet received after the lull was this *sūrah*."

A different report is given by al-Ṭabarānī on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah prepared food for a number of people from the Quraysh, and when they had finished their meal, he asked them what they thought of Muḥammad. Some said that he was a sorcerer, but others said he was not. Some said he was a soothsayer, but others denied this. Others still said he was a poet, but yet others objected. Then some said that what he said was mere 'sorcery handed down from olden times'. They all agreed to this. When the Prophet was informed of this, he felt very sad. He covered his head and wrapped himself up. God revealed to him: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 1–7)

1. This translation of this second verse of *Sūrah* 96 is more accurate than what I have given in Vol. XVIII, or what is variously given in other Qur'ānic translations. – Editor's note.

This report is almost identical to the one that refers to the preceding *sūrah*, The Enfolded One. Thus, we cannot be at all certain which of these two *sūrahs* preceded the other, or which was revealed on what occasion.

Yet a close look at the text of the *sūrah* suggests that its first seven verses were probably revealed in the very early days of the Islamic message. The same may be said of the first nine verses of *Sūrah* 73, The Enfolded One. Both openings aimed to prepare the Prophet for his great task, particularly when he needed to go public and address all the community with his message. He would then have to face strong opposition and compounded trouble that required such preparations. This would mean that the rest of the two *sūrahs* was revealed later, when the Prophet faced determined rejection and false accusations of fabricating his message.

Nevertheless, this does not exclude the other possibility that the openings of the two *sūrahs* were revealed together with what followed them. This so as to reply to the denial by the Quraysh and to comfort the Prophet who took their scheming to heart. Thus, the two *sūrahs* would be like *Sūrah* 68, The Pen, which is also discussed in this volume.

Be that as it may, the *sūrah* begins with an address from on high assigning a great mission to the Prophet, one that required he get out of bed and start striving: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) He is directed to prepare himself for his great task, taking the measures outlined to him in the *sūrah*: "*Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 3–7) Like the one in the preceding *sūrah*, this directive ends with the need to be patient.

The *sūrah* then includes a strong warning to those who deny the Day of Judgement, threatening them with a war directly waged by God, on the same lines as the warning given in the preceding *sūrah*: "*When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers. Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verses 8–17)

The *sūrah* makes special mention of this person who was particularly hostile to the Islamic message, but without naming him. It paints an image of his scheming against Islam, in the same way as we have seen in *Sūrah* 68. It may be that both *sūrahs* talk of the same person, said to be al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, but more of this later. The *sūrah* mentions the reason for God's warning to this person: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The *sūrah* then specifies his destiny: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen.*" (Verses 26–30)

The mention of the '*scorching fire*' and the nineteen guards in charge of it invited much questioning from the unbelievers who also added to it ridicule and sarcastic remarks, and raised doubts among those who were not firm in faith. The *sūrah* outlines God's wisdom in mentioning this number, giving us a glimpse of the world beyond our perception and the fact that knowledge of this world is God's own preserve. This glimpse sheds light on some aspects of the Islamic concept of this world beyond: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31)

The whole question of hell and the life to come is then related to some scenes of the universe which all people see. Thus the *sūrah* combines the inspiration of these scenes with the feelings aroused by the earlier warnings: "*No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind.*" (Verses 32–37)

The *sūrah* shows the respective positions of the unbelievers and the righteous. The unbelievers will make a long confession explaining the reasons why they deserved their fate on that day of reckoning and requital. This is followed by a final word about them, when no word of intercession on their behalf will be of any use: "*Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.' So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verses 38–48)

Having painted this image of their position of humiliation and shameful confession, the *sūrah* wonders at the unbelievers' attitude to the call that seeks to remind them of the way to save themselves. It paints a sarcastic picture that invites ridicule at their wild resistance: "*What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?*" (Verses 49–51) It exposes their arrogance, which is the true reason for their obstinate rejection of every caring advice: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) They are so envious of the Prophet, thinking that they were more deserving of being given the divine message. There is, however, another deep reason: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53)

Finally, the *sūrah* makes a categorical statement that leaves no room for favours for anyone: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) All is left up to God's will: "*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.*" (Verse 56)

The *sūrah* represents a stage of the hard fought struggle in which the Qur'ān is in combat with *jāhiliyyah* and its ingrained notions and concepts. It was also combating headstrong and deliberate rejection using diverse methods. There are many similarities of approach between this *sūrah* and *Sūrahs* 73 and 68, which suggests that all three were revealed within the same period, dealing with similar situations. The only exception, of course, is the second part of *Sūrah* 73, which as we have seen deals with something different.

The present *sūrah* is characterized by short verses and a fast flow. Its verses have a variety of endings and rhymes. Its beat moves slowly at times, but is very fast at others, particularly when it describes the individual who comes in for criticism, or when it paints the image of hell's scorching fire. This variation of tone, beat, rhyme, images and scenery gives the *sūrah* a distinctive ambience, particularly as it picks up a rhyme that has already been used and changed, or when the rhyme changes in the same section to deliver an intended surprise. We will now look at the *sūrah* in detail.

Al-Muddaththir
(Wrapped in Cloak)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

You, wrapped in your cloak, (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُدَّثِّرُ ﴿١﴾

arise and give warning. (2)

قُمْ فَأَنذِرْ ﴿٢﴾

Glorify your Lord's greatness; (3)

وَرَبَّكَ فَكَبِّرْ ﴿٣﴾

clean your garments; (4)

وَثِيَابَكَ فَطَهِّرْ ﴿٤﴾

stay away from all filth; (5)

وَالرُّجْزَ فَاهْجُرْ ﴿٥﴾

do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; (6)

وَلَا تَمْنُن تَسْتَكْثِرُ ﴿٦﴾

but to your Lord turn in patience. (7)

وَلِرَبِّكَ فَاصْبِرْ ﴿٧﴾

When the trumpet is sounded (8)

فَإِذَا نُقِرَ فِي النَّاقُورِ ﴿٨﴾

that will be a day of anguish, (9)

فَذَٰلِكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَوْمٌ عَسِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

far from easy for the unbelievers. (10)

عَلَى ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ غَيْرُ يَسِيرٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Leave to me the one I created alone, (11)

ذَرْنِى وَمَنْ خَلَقْتُ وَحِيدًا ﴿١١﴾

to whom I have granted vast wealth, (12)

وَجَعَلْتُ لَهُۥ مَالًا مَّمْدُودًا ﴿١٢﴾

and sons by his side, (13)

وَبَنِينَ شُهُودًا ﴿١٣﴾

making life smooth and easy for him; (14)

وَمَهَّدتُّ لَهُۥ تَمْهِيدًا ﴿١٤﴾

yet he greedily desires that I give him more. (15)

ثُمَّ يَطْمَعُ أَنْ أَزِيدَ ﴿١٥﴾

No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. (16)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ لِـَٔايَٰتِنَا عَنِيدًا ﴿١٦﴾

I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! (17)

سَأُرْهِقُهُۥ صَعُودًا ﴿١٧﴾

He thought and he schemed. (18)

إِنَّهُۥ فَكَّرَ وَقَدَّرَ ﴿١٨﴾

Damn him, how he schemed! (19)

فَقُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿١٩﴾

Again, damn him, how he schemed! (20)

ثُمَّ قُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿٢٠﴾

He looked around, (21)

ثُمَّ نَظَرَ ﴿٢١﴾

then he frowned and glared, (22)

ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ ﴿٢٢﴾

then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, (23)

ثُمَّ أَدْبَرَ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ ﴿٢٣﴾

and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! (24)

فَقَالَ إِنْ هَٰذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ يُؤْثَرُ ﴿٢٤﴾

This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' (25)

إِنْ هَٰذَا إِلَّا قَوْلُ الْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٥﴾

I will cast him into the scorching fire. (26)

سَأُصْلِيهِ سَقَرَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! (27)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا سَقَرُ ﴿٢٧﴾

It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; (28)

لَا تُبْقِي وَلَا تَذَرُ ﴿٢٨﴾

it appears before mankind, (29)

لَوَّاحَةٌ لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٩﴾

guarded by nineteen. (30)

عَلَيْهَا تِسْعَةَ عَشَرَ ﴿٣٠﴾

We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test

وَمَا جَعَلْنَا أَصْحَابَ النَّارِ إِلَّا مَلَائِكَةً
وَمَا جَعَلْنَا عِدَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ

كَفَرُوا۟ لِيَسْتَيْقِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟
ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَيَزْدَادَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟
إِيمَٰنًا ۙ وَلَا يَرْتَابَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ
وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ۙ وَلِيَقُولَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ
ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ
مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ
جُنُودَ رَبِّكَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَمَا هِىَ إِلَّا ذِكْرَىٰ
لِلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣١﴾

for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind. (31)

كَلَّا وَٱلْقَمَرِ ﴿٣٢﴾

No! By the moon! (32)

وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذْ أَدْبَرَ ﴿٣٣﴾

By the night when it departs, (33)

وَٱلصُّبْحِ إِذَآ أَسْفَرَ ﴿٣٤﴾

and the shining dawn! (34)

إِنَّهَا لَإِحْدَى ٱلْكُبَرِ ﴿٣٥﴾

It is indeed one of the mighty things, (35)

نَذِيرًا لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣٦﴾

a warning to all mankind, (36)

لِمَن شَآءَ مِنكُمْ أَن يَتَقَدَّمَ أَوْ يَتَأَخَّرَ ﴿٣٧﴾

to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. (37)

Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, (38)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

except for those on the right hand. (39)

إِلَّآ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٩﴾

They will be in gardens, and will ask (40)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

about the guilty ones: (41)

عَنِ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

'What brought you into the scorching fire?' (42)

مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِى سَقَرَ ﴿٤٢﴾

They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, (43)

قَالُوا۟ لَمْ نَكُ مِنَ ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither did we feed the needy; (44)

وَلَمْ نَكُ نُطْعِمُ ٱلْمِسْكِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

but we indulged with others in vain talk, (45)

وَكُنَّا نَخُوضُ مَعَ ٱلْخَآئِضِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and we denied the Day of Judgement (46)

وَكُنَّا نُكَذِّبُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٤٦﴾

until there came upon us that which is certain.' (47)

حَتَّىٰٓ أَتَىٰنَا ٱلْيَقِينُ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors. (48)

فَمَا تَنفَعُهُمْ شَفَٰعَةُ ٱلشَّٰفِعِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition (49)	فَمَا لَهُمْ عَنِ ٱلتَّذْكِرَةِ مُعْرِضِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾
like terrified asses (50)	كَأَنَّهُمْ حُمُرٌ مُّسْتَنفِرَةٌ ﴿٥٠﴾
fleeing from a lion? (51)	فَرَّتْ مِن قَسْوَرَةٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him. (52)	بَلْ يُرِيدُ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُؤْتَىٰ صُحُفًا مُّنَشَّرَةً ﴿٥٢﴾
No! They do not fear the life to come. (53)	كَلَّا ۖ بَل لَّا يَخَافُونَ ٱلْآخِرَةَ ﴿٥٣﴾
No! This is indeed an admonition. (54)	كَلَّآ إِنَّهُۥ تَذْكِرَةٌ ﴿٥٤﴾
Let him who will, take heed. (55)	فَمَن شَآءَ ذَكَرَهُۥ ﴿٥٥﴾
They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness. (56)	وَمَا يَذْكُرُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ هُوَ أَهْلُ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ وَأَهْلُ ٱلْمَغْفِرَةِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Essential Preparations

You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience. (Verses 1–7)

This is an address from on high, calling on the Prophet to get ready for his great task. He is to warn mankind, wake them up and save them from evil in this life and from the fire in the life to come, setting them on the way to salvation before it is too late. This is a hard, momentous task when assigned to an individual human being, even though he may be God's Prophet and Messenger. Mankind had, however, gone so far astray and were too steeped in sin, rebellion, arrogance and persistence. All this made advocacy of the divine faith the most difficult task to be assigned to anyone.

"*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) To give warning is the most obvious aspect of the divine message. It alerts people to the impending danger that threatens to engulf those who are oblivious of it, heading unaware into error. Such warning manifests God's grace which He bestows on people. They take away nothing of His kingdom when they go astray, and increase His kingdom by nothing when they follow His guidance. However, it is out of His grace that He gives them such care so as to save themselves from severe punishment in the life to come and to rid themselves of evil in this life. The fact that His messengers call on them to respond so as to earn His forgiveness and be admitted into His heaven is certainly a manifestation of His grace.

Having given His Messenger the instruction to warn others, He adds some directives for the Prophet to observe in his own life. The first of these is to "*Glorify your Lord's greatness.*" (Verse 3) Only your Lord is great and only He deserves to be glorified. This directive lays down an aspect of the Islamic concept of God and His oneness. Every person, every creature, every value and everything is small, while God alone is great. All entities, sizes, forces, values, events, situations, concepts and shapes dwindle into insignificance, while God alone is supreme, perfect and majestic. The Prophet is instructed to warn mankind, bearing all the difficulties of such a task, with this vision in mind. He will then think little of any force or plot aiming to impede his work, as he realizes that his Lord alone is great. Advocates of the divine message need to always keep this principle in mind when they go about fulfilling their difficult task.

The Prophet is then directed to maintain purity and cleanliness: "*Clean your garments.*" (Verse 4) In Arabic usage, this expression of cleaning one's garments means maintaining purity of heart and high moral values together with clean action. It refers to the purity of self which is covered by those garments. Such purity and cleanliness signify the condition that is best suited for receiving instructions from on high. Moreover, it is the closest thing to the nature of the Islamic message. Furthermore, it is necessary for the task of warning and delivering the message, advocating it in the midst of a multitude of forces and trends that bring with them much filth, dirt and indecency. The advocate of the divine faith needs to be perfectly clean so that he can save those who are tainted while allowing nothing to taint him. This directive shows deep understanding of the needs of those who undertake advocacy of God's faith in all types of social environment and situations.

The next directive requires the Prophet to steer away from polytheism and all that exposes people to God's punishment: "*stay away from all filth.*" (Verse 5) The Prophet stayed away from all this long before he was endowed with prophethood. His was an upright nature that disliked all deviation from the truth, and disowned all erroneous beliefs and loose morality. He never indulged in any unbecoming practice. However, this directive is a declaration of separation between two different routes that can never cross. The Arabic word *rujz*, which is translated here as 'filth', originally meant suffering or torment. It then came to signify anything that leads to it. Hence, the directive to abandon all such filth that incurs punishment and torment.

The Prophet is also directed to be self-effacing so as not to hold up what he has to exert of effort, thinking it to be much: "*Do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much.*" (Verse 6) He was to give much, sacrifice much and put up with much hardship. Yet God wants him not to think too highly of what he has to give, feeling that it is much. To be a true advocate of the divine faith, one must not think of what one has to give or sacrifice for it. The sacrifice required is so great that no one can give it willingly unless he also forgets it, or rather does not feel it in the first place because he is so preoccupied with his duty towards God. In essence, he feels that whatever he has to give for His sake is only part of His grace and favour. Thus, giving the sacrifice and

exerting the effort are an aspect of grace God bestows on us. We should be grateful to Him for enabling us to give it in the first place, rather than holding it up, thinking we have done something great.

The last directive is to be patient: "But to your Lord turn in patience." (Verse 7) This is a directive that is given every time the Prophet is assigned a task or needs counselling. Patience is the most important prerequisite in this hard battle of advocating God's message. It is a battle against two enemies simultaneously: personal desires on the one hand, and external enemies motivated by their own desires on the other. The most effective weapon in this hard and long battle is patience for God's sake and with the aim to please Him.

When this divine directive has been given to the noble Prophet, the *sūrah* outlines the terms of the warning to be given. This is delivered in a way that alerts attention to the hard day they are warned about:

> *When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers.* (Verses 8–10)

The sounding of the trumpet is here expressed in a stronger way than normally used in other *sūrahs*. In its Arabic expression, *nuqira fin-nāqūr*, it gives a feeling of a sound that is sharper to the ear, almost beating on it. Hence, the day will be hard for the unbelievers. Its hardship is emphasized by negating all traces of ease. It is hard from start to finish, without any respite. No details are given of this hardship; it is left in general terms to impart a feeling of distress and choking. It behoves those unbelievers, then, to heed the warning before the trumpet is sounded, ushering in this very hard day.

Singled Out

This general warning gives way to the case of a particular individual who seems to have played a leading role in rejecting the divine message and plotting against it. The *sūrah* issues a crushing warning, painting an ugly image of him that invites derision. This is particularly so when his unpleasant features appear lifelike before our eyes:

Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen. (Verses 11–30)

There are several reports suggesting that the person so referred to is al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. 'Ikrimah reports: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah met the Prophet who read to him a passage of the Qur'ān. It appeared as though al-Walīd softened a bit. Abū Jahl heard of this, so he went to al-Walīd and said to him: 'Uncle! Your people are raising some money for you.' He asked for what reason. Abū Jahl answered: 'They want to give it to you, because you went to Muḥammad to see what you might gain from him.' [Abū Jahl was thus playing on a most sensitive point, trying to arouse al-Walīd's pride.] Al-Walīd said: 'The Quraysh know that I am the richest among them.' Abū Jahl said: 'Then say about him something to make clear to your people that you are opposed to what he says.' Al-Walīd said: 'What shall I say. None of you has better knowledge of poetry than me. I know all about poetry including the poetry of the *jinn*. What Muḥammad says is nothing like that. What he says is indeed sweet; it towers over all speech; it rises high and nothing can top it.' Abū Jahl said: 'Your people will not be satisfied unless you say something negative about him.' Al-Walīd said: 'Then give me time to think.' When he thought it over, he said of the Qur'ān: 'This is sorcery taken from olden times.' The above passage was then revealed in reference to him.

In another report, it is said that some of the Quraysh said: 'If al-Walīd follows Muḥammad, the whole tribe will follow suit.' Abū Jahl said: 'I will take care of him.' He went to see him... The report then

mentions the above conversation between the two, and that after long thinking al-Walīd said: 'It is sorcery handed down from olden times. Do you not see how it causes divisions between a man and his family, children and servants?'

Such was the event as reported. The Qur'ān, however, describes it in its own moving way. It so starts with a fearsome threat: "*Leave to me the one I created alone.*" (Verse 11) The address is made to the Prophet. He is told to leave this person to God. He created him alone, without anything in which he now takes pride, such as wealth, children, comforts and luxuries. Yet he still seeks to possess more. God says to the Prophet to leave him to Him, for He will battle with him. Here, we can only shudder as we imagine the overwhelming power of the Almighty moving to crush this powerless individual. This shuddering is experienced by the reader and the listener who are not meant by it. How, then, about the one facing this power?

The *sūrah* describes at length this creature and what God has given him of favours, before it mentions his headstrong rejection of the truth. God created him alone, deprived of everything, naked. Then He gave him plentiful wealth, and able sons who attend to his needs and give him authority and protection. He facilitated life for him. Yet, "*he greedily desires that I give him more.*" (Verse 15) He is neither content nor grateful. Or perhaps he hopes to receive revelations and a sacred book, as mentioned towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) He did indeed envy the Prophet.

At this point he is strongly repudiated for his greed. He has not shown any gratitude to God for what He has given him.

"*No!*" The repudiating word is decisive. "*He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations.*" (Verse 16) He deliberately set himself against all pointers to the truth and indicators of the way to true faith. He opposed the divine message and the Messenger preaching it, prevented others from listening to it and spread false rumours about it. This repudiation of the man and his attitude is followed by a threat to replace his ease with hardship: "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verse 17) This verse paints hardship in the movement. Going uphill is the most difficult and tiring way of walking. If the person set on such

an uphill road has no intention of so going up, but is instead being pushed, the hardship is even greater and more exhausting. At the same time, the statement expresses a reality. A person who moves away from the easy, friendly and facilitated path of faith will find himself in a hard to traverse passage that leads nowhere. He goes through life worried and distressed, as though he is rising high into the sky, or going up a rough, hard track carrying neither food nor drink, and expecting no comfort at the end.

The *sūrah* draws a sarcastic caricature of this person with grim features, frowning, thinking hard and trying to find fault with the Qur'ān. He is obsessed with trying to find an apt and negative description to label the Qur'ān with: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The image we are given here takes us one glimpse at a time, step by step, and movement by movement. It is like watching a paint brush at work, rather than hearing words giving a meaning. More than that, it is like a scene in a film, consisting of many frames. One frame shows him thinking and scheming. This is coupled with an invocation, '*Damn him!*' and a derisive remark, '*how he schemed.*' Both invocation and derisive remark are repeated to heighten the effect. Another frame shows him looking here and there, in affected seriousness, again inviting ridicule. The next frame shows him frowning, and another shows his features grim. In both, the impression is that he is trying to concentrate, but in a laughable way. Yet, after all this labour, he comes up with nothing. He closes his eyes to the light and turns away from the truth. All he can say is: "*This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!*" (Verses 24–25)

These glimpses of such a sad individual are impressed on our minds more strongly than a painting or a film. Moreover, the man becomes the laughing stock for the rest of time. His miserable picture is raised there for all future generations to see.

Once the picture is hung in place and this miserable creature is seen by all there then comes a frightening warning: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire.*" (Verse 26) The warning is made even stronger by the

enigmatic air that surrounds the fire: "*Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like!*" (Verse 27) It is too great to be imagined! Yet another description is added to make it even more terrifying: "*It leaves nothing, and spares nothing.*" (Verse 28) It swallows everything, obliterating whoever or whatever is cast into it, leaving no trace. Moreover, it presents itself before people: "*It appears before mankind.*" (Verse 29) This echoes the verse in an earlier *sūrah*: "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (70: 17) It thus shows itself, deliberately striking fear into those who are destined to suffer its torment. Guards stand there: "*Guarded by nineteen.*" (Verse 30) We do not know if the number refers to individual angels who are '*stern and mighty*', as described in *Sūrah* 66, or whether it refers to rows or types of angels. This is merely a piece of information to which more will be added in the *sūrah*.

A Test for Unbelievers

The believers received God's words with the sort of acceptance worthy of one who trusts his Lord and shows the sort of manners a servant should have. They neither doubted this piece of news nor questioned it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, received it all with hearts devoid of faith or seriousness. They had no reverence of God. Hence, they made sarcastic comments, making the number, i.e. the 19, the subject of endless jokes. One of them said: 'Will not each 10 of you be sufficient to overcome one of them?' Another said: 'You take care of two of these and I will take care of the rest. You will have nothing to worry about from them.'

It was then that the next verse was revealed, explaining God's purpose behind giving this piece of information on something that belongs to the realm beyond human perception and mentioning this particular figure. It makes clear that that realm and the knowledge of all that relates to it belongs to God alone. It also mentions the ultimate end that results from the mention of the scorching fire and its guard:

> *We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the*

believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind. (Verse 31)

The verse begins by mentioning the nature of the 19 guards whose number the unbelievers joked about: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire.*" (Verse 31) They belong to that species of creature the nature and strength of which are known only to God Almighty. He mentions elsewhere in the Qur'ān that the angels "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (66: 6) This statement makes it clear that they always obey God's orders and that they have the power to do whatever He bids them. Since He has assigned to them the task of guarding hell, then they have been given the power to undertake this task and fulfil it as it should be done. Thus, there is no way that human beings can fight with them or subdue them. Such talk only betrays the unbelievers' crude ignorance of the nature of God's creation and how He conducts affairs.

"*We have made their number a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 31) It is the unbelievers that start arguing when the number is mentioned, because they cannot distinguish when an argument is out of place. Since this question belongs to the realm beyond, and mankind have no knowledge of it, then whatever God says about it should be accepted without argument. It should also be understood that mentioning this fact only, without adding further details, is the appropriate and beneficial way. To argue about it is futile, because argument can only be based on knowledge that does not fit with the information to hand. Their exact number, whatever it signifies, is determined by the One who coordinates everything in the universe and creates everything according to a specific measure. This number is like any other, and a person who wants to argue will make the same objection to any other number. Why are the heavens seven? Why was man created from dried clay, like pottery while the *jinn* were created from raging flames of fire, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 55? Why does pregnancy last nine months? Why do tortoises live for centuries?

Why this, and why that! The answer is that because the Creator who holds sway over all things has willed it so, and His will is always done! This is the final answer in such matters.

"*Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt.*" (Verse 31) Both groups will find in the number of the guards of hell what will give some of them more certainty and give others firmer faith. The people given revelations in the past must have known something of this fact so that when they heard the Qur'ān confirming it, they were certain about it. As for the believers, whatever God says will add to their faith and make it firmer, because their hearts are open to receive facts directly, happy with every new piece of information from God. They realize that such a number serves a particular purpose in God's accurate and fine scheme of creation. Their faith thus grows firmer. This fact thus becomes more firmly established in the hearts of both groups and neither will then doubt anything that comes from God.

"*But the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?'*" (Verse 31) The same fact leaves opposite effects on different hearts. While the people of the scriptures and the believers will have more faith as a result of mentioning the number of hell's guards, the very mention of this makes the unbelievers and hypocrites wonder about the reason for giving such an image. They neither appreciate the wisdom behind this strange matter, nor acknowledge God's absolute wisdom of creation. Besides, they are in doubt about the information given and the good purpose served by it.

"*Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills.*" (Verse 31) God mentions facts and puts up signs and indicators. Different hearts receive it differently. A group will be guided to the truth by such facts, as God wills, while another will go astray, also as God wills. Everything is ultimately determined by God's will which is absolutely free. Human beings were created by God's will with a dual tendency to follow either His guidance or error. Thus, every person acts within God's will whether he follows guidance or goes astray.

When we fully appreciate the fact that God's will is absolutely free, without restriction or impediment, and that everything that occurs in

the universe ultimately reverts to His will, and when we put this in the proper perspective, we spare our minds the narrow and endless argument on what people call 'predestination'. Such argument is futile, because it looks at this question, which relates to God the Infinite, from a narrow angle, limiting it to human logic and experience.

God clearly put before us two ways: one follows His guidance and the other leads to error. He has laid down for us a method of action which will, if we implement it, ensure that we have all the guidance we need, live happily and earn His reward. He has also pointed out to us other methods which lead us into error, misery and ruin. He has not required us to know anything beyond this, and has not given us the power to know more. He tells us that His will is absolutely free and inevitable. We should, therefore, deal with understanding this within our abilities and limitations, following the way of guidance and avoiding the different ways leading into error. We must not enter into any futile argument about something that we will never be able to fathom, because it pertains to the world beyond. When we do so, we arrive at the conclusion that all the efforts theologists and philosophers put into the question of predestination, in the way they argued it, were useless, because they were the wrong efforts put into the wrong field.

We do not know what God's hidden will is concerning us, but we do know what God wants of us: namely to deserve His grace which He has committed Himself to bestow upon us. Our proper course, then, is to devote our efforts to the fulfilment of what He has required us to do, leaving His hidden will to Him alone. What will happen to us is according to His will, and we will know it when it happens, and not before. What happens will fulfil His purpose and will be according to His wisdom.

"*No one knows your Lord's forces except Him.*" (Verse 31) The nature, function and effect of these forces are all matters beyond our perception. Of these, He reveals to us what He wishes. His decision is final. No one need argue about anything God has chosen not to inform us about. Such argument is futile.

"*This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31) 'This' may be a reference to God's forces, or to hell and those guarding it as these are also part of God's forces. Mentioning these is meant to alert and

warn people, not to open a way for conjecture. Believing hearts will certainly benefit by such reminders, but erring ones will continue to argue endlessly.

A Look at the Universe

The *sūrah* now relates the truths of the life to come, the scorching fire of hell and God's forces to various aspects of His fine creation in the universe, which people often overlook because of long familiarity. Yet these are evident proofs of God's limitless power of creation and His perfect design of the universe:

> *No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.* (Verses 32–36)

The sight of the moon, the departing night and the shining dawn are certainly inspiring. They say much to the human heart, whispering secrets and arousing deep feelings. In its quick reference to these, the Qur'ān touches our innermost selves where feelings and secrets are settled. It is rarely the case that people contemplate the sight of the moon as it rises, travels or sets without the moon whispering some universal secret in their ears. It sometimes takes no more than to stand in the moonlight in order to feel your heart being washed, as if you were bathing in light. It is hardly possible for anyone to look carefully at the night as it starts to depart, at that time of complete serenity before sunrise, when the world starts to wake up and opens its eyes, without being profoundly affected by it. Likewise, it is hardly possible for anyone not to be alert to the scene of dawn as it breaks and begins to shine without experiencing a sense of opening up that makes us aware of a change of feeling. This change makes us ready to receive the light that shines within our hearts just as we receive the light shining over the world around us.

God, the Creator of the human heart, knows that these very sights can sometimes work wonders with this heart, as though they are recreating it. Beyond these shining feelings and openings up, the moon, the night and the dawn all refer to a great truth to which the Qur'ān alerts us.

They all point to God's power of creation, His limitless wisdom and His fine coordination of His creation.

God Almighty swears by these great universal truths in order to alert those who are oblivious to their greatness and the message they impart. He swears that the scorching fire, or its guards, or the hereafter and its events, is one of the great wonders that serve as a warning to mankind of the impending danger ahead: "*It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.*" (Verses 35–36) The very oath, its contents and subject matter are all like hammers striking hard at people's hearts. This is in perfect harmony with the sounding of the trumpet mentioned earlier, and with the opening of the *sūrah* as it addresses the Prophet and bids him to arise and warn. The whole atmosphere is one of hard hitting, warning of an impending danger.

Individual Responsibility

The *sūrah* now declares that every soul bears responsibility for itself, leaving everyone to choose for themselves. It also states that each soul will have to account for its choices and be judged according to its deeds:

> *It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought.* (Verses 35–38)

All people, every single one of them, are responsible for themselves, choosing their own positions, going ahead or lagging behind, achieving an honourable status or bringing humiliation upon themselves. Thus, every soul is tied to what it does and the action it takes. God has shown all people the way that leads to Him so that they can take that way with open eyes. As this declaration of individual responsibility is made against the backdrop of inspiring universal scenes, as well as the scene of the scorching fire that spares nothing, it has its profound effect.

It is further declared, however, that an exception is made in the case of the believers who are referred to here as the ones on the right hand. These are untied. They are also given the right to ask the guilty about what has perpetrated their fate:

Except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.' (Verses 39–47)

That the believers are thus excepted is due to God's grace, for He blesses their good deeds and multiplies them. This declaration, at this particular point, touches all hearts. It first touches the hearts of the guilty who were bent on denying the truth. They see themselves in such a humiliating position, making long confessions, while the believers, whom they looked down upon in this world, stand in a position of dignity, asking them as if they are put in a position of authority: "*What brought you into the scorching fire?*" (Verse 42) It also touches the hearts of the believers who used to be at the receiving end of much hardship from those same guilty ones. Now they see themselves in a high position while their arrogant enemies of old are placed in such humiliation. The image is so powerful that it gives both sides a feeling that it is actually taking place now, as though the life of this world has come to an end and is now a thing of the past.

The long confession by the guilty gives details of the many wrongs they have perpetrated, and for which they are led to the scorching fire. They humbly admit to these in front of the believers. "*They will answer: We were not among those who prayed.*" (Verse 43) This is a reference to faith altogether, rather than to the act of prayer. It highlights the great importance of prayer in the Islamic faith, presenting it as a symbol and proof of faith. Denying it puts a person in the ranks of the unbelievers.

"*Neither did we feed the needy.*" (Verse 44) This comes next to denying the faith. It is an act of worship in respect of His creatures, following worship dedicated to Him only. The fact that this quality is expressed so strongly in several places in the Qur'ān gives us an impression of the social environment the Qur'ān addressed. It was a hard environment where kindness to the poor was rare, despite showing great generosity when that served social interests. Such generosity did not apply in situations of real need or pure kindness.

"*But we indulged with others in vain talk.*" (Verse 45) This describes how they took faith lightly and treated it carelessly, in jest, when it was the most important matter in man's life. Indeed man should resolve this issue of faith within his own mind and heart, before he attends to any other matter in life, because it is the issue that gives him his concept of life, values and standards. It provides him with the light that shows him his way in life. How, then, can man take it other than seriously? How can he treat it as vain talk in which he indulges with similarly careless people?

"*And we denied the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 46) This is the core guilt. A person who denies the Day of Judgement will have no proper standard by which to evaluate things. All values are shaken in his mind. To him, the scope of life becomes too narrow as it dwindles into this limited space of his time on earth. He looks at the consequences of events as they are within this limited space of time and place, and he is unhappy. How can he be otherwise when he does not take the final outcome into account? Indeed, all his standards, and all matters of this life will be defective, before his evaluation of the life to come and his position there becomes faulty. Hence, he ends in utter ruin.

The guilty admit that they continued in that situation, unwilling to pray, being uncharitable to the needy, indulging in vain talk and denying the Day of Judgement, "*until there came upon us that which is certain.*" (Verse 47) What came upon them is death, which ends all doubt, bringing the final say and leaving no room for regret, repentance or the mending of one's ways.

The *sūrah* comments on their abject humiliation by raising no hope of any change in their status: "*So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verse 48) The whole thing is settled. The end of the guilty has been determined. There is no one to intercede on their behalf anyway. Assuming that such intercessors are there and willing, which is not the case, their pleas will be of no benefit to the guilty.

Who Heeds the Reminder?

The *sūrah* now puts them back in this life, where they have the chance to do something before facing such an abject outcome. Yet they turn

away, fleeing from the guidance that would bring them only what is good. The means of salvation are shown to them, but they run away from them. Therefore, the *sūrah* draws a sarcastic image of their situation:

> *What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?* (Verses 49–51)

The scene of asses or zebras in great agitation, running in all directions as they hear a lion roaring, was well known to the Arabs. It is a scene of fast movement in a state of panic. Hence, when it is applied to humans, it invites loud laughter. This is especially so if those humans were in real fear of some impending danger. What can be said about them if such is their state, like terrified asses, only because someone is reminding them of their Lord and their eventual destiny, showing them the way to avoid such misery and pain? The image drawn is profound and effective. Those who contemplate it will be too ashamed if they find themselves in it.

Such is their external condition. The *sūrah*, however, describes their inner feelings as well: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) It is, then, a question of envy. They begrudge the Prophet for God having given him this exceptional favour. Each one of them is so keen to attain the same status and to be given scriptures to announce to mankind. This must be a reference to their elders who felt hurt that they were bypassed when divine revelations were granted to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Hence, they said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (43: 31) God certainly knows to whom to entrust His final message. He chose for this task a great man with the noblest of hearts. This was enough to fill those unbelievers with rancour. Their unjustifiable grudges were also enough for the Qur'ān to expose.

The *sūrah* continues its presentation of their inner feelings. As it censures their envy, which lacks sound basis, the *sūrah* now gives another reason for the unbelievers' continued denial of the truth and their rejection of the message: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53) It is indeed their lack of fear of what may happen in the life to come that leads to their heedless attitude to reminders. It makes them react

illogically to the divine message. Had they genuinely felt the truth of the hereafter they would have had a totally different reaction.

The *sūrah* repudiates their attitude once more, as it puts its final word to them, leaving them to choose for themselves what they may: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) This Qur'ān to which they refuse to listen, and from which they turn away like frightened asses, is a reminder highlighting the truth. Everyone adopts the attitude they want towards it. Whoever is willing to be reminded will have the reminder. Others choose their own way. The outcome is either heaven and the dignity it imparts or hell and the humiliation it involves. It all depends on one's own choice.

The *sūrah* concludes with a restatement of God's free will which ultimately determines all affairs. This is the truth the Qur'ān is keen to state whenever an occasion arises in order to give the believers the correct concept concerning His will, and its being absolutely free and universally applicable.

> *They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.* (Verse 56)

Whatever happens in the universe is tied to God's grand will and occurs within it. It is not possible for anyone or anything to will something that is in conflict with God's will. It is His will that controls everything in the universe. It is the will that brought the universe into existence and established its rules and forces. Therefore, the universe, with all living things in it, moves within the framework of God's will that is unbound by limit or restriction.

Taking heed is something that God facilitates for everyone He knows to deserve it. When a servant of His shows that he or she has sincerity of intention, He directs them to what brings them closer to Him. No servant knows what God's will is for him, but everyone knows what God wants of them. He has explained this to them. Therefore, He helps, according to His free will, everyone who is sincere in the attempt to fulfil the duties He has assigned to them.

The Qur'ān aims to impress on every Muslim mind the dual notion that divine will is absolutely free and that it incorporates every will; this

so that we turn to it willingly and submit to it completely. This is the essential notion without which Islam cannot be firmly established in one's heart. When it is thus established, it initiates a comprehensive vision to which a Muslim resorts in all life events. This is why this principle is emphasized whenever the Qur'ān promises believers they will be in heaven, warns unbelievers against hell, and speaks of guidance and error. To take such a statement in a narrow way arguing about predestination is no more than taking a partial view of a universal truth, forcing it into a narrow vision that leads nowhere.

"*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills.*" (Verse 56) Their will cannot be on a collision course with God's will. Indeed, they cannot move in any direction without the operation of God's will that so enables them to move. God is "*the Lord to be feared,*" by His servants. Hence, they are required to demonstrate this. He is also "*the Lord of forgiveness,*" who bestows this on His servants by His will. To fear God is to deserve forgiveness, and God is the Lord of both.

The *sūrah* concludes with this humbly felt glorification of God. It leaves us looking up to God. It leaves us hoping that He will guide us to His remembrance, so that we will always fear Him and that He will then grant us forgiveness.

SŪRAH 75

Al-Qiyāmah

(The Resurrection)

Prologue

This *sūrah* puts forward such a great number of truths, scenes, images, special effects, tones and touches that no attentive heart can easily handle or escape from them. Furthermore, its distinctive style and musical cadence also combine to enhance its effect and bring it to a level that is again difficult to resist or to shed. It starts with two short verses with distinctive notes about the Day of Resurrection and the self-reproaching soul: "*I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul!*" (Verses 1–2) The *sūrah* then continues with a discourse that from start to finish relates to both the human soul and the Day of Resurrection, often coupling them together. It is as if the opening two verses sum up the subject matter of the whole *sūrah*, or that they set the tone influencing its notes in a fine and beautiful way.

One of the great truths the *sūrah* speaks about is death. The reality of how death applies to every living creature, and from which none can escape or divert it from a loved one is a hard truth. It occurs at every moment, and is applicable to young and old, rich and poor, strong and weak alike. All stand in the same position: there is no escape, no evasion, no resistance, no intercession and no deferment. This suggests that death comes from a higher source, one mankind cannot influence in any way. When it occurs, man simply submits to this higher source.

This is the note with which the *sūrah* takes hold of our hearts: "*Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' When he knows it is the final parting, and one leg will be joined with another, to your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verses 26–30)

Another great truth highlighted in the *sūrah* is how man comes into existence in the first place, and its significance in confirming the truth of resurrection. In this way we see how man's creation occurs according to careful planning. God informs people of the fine stages of their coming into existence, and how these stages succeed one another in such a marvellous procession that only He could have designed. Indeed, even those who deny the resurrection do not claim a different origin for this process. This, in itself, provides irrefutable evidence of the presence of the One God, who deals death and determines its timing. Moreover, death provides clear evidence that resurrection is easy, and also implies that it is necessary. It is, thus, seen as being consistent with the planning whereby man has a clear purpose, and that his life does not end without him accounting for his deeds. This is the note that touches hearts at the beginning of the *sūrah*: "*Does man think that We will not put his bones together again?*" (Verse 3) As it draws to its end, the *sūrah* says: "*Does man think that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life?*" (Verses 36–40)

One of the scenes the *sūrah* paints is that of the Day of Resurrection and the great celestial events that take place on that day. In this, we see the psychological upheaval that leaves man at a loss, unable to decide how to face these events. Thus, the great upheaval occurs in the centre of the universe, as well as in the very depths of the human soul, leaving man like a mouse in a trap. This comes in response to man as he wonders, with much doubt, about whether the Day of Resurrection will ever come. In so doing, he treats it with carelessness, persisting in his erring ways. God's response to all this is delivered with a quick rhythm, one that paints a fast succession of images and glimpses: "*Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the*

moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return. Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses." (Verses 5–15)

One of these images is that of the believers, with full trust in their Lord, looking up to His benevolent face in the midst of all this horror. Another image is of those on the other side, who have no bond with their Lord and no hope of His grace. These expect to receive what their earlier denials, disbelief and disobedience entail. This image is presented forcefully, as if it is taking place at the very moment the *sūrah* is being recited. It responds to people's love of this present world and their disregard of the life to come: "*Yet you love this fleeting life, and give no thought to the life to come. Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord; and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them.*" (Verses 20–25)

Four verses interrupt this sequence of truths to deliver a special directive to the Prophet concerning the way he receives Qur'ānic revelations. It would also appear that this directive relates to something in particular about this *sūrah*. The Prophet had feared that he might forget something of what was being revealed to him, and in his eagerness to ensure that he did not forget, he used to repeat its verses, one by one, as they were recited to him. He would vocalize the words to make sure that he learnt them by heart. Therefore, he was given the following instruction: "*Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. We shall see to its collection and recitation. When We recite it, follow its recitation. Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.*" (Verses 16–19) This instruction is given to the Prophet to reassure him that the revelation of the Qur'ān, its preservation, collection and explanation of its message are left to the Almighty, the Author of the Qur'ān. The Prophet's own role is to receive the message and deliver it as he receives it. Therefore, he need not worry. He should receive the revelation in full and then he will find it engraved in his heart without change. This was exactly what happened. This instruction, however, has been retained at the precise point where it occurred. Is it not given in God's own words? God's word is sure to stay in place, whatever purpose it addresses. These four verses,

therefore, represent words He said, and therefore, they stay in His book like the rest of it. In fact, retaining these four verses in the middle of the *sūrah* points to an inspiring truth concerning all God's words, whatever their purpose happens to be. It tells us that every word God said to His Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), has been recorded; not a single letter has been lost.

As it listens to this *sūrah*, the human heart realizes that there is no escape. Man will have to account for his deeds, with no one to protect him from God. His existence, in both this life and the life to come, is determined by God, according to His knowledge and planning. Meanwhile, man plays around and thinks himself too important: "*He neither believed nor prayed, but denied the truth and turned away, then he went back to his people full of arrogance.*" (Verses 31–33) As he faces this large number of truths, images and special effects, man is given an implicit but highly effective warning: "*Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, and ever nearer and nearer.*" (Verses 34–35)

We see how the *sūrah* deals with man's obstinate rejection of the divine message, making him feel, in all clarity, the seriousness of its discourse about resurrection, the human soul and the accurate measure of life. It tells him that the Qur'ān is also a very serious matter: not a single letter of it will ever be lost because it is all God's own words.

We have thus outlined the truths and images presented in the *sūrah* individually, but when these are read in the *sūrah* itself and as a whole they give a totally different effect. The sequence of these images, the way they are intertwined, and their presentation of an aspect of the truth at one time and then giving another aspect of it a little later are all characteristics of the Qur'ān's inspiring style as it addresses the human heart. No other style or method could possibly achieve a similar effect.

Al-Qiyāmah
(The Resurrection)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection (1)

لَا أُقْسِمُ بِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ ﴿١﴾

and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul! (2)

وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ ﴿٢﴾

Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? (3)

أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنسَانُ أَلَّن نَّجْمَعَ عِظَامَهُ ﴿٣﴾

Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips! (4)

بَلَىٰ قَادِرِينَ عَلَىٰ أَن نُّسَوِّيَ بَنَانَهُ ﴿٤﴾

Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. (5)

بَلْ يُرِيدُ الْإِنسَانُ لِيَفْجُرَ أَمَامَهُ ﴿٥﴾

He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' (6)

يَسْأَلُ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ الْقِيَامَةِ ﴿٦﴾

When the sight is dazzled (7)

فَإِذَا بَرِقَ الْبَصَرُ ﴿٧﴾

and the moon eclipsed, (8)

وَخَسَفَ الْقَمَرُ ﴿٨﴾

when the sun and the moon are brought together, (9)

وَجُمِعَ الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ ﴿٩﴾

يَقُولُ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ يَوْمَئِذٍ أَيْنَ ٱلْمَفَرُّ ﴿١٠﴾

on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' (10)

كَلَّا لَا وَزَرَ ﴿١١﴾

But no! There is no refuge. (11)

إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ ٱلْمُسْتَقَرُّ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day, to your Lord all shall return. (12)

يُنَبَّؤُا۟ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بِمَا قَدَّمَ وَأَخَّرَ ﴿١٣﴾

Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. (13)

بَلِ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ بَصِيرَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾

Man will be a witness against himself, (14)

وَلَوْ أَلْقَىٰ مَعَاذِيرَهُۥ ﴿١٥﴾

even though he may put up his excuses. (15)

لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِۦ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِۦٓ ﴿١٦﴾

Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. (16)

إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُۥ وَقُرْءَانَهُۥ ﴿١٧﴾

We shall see to its collection and recitation. (17)

فَإِذَا قَرَأْنَٰهُ فَٱتَّبِعْ قُرْءَانَهُۥ ﴿١٨﴾

When We recite it, follow its recitation. (18)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُۥ ﴿١٩﴾

Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear. (19)

كَلَّا بَلْ تُحِبُّونَ ٱلْعَاجِلَةَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Yet you love this fleeting life, (20)

and give no thought to the life to come. (21)

وَتَذَرُونَ ٱلْآخِرَةَ ﴿٢١﴾

Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, (22)

وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَّاضِرَةٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

looking towards their Lord; (23)

إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, (24)

وَوُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ بَاسِرَةٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them. (25)

تَظُنُّ أَن يُفْعَلَ بِهَا فَاقِرَةٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, (26)

كَلَّآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلتَّرَاقِيَ ﴿٢٦﴾

when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' (27)

وَقِيلَ مَنْ ۜ رَاقٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

When he knows it is the final parting, (28)

وَظَنَّ أَنَّهُ ٱلْفِرَاقُ ﴿٢٨﴾

and one leg will be joined with another, (29)

وَٱلْتَفَّتِ ٱلسَّاقُ بِٱلسَّاقِ ﴿٢٩﴾

to your Lord he will on that day be driven. (30)

إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ ٱلْمَسَاقُ ﴿٣٠﴾

He neither believed nor prayed, (31)

فَلَا صَدَّقَ وَلَا صَلَّىٰ ﴿٣١﴾

but denied the truth and turned away, (32)	وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٢﴾
then he went back to his people full of arrogance. (33)	ثُمَّ ذَهَبَ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِ يَتَمَطَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾
Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, (34)	أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰ ﴿٣٤﴾
and ever nearer and nearer. (35)	ثُمَّ أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰ ﴿٣٥﴾
Does man think that he will be left without purpose? (36)	أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنسَانُ أَن يُتْرَكَ سُدًى ﴿٣٦﴾
Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? (37)	أَلَمْ يَكُ نُطْفَةً مِّن مَّنِيٍّ يُمْنَىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾
It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, (38)	ثُمَّ كَانَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾
fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. (39)	فَجَعَلَ مِنْهُ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾
Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life? (40)	أَلَيْسَ ذَٰلِكَ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَىٰ أَن يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

Self-Reproaching Soul

> *I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul! Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips! Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?' When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?' But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return. Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back. Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses.* (Verses 1–15)

The *sūrah* starts with a reference to making an oath, but then decides not to make it. This has a deeper effect than a straightforward oath, and this is what is intended. Indeed, a more literal rendering would be: 'I do not swear by...' When this has been stated, the truths of the resurrection and self-reproaching soul appear in view.

There is much discussion of resurrection in the *sūrah*. As for the self-reproaching soul, various reports explain this. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī says: "You will always find a believer questioning himself: 'What did I mean by this word? What did I eat this food for? What do I mean by speaking to myself thus?' A transgressor will go on never blaming himself." Al-Ḥasan says: "Every single soul in the heavens and earth will be blaming himself on the Day of Judgement." 'Ikrimah says: "It is the soul that blames itself for good and bad things, saying: if only I did this or that." Sa'īd ibn Jubayr said the same. Ibn 'Abbās says: "It is always blaming." He also says: "It is often blaming, much criticized." Mujāhid says: "It regrets what has passed and blames for it." Qatādah says: "It is the one tending towards evil." Jarīr says: "All these definitions are in practically the same vein. However, what is closer to the apparent meaning of the Qur'ānic statement is to say that it is the soul that blames a person for whatever he does, good or bad, and regrets what has passed." For our self, we prefer the first definition stated by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

Such a pious, self-reproaching soul, one that fears God's punishment, and is always cautious, looking around, reviewing its actions, identifying

what it desires, making sure not to cheat itself, is certainly so honoured by God as to warrant mention alongside the Day of Resurrection. It is the opposite of the soul of one who wants to indulge in sin undeterred; who lies, turns away from the truth and then returns to his people full of arrogance, never taking stock of his actions and paying no heed to the truth.

"*I need not swear by the Day of Resurrection and I need not swear by the self-reproaching soul!*" (Verses 1–2) What is at the centre of this opening is the arrival of the Day of Resurrection, but when the oath is left aside, the *sūrah* does not mention the subject of that oath further. Instead, it picks it up in another form, as if to start a discourse having alerted our minds to it with this clear opening: "*Does man think that We will not put his bones together again? Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips!*" (Verses 3–4)

The essential difficulty for the unbelievers was that they could not imagine that bones becoming dust and being swallowed by the earth could then be gathered together again to bring a human being back to life. This is also most probably true of some people today! The *sūrah* responds to this sort of thinking, confirming that putting everyone's bones back together will assuredly take place: "*Yes, indeed! We are able to put in perfect order his very fingertips!*" (Verse 4) The *sūrah* reasserts this process of putting bones back together by stating something more complex, which is to put fingertips in their respective positions, just as they were in life. This implies that man will be brought back to life, with every little detail or small aspect of his physique put back in perfect order. Nothing is lost, however small!

This reconfirmation is enough here. Towards the end of the *sūrah*, we have another proof derived from the fact of man's first creation. Here, however, the *sūrah* exposes the mental flaw leading to this sort of thinking that cannot conceive of bones being put back together. Man simply wants to persist in his denial so that he goes on the loose, with nothing to check or restrain his march. He does not want to face any reckoning or requital. Therefore, he expects no resurrection and no answerability: "*Yet man wants to deny what lies ahead of him. He asks: 'When will this Day of Resurrection be?'*" (Verses 5–6) This question is stated in the Arabic with the interrogative pronoun *ayyāna*, which

adds to the normal equivalent of 'when', which is *ayna*, the doubling of the '*y*' sound and a long '*a*'; a form that suggests the improbability of happening. This is in line with the desire of the questioner to run loose and continue with his sinful ways, undeterred by any thought of the hereafter. Indeed, the hereafter often acts as a restraint checking the desire to indulge in sin. Now this person tries to remove this restraint so that he can go ahead with sinful practices undeterred.

The answer that comes is swift, decisive, maintains a fast beat and uses hard-hitting words. It draws a scene of the Day of Resurrection in which human senses and feelings combine with celestial images to produce an awesome effect: "*When the sight is dazzled and the moon eclipsed, when the sun and the moon are brought together, on that day man will say: 'Where to flee?'*" (Verses 7–10) The sight is very swiftly distracted here and there, like lightning, and the moon is eclipsed and no longer reflects any light, while the sun and the moon are brought together after they have long been parted. Their familiar operation is disrupted since the entire celestial system, known for its accuracy of movement, is no longer operating. In the midst of all this upheaval, man stands terrified, asking, 'Where to flee?' The very question imparts a feeling of fear and utter panic. Man looks lost, wherever he turns his eyes he sees nothing but a blocked way.

There is no refuge or protection. No one can avert God's power and punishment, since all return to Him and there is no hiding place to seek other than the one He determines: "*But no! There is no refuge. On that day, to your Lord all shall return.*" (Verses 11–12) So what man has desired, hoping to be able to continue with his erring ways, fearing neither reckoning nor requital, is not what happens. On the contrary, everything will be reckoned, and he will be reminded of anything he may have forgotten. It will all be brought before him so that he faces his fair requital: "*Man will be told on that day all that he put forward and all that he put back.*" (Verse 13) He will be told of what he did before his death, as also what effects his actions produced after his death, whether good or evil. Some actions produce long-lasting effects, and these effects are added to the account of the person who performed them.

Whatever excuses man may try to put forward, none will be accepted. He is responsible for himself, and it is his duty to bring himself to divine

guidance. When he let himself sink into evil, only he himself can be answerable for this: "*Man will be a witness against himself, even though he may put up his excuses.*" (Verses 14–15)

It is worth noting here that every expression in the *sūrah* thus far is short and quick: the verses, the endings, the rhythm, the images and the reckoning process. This appears to be a response to man's attempt to disregard the whole idea of the Day of Reckoning and to think that it is too far off.

God's Guarantee

Then come the four verses giving the Prophet special instruction as regards the way he received Qur'ānic revelations:

> *Do not move your tongue repeating its words in haste. We shall see to its collection and recitation. When We recite it, follow its recitation. Then it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.* (Verses 16–19)

In addition to what we have already said about these four verses in the Prologue, we note that God takes all responsibility for the Qur'ān: its revelation, preservation, collection and explanation. All this is undertaken by none other than God Almighty. The Prophet's role is no more than to receive and deliver it. We also note here how the Prophet was so eager and keen to fully understand what was being revealed to him, taking it most seriously, fearing to forget a phrase or a word. Hence why he repeated the words after the Angel Gabriel recited them to him, to make sure that he had not omitted any of it. The fact that this is recorded in the Qur'ān itself further emphasizes what we have just said.

Opposite Positions

The *sūrah* now reminds the unbelievers of their love of this present world, which is their main concern, and their disregard of the hereafter. It shows them the state in which they will end up in the life to come in a highly inspiring image:

Yet you love this fleeting life, and give no thought to the life to come. Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord; and some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them. (Verses 20–25)

The first thing we notice, which adds to the harmony of style, is that this life is described at this point as '*fleeting*'. This not only stresses the short duration of this present life, which is the intended meaning, but also provides an element of harmony between these connotations and those of the preceding verses speaking of the Prophet as he repeated the words of the Qur'ān. In both, haste is a common feature. It also appears to be a feature of mankind in this present world.

These last quoted verses paint two contrasting images: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (Verses 22–23) This is a very quick reference to a situation no words can describe and no imagination can fully understand. Those people are promised a kind of happiness that is unlike any other. Indeed, heaven and all the happiness it includes appear too small by comparison. These beaming faces are so radiant with happiness because they are looking towards their Lord! They are looking towards God! How sublime! What pure, perfect and absolute happiness!

Sometimes man's soul looks briefly at an aspect of beauty God has placed in the universe or within man. It may see this in the full moon, the still night, the breaking dawn, the stretching shadow, the bustling sea, the endless desert, the blossoming garden, the happy face, the noble heart, the unshakable faith, the unwavering patience or many other manifestations of beauty in this world. Looking at such beauty, man feels ecstatic, flowing with happiness, flying into a world of light and purity. All adversity seems to shrink and disappear. So how will man's soul feel when he looks, not at the beauty of God's creation, but at God's own beauty? This is a position that needs both help and reassurance from God so that man can steady himself and begin to enjoy such indescribable happiness: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (Verses 22–23) How could these faces be anything but radiant and beaming when they are looking towards their Lord and His beauty?

We experience a feeling of happiness that rises from our hearts and gives our faces a beaming look, simply because we see the beauty of something God has created: a bright face, a lovely flower, a spread-out wing, a noble soul or a kindly deed. What feelings, then, will overwhelm us when we look at the beauty of perfection, and when we are free of all life's concerns that may distract us from appreciating such beauty? When we speak of 'life's concerns' we do not mean only in the world around us but also in terms of our own shortcomings and needs.

How do those happy people look; with what organ and by what means? These are questions that do not even occur to a heart touched by the happiness that this Qur'ānic statement radiates into a believer's soul. Why, then, do some people deprive their souls from enjoying this light that overflows with happiness and joy? Why do they, instead, get involved in futile arguments about an abstract that human minds, restricted as they are by their familiar world, cannot fathom? Only man's release from the shackles of his worldly existence will give him the hope of facing the absolute truth on the Day of Resurrection. Without such release, man cannot even imagine what facing that truth will be like.

This means that the seemingly endless arguments the Mu'tazilah entered into with their Sunnī theological opponents and other philosophers were absolutely futile, leading nowhere. They argued about the nature of 'the look' and 'the sight' on that day. They used earthly standards, speaking about encumbered man, man restricted by what he knows when on earth, and so looked at the whole question with faculties that are essentially limited in scope.

The very import of the words is restricted by what our finite minds and imaginations understand. If our minds are freed from such restrictions, the very words may acquire different meanings. Words are only symbols, and what they symbolize differs in accordance with man's thoughts and concepts. When man's powers and faculties change, his concepts change and, consequently, the significance of words change. In our life on earth, we deal with these symbols according to our power. Why, then, should we argue about something when we are not even sure about the significance of the words expressing it? Let us, then, look up to this absolutely serene happiness and pure joy which we feel when we try, as we can, to imagine that position. Let our souls revel in that

happiness, for the mere looking up to such happiness is a great blessing of far-reaching dimensions.

"*And some faces will on that day be overcast with despair, realizing that a great calamity is about to befall them.*" (Verses 24–25) These are faces looking absolutely grim, with their sins and misdeeds casting a dark shadow over them. Their expectation of an impending calamity that crushes their very backbones weighs heavily on them and heightens their immense sorrow. How dreadful and ghastly they look!

Such is the life to come which they ignore, preferring to indulge in this life of fleeting pleasures. They love this life despite having ahead of them that day which brings widely different fates.

The Scene of Death

The scenes painted so far of the Day of Judgement and its great upheavals and divergent fates derive their effect from the truth they represent and the Qur'ān's own powerful style, bringing them alive before us. The *sūrah* now comes closer and closer so as to present a scene of something that occurs all the time. Indeed, people encounter this most clearly at every moment in their lives. It is the scene of death that overtakes every living soul. No one can evade or escape death, which separates a person from his loved ones. Death moves along its course, uninterrupted by anything. It does not respond to an impassioned appeal, an outcry of grief, a fervent desire or a seizure of panic. It takes the most powerful giants as easily as it takes the weakest dwarfs, and overcomes tyrants in the same way as it overcomes the oppressed. Mankind have no way to prevent death, yet they do not consider the great power that deals it:

> *Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat, when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?' When he knows it is the final parting, and one leg will be joined with another, to your Lord he will on that day be driven.* (Verses 26–30)

This is the scene of approaching death, presented to people by the Qur'ān as if it is happening now. It comes out from within the words, just like a picture comes out of a painter's brush.

"*Yet when the departing soul comes up to the throat.*" (Verse 26) At this point the dying person is in his last throes, with distress all around. Those present look everywhere, trying to think of something or some means to save the one suffering this distress: "*when it is said, 'Can any charmer [do something now]?'*" (Verse 27) Could a charm possibly be of any use? The suffering one is writhing with pain, "*and one leg will be joined with another.*" (Verse 29) All means are of no use. The road ahead becomes clear; it is the road every living being will eventually have to walk: "*To your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verse 30) The scene almost moves in front of us and almost talks. Every verse draws a movement, and the image of approaching death is clearly visible spreading impassioned feelings of loss and panic, before facing the bitter, hard truth no one can escape from. The inevitable end then clearly appears: "*To your Lord he will on that day be driven.*" (Verse 30) The curtains are drawn over this distressing scene, leaving a distinct image in our eyes, prominent feelings in our hearts and a clear sense of grimness in the air.

Arrogant Rejection

By contrast, we have an image of those bent on denying the truth. They do not prepare for the inevitable end by doing something in obedience of God. Rather, they arrogantly indulge in disobedience and sin:

> *He neither believed nor prayed, but denied the truth and turned away, then he went back to his people full of arrogance.* (Verses 31–33)

It is reported that these verses refer to a particular person, Abū Jahl 'Amr ibn Hishām, who used to visit the Prophet sometimes and listen to the Qur'ān. He would then go away, refusing to believe. In fact, he was neither polite nor fearful of God. He would continue to hurt the Prophet by what he said, and would try to turn people away from Islam. He would also take pride in such actions, treating his evil deeds as something to be proud of. The Qur'ān derides his attitude. In its description of his arrogant movements, it invites the listeners' scorn.

Yet there are many like Abū Jahl whom the message of Islam faces. They listen but turn away. They are inventive in their opposition to the word of truth, pouring harm on its advocates, working out evil schemes and feeling proud of their evil deeds and of the corruption they spread on earth. Hence, the Qur'ān issues a clear threat to such people:

> *Your doom, man, comes nearer and nearer, and ever nearer and nearer.* (Verses 34–35)

The *sūrah* uses here an idiom, *awlā laka fa 'awlā*, which implies a strong threat and repeats it twice. Hence the translation expresses the implied meaning. On one occasion, the Prophet held Abū Jahl by the scruff of his neck and used this expression as it occurs in the *sūrah*. Abū Jahl said: "Are you threatening me, Muḥammad? By God, neither you nor your Lord can do anything to me. I am the most powerful man ever to walk in between these hills." When the Battle of Badr took place, God killed him by the hands of Muḥammad's followers. Before him, Pharaoh said to the chiefs of his people: "*Nobles! I know of no deity that you could have other than myself.*" (28: 38) He also said: "*My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet?*" (43: 51) Yet God smote him down, drowned him.

The history of the divine message is full of people who forgot God and His power, of those who feel their own power, relying on tribes, forces and authority, thinking that all these will give them protection. Then such people are taken away like a fly or a mosquito. Remember then, when the time of death comes it cannot be put forward or backward by even a fraction of a second.

Can it be Without Purpose?

As the *sūrah* draws to its conclusion, it presents another truth from this world that carries a clear pointer to God's design of human life as also to the life to come:

> *Does man think that he will be left without purpose? Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and*

then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female. Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life? (Verses 36–40)

This last section strikes powerful notes and points to great truths, which those who were addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelations could never imagine. The first of these refers to the deliberate design and planning in man's life: "*Does man think that he will be left without purpose?*" (Verse 36) Those people used to think that life was merely a process that takes place, having neither cause nor goal. Women get pregnant and give birth, and graves take the dead away! In between, there is nothing other than idle play, putting on some adornments, competing for good things, and enjoyment that is not much different from animals. To think that it all goes according to an elaborate law, serving a definite goal and purpose; that man's arrival in this life is according to a deliberate will and a set plan; that it all ends with accountability and requital, and that the journey of life is a test before the final requital was far beyond people's thoughts. Few could recognize in all this the wisdom of God, that He does everything for a clear purpose and towards a pre-willed end.

What distinguishes man from animals is man's recognition of the link between time, events and objectives and that human life has a definite purpose linked to that of the universe around him. The greater and broader this feeling is in man's consciousness and the more refined is his concept of the law that links things and events, the higher he rises in his humanity. Thus, he does not live his life one minute or one event after another. On the contrary, time, place, the past, present and future are all connected in his consciousness. They are all related to the existence of the great universe and its laws. These are the result of a higher will that creates, plans and designs. This higher will does not create people and leave them to a life without purpose.

The Qur'ān put this profound concept in people's minds so long ago. It was a great departure from the concepts that prevailed at the time. It remains greatly removed from all concepts about the universe that philosophers of olden and modern times have advanced.

"*Does man think that he will be left without purpose?*" (Verse 36) This is a fine touch, which the Qur'ān uses to alert the human mind to think and reflect, looking at bonds, goals, causes and effects that link his existence to that of the universe and to the will that conducts everything in that universe.

In a clear and simple manner, the *sūrah* cites clear evidence confirming that man will not be left without purpose. These are taken from man's first origins: "*Was he not a mere drop of emitted sperm? It then became a clinging cell mass, and then God created and shaped it, fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female.*" (Verses 37–39) What is man? How does he come into existence? What are his origins? How does he grow into his present status? What journey did he make before arriving on this planet? Was he not a mere drop of a certain emitted fluid? Did not this one-celled drop transform into a cell mass that clung to the wall of the uterus to survive and be nourished? Who guided it to do this, and who gave it this ability?

Then again, who made out of it an embryo with perfectly shaped organs, composed of millions and millions of cells, when it only originated as a single cell that fertilized an egg? Its journey from one cell to a fully-shaped embryo is far longer than man's journey from birth to death. The changes and transformations it goes through during the embryonic journey are much more varied and wider than all that a man encounters through his life journey from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Who guided his long eventful journey while he was a helpless creature without an intellect, perception and experience?

Ultimately, who brought out of the single cell the two types, male and female? What will did this cell have to develop into a male while the other developed into a female? Or, who indeed can claim to have intervened to guide their different routes to make this choice in the dark depths of the uterus?

There is no escape! Everyone admits the presence of the gentle hand that guided the emitted drop of fluid along its long way and brought it to its final shape, according to an elaborate plan: "*Fashioning out of it the two sexes, male and female.*" (Verse 39)

As this truth imposes itself on our human senses, the *sūrah* concludes with a note that brings together the truths outlined through its verses:

"*Is He not, then, able to bring the dead back to life?*" (Verse 40) Yes, indeed! God Almighty is able to bring the dead back to life. Yes, indeed! Limitless is He in His glory, God is able to bring about the second life. Yes, without doubt. Man can say nothing to this, other than submit to its truth.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes, with such a powerful and decisive note that allows the truth of human existence and the elaborate planning behind it to fill our minds.

SŪRAH 76

Al-Insān

(Man)

Prologue

Some reports suggest that this *sūrah* was revealed in Madīnah, but it is a Makkan revelation. Its Makkan character is indeed very obvious considering its subject matter, its flow and other characteristics. Hence, we give more credence to those reports stating its revelation in Makkah. In fact, there are indications in the way it runs suggesting that it was among the earlier *sūrahs* to be revealed in Makkah. We may cite for example the detailed images of happiness and torment in the life to come, the directive given to the Prophet to remain patient, awaiting his Lord's judgement, and not to obey any sinner or unbeliever from among them. These are the things Makkan revelations always emphasized, particularly when the persecution of the advocates of the Islamic message was becoming fierce. Moreover, the Prophet is encouraged to hold firmly to the truth he has been given, allowing the unbelievers respite but not to incline to or listen to them. Such directives are found in *Sūrahs* 68, 73 and 74 in this volume. These directives are similar to the ones found in this *sūrah*. Therefore, the possibility that it was revealed in Madīnah is remote and better discounted.

In totality, the *sūrah* is a calm address encouraging people to turn to God, obey Him, seek His pleasure, remember His favours, work to avoid His punishment, maintain alertness to the test He puts His servants to

and understand His wisdom in creation, bestowing favours, testing and giving the unbelievers respite.

The *sūrah* begins with an inspiring touch, asking the question: where was man before coming into this life? Who gave him his existence? Who gave him the position he occupies in this life after he had none: "*Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of?*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a second touch speaking about man's origins and God's wisdom manifested in his creation and His giving him his energies and faculties: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight.*" (Verse 2) The third touch speaks of guiding man to the right way, giving him help to go along this way before leaving him to choose the way he wants to go and the fate he wants to end up with: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) These three touches set the human heart thinking deeply, glancing back and casting a look forward, and then reflecting before choosing which way to go. Then the *sūrah* gives clear advice to man as he stands at the crossroads, warning him against taking the way leading to hell and encouraging him in every way to take the way to heaven, pointing to the great variety of pleasure that awaits him there: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.*" (Verses 4–6)

Before completing its description of what believers will enjoy, the *sūrah* now draws a sketch showing the features of those righteous people. In so doing, it uses some fine words and expressions that are in perfect harmony with the splendid bliss these people enjoy in heaven: "*They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 7–10)

The *sūrah* then presents the reward which will be given to these people who willingly attend to difficult duties, who fear the bleak, grim day, the generous who feed others despite themselves being in need, and who only seek God's pleasure, hoping for no reward from anyone else. As the

sūrah presents this, we find that it is a reward of security, happiness and perfect enjoyment: "*God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called* Salsabīl. *They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.* (Verses 11–22)

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet encouraging him to stand firm in the face of those who turn away, persist in disbelief and deny the truth. He is directed to remain patient in the face of all this adversity and to await God's judgement. He should maintain his tie with his Lord, deriving strength from Him whenever he feels that the road he has to travel is too long: "*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 23–26)

In conclusion, the *sūrah* reminds the unbelievers of the heavy day that they do not reckon with. This is the day feared by the righteous who are keen to guard against its punishment. It tells them that they represent no serious issue to God who gave them all the power they have and is able to replace them with others. He bestows His favours on them in fulfilment of His wish to put people to the test. The *sūrah* ends with a brief mention of the results of this test: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. Yet you cannot will*

except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering." (Verses 27–31)

The *sūrah* begins with a reminder of how man comes into existence and God's design in so originating him to undergo a test, and it concludes with the outcome of this test, as determined by God at the point of origination. Thus, the beginning and the end point to the deliberate and elaborate planning of life. Man performs very badly if he remains heedless, unaware of the purpose of his life when he is being put to a test, and has been equipped with the faculties that help him pass this test.

Between the opening and close, the *sūrah* gives the longest, or perhaps one of the longest if we take *Sūrah* 56 into account, description of the blessings granted to the people of heaven. These are mostly material, but they are coupled with God's acceptance and the honour He grants. The fact that this description is so detailed points to its being a Makkan revelation, because the addressees were newcomers to Islam, having lived in *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance. They were fond of material luxuries. They would be very impressed with its prospect. There will always be people who store much by such luxuries. God knows His creation best, and knows what suits them and what has a deep effect on their hearts and minds. There is definitely a higher and more refined type of happiness and joy, such as the one mentioned in the preceding *sūrah*, The Resurrection: "*Some faces will on that day be radiant with happiness, looking towards their Lord.*" (75: 22–23)

Al-Insān (Man)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? (1)

هَلْ أَتَىٰ عَلَى الْإِنسَانِ حِينٌ مِّنَ الدَّهْرِ
لَمْ يَكُن شَيْئًا مَّذْكُورًا ﴿١﴾

We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. (2)

إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ
نَّبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful. (3)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا
وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا ﴿٣﴾

For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire. (4)

إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَافِرِينَ سَلَاسِلَا
وَأَغْلَالًا وَسَعِيرًا ﴿٤﴾

The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with *kāfūr*, (5)

إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ يَشْرَبُونَ مِن كَأْسٍ كَانَ
مِزَاجُهَا كَافُورًا ﴿٥﴾

a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance. (6)

عَيْنًا يَشْرَبُ بِهَا عِبَادُ اللَّهِ يُفَجِّرُونَهَا
تَفْجِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, (7)

يُوفُونَ بِالنَّذْرِ وَيَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا كَانَ شَرُّهُ
مُسْتَطِيرًا ﴿٧﴾

who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, (8)

وَيُطْعِمُونَ ٱلطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِۦ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

[saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. (9)

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ ٱللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنكُمْ جَزَآءً وَلَا شُكُورًا ﴿٩﴾

We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.' (10)

إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِن رَّبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا ﴿١٠﴾

God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy, (11)

فَوَقَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ شَرَّ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمِ وَلَقَّىٰهُمْ نَضْرَةً وَسُرُورًا ﴿١١﴾

and will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. (12)

وَجَزَىٰهُم بِمَا صَبَرُوا۟ جَنَّةً وَحَرِيرًا ﴿١٢﴾

They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. (13)

مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ فِيهَا عَلَى ٱلْأَرَآئِكِ ۖ لَا يَرَوْنَ فِيهَا شَمْسًا وَلَا زَمْهَرِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach. (14)

وَدَانِيَةً عَلَيْهِمْ ظِلَـٰلُهَا وَذُلِّلَتْ قُطُوفُهَا تَذْلِيلًا ﴿١٤﴾

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, (15)

وَيُطَافُ عَلَيْهِم بِـَٔانِيَةٍ مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ كَانَتْ قَوَارِيرَا۠ ﴿١٥﴾

قَوَارِيرَا مِن فِضَّةٍ قَدَّرُوهَا تَقْدِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. (16)

وَيُسْقَوْنَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا زَنجَبِيلًا ﴿١٧﴾

They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, (17)

عَيْنًا فِيهَا تُسَمَّىٰ سَلْسَبِيلًا ﴿١٨﴾

from a spring there called *Salsabīl*. (18)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ إِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ حَسِبْتَهُمْ لُؤْلُؤًا مَّنثُورًا ﴿١٩﴾

They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls. (19)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَ ثَمَّ رَأَيْتَ نَعِيمًا وَمُلْكًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٢٠﴾

If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom. (20)

عَالِيَهُمْ ثِيَابُ سُندُسٍ خُضْرٌ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٌ ۖ وَحُلُّوا أَسَاوِرَ مِن فِضَّةٍ وَسَقَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ شَرَابًا طَهُورًا ﴿٢١﴾

They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink. (21)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا كَانَ لَكُمْ جَزَاءً وَكَانَ سَعْيُكُم مَّشْكُورًا ﴿٢٢﴾

This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated. (22)

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ تَنزِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. (23)

فَٱصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ وَلَا تُطِعْ مِنْهُمْ ءَاثِمًا أَوْ كَفُورًا ﴿٢٤﴾

Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. (24)

وَٱذْكُرِ ٱسْمَ رَبِّكَ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. (25)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيْلِ فَٱسْجُدْ لَهُۥ وَسَبِّحْهُ لَيْلًا طَوِيلًا ﴿٢٦﴾

At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night. (26)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ يُحِبُّونَ ٱلْعَاجِلَةَ وَيَذَرُونَ وَرَآءَهُمْ يَوْمًا ثَقِيلًا ﴿٢٧﴾

These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy. (27)

نَّحْنُ خَلَقْنَٰهُمْ وَشَدَدْنَآ أَسْرَهُمْ ۖ وَإِذَا شِئْنَا بَدَّلْنَآ أَمْثَٰلَهُمْ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٨﴾

It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind. (28)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذْكِرَةٌ ۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلًا ﴿٢٩﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (29)

وَمَا تَشَآءُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٣٠﴾

Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (30)

يُدْخِلُ مَن يَشَآءُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ ۚ وَٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ أَعَدَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٣١﴾

He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering. (31)

When Man Was Nothing

> *Was there not a period of time when man was not yet something to be thought of? We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him. Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight. We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.* (Verses 1–3)

This question with which the *sūrah* opens signifies a statement, but it is phrased in this way so that man should ask himself: 'Am I not aware that there was a period of time when I was nothing to be thought of?' This should lead to further questioning: should he not reflect on this fact? Should not such reflection guide him to how he was ushered in on life's stage where lights were focused on him to make of him a creature of note? The interrogative form in this instance facilitates some fine thoughts, encouraging us to reflect further.

One point of reflection takes us to the stage before man comes into existence. What was the universe like before man's advent? Man is so full of himself that he tends to forget that the universe was there long, long before he was. Perhaps the universe never expected that a new creature, man, would ever come into existence and certainly not until God willed it to so happen.

Another point takes us to the moment when human existence first began. Our imagination can paint different visions of that moment, known only to God, which added this new creature to the universe. Yet this was taken into account by God before it happened, with this new creature's role within the life of the universe well determined.

We should also reflect on how God's hand placed this new creature on life's stage, assigning a role to him and preparing him for it. Indeed, the same hand has linked his life to the life of the universe and provided the circumstances that ensure his survival and ability to fulfil his role easily. It monitors his progress, step by step.

Further reflections can be added, all coming from this short statement, culminating in the realization that the initiation, the life journey and the end are all determined according to an elaborate scheme.

Man's development and survival is also outlined in the *sūrah*: "*We have created man from a drop of mingled fluid, so that We might try him.*

Therefore, we have endowed him with hearing and sight." (Verse 2) The '*drop of mingled fluid*' perhaps refers to its formation when the man's sperm fertilizes the woman's egg. Alternatively, it may refer to the genes, or units of heredity, which distinguish the human species in the first place and transmit features from parent to offspring.

So, man is created from a drop of mingled fluid, neither by coincidence nor in idle play. He is created so that he can be tested. God certainly knows man, his test and the outcome of this test. What is meant here is that all this should come out on life's stage, producing its effects which cling to man so that he is requited in accordance with the outcome of his test. It is for this reason that God endowed man with the faculties of hearing and sight. He has been given these faculties of perception so that he can receive and respond, measure things and values, judging them and picking his choices. He will be rewarded in accordance with his choice.

In addition to knowledge and its acquisition, God gave man the ability to choose his way in life. He has shown him the way of guidance, i.e. the one that leads to Him, and left him to choose this way by himself or to stray from it, opting instead for one of the many other ways that do not lead to Him: "*We have shown him the way, [giving him the choice] to be thankful or ungrateful.*" (Verse 3) The verse refers to following divine guidance by being thankful, because the first thought that occurs to someone receiving guidance is to express gratitude for it. He is now aware that God has willed for him to be a creature of note after having being nothing to be thought of. God also granted him sight and hearing, as well as other faculties to be able to learn and acquire knowledge. He then provided him with guidance and left the choice to him. If such a person is a believer, then the first thought that occurs to him is to be thankful. If he does not give thanks, then he is certainly ungrateful.

With these three touches given at the opening of the *sūrah*, man realizes that there is a purpose behind his creation. He becomes aware that he is tied to a central point; that he is equipped with knowledge and is answerable for it; and that he is set a test and needs to pass it. In other words, his life on earth is a trial, not a period of idle play and neglect. These three short verses give him such a range to reflect upon. He acquires a very serious outlook on life and knows that the results of

the test will be announced once it is all over. Hence, how these verses change his vision in life and his feelings towards it and towards life values in general.

When the Test is Over

Now that the test has been put, and man has chosen one way or the other, what happens next? What awaits the unbelievers is briefly stated in one verse, because the general ambience of the *sūrah* is one of luxury, comfort and blessing. The torment prepared for the unbelievers is summed up: "*For the unbelievers, we have prepared chains and shackles, and a blazing fire.*" (Verse 4) They will have chains for their feet and shackles for their wrists, and then they will be cast into the blazing fire. The *sūrah* then quickly moves on to speak about the happiness of the other group:

> *The righteous shall drink from a cup mixed with* kāfūr, *a fountain where God's servants shall drink, making it flow in abundance.* (Verses 5–6)

This statement implies that the drink given to the righteous who are in heaven will be mixed with *kāfūr*, i.e. the calyx of sweet-smelling flowers, and that they will receive this drink in a cup filled from a fountain which flows in abundance. The Arabs used to mix their wine with *kāfūr*, or ginger, to give it a fine taste. Now, they know that their drink in heaven will be mixed with this and that it is plentiful. As for the nature of this drink, we understand that it is much finer and purer than any type of drink in this world, and that its enjoyment will be that much more enhanced. In our limited world, we cannot define the level or kind of enjoyment in the life to come. These are merely descriptions that give us an impression of what there is, because God knows that mankind cannot imagine what is beyond their world.

The *sūrah* calls the dwellers of heaven '*the righteous*' in the first verse, and describes them as '*God's servants*' in the second, honouring them first by acknowledging their moral standing and then referring to them as close to God. It then describes the qualities that earned them such a prize:

> *They are the ones who fulfil their vows and stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide, who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive, [saying within themselves,] 'We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.'* (Verses 7–10)

This is a bright picture of people with sincere hearts, sincere in their determination to fulfil the duties required by their faith, compassionate to those who are less fortunate, putting them ahead of themselves, keen to earn God's pleasure and wary of incurring what may earn His punishment. Thus, they are God-fearing and serious in approaching their duties.

Sincere and Generous

"*They are the ones who fulfil their vows.*" (Verse 7) They thus fulfil what they intend to do of acts of worship and the duties they commit themselves to perform, taking the question of faith very seriously. They neither shirk their duty nor evade their commitment. The Qur'ānic statement is wider in scope than the literal meaning of *nadhr*, the Arabic word used here meaning pledge, vow, etc. "*And stand in awe of a day of woes that fly far and wide.*" (Verse 7) They realize what sort of day it will be. It is a day of woes and these woes can spread all over, affecting those who fall short of fulfilling their duties and those who are even worse, doing badly. Hence, they fear that some of these woes may apply to them. This fear is characteristic of people who are God-fearing, aware of the heavy duty placed on them, worried that they may not be up to its fulfilment however much they do of good deeds.

"*Who give food – though they need it themselves – to the needy, the orphan and the captive.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes their compassionate feelings, symbolized in their offering of food, which they need for themselves, to people who are less fortunate than themselves. In other words, they put such needy people, orphans and captives ahead of themselves, feeding them despite their own need of the food they give them. This picture suggests that the social environment that prevailed

in Makkah upon the advent of Islam was hard, lacking in compassion. Yet these Arabs paid generously when it was a question of competing for social standing. The righteous servants of God were like an oasis in this hard and barren desert: they gave food out of genuine compassion, sincerely dedicating their action to God: "*We feed you for the sake of God alone. We desire neither recompense from you, nor thanks. We fear the day of our Lord: a bleak, distressful day.*" (Verses 9–10) We see compassion overflowing from such hearts that seek God's pleasure, looking for no reward or praise from any creature. They do not hold up their favours in an attitude of conceit. They simply want to avoid the woes of a bleak and grim day, which they genuinely fear. The Prophet showed them the way to spare themselves its woes, as he said: "Save yourself from the fire by as little as half a date."[1]

Giving food to the needy in such a direct manner was at the time the proper expression of these people's own compassion and the most needed type of help. Ways and forms of charity may be completely different in other circumstances and social environments. What is important is the need to maintain such compassion towards others and the desire to do good only for God's sake, looking for no earthly recognition or reward.

Taxes may be regulated in society, and a portion of such taxes may be allocated for social security, ensuring that the poor are helped. However, this meets only one part of the Islamic objective that these verses refer to. Islam imposes the *zakāt* duty to fulfil this part of meeting the needs of the poor and the deprived. Islam, however, considers an equally important part of this objective, the feelings of those who give; in other words their desire to give elevates them to a high, noble standard. We must not belittle the importance of this objective. Yet some people seek to turn such high standards upside down, describing the Islamic system of *zakāt* and voluntary charity as ugly and claiming that it humiliates those

1. This *ḥadīth* urges kindness to the poor, making it clear that even a small act of kindness can be greatly rewarded. A person who has only one date and gives half of it to someone who is in dire need may have done enough to ensure his salvation on the Day of Judgement. Needless to say, a wealthy person needs to make his charity commensurate with his means. – Editor's note.

who take and corrupts those who give. Islam is a faith that sets a system to cultivate people's better feelings and sentiments. Kindly feelings and generosity refine those who are charitable and benefit the ones in need. They, thus, meet both aspects of the Islamic social objective. Hence, the Qur'ānic praise of this noble feeling.

> *God will save them from the woes of that day, and will grant them radiance and joy.* (Verse 11)

The *sūrah* mentions straightaway that they will be saved from whatever they feared on that day, thus reassuring them of their outcome while they are still in this life, believing in the Qur'ānic revelations they received. It also mentions that they will be blessed with radiant faces and joy in recompense for their hearty feelings towards others and their God-fearing attitude. The *sūrah* moves on to describe the comforts they will receive in heaven:

> *And will reward them for their patience in adversity with a garden and [garments of] silk. They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold. Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.* (Verses 12–14)

They will thus have the garden of heaven to dwell in, and garments of silk to wear. "*They will recline there on soft couches, feeling neither burning sun nor severe cold.*" (Verse 13) They are comfortable as they sit on these soft couches, in a pleasant atmosphere with no extreme temperatures. We should add here that this is a different world, one that has neither the sun we know, nor similar suns. "*Its shades will come low over them, and its clusters of fruit will hang low, within easy reach.*" (Verse 14) When shades come low and fruits are near, a feeling of ease and happiness spreads.

Such is the overall picture of heaven where God rewards His righteous servants who are given such a fine description of their status in this world. The *sūrah* adds more details of the luxuries they will have and the services provided for them:

They will be served with silver plates and goblets that seem to be crystal, crystal-clear, but made of silver, the measure of which they are the ones to determine. They will be given to drink of a cup flavoured with ginger, from a spring there called Salsabīl." (Verses 15–18)

As they sit on their soft couches in the pleasant shade, enjoying the fine atmosphere and delicious fruits, they find themselves served such pleasantries on silver plates and in silver goblets, yet these are as transparent as crystal, and so are unknown in this world. Moreover, these are of the right measure to give them maximum pleasure. Their drink is mixed with ginger, while it was previously mixed with *kāfūr*. These goblets are filled from a running spring called *Salsabīl*, a name implying a sweetly tasting drink.

To increase their enjoyment, those who bring them their plates and serve them their drinks are handsome youths whose young looks are permanent, unaffected by the passage of time, always looking like pearls: "*They will be waited upon by immortal youths. If you see them, you would think they were scattered pearls.*" (Verse 19) The *sūrah* then casts a general look at the scene and sums it up as well as its effect: "*If you were to look around, you would see only bliss and a vast kingdom.*" (Verse 20) That is how those servants of God, the righteous, live, in utter bliss and a vast kingdom. One aspect of all this bliss is highlighted, as though to justify this general description and further explain it: "*They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and brocade; and adorned with bracelets of silver. And their Lord will give them a most pure drink.*" (Verse 21) All these luxuries and all this bliss they receive directly from God, which adds greatly to its value. A more welcoming gesture is then added: "*This is a reward for you. Your endeavours are well appreciated.*" (Verse 22)

Thus the presentation ends, having given us an inspiring and detailed picture of the bliss and luxury enjoyed by the dwellers of heaven. All this is given in contrast with the chains, shackles and blazing fire the unbelievers suffer. We, thus, see the two widely different ends to the two widely divergent ways.

No Compromise

The *sūrah* now looks at the situation of the unbelievers who persist in their opposition to the divine faith. These did not understand the nature of what the Prophet advocated. Therefore, they tried to compromise with him, hoping that he would stop, or at least forgo the part of it that most offended them. The last section of the *sūrah* deals with this situation against the backdrop of their seeking a compromise with the Prophet, persecuting his followers, turning people away from God's message and rejecting the way of goodness that ensures reward in heaven:

> *It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation. Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers. Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.* (Verses 23–26)

These four verses sum up an important principle of the Islamic faith, one which its advocates should fully understand and appreciate. They should study its effects within the human soul and in practical life.

God's Messenger faced the unbelievers directly, calling on them to believe in God's oneness. In advocating his message, the Prophet was not merely facing different beliefs. Had it been so, the case would have been much easier. The unbelievers' polytheistic beliefs were too flimsy and groundless to give them any solid ground to reject the clear, simple and logical Islamic faith. Instead, what led to their fierce and determined opposition, reported in history and recorded in the Qur'ān, was a host of circumstances and considerations. Social position as well as pride in prevailing values and what they might entail of material interest constituted the first factor motivating such people to hold tight to their flimsy and false beliefs, resisting those that were evidently true. Similarly, life under a system of *jāhiliyyah* allowed indulgence in every type of pleasure and gratification of every desire. Hence, people who were keen to indulge in these were expected to resist a faith that adopted a serious approach to morality and high values, stamping out all immoral and carnal practices. All these factors stood up against the Islamic message

when it was first advocated. They continue to stand up against it in every community and every generation. They represent the essential forces in the battle of faith, making it a hard-fought battle, requiring those fighting for faith to stand firm in the face of all such difficulties, willing to make great sacrifices. Therefore, advocates of Islam, regardless of place or time, must fully understand the truth summed up in these four verses and learn the circumstances leading to their revelations so that they apply to them too.

The Prophet received instructions from his Lord requiring him to warn his people. When he began carrying out his instructions, he was faced with those factors and circumstances that turned people away from his message and motivated them to persist with their own beliefs, knowing how flimsy and insupportable these were. They were very stubborn, and fought hard to preserve their beliefs, social order, personal interests and familiar practices and indulgences. They realized that the new faith threatened all these. Their defence of their system and old ways took several manifestations, starting with persecuting the few believers who responded to the new faith and trying to turn them back to the old way by force and physical torture. They also tried to give the new faith a bad image, making false accusations and spreading false rumours about it and the Messenger preaching it. They hoped that in this way they could prevent people from joining it. They thought that stopping people joining the new faith would be much easier than trying to turn them back from it after they had embraced and felt its truth.

At the same time, the unbelievers also tried different aspects of temptation, alongside the usual pressures and threats, to persuade the Prophet to meet them halfway. They wanted him to stop his onslaught against their beliefs, traditions and practices, and to work out some compromise, which would be acceptable to both parties. People normally try to work out a sort of *modus vivendi* when they have conflicting interests and claims. These same methods, or very similar ones, are often faced by the advocates of Islam.

It is true that, as a Messenger of God, the Prophet enjoyed God's protection and help, yet he was a human being facing difficult pressures and supported only by a small band of believers who were far weaker than their opponents. God was aware of all this. Therefore, He did not

abandon him, leaving him to face all this without support, or without marking the road ahead for him to follow. These four verses thus provide the essence of this much-needed support.

"*It is We who have bestowed the Qur'ān upon you by gradual revelation.*" (Verse 23) This is the first point, stating where this message comes from and who has assigned the duty of its advocacy. It comes from God, having no source other than Him. It is the message the Qur'ān outlines. It cannot be mixed up with anything that does not come from its pure source. It will incorporate nothing that comes from anywhere other than its own source. It will borrow nothing alien to its nature. Moreover, God, who revealed the Qur'ān and entrusted the message to its advocate, will not abandon him or leave him to his own devices when it is He who gave him the Qur'ān.

Yet falsehood behaves with insolence, and evil blows its own trumpet. Hardship is inflicted on the believers and they are subjected to persecution. The enemies of the divine faith possess the means to turn people away from it, and they use different tactics to achieve their purpose. They appear adamant about maintaining their beliefs, preserving their traditions and following their erring and corrupt ways. Then, suddenly, they offer the opportunity for reconciliation and hold out the prospect of compromise. In such circumstances, such an offer is hard to resist.

Here comes the second point, stating a clear directive: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) All matters are subject to God's will. He may allow evil and falsehood to have their day, and He may allow the believers' trial to last long. All this will be for a purpose that sees His will being done: "*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience,*" until it comes at its appointed time. The instruction given to the Prophet requires him to persevere despite all the harm to which he may be exposed, and all the trials he may be put through. He is to remain patient even when he sees falsehood achieving victory, and evil taking airs. Moreover, he is to persevere in holding to the truth the Qur'ān lays down. He is not to listen to any offer of compromise or a meeting halfway if this is at the expense of the message he is advocating: "*Pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" They do not offer anything good or beneficial.

How can they, when they are sinners and unbelievers? All that they offer you, when they try to compromise, is a share of sin and disbelief. They offer what they think will please and tempt you. They offered him what was indeed tempting: power, wealth and women. They were willing to make him their leader and to make him the richest among them. They also offered him pretty women. 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah said to him: "Abandon this matter you are advocating and I will give you my daughter as your wife. I have the prettiest daughters among the Quraysh." Those advocating falsehood always make such tempting offers to advocates of the truth, seeking to silence their message.

"*Await, then, your Lord's judgement in all patience, and pay no heed to any of these sinners and unbelievers.*" (Verse 24) There is no meeting point between you and them. No bridge can be built over the wide gulf separating your method from theirs, your truth from their falsehood, your light from their darkness, your faith from their disbelief, your message of truth from their *jāhiliyyah*.

The Prophet is told to remain patient, even though the adversity may be continuous, the trial hard, and the temptation powerful. Yet patience does not come easy. Help and support are always needed. Hence: "*Remember your Lord's name morning and evening. At night prostrate yourself before Him, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night.*" (Verses 25–26) This, in a nutshell, is all the help and support that is needed: remembering God's name at the beginning and end of the day, prostrating before Him at night, and glorifying Him at length. The Prophet is told that these are the means to maintain the bond with God who gave him the Qur'ān and who entrusted him with His message. He is the source of all power. The way ahead is long, the burden he carries is heavy, and he needs much support. Now, the support is identified as maintaining contact with God by glorifying Him through the long night. Thus, the servant meets his Master alone, speaking to Him directly, looking up to Him for favour and support, feeling His compassion that removes all trouble and relieves exhaustion. His power will transform His servants' weaknesses and lack of numbers. When they shed their earthly burdens and look at the great task entrusted to them, they will think little of all the hardships they are going through and their resolve to get on with the task ahead will be that much strengthened.

God is ever merciful. He entrusted His servant, the Prophet, with His message and revealed the Qur'ān to him. He is aware of the hardship he would meet along his way. Therefore, He did not leave him without support. On the contrary, He gave him the support and help He knew to be most useful and effective along his difficult journey. This remains the support needed by all advocates of the divine message, regardless of time, circumstance or place. It is the same message, with the same circumstances, facing the same intransigent opposition by falsehood, and for the same reasons. Falsehood employs the same tools and means against it. Let, then, the means the truth employs be the ones God knows to be the most effective.

The truth advocates of the divine message should always bear in mind is the one God impressed on the first advocate of this message, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). The duty to advocate the message is assigned by God, and it remains His message. The truth it outlines can never be mixed with the falsehood advocated by sinners and unbelievers. Hence, there can be no meeting point or reconciliation between the truth and falsehood. Nor can there be any halfway meeting between those advocating the truth and those advocating falsehood. They follow two ways that never meet. Should falsehood at times be very powerful and able to subdue the believers, who may be weak and small in number, it will be so because God, in His infinite wisdom, allows this. In such a situation, the only way is to remain patient and await God's judgement. In the meantime, support should be sought through night worship and glorification of Him. This is the only help that is guaranteed to work. This is an essential truth that must be fully understood by those who want to follow the Prophet's footsteps and tread along his way.

Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* continues to emphasize the fact that the Prophet's way has no meeting point with that of the unbelievers. They are so oblivious to what serves their own good, completely preoccupied with trivialities: "*These people love the fleeting life, and leave behind them a day that will be heavy.*" (Verse 27) Their concerns are petty, their goals insignificant, they are fully immersed in the fleeting life of this world, caring little

for the heavy day ahead. It is heavy with accountability and outcome. Such people cannot be heeded, and their way cannot be followed. They share no goal with the believers. Hence, no thought should be paid to their life, wealth, power and comfort. They all belong to this fleeting life and are, therefore, of little value. Their preference for this fleeting life indicates their inability to see what is good for them. This verse, then, continues with strengthening the Prophet and his followers as they faced the unbelievers' opposition. It also implies a warning for the unbelievers of the difficulty that lies ahead for them on the Day of Judgement.

The *sūrah* makes it clear that God, who created them and gave them all the power they enjoy, can easily replace them by others. However, in His infinite wisdom, He gives them time to reconsider:

> *It is We who have created them and strengthened their constitution. If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.* (Verse 28)

This is a reminder to those unbelievers, who are proud of their strength, of the source of their power, and indeed the source of their very lives. It reassures the believers, few and weak as they were, that they actually advocate the message of the One who grants power to whom He will. It assures them that God's will operates according to His wisdom and to fulfil His purpose, until He makes His judgement. He is certainly the best of judges.

"*If it be Our will, We can replace them entirely with others of their kind.*" (Verse 28) They cannot use their power to defy God; it is He who has created them and given them their power. He is able to replace them with other people. If he gives them respite, this is an aspect of His grace that He bestows on His creatures. It is all His judgement and a manifestation of His wisdom.

Again, this verse aims to give the Prophet and the believers further strength, stating the respective positions of believers and unbelievers. It alerts the unbelievers who are so preoccupied with their love of this world and its pleasures, and who think too highly of their strength, that they must express their gratitude for God's favours and treat these as a test.

The *sūrah* alerts them further to the chance they still have as the Qur'ān, including the present *sūrah*, is recited to them: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 29)

This is followed by re-emphasizing God's absolute will, to which everything refers. This is mentioned here so as to ensure that people submit to its judgement, and that they recognize it as the ultimate power: "*Yet you cannot will except by the will of God. God is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 30)

People should know that God Almighty is the One who decides and acts, and that He conducts the universe and holds sway over all things. They will then learn how to turn to Him and submit to His will. This is how such texts should be understood, recognizing at the same time that God has willed to give human beings the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and to choose their way to either one or the other. They, thus, make their choice in accordance with God's will who knows the nature of human hearts and who has helped His servants by giving them knowledge, showing them the right way, sending messengers and revelation of the Qur'ān. Yet all this ends up determined by God's will. It is He who will guide a person to the right path through obedience and glorification of Him. When a person does not recognize God's controlling power and does not appeal to Him for help, then he has no guidance to what is good and will not glorify God.

Hence, "*He admits to His grace whoever He will, but for the wrongdoers He has prepared grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) As we have repeatedly said, His will is free and absolute, taking whatever action He wishes. It is part of His will that His grace is granted to whoever He chooses. These are the ones who turn to Him, seeking His help and following His guidance. As for the wrongdoers, He gave them respite and granted them time, but they chose wrongly, so as to end in grievous suffering.

There is perfect harmony between the end and the beginning of the *sūrah*. The end gives an outline of the completion of the test to which man, whom God created from a drop of mingled fluid, is subjected. This after giving him guidance and allowing him to choose the way he wants to follow.

SŪRAH 77

Al-Mursalāt

(Sent Forth)

Prologue

This *sūrah* bears sharp features, powerful images and strong notes. Indeed, it sounds like a spitting fire. It puts hearts to trial, presenting questions and threats that pierce like sharp arrows. We see a host of images from both this life and the life to come, the universe and the human soul, as well as scenes of the suffering that unbelievers will endure. After each main scene, the *sūrah* levels a fire-like strike at those hearts who deny the truth, saying: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" This comment is repeated ten times in this *sūrah* alone, as it is the final note deployed in each of its sections. It is an especially apt comment, given its sharp features and strong beat. In this respect, it reminds us of *Sūrah* 55, The Lord of Grace, where the same verse is repeated after the mention of every aspect of blessing: *"Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?"* Likewise, in *Sūrah* 54, The Moon, the same comment is used after every image of punishment is drawn: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" The verse repeated in this *sūrah*, as in other *sūrahs*, serves to give its distinctively sharp tone.

The *sūrah* is composed of sections with short, quick verses. It changes its rhyme with each section, although some rhyming sounds are picked up again after they have been changed. All these sections, rhymes and

short verses are sharply felt, one after the other. One hardly recovers after one sharp note when a new one begins. Right from the outset, the general atmosphere is tempestuous, starting with a scene of strong winds, or angels: "*By those sent forth in swift succession; and those tempestuously storming on; and those scattering far and wide; and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning.*" (Verses 1–6) This opening is perfectly consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*.

The Qur'ān is extraordinary in the way in which it uses particular frameworks to enhance the atmosphere of certain *sūrahs*. In *Sūrah* 93, The Morning Hours, which speaks about God's care and kindness, the framework is drawn from the bright morning hours and still nights. In *Sūrah* 100, The Coursers, which depicts the scattering of grave contents and the gathering of what is in people's breasts, we have a framework drawn from snorting horses striking sparks of fire. Further examples could be given in plenty.

Each of the ten sections that follow the opening of the *sūrah* represents a special round or a journey into a different world. This gives the *sūrah* great scope for reflection, feeling, ideas and responses. This scope is also much wider than the words and sentences imply.

The first round paints scenes from the day of distinction, showing the great upheaval that will take place in the universe. This is the appointment defined by God's messengers to mankind: "*When the stars are dimmed, and the sky is rent asunder, and the mountains are scattered like dust, and the messengers are given their appointed time... For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 8–15)

The second round refers to the fates suffered by communities of olden times, highlighting the divine law that applies to those who deny the divine message: "*Did We not destroy those people of old? We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. Thus do We deal with the guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 16–19)

Round three takes us to the origins of man and the impression they give of God's overall planning: "*Have We not created you from a humble fluid, placing it in a safe lodging for a pre-determined term? Thus have We*

determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth." (Verses 20–24)

In the fourth round we see how the earth, which takes its children, living or dead, to its bosom, has been equipped with the facility of stable life and with water that is necessary for life: "*Have We not made the earth an abode for the living and the dead? We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 25–28)

The fifth round speaks of those who reject the divine message and how they are received with strong rebuke, as well as their impending punishment, on the day of distinction: "*Go to that which you used to deny! Go to a shadow rising in three columns; giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 29–34)

The next two rounds continue with the unbelievers, adding further rebuke: "*On that day they will not utter a word, and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 35–40)

Round eight speaks of the God-fearing and the blessings prepared for them: "*The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, and fruits as they may desire. Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 41–45)

The last two rounds provide quick glimpses of the people who are bent on denying God's message. The first reproaches them and the second shows them in obstinate rejection: "*Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verses 46–49)

These rounds, their images and sharp notes conclude with a single verse asking: "*In what message, after this, will they believe?*" (Verse 50)

The listener follows the quick rhythm of the *sūrah* feeling almost out of breath at its succession of images. The subject matter of the *sūrah* is covered in several other *sūrahs*, particularly Makkan ones. However, the

Qur'ān tackles the truth it presents from different angles, in different lights, and with different emphases according to the situations they face. Such approaches address hearts and souls as best suits them, according to their conditions known to the One who has revealed the Qur'ān to His Messenger. They thus appear new with every new situation, because they produce new responses.

We see that this *sūrah* draws new images of hell, and takes a new approach in showing these images to unbelievers; in other words, it employs a new style of address. Thus, the *sūrah* acquires a distinctive character with intense features, sharp images and a rapid rhythm.

Al-Mursalāt (Sent Forth)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By those sent forth in swift succession; (1)

وَالْمُرْسَلَاتِ عُرْفًا ﴿١﴾

and those tempestuously storming on; (2)

فَالْعَاصِفَاتِ عَصْفًا ﴿٢﴾

and those scattering far and wide; (3)

وَالنَّاشِرَاتِ نَشْرًا ﴿٣﴾

and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; (4)

فَالْفَارِقَاتِ فَرْقًا ﴿٤﴾

and those giving a reminder, (5)

فَالْمُلْقِيَاتِ ذِكْرًا ﴿٥﴾

with an excuse and a warning, (6)

عُذْرًا أَوْ نُذْرًا ﴿٦﴾

what you have been promised shall be fulfilled. (7)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٧﴾

When the stars are dimmed, (8)

فَإِذَا النُّجُومُ طُمِسَتْ ﴿٨﴾

and the sky is rent asunder, (9)

وَإِذَا السَّمَاءُ فُرِجَتْ ﴿٩﴾

and the mountains are scattered like dust, (10)

وَإِذَا ٱلْجِبَالُ نُسِفَتْ ﴿١٠﴾

and the messengers are given their appointed time... (11)

وَإِذَا ٱلرُّسُلُ أُقِّتَتْ ﴿١١﴾

For what day has all this been set? (12)

لِأَيِّ يَوْمٍ أُجِّلَتْ ﴿١٢﴾

For the day of distinction. (13)

لِيَوْمِ ٱلْفَصْلِ ﴿١٣﴾

Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! (14)

وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا يَوْمُ ٱلْفَصْلِ ﴿١٤﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (15)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

Did We not destroy those people of old? (16)

أَلَمْ نُهْلِكِ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. (17)

ثُمَّ نُتْبِعُهُمُ ٱلْآخِرِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Thus do We deal with the guilty. (18)

كَذَٰلِكَ نَفْعَلُ بِٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (19)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Have We not created you from a humble fluid, (20)

أَلَمْ نَخْلُقكُّم مِّن مَّآءٍ مَّهِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

placing it in a safe lodging (21)

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُ فِى قَرَارٍ مَّكِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾

for a pre-determined term? (22)

إِلَىٰ قَدَرٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. (23)

فَقَدَرْنَا فَنِعْمَ ٱلْقَٰدِرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (24)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Have We not made the earth an abode (25)

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ ٱلْأَرْضَ كِفَاتًا ﴿٢٥﴾

for the living and the dead? (26)

أَحْيَآءً وَأَمْوَٰتًا ﴿٢٦﴾

We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. (27)

وَجَعَلْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ شَمِخَٰتٍ وَأَسْقَيْنَٰكُم مَّآءً فُرَاتًا ﴿٢٧﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (28)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Go to that which you used to deny! (29)

ٱنطَلِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Go to a shadow rising in three columns; (30)

ٱنطَلِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ ظِلٍّ ذِى ثَلَٰثِ شُعَبٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. (31)

لَّا ظَلِيلٍ وَلَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱللَّهَبِ ﴿٣١﴾

إِنَّهَا تَرْمِي بِشَرَرٍ كَالْقَصْرِ ﴿٣٢﴾

It throws up sparks as huge as forts, (32)

كَأَنَّهُ جِمَالَتٌ صُفْرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

as bright as yellow camels. (33)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (34)

هَٰذَا يَوْمُ لَا يَنطِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

On that day they will not utter a word, (35)

وَلَا يُؤْذَنُ لَهُمْ فَيَعْتَذِرُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. (36)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (37)

هَٰذَا يَوْمُ الْفَصْلِ جَمَعْنَاكُمْ وَالْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. (38)

فَإِن كَانَ لَكُمْ كَيْدٌ فَكِيدُونِ ﴿٣٩﴾

If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. (39)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (40)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي ظِلَالٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٤١﴾

The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, (41)

وَفَوَاكِهَ مِمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

and fruits as they may desire. (42)

كُلُوا۟ وَٱشْرَبُوا۟ هَنِيٓـًٔۢا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. (43)

إِنَّا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Thus do We reward those who do good. (44)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (45)

كُلُوا۟ وَتَمَتَّعُوا۟ قَلِيلًا إِنَّكُم مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. (46)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (47)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱرْكَعُوا۟ لَا يَرْكَعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. (48)

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (49)

فَبِأَىِّ حَدِيثٍۭ بَعْدَهُۥ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

In what message, after this, will they believe? (50)

Enigmatic Beginning

By those sent forth in swift succession; and those tempestuously storming on; and those scattering far and wide; and those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning, what you have been promised shall be fulfilled. (Verses 1–7)

The question here is that of the resurrection which the unbelievers found very hard to accept, yet the Qur'ān confirms it time after time, in many *sūrahs*, and in various ways. It was especially necessary that the Qur'ān take such care in establishing the truth of resurrection, this so that the faith can be properly established in people's minds and hearts and further that their standards and values could then be redefined. Belief in the Day of Judgement is the corner-stone of both the divine faith and human life. It is the pivot around which everything in life turns, and the criterion that judges all values and standards. Hence, establishing the truth of resurrection and subsequent reckoning and judgement needed such a sustained effort.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by God that this promise of a life to come is certainly true. The way the oath is phrased suggests that that by which God swears belongs to the realm beyond our perception. It mentions some hidden forces that have a definite effect on the universe and on human life. Early scholars differed as to what these were: some said that they all refer to winds, and some said they refer to angels, while a third group said that some refer to winds and some to angels. It is clear, then, that these terms are ambiguous, which makes them best suited for an oath by God confirming an event which only He knows about. Just as these ambiguous things exist and have an effect on human life, this event belonging to the world beyond our perception will certainly take place.

"*By those sent forth in swift succession.*" (Verse 1) Abū Hurayrah says that this is a reference to the angels. The same is reported to have been said by Masrūq, Abū al-Ḍuḥā, Mujāhid (in one report), al-Suddī, al-Rabī' ibn Anas and Abū Ṣāliḥ. Thus the verse means an oath by the angels that are sent forth in successive waves, like running horses. Abū Ṣāliḥ says that the next four verses also refer to the angels.

Ibn Mas'ūd is reported to have said that '*those sent forth*' refers to the wind, which means that winds are sent in succession like horses running. He is reported to have said that those '*storming on*' and '*scattering far and wide*' [mentioned in the next two verses] also refer to the wind. This view is shared by Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid (in a second report), Qatādah and in another report by Abū Ṣāliḥ.

Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī is uncertain whether '*those sent forth*' mentioned in the first verse refers to the angels or to the wind, but he is certain that the stormers and scatterers are the winds. He explains that the winds scatter the clouds in the sky.

Ibn Mas'ūd says that "*those separating [right and wrong] with all clarity; and those giving a reminder, with an excuse and a warning,*" refer to the angels. This is also stated by Ibn 'Abbās, Masrūq, Mujāhid, Qatādah, al-Rabī' ibn Anas, al-Suddī and al-Thawrī. It is the angels that come down carrying God's orders to His messengers, separating right from wrong, and giving revelations to those messengers that contain justification and a warning to mankind.

We note that the ambiguity is intended to give these matters by which the oath is made a particularly awesome air. This is the same as in *Sūrahs* 51 and 79. The first of these begins with the oath: "*By the winds that scatter far and wide.*" *Sūrah* 79 also starts with an ambiguous oath: "*By those that pluck out vehemently.*" This ambiguity, evident in the differences of opinion about their meaning, is intended, because their very ambiguity combines with the quick rhythm employed in the opening of the *sūrah* to produce a jolt or a shake in the listener or reader. This fits perfectly with the subject matter of the *sūrah*. In fact, every subsequent section delivers such a jolt. Thus the *sūrah* may be compared to someone in authority taking a person by the collar as he questions him about a misdeed or about his negation of something very obvious, then releasing him with a strong warning: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*"

Universal Upheaval

This enigmatic beginning is now followed by a strong jolt as we are shown images of great events that take place in the universe on the day appointed for God's messengers to present the results of their having delivered the divine message to all generations of mankind:

> *When the stars are dimmed, and the sky is rent asunder, and the mountains are scattered like dust, and the messengers are given their*

appointed time... For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is! Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth. (Verses 8–15)

On that day, the stars lose their light, and the sky is split apart, while the mountains crash and scatter like dust. Similar images of this universal upheaval are given in several *sūrahs*, all suggesting that the system of the universe we see will collapse and its collapse will be accompanied by great crashes and explosions unlike any of the smaller events – volcanoes erupting, thunderbolts, earthquakes and the like – that nonetheless leave people absolutely terrified. To compare what will happen on that day to volcanoes and earthquakes is the same as comparing bonfires organized on festive occasions to nuclear explosions. This is merely to give an idea of what will happen. In fact, it is impossible to describe the great horror that will take place when the universe explodes and scatters. That horror is beyond all human imagination.

Alongside this horror, the *sūrah* mentions another important event that is delayed until that day. It is the time appointed for God's messengers to present the outcome of their efforts in advocating the divine message throughout all generations of human life. Presenting this final account is greater than what happens to the skies, the earth and the mountains. It will entail a judgement by God of all matters relating to life on earth. This is the final word concerning all human generations across the centuries. Its description is given an air of awe that suggests that its true nature is beyond human comprehension: "*For what day has all this been set? For the day of distinction. Would that you knew what the day of distinction is!*" (Verses 12–14) It is clear that these verses are speaking about something great and serious. When this sense of seriousness, which is greater than the stars losing their light and the rending of the skies and the crashing of the mountains, is clearly felt, a frightening warning is given: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 15)

This warning by the Almighty, against the backdrop of the great universal upheaval and the majestic scene when God's messengers submit their final account on the day of distinction, is very serious indeed.

Three Quick Rounds

The first round taking us to the expected universal upheaval on the Day of Judgement is followed by one going back to the fates suffered by earlier communities that rejected the divine faith. Later communities could follow on their heels:

> *Did We not destroy those people of old? We shall certainly cause later ones to follow them. Thus do We deal with the guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 16–18)

One strike to reveal the fates of past communities, numerous as they were and another to reveal what could happen to later ones, numerous as they may be. The scene of destruction stretches as far as anyone can see. Now the warning comes clear, stating the law God set in operation: "*Thus do We deal with the guilty.*" (Verse 18) It is His law that never fails. As those who are guilty expect a fate like earlier communities, the warning of impending doom is repeated: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 19)

The next round turns to the living and how they are brought into life, in accordance with elaborate planning:

> *Have We not created you from a humble fluid, placing it in a safe lodging for a pre-determined term? Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 20–24)

The long and remarkable journey of an embryo, from the moment of conception, is included here, in a few fine touches, starting with a humble fluid being placed after conception in the uterus that gives it a safe lodging until an appointed time. The whole journey is planned with remarkable accuracy at every stage. A comment is added here to emphasize the infinite wisdom that assigns a fine, accurate measure to everything: "*Thus have We determined; excellent indeed is how We determine.*" (Verse 23) With this planned determination that applies

universally, the warning is repeated again: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 24)

We then have a round on earth and the life God has determined on it for mankind, giving it the facilities that make such human life easy:

> *Have We not made the earth an abode for the living and the dead? We have placed on it firm, lofty mountains and provided you with fresh water to drink. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 25–28)

These verses alert us to what we see on earth, which is made an abode embracing its children in life and death. Lofty mountains are placed on it, making it firm, and over their tops the clouds gather and then clear water runs down via them to the ground. Could all this have come about by anything other than elaborate and wise planning? How can those unbelievers continue to deny the truth they see with their own eyes: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 28)

The Release

Having filled our senses with such effects as these images and rounds produce, the *sūrah* suddenly moves to the Day of Judgement when accounts are checked and requital determined. The dreaded command is given to the guilty to go on their way to suffer the punishment they were wont to deny. The command is coupled with a strong and painful rebuke:

> *Go to that which you used to deny! Go to a shadow rising in three columns; giving no shade, nor relief from the flame. It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 29–34)

Now that you have been long restrained on this day of distinction, you may go. But where can they go? To remain constrained is much better than this release, because they are told: "*Go to that which you used*

to deny." (Verse 29) It is present here before their very eyes. "*Go to a shadow rising in three columns.*" (Verse 30) The smoke of hell rises in three columns giving a shadow to which they are told to go. Yet the scorch of the flame is better than this shadow, because it is "*giving no shade, nor relief from the flame.*" (Verse 31) It is suffocating and burning. To call it a shadow or shade, the Arabic word *ẓill* carrying both meanings, is merely sarcastic.

They are told to go, and they know where they will have to go. Therefore, their destination is not mentioned by name: "*It throws up sparks as huge as forts, as bright as yellow camels.*" (Verses 32–33) Sparks are thrown in quick succession, but they are as big as large stone buildings, looking like yellow camels grazing. Such are the sparks thrown up by this fire. What is that fire like? At the moment we are absorbed in thought about this, the stern warning is repeated: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 34)

The *sūrah* has described the physical horror, giving us an image of hell. Now it presents the psychological horror that leaves the guilty speechless:

> *On that day they will not utter a word, and they will not be allowed to offer any excuse. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 35–37)

The horror described here is that deafening silence, when everyone is utterly speechless. All look humble, without a word of excuse. The time for arguments and excuses is over. Woe is present now: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 37) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have scenes describing their sorrow and grief, as well as the excuses they present and the oaths they swear. That day is very long, and both situations happen then, as Ibn 'Abbās explains. Here, the image given is that of absolute silence as it fits better with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

> *This is the day of distinction: We have gathered you with all those people of old. If you have a scheme left, then use it against Me now. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 38–40)

This is, then, the day of distinction, not one for submitting excuses and justifications. You are gathered here together with all communities that lived before you so that if you can work out a plan or you are able to contrive something, you can go ahead and do it. None, however, can devise or contrive anything. The painful rebuke is met with deep silence. "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 40)

The Other Group

Now the *sūrah* gives us an image of the God-fearing and how they are honoured on that day:

> *The God-fearing shall dwell amid cool shades and springs, and fruits as they may desire. Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 41–45)

These shades the God-fearing enjoy are real ones, unlike the shadow of three columns that gives no protection from the fire. They dwell among springs of water, not in the midst of choking smoke. They have "*fruits as they may desire.*" (Verse 42) What is more is that such material luxuries are given to them in front of all people gathered on that day. They all listen as the God-fearing are honoured: "*Eat and drink to your hearts' content in return for what you did. Thus do We reward those who do good.*" (Verses 43–44) How welcome is such friendly honour bestowed upon them by the Almighty. In contrast, the warning is repeated to the other group: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 45)

The *sūrah* has so far shown nothing of this present life. Now it gives a very quick glimpse of it. We are now back on earth, where strong reproach is levelled at those who are guilty:

> *Eat and enjoy your life for a little while, for you are certainly guilty. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 46–47)

Thus the two lives, the present one and the other to come, are shown in quick succession, in two images that appear to be before us now, even

though the gap between them stretches into the future, age upon age. The address was given first to the God-fearing in the life to come. It is then directed to the guilty here in this life. It is as if they are being told to consider the difference between the two moments. You may eat and enjoy yourselves a little here in this world, but you will then be deprived of it all in the next, where you will receive your due punishment: "*Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.*" (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* wonders at their attitude as they are presented with divine guidance and called upon to follow it. Yet still they persistently refuse:

> *When they are told to bow down before God, they do not bow down. Woe on that day betide those who deny the truth.* (Verses 48–49)

Yet they are given every opportunity to see the guidance and consider the warning. Still, they continue with their erring ways. Hence, the question: "*In what message, after this, will they believe?*" (Verse 50) A person who listens to this discourse, which shakes firm mountains, who still does not believe will never come to believe, no matter how he is addressed. He is only fit for utter misery and a fate only the most miserable will suffer.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes. Its construction, musical beat, powerful images, sharp comments combine to make of it an attack that no heart can resist. Infinite in His glory is God who revealed this Qur'ān and gave it this powerful effect.

IN THE Shade OF THE Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

Sayyid Quṭb

Vol XVIII
Sūrahs 78-114

Contents

Contents ..... **II**

Transliteration Table ..... **VII**

Al-Naba' **1**

Overview 4
Needless Enquiry 9
Around Man's World 10
Reckoning and Reward 13
The Fateful Day 14
In God's Presence 15

Al-Nāzi`āt **17**

Overview 20
The Pluckers and the Event 22
Instructions Given to Moses 24
Unrivalled Insolence 26
Conducive to Life 27
Different Dwellings 30
The Timing of the Last Hour 32

`Abasa **33**

Overview 36
The Basis of Social Values 37
Who Takes Priority? 39
A Reproach and a Principle 42
Instilling a New Value 43
The Principle in Practice 45
Man's Arrogant Attitude 48
Useful Reflection 49
A Signal for Resurrection 52

Al-Takwīr **54**

Overview 56
Upheaval in the Universe 57
Girls Buried Alive 59
A Splendid Universal Scene 62
The Two Messengers 63
Free Choice 64

Al-Infiṭār **66**

Overview 67
The Great Upheaval 68
Grace Without Limits 70
Man's Unique Qualities 73
Different Destinies 75

Al-Muṭaffifīn **77**

Overview 80

Giving a Raw Deal 81
The Inevitable Reckoning 84
Faces Radiant with Joy 86
Stark Contrast 88
Who Laughs at Whom? 90

Al-Inshiqāq 92

Overview 94
Complete Universal Submission 95
Man's Hard Labour 96
Suffering Through Life 98
Unfailing Reward 99

Al-Burūj 101

Overview 103
The Horrendous Event 104
Different Destinies 106
God's Unique Attributes 107

Al-Ṭāriq 110

Overview 111
A Special Type of Visitor 112
Man's Humble Origin 112
A Powerful Discourse 115

Al-A`lā 117

Overview 118
Glorifying the Creator 119
The Perfection of God's Creation 120
Happy News for the Prophet 127
A Life Characterized by Ease 128
Ease in Practice 131
The Prophet's Great Task 133

Al-Ghāshiyah 136

Overview 138
The Story in Brief 139
Reflection on God's Creation 141
The Prophet's Mission 143

Al-Fajr 145

Overview 147
A Serene Opening 148
Swift Punishment of Tyranny 149
Human Short-Sightedness 151
The Fateful Day 153
The Fateful Day 154

Al-Balad 157

Overview 158
Affliction in Human Life 159
Great Blessings 161
Scaling the Ascent 162

Setting Practical Examples 163

Al-Shams 167

Overview 168
God's Solemn Oath 168
A Look into the Human Soul 170
Historical Example 172

Al-Layl 174

Overview 175
An Oath by Universal Phenomena 176
A Journey with Divergent Ends 177
And Different Ends 179

Al-Đuĥā 181

Overview 182
Unfailing Favours 183

Al-Sharĥ 186

Al-Tīn 189

Overview 190
Man's Fair Shape 191

Al-`Alaq 193

The First Revelation 194
A Momentous Event 196
A Special Type of Education 199
Arrogance and Ingratitude 204

Al-Qadr 207

A Most Distinguished Night 207

Al-Bayyinah 211

Overview 212
Need for a Divine Message 213
Internal Division and Hostility 215
Clear and Simple 219

Al-Zalzalah 222

Overview 223
The Results of a Life's Work 223

Al-`Ādiyāt 226

Overview 227
Witness to His Shortcomings 227

Al-Qāri`ah 230

Overview 231
Determination of People's Fates 231

Al-Takāthur 233

Greedy Preoccupations 233

Al-`Aşr 236

Overview 236
Faith and Its Significance 237
Faith in Human Life 239
Need for Righteous Deeds 240
Profit and Loss 245

Al-Humazah 247

Despicable Character 248

Al-Fīl 250

Historical Background 250
A Rationalist View 253
Natural Phenomena and God's Power 254
A Momentous Event 258
The Arabs and Islam 259

Al-Quraysh 262

Lest They Forget 262

Al-Mā`ūn 265

Overview 265
Belief and Practice 266

Al-Kawthar 269

Overview 269
Background 270
Blessings in Abundance 270

Al-Kāfirūn 273

No Meeting of the Ways 273

Al-Naşr 278

Overview 278
An Awaited Event 280

Al-Masad 284

Background 284
The Final Word 286

Al-Ikhlāş 288

God's Absolute Oneness 288
A Complete Way of Life 290

Al-Falaq 293

Overview 293
Protection against Evil 294

Al-Nās 298

The Lord of Mankind 298

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	ʻ	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:		ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u
Long:		ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū
Diphthongs:				ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH 78

Al-Naba′

(The Tiding)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

عَمَّ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿١﴾	*About what are they asking?* (1)
عَنِ ٱلنَّبَإِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢﴾	*About the fateful tiding* (2)
ٱلَّذِى هُمْ فِيهِ مُخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٣﴾	*on which they dispute.* (3)
كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤﴾	*No indeed; they shall certainly know!* (4)
ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَيَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥﴾	*Again, no indeed; they shall certainly know!* (5)
أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِهَـٰدًا ﴿٦﴾	*Have We not spread and levelled the earth,* (6)
وَٱلْجِبَالَ أَوْتَادًا ﴿٧﴾	*and made the mountains as pegs?* (7)
وَخَلَقْنَـٰكُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا ﴿٨﴾	*We created you in pairs,* (8)
وَجَعَلْنَا نَوْمَكُمْ سُبَاتًا ﴿٩﴾	*and made your sleep a cessation of activity.* (9)
وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلَّيْلَ لِبَاسًا ﴿١٠﴾	*We made the night a mantle,* (10)

وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلنَّهَارَ مَعَاشًا ﴿١١﴾	*and appointed the day for gaining a livelihood.* (11)
وَبَنَيْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعًا شِدَادًا ﴿١٢﴾	*We built above you seven mighty ones,* (12)
وَجَعَلْنَا سِرَاجًا وَهَّاجًا ﴿١٣﴾	*and placed therein a blazing lamp.* (13)
وَأَنزَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلْمُعْصِرَٰتِ مَآءً ثَجَّاجًا ﴿١٤﴾	*We send down out of the rain- clouds water in abundance,* (14)
لِّنُخْرِجَ بِهِۦ حَبًّا وَنَبَاتًا ﴿١٥﴾	*by which We bring forth grain and varied plants,* (15)
وَجَنَّٰتٍ أَلْفَافًا ﴿١٦﴾	*and gardens thick with trees.* (16)
إِنَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَصْلِ كَانَ مِيقَٰتًا ﴿١٧﴾	*Fixed is the Day of Decision.* (17)
يَوْمَ يُنفَخُ فِى ٱلصُّورِ فَتَأْتُونَ أَفْوَاجًا ﴿١٨﴾	*On that day the Trumpet is blown and you shall come in crowds,* (18)
وَفُتِحَتِ ٱلسَّمَآءُ فَكَانَتْ أَبْوَٰبًا ﴿١٩﴾	*and heaven is opened, and becomes gates,* (19)
وَسُيِّرَتِ ٱلْجِبَالُ فَكَانَتْ سَرَابًا ﴿٢٠﴾	*and the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage.* (20)
إِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ كَانَتْ مِرْصَادًا ﴿٢١﴾	*Hell stands as a vigilant watch guard,* (21)
لِّلطَّٰغِينَ مَـَٔابًا ﴿٢٢﴾	*a home for the tyrants and the transgressors.* (22)
لَّٰبِثِينَ فِيهَآ أَحْقَابًا ﴿٢٣﴾	*Therein they shall abide for ages,* (23)
لَّا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا بَرْدًا وَلَا شَرَابًا ﴿٢٤﴾	*tasting neither coolness nor any drink,* (24)
إِلَّا حَمِيمًا وَغَسَّاقًا ﴿٢٥﴾	*except boiling fluid and decaying filth:* (25)
جَزَآءً وِفَاقًا ﴿٢٦﴾	

إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ لَا يَرۡجُونَ حِسَابٗا ﴿٢٧﴾	*a fitting recompense.* (26)
وَكَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا كِذَّابٗا ﴿٢٨﴾	*They did not expect to be faced with a reckoning,* (27)
وَكُلَّ شَيۡءٍ أَحۡصَيۡنَٰهُ كِتَٰبٗا ﴿٢٩﴾	*and roundly denied Our revelations.* (28)
فَذُوقُواْ فَلَن نَّزِيدَكُمۡ إِلَّا عَذَابٗا ﴿٣٠﴾	*But We have placed on record every single thing,* (29)
إِنَّ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ مَفَازًا ﴿٣١﴾	*[and We shall say]: 'Taste this, then; the only increase you shall have is increase of torment.'* (30)
حَدَآئِقَ وَأَعۡنَٰبٗا ﴿٣٢﴾	*The God-fearing shall have a place of security,* (31)
وَكَوَاعِبَ أَتۡرَابٗا ﴿٣٣﴾	*gardens and vineyards,* (32)
وَكَأۡسٗا دِهَاقٗا ﴿٣٤﴾	*and high-bosomed maidens, of equal age, for companions,* (33)
لَّا يَسۡمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغۡوٗا وَلَا كِذَّٰبٗا ﴿٣٥﴾	*and a cup overflowing.* (34)
جَزَآءٗ مِّن رَّبِّكَ عَطَآءً حِسَابٗا ﴿٣٦﴾	*There they shall hear no idle talk, nor any falsehood.* (35)
رَّبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَا ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِۖ لَا يَمۡلِكُونَ مِنۡهُ خِطَابٗا ﴿٣٧﴾	*Such is the recompense of your Lord, a truly sufficient gift.* (36)
يَوۡمَ يَقُومُ ٱلرُّوحُ وَٱلۡمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ صَفّٗاۖ لَّا يَتَكَلَّمُونَ إِلَّا مَنۡ أَذِنَ لَهُ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ وَقَالَ صَوَابٗا ﴿٣٨﴾	*Lord of the heavens and earth and all that lies between them, the Most Gracious, with whom they have no power to speak.* (37)
	On the day when the Spirit and the angels stand in ranks, they shall not speak, except those to whom the Most Gracious

has given leave, and who shall say what is right. (38)	ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡيَوۡمُ ٱلۡحَقُّۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ مَـَٔابًا ﴿٣٩﴾
That day is a certainty. Let him who will seek a way back to his Lord. (39)	
We have forewarned you of an imminent scourge, on the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust!' (40)	إِنَّآ أَنذَرۡنَٰكُمۡ عَذَابٗا قَرِيبٗا يَوۡمَ يَنظُرُ ٱلۡمَرۡءُ مَا قَدَّمَتۡ يَدَاهُ وَيَقُولُ ٱلۡكَافِرُ يَٰلَيۡتَنِي كُنتُ تُرَٰبَۢا ﴿٤٠﴾

Overview

This volume contains 37 *sūrahs* forming what is traditionally known as the thirtieth part of the Qur'ān, on the basis that divides the Qur'ān into 30 parts of equal length, so as to make it easy to read the whole book once a month. Yet this part has a special, distinctive colour. All the *sūrahs* it includes are Makkan, except two, The Clear Proof and Divine Help, which take numbers 98 and 110 respectively. Although they vary in length, they are all short. More significant, however, is the fact that they form a single group with more or less the same theme. They enjoy the same characteristics of rhythm, images, connotations and overall style. They are, indeed, like a persistent and strong knocking on a door, or a series of loud shouts seeking to awaken those who are fast asleep, or those who are drunk and have lost consciousness, or are in a night club, completely absorbed in their dancing or entertainment. The knocks and the shouts come one after the other: Wake up! Look around you! Think! Reflect! There is a God! There is planning, trial, liability, reckoning, reward, severe punishment and lasting bliss. The same warning is repeated time after time. A strong hand shakes them violently. They seem to open their eyes, look around for a second and return to unconsciousness. The strong hand shakes them again. The shouts and knocks are repeated even more loudly. They may wake up once or twice to say obstinately, "No!" They may stone the person warning them or insult him and then resume their position of inattention. He shakes them anew.

This is how I feel when I read this part of the Qur'ān. It places much emphasis on a small number of significant facts and strikes certain notes which touch people's hearts. It concentrates on certain scenes in the universe and in the world of the human soul, as well as certain events which take place on the Day of Decision. I note

how they are repeated in different ways, which suggests that the repetition is intended.

This is how one feels when one reads: *"Let man reflect on the food he eats."* (80: 24) Or: *"Let man then reflect of what he is created."* (86: 5) Or: *"Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created; and heaven, how it is raised aloft; and the mountains, how they are hoisted; and the earth, how it is spread out."* (88: 17-20) Or: *"Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm, for you and your cattle to delight in."* (79: 2733) Or: *"Have We not spread and levelled the earth, and made the mountains as pegs? We created you in pairs, and made your sleep a cessation of activity. We made the night a mantle, and appointed the day for gaining a livelihood. We built above you seven mighty ones, and placed therein a blazing lamp. We send down out of the rain- clouds water in abundance, by which We bring forth grain and varied plants, and gardens thick with trees."* (78: 6-16)

We entertain similar feelings when we read: *"Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents, and cleave the earth in fissures; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes and the fresh vegetation, the olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit-trees and the green pastures, for you and your cattle to delight in."* (80: 24-32) Or: *"O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form. He can give you whatever shape He wills."* (82: 6-8) Or: *"Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides, who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass."* (87: 1-5) Or: *"We indeed have created man in the finest form, then We brought him down to the lowest of the low, except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs shall be an unfailing recompense. Who, then, can henceforth cause you to deny the Last Judgement? Is not God the most just of judges?"* (95: 4-8) Or: *"When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight, when people's souls are paired (like with like), when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain, when the records are laid open, when the sky is stripped bare; when hell is made to burn fiercely, when paradise is brought near, every soul shall know what it has put forward."* (81: 1-14) Or: *"When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode, when the graves are hurled about, each soul shall know its earlier actions and its later ones."* (82: 1-5) Or: *"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission."* (84: 1-5) Or: *"When the earth is rocked by her [final] earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens, and man asks: 'What is the matter with her?' On that day she will tell her news, for your Lord will have inspired her."* (99: 1-5)

We experience the same feeling as we meditate on the scenes of the universe portrayed at the beginning or in the middle of some of the *sūrahs* in this part of the Qur'ān: *"I swear by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe."* (81: 1518) Or: *"I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection."* (84: 16-18) Or: *"By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on!"* (89: 1-4) Or: *"By the sun and his morning brightness, by the moon as she follows him, by the day, which reveals his splendour, by the night, which veils him. By the heaven and its construction, by the earth and its spreading, by the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness."* (91: 1-8) Or: *"By the night when she lets fall her darkness, by the day in full splendour, by Him who created the male and the female."* (92: 1-3) Or: *"By the bright morning hours, and the night when it grows still and dark."* (93: 1-2)

Strong emphasis is laid, throughout this part of the Qur'ān, on the origin of man as well as on the origin of life, in both its vegetable and animal forms. Emphasis is also given to various scenes in the universe, such as the Day of Resurrection, which is described in different places as the Greatest Catastrophe, the Stunning Blast, the Enveloper, etc. Scenes of the reckoning, fine reward and severe retribution are also given prominence. They are drawn with images which leave a stunning effect. All these are given as a proof of the reality of creation and the elaborate planning of the universe by God, as well as evidence confirming the reality of the life to come, and its decisive reckoning. These scenes are, at times, combined with scenes of the fate of some of the communities which rejected the divine messages. The whole of this part exemplifies all this. We will make, however, a brief reference in this introduction to some examples.

The present *sūrah,* The Tiding, lays its emphasis on the realities of creation and resurrection, and on scenes of the universe and the hereafter. The same applies to the next *sūrah,* The Pluckers. The third *sūrah* in this part, The Frowning, begins with a reference to a certain incident during the early days of Islam. The rest of the *sūrah* is devoted to a discussion of the origins of man and plants before it tackles what it terms the 'Stunning Blast':

> *On that day everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own. Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful. Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. (80: 34-41)*

Sūrah 81, The Darkening, portrays scenes of the great upheaval which envelops the whole universe on the Day of Resurrection. It also draws some fine and inspiring scenes of the universe in the context of affirming the reality of revelation and the

Prophet's honesty. The next *sūrah,* Cleaving Asunder, also contains scenes of universal upheaval, coupled with scenes of perfect happiness and eternal suffering in the hereafter. As it portrays these it aims to shake and awaken people's hearts: *"0 man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord?"* (82: 6) Scenes of both types are also portrayed in *Sūrah* 84, The Rending. *Sūrah* 85, The Constellations, touches very briefly on aspects of the universe and the hereafter by way of introduction to its main theme. The *sūrah* then tackles the history of a group of believers who were subjected to extreme fire torture by the unbelievers. It also states how God will inflict greater and more severe torture with fire on those unbelievers.

The next *sūrah,* The Night Visitor, draws some scenes of the universe and speaks of the origins of man and plants prior to an oath, by all these, affirming that *"This is surely a decisive word; it is no idle talk."* (86: 13-14) *Sūrah* 87, The Most High, speaks of creation, planning, divine guidance and the various stages of the growth of pastures. All this is given by way of introduction to the theme of the hereafter, reckoning, reward and retribution. The next *sūrah,* The Enveloper, provides some images of the believers' happiness in the hereafter, and the unbelievers' misery. It also draws attention to the creation of camels, heaven, earth and the mountains. The same applies right through to the end of this part, with the exception of a few *sūrahs* which are devoted to the exposition of the fundamental principles of faith, such as those *sūrahs* entitled Purity of Faith, The Unbelievers, Small Kindness, The Declining Day, Power, and Divine Help. Also excepted are a few *sūrahs* which give encouragement and solace to the Prophet and direct him to seek refuge with his Lord against all evil, such as those entitled, The Morning Hours, Solace, Abundance, The Daybreak, and Mankind.

Another aspect of this part is its artistic use of fine expressions, images, rhythm, meter and rhyme to touch upon areas of exceptional beauty in the human soul and in the universe at large. It does this in order to achieve better results as it addresses those who have lost sight of the truth, trying to attract their attention and awaken their feelings. This is clearly evident, for example, in its portrait of the stars as they turn in their orbits, rise and set, in the image of deer disappearing in their dens then appearing again, its image of the night as a living being walking quietly in the dark, and the dawn breathing with the first rays of light: *"I swear by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe."* (81: 15-18)

It is also clear in the description of sunset, the night and the moon: *"I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection."* (84: 16-18) And in the scenes of dawn and the travelling night: *"By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on!"* (89: 1-4) Or: *"By the bright morning hours, and the night when it grows still and dark."* (93: 1-2)

Again it is markedly evident in the inspiring address to the human heart: "*O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, Who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form? He can give you whatever shape He wills.*" (82: 6-8) The same applies to scenes from heaven: "*Other faces on that day are jocund, well pleased with their striving, in a sublime garden, where they hear no babble.*"(88: 8-11) And in a similar fashion it applies to scenes from hell: "*But he whose weight is light in the balance, shall have the abyss for his home. Would that you knew what that is like! It is a scorching fire.*" (101: 8-11)

Allegory is often employed and an unusual derivation is sometimes preferred in order to obtain the intended musical effect. All this shows the artistry which so entirely pervades this part of the Qur'ān.

The present *sūrah* is a good example of the general bent of this part, its themes, the fundamental principles it seeks to establish, the scenes and images it portrays, its inferences, its music and its fine touches, as well as its artistic selection and manipulation of terms and expressions to enhance its effect. It opens with a form of question imparting a sense of gravity to the matter in dispute, yet it is something that admits of no dispute. This is followed by an immediate warning of what will happen on the day when they will realize its nature: "*About what are they asking? About the fateful tiding on which they dispute. No indeed; they shall certainly know! Again, no indeed; they shall certainly know!*" (Verses 1-5) Discussion of this fateful tiding is then temporarily dropped. The *sūrah* draws attention to what we see around us in the universe and what we feel in our souls which give an unmistakable indication of what will follow: "*Have We not spread and levelled the earth, and made the mountains as pegs? We created you in pairs, and made your sleep a cessation of activity. We made the night a mantle, and appointed the day for gaining a livelihood. We built above you seven mighty ones, and placed therein a blazing lamp. We send down out of the rain- clouds water in abundance, by which We bring forth grain and varied plants, and gardens thick with trees.*" (Verses 6-16)

After this multitude of images taken from actual life the *sūrah* takes up the issue of the event of which they have been warned. It explains to them its nature and how it takes place: "*Fixed is the Day of Decision. On that day the Trumpet is blown and you shall come in crowds, and heaven is opened, and becomes gates, and the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage.*" (Verses 17-20)

Then follows a scene of misery, that is at once both violent and infinitely powerful: "*Hell stands as a vigilant watch guard, a home for the tyrants and the transgressors. Therein they shall abide for ages, tasting neither coolness nor any drink, except boiling fluid and decaying filth, a fitting recompense. They did not expect to be faced with a reckoning, and roundly denied Our revelations. But We have placed on record every single thing, [and We shall say]: 'Taste this, then; the only increase you shall have is increase of torment.'*" (Verses

21-30) The scene of happiness, on the other hand, overflows with beauty: "*The God-fearing shall have a place of security, gardens and vineyards and high-bosomed maidens, of equal age, for companions, and a cup overflowing. There they shall hear no idle talk, nor any falsehood. Such is the recompense of your Lord, a truly sufficient gift.*" (Verses 31-36)

The *sūrah* closes with a distinctive note which accompanies a majestic scene of the day when all this takes place: "*Lord of the heavens and earth and all that lies between them, the Most Gracious, with whom they have no power to speak. On the day when the Spirit and the angels stand in ranks, they shall not speak, except those to whom the Most Gracious has given leave, and who shall say what is right. That day is a certainty. Let him who will seek a way back to his Lord. We have forewarned you of an imminent scourge, on the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust!'*" (Verses 37-40)

This is the fateful tiding about which they ask, and this is what will happen on the day when they realize the true nature of this great event.

Needless Enquiry

> *About what are they asking? About the fateful tiding on which they dispute. No indeed; they shall certainly know! Again, no indeed; they shall certainly know!* (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* opens by shunning the enquirers and the enquiry. It wonders that anyone should raise doubts about resurrection and judgement, which were central points of bitter controversy. For the unbelievers could hardly imagine that resurrection were possible, despite the fact that it is most logical. The *sūrah* asks what they are talking about: "*About what are they asking?*" (Verse 1) We are then given the answer. The question is not meant to solicit information but rather draws attention to the subject of their questions and stating its nature: "*About the fateful tiding on which they dispute.*" (Verses 2-3) The answer does not name the event but describes it to enhance the feeling of wonder and amazement at such people. The dispute was between those who believed in resurrection and those who denied it, but the questions were raised by the latter only.

The *sūrah* does not provide any more details about the event in question. It simply describes it as great before adding an implicit threat which is much more frightening than a direct answer. "*No indeed, they shall certainly know! Again, no indeed, they shall certainly know!*" (Verses 4-5) The phrase, *'no indeed,'* is used here as the nearest possible rendering of the Arabic term, *kallā,* which denotes strong shunning. The whole sentence is repeated to add force to the threat implied.

Around Man's World

The *sūrah* then puts aside, apparently, that great event which is at the centre of controversy, only to pick it up later on. We are then taken on a quick round of the universe in which we see a multitude of scenes, creatures and phenomena. Contemplation of which strongly shakes any human heart: *"Have We not spread and levelled the earth, and made the mountains as pegs? We created you in pairs, and made your sleep a cessation of activity. We made the night a mantle, and appointed the day for gaining a livelihood. We built above you seven mighty ones, and placed therein a blazing lamp. We send down out of the rain-clouds water in abundance, by which We bring forth grain and varied plants, and gardens thick with trees."* (Verses 6-16)

In this round we traverse the vast universe, observing a great multitude of scenes and phenomena, which are sketched out with great economy of words. This helps make the rhythm sharp and penetrating, like an incessant hammering. The form of questioning implying a statement is also used here deliberately. It may be likened to a strong hand shaking those who are still unaware. It draws their attention to all these creatures and phenomena which provide strong evidence of the deliberate planning and designing which go into their creation, the ability to create and re-create, and the wisdom behind creation, which dictates that no creature will be left out of the great reckoning. Hence we come back to the fateful tiding, the subject of the argument.

The first leg in this round takes us across the earth and the mountains: *"Have We not spread and levelled the earth, and made the mountains as pegs?"* (Verses 6-7) Both facts mentioned here can be easily recognized and appreciated by everyone. Indeed, even primitive man can be affected by them once his attention is drawn to them.

As human knowledge advances and man acquires better insight into the nature of the universe and its varied phenomena, his appreciation of these two aspects is enhanced. He recognizes more fully God's elaborate planning of the universe, the accurate balance maintained between the individual kinds of creation and their respective needs, the preparation of the earth for human existence and man's adaptability to his environment. That the earth has been specially prepared as a comfortable home for human life in particular is irrefutable evidence of the careful designing of this existence. It is sufficient to break one relation in the conditions available on earth or in the conditions and proportions required for life and the earth would no longer be that comfortable home for mankind to tread on.

Man recognizes easily, by eyesight, that the mountains are very much like the pegs of a tent. From the Qur'ān we learn that they steady the earth and keep its balance. This may be because the height of the mountains offsets the depth of the seas and oceans. An alternative explanation is that mountains balance out the inner

with the outer movements of our planet. Or probably they merely increase the weight of the earth at certain spots to prevent its violent shaking with earthquakes, volcanoes or internal tremors. There may be another explanation not yet known to man. In the Qur'ān we find numerous references to natural laws the essence of which was completely unknown to man at the time of revelation, but knowledge of which was acquired a few centuries later.

In its second leg, this round touches upon various aspects of human existence: *"We created you in pairs."* (Verse 8) Again, this is a well established phenomenon, easily recognized by every human being. God has made the survival and continuity of mankind conditional on each of the two different sexes, male and female, playing its role in life fully. Not much knowledge is required to appreciate what this involves of comfort, pleasure and recreation. Hence the Qur'ānic statement stands to be appreciated by every generation in every society according to its abilities and knowledge.

Beyond the primitive importance of this fact there is the wider scope of contemplation as man's knowledge increases and his feelings become more refined. We may contemplate how one sperm produces a male child while another, absolutely similar to the first, produces a female one. Our contemplation, however penetrating, is bound to lead us to the inescapable conclusion that it is God's perfect planning which gives each sperm its distinctive characteristics, so that we may eventually have a male and a female, for life to continue.

"And made your sleep a cessation of activity. We made the night a mantle, and appointed the day for gaining a livelihood." (Verses 9-11) God has willed that sleep should overpower man and make him lose consciousness and activity. When asleep, man is in a state which is unlike life and unlike death. It ensures rest for his body and mind and compensates both for whatever effort they have exerted during wakefulness. All this happens in a way the true nature of which man cannot conceive. His will plays no part in it and it is impossible for him to discover how it happens. When awake, man does not know his condition while he is asleep. He is also unable, when asleep, to observe his condition and how sleep affects him. It is one of the secrets of man's constitution and of all living creatures, unknown except to the Creator Who has made sleep essential for life. For there is no living creature who can stay without sleep except for a limited period. If he were forced, by external means, to stay awake, he would certainly die.

Sleep does not merely satisfy some of man's physical and mental needs. It is, indeed, a truce for the human soul from the fierce struggle of life. It is a respite which allows man to lay down his armour, willingly or unwillingly, and enjoy a period of perfect peace which he needs no less than he needs food and drink. Sometimes, when one is low-spirited, mentally exhausted, possessed by fear and alarm, sleep may

overpower one, for a few minutes perhaps, and bring about a total change in one's condition. Sleep does not merely renew one's strength, but it may revive one in such a way as to wake up a new person altogether. This is miraculous, yet very true. It happened on a large scale to the early Muslims who fought in the Battles of Badr and Uĥud. God mentions both occasions in the Qur'ān, reminding the Muslims of His favours. *"He made slumber fall upon you, as an assurance from Him."* (8: 11) *"Then, after sorrow, He let peace fall upon you, in the shape of a slumber which overtook some of you."* (3: 154) Many other people have had the same experience in similar conditions.

Cessation of activity and consciousness through sleep is a prerequisite for the continuity of life. Yet it can be given only by God. It is mentioned here by way of inviting man to contemplate his own creation and constitution.

God's perfection of creation has provided a correspondence between the movement of the universe and that of living creatures. As man requires sleep after his day's work, so God has provided the night as a covering mantle for man to enjoy his slumber. Day is also provided as a period of activity for man to pursue his livelihood. Thus perfect harmony is established. The world is perfectly suited to the creatures who live in it, and God's creation is endowed with those characteristics which fit in easily and gently with the universe. What perfect planning by a scrupulous Designer!

The final leg of this round touches on the creation of heaven: *"We built above you seven mighty ones, and placed therein a blazing lamp. We send down out of the rain-clouds water in abundance, by which We bring forth grain and varied plants, and gardens thick with trees."* (Verses 12-16) The seven mighty ones God has built above the earth are the seven heavens or skies, the precise nature of which is known only to God. They may be seven galaxies which have a bearing on our planet or on our solar system. The phrase may also refer to something else that is unknown to us. What we know for certain, however, is that these seven have a strong constitution and do not easily disintegrate. This much we know about the stars and we observe in what we call 'the sky'. The *sūrah* also points out that the construction of the seven mighty ones is in perfect harmony with the creation of the earth and the world of man. This is implied in the following verses: *"And placed therein a blazing lamp."* (Verse 13) This is a reference to the sun which shines and gives the heat necessary for the earth and its living creatures. It also plays an important part in forming the clouds by evaporating sea water: *"We send down out of the rain-clouds water in abundance."* (Verse 14) The Arabic text refers to these clouds as something squeezable. But who squeezes them to extract their juice? The winds, maybe, or perhaps some kind of electric charge in the atmosphere! Beyond both types, however, there is the hand of the Designer, who has assigned to everything in the universe its respective qualities.

The use of the word '*lamp*' to refer to the sun is very apt, for a lamp gives heat and

light. It also shines as if it is ablaze. The heat and the light provided by the sun combine with the water flowing in abundance, time after time, from the 'squeezable' clouds to help the seeds send out their shoots. This is how grains, vegetables, bushes and wide-branching trees grow. This consonance in the design of the universe could not have been achieved without God's careful planning. Any man can appreciate this if his attention is drawn to it. If he acquires advanced knowledge, he finds even more consonance and congruity in the universe, which leaves him wondering in complete amazement. He then finds completely insupportable the argument that all this is the result of coincidence. He considers those who evade admitting the fact of elaborate and conscious planning pigheaded and unworthy of respect.

Reckoning and Reward

All this has been for work and pleasure, but there are reckoning and reward to follow, on the appointed day: "*Fixed is the Day of Decision. On that day the Trumpet is blown and you shall come in crowds, and heaven is opened and becomes gates, and the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage.*" (Verses 17-20) Creation is not without purpose. The Creator, who has accurately measured human life and carefully provided perfect harmony between it and the universe, will not let people just live and die in vain. Reason cannot accept that those who do good and the evildoers should both end in dust. The rightly-guided and the straying folk, the just and the tyrants cannot all share the same fate. There must be a day when everything is judged and evaluated. The day is appointed by God: "*Fixed is the Day of Decision.*" (Verse 17)

It is a day when upheaval overtakes the universe and destroys its systems. "*On that day the Trumpet is blown and you shall come in crowds, and heaven is opened and becomes gates, and the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage.*" (Verses 18-20) The *'Trumpet'* is a kind of horn of which we know nothing except its name and that it will be blown. We need not waste our time trying to discover how, for such discovery will not strengthen our faith.

God has revealed to us what we need to know of the secrets of the universe so that we may not waste our energy in the futile pursuit of useless knowledge. We can imagine, however, a blast on a Trumpet which people answer by arriving in droves. We can visualize the scene whereby all the generations of mankind rise up, walking in their multitudes, from all directions, to attend the great reckoning. We can imagine the fearful sight of people rising from their graves and the great, huge, endless crowd they form. We can feel the horror of the day, people's helplessness and fear. We do not know where all this will happen, nor when, for the universe is full of great events: "*And heaven is opened and becomes gates, and the mountains are made to move*

away, and seem to have been a mirage." (Verses 19-20)

Heaven, the mighty heaven, is opened up so that it becomes gates. It is, as described elsewhere in the Qur'ān, rent asunder. So, it will look very unfamiliar to us. The firmly dug-in pegs, i.e. the mountains, are made to move away. They are hammered, scattered, turned into dust, blown by the wind, as other Qur'ānic verses describe. Hence, they become non-existent, like a mirage which has no reality. Or, probably, different rays are reflected against them after they have been turned into dust and they look like a mirage.

All in all, horror is apparent in the upheaval which envelops the universe as well as in men's resurrection after the Trumpet is blown. Such is the Day of Decision carefully and wisely fixed.

The Fateful Day

The *sūrah* takes another step, beyond resurrection, to describe the fate of the tyrant unbelievers and also that of the righteous. It begins with the former group who raise doubts about the fateful tiding: *"Hell stands as a vigilant watch guard, a home for the tyrants and the transgressors. Therein they shall abide for ages, tasting neither coolness nor any drink, except boiling fluid and decaying filth: a fitting recompense. They did not expect to be faced with a reckoning, and roundly denied Our revelations. But We have placed on record every single thing, [and We shall say]: 'Taste this, then; the only increase you shall have is increase of torment.'"* (Verses 21-30)

Hell has been created so that it may watch the tyrants and transgressors and await their arrival. They find it well prepared to receive them, as if they are returning to their natural home after having sojourned on earth a while. It is a home in which they stay endlessly. But they taste *"neither coolness nor any drink."* (Verse 24) The next verse provides an exception to this, but the exception is even worse: *"except boiling fluid and decaying filth."* (Verse 25) Their throats and stomachs burn as they drink the boiling fluid, which is the only *'coolness'* they have, while their other drink is the filth of the burning bodies, decaying in the enormous heat. The Qur'ān comments that this is 'a fitting recompense'. It is in keeping with what they have done in their lives. For they thought they would never return to God: *"They did not expect to be faced with a reckoning, and roundly denied Our revelations."* (Verses 27-28) Their denial, as the Arabic verse suggests, is strongly emphatic and stubbornly upheld. But God keeps a meticulous record which does not leave out anything they do or say: *"But We have placed on record every single thing."* (Verse 29) Then follows a reproach coupled with the tiding that they can hope for no change in their condition and no abatement of its intensity: *"Taste this, then; the only increase you shall have is increase of torment."* (Verse 30)

We then have the corresponding scene of the righteous in complete bliss. *"The God-fearing shall have a place of security, gardens and vineyards, and high-bosomed maidens, of equal age, for companions, and a cup overflowing. There they shall hear no idle talk, nor any falsehood. Such is the recompense of your Lord, a truly sufficient gift."* (Verses 31-36) If hell is a vigilant watch guard which the tyrants cannot escape, the righteous, the God-fearing will end in a place of security. What a place it is: *"gardens and vineyards."* (Verse 32) The vine tree is specifically mentioned because it is well known to the addressees. The God-fearing will also have companions who are described here as high-bosomed and of equal age. They also drink from a cup overflowing with refreshing beverage.

These luxuries are given a physical description so that we may better appreciate them. The precise nature of these luxuries and how they may be enjoyed remain unknown to us as our understanding is restricted by our limited world. But the enjoyment provided to the righteous is not purely physical. *"There they shall hear no idle talk, nor any falsehood."* (Verse 35) So it is a pure life there, free of the idle chatting and falsehood which give rise to controversy. The reality is known to everyone, which means that there is no room for futile argument. It is a sublime state of affairs suitable for eternal life. Then follows the Qur'ānic comment: *"Such is the recompense of your Lord, a truly sufficient gift."* (Verse 36)

In God's Presence

The *sūrah* closes with the final scene of the day when all this happens. It is a scene in which we see the angel Gabriel, who is the Holy Spirit, and all the angels standing in ranks before God, their Most Merciful Lord. They stand in awe of Him; no one dares utter a word without prior permission from Him. *"Lord of the heavens and earth and all that lies between them, the Most Gracious, with whom they have no power to speak. On the day when the Spirit and the angels stand in ranks, they shall not speak, except those to whom the Most Gracious has given leave, and who shall say what is right."* (Verses 37-38)

The recompense given to the righteous and to the tyrant transgressors, which was detailed in the previous section, is from your Lord. *"Lord of the heavens and earth and all that lies between them, the Most Gracious."* (Verse 37) What a befitting context to reaffirm the eternal truth of Godhead. God is the Supreme Lord of man, the heavens and earth, this life and the next, who metes out reward for righteousness and punishment for transgression and tyranny. But above all He is the Most Gracious. The reward He assigns to each group is a manifestation of His mercy. Even the torment endured by the transgressors originates from God's mercy. For it is indeed part of mercy that evil should be punished and that it should not have the same end as good.

The other divine attribute implied here is majesty: *"with whom they have no power to speak."* (Verse 37) In this awesome situation neither man nor angel can speak without permission from the Most Gracious. Whatever is said will be right because He does not permit anyone to speak whom He knows will not be saying what is right.

When we think that the angels, who are favoured by God, and absolutely pure from sin, stand silent in front of God and dare not speak without His permission, we are bound to feel how awesome the atmosphere is. Having motivated such a feeling, the *sūrah* delivers a warning to those who have chosen not to hear or see: *"That day is a certainty. Let him who will seek a way back to his Lord. We have forewarned you of an imminent scourge, on the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust!"* (Verses 39-40)

Those who raise doubts and question the reality of the Day of Resurrection are here shaken violently: *"That day is a certainty."* (Verse 39) There is no room left for doubt and controversy. Yet there is time for mending one's erring ways before the fearful watch guard, i.e. hell, becomes a permanent home: *"Let him who will seek a way back to his Lord."* (Verse 39) The warning is stern enough to make the drunken awake: *"We have forewarned you of an imminent scourge."* (Verse 40) It will not be long coming, for man's life is but a short period. The scourge is so fearful that the unbelievers, when faced with it, will send up that great cry expressing the wish that they had never lived: *"On the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust!"* (Verse 40)

This is the cry of one who is in great distress, who feels ashamed for what he has been and what he has done. He feels that it is better not to be, or to be something as worthless as dust, than to witness such a fearful occasion. The terrible position of the unbelievers is the subject of the questions and doubts they raise concerning that fateful tiding.

SŪRAH 79

Al-Nāzi`āt

(The Pluckers)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلنَّٰزِعَٰتِ غَرْقًا ﴿١﴾	*By those that pluck out vehemently,* (1)
وَٱلنَّٰشِطَٰتِ نَشْطًا ﴿٢﴾	*and those that move forward rapidly;* (2)
وَٱلسَّٰبِحَٰتِ سَبْحًا ﴿٣﴾	*by those that float along at ease,* (3)
فَٱلسَّٰبِقَٰتِ سَبْقًا ﴿٤﴾	*and those that outstrip swiftly,* (4)
فَٱلْمُدَبِّرَٰتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٥﴾	*and those that conduct matters.* (5)
يَوْمَ تَرْجُفُ ٱلرَّاجِفَةُ ﴿٦﴾	*On the day when a violent convulsion will [be overwhelming],* (6)
تَتْبَعُهَا ٱلرَّادِفَةُ ﴿٧﴾	*to be soon followed by a further [convulsion],* (7)
قُلُوبٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَاجِفَةٌ ﴿٨﴾	*all hearts shall be filled with terror,* (8)
أَبْصَٰرُهَا خَٰشِعَةٌ ﴿٩﴾	*and all eyes shall be downcast.* (9)

يَقُولُونَ أَءِنَّا لَمَرۡدُودُونَ فِي ٱلۡحَافِرَةِ ﴿١٠﴾

They say, 'What! Are we being restored to our former state, (10)

أَءِذَا كُنَّا عِظَٰمٗا نَّخِرَةٗ ﴿١١﴾

even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?' (11)

قَالُواْ تِلۡكَ إِذٗا كَرَّةٌ خَاسِرَةٞ ﴿١٢﴾

They say, 'That will be a return with loss.' (12)

فَإِنَّمَا هِيَ زَجۡرَةٞ وَٰحِدَةٞ ﴿١٣﴾

But with just one blast (13)

فَإِذَا هُم بِٱلسَّاهِرَةِ ﴿١٤﴾

they shall be alive on earth. (14)

هَلۡ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ مُوسَىٰٓ ﴿١٥﴾

Have you heard the story of Moses? (15)

إِذۡ نَادَىٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ بِٱلۡوَادِ ٱلۡمُقَدَّسِ طُوٗى ﴿١٦﴾

His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā, (16)

ٱذۡهَبۡ إِلَىٰ فِرۡعَوۡنَ إِنَّهُۥ طَغَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

saying: 'Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, (17)

فَقُلۡ هَل لَّكَ إِلَىٰٓ أَن تَزَكَّىٰ ﴿١٨﴾

and say to him. 'Would you like to reform yourself? (18)

وَأَهۡدِيَكَ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَتَخۡشَىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him.'" (19)

فَأَرَىٰهُ ٱلۡأٓيَةَ ٱلۡكُبۡرَىٰ ﴿٢٠﴾

He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, (20)

فَكَذَّبَ وَعَصَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. (21)

ثُمَّ أَدۡبَرَ يَسۡعَىٰ ﴿٢٢﴾

He then turned away hastily. (22)

فَحَشَرَ فَنَادَىٰ ﴿٢٣﴾

He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: (23)

فَقَالَ أَنَا۠ رَبُّكُمُ ٱلۡأَعۡلَىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

'I am your supreme Lord', he said. (24)

فَأَخَذَهُ ٱللَّهُ نَكَالَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَٱلۡأُولَىٰٓ ﴿٢٥﴾

God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. (25)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَعِبۡرَةٗ لِّمَن يَخۡشَىٰٓ ﴿٢٦﴾

Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing. (26)

ءَأَنتُمۡ أَشَدُّ خَلۡقًا أَمِ ٱلسَّمَآءُۚ بَنَىٰهَا ﴿٢٧﴾

Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? (27)

رَفَعَ سَمۡكَهَا فَسَوَّىٰهَا ﴿٢٨﴾

He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, (28)

وَأَغۡطَشَ لَيۡلَهَا وَأَخۡرَجَ ضُحَىٰهَا ﴿٢٩﴾

and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. (29)

وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ بَعۡدَ ذَٰلِكَ دَحَىٰهَآ ﴿٣٠﴾

After that He spread out the earth. (30)

أَخۡرَجَ مِنۡهَا مَآءَهَا وَمَرۡعَىٰهَا ﴿٣١﴾

He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; (31)

وَٱلۡجِبَالَ أَرۡسَىٰهَا ﴿٣٢﴾

and the mountains He set firm, (32)

مَتَٰعٗا لَّكُمۡ وَلِأَنۡعَٰمِكُمۡ ﴿٣٣﴾

for you and your cattle to delight in. (33)

فَإِذَا جَآءَتِ ٱلطَّآمَّةُ ٱلۡكُبۡرَىٰ ﴿٣٤﴾

Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass — (34)

يَوۡمَ يَتَذَكَّرُ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٥﴾

on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, (35)

وَبُرِّزَتِ ٱلۡجَحِيمُ لِمَن يَرَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; (36)

فَأَمَّا مَن طَغَىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, (37)

and chose this present life (38)	وَءَاثَرَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا ﴿٣٨﴾
will have hell for his dwelling place. (39)	فَإِنَّ ٱلۡجَحِيمَ هِيَ ٱلۡمَأۡوَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾
But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire (40)	وَأَمَّا مَنۡ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِۦ وَنَهَى ٱلنَّفۡسَ عَنِ ٱلۡهَوَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾
will dwell in paradise. (41)	فَإِنَّ ٱلۡجَنَّةَ هِيَ ٱلۡمَأۡوَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾
They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? (42)	يَسۡـَٔلُونَكَ عَنِ ٱلسَّاعَةِ أَيَّانَ مُرۡسَىٰهَا ﴿٤٢﴾
But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? (43)	فِيمَ أَنتَ مِن ذِكۡرَىٰهَآ ﴿٤٣﴾
The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. (44)	إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ مُنتَهَىٰهَآ ﴿٤٤﴾
Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. (45)	إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مُنذِرُ مَن يَخۡشَىٰهَا ﴿٤٥﴾
On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning. (46)	كَأَنَّهُمۡ يَوۡمَ يَرَوۡنَهَا لَمۡ يَلۡبَثُوٓاْ إِلَّا عَشِيَّةً أَوۡ ضُحَىٰهَا ﴿٤٦﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is just one example of many in this part of the Qur'ān which shares a common objective; namely, to drive home to man the reality of the hereafter, its inevitability and its awesome nature, and to stress its importance to the divine planning of man's life in this world. Such planning culminates in man's death and subsequent resurrection in a new life. As it sets out to drive this idea home to man, the *sūrah* touches upon our emotions in a variety of ways that are directly relevant to its central theme.

First we have an ambiguous opening which creates an air of fear and worried expectation. The rhythm here is quick and throbbing; it helps evoke feelings of fear,

surprise and wonder: "*By those that pluck out vehemently, and those that move forward rapidly; by those that float along at ease, and those that outstrip swiftly, and those that conduct matters.*" (Verses 1-5)

This equivocal, shaking opening is followed by the first of those scenes which deal with the hereafter. The style and tempo of the opening is here maintained and thus serves as a framework for the overall scene: "*On the day when a violent convulsion will [be overwhelming], to be soon followed by a further [convulsion], all hearts shall be filled with terror, and all eyes shall be downcast. They say, "What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?' They say, 'That will be a return with loss.' But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth.*" (Verses 6-14)

Having cast an air of awe, the *sūrah* then provides an account of the end met by some of the unbelievers during the time of Moses and Pharaoh. Here the rhythm is quieter and more relaxed to suit the narrative style: "*Have you heard the story of Moses? His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā, saying: 'Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: "Would you like to reform yourself? I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."' He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: I am your supreme Lord', he said. God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing.*" (Verses 1526) This account serves as an introduction to the great principle the *sūrah* aims to establish.

Leaving history aside, the *sūrah* then takes up the open book of the universe. It paints great scenes of the universe which testify to the limitless power and careful planning of God, the Creator of the universe who controls its destiny both in this life and in the life to come. These scenes are drawn in a powerful style and contain a strong rhythm in harmony with the opening of the *sūrah* and its general cadence. "*Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm, for you and your cattle to delight in.*" (Verses 27-33)

Then comes a statement about the great and overwhelming event, which will be accompanied by the distribution of rewards for actions done in this life. The rewards are portrayed in such a way as to fit in harmoniously with the event itself: "*Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass – on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place. But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise.*" (Verses 34-41)

At this point, when we are overwhelmed by the respective fates of the

transgressors who prefer this life to the next, and the God-fearing who restrain themselves, the *sūrah* turns to those who deny resurrection, yet ask the Prophet to fix its time. The rhythm here is superb. It further contributes to the awe produced by the account of the Last Hour. *"They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning."* (Verses 42-46) Perhaps we should note that these verses end with the sound *'āhā',* which adds length to the metre, intensifying the effect of majesty and awe.

The Pluckers and the Event

> *By those that pluck out vehemently, and those that move forward rapidly; by those that float along at ease, and those that outstrip swiftly, and those that conduct matters.* (Verses 1-5)

Some commentators say of these verses that they refer to the angels who pluck out souls vehemently, move along with ease and speed, float along as they move in the outer world, outstrip other creatures to embrace the faith and carry out God's commands and conduct whatever affairs they are charged with. Other commentators maintain that they refer to the stars which come on as they traverse their orbits, move rapidly in phases, float in space, outstrip others as they run fast and bring about certain phenomena and results which are entrusted to them by God and which affect life on earth. A third group of commentators are of the view that the pluckers, runners, floaters and outstrippers refer to the stars while the conductors of affairs are the angels. Another group believe that the first three are the stars while the outstrippers and conductors of affairs are the angels.

Whatever the referents of these terms are, their mention in this particular way produces a shock and a feeling of expectation of something fearful. Thus, they contribute, right at the outset, to preparing our minds for the frightening account of the first and second quakes and of the overwhelming event mentioned later in the *sūrah.*

Perhaps it is better not to go into great detail in trying to explain and discuss these verses. It is perhaps more fruitful to let these verses produce their effect naturally. The Qur'ān seeks to achieve its objective of awakening people's hearts in different ways. If we do this we simply follow the example of `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. He once read *Sūrah* 80, The Frowning. When he reached the verse which reads *'wa fākihatan wa abba',* he wondered, "we know the fruit trees, *fākihatan,* but what is *abba?"* But

then he reproached himself, saying: "You, Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, are being really fussy today! What harm is there in your not knowing the meaning of a word used in God's book?" He then said to the people around: "Follow what you understand of this book; what you do not understand you may leave alone." His statement, aimed at discouraging people from trying to explain what may be equivocal to them, without the backing of perfectly sound authority, represents an attitude of veneration towards God's words. Indeed, some words and phrases may deliberately have been left equivocal so as to fulfil a certain objective.

The opening of the *sūrah* takes the form of an oath, to confirm the event related in verses that immediately follow: "*On the day when a violent convulsion will [be overwhelming, to be soon followed by a further [convulsion], all hearts shall be filled with terror, and all eyes shall be downcast. They say, "What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?' They say, 'That will be a return with loss." But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth."* (Verses 6-14) It has been suggested that the convulsion refers to the earth being overwhelmed by a violent quake. This is based on what the Qur'ān says in another *sūrah:* "*On the day when the earth and the mountains will be convulsed."* (73: 14) It has also been suggested that the convulsion that follows affects the sky, as it follows the earth in witnessing its own upheaval causing it to split and the stars to scatter. An alternative suggestion claims that the first convulsion refers to the first blast on the Trumpet which causes the earth, the mountains and all creation to quake and tremble, and makes all who are in heaven and on earth fall down fainting, except those who are spared by God. The follower, it is claimed, refers to the second blast on the Trumpet which brings all creation back to life as stated in verse 68 of *Sūrah* 39.

Whichever suggestion is correct, these verses make men's hearts feel the convulsion and shake with fear and worry. They prepare us for the terror that will fill people's hearts on the Day of Judgement: "*All hearts shall be filled with terror and all eyes shall be downcast."* (Verses 8-9) Thus, it is a combination of worry, fear, humiliation and breakdown. This is what happens on that day, and it is this fact which the oath at the opening of the *sūrah* seeks to establish. In both sense and rhythm, the scene portrayed by these verses fits in perfectly with the opening.

The *sūrah* goes on to speak of people's surprise and wonder when they are resurrected: "*They say: 'What! Are we being restored to our former state, even though we have become [no more than] hollow bones?'"* (Verses 10-11) They wonder whether they are being returned to life again. Amazed, they ask how this can be done after they have been dead for so long that their bones are hollow. Then they realize that their awakening does not take them back to their life on earth, but to their second life. At this point they feel their great loss and cry: "*That will be a return with loss."* (Verse 12) They have not banked on such a return, and have not prepared for it, so they have

everything to lose by it. The Qur'ānic comment is to state what will actually happen: *"But with just one blast they shall be alive on earth."* (Verses 13-14)

The *'blast'* is a shout, but it is described here as a blast to emphasize its force, and to strike a note of perfect harmony between this scene and others drawn in the *sūrah.* The term used for *'the earth'* here refers to a bright white earth which is the land of resurrection. We do not know its exact location. All we know of it is that which the Qur'ān or the authentic traditions of the Prophet relate. We have no intention of adding anything unauthoritative to their account. Other Qur'ānic statements lead us to the conclusion that this one blast is most probably the second blow on the Trumpet, i.e. the blow of resurrection. The expression used here gives a sense of speed. The blast itself is associated with speed, and the general rhythm of the *sūrah* is a rapid one. Terrified hearts also beat fast. Hence the perfect harmony between the sense, the rhythm, the scenes and the *sūrah* as a whole.

Instructions Given to Moses

The rhythm then slows down a little in order to suit the style of narration. For next we have an account of what took place between Moses and Pharaoh, and the end which Pharaoh met after he had tyrannized and transgressed all bounds: *"Have you heard the story of Moses? His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā, saying: 'Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: "Would you like to reform yourself? I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."' He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled. He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: "I am your supreme Lord', he said. God smote him with the scourge of both the life to come and this life. Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing."* (Verses 15-26)

The story of Moses is the most frequent and detailed of Qur'ānic historical accounts. It is mentioned in many other *sūrahs,* in different ways and with varying emphasis. At times, certain episodes are given greater prominence than others. This variation of style and emphasis aims at striking harmony between the historical account and the *sūrah* in which it occurs. Thus, the story helps to make the message of the *sūrah* clearer. This method is characteristic of the Qur'ān. Here the historical account is given in quick successive scenes which open with the call Moses receives in the sacred valley and end with the destruction of Pharaoh in this life and perdition in the life to come. Thus, it fits very well with the main theme of the *sūrah,* namely the hereafter. The part given here of Moses's history spans a long period, yet it is conveyed by only a few short verses that fit in well with the rhythm and message of the *sūrah* as whole.

They start with an introductory question addressed to the Prophet: *"Have you*

heard the story of Moses?" (Verse 15) The question serves to prepare us to listen to the history and contemplate its lessons. Moses's story is described here as history to emphasize that it actually happened. It starts with Moses being called by God: *"His Lord called out to him in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā."* (Verse 16) Ṭuwā is probably the name of the valley which lies to the right of Mount Ṭūr in Sinai, as one comes up from Madyan in North Ĥijāz.

The moment this call was made was an awesome one. The call from God to one of His servants is beyond description, yet it embodies a secret of divinity, and a secret of how God has made man susceptible to His call. No one can comprehend what is involved here without inspiration from God Himself.

The communication between God and Moses is discussed in more detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. However, with the brevity and rapid rhythm that characterize this *sūrah,* it is touched upon here only very briefly, before God's command to Moses is stated: *"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds, and say to him: 'Would you like to reform yourself I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."* (Verses 17-19)

"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds." (Verse 17) The Arabic term for 'transgress', which is *ṭaghā,* also suggests tyranny. Neither tyranny nor transgression should be allowed to take place or be left unchecked. They lead to corruption and to what displeases God. So God [limitless is He in His glory] selects one of His noble servants and charges him with the task of trying to put an end to them. The instructions given to this noble servant require him to go to a tyrant in an attempt to turn him away from his erring ways, so that he has no excuse should God decide to exact His retribution.

"Go to Pharaoh: he has transgressed all bounds." God teaches Moses how to address this tyrant in the most persuasive manner: *"Say to him: 'Would you like to reform yourself?"* (Verse 18) The first question then is whether or not the tyrant would like to purify himself of the stains of tyranny and abominable disobedience to God. Would he like to know the path of the pious, the blessed?: *"I will guide you to your Lord, so that you may be in awe of Him."* (Verse 19) The offer here is for Pharaoh to be shown the way acceptable to God. Once he knows it, he will feel the fear of God in his heart. Man does not transgress and tyrannize unless he loses his way and finds himself taking a road which does not lead to God. His heart hardens as a result, and he rebels and resorts to tyranny.

Moses was told all this when God called to him. He of course puts these questions to Pharaoh when he encounters him. The *sūrah,* however, does not repeat them when it describes the encounter. It skips over what happens after God's call to Moses and deletes what Moses says when he conveys his message. It is as if the curtain falls

after the call to repentance. When it is lifted again, we are presented with the end of the encounter: *"He showed Pharaoh the mightiest miracle, but Pharaoh cried lies and rebelled."* (Verses 20-21)

Unrivalled Insolence

Thus, Moses conveys the message with which he has been entrusted in the manner God has taught him. This warm, friendly attitude, however, cannot win over a heart that has been hardened by tyranny and ignorance of the Lord of the universe. So Moses shows him the great miracles of the stick turning into a snake and Moses's own hand becoming a brilliant white, as they are described in other *sūrahs, "but he cried lies and rebelled."* (Verse 21) The scene ends with Pharaoh's rejection and rebellion against God.

Pharaoh then turns away to mobilize his forces and bring forward his sorcerers for an encounter between magic and the truth. Essentially, Pharaoh was determined not to accept the truth or submit to right. *"He then turned away hastily. He summoned all his men and made a proclamation to them: I am your supreme Lord', he said."* (Verses 2224) The *sūrah* does not give any details of Pharaoh's efforts to muster his magicians, sorcerers and men. It simply says that he went away to do so, and then uttered his impertinent proclamation: *"I am your supreme Lord".* (Verse 24)

Pharaoh's declaration betrays the fact that he was deceived by his people's ignorance and their submission to his authority. Nothing deceives tyrants more than the ignorance and abject submission of the masses. A tyrant is in fact an individual who has no real power or authority. The ignorant and the submissive simply bend their backs for him to ride, stretch out their necks for him to harness with reins, hang down their heads to give him a chance to show his conceit, and forego their rights to be respected and honoured. In this way they allow themselves to be tyrannized. The masses do all this because they are deceived and afraid at the same time. Their fear has no real basis except in their imagination. The tyrant, an individual, can never be stronger than thousands or millions, should they attach proper value to their humanity, dignity, self-respect and freedom. Every individual in the nation is a match for the tyrant in terms of power. No one can tyrannize a nation which is sane, or knows its true Lord, believes in Him and refuses to submit to any creature who has no power over its destiny.

Pharaoh, however, found his people so ignorant, submissive and devoid of faith that he was able to make his insolent, blasphemous declaration, *"I am your supreme Lord!"* (Verse 24) He would never have dared to make it had his nation possessed the qualities of general awareness, self-respect and faith in God.

Against such intolerable insolence, the Supreme Power moved in: *"God smote him*

with the scourge of both the life to come and this life." (Verse 25) The scourge of the life to come is mentioned first because it is much more severe and perpetual. It is indeed the real punishment for tyrants and transgressors. It is also appropriate to give it prominence since the life to come is the main theme of the *sūrah.* Besides, it fits in perfectly with the general rhythm of the *sūrah.*

Nevertheless, the scourge that engulfed Pharaoh in this life was fearful and severe, but that of the life to come will be much more so. Pharaoh had power, authority and glory, yet none of this will be of any use to him. One can only imagine what the fate that will be faced by unbelievers who do not have similar power, authority or glory but who still resist God's message and try to suppress it.

"Surely in this there is a lesson for the God-fearing." (Verse 26) Only those who know their true Lord and fear Him will benefit from the lessons of Pharaoh's history. Those who do not fear God will continue in their erring ways until they reach their appointed end, when they shall suffer the scourge of both this life and the life to come.

Having mentioned the end met by tyrants who thought themselves very powerful, the *sūrah* turns to the present unbelievers who also depend on their own power. It directs their attention to some manifestations of the work of the Supreme Power in the universe. Their power holds no sway against God's: *"Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built? He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape, and gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight. After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm, for you and your cattle to delight in."* (Verses 27-33)

The question these verses start with, *"Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built?"* admits of one answer only: heaven. So the question seems to infer another: 'Why should you think so highly of your own power when heaven is much stronger in constitution than you and the Lord who created it is much stronger than it?' The question may also be carried forward in a different direction: 'Why do you think resurrection is impossible, when God has created heaven, the creation of which requires more power than your own creation?' Resurrection is merely a repetition of creation. It follows that He who has built heaven will find your resurrection an easier proposition.

It is He who has 'built' heaven. The term 'build' suggests strength and firm constitution. Heaven is indeed so. Its planets are held together in perfect harmony. They neither scatter, nor fall out of their orbits.

Conducive to Life

"He raised it high and gave it its perfect shape." (Verse 28) We need no more than a glance in order to recognize the perfect coherence and harmony in the building of heaven. Knowledge of the laws which govern the existence of the creatures in the sky above us and provide a perfect balance between their actions, movements and mutual effects helps us to understand the full meaning of this verse. It intensifies our feeling of the limitlessness of their very real world, of which human knowledge has uncovered only a tiny part. It overwhelms us with wonder and astonishment. We stand speechless at the infinite beauty of the universe. We can give no explanation for it except that a superhuman power has planned and governs it. This explanation is now accepted even by most of those who profess not to believe in any religion.

"And gave darkness to its night, and brought out its daylight." (Verse 29) The Arabic words used in this verse add to the strength of the general tone. They also have stronger connotations than the translation suggests. They are used here because they are more fitting with the general context. The succession of darkness and light, at night and in the morning, is a phenomenon recognized by all, but it may be overlooked because we are so familiar with it. Here, the Qur'ān reminds us of its permanent novelty. For it is repeated anew every day, producing the same effects and reactions. The natural laws governing this phenomenon are so precise and miraculous that they continue to impress and astonish man as his knowledge increases.

"After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures; and the mountains He set firm." (Verses 30-32) Spreading out the earth is a reference to the levelling of its surface so that it becomes easy to walk on, and to the formation of a layer of soil suitable for cultivation. Setting the mountains firm is a result of the final shaping of the surface of the earth and its cooling down to a level suitable for the emergence of living organisms. God also brought out water from the earth. This applies to springs that allow deep waters to flow out onto the surface of the earth. It also applies to rain water, since it comes originally from the earth. He also brought forth the pastures, which is, in this context, a reference to all plants upon which man and animals feed, and which directly and indirectly sustain life.

All this happened after heaven was built, the night darkened and the earth spread. Recent astronomical theories support this Qur'ānic statement, for they assume that the earth was moving in its orbit, with day and night succeeding each other for hundreds of millions of years before it was levelled and spread out, becoming suitable for vegetation, and before its surface took its final, present shape of plains, valleys, mountains and oceans.

The Qur'ān declares that all this is *"for you and your cattle to delight in."* (Verse 33) This is a reminder to man of what God has made for him, and of His perfect and elaborate planning. It is not by chance that heaven was built in this fashion and the

earth spread out to take its present shape. Man's existence, as God's vicegerent, was taken into account. Indeed, human life and progress depend on so many factors which operate in the universe generally, and in the solar system in particular, and even more particularly on the earth itself. All these factors must be made to function in absolute harmony.

Following the Qur'ānic method of delivering a short statement which embodies the basic fact, yet is rich with hints and inferences, the *sūrah* names just a few of these harmonized factors — the building of heaven, the darkening of the night, the bringing forth of daylight, the spreading of the earth, the manipulation of its waters and pastures and the setting firm of mountains — for man and his cattle to delight in. This statement ensures the elaborate planning of the universe is understood by everybody, regardless of education standard. It addresses all mankind, throughout all ages and societies, whether primitive or advanced. The reality of such meticulous and elaborate planning, however, goes far beyond the level mentioned here. The very nature of this universe rules out any possibility of its formation by chance, for no chance construct could result in such perfect and absolute harmony on such an immeasurable scale. The harmony starts with the fact that our solar system is unique among millions and millions of planetary systems, and our earth is also a unique planet with regard to its location in the solar system. It is this uniqueness that makes life on earth possible.

Life may appear on a certain planet if certain conditions are met: the planet must be of suitable size, at a medium distance from the sun, and it has to be of a composition which mixes the elements in the right proportion to permit the emergence of life. The suitable size is necessary because the atmosphere of the planet is conditioned by the force of its gravity. The medium distance is also a necessary condition because the planets which are near to the sun are so hot that nothing can solidify on them, and those that are far from the sun are so cold that nothing on them can have any measure of elasticity. The right composition of elements is necessary because such a composition in the right proportion is a must for the growth of vegetation which is, in turn, essential for the sustenance of life. The Earth has the ideal location to satisfy all these conditions which are conducive to the emergence of life in the only form which we now know.[1]

Establishing the fact of elaborate planning of the grand universe, and giving man a special place in it prepares man's heart and mind to receive and accept the statement about the reality of the hereafter and its final judgement. If the origins of the universe and of man are such, then the cycle must be completed, and everyone must have

[1] A.M. Al-Aqqad, *`Aqā'id al-Mufakkirīn fī al-Qarn al-`Ishrīn*, Beliefs of Twentieth Century Thinkers, Maktabat al-Anglo—al-Maşriyyah, Cairo, n.d., p. 36.

their reward. It is inconceivable that the final end comes with the end of man's short life in this world, or that evil and tyranny can get away without retribution, or that good, justice and right can be left to suffer whatever hardship is visited on them in this life, without there being a chance to put matters right. Such an assumption is, in its very essence, contrary to the fact of elaborate planning so apparent everywhere in the universe. Hence the reality touched upon in this part of the *sūrah* serves as an introduction to the reality of the hereafter, which is the main theme of the whole *sūrah.*

Different Dwellings

> *Then, when the great, overwhelming event comes to pass — on that day man will clearly remember what he has done, when hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on; then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place. But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise.* (Verses 34-41)

This present life is a period of comfort and enjoyment which are given in precise and accurate measure. Its duration is determined according to the overall planning of the universe and human life. Its comfort and enjoyment will end at the time appointed for their expiry. When the great event takes place, it ravages all and overwhelms all. The fleeting comfort of this life is extinguished. The whole universe, its built heaven, spread out earth and firm mountains are overturned and all living creatures are overwhelmed. At that moment *"man will clearly remember what he has done."* (Verse 35) He might have been distracted by the events and comforts of this life and he might have overlooked what he has done. But he will recall it all then, when remembrance brings him nothing but sadness and grief as he realizes what a miserable end he faces. *"When hell is brought in sight of all who are looking on."* (Verse 36) The term *'bringing in sight'* is particularly powerful. It is rich in connotations and further strengthens the rhythm. The result is an image so vivid we almost see it in front of us now.

Then, people will have different destinies and the aim of earlier planning in the first life is revealed: *"Then, he who transgressed the bounds of what is right, and chose this present life will have hell for his dwelling place."* (Verses 37-39) The Arabic term, *ṭaghā,* rendered here as 'transgress the bounds of what is right' means literally 'tyrannize', but this term is used here, as elsewhere in the Qur'ān, in a much wider sense than the strict despotism of rulers and dictators. 'Tyranny' is used here as being synonymous with exceeding the limits of right and truth. Hence these three verses refer to all

those who transgress the boundaries of right, prefer this life to the future life, taking no heed of the latter. Since consciousness of the hereafter defines the values and standards to be applied, he who prefers this present life suffers a breakdown of values and standards resulting in his adoption of faulty standards of behaviour. This puts him in the category of despots and transgressors. Thus, hell which is brought in sight of everybody on that great day will be his dwelling place.

"*But he who feared that he will stand before his Lord and forbade his soul its base desire will dwell in paradise.*" (Verses 40-41) The one who fears to stand in front of God does not indulge in sin. If he slips and commits a sin, in a moment of weakness, his fear of God will lead him to repent and pray for forgiveness. Thus, he remains within the area of obedience, the central point of which is the control of one's caprice and desires. Indulgence of desire and caprice is essentially the cause of all forms of tyranny and transgression. It is the spring of evil. Man hardly ever falls for any reason other than succumbing to caprice and desire. Ignorance is easy to cure. Desire, once ignorance has been cured, is a plague which requires a long and hard struggle to overcome. Yet fear of God is the only solid defence against violent attacks of desire. Indeed, there is hardly any other defence which can withstand such attacks. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions fear of God and control of desire together in one verse. This fact is here stressed by God, the Creator of man and the only One who knows the human soul, its weaknesses and their effective cure.

God does not ask man to suppress his desires, because He knows that it is not possible for him to do so. He simply asks man to control his desires and not to let them control him. He tells him that fear of standing before his Lord, the Almighty, should be of great assistance. He has fixed his reward for this hard struggle: paradise as a dwelling place. For God knows perfectly well the hardships involved in this struggle and the high standards to which man is elevated by the same. This struggle, self-control and elevation help man fulfil his humanity. Such fulfilment cannot be achieved by giving way to all desires, and following caprice wherever it leads, on the pretext that desire and caprice are part of human nature. God, who made man sensitive to certain urges, also gave him self discipline. He also gives him paradise as a reward when he elevates himself to a high standard of humanity.

There are two types of freedom. The first is achieved through scoring a victory over one's desires and releasing oneself from the chains of caprice. When man achieves such a victory he finds himself able to fulfil these desires and caprices in a controlled and balanced way which emphasizes his freedom of choice. This type of freedom is human, one which suits the honour God has bestowed on man. The other type is animal freedom, represented in man's defeat, his enslavement by his desires, and his loss of control over himself. This type of freedom is advocated only by those who have lost their humanity, so they try to cover their slavery with a dress of

deceptive freedom.

The Timing of the Last Hour

The last part of the *sūrah is* expressed in a rhythm which evokes awe. *"They question you about the Last Hour, when will it come to pass? But why should you be concerned with its exact timing? The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord. Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it. On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning."* (Verses 42-46)

Every time the diehards among the pagan Arabs heard a description of the fearful events of the Day of Judgement, and the reckoning which then takes place, they used to ask the Prophet (peace be upon him) to specify its time: *"When will it come to pass?"* The answer given here to such questions takes the form of a rhetorical question, *"But why should you be concerned with its exact timing?"* (Verse 43) It is an answer which suggests that the Last Hour, or the Day of Judgement, is so great and majestic that the questions put by the unbelievers concerning it sound stupid and pitiful. Moreover, such questions are only put forward by the impudent. The great Prophet himself is asked, "*Why should you be concerned with its exact timing?"* It is so great that neither you nor anyone else should ask to be informed of its exact time. This knowledge belongs to God alone, not to anybody else. *"The final word concerning it belongs to your Lord."* (Verse 44) He is the Master of everything which relates to it. The Prophet's own duties, and the limits he should not, and need not exceed are well defined: *"Your mission is merely to warn those who fear it."* (Verse 45) He is to warn those who will benefit by such warnings. Such people will then live according to their firm belief that it will arrive at the time appointed by God.

The majesty and awe of the Last Hour is explained through the description of its effects on men's feelings and the comparison that is drawn between its duration and the length of this present life.

"On the day when they see that hour, it will seem to them that their life on earth had spanned only one evening, or one morning." (Verse 46) It so grips the soul that our present life with all its epics, events and luxuries will seem to those who lived them shorter than a single day, just one evening or one morning. So, the whole world, its centuries and generations will shrink to nothing longer than a morning or an evening in the sight of the very people who quarrel and fight for it, preferring it to their share in the life to come. Yet for such passing enjoyment they abandon the hereafter and forego the certain prospect of dwelling in paradise. This is definitely the greatest stupidity of all, which no man who has ears to hear and eyes to see can ever perpetrate.

SŪRAH 80

`Abasa

(The Frowning)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّىٰٓ ﴿١﴾	*He frowned and turned away* (1)
أَن جَآءَهُ ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ ﴿٢﴾	*when the blind man came to him.* (2)
وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّهُۥ يَزَّكَّىٰٓ ﴿٣﴾	*How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself.* (3)
أَوْ يَذَّكَّرُ فَتَنفَعَهُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰٓ ﴿٤﴾	*He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him.* (4)
أَمَّا مَنِ ٱسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٥﴾	*But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient* (5)
فَأَنتَ لَهُۥ تَصَدَّىٰ ﴿٦﴾	*you were all attention.* (6)
وَمَا عَلَيْكَ أَلَّا يَزَّكَّىٰ ﴿٧﴾	*Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed.* (7)
وَأَمَّا مَن جَآءَكَ يَسْعَىٰ ﴿٨﴾	*As to him who comes to you with zeal,* (8)
وَهُوَ يَخْشَىٰ ﴿٩﴾	*and with a feeling of fear in his heart,* (9)

him you ignore. (10)	فَأَنتَ عَنْهُ تَلَهَّىٰ ﴿١٠﴾
No indeed! This is an admonition. (11)	كَلَّآ إِنَّهَا تَذْكِرَةٌ ﴿١١﴾
Let him who will, bear it in mind. (12)	فَمَن شَآءَ ذَكَرَهُۥ ﴿١٢﴾
It is written on honoured pages, (13)	فِى صُحُفٍ مُّكَرَّمَةٍ ﴿١٣﴾
exalted, purified, (14)	مَّرْفُوعَةٍ مُّطَهَّرَةٍۭ ﴿١٤﴾
by the hands of noble and devout scribes. (15-16)	بِأَيْدِى سَفَرَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾
Perish man! How ungrateful he is! (17)	كِرَامٍۭ بَرَرَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾
Of what did God create him? (18)	قُتِلَ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ مَآ أَكْفَرَهُۥ ﴿١٧﴾ مِنْ
Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. (19)	أَىِّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقَهُۥ ﴿١٨﴾
He makes his path smooth for him. (20)	مِن نُّطْفَةٍ خَلَقَهُۥ فَقَدَّرَهُۥ ﴿١٩﴾
He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. (21)	ثُمَّ ٱلسَّبِيلَ يَسَّرَهُۥ ﴿٢٠﴾
He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases. (22)	ثُمَّ أَمَاتَهُۥ فَأَقْبَرَهُۥ ﴿٢١﴾
But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding. (23)	ثُمَّ إِذَا شَآءَ أَنشَرَهُۥ ﴿٢٢﴾
	كَلَّا لَمَّا يَقْضِ مَآ أَمَرَهُۥ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَلْيَنظُرِ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ إِلَىٰ طَعَامِهِۦٓ ﴿٢٤﴾	*Let man reflect on the food he eats:* (24)
أَنَّا صَبَبْنَا ٱلْمَآءَ صَبًّا ﴿٢٥﴾	*how We pour down the rain in torrents,* (25)
ثُمَّ شَقَقْنَا ٱلْأَرْضَ شَقًّا ﴿٢٦﴾	*and cleave the earth in fissures;* (26)
فَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا حَبًّا ﴿٢٧﴾	*how We bring forth the corn,* (27)
وَعِنَبًا وَقَضْبًا ﴿٢٨﴾	*the grapes, and the fresh vegetation,* (28)
وَزَيْتُونًا وَنَخْلًا ﴿٢٩﴾	*the olive and the palm,* (29)
وَحَدَآئِقَ غُلْبًا ﴿٣٠﴾	*the dense-treed gardens,* (30)
وَفَـٰكِهَةً وَأَبًّا ﴿٣١﴾	*the fruit-trees and the green pastures,* (31)
مَّتَـٰعًا لَّكُمْ وَلِأَنْعَـٰمِكُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾	*for you and your cattle to delight in.* (32)
فَإِذَا جَآءَتِ ٱلصَّآخَّةُ ﴿٣٣﴾	*But when the stunning blast is sounded,* (33)
يَوْمَ يَفِرُّ ٱلْمَرْءُ مِنْ أَخِيهِ ﴿٣٤﴾	*on that day everyone will forsake his brother,* (34)
وَأُمِّهِۦ وَأَبِيهِ ﴿٣٥﴾	*his mother and his father,* (35)
وَصَـٰحِبَتِهِۦ وَبَنِيهِ ﴿٣٦﴾	*his wife and his children:* (36)
لِكُلِّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ شَأْنٌ يُغْنِيهِ ﴿٣٧﴾	*for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own.* (37)

Some faces on that day shall be beaming, (38)	وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّسْفِرَةٌ ﴿٣٨﴾
smiling and joyful. (39)	ضَاحِكَةٌ مُّسْتَبْشِرَةٌ ﴿٣٩﴾
Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, (40)	وَوُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَلَيْهَا غَبَرَةٌ ﴿٤٠﴾
veiled with darkness. (41)	تَرْهَقُهَا قَتَرَةٌ ﴿٤١﴾
These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin. (42)	أُوْلَـٰئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْكَفَرَةُ ٱلْفَجَرَةُ ﴿٤٢﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* discusses certain principles of grave importance. It is unique in its images and the impressions it leaves. Furthermore, it combines its marked spiritual effect with superb musical rhythm.

Its first part treats a certain incident which took place in the early days of Islam. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was busy with a few Quraysh dignitaries, explaining to them the Islamic message, when Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor blind man, interrupted him. Unaware that the Prophet was busy, the blind man asked him repeatedly to teach him some verses from the Qur'ān. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was not very pleased at this interruption. He frowned and turned away from Ibn Umm Maktūm. This *sūrah* opens by criticizing the Prophet's behaviour in this incident. It lays down clearly the values and principles upon which Islamic society is founded and states the true nature of the message of Islam. "*He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal, and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes.*" (Verses 1-16)

Man's ungrateful attitude towards God and his denial of Him come up for discussion in the second part. Here man is reminded of his origin; how his life is made easy; how God determines his death and resurrection; and how, after all this, he fails to carry out His orders: "*Perish man! How ungrateful he is! Of what did God*

create him? Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. He makes his path smooth for him. He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. He will surely bring him to life when He pleases. But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding." (Verses 17-23)

The third part directs man to reflect upon things of immediate concern to him, namely, his food. Absolute perfection of creation is obvious in the provision of food for man as it is obvious in the creation, proportioning and development of man himself: *"Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents, and cleave the earth in fissures; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes, and the fresh vegetation, the olive and the palm, the dense- treed gardens, the fruit-trees and the green pastures, for you and your cattle to delight in."* (Verses 24-32)

The final part touches upon "the stunning blast" and its fearful effects. The very sound of the words gives the impression of horror. It makes people unaware of anything around them. Their faces, however, provide a lucid account of what is happening to them. *"But when the stunning blast is sounded, on that day everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own. Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful. Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin."* (Verses 33-42)

A quick preview of the *sūrah* leaves a profound effect on the reader. Its message and its implications are so powerful that no human heart can avoid being deeply touched, even by a quick perusal of it. In the following pages we will attempt to illustrate some of the far-reaching effects certain parts of the *sūrah* have and which may not be immediately apparent.

The Basis of Social Values

> *He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes.* (Verses 1-16)

The divine instructions which followed this incident are much more far reaching than appears at first sight. They are indeed a miracle. These instructions, the principles they seek to establish and the change they aim to accomplish in human

society are, perhaps, the most important miracle of Islam. But the instructions are made here as a direct comment on a single incident. It is part of the Qur'ānic method to make use of isolated incidents in order to lay down fundamental and permanent principles. The principles established here and their practical effects, as seen in the early Islamic society, are indeed the essence of Islam. They constitute the truth which Islam, and all divine religions that preceded it, seek to plant in human life.

The point at issue here is not merely how an individual or a class of people should be treated. This is indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic comment on the incident itself, taken in isolation. The heart of the matter is, however, something far more important. It is: how should people evaluate everything in their lives? From where should they derive the values and standards necessary for such an evaluation?

What the divine instructions contained in the opening part of the *sūrah* seek to establish is that people must base their values and standards on divine considerations, laid down by God. No social circumstances, traditions or practices, nor any concept of life derived from them should be allowed either to encumber or determine these values and standards. There is no denying the difficulties involved in conducting human life on the basis of values and standards laid down by the Divine Being, free from the pressure of all worldly considerations.

If we consider the pressure of society on the individual's feelings and attitudes, and the weight of considerations to be taken into account such as traditional values, family and social ties, as well as the values that prevail in one's own environment, we can appreciate the difficulty of carrying out these divine instructions. Our appreciation of such difficulty is even greater when we remember that in order to convey it to people, Muĥammad himself (peace be upon him) needed this special directive, or rather censure. Reference to this is sufficient to convey the gravity of the matter. For Muĥammad (peace be upon him) attained greater heights of sublimity and greatness than any man can aspire to. Yet the fact that special instructions were required for him to convey a certain principle makes that principle greater than greatness, subliminally unique.

This is, indeed, a true description of the principle established here, namely that mankind should derive their values and standards from the Divine Being, after they have freed themselves from the pressure of their social set-up with all its values and standards.

The basic standard God has, through His prophets, commanded mankind to adopt is: *"The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most."* (49: 13) This is the standard by which all values, traditions and practices should be evaluated. It establishes a purely divine criterion which has nothing to do with any worldly considerations. But people live on earth and establish a multitude of ties, each having

its own weight and gravity. They have considerations of family relations, power and wealth. The distribution or concentration of these creates certain practical and economic results which determine the position of every man, woman or class of people in relation to others. Thus some acquire a position superior to that of others, in worldly standards.

When Islam declares, *"The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most,"* it simply indicates that all these values and considerations are void, however important they seem to us. It substitutes for them a single value derived directly from God. Moreover, it is the only value acceptable to Him. The incident depicted here serves to establish this value in an actual situation. Thus the essential principle is established: the scales recognized are those of God; the supreme value which should govern human life is the divine one. Hence, the Muslim community must abandon all human values, standards, traditions and concepts.

Who Takes Priority?

Let us now consider the incident itself. Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor blind man, comes to the Prophet (peace be upon him) at a time when he is busy with a group of the most powerful and influential personalities in Makkah, including 'Utbah and Shaybah, sons of Rabī`ah, Abū Jahl, `Amr ibn Hishām, Umayyah ibn Khalaf, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. Also present is al-`Abbās ibn `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's uncle. It is a crucial meeting. The Prophet explains the message of Islam to them and hopes for a favourable response. He feels that the cause of Islam stands to gain much by such a response. Islam is facing a hard time in Makkah. Those very people have been using all their wealth, power and influence to check its advancement, and stop people from accepting it. They have managed to freeze Islam in Makkah and hinder its progress elsewhere. Outside Makkah, the other tribes have adopted an attitude of wait and see. For they feel this to be their best stand in a society which gives paramount importance to the tribe's attitude. They are aware that against Muĥammad, the Prophet of Islam, stand his own kinsmen, who, theoretically speaking, should be his most ardent supporters.

It must be emphasized that when we say that the Prophet is busy with these people, he has no personal interest in them. He is simply working for Islam. Acceptance of Islam by these influential and powerful people means the removal of all impediments from the path of Islam in Makkah. It also ensures for Islam the freedom to progress in the rest of Arabia.

While this crucial meeting is in progress, a poor man comes and interrupts the Prophet (peace be upon him) saying: 'Messenger of God! Teach me some verses of what God has taught you.' Although he could sense that the Prophet is busy, he

repeats his request several times. The Prophet dislikes this interruption. His face, which remains unseen by the blind man, expresses his aversion. He frowns and looks away from the poor man. Indeed, the Prophet's motive has been his great enthusiasm to win badly needed support for Islam.

Here, heaven intervenes to say the final word in this matter and to put landmarks along the whole length of the road the Islamic message should take. Thus we are given the scales by which to weigh our values regardless of all other considerations, including those which may appear to serve the interests of Islam, as seen by human beings, including Muĥammad, the greatest of all mankind. This is why the Prophet who has been described elsewhere in the Qur'ān as having *"great and sublime nature"*, (68: 4) is strongly censured by God, the Most High. It is the only point in the Qur'ān where the Prophet, who is very dear to God, is addressed by the term *kallā,* [inadequately translated as "no indeed"]. *Kallā* is a term of censure and an order to desist. This is because the contravened principle is central to this religion.

The reproof is made in a unique style, which defies translation into ordinary language. Written language has to apply certain rules and observe some well defined norms. These would dampen the effects of the very vivid style which is characterized in this instance by its rapid touches and short phrases which are more like reflex actions and instant pictures.

"He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him." (Verses 1-2) The use of the third person here is significant. It suggests that the subject matter is so distasteful to God that He does not like to confront His beloved Messenger with it. This in itself is a gesture of mercy and kindness to the Prophet. Thus, the action which necessitated the reproof has been disguised with great subtlety. The reproof then takes the form of direct address, starting somewhat mildly: *"How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him."* (Verses 3-4) How could you tell but that a great gain might have been made? That is to say that the poor, blind man who came to you seeking light might have profited by God's reminder and set about purifying himself. His heart might have been brightened by God's light and he might have become like a lighthouse, guiding people to safety. This is exactly what happens every time a human being genuinely accepts the faith. It is, indeed, what carries real weight on God's scales.

The reproof then takes a stronger tone. It wonders at the action in question: *"But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore."* (Verses 5-10) The one who pretends that he can do without you and your religion, light, goodness and purity is the one who receives your attention! You go to him yourself when he turns away, and you are at pains to

try to persuade him to accept the faith. "*Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed.*" (Verse 7) What is it to you if he chooses to remain in filth? You are not answerable for his sins. He will not secure your victory. "*As to him who comes to you with zeal,*" out of his own free will, "*and with a feeling of fear in his heart,*" groping his way with outstretched hands, fearful of pitfalls, *"him you ignore."* What a strong description of not paying due attention to the man who came to seek right guidance.

The tone becomes even stronger and the reproof then takes the form of outright censure: *kallā* or "no indeed", this must never be the case.

Then follows a statement affirming that Islam is an honourable and noble call. It has no need for anybody's support. It cares only for the one who accepts it on its merits, regardless of his position in human society! "*This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes.*" (Verses 11-16) It is a noble and honoured message in every respect. Its pages are purified and exalted, entrusted to *'noble and devout'* angel ambassadors who convey it to those human beings selected to convey it to their people. It is also dignified. No one who pretends that he is self-sufficient need be approached about accepting this message of Islam. It is only for those who know its value and seek to be purified by it.

So this is the divine standard by which all values and considerations should be evaluated, and all people should be judged. This is also God's word, which is the final judgement in all situations.

But where and when was this laid down? The answer is in Makkah when the Muslims were few in number, and Islam was the weaker side in an unequal battle. The attempt to win a group of powerful and influential men was not motivated by any personal interest. Ignoring the poor blind man was not occasioned by any personal consideration. All was for the sake of the new message. But the message itself calls for the adoption and application of this very standard and these very values. For Islam can never acquire any real power or achieve any true victory except through the establishment of these values and standards.

As stated earlier, the essential principle involved is far greater and wider in scope than this single incident. It is that humanity should derive its values and standards from God, not from any worldly source. "*The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most.*" (49: 13) Indeed, the one whom God considers noble is the one who deserves to be attended to and looked after, even if he is completely lacking in family relations, power and wealth, assets highly valued by worldly standards. These and all other worldly values are worthless when they part ways with faith and fear of God. This is the great issue which divine instruction in this *sūrah* seeks to settle.

A Reproach and a Principle

The Prophet was deeply touched by these divine instructions and by God's reproof. Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly for the establishment of this great principle in Islamic society.

The first action he took was to announce these instructions and the reproof in public. This in itself is something very great. Taken from any point of view, no person other than a messenger from God would have announced in public that he had been censured so strongly for his slip. It would have been enough for any other great man to recognize his mistake and to avoid any repetition in the future. With God's Messenger however, things acquire different proportions. No person other than God's Messenger could have had the courage, in such circumstances as Islam was facing, to make this declaration, challenging with it the masters of the Quraysh, who were very proud of their lineage, power and wealth.

These were, at the time, the only considerations of any importance in Makkan society, where people wondered: *"Why was this Qur'ān not revealed to some great man from the two towns?"* (43: 31) They were, of course, aware of Muĥammad's lineage, and that he was a descendant of the noblest family in Arabia. His ancestors were masters of Makkah. They nonetheless asked the question because Muĥammad himself did not occupy a position of power in Makkah before his prophethood.

In such a society, at that particular time, such a great principle could never have been the product of any earthly factor, or factors. It could only have had one source: God. No power could have ensured it other than divine will. Islamic society received it directly from the Prophet. Thereafter it became well established acquiring depth and momentum, which helped it to continue its operation in the Islamic community over the centuries.

The establishment of this principle was, indeed, a rebirth of humanity. It was greater in importance than the birth of the first man. Man was able to free himself from all worldly bonds and standards, and substitute for them a set of heavenly values independent of all earthly considerations. These new values were soon understood and accepted by everybody. Soon the grave matter which had required a special directive to be issued to Muĥammad, God's Messenger, and an order to him to deliver it in detail, became the operative principle of the Islamic conscience and the basic code of Islamic society. It remained so for a very long time.

Perhaps we cannot fully appreciate the true nature of this rebirth of humanity, because we cannot conceive the practical significance of our release from the pressures of social environment, values, standards, traditions and practices. In order to appreciate the magnitude of these pressures we have only to remember that advocates of a materialistic view of history consider that the economic condition of a

certain society determines its beliefs, arts, literature, laws and customs, as well as its view of life and its destiny. What a narrow and mistaken view of man's true nature! It was with this basic principle that Islam accomplished the miracle of the rebirth of man.

Instilling a New Value

Since then the values attached to this great principle have become supreme. Their ascendancy, however, was by no means easy, neither in the Arabian society, nor in the minds of the Muslims themselves. Through his actions and directives, coloured by the profound effect the divine instructions in this *sūrah* left on him, the Prophet was able to implant this basic Islamic principle into his Companions' consciences and into the life of the Islamic society he had established. He looked after his new plant with unfailing care until it had established deep roots and spread its branches wide. Hence why this principle remained for centuries the guiding principle of the Muslim community.

After this incident the Prophet always welcomed Ibn Umm Maktūm warmly. Whenever he met him, he said: "Welcome to the man for whose sake my Lord reproved me." Twice, he appointed him as his deputy governor in Madinah when he himself had to be away.

The Prophet married his own cousin Zaynab bint Jaĥsh of the Asad clan to his former slave Zayd ibn Ĥārithah. Marriage has always been a very delicate issue, and it was particularly so in the Arabian Peninsula at that time. The Prophet's motive was to deal a deadly blow to all the social values and standards based on worldly considerations.

Soon after the Makkan Muslims settled in Madinah the Prophet established a bond of brotherhood between every two Muslims. He made his own uncle, Ĥamzah, a brother to his former slave, Zayd; and Khālid ibn Ruwayĥah of the Khatham tribe and Bilāl, the former slave, were made brothers.

He appointed Zayd as Commander-in-Chief of the Muslim army which fought the Battle of Mu'tah. Zayd's first deputy was the Prophet's own cousin Ja`far ibn Abī Ṭālib. The second deputy was `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah of the *Anṣār.* A number of well-known personalities from Makkah and Madinah were in that army of three thousand men, including the most famous Muslim commander of all time, Khālid ibn al-Walīd. The Prophet himself went out to bid them farewell. It is also worth mentioning that Zayd and his two deputies were killed during that battle.

The Prophet's last action was to appoint Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young man, as commander of an army he had raised to fight the Byzantines. A large number of

early Muslims, from both the *Muhājirīn* (Makkans) and the *Anşār* (Madinans), including his two most distinguished Companions and immediate successors, Abū Bakr and `Umar, as well as his own relative Sa ‘d ibn Abī Waqqāş, one of the very earliest people to embrace Islam, were in that army. Some people, however, grumbled about the fact that Usāmah had been made commander, young as he was. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar takes up the story: “When some people complained about giving the army command to Usāmah, the Prophet said: ‘You are deprecating his appointment as commander in the same way as you previously deprecated his father’s appointment. By God, his father was a worthy commander, and one of the dearest people to me. Usāmah is also one of the dearest people to me.” [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

Some people spoke in derogatory terms about the Prophet’s Companion, Salmān, the Persian. They took a narrow nationalistic view and spoke of the inferiority of the Persians in relation to the Arabs. The Prophet took a decisive step to eradicate such narrow tendencies. He declared: “Salmān belongs to the Prophet’s family.” [Related by al-Ţabarānī and al-Ĥākim.] This statement transcends all lineage, tribal and national considerations, which carried immense weight in Arabia.

Furthermore a disagreement occurred between Abū Dharr and Bilāl, two of the Prophet’s highly esteemed Companions. In a fit of temper, Abū Dharr called Bilāl “the son of a black woman”. The Prophet was extremely upset at this. He rebuked Abū Dharr saying: “That is too much, Abū Dharr. He who has a white mother has no advantage which makes him better than the son of a black mother.” [Related by Ibn al-Mubārak with slightly different wording.] Thus the Prophet put the dispute into its proper perspective. What distinguishes people is their faith, not their colour. This is the Islamic criterion, which is so unlike the worldly criteria of *jāhiliyyah* societies. The Prophet’s rebuke had a profound effect on Abū Dharr, who was very sensitive. He wanted to atone for his mistake, so he put his head on the ground swearing that he would not raise it until Bilāl had put his foot over it.

Bilāl achieved a position of great distinction in Islamic society. What made his achievement possible was the application of heaven’s values. Abū Hurayrah related that the Prophet once said to Bilāl: “Tell me, which of your actions do you hope to be the most rewarding for you, for last night I heard your footsteps as you drew near to me in heaven?” Bill answered: “I do not think that since becoming a Muslim I have ever done anything which I hope to be more rewarding than that every time I perform ablution at any time of the day or night I pray whatever I can.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Once `Ammār ibn Yāsir asked for permission to see the Prophet. The Prophet said: “Let him come in. Welcome to the cleansed, good man.” [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] He also said of him: “Ammār is full of faith to the top of his head.” [Related by al-

Nasā'ī.] Ĥudhayfah related that the Prophet said: "I do not know how long I shall be with you, so accept the leadership of the two who will follow me [and he pointed to Abū Bakr and `Umar], and follow `Ammār's guidance. Believe whatever Ibn Mas`ūd tells you." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

Ibn Mas`ūd was so close to the Prophet that any stranger in Madinah would have thought him a member of the Prophet's household. Abū Mūsā said: "I came to Madinah from the Yemen with my brother. For quite some time we were under the impression that Ibn Mas`ūd and his mother belonged to the Prophet's household, an impression we had formed because of the frequency of their comings and goings from the Prophet's homes, and their long companionship with him." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

The Prophet himself sought the hand of an *Anşārī* woman in marriage for Julaybib, a former slave. "Her parents were reluctant to sanction such a marriage. She, however, said to them: 'Do you mean to reject the Prophet's suit? If the Prophet thinks that this man is suitable for us, then let this marriage go through.' So they gave their consent." [Related by Aĥmad.]

Soon after his marriage, Julaybib took part in an armed expedition. After the battle, which resulted in a victory for the Muslims, the Prophet asked his Companions: "Is anybody missing?" They named a few people. He repeated the question and they named a few others. He asked the same question for the third time and they answered in the negative. He said: "I think Julaybib is missing." They looked for him and found his body next to seven enemy soldiers whom he had killed. The Prophet went over, stood near him, and said: "He killed seven before he himself was slain. This man belongs to me and I belong to him." He lifted him into his arms until a grave had been dug. He then put him in his grave. The tradition does not say whether Julaybib was given a death wash or not. [Related by Muslim.]

The Principle in Practice

With this divine instruction and the Prophet's guidance, the rebirth of humanity was accomplished in a unique manner. Thus a new society came into existence, which imported its values and standards from heaven, and lived on earth, unhampered by earthly restrictions. This is the greatest miracle of Islam; a miracle which could not have happened except by God's will, and through the Prophet's actions. This miracle is, in itself, proof that Islam is a religion revealed by God, and that the man who conveyed it to us was His Messenger.

It was divine will that leadership of the Islamic society, after the Prophet's death, should be assigned successively to Abū Bakr and `Umar, the two who were most keenly aware of the true nature of Islam and most vividly impressed by the Prophet's

guidance. Indeed, Abū Bakr and `Umar surpassed everyone else in their love for the Prophet and determination to follow very closely in his footsteps.

Abū Bakr was well aware of the Prophet's object in assigning the army's command to Usāmah. His first action after he became Caliph was to send the army raised by the Prophet and commanded by Usāmah on its original mission. Abū Bakr, the Caliph, went along with the army to the outskirts of Madinah to bid it farewell. It was a strange scene: 'Usāmah on his horse while Abū Bakr walked. Usāmah, the young commander, felt embarrassed that he should ride while the Caliph, an old man, should walk. He begged Abū Bakr to ride, or else he would walk alongside him. Abū Bakr refused, saying: "You shall not walk and I shall not ride. It will do me no harm to walk for an hour if my walking is for God's cause."

Abū Bakr felt that he needed `Umar to help him shoulder the responsibilities of government. `Umar, however, was a soldier in Usāmah's army, so he had to ask Usāmah's permission to discharge him. Hence, the Caliph, the Head of State, said to his army commander: "If you think you can spare `Umar to help me, then please do so!" What a request! It is the height of magnanimity, attainable only with God's will, by individuals well taught by God's Messenger.

A few years later `Umar assumed the leadership of the Muslim community, as its second Caliph. One of his actions was to appoint Ammār ibn Yāsir, who formerly belonged to the lower classes of Makkah, as governor of the Kufah region in Iraq.

One day a number of dignitaries from the Quraysh, including Şuhayl ibn `Amr and Abū Sufyān, sought to see `Umar. He let them wait and admitted first Şuhayb and Bilāl, two former slaves, on the grounds of their early acceptance of Islam and their taking part at the Battle of Badr. Abū Sufyān was angry and said: "I have never seen a day like this. These slaves are admitted and we are kept waiting!" Şuhayl, who was more keenly aware of the true nature of Islam, said: "Gentlemen! I see in your faces an expression of what you feel, but I say to you that if you are angry you should be angry with yourselves. Both they and you were called upon to accept Islam at the same time. They were quick to respond but you were slow. What will you do if on the Day of Judgement you find that they are included among the chosen and you are left behind?"

`Umar allotted Usāmah ibn Zayd a larger share of the spoils of war than he allotted his own son Abdullāh. When `Abdullāh queried his father's decision `Umar said: "Son, the Prophet used to love Zayd more than he loved your father, and he loved Usāmah more than he loved you. What I did was simply to attach to the Prophet's love higher value than I attached to my own love." As he said this `Umar was, of course, fully aware that the Prophet measured his love by divine standards.

`Umar sent Ammār to question Khālid ibn al-Walīd, the victorious commander of the Muslim army who belonged to a noble family, about certain charges. `Ammār tied Khālid's robes round his neck. Some reports add that he tied Khālid's hands throughout the interrogation with his own turban. When the investigation proved Khālid's innocence, `Ammār untied him and put Khālid's turban back on his head with his own hands. Khālid did not object to this treatment. He knew that `Ammār was one of the Prophet's early Companions. Khālid also knew what the Prophet used to say about `Ammār, which we have already quoted.

It was `Umar himself who used to say about Abū Bakr and Bilāl: "Abū Bakr is our master and he freed our master." This refers to the days when Bilāl was Umayyah ibn Khalaf's slave, who tortured him mercilessly in order to turn him away from Islam. Abū Bakr bought Bilāl from Umayyah and set him free. This former slave, Bilāl, is described by `Umar, the Caliph, as "our master".

`Umar was the one who said, "Had Sālim, the former slave of Abū Ĥudhayfah, been alive I would have nominated him to succeed me." This statement must be taken against the background that `Umar did not nominate anyone to succeed him, not even `Uthmān, `Alī, Ṭalhah or al-Zubayr. He only appointed a consultative committee of six, so that the next Caliph should be chosen from among them.

`Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib sent `Ammār and al-Ĥasan, his own son, to Kūfah to seek its people's support against `Ā'ishah [may God be pleased with her]. His message said, "I know that she is your Prophet's wife in this life and in the life to come. You are, however, faced with a test which will prove whether you follow your Prophet or his wife." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] The people of Kūfah accepted his case against `Ā'ishah, mother of the believers and Abū Bakr's daughter, [may God be pleased with them all].

Bilāl was asked by his brother in Islam, Abū Ruwayĥah of Khatham, to speak on his behalf to the family of a Yemeni woman he wished to marry. Bilāl did so, saying: "I am Bilāl ibn Rabāĥ and this is my brother, Abū Ruwayĥah. He lacks good manners and firm belief. You may please yourselves whether you give him your daughter in marriage or not." He did not deceive them by hiding the truth, nor did he behave as a mediator, unmindful of his accountability to God. The family concerned were pleased with such honesty. They married their daughter to Abū Ruwayĥah, the noble Arab whose advocate was Bilāl, a former slave from Abyssinia.

This fundamental principle remained firmly entrenched throughout Islamic society for centuries, despite the various factors working for a setback. `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās was always remembered with his slave `Ikrimah, while `Abdullāh ibn `Umar was remembered with his slave Nāfi`. Anas ibn Mālik was always associated with his slave Ibn Sīrīn, as was Abū Hurayrah with his slave `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn

Hurmuz.[2] In the generation that followed, the most distinguished men of learning were al-Ĥasan in Başrah, Mujāhid ibn Jabr, `Aṭā' ibn Rabāĥ and Ṭāwūs ibn Kaysān. In Egypt, Yazīd ibn Abī Ĥabīb, a black slave from Dengla, was the grand Mufti [holder of the highest position of religious authority] during the reign of `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Azīz.[3]

This divine standard continued to win great respect for the pious and God-fearing, even when they were deprived of all things to which worldly considerations attached great value. It is only in comparatively recent times that this divine standard has ceased to operate. For now the whole world is overwhelmed by a tide of *jāhiliyyah,* wherein there is a total disregard for divine values. In the United States, the leading Western country, a man is valued according to the size of his bank balance. In the Soviet Union,[4] where Communism, the ruling philosophy, looks at life as no more than matter, and a man is worth less than a machine. The land of Islam, on the other hand, has sunk back *into jāhiliyyah.* The creeds *of jāhiliyyah,* which Islam had rooted out, have now been revived. The divine standard has been abandoned in favour of materialistic values which are completely alien to Islam.

The only hope that remains is that the Islamic revivalist movement will rescue mankind once again from the clutches of *jāhiliyyah* and bring about humanity's second rebirth, similar to the one announced by the decisive verses at the opening of this *sūrah.*

Man's Arrogant Attitude

The second part of the *sūrah* wonders at man's conceit as he turns his back on the true faith. It wonders at how man forgets his humble origins, and how he remains totally oblivious of the care God has taken of him and His complete power over every stage of his existence, both in this life and in the hereafter. In his ingratitude man fulfils nothing of his duties towards his Lord, who has created and sustained him and who will hold him to account for his actions: *"Perish man! How ungrateful he is! Of what did God create him? Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. He makes his path smooth for him. He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases. But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding."* (Verses 17-23)

"Perish man!" He deserves to die. The mode of expression employed also adds to

[2] All these were scholars of the highest calibre, with the four mentioned first being Companions of the Prophet. The others passed on their scholarship to the succeeding generations. — Editor's note.
[3] These details are based on information given by A.H. al-Guindi in his book *Abū Ĥanīfah,* Cairo.
[4] The author is referring here to the former Soviet Union, which was one of the two superpowers in his own time. — Editor's note.

the sense of horror excited by this abominable attitude. "*How ungrateful he is!*" He strongly denies the claims of his creation. Had he been mindful of these claims he would have been humbly grateful to his Lord who created him. He would not have shown such conceit and he would have remembered the end he is certain to meet.

Indeed, how can man be so arrogant and conceited? What are his origins: "*Of what did God create him?*" (Verse 18) His is a very humble origin, worthless indeed except for God's grace. "*Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him.*" (Verse 19) A drop of sperm of no significance; that is man's beginning. God, the Creator, then proportioned him. The Arabic verb used here *qaddara* denotes precise and meticulous proportioning. It also denotes bestowing weight and value. This is how man has been created, honoured and raised from his humble origins to a high position in which the whole world has been put at his disposal.

"*He makes his path smooth for him.*" (Verse 20) The path of life has been smoothed for him. He has also been given the ability to recognize and follow the right path.

When the journey of life is over, when every living being meets its inevitable end, "*He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave.*" (Verse 21) So in the end the case is just the same as in the beginning: man submits to his Lord who brings him to life when He wills and ends his life when He wills. He honours him by making the earth his last abode, rather than leaving him as food for wild animals. He has made it part of human nature to bury the dead. When the time He has appointed arrives, He brings him back to life for the reckoning: "*He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases.*" (Verse 22) So man will not be left without reward or retribution.

But has man prepared himself for this reckoning? It would seem that "*by no means has man fulfilled His bidding.*" (Verse 23) Mankind as a whole, from the very first to the very last, will not have fulfilled God's bidding. This is the inference of the Arabic expression used here, *lammā Yaqđi mā amarah.* Man will always remain negligent of his duties. He will never remember his origins and creation as he should, nor will he thank and praise his Creator who has guided and looked after him as He should be thanked and praised. Man does not prepare himself in this life for the day of reward and retribution. This applies to humanity as a whole. In addition, the great majority of people arrogantly turn their backs on divine guidance.

Useful Reflection

Next, the *sūrah* invites man to reflect upon his food and that of his cattle, which is one of the great many things God has provided for him: "*Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents, and cleave the earth in fissures; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes, and the fresh vegetation, the olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit trees and the green pastures, for you and your cattle to delight in.*" (Verses

24-32)

This is the full story of man's food, related here stage by stage. Let man reflect: does he play any significant role in it? Can he determine or change its course? Indeed, the same hand which has brought him to life has brought forth the food which sustains him.

"*Let man reflect on the food he eats.*" (Verse 24) Food, the first necessity of human life, deserves a few thoughts. It is made readily available day after day. But behind all this is a simple and wonderful story. Yet such simplicity makes man forget its wonder. Nevertheless, it is as miraculous as man's own creation. Every step is determined by the Supreme Will that creates man.

"*How we pour down the rain in torrents.*" (Verse 25) The pouring rain is a fact known to every human being, wherever he lives, regardless of his level of experience or knowledge. It is, therefore, taken up in this address to all human beings. As man's knowledge has increased, he is now able to appreciate the meaning of this verse more fully. He knows that something happened a long time before the daily phenomenon of rain came to be established. Perhaps the theory closest to the truth concerning the formation of the oceans, whose water evaporates and then returns is rain, claims that they were formed somewhere above the earth and were then poured down in torrents. A contemporary scientist says on this subject:

> If it is true that the temperature of the earth at the time of its separation from the sun was about 12,000 degrees, or that of the surface of the sun, then all the elements were free and, therefore, no chemical combination of importance could exist. Gradually, as the earth, or the earth-forming fragments, cooled, combinations would take place and a nucleus of the world as we know it is formed. Oxygen and hydrogen could not combine until the temperature was reduced to 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. At this point these elements would rush together and form water. What we know as the atmosphere must have been enormous at that time. All the oceans were in the sky and all those elements not combined were in the air as gases. Water, having formed in the outer atmosphere, fell towards the earth but could not reach it, as the temperature near the earth was higher than it was thousands of miles out. Of course, the time came when the deluge would reach the earth only to fly up again as steam. With whole oceans in the air, floods that would result as cooling progressed are beyond calculation.[5]

Although we do not claim any definite link between this theory and this particular Qur'ānic statement, we acknowledge that the theory gives us a better understanding

[5] A. Cressy Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* London, 1962, pp. 25-26.

of what it means and the period of history it refers to, i.e., the period of water pouring down in torrents. The theory may be proved right. On the other hand, other theories may be put forward to explain the origins of water. The Qur'ānic statement, however, remains valid for all ages and societies.

This is how the production of food starts: *"We pour down the rain in torrents."* (Verse 25) No one can claim either to have produced water, at any stage of its formation, or to have caused it to be poured, so that the process of food production could be set in motion.

"And cleave the earth in fissures." (Verse 26) Primitive man sees the rain falling and realizes that he has no power over it. He sees the water splitting the earth and penetrating the soil. He also sees the plants cleaving the earth with the Creator's will and growing over its surface. He notices that the plants are thin and the earth heavy yet the Creator's hand enables the plants to split the earth and move through it. Anyone who contemplates how plants grow can recognize the miracle involved here.

As human knowledge expands, a new understanding of this statement may be developed. The cleaving of the earth so that it became suitable for vegetation may have taken place a long time ago. The Qur'ānic statement may refer to the multiple break up of the earth's surface rocks caused by the great floods and by the various climatic factors which, according to modern scientists, contributed to the formation of a soil layer where vegetation could grow. This interpretation fits more closely with the sequence of events as it is reported here.

In either case, the third stage is that of the growth of all kinds of vegetation. The kind mentioned here is the best known to the people immediately addressed by the Qur'ān. *"How We bring forth the corn."* (Verse 27) *'The corn'* refers to all cereals and grains used for human or animal food. *"The grapes, and the fresh vegetation."* (Verse 28) The reference here is to the well-known vine fruits and to all vegetables which can be eaten raw and picked time after time. *"The olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit trees and the green pastures."* (Verses 29-31) The olive and the palm fruits are well-known to all Arabs. *'The gardens'* refer to the fenced fields of fruit trees. They are described here as being dense with trees. The Arabic term *'abb'*, translated here as green pastures, refers in all probability to the herbage used for cattle. As mentioned in the commentary on the preceding *sūrah,* `Umar asked what *'abb'* meant and then blamed himself for asking. So we follow `Umar's suit and add nothing to what has already been mentioned.

This is the story of food, the provision of which is carefully planned by the hand which created man. Man plays no role in any of its stages. Even the seeds and grains he casts on the earth are not of his making. The miraculous aspect here lies in the original production of these seeds and grains, which is beyond man's

comprehension. Various seeds may be planted on the same piece of land, irrigated by one kind of water; yet each produces its own fruit. It is the hand of the Creator which makes this infinite collection of plants and their fruits, and preserves in the little seed the characteristics of its mother plant so that they may reappear in the plant which issues from it. Man remains ignorant of the secrets of this process. He has no power over it. It is God's own production: "*For you and your cattle to delight in.*" (Verse 32) This delight is, however, for a limited period. There follows something totally different which needs to be carefully considered by man before it actually arrives.

A Signal for Resurrection

> *But when the stunning blast is sounded, on that day everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own. Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful. Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin.* (Verses 33-42)

This is the end of all delight and enjoyment. It fits perfectly with the planning and designing which included every stage of man's development. The end portrayed here fits perfectly with the scene at the beginning of the *sūrah* which shows someone coming forward with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, and another considers himself self-sufficient and turns away from divine guidance. Here we have an exposition of their standing in God's view.

'*The stunning blast*' is the nearest translation of an Arabic term, *al-ṣākhkhah,* which carries a very sharp tone; it almost pierces the ears. This effect simply prepares us for the following scene in which we see "*everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children.*" (Verses 34-36) Such ties between a person and his nearest relations cannot be severed in the normal course of events. Yet *the stunning blast* destroys these very links and throws them up into the air.

The fearfulness depicted in this scene is purely psychological. It strikes the soul, isolates it and holds it in its grip. The result is that each of us will think only of ourselves. None shall have any time or power to think of others: "*For each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own.*" (Verse 37) The description is vivid; yet there can be no shorter and yet more comprehensive statement to describe the general condition of worried minds and souls.

When the *stunning blast* takes place the condition is universal. Then follows a description of the conditions of the believers and the unbelievers after the two groups have been assigned their values by divine standards and given their

respective positions: *"Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful."* (Verses 38-39) These faces beam with a happiness overflowing with delight. They are hopeful and reassured because they feel that their Lord is pleased with them. These people are spared the terror of *the stunning blast,* so they can afford to smile and demonstrate their joy. Or probably the smiles and manifestations of happiness are seen after these people have realized the good end awaiting them.

"Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin." (Verses 40-42) Such faces are covered with the dust of sadness and misery, darkened with humiliation and depression. They know what they have done in this life and they await their inevitable punishment. *"These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin."* (Verse 42) These people are devoid of faith. They do not believe in God or in the divine message. Moreover, they are hardened in their erring and sinful ways. They persistently violate divine commandments.

The destiny of each group is portrayed in their faces. It is a vivid portrait drawn with words and expressions — a fact which testifies to the immense power characteristic of the Qur'ānic style. The opening and the close of the *sūrah* are in perfect harmony. The opening lays down a fundamental principle and a general standard, and the close shows us the results of applying this standard. The *sūrah* is a short one; yet it states a number of major facts and principles, portraying a large number of scenes, utilizing different rhythms. Furthermore the style brings out these images in full relief.

SŪRAH 81

Al-Takwīr

(The Darkening)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِذَا ٱلشَّمْسُ كُوِّرَتْ ﴿١﴾	*When the sun is darkened,* (1)
وَإِذَا ٱلنُّجُومُ ٱنكَدَرَتْ ﴿٢﴾	*when the stars fall and disperse,* (2)
وَإِذَا ٱلْجِبَالُ سُيِّرَتْ ﴿٣﴾	*when the mountains are made to move away,* (3)
وَإِذَا ٱلْعِشَارُ عُطِّلَتْ ﴿٤﴾	*when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended,* (4)
وَإِذَا ٱلْوُحُوشُ حُشِرَتْ ﴿٥﴾	*when the wild beasts are brought together,* (5)
وَإِذَا ٱلْبِحَارُ سُجِّرَتْ ﴿٦﴾	*when the seas are set alight,* (6)
وَإِذَا ٱلنُّفُوسُ زُوِّجَتْ ﴿٧﴾	*when people's souls are paired [like with like],* (7)
وَإِذَا ٱلْمَوْءُۥدَةُ سُئِلَتْ ﴿٨﴾	*when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked* (8)
بِأَىِّ ذَنۢبٍ قُتِلَتْ ﴿٩﴾	

وَإِذَا ٱلصُّحُفُ نُشِرَتۡ ﴿١٠﴾	*for what crime she was slain,* (9)
وَإِذَا ٱلسَّمَآءُ كُشِطَتۡ ﴿١١﴾	*when the records are laid open,* (10)
وَإِذَا ٱلۡجَحِيمُ سُعِّرَتۡ ﴿١٢﴾	*when the sky is stripped bare,* (11)
وَإِذَا ٱلۡجَنَّةُ أُزۡلِفَتۡ ﴿١٣﴾	*when hell is made to burn fiercely,* (12)
عَلِمَتۡ نَفۡسٞ مَّآ أَحۡضَرَتۡ ﴿١٤﴾	*when paradise is brought near,* (13)
فَلَآ أُقۡسِمُ بِٱلۡخُنَّسِ ﴿١٥﴾	*every soul shall know what it has put forward.* (14)
ٱلۡجَوَارِ ٱلۡكُنَّسِ ﴿١٦﴾	*I swear by the turning stars,* (15)
وَٱلَّيۡلِ إِذَا عَسۡعَسَ ﴿١٧﴾	*which move swiftly and hide themselves away,* (16)
وَٱلصُّبۡحِ إِذَا تَنَفَّسَ ﴿١٨﴾	*and by the night as it comes darkening on,* (17)
إِنَّهُۥ لَقَوۡلُ رَسُولٖ كَرِيمٖ ﴿١٩﴾	*and by the dawn as it starts to breathe,* (18)
ذِي قُوَّةٍ عِندَ ذِي ٱلۡعَرۡشِ مَكِينٖ ﴿٢٠﴾	*this is truly the word of a noble and mighty messenger;* (19)
مُّطَاعٖ ثَمَّ أَمِينٖ ﴿٢١﴾	*who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne.* (20)
وَمَا صَاحِبُكُم بِمَجۡنُونٖ ﴿٢٢﴾	*He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust.* (21)
وَلَقَدۡ رَءَاهُ بِٱلۡأُفُقِ ٱلۡمُبِينِ ﴿٢٣﴾	

Your old friend is not mad. (22)	وَمَا هُوَ عَلَى ٱلْغَيْبِ بِضَنِينٍ ﴿٢٤﴾
He saw him on the clear horizon. (23)	وَمَا هُوَ بِقَوْلِ شَيْطَٰنٍ رَّجِيمٍ ﴿٢٥﴾
He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. (24)	فَأَيْنَ تَذْهَبُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾
It is not the word of an accursed devil. (25)	إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾
Whither then are you going? (26)	لِمَن شَآءَ مِنكُمْ أَن يَسْتَقِيمَ ﴿٢٨﴾
This is only a reminder to all mankind, (27)	وَمَا تَشَآءُونَ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾
to those of you whose will is to be upright. (28)	
Yet, you cannot will except by the will of God, Lord of all the worlds. (29)	

Overview

This *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each of them treating one major principle of faith. The first is the principle of resurrection accompanied by a great upheaval in the universe, which affects the sun and the stars, the mountains and seas, heaven and earth, wild and domestic animals, as well as man. The second principle is that of revelation. The *sūrah* has something to say about the angel carrying the divine revelation, the Prophet receiving it, the people addressed by it, and the Supreme Will which has shaped their nature and bestowed this revelation.

The rhythm of the *sūrah* is one of violent movement which leaves nothing in its place. Everything is thrown away, smashed or scattered. The movement is so violent that it excites and frightens. It alters every familiar situation and shakes people's hearts violently so that they feel deprived of both shelter and reassurance. In such a violent destructive storm the human heart is no more than a little feather, blown in every direction. No protection and, indeed, no safety can be found except what is granted by God, the Eternal. Thus, the rhythm of the *sūrah* has, on its own, the effect of pulling man's heart and soul away from everything associated with safety and

security, in order to seek peace, safety and protection with God.

The *sūrah* is also a gem of striking images drawn from the universe in both its present beautiful condition, which is familiar to us, and its condition on the Day of Resurrection when every familiar thing is changed beyond recognition. The *sūrah is,* moreover, rich in fine expressions which add colour to the images portrayed. As the *sūrah* is so short, the rhythm, images and expressions combine together to produce a very strong and lasting effect. Had it not been for the fact that the *sūrah* contains some words which are no longer familiar to us today, I would have preferred not to comment on it. Its rhythm and images leave a far stronger effect than any human interpretation can aspire to achieve.

Upheaval in the Universe

> *When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight, when people's souls are paired [like with like], when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain, when the records are laid open, when the sky is stripped bare, when hell is made to burn fiercely, when paradise is brought near, every soul shall know what it has put forward.* (Verses 1-14)

These verses sketch a scene of great upheaval which envelops the whole universe. It is an event which reveals every guarded secret and leaves nothing hidden away. Every human being faces what he has put forward for the day of reckoning and judgement. The great events mentioned indicate that the present familiar state of the universe, with its perfect harmony, measured movement, controlled relations, perfected by the Maker whose work is flawless, will suffer a complete break down. Its role will be finished. Along with all creation, it will move into a new predetermined phase of life, unlike anything known to us in this world.

The *sūrah* aims to get this idea of the inevitable upheaval well established in people's hearts and minds so that they may attach little or no importance to the values and riches of this world, though these may seem to be of lasting consequence. People should establish a firm bond with the everlasting truth, i.e. the truth of God, the Eternal, who never changes when everything else changes and disappears. They should break the chains of what is familiar in this life in order to recognize the absolute truth which admits no restrictions of time, place, finite faculties or temporal standards.

As one goes through the events of this universal upheaval, one cannot fail to observe an inner feeling for this affirmation.

As to what exactly happens to all these creations during the resurrection we can only say that it is known to God alone. We can only comprehend what we have experienced. When we think of a great upheaval in the world, our imagination cannot stretch beyond a violent earthquake or volcano, or, perhaps, the fall of a comet or a small celestial body. Floods are perhaps the most destructive manifestation of the power of water known to us. The most powerful events in the universe we have monitored were some limited explosions in the sun, which is millions of miles away from us. All these events, great as they may be, seem so small when they are compared to the universal upheaval which will take place on the Day of Resurrection that they may be considered akin to child's play. If we really want to know what will happen then, we can do no more than attempt to draw some sort of comparison with what we have experienced in this life.

The darkening of the sun probably means that it will cool down and its flames which stretch out for thousands of miles in space will dwindle and die. As the sun is now in gaseous form because of its intense heat, which reaches a maximum of 12,000 degrees, its darkening probably means its transformation by freezing to a form similar to that of the surface of the earth. It may adopt a circular shape without becoming stretched out. This is probably the meaning of the opening verse, but it could also mean something different. As to how it will happen, or its causes, we can only say that this is known only to God.

The falling of the stars probably means that they will break away from the system which holds them together and lose their light and brightness. Only God knows which stars will be affected by this event: will it affect only a small group of stars, say, our own solar system, or our galaxy, which comprises hundreds of millions of stars, or will it affect all the stars in their millions of millions? The universe, as everyone knows, comprises an almost infinite number of galaxies, each with its own space.

Forcing the mountains to move away probably means that they will be crushed and blown away as indicated in other *sūrahs: "They ask you about the mountains. Say: My Lord will crush them to fine dust and leave them a desolate waste."* (20: 105) *"When the mountains crumble away and scatter into fine dust."* (56: 5) *"And the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage."* (78: 20) All these verses refer to a certain event which will affect the mountains and do away with their firm foundations and stability. This may be the beginning of the quake which will shake the earth violently, and which is mentioned in *Sūrah* 99, The Earthquake: *"When the earth is rocked with her final earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens."* (99: 1-2) All these events will take place on that very long day.

"When the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended." (Verse 4) The Arabic description of the camel here specifies that she is in her tenth month of pregnancy.

When in this state, she is to the Arab his most valuable possession because she is about to add to his wealth a highly valued young camel, and to give him a lot of milk which he and his family will share with the new-born animal. However, on that day, which will witness such overwhelming events, such priceless camels will be left without care, completely untended. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by this verse never left such camels untended, except for the gravest of dangers.

"When the wild beasts are brought together." (Verse 5) The great terror which overwhelms the wild beasts in their jungles is the cause of their coming together. They forget their mutual enmities, and move together, unaware of their direction. They neither seek their homes nor chase their prey as they usually do. The overwhelming terror changes the character of even the wildest of beasts. What then will it do to man?

"When the seas are set alight." (Verse 6) The Arabic term, *sujjirat,* used here may mean that the seas will be overfilled with water, from floods similar to those which characterized the early stages of life on earth. On the other hand, earthquakes and volcanoes may remove the barriers now separating the seas so that the water of one will flow into the other. The Arabic expression may also mean that the seas will experience explosions which set them ablaze, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"When the oceans are made to explode."* (82: 3) Such explosions may result from separating oxygen and hydrogen which make sea water. They could also be atomic explosions of some sort. If the explosion of a limited number of atoms in a hydrogen or atom bomb produces such dreadful consequences as we have seen, then the atomic explosion of the waters of the oceans, in whatever manner it may occur, will produce something much too fearful for our minds to visualize. Similarly, we cannot conceive the reality of hell, which stands beyond these vast oceans.

"When people's souls are paired." (Verse 7) The pairing of souls may mean the reunion of body and soul at the time of resurrection. It may also mean their grouping, like with like, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān: "*You will be divided into three groups."* (56: 7) These are the chosen elite, the people of the right, and the people of the left. It may also mean some other way of grouping.

Girls Buried Alive

"When the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain." (Verses 8-9) The value of human life must have sunk very low in pre-Islamic Arabian society. There existed a convention of burying young girls alive, for fear of shame or poverty. The Qur'ān describes this practice in order to portray its horror and denounce it as a practice of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah.* Its condemnation fits in perfectly with the declared aim of Islam, to destroy *jāhiliyyah* and save mankind from sinking to its depths. In

Sūrah 16, The Bee, we read in translation: *"When the birth of a girl is announced to one of them, his face grows dark and he is filled with rage and inward gloom. Because of the bad news he hides himself from everybody: should he keep her with disgrace or bury her under the dust? How ill they judge."*(16:58-9) And in *Sūrah 17,* The Night Journey: *"You shall not kill your children for fear of want. We will provide for them and for you."*(17:31)

Girls were killed in an extremely cruel way. They were buried alive! The Arabs used different ways of doing so. Some would leave the girl until she was six years of age. The father would then say to his wife to dress the girl in her best clothes and make her presentable because she would be visiting her prospective in-laws. He would have already dug a hole for her in the desert. When the girl got there, he would tell her that the hole is a well and then tell her to look down it. As she stood at the edge, he would push her into the hole and as she fell, he would throw sand over her and bury her. In certain tribes when a pregnant woman was about to give birth, she would sit over a hole in the ground. When the baby was born she would first establish its sex. If it was a boy, she would take him home, and if it was a girl, she would throw her in the hole and bury her. If a father decided not to bury his daughter alive, he would bring her up in a condition of deprivation until she was old enough to tend sheep or cattle, giving her only an overall made of rough wool to dress and making her do this type of work.

Those Arabs who did not kill their young daughters or send them to mind cattle, had different methods of ill-treating women. If a man died, the head of the clan would throw his gown over the widow. This was a gesture of acquisition which meant that the widow could not marry anyone except the owner of the gown. If he was attracted to her, he would marry her, paying absolutely no regard to her feelings. If he did not marry her, he would keep her until she died so as to inherit any money or property she might leave behind.

Such was the attitude of *jāhiliyyah* society in Arabia to women. Islam condemns this attitude and spurns all these practices. It forbids the murder of young girls and shows its abhorrent and horrifying nature. It is listed as one of the subjects of reckoning on the Day of Judgement. Here, the *sūrah* mentions it as one of the great events which overwhelms the universe in total upheaval. We are told that the murdered girl will be questioned about her murder. The *sūrah* leaves us to imagine how the murderer will be brought to account.

The *jāhiliyyah* social order of the pre-Islamic period would never have helped women to gain a respectable, dignified position. That had to be decreed by God. The way of life God has chosen for mankind secures a dignified position for both men and women who share the honour of having a measure of the divine spirit breathed into them. Women owe their respectable position to Islam, not to any environmental factor or social set-up.

When the new man with heavenly values came into being, women became respected and honoured. The woman's weakness of being a financial burden to her family was no longer of any consequence in determining her position and the respect she enjoyed. Such considerations have no weight on the scales of heaven. Real weight belongs to the noble human soul when it maintains its relationship with God. In this men and women are equal.

When one puts forward arguments in support of the fact that Islam is a divine religion, and that it has been conveyed to us by God's Messenger who received His revelations, one should state the change made by Islam in the social status of women as being irrefutable. Nothing in the social set-up of Arabia at the time pointed to such elevation for women. No social or economic consideration made it necessary or desirable. It was a deliberate move made by Islam for reasons which are totally different from those of this world and from those *of jāhiliyyah* society in particular.

"When the records are laid open." (Verse 10) This is a reference to the records of people's deeds. They are laid open in order that they may be known to everybody. This, in itself, is hard to bear. Many a breast has a closely hidden secret, the remembrance of which brings shame and a shudder to its owner. Yet all secrets are made public on that eventful day. This publicity, representative of the great upheaval which envelops the whole universe, is part of the fearful events which fill men's hearts with horror on the day.

"When the sky is stripped bare." (Verse 11) This image corresponds closely to throwing open people's secrets. When the word 'sky' is used, our first thoughts reach to the blue cover hoisted over our heads. Its stripping means the removal of that cover. How this happens remains a matter of conjecture. It is enough to say that when we look up we will no longer see our familiar blue dome.

The last scene of that fearful day is portrayed by the next two verses: *"When hell is made to burn fiercely, when paradise is brought near."* (Verses 12-13) Where is hell? How does it burn? What fuel is used in lighting and feeding its fire? The only thing we know of it is that it *"has the fuel of men and stones."* (66: 6) This is, of course, after they have been thrown in it. Its true nature and its fuel prior to that is part of God's knowledge. Heaven, on the other hand, is brought near to those who have been promised admission. They see it to be of easy access. Indeed, the expression here shows it ready to receive its dwellers.

When all these great events take place throughout the universe, changing the status of all life, no one can entertain any doubt about what they have done in this present life, or what they have carried with them to the next life: *"Every soul shall know what it has put forward."* (Verse 14) In the midst of all these overwhelming events, every soul shall know for certain what sort of deeds it has brought and that it

cannot change, omit from or add to what it has done.

People will find themselves completely separated from all that has been familiar to them, and from their world as a whole. Everything will have undergone a total change except God. If man turns to God, he will find that His support is forthcoming when the whole universe is overwhelmed by change. Thus ends the first part of this *sūrah,* leaving us with a vivid impression of the universal upheaval on the Day of Resurrection.

A Splendid Universal Scene

The second part of the *sūrah* opens with a form of oath using some very beautiful scenes of the universe. Essentially, this oath is made to assert the nature of revelation, the angel carrying it, and the Messenger receiving and delivering it to us, as well as people's attitudes to it, all in accordance with God's will: *"I swear by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe, this is truly the word of a noble and mighty messenger, who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne. He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust. Your old friend is not mad. He saw him on the clear horizon. He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. It is not the word of an accursed devil. Whither then are you going? This is only a reminder to all mankind, to those of you whose will is to be upright. Yet, you cannot will except by the will of God, Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 15-29)

The stars referred to here are those which turn in their orbit, and are characterized by their swift movement and temporary disappearance. In translating the text we have to forego the metaphor used in Arabic which draws an analogy between these stars and the deer as they run at great speed towards their homes, disappear for a while and then reappear at a different point. This metaphor adds considerable liveliness and beauty to the description of the movement of the stars, which echoes the fine rhythm of the expression.

Again, the rhythm of the Arabic verse translated as *"and by the night as it comes darkening on"* gives a feeling of life, depicting the night as a living being. The beauty of the Arabic expression is of surpassing excellence. The same applies to the next verse: *"and by the dawn as it starts to breathe"*. This verse is indeed more effective in portraying dawn as alive, breathing. Its breath is the spreading light and the life that begins to stir in everything. I doubt whether the Arabic language, with its inexhaustible wealth of imagery and vivid expression, can produce an image portraying dawn which can be considered equal to this Qur'ānic image in aesthetic effect. After a fine night, one can almost feel that dawn is breathing.

Any aesthete will readily perceive that the divine words of the first four verses of this second part of the *sūrah* constitute a gem of expression and description: *"I swear*

by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe." (Verses 15-18) This descriptive wealth adds power to man's feelings as he responds to the natural phenomena to which the verses refer.

The Two Messengers

As the Qur'ān makes this brief, full-of-life description of these phenomena it establishes a spiritual link between them and man, with the result that, as we read, we feel the power which created these phenomena, and the truth which we are called upon to believe. This truth is then stated in a manner which fits in superbly with the general theme of the *sūrah: "This is truly the word of a noble and mighty messenger, who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne. He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust."* (Verses 19-21) This Qur'ān with its description of the Day of Judgement is the word of a noble and mighty messenger, i.e. Jibrīl or Gabriel, the angel who carried and delivered it to Muĥammad (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* then gives a description of this chosen messenger. He is 'noble', honoured by God who says that he is 'mighty', which suggests that considerable strength is required to carry and convey the Qur'ān. *"Who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne."* (Verse 20) What a great honour for Jibrīl to enjoy such a position with the Lord of the universe. "*He is obeyed in heaven*", i.e. by the other angels. He is also "*faithful to his trust*", carrying and discharging the message.

These qualities add up to a definite conclusion: that the Qur'ān is a noble, mighty and exalted message and that God takes special care of man. It is a manifestation of this care that He has chosen an angel of Jibrīl's calibre to bring His revelations to the man He has chosen as His Messenger. As man reflects on this divine care he should feel humble. For he himself is worth very little in the kingdom of God, were it not for the care God takes of him and the honour He bestows on him.

There follows a description of the Prophet who conveys this revelation to mankind. The *sūrah* seems to say to them: You have known Muĥammad very well over a considerable length of time. He is your old, honest, trusted friend. Why, then, are you fabricating tales about him, when he has been telling you the simple truth which he has been entrusted to deliver to you: *"Your old friend is not mad. He saw him on the clear horizon. He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. It is not the word of an accursed devil. Whither then are you going? This is only a reminder to all mankind."* (Verses 22-27)

They knew the Prophet perfectly well. They knew that he was a man of steady character, great sagacity and complete honesty. But in spite of all this they claimed that he was mad, and that he received his revelations from the devil. Some of them

took this view as the basis for their sustained attack on the Prophet and his Islamic message. Others did so out of amazement and wonder at the words revealed to him, which are unlike anything said or written by man. Their claim confirmed the traditional belief that each poet had a devil writing his poems, and each monk had a devil uncovering for him the secrets of the unknown world. They also believed that the devil might come into contact with people causing them to say some very strange things. They ignored the only valid explanation, that the Qur'ān was revealed by God, the Lord of all the worlds.

The *sūrah* counters this attitude by a reference to the surpassing beauty of God's creation, noticeable everywhere in the universe, and by portraying some universal scenes, as they appear, full of life. This method of reply suggests that the Qur'ān comes from the same creative power which has endowed the universe with matchless beauty. It also tells them about the two messengers entrusted with the Qur'ān, the one who brought it down and the one who delivered it to them, i.e. their own friend whom they knew to be sane, not mad. The *sūrah* tells them that he has indeed seen the other noble and mighty messenger, Gabriel, with his own eyes, on a clear horizon where no confusion is possible. He is faithful to his trust and cannot be suspected of telling anything but the truth. After all, they have never associated him with anything dishonest. *"It is not the word of an accursed devil".* (Verse 25) Devils, by nature, cannot provide such a straightforward and consistent code of conduct. Hence the *sūrah* asks disapprovingly: *"Whither then are you going?"* (Verse 26) How far can you err in your judgement. And where can you go away from the truth which stares you in the face wherever you go?

"This is only a reminder to all mankind." (Verse 27) It reminds them of the nature of their existence, their origin and the nature of the universe around them. The reminder is to all men and women.

Islam here declares the universal nature of its call right from the start, in Makkah, where it was subjected to sustained and unabating persecution.

Free Choice

The *sūrah* then reminds us that it is up to every individual to choose whether to follow the right path or not. Since God has granted everyone his or her free will, then every human being is responsible for himself: "*To those of you whose will is to be upright",* (Verse 28) that is to say, to follow God's guidance. All doubts have been dispelled, all excuses answered by this clear statement of all the relevant facts. The right path has been indicated for everyone who wishes to be upright. Anyone who follows a different path shall, therefore, bear the responsibility for his actions.

There are, in the human soul and in the universe at large, numerous signs which

beckon every man and woman to follow the path of faith. These are so clearly visible and so powerful in their effect that one needs to make a determined effort to turn one's back on them, especially when one's attention is drawn to them in the stirring, persuasive manner of the Qur'ān. It is, therefore, man's own will which leads him away from God's guidance. He has no other excuse or justification.

The *sūrah* concludes by stating that the operative will behind everything is the will of God: "*You cannot will except by the will of God, Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 29) We notice that the Qur'ān makes statements of this type whenever the will of human beings or creatures generally is mentioned. The reason for this is that the Qur'ān wants to keep the fundamental concepts of faith absolutely clear. These include the fact that everything in the universe is subject to God's will. No one has a will which is independent from that of God. That He grants man free will is part of His own divine will, like everything else. The same applies to His granting the angels the ability to show complete and absolute obedience to Him and to carry out all His commandments.

This fundamental fact must be clearly understood by believers, so that they have a clear concept of absolute truth. When they acquire this concept they will turn to divine will for guidance and support, and regulate their affairs according to this will.

SŪRAH 82

Al-Infiṭār

(Cleaving Asunder)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِذَا ٱلسَّمَآءُ ٱنفَطَرَتْ ﴿١﴾	*When the sky is cleft asunder,* (1)
وَإِذَا ٱلْكَوَاكِبُ ٱنتَثَرَتْ ﴿٢﴾	*when the stars are scattered,* (2)
وَإِذَا ٱلْبِحَارُ فُجِّرَتْ ﴿٣﴾	*when the oceans are made to explode,* (3)
وَإِذَا ٱلْقُبُورُ بُعْثِرَتْ ﴿٤﴾	*when the graves are hurled about,* (4)
عَلِمَتْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ وَأَخَّرَتْ ﴿٥﴾	*each soul shall know its earlier actions and its later ones.* (5)
يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ مَا غَرَّكَ بِرَبِّكَ ٱلْكَرِيمِ ﴿٦﴾	*O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord* (6)
ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكَ فَسَوَّىٰكَ فَعَدَلَكَ ﴿٧﴾	*who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form?* (7)
فِىٓ أَىِّ صُورَةٍ مَّا شَآءَ رَكَّبَكَ ﴿٨﴾	*He can give you whatever shape He wills.* (8)

Shun it! But you deny the Last Judgement. (9)	كَلَّا بَلۡ تُكَذِّبُونَ بِٱلدِّينِ ﴿٩﴾
Yet there are guardians watching over you, (10)	وَإِنَّ عَلَيۡكُمۡ لَحَٰفِظِينَ ﴿١٠﴾
noble recorders, (11)	كِرَامٗا كَٰتِبِينَ ﴿١١﴾
who know all that you do. (12)	يَعۡلَمُونَ مَا تَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾
Surely the righteous shall be in bliss, (13)	إِنَّ ٱلۡأَبۡرَارَ لَفِي نَعِيمٖ ﴿١٣﴾
while the wicked shall be in a blazing fire, (14)	وَإِنَّ ٱلۡفُجَّارَ لَفِي جَحِيمٖ ﴿١٤﴾
which they shall enter on the Day of Judgement; (15)	يَصۡلَوۡنَهَا يَوۡمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿١٥﴾
nor shall they ever be absent from it. (16)	وَمَا هُمۡ عَنۡهَا بِغَآئِبِينَ ﴿١٦﴾
Would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! (17)	وَمَآ أَدۡرَىٰكَ مَا يَوۡمُ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿١٧﴾
Oh, would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! (18)	ثُمَّ مَآ أَدۡرَىٰكَ مَا يَوۡمُ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿١٨﴾
It is the day when no soul can be of any help to any other soul; for on that day all sovereignty is God's alone. (19)	يَوۡمَ لَا تَمۡلِكُ نَفۡسٞ لِّنَفۡسٖ شَيۡـٔٗاۖ وَٱلۡأَمۡرُ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلَّهِ ﴿١٩﴾

Overview

This short *sūrah* refers to the great upheaval discussed in the previous *sūrah* The Darkening, but gives it a special colour. It has a different rhythm, deep and calm. It adds a touch of expostulation coupled with an implicit threat. Hence, it does not detail the scenes of the great upheaval as in the previous *sūrah,* where these scenes predominate. Instead the scenes here are shorter, in order to suit its quieter

atmosphere and slower rhythm.

At the opening the *sūrah* mentions the cleaving of the sky, the scattering of the stars, the bursting of the oceans and the hurling of the graves as simultaneous with every soul's knowledge of its earlier and later actions, on that momentous day.

The second part starts with a remonstration combined with an implicit threat to man who is the recipient of abundant grace but who shows no gratitude for it. "*O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form? He can give you whatever shape He wills.*" (Verses 6-8)

The third part provides the reason for man's ungrateful attitude. Denial of reckoning and judgement, the *sūrah* tells us, is the source of every evil. The reality of meting out reward and punishment at the Last Judgement is re-emphasized; "*Shun it! But you deny the Last Judgement. Yet there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders, who know all that you do. Surely the righteous shall be in bliss, while the wicked shall be in a blazing fire, which they shall enter on the Day of Judgement, nor shall they ever be absent from it.*" (Verses 9-16)

The final part gives an idea of how fearful the Day of Judgement is, how everyone is absolutely helpless and how all power belongs to God: "*Would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! Oh, would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! It is the day when no soul can be of any help to any other soul; for on that day all sovereignty is God's alone.*" (Verses 17-19) Thus, the *sūrah* represents yet another way of portraying the same basic principles stressed in this thirtieth part of the Qur'ān in various methods and styles.

The Great Upheaval

> *When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode, when the graves are hurled about, each soul shall know its earlier actions and its later ones.* (Verses 1-5)

In the commentary on the previous *sūrah* we described the feelings generated in people when they visualize the universe undergoing a change so violent that it leaves nothing in its familiar shape and condition. We also said that such feelings tend to pull man away from anything which gives him a sense of security, with the exception of God, the Creator of the universe, the One who lives on after everything has died and withered away. Man's heart is thus made to turn to the only true being who neither changes nor dies, to seek His support and security in the face of the general upheaval which destroys everything that might once have seemed so permanent. For nothing lives forever except the Creator who is the only one worthy

of worship.

The first aspect mentioned here of the universal upheaval is the cleaving or rending of the sky, which is mentioned in other *sūrahs: "When the sky is split asunder and becomes rose red, like freshly tanned leather."* (55: 37) *"When the sky will be rent asunder, for on that day it is frail and tottering."* (69: 16) *"When the sky is rent asunder."* (84: 1) That the sky will be split or rent asunder on that hectic day is certain. What is meant exactly by such rending, and how the sky will look after it has been rent are difficult to say. All that we are left with is a feeling of violent change which overwhelms the universe, as we see it, and a realization that its perfect system will no longer be in operation.

The violent upheaval in the universe causes the stars to scatter after they have been held together by a system which makes every star stick to its orbit, even though its movement is exceedingly fast. If this system is broken, as will happen when the life of the stars comes to its end, they will just disappear in the wide space, as does a particle of dust running loose.

The explosion of the oceans may refer to their being overfull to the extent that they swallow all dry land and rivers. It may, alternatively, mean an explosion which separates oxygen from hydrogen, the two gases which form water. Thus water returns to its original gas condition. The verse may also be taken to refer to a nuclear explosion of the atoms of the two gases. If this is the case, then the explosion would be so fearful that our nuclear devices of today would seem, in comparison, like child's toys. The explosion may also take a different form, totally unknown to us. One thing, however, we know for certain is that there will be a horror far greater than any man could ever have experienced.

The hurling about of the graves may be a result of one of the events mentioned above. It may also be a separate event which occurs on that eventful day. As these graves are hurled about people are resurrected so as to face the reckoning and receive their reward or punishment. This is complemented by the verse which follows: "*Each soul shall know its earlier actions and its later ones."* (Verse 5) That is, each soul shall come face to face with what it has done and what it has left behind of the consequences of its actions; or, what it has enjoyed in this present life and what it has saved for the hereafter. Such knowledge, however, will accompany these horrific events. It will indeed be part of them, for it terrifies the soul no less than any of the other events.

The Arabic expression used here, *`alimat nafsun,* may be translated literally as "a soul shall know..." It is, however, in Arabic a neater and more effective denotation of *"each soul shall know..."* Furthermore, such knowledge by every soul is not the end of the matter. It has consequences which are as violent as the scenes portrayed here of

the great upheaval. These consequences are merely implied, not stated, and this is even more effective.

Grace Without Limits

After this opening which alerts men's senses and consciences, the *sūrah,* by means of gentle remonstrance coupled with an implicit threat, touches the hearts of men who busy themselves with trivialities. It reminds man of God's very first act of grace towards him, namely, his moulding in such an upright, perfectly proportioned form. God could have easily given him any form He wished. Yet man is ungrateful: "*O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form? He can give you whatever shape He wills.*" (Verses 6-8) The address appeals to man's most noble quality, his humanity, which distinguishes him from all other creatures and assigns to him the highest position among them. This quality represents God's gracious blessing to man and His abundant generosity.

This appeal is immediately followed by a gentle remonstrance: *"What has lured you away from your gracious Lord?"* (Verse 6) What makes you neglect your duties to your Lord and behave impudently towards Him when He has given you your humanity which raises you above all His creation and provides you with the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. A few details of God's generosity are then added: "*man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form.*" (Verses 6-7) It is an address which appeals straight to man's heart. He listens to God's remonstrance as He reminds him of His grace while he continues with his erring ways and impudent behaviour towards Him.

Indeed, man should reflect deeply over his creation, and the fact that he has been given a physically and physiologically perfect constitution. Reflection should prompt him to show his real love, deep respect and genuine gratitude towards God, his gracious Lord, who has blessed him with such constitution: perfect, upright and handsome. The miraculous aspects of man's constitution are far greater than what he sees all around him and what he can imagine. Perfection and right balance are easily evident in man's physical, mental and spiritual constitution. Full volumes have been written on the perfection of creation as evidenced by man. It is perhaps useful to include here one or two quotations from such works.

The human body is composed of a number of specialized systems: the skeleton, muscular system, skin, digestive system, blood circulation, respiratory system, procreative system, lymphatic system, nervous system, the urinal system and the senses of taste, smell, hearing and sight. Every one of these systems is miraculous and far more wonderful than any scientific achievement. Yet man tends to overlook the wonders of his own constitution! A contributor to the British Scientific Journal

writes:[6]

> Man's hand is one of the most remarkable wonders of nature. It is extremely difficult, indeed impossible, to invent a device which can match the human hand for simplicity, efficiency, ability and instant adaptability. When you read a book you take it in your hand, then you hold it in the position most suitable for your reading. The same hand will automatically correct the position of your book whenever a correction of position is necessary. When you turn a page you place your finger underneath the paper and apply the amount of pressure needed for turning the page. When the page is turned no more pressure is applied. You also use your hand to hold a pen and to write. With your hand you use all the tools you need such as a spoon, a knife or a pen. You use it to open or close the window and to carry anything you wish to carry. Each hand has 27 pieces of bone in addition to 19 groups of muscles.[7]
>
> A part of the human ear is a series of some four thousand minute but complex arches graduated with exquisite regularity in size and shape. These may be said to resemble a musical instrument, and they seem adjusted to catch, and transmit in some manner to the brain, every cadence of sound or noise, from the thunderclap to the whisper of the pines and the exquisite blending of the tones and harmonies of every instrument in the orchestra. If in forming the ear the cells were impelled to evolve strict efficiency only that man might survive, why did they not extend the range and develop a superacutness? Perhaps the power behind these cells' activities anticipated man's coming need of intellectual enjoyment, or did they by accident build better than they knew?[8]
>
> The visual functions are carried out mainly by the eye with its 130 million retinal light receptors. The eyelids with the eyelashes at their tips protect the eyes day and night. Their movement, which is involuntary, keeps out dust particles and other alien bodies. The eyelashes throw their shades over the eye to lessen the intensity of light. Furthermore, by their movement the eyelids prevent the eyes from becoming dry. The fluid around the eye, which we call tears, is a highly effective, most powerful disinfectant ...
>
> In human beings, the taste function is carried out by the tongue, through

[6] The original passages of this journal could not be traced by the translators, so a re-translation is given to put back into English the two passages quoted here. The author quotes them from `Abd al-Razzāq Nawfal, *Allāh wal-`Ilm al-Hadīth,* or 'God and Modern Science', Cairo, 1957. Nawfal, however, does not specify the name and number of the Journal he quotes from. — Editor's note.
[7] Ibid.
[8] A.C. Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* London, 1962, pp. 63-64.

groups of the taste cells which are located in the taste buds of the mucosal surface of the tongue. These buds are of different shapes: some are filamentary, some mushroom-shaped and others are lenticular. They are supplied by fine branches of the glosso-pharangeal nerve as well as the nerve which carries the taste sense. When we eat, these fine branches of the taste nerve are stimulated and convey the impulses of the taste sensation to the brain. This system is located at the front of the tongue, so that we may reject what we sense to be harmful. It is this system which helps us sense whether what we eat is bitter or sweet, hot or cold, sour or salty, etc. The tongue contains nine thousand of these fine taste buds, each of which is linked with the brain by more than one nerve. Hence we may wonder: How many nerves have we? What are their sizes? How do they function individually and how do they combine to give the brain their various types of sensation?

The nervous system, which effectively controls the body, is composed of fine neurons which cover every part of the body. The neurons are linked to larger nerves which are, in turn, linked to the central nervous system. Whenever any part of the body feels any sensation, even the slightest change of temperature, the neurons convey this sensation to the peripheral nerves which, in turn, convey it to the brain so that it may order the necessary action. The signals are carried through the nerves at the speed of 100 metres per second.[9]

If we think of digestion as a process in a chemical laboratory and of the food that we eat as raw materials, we immediately discover that it is a wonderful process which will digest anything edible except the stomach itself.

First into this laboratory we put a variety of food as a raw material without the slightest regard for the laboratory or how the chemistry of digestion will handle it. We eat steak, cabbage, corn and fried fish, wash it down with any quantity of water, and top it off with alcohol, bread, and beans. We may add sulfur and molasses as spring medicine. Out of this mixture the stomach selects those things which are useful by breaking down into its chemical molecules every item of food, discarding the waste, and reconstructs the residue into new proteins, which become the food of the various cells. The digestive tract selects calcium, sulphur, iodine, iron and any other substances which are necessary, takes care that the essential molecules are not lost, that the hormones can be produced and that all of the valid necessities of life are on hand in regulated quantities, ready to meet every necessity. It stores fat and other reserves to meet such an emergency as starvation, and does all this in spite of human thought or reason. We pour this infinite variety of

[9] A. Nawfal, op. cit.

> substances into this chemical laboratory with almost total disregard of what we take in, depending on what we consider the automatic process to keep us alive. When these foods have been broken down and are again prepared, they are delivered constantly to each of our billions of cells, a greater number than all the human beings on earth. The delivery to each individual cell must be constant, and only those substances which the particular cell needs to transform them into bones, nails, flesh, hair, eyes, and teeth are taken up by the proper cell. Here is a chemical laboratory producing more substances than any laboratory which human ingenuity has devised. Here is a delivery system greater than any method of transportation or distribution the world has ever known, all being conducted in perfect order.[10]

Man's Unique Qualities

A lot may be said about every other system of the human body. But wonderful as these systems are, man may have them in common with animals. He, however, is privileged to possess his unique mental and spiritual qualities, regarded in this *sūrah* as a special favour from God. After the *sūrah* has dealt with man's humanity, it mentions the perfection of his creation and the right proportioning of his mould: *"O man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form."* (Verses 6-7)

Let us reflect on our powers of comprehension, the nature of which is unknown to us. The mind is the medium of comprehension but the working of our minds and how they function remain to us incomprehensible. If we suppose that what we grasp is transmitted to the brain through the nerves, where and how does the brain store its information? If we compare the brain to a magnetic recording tape, every man needs in his average lifetime of sixty years[11] a great many billion metres on which to record such a huge multitude of pictures, words, meanings, feelings and responses so that he may, as he actually does, remember them several decades later. Furthermore, how does man sort out individual words, meanings, events and pictures to mould them together in a sort of coherent education? How does he transform information and experiences into knowledge?

Yet this is by no means the most significant of man's distinctive qualities. There is that wonderful ray of God's spirit which provides a link between man and the beauty of the universe and its Creator. As this link is established, man can experience at clear, bright moments a sense of communion with the infinite, the absolute, which

[10] A.C. Morrison, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

[11] Average life expectancy has considerably risen since the author's time, but the idea is still correct. If anything the tape required for storing all what human memory stores would today be far greater in length, and its efficiency much more enhanced. — Editor's note.

prepares him for a blissful eternal life in God's paradise. Yet man has no power to comprehend the nature of his spirit, which is God's greatest favour to him and which makes him a man. Hence God addresses him by this quality "*O man!*" He then remonstrates with him directly: *"What has lured you away from your gracious Lord?"* Thus man is reminded of God's greatest favour, but he stands impudent, negligent of his duties, unashamed and ungrateful. But man does not need more than to realize the source of this remonstrance and what attitude he adopts when he stands before his Lord to be absolutely overwhelmed by shame: "O *man, what has lured you away from your gracious Lord, who created and moulded you and gave you an upright form? He can give you whatever shape He wills.* "(Verses 6-8)

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the reason for man's impudence and negligence, namely, denial of the Last Judgement. It emphatically confirms the reality of reckoning, reward and punishment: "*Shun it! But you deny the Last Judgement. Yet there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders, who know all that you do. Surely the righteous shall be in bliss, while the wicked shall be in a blazing fire, which they shall enter on the Day of Judgement; nor shall they ever be absent from it."* (Verses 9-16) The English expression, 'shun it', is used here to render the meaning of the Arabic word, *kallā,* which is a command to desist and an indication of a change of subject and style. Hence the following verses are in the form of a statement.

"*Shun it! But you deny the Last Judgement.*" (Verse 9) You think that reckoning and accountability are falsehoods, and this is precisely the cause of your impudence and negligence of duties. How can any person disbelieve in the judgement and still lead a life based on goodness and right guidance? Some people may achieve a higher degree of faith: they worship God because they love Him, neither out of fear of punishment nor in hope of reward. But these people continue to believe in the Last Judgement. They fear it and look forward to it at the same time, because they hope to be with their beloved Lord. When man, however, flatly rejects the Day of Judgement he will be devoid of politeness and light; his heart and conscience are dead.

You deny the Day of Judgement when you will certainly face it. Everything you do in this life will be counted for or against you. Nothing is lost, nothing forgotten: "*Yet there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders, who know all that you do.*" (Verses 10-12) These recorders are the angels charged with accompanying people, watching them and recording all what they do and say. We do not know, and are not required to know, how this takes place. God knows that we are neither given the ability to understand it nor are we going to benefit by understanding it because it does not affect the purpose of our existence. Hence it is useless to attempt to explain by our means what God has chosen not to reveal to us of the world of imperceptibles. It is sufficient for us to feel that we do not live in vain and that there are noble recorders who note what we do, in order to be so that we are always alert and

prudent.

Since the atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of benevolence and nobility, the description of those recorders is that they are "*noble*", so that we are shy and polite in their presence. It is only natural for people to exercise extra care not to say or do anything impolite or disgraceful when they are in the presence of people whose character reflects nobility. How careful would they be if they realized they were always in the presence of angels? The *sūrah* then arouses the most noble feelings of our upright nature by portraying this fact in such a familiar way.

Different Destinies

We are then told of the destinies of the righteous and the wicked, which are determined by the reckoning based on the recordings of the noble angels: "*Surely the righteous shall be in bliss, while the wicked shall be in a blazing fire, which they shall enter on the Day of Judgement; nor shall they ever be absent from it.*" (Verses 13-16) The end is certain. That the righteous shall dwell in blissful happiness and the wicked shall end in hell is already determined. A righteous person is the one who consistently does right actions, i.e. good deeds, until doing them becomes his intrinsic quality. The adjective 'righteous' has connotations which fit in well with nobility and humanity. The contrasting quality, 'wickedness', carries connotations of insolence and impudence as the wicked indulge in sinful actions. Hell is a proper recompense for wickedness. The *sūrah* emphasizes the certainty of this punishment: "*which they shall enter on the Day of Judgement.*" Then it re-emphasizes it: "*nor shall they ever be absent from it.*" They cannot escape it in the first place, nor will they be allowed to leave it, not even for a short while.

Having stated what happens on the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* emphasizes again the certainty of that day, since it is denied by some. The emphasis provided here is in the form of a rhetorical question which enhances the mystery surrounding the object of the question. The *sūrah* then states the complete helplessness of everyone, the absolute impossibility of giving or receiving support and that God is the absolute sovereign on that awesome day: "*Would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! Oh, would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! It is the day when no soul can be of any help to any other soul; for on that day all sovereignty is God's alone.*" (Verses 17-19)

The form "*would that you knew...*" is a form of rhetorical question often used in the Qur'ān. It suggests that the matter under discussion is far beyond our imagining and understanding. This is stressed here by repetition of the question before details about conditions on the day concerned are given: "*It is the day when no soul can be of any help to any other soul.*" (Verse 19) It is a state of total helplessness when everyone stands alone, busy with their own problems, unable to think of anyone else, relative or

friend. "*For on that day all sovereignty is God's alone.*" (Verse 19) He indeed reigns supreme in this life and the next. This fact, however, becomes so clear on that day that no one can overlook it, as the ignorant and the conceited do in this life.

The *sūrah* closes with an air of fear and speechless expectation which contrasts with the opening air of violent horror. In between the two man is addressed with that remonstrance which overwhelms him with shame.

SŪRAH 83

Al-Muṭaffifīn

(The Stinters)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَيْلٌ لِّلْمُطَفِّفِينَ ﴿١﴾	*Woe to the stinters* (1)
ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ٱكْتَالُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ يَسْتَوْفُونَ ﴿٢﴾	*who, when others measure for them, exact in full,* (2)
وَإِذَا كَالُوهُمْ أَو وَّزَنُوهُمْ يُخْسِرُونَ ﴿٣﴾	*but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them.* (3)
أَلَا يَظُنُّ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَنَّهُم مَّبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤﴾	*Do such people not think that they will be raised to life* (4)
لِيَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٥﴾	*on a great day,* (5)
يَوْمَ يَقُومُ ٱلنَّاسُ لِرَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦﴾	*the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?* (6)
كَلَّآ إِنَّ كِتَٰبَ ٱلْفُجَّارِ لَفِى سِجِّينٍ ﴿٧﴾	*No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn.* (7)
وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا سِجِّينٌ ﴿٨﴾	*Would that you knew what Sijjīn is!* (8).

كِتَٰبٌ مَّرۡقُومٞ ٩

It is a record inscribed. (9)

وَيۡلٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لِّلۡمُكَذِّبِينَ ١٠

Woe on that day to the unbelievers (10)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُكَذِّبُونَ بِيَوۡمِ ٱلدِّينِ ١١

who deny the Day of Judgement. (11)

وَمَا يُكَذِّبُ بِهِۦٓ إِلَّا كُلُّ مُعۡتَدٍ أَثِيمٍ ١٢

None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, (12)

إِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا قَالَ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ١٣

who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients!' (13)

كَلَّاۖ بَلۡۜ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُواْ يَكۡسِبُونَ ١٤

No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. (14)

كَلَّآ إِنَّهُمۡ عَن رَّبِّهِمۡ يَوۡمَئِذٖ لَّمَحۡجُوبُونَ ١٥

No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. (15)

ثُمَّ إِنَّهُمۡ لَصَالُواْ ٱلۡجَحِيمِ ١٦

They shall enter the blazing fire, (16)

ثُمَّ يُقَالُ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِي كُنتُم بِهِۦ تُكَذِّبُونَ ١٧

and will be told: 'This is [the reality] which you denied!' (17)

كَلَّآ إِنَّ كِتَٰبَ ٱلۡأَبۡرَارِ لَفِي عِلِّيِّينَ ١٨

But the record of the righteous is in `Illiyūn. (18)

وَمَآ أَدۡرَىٰكَ مَا عِلِّيُّونَ ١٩

Would that you knew what `Illiyūn is! (19)

كِتَٰبٞ مَّرۡقُومٞ ٢٠

It is a record inscribed, (20)

يَشْهَدُهُ ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿٢١﴾	*witnessed by those who are closest to God.* (21)
إِنَّ ٱلْأَبْرَارَ لَفِى نَعِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾	*The righteous will surely be in bliss.* (22)
عَلَى ٱلْأَرَآئِكِ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾	*[Reclining] on couches, they will look around them.* (23)
تَعْرِفُ فِى وُجُوهِهِمْ نَضْرَةَ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٢٤﴾	*In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss.* (24)
يُسْقَوْنَ مِن رَّحِيقٍ مَّخْتُومٍ ﴿٢٥﴾	*They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed,* (25)
خِتَـٰمُهُۥ مِسْكٌ ۚ وَفِى ذَٰلِكَ فَلْيَتَنَافَسِ ٱلْمُتَنَـٰفِسُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾	*with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive.* (26)
وَمِزَاجُهُۥ مِن تَسْنِيمٍ ﴿٢٧﴾	*It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm,* (27)
عَيْنًا يَشْرَبُ بِهَا ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾	*a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink.* (28)
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أَجْرَمُوا۟ كَانُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾	*Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful* (29)
وَإِذَا مَرُّوا۟ بِهِمْ يَتَغَامَزُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾	*and wink at one another as they pass by them.* (30)
وَإِذَا ٱنقَلَبُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِمُ ٱنقَلَبُوا۟ فَكِهِينَ ﴿٣١﴾	*When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests,* (31)
وَإِذَا رَأَوْهُمْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّ هَـٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَضَآلُّونَ	*and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!'* (32)

Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. (33)	﴿٣٣﴾
So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, (34)	وَمَآ أُرۡسِلُواْ عَلَيۡهِمۡ حَٰفِظِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾
as they recline upon their couches and look around them. (35)	فَٱلۡيَوۡمَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ مِنَ ٱلۡكُفَّارِ يَضۡحَكُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾
Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do? (36)	عَلَى ٱلۡأَرَآئِكِ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾
	هَلۡ ثُوِّبَ ٱلۡكُفَّارُ مَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* describes the conditions the Islamic message faced in Makkah. Its other objective is to awaken people's hearts and draw their attention to the new event which would help the Arabs, and mankind in general, to take a new turn in their lives. The event in question is the arrival of the divine message to earth.

A particular aspect of Arabian society is portrayed at the outset, as the *sūrah* threatens the stinters with what will befall them on the great day, "*the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 6) The reason for such a threat is revealed at the end, when the *sūrah* sketches the manners of the evildoers, their attitude towards the believers, their scoffing at them, winking to one another as they pass by and their assertion that the believers have gone astray. Moreover, the *sūrah* shows the reality of the righteous on the one hand and the transgressors on the other.

The *sūrah* can be divided into four parts The first opens with a declaration of war against the stinters: "*Woe to the stinters who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them. Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all worlds?*" (Verses 1-6)

The second part warns the transgressors and denounces them in strong terms. It threatens them with woe and ruin and establishes their guilt and aggression. It explains the reasons for their blindness and describes the punishment awaiting them on the Day of Judgement. "*No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would*

that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients! No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: 'This is [the reality) which you denied!" (Verses 7-17)

The third part gives an account of the righteous. It describes their high rank, the bliss they will enjoy, the delight on their faces, and the pure drink they will have while they recline on soft couches, and look all around them. It is an image of happiness: *"But the record of the righteous is in `Illiyūn. Would that you knew what `Illiyūn is! It is a record inscribed, witnessed by those who are closest to God. The righteous will surely be in bliss. [Reclining] on couches, they will look around them. In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive. It is a drink mixed with the waters of* Tasnīm, *a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink."* (Verses 18-28)

The last part of the *sūrah* describes what the transgressors mete out to the righteous in this world of conceit and hollow vanity, harsh treatment, ridicule and bad manners. Juxtaposed are descriptions of the ultimate situation of each group, the transgressors and the righteous, in the world of truth and immortality: *"Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful and wink at one another as they pass by them. When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests, and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!' Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them. Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do?"* (Verses 29-36)

The *sūrah* depicts a social environment. It also provides an account of the Islamic way of dealing with the world as it exists and with the human mind. This is what we shall attempt to explain as we consider the *sūrah* in detail.

Giving a Raw Deal

> *Woe to the stinters who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them. Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?* (Verses 1-6)

The *sūrah* opens with God's declaration of war against the stinters: *"Woe to the stinters"*. The Arabic term, *way,* used for 'woe' implies destruction and ruin. The implication is the same whether we consider this verse as a statement of a future

eventuality or a curse, for a curse made by God has the same effect as that of a statement about what is going to happen. The next two verses explain the meaning of the 'stinters' or defrauders as intended in the *sūrah*. They are those *"who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them."* (Verses 2-3) They are those who want their merchandise complete and intact when they buy, but who do not give the right amount when they sell. The following three verses wonder at the defrauders, who behave as if they will not have to account for what they gain in this life. *"Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?"*

The fact that the defrauders' behaviour is tackled in this manner in a Makkan revelation is very interesting. Makkan *sūrahs* generally concentrate on the fundamentals, such as the assertion of God's unity, the supremacy of His will and His dominion over the universe and mankind, and with assertions about the truth of revelation and prophethood, the truth of the Day of Judgement, reckoning and reward. The Makkan revelations also endeavour to form and develop the moral sense and relate it to the fundamentals of faith. The tackling of a specific issue of morality, such as the stinting of weights and measures, or business dealings in general, is a later concern; it is more characteristic of Madinan revelations, which regulate the life of the community in an Islamic state. The fact that this Makkan *sūrah* makes the issue of stinting its focal point therefore deserves careful consideration.

The first point to note is that in Makkah the nobility were very rich, but totally unscrupulous. They exercised a complete monopoly of trade in their business concerns. They organized the export and import trade using caravans which travelled to Yemen in winter and to Syria in summer. They had their seasonal trade fairs such as the 'Ukāz fair which was held during the pilgrimage season. The fairs were for business dealings as well as literary activities.

The text suggests that the defrauders against whom war was declared belonged to the nobility and wielded much power and influence, enabling them to force others to succumb to their wishes. Several features of the Arabic wording used here connote that for some unspecified reason they were able to impose their will and exact in full. The meaning implied is not that they exacted their full due; for this would not justify a declaration of war against them. What is meant is that they obtained by sheer force what they had no right to demand. But when it was their turn to weigh or measure for others, they exercised their power by giving less than what was due.

Indeed this warning, coming so early in the Makkan period, gives an idea of the nature of the religion of Islam. It demonstrates that Islam embraces all sides of life and aims to establish a firm moral code which accords with the basic principles of divine teachings. At the time when this *sūrah* was revealed the Muslim community was still weak. The followers of Islam had not yet won power in order to organize

society and the life of the community according to Islamic principles. Yet Islam demonstrated its opposition to those acts of flagrant injustice and unethical dealings. It declared war against stinters and threatened them with woe and destruction at a time when they were the powerful rulers of Makkah. It declared its uncompromising stand against the injustices suffered by the masses whom it has never sought to lull into a state of lethargy and apathy.

This gives us an insight into the real motives behind the stubborn opposition to Islam by the masters of Makkah. They were undoubtedly keenly aware that what Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was calling for was not merely a matter of personal conviction which demanded no more than a verbal assertion of God's oneness and Muĥammad's prophethood, and a form of prayer addressed to God and not idols. They realized that the new faith would establish a way of life which would cause the very basis of their positions and interests to crumble. They were fully aware that the new religion, by its very nature, did not admit any partnership or compromise with any worldly concepts alien to its divine basis, and that it posed a mighty threat to all *jāhiliyyah* values. This is why they launched their offensive, which continued in full force both before and after the Muslims' migration to Madinah. It was an offensive launched to defend their way of life in its entirety, not only a set of concepts which have no effect beyond individual acceptance and personal conviction.

Those, in any age or land, who attempt to prevent Islam from organizing and ruling human life also recognize these essential facts. They know very well that the pure and straightforward Islamic way of life endangers their unjust order, interests, hollow structure and deviant practices. Indeed the tyrannical stinters — whatever form their stinting takes and wherever it is, in money and finance, or in rights and duties — are those who fear most the ascendancy of Islam and the implementation of its just methods.

The representatives of the two Arabian tribes of Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, who pledged their support and loyalty to the Prophet were also aware of all this. Ibn Isĥāq, the Prophet's biographer, wrote: `Āşim ibn `Umar ibn Qatādah told me that when the Madinan Muslims came to give their pledge to the Prophet, al-`Abbās ibn `Ubadah al-Anşārī, who belonged to the clan of Sālim ibn `Awf, said to them: "You Khazraj! Do you know what your pledge to this man really means?" They answered "Yes, we do." His rejoinder was: "You are pledging to fight the rest of mankind, white and black alike! So it would be better to leave him alone now if you think you would give him up to his enemies in the event of your sustaining material losses or losing your leaders. If you do such a thing you will bring upon yourselves great humiliation both in this life and in the life hereafter. But if you feel that you will honour your pledges despite any sacrifice in money and men, then go ahead, because this will be best for you here and in the hereafter!" They said: "We

offer our loyalty and support and declare our readiness to sustain any sacrifice, material or personal!" Turning to the Prophet, they asked him: "What will be our reward if we honour our pledges?" He said: "Heaven." They said: "Stretch out your hand." He did and they gave him their pledges of support.

These supporters, like the Makkan tyrants, were keenly aware of the nature of Islam. They realized that it stands for absolute justice and fairness in the social order it seeks to create. It accepts no tyranny, oppression, conceit, injustice or exploitation. Hence it faces the combined forces of all forms of despotism, arrogance and exploitation.

"Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?" (Verses 4-6) Their attitude is singularly strange. The mere idea of being raised to life again on that great day, when all mankind shall stand as ordinary individuals in front of the Lord of the universe, awaiting His just judgement, without support from any quarter, should be enough to make them change course. But they persist, as if the thought of being raised to life after death has never crossed their minds.

The Inevitable Reckoning

They are called stinters in the first part of the *sūrah;* but in the second they are described as transgressors. The *sūrah* proceeds to describe the standing of this group with God, their situation in this life, and what awaits them on the great day. *"No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients!' No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: 'This is (the reality) which you denied!"* (Verses 7-17) They think they will not be raised to life after death, so the Qur'ān rebukes them and affirms that a record of their actions is kept.

The location of that record is specified as an additional confirmation of the fact, albeit a location unknown to man. They are threatened with woe and ruin on that day when their record shall be reviewed: *"No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers."* (Verses 7-10)

The transgressors, as the Arabic term, *fujjār,* here connotes, are those who indulge excessively in sin. Their book is the record of their deeds. We do not know the nature of this book and nor are we required to know. The whole matter belongs to that realm of which we know nothing except what we are told by God. The statement that

there is a record in *Sijjīn* of the transgressors' deeds, is followed by the familiar Qur'ānic form of expression associated with connotations of greatness: *"Would that you knew what Sijjīn is!"* (Verse 8) Thus, the addressee is made to feel that the whole matter is too great to be fully understood.

The *sūrah* then gives a further account of the transgressors' book: *"It is a record inscribed."* (Verse 9) There is no possibility of addition or omission until it is thrown open on that great day. When this takes place, *"woe on that day to the unbelievers."* (Verse 10) Then we are given information about the subject of unbelief, and the true character of the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. *"None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: Fables of the ancients!"* (Verses 12-13) So, aggression and bad deeds lead the perpetrators to deny the Day of Judgement and to take a rude and ill-mannered attitude towards the Qur'ān, describing it as *"Fables of the ancients!"* This description by the unbelievers is, of course, based on the fact that the Qur'ān contains some historical accounts of former nations. These accounts are related as a lesson for later generations as they demonstrate with much clarity the working of the divine rules to which all nations and generations are subject.

They are strongly rebuked and reprobated for their rudeness and rejection of the truth. These connotations, carried by the Arabic term *kallā,* translated here as *'No indeed',* are coupled with an assertion that their allegations are unfounded. We are then given an insight into the motives of their insolent disbelief and the reasons for their inability to see the obvious truth or respond to it: *"Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts."* (Verse 14) Indeed the hearts of those who indulge in sin become dull, as if they are veiled by a thick curtain which keeps them in total darkness, unable to see the light. Thus they gradually lose their sensitivity and become lifeless.

The Prophet says: "When a man commits a sin, it throws a black spot over his heart. If he repents, his heart is polished; but if he persists in his practice, the stains increase." [Related by Ibn Jarīr, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] Al-Tirmidhī describes this *Ĥadīth* as authentic. Al-Nasā'ī's version differs in wording but not in import. His version may be translated as follows: "When a man commits a sin, a black spot is formed on his heart. If he desists, prays for forgiveness and repents, his heart will be polished; but if he persists, the spot grows bigger until it has covered his whole heart. This is what God refers to when He says: *'No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts.'''* (Verse 14) Explaining this verse, Imām al-Ĥasan al-Baṣrī said: "It is a case of one sin on top of another until the heart is blinded and dies."

Thus we have learnt the situation of transgressing unbelievers, as well as their motives for transgression and rejection of the truth. Then we are told what will

happen to them on that great day, a destiny which befits their evil deeds and denial of the truth: "*On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: 'This is [the reality] which you denied!"* (Verses 15-17) Because their sins have cast a thick veil over their hearts, they are unable in this life to feel God's presence, and it is only appropriate that they not be allowed to see His glorious face. They will be deprived of this great happiness, which is bestowed only on those whose hearts and souls are so clean and transparent that they deserve to be with their Lord, without any form of separation or isolation. Such people are described in *Sūrah* 75, The Resurrection: "*On that day there shall be joyous faces, looking towards their Lord."* (75: 22-23)

This separation from their Lord is the greatest and most agonizing punishment and deprivation. It is a miserable end of a man whose very humanity is derived from only one source, namely his contact with God, his benevolent Lord. When man is torn away from this source of nobleness he loses all his humanity and sinks to a level which ensures hell is his just reward: "*They shall enter the blazing fire."* (Verse 16) On top of this, there is something much worse and much more agonizing, namely, rebuke. "*And will be told: 'This is [the reality] which you denied!"* (Verse 17)

Faces Radiant with Joy

Then follows an account of the other group, the righteous. This is given in the customary Qur'ānic manner of providing two elaborately contrasting images, so that a detailed comparison may be drawn: "*But the record of the righteous is in 'Illiyūn. Would that you knew what 'Illiyūn is! It is a record inscribed, witnessed by those who are closest to God. The righteous will surely be in bliss. [Reclining] on couches, they will look around them. In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive. It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink."*(Verses 18-28)

This section of the *sūrah* starts with the Arabic term, *kallā,* which connotes strong reproach and a firm command to the transgressors to desist from their rejection of the truth. It then proceeds to speak about the righteous. Since the record of the transgressors is in *Sijjīn,* that of the righteous is in *'Illiyūn.* The term 'righteous' refers to the obedient who do good. They are the exact opposite of the transgressors, who indulge in every excess. The name 'Illiyūn connotes elevation and sublimity, which suggests that *Sijjīn* is associated with baseness and ignominy. The name is followed by the form of exclamation often used in the Qur'ān to cast notions of mystery and grandeur: "*Would that you knew what 'Illiyūn is!"* (Verse 19)

The *sūrah* then states that the book of the righteous is "*a record inscribed, witnessed*

by those who are closest to God." (Verses 20-21) We have already stated what is meant by *'a record inscribed.' We* are told here that the angels closest to God see this book and witness it. This statement gives the feeling that the record of the righteous is associated with nobility, purity and sublimity. The angels closest to God look at it and enjoy its description of noble deeds and glorious characteristics. The whole image provides evidence of the honour the righteous receive.

There follows an account of the situation in which the righteous find themselves. We are told of the bliss they enjoy on that great day: *"The righteous will surely be in bliss."* (Verse 22) This contrasts with hell, in which the transgressors dwell. *"[Reclining! on couches they will look around them."* (Verse 23) This means that they are given a place of honour. They look wherever they wish. They do not have to look down, out of humility; and they suffer nothing which distracts their attention. The description here represents to the Arabs, who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān, the highest form of comfort and luxury.

In their bliss, the righteous live in mental and physical comfort. Their faces are radiant with unmistakable joy: *"In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure- drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk."* (Verses 24-26) Their drink is absolutely pure without any unwanted additions or particles of dust. Describing it as securely sealed with musk indicates, perhaps, that it is ready made in secured containers to be opened when refreshment is needed. All this adds to the impression of meticulous care being taken. The fact that the seal is of musk also adds an element of elegance and luxury. The whole picture, however, is understood only within the limits of human experience in this world.

In the life to come people will have different concepts, tastes and standards which will be free from all the bonds of this limited world.

The description is carried further in the following two verses: *"It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink."* (Verses 27-28) o, this pure, securely sealed drink is opened and mixed with a measure of the water from a fountain called *Tasnīm* and described as the one from which the favoured who are close to God drink. Before this last part of the description is given we are also given a significant instruction: *"For this let the strivers emulously strive."* (Verse 26)

Those stinters who defraud their fellow men pay no regard to the Day of Judgement, and, worse still, deny that such a Day of Reckoning will come. Hardened by their sins and excesses, they strive endlessly for the petty riches of this world. Each of them tries to outdo the others and gain as much as possible. Hence, he indulges in all types of injustice and vice for the sake of ephemeral luxuries. It is the other type of luxury and honour which deserves emulous striving: *"For this let the*

strivers emulously strive." (Verse 26)

Those who strive for an object of this world, no matter how superb, grand or honourable it is, are in reality striving for something hollow, cheap and temporary. This world, in its totality, is not worth, in God's view, one mosquito's wing. It is the hereafter which carries real weight with Him. So, it should be the goal for strenuous competition and zealous striving.

It is remarkable that striving for the hereafter elevates the souls of all strivers, while competition for worldly objects sinks the competitors' souls to the lowest depths. As man works continuously to achieve the happiness of the hereafter, his work makes this world a happy and pure one for everybody. On the other hand, efforts made for the achievement of worldly ends turn this world into a filthy marsh, where animals devour one another and insects bite the flesh of the righteous.

Striving for the hereafter does not turn the earth into a barren desert, as some transgressors imagine. Islam considers this world a farm, and the hereafter its fruits. It defines the role of the true believer as the building of this world while following the path of piety and righteousness. Islam stipulates that man must look on his task as an act of worship which fulfils the purpose of his existence as defined by God: *"I have not created the jinn and mankind to any end other than that they may worship Me."* (51: 56) The statement, "*For this let the strivers emulously strive,"* inspires man to look far beyond this finite, little world, as he sets out to fulfil his mission as God's vicegerent on earth. Thus as they work on purifying the filthy marsh of this world their souls are elevated to new heights.

Man's life on earth is limited while his future life is of limitless duration. The luxuries of this world are also limited while the happiness of paradise is much too great for us to conceive. The elements of happiness in this life are well known to everyone, but in the next world they are on a level befitting a life everlasting.

What comparison can then hold between the two spheres of competition or the two goals, even when we apply the human method of balancing losses against profits? It is, indeed, one race and a single competition: *"For this let the strivers emulously strive."* (Verse 26)

Stark Contrast

The beatitude enjoyed by the righteous is discussed at length in order to give a detailed account of the hardships, humiliation and insolence they are made to suffer at the hands of the transgressors. The final comment of the *sūrah* taunts the unbelievers as they behold the righteous enjoying heavenly bliss: *"Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful and wink at one another as they pass by them. When*

they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests, and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!' Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them. Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do?" (Verses 29-36)

The images portrayed by the Qur'ān of the evildoers' derision of the faithful, their rudeness and insolence, and their description of the faithful, as having *'gone astray'* are taken directly from Makkan life at the time. But the same actions happen over and over again in all ages and places. Many people in our own age have witnessed similar actions, and it is as if the *sūrah* was revealed to describe what they see with their own eyes. This proves that the attitude of the transgressors and the evildoers to the believers hardly ever changes from one country to another or from one period of time to another.

"*Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful.*" (Verse 29) In the Arabic original, the past tense is used here so as to take us away from this world to the hereafter to see the righteous in their bliss while we also hear what happened to them in this world. The believers were made to suffer ridicule and derision by the transgressors, either because they were poor or weak or because their self-respect would not allow them to return the abuse of base evildoers. What a contrast: the evildoers persecute the believers and laugh at them shamelessly while the believers stick to dignified self respect and perseverance.

"*And wink at one another as they pass by them.*" (Verse 30) They wink at one another or make certain actions intended as mockery and derision. Such behaviour betrays their baseness and bad manners. They try to make the believers feel embarrassed and helpless. "*When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests.*" When they have nourished their evil, little minds with such mockery and injurious actions they go back to their own folk to continue their laughter and derision. They are satisfied with what they have done. Although they have sunk to the lowest depths, they cannot imagine how contemptible they are.

"*And when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!*" (Verse 32) This is even more singular! Nothing is more absurd than that those transgressors should speak about right and error, or that they should say that the believers have gone astray. Transgression knows no limits. The transgressors never feel ashamed of what they do or say. Their description of the believers as having gone astray is a clear manifestation of this fact. The Qur'ān does not try to defend the believers or refute the evil accusation levelled at them, because it is not worth refuting. It laughs loudly, however, at those who involve themselves impudently in something which does not concern them, "*Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians!*" (Verse 33) No one has asked them to look after the believers, or to watch over them,

or to assess their situation. So why do they give their unsolicited opinion?

This sarcasm concludes the narration of what the transgressors do in this life. The *sūrah* relates it as if it is something of the past, and gives an image of the present, i.e. in the hereafter, when the believers rejoice in their heavenly bliss: *"So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them."* (Verses 34-35) On that day the unbelievers will be shut out from their Lord, suffering isolation combined with the torture of hell when they are told: *"This is [the reality] which you denied!'* (Verse 17) At the other end of the scale, the believers recline on couches, in total beatitude, partaking of a pure drink which is secured with a seal of musk and mixed with the waters of *Tasnīm.* As the *sūrah* draws the two images, it shows how the tables are turned; for then it is the believers who laugh at the unbelievers.

The *sūrah* concludes with another loud, ironic question: *"Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do."* (Verse 36) Their requital is not a good one, as the term used here connotes. For we have just been given an image of their doom, which is described here sarcastically, as their reward.

Who Laughs at Whom?

The scene of the evildoers' ridicule of the believers merits further discussion. It is portrayed in considerable detail, in the same way as the earlier scene of the righteous in heavenly bliss. This detailed description is highly artistic. It also has a marked psychological effect which is at once soothing, comforting and reassuring. The Muslim minority in Makkah was facing a sustained, demoralizing onslaught by the unbelievers, but God did not leave the Muslims on their own: He comforted them and urged them to persevere.

They are comforted by the very fact that their sufferings are outlined by God in detail. He sees what the believers suffer and does not ignore what He sees, although He may let the unbelievers do as they wish, if only for a while. He also sees how the transgressors laugh unrepentantly at the sufferings of the faithful. Since He describes all this in the Qur'ān then He must take it into account. This, in itself, is enough consolation for the believers.

There are also those scornful remarks about the evildoers. They may go unnoticed by the unbelievers because their indulgence in their sinful practices have made them insensitive. The highly sensitive hearts of the believers, however, are touched and comforted by them.

It must be noted that the only consolation offered by God to the believers who were subjected to harsh treatment and painful ridicule was heaven for the believers

and hell for the unbelievers. This, again, was the only promise the Prophet (peace be upon him) made to the believers when they pledged all their property as well as their lives for the cause of Islam. Victory in this life was never mentioned in the Makkan Qur'ānic revelations as a consolation or as an incentive to persevere. The Qur'ān was instead cultivating the hearts of the believers, and preparing them to fulfil the task with which they were entrusted. It was necessary that such hearts attain a high standard of strength and self-denial so that they would give everything and suffer all hardship without looking for anything in this life. They were to seek only the reward of the hereafter and to win God's pleasure. They were prepared to go through life suffering all sorts of hardship and deprivation with no promise of reward in this life, not even victory for the cause of Islam.

Such a group of people must be first established. When this happens and God knows that they are sincere and determined in what they have pledged themselves to do, then He will give them victory in this life. Victory will not be theirs as a personal reward. They will be given power as trustees appointed for the implementation of the Islamic way of life. They will be worthy trustees because neither were they promised nor did they look for any worldly gain. They pledged themselves truly to God at a time when they were unaware of any worldly benefit that may befall them except that they would win God's pleasure.

All the Qur'ānic verses which speak of victory were revealed later in Madinah when this was no longer an issue. Victory was given because God willed that successive human generations should have an actual, definite and practical example of the Islamic way of life. It was not a reward for sacrifices made or hardships suffered.

SŪRAH 84

Al-Inshiqāq

(The Rending)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِذَا ٱلسَّمَآءُ ٱنشَقَّتْ ﴿١﴾	*When the sky is rent asunder,* (1)
وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ ﴿٢﴾	*obeying her Lord in true submission;* (2)
وَإِذَا ٱلْأَرْضُ مُدَّتْ ﴿٣﴾	*when the earth is stretched out* (3)
وَأَلْقَتْ مَا فِيهَا وَتَخَلَّتْ ﴿٤﴾	*and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty,* (4)
وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ ﴿٥﴾	*obeying her Lord in true submission!* (5)
يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَٰقِيهِ ﴿٦﴾	*O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him.* (6)
فَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِىَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ بِيَمِينِهِۦ ﴿٧﴾	*He who is given his record in his right hand* (7)
فَسَوْفَ يُحَاسَبُ حِسَابًا يَسِيرًا ﴿٨﴾	*will in time have a lenient reckoning,* (8)

وَيَنقَلِبُ إِلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِهِۦ مَسۡرُورٗا ٩

and return rejoicing to his people. (9)

وَأَمَّا مَنۡ أُوتِيَ كِتَٰبَهُۥ وَرَآءَ ظَهۡرِهِۦ ١٠

But he who is given his record behind his back (10)

فَسَوۡفَ يَدۡعُواْ ثُبُورٗا ١١

will in time call down destruction upon himself (11)

وَيَصۡلَىٰ سَعِيرًا ١٢

and will enter the fire of hell. (12)

إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ فِيٓ أَهۡلِهِۦ مَسۡرُورًا ١٣

He lived joyfully among his people. (13)

إِنَّهُۥ ظَنَّ أَن لَّن يَحُورَ ١٤

He surely thought he would never return. (14)

بَلَىٰٓ إِنَّ رَبَّهُۥ كَانَ بِهِۦ بَصِيرًا ١٥

Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him. (15)

فَلَآ أُقۡسِمُ بِٱلشَّفَقِ ١٦

I swear by the twilight, (16)

وَٱلَّيۡلِ وَمَا وَسَقَ ١٧

and by the night and what it envelops, (17)

وَٱلۡقَمَرِ إِذَا ٱتَّسَقَ ١٨

and by the moon in her full perfection, (18)

لَتَرۡكَبُنَّ طَبَقًا عَن طَبَقٖ ١٩

that you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage. (19)

فَمَا لَهُمۡ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٢٠

Why then do they not accept the faith? (20)

وَإِذَا قُرِئَ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانُ لَا يَسۡجُدُونَۜ ٢١

Or, when the Qur'ān is read to them, they do not fall down in prostration? (21)

But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth], (22)	بَلِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ يُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾
yet God knows very well what they are hiding. (23)	وَٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يُوعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾
So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering, (24)	فَبَشِّرۡهُم بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٤﴾
except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailing reward. (25)	إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُمۡ أَجۡرٌ غَيۡرُ مَمۡنُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* opens by sketching a few images of the universal upheaval portrayed in greater detail in *Sūrahs* 81, 82 and earlier in *Sūrah* 78, The Darkening, Cleaving Asunder and The Tiding, respectively. These scenes, however, are now given a special tone by means of the emphasis placed on the complete submission to God by both heaven and earth: *"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission."* (Verses 1-5)

This powerful opening, with its emphasis on submission to God, is a foreword to the subsequent address encouraging man towards humbleness before his Lord. Man is reminded of his position and his ultimate destiny when he returns to God: "*O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him. He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning, and return rejoicing to his people. But he who is given his record behind his back will in time call down destruction upon himself and will enter the fire of hell. He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return. Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him."* (Verses 6-15)

The third part of the *sūrah* paints a picture of life on earth which is well known to man. Such images point to God's planning, which is both elaborate and faultless. An oath is made to assert that men must live through deliberately planned stages which they cannot escape from: *"I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection, that you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage."* (Verses 16-19)

The last part of the *sūrah* wonders at those who deny the faith when their position is as described in the previous two parts, and the end of their world is as described at the beginning of the *sūrah: "Why then do they not accept the faith? Or, when the Qur'ān is*

read to them, they do not fall down in prostration? But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth], yet God knows very well what they are hiding. So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering, except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailing reward." (Verses 20-25)

Two main qualities are evident in this *sūrah:* its quiet rhythm and its earnest message. Both are clearly felt, even in the images of universal upheaval the *sūrah* sketches. Scenes of this upheaval are portrayed with much more violence elsewhere, as in *Sūrah* 81, The Darkening. Here an attitude of sympathetic and compassionate cautioning is adopted. The cautioning is gradual, presented in a quiet, inspiring statement beginning with the words "*O man*". This awakens people's consciences.

The various parts of the *sūrah* are ordered according to a special plan. This carries the reader through a variety of scenes, some relating to the universe, others to man himself. The scenes are sketched one after the other in a thoughtful order starting with universal submission to God, which leaves a gentle but real impression on the reader's heart. Then we are given an image of the reckoning, reward and retribution, followed by a contemporary scene of life on earth and its phenomena. Then follows a statement of wonder at those who, after all this, still refuse to accept the faith. This statement combines with a warning of severe punishment, and a promise of unfailing reward to the believers.

All this is embodied in the few lines which compose this short *sūrah.* Such succinctness is just one aspect of the unique nature of the Qur'ān . The ideas the *sūrah* sets out to explain could not normally be tackled with such power and to such effect, even if entire books were devoted to the task. But the Qur'ān achieves its purpose because it addresses our hearts directly. No wonder! It is the word of God.

Complete Universal Submission

"When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission." (Verses 1-5) The splitting of the sky has been dwelt upon in the commentary on other *sūrahs.* One new element here is the submission and complete obedience of the sky to her Lord: *"obeying her Lord in true submission."* (Verse 2) Another new element is the stretching of the earth: *"When the earth is stretched out."* (Verse 3) This means perhaps an expansion of her size or shape as a result of a disruption of the laws of nature which govern her and preserve her in her present shape. The statement, made in the passive, suggests that this will be carried out through the intervention of an outside force. *"And casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty."* (Verse 4) This image portrays the earth as a living entity casting out what is within her and getting rid of it.

There are indeed a great many things within the earth, countless types of creation that have lived, died and been buried over a long period of time, the span of which is known to no one but God. It also includes an abundant resource of metals, water and other secrets unknown except to the Creator. The earth carries all this load one generation after another until that final day when it casts forth all that is within her. "*Obeying her Lord in true submission,*" she follows the sky's suit and declares total obedience and complete submission to God.

These short verses vividly demonstrate how both the living sky and earth receive their orders and instantly comply with them. Their obedience is a manifestation of their conscious and dutiful submission. The image drawn here has shades of humility, solemnity and tranquillity that are brought out in full relief. The impression it leaves is one of humble and obedient submission to God.

Man's Hard Labour

In such an atmosphere of conscious obedience, man is addressed from on high: "*O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him.*" (Verse 6) "*O* man!" your Lord has made you in a perfect way. He has given you your humanity which distinguishes you from the rest of creation. Your humanity endows you with certain characteristics which should have made you more conscious of your Lord, and more obedient and submissive to Him than both the sky and the earth. He has given man of His own spirit and endowed him with the ability to communicate with Him, receive His light, ennoble himself with God's grace in order to achieve the highest degree of perfection attainable by man. This is no little distinction.

"*O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord and you shall meet Him.*" (Verse 6) Man certainly labours hard in this life, shouldering his responsibilities and exerting himself. All this he does in order to return, in the end, like all the rest of creation, to God. Man labours even for what he enjoys! Nothing in this life comes easily or without effort: if sometimes no physical labour is needed, then surely some mental and emotional effort is required. In this the rich and poor are alike, although the labour exerted may differ in kind and form. This address reminds man that labouring hard is the lot of all in this life on earth. But when we meet our Lord, we will fall into two groups: one will suffer hardship incomparable to that suffered on earth; and the other, consisting of those who have demonstrated their obedience and true submission, will enjoy a rest in which the suffering of this life will be forgotten.

"*He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning, and return rejoicing to his people.*" (Verses 7-9) He who is given his book in his right hand is the happy one who was true to his faith. God is pleased with him and rewards him well. He will have a lenient reckoning, that is to say that he will not be called to

account for what he did in this life. This is abundantly clear in the traditions of the Prophet. `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, quotes him as saying: "He who is called to account will suffer affliction." Continuing her report, she pointed out that God says, 'He... shall have a lenient reckoning.' God's Messenger answered: 'That is not what is meant by reckoning and accountability. Lenient reckoning signifies no more than showing him his record. He who is called to account on the Day of Judgement will suffer affliction.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

`Ā'ishah also related: "I heard God's Messenger (peace be upon him) saying in his prayers 'My Lord, make my reckoning a lenient one'. When he had finished his prayers I asked him, 'What is the lenient reckoning?' He answered: 'He who receives lenient reckoning will have his record looked into and will be forgiven, but he who is called to account on that day will perish." [Related by Aĥmad.]

This is, then, the lenient reckoning accorded to him who receives his record in his right hand. He shall win *"and return rejoicing to his people,"* who will also have won and arrived in heaven ahead of him. We deduce from this statement that those who accept the faith in this life and adhere to the right path will gather together in heaven. Everyone ends up with those whom he loves. We also have an image of the winner's all-important test: he returns with his face overflowing with happiness.

This image is the opposite of what happens to the afflicted one who has to account for his evil deeds and receives his record with reluctance. *"But he who is given his record behind his back will in time call down destruction upon himself and will enter the fire of hell."* (Verses 10-12)

The Qur'ān usually makes a distinction between receiving one's record with one's right or left hand. Here we have a new image: the record is given from behind one's back. There is no reason to prevent anyone being given his record in his left hand and from behind his back at the same time. It is an image of one who feels great shame and hates to be confronted with what he has done. We have no real knowledge of the nature of this record or how it is given in one's right or left hand or behind one's back. But we can comprehend from the first expression the reality of being a winner, and from the second the reality of doom. This is indeed what we are meant to appreciate. These various forms of expression are used mainly to drive the point home to us and to enhance its effects. For exact knowledge of what will happen and how it will happen belongs only to God.

So, the unfortunate one who lived his life on earth labouring hard but disobeying God and indulging in what is forbidden will know his destiny. He realizes that what lies in front of him is more suffering and hard labour with the only difference being that this time the suffering is greater, uninterrupted and endless. So, he calls destruction upon himself, for he sees his own destruction as the only means of

salvation from what will befall him. When man seeks refuge in his own destruction, then he is certainly in a helpless position. His own non-existence becomes his strongest desire. His hopelessness is beyond description. This is the meaning implied by the Arab poet al-Mutanabbī in his poem which starts with what may be rendered in English as: "Suffice it a malady that you should think death a cure. It says much that doom should be eagerly desired." It is certainly a case of indescribable distress and misery. "*And [he] will enter the fire of hell.*" (Verse 12) This is the end from which he wishes to escape by means of his own destruction; but there is no way out.

Having portrayed this miserable scene, the *sūrah* gives us a glimpse of the sufferer's past which led him to this endless misery: "*He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return.*" (Verses 13-14) The past tense is used here because we feel that the Day of Judgement has arrived, after this life has ended. The indulgence and the joy had taken place in this life. "*He lived joyfully among his people.*" He cared for nothing beyond the moment he was in, and made no preparation for the hereafter. "*He surely thought he would never return,*" to his Lord. Had he thought about the return at the end of his journey through life, he would have carried provisions to sustain him. "*Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him.*" (Verse 15) Indeed God has always been aware of man's thoughts, actions and feelings. God knows that, contrary to what man may think, there will be a return to Him to receive the reward merited by actions on earth. This is indeed what happens when all return to God to meet their appointed destiny, when what God has ordained will take place.

"*He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return. Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him.*" (Verses 13-15) This image of the misery of the one who was joyful among his people during his short life on earth has a counterpart in the image of the happy one who returns rejoicing to his people to live with them an eternal happy life, free from hardship: "*He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning and return rejoicing to his people.*" (Verses 7-9)

Suffering Through Life

The *sūrah* then refers briefly to some worldly scenes. People, however, continue to overlook the evidence such scenes provide of the deliberate planning that has gone into the making of this world. Indeed, this planning includes the creation of man himself, and his phases and transitions through life: "*I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection, that you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage.*" (Verses 16-19) The oath, which is indirect in the Arabic text, serves to draw man's attention to these universal scenes. The connotations here are in perfect harmony with those of the opening of the *sūrah* and the scenes portrayed there. The twilight refers to that period of stillness after sunset when the

soul is overwhelmed by a deep feeling of awe. The heart feels, at such a time, the significance of parting with a beloved companion, and the quiet sadness and deep melancholy this involves. It also experiences fear of the approaching darkness.

"And by the night and what it envelops." (Verse 17) What the night envelops is left unspecified to enhance the effect. Imagination can travel far and wide as one thinks of what the night may conceal of events and feelings. But the travels of the imagination cannot capture all the images generated by the short Qur'ānic verse, *"And by the night and what it envelops." We* are left with an overwhelming feeling of reverence which is in perfect harmony with the stillness and awe associated with the twilight.

"And by the moon in her full perfection." (Verse 18) This is another quiet and splendid scene, describing the full moon as her light descends over the earth. The full moon is always associated with tranquillity. The general impression formed here is closely associated with twilight, and the dark night as it conceals everything. The feeling is one of a complementary stillness and reverence.

"T*hat you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage."* (Verse 19) This means, you will pass from one stage of suffering to another, as has been charted for you. The Qur'ān uses the term 'ride', although we use the expression 'move onward', to denote the undergoing of various stages of suffering. 'Ride' is frequently used in Arabic to signify the passage through risk and difficulty. This usage suggests that difficulties and risks are like horses or mules to be ridden. Each one will take the rider to the stage determined for them. Thus each one will deliver the rider to a new, predetermined stage, in the same way as twilight, the night and perfect moon are predetermined. They eventually end with their meeting with God, which was mentioned in the preceding part. This coherent ordering of the parts of the *sūrah* and the smooth movement from one point to another is characteristic of the superb Qur'ānic style.

Unfailing Reward

There then follows an expression of wonder at those who persist in their denial of the faith when they have all these signs and all this abundant evidence within themselves and in the world at large which indicates the truth: *"Why then do they not accept the faith?"* Or, "*when the Qur'ān is read to them, they do not fall down in prostration?"* (Verses 20-21) Indeed, why do they not accept the faith? There are numerous indications in the universe and within the soul which point out that the path of faith is the right path. They are at once numerous, profound and powerful, so they besiege the heart if it tries to run away from them. But if someone listens to them, then they address him in a friendly and affectionate way.

The Qur'ān addresses them in the language of pure human nature. It opens the heart to the truth and points out its evidence both within themselves and over the horizon. It kindles in people's hearts God-consciousness, humbleness, obedience and submission to the Creator of the universe. The expression, *"fall down in prostration,"* refers to these feelings. The universe is splendid and inspiring: it offers a multitude of signs, mental stimuli and moments of purity which combine to arouse in us a ready response and a willing submission. The Qur'ān is also superb and inspiring; it links the human heart with the splendid universe and, consequently, with the Creator who made it. It gives us a feeling of truth about the universe which also demonstrates the truth of creation and the Creator. Hence the wonder: *"Why then do they not accept the faith? Or, when the Qur'ān is read to them, they do not fall down in prostration?"* (Verses 20-21)

It is indeed amazing, but the Qur'ān does not dwell on this for long. It proceeds to describe the behaviour of the unbelievers and the end which awaits them. "*But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth], yet God knows very well what they are hiding. So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering."* (Verses 22-24) The unbelievers shout, 'lies', but the object of their denunciation as lies is unspecified. In Arabic, omission of the object serves to widen the scope of reference for the verb. Thus, here we understand that the denunciation as lies is an entrenched habit and a characteristic of unbelievers. But God is fully aware of the evil they conceal in their hearts and He knows perfectly well their motives for denouncing the truth.

The *sūrah* then halts its discussion of their state and addresses God's Messenger: "*So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering,"* an unpleasant tiding for anyone who is awaiting news of his future.

At the same time the *sūrah* describes what awaits the believers who prepare for their future by good deeds. This description is made in the form of an exception from what awaits the unbelievers: *"except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailing reward."* (Verse 25) This type of exception is known in Arabic linguistics as "unrelated exception". The believers, not originally among the recipients of the gloomy news, are then excepted from it. This form of expression serves to draw attention to what follows. The unfailing recompense is one which is continuous and unceasing, and will be given in the hereafter, when people will be immortal.

On this decisive note the *sūrah* ends. It is a *sūrah* of short yet immensely powerful verses.

SŪRAH 85

Al-Burūj

(The Constellations)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلسَّمَآءِ ذَاتِ ٱلْبُرُوجِ ﴿١﴾	*By the heaven with its constellations,* (1)
وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْمَوْعُودِ ﴿٢﴾	*by the promised day,* (2)
وَشَاهِدٍ وَمَشْهُودٍ ﴿٣﴾	*by the witness and that which is witnessed,* (3)
قُتِلَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْأُخْدُودِ ﴿٤﴾	*slain be the people of the pit* (4)
ٱلنَّارِ ذَاتِ ٱلْوَقُودِ ﴿٥﴾	*of the fire abounding in fuel,* (5)
إِذْ هُمْ عَلَيْهَا قُعُودٌ ﴿٦﴾	*when they sat around it,* (6)
وَهُمْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَفْعَلُونَ بِٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ شُهُودٌ ﴿٧﴾	*watching what they did to the believers.* (7)
وَمَا نَقَمُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ إِلَّآ أَن يُؤْمِنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْحَمِيدِ ﴿٨﴾	*They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due,* (8)

ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ شَهِيدٌ ٩

to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things.(9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ فَتَنُواْ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ وَٱلۡمُؤۡمِنَٰتِ ثُمَّ لَمۡ يَتُوبُواْ فَلَهُمۡ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابُ ٱلۡحَرِيقِ ١٠

Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. (10)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتٞ تَجۡرِى مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلۡفَوۡزُ ٱلۡكَبِيرُ ١١

But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph. (11)

إِنَّ بَطۡشَ رَبِّكَ لَشَدِيدٌ ١٢

Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance. (12)

إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ يُبۡدِئُ وَيُعِيدُ ١٣

It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life. (13)

وَهُوَ ٱلۡغَفُورُ ٱلۡوَدُودُ ١٤

He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate, (14)

ذُو ٱلۡعَرۡشِ ٱلۡمَجِيدُ ١٥

Lord of the Throne, Glorious, (15)

فَعَّالٞ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ ١٦

He does whatever He wills. (16)

هَلۡ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ٱلۡجُنُودِ ١٧

Have you heard the story of the hosts, (17)

فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَثَمُودَ ١٨

of Pharaoh and Thamūd? (18)

بَلِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ فِى تَكۡذِيبٖ ١٩

Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. (19)

But God surrounds them all. (20)	وَٱللَّهُ مِن وَرَآئِهِم مُّحِيطٌۢ ﴿٢٠﴾
This is indeed a glorious Qur'ān, (21)	بَلۡ هُوَ قُرۡءَانٞ مَّجِيدٞ ﴿٢١﴾
inscribed on an imperishable tablet. (22)	فِي لَوۡحٖ مَّحۡفُوظِۭ ﴿٢٢﴾

Overview

This short *sūrah* outlines the essentials of faith and the basics of belief as matters of great importance. It sheds a powerful and searching light over these essentials in order to reveal what lies beyond the elementary facts expressed in the text. Every verse, and sometimes every word, in this *sūrah* virtually opens a window overlooking a limitless world of truth.

The immediate theme of the *sūrah* is the pit incident, when a community of believers who lived before the advent of Islam, said to be unitarian Christians, were faced by ruthless and tyrannical enemies who sought to force them away from their faith. The believers refused. The tyrants then lit a great fire in a pit they had dug, and threw them into it. The believers were thus burnt to death in front of large crowds that had gathered to witness this ghastly act of extermination. The tyrants sat by, amused by the believers' sufferings: "*They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due.*" (Verse 8)

The *sūrah* starts with an oath: "*By the heaven with its constellations, by the promised day, by the witness and that which is witnessed, slain be the people of the pit.*" (Verses 1-4) In this way the *sūrah* links heaven and its magnificent constellations, the promised Day of Judgement and its great events, the multitudes which witness that day and the events they witness with the pit incident and God's anger with the aggressors responsible for it. The *sūrah* then proceeds to portray the tragic scene in a few, quick flashes which demonstrate the horror without dwelling on detail.

It includes a reference to the greatness of faith which exalted itself over the tyrants' atrocious cruelty and triumphed over the fire, attaining a level of sublimity which is an honour to all mankind. It also refers to the heinous crime and the evil and injustice it involves in comparison with the sublimity, innocence and purity of the believers: "*Slain be the people of the pit of the fire abounding in fuel, when they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers.*" (Verses 4-7)

Then follows a series of short comments stating a number of principles which are highly important to the Islamic faith, its outlook and advocacy. We have firstly a

reference to the fact that all the heavens and earth are part of God's kingdom and to His witnessing of all that takes place in them. He is the Sovereign of the heavens and the earth, who witnesses all.

Secondly, we have a reference to the burning in hell which awaits the tyrants, and a reference to the perfect heavenly bliss which awaits the believers who choose faith over life and exalt themselves despite their persecution. The believers' action is referred to as the great triumph: *"Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph."* (Verses 10-11)

A further reference is made to the power with which God smites His enemies and to the fact that He creates and brings back to life after death: *"Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance. It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life."* (Verses 12-13) This relates directly to the lives blotted out in the pit incident.

The *sūrah* then mentions some of the divine attributes, each of which has a specific relevance to the subject matter of the *sūrah: "He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate."* (Verse 14) He forgives those who repent regardless of the enormity and horror of their sins. He also loves His servants who choose Him. His love is the soothing balsam which heals whatever injuries they may have suffered. *"Lord of the Throne, Glorious, He does whatever He wills."* (Verses 15-16) These attributes portray God's absolute will, dominance and power, all of which are relevant to the event discussed in the *sūrah.*

Then follows a reference to examples of God's punishment of tyrants even though they were heavily armed. *"Have you heard the story of the hosts, of Pharaoh and Thamūd?"* (Verses 17-18) These were two very different instances of God's punishment with widely different effects. Along with the pit horror, they carry numerous implications.

Finally, the *sūrah* explains the situation of the unbelievers and that God surrounds them though they may be unaware of the fact. *"Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. But God surrounds them all."* (Verses 19-20) It concludes with a statement of the truth of the Qur'ān and its blessed origin: *"This is indeed a glorious Qur'ān, inscribed on an imperishable tablet."*(Verses 21-22)

The Horrendous Event

"By the heaven with its constellations, by the promised day, by the witness and that which is witnessed." (Verses 1-3) Before making any reference to the pit event, the *sūrah* opens with an oath by a heaven full of constellations. The Arabic term, *burūj,* used

for 'constellations' may be taken to mean the huge mass of planets which resemble great towers or palaces built in the sky. In this sense the verse can be related to two other verses: *"We built heaven with Our might, and gave it a wide expanse."* (51: 47) and, *"Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built?"* (79: 27) The Arabic term may, alternatively, be interpreted as meaning the positions between which these planets move as they go round in orbit. These constitute the spheres within which the planets remain as they move. This reference to the constellations however, gives an impression of a huge creation. This is, indeed, the connotation intended at the outset.

"By the promised day." (Verse 2) That is the day when judgement is passed on all the events of this life and when the accounts of this world are settled. It is a day God has promised will come, and is a great day awaited by all creation. *"By the witness and that which is witnessed."* (Verse 3) On that day all deeds and creatures are exposed and witnessed. Everybody becomes a witness. Everything becomes known as there is no cover to hide anything from beholding eyes.

References to the heaven and the constellations, the promised day, the witness and what is witnessed all combine to impart an aura of seriousness, concern, attention and momentum to the manner in which the pit event is related. They also provide the framework in which the event is viewed, judged and settled on the basis of its true nature. It is a framework stretching far beyond the limits of this short life.

Having thus provided the desired atmosphere, the *sūrah* then refers to the event in just a few brief strokes. *"Slain be the people of the pit of the fire abounding in fuel, when they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers. They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due, to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things."* (Verses 4-9)

Reference to the event starts with a declaration of anger with the tyrants: *"Slain be the people of the pit."* (Verse 4) It also gives an impression of the enormity of the crime which has invoked the displeasure and anger of God, the All-Clement, and which makes Him threaten the perpetrators. We then have a description of the pit: *"The fire abounding in fuel."* (Verse 5) The literal meaning of 'pit' is a hole in the ground, but the *sūrah* defines it as 'the fire' instead of using the term 'trench' or 'hole' in order to give an impression that the whole pit was turned into a blazing furnace.

The perpetrators aroused God's wrath for the evil crime they committed: *"When they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers."* (Verses 6-7) They sat over the fire, in the actual vicinity of the horror, watching the various stages of torture, and madly enjoying the burning of human flesh in order to perpetuate in their minds this ghastly scene.

The believers had not committed any crime or evil deed against them: *"They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due, to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things."* (Verses 8-9) That was their only crime: they believed in God Almighty who deserves praise for every situation even though ignorant people do not do so. He is the Lord who deserves to be worshipped, the sole sovereign of the kingdoms of the heavens and the earth. As He witnesses all things He has witnessed what the tyrants did to the believers. This verse reassures the believers and delivers a powerful threat to the tyrants. God has been a witness and He suffices for a witness.

The narration of the event is completed in a few short verses which charge our hearts with a feeling of repugnance towards the terrible crime and its evil perpetrators. They also invite us to contemplate what lies beyond the event, its importance in the sight of God and what it has aroused of God's wrath. It is a matter which is not yet completed. Its conclusion lies with God.

As the narration of the event concludes we feel overwhelmed by the magnificence of faith as it exalts the believers and attains its triumph over all hardships, and indeed over life itself. We feel the elevation of the believers as they rid themselves of the handicaps of human desire and worldly temptation. The believers could easily have saved their lives by accepting the tyrants' terms. But what a loss humanity as a whole would have incurred! How great the loss would have been had they killed that sublime concept of the worthlessness of life without faith, its ugliness without freedom and its baseness when tyrants are left free to exercise their tyranny over people's souls after they have exercised it over their bodies. But they have won a very noble and sublime concept while the fire burned their flesh. Their noble concept has triumphed as it was purified by the fire. They will, later on, have their reward from God and their tyrannical enemies will have their retribution. The *sūrah* then goes on to explain both.

Different Destinies

"Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph." (Verses 10-11) What happens on earth in this first life is not the end of the story. There remains an inevitable part which will follow later. There remains the allocation of awards, which will restore the balance of justice and provide the final settlement of what took place between the believers and the tyrants.

That it will come is certain and confirmed by God: *"Those who persecute the believers, men and women"* and persist with their evil ways, careless, unrepentant, *"and*

do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning." Burning is specified although it is also implied by the very mention of hell.

It earns its specific mention in order to serve as a counterpart to the burning in the pit. Although the same word signifying the action is used, the two types of burning are dissimilar in intensity and duration. The burning here is by fire lit by human beings while the burning in the hereafter is by fire lit by the Creator. In this present world, the burning is over in a few minutes while in the hereafter it goes on for ages unknown except to God. The believers who suffer the burning here earn with it God's pleasure, and ensure the triumph of that noble human concept referred to earlier. In the hereafter the burning is attended by God's anger and man's abject degradation.

Paradise symbolizes God's pleasure with righteous believers and His reward to them. *"But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 11) The Arabic term, *fawz,* used here for triumph also connotes escape and success. To escape the punishment of the hereafter is to achieve success. How to describe, then, the reward of gardens with running waters!

With this conclusion justice is restored and the whole question is finally resolved. What has taken place on earth is no more than one part; the matter remains unfinished here. This is the fact emphasized by this initial comment on the pit event, so that it may be fully comprehended by the few believers who have accepted the faith in Makkah, and by every group of believers subjected to trial and tyranny during any period of history.

God's Unique Attributes

Further comments follow: *"Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance."* (Verse 12) This comment suitably contrasts God's punishment with the petty and trifling vengeance exacted by tyrants, and thought by them and by people generally to be very powerful. The real power is that levelled by the Almighty, to whom belongs the heavens and the earth, not that levelled by insignificant people who impose their rule over a limited piece of land for a limited period of time.

The statement also emphasizes the relationship between the addressee, namely, God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and the speaker, who is God Almighty. He says to him, *"stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance."* He is your Lord, in whose Godhead you believe, and on whose assistance you rely. This relationship is very significant in situations where believers are afflicted by tyrants.

"It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life." (Verse 13) In their wider

connotations, origination and restoration refer to the first and second processes of bringing into life. The two terms, however, signify two events which constantly take place. In every moment there is origination as well as restoration of what has died and decayed. The whole universe is in a state of continuous renovation, and constant decay. Within the context of this ever-repeated cycle of origination and re-origination the whole affair of the pit and its apparent results seem to be, in reality, no more than a beginning of what can be created anew, or a re-creation of what has already been originated. It is part of a continuous process.

"*He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate.*" (Verse 14) Forgiveness relates to the earlier statement: "*and do not repent*". Forgiveness is part of God's mercy and grace which have no limits or restrictions. It is an open door which is never closed in the face of anyone who repents, no matter how grave his sins are. Compassion, however, relates to the believers' attitude who choose their Lord in preference to all things. It is a generous touch of divine benevolence. God elevates His servants who love and choose Him to a grade which one would hesitate to describe except for the fact that God, out of His blessing, bestows it. It is the grade of friendship between Lord and servant. It is a tie of love which exists between God and His favoured servants. How insignificant the transitory life they have sacrificed and the momentary affliction they have suffered appear when compared to only a small part of this splendid and tender love. Some of those who live in servitude to another human being take fatal risks in order to win a word of encouragement or receive a sign of pleasure from their master. They do this although both master and servant are God's slaves. What, then, should be the attitude of God's servants who receive that compassionate love and benevolence from the "*Lord of the Throne, the Glorious*", the All- Powerful, the Sublime. So petty becomes life, so paltry becomes all suffering, and so trifling becomes every treasured object when the pleasure of the loving Lord of the Throne is at stake.

"*He does whatever He wills.*" (Verse 16) This is His constantly realized, never failing attribute. His will is absolute. He may choose, on a certain occasion, that believers should, by His grace, win victory for a specific purpose He wants to accomplish. He may choose, on other occasions, that faith should triumph over persecution and trial. This may be manifested, at times, through the physical elimination of believers from this transitory life, again to accomplish a specific purpose. He may decide to smite tyrants in this life, or to delay their punishment to the promised day. Either course of action fulfils a certain purpose behind which divine wisdom lies. Any action He performs is part of His well-defined scheme and His ability to do what He wills. All this fits very well with the account of the pit and with what comes later of reference to the fates of Pharaoh and Thamūd and their respective hosts. Beyond all these events and beyond life and the universe there exist the free will and absolute power

of God.

Examples of this are given: *"Have you heard the story of the hosts, of Pharaoh and Thamūd?"* (Verses 17-18) This is a reference to two long stories well known to the addressees as they have been mentioned several times in the Qur'ān. The two nations concerned are described here by the term "the hosts" in reference to their might and equipment. Have you heard their stories and how God did with them as He pleased? Theirs were two stories, different in nature and consequence. Pharaoh and his army were eliminated when the Children of Israel were saved by God. He gave them power to rule for a certain period in order to accomplish a certain scheme. As for the Thamūd, God exterminated them and saved His prophet, Ṣāliĥ, along with his few followers. The believers in this instance did not establish a state of their own; they were merely saved from corrupt enemies.

Both stories are manifestations of the divine will and its performance. They provide two examples of what may befall advocates of the Islamic faith. They are mentioned along with a third possibility which distinguishes the pit event. The Qur'ān explains all three eventualities to the believers in Makkah and to all generations of believers.

The *sūrah* concludes with two statements characterized by their sharp and decisive rhythm. Each is a statement of fact and a final verdict. *"Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. But God surrounds them all."* (Verses 19-20) The truth about the unbelievers is that they are in a constant state of disbelief, crying "lies" morning and evening *"But God surrounds them all."* They are unaware that God's might and His knowledge engulf them, making them even more powerless than mice stranded in a great flood.

"This is indeed a glorious Qur'ān, inscribed on an imperishable tablet." (Verses 21-22) The term 'glorious' signifies nobility and sublimity. Indeed, there is nothing more noble or more sublime or more glorious than God's word. It is inscribed on an imperishable tablet, the nature of which we cannot comprehend because it is part of the knowledge God has reserved for Himself. We benefit, however, from the connotations of the statement and the impression it leaves that the Qur'ān is well preserved and well-guarded. It is the final word in every matter it deals with.

The Qur'ān states its judgement in the pit event and what lies behind it. This judgement is final.

SŪRAH 86

Al-Ṭāriq

(The Night Visitor)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلطَّارِقِ ﴿١﴾	*By the heaven and by the night visitor.* (1)
وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا ٱلطَّارِقُ ﴿٢﴾	*Would that you knew what the night visitor is!* (2)
ٱلنَّجْمُ ٱلثَّاقِبُ ﴿٣﴾	*It is the star that pierces through darkness.* (3)
إِن كُلُّ نَفْسٍ لَّمَّا عَلَيْهَا حَافِظٌ ﴿٤﴾	*For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it.* (4)
فَلْيَنظُرِ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ مِمَّ خُلِقَ ﴿٥﴾	*Let man then reflect: of what he is created.* (5)
خُلِقَ مِن مَّآءٍ دَافِقٍ ﴿٦﴾	*He is created of gushing water;* (6)
يَخْرُجُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ ٱلصُّلْبِ وَٱلتَّرَآئِبِ ﴿٧﴾	*he issues from between the loins and the chest bones.* (7)
إِنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَجْعِهِۦ لَقَادِرٌ ﴿٨﴾	*God is well able to bring him back [to life].* (8)
يَوْمَ تُبْلَى ٱلسَّرَآئِرُ ﴿٩﴾	*On the day when consciences are tried,* (9)

man shall be helpless, with no supporter. (10)	فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن قُوَّةٍ وَلَا نَاصِرٍ ﴿١٠﴾
By the heaven with its returning rain, (11)	وَٱلسَّمَآءِ ذَاتِ ٱلرَّجۡعِ ﴿١١﴾
by the earth ever splitting with verdure, (12)	وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ ذَاتِ ٱلصَّدۡعِ ﴿١٢﴾
this is surely a decisive word; (13)	إِنَّهُۥ لَقَوۡلٞ فَصۡلٞ ﴿١٣﴾
it is no idle talk. (14)	وَمَا هُوَ بِٱلۡهَزۡلِ ﴿١٤﴾
They devise many an artful scheme, (15)	إِنَّهُمۡ يَكِيدُونَ كَيۡدٗا ﴿١٥﴾
but I too have My schemes. (16)	وَأَكِيدُ كَيۡدٗا ﴿١٦﴾
So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while. (17)	فَمَهِّلِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ أَمۡهِلۡهُمۡ رُوَيۡدَۢا ﴿١٧﴾

Overview

It is stated in the introduction to the first *sūrah* in this volume, which forms the thirtieth part of the Qur'ān, that its *sūrahs* are "like a persistent and strong knocking on a door, or a series of loud shouts seeking to awaken those who are fast asleep, or those who are drunk and have lost consciousness, or are in a night club, completely absorbed in their dancing or entertainment. The knocks and the shouts come one after the other: Wake up! Look around you! Think! Reflect! There is a God! There is planning, trial, liability, reckoning, reward, severe punishment and lasting bliss."

The present *sūrah* is a typical example of these qualities. Its tone is sharp. The scenes portrayed, the rhythm chosen, the sounds of the individual words and their meanings — all contribute to this sharpness of tone. The scenes include the night visitor, the star piercing with brightness, the gushing water, the returning rain and the splitting earth. The meanings include watching over souls: "*For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it*"; the lack of strength and help: "*On the day when consciences are tried, man shall be helpless, with no supporter*"; the complete seriousness:

"This is surely a decisive word; it is no idle talk." The same characteristics apply to the warnings given in this *sūrah: "They devise many an artful scheme, but I too have My schemes. So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while."*

There is complete harmony between the scenes of the universe portrayed in the *sūrah* and the facts it states. This harmony becomes abundantly clear when the *sūrah* is carefully considered.

A Special Type of Visitor

"By the heaven and by the night visitor. Would that you knew what the night visitor is! It is the star that pierces through darkness. For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it." (Verses 1-4) This oath includes a scene of the universe and a fact of faith. It opens by mentioning heaven and the night visitor and follows with a form of exclamation made familiar in the Qur'ān; *"Would that you knew what the night visitor is!'* (Verse 2) This exclamation gives the impression that it is mysterious, beyond explanation.

The Qur'ān then states its nature and form: *"It is the star that pierces through darkness."* (Verse 3) Its powerful, penetrating rays travel at speed through the surrounding darkness. The description applies to all stars. There is no need to attach it to a particular one. Generality is more useful in this kind of context. Thus, the meaning sounds as follows: By heaven and its stars which pierce darkness and penetrate through that veil covering all things. Thus, this reference sheds its own light on the facts outlined in this *sūrah* and the scenes it portrays.

God swears by heaven and its piercing stars that every soul has an observer appointed by Him to watch over it: *"For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it."* (Verse 4) This implies a strong assertion that there is an agent appointed by God to watch over every soul and keep a record of its actions and thoughts. The watch is over the soul because it is there that thoughts and secrets which are responsible for action and reward lie. Thus, people are not left to roam about the earth as they wish. On the contrary, an accurate and immediate record is kept, on the basis of which reckoning is made.

This awesome inference becomes clear as the soul feels that it is never alone even when without company. There is always the watcher who remains nearby even when one hides from all and is secure against any visitor or intruder. There is still the watcher who penetrates all covers and has access to all things concealed, in the same way as the piercing star tears through the night cover. For God's method of creation is the same with regard to human souls and the wide horizons.

Man's Humble Origin

This opening touch, which unites the human soul with the universe, is followed by another which emphasizes the truth of organized creation and deliberate planning to which God has sworn by the heaven and the night visitor. The early stages of man's creation constitute a proof of this fact and suggest that man is not forgotten as something insignificant: *"Let man then reflect: of what he is created. He is created of gushing water; he issues from between the loins and the chest bones."* (Verses 5-7)

Let man consider his origins and what has become of him. It is a very wide gulf which divides the origins from the final product, the gushing water from man the intelligent, rational being with his highly sophisticated organic, neurological, mental and psychological systems. The reference to this great gulf which the gushing water crosses in order to be made into a communicating being suggests that there is a power beyond the province of man which moves that shapeless and powerless fluid along its remarkable and impressive journey until it is shaped into its magnificent ultimate form. It implies that there is a guardian appointed by God to look after that moist germ, and to guide it through its remarkable journey.

This one fertilizing cell, of which there are millions in every gush, is hardly visible under the microscope. It is a creature without support, reason or will. But as soon as it settles in the womb it proceeds to search for food. The guarding hand of God equips it with a quality which enables it to convert the lining of the womb around it into a pool of blood, thus supplying it with fresh nourishment. Once it is sure of the availability of food it starts another process of continuous division to produce new cells. This shapeless and powerless creature which has no reason or will, knows exactly what it is doing and what it wants. The guarding hand watching over it provides it with guidance, knowledge, power and will to enable it to know its way. It is charged with the task of making every group of newly produced cells specialize in building a part of the magnificent structure of the human body. One group proceeds to produce the skeleton; another group forms the muscles; a third the nervous system; a fourth the lymphatic system. The same applies to every major part of the human structure. But the matter is not as simple as that: it involves a higher degree of specialization; for every bone, every muscle and every nerve is unique and dissimilar to every other. The structure is accurately planned, and has a wide range of functions. Hence, as every group of cells proceeds to fulfil its appointed task in building this structure, it learns to break up into specialized subdivisions, each having its particular function in the general set up. Every little cell proceeds knowing its way, destination and function. Those cells entrusted with the task of forming the eye know that the eye must be in the face, and that it cannot be situated in the abdomen or the foot or the arm, despite the fact that any of these localities is a suitable place for forming an eye. If the first cell charged with making the eye was taken off course and planted in any of these localities, it would have fulfilled its

mission and made an eye there. But when it sets out on its mission it simply goes to the exact spot specified for the eye. Who then has told this cell that this structure needs its eye to be in that particular spot? It is God the watching Guardian who guides it, looks after it and shows it its way.

All the cells work individually and collectively within a framework set for them by certain elements functioning inside the cells. These elements are known as the genes which preserve the general characteristics of the species and the distinctive traits of the parents and forefathers. When the eye cell divides and proliferates in order to form the eye, it endeavours at the same time to preserve its shape and particular features so that it turns out to be a human eye and not the eye of an animal. Furthermore, it endeavours to make it an eye of a human whose forefathers had certain features and characteristics distinguishing their eyes. The slightest error in designing that eye, whether in shape or qualities, forces the forming cell out of its set course. So who has endowed power, ability and knowledge to this insignificant cell which has no reason, will or power of its own? It is God who taught it to design and produce what all mankind can never design or produce. For man cannot design an eye or a part of it, even if charged with this task, while an insignificant cell or group of cells in the body can accomplish this great mission.

This is merely a quick glance at parts of the remarkable journey which transforms the gushing water into the communicative human being. But there is indeed a great multitude of wonders in the physiological functions of the various organs and systems. It is beyond the scope of this work to trace these wonders but they all constitute evidence of elaborate planning and organization and bear the stamp of God's guarding, helping and guiding hand. They emphasize the first fact in the *sūrah* sworn to by the heaven and the night visitor, and prepare for the next fact, namely, the resurrection, which was denied by the idolaters who were among the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān.

"God is well able to bring him back [to life]. On the day when consciences are tried, man shall be helpless, with no supporter." (Verses 8-10) God, who has created him and looked after him, is well able to bring him back to life after death. The first creation is evidence of His ability as well as His elaborate planning and organization. Unless there is a return in order to accord everyone his or her fair reward then this highly sophisticated and wise creation would be in vain. *"On the day when consciences are tried."* (Verse 9). The Arabic terms, *tublā* and *sarā'ir* used by the Qur'ān have much wider connotations than conscience and trial. They suggest that that part of the human soul where secrets are safely deposited will be thrown open, searched and exposed in the same way as the night visitor penetrates the covering darkness of the night. As the guarding watcher penetrates through the soul hidden under multiple covers, secrets are examined and man finds himself powerless and without support:

"Man shall be helpless, with no supporter." (Verse 10) Standing bare without cover and strength adds to the strains and hardships of the situation. This has a deep effect on the reader's perception, as it moves from talking of the universe and the human soul to man's creation and his remarkable journey, until he reaches the end when his secrets are exposed and he stands alone, powerless, without support.

A Powerful Discourse

There may be some lingering doubts within some people's minds that this could happen. Therefore, the *sūrah* gives an oath to its seriousness. It adds a link between this assertion and the universe at large, as we saw at the opening of the *sūrah: "By the heaven with its returning rain, by the earth ever splitting with verdure, this is surely a decisive word; it is no idle talk."* (Verses 11-14)

The rain which comes from the sky again and again and the vegetation which splits the earth and springs forth are two images describing one of the many manifestations of life, the life of plants and their origins. Water which pours down from heaven and verdure which springs out from the earth, are akin to the infant coming into the world, passing between the loins springing out from the darkness of the womb. It is the same life, the same scene, the same movement. It is one system pointing to the Maker who has no competitors.

The image of rain and verdure is not dissimilar to that of the night visitor, the piercing star as it splits covers and curtains. It is also similar to the scene depicting consciences being searched and all that is concealed being thrown open. It is again the same sort of structure which tells of the Maker. God swears by these two creations and their two events, the heaven of returning rains and the earth splitting with verdure. The impact of the scene portrayed combines with the rhythm to strike a strong note of finality and decisiveness. The oath is that this word, or the Qur'ān generally, which states that people will return to life so as to face a trial, is the decisive word which admits of no frivolity. It puts an end to all argument, doubts and uncertainties. It is a true and final word, to which both the heaven of the returning rain and the earth splitting with verdure are witnesses

When this final statement of return and trial is made, there follows an address to God's Messenger. At the time of revelation he had only a few believers who supported him in Makkah. They were suffering the brunt of the idolaters' hostility and their plots against the Islamic message. The idolaters were tirelessly trying to smother the call. The address is made to the Prophet so as to encourage and reassure him, and to disparage what the schemers devise. It states that their scheming is only temporary; the battle is in God's hands and under His command. So, let the Prophet persevere and be patient, and let him and the believers be reassured: *"They devise*

many an artful scheme, but I too have My schemes. So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while." (Verses 15-17)

Those who were created from gushing water, then issued between the loins, brought forth without any strength, ability or will of their own, guided along their long journey by divine power and destined to that return when secrets are searched and tried and where they have no strength or support — are devising a scheme against the Prophet and the Muslims! I, the Creator who guides, preserves, directs, brings back to life and puts to trial; the Almighty; the Victor who has made the sky, the night visitor, the gushing water and man; the Maker of the heaven with its returning rain and the earth splitting with verdure; I, God, am devising a scheme of My own. So, there are the two schemes and the battle. It is, in truth, a one-sided battle but described as being between two sides for the sake of sarcasm.

"*So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while."* (Verse 17) Do not be impatient. Do not precipitate the end of the battle when you have seen its true nature. There is wisdom behind this respite and delay which is short even though it may take up the whole length of this first life; for how short this life appears when compared with a life of limitless duration.

God's benevolent and compassionate attitude to His Messenger is noticeable in the final verse: "*So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while." He* is addressed here as if he were the final authority, or as if he were the one who decides or approves that they may take a short respite. But the Prophet has no such authority; it is merely an expression of kind and benevolent tenderness which bestows compassion on his heart. It is divine kindness which suggests that God's Messenger has a say in the whole matter as if he had a share or interest in it. It lifts all barriers between the Prophet and the divine domain, where all matters are judged and settled.

SŪRAH 87

Al-A`lā

(The Most High)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

سَبِّحِ ٱسْمَ رَبِّكَ ٱلْأَعْلَى ﴿١﴾	*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High,* (1)
ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ ﴿٢﴾	*who creates and proportions well,* (2)
وَٱلَّذِى قَدَّرَ فَهَدَىٰ ﴿٣﴾	*who determines and guides,* (3)
وَٱلَّذِىٓ أَخْرَجَ ٱلْمَرْعَىٰ ﴿٤﴾	*who brings forth the pasturage,* (4)
فَجَعَلَهُۥ غُثَآءً أَحْوَىٰ ﴿٥﴾	*then turns it to withered grass.* (5)
سَنُقْرِئُكَ فَلَا تَنسَىٰٓ ﴿٦﴾	*We shall teach you and you shall not forget,* (6)
إِلَّا مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ يَعْلَمُ ٱلْجَهْرَ وَمَا يَخْفَىٰ ﴿٧﴾	*except what God wills. He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden.* (7)
وَنُيَسِّرُكَ لِلْيُسْرَىٰ ﴿٨﴾	*And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease.* (8)

Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use. (9)	فَذَكِّرۡ إِن نَّفَعَتِ ٱلذِّكۡرَىٰ ﴿٩﴾
He who fears God will heed it, (10)	سَيَذَّكَّرُ مَن يَخۡشَىٰ ﴿١٠﴾
but the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it, (11)	وَيَتَجَنَّبُهَا ٱلۡأَشۡقَى ﴿١١﴾
who shall be cast into the great fire, (12)	ٱلَّذِى يَصۡلَى ٱلنَّارَ ٱلۡكُبۡرَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾
in which he shall neither die nor remain alive. (13)	ثُمَّ لَا يَمُوتُ فِيهَا وَلَا يَحۡيَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾
Successful will be he who purifies himself, (14)	قَدۡ أَفۡلَحَ مَن تَزَكَّىٰ ﴿١٤﴾
and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays. (15)	وَذَكَرَ ٱسۡمَ رَبِّهِۦ فَصَلَّىٰ ﴿١٥﴾
Yet you prefer this present life, (16)	بَلۡ تُؤۡثِرُونَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا ﴿١٦﴾
while the life to come is better and longer lasting. (17)	وَٱلۡأَخِرَةُ خَيۡرٞ وَأَبۡقَىٰٓ ﴿١٧﴾
All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; (18)	إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَفِى ٱلصُّحُفِ ٱلۡأُولَىٰ ﴿١٨﴾
the scriptures of Abraham and Moses. (19)	صُحُفِ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

Overview

Imam Aĥmad ibn Ĥanbal relates on the authority of `Alī, the Prophet's cousin and Companion, that the Prophet loved this *sūrah.* The famous *Ĥadīth* anthologist, Muslim, also relates that the Prophet used to read this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 88, The Enveloper, in `Īd prayers and also in Friday prayers. If one of the festivals fell on a Friday, the Prophet would be sure to read these two *sūrahs* in the prayers.

The Prophet is right to love this *sūrah* as it turns the whole universe into a temple whose four corners echo the praises and glorification of God, the Sublime. *"Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides, who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass."* (Verses 1-5) The rhythm of the *sūrah,* characterized by the long vowels with which each of its verses ends, imparts a feeling of the praises echoed everywhere in the universe.

The Prophet is also right to love this *sūrah* as it brings him good news. As God charges him with the double task of delivering His message and warning people, He promises him: *"We shall teach you and you shall not forget, except what God wills. He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden. And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease. Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use."* (Verses 6-9) o God takes upon Himself the responsibility of making His Messenger not forget anything of the Qur'ān. He also promises that his path will be smoothed in all his affairs, whether they are personal or concerned with his message. This is certainly a great favour.

Again, the Prophet is right to love this *sūrah* as it includes the basic ingredients of the Islamic concept of life and existence: the oneness of the Creator; the reality of divine revelation; and the certainty of the life to come with the reward and punishment it involves. The *sūrah* also affirms that these basic principles have well-established roots in earlier divine messages. *"All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; the scriptures of Abraham and Moses."* (Verses 18-19) All this is in addition to the impression it imparts of the easy nature of the Islamic ideology, the Messenger who conveys it, and the nation it builds.

Glorifying the Creator

"Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides, who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass." (Verses 1-5) The *sūrah* opens with an order to praise the Lord, which means to glorify Him, recognize His supremacy and infallibility in everything, and remember His divine attributes. It is much more than verbal repetition of the phrase '*Subĥān Allah*', which we normally translate as 'limitless is God in His glory.' It is a genuine feeling of the sublimity of His attributes.

As the *sūrah* inspires us with the splendour of a life based on constant appreciation of divine attributes, we experience a feeling which is very real and very difficult to describe at the same time.

The two immediately presented attributes are Lordship and Highness. The "Lord" or the Arabic equivalent, *Rabb,* is the one who tends and nurtures. The connotations

of this attribute fit in very well with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah,* the happy news it brings and its easy rhythm. The 'Highness' attribute prompts one to look up to endless horizons. Having a genuinely vivid feeling of this attribute is indeed the essential purpose of praising God and glorifying Him.

The *sūrah* opens with an order addressed by God to the Prophet in the first instance: "*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High.*" (Verse 1) The order is given with an air of friendliness and compassion almost beyond description.

Whenever the Prophet read this *sūrah* he used to fulfil this order promptly by stopping after the first verse to say: "Limitless in his glory is my Lord, the Most High". Thus, he would receive the order, carry it out promptly and read on. When this *sūrah* was revealed the Prophet told the Muslims to fulfil the divine order as they prostrated themselves in their daily prayers. Similarly he told them to carry out the other order to '*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most Great,*' (56: 96) as they bowed in prayer. These praises, warm with life, have been included in the prayers as a direct response to a direct order, or more precisely to a direct permission. For God's permission to His servants to praise Him is one of the favours He has bestowed on them. It is a permission to them to be in contact with Him in a way, given their limited abilities, they can appreciate. He, out of His grace, has permitted them to do this so that they may know Him and His attributes as best they can.

"*Extol the limitless glory of the name of your Lord, the Most High, who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides.*" (Verses 1-3) Everything God has created is well proportioned and perfected. Every creature is assigned its own role and given guidance so that it may know its role and play it. It is told the purpose of its creation, given what it needs for sustenance and guided to it. This is clearly visible in everything around us, large or small, important or trivial. For everything is well perfected and guided to fulfil the purpose of its creation. Furthermore, all things are also collectively perfected so that they may fulfil their role together.

The Perfection of God's Creation

A single atom is well balanced between its electrons and protons, to the same degree as the solar system, its sun, planets and satellites are well balanced. Each of the two knows the way it is assigned to travel and fulfils its role. A single living cell is also perfect and well equipped to do everything it is asked to do, in the same measure as the most advanced and complex species. This perfect balance, in the individual and collective sense, is easily noticed in every one of the countless types of creation that fill the gap between the single atom and the solar system or between the single cell and the most advanced living creature.

This basic fact, evidenced by everything in the universe, is well recognized by the human heart as it contemplates what is in the universe. This sort of inspiration and recognition is within the reach of every man in every age, regardless of his standard of education. All that is required is an open mind which contemplates and responds. Increased knowledge then endorses and emphasizes, with numerous examples, what inspiration has already proven at first glance. The results of study and research endorse, within their limited scope, this basic truth which applies to everything in the universe.

The American scientist, A. Cressy Morrison, Head of the Science Academy in New York, says in his book *Man Does Not Stand Alone:*

> Birds have the homing instinct. The robin that nested at your door may go south in the autumn, but will come back to his old nest the next spring. In September, flocks of many of our birds fly south, often over a thousand miles of open sea, but they do not lose their way. The homing pigeon, confused by new sounds on a long journey in a closed box, circles for a moment then heads almost unerringly for home. The bee finds its hive while the wind waving the grasses and trees blots out every visible guide to its whereabouts. This homing sense is slightly developed in man, but he supplements his meagre equipment with instruments of navigation. We need this instinct and our brain provides the answer. The tiny insects must have microscopic eyes, how perfect we do not know, and the hawks, the eagle and the condor must have telescopic vision. Here again man surpasses them with his mechanical instruments. With his telescope he can see a nebula so faint that it requires two million times his vision, and with the electron microscope he can see hitherto invisible bacteria and, so to speak, the little bugs that bite them.
>
> If you let old Dobbin alone he will keep to the road in the blackest night. He can see, dimly perhaps, but he notes the difference in temperature of the road and the sides with eyes that are slightly affected by the infra-red rays of the road. The owl can see the nice warm mouse as he runs in the cooler grass in the blackest night. We turn night into day by creating radiation in that short octave we call light.[12]
>
> The honey-bee workers make chambers of different sizes in the comb used for breeding. Small chambers are constructed for the workers, larger ones for the drones, and special chambers for the prospective queens. The queen bee lays unfertilized eggs in the cells designed for males, but lays fertilized eggs in the proper chambers for the female workers and the possible queens. The workers, who are the modified females, having long since anticipated the

[12] A. Cressy Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone,* Morrison & Gibb Ltd., London, 1962, pp. 58-59.

coming of the new generation, are also prepared to furnish food for the young bees by chewing and predigesting honey and pollen. They discontinue the process of chewing, including the predigesting, at a certain stage of the development of the males and females, and feed only honey and pollen. The females so treated become the workers.

For the females in the queen chambers the diet of chewed and pre-digested food is continued. These specially treated females develop into queen bees, which alone produce fertile eggs. This process of reproduction involves special chambers, special eggs, and the marvellous effect of a change of diet. This means anticipation, discretion, and the application of a discovery of the effect of diet. These changes apply particularly to a community life and seem necessary to its existence. The knowledge and skills required must have been evolved after the beginnings of this community life, and are not necessarily inherent in the structure or the survival of the honey bee as such. The bee, therefore, seems to have outstripped man in knowledge of the effects of diet under certain conditions.

The dog with an inquiring nose can sense the animal that has passed. No instrument of human invention has added to our inferior sense of smell, and we hardly know where to begin to investigate its extension. Yet even our sense of smell is so highly developed that it can detect ultra-microscopic particles. How do we know that we all get the same reaction from any single odour? The fact is that we do not. Taste also gives a very different sensation to each of us. How strange that these differences in perception are hereditary.

All animals hear sounds, many of which are outside our range of vibration, with an acuteness that far surpasses our limited sense of hearing. Man by his devices can now hear a fly walking miles away as though it was on his eardrums, and with like instruments record the impact of a cosmic ray.[13]

One of the water spiders fashions a balloon-shaped nest of cobweb filaments and attaches it to some object under water. Then she ingeniously entangles an air bubble in the hairs of her under-body, carries it into the water, and releases it under the nest. This performance is repeated until the nest is inflated, when she proceeds to bring forth and raise her young safe from attack by air. Here we have a synthesis of the web, engineering, construction, and aeronautics. Chance perhaps, but that still leaves the spider unexplained.

The young salmon spends years at sea, then comes back to his own river, and, what is more, he travels up the side of the river into which flows the tributary in which he was born. The laws of the States on one side of the dividing

[13] Ibid., pp. 61-63.

stream may be strict and the other side not, but these laws affect only the fish which may be said to belong to each side. What brings them back so definitely? If a salmon going up a river is transferred to another tributary he will at once realize he is not in the right tributary and will fight his way down to the main stream and then turn up against the current to finish his destiny. There is, however, a much more difficult reverse problem to solve in the case of the eel. These amazing creatures migrate at maturity from all the ponds and rivers everywhere, those from Europe across thousands of miles of ocean, all go to the abysmal deeps south of Bermuda. There they breed and die. The little ones, with no apparent means of knowing anything except that they are in a wilderness of water, start back and find their way to the shore from which their parents came and thence to every river, lake and little pond, so that each body of water is always populated with eels. They have braved the mighty currents, storms and tides, and have conquered the beating waves on every shore. They can now grow and when they are mature, they will, by some mysterious law, go back through it all to complete the cycle. Where does the directing impulse originate? No American eel has ever been caught in European waters and no European eel has ever been caught in American waters. Nature has also delayed the maturity of the European eel by a year or more to make up for its much greater journey. Do atoms and molecules when combined in an eel have a sense of direction and willpower to exercise it?[14]

A female moth placed in your attic by the open window will send out some subtle signal. Over an unbelievable area, the male moths of the same species will catch the message and respond in spite of your attempts to produce laboratory odours to disconcert them. Has the little creature a broadcasting station, and has the male moth a mental radio set beside his antennae? Does she shake the ether and does he catch the vibration? The cricket rubs its legs or wings together, and on a still night can be heard half a mile away. It shakes six hundred tons of air and calls its mate. Miss Moth, working in a different realm of physics and, in apparent silence, calls quite as effectively. Before the radio was discovered, scientists decided it was odour that attracted the male moth. It was a miracle either way, because the odour would have to travel in all directions, with or without the wind. The male moth would have to be able to detect a molecule and sense the direction from whence it came. By a vast mechanism, we are developing the same ability to communicate, and the day will come when a young man may call his loved one from a distance and without mechanical medium and she will answer. No lock or bars will stop them. Our telephone and radio are instrumental wonders and give us means

[14] Ibid., pp. 64-65.

of almost instant communication, but we are tied to a wire and a place. The moth is still ahead of us, and we can only envy her until our brain evolves an individual radio. Then, in a sense, we will have telepathy.

Vegetation makes subtle use of involuntary agents to carry on its existence — insects to carry pollen from flower to flower and the winds and everything that flies or walks to distribute seed. At last, vegetation has trapped masterful man. He has improved nature, and she generously rewards him. But he has multiplied so prodigiously that he is now chained to the plough. He must sow, reap, and store; breed and cross-breed; prune and graft. Should he neglect these tasks starvation would be his lot, civilization would crumble, and earth return to her pristine state.[15]

Many animals are like a lobster, which, having lost a claw, will by some restimulation of the cells and the reactivation of the genes discover that a part of the body is missing and restore it. When the work is complete, the cells stop work, for in some way they know it is quitting time. A fresh-water polyp divided into halves can reform itself out of one of these halves. Cut off an angle worm's head and he will soon create a new one. We can stimulate healing but when will our surgeons, if ever, know how to stimulate the cells to produce a new arm, flesh, bones, nails, and activating nerves?[16] An extraordinary fact throws some light on this mystery of recreation. If cells in the early stages of development are separated each has the ability to create a complete animal. Therefore, if the original cell divides into two and they are separated, two individuals will be developed. This may account for identical twins but it means much more — each cell at first is in detail potentially a complete individual. There can be no doubt then, that you are you in every cell and fibre.[17]

An acorn falls to the ground — its tough brown shell holds it safe. It rolls into some earthy crevice. In the spring the germ awakes, the shell bursts, food is provided by the egg-like kernel in which the genes were hidden. They send roots into the earth, and behold a sprout, a sapling, and in years a tree. The germ with its genes has multiplied by trillions and made the trunk, bark and every leaf and acorn identical with that of the oak which gave it birth. For hundreds of years in each of the countless acorns is preserved the exact

[15] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[16] At the time when this book was published, such tasks seemed a long time coming. However, most of them now seem possible. Still, the argument is correct and the more advancements science makes the more amazing God's creation appears to be. — Editor's note.

[17] A.C. Morrison, op. cit., p. 68.

> arrangement of atoms that produced the first oak tree millions of years ago.[18]

The author says in another chapter:

> Every cell that is produced in any living creature must adapt itself to be part of the flesh, to sacrifice itself as a part of the skin, which will soon be worn off. It must deposit the enamel of teeth, produce the transparent liquid in an eye, or become a nose or an ear. Each cell must then adapt itself in shape and every other characteristic necessary to fulfil its function. It is hard to think of a cell as right-handed or left-handed, but one becomes part of a right ear, the other becomes part of the left ear. Some crystals that are chemically identical turn the rays of light to the left, others to the right. There seems to be such a tendency in the cells. In the exact place where they belong, they become a part of the right ear or the left ear and your two ears are opposite each other on your head, and not as in the case of a cricket, on your elbows. Their curves are opposite, and when complete, they are so much alike you cannot tell them apart. Hundreds of thousands of cells seem impelled to do the right thing at the right time in the right place.[19]

Elsewhere in his book Morrison says:

> In the melee of creation many creatures have come to exhibit a high degree of certain forms of instinct, intelligence, or what not. The wasp catches the grasshopper, digs a hole in the earth, stings the grasshopper in exactly the right place so that he becomes unconscious but lives as a form of preserved meat. The wasp lays her eggs exactly in the right place, perhaps not knowing that when they hatch, her children can eat without killing the insect on which they feed, which would be fatal to them. The wasp must have done all this right the first and every time, or there would be no wasps of this species. Science cannot explain this mystery, and yet it cannot be attributed to chance. The wasp covers a hole in the earth, departs cheerfully, and dies. Neither she nor her ancestors have reasoned out the process, nor does she know what happens to her offspring. She doesn't even know that she has worked and lived her life for the preservation of the race.[20]

In the same book we also read:

> In some species, the workers bring in little seeds to feed the other ants through the winter. The ants establish what is known as the grinding room,

[18] Ibid., pp. 86-87.
[19] Ibid., pp. 52-53.
[20] Ibid., pp. 71-72.

> in which those which have developed gigantic jaws especially built for grinding, prepare the food for the colony. This is their sole occupation. When the autumn comes and the seeds are all ground, 'the greatest good for the greatest number' requires that the food supply be conserved and as there will be plenty of grinders in the new generation, the soldier ants kill off the grinders, satisfying their entomological conscience by believing perhaps that the grinders had had reward enough in having had first chance at the food while they ground.
>
> Certain ants, by means of instinct or reasoning (choose which you prefer), cultivate mushrooms for food in what may be called mushroom gardens, and capture certain caterpillars and aphids (plant lice). These creatures are the ants' cows and goats, from which they take certain exudations of a honey-like nature for food. Ants capture and keep slaves. Some ants, when they make their nests, cut the leaves to size, and while certain workers hold the edges in place, use their babies, which in the larval stage are capable of spinning silk, as shuttles to sew them together. The poor baby may be bereft of the opportunity of making a cocoon for himself, but he has served his community.
>
> How do the inanimate atoms and molecules of matter composing an ant set these complicated processes in motion? There must be Intelligence somewhere.[21]

True, there must be a Creator who guides these and other creatures, large and small. He is the One *"who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides."* (Verses 2-3)

The examples we have quoted above are but a few of the large number of remarkable aspects science has recorded in the worlds of plants, insects, birds and animals. But all these aspects reflect only a part of the import of the two verses: *"who creates and proportions well, who determines and guides."* (Verses 2-3) For our knowledge covers only a scanty part of what is in the visible universe, beyond which extends a whole world of which we know nothing apart from the few hints God has chosen to drop us, as befits our limited abilities.

Having fired such a great volley of praises to God, resounding in even the remotest corners of the universe, the *sūrah* complements this with an inspiring insight from the realm of plants: *"who brings forth the pasturage, then turns it to withered grass."* (Verses 4-5) The pasturage, as used here, refers to all plants. Every plant is suitable for one sort of species or another. The term then has a much wider sense

[21] Ibid., pp. 72-73.

than the familiar pastures where cattle feed. God has created this planet and provided on it enough food to nourish every single living creature which walks, swims, flies or hides itself underground.

The pasturage is green when it first shoots forth, but it withers away and blackens. It may be used for feeding when green, after it blackens and withers, or in between. Thus, it is useful in every condition, and it serves a purpose according to the elaborate planning of the One who creates, proportions, determines and guides.

The reference here to the life of plants carries also an implicit connotation that all plants are reaped and harvested. Similarly, every living being will come to its appointed end. This connotation fits in well with the reference to the two worlds of man: *"Yet you prefer this present life, while the life to come is better and longer lasting."* (Verses 16-17) This life is a pasture which comes to its end when it withers away and blackens, while the life to come is the one which lasts.

Happy News for the Prophet

As the beginning of the *sūrah* opens up this limitless horizon, it provides a framework for the fundamental facts tackled in this *sūrah* to be related to the whole universe. This framework is especially suitable, for it is in perfect harmony with the atmosphere of the *sūrah,* its rhythm and shades of meaning.

The *sūrah* then gives the Prophet, and the Muslim nation in general, a very welcome tiding: *"We shall teach you and you shall not forget, except what God wills. He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden. And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease. Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use."* (Verses 6-9) The happy news starts with sparing the Prophet the trouble of memorizing the Qur'ān. All he needs to do is to read as he is taught and God will ensure that he will never forget any part of it. *"We shall teach you and you shall not forget."* (Verse 6) So keen to keep the Qur'ān in his memory, the Prophet used to repeat it after Gabriel, the angel, delivered it to him. He felt that it was part of his responsibility to keep it registered in his mind. But God decided that He would look after this task. The promise is also a happy one for the Islamic community, since it is a reassurance that the faith the Prophet preaches is authentic. It is from God and He looks after it. This is part of God's grace. It shows how weighty the question of purity of faith is in His scales.

Every time the Qur'ān states a definite promise or constant law, it follows it with a statement implying that divine will is free of all limitations and restrictions, even those based on a promise or law from God. For His will is absolute. Here, the *sūrah* emphasizes this principle after the promise is made to the Prophet that he will never forget any part of the Qur'ān: *"except what God wills."* (Verse 7) The two are

complementary in the sense that the promise is within divine will. So we look forward to God's fulfilment of what He has willed to promise.

"He knows what is manifest and what is kept hidden." (Verse 7) This is stated here by way of giving a reason for all that has passed: teaching to read, freedom from forgetfulness and the exception made to it. Everything is decided according to the wisdom of the One who knows the secret and the manifest. He views everything from all angles and makes His decisions on the basis of His unfailing knowledge.

Then follows another promise, happy and all-embracing: *"And We shall smooth your way to perfect ease."* (Verse 8) This is again happy news for the Prophet personally and for the Muslim community at large. It is furthermore a statement of the nature of Islam, its role in human life and in the universe. This verse, which is rendered in Arabic in no more than two words, states one of the most fundamental principles of faith and existence. It provides a link between the nature of the Prophet and the nature of Islam on the one hand and the nature of the whole universe on the other. It is a universe created by God with ease; it follows its appointed way with ease and draws nearer its final objective with ease. Thus it is an inspiration lighting limitless horizons.

If God smooths a certain person's path, he finds ease in everything in his life. For he will move along his way to God with the universe, which is characterized by its harmony of construction, movement and direction. Hence he does not clash with those who digress, for these are of no importance, compared with the vast universe. Ease will pervade his whole life. It will be evident in his hand, tongue, movement, work, concepts, way of thinking and in the way he conducts all affairs and tackles all matters. Ease will be the main feature of how he carries himself and how he deals with others as well.

A Life Characterized by Ease

Such was the Prophet in all affairs. His wife, `Ā'ishah, reports that "whenever faced with a choice, the Prophet would always choose the easier of the two alternatives." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] She also reports: "Whenever the Prophet was alone with his family at home, he was the easiest of men, always smiling and laughing." Al-Bukhārī also relates: "Any woman would take the Prophet by the hand to take him wherever she wished." His guidance in matters of clothing, food, household furniture and other matters of day to day life pointed to a preference for what is easy.

Imām Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah speaks in his book, *Zād al-Ma`ād,* of the Prophet's guidance concerning what to wear:

> He had a turban which he gave to `Alī as a gift, but he used to wear it over a cap. But he also wore either the turban or the cap separately. When he wore the turban, however, he used to leave the end part of it hanging between his shoulders. This is related by Muslim in his Ṣaĥīĥ anthology of authentic *aĥādīth*, on the authority of `Umar ibn Ĥarīth, who said, 'I saw the Prophet speaking on the platform of the mosque, wearing a black turban with its end hanging between his shoulders'. Muslim also relates on the authority of Jābir ibn `Abdullāh that the Prophet entered Makkah wearing a black turban, but nothing is mentioned here about his leaving its end part hanging. This signifies that the Prophet did not always leave the tail of his turban hanging between his shoulders. It is also said that the Prophet entered Makkah wearing his fighting attire, with a helmet on his head, which suggests that he used to wear what suited the occasion.[22]
>
> The best method, it is true, is that followed by the Prophet and which he encouraged his Companions to adopt. His guidance regarding clothes is, in short, that he used to wear whatever was available, whether woollen, cotton, linen or other types of material. He used Yemeni gowns and had a green gown. He also used different types of dress such as overcoat, long robe, shirts, trousers, top gown, sandals and shoes. He left the end of his turban hanging between his shoulders on occasions, and not on other occasions.[23]

On food, the Prophet's guidance gives a similar message:

> The Prophet never refused what was available at home, nor did he ever go out of his way to get what was not. He would eat whatever was served of good food and he never slighted any sort of food whatsoever. If he did not like something he would simply not eat it, but would not forbid it. An example of his attitude is the case of lizard, which he would not eat without forbidding others to eat it. On the contrary, he was present when others ate it at his own table.
>
> He liked sweets and honey, used to eat dates, fresh and preserved... drank milk, pure and mixed, added water to ice and honey and drank a drink made from dates. He also ate *khazīrah,* which is a thick soup made of milk and flour. He ate cucumber with fresh dates, butter, dates with bread, bread with vinegar, bread with meat, dried meat, a dish called dubbā' (which was one of his favourites), boiled meat, rice and meat cooked with fat, cheese, bread with oil, water melon with fresh dates, and he used to like dates cooked with

[22] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Mu'assasat al-Risalah, and Maktabat al-Manar, Beirut and Kuwait, 1994, Vol. I, pp. 135-136.
[23] Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 143.

> butter. In short, he never refused good food, nor did he go to any trouble to get it. His guidance was to eat what was available. If he did not have anything to eat, he would simply go hungry, etc.[24]

As for the Prophet's example regarding sleep:

> He used to sleep sometimes on a mattress, sometimes on a simple animal skin. Occasionally he would sleep on a rough mat, or on the cold earth with nothing under him. He sometimes used a bed; a plain one at times and covered with a black bedspread at other times.[25]

The Prophet's traditions urging the adoption of an easy, gentle and tolerant attitude in all matters, especially those which concern religious duties are numerous. By way of example we may quote: "This religion is of an easy nature. Anyone who pulls hard against it shall be the loser." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "Do not be hard on yourselves lest it should be made hard for you. A former community chose to be hard and it was made harder for them." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] "A rider driving hard neither reaches his destination nor keeps his transport." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "Make it easy, not difficult, for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Concerning social dealings, the Prophet says: "May God have mercy on any person who is tolerant when he buys, sells and asks for his rights." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] "A believer is gentle and friendly." [Related by al-Bayhaqī.] "A believer gets on well with others and is easy to get on well with." [Related by al-Dāraquṭnī.] "The type of man God dislikes most is the quarrelsome one who does not budge." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

A highly significant feature of his character is that he hated hardness even in names and physical features. This shows how God moulded his nature and smoothed even his temperament. Sa`īd ibn al-Musayyib reports that the Prophet asked his father what his name was, since al-Musayyib was his nickname. He answered, Ĥazn, [which means rough and difficult]. The Prophet said, "No, you are Sahl [i.e. plain and easy]."[26] The man said, "I will never change a name given to me by my father." Sa`īd comments, "As a result, we have always had a trace of hardness in our characters." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Ibn `Umar reports that the Prophet changed the name of a woman from `Āşiyah [meaning disobedient] to Jamīlah [meaning pretty]." [Related by Muslim.] He also said: "It is part of kindness to receive your brother with a smiling face." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Thus we realize how refined and gentle the Prophet was, disliking even names and features which smacked of roughness and trying to substitute for them what related to gentility and

[24] Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 147-148.
[25] Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 155.
[26] This was the Prophet's way of changing a name which he did not approve of. — Editor's note.

kindness.

Ease in Practice

The Prophet's life story is composed of pages of gentility, ease, tolerance and understanding in all affairs. Let us quote here an incident which reveals his method of dealing with people of difficult temperament: "Once a bedouin came to the Prophet asking something. The Prophet granted his request then said, 'Have I treated you well?' The bedouin said, 'No, and you have not been kind either!' The Prophet's Companions present felt very angry and wanted to punish the man. The Prophet, however, motioned them to leave him alone. He then went into his house, sent for the man and gave him something over and above his original request. He then asked him: 'Have I treated you well?' The man said: 'Yes, indeed. May God reward you well for you are a good kinsman and a good tribesman.' The Prophet then said to him: 'When you said what you said you made my Companions feel angry with you. Would you now like to tell them what you have just told me so that they hold nothing against you.' The man said: 'I will.' The following day he came and the Prophet said: 'This bedouin said yesterday what you heard. We gave him more and he claimed that he was satisfied. Is that so?' The bedouin said: 'Yes indeed! May God reward you well, for you are a good kinsman and a good tribesman.' The Prophet then said to his Companions: 'My affair with this bedouin is similar to that of a man who had a she-camel which ran loose. Other people rushed to try to catch her but they managed only to make her run wild. The owner then appealed to them to let him alone with his she-camel as he was gentler to her and knew her temperament. The owner then went towards her, having picked something to feed her with. He approached her gently until she responded and sat down. He then saddled her and mounted her back. Had I left you alone when the man said what he said, you would probably have killed him and he would have gone to hell."

So gentle, simple and compassionate was the Prophet's attitude towards any person of rough nature. Examples of this attitude abound in the records of his life. These examples are practical manifestations of how his path was smoothed for him to achieve perfect ease in every aspect of life. He was given a tolerant, understanding nature so that he might carry out his mission as God's Messenger to mankind. In this way his nature and the nature of Islam, the message he carried and delivered, are alike. He was able, with God's grace, to fulfil the great task with which he was entrusted. For when his path was smoothed, the heavy burden of his mission became an enjoyable sport.

The Qur'ān carries descriptions of Muĥammad, God's Messenger, and the role assigned to him: *"We have sent you forth only as a mercy to mankind."* (21: 107) "*Those*

who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel that are with them. He commands them to do what is right and forbids them to do what is wrong, and makes lawful to them the good things of life and forbids them all that is foul. He lifts from them their burdens and the shackles that weigh upon them." (7: 157) As the Qur'ān states, Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was a messenger bringing mercy to mankind, lifting their burdens which were imposed on them when they sought to make things hard.

The Qur'ān also describes the message the Prophet delivered in statements of like import: *"We have made the Qur'ān easy for warning: but will any take heed?"* (54: 22) *"He has laid on you no hardships in the observance of your religion."* (22: 78) *"God does not charge a soul with more than it can bear."* (2: 286) *"God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but He wants to purify you."* (5: 6) The message of Islam is made easy for people to follow since it takes into consideration the limitations of human abilities. It imposes no burdens which are too heavy. This easy nature of Islam is readily identifiable in its spirit as well as in its commandments: *"Follow the upright nature God has endowed mankind with."* (30: 30)

When we look carefully through this religion we find that care has been taken to make it easy for people to follow, without overstraining themselves. It takes into consideration the different situations man finds himself in, and the conditions he faces in different environments. The faith itself is based on concepts which are easy to grasp: a single deity; none like Him; He has created everything; He has guided everything to realize the purpose of its existence; He has also sent messengers to remind people of their role in life and to call them back to their Lord who created them. All obligations imposed by this faith fit perfectly together: there are no conflicts, no contradictions. People have to fulfil these obligations according to their abilities. There need be no overstraining, no heavy burdens. The Prophet teaches us: "When I give you an order, fulfil it as much as you can; but leave off what I forbid you." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Prohibition may also be relaxed *"He has clearly spelled out to you what He has forbidden you [to eat] unless you are driven to do so by sheer necessity."* (6: 119) These basic principles provide the limits within which the Islamic commandments and principles operate.

Hence the Messenger and the message have in common this basic feature of easy nature. So does the Muslim community which is brought into being by Islam, the easy message: it is a 'middle' community, merciful, the recipient of divine mercy, easy natured, enjoying a life which is perfectly harmonious with the wider universe. The universe itself with its perfect harmony provides a true picture of how God's creation moves easily and smoothly, without clash or crash. Millions and millions of stars move in their orbits in the great space God has provided, each with its own gravity, yet none moves out of step and none crashes into another. There are

countless millions of living creatures, each moving through life to its appointed aim, near or distant, according to a perfect plan. Each is given the abilities which make its aim easy to achieve. Endless millions of movements, events and conditions come together then go their separate ways; yet they are much the same as the sounds of the different instruments in an orchestra: so different but which combine together to produce beautiful harmonies.

In short, perfect harmony exists between the nature of the universe, the message, the Messenger and the Muslim community. They are all the creation of God, the One, the Most Wise.

The Prophet's Great Task

"*Give warning, therefore, [regardless of] whether such warning is of use.*" (Verse 9) God has taught the Prophet so as not to forget, smoothed his way to perfect ease so that he may be able to discharge his great task of warning mankind. For this he has been the subject of careful preparation. Hence, he is asked to warn whenever he has a chance to address people and to convey to them God's message.

"*Regardless of whether such warning is of use.*" Warning is always useful. There will always be, in every land and every generation, those who will listen to the reminders and warnings and will benefit by them, no matter how corrupt their society is and how hardened their people are.

If we ponder a little over the verses in this *sūrah* and their sequence, we realize how great the message entrusted to the Prophet is. To deliver it, and to give the warnings he is asked to give, he needs special equipment: a smooth way to perfect ease in everything, to be taught what to say, and God's preservation of the message intact.

Once the Prophet has delivered his message, his task is fulfilled. Everyone is left to choose his way. Destinies differ according to the choice of ways people follow: "*He who fears God will heed it, but the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it, who shall be cast into the great fire, in which he shall neither die nor remain alive. Successful will be he who purifies himself and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays.*" (Verses 10-15) The Prophet is told here that his warnings will benefit those who fear God and dread to incur His displeasure. Any intelligent person will shudder when he learns that there is a Creator who proportions well, determines and guides. For he realizes that such a Creator must hold everyone responsible for their actions, good or evil, and will reward them accordingly. Hence they fear Him and heed the warnings they are given.

"*But the most hapless wretch will turn aside from it.*" (Verse 11) If a man does not

listen to the warning given, then he is absolutely *"the most hapless wretch."* He lives in a void, uninspired by the facts surrounding him, turning a deaf ear and a senseless mind to the evidence they give. Such a person lives in constant worry, striving hard to attain the paltry pleasures of this world. Hence he is the most wretched in this life. But he is also the most wretched in the hereafter as he will there suffer endless torment: He *"shall be cast into the great fire, in which he shall neither die nor remain alive."* (Verses 12-13) The great fire is that of hell. It is indeed the greatest of all fires in intensity, duration and size. He who suffers it finds it endless. He neither dies to rest from its torment, nor does he live in it a life of rest and security. It is an unending agony which makes the sufferer yearn for death as his greatest hope.

At the other end we find prosperity accompanied with self- purification and a heeding of warnings: *"Successful will be he who purifies himself and glorifies the name of his Lord and prays."* (Verses 14-15) Purification is used here in the widest sense of the word: purification from everything filthy or sinful. The person who seeks to purify himself, glorifies his Lord, feels His power and majesty in his inmost soul and prays, [whether praying is taken in its general sense or its specific Islamic sense] will definitely be successful, as God states here. He will achieve success here in this life as he enjoys his relationship with God and the perfect bliss that results from his glorification of God. He will achieve even greater success in the hereafter as he escapes hell and is rewarded with perfect happiness in heaven. How different the two destinies are.

Having sketched the two different ends of the most wretched and the God-fearing, the *sūrah* points out to the addressees the real reason for their great wretchedness, the failure which drives them headlong into the great fire: *"Yet you prefer this present life, while the life to come is better and longer lasting."* (Verses 16-17) This short-sighted preference is the real reason for every misery which befalls man. It is indeed the cause of man's taking no heed of the warnings given to him. The Qur'ān calls the present life *dunia* which connotes both contempt and easy access. The life to come is better in kind and duration. Only the foolish who are deprived of sound judgement would, in the circumstances, prefer the present life to the next.

In conclusion, the *sūrah* points out that the message of Islam is not new; its roots go back far deep in time. *"All this has indeed been stated in the earlier revelations; the scriptures of Abraham and Moses."* (Verses 18-19) The basics of the grand faith contained in this *sūrah* are the same old basic facts outlined in the ancient scriptures of Abraham and Moses.

The truth is one and the faith is one. This results from the fact that their origin is one, God, whose will it was to send messengers to mankind. The messengers deliver basically the same message, the same simple truth. Details of the messages may differ according to local or temporal needs, but the basics are the same. They have one

origin: God, the Most High, who creates, proportions well, determines and guides.

SŪRAH 88

Al-Ghāshiyah

(The Enveloper)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

هَلۡ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ٱلۡغَٰشِيَةِ ﴿١﴾	*Have you heard the story of the Enveloper?* (1)
وُجُوهٞ يَوۡمَئِذٍ خَٰشِعَةٌ ﴿٢﴾	*Some faces on that day are downcast,* (2)
عَامِلَةٞ نَّاصِبَةٞ ﴿٣﴾	*labour weary, worn out,* (3)
تَصۡلَىٰ نَارًا حَامِيَةً ﴿٤﴾	*about to enter a scorching fire,* (4)
تُسۡقَىٰ مِنۡ عَيۡنٍ ءَانِيَةٖ ﴿٥﴾	*made to drink from a boiling fountain.* (5)
لَّيۡسَ لَهُمۡ طَعَامٌ إِلَّا مِن ضَرِيعٖ ﴿٦﴾	*Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns,* (6)
لَّا يُسۡمِنُ وَلَا يُغۡنِي مِن جُوعٖ ﴿٧﴾	*which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger.* (7)
وُجُوهٞ يَوۡمَئِذٖ نَّاعِمَةٞ ﴿٨﴾	*Other faces on that day are jocund,* (8)
لِّسَعۡيِهَا رَاضِيَةٞ ﴿٩﴾	*well-pleased with their striving,* (9)

فِي جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ ﴿١٠﴾	*in a sublime garden,* (10)
لَّا تَسْمَعُ فِيهَا لَغِيَةً ﴿١١﴾	*where they hear no babble.* (11)
فِيهَا عَيْنٌ جَارِيَةٌ ﴿١٢﴾	*A running fountain shall be there,* (12)
فِيهَا سُرُرٌ مَّرْفُوعَةٌ ﴿١٣﴾	*and raised couches,* (13)
وَأَكْوَابٌ مَّوْضُوعَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾	*and goblets placed ready,* (14)
وَنَمَارِقُ مَصْفُوفَةٌ ﴿١٥﴾	*and cushions laid in order,* (15)
وَزَرَابِيُّ مَبْثُوثَةٌ ﴿١٦﴾	*and carpets spread out.* (16)
أَفَلَا يَنظُرُونَ إِلَى ٱلْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ ﴿١٧﴾	*Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created;* (17)
وَإِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ كَيْفَ رُفِعَتْ ﴿١٨﴾	*and heaven, how it is raised aloft;* (18)
وَإِلَى ٱلْجِبَالِ كَيْفَ نُصِبَتْ ﴿١٩﴾	*and the mountains, how they are hoisted;* (19)
وَإِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ كَيْفَ سُطِحَتْ ﴿٢٠﴾	*and the earth, how it is spread out.* (20)
فَذَكِّرْ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مُذَكِّرٌ ﴿٢١﴾	*Therefore exhort them; your task is only to exhort.* (21)
لَّسْتَ عَلَيْهِم بِمُصَيْطِرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾	*You are not their overseer.* (22)

But he who turns his back and disbelieves, (23)	إِلَّا مَن تَوَلَّىٰ وَكَفَرَ ﴿٢٣﴾
God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering. (24)	فَيُعَذِّبُهُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَكْبَرَ ﴿٢٤﴾
To Us they shall surely return, (25)	إِنَّ إِلَيْنَآ إِيَابَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾
when We shall bring them to account. (26)	ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا حِسَابَهُم ﴿٢٦﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is a deep and calm melody which invites meditation, hope and fear. It warns man to be ready for the day of reckoning. It carries man's heart into two vast spheres: the life hereafter with its limitless world and moving scenes; and the visible sphere of existence, with the signs God has spread in all the creatures sharing this existence held out for everyone to see. After these two great scenarios, the *sūrah* reminds man of the reckoning on the Day of Judgement, of God's power, and of the inevitable return to Him. Throughout, the style is characterized by its depth of tone: it is calm but highly effective, powerful and awesome.

"*Have you heard the story of the Enveloper?*" (Verse 1) With this introduction, the *sūrah* wants to make hearts turn back to God, to remind men of His signs in the universe, His reckoning on the Day of Judgement, and His certain reward. It starts with this inquiry, which implies greatness and indicates a positive statement. It points out that the question of the hereafter had already been affirmed and earlier reminders had been given. The Day of Resurrection is here given a new name, "the Enveloper", which suggests that a calamity will befall mankind and envelop them with its horrors. It is one of the many evocative names mentioned in the *sūrahs* included in this volume. Others are: The Overwhelming, The Deafening, The Stunning Event. They all suit the general tone and nature of these *sūrahs.*

Whenever the Prophet (peace be upon him) listened to this *sūrah,* he felt that the address "*Have you heard...*" was directed to him personally, as if he was receiving it from his Lord directly for the first time. He was extremely moved by this. The reality of this divine address was always present in his mind. A tradition related by `Umar ibn Maymūn says that the Prophet once passed by a woman who was reading this *sūrah.* When she read "*Have you heard the story of the Enveloper...?*" he stopped to listen and said "Yes, I have heard it."

The address is nevertheless a general one, directed at everyone who hears the Qur'ān. The story of the Enveloper is an oft-repeated theme in the Qur'ān, reminding men of the hereafter, warning them of its punishment, and promising its rewards. It is a story which aims to awaken people's consciences, to arouse their fear and apprehension as well as their hope and expectancy.

The Story in Brief

The *sūrah* opens with a question: *"Have you heard the story of the Enveloper?"* (Verse 1) It follows this by relating part of its story: *"Some faces on that day are downcast, labour weary, worn out, about to enter a scorching fire, made to drink from a boiling fountain. Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns, which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger."* (Verses 2-7) The scene of suffering and torture is given before the scene of joy, because the former is closer to the connotations of the name given to the event, the Enveloper, and the impressions it generates.

Thus we are told that there are on that day faces which look humble, downcast and worn out. They belong to people who have laboured and toiled without satisfactory results. Indeed the results they get are a total loss, which increases their disappointment, and causes looks of humiliation and exhaustion on their faces. Hence they are described as *"labour weary, worn out"*. (Verse 3) They had laboured and toiled for something other than God's cause. Their work was totally for themselves and their families, for their own ambitions in the life of this world. Then they come to reap the fruits of their toil, not having made any provision for their future life. Hence they face the end with a mixture of humiliation, exhaustion, misery and hopelessness. In addition to all this they roast *"at a scorching fire."* (Verse 4)

They are *"made to drink from a boiling fountain. Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns, which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger."* (Verses 5-7) The Arabic text uses the term *đarī`*, which is translated here as 'dry thorns'. However, some commentators say that it refers to a tree of fire in hell. This explanation is based on what has been revealed about the tree of *zaqqūm* which grows at the centre of hell. It is also said to be a kind of cactus thorn, which when green is called *shabraq* and is eaten by camels. However, when it is fully grown it becomes poisonous and cannot be eaten. Whatever it is in reality, it is a kind of food like *ghislīn* and *ghassāq* [names given in the Qur'ān to refer to the food available in hell] which neither nourishes nor appeases hunger.

It is obvious that we, in this world, cannot fully comprehend the nature of such suffering in the hereafter. The description is made in order to give our perceptions the feeling of the greatest possible pain, which is produced by a combination of humiliation, weakness, failure, the scorching fire, drinking and bathing in boiling

water, and eating food unacceptable even to camels, which are used to eating thorns when they travel in desert areas. This type of thorn, however, is dry and gives no nourishment. From all these aspects we get a sense of the ultimate affliction. But the affliction of the hereafter is, nevertheless, greater. Its true nature is incomprehensible except to those who will actually experience it. May God never count us among them.

On the other hand we find *"other faces on that day are jocund, well pleased with their striving, in a sublime garden, where they hear no babble. A running fountain shall be there, and raised couches, and goblets placed ready, and cushions laid in order, and carpets spread out."* (Verses 8-16) Here are faces bright with joy, animated with pleasure. They are well pleased with what they are given. They enjoy that splendid, spiritual feeling of satisfaction with what they have done, as they sense God's pleasure with them. There is no better feeling for man than to be reassured of his own actions, and to see the results reflected in God being pleased with him. The Qur'ān gives precedence to this kind of happiness over the joys of heaven. Then it describes heaven and the joys it affords to its happy dwellers: *"in a sublime garden."* (Verse 10) It is glorious and sublime, with lofty positions and elevated gardens.

The description of height and elevation gives us a special feeling. *"Where they hear no babble."* (Verse 11) This expression creates a sense of calmness, peace, reassurance, love, satisfaction and pleasant discourse between friends. It also provides a feeling of raising oneself above any vain conversation. This is in itself a kind of joy and happiness, which is better felt when one remembers the first life and its increasing polemics, disputes, contentions, quarrels, sin and uproar. When one remembers all this, one relaxes into complete calmness, total peace of mind and a pleasant happiness generated by the Qur'ānic expression *"where they hear no babble"*. The very words are endowed with a pleasant fragrance. They flow with gratifying rhythm. It also implies that, as the believers turn away in this life from polemics and vain discourse, their way of life acquires a heavenly element.

As has been said earlier, of all the descriptions of heaven, God emphasizes first this sublime and brilliant element, before He mentions the joys which satisfy the senses. These are given in a form comprehensible to man, but in heaven they take the form which is suited for the elevated standards of the people there. Thus they remain unknown except to those who actually experience them.

"A running fountain shall be there." (Verse 12) The description combines a sense of quenching thirst, with beauty of movement and flow. Running water gives a sense of liveliness and youth. It is pleasant to the eye and the mind, and touches the depths of human feeling.

"And raised couches." (Verse 13) The adjective, raised, gives an impression of

cleanliness and purity. *"And goblets placed ready,"* (Verse 14) so they are ready for drinking — there is no need to order or prepare them. *"And cushions laid in order."* (Verse 15) These are prepared for dwellers to recline and relax. *"And carpets spread out."* They serve the dual purpose of decoration and comfort. All these luxuries are similar to the luxuries enjoyed in this life, but these are mentioned merely to make them comprehensible to us. Their true nature, and the nature of their enjoyment, are left for the experience of those whom God has rewarded.

It is useless to make comparisons or enquiries concerning the nature of the joys of the hereafter, or the nature of its afflictions. People gain their understanding by means that are limited to this world, and the nature of life in it. When they are in the next life all veils will be lifted and barriers removed. Souls and senses will be free from all restrictions, and the connotations of the very words will alter as a result of the change in the feelings to which they refer. These Qur'ānic descriptions help us to imagine the ultimate of sweetness and joy. This is all that we can do while we live on earth, but when God honours us with His grace and pleasure, as we pray He will, we will know the reality to which the Qur'ān refers.

Reflection on God's Creation

When this account of the hereafter comes to its close, the *sūrah* refers to the present world, which is in itself a manifestation of the power and perfect planning of God, the Almighty: *"Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created; and heaven, how it is raised aloft; and the mountains, how they are hoisted; and the earth, how it is spread out."* (Verses 17-20) These four short verses join together the boundaries of the world of the Arabs — the first people to be addressed by the Qur'ān. They also group together the prominent ends of creation in the universe as they speak of the sky, earth, mountains and camels. The last of these stands for all animals, although the camel has its own distinctive features and a special value for Arabs.

All these aspects of creation — the sky, earth, mountains and animals — are always in front of man wherever he is. Whatever man's level of civilization and scientific advancement, they remain within his world and within his sphere of consciousness. When he considers their roles, they suggest to him something of what lies beyond. In each of them there is a miracle of creation. The distinctive, incomparable work of the Creator is clear in them all, and this alone is sufficient to indicate the true faith. Hence the Qur'ān directs to them the attention of every human being.

"Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created." (Verse 17) The camel was the most important animal for the Arab. It was his means of transport which also carried his belongings. It gave him food and drink. From its hair and skin he made his

clothes and dwellings. Besides, the camel is unique among all animals. Despite its strength, size and firm build, it is tame: a young boy can manage it. It gives man great service and, at the same time, it is inexpensive to keep and its food is easy to find. Moreover, it is the only animal to endure hunger, thirst, hard work and poor conditions. Its shape has also a special characteristic which is in perfect harmony with the portrait drawn here, and this will be discussed later on.

So, the Qur'ān, asks of its first audience to ponder on how the camel is made. This does not require them to undertake any difficult task or to discover any obscure field of science. *"Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created."* (Verse 17) Camels were a part of their world, and they only needed to look and consider how they were made most suitable for their role; how their shape and build fitted perfectly with their environment and function. Man did not create camels, nor did camels create themselves. o, they must have been made by the Supreme Maker whose work reflects His limitless ability and perfect planning, and testifies to His existence.

"And heaven, how it is raised aloft." (Verse 18) The Qur'ān repeatedly directs man's reflective faculties to the skies. The desert people should be the first to undertake this, because in the desert the sky is much richer and more inspiring — as if it has a unique existence. In the middle of the day, the sky is brilliant and beaming; at late afternoon, it is captivating and fascinating; at sunset, most charming and inspiring. Then as the night spreads its wings the sky shows its sparkling stars and makes its friendly whispers. At sunrise, the sky comes alive again and becomes animating. All this is certainly worth a good deal of reflection and contemplation. They should consider how it was raised up. Who placed it so high without pillars to support it? Who scattered those innumerable stars? Who endowed it with its beauty and inspiration? They certainly did not lift it up, and it could not have been lifted by itself. A power is responsible for its creation and erection, and intelligent thought is enough to indicate Him.

"And the mountains, how they are hoisted." (Verse 19) For the Arab in particular, a mountain is a refuge and a friend. In general, it always looks majestic and awesome. Next to a mountain, a man appears small and humble. It is natural for a man on a mountain to think of God, and feel himself nearer to Him. He feels a distinct detachment from the petty concerns of his worldly life. It was neither a vain whim nor a coincidence that Muĥammad (peace be upon him) should go to the cave on Mount Ĥirā' for periods of worship and contemplation before he was given God's message. It is also not surprising that those who want to spend a period in self-purification should seek to do so on a mountain. The reference here to the mountains speaks of them being 'hoisted', because this fits in perfectly with the image portrayed, which we will discuss presently.

"And the earth, how it is spread out." (Verse 20) The earth is obviously outstretched

and made suitable for human life and its full and varied range of activities. Man could not have made it so, as its creation was completed long before his existence. o should not man consider who spread out the earth and made life feasible on it? Intelligent reflection on all these aspects will always inspire minds and excite souls into recognition of God, the Creator.

Perhaps we should pause a little to consider the perfection with which this image of the universe is portrayed. The Qur'ān addresses man's religious conscience in a language of artistic beauty, and both coalesce in the believer's perception to bring the whole image into full relief. The scene portrayed here includes the elevated heaven and the spread out earth. Across such a boundless horizon stand the mountains. They are not described as firmly-rooted, but rather they are 'hoisted'. The camels also stand with their upright humps. It is a majestic scene, vast and infinite, with merely two horizontal lines and two vertical ones. This manipulation of graphic description for the expression of ideas is a distinct characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The Prophet's Mission

Having dealt first with the hereafter, and pointed out some apparent aspects of the universe, the *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet, (peace be upon him), laying down the nature of his mission and limits of his role. It then concludes with a final reminder to mankind: "*Therefore exhort them; your task is only to exhort. You are not their overseer. But he who turns his back and disbelieves, God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering. To Us they shall surely return, when We shall bring them to account.*" (Verses 21-26)

Remind them, then, of the hereafter and the universe, and all there is in each of them. Your specific task is to remind people, and you have no other role. This is indeed your mission for which you have been suitably equipped.

"*You are not their overseer.*" (Verse 22) You have no control over their hearts and you cannot compel them to adopt the faith. Men's hearts are in the hands of God, the Merciful. *Jihād,* which means striving for God's cause and which was later made a duty of the Prophet and all Muslims, did not aim at converting people to Islam by force. Its only aim was to remove all hindrances in the way of the Islamic message, so that it could be delivered freely, and people would not be prevented from listening to it or be persecuted for doing so. This is the role the Prophet can fulfil: to remove the obstacles which prevent him from delivering his message.

The notion that the Prophet's mission is confined to reminding people and delivering God's message is often repeated and stressed in the Qur'ān. There are several reasons for this emphasis, the first of which is to relieve the Prophet of the heavy burden of directing the course of the Islamic message once he has conveyed it. He must leave it to God to decide its course. The urgency of the human yearning to

win victory for the truth and to get people to benefit from its absolute goodness is so keen that such repetition is required to make the advocates of this message distinguish their own desires and ambitions from their mission. When this distinction is clear, they proceed in fulfilment of their duty, regardless of the response and consequence. Thus advocates of Islam do not worry themselves over who has accepted the faith and who has not. They are not charged with this burden, which becomes particularly heavy at times of adversity, when a favourable response becomes a rarity and enemies abound.

But the delivery of the message, which is the limit of the Prophet's task, is not the end of the matter. The unbelievers are not to be left alone. They cannot deny God and be safe. *"But he who turns his back and disbelieves, God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering."* (Verses 23-24) They will no doubt return to God, and He will inevitably administer their retribution. Such is the final and decisive note on which the *sūrah* ends: *"To Us they shall surely return, when We shall bring them to account."* (Verses 25-26)

The definition of the Prophet's role and the role of every subsequent advocate of Islam is thus completed. They have only to remind and the reckoning will be made by God. It must be stressed, however, that the process of reminding includes the removal of hindrances so that people are free to listen to the divine message. This is the aim of *jihād* as it is understood from the Qur'ān and the Prophet's history. It is a process which neither admits negligence nor permits aggression.

SŪRAH 89

Al-Fajr

(The Dawn)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلْفَجْرِ ﴿١﴾	*By the dawn,* (1)
وَلَيَالٍ عَشْرٍ ﴿٢﴾	*by the ten nights,* (2)
وَٱلشَّفْعِ وَٱلْوَتْرِ ﴿٣﴾	*by that which is even and that which is odd,* (3)
وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذَا يَسْرِ ﴿٤﴾	*by the night as it journeys on!* (4)
هَلْ فِي ذَٰلِكَ قَسَمٌ لِّذِي حِجْرٍ ﴿٥﴾	*Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?* (5)
أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِعَادٍ ﴿٦﴾	*Have you not heard how your Lord dealt with the ʿĀd,* (6)
إِرَمَ ذَاتِ ٱلْعِمَادِ ﴿٧﴾	*the people of Iram, the many-pillared [city],* (7)
ٱلَّتِي لَمْ يُخْلَقْ مِثْلُهَا فِي ٱلْبِلَادِ ﴿٨﴾	*the like of whom has never been created in the whole land?* (8)
وَثَمُودَ ٱلَّذِينَ جَابُوا۟ ٱلصَّخْرَ بِٱلْوَادِ ﴿٩﴾	*And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley?* (9)

وَفِرْعَوْنَ ذِى ٱلْأَوْتَادِ ﴿١٠﴾

And with Pharaoh, of the tent- pegs? (10)

ٱلَّذِينَ طَغَوْا۟ فِى ٱلْبِلَـٰدِ ﴿١١﴾

They were all transgressors throughout their lands, (11)

فَأَكْثَرُوا۟ فِيهَا ٱلْفَسَادَ ﴿١٢﴾

bringing about much corruption there. (12)

فَصَبَّ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّكَ سَوْطَ عَذَابٍ ﴿١٣﴾

Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. (13)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَبِٱلْمِرْصَادِ ﴿١٤﴾

Your Lord surely observes all. (14)

فَأَمَّا ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ إِذَا مَا ٱبْتَلَىٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ فَأَكْرَمَهُۥ وَنَعَّمَهُۥ فَيَقُولُ رَبِّىٓ أَكْرَمَنِ ﴿١٥﴾

As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His generosity and with a life of ease, he says, 'My Lord is bountiful to me.' (15)

وَأَمَّآ إِذَا مَا ٱبْتَلَىٰهُ فَقَدَرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقَهُۥ فَيَقُولُ رَبِّىٓ أَهَـٰنَنِ ﴿١٦﴾

But whenever He tries him by stinting his means, he says, 'My Lord has disgraced me.' (16)

كَلَّا ۖ بَل لَّا تُكْرِمُونَ ٱلْيَتِيمَ ﴿١٧﴾

No indeed; but you are not generous towards the orphan, (17)

وَلَا تَحَـٰٓضُّونَ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ ٱلْمِسْكِينِ ﴿١٨﴾

nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. 18)

وَتَأْكُلُونَ ٱلتُّرَاثَ أَكْلًا لَّمًّا ﴿١٩﴾

You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, (19)

وَتُحِبُّونَ ٱلْمَالَ حُبًّا جَمًّا ﴿٢٠﴾

and you love wealth passionately. (20)

كَلَّآ إِذَا دُكَّتِ ٱلْأَرْضُ دَكًّا دَكًّا ﴿٢١﴾

No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, (21)

وَجَآءَ رَبُّكَ وَٱلْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا ﴿٢٢﴾	*and your Lord comes, with the angels rank on rank,* (22)
وَجِاْىٓءَ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بِجَهَنَّمَ ۚ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَتَذَكَّرُ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ وَأَنَّىٰ لَهُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ ﴿٢٣﴾	*and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him?* (23)
يَقُولُ يَٰلَيْتَنِى قَدَّمْتُ لِحَيَاتِى ﴿٢٤﴾	*He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!'* (24)
فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يُعَذِّبُ عَذَابَهُۥٓ أَحَدٌ ﴿٢٥﴾	*On that day, none will punish as He punishes,* (25)
وَلَا يُوثِقُ وَثَاقَهُۥٓ أَحَدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾	*and none will bind with chains as He binds. (26*
يَٰٓأَيَّتُهَا ٱلنَّفْسُ ٱلْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ﴿٢٧﴾	*'Oh soul at peace!* (27)
ٱرْجِعِىٓ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً ﴿٢٨﴾	*Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing.* (28)
فَٱدْخُلِى فِى عِبَٰدِى ﴿٢٩﴾	*Enter, then, together with My servants!* (29)
وَٱدْخُلِى جَنَّتِى ﴿٣٠﴾	*Enter My paradise!'* (30)

Overview

The present *sūrah* follows, in general, the line of this part of the Qur'ān, inviting the human heart to faith, urging man to awake, meditate and follow the path of righteousness. It uses different kinds of emphasis, connotation and rhythm, but constitutes, nevertheless, a single harmonious piece of music, varying in tones but maintaining the same cadence. Some of its scenes impart a touch of quiet beauty and a light, pleasant rhythm. This is particularly evident in its opening, which describes certain charming aspects of the universe and provides at the same time an aura of worship and prayer: "*By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on!*" (Verses 1-4) Other scenes are tense and dramatic in both what they describe and in their music, like this violent, frightening picture: "*No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, and your Lord comes, with the*

angels rank on rank, and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him? He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!' On that day, none will punish as He punishes, And none will bind with chains as He binds." (Verses 21-26)

Some of the portraits drawn in the *sūrah* are pleasing, gentle and reassuring, striking perfect harmony between subject matter and rhythm. This is especially true of its ending: "*Oh soul at peace! Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Enter, then, together with My servants! Enter My paradise!'* (Verses 27-30)

The *sūrah* also includes references to the destruction that befell insolent peoples of the past. The rhythm here falls somewhere between that of easy narration and that of violent destruction: "*Have you not heard how your Lord dealt with the `Ād, the people of Iram, the many pillared [city], the like of whom has never been created in the whole land? And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley? And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs? They were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there. Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verses 6-14)

We also have an outline of some human concepts and values which are at variance with faith. This part has its own style and rhythm: "*As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His generosity and with a life of ease, he says, My Lord is bountiful to me.' But whenever He tries him by stinting his means, he says, My Lord has disgraced me.'"* (Verses 15-16)

A refutation of these erroneous concepts and values is provided through an exposition of the human conditions which give rise to them. Here we have two kinds of style and rhythm: "*No indeed; but you are not generous towards the orphan, nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately."* (Verses 17-20)

It is clear that the latter style and rhythm serves as a bridge between the statement of erroneous human ways and that which explains their inevitable attendant fate. These verses are immediately followed by a picture of the earth as it is levelled.

This brief overview reveals to us the numerous colours of the scenes described and explains the change of metre and rhyme according to the change of scenes. The *sūrah* is indeed an excellent example of an exceptionally beautiful style which is varied and harmonious at the same time.

A Serene Opening

"*By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on! Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?"* (Verses 1-5) This

opening groups together a few scenes and creatures who have familiar, pleasant, and transparent souls. *"By the dawn,"* refers to the time when life starts to breathe with ease and happiness, a time of fresh, friendly companionship. This dormant world gradually wakes up in a prayer-like process.

"By the ten nights." (Verse 2) The Qur'ān does not specify which these ten nights are. Several explanations, however, have been advanced. Some say they are the first of the month of Dhu'l-Hijjah; some say they are in al-Muharram; and others state that they are the last ten nights of Ramaḍān. As it leaves them undefined, the Arabic reference acquires an added yet amiable effect. They are merely ten nights known to God but the expression connotes that they have special character, as if they were living creatures with souls and there was mutual sympathy between them and us, transmitted through this Qur'ānic verse.

"By that which is even and that which is odd." (Verse 3) This verse adds an atmosphere of worship to that of the dawn and the ten nights. According to al-Tirmidhī, the Prophet says: "Some prayers are of even number and some are odd." This is the most appropriate import to be attached to this verse, in the general context of the *sūrah.* It suggests a mutual response between the souls of the worshippers and those of the selected nights and the brightening dawn.

"By the night as it journeys on." (Verse 4) The night here is personified as if it were a traveller journeying in the universe. Its portrait is like that of an insomniac walking on and on in the darkness, or a wayfarer who prefers to start his long journey at night. What a beautiful expression, one enhanced by its superb rhythm! The harmony between this verse and the dawn, the ten nights, the even and the odd is perfect. These are not mere words and expressions: they provide a feeling of the breeze at dawn, and of the morning dew diffusing the fragrance of flowers.

This is the effect of a gentle, inspiring whisper on our hearts, souls and consciences. The beauty of this loving address is far superior to any poetic expression because it combines the beauty of originality with the statement of certain fact. Hence it concludes with a rhetorical question: *"Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?"* (Verse 5) The oath and the conviction are certainly there for anyone with a meditative mind. Although the positive meaning is intended, the interrogative form is used because it is gentler. Thus harmony with the preceding address is maintained.

Swift Punishment of Tyranny

The subject of the oath is omitted, but it is explained by the discussion that follows on tyranny and corruption. The punishment inflicted by God on the insolent, tyrannical and corrupt communities is a law of nature asserted by this oath. The assertion takes the form of a hint befitting the generally light tone of this *sūrah: "Have*

you not heard how your Lord dealt with the `Ād, the people of Iram, the many pillared [city], the like of whom has never been created in the whole land? And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley? And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs? They were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there. Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all." (Verses 6-14)

The interrogative form in such a context is more effective in drawing the attention of the addressee, who is, in the first instance, the Prophet (peace be upon him) and then all those who may ponder over the fates of those past communities. The people of the Prophet's generation, who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān, were aware of what happened to these nations. Their fates were also explained in reports and stories conveyed by one generation to another. The description of these outcomes as the deeds of God is comforting and reassuring for the believers. It was particularly so to those believers in Makkah who, at the time when this *sūrah* was revealed, were subjected to relentless persecution and hardship by the unbelievers.

These short verses refer to the fates of the most powerful and despotic nations in ancient history. They speak of the earlier tribe of `Ād of Iram, a branch of extinct Arabs. They used to dwell in al-Aĥqāf, a sandy piece of land in southern Arabia, midway between Yemen and Ĥadramowt. The `Ād were nomadic, using posts and pillars to erect their tents. They are described elsewhere in the Qur'ān as being extremely powerful and aggressive. Indeed they were the most powerful and prestigious of all contemporary Arabian tribes: *"The like of whom has never been created in the whole land."* (Verse 8) The distinction here is restricted to that particular age.

"And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley?" (Verse 9) The Thamūd used to live at Al-Ĥijr, a rocky tract in northern Arabia, on the road from Madinah to Syria. They excelled in using rocks to build their palaces and homes. They also dug shelters and caves into the mountains.

"And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs." (Verse 10) The term, *tent- pegs',* refers to the pyramids which are as firm in their construction as pegs well dug into the ground. The Pharaoh referred to here is the despot who was Moses's contemporary.

These people *"were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there."* (Verses 11-12) Corruption is an inevitable result of tyranny, and it affects the tyrant and his subjects alike. Indeed, tyranny ruins all human relations. It forces human life out of its healthy, constructive and straight path and diverts it into a line which does not lead to the fulfilment of man's role as God's vicegerent on earth. Tyranny makes the tyrant captive of his own desires because he is uncommitted to any principle or standard and unrestrained within any reasonable limit. Thus the tyrant is always the first to be corrupted by his own tyranny. He assumes for himself a role other than that of a servant of God, entrusted with a

specific mission. This is evident in Pharaoh's boastful claim: *"I am your supreme Lord."* (79: 24)

Here we have an example of the corrupting influence, indeed insolence, of despotism in Pharaoh's aspiring to a status greater than that of an obedient creature. Tyranny also corrupts the masses, as it humiliates them and compels them to suppress their discontent and hatred. It kills all human dignity and wastes all creative talents, which cannot flourish except in an atmosphere of freedom. A humiliated soul inevitably rots away and becomes a breeding ground for sickly desires. Hence, digression from the right path becomes the order of the day as clear vision becomes an impossibility. In such conditions no aspiration to a higher human standard can be entertained. The net result of all this is the spread of corruption.

Tyranny also destroys all healthy standards and concepts because they constitute a threat to its existence. Hence, values are falsified and standards are distorted so that the repulsive idea of despotism becomes acceptable as natural. This, in itself, is great corruption.

When these aforementioned peoples caused such corruption, the remedy was, inevitably, a complete purge: *"Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verses 13-14) God is certainly aware of their deeds and He records them all. So, when corruption increased, He severely punished the corrupt. The text connotes that the punishment was very painful as it uses the term *'scourge'*, or 'whip' as the Arabic term literally means, and that it was in large supply as indicated by use of the phrase *'let loose'*. Thus these tyrants were made to suffer a plentiful and painful retribution.

As the believer faces tyranny in any age or place, he feels great reassurance emanating from far beyond the fates of all those communities. He also feels a particular comfort as he reads the verse: *"Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verse 14) Nothing passes unnoticed and nothing is forgotten. So let the believers be always reassured that God will deal, in time, with all corruption and tyranny.

Thus the *sūrah* provides some examples of what God may do about the cause of faith, which are totally different from the example of the people of the pit outlined in *Sūrah* 85, The Constellations. All these stories are related for a definite purpose, namely, the education of the believers and their preparation to face whichever course God chooses for them. They will, then, be ready for all eventualities and equipped with God's reassurance as they submit themselves to Him and let His will be done.

Human Short-Sightedness

"Your Lord surely observes all." (Verse 14) He sees, records, holds to account and

rewards according to a strict and accurate measure which neither errs nor exceeds the limits of justice. It is never deceived by appearances because it judges the essence of things. Human measures and standards are liable to all sorts of errors. Man sees nothing beyond appearances unless he adopts the divine measure.

"*As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His generosity and with a life of ease, he says, My Lord is bountiful to me.' But whenever He tries him by stinting his means, he says, My Lord has disgraced me.*'" (Verses 15-16) Such is man's thinking about the various forms of trial God may set for him, be it comfort or hardship, abundance or scarcity. God may test him with comfort, honour, wealth or position but he does not realize the probationary nature of what he is given. Rather he considers the gesture as proof that he deserves to be honoured by God and as evidence that He has chosen him for a special honour. It is a line of thinking which mistakes trial for reward and test for result. It imagines honour in the sight of God to be measured by worldly comforts. God may also try man by stinting his means, and man again mistakes trial for reward and imagines the test to be a retribution. He feels that God has made him poor in order to humiliate him.

In both situations the human concept is faulty. Wealth and poverty are two forms of a test which God sets for His servants. A test with abundance reveals whether a man is humble and thankful to his Lord or arrogant and haughty, while a trial of the opposite kind reveals his patient acceptance or his irritability and fretfulness. A man's reward is given according to what he proves himself to be. What he is given or denied of worldly comforts is not his reward, and a man's standing in the sight of God is in no way related to his possessions, for He gives and denies worldly comforts regardless of whether a man is good or bad. A man devoid of faith cannot comprehend the wisdom behind God's action of giving or denying worldly comforts. However, when his mind is enlightened with faith and truth becomes apparent to him, he realizes the triviality of worldly riches and the value of the reward after the test. So he works for this reward whether he is tried with worldly abundance or scarcity. As he disregards the hollow considerations of wealth and poverty, he is reassured about his fate and his position in God's sight.

At the time of revelation, the Qur'ān addressed a kind of people common to all *jāhiliyyah* societies, one who had lost all relation with a world beyond our present life. Such people adopt this mistaken view about God's granting or denial of wealth, and apply a set of values which reserve all honour to money and social standing. Hence, their craving for wealth is irresistible. It makes them covetous, greedy and stingy. The Qur'ān reveals their true feelings. It states that their greed and stinginess are responsible for their inability to understand the true significance of divine trial, whether by granting or denying wealth. "*No indeed; but you are not generous towards the orphan, nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. You devour the inheritance [of*

others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately." (Verses 17-20)

The real issue is that when people are given wealth they do not fulfil the duties demanded of the wealthy. They do not look after the young orphan who has lost his father and become, therefore, in need of protection and support. They do not urge one another to contribute to general welfare. Such mutual encouragement is indeed an important feature of the Islamic way of life. Since such people do not comprehend the significance of the trial, they do not even try to come out of it successfully by looking after the orphans and urging one another to feed the needy. On the contrary, they greedily devour the orphans' inheritance, and unrestrainedly crave for wealth. It is a craving which kills all their nobility.

In Makkah, Islam faced this common urge to accumulate wealth by every possible means. The weak position of orphans, and orphan girls in particular, tempted many to deprive them of their inheritance in different ways. The ardent love of wealth, the craving to accumulate it through usury and other means, was a distinctive feature of Makkan society as it is a distinctive feature of all *jāhiliyyah* societies at all times.

These few verses do not merely expose the true nature of such an attitude. They also condemn it and urge its discontinuation. Condemnation is evident in the repetition noted in these verses, their rhythm and metre: "*You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately."* (Verses 19-20)

The Fateful Day

Once their erroneous concept of the trial with wealth and poverty is outlined, and their vile attitude is exposed there follows a stern warning about the Day of Judgement which comes after the result of the test is known. Here the rhythm is very powerful: "*No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, and your Lord comes, with the angels rank on rank, and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him! He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!' On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds."* (Verses 21-26)

The total destruction of all that is on earth and its systematic levelling is one of the upheavals that overwhelm the universe on the Day of Resurrection. God's coming with the angels is unexplained but the expression overflows with reverence, awe and fear. The same applies to bringing hell closer. We take it to mean that hell on that day will be very close to its prospective dwellers. What actually happens and how it happens is part of the divine knowledge God has chosen to withhold until that day. These verses, with their captivating rhythm and sharp notes, portray nevertheless a scene which strikes fear into people's hearts, and makes it apparent in their eyes. The earth is being systematically levelled; God Almighty judges everyone; the angels

stand there rank on rank, while hell is brought near and set in readiness.

At that moment *"man will remember."* Man, who lived unaware of the wisdom behind the trial with worldly riches or with deprivation; who devoured the inheritance of orphans greedily; who craved for money and did not care for the orphans or the needy; who tyrannized, spread corruption and turned away from divine guidance, will then remember the truth and take account of what he beholds. But alas! It is too late: *"But how will that remembrance avail him?"* (Verse 23) The time for remembrance is over, so remembrance on the Day of Judgement and reward will not profit anybody. It serves merely as an act of grief for a chance given but not taken in this present life.

When man is fully aware of the true nature of his situation he says despairingly, *"Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!"* (Verse 24) For the true life, the only one that deserves the name, is indeed the life hereafter. It is the one which is worth preparing for. *"Oh, would that I had..."* It is a sigh of evident regret and grief, but it is the most a man can do for himself then.

The *sūrah* goes on to portray man's fate after his desperate sighing and useless wishing: *"On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds."* (Verses 25-26) It is God Almighty who inflicts His incomparable punishment, and who binds as no one can bind. This divine punishment and binding are explained in detail in other parts of the Qur'ān, but the reference here is very brief, stressing mainly their incomparability to human action.

The reference to divine punishment here brings to mind the earlier reference to human tyranny in the given examples of the 'Ād, Thamūd and Pharaoh. Those tyrants are stated to have spread much corruption in their lands, including physically torturing people and binding them with chains and ropes. These last verses serve as an address to the Prophet and the believers, reminding them that their Lord will punish and chain those who tortured and chained others. But the two kinds of punishment are entirely different. Meagre is the torture that any creature can administer, but great is that inflicted by the Creator. Let the tyrants continue with their punishment and in different ways. The ardent love of wealth, the craving to accumulate it through usury and other means, was a distinctive feature of Makkan society as it is a distinctive feature of all *jāhiliyyah* societies at all times.

These few verses do not merely expose the true nature of such an attitude. They also condemn it and urge its discontinuation. Condemnation is evident in the repetition noted in these verses, their rhythm and metre: *"You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately."* (Verses 19-20)

The Fateful Day

Once their erroneous concept of the trial with wealth and poverty is outlined, and their vile attitude is exposed there follows a stern warning about the Day of Judgement which comes after the result of the test is known. Here the rhythm is very powerful: "*No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, and your Lord comes, with the angels rank on rank, and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him! He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!' On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds.*" (Verses 21-26)

The total destruction of all that is on earth and its systematic levelling is one of the upheavals that overwhelm the universe on the Day of Resurrection. God's coming with the angels is unexplained but the expression overflows with reverence, awe and fear. The same applies to bringing hell closer. We take it to mean that hell on that day will be very close to its prospective dwellers. What actually happens and how it happens is part of the divine knowledge God has chosen to withhold until that day. These verses, with their captivating rhythm and sharp notes, portray nevertheless a scene which strikes fear into people's hearts, and makes it apparent in their eyes. The earth is being systematically levelled; God Almighty judges everyone; the angels stand there rank on rank, while hell is brought near and set in readiness.

At that moment "*man will remember.*" Man, who lived unaware of the wisdom behind the trial with worldly riches or with deprivation; who devoured the inheritance of orphans greedily; who craved for money and did not care for the orphans or the needy; who tyrannized, spread corruption and turned away from divine guidance, will then remember the truth and take account of what he beholds. But alas! It is too late: "*But how will that remembrance avail him?*" (Verse 23) The time for remembrance is over, so remembrance on the Day of Judgement and reward will not profit anybody. It serves merely as an act of grief for a chance given but not taken in this present life.

When man is fully aware of the true nature of his situation he says despairingly, "*Oh, would that I had prepared for my life*" (Verse 24) For the true life, the only one that deserves the name, is indeed the life hereafter. It is the one which is worth preparing for. "*Oh, would that I had...*" It is a sigh of evident regret and grief, but it is the most a man can do for himself then.

The *sūrah* goes on to portray man's fate after his desperate sighing and useless wishing: "*On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds.*" (Verses 25-26) It is God Almighty who inflicts His incomparable punishment, and who binds as no one can bind. This divine punishment and binding are explained in detail in other parts of the Qur'ān, but the reference here is very brief, stressing mainly their incomparability to human action.

The reference to divine punishment here brings to mind the earlier reference to human tyranny in the given examples of the `Ād, Thamūd and Pharaoh. Those tyrants are stated to have spread much corruption in their lands, including physically torturing people and binding them with chains and ropes. These last verses serve as an address to the Prophet and the believers, reminding them that their Lord will punish and chain those who tortured and chained others. But the two kinds of punishment are entirely different. Meagre is the torture that any creature can administer, but great is that inflicted by the Creator. Let the tyrants continue with their punishment and persecution; they will have their turn and be the sufferers of a punishment which is beyond all imagination.

Amidst all this unimaginable horror comes an address from on high to the believers: "*Oh soul at peace! Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Enter, then, together with My servants! Enter My paradise!"* (Verses 27-30)

It is a tender, compassionate and reassuring address: "*Oh soul at peace!"* (Verse 27) It speaks of freedom and ease, after the earlier reference to chains and affliction: *"Return to your Lord."* (Verse 28) After your alienation on earth and your separation from the one you belong to. Return now to your Lord with whom you have strong ties: *"well pleased and well pleasing."* (Verse 28) It is a gentle address which spreads compassion and satisfaction. "*Enter, then, together with My servants,* " among those servants chosen to enjoy this divine grace." *Enter My paradise,"* to receive God's mercy and protection.

As it opens, this address generates an aura of heaven: *"Oh soul at peace!"* The believer's is a soul at peace with its Lord, certain of its way, confident of its fate. It is a soul satisfied in all eventualities, happiness or affliction, wealth or poverty. It entertains no doubts; it is free from transgressions. The gentle music adds a feeling of intimacy and peace. The majestic face of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, with all His splendour looks on from above.

SURAH 90

Al-Balad

(The City)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

لَآ أُقْسِمُ بِهَٰذَا ٱلْبَلَدِ ﴿١﴾	*I swear by this city,* (1)
وَأَنتَ حِلٌّۢ بِهَٰذَا ٱلْبَلَدِ ﴿٢﴾	*this city in which you are a dweller,* (2)
وَوَالِدٍ وَمَا وَلَدَ ﴿٣﴾	*by parent and offspring:* (3)
لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ فِى كَبَدٍ ﴿٤﴾	*indeed, We have created man in affliction.* (4)
أَيَحْسَبُ أَن لَّن يَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ ﴿٥﴾	*Does he think that no one has power over him?* (5)
يَقُولُ أَهْلَكْتُ مَالًا لُّبَدًا ﴿٦﴾	*He says: 'I have spent abundant wealth.'* (6)
أَيَحْسَبُ أَن لَّمْ يَرَهُۥٓ أَحَدٌ ﴿٧﴾	*Does he think that none observes him?* (7)
أَلَمْ نَجْعَل لَّهُۥ عَيْنَيْنِ ﴿٨﴾	*Have We not given him two eyes,* (8)
وَلِسَانًا وَشَفَتَيْنِ ﴿٩﴾	*a tongue, and two lips,* (9)

and shown him the two paths? (10)	وَهَدَيْنَٰهُ ٱلنَّجْدَيْنِ ﴿١٠﴾
Yet he would not scale the Ascent. (11)	فَلَا ٱقْتَحَمَ ٱلْعَقَبَةَ ﴿١١﴾
Would that you knew what the Ascent is. (12)	وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا ٱلْعَقَبَةُ ﴿١٢﴾
It is the freeing of a slave, (13)	فَكُّ رَقَبَةٍ ﴿١٣﴾
or the feeding, on a day of famine, (14)	أَوْ إِطْعَٰمٌ فِى يَوْمٍ ذِى مَسْغَبَةٍ ﴿١٤﴾
of an orphaned near of kin, (15)	يَتِيمًا ذَا مَقْرَبَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾
or a needy man in distress, (16)	أَوْ مِسْكِينًا ذَا مَتْرَبَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾
and to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another. (17)	ثُمَّ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِٱلصَّبْرِ وَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِٱلْمَرْحَمَةِ ﴿١٧﴾
Those who do this shall be on the right hand. (18)	أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْمَيْمَنَةِ ﴿١٨﴾
And those who deny Our revelations shall bon the left hand, (19)	وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا هُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْمَشْـَٔمَةِ ﴿١٩﴾
with fire closing in upon them. (20)	عَلَيْهِمْ نَارٌ مُّؤْصَدَةٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

Overview

This short *sūrah* touches on a great many facts which are of central importance to human life. Its style is characterized by powerful allusions. Numerous facts of this nature are not easily combined in any form of concise writing except that of the

Qur'ān, with its unique ability to hit the right chords with such swift and penetrating strokes.

Affliction in Human Life

The *sūrah* opens with an emphatic oath asserting an inherent fact of human life: *"I swear by this city, this city in which you are a dweller, by parent and offspring: indeed, We have created man in affliction."* (Verses 1-4) The city is Makkah, which houses the Ka`bah, the sacred house of God that was the first temple ever to be erected on this earth as a place of peace where people put down their weapons and forget their quarrels. They meet there in peace; each is sacred to all. Even the plants, the birds and all creatures that happen to be in this city enjoy full and complete security. It is the House built by Abraham, the father of Ishmael, who is the grandfather of all Arabs and Muslims.

God then honours His Prophet, Muĥammad, by mentioning him and his residence in Makkah, a fact which adds to the sanctity of the city, its honour and glory. This is a point of great significance in this context; for the unbelievers were violating the sanctity of the House by harassing the Prophet and the Muslims in it. But the House is sacred and the Prophet's dwelling in its neighbourhood makes it even more so. God's oath by this city and by the Prophet's residence in it adds even more to its sacredness and glory, which consequently makes the unbelievers' attitude grossly impertinent and objectionable. Their attitude becomes even more singular, considering their claims to be the custodians of the House, Ishmael's descendants and Abraham's followers.

This last reference supports the inclination to take the next-- verse, *"by parent and offspring,"* to refer to Abraham and Ishmael in particular. This reading includes in the oath the Prophet, the city where he lives, the founder of the House and his offspring. However, it does not preclude that the statement can also be a general one, referring to the phenomenon of reproduction which preserves the human race. This reference may be taken as an introduction to the discussion about man's nature, which is indeed the theme of the *sūrah.*

In his commentary on this *sūrah* in *Tafsīr Juz `Amma,* the late Shaikh Muĥammad `Abdūh, makes a fine remark which is useful to quote here:

> God then swears by parent and children to draw our attention to the great importance of this stage of reproduction in life, and to the infinite wisdom and perfection which this stage involves. It also emphasizes the great suffering encountered by parent and offspring during the process from its inception up to its conclusion, when the newcomer achieves a certain degree

of development.

Think of plants and the tough opposition met by a seed of a plant in the process of growth, until it adapts to the various factors of climate. Think of its attempts to absorb the food necessary for its survival from its surroundings, till it develops branches and leaves. It then prepares for the production of a similar seed or seeds that will repeat its function and add to the beauty of the world around it. Think of all this then consider the more advanced forms of animal and human life and you will see something much greater and far more wonderful concerning reproduction. You will have a feeling of the hardship and suffering met by all parents and offspring for the sake of preserving the species and the beauty of this world.

The oath reaffirms an intrinsic fact in human life: "*Indeed, We have created man in affliction.*" (Verse 4) Indeed, man's life is a process of continued hardship that never ends, as stated in *Sūrah* 84, The Rending: "O *man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him.*" (84: 6)

No sooner does the first living cell settle in the mother's womb than it starts to encounter affliction and has to work hard in order to prepare for itself the right conditions for its survival, with the permission of its Lord. It continues to do so until it is ready for the process of birth, which is a great ordeal for both mother and baby. Before the baby finally sees the light it undergoes a great deal of pushing and squeezing to the point of near suffocation in its passage out of the womb.

A stage of harder endurance and greater suffering follows. The new-born baby begins to breathe the air, which is a new experience. It opens its mouth and inflates its lungs for the first time with a cry which tells of the harsh start. The digestive system then starts to function in a manner which is totally unfamiliar, as does blood circulation. Then it starts to empty its bowels, encountering great difficulty in adapting its system to this new function. Indeed, every new step or movement is attended by suffering. If one watches this baby when it begins to crawl and walk, one sees the kind of effort required to execute such minor and elementary movements. Such affliction continues with teething, and learning to stand, walk, learn and think. Indeed, in every new experience much affliction is involved.

Then the roads diverge and the struggle takes different forms. One person struggles with his muscles, another with his mind and a third with his soul. One toils for a mouthful of food or a rag to dress himself with, another to double or treble his wealth. One person strives to achieve a position of power or influence and another for the sake of God. One struggles for the sake of satisfying lusts and desires, and another for the sake of his faith or ideology. One strives but achieves no more than hell and another strives for paradise. Everyone is carrying his own burden and

climbing his own hill to arrive finally at the meeting place appointed by God, where the wretched shall endure their worst suffering while the blessed enjoy their endless happiness.

Affliction, life's foremost characteristic, takes various forms and shapes but it is always judged by its eventual results. The loser is the one who ends up suffering more affliction in the hereafter, and the prosperous is the one whose striving qualifies him to be released from affliction and ensures him the ultimate repose under his Lord's shelter. Yet there is some reward in this present life for the different kinds of struggle which people endure. The one who labours for a great cause differs from the one who labours for a trivial one, in the amount and the quality of gratification each of them gains from his labour and sacrifice.

Great Blessings

Having established this fact concerning human nature and human life, the *sūrah* goes on to discuss some of the claims that man makes and some of the concepts underlying his behaviour. *"Does he think that no one has power over him? He says: 'I have spent abundant wealth.' Does he think that none observes him?"* (Verses 5-7)

This creature, man, whose suffering and struggling never come to an end, forgets his real nature and becomes so conceited with what God has given him of power, ability, skill and prosperity that he behaves as if he is not accountable for what he does. He indulges in oppression, tyranny, victimization and exploitation, trying to acquire enormous wealth. He corrupts himself and others in total disregard of anything of value. Such is the character of a man whose heart is stripped of faith. When he is called upon to spend for good causes, he says, *"I have spent abundant wealth,"* and given more than enough. *"Does he think that none observes him?"* (Verse 7) Has he forgotten that God is watching over him? He sees what he has spent and for what purposes. But man still ignores this, thinking that God is unaware of what he has done.

In view of man's arrogance, which makes him believe that he is invincible, and in view of his meanness and claims of having spent abundantly, the Qur'ān puts before him the bounties God has bestowed on him which are manifested in his inherent abilities, although he has depreciated them: *"Have We not given him two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and shown him the two paths?"* (Verses 8-10)

Man is conceited because he feels himself powerful, but he is granted his power by God. He is mean with his wealth while God is the One who provided him with it. He neither follows right guidance nor shows gratitude, although God has given him the means to do so. He has given him eyes which are marvellous, precise and powerful. He has also granted him speech and the means of expression, *"a tongue, and two lips."*

He has equipped him with the ability to distinguish good from evil, and right from wrong: *and shown him the two paths,"* so that he can choose between them. Inherent in his make-up is the ability to take either way. It is God's will that man should be given such ability and such freedom of choice, to perfect His scheme of creation which assigns to every creature its role in life and equips it with the means necessary for its fulfilment.

This verse explains the essence of human nature. In fact, the basis of the Islamic viewpoint of human psychology is contained in this verse and four verses in the next *sūrah,* The Sun: *"By the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it."* (91: 7-10)

Scaling the Ascent

These are the favours bestowed on man to help him follow right guidance: his eyes with which he recognizes the evidence of God's might and the signs throughout the universe which should prompt him to adopt the faith, and his tongue and lips which are his means of speech and expression. One word sometimes does the job of a sword or a shotgun and can be even more effective than either. It may, on the other hand, plunge a man into the fire of hell. Mu 'ādh ibn Jabal said: "I was with the Prophet on a journey. One day I was walking beside him when I said, 'Messenger of God! Point out to me something I may do to take me to paradise and keep me away from hell.' He said, 'You have indeed asked about something great, yet it is quite attainable by those for whom God has made it easy. Worship God alone, assigning to Him no partner, offer your prayers regularly, pay out your *zakāt* [i.e. what is due to the poor of one's money], fast in the month of Ramadān and offer the pilgrimage.' The Prophet then said, 'Shall I point out to you the gates of goodness?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'Fasting is a safeguard and a means of protecting yourself; charity erases your errors just as water extinguishes a burning fire; and your praying in the late hours of the night is the sign of piety.' He then recited the verse, *"[those] who forsake their beds as they call on their Lord in fear and in hope; and who give in charity of what We have bestowed on them. No soul knows what bliss and comfort is in store for these as reward for their labours."* (32: 16-17) The Prophet then added: 'Shall I tell you what the heart of the matter is, its backbone and its highest grade?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'The heart is Islam, i.e. submission to God, the backbone is prayers, and the highest grade is *jihād,* i.e. struggle for the cause of God.' He then said, 'Shall I tell you what commands all these?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'Control this,' pointing to his tongue. I said, 'Are we, Prophet of God, really accountable for what we say?' He said 'Watch what you are saying.

For what else are people dragged on their faces in hell apart from what their tongues produce?'" [Related by Aĥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.]"

All these bounties have not motivated man to attempt the Ascent that stands between him and heaven. God explains the nature of the Ascent in the following verses: "*Yet he would not scale the Ascent. Would that you knew what the Ascent is. It is the freeing of a slave, or the feeding, on a day of famine, of an orphaned near of kin, or a needy man in distress, and to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another. Those who do this shall be on the right hand.*" (Verses 11-18)

This is the ascent which man, except those who equip themselves with faith, refrains from attempting, and which separates him from paradise. If he crosses it he will arrive! Putting it in such a way serves as a powerful incentive and stimulus to take up the challenge. For the ascent has been clearly marked as the obstacle depriving man of such an enormous fortune. The importance of scaling the ascent in God's sight is then emphasized to encourage man to scale it no matter what the effort. For struggle he must, in any case. But if he attempts it, his struggle will not be wasted but will bring him favourable results.

Then follows an explanation of this ascent and its nature by means of, first, pointing out some actions which were totally lacking in the particular surroundings that the message of Islam was facing at the time: the freeing of slaves and the feeding of the poor who were subjected to the cruelty of an ungracious and greedy society. It then adds what is applicable to all ages and societies and needed by all who wish to attempt the ascent: "*To be of those who bElieve and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another.*" (Verse 17) There are reports which comment on the particular usage of freeing slafes in this *sūraH,* explaining that it includes eVen sharing in an effort to free a slave, not meBely bearing all the expense involved. Even then the outcome is the same.

Setting Practical Examples

This *sūrah* sas revealed in Iakkah when IslaM was surrounded powerful enemies and the state that would implement its laws s non-existent. Slavery was widespread in Arabia and the world large. The treatment meted out to slaves was brutal. When some the slaves or former slaves, like `Ammār ibn Yāsir and his family, Bilāl ibn Rabah, and others, accepted Islam their plight became worse, and their cruel masters subjected them to unbearable torture. then became clear that the only way to save them was to buy them from their masters. Abū Bakr, the Prophet's Companion, was, as usual, the first to rise to the occasion, with all the boldness and gallantry it required.

Ibn Isĥāq relates:

> Bilāl, Abū Bakr's servant, was owned by some individual of the clan of Jumaĥ as he was born a slave. He was, however, a genuine Muslim and clean-hearted. Umayyah ibn Khalaf, the Jumaĥ master, used to take Bilāl out when it became unbearably hot and order him to be laid down on his back on the hot sand of Makkah and cause a massive rock to be placed on his chest. Then, he would say to Bilāl that he was to stay like that until he died or renounced Muĥammad and accepted as deities the idols called al-Lat and al-'Uzzā, the goddesses of the pagan Arabs. Under all such pressure, Bilāl would simply say, 'One, One,' meaning that there is only one God.
>
> One day, Abū Bakr passed by and saw Bilāl in that condition. He said to Umayyah: 'Do you not fear God as you torture this helpless soul? How long can you go on doing this?' Umayyah replied, 'You spoiled him, so you save him.' Abū Bakr said, 'I will. I have a black boy who follows your religion but he is stronger and more vigorous than Bilāl. What do you say to an exchange deal?' Umayyah said, 'I accept.' Abū Bakr said, 'Then he is yours.' Then Abū Bakr took Bilāl and set him free.
>
> While in Makkah, before the migration to Madinah, Abū Bakr freed a total of seven people: `Āmir ibn Fahīrah, who fought in the Battle of Badr and was killed in the Battle of Bi'r Ma`ūnah, was the only other man freed by Abū Bakr. The other five were women. The first two were Umm `Ubays and Zanīrah, who lost her eyesight when she was freed. Some of the Quraysh claimed that the two idols al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā caused the loss of her eyesight. Zanīrah said, 'What rubbish! Al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā are absolutely powerless.' God then willed that she should recover her sight.
>
> Abū Bakr also freed a woman called al-Nahdiyyah and her daughter, who belonged to a woman of the clan of `Abd al-Dār. One day he passed by the two women as their mistress was sending them on an errand to prepare some flour. As she gave them her instructions, she declared: 'By God, I will never set you free.' Abū Bakr said to her, 'Release yourself of your oath.' She rejoined, 'It was you who spoilt them. Why don't you set them free?' He said, 'How much do you want for them?' She named her price. He said, 'It is a deal, and they are free.' He turned to the two women and told them to give the woman her flour back. They suggested that they should finish preparing it for her first and he agreed.
>
> The fifth woman was a Muslim slave of the clan of Mu`ammal. She was being tortured by `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was then still an unbeliever. He beat her until he was tired and said to her, 'I apologize to you. I have only stopped

> beating you because I am bored,' to which she replied, And so God shall thwart you.' Abū Bakr bought her and set her free.
>
> Abū Quĥāfah, Abū Bakr's father, said to him, 'I see you, son, freeing some weak slaves. Why don't you free some strong men who can defend and protect you?' Abū Bakr replied, 'I am only doing this for the sake of God, father.' Thus Abū Bakr scaled the ascent by freeing those helpless souls, for the sake of God. The attendant circumstances in that particular society make such an action one of the most important steps towards scaling the ascent.[27]

"Or the feeding, on a day of famine, of an orphaned near of kin, or a needy man in distress." (Verses 14-16) A time of famine and hunger, when food becomes scarce, is a time when the reality of faith is tested. For orphans in that greedy, miserly and ungracious society were oppressed and mistreated even by their relatives. The Qur'ān is full of verses which urge people to treat orphans well. This, in itself, is a measure of the cruelty of the orphans' surroundings. Good treatment for orphans is also urged in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, as they outline the rules of inheritance, custody and marriage, especially in *Sūrahs* 2, The Cow, and 4, Women. The same can be said of feeding the needy on a day of famine, which is portrayed here as another step for scaling the ascent. For this is again a test which reveals the characteristics of the believer, such as mercy, sympathy, co-operation and lack of selfishness. It also reveals the extent of one's fear of God.

These two steps, freeing slaves and feeding the needy, are mentioned in the *sūrah* as necessary in the existing situation at the time of revelation. However, their implication is general, which accounts for their being mentioned first. They are followed by the widest and most important step of all: *"And to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another."* (Verse 17) The conjunction in the Arabic text is 'then', but it does not signify here any time ordering; it is used simply as an introduction to the statement about the most important and valuable step of all towards scaling the ascent. For what would be the value of freeing slaves or feeding the hungry without faith? It is faith which gives such actions their value and their weight in God's sight, because it relates them to a profound and consistent system. Thus good deeds are no longer the result of a momentary impulse. Their aim is not any social reputation or self-interest.

Patience in adversity is an important element in the general context of faith as well as in the particular context of attempting the ascent. That people should counsel each other to be patient in adversity is to attain a highest level than that of having such a quality themselves. It is a practical demonstration of the solidarity of the believers as they co-operate closely to carry out their duties as believers in God. The society

[27] Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah,* Dār al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, n.d., pp. 339-41.

formed by the believers is an integrated structure whose elements share the same feelings and the same awareness about the need to exert themselves in establishing the divine system on earth and to carry out its duties fully. Hence, they counsel each other to persevere as they shoulder their common responsibilities. They rally to support one another in order to achieve their common objective. This is something more than perseverance by individuals, although it builds on it. For it indicates the individual's role in the believers' society, namely, that he must be an element of strength and a source of hope and comfort to the whole society.

The same applies to enjoining each other to be merciful, which is a grade higher than simply being merciful themselves. Thus the spirit of mercy spreads among the believers as they consider such mutual counselling an individual and communal duty in the fulfilment of which all co-operate. Hence, the idea of 'community' is evident in this injunction, as it is emphasized elsewhere in the Qur'ān and in the traditions of the Prophet. This idea is central to the concept of Islam which is a religion and a way of life. Nevertheless, the responsibility and accountability of the individual are clearly defined and strongly emphasized. Those who scale the ascent, as defined here in the Qur'ān, shall have their dwelling place on the right hand, which indicates that they will enjoy a happy recompense for what they do in this life.

"And those who deny Our revelations shall be on the left hand, with fire closing in upon them." (Verses 19-20) There is no need here to identify this group with more than *'those who deny Our revelations,'* as this is enough to settle the issue. Nothing can be good if coupled with unbelief. All evil is contained and encompassed by the denial of God. There is no point in saying that this group do not free slaves or give food to the needy, and, moreover, they deny Our revelations. For such a denial renders worthless any action they may do. They dwell on the left hand, which indicates their degradation and disgrace. These people cannot scale the ascent.

"With fire closing in upon them." (Verse 20) That is, they are encircled by it either in the sense that they are locked within it, or in the sense that it is their eternal abode. Its being close above them gives them no chance of breaking away from it. The two meanings are quite interesting.

These are then the fundamental facts concerning human life laid down from the point of view of faith, in a limited space but with great power and clarity. This remains the distinctive characteristic of Qur'ānic style.

SŪRAH 91

Al-Shams

(The Sun)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلشَّمْسِ وَضُحَىٰهَا ﴿١﴾	*By the sun and his morning brightness,* (1)
وَٱلْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَىٰهَا ﴿٢﴾	*by the moon as she follows him,* (2)
وَٱلنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّىٰهَا ﴿٣﴾	*by the day, which reveals his splendour;* (3)
وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَىٰهَا ﴿٤﴾	*by the night, which veils him.* (4)
وَٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا بَنَىٰهَا ﴿٥﴾	*By the heaven and its construction,* (5)
وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَىٰهَا ﴿٦﴾	*by the earth and its spreading,* (6)
وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّىٰهَا ﴿٧﴾	*by the soul and its moulding*(7)
فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَىٰهَا ﴿٨﴾	*and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness.* (8)
قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكَّىٰهَا ﴿٩﴾	*Successful is the one who keeps it pure,* (9)

and ruined is the one who corrupts it. (10)	وَقَدۡ خَابَ مَن دَسَّىٰهَا ﴿١٠﴾
In their overweening arrogance the people of Thamūd denied the truth, (11)	كَذَّبَتۡ ثَمُودُ بِطَغۡوَىٰهَآ ﴿١١﴾
when their most hapless wretch broke forth. (12)	إِذِ ٱنۢبَعَثَ أَشۡقَىٰهَا ﴿١٢﴾
God's Messenger said to them: 'It is a she-camel belonging to God, so let her have her drink.' (13)	فَقَالَ لَهُمۡ رَسُولُ ٱللَّهِ نَاقَةَ ٱللَّهِ وَسُقۡيَىٰهَا ﴿١٣﴾
But they rejected him, and cruelly slaughtered her. For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge upon them, and razed their city to the ground. (14)	فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَعَقَرُوهَا فَدَمۡدَمَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ رَبُّهُم بِذَنۢبِهِمۡ فَسَوَّىٰهَا ﴿١٤﴾
He does not fear what may follow. (15)	وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقۡبَىٰهَا ﴿١٥﴾

Overview

This *sūrah,* which maintains the same rhyme in all its verses and keeps the same musical beat throughout, starts with several aesthetic touches which seem to spring out from the surrounding universe and its phenomena. These phenomena form the framework which encompasses the great truth which is the subject matter of the *sūrah,* namely, the nature of man, his inherent abilities, choice of action, and responsibility in determining his own fate.

This *sūrah* also refers to the story of the Thamūd and their negative attitude to the warnings they received from God's messenger, to their killing of the she-camel, and finally their complete annihilation. This provides an example of the unpromising prospects which await those who corrupt their souls instead of keeping them pure and who do not confine themselves within the limits of piety. "*Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it.*" (Verses 9-10)

God's Solemn Oath

> *By the sun and his morning brightness, by the moon as she follows him, by the day, which reveals his splendour, by the night, which veils him. By the heaven and its*

> *construction, by the earth and its spreading, by the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it.* (Verses 1-10)

God swears by these objects and universal phenomena as He swears by the human soul, how it is fashioned and the inspiration it receives. The oath gives these creatures an added significance and draws man's attention to them. Man ought to contemplate these phenomena and try to appreciate their value and the purpose of their creation.

There exists in fact, some kind of a special language through which the human heart communicates with the universe. This language is part of human nature. It is a language which does not use sounds and articulation. It is a communication to hearts and an inspiration to souls which come alive whenever man looks up to the universe for an inspiring or cheerful sight. Hence, the Qur'ān frequently urges man to reflect upon his surroundings. It does this in various ways, sometimes directly and sometimes with hints, incidental touches and stimuli. In this case, for example, some phenomena of the universe are made the subject of God's oath, in order to serve as a framework for what follows in the *sūrah.* These explicit directives and indirect hints are very frequent in the *sūrahs* of the present volume. There is hardly any *sūrah* which does not encourage man, in one way or another, to communicate with the universe, in secret language, so that he may appreciate its signs and understand its address.

Here we have an inspiring oath by the sun and the mid-morning. The oath also specifies the time when the sun rises above the horizon, when it is indeed at its most beautiful. Indeed, mid-morning is, in winter, a time of refreshing warmth. In summer, it is a time when the atmosphere is just mild and fresh before the blazing heat of midday sets in, and the sun is at its clearest.

The oath is also by the moon as she follows the sun and spreads her beautiful and clear light. Between the moon and the human heart there is an age-long fascination that is well established in men's inmost souls. It is a fascination that is born anew every time the two meet. The moon issues her own special whispers and inspirations to the human heart, and she sings her songs of praise of God, the Creator. On a clear night, one can almost feel oneself sailing through the moonlight, clearing one's worries and enjoying perfect bliss as one feels the hand of the Maker beyond this perfect creation.

God also swears by the day as it reveals the sun. The Arabic wording of this verse, *wan-nahāri idhā jallāhā,* makes the possessive pronoun attached to 'splendour' ambiguous. Initially, one tends to take it as if it refers to the sun. The general context, however, suggests that it refers to the earth as it is lit by the sun. This method of

changing referents is widely employed in the Qur'ān when the change is easily noticed and the subject matter familiar. Here we have a discreet allusion to the fact that sunlight reveals the earth and has a great effect on human life. Our familiarity with the sun and its light makes us tend to overlook its beauty and function. This Qur'ānic hint alerts us anew to this magnificent daily spectacle.

The same applies to the next verse, *"by the night, which veils him."* (Verse 4) This is the opposite of what happens during the day. Night time is like a screen that covers and hides everything. It also leaves its own impressions on everyone, and its impact on human life is no less important than that of the day time.

God then swears *"by the heaven and its construction."* (Verse 5) When heaven is mentioned, our immediate thoughts go to the huge dome-like sky above us in which we see the stars and the planets moving, each in its orbit. But we are in fact uncertain of the exact nature of heaven. However, what we see above us does bear the idea of building and construction because it looks to us a firm and solid whole. As to how it is built and what keeps it together as it floats in infinite space, we have no answer. All that has been advanced in this field is only theory that is liable to be invalidated or modified. We are certain, however, that God's hand is the one which holds this structure together, as emphasized elsewhere in the Qur'ān: *"It is God who upholds the heavens and the earth lest they collapse. Should they collapse none could uphold them after He will have ceased to do so."* (35: 41) This is the only definite and absolute truth about the matter.

The oath then includes the earth and its spreading as preparatory to the emergence of life. Indeed, human and animal life would not have been possible had the earth not been spread out. It is indeed the special characteristics and the natural laws which God has incorporated in the making of this earth that make life on it possible, according to His will and plan. It appears that if any of these laws were violated or upset, life on earth would become impossible or change its course. The most important of these is perhaps the spreading out of the earth which is also mentioned in *Sūrah* 79, The Pluckers: *"After that He spread out the earth. He brought out water from it, and brought forth its pastures."* (79: 3031) When the *sūrah* mentions the spreading out of the earth, it actually reminds us of God's hand which brought this about.

A Look into the Human Soul

The *sūrah* moves on to state the basic truth about man, and relates this truth to the various phenomena of the universe, for man is one of the most remarkable wonders in this harmonious creation: *"By the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and*

ruined is the one who corrupts it." (Verses 7-10)

The basis of the Islamic concept of human psychology is outlined in these four verses, along with verse 10 of the preceding *sūrah,* The City, *"And [We have] shown him the two paths,"* and verse 3 in *Sūrah* 76, Man, which says: *"We have shown him the right path, be he grateful or ungrateful."* They supplement the verses which point out the duality in man's make-up in *Sūrah* 38, Ṣād, which says: *"Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am creating man from clay. When I have fashioned him, and breathed of My spirit into him, kneel down and prostrate yourselves before him.'"* (38: 7172) These verses also supplement and relate to the verses which define man's responsibility and accountability for his actions, such as the one in *Sūrah* 74, The Cloaked One, which reads: *"Everyone is held in pledge for whatever he has wrought,"* and the verse in *Sūrah* 13, Thunder, which states that God's attitude to man is directly related to man's own behaviour: *"God does not change a people's lot until they change what is in their hearts."* (13: 11) These and similar verses define the Islamic view of man with perfect clarity.

God has created man with a duality of nature and ability. What we mean by duality is that the two ingredients in his make-up, i.e. earth's clay and God' spirit, form within him two equal tendencies to good or evil, to either follow divine guidance or go astray. Man is just as capable of recognizing the good as he is of recognizing the evil in everything he encounters, and he is equally capable of directing himself one way or the other. This dual ability is deeply ingrained within him. All external factors, like divine messages, only serve to awaken his ability and help it take its chosen way. In other words, these factors do not create this innate ability; they only help it to develop.

In addition to his innate ability, man is equipped with a conscious faculty which determines his line of action. Hence, he is responsible for his actions and decisions. He who uses this faculty to strengthen his inclinations to what is good and to purify himself and to weaken his evil drive will be prosperous and successful. By contrast, a person who uses this faculty to suppress the good in him will ruin himself: *"Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it."* (Verses 9-10)

There must be, then, an element of responsibility attached to man's conscious faculty and freedom of choice. Since he is free to choose between his tendencies, his freedom must be coupled with responsibility. He is assigned a definite task related to the power given to him. But God, the Compassionate, does not leave man with no guidance other than his natural impulses or his conscious, decision-making faculty. God helps him by sending him messages which lay down accurate and permanent criteria, and points out to him the signs, within him and in the world at large, which should help him choose the right path and clear his way of any obstructions so that he can see the truth. Thus, he recognizes his way easily and clearly and his conscious

decision-making faculty functions in full knowledge of the nature of the direction it chooses and the implications of that choice.

This is what God has willed for man and whatever takes place within this framework is a direct fulfilment of His will.

From this very general outline of the Islamic concept of man emerge a number of vital and valuable facts: firstly, that this concept elevates man to the high position of being responsible for his actions and allows him freedom of choice, within the confines of God's will that has granted him this freedom. Responsibility and freedom of choice, therefore, make man the honoured creature of this world, a position worthy of the creature in whom God has blown something of His own spirit and whom He ha made with His own hand and raised above most of His creation

Secondly, it puts man's fate in his own hands — according to God's will as already explained — and makes him responsible for it. This stimulates caution in him as well as a positive sense of fear of God. For he knows then that God's will is fulfilled through his own actions and decisions: *"God does not change a people's lot until they change what is in their hearts."* (13: 11) This is in itself a great responsibility which demands that one should always be alert.

Thirdly, it reminds man of his permanent need to refer to the criteria fixed by God in order to ensure that his desires do not get the better of him. Thus man stays near to God, follows His guidance and illuminates his way by divine light. Indeed, the standard of purity man can achieve is limitless.

Historical Example

The *sūrah* then gives an example of the failure which befalls those who corrupt themselves, and erect a barrier between themselves and divine guidance: *"In their overweening arrogance the people of Thamūd denied the truth, when their most hapless wretch broke forth. God's Messenger said to them: 'It is a she-camel belonging to God, so let her have her drink.' But they rejected him, and cruelly slaughtered her. For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge upon them, and razed their city to the ground. He does not fear what may follow."* (Verses 11-15)

The story of the Thamūd and their messenger, Ṣāliĥ, is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān. A discussion of it is given every time it occurs. The reader may refer for further details to the commentary on *Sūrah* 89, The Dawn, in this volume. The present *sūrah,* however, states that the people of Thamūd rejected their prophet and accused him of lying simply because they were arrogant and insolent. Their transgression is represented here by the most hapless wretch among them rushing to slaughter the she-camel. He is the most wretched as a result of his crime. Their

messenger had warned them in advance, saying, "*It is a she-camel belonging to God, so let her have her drink.*" This was his condition when they asked him for a sign. The sign was that the she-camel had the water for herself one day and left it for the rest of the cattle the next day. The she-camel must have had something else peculiar to her, but we shall not go into detail because God has not told us about it. The Thamūd, however, did not heed their messenger's warnings but killed the she-camel. The person who perpetrated the crime, the arch sinner, is the most- wretched, but they were all held responsible because they did not take him to task. On the contrary, they applauded what he did. A basic principle of Islam is that society bears a collective responsibility in this life. This does not conflict with the principle of individual responsibility in the hereafter when everyone is answerable for his own deeds. It is a sin, however, not to counsel and urge one another to adhere to what is good and not to punish evil and transgression.

As a result of the Thamūd's arrogance and their outrageous crime, a calamity befell them: "*For this their sin their Lord let loose His scourge upon them, and razed their city to the ground.*" (Verse 14) The Arabic verse uses the verb *damdama* for *'let loose His scourge',* which creates, by its repetitiveness, an added feeling of horror, as we learn that the city was completely razed to the ground.

"*He does not fear what may follow.*" (Verse 15) All praises and glorification be to Him. Whom, what and why should He fear?

The meaning aimed at here is what the statement entails: he who does not fear the consequences punishes most severely. This is true of God's punishment.

In conclusion, we say the *sūrah* provides a link between the human soul, the basic facts of the universe, its constant and repetitive scenes and God's unfailing law of punishing tyrant transgressors. This He does according to His own wise planning which sets a time for everything and a purpose for every action. He is the Lord of man, the universe and fate.

SŪRAH 92

Al-Layl

(The Night)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَىٰ ﴿١﴾	*By the night when she lets fall her darkness,* (1)
وَٱلنَّهَارِ إِذَا تَجَلَّىٰ ﴿٢﴾	*by the day in full splendour,* (2)
وَمَا خَلَقَ ٱلذَّكَرَ وَٱلْأُنثَىٰٓ ﴿٣﴾	*by Him who created the male and the female:* (3)
إِنَّ سَعْيَكُمْ لَشَتَّىٰ ﴿٤﴾	*surely your endeavours have divergent ends.* (4)
فَأَمَّا مَنْ أَعْطَىٰ وَٱتَّقَىٰ ﴿٥﴾	*As for him who gives and is God-fearing* (5)
وَصَدَّقَ بِٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ﴿٦﴾	*and believes in the truth of the ultimate good,* (6)
فَسَنُيَسِّرُهُۥ لِلْيُسْرَىٰ ﴿٧﴾	*We shall smooth the way to perfect ease.* (7)
وَأَمَّا مَنۢ بَخِلَ وَٱسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٨﴾	*But as for him who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient,* (8)
وَكَذَّبَ بِٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ﴿٩﴾	*and rejects the truth of the ultimate good,* (9)

We shall smooth the way to affliction. (10)	فَسَنُيَسِّرُهُۥ لِلۡعُسۡرَىٰ ﴿١٠﴾
What will his wealth avail him when he goes down [to his grave] . (11)	وَمَا يُغۡنِي عَنۡهُ مَالُهُۥٓ إِذَا تَرَدَّىٰٓ ﴿١١﴾
It is for Us to give guidance, (12)	إِنَّ عَلَيۡنَا لَلۡهُدَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾
and Ours is the life to come, and this first life. (13)	وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلۡأٓخِرَةَ وَٱلۡأُولَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾
I warn you, therefore, of the raging fire, (14)	فَأَنذَرۡتُكُمۡ نَارٗا تَلَظَّىٰ ﴿١٤﴾
which none shall have to endure but the most hapless wretch, (15)	لَا يَصۡلَىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡأَشۡقَى ﴿١٥﴾
who denies the truth and turns away. (16)	ٱلَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٦﴾
Kept away from it will be him who is God-fearing, (17)	وَسَيُجَنَّبُهَا ٱلۡأَتۡقَى ﴿١٧﴾
who gives away his money to purify himself, (18)	ٱلَّذِي يُؤۡتِي مَالَهُۥ يَتَزَكَّىٰ ﴿١٨﴾
not in recompense of any favours done him by anyone. (19)	وَمَا لِأَحَدٍ عِندَهُۥ مِن نِّعۡمَةٖ تُجۡزَىٰٓ ﴿١٩﴾
but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Lord, the Most High. (20)	إِلَّا ٱبۡتِغَآءَ وَجۡهِ رَبِّهِ ٱلۡأَعۡلَىٰ ﴿٢٠﴾
He shall indeed be well pleased. (21)	وَلَسَوۡفَ يَرۡضَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

Overview

Within a framework of scenes taken from the universe and human nature, this *sūrah* states emphatically the basic facts of action and reward. This issue has diverse aspects: *"Surely your endeavours have divergent ends. As for him who gives and is God-*

fearing and believes in the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to perfect ease. But as for him who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient, and rejects the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to affliction." (Verses 4-10)

The end in the hereafter is also varied, according to the type of action and the direction taken in this life: *"I warn you, therefore, of the raging fire, which none shall have to endure but the most hapless wretch, who denies the truth and turns away. Kept away from it will be him who is God-fearing, who gives away his money to purify himself"* (Verses 14-18)

The subject matter of the *sūrah,* i.e. action and reward, is by nature double directional, so the framework chosen for it at the beginning of the *sūrah* is of dual colouring. It is based on contrasting aspects in the creation of man and the universe: *"By the night when she lets fall her darkness, by the day in full splendour, by Him who created the male and the female."* (Verses 1-3) This is one form of artistic harmony used extensively in the Qur'ān.

An Oath by Universal Phenomena

"By the night when she lets fall her darkness, by the day in full splendour, by Him who created the male and the female." (Verses 1-3) God swears by these two of His signs, namely, the night and the day, and describes them by the scene each produces on the horizon: the night as she enshrouds everything with her veil of darkness, and the day as it attains its full splendour. The night covers and conceals the land and all there is on it, and the day brightens up and makes every object apparent and visible. These times contrast in the astrological cycle and in their respective scenes, qualities and effects. God also swears by His creation of all species in two contrasting sexes: *"By Him who created the male and the female."* (Verse 3) This completes the contrast both in the general atmosphere of the *sūrah* and in the facts it emphasizes.

The night and the day are two general phenomena which carry a certain message with which they inspire human hearts. The human soul is automatically affected by the cycle of the night and its curtain and the day and its splendid brightness. This continuous succession of night and day speaks about the universe, its mysterious secrets and phenomena over which man has no control. It suggests that there is a power which controls time in the universe as if it was a simple wheel. It also tells of never-ending change in the universe.

As one contemplates and meditates upon these phenomena one is bound to conclude that there is an able hand which controls the universe and alternates the night and day in that perfect, unfailing accuracy. One is also bound to conclude that the hand of God also controls the lives of men. He has not created them in vain, and He does not abandon them to lead a life without purpose.

However unbelievers try to drown this reality and divert attention away from it, our hearts remain responsive to this universe. We receive its intimations and ponder over its changes and phenomena. Contemplation and meditation endorse our innate feeling that there is a Controller whose presence is bound to be felt and recognized in spite of all conceited denials.

The same applies to the creation of male and female. In man and mammals it all starts with a living germ settling in a womb, a sperm which unites with a cell. What is the reason then for this difference in outcome? What is it that tells one germ to be a male, and instructs another to be a female? Discovery of the operative factors does not make the matter any different. How do the male factors exist in one case and the female in another? What makes the end product, i.e. division of the species into two sexes, so fitting with the course of life as a whole and a guarantee of its continuity through procreation?

Is it all a coincidence? Even coincidence has a rule which deems it impossible for all those elements to come together accidentally. The only explanation is that there is a Controller in charge who creates the male and the female according to a carefully worked out plan which has a definite objective. There is no room for chance in the order of this universe.

Moreover, the male and female division is not limited to mammalia alone: it is applicable to all animate species, including plants. Singularity and oneness belong only to the Creator who has no parallel whatever.

A Journey with Divergent Ends

God swears by these contrasting aspects of the universe and of man's creation and constitution that the striving of human beings is diverse. Since the roads they follow lead to different ends, their rewards are also diverse. Good is not the same as evil; following right guidance is unlike wrong-doing; and righteousness is different from corruption. Generosity and God-consciousness are unlike hoarding and conceit. The faithful are totally different from those devoid of faith. Variance of ways necessitates variance of destinations: *"Surely your endeavours have divergent ends. As for him who gives and is God-fearing and believes in the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to perfect ease. But as for him who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient, and rejects the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to affliction. What will his wealth avail him when he goes down [to his gravel."* (Verses 4-11)

"Your endeavours have divergent ends." (Verse 4) These endeavours vary in essence, motives, directions and results. Men have diverse temperaments, environments, concepts and concerns, so much so that every man seems to be a distinct world unto himself living in his own, special planet.

This is a fact, but along with it there is another general fact which applies to all beings and their different worlds. It groups them into two distinct classes and two contrasting positions. It assigns to each its distinctive label: one *"who gives and is God-fearing and believes in the truth of the ultimate good;"* and another *"who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient, and rejects the truth of the ultimate good."*

These are the two positions at which disparate souls line up where all diverse striving and divergent ways of life end. Each group has its way in this life smoothed, with all obstructions removed: *"As for him who gives and is God-fearing and believes in the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to perfect ease."* (Verses 57) He who is charitable, God-fearing and believes in an ideology which is synonymous with ultimate good has indeed done his best to purify himself, seeking right guidance. Hence, he deserves the help and grace which God has, by His own will, committed Himself to provide. For without this grace man finds himself absolutely helpless. He whose path to perfect ease and comfort is made smooth by God achieves something great. What is more, such a person achieves this great goal in this life without difficulty. He lives in ease. Indeed, ease flows from him to all around him. Ease becomes characteristic of his movement, action and handling of all things and situations. Success and quiet contentedness become the distinctive mark of his life in all its details and general aspects. He attains the highest grade of all, in the sense that he joins the Prophet as a recipient of God's promise to His Messenger: *"We shall smooth your way to perfect ease."* (87: 8)

> *But as for him who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient, and rejects the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to affliction. What will his wealth avail him when he goes down [to his grave].* (Verses 8-11)

He who sacrifices nothing of himself or his wealth, professes that he is in no need of His Lord or His guidance and disbelieves in His message and religion, makes himself vulnerable to evil. For so doing he deserves that everything should be made hard for him. Hence, God makes easy his path to affliction, and withholds from him all kinds of help. God makes every stride he takes really hard, drives him away from the path of right guidance, and leaves him to traverse the valleys of misery, although he may imagine himself to be taking the road to success. How greatly mistaken he is! He loses balance: thus he tries to avoid falling only to go down heavily, and finds himself further away from the path set by God, deprived of His pleasure. When he eventually goes down to his grave, he can make no use of the wealth he has hoarded. It is that very wealth that has caused him to imagine himself in no need of God or His guidance. *"What will his wealth avail him when he goes down [to his grave]."* (Verse 11) Facilitating evil and sin is the same as facilitating the way to affliction, even though the sinful may be successful and prosperous in this life. For is there any

affliction worse than hell? Indeed, hell is affliction itself?

Thus the first part of the *sūrah* ends having made clear that there are only two ways for all mankind at all times and in all places. All humanity forms into two parties, under two headings, however numerous their colours and forms may be.

And Different Ends

The second part states the fate of each group. It emphasizes firstly that the end and reward of each group is fair and inevitable, for guidance has been provided and warnings have been issued: *"It is for Us to give guidance, and Ours is the life to come, and this first life. I warn you, therefore, of the raging fire, which none shall have to endure but the most hapless wretch, who denies the truth and turns away. Kept away from it will be him who is God-fearing, who gives away his money to purify himself not in recompense of any favours done him by anyone but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Lord, the Most High. He shall indeed be well pleased."* (Verses 12-21)

One aspect of God's grace and mercy to His servants is that He has taken it upon Himself to provide clear guidance that is readily acceptable to human nature, and to explain it as well through His messages and messengers, and by means of the signs He has provided. Thus, no one has a valid argument for deviation, and no one will suffer injustice: *"It is for Us to give guidance."* (Verse 12) Then follows a straightforward statement of the essence of power which has control over man and everything around him, from which he can have no shelter: *"and Ours is the life to come, and this first life."* (Verse 13)

By way of elaboration on the two facts just mentioned, namely, God's provision of guidance and that to Him belongs this life and the hereafter, i.e. the realms of action and reward, there is a reminder to us that He has given clear warning to us all: *"I warn you, therefore, of the raging fire."* (Verse 14) It is only the most wretched of mankind who are thrown in this fire. Indeed there is no wretchedness worse than suffering in hell: *"None shall have to endure [id but the most hapless wretch."* (Verse 15) We then have a definition of such a wretched person. It is he *"who denies the truth and turns away."* (Verse 16) He denies this message and turns away from divine guidance. He does not answer his Lord's beckoning so that He may guide him as He has promised any who come towards Him with an open mind.

"Kept away from it will be him who is God-fearing." (Verse 17) A person who fears God will be the happiest, in contrast to the most hapless wretch. The *sūrah* similarly gives a definition of such a person. He is the one *"who gives away his money to purify himself"* (Verse 18) He has no vain motive or need to satisfy any snobbery. He spends it voluntarily not out of any indebtedness, seeking gratitude from no one. His only objective is the pleasure of his Lord, the Most Exalted: *"Not in recompense of any*

favours done him by anyone but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Lord, the Most High." (Verses 19-20)

What can the righteous person expect in return for spending his money in self-purification, and for seeking the pleasure of his Lord? The reward which the Qur'ān states is indeed surprising, and very unfamiliar: *"He shall indeed be well pleased."* (Verse 21) It is the pleasure that fills the believer's heart and soul, animates everything in his life, and radiates to all around him. What a reward, and what grace! *"He shall indeed be well pleased."* He will be satisfied with his religion, his Lord and his destiny. He will be content with whatever befalls him of comfort or discomfort, and whether he is poor or wealthy. He will be free of anxiety and hard feelings. He does not worry about his burden being too heavy or his goal being too far. This satisfaction is in itself a reward, great beyond description. Only the person who sacrifices himself and his wealth for it and who seeks to purify himself and to win God's pleasure deserves this reward. It is God alone who can pour such a reward into those hearts which submit to Him with all sincerity and pure devotion. Having paid the price, the believer *"shall indeed be well pleased."* At this point, the reward comes as a surprise, but it is a surprise awaited by the one who attains the standard of the righteous, whose main qualifications are spending for self-purification and seeking God's pleasure. Such a person will be well pleased and well satisfied.

SŪRAH 93

Al-Đuĥā

(The Morning Hours)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلضُّحَىٰ ﴿١﴾	*By the bright morning hours,* (1)
وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذَا سَجَىٰ ﴿٢﴾	*and the night when it grows still and dark,* (2)
مَا وَدَّعَكَ رَبُّكَ وَمَا قَلَىٰ ﴿٣﴾	*your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you.* (3)
وَلَلْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ لَّكَ مِنَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٤﴾	*Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life.* (4)
وَلَسَوْفَ يُعْطِيكَ رَبُّكَ فَتَرْضَىٰٓ ﴿٥﴾	*And, certainly, in time your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased.* (5)
أَلَمْ يَجِدْكَ يَتِيمًا فَـَٔاوَىٰ ﴿٦﴾	*Has He not found you an orphan and given you a shelter?* (6)
وَوَجَدَكَ ضَآلًّا فَهَدَىٰ ﴿٧﴾	*And found you in error, and guided you?* (7)
وَوَجَدَكَ عَآئِلًا فَأَغْنَىٰ ﴿٨﴾	*And found you poor and enriched you?* (8)
فَأَمَّا ٱلْيَتِيمَ فَلَا تَقْهَرْ ﴿٩﴾	*Therefore do not wrong the orphan,* (9)

nor chide away the beggar; (10)	وَأَمَّا ٱلسَّآئِلَ فَلَا تَنْهَرْ ﴿١٠﴾
but speak of your Lord's favours. (11)	وَأَمَّا بِنِعْمَةِ رَبِّكَ فَحَدِّثْ ﴿١١﴾

Overview

This *sūrah,* in subject matter, expression, images, connotations and rhythm provides a touch of tenderness and mercy. It is a message of affection, the touch of a benevolent hand to soothe pain and remove hardship. At the same time, it generates an air of contentment and confident hope.

The *sūrah* is dedicated in its entirety to the Prophet (peace be upon him). It is a message from his Lord which touches his heart with pleasure, joy, tranquillity and contentment. All-in-all, it proffers mercy and compassion to his restless soul and suffering heart.

Several accounts mention that the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet came, at one stage, to a halt and that the angel Gabriel stopped coming to him for a while. The unbelievers therefore said, "Muĥammad's Lord has bidden him farewell!" God therefore revealed this *sūrah.*

Revelation, Gabriel's visits and the link with God were the Prophet's whole equipment along his precarious path. They were his only solace in the face of hard rejection and his sole comfort against outright repudiation. They were the source from which he derived his strength to stand steadfast against the unbelievers who were intent on rebuff and refusal, and on directing a wicked, vile attack against the Prophet's message and the faith he preached.

So when the revelation was withheld, the source of strength for the Prophet was cut off. His life spring was sapped and he longed for his heart's friend. Alone he was left in the wilderness, without sustenance, water, or the accustomed companionship of his beloved friend. It was a situation which heavily taxed human endurance.

Then this *sūrah* was revealed and it came as a river of compassion, mercy, hope, comfort and reassurance. "*Your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you. Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life. And, certainly, in time your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased.*" (Verses 3-5) Your Lord has never before left you or rejected you, or even denied you His mercy or protection. "*Has He not found you an orphan and given you a shelter? And found you in error, and guided you? And found you poor and enriched you?*" (Verses 6-8)

Do you not see the proof of all this in your own life? Do you not feel it in your

heart? Do you not observe it in your world? Most certainly, "*your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you.*" (Verse 3) Never was His mercy taken away from you and nor will it be. "*Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life.*" (Verse 4) And there will be much more: "*And, certainly, in time your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased.*" (Verse 5)

This statement, is given in the framework of a universal phenomenon: "*By the bright morning hours, and the night when it grows still and dark.*" (Verses 1-2) The expression spreads an air of affection, kindliness and complete satisfaction. "*Your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you. Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life. And, certainly, in time your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased. Has He not found you an orphan and given you a shelter? And found you in error, and guided you? And found you poor and enriched you?*" (Verses 3-8) Such tenderness, mercy, satisfaction and solace are all felt in the sweet and soothing words which softly thread along the *sūrah* echoing the morning hours and still night, the times most conducive to clarity. During these periods one's reflections flow like a stream, and the human soul is best able to communicate with the universe and its Creator. It feels the universe worshipping its Lord and turning towards Him in praise with joy and happiness. In addition, the night is described as growing still and dark. It is not the dark gloomy night as such but the still, clear and tranquil night, covered with a light cloud of sweet longing and kind reflection. It is a picture similar to that of the orphan's life. More still, the night is cleared away by the crossing morning and thus the colours of the picture beautifully match those of the framework, making for perfect harmony.

The scene drawn here is one of perfect beauty. Such perfection is divine, unparalleled and inimitable.

Unfailing Favours

> *By the bright morning hours, and the night when it grows still and dark, your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you. Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life. And, certainly, in time your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased.* (Verses 1-5)

God vows by these two calm and inspiring periods of time and establishes a relationship between natural phenomena and human feelings. Thus, mutual response is encouraged between human hearts and the universe, which is beautiful, alive and sympathetic to all living beings. Hence, hearts live in peace with the world, relaxed and happy.

This mode of expression is particularly appropriate in this *sūrah* as the feeling of

fellowship is stressed here. It is as if the Prophet is being told straightaway that his Lord had already blessed him with the fellowship of the world around him and that he was by no means forsaken or left alone.

Then follows a clear and emphatic assertion: "*Your Lord has neither forsaken you, nor does He hate you.*" (Verse 3) He has not left you, nor has He been harsh to you as is alleged by those who want to afflict your heart and soul. For He is your Lord and you belong to Him. He is your sustainer and protector. God's favours on you have neither run out nor have they been stopped. You, Muḥammad, are to get much more and better favours in the hereafter than you are getting in this life. "*Surely the life to come will be better for you than this present life.*" (Verse 4)

God is saving for you, Muḥammad, what will satisfy you in your mission and ease your hard path and bring about the victory of your message, vindicating the truth you advocate. These thoughts were in fact preoccupying the Prophet's mind as he encountered his people's adamant rejection, ill-treatment, and malice. "*In time, your Lord will be bounteous to you and you will be well pleased.*" (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then goes on to remind the Prophet of his Lord's attitude towards him from the very beginning of his mission so that he can reflect on how favourably God treats him. This to make him recall the happy memories of divine kindness: "*Has He not found you an orphan and given you a shelter? And found you in error, and guided you? And found you poor and enriched you?*" (Verses 6-8) Reflect on your present life and on your past. Has He ever forsaken you or hated you even before He charged you with prophethood?

You were born an orphan but God protected you. He made so many people kind to you, especially your uncle Abū Ṭālib, though he followed a religion different from yours. You were poor and He made your heart rich with contentment, and made you rich through your business gains and wife's wealth, so that you would not suffer from poverty or yearn for the riches that abound all around you.

You were also brought up in an ignorant society, full of confused beliefs and concepts, where erring ways and practices abounded. You did not like those beliefs, concepts and practices but you could not find a clear and suitable way out. You could find your way neither in the world of *jāhiliyyah,* nor with the followers of Moses and Jesus who adulterated their beliefs, distorted their original form and went astray. But God has guided you through His revelations and the way of life He has laid down, establishing a firm bond between Him and you.

This guidance in the wilderness of disbelief and confusion is the greatest favour of them all. The happiness and reassurance it brings about cannot be matched. The Prophet had been greatly perturbed and afflicted because of the cessation of revelation, and the malicious attitude of the unbelievers during the period of its

cessation. Hence comes this reminder to put his heart at ease and to reassure him of his Lord's promise that he will never be abandoned.

God takes the opportunity of mentioning the Prophet's earlier orphanhood, error and poverty in order to instruct him, and all Muslims, to protect every orphan, be charitable to every beggar, and to speak of the great favours God has bestowed on them. The first and most important of these is having been guided to Islam. *"Therefore do not wrong the orphan, nor chide away the beggar, but speak of your Lord's favours."* (Verses 9-11)

As we have frequently mentioned, these instructions reflect the needs of the day, in that greedy and materialistic society in which the weak, who could not defend their own rights, were not catered for. Islam came to reform that society with God's laws which establish equity, justice and goodwill. Speaking of God's bounties, especially those of guidance and faith, expresses gratitude to Him who has given us all that we have. It is the recipient's practical manifestation of thanks.

SŪRAH 94

Al-Sharĥ

(Solace)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Have We not opened up your heart, (1)	أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ ﴿١﴾
and relieved you of your burden, (2)	وَوَضَعْنَا عَنكَ وِزْرَكَ ﴿٢﴾
which weighed heavily on your back? (3)	ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ ﴿٣﴾
And have We not given you high renown? (4)	وَرَفَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ ﴿٤﴾
With every hardship comes ease. (5)	فَإِنَّ مَعَ ٱلْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ﴿٥﴾
Indeed, with every hardship comes ease. (6)	إِنَّ مَعَ ٱلْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ﴿٦﴾
When you have completed your task resume your toil, (7)	فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَٱنصَبْ ﴿٧﴾
and to your Lord turn with love. (8)	وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَٱرْغَب ﴿٨﴾

This *sūrah* was revealed soon after the preceding one, *Sūrah* 93, The Morning

Hours, as if it were a continuation of it. Here, also, the feelings of sympathy and an atmosphere of delightful, friendly discourse abound. It portrays the divine care the Prophet enjoys and explains the measures taken out of concern for him. The *sūrah* also gives the good news of forthcoming relief, points out to the Prophet the secret of ease, and emphasizes his strong ties with God.

"*Have We not opened up your heart, and relieved you of your burden, which weighed heavily on your back? And have We not given you high renown?*" (Verses 1-4) This suggests that the Prophet was troubled for some reason concerning the message he was entrusted with, and the obstacles in its way. These verses also suggest that the difficulties facing his mission weighed heavily on his heart, making him feel the need for urgent help and backing. Hence this comforting address.

"*Have We not opened up your heart,*" so that it may warm to this message? Have We not facilitated it for you, endeared it to you, defined its path and illuminated it for you to see its happy end? Look into your heart! Do you not see it to be full of light, happiness and solace? Reflect on the effects brought about by all the favours bestowed on you! Do you not feel comfort with every difficulty, and find contentment with every kind of deprivation you suffer?

"*And relieved you of your burden, which weighed heavily on your back?*" (Verses 2-3) Your burden was so heavy that it almost broke your back, but We relieved you of that. Relief took the form of giving your heart a lift so that you might feel your mission easier and your burden not so hard to shoulder. Another aspect of the relief was the guidance you received on how to discharge your mission and how to appeal to people's hearts. Furthermore, there is relief for you in the revelation of the Qur'ān which explains the truth and helps you to drive it home to people easily and gently. Do you not feel all this when you think of how heavy your burden was? Do you not feel it to be lighter after We opened up your heart?

"*And have We not given you high renown?*" (Verse 4) We exalted you among those on high, on earth and in the whole universe. We raised your fame high indeed as we associated your name with that of God's whenever it is pronounced. "No Deity but God, Muĥammad is God's Messenger." Indeed, this is the highest degree of praise. It is a position granted only to Muĥammad, with no share of it to anyone else. God has willed that one century should turn after another and generations succeed generations with millions and millions of people in all corners of the world honouring the blessed name of Muĥammad with prayers for peace and blessings to be granted him, and with his profound love entrenched in their hearts. Your fame spread far and wide when your name became associated with this divine way of life.

Certainly the mere fact that you were chosen for this task is an exaltation to which no one else in this universe can ever aspire. How can there remain any feeling of

affliction or hardship after this favour which heals all such difficulties?

God, nevertheless, addresses His beloved messenger kindly. He comforts and reassures him, explaining to him how He has given him unceasing ease. *"With hardship comes ease. Indeed, with every hardship comes ease."* (Verses 5-6) Hardship is never absolute, for ease always accompanies it. When your burden became too heavy, We lifted up your heart and relieved you.

This is strongly emphasized by a literal repetition of the statement: *"With hardship comes ease."* The repetition suggests that the Prophet had endured serious hardship and much affliction. This reminder recalls the various aspects of care and concern shown to the Prophet and then reassures him emphatically. A matter which afflicts Muĥammad's soul so much must be very serious indeed.

Then follows a statement pointing out the aspects of comfort and the factors contributing to the lifting up of hearts and spirits, which is of great help to Muslims as they travel along their hard and long way: *"When you have completed your task resume your toil, and to your Lord turn with love."* (Verses 7-8)

With hardship goes ease, so seek relief and solace. When you have finished whatever you may have to do, be it a matter relating to the delivery of your message or an affair of this life, then turn with all your heart to what deserves your toil and striving, namely devotion and dedication in worship. *"And to your Lord turn with love."* (Verse 8) Seek Him alone and let nothing whatsoever distract you. Do not ever think of the people you call on to believe in Him. A traveller must have his food with him, and this is the real food for your journey. A fighter for a cause needs to have his equipment, and this is the equipment necessary for you. This will provide you with ease in every difficulty you may encounter, and with comfort against every kind of affliction you may suffer.

The *sūrah* ends on the same note as the preceding *sūrah,* The Morning Hours. It leaves us with two intertwined feelings. The first is a realization of the great affection shown to the Prophet, which overwhelmed him because it was the love of his Lord, the Compassionate, the Merciful. The other feeling is one of sympathy shown to his noble self. We can almost feel what was going on in his blessed heart at that time which required this reminder of delightful affection.

It is this mission of Islam: a grave trust and a burden which weighs him down. It is nevertheless the rising of the divine light, the link between mortality and eternity, existence and non-existence.

SŪRAH 95

Al-Tīn

(The Fig)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلتِّينِ وَٱلزَّيْتُونِ ﴿١﴾

By the fig and the olive, (1)

وَطُورِ سِينِينَ ﴿٢﴾

and by Mount Sinai, (2)

وَهَٰذَا ٱلْبَلَدِ ٱلْأَمِينِ ﴿٣﴾

and by this secure city, (3)

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ فِىٓ أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

We indeed have created man in the finest form, (4)

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَٰهُ أَسْفَلَ سَٰفِلِينَ ﴿٥﴾

then We brought him down to the lowest of the low, (5)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَلَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٦﴾

except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs shall be an unfailing recompense. (6)

فَمَا يُكَذِّبُكَ بَعْدُ بِٱلدِّينِ ﴿٧﴾

Who, then, can henceforth cause you to deny the Last Judgement? (7)

Is not God the most just of judges? (8)

أَلَيْسَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَحْكَمِ ٱلْحَٰكِمِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Overview

The basic fact outlined in this *sūrah* is that God has given man an upright nature. This is essentially in perfect harmony with the nature of faith. With faith it attains its ultimate perfection. But when man deviates from this upright nature and from the straight path of faith he sinks into the lowest abyss.

God swears to the validity of this by the fig, *tin,* the olive, *zaytūn,* Mount Sinai, *Ṭūr Sīnīn* and the secure city of Makkah, *al-balad al-amīn.* As we have already seen in many *sūrahs* in this part of the Qur'ān, this oath is the framework which perfectly fits the essential facts presented within it.

The Tar in Sinai is the mountain on which Moses received his divine summons. The secure city is Makkah, which houses the Ka`bah, God's inviolable house. The relationship between the two on the one hand and religion and faith on the other is obvious. But a similar relationship is not readily clear with regard to the figs and olives. Suggestions as to the significance of these are numerous. It is said that the fig refers to the fig tree in heaven, with the leaves of which Adam and his wife, Eve, tried to cover their private parts. Another suggestion is that it refers to the place where the fig tree appeared on the mountain where Noah's ark landed.

As for the olive, it is suggested that it refers to the Mount of Ṭūr Zaitā in Jerusalem. It is also said that it refers to Jerusalem itself. Another suggestion is that it refers to the olive branch brought back by the pigeon which Noah released from the ship to examine the state of the foods. When the pigeon brought back an olive branch, he knew that t e land had reappeared and that vegetation was growing.

A different opinion posits that the fig and olive mentioned in the *sūrah* are simply those two kinds of food with which we are familiar. Alternatively, it is claimed, they are symbols of growth out of land.

There is another reference in the Qur'ān to the olive tree in association with Mount Sinai. The verse there reads as follows: *"And a tree issuing from Mount Sinai which bears oil and seasoning for all to eat."* (23: 20) This, however, is the only case where reference to the fig tree is made in the Qur'ān.

Hence, we cannot say anything definite on this matter. However, on the basis of parallel frameworks in other *sūrahs,* the most likely explanation of the fig and olive mentioned here is that they refer to certain places or events which have some relevance to religion and faith or to man as the creature fairest in shape and form. This may have been established in heaven where man's life began. The harmony

between this detail and the main fact outlined in the *sūrah* is yet another example of the unique method of the Qur'ān whereby the framework fits perfectly with the facts contained within it.

Man's Fair Shape

The essential fact of the *sūrah* is embodied in the verses: *"We indeed have created man in the finest form, then We brought him down to the lowest of the low, except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs shall be an unfailing recompense."* (Verses 4-6)

God has perfected all His creation; and the special emphasis laid here and elsewhere in the Qur'ān on man's being endowed with perfect form shows clearly that man has enjoyed extra divine care. Moreover, God's care for man, despite his distortion of his upright nature and the corruption he indulges in, suggests that God has given him special rank and special weight in the universe. God's care is most clearly apparent in the moulding of man's highly complicated physical structure and his unique spiritual and mental make-up.

The emphasis here is on man's spiritual qualities since these are the ones which drag man down to the most ignoble state when he deviates from his upright nature and turns away from belief in God. Needless to say, man's physical structure does not sink to such a low level. Moreover, the superiority of man's creation is most clearly apparent in his spiritual qualities. He is made in such a way as to be able to attain a sublime standard, superior to that of the highest ranking angels. This is illustrated in the story of the Prophet's ascension to heaven. Then, Gabriel stopped at a certain level and Muĥammad, human as he was, was elevated much higher.

At the same time, man is given the dubious ability to sink down to levels unreached by any other creature: *"Then We brought him down to the lowest of the low."* (Verse 5) In this case, the animals are superior to him and more upright, since they do not violate their nature. They praise the Lord and fulfil their function on earth as they are guided to do. But man who has been given the fairest form and abilities denies his Lord and so sinks right down.

"We have created man in the finest form." (Verse 4). This is a reference to his nature and abilities. *"Then We brought him down to the lowest of the low."* (Verse 5) That is, when he forces his nature away from the line God has defined for him. Having laid down the way, God left man to choose whether to follow it or not.

"Except for those who believe and do good deeds." (Verse 6) For these are the ones who stick to their upright nature, consolidate it with faith and righteous deeds, and who elevate it to the highest level it can attain in this world so they can finally attain a life of perfection in the world of perfection: *"For theirs shall be an unfailing recompense."*

(Verse 6) But those who cause their nature to sink to the lowest of the low go down along their slippery road until they reach the lowest level, that is, in hell where their humanity is shed and they are completely debased. Both ends are natural results of two widely different starts and lines of action.

Thus, the importance of faith in human life becomes clear. Faith is the elevating path through which upright human nature ascends to its ultimate perfection. It is the rope stretched between man and his Maker. It is the light showing him where to step along the elevating path. When the rope is cut and the light put out, the inevitable result is the fall down the steep path into the lowest of the low. The clay element in man's make-up separates from the spiritual element and man, along with stones, becomes the fuel for hell-fire.

In light of this fact, the Prophet is addressed in this manner: *"Who, then, can henceforth cause you to deny the Last Judgement? Is not God the most just of judges?"* (Verses 7-8) What makes you, man, deny this religion after you have known this fact, realized the importance of faith in the life of humanity, and become aware of the destiny awaiting those who disbelieve? Why do you turn away from this light and refuse to follow the straight path laid down by God?

"Is-not God the most just of judges?" (Verse 8) Is not He the most just when He gives this ruling concerning the destiny of creation? Is not God's wisdom clearest and most reassuring as He rules between believers and unbelievers? Justice is certainly clear and wisdom is manifest. Hence, we are taught in a *ĥadīth* related by Abū Hurayrah that when one reads this *sūrah* one should answer the rhetorical question, "*Is not God the most just of judges?"* by saying: "Indeed, and I am a witness to that."

SŪRAH 96

Al-`Alaq

(The Germ-Cell)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱقْرَأْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ﴿١﴾	*Read in the name of your Lord who has created* (1)
خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ﴿٢﴾	*– created man out of a germ- cell.* (2)
ٱقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ ٱلْأَكْرَمُ ﴿٣﴾	*Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One,* (3)
ٱلَّذِى عَلَّمَ بِٱلْقَلَمِ ﴿٤﴾	*who has taught the use of the pen,* (4)
عَلَّمَ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ﴿٥﴾	*taught man what he did not know.* (5)
كَلَّآ إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ لَيَطْغَىٰٓ ﴿٦﴾	*Indeed, man becomes grossly overweening,* (6)
أَن رَّءَاهُ ٱسْتَغْنَىٰٓ ﴿٧﴾	*once he thinks himself self- sufficient.* (7)
إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ ٱلرُّجْعَىٰٓ ﴿٨﴾	*Surely to your L rd all must return.* (8)
أَرَءَيْتَ ٱلَّذِى يَنْهَىٰ ﴿٩﴾	*Look at the one who tries to prevent* (9)

a servant of God from praying! (10)	عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّىٰٓ ﴿١٠﴾
Think: does he follow the right guidance (11)	أَرَءَيْتَ إِن كَانَ عَلَى ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ﴿١١﴾
and enjoin [others to be] God-fearing? (12)	أَوْ أَمَرَ بِٱلتَّقْوَىٰٓ ﴿١٢﴾
Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back, (13)	أَرَءَيْتَ إِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰٓ ﴿١٣﴾
does he not realize that God sees all? (14)	أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَرَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾
Nay, if he does not desist, We will most certainly drag him by his forelock, (15)	كَلَّا لَئِن لَّمْ يَنتَهِ لَنَسْفَعًۢا بِٱلنَّاصِيَةِ ﴿١٥﴾
his lying, sinful forelock. (16)	نَاصِيَةٍ كَـٰذِبَةٍ خَاطِئَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾
Then let him call his henchmen. (17)	فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُۥ ﴿١٧﴾
We will call the guards of hell. (18)	سَنَدْعُ ٱلزَّبَانِيَةَ ﴿١٨﴾
No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself and draw closer to God. (19)	كَلَّا لَا تُطِعْهُ وَٱسْجُدْ وَٱقْتَرِب ۩ ﴿١٩﴾

The First Revelation

It is universally agreed that the opening of this *sūrah* was the first Qur'ānic revelation. The accounts stating that other verses were revealed first are not authentic. Imām Aĥmad transmits the following *ĥadīth* on the authority of `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife:

> The first aspect of revelation to God's Messenger was that his dreams came true. Whatever vision he might have in his sleep would occur exactly as he had seen. Then, he began to enjoy seclusion. He used to retreat alone into the

> cave of Ĥirā' where he would spend several days in devotion before going back to his family. He used to take some food with him, and when he came back, he would take a fresh supply for another period. He continued to do so until he received the truth while in the cave of Ĥirā'. The angel came to him and said, 'Read.' He replied, 'I am not a reader.' The Prophet says, 'He held me and pressed hard until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, 'Read,' and I replied, 'I am not a reader.' o, he held me and pressed me hard a second time until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, 'Read.' I replied, 'I am not a reader.' He then held me and pressed me hard for the third time. Then he said, 'Read in the name of your Lord who has created — created man out of a germ-cell. Read — for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.' The Prophet returned home to Khadījah trembling and said, 'Wrap me! Wrap me!' They wrapped him and his fear subsided. He turned to Khadījah and exclaimed, 'What has happened to me?' and related to her what had happened and said, 'I fear for myself.' And Khadījah replied, 'Fear not, be calm and relax. God will not let you suffer any humiliation, because you are kind to your relatives, you speak the truth, you assist anyone in need, you are hospitable to your guests and you help in every just cause.' Then she took him to Waraqah ibn Nawfal, her paternal cousin who was a Christian convert and a scholar with a good knowledge of Arabic, Hebrew and the Bible. He had lost his eyesight and had grown very old. Khadījah said to Waraqah, 'Cousin, would you like to hear what your nephew has to say?' Waraqah said, 'Well, nephew, what have you seen?' The Prophet related to him what he had seen. When he finished, Waraqah said, 'It is the same revelation as was sent down to Moses. I wish I was a young man so that I might be alive when your people turn you away from this city.' The Prophet exclaimed, 'Would they turn me away?' Waraqah answered 'Yes! No man has ever preached a message like yours but was met with enmity. If I live till that day, I will certainly give you all my support.' But Waraqah died soon after that...

This *ĥadīth* is related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim in both of the most authentic books of the Prophet's traditions. Al-Ṭabarī also relates the following *ĥadīth* on the authority of `Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr:

> The Prophet said, 'While I was asleep he came to me carrying a case made of very rich material in which there was a book. He said, 'Read.' I replied, 'I am not a reader.' He pressed me so hard that I felt I was about to die. Then he released me and said, 'Read.' I asked 'What shall I read?' (I said this only out of fear that he might repeat what he had already done to me.) He said, 'Read in the name of your Lord who has created — created man out of a germ-cell.

> Read — for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.' I read it. He stopped, then left me and went away. I woke up feeling that it was actually written in my heart.' The Prophet went on to say, 'No man was ever more loathsome to me than poets or the deranged. I could not bear even looking at either. I thought, 'The man (meaning himself) is undoubtedly a poet or deranged. This shall not be said about me among the Quraysh. Let me climb high up in the mountain and throw myself down and get rid of fall.' I went to carry out this intention. When I was half way up in the mountain I heard a voice coming from the heavens saying, 'Muĥammad, you are God's Messenger and I am Gabriel.' I raised my head up to the sky and I saw Gabriel in the image of a man with his feet one next to the other, up on the horizon. He said again, 'Muĥammad, you are God's Messenger and I am Gabriel.' I stood in my place looking up at him. This distracted me from my intention. I was standing there unable to move. I tried to turn my face away from him and to look up at the sky, but wherever I looked, I saw him in front of me. I stood still, moving neither forward nor backward. Khadījah sent her messengers looking for me and I remained standing in my place all the while until they went back to her. He then left me and I went back to my family.

This tradition is related in these details by Ibn Isĥāq, on the authority of Wahb ibn Kaysān.[28]

A Momentous Event

I reflected for a while upon this event. We have all read it many times in books; either those of the Prophet's biography or those explaining the meaning of the Qur'ān. But we either read it casually or give it little thought and go on with our reading.

Yet this is an event which has immense significance. It is an event which has an important bearing on the life of humanity; but much as we try today to perceive its great value, many of its aspects remain beyond our perception. It is no exaggeration to describe this event as the greatest in the long history of human existence.

The true nature of this event is that God, the Great, the Compeller, the Almighty, the Supreme, the Sovereign of the whole universe, out of His benevolence, has turned to that creation of His which is called man, and which takes its abode in a hardly visible corner of the universe, the name of which is the earth. He has honoured this species of His creation by choosing one of its number to be the

[28] Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah,* Dār al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, n.d., pp. 252-3.

recipient of His divine light and the guardian of His wisdom.

This is something infinitely great. Some aspects of its greatness become apparent when man tries, as best as he can, to perceive the essential qualities of God: absolute power, freedom from all limitations and everlastingness; and when he reflects, in comparison, on the basic qualities of God's servants who are subject to certain limitations of power and life duration. One may then perceive the significance of this divine care for man. He may realize the sweetness of this feeling and manifest his appreciation with thanksgiving, prayer and devotion. He feels that the whole universe shares in the general happiness spread by the revelation of divine words to man in his obscure corner of the universe.

What is the significance of this event? With reference to God, it signifies that He is the source of all great bounties and unfailing compassion. He is the Benevolent, the Loving, who bestows His mercy and benefactions for no reason except that benevolence is one of His divine attributes. As for man, this event signifies that God has bestowed on him an honour the greatness of which he can hardly ever appreciate and for which he can never show enough gratitude, not even if he spends all his life in devotion and prostration. This honour is that God has taken notice and care of him, established contact with him and chosen one of the human race as His Messenger to reveal to him His words; that the earth, man's abode, has become the recipient of these divine words, which the whole universe echoes with submission and devotion.

This great event began to bear on the life of humanity as a whole right from the first moment. It marked a change in the course of history, following the change it brought about in the course followed by human conscience. It specified the source man should look up to in order to derive his ideals, values and criteria. The source is heaven and divine revelations, not this world and man's own desires. When this great event took place, the people who recognized its true nature and adapted their lives accordingly enjoyed God's protection and manifest care. They looked up to Him directly for guidance in all their affairs, large and small. They lived and moved under His supervision. They expected that He would guide them along the road, step by step, stopping them from error and leading them to the right way. Every night they expected to receive some divine revelation concerning what they had on their minds, providing solutions for their problems and saying to them, 'Do this and leave that.'

The period which followed the event was certainly remarkable: 23 years of direct contact between the human race and Supreme Society. The true nature of this cannot be recognized except by those who lived during this period and experienced it: witnessed its start and end, relished the sweet flavour of that contact and felt the divine hand guiding them along the road. The distance which separates us from that

reality is too great to be defined by any measure of length this world has known. It is a distance in the world of conscience incomparable to any distance in the material world, not even when we think of the gaps separating stars and galaxies. It is a gap that separates the earth and heaven; a gap between human desires and Divine revelation as sources from which concepts and values are derived; a gap between *jāhiliyyah* and Islam, the human and the divine.

The people who lived at the time were fully aware of its uniqueness, recognized its special place in history and felt a huge loss when the Prophet passed away to be in God's company. This marked the end of that unique period.

Anas related that Abū Bakr said to `Umar after the Prophet had passed away: 'Let us go to visit Umm Ayman as the Prophet used to do.'[29] When they went to her she burst into tears. They said, 'What are you crying for? Don't you realize that God's company is far better for the Prophet?' She replied, 'That is true, I am sure. I am only crying because revelation has ceased with his death.' This made tears spring to their eyes and the three of them cried together. [Related by Muslim.]

The impact of that period has been in evidence in the life of humanity ever since its beginning up to this moment, and it will remain in evidence until the day when God inherits the earth and all that walks on it. Man was reborn when he started to derive his values from heaven rather than earth and his laws from divine revelation instead of his own desires. The course of history underwent a change the like of which has never been experienced before or since. That event, the commencement of revelation, was the point at which the roads crossed. Clear and permanent guidelines were established which cannot be changed by the passage of time or effaced by events. Human conscience developed a concept of existence, and human life and its values became unsurpassed in comprehensiveness, clarity and purity of all worldly considerations. The foundations of this divine code were firmly established in the world and its various aspects and essential standards were made clear, *'so that anyone who was destined to perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth and anyone destined to live might live in clear evidence of the truth.'* (8: 42) There would no longer be any excuse of lack of clarity. Error and deviation would be upheld deliberately, in the face of clear guidance.

The beginning of revelation was a unique event at a unique moment marking the end of one era and the start of another. It was the demarcation line in the history of mankind, not merely in the history of a certain nation or a particular generation. It was recorded by the universe and echoed in all its corners. It was also recorded in man's conscience which today needs to be guided by what God has revealed and

[29] Umm Ayman was the nurse who took care of the Prophet during his childhood. He remained grateful to her throughout his life. — Editor's note.

never lose sight of it. Man needs to remember that this event was a rebirth of humanity which can take place only once in history.

A Special Type of Education

It is self evident that the rest of the *sūrah* was not revealed at the same time as its opening but at a later date. It refers to a certain situation and later events in the Prophet's life, after he was instructed to convey his message and offer his worship in public, and after he was met with opposition by the unbelievers. This is indicated in the part of the *sūrah* which begins: *"Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying!"* (Verses 9-10) Yet there is perfect harmony between all parts of the *sūrah.* The facts it relates after the opening part are also arranged in a perfect order. These two factors make the *sūrah* one perfectly harmonious unit.

> *Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a germ-cell. Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.* (Verses 1-5)

This is the first *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, so it starts with the name of God. It instructs God's Messenger right at the very first moment of his blessed contact with the Supreme society and before taking his very first step along the way of the message he was chosen to deliver, to read in the name of God, *'Read in the name of your Lord.'* The first attribute of God's it mentions is that of creation and initiation: *... your Lord who has created.'* Then it speaks in particular of the creation of man and his origin: *'created man out of a germ-cell.'* He is created from a dried drop of blood which is implanted in the womb: a humble and unsophisticated substance. This reflects the grace and mercy of the Creator as much as it reflects His power. It is out of His grace that He has elevated this germ-cell to the rank of man who can be taught and who can learn: *'Read! For your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.'* The gulf between the origin and the outcome is very wide indeed. But God is limitless in His ability and generosity; hence this extremely wonderful change.

Here also emerges the fact of man's teaching by the Creator. The pen has always been the most widespread means of learning and it has always had the most far-reaching impact on man's life. This fact was not as clear at the time of revelation as it is now. But God knows the value of the pen; hence, this reference to the pen at the beginning of this His final message to humanity, in the first *sūrah* of the Qur'ān. Yet God's Messenger charged with the delivery of this message could not write. Had the Qur'ān been his own composition, he would not have stressed this fact at the first moment. But the Qur'ān is a message God has revealed.

The *sūrah* then states the source of learning, which is God. From Him man receives all his knowledge, past, present and future. From Him man learns any secret revealed to him about this universe, life and himself.

This single paragraph revealed at the very first moment of the Islamic message states the comprehensive basis of faith and its concepts. Everything starts, works and moves in His name. He is the One who creates, originates and teaches. Whatever man learns and whatever experience and knowledge he acquires come originally from God. He has taught man what he did not know. The Prophet recognized this basic Qur'ānic fact. It governed his feelings, teachings and practices for the rest of his life because it is the principal fact of faith.

Imām Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah summarizes the Prophet's teaching concerning remembrance of God:

> The Prophet was the most perfect man with regard to his remembrance of God. Indeed whatever he spoke was in the line of such remembrance. His commands, prohibitions, legislation, what he taught about the Lord and His attributes, judgements, actions, promises and threats were all part of this remembrance. o were his praise and glorification of God, prayers, his feelings of fear and hope and even his silence. He was conscious of God at all times and in every state. His praise of God was part of his very nature as if he praised Him with every breath. Indeed he praised Him as he stood up, sat or reclined and when walking, riding, moving, at home or travelling.
>
> When he woke up he used to say, 'Praise be to God who has given us life after He had caused us to die. To Him we shall be resurrected.' [Related by al-Bukhārī.]
>
> `Ā'ishah said that the Prophet used to say when he woke up at night, 'God is Supreme,' and would repeat it ten times. Then he would repeat ten times the statement, 'There is no deity but God,' and pray, 'My Lord, I seek refuge with You against constraint in this life and on the Day of Resurrection,' repeating it also ten limes. Then he would start his formal prayers. `Ā'ishah also said that when the Prophet woke up at night for his devotion he would say, 'There is no God but You, my Lord. Praise be to You. I beseech You to forgive my sins and appeal to You for mercy. My Lord, enrich my knowledge and cause not my heart to go astray after You have granted me Your guidance. Grant me Your mercy, for You are the most Bountiful One.' [Both *ahādīth* are related by Abū Dāwūd.]
>
> The Prophet has also taught us that whoever gets up at night and says, 'There is no deity other than God alone; He has no partner; to Him belongs all dominion and to Him is due all praise; He is able to do everything; praised is

God who is limitless in His glory; there is no deity but God; God is great; no power can operate without His permission; He is the Great, the Supreme,' and after this says, 'My Lord, forgive me,' or any other prayer, his prayers will be answered. Should he make ablution and offer prayers, these will be accepted. [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

God's Messenger once stayed overnight at Ibn `Abbās's home, who later reported that when the Prophet woke up he raised his hands to the sky and read the last ten verses of *sūrah* Āl `Imrān before going on to say, 'My Lord, to You belongs all praise; You are the light of heaven and earth and all therein; praise be to You, the true Lord; Your promise is true; whatever You say is true; the meeting with You is true; heaven is true; hell is true; the Prophets are true; and the Hour is true. I submit myself to You, I believe in You and depend on You. To You I shall return. Any dispute I may enter into is for You. To You I turn for judgement. Forgive me all my sins, past and future, public and secret. You are my Lord and there is no God but You. No power can operate without God's permission; He is the Great, the Supreme.' [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Aĥmad.]

`Ā'ishah related that when the Prophet woke up at night to worship he used to say, 'My God, the Lord of Gabriel, Mikā'īl and Isrāfīl, the Creator of heaven and earth, who knows what is concealed and what is made public. You judge between Your servants in their disputes. Guide me, with Your own will, to the truth over which people argue and dispute, for You guide whom You will to the straight path.' She might have also said that he used to say this at the start of his prayers. [Related by Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.]

After offering the *witr* prayer, the Prophet used to repeat three times, 'Glorified be God, the Holy One.' [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and Aĥmad.]. When he went out of his house he would say, 'In the name of God. I place my trust in God. My Lord, I appeal to You to guard me against going astray or causing anyone to go astray, and against making a slip or causing anyone to slip, and being unjust to anyone or being victim to any injustice by others, and against acting ignorantly, or being ignorantly done by.' [Related by al Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and Aĥmad.]

The Prophet said, "Whoever says as he leaves his home: 'In the name of God. I place my trust in God. No power is operative without God's leave,' will be answered: 'You are rightly guided and well protected,' and the devil will be made to turn away from him." [Related by al-Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd.]

Referring to the night when he was host to God's Messenger, Ibn `Abbās said

that when the Prophet left for the dawn prayers at the mosque he said, 'My Lord, give me light in my heart, tongue, ears and eyes: give me light in front of me, over me and below me, and make the light You give me abundant.' [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Abū Said al-Khudrī relates that the Prophet said: "When a man goes out to the mosque for prayers and says, 'My Lord, I appeal to You by the right of those who pray to You, and the right of my journey to You. I have not come out with any feeling of self- sufficiency, nor in hypocrisy or conceit, nor to seek reputation. I have come out with the hope of avoiding Your anger and earning Your pleasure. I pray to You to save me from hell and to forgive me my sins; You are the only One who forgives sins;' seventy thousand angels will be charged with praying for his forgiveness and God will receive and welcome him until he finishes his prayers.' [Related by Aĥmad and Ibn Mājah.]

Abū Dāwūd related that the Prophet used to say when he entered the mosque, 'I seek refuge with God, the Great, and His Holy face, and His old power against Satan, the outcast.' When a man says this, the Devil says, 'He is now protected against me for the rest of the day.'

The Prophet said: "Whenever any of you comes to the mosque, let him pray and ask peace for the Prophet and say, 'My Lord, open to me the doors of Your mercy.' When he leaves the mosque, let him say, 'My Lord, I pray to You to give me out of Your grace.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah.]

It is also related that when the Prophet entered the mosque, he would ask peace for Muĥammad (himself) and his household, then he would say, 'My Lord, forgive me my sins and open the doors of Your mercy to me.' When he left, he would again ask peace for Muĥammad and his household, and say, 'My Lord, forgive me my sins and lay open to me the doors of Your grace.' [Related by Aĥmad and al-Tirmidhī.]

After offering the dawn prayers, God's Messenger used to stay in his praying place until sunrise, utilizing his time in remembrance of God.

In the morning, he would say, 'Our Lord, we have lived till this morning by Your will, and we also live till evening by Your will. We live and die by Your will. To You we will return.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah.]

He also used to say, 'The morning has appeared. This morning all dominion belongs to God, praised be He. There is no deity but God alone. He has no partner; to Him belongs all the universe and to Him is all praise due. He is

able to do what He wills. My Lord, I pray to You to give me of the best of this day and the best of the days to follow. I seek refuge with You against the evil of this day and the days to follow. My Lord, I seek Your refuge against laziness and the evils of old age, against suffering in hell and suffering in the grave.' In the evening he would repeat the same prayer substituting evening for morning. [Related by Muslim.]

Abū Bakr, the Prophet's Companion said once to him: "Teach me some prayers to say in the morning and in the evening." God's Messenger taught him the following prayer, 'My Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, who knows the visible and the unseen, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the Lord and Possessor of all, I declare that there is no deity but You. I appeal to You to protect me against my own evil and the evil of Satan;

I seek Your refuge against doing myself any harm or causing harm to any Muslim.' The Prophet told Abū Bakr to say this prayer in the morning, evening and before going to bed. [Related by al-Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd.][30]

When God's Messenger had a new garment, he would mention it by name (for example, a shirt, gown or turban) and say, 'My Lord, praise be to You. You have given me this. I pray to You to give me its goodness and the goodness for which it was made; and to guard me against its evil and the evil for which it was made.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Aĥmad and al-Nasā'ī.][31]

The Prophet was in the habit of saying the following prayer when he returned home, 'Praise be to God who has given me this shelter and what is sufficient for me; and praise be to God who has given me food and drink, and praise be to God who has given me abundance out of His generosity. I pray to You to extend Your protection to me against hell.' [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

It is confirmed in the two most authentic *Ĥadīth* anthologies by al-Bukhārī and Muslim that, as the Prophet was about to enter the toilet, he used to say, 'My Lord, I pray to You to rid me of evil things.'[32]

When he finished his toilet, he used to say, 'I seek Your forgiveness, my Lord.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]. It is also reported that he would say, 'Praise be to God who has ridden me of harm and given me good health.' [Related

[30] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma`ād,* Beirut and Kuwait, 1994, Vol. 2, pp. 365-371. Many more *ahādīth* are also included under the same chapter.
[31] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 379.
[32] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 383.

by Ibn Mājah.][33]

It is also confirmed that he once put his hand in a water container and said to his Companions, 'Make ablutions in the name of God.' [Related by al-Nasā'ī.][34]

When he saw the new moon, he used to say, 'My Lord, let it come to us with security, faith, safety and submission to You. New moon, God is my Lord and Your Lord.' [Related by al- Tirmidhī, Aĥmad and al-Dārimī.][35]

When he started eating, he used to say, 'In the name of God.' He also said, 'When any of you eats, let him mention the name of God. If he forgets to do so, let him say [when he remembers], in the name of God at the beginning and at the end.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī.][36]

Thus was the life of God's Messenger. It was conditioned, down to every single detail, by the divine instruction which he received at the very first moment of his message. This instruction helped his faith to be established on a genuine basis.

Arrogance and Ingratitude

It is God, then, who creates, teaches and bestows His abundant bounties on man. This implies that man should acknowledge God's benevolence and be grateful for it. But what actually happens is something different.

The second part of the *sūrah* deals with man's transgression. "*Indeed, man becomes grossly overweening, once he thinks himself self- sufficient. Surely to your Lord all must return.*" (Verses 6-8) It is God who gives to man in abundance and makes him independent. He also creates and teaches him and extends to him His generous treatment. But men in general — except for those guarded by faith — are not thankful for their independence which is made possible by what they are given. They do not recognize the source of this grace, which is the same as the source of their creation, knowledge and livelihood. They behave arrogantly and transgress all limits instead of being dutiful and thankful.

The image of the transgressing, conceited person who has forgotten his origin is followed by a comment charged with an implicit warning: "*Surely to your Lord all must return.*" (Verse 8) Where can this proud and overweening person then turn?

At the same time a fundamental rule of the Islamic faith is emphasized. That is, all

[33] Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 386-387.
[34] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 387.
[35] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 396.
[36] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 397.

must refer to God in every matter, thought or action. He is the only resort and refuge. The good and the bad, the obedient and the sinner, the righteous and the wrongdoer, the rich and the poor, will all return to Him. Even the man who tyrannizes when he thinks himself independent will come to Him eventually.

Thus, the first two sections of the *sūrah* lay down the essential components of the Islamic ideological concept: creation, education and honour come from God alone, and to Him all will return: *"Surely to your Lord all must return."* (Verse 8)

The third section of this short *sūrah* tackles a particularly appalling form of tyranny. Its description in the inimitable Qur'ānic style fills us with wonder and dismay that it should take place at all. *"Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying! Think: does he follow the right guidance and enjoin [others to be] God-fearing? Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back, does he not realize that God sees all?"* (Verses 9-14)

Our dismay is enhanced by the manner of expression which takes the form of address and conversation, using short sentences that follow in rapid succession. The effect can hardly ever be produced by ordinary written language. 'Look at' this ghastly business actually taking place! *"Look at the one who tries to prevent a servant of God from praying."* (Verses 9-10) Have you seen this repulsive sight? Have you realized how repugnance is doubled by the fact that the person being prevented from his prayers is in fact following divine guidance. He merely enjoins righteousness and piety, yet he is discouraged and told to desist!

Yet the transgressor outdoes himself by taking a still more abhorrent stand, *"Think: if he denies the truth and turns his back."* (Verse 13) The closing note is one of implicit warning, similar to that of the previous paragraph, *"Does he not realize that God sees all?"* (Verse 14) He sees everything: the denial of truth, the turning away from it, as well as the prevention of believers from offering their prayers. Since God sees all, something must be done on the basis of what He sees. This is the implicit warning.

Thus, we have a scene of tyranny trying to suppress the call of faith and obedience to God. This is followed immediately by a stern warning stated explicitly this time: *"Nay, if he does not desist, We will most certainly drag him by his forelock, his lying, sinful forelock. Then let him call his henchmen. We will call the guards of hell."* (Verses 15-18) The Arabic term, *lanasfa`n,* used for 'drag' has a marked violence about it. The dragging is by the forelock, the part of the head raised high by every conceited tyrant. It undoubtedly deserves to be hit violently: *"His lying, sinful forelock!"* The tyrant may think of calling his clan and supporters to come to his aid: *"Then let him call his henchmen."* On the other side, *"We will call the guards of hell,"* and they are powerful and ruthless. The outcome of the battle is never in doubt.

In the light of this frightening destiny for the unbelievers, the *sūrah* concludes with an instruction to God's obedient servants to persevere and follow the path of faith: *"No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself and draw closer to God."* (Verse 19) Do not obey this tyrant who tries to stop you from offering your devotion and conveying your message. Prostrate yourself before your Lord and bring yourself closer to Him through worship and obedience. As for the tyrant, leave him to the guards of hell who are sure to mete out to him what he deserves.

Some authentic reports say that the *sūrah,* with the exception of the first part, refers to Abū Jahl who once passed by the Prophet while he was praying at *Maqām Ibrahīm,* close to the Ka`bah. He turned to him and said, 'Muĥammad, have I not ordered you to stop these practices?' He also added some warning to the Prophet who gave him a stern reply. This was possibly the time when the Prophet seized Abū Jahl by the collar and warned him of his impending doom. Abū Jahl said, 'Muĥammad, what do you threaten me with? I am sure I have the largest following in this valley.' Hence, the revelation, *'Let him call his henchmen.'* Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's learned Companion, said in comment: "Had he called them, the angels charged with meting out punishment would have taken him away there and then."

The *sūrah,* however, is general in its significance. It refers to every obedient believer calling men to follow the path of God and to every tyrant who forbids prayer, threatens the believers and acts arrogantly. The concluding divine instruction is therefore: *"No, pay no heed to him, but prostrate yourself and draw closer to God."* (Verse 19)

SŪRAH 97

Al-Qadr

(Power)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِنَّآ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ فِى لَيْلَةِ ٱلْقَدْرِ ﴿١﴾

From on high have We bestowed it [i.e. the Qur'ān] on the Night of Power. (1)

وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا لَيْلَةُ ٱلْقَدْرِ ﴿٢﴾

Would that you knew what the Night of Power is! (2)

لَيْلَةُ ٱلْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ ﴿٣﴾

The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. (3)

تَنَزَّلُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَٱلرُّوحُ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِم مِّن كُلِّ أَمْرٍ ﴿٤﴾

On that night the angels and the Spirit by their Lord's leave descend with all His decrees. (4)

سَلَٰمٌ هِىَ حَتَّىٰ مَطْلَعِ ٱلْفَجْرِ ﴿٥﴾

That night is peace, till the break of dawn. (5)

A Most Distinguished Night

This *sūrah* speaks about the promised great night which the whole universe marks with joy and prayer. It is the night of perfect communion between this world and the Supreme society. That night marked the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'ān to Muĥammad (peace be upon him), an event unparalleled in the history of mankind for its splendour and the significance it has for the life of mankind as a whole. Its greatness is far beyond human perception. "*From on high have We bestowed it [i.e. the Qur'ān] on the Night of Power. Would that you knew what the Night of Power is! The Night*

of Power is better than a thousand months." (Verses 1-3)

The Qur'ānic statements which relate this great event radiate with God's clear and shining light: "*From on high We bestowed it on the Night of Power."* (Verse 1) There is also the light of the angels and the Spirit moving between the earth and the Supreme society. "*On that night the angels and the Spirit by their Lord's leave descend with all His decrees."* (Verse 4) In addition, there is also the light of dawn which the *sūrah* represents as perfectly harmonious with the light of the Qur'ān and the angels as well as with their spirit of peace: "*That night is peace, till the break of dawn."* (Verse 5)

The night in question here is the same night referred to in *Sūrah* 44, Smoke: "*From on high We bestowed it [i.e. the Qur'ān] on a blessed night, for We would warn [mankind]; on a night when every precept was made plain as a commandment from Us. We have ever sent forth messengers as a blessing from your Lord. It is He alone who hears all and knows all."* (44: 3-6) It is clearly established that it is a night during the month of Ramaḍān, as stated in *Sūrah* 2, The Cow: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed: a guidance for mankind and a self-evident proof of that guidance and a standard to distinguish right from wrong."* (2: 185) This means that the Night of Power marked the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet and his mission of delivering it to mankind.

Ibn Isĥāq related that the first revelation, consisting of the opening of *Sarah* 96, The Germ-Cell, took place during the month of Ramaḍān, when God's Messenger was at his devotion in the Cave of Ĥirā'.

A number of *aĥādīth* specifying this night have come down to us: some stress that it is on 27 Ramaḍān, others on 21; a few others say it is one of the last ten days and still some others do not go beyond saying that it is in Ramaḍān.

Its name, *Layalt al-Qadr,* or the Night of Power, may be taken to mean deliberate planning, management and organization, or it may mean value, position and rank. Both meanings are relevant to the great, universal event of the revelation of the Qur'ān and the assigning of the message to the Prophet. It is indeed the greatest and most significant event the universe has ever witnessed. It is the event which explains most clearly how human life benefits by God's planning, management and organization. This night is better than a thousand months. The figure here and elsewhere in the Qur'ān does not signify a precise number. It simply denotes something very high. Many thousands of months and many thousands of years have passed without leaving behind a fraction of the changes and results brought about during that blessed and happy night.

This night is too sublime for proper human perception: *"Would that you knew what the Night of Power is!"* (Verse 2) There is no reason to attach any value to the legends circulated concerning this night. It is great because God chose it for the revelation of

the Qur'ān, so that its light may spread throughout the universe, and divine peace may spread in human life and conscience. That night is great because of what the Qur'ān includes: an ideology, a basis for values and standards and a comprehensive code of moral and social behaviour, all of which promote peace within the human soul and in the world at large. It is great because of the descent of the angels, and Gabriel in particular, by their Lord's leave, carrying the Qur'ān. They fill all the space between heaven and earth in such a splendid, universal celebration, vividly portrayed in this *sūrah.*

When we look today in retrospect, after the lapse of numerous generations, at that glorious and happy night, imagine the fascinating celebration the world then witnessed, and ponder over the essence of revelation and its far-reaching effects on human life and values, we appreciate how great this event was. We can then understand, to some extent, why the Qur'ānic reference to that night is made in such an equivocal way: *"Would that you knew what the Night of Power is!"* (Verse 2)

On that night every matter of significance was made plain and distinct; new values and standards were established; the fortunes of nations were determined; and values and standards were sorted out.

Humanity, out of ignorance and to its misfortune, may overlook the value and importance of the Night of Power. When humanity does so ignore it, it loses the happiest and most beautiful sign of grace which God bestowed on it. It also suffers the loss of the real happiness and peace gifted to it by Islam, namely, the peace of conscience, family and society. What it has otherwise gained of material civilization is inadequate compensation for its loss. Humanity is miserable in spite of higher production levels and better means of existence. The splendid light which once illuminated its soul has been put out; the happiness which carried it high up to the Supreme society has been destroyed; the peace which overflowed in people's hearts and minds has disappeared. Nothing can compensate for the happiness of the human soul, the heavenly light and elevation to the loftiest ranks.

We, the believers in Islam, are commanded not to forget or neglect this event. The Prophet has taught us an easy and enjoyable way to commemorate it, so that our souls may always be in close communion with it and with the universal event which it witnessed. He has urged us to spend this night of each year in devotion. He said: "Seek the Night of Power in the last ten nights of Ramaḍān." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He also said: "Whoever spends the Night of Power in worship, with a pure motive of faith and devotion, will have all his past sins forgiven." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Islam is not mere formalities. Hence, the Prophet specifies that the consecration of that night must be motivated by faith and devotion. This would make its

consecration by any individual an indication of his or her full awareness of the far-reaching effects of what took place on that night.

The Islamic method of education and character building links worship with faith and establishes truth in our hearts and consciences. By this method, worship is considered a means for maintaining full awareness of this truth, its clarification and firm establishment in our minds, hearts and souls. This method has been proved to be the best for the revival of this truth so that it has an unfailing influence on people's behaviour. The theoretical understanding of this truth cannot, on its own and without worship, establish it or give it the necessary impetus for its operation in the life of the individual or society. This link between the anniversary of the Night of Power and its consecration in faith and devotion is a part of the successful and straightforward method of Islam.

SŪRAH 98

Al-Bayyinah

(The Clear Proof)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

لَمْ يَكُنِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ مُنفَكِّينَ حَتَّىٰ تَأْتِيَهُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَةُ ﴿١﴾

It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: (1)

رَسُولٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ يَتْلُواْ صُحُفًا مُّطَهَّرَةً ﴿٢﴾

a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, (2)

فِيهَا كُتُبٌ قَيِّمَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

wherein are sound decrees of high value. (3)

وَمَا تَفَرَّقَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلْبَيِّنَةُ ﴿٤﴾

Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had been given to them. (4)

وَمَآ أُمِرُوٓاْ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ حُنَفَآءَ وَيُقِيمُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤْتُواْ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ دِينُ ٱلْقَيِّمَةِ ﴿٥﴾

Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their zakāt. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight. (5)

The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. (6)	إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡ أَهۡلِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ وَٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ فِي نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمۡ شَرُّ ٱلۡبَرِيَّةِ ٦
But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. (7)	إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمۡ خَيۡرُ ٱلۡبَرِيَّةِ ٧
Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they with Him. This is for him who is God-fearing. (8)	جَزَآؤُهُمۡ عِندَ رَبِّهِمۡ جَنَّٰتُ عَدۡنٖ تَجۡرِي مِن تَحۡتِهَا ٱلۡأَنۡهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَآ أَبَدٗاۖ رَّضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنۡهُمۡ وَرَضُواْ عَنۡهُۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِمَنۡ خَشِيَ رَبَّهُۥ ٨

Overview

As stated in our copies of the Qur'ān and according to the greater number of reports, this *sūrah is* a Madinan revelation. There are, however, some reports which classify it as Makkan. Although its classification as a Madinan revelation carries more weight in view of these reports and its mode of expression and style, yet the possibility of its being Makkan cannot be ruled out. The fact that it mentions *zakāt*, i.e. the obligatory charity, and the people of earlier revelations is not a clear-cut argument against the Makkan possibility. Some *sūrahs* which are indisputably Makkan mention the people of earlier revelations. Furthermore, there were some Makkans, a few, who followed earlier divine religions. Some of these adopted Islam but others did not. Moreover the Christians from Najran came to the Prophet when he was still in Makkah, and they accepted the Islamic faith, as it is well-known. Moreover, *zakāt is* mentioned in some *sūrahs* that were indisputably revealed in Makkah.

This *sūrah* deals in a positive manner with a number of facts relating to history and faith. The first fact is that the sending of God's Messenger, Muĥammad (peace be upon him), was essential to the transformation of people of earlier revelations and idolaters, who had found their way into disbelief. They could not leave their erring ways behind without the Prophet's mission: "*It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their*

ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, wherein are sound decrees of high value." (Verses 1-3)

Secondly, religious discord and conflict among the people of earlier revelations did not arise out of ignorance of their own religion, or from any obscurity or ambiguity in it. On the contrary, they ran into discord after they had received true knowledge and clear proof: "*Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had been given to them."* (Verse 4)

Thirdly, with regard to its origin, divine faith is one. Its fundamentals are simple and clear and do not, by themselves and by their plain and easy nature, make for division or conflict: "*Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their zakāt. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight."* (Verse 5)

Fourthly, those who disbelieved after receiving clear proof are the worst creatures of all, while those who believe and do good deeds are the best. Hence the two receive totally different rewards: "*The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they with Him. This is for him who is God- fearing."* (Verses 6-8)

Need for a Divine Message

> *It is inconceivable that the unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters could have ever changed their ways until there had come to them the clear evidence of the truth: a Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity, wherein are sound decrees of high value.* (Verses 1-3)

The world was desperately in need of a new message. Corruption was so widespread that reform could not come about except by means of a new message, a new method of orientation and a new movement. Disbelief had become the characteristic of the followers of all creeds and doctrines, whether pagan or earlier divine revelations [i.e. the Jews and the Christians]. They could only turn away from disbelief by means of this new message and at the hands of a messenger who would himself be the proof, clear, unmistakable and specific. "*A Messenger from God reciting revelations blest with purity;"* that is, purified of all idolatry and disbelief, "*wherein are sound decrees of high value."* The Arabic term *kutub,* which in modern usage means 'books', is given in our translation as 'sound decrees'. In the past, it was normally used in reference to the subject under discussion and its instructions or obligations.

These pure revelations are indeed the Qur'ān which contains valuable and important directives.

Hence the message delivered by the Prophet came at a most suitable time. The new revelations, with all that they included of themes and decrees, were vouchsafed so that they could bring about a far-reaching reform of this world. As to how badly the world needed this message, let us content ourselves with some inspiring remarks from Sayyid Abū'l Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī:

> The sixth century of the Christian era, it is generally agreed, represented the darkest phase in the history of our race. Humanity had reached the edge of the precipice, towards which it had been tragically proceeding for centuries, and there appeared to be no agency or power in the whole world which could come to its rescue and save it from crashing into the abyss of destruction.
>
> In his melancholy progress from God-forgetfulness to self- forgetting, man had lost his moorings. He had grown indifferent to his destiny. The teachings of the prophets had been forgotten: the lamps that they had kindled either had been put out by the storms of moral anarchy or the light they shed had become so feeble that it could illumine the hearts of but a few men, most of whom had sought refuge in passivity and resignation. Having been vanquished in the battle between spiritualism and materialism, they had shut themselves up in monasteries or gone into the wilderness. Such of them as were still left in the whirlpool of life had aligned themselves with the ruling classes of their lands. They helped them in the satisfaction of their sensual desires and in the maintenance of unjust political and economic systems and cooperated with them in reaping unlawful benefits out of the wealth of the people...
>
> Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased ecclesiastics who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they could not have recognized them. In consequence of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere got entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for their personal conduct nor any abiding and rational principles for running a state.[37]

This outlines briefly the condition of mankind and religions just before the advent

[37] Abu'l Hasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World,* Academy of Islamic Research Publications, Lucknow, 1980, pp. 13-14.

of the Prophet Muĥammad (peace be upon him). The Qur'ān refers in various parts to the aspects of disbelief which spread among the people of the earlier revelations as well as the idolaters. Among these references to the Jews and Christians are: "*The Jews say: Ezra is the son of God,' while the Christians say: 'The Christ is the son of God.'*" (9: 30) "*The Jews say the Christians have no basis for their faith and the Christians say the Jews have no basis for their faith.*" (2: 113) The Qur'ān also refers to the Jews as follows: "*The Jews say, 'God's hand is shackled.' It is their own hands that are shackled. Rejected [by God] are they for what they say. Indeed, both His hands are outstretched. He bestows [His bounty] as He wills.*" (5: 64) It says about the Christians: "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary'*" (5: 72) And: "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity'*" (5: 73) The Qur'ān also speaks about the idolaters: '*Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine.'*" (109: 1-6) There are many other statements in the Qur'ān which support this view.

In addition to such disbelief, there were backwardness, division, ruin as well as other evil spread throughout the world.

> There was, briefly, not a single nation in the whole world of the sixth century of the Christian era that could be called healthy in temperament, not a single society that was imbued with high ethical ideas, nor a single State that was based on principles of justice, equity and fairness, nor yet a leadership that possessed knowledge and wisdom, nor a religion that represented the pure teachings of the Prophets of God.[38]

Hence, the divine grace extended to mankind required that a messenger be sent by God to recite purified scriptures containing valuable and important themes. There was no other way of putting an end to such widespread corruption except by sending a messenger, who would deliver mankind from their misery and provide them with divine guidance.

Internal Division and Hostility

Having made this fact clear at the outset, the *sūrah* goes on to state that the people of earlier revelations in particular did not experience religious conflict and division as a result of ignorance, on their part, or confusion or complication on the part of their religion. Instead, their divisions occurred after true knowledge and clear signs were delivered to them through God's messengers: "*Nor did the people given revelations in the past break up their unity until after such clear evidence of the truth had*

[38] Ibid., pp. 43-44.

been given to them." (Verse 4)

The first division occurred among the Jews who split into sects and groups before the advent of the Prophet Jesus. Although their prophet was Moses and the Torah was their book, they divided into five main sects, namely, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Asians, the Extremists and the Samaritans. Each had their own characteristics and their own ways. Later on a division between the Jews and Christians took place in spite of the fact that Jesus was the last prophet sent to the Children of Israel. He came to endorse the Torah and confirm it. Nevertheless, the quarrel between the Jews and Christians reached a high level of violent enmity and hatred. History tells us about the horrifying massacres that took place between the two parties.

> The mutual jealousy and hatred between Christians and Jews, which did not permit them to forego any opportunity of settling an old score, was brought to its climax towards the close of the sixth century. In 610 A.D. the Jews of Antioch rebelled against the Christians, and the Emperor Phocas sent his famous general, Bonosus, to put down the uprising. It was he who set about his business with such enthusiasm that the whole of the Jewish population was wiped out. Thousands of Jews perished by the sword, while hundreds more were either drowned, burnt alive or thrown to the wild beasts.[39]
>
> Such atrocities were repeated again and again between the Jews and Christians. Al-Maqrīzī says in his book *Al-Khiṭaṭ,* "During the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Phocas, Chosroes, the Shah of Persia, dispatched his armies to Syria and Egypt. They destroyed the churches of Jerusalem, Palestine and the rest of the Syrian land. They wiped out all the Christians and pursued them to Egypt, where they slaughtered them in large numbers and enslaved an unimaginable number. The Jews helped them in fighting the Christians and destroying their churches. They poured from all directions to help the Persians and came from Tiberia, the Mount of Galilee, Nazareth village and the City of Tyre and all around Jerusalem. They committed all sorts of atrocities against the Christians, organized ghastly massacres, destroyed two Christian churches in Jerusalem, burnt their places, stole a piece of the pillar of the Cross and captured the Patriarch of Jerusalem and a great many of his friends and companions..." Al-Maqrīzī goes on to relate the Persian conquest of Egypt; then he writes: "At that time, the Jews in the City of Tyre rebelled and sent messengers from among themselves to other cities and towns and all agreed to lay a trap for the Christians and kill them. A war broke out between the Jews and Christians in which the number of the Jews

[39] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

was around 20,000. They destroyed the Christian churches around Tyre. But the Christians surrounded them and raised much greater numbers, so the Jews suffered a ghastly defeat and a great number were killed. At the time Heraclius ascended to power in Constantinople. He defeated the Persians by setting a trap for the Shah, who left him eventually and went away. Then he marched from Constantinople to re-establish his authority over Syria and Egypt and to renew what the Persians had destroyed. The Jews from Tiberia and other places went out to meet him. They presented him with precious gifts and begged him to guarantee their security and to take an oath to this effect. He granted their request. He went on to Jerusalem where he was received by the Christian population holding up their Bibles, crosses, and incense, and burning candles. He was very much displeased at seeing the city and its churches destroyed. He expressed his sorrow to the local Christians who told him about the uprising by the Jews and their siding with the Persians, the massacre of the Christians and the destruction of their churches. They told Heraclius to level a blow to the Jews but he protested that he had already guaranteed their security and had taken an oath to that effect. Their monks, cardinals and priests gave their judgement that the killing of the Jews was justifiable on the grounds that they had played a trick in order to win that assurance from him before he knew what they had done. The clergy also pledged to atone for Heraclius' oath by committing themselves and all Christians to fast a certain Friday every year for the rest of time. Thus he leaned to their argument and wreaked such a savage vengeance upon the Jews that in the Byzantine provinces of Syria and Egypt those alone could save themselves who could take to flight or go into hiding.

These reports give us an idea about the degree of savagery the two parties had reached, their watching for every chance to strike their enemy and heeding no rules in the process.[40]

Then divisions and differences broke out among the Christians themselves in spite of the fact that their book is one and their messenger is one. They were divided first in matters of faith; then they split up into hostile and warring factions. Their differences concerned the nature of Jesus and whether he had a divine or human nature, the nature of Mary, his mother, and also the nature of the Trinity which they claim constitutes God. The Qur'ān relates two or three of their sayings on these issues: "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the Christ, son of Mary."* (5: 72) And: "*Unbelievers indeed are those who say: 'God is the third of a trinity."* (5: 73) And, "*God will say: Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to people, 'Worship me and my mother as deities beside*

[40] Abu'l Ĥasan 'Alī Nadwī, Mādhā Khasir al-`Ālam binĥiṭāṭ al-Muslimīn, which is the Arabic edition of Islam and the World, n.d., pp. 9-11.

God?' [Jesus] answered: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! I could never have claimed what I have no right to [say] "(5: 116)

The most violent of doctrinal divisions was that which erupted between the Byzantine State and the Christians of Syria and the Christians of Egypt, or, in a more accurate definition, the Melkites and the Monophysites. The main dispute centred around the alleged combination of the divine and human natures in Jesus. The Melkite Christians of Syria held that he was both divine and human, while the Monophysites of Egypt insisted upon his being truly divine, the human part of his nature having lost itself in the divine as a drop of vinegar loses its identity in an ocean. The dispute between the two parties became so strong during the sixth and seventh centuries that it looked as if it were a ceaseless war between two rival religions, or a dispute between Jews and Christians. Each faction saying to the other that its stand was without foundation.

Emperor Heraclius (610-641) tried after his victory over the Persians in 638 to reconcile the contending creeds in his state and to unite them by compromise. This compromise took the shape of a general ban on indulging in any argument on the nature of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and whether he had a single or dual nature. But everyone had to accept the doctrine of a single energy in Christ.[41] Agreement on this was established at the beginning of 631, and thus the Menothelian creed was declared the official creed of the state and all those of its populations who belonged to the Christian Church. Heraclius was determined to give the new creed overall supremacy, and he utilized all means to this end. But the Copts disputed his authority and declared their total rejection of this innovation and deviation. They took the opposing stand and sacrificed their all for the old faith. The Emperor tried once again to unite all the creeds and settle the differences. He was content that people should accept that there is a single will for Christ.[42] As for the other issue, namely, the realization of that will by action, he deferred taking a stand on it altogether. He also banned all parties from indulging in arguments and debates on these issues. He included all this in an official message which he delivered to all parts of the Eastern world. But the message failed to end the storm. Instead, brutal persecution of a sort that would send a shiver through any mortal, was administered by the Emperor in Egypt for ten years. Men were savagely tortured before being drowned. Huge torches were

[41] The doctrine of a single energy in Christ was that the allegedly divine and human natures in Jesus had one active force.

[42] The doctrine of a single energy was repudiated, and the doctrine of a single will (the Monothelete formula) was propounded in 638.

> lit and directed onto the miserable prisoners until the fat ran from both sides of their bodies to the floor. Prisoners were put in sacks which were then filled with sand and thrown into the sea.[43]

All these disputes among the people of earlier revelations took place after "*clear evidence of the truth had been given to them.*" (Verse 4) They were not lacking in knowledge and proof, but they were blindly driven by their desires into deviation.

Clear and Simple

Yet religion is clear in its original form and the faith is simple in its essence: "*Yet they were ordered to do nothing more than to serve God, to worship Him alone with sincere dedication and purity of faith, to attend to their prayers and to pay their zakāt. That is surely the right religion, pure and straight.*" (Verse 5)

This is the basis of divine religion throughout history and in all its forms. It is simply the worship of God alone. A sincere and pure submission to Him, a detachment from polytheism in all its shapes and forms, the establishment of regular worship and the payment of the regular obligatory charity, or *zakāt:* "*That is surely the right religion, pure and straight.*" (Verse 5) It is a pure and sincere faith that is firmly established in the heart, the worship of God alone which is a translation of this faith, and spending money for God's cause as He has stated. He who fulfils these injunctions has met the requirements of faith, as the people of earlier revelations were commanded to do, and as these requirements are outlined in all forms of divine faith. It is one religion, the same faith in all the successive messages, as preached by the messengers of God. It is a religion free from all ambiguity and complication; a faith which gives no reason for division and dispute. It is very clear and very simple. How completely different this religion is from those complicated and confusing concepts and from those lengthy polemics.

Since clear evidence was given to them formerly in their own religions through their own prophets, and since clear evidence was given to them again, full of life, in the form of a messenger from God reciting pure revelations, and offering them a clear and simple faith, then the true path becomes very clear. So does the destiny of unbelievers, as also that of believers: "*The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures. But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures. Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever. God is well pleased with them and they*

[43] Nadwī, *Mādhā Khasir al-`Ālam,* pp. 3-5. This is summarized in the English edition, *Islam and the World,* p. 15.

with Him. This is for him who is God-fearing." (Verses 6-8)

Muĥammad (peace be upon him) was the last messenger, and Islam, which he preached, the final message. Messengers from God came successively every time corruption spread in human life. Their objective was to make mankind return to righteousness. Those who deviated from the right path had one chance after another to correct their behaviour. But now that God had willed to close His messages to earth by this final, comprehensive, perfect and accomplished message, then the last chance was also given. This entailed either the adoption of faith leading to salvation, or the denial of faith ending in destruction. For disbelief now is an established evidence of unlimited evil, while accepting the faith is proof of goodness which goes to its absolute end.

"The unbelievers among the people of the earlier revelations and the idolaters will be in the fire of hell, where they will abide. They are the worst of all creatures." (Verse 6) It is a clear and absolute verdict which leaves no room for argument or dispute. It is applicable even if some of their actions, values or systems were good, since these were not based on believing in this final message and messenger. No appearance of goodness makes us entertain even the slightest doubt in this judgement, since apparent goodness is detached from the upright method of living laid down by God.

"But those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of all creatures." (Verse 7) This is also an absolute verdict that makes for no dispute or argument. Its condition is also clear, free from any ambiguity or deception. The condition is faith, not merely being born in a land which claims to be Islamic, or in a family which claims to belong to Islam. Nor is it a few words which one repeats again and again. It is the acceptance of faith which establishes its effects on actual life, *"and do righteous deeds."* It is entirely different from the words that go no further than the lips. As for righteous deeds, these are everything God has commanded to be done in matters of worship, behaviour, action and day-to-day dealings. The first and most important of these righteous deeds is the establishment of God's law on this planet, and the government of people according to what God has legislated. Those who act accordingly are the best creatures of all.

"Their reward [awaits them] with their Lord: the gardens of Eden through which running waters flow, in which they will abide forever." (Verse 8) These gardens are a specially prepared, permanent and happy dwelling. Happiness is symbolized here by security against death and by a prevalent feeling of contentment as against anxiety which mars and disrupts all earthly comforts. It is also symbolized by the running waters flowing through these gardens; a picture which adds a sense of ease, life and beauty.

The *sūrah* then adds some refined touches to the picture it portrays of their perpetual happiness: *"God is well pleased with them and they with Him."* (Verse 8) God's

pleasure with them is much more exalted and far more enjoyable than any happiness. Moreover, in their inmost souls they feel happy with their Lord. They are well pleased with the destiny He has set for them, delighted with the grace He has granted them, and enchanted by this relationship with their Lord: "*God is well pleased with them and they with Him.*"

"*This is for him who is God-fearing.*" (Verse 8) This is the final assertion. It stresses that all that has been said is dependent on the nature of the relationship between man's heart and God. It also depends on man having a feeling of God which urges him to all sorts of good deeds and militates against all sorts of deviation. It is a feeling which removes barriers, lifts curtains and makes man's heart stand bare before God, the One, the All-Powerful. Such a feeling helps make worship and submission to God pure and purges human actions from all elements of hypocrisy and idolatry. So he who truly fears his Lord cannot allow his heart to entertain the slightest shred of influence by any being other than God, the Creator of all. Such a person knows that God rejects any deed done for the sake of anyone other than Him. For God is in no need of partners. Every action must be purely for Him or else He rejects it.

SŪRAH 99

Al-Zalzalah

(The Earthquake)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِذَا زُلْزِلَتِ ٱلْأَرْضُ زِلْزَالَهَا ﴿١﴾

When the earth is rocked by her [final] earthquake, (1)

وَأَخْرَجَتِ ٱلْأَرْضُ أَثْقَالَهَا ﴿٢﴾

when the earth shakes off her burdens, (2)

وَقَالَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنُ مَا لَهَا ﴿٣﴾

and man asks: 'What is the matter with her?' (3)

يَوْمَئِذٍ تُحَدِّثُ أَخْبَارَهَا ﴿٤﴾

On that day she will tell her news, (4)

بِأَنَّ رَبَّكَ أَوْحَىٰ لَهَا ﴿٥﴾

for your Lord will have inspired her. (5)

يَوْمَئِذٍ يَصْدُرُ ٱلنَّاسُ أَشْتَاتًا لِّيُرَوْا۟ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾

On that day people will come forward, separated from one another, to be shown their deeds. (6)

فَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُۥ ﴿٧﴾

Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it then, (7)

وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُۥ ﴿٨﴾

and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it then also. (8)

Overview

According to some reports, this *sūrah* is a Madinan revelation, but other reports suggest that it was revealed in Makkah. The latter reports seem to be more valid, because the *sūrah's* mode of expression and subject matter are more in line with the style and subjects of Makkan *sūrahs.*

The *sūrah* makes a violent wake-up call to drowsy hearts; the subject matter, scene drawn and rhythm all contributing to the effect of this jolt. It is a powerful blast that makes the earth and all that is on it quake and tremble. Men hardly recover their senses when they find themselves confronted with the reckoning, weighing and evaluating of actions and deeds. They immediately receive their recompense. All this is expressed in just a few short phrases, which is characteristic of this part of the Qur'ān as a whole and forcefully portrayed in this particular *sūrah.*

The Results of a Life's Work

> *When the earth is rocked by her [final] earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens, and man asks: 'What is the matter with her?' On that day she will tell her news, for your Lord will have inspired her.* (Verses 1-5)

It is the Day of Judgement when the firm earth trembles and quakes violently and yields up her long-carried loads of bodies and metals and other matters which have weighed heavily on her. It is a scene that makes every firm and solid object under the feet of the listeners shake and totter. They think themselves to be staggering and toddling along and the earth beneath them shuddering and quaking. It is a scene which separates one's heart from everything on earth it clings to, assuming it to be firm and everlasting. The Qur'ān imparts to these scenes a kind of movement which is transmitted almost to the very sinews of the listener. Such immediate impact is all the more forceful because man is portrayed as confronting and reacting to it all: "*And man asks: 'What is the matter with her?'*" (Verse 3)

It is the question advanced by one who is bewildered, astonished, surprised and puzzled, who sees something unfamiliar, encounters what is imperceptible, and beholds what makes him impatient and agitated. o he blurts out: What is the matter with her? What is quaking and shaking her so violently? He cries as he reels and staggers, trying to hold on to anything which may support or keep him upright. But all around him waver and totter violently.

Man has experienced earthquakes and volcanoes which have filled him with awe and ,terror, and have brought to him ruin and destruction. But when man witnesses

the quake of the Day of Resurrection he will see no similarity between it and the earthquakes and volcanoes of this world. He neither knows its secrets, nor does he remember anything similar to it. It is something dreadful, taking place for the very first time.

"*On that day*", when this quake occurs, leaving man entirely shaken, "*she will tell her news, for your Lord will have inspired her.*" (Verses 4-5) This earth will then tell her news, describe her condition and what has happened to her. It will all have been brought about simply because 'your Lord has inspired her,' ordered her to shake and quake so fiercely and shake off her burdens. She obeys only the Lord's orders *'in true submission!'* (84: 5) She will relate her news because what will take place is a simple and clear account of what lies behind it of God's orders and inspiration to the earth.

At this point when man is astonished, puzzled and crying out, and as the rhythm gasps with dread and terror, surprise and wonder, tottering and shuddering, crying out: What is the matter with her? What has happened to her? — at this point he encounters the scene of resurrection, reckoning, weighing and recompense. "*On that day people will come forward, separated from one another, to be shown their deeds. Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it then, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it then also.*" (Verses 6-8)

In the twinkling of an eye we behold people rising from their graves. "*On that day people will come forward, separated from one another.*" (Verse 6) We behold them issuing forth from all over the globe: "*as if they were swarming locusts.*" (54: 7) This scene is also unknown to man, it is something unprecedented, unique in nature. "*On that day, the Earth will split asunder and they will come out in haste.*" (50: 44) Wherever you look you behold a ghost hurrying away, caring for nothing and never looking back or turning his head left or right. They all are "*rushing to the summoner,*" (54: 8), with their heads down and their eyes staring forward, "*for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own.*" (80: 37) It is a scene indescribable in human language. It is both ghastly and astonishing. All these adjectives and all their synonymous and analogous terms cannot describe it. It would be better conceived with a stretch of imagination and contemplation within the limits and capacity of our minds.

"*On that day people will come forward, separated from one another, to be shown their deeds.*" (Verse 6) This is far more terrible and dreadful. People go to where they will be shown their deeds. They have to face their deeds and their rewards or punishments.

Encountering one's own deeds may, sometimes, be far more severe than any other punishment. Man sometimes does things which he avoids even thinking about when he is alone.

In a spell of repentance and remorse, man may even turn his face from some of his deeds because they are so ghastly. o, in what condition will he be on that day when he faces his deeds in front of all mankind and in the presence of God Almighty? It is a terrible and frightful punishment, although it is only that they are shown their deeds and have to confront their labours. However, following this confrontation comes the accurate reckoning which does not leave out an atom's weight of good or evil. *"Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it then, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it then also."* (Verses 7-8)

"An atom's weight!" Early commentators on the Qur'ān explain this phrase as "a mosquito" or "a particle of dust" which can only be seen when exposed to sunlight. These were the smallest things they could think of, and which may be referred to as an atom. But now we know that the word 'atom' refers to a definite thing which is much smaller than a particle of dust seen in sunlight. For the particle of dust can be seen by the human eye while it is impossible to see the atom, even with the help of the most powerful microscopes in modern laboratories. It is only conceived by scientists. None of them has seen it either with his own eyes or with his microscope. All that they have seen is its effects.

This atom, or what is similar to it in weight, whether good or bad, will be brought forth and shown to its doer, who will then receive its reward. At that time man does not undervalue any of his actions and deeds, whether good or bad. He does not say, "Oh, this is a trivial thing which has no weight or consideration." On the contrary, his conscience will be as sensitive to everything he has done as an accurate scale registering even the weight of an atom favourably or unfavourably. There is nothing parallel or similar to this measure in this world, except the heart of a believer. Such a heart is sensitive to even an atom's weight of either good or evil.

But there are some hearts in this world which are unmoved even by mountains of sin and crime. They remain unaffected while suppressing fountains of goodness which are far firmer than mountains. These hearts are conceited on this earth but on the Day of Judgement they are crushed under their own burdens.

SŪRAH 100

Al-`Ādiyāt

(The Coursers)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلْعَٰدِيَٰتِ ضَبْحًا ﴿١﴾	*By the snorting coursers,* (1)
فَٱلْمُورِيَٰتِ قَدْحًا ﴿٢﴾	*striking sparks of fire,* (2)
فَٱلْمُغِيرَٰتِ صُبْحًا ﴿٣﴾	*rushing to assault at dawn,* (3)
فَأَثَرْنَ بِهِۦ نَقْعًا ﴿٤﴾	*raising a trail of dust,* (4)
فَوَسَطْنَ بِهِۦ جَمْعًا ﴿٥﴾	*storming into any army:* (5)
إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ لِرَبِّهِۦ لَكَنُودٌ ﴿٦﴾	*man is surely ungrateful to his Lord,* (6)
وَإِنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ لَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٧﴾	*and to this he himself bears witness;* (7)
وَإِنَّهُۥ لِحُبِّ ٱلْخَيْرِ لَشَدِيدٌ ﴿٨﴾	*and truly, he is passionate in his love of wealth.* (8)
۞ أَفَلَا يَعْلَمُ إِذَا بُعْثِرَ مَا فِى ٱلْقُبُورِ ﴿٩﴾	*Does he not know that when the contents of the graves are scattered about,* (9)

and what is in the breasts is brought out — (10)	وَحُصِّلَ مَا فِي ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١٠﴾
that on that day their Lord [will show that He] is fully aware of them? (11)	إِنَّ رَبَّهُم بِهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَّخَبِيرٌۢ ﴿١١﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is presented in rapid and violent strokes. The text moves swiftly from one scene to another. As we come to the last verse, everything — the verbal expressions, connotations, subject matter and rhythm — settle down in a manner similar to that of a courser reaching the finishing line.

The *sūrah* starts with a scene of war steeds running, snorting, striking sparks of fire with their hoofs, launching a raid at dawn and blazing a trail of dust, cleaving suddenly into the centre of the enemies' camp, taking them by surprise and striking terror and fear in their hearts.

Then follows a picture of the human soul: a scene of ingratitude, ignobleness, greed and extreme miserliness. Immediately after that there is a description of graves laid open and their contents scattered, and the secrets of hearts poured out. Finally the trail of dust, ingratitude and miserliness, the contents of graves and dragged out secrets all come to the same terminus. They come to God and settle down: *"On that day their Lord [will show that He] is fully aware of them?"* (Verse 11)

The rhythm of the *sūrah* is robust and thunderous, and thus fits well with the dusty and clamorous atmosphere generated by the upturned graves and the secrets violently pulled out of people's breasts. These characteristics of the rhythm are also appropriate to the picture of ingratitude, thanklessness and extreme miserliness. The framework for this picture is provided by a dusty and tumultuous stampede of horses racing and thundering. Thus the frame and the picture are in perfect harmony with each other.

Witness to His Shortcomings

> *By the snorting coursers, striking sparks of fire, rushing to assault at dawn, raising a trail of dust, storming into any army: man is surely ungrateful to his Lord, and to this he himself bears witness; and truly, he is passionate in his love of wealth.* (Verses 1-8)

God swears by the war horses and describes their movements one after the other: running, snorting and neighing. They strike their hoofs against rocks, producing sparks of fire. They wage their attack early at dawn in order to take the enemy by

surprise, producing a trail of dust during the unexpected battle. They swiftly pierce the enemy ranks creating disorder and confusion amongst them. These successive stages were well known to those who were first addressed by the Qur'ān. The fact that God swears by the horses provides an emphatic suggestion that the movement portrayed is a lovable one and that people should respond to it actively. This they do only after realizing how precious it is in God's measure, which is reflected in His paying attention to it. Added to all this is the harmony between this scene and the scenes which are the subject of the divine oath, namely the state of the human soul when it is devoid of faith and its impetus. The Qur'ān draws our attention to this state in order that we may gather all our will-power to combat it. For God is perfectly aware of how deeply it is ingrained in man and what great pressure it exercises on him.

"Man is surely ungrateful to his Lord, and to this he himself bears witness; and truly, he is passionate in his love of wealth." (Verses 68) It is a fact that man reacts with ingratitude to all the bounties of his Lord. He denies the favours which God confers on him. His thanklessness and ingratitude is reflected in a host of actions and verbal statements which will serve as witness against him. Or perhaps, on the Day of Judgement, he may testify against himself, admitting his ingratitude: *"and to this he himself bears witness."* (Verse 7) For on the Day of Judgement he will speak the plain truth even against himself, without contention or excuse. *"And truly, he is passionate in his love of wealth."* (Verse 8)

Man is a passionate self-lover. But he loves only what he imagines to be good for himself: wealth, power and the pleasures of this world. This is his nature unless he has faith which changes his concepts, values and even his concerns. Faith changes his ingratitude to humble thankfulness. It changes his greed and miserliness to benevolence and compassion. It makes him aware of the proper values which are worthy of being the object of ambition and hard competition. Indeed these are much more exalted than money, power and mundane pleasures.

Man without faith is an ignoble creature, having only trivial ambitions and petty concerns. However large his desires, however strong his ambitions and high his objectives may seem, he remains sunk in the cesspool of this earth, confined within the limits of this life, imprisoned in self. He cannot be freed or elevated except by an attachment to a world superior to this earth, extending beyond this life; a world which originates from God who is the First Being and returning to God the Eternal; a world into which this life and the life hereafter converge and which has no end.

Hence, the final touch in the *sūrah* provides the cure for ingratitude, greed and miserliness. It portrays the scene of resurrection in a way that makes man shudder, and puts his love for wealth and indulgence in worldly riches out of his mind, unshackling hi soul and setting it free from earthly attachments: *"Does he not know*

that when the contents of the graves are scattered about, and what is in the breasts is brought out – that on that day their Lord [will show that He] is fully aware of them?" (Verses 9-11)

It is a violent and frightening scene in which we witness the 'scattering about' of the contents of the graves and the bringing out of closely-guarded secrets. The Arabic terms, *bu`thira* and *huşşila,* used here for scattering and pulling are very forceful, suggesting an atmosphere of violence and force.

Does he not know what happens when this will take place? Mere awareness of all this is enough to inspire man to seek an answer and explore every avenue in search of it. For it finally rests where every matter and destiny is settled: *"on that day their Lord [will show that He] is fully aware of them?"* (Verse 11)

So to their Lord is their end. On that day He shows that He knows them and all their affairs and secrets. God certainly knows everything at all times and in all conditions, but knowledge of "that day" has the effect of drawing their attention. It is a knowledge which necessitates reckoning and reward. This implicit meaning is the one underlined here.

All in all this *sūrah* is a swift, vehement and breathless piece, with a sudden terminus of meaning, expression and rhythm all at the same time.

SŪRAH 101

Al-Qāri`ah

(The Striker)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

ٱلْقَارِعَةُ ﴿١﴾	*The Striker!* (1)
مَا ٱلْقَارِعَةُ ﴿٢﴾	*What is the Striker?* (2)
وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا ٱلْقَارِعَةُ ﴿٣﴾	*Would that you knew what the Striker is!* (3)
يَوْمَ يَكُونُ ٱلنَّاسُ كَٱلْفَرَاشِ ٱلْمَبْثُوثِ ﴿٤﴾	*The day when people will be scattered moths,* (4)
وَتَكُونُ ٱلْجِبَالُ كَٱلْعِهْنِ ٱلْمَنفُوشِ ﴿٥﴾	*and the mountains like tufts of carded wool.* (5)
فَأَمَّا مَن ثَقُلَتْ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ ﴿٦﴾	*Then he whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance,* (6)
فَهُوَ فِى عِيشَةٍ رَّاضِيَةٍ ﴿٧﴾	*shall enjoy a happy life.* (7)
وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَفَّتْ مَوَٰزِينُهُۥ ﴿٨﴾	*But he whose weight is light in the balance,* (8)

shall have the abyss for his home. (9)	فَأُمُّهُۥ هَاوِيَةٌ ۝٩
Would that you knew what this is like! (10)	وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا هِيَهْ ۝١٠
It is a scorching fire. (11)	نَارٌ حَامِيَةٌۢ ۝١١

Overview

Al-Qāri`ah,* or the Striker, means the resurrection. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān it is given names such as the Overwhelming One, the Deafening Shout, the Stunning Blast and the Enveloper. The term *al-Qāri`ah also connotes hitting and knocking hard. It knocks people's hearts with its engulfing horror.

The *sūrah* as a whole deals with the Striker, its essence, what takes place in it and what it eventually leads to. Thus the *sūrah* portrays one of the scenes of the Day of Resurrection.

The scene portrayed here is one of horror directly affecting man and mountains. In this scene people look dwarfish in spite of their great number. For they are like scattered moths. They fly here and there having no power or weight, going through the dilemma of moths which rush to destruction, having no aim or purpose.

On the other hand, the mountains, which used to be firm and solidly based, seem to be like carded wool carried away by winds, and even by a light breeze. Thus, it is in harmony with this image that the Day of Resurrection is described as the one that strikes or knocks out. The connotations used and the rhythm are in consonance with the effects of the Striker on both people and mountains. The *sūrah* spreads an air of awe and expectation about the outcome of reckoning.

Determination of People's Fates

"The Striker! What is the Striker! Would that you knew what the Striker is!" (Verses 1-3) This *sūrah* starts with the single word, *al-Qāri`ah,* rendered in English as the Striker. It is thrown like a shot, without any further information, predicate or adjective. As such it creates through its sound and connotations an ambiance of awe and apprehension.

The word is immediately followed by a question suggesting alarm: *"What is the Striker?"* (Verse 2) It is that dreadful and formidable thing which arouses curiosity and questioning. Then comes the answer in the form of a cryptic exclamation: *"Would that you knew what the Striker is!'* It is too great to be comprehended or imagined. Then

follows the answer which states what takes place in it but refrains from stating its exact nature: *"The day when people will be scattered moths, and the mountains like tufts of carded wool."* (Verses 4-5)

This is the first scene of the Striker, a scene that leaves people's hearts in panic and makes limbs tremble with fear. The listener feels that everything he clings to in this world is flying all around him like dust. Then comes the end of all mankind. *"Then he whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance, shall enjoy a happy life. But he whose weight is light in the balance, shall have the abyss for his home. Would that you knew what this is like! It is a scorching fire."* (Verses 6-11)

It is useful for us to consider the weights, whether heavy or light. This means that there are standards which God credits with being valuable and others that are valueless. This is the general meaning of the statement which the *sūrah* wants to convey. However, God knows best the exact nature of the balance determining such weights. To indulge in a sophisticated, logical and linguistic argument about the meaning of the Qur'ānic term, *mawāzīn,* used here is in itself a departure from the Qur'ānic spirit and indicates that the reader is not interested in the Qur'ān or in Islam.

"Then he whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance", according to God's measures and evaluation, *"shall enjoy a happy life."* God makes this statement general without any detailed information. Thus, the statement imparts to man the connotations of content and satisfaction or, indeed, pure happiness.

"But he whose weight is light in the balance," according to God's same measure and evaluation, *"shall have the abyss for his home."* The Arabic text uses the term, *umm,* 'mother', for what is rendered here as 'home'. It is to his mother that a child turns for help and protection as he seeks shelter and security at home. But such people with light measure can only turn and resort to the abyss! The expression is a fine one, beautifully ordered. It also has a shade of obscurity preparing the way for subsequent clarification which adds to the depth of the intended effect: *"Would that you knew what this is like."* (Verse 10) It is again the cryptic exclamation used often in the Qur'ān which emphasizes that it is beyond comprehension and vision. Then comes the answer in the closing note: *"It is a scorching fire."* (Verse 11)

Such is the mother of any person whose weight of good deeds is light. This is his mother to whom he turns for help and protection and for security and comfort. But what does he find with such a mother? He finds nothing but the abyss and a scorching fire. The expression here makes a sudden jolt to represent the hard reality.

SŪRAH 102

Al-Takāthur

(Rivalry for Worldly Gain)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

أَلْهَىٰكُمُ ٱلتَّكَاثُرُ ﴿١﴾	*You are preoccupied by greed for more and more,* (1)
حَتَّىٰ زُرْتُمُ ٱلْمَقَابِرَ ﴿٢﴾	*until you go down to your graves.* (2)
كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣﴾	*Nay, in time you will come to know!* (3)
ثُمَّ كَلَّا سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤﴾	*Again, in time you will come to know!* (4)
كَلَّا لَوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عِلْمَ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٥﴾	*Indeed, were you to know [the truth] with certainty...* (5)
لَتَرَوُنَّ ٱلْجَحِيمَ ﴿٦﴾	*You would, most certainly, see the fire of hell.* (6)
ثُمَّ لَتَرَوُنَّهَا عَيْنَ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٧﴾	*Again, you will, most certainly, see it with your very eyes.* (7)
ثُمَّ لَتُسْـَٔلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٨﴾	*Then on that day you will certainly be questioned about your joys and comforts.* (8)

Greedy Preoccupations

This *sūrah* has a rhythm that is both majestic and awe-inspiring; as if it were the voice of a warner standing on a high place, projecting his voice as it rings out in weighty emphasis. He calls out to people who are drowsy, drunken, confused. They approach a precipice with their eyes closed and their feelings numbed. So the warner increases the volume of his voice to the limit: *"You are preoccupied by greed for more and more, until you go down to your graves."* (Verses 1-2)

You drunken and confused lot! You who take delight and indulge in rivalry for wealth, children and the pleasures of this life, from which you are sure to depart! You who are absorbed with what you have, unaware of what comes afterwards! You who will leave the object of this rivalry, and what you seek pride in, and go to a narrow hole where there is no rivalry or pride! Wake up and look around, all of you! For indeed, *"you are preoccupied by greed for more and more, until you go down to your graves."* (Verses 1-2)

With a deep and grave rhythm the *sūrah* then strikes their hearts with the terror awaiting them after they are left in their graves: *"Nay, in time you will come to know."* (Verse 3) Then it repeats the same note, employing the same words and the same firm and terrifying rhythm: *"Again, in time you will come to know!"* (Verse 4) Then it adds to the depth and awe of this assurance, and hints at the grave prospect that lies beyond, the terrifying essence of which they do not recognize in their flush of intoxication and rivalry for worldly riches: *"Indeed, were you to know [the truth] with certainty..."* (Verse 5)

The conditional sentence is not completed in the text. This is acceptable as a refined form of Arabic. It adds to the feeling of awe generated by the *sūrah.* The inference here is that had they known what they should know for certain, they would not have indulged in such rivalry for petty gain. The *sūrah* then discloses the fearful fact which has been withheld: *"You would, most certainly, see the fire of hell."* (Verse 6)

It then emphasizes this fact and enhances its impact on people's hearts: *"Again, you will, most certainly, see it with your very eyes."* (Verse 7)

Finally, it puts the last statement which makes the drunkard sober, the lethargic conscious, the confused attentive and the self-indulgent tremble and feel apprehension at his indulgence in comfort and pleasure: *"Then on that day you will certainly be questioned about your joys and comforts."* (Verse 8) You will be questioned concerning all this: How did you get it? How did you dispense with it? Was it obtained from a lawful source and dispensed with lawfully? Or was it gained unlawfully and used in a sinful manner? Have you praised and thanked God for it? Have you given the poor their due? Have you spent some of it on others? Or monopolized it all for your selves? *"You will be questioned"* about your rivalry in

gathering and amassing wealth and about what you take pride in. It is a burden which you, in your preoccupation and enjoyment, think little of. But beyond it lie heavy responsibilities.

This is a self-expressing *sūrah.* It leaves its impact on us by its meaning and rhythm. It leaves the heart occupied, burdened with the problem of the hereafter, inattentive to the trivialities of this worldly life and its petty concerns.

It portrays the life of this world as a fleeting wink in the long span of existence: *"You are preoccupied by greed for more and more, until you go down to your graves."* (Verses 1-2) The wink of this life is over and its small leaf is turned. Thereafter time stretches on and the burdens become heavier. The style of the *sūrah* presents this inference, achieving harmony between the actual reality and its manner of expression.

Whenever we read this awe-inspiring and majestic *sūrah,* we feel its rhythm travelling upwards in space at the beginning and downwards to the deep, deep level at the end. We feel the burden of this wink of a life on our shoulders as we walk heavily along the road. Then we start questioning ourselves about the smallest and most trivial of our deeds.

SŪRAH 103

Al-`Aşr

(The Declining Day)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَٱلْعَصْرِ ﴿١﴾	*I swear by the declining day,* (1)
إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنَ لَفِى خُسْرٍ ﴿٢﴾	*that man is a certain loser,* (2)
إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِٱلصَّبْرِ ﴿٣﴾	*except for those who have faith and do righteous deeds and counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be patient in adversity.* (3)

Overview

This very short *sūrah* outlines a complete system for human life based on the Islamic viewpoint. It defines, in the clearest and most concise form, the basic concept of faith in the context of its comprehensive reality. In a few words the whole Islamic constitution is covered and in fact, the Muslim community is described in its essential qualities and message in one verse only, the last. Such is the clear and most expressive style of which only God is capable.

The great fact which this *sūrah* affirms is simply that throughout the history of mankind there has been one worthwhile and trustworthy path, which is, specifically, the one the *sūrah* describes. All other ways lead only to loss and ruin. As it says in outline, this way means first the adoption of faith, followed by good deeds and exhortation to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity.

Faith and Its Significance

What does the adoption of faith then mean? We shall not give here its juristic definition. Instead, we shall describe its nature and importance in human life.

Faith is the characteristic by which man, a small creature with a life of short duration in a limited world, attains closeness to the Absolute and Everlasting Originator of the universe and all that exists in it. He thus establishes a link with the whole universe, which springs from that One Origin, with the laws governing it and the powers and potentialities it provides. As a result, he breaks away from the narrow boundaries of his trivial self to the broadness of the universe, from his inadequate power to the great unknown universal energies, and from the limits of his short life to the eternity that God alone comprehends.

This bond with God grants man assured power, limitless scope and freedom. It endows him with great enjoyment of this beautiful life and enriches his life with a mutual friendship with other creatures. Thus life becomes a pleasant journey for man everywhere and at all times. From this an everlasting happiness and intimate understanding of life and creation are derived. This is the invaluable gain, to lack *w*hich is an immeasurable loss.

The qualities of faith are also precisely those of sublime and dignified humanity, such as the worship of one God which elevates *m*an above servitude to others and establishes within him the truth of all mankind's equality so that he neither yields nor bows down his head to anyone other than God, the One, the Absolute. The result is that man enjoys true liberty, which radiates from within his conscience following his realization that there is only one power and one Lord in this world. This liberation is spontaneously developed from such an awareness, for it is the only logical sequence.

Godliness is the second quality of dignified humanity. This quality determines for man the source from which he derives his concepts, values, criteria, considerations, doctrines, laws and whatever brings him into relation with God, the world at large and with his fellow human beings. Thus, equity and justice replace personal desires and self-interest. This strengthens the believer's realization of the value of his way of life and keeps him above all *jāhiliyyah* concepts, interests and mundane values. This is so even when a believer finds himself alone, with no one else of his kind. For he counters all these features with values he derives directly from God. As such, they are the highest in value, most sound and most deserving of devotion and esteem.

A third quality of faith and dignified humanity is the clarity of the relationship between the Creator and His creatures. Thus, man, who is a creature restricted by his own world, is connected with the Everlasting Truth without any mediator. It supplies his heart and soul with light and contentment; and it gives him confidence

and purpose. It eliminates from his mind perplexity, fear and anxiety, as well as any inclination towards arrogance and tyranny over others.

Following the path ordained by God, with steadfastness and clarity of vision, is the next quality of the community of believers. This must be maintained so that goodness does not come about casually, incidentally or without deliberation but rather springs from definite motives and heads towards certain aims. People united for God's cause collaborate. Thus, with a single definite purpose and a single distinguished banner, the Muslim community is raised. This is true for all generations that are similarly welded together.

Another quality is belief in the dignity of man in God's sight. This heightens man's regard for himself and restrains him from aspiring to a position higher than that which the Creator has defined for him. For man to feel that he is dignified in God's sight is the loftiest concept he may attain of himself. Any ideology or philosophy that abases this valuation and ascribes a dishonourable origin to man, separating him from the Supreme society of God is, in effect, nothing but a position of ignominy and degradation, even though it may not say so openly. Hence, the[1] effects of Darwinism, Freudianism and Marxism are among the most horrid disasters human nature has encountered. For they teach mankind that all abasement and downright animalism are natural phenomena with which we should be familiar and of which we need not be ashamed.

Purity of motivation is yet another quality of the dignified humanity established by faith. This directly follows the realization of man's dignity in God's sight, His supervision over human conscience and His knowledge of what man harbours in his innermost soul. A normal human being, whom the theories of Freud, Karl Marx and their type have not deformed, feels ashamed should another person come to know what unhealthy feelings he may incidentally experience. The believer feels the awesome presence of God in his innermost consciousness and his awareness makes him tremble. He, therefore, resorts to self-purification and spiritual cleansing. A refined moral sense is the natural fruit of faith in God who is just, kind, compassionate, generous and forbearing and who abhors evil, loves goodness, knows every furtive look and every secret thought. From this follows the believer's responsibility, which is the direct result of his free-will and the fact that God is aware of all that he does and feels. It stimulates within him healthy awareness, sensitivity, serenity and foresight. His is a communal, rather than an individual responsibility. What is more is that it is a responsibility towards all humanity, pure and simple. A believer feels all this in every action. He achieves a higher degree of self-respect and calculates results before taking any step. He is of value in the world and the whole realm of existence and has a role in its smooth running.

The final quality is man's elevation above greed for worldly gains, preferring

instead God's richer, everlasting reward for which all people should strive, as the Qur'ān directs them to do. Such striving for all that is good results in spiritual elevation, purification and cleansing. Of immense help in this regard is the fact that a believer has a broad scope for action: between this life and the next and between the heavens and the earth. Man's elevation lessens his anxiety about the results and fruits of his actions. He does what is good only because it is good and because God requires it. It is never his concern whether it leads to further goodness in his own short life. God, for whom he performs the good, neither dies, forgets nor ignores anyone's deeds. The reward is not to be received here, for this life is not the last. Thus, a believer acquires the power to continue to perform good deeds without waiting for immediate results. He is sustained in his determination to do good deeds by his unshakable belief in God. This is what guarantees that doing good becomes a carefully chosen way of life, not a casual incident or motiveless event. It is this belief that supplies believers with the power and fortitude to face evil, whether manifested in the despotism of a tyrant, the pressures of *jāhiliyyah,* or the frailty of their will-power to control their passions. All these represent pressures which arise primarily from a sense that this life is too short for us to achieve our aims and pleasures and from our inability to comprehend the deeper results of doing good or to see the ultimate victory of right over evil. Faith provides a radical and perfect way of dealing with such feelings.

Faith in Human Life

Faith is the foundation of all goodness in human life. It is from faith that all forms of goodness spring and to which all its fruits are due. What does not spring from faith is a branch cut from its tree: it is bound to fade and perish; or else, it is a stray shoot, limited and temporary! Faith is the axis to which all the fine fabric of life's networks is connected. Without it life is a loose event, wasted through the pursuit of yearnings and fantasies. It is the ideology which brings together diversified deeds under a consistent system, following the same route and geared to the same mechanism, possessing a definite motive and a well-defined goal.

Hence, all deeds not stemming from this origin and not related to that way are completely disregarded by the Qur'ān. Islam is invariably candid over this. In *Sūrah* 14, Abraham, we read: "*The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned.*" (14: 18) In *Sūrah* 24, Light, we read: "*As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing.*" (24: 39) These are clear statements discrediting every deed not related to faith. The fact is that faith gives a person's deed a motive that is connected with the origin of existence and an aim compatible

with the purpose of all creation. This is a logical view of an ideology that attributes all events to God. Whoever dissociates himself from Him, vanishes and loses the reality of his existence.

Faith is a sign of health in a person's nature and soundness in his disposition. It also indicates man's harmony with the nature of the whole universe, and the presence of mutual effect between man and the world around him. His life, as long as his behaviour is straightforward, must bring about an orientation which ends up in his adoption of faith because of what this universe itself possesses of signs and testimonies about the absolute power that created it. Were the contrary the case, something must then be wrong or lacking in the state of the recipient, i.e. man, which would be a sign of corruption that only leads to loss and nullifies any deed which might somehow give an appearance of righteousness. So extensive and comprehensive, so sublime and beautiful, so happy is the believers' world that the world of unbelievers appears, by comparison, minute, trivial, low, feeble, ugly and miserable.

Need for Righteous Deeds

Doing what is righteous is the natural fruit of faith. It is a spontaneous interaction generated once the reality of faith settles inside the human heart and mind. For faith is a positive and active concept which, once it has pervaded the human conscience, hastens to reflect itself to the outside world in good deeds. This is the Islamic view of faith. It must be dynamic. If it is not, then it is either phoney or nonexistent, just as a flower cannot withhold its fragrance which naturally spreads. Otherwise, it is not in the flower at all.

From all this we recognize the value of faith: it is dynamic, active, creative, productive and totally devoted to God's pleasure. It is the opposite of narrowness, negativity or introversion. It is not just sincere and innocent intentions that never develop into actions. This is the distinguishing characteristic of Islam that makes it a creative power in practical life.

All this is logical only as long as faith remains the link with the way of life God has outlined. This way of life is characterized by perpetual dynamism in the world and among people. It is founded according to a specific plan and orientated towards a definite goal. Moreover, faith propels humanity towards implementing what is good, pure, constructive and utilitarian.

Counselling one another to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity reveals a picture of Islamic society which has its own very special entity, a unique inter-relationship between its individual members and a single objective. It fully understands its position, role and duties. It realizes the essence of its faith and

what it has to do of good deeds which include, among other tasks, the leadership of humanity along its own way. To execute this tremendous duty, mutual counselling and exhortation become a necessity.

From the meaning and nature of the very word 'counsel' appears a most magnificent picture of a united, co-ordinated, righteous and enlightened community or society which pursues right, justice and goodness on this earth. This is exactly how Islam wants the Muslim community to be.

Mutual counsel aimed at that which is right is a necessity because it is hard always to maintain what is right, bearing in mind that the obstacles in its way are innumerable: egoistic passions and predilections, false concepts in the social environment, and the tyranny, inequity and despotism of some. Hence the mutual exhortation urged here means reminding, encouraging and expressing the unity of aim and destination and equality in duty and responsibility. It also collects individual efforts into a unified whole and thus increases feelings of brotherhood in every guardian of truth, in so far as there are others with him to exhort, encourage, support and love him. This is precisely the case with Islam, the righteous way of life whose establishment requires a co-ordinated, interdependent, self- sufficient and self-supporting community.

Counsel and exhortation to persevere in the face of adversity are also a necessity because the sustenance of faith and good deeds and catering for right and equity are the hardest tasks to carry out. This makes endurance utterly indispensable. Endurance is also necessary when adapting oneself to the Islamic way of life, confronting others, and when afflicted with ill-treatment and hardship. Perseverance is necessary when evil and falsehood triumph. It is necessary for traversing the length of the route, putting up with the slowness of the process of reform, the obscurity of the road- posts and the lengthy road leading to the destination.

Exhortation to endure hardship and persevere against adverse conditions broadens man's capacities by inspiring unity of aim and direction as well as feelings of togetherness in everyone, equipping them with love, fortitude and determination. It generates vitality in the community where the truth of Islam can survive and through which it is implemented.

Judging by the doctrine which the Qur'ān outlines for the life of the successful group which attains salvation, we are gravely shocked to see the loss and the ruin in which humanity today finds itself everywhere. We are amazed at the frustrations humanity suffers in this present world and at how humanity turns away from the goodness God has bestowed upon it. We are the more distressed by the absence a righteous and faithful authority to stand up for the truth. Moreover, the Muslims, or rather people claiming to be Muslims, are the farthest of all from what is good and

the most averse to the ideology God ordained for their community and the one route He pointed out for their deliverance from loss and ruin. People, in the very realm where this righteousness took its roots, have deserted the banner God raised for them, that is the banner of faith. They have raised instead banners of race which have never done them any good throughout their history or given them a respectable position either on earth or in the heavens. For it was Islam that raised for them the banner totally conforming to God's will, hoisted in His name only and identified with Him alone. Under this banner the Arabs triumphed, were predominant and gave humanity a righteous, strong, enlightened and successful leadership for the first time in human history. Shaikh Abū'l al-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī outlines the characteristics of this unique leadership:

> Once the Muslims were aroused, they quickly burst the bounds of Arabia and threw themselves zealously into the task of the fuller working out of human destiny. Their leadership held the guarantee of light and happiness for the world; it gave the promise of turning humanity into a single divinely-guided society. Some of the characteristics of Muslim leadership were:
>
> The Muslims had the unique advantage of being in possession of the divine book (the Qur'ān) and the sacred law (the Shariah). They did not have to fall back on their own judgement on the vital questions of life, and were thus saved from the manifold difficulties and perils that are attendant upon such a course. The divine word had illumined all the avenues of life for them and had enabled them to progress towards a destination which they clearly envisaged. With them it was not to be a case of trial and error. Says the Holy Qur'ān: *"Can he who is dead, to whom We give life and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness from which he can never come out?"* (6: 122)
>
> They were to judge among men on the basis of the revealed word; they were not to diverge from the dictates of justice and equity; their view was not to be blurred by enmity, hatred or desire for revenge. "O *you who believe, stand out firmly for God as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; that is nearer to piety; and fear God, for God is well acquainted with all that ye do."* (5: 8)
>
> They had not by themselves leapt into power all of a sudden from the abysmal depth of degradation. The Qur'ān had already beaten them into shape. They had been brought to a high level of nobility and purity by the Prophet through long years of unremitting care. The Prophet had conditioned them to a life of austerity and righteousness; he had instilled into their hearts the virtues of humility and courageous self-denial; he had purged them clean

of greed and of striving after power, renown or wealth. It was laid down by him as a fundamental principle of Islamic polity that "We shall not assign an office under the government to anyone who makes a request for it, or shows his longing for it in any other way." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

The Muslims were as far removed from falsehood, haughtiness and mischief as white is from black. The following words of the Qur'ān had not in vain been grounded into them night and day: *"That home of the hereafter We shall give to those who intend not high-handedness or mischief on earth; and the end is (best) for the righteous."* (28: 37)

Instead of aspiring for positions of authority and trust, they accepted them with great reluctance and when they did accept an official position they accepted it as a trust from God, to whom they would have to render full account of their sins of omission and commission on the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: *"God commands you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice."* (4: 58) *"It is He Who has made you (His) vicegerents on the earth. He has raised you in ranks, some above others, that He might try you in the gifts you receive; for your Lord is quick in punishment, yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."* (6: 165)

Further, the Muslims were not the agents of any particular race or country; nor were they out to establish Arab imperialism. Their mission was a universal mission of faith and freedom. They were happily free from all the sickly obsessions of colour and territorial nationality. All men were equal before them. The Qur'ān had pointedly said: "O *mankind, We created you from (a single pair of) a male and a female; and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is [he who is] the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things]."* (49: 13)

Once the son of `Amr ibn al-`Āṣ, the Governor of Egypt, struck an Egyptian commoner with a whip. The matter was brought to the notice of Caliph `Umar. The Caliph did not show the least regard for the high status of the offender's father, and ordered the Egyptian straightaway to avenge himself for harm done to him. To the offender's father he administered this telling rebuke, "Why have you made them slaves when they were born free?"

The Arabs were not stingy in making the benefits of faith, culture and learning available to the non-Arabs. They did not care for the nationality or the family connections of the recipients when it came to the conferment of high honours and positions in the State. They were, as it were, a cloud of bliss that rained ungrudgingly over the entire world, and from which all peoples,

everywhere freely profited according to their own capacity.

The Arabs allowed a free and equal partnership to all nations in the establishment of a new socio-political structure and in the advancement of mankind towards a fuller and richer moral ideal. There were no national divisions, no colour bars, no vested interests, no priesthood and no hereditary nobility in the Islamic Commonwealth. No special benefits were reserved for anyone. There was nothing to prevent the non-Arabs from surpassing the Arabs in the various fields of life. Even as Doctors of *Fiqh* and Ĥadīth a number of non-Arabs attained to distinction for which the Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular feel proud. Ibn Khaldūn writes: "It is an amazing fact of history that though their religion is of Arabian origin and the Law that the Prophet had brought had an Arab complexion, with a few exceptions, all eminent men of learning in the Muslim *Millat* [i.e. faith], in the field of theological as well as secular sciences, are non-Arabs. Even those who are Arabs by birth are non-Arabs by education, language and scholarship. During the later centuries, too, the non-Arab Muslims continued to produce leaders, statesmen, saints and savants of exceptional merit. This would obviously not have been possible, had the Arabs been mean or prejudiced in sharing their opportunities with the people of other nationalities in the Islamic world. Humanity has many sides — physical, emotional, social, moral, mental and spiritual. We cannot neglect any one of them for the benefit of another. Humanity cannot progress to its highest level unless every human instinct is brought into proper play. It would be futile to hope for the establishment of a healthy human society till an intellectual, material, moral and spiritual environment is created in which a man is enabled to develop his latent potentialities in harmony with God's plan of creation. We learn from experience that this goal must remain a dream so long as the reins of civilization are not held by those who attach due importance to both the material and the spiritual yearnings of life, and can, together with having a high moral and spiritual sense, fitly appreciate the claims of flesh and blood upon man and the interrelationship between the individual and the society.[44]

Shaikh Nadwī then speaks of the reign of the first four Caliphs who ruled after the Prophet:

We, consequently, find that no period in the recorded history of the human race has been more auspicious for it in the true sense of the term than what is known among the Muslims as *Khilāfat-i-Rāshidah.* During this epoch, all the material, moral and spiritual resources of man were brought into use to make

[44] Abu'! al-Ĥasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World,* pp. 75-78.

> him an ideal citizen of an ideal State. The Government was judged by the yard-stick of morality, and the morals were judged by their utility to lift humanity in permanent values and establishing justice in human society. Though the Islamic Commonwealth was the richest and the most powerful State of its time, the popular heroes and ideal personalities in it used to be drawn from among those who possessed, not earthly glory, but purity and nobleness of character. There was no disparity between power and morality. Material advancement was not allowed to outrun moral progress. That is why in the Islamic world the incidence of crime was very low in spite of the abundance of wealth and the great heterogeneity of its population. To put it in a nutshell, this epoch was the most beautiful springtime mankind has to this day experienced.[45]

We know some features of that glorious period of human history whose generation lived under the Islamic constitution, the pillars of which this particular *sūrah* erects. That happy period of history was made possible under the banner of faith carried by a group of believers who performed righteous deeds and encouraged each other to follow the truth and to persevere in adversity.

Profit and Loss

Now what, in the light of all this, is the loss humanity is suffering everywhere? How great is its failure in the battle between good and evil as a result of turning a blind eye to the great message the Arabs delivered to it when they raised the banner of Islam and thus assumed the leadership of mankind? Having abandoned Islam, the Arab nation is in the forefront of the caravan which is heading towards loss and ruin. Since then, the banners of mankind have been for Satan, falsehood, error, darkness and loss. No banner has been raised for God, truth, guidance, light or success. God's banner, however, is still there awaiting the arms that will raise it and the nation which under it will advance towards righteousness, guidance and success.

All that has been said so far concerned gain and loss in this life which, though of great importance, is very trivial in comparison with the hereafter. There is an everlasting life and a world of reality where real profit is made or real loss is suffered; that is, either the attainment of, or deprivation from, paradise and the pleasure of God. There man either accomplishes the highest of perfection allowed for him or completely collapses so that his humanity is crushed and ends up as worthless as pebbles or even worse: "*On the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust.'*" (78: 40)

[45] Ibid., p. 80.

This *sūrah* is unequivocal in indicating the path leading humanity away from loss: *"except for those who have faith and do righteous deeds and counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be patient in adversity."* (Verse 3) There is only one right path — that of faith, good deeds and the existence of a Muslim community whose members counsel one another to follow the truth and to show endurance and perseverance.

Consequently, whenever two Companions of God's Messenger were about to depart from each other, they would read this *sūrah,* after which they would shake hands. This was indicative of a pledge to accept this doctrine fully, to preserve this faith, piety and a willingness to counsel each other to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity. It was a mutual compact to remain good elements in an Islamic society established according to that doctrine and to preserve the foundation of this society.

SŪRAH 104

Al-Humazah

(The Slanderer)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ هُمَزَةٍ لُّمَزَةٍ ﴿١﴾	*Woe to every taunting, slandering backbiter,* (1)
ٱلَّذِى جَمَعَ مَالاً وَعَدَّدَهُۥ ﴿٢﴾	*who amasses wealth and keeps counting it again and again,* (2)
يَحْسَبُ أَنَّ مَالَهُۥٓ أَخْلَدَهُۥ ﴿٣﴾	*thinking that his wealth will make him immortal.* (3)
كَلَّا ۖ لَيُنۢبَذَنَّ فِى ٱلْحُطَمَةِ ﴿٤﴾	*By no means! He will indeed be flung into the crushing one.* (4)
وَمَآ أَدْرَىٰكَ مَا ٱلْحُطَمَةُ ﴿٥﴾	*Would that you know what the crushing one is!* (5)
نَارُ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْمُوقَدَةُ ﴿٦﴾	*It is God's own kindled fire,* (6)
ٱلَّتِى تَطَّلِعُ عَلَى ٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةِ ﴿٧﴾	*which will rise over people's hearts.* (7)
إِنَّهَا عَلَيْهِم مُّؤْصَدَةٌ ﴿٨﴾	*It will close in upon them,* (8)
فِى عَمَدٍ مُّمَدَّدَةٍۭ ﴿٩﴾	*in towering columns.* (9)

Despicable Character

This *sūrah* portrays a real scene from the early days of the Islamic message, yet the same scene is repeated in every environment and society. It shows a vile, mean person who is given wealth and who uses it to tyrannize others, until he begins to feel himself almost unbearable. He thinks that wealth is the supreme value in life, before which all other values and standards come toppling down. He feels that since he possesses wealth, he controls other people's destiny without being accountable for his own deeds. He imagines that his money and his wealth is a god, capable of everything without exception, even of resisting death, making him immortal and stopping God's judgement and His retribution.

Deluded as he is by the power of wealth, he counts it and takes pleasure in counting it again and again. A wicked vanity is let loose within him driving him to mock other people's positions and dignity, to taunt and slander them. He criticizes others verbally, mocks them with his gestures, either by imitating their movements and voices or by ridiculing their looks and features, by words and mimicry, by taunt and slander.

It is a vile and debased picture of someone devoid of human ideals and generosity and stripped of faith. Islam despises this type of person whose characteristics are diametrically opposed to its own high standards of morality. Islam emphatically forbids mockery and ridicule of other people as well as deliberate fault-finding. But in this case the Qur'ān describes these actions as sordid and ugly, delivering a stern warning to anyone who indulges in them. This suggests that the *sūrah* is referring to an actual case of some unbelievers subjecting the Prophet and the believers to their taunts and slander. The reply to these actions comes in the form of a strong prohibition and awesome warning. There are some reports which name specific individuals as being the slanderers meant here, but these are not authentic, so we will not discuss them, but instead content ourselves with general observations.

The warning comes in the form of a picture of the hereafter portraying the mental and physical suffering there and drawing an image of hell which is both palpable and telling. It takes care to relate the crime to the punishment inflicted and to its effect on the culprit. On the one side there is the image of the taunting, slandering backbiter who mocks and ridicules others while he gathers wealth thinking that he is guaranteed immortality in this way. This image of a cynical calumniator seeking power through wealth is contrasted with the slighted, ignored person flung into a crushing instrument which destroys all that comes in its way. It soon crushes his

structure and his pride.

The crushing instrument is *"God's own kindled fire."* (Verse 6) Its identification as the fire of God suggests that it is an exceptional, unfamiliar sort of fire, full of terror. This fire 'rises' over the person who mocks and ridicules others. To complete the image of the slighted, ignored and crushed person, the fire closes in on him from all directions and locks him in. None can save him and none asks about him. Inside he is tied to a column, as animals are tied, without respect.

The tone of the vocabulary used in this *sūrah* is very strong *'Keeps counting it again and again; by no means! He will indeed be flung; rises, towering.'* By such expressions, forcefulness is emphatically conveyed: *"He will indeed be flung into the crushing one. Would that you know what the crushing one is! It is God's own kindled fire."* (Verses 4-6) First comes the generalization and cryptic expression, then the exclamation suggesting great horror, and then the clear answer — all are forms of forceful expression. The style also conveys warnings: *'Woe to...; He will be flung into...; The crushing one...; God's kindled fire; which will rise over people's hearts, it will close in upon them; in towering columns.'* In all this there is a kind of harmony between imagery and feelings and the actions of the *'taunting, slandering backbiter.'*

At the time of its revelation, the Qur'ān followed up the incidents faced by the Islamic message whilst also leading it along its way. The Qur'ān is the infallible weapon which destroys the cunning of conspirators, shakes the hearts of enemies, and fills the believers with courage and determination to persevere. Indeed we recognize two significant facts in God's care here as He denounces this sordid type of people: firstly, we are shown the ugliness of moral decline and how people are rendered so abject. Secondly, we realize that He defends the believers, preserves their souls against their enemies' insults, shows them that God knows and hates what is inflicted on them, and that He will punish the wrongdoers. This is enough to elevate their souls and to make them feel their position high above the wicked designs of others.

SŪRAH 105

Al-Fīl

(The Elephant)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْفِيلِ ﴿١﴾

Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant? (1)

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِى تَضْلِيلٍ ﴿٢﴾

Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, (2)

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ ﴿٣﴾

and send against them flocks of birds, (3)

تَرْمِيهِم بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ ﴿٤﴾

which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? (4)

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ ﴿٥﴾

Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves. (5)

Historical Background

This *sūrah* refers to a widely famous incident in the Arabian Peninsula which took place before the commencement of the Islamic message. The incident shows very clearly how God protected the sacred area, which He willed to be the focal point of the last enlightenment, the cradle of the new faith, from where it was to begin its blessed march to exterminate *jāhiliyyah* from all corners of the world and to establish in its place God's infallible guidance.

The various reports about this incident relate that after the Abyssinians had expelled the Persians from Yemen and established their rule there, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen, Abrahah, built a superbly luxurious church giving it the name of the then Abyssinian Emperor. He did this after he had observed the love and enthusiasm of Yemeni Arabs — the same as those felt all over the Arab land — for the Ka`bah, the Sacred Mosque at Makkah. His purpose behind building the church was to make the Arabs forsake their attachment to the Mosque at Makkah and turn instead to his new luxurious church.

But the Arabs did not turn away from their historical shrine. They believed themselves to be the descendants of Abraham and Ishmael who built the House, which is the name they often used for the Ka`bah. For them, this fact was a source of pride in line with their tradition of honouring their forefathers. Vain and hollow as they were, their beliefs were, in their eyes, better and more profound than those of the people of earlier revelations [i.e. the Jews and Christians]. They viewed these religions as contradictory and futile.

As a result, Abrahah decided to pull the Ka`bah down in order to achieve his objective of turning the Arabs away from it. He therefore marched at the head of a great army equipped with elephants. At the front was a huge elephant which enjoyed special fame among Abrahah's men. News of Abrahah's march and his objective travelled throughout Arab lands giving rise to very strong feelings amongst the Arabs about the destruction of their sacred House. A nobleman of the royal family of Yemen, called Dhū Nafar, tried to stop the Abyssinian governor, calling on his people and other Arabs to fight Abrahah and defend the House. Some Arab tribes joined him in a battle against Abrahah which Dhū Nafar lost before he was taken prisoner. Later, while Abrahah was on his way, he was intercepted by Nat'l ibn Ĥabīb al-Khath`amī, who had mobilized two Arab tribes as well as other Bedouin volunteers, but Abrahah again won the battle and captured Nat'l. Nat'l then agreed to act as a guide for Abrahah showing him the way. When the Abyssinian governor approached Ṭā'if, a number of its leaders went to him to say that the House he wanted to pull down was in Makkah and not at Ṭā'if. They did this in order to prevent him from destroying the house they had built for their idol, al-Lāt. They also provided him with a guide to show him the way to the Ka`bah.

Then, on his arrival at al-Mughammas, a valley *en route* from Ṭā'if to Makkah, Abrahah despatched one of his commanders to Makkah where he looted some belongings of the Quraysh and other Arabs, including 200 camels which belonged to `Abd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim, the chief of Makkah and the Prophet's grandfather. Quraysh, Kinānah, Hudhayl and neighbouring Arab tribes then gathered together to fight Abrahah, but realized that they stood no chance of winning, so did not proceed any further. Then Abrahah sent a messenger to Makkah to meet its chief and convey

to him that the governor of Yemen did not come to fight the people of Makkah, but just to pull the House down. If they left him to accomplish his objective, he would be pleased not to cause any further bloodshed. Abrahah also ordered his messenger to bring with him the Makkan chief, if the latter did not propose to fight. When the messenger communicated his master's message to `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the latter said: "By God, we do not want to fight him and we have no power to resist him. This is God's sacred House, built by His chosen friend, Abraham. If He protects it against Abrahah, it is because the House is His, and if He leaves it to him to destroy, we cannot defend it." `Abd al-Muṭṭalib then went with the messenger to meet Abrahah.

Ibn Ishāq said that `Abd al-Muṭṭalib was a most handsome, charming and venerable-looking person. When Abrahah saw him he felt much respect for him. He felt that `Abd al-Muṭṭalib was too noble to sit beneath his royal bed, but at the same time he did not wish his officers and troops to see him elevate his guest and sit him on his own couch, so instead he sat with `Abd al-Muṭṭalib on the carpet. Then Abrahah ordered his interpreter to ask his guest what he wanted. `Abd al-Muṭṭalib said he wanted to request the king to give him back his 200 camels which had been looted by his commander. Abrahah ordered his interpreter to tell `Abd al-Muṭṭalib on his behalf: "I admired you when I first saw you but when I spoke to you I was disappointed. Do you come to talk to me about 200 looted camels and forget about the House which is an embodiment of your and your forefathers' religion and which I have come to destroy? You did not even say a word to persuade me to spare it."

`Abd al-Muṭṭalib said: "I am only the master of my camels, but the House has its own Lord who is sure to protect it." Abrahah snapped: "It cannot be defended against me." The Makkan chief said: "You take your chance!" Abrahah returned his camels to him.

`Abd al-Muṭṭalib went back to the Quraysh and told them of his encounter with the Abyssinian commander. He ordered them to leave Makkah and seek shelter in the surrounding mountains. Then he accompanied a few Quraysh dignitaries to the Ka`bah where he held the ring on its door in his hand. They all prayed hard to God for His help and protection of the House. `Abd al-Muṭṭalib is reported to have recited the following lines of poetry in his prayer:

Our Lord, a creature protects his property, so protect Yours. Let not their cross and their might ever overcome Your might. If You are leaving them to destroy our House of worship, then You surely have something in mind.

Abrahah, on the other hand, ordered his army to march with the elephants to complete their mission, but at a short distance from Makkah, their famous, huge elephant sat down and refused to go any further. The soldiers exerted all efforts to persuade the elephant to enter the city, but their attempts were in vain. This incident

is a fact acknowledged by the Prophet. When his she-camel, al-Qaşwā', sat down some distance from Makkah, on the day the Ĥudaybiyah peace agreement was concluded, the Prophet said to those of his Companions who claimed she had become mulish, that she had not and that mulishness was not part of her nature. "But," the Prophet added, "she has been prevented by the same will which debarred the elephant from entering Makkah." On the day of the conquest of Makkah, the Prophet said: "God protected Makkah against the elephant but He allowed His Messenger and the believers to take it under their control. Its sanctity today is the same as yesterday. Let those who hear this convey it to those who are absent."

Then God's will to destroy the Abyssinian army and its commander was fulfilled. He sent groups of birds to stone the attackers with pebbles of sand and clay, leaving them like dry and torn leaves, as the Qur'ān describes. Abrahah suffered physical injuries. The remainder of his army carried him back to Yemen, but his limbs began to separate from the rest of his body and he started losing one finger after another, until they arrived at Sana`ā'. According to various reports, Abrahah died after his chest was cleaved apart.

A Rationalist View

Versions of this event vary with regard to the description of the bird flocks, their size, the nature of the stones and the manner of their effect. Some accounts add that smallpox and measles broke out in Makkah that year. Those who are inclined to limit the scale of miracles and unfamiliar phenomena, seeking to explain all events as resulting from the operation of natural phenomena that are familiar to us, prefer to explain this event as an actual outbreak of smallpox and measles that afflicted the army. They further explain that the 'birds' could have been flies or mosquitoes carrying germs. The word 'bird' in Arabic refers to all that flies. Explaining this *sūrah* in his own commentary on this part of the Qur'ān, Imām Muĥammad `Abduh says:

> On the second day, a smallpox and measles epidemic broke out among Abrahah's soldiers. `Ikrimah says: "It was the first time smallpox had appeared in the Arabia." Ya`qūb ibn `Utbah says: "That was the year when measles and smallpox appeared in Arabia. The diseases had an almost unparalleled effect on their bodies: their flesh began to fall apart. The soldiers and their commander were horror-stricken and ran away. Abrahah was also hit. His flesh continued falling off his body, finger by finger, until eventually his chest broke up and he died at Sana`ā'.
>
> This is what different reports have mentioned and what is logically acceptable. This *sūrah* shows us that the smallpox and measles were produced by solid stones carried and thrown on the soldiers by colossal

flocks of birds that are helped on their way by winds.

It is in line with these reports to believe that those birds mentioned in the *sūrah* refer to a kind of fly or mosquito which carries the germs of some diseases, and that the stones were of dried and poisonous clay which the wind carried and which might have stuck to the birds' legs. When this clay touched any organism, it penetrated deep into it and then caused complications in wounds and injuries which upset the whole body, leading to the dropping off of flesh. Many kinds of these powerless birds are, as a matter of fact, among the most efficient of God's troops, which He uses for the destruction of whomsoever He wills. That little organism, called nowadays 'germ', is within this classification. It gathers in large groups, the number of which is unknown except to the Creator. It is not essential for the manifestation of God's might that the birds should be as large as mountain tops, or of a certain shape or colour, and it is not essential for this manifestation that we should know the size of those stones and the way they work. For God has troops of all kinds: "In everything He has a sign attesting to His oneness," as the saying goes.

There is no force in the universe but is subject to God's power. To that tyrant, Abrahah, who wanted to destroy the Ka`bah, God sent birds carrying smallpox and measles. Both he and his people were destroyed before entering Makkah. That was an act of grace and a blessing from God bestowed on the neighbours of His sanctuary in spite of the fact that they were idolaters. God wished to protect His House until He sent His Messenger, Muĥammad, to protect it with the force of faith and ideology. At the same time, it was a punishment from God inflicted on His enemies, the people of the Elephant, who wanted to destroy the House without reasonable justification.

This can be taken as a basis for understanding this sūrah. Nothing else can be accepted without logical explanation, even if it is authentically reported. Divine power is exhibited more strikingly when those who manifested their might by recruiting elephants, the largest quadruped animals, were destroyed and crushed by a tiny animal, invisible to human eyes. A wise person finds this certainly greater, more fascinating and miraculous.

Natural Phenomena and God's Power

This assumption [of smallpox or measles resulting from clay infected with the germs of those diseases] advanced by the well-versed Imam is contrasted with one included in some narratives, describing the stones thrown by the birds as causing the heads and bodies of the Abyssinians to split. They speak of the stones boring through

their bodies, leaving them like remnants of dry leaves. To us, neither of the two explanations outweighs the other in manifesting God's might, or provides a better explanation of the event. Both are the same with regard to their possibility and the demonstration of God's power. Whether the natural phenomena known and familiar to man operated to destroy the people God willed to be destroyed, or His purpose was accomplished through some divine rule and phenomena of which man has no knowledge, are in our view exactly the same.

The divine rules of nature are not circumscribed by the boundaries of man's knowledge or what is familiar to him. For man knows only the fraction which God puts before him, and only that which suits his understanding and thought. Hence, so-called miracles are part of the rules of nature laid down by God, but they are miracles only when measured by human knowledge and experience.

Hence, there is no need for unease or doubt when faced with a supernatural event. Nor is there any need to seek an explanation for it, if the reports mentioning it are authentic, or there are enough reasons, based on what is in the texts, to suggest that it was supernatural, going beyond known natural laws. That a certain event should run according to familiar natural laws is no less significant or less effective than its following supernatural laws. Natural rules familiar to men are in fact miraculous when measured against human power and ability. Sunrise is a miracle, though it occurs every day, and the birth of every child is superhuman in spite of its happening every minute. If anyone wants to challenge this, let him try to devise a birth! The employment of birds of any kind to carry crushed stones infected with germs, and cast them at the raiding army the moment it was about to overwhelm the city and destroy the House, is indeed a great miracle. That God's will should have been realized in that way would comprise several miracles, with each regarded as a clear and spectacular manifestation of His might and will. Had this course been followed, it would not have been less significant or less striking than sending a certain kind of bird, carrying unfamiliar kinds of stones, to afflict human bodies with a peculiar sort of affliction at that particular time. The two courses are the same; both are miraculous and superhuman.

As for the event in question, the opinion advocating an unfamiliar, preternatural course carries more weight. This opinion visualizes that God sent groups of unfamiliar birds, carrying strange stones which caused extraordinary affliction to human bodies. To accept this opinion does not necessitate the acceptance of those narratives which describe the birds in most fascinating terms, similar to descriptions of legendary incidents that betray exaggeration.

God had a scheme for the House: He wanted to preserve it as a refuge for mankind where everyone finds peace, and to make it a gathering point for the followers of the new faith to march out in security in a free land, not subject to any

external force or to any tyrannical government which might try to smother the new message in its cradle. God also wanted to make this event a permanent lesson, clear to everyone in all ages, so much so that in this *sūrah* He reminds the Quraysh, even after Muĥammad (peace be upon him) is given his message, of this grace He bestowed on them, making it an example of how He protects His sanctuaries and preserves them. There is no need for any attempt to impart a familiar image to this event, exceptional as it is in essence and circumstances. This is all the more so when we take into consideration the fact that what we know of smallpox and measles and their effects on man does not fit with what was reported of the effects of the incident on the soldiers' and their commander's bodies. Neither of the two diseases causes man's limbs to fall off, finger by finger and organ by organ. Nor does either disease cause the cleaving of one's chest. The Qur'ānic narrative suggests very clearly that this is what happened: "*Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves.*" (Verse 5)

Moreover, the reports of 'Ikrimah and Ya`qūb ibn 'Utbah do not state that smallpox hit the army. Neither report says anything more than that smallpox broke out that year for the first time in the Arabian Peninsula. Neither of the two men suggests that Abrahah and his army in particular fell victim to this epidemic. Besides, if only the army was affected by the diseases while the Arabs around remained safe — that is, if the birds were meant to strike only the army — then this is again preternatural. Since the event is in any case supernatural, why trouble ourselves in limiting it to a certain explanation only because this explanation is based on what is familiar to us?

The motives of the Rationalist School, of which Imām Muĥammad `Abduh was the leading figure, to limit the field of the supernatural and the imperceptible to our senses when explaining the Qur'ān, are both understandable and commendable. This school tried to explain such events within the bounds of the known and familiar natural laws. It was confronted with a superstitious trend which tightened its grip on the minds of the masses at that time. Moreover, it faced a flood of legends and Talmudic narratives which books explaining the Qur'ān were overburdened with, while fascination with modern technology and science on the one hand, and doubt in the principles of religion on the other, were reaching their zenith. The Rationalist School tried, therefore, to preserve the place of religion taking the standpoint that whatever it says is compatible with reason. Hence, this school strived to keep religion pure from any association with any kind of legend and superstition. It also tried to establish a religious mentality which understood natural laws and recognized that they were constant and infallible, and which attributed all human and universal functions and operations to these natural laws. This mentality is, in essence, the Qur'ānic mentality. For the Qur'ān refers people to natural laws as they constitute the permanent and infallible rule which organizes individual operations

and diverse phenomena.

Yet resisting the pressures of superstition on the one hand and fascination with technology on the other left their stamps on the school. It became extra cautious, tending to make familiar natural laws the only basis for the divine laws of nature. Hence the Qur'ānic explanations of Shaikh Muĥammad `Abduh and his two disciples Shaikh Rashīd Riđā and Shaikh `Abd al-Qādir al-Maghribī clearly show a strong desire to reduce the greater number of miracles to only the more familiar of God's natural laws rather than the preternatural. They explain some of these miracles in a way that would be in line with what is called 'rational', and they are excessively cautious in accepting what is imperceptible to human senses.

With this understanding of the environmental factors behind the Rationalist School's trend, it should be noted that it has gone too far in overlooking the other side of the comprehensive concept which the Qur'ān aims to implant in Muslim minds. This is that God's will and power are absolute, limitless and go far beyond the universal rules and laws He ordained, whether familiar to man or not. This absoluteness does not accept the human mind as a final arbiter. Neither does it accept the limits of the human mind as binding in such a way as to classify as probable only that which may be acceptable to human reason, and to demand 'rational' explanations for all that is unacceptable to it. This demand is frequently stated by advocates of this school.

Moreover, the divine laws of the universe are not only those familiar to man. Indeed, what is familiar to man is only a fraction of these laws. Both these and the unfamiliar laws are the same in manifesting the greatness of divine power and the exactness and precision of God's designs.

Nevertheless, we must be well guarded against superstition and at the same time reject any unfounded legend with conscious moderation, so that we neither succumb to the influence of particular environments nor feel urged by a need to resist a common tradition of a certain age.

There is a safe rule for approaching Qur'ānic texts, which may be appropriately stated here. We cannot approach what the Qur'ān states with prejudiced minds and preconceived ideas, whether generally or in relation to the subject matter of the statements under study. The opposite is the correct way: we must approach Qur'ānic statements in such a way that helps us to derive our concepts from them and formulate our ideas on their basis. What the Qur'ān states is final as it is. For what we call 'reason' and its adjudication on what the Qur'ān relates of events in the universe or of history, in our own world or in the realm of the imperceptible, is no more than the net result of our finite human existence and experience.

Although human reason is, in essence an absolute force, not subject to, or limited

by, individual experiences or events, it is, after all, confined to human existence. This existence does not reflect the absolute, as this belongs to God. The Qur'ān comes from God, the Absolute. Hence, it is binding on us in the sense that whatever it states is the basis of our very 'rational' concepts. Then, no one can say of a certain Qur'ānic statement: 'It is unacceptable to reason, so a logical explanation must be sought for it,' as advocates of the Rationalist School frequently say. This does not mean that we should accept superstitions, it only stresses that human reason is not the arbiter of what the Qur'ān states. When the expressions of a Qur'ānic text are clear and straightforward, they determine how our reason should approach that text in order to formulate our views concerning its subject matter as well as regarding other universal facts.

A Momentous Event

Let us now examine the text of the *sūrah* itself and try to understand the significance of the story.

"Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant?" (Verse 1) It is a question that draws attention to the wonders involved in the incident itself and stresses its great significance. The incident was so well known to the Arabs that they used to consider it a sort of beginning of history. They would say, 'This incident happened in the year of the Elephant', and, 'That event took place two years before the year of the Elephant', or, 'This dates to ten years after the year of the Elephant'. It is well known that the Prophet was born in the year of the Elephant itself. This is perhaps one of the fascinatingly perfect arrangements of divine will.

The *sūrah* then is not relating to the Arabs something they did not know. It is a reminder of an event well known to them, aiming at achieving something beyond actual remembrance of it.

After this opening note, the *sūrah* tells the rest of the story in the form of a rhetorical question: *"Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan?"* (Verse 2) This means that the designs of the people of the Elephant were useless, incapable of achieving anything at all. They were like someone who had lost his way and thus could not arrive at his destination. Perhaps this is a reminder to the Quraysh of the grace God bestowed on them when He protected and preserved the House at a time when they felt too weak to face the mighty aggressors, the people of the Elephant. Such remembrance was perhaps intentionally meant to make them feel their disgrace when they persistently denied God after He had helped them out of their weakness. It may also curb their conceit and heavy-handedness in their treatment of Muĥammad and the few believers who supported him. God destroyed the powerful aggressors who wanted to pull down His House, which serves as a sanctuary for all

people. God, then, may destroy the new aggressors who try to persecute His Messenger and suppress His message.

The Qur'ān portrays superbly how the aggressors' defeat was brought about: *"Did He not... send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves."* (Verses 3-5) The birds flew in flocks. The Qur'ān uses a Persian term, *sijjīl,* which denotes 'stone and clay' to describe the substance with which the birds struck the aggressors. The dry leaves are described as "devoured" to denote that insects or other animals had eaten them. It is a vivid image of the physical shattering of the Abyssinian army as they were stricken with these muddy stones. There is no need to go into such explanations as that it was an allegorical description of their destruction by smallpox or measles.

The Arabs and Islam

The significance of this event is far reaching and the lessons deduced from its mention in the Qur'ān are numerous. It first suggests that God did not want the idolaters to take responsibility for protecting His House, in spite of the fact that they held it in deep respect and sought its security. When He willed to preserve the House and made it clear that He Himself was its protector, He left the idolaters to their defeat by the Abyssinians. Divine will then directly intervened to repel the aggression and preserve His sacred House. Thus the idolaters did not have a chance to hold the protection of the House as a 'favour they did to God' or as 'an act of honour'. If they had done so, they would have been prompted by fanatic *jāhiliyyah* impulses. This point gives considerable weight to the argument that the divine will of destroying the aggressors was accomplished through preternatural rules.

This direct intervention by God to protect the House should have prompted the Quraysh and the rest of the Arabian tribes to embrace Islam, the divine religion, when it was conveyed to them by the Prophet. Surely, their respect and guardianship of the House, and the paganism they spread around it, should not have been their reason for rejecting Islam! God's reminder to them of this event is a part of the Qur'ānic criticism of their stand, drawing attention to their amazing stubbornness.

The event also suggests that God did not allow the people of earlier revelations, represented in this case by Abrahah and his army, to destroy the sacred House or to impose their authority over the holy land, even when it was surrounded by the impurity of idolatry and idolaters were its custodians. Thus the House remained free from any human authority, safe against all wicked designs. God preserved the freedom of the land in order that the new faith would develop there completely free, not subjected to the authority of any despot. God revealed this religion as the force which supersedes all other religions. He wanted it to take over the leadership of

humanity. God's will concerning His House and religion was accomplished long before any human being knew that the Prophet, who was to convey the new message, was born in the same year. We are reassured when we realize this aspect of the significance of the event. We know the wicked ambitions of international imperialist forces and world Zionism concerning the holy lands. We realize that these forces spare no effort to achieve their wicked ambitions. But we are not worried. For God who protected His House against the aggression of the people of earlier revelations when its custodians were idolaters will protect it again, if He wills, just as He will protect Madinah, His Messenger's city, against the wicked designs of evildoers.

Moreover, the event refers to the reality of the Arabian situation at that time. The Arabs did not have any role to play on the face of the earth. They did not even have an identity of their own before Islam. In the Yemen they were subjugated by either Persians or Abyssinians. If they had any government of their own, it was under the protection of the Persians. In the north, Syria was subject to Byzantine rule which was either direct or in the shape of an Arab government under Byzantine protection. Only the heartland of the Arabian Peninsula escaped foreign rule. But this was in a state of tribalism and division which deprived it of any weight in world politics. Tribal warfare could drag on for 40 years or longer, but neither individually nor as a group did these tribes count as a power in the eyes of the mighty empires neighbouring them. What happened with regard to the Abyssinian aggression was a correct assessment of these tribes' real strength when faced with a foreign aggressor.

Under Islam the Arabs had, for the first time in history, an international role to play. They also had a powerful state to be taken into consideration by world powers. They possessed a sweeping force that destroyed thrones, conquered empires, and brought down false, deviating and ignorant leaderships in order to take over the leadership of mankind. But what facilitated these achievements for the Arabs for the first time in their history was that they forgot their Arabism. They forgot racial urges and fanaticism. They remembered that they were Muslims, and Muslims only. They carried the message of a forceful and all-comprehensive faith, which they delivered to humanity with mercy and compassion. They did not uphold any sort of nationalism or factionalism. They were the exponents of a divine idea which gave mankind a divine, not earthly, doctrine to be applied as a way of life. They left their homes to struggle for the cause of God alone. They were not after the establishment of an Arab empire under which they might live in luxury and conceit. Their aim was not to subjugate other nations to their own rule after freeing them from the rule of the Byzantines or Persians. It was an aim clearly defined by Rib`iy ibn `Āmir, the Muslims' messenger to the Persian commander, when he said in the latter's headquarters: "God ordered us to set out in order to save humanity from the

worship of creatures and to bring it to the worship of God alone, to save it from the narrowness of this life so that it may look forward to the broadness of the life hereafter, and from the oppression of other religions so that it may enjoy the justice of Islam."

Then, and only then, did the Arabs have an identity, a power and a leadership. But all of these were devoted to God alone. They possessed their power and leadership as long as they followed the right path. But when they deviated and followed their narrow nationalistic ideas, and when they substituted for the banner of Islam that of factional bonds, they came under subjugation by other nations. For God deserted them whenever they deserted Him; He neglected them as they neglected Him.

What are the Arabs without Islam? What is the ideology that they hold, or they can give to humanity if they abandon Islam? What value can a nation have without an ideology which it presents to the world? Every nation which assumed the leadership of humanity in any period of history advanced an ideology. Nations which did not, such as the Tartars who swept over the east, or the Berbers who crushed the Roman Empire in the west, could not survive for long. They were assimilated by the nations they conquered. The only ideology the Arabs advanced for mankind was the Islamic faith which raised them to the position of human leadership. If they forsake it they will no longer have any function or role to play in human history. The Arabs should remember this well if they want to live and be powerful and assume the leadership of mankind. It is God who provides guidance for us lest we go astray.

SŪRAH 106

Al-Quraysh

The Quraysh

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

لِإِيلَٰفِ قُرَيۡشٍ ١	*For the tradition of the Quraysh,* (1)
إِۦلَٰفِهِمۡ رِحۡلَةَ ٱلشِّتَآءِ وَٱلصَّيۡفِ ٢	*their tradition of travelling in winter and summer.* (2)
فَلۡيَعۡبُدُواْ رَبَّ هَٰذَا ٱلۡبَيۡتِ ٣	*Let them worship the Lord of this House,* (3)
ٱلَّذِيٓ أَطۡعَمَهُم مِّن جُوعٖ وَءَامَنَهُم مِّنۡ خَوۡفِۭ ٤	*who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear.* (4)

Lest They Forget

When Abraham, God's friend, or *khalīl* as he is called in Arabic, completed the building of the House of worship, the Ka`bah, and had purified it he turned to God with the following prayer: *"Lord, make this a land of security and make provisions of fruits for those of its people who believe in God and the Last Day."* (2: 126) o God made that House one of peace; free from all human authority and from all tyranny. He granted security and peace to anyone seeking shelter in that House, while fear was all around it. Even when the people transgressed, ascribed divinity to beings other than God and worshipped idols, there was peace and security in it; for God had designed a purpose for this sacred House.

When the people of the Elephant marched to destroy the House, there happened to them what is described in the preceding *sūrah,* The Elephant. God preserved for the House its peace, security and sacredness. Of those who lived around it, God said: *"Do they not see that We have made a secure Sanctuary, and that men are being snatched away from all around them?"* (29: 67)

The Elephant incident had an added effect in greatly enhancing the sanctity of the House amongst the Arabs all over the Peninsula. It also strengthened the position of the Quraysh, the custodians of the House, in all Arabia. They were thus able to travel far and wide in peace and security. Wherever they went they met with generosity and high esteem. This encouraged them to establish two great routes for their commercial caravans, to the Yemen in the south and to Syria in the north. They organized two enormous trading expeditions; one to the Yemen in winter and the other to Syria in summer.

In spite of very poor conditions of security in all parts of the Arabian Peninsula at that time, and in spite of all the looting and plundering raids that were common in that land, the sanctity of the House in the eyes of all Arabs guaranteed security and peace in their flourishing business to those who lived near it and were its custodians. It created for the Quraysh a distinct and exclusive position and opened up for them an extensive and guaranteed means of sustenance in peace, security and contentment. The Quraysh became accustomed to these two profitable and peaceful trips, which were soon established among their traditional habits.

This is the specific grace of which God reminds the Quraysh, as He reminded them of the Elephant incident in the previous *sūrah.* It is the grace of their being accustomed to the winter and summer trips, and the abundance with which He endowed them by means of these two fruitful journeys. It is by the grace of God that while their land is desolate and dry, they still live a comfortable life. Out of His grace He secures them from fear whether in their hearths and homes, next to God's House, or on their journeys. Their security is the result of their being the custodians of the House, the sanctity of which is ordained and preserved by God against any violation.

God reminds them of these graces in order that they may be ashamed of their submission to other beings, while He is the Lord of the House. God says to them in effect: for this tradition of the Quraysh, namely their winter and summer trips, let them submit to the Lord of this House who guaranteed their security and so encouraged them to take such beneficial journeys. *"Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear."* (Verses 3-4) As their land was infertile, they would have starved had it not been for the sustenance supplied by God. *"And with security against fear."* Poor as they were, and living in an insecure surroundings, their life would have been one of fear and apprehension. But God granted them security and allayed their fear.

This is a reminder which should have left a profound sense of shame in the hearts of the Quraysh, who were not unaware of the great value of the House and the effect of its sanctity on their lives. At the moment of danger and difficulty, the Quraysh used to appeal only to the Lord of that House and seek only His help. This was the case with `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who did not confront Abrahah with any army or physical strength. Instead `Abd al-Muṭṭalib addressed himself only to the Lord of the House, because He was the only One who could protect His House. `Abd al-Muṭṭalib did not appeal to any of the idols or craven images for help. He did not even say to Abrahah that these deities would protect their House. He only said to him, "I am only the master of the camels, but the House has its own Lord who is sure to protect it." But ignorance does not listen to any logic, or acknowledge what is right, or accept any reasonable argument.

This *sūrah* seems to be an extension of the preceding one, The Elephant, with regard to its subject matter and general tone. Nevertheless, it is an independent *sūrah* with the usual beginning of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs,* namely, "*In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.*" Qur'ānic commentators state that nine *sūrahs* were revealed between the revelation of this and the preceding *sūrah,* but that they were placed next to each other in the Qur'ān because of their close similarity of subject.

SŪRAH 107

Al-Mā`ūn

(Small Kindness)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Have you seen him who denies religion? (1)	أَرَءَيْتَ ٱلَّذِى يُكَذِّبُ بِٱلدِّينِ ﴿١﴾
It is he who thrusts the orphan away (2)	فَذَٰلِكَ ٱلَّذِى يَدُعُّ ٱلْيَتِيمَ ﴿٢﴾
and does not urge others to feed the needy. (3)	وَلَا يَحُضُّ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ ٱلْمِسْكِينِ ﴿٣﴾
Woe, then, to those who pray (4)	فَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤﴾
but are heedless of their prayers; (5)	ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَن صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ ﴿٥﴾
who put on a show of piety (6)	ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَآءُونَ ﴿٦﴾
but refuse to give even the smallest help to others. (7)	وَيَمْنَعُونَ ٱلْمَاعُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation according to some authorities and a Makkan-Madinan one according to others, with the first three verses said to have been revealed in Makkah and the rest in Madinah. The latter view is perhaps weightier. Yet the *sūrah* is one interwoven entity, aiming at the establishment of one of the most

fundamental aspects of faith. Hence we are more inclined to take it as being an entirely Madinan revelation. Its subject matter is more in line with the topics of the part of the Qur'ān revealed in Madinah. It relates to the phenomena of hypocrisy and false pretences which were unheard of among the Muslim community in Makkah. But there is no need to reject the assertion that the *sūrah* is a Makkan-Madinan one, because it is possible that the last four verses were revealed in Madinah and integrated with the first three on the grounds of similarity of subject matter. Having said that, let us now consider the *sūrah* and its theme.

Belief and Practice

This *sūrah* of seven short verses tackles an important and vital issue which could very well change the common meanings normally assigned to the terms 'faith', or *īmān,* and 'disbelief', or *kufr.* Moreover, it brings out the fundamental truth intrinsic in the nature of the Islamic faith, the enormous benefit it offers to all humanity and the abundant blessings with which God favoured mankind when He sent them His last message.

As a way of life, Islam is not built on ostentation and superficiality. The apparent aspects of the different acts of worship are, according to Islam, meaningless unless they are motivated by sincerity and devotion to God. Worship sincerely motivated produces effects within a person's heart, and these cause him to act righteously. The effects of worship are reflected in a type of social behaviour which elevates man's life on this earth.

No less true is the fact that Islam is not a loose, fragmentary, disjointed system from which one can pick and choose at leisure. On the contrary, it is a complete way of life with acts of worship and rites, as well as individual and collective obligations that are mutually complementary. Together they lead to a goal of which mankind is the sole beneficiary; a goal which ensures that hearts are purified, life is ennobled, and men co-operate for the common good and progress; a goal wherein abound God's blessings.

A person may profess to be a Muslim, that is, he accepts this religion and all its principles, offers prayers regularly and observes other acts of worship, and yet is lacking in the essence of faith and sincerity of belief. In fact, he may be very far from these. For there are signs which indicate the firm establishment of these qualities in people's hearts.

As explained in the commentary on *Sūrah* 103, The Declining Day, the essence of faith once firmly rooted in people's hearts and minds, immediately begins to operate and manifest itself in their behaviour. The *sūrah* stresses unequivocally that, if this is not the case, there is no faith.

"Have you seen him who denies religion? It is he who thrusts the orphan away and does not urge others to feed the needy." (Verses 1-3) The *sūrah* starts with a question addressed to all who can see, generating suspense and holding their attention in order to make them discover the target and subject of the *sūrah.* Who is this creature identified by the Qur'ān as the one who denies the religion of Islam? The answer is given immediately: *"It is he who thrusts the orphan away and does not urge others to feed the needy."* (Verses 2-3)

This definition of unbelievers may sound surprising when compared with a traditional definition of faith, but this is the crux of the matter. Indeed the one who denies the faith is he who harshly pushes away the orphan, humiliating him and hurting his feelings, and who does not care for the needy or their welfare. For if the truth of Islam has touched his heart in any degree, he would not commit such acts. True belief in Islam is not a verbal statement, but an overall change of the individual's heart, motivating him to benevolence and goodwill for all his fellow beings that are in need of his care and protection. God does not want mere words from His servants but demands deeds to support the spoken words which, otherwise, are as weightless and valueless as blown ash. Nothing can be more forceful than these three verses in affirming this fact which represents the nature of faith.

We do not intend here to indulge in a juristic discussion on the boundaries of faith and Islam. These are required in legal affairs, whereas this *sūrah* states the facts from God's point of view and judgement, which is quite different from the legal aspect.

Next, God offers a practical illustration of what is meant above: *"Woe, then, to those who pray but are heedless of their prayers."* (Verses 4-5) These verses contain God's invocation against, or a threat of destruction to, those who offer prayers but are careless about them. Who exactly are such people? They are those *"who put on a show of piety but refuse to give even the smallest help to others."* (Verses 67) Those who perform prayers but who do not aptly meet their requirements. They execute the mechanical aspects and pronounce the verbal formulae of prayers but their hearts are never alive to them, nor do they benefit by the spiritual nourishment prayers give. The essence and purpose of prayer and its component parts, such as Qur'ānic recitation, supplication and glorification of God, are never present in their souls. They offer prayers only to deceive others and not out of devotion to God. Hence, they are inattentive when they pray. They only outwardly perform their prayers. Muslims are required to offer their prayers regularly, having in mind that their prayers are a manifestation of their servitude to God alone. Thus, prayer leaves no result in those who are neglectful and inattentive to it. Consequently they refuse to give any kindness or help to their fellow beings and deny the slightest charity to any of God's servants.

Once again, we find ourselves presented with the fundamental truth and nature of this religion. A Qur'ānic verse threatens with destruction those who offer prayers precisely because they carry out meaningless movements devoid of any spirit or sense of purpose, intended for deceit and pretence, and not devoted to God. Since their prayers have not affected their hearts and behaviour, they are not merely useless but rather a sin for which they will be punished.

We thus gather the purpose behind what God demands of His servants when He instructs them to believe in, and worship Him. He seeks no benefit thereof for Himself, as He is in no need of anyone or anything. All He cares for is their own welfare and prosperity, purification of their hearts and happiness in their lives. God wishes human life to be elevated, happy, based on pure motives and characterized by mutual compassion, brotherhood and purity of hearts and behaviour.

To where then is humanity driving itself, moving away from this abundance of mercy; away from this wonderful and sublime path? How can mankind debase itself to living in the wilderness of a wretched and gloomy *jāhiliyyah* when it beholds the splendid light of faith before its very eyes at the cross-roads where it now stands?

SURAH 108

Al-Kawthar

(Abundance)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِنَّآ أَعْطَيْنَٰكَ ٱلْكَوْثَرَ ﴿١﴾	*We have certainly given you abundance.* (1)
فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَٱنْحَرْ ﴿٢﴾	*So pray to your Lord and sacrifice to Him.* (2)
إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ ٱلْأَبْتَرُ ﴿٣﴾	*Surely, he who hates you is the one cut off.* (3)

Overview

Similar to *Sūrahs* 93 and 94, The Morning Hours and Solace, this *sūrah* exclusively concerns the Prophet, seeking to cheer him up and assure him of happier prospects in his struggle. In it God threatens his enemies with destruction while directing the Prophet to the path of thanksgiving.

The *sūrah* represents a glimpse of the Prophet's life and the course of his mission in the early period at Makkah. It deals with the plots and insults directed against the Prophet and the divine message he conveys. The *sūrah* is an example of God's protection of His servant, the Prophet Muĥammad, and the few who followed him and believed in God. It is an instance of God's direct support to the believers in their struggle, supplying them with fortitude, restraint and promise, while threatening a terrible fate on their antagonists.

In this way, the *sūrah* symbolizes the reality of guidance, goodness and faith on the one hand and that of error, evil and disbelief on the other; the former category is one of abundance, profusion and expansive goodness, the latter one of scantiness,

shrinking resources and annihilation.

Background

Among the people of the Quraysh, the Arab tribe which controlled Makkah, there were some impudent folk who viewed the Prophet and his mission with no small degree of antagonism. They would resort to machinations and taunts against him to deter the people from listening to the truth which he conveyed to them in the form of a divine message. Among them were people like Al-`Āş ibn Wā'il, `Uqbah ibn Abī Mu`ayṭ, Abū Lahab, Abū Jahl and others. They said about the Prophet that he was a man with no posterity, referring to the early death of his sons. One of them once remarked, "Do not be bothered with him; he will die without descendants and that will be the end of his mission."

Such a trivial and cunning taunt had a wide impact on the Arab society of the time, which set great store by sons. Such taunting delighted the Prophet's enemies and undoubtedly this was a source of depression and irritation to his noble heart. This *sūrah* was therefore revealed to comfort the Prophet and assure him of the abiding and profuse goodness which God had chosen for him and of the deprivation and loss awaiting his persecutors.

Blessings in Abundance

"We have certainly given you abundance." (Verse 1) The word used in the *sūrah* and rendered here as 'abundance' is *kawthar,* derived from the stem word *kathrah* which signifies 'abundance' or 'a multitude'. This *kawthar* is unrestricted and unlimited. It indicates the opposite meaning to the one the impudent Quraysh tried to attach to the Prophet. We have given you that which is plentiful, overflowing and rich, unstinting and unending.

If anyone wishes to pursue and observe this abundance which God has given to His Prophet, he will find it wherever he looks and reflects. He will find it in Muĥammad's prophethood itself, which gave him a link with the great reality and the Supreme Being, who has no parallel and no partner. What indeed can the one who has found God be said to have lost?

He will also find it in this Qur'ān which was revealed to Muĥammad, every chapter of which is a fountain of richness that flows incessantly.

Moreover, he will find this *kawthar,* or abundance, manifest in Muslims' following of the Prophet's *sunnah,* i.e. way of life, throughout the centuries, in the far-flung corners of the earth, in the millions upon millions who follow in his footsteps and pronounce his name with respectful affection. He will see it in the millions upon

millions of hearts that cherish his example and memory even to the Day of Resurrection.

He will also find this *kawthar,* or abundance, manifest in the goodness and prosperity which have accrued to the human race as a result of his message, and which reach those who know and believe in him as well as those who do not. He will also discern this abundance in various and manifold phenomena, attempting to enumerate which give, at best, only a passing feeling of a great reality.

This indeed is abundance in its absolute and unlimited sense. The *sūrah,* therefore, does not give it a specific definition. Several accounts relate that *'al-kawthar'* is a river in heaven granted to the Prophet. However, Ibn `Abbās, the Prophet's learned cousin, contends that the river is but one part of the abundance which God has furnished for His Messenger. Keeping the circumstances and the whole context in mind, Ibn `Abbās's view is the more valid.

"So pray to your Lord and sacrifice to Him." (Verse 2) Having assured the Prophet of this munificent gift, which disproves what the calumniators and wicked schemers say, God directs the Prophet to be completely and sincerely thankful to Him for His bounty. He is to devote himself to Him alone in worship and ritual slaughter, taking no heed whatsoever of any form of idolatry and refusing to participate in the worship rituals offered by idolaters, especially when they invoke anyone other than God in their offerings.

Islam frequently lays emphasis on the pronouncing of God's name when slaughtering animals. It prohibits anything that is consecrated to any other being, which indicates the importance Islam attaches to the purification of human life from all forms of idolatry and all that leads to it. Because it is based on the principle of God's oneness in its purest sense, Islam does not aim merely at purifying human imagination and conscience. It pursues idolatry in all its manifestations, striving to eliminate its marks in man's consciousness, worship rituals and general behaviour. Life, Islam says, is one indivisible entity and must be treated as such. It must be cleansed inside out and completely oriented towards God, in all its aspects: worship, tradition and social behaviour.

"Surely, he who hates you is the one cut off" (Verse 3) In the first verse, God specified that Muĥammad was not the one who had no posterity but, on the contrary, was the one endowed with abundance. In this verse, God throws back the taunt on those who hated and reviled the Prophet. Indeed, God's promise has come true. For, the influence and legacy of Muĥammad's enemies were short-lived, while his impact on human life and history has grown and deepened. Today we are witnessing the truth of this divine pronouncement as clearly as no one among those addressed by the Qur'ān for the first time ever did or imagined.

Faith and goodness cannot be barren. Their influence is both profound and deep-rooted. By contrast, falsehood, error and evil may grow and spread quickly, but they ultimately come to nothing.

God's criteria are different from the criteria laid down by man. Men are often deceived when they vainly believe their sense of judgement to be the criterion. Before us is the eloquent and enduring example of the Prophet. Of what value or interest to humanity have Muĥammad's slanderers and foes been to anyone?

On the other hand, calling others to the religion of God, to truth and goodness, can never be called futile. Neither can the righteous and the true be called deprived or cut off. How can it be, when this message itself comes from, and is supported by, God, the Immortal, the Eternal? But deprived and sterile indeed are disbelief, error and evil as are their votaries, however strong and widespread they may appear to be at any moment.

God affirms the truth; wily opponents are but liars!

SŪRAH 109

Al-Kāfirūn

(The Unbelievers)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

قُلْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١﴾	*Say: 'Unbelievers!* (1)
لَآ أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢﴾	*I do not worship what you worship,* (2)
وَلَآ أَنتُمْ عَٰبِدُونَ مَآ أَعْبُدُ ﴿٣﴾	*nor do you worship what I worship.* (3)
وَلَآ أَنَا۠ عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدتُّمْ ﴿٤﴾	*I shall never worship what you worship,* (4)
وَلَآ أَنتُمْ عَٰبِدُونَ مَآ أَعْبُدُ ﴿٥﴾	*nor will you ever worship what I worship.* (5)
لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ ﴿٦﴾	*You have your own religion and I have mine.'* (6)

No Meeting of the Ways

Although the Arabs before Islam did not deny God altogether, they did not know Him by His true identity as the One and the Eternal. They neither showed any true understanding of God, nor worshipped Him properly. On the contrary, they ascribed to Him, as partners, idols that were supposed to represent their great and pious ancestors or, in some cases, the angels whom they claimed to be God's daughters. Moreover, they alleged a kinship between Him and the *jinn*. They often ignored all

these qualifications, however, and worshipped those idols themselves. But in all cases they claimed, as the Qur'ān quotes them, that they *"only worship them [i.e. their various deities] so that they may bring us near to God."* (39: 3)

The Qur'ān also states: *"If you ask them who it is that has created the heavens and the earth, and subjected the sun and the moon (to fixed laws) they will say: God."* (29: 61) And again: *"If you ask them who it is that sends down water from the sky, and thereby revives the earth after it has died, they will say: God."* (29: 63) Moreover, God superseded their deities in their oaths and supplications.

But in spite of their belief in God, the polytheism they entertained fouled their concepts, traditions and rites to the extent that they assigned to their alleged deities a portion of their earnings and possessions, and even their offspring. In fact, they were at times forced to sacrifice their children. Concerning this, the Qur'ān has the following to say:

> *Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him].' Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners. How ill they judge! Thus have the partners they associate [with God] made the killing of their own children seem goodly to many idolaters, seeking to bring them to ruin and to confuse them in their faith. Had God willed otherwise, they would not have done so. Leave them, then, to their false inventions. They say: Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him. He will surely requite them for their inventions. They also say: 'That which is in the wombs of these cattle is reserved to our males and forbidden to our women.' But if it be stillborn, they all partake of it. He will requite them for all their false assertions. He is Wise, All-Knowing. Losers indeed are those who, in their ignorance, foolishly kill their children and declare as forbidden what God has provided for them as sustenance, falsely attributing such prohibitions to God. They have gone astray and they have no guidance. (6: 136-140)*

The Arabs were also convinced that they were the followers of the religion of Abraham and that they were better guided than the people of earlier revelations [i.e. the Jews and Christians] inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula at the time: the Jews and Christians preached respectively that Ezra and Jesus were the sons of God whereas they, the Arabs, worshipped angels and *jinn* – the true offspring of God according to them. Their belief, they maintained, was more logical and more conceivable than that of the Christians and Jews. Nonetheless, all were forms of idolatry.

When Muĥammad (peace be upon him) declared his religion to be that of Abraham, they argued that there was no reason for them to forsake their beliefs and follow Muĥammad's instead, since they too were of the same religion. In the meantime, they sought a sort of compromise with him proposing that he should prostrate himself before their deities in return for their prostration to his God, and that he should cease denouncing their deities and their manner of worship in reciprocation for whatever he demanded of them! This confusion in their concepts, vividly illustrated by their worship of various deities while acknowledging God, was perhaps what led them to believe that the gulf between them and Muĥammad was not unbridgeable. They thought an agreement was somehow possible by allowing the two camps to co-exist in the region and by granting him some personal concessions!

To clear up this muddle, to cut all arguments short and to firmly distinguish between one form of worship and the other, and indeed between one faith and the other, this *sūrah* was revealed in such a decisive, assertive tone. It was revealed in this manner to demarcate monotheism, i.e. *tawĥīd,* from polytheism, i.e. *shirk,* and to establish a true criterion, allowing no further wrangling or vain argument.

"Say: 'Unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion and I have mine." (Verses 1-6) Following one form of negation, assertion and emphasis after another, the *sūrah* sets its message in absolute clarity. It starts with the word, *'Say,'* which denotes a clear divine order stressing the fact that the whole affair of religion belongs exclusively to God. Nothing of it belongs to Muĥammad himself. Moreover, it implies that God is the only One to order and decide. Address them, Muĥammad, by their actual and true identity: *"Say: Unbelievers!"* (Verse 1) They follow no prescribed religion, nor do they believe in you. No meeting point exists between you and them anywhere. Thus the beginning of the *sūrah* brings to mind the reality of difference which cannot be ignored or overlooked.

"I do not worship what you worship," is a statement affirmed by *"I shall never worship what you worship."* Similarly, *"nor do you worship what I worship,"* is repeated for added emphasis and in order to eliminate all doubt or misinterpretation.

Finally, the whole argument is summed up in the last verse: *"You have your own religion, and I have mine,"* meaning that you, unbelievers, and I, Muĥammad, are very far apart, without any bridge to connect us. This is a complete distinction and a precise, intelligible demarcation.

Such an attitude was essential then in order to expose the fundamental discrepancies in the essence, source and concepts of the two beliefs, i.e. between monotheism and polytheism, faith and unbelief. Faith is the way of life which directs

man and the whole world towards God alone and determines for him the source of his religion, laws, values, criteria, ethics and morality. That source is God. Thus life proceeds for the believer, devoid of any form of idolatry. Idolatry on the other hand is the opposite of faith. The two never meet.

On the whole, the distinction we are dealing with here is indispensable both for those who call on people to accept Islam and the people themselves, because *jāhiliyyah* concepts are often mixed with those of Islam in those societies which previously followed the Islamic way of life, but have later deviated from it. Of all communities, they are certainly the most rigid and hostile to the idea of regaining faith in its healthy, clear and straightforward form, certainly more so than those who have not known Islam originally. They take it for granted that they are righteous while they grow more and more perverse!

The existence of noble beliefs and thoughts in those societies, albeit mixed with base ones, may tempt the advocate of the Islamic system to hope for their quick return, thinking he may be able to strengthen such good aspects and rightly correct undesirable features! Such temptation is, however, dangerously misleading.

Jāhiliyyah and Islam are two totally different entities, separated by a wide gulf. The only way to bridge that gulf is for *jāhiliyyah* to liquidate itself completely and substitute for all its laws, values, standards and concepts their Islamic counterparts. The first step that should be taken in this respect by the person calling on people to embrace Islam is to segregate himself from *jāhiliyyah.* He must be separated to the extent that any agreement or intercourse between him and *jāhiliyyah* is absolutely impossible unless and until the people of *jāhiliyyah* embrace Islam completely: no intermingling, no half measures or conciliation is permissible, however clever *jāhiliyyah* may be in usurping or reflecting the role of Islam. The chief characteristic of a person who calls on others to adopt Islam is the clarity of this fact within himself and his solemn conviction of being radically different from those who do not share his outlook. They have their own religion, and he has his. His task is to change their standing point so that they may follow his path without false pretence or compromise. Failing this, he must withdraw completely, detach himself from their life and openly declare to them: "*You have your own religion, and I have mine.*" (Verse 6)

This is a *sine qua non* for contemporary advocates of Islam. They badly need to realize that they are calling for Islam today in entirely *neo-jāhiliyyah* surroundings, amongst ex-Muslim people whose hearts have grown harder and whose beliefs have deteriorated considerably. They need to understand that there is no room for short-term or half-baked solutions, compromises, or partial redemption or adjustment, and that their call is for a uniquely distinguished Islam, in contrast to such people's conception. They must face these people bravely and put it to them explicitly: you have your own religion, and we have ours. Our religion is based on absolute

monotheism whose concepts, values, beliefs and laws cover all aspects of human life and are all received from God and no one else.

Without this basic separation confusion, double-dealing, doubt and distortion will certainly persist. And let it be clear in our minds here that the movement advocating Islam can never be constructed on any ambiguous or feeble foundations, but has to be built upon firmness, explicitness, frankness and fortitude as embodied in God's instruction to us to declare: "*You have your own religion, and I have mine.*" (Verse 6) Such was the way adopted by the Islamic message in its early days.

SŪRAH 110

Al-Naşr

(Divine Help)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

إِذَا جَآءَ نَصْرُ ٱللَّهِ وَٱلْفَتْحُ ﴿١﴾	*When God's help and victory come,* (1)
وَرَأَيْتَ ٱلنَّاسَ يَدْخُلُونَ فِى دِينِ ٱللَّهِ أَفْوَاجًا ﴿٢﴾	*and you see people embracing God's religion in large numbers* (2)
فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ تَوَّابًا ﴿٣﴾	*then extol your Lord's limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness. He is the One who accepts repentance.* (3)

Overview

This short *sūrah* brings the good news to Muĥammad, God's Messenger, that God's help will be forthcoming, as will victory and peoples' collective acceptance of His religion. It instructs him to turn towards his Lord in devoted adoration coupled with a humble request for His forgiveness. The *sūrah* also presents the nature and the righteousness of this faith and its ideology, which elevates humanity to a standard of dignity, dedication and freedom that it can never attain except through responding to the call of Islam and implementing the Islamic message.

Of the several traditions regarding the revelation of this *sūrah,* we quote the one related by Imām Aĥmad which runs as follows: "`Ā'ishah said that God's Messenger used to repeat very frequently, towards the end of his life: All glorification and

praises are due to God. I seek His forgiveness; and I repent of my sins.' He also said: 'My Lord told me I would see a sign in my community. He ordered me to glorify and praise Him, the Forgiving, and ask His pardon when I see this sign. Indeed, I have. *When God's help and victory come, and you see people embracing God's religion in large numbers then extol your Lord's limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness. He is the One who accepts repentance.*'" [Related also by Muslim with a different chain of transmission.]

Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "The victory mentioned in this *sūrah* refers, as unanimously agreed, to the conquest of Makkah. The Arab tribes were awaiting the settlement of the conflict between the Quraysh and the Muslims, before making a decision about their acceptance of Islam, saying that if Muĥammad were to prevail over his people, he would indeed be a prophet. Consequently, when that was accomplished they accepted Islam in large numbers. Within two years of the conquest of Makkah, the whole Arabian Peninsula was dominated by Islam, and, all thanks to God, every Arab tribe declared its belief in Islam."

In his *Ṣaĥīĥ* al-Bukhārī quotes `Amr ibn Salamah as saying: "When Makkah fell to Islam, every tribe hastened to declare to God's Messenger its acceptance of Islam. They were waiting for it to take place, saying, 'Leave him alone with his people. He would indeed be a prophet if he prevailed over them..."

These reports are chronologically in line with the wording of the *sūrah,* in the sense that its revelation was a sign of something to follow, with some instructions to the Prophet on what he should do when this event would take place.

There is, nevertheless, a different report which is not difficult to reconcile with the one we have already discussed. `Abdullāh ibn`Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and learned Companion, reports: "Umar used to let me join the company of elders who were present at Badr, but some of them felt uneasy and asked why I should be allowed with them when I was of the same age as their own children. But `Umar said to them, 'You know to what family he belongs.' One day `Umar invited them all and invited me as well. I felt that he wanted to show them why he gave me such a privilege. He asked them, 'What do you make of God's saying: *When God's help and victory come?'* Some of them replied, 'It is an order that we must praise Him and seek His forgiveness when He helps us to triumph and bestows His favours on us.' Others remained silent. Then `Umar asked me, 'Do you agree with this view, Ibn `Abbās?' I answered in the negative. `Umar asked me again, 'What, then, do you say?' I replied, 'It was a sign from God to His Messenger indicating the approach of the end of his life. It means: *when God's help and victory come,* you should know that your end is near, *then extol your Lord's limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness. He is the One who accepts repentance.*'" `*Umar* commented, 'To my knowledge, it only means what you have just said." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

So it is possible that God's Messenger, having witnessed his Lord's sign, realized that he had fulfilled his mission in this life, and that it was time for him to depart, which was what Ibn `Abbās actually meant.

A different report related by al-Bayhaqī, also on Ibn `Abbās's authority, mentions that when this *sūrah* was first revealed, the Prophet asked his daughter, Fāṭimah, to come over and told her, 'My death has been announced to me.' She was seen to start crying. But a little later she smiled. Some time later she explained, "I cried when he told me of his approaching death. But he then said to me, Be patient, because you will be the first of my household to join me', so I smiled."

According to this last *ĥadīth,* the time of the revelation of the *sūrah* is actually fixed as coming later than the sign. That is, the victory and the people's collective acceptance of Islam. When events took place in this fashion the Prophet knew that his life would soon come to a close. But again the first account is more authentic and fits in more suitably with the import of the *sūrah,* especially as the incident concerning Fāṭimah and her crying and smiling is related in a different context which agrees with the version we prefer. This other report goes as follows: "Umm Salamah, the Prophet's wife, said: 'The Prophet invited Fāṭimah one day during the year of the victory and spoke to her in private. She cried. Then he spoke to her again and she was smiling. After he died, I asked her about the incident and she explained, God's Messenger told me he was soon to die, so I cried. Then he told me that I would be the next most celebrated woman in heaven, next to Maryam bint `Imrān, so I smiled.'" [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

This report agrees with the general meaning of the Qur'ānic text and with what Imām Aĥmad related, which also appears in Muslim's *Ṣaĥīĥ.* That is, there was a sign between God and His Messenger, which the *sūrah* specifies. Hence, when the victory that secured Makkah to Islam was accomplished, the Prophet knew that he was soon to meet his Lord. Hence he spoke to Fāṭimah in the manner described by Umm Salamah.

An Awaited Event

We will now consider the permanent import and instructions outlined in this short *sūrah: "When God's help and victory come, and you see people embracing God's religion in large numbers, then extol your Lord's limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness. He is the One who accepts repentance."* (Verses 1-3)

The beginning of the first verse implicitly presents a concept of what goes on in this universe and the events that take place in this life. It also covers the actual role of the Prophet and his followers in the progress of Islam, and to what extent it depends on their efforts. *'When God's help and victory...',* denotes that it is help granted by God,

and it is He who brings about victory in His own good time, in the form He decides and for the purpose He determines. The Prophet and his Companions have nothing to do with it at all, and they obtain no personal gain from it. It suffices for them that He does it through them, appoints them as its guards and entrusts it to them. This is all they acquire from God's help, the victory and people's acceptance *en masse* of His religion.

According to this concept, the duty of the Prophet and his Companions whom God chose and gave the privilege of being the instruments of victory for His cause, was to turn to Him at the climax of victory in praise, expressing gratitude and seeking forgiveness. Gratitude and praise are for His being so generous as to have chosen them to be the standard-bearers of His religion; for the mercy and favour He did to all humanity by making His religion victorious; and for the conquest of Makkah and people's collective acceptance of Islam.

His forgiveness is sought for any defective feeling, privately entertained, such as vanity, which sometimes creep into one's heart when victory is attained after a long struggle. It is almost impossible for human beings to prevent this happening and therefore God's forgiveness is to be sought. Forgiveness also has to be sought for what might have been insinuated within one's heart during the long and cruel struggle and for petulance resulting from a conceived delay of victory, or the effects of convulsive despair, as the Qur'ān mentions elsewhere: "*Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand.*" (2: 214)

It is also necessary to seek God's forgiveness for one's shortcomings in praising God and thanking Him for His infinite favours which are granted at all times. "*If you were to count God's favours, never will you be able to number them.*" (16: 18) However great one's efforts in this respect are, they are never adequate.

Seeking forgiveness at a moment of triumph also arouses feelings of weakness and imperfection at a time when an attitude of pride and conceit seems natural. All these factors guarantee that no tyranny will afflict the vanquished. The victorious leader is made to realize that it is God who has appointed him, a man who has no power of his own and who is devoid of any strength, for a predetermined purpose; consequently the triumph and the conquest as well as the religion are all His, and to Him all things ultimately return.

This is the lofty, dignified ideal the Qur'ān exhorts people to toil towards, an ideal in which man's exaltation is in neglecting his own pride and where his soul's freedom is in his subservience to God. The goal set is the total release of human souls

from their egoistic shackles, their only ambition being to attain God's pleasure. Along with this release there must be exerted effort which helps man flourish in the world, promotes human civilization and provides a rightly-guided, unblemished, constructive, just leadership devoted to God.

By contrast, man's efforts to liberate himself while in the grip of egoism, shackled by his zest for worldly things, or overpowered by his cravings, turn out to be absolutely useless unless he frees himself from personal desires and ambitions. His loyalty to God must be made to override everything else, particularly at the moment of triumph and the collection of booty. Such behaviour, which God wants humanity to attain, was the characteristic feature of all the Prophets.

Such was the case with the Prophet Joseph, when all he wanted was achieved and his dream came true: "*And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.*" (12: 100)

Then, at that moment of climax, Joseph took himself away from the jubilations and embracing arms to turn towards his Lord, praising Him with a pure sense of gratitude: "*My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.*" (12: 101)

Thus any sense of his own egotism and happiness brought about by his reunion with his family vanished, and the picture we are left with is that of an individual, Joseph, praying to God to help him remain submissive to Him until he dies and to let him, out of His mercy and grace, join His righteous servants.

o, it was also with the Prophet Solomon, when he saw the Queen of Sheba's throne brought into his very reach: "*When he saw it set in his presence he said: 'This is of the bounty of my Lord, that He may try me whether I give thanks or remain ungrateful. He who gives thanks does so for his own good, and he who is ungrateful, well, my Lord is all sufficient and bountiful.*" (27: 40)

And so indeed it was with Muĥammad throughout his life. In the moment of triumph, as the conquest of Makkah was accomplished, he entered the city on the back of his camel with his head bowed low. He forgot the joy of victory and thankfully bowed his head seeking his Lord's forgiveness, even though he had just conquered Makkah, whose people had openly and unashamedly persecuted and expelled him. This also was the practice of his Companions after him.

Thus, upon belief in God, was that great generation of humanity raised very high, reaching an unparalleled standard of greatness, power and freedom.

SŪRAH 111

Al-Masad

(Fire Flames)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

تَبَّتْ يَدَآ أَبِى لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ ﴿١﴾	*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he.* (1)
مَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُ مَالُهُۥ وَمَا كَسَبَ ﴿٢﴾	*His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing.* (2)
سَيَصْلَىٰ نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَبٍ ﴿٣﴾	*He shall have to endure a flaming fire,* (3)
وَٱمْرَأَتُهُۥ حَمَّالَةَ ٱلْحَطَبِ ﴿٤﴾	*and his wife, the carrier of firewood,* (4)
فِى جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِّن مَّسَدٍ ﴿٥﴾	*shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.* (5)

Background

Abū Lahab, whose real name was `Abd al-'Uzzā ibn `Abd alMuṭṭalib, was the Prophet's uncle. He was so nicknamed because of the radiant look on his face. Together with his wife, Abū Lahab was one of the most hostile opponents of God's Messenger and the ideas he propagated.

Ibn Isĥāq related the following report by Rabī`ah ibn `Abbād al-Daylī: "When I was young I once watched, with my father, God's Messenger preaching Islam to the Arab tribes, saying 'O sons of... (calling their respective tribal names), I am God's

Messenger sent to order you to submit to, and worship Him alone, invoking nothing else beside Him, and to believe in me and protect me until I carry out what God has entrusted to me.' A cross-eyed, bright-faced man was behind him, who used to say, after he had finished, 'O sons of... This man wants you to forsake al-Lāt and al-`Uzzā [two prominent idols worshipped by the pagan Arabs] and your allies of the *jinn,* the children of Mālik ibn Aqmas and to substitute for them these innovations and nonsense he has come up with. Do not listen to him, nor follow what he preaches.' I asked my father who that man was and he told me that it was Abū Lahab, the Prophet's uncle." [Related by Aĥmad and al-Ṭabarānī.]

This is but one incident of Abū Lahab's intimidation and ill- will towards the Prophet and his message. His wife, Arwā bint Ĥarb ibn Umayyah, Abū Sufyān's sister, gave him unfailing support in his virulent, relentless campaign.

Such was Abū Lahab's attitude towards the Prophet from the very start of his divine mission. Al-Bukhārī relates, on Ibn `Abbās's authority, that "one day the Prophet went out to al-Baṭĥā', a large square in Makkah, climbed a hill and summoned the people of the Quraysh. When they came to him, he addressed them, saying, 'Were I to tell you that an enemy is drawing near and will attack you tomorrow morning or evening, would you believe me?' 'Yes,' they replied. 'o listen to me,' he went on, 'I am warning you of [God's] gruesome torment.' Abū Lahab was there and snapped at him, 'Damn you! For this have you called us?" [Another version says: Abū Lahab stood up shaking the dust off his hands and saying, 'Damn you all day long...'] Then this *sūrah* was revealed.

Another instance was when the Hāshimite clan [i.e. the Prophet's own clan], under Abū Ṭālib's leadership, decided on grounds of tribal loyalty to protect the Prophet despite their rejection of the religion he preached. Abū Lahab was the only one to take a different stand. He joined with the Quraysh instead, and was with them in signing the document imposing a complete social and business boycott on the Hashimites so as to starve them out unless they delivered the Prophet to them.

Abū Lahab also ordered his two sons to renounce Muĥammad's two daughters to whom they had been engaged before Muĥammad's prophetic assignment. His aim was to burden the Prophet with their living and welfare expenses.

Thus, Abū Lahab and his wife, Arwā, who was also called Umm Jamīl, continued with their persistent onslaught against the Prophet and his message. The fact that they were close neighbours of the Prophet made the situation even worse. We are told that Umm Jamīl used to carry thorns and sharp wood and place them along the Prophet's path [although it is thought that the phrase *the carrier of firewood*' in the *sūrah* is used only metaphorically to indicate her lies and malice about him].

The Final Word

This *sūrah* was revealed as a counterattack against Abū Lahab's and his wife's hostile campaign. God took it upon Himself to say the final word on behalf of His Messenger.

"Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he." (Verse 1) The Arabic term, *tabba,* rendered here as 'doomed' also signifies failure and cutting off. The term is used twice in two different senses. It is used first as a prayer, while in the second instance it implies that the prayer has been already answered. So, in one short verse, an action is realized which draws the curtains upon a battle scene. What later follows is merely a description of what took place with the remark that *"his wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing."* (Verse 2) He can have no escape. He is defeated, vanquished and damned.

This was his fate in this world, but in the hereafter *"he shall have to endure a flaming fire."* (Verse 3) The fire is described as having flames in order to emphasize that it is raging.

"And his wife, the carrier of firewood," will reside there with him having *"a rope of palm-fibre round her neck,"* with which, as it were, she is being dragged into hell, or which she used for fastening wood bundles together, according to whether a literal or metaphorical interpretation of the text is adopted.

The language of this *sūrah* achieves remarkable harmony between the subject matter and the atmosphere built around it. Abū Lahab will be plunged into a fire with *lahab,* which is the Arabic for flames; and his wife who carries the wood, a fuel, will be met with the same fire with a palm-fibre rope around her neck. Hell, with its fiercely burning *lahab,* or flames, will be inhabited by Abū Lahab. At the same time his wife, who collects thorns and sharp woods, materials which can significantly increase the blaze of a fire, puts them all in the Prophet's way. Hence, she will, in time, be dragged into hell with a rope tied round her neck, bundled like firewood. How perfectly matched are the words and the pictures portrayed: the punishment is presented as being of the same nature as the deed: wood, ropes, fire and *lahab!*

Phonetically, the words are arranged in a way which provides wonderful harmony between the sounds made by the tying of wood into bundles and pulling the neck by ropes. Read in Arabic the opening verse, *"Tabbat yadā abī Lahabin wa tabb."* You will not fail to note that it sounds like a hard sharp tug, analogous to that of bundles of wood or an unwilling person being dragged by the neck into a wild fire; all is in phase with the fury and violent, bellicose tone that goes with the theme of the *sūrah.* Thus, in five short verses making up one of the shortest *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān, the vocal melodies click neatly with the actual movement of the scene portrayed.

This extremely rich and powerful style led Umm Jamīl to claim that the Prophet was in fact satirizing her and her husband. This arrogant and vain woman could not get over being referred to by such a humiliating phrase as *'the carrier of firewood,'* who *'shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.'* Her rage grew wilder when the *sūrah* became popular among the Arab tribes who greatly appreciated such fine literary style!

Ibn Isĥāq relates: "Umm Jamīl, I was told, having heard what the Qur'ān said about her and her husband, came to the Prophet who was with Abū Bakr at the Ka`bah. She was carrying a handful of stones. God took her sight away from the Prophet and she saw only Abū Bakr to whom she said, 'Where is your comrade? I have heard that he has been satirizing me. Were I to find him, I would throw these stones right into his face. I, too, am gifted in poetry.' Then she chanted before leaving:

The contemptible we obey not! Nor what he says shall we accept!

"Abū Bakr turned around to the Prophet and said, 'Do you think that she saw you?' 'No,' replied the Prophet, 'God made her unable to see me.

Al-Bazzār relates on Ibn `Abbās's authority that "when this *sūrah* was revealed Abū Lahab's wife sought the Prophet. While he was with Abū Bakr she appeared. Abū Bakr suggested to the Prophet: 'She will not harm you if you move out of her sight.' 'Do not worry,' said the Prophet in a soothing manner. 'She will not see me.' She came to Abū Bakr and said: 'Your friend has lampooned us!' 'By the Lord of this Ka`bah, he has not,' Abū Bakr assured her. 'He is no poet and what he says is not poetry,' he added. She said, 'I believe you,' and then left. Abū Bakr then enquired from the Prophet whether she had seen him and he said, 'No, an angel was shielding me all the time she was here.' So much was her fury and her indignation at what she thought was poetry and which Abū Bakr rightly refuted.

Thus, the humiliating picture of Abū Lahab and his wife has been recorded to last forever in this eternal book, the Qur'ān, to show God's anger with them for their animosity towards His Messenger and message. All those who choose to take a similar attitude towards Islam, therefore, will meet with the same disgrace, humiliation and frustration, both in this life and in the life to come.

SŪRAH 112

Al-Ikhlāş

(Purity of Faith)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Say: He is God, the One and only God (1)	قُلْ هُوَ ٱللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ﴿١﴾
the Eternal, the Absolute. (2)	ٱللَّهُ ٱلصَّمَدُ ﴿٢﴾
He begets none, nor is He begotten, (3)	لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ﴿٣﴾
and there is nothing that could be compared to Him. (4)	وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُۥ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌۢ ﴿٤﴾

God's Absolute Oneness

This short *sūrah* is equivalent to one-third of the Qur'ān, as authentic *aĥādīth* confirm. Al-Bukhārī, the leading *Ĥadīth* scholar, relates a Ĥadīth which mentions the case of one who had heard another man reciting this *sūrah* repeatedly. He went to the Prophet the following morning and told him disapprovingly about what he had heard, as though he felt that it was too little. The Prophet commented, "I swear by Him who holds my soul in His hand that it [i.e. this *sūrah]* is equivalent to one third of the Qur'ān."

And, indeed, there is nothing surprising in that. For God's oneness which the Prophet was ordered to declare to the whole world is a belief to be ingrained in our minds, an explanation of human existence and a way of life in itself. From this standpoint, the *sūrah* can be said to have embraced, in the clearest of terms, the

principal and most fundamental ideas of the great truth of Islam.

The Arabic term, *aĥad,* used here to refer to God's oneness is much more precise than the more frequently used term, *wāĥid,* which means 'one'. *Aĥad* has the added connotations of absolute and continuous unity and an absence of equals.

God's oneness is such that there is no reality and no true and permanent existence except His. Moreover, every other being acquires whatever power it may possess from God who rules over this world. Nothing else whatsoever plans anything for the world nor, for that matter, decides anything in it.

This is the belief that should be entrenched in us. It gives us a full explanation of human existence. Once this belief is clear and the explanation has established itself in our minds, our hearts are purified of all falsities and impurities. They are thus released from all bonds except their bond with the Unique Being to whom alone the reality of existence belongs and who is the only effective power in this world. Thus, the human heart is released from bondage to anything in this world, even if it cannot shirk the notion that other beings exist. Indeed, why should our hearts aspire to anything that has neither a permanent reality, nor any independent power to function in this world? The only real existence is that of the Divine Being and the truly effective power is Divine Will.

When a human heart releases itself from believing in anything but the one truth of God, and upholds this everlasting truth, it begins to enjoy its freedom from all shackles, false ideas, evil desires, fears and confusions of any sort. Indeed, when a human heart finds God, it benefits much and loses nothing. o why should it desire anything but God's pleasure? Why should it fear anything, since there is no absolutely effective power but that of God?

When a concept that sees nothing in the world but the reality of God establishes itself in our hearts and minds, we begin to see this genuine and permanent reality in everything He has made. This is when our hearts feel the hand of God in everything. There is only one level beyond this and that is when our hearts feel nothing but God's reality in the whole universe.

Thus, every event and every movement in this life and in the universe is attributed to the first and only cause; that is, God who brings other causes into play and influences their effectiveness. The Qur'ān takes great care to establish this truth. It has always put aside apparent causes, associating events directly with God's will. It says: *"When you threw [a handful of dust] it was not your act, but God's."* (8: 17) *"For victory comes only from God."* (8: 10 and 3: 126) *"You have no will except as God wills."* (76: 30)

By disregarding all apparent causes and connecting matters directly with God's will, a feeling of relief gently penetrates our hearts so that we recognize the only

Saviour from whom we can ask whatever we may wish, and by whom we are rescued from all fear. We are no longer impressed by apparent influences, reasons and causes that bear no reality or true existence in themselves.

These are the steps of the way some mystics, or Sufis, tried to climb, but they deviated too far from it. For Islam wants people to follow this route struggling with the realities of life, and leading a human life in which they exercise the role God has assigned to human beings on earth, using all their resources and fulfilling all the obligations laid upon them.

From this concept of God's oneness stems a perfect way of life based on an explanation of human existence and whatever outlooks, feelings, and traits it stimulates. This way of life is based on the worship of God alone whose will is the only effective power in the world. Thus, people seek refuge with Him in times of need and fear, happiness and discomfort, ease and hardship. For what is the use of turning towards a non-existent or powerless being? This way of life looks to God alone as its benefactor. From Him we receive our beliefs, outlooks, values, criteria, legislation, institutions, systems, ethics and traditions.

A Complete Way of Life

On this basis a complete way of life is formulated, in which people perform all their activities and make sacrifices absolutely and only for God, hoping always to be nearer the truth. This way of life strengthens bonds of love, brotherhood, mutual sympathy and care between all beings and human hearts. For when we speak of liberation from complete submission to these feelings we are by no means suggesting that people should despise or hate them or escape from practising them. Instead they arise from the creative hand of God and they all owe their existence to Him. They are a gift to us from God who loves us and whom we love. Therefore, they deserve our love.

It is a sublime and lofty way of life that looks at this earth as small, life as short, its enjoyments and luxuries as worth little; and the breaking away from hindrances as humanity's great aim. In Islam, however, this release does not mean seclusion, isolation and neglect, nor does it mean contempt for, or escape from life. Instead it simply means a continuous and sincere endeavour and an everlasting struggle to lead humanity towards submission of everything in human life to God alone. Consequently, it is the fulfilment of man's role as God's vicegerent on earth with all its obligations, as we have already explained.

Liberation of the soul through a life of isolation and extreme spiritualism is easy to achieve but Islam does not approve of it, because it wants its followers to fulfil man's role assigned to him by God who placed him in charge of the earth and to provide

the leadership humanity needs. This is the harder way that guarantees man's elevation and achieves the victory of divine will within him. This is real liberation, for it urges the human soul to fly to its divine source and achieve its sublime status within the scope God, the wise Creator, has defined for it.

For the sake of all this, the first address the Islamic message made was devoted to the establishment of the reality of God's oneness in people's hearts and minds. In this form, the Islamic message is seen by the soul, heart and mind, as a full explanation of human existence, a way of life and not merely a spoken word or an inert belief. It is life in its entirety and religion in its totality. Whatever details are later put in place are no more than the natural fruits of its establishment in people's hearts and minds.

All the deviations that afflicted the followers of earlier divine religions, and which corrupted their beliefs, ideas and lives arose, in the first place, from a deterioration of the concept of God's absolute oneness in their minds. But what distinguishes this concept in the Islamic faith is the fact that it is deeply rooted throughout human life. Indeed, it forms the foundation of a realistic and practical system for human life, clearly reflected in both legislation and belief.

To say, "*He is God, the One and only God,*" (Verse 1) means that "*He is the Eternal, the Absolute,*" (Verse 2) and that "*He begets none, nor is He begotten, and there is nothing that could be compared to Him.*" (Verses 3-4) But the Qur'ān states it all in detail for added emphasis and clarification.

"*The Eternal, the Absolute*" also means the Lord to whom all creation turns for help, and without whose permission nothing is decided. God is the One and only Lord. He is the One God and Master while all other beings are but His servants. To Him and Him alone are addressed all prayers and supplications. He and only He decides everything independently. No one shares His authority.

"*He begets none, nor is He begotten,*" means that the reality of God is deep-rooted, permanent and everlasting. No changeable circumstances ever affect it. Its quality is absolute perfection at all times. Birth is descent and multiplication and implies a developed being after incompleteness or nothingness. It requires espousal which is based on similarity of being and structure. All this is utterly impossible in God's case. So the quality of 'One' includes the renouncement of a father and a son.

"*There is nothing that could be compared to Him,*" means that no one resembles Him in anything or is equivalent to Him in any respect, either in their reality of being, in the fact that He is the only effective power, or in any of His qualities or attributes. This is implied in the statement of his being 'One' made in the first verse, but it is repeated so as to confirm and elaborate upon that fact. It is a renunciation of the two-god belief which implies that God is the God of Good while Evil has its own lord who, as the belief goes — is in opposition to God, spoils His good deeds and

propagates evil on earth. The most well-known two-god belief was that of the Persians, who believed in a god of light and a god of darkness. This belief was known to the people in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, where the Persians once had a state and exercised sovereignty.

This *sūrah* firmly establishes and confirms the Islamic belief in God's oneness just as *Sūrah 109,* The Unbelievers, is a denunciation of any similarity or meeting point between the Islamic concept of God's oneness and any belief that ascribes human form, attributes, or personality to God. Each *sūrah* deals with God's oneness from a different angle. The Prophet used to start off his day reciting these two *sūrahs* in the *sunnah,* or voluntary prayer before the obligatory dawn or *fajr* prayer. This, surely, was immensely significant.

SŪRAH 113

Al-Falaq

(The Daybreak)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ ٱلْفَلَقِ ﴿١﴾	*Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak,* (1)
مِن شَرِّ مَا خَلَقَ ﴿٢﴾	*from the evil of anything that He has created;* (2)
وَمِن شَرِّ غَاسِقٍ إِذَا وَقَبَ ﴿٣﴾	*from the evil of darkness when it gathers;* (3)
وَمِن شَرِّ ٱلنَّفَّٰثَٰتِ فِى ٱلْعُقَدِ ﴿٤﴾	*from the evil of the conjuring witches;* (4)
وَمِن شَرِّ حَاسِدٍ إِذَا حَسَدَ ﴿٥﴾	*from the evil of the envious when he envies.* (5)

Overview

This *sūrah,* along with the following one, Mankind, contains a directive from God primarily to His Prophet and secondly to the believers at large, to take refuge in Him and seek His protection in the face of any source of fear, subtle or apparent, known or unknown. It is as if God — limitless is He in His glory — is unfolding His world of care, and embracing the believers in His guard. He is kindly and affectionately calling on them to resort to His care through which they will feel safe and at peace. It is as if He is saying to them: I know that you are helpless and surrounded by foes and fears. Come to Me for safety, contentment and peace. Hence, the two *sūrahs* start with, "*Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak,*" and, "*Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of*

mankind."

Several accounts have been handed down concerning the revelation and popularity of these two *sūrahs.* They all fit in neatly with the above interpretation that God, the Most Merciful, offers His care and shelter to His faithful servants. God's Messenger loved these two *sūrahs* profoundly, as is clearly apparent in his traditions.

`Uqba ibn `Āmir, a Companion of the Prophet, reports that the Prophet said to him: "Have you not heard the unique verses that were revealed last night, "*Say: 'I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak,'* and *'Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind.'*" [Related by Mālik, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

Jābir, the Prophet's Companion, said: "God's Messenger said to me once, 'Jābir! Recite!' and I asked, 'What shall I recite?' He replied, 'Recite, *'Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak,'* and *' Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind.' S*o I recited them and he commented, 'Recite them [as often as you can] for you shall never recite anything equivalent to them.'" [Related by al-Nasā'ī.]

Dharr ibn Ĥubaysh said that he had inquired from Ubayy ibn Ka`b, the Prophet's Companion, about *al-Mu`awwadhatayn,* a name that refers to these two *sūrahs* together, saying, "Abū al-Mundhir! Your brother, Ibn Mas`ūd says so and so. (For some time Ibn Mas`ūd was under the false impression that these two *sūrahs* were not part of the Qur'ān, but he later admitted his mistake.) What do you think of that?" He replied, "I asked God's Messenger about this and he told me that he had been instructed to say the text of these *sūrahs* and he had carried out the instruction. We surely say the same as God's Messenger had said." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] All these reports throw powerful light on that underlying factor of God's kindness and love to which the two *sūrahs* draw attention.

Protection against Evil

God — limitless is He in His glory — refers to Himself in this *sūrah* as the Lord of the daybreak. The Arabic term, *falaq,* simply means 'daybreak', but it could be taken to mean 'the whole phenomenon of creation,' with reference to everything springing forth into life. This interpretation is supported by God's saying in *Sūrah* 6, Cattle: *"It is God who splits (fāliq) the grain and the fruit- stone. He brings forth the living out of that which is dead ... He is the One who causes the day to break (fāliq). He has made the night to be [a source of] stillness, and the sun and the moon for reckoning."* (6: 95-96) If the meaning 'daybreak' is adopted, refuge is being sought from the unseen and the mysterious with the Lord of the daybreak, who bestows safety as He kindles the light of day. If, however, *fāliq* is taken to mean 'creation', then refuge from the evil of some creature is being sought with the Lord of all creation. In both cases, harmony with the theme of the *sūrah* is maintained.

"*From the evil of anything that He has created.*" (Verse 2) The phrase contains no exceptions or specifications. Mutual contact between various creatures, though no doubt advantageous, brings about some evil. Refuge from it is sought with God by the believers in order to encourage the goodness such a contact produces. For He who created those creatures is surely able to provide the right circumstances that lead them on a course where only the bright side of their contact prevails.

"*From the evil of darkness [i.e. ghāsiq] when it gathers [i.e. waqab].*" (Verse 3) From a linguistic point of view, *ghāsiq*, means 'substantially pouring out' and *waqb* is the name given to a little hole in a mountain through which water issues forth, while *waqab* is the verb denoting such an action. What is probably meant here is the night, with all that accompanies it when it rapidly engulfs the world. This is terrifying in itself. In addition it fills our hearts with the possibility of an unknown, unexpected discomfort caused by a savage beast, an unscrupulous villain, a striking enemy or a hissing poisonous creature, as well as anxieties and worries [which may lead to depression and uneasiness], evil thoughts and passions that are liable to revive in the dark, during one's state of solitude at night. This is the evil against which the believer needs God's protection.

"*From the evil of conjuring witches,*" (Verse 4) refers to various types of magic, whether by deceiving people's physical senses or by influencing their will-power and projecting ideas onto their emotions and minds. The verse specially refers to a form of witchcraft carried out by women in Arabia at the time who tied knots in cords and blew upon them with an imprecation.

Magic is the production of illusions, subject to a magician's designs, and it does not offer any kind of new facts or alter the nature of things. This is how the Qur'ān describes magic when relating the story of Moses in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā: "*They [Pharaoh's magicians] said, Moses, Will you throw down your gear first or shall we be the first to throw?' He said: 'Throw down yours.' And by the power of their magic, their cords and staffs appeared to him as though they were running. Moses conceived a secret fear within him. But We said: Fear not! You shall have the upper hand. Throw that which is in your right hand! It will swallow up that which they have made. That which they have made is but the deceitful show of witchcraft. Come where he may, a magician shall never be successful.*'" (20: 65-69). Thus, their cords and staffs did not actually turn into snakes but it seemed so to the onlookers, Moses included, to the point where he felt uneasy inside. He was restrained by the transformation of his own stick into a real snake, by God's doing, to destroy the phoney ones.

This is the nature of magic as we ought to conceive it. Through it a magician is capable of influencing other people's minds, causing them to think and act according to his own suggestions. We refrain from going any further with this. It is indeed an evil from which God's protection needs to be sought.

A few unsupported reports, some of which have been quoted by authentic sources, allege that after the Prophet had settled in Madinah, Labīd ibn al-A`şam, a Jew, put a magic spell on him that affected the Prophet for several days or months so that, according to some versions, he felt he was having marital relations with his wives when he was not; or, according to others, thought of having done something when he had not. According to these reports, by reciting this *sūrah* and the next one, Mankind, he was released from such a state.

But surely these stories contradict the very idea of the Prophet's infallibility in word and deed and do not agree with the belief that all his actions are indicative of the Islamic way of life for all Muslims. Above all, they conflict with the Qur'ānic statements emphatically denying his being influenced by any kind of magic whatsoever, as claimed by some opponents of Islam. Hence, we dismiss such stories, on the grounds that the Qur'ān is the ultimate arbiter, and that singularly narrated traditions are left out in matters concerning faith. These stories have not had proper backing, which is an essential qualification for a tradition to be accepted as authentic. What weakens such stories even further is that the two *sūrahs* were revealed in Makkah while these stories relate the incident as having occurred some years later, in Madinah!

"And from the evil of the envious when he envies." (Verse 5) Envy is the evil, begrudging reaction one feels towards another who has received some favour from God. It is also accompanied by a very strong desire for the end to such favours. It is also possible that some harm to the envied may result from such a baseless grudge. This may either be the outcome of direct physical action by the envier, or from suppressed feelings alone.

We should not be uneasy to learn that there are countless inexplicable mysteries in life. There are several phenomena for which no account has been offered up till now. Telepathy and hypnosis are two such examples.

We should not try to deny the psychological effects of envy on the envied person just because we cannot ascertain how this takes place by scientific means and methods. Very little is known about the mysteries of envy and the little that is known has often been uncovered by chance and coincidence. In any case, there is in envy an evil from which the refuge and protection of God must be sought. For He, the Most Generous, Most Merciful, who knows all things, has directed the Prophet and his followers to seek His refuge from such evil. It is unanimously agreed by all Islamic schools of thought that God will always protect His servants from such evils, should they seek His protection as He has directed them to do.

Al-Bukhārī relates that `Ā'ishah said: "The Prophet would blow into both hands when getting into bed to sleep, and recite: *'Say: He is God, the One...'* and, *'Say: I seek*

refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak...' and, *'Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind,'* and, starting with his head, he would run his palms over his face and the front part of his body, before running them over the rest of his body. He did this three times." [Also related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

SŪRAH 114

Al-Nās

(Mankind)

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ ٱلنَّاسِ ﴿١﴾	*Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind,* (1)
مَلِكِ ٱلنَّاسِ ﴿٢﴾	*the King of mankind,* (2)
إِلَٰهِ ٱلنَّاسِ ﴿٣﴾	*the God of mankind,* (3)
مِن شَرِّ ٱلْوَسْوَاسِ ٱلْخَنَّاسِ ﴿٤﴾	*from the mischief of the slinking prompter,* (4)
ٱلَّذِى يُوَسْوِسُ فِى صُدُورِ ٱلنَّاسِ ﴿٥﴾	*who whispers in the hearts of mankind,* (5)
مِنَ ٱلْجِنَّةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ ﴿٦﴾	*from among jinn and mankind.* (6)

The Lord of Mankind

In this *sūrah* refuge is sought in the Lord, Sovereign and God of mankind from the insidious whisperer, *jinn* or human, who prompts evil ideas in people's minds. The *sūrah* presents God's relevant attributes to keep away this invisible evil which the mind on its own cannot shut out. For the Lord is He who preserves, directs, cherishes

and protects mankind; the Sovereign is He who owns, governs and independently runs the world; and God is the One who supersedes all other beings and supervises over all their affairs. The particular mention of mankind here brings man closer to God's protection and care.

God, in His grace, instructs His Messenger and his community of followers to recognize these of His attributes, and to seek His protection against this sneaking evil which locates itself within their hearts. For they cannot rid themselves of such an evil which surreptitiously and imperceptibly creeps into their hearts, unless they are helped by God, the Lord, the Sovereign.

The nature of this evil-importing medium is identified in the text first as *'the slinking prompter.'* Its function is outlined as to *'whisper in the hearts of mankind.'* Then its origin is specified as *'from among* jinn *and mankind.'*

The style adopted here is quite significant because it draws our attention fully to the identity of this sneaking whisperer after describing its nature in order to show the process by which such evil is insinuated. This enables us to be alert and able to confront it. When we are given the full picture we know that this sneaking whisperer operates secretly. We also realize that it can be either *jinn* or human, for human beings can easily spread their evil stealthily.

We do not know how the *jinn* perform this whispering, but we certainly find its repercussions in the behaviour of individuals as well as in human life generally. We know for sure that the battle between Adam (man) and Iblīs (Satan) is a very old one. War between the two was declared by Satan out of the evil inherent in him, his conceit, envy and resentment of man. He was given God's permission to carry out this battle for some purpose which only God knows. But, significantly, man has not been left alone, dispossessed of the necessary means of protection. He has been provided with the power of faith, [that is, conscious belief in, and knowledge of, God and His attributes through conviction and sincere devotion]. Meditation and seeking refuge in God are among the most effective weapons. When man neglects these means of security and defence, he indeed has only himself to blame.

Ibn `Abbās quotes the Prophet as saying: "Satan besieges a person's heart, but he subsides whenever that person conscientiously remembers God. He only insinuates his evil when a person is heedless of Him."

As for humans, we know a great deal of their curious ways of whispering and prompting. Some types are more devilish than the Devil, such as: 1) a bad companion who injects evil into his comrade's heart and mind while he is unaware, thinking his friend to be trustworthy; 2) a ruler's counsellor or advisor who 'whispers' all sorts of evil thoughts to him, trying to turn him into a tyrant; 3) an unscrupulous slanderer who fabricates and decorates tales to make them sound factual and convincing; 4) a

hustler of immoral business dealings who tries to get through to people by exploiting their sensual, carnal desires. There are scores of other 'whisperers' who inconspicuously lay their traps, utilizing different weak points which they deliberately look for. These are more devilish than even the *jinn* themselves. Faced with evil in this guise, man is incapable of ensuring his own safety. God therefore points out to him the means he can employ in this fierce battle. There is also a very direct significance in describing the *'prompter'* as *'slinking'*. While this description indicates the secretiveness of the whisperer on the one hand, it is, on the other, an illusion to its intrinsic feebleness whenever it is discovered or resisted. It subsides and meekly withdraws when met in the open; or, as the Messenger said in his accurate illustration: "He (Satan) subsides whenever one conscientiously remembers God, but insinuates his evil whenever one is heedless of Him." This fortifies any believer's heart against this timid, subsiding whisperer.

Nevertheless, the battle is everlasting since this *'prompter'* is always watchful for the right moment, when one neglects remembrance of God, to implant its evils. For a believer to be conscious of God once in a while is not sufficient, as the war continues till the end of time. The Qur'ān vividly states this in a scene that is full of life:

> *When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; but not so Iblīs [Satan]. He said, Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?' [And] he added: 'Do You see this being whom You have exalted above me? Indeed, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway.' [God] said: "Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense. Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them wealth and offspring, and promise them [what you will] — indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception. But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian. (17: 61-65)*

This concept of the battle and the source of evil in it, whether provoked by Satan himself or by his human agent, inspires man to feel that he is not helpless in it; since God, his Lord and Sovereign of the universe controls all creations and events. Though He has permitted Satan to attack, He has supreme power over him and He has also provided guidance for mankind. God leaves to Satan only those who neglect Him. By contrast, those who live in consciousness of Him are safe and protected against his intimidation and incitements. Thus, righteousness is supported by the only true power, God's, whereas evil is backed by a *'slinking prompter'*, a sneaky whisperer, cowardly in the open field, quick to retreat in war, and easily defeated when we seek refuge with God.

This is the most perfect concept of the battle between good and evil. It is a concept which protects human beings against defeat and provides them with strength, confidence and contentment.

Praise be to God at the beginning and at the end. From Him we derive confidence and success. To Him we turn for unfailing support.